

Goldfrap John Henry

The Motor Rangers Through the Sierras



John Goldfrap
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Marvin West

The Motor Rangers Through the Sierras

CHAPTER I INTO THE SIERRAS

"Say Nat, I thought that this was to be a pleasure trip?"

Joe Hartley, the perspiration beading his round, good-natured countenance, pushed back his sombrero and looked up whimsically from the punctured tire over which he was laboring.

"Well, isn't half the pleasure of running an auto finding out how many things you don't know about it?" laughingly rejoined Nat Trevor, the eldest and most experienced of the young Motor Rangers, as they had come to be called.

"V-v-v-variety is the s-s-spice – " sputtered our old friend William, otherwise Ding-dong Bell.

"Oh, whistle it, Ding-dong," interjected Joe impatiently.

"*Phwit!*" musically chirruped the stuttering lad. "Variety is the spice of life," he concluded, his hesitating manner of speech leaving him, as usual, following the puckering of his lips and the resultant music.

"That's no reason why we should be peppered with troubles," grumbled Joe, giving the "jack" a vicious twist and raising the rear axle still higher. "Here it is, only three days since we left Santa Barbara and I'm certain that I've fixed at least four punctures already."

"Well, you'll be a model of punctuality when – " grinned Nat aggravatingly, but Joe had sprung from his crouching posture and made for him threateningly.

"Nat Trevor, if you dare to pun, I'll – I'll – bust your spark plug."

"Meaning my head, I suppose," taunted Nat from a safe distance, namely, a rock at the side of the dusty road. "'Lay on, Macduff.'"

"Oh, I've more important things to go," concluded Joe, with as much dignity as he could muster, turning once more to his tools.

While he is struggling with the puncture let us look about a little and see where the Motor Rangers, whom we left in Lower California, are now located. As readers of "The Motor Rangers' Lost Mine" know, the three bright lads with a companion, oddly named Sandrock Smith, had visited the sun-smitten peninsula to investigate some mysterious thefts of lumber from a dye-wood property belonging to Mr. Pomery, "The Lumber King," Nat's employer. While in that country, which they only reached after a series of exciting and sometimes dangerous incidents, they stumbled across a gold mine in which Nat's father had, years before, been heavily interested.

Readers of that volume will also recall that Hale Bradford, the Eastern millionaire, and his unscrupulous associates had made a lot of trouble for Nat and his companions after the discovery. The exciting escape of Nat in a motor boat across the waters of the Gulf of California will also be called to mind, as well as the story of how matters were finally adjusted and Nat became, if not a millionaire, at least a very well-to-do young man. The gift of the auto in which they were now touring was likewise explained. The splendid vehicle, with its numerous contrivances for comfortable touring, had been the present of Mr. Pomery to the lads, as a token of his esteem and gratitude for the conclusion to which they had brought the dishonest dealings of Diego Velasco, a Mexican employed by Mr. Pomery.

On their return to California proper, the lads had spent a brief time with their parents, and Nat had seen his mother ensconced in a pretty house on the outskirts of Santa Barbara. It had been a great delight to the lady to leave the tiny cottage in which straitened circumstances following the death of Nat's father, had compelled them to live. Joe Hartley, we know, was the son of a department store keeper of Santa Barbara, and Ding-dong Bell was the only child of a well-to-do widow. So much for our introductions.

Inactivity had soon palled on the active minds of the Motor Rangers, and they had, with the consent of their parents, planned another trip. This time, however, it was to be for pleasure. As Nat had said, "We had enough adventures in Lower California

to last us a lifetime." But of what lay ahead of them not one of the boys dreamed, when, three days before, they had started from Santa Barbara for a tour of the Sierras. Nat was desirous of showing that it was feasible to hunt and fish and tour the mountains in an automobile just as well as on horseback. The car, therefore, carried rifles and shot guns as well as fishing rods and paraphernalia for camping. We shall not give an inventory of it now. Suffice it to say that it was completely outfitted, and as the details of the car itself have been told in the previous volume we shall content ourselves with introducing each as occasion arises.

The particular puncture which Joe was repairing when this volume opens, occurred just as the lads were bowling over a rather rough road into Antelope Valley, a narrow, wind-swept canyon between two steep ranges of mountains. The valley is in the heart of the Sierras, and though too insignificant to be noted on any but the largest maps, forms a portion of the range well known to mountaineers. It is a few miles from the Tehachapi Pass, at which, geographers are agreed, the true Sierra Nevadas begin.

"Say, fellows," exclaimed Nat suddenly, looking about him at the sky which from being slightly overcast had now become black and threatening, "we're going to have a storm of some sort. If you're ready there, Joe, we'll be jogging along. We ought to be under shelter when it hits."

"Yes," agreed Joe, wiping his brow with the back of his hand, "it will go whooping through this narrow valley like the

mischief."

As he spoke he lowered the "jack," and put the finishing touches on his repair. The auto carried plenty of extra tires, but naturally the boys wished to be sparing of their new ones while the others offered an opportunity for a patch.

As the first heavy rain drops fell, sending up little spurts of dust from the dry road and the dusty chaparral bordering it, Nat started the motor, and the car was soon whizzing forward at a good speed. Thanks to its finely-tempered springs and the shock absorbers with which it was equipped, the roughness of the road had little effect on the comfort of the riders.

"This is going to be a hummer," shouted Joe suddenly, "we'd better get up the shelter hood."

Nat agreed, and soon the contrivance referred to, which was like a low "top" of waterproof khaki, was stretched on its collapsible frames. It fitted all round the auto, enclosing it like a snug waterproof tent. In front was a window of mica through which the driver could see the road. The erection of the shelter took but a few seconds and presently the car was once more chugging forward.

But as the storm increased in violence, the wind rose, till it fairly screamed through the narrow funnel of the rocky-walled valley. Through his window Nat could see trees being bent as if they were buggy whips.

"If this gets much worse we'll have to find cover," he thought, "or else lose our shelter hood."

He glanced apprehensively at the steel supports of the shelter, which were bending and bowing under the stress put upon them. As Nat had remarked to himself, they would not stand much more pressure.

"Say, the rain is coming in here," began Joe suddenly, as a tiny trickle began to pour into the tonneau. It came through a crack in the khaki top which had been wrenched apart by the violence of the wind.

"It's g-g-g-gone d-d-d-down the bab-b-b-back of my n-n-n-neck," sputtered Ding-dong Bell protestingly.

"Never mind, Ding-dong," comforted Joe, "maybe it will wash your parts of speech out straight."

"I'm going to head for that cave yonder," exclaimed Nat, after running a few more minutes.

He had spied a dark opening in the rocks to his right, while the others had been talking, and had guessed that it was the mouth of a cave of some sort. And so it proved.

The auto was turned off the road, or rather track, and after bumping over rocks and brush rolled into the shelter of the cavern. It seemed quite an abrupt change from the warring of the elements outside to the darkness and quiet of the chamber in the rocks, and the Motor Rangers lost no time in lowering the hood and looking about to find out in what sort of a place they had landed.

So far as they could see, after they had all climbed out of the car, the cave was a large one. It ran back and its limits were lost

in darkness. The mouth, however, was quite a big opening, being more than twenty feet across at the base. It narrowed into a sharp-topped arch at the summit, from which greenery hung down.

"Let's see where we are," remarked Nat, taking off his heavy driving gloves and throwing them upon the driver's seat.

"You'd have to be a cat to do that," laughed Joe Hartley, gazing back into the dense blackness of the cavern.

"That's soon fixed," added Nat, and removing one of the lights of the car from its socket he pressed a little button. A sharp click resulted, and a flood of brilliant white radiance poured from the lamp. It was an improved carbide contrivance, the illuminant which made the gas being carried in its socket.

The boy turned its rays backward into the cave, flooding the rough, rocky walls, stained here and there with patches of dampness and moss, with a blaze of light.

"Say," cried Joe suddenly, as the rays fell far back into the cave but still did not seem to reach its terminus, "what is that back there?"

As he spoke he seized Nat's sleeve in a nervous, alarmed way.

"What?" demanded Nat, holding the light high above his head in his effort to pierce the uttermost shadows.

"Why that – don't you see it?" cried Joe.

"I do now," exclaimed Nat in a startled voice, "it's – "

"T-t-t-two g-g-glaring eyes!" fizzed Ding-dong Bell.

As he spoke, from behind the boys, came a low, menacing growl. They faced about abruptly to see what this new source of

alarm might be.

As they all turned in the direction from which the growl had proceeded – namely the mouth of the cave – a cry of dismay was forced from the lips of the three lads. Stealthily approaching them, with cat-like caution, was a low, long-bodied animal of a tawny color. Its black-tipped tail was lashing the ground angrily, and its two immense eyes were glaring with a green light, in the gloom of the cave.

"A mountain lion!" cried Nat, recognizing their treacherous foe in an instant.

"And its mate's back there in the cave," called Joe, still more alarmedly.

"G-g-g-g-get the g-g-g-guns!" sputtered Ding-dong.

This was far more easy to recommend than to accomplish, however. The lads, never dreaming that they would want their weapons, had left them in the automobile. The car, as will be recalled, had been left near the mouth of the cave. The mountain lion advancing toward them had already passed the auto and was now between them and the place in which their weapons were reposing.

The mountain lion, or cougar, ordinarily not dangerous unless it gets its foe at an absolute disadvantage, becomes, during the mating season, a vindictive, savage brute, if separated from its mate. That this was now the case was evident. There was no room to doubt that the two green eyes glaring from the remote blackness of the cave were the optics of another "lion."

The young Motor Rangers were fairly trapped. Without weapons or any means of protecting themselves but their bare hands, they were in imminent peril of a nasty conclusion to their sudden encounter.

CHAPTER II

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

Snarling in very much the manner of an angry cat, the lion, which had appeared at the mouth of the cave, began to come forward more rapidly. At the same instant, as if by mutual consent, his mate started to advance from the rear of the cave. It was evident that if they did not wish to be seriously injured, perhaps killed, the Motor Rangers would have to act, and act quickly.

But what were they to do? Nat it was who solved the question. The floor of the cave was littered with boulders of various sizes, ranging from stones of a pound or so in weight, up to huge rocks beyond a boy's power to lift.

Stooping down swiftly Nat selected a stone a little larger than a baseball, and then throwing himself into a pitching posture, awaited the oncoming cougar, approaching from the cave mouth.

The boy had been the best pitcher the Santa Barbara Academy had ever produced, and his companions saw in a flash that he meant to exercise his skill now in a way of which he had little dreamed when on the diamond. His hand described an evolution in the air, far too quick to be followed by the eye. The next instant the stone left his grasp, and swished through the atmosphere.

Straight and true it sped to its mark.

And it struck home none too quick. The lion had already crouched for a spring on the defenseless lads, who stood between himself and his mate, when Nat's missile was discharged.

Crack!

The sharp noise of the stone's impact with the skull of the crouching feline sounded like a rifle shot.

"Bull's-eye!" yelled Joe excitedly.

And bull's-eye it was. The rock had a sharp edge which Nat, in his haste, had not noticed. As it struck the lion's head it did so with the keen surface foremost. Like a knife it drove its way into the skull and the lion, with a howl of pain and fury, turned, stumbled forward a few paces, and then rolled over.

Before the others could stop him, Ding-dong Bell, entirely forgetting the other lion, dashed forward to examine the fallen monster. The result of his action was that his career came very near being terminated then and there. The cougar had only been stunned, and as the stuttering boy gave one of its ears a tug, it leaped erect once more and struck a blow at him with its chisel-like claws that would have torn him badly had they struck.

But Ding-dong, though deliberate in his speech, was quick in action. He leaped backward like an acrobat, as he saw the mighty muscles tauten for action, and so escaped being felled by the blow. He could feel it "swish" past his nose, however, and entirely too close to be pleasant.

In the meantime, Nat, realizing that his best move would be to get to their arms, had made a flying leap for the auto and seized

an automatic rifle of heavy calibre. As Ding-dong leaped back he aimed and fired, but in the darkness he missed, and with a mighty bound the wounded cougar leaped out of the cave and dashed off through the storm into the brush on the hillside above.

"One!" exclaimed Nat, like Monte Cristo in the play.

The others gave a low laugh. They could afford not to worry so much now. True, there was one of the cougars still back in the cave, but with their rifles in their hands the lads had little to fear.

"I felt for a minute, though, like I did that time the Mexican devil sprang on me near the gulf village," said Nat, recalling one of his most perilous moments in Lower California.

But there was little time for conversation. Nat had hardly uttered his last remark before the cougar at the rear of the cave began to give signs that it too was meditating an attack. There are few animals that will not fight desperately when cornered, even a rat making a formidable foe sometimes under such conditions, and cornered the cougar unquestionably was.

"She's coming," warned Joe in a low voice, as a rumbling growl resounded above the roar of the storm outside.

"L-l-let her c-c-come," sputtered Ding-dong defiantly.

"Better climb into the car, boys," said Nat in a whispered tone, "we can get better aim from an elevation."

Accordingly they clambered into the tonneau of the motor vehicle, and kneeling on the seat awaited the onslaught which they knew must come in a few seconds.

"I've half a mind to let her go, if we can without putting

ourselves in danger," said Nat, "it doesn't seem fair somehow to shoot down a poor brute in cold blood."

"But that poor brute would attack you without hesitation if you lay injured on a trail," Joe reminded him; "these cougars, too, kill hundreds of sheep and young calves, just for the sheer love of killing, for half of what they kill they never touch."

"That's right," agreed Nat, "still fair play is a jewel, and —"

Further words were taken out of his mouth by something that occurred just at that instant, and settled the fate of the cougar then and there.

Ding-dong Bell, whose unlucky day it seemed to be, had, in his excitement, been leaning far over the back of the tonneau, peering into the darkness at the rear of the cave. He was trying to detect the shadowy outlines of the cougar. A few seconds before Joe Hartley had said: —

"Look out, Ding-dong, or you'll go overboard."

The stuttering youth's reply had been a scornful snicker. But now, however, he craned his neck just a bit too far. His upper quarters over-balanced his stumpy legs and body, and with a howl that rivalled the cougar's, he toppled clean over the edge of the tonneau.

The floor of the cave sloped steeply toward the rear, and when Ding-dong struck it he did not stop. Instead, the momentum lent him by his fall appeared to propel him forward down the sloping floor. He yelled for help as he felt himself rapidly and involuntarily being borne toward the hidden cougar.

By some mysterious combination of misfortune, too, the carbide in the lamp, which had not been renewed since they left Santa Barbara, gave out with a flicker and a fizz at this moment. The cave was plunged into almost total darkness. Nat's heart came into his throat as he realized that if the cougar was not killed within the next few seconds, Ding-dong's life might pay the forfeit.

"Good gracious!" shouted Joe above poor Ding-dong's cries, "how are we going to see to shoot?"

"Aim at the eyes," grated out Nat earnestly, "it's our only chance."

As he spoke there came an angry snarl and a hissing snort. It mingled with a shout of alarm from Ding-dong, who had now stopped rolling, but was not yet on his feet. The she-cougar had seen his peril and had taken the opportunity to bring down at least one of her enemies.

Straight up, as if impelled by a powerful steel spring, she shot. But even as she was in mid-spring two rifles cracked, and with a convulsive struggle the great tawny body fell with a thud to the floor of the cave, clawing and scratching and uttering piercing roars and cries.

"Put her out of her misery," said Nat, as Ding-dong, having regained his feet, darted at the top of his speed for the mouth of the cave.

Once more the rifles blazed away at the two green points of fire which marked the wounded cougar's eyes. This time dead

silence followed the reports, which reverberated deafeningly in the confines of the cave. There was no doubt but that the animal was dead. But where was Ding-dong?

His companion Motor Rangers looked anxiously about them, but could see nothing of him. In the excitement they had not noticed him dart by. Presently, however, a slight noise near the cave mouth attracted their attention. There was Ding-dong out in the rain, and drenched to the skin, peering into the cave.

"C-a-can I c-c-c-come in?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Yes, and hurry up, too," ordered Nat in as stern a voice as he could command. "Your first duty," he went on, "will be to dig down in the clothes chest and put on dry things. Then you will refill the lamps with carbide, which you ought to have done two days ago, and after that you may patch up the tear the wind made in our shelter hood."

"And – phwit – after that?" inquired Ding-dong with so serious an aspect that they had to laugh.

"I'll think up something to keep you out of mischief," said Nat finally.

While Ding-dong set about his tasks after investing himself in dry clothes, the others skinned the cougar and kindled a fire with some driftwood that lay about the cave. Hot coffee was then brewed, and some of the stores opened. After imbibing several cups of the steaming mixture, and eating numerous slices of bread and butter, the Motor Rangers felt better.

By this time, too, the storm had almost passed over, only

a slight drizzle remaining to tell of the visit of the mountain tempest. An investigation of the cave failed to show any trace of a regular den in it, and the boys came to the conclusion, which was probably correct, that the cougars had merely taken to it for shelter from the storm. However that was, all three of them felt that they had had a mighty narrow escape. Ding-dong inwardly resolved that from that time on he would take care to have the lamps packed with carbide, for Nat's relation of how nearly the sudden cessation of the light had cost him his life gave the stuttering youth many qualms.

"I guess the storm is about over," said Joe, looking out of the cave while holding a tin cup of coffee in his hand.

"I see enough blue sky to m-m-m-make a pair of pants for every s-s-s-s-sailor in the navy," remarked Ding-dong, who had joined him.

"That's a sure sign of clearer weather," said Nat, "come on, boys, pack up the cups and get the car ready and we'll go ahead."

"Where are we going to stop to-night?" asked Joe. "I guess we can't be many miles from Lariat, can we?"

"I'll see," rejoined Nat, diving into his breast pocket and pulling out a map stoutly mounted on tough linen to prevent tearing. He pored over it for a moment.

"The map puts Lariat about fifteen miles from here," he said.

"What sort of a p-p-p-lace is it?" Ding-dong wished to know.

"A small post-office station," rejoined Nat. "I don't imagine that there is even a hotel there."

Ding-dong, who didn't object to the luxuries of life, sighed. Somehow, he had been looking forward to stopping at a hotel that night. He said nothing, however, well knowing how his complaints would be received.

The auto was soon moving out of the cave in which they had had so exciting an encounter. Nat was at the wheel and his two companions in the tonneau. The faces of all were as beaming as the weather had now turned out. These boys dearly loved the sensation of taking to the road and proceeding on into the unknown and adventurous.

The rough strip separating the road, as we must in courtesy call it, from the steep rock-face in which the cave lay, was speedily traversed and the auto's nose headed north. For some time they bowled along at a slow speed, the track growing rapidly rougher and rougher, till it seemed that nothing on wheels could get over it.

"What's the m-m-m-matter?" asked Ding-dong suddenly of Joe Hartley, who for a bumpy mile or two had sat with his head cocked on one side as if listening intently for something.

"I'm listening for a puncture," grinned Joe, resuming his posture of attention.

As the road grew rougher the walls of the valley began to close in. They grew more lofty as the pass grew narrower, till only a thin strip of blue sky showed at the summit. The rugged slopes were clothed with a sparse growth of pine timber and chaparral. Immense faces of rock cropped out among these. The whole

scene had a wild and savage aspect.

Suddenly they reached a spot where the road took an abrupt dip downward. From the summit the descent looked as steep as the wall of a house. Fortunately, they carried an emergency brake, so that the steepness of the declivity did not alarm them. Without hesitating Nat allowed the car to roll over the summit and begin the drop. The exhilaration of the rapid motion made him delay applying his emergency just as soon as he should have, and the car had been running at considerable speed when there came a sudden shout from Joe: —

"Look, Nat! Look!"

The boy, who had been adjusting his spark lever, looked up suddenly. They were just rounding a curve, beyond which the road pitched down more steeply than ever.

At the bottom of the long hill stood an obstacle. Nat at a glance made it out as a stage coach of the old-fashioned "thorough-brace type." It was stationary, however, and its passengers stood about it in scattered groups, while, so far as Nat could see, no horses were attached to it.

"Better go slow. There seems to be something the matter down there at the bottom of the grade," the boy remarked.

At the same instant his hand sought the emergency brake lever and he pushed it forward.

There was a loud crack as he did so, and an alarmed look flashed across his face as the lever suddenly felt "loose" in his hand. The car seemed to give an abrupt leap forward and plunge

on more swiftly than ever.

Below him Nat could see the scattered figures pointing upward excitedly. He waved and yelled to warn them that he had no control over the car which was tearing forward with the speed of the wind. The ordinary brake had no effect on it under the speed it had now gathered. Lurching and plunging like a ship at sea, it rushed onward.

Directly in its path, immovable as a rock, was the stage coach. All three of the Motor Rangers' bronzed, sunburned faces blanched as they rushed onward to what seemed inevitable disaster.

CHAPTER III

IN A RUNAWAY AUTO

"Can't you stop her?" gasped Joe, clutching the forward portion of the tonneau and gripping it so tight that his knuckles went white.

Nat shook his head. He felt that he had done what he could to slow down the car. There was nothing left now but to face the end as resolutely as possible. As long as they lived the Motor Rangers never forgot that wild ride down the mountainside in a runaway car.

The speed can be described by no other word than terrific. The handkerchiefs all three of the boys wore about their necks to keep off sunstroke and dust streaked out behind as stiff as if cut out of tin. Their hair was blown back flat on their heads by the speed, and every now and then the car would strike a rock, which at the speed it was going would throw it high into the air. At such moments the auto would come back to the trail with a crash that threatened to dislocate every spring in its composition.

But Nat, his eyes glued to the path in front of him, clung to the wheel, gripping it till the varnish stuck to his palms. He knew that the slightest mistake on his part might precipitate the seemingly certain disaster. Suddenly, however, his heart gave a glad bound.

He saw before him one loophole of escape from a catastrophe.

The stage was halted against the rocky wall on the right-hand side of the trail. So far over toward the rocky wall was it, in fact, that its hubs almost scraped it. This left a narrow space between its left-hand wheels and the other wall of the pass.

True, it looked so narrow that it hardly seemed possible that the auto could dash through, but it was the only chance that presented itself, and Nat was quick to take advantage of it. As they saw what the boy intended to do the onlookers about the stage broke into a cheer, which was quickly checked as they held their breath in anticipation. It was one chance in a thousand that Nat was taking. Would he win out?

Closer thundered the auto while the alarmed stage passengers crowded to the far side of the pass. Nat, his eyes glued on the narrow space between the stage and the wall of rock, bent low over the wheel. His heart underwent a terrible sinking sensation as it grew closer and he saw how narrow the space was. But he didn't give up on that account. On the contrary, the extremely narrow margin of hope acted as a tonic on his nerves.

As a naval gunner aims his big projectiles so Nat aimed the thundering runaway automobile for the narrow opening between the stage and the cliff.

Almost before he realized it he was there.

There was a quick flash of a brightly painted vehicle and white, anxious human faces as he shot by the stage and its dismounted passengers.

An ominous scraping sound was audible for an instant as the

hubs of the stage and the auto's tonneau came in contact. To the left, Nat felt the scrub growing in the cracks of the rock brush his face, and then, amidst a shout of joy from behind, the auto emerged beyond the stage, unharmed save for a few scratches.

As Nat brought it to a standstill on the level, the travellers came running up at top speed. All were anxious to shake the hand of the daring boy who had turned seeming disaster into safety by his grit and cool-headedness.

"Pod'ner, you jammed that thar gas brigantine through that lilly hole like you wos makin' a poket at bill-yards," admiringly cried a tall man in a long linen duster and sombrero, about whose throat was a red handkerchief. He grasped Nat's hand and wrung it as if he would have shaken it off.

"My name's Cal Gifford. I'm the driver of the Lariat-to-Hombre stage," he announced, "and any of you kids kin ride free with me any time you've a mind to."

"Thank you," said Nat, still a bit trembly from his nervous strain, "I really believe that if you only had horses we'd accept your invitation and tow the auto behind."

As he spoke he started to scramble out of the car, the others following his example. The Motor Rangers were anxious to see what had gone wrong with their ordinarily trustworthy vehicle.

"Oh, he's quite young," simpered an elderly lady in a big veil, who was accompanied by her daughter, a girl of about twenty. An old man with fierce white whiskers stood beside them. They were evidently tourists. So, too, was a short, stout, blonde little

man as rotund as a cider keg, who stepped up to the boys as they prepared to examine their car.

"Holt, plez!" he said in an authoritative voice. "I vish to take zee phitograf."

Nat looked somewhat astonished at so curt an order, but the other two Motor Rangers merely grinned.

"Better let him, pod'ner," suggested Cal Gifford. "He took them road agents a while back. Caught 'em in the act of sneaking the express box."

"Chess!" sputtered the little German. "I gedt find pigdures of all of dem. Dey vossn't looking andt I – click!"

As he spoke he rapidly produced a camera, and before the boys knew what was happening he had pressed a little lever, and behold they were "taken." But, in fact, their minds had been busy with something else. This something was what the stage driver had referred to.

"Road agents?" asked Nat. "You've been held up, then?"

"Yep, pod'ner, that's what it amounts to," drawled Cal nonchalantly, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

"The varmints stepped out frum behind that thar rock and we didn't hev time ter say 'Knife' afore we found ourselves lookin' inter the muzzles of as complete a collection of rifles as you ever saw."

"Un dey tooked away der horses by der oudtside," put in the German tourist. "Oh, I schall have me fine tales to tell ven I get me pack by der Faderland."

"The Dutchman's right," said Cal. "The onnery skunks unhitched our plugs and scampered 'em off up the trail. I reckon they're in their barn at Lariat by this time."

"Oh, dear, and we'll have to walk," cried the young lady, bursting into tears.

"And I haf vot you call it, a oatmeal? – py my pig toe," protested the German.

"I guess you mean a corn, Dutchy," laughed Cal.

"Vell, I knowed it vos some kindt of cereal," was the reply.

"Seems a shame to see that purty critter cry, don't it?" said Cal, nodding his head sidewise toward the weeping young lady.

"This is an outrage! An outrage, I say!" her white-whiskered father began shouting. "Why were those highwaymen not shot down? Why didn't somebody act?"

"Well, pod'ner, you acted up fer sure," grinned Cal. "Am I mistaken or did I hear you say you'd give 'em five thousand dollars for your life?"

"Bah!" shouted the white-whiskered man. "It was your duty sure to protect us. You should have fired at them."

"I'd hev bin a hull lot uv use to yer then, except fer funeral poposes, wouldn't I?" inquired Cal calmly.

"Bah! sir, bah!" sputtered the angry old gentleman.

"Good thing ther h'aint no mounting lions 'round," drawled Cal. "They might think we wuz an outfit of sheepmen by all the bah-bahing we be doin'."

"But how is my daughter to get to Lariat, sir?" begged the

elderly lady. "She hurt her foot in getting off the stage."

"Well, ma'am," said Cal, "supposing yer man yonder takes a try at carryin' her instead of wasting wind a-bahing?"

"Voss iss diss bah? Maybe I get a picture of him?" asked the German, bustling up excitedly with his camera all ready for business.

"Oh, sir, my husband was excited. He didn't know what he was saying," exclaimed the elderly lady clasping her hands.

"There, ma'am, don't take on. I was only a-having my bit of fun," said Cal. "Maybe when these boys get their gasoline catamarang fixed up they'll give us a ride."

"But they cannot take all of us, sir," cried the lady, beginning to weep afresh.

"There, there, ma'am, never mind ther irrigation – I mean 'Weep not them tears,'" comforted Cal. "Anyhow, you and your daughter can get a ride."

"But my husband – my poor husband, sir."

Cal turned with a grin at a sudden noise behind them. The white-whiskered man had now turned his wrath on the unfortunate German.

"Out of my sight, you impudent Teuton," he was shouting. "Don't aggravate me, sir, or I'll have your blood. I'm a peaceable tourist, sir, but I have fought and bled in my time."

"Must hev bin bit by a mosquito and chased it," commented Cal to himself as the lady hastened to console her raging better half, and the little Dutchman skipped nimbly out of harm's way.

"What yo' bin a-doing to ther ole bell-wether, Dutchy?" inquired Cal.

"I ask him if he please tell me vere I can get a picture of dot Bah, und he get madt right away quvick," explained the Teuton.

While all this had been going on among the tourists and Cal, the other passengers, mainly mountaineers, had stood in a group aside talking among themselves. In the meanwhile, the Motor Rangers had been examining the damage to their car. They found that the connecting rod working the band of the emergency brake had snapped, and that a blacksmith would be needed to weld it. Cal, who had strolled up in time to hear this decision, informed them that there was a blacksmith at Lariat.

"And a good 'un, too," he volunteered.

The stage driver then made a request for a ride on behalf of the young lady and her parents.

"Me and the Dutchman and the rest kin hoof it," he remarked. "It ain't above five mile, and down grade, too."

"A steep grade?" asked Nat, with some appearance of interest as Joe finished unbolting the loose ends of the broken rod.

"No, jest gentle. It runs on 'bout this way all down into Lariat."

"Well, then," said Nat, with a smile, "I'll save you all the trouble of walking."

"How's that, pod'ner? We kain't all pile in the hold of that benzine buggy."

"No; but I can give you a tow."

"What, hitch my stage on ahind your oleomargerinerous gas

cart?"

"That's it."

"By the big peak of Mount Whitney, that's an idee!" exclaimed the delighted stage driver, capering about and snapping his fingers like a big child. "Wait a jiffy, I'll explain it all to Bah-bah and the rest."

This was soon done, and the Motor Rangers in the interval attached a rope to the rear axle of the car and in turn made it fast to the front of the stage. The pole of the latter vehicle was then led over the tonneau of the auto and Joe and Ding-dong deputed to steer. From the driver's box of the stage Cal worked the brake.

An experimental run of a few yards was made, and on the gentle grade the plan was found to work perfectly, the auto towing the heavy stage without difficulty.

"Now, then, all aboard the stagemotebubble!" shouted Cal, and a few minutes later all the passengers, delighted with the novelty of the experience, had piled on board. All delighted, that is, except the white-whiskered man.

"All aboard that's a-goin' ter get thar!" bellowed Cal, fixing him with a baleful eye.

"Bah! Bah!" sputtered the white-whiskered one indignantly, nevertheless skipping nimbly on beside his wife and daughter.

But there came a fresh delay.

"Holt on, blease! Vait! I vish a photegrift to take him!"

"Ef yer don't hurry up Dutchy," shouted Cal, "you'll hev a picter of yerself a-walking inter Lariat."

But the photo was taken without delay, and amid a cheer from her overjoyed passengers, the stage, which moved by such novel means, rumbled onward on its way to Lariat.

CHAPTER IV

MOTOR RANGERS TO THE RESCUE

"That came pretty near being like the time we collided with the hay wagon in Lower California," commented Joe, as the auto got under way, with her cumbersome tow rattling along behind.

"Yes, only this time we didn't hit," laughed Nat, who had quite recovered from the strain of those terrible moments when it seemed that they must go crashing into the stage.

"A m-m-m-miss is as g-g-g-good as a m-m-m-mile any day," said Ding-dong, as his contribution to the conversation.

As Cal Gifford had said, the road was a gentle gradient between steep mountain ranges. Consequently, the towing of the coach was an easy matter. The two boys in the tonneau steered it by giving the pole a push or a tug as occasion required – much as they would have handled the tiller of a boat. When the stage showed signs of coming ahead too fast Cal shoved the foot brake forward, at once checking the impetus.

Quite a small crowd turned out to witness the strange scene as the two vehicles rolled into Lariat. The place was a typical western mountain station. There was a small post-office, two or three rough houses and a hotel. In the heyday of gold mining, Lariat had been quite a flourishing place, but the hand of decay

was upon it at the present time. The hotel, however, was, as Ding-dong noticed, apparently open for business. At least several loungers arose from their chairs on the porch, and came forward with exclamations of surprise, as the two conveyances lumbered into town.

Nat shut off power in front of the post-office and at the same time Cal applied and locked the brakes, bringing the stage likewise to a standstill. The postmaster, a long, lanky Westerner, with a much-patched pair of trousers tucked into boot tops, was already out in front of his little domain.

"Ther horses be back in ther barn," he volunteered, as Cal looked at him questioningly. "They come galloping in here like a blue streak an hour ago."

"Yep, bin held up again," Cal volunteered as the crowd gathered about the stage, "and ef it hadn't been for these bubble boys here we wouldn't hev got inter town yit."

"Take everything, Cal?" asked the postmaster.

"Yep; stock, lock and barrel, as the feller says. Left us our vallibles, though. I reckon they would have taken them if it hadn't bin for the noise this here gasolene giglet made as it come over ther hill. Thet scared 'em, and they galloped off, takin' ther plugs with 'em."

"Consarn 'em! I reckon they're some of Col. Merced Morello's gang. They've bin active hereabouts lately. Jes heard afore you come in thet they'd raided a ranch up north an' tuk two hundred head of stock."

"Outrageous! Outrageous!" exclaimed the white-whiskered man, who had been listening with an angry, red countenance, "why does not some one capture them?"

"Well, sir," rejoined the postmaster, "if you kin tell us whar ter find 'em we'll furnish ther men to smoke 'em out. But up to date no one ain't bin able ter git a glimpse of 'em. They jes' swoop down and then vanish ag'in."

"They've got some hidin' place off in the mountins," opined Cal; "but you can bet that the old colonel's foxy enough ter keep it close, wherever it is."

"Betcher life," said one or two in the crowd who had heard.

While this had been going on the Motor Rangers had been hard at work unhitching their car from the stage. In this operation they had been considerably bothered by the crowd which, never having seen an auto before, elbowed right up and indulged in comment and investigation. Ding-dong caught one bewhiskered old fellow in the very act of abstracting a spark plug. The boy promptly switched on the current and the investigator, with a wild yell, hopped backward into the crowd, wringing his hand.

"The critter bit me," he explained to the crowd. Such was his explanation of the sharp electric shock he had received.

The proprietor of the hotel now hastened up, and began urging the passengers on the stage to stay the night in his hotel. Another stage went on from Lariat, and after a run of sixty miles struck the railroad in the valley. This stage was to start in half an hour. After a hasty meal the white-whiskered man and his family, and several

of the other passengers, decided to continue their journey. The boys, however, after a consultation, came to the determination to spend the night at Lariat.

Their first care had been to hunt up the blacksmith Cal had referred to, and to give into his hands the connecting rod. He promised to have it welded as good as new by morning. This arranged, the boys sauntered back to the hotel just in time to watch the other stage pull out. On a rear seat sat the white-whiskered man. He was still boiling, despite the fact that the robbers had not harmed him or his family in any way. In fact, he occasionally simmered over.

The last the boys saw of him he had gotten hold of a fat, good-natured little man, who looked like a drummer, and they could hear frequent exclamations of "Bah!" coming back toward them, like the explosions of a rapid-fire gun. A moment later the stage vanished behind a rocky turn in the road.

Soon after the boys were called in to supper. Among the company at the meal was a tall man with a black mustache drooping down each side of his mouth in typical Western fashion.

"He looks like the pictures of Alkali Ike," remarked Joe in an undertone as they concluded the meal and arose, leaving the black-mustached man and the others still eating.

Outside they found it was a beautiful night. The storm of the afternoon had laid the dust, and the moon was rising brilliantly in the clear and sharp atmosphere peculiar to the high regions of the Sierras. In the silvery radiance every rock and bush was outlined

sharply. The road lay between black curtains of mountainside, like a stretch of white ribbon.

"Let's go for a stroll," suggested Nat, as they stood about on the veranda wondering what they could do with themselves till bedtime.

The other two were nothing loath, and so, without bothering to say a word to any one, the lads sauntered off down the road. The balmy scent of pines and the mountain laurel hung heavily in the air. Nat inhaled it delightedly.

"I tell you, fellows, this is living," he exclaimed.

"You bet," agreed Joe heartily.

"T-t-t-that p-p-pie was f-f-fine," said the unpoetical Ding-dong, smacking his lips at the recollection of the dessert.

"There you go," said Nat in mock disgust, "always harping on eating."

"T-th-that's b-b-better-phwit – than eating on harpoons, isn't it?" asked Ding-dong, with a look of injured innocence.

"I said harping on eating. Not harpoons on eating," retorted Nat.

"Oh," said Ding-dong. "Well, don't wail about it."

"Say, if you make any more puns I'll chuck you down into that canyon," threatened Joe, pointing downward into a black abyss which, at the portion of the road they had now reached, yawned to one side of the thoroughfare.

"You make me chuckle," grunted the incorrigible Ding-dong, avoiding the threatened fate, however, by clambering and hiding

behind a madrone tree.

"Tell you what I'll do," cried Nat suddenly.

"Well, what?" demanded Joe, as Nat stopped short.

"I'll run you fellows a race to the bottom of the hill."

"You're on," cried Ding-dong from his retreat, and emerging immediately thereafter, "don't bust your emergency brake though, or we'll have more trouble."

He peered ahead down the moonlit canyon, and noted that the road was quite steep for a distance of about a quarter of a mile.

The boys were all good runners and experts, in fact, at all branches of athletics. Their blood fairly tingled as Nat lined them up and they stood awaiting the word "go."

At last it came.

Like arrows from so many bows the three boys shot forward, Ding-dong in the lead. How his stubby legs did move! Like pistons in their speed and activity. There was no question about it, Ding-dong could run. Five feet or so behind him came Joe and at his rear was Nat, who, knowing that he was ordinarily a faster runner than either, had handicapped himself a bit.

He speedily overhauled the others, however, although Ding-dong gave him a stiff tussle. Reaching the finishing line, Nat looked back up the moonlit road. Ding-dong and Joe were speeding toward him neck and neck.

"Go it, Ding-dong!" yelled Nat, "come on, Joe."

In a cloud of dust and small rocks the two contestants rushed on. Suddenly one of Ding-dong's feet caught in a rock, and at the

impetus he had attained, the sudden shock caused him to soar upward into the air, as if he were about to essay a flight through space.

Extending his arms spread-eagle fashion, the fleshy, stuttering youth floundered above the ground for a brief second, and then, as Joe dashed across the line he came down with a resounding crash. Flat on his face he fell in the middle of the dusty road.

"Pick him up," exclaimed Nat as he saw the catastrophe.

Joe, who had by this time checked his speed, headed about after Nat, and started for the recumbent Ding-dong. As they neared his side, however, the lad jumped up with a grin on his rotund features.

"Fooled you, didn't I?" he chuckled.

"Goo – d gracious. I thought you had fractured every bone in your body," exclaimed Nat.

"Can't hurt me; I'm made of cast-iron," snickered Ding-dong.

"I always knew that applied to your head," said Joe, determined to tease the boy a bit in revenge for the fright he had given them, "but I never realized before that the complaint had spread all over you."

"I'd have won the race anyhow if I hadn't taken that tumble," retorted Ding-dong, and as this seemed to be no more than the truth the others had nothing to say in rejoinder.

"I guess we had better be getting back to the hotel," said Nat, "we want to get an early start to-morrow, so a good night's sleep will be in order."

But the words were hardly out of his mouth before he stopped short.

The boy had heard voices, apparently coming from the air above them. He soon realized, however, that in reality the speakers were on the mountain-side above them. In fact, he now saw that a trail cut into the road above the point at which they stood. In their dash down the hill they had not noticed it. The other lads, who had also heard the voices, needed no comment to remain quiet.

While they stood listening a figure appeared on the trail, walking rapidly down it. As the newcomer drew closer the boys recognized the features and tall, ungainly outline of the man with the black mustache – "Alkali Ike." He came forward as if with a definite purpose in mind. Evidently, he was not, like the boys, out for a moonlight stroll.

As he approached he stopped and listened intently. Then he gave a low, peculiar whistle. It was like the call of a night bird.

Instantly, from the hill-side above them they heard the signal – for such it seemed – replied to.

At the same instant whoever was on the hillside above began to advance downward. The boys, crouching back in a patch of shadow behind a chaparral clump, could hear the slipping and sliding of their horses' hoofs as they came down the rocky pathway.

CHAPTER V

AN APPOINTMENT ON THE TRAIL

"Something's up," whispered Joe, as if this fact was not perfectly obvious.

"Hush," warned Nat, "that fellow who just came down the trail is the chap we noticed at supper."

"Alkali Ike?"

"Yes. That's what you called him."

"He must have a date here."

"Looks that way. If I don't miss my guess he's here to meet whoever is coming on horseback down that trail."

"Are you going to stay right here?"

"We might as well. I've got an idea somehow that these chaps are up to some mischief. It doesn't look just right for them to be meeting way off here."

"That's right," agreed Joe, "but supposing they are desperate characters. They may make trouble for us."

"I guess not," rejoined Nat, "we're well hidden in the shadow here. There's not a chance of their seeing us."

"Well I hope not."

But the arrival of the horsemen on the trail put a stop to further conversation right then. There were two of them, both, so far

as the boys could see, big, heavy men, mounted on active little ponies. Their long tapaderos, or leather stirrup coverings, almost touched the ground as they rode.

"Hello, Al," exclaimed one of them, as the black mustached man came forward to meet them.

"Hello, boys," was the rejoinder in an easy tone as if the speaker had no fear of being overheard, "well, you pulled it off I see."

"Yes, and we'd have got more than the express box too if it hadn't been for the allfiredest noise you ever heard at the top of the trail all of a sudden. It came just as we was about ter go through ther pockets of the passengers. Sounded like a boiler factory or suthin'. I tell you we lit out in a hurry."

The speaker was one of the pony riders. As he spoke Nat gave Joe a nudge and the other replied with a look of understanding. The men who stood talking not a score of paces from them had taken part in the stage-robbery.

The man on foot seemed immensely amused at the mention of the "terrible noise" his companions said they had been alarmed by.

"Why, that was an automobubble," he laughed.

"A bubble!" exclaimed one of the others, "what in the name of the snow-covered e-tarnal hills is one of them coal oil buckboards doin' in this neck of ther woods?"

"Why, three kids are running it on a pleasure trip. The Motor Rangers, or some such fool name, they call theirselves. They

hitched the bubble on ter ther stage and towed her inter town as nice as you please."

"Did you say they called theirselves the Motor Rangers?" asked the other mounted man who up to this time had not spoken.

"That's right, why?"

"One of 'em a fat, foolish lookin' kid what can't talk straight?" asked the other instead of replying.

Nat nudged Ding-dong and chuckled, in imminent danger of exposing their hiding place. It tickled him immensely to hear that youth described in such an unflattering manner.

"Why yep. There is a sort of chumpish kid with 'em. For the matter of that all three of 'em are stuck up, psalm singin' sort of kids. Don't drink nor smoke nor nuthin'."

"True for you. We're not so foolish," breathed Nat to Joe.

"Why are you so anxious about 'em, Dayton?" asked the other rider who had remained silent while his comrade was making the recorded inquiries.

"Cos I know 'em and I've got some old scores to even up with them," was the rejoinder. "Do you remember what I told you about some kids fooling us all down in Lower California?"

"Yep. What of it?"

"Well, this is the same bunch. I'm sure of it."

"The dickens you say. Do they travel with much money about them?"

It was the black-mustached man who was interested now.

"I don't know about that. But their bubble is worth about

\$5,000 and one of them has a gold mine in Lower Cal. Then, too, they always carry a fine stock of rifles and other truck."

"They'd be worth plucking then?"

"I guess so. At any rate I'd like to get even with them even if we didn't get a thing out of it. Ed. Dayton doesn't forgive or forget in a hurry."

Small wonder that the boys leaned forward with their ears fairly aching to catch every word. Nat knew now why the outline of one of the riders had seemed familiar to him. The man was evidently none other than Ed. Dayton, the rascal who had acted as the millionaire Hale Bradford's lieutenant in Lower California.

Nat, it will be recalled, was captured on the peninsula and an attempt made to force him to give up papers showing his right to the mine, which the gang Hale Bradford had gathered about him was working. I can tell you, Nat was mighty glad that he and his companions happened to be there in the shadow; for, thought he to himself: —

"Forewarned is forearmed, Mr. Ed. Dayton."

But the men were resuming their talk.

"Tell you what you fellows do," said the black-mustached man. "Just lie off here in the brush for an hour or so and I'll go back to the hotel and look around. Then I'll come back and tell you if the coast's clear. They've got their auto out in some sort of a shed and if we could run it we could swipe the whole thing. Can you run an auto, Ed.? Seems to me I've heard you talk about them."

"Can a dog bark?" inquired the other, who if the memory of my readers goes back that far, they will recall had at one time been a chauffeur for Mr. Pomery.

"Very well then, that's settled. At all events it might be a good thing to smash up the car if we can't do anything else with it."

"That's right Al.," agreed Ed. Dayton's companion, "we don't want any nosy kids around in the mountains. They might discover too much."

"That's so, too. Well, you leave it to me, Al. Jeffries, and I'll bet you that after to-night they'll all be glad to go home to their mummies."

But right here something happened which might, but for good fortune, have caused a different ending to this story.

Ding-dong Bell, among other peculiarities, possessed a pair of very delicate nostrils, and the slightest irritation thereof caused him to sneeze violently. Now at the time of the year of which we are writing the California mountains are covered with a growth, called in some localities tar weed. This plant gives off an irritating dust when it is shaken or otherwise disturbed, and the hoofs of the two riders' ponies had kicked up a lot of this pungent powder. Just as the rascals concluded their plans a vagrant puff of wind carried some of it in Ding-dong's direction.

Realizing what serious consequences it might have, the lad struggled with all his might against his immediate inclination to sneeze, but try as he would he could not keep the ultimate explosion back.

"A-ch-oo-oo-oo-oo!"

It sounded as loud as the report of a cannon, in the silent canyon, and quite as startling.

"What in thunder was that?" exclaimed Ed. Dayton wheeling his pony round.

He, of course, saw nothing, and regarded his companions in a puzzled way.

Al. Jeffries was tugging his black mustache and looking about him likewise for some explanation. But he could not find it. In the meantime, the boys, in an agony of apprehension, scarcely dared to breathe. They crouched like rabbits behind their shelter awaiting what seemed inevitable discovery.

"Must have been a bird," grunted Ed. Dayton's companion.

"Funny sort of bird," was the rejoinder.

"That's right. I am a funny sort of bird," thought Ding-dong with an inward chuckle.

"Sounded to me more like somebody sneezin'," commented Ed. Dayton who was still suspicious.

"It'll be a bad day for them if there was," supplemented Al. Jeffries grimly.

"Tell you what we do, boys," came a sudden suggestion from Ed.'s companion, which sent a chill to the hearts of the boys; "let's scatter about here and look around a bit."

"That's a good idea," was the alarming rejoinder.

Nat was just revolving in his mind whether it would be the better expedient to run, and trust to hiding in the rocks and

chaparral, or to leap up and try to scare the others' ponies, and then escape. But just then Al. Jeffries spoke:

"No use wastin' time on that now, boys," he said, "it's gettin' late. You do as I say, and then in a while we'll all take a little spin in that grown up taxi cab of the Motor Rangers."

To the intense relief of the boys the others agreed. Soon after this the trio of rascals separated. Ed. Dayton and his companions rode back up the trail while Al. Jeffries started off for the hotel.

As soon as their footsteps grew faint Nat galvanized into action.

"We've got a lot to do in a very short time," he announced excitedly. "Come on, Joe! Shake a foot! We've got to beat Mr. Al. back to the hotel."

"How?" inquired Joe amazedly, but not doubting in his own mind that Nat had already thought the matter out thoroughly.

"We'll skirt along the mountain-side above him. If we are careful he won't hear us."

"That is, if Ding-dong can muffle that nasal gatling gun of his," grunted Joe. "Say, young fellow, the next time you want to sneeze when we're in such a tight place, just oblige us by rolling over the edge of the canyon, will you?"

"I c-c-c-o-o-ouldn't help it," sputtered Ding-dong sorrowfully.

"Couldn't," exclaimed the indignant Joe, "you didn't even try."

"I did too. But I couldn't remember whether the book said that you could stop sneezing by pulling the lobe of your ear or rubbing the bridge of your nose."

"So you did both?"

"Y-y-y-yes; why?"

"Well, they were both wrong. You should have wiggled your right big toe while you balanced a blade of grass on your chin."

CHAPTER VI

SOME RASCALS GET A SCARE

Everybody in the hotel at Lariat had long retired to bed, when three youthful forms stole toward the stable which had been turned into a temporary garage for the Motor Rangers' big car. From their bed-room window, the boys had, a few moments before, watched Al. Jeffries stride off down the trail to meet his cronies for the second time and inform them that the time was ripe to put up their attempted trick on the lads.

The doughty Al., on his return to the hotel after the conference at which the lads were eavesdroppers, had found nothing to excite his suspicion. The boys were all seated on the porch and apparently had not moved since he had last seen them. Al. had even sat around with them a while, trying to pump them, but of course, after what they knew of him, they did not give him much information. Nat had formed an idea that the man was a sort of agent for the gang of the famous Morello. That is, he hung about towns and picked up any information he could about shipments of specie from the mines, or of wealthy travellers who might be going through. In this surmise we may say that Nat was correct.

But to return to the three lads whom we left at the beginning of the chapter stealthily slipping across the moonlit space between the hotel and the stable. All three had changed their boots for

soft moccasins, in which they made next to no noise at all as they moved. Each lad, moreover, carried under his arm a small bundle. Their clothing consisted of trousers and shirts. Their broad-brimmed sombreros had been doffed with their coats. The Motor Rangers were, so to speak, stripped for action. And it was to be action of a lively kind as the event was to show.

On their arrival at the stable the boys slipped into an empty stall alongside their car, and undoing their bundles, hastily donned what was in them. Then Nat uncorked a bottle, while a strong odor filled the air. It was a pungent sort of reek, and from the bottle could be seen a faint greenish light glowing.

Their preparations completed, the Motor Rangers crouched behind the wooden wall of the stall, awaiting the next move on the program.

"And for heaven's sake sit on that sneeze!" Joe admonished Ding-dong.

Before very long the boys could hear cautious footsteps approaching the barn, and the sound of low whispering.

"The auto's right in here," they caught, in Jeffries' voice. "Say, what a laugh we'll have on those kids in the morning."

"They laugh best who laugh last," thought Nat to himself, clutching more tightly a small gleaming thing he had in his hand.

"This is pie to me," they could hear Dayton whispering, in a cautious undertone, "I told those kids I'd get even on them for driving me out of Lower California, and here's where I do it."

Nat gritted his teeth as he listened.

"You're going to get something that you don't expect," he muttered softly to himself.

The next instant the barn door framed three figures. Behind them were two ponies. The feet of the little animals were swathed in sacks so that they made no noise at all.

"Pretty foxy," whispered Joe, "they've padded the ponies' hoofs."

"Hush!" ordered Nat, "don't say a word or make a move till I give the signal."

"There's the car," whispered Jeffries, as they drew closer and the shadow of the place enclosed them, blotting out their outlines.

"Seems a shame to run it over a cliff, don't it?" put in Dayton's fellow pony rider.

"That's the only thing to do with it," said Dayton abruptly, "I want to give those kids a lesson they won't forget."

"So, you rascals," thought Nat, "you were going to run the car over a cliff were you? Oh, how I'd like to get my hands on you for just five minutes."

"Go on, Dayton. Climb into the thing and start her up," said Jeffries.

"Hope them kids don't wake up," put in Dayton's companion.

"They're off as sound as tops," Al. assured him, "I listened at their door after I came out, and they were snoring away like so many buck saws."

With the ease born of familiarity with motor vehicles, Dayton climbed into the driver's seat and bent over the steering wheel.

Presently there came a sharp click!

"Now!" whispered Nat.

As he gave the word, from behind the wooden partition upreared three terrifying objects. Their faces glared greenly and their white forms seemed to be shrouded in graveyard clothes.

In unison they uttered a dismal cry.

"Be-ware! Oh be-ware of the car of the Motor Ranger boys!"

"Wow!" yelled Dayton's companion.

As he gave the alarmed cry he fairly reeled back against the opposite stall and fell with a crash. At the same instant, an old claybank mule tethered in there awoke, and resenting the man's sudden intrusion, let fly with his hind hoofs. This shot the ruffian's form full tilt into that of Al. Jeffries, who was making at top speed for the door, and the two fell, in a rolling, cursing, struggling, clawing heap on the stable floor.

"Lemme up!" yelled Al. Jeffries, in mortal terror of the grim sheeted forms behind him.

"Lemme go!" shouted Dayton's companion, roaring half in fear and half in pain at the reminiscences of the mule's hoofs he carried.

But the startling apparitions, while at their first appearance they had made Dayton recoil, only fooled him for an instant. Springing erect from his first shock of amazement and alarm he gave an angry shout.

"Get up there you fools."

"Oh the ghosts! The ghosts with the green faces," bawled Al.

Jeffries.

"Ghosts!" roared Dayton angrily, "they're no ghosts. Get up and knock their heads off."

Suiting the action to the word he leaped from the car and charged furiously at Nat. The boy's fist shot out and landed with a crash on the point of his jaw, but although Dayton reeled under the force of the blow he recovered instantly and charged furiously again on the sheeted form.

In the meantime, Al. Jeffries and the other man had rolled apart and perceived the state of affairs. The noise of the impact of Nat's fist showed conclusively that it was no ghostly hand that had struck the blow, and the fact rallied their fleeting courage. As furiously as had Dayton, they charged upon the boys. The rip and tear of sheets, and the sound of blows given and received, mingled with the angry exclamations of the men and the quick, panting breath of the boys.

Suddenly, Nat levelled the little bright glinting thing he had clutched in his hand as they crouched behind the wooden partition. He pressed a trigger on its underside and a hissing sound followed.

"Sfiz-z-z-z-z-z!"

At the same instant the air became surcharged with a pungent odor. It seemed to fill the atmosphere and made nostrils and eyes smart.

"Ammonia!" shouted Al. Jeffries, staggering backward and dabbing desperately at his face where the full force of Nat's

charge had expended itself. As upon the other occasion, when the ammonia pistols had been used, the rout of the enemy was complete. With muffled imprecations and exclamations of pain, the three reeled, half blinded, out of the barn.

At the same instant the boys heard windows thrown up and the sharp report of a revolver.

"Fire! Thieves! Murder!" came from one window, in the landlord's voice, following the discharge of the pistol.

"Get to the ponies," roared Dayton, "we'll have the whole hornets' nest about our ears in a minute."

The others needed no urging. Grabbing Al. Jeffries by the arm, Dayton's companion, who was only partially blinded, made for his little steed. But Dayton, who had hardly received any of the aromatic discharge, suddenly whipped about and snatched a revolver from his side. Before the boys could dodge the man fired at them.

Nat felt the bullets fan the air by his ear, but fortunately, the man fired so quickly and the excitement and confusion was such, that in the moonlight he missed his aim.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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