

Chase Josephine

**Grace Harlowe's Overland
Riders in the
High Sierras**



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Jessie Graham Flower

Grace Harlowe's Overland Riders in the High Sierras

CHAPTER I

OLD FRIENDS GET TOGETHER

“Who is this Stacy Brown that you girls are speaking of?” questioned Emma Dean as the Overland girls sat down to dinner in Grace Harlowe’s hospitable Haven Home.

“He is my Hippy’s nephew,” Nora Wingate informed her. “You will like ‘Chunky,’ as he is known to his friends, and I promise you that he will keep this outfit from getting lonely,” added Nora laughingly.

“He was one of the members of the Pony Rider Boys’ outfit,” volunteered Grace. “You know we have heard of them several times on our journeyings. They used to go out in search of adventure every summer, so Stacy is a seasoned campaigner. We shall need him where we are going, too.”

“By the way, where are we going, Grace?” spoke up Elfreda Briggs. “I believe our destination is to be in the nature of a surprise – a mystery, as it were.”

“I just dote on mysteries,” bubbled Emma. “Of course I could have learned all about it had I not been too conscientious.”

“That is characteristic of your sex,” replied Hippy Wingate soberly. “May I ask you how you could have found out?”

“I thank you for the compliment, and regret exceedingly that I cannot return the compliment in kind. How could I have found out? Why, by the transmigration of thought.”

“The what?” cried Elfreda laughingly. “Is this some new freak, Emma Dean?”

“It may be new with me, but the principle is as old as the ages. I belong to the Society for the Promotion of Thought Transmigration. Our great and Most Worthy Master lives in Benares, India, where numbers of the faithful journey for instruction and inspiration once every two years.”

“Do you mean to say that you belong to that fool outfit?” wondered Hippy.

“I am happy to say that I do. I joined last winter, and, novice that I am, I have realized some remarkable results,” replied Emma.

“Nora, we ought to take her to a specialist before we start on our journey. It won’t do to have a crazy person with us. She might get us into no end of trouble,” suggested Hippy.

“Humph! I’d much prefer to be crazy than to have a bungalow head,” retorted Emma scornfully.

“A bungalow head?” exclaimed the girls.

“Yes. A bungalow has no upper story, you know.”

“Ouch!” cried Hippy Wingate, clapping both hands to his head. “Now that our Sage of India has spoken, suppose Grace and Tom enlighten us as to where we are going this summer. In view of the fact that this is my treat – that I have offered to pay the expenses of the Overland Riders on this journey – it might not be inappropriate for me to inquire where we are going. Elfreda’s question in that direction is as yet unanswered.”

Tom Gray nodded to his wife.

“I had intended to wait until Stacy Brown arrived, but as he is not a member of our little organization, there is no reason why our business matters should be discussed with him,” said Grace. “Dear friends, we are going to the High Sierras, the great snow-clad peaks of the far west. Adventure, hardship and health are awaiting us there. It will be a long journey before we reach the beginning

of our real objective, but I believe you folks will agree with me that the preliminary journey is well worth while.”

“You say that Hippy is paying the bills?” interjected Emma.

“He has so said. However, Tom will not have it that way, so we have agreed that Tom and Hippy shall share equally in the expense of the journey. Both feel quite rich now since they cleaned up on their big lumber deal in the North Woods,” replied Grace.

Elfreda said that such an arrangement would not please her at all, declaring that she would pay her own expenses.

“You have nothing to say about it,” laughed Tom. “The subject is closed. So far as our having Stacy Brown as our guest, is concerned, you all agreed to that when Grace wrote to you about his wish to join us on our summer outing. Are you still of the same mind?”

“Yes,” answered the girls in chorus.

“What about a guide? Is that arranged for?” asked Miss Briggs.

“Not yet,” answered Grace. “We thought we would leave that until we reached our destination. Oh, girls, I have some of the loveliest trips in mind for several seasons ahead, but I’m not going to tell you a word about them now. In the meantime, anyone that has a suggestion to offer will please offer it.”

“I have no suggestions to offer, but I should like to ask further light on this new dope that Emma Dean has sprung on us. What is it, and how does it work?” asked Hippy.

“If you won’t make fun of me I’ll tell you,” replied Emma. “The transmigration of thought is ‘tuning-in’ one’s mind to receive messages from the mind of another person, just as a wireless operator ‘tunes-in’ his instrument to catch the message being sent by another operator far away. In other words, persons so attuned to each other may converse, read each other’s thoughts and hold communion, even though separated by thousands of miles of sea or land or both.”

“Marvelous!” breathed Hippy. “For instance, please tune-in your mind and tell me what I am thinking about. Let’s see you do that, if you can,” he declared triumphantly.

“Our minds never could be in perfect accord, Theophilus Wingate. We are as far apart as the poles, but our range being so short, I can easily tell you what you are thinking about. Not being a deep thinker, you are as transparent as a piece of clear crystal.”

“Emma, don’t you say that about my Hippy,” protested Nora indignantly. “My Hippy has a mind as big as his heart, and – ”

“You are thinking,” interjected Emma gravely, “what a shallow little butterfly I am, but what you do not know is that that thought is merely the reflection of your own mentality. You are, in other words, seeing yourself as others see you, Hippy Wingate.”

A peal of laughter from the Overland girls greeted Emma’s retort. Hippy flushed, then joined in the laughter.

“This is so sudden,” he murmured. “I’ll tell you what you do. Wait until Stacy arrives, then you just practice your transmigration stuff on him. Stacy will make a wonderful subject for you. He is so temperamental, so spiritual, that I am positive you and he will get wonderful results.” Hippy winked at Nora as he said it.

None of the others had ever seen Stacy Brown, so they had not the least idea what was in store for them from the comedian of the Pony Rider Boys’ outfit. Stacy was an old campaigner, however, and Hippy knew that he would prove a valuable member of their party on the ride into the High Sierras. Stacy knew the open, and with his companions had experienced many exciting adventures in the wilder parts of the country. The Overland Riders, too, had had their full share of thrilling adventure, first as members of the Overton College Unit in France during the great war, where Hippy Wingate had won honors as a fighting air pilot, and Tom Gray at the front as a captain of engineers. However, they had a new phase of excitement to experience in “Chunky” Brown, and the first of those experiences was near at hand.

A shot suddenly broke the summer stillness of Haven Home, a shot that brought the Overland Riders to their feet.

“*Bang, bang, bang!*”

“Merciful Heaven! Are we attacked?” cried Elfreda Briggs.

“Whoop! Yeo-o-o-o-w!”

Three more shots were fired, followed by a succession of startling whoops and yells.

“What does it mean? I’m afraid!” cried Emma.

The Overlanders ran out of the dining room to the veranda, but no one was in sight.

“Chunky has arrived. Don’t be afraid, girls,” laughed Hippy Wingate. “He is on the other side of the house. There he comes!”

A short, fat young fellow, riding a gray bronco and perched high on his saddle, at this juncture dashed around the end of the house, firing two shots into the air as he passed the amazed group. Just as he swept past, his sombrero fell off, but Chunky did not stop. In a minute or two he was back, and, making a graceful dip from the saddle, reached down for the hat. As he did so, the pony swerved and Stacy Brown landed on the grass of Haven Home, flopped over on his back, and after a few dazed seconds got up and shook himself.

Stacy made a low bow to the spectators gathered on the veranda.

“Oh, my dear, my dear! Are you hurt?” begged Nora, running to him.

“Hurt? Of course not. I always fall off before dinner. It puts a keen edge on my appetite. Hulloo, folks! Glad to meet ye. Hey, Bismarck! Come here,” he ordered.

His dusty gray pony trotted to him and nosed Stacy’s cheek affectionately.

“Got anything loose around the house? I’m half starved,” urged Chunky. “Uncle Hip, introduce me to these beautiful young ladies. I’ve heard of you folks, and so has Bismarck. You’ll find him right friendly, especially the front end of him, but I shouldn’t advise you to get too close to the tail end. He is very light there. Let him browse in the yard while I feed the inner man.”

“Indeed not,” objected Grace. “I am not going to have my flowers trampled down after all my hard work on them this spring. Tom, please lead Stacy’s pony around to the stables. I will put something on the table for you at once, Stacy. Come right in. We were just finishing dinner when you arrived so violently. Oh! Pardon me. You haven’t yet been introduced to the girls.”

“Thanks!” bowed Stacy. “Thanks for the invitation, but come to think of it don’t introduce me until after dinner. I never like to meet strangers on an empty stomach.”

“This is Miss Elfreda Briggs, a rising young lawyeress, and here is the life of our Overland party, Miss Emma Dean. We address each other by our first names, so you may call her Emma. Come now, Stacy.”

“You’re a funny fellow, aren’t you?” said Emma, surveying the newcomer curiously as they walked towards the house.

“Then we are a pair of ’em, eh?” chuckled the fat boy.

“I am not a boy, thank my lucky stars and all the saints,” objected Emma. “I’ll have you understand that, sir.”

“Let the dove of peace rest over your touchy spirit, Emma,” laughed Grace chidingly.

“It isn’t a dove. It’s a crow,” corrected Chunky. “A thousand pardons, Emma dear. I – ”

“I’m not your dear,” answered Emma with considerable heat.

“Yes, you are, but you don’t know it. To realize it you will have to emerge from the unconscious state in which you now so sweetly repose,” teased Stacy, amid the laughter of the others.

“I should prefer to be unconscious all the time,” flung back Emma.

“Ah! The food does smell good. Food always has a strange effect on me, and really, I haven’t smelled any in almost a thousand years – not since breakfast this morning. By the way, where do we go and when do we start?”

“To the Sierras,” answered Tom Gray. “How are you, Chunky?” he added, extending a hand.

“Starved. How’s yourself?”

“I think after we go back to the dining room and after I have my dessert that I shall feel fit as a fiddle,” replied Tom. “To answer the rest of your question, we expect to start tomorrow forenoon. The ponies will be shipped in a car that is now on the siding at Oakdale.”

“Girls, what do you think of my nephew?” cried Hippy jovially, as they again seated themselves at the table.

“So far as I am concerned, I think that he is another of those bungalow fellows just like yourself, Hippy,” answered Emma. “Mr. Brown, may I ask if you ever have had any experience with mental transmigration?” she asked, turning to Chunky.

Chunky, his mouth full of food, surveyed her solemnly.

“Uh-huh!” he replied thickly. “I met one of those animals once in the Rocky Mountains. You see it was this way. We had been riding far into the night to find a suitable camping place, when we were suddenly halted by a savage growl just ahead of us. I went on ahead, with my trusty rifle ready, to slay the beast whatever it might be. Suddenly I saw him. He was the most terrible looking object that I’ve ever come up with in all my mountain experience. I threw up my rifle and shot the beast dead in his tracks.”

“Wonderful!” breathed Emma. “But what has that to do with mental transmigration?”

“I’m coming to that. It is wonderful – I mean it was. Will you believe it, that terrible beast came to life. Yes, sir, he rose right up and made for us. My pony bolted, and I fell off – just as I ordinarily do before meal time. My feet at the moment chanced to be out of the stirrups and I fell off. Well, I might have been killed – I surely would have been killed, but I wasn’t, just because of that stunt that you mentioned. I transmigrated myself out of that vicinity with a speed that left that terrible object so far behind that he just lay down and died again,” finished Stacy Brown solemnly, amid shouts of laughter, in which all but Emma Dean joined.

Stacy gave her a quick sidelong glance, and Hippy Wingate, observing the look, knew that war had been declared between Stacy Brown and Emma Dean.

CHAPTER II

AN INTERRUPTED SLEEP

“Right at this point,” said the traveling salesman impressively, “a train left the track and plunged into that ravine down there.”

“Any loss of life?” questioned Tom Gray.

“A great many. I was in that wreck myself. I was shaken up a bit, that’s all. You see I know how to take care of myself. We commercial travelers have to or we should soon be out of business. Nearly the whole train went into that ravine, and the car in which I was riding stood on end. I clung to the air-brake cord and thus was miraculously saved.”

“Humph!” muttered Stacy, hunching his fat shoulders forward. “You don’t look to be light enough to perch on an air-brake cord.”

The Overland girls glanced amusedly at Chunky and the traveling salesman. The entire party was enjoying the late afternoon mountain air from the rear platform of the observation car on the transcontinental train known as the Red Limited. Just inside the door sat other passengers, who had been enjoying the frequent passages-at-arms between Stacy Brown and Emma Dean. The train had been rumbling over bridges and lurching through narrow cuts, affording the passengers brief views of a swiftly moving scenic panorama of interest and attractiveness.

“As I was saying, the rope, in all probability, saved my life, as I was the only person in the car that came out alive,” continued the traveling salesman. “I’m in ladies’ fine shoes, you know.”

Stacy and Emma regarded the speaker’s large feet, glanced at each other and grinned.

“I’ll bet you couldn’t transmigrate them,” whispered the fat boy.

Emma elevated her nose, but made no reply to the trivial remark.

“I mean that I am selling ladies’ fine shoes, young man,” added the salesman, he having observed the fat boy’s grin. “My card.” He passed business cards to those nearest to him, and from them the Overlanders learned that he was William Sylvester Holmes, traveling for a Denver shoe firm. “My trade call me ‘Bill,’” he explained.

“Hello, Bill!” muttered Hippy, nudging Nora.

“May I ask what car you were in?” questioned a tall, bronzed passenger in a mild, apologetic voice.

“The same as this one.”

“Hm-m-m! That’s odd. I do not recall having seen you. However, I was in the other end of the car, which perhaps accounts for it,” said the stranger in a more humble voice.

William Sylvester flushed. Instead of being overcome, however, he shifted his conversation to another train wreck that he said had occurred a few miles further on at a place called Summit.

The faces of the Overland Riders expanded into discreet smiles at the mild way in which the tall man had rebuked the loquacious traveler. Grace and Elfreda, in particular, found themselves much interested in this big man. Grace asked a fellow passenger who the man was, and learned that he was Bill Ford, for some years sheriff of Sonora County. Ford had been observing the traveling salesman through mild blue eyes in which there appeared an expression of more than casual interest.

“It was that Summit wreck that nearly did me up,” resumed Holmes. “We went over an embankment there. Being in a berth in a sleeping car I was unable to grab hold of anything. The car played football with me, but I came off with nothing more serious than a broken arm. Oh, I have had my experiences! Were you in that wreck, too?” he asked, turning quickly to the sheriff.

“Never heard of it,” answered Ford carelessly.

“All that saved us was the fact that the cars were made of steel. We’ll pass Summit within the hour, and I’ll show you where we went off the rails that time.”

“Tell us about something that happened when the train didn’t leave the rails,” urged Stacy.

“With pleasure. I remember, some two years ago – it was this very train, I do believe – when a party of bandits held up a train on this line. That occurred between Summit and Gardner. They uncoupled the express car and, after compelling the engineer to haul it up the track a short distance, dynamited the car and robbed it of the treasure it was carrying.”

“They’ve been cutting up that same kind of caper quite lately,” nodded the sheriff.

“Di – id they rob the passengers?” stammered Emma Dean.

“In some of the cars, yes. In my car they did not. I held them off with my revolver. I – ”

“That was very careless of you. Why, sir, you might have shot yourself,” cried Stacy.

Mr. Holmes gave the fat boy a withering glance and resumed his story.

“After my display of courage the other passengers got brave, and with their assistance I drove the bandits off. However, I should not advise it. For the average person, the safe course is to sit still and take his medicine. Gentlemen, never offer resistance when a gang of bandits orders you to put up your hands, but put them up as fast as you can and let them stay put,” he added, fixing his gaze on Tom Gray who smiled and nodded.

“Yes, sir,” agreed Chunky. “That’s the way I always do.”

“Were you ever held up?” questioned the salesman.

“Many times. I put up my hands too, but there was a gun in both of ’em,” answered Stacy amid much laughter.

At this juncture a passenger asked the storyteller to tell them more about the hold-up, which he did without urging.

“The train in question was carrying a treasure, just as this one no doubt is. The bandits had obtained information of this fact from a confederate. They were right on the job when the train came along. After stopping the train they placed men at the car door to take up a collection from the passengers. All submitted tamely, as they should have done, except in the car where I was, and – we are approaching Summit now. From that point we go down grade for twenty miles or so, then we begin to climb again. We stop at Summit.”

“Isn’t it terrible, all that banditry. I’m afraid,” shivered Emma when a little later the party had gone to the dining car for supper.

“For one who can transmigrate as well as you can, there should be no fear,” suggested Hippy. “Just transmigrate the bandits to some other train.”

“I think we should transmigrate ourselves in the event of such a thing occurring,” vouchsafed Elfreda Briggs.

Sheriff Ford came into the dining car shortly after the train had left Summit, and nodded at the party in a friendly fashion.

“What has become of our story-telling friend, sir?” asked Grace.

“I saw him go into the smoking car ahead as the train was leaving Summit. He sent two telegrams before leaving. This shoe business requires a lot of telegraphing, it appears,” added the sheriff dryly.

“How do you know it was about shoe business?” demanded Stacy.

“Because I happened to see the last telegram.”

Tom Gray eyed the sheriff inquiringly, but the mild blue eyes of Mr. Ford conveyed nothing to him.

After a pleasant evening, during which they saw no more of the traveling salesman, the Overland party retired to their berths for sleep. Forward, near the express car, rode the Overlanders’ ponies in as much comfort as is possible to provide for animals en route. At every stop during the day one of the men of the party had run forward to look over the car of “stock,” as the riders called their saddle animals. Now, however, all were too soundly asleep to think of ponies, and above the rumble of the train might be heard the rasping snores of Stacy Brown and Hippy Wingate.

It was shortly after one o'clock in the morning when many of the sleepers were awakened by a sudden disconcerting jolt caused by an abrupt application of the air brakes. The train slowly settled down to a slow crawl, the hiss of the air from the brakes being plainly audible to those who had been awakened.

The train stopped. Nothing of an alarming nature seemed to have occurred, so the nervous passengers again settled down into their blankets, for the night air was chill and penetrating. Others lay awake, but there was nothing to hear except the snores which continued without interruption.

A few moments of this and then a subdued murmur of voices was heard just ahead of the Overlanders' car. A brief period of silence followed the murmur, then a man's voice, agitated and full of alarm, was raised so high that almost every person in the car was awake on the instant.

"What is it?" cried a woman's voice from behind berth curtains.

"We're held up! The train is held up!" cried the man.

"Robbers! Robbers!" screamed the woman who had asked the question; and a chorus of frightened voices took up the refrain.

CHAPTER III

THE HOLD-UP OF THE RED LIMITED

“Take it easy! Don’t lose your heads. We are safe for the moment,” urged a voice that sounded like Sheriff Ford’s. Whoever it was, his words brought a measure of quiet to the excited passengers who were shivering in the aisle in scant attire.

The passengers then sought their berths again and began dressing, for there would be no more sleep for them that night. Outside of the car there was not the slightest indication that anything out of the ordinary was occurring. An ominous stillness enshrouded the scene. Some one, more curious than the rest, stepped to the front platform of the sleeping car and, opening the vestibule door, looked out. The Overlanders learned later that it was Mr. Ford.

A rifle shot roared out, whereupon the sheriff prudently stepped back and closed the door. Several smothered screams were heard, and then silence once more settled over the car.

Up to the present time not a word had been heard from the Overland Riders. The curtains of their berths hung motionless, and Stacy Brown’s snores were louder than ever. Perhaps they were all asleep, but how that could be possible in the circumstances it would be difficult to understand.

The voice of Sheriff Ford once more focused the attention of the passengers on him.

“Men,” he said, addressing the passengers from one end of the car, “this train is being held up, but it does not look as if the passengers will be disturbed. If they are not, it means that the bandits are after the express car, in which, as I happen to know, there is a large amount of gold for shipment to the Pacific Coast for export. I am an officer of the law. The fact that I am not in my own county is sufficient excuse for my sitting down and letting the bandits have their own way, but I’m not that kind of a critter. I’m going out to take a hand in this affair, and I ask all the men in this car, who have weapons, to join me. Provided we get help from the other cars of the train, we can, perhaps, drive the robbers off. How many of you men are with me?”

Two passengers stepped out from their berths. The curtains of the berths occupied by Lieutenant Theophilus Wingate and Captain Tom Gray were thrust aside, the curtain hooks rattling on the rods overhead, and they were revealed clad in shirts, trousers and boots, each with a revolver strapped on, sitting quietly on the edge of his berth.

“Isn’t there another *man* in this car?” questioned Ford sarcastically.

At this juncture Grace Harlowe, Elfreda Briggs, Nora Wingate and Emma Dean stepped out into the aisle, each wearing a revolver at her side, and Emma very pale and shaking in the chill air.

“We are not men, but we are ready to do whatever you wish, Mr. Ford,” announced Grace.

Ford smiled and nodded.

“I thought so,” he said. “This appears to be about all we can depend upon. As for you young women, my hat is off to you, but this is no job for women. It’s a man’s job. What you can do, however, is to mount guard over this car and protect the other women. Can you all shoot?”

Grace said they could.

“Very well. Guard the vestibules, but in no circumstances open the vestibule door. The other passengers will please remain in their berths to avoid the possibility of being shot, and you young women will be careful that you do not shoot the train crew. Challenge first, then shoot, if you are not positive as to who any person is. Have you men ammunition?”

“Yes,” answered Hippy. “Lead us to it. We haven’t had any action in so long that we are going stale.”

“We will go out by the rear door,” announced the sheriff. “Please do not use your weapons until you are ordered to do so. The most we can hope to accomplish is to drive the bandits off – make them

think they are attacked by a posse. There isn't much chance of our being able to capture the gang or any of them, much as I should like to do so. Yet I'm going to try to get hold of at least one. All ready!"

"Be careful, Hippy darling," begged Nora as the little party moved towards the rear of the car.

"You watch my smoke," chuckled Hippy.

"Good luck," smiled Grace, waving a kiss to Tom as he turned to nod in return for her parting words.

Ford stepped out into the rear vestibule and peered through the window into the darkness.

"I'll go first," he said. "You follow when I give the signal. Not a word from any of you. Wait!" Lifting the trap-door in the vestibule floor, the sheriff let himself down on the steps, then cautiously stood up on the outside, revolver in hand for use in case of trouble.

"Come out!" he commanded in a low voice. "There appears to be no one here. There goes the express car!" he added as a slight jolt of the train was heard. "They've cut out that car and are going to pull it up the track a piece and force it open. We'll have to hurry."

Ford started on a run, the others falling in behind him.

Up to this time no one had given Stacy Brown a thought, but as the party was leaving the sleeper something awakened him. Then Stacy heard someone say, "robbers!" The fat boy tumbled out into the aisle in his pajamas.

"Wha – what is it?" he demanded sleepily.

"The train is held up," answered Grace.

"Oh! Wow!"

"Yes, and Tom, Hippy and Mr. Ford, with two other passengers, have just gone out by the rear door to see what they can do to help us out," announced Miss Briggs. "You are a fine brave fellow to sleep through all this uproar."

"They have gone to capture the bandit outfit and get their heads shot off for their pains," jeered the voice of a male passenger from the forward end of the car.

"You're a brave man, aren't you?" chided Emma, directing her remark at Stacy.

The fat boy blinked sleepily, then all of a sudden he woke up to a fuller realization of the situation. Emma's remark had passed unnoticed, but the taunt of the cowardly passenger had sent the blood pounding to Stacy's temples. The boy snatched his revolver from his grip and buckled on the holster, starting for the rear door at a run.

"We can't all be heroes," he flung back at the passenger who had jeered at the Overlanders. "Some of us are born cowards with a stripe of yellow a yard wide through us. Go to sleep, children! I'll bag the lot of 'em and fetch 'em back for you to look at."

Stacy fell through the opening in the platform, the trap-door still being open. In the fall, he bumped all the way from the platform to the ground, where he fetched up heavily in a sitting posture.

"Hey, you fellows! Where are you? Wait for me, I'm on the way," he bellowed. "I've got the medicine with me. Sing out where you are."

The fat boy started to run along the side of the train. He could not see his companions, but he was positive that they could not be far in advance of him.

"W-a-i-t!" he shouted.

"Who's that?" demanded Ford sharply.

"It sounds like Brown of our party," laughed Hippy.

"For goodness sake, go back and stop his noise or we'll have the robbers down on us," urged Ford. "Run for it!"

Hippy started back at a brisk trot, on the alert for the presence of bandit sentries. He nearly collided with Stacy, and, knowing that the fat boy was impulsive, Hippy feared that Stacy might take him for a train robber and shoot, so he dropped down the instant he discovered his companion.

"Stop that noise! Do you want to get hurt?" demanded Hippy sternly.

"Course I don't. I want to hurt a robber. Where are they?"

“You will find out soon enough if you don’t keep quiet.”

“That’s what I’m making a noise about. I want to call ’em out; then you’ll see what Stacy Brown and his little gun can do.”

“You are not to use your revolver until Mr. Ford gives you permission to do so. He is in command of our party. The bandits are supposed to be somewhere ahead of us. Come along, but don’t you dare make a sound. Where have you been all the time?”

“Sleeping. Isn’t that what folks buy sleeping car tickets for?”

“Hurry,” urged Hippy, who ran on, followed by Stacy, stumbling and grunting, making enough noise to be heard several car-lengths away. The two came up with the others of their party at the front end of the forward car, where Ford had halted.

“Where are they?” demanded Stacy. “I’m ready to capture the whole bunch. All I want now is to be shown. I’m a wild-cat for trouble when I get stirred up.”

“Silence, young man! I’ll do all the talking necessary. You will get your wish for action soon enough, and I reckon you’ll get some of the brag taken out of you, too,” retorted Ford sarcastically.

“Not if I see ’em first,” gave back Stacy belligerently.

“What is the order, Mr. Ford?” questioned Tom Gray.

“We will go off to one side. It won’t do to follow the railroad tracks. To do so would surely draw the fire of the bandits. There are several on guard not far from us,” he added in a whisper, having been observing closely as he talked. “I think I now know the lay of the land. Be careful, all of you. If you will look sharp you will see that the bandits have the treasure car near the mouth of the ravine that leads up into the mountains.”

“They’ve taken our stock car too,” groaned Stacy.

“That’s so. The ponies are gone, Ford,” whispered Lieutenant Wingate.

“I reckon they count on making a get-away on your horses,” answered the sheriff. “We’ll be able to block that game, I hope. Come!”

After having walked some distance parallel with the tracks, the sheriff’s party slowed down at a signal from their leader. Lanterns were seen moving about beside the tracks a short distance ahead of the sheriff. The safety valve of the engine was blowing off steam, the blow-off growing to a deafening roar that died down only when the engine pulled away from the express, baggage and stock cars. The locomotive came to a stop a short distance from the three cars, then the sound of a heavy object beating against the side door of one of the cars, was heard.

“They’re trying to smash in the door of the express car,” whispered Ford.

A volley of shots was fired at the car door by the bandits and was promptly answered by shots from within the car. The men in the express car appeared to be vigorously resisting the attack. They were firing at the band outside with such good effect that the robbers soon ceased their attempts to beat in the door with the section of a telegraph pole that they were using for the purpose. A period of silence followed while the bandits were holding a hurried consultation; then followed a movement among them.

“Let me shoot! They’re getting away, I tell you,” urged Stacy excitedly.

“Not yet, young man. Those fellows are up to more mischief, and I think I know what it is,” answered Ford in a tense voice. “Men, we must get in and get in at once or we shall be too late. It is time to move. Listen to me, then obey promptly.”

CHAPTER IV IN A LIVELY SKIRMISH

“We will crawl across the tracks between the engine and the cars,” whispered the sheriff. “Once on the other side we must get to the rear of the bandits, and as soon as we find cover there we shall begin to shoot. I hope we may be in time. When we reach the other side of the rails I wish you men to spread out, but I want to know where every man of our party is.”

Ford started at a run, the others following, fully as eager as the sheriff to get into action. They had barely reached the rails when there occurred a sudden, blinding flash, followed by a heavy report.

“Dynamite!” exclaimed Ford. “I expected that.”

“Our poor ponies,” groaned Tom Gray.

“If they get near my Bismarck he’ll kick the everlasting daylights out of them,” growled Stacy Brown.

“Can’t we do something?” urged Hippy.

“Yes. We’re going to do something and do it right quick,” answered Ford grimly. “Fellows, remember that the bandits have rifles, while we have only our revolvers. You look out for those rifles, is my best advice to you.”

They reached the other side of the railroad tracks without loss of time and without attracting attention to themselves, and it was soon evident to the sheriff’s party that the dynamite had not accomplished its purpose. The explosive had not been well placed, and the express car had been little damaged, though a hole had been dug out beside the tracks from the force of it.

“When I give the word, shoot, but shoot over their heads,” commanded Ford incisively. “Spread out and get down on your stomachs when you have taken your positions. Get going!”

The men of the party crept along, skulking through the bushes that grew on the mountain side along the railroad right of way. One by one the members of the party dropped down and lay awaiting the word of command. Every now and then a shot would be fired from the interior of the express car, answered in each instance by a volley from the bandits.

The preparations of Sheriff Ford up to this time had been made swiftly. The signal agreed upon for beginning the attack on the train bandits was two quick shots from Ford’s revolver.

The thin line of assailants waited in tense silence for the beginning of hostilities. The members of the little party were steady, although their pulses beat high, for no one deluded himself into the belief that this affair was going to be wholly one-sided.

Two sharp reports from Ford’s revolver, even though eagerly looked for, came so unexpectedly that every member of the party was startled, but their panic lasted for only a few seconds. Six heavy revolvers answered the signal. Three bullets sped harmlessly over the heads of the men who were trying to rob the express car. Three other bullets from the weapons of Ford, Tom and Hippy, by arrangement at the last moment before the party spread out, had been fired low enough to reach the legs of the bandits.

Of course there could be no fine shooting on account of the darkness, but the sheriff and the two men with him did very well indeed, if the yells of rage that came from the bandits could be depended upon as indication of hits.

“Down!” warned Ford when the revolvers had been emptied. Every man in the party well knew what was coming.

The expected was not long in arriving. A volley of heavy rifle shots ripped over the heads of the sleeping-car party. Ford’s party quickly reloaded as they lay; then began firing as rapidly as they could pull the triggers of their weapons, aiming whenever they saw anything to aim at.

During all this firing the orders of the sheriff were implicitly followed. Tom Gray and Lieutenant Wingate were as steady as rock, for they had been through skirmishes before. Stacy was a little excited, but more from eagerness to be up and at the bandits than from fear. The bandits were getting desperate. On account of the interruption there had been no opportunity to explode another charge of dynamite under the express car, and they were now too fully engaged to proceed with that work.

The desperadoes knew very well from the sound that the attackers were using small arms instead of rifles, thus leaving the advantage with the bandits so far as weapons were concerned. The robbers now began creeping stealthily up the slope, firing at every flash from a revolver, but Ford's party was keeping so low that there was no great danger of any one being hit except as they changed positions and ran for fresh cover, which they always did following a volley from the bandits' rifles. The sheriff's party was giving ground slowly, constantly changing positions under his orders, the officer himself now and then running along the line, giving quick low-spoken orders, without regard to his own safety.

The bandits had been drawn away from the tracks for some distance when Ford dropped down beside Hippy Wingate, who was firing from behind a small boulder.

"What is it, Sheriff?" questioned Hippy.

"I have a plan," answered Ford.

"Good! What is it?"

"Our revolvers won't hold them back much longer. Should they rush us someone is certain to get hit. In any event we shall then have to run for it. I don't like to do that."

"Not yet," answered Hippy with emphasis.

"I think we may be able to save your horses and the express car if you are willing to take a long chance."

"I have taken so many already that chances no longer are a novelty. What is it you wish me to do?" demanded Hippy.

"Go to the engineer and tell him to back up. Tell him to hit those three cars as hard as he dares – hit them as fast as he can without throwing them from the rails or injuring the horses. Having done that, let him back down the grade as quietly as possible so those fellows won't notice him. When he hits the express car he is to keep on backing until he reaches the train, which he is to push back a full half mile, and then stop and wait for us to finish our job. When we have done that we will fire a signal – three shots at intervals. I reckon the moon will soon be up so we can see what we are doing. Tell the engineer, too, that we will fire the same signal if we approach him, but, should he see anybody coming up who does not give that signal, he is to start up his engine and reverse for all he's worth. Get me?"

"I get you, Buddy."

"I would go myself, but I am needed here. When the time comes we shall have to make a sharp get-away ourselves, but if we save the train that will be enough. Do you think you can reach the locomotive?"

"Surest thing you know, old top," answered Hippy laughingly.

"Be careful! You will find that the engine is guarded, but I don't believe there will be more than two men guarding it, and perhaps this firing may have drawn them away, though I hardly think so."

"Leave it to me."

"Should you miss us on your return, make for the train as fast as you can. You're the right sort, Lieutenant. Pick your own trail and the best o' luck."

Lieutenant Wingate was off a few seconds later, running cautiously, now and then flattening himself on the ground to avoid the occasional volley. Hippy had no fear of the bullets that whistled over him, though he had a sufficiently intimate acquaintance with such missiles to hold them in high respect. That was why he dropped to the ground when firing was resumed. In a few moments he was out of range of the firing. He then straightened up and ran with all speed, parallel with the tracks, but keeping several rods to one side.

As he neared the locomotive Hippy proceeded with more caution. The night was now sufficiently light to enable him to see the figures of two men sitting on the bank beside the tracks on the right side of the engine. There was no special need for vigilance on their part now, for ahead of the locomotive a telegraph pole had been felled across the tracks, while to its rear were the cars and the bandits. All this made the guards somewhat careless so that they failed to see a figure dart across the tracks a few rods back of the locomotive tender.

Lieutenant Wingate crept along under the overhang of the tender, on the side opposite from the two guards. He did not know but there might be men on that side also, but soon discovered that there were not. He had crawled to the running board, by which entrance is gained to the locomotive cab, before he was discovered by the fireman.

“Sh-h-h-h!” warned Hippy just in time to check an exclamation that was on the lips of the fireman. “Lean over. I have a message for you – for the engineer. Don’t make a quick move, but just settle down. You might fire up the boiler a little. With the glare from the fire in their eyes those two fellows won’t see quite so clearly.”

The fireman, after a whispered word to the engineer, opened the fire door and threw in fresh coal, then crouched down with his ear close to the Overland Rider, whereupon Hippy briefly explained Sheriff Ford’s plan, at the same time acquainting the fireman with the situation to the rear.

Another whispered conversation across the boiler between engineer and fireman followed, with Hippy Wingate clinging on the step of the locomotive in tense expectancy. A sudden hiss of steam from the cylinders on both sides of the engine startled him, and the big drive wheels began slipping on the rails.

“Hey there! What are ye up to?” yelled a guard, making a leap for the running board.

The fireman responded by hieing a chunk of coal, which caught the bandit in the stomach, laying the fellow flat in the ditch beside the tracks. The remaining guard fired point-blank without effect at the engineer’s window, but the driver’s head was below the level of the cab window at that instant. The wheels gained a foothold, the engine began backing rapidly while the guard continued to shoot at the reversing hulk of steel.

“Good for you, Buddies!” cried Hippy enthusiastically.

The engineer did not slow down as he approached the scene of the hold-up, knowing that there were no persons in the way.

Hippy had dropped off before the engine gained much headway, and rolled over into the ditch and soon heard the tender hit the express car.

The bandits had heard the engine rumbling down the grade, but they were too busy shooting at Sheriff Ford’s party to be able to spare the time to interfere. In the meantime a new note had been added to the battle. The train crew, now taking courage, had gone to the assistance of the Sheriff, armed with revolvers, shot guns, iron bars and whatever else they could lay their hands on.

Grace Harlowe and her friends, in the meantime, however, remained on guard, and not even the trainmen could have got into her sleeping car without giving an account of themselves to the Overland girls.

The firing now grew fast and furious. Hippy heard it, listened attentively and realized that his little party was being assisted.

“I must get back and take a hand,” he muttered, making a wide detour with the intention of coming in to the rear of Sheriff Ford and his men. To do this he ran up the ravine from the railroad, near where the attack had been made.

Lieutenant Wingate had not proceeded far before he heard what sounded like hoof-beats. At first he feared that the ponies of his outfit had been taken; then he realized that this could not be the case.

The ravine in which he found himself was now fairly well lighted by the rising moon, and discovery was certain, the banks on either side being so steep that the Overlander knew that he could

not look for escape that way. Not caring to be caught in a trap, Hippy turned and began to retreat down the ravine, then halted abruptly, as he discovered a horseman coming up the ravine at a gallop. A man was running just ahead of the rider, the latter calling orders to the runner.

At this juncture, Lieutenant Wingate unlimbered his revolver and waited. The two men saw him, and the runner pointed to him, then dashed right past Hippy, shielding his face with a hand. As he passed, the runner fired a shot at Hippy.

“I know you!” yelled the Overlander, sending a bullet into the ground behind the runner. “I know your game, you scoundrel!”

Hippy, for the moment, apparently had forgotten the man on horseback, who was now to the rear of him, for Lieutenant Wingate, upon discovering the identity of the man on foot, was so amazed that all other thoughts took flight.

All at once the Overland Rider remembered. He wheeled like a flash and fired at the figure that was now towering over him. A blow, crushing in its force, came down on the head of the Overland Rider, felling him to the ground. The butt of a rifle in the hands of the horseman was the instrument that caused Hippy's undoing.

In the meantime, while Hippy was carrying Ford's message to the engineer of the Red Limited, the hot reception they were getting led the bandits to give up the fight and scatter. It was one of the fleeing train-robbers who had struck Lieutenant Wingate down.

CHAPTER V

ON THE TRAIL OF THE MISSING

“Have the train draw up here and wait for us,” Sheriff Ford directed, as the trainmen were about to return to their train after the bandits had finally been driven off. “Those ruffians have had enough, and won’t come back. Some of them are wounded, too.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” asked a trainman.

“No. I’m going to look for Lieutenant Wingate. He may be on the train, but, if he is not, have the engineer give us three whistles.”

“Hippy wouldn’t go back without us,” declared Tom Gray with emphasis.

“Go back to your train, men, while we look for our friend,” urged Sheriff Ford.

The train crew lost no time in following Ford’s advice, being eager to get away from that locality. Stacy Brown was sent back with them to put on his clothes. Stacy was shivering in his pajamas, but the fat boy had done his duty as steadily as any of his companions, and fully proven his courage, thus winning the admiration of Sheriff Ford and Tom Gray. The two other volunteer passengers, one a salesman for a Chicago grocery house, the other a Colorado ranchman, announced their intention of remaining with the sheriff to assist him in his search.

Shortly after the departure of the trainmen, three long blasts of the locomotive whistle told the party that Lieutenant Wingate had not returned to the train.

“That settles it, men. It is up to us to get to work,” declared the sheriff. Ford divided his forces and sent parties in various directions to search for the missing Hippy Wingate, hoping, and partly believing, that the lieutenant had probably met up with the bandits on their retreat into the mountains after abandoning their attack on the train, and secreted himself somewhere in the vicinity of the attempted hold-up.

The Overlanders were now in the Sierras, and the country all about them was wild and uninhabited. After surveying his surroundings with critical eyes, Ford took to the ravine up which Hippy had gone in attempting to get back to his companions, and soon found the place where the bandits had staked down their horses.

Two warning whistles, the engineer’s regular signal that the train was about to start ahead, caused the sheriff to run down the ravine to the railroad, at the same time firing three shots to recall his companions.

“Get aboard in a hurry!” shouted the conductor, leaning from the engine cab as the train came back to the scene of the attempted robbery.

“Wait! Has Lieutenant Wingate returned?” demanded Ford.

“No!” shouted Stacy Brown from the platform of the smoking car. “Didn’t you find him?”

“Are you positive, Stacy?” called Tom Gray, running up at this juncture.

“He is not on the train, Tom,” answered Grace Harlowe from a vestibule doorway. “The engineer said he dropped off just as the engine began backing down. Tom, you must search for Hippy. Nora is nearly wild from worry over him.”

“We are going to find him, little woman,” answered Captain Gray.

“Are you folks going to get aboard?” demanded the conductor insistently.

“No. We’re not going to leave that man here by a long shot,” retorted Ford.

“All right. Stay if you want to. We’re going ahead,” snapped the conductor.

“Stop!” ordered the sheriff. “You hold this train until I give you leave to move it. I am an officer of the law, and in command here for the present. Captain Gray, what do you wish to do?”

“Find the lieutenant, Sheriff.”

“Then, would it not be a good idea to unload your ponies?” asked Ford. “We may have to be here until tomorrow, and perhaps make a long journey into the interior, which we cannot well do on foot.”

“Yes. We will unload enough animals to carry your party,” answered Tom.

“Pull your train up to the mouth of the ravine and stop,” commanded Ford, clambering aboard the locomotive. “Get aboard there, boys.”

The train promptly pulled ahead while the sheriff had his final argument with the conductor in the locomotive cab. The argument was brief, but heated, the sheriff laying down the law to the angry conductor, who, by the time his train had reached the mouth of the ravine, was wholly subdued.

The Overland Riders stepped off the train to watch the unloading of the ponies and to get instructions from Tom and Mr. Ford.

“We are about twenty-five miles from Gardner,” said the sheriff, addressing Grace. “You people, I believe, intend to detrain there. Have someone unload your stock and then wait until we return. You will find a very fair little hotel at Gardner.”

“We will wait,” answered Grace composedly.

Ford called upon the train crew to assist in unloading the ponies. Unloading boards were obtained from the baggage car with which a rather substantial gangway was constructed, and down it the light-footed ponies – five of them – were led without the least difficulty. Rifles and light equipment for the party were unloaded, the rest of the Overlanders’ property and two ponies being left on the train.

While the unloading was in progress Tom Gray went to the dining car and purchased provisions, consisting of canned goods, pork and beans and a side of bacon. Stacy Brown, who had gone back to the sleeping car for something he wanted from his suitcase, dropped in while Tom was bartering, and helped his companion carry back their purchases. By the time they reached the head of the train all was in readiness for the departure.

Ford waved the lantern that he had borrowed from the conductor.

“Go ahead,” he called to the conductor. “Mrs. Gray, don’t forget to report to Gardner what has become of us. If we are not back in two days have them send a posse for us.”

“I understand,” answered Grace Harlowe.

“I say, you! You might have Emma do a little transmigrating for us while we’re away. I reckon we’ll be needing it,” called back Stacy.

As the train pulled out, the passengers, including the girls of the Overland party, were gathered on the platforms cheering. The searching party now consisted, besides Sheriff Ford, of Tom Gray, Stacy Brown and the two passengers who had been with them from the first, making five in all.

“Now, sir, what is your plan?” demanded Tom after they had saddled and made ready to start.

“I think we will follow up the ravine for a little way,” answered the sheriff. “Your man went this way. I know because the fireman saw him take to the ravine. One of you lead my horse; I’m going ahead on foot with the lantern.”

“If you have no objection, I will go with you,” offered Tom.

Ford nodded, and the two started away, the others, on the ponies, keeping well to the rear.

The two men in advance finally reached the point in the ravine where Lieutenant Wingate had been struck down. With lantern held close to the ground, the sheriff went over it on hands and knees, examining every foot of the ground.

“Stand where you are until I come back,” he directed, addressing Tom Gray. “Do you recognize this?” he asked, holding up a hat, upon his return a few moments later.

“It is the lieutenant’s hat,” answered Tom promptly, and Stacy Brown agreed with him.

“What’s the use of a hat without a head to wear it?” demanded Stacy.

“This!” replied Ford. “I have proved one thing. Our man came this way, but beyond this point the only trace of him is the hat. Unless I am much mistaken, he left here on the back of a horse,

and he went that way.” The sheriff pointed up the ravine. “It is fair to assume that he did not go voluntarily. The only inference possible, then, is that he has been taken.”

“Captured by the bandits!” exclaimed Tom.

Ford nodded.

“For what reason?”

“Candidly, I don’t know, Captain. We have got to find out, and it is advisable for us to go in search of the answer to that question as fast as we can. We will mount and move on.”

“I suppose I am the one who will have to furnish the brains for this party and find the missing man,” declared Stacy pompously, but no one laughed at his sally.

A minute later they were mounted and on their way up the ravine, the sheriff still carrying the lantern, which he held low, keeping his gaze constantly on the trail, which still was fairly plain and easy for an experienced man to follow. Stacy dropped behind a little way and produced a plum pudding can from his pocket. Opening the can, he calmly proceeded to eat the pudding.

“What’s that you’re eating?” demanded one of the two passengers.

“Pudding. A plum one.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Oh, back there in the diner,” answered Stacy carelessly.

“You stole a pudding, eh?” laughed the questioner.

“Oh, my; no, sir. How could you think such a thing? Don’t you know I wouldn’t do anything like that?”

“Oh! You paid for it,” nodded the passenger.

“I did not. Captain Gray did. You see it was this way. The captain paid for six cans of baked beans, but they gave him only five cans. The colored gentleman in the diner cheated us out of one can, and probably pocketed the difference, so I sort of helped myself to a pudding to even things up.”

“Humph! You are a young man of unusual ability. You should have been a lawyer.”

“I know it,” admitted Chunky.

An exclamation from Ford interrupted the conversation. The sheriff had picked up a handkerchief which Tom thought belonged to Hippy Wingate. They believed that the lieutenant had dropped it purposely, knowing full well that pursuit would follow promptly when his friends discovered that he was missing.

“We are on the trail all right,” cried the sheriff. “Look sharp and don’t make much noise about it, either.”

Daybreak found the outfit still in the saddle. Now that they could see, Ford threw away the lantern, and, after watering their ponies at a mountain spring, they pressed on with all speed. The men ate a cold breakfast in the saddle, there being no time to waste in halting to cook breakfast. Further, the smoke from a camp-fire would be a danger signal to the men for whom they were searching.

About nine o’clock in the morning the sheriff and Tom found a split-trail. The two trails led up a steep incline to a small plateau. There they discovered the remains of a camp-fire. Ford dismounted and ran his fingers through the ashes.

“There has been a fire here within a few hours,” he announced.

“And the trail has gone to pieces,” added Stacy Brown who had got down from his pony and begun nosing about.

“The bandits have taken different directions from here, haven’t they?” questioned the sheriff, glancing up.

“Yes. I’ll tell you what let’s do. Let’s shut our eyes and let the ponies decide which trail to take,” suggested Chunky gravely. “My Bismarck can follow the trail of a squirrel.”

“This is not a squirrel trail,” answered Ford briefly. “There are five of us men here. Four will take separate trails while one remains here. Let each man follow his trail for, say, three hours, then,

whether or not he has discovered anything, he will return to this point. We can then decide upon further action.”

“I have an idea that the bandits discovered that they were being followed,” suggested one of the two passengers. “Otherwise, why should they split up and take different trails?”

“Yes. I agree with you,” nodded the sheriff. Mr. Ford decided that one of the passenger volunteers should remain behind, then assigned the other passenger and Tom, Stacy and himself to follow the bandits’ trails, Ford selecting what seemed to be the most promising trail for himself.

Full understanding of what each one was to do was had, then the four rode away, leaving their guard where he could see, yet remain hidden.

The four trails led on for five miles without a break. Stacy, full of importance because of the duty assigned to him, was watching his trail closely, and, had he been less observant, he might have missed the point where the trail again split. Discovering this, he halted and sat regarding the two trails with solemn eyes.

“Sharp trick,” he nodded. “It doesn’t fool Stacy Brown, though.” He decided that the left-hand trail swung over towards the one that Tom Gray was riding, perhaps joining it a short distance from the junction where Stacy was at that moment. Having come to this conclusion, the fat boy had a bright idea. He would take a short cut across country. He knew that this was a risky thing to do, but he had several mountain peaks for landmarks and did not believe that he could go astray, so he started full of confidence, leaving both trails behind him.

An hour-and-a-half passed. Stacy still had thirty minutes to ride before it would be time for him to turn back towards the starting point, as he learned by consulting his watch, and he decided to make the most of those thirty minutes.

“There! Didn’t I tell you?” he cried as he rode out into an open space and instantly discovered the hoof-prints of several horses on the soft ground. “I was positive that I couldn’t be wrong. My time is up, but I have found the spot where the rascals got together. Now I’ll just turn about and follow it home. This is the trail we must follow to find Uncle Hip. Yes, I’ll go back and report.”

Stacy Brown’s intentions were good, and, well satisfied with what he had accomplished, he rode along humming softly to himself, now and then confiding his opinions to his pony. The little animal wiggled its ears as if it understood.

“Hulloa! There goes the sun. Seven o’clock! Who would have thought it? According to my watch I’ve been back at the forks for a quarter of an hour. I wonder if I really have?” Stacy regarded his surroundings narrowly. “No. I never saw any of you mountain-peak fellows before. I must have made a mistake in my reckonings, but I’ve got a biscuit in my pocket, and we’ll be able to go quite a distance on one biscuit, especially on this kind of a biscuit. Some biscuits go a great deal farther than others. This is one of the farther kind,” finished Chunky, performing a series of contortions as he tried to break off a piece of biscuit with his teeth.

The pony was laboring up a steep incline, the stirrup straps creaking in rhythm with the animal’s quick, short steps, Stacy’s body, from the belt up, bobbing upwards and backwards with monotonous regularity. The reins lay over the saddle pommel, thus giving the pony’s head full play and enabling it to snatch a mouthful of greens here and there.

Suddenly the little animal threw its head up and snorted. Stacy Brown ceased munching and sat staring wide-eyed.

“Suffering cats! You’re IT, Stacy Brown!” he gasped.

Jerking his rifle from the saddle-boot he fired three quick shots over the head of his pony.

CHAPTER VI

CHUNKY MEETS THE BANDITS

The pony had nosed its way around the base of a high rock, fetching up on a meadow, when Stacy made the discovery that startled him. What he saw was a group of men sitting about a cook-fire, hurriedly eating a meal while their ponies grazed on the mountain grass some distance from the fire.

The boy knew instantly that he had stumbled upon the bandits. He realized, too, in those brief seconds, that he must be a long way from the place where he was to meet his companions.

The desperadoes saw the intruder about the time that Chunky saw them. Used to emergencies and quick action, the men sprang for their rifles, which were standing against a boulder near at hand. Chunky also saw that Lieutenant Wingate was not with them. Had the boy thought twice he would have held his fire, but, as it turned out, his shots served a good purpose. It startled the bandits, causing momentary confusion, which gave Stacy an opportunity to head in an opposite direction, which he was not slow in doing.

“Ye-o-o-o-ow!” howled the fat boy in a shrill, piercing voice. The shots and the yells startled the bandits’ ponies as it had their owners. The horses threw up their heads, snorted and galloped into the mountain meadow, fully twenty rods from the camp, while the boy threw himself on the neck of his pony, fully expecting a shot or a volley from them, and dashed around the base of a high rock at a perilous pace. He had no more than reached the protection of the rock than the *pock, pock* of rifle bullets, as they hit the rock to his rear, reached his ears.

“Oh, wow!” howled Chunky. “I lost my biscuit.” In ordinary circumstances he would have gone back to look for the biscuit, but just now Stacy was in somewhat of a hurry. Fortunately for the boy, it took the bandits fully twenty minutes to round up their horses, by which time the fat boy was far in the lead, riding like mad. He had lost all sense of direction, but perhaps the pony had not. The little animal had taken affairs into its own control and was laying out its own trail.

The bandits, instead of following, rode with all speed farther into the mountains, but Chunky continued on at his same perilous pace, even though darkness had now overtaken him.

“Whoa, Bismarck!” commanded Chunky finally, reining in his pony. “Do you know where you’re going, or don’t you?”

The pony rattled the bit between its teeth, tossed its head up and down, and uttered a loud whinny.

“You said ‘yes,’ didn’t you? All right, if you know where you are, go along. You surely can’t know any less about it than I do.”

Rider and mount resumed their journey at a somewhat slower pace, and rode on until Stacy was brought to a sudden stop by a sharp, gruff word of command.

“Halt!” ordered a voice just ahead of him. The pony gave a startled jump that nearly unhorsed its rider.

“Oh, wow!” howled Chunky, and on the impulse of the moment he fired two quick shots at the sound.

“Stop it! It’s Tom Gray. Haven’t you any more sense than to blaze away before you know at what you are shooting?”

“Oh, fiddlesticks! Had you been through what I have you would shoot at the drop of the hat. Are you lost, too?”

“Lost? I am not lost. Don’t you know where you are?”

“No. I might be in the suburbs of Chillicothe for all I know.”

“The camp is only a few rods away,” Tom Gray informed him.

“You don’t say?” wondered Chunky.

“We heard you coming, and thought it might be Mr. Ford. How did you happen to come in over that trail?”

“Ask Bismarck. He knows all about it. I don’t. Got any news about Uncle Hip?”

“No. Of course you saw nothing of either him or the bandits.”

“I not only found the robbers, but I had a battle with them,” answered Stacy.

“What’s that? Don’t trifle, Brown. This is a serious matter,” rebuked Tom.

“I’m telling you the truth. It was this way. I was riding along, peaceful like, when, all of a sudden, biff, boom, bang! It seemed to me that fifty or a hundred men burst from the bushes.”

“So many as that?” laughed Tom.

“Well, something like that. I may be a dozen or so out of the way, but you see I didn’t stop to count them. I raised my trusty rifle and – well, to make a long story short, I fired right into that howling bunch of bandits. I suppose I emptied as many as twelve saddles.”

“Wait a moment,” urged one of the travelers who had joined them. “How many times did you reload?”

“Not at all. I didn’t have time.”

“Captain Gray, he emptied twelve saddles, so he must have shot two men with each bullet, as his magazine holds only six cartridges. I call that some shooting.”

“Is that so? Then I must have done as you say. Wonderful, wasn’t it?”

At this juncture, Sheriff Ford rode into camp and was quickly told of what Stacy had discovered. Mr. Ford, after a few quick questions, realized that the boy really had stumbled on the right trail and discovered the bandits.

“You did well, young man,” he complimented. “I thought I had struck a lead, but the trail pinched out. Can you take us to the place where you came on those ruffians?”

“No, but the pony can, or you can follow my trail. I reckon I left a pretty plain one. I know Uncle Hip better than you do, and if he has been able to get away from the fellows who captured him I’ll guarantee that he will find us. He would know we wouldn’t go away and leave him. For that reason I suggest that we build a fire to attract Uncle Hip’s attention, should he be in this vicinity.”

One of the men protested, saying it would be dangerous, but the sheriff agreed with Stacy.

“We will have a fire and will post guards to protect ourselves,” he said. “We shall not be bothered by the bandits to-night; I am positive of that. They know that the alarm has been given and that, in all probability, a posse is already on their trail. If nothing develops during the night – if we get no news from Lieutenant Wingate – we will start for Gardner in the morning and organize a big searching party to comb the mountains for him.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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