

Scott Morgan

Boys of Oakdale Academy



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CHAPTER I.

A BOY OF MYSTERY

“He’s a fake,” declared Chipper Cooper positively, backing up against the steam radiator to warm himself on the other side. “I’ll bet a hundred dollars he never was west of Scranton, Pennsylvania.”

“A hundred dollars,” drawled Sile Crane, grinning. “Why don’t yeou bate something while you’re ababout it? Nobody’d bother to take a measly little wager like that. Now I’ve kinder got an idee that the new feller really comes from Texas, jest as he says he does. I guess he ain’t no fake.”

“Oh, is that so!” retorted Cooper, a bit warmly. “Well, I’ll talk business to you, Mr. Crane; I’ll really bet you fifty cents Rodney Grant never saw the State of Texas in his life. Now put up or shut up.”

“I don’t want to bate on it,” said Sile; “but I guess I’ve got a right to my opinion, and I cal’late Rod Grant ain’t no fake Westerner.”

“I knew you didn’t have the sand to back your opinion,” chuckled Chipper. “It’s my idea that Grant is a fake and you’re no better.”

“Awful bad pun, Chipper,” said Chub Tuttle, a roly-poly, round-faced chap who was munching peanuts. “I think you’re right, though; I don’t believe he’s a Texan. Why, he hasn’t a bit of brogue.”

“Bub-brogue!” stuttered Phil Springer, who had a slight impediment in his speech. “Texans don’t have a brogue; they have a dialect – they talk in the vernacular, you know.”

“Talk in the ver – what?” cried Cooper. “Where did you get that word, Phil? I don’t know what it means, but I do know Rod Grant talks through his hat sometimes. When he tells about living on a ranch and herding cattle and breaking bronchos and chasing rustlers and catching horse thieves, he gives me a cramp. He certainly can reel off some whoppers.”

At this point up spoke Billy Piper, commonly known as “Sleuth” on account of his ambitions to emulate the great detectives of fiction.

“Of late,” said Billy, “I’ve been shadowing this mysterious personage who came into our midst unannounced and unacclaimed and who has been the cause of extensive speculation and comment. My deduction is that the before-mentioned mysterious personage is a big case of bluff, and I must add that, like my astute comrade, Cooper, I gravely doubt if he has ever seen the wild and woolly West. His tales of cowboy life are extremely preposterous. All cowboys are bow-legged from excessive riding in the saddle; the legs of Rod Grant – I should say the before-mentioned mysterious personage – are as straight as my own. Westerners wear their hair long; Grant – the before-mentioned mysterious personage – has his hair cut like any civilized human being. Likewise and also, he does not talk as a true Westerner should. Why, nobody has ever heard him say ‘galoot’ or ‘varmint’ or any of those characteristic words all Westerners scatter promiscuously through their conversation. Therefore – mark me, comrades – I brand him as a double-dyed impostor.”

“Speaking about Grant, I presume?” said Fred Sage, joining the group by the radiator. “I think you’re right, Sleuth. Why, I told him only last night that no one around here believed him the real thing, because he didn’t look like it, act like it or talk like it. What do you suppose he said? He claimed he had to keep on guard all the time to prevent himself from using cowboy lingo – said he was sort of ashamed of it and trying to get out of the habit.”

Berlin Barker, a tall, cold-eyed chap who had been listening without comment to this conversation, now ventured to put in a word.

“Fellows like this Grant are more or less amusing,” he observed. “I’m also inclined to think him a fraud, and I have good reasons. Didn’t Captain Eliot try to get him out for football practice the very day he showed up here at Oakdale Academy? He looks stout and husky, and Roger thought he might work in as a substitute; but, after watching practice one night, he wouldn’t even step onto the field. It’s my opinion the game seemed too rough and rude for this wild and woolly cow-puncher. If anybody should ask me, I’d say that he has all the symptoms of a chap with a yellow streak in him. I don’t believe he has an ounce of sand in his makeup.”

“Somebody ought to be able to find out if he really does come from the West,” said Tuttle. “Why don’t we ask his aunt?”

“Go to the ant, thou sluggard,” chuckled Cooper. “Nobody else wants to ask her. People around here know enough to keep away from Priscilla Kent.”

“Oh, she’s cracked,” stated Piper. “She’s lived here in Oakdale for the last twenty years, and nobody has ever been able to find out much of anything about her. Take a woman who lives alone with only a pet parrot and a monkey for companions, and never associates with the neighbors, and talks like an asylum for the simple-minded, and you have a proposition too baffling for solution even by my trained and highly developed mind. My deduction is – ”

“Here comes Roger!” exclaimed Fred Sage. “Let’s ask him what he thinks about the fellow.”

It was the hour of the noon intermission at Oakdale Academy, and, the season being early November, with the atmosphere biting cold, Roger Eliot stepped forward to warm his hands at the radiator, near which hovered the group who were discussing the new boy. Roger was a tall, well-built, somewhat grave-looking chap, whose sober face, however, was occasionally illumined by a rare smile. The son of Urian Eliot, one of the wealthiest and most influential men of the town, Roger, being a natural athlete, was the recognized leader among the academy boys.

“Hello, fellows,” was his pleasant greeting. “Talking football?”

“No,” answered Hayden; “we were discussing that fellow Rodney Grant. We were trying to size him up, and it seems to be practically the universal opinion that he’s a fraud. We doubt if he has ever been west of the Mississippi. What do you think about it?”

“Well,” confessed Roger slowly, “I’ll own up that I don’t know what to, think. Still, I don’t see any reason why he should lie about himself.”

“Some fellers had rather lie than eat,” observed Sile Crane.

“Why shouldn’t he lie about himself?” questioned Cooper. “He’s told some wallopers about everything else. I never heard a fellow who could bust the truth into smithereens the way he can.”

“Oh,” said Eliot, “I know what you mean. When he first struck Oakdale he didn’t have much of anything to say, and you fellows kept at him, asking questions, until I fancy he grew weary and took a notion to sling off a few big yarns for his own amusement.”

“Putting aside the question as to whether he came from the West or not,” said Barker, “I’ve decided that he’s a quitter – in short, a coward.”

“What makes you think so?” asked Roger.

“Why shouldn’t I think so? Didn’t you try to get him out for football practice? and didn’t he refuse after watching us work one night? It was too husky business for the gentleman who had punched cows and hunted cattle thieves. Why, even Hunk Rollins doesn’t take any stock in that chap, Eliot, and yesterday Hunk backed him down completely. Rollins had a chip on his shoulder and was looking for trouble. He picked out Grant and loaded him with jibes and insults. The cow-puncher swallowed them all. Any one with a particle of grit would have climbed all over Hunk.”

“Perhaps you may be right, boys,” admitted Roger; “but don’t forget that you made a blunder in sizing up Ben Stone when he came here. It is possible you’re just as far wrong about Rodney Grant. He – ”

“Sh!” hissed Piper suddenly, as the door swung open and another boy entered the room. “Here he comes now!”

CHAPTER II. PLAYING THE PART

For a few moments they stared in dumfounded silence at the latest arrival. Sile Crane was the first to speak; a grin broke over his homely face, and in a suppressed tone he drawled:

“Great codfish! He’s sartainly come to school this artemoon all dressed up fit to kill.”

“Oh, ginger!” snickered Chipper Cooper. “Here’s the real wild and woolly article now. Just look at it!”

Chub Tuttle snorted, clapping a hand to his mouth to check the spray of half-munched peanuts which flew from his lips. “Scuse me,” he entreated, as Barker fell back a step, frowning and producing a handkerchief to brush some of the peanut crumbs from his coat sleeve. “Couldn’t help it. Did you ever see such a funny sight in all your life?”

Even Roger Eliot could not repress a smile as he gazed at the new boy in Oakdale who professed to come from the State of Texas; for never before had a person thus attired ventured to cross the threshold of the academy, and in a moment the eyes of nearly every boy and girl in the room were focused upon Rodney Grant.

Grant was a well-set-up youngster of sixteen, somewhat large for his age, and yet not large enough to be noticeably overgrown. He had clear, dark brown eyes, which were almost black; a strong, well-formed, prominent nose; a square, firm chin; and a mouth which, while in no way disagreeable, had something about it to give the impression that the boy could say “no” and stick to it. In his dark brown hair there was a glint of red. The short time he had spent as a student at Oakdale Academy had not yet begun to weaken perceptibly the deep tan of his cheek and neck.

Set a bit rakishly on the boy’s shapely head was a battered, wide-brimmed old felt hat that looked as if it had seen any amount of wear. The crown was encircled by a buckled leather strap, and in front the brim had been turned up and fastened with a thong. Neither coat nor vest covered the loose woollen shirt, which had been left open a bit at the throat. A dark red handkerchief was knotted about the lad’s neck. His legs were encased in shiny, soiled, calfskin chaps, fringed down the outer seams; and these likewise bore the tokens of much wear. Hanging loosely from the point of his left hip was a cartridge-looped belt that supported a pistol holster dangling low against the upper part of his right leg. On his feet were tight, thin-soled, high-heeled boots, to which were attached huge roweled spurs that clanked with every step he took.

Calm, serene, without the flicker of a smile on his face or a symptom of self-consciousness in his manner, Rod Grant glanced around and then walked toward the staring lads near the steam radiator. His high-heeled boots gave him a somewhat awkward gait.

“Howdy, gents,” he saluted. “This yere weather is sure some nipping to-day. If it continues, it’s right certain she’ll freeze up tight before long. Out on the Canadian we’d get it this cold on the front edge of a no’ther.”

Berlin Barker’s lips curled scornfully as he openly took the measure of the speaker from head to feet. “On my word,” he sneered, “you’re a sight. You’re all dressed up, aren’t you?”

“Sure,” was the cheerful answer. “Not knowing but that I might be invited out to afternoon tea or some sort of social function, I spent as much as five minutes adorning my person for the occasion. I own up I’m a heap more familiar with the social etiquette of the range, being generally accustomed to taking my grub from the tail end of the cook’s wagon; but, when he sent me East, my old man he says to me, says he, ‘Rod, when you’re in Rome you must seek some to emulate the Romans.’ Therefore, being plenty dutiful, I feel it incumbent to stand up and meet what’s coming without shying or bucking.”

“Oh, slush!” snickered Cooper. “Who said he didn’t talk in the ver – what-do-you-call-it?”

“I presume,” said Barker, “that he picked up that line of talk from some cheap Western novel.”

“You’ve certain got two more guesses coming, partner,” retorted Grant, still unruffled. “Since locating on this here section of the range, I’ve spent the greater part of my time in the right painful effort to talk pure Bostonese. What has been the result? You gents hereabouts have acquired the impression that I’m an impostor, and therefore all my trouble has gone for naught. I allow you’ll admit that this must be a heap discouraging to a person with a naturally retiring and sensitive nature – that’s me. I now give you notice that henceforth and hereafter I’m Rodney Grant of the Star D Ranch, Roberts County, Texas Panhandle, and any gent who doesn’t approve of my style is at liberty to segregate himself from my society.”

Roger Eliot laughed outright, which was unusual for him.

“That’s plain enough,” he said. “A great many people find it necessary to play the part in order to be accepted as the real thing.”

Grant flashed him a look from those deep brown eyes; to his surprise, here was a fellow who seemed to understand.

Barker shrugged his shoulders. “My dear chap,” he said patronizingly, “I’m afraid you were rather careless in letting us get onto your curves. Tell us, how much did that rig-out cost you? I presume you bought it from some fake cowboy in a dime museum.”

“I’ve already noticed,” returned Rodney, “that you’re a presuming sort of a gent. Being of a forgiving nature, I’ll overlook it and charge it up to your ignorance.”

Barker flushed with anger. “Cut it out, you freak!” he exclaimed. “Why, you’re a sight! Folks around here weren’t born yesterday, and you can’t fool anybody with your bluff. Next thing we know you’ll be calling us tenderfeet; but we’re not so tender we can’t tell the difference between a fake and the genuine article.”

“I pray thee, be not so harsh, Berlin,” chuckled Cooper. “Why, we can all see by looking at his clothes that Mr. Grant is a real, genuine, *bona fide* cow-puncher from the Texas Panhandle, just as he claims to be. At least, he not only looks it, but he’s slinging the lingo.”

Sleuth Piper shook his head doubtfully. “He hasn’t yet said ‘whoop’ or ‘galoot’ or ‘varmint,’” he muttered.

“Thanks, my friend,” bowed Grant, beaming on Cooper. “It’s sure a relief to know that at last I’m making an impression on one person, at least.”

“Have a peanut,” invited Chub Tuttle. “Can you shoot a pistol?”

“I’m a rip-roarer with a gun.”

“Know how to throw a lasso?”

“Sure. I can rope and tie a wild steer in thirty-six seconds. The world’s record is something like forty-one and a half. But that’s because I’ve never competed in a public steer-roping contest.”

“Bah!” sneered Barker. “Did you ever see a longhorn steer in your life?”

“At least,” returned Grant, gazing fixedly at him, “I’ve seen a long-eared donkey.”

“Score one for the gent from the Panhandle,” snickered Cooper.

“You insolent puppy!” breathed Barker, in a low, savage voice. “You want to be careful of your language, or you’ll have a fight on your hands. Somebody will – ”

“I never fight with my fists.”

“No, I don’t suppose you ever fight with anything but your mouth. You showed the white feather when Hunk Rollins got after you. It’s my opinion you’re a big case of blow.”

“Your opinions are of so little value that they don’t disturb me any at all.”

“Quit it, fellows!” interposed Eliot, stepping forward to keep them apart in case Barker should go at Grant. “You know what it means to have a scrap here, Berlin.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t touch him – here; but, if he isn’t more civil, I’ll catch him somewhere and teach him a lesson.”

With which threat Berlin turned disdainfully and walked away, watched as he departed by the eyes of Grant, in which there shone a strange gleam of mingled anger and amusement.

“Yeou better not git that feller stirred up, Mr. Cow-puncher,” advised Sile Crane. “He’s a bad critter when he’s mad. He never forgits a grudge.”

“I ask you fair and square, gents,” said Grant, “did I begin it? Didn’t he start the rumpus by spurring me a plenty with slurs and insults? Never mind, I won’t fight him anyhow, because, as I before stated, I don’t fight.”

“How about fighting cattle thieves and Injuns?” questioned Cooper.

“That’s a heap different. Having a right violent temper of my own, I reckon it’s best for me to keep it hobbled constant and regular. Gents, when I’m riled I’m bad – I sure am. I opine I’ve caused my old man no end of disturbance and worry. This yere is the first school I’ve never been expelled from – and there’s enough time for that. Last school I attended, the master allowed it was his duty to give me a ferruling. It certain was the mistake of his life, for he got me going some, and I clean lost my head. As a result, I threw him, traddled him, and lifted his scalp.”

“You wha-what?” gasped Phil Springer. “You don’t mean that you actually sus-scalped a schoolmaster, do you?”

“Sure. I removed a portion of the gent’s topknot with my trusty scalping knife. I opine it was a severe shock to his system, but he recovered in time, though he remained baldheaded in a spot as big as the palm of your hand.”

“You must be dangerous,” laughed Cooper. “I suppose you learned the scalping business that time you was captured by Injuns. You know you said you were captured once.”

“Such was the fate which befell me.”

“Tell us ababout it,” urged Crane. “Haow did yeou escape?”

“By breaking the bonds with which the savages tied me. I am the possessor of sure enough amazing strength, which enabled me to accomplish the seeming impossible. There were three of the onery redskins. They caught me when I was sound asleep, and they were taking me to their tribe for the self-evident purpose of amusing themselves by burning me at the stake, or something like that. It was a journey of two days or more. The first night we camped in a dark and lonely valley. My captors regaled themselves on roast beef cut from one of my father’s steers which they had stolen, but not a morsel did they offer me, although I was mighty near starved to death. When they had eaten their fill they rolled themselves in their blankets and slept. There I was, tied hand and foot, and apparently helpless. I watched the campfire die down and the stars twinkle forth in the lonely sky. I knew it was up to me, and so when the aborigines were securely wrapped in the arms of Morpheus I proceeded to put forth my energies to burst my bonds, and finally succeeded.”

“I s’pose yeou sneaked off and took to your heels then, didn’t ye?” questioned Crane.

“No, indeed, not any. I knew they would awaken and follow me. I knew there was only one salvation for me: I must destroy all three of those red fiends.”

“Did yeou kill ’em?”

“I confess that I did, but never in the history of the world have redskins died in such a manner. They laughed themselves to death.”

“How was that?” asked Tuttle, so interested that he had forgotten to eat peanuts.

“As they slept I crept upon them, one by one, seized them, gagged them, bound them all. This I did to each one in turn, without arousing the others. Having them securely bound, I meditated on my future course. It sure seemed some inhuman to hike off and leave them trussed up to starve or to be eaten by coyotes. I shuddered a plenty at the thought of tomahawking or shooting them. It was a right long time before I finally hit upon a mode of execution. Finally I removed their moccasins – stripped their feet bare. Then from the topknot of the chief I plucked some feathers. With those very feathers I proceeded to tickle first one and then another of the redskins upon the soles of his feet. In

about two jiffys I had all three laughing and squirming, and the more I tickled them the more they laughed. I kept it up, gents, until those redskins laughed themselves to death.”

“Ge-gee!” exploded Phil Springer. “What a whopper!”

“Pretty fair,” nodded Roger Eliot – “pretty fair.”

Prof. Richardson entered. He paused a moment to peer over his spectacles, and his eyes fell on Rodney Grant. Slowly an expression of wonderment crept over the old man’s face.

“What’s this, young man – what’s this?” he inquired, coming forward and removing his knit woollen gloves. “What are you doing here in such a rig?”

“I reckon you’ll pardon me, Professor, but people around this neck of the woods seem to think I’m a fake Texan because I don’t look it, and therefore I took a notion to wear my cowboy regalia this afternoon.”

The professor shook his head disapprovingly. “Go home,” he said – “go home at once and change those clothes for civilized garments. I certainly shall not approve of your wearing such a rig while you attend this school.”

“Fate is against me,” murmured Rodney Grant, as he turned toward the door.

CHAPTER III. ROD'S WONDERFUL JUMP

Prof. Richardson was giving his attention to the class in physiology when Rod Grant returned to the academy. The boy from Texas walked quietly down the center aisle and took his place in the class. In truth, as he now appeared, there was nothing about him, save possibly the deep tan of his cheeks, to give him an appearance different from that of any clean, healthy, manly-appearing Eastern youngster. He wore a well-fitting suit of dark blue serge, a negligée shirt, and a carelessly knotted crimson four-in-hand tie. On his feet were stout, serviceable, yet distinctly well made and stylish tan shoes.

Berlin Barker, who had been reciting, sat down. The principal surveyed Rod over his gold-rimmed spectacles, which perched precariously on the end of his nose, nodding his head slightly as if inwardly approving of the change in the new boy's appearance.

"Grant."

"Yes, sir?"

"You may recite."

Rodney stood up.

"How many bones are there in the entire skeleton of an adult?"

"Two hundred, sir."

"You may state the number and give the names of the various bones of the human arm and hand."

Grant did so without hesitation, speaking in a clear, well-modulated voice, his language having no touch of the vernacular which Phil Springer had asserted to be characteristic of a Westerner. His accent and inflection, it is true, differed slightly from that of Easterners in general, but this difference was not sufficient to attract the notice of a person who was not particularly observing.

"Very good, Grant," nodded the principal. "You may be seated. I have the pleasure of informing this class that I have been enabled, at considerable expense and after no end of trouble, to purchase a complete and perfect human skeleton, which arrived yesterday and is now stored in the laboratory. I obtained this skeleton for demonstrating purposes; but, not wishing to disturb those scholars who are naturally nervous or timid, I shall not display it before the school during the period of any regular session. To-morrow, however, such members of this class as may desire to remain after the last period will be given the privilege of seeing and examining the skeleton. I wish it understood, however, that no one is positively required to remain for that purpose, and I would suggest that the timid ones do not remain. Class dismissed."

"Jiminy!" whispered Cooper in Sleuth Piper's ear. "Where d'you s'pose he got his old skeleton?"

"My deduction is," answered Sleuth, "that he obtained it from a cemetery."

"What a grave thing to do," grinned Chipper. "On the dead, it gives me a shiver."

At intermission some of the boys gathered near the academy steps and talked about the skeleton.

"My eagle eye detected the long, gruesome-looking box in the express office yesterday," said Piper; "but on lifting one end of it, which I did, my deduction was that the box, being very light, could not possibly contain a subject for a funeral. Ever since then the mystery has preyed upon me, but at last the prof's statement has cleared it up to the satisfaction of all concerned."

"Be yeou goin' to see the old thing to-morrer?" questioned Crane.

"I shall take pleasure in doing so."

"Pleasure! Great scissers! I don't see no fun in lookin' at a skeleton. The prof is a crank about such things; everybody says so."

"I sure can't see the necessity of exhibiting a genuine skeleton before the class," said Rod Grant. "If we were medical students, it would be different; but, as far as I'm concerned, I can acquire all the

knowledge I desire about the bones of the human body without examining such human framework at short range.”

“It can’t be possible,” said Chub Tuttle, “that a fellow who has scalped schoolmasters and tickled Injuns to death is afraid of a harmless skeleton.”

“I don’t admit any that I’m afraid of the thing,” returned Grant; “but I simply say, what’s the use?”

Standing near, Berlin Barker shrugged his shoulders and laughed an unspoken sneer, which caused the warm blood to glow through the tan of Rod’s cheeks. Turning on his heel, Barker joined some fellows who were jumping at the corner of the academy. Grant’s gaze followed him. In a moment or two, urged to do so, Barker, who prided himself on his ability as a jumper, stripped off his coat and entered into competition with Jack Nelson.

Rod drew near and looked on.

“That’s pretty fair,” he observed, when Berlin, doing his level best, had beaten Nelson by a good six inches.

Barker turned on him. “Pretty fair, you lead-heeled gas bag! Perhaps you think you can beat it?”

“Maybe so,” nodded Rod.

“I’ll bet ten dollars you can’t come within a foot of my mark.”

“Keep your money in your clothes, partner; you may need it some.”

“You’ve been blowing around lately about what you can do, but nobody has ever seen you do anything. I’m not from Missouri, but you’ve got to show me, and there are various other fellows who feel the same way.”

“I’m out of practice,” said Grant, slowly removing his coat and dropping it to the ground; “but, as long as you’ve put it up to me that fashion, I opine I’ll have to show you a stunt.”

Eagerly the boys gathered around to watch the fellow from Texas, who stepped forward with a calm, confident air and toed the mark. Backward and forward at his sides Grant swung his clenched fists, stooping a little, while the muscles in his body grew tense. Suddenly he launched himself through the air with a long, graceful leap, flinging his feet forward beneath him at the proper moment and planting his heels firmly and fairly in the turf, coming upright without a falter or a struggle.

The spectators shouted.

“Jerusalem!” cried Sile Crane. “He’s beat Berlin, ding my boots if he hain’t!”

Measurement with a tape showed that the lad from Texas had outjumped Barker by fully four inches.

“Great work, Grant,” said Roger Eliot approvingly; but Berlin, choking with chagrin and wrath, turned away without a word.

“Oh, that was right easy,” beamed Rod, accepting his coat from Crane, who had hastened to get it. “Sometime when I’m feeling plenty like it I’ll show you a real jump.”

“What’s the longest jump you ever made?” asked Piper.

“I hold the world’s record,” replied Rod unblushingly.

“Oh, say! what are you giving us?” cried Jack Nelson.

“Cold facts, my friend. In dire peril of my life, I once made a jump only equaled by the original owner of the seven league boots.”

“Tell us ababout it,” urged Crane, scenting a story. “How fur did yeou jump?”

“Twenty miles.”

“Wha-what?” gulped Phil Springer. “Oh, say! Now that sus-spoils the whole story.”

“Yes,” sighed Crane, “that spiles it. If yeou had only stretched her a little bit – just within the bounds of reason!”

“I was well aware, gents,” said Grant, smoothing a wrinkle in his coat sleeve, “that you would think me prevaricating. I presume it’s right natural that you should. Nevertheless, I’ll tell the tale. I learned the art of jumping from grasshoppers; you know they are great jumpers. Occasionally these

pests come down in millions upon the Panhandle country. They have been known to eat every blade of grass clean to the roots on a section as big as the State of Rhode Island. They have even invaded houses and chewed up muslin window curtains, carpets, rugs, and similar articles. Two years ago we had the greatest grasshopper season ever known in Roberts County. The pests came down on us suddenly in swarms which darkened the sky and blotted out the light of the sun. I was out riding the range at the time the advance guard of the varmints appeared.”

“Oh, jinks!” hissed Piper. “He said *varmints!*”

“Some of our boys over on Bitter Crick had sent me with a message to the ranch, and I started out at an early hour. The ranch house is located on the south bank of the Canadian River. We were some thirty miles or more to the north of the river. Shortly after sunrise I perceived what I took to be a cloud in the sky. It drew nearer with great rapidity, and I was looking for a dry gully or some shelter to protect me from what I took to be a sure enough tornado when the first sprinkling of grasshoppers settled around me. It didn’t take me long after that to make out what that cloud was – nothing but grasshoppers. They kept on coming thicker and thicker, until the air was literally full of them and the ground was covered to a depth of several inches. The sunshine was blotted so that it was almost as dark as twilight on a late autumn day. The blamed things got in my nose, my ears, my eyes, and they crawled down my neck and filled my hair. It sure was some unpleasant. All I could do was ride along, letting my horse pick his way; for, not having a compass nor being able to see the sky or the surrounding country, I had no idea where the river lay.”

“Yeou sartain was in a scrape, wasn’t ye?” grinned Crane.

“Wait, my friend – wait. I have not begun to tell you the full extent of my horrible dilemma. Once or twice I fancied I smelled something like smoke, but I paid no heed to this until a sort of dull reddish glow penetrated that mass of flying insects. Finally, looking back, I perceived behind me, spreading out on both sides, a gleam like fire. It was fire. The dry prairie grass was burning, and the wind was sweeping the flames down on me with the speed of an express train. In a measure that accounted for the tremendous number of grasshoppers now swarming about me and beating against me in their flight. They were being driven ahead of the flames, and as the fire advanced their numbers became greater and greater, until I could scarcely breathe without my nostrils being plugged by grasshoppers.”

“Horrible!” snickered Cooper.

“It was horrible,” said Grant solemnly. “When I realized my peril from that onrushing conflagration I put spurs to my horse in a hopeless effort to keep ahead of it. It was like galloping through the darkness of night. The beating and rustling of grasshoppers’ wings, which had sounded faint at first, had gradually risen until it was like the roaring of a gale. The pressure of insects against my back helped in a measure to carry me onward. Finally, however, my horse plunged into a gopher hole and broke its leg. Poor beast!

“But think of me, gents – think of me some! There I was dismounted in the path of that fearful prairie fire. Desperately I succeeded in rising, and madly I stumbled on knee deep amid squirming grasshoppers. The gloom was penetrated in a way by the light of the flames, and I could feel the scorching heat upon the back of my neck. Suddenly right ahead of me I beheld a deep fissure in the plain. The bottom of the fissure was packed with layers of grasshoppers many feet in depth. For a moment I hesitated, and then, as the fire rushed upon me, I launched myself in a desperate spring for the opposite side of the fissure.

“At that very moment, apparently aroused, despite their weariness, by the close approach and searing heat of the flames, the grasshoppers in that gully rose in a solid mass. They actually lifted me and bore me upward for a few moments. True, I was nearer smothered than ever before in all my life. Like a drowning person, I sought to rise higher by paddling with my hands and treading with my feet.

“I rose, gents – I sure did. I kept on rising, too, until I opined I was, pretty near the top of that tremendous mass of grasshoppers, which was sweeping along the surface of the earth ahead of the

fire. I soon discovered that by paddling gently with feet and hands I could keep myself up, and to my unbounded relief I perceived that the flying grasshoppers were bearing me along with such speed that the flames could not gain upon me.

“I don’t know just how long I was in the air, but I do know that at least twenty good miles of Texas territory was passed over before that mass of flying grasshoppers became so thinned that I finally sank slowly and gently, like a feather, to the ground. Believe it or not, I landed on the south side of the Canadian River, and thus my life was saved; for when the flames reached the river they could go no farther.

“That, gents, is, I reckon, beyond the shadow of dispute, the longest jump on record. If any one has ever beaten it, I’d like to meet up with the party and yield him the palm.”

The bell clanged; intermission was over.

“Oh, suffering misery!” groaned Chipper Cooper, staggering toward the academy door. “Somebody support me. I’m weak and exhausted. That’s what I call a real w-hopper!”

CHAPTER IV. THE FELLOW WHO REFUSED

Coached by Dash Winton, a former Dartmouth College player, the Oakdale Academy football team thus far had not lost a game for the season, and there was now but one more game to be played, which, however, was the one the boys especially desired to win; for, could they defeat Wyndham, the school that during the past three years had held the county championship, they would themselves win the title of champions.

As usual, Wyndham had a strong eleven; so strong, indeed, that in almost every respect it had wholly outclassed its opponents, thus far not having been once scored against; therefore, having won some of her contests by the narrowest possible margin and succeeded only once in blanking the enemy, it was no more than natural that Oakdale should feel more or less apprehension over that deciding battle so soon to be fought. Another reason for apprehension lay in the fact that Oakdale's battered rush line contained several cripples; but it was likely that only the coach and Eliot, the captain, had detected certain alarming indications that the players were "going stale," a calamity which they had privately discussed. In his heart Winton feared he had driven the youngsters too hard, when better judgment should have held them somewhat in restraint for the great battle of the season.

The autumn days had grown so short that there was little time to practice between the closing of the afternoon session at the academy and the coming of nightfall. As soon as possible, on being let out, the boys rushed from the academy to the gymnasium, jumped into harness and hurried onto the field, where they invariably found the coach waiting. Night after night they put in a brief practice game against the scrub, which contained a number of grammar school boys and was strengthened by the regular substitutes and, usually, by Winton himself.

But even this work had ceased to be properly beneficial, especially in developing defensive tactics; for the time had passed when the scrub could force them to exert themselves to the utmost. Indeed, the only substitutes obtainable were few in numbers and sadly deficient in real football qualifications, so that even the least astute knew that disqualifying injuries to two or three regular players, occurring in the game with Wyndham, would be almost certain to weaken the team hopelessly.

The great desire for reliable substitutes had led Roger Eliot to ask, almost to beg, Rodney Grant to come out for practice. For even though Grant might know little about the game, there was a chance for him to acquire some rudimentary knowledge, and, being a strong, lithe, athletic fellow, there was a possibility that he could be used to fill a gap at a time of extreme emergency. Eliot's entreaties, however, had proved unavailing, the Texan flatly declining to practice, without giving his reasons for the refusal.

This new boy, entering Oakdale in the midst of the autumn term, where he appeared unannounced and unacclaimed, had at first seemed to be quiet and retiring to the verge of modesty. Of late, however, beset, almost pestered, by his schoolmates, his manner had undergone a decisive change, and it was not at all remarkable that various lads besides Berlin Barker had come to regard him as a braggart.

In the midst of practice on the afternoon of Grant's feat as a jumper, Hunk Rollins, filling the position of right guard for the regulars, gave his right knee, injured in the last game, a twist that sent him hobbling off the field. There was a pause, in which Eliot consulted Winton concerning a substitute.

"No use to try Springer or Hooker," said the coach in a low tone. "Neither is fitted for the place. In fact, we haven't a man."

Ben Stone, the left guard, an uncomely chap who, nevertheless, had become amazingly popular with the boys, chanced to overhear these words. In a moment he joined them.

“Why don’t you ask Grant again, captain?” he suggested. “I don’t know why it is, but I have a notion that he can play the game.”

“Grant?” said Roger in surprise. “I’ve asked him once, and he refused. Where is he?”

“Sitting alone over yonder on the seats,” answered Ben, with a movement of his head. “I saw him come in shortly after we commenced work.”

“Oh, yes,” muttered Roger, perceiving the solitary figure of Rod Grant. “There he is. Confound him! why doesn’t he come forward like a man and get into it? I did my best to induce him.”

“Let me talk to him,” said Winton, starting quickly toward the young Texan.

Barker, observant, strolled over in the wake of the coach.

Reaching the lower tier of seats, Winton shot a sudden question at Rodney Grant:

“Do you know anything about football?”

“Mighty little,” was the surprised answer.

“But you do know something? You’ve played the game, haven’t you?”

“Not much.”

“That’s an admission that you’ve played it some. We need you to fill a hole in the line – just for this practice game, you understand. Come on.”

“I reckon you’ll have to excuse me, sir,” said Grant. “I don’t believe I’ll play football.”

“This isn’t a regular game; it’s practice. You’ve got a little patriotism, haven’t you? You’ve got some interest in your school and your school team, I hope? It won’t hurt you to practice. Come, we haven’t any time to lose before it gets dark.”

But the boy on the seats shook his head. “I thank you for the invite, but I allow I’d better keep out of it. You’ll certain have to get some one else.”

Barker’s cold, irritating laugh sounded at Winton’s shoulder. “He’s afraid! He hasn’t even got sand enough to take part in a practice game.”

“You’re a – ”

Rod Grant cut himself short with the third word trembling on his lips. Involuntarily he had started up and was coming down over the seats.

“Say it – say it if you dare!” cried Barker, springing past Winton. “I wish you would.”

The young Texan faltered on the lowest seat. “Never mind,” he said slowly. “I judge maybe I’d better keep my tongue between my teeth.”

“You’re right, you had,” Barker flung back, his aggressiveness and insolence increasing, if possible, with the hesitation of the other. “What are you here for, anyhow? If you haven’t got sand enough even to practice, why do you come out here and sit around watching the rest of us? You’d better get off the field before some one runs you off.”

Grant stepped down to the ground. “I sure hope nobody will try it,” he muttered.

By this time Winton had Barker by the shoulder.

“Why are you butting in here?” he exclaimed warmly. “If you would let him alone, perhaps I’d get him to – ”

“Don’t you believe yourself, Mr. Winton. You couldn’t get him to do anything but talk and blow. I’ve been up against this same chap once before to-day, and he knows what I think of him. He’s a white-livered coward, that’s what’s the matter with him.”

Again it seemed that the boy from Texas would be taunted beyond endurance, and for a moment he crouched slightly, as if on the verge of springing at his insulter.

“Come on,” invited Barker. “You know how many bones there are in the human hand, even if you are afraid to examine a skeleton at short range. Come on, and I’ll let you feel the bones in my fists.”

These loud words had brought the boys flocking to the spot. Not a few of them believed for a moment or two, at least, that the impending fight between Barker and Grant must take place then and

there, and, boylike, they welcomed it as a test of the stranger's courage. Imagine their disappointment when Rod Grant dropped his half lifted hands by his sides and turned away.

"I'll get off the field," he muttered huskily. "I'm going, and I hope Mr. Barker will let me alone in future. He'd sure better."

They watched him depart in the direction of the gate.

"That proves what he is," said Berlin.

"By jinks, I guess yeou're right," acknowledged Sile Crane. "He is a coward."

"Fellows," said Ben Stone, "I may be wrong, but I don't believe he refused to fight because he was afraid."

"Perhaps not," said Winton, shrugging his shoulders; "but I'd like to know why he refused to practice. Come on, boys, we'll put some one in Rollins' place and go ahead."

It was quite dark when Stone, having shed his football togs, left the gymnasium and strode down the street toward the cottage of the Widow Jones, where he roomed. As he was passing through the front yard gate some one called to him, and he saw a figure hurrying toward him. It was Grant, who came up and stopped with his hand on the fence.

"Stone," said the Texan, "I heard what you said as I was leaving the field to-night, and I want to thank you. It's mighty agreeable to know that one fellow, at least, was inclined to stand up for me."

"Look here, Grant," said Ben, "I wish you'd tell me why you swallowed Barker's insults. There must have been a reason."

"There was; but I can't tell you – not now, anyhow."

"Why didn't you fight him?"

"I – I didn't want to," faltered Rod.

"You weren't afraid, were you?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Yes," answered Grant in a low tone, "I was afraid."

"I didn't think that," muttered Ben in disappointment.

"I can't explain it now," Grant hastened to say. "Sometime I will – perhaps. I won't forget that you stood up for me. I can hear some of the fellows coming. Good night." He turned sharply, and a moment later his figure melted into the darkness down the street.

Puzzled and wondering, Stone reached the door of the cottage and stopped there, listening involuntarily to the voices of several fellows he could see approaching. They were nearly opposite the house when he heard Chipper Cooper laugh loudly and say something about frightening the Texan into fits.

"If we can make it work it will be better than a circus," said the voice of Fred Sage. "Are you sure you can get the old thing, Sleuth?"

"I've a skeleton key that will admit us," replied Billy Piper.

"Oh, a skeleton key!" chuckled Chipper Cooper, as they passed on. "That's the kind of a key for this job. Eh, Barker?"

Barker was with them. He said something, but Stone could not understand his words.

With his hand on the doorknob, Ben stood there speculating. "They're putting up some sort of a job on Grant," he murmured. "I wonder what they mean to do?"

CHAPTER V. AMBUSHED

Priscilla Kent, spinster, sharp-visaged, old and eccentric, sat knitting by lamplight before the open Franklin stove at which she warmed her slippers. In its hanging cage an old green parrot slept fitfully, occasionally waking to roll a red eye at its mistress or to mutter fretfully like one disturbed by unpleasant dreams. Behind her back a small monkey had silently enlarged a rent in the haircloth covering of an old spring couch and was industriously extracting and curiously inspecting the packing with which the couch was stuffed. The hands of the old-fashioned clock upon the mantel pointed to eight thirty-five.

“Goodness!” said Miss Priscilla, after peering at the clock. “It’s goin’ on to nine, and Rod ain’t back yet. He said he was just goin’ down to the village to mail a letter. I’m afeared he’s gittin’ into the habit of keepin’ late hours. He takes his natteral reckless disposition from his father’s side, but I do hope the terrible misfortune that befell Oscar will be a lesson to him and teach him to shun bad company and curb his violent temper. If he don’t come purty soon I shall get real worried.”

Now Miss Priscilla, living as she did on the outskirts of the village in a small house reached only by a footpath from the main highway, might have worried indeed had she known that the darkness and the bushes bordering that path hid a trio of armed and desperate-looking savages who were lying in ambush. The faintest sort of a moon or even a few stars might have shed light sufficient to show that the ambuscaders were attired in fringed khaki garments and moccasins, and wore upon their heads bonnets adorned with feathers plucked from the tails of more than one unfortunate rooster. Even such a dim light would also have revealed that the papier-mache masks which hid their faces added in a degree to their make-up as Indians, while the red paint which stained the edges of their wooden tomahawks and scalping knives was certainly sufficient to produce a shudder. In the parade of “horribles,” on last Independence Day, these warriors had appeared for the amusement of the admiring populace of Oakdale, and now their carefully preserved disguises were again being put to use.

Even though they lurked in concealment so near the exposed and defenseless home of Miss Priscilla, the savages had no murderous designs upon the spinster. They were, however, as their guarded conversation indicated, lying in wait for some one whom they expected soon to return along that footpath, and protracted lingering in ambush upon a nipping November night was proving far from pleasant, as their chattering teeth and occasional fretful remarks plainly indicated.

“Ugh!” grunted one, whose voice sounded amazingly like that of Phil Springer. “I wonder why the hated pup-paleface does not appear?”

“Peace, noble Osceola,” said another, with a shivery chuckle that might have come from the lips of Chipper Cooper. “The hated enemy of our people will surely return in time to his wigwam. If he don’t I’ll be froze stiff; for, with only this feather headdress as protection, I can’t keep my own wig warm to-night.”

“Oh, say, King Philip,” drawled the third, “don’t increase our sufferin’s by any such cracks as that.”

“Enjoy you not my persiflage, Tecumpseh?” asked the one who had been addressed as the war chief of the Narragansetts. “Tis thus by light and airy jesting we aid the leaden hours to pass on fleeting wings.”

“Heap bub-bad Injun lingo, King Philip,” criticized Osceola. “A real aborigine such as you impersonate wouldn’t talk about leaden hours. Cuc-cut it out.”

“Your slang, Osceola, is somewhat too modern. You don’t s’pose that sucker got onto our game and fooled us by sneaking back to his teepee by some other road, do you?”

“If he has,” growled Tecumpseh, “he’ll sartainly have the laugh on us. But, in that case, why hain’t we been informed by Girty, the renegade, who’s trailin’ him?”

“Sh!” hissed King Philip suddenly. “I hear a signal. Muffle the chin-music and listen.”

A smothered, suppressed sound, like the faint-hearted hooting of an owl, drifted up the dark path, and instantly the three savages were palpitant with eagerness.

“It’s Hunk – I mean Girty,” spluttered Cooper, rising on his hands and knees. “Where’s the blanket? Get the blanket ready, fellows. Now don’t bungle this job.”

A sound of running feet grew more distinct, and a panting lad came hurrying up the path.

“Hey, Hunk – hey!” called Tecumpseh softly. “Here we be. Is he comin’?”

“Oh, here you are!” gasped the new arrival, as he plunged into the shelter of the pathside thicket and joined them. “Yep, he’s coming. I watched him till I saw him start, then I made a short cut by the footpath past Tige Fletcher’s, and got here first. He’ll be right along. I guess the fellers are getting the other end of the game fixed up all right, for I see Sleuth buying phosphorus at the drug store. Oh, say! we’ll scare that bragging coward to death to-night. After we catch him we’ve got to keep him till they get ready to work the rescue racket.”

“Oh, we’ll keep him all right if we catch him, and we’ll make it warm for him, too,” said King Philip. “Come on, Hunk – I mean Girty, – we’ll take the other side of the path, you and I. Osceola and Tecumpseh, have the blanket ready. Everybody jump at him all together; get him before he can scoot. Come on.”

Followed by the one called Girty, who was disguised in rough, loose fitting clothes, a slouch hat and a hideous white-face mask, King Philip hustled across the path and ensconced himself close beside a low clump of cedars. Silence followed, broken presently by the faint, clear sound of a whistled tune, becoming more and more distinct as the whistler drew near. Their muscles taut, their nerves strung high, the three redskins and the renegade crouched for the attack upon their chosen victim, who, wholly unsuspecting, sauntered heedlessly into the trap.

Out from cover leaped the quartet, flinging themselves upon the paleface, whose whistled tune was actually cut short by the muffling folds of the blanket cast over his head and twisted tight. Nevertheless, although his feet were kicked from beneath him and all four united in the effort to subdue him, the boy from Texas, squirming, twisting, kicking, fighting desperately to fling off the blanket, gave them a lively time of it for several minutes. At last, however, smothered and crushed, he began to weaken, and presently his hands were twisted round behind his back and tied there with a stout piece of rope produced from a pocket of King Philip’s khaki war-suit.

“Got him now!” grated Girty viciously, as he gave the captive a punch in the ribs. “Confound him! he kicked me one in the breadbasket that near knocked the wind out of me.”

“Stop that!” commanded King Philip authoritatively. “He will pay the bitter penalty when we put him to the torture. Come on, let’s hit the high places.”

Still keeping the blanket wrapped about the head and shoulders of the victim, they lifted him to his feet, held him fast, plunged through the bushes, and struck out across a rough open field in the direction of Turkey Hill. The captive staggered as he was forced along, but their firm hands sustained him, and they paid no heed to the muffled gasping and groaning which came from beneath the blanket. Over a fence and across a stone wall he was pushed and dragged, and finally the woods at the eastern base of Turkey Hill were reached. A short distance into the blackest of the night-shrouded timber they penetrated, halting at last in a small glade near a bubbling spring.

“This is the place,” whispered King Philip. “We agreed to have him here at the spring. We’ll have some fun with him while we’re waiting for the other fellers to come.”

“I guess we’d better give him a chance to git a breath,” observed Tecumpseh, who was supporting the captive with both arms. “He’s limp as a dish-rag. I cal-late he’s purty near done up.”

In truth, Rodney Grant was nearly smothered, and when the blanket was removed he lay gasping painfully upon the cold ground.

“Guard the paleface dog, Osceola,” commanded King Philip. “If he attempts to escape, crack his skull with your trusty tomahawk and lift his topknot with your gory scalping knife. Girty, build a fire, and fear not; for neither Daniel Boone nor Simon Kenton are nearer to-night than the Dark and Bloody Ground.”

Girty promptly gathered some sticks of wood, scraped together a mass of dry fallen leaves, and applied a lighted match. A blaze sprang up at once, illuminating the whole glade.

“My brothers,” said King Philip, “we will now hold a council of war to decide the fate of this wretched paleface captive. As the war chief of the Narragansetts, hunted in the swamps like a wild beast, my spirit cries out for vengeance. The most frightful torture we can inflict upon this wretch will but poorly atone for the suffering he has caused our people; for has he not with his own lips boasted that he tortured three noble warriors to death by tickling them on the bottoms of their bare feet with feathers? What torture can we devise that will serve as sufficient retaliation? I would listen to the wisdom from the lips of the great Seminole, Osceola.”

“It is my idea,” said Osceola, “that we ought to soak it to him heap much. I’m in favor of skinning him alive.”

“What do you propose, Tecumpseh?”

“I would hang him by the heels over a slow fire. I guess that would warm him up some.”

“Simon Girty, even though your skin is the color of the despised paleface, you have renounced your people and become one of us. You are even more bloodthirsty and cruel than the bloodiest warrior that roams the primeval forest. What say you? Spit it out.”

“Burn him to the stake,” growled Girty.

“Good! It shall be done. Lift him and tie him, standing, with his back to a stout sapling. Here’s another hunk of rope.”

The captive, although somewhat recovered, made resistance when they raised him from the ground and dragged him to the sapling.

“Go ahead with your funny business, you onery coyotes!” he exclaimed. “I opine I know you all, in spite of your rigs; and when I promise to get even a plenty I certain mean it.”

Scoffing at him, they tied him fast, and then piled in a circle about his feet a mass of dry leaves and broken branches, taking care, however, that this combustible material did not touch him by a foot or more.

“We’ll toast him gently at first,” chuckled King Philip. “When a victim is too quickly burned at the stake it is a sad *mistake*, for it ends our fiendish joys all too soon. Apply the torch.”

Girty seized a burning stick of wood and touched it to the leaves near the prisoner’s feet. The fire blazed up and began creeping round the circle of combustible material. The heat of the flames reached the helpless boy’s face and hands, while the smoke filled his eyes and nostrils, making him choke and gasp. In a moment King Philip, Tecumpseh, Osceola, and Girty, the renegade, were dancing and whooping around Rod Grant, flourishing their tomahawks and knives.

From the midst of the enveloping mass of smoke and sparks came a harsh voice, vibrant with intense rage:

“Whoop it up, you skunks! You’d better carry the game through and finish me, for if you don’t I’ll make every one of you dance a different jig before long!”

CHAPTER VI.

THE RESULT OF A PRACTICAL JOKE

The woods rang with their whoops and yells; their circling figures cast flitting, grotesque, fantastic shadows. The helpless captive choked and strangled; the fire had begun to scorch his shins.

Suddenly, with a series of answering yells, half a dozen masked fellows charged forth from the darkness and fell upon the savages, who, in seeming panic, took to their heels and fled, after a brief show of resistance. Two or three of the newcomers had apparently made an effort to dress themselves like cowboys, while the remainder simply wore rough, ill-fitting clothes, or garments turned wrongside out. One, who seemed to be the leader, scattered the blazing leaves and sticks with his feet and began stamping out the fire.

“Pards,” he said, “we’ve put the pesky redskins to rout and saved this poor fellow from a frightful death. I reckon he will be very grateful.”

The still choking captive, blinking the smoke from his eyes, gazed sharply at the speaker.

“I’m sure much obliged for the temporary relief, Mr. Barker,” he said; “but I’m not chump enough to opine you’re through with your shindig, and I allow there’s something more coming to me.”

“What’s this?” cried the other. “His voice sounds familiar. His face – I’ve seen it before. So help me, he’s the galoot that led the cowpunchers who lynched my partner, poor old Tanglefoot Bill. I swore vengeance upon him, and my hour has come. He shall pay dearly for what he did to Tanglefoot. Eh, pards?”

“That’s right; that’s right,” they cried, glaring threateningly at the captive through the eyeholes of their masks.

“Let’s swing him from a limb,” proposed a stout chap, who was occasionally losing a peanut from a hole in the bottom of the well stuffed side pocket of his coat. “Many a time and oft has he boasted of what he has done to cattle rustlers like us.”

“My deduction is – ” began a little chap; but instantly some one gave him a poke in the ribs, which cut him short.

“We’ll bear him to our retreat amid the mountains,” proposed the leader, “and there we can decide what fate shall be meted out to him. Release him from the tree, but blindfold his eyes, in order that he may not observe the trail we follow.”

These instructions were carried out, although they took care to leave Grant’s hands pinioned behind his back. A thickly folded handkerchief was placed over his eyes and securely tied at the back of his head. Barely was this done when the three redskins and the renegade came sneaking back from the shadows of the woods and joined the self-styled cattle rustlers. Threatening Grant if he made an outcry, they hurried him forth from the woods and away toward the twinkling lights of the distant village. Down the Barville road they went, approaching the dark and silent academy and the gymnasium. Among themselves at intervals they muttered fierce threats of vengeance for the death of the mythical “Tanglefoot Bill.”

Once or twice a sound like a suppressed, smothered giggle came from behind the mask of the fat fellow, causing one of his companions to give him a vigorous punch and hiss into his ear an order to “dry up.”

Within the gymnasium a shaded light glowed dimly. Beneath this light they gathered, with the unresisting and still blindfolded captive in their midst.

“What shall we do with him, comrades?” questioned the leader.

“String him up to a rafter,” urged one of his followers.

“Show him no mercy,” advised another.

“Make short work of him,” growled still another.

“Had we known who he was,” said the leader, “we’d never risked our lives to rescue him from the redskins. Comrades, listen. In yonder small, dark room lie the bleaching bones of poor Tanglefoot Bill. While we are debating over the proper fate for Bill’s slayer, I would suggest that we place the wretched captive in that room with the remains of his victim.”

This proposal meeting no opposition, Grant was pushed toward a door, at which one of the masked fellows took his place with his hand on the knob. At a signal from the leader, the door was opened, the blindfold snatched from Rod’s eyes, and he was given a push that sent him staggering into the room. At the same time some one cried in his ear:

“Behold the bones of your victim!”

The door slammed and the key was hastily turned in the lock.

Barely succeeding in keeping upon his feet, Rodney Grant stumbled against something that rattled; and then in the deep darkness of that place he saw lying at his very feet what seemed to be a skeleton, every bone of which glowed with a dull, phosphorescent luminosity. Involuntarily he backed away from the thing until he had retreated against the door.

“Great jackrabbits!” he gasped. “It can’t be – ” He choked, the words seeming to stick in his throat, for, to his added amazement and consternation, the skeleton moved, its head rising slowly from the floor and the upper part of its body following. Little by little it continued to rise, until at last it was in an upright position. Then one long, faintly gleaming arm was lifted from its side until it became outstretched toward the shivering, cowering lad. From some source a hollow groan sounded, followed immediately by a faint, huskily spoken word, twice repeated:

“Retribution! Retribution!”

Outside that room, which in the days when the building had served as a bowling alley had been a washroom and a closet for the keeping of clothing and various other articles, one of the masked jokers was manipulating the cords that had caused the skeleton to rise and lift its arm. Another fellow, with his mask removed, had applied his lips to a knothole in the partition, through which he sent the groan and spoke that terrible sounding word.

“Gee whiz!” giggled the fat chap. “I’ll bet he’s pretty near frightened into fits. I know I’d be.”

“Shut up, Chub!” hissed the leader, who was listening at the door. “Of course he’s scared stiff, for he’s a coward, anyhow.”

“He ought to be yelling blub-bloody murder by this time,” murmured Osceola, the Seminole.

“Can yeou hear anything, Berlin?” asked Tecumpseh, the Shawnee.

“How can I hear anything with all you fellows pushing and chattering?” fretfully retorted the one at the door.

“My deduction is,” said the chap who had pulled the cords, “that he’s too scared to even utter a chirp.”

“I bate a hundred dollars,” laughed King Philip, “that this will cook him so he won’t tell no more yarns about hunting Indians and lynching cattle thieves.”

“Shut up!” once more ordered the leader. “I can hear something now. Listen to that. What’s he doing?”

The sounds, low and weird and doleful, issuing from that small, dark room, filled them with unspeakable astonishment.

“So help me, Bob,” spluttered King Philip, “he’s singing!”

It was a sad and doleful wailing, like a funeral dirge, and the jokers, who had been ready to shriek with laughter a few moments before, were now struck dumb by wonderment, and more than one of them felt a shiver creep along his spine. Suddenly the singing ceased, but it was followed by a burst of wild laughter even more startling.

“He’s gug-giving us the ha-ha,” said Osceola. “Now what do you think of that!”

There seemed, however, to be no merriment in the strange, wild peals of laughter which reached their ears. Agitated and apprehensive, one fellow seized the shoulder of the chap who stood at the door.

“Open up, Bark,” he urged – “open up! Turn the lights on, somebody. Let’s see what’s the matter in there.”

As the lights were turned on the door swung open, and those practical jokers, crowding forward, beheld a spectacle that made more than one recoil. In some manner Rodney Grant had succeeded in freeing his hands from the rope. His coat had been torn off and flung aside. His shirt was ripped open at the throat, and one sleeve had been torn into shreds. He was crouching on one knee directly in front of the dangling skeleton, and the flood of light from the open door fell on a face so wild and terrible that the disguised boys shuddered at beholding it. He was white as a sheet; his eyes glared, and a frothing foam covered his lips.

“Avaunt!” he shrieked. “Quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee! Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold; thou hast no speculation in those eyes which thou dost glare with!”

“Great mercy!” gurgled one of the group at the door. “He’s gone mad – stark, staring mad!”

CHAPTER VII. THE ONE WHO LAUGHED LAST

While they stood paralyzed Rodney Grant suddenly leaped to his feet, still jabbering and laughing wildly, seized the skeleton, tore it from the ropes by which it was suspended, and charged them with the grisly thing in his grasp. Right and left they scattered, terrified beyond words, some of them actually uttering screams of fear. Their one great desire seemed to be to get out of the way and give Grant plenty of room.

Having driven them in this manner, the victim of the joke hurled the skeleton aside, rushed across the open floor of the gymnasium, caught up a chair and dashed it through a window, carrying away sash and glass. A single step he retreated, and then, with a forward bound and a yell, he followed the chair through the broken window, disappearing into the darkness outside. The appalled boys heard the sound of running feet swiftly die out in the distance.

“Well, we’ve done it!” said Cooper huskily, as he tore off his mask and revealed a face almost as ghastly as that of the lad who had leaped through the window.

“You’re right, Chipper,” agreed Chub Tuttle, also unmasking. “We drove him plumb daffy. It’s awful!”

“He busted the skeleton,” said Sleuth Piper, gazing ruefully at the broken thing, which lay on the floor where Grant had flung it. “The prof will raise the dickens about this.”

“Oh, hang the sus-skeleton!” stuttered Phil Springer. “Think of driving that fellow out of his wits! Gee! boys, it’s bad business.”

“Yeou bate it is,” agreed Sile Crane. “We’d orter knowed he wasn’t well balanced, for his old aunt has been half crazy all her life.”

Tuttle, his peanuts forgotten, had dropped his mask to the floor and sunk limply on a bench near the lockers, where he sat shivering like a round jelly pudding.

“It’s awful,” he muttered over and over – “it’s awful, fellows!”

“I guess we’re in a bad scrape,” said Hunk Rollins, who was posing no longer as Girty, the renegade.

“It’s awful!” mumbled Tuttle. “If we had ever stopped to think that he came from a family of loose screwed people we might not have pushed this thing so far.”

“He’s busted the skeleton,” complained Piper again. “Won’t the prof be hopping about that!”

“Busting the old sus-skeleton is nothing compared with driving a chap plumb cuc-crazy,” groaned Springer. “Perhaps he’ll never get his wits back. Maybe they’ll have to send him to a mum-madhouse, and we’ll be responsible – think of that, boys, we’ll be responsible! I’ll nun-never get over it.”

“Who proposed this thing, anyhow?” asked Roy Hooker, looking around. “Was it you, Sleuth?”

“Not much I didn’t,” answered Piper instantly. “It was Barker’s scheme. He said Grant was a scarecrow who was even afraid of the prof’s old skeleton, and suggested that it would be great fun if we could only haze him the way college fellows do.”

“But you got the skeleton. If it hadn’t been for you – ”

“Now don’t you try to shoulder all the blame onto me,” cried Piper, in terrified resentment, forgetting for the time being his artificial style of speech. “You were all in for it, every one of you. I simply had some keys by which I could get into the lab, where the skeleton was kept. You’re all as deep in the mud as I am in the mire. Barker is really the one who engineered this thing.”

“Where is he, anyhaow?” asked Crane, looking around.

“Yes, where is he?” cried the others, realizing for the first time that the fellow they had recognized as their leader was missing.

They called to him in vain. The outer door of the gym stood slightly ajar, and, after a time, looking at one another in dismay, they understood that Barker had slipped away.

“Now what do yeou fellers think of that!” rasped Sile Crane. “He’s skeddaddled and left us; he’s run away.”

“Well, if that isn’t the tut-trick of a coward, I don’t know what you’d call it!” exploded Springer.

“He needn’t think he can get out of it that way!” blazed Jack Nelson.

“I’m sick,” moaned Tuttle – “oh, I’m awful sick! What do you s’pose they’ll do to us if we’ve really drove Grant batty? Oh, say! won’t I catch it at home!”

“We ought to follow him,” said Nelson. “We ought to catch him. No telling what he will do. Maybe he’ll jump into the lake or the river and be drowned.”

“I’m going home,” wheezed Hunk Rollins huskily. “Somebody is liable to come along and spot the whole of us here.” He edged toward the door.

“Yeou’re another quitter, jest like Barker,” roared Crane suddenly. “Yeou pranced around and made a lot of fightin’ talk to Rod Grant arter yeou’d figured it out that he wouldn’t take yeou up, and now yeou’re so allfired sca’t yeou want to skeddaddle.”

“Somebody has got to help me take the skeleton back to the academy,” said Piper appealingly. “Don’t skin out and leave me, boys; let’s hang together.”

“If we don’t hang together,” muttered Cooper, with a rueful grimace, “we may hang separately.”

Little did they dream that at that very moment they were watched by two pairs of eyes gazing at them through the broken window.

Grant, having made his spectacular getaway, reached the road and ran as far as the lower corner of the academy yard, where he stopped, breathing a trifle heavily, and leaned upon the fence. In a moment he was startled by a voice coming from the shadows of a nearby tree.

“What’s the matter?” was the question that reached his ears. “What’s going on at the gym to-night?”

He recognized the voice as that of Ben Stone, whose figure he could perceive in the denser darkness under the tree. For a moment he hesitated; then, with a short laugh, he answered:

“Oh, just a bit of a monkey circus, that’s all. A few of my friends tried to force me into playing the clown, but I sure reckon the laugh is on them some. What are you doing here?”

“I knew something was up,” answered Stone, as he came forward, “and, while I didn’t want to butt in, I couldn’t choke down my curiosity entirely. Tell me about it.”

Grant did so briefly and concisely, beginning with his ambuscade by the fake Indians. Although a narrative unadorned and cut short, it was vivid and interesting enough to absorb the listener.

“All the time,” proceeded Rod, “I was doing my level best to get my hands free, for I allowed I’d sail into that bunch right lively if I could obtain the use of my paws. I was sure enough jarred some when they handed me into the dark room with the old skeleton and the thing rose up on its hind legs and groaned. That made me give an extra twist, and I broke the rope. I knew where I was, for Roger Eliot had shown me all over the gym. I likewise knew the powdered chalk for marking the field was kept on a shelf in that closet. It didn’t take me long to think of a plan to turn the laugh on that bunch of merry old roasters. I found the chalk and rubbed it over my face. Then, feeling around, I got hold of a cake of soap on the washstand and bit off a piece, which I proceeded to chew up so that I could froth at the mouth in fine shape. All the while I was chanting a funeral dirge a plenty doleful, punctuating it with occasional loud and mirthless ha-ha’s. The game worked well. They were listening, and I reckon it set them guessing. When I heard the key turning in the lock I proceeded to drop down on my shin bones in front of the skeleton, and I turned off a bit of the mad scene from Macbeth. Say, Stone, it knocked ’em stiff. Then when I saw I had them going I grabbed the old skeleton and made a dash at the bunch. They fell over one another in their urgent desire to give me ample room. I didn’t propose to let them get their hooks on me again, so I dropped old phosphorus

bones, grabbed a chair, smashed a window, jumped through and touched the elevated spots outside. I opine the merry jesters left behind are a plenty disturbed about now, and – ”

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