

Duffield J. W.

Bert Wilson, Marathon Winner



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CHAPTER I

With Flying Feet

A thundering cheer burst from ten thousand throats, as the three athletes, running like deer, swung into the stretch and straightened away for home.

It was the last day of the intercollegiate meet for field and track events, and the most thrilling feature had been reserved for the wind-up. It was a modified Marathon of fifteen miles and the fastest runners in the East had entered the lists. Each college had sent the pick of its runners to struggle for the mastery, and excitement was at fever heat.

The stands were a mass of color, packed with the partisans of the various contenders and “rooting” fiercely for their favorites. The different events – pole vaulting, hammer throwing, broad and high jumping – had been bitterly contested, and the victories had been only a matter of inches. And now with the minor features disposed of, all eyes were centered on the most important of all – the long distance race.

A splendid body of athletes, twenty in number, had faced the starter, and at the crack of his pistol had darted off like greyhounds freed from the leash. They formed a magnificent picture of youth and vigor as they sped around the track. For the first mile or two they kept a fairly compact formation; but then the line began to lengthen. Some through weariness, others through craftiness, fell to the rear and let the others make the pace. By the time five miles had been covered, the sifting process began. Brawn and wind and staying power asserted themselves. The weaker or more poorly conditioned dropped out altogether or plodded hopelessly in the rear. At six miles from the finish, only five were left, and when they entered upon the last mile, the race had narrowed down to three.

In the stands Bedlam broke loose. The excitement that had been seething all the afternoon reached its climax. The frantic rooters hurled entreaties and begged their favorites to come on and win. Old “grads” worked themselves into a state bordering on apoplexy, while pretty girls waved their flags and joined their treble to the bass of the men. The tremendous uproar put new life and spirit into the tired racers as they braced themselves for the final sprint.

The race seemed to belong to one of the first two who were running neck and neck. Fifty feet behind came the third. He was tall and splendidly built with the narrow hips and broad chest that mark the thoroughbred. To the ordinary observer he seemed to be out of it, in view of the gap that separated him from the two leaders. An expert, however, would have seen that he was running easily and had himself well in hand. At the half he lengthened his stride almost imperceptibly and reduced the lead to twenty feet.

Then something happened. The steady lope became a sprint; the sprint became a flight. He came down the track like a bullet from a gun, with eyes blazing, head erect and his legs working like piston rods. He seemed to be flying rather than running. Foot by foot he overtook the men in front. They knew from the startled roar of their partisans that he was coming, they heard the rushing feet behind them, and they called on every ounce of strength they had for a last desperate effort. For a moment they held their own, but only for a moment. With a terrific burst of speed that brought the yelling stands to their feet, he passed them as though they were standing still and breasted the tape a winner, in the fastest time ever recorded for the track.

“Wilson,” “Wilson,” “Wilson,” shouted the wearers of the Blue as they poured down over the field in a frantic mob that threatened to engulf him. In a twinkling they hoisted him on their shoulders

and carried him about the track while their college songs went booming down the field. They fairly fought to get near him and refused to let him go, until at the clubhouse door he laughingly shook himself loose and went in for his bath and rub-down.

“By the powers,” exclaimed Reddy, the trainer of the team, as he nearly shook his hand off, “you did yourself proud, Wilson, me boy. I’m not denying that me heart was in me mouth when the fellows were showing you the way to the tape. But I kept saying to myself: ‘He’ll know when the time comes to let himself out,’ and sure enough ye did. Ye came down that track in the last lap like the Twentieth Century Express. Ye only hit the high places. I never saw such running in my life.”

“Well,” came the answer laughingly, “I’m sorry I nearly gave you heart failure, Reddy, but we won, and that’s the main thing after all. I never felt worried myself for a minute. I was sure I had the other fellows’ number as soon as I cared to let go. I could see that they’d shot their bolt when we turned into the stretch and I knew I had plenty in reserve. I had my second wind and felt as if I could run all day.”

“They sure were all in when they staggered over the line,” said Reddy. “Brady collapsed altogether and Thornton looked like a ghost. But you’re as fine as silk and haven’t turned a hair. Ye look as though ye could do it all over again,” he went on admiringly as he noticed the elastic step and regular breathing.

“No, thank you,” was the response, “I’m no glutton and I know when I have enough. But now for the shower, Reddy, and then for the training table. I’m hungry as a wolf.”

With his skin glowing and every muscle tingling from the vigorous rub-down, he stepped from the clubhouse only to run the gauntlet of the enthusiasts who had been waiting for him at the entrance. A mighty shout rose and hands without number grasped his or patted him on the back.

“What’s the matter with Wilson?” they queried and the answer came in a rousing chorus: “He’s all right.”

At last he escaped from his rejoicing comrades, and in company with Dick Trent and Tom Henderson, his special chums, started over to the college buildings. The reaction from the terrific strain was beginning to make itself felt. But his heart was filled with exultation. He had fought fiercely. He had fought fairly. And he had fought victoriously. He had won glory for his Alma Mater and carried her colors to triumph. And just at that moment he would not have changed places with the President of the United States or the king of any country in the world.

“Gee, Bert,” said Tom, “that was a wonderful sprint in the stretch. You didn’t have legs; they were wings. Just as the other fellows too were thinking it was all over except the shouting.”

“Yes,” added Dick, “it would have been tall running even for a hundred yard dash. But how you did it after running fifteen miles is beyond me. By George, I wish I had timed you on that last lap. I’d have hated to be in your way as you came tearing down to the line.”

“There might have been a mix-up for a fact,” laughed Bert. “That tape looked awfully good to me and I’d surely have felt peevish if any one had hit it before I did. And it wasn’t any sure thing at that. Thornton and Brady were certainly running some. I looked for them to crack before they did. If they’d had the least bit in reserve, they might have made it hot for me. But they’d killed themselves off in making the pace. I just kept trailing and watching, and when the right moment came I made my run. But they’re dandy runners,” he added, with the generosity that was one of his leading traits, “and in another race they might reverse the verdict.”

“Not in a thousand years,” maintained Tom stoutly. “They never saw and never will see the day they can outrun you. It’s you for the Olympic team all right. There’s no one this side of the ‘big pond’ who can make you take his dust.”

“No,” chimed in Dick, “nor on the other side either. There isn’t a fellow who saw you run to-day that wouldn’t back you to beat anything in Europe and America put together.”

“Not so fast fellows,” remonstrated Bert. “Remember I haven’t even made the team yet. This is only a preliminary tryout for the Eastern cracks. I’ve got to come up against the Western bunch and

if all I hear is true they are going 'great guns' in practice. Then too they grow some speedy sprinters in the amateur athletic clubs – regular streaks of greased lightning. I may prove only a false alarm when I match my wind and speed against theirs.”

“Yes,” said Tom with fine scorn, “we’ll worry a lot about that, won’t we Dick? Didn’t Thornton hold the American record up to to-day?” he demanded, “and didn’t you run rings around him?”

“But this mightn’t have been his day,” began Bert.

“No,” said Dick mockingly, “it wasn’t. Suppose we say it was Bert Wilson’s day and let it go at that.”

Their faith in Bert could not be shaken, nor was this surprising, since it was founded on repeated incidents in their own experience. Again and again they had seen him put to the test, and he had never failed to measure up to the emergency. Dangers that might have daunted the stoutest heart he had met without quailing. His physical prowess was beyond dispute. He was a typical athlete, strong, quick, muscular, and a natural leader in all manly sports. In most of them he stood head and shoulders above his fellows. He had borne off trophy after trophy on field and track. This alone would have marked him out as one to be reckoned with, but it was only a part of the reason why he was the idol of his friends and comrades.

His popularity lay in the fact that his splendid body held a heroic soul. He was clear grit through and through. His muscles were no more iron than his will. His beaten opponents often grumbled that he had no nerves, but they never questioned his nerve. He faced life with eyes wide open and unafraid. He stood on his own feet, asking no odds and seeking no advantage. He never quit. There was no “yellow streak” in him anywhere. To-day had only been one more illustration of his indomitable will, his bulldog tenacity. Add to this that he was a staunch friend, a jolly “pal,” a true comrade, and there was no mystery as to the feeling his friends had for him.

None felt these qualities more strongly than his particular chums, Tom and Dick. Their friendship was one of many years standing and grew steadily stronger as time went on. Every new experience tightened the bond between them. They had been with him on many occasions, some merely exciting, others attended by personal danger, and none had ever shown the white feather. In all their adventures, Bert had been easily the central figure. When as campers they had had that thrilling automobile race it was Bert’s hand on the wheel that had steered the Red Scout to its glorious victory over the Gray Ghost, its redoubtable rival. In that last heart-breaking game when the “Blues” captured the championship of the college diamond, it was Bert’s masterly pitching of his great ‘fadeaway’ ball that snatched victory from defeat before twenty thousand frenzied rooters. Only a few months before, when acting as wireless operator on that summer evening off the China coast, it was Bert’s quick wit and dauntless courage that had beaten off the pirate attack and sent the yellow scoundrels tumbling into their junks. Small wonder then that they believed in him so fully and refused to concede that he could lose in anything he undertook. Mentally and actually they were prepared to back him to the limit. While delighted at to-day’s victory they were in no way surprised. He “had the habit” of winning.

After supper, where Bert made ample amends for the “short commons” he had been under while preparing for the race, Tom came into the rooms that Bert and Dick shared together, for his usual chat before bedtime.

“Mustn’t keep you up too late, old fellow,” he said as he dropped into a chair. “I suppose you want to hit the feathers early to-night. You must be dead tired after the race.”

“Oh, I’m not especially sleepy,” replied Bert, “just a little lazy. I had such a big supper that I’m doing the anaconda stunt, just now. I’m full and therefore happy. I’m at peace with all mankind. If I’ve an enemy in the world, I forgive him.”

“Well, you haven’t an enemy in this college world just now, you can bet on that,” said Tom. “The fellows are talking of nothing else than the race this afternoon. The whole place is buzzing with it. They’re sure that you’ve cinched your place on the Olympic team beyond all question.”

“By the way,” broke in Dick, “how did this Olympic idea get its start anyway? Who dug it up? Who saw it first?”

“Why,” replied Tom, “it was a Frenchman I believe – de Coubertin or some name like that – who suggested it.”

“That seems queer too,” said Dick. “You don’t usually think of the French in connection with athletics. Of course they’re a great nation and all that, but somehow or other they bring to mind high heels and frock coats and waxed mustaches and button hole bouquets. The men kiss each other when they meet and they cry too easily. They seem a little too delicate for the rough work of the field and track.”

“They do seem a little womanish,” admitted Bert, “but that is only a matter of custom. Don’t think for a minute, though, that there is anything weak or cowardly about the French. There are no finer fighters in the world. They go to their death as gaily as to a dinner. No one will die more readily for an idea. A little theatrical about it, perhaps, but the real stuff is there.”

“Oh, they’re fighters sure enough,” asserted Dick. “They’re something like old Fuzzy-Wuzzy that Kipling tells about;

“‘E’s all ’ot sand and ginger when alive,
And ’e’s generally shammin’ when ’e’s dead.”

“To be sure,” went on Bert, “they had it handed to them good and plenty in 1870. But that wasn’t due to any lack of courage on their part. Both sides fought bravely, but the Germans were better prepared. They caught the French napping.”

“Well,” said Tom, “it was this very affair of 1870 that started de Coubertin in the matter of the Olympic games. He smarted under defeat. He got the idea that his people needed building up physically. It was shy on brawn and muscle. At first he had only the French in mind, but soon his plans took in other nations too. So a big convention of delegates met in Paris and formed an Olympic committee that has carried on the work ever since.”

“When did they hold the first meet?” asked Dick.

“At Athens in 1896,” answered Tom, “and it certainly seemed right that Greece, the scene of the old Olympic games, should have the first chance at the new. And everybody was glad too to have a Greek win the first great Marathon race. The excitable Greeks went wild over it. They gave him all sorts of presents. Some were of great value; others were simply comical. A tailor gave him a suit of clothes. A barber promised him free shaves for life. A restaurant gave him a dinner every day for a year and another volunteered two cups of coffee daily as long as he lived. One laundry did his washing free and another his ironing. Many women offered to marry him, but he turned them all down for the little Greek girl, his sweetheart, who had promised to say ‘yes’ if he came in first.”

“Perhaps that’s what made him win,” laughed Dick.

“Well it didn’t slow him up any,” agreed Tom, “you may be sure of that.”

“Since that time,” he went on, “they have met in various places. We’ve had it once in this country, in St. Louis, in 1904. But whether held here or abroad, your Uncle Sam has been on deck every time. Our boys have taken twice as many first prizes as all other nations put together.”

“That’s a winning way we have,” crowed Dick. “We’re seldom far behind when the laurel crowns are handed out.”

“The whole idea is splendid, anyway,” exclaimed Bert. “The men that meet in the games learn to like and respect each other. When they once get together they’re surprised to find how much they are alike in all that goes to make up a man.”

“Yes,” said Dick, “it helps a lot. I’ll bet it does more good than all the Peace societies you hear so much about. It’s bound to make us understand each other better. So here’s to the next Olympic, especially its Marathon race, and may the best man win!”

“He will,” said Tom, with a glance at Bert, “and I know his name.”

CHAPTER II

The Deadly Rattler

The days flew by as though on wings. Reddy brought his men along by easy stages. He was far too wise to be impatient. He believed in the old motto of “hastening slowly.” But every day saw its quota of work mapped out and performed, and before long his persistent effort began to tell. The little group of athletes under his control rounded into form, and it became certain that the Blue colors would be carried to victory in more than one event when it came to the final test.

Upon Bert, however, he banked more heavily than on any other. He felt that here he had an ideal combination of brain and brawn. Nature had given him the material to work with and it depended entirely on the training to turn him out in the “pink of condition” for the decisive race.

Not once, however, did he let him run the full Marathon distance of twenty-six miles. In his expressive phrase it would “take too much out of him.” From fifteen miles he gradually increased the distance, until on one occasion he let him run twenty-two, and then he stopped him, although Bert protested that he was easily good for the remaining four.

“No, you don’t,” said Reddy. “I’m only asking your legs and lungs to make the twenty-two. The last few miles will be run on your nerve anyway, and I want you to save up every bit of that until the day of the race. You’ll need every ounce of it when the time comes.”

For Bert it was a time of stern self denial. As he neither smoked or drank, it was no sacrifice to be forbidden these indulgences. But the carefully restricted diet, the cutting out of the many things his appetite craved and had been accustomed to, the hard and unending work required to perfect his wind and develop his muscles called on all his courage and determination to see the thing through.

“Gee,” said Tom one day, when after an especially severe practice they were walking toward their rooms, “I don’t see how you stand it, Bert. A slave in the cotton fields before the war had nothing on you in the matter of work.”

“Work certainly does seem to be my middle name, just now,” laughed Bert, “but the pay comes later on. I’ll forget all this slavery, as you call it, if I can only flash past the line a winner. And even if I don’t have that luck, I’ll have the satisfaction of knowing that I have done my best and gone down fighting.”

“You’ll end up fighting, sure enough,” said Tom emphatically, “but you won’t go down unless you sprain an ankle or break a leg. The only question with the boys here is not whether you will win – they’re dead sure of that – but whether you’ll hang up a new record.”

“There really isn’t any such thing as a record for the Marathon,” said Bert. “The conditions are so different in each race that no one can fairly be compared with another. If it were simply a matter of padding around on a flat track, you could get at the time easily. But the roads, the hills, the wind and the weather all come into the account, and they’re never just alike. The fastest time so far is two hours and thirty-six minutes.”

“The day you ran twenty-two miles, Reddy said that you were going at the rate of two hours and twenty-five minutes for the whole distance,” said Tom. “That’s some speed, all right.”

“Yes,” replied Bert, “and as far as feeling went, I could have kept it up to the end. Those last four miles though would have been the hardest and probably the slowest. But I never cared much about records anyhow. It’s men that I have to beat. Time is a thing you don’t see or hear and you can’t work up much enthusiasm over it. But when another fellow is showing you the way or pushing you hard, then’s the time you really wake up. The old never-give-up feeling comes over you and you tell yourself you’ll win or drop dead trying.”

Just at this moment Dick ran up, waving a telegram.

“Hello, old scout,” called out Bert, “what’s up? You look as though you’d got money from home.”

“Better even than that,” answered Dick. “I’ve just had a wire from Mr. Hollis that he’s on his way in the Red Scout and is going to drop in on us.”

“Good,” cried Bert, and “Bully,” echoed Tom. “When’s he going to get here?”

“Some time to-morrow if nothing happens. Say we won’t be glad to see him, eh, fellows?”

There was no need of the enthusiastic whoop that followed. Their former Camp Master had always held a warm place in their hearts. A gentleman of means and culture, he had been identified with their plans and experiences for several years past. Under his wise and genial leadership, they had passed some of the happiest hours of their lives in the summer camp of which he was the ruling spirit. His help and advice had always been so sound and kind that they had come to look upon him almost as an older brother. While never indulging in the “familiarity that breeds contempt,” and firm almost to sternness when that quality was needed, they felt that he was always looking for their best interests and making their cause his own. And now that they were in college he had still kept in touch with them through letters and occasional reunions of the old summer campers at his home.

A host of recollections came up before them as they talked of his coming. They saw him as he faced the scowling mob of gipsies who had stolen Dick’s watch and forced them to give up their plunder. They recalled the glorious outing that his thoughtfulness had planned for the orphaned youngsters of the county town. They heard again the crack of his pistol as he started that memorable race between the Red Scout and the Gray Ghost, and the delight in his face as the good old Scout with Bert at the wheel had shown the way to its rival over the finish line.

So that when they heard the familiar “honk-honk” of his car the next day and saw the Red Scout slipping swiftly up the drive under the elms, Mr. Hollis had a royal and uproarious welcome that “warmed the cockles of his heart.”

“Say, boys, remember that my hand is flesh and blood and not Bessemer steel,” he laughed, as they bore him off to their rooms.

After the first greetings were over, he came straight to the purpose of his visit.

“I ran out here to kidnap you fellows,” he explained. “None of you look weak and wasted” – and he smiled as he looked at their bronzed faces, glowing with health and vitality – “and I don’t have any idea that you’re killing yourself with over work. Still, a few days change is a good thing for all of us at times. I’m going up to my lodge in the Adirondacks to get it ready for my family who expect to stay there this summer. I shan’t be gone more than a week, and as your mid-term vacation starts to-morrow it won’t interfere with your studies. It’s a wild place there – no neighbors, no telephones, no anything that looks like civilization. The nearest town is fourteen miles away and I plan to leave the Red Scout there while we go the rest of the way on foot. We’ll have to rough it a little, but it’s a glorious bit of ‘God’s outdoors,’ and I’ll guarantee that you’ll eat like wolves and sleep like babies and come back kicking up your heels like thoroughbreds. Will you go?”

Would they go! Could anything keep them from going? But after the first wild shout of assent, Bert’s face fell.

“I don’t know just how Reddy will look at it,” he said slowly. “You know how strict he is about training. He may kick like the mischief at my going out of his sight just now. I’ll have to put it up to him.”

So put it up to him he did, and that autocrat promptly put his foot down hard.

“Not for a minute,” he snapped. “I wonder at your asking me.”

But as he saw Bert’s disappointment, he hesitated.

“Wait a bit,” he said, “till I think.” And he fell into a brown study.

At length he looked up. “I tell you straight, Wilson,” he said slowly, “if it were any other fellow on the track team, I wouldn’t do it. But you’ve never shirked or broken training and I’m going to let you go. You’re drawn pretty fine, just now and perhaps a few days up in the pine woods won’t hurt

you any. I've been thinking of letting up on you a bit so that you wouldn't go stale. Just at present you're right on edge and fit to run for a man's life. Go easy on the eats and do just enough training each day to keep in condition. I don't mind if you take on five pounds or thereabouts, so that I'll have that much to work off when you get back. And turn up here in a week from to-day as fit as a fiddle. If you don't, may heaven forgive you for I won't. Now go quick," he ended up with a twinkle in his eye, "before I take it back."

Bert needed no urging and rushed back to his rooms with the good news that made his friends jubilant.

"Hustle's the word from now on," cried Tom. "Let's get our things together in a hurry."

And they hustled to such good purpose that within an hour their traps and outing togs were thrown into the capacious tonneau of the Red Scout and they piled in ready for the start.

Bert's fingers thrilled as he grasped the wheel and threw in the clutch. The noble car almost seemed to recognize its driver and flew along like a thing alive. The roofs and towers of the college buildings faded away behind them and their journey to the Adirondacks was begun.

The roads were fine and the weather superb, and they figured that if these conditions held out they would reach their destination the afternoon of the following day. An ordinary car with a mediocre driver could not have made it. But the Red Scout had long before demonstrated its speed, and under Bert's skilful handling it fairly ate up the miles that intervened between them and their journey's end. Of course they had to slow up a little when they passed through towns, but when the road stretched far ahead like a white ribbon with no other vehicle in sight, Bert let her out to the limit. If the speed laws weren't exactly broken, they were at least in Tom's phrase "slightly bent." Occasionally Tom and Dick relieved him while he leaned back in the tonneau and talked with Mr. Hollis.

At railroad crossings they were perhaps unduly careful, for all remembered that awful moment when they had been caught on the tracks and only Bert's lightning calculation had saved them from a frightful disaster.

"Will you ever forget," asked Tom, "how the old Scout bumped over the ties at the rate of a mile a minute while the express train came roaring up behind us?"

"Never," replied Dick. "More than once I've dreamed of it and lived it all over again until I woke in a cold perspiration. Once it actually seemed to strike and throw me up in the air, and when I landed I almost jumped out of bed. It gives me the creeps just to think of it, and I don't want anything more of that kind in mine."

"It sure was a case of touch and go," chimed in Bert. "I could feel the heat from the engine on my neck as I bent over the wheel. Of course we knew that the engineer was working desperately to stop, but the question was whether he could do it in time. If anything had given way in the Scout, it would have been all up with us."

"But she pulled us through all right," said Dick, patting the side of the car, "like that famous horse on his way to the battlefield:

'As though it knew the terrible need,
It stretched away at its utmost speed.'

But we can't gamble that way with death more than once and hope to 'put it over,' and after this I don't need to have any railroad sign tell me to 'Stop. Look. Listen.' I'll do all three."

With chat and song and laughter the hours sped by. They were young, life ran warm in their veins, the world lay before them full of promise and of hope, glowing with all the colors of the rainbow. A happier, more carefree group it would have been hard to find in all the broad spaces between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Had any one told them of the awful hazard, the haunting fear, the straining horror that they were soon to undergo they would have laughed at him as a false prophet of evil. The present at least was theirs and they found it good.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon they reached the county town, and here they reluctantly said good-bye for the present to the Red Scout. The one road through the wilderness up to Mr. Hollis' house was a rough path to be trodden only on foot or, at need, in one of the mountain buckboards that could bump its way along over spots and around stumps that might have wrecked a machine. So after arranging for the care of the auto, they shouldered their few bundles and set out on foot. It was an ideal day for walking. The sun scarcely made itself felt as it filtered through the trees, and the balsam of the woods was like a tonic. Long before dusk they reached the lodge where a good supper awaited them, prepared by the caretaker whom Mr. Hollis had notified of his coming.

The night came on clear and almost cold in that high mountain altitude and it was hard to realize that men were sweltering in cities not far away.

"We'll sleep under blankets to-night," said Mr. Hollis, "and in the meantime what do you say to building a roaring camp fire right out here in the open? It'll be a reminder of the old days in camp when Dave Ferris used to spin his famous ghost and tiger yarns."

The boys hailed the suggestion with enthusiasm. They speedily gathered a supply of dry branches, enough to replenish the fire the whole evening. Then while the flames crackled and mounted high in the air they threw themselves around it in all sorts of careless attitudes and gave themselves up to unrestrained enjoyment of the time and place. At last slumber beckoned and they turned in.

They slept that night the dreamless sleep of health and youth and woke refreshed the next morning ready, as Tom put it, "for anything from pitch and toss to manslaughter." A plunge in a nearby stream whetted their appetites for the hearty breakfast that followed, and then they went out for a stroll, while Mr. Hollis remained in the lodge, discussing with the caretaker the approaching visit of his family.

It was a glorious morning. The dew still sparkled on the grass, birds sang in the trees, and the newly risen sun flooded the landscape with beauty. A mountain brook rippled over the stones. Partridges drummed in the tangled thickets, chipmunks flitted like shadows across the mountain paths, squirrels chattered noisily in the branches. Everywhere was life and movement, but all the artificial noises of the town were conspicuous by their absence. To the boys, so long used to city life, the change was delightful beyond words.

By the side of the path, about a quarter of a mile from the lodge, was a great dogwood tree snowy with its fragrant blooms. Tom reached up to break off a branch, but just as he snapped the stem it slipped through his fingers and fell in the bushes beneath. He stooped over to pick it up. There was a whirring sound, a rattle that struck terror to their hearts and Tom jumped back with a great, gray, writhing thing hanging to his sleeve. He shook it off and staggered backward, while the rattler instantly coiled to strike again.

CHAPTER III

A Run for Life

Quick as lightning Bert slashed at the wicked head with a heavy stick he had been carrying. It caught the snake just as it darted forward and broke its back. It fell, twisting and writhing, and Bert throwing away his stick leaped to Tom's side.

"Did he get you, Tom?" he asked, with a horrible fear tugging at his heart.

"I don't know," answered Tom, trying to smile. "He seemed to be tangled up in my sleeve. Perhaps his teeth didn't go through. But I feel – rather – queer."

In an instant Dick and Bert yanked off Tom's coat and rolled up his shirt sleeve. Their hearts almost stopped beating. There, just below the elbow were two tiny punctures, fiery red against the white skin.

Like a flash Dick's lips were on the wound as he strove to draw out the venom. Bert whipped out his handkerchief and tied it tightly just above those ominous spots. Then he thrust a stick through the folds and twisted it until Tom grew white with the pain.

Drawing his whistle from his pocket, Bert blew loud and shrill a series of short and long notes in the Morse alphabet that told of deadly need and peril. He knew that if it reached the ears of Mr. Hollis it would bring him instantly.

And now for a doctor. But where? He cast wildly about him and his heart sank as he realized that there was none nearer than the county town fourteen miles away. Fourteen long miles over a rough forest road. There was no telephone or telegraph in that wilderness. The only horse on the place was a sedate old brute who couldn't be flogged into a gallop. There was one thing to do and only one. He leaped to his feet.

At that moment an answering whistle came over the hill, telling him that Mr. Hollis had heard and was coming.

"I'm off," Bert cried to Dick. "Keep a stiff upper lip, old man," as he clapped Tom on the shoulder. Another moment and the woods closed round him.

Those giant trees, centuries old, had seen some strange sights in their time. Perhaps in the old days some Indian brave in pursuit of his quarry or himself pressed hard by enemies had passed beneath them like the flight of an arrow. But it is doubtful if they had ever seen a white man running at such speed as Bert's, as like a young Mercury with winged heels he rushed along under their branches. Life was at stake – Tom's life, he reflected as a pang tore through him – and he must run as he had never run before if he were to come out winner.

The road itself was a fearful handicap. It was little more than a woodcutter's path, ridged by deep furrows, dotted here and there with stumps, strewn with branches blown down in storms. Even where it was comparatively clear, the pine needles that carpeted it in spots offered a slippery and treacherous footing. Low-hanging branches brushed his face, long creepers reached out to grasp his flying feet. If he should once slip or trip or sprain an ankle – . He shuddered and ran on.

He had started off at a terrific pace and had covered three miles or more at top speed. Then the strain began to tell. His lungs were laboring and his breath came in gasps that were almost sobs. He took a grip on himself. At this rate he would collapse before he had gone five miles. He must husband his strength or he would never reach the end of his journey. And then – .

At the thought he slackened speed and fell into the long steady lope that yet covered the ground at an amazing rate. His breathing became easier and he knew that he would soon get his second wind. Then he felt that he could run all day.

Now he had made half the distance and from the crown of a hill he caught sight of the far-off spire of a church that marked the location of the town. It put new speed into his feet and life into his

veins. He would win through. He must win through. Yet through his self assurance came at times the terrible thought – suppose that after all he should be too late.

A fierce rage against the whole snake family took possession of him. Again he heard the blood-curdling rattle; again he saw the malicious eyes in which a devil lurked, the ugly triangular head, the long slimy diamond-marked body that turned him sick with loathing. He could have wished that all the venomous tribe had been compressed in one, that he might kill it with a single blow.

But he shook off this feeling. Hate weakened him – taxed too heavily his vital forces. He must concentrate on just one thing – Tom and the terrible need for haste.

Now he was running easily. His wind was in good condition. His legs had taken on new strength. The only danger left was the path. If he could avoid injury that would cripple him, he knew he could win. He had shed hat and coat and vest, had even thrown away his knife and whistle to lighten himself by every ounce for the final sprint. A mountain brook lay in his path. He stooped, dashed the water over his head and ran on.

At last the woods became less dense. Scattered clearings here and there told him he was reaching the outskirts of the town. He passed a farmhouse, then another. He caught a glimpse of people at doors and windows staring at him as though at an apparition. A team drew hastily aside to let him pass. A straggling line of houses marked the entrance to the town. Just as he reached the main street, he caught sight of a doctor's sign, and dashing upon the porch hammered at the door.

The woman who opened it started back at the sight of him. He was dripping with sweat, his face was haggard and drawn, his eyes burning with excitement.

“The doctor,” he gasped.

“Here he is,” said a tall, keen-faced man, appearing at this moment. “What is it?”

Between gasps Bert made known his errand. The doctor's face grew grave.

“Sit down,” he said, “and I'll harness up and be with you in a minute.” And he hurriedly left the room.

But Bert was thinking quickly. Over that rough road and largely uphill, even a good horse – and the doctor's nag was not likely to be a thoroughbred – would find it hard to negotiate the distance within two hours. And what might happen to Tom in that time he did not dare to think. What could he do? And then like a flash came the solution. The Red Scout! She could make it in twenty minutes.

Without a word he rushed out of the house and across to the combination livery and garage where the machine was stored. There it stood, the most conspicuous object in the place, with all trace of its journey removed and its cylinders shining. It was the work of a moment to explain matters to the proprietor and see that there was plenty of gasoline in the tank. He sprang to the driver's seat, threw in the clutch and glided swiftly out to the road. So that when the doctor drove around the side of the house he was astonished to see the great car come swooping down upon him.

“All ready, doctor,” shouted the wild-eyed youth at the wheel, “come along.”

“You'll never make it,” he protested, “on this road. You'll split it apart. You'll tear it to pieces.”

“We will make it,” cried Bert. “We *must* make it. Jump in.”

For a moment the doctor hesitated. He knew – none better – the need of haste. Still his own life was precious. Then he rose to the occasion. His sporting blood was roused. He would take a chance. He swung his case into the tonneau and leaped in after it. “Let her go,” he called.

And Bert let her go!

The doctor saw some “demon driving” that day. The great machine sprang forward like an arrow released from the string. The cheer that rose from the little knot of townspeople who had hastily collected was lost in the roar of the exhaust. The town itself melted away like a dream. The wind whistled past them with a shriek. In a moment they had passed the straggling farmhouses and entered on the road that led upwards through the woods.

Crouched low over the wheel to offer as little resistance as possible to the wind, Bert kept his eye glued on the path ahead. To strike a tree meant death. Collision with a stump would be wreck

and disaster. The car lunged from side to side and the doctor, down on the floor of the tonneau, held on for his life. Again and again they grazed death by a hair's-breadth and escaped as by a miracle. Yielding to Bert's slightest touch, the Scout evaded a stump here, a gully there, part of the time on two wheels, again on three, but always righting in time. And all the while, it was climbing, climbing – .

Now they had covered three-fourths of the distance and his heart leaped in a wild riot of exultation. He patted the wheel, soothed it, talked to it as though it could understand.

“Go it, old scout,” he muttered, “keep it up. We'll get there yet. We're running for Tom. You know Tom, good old Tom. You've carried him many a time. Now perhaps he's dying. Hurry, hurry, hurry.”

His own fierce energy seemed to impart itself to the car. On it went until it topped the rise of the clearing, swung into the road that led to the lodge, and with a triumphal blast from its horn tore up to the door. Before it had fairly stopped, Bert leaped from his seat and the doctor stepped down from the tonneau, his face set and drawn from the perilous ride.

“Thank God, you've come,” cried Mr. Hollis appearing at the door. “I didn't dare to hope for you for two hours yet. Come in, quick.”

There was no time for further explanations, but in the course of the fight for Tom's life that followed, Bert learned of what had happened since he had started on his run for help. Warned by the whistle, Mr. Hollis and the caretaker had hurried to Dick's side, and together they had carried Tom to the house. They had kept the ligature tight and had cut out the part immediately surrounding the wound. By the greatest efforts they had fought off the deadly coma, but, despite it all, he was fast lapsing into unconsciousness when the doctor appeared.

Faced by a peril that he knew, the doctor pulled himself together and became the cool, alert man of science. Such cases were familiar to him in that wild district, and there was no hesitation or uncertainty in his treatment. His quick sharp commands found ready obedience from his willing helpers, and after an hour of the hardest kind of work the fight was won. Tom's pulse became more normal, his brow grew moist and he opened his eyes and smiled faintly at the group around him. The doctor rose.

“He'll be all right now,” he said. “The fangs just missed the large vein, or he'd have been done for. As it is, we've barely pulled him through. If we'd been an hour later, I wouldn't have answered for him. We can thank this young man,” looking at Bert, “for saving his friend's life. By George, such driving! I've never ridden so fast before and I never want to again. A little more of that and I'd be a candidate myself for the hospital or insane asylum. How we escaped being dashed to pieces I don't know.”

“It was great luck,” said Bert.

“It was great skill,” ejaculated Dick.

“It was Providence,” said Mr. Hollis gravely, and no one cared to dispute him.

After Tom was sleeping naturally and healthfully, and Bert and the doctor had bathed and dressed, they sat down to dinner. It was a quiet meal as all were feeling the reaction from the tremendous efforts of the morning. But their fatigue was lost in thankfulness. They had matched their forces against death and this time had won. But by how narrow a margin!

Dinner over, they strolled down the path to the scene of the encounter. There lay the cause of all the trouble. The long body, as thick as a man's wrist, stretched out in a wavy line across the road. The diamond markings had dulled somewhat, but the staring eyes still seemed lit with malice.

“What a holy terror!” exclaimed Dick.

“Yes,” said the doctor. “He's an old-timer, sure enough. He must be over five feet long and eleven years old, as you can see from his rattles. If you don't mind, I'll take these rattles along and hang them up in my office. They'll serve to remind me of the most stirring incident in my life so far,” and he smiled, mischievously, at Bert.

“Take them and welcome as far as I’m concerned,” said Bert. “For my part I never want to see another snake, living or dead, for the rest of my natural life.” And as every one else felt the same way, the doctor neatly severed the grisly memento, to be duly dried and mounted in his sanctum.

Bert offered to take the doctor back to town in the auto, but the others put in an emphatic veto.

“No, you don’t,” said Mr. Hollis. “Not another thing for you to-day but rest.”

“You bet there isn’t,” echoed Dick. “Even Reddy, tyrant that he is, would agree that you’d had exercise enough for one day. I’ll take the doctor down myself. He won’t go back as fast as he came up, but he’ll be more comfortable. I always look out for the safety of *my* passengers,” he added, with mock severity.

The doctor grinned appreciatively. “Slow down to a walk as far as I’m concerned,” he said. “My appetite for speed has been satisfied for a long time to come. Any more just now would give me indigestion.”

Dick’s plan was to put the Red Scout in the garage, stay at the hotel that night and walk back in the morning. But the doctor who had taken a great liking to these young specimens of manhood overruled this, and insisted so strongly that Dick should be his guest over night that this was finally agreed upon.

“I’ll bring you back in the buckboard,” he said, “when I come up to-morrow to see how our patient is getting along. In the meantime, don’t worry. The worst is over and it’s only a matter of careful nursing for the next few days and he’ll be on his feet again. His youth and vitality and clean life, together with the ‘first aid’ you gave him have pulled him through.”

“Not to mention the doctor and Bert and the ‘Red Scout,’” added Mr. Hollis.

The doctor laughed and stepped into the machine. Dick took the wheel and the splendid car, none the worse for its wild ride, started on its way back to town, while Bert and Mr. Hollis, standing on the porch, looked after it almost as affectionately as though it had been human.

“Tally one more for the good old Scout,” murmured Bert, as he turned away.

That evening, his face still flushed at the heartfelt praise of his host, Bert went in to bid Tom good-night. The patient was getting on famously, but the shock to his system still persisted and he had been forbidden to do much talking. But the pressure of his hand on Bert’s and the look in his eyes were eloquent.

“Do you remember, Bert,” he half whispered, “what Reddy said the last time you saw him?”

“Why, no,” answered Bert, puzzled, and cudgeling his memory, “nothing special. What did he say?”

Tom smiled. “You’re fit to run for a man’s life.”

CHAPTER IV

A Desperate Struggle

Tom mended fast, though not in time to go back with Bert and Dick, and Mr. Hollis insisted that he should stay a week or ten days longer at the lodge until he had fully recovered.

The precious week of vacation passed only too quickly, and promptly on the day that college resumed, Bert, faithful to his promise, was back at work. He had carefully kept up his practice, and this, combined with the invigorating mountain air, had put him in splendid shape. As he confided to Dick, "if he'd felt any better he'd have been afraid of himself." So that when he reported to Reddy and submitted to his inspection, even that austere critic could find no fault with the sinewy athlete who smilingly extended his hand.

"By the powers," he said, as he looked him up and down approvingly, "I did a good thing to let you go. You're fine as silk and trained to the hour. If looks count for anything you could go in now and break the record. Get out on the cinder path and let me time you for a five-mile spin."

With the eye of a lynx, he noted Bert's action as he circled the track. Nothing escaped him. The erect carriage, the arms held close to his sides, the hip and knee movement, the feet scarcely lifted from the ground, the long, easy stride that fairly ate up space, the dilated nostrils through which he breathed while keeping the mouth firmly closed, the broad chest that rose and fell with no sign of strain or labor – above all, the sense of reserve power that told of resources held back until the supreme moment called for them – all these marks of the born runner the trainer noted with keen satisfaction; and he was chuckling to himself when he snapped shut his split-second watch and thrust it in his pocket.

"He'll have to break a leg to lose," he gloated. "That lad is in a class by himself. I'm none too sure of the other events, but we sure have this one cinched. We'll win in a walk."

But while he thus communed with himself, he carefully abstained from saying as much to Bert. He had seen too many promising athletes ruined by overconfidence. Besides, while he felt sure that Bert could take the measure of any one now known to him as a runner, he couldn't tell but what some "dark horse" would be uncovered at the general meet who would bring all his hopes tumbling about his head like a house of cards. Too many "good things" had gone wrong in his experience not to make him cautious. So it was with well-simulated indifference that he held up his hand at the end of the fifth mile.

"That's enough for to-day," he commanded. "To-morrow we'll start in with the real work. We only have a scant two weeks left before the New York meet and we'll need every minute of it."

And Bert bent himself to his task with such earnestness and good will that when at last the great day of the final meet arrived he was at the top of his form. Neither he nor Reddy would have any excuses to offer or anything to reproach themselves with, if he failed to show his heels to the field.

And, as Dick remarked, when they entered the gate of the mammoth park, it "was certainly some field." From every section of the country they had gathered – burly giants from the Pacific slope, the slenderer greyhound type of the East – some from colleges, others wearing the badge of famous athletic clubs – all of them in superb condition and all passionately bent on winning. To carry off a trophy in such company was a distinction to be prized. And, in addition to the ordinary incentives, was the international character of the event. Before the eyes of each hung the lure of a European trip and the opportunity of proving on foreign fields that the picked athletes of America could lead the world. Patriotism was blended with personal ambition and they formed a powerful combination.

Moreover, the chances of being chosen were much greater than is usual in such contests. Not only the winner in each event was to make the trip, but the man who came in second or third or even farther down the list would go. The Committee was not going to "put all its eggs in one basket." The

chances of sickness or accident or change of climate were too many to justify them in depending upon a single competitor to carry the colors of his country in any given struggle. Thus in the pole vaulting, hammer throwing, swimming, hurdling, javelin casting, there would be from three to six competitors each. In the Marathon – most important of all – as many as a dozen would probably be taken. So that all were buoyed up by the hope that even if some luckier or better man carried off first honors to-day, they still might be of the elect, if they were well up at the finish.

It was a striking and animated scene that the great park presented. A famous regimental band played national airs and “Old Glory” floated proudly over the judges’ pavilion. The stands were packed with a vast multitude that overflowed on the lawns, while on the inner track groups of contenders indulged in preliminary practice and loosened up their muscles before the games began. Then the bell rang, the tracks were cleared and the throng settled down to watch the performance of their favorites.

Fortune was kind to the Blues that day and their number was hoisted more than once on the bulletin board. Burly Drake cast the discus one hundred and thirty-four feet. Axtell won the standing broad jump and set the mark at eleven feet, two inches. Hinchman was second in the half-mile, and Martin cleared the pole at a height of twelve feet, one inch. Bert and Dick exulted at the showing of their Alma Mater and Reddy tried in vain to conceal his delight under a mask of grim indifference.

At last the time came for the Marathon. Eighteen miles was to be the limit, as the Committee agreed with Reddy that the actual Marathon distance might well be deferred until the day of the actual race. It was a fair presumption that those who showed up best at the end of the eighteen miles would be best prepared to cover the full distance of twenty-six when they had to face that heart-breaking test.

A final rub-down and Bert was ready. A last slap on the shoulder from Dick, a word of caution from Reddy, a howl of welcome from the Blues as he came in sight, and he trotted to the starting line where forty more were gathered. He threw off his sweater, and clad only in his light tunic and running trunks, with a blue sash about his waist, faced the starter. Like a young Viking he stood there, lithe and alert, in his eye the light of combat, in his veins the blood of youth, in his heart the hope of triumph.

A moment’s breathless pause. Then the pistol cracked and they were off.

As they rushed in a compact body past the stand, a tremendous roar of greeting and encouragement nerved them to the struggle. In a twinkling they were rounding the first turn and the race was fairly on.

They had not gone a mile before Bert knew that he had his work cut out for him. It was not that there was any phenomenal burst of speed that tended to take him off his feet. At this he would merely have smiled at that stage of the game. Sprinting just then would have been suicidal. But it was rather the air of tension, of grim determination, of subtle craftiness that made itself felt as in none of his previous races. Many of these men, especially the members of the athletic clubs, were veterans who had competed at a score of meets, while he was a comparative novice. They knew every trick of the racing game. Their judgment of pace, based on long experience, was such that without the aid of a watch they could tell within a few seconds the time of every mile they made. Hard as nails, holders of records, intent of purpose, they might well inspire respect and fear.

Respect – yes. Fear – no. There flashed across Bert’s mind a quaint saying of Reddy’s about pugilists: “The bigger they are the harder they fall.” And he ran on.

Gradually the group spread out like a fan. None had quit, for it was any one’s race so far. But stamina and speed were beginning to tell. That indefinable something called “class” made itself felt. Some were faltering in their stride, others laboring heavily for breath. Sometimes the laggards made despairing sprints that partly closed the gap between them and the leaders, but, unable to maintain the pace, fell back again to the ruck.

Running easily and keeping himself well in hand, Bert at the end of the twelfth mile was bunched with five others up in front. He knew now whom he had to beat. Thornton was at his left, and Brady a little in front. But these did not worry him. Magnificent runners as they were, he felt that he had their measure. He had beaten them once and could do it again.

On his right was a little Irishman with a four-leaved clover – the emblem of his club – embroidered on his sleeve. Behind him pounded two others, like wolves on the flank of a deer. One of them was an Indian runner from Carlisle, tall and gaunt, with an impassive face. The other bore the winged-foot emblem that told of membership in the most famous athletic club in the East.

Mile after mile passed, and still they hung on. The little Irishman was wabbling, but still fighting gamely. Brady had “bellows to mend.” Bert could hear his breath coming in long, hoarse gasps that told of strength rapidly failing. The Indian had ranged alongside, going strong. Behind him still padded the feet of the remaining runner.

At the sixteenth mile, Bert quickened his pace and called on his reserve. His heart was thumping like a trip-hammer and his legs were weary, but his wind was good. He left the Irishman behind him and was passing Brady, when the latter swerved from sheer fatigue right in Bert’s path and they went down in a heap.

A groan burst from the Blue partisans at the accident. Dick hid his face in his hands and Reddy danced up and down and said things that the recording angel, it is to be hoped, omitted to set down, in view of the provocation.

Dazed and bruised, Bert struggled to his feet. He was not seriously hurt, but badly shaken. He looked about and then the full extent of the calamity burst upon him.

The downfall had acted on the other runners like an electric shock. Thornton and the Irishman were two hundred feet in front, while the Indian and he of the winged-foot, running neck and neck, had opened up a gap of five hundred feet.

Had it been earlier in the race he would still have had a chance. But now with only a mile and a half to go, the accident threatened to be fatal to his hopes. The others had gained new life from this unexpected stroke of luck, and it was certain that they would not easily let go their advantage. To win now would be almost a miracle.

With savage resolution he pulled himself together. His dizzy brain cleared. Never for a second did he think of quitting. Disaster spurred him on to greater efforts. The Blues roared their delight as they saw their champion start out to overtake the flyers, now so far in front, and even the followers of the other candidates joined generously in the applause. A crowd loves pluck and here was a fellow who was game to the very core of him.

Link by link he let himself out. The track slipped away beneath him. The stands were a mere blur of color. At the turn into the last mile he passed the nervy little Irishman, and a quarter of a mile further on he collared Thornton. Foot by foot he gained on the two others. At the half, he ranged alongside the Indian who was swaying drunkenly from side to side, killed off by the terrific pace. Only one was left now, but he was running like the wind.

Now Bert threw away discretion. He summoned every ounce of grit and strength that he possessed. With great leaps he overhauled his adversary. Down they came toward the crowded stands, fighting for the lead. The Blues tried to sing, but in their excitement they could only yell. The crowd went crazy. All were on their feet, bending far over to watch the desperate struggle. On they came to the line, first one, then the other, showing a foot in front. Within ten feet of the line Bert gathered himself in one savage bound, hurled himself against the tape and fell in the arms of his exulting mates. He had won by inches.

CHAPTER V

The Floating Race-Track

Just what followed Bert never clearly remembered. A hurricane of cheers, a sea of spectators, Dick's face white as chalk, Reddy's like a flame of fire. Then the jubilant trainer thrust a way through the howling mob and led him to his dressing room. An immense fatigue was on him. His heart wanted to come out of his body and his legs weighed a ton. But deep down in his consciousness was a measureless content. He had won. Again the dear old college had pinned its faith to him and again her colors had been the first to cross the line.

A long cooling-out process followed, and then came the bath and rub-down. The strain had been enormous, but his vitality reacted quickly, and under Reddy's skillful ministrations he was soon himself again.

It was a jolly party that took the special train of the Blues back to college. More than their share of the events had fallen to them. Drake, Axtell, Hinchman, Martin and Bert were the center of a hilarious group, who kept demanding at short intervals "who was all right" and answering the questions themselves by shouting the names of their victorious athletes. Not since that memorable day when Bert's fadeaway ball had won the pennant had their cup of satisfaction been so full to overflowing.

The lion's share of the applause naturally fell to Bert, not only because the Marathon was more important than any other feature, but on account of the accident that had come so near to ruining his hopes and which he had so gallantly retrieved.

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