

ON THE TOP WAVE OF SUCCESS

# TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

Edited by BURT L. STANDISH

Vol. I, No. 2.

APRIL, 1910.

Price 5 Cents



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A Hit at  
the Start

# TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

With Some  
Home Runs  
Coming!

As we write this, reports of the success that the first number of TOP-NOTCH met with are coming in fast. We have orders on our hands now for a big lot of copies that we cannot supply, because we were a little overcautious when printing the first edition.

We could well have been more liberal in our printing order, however, for we could readily sell ten thousand copies more if we had them. It is, therefore, with confidence that we offer the second number of TOP-NOTCH.

Of course, you understand that it is a very hard proposition to make the first few numbers of a magazine anywhere near perfect, but if you were pleased with the March number, and we feel sure that you were, we are going to please you still more with the succeeding numbers. If money, brains and energy can do it, we are going to improve TOP-NOTCH until every young man in the United States becomes an enthusiastic reader.

In the present number you will find another story by J. G. St. Dare, entitled "Clif Stirling's Support." It is a complete story of athletic sports woven around very likeable characters and is everything that it should be from the standpoint of interest and quality.

Then there is a story by Herbert Wyndham-Gittens, entitled "Puck and Pluck," in which a youth, who is despised for his supposed cowardice, rises to an emergency and proves himself a hero, full of grit and determination.

Next, there is the second installment of the three-

part story by Edwin Larkmore, entitled "Bob Halliday, Freshman." The first part was very interesting, but the second is even more so.

After that, comes a short story by Albert W. Tolman, entitled "To Save the *Maharajah*," which is so graphic in description that it makes the reader dwell for a short time on heaving waters and to feel the same thrills that a person would have experienced had he witnessed the superhuman effort of a plucky lad to save a burning steamship.

Lastly, there is another installment of the serial story by Gilbert Patten, entitled "The Deadwood Trail." It brings the reader face to face with the emotions experienced by a boy who is abandoned in the heart of a country infested by hostile tribes of Indians. "The Deadwood Trail" is bound to be appreciated by all our readers.

Mr. Standish has secured for the May number of TOP-NOTCH, a story about a college athlete, entitled "The Yellow Streak." It is simply superb, and is a good example of what we are going to give our readers in future num-

bers of TOP-NOTCH. "The Yellow Streak" is interesting to the point of excitement all the way through, and every boy who has felt a queer lack of confidence at a crucial moment will appreciate just how the hero of this story felt and what a supreme effort he made to conquer his "yellow streak." Tell your newsdealer to save you a copy of the May number. Aside from the other big features, you will find that "The Yellow Streak" is worth more than the price of the whole number.

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PUBLISHED  
MONTHLY

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NEW YORK

OUR AIM: THE LIVELIEST, CLEANEST AND BEST STORIES

Vol. I, No. 2.

APRIL, 1910.

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## CLIF STIRLING'S SUPPORT

A Complete Long Story of Athletic Sports

By J. G. ST. DARE

A running race, a robbery, a fist fight, a rattling baseball game—these are some of the things which happen in this snappy yarn of schoolboy sports. It is really Clif Stirling's impetuous, headstrong younger brother, Jack, who holds the center of the stage. He's a human fellow, and you'll like him.

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE FOOT RACE.

"On your mark—set!"

Six lads in running clothes, arms bare to the shoulders, legs bare below the knees, crouched upon the line in various positions, ready to dash away at the sound of the pistol.

At one end of the line stood the time-keeper, stop watch in his palm. Just behind the line the starter lifted his hand, which grasped something that glittered brightly in the soft, slantwise rays of the setting sun.

Bang!

A puff of smoke burst from the pistol, and at the sound of the sharp report the runners leaped away.

A little group of spectators, mainly students of Fairfield Academy, gave a shrill cheer as the contestants went speeding down the brown road, which led out of town and away toward the Alder Stream bridge. One of those watchers, a big, handsome, smiling, blue-eyed chap, lifted his voice and shouted clearly:

"Go it, Jacko! Remember the Coveport game!"

This was Clif Stirling, lately chosen captain of the Fairfield Academy nine to fill the place of the former holder of that position, who had unexpectedly left the school and the town in the midst of the baseball season with the most important games yet to be played.

His words were intended for the ears of his brother Jack, one of the runners, a grammar school boy, who, with two companions, had challenged any three members of the academy track team to compete with them in a foot race.

This challenge had been the outcome of irritating jests and sneers from the lips of certain academy lads who found some pleasure in arousing the quick temper of Jack Stirling, the natural leader of the would-be athletes in the grammar school. Having induced Breezy Lufkin and Scotty McLoon to join him, Jack undertook to silence the jeering fellows of the academy by daring them to pick three men to meet the trio of grammar school lads in a running race.

Although he had not made as much talk as some others, the biting sarcasm of Park Wickford, the son of Fairfield's richest mill owner, had served more than anything else to inflame and arouse young Stirling. Wickford, disappointed in his ambition and his scheming to be chosen to fill Pemberton's place, was bitterly resentful, not only toward Clif, the successful candidate, but also toward Jack, who had served as a substitute player when Park, declaring that he had sprained his wrist, attempted to weaken the team by declining to play in a critical game. Even though the designing fellow wore a bandage upon that wrist for several

days, he knew in his heart that the Stirling brothers were not the only ones who suspected him of faking.

Wickford had vainly sought to avoid taking part in this race, but, being one of the academy's fastest runners, and having assisted, through his taunts, in drawing the challenge from the grammar school lads, he found it impossible to escape without leaving the impression that he had shown the white feather; and above all things he was anxious that no one should believe him a chap who lacked sand. Therefore, Park Wickford was one of the three academy runners, the other two being Reddy Sprowl, reckoned the fastest man of the nine on bases, and Skippy Fisk, the lively little shortstop of the team.

As Clif Stirling shouted after his brother, urging him to remember the Coveport game, he felt a slap on the back, and turned to find Jud Murdock, the catcher of the nine, beside him.

"Why didn't you get into that race, old man?" asked Murdock. "Afraid Wickford would beat you?"

"Hardly that," answered Clif good-naturedly. "You know I don't pretend to be a great runner."

"But I know you can run like blazes when you have to," returned Murdock. "I've seen you go some, Clif. The trouble with you is that you don't like to exert yourself too much."

"Perhaps that's it," nodded the cap-

tain of the nine. "I reckon I'm too lazy. It's sort of a disease with me; I do hate to exert myself unless I'm compelled to do so."

"It would have been somewhat interesting if you had taken part," said Murdock. "Now Wickford will have a walkover. It will be all his own way." "Think so?"

"Sure. Look at him—look! Why, he's taking the lead already."

It was true that Wickford had forged to the front and seemed to be swiftly drawing away from some of the other contestants as they sped along the straight stretch of the elm-shaded street. There was one of the runners, however, who refused to be dropped behind thus early in the race, and Clif Stirling laughed as he saw a slender, lithe-limbed figure clinging close to Wickford's heels.

"He's taking the lead," he nodded, "but you'll notice that he isn't shaking Jack; and I'm going to admit that I'll be greatly disappointed if he beats my brother ten seconds at the finish. Perhaps it was Jack I was afraid of, not Park Wickford."

"Oh," grunted Murdock, "Jack's too young. I acknowledge that he's pretty good for a kid, but he hasn't the stamina and bottom of Wickford, who always keeps himself in prime condition."

"Perhaps not; but if you stay here and watch them finish, Jud, I have a notion that you may be surprised, as well as Wickford."

Full of self-confidence, Wickford had determined to "kill off" the weaker runners by setting such a fierce pace at the beginning that they must soon become winded and discouraged. Away he went like a mettlesome racer, breathing easily as he flew over the ground with long, light strides. There was little or no side swaying of his body, for he ran naturally, without lost motion or waste of effort. His breathing was rhythmical and perfect. His keen ears told him that he was drawing away from most of the runners, but that at least one was making a determined effort to stick by him.

"Sprowl," he decided, without turning his head. "Reddy is good for a quarter of a mile at this rate, but he hasn't the stuff in him to keep it up over the whole course, which must be at least a mile and a quarter."

The route agreed upon would take the runners out across the Alder Stream, up an old road along the west side of the stream, back over a foot-bridge below the Felt Mill dam, thence by Mill and Dye Streets into Elm, and then straight to the starting point near the academy, which was to be the finishing line.

On Elm Street a few spectators turned to look after the runners as they sped past.

As he swung into the road which led to the Alder Stream bridge Wickford glanced over his shoulder and made the unpleasant discovery that the fellow who was keeping close to him was not Reddy Sprowl, but Jack Stirling.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, astonished. "Hello yourself," returned Jack. "You're setting the pace nicely, Wickford."

The words stung Park to sudden anger. So young Stirling was using him as a pace maker! And, what was still more disturbing, the fierce dash down Elm Street had not seemed to wind the grammar school lad greatly, for he scarcely appeared to be panting, and he spoke those words without effort as he swung lightly and swiftly along over the ground.

"But I'll fix him!" thought Wickford. "He's only a kid, and he can't keep it up. I'll have his wind broken if he sticks by me to the bridge."

He let himself out still more as the outskirts of the town were left behind.

"I'll ease up a bit and get my second wind after I've cooked his goose," decided Park.

But still his keen ears could hear those softly pattering, swift-flying feet close behind him, and he knew Jack Stirling was hanging on like a leech.

They passed an old farmer jogging homeward from town behind an ancient nag, and the man shouted:

"Hey! Go it while you're young; when yer git'old ye can't!"

Hearing the other runners approaching, the old man looked around at them and grinned.

"You'll have ter hurry up," he called, "or them fellers will have the laff on ye. Bate I could beat ye myself if I tried."

"Go on!" panted Reddy Sprowl, passing. "Give us a chew off your plug, will you?"

Park Wickford bounded over the Alder Stream bridge and turned into the crossroad leading toward the Felt Mill dam. And now, in spite of his own fine condition, the pace was beginning to tell on him, and he was breathing heavily.

As he turned, he noted with absolute dismay that he had not gained a yard on Jack Stirling.

"Confound that brat!" he wheezed. "He can't keep it up. It's impossible."

The road was rough and grass-grown. It led through a mass of scrub alders which grew close on either hand.

Thinking to ease up a bit in order to get his second wind, and believing young Stirling would still take him as a pace maker and do the same, Wickford slackened the speed of his stride. Barely had he done this when Jack forged alongside and threatened to pass.

"Oh," panted Park, bracing up at

once, "so you're still in the race, are you?"

"Rather," was the irritating answer; "and I fancy you'll find me in the race at the finish."

"Yah! you're a conceited little whelp!" snarled Wickford, again exerting himself in an effort to regain the ground he had lost.

But Jack kept at his side, and together they flew along that narrow lane through the scrub alders, rapidly approaching the Felt Mill dam.

Wickford's legs and lungs were beginning to feel the strain. His breath whistled through his teeth, and as they came out of the alders and turned toward the footbridge he suddenly stumbled and seemed barely to save himself from falling.

"My ankle," he gasped—"I've turned my ankle!"

Jack Stirling flung a laugh over his shoulder.

"Perhaps you've hurt it the same as you sprained your wrist," he called. "It will make a nice excuse for you."

That was enough to put Park on edge again.

"I can't let him beat me!" he thought, as he let out every notch of which he was capable. "If I do I'll never hear the last of it."

Jack was at least two rods in advance when the narrow, railless foot-bridge was reached.

On the bridge, long-handled fish spear in hand, watching for barvel, sat Hop Tobin, looking like a huge bullfrog in his rusty brown, greenish-tinged clothes. Tobin was a fellow with a bad reputation—a bully, a sneak, and a leader among the tough boys of the town. He had reasons for disliking Clif Stirling, and he had grown to dislike Jack also since the latter had avoided him of late.

Tobin saw the two runners approaching. In the past he had tried to curry favor with Wickford without much success.

"Hey!" he cried. "Where's the fire?" And then, as Jack gave him barely a glance, he suddenly shifted his hold on the spear and thrust the handle between young Stirling's feet.

Tripped by that contemptible trick Jack staggered to one side, trying to save himself from falling. There was no hand rail for him to grasp, and, in spite of all he could do, he plunged headlong from the bridge into the stream.

## CHAPTER II.

### SOME SURPRISES.

Park Wickford's heart gave an exultant leap as he saw Jack Stirling topple from the bridge. Hop Tobin, rising to his feet, grinned at him as he passed.

"I guess you can win now," he cried. Wickford made no reply. As he left the bridge and turned into Mill Street

he saw Tobin hurrying away on the far side of the stream and beheld Jack Stirling rising in the shallow water to wade toward the shore.

"That was a great piece of luck for me," thought Park: "but somebody is going to be blazing mad."

Having little fear that any runner would overtake him now, he eased up through Mill and Dye Streets, but let himself out in the handsomest manner as he reached Elm Street and struck the straight stretch to the finishing point.

Indeed, when Park Wickford romped over the line with some of the spectators cheering, only one other runner, Reddy Sprowl, was in sight.

"What did I tell you?" muttered Jud Murdock in Clif Stirling's ear. "I knew how it would be."

Clif was intensely disturbed. More than that, he was puzzled when the other runners came swinging in one by one and all of them had arrived except his brother.

"Where's Jack?" he asked. "Has anything happened to him?"

"Last I saw of him," panted Reddy Sprowl, lying on the ground to get his breath, "he was right at Wickford's heels on the old crossroad."

Park, seated a short distance away, rubbed his ankle without seeming to hear these words.

"Gave it a twist over on the other side of the stream," he said. "Thought sure I'd sprained it so bad it would put me out."

"Wickford," asked Clif, "what became of Jack?"

"Hey? Jack? Oh, say, he had an accident."

"An accident?"

"Yes; a loose plank on the mill-dam footbridge must have tripped him, for he fell off into the drink."

"I don't understand that," said Clif slowly, looking suspiciously at Wickford. "Did you see him trip?"

"Sure. I turned my ankle just before I reached the bridge. It held me up for a bit. Pained like the toothache. I was trying to hobble along when Jack panted past me, and he was a little bit ahead when the plank tripped him."

"You're sure he wasn't hurt, Wickford? Did you stop to help him?"

"Wasn't any need of it. I held up a bit when I reached this side of the bridge and saw him wading out of the water. He was all right."

"Well, I reckon that business spoiled a good hot finish," said Reddy Sprowl. "I'll own up that I didn't think Jack Stirling had it in him. He had me trimmed for fair."

"Of course I'd have beaten him all right if I hadn't hurt my ankle," said Wickford. "Still, I confess that he's a rather clever runner—for his years. I was holding some steam in reserve

for the final dash along Elm Street. After he took that tumble I didn't need to use it."

"I wonder why he doesn't come?" muttered Clif. "He ought to be here before this, anyhow. I think I'll go look for him."

Murdock and two or three other boys accompanied Clif. The dusk of evening was falling when they reached the footbridge. There they found no sign of Jack Stirling.

"I reckon," said Murdock, "that he felt so sore over it he must have gone straight home. You'll find him there all right, Clif."

Clif had about decided that this might be true, when one of the boys called attention to a dusky figure approaching at a trot on the far side of the stream.

"There he is," breathed Clif. "That's Jack. Hey, Jacko!"

The approaching lad came jogging over the bridge. Despite the dusky gloom, they fancied they could see a look of wrath on his face while he was still some distance away. As he joined them he savagely cried:

"Wait—wait till I get my hands on Hop Tobin! I'll pound him within an inch of his life!"

"Hop Tobin?" said Clif, grasping his brother's bare arm. "What about him, kid? What has he done?"

Fairly quivering with the intensity of his rage, Jack told them the story.

"He took to his heels," he finished. "He legged it, like the coward he is. I chased him, but he got away from me somewhere in the vicinity of old Cale Harkness' house. I saw him dodge round the corner of the house, but I couldn't find him afterward, though I hid behind a bit of old stone wall and waited a while to see if he wouldn't come out of some hiding place. He must have got away through the orchard."

"It was a dirty trick," said Murdock; "but it was just like Tobin. A fellow who could fancy it a fine joke on old Crazy Nancy to pretend he was a burglar and nearly scare her into fits when she refused to tell him where she had her money hidden would do almost anything."

"Wait till I catch him!" Jack rasped. "I'll give him a dose of medicine!"

"You can't do it," declared Murdock. "He's bigger and stronger than you are."

"Can't I? Well, he'll find out whether I can or not!"

"I'm sorry your chance in the foot race was spoiled, Jack," said Clif; "but I want you to keep away from Tobin. I'll take care of that fellow myself."

As the brothers were making their way homeward, having bidden the other boys good night, Clif said:

"I'm mighty sorry this thing happened, Jack, for I was really hoping

that you might be able to beat Wickford in that race."

"I would have beaten him," declared the younger lad positively—"I'd beaten him just as sure as fate, Clif, if it hadn't been for that sneak Tobin. Why, I had him run off his feet. He made a bluff about turning his ankle, but there wasn't anything to it—it was all sham, I'm dead certain. But say, Clif, while I was crouching behind that stone wall near old Hark's house I saw something that surprised me. Did you ever know father to have any business dealings that skinflint, Harkness?"

"Father?" exclaimed Clif. "Why, no. What do you mean, Jack?"

"He came out of old Hark's house."

"Are you sure? You're certain you were not mistaken?"

"Dead sure, Clif. It was our dad. Now why the dickens was he visiting old Cale Harkness, the Fairfield Shylock, who holds mortgages on half the property in town?"

"You've got me guessing," admitted Clif. "Perhaps—perhaps father had to borrow money of that man to make out his weekly pay roll, or something of the sort."

"Well, I hope not. If he ever gets into old Cale's grip he'll have a hard time struggling out of it."

The shadows hid the frown which settled on Clif Stirling's usually pleasant face. Thinking swiftly, he recalled the fact that of late his father had seemed not a little disturbed about something, and once he had caught his parents consulting together privately in a manner which indicated they were speaking of affairs over which they were more or less troubled. And, although Clif's father, a contractor and builder, was supposed to be prospering in his business, the strictest economy had been maintained in the Stirling household for two or three years.

Arriving home, the boys found their father smoking his pipe on the veranda after his usual custom upon pleasant evenings. His greeting was cheerful enough.

"Hello, youngsters," he called. "What have you been up to this evening—swimming?"

"Well, Jack took a plunge," chuckled Clif; "but I didn't."

"Ha, ha! Fine joke!" muttered the younger lad sourly, as he disappeared into the house.

Clif sat down on the steps to talk with his father, but they had not chatted five minutes when an excited, stoop-shouldered old man came running pantingly along the street and staggered up the walk, apparently almost exhausted. To Clif's surprise he recognized old Caleb Harkness, the village money lender, of whom he and Jack had been speaking only a short time before. Quite out of breath, the old man tot-

tered and stumbled on the steps, being caught and supported by the strong, quick hand of the boy.

"Stirling—Stirling," gasped Harkness, holding out his shaking hands to Clif's father, "I've—I've been—robbed!"

"Robbed!" cried Justin Stirling. "Of what?"

"Of the mortgage—your mortgage—and your notes and—and the interest money you—you paid me!"

"Why, such a thing seems impossible, Mr. Harkness. Were you waylaid and robbed upon the street?"

"No—no, no, Stirling! I was robbed—in my own house! The papers—the money—I left them all lying on the table in the sitting room. My wife—called me. She declared she had heard some one in the cellar. I was sure she must be mistaken; but, to pacify her, I lighted a candle and went down to investigate. I didn't find anybody, but when I returned, the papers—the papers and the interest money, one hundred and fourteen dollars—all were gone. Somebody robbed me in my own house, Stirling. I'm a poor man. I can't stand such a loss. What shall I do?"

Whimpering, whining, with tears in his voice, Harkness appealed to Justin Stirling.

"There's only one thing to be done," said Mr. Stirling. "Dearborn, the deputy sheriff, should be notified at once. But I think, Mr. Harkness, you will find you've mislaid the papers and the money. I think you'll find them in your house, all right."

"But if I don't, Stirling—if I don't, will you give me a duplicate mortgage and notes? Will you pay the interest money that has been stolen?"

"I hardly think it's up to me to grant that last request, Mr. Harkness," said Stirling. "I've paid you once, and saw it recorded on the backs of the notes. I see no reason why I should pay that money a second time. Of course, if the mortgage and notes have been lost I'll give you duplicates. Clif, give me my hat. I'm going along with Mr. Harkness to find the deputy sheriff."

### CHAPTER III.

#### SETTLING WITH TOBIN.

Clif brought his father's hat, and Mr. Stirling set off with Caleb Harkness, who had in a measure recovered his breath and strength. Following them down the walk, Clif asked if he could be of any assistance.

"No, boy," answered Mr. Stirling: "but you may come along. I presume this unfortunate affair will disclose to every one in town the facts concerning my private business with Mr. Harkness, which, for the best of reasons, I have endeavored to keep secret."

"Yes, yes," rasped old Cale, as he hobbled along at Justin Stirling's side.

"Only for your foolish notions about it, I would have had that mortgage recorded. I never failed to have one recorded before. I knew it wasn't business-like. Now the documents are lost, the notes are gone, and you might refuse to pay a just and legal debt. You won't do that, will you, Stirling?" he whined, clawing at the other man's coat sleeve with his fingers. "You wouldn't repudiate an honest debt to a poor old man like me? You know I helped you when you had to have the money. You would have found yourself in a bad hole if it hadn't been for me. You had to have thirty-eight hundred dollars in order to fulfill your contract to build that house for Theron Wickford. When you came to me I let you have the money."

"On the very best of security, Harkness," said Justin Stirling, "and at the highest legal rate of interest. You took a mortgage on my property, which is worth at least six thousand dollars. It would bring five thousand to-morrow under the hammer. That was business, not generosity, sir."

"Perhaps you'll say I wasn't generous and obliging when I agreed not to record the mortgage simply because you were afraid some people might go to the records and find out how you stood financially, which you thought would hurt you in your business? I say I was a fool to make any such agreement. I'll never do it again. If you're really ready to do the right thing you'll go with me to see Lawyer Duffy to-night, and we'll have him draw up another mortgage and notes for you and your wife to sign. Duffy may hold the duplicates until we've done our best to catch the thief. If he's caught and the papers recovered, you can destroy the duplicates."

The anxiety of the greedy, whining old man was disgusting to Clif.

"You needn't fear, Harkness," said Mr. Stirling, "that you will ever fail to receive a dollar that I honestly owe you; but I see no reason whatever for all this haste in making new papers. I am ready to acknowledge the debt in the presence of your lawyer and give a pledge to sign the duplicates in case the originals are really lost. The first thing to be done is to get officers at work on the case. The thief can't be far away. If he's a tramp, or a stranger in Fairfield, he ought to be spotted and apprehended without much trouble."

"I've an idea," said the old money lender, "that whoever robbed me was no stranger in town."

"What makes you think that?"

"It must have been somebody familiar with my house. He was a bold scoundrel to enter it in the daytime, or even just as darkness was coming on. He must have known you were going to pay me money to-day. I never keep

more than a few dollars in the house at one time, and you know I didn't want to accept payment at an hour when it was impossible for me to put the money in the bank until the following day. You made the arrangement, Stirling. I took the mortgage and the notes out of my safe-deposit box just before the bank closed this afternoon. Even if I hadn't been robbed I'd scarcely have slept to-night with all that money in the house."

To hear him talk like that a stranger could never have dreamed that old Caleb Harkness was a man whose wealth the surmising citizens of Fairfield had estimated at various amounts above two hundred thousand dollars.

They reached the home of the local deputy sheriff, and a ring at the bell brought the officer himself to the door.

"I've been robbed, Dearborn—robbed!" Caleb Harkness excitedly began. "I've lost a large sum of money and valuable papers—stolen right out of my own house."

"You don't say!" drawled the deputy sheriff. "Well, just step inside and give me the perticlers."

Clif did not enter the house. He was moved to get away by himself, that he might think over the surprising and unpleasant knowledge which had been brought to him as a result of this robbery.

Straight through town he went with swinging strides, so absorbed in meditation that he scarcely noticed one or two friends who called to him. Not until he had walked at least a full half mile into the country beyond the outskirts of the town did he pause to turn back.

At last he knew the meaning of the strict economy that had been practiced at his home, and the cause of the worriment he had sometimes noted in both his parents had been made clear. Instead of being fairly prosperous and successful in his business, Clif's father had met with misfortunes that had plunged him deeply into debt.

"He lost money in building that fine house for Theron Wickford," muttered Clif, as he retraced his steps slowly. "We all supposed he made a good thing out of that. It begins to seem as if a Stirling couldn't have anything to do with a Wickford without getting into trouble. It's mighty tough to think of my father in the grip of that old skin-flint, Harkness. Give old Caleb a chance, and he will squeeze the last drop of blood out of any one. He's cold as ice and hard as steel, and he has demonstrated his grinding greed by foreclosing mortgages on widows and sick persons who could not meet their iron-bound obligations to him. If anything should happen to make it impossible for father to work, that old wretch would cut our home out from beneath

us. And to hear him snivel and whimper one might imagine him on the verge of the poorfarm. It's sickening!"

Avoiding the main street of the village, Clif was returning home by a roundabout way when the sound of excited voices coming from the rear of the grammar schoolhouse attracted his attention.

"Soak him, Jack!"

"Thump him, old boy!"

"Make him beg!"

"Pound the stuffing out of him, Stirling!"

These and similar cries caused Clif to run hastily round the building, behind which he discovered a circle of shouting lads watching a fierce fight between two fellows who were on the ground, one pinning the other to the turf despite his floundering attempts to get free, and mercilessly beating him the while.

"Oh, quit, quit!" croaked the one underneath. "I give up! I beg!"

"You sneaking cur!" panted the other. "If you ever play another dirty trick on me I'll pound the face off you!"

Then Clif's strong hand gripped the collar of Jack Stirling, and lifted him from the prostrate figure of Hop Tobin.

"What are you doing, Jack?" Clif cried.

"Hello!" said the younger lad. "I'm just giving Tobin a good licking."

"He did it, too!" exulted one of the circle of spectators. "Nobody thought he could, but he did."

"I'm ashamed of you, Jack, to strike an antagonist when he's down," reproved Clif.

"But say," was Jack's protest, "you should have seen him kick me when he knocked me down first!"

"That's right, Clif—that's right," cried the witnesses. "He knocked Jack down and kicked him."

"But, oh," laughed a little chap joyously, "didn't Jack come back at him and give it to him good!"

With scarcely an exception, those lads seemed rejoiced over the thrashing the bully of the village had received. Many of them had suffered abuse and cruel punishment at the hands of Tobin. They had feared him in the past, but henceforth, now that they had seen the ruffianly fellow conquered and forced to beg by a younger and smaller chap, they would not stand in such terror of him.

"Where's your coat, Jack?" asked Clif. "Get it, and we'll go home."

Somebody tossed Jack's coat to him, and the older brother led him away.

"Didn't I tell you to keep away from Tobin?" asked Clif.

"And didn't I tell you what I'd do to him when I caught him?" laughed Jack exultantly.

"He's bigger than you—and stronger. I thought he could whip you."

"I didn't. Why, he couldn't have made me own up whipped if he had killed me."

When they reached the house they took pains to slip in by the rear door and climb the back stairs hastily, to avoid being seen. In the bathroom Clif turned on the light and took a look at his brother. Jack had received a smash on the nose, and blood had besmeared his face and the front of his shirt.

"Jack, you're a sight," said Clif.

"Ho! that's nothing," was the retort.

"My old nose always bleeds when I get a thump on it. You've made it bleed more than once when we were boxing with the gloves. Wait till I wash up. I don't believe I'll look so terribly bad, but I'll bet Tobin will have a fancy mug and a handsome pair of black eyes to-morrow."

"Aren't you ashamed?" asked Clif.

"Not a bit. Were you ashamed when you had to fight Park Wickford on the baseball field?"

"I couldn't avoid that, Jack. I had to fight him."

"Well, I had to fight Tobin, too. If I hadn't, I'd have felt like a coward."

Soap and warm water quickly removed every trace of blood from the younger lad's face. His nose was a trifle swollen, but that was the only mark of battle that he bore on his person.

"There, Clif," he smiled, turning toward the other, after a glance in the mirror, "I don't look so bad, do I? Tell me honest, are you ashamed of me now?"

In spite of himself, Clif burst into a shout of laughter.

"No, kid," he answered. "I'm not ashamed of you. You've got a temper of your own, but I've never known you to strike a younger or smaller boy, and I'm certain there isn't a cowardly bone in your body. I'm proud of you."

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE FELLOW WHO LIMPED.

The report of the robbery produced a great sensation in Fairfield. For the next few days it was the principal topic of conversation in almost every home and place of business.

It must be admitted that few persons sympathized with Caleb Harkness. A few expressed surprise on learning that Harkness had held a mortgage on Justin Stirling's home, but there were many who sagely declared that they had long suspected Stirling was not prospering, and had often wondered over his seeming ability to execute all of his contracts without sustaining a loss. McGowan, a rival contractor, asserted he had known that Stirling was beaten on the Wickford job when he took it, and had been aware many times since then

that the man could not make a dollar in various other undertakings upon which his estimates had been altogether too low.

As for the robber, it seemed as if he had vanished like a wraith, leaving no trace behind. Deputy Sheriff Dearborn, assisted by two constables, scoured the town and the surrounding country. They arrested one man on suspicion, but he was able to prove an alibi and was quickly set free.

Officers of surrounding towns were notified, and urged not to let any suspicious persons escape.

There were many in Fairfield, however, who believed that Caleb Harkness, whose mental faculties were thought to be failing, had misplaced the papers and money, and some went about declaring they were confident he would some time find the missing valuables beneath his own roof.

The story he had told, with the usual variations and additions which such stories always acquire in passing from lip to lip, seemed sufficient to confirm these persons in their belief that there had been no robbery. Mrs. Harkness, who was paralyzed in her lower limbs, had called her husband into her room immediately after the departure of Justin Stirling, declaring she had heard some one in the cellar; but when old Cale went to investigate with a candle, leaving the doors open behind him in order that his wife might hear his voice if he shouted to her, he found no one. The bulkhead door had been closed and fastened by the spring lock upon it, and there seemed no method by which any one could have entered the cellar. On returning to the room where he had left the money and papers, however, he declared he had discovered that they were gone.

"Ten chances to one," said one of the Fairfield wiseheads, "the old man tucked the papers and money into some hiding place when his wife called him, and hasn't any recollection of it now. If they were to go into that house, rip up the old rag carpet and look behind the chromos on the walls, and peep into the old clocks or sewing-machine drawers, or something of the sort, I'll guarantee they would dig out the missing stuff."

This belief gradually became almost universal. But, although Cale Harkness searched his own house from cellar to attic, he could not find the money and papers.

Among the boys of the town the story of Jack Stirling's fight with Hop Tobin aroused even more comment than the tale of the robbery. That Clif's younger brother was a chap who would fight at the drop of the hat no one had ever doubted; but, at the same time, no one had imagined he could whip such a big, strong, brutal chap at Tobin.

"You want to look out for Hop, Jackie," grinned Skippy Fisk, as he met the victor at the village post office. "He's making threats against you. He swears he's going to get even."

Jack snapped his fingers disdainfully. "He'd better not try it," he said. "If he tries any more of his tricks on me he will get something worse next time."

At school, on the day following the foot race, Park Wickford limped about, stating that his ankle was very lame. Harp Woodcock, starting for the baseball field for practice after school was over, encountered Wickford.

"Come on, Wick," he called. "Stirling wants everybody out on time to-night. You know we've just got to beat Elmville Saturday, for if we don't Belmont High will lead us one game in the contest for the championship. It would be tough for Belmont to take the honors away from us this year."

"That's right," nodded Wickford, "it would be tough, and there wouldn't be a chance of it if we hadn't lost Pemberton."

"No use to cry over what can't be helped. Pemberton's gone. We've got to do our level best without him. Coming?"

"No."

"Not coming out to-night? Why not?"

"Deuce take it, Woodcock, I've got a lame ankle! Even if I felt inclined to come out and let your new captain order me around, I'd be a chump to practice on this ankle to-night."

"Our new captain," exclaimed Woodcock. "Why do you put it that way, Park? You aren't going to quit the team just because we elected him captain to fill Pemberton's place, are you?"

"Don't say we elected him," snapped Wickford. "I didn't have anything to do with it."

"But, say, old chap, you can't afford to hold a grudge this fashion. It's a mistake. We need you to pitch."

"Is that so? Seems to me Captain Stirling is doing the pitching for you."

"Clif doesn't want to pitch all the games. He didn't want to pitch against Coveport, but he had to when you—when you hurt your wrist. He had rather cover first and have you on the slab. Without you we were compelled to substitute Clif's brother Jack, and he's only a grammar school boy."

"If you need any more substitutes," laughed Wickford sneeringly, "Stirling has two more brothers you might get—Keith, the invalid, and Bob, the baby. The nine would be well filled with Stirlings then. It would be a hot bunch."

Woodcock began to lose his temper.

"I didn't think you were the kind of a fellow to throw us down, Park," he said resentfully.

"I'm not throwing you down," retorted Wickford, observing Jud Mur-

dock, the catcher, approaching. "I don't want any one to accuse me of that."

Murdock gave the speaker a stare, and, in spite of himself, Park flushed in a guilty manner, for he knew what was passing through Jud's mind.

In order to injure Stirling's chance of being elected captain, Park had not only declined to pitch in the Coveport game, on the pretense that his wrist was sprained, but he had sought to lead Murdock, the catcher, into betraying his comrades to the opposing players, by a prearranged code of signals, just what sort of curves Stirling would pitch. At the last moment Murdock had refused to betray his own team and had defied Wickford. Nevertheless, because of a secret which Park held over his head like a whip, the catcher had not possessed the courage to expose him.

The instant Wickford realized that he had flushed with guilt before Murdock's eyes, he threw up his head and gave the catcher a defiant glare that was but faintly expressive of the wrath and resentment flaming in his heart.

For Park was a fellow who thoroughly believed in his own superior birth and breeding, and it enraged him to realize that he had quailed, or even lowered an eyelash, before a fellow like Murdock, whom he considered in every way his inferior.

"Come on, Woodcock," urged Jud, "let's begin practice on time to-night, for I've got to get home early."

He did not include Wickford, and, still more inflamed, Park felt like punching the catcher's homely face.

"If any one asks for me, Harp," Wickford called, as he started to limp away. "just explain that I'm too lame to practice."

"Wick is having hard luck lately, isn't he?" said Woodcock, as the two lads made for the ball field.

"Oh, I don't know," muttered Murdock; "in some respects, he may be lucky."

He was thinking of the fact that he had refrained from showing the secret code of signals, written for him by Wickford on a sheet of paper and handed over privately, with orders to give those signals for the benefit of the Coveport players in any critical stage of the game, and accompanied by a threat calculated to enforce obedience.

"What do you mean?" asked Woodcock wonderingly.

"Oh, never mind," answered Murdock, breaking into a loping trot. "Let's hurry."

After half an hour of practice, Murdock explained to Stirling that it was necessary for him to be home early that night, and was excused.

On his way he passed the handsome home which Justin Stirling had built for Theron Wickford. And there he beheld Park Wickford, playing tennis

with Gertrude Morton, his sister's girl chum, while Winnie Wickford watched and applauded from a swinging chair near at hand.

Murdock stopped short and stood watching Park, as the latter danced lightly over the hard, smooth surface of the court.

"Just as I thought," muttered the catcher. "His ankle is about as lame as his wrist was when we played Coveport."

As Wickford and his girl opponent changed to opposite sides of the net, Park saw Murdock watching him, and again his face flushed and his heart burned with anger and humiliation at the knowledge that this fellow, at least, knew him for what he was, a jealous, scheming chap, who had betrayed his own comrades in the fruitless attempt to obtain advancement over a rival he bitterly hated.

## CHAPTER V.

### A PECULIAR PROPOSAL.

In the noon mail the day before the game between Fairfield and Elmville was to be played, Clif Stirling received a letter from Buster Boyd, the Elmville captain, over which he frowned in considerable doubt and perplexity.

Ere the afternoon session at the academy began Clif had requested the members of the baseball team to meet him in the gymnasium immediately after school was over for the day.

They appeared, as desired, wondering somewhat over the serious look on the face of their captain.

"Fellows," said Stirling, "I've called you together to get an expression of your opinion upon a matter of some importance. I have here a letter from Captain Boyd, of the Elmilles, who makes a rather singular request. He states that the Elmville pitcher, Crookshank, is ill and can't play to-morrow. Crookshank being their only pitcher, Boyd asks leave to use an outside man, not a student of Elmville High, but a fellow who claims to be a straight amateur of the same grade as the other players who will participate in the game. Listen, and I will read the letter."

When Clif had read the letter aloud there arose a clamor of voices. With one accord, the Fairfield lads were united in declaring that Boyd's request was quite unusual.

"Why doesn't he say who the fellow is?" cried Reddy Sprowl. "He doesn't give his name."

"It looks to me like a trick," declared Win Mitchell. "If Elmville beats us to-morrow our chance for the championship will be a slim one."

"I believe it is a trick," asserted Bob Clayton. "He's got a better man to fill



Crookshank's shoes. They're going to spring a ringer on us."

"Perhaps Crookshank isn't sick at all," suggested Skippy Fish. "Let's refuse to play under such conditions."

"And if we do refuse," said Clif, "Boyd states that Elmville can't possibly meet us, having no other man to put onto the slab."

"Well, we can put our team onto the field and claim the game by forfeit," said Harp Woodcock. "That's what I advise."

"That would disappoint everybody who is looking for a game to-morrow," said Stirling. "We're getting out big crowds now—and we need the money," he finished, laughing.

"But see here, captain," spluttered Skippy Fish, "we're not going in the hole—we've got money enough now to feel assured we can meet all our expenses, reckoning on the revenue from the two home games to follow the one scheduled with Elmville."

The hubbub of voices once more became so confusing that Clif rapped for silence.

"Let's not be hasty," was his advice. "Of course we could follow Woodcock's suggestion and claim the game by forfeit, but it seems to me there are one or two good reasons why we shouldn't do this if we can help it. In the first place, it will disappoint those who are expecting a game. Furthermore, it will look as if we were afraid of Elmville. But there is another and still stronger reason why we should grant Boyd's request, if we're satisfied he's not deceiving us in stating that his substitute pitcher will be a man in our own class, which means a straight amateur from some small high school or academy."

"I'll bet they've got Garflin, of Belmont," growled Jud Murdock. "If Elmville can beat us to-morrow, it will give Belmont the bulge on us."

Clif shook his head. "You must be mistaken about that, Jud. Belmont plays Coveport to-morrow, and they wouldn't dare use a weaker pitcher than Garflin, for fear of losing the game."

"Well, what's your especially strong reason for permitting them to use an outside man, captain?" asked Woodcock.

"We've been compelled to do that very thing ourselves," said Clif. "With Pemberton gone and Wickford laid up, we had no available academy man to substitute in the Coveport game, and it was necessary to take on my brother Jack."

"Oh, but he's only a grammar school boy," cried Reddy Sprowl.

"But I'll leave it to any one if he didn't demonstrate that he could play the game as well as most of us," smiled Clif proudly. "I think every fair-minded fellow will be willing to ac-

knowledge that Jack practically won that game for us."

"That's right! that's right!" agreed the boys.

"Well now, fellows," Clif went on, "if it should happen that Wickford's lame ankle prevented him from playing to-morrow we'd still be compelled to use an outside man as a substitute; and if one of our players was injured in the game we'd be forced into substituting still another grammar school boy, for which reason I have made arrangements to have Scotty McLoon on the bench in uniform. Now, think it over, and see if you conclude that we can very well afford to refuse Buster Boyd's request."

He waited a few moments for them to talk the matter over, perceiving that the force of his argument was having a pronounced effect.

"If Boyd had only told us the fellow's name it would be different," said Jud Murdock. "Can't you get hold of him by phone, Clif? There isn't time to write him and get an answer. Call him up and tell him we insist on knowing the name of the pitcher he wishes to substitute for Crookshank."

"I'll do that," nodded Clif. "I'll run across the street to Mr. Bradley's house—they have a telephone—and see if I can get Boyd on the wire now. While I'm gone you fellows can talk it over some more."

Clapping his cap on his head, he hurriedly left the gym. In less than fifteen minutes he was back.

"Well, what did you find out?" was the cry.

"It's like this," explained Clif. "Boyd says he hasn't yet secured the substitute for a dead certainty, but is positive he can get him. He maintains that the man is a chap in our own grade of players, but will not disclose his name until after he has completed arrangements with him. It seems to me we'd better take Boyd's word and agree."

"We've practically decided that's the best thing to do," said Woodcock. "If Boyd does spring a ringer on us, we can decline to play after we learn who the man is, and we'll have justice on our side; so those chaps won't stand any show of carrying the point if they try to claim the game by forfeiture."

"In order to make sure we're united," said Clif. "I'm going to ask each man to vote separately, yes or no, on this matter."

As he called them by name, one by one, each and every man voted yes, and Clif then announced that, in compliance with the request of Boyd, who was waiting at the phone to learn their decision, he would tell the Elmville captain at once.

"Go ahead out for practice, fellows," he said. "It won't take me long to phone. I'll be with you directly."

Spot Norwood, the bat boy and mas-

cot of the Fairfield nine, had been present while this matter was discussed, and now he slipped out and scampered down the street until he met Park Wickford, who seemed to be waiting for him.

"Well, how about it, Spot?" asked Wickford eagerly.

"They have agreed to Elmville's proposition," answered the bat boy.

"Good," smiled Park, in satisfaction. "Now be sure not to tell them that I was interested. Here's the half I promised you."

The shining silver piece he snapped spinning through the air was deftly caught by Spot Norwood.

## CHAPTER VI.

### WICKFORD'S RESIGNATION.

The team had nearly finished practicing when Wickford appeared, limping slightly as he approached.

"Stirling," he called, "I wish to speak to you."

Clif turned and waited for the fellow to come up.

"I've something here," said Wickford haughtily, "which I request you to ask immediate action upon by the team. You can let me know the decision this evening. I'll be at the post office at five minutes to eight."

With these words he produced and handed over a folded paper. This done, he immediately hurried away, without speaking a word to any one else.

Having unfolded the paper and read what was written upon it, Stirling muttered to himself:

"I didn't think he'd go that far. It's too bad."

Some of the boys were watching Clif curiously; but he slipped the paper into the pocket of his woolen shirt and said nothing about it until practice was wholly over. Then he called his comrades around him and announced that he had a matter of business for their consideration.

"Wickford handed me this paper a few minutes ago," he said. "Listen."

Then he read from the paper as follows:

"I hereby offer my resignation from the Fairfield Academy baseball nine, and request that said resignation may be accepted at once. PARKER WICKFORD."

"Well, what do you know about that!" exclaimed Skippy Fisk, in amazement. "He's certainly shown himself up, all right."

"Fellows," said Stirling, "I'm deuced sorry over this business. It's a shame Wickford should feel as he does."

"It's disgraceful for him to quit us in such a way," snapped Reddy Sprowl hotly. "Just because he wasn't chosen captain, he's going to throw us down."

"If we let him," growled Murdock:

"but perhaps it won't be such a throw-down, after all. We got along without him in one game."

"But, fellows, we need him—we need him like the dickens," said Win Mitchell. "Park is not only a corking pitcher, but he's a ripping good batter. It's going to make an awful hole on the team. He can't be serious. I think we'd better see him and coax him to—"

"Coax him nothing!" rasped Murdock savagely. "We'd be fools to crawl around after Wickford. Perhaps that's what he wants."

"If I had thought my election would produce dissension on the team and lead to anything like this I'd never have accepted," said Clif.

"Oh, rats!" exclaimed Skippy Fisk. "A fellow who'll quit this way, just because he's sore over not being able to run the team all by his lonesome, is just the sort of a chap we can get along without."

"We can't get along without him very well," acknowledged Stirling. "Mitchell is right. Wickford is a rattling good pitcher and a great batter. I had to pitch in the Coveport game, but you all know how hard they bumped me."

"At first," nodded Woodcock; "but you certainly pitched like a streak in the last few innings."

"It was the support you fellows gave me that prevented Coveport from trimming us," said Clif. "You certainly played like fiends, fellows. With Wickford handing 'em up for us, it would have been an easier proposition."

"Wickford pitched the last Belmont game, and we lost," reminded Reddy Sprowl.

"Now listen to me, everybody," invited Murdock. "I've always claimed that Wickford was the best man I ever back-stopped for, but I'm going to state right here that in the last three or four innings of the Coveport game Clif was pitching as well as Park Wickford ever pitched in all his life. Wick depends almost wholly on his speed and sharp curves. Clif used his head all the time, and, while he had speed when he wanted it, he also made use of a slow ball at times, and the change of pace fooled the batters beautifully. His control was great in those last innings; he could put the ball exactly where he wanted to put it, and that counts. Perhaps his curves weren't quite as sharp as Wickford's, but somehow they fooled that Coveport bunch just the same. Park's resignation won't leave us without a pitcher. I don't believe in toadying to a fellow who will throw his own team down the way Wickford has thrown us down. I propose that we accept his resignation at once."

"Wait, fellows; don't be too hasty," entreated Stirling. "If we give Wickford a little time, perhaps he will

change his mind and withdraw his resignation."

"Let him change his mind after we've accepted," cried Fisk. "Then if we want to take him back onto the team we can do so, and he'll realize that he can't browbeat us into knuckling down to him."

"That's the talk," nodded Murdock grimly.

"That's the thing for us to do," declared Sprowl.

"Yes, I think it is," agreed Woodcock.

Only the voice of Mitchell was raised in dissension, and even he seemed to be yielding. They urged Clif to put the matter to vote, and, after again suggesting that they had better wait and not act too hastily, he was finally induced to yield.

With the exception of Mitchell and Stirling, the boys voted unanimously to accept Wickford's resignation.

That night, just before eight o'clock, Clif entered the post office, and found Wickford there.

"Well," demanded Park, "how about it?"

"Your resignation has been accepted," answered Clif.

"Kindly carry my thanks to the members of your baseball team, Mr. Stirling," sneered Park, as he turned on his heel and walked out of the post office.

At the street corner, Hop Tobin stepped hurriedly forward and spoke to Wickford.

"I say, old man," croaked Hop, "I'd like to have a word with you in private. Come on round the corner, out of the light of this lamp, will you?"

Wickford hesitated, frowning with displeasure.

"I'm in a hurry," he said. "If you've got anything to say to me, say it here."

"Oh, now that ain't nice. Mr. Wickford," said Tobin, with mingled humbleness and insolence. "You know I've always treated you right. Didn't I fix it so you could win that foot race—and didn't I get into a nasty scrap over it? You ain't heard me telling that Jack Stirling was outrunning you, have you? I've kept my mouth shut."

"What are you looking for, Tobin—a favor?"

"Oh, nothing but what you can grant without troubling yourself a bit."

"Because if you are," added Park, "I warn you now that you're wasting your time."

Nevertheless, he followed Hop round the corner into the darkness of a side street.

"You alwus have plenty of money," said Tobin, in a low, husky tone. "Now don't get frightened; I ain't trying to touch you for a loan. I've got some money myself. Here's a ten-dollar bill, and I want to git it changed."

"Well, why don't you take it into

some store and get it changed?" asked Park, as Tobin produced and displayed a banknote.

"Well, I'll tell you. It's this way. If I should flash a bill that large somebody might wonder how I come to have it."

"I was thinking of that myself." "Well, I'll tell you," Tobin hurriedly whispered. "You know my old man is a deacon in the church. He has charge of the deacons' fund, which is collected for the deserving poor, and he keeps it in a desk drawer at home. Sometimes when I git hard up I touch the fund gently. The old man don't never miss it, and if he does he thinks mother has been into it for household use, and he makes up the deficiency. There you are, Mr. Wickford. A feller has got to have some money to git along. You don't realize how it is, because you always have enough. Your father is generous with you; mine's a blamed old skinflint. I never git more than five or ten cents handed me at a time, and he has a cramp in his fingers every time he passes that much over."

"It's bad business, Tobin," said Wickford, "and I'm sorry you told me about it. Still, I'm not supposed to know where you get your money. Yes, I'll change the bill."

"Much obliged," grunted Tobin, ducking his head as Park accepted the banknote and gave some smaller bills in exchange. "Maybe I'll be able to do as much for you some time. Good night."

Wickford stood looking after Tobin as the latter ambled away with his shuffling, awkward gait, which added in a measure to his strong resemblance to a huge bullfrog.

"A bad nut," muttered Park. "I wonder if he told me the truth about that money?"

Then he followed Tobin slowly at a distance.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE ARREST OF JACK STIRLING.

There was a big crowd of spectators on hand when the players of the Elmville team marched through the gate on the Fairfield grounds the following afternoon, with a band of supporters, carrying banners, tin horns, and cow bells, tramping at their heels.

"Here we come!" was the cry. "Ra-be! ra-hoo! ra-hoo-rah! Elm! 'Rah! 'rah! 'rah! Ville! 'Rah! 'rah! 'rah! Hoo-rah! Elmville!"

A section of seats back of the third-base line had been reserved for the visiting spectators, and there they gathered, ready to respond to the commands of their cheer captain.

Clif Stirling looked around for Buster Boyd, the Elmville captain. Not seeing him, he spoke to one of the players. "Where's Captain Boyd?" he asked.

"Oh, he's coming right along—with our pitcher," was the smiling assurance.

"Who is your pitcher?"

"You'll find out pretty soon."

Not three minutes passed before Boyd came through the gate, accompanied by a slender, dark-eyed chap in an Elmville suit, at sight of whom Stirling and several of his companions gasped in astonishment.

It was Park Wickford!

"Great fishhooks!" spluttered Skippy Fisk. "Is that Wick? What's he doing wearing that uniform?"

Stirling said nothing. A light had broken in upon him, but even now he could not quite bring himself to believe that Wickford was the mysterious pitcher of the Elmville team.

The great majority of the spectators watched Wickford and Boyd as they approached Stirling, and there was a hum of surprise on every side.

"How are you, Stirling?" cried Captain Boyd. "I'm much obliged to you for agreeing to let us use an outside pitcher. Otherwise it would have been impossible for us to play here to-day."

"Is that man going to pitch for you?" asked Cliff, with a touch of incredulity in his face and voice.

"Yes," nodded Boyd, "Wickford's going to hand 'em up for us this afternoon. He tells me he's no longer a member of your team—that he has resigned and his resignation has been accepted."

"The sneak!" muttered Skippy Fisk wrathfully. "The traitor!"

Evidently Wickford did not hear these words.

"Yes," nodded Stirling, "he resigned—last night. But that was after we had arrived at an agreement to let you use an outside pitcher. Evidently he was negotiating with you while still a member of our team."

Aroused, the Fairfield boys crowded about and began expressing their feelings in heated language. Some of the talk angered Wickford to such an extent that there seemed no small danger of a fight.

Furthermore, the crowd of loyal Fairfield spectators were shouting and jeering at Wickford, and crying for Stirling not to permit Park to play in the game.

"Mr. Stirling," said Wickford, holding himself in restraint with difficulty, "it has been my intention for some days to resign from your team, as I knew it would be impossible for me to play with it as long as you were running things. Having that intention in mind, I offered my services to Elmville when I learned that their pitcher was ill."

"Don't let him play, Cliff—don't let him play!" shouted many voices.

"Wickford," said the Fairfield captain, looking Park straight in the eyes, "you've certainly got more brass than any man I ever saw. There isn't money

enough in this town to hire me to do what you propose to do to-day."

"Kindly keep your comments on my actions for other ears, Stirling," flamed Wickford.

"Let's not play if he pitches, Cliff," urged Jud Murdock. "They have no right to use him. Let's claim the game by forfeit."

"Oh, I don't think you'll do that," said Captain Boyd. "Stirling is not the sort of a man to go back on his word, and, with the understanding that we should use a pitcher that was in our own class, he agreed to let us have a man outside of our nine. As you've accepted Wickford's resignation from your team, he certainly is at liberty to play with us, and we shall claim the game by forfeiture if you refuse to play."

"They're pretty badly frightened," snickered an Elmville player. "They know we'll beat 'em, and so they want to squeal."

Cliff felt a hand gripping his elbow, and looked round to see his brother Jack at his side.

"Let him play, Cliff—let him play," whispered Jack. "We can beat them just the same. Murdock says you're as good a pitcher as Wickford."

After some further argument, the Fairfield captain agreed to let Wickford play, and the visitors took the field for practice.

In a disgusted mood, the crowd was inclined to shout and jeer at Wickford; but Park's only indication that he heard their scoffing was a slight pulling down of one corner of his mouth and a shrug of his shoulders.

The visitors put up ten minutes of sharp, snappy practice, and then gave the locals the field, while Wickford warmed up with the Elmville catcher.

Practice was over, and Cliff about to send his players out, that the game might begin, when Deputy Sheriff Dearborn, followed by old Cale Harkness, appeared and pushed among the lads, putting a hand on Jack Stirling's shoulder.

"You'll have to come with me, young fellow," said the officer.

"What—what for?" gasped Jack, in surprise.

"You're under arrest."

"Under arrest! Why, what have I done?"

"Don't let him get away from you, Dearborn," urged Harkness, excitedly brandishing his crooked cane. "Hold him tight or he'll cut and run, the young rascal!"

Cliff Stirling had stepped forward quickly, and now he addressed the deputy sheriff.

"What's the meaning of this, Mr. Dearborn?" he asked. "It certainly can't be a hoax, but why should you arrest my brother?"

"Because he's a thief!" shrilled old

Hark. "He stole a hundred and fourteen dollars right out of my house, along with that mortgage and them notes of your father's."

"Why, it's a lie!" blazed Jack. "That old man is crazy!"

"Look out for him, Dearborn!" again implored Harkness. "He's a bad boy. He's got a bad reputation in the village. He goes round with a tough crowd, and he's a fighter."

"Such a charge against my brother is preposterous, Mr. Dearborn," said Cliff. "I don't understand how it comes to be made, but I'd stake my life on it that it's false."

"I'm afraid you'd lose, Cliff," said the deputy sheriff, shaking his head soberly. "We've just come from the dressing room under the stand, where we searched your brother's clothes and found the missing mortgage and notes in an inside pocket of his coat."

"But we didn't find the money," whined Caleb Harkness. "He'll have to give it up, though. He'll have to turn it over, every cent, or I'll make his father do so. He's a bad boy, and it will be a good thing for Fairfield if he's sent away for a few years."

"If you weren't an old man," snarled Jack, "I'd ram your own words down your throat!"

Cliff Stirling was pale and agitated.

"There's some mistake," he muttered. "I know it's a mistake."

"Cliff," cried Jack, turning quickly to him, "you don't believe I'm a thief, do you?"

"Nothing could make me believe that, Jacko," was the elder brother's answer, as he sought to hold his emotions in check. "I'll go along with you and see what can be done."

"But how about this baseball game?" called the Elmville captain. "We've got to play at once if we're to get through in time to return home to-night."

"Oh, I—I can't—play baseball now," faltered Cliff.

"Yes, you can, Cliff—yes, you can," said Jack. "Go ahead and pitch this game. Put Scotty McLoon in my place. He's a good man. Play this game and beat those fellows. It will be time enough for you to do anything you can for me after the game is over. Besides, I presume they'll give father notification right away."

"But, Jack, can't you see—can't you see I'm in no condition to pitch? I'd do a bum turn at it after this."

"I reckon Stirling is mighty glad of an excuse to get out of pitching to-day," said the voice of some one standing back a short distance in the crowd that had packed around the officer and his prisoner.

Cliff heard those words, and recognized the voice of Wickford. Jack heard them, too, and he fairly rasped, as he again seized Cliff's arm:

"You've got to play! You've got to beat that traitor, Clif! I'm all right. You know I'll come out of this thing all right, so what's the use to let it stop the game? Go in and pitch your best. I think the fellows will back you up."

That was what Clif suddenly decided to do.

"All right, Jacko—all right," he said, forcing a smile to his lips. "I'll be with you just as soon as the game is over."

The officer, followed by old Hark, led the boyish prisoner away, and the diamond was hastily cleared of the crowd that had swarmed onto it. At the gate Jack Stirling turned to wave his hand to his brother, who waved in answer.

"If it's in me to win this game by pitching," thought Clif Stirling, "I'm going to do it."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### SPLENDID SUPPORT.

For four innings Clif Stirling amazed every one by his pitching. He had whirlwind speed, sharp curves, and beautiful control. Cutting the corners, twisting the ball round the batters' necks, and occasionally varying his performance by handing up an exasperatingly slow one, the big Fairfield captain kept the visitors guessing.

The Fairfield crowd roared its approval, while Clif's schoolmates waved their blue-and-gray banners and cheered joyously.

"You've got the goods to-day, captain," grinned Jud Murdock approvingly. "It's never before been my luck to handle such pitching."

Twice Clif struck Park Wickford out, to the wild delight of the majority of the spectators, who, in spite of the remonstrances of some, were inclined to hiss the traitor.

Park was the last man to go down in Elmville's half of the fourth, and he returned to the pitching slab in no enviable frame of mind. His face was pale and set, and unspeakable wrath filled his soul. Up to this point he had pitched in handsome form, but now he seemed to lose control of himself, for the locals fell on him with terrific violence, banging the ball to all quarters of the field. In short order they secured an earned score, and Stirling came up to hit with only one out and two runners on the sacks.

Clif actually smiled at Wickford from the batter's box, and Park blindly whipped the ball straight over the centre of the pan. The Fairfield captain met that speed perfectly, and cracked out a liner that was good for two sacks, sending two more men across the plate.

"Good boy, Clif!" was the cry; and many of the spectators shrieked and

cheered until they were purple-faced and pop-eyed.

During those few moments Wickford would have given a great deal had he not offered his services to Elmville. Indeed, he was in such a state of mind that he continued his kindness to Clif with the wildest sort of a wild pitch, and Stirling, laughing aloud, jogged on to third.

Byb Clayton, the next club swinger, banged a grounder at Laith Melvin, the Elmville shortstop.

It seemed that Stirling started for the plate with Wickford's first movement of delivery, and Melvin snapped himself in an effort to stop the run by throwing to Bingo Thompson, the catcher.

Nevertheless, a handsome slide landed Clif safely on the rubber, and Melvin's throw permitted Clayton to reach first.

It was not Wickford's pitching which prevented the locals from securing more runs in that inning, for the two men following Clayton both smashed the ball hard, but drove it straight into the enemy's hands, and were out.

Wickford's wrath chained his tongue, but he gave Clif a look of hatred as he walked to the bench and Stirling went out to pitch.

Something in that look caused the big Fairfield captain to think of his brother Jack. On more than one occasion Clif had detected Jack in falsehoods, and he knew the lad had at times associated with some of the reckless youngsters of the town. Furthermore, he now recalled the disquieting fact that on one occasion he had detected Jack in the act of pilfering small change from his pockets. Was it possible, after all, that his brother could be the thief who had robbed Caleb Harkness? Strong, almost violent in his likes and dislikes, Jack Stirling had never attempted to conceal his contempt and detestation for the aged money lender.

"No, it can't be possible," muttered Clif.

But Jack had stated that in his pursuit of Tobin he had hidden in the vicinity of old Hark's home and saw his father come out of that house. Was there a chance that he had told only a part of the truth? Could it be that he had slipped into the house and taken the money and the papers while Harkness was in the cellar?

"Come, come," cried Captain Boyd, "pitch the ball, Stirling! Are you in a trance?"

Clif shook himself and began to pitch. But now, like Wickford, he seemed suddenly and unexpectedly to have weakened, and one after another the visitors stepped forth and hit the ball. The Elmville crowd awoke; they shrieked, they cheered, they blew their horns and rattled their cow bells. Their rejoicing was tumultuous as two men scored.

Although he realized what was hap-

pening and comprehended the danger, Stirling seemed to have lost his cunning, and only for the support of his teammates, who did some really marvelous work behind him, Elmville must have secured more scores. The relief was great when Mitchell made a marvelous one-hand catch far out in deep centre field, which finally retired the visitors.

"That was your bad inning, captain," said Jud Murdock encouragingly. "It's all over now, and we're holding the lead by two runs."

Encouraged by the knowledge that Stirling could be hit freely, Wickford took a brace, striking out two men and compelling the third to hit a weak, easily handled grounder into the diamond.

"Now eat Stirling up, fellows," he urged savagely. "You've got him going. Don't let him get on his feet."

Fortune, however, did not favor them, for, although three men slammed the ball hard in succession, the locals made hair-raising stops and one astounding catch that spoiled what had seemed like sure hits.

Nevertheless, Wickford kept up the pace he had again set for himself, and the Fairfielders could not increase their lead.

In the seventh Elmville again fell on Stirling, and when the smoke had cleared away they had batted in three runs, once more being checked by the surprising support accorded Clif.

"We're not going to let them rub it into us this way, are we, fellows?" rasped Jud Murdock. "As far as I'm concerned, I'd rather lose the championship than this game."

He was not the only one who felt that way. They saw Wickford, encouraged and hopeful, wearing a contemptuous smile as he again toed the slab, but in a very few moments they had wiped that smile off his face, for one after another they stung the ball and went romping over the sacks.

"For goodness' sake, stop this hitting, Wickford," implored Buster Boyd. "Don't let them get any more scores."

"They wouldn't have what they've got if you fellows were only supporting me the way they're supporting Stirling," flung back Park.

Not until Fairfield had duplicated Elmville's feat in the seventh and made three runs, which again gave them a lead of two tallies, was the merry-go-round brought to an end.

The Elmville crowd made a terrific racket in the eighth, evidently seeking to rattle Stirling. It was the apprehension and doubt which possessed him, however, and not the uproar, that made him easy to hit; but his teammates stood behind him faithfully, and the visitors grumbled and groaned in regret over their inability to get a runner beyond third base.

"Stirling must be carrying a rabbit's foot," said Boyd. "We've pounded him hard enough to win this game, but I never saw such backing up in my life."

"If he doesn't win with that support he never ought to win any game," said Wickford sullenly.

He had lost heart at last, and his work in the last of that inning was of a most ordinary nature. It seemed to be luck which prevented Fairfield from adding more than one run to her side of the score sheet; but that one run the home team did get.

"Now, captain, this is their last chance," reminded Murdock. "If we can hold them down we've got the game cinched."

Clif did his best to put aside the troublesome thoughts which had weakened his pitching, and he succeeded well enough to strike out the first batter who faced him and cause the next man to lift a high foul which Murdock gathered in.

"Only one more!" cried Jud. "It's all over but the shouting."

For a single moment hope rose in the breasts of the visitors, as the next batter drove a long fly to left field. The locals were somewhat apprehensive, for that field was filled by Scotty McLoon, the grammar school lad who had been chosen to act as substitute for Jack Stirling. Scotty climbed over the ground with fine speed and succeeded in pulling the ball down and hanging to it.

The home team had won by a score of 8 to 5, and Park Wickford was a most disappointed and humiliated fellow.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE THIEF.

Without waiting to call his teammates together to give a cheer, Clif hurried from the field, dodging through the crowd that swarmed onto the diamond, and ran at top speed down the street into the town. Making inquiries, he learned that, only a short time before, his brother had been taken before Judge Day in the latter's private office.

A number of curious persons had gathered outside the door, but Clif pushed his way through, and, when recognized, was admitted by a constable who was acting as guard to keep out the crowd.

Besides the constable, there were six persons in that room. Justin Stirling, who had been notified of his son's arrest, was standing beside Jack, with his arm across the lad's shoulders, the expression on his face sending a pang to Clif's heart. The officer who had made the arrest stood near, as if guarding his prisoner. Caleb Harkness, his face grim and cold, sat perched on the edge of a chair, with his knucky old

hands resting on the handle of his cane. The judge, a kindly faced gentleman, had turned his revolving chair away from his desk, so that he might look straight at a boy he was questioning—and that boy was Hop Tobin!

"Tobin," the judge was saying, "I warn you to be careful in your statements. You are ready to testify in court, are you, that you saw Master Stirling enter the house of Mr. Harkness after Mr. Stirling had departed?"

"Sure, I be," croaked Hop, bobbing his head. "I was hid in the orchard all the time. I see him looking through the window into old Hark's house."

"Mr. Harkness, sir!" corrected the justice sternly.

"Yes, yes, I mean Mr. Harkness. You see, so many folks call him old Hark that I forgot."

Caleb Harkness coughed harshly.

"Go on, Tobin," directed Judge Day.

"I s'pose Jack thought I wasn't nowhere 'round. You see, I dodged him after he chased me as far as Mr. Harkness' house, and he must have thought I'd skinned on. I just lay low and watched. When Mr. Stirling come out of the house, Jack he dodged back and kept out of sight; but the minute his father was gone down the road he skipped round the corner of the house and just went right in at the front door as bold as anything."

"Could you see the front door from where you were hidden in the orchard, Tobin?"

"Er—er, no, sir, I—I couldn't."

"Then how do you know Jack went into the house by that door?"

"Oh, I just jumped up and snooped alongside of the fence till I could see the door standing wide open. He left it open when he went in. I was sort of guessing where he'd gone when I see him come dusting out in an awful hurry, a-chucking something into his pocket. I didn't know what it was then, but next day when I heard about the robbery I certainly had my suspicions."

"Why didn't you report what you had seen, Tobin? Why did you wait so long?"

"Well, you see, judge, I wasn't just sure, and I didn't like to cast no false suspicions on a feller that might be innocent."

Tobin's words brought a look of derisive scorn to the face of the accused lad, who started to speak, but was checked by a low-spoken word from his father.

"Go on, young man," urged the judge; "explain how you came to feel certain that you were not making a mistake in thinking that young Stirling had committed the robbery."

"The more I thought about it," continued Tobin, keeping his gaze on the floor, "the more certain I felt that he took the papers and that money. You

see, maybe he reckoned if he destroyed the papers that his old man wouldn't have to pay back the money he'd hired from old Hark—I mean, Mr. Harkness."

"If that is the case," said Judge Day, "it's most singular that he kept the papers in his possession instead of destroying them."

"Oh, I guess he was afraid to destroy them, after all," said Tobin. "Anyhow, he did keep 'em. I watched him every day. Last night, after supper, I followed him over into Billing's woods, and there I see him a-looking at the papers. He didn't see me."

"What a lie!" exclaimed Jack Stirling angrily.

"Be silent, my boy," commanded the judge. "If it's a lie, the truth will come out some time. What did you do after you watched him examining those papers, Tobin?"

"I just lay still in a bunch of bushes till he went away; then I took a sneak myself."

"How did you know the nature of the papers you saw Master Stirling examining?"

"Well, I wasn't just certain," admitted Hop; "but I sort of suspected what they was."

"In that case, why didn't you report the matter to the authorities last night?"

"I was sort of thinking it over. I didn't know but I'd be making a mistake. You see, if they wasn't the stolen papers, I'd get gowdy for accusing Jack. I kept thinking it over, and to-day I made up my mind that I'd ought to tell about it, and so I went to Mr. Dearborn and told him. And I suggested that he might possibly find the papers if he'd go to the ball ground and search Jack Stirling's clothes after Jack had left them in the dressing room. That's all there is to it, and it's dead straight. They found the papers, didn't they? Wasn't that enough? Didn't it prove I was right?"

"But we never found a cent of that money in the boy's clothes," piped up Caleb Harkness. "I've got to have my money back. I can't afford to lose it."

"If the money is returned to you, Mr. Harkness," asked Justin Stirling, his voice sounding strange and unnatural to the ears of his sons, "will you withdraw the charge against my son? Will you give him a chance to—"

"Hold on, father!" interposed Jack excitedly. "What are you talking about? Good gracious, it can't be possible you think I am really the thief! I'm not, father—I never touched a cent of that money. I never saw those papers. Tobin lies like a trooper. He must have put the papers in my pocket himself."

"Never done nothing of the kind," denied Hop instantly. "You will find you can't wiggle out of this scrape by trying to pack it onto me, Jack Stirling."

So interested were they all that no one save the constable at the door had been aware of the entrance of another person, who had listened with equal interest to Tobin's statements. When the constable had attempted to keep this individual out he had been informed that the late comer could give some important information concerning the robbery. It was Park Wickford, who, like Cliff, had not waited to change his baseball suit for his other clothes. He stepped forward now, addressing the justice.

"Judge Day," he said, "I think I can tell something that will interest you. May I speak?"

"Why, Parker," said the judge, who was a friend of Theron Wickford, "what do you know about it?"

"I know," declared Wickford positively, "that Jack Stirling is not the thief."

A thrill shot over Cliff, while Jack, staring in surprise at Park, seemed to doubt the evidence of his own ears. Justin Stirling betrayed excitement, and Caleb Harkness started up, crying:

"What's that—what's that, young man? Now take care what you say. The papers were found in the Stirling boy's pocket."

Hop Tobin, his jaw drooping, had turned pale, although he was wondering what Wickford really knew.

"Let me tell my story, judge," urged Park. "It won't take a minute. Last evening I met Tobin on the street, and he asked me to change a ten-dollar bill for him. I did so. He told a fishy story about borrowing that ten-dollar bill from the deacons' fund, of which his father has charge. My suspicions were aroused. I followed Tobin without letting him know it. After a time I saw him dodge round behind the Felt Mill, where there stands a big horse-chestnut tree on the bank of the pond. He went close to the tree, but I couldn't make out what he was doing there. After he departed I investigated, but found nothing. This very forenoon I went to the tree, still wondering what Tobin had been doing there. A branch of that tree was cut off some years ago about five or six feet from the ground. The place where the branch was cut off has rotted away until there is a hole in the trunk of the tree nearly as large as a man's head and almost a foot deep. By chance I put my hand into that hole, and I pulled out the stolen mortgage and notes, along with some money. Then I knew what had brought Tobin to that place."

"It ain't so!" shouted Hop. "It's a lie! If there was papers and money hid in that tree I never put them there! I never knew nothing about it!"

The judge rapped sharply on his desk. "That will do, sir," he said sternly. "Why didn't you report this matter at once, Parker?"

Wickford hesitated; he did not like to confess that he had refrained from reporting the matter because he feared Tobin would retaliate by telling something about him.

"Judge," he said, "this is a pretty serious affair, and I hate to see any one branded as a thief—even Hop Tobin. I tried to find Tobin, with the intention of frightening him into returning the stolen papers and the money. I knew I could make him do so if I threatened to expose him, and that would let him out and perhaps save him from being sent to prison or the reformatory."

The judge shook his head. "You made a mistake, Parker. You should have reported your discovery without the loss of a minute."

"Why didn't you tell the truth, Wickford, when my brother was arrested on the ball field?" asked Cliff Stirling.

Park gave him a single quick glance. "That's my business," he said. "I've told the truth now, and that should be sufficient."

His pride prevented him from acknowledging that he had refrained from speaking up at the time of Jack's arrest because he had hoped that the affair would so unstring Cliff that it would be impossible for him to pitch a winning game.

"It is sufficient, Wickford," said Cliff, with a sudden burst of emotion. "You've done the square thing. Won't you shake hands?"

"Not I," returned Park, disdainfully proffered hand. "Don't think I've done anything out of love for you, Stirling, but I'm not the sort of fellow to keep still and make myself, in a way, the accomplice of a thief."

Hop Tobin, arrested, finally broke down and confessed.

Instead of hiding in Caleb Harkness' orchard when pursued by Jack Stirling, he had seen the bulkhead door of the house standing open and dodged into the cellar to avoid his pursuer. The door, which fastened with a spring lock, had shut him in there, a prisoner. Mrs. Harkness had heard him stumble over a box. When old Cale came down the cellar stairs with a candle in his hand, Tobin had concealed himself behind some barrels at the very foot of those stairs. While the man was looking through the cellar, Hop had succeeded in creeping up the stairs into the kitchen, and had passed through the sitting room, leaving the house by the front door. On his way he had seen the money and papers and taken them.

Thinking to obtain revenge on Jack for the thrashing he had received, Hop had planned to throw the guilt upon his conqueror. Having told Sheriff Dearborn that Jack was the thief, and suggested the searching of his clothes in the dressing room, Tobin scampered

away, watched his chance, and placed the papers in Jack's pocket after the baseball team went out onto the field. He was barely able to do this and get out of the dressing room before Dearborn arrived with Caleb Harkness.

All the stolen money, except what Tobin had already spent, less than ten dollars, was found hidden in the hollow of the old horse-chestnut tree.

This confession brought about Jack Stirling's release from custody, while Tobin was locked up, instead, to await trial.

THE END.

## Colder than the North Pole.

The coldest place in the world one would naturally expect to be either the North or the South Pole; but it is not. It is a small village in the northeast of Siberia, named Verhojansk.

There the average temperature of the three worst winter months is fifty-three degrees Fahrenheit below zero, which means eighty-five degrees of frost. During January the average temperature is fifty-six below zero, or eighty-eight degrees of frost. On one occasion the thermometer registered the remarkable figure of one hundred and twenty degrees of frost!

No farming, of course, is possible. There are no cattle or poultry. All food is imported. Why, then, does this little village exist? It is a convict station, and its population of four hundred is made up of officials and exiles.

No precautions against escape are needed. Prisoners have been known to go mad with the loneliness of the place. But no one has ever been mad enough to try to escape. Verhojansk, strange though it sounds, is guarded by the wind. A gale, when the thermometer stands at thirty or more below zero, will destroy every living thing that is not under shelter.

Half an hour in that fierce, biting cold means death. But the intense dry cold, that is Verhojansk's normal weather, is, if not so dangerous, quite as powerful in its effects. In that icy stillness an iron axe head dropped on the ground smashes like glass. A board of unseasoned wood, on the other hand, freezes as hard as iron.

Verhojansk is a huddle of mud-plastered huts along one straggling street. The windows are of ice, so that candles are needed both summer and winter. Twenty miles away, across a dismal plain of snow, lies a low black line of pine forests.

On the other side is the frozen river, from which dense, unhealthy mists roll up for weeks together in the autumn. There are no flowers in spring; the summer is dingy. Perhaps they are right at Verhojansk in looking forward to the long months of winter.

# P U C K   A N D   P L U C K

A SHORT STORY OF ICE HOCKEY

By HERBERT WYNDHAM-GITTENS

The boy of mystery, Jack Shattuck, supposed to have a "yellow streak," is practically forced by circumstances to prove his manhood, and St. Swithin's School finds him to be a thoroughbred. The solution of the mystery is—worth reading the story to learn.

"Looks as if he might play football," hazarded "Runt" Holmes, as, in company with a dozen other fellows gathered about the gymnasium door, he watched the approach of the new boy, who was walking with Dick Rodney, the hockey captain.

"Then he's come to the wrong shop, Runt, and you ought to warn him," countered George Martin, who, as the closest friend of the stocky Holmes, was privileged to quiz him. "But he's a big fellow, and no mistake. I'll bet Dick has been getting in his good work already, urging him to play hock and cut out basketball."

"Oh, but you must come out for hockey," the captain was saying positively, as he and the new member of the school came up together. "It's always been our strongest point, and is about the only thing we have left, now that the faculty have put the ban on football. You're a sizable fellow, and St. Swithin's needs all the big men we can get on the squad."

"But I've told you I don't play," replied the big blond youth, looking uneasily about him at the strange faces grouped by the gymnasium door.

"You skate, don't you?" retorted Rodney quickly, out of his experience with possible candidates who were too lazy or too bashful to try for the team.

"Yes, of course—that is—" stammered John Shattuck uncomfortably.

"Then you can easily learn the points of the game," stated the captain, placing a hand on the big fellow's shoulder, as though to indicate that the matter was settled. "Skating's the important thing, of course. If a fellow can't move fast on his feet, the quickest eye or the longest reach isn't going to do any good for the team; whereas speed can give odds in favor of the amateur who doesn't know the puck from the goal posts."

"Rah for Professor Rodney, the hockey expert!" mocked Runt Holmes, who stood within arm's reach of the new fellow.

Captain Rodney looked up, in pretended astonishment. "Why, is that you, little Grow-close-to-the-ground? I thought I heard a noise." He turned to the big blond youth. "Runt's our great authority on football—a curious game, long extinct, which he pretends

to have known how to play. But the faculty has squashed all his efforts to introduce it into the school, and he's jealous of us real athletes."

"Aw—don't you mind Dick Rodney!" said Runt, in self-defense, acknowledging the introduction with a slight nod. "He's crazy—everybody knows that. He's never been the same since he got a whack over the head with a hockey stick in his early youth, poor fellow!" he added, in mock seriousness.

But John Shattuck did not laugh at the intended joke; instead, he shifted his feet uneasily, twisted his fingers together behind his back, and dropped his eyes before the battery of stares that was leveled at him.

"I've just been telling Shattuck he's needed on the team," said Dick to the assembled group, with the inclusive manner which had done so much to win for him the good will of every boy in St. Swithin's. "He needs a bit of coaxing, but he's going to make a strong try for it. Better look out for your place at forward, George," he added, turning to Martin, "or he'll give you a hot race for it."

Martin knew that Dick was only talking to put the newcomer at his ease, and he grinned in friendly fashion; but, to his surprise, the other would not meet his gaze, and stammered:

"Oh, no—that is—really, I think I'd better not come out!"

"Why?" The single word of interrogation shot from the captain's lips. He was not accustomed to have such persistent denials made to him, and it began to look as though—

"You're not afraid, are you?" he added quickly, with contempt suddenly in his tone, as the other still kept his gaze averted.

For an instant John Shattuck's blue eyes blazed; he again clinched his hands behind his back, and bent forward until Runt Holmes would have sworn that there was going to be a fight; then, suddenly turning, he fled ignominiously through the near-by door, leaving behind him, in the gymnasium, an almost universal opinion as to what his conduct signified.

"Aw, he's a quitter—a rank coward!" sneered Phil Carter, who was the first to get his breath.

Dick Rodney turned upon him.

"You've said about enough to-day, you chump!" he exclaimed angrily. "Even supposing he is what you said, do you suppose we're proud of the fact? Do you suppose we want the whole school to know? Don't be a paper sport, Carter!"

"I'm as much to blame as you are," he continued, more calmly, "for I put the question to him direct. But to be turned down cold by a chap like that was enough to make me lose patience."

"He has the build of a forward—a runner and skater," said Martin judiciously. He had been making a quiet appraisal of John Shattuck's long, powerful limbs and easy carriage. "What do you know about him, Dick?"

"Nothing much," responded Rodney. "Mr. Ferris told me he'd just come back from a trip to Canada—that's why he missed the first weeks of the term."

"Maybe he's just been ill, and can't go in for athletics till later," said Martin hopefully, looking on the best side of the affair, as was his way. "Though he looks healthy enough," he added dubiously.

Rodney slapped him on the back. "We'll find out later," he said. "Go around to his room with me to-night. I want to apologize to him for what I said, and maybe we can talk him into it. And now let's get down to tacks and talk hockey. We've simply got to beat Elberon this year."

In the meeting that followed no mention was made of the incident of the last few minutes; yet before supper time that evening, notwithstanding the captain's reproof of Phil Carter, every boy in St. Swithin's was aware that John Shattuck, the new fellow, had shown a yellow streak in refusing to come out for hockey.

John Shattuck snapped the door open in response to the knock, and presented a grim face to the two unexpected visitors.

"Come in," he said, in a strained voice, willing to be courteous, yet dreading an interview of any sort—especially with the captain of the hockey team.

"We're only going to stay a minute, Shattuck," said Dick Rodney, as he crossed the threshold. "This is George Martin, one of the best fellows in the

school, and a cracking good forward. I've asked him to come with me to represent the school while I apologize to you for my thoughtless and unkind remark this afternoon. I'm really sorry for what I said, the more so because the fellows look up to me a little, and the captain of a team ought to be a better judge of men than I am, I'm afraid. Shake hands, won't you?"

Shattuck stared at the extended hand, and his face went whiter than before. His arms were behind his back, and Martin, standing at a little distance, could see the fingers working and twisting at each other. But the big freshman made no move to accept the advances of the captain.

"I—I don't want any apology—from you," he said huskily.

Back Rodney drew back like one struck in the face. For an instant the blood flushed hot to his temples; then he partially recovered himself and looked at Martin.

"This is no way to act, Shattuck," said the latter reprovingly, frowning on the big fellow. "Don't bear a grudge. If it makes any difference to you, I'll tell you that Rodney was sorry for his hasty words the very minute after he spoke. He asked me then to come over here with him."

Shattuck's pale face took on a little color, and then went white again, as he struggled with some emotion. "You—don't—understand," he said slowly, dropping out his words with evident difficulty. "Rodney doesn't need to apologize. He asked me if I was afraid. Well—I am. That is——" He broke off lamely, apparently wholly at a loss for words.

Martin uttered an ejaculation. He had not imagined that the visit to Shattuck's room would result in anything so humiliating as the confession which he had just heard. Confound it! The fellow had put both himself and Rodney in an uncomfortable position. There seemed to be nothing else to say, and he looked helplessly at Dick.

The captain, also, had been utterly taken aback; but he had no intention of letting the affair end like this, and presently he managed to remove his gaze from the twisting fingers of the freshman, and to say:

"You're dead wrong, Shattuck. Mr. Ferris says that a fellow who will confess that he's afraid of something is a heap pluckier than the fellow who won't. It isn't for us to judge you, and we didn't intend to do anything of the sort; but you give me the idea that you're deceiving yourself. All we came for was to show you that a fellow owes something to his school, just as, later on, he owes something to his college."

Shattuck faced him more quietly now. "You don't have to tell me that," he said. "This isn't the first school I've

attended. I was at another one, once—but I couldn't go back. Not that I'd done anything wrong!" he added quickly. "But I couldn't go back—and I didn't want to come here, either."

Martin stepped forward. "That's your affair, of course," he said quietly. "But would you mind telling us the reason why you won't play hockey?"

"That's none of your business, either!" exploded Shattuck, his eyes flashing. "And if it is, you've had the reason already—because I'm afraid! Now, if there's nothing else you want to know, I've some studies to prepare." Moving toward the door, his hands still clinched behind his back, he continued in a milder tone: "It was very kind of you to come as you did, but it would be better if you didn't come again." He held the door open. "All I want is to be let alone—if you don't mind."

But he was not to be let alone—not just yet, at any rate.

The next afternoon, as Rodney and Martin were going out to practice on the artificial rink adjoining the school grounds, they heard some one cry: "Yellow streak!" in a jibing tone, and, looking round, saw John Shattuck moving rapidly away from the vicinity of Phil Carter, who evidently had shouted the insulting words.

"Well, that big fellow's actually running away from Carter!" exclaimed Martin in amazement. "A chap who won't hit back in a case like that——"

"I don't agree with you, George," interrupted Rodney. "In my opinion, Shattuck is perfectly right. What good would it do him to lick Carter? You know perfectly well he could do it with one hand, if he tried."

"He's big enough," answered Martin dubiously. "But what's he doing down here at the rink, if he won't play? You'd think he'd be ashamed to be seen near the place."

Some forty or fifty boys were lined up along the low fence about the skating rink, waiting to watch the hockey practice; a number of them had their skates on, as they had just vacated the ice in favor of the squad. As unobtrusively as possible, John Shattuck sought a place where he would be farthest away from any of them, and hung over the fence, following every movement of the few team members who were slashing the puck about until the scrimmage between the first and second teams should begin.

What would he not have given to be with them, swooping down toward the goal in one, dizzying glide, a clean forty yards of swift movement, until the shouts of the onlookers should proclaim how he had dodged all opposition and outwitted the most determined efforts of the goal keeper with one clean, smacking drive, that would send the puck skimming over the ice between the

posts and into the net! He almost groaned aloud at the thought of being unable to join in the sport, and not even the clinching of his hands behind his back enabled him to put away the memory of the thing which prevented him from so doing.

He saw Martin, flushed with the exercise until his face was almost as red as the big S which, as a member of last year's team, he wore proudly on his sweater, drive smartly down the ringing ice, overturning the hapless Carter, who blocked his path, and shoot the puck fairly between the skates of the goal-keeper for the first score of the play. At the sight of that brilliant work, all the admiration of the expert arose in him; and unconsciously his hands unclasped and came forward, ready to give the applause which Martin deserved.

But the nearest of the onlookers had turned his way, and with a disheartening shock Shattuck recalled vividly that he was not supposed to be interested in the game—that a man who had refused to play for his school had no right to cheer the team.

Sick at heart, he was turning away, lest he should again forget himself, when a shout from the onlookers caused him to turn.

In a single glance he saw what had caused the shouting.

Rodney, trying a "lifted" pass, his stick still raised on the upward swing of the stroke, had made a misplay and scooped the puck into the air, instead of driving it along the ice. The hard disk of rubber was flying toward the fence, ever higher and higher—straight toward the group of onlookers at Shattuck's right.

Forgetful of his self-established standing in the eyes of the school—forgetful of everything except the fact that the puck was now outside the fence, and over the heads of the bystanders—the big freshman mechanically gathered himself for a leap, and shot superbly into the air, with arm stretched high above his head. Up and forward, to the right, he went, as accurately as any star first baseman reaching for a wild throw, and caught the flying puck with a sure hand.

Then, for an instant, the school, in its turn, forgot that this fellow had a yellow streak; and the applause rolled up from the ice, from the players and the onlookers—applause for John Shattuck, standing where he had come to earth again, with the puck in his hand.

"Golly, what a first baseman that fellow would make!" cried George Martin enthusiastically; and no one gainsaid him.

But at the next instant both Shattuck and the school remembered. The burst of applause subsided, save for the efforts of a few impartial spirits like Dick Rodney; and Shattuck, awaking to the



fact that he still held the puck in his hand, raised his arm again, and, with a clean straight-arm throw, smacked it down upon the ice, where it glanced and spun into the centre of the rink. Then, with upraised head and hands behind his back, the freshman hastened away toward the school buildings.

"Help—help!"

The agonized cry rang over the creaking ice to the far shore of the river, but there seemed to be no human ear to hear it, and no human hand to aid; for the thawing of the ice in the few warmer days had warned the townspeople away, and one of the most adamant rules of St. Swithin's School forbade a boy venturing on the river in winter, under pain of instant expulsion.

"Help—help!" cried Phil Carter again, as George Martin went down for the second time; and the cry froze in his paralyzed throat as he realized that there was no one to hear.

In his extremity of terror, he wished himself a hundred miles from the spot; he wished that he and the drowning boy had never broken the rules and come out on the frozen river "because there was room to skate there," as poor George had said, in urging the scheme.

He gazed wildly about; for an instant he entertained the thought of trying to save Martin himself; then he realized that it was impossible, and unreasoning horror, distorting the true state of affairs, sent him shrieking over the ice toward the shore, with a frantic idea of going for assistance—and a harrowing consciousness of the difficulty that he would have in explaining how Martin had met his death.

How he managed to reach the shore he did not know. He forgot that he had his skates on; and as he ran blindly up the road, with some vague idea of reaching Miller's farmhouse, he tripped, stumbled, and fell more than once, only to pick himself up and race madly on, with his heart thumping in his breast, but with a cold sweat on his brow, and his brain shouting foolishly:

"George is drowned! What'll I do? George's drowned!"

Badly winded, with a pain in his side, he took short, sobbing breaths as he stumbled on. He told himself frantically that he was going for help, and that he must keep on until he found it; but in his heart he knew that it would be of no avail when he had found it, and that in reality he was running away from fear.

Hardly had he plunged into the road when around the bend at Oyster Point, a hundred yards south of where he had struck the shore, there came a flying figure, whose speeding skates caused the ice to shriek. Skirting the land, he pushed ever faster and faster toward the source of the wind-borne cry which

had come faintly to his ears while he was still on the lower arm of the bend.

Never had any one skimmed the surface of the ice-bound river with such speed as the lone skater, who was striking out desperately, and yet more desperately with the long, keen-edged racing irons on his feet.

On he came, and, with hardly a pause in his flight, swept resolutely to the left as his quick eye recorded the momentary sight of something that had bobbed up above the ice in the broken water fifty yards away, only to sink out of view again on the instant.

Without slackening speed, the would-be rescuer put up his hands, pulled down his red woolen cap yet more securely over his ears, grasped more firmly the hockey stick in his right, and, measuring the distance with a calculating eye, suddenly squatted on his heels and allowed his momentum to carry him along, gradually slowing down, until he was not twenty feet from the edge of the hole in the ice.

An ominous creaking caused him to halt. Without hesitation, for he realized that every second counted now, he dropped the hockey stick, plucked desperately at the cowhide lace of his left boot, and quickly drew off the shoe itself, with the long skate riveted on.

Then furiously he attacked the ice beneath him, taking no heed of the cold contact against his one stockinged foot. He worked like a maniac digging for gold, and soon had a small hole pecked a foot deep into the ice, which fortunately was shelly and soft, with air bubbles at that point.

Throwing the boot behind him, so that it fell with a clank of the steel skate on the firmer ice, he seized the hockey stick and jabbed the crooked end into the hole he had made, working it in with all the strength of his big arms and twisting it from him. When he had tested it with a stout pull, the handle was extended straight toward the break through which the drowning person had crashed when the treacherous ice gave way.

"Tackle from the side," murmured the would-be rescuer, as he pushed to the right, and then, rapidly but cautiously, wormed his way toward the crumbled brink of the water hole. He had evidently had experience with such a situation as this: for he would not trust himself to stand erect as he approached the danger mark, but squatted lower on his haunches, so as to concentrate his weight as close as possible to the quivering ice.

Almost before he heard the warning crack which he expected, he had braced himself to meet the shock of the water; and his involuntary plunge through the yielding ice was in reality a foot-foremost dive, for he straightened his body,

with his arms above his head, as he went down.

In the blue darkness under the ice he groped unsuccessfully once; then his hands clutched at something which resisted their pulling, and he rose to the surface with a gasp, mercifully clear of the solid crystal that hemmed him in, and kicking out with his powerful legs he managed to hoist his burden so that the boy's head would be out of the water.

"Martin!" he gasped, recognizing the blank features by instinct rather than from positive indications.

Sure of himself—for he knew that otherwise he must fail, as was likely even now—he shifted the burden to his chest, against which he hugged it desperately with his chilled right hand. With the free arm he contrived to reach up and bear down upon the ragged fringe of ice near at hand.

As he expected, it yielded and broke like a crushed lump of sugar. But he had not trusted his weight to it; he was merely working deliberately to clear away the rotten ice about the hole, so that he might reach the solid shelf upon which lay his hockey stick, straight before him five feet away, like a finger pointing the way for him.

Low in the water, because of his burden, he yet contrived somehow to reach the point for which he was working, and, with an effort which stirred the blood in his numbing fingers, succeeded in laying hold of the stick, barely three inches beyond the extreme end.

Thanks to the twist which he had given it after setting the crooked end in the hole he had dug, the stick afforded him a purchase sufficient to enable him, with a tremendous effort, to thrust the sagging body of George Martin clear of the water. The inert weight sank back upon him as he prayed that the ice might hold, and only by dint of submerging himself again in the chill water did he succeed at last in shoving the body to security upon the shelf.

He knew that the ice would never bear his added weight at that spot, and unhesitatingly, at the risk of his life, he plunged toward the opposite side of the hole, swimming desperately with fast-numbing arms and legs, until he reached the solid eighteen-inch thickness beyond the tangled wrack of fragments, where, with the lumbering efficiency of a walrus, he accomplished the amazing feat of hoisting himself out, spent, but unable to pause for breath, if he wished to fan back to life the flickering spark that was George Martin.

The single skate on his right foot aided him, now, in gaining a steady purchase on the ice while he gathered up his burden and started to pad-pad laboriously toward the shore.

A shout sounded remotely in his ears; he hunched his big shoulders and shook his dripping yellow head, from which the skating cap had been lost, as he essayed to answer. Then men loomed large in his eyes, and, his work done, nature claimed her forfeit for overexertion. He fainted in the arms of Farmer Miller's hired man.

Principal Ferris, a man who knew boys, had to confess himself at a loss to understand the case of John Shattuck. The head master had come back from the infirmary, where he had watched with anxious eyes while the doctor worked over George Martin, to find Dick Rodney waiting in his study.

As captain of the hockey team and recognized leader in the school, Rodney had come for information concerning George Martin—something that he could tell the waiting lads who had seen Farmer Miller's wagon drive up.

In return for the information he desired, the hockey captain, under pretense of asking advice about the team, enlightened the principal as to the school's attitude toward Shattuck.

"I'm ashamed to say I thought it was a yellow streak myself," he said, in conclusion. "But it doesn't look like it now, does it, sir?"

"It does not," admitted Mr. Ferris, his eyes grave.

And Rodney departed, downcast over the loss which the team would suffer now that George Martin was hovering on the brink of death; for somehow a captain thinks first of the team, and afterward of the men. "If only Shattuck would play!" he murmured disconsolately.

But John Shattuck had given no sign of intending to play, up to the time when, thanks to his robust constitution, he was able to go over to Colburn Junction to meet the three-five train from New York; and the school, not knowing his plans, thought that it had seen the last of him.

In this, however, they were mistaken—not that it seemed important to them at the time, for there were bigger matters demanding attention. It was the day of the big game.

With a clatter of paraphernalia which might have been meant to impress upon St. Swithin's the fact that they were there to win, and an air of no-nonsense-with-us-if-you-please, the Elberon team and substitutes, a dozen strong, descended from the coach which had brought them from Colburn Junction, and got down at once to the business of dressing for the meet. They were a formidable-looking lot, especially that lanky forward who trotted along beside the captain with his head thrust out like a lizard's; and St. Swithin's, knowing their own weakness, groaned in spirit.

But while there was life there was hope; and the school lined up about the rink to cheer the disabled team. They cheered Rodney when he came out; they even cheered Carter who, in default of a better man, was filling the place of the much-needed George Martin. And they forgot that Martin, on his back in the infirmary, was almost hysterical with anxiety for news of the game.

The teams met with a clash which began with the "face-off."

Almost immediately it seemed apparent that St. Swithin's was doomed to defeat; for the lanky Elberon forward scored a goal with a smacking drive in the first five minutes of play. Then Carter, playing back, went down under a hot scrimmage, and was taken out with a sprained ankle.

St. Swithin's groaned, and then rubbed its eyes and wondered. Surely this was a vision—this powerfully built figure in the gray sweater, standing at tension between Mr. Ferris and a tall, broad-shouldered gentleman whom none of the boys had ever seen before. It was Shattuck—the fellow with the yellow streak!

At a word from Mr. Ferris, and a clap on the back from the broad-shouldered gentleman, who was heard to say, "Go in and win, Jack!" the big freshman plunged out upon the rink, nodded to Dick Rodney, and took his place at forward as though by instinct. And immediately the game was on again; and St. Swithin's was privileged to look on at a hockey game which was beyond its wildest dreams.

Shattuck was everywhere; he was a host in himself; he caused alarm to leap into the hearts of the hitherto jubilant Elberon rooters. Flying from side to side of the rink with marvelous agility, he took the St. Swithin's team figuratively by the neck and lifted it to victory. When the whistle was finally tooted, almost unheard amid the hysterical shouting of St. Swithin's, the score was four to one.

And it would have been more, but for the fact that Shattuck, with victory assured, seemed to force himself to keep from piling up the goals. Time and again he started to descend like a whirlwind on the unfortunate Elberon defense, but each time he caught himself back.

This curious behavior came immediately after he had an altercation with the lanky Elberon forward in the middle of the rink. The latter had fouled obviously, and Shattuck, his blue eyes blazing, seemed about to strike him with the stick which he swung straightway to his shoulder.

The school gasped, for a single blow from that weapon, in the hands of the big fellow, would have laid the lanky forward low and lost the game to St.

Swithin's through a foul. Carter, limping badly, but refusing to leave the side lines, was standing near Mr. Ferris and the broad-shouldered gentleman; and afterward he told how the latter had paled and uttered an exclamation as Shattuck swung up the stick.

"His name's Shattuck, too," said Carter, telling the tale. "Jack's father, I guess. I heard Mr. Ferris call him that."

And that "Jack" on the lips of Carter settled for all time the status of John Shattuck in the eyes of the admiring St. Swithin's. Henceforward, he was Jack to all.

Afterward, with the jubilation at its height and the school cheering "Jack" Shattuck, while the despondent Elberonites wended their way homeward, Dick Rodney, called into the principal's study to meet Mr. Shattuck, heard with wondering ears the tale which the grave, broad-shouldered gentleman had to tell. And it was too good to keep; besides, St. Swithin's had a right to know.

"You see," explained Dick to the hushed school, while Jack Shattuck was showing his father round the buildings, "Jack used to be at Maydale—one of their crack forwards. But he had a bad temper—and more than that. A sort of strain runs in the Shattuck blood, his father told me. It made Jack slug a fellow in a game, and he nearly put him out of business.

"That settled it for Jack; he vowed never to play hockey again, for the awful thing he had done nearly pulled him to pieces. Remember how he used to keep his hands behind his back? That was because he was afraid that he might hit somebody—monomania, or something, Mr. Ferris called it. His father took him on a trip to Canada, and there he gradually recovered; but he wouldn't go back to Maydale. This afternoon, when he swung on that lanky forward, the old strain came pretty near cropping out again; but he managed to check it, and now he says it's all right. He'll never slug again, for he's got his temper beat. And say, fellows"—Dick Rodney was all boy now—"isn't he a peach of a forward? We'll lick every team in sight!"

And the mighty cheer which went up proved conclusively that St. Swithin's believed fully in the prowess of "Jack" Shattuck.

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# BOB HALLIDAY, FRESHMAN

A STORY IN THREE PARTS

By EDWIN LARKMORE

## Part II—The White Feather

### SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

Big Bob Halliday and his chum, little Billy Frazer, Princeton freshmen, receive an invitation to become the guests of the Crescent City Eagles, a famous athletic club, while spending a part of their vacation in New Orleans. While taking an automobile ride, with Bob driving the car, they see a reckless speeder run down a cripple boy. Bob gives chase and overtakes the scoundrel after a hot and exciting race. The man gives his name as Oliver Frothingham; but as soon as Bob leaves him he hastens to change the number plates on his car, and later the freshmen find that both the name and address given Bob are fictitious. The cripple, Pierre Trairon—called "Pete" by Bob—is taken to his home, a "tiny bird cage house" in the French quarter, where he is received by an angular old woman, whom he calls Gran, and a beautiful, sad-eyed, mysterious young woman by the name of Colette. Pete's broken leg is set, and Bob promises to bring the speeder to justice. That night, at the club rooms of the Eagles, he is introduced to a new member called Brownlee, who is said to be a fine athlete and skillful fencer. Brownlee is instantly recognized as "Frothingham," but Bob and Billy refrain from making a scene by exposing him at once. Bob is cajoled into a fencing bout with Brownlee.

### CHAPTER VI.

#### THE FENCING BOUT.

Bob Halliday's acceptance of Brownlee's challenge brought a round of applause from the club members, which was led by Spencer, the president.

"Your friend will wish he had not let himself be led into this," somewhat chaffingly remarked a young fellow named Cross, who stood close by Billy's side.

"Don't let that trouble you," said Billy. "You'll find that even a freshman is able to take care of himself."

"I'm glad of it, for Brownlee is a wonder."

"And Bob Halliday is something of a wonder himself," retorted Billy. "He's handled the foils with more than one cocky senior at Princeton—and bested them, too."

"But I tell you that you don't know Brownlee," persisted Cross, more seriously.

"Perhaps I know more of him than you think I do!" Billy retorted.

"Did you ever meet him before? I don't know myself just where he came from. He's a good deal of a stranger here."

"You'll know more of him, after Bob gets through with him."

The double meaning of this prophecy escaped the clubman.

Foils, masks, jackets, and gauntlets were brought into the room. Brownlee carried in the foils himself, and, balancing them in his hands, held them out for Bob to make his choice.

They were slender and glittering, with button tips for safety.

Bob took the one nearest his hand; they looked exactly alike.

"I suppose you're not ready to back out?" asked Brownlee insolently.

"Bob Halliday back out?—hardly!" exclaimed Billy fiercely, now thoroughly angry.

"That's good," said Brownlee, with a forced laugh. "Mr. Halliday, I hope you're the fencer that your reputation would lead one to fancy. Then, if I defeat you, it will be worth while."

"It's not my habit to boast," said Bob quietly. "If you've heard anything about my fencing abilities, it probably came from some of my overenthusiastic friends, who have a reprehensible habit of blowing off more or less hot air about me."

The preparations were completed, and the two combatants stood facing each other, near the centre of the room, with the billiard tables and the club members as a background.

At one side stood Spencer, the club president and referee.

"On guard, gentlemen!" he said, speaking quietly.

The foils swept through the air, and the fencers advanced their right feet and were ready.

It was a pretty sight. Brownlee seemed as lithe, as agile, as graceful as Bob Halliday himself, though he was considerably older. He carried his weight well, and was in perfect trim. Yet there was an uneasy flush on his face that was absent from Bob's.

"Engage!" said Spencer.

The foils met—the bout had begun.

The fencers seemed cautious in the beginning. Billy Frazer could see that Bob was "feeling" his antagonist. The fact that Brownlee had been heralded as such a wonder was enough to make the most skillful fencer cautious in meeting him.

Brownlee was himself confident in his own skill; yet he showed no more disposition than Bob to rush matters. It was not so much fear of the freshman, however, as a desire to steady his nerves and his hammering heart that made Brownlee wary in the beginning.

The fencers advanced and retreated, feinted, engaged, and disengaged, with swift circling and clicking of foils.

Then, thinking an opening had come, Brownlee made a lunge.

With lightning quickness Bob altered

the position of his foil, and turned Brownlee's stroke.

"Ah!" came from the assembled club members, some of whom already foresaw the downfall of their idol.

The foils were clicking again, and Brownlee was seeking another opening.

"Your friend is skilled in defense, I see," said young Cross to Billy Frazer.

"And in offense," retorted Billy cheerfully, his eyes fixed on his chum.

There was no attempt yet on Bob's part, however, to take the offensive.

Again Brownlee fancied he had found an opening, and once more he lunged, his lips parting, and a glitter that was unpleasant coming into his dark eyes.

Brownlee was marvelously quick, but Bob Halliday was even quicker; and again, by a deft turn of the foil, the lunge was turned aside.

Before Brownlee could recover, Bob had countered and scored.

"Touch!" acknowledged Brownlee, with a gasp of surprise, and there was a round of applause from the generous Southerners.

The thing had come so unexpectedly and seemed to have been done so easily that Brownlee was astonished.

"But that can't happen again!" he thought. "Nothing like that can happen again."

"That looked to be an accident on your friend's part," commented Cross, who was still at Billy's side.

"Such accidents, in real duels, spell death to the fellow who lets them happen!" Billy retorted.

"Yes, that's so, too," was the prompt admission. "But you'll see Brownlee push your friend now."

The battle was on again, and Billy did not reply. He was not alarmed concerning any supposed danger of defeat. In truth, he was sure of his chum from the outset. The faith of the Eagles in their champion he considered natural, but it was due to ignorance.

Brownlee had so far lost nothing of his confidence. He simply would not believe that the freshman was the better man with the foils. He accounted for that touch by acknowledging to himself that his nerves were slightly unstrung by the strange circumstances which had preceded this meeting.

"I must forget all about running down that kid and what followed it," he said to himself, after he had again tried for

a touch, with the result that he had failed and Bob had scored once more. "And I must settle with this youngster right here and now, and show him that I'm his master."

Bob made a pretense of attacking. Brownlee parried and thrust, but his thrust was met and turned with a barely perceptible, but wholly effective wrist movement.

Brownlee seemed to recover himself. At last he attacked with skill, and his button caught his opponent.

"Touch!" admitted Bob, and there was a burst of applause.

"You see it is changing," Brownlee's defender whispered to Billy.

"Oh, is it?" retorted Billy. "Don't be in a hurry."

Feeling that he must win over the freshman, not only because his previous boasting and that of his friends made this necessary, but that he might carry out the plans he had formed, Brownlee attacked again, with much skill and fire. His dark eyes glittered, his lips were slightly apart, and a strange sneer seemed to have settled upon them.

Forcing the work thus, he kept himself well in hand and covered. Once, and then again, he tried almost desperately to reach Bob Halliday. He failed, but at the same time, by lightning-like recovery and defense, he prevented a touch on the part of the freshman.

Having aroused himself, Brownlee was now fighting with the skill which had given him the championship in that section of the country. He forced the work. His weapon circled and flashed, foil meeting foil with peculiar, serpent-like hisses. Suddenly he made a quick cut-over, and scored again.

"Touch!" said Bob, and again a soft clapping of hands followed the play.

"Now you begin to see what our man can do," whispered Cross. "He is going now, and your friend hasn't a show."

"Bob has made two touches!" said Billy.

"Yes, right at the outset; and it's a tie. Now you'll see something worth looking at."

"I believe you," and Billy nodded emphatically. "You sure will see something worth looking at."

"You still think your friend can win?"

"If he doesn't, I'll dine on crow for a month."

Brownlee was still satisfied that he could win, though he had learned caution and knew that Bob was not to be as easy a victim as he had imagined.

Once more he pressed Bob so hard that for a few seconds the latter had to exert himself to the utmost to prevent a touch.

Then, like a flash, a change came over the Princeton man. He had let Brownlee expose every form of his offense, and had also let him wind himself to a certain extent.

It was now the freshman who attacked.

Within less than three seconds he had reached home; and Brownlee, flushing, was forced to acknowledge the "touch." The man seemed confused; and again, driven by Bob Halliday, and attempting to turn his point, another "touch" was counted against him.

Brownlee's face grew pale, and his dark eyes took on a baleful glitter.

"Now you see what is happening!" chuckled Billy. "Your champion will learn a few things before he is much older."

Young Cross did not answer. He was staring in surprise, as he saw Brownlee forced back by the freshman.

Brownlee thrust furiously, after retreating.

Bob took advantage of an opening, and touched again.

Billy Frazer clapped his hands loudly, and the applause was taken up by the others.

Brownlee's face whitened to the color of chalk. Wild fury took possession of him, and flung aside discretion. He swept his foil through the air with a peculiar jerk, and then came at Bob murderously.

A cry went up from Billy Frazer.

"The button!" he shouted, stepping forward as if he meant to interfere.

How it had happened Billy did not know, though he was ready to accuse Brownlee of treachery, but the button was gone from the tip of Brownlee's blade.

Brownlee heard neither Billy's cry nor the sudden stirring of the club members at the disclosure. With eyes blazing, he lunged straight at Bob Halliday's heart.

Then again the unexpected happened. Bob's foil caught his opponent's as with a hook, and Brownlee's now really dangerous weapon was torn from his hand and fell to the floor.

Then another cry arose.

The button was gone from Bob Halliday's foil, as well as from Brownlee's!

"You villain!" shouted Billy, dashing at Brownlee. "You snatched the button from your foil and tried to drive the point into Bob's breast!"

Young Cross caught him by the arm with a strong clutch.

"Look!" he cried. "The button is gone from your friend's foil, also."

Brownlee stood disarmed in front of Bob Halliday, shaking with passion. His bosom heaved, and his fingers worked nervously, like the claws of a bird of prey.

"You coward!" Billy shouted at him. "This isn't the first time to-day that you've shown yourself to be a villain."

Brownlee's expression changed, fear suddenly taking the place of rage, or mingling with it.

"I—I don't understand!" he stam-

pered, as some one held up the foil that had been torn from his grasp. "How did that happen? How came that button to be gone?"

"I was thinking that perhaps you could answer," said Bob, looking fiercely at him.

"But your foil has the button gone, also!" Brownlee cried.

Bob looked at the point of his foil. Then he examined it more closely.

"Let me see the other," he requested.

The members of the club were crowding round, greatly excited.

"Both of these foils have been tampered with in a cowardly way," Bob announced. "See there! The buttons were so loosened that they would come off readily with a certain wrench, and the points of the foils have been sharpened. Somebody seemed to desire that one or both of us should be killed to-night."

He looked hard at the agitated fencer who had been his opponent.

"I—I—I'm no more able to explain that than you are," Brownlee stammered. "Both buttons are gone."

"Here is one," said Spencer, picking it up from the floor. "And over there is the other."

Bob turned to the wide-eyed group of club members.

"The button of his foil came off, or was removed; I'm not prepared to say how. Then mine was jerked loose when I tore his foil from his hand. I leave it to you, Mr. , if that is not the truth?"

Brownlee tried hard to get control of his shaking nerves.

"I know nothing about it," he said positively.

Spencer looked worried.

"I'll take possession of these foils," he announced. "There must be an investigation of this. I can't imagine who has tampered with the foils. It cannot have been our friends and guests of the evening. They never saw the foils until they were brought into this room. This thing, gentlemen, must be thoroughly investigated."

"I hope you don't think I could have done it?" snapped Brownlee. "The condition of the foils put me in quite as much danger as it did him."

He turned to Bob Halliday.

"You don't think I had anything to do with that?"

It was an unwise question; for Bob, looking him firmly in the eye, answered:

"A thing you did to-day, Mr. Brownlee, makes me feel that you would be quite capable of it."

Brownlee took a step toward the freshman.

"Do you mean that as an insult?" he demanded, his lips quivering.

"You know quite well what I mean, sir. I am confident that you knew of the condition of those foils. When you swung your foil through the air with

that queer jerk, I saw that the button was gone; and as you lunged at me, your manner of making that lunge informed me that you knew it was gone, and that your purpose was foul—even murderous. I'll not let any man try a trick of that kind on me and go unexposed. I was expecting cowardice and treachery from you from the start. And you know why!"

Brownlee again threw himself toward Bob, but was caught and held by some of his friends.

The freshman turned toward the excited club members and their president.

"I must beg your pardon for what I have said, and the accusations I have made. But I stand ready to meet any committee you may name and give full answers concerning the things I have mentioned."

Brownlee saw now that Bob Halliday meant to expose him and make his cowardice plain before all the club members.

It threw him into an ungovernable fury.

Again he tried to get at Bob, but was still held by his friends.

"Here is my card!" he panted, taking a card from his pocket and hurling it at Bob. "I demand full satisfaction for this insult. Of course, you'll make charges against me now—cowardly and infamous charges likely, if you can conjure up such—in order to distract attention from yourself. Whatever they may be, I brand them as falsehoods in advance. I am a gentleman!"

"You act like one—I don't think!" sneered Billy Frazer hoarsely, seeming to hug himself in a most amazingly joyous and affectionate manner.

"I demand that you shall meet me. I prefer swords; and, as you've shown yourself to be a master with weapons of that sort, no doubt you'll be willing to accommodate me. I know a place where we can meet and not be interfered with by the police. Give me satisfaction for this insult—this contemptible and cowardly treatment at your hands!"

He was frothing with a rage that was partly real and partly assumed.

A sudden wild, reckless impulse took full possession of Bob Halliday, and, ere he himself knew what he was saying, he hotly answered:

"I'll accommodate you in any way, even though you who make the challenge assume, also, to name the weapons and everything else."

He turned to Spencer, the president. "I apologize for what has happened," he said, his face flushed, but his voice low and steady. "You'll know more of my reasons later."

"Tell them now!" fumed Billy Frazer. "Go ahead, Bob, show him up."

"I suppose I ought to do so. Well, then"—he again faced Spencer—"I shall try to prove in the courts that the man

you know as Brownlee is a consummate coward; and my reasons are, that to-day my friend and I and others saw him run down a little, helpless cripple with his automobile rather than take some personal risk himself, after which he fled in his car to escape discovery.

"I overtook him in another automobile. Instead of giving me his right name of Brownlee—if that is his right name—he lied to me and said his name was Oliver Frothingham, giving me also a street number that was false. And he had on his car a false number for the records show there is to-day no car in commission legally bearing such a number.

"Those are my reasons for denouncing him as a coward, and the reasons which impel me to believe that he tampered with the foils and tried to run me through with his naked weapon. If he really means to meet me and settle this matter with swords, I'll give him a go of it. But he need not think that even that will be the last of it. Unless I puncture him for keeps, he must make reparation to that little fellow he ran down and settle the matter in something like a decent way, or he will be made to settle in the courts."

Bob Halliday of Princeton was now fully aroused, and having given his reasons for the course he had pursued, he stood ready to back them with the proofs. The acceptance of Brownlee's challenge to a duel had been impulsive and thoughtless; but now, with his blood dancing in his veins, he was more than willing to meet the scoundrel with naked swords.

"I will meet any committee that this club may appoint," he went on; "and will answer any questions they put to me. All I ask is that Brownlee shall do the same."

## CHAPTER VII.

### BROWNLEE'S CONFESSION.

After returning to his hotel that night, Bob Halliday sat down to write a full apology to the Eagles, when he was interrupted by a card from the president of the club, who was below with several of the club members.

Bob asked that they should be sent up, and he and Billy Frazer met them at the door of the room.

There was a strange light in the face of Spencer.

"I was just putting my apology into writing," said Bob, when Spencer and his friends were in the room.

"And we have just come to offer an apology to you," answered Spencer, that peculiar look still in his face. "The fact of the matter is we've discovered that you were right, in one thing at least. Brownlee did tamper with those foils!"

"I felt sure that he did." Billy de-

clared eagerly, "though I didn't know just how he accomplished it. He hadn't much time."

"He didn't do it to-night," said Spencer; "nor did he fix them for either of you boys. It seems he has had trouble with a certain member of our club, who is something of a fencer. He prepared the foils for him. They were not the regular foils he has been using, though just like them; but a pair he smuggled into the rooms, and had concealed, intending to use them against this man he had quarreled with. Some devilish notion made him produce them to-night when the contest with you came off. And I think he really meant to kill you, or wound you badly, when he made that lunge."

"The look in his eyes told me that," nodded Bob, "and also gave me timely warning."

"A man who will do that will do anything," Billy grunted. "I should think you'd be especially proud of him as a member of the Eagles!"

"He'll be a member no longer," said Spencer. "The truth came out after you'd left the rooms. The other pair of foils was found; and then we suspected something and pressed him into a corner. He lost his head in his anger, and then admitted everything. He said he fixed the foils, and told why; but still claimed that he did not mean to injure you."

"Did he deny the story I told, about the youngster he ran down?"

"Yes, he denied that."

"That simply makes it necessary for me to prove it against him in the courts; and I shall do so with pleasure, and see, too, that the boy gets pay for what he suffered."

Spencer and the self-appointed committee with him were much distressed by what had happened.

They admitted that they had known little or nothing about Brownlee. He had brought some letters, which they had not questioned or investigated, but on the strength of which they had given him membership in the Eagles; and, after that, his ability as a fencer and all-round swordsman had drawn him admirers, and admirers meant friends, for he had money as well, as seeming prestige and influence.

"But he goes out of the club at once," said Spencer positively. "A fellow who would manipulate foils in that manner has no place in our club, and we'll have no more to do with him."

"New Orleans will be even hotter for him than your club is likely to be, before the week is over," prophesied Billy Frazer. "The fellow is a thorough scoundrel, and the sooner he is shown up the better for everybody."

Spencer and his committee had barely gone when the hotel messenger came again, this time with a sealed envelope addressed to Bob Halliday.

It was from Brownlee:

"I, Arthur T. Brownlee, challenge Robert Halliday, of Princeton, now visiting New Orleans, to fight a duel with swords to-morrow evening in the grove north of the lake. My seconds will meet you at the bridge on the Pontchartrain Road at nine o'clock and conduct you to the spot. I will have the swords in readiness, and you can make your own selection. ARTHUR T. BROWNLEE."

"55 St. Charles Avenue, New Orleans."

"This is simply a colossal piece of bluff!" declared Billy wisely. "That coward won't ever dare to meet you!"

"Maybe not, Billy. But if he handles a sword as well as he does the foils, he has some excuse for thinking he can put me out of business. But we won't worry about it. I'll do my best if he ever does come up to scratch."

"And I know what that best is," chuckled Billy Frazer. "Those New Haven 'freshies' got a taste of it that they won't forget."

"But a scrap between the Tiger and the Bulldog isn't in it with a duel between a freshman and a deadly swordsman, Billy."

"And particularly when the swordsman is as crooked as they make 'em," added Billy. "Something doing, old boy—something doing! Better look out for him, Bob!"

"I sure will, Billy. Great Scott! I didn't know when I agreed to come South with you that I was being let in for any such excitement as we've been having ever since I came here. We witness an automobile accident, and I start on a wild ten-mile ride. We meet three interesting characters—a double-dyed scoundrel, a mighty plucky youngster, and a pretty girl with a secret still unrevealed."

"Then comes an attempt to end my life with a buttonless foil, and now I have a challenge to deadly combat! If that isn't enough for one day, Billy, I give up. Old chap, I'm tired. Good night. We'll look up Pete in the morning. Pete—Pete—plucky—little—"

Bob ended the sentence with a prodigious yawn, and a few minutes later was in dreamland.

Early the next morning the freshmen visited the bird-cage house which was the home of Pete Trianon.

Celeste met them at the door, and led them at once to the room where the little fellow lay. Her sad eyes brightened when she beheld the look of joy which came to the youngster's face as he saw his "college chums."

"Well, Pete, how goes it?" asked Bob cheerily.

"The doctor's been here already," he cried, "and he says I'll be a well man inside of a month, if I'm good. You bet I'll be good, all right! I want to

get on my pins ag'in and go after that feller. You haven't seen him, have you?"

"Sure thing, Pete, and we'll put you next to him when your leg is all right."

"That's bully!" chirped the boy.

Though the girl used a French patois when the old woman entered the room and spoke to her, there was no trace of accent in her speech to the freshmen, and her voice was like a bell, with a peculiarly sweet and clear intonation, in spite of its sadness.

Bob again gave her close attention, wondering at the shadow of sorrow which was so plainly to be seen in her face and eyes.

"There's a mystery about that girl," he again thought, "and I'd like to know what it is. She seems to me to be in need of help or advice."

His interest was still further quickened when, on speaking to Pete more particularly of the reckless autoist who had run him down, he gave the man's real name, and the boy exclaimed:

"Gee whiz! Celeste, ain't that the feller that came here to see you? Seems to me it was his name."

"You're mistaken," said Celeste quickly; but her face had paled in a suspicious way.

"She's met Brownlee and knows him," was Bob's instant conclusion. "I wonder if he has anything to do with that look of trouble in her face?"

The discovery that Brownlee was known to this girl seemed almost startling.

When they left the house, Bob spoke to his chum on the subject.

"If Celeste is acquainted with that villain I'm sorry for her," Billy answered. "He's no good, and he'll bring trouble to any one connected with him."

The freshmen set out to pay a personal visit to Brownlee himself, going to the address he had given in the written challenge.

It was Bob's intention to demand again that he should make a money recompense to Pete Trianon.

"You'll find he'll do nothing, and that this is a waste of time," remarked Billy sceptically.

They were surprised, when they arrived at the place given in the challenge; for not only was Brownlee not living there, but no trace of him could be found. The people at the house declared he had never been there, so far as they knew, and that they were not even familiar with the name.

"More of his crooked work," growled Billy. "He's about as contemptible a scoundrel as you'll be able to find in the whole city of New Orleans."

"No doubt of it, Billy. Yet see how he deceived the Eagles!"

"That's because they accepted his lying letters as credentials, without proper investigation," Billy retorted. "They

thought he was all right, and let it go at that. Likely he wrote the letters himself."

Bob was almost convinced that in this Billy Frazer was right.

The action would be in line with what he had discovered of Brownlee's character.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A HINT OF MYSTERY.

It is probable that Bob Halliday would have given no further attention to the challenge sent him by Brownlee but for the fact that he desired once more to come into contact with that rascal.

At the same time, he was not at all sure that Brownlee would be at the appointed rendezvous that night, either alone or with a second. In fact, judging by the result of the visit to the place given by Brownlee as his residence, it began to look very much as if he had no intention of meeting the freshman.

"If he hasn't jumped the town it will be a surprise to me," was Bob's comment, as he and Billy set out for the grove, driving out in one of the antiquated hacks at the hotel door.

They had hired the cab for the entire night, and had paid a considerable sum as deposit, for Bob had decided to leave the cabman behind, in order to insure as much privacy as possible. The cabbie was a bit suspicious about turning over his ancient vehicle and steed to the freshmen, but he was easily persuaded that he would suffer no loss, and the deposit money satisfied his scruples.

They drove slowly along the Pontchartrain Road—for they were ahead of time—and reached the bridge at a quarter before the hour appointed. There Bob reined up his horse to await the arrival of Brownlee's seconds.

A slightly built man, whose marked characteristics were a general air of alertness and a pair of wonderfully keen eyes, approached the cab, glanced swiftly at its occupants, passed slowly on, then suddenly turned and retraced his steps.

This time, when he reached the cab, he stopped, and said in an apologetic tone:

"You will excuse me, gentlemen, but may I ask if I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Robert Halliday?" He looked embarrassingly from one to the other.

"That's my name," said Bob promptly. "I suppose you have come to conduct us to the place of meeting?"

A smile of satisfaction lit up the face of the keen-eyed man.

"Mr. Halliday," he began, in a remarkably brisk tone, that contrasted strangely with the apologetic accents of a moment ago; "Mr. Halliday, I must

ask you to consider yourself under arrest."

"Arrest!" gasped Billy Frazer.

"Arrest!" echoed Bob. "Who are you?"

"My name is Munroe—a legally constituted detective, and I advise you to keep a check-rein on your tongue, since it is my duty to warn you that whatever you say will be used as evidence against you. Will you submit to arrest, or—"

"Oh, I have no objection to arrest," interrupted Bob sarcastically. "But what is the charge?"

"Duelling is against the laws of the State," was the laconic response.

"Duelling? So Brownlee has peached?"

"Who's Brownlee?" asked the detective warily.

"Why, you didn't suppose I was going to fight a duel with myself? Brownlee is the man I hoped to meet to-night. Didn't you know that?" Bob asked suspiciously.

"No. I'll be quite candid with you. My chief got an anonymous letter, informing him of the contemplated meeting. He didn't take much stock in it, but as the letter contained very explicit details as to time and place, I decided to look into the matter. Now, would you mind telling me who this Brownlee is?"

Bob was rather attracted to this alert young officer, and he told the whole story, Billy Frazer interrupting now and then to supply some graphic details which greatly interested Detective Munroe.

"And now I am at your service," concluded Bob. "Do you still wish to press the charge?"

"No, I guess we'll let the arrest go," said Munroe, laughing. "But I'm mighty glad I met you. I'd like to get next to this fellow Brownlee. You don't know his address, I suppose?"

"No. He gave an address on his challenge; but it was a fake one."

"Well, he's a crook, all right," declared the detective. "It is clear that he had no intention of meeting you here. Instead, he engineered a plot by which to effect your arrest."

"Yes, that seems evident," Bob admitted.

Munroe was silent for a minute; then he said:

"I wonder if we couldn't get on the track of him through the girl Celeste?"

"Just what I was thinking," cried Billy Frazer. "Jump in and we will drive to Celeste's home."

Munroe "jumped in," as Billy had suggested, and they headed back to town.

"By the way, there is a short cut, if you want to take it," said Munroe. "It's a pretty gloomy road, and leads through a part of the open country, but it will save us fifteen minutes at least."

"By all means let us take it," said Bob. "Every minute counts."

Directed by the detective, Bob swung to the right and drove along a narrow lane, lined with great ancestral oaks, and lighted very dimly by sputtering lamps placed at long distances from each other.

While they were slowly climbing one of the many hills on the road, a scuffling of feet was heard in a clump of bushes by the roadside, followed by a woman's scream.

"Pull up!" whispered the detective.

Bob drew the horse in with a jerk.

The scream arose again, with words in a woman's voice.

"Celeste!" cried Bob, for he recognized the voice, though it was changed by fright. "In the name of all that's wonderful, what can she be doing here?"

Before he had finished speaking, Munroe was over the wheel and running swiftly back along the road. Bob began to turn the carriage, while Billy held himself in readiness for any call upon his grit.

Then a big automobile jumped from the bushes like a thing of life, and, with a rattling roar of the opened exhaust, shot down the road toward the level, open country.

Munroe started to run in pursuit of it; but stopped, after a shout to the chauffeur, and waited for Bob to bring up the carriage.

By the time this was done and Munroe had scrambled into the carriage, the car had disappeared from sight in the darkness, though they still heard it.

"That was Celeste!" Bob declared, speaking with unusual excitement.

"And the scoundrel was Brownlee, I'm betting!" added Billy Frazer palpitably.

"You're right, I think," said Bob. "She met him here, or he brought her here from the city. What it means I don't know."

"Well, we're going to find out," interrupted Munroe, and he laid the whip over the horse's back and gave chase; but it was almost a foregone conclusion that the pursuit could not be successful.

Though the horse did its best, the big car drew farther and farther away, and after a run of five minutes it was lost to hearing.

Munroe stopped the panting horse.

"This is foolish, to try to catch him in this way," he said. "We must get back to town and send in an alarm."

He sat still in the carriage with the freshmen, listening.

Not a sound could be heard but the sighing of the wind through the trees at the side of the road, which seemed to stretch away illimitably into the darkness.

"This whole business is twisted and tangled," said Bob, when the carriage was headed toward the city. "When I mentioned his name at that house to-day, Billy, you remember how it affected

that girl. Her manner betrayed that the name was very familiar to her. And Pete had seen him at the house.

"If she was afraid of him, why should she come out with him, or meet him out here?" demanded Billy.

"That's a part of the mystery of it, Billy. We'll have to look into this thing. Fortune favored us in one way to-night, anyhow, by sending us Detective Munroe."

"It doesn't seem to be much of a favor," said Munroe gloomily. "But I'll do my best to round-up that scoundrel Brownlee. You feel sure it was the girl Celeste?" he asked.

"Almost dead certain of it, if I'm any judge of voices. She has a peculiar one—the sort you can't forget. Yes, that was Celeste."

When they reached the city, and, after a long drive, arrived at the bird-cage house in the French quarter, Bob and Munroe dismounted from the carriage, leaving Billy Frazer with the horse, and rang the bell. They heard the musical jingle of the bell in the interior of the little house, and presently the old woman appeared, with a faded shawl thrown over her head.

She looked out at the two visitors with peering black eyes.

"Oh, it's the gentleman who was here to-day!" she said, recognizing Bob, and drawing back as if to open the door. "The young gentleman who has been so kind to Pierre."

"I came to make an inquiry," said Bob. "Is your daughter at home? If so, I should like to speak to her."

The peering black eyes snapped suddenly.

"She is not my daughter," she declared.

"No? I thought she was."

"You mean Celeste. She is not my daughter, but my niece."

"Could we see her for a few moments only?" Bob persisted.

"But she is not in the house," said the old woman, with a queer flash of her eyes. "Would the kind gentlemen be pleased to call in the morning?"

"You are sure she is not in?" Bob queried.

"Quite sure, m'sieu. Is the matter important?"

"Very important—very. Your niece is—"

The detective interrupted him with a tug at his sleeve. He had seen that peculiar flash in the woman's eyes, and divined her duplicity. Bob, in his straightforward way, would have blurted out the whole story, but Munroe had a wider knowledge of men and women, and if, as he believed, this old hag was an accomplice of Brownlee's, there was no need to advertise the fact that they had knowledge of the kidnapping.

"After all, I don't think it is so very important," the detective said placidly.

"It can easily wait till your niece returns. When do you expect her?"

For a moment Bob was disposed to take the bit in his teeth and pursue his own course. But cooler judgment prevailed, and he allowed the detective to continue.

"It may be late—quite late," said the woman. "Perhaps you could call in the morning? Yes? Well, I will tell her."

"Very good; we will come to-morrow," and taking Bob's arm he led him toward the carriage.

The old woman came forward again, peering, when she saw they did not intend to insist on entering the house. Her manner expressed a lively curiosity, and, coming to the curb, she said:

"Perhaps the gentlemen have seen Celeste somewhere on the streets this evening? She is out far too late."

"We have not seen her on the street," said Munroe, veiling the truth.

"The good gentlemen are very kind to the poor," whined the woman, "and so they take the interest in Celeste! Is it not so?"

"Oh, we only wished to see her for but a moment," Munroe evaded. "To-morrow will do as well."

They drove away, and Billy, looking back, saw the woman still peering at them from the door.

## CHAPTER IX.

### SOME DETECTIVE WORK.

Munroe was busy on a murder case next morning, and was unable to accompany the freshmen to the bird-cage house, where they were informed that Celeste had not yet returned.

The peering old woman was noticeably nervous as she answered Bob's questions.

"It is not strange that she is still away," she insisted. "Last year she went away, and did not return for a month, and I did not know where she was."

Bob hoped to learn more from the boy.

"That ain't so, what gran says," declared Pete, in reply to Bob's cautious questions, for he had heard her statement. "Celeste wasn't never gone that long, and I know it. But what did you want to see her about? About that feller that knocked me down?"

"We hope to get track of him soon," said Bob.

"Well, I think he ought to pay me a hundred dollars, don't you? The doctor says he won't charge me nothing, and if I could git a hundred out of that automobile feller it would maybe pay expenses at college—eh?"

"He'll pay you more than that, if I can make him do so," Bob promised—a promise that brought a cheery look into the boy's face.

Billy Frazer, who had remained out-

side, looked searchingly into Bob's face when he came out.

"Well, what now?"

"The girl isn't there."

"That's as we thought likely. Well, what's to be done now?"

"We must try to find Celeste. Whatever the old woman knows—and it's a good deal, in my opinion—she won't tell. She distrusted me, and that shows she has knowledge of some kind."

"You think she knows about Brownlee?"

"I think so—and so does Munroe. I'm sorry he couldn't be with us on the search to-day."

Bob mounted to his seat.

As he took the wheel and started the big machine, he glanced toward the door of the house.

The woman had the door open slightly again, and only those flashing black eyes showed. She was watching them.

"There's some monkey business here," said Billy; "and that girl's the victim of it. I'd like to get Brownlee by the throat."

"Of which there doesn't seem to be much chance just now."

"It will come later!" Billy declared, with conviction.

"Meantime, Billy, we will look up Spencer, the president of the Eagles. Munroe suggested that we might get some more particulars about Brownlee there—perhaps the fellow's right address."

"Good idea. Pike along."

They found Spencer at his downtown office in one of the new sky-scraper buildings that are fast changing the character of New Orleans.

"You haven't seen Brownlee since the meeting at the Eagles' clubrooms?" Bob asked him.

"No," said Spencer. "I don't fancy he'll come there again, for he must realize that he'll be expelled."

"You know where he lives, I presume? Is that the place?"

Bob produced the written challenge, containing the address.

Spencer looked at it in surprise.

"That isn't the address he gave when he applied for membership. I am sure; but he may have changed his residence since then."

"The queer part of this is," said Bob, "that he doesn't live at the address he gave here, and has never lived there, so I've been informed. This is the second time he has fooled me as to his address. I should like to discover just where he does live, or if he has any permanent residence in New Orleans."

Spencer hunted up an old letter, which he had in his files.

"Here is his original address—the one he used when he became a member of the club."

Bob copied it, and they motored away with considerable elation.

It was Brownlee's right address at last, as they discovered when they sought the place. But—Brownlee had not been there since the preceding day; and that morning a truckman had removed all his belongings from the rooms.

"He's jumped the country," cried Billy Frazer. "And I bet he has taken Celeste with him."

Bob shook his head slowly. "I hardly think so. Munroe sent out an alarm, you remember; and if Brownlee is as wary a villain as I think he is, he won't run any risks by making his escape in the open. He'll probably lay low for a day or two."

"Well, I hope you are right, Bob, for I'd hate to see that pretty girl come to any harm. If he hasn't left the State we'll get him, Bob—we'll get him," he repeated emphatically—"sure as fate."

"Fate is a queer thing," said Bob Halliday thoughtfully. "Brownlee runs down a boy on the streets, who turns out to be the brother of the girl he has set his false heart upon—fate. We leave Princeton on a pleasure trip and find ourselves tracking down a criminal—fate. Brownlee plans to have us thrown into prison, but instead we make friends with the detective—fate, fate, fate!"

"Well, I hope, since fate has steered us up against that detective, he will get busy and land Brownlee," said the unphilosophical Billy.

"Munroe is all right," Bob declared warmly. "And I'm hoping to see more of him."

They spent the day in an inspection of automobiles. Every red car they could hear about awakened fresh interest—and there seemed to be hundreds of red cars in New Orleans at that moment. But no amount of zeal on the part of the freshmen could locate the Brownlee car.

Billy was unmistakably upset. He was mad clear through. He saw red. Everything was scarlet-tinted. That night he dreamed that he was in deadly conflict with a red dragon whose jaws dripped blood.

Next morning, while the freshmen were eating breakfast in their rooms, Detective Munroe was announced.

"What news?" he asked at once. "Have you got Brownlee—and the girl?"

"Neither one nor the other," Billy exploded disgustedly. "We've been playing hide and seek all day, laying violent hands on all sorts of cars, from the most delicate shade of pink to the most shrieking vermilion. But nary a sight of our man have we had."

"Don't get mad, Billy," interposed Bob Halliday. "Never get rattled—that's one of the things pounded into you on the baseball diamond, and it's just as applicable to everyday life. Take it easy and do your best. Worry,



spells failure—don't forget it. Sit down, Mr. Munroe"—turning to the young detective—"you're in time to drink a cup of coffee with us."

But Billy Frazer was not subdued, by any means. "It's enough to make anybody swear," he muttered. "I wish I was face to face with that crook Brownlee. Little as I am, I bet I'd kill him—that's what I'd do: kill him!"

Then, suddenly pointing an accusing finger at the detective, he cried: "What are you going to do about it?" He was terribly in earnest, and his eyes were flashing excitedly. "You're a detective. We're only college freshmen. We know little of the game of tracking a crook. That's your business. Now what do you propose?"

The detective slowly sipped his coffee, and, putting down his cup, looked quizzically at Billy Frazer.

The silence was becoming embarrassing, and Billy was about to break in again, when Munroe took from his pocket a black box, long and flat, with a hole in the upper corner and a press-button on the side.

Carefully he laid the black box on the table, and, in a quiet, intense tone, said: "There's something that will interest you, Mr. Frazer. I got it a few hours ago from a man named Brownlee in a red automobile!"

## CHAPTER X.

### THE BLACK BOX.

"Stop! Don't touch it!" shouted Detective Munroe, as the impulsive Billy stretched out a hand to take the black box. "It's dangerous!"

Billy dropped back in his chair with a gasp, and Munroe went on calmly:

"I'd like to tell you of an experience I had yesterday—an experience that makes me tremble even now when I think of the horror of that black box.

"From your excellent description of the man Brownlee and his red car, I phoned to a number of officers in various parts of the city, asking them to keep a lookout. I was rewarded just after lunch, when I was called at headquarters and told that a car answering to my description had been left at a West End garage, and that the owner—who also answered to my description—would call for it at four o'clock.

"I tried to get you at your hotel, but you had not been there since morning, and you had left no message as to where you could be reached.

"The news was mighty interesting, as you may guess. It was too good a chance to lose, so I turned the case I was at work upon over to an assistant and got to the West End garage—just in time to see a big red automobile moving slowly down the grade to the street.

"With a few quick bounds, I reached the car and sprang upon the step. Brownlee had not seen me, and he was throwing into high when I reached over and put a hand on his shoulder.

"He turned around, and in his excitement nearly wrecked his machine against a lamp-post.

"But with a motorist his car is always first; and Brownlee's sixth sense impelled him to clamp down the brake, and the big machine was brought to a stop.

"What the devil do you want here?" he roared.

"You, I answered. 'What is your name?'

"Who are you?" he demanded savagely, and it looked for a minute as if he was going to come at me.

"A detective," I said bluntly. "Isn't your name Brownlee?"

"Brownlee?" he repeated after me, and he laughed uproariously. There was an insincerity about that laugh which told me that I had found our man. "Brownlee!" he said again. "How many times am I to be taken for somebody called Brownlee? Here is my card."

"His hand went to his pocket while he spoke, and I fancied he was going to bring out a cardcase and present me with a card he had had printed for just such an emergency, containing a false name and address.

"But in the excitement of the moment I missed noticing one little detail. And it is details that count most in detective work, as I am finding out.

"I did not observe that the breast pocket in which he was ostensibly seeking his cardcase was at the left instead of the right, as is usual; and that it was his right hand he was using to bring out the case.

"That little oversight might have cost me my life. As it was, it brought me into contact with a new form of attack by criminals; and I want to warn you to be very careful if you get on the track of Brownlee.

"What he brought from his pocket was not a cardcase, but the identical black box you see lying on the table.

"I had my eyes on him, and as the black box appeared I suspected danger instantly. I jumped to the other side of the car—but too late. From the little hole you see in the top corner issued a stream of acid so powerful that it eats its way through a steel plate.

"The stream struck me on the breast and shoulder, and burned its way through my outer clothing and—well, this right arm is wrapped in linen bandages from the shoulder to the wrist, and there is as much muslin wrapped around my chest as would make a dress for a woman.

"I learned the strength of the acid later. At the moment I only guessed

what issued from the black box. Nor had I much time to think about it. For when I swerved aside Brownlee threw in the clutch, and the car bounded forward so suddenly that I was pitched headlong to the road.

"Whether the automobile soared into the clouds or sunk into the earth, or simply skipped away down the road, I didn't know. In fact, I didn't know anything. My head had struck the curb, and I was dead to the world.

"When I woke a nurse was bending over me. There was still a terrific pain in my head, and my arm and chest ached somewhat. I was dazed and couldn't understand why I should be in a hospital.

"Very gently the nurse told me the story of how an officer had picked me up and sent me to the hospital, offering the explanation that I was probably one of those joy-riding fiends, and that I had drunk more champagne than was good for me and had tumbled out of the car and been abandoned by my heartless companions. You see, for reasons of my own, I'm not known to many of the regular city police.

"The mention of automobiles brought the scene before me again, and I asked no more questions.

"This morning at daybreak I was permitted to leave my little white bed, and I'm glad of it. I came straight here. You boys have certainly put me in touch with an all-around villain, and it's up to us to see that he is put behind prison bars."

***By this time you ought to be pretty well acquainted with Bob Halliday. Are you?***

***Do not miss the third installment of the great story of his adventures, which will appear in the May TOP-NOTCH published April 25th.***

## ONE WAY OF CONFESSING.

She stood in the doorway, one hand on the knob.

"Papa, dear," she lisped, "do you know what I'm going to buy you thith year for a birthday prethent?"

"No, darling," said papa, looking up from his papers. "What?"

"Pleathe, papa," answered the little maid, "a pwetty new china thaving mug, with gold flowerth on it."

"But," said the fond parent, "papa has a nice one like that already, clear—a very handsome one."

"Oh, no, he hathn't!" replied the little girl. "I've jutht dwopped it!"

# TO SAVE THE "MAHARAJAH"

By ALBERT W. TOLMAN

Seeking to locate the fire in the hold of a burning ship, Orville Perry, the plucky cabin boy, is caught and held fast when a heavy sea causes the ship to roll and pack the coal about him as he is crawling through a narrow passage. Plunged into utter darkness by the breaking of his lantern, almost crushed by the weight of the coal, smothered, giddy and nauseated by dust and smoke and foul gases, he makes a brave fight for life—and wins!

When Orville Perry became first mate of the *Maharajah*, he bought a thirty-second of the big new ship for an eighth of the old barkentine *Calypso*, and two thousand dollars to boot, his total deposit in the Seaman's Bank after twenty-two hard years from forecabin to forward cabin.

That very August he was stricken with brain fever. He was out of danger by the middle of September, but months would elapse before his complete recovery. Meanwhile the *Maharajah* had chartered, and another first mate had been engaged. Perry's son, Orville, junior, who had signed as cabin boy before his father's illness, decided to sail with the ship. He was a wiry lad of seventeen, rather small, but gritty and clear-headed.

October seventh, the *Maharajah* finished loading five thousand tons of steam coal at Norfolk for the San Francisco navy yard, and by early March she had struck the northeast trades in mid-Pacific fifteen degrees above the Equator.

One thing bothered young Perry all the way round the Horn. Somehow in the bustle of getting to sea he had neglected to insure that thirty-second; and he was mortally afraid of fire. The *Maharajah* was now the family treasury. If anything happened to her, his father's earnings were gone. Twenty-two years lay under Orville's feet, and all at the mercy of the inflammable mineral within those hard-pine walls. Ten times the money wouldn't have tempted him to undergo so much worry again. He was glad it was almost over.

He sentined the coal like a hawk, his nose keen to detect the slightest fumes, his eyes straining for the faintest smoke oozing from any seam. Every night he watched the mate take the temperature in three sections of the hold. Every morning he was present when the forward and after hatches were ordered off to allow any pent-up gas to escape.

But one day before dawn the bolt fell.

Just after five o'clock coffee, the mate, with part of his watch, was opening the fore hatch, while the boatswain took the cover off the lazaretto hatch in the wheel-house. A black smoke, curling

thinly up, appraised Perry that disaster had overtaken him at last.

It was a badly scared boy who startled Captain Forsyth from his sleep with:

"The coal's afire, sir!"

Barefooted and half-dressed, the captain was running forward thirty seconds later, fuming at himself and his owners for ever allowing such a risky cargo to be dumped aboard. The first unpleasant surprise over, he called his mates aft.

"There must be sulphur or pyrites in the stuff," said he; "it was dry enough, when it came overside. But we're in the scrape, and must get out as best we can. It's only about eight hundred miles to Valparaiso or Callao, but the coast airs are light, and the run might take weeks; and then we'd be in a foreign port. Frisco'd mean head winds and at least twenty-five hundred miles sailing. Honolulu's twenty-two hundred miles due west with the breeze fair, and the government station'll be glad of the coal. We ought to get there in two weeks, if we don't burn or blow up."

So the ship squared off for the Sandwich Islands. Then came fighting the fire.

"It can't have made much headway yet," was the captain's conjecture, "for the temperature in the pump-well last night was only ninety. We've got to find it quick, and kill it, if we can; if not, we must abandon the ship. Somebody must hunt it out."

After a moment of silence, Perry volunteered:

"I'll go, sir."

For a moment Captain Forsyth eyed him in silence; it seemed a pity to allot so dangerous a duty to a mere lad. But something must be done at once; and Perry's small size peculiarly fitted him for the task. So reluctantly at last the captain gave his consent.

The ship was rolling heavily in an old southwest swell, when, two hours later, the cabin boy prepared to descend by the forward hatch. Smoke was still rising, but by this time the hold must be at least partially aired out.

Perry was determined to find that fire: if he didn't succeed the first time, he'd keep on trying until he did. The re-

membrance of his father's thirty-second strengthened his resolution. A lighted lantern on his arm, he stepped on the first ladder rung.

"Better have a rope round you," advised the captain.

"It'd only bother me," replied Perry. "Let Olesen come down, and stand on the keelson. I'll sing out to him, if I get stuck."

One long draught of cool, salt air, and he backed quickly down the ladder, the excited Swede almost treading on his fingers.

Rung by rung the boy descended into the black, smoking cavern, the coal dust gritting under his fingers. As his head dropped below the combings, the hot, nauseating atmosphere closed over him like liquid. Ough! But that was wicked stuff to suck into one's lungs.

Nine feet brought him to the floor of the upper 'tween-decks; eight more to the open deck of the lower 'tween-decks; from there it was thirteen feet to the bottom of the lower hold.

The coal filled the greater part of the ship, being trimmed forward to the fore hatch and aft to the lazaretto, a huge black ridge, three hundred feet long, forty-five wide, and thirty high at its peaks under the amidships' hatches. Somewhere in its heart the fire was gnawing with red, corroding teeth, somewhere—where?

The slope of the coal met the ladder foot on the keelson.

"Stand here, and keep your ears open," said Perry to Olesen. "Come for me if I sing out."

Should he turn to starboard or port? He held up his lantern. Starboard the smoke rolled thicker, clinging fungus-like to the beams; so he went that way.

Feet sinking in the soft slope, staggering as the ship rolled, he plunged toward the side. Already a drowsiness was stealing over him, accompanied by nausea and a dull headache. Soon he touched the hard-pine planks.

As Perry scrambled aft, lantern held ahead, the rising slope brought him close up under the plank-sheer, which, with the two feet of deck plank on its edge, formed a five-foot shelf extending along the side of the ship. Under this the boy crawled through a steadily contracting space, broken by beams and

hanging knees. On his left was the hard pine, rough with bolts and trunnel ends; on his right the coal slanted up to the deck planks. A few inches of its top was loose and dry; and a choking dust, raised by the motion of the ship, overhung it.

It was a hot, dirty trip. Perry judged he must now be almost amidships. He dragged himself along on his stomach through the little triangular tunnel, bumping his head against the beams. He had barely room to wriggle; lucky he was small! Hotter grew the air; thicker and thicker puffed the smoke. He couldn't stand it much longer.

What a heavy sea that was! The fire couldn't be much farther ahead. The coal under him felt hot. His lantern was dimming. Through the dirty glass Perry kept sharp watch of the sickly light. If that went out, it was no place for him. He would have to retreat without delay—if he could.

A furnace blast scorched his left cheek. From an air space between the planks the greasy smoke was coiling densely. He pushed his left hand down, and drew it back quickly. How hot it was! The fire unquestionably lay right below; it must have eaten through the flooring. He pressed his ear to the space, and heard a faint crackling.

Perry had learned what he was after: he must return to the fore hatch, and report at once. There was no room to turn round, so he would have to back out. He felt frightfully sick and dizzy.

Suddenly the ship gave a tremendous roll, and the entire top of the coal on his right slid against the side, and buried him.

It snuffed out his lantern. It pasted him up against the planks, packing round arms, legs, and body like a plaster jacket. It filled his ears, his eyes, his nostrils. He couldn't see or hear. He couldn't move. A little more, and it would be all up with him. It was horrible to be entombed alive like that.

Then the ship rolled the other way, the pressure eased, and the coal grew looser. Fighting it away from his face with his left hand, he made an opening in which he drew a fearful breath. He mustn't be caught there, when she rolled back.

For the next few seconds Perry struggled like a madman to clear himself. Inch by inch he battled ahead, a blind human worm, burrowing for life through the black heap. It was useless now to try to work back; the tunnel was choked with coal, and he could clear a way with his hands far better than he could with his feet. Instinctively he pushed forward.

Through the broken lantern glass he writhed, cutting his hands till they bled. He was a full length farther along when

the next roll caught him, and packed the coal to the plank-sheer.

Again all was utterly black, only coal, coal, coal everywhere. He felt it, breathed it, tasted it. Then it grew loose, and he pawed his way ahead again. Another roll like that would finish him.

But the next wasn't so bad, or the next; and soon he lay gasping in a space that was permanently clear. Before long he reached the slope toward the stern.

Perry was almost spent. What should he do? It was no use shouting to Olesen, for more than two hundred feet of coal lay between them. He could never reach the fore hatch through that terrible passage, and the one to port would be no better. His lantern was useless, though its bail still hung over his arm. His head was roaring, splitting. In a few minutes would come insensibility, death.

The lazaretto hatch!

It was his only chance. It couldn't be much more than fifty feet ahead, and he knew the cover was off. Again he began dragging himself along.

His head was swelling like a balloon; the bones of his skull were spreading, almost bursting the skin. He tasted all sorts of things. Oh, for some water! If he ever got on deck again!

Down the slope he pitched headlong, and pressed his face into the coal. Raising himself, he planted his hand on something soft and furry, which lay feebly kicking. With a shrill squeal it twisted itself suddenly about and sent its teeth through his hand. The sharp pain roused Perry from his lethargy. Ugh! If he didn't make haste, he'd soon be dying like that rat.

A faint gray light filtered through his coal-gummed lashes. He stood up. Then his head went round, the coal rose and hit him, and he found himself on his knees again.

On he went, rolling and creeping, toward the smoky blur of gray, until he reached the end of the coal pile on the keelson. Craning his neck upward he saw the wheel-house ceiling framed by the square of the lazaretto hatch.

It was heaven up there—light, air, coolness, water. How could he ever climb those iron rungs! He gazed hopelessly.

Two men, he knew, were at the wheel. He tried to shout. Was that husky croak his voice? No wonder they couldn't hear. He must do it alone. He pulled himself upright. Why wouldn't his muscles work?

The ship, his father's thirty-second, the lives aboard, his duty, all went round and round in Perry's head, as with terrible effort he won his way up, rung by rung.

He heard the movement of the wheel, the tread of feet, an occasional word.

They weren't expecting him there. Forward they were waiting, wondering anxiously why he didn't show up.

Five rungs below the top he stopped and hung. He couldn't go another inch. He couldn't cry out. Presently he would fall back to the bottom of that hot, foul lake of gas, and die.

A sea rushed over the quarter and in through the open door of the wheel-house. Some of it slopped across the combings, and splashed down on his head. The fresh cool douche roused him.

"Better put that cover on," said a gruff voice; and it grated overhead, cutting off the light. Now was his time, or not at all. Dread wrenched a hoarse cry from his throat.

A little later he lay on the wheel-house floor, deathly sick, but able to tell the captain what he had discovered. Then he became insensible.

Perry was in his bunk for a week. Meanwhile the captain pumped six feet of water into the lower hold, and succeeded in drowning out most of the fire; the rest he was able to hold under control. In fifteen days they reached Honolulu, where the cargo was gladly received at the government station.

The keelson and flooring of the *Maharajah* were found to be badly burned, but their repair was not difficult. When they finally got to San Francisco, Perry received a present of three hundred dollars from the company that had insured ship and cargo.

## TOP NOTCHERS!!

Do not fail to ask your newsdealer to save you a copy of the May Number of TOP-NOTCH, which will contain

## "THE YELLOW STREAK"

by James Weber Linn, of the University of Chicago. Mr. Weber Linn is a college man himself and has given us a story of college athletes that is simply great. Do not fail to read it.

# THE DEADWOOD TRAIL

By GILBERT PATTEN

## A SERIAL ADVENTURE STORY

### SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

Lang Strong, the boy from Maine, arrives at Fort Laramie, Wyoming, in pursuit of his uncle, David Norton, whom he has never seen, and who has failed to keep an appointment to meet him in Cheyenne. Hearing Lang's story, Injun Jo, an old frontiersman and scout, bound for the Black Hills, agrees to accompany him. Lang attempts to ride the pinto pony of a blonde giant who calls himself Rattlesnake Jack Harper, succeeds after being once bucked off; but Jack then refuses to keep his agreement to swap horses with the lad. Bud and Barbara Blake, brother and sister, who are also anxious to hurry on, make friends with Lang and give him breakfast. The party of four set forth from the fort, Lang riding on the "jerky" wagon. They have not traveled far before Rattlesnake Jack overtakes them and forces his company upon them. They meet five men, who tell them there is a big wagon train hung up at Rawhide Buttes, and they hasten forward.

### CHAPTER V.

TELLING HOW LANG FINALLY OVERTOOK HIS UNCLE AND WAS GIVEN A RECEPTION THAT QUITE UPSET HIM.

Finding the others of the party disinclined to waste either time or breath in talking with him, Harper reined his piebald pony alongside the jerky and did his best to draw Lang out. He affected a hearty, free-and-easy manner, beginning by an apology.

"I shore hopes you don't hold no hard feelin's whatever agin' me on account o' that little hoss joke back yander at the fort?" he observed. "I didn't mean no offense, an' I 'low mebber ye'll be willin' to let bygones be bygones an' bury the hatchet. Ef I offended you, I'm ready to say I'm sorry, an' what fairer thing kin I do?"

"It was a mighty poor joke," declared Lang, his sunburned and peeling face flushing hotly. "I took you at your word, and you didn't stand by it, like a man. I was in desperate need of a horse, for I meant to push on alone in an effort to overtake my uncle with the train ahead."

Lang spoke plainly, but the man did not seem inclined to notice that.

"I didn't reckon you could ride this yere cayuse nohow," he said. "Besides, it was only arter you hed struck out from the fort with this outfit that I heerd you was in sich a powerful fush."

"Why, I told you—"

"But I sartin didn't savvy it was a heap important. I likes your style, younker, an' I reckons you has plenty sand, which you showed fair enough in straddling this cayuse arter you was pitched off."

Jack had a smooth, flattering way, and, in spite of everything, Lang felt his

anger subsiding. So, as they joggled along through the waning afternoon, the boy was finally led to tell the particulars of his trip to join his uncle, who had failed to meet him according to appointment. He was quite unaware that the picturesque adventurer was craftily leading him on to tell all those things, although he did feel vague surprise that the man should take so much interest in him and his affairs.

The trail grew rougher and the country wilder with the passing of the day. The rolling plains were left behind, giving place to keenly outlined bluffs and immense mounds of yellow earth, with a thin covering of buffalo grass and a scanty growth of stunted oak. In passing the steep and precipitous gulches which now crossed the trail at frequent intervals all of Lang's skill as driver was brought out, and the prospect of extending the journey over such rough ground after nightfall was anything but agreeable.

The afternoon was well advanced when, far off and blue against the horizon, they beheld some hills, which Injun Jo pronounced to be Rawhide Buttes. This information Lang received with an expression of deep gratification, for already he was lame and sore and wearied beyond telling by the surprisingly unexpected and erratic movements of the jerky.

"How long will it take us to reach the Buttes, Jo?" asked Bud.

The old man squinted with his keen single eye, rolled his quid of tobacco over, expectorated carelessly, and answered:

"In case nothing onexpected hinders, I opine we sartin ought to git thar somewhere about dark."

To Lang it seemed that there was no reason why it should take so long to cover the distance, but the Buttes were much farther away than he supposed, and he noted with regret and impatience with what slowness they drew nearer.

Now he was troubled by a fear that he might again be disappointed in finding the somewhat mysterious uncle whom he sought and whose singular movements had filled him with perplexity and doubt. As he was given time to ponder upon this matter, his doubts and uncertainty increased, and he was seized by a disquieting conviction that David Norton was seeking to avoid him.

After talking with Lang, although he had proposed to be sociable, Rattlesnake Jack fell to the rear and kept by himself, betraying no desire to join in the conversation of the others. However, he watched them closely, and no word or sign that he did not observe passed between them.

Many times Lang's eyes turned toward Bab, noting the graceful manner in which she rode, the dashing slant of her wide-brimmed hat with its one black feather, the small gloved hand that grasped the hackamore, the turn of her head as she spoke to her brother; and sometimes she laughed a laugh that was like music in the silence of the mound-dotted plain.

As they came yet nearer to the hills toward which they were crawling, the buckskin giant started forward and rode to the front, observing:

"I opine I'll hike along and locate the train. I'll let them know you're comin' and have things all ready and prepared for ye when you arrive."

Injun Jo squinted at Jack with his piercing eye.

"What's your mighty great hurry?" he asked sharply. "Now that you've jined us unaxed it would jest nacherally seem more decent-like for you to hang 'by until the train is reached, as there's no telling what we might run inter atween here an' there."

Jack shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I don't 'low there is any speshul danger to worry ye, partner," he said, and straightway put spurs to his pinto and went tearing off toward the Buttes, kicking up a little cloud of dust, that grew fainter behind the heels of the pony as he receded.

"Good riddance," muttered Jo; "and it won't cause me grief none at all if we fail to meet up with you again."

Rising and falling as one with his mount, the figure of the adventurer grew smaller and smaller until it melted away and was gone in a valley between two low hills.

Dusk was creeping over the dreary expanse and softening the sharp outlines of the distant bluffs when, a mile or two in advance, they saw the wagon train drawn up in a circle on the summit of a hill.

At this sight, Lang's heart gave a bound and then seemed to drop back heavily with a burden of dread lest he should again meet disappointment. But

the spectacle caused him to fling off some of the weariness that had fallen upon him, and he was eager to know what the arrival at the train had in store for him.

The camp fires of the train were twinkling through the gloom as they approached. Some of the men came out and watched them with idle curiosity as they toiled up the hill. Lang looked them over, wondering if one might not be his uncle, and what excuse that uncle would make for his singular conduct. However, no one came forward to meet them, which increased the suspense that was wearing on the nerves of the young tenderfoot.

Injun Jo was recognized by one of the men, and he was informed where they could find a place for the jerky in the circle of wagons, which had been arranged thus about the camp, with the horses inside, for protection in case of an Indian attack.

"Here we are, partner," said Bud cheerily, to Lang. "And I judge we're all some glad. Now you can find your uncle in short order."

"If he's here," muttered Lang, with a worried look, as he gratefully stretched his long legs.

"Of course he's here," said Bud. "But if he shouldn't be," he added, "you know where you're welcome, and I sure allow we can get along all right."

"Thank you," said Lang. "You are very kind." And then, with a pleasant word and a charming smile from Bab, he started to look around for David Norton.

"Norton?" repeated the first man of whom he inquired. "I don't know. I don't know the name of hardly anybody in the party."

But the next one said, with a jerk of his thumb:

"I think you'll find him over yander."

Lang made his way toward the part of the camp indicated by the gesture, his heart once more beating high with hope. All around him men were preparing supper over their fires, and the hiss of bacon and smell of coffee gave the young tenderfoot the knowledge that he was again nearly famished.

In a few moments he came upon two men who were standing beside a wagon and talking earnestly. One of these men the boy recognized as Rattlesnake Jack, who saw him approaching and called the attention of the other by saying something in a low tone.

"Well, here you are, younker," called the buckskin giant bluffly: "and I shore reckons your uncle will be some surprised to see ye."

"My uncle?" exclaimed Lang, looking at the other man, who returned the stare with interest. "Is this my uncle? Are you Mr. Norton?"

"That's my name, boy," admitted Jack's companion, in a low, gentle voice

that somehow did not seem to harmonize with his shifty, sharp eyes and coal-black mustache and imperial. "And I presume from what my partner has been telling me that you are my nephew from the East."

"Your partner?" cried Lang, turning his eyes on Jack. "Why, are you—"

"That's whatever, boy," grinned the giant. "Your uncle sure is the partner I spoke of and the gent I was pinin' to ketch up with myself."

"But how is that?" asked the boy, still wondering. "You didn't tell me."

"How was I to tell you any when I didn't savvy it was so myself? You was keerless like, an' failed to mention your uncle's cognomen, or if you did I sartin failed to ketch it."

Now Lang was almost certain he had told Jack the name of his uncle, and, having plenty of good sense in spite of his years, he was not at all satisfied with this explanation. The whole affair gave him a sense of uneasiness and dissatisfaction that served to temper the pleasure of his meeting with his uncle; but, to add to his feeling of perplexity, Mr. Norton evinced no particular satisfaction in beholding him and received him with something like coldness. Having looked forward to an entirely different greeting, Lang experienced a sensation like a dash of cold water.

"Why didn't you wait for me at Cheyenne, Uncle Dave?" he asked, almost resentfully. "Mother wrote and telegraphed that I would be on hand before the date when you said you would leave for Deadwood."

"I received neither letter nor telegram," was the answer. "I was not looking for you."

"But you said in your letter to mother that any message properly addressed would surely be delivered to you if it reached Cheyenne before you left."

For a moment the man seemed to hesitate, casting a quick glance toward Harper.

"Nevertheless," he finally said, "I heard no word from her, so made no arrangements to take you along. That being the case, it is unfortunate you have come."

The words were almost like a blow. For a moment, Lang was speechless; but, his face flushed, he quickly found his tongue.

"If you don't want me," he cried, "just say so. I think I can find a way to get along on my own hook, and I won't be indebted to any one."

"You do not seem to understand, boy. As I did not expect you, I failed to outfit for you before starting, which makes it very inconvenient, to say the least. However, as you are here, I suppose I'll have to make the best of it. At the same time, I think it was very foolish of your mother to let you come."

"You didn't write like that in your

letter to her. You said there was little opportunity for a boy in Maine, and urged her to let me come."

"Oh, I may have written something like that, but it was to show my good will toward you; I didn't fancy there was any danger that she would let you off."

"Then you were not sincere; you pretended to take an interest in me when you didn't. Mother believed you; I believed you. That's why I'm here."

"Well, as I said, we'll make the best of it, although you will be a mighty incumbrance and bother on my hands."

With which David Norton turned away toward the wagon, the lifted flap of which enabled him to overhaul some articles in the rear end. Lang stood staring at the man's back for a moment, overcome by disappointment, dismay, and anger. Then he sat down on an upended bucket by the camp fire and buried his face in his hands, his soul overwhelmed by a flood of homesickness.

## CHAPTER VI.

RELATING SOME THINGS OF A SURPRISING AND THRILLING NATURE WHICH TOOK PLACE IN THE CAMP AT RAWHIDE BUTTES.

In those moments of dejection, overcome by a sensation of disappointment almost too keen to bear, Lang presented a pitiful figure. Through former trials and discouragements he had been borne up by the confident anticipation of at least a hearty and cordial reception when he should overtake his perplexing uncle, which had led him to overcome all obstacles and push on with determined heart; but now for the time all hope and courage seemed gone out of him, and, with covered face, he squatted on the bucket, heartily wishing he had never been led into undertaking this wild journey in search of fortune.

As if to add to the boy's emotion of heartsickness, the mellow air brought to his ears from some distant portion of the camp the strains of an accordion, from which the operator was torturing that sweetest of tunes, "Home, Sweet Home." Home! Lang thought of it with a thrill of intense longing, while before him seemed to rise a vision of his sweet-faced mother in cap and spectacles, seated by the shaded sitting-room lamp, just as he had seen her hundreds of times. He wondered if she was thinking of him, and he was thankful that she knew nothing of his wretched plight.

A hand fell on his shoulder and a familiar voice sounded in his ear.

"I opines it's not half as bad as that, younker," said Rattlesnake Jack, in his ree-and-easy way. "Brace up!"

Lang drew away from that touch, his aversion for the giant sweeping over

him anew and with double volume. Rising, he confronted Jack, who stood in an easy attitude, one thumb hooked carelessly into his loose cartridge belt, regarding the boy with eyes in which lurked mingled amusement and a sympathy which Lang believed assumed, and which therefore aroused in the lad a feeling of anger that threatened to break forth in words.

"I shore reckon it'll all come out in the wash," drawled the adventurer. "Just you keep a stiff upper lip, and you'll sartin git thar with both feet."

Lang choked down his anger. } Of what use were words to him in such a situation? Realizing the fruitlessness of anything he could say or do, he remained silent, although the expression of his face betrayed his feelings in an unmistakable manner.

Mr. Norton, who had departed for some cause, now returned, and preparations for supper were begun, Lang being called on to bring a bucket of water from the spring near the foot of the hill. He was glad enough to make himself of some use, thinking his uncle might soften toward him on finding him willing to help and not wholly an encumbrance.

Still the supper was a wretched failure for the boy, whose hunger had been driven from him by his disappointment, and who crowded down the few dry mouthfuls he took, the lump in his throat making it no easy matter to swallow at all. When this was over he washed the few dishes used, Norton and Rattlesnake Jack smoking near the fire and talking in low tones, their heads quite near together. In their manner there seemed something secret and sinister. Lang was also required to care for Jack's pinto, and the vicious creature sought to do him harm with teeth and hoofs, compelling him to leap aside more than once to escape.

When there was nothing more for him to do about the camp, he asked permission to speak to the friends in whose company he had traveled from the fort to the Buttes, which privilege was granted by a curt nod from Mr. Norton.

He found Bud and Bab at the opposite side of the camp, and they greeted him in a way that warmed his blood somewhat. To their questions he responded that he had found his uncle all right, but his pride prevented him from even hinting at the disappointment that had been his when the meeting took place.

"Well, I'm certain glad you're all right at last, partner," said Bud; and Bab joined in expressing her pleasure over his fortune, smiling upon him with that peculiar little crinkle in her chin that made her smile so perfectly bewitching.

Could he have severed all connection with David Norton and clung to these

friends during the rest of the journey, Langley Strong would have done so readily, but he felt that such a thing was impossible or would be unwise, to say the least.

Still chewing tobacco, Injun Jo came slouching back to the little camp fire, accompanied by a man who seemed to know him well. They were discussing the probable dangers of the journey, and the others listened with some interest.

"It sartin may happen," said Jo; "but we ain't more than meejum likely to run inter redskins atween here an' Hat Crick. Beyend that thar's no tellin' what may turn up, though this yere outfit's too strong for any small bunch o' the varmints to tackle, unless they ketch us dead to rights, like they did the Metz outfit in Red Cañon."

"If we can get across the Red Cloud Trail without encountering them," said the other man, "we stand a good show of pulling through to the Hills all right. Don't you think so?"

"Red Cañon is beyend the Red Cloud Trail," returned Jo; "an' it's thar more murderin' has took place than anywhere else along the route."

"Well, I'm mighty glad there are so many of us together," nodded the stranger. "Them that go through in small parties are fools; that's what I think."

The conversation of old Jo and his companion plainly betrayed that the people of the train, in spite of their strength of numbers, were somewhat apprehensive of an encounter with Indians, and Lang felt the thrill which such a possibility had brought upon him more than once already. Tired in every limb, with a sense of sleepiness oppressing him, he finally arose, bade his friends good night, and departed. On his way back he noted that many of the weary travelers had already wrapped themselves in blankets and crawled into wagons or stretched themselves out upon the ground to sleep, some with boots or saddles beneath their heads for pillows. The fires were dying down, and the sounds of the camp were sinking, although the growing quietness was broken by the subdued conversation of groups of men here and there, the stamp of horses' feet, and the occasional braying of an uneasy mule.

As the boy approached his uncle's outfit, he was surprised to observe five men sitting on the ground and engaged in a game of cards by the light of the replenished fire. They gave little heed to the boy as he came up, but calmly continued their game. Two of the players were Rattlesnake Jack and David Norton.

Thinking at first that the game was one of harmless amusement, Lang was startled when he soon discovered that the men were playing for money. In

short, they were gambling, and a pretty stiff game it seemed to be.

Aroused from his weariness by this discovery, the boy sat down outside the circle and watched them a while, for there was in it a fascination that he felt strongly, and he was given another far from reassuring glimpse at the true character of his uncle. His watching eyes noted well the appearance and movements of these gambling men, whose hats were pulled well down over their eyes; yet who seemed to watch one another from beneath those lopping brims with the keenness of wolves. Of the three strangers two were rough and bearded, while the third had the appearance and air of a business man from the East. The bearded men each wore a revolver in a convenient holster at the hip, but about the beardless one no weapon was visible.

Before long, David Norton turned to Lang and said:

"You had better turn in."

That was all, but it was a command. The boy was not told where he was to sleep, nor was he given further attention, so he crept beneath the near-by wagon and stretched himself on the ground, shivering a little from the cold night air that came up the hill. With his head pillowed on his arm, he lay there, studying the profiled face of his uncle, listening to the sound of shuffled cards, the clink of money tossed into the little pile on the blanket about which the men were sitting, and the low voices of the players saying, "I raise you," "Ten better," "I see it and call." He did not understand the game, but he vaguely felt that there was something about it that was dangerous to the point of deadliness.

As he watched David Norton, Lang noted that there was a strong contrast between this cold, placid, deliberate man and his warm, tender, sweet-faced mother. Sleepiness was again threatening to steal upon him when he was startled into full wakefulness by observing something that seemed to him, unfamiliar with the game as he was, quite irregular. Mr. Norton was not winning; instead, he seemed to be somewhat behind the game: but Rattlesnake Jack was ahead and in very good spirits. Norton was dealing, and the boy had observed how his supple fingers glided over the backs of the cards as he deftly tossed them off the pack, while on his little finger gleamed a ring, the glittering stone of which seemed to reflect a hundred shades of dazzling light from the blazing fire. The players had discarded and called for cards in place of those thrown down. Norton rapidly slipped them from the pack, but Lang would have sworn that one of the two cards given to Rattlesnake Jack was taken from the bottom instead of the top. Following this there was some

lively betting, which ended in the taking of all the money by Harper, much to the disgust of two of the men, both of whom held excellent hands.

Then, overcome by sleep, the boy beneath the wagon ceased to listen and watch, his eyes closed, and he passed into the slumber of complete exhaustion. From this he was rudely and suddenly awakened by harsh and angry sounds of quarreling voices and the immediate report of a pistol. Lifting himself quickly on one elbow, he stared in startled bewilderment at the figures of struggling, fighting men as revealed by the light of the camp fire. The game of cards was over, and it had terminated in a personal encounter that looked decidedly deadly.

The quarrel and the shot had aroused the camp. Lang crept from beneath the wagon on all fours, noting that Mr. Norton and Rattlesnake Jack seemed battling against the three men who had been gambling with them, while on the ground lay a still smoking pistol. Two of the men were at the giant, and Lang Strong saw one of them draw a knife and lift it to plunge it into Jack's back.

That sight stirred the boy from Maine into action, and he went forward with a great leap, clutching the man's wrist and stopping the blow just in time. At the same moment Harper hurled his other assailant aside, and wheeled to see Lang still clinging desperately to the wrist of the hand that held the knife. In a twinkling the giant had a pair of revolvers in his hands and was saying:

"I calls this yere play, gents, and I sure opines I'll be compelled to shoot you up a whole lot if you don't quit the game instanter."

Norton had shaken off his opponent and immediately joined his partner, having likewise drawn his shooting irons, which he held ready for use, an ugly gleam in his coal-black eyes.

Lang was thrown off by the man with the knife, who stood there crouching and uncertain in the firelight, glaring at Norton and Harper. The others arose, but those ready revolvers were warning enough against an attempt to resume the encounter, and they backed off slowly, using language that will not be recorded here.

"You're a brace of dirty, crooked sharks!" declared the man with the knife, as he also retreated.

"Which same it would not be entirely healthy for you to remark if circumstances was diffrunt," observed Rattlesnake Jack.

That part of the aroused camp in the immediate vicinity had witnessed the termination of the affair, which fortunately had ended without bloodshed, although David Norton had a bullet hole through his coat sleeve near the shoulder, seeming to indicate that the shot

which had awakened Lang had nearly deprived him of an uncle.

"The galoot would have salted you for keeps, partner, if I hadn't been some lively in jostling his elbow," said Harper to Norton. "And," he added, turning to Lang, "I savvy, younker, that you chipped in just in time to keep me from being cut up easy-like, for which same accept thanks."

The boy said nothing. Not from any increased liking of Rattlesnake Jack had he seized the wrist of the man with the knife, but his natural instinct had caused him to make an effort to prevent bloodshed and had hurled him almost without volition into the struggle.

There was now a huddling together and excited talking among the men of the camp who had been aroused by the shot and the encounter. They gathered in an ominous group at some distance, being joined by the trio who had lately taken part in the card game. With the exception of the one near Norton's wagon, the camp fires had smoldered to ashes or a few dying embers, which were occasionally blown to faint life by cool breaths from the lips of the night; but millions of wonderfully bright stars and the thin rim of a moon gave forth a nebulous light, by which it could be seen that the clustered men had their faces turned threateningly toward that end of the camp where two men and a boy now remained alone, while from them came the murmur of angry voices, like the muttering of a gathering storm. To these men the trio who had taken part in the card game were talking savagely, with expressive gestures toward their late antagonists.

Lang saw his uncle carefully examine his revolvers, making sure they were in working order, his face bearing a hard and desperate look. While Rattlesnake Jack retreated a few steps, keeping his eyes toward the men and placing himself where the light of the fire would not dazzle him and prevent him from seeing them plainly. At the same time, the blond giant observed:

"It's not unlikely thar may yet be a little gun play here, partner."

Norton nodded, but said nothing. Lang had already discovered that he was a man of few words.

The boy was impressed deeply by all that had happened and by the position in which he now found himself, for he was quick to see that something had aroused the camp against Norton and Harper, and a lad of far less shrewdness could not have failed to understand it to his complete dismay. So Lang waited in anxious expectation and dread of what was to occur.

He did not have to wait long. Soon a number of the men detached themselves from the rest of the dark group and approached the fire until they were politely invited by David Norton to

state what they wanted, upon which the spokesman of the party put himself forward and said:

"As a committee we are here to request you gents to hitch up your outfit and hike out directly, as we don't care to travel or associate further with persons of your calibre, which I judge is straight enough for you to understand. We'll give you precisely fifteen minutes to get under way, and if you are not started when the time expires there is certain to be doings around these diggin's."

"But you can't mean to turn us out to-night?" said Mr. Norton quietly. "You'll let us remain until morning?"

"If you linger beyond the time stated you'll do so on your own responsibility, and I am mortal sure you'll regret it exceedingly," was the retort.

The man then demanded the revolver that had been dropped by the fire, secured it, and the party retreated to the dark huddle of men in the background.

## CHAPTER VII.

WHEREIN SOME DISTANT SHOTS ARE HEARD, AND RATTLESNAKE JACK DISPLAYS A BULLET HOLE IN HIS HAT.

Rattlesnake Jack growled and then he laughed.

"Well, partner," he said, "I reckon we've got it all fair an' proper, and we can take our choice to hike instanter in peace or stay and mix in a scrimmage that's nacherally certain to be powerful unpleasant for us."

David Norton seemed in doubt, and it was plain that he did not fancy either alternative.

"I suppose we'll have to get out, Jack," he concluded, after a moment. "The whole camp's against us now, and that settles it."

Then straightway they set about hitching up and preparing for the move, wasting no further words in discussing the matter, although Rattlesnake Jack observed:

"I 'low I oughter have that hoss I won, but I don't judge it'd be healthy to try to take the critter along with us."

"None whatever," said Mr. Norton decisively.

Lang was bewildered and dazed by what had happened and by the unwelcome prospect before them. These men had aroused the train against them, and now they must go on alone to face the dangers of the trail that ran through the heart of Indian land. They were outcasts, hurled forth into the night by the mandate of the committee that represented the indignant and angry fortune hunters, and for them there was no more the agreeable companionship of others bound on the journey, nor that feeling of comparative safety and strength that comes of numbers. And already the boy

had heard it said that small parties who tried to reach the Hills were made up of fools.

David Norton paid no attention whatever to Lang, but Rattlesnake Jack said: "Come, younker; if ye're goin' to levant with us ye wants to be ready in a right smart hurry."

Lang thought of Bud and Bab. He would bid them good-by, and asked a few moments in which to do so. Receiving neither permission nor refusal, he hastened away toward the other extremity of the camp, passing the ominous cluster of men, who looked at him curiously, but made no move to molest him.

Bud Blake was awake and up, but he had reassured Bab, who had returned to her bed in the jerky. Injun Jo was not there; doubtless he was with the men of the outfit who had been aroused by the encounter.

In a few words, Lang explained the situation as well as possible, confessing that the trouble had arisen over a game of cards, but withholding his conviction that his uncle and Harper were undoubtedly to blame.

"Well, this certain is too bad!" exclaimed Bud regretfully. "I'm a heap sorry."

"So am I," said Lang; "but it can't be helped. We may meet again in Deadwood."

"I sure hope so, and I wish you a barrel of good luck. If you ever need a friend and I'm where you can locate me, don't be bashful about calling on."

Bud held out his hand, giving Lang a hearty, friendly grip that did the soul of the young tenderfoot good. Lang tried to think of something he wished Bud to repeat for him to Bab, but he failed to find suitable words.

When he returned to the place where he had left David Norton and Jack Harper, the boy was astonished to find them gone and the men of the camp engaged in closing up the gap left in the circle by the removal of the wagon.

"Where are they?" gasped Lang.

"There they go," answered one of the men, pointing down the hill. "They didn't think it healthy to linger too long. You can catch them easy, if you hustle."

Lang ran down the hill after the wagon, which he could see in the pale moonlight, and the creaking of which was brought to his ears by the clear air. When he overtook them he uttered no reproaches for their failure to wait for him, mounting at the foot of the hill to the wagon seat beside Mr. Norton, having been curtly told to do so.

Mounted on the spotted broncho, Rattlesnake Jack rode in advance, his high-peaked hat canted rakishly, there being about him, as it seemed to Lang, who peered in fascination at the man's back, on which the misty starlight fell, a devil-may-care atmosphere of reckless-

ness. Jack struck the trail that led on from Rawhide Buttes to the land of promise, and the outcasts fared forth into the lonely night.

Once Jack's pinto started to buck and pitch, causing the rider promptly to use his quirt, while expressing his opinion of the animal in that forceful language with which Lang was becoming quite familiar. The pony ceased cavorting with the same suddenness that it had begun, and, having waited for the wagon to come up, the buckskin giant again rode serenely in advance.

Two miles, perhaps, had been covered in this manner when Jack suddenly drew up, headed his pony about, and observed:

"I'm some weary o' this yere beast, partner, and I hates amazin'ly to proceed farther without the hoss which belongs to me, considerin' which I opine I'll slip back an' take possession o' my property."

David Norton immediately raised an objection, declaring that such a course was both foolhardy and dangerous, not to say impractical; but all argument was wasted with the big man, who had been meditating on the course he would pursue, and was set on carrying out his plan.

"I knows just where to lay my hand on the critter," he said. "They won't be expectin' me none, an' I sartin judge I kin turn the trick without raisin' no great disturbance. I'll be with ye ag'in in short order."

With which he rode back along the trail toward the Hills, that rose dark and grim against the starry horizon, soon fading into the gloom that hovered about them.

Lang watched until Jack had vanished, and then sought to question his companion; but Mr. Norton cut him short, making no explanation, and they sat shivering and waiting—for what? Occasionally the horses stamped and shifted their footing, the wind moved with a slapping sound a loose piece of canvas on the wagon, and from far away in the mysterious night came the shrill-keyed notes of prowling coyotes.

Perhaps a full hour had passed when to their ears came faintly, yet distinctly from the direction of the dark hills, a sudden shot, followed directly by several others. These sounds stirred David Norton into action, and he immediately whipped up the horses, savagely muttering something Lang did not catch. The whip whistled and fell on the backs of the horses, and the complaining wagon jolted and reeled over the rough trail in a reckless manner, making it necessary for the boy to cling fast, in order to prevent being pitched off by a sudden lurch. The outfit clattered noisily, but the relentless driver continued to use the whip whenever the horses

showed signs of flagging, and they fled on with the black buttes behind them.

Not until some miles had been covered in this manner did Mr. Norton permit the sweaty and panting horses to slacken their speed, and even then he continued to keep them at a brisk walk. To Lang it seemed that they were fugitives, as well as outcasts, and that somewhere back along the trail a great peril sought them.

They had crossed a deep gully with no small difficulty, sliding down one side and laboring up the other, when Mr. Norton finally drew up, leaning out past the end of the canvas top to peer back through the starlight and listen. In a moment he straightened up on the seat, again lashed the horses, putting them into a run, as he muttered:

"I thought so!"

Lang felt his heartstrings tighten.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Some one coming," was the curt answer.

They did not proceed far before Mr. Norton swung about behind some scraggy bushes, which he seemed to accept as a possible shelter to deceive the eyes of whoever was pursuing. Then he reached back into the wagon and quickly brought out a rifle, with which he stepped down from the seat, standing in the shadow, the weapon held in the hollow of his left arm and his face turned toward the trail over which they had come.

And now Lang distinctly heard the sound of horses' hoofs, faint and far away at first, but growing more distinct with each passing moment.

"Two of them!" said David Norton, in grim calmness, at the same time bringing his rifle forward a little and cocking it with a double click.

Lang shivered, but not wholly from the effect of the cold wind. His heart was pounding frightfully in his bosom, yet the blood seemed to run cold in his body. He strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of the pursuers, while he dreaded to see them. However, he felt that his uncle's cause was now his own, whether right or wrong, and so he drew forth his nickel-plated revolver and slipped down at the side of the man with the rifle.

"What are you doing?" asked Norton, in a low tone that betrayed surprise.

"If we've got to shoot," said Lang, "I'll do my part of it."

"With that?" murmured the man contemptuously, as the starlight glinted on the boy's revolver. "Get out of the way behind the wagon and let me attend to this matter. You'll bother me, and you may get hurt."

But Lang did not hide behind the wagon. He waited there for what was to happen, still holding his revolver.

The sounds of pursuit almost died out in the deep gully, and then some figures



loomed vaguely on the nearer bank, coming straight on. A moment later a clear, peculiar whistle cut the air, upon which Mr. Norton lowered his rifle and let down the hammer, answering the whistle with a similar signal.

Lang's relief was intense, for he immediately divined that the pursuer was Rattlesnake Jack, which proved to be the case when the adventurer came riding up astride a horse with a white blaze and a pair of white stockings on its forward legs, having the pinto in tow.

"Hey, partner!" called Jack gayly. "You sartin must have let out some. I figured to overtake ye long afore this."

"Well," confessed David Norton, "I didn't waste a great amount of time after hearing that shooting. So you got the horse?"

"I opine I did; but the critter kicks up a small rumpus just as I gently leads him away, which makes it necessary fer me to straddle him an' git plenty lively."

"And the shooting?"

"It was powerful keerless," chuckled Jack, removing his high-crowned hat and holding it to be inspected. "Howsomever," he added, pointing to a hole clean through the peak, "this yere is the only damage it done."

Mr. Norton shook his head disapprovingly.

"That may not be the end of it," he said.

"I reckons it will," assured the giant, "as I loped out on the back trail, as if bound that way instid o' this, doublin' arter shakin' 'em off, an' pickin' up the pinto, which I had staked out. Anyhow, I shore allow I has a right to my own hoss, that I wins all fair an' proper."

"On my deal," said David Norton, mounting again to the wagon seat and disposing of his rifle. "They'll be likely to remember that."

Lang resumed his place on the wagon, and the journey was once more taken up, with Rattlesnake Jack again in the lead.

## CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH DAVID NORTON IS STRANGELY MISTAKEN FOR A PERSON OF QUITE A DIFFERENT NAME.

To Langley Strong that night journey, which was a flight over the difficult and sometimes dangerous trail, seemed like a fantastic dream. More than once he wondered if it could be true that he was there on that wagon driving the horses, for, finding the lad could drive well, Mr. Norton had surrendered the lines to him and taken to Harper's pinto, despite the objections of that vicious little beast.

It will be remembered that Lang had obtained very little sleep of late and that he was sorely in need of rest. As

the night wore on he began to find it more and more difficult to keep his drooping eyelids propped open, and often he dozed on the seat until abruptly awakened by the striking of a wheel against some obstruction. This was dangerous indeed, for the trail was one on which a careful and experienced driver must need keep wide awake and wholly alert to avoid mishap in the full light of day; therefore it was not remarkable that, while descending an incline, Lang awoke to find himself flung through the air as the result of a great shock, following which he struck sprawling on the ground, though still clinging to the lines.

The horses were too tired to kick up much, and, although his arm and shoulder were benumbed, the boy quickly quieted them. Mr. Norton at first rebuked him for his carelessness, and then observed that it had grown too dark for farther progress with any degree of safety. And now the boy noted for the first time that the phantom moon had sunk beyond the horizon and the bright stars were being obscured by clouds, while in the chill air there was a feeling that told of coming rain.

Rattlesnake Jack was not loath to camping, and so they finally drew up in the shelter of a low bluff, where they prepared to spend the remainder of the night. The horses were unhitched from the wagon and cared for as well as possible by Lang and Mr. Norton, while Harper gathered such fuel as he could and started a little fire, beside which the two men squatted. Lang felt himself neglected, and more than ever experienced the unpleasant sensation of being an unwelcome encumbrance for his companions.

Norton gave his nephew little attention. He now drew from his pocket a paper, which he unfolded and studied attentively by the light of the fire. Harper drew near to look over his partner's shoulder, and the two men fell to talking in low tones.

"Do you 'low it shore is a clear title?" Harper asked.

"It seems all regular enough," said David Norton; "although in these times we're likely to find the claim jumped."

"In which case we has to demand our property an' back our claim with our guns, as well as with this yere paper."

"We can do that, too."

"I shore reckon we kin, pard, an' we'll hold the claim if thar ain't no question raised consarnin' how you got holt o' this paper. But it's sartin likely you may meet up with some gent that will reckergnize you an' get curious-like."

"If the claim is valuable," said Mr. Norton, "it's not likely to take me long to dispose of it. After that let them fight over it who care to. We'll attend strictly to our regular line of business."

Then, noting that Lang was watching

and listening, while seeking warmth at the fire, Norton frowned darkly and directed him to turn in.

"You'll find a slicker in the wagon," he said. "Take that and make yourself comfortable with it."

Now Lang did not know what a "slicker" might be, but on investigation in the wagon, aided by the light of a match, he found a garment of oilskin, like that used by fishermen, and fancying it was the thing meant, he took it and tried to make himself content on the ground near the fire. As he was doing this, he saw his uncle take out a handsome gold watch, on the case of which was a monogram of two letters, which looked like "B. R." Hazily wondering why Mr. Norton carried a watch marked thus, the boy dropped, from sheer weariness, into sudden sleep.

He was awakened by the beating of cold rain on his face, and he found that morning was coming on gray, and drear, and dismal. He was wet and chilled, and his shoulder, which had been bruised by his fall in the night, was stiff and lame.

The two men were astir, and Lang got up at once, although it cost him an effort. The fire had gone out, and preparations for breakfast were simple and quickly made, the tinned beef and hard bread being washed down with cold coffee. None of the trio was inclined to talk, and no great amount of time was lost in resuming the journey.

Lang retained the slicker, which served to protect him in a measure from the rain as he sat on the wagon seat; but his fingers were cold, and the dampness seemed to get into his very bones. If ever a boy had good cause for homesickness it was Langley Strong on that wretched morning.

The cold rain seemed to take much of the jauntiness out of Rattlesnake Jack, who rode his new mount with no attempt at grace, his broad shoulders rounded, his Mexican hat with the bullet-pierced crown set squarely on his head and pulled hard down. In place of a saddle he had strapped on a blanket, as there was but one saddle in the outfit, and that he had resigned to Mr. Norton, who at first found the usual trouble with the pitching pinto.

The wheels of the wagon soon began to pick up mud, and progress was slow and toilsome. The dreary landscape seen through the drizzling rain oppressed the boy on the wagon, and seemed to bear upon his spirit like a crushing load. Thoughts of a cheerful and comfortable fireside were like contemplation of paradise.

The ascents and descents of the road grew more and more difficult as the day advanced, and two or three times the wagon became stuck, being extricated after no small amount of trouble and great expenditures of violent language

by Harper, who rode close to the wagon horses and lashed them with his quirt.

It was not far from midday when the rain began to slacken and finally let up, to the relief of all, although the sky continued overcast and the mire was no less annoying. To Lang it seemed that there was little hope of ever arriving at the Hills at that rate of progress; but from bits of conversation between the two men he learned that somewhere ahead on Hat Creek there was another "ranch," which they hoped to reach before long.

Finally, having toiled to the summit of a high bluff, they discerned far in the distance a line of shrubbery, the green hue of which contrasted strongly with the gray, leaden aspect of the surrounding country, and this Rattlesnake Jack declared indicated the location of Hat Creek.

Nearly two hours were consumed in reaching the stream, where they came at last to "Johnny Bowman's Ranch," a square one-story building, which was a hotel, barroom, and general store all in one, having but a single room, where all the business of the place was transacted. Outside the ranch a "bull train" of several wagons was drawn up in the usual corral-like circle, having been detained there by the bad weather. This train was loaded with flour and merchandise for the Hills. The heavy freight wagons were commonly called "prairie schooners," and were drawn by oxen, the teamsters being termed "bullwhackers."

Just across the creek was a soldiers' camp, generally garrisoned by nearly half a hundred men; but this force was now much reduced, many of the soldiers having been called away to join General Terry's expedition against the Sioux under Sitting Bull.

Having cared for the wagon horses as directed by his uncle, Lang found immense relief and satisfaction on entering the ranch and confronting a blazing log fire, that crackled forth its cheerful music and sent out a grateful glow which took possession of the boy, who sank with a sigh of relief upon a rough seat before it, resting his elbows on his knees and holding up his hands to the heat. For a time he was oblivious to his strange surroundings, satisfied only in getting warm again and feeling that his blood was moving once more in his body.

He was aroused by the sound of Rattlesnake Jack's voice. Jack was at the long counter which ran down one side of the room and served also as a bar, and he was calling for "tanglefoot," at the same time inviting all present to step up, Lang being the only one who gave no heed to the invitation.

Several of the bullwhacks were in the room, and one, a thickset, sandy-whiskered, unkempt man, paused and

stared at David Norton, who had leaned against one end of the counter, quietly waiting for those invited to come up.

"Why, howdy, Rolfe!" said the sandy teamster, stretching out a thick, caloused hand. "Is it yourself?"

The man addressed did not accept the outstretched hand. He looked the teamster over coldly, saying in a quiet voice:

"I beg your pardon; you must have made a mistake, sir. I'm sure we have never met."

The tanned face of the bullwhacker flushed with angry resentment, and he betrayed unmistakable surprise. There was a hush, and all looked at the two men, while some who were in a line with them shifted positions quietly.

David Norton leaned with one elbow on the counter, his other hand closed and resting easily on his hip. His grave face wore a calm and undisturbed expression, but his eyes, looking forth from beneath their black, overhanging brows, were fixed steadily and unwaveringly on the face of the teamster.

Although he lacked experience and was unfamiliar with Western ways, Lang felt the tension of the moment and half started from his seat.

It was the teamster who broke the silence, having lowered his hand.

"Waal, hang me if I didn't take ye fer Brandon Rolfe!" he said; "an' if you ain't him, then you sartin shore is his twin brother."

"I must disclaim the honor of any relationship whatever with the gentleman," said the dark man, in the same undisturbed manner. "My name is David Norton, and the gentleman who has invited you to drink is my partner. You will give us both pleasure by taking the best the house puts out. And as David Norton my hand is open to you any time."

Having said which, he removed the clinched hand from his hip, unclosed and extended it toward the man with the sandy beard, who hesitated barely a second in taking it, crying:

"Waal, Mr. Norton, as no offense wuz meant, none will be taken; an' I sartin admit you has a right to any name that suits ye best, without no questions being axed by anybody."

Then they drank and exchanged gossip in a manner that had the outward semblance of friendliness, at least.

Lang sank back before the fire and remained there wondering until Rattlesnake Jack strode over and informed him that they would take dinner at the ranch, Bowman having agreed to prepare it for them. Then the boy became aware that, his outward discomfort having passed away, the inner man was calling loudly for attention.

It was long past the regular dinner hour at the ranch, and they were compelled to be satisfied with "left overs";

but the beef was excellent, the coffee was not half bad, and, everything considered, there was no cause for complaint.

His hunger fully satisfied, Lang went out to take a look around. Harper had preceded him, and the boy found the buckskin-clad adventurer standing with his hands on his hips, his feet planted wide apart, and his eyes resting with disfavor on a teamster who appeared to be critically inspecting the horse with the white blaze.

"You seems to like the looks o' that thar critter, stranger," said the giant. "Mebbe ye'd like to buy him? If so, you're at liberty to make an offer."

The man retreated a little, shaking his head, and continuing to stare at the horse.

"Yourn?" he questioned.

"I 'low he are," nodded Jack. "I don't opine you'd be after hintin' any that I'd sell a hoss that didn't b'long to me, partner?"

"Waal, no," drawled the teamster; "though I sure should want a clear title to any hoss I puts my mazuma into."

Having said this, he turned his back on Jack and walked away, leaving the giant glaring after him, a heavy frown on his face.

Five minutes later Mr. Norton came from the building briskly, and immediately exchanged a few low words with Harper, following which Lang was notified that they would hitch up right away and continue the journey, information which surprised the boy not a little. Lang had fancied they would wait the movement of the bull train and keep with it for protection, as the most dangerous part of the journey now lay directly before them; but when he attempted to express himself on this point he was curtly silenced, and, with seemingly unnecessary haste, the trio made ready to push onward from Johnny Bowman's.

Bowman now came out and told them that Indians had been seen the day before, not more than ten miles to the northeast, advising them strongly against the foolhardiness of trying to get through to the Hills in such a weak condition. To this advice Rattlesnake Jack gave a swaggering retort which did not seem to please Bowman.

The teamsters and others about the place gathered to watch them off and comment on their going. As the wagon rolled away, with the boy on the seat and the two men mounted on the strip-faced horse and the pinto, a wizen old man with a corn-cob pipe in his mouth and his hands sunk deep in his trousers pockets ominously observed:

"It's a clean ten-to-one chance that nary galoot in that outfit is ever seen ag'in a-wearin' the whole o' his ha'r."

**To be continued in May TOP-NOTCH. Don't fail to get it!**

# TALKS WITH TOP-NOTCH FELLOWS

BY BURT L. STANDISH

**The Conceited Chap.** There is no bore more tiresome than the conceited chap who is forever cackling about himself and his affairs, whether he boasts of his great accomplishments or bemoans his hard luck and undeserved failures. Some fellows are so egotistical that they never seem wholly to forget themselves under any circumstances. To such a person everything he says or does or sees or hears, no matter how trivial, seems to be of vital interest, and he is beset by a feverish yearning to tell the next chap all about it. Boasters and braggarts are always bores, but there are some fellows who seldom or never boast, yet who weary one to the point of savage protest by their constant gabble-gabble, in which the great personal pronoun predominates: "I did so and so," "I said to him," "He told me," "I saw something or other"—always and forever "I" and "me." Haven't you ever become so tired of listening to this sort of babble that, in utter desperation, you've felt that either you must run away or punch the chatterer's head? It's simply maddening to be compelled to listen long to such a fellow; and, besides, if he persists in keeping on talking, how are you ever going to find a chance to tell him all about yourself and your own affairs?

**Self-confidence Necessary.** There is a difference between self-esteem and egotism, although some dull persons seem unable to perceive the distinction. The boy or the man who lacks self-esteem is to be pitied, for unless he thinks well of himself how may he ever expect to win the good opinion of others? But no matter how smart or efficient you may believe yourself to be, you'll discover it far more to your benefit if you let the world find out about it through your deeds rather than by your words. Words are often mere wind; deeds are solid things. Never give people cause to call you a "hot-air artist." At the same time, don't make the fatal mistake of conveying the impression that you lack confidence in yourself, for if they get such a notion, they'll never place any confidence in you. If you are asked if you can do a thing, and you believe you are able, do not falter or hesitate about answering that you can. Then, if called upon to make good, go ahead and do it—or die!

**Fellows Who Quit.** When you have decided that a thing is worth doing, go at it in earnest. But, above all things, don't permit weariness or waning enthusiasm to lead you into abandoning the task to which you have set your hand. Hosts of fellows never accomplish anything really worth while because they lack one great qualification which every successful person must have—staying power. They begin an undertaking splendidly—start off with dash, vim, and enthusiasm; but before long, feeling the first weariness that follows any trying effort, they begin to lose interest, their attention turns to other and newer things, and finally they stop—quit—lay down. Sometimes a fellow does this when the prize for which he has been striving is almost within his grasp. Occasionally he loses heart because it happens that some other person—some rival—is striving for the same prize and pushing him hard. It may seem that he has reached the limit of his endurance; the strain is frightful; it is too much—too much—and he quits! But all the while the other fellow was feeling the strain just as keenly, the anguish of the struggle pressed fully as hard upon him, yet he did not quit; he kept on, and won the prize. He had real staying power.

**"The Yellow Streak."** Such a loser has a "yellow streak"; that's the world's opinion of him, and in most instances the public estimate of a person is very close to the truth. The exceptions prove the rule. And this brings me to speak of a splendid story of college athletics which will appear next month in this magazine. It is entitled "The Yellow Streak," and tells about a distance runner who fell into the habit of quitting, and how he was cured. I consider it one of the strongest, cleanest, and most interesting stories I have had the satisfaction of reading in lo! these many moons. The author, James Weber Linn, is a student in the University of Chicago, and he demonstrates in the opening paragraph that he knows what he is writing about. The story grips you with deep interest, and holds you to the last word. And it leaves a good taste and a desire for more of the same sort. Don't fail to get the May issue of TOP-NOTCH and read "The Yellow Streak."

**Other Good Things.** There will be other fine features in the May number. St. Dare continues his excellent "Clif Stirling" stories with the third of the series, entitled, "Clif Stirling's Champions," in which Clif demonstrates that he is a good baseball general and wins the championship through his clever headwork quite as much as by his really fine pitching. In many ways this third story is superior to those already printed. In "When the Big Woods Blaze," Albert W. Tolman furnishes another exciting short story, descriptive of a thrilling rescue from a forest fire. Gilbert Patten's "Deadwood Trail" progresses with increasing interest, and Edwin Larkmore's "Boh Halliday, Freshman," ends with a few fireworks. The present number of TOP-NOTCH speaks for itself; it is a deed; words about it would be wasted. Besides, I haven't wholly forgotten what I wrote about egotism and boasting to begin with.

**Save the Magazines.** The fellow who begins now to buy TOP-NOTCH regularly—or, better still, the one who subscribes for it, and that's the only way you can be practically sure of getting it every month—will, if he preserves his copies, accumulate in time a choice supply of good reading to which, in years to come, he may revert on occasions, reperusing the old stories with almost as much pleasure as he derived from them in the first reading. Don't throw your magazines away; put them away, save them, have them bound, if you can. Lend them? Well, I certainly don't fancy the chap who is mean in anything; but I fancy still less the one who borrows a book or magazine and either soils, tears, or fails to return it. And there should be a limit of lending, even to the fellow who returns your property, unless he is too poor to dig up a nickel once a month to buy a magazine for himself. Let him sample one or two, if you please, and then, if he likes it so well, let him buy for himself, instead of thumbing out your copies.

*Burt L. Standish*

TO APPEAR IN THE MAY NUMBER OF  
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**CLIF STIRLING'S CHAMPIONS**

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In which long complete story Clif proves that he is a born baseball general. A slashing, snappy touch-and-go yarn for real-live boys.

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**THE DEADWOOD TRAIL**

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In this installment of Patten's serial, Lang Strong meets with another startling surprise, and proves that he is a fellow of sand. The story grows better with every slice.

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Third and concluding part. The mystery is cleared up and the rascals get their due. The things which happen in Dr. Dodd's private sanatorium make lively reading.

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