The Rover Boys at Big Horn Ranch; Or, The Cowboys' Double Round-Up

Edward Stratemeyer

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ANDY AND FRED FOUND THE ROCKS ANYTHING BUT EASY TO ASCI
Rover Boys at Big Horn Ranch (*Page* 271)

THE ROVER BOYS AT BIG HORN RANCH

OR

THE COWBOYS' DOUBLE ROUND-UP

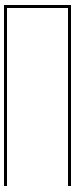
BY

ARTHUR M. WINFIELD
(Edward Stratemeyer)

AUTHOR OF "THE ROVER BOYS AT SCHOOL," "THE ROVER BOYS
ON TREASURE ISLE," "THE ROVER BOYS AT COLBY HALL,"
"THE PUTNAM HALL CADETS SERIES," ETC.

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BOOKS BY ARTHUR M. WINFIELD

(Edward Stratemeyer)

THE FIRST ROVER BOYS SERIES

THE ROVER BOYS AT SCHOOL
THE ROVER BOYS ON THE OCEAN
THE ROVER BOYS IN THE JUNGLE
THE ROVER BOYS OUT WEST
THE ROVER BOYS ON THE GREAT LAKES
THE ROVER BOYS IN THE MOUNTAINS
THE ROVER BOYS IN CAMP
THE ROVER BOYS ON LAND

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EDWARD STRATEMEYER

The Rover Boys at Big Horn Ranch

INTRODUCTION

MY DEAR BOYS: This book is a complete story in itself, but forms the sixth volume in a line issued under the general title, "The Second Rover Boys Series for Young Americans."

As noted in some volumes of the first series, this line was started years ago with the publication of "The Rover Boys at School," "On the Ocean," and "In the Jungle," in which I introduced my readers to Dick, Tom and Sam Rover and their relatives and friends. The twenty volumes of the First Series related the doings of these three Rover boys while attending Putnam Hall Military Academy, Brill College, and while on numerous outings.

Having finished their education, the three young men established themselves in business and became married. Dick Rover was blessed with a son and a daughter, as was also his brother Sam, while Tom became the proud father of a pair of the liveliest kind of twin boys.

From their home in New York City the young Rovers

were sent to a boarding school, as related in the first volume of the Second Series, entitled “The Rover Boys at Colby Hall.” From that institution of learning the scene was shifted to “Snowshoe Island,” where the lads spent a mid-winter outing. Then they rejoined their fellow-cadets and had some strenuous doings while “Under Canvas.” After that, in a volume entitled “The Rover Boys on a Hunt,” I related how they uncovered the mystery surrounding a strange house in the woods. And following this came a trip to Texas and Oklahoma, where, “In the Land of Luck,” the boys aided Dick Rover in his efforts to locate some valuable oil wells.

In the present volume the scene is shifted back to Colby Hall and then to a ranch in the West where some remarkable happenings await our young heroes.

From reports received I am assured that the sale of this line of books has now passed the *three million* mark! This is as astonishing as it is gratifying. I sincerely trust that the reading of the volumes will do all of the boys and girls good.

Affectionately and sincerely yours,
EDWARD STRATEMEYER.

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THE ROVER BOYS AT BIG HORN RANCH

CHAPTER I

SNOW AND SNOWBALLS

"Line up, fellows! No crowding ahead in this contest."

"Here, Jack, give me some elbow room if you want me to do any real snowball throwing!" cried Fred Rover.

"All the elbow room you want," returned his cousin gayly.

"Remember the prize!" shouted Andy Rover to the cadets who were stringing themselves out in a ragged line. "The first fellow to throw a snowball over the top of the barn gets a sock doughnut."

"For gracious sake! what do you call a sock doughnut?" demanded Phil Franklin, another cadet, as he paused in the act of rounding up a snowball he was making.

"A sock doughnut is one with a big hole in it," answered Andy, with a grin.

"Then my socks must be all of the doughnut variety," put in one of the cadets dolefully. "They are always full of holes."

"Never mind the socks now!" cried Randy Rover. "Let's see who can put the first snowball over the barn."

It was late in the afternoon of a day in January and a number of the cadets of Colby Hall had been amusing themselves in the snow which covered the ground to a depth of nearly a foot. They had started in to snowballing each other, but had then grown more serious and had built several snow forts and likewise two or three snowmen which later they had taken great sport in knocking apart. Then some one had suggested that they try their skill at seeing who could throw, the highest and farthest, and this had led to the present contest.

“We’ll mark off a line about a hundred feet from the main barn,” Jack Rover had announced. “And then we’ll see who can throw highest over the roof.”

The four Rovers were accompanied by half a dozen of their chums and six or eight others, and at the word from Jack the snowballs began to fly at a lively rate, a few landing on the roof of the big barn and the majority hitting the side.

“Say, look out that you don’t break a window,” warned Gif Garrison. “If you do, you’ll have an account to settle with Captain Dale.”

“Here she goes!” yelled Dan Soppinger, and let fly with so much strength that the snowball sailed up to the very ridgepole of the barn and disappeared on the other side.

“Hurrah! Dan draws first blood!” shouted Jack.

“Huh! Dan didn’t throw over the barn, he just slid over it,” snickered Randy.

Jack was hard at work making a small and perfectly round ball. Now, taking careful aim, he let fly with all his might.

“There she goes fair and square,” he announced with

pardonable pride, as the snowball cleared the top of the barn by several feet and disappeared beyond.

The snowball had scarcely been thrown when two other balls thrown by Fred and another cadet went sailing over the barn. Then those in the contest seemed to acquire better skill, and soon nearly every one of them was topping the barn with the missiles.

“Phew! some hot work, I’ll say,” panted Will Hendry, usually called Fatty because he was the stoutest boy in the school.

“This exercise will do you good, Fatty,” returned Fred. “You need to reduce.”

“If Fatty keeps on he’ll be eating Colby Hall poor,” announced Spouter Powell.

“Huh! I don’t eat any more than any of you,” grumbled Fatty. “Fact is, I hold myself down.”

“Gee! listen to that, will you?” exclaimed Andy. “Fatty says he holds himself down! And this morning I saw him storing away three helpings of sausages and about ’steen dozen buckwheat cakes.”

“Nothing of the kind! I didn’t have a bit more than you had,” growled Hendry. He broke off suddenly. “Hello! what’s up now?”

“Hi! Hi! What’s the meaning o’ this?” cried a voice from around one end of the big barn, and a man, dressed in overalls and a heavy cap and carrying a broom, appeared.

“Hello there, Bob Nixon!” cried Jack. “What’s wrong?”

“There’ll be a whole lot wrong if you fellows keep on throwing those snowballs much farther,” answered Bob Nixon, who was a chauffeur for the Hall and

who did all sorts of odd jobs in the winter time.

“Did we hit you?” questioned Phil Franklin.

“You sure did—on the back and on my hand,” answered Nixon.

“We didn’t know anybody was around on that side of the barn,” announced Andy.

“I don’t suppose you did. But never mind me. What I want to know is, do you fellows intend to smash all the glass in those hotbed frames out yonder?”

“Great salt mackerel!” ejaculated Fred. “I forgot those hotbed frames were there.”

“Why, the glass is out of ’em, anyway, isn’t it?” questioned Gif.

“It was out. But they’ve been setting some of ’em in again, getting ready for some early stuff. You’ve sent those snowballs up to within ten or fifteen feet of where the frames are located.”

“Gosh! it’s a good thing you told us of this,” burst out Fatty Hendry. “We might have had a nice lot of glassware to pay for.”

“Not you, Fatty,” grinned Andy. “You never even hit the top of the barn. If you break any glass it will be in some of those basement windows.”

“Come on up to the other end of the barn,” suggested Gif. “Then the snowballs will fly right out into the open field and do no harm.”

“Well, I don’t care where you throw ’em as long as you don’t get into mischief,” answered Bob Nixon, and disappeared into the barn.

After that the cadets continued to throw over the structure for some time. But then they gradually lost

interest, and as the short winter day was coming rapidly to an end some hurried into the Hall to do a little extra school work before the bell should ring for supper.

“Well, what next?” questioned Fred Rover, when he and his three cousins and Gif, Phil and Spouter found themselves left alone.

“I’ve got a great scheme for to-night if you fellows will help,” announced Randy. He and his twin brother were always ready for a joke.

“What is it?” questioned Jack quickly.

“This snow is just soft enough for rolling some big balls, as we found out this afternoon,” answered his cousin. “What’s the matter with making a whole lot of big snowballs and placing ’em in some of the bedrooms to-night?”

“Gee, that’s the talk!” cried his twin merrily. “I’d like to place a couple in Codfish’s room.”

“He certainly deserves ’em,” added Fred. “He’s getting to be just as big a sneak as he ever was. All of our kindness to him seems to have been useless.”

“And I thought he was going to turn over a new leaf,” declared Jack. “I wonder if some of the other fellows haven’t been teasing him and that has made him go back to his old tricks.”

“I know one person I’d like to treat to some big snowballs!” broke out Fred. “That’s Professor Duke.”

“Oh, say! I’d like to square up with him myself,” burst out Andy. “Gee! he certainly did have it in for us yesterday.”

“Professor Duke is certainly a sour one—much worse than Asa Lemm ever dared to be,” came from Gif.

"I was thinking of Duke when I mentioned it," said Randy. "You know he has his room in our building instead of with the other professors in Colonel Colby's residence."

"We don't want to get in bad with the colonel," remarked Fred seriously.

"Oh, I think we can fix it so that nobody will know who did it," returned his cousin.

The matter was talked over for several minutes, and then, having agreed on their plan for more fun, the Rover boys and their chums set to work rolling a number of snowballs which were two feet or more in diameter. These they placed close to the school building at a point where there was a series of fire-escapes leading down from the upper halls of the institution.

"We can let down the ladder just as soon as we're ready to turn the trick," announced Randy. "I don't believe anybody will notice it, for it will be dark and so cold that most everybody will be indoors."

"We've got to be on our guard to make certain that Codfish or Duke or somebody else doesn't spot us," said Spouter Powell. "Of course it wouldn't hurt if some of the regular fellows found us out, because they'd keep it to themselves."

It must be confessed that the Rover boys were rather preoccupied in mind during supper that evening. In fact, Andy grew so thoughtless that he salted some eggs he was eating three times, so that when he finally came to his senses the food had to be pushed aside. This happened just as Professor Snopper Duke was passing, and the new teacher eyed the young cadet suspiciously.

“What is the matter with that omelet, Rover?” he demanded, in his high-pitched, nervous tone of voice.

“Nothing the matter with it, sir,” answered Andy. “Only I somehow forgot and salted it too much.”

“Really!” returned Snopper Duke sarcastically. “Is that the way you waste food?”

“No, sir. It was only a mistake,” answered Andy meekly.

“You ought to be made to eat that omelet,” continued the professor severely. “Don’t let such a thing happen again.” And then, with his eyes rolling around among the other cadets to see if anything else might be wrong, he passed slowly down among the tables of the mess hall.

“Oh, isn’t he a perfect little lamb!” murmured Randy. “So awfully tender-hearted!”

“Somebody ought to wring his neck,” grumbled his twin.

“Just the same, Andy, you’d better be careful how you handle the salt-shaker after this,” put in Jack.

After the meal the Rovers and their chums mingled with the other cadets and informed two or three of what was in the wind, and as a consequence there was quite some excitement noticeable when a little later the crowd, with the exception of Randy, slipped out of the school building by a side door. Randy ran upstairs, to appear presently on the lower landing of the fire-escape. Here was suspended a heavy iron ladder in such a fashion that it could be easily shoved out so that one end would drop to the ground.

Soon the crowd of cadets appeared in the snow below him, and then, with a warning to them to get out of the way, Randy let down the ladder and then came down himself.

“All clear upstairs,” he announced. “Not a soul in sight.”

“One of us ought to stay on guard up there to give warning in case it’s necessary,” announced Spouter.

“Well, suppose you go up,” returned Jack.

“I’d just as soon help with the snowballs,” returned Spouter. “But if you want me to go I’ll do so.” And a moment later he disappeared up the ladder and into the school building through a window which had been thrown open.

The cadets on the ground found it no easy task to raise the big snowballs up the ladder. They tried it first with nothing but their hands, but soon found they could do much better by dumping a snowball into a big overcoat and then hauling it up by the sleeves and the tail of the garment. They worked as rapidly as possible, and soon had eight of the snowballs raised to the platform of the fire-escape.

“How about it? Everything clear?” questioned Randy, as he came into the corridor where Spouter was on guard.

“All clear so far,” was the reply. “A few of the fellows are in their rooms, but no one that we are going to bother.”

“Then let’s get those snowballs inside and distribute ’em.”

In a few minutes the snowballs were gotten inside the building, and then two were rolled and pushed

over to the room occupied by Henry Stowell, a cadet commonly called Codfish on account of the broadness of his mouth. Luck was with them, for the door was unlocked, so that they had little trouble in rolling the snowballs inside, where they were placed one on either side of the single bed the cadet occupied.

After this the cadets rolled several of the balls to various other rooms, one being placed in the tub of a bathroom.

“I’ve saved the biggest of the snowballs,” whispered Randy. “That’s the one we must place in Professor Duke’s room.”

The professor’s room was around in another corridor, and to get to this the cadets had to roll the big snowball directly past the top of the broad stairs leading to the hall below. They had the snowball in a position right at the head of the stairs when Spouter, who was leaning over the upper railing on guard, gave a sudden hiss of warning.

“Somebody coming!” he announced in a whisper. “And unless I’m mistaken, it’s Professor Duke!”

“Gosh! I hope he doesn’t catch us,” returned Gif Garrison. “Maybe we had better run for it.”

“Here he comes right for the stairs!” put in Jack, as he saw the familiar form pass a light in the lower hall.

The cadets did not know just what to do, and while they paused to consider, Professor Duke started up the long, straight stairs. He was evidently in deep thought and did not look above him.

“Run, fellows! Run!” whispered Andy excitedly, and then, as the others started away he attempted to

follow. But the floor was wet from the melting snow, and down he came flat on his back, both feet hitting the big snowball squarely.

The movement was sufficient to send the snowball directly to the edge of the top step. Here, as Andy scrambled to his feet, it hovered for a moment, then began to slide down the stairs, gathering speed from step to step.

“Hi! Hi! What is this?” those above heard Snopper Duke ejaculate. And the next instant the teacher set up a yell of alarm as the big snowball hit him in the stomach and hurled him to one side. Then the snowball passed on down the stairs, slid across the lower hallway, and shot directly through the open door leading to Colonel Colby’s private office!

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING ABOUT THE ROVER BOYS

“Gee, we’ve done it now!”

“The snowball knocked Professor Duke over!”

“Hi! Stop that! What do you mean? Who did that?” came in smothered tones from Snopper Duke, who now sat on one of the lower steps of the stairs, holding both hands over the spot where the big snowball had struck him.

“Gosh! it struck him, all right,” whispered Gif Garrison.

“Yes. And it went across the hallway into Colonel Colby’s office!” gasped Andy, who had scrambled to his feet and given a glance downward.

“Skip for it!” put in his twin brother quickly. “We mustn’t be caught at this.”

The warning was not needed, for all of the cadets were already scrambling through the corridor and away from the stairs as rapidly as possible. They came to a halt in front of Room 18, that which Jack occupied.

“Skip inside and pretend to be reading or studying,” said the oldest of the Rover boys.

“I think we had better go to our own rooms,” said Gif to Phil and Spouter. “And remember, mum is the word,” he added for the benefit of the others.

“There’ll be some fun sooner or later, believe me,” remarked Fred. “Andy, why did you push that snowball downstairs on top of old Duke?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose. I slipped,” was the answer. “But come before they start to investigate.” And then he slipped into Jack’s room, followed by his cousins.

And here let me pause for a moment to tell something about the Rover boys and how it was that they came to be at Colby Hall. My old readers will not need this introduction, and, therefore, I shall not feel hurt if they skip my words on the subject.

In the first volume of this line, entitled “The Rover Boys at School,” I introduced three brothers, Dick, Tom, and Sam Rover, and told how they were sent to Putnam Hall Military Academy where they made a

number of chums, including a cadet named Lawrence Colby.

Passing through Putnam Hall successfully, the three brothers next attended Brill College, and then went into business in New York City, where they organized The Rover Company, with offices on Wall Street.

During their school days the Rover brothers had fallen in with three very nice girls, Dora Stanhope and her cousins, Nellie and Grace Laning. The three young couples became married and settled down in connecting houses on Riverside Drive, New York City.

About a year following their marriage Dick and his wife Dora became the parents of a son, who was named John, and this son was followed by a daughter Martha. The boy Jack, as he was usually called, was a sturdy youth with many of the independent qualities which had made his father so successful.

Shortly after the birth of Jack, Tom Rover and his wife Nellie came forward with a great surprise in the form of a pair of lively twin boys, one of whom was named Anderson and the other Randolph. Andy and Randy, as they were invariably called, were exceedingly active lads, in that particular being a second edition of their fun-loving father, Tom.

About the time Tom’s twins came upon the scene, Sam Rover and his wife Grace became the parents of a little girl, called Mary. Then, a year later, the girl was followed by a boy who was christened Fred.

Residing side by side, the younger generation of Rover boys, as well as their sisters, were brought up very much as one large family. At first they were

sent to private schools in the Metropolis, but the boys, led by Andy and Randy, showed such an aptitude for fun and horseplay that their parents were compelled to hold a consultation.

“We’ll have to send those kids to some strict boarding school—some military academy,” said Dick Rover.

“I guess that’s right,” his brother Tom had answered. “Although how my wife is going to get along without having the twins around is more than I know.”

At that time Lawrence Colby, the Rovers’ former Putnam Hall chum, was at the head of a military academy called Colby Hall. To this institution Jack, Fred, and the twins were sent. And what they did upon their arrival there is told in detail in the first volume of my second series, entitled “The Rover Boys at Colby Hall.”

The military school was located about half a mile from the town of Haven Point on Clearwater Lake. At the head of the lake was the Rick Rack River, running down from the hills and forests beyond. The school consisted of a large stone building facing the river, and close by was a smaller building occupied by Colonel Colby and his family and some of the professors, and at a short distance were a gymnasium, a boathouse, and likewise bathing pavilions.

On arriving at Colby Hall the younger Rovers found several of their friends awaiting them, including Dick Powell, usually called Spouter because of his occasional desire to make long speeches, and Gifford Garrison. Spouter and Gif were the sons of Songbird Powell and Fred Garrison, men who in their boyhood days had been close chums of the older Rovers while

at Putnam Hall. The Rovers made a number of other friends, and, likewise, a few enemies, many of whom will be heard of later.

As mentioned, Colby Hall was located about half a mile beyond Haven Point, and on the opposite side of the town was Clearwater Hall, a boarding school for girls. During a panic in a motion picture house the Rover boys became acquainted with several girls from Clearwater Hall, including Ruth Stevenson, May Powell, Alice Strobell, and Annie Larkins. They discovered that May was Spouter Powell's cousin, and the whole crowd of young people soon became friends. Later on Mary and Martha Rover became pupils at the girls' school.

Ruth Stevenson had an old uncle, Barney, and one day, while out hunting, the Rover boys did the old man a great service. For this he invited them to spend some winter holidays with him, which they did, as related in another volume, called "The Rover Boys on Snowshoe Island."

On this island the boys met two of their former enemies, Nappy Martell and Slugger Brown, as well as Asa Lemm, a discharged teacher of Colby Hall. The Rovers exposed a plot against old Uncle Barney and caused the hunter's enemies to leave Snowshoe Island in disgust.

Some of the boys hoped they had seen the last of Nappy and Slugger, but Jack was doubtful; and how those two unworthies turned up again to cause more trouble is related in the book entitled "The Rover Boys Under Canvas."

This was at the time of the annual encampment, and at an election of officers Jack was made captain of Company C and Fred made first lieutenant.

While the Rover boys were at Colby Hall the great war in Europe opened. When the call for army volunteers came Dick Rover and his brother Sam lost no time in enlisting, and as soon as he could get away Tom Rover followed; and the three fathers of the boys went into the trenches in Europe to do their duty for Uncle Sam.

During the following winter at Colby Hall Gif Garrison received a letter from an uncle, stating that he and his chums might use a bungalow up in the woods. Gif at once invited the Rover boys and Spouter to become his guests, and what a glorious time the lads had is related in a volume entitled “The Rover Boys on a Hunt.”

The return of the older Rovers from Europe at the conclusion of the great war in which they had served gallantly brought something of a surprise. Dick Rover had saved the life of a man from Texas, and in return had been given the deed to some property located between Texas and Oklahoma and said to be in a region containing oil. He decided to go to Texas and Oklahoma to investigate, and the four boys begged to go along. How they went to the oil fields and what stirring adventures they had there are related in detail in the volume preceding this, called “The Rover Boys in the Land of Luck.”

Here they fell in again with Nappy Martell, Slugger Brown, and another good-for-nothing lad named Gabe Werner, and also with a man named Carson Davenport, who did his best to do Dick Rover great harm. Davenport and some of his cohorts were finally placed under arrest. As a result of this Gabe Werner’s father took hold of some wells that were being sunk by the Davenport crowd. But in the end he and the Martells and the Browns lost a great deal

of their money, so that they were left almost penniless.

“It’s a terrible blow for those three families,” said Dick Rover, when this occurred. “It will make Mr. Werner quite a poor man.”

“Well, I don’t particularly wish them any hard luck,” remarked Andy. “Just the same, I guess Nappy, Slugger, and Gabe got what was coming to them.”

Before going down to Texas and Oklahoma the Rover boys, while along the Rick Rack River during a violent storm, had succeeded in rescuing a man and his son who were caught between some rocks and a drifting tree in the middle of the swiftly flowing stream.

The man, John Franklin, was exceedingly thankful for what had been done for him, and so was his son Philip. It developed later that the Franklins owned a tract of land in Texas. And when it was discovered that the tract inherited by Dick Rover from the soldier in France was practically worthless, Jack’s father made an arrangement to work the Franklin place on shares. Two oil wells were bored, and both of these paid handsomely, making the Rovers richer than ever and also placing a substantial amount in the bank to John Franklin’s account.

“Do you know I can scarcely believe it’s true,” Phil Franklin had said to the Rover boys. “Why, my father will have more money than he ever dreamed of.”

“We’re as glad as you are, Phil,” Jack had answered. “Glad on your account as well as our own. Now maybe you can go to Colby Hall with us.”

“Say, that would be immense!” Phil had returned with pleasure. And that fall he had joined the crowd

at the military academy and soon made for himself a host of friends.

“Gee, I never thought going to school could be so nice,” declared Phil Franklin to the Rover boys one day. “I always considered going to school a hardship. But this is bang-up in every way.”

“I guess you haven’t made any enemies yet, Phil,” remarked Fred. “Don’t forget that Nappy Martell, Slugger Brown, and Gabe Werner all hailed from here.”

“I’ve met only one fellow that I don’t like,” returned Phil Franklin. “That’s a fellow who came in the day I did, a big, tall, lanky chap named Lester Bangs.”

“Oh, you mean Brassy Bangs,” broke in Randy. “I know that fellow only too well. I had quite a set-to with him one day in the gym.”

“For a new cadet he’s certainly pretty forward,” answered Jack. “I’m glad he isn’t a member of my company. If he was I think I’d have to call him down more than once.”

“I guess Colby Hall is bound to have its bullies,” Andy had remarked on hearing this. “No sooner do we get rid of one group than another appears. They seem to grow like weeds.”

During the fall there had been the usual football season at the military academy, and the boys had acquitted themselves quite creditably, winning seven games out of twelve. Then had come the brief Christmas holidays. And following this the lads had settled down once more into the grind, resolved to do their best at their lessons. But, of course, they were only boys, and they had to have their fun, and occasionally the fun went a little too far and brought

forth rather disastrous results, as we have just seen.

CHAPTER III

WHAT THE SNEAK TOLD

"I certainly didn't think that snowball would go down the stairs so easily," remarked Andy, when he and the other Rovers were alone.

"Keep quiet," warned Jack, who had remained at the partly-opened door. "I want to hear what takes place."

"This is outrageous, simply outrageous!" they heard in Snopper Duke's high-pitched voice. "How dared you roll such a snowball down these stairs? And how came you to get that snowball up there anyway?"

"Excuse me, Professor, but I don't know what you're talking about," answered another voice; and at this Jack gave a slight start, for he recognized the words as coming from Brassy Bangs.

"What is that? You do not know anything about the big snowball that just came hurtling down these stairs?" stormed Professor Duke.

"No, sir. I just reached the top of the stairs," answered Brassy Bangs. "I came out of my room not ten seconds ago."

“What do you know about this, Stowell?” went on the professor, who had now come slowly to the top of the stairs, followed by Professor Grawson, who had come out of Colonel Colby’s private office where he had been looking over some reports when the big snowball had landed with a thump against the desk at which he had been seated.

“Me? What do you mean?” stammered the youth who was known to the cadets as Codfish and who had always been more or less of a sneak.

“Somebody just rolled a big snowball down the stairs. It struck me and nearly knocked me flat,” returned the irate teacher.

“Yes, and it rolled all the way into the private office,” added Professor Grawson.

“I don’t know anything about any snowballs,” said Codfish. “I noticed the floor was all wet and I wondered what it meant.”

“I saw some fellows rushing around the corner,” came from Brassy Bangs.

“Who were they?” demanded Snopper Duke.

“I don’t know.”

“Which way did they go?”

“That way,” and Brassy pointed out the direction.

By this time the two professors had reached the top of the stairs and Grawson was looking at the water marks on the polished floor.

“Here is where they brought that big snowball in,” he remarked, pointing to the track that led to one of the windows. “They must have brought it up on the fire-escape.”

“Here are several other tracks. I think we had better follow them,” returned Snopper Duke quickly.

The track leading to the bathroom was most in evidence, and the two professors quickly discovered the big snowball resting in the bathtub.

“Evidently they put this here to have some more fun with,” announced Professor Grawson grimly. “Well, it won’t do much harm here. I’ll turn on a little hot water and it will soon melt and run off,” and he turned on the faucet as he spoke.

From the bathroom the two professors, followed by Codfish and Brassy, followed the water trail into a room occupied by several students who were particularly uppish and whom the Rovers did not like, and here some more of the snowballs were found.

“Here is another trail,” announced Professor Duke, and in a moment more had thrown open the door leading to Stowell’s bedroom.

“Here! what does this mean?” stammered Codfish, as, after the light had been turned on, he and the others saw the two big snowballs resting on either side of the bed.

“Stowell, you must have had something to do with this,” cried Snopper Duke savagely.

“No, sir. Not at all, sir,” answered the sneak in a trembling voice. “I don’t know a thing about it.”

“Where did you come from just now?”

“I—I came up the back stairs. I was just coming through the corridor when I heard the noise and came to see what it meant.”

“The back stairs, eh?” put in Professor Grawson.

“What were you doing on the back stairs this time in the evening?”

“I—I was down in the kitchen.” And now Codfish grew pale.

“And what called you to the kitchen?”

“I—I was hungry, and so I asked one of the servants for something to eat.” And now Codfish was fairly whining.

“Humph! didn’t you have any supper?”

“Yes, sir. But I wasn’t feeling extra well just then and I didn’t eat very much, and that made me hungry afterwards. And, oh, say! I guess I can tell you something about those snowballs,” and Codfish’s face lit up suddenly.

“What do you know?”

“When I was passing through the little entryway that leads into the kitchen I happened to glance out of the window and I saw four or five fellows down at the foot of the fire-escape.”

“What were they doing?”

“When I looked at them they were just talking among themselves. I only looked for a moment because I was in a hurry to get to the kitchen and get back again.”

“Did you recognize any of the cadets?”

At this direct question, Codfish hesitated and showed that he felt far from comfortable.

“I don’t like to tell on anybody,” he whined. “If I do that they’ll be sure to lick me later on—I know they will!”

“You tell me who they were and I’ll see to it that

they do not harm you," put in Professor Duke quickly.

"I only saw two of the fellows real plainly," answered Stowell. "They were standing in the light from one of the windows."

"And who were they? Tell me! I want no nonsense now," and Snopper Duke caught the sneak firmly by the shoulder.

"Ouch! Please don't hurt me!" cried Codfish, in added alarm.

"Then answer me!"

"The two fellows I recognized were Captain Jack Rover and his cousin, Lieutenant Fred Rover."

"You didn't know the others?" put in Professor Grawson.

"No, sir. I didn't see them well enough. They were all in the shadows."

"I'll investigate this," cried Professor Duke. "Stowell, you come with me."

"Oh, please don't make me come!" cried the sneak. "They'll almost kill me if they find I gave them away!"

"They sha'n't touch you."

"Oh, I know what they'll do," moaned Codfish. He had not forgotten how the Rover boys had sided with him on more than one perilous occasion, and it scared him half to death to think what they might do when they discovered how meanly he was acting.

But there was no help for it, and Codfish was marched along between the two professors, with Brassy and a number of other cadets, who had been

attracted by the noise and the talk, following.

Meanwhile the four Rover boys had listened to as much of the conversation as they could catch.

“They went into Codfish’s room—they are following the trail of the water on the floor,” announced Jack.

“Some of the other fellows are coming out and coming upstairs,” announced Fred. “Let us go out too and see what happens.”

“Maybe they’ll accuse Codfish of this,” remarked Randy, with a grin.

The four Rovers had just come out in the corridor and been joined by Gif, Phil, and Spouter when they found themselves suddenly confronted by Professor Duke, with Professor Grawson and poor Codfish directly behind him.

“So this is your work, is it?” demanded Snopper Duke, glaring angrily at Jack and Fred in turn.

“To what do you refer, Professor?” asked Jack, as calmly as he could.

“You know well enough, Captain Rover. It is useless for you to deny it,” stormed the angry teacher. “You and your cousins here are responsible for bringing those big snowballs into the school.”

“Who says so?” questioned Fred. At the same time he gave Codfish a look that made the sneak want to hide himself.

“Never mind who says so. We know it to be a fact,” stormed Snopper Duke. “Will you kindly let me know what you mean by such outrageous conduct?”

“Is it so very outrageous, Professor, to bring a few snowballs into the school?” questioned Randy innocently.

"We've often brought snow into the school," put in Andy. "We used to use it for making a sort of home-made ice-cream—with milk and sugar and a little flavoring, you know."

"Colonel Colby or Captain Dale never ordered us to leave the snow outdoors," added Fred, and at this there was a snicker from among a number of the cadets who were gathered.

"I will not listen to such nonsense," stormed Snopper Duke. "You four brought those snowballs into this school, and some of you kicked that snowball down the stairs on top of me," he added, glaring at them.

"I want to say right now, Professor Duke, that that big snowball went downstairs by accident," answered Andy, feeling that there was no help for it and that he must make a clean breast of the matter. "We were rolling it down the corridor when all at once I slipped in a puddle of water and both my feet struck the snowball and sent it on its way down the stairs. But we didn't mean to send it down; I can give you my word on that."

"I don't believe it," stormed Snopper Duke.

"I'm telling you the truth, sir."

"Perhaps Rover didn't mean to send the snowball downstairs," put in Professor Grawson mildly. As a general thing he sided with the cadets and they had little difficulty in getting along with him.

"Mr. Grawson, I was the one to suffer through this outrageous trick," fumed Snopper Duke. "And you will kindly permit me to handle the affair. These four cadets are guilty and must be punished."

"I agree it is more your affair than mine, Mr. Duke," returned the other teacher. "But don't you think it

would be wise to let the matter rest until Colonel Colby comes back from the city?"

"Not at all! Not at all! These young rascals must be taken in hand, and at once. Otherwise our authority in this institution will go to pieces."

At this moment there was a movement among the students who had collected in the corridor, and Gif and Spouter stepped forward.

"Excuse me, Professor Duke," said Gif. "But I had as much to do with bringing those snowballs upstairs as anybody."

"And so did I," added Spouter.

"And I was in on the deal, too," came from Phil Franklin, as he too stepped forward.

"What? All of you?" demanded Snopper Duke, eyeing them coldly.

"I can assure you we meant no great harm," continued Spouter. "We were only going to have a little fun among ourselves and with our fellow-cadets —that is, mostly," he added somewhat lamely, as he remembered what had been said about placing some of the snowballs in the teacher's room.

"Were any others implicated in this despicable piece of business?" demanded Professor Duke, looking around at the assembled cadets. "Answer me at once!"

There was no reply to this, the cadets simply looking at each other questioningly.

"We're all here, sir," said Jack. "There were no others." And he and his cousins gave their chums a warm look to show they appreciated their coming forward to take a share of the blame.

"Seven of you, eh?" was the teacher's sour comment. "A fine piece of business, truly." He thought for a moment. "Come with me, all of you, and we'll see what damage has been done down in the office."

The assembled cadets made a passageway, and through this filed the Rovers and their chums with Professor Duke following close on their heels. Professor Grawson remained behind to talk to Stowell.

"They'll kill me for this—I know they will!" whined Codfish. And now he was on the verge of tears.

"I don't think the Rovers will touch you, Stowell—I don't think they're that class of boys," answered Professor Grawson. "Come. I'll go to your room with you and help you throw those snowballs out of the window." He had not forgotten that he had been a schoolboy himself once, and he had small sympathy for such a sneak as Henry Stowell.

Down in Colonel Colby's private office it was found that the big snowball had done little damage outside of wetting a couple of the rugs. What was left of the snowball had been gathered up by Pud Hicks, the janitor's assistant, and now he was mopping up the floor.

"I'll take the rugs and dry 'em in the laundry," said Hicks. "I think they'll be all right by morning."

"You cadets remain here until I return," said Professor Duke, when Hicks was ready to depart. And then he went outside and in the hallway held a whispered conversation with the janitor's assistant.

"I guess we're in for it," said Jack to his cousins and his chums.

"What do you suppose they'll do with us?"

questioned Phil.

“I’m sure I don’t know.”

In a few minutes Snopper Duke returned, and there was a grin of satisfaction in his eyes as he faced the cadets.

“You will all follow me,” he declared, “and I’ll show you what can be done in this school to cadets who act as outrageously as you have acted. Come! March!” and he led the way out of the private office.

CHAPTER IV

PRISONERS

In one of the wings of the school building there was located a room about twelve feet square with one window which was barred, and this, as my old readers know, was known officially as the school guardroom or prison. Jack and Fred had once been prisoners in this guardroom on a charge that was afterwards proved to be false.

“Gee! I wonder if he’s going to take us to the guardroom?” whispered the youngest of the Rovers.

“I don’t see how he can crowd seven of us into that small room,” answered Randy. “Why, it’s only got one cot in it!”

Professor Duke led the way through the corridor and up the broad stairs. In the meanwhile Professor Grawson had ordered the other cadets to their rooms, so there was no one at hand to witness what was taking place.

Arriving on the second floor, Snopper Duke led the way into another corridor and then up a somewhat narrow stairway leading to the third floor.

“Hello! I wonder where he’s going to take us now?” questioned Fred in wonder.

“This is certainly a new wrinkle,” declared Gif.

The third floor was but dimly lit until the professor turned on more light. Then he turned into a little side corridor at the end of which was located a long, narrow room which, during the previous year, had been used by some of the hired help but which was now unoccupied.

“You will remain in this room until I have a chance to communicate with Colonel Colby,” said Professor Duke, as he marched the cadets in. “And remember! I want no cutting up here. I want you to remain perfectly quiet.”

“How long shall we have to stay here?” questioned Jack.

“That will depend on what Colonel Colby has to say about it,” was the sharp answer.

“Do you expect us to stay here all night?” demanded Randy.

“You will have to stay here unless Colonel Colby gets back from the city, and I think that hardly likely to-night,” answered the teacher. “Now remember! No noise and no horseplay or I’ll do something that you

won't forget in a hurry," and with this admonition he walked out of the room, closing and locking the door after him.

"Listen!" cried Fred, as all of the others started to talk at once. And going to the door, he listened intently, and so did the others, and they heard Snopper Duke pass through the little corridor and down the stairs.

"He's gone, all right enough," remarked Phil Franklin.

"Well, what do you know about this, anyhow!" cried Gif.

"I think he's treating us like a lot of children," declared Andy angrily.

"I don't believe he has any right to keep us out of our regular rooms," came from his brother.

"Well, anyway, he took the right," answered Jack grimly. "And what is more, he seems to have the best of us."

"He won't have if we break down that door."

"I don't think you'll have an easy job of it breaking down that door," put in Spouter. "I happened to notice that there was not only a regular lock on it, but also a top bolt. You'd have to smash the whole door to get out. But it certainly is a despicable piece of business," Spouter continued. "And at the first opportunity we have we'll have to lay the whole case before Colonel Colby. I'm sure when he has verified our report, and gone into the various merits of the case, he will make a finding that will be in accordance with——"

"Gee! Spouter can spout even if he is a prisoner,"

burst out Randy. “Better get up on a chair, Spouter, and make a regular speech about it,” he continued, grinning.

“This is a new experience for me,” remarked Phil, with a smile. “I never thought I was going to be put in jail.”

“You can hardly call it being put in jail, Phil,” answered Jack. “In a military academy it is quite common for a cadet, when he has broken the rules and regulations, to be placed in the guardhouse, just the same as he is placed in the guardhouse in the regular army.”

“I thought maybe they’d make us do what they call police duty,” said the boy from Texas. “One fellow told me that while he was in the training camp he overstepped the regulations and they made him peel potatoes until he was sick and tired of seeing them.”

“Well, they do that too,” put in Fred. “You might have to do something like that if we were at the annual encampment. But while the school session is on all they do is to lock you up.”

The boys found that the long narrow room contained two double beds and two cots, as well as a couple of bureaus, several stools, and a table. At one end was a small bathroom and a clothing closet. There were three small windows in a row, all looking out on the snow-covered fields behind the school.

“Well, we’ve got a place to sleep, anyhow,” announced Jack. “Although three of us will have to sleep in one of the beds.”

“Not much in the way of covering,” remarked Gif, who had been making an investigation. “Just one thin blanket on each bed. And that radiator is not

letting out heat enough to warm a cat," he added, as he placed his hand on the one small radiator of which the long bedroom boasted.

"Never mind, we can keep on our uniforms if we want to," declared Randy. "And who knows but what Colonel Colby may come back at any minute, and then I'm almost certain that he'll let us go back to our own rooms."

"He will unless old Duke cooks up some dreadful story against us," came from his brother. "You can bet he'll make out as black a case against us as he can."

"Yes. But I think Professor Grawson will have something to say too," said Jack. "And he has always been a very fair-minded man."

"I don't see why Colonel Colby took on such a man as Snopper Duke," declared Spouter. "He's every bit as bad as Asa Lemm was."

"But you've got to hand it to him for being a very well educated man," said Jack. "And he certainly knows how to teach when he's in the humor for it."

"I don't think a man who is as harsh-minded as he is ought to be a teacher," was Gif's comment. "He can't get a cadet to do his best if he's forever nagging at him. Now, if I was a teacher, I'd do my best to gain my pupils' confidence."

There was a pause, and presently Andy began to chuckle.

"Say, he certainly did look funny when that big snowball hit him in the stomach and nearly knocked him over," he cried.

"How could you see that when you were on your

back?" questioned Fred.

"Oh, I managed to flop over and look down the stairs just in time. He was some sight, believe me. It's a wonder he didn't go over backward to the floor below. I don't know what saved him. He must have grabbed the banisters just in time."

"You can't really blame him for being mad. I think maybe I'd be mad myself," said Gif. "However, let's drop that. What are we going to do? Go to bed?"

"I don't see that there is anything else to do," answered Jack.

"I've got to do something to keep warm," declared Andy, and suddenly turned a somersault over one of the beds. Then he began to box with his brother, and the two spun around from one end of the room to the other.

"Here! you stop that," warned Fred. "You know what Duke said. You keep on and he'll put us down in the cellar or some other worse place."

After this the seven cadets became more quiet, and, sitting as close as possible to the little radiator which gave forth only a mite of warmth, they discussed the situation for half an hour longer.

"That's another one against Codfish," declared Randy. "I'm sure he's guilty."

"Well, he had some reason for saying what he did," said Jack. "He had to clear his own skirts after they found those two big snowballs in his room."

"Just the same, Jack, you know well enough hardly any other fellow in the school would have squealed," cried Randy. "Codfish always was a sneak, and I guess he always will be, no matter what some of the

other fellows do for him."

"Say, look here! I thought you fellows told me that Captain Dale was in charge of this school whenever Colonel Colby was absent," burst out Phil suddenly.

"That's true," answered Jack. "He was in charge all the time the colonel was in the regular army."

"Then why didn't Professor Duke put this up to the captain?"

"Because Captain Dale is away on a little vacation," announced Gif. "He won't be back until some time next week."

"And where did Colonel Colby go?"

"They said he had gone to the city," answered Fred. "But I don't know what they mean by that. They may mean Boston, or New York, or some smaller place."

"The radiator is growing stone cold," declared Gif, who had his hands on it.

"What'll you bet old Duke didn't turn the heat off?" broke in Andy quickly. "It would be just like him to do it."

"I guess about the only thing we can do is to go to bed," announced Jack.

"Well, you had better do it with your uniform on, then," said Spouter. "Because I'm not going to bed with the windows closed, and it's going to be beautifully cold by and by."

All of the cadets had been accustomed to sleeping with the windows of their bedrooms open. But they had also been accustomed to plenty of bed clothing, and knew they would probably suffer with the scant quantity of quilts now provided.

However, they had to make the best of it, and in the end did little else but take off their shoes and coats and then wrap themselves in the blankets as best they could. Of course, there was some horseplay in which even Phil Franklin indulged. But on the whole the cadets kept rather quiet, for they did not want to make matters worse than they were.

“The last time Randy and I were home our dad laid down the law good and plenty,” announced Andy. “So we’ve got to do something towards toeing the mark.”

“I’m afraid Brassy Bangs and a lot of the other fellows will have the laugh on us for this,” remarked Fred, as he turned in.

“Oh, well, you can’t have fun without paying the piper once in a while,” was Jack’s comment.

It grew colder during the night, and on rising to cut off some of the air that was blowing over him, Fred noticed that it had begun to snow. The fine hard particles were drifting into the room, and he called the attention of some of the others to this.

“I don’t care. Let it snow in if it wants to,” grumbled Randy sleepily.

But some of the others demurred to this, and presently one of the windows was closed entirely and the others left open only a few inches.

“Gee, talk about Greenland’s icy mountains!” exclaimed Gif, on arising a little after seven o’clock. “Some coldness, if you ask me!”

“You said it!” declared Jack, as he got up and walked across the floor to where the radiator was located. “Cold as ice!” he announced.

“Did you leave it turned on?” questioned Randy quickly.

“I certainly did.”

“Then old Duke must intend to freeze us out!” exclaimed Fred. “What do you know about that!”

“I know it’s a mean piece of business,” answered Andy. “Gee! why, we might all catch our death of cold.”

Having washed themselves, the cadets lost no time in donning the clothing they had taken off on retiring. Then they continued to walk around the narrow room in order to keep their blood in circulation. It was now about eight o’clock, and they wondered if they would get any breakfast.

“A hot cup of cocoa or coffee wouldn’t go bad,” remarked Spouter. “Not to say anything about ham and eggs, hot muffins, or a few other things on the side.”

“Yum, yum! don’t mention them,” groaned Andy. “I feel hollow clean down to my shoes. I didn’t have any too much supper, and I was depending on having a few crackers I had in my closet.”

“And I left an apple on my bureau,” declared Phil.

“And I had two doughnuts stored away to take to bed with me,” came from Fred.

The boys heard the cadets below assembling for roll call and the short morning parade, and then heard them march into the mess room of the Hall for breakfast.

“My! but I wish I was downstairs right now,” declared Randy. “I wouldn’t do a thing to that breakfast table!”

"Maybe they'll bring our breakfast to us," suggested Jack.

"If they do you can bet there won't be any too much of it—if old Duke has anything to do with it," returned Gif grimly.

CHAPTER V

BY THE FISHING-POLE ROUTE

Another half hour went by, and the boys confined in the room on the third floor of the school building became more and more impatient.

"Perhaps they won't give us any breakfast at all," said Phil Franklin presently.

"If they don't there'll be war," declared Andy. "I won't stand for being starved."

"None of us will stand for that," put in Gif grimly. "But I don't believe Duke will dare do it. You must remember he will have all the other teachers to contend with. They have the same rights here as he has."

"Yes, but Professor Grawson turned this affair over to Duke," was Fred's comment.

"That was because old Duke was the only one to really suffer through what we did," answered Jack.

Another fifteen minutes passed, and then those in the room heard footsteps outside. The door was unlocked and Professor Duke appeared, followed by Pud Hicks and Bob Nixon and two of the mess-room waiters.

“Well, did you behave yourselves during the night?” demanded the teacher, as he glanced sharply from one to another of the cadets, all of whom eyed him curiously.

“We did, sir,” answered Phil, who was nearest to the door.

Leaving those who had accompanied him at the door so that none of the cadets present might escape, Snopper Duke strode into the room and looked around suspiciously, even going so far as to glance into the bathroom and the clothing closet. As was the custom during the school term, the cadets had put the beds and the cots in order, and also arranged the chairs and other furniture.

“Professor Duke, I’d like to ask something. Do you know we have no heat in here?” questioned Jack.

“Growing boys like you don’t need too much heat—it makes them lazy,” responded the teacher tartly. “You will be warm enough after you have had your breakfast.”

“Can we go downstairs now and get it?” asked Andy quickly.

“No. You are to have it up here. I have had it brought up for you,” was the answer. And then Professor Duke motioned for the two waiters to come in.

They carried two trays covered with napkins, and these they deposited on the table.

“Has Colonel Colby come back yet?” questioned Spouter.

“You will know quickly enough when he comes,” was the teacher’s reply. And then he motioned the waiters out of the room.

“Professor, do you think——” began Bob Nixon. But the teacher caught the Hall chauffeur by the arm and pushed him out into the hallway.

“Never mind now, Nixon,” he broke in hastily. “We’ll talk matters over downstairs.” And thereupon he closed and locked the door once again, and the cadets heard him and all of the others go below.

“What do you suppose he brought Hicks and Nixon up here for?” questioned Randy, when they were left alone.

“I don’t know, unless he thought we might try to break out, and if so he would have them along to stop us,” answered Jack.

“Maybe he thought the cold and waiting for breakfast would make us desperate,” suggested Gif. “However, now they’ve gone, let’s see what they have brought us to eat.”

Eagerly the seven cadets whipped away the napkins that covered the two trays. They gave one look, and then a cry of disappointment arose.

“What do you know about this!”

“Isn’t this the limit!”

“Black coffee and bread without butter!”

“And mush with nothing but a little molasses on it!”

“And no sugar in the coffee, either!”

“Talk about your prison fare!” groaned Andy. “I

think this takes the cake!"

"You mention cake and I'll murder you!" burst out Fred. "Why don't you speak of ham and eggs, lamb chops, fried potatoes, coffee cake with raisins in it, and things like that while you're at it?"

"Wow! Fred for the water faucet!" exclaimed Jack, and got his cousin by the arm and made as if to run him into the bathroom.

"Hold up! I'll be good!" pleaded the youngest Rover. "But, say! doesn't looking at these two trays make you weary in the bones?"

"Well, anyway, the coffee is hot," declared Spouter, as he tasted it. "And we might as well drink it before it gets cold. It will help to warm us up."

Thereupon the seven cadets fell to eating, and soon every particle of the scanty breakfast furnished to them had disappeared. They grumbled, however, as they ate, and continued to grumble after the repast was finished.

"I'm quite sure Colonel Colby wouldn't treat us like this," declared Gif.

"He certainly did much better by Fred and me when we were placed in the guardroom," declared Jack. "We got as good a meal as we ever had served to us in the mess hall."

"It's nothing short of a crime not to turn the heat on," said Fred, who was examining the radiator again. "Just as cold as ever."

"Listen!" cried Randy suddenly.

All did so, and heard a faint knocking on the door.

"Who is that?" questioned Jack, moving to the portal.

“Is that you, Jack?” came in Fatty Hendry’s voice. The stout youth was whispering through the keyhole.

“Yes, Fatty. What brought you up here?”

“I got wind that you fellows were being fed scanty rations,” answered Fatty. “How about it?”

“It’s true, all right enough.”



"OUR FRIENDS ARE ON THE JOB!" CRIED FRED, DELIGHTEDLY.
Rover Boys at Big Horn Ranch (*Page* 51)

"Well, Dan Soppinger, Walt Baxter and myself got our heads together and we managed to make up a

bundle of food for you. Just watch the window on your right," continued the stout youth, and then tiptoed away.

Wondering what their friends intended to do, the seven cadets crowded to the window in question and opened it wide. It was still snowing, and through the thickly-flying flakes they presently saw the end of a fishing pole on which was tied a bundle done up in a pillow case.

"Hurrah! Our friends are on the job," cried Fred delightedly, as the bundle was slipped from the end of the fishing pole and hauled into the room. Then he looked out of the window and saw at a little distance the face of Dan Soppinger at another window.

"Got it all right, did you?" demanded Dan, as he hauled in the fishing pole.

"We sure did, Dan; and much obliged to you."

"Has Colonel Colby come back yet?" questioned Jack, looking over his cousin's shoulder.

"No. And there is no telling when he'll come back," answered Dan. "He sent word that his business might keep him away for several days." Then Dan spoke to some one behind him, and continued in a low voice, "I've got to go now, or they'll catch us. Good-bye."

The imprisoned cadets closed the window again and then placed the bundle on the table and opened it. They found it contained a rather jumbled collection of buttered bread, cheese, the knuckle of a boiled ham, a small glass full of jelly, a square of pound cake, three bananas, a couple of oranges, several apples, a small bag of lump sugar, and a can of condensed milk.

“Some collection, all right enough,” declared Spouter, as they surveyed it. “I guess they grabbed up anything they could lay their hands on.”

“They must have heard we had black coffee without sugar,” put in Fred. “Too bad we were in such a hurry. We might have feasted in great shape off of this collection.”

“Never mind. The sugar and condensed milk may come in handy later,” answered Jack.

The boys divided some of the fruit, and then made themselves a few sandwiches, and with this topped off the scanty breakfast they had previously consumed. They placed the rest of the things on the top shelf of the closet and folded up the pillow case carefully.

“We’ll have to send that back the first chance we get,” declared Fred. “Otherwise some cadet is going to catch it when his room is inspected.”

With nothing to do, the cadets found the time drag heavily. They looked around the room for some reading matter, but found nothing outside of some newspapers which had been placed on the shelves of the closet. These were old sheets, and contained nothing which they cared to peruse.

“Hurrah! we’re going to have some heat, anyhow,” cried Randy, about eleven o’clock. “Hear the radiator cracking?”

He was right, and soon the radiator became moderately warm. This did not, of course, warm the room very thoroughly, but it took the chill off and made it more comfortable than it had been.

“I’ll bet a cooky that some of the others made old Duke turn the heat on,” declared Gif.

“Either that or else some of our chums turned it on when he wasn’t watching,” answered Jack. Some time later they found out that Bob Nixon had turned on the heat unbeknown to Snopper Duke. It was also learned that Professor Grawson and Professor Brice knew nothing about the heat having been turned off.

About half-past twelve Snopper Duke appeared again, this time with one of the under teachers and two of the waiters. The under teacher had his arms full of books.

“I have had some of your text books brought up here,” explained Professor Duke. “There is no sense in your wasting your time here doing nothing. I want you to study the same as if you were attending your classes. I have also had your dinner brought up.”

“Do you expect us to study in a cold room?” questioned Jack. He had thrown one of the small bed covers over the radiator and added a book or two so that the teacher might not notice that it was warm.

“I’ll not discuss that point with you, Rover,” was Snopper Duke’s sharp reply. “You can eat your dinner, and then go at your studies.” And thereupon he directed the two waiters to deposit the fresh trays on the table and take the old ones away. Then the seven cadets were locked up as before.

In comparison, the dinner was just as scanty as the breakfast had been. For each pupil there was a small boiled potato, almost cold, a few lima beans, a small slice of roast beef, and one slice of unbuttered bread. There were also several paper drinking cups, to indicate that the cadets might drink all the water they cared to draw from the faucet in the bathroom.

“Regular miser’s lunch,” was Andy’s comment, as he surveyed it.

“Exactly!” answered Fred. And then he added dryly: “What are we going to use that sugar and condensed milk on?”

“Oh, the condensed milk will go fine on the bread,” put in Spouter. “I used to like condensed milk sandwiches.”

“And you can eat the lump sugar for dessert if you want to,” put in Jack.

All began to eat, and in the midst of the meal they heard another knock on the door. This time Ned Lowe was there, one of their chums who was a great singer and banjo player.

“Be on the watch for the beautiful fishing pole,” sang Ned in a low voice. “Hurry up. We can’t stay up here very long.”

All leaped for the window, and a few minutes later the fishing rod came once more into view, this time with another bundle attached to it. They held the end of the pole while they detached the bundle and fastened upon it the empty pillow case. The new bundle was in a large paper flour bag.

“Here is where we are going to have a regular feast!” cried Jack with satisfaction. “Just look! Almost half a boiled tongue, a quart jar of hot coffee, some boiled sweet potatoes, and half an apple pie. I declare I don’t see how they managed to get hold of it.”

“They’re certainly looking out for us,” answered Spouter.

With this addition to the food already on hand, the boys started in to have a real good dinner. They were enjoying it thoroughly and cracking all kinds of jokes when they suddenly heard a commotion in the corridor outside.

“I’ve caught you, have I?” they heard Snopper Duke exclaim. “What business have you up here, anyway?”

“I wasn’t doing any harm, Professor,” came in the voice of Dan Soppinger.

“What is that you have behind your back? Give it to me this instant,” went on the teacher.

“Gee! that’s Dan Soppinger, and he’s got himself into trouble!” exclaimed Jack, in alarm.

“I really didn’t mean to do any harm,” the imprisoned cadets heard Dan answer.

“What is that you are trying to hide? Give it to me!” There was a brief silence, and then those in the room heard the teacher continue: “A pumpkin pie and almost a pound of cheese! Where did you get those things, Soppinger? And what were you going to do with them? Come, answer me!”

“If you want to know, I was going to try to get them to those fellows you locked up,” answered Dan Soppinger, in desperation. “I heard you were just about starving them to death.”

“What’s that? Starving them to death? Stuff and nonsense! They are getting all that they need, and it’s not for you to interfere in my business,” went on Snopper Duke, his high-pitched voice rising still higher in anger. “You should be down in your classroom. Give me those things and go downstairs at once. I’ll attend to your case later.”

“Gee! poor Dan is certainly in hot water,” whispered Jack.

“Old Duke must have been spying on him,” said Randy.

“Maybe he’ll come in here and see how matters are

going!" cried Spouter excitedly. "It might not be a bad thing to get all that extra food out of sight."

He had scarcely spoken when they heard Professor Duke at the door. An instant later the portal was thrown open and the teacher stepped in. His eyes swept the trays and the plates of food the cadets were holding.

"Ha! So this is what is going on, eh?" he stormed. "Having food brought in on the sly, eh? Well, I'll see that that is stopped! You'll go without your supper for this!" And then, after a few more words, he stormed out of the room, banging the door behind him and locking it.

CHAPTER VI

A TOUCH OF MYSTERY

"Now I reckon we are worse off than we were before," remarked Jack, as the assembled cadets looked at each other in consternation.

"If he cuts off our supper the best thing we can do is to save this grub," declared Randy. "We'll have to go on short rations."

"And when we feel real hungry we can turn to our school books for consolation," added his twin brother. "Gee! but doesn't this take the cake?" And

picking up his algebra he threw it at Phil. The boy from Texas dodged, and the algebra hit the wall behind him.

“Don’t start a rough-house, Andy,” remonstrated Jack quickly. “We’re in deep enough as it is. Please don’t forget that Fred and I are worse off than any of you.”

“How do you make that out?” demanded Gif.

“Because we are officers, and are supposed to be models for the rest of the cadets.”

“Huh! I forgot that,” said Gif. “That’s too bad.”

It must be admitted that the cadets were far less cheerful while finishing their meal than they had been a few minutes before. They ate somewhat sparingly, and placed what was left of the food in an out-of-the-way corner under one of the cots.

“No use of taking chances,” said Jack. “Duke may come in here and search the closet for rations when he gets the dirty dishes.”

“Well, I suppose we might as well spend our time studying,” came from Spouter presently. “We’ve got to learn our lessons, no matter if we are prisoners. Otherwise later on we’ll be marked down for that, too.”

“Too bad that poor Dan had to be caught with that pumpkin pie and cheese,” groaned Randy. He was particularly fond of the pies turned out by the Hall cooks.

Making themselves as comfortable as they could around the radiator, the seven cadets began to study. Thus an hour passed, and then came more footsteps in the hall.

“Another visitor,” said Jack, looking up.

When the door was thrown open they expected to see Snopper Duke or one of the other professors, and they were, therefore, much surprised when Colonel Colby stepped into the room. The master of the Hall was alone.

“Attention!” called Jack sharply—for this had been arranged between the cadets earlier in the day—and thereupon all of the cadets leaped to their feet and saluted.

This action came somewhat as a surprise to the master of the school, and just the faintest flicker of a smile passed over his features. Then he closed the door behind him and came forward.

“I am very sorry to learn that all of you have been breaking the rules of this institution,” said Colonel Colby, in an even tone of voice. “Captain Rover, I would like to have your version of the affair if you care to make a report.”

“I don’t know that I can make much of a report, Colonel,” answered the young captain, his face flushing. “We brought the snowballs into the school, and that is all there is to it.”

“Well, what about sending that big snowball down the stairs on top of Professor Duke?”

“That was an accident, sir, and I was responsible for it,” broke in Andy.

“An accident? Professor Duke is quite certain it was done by design.”

“He is mistaken, sir,” continued Andy, and then in a few words related exactly how the accident had occurred.

“Well, what about the snowballs that were placed in the rooms of Stowell, Besser, Lunn and in the bathroom?”

“We only meant it for a little fun, Colonel,” pleaded Fred. “Of course, I realize now that maybe we went a little too far.”

“You certainly did go too far, Lieutenant Rover. And I am especially surprised to find you and Captain Rover mixed up in anything of this sort. I expect the officers of the cadets to set a good example.”

“I was thinking you might say that, Colonel Colby,” put in Jack quickly. “And I should have thought of it before I went into the affair. But we were having such fun outside snowballing, and like that, that we got deeper into it before we gave it a second thought.”

“And we really didn’t know that we couldn’t bring any snow into the school,” put in Phil rather lamely.

“Such an explanation won’t go here, Franklin. I expect my students to have more common sense than that. Of course, it may have been nothing but a boyish prank, and if you can give me your word that the snowball which went down the stairs and hit Professor Duke was not aimed at him deliberately, I shall feel inclined to let the matter pass.”

“Oh, Colonel Colby, will you really do that?” questioned Fred eagerly.

“Please remember we’ve been punished already,” put in Spouter. “Locked up like a lot of criminals, and the radiator turned off until we almost froze to death!”

“The radiator turned off?” questioned the owner of the school. “It is hot enough now,” he added, as he

placed his hand upon it.

“But it wasn’t before,” answered Gif, and gave the particulars. As he did this Colonel Colby’s face became a study.

“I will look into that,” he said, and then walked over to one of the cots and also to one of the beds and inspected the thin coverings. “I trust none of you caught cold?”

“Well, I did catch a little cold,” answered Spouter, and began to cough, for what he said was true.

After this Colonel Colby talked to the cadets for fully ten minutes, trying to show them that what they had done was not what he expected of them. He was kind almost to the point of being fatherly, and made several remarks which caused the boys to do considerable thinking.

“I am afraid some of you lads do not like Professor Duke,” said he. “I am afraid you consider him rather quick-tempered and irritable.”

“Well, he certainly isn’t as nice as most of the other teachers,” declared Randy flatly.

“He always seems to be waiting for a chance to get in on a fellow,” broke out Fred. “In some ways he’s even worse than Asa Lemm was.”

“But he’s a splendid teacher, I will say that for him,” declared Jack. “Only, the way he sometimes jumps on a fellow is terrible.”

“I shouldn’t like to have you boys compare Professor Duke with that scalawag, Asa Lemm,” declared Colonel Colby. “Lemm had a good education—if he hadn’t had I should not have engaged him to teach here—but he was not the honest and upright man

Snopper Duke is. I will admit that at times he is quick-tempered, but, believe me, boys, he has good reasons for it—or, at least, there is quite some excuse for his acting that way at times. I do not feel like discussing his personal affairs with you, but you will be doing a real act of kindness if at times you don't notice his actions when he seems rather sharp. I am quite sure he doesn't always mean it."

"Well, of course, if there's some reason——" began Jack.

"There is quite a reason, Captain Rover. But, as I said before, I do not care to discuss Professor Duke's personal affairs further. Only, if I were one of you boys, I should go very slow in judging him. And now to come back to this present affair: I have had a talk with Professor Duke and I will have another talk this evening, and, all told, I think you have been punished enough. So we will call the matter off and you can return to your classrooms."

"Thank you very much, Colonel Colby," cried Jack, and, starting forward, he offered his hand, and the master of the school shook it warmly. Then all of the other cadets came forward to do likewise.

"I hope you won't punish those other fellows for getting some extra food up to us," said Fred, as he and Andy brought out the hidden things and placed them on one of the trays. "They only tried to do us a good turn."

"You may rest assured, Rover, that I shall treat them only as they deserve," answered Colonel Colby, and led the way downstairs. Here the cadets separated, each to pay a brief visit to his own room before going down to the classrooms on the lower floor.

"I wonder what Colonel Colby meant when he said

Duke had reasons for being irritable?" remarked Randy.

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Jack thoughtfully.

"Maybe he's suffering from some sickness," suggested Fred. "Perhaps he ought to have an operation and hates to have it done."

"Maybe he's worried about money matters," came from Randy.

"It was certainly something worth while or Colonel Colby wouldn't have been so serious about it," said Fred. "Gee! I'm sorry if I misjudged him, if there is really something wrong."

"I don't believe Colonel Colby would caution us if it wasn't so," said Jack. "And after this I'm going to give Duke as much consideration as I possibly can."

The boys had been told to go to their classrooms, but this was hardly necessary, for they had just about presented themselves when the afternoon session of the school came to an end. Then they followed some of their friends down to the gymnasium, where they were at once surrounded and asked to give the particulars of what had happened to them.

"It wasn't a great deal," said Jack. "And first of all I want to know what was done to Dan and the others."

"Oh, Colonel Colby read us a little lecture, that's all," answered Walt Baxter, one of the cadets. "He told us we had no right to take any of the food without asking for it."

"I offered to pay for it," put in Ned Lowe, "and so did Dan. But the colonel said that wasn't the point. That he wanted the discipline of the Hall maintained."

"Did he say anything about Professor Duke?"

questioned Fred.

“Not a word.”

“Well, he told us something,” continued the youngest Rover, and then related what had been said on the subject.

“Say, that squares with something I once heard,” cried Walt Baxter. “I met Professor Duke down at the barn one day where he was waiting to have Nixon drive him down to town. The professor was walking around, wringing his hands and muttering to himself. He looked all out of sorts, and he said something that sounded to me like ‘I don’t see how I can do it! I don’t see how I can really attempt it!’”

“And what do you suppose it was that bothered him, Walt?” questioned Jack curiously.

“I’m sure I don’t know. I watched him walk up and down and wring his hands. And then he took a notebook out of his pocket and began to study some of the figures in it. Then Nixon came along with the auto, and he jumped in and rode off.”

“Well, that sure is a mystery,” declared Randy.

This news concerning Snopper Duke gradually spread throughout the school, and many of the boys watched the teacher curiously. In the meantime Colonel Colby had a conference, not only with Duke, but also with Professor Grawson; and when the classes opened the next day Jack and the others found themselves treated just as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

“Colonel Colby said he would let the matter pass, and I guess he’s going to keep his word,” remarked Fred.

There was only one boy who remained troubled, and that was Codfish. He avoided the Rovers and the others as much as possible, often running away at the sight of them.

“Codfish is just about scared stiff,” remarked Randy. “He knows he got himself in wrong.”

“What a poor fish he is,” answered his twin.

On Saturday afternoon a number of the boys obtained permission to visit the town and attend the moving picture performance if they so desired. Jack had telephoned to his sister, and Martha had answered that probably a number of girls from Clearwater Hall would be in town at the same time.

“And I’ve got something to tell you, too, Jack,” said Martha over the wire. “Something I’m sure you’ll be interested in hearing.”

“Why don’t you tell me now?” he replied.

“Oh, this isn’t something to tell over a public telephone,” his sister answered.

The snowstorm had come to an end, and it was clear and bright overhead when the four Rovers and some of the others tramped to Haven Point. Here, at the railroad station, they met Martha and Mary, and also Ruth Stevenson, May Powell, and several other girls from the academy.

“How are your eyes feeling, Ruth?” questioned Jack anxiously, as he walked side by side with the girl on the way to the moving picture theater. As my old readers know, Ruth had once suffered dreadfully through getting some pepper into her eyes, and it had been feared that she might go blind.

“Oh, my eyes are quite all right again, Jack,”

answered the girl. “Sometimes they feel the least bit scratchy. But I bathe them with a solution the doctor gave me and then they feel quite natural.”

“I’m mighty glad to hear that,” Jack returned warmly. For of all the girls who were friends of his sister he liked Ruth the best.

As luck would have it, there was a very good show on that afternoon, and as a consequence a crowd had assembled to obtain tickets of admission. Randy went ahead to get all the tickets needed, and while he did this Martha plucked her brother by the coat sleeve and drew him a little to one side.

“What’s this you’ve got to tell me, Martha?” questioned the young captain in a whisper.

“It’s about a fellow at your school—a chap named Lester Bangs,” replied the girl.

“Oh, you mean the fellow we call Brassy Bangs! What about him?”

“He and one or two of his particular chums have been up to Clearwater Hall three times. They took some of the girls out in a sleigh they hired, and that Bangs did his level best to get Ruth to go along. And now he has invited her to attend some kind of a party next week,” was Martha’s reply, words which for some reason he could not explain even to himself cut Jack to the heart.

CHAPTER VII

SOMETHING ABOUT A SLEIGHRIDE PARTY

“What kind of a party is it, Martha?”

“I don’t know, except that it’s somewhere out of town and some of the girls and fellows are going to the place in sleighs. I wasn’t asked to go, and I got the information in a roundabout way.”

“Then Ruth hasn’t said anything to you about it?”

“Not a word. But I’m sure she received this Lester Bangs’ invitation.”

“And you think she may accept it?”

“I hope not, Jack. Because I don’t like Bangs. He wears such showy clothing and jewelry.”

“That’s the reason we call him Brassy—he is brassy in looks and brassy in manner. He’s just as much of a hot-air bag as Tommy Flanders,” went on the young captain, referring to an arrogant youth who the summer before had pitched for Longley Academy and been knocked out of the box.

“Isn’t it queer, he put me in mind of Flanders?” whispered Martha. “I hope you don’t have any trouble with him, Jack.” And then, as some of the others came closer, the private conversation had to come to an end.

While in the moving picture theater Jack sat with Ruth beside him. They occasionally spoke about the scenes presented to them and also about school matters in general, but not one word was said by either about the party Martha had mentioned.

“Mr. Falstein certainly gets good pictures,” remarked the girl, when the performance had come to an end and the crowd of young people was moving out of the theater. “They’re just as good as one can see in the big cities.”

“They’re the same thing, only he gets them a little later,” answered Jack.

“I like the comic pictures better than anything,” declared Andy. “I hate those serious ones. They’re generally so awfully mushy.”

“Why, Andy Rover, how you talk!” cried Alice Strobell. “I think that picture they showed today of Life in a Big City was perfectly grand.”

“Especially where the heroine sobbed herself to sleep over the sewing machine in her garret room,” went on Andy, with a snicker. “Wasn’t that just the tear-bringer?”

“I don’t care! It was just as true to life as it could be,” answered Alice sturdily.

“Well, maybe,” was the airy return of the fun-loving Rover. “Come to think of it, I never did run a sewing machine in a garret room with the snow blowing through a busted window. I’d rather sit in the shade of the old apple tree reading a good book and getting on the outside of some ripe pears,” he continued, and at this there was general laughter.

As was their custom, the young folks drifted from the theater to a nearby candy and ice-cream establishment. Here they split up into various groups at some tables in the rear. Of course, the boys insisted on treating the girls, and there was quite a discussion over what each would have. Martha and Mary had paired off with Gif and Spouter, and Fred

and the twins were with some of the other girls, and this left Ruth and Jack by themselves.

Several times the young captain wanted to bring the conversation around to the question of the party that had been mentioned. But every time he checked himself.

“What were you going to say?” questioned Ruth, when he caught himself once. “You act as if you had something on your mind of special importance, Jack.”

“Not at all! Not at all!” he returned hastily. “How are you getting along with your studies, Ruth? Do your eyes interfere much with them?”

“Not a great deal. But, of course, I have to be more or less careful. But I’m doing finely, so the teachers say.”

“We’re going to have an election of officers soon,” continued the young captain. “Some of the fellows are urging me to run for major of the battalion. Ralph Mason is going to drop out, you know.”

“Oh, Jack! why don’t you run?”

“Do you want me to run, Ruth?”

“Why, of course! if there’s any chance of getting it, and I don’t see why there shouldn’t be,” she returned quickly.

Her manner was so intimate that once again he was on the point of mentioning the party. But then he shut his teeth hard and pretended to be interested in something taking place at the other tables.

“Don’t you think you could win the election if you tried?” Ruth continued, after looking at him questioningly for a moment.

"Oh, I guess I'd have as good a chance as any one in command. Of course, there are a number of other officers who would have as good a chance as I'd have. But I'm not altogether sure that I want to be major. If I held that office Colonel Colby would expect me to toe the mark all the time just as an example to the others. Even as it was, he didn't like to have me as a captain and Fred as a lieutenant mixed up in that snowball affair."

"Oh, but, Jack! think of the honor of being major of the battalion," cried the girl. "I'm sure Martha and your folks will be very proud of you."

"Would you be proud, Ruth, if I should win the position?" he asked in a low tone.

"Why, of course—we all would," returned the girl, her face flushing slightly. "I always like to see my friends make something of themselves."

Ruth's tone was cordial enough, and once again Jack was on the point of switching the talk to the party. But now some of the young folks had finished, and the little gathering began to break up and he and Ruth were surrounded by the others.

"We've got to do some shopping," declared Mary, when they were out on the sidewalk. "So we can't remain with you boys any longer." And a few minutes later the crowd separated, the girls hurrying in one direction and the cadets in another.

"You let me know if you hear any more about that party," whispered Jack, on parting from his sister.

"I will," she answered.

On starting back for the Hall Jack paired off with Fred and purposely lagged behind.

“Did you hear anything about a party in which Brassy Bangs was interested?” he asked of his cousin.

“Mary said that Brassy was getting up some sort of party, to come off either Thursday or Friday of this week. The crowd is going somewhere in two big sleighs.”

“She didn’t say where?”

“She didn’t know.”

“Did she say who was going?”

“As far as she knew the crowd of fellows consisted of Brassy and two or three of his chums at the Hall and some young fellows around town.”

“And what about the girls, Fred?”

“They asked Jennie Mason and Ida Brierley to go and a number of the other girls from Clearwater.”

“Did they ask May?”

“Mary wasn’t sure. But she rather thinks that May and Ruth both got an invite, although in some kind of roundabout way. Did Ruth say anything to you about it?”

“Not a word. But Martha did. She, too, thought Ruth had an invitation, but she didn’t mention May.”

“I wonder if May and Ruth will go?” questioned the youngest Rover. He was almost as chummy with Spouter’s cousin as Jack was with Ruth.

“I’m sure I don’t know, Fred. But I do know I’d hate to see either of them going out with such a fellow as Brassy.”

“It will be a shame to have any of those girls associate with him!” burst out Fred indignantly. “He’s not in their class at all—he’s altogether too

loud and flashy."

"He certainly sports a lot of cheap jewelry," was Jack's comment. "And that suit of clothes that he had on when he first came to the Hall was a scream."

"Let's go around to the livery stable and see if we can find out something about the party."

The place Fred had in mind was located on a side street less than a block away, and it did not take the two young officers long to reach it. They found the livery-stable keeper out, but one of his assistants came forward to see what they wanted.

"Hello, Waxy," cried Jack cordially, for he had met the young fellow many times before. "How are you these days?"

"Fine as a spider's web," answered Waxy, with a grin.

"I understand you're going to use your two big sleighs for a party this week for some of our fellows?" went on the young captain.

"Yes, both sleighs are hired for Thursday or Friday night," was the answer. "But you could get 'em for any other night you might want," went on Waxy, with an eye to business.

"Where is the party to be held?" questioned Fred.

"I don't know exactly. They're to go about twelve miles out of town, so I was told."

"Some young fellows from town helping to get it up, I believe?"

"Yes. Tom Drake, Bill Fenny, Joe McGuire, Ted Rosenblatt, and a bunch of others are interested. They'll have one high old time, you believe me," went on the livery-stable keeper's assistant, with a

grin.

“Rather a lively bunch, are they?” questioned Jack.

“About as lively as this town affords.”

“It’s a wonder some of our fellows are going with them,” was Fred’s comment.

“Oh, that’ll be all right. There won’t be anything out of the way,” put in Waxy hastily, afraid that he had said too much. “They’ll have a lively time, but everything will be perfectly all right.”

“Maybe,” answered Jack, and then, after a few more words with the assistant, the two cadets hurried off after their chums.

“If McGuire and Rosenblatt have anything to do with that party it will certainly be a lively one,” said Fred, on the way to the school. “They’re the liveliest fellows this town affords.”

“It won’t be any kind of a party for our girl friends to attend,” remarked Jack. “I certainly hope May and Ruth don’t go.”

“Maybe we ought to warn them, Jack.”

“If we did that somebody might say we were sore because we weren’t invited, Fred.”

“I know it. But it’s a shame, just the same.”

“We might let Martha and Mary know what we found out, and then they might put a flea in the ears of the other girls.”

It must be confessed that Jack was rather sober that night and all day Sunday. He could not get the coming party out of his mind, and he wondered constantly whether Ruth would really accept the invitation which had been extended to her. Along

with a number of other cadets he attended church in town, but, owing to the fact that it had begun to snow again, none of the girls from Clearwater Hall were present at the services.

“I guess I might as well call Martha up on the ’phone,” he told Fred, Sunday evening.

“All right,” was his cousin’s reply. “And don’t forget to mention May.”

When the young captain had his sister on the wire he learned a number of things that surprised him not a little. It seemed that the matter of the coming sleighride party had been rather freely discussed at Clearwater Hall, and a number of the pupils there were divided on the question as to whether to participate in the affair or not. Jennie Mason, Ida Brierley, and four or five others were in favor of accepting, while others had either declined or were noncommittal.

“Some of the girls have gotten almost into a fight over it,” said Martha. “It’s the liveliest thing that has happened in this school in a long while. I believe if the discussion keeps up none of the girls will be allowed to go, even though two married ladies from the town are to go along as chaperones.”

“Did you hear anything further about Ruth or anything about May?” questioned Jack.

“Not a word. Of course, not having been invited myself, I didn’t care to question either of them for fear they might think I was just a bit jealous, or something like that.”

“Well, I don’t think they ought to go to any such party,” answered Jack, and then told what he and Fred had learned at the livery stable.

“I’ve heard of Joe McGuire and also heard of Ted Rosenblatt!” exclaimed Martha. “I certainly shouldn’t want to be seen in their company. I’ll have to mention this to some of the others.” And here the conversation had to come to an end.

On Monday morning Jack met Brassy Bangs in one of the corridors and noticed that the loud-spoken youth looked at him rather speculatively. Nothing, however, was said, and the young captain entered one of the classrooms and was soon deep in his studies. That evening, however, Brassy Bangs and two of his chums were missing from their usual places at one of the mess-hall tables.

“They got permission to go to town. I suppose they went to make further arrangements about that big sleighing party,” remarked Randy.

To show that he meant to do his best as captain of Company C, Jack put in a full day on Tuesday drilling his command and in the classrooms. As a consequence that evening found him pretty well worn out from his duties. Yet he had some studying he felt he must do, and so announced he was going to sit up for a while after his cousins, who occupied rooms on both sides of him, had retired.

The young captain was hard at work doing some examples in geometry when there came a sudden sharp rap on his door. Thinking that one of his school chums had come to have a word with him before retiring, he threw the door open and found himself confronted by Brassy Bangs.

“I want to have a few words with you, Jack Rover!” cried the loud-mouthed cadet savagely. And then closing the door he advanced upon the young captain in anything but a friendly manner.

CHAPTER VIII

A FIGHT AND A CHALLENGE

Jack Rover could see that Brassy Bangs was laboring under great excitement. The youth who loved to dress in such a showy manner was red of face and his eyes glittered in a manner calculated to make any one quail before him.

But the young captain of Company C was not going to quail, and he stood his ground and looked the other youth squarely in the face.

“You want a few words, eh?” he said coldly. “Well, what is it?”

“You know well enough what brought me here!” cried Brassy. “I’ve a good mind to wipe up the floor with you!”

“I’m not fighting just now, Bangs. But don’t forget that I can defend myself if it’s necessary,” answered the young captain quickly. And then he added: “Now say what you’ve got to say or get out.”

“I’ll stay as long as I please,” blustered the showy youth. “It’s a fine piece of business you’ve been in—trying to belittle me and my chums in the eyes of the girls at Clearwater Hall.”

“If you came here to talk about the young ladies from Clearwater the sooner you get out the better,” answered Jack, his face flushing.

“Thought you were pulling off a fine stunt, didn’t you, when you talked to Ruth Stevenson about me?” sneered Brassy.

“I haven’t said a word to Miss Stevenson about you.”

“I know better, Jack Rover. You went to her and some of the other girls and told them that my chums and I were no good, and that the sleighride party we and some other fellows were getting up was going to be the wildest thing that ever took place at Haven Point.”

“You’re entirely mistaken, Bangs. And the sooner you get out of here the better it will please me.”

“Do you dare deny that you hauled us over the coals with those girls at Clearwater Hall?”

“I decline to discuss the matter any further with you,” answered the young captain.

“See here, Rover! you can’t ride any high horse like that with me,” blustered Brassy. “You and your cousins and some of the other fellows did your best to queer our whole sleighing party, and you’ve got to take the consequences!” And now Brassy Bangs doubled up his fists and tried to look more dangerous than ever.

“See here, Bangs! if you don’t stop your noise and get out of here I’ll put you out,” returned Jack, in a low but firm voice. “I don’t want any fight with you, but I want you to understand that I can hold up my end every time.”

“Like pie you can! You put on a big front as a captain, but I know your sort well enough! You can’t pull the wool over my eyes! You went to the girls’ school and shot off your mouth, and you are going to take the consequences!” and without further ado

Brassy Bangs stepped forward and aimed a heavy blow at Jack's face.

Had the fist landed as intended, Jack might have been knocked flat. But the young captain had not been in athletic training for several years for nothing, and he dodged quickly. Brassy was carried forward, so that his arm shot over Jack's shoulder and his body came in contact with the young captain's arm. The next instant Jack had him by the back of the collar and was holding him at arm's length.

"Now you get out of here!" he cried, and tried to drag Brassy toward the door.

Of course the other youth squirmed, and in an instant there was a rough and tumble scuffle. Jack was pushed against the wall, and retaliated by forcing Brassy backward over a chair. Then the two spun around the room, upsetting a stand containing a number of books.

"Hello! what's going on here?" came a voice from one of the side rooms, and Fred appeared. He had been in bed and was attired only in his pajamas.

Jack and Brassy were so wrought up by this time that neither paid attention to the interruption. Nor did they take notice when another door opened and Andy and Randy came into view. Brassy managed to break away and land a blow on Jack's arm, and in return received a crack in the chin which sent his head backward and all but unbalanced him.

"Gee! it's a regular fight," burst out Andy. "I didn't know Brassy was here."

"Neither did I," said Fred. "Why didn't you call us, Jack?"

“He didn’t give me time,” answered the young captain. “He accused me of getting him into trouble at Clearwater Hall, and then pitched into me.”

“I’ll fix you!” yelled Brassy, who was now almost beside himself with rage. “I’ll fix you!” and he made another lunge for Jack.

But the blow he intended to deliver fell short, and before he could recover the young captain came at him with a crack in the ear, followed by another on the cheek, and these caused Brassy to stagger into a corner where he held fast to a chair.

“Say, you fellows will have Colonel Colby here in another minute,” warned Fred.

“I don’t care who comes!” bellowed Brassy recklessly. “But see here, I’m not going to fight four of you!” he went on sullenly, as he glared from one to another of the Rovers.

“There won’t be any more fight!” cried Jack, who had no desire to be brought up before the master of the school again. “Fred, open that door!” And then, as the youngest Rover did so, he added to his opponent: “Now get out of here before I throw you out.”

“You can’t throw me out!” blustered Brassy. But then, as Jack advanced on him threateningly, he made a sudden spring for the door and ran out into the corridor. “I’m not going to fight four to one. But just wait—this isn’t ended yet,” he went on, and then disappeared.

Fred closed the door again, and he and the others gathered around Jack, who was panting from his unexpected exertions.

“Gosh, but he looked mad!” was Randy’s comment.

"What was it all about?"

In as few words as possible the young captain explained the situation so far as he was able.

"Brassy must have gone over to Clearwater Hall and there got the idea that you were queering that proposed party," was Fred's comment. "Well, I'm glad if the girls are wise to what is going on."

"Better chew this over in the morning," admonished Andy. "The thing now is to get into bed and put out the lights. One of the professors may be up here any minute."

This advice was considered good, and with lightning-like rapidity the room was placed in order and the others retired again, leaving Jack to undress and go to bed as quickly as possible. A little later one of the monitors came through the hall, but none of the Rovers was disturbed.

It was not until two days later that the Rovers heard the particulars of what had occurred at Clearwater Hall. Then they learned that, unknown to any of the girls, one of the teachers had been delegated by Miss Garwood, the head of the academy, to make a quiet investigation concerning the proposed sleighing party. And when this teacher had found out who were on the committee of arrangements, Miss Garwood had forbidden any of the young ladies to participate. When this became known, Brassy Bangs had at once concluded that Jack—and perhaps some of his relatives and friends—was responsible for what had occurred. The party had been called off.

"I'm glad it's called off," said Jack.

"So am I," returned Fred. "But, believe me, Jack, Brassy will have it in for you after this."

“Possibly.”

“You didn’t hear anything about what girls intended to go, did you?” put in Randy.

“I heard Jennie Mason, Ida Brierley, and Nettie Goss mentioned. That’s all,” answered Jack.

He would have given a good deal to have known what was the real attitude of Ruth and May toward the party. But, as before, neither he nor Fred felt inclined to make any direct inquiries.

“It almost looks as if Brassy had expected Ruth to go with him,” murmured the young captain to himself, when he was alone that night. And it must be confessed that the thought made him feel quite gloomy.

After this incident matters ran along smoothly for a week or more at the Hall. During that time the snow commenced to melt and almost before the cadets knew it, it had disappeared entirely.

In the meanwhile there was constant talk of the election for officers that was to take place. Ralph Mason, the major of the school battalion, was about to leave, as was also one of the captains, so there would be first an election to fill these vacancies and then another election in case one or both vacancies were filled by those who were already acting as officers.

“I really think you ought to try for the majorship,” said Gif to Jack. “You certainly have done well as a captain.”

“It would be very nice, Gif,” was Jack’s reply. “But I feel sometimes as if I ought to give some of the other fellows a show.”

"But they may not want it," answered Andy. "Look at me, for instance. I don't want to be an officer, and neither does Randy. And Gif here would rather continue at the head of our athletics."

"Yes, but you fellows are not the whole school," declared Jack, with a smile.

"I know lots of fellows who want you to run," declared Spouter. "And you say the word and I'll go around and do a lot of electioneering for you."

The matter was talked over a good many times, and fully twenty of the cadets came to Jack and told him they wanted him to run for the office of major. And finally he consented.

"Hello, here's news!" burst out Fatty Hendry, one day, as he joined his chums. "It's the richest thing ever," and he grinned broadly.

"What's that?" questioned Dan Soppinger, who was present.

"I just heard through Teddy Brown that Brassy Bangs wants to run for major. That he even told one of the professors about it."

"Why, he can't do that!" declared Fred quickly. "That is, not without special permission from Colonel Colby or Captain Dale. The major is always chosen from among the captains and lieutenants, or those who have been officers before. That is, if there is any one to pick. It's only Colonel Colby or Captain Dale who can declare the election open to any one. You can't put a fellow who has just learned to handle a gun to march at the head of the battalion."

"Well, of course Brassy didn't know that, and he wouldn't believe it until Captain Dale explained it to him. And then he said he thought he ought to be able

to hold the position because he was one of the best shots in the school."

"Well, he certainly is a good shot," declared Fred. "I saw him shooting at a target one day and he certainly made some marvelous hits."

"He comes from the West—from some place where everybody knows how to shoot," declared Walt Baxter. "I heard him telling some of the fellows about it one day. He said he had learned to ride and to shoot when he was only six or seven years old. And he can ride, all right enough, too. I saw him do it one day when I was on the road back of the Point."

"Well, I think a few of us can do a little shooting," declared Andy. "Don't forget that out of a possible twenty-five points Fred once made nineteen and Jack eighteen."

"Oh, yes, I remember that," put in Ned Lowe. "That was the time Lew Barrow scored twenty."

"Yes, and the time I scored the whole of ten," chuckled Andy. "But I don't care," he added proudly. "I guess I brought down my share of small game when we went hunting."

The talk concerning Brassy Bangs wanting to run for the office of major was true, and the cadet was much disgusted when he found that the regulations of the Hall forbade this.

"I can beat any one of them at shooting," he grumbled to Paul Halliday, one of his particular cronies and the fellow who had aided in trying to get up the sleighing party.

"Of course you can," was Halliday's quick reply. Then he went on: "Say, Lest, why don't you challenge Jack Rover and his cousin Fred to shoot

against you? You can show 'em up in great shape. It would be better than fighting them."

"I'll do it!" announced Brassy promptly, for the idea was one that appealed to him. "I'll shoot against them with either pistols or rifles, just as they may choose. I'll show 'em up for a couple of dubs when it comes to handling firearms."

"That's the talk!" broke in Billy Sands, another of Bangs' chums. "You say the word and Paul and I will take the challenge to the Rovers right away."

"All provided Colonel Colby or Captain Dale will permit the contest," said Brassy sourly. "Maybe that's another one of the things their dirty rules won't allow."

The matter was talked over for a while longer, and the three boys went off to interview Captain Dale. He listened to them with a smile, and then nodded.

"Of course you can have a contest of that sort if you desire, Bangs," he said presently.

Following this the challenge to Jack and Fred was promptly issued. It, of course, came as a surprise to the Rovers.

"We ought not to dirty our hands with a fellow like Bangs," declared the young captain to Fred.

"Oh, we can't afford to refuse, Jack!" cried his cousin. "If we did the fellows in the Hall would think we were afraid."

And thereupon the challenge was accepted.

CHAPTER IX

THE SHOOTING CONTEST

It was decided that the shooting contest should take place the next day.

“It doesn’t give us much time to practice,” grumbled Fred.

“We might as well have it over with,” answered Jack. “There is no use of allowing it to interfere with our lessons or with the coming election for officers.”

“Do you think we can shoot as well as Brassy?”

“We can try, Fred. From all reports he’s quite a wonderful shot. It seems he comes from a place where everybody is used to firearms.”

It had been decided to hold the contest on the regular range back of the school grounds. Fred and Jack had been in favor of rifles, but the boy from the West had voted in favor of pistols. As a consequence, Captain Dale had told them the contest would be divided into two parts of a possible fifteen points each, the first part to take place with pistols and the second with rifles.

“Say, you fellows have just got to snow Brassy under!” cried Randy. “Don’t leave him a leg to stand on.”

“That’s easy enough to say, Randy,” answered Jack. “But it isn’t so easy to do.”

“I know it, and I was only fooling. However, do your best and make some kind of showing against that loud-mouthed fellow.”

Early on the morning of the contest Jack and Fred received permission to take rifles and pistols and do a little practicing with the firearms. They went out alone, not wishing to be disturbed by any one.

As they were crossing the fields they saw a figure coming from a side road. The person approaching had the cape of his overcoat drawn up tightly around his throat and wore his cap pulled down well over his forehead.

“That fellow looked like Brassy Bangs,” declared Fred, as the distant figure leaped over a hedge and disappeared.

“It certainly did look like Brassy,” answered his cousin. “But what in the world could he be doing out so early in the morning?”

“Maybe he was practicing a little on his own account.”

“He didn’t have any gun with him.”

“That’s right. But he might have a pistol.”

“He never struck me as a fellow who would get up so very early. He always appeared to be rather lazy. And besides that, he didn’t come from the range. He came from the river road.”

“I know it, Jack. Maybe he’s been out all night for a good time with some of those fellows from town.”

After this the two Rovers lost no time in hurrying to the rifle range, and there practised with their pistols and their rifles until it was time to return to the Hall for roll call and the drill before breakfast.

“Well, we may not win, but we’ll make some kind of a showing,” remarked Fred.

It was a clear day, the air just bracing enough to put

the cadets of Colby Hall in good spirits. When the time came for the contest nearly all of them hurried to the range.

“Now then, Lest, show ’em what you can do!” cried Paul Halliday.

“The Rovers won’t have a look-in!” broke out Billy Sands. “It will be a regular walk-away for Lest.”

“Don’t be so sure of that,” answered Gif.

“Brassy may be all right enough with a pistol; but don’t forget that Jack and Fred know how to handle a rifle,” added Spouter.

A coin was tossed up and it was thereby decided that the contest with pistols should take place first. Each contestant was to shoot three times, the rings on the target counting from 1 to 5. The three contestants were to shoot in rotation, Fred first, Brassy second, and Jack last.

If Fred was a trifle nervous when he went to the front to shoot, he did his best to control it. Taking as careful aim as possible, he fired.

“A three!”

“That’s good enough for a starter!”

With a self-satisfied look on his face, Brassy Bangs strode forward, took quick aim, and fired.

“A bull’s-eye!” shouted Billy Sands in delight.

“I told you he could do it!” added Paul Halliday.

When Jack came to the front he managed to make a 4.

“That’s the stuff!” cried Randy. “You’re only one point behind!”

On the second round Fred managed to make a 4, while Jack scored a 3, thus tying the Rovers. Brassy scored a 4.

“Seven to nine in favor of Bangs!”

Then came the third round, and again Fred scored a 3 and Jack did likewise, while Brassy delighted his cronies by scoring another bull’s-eye.

“A total of ten each for the Rovers!”

“And fourteen for Bangs!”

“I told you Lest could hold ’em down!” shouted Billy Sands.

“Just wait till they shoot with the rifles. He’ll walk away from ’em!” added Paul Halliday.

It must be admitted that the Rovers and their chums were somewhat disappointed that the score stood four points in favor of Brassy.

“Now, Fred, do your best,” whispered Andy to his cousin, as the latter went to the front after carefully examining the rifle handed to him by Captain Dale.

The firearm was a light affair, but of approved pattern and supposed to be quite accurate for use at a distance of two hundred yards.

Fred took longer to aim with the rifle than he had with the pistol, and there was a breathless silence until after the report rang out.

“A four!”

“That’s the stuff, Fred!”

“Now, Brassy, let us see what you can do!”

As confident as ever, Brassy Bangs came to the front, took the rifle handed to him, and shot rather hastily.

"A three!"

Jack was up next, and to the dismay of many of his friends made only a 2.

Then came the second round with rifles, and in that Fred scored a 4, Bangs a 1, and Jack a 3.

"Hurrah! Fred Rover and Brassy Bangs are tied with eighteen points each."

"And Jack Rover has fifteen points."

Then came the final round, and amid a breathless silence Fred shot and scored a bull's-eye. Then came Bangs, and made a 2. And Jack ended the contest with a bull's-eye.

"Hurrah! Fred Rover wins the match with twenty-three points!"

"Yes, and Jack Rover and Brassy Bangs are tied for second place with twenty each!"

"Hurrah for Fred Rover!"

"Pretty good shooting, I'll say!"

"It was all to the merry, Fred!" exclaimed Jack, as he caught his cousin's hand. "You did fine!"

"The best ever!" burst out Andy.

"Say, Jack, why don't you and Brassy shoot off the tie?" questioned Spouter.

"I'm willing," was the ready reply of the young captain.

"I'll shoot off the tie with pistols," put in Brassy quickly.

"No, let it be with rifles," broke in Randy.

"I'll tell you what I think would be fair," announced Captain Dale. "Each of you take one shot with a rifle

and one shot with a pistol." And after quite a little discussion it was so agreed.

The pistols were used first, and there Brassy made a bull's-eye while Jack managed to register a 4. Then the rifles were used, and here Jack, shooting first, made a bull's-eye while Brassy got a 2.

"Hurrah! Nine to seven in favor of Captain Rover!"

"Some shooting, Jack!"

"If you had shot as good as that in the first contest you might have beaten Fred."

"I'm quite content, even if I didn't beat Fred," announced the young captain, with a smile.

Brassy Bangs was quite gloomy over the outcome of the contest, and he and his cronies lost no time in quitting the range.

"I'm mighty glad you two fellows beat him," announced Gif. "Maybe it will take a little of the conceit out of him."

"Well, Gif, you've got to admit he's a wonderful shot with the pistol," answered Jack.

"Yes. And his rifle work isn't any worse than mine," answered Andy. "Now, I'll promise to make a lot of bull's-eyes for you if you'll let me use a good-sized shotgun or a blunderbuss," and at this there was a snicker.

For the rest of that day Brassy Bangs had little to say. But the next morning he was as loud-mouthed as ever, declaring that he would have won the contest had he been allowed to use his own pistol—a long affair of the old-fashioned western variety.

"Had he done that it might have given him one more point," declared Randy. "Of course that would have

put him ahead of Jack in the first contest, but it wouldn't have helped him when it came to the rifle work."

"Oh, let's drop Brassy," said Jack. "I am really getting tired of hearing of him."

"I can't bear him," put in Phil Franklin. "Once or twice he has tried to become chummy with me, but I've always given him the cold shoulder."

It was now drawing on toward the time for the election, and there was a great deal of wire-pulling among the various cadets as to who might run for the offices. Three names were in the field for the office of major: Jack, a Captain Glasby, and a Lieutenant Harkness.

Glasby was a fellow who was very well liked, while Harkness was a lieutenant who at one time had been more or less of a crony of Nappy Martell, Gabe Werner, and others of the crowd that had been opposed to the Rover boys.

"Well, I sha'n't complain if Glasby gets the position," declared Jack. "But I'd hate mightily to see Lieutenant Harkness at the head of the school battalion."

"I never liked Harkness myself," put in Spouter. "He isn't a bit better in many respects than Gabe Werner."

It was soon noised around the school that Brassy Bangs and his cronies were doing their best for Harkness, while another crowd, led by Bart White, were rooting in rather a lively fashion for Captain Glasby.

"We've got to get busy for Jack," said Gif to Spouter. "Come on! Let's sound out all the fellows in the Hall

we think we can influence." And thereupon he and Spouter and a number of others set to work to electioneer for Jack as hard as they could.

Several days before the election Andy and Randy obtained permission to go to Haven Point on an errand. It was rather a disagreeable, misty day, and they were tramping along through the mud on the outskirts of the town when they saw Brassy Bangs and a stranger ahead of them. The stranger was a tall, thin individual, dressed in an old-fashioned suit of rusty black and with a big slouch hat pulled well down over his head. He was puffing away at a large black cigar, and seemed to be very much in earnest in what he was saying to Brassy.

"I saw that fellow around the school about a week ago," declared Randy. "He didn't look like a very nice sort, either."

"He certainly has a fierce-looking mustache," was Andy's comment. "And it's as red as his hair."

"I tell you I can't do it, and that's all there is to it," the boys heard Brassy exclaim, in reply to something the stranger had said.

"And I say you've got to do it," returned the man, and his tone was decidedly ugly. "You've got to do it —or otherwise you've got to take the consequences."

"You wouldn't be so mean, Haddon!" pleaded Brassy, and now the Rovers could see that he was more or less scared.

"Wouldn't I?" returned the strange man harshly. "You just try me and see! The best thing you can do is to agree to what I said. If you don't, well——" and here the tall man shrugged his shoulders—"you'll do as I said before—or you'll take the consequences."

CHAPTER X

SPOUTER'S SECRET

"Say, this is rather interesting," remarked Randy in a low tone to his brother.

"That fellow is certainly threatening Brassy," returned Andy. "I wonder what it can be all about."

"He wants Brassy to do something."

The two Rovers kept on behind Bangs and the man called Haddon, and presently saw them turn down a side street where was located a small factory that had been in operation during the war but which was now closed. Both disappeared into a shed attached to the factory.

"Let's see if we can find out what it's all about," said Randy.

"I'm willing," answered his twin. "Maybe that fellow will grow abusive and hurt Brassy."

"Well, a good licking wouldn't hurt him," answered his brother, with a grin.

"Oh, that's all right. But we don't want to see him half killed even if we don't like him."

"You trust Brassy to take care of himself," was the quick reply.

The twins hurried to the shed and there found that the door had been left open and that the man and their fellow-cadet had gone into another part of the low building.

"You know as well as I do that that barn and them hosses was worth at least twelve thousand dollars,"

the man was saying to Brassy. “That was a big loss for John Calder.”

“Please don’t say another word about it!” pleaded Brassy.

“I won’t if you’ll do as I told you to.”

“But I’ve let you have a hundred and ten dollars already! It’s every cent I can spare!”

“Well, I’ve got to have more.”

“I’ll bet you’ve been gambling it away, Haddon.”

“It’s none of your business what Bud Haddon does with his money!” exclaimed the stranger, with a toss of his head and blowing a ring of tobacco smoke toward the ceiling of the shed. “If you don’t want me to start things you do as I told you to.”

“Do you know what I think!” exclaimed Brassy, after a pause. “I think those tramp cowboys were guilty.”

“You can’t put that off on no cowboys!” exclaimed Bud Haddon. “I know all about it, and so do Jillson and Dusenbury.”

“They don’t know anything—at least they don’t know anything about me!” cried Brassy. But it was plainly to be seen that he was exceedingly nervous. “Somebody’s been cooking up a story against me!”

“Ain’t nobody cookin’ up nothin’,” growled the man. “I know what I’m talkin’ about. You’d better get busy if you know when you’re well off. If you don’t, and your uncle gets wind of this—well, good-night for you!”

“Oh, don’t say anything to my uncle! Please don’t!”

“Well, then you get busy. I’ve hung around here about as long as I intend to. I’m goin’ back to

Chicago in a few days."

At this juncture the Rovers heard a noise outside, and several boys playing hide-and-seek appeared. Not wishing to be discovered by Brassy and his companion, Andy and Randy hurried out into the street and up to the corner. Here they waited for a while, and presently saw Brassy and Bud Haddon come forth. The man sauntered away in the direction of the town while Brassy sped off on the winding road leading to Colby Hall.

"Now what do you make of this?" questioned Randy, as he and his brother continued on their errand.

"It looks rather suspicious to me," answered Andy. "It looks as if Brassy had done something that wasn't right and this man was going to expose him unless Brassy paid over some hush money."

"Yes, and from what Brassy said, he evidently has already paid the man one hundred and ten dollars."

On the way back to Colby Hall after their errand was finished the twins discussed the matter, but could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion. That evening they told their cousins of what they had heard, and also mentioned the matter to Gif and Spouter.

"It looks to me as if that Bud Haddon had a hold on Brassy," remarked Jack. "But whether Brassy is really guilty or not of some wrongdoing remains to be found out."

"I wouldn't put it past him to do something that wasn't right," came from Fred.

"That remains to be seen, Fred. Brassy might do some things that we wouldn't do; but at the same time I doubt if he's so very bad at heart. He's loud-mouthed and has a hasty temper, and he likes to

show off, and all that sort of thing, but that doesn't say he's a criminal."

"That Bud Haddon looks like a bad one," announced Randy. "I wouldn't trust him with a nickel."

"It certainly is a mystery," came from Fred. "Just the same as it's a mystery about Professor Duke."

"Gosh, don't mention Duke!" broke out Gif. "I had all I could do to keep from getting into a row with him this morning. He certainly is a tart one at times."

"But he looks troubled," answered Jack. "Ever since Colonel Colby spoke about him I've been watching him carefully. And, believe me, that man has something on his mind that's far from pleasant."

"He certainly comes and goes a good deal," said Spouter. "He was away several hours last night and the night before. And I understand he's going away to-morrow afternoon again."

"Colonel Colby must know it's all right. Otherwise he wouldn't let him go away so much," declared Gif.

On the following morning when the mail was distributed Spouter received a letter from his father that interested him greatly. He read the communication several times, and then, placing it in his pocket, ran off to where he had left Gif.

"Come on, Gif!" he cried gayly. "I've got great news! Come ahead and help find the Rovers."

"What's the news?" demanded the other, as they hurried on side by side.

"Just wait and I'll tell you all about it—maybe." And then Spouter stopped short, struck by a sudden idea. He thought for a few seconds and then his face broke into a broad smile.

The two boys found the Rovers up in Room 20, which the four cousins used as a sitting room. All were busy studying and looked up in surprise as Spouter dashed in with Gif at his heels.

“Glorious news, boys! Glorious news!” sang out Spouter, as he beamed at them.

“What is it?” they demanded in chorus.

“Glorious, I tell you, glorious!” Spouter waved his hands eloquently. “Why remain cooped up here within the dingy walls of a school when the mighty plains, the boundless forests, the leaping streams, and the azure blue of the skies await you? Why snuff the tainted air of the musty classroom when the free ozone of the hills and mountains beckons to you? Why waste time over musty books when rifle and fishing rod can be had, when one can fling himself in the saddle and go dashing madly across the——”

“Jumping crabs and hopping mud turtles!” exclaimed Andy. “Spouter has got ’em again!”

“What is this, Spouter?” demanded Randy. “A moving picture, or just a plain everyday nightmare?”

“Ha, ha!” continued Spouter, prancing around. “Whoopee! Bang! Bang! Let her go, boys! Lasso him quick before he gets away!” and the talkative cadet made a movement as if throwing a lasso.

“Say, Spouter, come down to earth, will you?” cried Jack, grabbing his chum by the shoulder. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Maybe he swallowed a few yeast cakes by mistake,” remarked Andy.

“It’s the best news ever, fellows!” went on Spouter. “I got it this morning.”

“All right! Let’s have it,” came quickly from Fred.

“I’ve been waiting for this news for several weeks.”

“News from where?” came from the others.

“News from home.”

“From your dad?” questioned Randy.

“Exactly.”

“What has he done now—bought you an automobile?” questioned Gif.

“Better than that!”

“For goodness’ sake, spill out what you’ve got to say!” returned Fred, in exasperation.

“When we went to Cedar Lodge on our grand hunt we were Gif’s guests,” resumed Spouter. “This summer the tables are to be turned, and all of you are to be the guests of yours truly.”

“Gee, that sounds interesting, Spouter!” cried Randy.

“Where do we go and when?” questioned his twin.

“You’re to go just as soon as school shuts down and you can get ready.”

“And where to?” questioned Jack curiously.

“Ha! that’s the deep, dark and delightful secret,” returned Spouter. “You’re all to be my guests, and I’ll promise you the time of your lives. Oh, boys, but this is going to be something great!” And the cadet playfully pounded one and another on the shoulder with his fist.

“But how can we go if we don’t know where we’re going?” asked Fred.

“You’ll know, Fred, before you’re on the way,” was the mysterious answer. “And, believe me, after

you've found out you won't want to turn back."

"What! do you mean you're not going to tell us where we're going?" demanded Jack, in astonishment.

"Exactly, Jack. That's going to be my little secret until this school shuts up," and Spouter folded his arms calmly and grinned at all his chums.

They looked at him in blank amazement. This was a proceeding that had never happened before. Suddenly Gif made a dash forward.

"Let's pound it out of him!"

"That's the talk! We'll make him tell!"

"Pull him down and sit on him!"

"Pull off his shoes and tickle his feet! He's got to tell!"

"Poke him in the ribs!"

"He got a letter this morning. I'll bet the news is in that!" shouted Gif. "It's in his pocket now!"

All attempted to pounce upon Spouter, but he was too quick for them, and, dashing across the room, he shot into Fred's bedroom, banging the door after him. Then, as the others followed, he ran out into the corridor and then sped for his own room, where he locked the door behind him. Then he hid the letter in a place where he was sure none of his chums would find it.

"Well, this takes the bakery!" announced Randy, after all of them had pounded on Spouter's door in vain. "What do you suppose it means?"

"It's simple enough," remarked Jack. "Spouter is going to invite us on some sort of outing this

summer, but he doesn't want to tell us yet what sort it's to be."

"He spoke about mountains and rivers and horseback riding," said Randy. "That looks like some sort of outdoor affair," and his eyes glistened.

"Come on out, Spouter, and let us love you a little," called Fred through the keyhole.

"You go on down and I'll meet you downstairs," was the reply. "And remember, you're not to know another word about this until vacation comes."

"Going to take us away in a submarine, Spouter?" demanded Andy.

"No, he's going to take us in an airship to the south pole," declared his twin.

"Never mind where I'm going to take you," answered Spouter. "You just keep calm until vacation time comes, and then you'll learn fast enough in what direction you're going to travel. And, believe me, we'll have some outing, or else I'll miss my guess."

And with this statement the Rover boys and Gif had to be content.

CHAPTER XI

THE ELECTION FOR OFFICERS

“Company attention! Shoulder arms! Forward march!”

Boom! Boom! Boom, boom, boom!

The drums rang out clearly on the morning air and the Colby Hall battalion swung into line on a march that carried it around the school buildings and then to the lake shore. Here Colonel Colby and Captain Dale inspected the three companies. Then the retiring major, Ralph Mason, was called on for a little speech which brought forth many cheers, and after this the command was dismissed.

It was the day for the election, and there was to be no school session until the afternoon.

At the last election there had been a total of 111 votes cast. But now there were one hundred and twenty-five cadets at the institution. There had been some talk of organizing a new command to be known as Company D, but so far this had not materialized.

As was the custom, the election was held in the main hall of the school and was presided over by Captain Dale and Professor Brice.

“I see they expect a hundred and twenty-five votes,” remarked Randy. “That means sixty-three will be necessary to a choice.”

“Well, I’m sure Jack will get at least forty on the first vote,” returned his brother.

“I hope he gets the whole sixty-three,” put in Dan Soppinger. Dan had once run for a captaincy, but had dropped out and turned most of his attention to athletics.

As at other elections, it was decided by Colonel

Colby that each officer should be voted for separately.

“We’ll try for a new major first,” announced the head of the Hall.

The ballot box was placed on the table, and after a short intermission during which there was some very active electioneering among the various groups assembled, a bell rang and the cadets were formed in one long line and told to march up and deposit their ballots in the box.

It must be admitted that Jack was rather anxious, although he did his best to conceal it. He smiled at Captain Glasby, who smiled back. Then he smiled at Lieutenant Harkness, but that under-officer only favored him with a scowl.

“Harkness will never win anything with that look on his face,” was Gif’s comment, as he noticed the scowl. “The fellows like an officer who can take things pleasantly.”

It did not take the cadets long to vote, and as soon as all of the ballots had been cast Captain Dale, assisted by Professor Brice, began to tabulate the vote. In less than ten minutes they had finished. Then a bell rang and Captain Dale came forward to read the result.

“Total number of votes cast	125
Necessary to a choice	63
Louis Glasby has	51
Jack Rover has	50
Darrell Harkness has	24”

“What do you know about that!” exclaimed Fred. “Jack and Glasby are within one vote of each other!”

“I’ll say that’s getting pretty close,” answered Randy.

“As no cadet has received the number of votes necessary to a choice, I will give the school a recess for fifteen minutes. Then we will vote again—for the same cadets or for new ones if you feel so inclined.”

After this brief announcement by Captain Dale came a hum of voices and there was some strenuous electioneering in all parts of the hall and also in the corridors and out on the campus.

“Glasby is stronger than I thought he was,” remarked Gif to Jack. “We’ll have to do some tall work to overcome his vote.”

“I think we can get some of the Harkness fellows to come over to us,” put in Spouter. “I don’t believe he’s as popular as he thinks.”

“Maybe we can get him to withdraw,” suggested Andy, with a grin.

“Withdraw, not!” broke out Fred. “He’s not that sort.”

While the conversation was going on somebody touched Jack on the shoulder, and turning he found himself confronted by Paul Halliday.

“Say, see here, Rover! I’d like a word with you,” whispered Halliday somewhat excitedly.

“All right, shoot!” answered the young captain.

“This is a little private matter,” went on Halliday. “You can bring your cousins along if you want to,” he added.

Wondering what Halliday had in his mind, Jack, along with Fred and Andy who happened to be close by, followed him to an out-of-the-way corner of a corridor.

“We want to know if you’re willing to make a deal with us,” said Halliday in a low, nervous tone of voice. “You know Harkness got twenty-four votes. Well, he’s willing to throw those votes to you if you are willing to back him for the new captain of Company C.”

“I can’t do that,” answered Jack quickly. “If I get to be major I’m going to back Fred here for the captaincy.”

“Oh, but, Jack, I could drop out of that!” put in his cousin quickly.

“Not much, Fred! I said I was going to do it, and I’m going to stick to my word. Besides that, I might as well tell you, Halliday, that I don’t believe Harkness is the best fellow for the position.”

“Then you won’t consider my offer?” demanded Halliday sourly.

“Certainly not!”

“I don’t believe you can control the Harkness votes,” put in Andy. “I believe Jack will get a whole lot of them on the next ballot.”

“He won’t get a one of them, and he’ll lose some of his own!” answered Paul Halliday. “You just wait and see!” And then he walked away.

“Jack, that move might have given you the majorship,” said Fred.

“If I’ve got to get it that way, Fred, I don’t want it,” was the prompt reply. “I wouldn’t vote for Harkness under any circumstances. He’s in hand and glove with Brassy Bangs, Halliday, Sands, and that whole bunch; and I don’t believe he ought to be an officer.”

A few minutes later came a commotion near the

main entrance of the Hall. A cadet named Gibson who was doing some electioneering for Glasby had knocked Paul Halliday down, and there was every prospect of a fight when the two cadets were separated by a number of friends.

“He offered to sell the Harkness vote if our crowd would vote later on the way he wanted us to!” declared Gibson. “You would think he had half the vote of the Hall in his pocket,” and he glared at Halliday, who thereupon lost no time in sneaking out of sight.

The report that Halliday, Sands, and even Brassy Bangs were trying to sell the Harkness vote in exchange for some votes for a captaincy soon spread, and a number of the cadets who had voted for the lieutenant became disgusted and promptly said they were going to change. A lively discussion followed, in the midst of which the bell rang for the second ballot.

“Gee, Jack! if some of those fellows do change their votes I hope they come to you,” murmured Gif.

“Well, I must confess I’m hoping that myself,” answered the young captain, with a smile.

Once more the boys lined up and deposited their ballots. Then came some anxious waiting, and finally Captain Dale announced the result:

“Total number of votes cast.....125 Necessary to a choice.....63 Jack Rover has.....67 Louis Glasby has.....46 Darrell Harkness has.....9 Peter Floyd has.....3”

“Hurrah! Jack wins!” cried Fred enthusiastically, and was the first person to grab his cousin by the hand and shake it warmly.

“That’s great, Jack!” exclaimed Gif, slapping him on the shoulder. “Let me congratulate you!”

“It’s just the result I was looking for!” burst in Spouter, his face wreathed in smiles.

Of course, Louis Glasby was much disappointed, but he took his defeat in good part and came up bravely to shake Jack by the hand.

“It was a fair and square contest, Jack,” he said. “And I congratulate you.” And then turning to the other cadets he called out: “Three cheers for Major Rover!” They were given with a will; and then Colonel Colby, Captain Dale, and many of the older persons came forward to congratulate the newly-elected head of the school battalion.

“Speech! Speech!” came the cry from the students. “A speech from the new major!” and almost before he was aware of it Jack was escorted to the platform.

“I don’t know what to say to you,” he said, as he faced his fellow-students. “I thank you very heartily for your support and I will do my best to deserve it. I want to say that I am particularly pleased at the nice manner in which Louis Glasby has taken his defeat. He’s a fine fellow and I hope I shall always have him for my friend.” And following these words there was more cheering.

“Evidently the Harkness combination went to pieces,” remarked Randy. “He polled only nine votes.”

“And that was nine too many,” murmured his brother.

Following the election for major, Captain Dale announced that they would next vote for a new captain for Company A.

“I don’t know what you fellows are going to do, but I know I’m going to vote for Louis Glasby,” announced Jack.

“I think a whole lot of fellows will do that,” answered Fred. “He’ll probably get every one of his original fifty-one votes.”

Again there was an intermission of a quarter of an hour, and then the boys were lined up for the vote to fill the vacancy in Company A. On the first ballot Glasby got 60 votes while Fred poled 18 votes, the rest being scattering. Then on the second ballot Glasby was declared elected with 69 votes in his favor.

“Three cheers for Captain Glasby of Company A!” called out Jack quickly, as he shook hands with his late rival, and the cheers were given with as much of a will as they had been for the newly-elected major.

“Well, I got thirty-two votes on that last ballot,” announced Fred. “That shows I’ve got some friends in this school. I don’t want to be the captain of Company A. I’d rather remain a lieutenant of Company C.”

“But we’ve got to have a new captain for Company C now that Jack has stepped out,” put in Phil Franklin.

A quarter of an hour later the balloting began for a new captain for the company Jack had commanded. Here developed a spirited rivalry, and it was not until the fifth ballot that the final vote was taken. Then Fred won by 64 votes with the other votes scattered among eight contestants.

“Three cheers for Captain Fred Rover!” shouted Phil Franklin enthusiastically, and threw his cap high in the air. He had electioneered as hard as anybody for

the youngest Rover.

Then Fred was called on for a little speech, and after that there was another election for lieutenants and a number of minor officers.

“It certainly was our day, Fred,” said Jack, as he and his cousin shook hands.

“Right you are, Major Rover,” and Fred saluted in the most precise military fashion.

“Bonfires to-night, boys!” sang out Andy. “And we’ll have some big doings, believe me!”

“Right you are!” declared his twin.

CHAPTER XII

BONFIRE NIGHT

It was the custom at Colby Hall for the officers of the battalion to take dinner with Colonel Colby on the day of an election. This was quite a formal affair and the cadets to participate made it a point to look their best.

“Say, Jack, you’re going to make a stunning looking major,” remarked Fred, as he watched his cousin dressing.

“How about yourself as captain?” was the reply.

“Just wait till Ruth Stevenson sees Jack in his new uniform!” cried Randy.

“Say, Jack, why not have a life-sized photo taken and give it to her to hang over her dressing table?” put in Andy, with a grin.

“You beware, Andy,” admonished his cousin, waving a finger severely at him. “Remember, as the commandant of the battalion, I can throw you into a dungeon cell if I feel so inclined,” and Jack strutted around grandly in the privacy of the Rovers’ sitting room.

“I’ll be good, oh, Most Noble One,” answered the fun-loving Rover, bowing down until his head almost touched his feet.

Jack and Fred had already sent word to Martha and Mary, and they, of course, had told Ruth and the others. It is needless to say that the Rover girls and their chums were almost as much pleased over the results of the election as the boys had been.

“I’m just dying to see them on parade with Jack at the head,” confided Martha to the others.

“Yes, and Fred in command of Company C,” added Mary. “Just to think of it! And he so much younger than the others!”

“I hope I’m on hand to see their first parade,” said Ruth, her eyes beaming with pleasure.

“I thought you were going to write Jack a letter about that party,” said Martha in a low tone.

“I am. To-night. And I’ll let him know that I’ve wanted to do it ever since the party was talked of,” went on Ruth.

The officers’ dinner was a great success. Every one

present made a little speech and Colonel Colby and Captain Dale made addresses to which the cadets listened with keen attention.

“It is my desire to make this military academy one of the best in the country,” declared the colonel earnestly. “And I cannot do that without the sincere coöperation of every cadet attending the institution. As many of you know”—and here he glanced at Jack and Fred—“when I was about your age I attended Putnam Hall Military Academy. I am sure the training I received there did me much good, and I am also sure that I made many friends who will stand by me as long as I live.

“I want this institution to be one of good-fellowship all around, and I am relying upon all of you to do your best. At Putnam Hall in many respects we followed the honor system which I have put into operation here. That honor system did not fail there, and I do not look for it to fail here. I want you all to have a good time; but there is a limit, and every one of you knows what that limit is just as well as I do. In the late war the training which some of our soldiers had received at Putnam Hall stood them in good stead. And I want the training received here to be of equal benefit if any of my cadets should ever be called upon to fight for our country.”

“Three cheers for Colonel Colby!” came from Jack a minute later, and the boys assembled nearly split their throats trying to do justice to their feelings.

While this dinner was going on the other cadets had their repast in the mess hall and then flew off in all directions to prepare for the real festivities of the evening. They had gotten together several piles of barrels and boxes, as well as brushwood from the forest behind the school, and these were soon heaped

up along the river bank into great bonfires, the light of which could be seen a long distance.

“It’s going to be some night, believe me!” sang out Andy merrily. “We’ll tear the woodpile down, as the old saying is.”

“We want to be a little bit careful or else we’ll have Snopper Duke or some other professor calling us down.”

“Snopper Duke is going away. I heard him tell one of the other teachers that he had had a sudden call to go somewhere out of town,” answered Randy.

“Going away again, eh?” questioned Gif, in surprise. “He certainly is getting to be a regular Man of Mystery.”

The greater part of the cadets were wildly excited over the prospects of a good time that night. A few of them, however, including Lieutenant Harkness, Paul Halliday, and Brassy Bangs, looked far from pleased.

“They make me tired,” was Brassy’s comment. “You’d think that being major of the school battalion was next to being president.”

“If I can’t be anything better than a lieutenant I think I’ll resign altogether,” returned Harkness. “I’d rather go in for athletics.”

“You’ll have a pretty good chance if you do,” announced Paul Halliday. “I understand they’re going to try to divorce the officers from participating in baseball and football as much as possible. A fellow can hold a commission and be on a team at the same time only when it seems absolutely necessary.”

“Then Jack Rover and Fred Rover will have to give up playing baseball,” put in Brassy quickly.

"More than likely. Although, of course, they'll hate to lose such good players as they are," put in another cadet who was present.

When the officers' dinner was at an end Jack and Fred lost no time in hurrying to their rooms, where they donned their old uniforms. It was what was termed a "holiday night" at the Hall, which meant that for the time being the cadets were all on an even footing and must treat each other as if such a thing as an officer was unknown.

By the time Jack and Fred joined the crowd along the river bank the fun was at its height. Many of the cadets were running around indulging in all sorts of horseplay while others were dancing around the bonfires singing the songs they had learned in the school and while at the encampments. Several of the boys, including Andy, were in clowns' costume with big slapsticks which they used vigorously on everybody who came within their reach.

"Hurrah, boys, let her flicker!" cried Fred, as he rushed forward. "Everybody join in!" he added, and then boomed out with this well-known Hall refrain:

"Who are we?
Can't you see?
Colby Hall!
Dum! Dum! Dum, dum, dum!
Here we come with fife and drum!
Colby! Colby! Colby Hall!"

"That's the stuff!" cried Jack. "Let's have it again!" And then the refrain boomed out louder than ever.

"Come on! Let's march around the school," came from Gif, and he caught up a firebrand as he spoke.

A number of others were quick to follow his

example, and in a minute more a torchlight procession was in progress, winding along over the campus, around the school, and through the edge of the woods beyond. Then the boys came back by way of the barns and sheds in the rear.

“Look out that you don’t set something on fire,” warned Jack.

“Something is on fire already!” burst out Andy suddenly.

“You don’t say!” queried Spouter.

“Where is the fire?” demanded half a dozen others, looking around anxiously.

“Right down there,” declared the fun-loving Rover, and pointed to the bonfires along the river.

“Wow! Let’s duck him for that!” cried Phil Franklin.

He made a dive for Andy and so did several others, but the agile Rover was too quick for them and danced out of their reach, having no desire to take an involuntary bath in the river, which at that time of the year was very cold.

In the past the cadets had had considerable fun with Job Plunger, the school janitor, who was quite deaf and who was often called Shout because everybody had to shout at him to make him hear. But this time Plunger was wise and kept out of sight, as did also Pud Hicks, his assistant, and Bob Nixon, the chauffeur. The only person the boys could get hold of was Si Crews, the gymnastic instructor.

“Give us a song, won’t you?” asked several of the boys at once, for Si Crews was known to be quite a singer.

“I will if Lowe will play the mandolin or the banjo,”

answered Crews.

“That’s the stuff, Ned!” called Fred. “Go on and get your mandolin.”

Ned Lowe, who was also a good singer, was willing, and at once ran off into the school to get the musical instrument mentioned. When he came out he tuned up hastily and then played while Si Crews sang one or two old-time songs. Then Ned gave the crowd one or two funny songs and a dozen or more of the cadets joined in the chorus.

“Here’s a chance to get square with Codfish!” cried Fred, as the sneak of the school showed himself in the crowd.

“Oh, we might as well let Codfish drop,” answered Jack.

But before this could be done Andy and Randy caught hold of Stowell and pushed him forward through the circle of merry cadets around one of the fires.

“We’re going to initiate you in the Ancient Order of Cornmeal,” declared Andy.

“I don’t want to be initiated,” answered Codfish. “You let me alone!”



THERE DESCENDED UPON CODFISH SEVERAL POUNDS OF FINELY-GR
CORNMEAL.
Rover Boys at Big Horn Ranch (*Page* 131)

“Oh, but this is a first-class Order, Codfish,” returned Randy. “If your reputation is bad it will render you

almost spotless."

"You let me go!" burst out Codfish in sudden fear, as Andy and Randy and several others came close to him. "I don't want any horseplay to-night. I'm tired out."

"To be initiated in this Order you've got to lie down," continued Andy, and, motioning to his brother and some of the others, they suddenly caught poor Codfish and stretched him out on the grass in front of the fire.

"Are you ready to be initiated?" questioned Randy solemnly, as he stood over Codfish with a small paper bag in one hand.

"You let me——" began Codfish.

"He says 'let me!'" burst out Randy quickly. "So go to it, Most Potent Sower of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Cornmeal! Go to it, I say!"

And thereupon without further ado Randy overturned the paper bag he held in his hand and there descended upon Codfish several pounds of finely-ground meal which the lads had purchased in town a day or two before.

"Hi! Hi! What's this? You let me go!" cried Codfish, and then began to splutter as the dry cornmeal got into his mouth and nose.

"My, Codfish, you'd make a regular muffin now," declared Andy, as the whitened youth struggled to his feet.

"Give us a song, Codfish."

"Make it a regular corncake hoedown," put in Randy.

"You let me go!" shrieked Codfish, and then in commingled rage and fear he suddenly caught up a

long firebrand from the bonfire and whirled it around rapidly before him.

“Get out of my way—all of you!” he screamed, and the next minute made a movement as if to dash the firebrand directly into Randy’s face.

CHAPTER XIII

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

“Drop that, Codfish!” exclaimed Randy, and backed away so suddenly that he tripped over some brushwood and came down flat on his back.

“I’m not going to be tormented any more,” stormed Codfish, and swung the firebrand around again, this time so the flames brushed Andy’s shoulder and also Fred’s arm.

“Drop that, you imp!” exclaimed Ned Lowe. “Do you want to put out somebody’s eyes?”

“I don’t care! You’ve got to let me alone!” screamed Codfish.

“We won’t let you alone until you learn how to behave yourself and act like the other fellows do,” answered Andy. “You’re the worst sneak this school ever had, and you know it!”

“Yes, and see how you acted after all we did for you

when we were at Cedar Lodge," added Randy, who had scrambled to his feet.

"I—I didn't mean to say anything about those snowballs," whined Stowell. "They made me do it!" And thereupon, pitching the firebrand back on the bonfire, he pushed his way through the crowd of cadets and disappeared in the darkness in the direction of the school.

"Gee, he certainly is a pill!" was Dan Soppinger's comment. "I think none of us would weep if Codfish left the school for good. How about it?"

"Never mind—don't let it spoil the festivities," cried Andy gayly. "Come on! Everybody join in! A fine of one suspender button for the fellows who don't sing!" And thereupon he began a ditty he had composed during the war.

"Johnny get your musket!
You must get your musket!
Johnny get your musket!
You must get it now!"

And this ditty the lads sang over and over again as they leaped and swung in a circle around the bonfires.

But all gala occasions must come to an end, and by eleven o'clock the bonfires were nothing but heaps of smouldering ashes, and then one by one the cadets returned to the Hall and retired.

"Well, Jack, it will seem kind of funny, won't it, to be at the head of the school battalion to-morrow morning?" questioned Gif, as he and the newly-elected major turned into the corridor leading to their rooms.

“Yes, Gif. But it won’t be so very strange either, because you know I had to command the battalion two or three times when the other officers were away.”

Their activities during the whole of the day had made the cadets sleepy, and nearly all turned in without much ado. Here and there there was an exception, and these included Fatty Hendry and Dan Soppinger.

“I’ve got to get out some sort of a composition on City Improvements,” declared Fatty. “I don’t know much about ’em, but if I don’t get the paper in by nine o’clock to-morrow morning there’s going to be trouble.”

“And I still have some examples in algebra to work out,” answered Dan. “So I think I’ll go at them before I retire.”

All of the Rovers slept soundly and did not awaken until they heard an unexpected knock on their door some time before the rising bell.

“Let me in,” came in the voice of Dan Soppinger. “I’ve got news.”

Jack opened the door and Dan came in, followed by Fatty.

“Say, what do you know about this!” exclaimed Dan. “Colby Hall has been robbed!”

“Robbed!” ejaculated Jack. “What do you mean? What did they take?”

“What did they take!” burst out Fatty. “I guess they took about everything they could get their hands on that was easy to carry off. I lost my stickpin and my watch.”

"And I lost two old stickpins and two rings that I haven't been wearing," put in Dan.

"When did you find this out?" questioned the newly-elected major.

"I made the discovery just when I was going to bed after doing some examples in algebra," answered Dan. "It was about half-past twelve, so I didn't want to wake anybody up—that is, none of the other fellows, although I did call on Fatty because I knew he was writing a composition. He looked around his room then and found he had been robbed, too. Then, as Professor Duke was away, we called on Professor Watson. He made an investigation and then said he would report to Colonel Colby the first thing this morning."

The talk in Jack's room had brought Fred to the scene, and a few minutes later Randy and Andy came in, rubbing their eyes sleepily.

"What was your stuff worth, Dan?" questioned Fred.

"I think the rings were worth about fifteen dollars each, and the stickpins almost as much."

"My stickpin was worth thirty-five dollars," groaned Fatty. "And the watch was a gold one given to me by my grandfather, and I wouldn't lose that for a good deal."

"Hark! What's that commotion?" put in Jack suddenly.

There was a murmur of excited voices in the corridor, and, throwing open the door, the Rovers and their friends came out to see what was up.

"My room has been robbed!"

"My watch is gone and a whole lot of other jewelry!"

“I lost three dollars!”

“Huh, that isn’t anything! I lost fourteen dollars and a half!”

So the talk ran on as an excited group of cadets, some fully attired and some still wearing their pajamas, crowded forward.

“Say, what do you know about this!” exclaimed Fred.

“Is anything belonging to us gone?” questioned Jack suddenly.

“I’m going back to find out,” came from Randy. “I was so sleepy last night that I just tumbled into bed and let it go at that.”

Without further ado the four Rovers ran back into the rooms they occupied and began a search of their chiffoniers and the other places where they kept their things of value.

“My stickpin is gone and also one of my rings,” groaned Randy.

“I had a brand new five-dollar bill tucked away in one of my drawers,” said his brother. “I can’t find it anywhere. And, yes, my wrist-watch is missing!”

“My watch and chain and stickpin are gone, and likewise all my badges!” cried Fred. “Oh, this is the worst ever!”

“Well, I’m out a ring and three stickpins,” announced Jack, “including that brand new pin I got last year.”

As quickly as possible the four Rovers dressed and then joined the other cadets in the corridor. From all sides were heard excited exclamations as one pupil after another came forward to announce that either his jewelry or his money—and sometimes both—were gone.

Colonel Colby and several of the professors had already been notified, and they quickly appeared on the scene and tried to interview the cadets. This, however, was a hard thing to undertake because nearly all the boys wanted to talk at once. There was so much excitement that for the time being the morning parade and breakfast were completely forgotten.

“This is certainly a terrible state of affairs,” remarked the colonel to Captain Dale. “Have you any idea who can be guilty?”

“No, Colonel. I have always thought that every one connected with this school was honest.”

“It may be the work of some of the hired help,” mused Colonel Colby. “But I hate to think that. Every one who is here came highly recommended.”

“We might make inquiry and see if any strangers were in the school last night during the celebration,” suggested Captain Dale. “There was so much excitement that some one might have slipped in and out without our noticing.”

Finally Colonel Colby told all the cadets to go below for breakfast, dispensing with the early morning drill.

“As soon as you have finished eating I wish each cadet to make a thorough search of his room and make out a written list of everything that is missing and sign the paper. Take careful note of everything when you are making your search, and if you find any clues to the perpetrator of this outrageous affair, let me know. The lists can be left at the office as soon as they are made out.” And then, after a moment of thought, he added: “There will be no session of the school this morning.”

“Shall we notify the Haven Point authorities?” questioned Professor Brice.

“Not at present. I wish to make my own investigation first,” answered the head of the school.

It did not take Jack and his cousins long to swallow their breakfast, and this finished, they hurried back to their rooms and began the search Colonel Colby had advised.

“Well, I’m shy that gold fountain pen Aunt Martha gave me,” announced Jack presently. “I’d forgotten about that because I didn’t usually use it. I use the one mother gave me.”

Outside of this the Rovers could find nothing more missing nor did they locate anything in the way of a clue that might lead to the robber. They sat down and made out their brief lists, signed them, and then walked together down to the office.

Here a crowd of cadets were coming and going. It was learned that twenty-two cadets in all had suffered losses which ranged from seventy-five cents to one hundred and twenty-five dollars. In all it was figured that the loss would amount to at least twelve hundred dollars.

“This is about the worst thing that ever struck Colby Hall,” announced Jack.

“Who do you suppose did it?” questioned Randy.

“Don’t ask me, Randy. I’d hate to suspect any of the fellows.”

“Oh, I don’t think any of the fellows did it!” burst out Fred.

“Well, what about the hired help?” questioned Andy.

“I don’t know any of them that I’d suspect,” said Jack

promptly. “Every one looks like a pretty good sort.”

Only two cadets came forward with objects that might possibly be a clue to the robbery. One boy had picked up a handkerchief in his room that he said did not belong to him, and another boy had found the marks of muddy footprints over his window sill and on a fire-escape outside.

“Say, that looks as if somebody had come up the fire-escape and got into the rooms that way,” said Jack, when he heard of this.

“They say the handkerchief that was picked up is not marked in any way,” said Gif.

“Well, every handkerchief used by the cadets is marked,” returned Spouter. “They’ve got to be that way or they’d get all mixed up in the laundry.”

“How about the help?”

“Their stuff is all marked, too. One of the teachers told me so,” put in Dan Soppinger.

“Say, Ned! you came upstairs for your mandolin,” cried Jack suddenly. “Did you see anybody up here?”

“I don’t remember that I did,” answered Ned Lowe. “I was in such a hurry to get the instrument that I didn’t pay much attention. And, besides that, it seemed pretty dark in here after coming away from that big bonfire.”

“A robber would be sure to keep out of Ned’s sight,” put in Fred.

“I remember seeing some fellows in the lower hall—Major Mason, Bart White, and one or two others. But I can’t seem to remember seeing anybody upstairs—and yet, somehow or other, it seems to me I did pass somebody just before I ran into my room,” and now

Ned looked perplexed.

“Can’t you think who it was?” questioned Andy quickly.

“No, I can’t.”

“If it was a stranger you would have remembered, wouldn’t you?” asked Jack.

“I think I would, Jack. I’d think right away what that person was doing upstairs.” Ned scratched his head. “No, if I did meet somebody, I’m sure it must have been one of the cadets. But who it was, I can’t think.”

A little later Colonel Colby continued his investigation by asking all those who had been inside the building during the celebration to come forward and tell anything they could that might be of advantage. It developed that not only Ned but also Ralph Mason, Bart White and two of the older cadets named Lawrence and Philips had been upstairs some time between eight and eleven o’clock. The most of these cadets said they had seen no one else upstairs in the building. But Bart White declared while at one end of a long corridor he had seen some one slip around a corner out of sight. He was not sure whether the person had been a cadet, one of the hired help, or an outsider.

“It was either a man or a big boy,” said Bart. “But he moved so quickly and it was so dark I didn’t recognize him, even if I happened to know him.”

“And what time was this?” questioned Colonel Colby.

“Some time between half-past nine and ten o’clock.”

Bart was asked to show the colonel where the disappearance of the stranger had taken place, and it

was proved that this was at a point just around a corner from the room where the footprints leading to the fire-escape had been discovered.

“Perhaps you saw the person just at the time he was making his escape,” was Colonel Colby’s comment. “We will look for footprints below the fire-escape.”

This was done, but the cadets the night before had tramped around the school building so much that the footprints were hopelessly mixed. Then the boys were questioned as to whether or not they had seen any one dropping from the fire-escape to the ground, and all answered in the negative.

“We will question the hired help and see what they have to say,” announced the master of the school.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PARADE

The inquiries made among the hired help of Colby Hall produced little results. Some of the servants were rather scared and declared to Colonel Colby that they were innocent of any wrong doing.

“I am not accusing any one here,” declared the master of the Hall. “I only want to find out, if possible, who was guilty of this outrageous proceeding.”

It was found that two men with wagon loads of supplies for the school had visited the place during the evening, but neither of these men had gone any further into the building than the storeroom, and both had departed as soon as their errands were finished. Outside of that, so far as the servants could remember, no outsiders had been on the premises.

“And yet those footmarks on the window sill and the fire-escape look as if it had been done by an outsider,” said Captain Dale to the head of the school.

“It’s just possible that it may have been an inside job and an outside job combined,” ventured Professor Grawson.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Somebody in the institution may be in collusion with some outsider—some professional thief. The inside person may have given the outsider a tip as to when the coast was clear and may even have stood on guard while the rooms were being looted.”

“That is possible, Professor. But is there any one in the place that you suspect?”

At this Professor Grawson shook his head.

“No, sir. So far as I can imagine they are all thoroughly honest.”

“We might institute a general search of all the buildings,” announced Captain Dale. “We can call all the cadets out on the campus and all the hired help into the mess room and request them to remain while the search is going on.”

“Some of the hired help may object to that,” came from Professor Watson.

"If they did it would throw suspicion on them," answered Colonel Colby quickly. "I think the idea had better be carried out."

All the persons in the school were assembled as mentioned, and then Captain Dale explained to the cadets what had been proposed and Colonel Colby did the same to the hired help.

"They're certainly welcome to search our rooms," declared Major Jack promptly.

"And mine, too," added a score of others.

"I'm sure I haven't anything to conceal," put in Lieutenant Harkness.

"And I haven't anything to conceal either," came from Brassy Bangs. "They can search my room all they please." He had announced the loss of a stickpin and six dollars and a quarter in cash.

Among the hired help there was more or less murmuring, one of the old cooks, an Irish woman who had been in the place since it had been opened, shaking her head dubiously.

"Sure an' I didn't think yez would take me fer a thief, Colonel Colby," said Bridget, gazing at the head of the school severely.

"I'm not taking any one for a thief, Mrs. Mulligan," he answered. "But it would not be fair to search any of the rooms without searching all of them."

"Sure an' that's true fer yez," announced the cook, nodding her head in assent. "An' if that's the way ye're after lookin' at it, go ahead and search me room all ye please. Only don't be disturbin' them trinkets I have from me dead mother."

The search was made without delay, all of the

teachers and the cadets who had lost their belongings taking part. It occupied the rest of the morning. Every room was gone over carefully, and when anything in the way of jewelry or other such articles as had been reported missing were discovered all those who had suffered were asked to look on and see if they could identify anything.

“Gee! there’s a fountain pen that belongs to me,” cried one of the boys presently. And then he added in a crestfallen manner: “It’s all right. I lent that to Bill Latimer a couple of weeks ago and forgot all about it.”

Outside of this incident the search came to an end with nothing out of the ordinary happening. Not an article that had been taken was discovered in any of the rooms occupied by the cadets or the hired help. Nor was anything discovered in any of the other rooms or closets of the institution.

“It certainly is puzzling,” declared Colonel Colby, after the search had been called off. “It looks to me as if a thief had gotten away with everything he took.”

“Either that or he has some hiding place which we as yet haven’t unearthed,” answered Captain Dale.

After that the hired help were told they might go, and as soon as possible dinner was served to the cadets and the teachers. Then, when the pupils were told to go to their afternoon classes, Colonel Colby and Captain Dale held a conference in the office and notified the local police authorities.

“I hate to do it,” said Colonel Colby. “But there seems to be no help for it. It will certainly give our institution a black eye.”

"But I do not see how anyone can hold you responsible for this affair," returned Captain Dale. "We are as watchful at this institution as they are anywhere."

"Of course I shall not permit our cadets to lose anything by this," went on the master of the school quickly. "I shall ask each of them to value carefully what they have lost, and then, if the things are not recovered before the end of the term, I will make the loss good."

"That would be very nice on your part, Colonel Colby. And I think it would be a good investment too," added Captain Dale. "It will prove to the parents of the cadets that you consider yourself responsible while they are under your care."

When the local authorities came to the school they went over the ground carefully with Colonel Colby and some of the others and asked innumerable questions.

"We have a number of strangers stopping in town, mostly traveling salesmen," announced the chief of police. "I'll look 'em up, and also look up any tramps or any other suspicious characters that may be hanging around." And that for the time being was all he could say. Soon he and his men departed.

That evening Jack found a letter in his box which had been mailed early that morning at Haven Point. It was from Ruth. There was also a brief note to Fred which had been sent by May.

In her communication to the newly-elected major Ruth congratulated him heartily on his success and said she hoped soon to see him in a parade at the head of the battalion. After that she wrote as follows about the sleighing party that had been called off:

> "I received an invitation to that party from Lester Bangs and May received an invitation from Paul Halliday. Jennie Mason, Ida Brierley and several of the other girls had invitations and they wanted us to go very much. But, of course, I did not want to go with such a fellow as Bangs. Then he came to me and started a report that all of you Rovers were going to another party with some of the girls from the town, and that the party was to take place the same night as our party. Of course, I did not want to say anything about it, because I realized that you could do as you pleased. But I told Bangs positively that I would not go with him and May told the same thing to Halliday. Then both of them got quite ugly and accused you and your cousin of trying to spoil his outing. I told him you had had nothing to do with it, but he declared that you had and that you had better look out or you would get into hot water. So, Jack, please look out for him and tell Fred to look out for Halliday and the others."

There was more to the letter, and Jack read the communication with great interest. He felt greatly relieved to think that Ruth had not intended to accept Brassy's invitation, and later on he dropped her a note thanking her for her kind congratulations and telling her that the report of another party in which the Rovers and some girls from Haven Point were to participate had been faked up.

The note received by Fred was on lines similar to the communication sent to Jack. He sent word to May clearing up the situation.

"It was a mean thing for Bangs and Halliday to do,"

declared the newly-elected captain of Company C. “We ought to pitch into them.”

“We can’t afford to do it, Fred, now that I’m a major and you’re a captain,” was Jack’s reply. “Remember what Colonel Colby said: We must be models for the other cadets.”

“Great Scott! does that mean we can’t stick up for our rights?” demanded the youngest Rover indignantly.

“Not at all, Fred. If those fellows say anything, give it back to them. And if they start to fight, defend yourself just as well as you are able.”

As mentioned before, Snopper Duke had been absent from the Hall during the election for officers and the celebration which had followed. When he returned he looked much worried, and this worry was far from dispelled when he visited his room.

“Colonel Colby, I, too, have been robbed!” he exclaimed, as he came rushing down to the office. “I’ve had a silver cardcase taken, and also a gold watch which has been in our family for several generations, a watch that belonged to my father and my grandfather.”

“It’s too bad, Professor Duke,” answered the master of the Hall seriously. “May I ask what the articles were worth?”

“I don’t suppose the cardcase was worth more than a few dollars, but the watch was of gold, and I presume it must have cost fifty or sixty dollars. It was an heirloom and I treasured it highly.”

“I am doing my best to find out something about the robbery,” said Colonel Colby. “But so far all my efforts have been in vain. I intend, if the articles are

not recovered by the time the school session comes to an end, to pay for everything that has been stolen." And that was all the master of the Hall could say.

It must be admitted that both Jack and Fred felt quite proud when the first regular parade of the battalion took place that spring. The cousins had, of course, sent home word of the election and had received permission to purchase new uniforms. Both looked spick and span as they marched out at the head of their respective commands. It was a clear, warm day, and Colonel Colby announced that the cadets could parade through Haven Point to Clearwater Hall and return if they so desired.

"Hurrah! That's the stuff!" cried Fred.

And so it was arranged, and one of the teachers telephoned over to the girls' academy, to let those at that institution know what they might expect. Then one of the cadets telephoned to Felix Falstein, the owner of the Haven Point moving picture theater.

"Falstein always hangs out his flags for us," said this cadet. "And he'll do it this time, I'm sure."

Colby Hall now boasted of a drum and fife corps of twelve pieces, and they made merry music as the battalion marched away in the direction of Haven Point. All but three or four of the cadets were in the best of spirits.

"I think marching over to Clearwater Hall is punk," declared Brassy Bangs, with a snarl. "Why can't they march some place worth while or just go around the town and let it go at that?"

"I guess Jack Rover wants to show off before those girls," grumbled Paul Halliday.

“I wouldn’t go if I could get out of it,” growled Brassy.

“Oh, don’t squeal,” returned his crony quickly. “If you do they’ll only laugh at us and make us go anyway.”

“Attention there, Bangs!” cried the captain of Company B, the command to which Brassy belonged. “No talking in the ranks!” And thereupon the cadets became silent.

As had been anticipated, when the cadets reached Haven Point they found that Felix Falstein had outdone himself in the way of decorations. Not only were several flags displayed across the front of his theater, but he had strung two big flags across the street, and between them placed a banner which he had had painted some time before and which read:

WELCOME TO
COLBY HALL

“That’s very nice of him,” remarked Jack, who was marching at the head of the procession with Captain Dale on horseback close beside him.

“Very nice, indeed, Major Rover,” answered the military man.

“I wonder if we can’t come to a halt here and go through the manual of arms?” went on the newly-elected major.

“Certainly, if you wish to do so.”

“Battalion halt!” called out Jack, turning around and the three companies came to a stop.

CHAPTER XV

BASEBALL

Soon the three companies of the Colby Hall battalion were in a long line in front of the moving picture theater. At once a crowd began to gather until several hundred people were assembled. Then the cadets were put through the manual of arms, after which followed some fancy evolutions in the street in front of the show house.

“Very good! Very good, indeed!” shouted Felix Falstein, who was present.

His face was beaming and he clapped his hands loudly, and, taking this hint, the crowd applauded with vigor. Then the march through Haven Point was resumed and soon the cadets came in sight of Clearwater Hall.

They had good reason to feel proud of what those at the girls’ school had done in their honor. The big flag was flying from the flagstaff on the campus and other flags were displayed from the front of the building. In addition to this the classes had been dismissed for the time being and nearly all the girls were out at the front of the school, many carrying small flags which they waved vigorously as the cadets approached.

“Oh, don’t they look grand!” cried Mary.

“Superb!” added Martha ecstatically.

“I do believe Jack has a brand new uniform,” came from Ruth, and then she began to cheer and all the girls joined in.

The cadets had been cautioned to preserve true military discipline, and they did their best not to smile and make eyes at their admirers. But it was hard work, and many a face broke into a grin impossible to control.

Opposite the school the command came to a halt, and then Miss Garwood and a number of her teachers came forward to greet the cadets and those with them and invite them to the campus. Here another drill was given, the girls applauding louder than ever as each movement was executed with a precision that would have done credit to the cadets at West Point.

“I’m sure that’s as good as our fathers did at Putnam Hall,” declared Mary to her cousin.

Colonel Colby had come along with Captain Dale, and during the drilling had been in earnest conversation with Miss Garwood. Then came a surprise as the cadets were asked to march into the dining hall of the girls’ school. Here they found generous plates of cake and ice-cream, as well as glasses of refreshing lemonade, awaiting them.

“Gee, this is the best ever!” declared Andy, smacking his lips.

“Yes. And what a surprise!” returned Randy.

“Some day we’ll have to return this compliment,” came from Jack. “My, wouldn’t it be a lark to have the girls in our mess hall and treat them?”

“I suppose we’d have to give ’em regular soldiers fare,” was Andy’s dry comment. “Salt pork and baked beans and things like that,” and he grinned.

“Nothing doing!” declared Fred. “We’ll feed ’em toasted marshmallows and angel cake,” and at this

sally there was a laugh.

Following the refreshments the cadets were allowed fifteen minutes in which to walk around the school campus and mingle with the girl students. Jack, of course, at once sought out Ruth to tell her personally how much he appreciated the letter she had sent.

“I hope, Jack, you haven’t had any more trouble with Lester Bangs,” the girl said anxiously.

“Oh, he’s growling around a little, but that’s all,” answered the young major. “I’m not paying any attention to him, Ruth. I’m mighty glad that you didn’t accept his invitation,” and he gave her a warm glance.

“It was awful for him to get up that report about another party,” answered the girl. “Of course I didn’t think it was true—that is, not what he said about you and your cousins.”

“Suppose we let the whole matter drop, Ruth, and forget Brassy Bangs and his crowd.”

“I’m sure I’m willing to do that, Jack.” And then the girl added quickly: “You’ve had some terrible doings over at the Hall, so I have been told.”

“You mean the robbery, I suppose?”

“Yes. Have they discovered anything?”

“Not a thing. It certainly is a mystery.”

When the gathering of boys and girls broke up nearly every one was in the best of humor, the only exceptions being Brassy Bangs and Paul Halliday. These two unworthies had done their best to get on friendly terms with some of the girls, but had been snubbed in such a manner that it made them much crestfallen.

“I’ll be glad when we start back,” grumbled Brassy to his crony.

“Come on, let’s take a walk outside,” answered Halliday, and thereupon the pair left the school grounds.

“What about baseball this spring, Jack?” questioned his sister just before the cadets were ready to start.

“I’ll be out of that this year. There is a new ruling that officers must step aside and let the other cadets have a chance on the baseball nine and the football eleven, as well as have a chance in the rowing and other contests. Colonel Colby has an idea that not enough cadets have filled these various places in the past. He wants to give every fellow a chance if possible.”

“Well, you can’t blame him for that.”

“Not at all, Martha. I’m quite content to step aside so far as baseball is concerned, and so is Fred. We want to do our best as officers and also do our best with our studies. You know the folks at home are expecting us to make real records in the classrooms.”

“I know that only too well, Jack. Mary and I are working day and night on our lessons here. We’re going to do our best to come out either at the head of our classes or very near to it.”

“How is Ruth making out?”

“She’s doing very well. Of course, she had a hard struggle to catch up on account of the time lost because of her eyesight.”

Following the parade to Clearwater Hall the cadets settled down to the usual routine of drills and studies. But soon there came a call for aspirants to

the baseball team, and then talk of the coming matches with Columbus Academy, Hixley High, and Longley Academy filled the air.

“Gee! it makes my hands tingle to think about baseball,” sighed Fred, when talking the matter over with Jack.

“I feel the same way,” answered the young major. “But remember, Fred, we can’t have everything in this world, and I’d rather be major of the school battalion—at least, for one term.”

“Of course! And I’d rather be captain of Company C.”

“Gif tells me there are going to be a number of important changes on the nine,” went on Jack. “A lot of new fellows are clamoring to get on. They’re going to have their try-outs in a day or two.”

What Jack said was true, and the following Saturday afternoon a somewhat patched-up first team played a scrub team. On the scrub, somewhat to the Rovers’ surprise, were Brassy Bangs and Paul Halliday.

“They both claim to know a whole lot about the game,” explained Gif. “So I’m bound to give them a try-out.”

“Why, I thought Brassy Bangs came from a ranch in the West?”

“So he does. But he told me they frequently played baseball on the ranch and that some of the cowboys were really good players. He said one of the fellows had once played on one of the Midwest Leagues.”

“Gee! there’s no telling what an up-to-date cowboy will do these days,” remarked Andy. “Playing baseball, going into the movies and into vaudeville, and I don’t know what else!”

"I guess he finds more money in the doing of those things than he does in the herding of cows," answered his twin.

The game between the patched-up first nine and the scrub nine resulted in a tie, 7 to 7. Jack and his cousins watched the game and had to admit that Brassy Bangs and Paul Halliday did quite well—in fact, much better than had been expected.

After that the practice was continued, Gif, as head of the athletic association, trying out one player after another. Then came the final selection of the regular club to represent Colby Hall, and Brassy Bangs was given the position of third baseman while Paul Halliday went to center field.

"I think I ought to be allowed to pitch," grumbled Brassy. "I'm sure I can send 'em in just as good as any of those other fellows."

"You pitch a pretty swift ball, I admit," returned Gif. "But your delivery is rather erratic. You put them over the catcher's head several times. If you did that when the bases were full, it would mean just so many runs coming in." And after that Brassy said no more about pitching.

The first game to be played was on the grounds of Longley Academy. The cadets journeyed to the place in carriages and automobiles and on bicycles, and were joined by quite a number of the girls from Clearwater Hall.

"Do you suppose Tommy Flanders will pitch?" questioned Randy.

"No. They tell me that last game we had over here was too much for Flanders and he has given up the nine entirely. I think they'll put in that new left-

hander that they tried at the end of that game," answered Jack. And in this surmise he was correct.

When the first man came to the bat it was easy to be seen that both nines were on their mettle. It was a Colby Hall player who had the stick, and the left-handed twirler for Longley Academy struck him out in one-two-three order.

"Hurrah! That's the way to do it!" yelled one of the Longley students. "Now make it three straight!"

"Gee! that was Nevins, one of our best batters," whispered Randy to his cousin Mary.

"Never mind that, Colby Hall!" shouted Jack. "You've got to encourage 'em a little bit!" and at this there was a smile.

The next man to the bat got a hit and on a wild pitch managed to reach third. But that was all that could be done, and Colby Hall retired without scoring.

During their half of the inning Longley Academy managed to make two runs, and this was increased by two more at the end of the fourth inning. In the meantime the best Colby Hall could do was to get two hits and bring in one run.

"Hurrah! Four to one in favor of Longley!" shouted one of the students from that academy.

"You've got to tighten up, boys!" called out Fred to the members of his school team. "Tighten up and show 'em what you can do!"

The fifth inning passed without a run, and so did the sixth. Then in the seventh Colby Hall managed to pass the home plate twice while Longley Academy scored once. This made the score, Longley Academy 5, Colby Hall 3.

“Oh, Jack, it looks as if Colby Hall might be beaten!” said Ruth anxiously.

“I think they might have a better fellow than Brassy Bangs on third,” put in Fred. “He could have put out that last runner with ease. That run wasn’t deserved at all.” And a number of others who heard this remark agreed with the young captain of Company C.

In the eighth inning Colby Hall made one more run. Then Longley Academy came once more to the bat, and with two men on first and second and two out, the batsman knocked a high fly to center field.

“Scoop it in, Halliday!”

“It’s a dead easy fly!”

“They won’t get any runs this inning!”

So the shouts from the Colby Hall boys went on.

In the meanwhile Paul Halliday stepped back a few paces and got directly under the descending sphere. Down it came, striking his finger tips and bouncing over his head.

“He’s muffed it! He’s muffed it!” yelled several of the Longley Academy contingent gleefully. “Run, boys, run!”

And how the runners did streak from base to base! And before the ball could be recovered by the bewildered Halliday the three runs had been scored.

CHAPTER XVI

SPOUTER IS CORNERED

“Hurrah for Longley!”

“That’s the way to do it! That makes the score eight to four!”

“My, what a muff that was! That center fielder is a regular butter-fingers!”

“Soak it to ’em good and plenty, Longley! Only two men out!”

Thus the hubbub on the part of the students of Longley Academy continued while the cadets of Colby Hall had little to say. There were one or two cries to take Halliday out of the field, but these were quickly hushed.

“Anybody might muff a ball,” declared Jack. “It’s too bad, but probably it couldn’t be helped.”

The very next player to the bat knocked a liner between first and second and got to second on a fumble by the first baseman. Then the next player, after having two strikes called on him, sent a low one down to center field.

“Go for it, Halliday! Get it!” yelled the cadets eagerly.

Halliday ran for the ball, but was only able to get it on the first bounce. Then, as he saw the batsman

rounding first for second, he threw the ball wildly.

“Run, Newcomb, run!”

“There goes the ball for the grandstand! Hurry up, Markle, and make it a homer!”

The ball had sailed over the head of the runner and landed at least ten feet away from the home plate. The catcher made a dive for it while the pitcher came to the plate to stop the runners. But it was too late, and before the sphere could be sent in both runs had been scored.

“Zip! Boom! Two more runs for Longley!”

“That’s the way to do it, boys! Let’s snow ’em under!”

“Take Halliday out!” was the angry cry of fully a dozen cadets. “Take him out! He has no business on the team!”

And thereupon amid shouts of derision Paul Halliday was compelled to quit the field and one of the substitutes went to take his place.

“It wasn’t my fault! I stepped in a hole,” growled Halliday when he came to the bench. He made a show of limping badly. “I almost sprained my ankle.”

“Well, your two errors have been very costly,” answered Gif coldly.

After that the pitcher for Colby Hall tightened up, and the next man up was put out on strikes and the side retired.

With the score 10 to 4 against them, Colby Hall did what it could to redeem itself during the last inning. They made one run, followed by two outs and two hits which brought a man on first and another on third. Then Brassy Bangs came to the bat.

“Now, Brassy, here’s your chance!”

“Knock it over the back lots!”

Brassy set his teeth and swung the bat with a do-or-dare expression. Then the first ball pitched came in an outcurve which he swung at in vain.

“Take your time!” called out Gif.

The next was an incurve, but Brassy swung at it and missed again.

“Strike two!”

“Hit it, Brassy! Hit it!”

“Knock the cover off!”

“Take your time! Wait until you get just what you want!”

And thereupon Brassy Bangs did wait—until he had three strikes called upon him and was declared out.

“That ends the game!”

“And the score is ten to five in favor of Longley Academy!”

“Hurrah! That’s the time we showed Colby Hall what we can do!”

The Longley Academy boys went wild in their enthusiasm and danced around the field like so many Indians. And they had good cause to be elated, for they remembered only too well the drubbing they had gotten at the hands of Colby Hall the season before when Jack and Fred had made such records for themselves.

The Colby Hall cadets could say nothing against the record made by the Longley nine. They had put up a stiff fight from the start and deserved their laurels.

“Our defeat was largely due to Halliday and Bangs,” declared Spouter. “Between them they let in at least five runs.”

“That’s exactly the truth,” answered Dan Soppinger. “If I were Gif I’d read the riot act to those two players.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’d be too hard on them,” came from Jack. “Anybody might have muffed that ball down in center field, and any of us might have struck out as Brassy did.”

“But both of them made several other errors,” put in Walt Baxter.

On the way back to Colby Hall the students were free in their comments on the game, and there were many uncomplimentary things said about Brassy and Halliday. Those two players tried to excuse themselves as best they could; but a baseball player who has not made good seldom gets any sympathy.

“I’ll give you both another chance in the game with Hixley High,” said Gif at last, in talking the matter over with the two players. “But if you make a single error it will cost you your positions.”

The game with Hixley High came off on the following Saturday and was won by the narrow score of 7 to 6. In the second inning Halliday made another wild throw from center to second, and Brassy Bangs made a bad fumble in the fourth inning, and as a consequence both were retired and substitutes put in their places.

“It was certainly a narrow squeak,” declared Fred, when the game was over and the boys were preparing to celebrate that evening. “I believe if Gif had kept Brassy and Halliday on the team we would

have lost."

"Well, we may lose some other games even so," said Jack. And he was right. Out of a total of seven games played with the other schools of that vicinity that season Colby Hall won but four.

"Well, we can't win every year," declared Randy. "And we're half a game to the good anyway, and that's something."

"It's certainly better than being half a game behind," answered his twin.

While these matters were going on Colonel Colby and Captain Dale had been doing everything possible with the aid of the local police, and also a private detective who had been called in, to solve the mystery concerning the robbery at the school. But all efforts seemed to be in vain. Not a trace of the person or persons who had committed the crime could be found. It was a great mystery.

"I think I'll have to settle with all of the boys and with Professor Duke," said Colonel Colby to his head assistant. "And there I suppose the matter will have to be dropped."

Later on he took up the various claims and paid each one of them in cash.

"I am very thankful to you for this, Colonel Colby," declared Snopper Duke, when he received his money. "It will come in quite handy, I assure you. And yet I am much distressed over that watch which once belonged to my grandfather."

"Well, I hope it is brought to light some day, Professor," answered the master of the Hall. "And if it is then you can pay me back for it," and he smiled faintly.

In those days a number of the cadets noticed that Snopper Duke seemed to be much preoccupied. He paid hardly any attention to what his pupils were doing and was so absent-minded that often he answered the simplest questions in the most ridiculous manner.

“He’s certainly got something on his mind,” was Fred’s comment. “I must say I’d like to know what it can be.”

“Maybe we’ll never know,” answered Jack. “But because of what Colonel Colby said I’m certainly going to be careful how I treat him. He may have more of a load on his mind and heart than any of us imagine.”

It now lacked but ten days to the end of the term, and the boys were busy finishing up with the examinations in the various classes and also in writing the final essays to be handed in. All had worked hard to make a showing.

“Just think! Only ten days more!” exclaimed Andy, throwing a grammar across his room at Randy. “Doesn’t it make you feel fine?”

“It sure does!” answered his twin, catching the book and sending it back so quickly that his brother was hit in the stomach. “And that puts me in mind, Andy. Why not get at Spouter and make him tell us what he’s got in mind about our vacation this summer?”

“Let’s do it! Come on! We’ll get Fred and Jack and Gif and go and pound it out of him.”

All alive with their scheme, the twins burst in upon the other Rovers while they were busy writing their essays and broached the subject. The others agreed, and Fred ran off to get Gif. Then the whole crowd

rounded up Spouter, and grabbing him by the arms fairly forced him along the corridor and into the Rover boys' sitting room.

"Now, Spouter, you've got to tell us!" declared Randy. "No more secrets!"

"Oh, gee! Is that it?" was Spouter's reply. "I thought you wanted to borrow a nickel from me, or something like that," and he smiled feebly.

"Come on now, Spouter! Give it to us straight," demanded Fred.

"No more sawing and fiddling," put in Andy. "We want straight goods. Where are we going this summer?"

"You're going with me," answered Spouter, with a grin.

"So you've told us about three thousand times. But where are we going?"

"You're going home first."

"Pound him, fellows, pound him! Throw him down and pound him good!" and thereupon the whole crowd pounced upon the luckless schemer.

"Hold on! Hold on! Let me up!" spluttered Spouter. "Let me up, and I'll tell you everything!"

"Honest?" demanded Andy. "If you fool us this time we'll drag you to the bathroom and duck you."

"Cross my heart!" panted Spouter. "Now let me up!"

The others allowed him to arise and then forced him into an easy chair in the corner and all stood over him menacingly.

"You are going to spend your vacation at a new place which was purchased by my dad only a few months

ago," answered Spouter.

"And what place is that?" came in a chorus from his chums.

"Big Horn Ranch."

CHAPTER XVII

GOOD-BYE TO SCHOOL

"What do you know about that!"

"Big Horn Ranch! That sounds interesting!"

"What sort of a place is it, Spouter?"

"I suppose you must have thousands of heads of cattle?"

"How about horses, Spouter? We'll have enough mounts, sha'n't we?"

"Any good hunting or fishing?"

"Stop! Stop! What are you trying to do?" spluttered Spouter. "Trying to drown me in a flood of questions? Why don't you ask one thing at a time?"

"Well, where is the ranch and how are we going to get to it?" questioned Jack.

"And how big is it?" put in Fred.

And then came another flood of questions until poor

Spouter placed his hands to his ears in dismay.

“I can’t answer everything at once,” he said finally. “So you’d better let me tell what I know in my own way. Big Horn Ranch is located out in Montana, and it comprises a thousand acres or more—how large I don’t exactly know. To get there you journey by rail to a little jumping-off place called Four Rocks, and then you have to ride or drive to the ranch, which is four or five miles away. The nearest town of any size is Arrow Junction, which is quite a distance off.”

“How is it your dad bought a place like that?” broke in Gif. “I didn’t know he was interested in ranches.”

“Oh, he has always liked outdoor life—you all know that. And this ranch came to him in rather an unexpected way. There were two brothers who were interested in a speculation in which my dad was interested, too. My dad advanced a lot of money to these brothers, and as they couldn’t pay up in cash they asked him if he wouldn’t take the ranch off their hands by allowing them an additional thirty thousand dollars. So he made a trip out there in company with another man who knew all about ranches and then he concluded to buy, and did so. So now we own Big Horn Ranch, and the family expects to spend a large part of each summer there.”

“And your father said we could all go out there with you?” questioned Randy.

“Yes. He told me to invite you four Rovers and also Gif. And that isn’t all,” went on Spouter. “He’s invited all your folks out there, too. He’s going to make a great big house-party of it!”

“Our folks!” exclaimed Fred. “What do you mean? They can’t all go. Uncle Dick is just back from Texas, and somebody has got to look after the offices in

New York."

"It has been arranged that your father and mother are to go along first, Fred, and later on Randy and Andy's father and mother are to come out. Then, when they go back to New York, it's possible that Jack's folks will come West before the season is over. Gif's folks have not decided on what they can do, but will let us know in a week or two."

"And what about the girls?" questioned Fred quickly.

"Of course, they are to go along, too. Martha will go with Mary and her folks, and May will, of course, be with my mother, and she is going to try to get Ruth to go with her."

"But Ruth said she was going somewhere else," remarked Jack, and his face showed disappointment.

"I know that, Jack. But I think May can get the Stevensons to allow her to go. Anyway, all the girls are going to try."

After that the Rovers and Gif asked many other questions concerning Big Horn Ranch and Spouter told them all he could.

"Of course, I know only what dad has written and what was said about the ranch before we purchased it. I suppose I'll learn a lot more as soon as I go home, and then I'll let you know about it."

"Gee! we ought to have the best time ever," exclaimed Andy gleefully, as he caught Spouter by the shoulders and commenced to dance him around the room.

"It was certainly well worth waiting for, Spouter," came from Jack.

"I don't see how you managed to keep it a secret,"

put in Randy. “I’d have been bustin’ to tell it every minute.”

“Well, I had a job of it, believe me, with you fellows dinging at me all the time,” was Spouter’s answer.

“When do you suppose we can start?” questioned Fred.

“That, of course, will depend a good deal on you and your folks,” answered Spouter. “My folks are already out there, getting the ranch in readiness for visitors. I suppose you’ll want to go home over the Fourth of July, but maybe you’ll be able to start West right after that.”

“I don’t know what could hold us back.”

“Is the ranch house big enough to accommodate such a large crowd?” questioned Jack. “There are a lot of us, remember.”

“I think so. You see the ranch is really a combination of two ranches, the buildings of one ranch were located near the eastern boundary while the buildings of the other ranch were set equally close to the western boundary, and as a result the two sets of buildings are not very far apart. Father and mother didn’t know exactly what they were going to do. They said they would either divide the party between the two ranch houses or otherwise send all the hired help to one of the houses and keep our whole party at the other.”

“It would be nice if we could stick together,” said Randy.

“Oh, it won’t make much difference, because, as I understand it, it’s only a short walk from one set of buildings to the other.”

After this revelation from Spouter it was difficult for the Rover boys and Gif to settle down once more to their essay writing and their examinations. However, all did their best, and when the school term came to an end each had made a creditable showing.

“I’ll be proud to take this card home and show it,” said Fred, as he examined the pasteboard which had been handed to him.

Out of a possible 100 per cent. he had received 94 per cent. Jack had passed with 92 per cent., Randy with 89 per cent., and Andy with 88 per cent. This last figure was the one also reached by Gif. Spouter, who was naturally a very studious person, had passed with the highest mark of the class—96 per cent.

“Well, eighty-eight per cent. isn’t as good as it might be, but it’s a good deal better than lots of the fellows made,” remarked Andy. “And it’s a long way from the failure mark—below seventy.”

Of course the boys had already talked over the telephone to the girls, and then it leaked out that all of those at Clearwater Hall knew about Big Horn Ranch and that Ruth was almost certain that she could go with the Rover girls and May.

“If we all go together we had better charter a private car,” remarked Jack.

“Say, that would be something worth while!” put in Fred, with satisfaction. “Let’s put it up to our folks!”

Two days before the boys were to leave for home, Randy saw a messenger boy deliver a telegram to Snopper Duke. The professor read the brief communication and then Randy saw him stagger up against a chair in the hallway as if about to fall. He

rushed forward and caught the professor by the arm.

“What is the trouble, Professor?” he questioned kindly, for he could see that Snopper Duke was in deep distress.

“I—I—— Don’t mind me, Rover,” stammered the teacher. “It’s a little bad news, that’s all. And coming on top of some other bad news I’ve received lately I can hardly stand it,” and with these words Snopper Duke turned and went slowly upstairs to his room. Half an hour later he was closeted with Colonel Colby and then drove away from the Hall; and that was the last the Colby Hall cadets saw of the strange teacher during that term.

“He’s certainly got something on his mind,” said Randy, in telling the others of the incident. “And I must confess I’m growing really sorry for him.”

On the next day came another surprise for the Rovers. All of them were out on the campus when they saw Brassy Bangs leap a side hedge and start toward the school. At the same time they saw a tall man wearing a slouch hat hurrying off in the opposite direction.

“Hello! there is that fellow Brassy had trouble with in town,” exclaimed Randy.

“Just look at Brassy!” whispered Fred, after the youth had passed them and gone into the Hall. “Why, he’s as pale as a ghost!”

“It certainly is a mystery about Brassy and that strange man,” was Jack’s comment. “Just as much of a mystery as about Professor Duke’s doings.”

Soon the boys were busy packing up, getting ready to leave. Then came the usual jolly times just previous to saying good-bye to their fellow-cadets and the

teachers. The students were to scatter in all directions and the majority of them expected to have a glorious time during the summer vacation. Phil Franklin was to go back to the oil fields, to visit his father.

At the railroad station the Rovers met Mary and Martha and also some of the other girls, and here many good-byes were said.

“I hope you get a chance to get out to Big Horn Ranch,” said Jack to Ruth.

“So do I, Jack. But I haven’t received permission to go yet. If I don’t get there you must write to me.”

“I certainly will, Ruth. And you must write also. But come out if you possibly can.”

The home-coming of the Rovers was, as usual, made a gala event. The three mothers had come down to meet their children and there was a happy reunion at the Grand Central Terminal, and then the three families drove off in their automobiles to their homes on Riverside Drive. A little later the fathers of the young folks came in from downtown, and that night there was a grand dinner spread for all in Tom Rover’s house.

“Gosh, it’s good to be home once more, Mother!” cried Andy, and hugged his parent from one side while his twin hugged her from the other.

“And it’s mighty good to think that we can all be together,” came from Jack. “It’s so different from what it was when the war was going on.”

“Oh, please don’t speak of the war! I never want to hear of it again!” put in Martha.

“And to think we’re all going out to Big Horn

Ranch!" burst out Fred. "Isn't that just the grandest ever?"

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE WAY WEST

"Well, we're off for Big Horn Ranch at last!"

"It certainly is a grand prospect, eh, Jack? We ought to have barrels of fun on the ranch."

"Yes, Randy, it certainly ought to make a dandy vacation."

"I'm fairly itching to get on horseback," put in Andy. "What dandy rides we shall have!"

"Maybe we'll get a chance to break in a broncho," put in Fred, with a grin.

"Don't you dare do such a thing, Fred Rover!" burst out his sister Mary. "Most likely the bronco would break your neck."

"Well, we won't bust any broncos until we get to the ranch," came with a smile from Fred's father, who had followed the young people into the sleeping car at the Grand Central Terminal.

It was the day of their departure for the West, and the young folks were quivering with suppressed excitement. Sam Rover and his wife headed the

party, which consisted of the four boys and the two girls.

Fourth of July had been spent rather quietly at home preparing for the trip. Of course, Andy and Randy had had some fun, especially with fireworks in the evening, but otherwise the young folks had been too preoccupied with their arrangements for getting away to pay special attention to the national holiday.

It had been arranged that only the Rovers mentioned above should at first make the trip to the ranch, and Gif and Spouter were to meet them in Chicago, where they would change cars for Montana. Tom Rover and his wife were to come to the ranch two weeks later and bring with them May Powell and Ruth Stevenson. Later still it was barely possible that Dick Rover and his wife would come West.

Jack's idea of chartering a private car had fallen through because not all of the party to meet at Big Horn Ranch were to go at the same time. But those now gathered had seats at one end of the sleeper along with a private compartment for Mrs. Rover and the two girls, so they were all comfortable.

The boys were in the best of spirits; and for a while Sam Rover had his hands full making Andy and Randy behave.

"I hope we strike a lot of lively cowboys, Uncle Sam," broke out Andy.

"Perhaps you'll find some of the cowboys too lively," was the answer.

Jack and Fred, as well as their sisters, were disappointed that May and Ruth had not been able to accompany them, but they were glad to know that the others would follow later to the ranch.

Soon New York was left behind and the train was speeding along the Hudson River on its way to Albany.

“Just think! By this time to-morrow we’ll be in Chicago,” remarked Martha. “Isn’t it wonderful how you can cover such a distance?”

“Do you know, I almost wish we were going out there in an auto,” returned Fred. “That would be a trip worth taking.”

“Especially if you had to put on all the extra tires along the way, Fred,” added Andy, with a grin.

“Oh, well, I guess I could do that, too, if I had to,” answered the youngest Rover boy quickly. “But the roads from here to Chicago are pretty good, they tell me, so I don’t think we’d have many punctures or blow-outs.”

“Such a trip would be dandy, only it might take more time than we’d care to spend on the way right now,” remarked Jack. “Personally I want to get out to Big Horn Ranch as soon as possible.”

“Exactly my sentiments,” came from Randy. “Me for the mountains and plains and a life in the open air!”

> “Oh, for a life in the open air,
> Under the skies so blue and fair!”

sang out Andy gayly.

“Gee, Andy is bursting into poetry!” cried Fred. “What’s going to happen next?”

“Maybe he ate something that didn’t agree with him,” giggled Mary.

“You’d better bottle up that poetry stuff, Andy,” remarked Jack. “Remember we’re going out to a

ranch owned by Songbird Powell, and he was nicknamed Songbird while at Putnam Hall because he was always bursting out into home-made poetry. Maybe we'll get a surplus of it when we get out to the ranch."

Lunch was had in the dining car, and almost before the young folks realized it the train was rolling into Albany. Here an extra car was attached, and then they were off on the long journey through the Mohawk Valley to Buffalo, Cleveland, and the great city by the Lakes.

After the train had passed Utica Andy and Randy, who found it hard to sit still, took a walk through the cars from end to end, thinking they might meet somebody they knew. They were gone so long that Sam Rover became a little worried over them.

"I think I'll hunt them up," he said to his wife. "For all we know they may have gotten into some mischief."

"More than likely they're into something," answered Mrs. Grace Rover. "They're exactly like their father Tom when it comes to stirring things up."

Sam Rover was just leaving his seat when Andy and Randy came back to the car. Their faces showed their excitement.

"What do you think!" exclaimed Randy, as he dropped into a seat. "We met that same fellow who was threatening Brassy Bangs at Haven Point."

"Was Brassy with him?" questioned Jack quickly.

"No. But two other men were with him, and it's a tough crowd, believe me."

"Where are they?" questioned Fred.

“Two cars behind. And from the way the three talked they must have gotten on at Albany. The fellow Brassy had something to do with is tough enough, but the other two men seem to be much worse. By their talk, they are cattle men, and I shouldn’t be surprised if they have been cowboys.”

“And that isn’t all!” added Andy. “They spoke about going to Arrow Junction!”

“Arrow Junction!” repeated Fred. “Why, that’s the town that Spouter said was nearest to Big Horn Ranch!”

“What were they going to do at Arrow Junction?” questioned Jack.

“They’ve got some sort of a deal on for handling horses and cattle. We couldn’t make out exactly what it was,” answered Randy. “But they certainly are a tough bunch. It looks to me as if they might have been drinking.”

“Did you hear them mention Brassy?” asked Fred.

“No. But that fellow who met Brassy at Haven Point, the chap called Bud Haddon, told the others he had struck a real snap in the East. And one of the others answered that he had noticed that Bud was rather flush.”

“It’s certainly a mystery what that fellow had to do with Brassy,” remarked Jack. And then of a sudden his face became a study.

A sudden thought had occurred to him, and it was such a horrible one that he was inclined to force it from his mind. And yet it came bobbing up time and again until Fred, who was sitting beside his cousin, noticed that something was on his mind.

“What are you thinking of, Jack? Ruth?”

“No, Fred. I was thinking of that fellow who met Brassy Bangs in Haven Point.”

“You’re wondering, I suppose, why Brassy let him have some money.”

“Partly that and partly something else, Fred. But it’s so horrible I hate to think of it.”

“Why, what do you mean, Jack?”

“Well, if you must know, it just happened to cross my mind that that Bud Haddon was hanging around Haven Point and was seen around the school several times just when Colby Hall was robbed.”

As the young major uttered these words in a low tone of voice, Fred stared at him in astonishment.

“My gracious, Jack, that’s so!” he whispered. “Isn’t it queer we didn’t think of it before? From what Andy and Randy tell of how that fellow treated Brassy I wouldn’t put it past him to be a bad one. But if he had anything to do with the robbery at the school, do you think Brassy had, too?”

“I don’t know what to think, Fred. Brassy never struck me as that sort of a fellow. He’s loud-mouthed and he’s got a big opinion of himself, and all that, but I never put him down as being crooked.”

“Neither did I. But you must remember one thing—that fellow was dinging at him for money. He said Brassy must get it or there would be trouble.”

“Yes, I’m remembering that, Fred. I must confess it looks pretty bad. But I don’t think we had better say anything until we know more about the men.”

“Let’s pump Andy and Randy all we can.”

Fred's suggestion was followed out, and the four Rover boys talked the matter over among themselves. The twins were as much surprised as Fred had been when Jack mentioned what was in his mind.

"Gee, that Bud Haddon may be the guilty one!" burst out Randy. "Why didn't we think of this before? Colonel Colby might have put a detective on his trail."

"Do you think we ought to send him a telegram or anything like that?" asked Andy.

"It wouldn't do much good. What would be better, I think, is for us to watch the man and see if we can find out more about him. If he is going to Arrow Junction we may have a chance of learning more about him out there. Did he expect to stay at the Junction?"

"I think so—or at least in that vicinity. The whole crowd is bound for some ranch out there."

"Then if we learn anything of importance against the fellow we can have the local authorities make an investigation," said Jack.

"Gosh! wouldn't it be queer if that fellow really had robbed Colby Hall and if Brassy was mixed up in it?" remarked Randy.

"It would be terrible if Brassy was guilty," answered Jack. "It would just about ruin him forever."

"Come on, Jack. Suppose you and I walk back and see if we can locate the fellows," suggested Fred. "They don't know us, so they won't be suspicious."

"Well, we might try it," was the young major's reply.

And thereupon he and his cousin walked through the

cars to the place where the twins said Bud Haddon and his two companions were seated.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE SADDLE

The two boys located the three men without any trouble. They were seated near the end of the car where there was a water cooler, and here the two lads stopped to fumble for a minute or two over the paper drinking cups and then to take their time getting a drink.

"Yes, we ought to make a lot of money on that deal, Noxley," they heard Bud Haddon say. "That is, provided we mind what we're doin'."

"Oh, there'll be no trip-up this time," answered the man called Noxley.

"I've been wonderin' how many horses there would be that we could sell," put in the third man of the group.

"I heard we could get at least twenty, Jenks. Of course, I can't tell exactly until I've looked over the ground."

"Well, twenty head of horses and two hundred head of cattle are not to be sneezed at," answered the man

called Jenks. “A fine piece of business, I’ll say,” and he laughed shrewdly.

“How long do you expect to stay at Arrow Junction before you go out to Bimbel’s Ranch?” questioned Noxley.

“Not more ’n three or four days. I’m expectin’ word from Bimbel as soon as I reach the Junction, and then I’ll know just what he wants us to do.”

“One thing I want understood,” went on Jenks crossly. “This time I get all that’s comin’ to me—no holdin’ back!”

“And I want the same, remember that,” put in Noxley sourly.

“You’ll get your full share—no fear of that,” said Haddon reassuringly. “Only remember, you’ve got to do your full share of the work, too. No shirkin’ at the last minute!”

“Well, we don’t want to be takin’ too many chances,” and Jenks shook his uncombed head dubiously.

“You’ve got to take chances in this game, Jenks. You can’t expect the hens to lay eggs right in your hands,” and Haddon chuckled at his little joke.

After that the men talked about a good time they had had in Albany the evening before. They said nothing further of what they expected to do in the West nor did Haddon mention Haven Point or Brassy Bangs.

“We might as well go back,” whispered Jack to Fred, after they had remained as long at the water cooler as they dared. The men had glanced at them carelessly, but had evidently given them scant attention.

When the two lads returned to the others they held a

consultation, and then laid the whole case before Fred's father. Sam Rover listened with interest, and his face became a study.

"It is just possible that your guess may be correct and this fellow Haddon may be guilty of robbing Colby Hall. But it would be sheer foolishness to accuse the fellow unless you had sufficient evidence against him. This talk about horses and cattle may be a perfectly legitimate affair. However, when we get to the ranch we can look into the matter further and find out what sort of place this Bimbel's ranch is and what the men really intend to do while there. That may give us a better line on this Bud Haddon and the others."

"I'm going to watch that crowd as long as they travel with us," said Jack, and the other lads said they would do the same.

A night was spent on the train, all the boys sleeping soundly, and in the middle of the forenoon they rolled into the great station at Chicago. Here the lads kept their eyes wide open and saw Haddon and his two companions walk away, dresssuit-cases in hand. Nor did they reappear when the Rovers, an hour later, hurried for the train which was to take them further westward. Evidently the three men were going to take some other train to Montana.

"Here they are! We've been waiting for you folks!" came the cry, and Spouter rushed up to the Rovers, followed by Gif.

"Ho for the glorious West!" put in Gif. "Aren't you fellows anxious to get there?" he questioned.

"Anxious doesn't express it!" answered Andy. "Why, all night long I was riding broncos and lassoing wild cattle!" and he grinned.

Sleeping-car accommodations had been reserved for all of the crowd, and they were soon making themselves at home. Then, as the train sped westward, the Rovers told their chums about Bud Haddon.

“That certainly is interesting,” said Gif. “Just the same, I can’t think that Brassy Bangs is a thief. Why, if you’ll remember, he said he had been robbed himself!”

“He might have said that just to throw dust in the eyes of the public,” answered Spouter. “To my mind it will certainly be a good thing to keep our eyes open for this fellow Haddon.”

The trip to Montana took the best part of three days, and every one in the party enjoyed the journey thoroughly. They often went out to the observation end of the train, there to view the endless panorama of prairies and mountains, forests and streams, as they sped swiftly past. The magnificent view impressed Spouter as much as anybody.

“It’s sublime—stupendously sublime,” he murmured over and over again. “The thoughts that well up in my bosom at such a sight as this are beyond the power of words to express. When I view these immense plains, these mountain tops fading away in the distance, these wild and weird torrents rushing over the rocks, and these trackless forests with often not a human abode in sight, I cannot but think——”

“That there is room here for every man, woman and child in the city of New York and then some,” finished Andy. “Gee, how can they stick in one or two miserable cubby-holes of rooms when we have all this land to draw on!”

“That’s what gets me,” put in Gif. “But they do it.

And I'm told that a whole lot of 'em would rather die huddled together than live out here where neighbors are miles apart."

The through train took them only as far as Arrow Junction. Here they alighted and then boarded a little side line, running through the hills to a dozen small stations, including Four Rocks.

"This isn't so nice," sighed Martha, when all had piled into one of the two little cars which comprised the train. Their baggage had been put in the other car, which was a combination baggage and smoking car. There were but a few other passengers in the car, including one fat woman with two small and exceedingly dirty children. There were also several cowboys, and a Chinaman who looked as if he might be a cook.

"I think dad has a Chink at our ranch," said Spouter. "Anyway, he wrote he thought he'd hire one."

They had telegraphed ahead, so that there might be some one to meet them when they arrived at Four Rocks.

"It's certainly an odd name for a railroad station," remarked Mrs. Rover to her husband.

"Four Rocks sounds substantial enough," he returned, with a smile.

"Is it much of a town?"

"Not likely to be any town at all. Perhaps a little railroad station and possibly one store, which, of course, would also be the post-office."

Sam Rover's idea of Four Rocks proved to be correct. Situated near a ridge of rocks was a small railroad station with a telegraph office and baggage room

attached, a water tower, and opposite to the station were two low buildings, one a general store and the other a place where there had once been a saloon and dance hall, but which was now closed up.

“There’s my dad now!” cried Spouter excitedly, as he leaped off the train. And the next minute he was running towards an automobile in which sat his parent. “Where is ma?” he demanded.

“She remained at the house to see that everything was in readiness when you got there,” answered Songbird Powell, as he shook hands with his son.

Close to the automobile stood a number of horses, all saddled. On one sat a bronzed cowboy, who grinned broadly at the boys and tipped his hat rather awkwardly to Mrs. Rover and the girls.

“This is my foreman, Joe Jackson,” said Songbird Powell. “Joe, this is Mr. and Mrs. Rover, and these are the Rover boys and their sisters, and this is my son and another of his chums. I guess you’ll get better acquainted a little later on,” and he smiled broadly.

“Who’s to ride on horseback?” questioned Andy quickly, “We can’t all get into that machine.”

“You boys can all ride with Joe,” answered Spouter’s father. “I thought you’d rather do that than anything else. The girls and the others can ride with me.”

“How do you know I don’t want to ride on horseback, Uncle John?” cried Martha gayly. She often called this intimate chum of her father “uncle.”

“No, Martha, you’d better ride with us now,” put in Mrs. Rover hastily. “You can do your horseback riding later on.”

"Oh, I was only fooling, Aunt Grace," the girl replied.

"I'm just crazy to see Big Horn Ranch, Uncle John," came from Mary.

"Well, I hope you'll like it," returned Songbird Powell. "I want every one of you to have the best times ever while you're here." His eyes glistened. "We ought to have a regular old-fashioned reunion." And then, unable to control himself, he broke out into a bit of his old-time doggerel.

> "I'm glad you're here.
> I hope you'll stay.
> I'll miss you much
> When you're away."

"Hurrah, Songbird, that certainly sounds natural!" cried Sam Rover, slapping his old chum on the shoulder. "You'll have to give us more of that later on."

"I haven't spent much time on verses the last few years, Sam," answered Songbird. "I've been too busy attending to business. But maybe I'll get back to it while loafing around the ranch," he added.

"Are any other people coming to the ranch?"

"Yes, one other person. And I think you'll be very much surprised to see him."

"Who is that?"

"Oh, you had better wait until he arrives," returned Songbird Powell, and began to grin as though the thought of what was coming pleased him.

The older persons and the girls waited until all the boys were safely in the saddle, and then Songbird Powell started the automobile.

"I'm leaving them in your care, Joe," he called back to his foreman, as he moved along. "Bring 'em to the ranch in safety."

"Trust me," called out the foreman promptly. "We'll be at the ranch almost as soon as you."

"Well, don't ride the horses to death," shouted back Songbird. And then in a few minutes more the automobile disappeared in the distance.

"The boys will certainly enjoy that horseback riding," said Mary.

"Glad of it," answered Songbird Powell, and as the automobile rolled onward he murmured gaily:

> "An elephant sat on a bamboo tree
> And he was as happy as he could be.
> 'To travel,' said he, 'is awfully punk
> Unless you remember to take your trunk!'"

"Oh, what a funny rhyme!" giggled Martha.

"I'll have to write that down in my scrap book," returned her cousin, and at this remark Spouter's father looked real pleased.

"Hurrah for Big Horn Ranch!" shouted Randy, waving his cap. "Come on if you're ready."

"Don't work your horses too hard at the start," cautioned Joe Jackson. "It's a good five miles to the ranch, and part of it is rather tough climbing."

"If it's tough climbing how is the automobile going to get there?" questioned Jack quickly.

"Oh, they'll go around by the river road. But that is eight miles longer. We'll take the hills."

"Then maybe we can get there first after all!" broke in Fred.

"Well, we can try, anyhow," answered the foreman of the ranch. "Do all of you boys know how to ride?"

"Sure we do!"

"Then forward it is!" And away rode the foreman with Jack and Spouter on either side of him and the others following close behind.

CHAPTER XX

AT BIG HORN RANCH

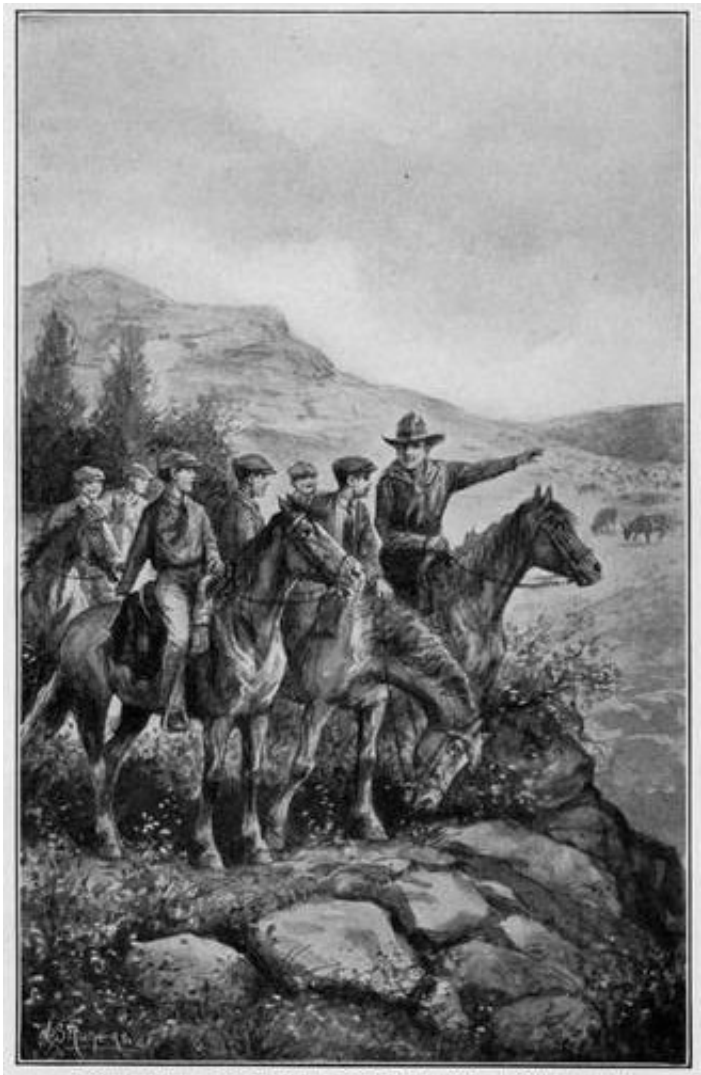
The way lay along a flat stretch of prairie bordering the river, and then up into the hills. The brushwood in the immediate neighborhood was scanty, but in the distance they could see some scrub timber backed up by a stretch of forest. Far to the westward they could see the distant mountains over which the sun was now setting.

"Come on, you fellows, come on! Don't lag behind!" shouted Spouter, and set off at a brisk pace along the well-defined trail leading to the ranch.

Joe Jackson, having seen that all of them could ride well, was quite willing to let them set their own pace.

"Only look and see where you're going!" he shouted. "And remember at the split in the trail to take the

one on the right." And then he allowed them to plunge on ahead, but kept his eyes on everything they were doing.



"OFF TO THE EASTWARD YOU CAN SEE A BIT OF OUR RANGE."

Two miles from the station the boys found they had quite a climb, and here they were forced to slow down. A little later they reached the top of the first hill.

“There off to the eastward you can see a bit of our range,” said the ranch foreman, pointing with his finger. “And those cattle yonder are our cattle.”

By the time they reached the foot of the first hill the sun was setting beyond the mountains in the west and the long shadows were creeping across the trail and over the forest beyond.

“This must be some dark trail at night,” remarked Jack.

“Dark as a tunnel,” answered Joe Jackson. “You have to carry a lantern or a flashlight when you try to ride it after dark.”

“Ever get held up?” questioned Fred curiously.

“Nary a hold-up, lad,” answered the foreman, with a grin. “We leave all that to the movie men.”

“Did you ever have a moving picture company out here?” asked Gif.

“Yes, we had one crowd out here last year. They stayed around about six weeks taking some sort of a drama, as they called it. It was funny,” added the foreman, with a chuckle. “The leading lady was scared to death of horses, and yet she had to do a little riding. The man who was having the pictures taken wanted her to smile while she was cantering along. But that smile, believe me, wasn’t anything to brag about. They ought to have brought along some

leading lady who liked horses and knew all about 'em."

"Did they use any of your outfit?"

"Oh, they used a few of our cowboys in a round-up. They wanted me to go into some of the pictures, but I told 'em there was nothing doing—that I was here to manage the ranch and not make moving pictures."

"How many men on the place?" asked Randy.

"We have six at present. But the boss is thinking of getting some more and increasing the herd."

"Did dad get his Chinese cook?" questioned Spouter.

"Yes. He's got a Chink named Hop Lung; a pretty good sort of a chap, too."

They crossed two more hills and then passed through a patch of tall timber. Here there was a rough wagon road, and the foreman explained that it was used for hauling firewood to the ranch house and the bunkhouse.

It was growing dark when the party on horseback approached the ranch. Already lights were streaming from the windows and the automobile stood in front of the wide veranda which ran around two sides of the building.

"They got here ahead of us," announced Jack.

"I thought they would," answered the foreman. "The river road is in pretty good shape just now, so I suppose the boss made fast time in driving over."

"The trail to the ranch was rougher than I expected," put in Andy. "If you tried to run a horse over it he would most likely break a leg and maybe you would break your neck."

"I've known one of our boys to go over to the station inside of twenty minutes," returned the foreman. "But he only did it to catch a train and on a bet. I'd rather take my time and save my horseflesh."

When they reached the ranch Mrs. Powell came out on the veranda to greet her son and his chums. She was a round-faced, motherly woman, and she immediately did all she could to make the young folks feel at home.

"You must be thoroughly tired out from your long trip," said she. "So we will have supper right away, and then if any of you want to go to bed you can do so."

"I can't say that I'm tired," answered Jack. "But I suppose the girls are and maybe Aunt Grace is, too."

The travelers were shown to some rooms and then told where they could wash up if they so desired.

"Supper will be ready in ten minutes," announced Mrs. Powell. "So don't take too much time in primping up," she added, with a smile to the girls. "Remember, you are on a ranch now and you can dress exactly as you please."

"I'm going to slip on a plain gingham right now," declared Martha.

Their hand baggage had been brought along on the running-board of the touring car, and a little later one of the cowboys came in with their trunks, which had been brought over from the station in a wagon. In the meanwhile the crowd sat down to a somewhat elaborate supper which Hop Lung had prepared under Mrs. Powell's supervision.

"He's a very good cook," the lady of the ranch confided to Mrs. Rover. "But he occasionally tries to

turn out some very funny concoctions, so that I find it advisable to keep my eyes on him."

"The cowboys are quite excited over the idea of having visitors here all summer," said Songbird Powell during the course of the meal. "And two or three of them are especially excited over the fact that there are going to be so many girls and ladies. You see, the brothers who used to own these combined ranches weren't married, and all they had around the houses were an Indian woman and a real old Dutch woman who was almost entirely deaf.

"Joe Jackson told me that one of the cowboys, a fellow named Hank Minno, was very bashful and had almost been on the point of giving up his job when he heard so many skirts were coming here."

"Oh, dear, I think I'd like to make the acquaintance of Mr. Hank," said Martha mischievously.

"Perhaps if he saw you coming he'd run away," returned Mary.

"Oh, I think he'll get over his bashfulness, and so will some of the others," answered Songbird Powell. "And let me tell you one thing—when I first got here I thought the men were a pretty rough crowd, but the more I get to know them, the more I'm satisfied they're all right at heart."

"Your foreman certainly seems to be a fine fellow," said Jack. "We got well acquainted with him riding over."

"He was well recommended by the former owners of the ranch, Jack. And so far I've had no occasion to find any fault with him. He seems thoroughly trustworthy."

The Powells had given their visitors their choice of

what to do concerning rooms. They could either crowd themselves a little and remain in the one ranch house, or otherwise the boys could take rooms in the other house, which was located about two hundred yards away.

“If we went over to the other place we could have things all our own way,” whispered Andy to his brother and Fred. “We could come and go to suit ourselves.”

“I think you boys had better stay in this house with us,” said Mrs. Rover. “Then we can keep an eye on you.”

“But there is no sense in all of us being crowded,” returned Sam Rover. “And the boys are certainly old enough to take care of themselves. I think we had better let this matter rest until to-morrow, and then we can see how we can arrange it.”

“If the boys go over to the other ranch house I’ll have Joe Jackson stay there with them,” said Songbird. “He’ll know how to make them line up if anything goes wrong.”

Several days later it was arranged for all the boys to take their belongings and settle down in the other ranch house so far as rooming was concerned. They were to have their meals in the main house. The foreman of the ranch went with them, taking a room in a corner where he could watch what was going on if it became necessary to do so. The boys took three connecting rooms, the twins occupying one, Jack and Fred another, and Spouter and Gif the third.

On the second day at the ranch the boys began to feel quite at home. Accompanied by the men, they had visited many points of interest and had become acquainted with all the cowboys, and also with Hop

Lung, the cook.

“Wellee nice boys,” remarked the cook, after they had been chatting with him and gone their way. “Wellee nice boys. Me cookee heap good dinner for ’em.” And then he dived into his kitchen to start his preparations for the next meal.

The boys found all the cowboys friendly. One of them could do some marvelous stunts with a lasso, and, urged by the foreman, gave an exhibition which interested the lads exceedingly.

“Why, that fellow is as good as anybody on the vaudeville stage,” remarked Fred. “I never dreamed so much could be done with a rope. Just see how he whirled it around his body and between his legs and over his head!”

“Yes, and how he lassoed those three running horses all in a bunch,” added Fred. “That’s what got me.”

“He ought to be in a Wild West Show,” put in Jack.

“I’ll have the boys give you an exhibition of shooting this evening,” said the foreman, and he was as good as his word.

Some of the cowboys proved to be remarkable shots both with the rifle and the pistol. But here the boys, especially Fred and Jack, felt at home, and they, too, showed what they could do.

“Rattlesnakes and tarantulas!” exclaimed one of the cowboys, Hank Minno, the fellow who was supposed to be so bashful. “You kids sure kin shoot some. I s’pose you learned it at that there military school you’ve been goin’ to.”

“Yes,” answered Fred. “Although we sometimes do a little practicing when we’re at home. Down in the

long cellar of our house."

"Well, it's a good thing to know how to shoot, lad. Sometimes it comes in mighty handy like," answered Hank Minno.

CHAPTER XXI

HOP LUNG AND THE FISH

By the end of the first week all of the boys felt thoroughly at home on Big Horn Ranch. They had visited many points of interest, including the cowboys' bunkhouse and also the big range to the eastward, and they had likewise tramped over a number of the hills and tried their hand at fishing in the river.

"It certainly is one dandy place," remarked Jack to the others one day when they were coming up to the house from the river, each with a fair-sized string of fish to his credit.

"We certainly never had such fishing as this in the East," answered Gif, as he looked at his string admiringly. "Just look at the size of 'em, will you?"

"I wonder what Hop Lung will say when he sees them," remarked Fred.

"I've got a scheme!" cried Andy. "Let's have a little fun," and thereupon he unfolded to the others what

he had in mind to do. They readily agreed to his suggestion, and all came up to the ranch house by a roundabout way. Then Spouter called out loudly:

“Hop Lung! Hop Lung! Come out here a minute!”

A moment later the Chinese cook appeared, a long soup ladle in on one hand and a carving knife in the other.

“You callee me?” he queried.

“Yes,” answered Spouter. “I want you to come around to the front of the house and tell me what you know about this,” and he motioned to the cook to follow him around to the big veranda.

No sooner had their chum and the cook disappeared than the others ran into the kitchen. Here at one side was a home-made kitchen cabinet, the top within a foot of the ceiling.

“See if you can find the big bread-board,” said Randy. “I guess that will answer our purpose.”

“And here is the fishing line,” added his twin. “We can run it from the ceiling over to the window and then outside.”

The line was run to the window as mentioned, then fastened to the ceiling back of the cabinet, and then to the back end of the board, which was placed flat on the top of the cabinet. On the board the boys placed the fish, laying them out in a row from front to back. One fish was placed on the pulled-out shelf of the lower part of the cabinet.

“Now then, clear out before Hop Lung catches us,” said Andy. And the lads lost no time in disappearing.

In the meanwhile Spouter had taken the Chinese cook to the front of the ranch house and then to an

out-of-the-way corner where there was a large spider's web.

"Hello, he's gone now!" exclaimed Spouter, in a tone of disappointment. "Do you see him anywhere, Hop Lung?"

"Hop Lung see what?" demanded the puzzled cook.

"Why, that great big blue and gold spider with white feet!"

"Blue an' gol' spide?" queried Hop Lung. "See black spide."

"Oh, no, I don't mean the black spider. I mean that great big blue and gold spider about that long," and Spouter showed up his two forefingers six inches apart.

"Noee see spide so long dat," answered the Chinese cook, shaking his head doubtfully. "Sploutel maybe see catpillal."

"No, it wasn't a caterpillar. It was a spider. Although I think it might have had wings."

"Um, wings! Spide he all the samee buttelfly," announced Hop Lung. "No see him," and he got down on his hands and knees to peer up into the corner to make certain.

Spouter continued to engage his attention until he heard the boys coming around the corner of the house. Then he turned to them as if in surprise.

"Hello! I thought you fellows were off fishing," he remarked.

"So we were," answered Gif calmly.

"I got a nice little fish, Hop Lung. I laid him in the kitchen for you," remarked Andy.

“You git only one flish?” queried the cook in surprise.

“Well, maybe you can catch more,” put in Randy.

“Hop Lung no go flishee. Hop Lung cookee,” was the calm reply. And then the cook walked back to the rear of the ranch house.

Watching their chance, the boys stole back, some to the window where was located the string which had been attached to the board on the top of the cabinet, and others to another window from which they might see what would take place. Hop Lung had gone inside and picked up the fish left on the cabinet shelf. He looked it over, wiped off the shelf carefully, and then took up the fish and disappeared into the pantry with it.

“Now then, Andy!” whispered his twin. And thereupon Andy gave the string in his hand two or three little jerks. From the board on the top of the cabinet a fish fell down to the shelf below.

It had hardly fallen in place when Hop Lung came from the pantry. He looked to see how matters were going on the stove, and then turned again to the cabinet.

A queer look came over his face when he saw the fish lying in the same place that the first had occupied. He looked toward the door to find no one there.

“Him funny,” he murmured in his Pidgin-English. “Him vellee funny.” Then he took up the second fish and walked into the pantry with it.

No sooner had he done this than Andy, doing his best to control his laughter, jiggled the string again. This time, as luck would have it, two fish came

down, to light side by side on the cabinet shelf.

Again Hop Lung entered the kitchen and again he looked at what was cooking on the stove. He stirred the mass in one of the pots carefully, and then came back to his cabinet to get some seasoning.

When he saw the two fish lying there his eyes nearly started out of his head. He jabbered something in his native tongue and then looked around wildly, first to one side of the kitchen and then the other. Then he looked toward the door leading to the dining room and then he came to the door leading to the yard.

“Duck!” was all Andy said, and he and the others lost no time in getting out of sight.

Hop Lung looked carefully around the yard and then came slowly back into the kitchen. He walked again to the stove to see that nothing was burning, and finally came back to the cabinet and picked up the two fish gingerly. Meanwhile, the boys tiptoed their way back to their original positions at the windows.

“He’ll begin to think the cabinet is haunted,” whispered Jack.

“Either that, or else he’ll think he’s bewitched,” answered Gif.

And both were about right, for the poor Chinaman looked all around the cabinet and even behind and under it, and then he looked under the table and the chairs. Finally, still bewildered, he walked into the pantry with the fish, which he carried before him at arm’s length, as if afraid it might bite him.

“Better give him a shower now, Andy,” whispered his brother, and thereupon Andy gave the string a strong pull which sent all the remaining fish tumbling down on the cabinet and the floor. The

noise reached Hop Lung in the pantry, and he came forth on a run.

When he saw the quantity of fish that had appeared so miraculously he was nearly dumbfounded. With eyes and mouth wide open and hands up-raised he uttered a sudden yell of fright and dove through the doorway leading to the dining room and the living room beyond.

In the living room Mrs. Rover and Mrs. Powell were sitting doing some sewing. The sudden appearance of the Chinaman caused them to look up in astonishment.

“What is the matter, Hop Lung?” demanded Mrs. Powell, as she sprang to her feet.

“Flishee! Flishee!” screamed the cook. “Kitchen full flishee! Hop Lung no knowee where flishee come! One flishee—two flishee—two flishee more—whole blame kitchen flishee!” spluttered the cook, his eyes rolling from one side to the other.

“Gracious me! is the man crazy?” asked Mrs. Rover, rising. “What does he mean by ‘flishee?’”

“Flishee! Flishee!” repeated Hop Lung. “No flishee—all flishee!”

“I can’t imagine what he’s driving at,” remarked Mrs. Powell. “Where is the trouble, Hop Lung? In the kitchen?”

“Les, Miz Plowell. Kitchen all flishee!”

Without ado the lady of the ranch marched into the kitchen, followed by Mrs. Rover. All the ladies could see were the freshly-caught fish resting on the cabinet shelf and the floor.

“I don’t see anything the matter here except that

some of your fish are on the floor," remarked Mrs. Powell calmly. "You had better pick them up and wash them off."

"Did the boys catch those fish?" asked Mrs. Rover. "They said they were going fishing a couple of hours ago."

"Boys clatchee one flishee," announced Hop Lung. Then a sudden idea entered his head, and he made a quick leap to the yard door. He was just in time to see the boys trying to retreat, all laughing merrily.

"You foolee Hop Lung! You foolee Hop Lung!" he shrieked wildly, and of a sudden came back into the kitchen, scooped up several of the fish, and ran outside again. Wildly he threw one fish after another at the lads.

"Hop Lung, stop that!" commanded Mrs. Powell sternly. "Those fish are too good to throw away!"

"Bloys fool Hop Lung," was the reply. "One flishee—two flishee—four flishee—all whole lot flishee," he continued, trying his best to explain. And then by pantomime he showed how he had found the first of the fish and placed them in the pantry.

"It's nothing more than some of their tricks, Hop Lung," said Mrs. Powell. "They had no right to play such tricks, and I'll call them to account for it. But you had better pick up the fish which you threw outside. They're too good to be thrown away."

"Hop Lung flix bloys, play flishee tlick," answered the Celestial. And then a little later he set about preparing supper.

The boys did not think it wise to return to the house just then, and so wandered off to the stable where the ranch horses were kept.

"It was certainly a rich joke," remarked Fred, with a chuckle.

"I'll bet Hop Lung will have it in for us for that," returned Randy.

And Hop Lung did have it in for them, as they were to learn in the near future.

CHAPTER XXII

A HORSE AND A SNAKE

During the days which followed at Big Horn Ranch the Rover boys and their chums asked Joe Jackson if he knew Bud Haddon and the other men who had been with him.

"Yes, I know Haddon," answered the foreman of the ranch. "He used to work for Bimbel on a ranch on the other side of the river; but I think he left there several months ago."

"Well, if he did, I rather think he's going back," answered Jack. "Can you tell us anything about him?"

"Oh, I imagine he's as good as the average fellow around Bimbel's place," answered Joe Jackson. "You see, none of our crowd have much to do with that outfit. Bimbel is a hard fellow to get along with, and some of the men working for his outfit have rather

shady characters." The foreman looked at the boys curiously. "How do you happen to know the fellow?"

The lads had come to like the foreman very much and felt that they could trust him thoroughly, so they told their story in detail, to which Jackson listened with interest.

"Looks to me as if Haddon was trying to blackmail that kid Bangs," was his comment. "That is unless there was something in the talk about that barn being burned with the horses. It's just possible that fellow Bangs had something to do with it and Haddon was making him pay for keeping his mouth shut."

"Do you know anybody by the name of John Calder whose barn burned down?"

"No. That couldn't have been anywhere around here or I certainly would have heard about it. But there's one thing I do know," added the foreman suddenly. "There's a man named Jarley Bangs who owns a ranch on the other side of the river—a small place next to the one run by Bimbel."

"Jarley Bangs!" exclaimed Fred. "Do you suppose it could be Brassy Bangs' father?"

"I don't think so," answered Gif. "I believe Bangs' folks live in Wyoming."

"But this Bangs may be some relative of his," put in Spouter.

The matter was talked over a while longer, but the boys could learn little further from the foreman.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Joe Jackson at last. "I'll put it up to some of the cowboys. They may know more about Bimbel and his outfit and about

Jarley Bangs than I do. Bangs has a reputation for being a very queer and miserly man, but that's about all I can say of him."

The boys, and even the girls, spent quite a little of their time in the saddle. Both Mary and Martha had learned to ride while at home, using the bridle path in Central Park, so they felt at home when galloping over the plains.

"This outing is going to do Mary a world of good," confided Mrs. Rover to Mrs. Powell. "She has always been so timid."

The river in which the boys went fishing and also bathing was a broad, shallow stream which could be forded in many places with ease. So far, however, the lads had remained on their side of the watercourse. But one day Jack proposed that they go off on horseback and do a little exploring on the other side.

"We might ride past the Bimbel place, and also the one Jarley Bangs owns," said he. "Who knows but what we may catch sight of Bud Haddon and his crowd."

"We don't want to get into any trouble with those fellows," put in Fred quickly.

"Oh, they can't touch us!" exclaimed Andy. "They don't even know us. And we've as much right to use the trails around here as anybody—the land isn't fenced in."

"Yes, but you know what Jackson said," went on Fred. "He said the Bimbel outfit wasn't a very nice one and that Bangs was very miserly and peculiar. That sounds as if both places were good ones to steer clear of."

"Oh, come on! Let's go anyhow," put in Spouter. "I'm anxious to know what sort of neighbors we have. They can't find any fault with us for coming over when they find out that my father owns this ranch."

The boys talked this matter over several times, and the next day obtained permission to take the horses and go off for a day's outing along the river. They were to take their lunch with them, and did not expect to come back until evening.

"I wish we could go along," sighed Martha.

"We'll take you along next time, Martha," answered her brother. "This time I'm afraid the ride will be a little too long for you."

"Never mind, Martha and I will take a little ride of our own," declared Mary. "We can go up to the edge of the woods and pick some wild flowers."

"Let's do it!" answered her cousin quickly. "One of the cowboys tells me there are all sorts of wild flowers up there near one of the springs."

Hop Lung was told to prepare a lunch which the boys might take along with them, and set to work immediately. As he got the things ready the Celestial had a faraway look in his eyes and once or twice he stuck out his tongue suggestively.

"One flishee—two flishee—lot flishee," he murmured to himself. "Hop Lung fixee boys," and he smiled in his own peculiar way.

The day dawned bright and clear, and immediately after breakfast the boys leaped into the saddle and with good-natured shouts swung the sombreros they were wearing, and started off on their ride. Each had equipped himself with a pistol, although they expected to do no shooting, and several carried small

saddlebags containing their food and drink, the latter placed in a couple of thermos bottles. They also carried feed for the horses.

“Whoop-la!” shouted Andy gaily. “Come on, fellows! let’s put distance between ourselves and the ranch.”

“Better take it a little easy at the start, Andy,” remonstrated Gif. “Remember we expect to cover quite a few miles, and we don’t want to wear out the horses at the start.”

“We’ll let Spouter set the pace,” announced Jack, for he had not forgotten that they were all guests of the lad mentioned.

They had questioned the foreman regarding the lay of the land, and he had drawn up a rough map for them which Jack carried. Inside of half an hour they reached the fording place he had mentioned, and there crossed the stream, coming out on the side of a small hill.

“I wonder if we’ll come across any wild animals,” remarked Fred, as they pushed along a well-defined trail leading to the top of the hill and through a small patch of scrub timber further westward.

“From what Joe Jackson said, I don’t think there’s very much left in this immediate vicinity,” answered Spouter. “You see, the cowboys have scared most of the animals away. Of course, they occasionally come across a bobcat or a mountain lion, and then we might come across a wolf or a fox or some jackrabbits, or even a bear.”

“Well, please don’t let ’em come at us in a bunch!” cried Randy, with a grin. “One at a time, please.”

“It’ll be our luck not to see a thing worth shooting,” declared Fred. “I wouldn’t give five cents for our

chances of bringing down anything."

Fred had scarcely spoken when the horse Gif was riding shied suddenly to one side, throwing Gif into some low bushes. Then the horse gave a snort and leaped ahead on the trail, not stopping until he had covered a hundred yards or more.

"Hello! what's the trouble?" exclaimed Jack, bringing his own steed to a halt. "Are you hurt, Gif?"

"No. I'm all right. But what startled that horse?" demanded the other lad, as he scrambled to his feet. Then he gave a sudden yell. "It's a snake! Look out!"

All looked in the direction pointed out by Gif, and there saw a black object wriggling away through the brushwood. As quickly as they could Jack and Spouter, who were close by, pulled out their pistols and fired at the snake. They saw the reptile rise up in the air, turning and twisting, and then disappear from sight between the rocks.

"What's up? What are you shooting at?" cried Fred, galloping to the spot.

"A snake. He scared Gif's horse and threw Gif into the bushes."

"Where is he?"

"I guess he got away, although I think we wounded him," answered Jack.

"It's funny how that horse shied," said Spouter. "Maybe he stepped right on the snake."

"That might be," put in Fred. "Maybe the snake was sunning himself and didn't notice our approach until the horse stepped on him. Then he switched around, and that must have started the horse off. I wonder if we can catch him."

“I think so,” answered Spouter. “Gosh! I’m glad no one was bit. That snake looked to be of pretty good size.”

While Spouter and Jack hurried forward to capture the runaway horse, Gif was assisted to the back of the steed Randy rode.

“I’m glad I didn’t go out on my head on the rocks,” remarked Gif, as the boys went forward. “I might have broken my neck.”

“Yes, you picked out just the right place to fall into,” answered Andy.

“I didn’t pick it out. I went where I was sent,” returned the other lad calmly. “After this I’m going to keep my eyes peeled for more snakes.”

“I think we had better all do that,” said Fred. “Gee! I’d forgotten all about those pests.”

When they reached the runaway horse they found him still somewhat skittish. But he was soon calmed down, and then Gif remounted him, and they set off along the trail as before.

“Well, we didn’t exactly meet a wild animal,” remarked Randy. “But we met something just as bad.”

Presently the boys came to a spot where the river wound around the hill, and beyond this was a broad stretch of plains, apparently many miles in extent. Far to the southward they could see some tall timber.

“The Bimbel ranch must be somewhere in this vicinity,” declared Jack.

“Yes, and the Bangs place can’t be so very far off,” returned Fred.

But distances in the open air are deceiving, and the

boys rode along over the plains for the best part of an hour before they reached a spot where the trail branched in several directions. Here they came to a halt, wondering which way to turn next.

“It’s too bad they don’t put up a few signboards out here,” grumbled Randy. “How is a fellow going to know where he’s heading?”

“I suppose the natives know these trails just like we know the main streets of New York City,” answered Jack. “And that being so, they don’t need any signboards.”

Jack had consulted the rude map given to him by the ranch foreman, but this did not seem to have upon it the forks of the trail.

“I suppose those cowboys would know at once which was the main trail and which were only side trails,” said Gif.

The boys were still uncertain which way to turn when Fred set up a cry of amazement.

“Here comes an auto, boys! What do you know about that?”

“An auto!” several of them repeated. “Where?”

The youngest Rover pointed with his finger, and there, to the astonishment of every one in the party, they beheld a small touring car coming across the plains at a speed of twelve or fifteen miles an hour. It was running in a curiously haphazard fashion.

“What a way to run an automobile!” ejaculated Randy.

“Maybe the driver is getting out of the way of holes,” answered Jack. And then he added quickly: “There isn’t any driver!”

Completely mystified, the boys stared at the oncoming automobile. For a moment it seemed heading directly for them, but suddenly swerved and started off across the plains in another direction.

“It is empty!” ejaculated Andy. “It’s running by itself!”

CHAPTER XXIII

JARLEY BANGS

“What do you know about that!”

“Who ever heard of an automobile running around by itself?”

“It’s gotten away from somebody,” came from Jack. “Just look at it skating over the ground!”

“Come on! Let’s stop the blamed thing!” shouted Andy, and started off on horseback after the runaway car.

“You’ll have a sweet job catching that auto,” declared his twin. Nevertheless, he followed Andy, and, not knowing what else to do, the others did the same.

The automobile was of a cheap variety, and clattered noisily on its way, with one cylinder occasionally missing fire. It had been running in a snakelike

course, but now it seemed to be making something of a circle.

“By jinks! I think it’s coming back here!” exclaimed Fred suddenly.

“It isn’t running as fast as it was,” declared Spouter. “Maybe it’s going to stop.”

“I’m going to see if I can’t get aboard!” cried Jack, with sudden determination, and headed his horse behind the touring car, which was still moving at a fair rate of speed.

Once one of the front wheels went down in a hole, and then the car slued around and started off, heading almost for the boys.

“Look out!”

“Get out of the way there or you’ll be run down!”

Wild cries rent the air, and the young horsemen scattered in every direction. But Jack was watching his chance, and as the car slued around once more he managed to leap from his horse and clutch the side of the automobile. Then he leaped into the car and turned off the power, and in a few seconds he brought the automobile to a standstill.

“This is the queerest adventure I ever heard of,” declared Gif, when the brief excitement had come to an end. “Who ever heard of meeting a runaway auto like this?”

“I guess we can be thankful that we weren’t run down,” returned Fred. “You took a big chance, Jack, in jumping on board as you did.”

“Oh, it wasn’t such a risk,” answered his cousin modestly. “I think the auto was getting ready to stop anyhow.”

“I wonder where the owner is?” questioned Andy.

“Perhaps the auto struck a stone and threw him out!” exclaimed Spouter suddenly. “He may be lying along the trail somewhere stunned or dead.”

“I guess the best thing we can do is to see if we can locate the owner,” declared Gif, after a pause.

“Come on, Spouter. You get in the auto with me and we’ll run it back in the direction it came from,” said Jack. “The other fellows can follow and bring our horses.”

“Do you think you can run this car?” questioned Spouter.

“Sure I can! It isn’t much different from the cars I’m used to even though it’s a cheap one,” was the reply.

Spouter dismounted and was soon beside Jack. The power was again turned on and the car moved on with many a little jerk and jangling of metal-ware.

“It’s next door to a bit of junk,” remarked Jack, as they moved forward along the trail at a rate of about fifteen miles an hour. “I think if a fellow tried to make real speed with it it would fall to pieces.”

“Sounds to me as if it needed oiling,” ventured Spouter.

“Yes, it needs oiling, and new springs, and a new engine, and a new chassis and a few other things, and then it would be quite a good car,” answered Jack, with a grin.

The two lads in the car had covered less than a mile, and the others were coming up behind them, when they saw a man running toward them and waving his arms wildly.

“Hi there! Stop!” called out the man. “Stop, I tell

you! If you don't stop I'll have the law on you!"

As soon as he saw the man Jack slowed up and came to a standstill by the side of the fellow. He was a tall, lean man of about fifty, with a strangely wrinkled and sallow face and long, drooping, reddish mustache. He had a pair of greenish-brown eyes that seemed to bore the boys through and through as he gazed rather savagely at them.

"What do you mean by running off with my car?" he demanded, as he shook his fist at the lads.

"Is this your car?" questioned Jack.

"You know well enough it's my car!" blustered the man. "And I demand to know what you mean by running away with it!"

"We didn't run away with it," answered Spouter.

"Yes, you did!"

"We did not!" put in Jack. "We found it back there on the plains running around all by itself."

"What? You expect me to believe such a story as that?" exclaimed the tall man, glaring at them more ferociously than ever. "Running around by itself! How could it be doing that? You took it from where I left it, up by the trees yonder!" and he pointed to a quantity of tall timber some distance away.

By this time the other boys were coming up, bringing with them the two unused horses. The man gazed at them in surprise and also noted the two steeds that were not being used.

"Maybe you're telling the truth and maybe you ain't," went on the man sourly. "I'd like to git at the bottom of this." Thereupon the boys related what had taken place and Spouter mentioned the fact that

his father was the owner of Big Horn Ranch.

“Oh, then you’re Mr. Powell’s son, eh?” cried the man. “Are you the boy who went to Colby Hall with my nephew, Lester Bangs?”

“Is Lester your nephew?” queried Spouter. And as the man nodded shortly, he added: “Then you must be Mr. Jarley Bangs?” and again the man nodded.

“I think you ought to thank our chum here, Jack Rover, for bringing your car back to you, Mr. Bangs,” remarked Gif. “If he hadn’t jumped from his horse into the car the machine might be racking itself to pieces out on the prairie now. It was doing all sorts of stunts when he jumped aboard and shut off the power.”

“I can’t understand this nohow,” grumbled Jarley Bangs. “If what you say is true, how in thunder did that car git started? I left it by the edge of the woods while I went in to look over some timber that we thought of gitting out this fall. All at once I heard the engine go off with a bang, and when I ran out of the woods to see what was doing the car was gone.”

“Was any one with you?” questioned Spouter.

“No. I came out alone. Lester wanted to come along, but I told him to stay at the ranch and do some work. He seems to think that all he’s out here for is to play.”

“Oh, then Lester is staying with you, is he?” queried Fred.

“Yes. His folks let him come up for a couple of months. Then he’s going back to his home in Wyoming, and after that he’s got to return to that military school. I think it’s a fool notion to send him to that school. If I was his father I’d make him stay

out here and go to work."

"You don't suppose Lester tried to start the car, do you?" questioned Andy.

"How could he if he was at the ranch? But wait a minute! He said something about going fishing in that brook that flows through the woods. Maybe he did come up that way, after all."

"Does he know how to run the auto?" asked Randy.

"Yes, he does. But I don't let him run it very often because he's so careless I'm afraid he'll ruin the machine—he bangs her over the rocks something awful. I ain't got no money to waste on a new car. This has got to do, even if it is kind of used up."

"Maybe Brassy—I mean Lester—came up and tried to start the car while the gears were in mesh," suggested Jack; "and then when the car started to run away perhaps he got scared and ran away, too."

"If he did anything like that he'll have an account to settle with me!" exclaimed Jarley Bangs, his eyes glowing with anger. "That boy is getting too fresh. I said he could come up here, thinking he'd do some work around the place and so earn the money that I promised him for his schooling. But evidently he thinks more of having a good time than he does of working. He is forever fooling around the car and wanting to run it; so I wouldn't put it past him to do what you suspect. As soon as I git home I'll ketch him and make him tell me the truth," continued Jarley Bangs, with a determined shake of his head.

After that he questioned Spouter concerning the ranch Mr. Powell had purchased and spoke of the men who had previously owned the place.

"These city fellows think they kin come out here and

make a fortune on a ranch," he growled. "But after they've owned a place a year or two they find it ain't so easy. A man has got to hustle like all git-out to make a living."

"Where is your ranch located?" asked Fred.

"Our buildings are right behind that patch of timber," was the reply. "It's not so very much of a place, but it's good enough for me."

"And where is the Bimbel ranch?" questioned Gif.

"That's up to the northward, over the top of yonder hill. But you young fellows had better give Bimbel a wide berth," went on Jarley Bangs, with a shake of his head.

"Why?" asked Spouter.

"He don't like no strangers hanging around, that's why. If a stranger comes up to his door Bimbel always reaches for his gun. He had trouble years ago with some tramps, and he never got over it."

After that Jarley Bangs had but little more to say. The boys had left the touring car, and now the man jumped inside, saw to it that everything was in order, and then asked Spouter to crank up for him.

"Ain't no use to waste time here," he remarked. "I've got to git back to what I was doing. I'll tell Lester I saw you, and if he wants to he kin come over to Big Horn Ranch and visit—he ain't of much account around my place. And I'll git at the bottom of what happened to this auto, too, even if I have to lick it out of him."

"I don't think Lester will care to visit our ranch," answered Spouter coldly.

"Well, I ain't got nothing to say about that one way

or the other. Now I'm off," and with a short nod of his head Jarley Bangs threw in the gears of his machine and rattled away, slowly gathering speed as he proceeded.

"A kind, considerate man, not!" exclaimed Andy in disgust.

"How politely he thanked Jack for returning his car," added Spouter.

"And the beautiful invitation we got to visit his place," put in Randy.

"I wonder if Brassy really started that car on him?" questioned Fred.

"It might be," answered Gif. And then he added: "Gee, I'm sorry for Brassy if he has to live with such an uncle as that! Wouldn't you think he'd rather stay at home?"

"Perhaps it's a case of money," put in Randy. "Didn't you hear what Mr. Bangs said about paying for tuition at Colby Hall? Brassy's folks may be quite poor, and they may be depending on this uncle for financial aid."

CHAPTER XXIV

A NEW ARRIVAL

After the disappearance of Jarley Bangs the Rover boys and their chums continued their trip on horseback.

“Let’s move over the hill in the direction of the Bimbel ranch,” suggested Spouter. “I’d like to get a bird’s-eye view of that outfit.”

“Perhaps we had better not go too close,” advised Fred. “Bimbel may be getting out a shotgun for us.”

“I guess it isn’t as bad as all that, Fred. Those things might have happened years ago when the country was more sparsely settled and when there were more bad men around. I don’t take much stock in what Bangs said. Probably he and Bimbel have quarreled. He struck me as being a man who could get into a dispute very easily.”

“Oh, I was only fooling,” answered Fred. “I wouldn’t be afraid to ride right up to his door. That is, in the daytime. Of course, if we did it at night he might become suspicious.”

“Say, do you fellows know that it’s five minutes to twelve?” questioned Andy, after consulting his watch. “I move that we keep our eyes open for some place where we can take it easy and have lunch.”

“And I second the commotion,” returned his brother, joking in a way their father had made familiar to them.

The boys rode on for half an hour longer, and then reached the top of the hill they were ascending. Here they could look a long distance in all directions.

“Some view, I’ll say,” declared Jack, as he surveyed the panorama. “What a picture for an artist to paint!” and he pointed to the majestic mountains to the westward.

"Just look at the river—how it glistens and sparkles in the sunshine," burst out Spouter. "See how it winds in and out like a silvery ribbon among the hills and brushwood and then comes out to cut the broad and fertile prairie in the far distance."

"Spouter, you'll have to write an essay about this when you get back to the Hall," said Fred, with a grin.

"Gee, don't mention school at a time like this!" burst out Andy. "I want to forget all about studying until it's absolutely necessary to go back to it. And don't forget it's high time to eat," he added.

They moved along slowly and presently selected a spot for their temporary camp. This was a short distance from the trail they had been following. It was at the edge of a patch of timber where they were sheltered from the rays of the sun which were now quite warm.

"We'll be in the shade here, and yet just see the view we'll have," cried Gif.

"Suits me," announced Spouter promptly; and the others agreed that the spot was a first-rate location.

It did not take the six chums long to give the horses their feed and then to empty the saddlebags and prepare their mid-day meal. They had brought along chicken as well as roast-beef sandwiches, hard boiled eggs, pickles, and a large cake, and also a bag of doughnuts which Hop Lung had learned to make from Mrs. Powell and of which the Celestial was justly proud. They also had with them a thermos bottle of hot cocoa and another of coffee, all fixed ready to drink.

"Well, Hop Lung certainly spread himself for us,"

said Jack, as he took up one of the fat chicken sandwiches and surveyed it with satisfaction. Then he turned to the twins. “What are you grinning about?” he questioned quickly.

“Oh, I was only thinking about the trick we played on the Chink,” chuckled Andy.

“And I was thinking of the same thing,” put in his twin.

“It’s a wonder he didn’t try to get square with us for that,” came from Fred. “An American would be sure to try it.”

The long ride in the open air had made all of the boys hungry, and it was not long before they had disposed of a large part of the sandwiches, pickles and eggs, washing the meal down with cocoa and coffee and also with water from a regular water bottle Spouter carried.

“Now I guess it’s about time we passed around some of the cake,” remarked Jack, presently.

“I think I’ll start on a doughnut,” answered Gif.

The cake was in a square tin and had been cut ready for use. In a few seconds all of the boys were munching away lustily.

And then something happened! It was Fred who was the first to notice that the piece of cake he was devouring had a peculiar puckery taste. He rolled some of the cake around in his mouth, and then suddenly ejected it, and just as he did this Andy dropped the doughnut he was devouring.

“Oh my! What’s the matter with that cake?”

“Say, this doughnut tastes like fire!”

“Gee, my mouth is burning up!”

“Give me some of that water, quick! My tongue is getting blistered!”

“What do you suppose is in this cake, anyhow, and in the doughnuts?” demanded Jack, as he, too, made a wry face and stopped eating.

“Gracious me! do you suppose Hop Lung put the wrong stuff in the cake and in the doughnuts?” demanded Spouter anxiously.

“Oh, this is awful!” groaned Gif. “I’m burning up inside!” And he put both hands on his stomach.

“Maybe we’re poisoned!” suggested Randy. He made a wild dive for the water bottle, and this was passed around from hand to hand, each lad drinking eagerly in an endeavor to wash the burning taste from his mouth and throat.

“I know what’s the matter,” said Jack, after the most of the excitement was over. “Hop Lung doctored the cake and the doughnuts to get square with us for the trick we played on him.”

“I wonder if that’s so?” questioned Andy soberly.

“Sure, it’s so!” broke in Gif. “That Chink wasn’t as slow as you thought, Andy.”

“Gosh, my mouth burns yet!” grumbled Randy, taking a drink of cocoa. “That’s the worst dose I ever chewed. What do you suppose he put in the cake?”

“Tasted to me like a combination of cayenne pepper, mustard, and a few things like that,” answered Jack.

“Then the whole cake and all the doughnuts must be no good.”

“That’s too bad! And I had my heart set on a nice doughnut,” answered Spouter. “Just the same, I can’t blame Hop Lung.”

“Well, anyway, let’s be thankful the sandwiches are all right and so are the eggs,” remarked Fred.

“Maybe some of the sandwiches that are left are doctored,” put in Andy suspiciously.

“No, they look all right,” announced Gif, after an inspection. “And he couldn’t do much with the eggs while they were in their shells,” he added.

While he was speaking, and while some of the boys were still taking drinks of various kinds to clear their mouths and throats of that awful burning taste, Spouter made an inspection of the paper bag containing the doughnuts.

“Hello! here’s another little bag at the bottom of the big one,” he cried. “Let’s see what it contains.”

He dumped out the doughnuts and drew forth the smaller bag. Opening this, the lads found it contained six pieces of golden yellow pound cake, neatly wrapped in tissue paper.

“Gee! is that more of the doctored stuff?” questioned Fred.

“Maybe. But I don’t think so,” answered Spouter. “I think Hop Lung put this in for a peace offering, to be found after we had chewed on that other stuff.”

And in that surmise Spouter proved correct. The pound cake was delicious, and, having sampled it with caution to find that it was all right, the boys ate it to the last crumb with great satisfaction.

“We’d better dump all that other stuff away,” said Fred. “No use of carrying it if it isn’t fit to eat.”

“Maybe some of it is good,” returned Andy.

“Do you want to sample it and make sure?” questioned Jack, with a grin.

“Not on your life! I wouldn’t want that burning taste in my mouth again for a hundred dollars.”

The boys threw the highly-seasoned cake and the doughnuts away, repacked what was left of the other food, and then continued on their ride. The trail led through the patch of timber and then over some rather rough rocks and through some brushwood. Among the rocks they found a spring where the water was clear and cold, and here they had a most refreshing drink and watered their horses.

“It’s queer this spring is away up here on the top of the hill,” remarked Spouter. “That water must flow underground from the mountains yonder.”

“What a lot of underground streams there must be!” returned Fred.

While moving along those in the lead had kept their eyes open for more snakes. But no reptiles appeared, for which they were thankful.

“But I’m sorry we didn’t see some sort of wild animals,” said Randy, in speaking of this. “I thought sure we’d see a bear or a deer or something like that.”

Even birds seemed to be scarce in that vicinity, and the only sound that broke the stillness as they advanced was their own voices and the clatter of the horses’ hoofs on the rocks.

The trail was a well-defined one, and they could see that it had been used only a short while before.

“Half a dozen horsemen have been this way within the last few hours,” declared Gif. “Most likely they were on their way to Bimbel’s ranch.”

“I wonder if that man Haddon has gotten here yet,”

said Jack.

“More than likely,” answered Fred. “If you’ll remember, those men didn’t expect to stay in Arrow Junction very long.”

“I’d like to know more about that chap, and know exactly how he’s mixed up with Brassy Bangs,” went on the oldest of the Rover boys.

“I guess we’d all like to know that,” put in Randy.

Presently they came to a turn of the trail. Here they could see across a wide stretch of prairie to where there was a collection of low buildings, seven or eight in number. To the rear of the buildings was a corral for horses.

“It doesn’t look much different from lots of other ranches,” said Fred.

“Do you want to go any closer to it?” questioned Gif.

The boys talked the matter over, and while Andy and Randy were rather curious to get a more intimate view of the place, the others decided that they would not ride any closer on this trip.

“It’s now nearly two o’clock,” said Spouter. “And if we want to go any distance up the river it will take us until sundown to get back home.”

They turned back, and an hour or so later reached the point where they had parted from Jarley Bangs. Then they took a trail up the river and followed this until the sun, sinking over the western mountains, warned them that it was time for them to head for home.

“Say, I’ve got an idea,” announced Andy, when they came in sight of the ranch house. “Don’t let on to anybody about that doctored cake. If Hop Lung or

anybody else mentions it, just act as if nothing unusual had happened. Say the lunch was as good as any we ever had."

"That's the idea!" returned his twin. "We'll keep that Chink guessing." And it may be added here that the boys kept their word, and Hop Lung never knew how his little joke had terminated, although he felt sure in his own mind that they had received the full benefit of the trick he had played.

The six boys were still some distance from the house when they saw a man come out on the veranda and wave his hand to them. At first they thought it might be Sam Rover. But then, of a sudden, Jack let out a yell.

"Boys, what do you know about this! Do you recognize that man?"

"It's Hans Mueller!" ejaculated Fred.

"Uncle Hans!"

"Who would have thought he was coming to the ranch?"

"Hans Mueller!" murmured Andy. "I'll be glad to see him. He's as full of fun as a stray dog is of fleas!"

Hans Mueller was a man who in his boyhood days had been a boon companion of the Rover boys' fathers. When he had gone to Putnam Hall with the Rovers he had spoken very broken English, and his improvement in speech had been slow and painful. But Hans had prospered in a business way, and was now the sole proprietor of a chain of delicatessen stores in Chicago. He was unmarried, and, having no family of his own, had insisted upon it that all of his young friends call him "uncle."

“Hello der, eferypody!” called out Hans Mueller cordially, as he came down from the veranda to greet them, his fat face beaming genially.

“How are you, Uncle Hans?” cried Jack, leaping to the ground and shaking hands. “This is certainly a surprise.”

“Yes, Songpird tol’ me you wouldn’t know I vas coming,” was the answer. “How you been alreatty?”

“Fine as silk,” answered Andy gayly. And now all the boys clustered around to shake hands.

“You’re just the man we want here to help us enjoy our vacation,” put in Fred.

“Dot’s nice, Fred. I tink I vas going to haf a fine time alreatty. And I need him,” went on Hans Mueller. “Since I come from de war back from Europe, where I fights for Uncle Sam, I work like a steam horse in mine delicatessen stores. But so soon like Songpird says come out here and meet dem Rovers and you udder friends, I say to my clerks, ‘you got to run dem stores by yourselfes alreatty yet awhile. I go oud to Pig Horn Ranch and git some fresh air mine lungs in.’”

“You’ll get the fresh air all right enough,” announced Spouter. “And we’re mighty glad you’re here,” he added, and then led the way into the house.

CHAPTER XXV

PROFESSOR DUKE'S SECRET

The girls had already returned from the woods and met Uncle Hans, as they called him.

"I got somet'ing by mine trunk in for you young ladies," said Hans Mueller, with a broad smile. And later on when his trunk arrived he presented each of them with a bottle of the highest grade of olives. He also had some olives for Mrs. Powell, for use on the table.

"I import dem olives myself alreatty yet," he vouchsafed. "Nopody by Chicago has olives half so goot."

"I knew you'd be surprised to see Uncle Hans here," declared Songbird Powell. "And I knew an outing on the ranch would do him a world of good. He has been confining himself too closely to business since he got back from the war."

"It was grand of you, Uncle Hans, to fight for Uncle Sam," declared Martha.

"And vhy, I like to know?" demanded Hans Mueller. "Since I come by der United States over I been just such a goot American like anypody."

"That's the way to talk, Uncle Hans!" cried Jack, and slapped him on the shoulder.

The next day the young folks took great pleasure in showing Hans Mueller around the place.

“He vas chust like a farm, only different,” remarked the delicatessen man. “Dot iss a nice lot of cows you got, Songpird. I dink dos cows vould make apout a million pounds of frankfurters, not?” and at this remark there was a general laugh.

A few days later Jack noticed that Songbird Powell seemed to be worried over something. The owner of Big Horn Ranch held an earnest consultation with Joe Jackson, and then the foreman of the ranch rode off in hot haste, accompanied by two of his cowboys.

“What’s the matter—is something wrong?” questioned Jack of Spouter.

“Four of our best horses are missing,” answered Spouter. “The men are not sure whether they strayed away or have been stolen. Jackson and the fellows with him are going to ride along the river and see if they can find out.”

“Didn’t you say something about other horses being stolen before we got here?”

“Yes. But they didn’t belong to my father. They belonged to the men who formerly owned this ranch. They left them here, but at their own risk.”

“Were the animals now missing the horses we rode?” questioned Fred.

“No. They were the mounts used by Jackson and his men. That is, three of the horses were. The other was that beautiful black my father occasionally rode.”

“You mean Blackbird?” exclaimed Randy.

“Yes.”

“Why, I think Blackbird is the finest horse on the

ranch," declared Gif.

"He certainly is a splendid nag," answered Spouter. "And my dad thinks a great deal of him."

The horse in question was a three-year-old, shining black in color, with a peculiar diamond-shaped spot of white on his forehead and a similar spot on his chest. Because of these spots some of the cowboys often referred to him as Two-spot.

"I suppose those horses are worth some money," remarked Fred.

"Indeed they are!" declared Spouter. "I heard my father say he wouldn't take four hundred dollars for Blackbird. And the other animals must be worth at least a hundred and fifty dollars apiece. You know they always had pretty good horses on this ranch."

"I certainly hope they get some trace of the horses," said Jack.

But this hope was not fulfilled. Jackson and those with him came back disappointed, saying that they had found no trace of the animals.

About a week later came another surprise. The young folks, including the girls, had gone off to the woods for the best part of the day, and when they returned, much to their astonishment, they saw seated in rocking chairs on the veranda Ruth and May.

"My goodness!" screamed Mary. "Ruth and May! Glory hallelujah! How in the world did you get here?"

"And you never let us know!" wailed Martha, as she bounced up the steps to embrace her school chums.

"We got started sooner than we expected," answered May.

“Did you come alone?” questioned Jack, as he, too, came forward, his pleasure showing on his face.

“No, we didn’t come alone,” answered Ruth. “We came with Mr. and Mrs. Rover. They are inside with the others.”

“My mother and dad!” burst out Andy. “Where are they?” And he raced into the house, followed by his twin.

There followed a joyous reunion all around. Everybody was happy to see everybody else, and for a while it seemed as if all were trying to talk at once.

“We had a splendid trip over,” declared Mrs. Nellie Rover. “Not a single hitch all along the way. Tom had everything mapped out to the last detail.” And she gave her husband an affectionate glance.

“That’s what army discipline did for me,” answered Tom Rover. “I didn’t used to be so particular. But now I’ve got in the habit of walking a regular chalk mark.”

“Yes, I’ve walked me a chalk mark, too,” put in Hans Mueller. “I run mine delicatessen stores chust like they vas by army regulations alreatty. And it pays, belief me!”

“It’s a regular touch of old times to see you around, Hans,” said Tom, grabbing his former school chum by both arms. “How is that new pickling machine getting along?”

“Vot pickling machine you mean, Tom?” questioned Hans, looking at him blankly.

“Why, that machine you’re going to invent whereby you can grind up old oilcloth and automobile tires and make dill pickles of them.”

“I don’t vas got no machine like dot, Tom,” answered the delicatessen man in bewilderment. “I buy mine dill pickles by der barrel. Dem dill pickles grows, you can’t make ’em by no machine.”

“Oh! Then maybe it was a new sourkraut stamper,” went on Tom innocently.

“Oh, Tom, you vas joking chust like you alvays vas!” exclaimed Hans, a light breaking in on him. “Vell, I don’t care. You vas a pretty goot fellow anyhow,” and Hans smiled as broadly as ever.

“It sure is a touch of old times,” declared Songbird Powell. And then, unable to restrain himself, he burst out:

> “From among the mountain tops
> Where the brooklet flows,
> There I love to linger long—”

> “Counting up my toes,”

broke in Tom, with a twinkle in his merry eyes.

“Counting up my toes!” snorted Songbird. “Nothing of the kind! You always did knock my poetry endways, Tom. That last line was to read like this:

> “Where the sunset glows.”

The young folks had a grand time that evening singing and dancing, and did not retire until the older heads had hinted several times that they had better do so.

“Oh, Jack, it’s a splendid place to come to!” said Ruth, when she was on the point of retiring. “I know I’m going to have the best times ever.”

“And to think my Uncle John owns the place!” put in

May. “Isn’t it simply glorious?”

After that the days seemed to speed along swiftly. The boys and girls made up various parties up and down the river, and on the hills and in the woods. Once they got up a grand family picnic, and everybody attended.

During those days the boys often wondered whether Brassy Bangs would show himself. But Brassy kept out of sight, and for the time being they heard nothing further concerning him. But they did hear through Joe Jackson of Bud Haddon. That man had been met on the trail to Bimbel’s ranch in company with several other persons.

“They were a bum-looking bunch,” declared Jackson. “I wouldn’t give one of ’em house room on this ranch.”

“Haddon certainly didn’t make a very good impression on me,” declared Jack. “I’m frank to admit I think he’s a thoroughly bad egg.”

From time to time the boys had been sending letters to some of their other school chums, and a number of letters had come in return. One day Gif received a long communication from Fatty Hendry which he read in wonder.

“Here’s something that will interest all of you,” he declared, after he had finished. “I guess it clears up the mystery surrounding Professor Duke.”

“What is it?” questioned Fred eagerly.

“It’s a letter from Fatty Hendry. He’s been staying at a place named Ellenvale, which, as you know, is about thirty miles north of Haven Point. He says that Snopper Duke came from that place, and has an aged father living there.”

“Has Duke been taking care of his father?” questioned Jack.

“Yes. And his father has been very sick and has had to have several operations. It seems the operations cost a lot of money, and Duke wanted two of his younger brothers to help pay for them. But they wouldn’t contribute a cent.”

“Gee, that was certainly rough!” declared Randy. “No wonder the professor was grouchy at times.”

“That isn’t all of it,” went on Gif. “Fatty got interested and made a little investigation, and he found out that there was another brother, a little older than the professor, who had gotten into difficulties with the firm he was working for. That firm was on the point of having him arrested, so Fatty heard, but at the last minute Professor Duke came forward and settled up for him, so he wasn’t prosecuted.

“But Fatty adds in his letter that he heard this not only took every cent the professor had, but it also placed him in debt to Colonel Colby and some of his friends.”

“Well, that’s what I call hard lines!” declared Jack emphatically. “The poor professor must have been worried half to death.”

“Does Fatty say anything further about Duke’s father?”

“Yes. Since the last operation the old gentleman is feeling quite like himself again.”

“And what became of the brother who got into trouble?” asked Spouter.

“He disappeared, and Fatty says there is a report that

he went to England, where the family originally came from. I suppose Professor Duke was glad to have him go."

After this Gif handed around the letter so that all might read it. After its perusal Andy was the first to speak.

"It's too bad," he said, with a deep sigh. "I'm mighty sorry now that I didn't treat the professor with more consideration. That poor man certainly had as much of a load as anybody to carry."

"We'll have to make it up to him when we get back to Colby Hall," declared Randy. "I'm going to show him just what I think of him," he went on. "He certainly was a fine fellow to help his old father and to get his brother out of that hole."

The boys were still discussing this matter when they suddenly saw Joe Jackson dash up to the ranch house on his horse and dismount in great haste.

"Hello, something is wrong!" declared Jack.

Songbird Powell and Tom and Sam Rover had seen the approach of the foreman, and men and boys ran out to listen to what he might have to say.

"Four more horses are gone!" declared Joe Jackson. "The best horses on the ranch! And, boss, I'm certain this time that they didn't stray away. They were stolen!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CATTLE STAMPEDE

"Four more horses gone!" cried Songbird Powell in consternation. "When did this happen, Jackson?"

"Less than half an hour ago, over on the three-tree range," returned the foreman.

"And what makes you certain that they were stolen this time?"

"Because the horses had been left all properly tethered. Billy Brown and his crowd had 'em, and I know Billy is a very careful man. He's positive they couldn't have broken away."

"This is certainly getting to be a serious matter," declared Sam Rover. "Songbird, if these last four horses were stolen, it's more than probable that the first four went the same way."

"Any clue to the thief or thieves?" asked Tom Rover.

"The boys looked around and picked up a quirt that they say don't belong to our outfit. But it's a very ordinary quirt and might belong to almost anybody. Of course, they found a good many hoof marks, but they were so mixed up with the marks from the other horses they couldn't tell one from the other."

"I'll ride over to the place with you and investigate," returned Songbird Powell after a moment's thought. "Perhaps we can get on the trail of the thieves."

"Can we go along?" questioned Spouter quickly.

"No, Son. We want to use the horses. And, anyway, I think it would be better for you lads to remain

behind."

Songbird and the foreman hurried down to the horse corral accompanied by Tom and Sam. And thus the boys and girls, as well as the ladies of the household, were left by themselves.

"Gee! I'd like to go on a chase after those horse thieves," burst out Andy.

"You might get a pretty warm reception if you did that," remarked Fred. "Horse thieves and cattle rustlers are usually a bad bunch."

"It isn't likely they'll get on the trail of the horses very quickly," put in Jack. "Those fellows have too much of a start. The most they can do is to advertise the loss as widely as possible and trust to it that some one will recognize the horses, especially Blackbird."

The boys had spoken about going fishing, and Ruth and May had asked if they could go along. As a consequence the young folks spent the remainder of the afternoon along the river. They managed to catch a good mess of fish, of which they were justly proud.

"And just to think! I caught two of the fish myself!" exclaimed Ruth. "I never knew I was going to be a fisherman."

"You mustn't say 'fisherman;' you must say fisherlady," put in Andy mischievously.

The men did not return until ten o'clock that night. All were tired and hungry and glad to sit down to the meal which Mrs. Powell and the cook provided.

"It was a wild-goose chase," answered Tom Rover in reply to a question from Andy. "We followed half a dozen clues, but they didn't get us anywhere."

“What are you going to do next, Dad?” questioned Spouter.

“We sent word to Arrow Junction and several other places, and they’ll post notices giving a description of the stolen animals,” answered Songbird. “And I’ve offered a hundred dollars reward for any information leading to the recovery of the horses.”

The next day one of the cowboys came in with more information. This was to the effect that a ranch in that neighborhood, owned by a man named Cheltham, had suffered the loss of three horses, one a mare of considerable value.

“Say, this certainly is getting interesting,” said Jack, when the lads heard the older heads talking it over. “First thing we know, all the horses on the place will be gone.”

“Years ago they used to suffer from the cattle rustlers in this neighborhood,” said Spouter. “But horse stealing is something new.”

“I wonder if that fellow Bud Haddon had anything to do with it?” questioned Fred.

“I was thinking of that,” broke in Randy. “I think they ought to make an investigation.”

The boys spoke to the men about this, and there was a long discussion which ended when Songbird said he would ride over to the Bimbel ranch with his foreman and interview the men.

The visit to the Bimbel ranch occurred the next day, and the boys waited impatiently for the return of the two men to learn what Bimbel and Bud Haddon might have to say.

“Another wild-goose chase,” announced Songbird

Powell, on the return that evening. “We saw Bimbel, and he seemed as much surprised as anybody to learn of the horses being taken.”

“And what about Bud Haddon?” asked Jack.

“We didn’t see Haddon. But Bimbel said he had been at the ranch house early in the morning and he was certain Haddon knew nothing about the loss. He said Haddon and the other men were out on a range to the westward, looking after the cattle. Of course, if Haddon was away out there he couldn’t have been here taking our horses.”

“And you didn’t see any trace of the animals?” asked Spouter.

“Nothing at all. They said they hadn’t heard of the theft nor of the loss of the horses over at Cheltham’s ranch.”

After that a week passed swiftly, during which time the young folks enjoyed themselves thoroughly, not only in tramping and riding around and in fishing, but also in other sports around the ranch home. With so much level ground available, a tennis court had been laid out, and also a croquet ground, and the boys and girls enjoyed these games immensely. The lads also pitched quoits, a sport which at times had been popular at Colby Hall.

One day the boys accompanied Joe Jackson on a round-up of some cattle far down the river. This was a day full of excitement, for some of the cattle broke away and Andy and Fred happened to be separated from the rest of the crowd and got directly in line with the runaway steers.

“Hi there! Hi there! Ride out of the way!” yelled Joe Jackson at the top of his lungs.

Andy and Fred were looking in the opposite direction and did not notice the cattle until the beasts were within a hundred yards of them. Then they heard the foreman's cry and also the beating of the hoofs on the prairie.

"My gracious!" gasped Fred. "Look what's coming!"

"We've got to get out of the way and be quick about it," returned Andy, and struck his horse on the flank.

The steeds the boys were riding needed no urging, for the sudden rush of the cattle filled them with alarm. Away they bounded across the grassy plain with the maddened cattle thundering after them.

"Let's ride to one side and let 'em pass!" gasped Fred, who was badly shaken by this sudden turn of affairs. He had not dreamed that the herd of cattle would head for them in this fashion.

But to get out of the way was not easy. To one side of the plains was a series of rough rocks, while to the other side there was a brook flowing into the river, and here the ground was soft and treacherous.

"Don't go that way!" cried Andy, as he saw his cousin heading toward the brook. "You'll get stuck and you'll never get out."

"I'd rather get stuck than be trampled under foot by those beasts," panted Fred.

"No, no, Fred! Turn this way! I'm sure we can get up on the rocks somehow!" declared Andy.

The boys continued to advance with the thoroughly frightened cattle not far behind them. While being rounded up both cattle and cowboys had come upon a nest of small rattlesnakes. These had, of course, frightened the beasts, and they were still more

frightened when the cowboys had begun to shoot at the reptiles. Then a few of the cattle had started the stampede, and the rest, terrorized by the pistol shots, had followed.

As the two lads galloped on, they looked anxiously to the side where the rocks were located. Most of the places they passed were too steep to ascend. But presently Andy caught sight of a point where there was something of a trail leading upward.

“Come on this way!” he yelled to his cousin. “I think we can get up on the rocks here!”

In the meanwhile Joe Jackson and his men, followed by Jack and the others, were doing their best to get the cattle to turn back to the point from which they had started. The best herd riders were circling the edge of the rushing animals, shouting at the top of their lungs and firing their pistols. But so far this demonstration had had little effect.

“Oh, Jack! do you think they’ll be run down?” gasped Randy.

“I hope not.”

“They’re on a pair of good horses; they ought to be able to outrun the cattle,” came from Gif.

“Don’t be so sure of that,” cried Spouter. “A mad steer can go some, believe me.”

“Who ever thought they would start off like that?” went on Randy.

“It was firing at those rattlesnakes did it,” declared Jack. “Of course, I can’t blame the cowboys for doing that.”

Andy and Fred found the rocks anything but easy to ascend. They went up a few feet, and then the horses

began to slip and were in danger of rolling over, carrying their young riders with them.

“Look out!” screamed Fred. He had to catch his horse around the neck to keep from being flung headlong.

But the horses were as anxious to escape the maddened cattle as were the lads, and the steeds continued to scramble upward until they reached a ledge of rock where the footing was comparatively level.

“Do you think we’ll be all right here?” panted Fred, when he could catch his breath sufficiently to speak.

“We shall be unless some of those steers take it into their heads to climb the rocks the same way we did,” answered Andy. He was suffering from a slight bruise on his left leg where he had brushed some of the roughest of the rocks.

The horses were still alarmed, and continued to snort and stamp their feet, and the two lads for a few seconds had their hands full quieting the animals. They looked below them and saw the cattle coming on in a great mass. Some had already passed, but others were huddled close to the rocks as if on the point of making an ascent.

“I really think they’ll try to come up,” said Fred.

“Come ahead! We’ll see if we can’t get a little higher up,” answered Andy. “I don’t think the steers will follow us very far, even if they do come. We can shoot at them if we have to,” he added, for each of them carried a pistol.

Beyond the ledge were more rough rocks, and here the two lads had to proceed with caution for fear one of their horses might slip and perhaps break a leg. As they advanced they looked back and saw that the

cowboys were coming closer and were beginning to drive a part of the cattle to the rear.

“Oh, if only they can drive them back!” sighed Fred. “Just look at ’em, Andy! There must be a hundred of the steers directly below us! And see how angry that big black fellow looks! He acts just as if he’d like to come up here and gore us!”

“Listen!” ejaculated Andy, pulling back on the rein. “What’s that funny noise?”

Both listened, and, mingled with the murmurs of the cattle at the foot of the rocks, came to their ears a peculiar whine or growl that was entirely new to the lads.

“It’s a wild animal of some kind!” cried Fred, as the growl was repeated.

“Where did it come from?”

“I don’t know. But it was close at hand.”

Thoroughly scared, both boys looked on all sides. Then, of a sudden, Fred let out another exclamation.

“There it is! Right on the shelf of rocks yonder! Oh, Andy, it’s a mountain lion!”

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MOUNTAIN LION

It was a time of extreme peril, and both of the Rover boys realized it. The shelf of rock was not over twenty feet ahead of them, and on this rested the mountain lion, crouched as if for a spring.

Fred had scarcely spoken when both horses began to snort and stamp their feet as if wanting to turn and run away.

“Look out!” screamed Andy, “or the horses will take us right back among those mad cattle.”

With the discovery of the mountain lion, that lay close to the rocky shelf with glaring eyes and tail that swept nervously from side to side, the boys had noted that the animal was as much penned in as they were themselves. Beyond the shelf was an overhanging cliff, so that further progress in that direction was cut off completely. Had this not been so, it is more than likely that the mountain lion would have turned and slunk away, for like all wild beasts they do not fight unless they think it is necessary to do so.

“Come on—give him a shot!” exclaimed Fred, as soon as he could recover from his astonishment.

His weapon was handy, and in a moment the pistol rang out sharply, and this shot was followed by one from his cousin.

Had the two boys been on the ground their shots might have been more effective. But it was another task to aim from the back of a restive horse that was threatening every instant to bolt, and so both bullets merely grazed the mountain lion’s side.

But these shots, mingled with those coming from the plain below, had one good effect. The cattle had been stopped in their mad flight and now they

turned back in the direction in which the cowboys wanted them to go.

As the pistols rang out the mountain lion gave a scream of commingled pain and rage. Then it crept forward several feet and made a movement as if on the point of leaping for Fred and his steed.

“Back up! Back up, Fred!” yelled Andy, and fired a second time, and his cousin did likewise.

This time the aim of the boys was better, and the mountain lion was hit in one of the forelegs and in the flank. It made a sudden leap, but the wound in the leg made it fall short, and it fell down between the rocks directly in front of where Fred’s horse was standing.

As the mountain lion went down in the hollow the horse uttered another wild snort and an instant later leaped directly over the wild beast, coming down at the foot of the rocky ledge beyond. The steed Andy rode backed violently until some other rocks stopped its retreat.

“Hi there! What are you shooting at?” came a cry from below, and the two boys recognized the voice of Joe Jackson.

“It’s a lion!” called back Andy.

“Then plug him! Plug him quick!” yelled Jackson. “Plug him before he gets a chance to get at you!”

There was no need for this advice, for Andy was already taking aim. This time the bullet passed through the body of the lion and the beast leaped up, turning over and over convulsively. Then Fred managed to steady his mount for a moment, and he, too, fired, this time catching the mountain lion in the ear. Then the beast gave a final leap and tumbled

down the rocks almost at the feet of the astonished ranch foreman.

“Are you hurt?” demanded Jackson anxiously, as he gave a glance at the lion to make certain that it was breathing its last.

“No,” came from both of the boys. But it must be confessed that their voices were trembling. They had all they could do to quiet their horses, the steeds showing a great inclination to leap over the rough rocks and run away.

By the time that Fred and Andy managed to descend to the plain below them the stampede of the cattle, which had been only momentary, was coming to an end, only two steers having run away for parts unknown.

“But they’ll come back, Boss,” said one of the cowboys to Jackson. “They always do. You can’t hire ’em to herd by themselves. They’ll sure be back.”

“A mountain lion! What do you know about that!” exclaimed Jack, as he came riding up, followed by the other boys.

“Did he hurt you at all?” questioned Spouter quickly.

“He didn’t get a chance,” answered Fred, just a bit proudly. “Andy and I let drive at him almost as soon as we saw him.”

“A pretty powerful beast, I’ll say,” remarked Gif, as he made an examination of the lion that was now dead. “I don’t think I’d like to face such a creature.”

“We had to fight him,” declared Andy. “He was right up on that rocky shelf yonder, and he couldn’t back out. If he had had the chance he’d have leaped right on us.”

“Well, you’re the prize hunters of this crowd,” declared Randy.

“You can’t put that down to hunting,” answered his twin promptly. “That was simply a case of necessity.”

“Anyway, you’ve got the lion, and that skin will make some rug,” declared Spouter.

“I wonder if there are any other mountain lions around?” remarked Gif. “I’d like to get a shot at one of them myself.”

“They often travel in pairs,” answered Joe Jackson. “But if you’re going after lions you had better arm yourselves with rifles. It was only good luck that brought this beast down with pistol bullets.”

“The pistols were good enough at close quarters,” answered Andy. “Just the same, I’d rather shoot the next mountain lion from a distance,” he added dryly.

Of course, when the boys rode up to the ranch home with the carcass of the dead lion there was a good deal of excitement among the older folks and the girls, and Fred and Andy had to tell their story in detail.

“You really must be more careful in the future, boys,” declared Mrs. Sam Rover. “Why, you might have been trampled under foot by the cattle, as well as chewed up by this mountain lion!”

“I didn’t know there was any danger of the cattle stampeding,” put in Mrs. Tom Rover.

“Oh, Jackson assures me that the stampede wasn’t of much consequence,” remarked Songbird Powell. “But, of course, the boys shouldn’t have gotten in front of the animals. But this question of facing a mountain lion is another story.”

“Py chimminy! you don’t vas cotch me facin’ no mountain lions,” declared Hans Mueller emphatically. “I did me dot years ago, ven I go oud mit your faders. But I ton’t do him no more alreatty.”

“Oh, Fred, you must be more careful!” protested May to the youngest Rover, when she got the chance. “Suppose that lion had jumped right on top of you?”

“Believe me, May, I didn’t want to get so close,” he answered. “When we discovered the beast he wasn’t over twenty feet away.”

“And they told us there weren’t very many wild beasts around here!” came from Martha. “After this I guess we had better be careful how we roam through the woods and along the river.”

“Oh, they’re not likely to harm you unless you corner them,” said Songbird Powell. “They’ll sneak away from you if you give them half a chance. It’s only when they’re cornered or when they’re needing food that they are really combative.”

The mountain lion was skinned and the pelt taken away by the ranch foreman to be cured, and then Fred and Andy took it easy for the rest of the day.

“Isn’t it queer that Brassy Bangs has never showed himself around this place?” remarked Spouter that evening. “Wouldn’t you think he’d at least ride over to see what sort of an outfit we had here?”

“More than likely he’s afraid of his welcome,” said Jack. “He knows that none of us care for him.”

“I’d like to know if he really started that auto,” put in Fred.

“Gosh, what a sour fellow that Jarley Bangs was!” exclaimed Andy.

There had been an indication of a storm, but this had passed away, and one day found the Rover boys and their chums off on a trip along a trail which led across the river and to the mountains westward, a trail which they were informed by Jackson led between the ranches owned by Jarley Bangs and Bimbel.

“I’d like to get a better view of Bimbel’s ranch and also of Bangs’ place,” declared Jack. “And maybe we’ll see something of Bud Haddon and his crowd.”

All of the boys were now on good terms with Hop Lung, and he had prepared for them a substantial lunch and also something extra in case they should remain out after the supper hour.

“Now you lads take good care of yourselves,” admonished Tom Rover, when they were ready to depart on their day’s outing. “No more rattlesnakes or mountain lions!”

“Or mix-ups with runaway cattle,” put in Sam Rover.

Spouter and Jack carried small rifles, and the others were armed with pistols. They, however, were not going out to hunt, but thought best to provide themselves with the firearms in case any game presented itself.

It did not take the boys long to cross the river, and then they followed a trail which led up a long hill and through a somewhat dense forest.

They had journeyed along the best part of two hours when they noticed the sun going under a cloud. This caused the trail under the trees to become dark.

“Gee! I wonder if we’re going to have a storm?” remarked Randy.

“Oh, maybe it’s nothing but a wind cloud,” answered Spouter.

They continued to move along the trail, and presently reached a small opening where there was a spring.

“Halt!” called out Jack, who was riding ahead with Spouter.

“What’s the matter?” questioned Gif quickly.

“Look there! Isn’t that a wolf?” asked Jack. He pointed with his rifle, which he had already unslung, and all the boys looked in the direction pointed out.

“Maybe it’s a dog,” put in Fred quickly.

“You don’t want to shoot somebody’s pet,” admonished Gif.

The animal had slunk away behind some brushwood, and now they saw it trying to retreat, pulling something through the dead leaves as it did so.

“It’s a wolf! I’m sure of it!” declared Jack, and, raising his rifle, he took quick aim and fired.

As the echo of the firearm died away the lads heard a snarl and a yelp, and an instant later a gaunt wolf showed himself, his fangs gleaming dangerously as he came closer.

Several shots rang out, for all of the boys had their weapons ready. The wolf was hit in three places, and gave a single leap into the air and then dropped lifeless.

“Hurrah! We’ve got him!” yelled Randy, with satisfaction.

“Be careful! Don’t go too close before we’re sure,” warned Jack. “Better reload first.”

But the wolf was past doing further harm, and having assured themselves of this the boys looked at what he had been carrying away.

“It’s the side of a calf!” exclaimed Spouter. “Isn’t this the limit? I’m glad we brought him down!”

“He must have been raiding some cow yard,” said Jack.

“No ranch cow yard,” said Gif. “This half of a calf was skinned by some person. I’ll bet he stole it out of some ranch larder.” And later on it was learned that the calf meat had been stolen from Jarley Bangs’ place the night before.

The boys had become so interested in bringing down the wolf that they had paid no attention to what was taking place overhead. But now they noticed that the sky was more overcast than ever. The wind began to blow through the woods, and of a sudden there came a downpour as surprising as it was dismaying.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE CAVE

“We’re in for it now!” cried Jack, as he looked up at the sky and at the trees beginning to bend in the wind.

"And it's going to be some storm, or I miss my guess," added Gif.

"I wonder if we can find any shelter around here?" put in Randy. "If we can't we'll be soaked to the skin in no time."

"Jackson was telling me of a couple of caves toward the end of these woods," said Spouter quickly. "I wonder if we could reach the nearest of them? It might help us to get out of the rain."

"Come on—let's try it!" put in Fred eagerly.

Leaving the dead wolf where it had fallen, the boys pushed forward on the trail, which now led downward on the other side of the hill. Here they noticed the going was getting rougher, and presently they found themselves entering a defile among the rocks. Here the trees were more scattering and consequently they were exposed to the full fury of the elements. Ever and anon a flash of lightning would illumine the sky, followed by the crack and rumble of thunder.

"Say, maybe we had better stay under the trees," suggested Andy.

"Suppose the trees should be struck by lightning?" questioned Jack. "I think we had better go on, especially if we're anywhere near those caves Jackson mentioned."

A turn in the defile brought them to something of an open place. Here on one side the rocks towered fully fifty feet above their heads and at one point there was an opening perhaps fifteen feet square and leading into the side of the hill.

"This must be the first of the caves!" cried Spouter. "Come on in!" And without ceremony he led the

way, and the others followed, glad to get out of the storm.

They found the cave an irregular one, running in somewhat of a semicircle and with a flooring that was comparatively level. It was dry and fairly comfortable, and once beyond the fury of the storm the lads dismounted and proceeded to make themselves at home.

The rain continued to come down and, with nothing better to do, the boys proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as possible. Near the entrance to the cave they found some leaves and dead tree branches which were still dry, and these they dragged inside and then made themselves a campfire.

“I reckon we’ll have to cut out going any further,” announced Spouter. “Even if the storm clears away, the trail will be very wet and slippery.”

It still lacked an hour to noon, and with nothing else to do the boys tethered their horses and then proceeded to investigate their surroundings. From the campfire they obtained several torches, and with these in hand they moved along slowly around the bend of the cave and over a series of rocks which led upward.

“It certainly is a larger cave than I supposed,” said Jack, as he and Gif led the way, with the others close behind.

“I think I see a light ahead, Jack,” was Gif’s remark. “That must be another opening to the cave.”

“Maybe the two caves that Jackson mentioned are really one, and this passageway connects them.”

“We’ll soon find out.”

By this time all but one of the torches had burnt themselves out. But this the lads did not mind, for the light ahead was steadily increasing, showing that they could not be far from another opening.

“Look!” called Jack suddenly. And then he added: “Keep quiet, all of you!”

He pointed ahead and there, around a bend of the rocks, all saw two figures moving around on horseback. One was the figure of a tall man, and the other that of a well-grown youth.

“Why, that’s Brassy Bangs!” whispered Fred excitedly.

“Yes. And the man is Bud Haddon,” returned Andy.

“What do you bet Haddon isn’t after Brassy for more money?” put in Fred excitedly.

While the youngest Rover was speaking, he and the others saw that the two figures on horseback had disappeared behind a mass of rocks.

“I’m going ahead and find out about this,” declared Jack. “Come on! So far as we can see there are only two of them, so the six of us have nothing to fear.”

“Especially as we’re armed,” added Fred, who carried his pistol with him.

Throwing down the last of their torches, the six boys advanced with caution. They heard the horses beyond the rocks occasionally stamping a hoof and caught a faint murmur of voices. Then, led by Jack, they mounted the rocks noiselessly, presently gaining a point where they could look directly down upon Brassy Bangs and his companion.

“It’s all wrong, Bud Haddon, and you know it!” they heard Brassy declare. “And sooner or later the

authorities will get after you for this."

"See here, Lester Bangs, you don't have to preach to me!" growled Bud Haddon. "You're just as deep in some things as I am in others."

"It isn't true, and you know it!" whined Brassy. And now the lads who were listening could see that their fellow-cadet was very much upset. "I'm not guilty, and I never have been guilty of any wrongdoing!"

"You tell that to the police and see what they have to say about it," sneered Haddon, "You know well enough that you set fire to John Calder's barn and burnt up horses that was worth thousands of dollars."

"And I always said it was some cowboys or tramps that did it!" stormed Brassy.

"Not much! You did it! I know it, and so do Jillson and Dusenbury! We've got the goods on you."

"What were Jillson and Dusenbury and you doing around the place?" questioned Brassy suddenly.

"Never mind what we were doing around there. We know you set the barn on fire. Didn't you have a quarrel with old Calder?"

"Yes, I did. But I didn't make any fire. Maybe you had a quarrel with him yourself."

"Hold on there, Bangs! None of that!" cried Bud Haddon sternly.

"Well, you wouldn't be too good to set the fire," added Brassy, with sudden recklessness. "Not after the way you are acting out here, running away with those horses, and after the way you acted at Colby Hall, trying to rob every room in the place!"

"Wait a minute now! Wait a minute!" returned the

man sarcastically. “Who was it lent me his uniform and who was it that told me just what rooms to go into? Answer me those questions, will you?”

“You wouldn’t have gotten hold of the uniform and you wouldn’t have gotten any information if you hadn’t threatened me in all sorts of ways,” answered Brassy, somewhat lamely. “I wish now that I’d never had anything to do with you!”

“Well, you keep your tongue between your teeth, or else you’ll get yourself in the hottest kind of water!” burst out Bud Haddon. “Don’t you know that they can send you to prison for ten years for what you did?”

“I haven’t said anything to anybody as yet,” answered Brassy hastily.

“Well, you see that you don’t!”

“But I didn’t set Calder’s barn on fire—really I didn’t!” pleaded the boy. “I don’t see why you won’t believe me.”

“I’m willing to let that matter drop if only you’ll keep a civil tongue in your head and mind what you’re doing,” returned Bud Haddon. “And don’t forget—I want at least a hundred dollars more just as soon as you can lay your hands on it.”

“I don’t see how I’m going to get it. I’m expecting some money from my uncle. But that has got to pay for my tuition at Colby Hall this fall.”

“Well, you let the school wait for its money and you turn it over to me. They won’t want you there anyhow if they should find out what sort of a fellow you are,” went on Bud Haddon coarsely. “Now I’ve got to be getting back to Bimbel’s, rain or no rain,” he continued. “Just remember, you’ve got to fork

over a hundred in cold cash before you start East again. If you don't—well, look out, that's all!" And with this threat the tall man rode out of the cave.

The Rovers and their chums had listened to every word that had been spoken. They were both mystified and amazed by what had been said.

"That fellow Haddon is surely a first-class rascal," whispered Spouter to Jack.

"Do you know what I think we had better do?" returned the young major. "Let's stop Brassy and have a straight talk with him. I don't think he's quite as bad as we thought he might be."

"Yes, let us stop Brassy by all means," came in a low tone from Fred.

Brassy Bangs had ridden to the mouth of the cave and there sat astride of his horse, watching Bud Haddon as he galloped away though the rain. Then he turned back in anything but a cheerful humor. The other boys saw him dismount and sink down on a rock, covering his face with his hands.

"Come on," said Jack, and without more ado he scrambled down from the rocks and came around to where Brassy was sitting, and the others did the same.

Brassy's misery was so great that for several seconds he did not notice their approach. Then, he looked up startled and leaped to his feet.

"Where did you come from?" he demanded, as soon as he could speak.

"We came from the other end of the cave, Brassy," answered Jack.

"How long have you been here?"

"We've been here long enough to hear the talk you had with that fellow named Haddon," answered Fred.

"You did!" Brassy turned pale. "It wasn't very nice to listen when you had no business to!"

"Never mind about that now, Brassy. What we want to know is, did you or that fellow rob Colby Hall?"

"He did it! I didn't have a thing to do with it—at least, willingly!" cried Brassy Bangs. "He forced me to do everything I did. He threatened me in all sorts of ways—said he would put me in prison and all that if I didn't help him. Oh, he's the worst man there ever was!" groaned the overwrought boy. And now the others could see that he was on the verge of collapse.

"See here, Brassy, why don't you tell us the whole story?" put in Gif kindly.

"Why should I tell my story to you? All you fellows are against me—you always were!"

"We're not against you, Brassy," answered Jack. "If you can prove to us that you're really being hounded by that man, we'll do what we can to help you. Isn't that so, fellows?" And at this question the others nodded.

"Hounded is right! He's done nothing but hound me ever since he knew me," whined the accused one.

"You tell me one thing!" demanded Spouter, striding up and catching Brassy by the shoulder. "Did that rascal steal the horses from our ranch?"

"I think he did—in fact, I'm about certain he did. That is, either he or the fellows he's in league with."

"Who are those other fellows?"

"Two fellows who just came out here from Chicago named Jillson and Dusenbury and two others from Bimbel's ranch named Noxley and Jenks. The whole bunch were mixed up with Bimbel some years ago in a shady transaction, and they lit out for quite a while. But now they're back again."

"I don't see why you want to get mixed up with a crowd like that," was Andy's comment.

"I didn't want to get mixed up with 'em," declared Brassy. "I haven't had a thing to do with any of 'em except Bud Haddon. Oh, I wish I'd never met that man!" And now Brassy seemed almost on the verge of tears.

CHAPTER XXIX

A CONFESSION

After that it was an easy matter for the other boys to get Brassy to make a complete confession.

"My first trouble came when I got a job with John Calder who has a farm on the outskirts of Omaha," said Brassy. "I had had a quarrel at home, and also a quarrel with my uncle here, and had made up my mind to get a place and support myself. But I couldn't get along with Calder, who was a very strict man, and one afternoon we had a lively quarrel, and

I told him I'd leave, and I did so and went to Omaha. About a week after that Calder's barn burned down and a number of horses were caught in the fire. That was just after I had fallen in with Bud Haddon and his two chums, Jillson and Dusenbury. Haddon pretended to be quite friendly. But all at once he accused me of setting the fire and said that Jillson and Dusenbury, who had left the day before, could prove it. I protested my innocence, but he insisted I was guilty and worked me up to such an extent that I gave him almost every dollar I had in my pocket to keep him quiet."

"And you say positively that you had nothing to do with the fire?" questioned Fred.

"Not a thing!"

"Couldn't you prove that you weren't there when the fire took place?" asked Andy.

"No, I couldn't, because I went to a vaudeville show that evening, and I was among strangers, so that I couldn't account for my time."

"Did Haddon hound you when you came to Colby Hall?" questioned Gif.

"He certainly did—not once, but half a dozen times. And I gave him all the money I could scrape up. In fact, I even borrowed some money from Halliday and a couple of the other fellows."

"But what about the robbery at the Hall?'" questioned Fred.

"Several times Haddon came to me and spoke in a mysterious manner about its being an easy matter to make a big haul. Then he hinted about the robbery; but I would have nothing to do with it. On the afternoon when we were getting ready to celebrate

that night, he sent word that he wanted to see me at a certain barn not far from the school. When I got there he demanded that I help him go through the bedrooms while the fellows were having a good time on the campus and down by the river. I said I wouldn't do it, and then all of a sudden he hit me on the head and knocked me down. Then he stripped me of my trousers and jacket and tied me fast in one of the disused horse stalls."

"And you mean to say he used your uniform in stealing into the school?" asked Spouter.

"That's it. I didn't know it at the time, because he went to another part of the barn where I couldn't see him. But later on, when he brought the uniform back, he told me all about it. He thought he had been wonderfully slick."

"Why didn't you expose him at once?" demanded Jack.

"He told me that if I exposed him he would tell the authorities that I had planned the whole scheme and that I had done most of the work myself. He said some one had seen him in the uniform scooting from one room to another, so that the report would circulate that some cadet was guilty. He got me so worked up that at last I promised to keep quiet."

"And had he really robbed your room, too?" demanded Fred.

"Yes. I lost my stuff just as I reported. Oh, you can't imagine how I felt!" went on Brassy Bangs in a hopeless tone of voice. "Many a time I thought I'd go to Colonel Colby and confess everything. But then I thought they would bring that old charge of barn-burning up against me, as well as the charge of helping in the robbery, and I didn't have nerve

enough to say a word. Oh, I know I was a big fool! I should have faced it out!"

"Wait a minute!" put in Jack suddenly. "Are you pretty sure Haddon, as well as Dusenbury and Jillson, are guilty of making off with the horses that are missing?"

"I am!"

"Well, then, isn't it possible that those three went to this John Calder's barn and stole some of the horses and then set fire to the place to cover the theft?"

"By golly, I'll bet that's just what they did!" burst out Brassy Bangs. "I remember now that the reports in the newspapers said the fire had been so fierce that the carcasses of the horses had been burnt up completely. They only found some of the bones in the ruins. Oh, if they really did do that!"

"Did Calder have any particularly good horses?"

"Yes, he had a splendid team of matched grays that were worth considerable money. He thought more of the grays than he did of all his other horses put together."

"I'll wager a toothpick against a lemon that gang stole the grays before the fire," declared Andy emphatically.

"The police ought to arrest those three men and put 'em through what they call the third degree," remarked Gif.

"I'd like to know one other thing," went on Andy, and now his face showed a slight grin. "What do you know about your Uncle Jarley's auto running away by itself?"

"Oh, please don't mention that tin junk wagon!"

pleaded Brassy. “I started it, and the blamed thing ran over me, and I was lame for a week.”

“Does your uncle know anything about what Haddon and his crowd are up to?” questioned Jack.

“Not exactly. Although he’s becoming suspicious of the whole gang around the Bimbel place. You know he’s never trusted Bimbel since the man got into difficulty with the authorities several years ago.”

After that the seven boys talked the matter over for half an hour longer. And then the others insisted upon it that Brassy accompany them to the other entrance to the cave, and there all sat down to partake of the lunch brought from Big Horn Ranch.

Brassy appeared much relieved by the confession he had made, and readily answered all the questions put to him. His assertive manner had left him entirely, and he appeared quite humble.

“If he ever gets out of this I’ll bet he’ll be a different fellow,” whispered Randy to Fred.

“I think so myself,” was the reply. “But how he is going to square himself with Colonel Colby remains to be seen. It was a serious piece of business to let Haddon steal all those things from the school and say nothing about it.”

While the boys were eating the storm stopped, and less than an hour later the sun was shining as before.

“I think we might as well be on our way back to the ranch,” remarked Spouter. “The sooner we get there and let our fathers know how matters stand, the better.”

“Don’t you want to go with us, Brassy?” asked Jack.

“If I did that I couldn’t get back to my uncle’s place

to-night, and then he'd worry about me. Otherwise I would just as lief go to your place as not. Now that I've told you everything I'd like to see the whole matter cleaned up, and quick too."

"How far is it to your uncle's ranch?" asked Fred.

"Not over a mile and a half."

"Then suppose we go there first, and then all of us can strike out for Big Horn Ranch. Maybe your uncle will want to take part in what is going on," said Jack.

"I wish you would go with me!" cried Brassy eagerly. "I'm afraid my uncle will raise Cain when I tell him the truth."

"He won't dare do much when we're around," answered Gif. "If he gets too ugly you can clear out and meet us on the way to our place."

"That's the talk," said Randy.

Again there was a discussion, but in the end it was decided that the whole party should lose no time in getting to Jarley Bangs' ranch. They would explain matters to Brassy's uncle, and then set out for Songbird Powell's place.

The campfire was speedily stamped out, and leaping into the saddle, the seven boys set out for the Bangs' place, Brassy leading the way, with Spouter beside him. It was a wet and dismal ride through the woods, and it is safe to say that Brassy felt every bit as dismal as his surroundings.

"Gee, but I certainly am sorry for him!" whispered Andy to his twin. "He isn't a fellow that I would cotton to, but he certainly has got himself into a pickle."

Presently the woods were left behind and they came out on the open prairie. Here the sun shone brightly, and the trail was drying rapidly. They urged their steeds into a gallop, and in a short while came in sight of the Jarley Bangs' outfit.

As they rode up they saw Jarley Bangs come from the ranch house and move swiftly toward one of the stables where the horses were kept. He was evidently in a hurry and much excited.

"Hello! where have you been?" he demanded of his nephew. "Where did you pick up these chaps?"

"I met 'em during the storm over at Twin Caves," answered Brassy.

"It's a wonder you wouldn't stay around the house once in a while," grumbled Jarley Bangs. "If you would, maybe I wouldn't be losing things."

"Losing things! What do you mean, Uncle Jarley?" questioned the nephew quickly.

"What do I mean?" stormed the ranch owner. "Do you know what has happened since you went away?"

"No."

"Well, then, I'll tell you! Two of our best horses have been stolen! Right out of the stable, too!" exclaimed Jarley Bangs wrathfully. "Duster and old Whitehead!"

"Stolen!" came from all of the boys simultaneously.

"Yes, stolen! Nobody saw 'em taken, but they're gone, and not a man on the ranch was near 'em!"

"I'll wager that's more of Bud Haddon's work," declared Jack quickly.

"But he wasn't here—he was over at the caves,"

returned Fred.

“Well, if he didn’t do it, then some members of his gang did,” put in Randy.

“I’m going to have the law on somebody for this!” stormed Jarley Bangs. “Too many horses in this neighborhood have been stolen. I’m going to visit some of the other ranchmen and notify the sheriff, and see if we can’t raise a posse to run down the rascals.”

“That’s the way to talk, Mr. Bangs!” cried Spouter. “And we know just what gang to go after.”

CHAPTER XXX

THE CAPTURE—CONCLUSION

Less than an hour later found the whole party, including Jarley Bangs, on the way to Big Horn Ranch.

Brassy’s uncle had listened with keen interest to the story his nephew and the other lads had to relate. He had interrupted a number of times to ask questions, and at the finish of the recital had held up both hands in disgust.

“You’re a bigger fool than I ever thought you were, Lester,” he had told his nephew. “Why in thunder didn’t you tell your folks and me all about this just as

soon as it happened? We could have set a trap for those rascals and caught 'em easy."

"But, Uncle Jarley, remember how I was tied up in that Colby Hall affair!" Brassy had pleaded.

"I don't believe Colonel Colby would hold you responsible for that—not after he'd made a thorough investigation. But that ain't here nor there. What we want to do now is to grab those fellows before they've a chance to make a get-away. I'd just like to ketch 'em with Duster and Whitehead in their possession! I think I could find enough old-timers around here to hand all of 'em a rope," and Jarley Bangs' eyes had flashed with a fire that was anything but agreeable.

The Rover boys and their chums had thought to take the regular trail leading back to Big Horn Ranch, but Jarley Bangs told them he knew of a shorter way.

"We can cut off over a mile," said he. "And I reckon the quicker we get a posse out the better."

"Don't you suppose we can round them up around Bimbel's ranch almost any time?" queried Spouter.

"Maybe, and maybe not. We'd probably be able to get the others, but Haddon, Dusenbury and Jillson come and go. Sometimes they're here, and sometimes in Omaha and Chicago."

"Perhaps that's where they disposed of their stolen horses," suggested Jack.

"More'n likely."

Jarley Bangs had armed himself with a double-barreled shotgun, and he rode in advance with Spouter at his side and the others close behind.

The way lay across a stretch of prairie and then into

the edge of the woods bordering the river. The party had just gained the water's edge and were looking for a good fording place when Brassy suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"Look up the river, will you? There are those men now! And see! they are leading a couple of horses!"

"Get back out of sight, quick!" ordered Jarley Bangs. And in a few seconds all were behind the bushes which at that point lined the river.

"Why, they're heading almost straight for Big Horn Ranch!" exclaimed Spouter excitedly.

"They're going to follow the old river trail," announced Jarley Bangs. "More'n likely they'll take to the lower trail when they reach the forks."

"Can't we head 'em off and capture 'em?" questioned Fred.

"I think we can. Anyhow, we can try," was Jarley Bangs' answer.

The old ranchman made a swift mental calculation and then directed the boys to follow him to a fording place a little further down the river. Once on the other side of the watercourse, he urged his steed forward at topmost speed in the direction of another patch of timber further southward.

"They wouldn't dare take the upper trail," he told the lads. "For that would take 'em too close to Big Horn. They'll come this way, I'm almost certain."

It was not easy riding on a trail which was used but seldom. Nevertheless, the lads hurried after the old ranchman as well as they could. They wound in and out over some rough rocks and up a small hill, and presently emerged upon a much better trail.

“Here is where they ought to pass,” announced Jarley Bangs. “Now then, we’ll put our horses in the thicket and then see what we can do toward pocketing ’em when they come.”

The old ranchman had seen strenuous times in his younger days, and he seemed to know exactly what to do. He divided the boys into two groups, placing them on either side of the winding and rocky road.

“Now if you have to shoot, shoot high so as not to hit anybody on the other side,” was his warning. “But maybe we can get ’em without firing a shot,” he went on.

Brassy was armed with a small rifle, and he insisted upon remaining in the roadway with his uncle. The other lads with their pistols and guns were placed in advantageous positions behind nearby rocks and trees.

The arrangement was scarcely completed when they heard the tramp of horses’ hoofs over the somewhat rocky trail, and in a minute more Bud Haddon came into view, followed by Jillson and Dusenbury, all on horseback and each of the latter leading an extra steed.

“Throw up your hands!” shouted Jarley Bangs, as the horsemen came closer, and he leveled his shotgun full at Haddon’s head, while Brassy covered Dusenbury with his rifle. The boys behind the rocks and trees covered all three men as well as they were able.

The three rascals had not anticipated such a meeting, and, seeing the guns leveled at them, not only from the front but also from the sides, three pairs of hands went up almost as one.

"It's Bangs!" murmured the man named Dusenbury. "I reckon the jig is up."

"Don't dare to budge or I'll blow somebody's head off!" roared Jarley Bangs. And he looked as if he meant what he said.

"You've got the drop on me, and I ain't moving," answered Bud Haddon surlily.

"Hi, Powell! Come out here, will you?" went on Brassy Bangs' uncle. And then, as Spouter came from the bushes with rifle in hand, he continued. "Go up there and take every one of their guns away from 'em."

As soon as they had been disarmed the three rascals were told to dismount and stand in a line along the side of the road. Then, as the boys confronted them, Jarley Bangs went through their pockets once more to make sure that no weapon had been overlooked.

"Fine piece of business, to run away with my horses!" exclaimed the old ranch owner, and he jerked his head in the direction of the two animals the men had been leading.

With their hands tied in front of them, the men were made to remount, and then the entire party lost no time in heading for Big Horn Ranch.

"I'll fix you for this!" hissed Haddon at Brassy when he got the chance.

"You do your worst!" retorted the boy. "I'm not afraid of you any more."

Of course, there was great excitement at the ranch when the crowd came in with the three prisoners. The story of what had happened was quickly circulated, and Joe Jackson and a number of the

cowboys were called in from the ranges. One of the cowboys was sent off to notify a deputy sheriff of what had occurred and of what the ranch owners expected to do, and two other cowboys were started off to notify the owners of other ranches in that vicinity.

As a consequence early the next morning a posse consisting of twelve men headed for Bimbel's ranch. Of course, the boys wanted to go along, but they were forced to remain behind, much to their chagrin.

"You might get shot," said Songbird Powell. "And, besides that, you have had glory enough, helping to catch these three rascals," and he smiled faintly.

The affair at Bimbel's was rather a strenuous one. Jenks and Noxley, as well as Bimbel, tried to escape, and Noxley was shot in the leg. The fellow thought he was going to die, and while waiting for the doctor to come and attend him he made a full confession concerning the stealing of many of the horses in that neighborhood. He said that Bud Haddon was at the head of the gang and that Haddon, with Jillson and Dusenbury, were in the habit of disposing of the animals either at Omaha or Chicago, although one or two steeds, including one belonging to the former owners of Big Horn Ranch had been sent further east.

"I guess it was one of the early thefts that took Haddon to Haven Point," declared Jack, and in that surmise he was correct.

With this evidence against them, Haddon, Jillson and Dusenbury were submitted to a severe gruelling, each being examined separately. Finally Dusenbury broke down completely and admitted that he and the other two had fired John Calder's barn after stealing his noted pair of gray horses. The horses had been

shipped out of town, and were later on recovered, as were also Mr. Powell's Blackbird and several other of the animals.

When Bud Haddon's effects were examined many pawn tickets were discovered, and following up the clues thus afforded Colonel Colby managed to get back many of the articles stolen from the school. These included Professor Duke's heirloom watch and a number of the things lost by our friends.

At first it was thought that Brassy might be prosecuted, but when Bud Haddon was brought to trial for the thefts the State used the youth as a witness against the fellow, and consequently Brassy was allowed to go free. He, however, received a stern lecture from Colonel Colby and was then told that he had better not return to the Hall.

"I don't think I want to come back," said Brassy. "A whole lot of the fellows would never forgive me for what I did." And in this surmise he was probably correct. Brassy returned to his uncle's ranch, and that was the last heard of him for a long time.

With the mystery of the robbery at Colby Hall and of the missing horses cleared up, the Rover boys and all the other young folks at Big Horn Ranch turned their attention once more to having a good time. Sam Rover went back to New York to take charge of the offices in Wall Street, and that gave Dick Rover and his wife a chance to come out and pay the ranch a visit.

"We've certainly had some strenuous times here," remarked Jack one day.

And he was right. But other strenuous times were still in store for the lads, and what some of these were will be related in the next volume, to be

entitled, “The Rover Boys at Big Bear Lake; or, The Camps of the Rival Cadets.”

“Big Horn Ranch is a delightful place,” said Ruth. “I never thought a spot where they raised cattle could be so interesting.”

“Is your father going to stay out here and become a regular ranchman, Spouter?” questioned Fred.

“I don’t know about that,” answered the ranch owner’s son. “He’ll stay here for a while, anyway. He likes it better and better every day.”

“I dink some day I got me a ranch mineself alreatty,” remarked Hans Mueller. “Den I could raise all mine own meats for mine delicatessen stores, not so?” and he smiled complacently.

“Come on, boys, let’s get on horseback and have a race!” cried Andy, as he came up from finishing a game of lawn tennis with Mary.

“I’m with you,” answered Fred, who had been playing a game of croquet with May and some of the others.

“All right! A horseback race it is!” cried Jack.

“An extra piece of cake to the boy who wins!” shouted his sister Martha after him.

“Hurrah! Me for that piece of cake!” came from every one of the boys assembled.

And here, while they are running down to the corral pell-mell to get on their horses for a gallop across the prairie, we will leave them and say good-bye.

THE END

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