

MOTOR STORIES

THRILLING
ADVENTURE

MOTOR
FICTION

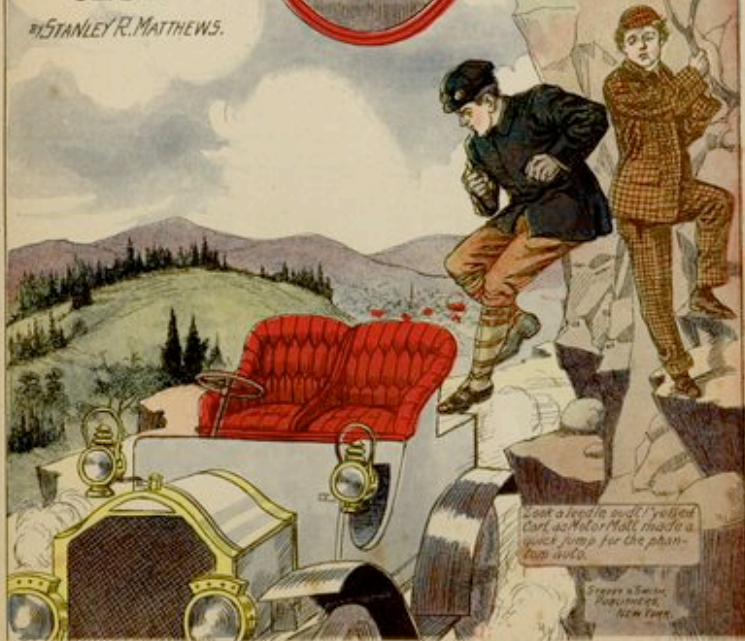
NO. 7
APR. 10, 1909

FIVE
CENTS

**MOTOR MATT'S
CLUE**

BY STANLEY R. MATTHEWS.

**THE PHANTOM
AUTO**



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or

The Phantom Auto

By Stanley R Matthews

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THRILLING ADVENTURE MOTOR FICTION

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Motor Matt's Clue

OR,

THE PHANTOM AUTO

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CHARACTERS THAT APPEAR IN THIS STORY.

Matt King, concerning whom there has always been a mystery—a lad of splendid athletic abilities, and never-failing nerve, who has won for himself, among the boys of the Western town, the popular name of "Mile-a-minute Matt."

Carl Pretzel, a cheerful and rollicking German lad, who is led by a fortunate accident to hook up with Motor Matt in double harness.

Uncle Jack, a wealthy Englishman, with ways and means of his own for accomplishing things, who leads a hermit's life in the wilds of New Mexico.

Dick Ferral, a Canadian boy and a favorite of Uncle Jack; has served his time in the King's navy, and bobs up in New Mexico where he falls into plots and counter-plots, and comes near losing his life.

Ralph Sercomb, a cousin of Dick Ferral, and whose sly, treacherous nature is responsible for Dick's troubles.

Joe Mings,
Harry Packard,
Balt Finn, } three unscrupulous friends of Sercomb, all
motor-drivers, and who come from Denver
to help Sercomb in his nefarious plans.

CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT MYSTERY.

"Oh, py shiminy! Look at dere, vonce! Vat it iss, Matt? Br-r-r! I feel like I vould t'row some fits rightd on der shpot! It's a shpook, you bed you!"

A strange event was going forward, there under the moon and stars of that New Mexico night. The wagon-road followed the base of a clifflike bank, and at the outer edge of the road there was a precipitous fall into Stygian darkness.

A second road entered the first through a narrow gully. A few yards beyond the point where the thoroughfares joined an automobile was halted, its twin acetylene lamps gleaming like the eyes of some fabled monster in the semigloom.

Two boys were on the front seat of the automobile, and one of them had leaned over and gripped the arm of the lad who had his hands on the steering-wheel. The eyes of the two in the car were staring ahead.

What the boys saw was sufficiently startling, in all truth.

Out of the gully, directly in advance of them, had rolled a white automobile—springing ghostlike out of the darkness as it came under the glare of the acetylene lights.

The white car was a runabout, with two seats in front and an abnormally high deck behind. It carried no lamps, moved with weird silence, and, strangest of all, *there was no one in either seat!* Yet, with no hand on the steering-wheel, the white car made the dangerous turn out of the gully into the main road with the

utmost ease, and was now continuing on between the foot of the cliff and the brink of the chasm with a steadiness that was—well, almost hair-raising.

Motor Matt, who had been piloting the Red Flier slowly and carefully along that dangerous course, had cut off the power and thrown on the brake the instant the white car leaped into sight. As he gazed at the receding auto, and noted the conditions under which it was moving, a gasp escaped his lips.

"That beats anything I ever heard of, Carl!" he muttered.

"It vas a shpook pubble!" clamored Carl Pretzel. "I don'd like dot, py shinks. Durn aroundt, or pack oop, or do somet'ing else to ged outt oof der vay. Shpooks iss pad pitzness, und schust vy dit it habben don't make no odds aboutt der tifference. Ged away, Matt, und ged away kevick! Py Chorge! I vas so vorked oop as I can't dell."

Carl released Matt's arm, pulled a big red handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the perspiration from his face. He was having a chill and perspiring at the same time; and his mop of towlike hair was trying to stand on end.

Matt started the Red Flier. There was gas enough in the cylinders to take the spark, so that it was not necessary to get out and use the crank.

To turn around on such a road was out of the question, even if Matt had desired to do so—which he did not. Nor did he reverse the engine and back away, but started along in the trail of the white car.

"Vat you vas doing, anyvay?" cried Carl.

"I'm going to follow up that phantom auto and see if I can find what controls it."

"You vas crazy, Matt! Meppy ve ged kilt oof ve ged too nosey mit dot machine. It don'd pay to dake some chances in a case like dose. I know vat I know, und dot's all aboutd it. Go pack pefore der shpook pubble hits us und knock us py der cliff ofer!"

Carl was excited. He believed in "spooks" and Motor Matt didn't, and that was all the difference between them.

"Don't lose your nerve, Carl—"

"It vas gone alretty!" groaned Carl, crouching in his seat, hanging on with both hands and staring ahead with popping eyes.

"Nothing's going to happen," went on Matt. "There's no such thing as ghosts, Carl."

"Don'd I know ven I see vone?" quavered Carl. "You t'ink I vas plind, Matt. Dot pubble moofs mitoudt nopody to make it go like vat it does; und it don'd hit der rocks or go ofer der cliff. Donnervetter! I vish I vas somevere else, py grickets. Ach! I vas so colt like ice, und I sweat; und my teet' raddle so dot I don't hardly peen aple to shpeak anyt'ing."

"We've seen the Red Flier moving along without anybody aboard, Carl," said Matt, in an attempt to quiet his chum's fears.

"Yah, so," answered Carl, "aber der Ret Flier vas moofing along some shdraighdt roads, und der veel vas tied mit ropes so dot she keeps a shdraighdt course. Aber dot shpook pubble don'd haf nopody on, und der veel ain'd tied, und yet she go on und on like anyding. Ach, I peen as goot as a deadt Dutchman, I know dot."

While the boys were thus arguing matters the Red Flier was trailing the phantom auto. The white machine, still controlled in some mysterious manner, glided safely along the treacherous trail. It was beyond

the glow of the acetylene lights, but the moonlight brought it out of the gloom like a white blur.

In advance of the runabout Matt saw a place where the road curved around the face of the cliff. The phantom auto melted around the curve.

Hardly had it vanished when a loud yell was wafted back to the ears of the boys.

Carl nearly jumped out of his seat, and a frightened whoop escaped his lips.

"Ach, du lieber!" he wailed. "Ve vas goners, Matt, ve vas bot' goners. I can't t'ink oof nodding, nod efen my brayers! Vat vas dot? I bed you it vas der teufel gedding retty to chump on us. Whoosh! I never had some feelings like dis yet."

"Don't be foolish, Carl," said Matt. "There was no spook back of that yell, but real flesh and blood. Keep a stiff upper lip and we'll find out all about it."

Just then the Red Flier rounded the turn. A long, straightaway course lay ahead of the boys, lighted brightly by the lamps and, farther on, by the moon and stars. But *the phantom auto had vanished!*

Matt was astounded, and brought the Red Flier to a halt once more. With a high wall of rock on one side of the road, and an abyss on the other, where could the white car have gone?

"Ach, chiminy!" chattered Carl. "Poof, und away she goes. Der pubble vas snuffed oudt, und schust meldet indo der moonpeams. Dis vas a hoodoo pitzness, all right. Ve ged der duple-gross pooty soon, I bed you someding for nodding!"

"But that yell—"

"Der teufel make him! Id don'd vas nodding but der shpook feller, saying in der shpook language, 'Ah, ha, I

ged you pooty kevick!' I vish dot I hat wings so I could fly away mit meinseluf."

Matt got down from the car and started to walk forward. Carl let off a yell and scrambled after him.

"Don'd leaf me, Matt! It vas goot to be mit somepody ad sooch a dime. Misery lofes gompany, und dot's vat I need."

"Come on, then," laughed Matt.

"Vere you go, hey?"

"I'm going to see if I can discover what became of that car."

"It vent oop on der moonpeams," averred Carl earnestly. "You can look, und look, und dot's all der goot it vill do. Dake it from me, Matt, dot ve don'd vas —"

"Ahoy, up there!"

The words seem to come from nowhere—or, rather, from everywhere, which was equivalent to the same thing.

Carl gave a roar and tried to push himself into the face of the cliff.

"Vat I tell you, hey?" he groaned. "Dere it vas again. Matt, more und vorse dan der odder dime. Rightd here iss vere ve kick some puckets; yah, leedle Carl Pretzel und Modor Matt King vill be viped oudt like a sponge mit a slate."

"Keep still, Carl!" called Matt. "There's no ghost back of that voice. Listen a minute."

Turning in the road, Matt lifted his head.

"Hello!" he called.

"Hello, yourself!" came the muffled but distinct

response.

The voice seemed to float out of the blackness of the chasm, and Matt stepped closer to the edge.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name'll be M-u-d, Mud, if you don't man a line an' give me a boost out of this."

"Where are you?"

"Down the wall, hanging like a lizard to a piece of scrub. Can't you tell by my talk where I am? From the looks, I'm about a fathom down; but I'll be all the way down if you don't get a move on. Shake yourself together, mate, and be lively!"

Carl's fear, as this conversation proceeded, was gradually lost in curiosity. The voice from over the brink had a very human ring to it, and the Dutch boy was beginning to feel easier in his mind.

"Get the rope out of the tonneau, Carl," called Matt. "Hurry up!"

"Bully!" came from below, the person on the wall evidently hearing Matt's order to Carl. "That's the game, matey. If you've got a rope, reeve a bowline in the end and toss it over. I'm a swab if I don't think it's up to you to do it, too. I wouldn't have slid over the edge if your white devil-wagon hadn't made me dodge out of the way. How'd it—Wow!"

The voice below broke off with a startled whoop.

"What's the matter?" called Matt.

"The bush pulled out a little," was the answer, "and I thought I was gone. Rush things up there, will you?"

At that moment Carl came with the rope, and Matt, standing above the place where he supposed the unseen speaker to be, allowed the noosed end to slide

down to him.

"I've got it!" cried the voice. "Are you ready to lay on?"

"Catch hold, Carl," said Matt, "and brace yourself. All ready," he shouted, when he and Carl were planted firmly with the rope in their hands.

"Then here goes!"

The rope grew taut under a suddenly imposed weight, and Matt and Carl laid back on it and hauled in.

CHAPTER II.

DICK FERRAL.

A young fellow of seventeen or eighteen crawled over the brink of the chasm and sat on the rocks to breathe himself. The lamps of the Red Flier shone full on him, so that Matt and Carl were easily able to take his sizing.

He wore a flannel shirt, cowboy-hat and high-heeled boots. His trousers were tucked in his boot-tops. His bronzed face was clean-cut, and he had clear, steady eyes.

"Wouldn't that just naturally rattle your spurs?" he asked, looking Matt and Carl over as he talked. "I thought you fellows had put a stamp on that rope and were sending it by mail. It seemed like a good while coming, but maybe that was because I was hangin' to a twig and three leaves with the skin of my teeth." He swerved his eyes to the Red Flier. "You've lit your candles," he added, "since you scared me out of a year's growth by flashin' around that bend. If you'd had the lights going *then*, I guess I could have crowded up against the cliff instead of makin' a jump t'other way and going over the edge."

"You vas wrong mit dot," said Carl. "It vasn't us vat come along und knocked you py der gulch."

"That's the truth," added Matt, noting the stranger's startled expression. "We were following that other automobile, and stopped when we heard you yell."

Without a word the rescued youth got up and went back to give the Red Flier a closer inspection. When he returned, he seemed entirely satisfied that he had made a mistake.

"I did slip my hawser on that first idea, and no mistake," said he. "As I went over, I saw out of the clew of my eye that the other flugee was white. Yours is bigger, and painted different. What are your names, mates?"

Matt introduced himself and Carl.

"I'm Dick Ferral," went on the other, shaking hands heartily, "and when I'm at home, which is about once in six years, I let go the anchor in Hamilton, Ontario. I'm a sailor, most of the time, but for the last six months I've been punching cattle in the Texas Panhandle. A crimp annexed my money, back there in Lamy, and I'm rolling along toward an old ranch my uncle used to own, called La Vita Place. It can't be far from here, if I'm not off my bearings. Where are you bound, mates, in that steam hooker?"

"Santa Fé," answered Matt.

"Own that craft?" and Dick Ferral nodded toward the car.

"No; it belongs to a man named Tomlinson, who lives in Denver. Carl and I brought it to Albuquerque for him. When we got there, we found a line from him asking us to bring the car on to Santa Fé. If we got there in two weeks he said it would be time enough, so we're jogging along and taking things easy."

"If you've got plenty of time, I shouldn't think you'd want to do any cruising in waters like these, unless you had daylight to steer by."

"We'd have reached the next town before sunset," Matt answered, "if we hadn't had trouble with a tire."

"It was a good thing for me you were behind your schedule, and happened along just after I turned a handspring over the cliff. If you hadn't, Davy Jones would have had me by this time. But what became of

that other craft? I didn't have much time to look at it, for it came foaming along full and by, at a forty-knot gait, but as I slid over the rock I couldn't see a soul aboard."

"No more dere vasn't," said Carl earnestly. "Dot vas a shpook pubble, Verral. You see him, und ve see him, aber he don'd vas dere; nodding, nodding at all only schust moonshine!"

"Well, well, well!" Ferral cast an odd glance at Motor Matt. "That old flugee was a sort of Flying Dutchman, hey?"

"I don'd know somet'ing about dot," answered Carl, shaking his head gruesomely, "aber I bed you it vas a shpook."

"There wasn't any one on the car," put in Matt, "and it's a mystery how it traveled this road like it did. It came out of a gully, farther back around the bend, right ahead of us. We followed it, and when we had come around that turn it had vanished."

"What you say takes me all aback, messmates," said Ferral. "I'm no believer in ghost-stories, but this one of yours stacks up nearer the real thing in that line than any I ever heard. Say," and Ferral seemed to have a sudden idea, "if you fellows want a berth for the night, why not put in at La Vita Place?"

"Sure, Matt, vy nod?" urged Carl.

"How far is it, Ferral?" asked Matt.

"It can't be far from here, although I'm a bit off soundings on this part of the chart. I've never been to Uncle Jack's before—and shame on me to say it—and likely I wouldn't be going there now if the old gentleman hadn't dropped off, leaving things in a bally mix. They say I'm to get my whack from the estate, if a will can be found, although I don't know why anything

should come to me. I've always been a rover, and Uncle Jack didn't like it. My cousin, Ralph Sercomb—I never liked him and wouldn't trust him the length of a lead line—stands to win his pile by the same will. Ralph is at the ranch, and, I suppose, waitin' for me with open arms and a knife up his sleeve."

"When did your uncle die?" inquired Matt.

"As near as I can find out, he just simply vanished. All he left was a line saying he was tired of living alone, that he never could get me to give up my roaming and come and stay with him, and that while Ralph came often and did what he could to cheer him up, he had always had a soft place in his heart for me, and missed me. He said, too, in that last writing of his, that when he was found his will would be found with him, and that he hoped Ralph and I would stay at the ranch until the will turned up. That's what came to me, down in the Texas Panhandle, from a lawyer in Lamy. As soon as I got that I felt like a swab. Here I've been knockin' around the world ever since I was ten, Uncle Jack wanting me all the time and me holding back. Now I'm coming to the ranch like a pirate. Anyhow, that's the way it looks. If Uncle Jack was alive he'd say, 'You couldn't come just to see me, Dick, but now that I'm gone, and have left you something, you're quick enough to show up.'"

Ferral turned away and looked down into the blackness of the gulch. He faced about, presently, and went on:

"But it wasn't Uncle Jack's money that brought me. Now, when it's too late, I'm trying to do the right thing—and to make up for what I ought to have done and didn't do in the past. A fellow like me is thoughtless. He never understands where he's failed in his duty till a blow like this brings it home to him. He's the only relative Ralph and I had left, and I've acted like a

misbemannered Sou'wegian.

"When I went to sea, I shipped from Halifax on the *Billy Ruffian*, as we called her, although she's down on the navy list as the *Bellerophon*. From there I was transferred to the South African station, and the transferring went on and on till my time was out, and I found myself down in British Honduras. Left there to come across the Gulf of Galveston, and worked my way up into the Texas Panhandle, where I navigated the Staked Plains on a cow-horse. Had six months of that, when along came the lawyer's letter, and I tripped anchor and bore away for here. As I told you, a crimp did me out of my roll in Lamy. He claimed to be a fellow Canuck in distress, and I was going with him to his hotel to see what I could do to help him out. He led me into a dark street, and somebody hit me from behind and I went down and out with a slumber-song. Then I got up and laid a course for Uncle Jack's. If you'll go with me the rest of the way, I'll like it, and you might just as well stop over at La Vita Place and make a fresh start for Santa Fé in the morning."

"We'll do it," answered Matt, who was liking Dick Ferral more and more as he talked.

"Dot's der shtuff!" chirped Carl. "Oof you got somet'ing to eat at der ranch, und a ped to shleep on, ve vill ged along fine."

"I guess we can find all that at the place, although I don't think the ranch amounts to much. Uncle Jack was queer—not unhinged, mind you, only just a bit different from ordinary people. He never did a thing in quite the same way some one else would do it. When he left England, a dozen years ago, he stopped with us a while in Hamilton, and then came on here and bought an old Mexican *casa*. He wanted to get away from folks, he said, but I guess he got tired of it; if he hadn't, he wouldn't have been so dead set on having

me with him after my parents died. The bulk of his money is across the water. But hang his money! It's Uncle Jack himself I'm thinking about, now."

"We'll get into the car," said Matt, "and go on a hunt for La Vita Place."

Matt stepped to the crank. As he bent over it, Carl gave a frightened shout.

"Look vonce!" he quavered, pointing along the road with a shaking finger. "Dere iss some more oof der shpooks!"

Matt started up and whirled around. Perhaps a hundred feet from where the three boys were standing, a dim figure could be seen, silvered uncannily by the moonlight.

"Great guns, Carl!" muttered Matt. "Your nerves must be in pretty bad shape. That's a man, and he's been walking toward us while we were talking."

"Vy don'd he come on some more, den?" asked Carl. "Vat iss he shtandin' shdill mit himseluf for? Vy don'd he shpeak oudt und say somet'ing?"

"Hello!" called Ferral. "How far is it to La Vita Place, pilgrim?"

The form did not answer, but continued to stand rigid and erect in the moonlight.

"Ve'd pedder ged oudt oof dis so kevvick as ve can," faltered Carl, crouching back under the shadow of the car. "I don'd like der looks oof dot feller."

"Let's get closer to him, Ferral," suggested Matt, starting along the road at a run.

"It's main queer the way he's actin', and no mistake," muttered Ferral, starting after Matt.

Matt was about half-way to the motionless figure,

when it melted slowly into the black shadow of the cliff. On reaching the place where the figure had stood, it was nowhere to be seen.

"What do you think of that, Ferral?" Matt asked in bewilderment.

Ferral did not reply. His eyes were bright and staring, and he leaned against the rock wall and drew a dazed hand across his brows.

CHAPTER III.

LA VITA PLACE.

"I'm all ahoo, and that's the truth of it," muttered Ferral. "This is the greatest place for seein' things, and then losin' track of 'em, that I ever got into. There was certainly a man standing right there where you are, wasn't there?"

"That's the way it looked to me," answered Matt. "It can't be that we were all fooled. Imagination might have played hob with one of us, but it couldn't with all three."

Ferral peered around him then looked over the shelf into the gulch, and up toward the top of the cliff.

"Well, sink me, if this ain't the queerest business I ever ran into! Some one must be hoaxin' us."

"Why should any one do that?" asked Matt. "What have they got to gain by such foolishness?"

"I'm over my head. There's no use staying here, though, overhaulin' our jaw-tackle. Let's go on to the ranch."

"That's the ticket! If what we've seen and can't understand means anything to us, it's bound to come out."

They started back.

"Are you on good terms with your cousin, Ralph Sercomb?" Matt asked, as they walked along.

"The last time I saw him was six years ago, when I came to Hamilton to settle up my father's estate. Ralph was there, and I licked him. I can't remember what it was for, but I did it proper. He was always more or less

of a sneak, but he's got one of these angel-faces, and to take his sizing offhand no one would ever think he'd do anything wrong."

"Does he live in Hamilton?"

"No, in Denver. His mother and my mother were Uncle Jack's sisters. Last I heard of Ralph he was driving a racing-automobile for a manufacturing firm—a little in your line, I guess, eh?"

By that time the two boys had got back to the machine. Carl was up in front, imagining all sorts of things.

"I peen hearing funny noises," he remarked, as Matt "turned over" the engine and then got up in the driver's seat, "und dey keep chabbering, 'Don'd go on, go pack, go pack,' schust like dot. I t'ink meppy ve pedder go pack, Matt."

"We can't go back, Carl," returned Matt, starting the machine as soon as Ferral had climbed into the tonneau. "We couldn't turn around in this road even if we wanted to."

"Vell, hurry oop und ged away from dis shpooky blace. Der kevicker vat ve do dot, der pedder off ve vas. I got some feelings dot dere is drouple aheadt. Dot shpook plew indo nodding ven you come oop mit it, hey?"

"The man vanished mysteriously—that's the size of it. If it was daylight, we might be able to figure out how he got away so suddenly."

Under Motor Matt's skilful guidance the Red Flier ran purring along the dangerous road. Half a mile brought the car and its passengers to the end of the cliff and the chasm, and they whirled out into level country, covered with brush and trees.

"There's a light ahead, mates!" announced Ferral, leaning over the back of the front seat, and pointing. "It's on the port side, too, and that agrees with the instructions I got on leaving Lamy. That's La Vita Place, all right enough, and Ralph's at home if that light is any indication."

Owing to the fact that the house was almost screened from the road by trees and bushes, it was impossible for the boys to see much of it. The single light winked at them through a gap in the tree-branches, and was evidently shining from an up-stairs window.

"While you're routing out your cousin and telling him he has company for the night, Ferral," said Matt, turning from the road, "Carl and I will look for a place to leave the car."

"Aye, aye, pard," assented Ferral, jumping out. "There must be a barn or something, I should think. Go around toward the back of the house."

There was a blind road leading through the dark grove toward the rear of the place. The car's lamps shot a gleam ahead and Matt pushed onward carefully. When he and Carl came opposite the side of the house, they heard voices, somewhere within the building, talking loudly. They could not distinguish what was said, as the intervening wall of the building smothered the words.

"Ve don't vas der only gompany vat dey haf donghdt, Matt," remarked Carl, in a tone of huge relief. "It feels goot to be so glose py so many real peoples afder dot shpook pitzness."

"I didn't think you believed in ghosts, Carl," laughed Matt.

"Vell, a feller vas a fool ven he don'd pelieve vat he sees, ain'd he?"

"That depends on how he looks at what he sees."

This was too deep for Carl, and before he could frame an answer, Matt brought the Red Flier to a halt in front of a small stone barn.

The barn had a wide door, and Matt got out, took the tail lamp and went forward to investigate. Opening one of the double doors, he stepped inside.

The barn was a crude affair, the stones having been laid up without mortar. The roof consisted of a thatch of poles and boughs, overlaid with earth.

There was plenty of room in the structure, however, for the machine, and there were no horses in the place to damage it.

While Carl opened both doors, Matt ran the Red Flier into its temporary garage. Just as they had closed the doors and were about to start for the house, Ferral ran up to them out of the darkness.

"Here's a go!" he exclaimed. "I pounded on the front door till I was blue in the face, and no one showed up."

"There's some one in the house, all right," declared Matt. "Carl and I heard them."

"Sure ve dit," struck in Carl, "so blain as anyt'ing. Und dare vas a lighdt, Verral—ve all saw der lighdt."

"Well, there's no noise inside the house now, and no light, either," replied the perplexed Ferral. "What sort of a blooming place is it? As soon as I began pounding on the door, the voices died out and the light vanished from the window."

"Are you positive this is La Vita Place?" asked Matt, with a sudden thought that they might have made a mistake.

Ferral himself had said that he had never been to the

ranch before, and it was very possible he had gone wrong in following directions.

"Call me a lubber if I ain't," answered Ferral decidedly. "Come around front and I'll show you."

Together the three boys made their way back through the gloomy grove, turned the corner of the building and brought up at the front door. The house continued dark and silent.

Ferral scratched a match and held the flickering taper at arm's length over his head.

"Look at that printing above the door," said he.

There, plainly enough, were the rudely painted words, "La Vita Place."

"We're takin' our scope of cable this far, all right," observed Ferral, dropping the match and laying a hand on the door-knob, "and I guess I've got as good a right in Uncle Jack's house as anybody. Open up, I say!" he shouted, and shook the door vigorously.

No one answered. Not a sound could be heard inside the building.

Matt stepped back and ran his eye over the gloomy outline of the structure.

It was a two-story adobe, the windows small and deeply set in the thick walls. The window through which the light had been seen was now as dark as the others. This was as puzzling as any of the other events of the night, but it could be explained. Those inside were not in a mood to receive callers; but, even if that was the case, why could not some one come to the door and say so?

"I'm going to get in," said Ferral decidedly, stepping back as though he would kick the door open.

"Wait a minute," suggested Matt, "and let's see if the kitchen door isn't unlocked."

"It isn't—I've tried it."

"How about the windows?"

"The lower ones are all fastened."

"Then I'll try one of the upper ones."

There was a tree close to the corner of the house with a branch swinging close to the window through which the boys had seen the light. Watched by Ferral and Carl, Matt climbed the tree and made his way carefully out along the branch. When opposite the window, he was able to step one foot on the deep sill and balance himself while lifting the sash.

"It's unlocked!" he called down softly. "I'll get inside and open the door."

"There's no telling what you'll find inside there," Ferral called back. "We'll all climb up and get in at the window, then look through the house together."

Carl was beginning to have "spooky" feelings again. Not wanting to be left alone by the front door, he insisted on being the next one to climb the tree. Matt, who had got into the house, reached out and gave his Dutch chum a helping hand. When Ferral came, they both gave him a lift, and all three were presently inside the up-stairs room.

"There's been somebody here, and not so very long ago," said Matt. "I smell tobacco smoke."

"It's t'ick enough to cut mit a knife," sniffed Carl.

"I'll strike a match and look for a lamp," said Ferral, "then we can see what we're doing."

As the little flame flickered up in his hands, the boys took in the dimensions of a small, square room. A table

with four chairs around it stood in the center of the room, and on the table was a pack of cards, left, apparently, in the middle of the game. In the midst of the cards stood a lamp.

Ferral lighted the lamp.

"Four people were here," said he, picking up the lamp, "and it's an easy guess they can't be far away. We'll cruise around a little and see what we can find."

Opening the only door that led out of the room, Ferral stepped into the hall. Just as he did so, a sharp, incisive report echoed through the house. A crash of glass followed, and Ferral was blotted out in darkness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HOUSE OF WONDER.

"Ferral!" cried Matt in trepidation.

"Aye, aye!" answered the voice of Ferral.

"Hurt?"

"Not a bit of it, matey. Strike me lucky, though, if I didn't have a tight squeak of it. The lamp-chimney was smashed and the light put out. If the bullet had gone a few inches lower, the lamp itself would have been knocked into smithereens and I'd have been fair covered with blazing oil. That flare-up proves the skulkers are still aboard." He lifted his voice. "Ahoy, there, you pirates! What're you running afoul o' me like that for? I've a right here, being Dick Ferral, of the old *Billy Ruffian*. Mr. Lawton's my uncle."

Silence fell with the last word. There were no sounds in the house, apart from the quiet, sharp breathing of the three boys. Outside the faint night wind soughed through the trees, making a sort of moan that was hard on the nerves.

Carl went groping for Matt, giving a grunt of satisfaction when he reached him and took a firm hold of his coat-tails.

"Ve pedder go py der vinder vonce again," suggested Carl, catching his breath, "make some shneaks py der pubble und ged apsent mit ourselufs. Ven pulleds come ad you from der tark it vas pedder dot you ain'd aroundt. Somepody don'd vant us here."

"I'm here because it's my duty," said Ferral, still in the hall, "and by the same token I've got to stay here and overhaul the whole blooming layout—but it ain't

right to ring you in on such a rough deal. You and the Dutchman can up anchor and bear away, Matt, and I'll still be mighty obliged for your bowing me off that piece of wall, and sorry, too, you couldn't be treated better under my uncle's roof."

"You're not going to cut loose from us like that, Ferral," replied Matt. "We'll stay with you till this queer affair straightens out more to your liking."

"But the danger—"

"Well, we've faced music of that kind before."

"Bully for you, old ship!" cried Ferral heartily. "I'll never forget it, either. Now, sink me, I'm going through this cabin from bulkhead to bulkhead, and if I can lay hands on that deacon-faced Sercomb, he'll tell me the why of this or I'll wring his neck for him."

Matt stepped resolutely into the hall and ranged himself at Ferral's side. Ferral was drawing a match over the wall. The gleam of light would make targets of the boys for their unseen enemies, but there would have to be light if the investigation was to be thorough.

No shot came.

"Either we've got the swabs on the run," muttered Ferral, "or I'm a point off. The lamp's out of commission, so I'll leave it here on the floor. We've got to find another."

"Be jeerful, be jeerful," mumbled Carl. "Efen dough ve ged shot fuller oof holes as some bepper-poxes it vas pedder dot ve be jeerful."

"Right-o," answered Ferral, moving off along the hall. "Only two rooms on this floor," he added, looking around; "we'll go into the other and try for a lamp we can use."

The door of the second room opened off the hall

directly opposite the door of the first. The boys stepped in and found themselves in a bedroom. There was a rack of books on the wall, a trunk—open and contents scattered—carpet torn up and bed disarranged.

"Looks like a hurricane had bounced in here," remarked Ferral.

"Here's a candle," said Matt, and lifted the candlestick from the table and held it for Ferral to touch the match to the wick.

When the candle was alight, Ferral stepped to the table and looked at a portrait swinging from the wall. It was the portrait of a gray-haired man. A broad ribbon crossed his breast and the insignia of some order hung against it. In spite of the surrounding perils, Ferral took off his hat.

"Uncle Jack," he murmured, his voice vibrant with feeling. "The warmest corner of my heart is set aside for his memory, mates. I wish I'd done more for his comfort when he was alive."

He turned away abruptly.

"But we can't lose time here. What have you got there, Matt?"

Matt had seen a sword swinging from the wall. Drawing the blade from its scabbard, he was holding it in his hand.

"I'd thought of borrowing this," said he, "until we see what's ahead."

"That's a regular jim-hickey of an idea!"

With one hand Ferral twitched at a lanyard about his neck and brought out a dirk.

"I might as well carry this, too," he added.

"Und vat vill I do some fighting mit?" asked Carl

anxiously. "I don'd got anyt'ing more as a chack-knife."

"You stay behind and act as rear-guard, Carl," said Matt. "Dick and I will go ahead."

With sword and dirk in readiness for instant use, Matt and Ferral forged along the short hall to the stairs, peering carefully around them as they went. They did not see anything of their enemies and could not hear a sound apart from the noise they made themselves.

The flickering gleams of the candle showed a number of rich furnishings in the lower hall. The first story consisted of three rooms, parlor, library and kitchen. The parlor covered one side of the house, and was divided by a passage from the two rooms on the other side.

But in none of the rooms, nor the hall, was any of their lurking foes to be seen!

"Dis vas der plamedest t'ing vat efer habbened!" whispered Carl. "A rekular vonder-house! Noises, und lights, und pulleds, und nopody aroundt."

"Wait," warned Ferral, making for an open door that evidently led into the cellar, "we haven't looked through the hold yet. We'll go down and get closer to bilge-water! I warrant you we'll stir up the rats."

They descended a short flight of stairs into a rock-walled cellar. The cellar covered the entire lower part of the house, and was so high as to leave plenty of head-room.

On a shelf were a number of cobwebbed bottles, and in one corner was a bin of potatoes—but there were no enemies in the cellar.

"Shiver me!" muttered Ferral, peering dazedly at Matt through the flickering gleams of the candle. "How

do you account for this?"

"The four people who were here," returned Matt, "must have got out while we were in your uncle's room. If they have gone to the barn and tampered with the Red Flier—"

This startling thought turned Motor Matt to the right about, and he raced back to the first floor. Carl and Ferral followed him swiftly.

There were only two outside doors to the house, one leading from the kitchen, and the other from the front hall.

Investigation showed that both of these doors were bolted on the inside.

All the lower windows were also securely fastened.

Ferral dropped down in a chair in the front hall and drew his hand across his forehead.

"I'll be box-hauled if I can twig this layout, at all!" he muttered. "Those fellows couldn't get out and leave those doors and windows locked on the inside."

"And they couldn't have got past us on the stairs and got out the way we came in," added Matt, equally nonplused. "We looked carefully as we came down from the upper floor, and the rascals must have been driven ahead of us. I'm knocked all of a heap, and that's a fact."

Carl cantered forward.

"Der shpooks vas blaying viggie-vaggle mit us," he averred in a stage whisper. "Led us say goot-by, bards, und shkin oudt. It vas pedder so, yah, so helup me."

"Are you getting cold feet, matey?" queried Ferral.

"I peen colt all ofer," admitted Carl, "efer since dot shpook pubble vented off indo nodding righdt vile ve

look. Den der man-shpook meldet oudt, und dese oder shpooks faded. Yah, you bed my life, ve vill go oop in shmoke ourselufs oof ve shtay here long."

"Carl does a lot of foolish talking, Dick," spoke up Matt, "but he's as game as a hornet, for all that. Don't pay any attention to his spook talk. I saw a lantern in the kitchen, and a padlock and key lying on a shelf. While you two are trying to solve this riddle, I'm going out to the barn and get a lock and key on the Red Flier. I can't afford to let anything happen to that machine."

"I vill go mit you, Matt," said Carl.

"You stay here with Dick," Matt answered. "I'll not be gone more than a minute."

Hurrying into the kitchen he lighted the lantern; then, with the padlock and key in his pocket and the sword in his hand, he unbolted the kitchen door and made his way to the barn.

He listened intently as he went, but there was no sound in the gloomy grove save the hooting of an owl.

He found the Red Flier just as he and Carl had left it, and an examination of the barn proved that no one had taken refuge there. After putting the bolt upon the door and locking it—he already had the spark-plug in his pocket—he felt easier, and returned unmolested to the house.

While he was gone, Ferral and Carl had lighted a large lamp in the parlor and drawn the shades at the windows. They were seated comfortably in easy chairs, eating sandwiches of dried beef and bread.

"There's your snack, mate," cried Ferral, pointing to a plate on the table. "Better get on the outside of it. We may have a lively time, and it's just as well to prepare ourselves for whatever is going to happen."

Carl, now that the tension had eased a trifle and food was in sight, was feeling better.

"I guess ve got der whole ranch py ourselufs," he beamed, his mouth half-full of sandwich. "Ve schared dem odder fellers away. Oof dey shday away undil ve clear oudt, dot's all vat I ask."

"Who were the lubbers, and how did they slip their cables?" queried Ferral. "That's the point that's got me hooked. Do you think that white car, and that man we saw in the road, had anything to do with the swabs who were in here?"

Before Matt could answer, a rap fell on the front door and its echoes ran through the house. Carl jumped up in a panic.

"Blitzen and dunder!" he cried chokingly, struggling with his last mouthful of sandwich and peering wildly at Matt and Dick, "dere's somet'ing else! Schust ven ve ged easy in our mindts, bang goes der front door! Now vat?"

"We'll see what," returned Ferral grimly, getting to his feet and starting for the hall.

Matt followed him, sword in hand, and ready for any emergency that might present itself.

CHAPTER V.

SERCOMB.

The rapping on the door had grown to a vigorous thumping before Ferral and Matt reached the entrance. Quickly throwing the bolt, Ferral pulled the door open and a young man of twenty-one or two stepped in.

He was well built and muscular and had a smooth, harmless face. The face was so void of expression that, to Matt, it showed a lack of character.

Ferral was carrying the candle. Through its gleams, he and the newcomer stared at each other.

"Why—why," murmured the youth who had just entered, "can this be my cousin Dick?"

"You've taken my soundings all right, Sercomb," answered Ferral coolly. "Wasn't you expecting me?"

"Well, yes, in a way," and Sercomb's eyes roamed to Matt. "We got track of you down in Texas, and the lawyer said he'd sent word, but we didn't know whether you'd come or not."

"Where have you been, Sercomb?" and Matt saw Ferral's keen eyes studying the other's face.

Sercomb met the look calmly.

"I've been spending the evening at a neighbor's," he replied, "my nearest neighbor's—a mile away through the hills."

"Got out of an up-stairs window, didn't you?" asked Ferral caustically.

"What do you mean?" demanded Sercomb, a slight

flush running into his face.

"Why, when you started to make that call you left all the lower windows fastened and both outside doors bolted on the inside."

"There's some mistake," answered Sercomb blankly. "When I went away I left the front door open. We don't go to the trouble of locking doors in this country, Dick."

"Well, these were locked when I got here. What's more, there were four men in a room up-stairs playing cards. Come, come, you grampus! Don't try to play fast and loose with me. How did you and the other three lubbers get out of the house? And why wouldn't you let me in when I rapped?"

"Look here," blustered Sercomb, "what do you take me for? You never liked me, and you're up to your old trick of suspecting me of something crooked whenever anything goes wrong. I was hoping you'd got over that. Uncle Jack was all cut up over the way you treated me, and he never could understand it. Now that he's dead and gone, I should think we might at least be friends."

"Dead and gone, is he," asked Ferral quickly. "How do you know?"

"Because I've found him—and the will."

Ferral was dazed, as though some one had struck him a blow in the face. Matt, who was watching Sercomb intently, thought he saw an exultant flash in his eyes as he spoke.

"The poor old chap," Sercomb went on, "was tucked away in a thicket of bushes, less than a stone's throw from the house. I don't know whether there was any foul play—I haven't been able to find his Hindu servant, Tippoo, yet, but there weren't any marks on the body. I laid Uncle Jack away in the grove, and I'll

show you the place in the morning. The will was in his coat-pocket, and wrapped in a piece of oilskin. It was very sad, very sad," and Sercomb averted his face for a moment; "and to think that neither you nor I, Dick, was with him. But come into the other room. I'm tired and want to sit down and rest."

Ferral, like one in a dream, followed his cousin into the parlor. Sercomb was standing in front of Carl, apparently wondering where Ferral had picked up so many friends.

"Here, Ralph," said Ferral, suddenly rousing himself, "I'd forgot to introduce my friends," and he presented Matt and Carl. "What you've told me," he went on, "catches me up short and leaves me in stays. I heard that Uncle Jack had disappeared, but not that Davy Jones had got him."

For the moment, Ferral's feelings caused him to thrust aside his dislike of Sercomb.

"It's too confounded bad, and that's a fact," said Sercomb, throwing himself into a chair and lighting a cigarette. "I haven't been down to see the old chap for six months. Our firm had a machine in the endurance run from Chicago to Omaha, and I was busy with that, and in getting ready for a big race that's soon to be pulled off, so my hands were more than full. When I got the lawyer's letter, though, I broke away from everything and came on here."

"Why didn't the lawyer tell me Uncle Jack and the will had been found?" asked Ferral.

"That only happened two days ago. The lawyer wrote you the same time he wrote me."

"But I saw the lawyer in Lamy, day before yesterday —"

"He didn't know it, then."

"How does the will read, Ralph?"

"Everything was left to me, this place and all Uncle Jack's holdings in South African stock. Of course, you know, you've never come near him, Dick. If you had, the will might have read different."

"I don't care the fag-end of nothing about Uncle Jack's money; it was Uncle Jack himself I wanted to see. If this place is yours, Sercomb—" and Ferral broke off and started to get up.

"You and your friends are welcome to stay here all night," said Sercomb. "It's not much of a place, and I'm going to pack up the valuables, send them to Denver, and clear out."

"Going to keep up your racing?"

Sercomb smiled.

"Hardly; not with a mint of money like I've got now," he answered. "In a few months, I'm off for old England."

A brief silence followed, broken suddenly by Sercomb.

"But I'm bothered about the intruders you say were here when you came. They must have locked both doors on the inside."

"A rum go," said Ferral, "if strangers can come in and make free with a person's property like that."

"Tell me about it. This country is a good deal of a wilderness, you know, and strangers are likely to do anything."

Ferral said nothing concerning the phantom auto, nor about the man who had so mysteriously vanished on the cliff road; he confined himself strictly to what had happened in the house, and tipped Matt and Carl a

wink to apprise them that they were to let it go at that.

Sercomb seemed greatly wrought up, and insisted on taking a lamp and making an investigation of the upper floor.

"They were thieves," Sercomb finally concluded. "They thought I had gone away for the night, and so they came in here and tore up Uncle Jack's bedroom like we see it. It was known that Uncle Jack had money, and it was just as well known that he had disappeared."

"If you knew all that yourself," said Ferral, "why didn't you lock up before you went visiting?"

"I was careless," admitted Sercomb, with apparent frankness. "The one thing that bothers me is the fact that you were shot at, Dick! A nice way for you to be treated in Uncle Jack's own house!"

"Don't let that fret you, Sercomb. I've had belaying-pins and bullets heaved at me so many times that I don't mind so long as they go wide. We'll have a round with our jaw-tackle to-morrow. Just now, though, I and my mates are ready for a little shut-eye. Where do we berth?"

"Two of you can fix up Uncle Jack's bed and sleep there; the other can bunk down on the couch in the room where those four rascals were playing cards. I'll sleep down-stairs on the parlor davenport. Yes," Sercomb added, "it will be just as well to sleep over all this queer business, and do our talking in the morning. Good night, all of you."

Leaving the lamp for the boys, Sercomb went stumbling down-stairs.

"What do you think of Ralph Sercomb, Matt?" whispered Ferral, when Sercomb had left the stairs and could be heard moving around the parlor.

"I don't like his looks," answered Matt frankly, "nor the way he acts."

"Me, neider," put in Carl. "He vas a shly vone, und I bed you he talks crooked mit himseluf."

"That's the way I always sized him up," admitted Ferral, "and strikes me lucky if I think he's improved any since I saw him last. But he's got the will, and poor old Uncle Jack—"

Ferral's eyes wandered to the picture on the wall, and he shook his head sadly.

"I'd have a look at that will," said Matt, "and I'd get a lawyer to look at it."

"These lawyer-sharps, of course, will have their watch on deck, but I hate to quibble over the old chap's property when it's Uncle Jack himself I wanted to find. Anyhow, I got my whack, all right, to be cut off without a shilling; at the same time, Ralph got more than was his due. But I'm no kicker."

"If Sercomb drives a racing-car," went on Matt, "he must have skill and nerve."

"Nerve, aye! Cousin Ralph always had his locker full of that. But how shall we sleep? My head's all ahoop with what's happened, and I need sleep to clear away the fog. You and your mate take the bed, Matt, and I'll —"

"No, you don't," said Matt. "I'm for the couch in the other room."

Matt insisted on this, and finally had his way. He was not intending to sleep on the couch, but to go out to the barn and spend the night in the tonneau of the Red Flier. If Sercomb knew so much about automobiles, Matt felt that the touring-car would bear watching. He had no confidence in Sercomb, and felt

sure that he was playing an underhand game of some kind.

Sitting down on the couch, Matt waited until the house was quiet, then went softly to the open window, climbed through, and made his way to the ground by means of the tree. Hardly had his feet struck solid earth, when he heard the front door drawn carefully open.

Sercomb stepped out and noiselessly closed the door behind him. Matt, intensely alive to the possibilities of the unexpected situation, drew back into the darker shadows of the tree-branches.

Sercomb, moving away a little from the house, gave a low whistle. A hoot, as of an owl, came instantly from the grove.

Sercomb started away rapidly in the direction from which the sound came.

Matt followed him, keeping carefully in the shadows.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PHANTOM AUTO AGAIN.

Sercomb did not follow the blind trail that led to the main road. He made for the road, but took his way along a foot-path that led through the grove.

It was not at all difficult for Matt to shadow him, and the young motorist was considerably surprised to see Sercomb gain the road at a point where a heavy touring-car had drawn up. The car was about the size of the Red Flier and, in the semidarkness, looked very much like it. But it had a top.

Three men were standing near the head of the machine, in the glow of the lamps. They were all fairly well dressed, quite young, and there was little of the ruffian about them.

They greeted Sercomb excitedly, and for several minutes all four of them engaged in a brisk conversation. Their voices were pitched in too low a tone, and Matt was too far away to hear what was said.

Undoubtedly, Matt reasoned, these three who had just come in the automobile had formed part of the number who had been in the up-stairs room. The fourth member of the party must have been Sercomb, himself.

But how had Sercomb and the other three got away? Their departure from the house was a mystery. And where had they kept their automobile while they were in the house? This was another mystery.

They were planning evil things of some sort, and against Dick Ferral.

Matt had a clue. It assured him that Sercomb had

not told the truth when he said he knew nothing about the so-called intruders who had vanished from the house so strangely. Sercomb, by this stealthy meeting with the three in the road, proved to Matt that he knew all about the men.

From their earnest talk it was clear that they were plotting mischief. Wishing that he could overhear something of what was said, Matt began creeping carefully along the path. By getting a few yards nearer he was sure that he would be within ear-shot.

Just as he had nearly reached the coveted point for which he was making, and the mumble of talk was breaking up into an occasional word which he could distinguish, the conversation broke off with a chorus of excited exclamations.

Matt started up, at first fearing he had been seen, and that the four in the road were coming to capture him. But in this he was mistaken. All four of them, as a matter of fact, had started in his direction, but they abruptly halted and whirled around. Matt's heart jumped when he saw what it was that had claimed their attention.

It was the phantom auto!

The white runabout was wheeling swiftly along the road in the direction of the treacherous cliff trail. The streaming lights of the touring-car were full upon the ghostly runabout, showing the vacant seats distinctly. The weird spectacle was more than enough to fill the four men with momentary panic. They stood as though rooted to the ground, watching the runabout turn of its own accord from the road, pass the touring-car, and then come neatly back into the road again.

An oath broke from one of the men. Leaping to the touring-car he cranked up the machine quickly and hopped into the driver's seat. Two others jumped in

behind him, one in front and the other behind, Sercomb being the only one who remained at the roadside.

Swiftly the touring-car was turned and headed in pursuit. Then, suddenly, there came the report of a firearm, shivering through the still air.

At first, Matt thought one of those in the touring-car had fired at the runabout; then, a moment more, he knew he was mistaken.

The shot had come from the runabout and had punctured one of the touring-car's front tires.

The big car limped and slewed until the power was cut off and it came to a halt. Those who were in the car piled out, sputtering and fuming, and Sercomb ran forward and joined them. Together, all four watched the white phantom whisk out of sight.

There followed a good deal of talking and gesticulating among Sercomb and the three with him. Finally one of them took off the tail lamp and all made an examination of the damaged tire.

A jack was got out and the forward wheel lifted.

From his actions, Sercomb was nervous and excited. He kept walking from the road, looking toward the house and listening. He fancied, no doubt, just as Matt did, that the sound of the shot might have awakened the sleepers in the house.

However, this did not seem to have been the case.

Leaving one of the men to tinker with the tire, Sercomb took the other two and led them off through the grove. They passed within a yard of where Matt was crouching in the bushes, but their plans, whatever they were, had been settled, and they were doing no talking.

Matt continued to dodge after Sercomb. The course he and the two with him were taking did not lead toward the house, but angled off through the grove on a line that would take them fully a hundred feet past the nearest wall of the adobe building.

Abreast of the house, at that point, there was a circular space, clear of timber and with only a patch of brush in the center. Matt, not daring to venture beyond the edge of the timber, stood and watched while Sercomb and his companions disappeared in the thicket.

Matt's position was such that he could see all around the little patch of bushes, and he watched for the three men to appear on the other side. They did not appear, and as minute after minute slipped away, Matt's amazement and curiosity increased.

The men had gone into that little thicket, and why had they not shown themselves again? What was there in that bunch of brush to attract them and keep them so long?

Matt concluded to investigate. There might be danger in doing that, as there would be three against him if he was discovered, but he knew he had only to raise his voice to bring Ferral and Carl.

This clue, which he had picked up so unexpectedly in the night, called upon him to make the most of it and, if possible, discover what Sercomb was up to.

Hastening across the cleared space, he came to the thicket without a challenge. Resolutely he plunged into the bushes—and the next moment the ground seemed to drop out from under him.

Throwing out his hands wildly he plunged downward, struck an incline and rolled over and over, finally coming to a jolting stop on hard earth, on his

hands and knees.

The suddenness of his fall had bewildered him. He was bruised a little, but not otherwise hurt, and as his wits returned his curiosity came uppermost.

What sort of a place was he in?

His groping hands informed him that the incline he had rolled down was a rude stairway. A patch of starlight above revealed the opening into which he had stumbled.

Climbing the stairway, he reached a stone landing and lifted himself erect in the very center of the thicket. A flat slab, tilted upon its edge, showed how the hole was covered when not in use.

Matt drew a quick breath. The mysteries of La Vita Place were clearing a little.

Here, undoubtedly, was a passage communicating with the house. Sercomb and the other three men must have used it in making their strange escape from the up-stairs room, earlier in the night.

But why were Sercomb and his two companions going back through the passage?

Instinctively Matt's suspicions flew to Dick Ferral. Sercomb was planning some evil against him, and the two from the touring-car were there to help him carry it out.

Matt hesitated a moment, trying to decide whether he should go through the passage or reach the house by crossing the cleared place and entering the front door.

He decided upon the passage. The rascals had gone that way and would probably make their escape in the same manner.

Hurrying down the steps he began making his way along a gallery. The passage was not wide, for he could stretch out his hands and touch either side. It ran straight, and Matt pushed rapidly through the gloom, trailing a hand along one wall.

He knew he had only a hundred feet to go before he should reach the house, but in his haste he covered the distance before he realized it, and stumbled against a flight of steps.

While he was picking himself up, he heard a commotion from somewhere above—a wild scramble of feet, a thump of blows and an overturning of furniture. Above the hubbub sounded the voice of Carl.

"Vat's der madder mit you? Hoop-a-la! Take dot, oof you like or oof you don'd like, und dere's anoder! Matt! Come along for der fight *fest*! Vere you vas, Matt, vile der scrimmage iss going on! Verral! Iss dot you?"

Just then, as Matt began scrambling upward, a form came hurtling down.

"They're onto us, Joe!" panted a voice. "This way, old pal! Nothing doing to-night. Cut for it! I ran into something at the foot of the steps—look out for that!"

Matt, who had been thrown violently against the wall, heard forms dashing past him. Before he could interfere with them, they were well along the passage.

CHAPTER VII.

SURROUNDED BY ENEMIES.

Although the two men had got past Matt, nevertheless he followed them to the end of the passage, arriving just in time to see them disappear through the opening and close the aperture with the slab.

Only two went out. What had become of Sercomb? Had Ferral and Carl captured him—catching him red-handed and so unmasking his treachery?

In any event, Ferral and Carl had proven more than a match for the two miscreants who had stolen in upon them. Thankful that the affair had turned out so fortunately for his friends, although still mystified as to what Sercomb's purpose was, Matt groped his way back along the corridor and mounted the steps.

It was a long flight—much longer than the one at the other end of the passage—and, at the top, Matt was confronted by a blank wall. He ran his hands over it, and, in so doing, must have touched a spring, for a section of the wall slid back and a sudden glow of lamplight blinded him.

"Ach, du lieber!" came the astounded voice of Carl. "Dere vas Matt, py chincher! Vere you come from, hey?"

Matt stepped from the head of the steps into the room in which Ferral and Carl had been sleeping. The panel closed noiselessly behind him.

"Sink me!" muttered Ferral, stepping past Matt to run his hands over the wall. "A nice little trap-door in the wall, or I'm a Fiji!" He whirled around. "How does

it come you stepped through it, messmate?"

"Where's Sercomb?" whispered Matt, peering around.

"What's he got to do with this?"

Just at that moment Sercomb's voice came up from below.

"What's going on up there? Anything happened, Dick?"

"Two men came in and made trouble for us!" shouted Matt. "Didn't you hear 'em run down the stairs?"

"No, I didn't hear anybody!" answered Sercomb.

"Take a look around, and we'll see what we can find up here."

During this brief colloquy, Ferral and Carl were staring at Matt in open-mouthed astonishment.

Matt whirled to Ferral.

"Not a word to Sercomb about that hole in the wall," he whispered. "Tell me quick, what happened in here?"

"I was sleeping full and by, forty knots," answered Ferral, in the same low tone, "when I felt myself grabbed. It was dark as Egypt, and I couldn't see a thing. I shouted to Carl, and we had it touch and go, here in the dark. My eye, but it was a scrimmage! Right in the midst of it the fellows we were fighting melted away. I had just got the glim to going when you stepped in on us."

"Wasn't Sercomb in the fight?"

"Why, no. He must have been down-stairs, sleeping like a log. He only just chirped—you heard him."

"Well, Sercomb came into this room with two other

men, through that hole in the wall—"

"Is that right?" demanded Ferral, his face hardening.

"Yes, but don't say a word about it. Wait till we find out what his game is."

"How dit you know all dot, Matt?" queried Carl.

Briefly as he could Matt sketched his recent experiences. The astonishing recital left his two friends gasping.

"The old hunks!" breathed Ferral, scowling. "I can smoke his weather-roll, fast enough. What did I tell you about the soft-sawdering beggar?"

Matt stepped into the hall and listened. Apparently, Sercomb was not in the house. Coming back, he pulled his two friends close together so they could hear him without his speaking above a whisper.

"Sercomb has gone out to hurry up the repairs on the big car and get it out of the way. We can talk a little, but we've got to be wary. Don't let Sercomb know anything about this clue I've picked up. We're surrounded by enemies, Ferral, and you're the object of some sort of game they've got on. By lying low, perhaps we can get wise to it."

"Dot shpook auto has dook a hant in der pitzness," murmured Carl, flashing a fearful glance around. "I don'd like dot fery goot."

"This spook business will all be explained, Carl," said Matt, "and you'll find that flesh and blood is mixed up in the whole of it. That white runabout put a shot into one of the tires of that big touring-car, and no revolver ever went off without a human hand back of it. We know, too, how those men got away from that room where they were playing cards. They ran in here, got through the hole in the wall and went out by way of the

tunnel. That shot that was fired at you, Dick, and put out the lamp, must have come from this room, just before Sercomb and the others dodged through the wall."

"Sercomb?" echoed Ferral.

"Sure! It's a cinch he was playing cards in that room with the three men. He came here from Denver, and he must have traveled in that big car and brought the others with him."

"Oh, he's the nice boy!" commented Ferral sarcastically. "A fine cousin, that swab is! That phantom flugee is mixing in the game. I wonder if Sercomb has anything to do with that?"

"No. When the phantom auto showed up in the road, Sercomb and all three of the others were scared nearly out of their wits. I'll bet that was the first time Sercomb ever saw it. Besides, the bullet that pierced the tire of the big car came from the runabout. That wouldn't have happened if the runabout was here to help Sercomb's plans."

"Right-o. What kind of a bally old place is this, anyhow? Holes in the wall, tunnels, and all that—it fair dazes me. What could Uncle Jack have wanted of a secret passage?"

"Didn't you tell me that this was an old Mexican house, and that your uncle bought it?" asked Matt.

"That's how he got hold of the place, matey."

"Then it must have come into his hands like we find it. The Mexicans used to build queer houses; I found that out while I was down in Phoenix."

Matt turned away and took a look at the walls. They were wainscoted in cedar, all around. Every little way there were panels, and the entrance to the passage,

which Matt had recently used, was by a panel.

"The walls of these adobe houses are always thick," went on Matt, "but these walls are even thicker than common. There's room in this wall for that stairway, and no one would ever suspect the wall is hollow, simply because it's made of adobe."

"How does the door work?" queried Ferral, stepping to the wainscoting and trying to manipulate the panel. "I'd like to know how to get the cover off the blooming hatch; the knowledge might come handy."

Along the wainscoting, about five feet from the floor, were arranged clothes-hooks. Matt, helping Ferral hunt for the secret spring that operated the panel, pulled on one of the hooks. Instantly the panel slid open, answering the pull on the hook with weird silence.

"Chiminy grickets!" murmured Carl, stepping back. "Dot looks like der vay to der infernal blace."

Ferral stepped forward as though he would pass through the opening, but Matt caught his arm and held him back.

"Don't go down there now, Ferral," said he. "When Sercomb comes we want him to find us here. He doesn't guess that I'm next to what he's done to-night, and none of his confederates know it. If we keep mum, the knowledge may do us a lot of good. If we try to face him down with it, we'll only show him our hands without accomplishing anything."

"The sneaking lubber!" growled Ferral. "Why, he berthed us in this room so he and his mates could sneak in on us while we were asleep. But," and here Ferral rubbed his chin perplexedly, "what did they want to do that for?"

"We'll find out," returned Matt, "if we play our cards

right."

"You're the lad to discover things," said Ferral admiringly. "I never had a notion you were going to slip out of the house when you left us."

"And I never had a notion what I was going to drop into," said Matt, "I can promise you that. But it is a tip-top clue, and we'll be foolish if we don't use it for all it's worth."

"You've started off in handsome style! Your head-work makes me feel like a green hand and a lubber."

"Dot's Matt, Verral," declared Carl, puffing up like a turkey-cock. "He always does t'ings in hantsome shdyle, you bed you. He iss der lucky feller to tie to, dot's righdt. I know, pecause I haf tied to him meinseluf, und I haf been hafing luck righdt along efer since, yah, so. Be jeerful, eferypody, und oof der shpooks leaf us alone, ve vill all come oudt oof der horn py der pig end. But vat makes Sercomb act like dot?"

"He wants Uncle Jack's property," scowled Ferral, "and I'll wager that's what he's working for."

"But how can he be working for it when he's already got it?" put in Matt. "He claims to have found your uncle, and to have secured the will."

"That's his speak-easy for it. He's a long-winded grampus, and can talk the length of the best bower, but that don't mean that there's any truth in all his wig-wagging."

"Now you're hitting the high gear without any lost motion," said Matt. "Between you and me and the spark-plug, Dick, I don't think he ever found your uncle; and, as for the will, if he really has it, and everything's left to him, what's all this underhand work for?"

A sudden thought came to Ferral.

"Say," he whispered hoarsely, "do you think that sneaking cur could have handed out any foul play to Uncle Jack? I hate to think it of him, but—"

"No," answered Matt gravely, "I don't think—"

He was interrupted by some one coming in at the front door, and stopped abruptly.

"There's Sercomb now," he whispered. "Let's hear what he's got to say for himself. Mind you don't let out anything about my clue. When you had your trouble, I ran in here from the other room and lent a hand."

"Are you up there?" came Sercomb's voice. "I can't find a soul about the place."

From the road the boys could hear the muffled pounding of a motor. And they knew, even as Sercomb spoke, that he was not telling the truth.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE KETTLE CONTINUES TO BOIL.

Sercomb came up-stairs and stepped into the room. Daylight was just coming in through the windows, and the gray of the morning and the yellow of the lamplight gave Sercomb's face a ghastly look. Nevertheless, it was a frank and open face—as always.

"Now, Dick," cried Sercomb, "what in the world has been going on here? Do you mean to say that some one came into this room and attacked you?"

"That's the how of it, old ship," answered Ferral, repressing his real feelings admirably. "As near as we can figure out, there were two of them. It was so dark, though, we couldn't see our own fists, so there may have been more than two."

"Some of the gang who dropped in here while I was away, I'll bet," said Sercomb.

"I'm thinking the same thing, Ralph," returned Ferral, with a meaning look at Matt. "They were handy, too, but not handy enough. They left us all at once, and how they ever did it beats me. We boxed the compass for 'em, though, and when we'd worked around the card they thought they had enough—and ducked."

"Where did they go?"

"Didn't you hear them go out the front door?"

"Not I, Dick! If I had, I'd have taken a part in the scrimmage myself."

"You were slow hearing the racket, Ralph. It was all over when you piped up."

"I heard it quick enough, but I was sound asleep when it aroused me. Being a little bewildered, I went out into the kitchen."

Something like loathing swept over Matt as he watched Sercomb's face and listened to his smooth misstatement.

"Wonder how Uncle Jack managed to hang on in such a lawless country as this," said Ferral.

"No one ever bothered him. He was pretty well liked by the scattered settlers."

"Everybody liked the old chap! I thought no end of him myself."

"Too bad you didn't show it, Dick, while he was alive," said Sercomb.

There wasn't any sarcasm in his voice—only a dry, expressionless statement of what Ferral knew were the cold facts. Nevertheless, there was a gratuitous slur in the words. Ferral bristled at once, but a look from Matt caused him to curb his temper.

"Belay a bit on that, Ralph," said Ferral mildly. "I know it well without your say-so to round it off. From now on, though, I'll do my best to show Uncle Jack what I think of him."

Sercomb looked a little puzzled.

"His will shows everybody what he thought of you—at the last," said he.

It looked as though Sercomb was deliberately trying to force a quarrel, but Ferral, still with Matt's glances to admonish him, did not fall into the trap.

"I'll go down and get breakfast," observed Sercomb, after waiting in vain for a response from Ferral. "Some Denver friends are coming up from Lamy to make me

a little visit, and we may be a bit crowded here. There are three of them."

It was a broad hint for Dick Ferral to take his two friends and leave, as soon after breakfast as he could make it convenient. Ferral fired up at that. Matt and Carl had served him well, and he was not the one to put up with any back-handed slaps from his cousin Ralph.

"By the seven holy spiritsails, Sercomb!" he cried, "I'll have you know that I and my friends have as much right under Uncle Jack's roof as you and yours. We'll be here to breakfast, and as long as we want to stay."

"Now, don't fly off at a tangent, Dick," returned Sercomb, with a distressed look. "I didn't mean anything like that, and why do you go out of your way to take me in any such fashion? I'll go down and get the meal for all of us—if you can put up with my cooking."

"Go and help, Carl," said Matt. "We don't want to make Mr. Sercomb any extra trouble. We won't be here very long, anyhow."

"Dot's me," said Carl, as cheerfully as he could.

He hated to be associated with Sercomb, but the idea of a meal always struck a mellow note in Carl's get-up.

"You understand, don't you, Mr. King?" said Sercomb, in a whining tone, turning to Matt and jerking his head toward Ferral.

"Perfectly," smiled Matt.

Carl and Sercomb went out. When they were going down the stairs Ferral shook his fist.

"Shamming the griffin!" he growled; "the putty-faced shark, I'd like to lay him on his beam-ends! Do you wonder I've had a grouch at him all these years, Matt?"

"No, I don't," said Matt frankly; "but stick it out. I've a hunch, Dick, that you're soon going to be done with your cousin for good and all. He's playing a game here that's going to get him into hot water."

Matt stretched himself out on the bed.

"I'm going to lie here," said he, "and you can talk to me. Carl will keep an eye on Sercomb. Tell me more about your uncle."

"He was no end of a toff in London," replied Ferral, taking a chair and casting a look at the portrait. "His wife died, and that broke him up; then his daughter died, and that was about the finish. He bucked up, though, and crossed the pond. When he was in Hamilton he said he wanted to go some place where there wasn't so many people. Then he came here."

"This last move of his," said Matt, "looks like a strange one to me."

"He was full of his crochets, Uncle Jack was, but there was always a good bit of sense down at the bottom of them. Sercomb would have gone down on his knees and licked his boots, knowing Uncle Jack had money, and nobody but him and me to leave it to. There's another cut to my jib, though. I wouldn't go around where he was because I was afraid he'd think the same of me. I've got a notion, Matt, and it just came to me."

"What is it?"

"I'll bet that, when Uncle Jack left, he hid that will, and that he signed it and left blank the place where his heir's name was to be. The one that was shrewd enough to find it, you know, could put in his own name."

"Why should he do that?"

"Just to see whether Sercomb or I was the smarter."

"But you overlook what your uncle said about being found wherever the will was discovered."

"Right-o. I'm always overlooking things. You see, I'm taken all aback with this game of Sercomb's. If I knew what his lay was, or what he's trying to accomplish, I'd have my turn-to in short order. Still, as you say, he's going to get his what-for no matter which way the wind blows."

"There's a lot of things happened that are mighty mysterious," mused Matt; "little by little, though, they're clearing up. That clue I hooked onto last night makes several things clear. Did Sercomb know you were coming?"

"The Lamy lawyer must have told him he'd found out where I was, and had written to me. One thing I did do, and that was to sling my fist to a letter for Uncle Jack, once a month, anyhow. So he knew I was down in the Panhandle."

"When you pounded on the door last night, Sercomb must have suspected it was you. If he hadn't, he'd have let you in."

"He'd have let me in anyhow, only he didn't want me to see those other three swabs. And then for him to play-off like he did, and say he was calling at a neighbor's! It would have done me a lot of good to blow the gaff, when he came in on us a spell ago, and let him understand just where he gets off."

"That wouldn't have helped any, and it might have spoiled our chances for finding out what he's up to."

What answer Ferral made to this Matt did not hear. The young motorist had put in a strenuous night, and he was worn out. Ferral's words died to a mumble, and before Matt knew it he was sound asleep.

Some one shook him, and he opened his eyes and started up.

"Dozed off, did I?" he laughed. "Sorry, old man, but I didn't sleep any last night, you know. You were saying —"

An odor of boiling coffee and sizzling bacon floated up from down-stairs.

"What I was saying, mate," answered Ferral, "was some sort of a while ago. I've had my jaw-tackle stowed for an hour, letting you do the shut-eye trick. But now it's about mess-time, I reckon; and, anyhow, those friends of Sercomb's are here from Lamy. Listen!"

The chug of a motor on the low gear came to Matt. Getting up, he looked out of a window that commanded the front of the house.

A car was coming slowly along the blind trail from the road, following the same course the Red Flier had taken the night before.

As the automobile drew closer, Matt gave a startled exclamation.

"Some new kink in the yarn, Matt?" queried Ferral.

"I should say so!" answered Matt. "That's the same car that was in the road last night—"

"What?" demanded Ferral, grabbing Matt's arm.

"There's no doubt of it, Dick," said Matt; "and the three in the car are the same ones Sercomb met and talked with. Two of them, of course, are the handy-boys who blew in here and roughed things up with you and Carl."

The car came to a stop in front. Just then the front door opened and Sercomb rushed out.

"Hello, fellows!" he called. "Mighty glad to see you.

Pile out and clean up for the grub-pile—"

Matt heard that much, and just then had to turn around to look after Ferral. With an angry growl, Ferral had broken away and started down the stairs.

"Dick!" called Matt, running after him.

But Ferral gave no heed to the call. He was down the stairs and out of the door like a shot. Matt was close on his heels, but he was not close enough to keep him from trouble.

"You two-faced crimp!" Matt heard him yell. "You'll down me in Lamy and take my money, will you, and then show up here! Now, strike me lucky if I don't play evens!"

CHAPTER IX.

ORDERED AWAY.

Matt remembered at once what Ferral had said about having been robbed while on his way to La Vita Place. Now that Ferral had recognized one of the newcomers as the man who had made the treacherous assault on him, a new light was thrown on that Lamy robbery. If the thief was one of Sercomb's friends, it looked as though Sercomb must have had a guilty knowledge of the affair—perhaps had planned it.

Matt attempted to grab Ferral and pull him away, but Sercomb and the other two got ahead of him. The three laid hold of Ferral so roughly that Matt immediately gave them his attention.

"Let up on that!" he cried, catching Sercomb and jerking him away just as he was about to strike Ferral with his clenched fist. "There's no need of pounding Dick."

"I'll pound *you* if you give me any of your lip!" answered Sercomb.

"The latch-string's out," answered Matt grimly. "Walk in."

At that moment Carl rolled out of the door.

"Vat's der rooction?" he tuned up, his eyes dancing over the squabble.

Carl was always as ready to fight as he was to eat, which is saying a good deal.

"Help me get Ferral away from that fellow, Carl," called Matt.

"On der chump!"

Carl landed right in the midst of the struggle, and in about half a minute he and Matt had separated Ferral from his antagonist. With a neat crack, straight from the shoulder, Matt disarmed a fellow who had jerked a wrench out of the automobile. This put the last finishing touch to the clash, and both sides drew apart, bunching together, and each panting and glaring at the other.

"Dere iss only vone t'ing vat I can do on a embty shtomach, und dot's fight," wheezed Carl, slapping his arms. "It don'd vas ofer so kevick? I got a pooty leedle kitney-punch vat I vould like to hant aroundt, only I don'd haf der dime."

"Take off your grappling-hooks, Matt," puffed Ferral, squirming to get out from under Matt's hands. "Dowse me if I've taken that crimp's full measure, yet. The nerve of him, breezing right up here with my money in his clothes!"

"Steady!" said Matt, closing down harder on Ferral and easily holding him. "This has gone far enough."

"I should say it had," spoke up Sercomb, showing a flash of temper. "Pretty way for my friends to be treated! I won't stand for it."

"When you've got thieves for friends, Sercomb," cried Ferral, "you're liable to have to stand for a good deal!"

"Hand him one for that, Joe!" urged one of the newcomers. "That's the first time I ever heard a thing like that batted up to Joe Mings, and him not raising so much as a finger against the man that said it."

"We've got to think of Ralph, Harry," said Joe Mings. "This row makes it uncomfortable for him."

"Especially since the chap that's making such a holy show of himself is my own cousin," remarked

Sercomb, with bitter reproach.

"The more shame to you," flared Ferral, "to let the hound that robbed your own cousin come here like he's done, and take his part. Keep your offing, Joe Mings," he added, to the thief, "or I'll tie you into a granny's knot and heave you clean over your devil-wagon! Where's that money? I need it, and I'm going to have it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," answered Mings. "You must be dippy! Why, I never saw you before until you rushed out and tried to climb my neck."

"You two-tongued swab! Do you mean to stand up there and say you didn't meet me in Lamy, tell me you were a Canadian in distress, and ask me to go to your boarding-house with you and square a bill with your landlady? And will you say you didn't land on me with a pair of knuckle-dusters in a dark street and run off with my roll?"

"That's a pipe," asserted Joe Mings. "Somebody's doped you."

"Enough of this, Dick," said Sercomb. "Joe's a friend of mine. All these lads are friends, and all of them drivers of speed-cars. They're here by my invitation. As for you, you're not here by anybody's invitation—"

"Except Uncle Jack's," interposed Ferral grimly.

"Uncle Jack has cashed in, and he's not to be counted. This ranch belongs to me, and you and your ruffianly friends will leave it. Your friends can't ever come back here—and neither can you until you learn how to behave. Come on in, boys," he added to the others. "Grub's on the table."

"Avast a minute!" called Ferral. "I'm ready to trip anchor and slant away—having never liked you so you

could notice, and liking you less than ever after this round—but I and my mates will have our chuck before we go. What's more, that shark will hand over my funds, or I'll come back here with an officer and make him more trouble than he can get out of."

"He hasn't got your money," said Sercomb, "so he can't turn it over. What's more, you'll dust out of here *now!*"

"Oh, I will!" Ferral lurched for the door, and Matt and Carl followed him. "You may have right and title to this bally old dugout, Sercomb, but you'll have a chance to show me that in court; and Uncle Jack may be dead and gone, but that's something I'll find out for myself, and make good and sure of it, at that. His money don't bother me, for I've my two hands and know the ropes of a trade, so I won't starve; but it's Uncle Jack himself I'm thinking of. As for you, you were always a mixture of bear, bandicoot, and crocodile, and I wouldn't trust you the length of a cable. I and my mates are going in and eat, and if you want to avoid a smash, don't cross our hawser while we're doing it."

He turned from the door, and, followed by Matt and Carl, went into the sitting-room, where the table had been spread.

"Now we've got Sercomb's signals," said Ferral, dropping into a chair at the table, "and know where we all stand. What do you think of this new twist in the game, Matt?"

"Too bad it happened," answered Matt, as he and Carl likewise seated themselves. "We were just getting squared away to find out something worth while, Dick."

"I couldn't hold myself in, that's all. The idea of Sercomb having that crimp in tow! I'm a Fiji if I don't

think my dear cousin put up that Lamy job with Mings."

"I'd thought of that, too. But why should he do it?"

"To knock the bottom out of my ditty-bag and keep me away from La Vita Place. More belike, he'd a notion Mings would land me in a sick-bay. You remember Uncle Jack's room was all torn up when we first saw it?"

Matt nodded.

"Why was that?" Ferral went on. "Carpet torn away, sea-chest dumped all over the floor, everything in a raffle. Why was that?"

"What do you think was the cause of it?"

Ferral leaned across the table.

"Sercomb had been looking for Uncle Jack's will!" he declared. "He never found Uncle Jack, and he never found the will. If he's got a piece of paper, it's one he's fixed up for himself."

"Mighty serious talk, old chap," said Matt gravely, "but I've a hunch you've got the right end of it, at that. But for this row, we might have been on fairly good terms with Sercomb, and have used our knowledge, in a quiet way, to discover what he's trying to do."

"Vell," remarked Carl, "he has rushed dot gang in here, und dot makes four to dree. Meppy id vas pedder ve don'd shday. Aber I'd like to hang on, you bed you! Sooch a chance for some fighding I nefer foundt yet."

Then followed a brief interval of silence, during which the boys gave their whole attention to their food. Ferral was first to speak.

"You were going to set sail for Santa Fé this morning, Matt."

"We could never pull out and leave you in this mess," answered Matt. "Mr. Tomlinson has given us plenty of time to get to Santa Fé."

"Sure, ve shday undil you vas pedder fixed to be jeerful, Verral," put in Carl. "Dot's der greadt t'ing in life, my poy, always to make some shmiles, no madder vich vay chumps der cat, und be jeerful."

"You're a pair of mates worth having," averred Ferral, with feeling. "I don't know what I'd have done if it hadn't been for you. The very first thing you haul me off a cliff wall. If you hadn't done that, by now Sercomb would be having the run of the ship. I'll do something for you some time, even if I have to travel around the world to do it. Just now, though, I'd like to know what's become of Tippoo, Uncle Jack's *kitmagar* and *khansa-man*."

"Vat's dose?" inquired Carl.

"The Hindu foot-servant and steward," explained Ferral. "Uncle Jack was in India for a while, and that's where he picked up Tippoo. Sercomb, when we first met him here, hinted that Tippoo may have handed Uncle Jack his come-up-with, but that was unjust. Tippoo would lay down his life for Uncle Jack, and has been devoted to him for years."

A noise from the barn reached those in the sitting-room. A window of the room commanded a view of the barn. Matt, suddenly looking through the window, uttered an exclamation, sprang up, grabbed his hat, and rushed through the kitchen and out of the house.

"What's the bloming racket now?" cried Ferral, likewise getting to his feet.

"Look vonce!" answered Carl, pointing through the window. "Dere iss a shance for more scrimmages! Led us fly some kites so ve don'd lose nodding oof der

seddo."

Through the window Ferral could see that the barn doors had been broken open, and that Sercomb and his three companions were around the Red Flier.

Knowing Matt's concern on account of the machine, Ferral lost not a moment in running through the kitchen and following Matt and Carl.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW PLAN.

"Get away from that machine!" cried Matt, leaping into the barn.

He had grabbed up a club on the way, and as he spoke he advanced threateningly upon Sercomb and his friends.

All four were in the car or around it. What they were trying to do Matt did not know, but he felt pretty sure they had not broken into the barn with harmless intentions concerning the Red Flier.

Sercomb turned away from the front of the machine and the others got out.

"What are you intending to do with that club?" Sercomb demanded.

"That depends on what you're trying to do to that car," answered Matt.

"This is my property and the car has no business here. We want this place for the other machine."

"Then leave the barn and I'll run the machine out. I don't allow any one to fool with that car."

"There ain't one of us," struck in Mings, "that don't know more about a car in a minute than you do in a year."

"That may be," said Matt, "but I'm boss of the Red Flier, all the same."

"I've heard about you, King," went on Mings. "Dace Perry, of Denver, is a friend of mine, and he told me just what kind of a four-flusher you are—always

sticking your nose into other people's business, same as now."

"Glad to hear Perry has a friend," returned Matt amiably, "but he could have told you a whole lot that I guess he thought he hadn't better."

Just then Carl and Ferral flocked into the barn.

"Are they trying to scuttle that red craft, Matt?" asked Ferral.

"No," was the reply, "they're just going to run it out of the barn to make room for the other car. I told them I'd attend to it."

"And when you get the car out of the barn," said Sercomb pointedly, "just keep going, all of you."

"We'll do that to the king's taste," averred Ferral. "I wouldn't hang around here with you and your outfit for a bushel of sovs, Sercomb, although I'm coming back after my roll."

"Come on, fellows," called Sercomb, and left the barn with his friends at his heels.

Matt got the Red Flier in shape, Carl climbed into the tonneau and Ferral into the front seat, and they moved out of the barn.

As they passed around the house they saw Mings sitting in the other car, evidently watching it to make sure it would not be tampered with. He scowled at the Red Flier as it passed.

"Dey like us a heap—I don'd t'ink," chuckled Carl. "I bed you dot Mings feller iss vone oof der chumps vat come indo der room lasht nighdt, Verral."

"He don't like me any too well," said Ferral grimly. "And he's none too easy in his mind, either. He knows what I can do to him for that Lamy business."

"Are you really going to get an officer in Lamy and come back here?" asked Matt.

"Strike me lucky if I'm not!"

Reaching the main road, Matt turned in the direction of Lamy and the cliffs.

"We'll take you to Lamy," said Matt, "and bring the officer back. We've the whole day before us, though, and there's something else I'd like to do."

"Name it, mate. I'm in for anything."

"I'd like to go along the top of those cliffs and see if I can find how and where that white runabout went to last night."

"If you go along the cliffs, you'll have to walk. Why not make your examination from the road?"

"We can't see enough from the road, Dick. There may be something on the other side of that ridge. By walking, and staying on the cliffs, we can see both sides. The mystery of that white auto may be the key to the whole affair at La Vita Place. Now's the time to settle it. If we don't, Sercomb and those other fellows will."

"Right-o! We'll leave the Red Flier somewhere and tackle the game on foot."

"We can't leave the Red Flier alone," said Matt. "I was going to suggest, Dick, that we run the car off the road, between here and the cliffs, and that you stay with it. I've got to look out for the machine, you know. I came pretty near losing it, near Fairview, in Arizona, and that gave me a jolt I'll never forget. It's a five-thousand-dollar car, and if anything happened to it it would be difficult to explain the matter satisfactorily to Mr. Tomlinson."

"I smoke you, mate," returned Ferral. "You've butted

into this affair of mine, and if you were to lose the old flugee on account of it, I'd feel worse than you. I'll stay with the thing, and you can be sure nothing will happen to it. You and Carl go hunt for the spook-car. I'll wait. How far do you intend to hoof it over the cliffs?"

"If necessary, I'd like to go clear to that gully where the machine flashed into the cliff road ahead of us; but I'm particularly anxious to look over the ground this side of the turn, at the place where the white car vanished so mysteriously."

"Crack the nut! If any one can do it, by jingo, it's Motor Matt."

By then they had reached a point about half-way between La Vita Place and the cliffs. Here, off to one side of the road, there was a patch of timber, and Matt turned the Red Flier, ran across the flat ground, and drew up among the trees.

"Here's a good shady place for you to wait, Dick," said Matt. "Carl and I may not be back before noon."

"Take your time, mate. I'm the greatest fellow to sojer in the dog-watch you ever saw. Take your turn-to, and when you want me on deck, just give the call."

Matt and Carl got out, returned to the road, and proceeded on toward the cliffs.

The road was a straight stretch clear to the first turn that carried it to the edge of the precipice. Matt and Carl remarked upon this as they strode forward.

"A pad blace for any one to come in der nighdt, oof dey vas regless," observed Carl. "I don'd vant to go ofer dot roadt again in der nighdt, nod me."

"We won't have to go over it again with our lamps, Carl," said Matt. "It won't take us long to run to Lamy,

get an officer, and come back to La Vita Place. If we get back to the Red Flier by noon, we can make the round trip to town by four o'clock, and have half an hour to get our dinner."

"Sure! Dot's der talk. Aber I don'd t'ink ve was going to findt der vite car, Matt."

"I'm not expecting to find the white car, but I want to discover how it managed to vanish like it did."

Carl shook his head gruesomely. He was still half-inclined to credit the runabout with "shpook" proclivities, and Matt's new plan didn't appeal to him very powerfully.

When they came to the chasm they paused to note how the road, in reaching its treacherous path along the edge, broke suddenly from a straight line into a sharp curve. Certainly it was a bad place for motoring.

In order to get to the top of the cliff that edged the road on the right, the boys had to do some hard climbing; but when they were on the crest of the uplift, the view that stretched out around them was ample reward for their toil.

On their left they could look down on the ribbon of road, winding between the foot of the cliff and the chasm; and on their right they looked away toward a swale, which made the cliff-tops a sort of divide.

"Dot gulch down dere," shuddered Carl, looking over the cliff, "iss more as a million feed teep, I bed you."

"I don't know about that," said Matt, "but it's deep enough."

"Oof Verral hat dumpted from dot push," went on Carl, "he vould haf gone clear py China."

"That swale," said Matt, pointing in the other direction, "is where the gully enters the hills. As the

gully runs on toward Lamy it comes closer and closer to the cliff trail."

He turned and looked behind him.

In the distance he could see the clump of timber where Ferral had been left with the Red Flier; and beyond the little patch of woods could be seen the larger grove that sheltered La Vita Place. The touring-car was screened from sight, and so was the adobe house. Matt was not interested in either of them just then, however, but was working out another problem in his mind.

"Carl," said he, "there's just a hint of a road leading out of the swale and off toward La Vita Place."

"Vell, vat oof dot?" asked Carl.

"Incidentally," answered Matt, "if one wanted to cut off a good big piece of that dangerous road, in going to Lamy, he could leave La Vita Place and follow the blind track through the swale and gully, coming out on the cliff trail just where the white runabout showed itself in front of us last night."

"Py shiminy!" exclaimed Carl. "You're der feller to vork mit your headt, Matt. Yah, so. Meppy dot's der vay dot shpook car come oudt on us, hey? You t'ink she come from La Fita Blace?"

"That's only a guess. The white car had to come from somewhere. Let's go on."

They climbed across the rugged cliff-top, and as they neared the turn where the white runabout had vanished the night before, the gully angled quite close to them; then, bending with the curve of the cliff road, went on until it merged with the face of the cliffs.

At this point the cliff was not so high, with respect to the road, and its face was not so steep. While Matt was

trying to figure out how the phantom auto had made its abrupt disappearance, a sudden cry from Carl drew his attention.

"Ach, du lieber!" faltered Carl. "Der teufel is coming some more. See here, Matt!"

Matt, following Carl's shaking finger with his eyes, saw the white runabout. Apparently of its own volition, it was proceeding Lamyward along the gully. Sometimes it darted out of sight behind a rise in the gully wall, and again it came into full view, white, gleaming, and presenting a most uncanny spectacle.

CHAPTER XI.

A DARING LEAP.

While Matt watched the car an idea darted through his head.

"The way to find out about that auto is to capture it," said he, speaking quickly.

"How you vas going to do dot?" queried Carl. "Oof ve hat der Ret Flier along, meppy ve could oferhaul der shpook, aber I don'd know vedder it vould be rightd to indulch in any sooch monkey-doodle pitzness. Ven der car puffs oudt mit itseluf, ve vould puff oudt mit it. Vere you vas going, Matt?"

Matt was lowering himself over the top of the steep bank, just around the curve above the cliff road.

"Come on," he called back, "and be careful. This is dangerous work."

Carl was not in a mood to tamper with the white runabout, nor was he in a mood to let Matt do the tampering alone. Sorely against his will, he began lowering himself down the steep bank, close beside his chum.

"Vy dis iss, anyvay?" he asked. "Vat a regless pitzness! Oof ve lose holdt oof somet'ing, ve vould fall in der roadt, undt meppy scood rightd ofer der roadt und go down vere Verral ditn't go."

"Hang on, Carl, that's the thing to do," returned Matt.

"Yah, you bed you I hang on! I don'd vant to fall py China und make some visits mit der Chings. I vouldn't enchoy dot, as I vould be all in bieces. Aber for vy iss

dis, Matt? Vy you do dot?"

As they worked their way down the desperate slope, hanging to stunted bushes and projecting rocks, Matt explained.

"The white runabout may be going to Lamy," said he, "but I hardly think it would show up in the town like that—"

"Id vould schare der peobles oudt oof deir vits oof it dit!" puffed Carl. "Wow!" he fluttered, making a slip and only saving himself a fall by grabbing a bush with both hands. "A leedle more, Matt, und you vouldn't haf hat no Dutch bard."

"But it's my opinion," pursued Matt, completely wrapped up in the work in hand, "that the runabout is going to make the turn, just as it did last night, and come back toward La Vita Place along the cliff road."

"Vy it do dot foolishness, hey?"

"Give it up. Perhaps we'll know all about it before long. Find a good place, about six feet above the road, and hang on."

"Yah, you bed my life I don'd ged indo der roadt oof der shpook pubble iss coming. I vould haf to ged oudt oof der vay, und meppy I vould go ofer der edge like vat Verral dit, und you couldn't haf some ropes to helup me oudt. I vas fixed all rightd, Matt."

Carl had planted himself on a good foothold and was clinging to a stunted bush. Matt was on a level with him and a little to one side.

"Listen!" cried Matt.

It was impossible, of course, for the boys to see around the shoulder of the cliff, but a low murmuring sound reached their ears, growing quickly in volume.

"Dot's it!" said Carl excitedly; "she vas coming, I bed you! She vill go py righdt unter us, und ve can look down und see vat ve can see, vich von't be nodding. Aber I vish dot I vas some odder blace as here. Oof dot —"

Carl broke off his talk. Just then the white car came spinning around the curve.

What Motor Matt was intending to do Carl hadn't the least notion, but he was pretty sure it must be something reckless.

The car was nearly upon them when Motor Matt, a resolute gleam in his gray eyes, loosened his hold on the rocks. Carl's shock of tow-colored hair began to stand up like porcupine bristles. Something was about to happen, and he caught his breath.

Then something *did* happen, and the Dutch boy got back his breath with a rush.

"Look a leedle oudt!" yelled Carl, as Motor Matt made a quick jump for the phantom auto.

It was a daring leap—so daring that Carl hung to his bush with both hands and expected to see his chum either miss the machine altogether or else carom off the opposite side, bound into the road, and go hurtling into the chasm.

But Matt was too athletic, his nerves were too steady, and his eyes too keen for that.

Carl saw him land in the front of the white runabout in a heap. He was thrown violently against the seat, and then went sprawling against the dash. The runabout slewed dangerously, and something like a squeal came from somewhere.

"Ach, chincher," panted Carl; "he vas some goners! I don'd nefer expect to see Motor Matt alife any more!

Donnervetter! Vy he do dot?"

Quickly as he could, Carl dropped into the road.

"Matt!" he called, whirling about and looking in the direction the white car had been going.

Then he staggered back against the rocks.

The auto had disappeared and taken Motor Matt along with it!

Carl's nerves were in rags. He didn't know what to do. Possessed with the notion that Matt had faded into nothing along with the spook car, he turned and began running the other way.

He stopped suddenly, however. Matt was his pard, and to run away from him like that was something Carl knew he ought not to do. But was he running away from Matt? If Matt had been snuffed into nothing with the car, how could he be running away from him?

This was all foolish, of course, but Carl was so upset he wasn't himself.

He stopped his running, however, and came stealthily back, staring on all sides of him with eyes like saucers.

"Now vat I vas going to do?" he groaned. "Dere don'd vas a Modor Matt any more, und dere iss der Red Flier, pack along der roadt, und Verral, und sooch a mess as I can't dell at der La Fita Blace. Ach, himmelblitzen!"

Carl, overcome by the dark outlook, sank down on the rocks and covered his face with his hands.

Near him the face of the cliff was covered with a growth of bushes and trailing vines.

Suddenly Carl heard a voice that lifted him to his feet as though a spring had been released under him.

It was his name! Somebody had called his name, and it sounded like Matt's voice.

"Vot it iss?" demanded Carl, a spasm of hope running through him.

"Come here!"

Carl looked all around, but without seeing where he was to go.

"Iss dot you, Matt?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Vere you vas, den? How you t'ink I come py you oof I don'd know dot? Chiminy grickets, aber dis iss keveer!"

"I'm inside the cliff," Matt answered. "Push through the bushes."

Carl stepped in front of the trailing vines and brush.

"Iss it all righdt?" he quavered.

"Come on, come on," called Matt impatiently.

Carl pushed the bushes and vines aside, revealing a wide clear space which had been completely masked by the foliage. The ground, breaking in a level stretch from the cliff road, led smoothly away into the very bosom of the cliff.

Still dubious, Carl pushed slowly on into the darkness. The vines fell back behind him and the parted bushes snapped across the opening.

"I can't see noddin!" he wailed.

"Come straight ahead," said Matt reassuringly. "I'm only a little ways off, and the car is here, too."

"Iss der shpook in der car?"

Matt laughed.

"We'll settle this spook business in short order," said he.

Carl reached the car, and felt Matt's hand guiding him around the side.

"How you shtop der pubble, Matt?" faltered Carl.

"I didn't stop it; somebody else did that."

At that moment a muffled voice called:

"Get in de car, sahib! We go on to de daylight."

Carl gave a jump and grabbed hold of Matt.

"Who iss dot?" he fluttered.

"We'll find out before we're many minutes older," said Matt. "Get in, Carl."

Assisted by Matt, Carl got into one of the seats, while Matt climbed into the other.

"All ready," announced Matt, in a loud voice.

Instantly a glow from the acetylene lamps flooded the gloom ahead. The boys could see a rocky tunnel, wide and high, leading straight on through the heart of the cliff.

"Ach!" chattered Carl. "Ve go py kingdom come now, I bed you."

"Hardly that," laughed Matt. "We're bound for daylight once more. Wait and watch."

Swiftly and surely the white car glided on. Presently the boys saw trailing vines and bushes ahead of them, similar to the screen at the other end of the tunnel.

Snap! Off went the lights. Then, with startling suddenness, they brushed through the screen and were once more in the broad light of day.

The gully lay before them, and when they had

reached the center of it the car came to a halt.

"Vouldn't dot knock you shlab-sitet?" murmured Carl wonderingly. "In vone door und oudt der odder! Ach, blitzen, und den some! Aber who vas dot vat shpoke in der tark?"

"Here's where we find out," rejoined Matt, leaping down.

Carl likewise gained the ground. As he did so, the deck of the car, behind the seats, lifted slowly until it lay wide in an upright position.

Then a form slowly rose, a form with a chocolate-colored face, the head crowned with a white turban. Jumping from the boxlike recess in the rear of the car, the form stretched itself and salaamed.

"You surprise', sahib? Ah, ha!"

CHAPTER XII.

DESPERATE VILLAINY.

Although Matt and his friends did not know it, yet the course taken by the Red Flier on leaving La Vita Place was watched.

Joe Mings, climbing a tree, kept the car under his eyes. In the distance he saw it leave the road, then he could make out two figures returning on foot to the road and proceeding toward the cliffs. He called down the result of his observations.

"What do you suppose they're up to?" asked Sercomb, with a worried look, as Mings slid back to the ground.

"I pass," replied Harry Packard, one of the most lawless of the quartet; "but it's a fair gamble, Ralph, that they're not up to any good."

"I should say not," said Balt Finn, the driver of the touring-car. "That Ferral is after Mings' hide."

"Well," said Mings sullenly, "I wouldn't have gone through Ferral in Lamy if you hadn't said so, Ralph."

"I'd like to know what their game is," mused Sercomb. "Mings, you and Packard go to the place where they left the car. If you can smash the car some way, they won't be able to go to Lamy until we're ready to leave here."

"A nice jaunt before breakfast!" muttered Packard.

"We can stand it, I reckon," scowled Mings. "Let's take a drink all around and try it, anyhow."

Packard pulled a flask from his pocket and took a swallow of its fiery contents; then he passed the flask

to Mings.

"You fellows have got some in the house," said Packard, corking the flask and returning it to his pocket. "Joe and I will take this with us. Maybe we'll need it," and he winked at Mings.

"Be careful what you do to the fellow that stayed with the car," cautioned Sercomb.

"Suppose it's Ferral?"

"Then," returned Sercomb, with a significant look, "be careful *how* you do what you're going to. You fellows fell down last night."

"I'll not forget in a hurry the thumping that Ferral and the Dutchman gave us," growled Packard.

"And don't you forget, Mings," said Sercomb, "what Ferral will do to you if he gets to Lamy. Smash the car."

Mings and Packard started off briskly toward the place where the Red Flier had been left. The spot was not more than half a mile from La Vita Place.

Ferral, all unconscious of the fact that two of his enemies were approaching, sprawled out in the front seat of the Red Flier and puzzled his brain over the queer situation in which he found himself.

He could make nothing of it, and as time slipped away his brain grew more and more befuddled. He was hoping Matt and Carl might discover something of importance, or, if they did not, that when the Red Flier returned from Lamy with an officer, the law might do something to clear up the mystery in which Uncle Jack had plunged everything at La Vita Place.

A deep quiet reigned in the little grove. A droning of flies was the only sound that disturbed the stillness. The warm air and the silence made Ferral drowsy.

Once he roused up, thinking he heard a sound somewhere around him; then, assuring himself that he was mistaken, he sank back on the front seat and his nodding head bowed forward.

Suddenly, before he could do a thing to protect himself, a quick arm went round his throat from behind, and he felt some one catch his feet from the side of the car. He gave a shout of consternation as his head bent backward and his eyes took in the face that leered above him.

It was the face of Mings!

"Caught!" laughed Mings hoarsely. "Thought you'd shaken us, eh? Well, you were shy a few!"

"Just a few!" tittered the voice of the man on the ground.

"Here's a rope," went on Mings, kicking the coiled riata, which Matt carried in the car, out through the swinging door. "Take it and tie his legs, Harry. I'll hold him. Got a strangle-grip and he can't budge."

As soon as Packard let go his hold, Ferral began to kick and struggle; but Mings was in such a position that he could keep him very easily from getting away.

Packard, although tipsy from the effects of the liquor he and Mings had imbibed on the way from La Vita Place, tied one end of the rope quickly about Ferral's ankles. The free end of the rope was then wound around the seat and Ferral's hands were made fast behind him. In a few minutes he was bound to the seat and absolutely helpless. Mings and Packard, gloating over his predicament, got around in front of the car.

"How do you like that?" asked Packard.

"He likes it," hiccupped Mings; "you can tell that by the looks of him."

"You're a fine lot of swabs!" exclaimed Ferral contemptuously. "Sercomb ordered me off the place, and I slanted away; now you follow me with your beach-comber tricks. Oh, yes, you're a nice lot! What are you trying to do?"

"Going to smash the car," answered Mings.

"You keep your hands off this car!" cried Ferral, realizing suddenly that he had been caught napping, and that Motor Matt might get into a lot of trouble on account of it.

"Well," grinned Packard, "you just watch us."

"Are you going to Lamy?" demanded Mings.

"That's where I'm going!" declared Ferral resolutely.

"Not to-day you won't; and not in this car. We're going to fix Motor Matt for butting into our plans, and we're going to fix you so you won't get to Lamy and back before we're on the road to Denver. You're cute, but you're not so cute as we are. Oh, no! Is he, Packard?"

"We're the boys!" observed Packard.

They were both partly intoxicated. Naturally lawless, the liquor they had taken had made them more so.

"See here," said Ferral, desperately anxious to save the car, "you've got some of my money, Mings, and I could have you jugged for taking it, but if I'll promise not to get an officer and to let you keep the money, will you leave this car alone? It doesn't belong to Motor Matt, and he's responsible for it. I was left here to watch it—"

"Nice watchman!" sputtered Packard; "fine watchman! Eh, Mings?"

"Dandy watchman!" and Mings laughed loudly. "He

didn't hear a sound when I sneaked into the tonneau. I tell you what, Packard!" he exclaimed, as a thought ran suddenly through his befogged brain.

"Well, tell it!" urged Packard.

"Let's send him to Lamy."

"Send him to Lamy?"

"Sure! Let's put him in the road and open the car up! Mebby he'll get to Lamy."

"He'll smash into the rocks, that's what he'll do."

"Well, that'll fix the car. By the time Motor Matt pulls Ferral out of the wreck, I guess he won't feel like getting an officer."

Ferral could hardly believe his ears.

"You scoundrels wouldn't dare do a thing like that!" he cried.

"He says we wouldn't dare, Packard," mumbled Mings.

"He don't know us, eh, Mings?"

"Not—not even acquainted. Let's throw the old benzine-buggy against the rocks, and give Motor Matt a surprise."

"He'll be surprised, all right. Serve him right, too, for meddling with Sercomb's business."

"He's a meddler, that's sure. Dace Perry told me all about him."

"Dace Perry's a blamed good fellow. He's one of our set."

"Can you navigate the car to the road?" asked Packard.

"Navigate a dozen cars! Anything more in the flask?"

"All gone," answered Packard gloomily.

"Well, there's more back at the house."

Mings got into the car and Packard did the cranking. When the car started it nearly ran over Packard.

"Trying to kill me?" shouted Packard, rolling out of the way.

"You're too slow," laughed Mings.

Fumbling awkwardly with the levers and the steering-wheel, Mings managed to get the car into the road and headed for the cliffs.

"Cut off a piece of that rope, Packard," called Mings. "I'll tie the wheel so as to be sure the car goes to Lamy."

"That's right," answered Packard, "you want to be sure."

He took out his knife, slashed a piece from the free end of the rope, and handed it up to Mings. The latter began lashing the wheel.

"Sercomb ought to give us a chromo for this," said Packard, watching Mings as he worked.

"You tell him we ought to have a chromo," returned Mings, with a foolish grin. "Sercomb's a blamed good chap; nicest chap I know."

Meanwhile, Ferral's face had gone white. He was fighting desperately with the ropes, but they held him firmly and he could not free his hands. A sickening sensation ran through him.

Neither Mings nor Packard had a very lucid idea of what they were attempting. They were fair examples of what liquor can do for a person in certain situations.

"Belay!" cried Ferral desperately. "You don't

understand what you're doing, you fellows! You've headed me for the cliffs, and—"

"They're big and hard, those cliffs," said Mings, "and you'll hit 'em with quite a jolt. But it'll only smash the car, Ferral, and we had orders to smash the car."

Having finished with the wheel, Mings got on the running-board. Packard cranked up again. Mings threw in the clutch with his hand, pushed on the high gear, and was thrown off as the car jumped ahead.

He collided with Packard, and both tumbled on the ground and rolled over and over. When they had struggled to their feet, the two scoundrels saw something that almost sobered them.

It was the white runabout racing across the level ground in the direction of the road and the flying red car!

But, what was even more strange, Motor Matt was in the driver's seat of the runabout, and beside him was a strange, turbaned figure which neither Packard nor Mings had ever seen before.

On the ground, a long way in the rear of the racing runabout, stood a figure which Packard and Mings recognized as being that of Motor Matt's Dutch chum.

CHAPTER XIII.

TIPPOO.

The little brown man in the turban Matt instantly recognized as a Hindu, undoubtedly the servant of Mr. Lawton, Ferral's uncle.

Here was a find, and no mistake!

Tippoo had vanished at the same time Mr. Lawton effected his queer disappearance, and the discovery of one might easily lead to the finding of the other.

"Is your name Tippoo?" asked Matt.

"*Jee, sahib.*"

"Vat iss dat?" muttered Carl. "Gee! Iss it a svear vort? He don'd look like he vas madt mit himseluf."

The Hindu certainly was taking his discovery in good part. His brown face was parted in a perpetual smile, and he seemed morbidly anxious to please.

"Does *jee* mean yes?" asked Matt.

The turban ducked vigorously.

"*Jee, Jee!*"

"Dot's two gees, vich means gootness cracious," bubbled Carl, very happy to find that the ghost had been laid; "und also it means jeerful. Led's try to be dot. So der shly brown roosder vas in der pack oof der pubble all der time! How he make it go, I vonder, ven he don'd vas aple to see der vay?"

Matt was also curious on that point. Stepping closer to the automobile, he looked into it, and saw a wonderful combination of mirrors and levers.

The smiling Hindu, observing the trend of the boys' interest, advanced and doubled himself up in the back of the runabout.

As he lay there, in tolerable comfort and with a cushion under his head, there was a mirror in front of his eyes. Other mirrors, set at various angles, cunningly reflected the scenery in front of the car. When the deck was closed down it was evident that the enclosed space became a sort of camera obscura.

Convenient to the Hindu's right hand was a small wheel with an upright handle on its rim. As he turned the wheel he steered the car—entirely independent of the steering-wheel in front. The spark was manipulated by a small lever near the wheel, and so were the throttle, the brakes, and the gears. Strangest of all, though, was the arrangement for cranking inside the box. This device was so ingenious that it should have entitled its originator to a patent.

"But vat's der goot oof it all?" queried Carl. "For vy shouldt a feller vant to pen himseluf oop in a smodery leedle blace like dot und leaf der two frondt seeds vagant? Ach, vat a foolishness!"

Matt also wondered at that.

"Why do you ride in such cramped quarters, Tippoo," asked Matt, "when you could just as well ride on a seat?"

"Baud mens, sahib," said Tippoo, clutching his forehead with one hand and bowing forward.

"Where were you going in the car?"

"Round-around, 'round-around."

"Ring aroundt a rosy," said Carl. "I haf blayed dot meinseluf, aber nod mit a pubble."

"Where is Lawton, sahib?" asked Matt.

"*Jee, jee!*" exclaimed the Hindu.

"He talks vorse der longer vat he speaks," said Carl disgustedly. "Ven ve vas in der tunnel, he shpeak pooty goot, aber now he don'd say nodding like vat ve can undershtand."

Matt despaired of being able to find out anything he wanted to know, and thought it would be well to take Tippoo to Ferral.

"You know Dick Ferral?" queried Matt.

"*Jee!*"

"Do you know where we left the red automobile?"

"*Jee!*"

"Gee stands for grazzy, too, vich he iss," said Carl.

"Will you take us to our car?" went on Matt.

"Awri'," answered the Hindu.

"Dot's pedder," said Carl.

Tippoo lowered the deck carefully over the queer mechanism in the box, and motioned Matt and Carl to get into the car. Matt got into the driver's seat, having a mind to run the car himself, and Carl got into the other one. Tippoo stood in front of Carl, getting in after he had "turned over" the engine by means of the crank in front. He watched Matt sharply, evidently wanting to make sure that he knew what he was about.

Matt started along the gully, marveling at the smooth course its bottom offered.

The runabout responded quickly to the slightest turn of the steering-wheel, and every other part of the mechanism worked to perfection.

Tippoo, delighted at the skill with which Matt handled the car, bent over and gave him an approving

slap on the shoulder.

"Chimineddy!" laughed Carl, "der prawn feller likes you, Matt."

"I guess he likes the way I run the car," said Matt. "It's a little dandy! I never handled a machine that purred along in neater style. I wish I knew more about the get-up in the back part of it."

"Ven somebody blays der shpook schust for foolishness, I don'd like dot," said Carl. "You mightd haf got your prains knocked outd by chumping indo der car—und all pecause der prawn feller wanted to blay shpook!"

"Me play gose, sahib, but not to scare de good white mans—only de baud white mans."

This from Tippoo, who was plainly keeping track of the conversation.

"Did you see us on the cliff road last night?" queried Matt.

"Jee."

"And you got away by running the machine into the cliff?"

"Jee, sahib."

"You didn't have any lights. How could you see where you were going?"

"Me know de road, no need de light till me get in de tunnel, sahib."

"You stopped the car in the tunnel last night, and came back into the road?"

Tippoo nodded.

"Why was that?"

"Me see fin' out if Dick sahib be awri'."

"Ah! You were worried about Dick, eh, and you came back to see if he was all right."

"Sure."

"Why didn't you wait till we could speak with you?"

"Naboob sahib give order no."

"Who is the 'nabob sahib'?"

Tippoo affected not to hear the question.

"He don'd vant to talk about dot," put in Carl. "He shies all aroundt dot Uncle Chack."

"You came past the house in the road last night?" asked Matt.

This question evidently startled the Hindu.

"Sahib see de car las' night?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Me no see sahib."

"What were you riding past the other car for?"

"Try scare baud white mans. Try see dem. Naboob sahib say so. *Jee!*"

"Then you must have been the one who fired that revolver and put a bullet through the tire?"

For answer to this, Tippoo pulled a revolver from a sash about his waist.

"Make lift board with head, make *dekke*, den bang!" He laughed. "Fine shoot, eh?"

"Certainly it was a fine shot," answered Matt. "Were you trying to keep away from Dick sahib?"

"Try keep 'way from Dick sahib, and from Ralph

sahib. All same. Leave 'em 'lone. Nabooob sahib say so."

This conversation, which cleared up some more dark points, carried the runabout out of the swale and onto the flat stretch which led off in the direction of La Vita Place. The course to the ranch paralleled, at a distance of about a quarter of a mile, the other road that led from the cliffs.

Matt turned the nose of the runabout so as to lay a direct course for the patch of trees where the Red Flier had been left. Before they had covered more than half the distance between the swale and the trees, a loud cry escaped the Hindu. His eyes were fastened upon the other road.

"*Dekke!*" he called, pointing.

Matt looked in the direction indicated.

"Ach, dunder!" cried Carl. "Dere iss der Ret Flier in der roadt, und some fellers vas aroundt it—two oof dem."

"Dick sahib him tied in car!" shouted Tippoo. "Dey let car go! Car go to de cliff, Dick sahib tied! *Kabultah! Hurkut-jee! Hur-r-r-kut-jee!*"

Tippoo lifted his hands and wrung them in an agony of fear and apprehension.

By that time Matt was able to take in the situation. He saw Ferral, bound in the front of the car, and the car speeding toward the cliffs and the chasm. Vividly before his eyes floated that turn of the treacherous road. The car would go straight until it reached the turn, and then, if no one was at hand to stop it, the Red Flier would go into the chasm and carry Ferral with it.

Motor Matt's face set resolutely.

"I'm going to slow down, Carl," said he, "and you pile out! There's too much freight for the race we've got to

make."

"All righdt! Don'd led nodding habben, bard, now ven ve're so near droo mit dis monkey-dootle pitzness."

Carl jumped for the ground, and Tippoo sank limply into his seat.

Matt immediately threw on the high speed, giving an angle to the car's course which would lay it alongside the Red Flier.

Like a flash, the white car leaped over the flat ground, Tippoo still wringing his hands and muttering fearfully to himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

There was no road-bed under the wheels of the white runabout, but, for all that, the earth was firm, although rilled, at irregular distances, with little sandy ridges. The car, being light, seemed fairly to leap over these small rises.

The Hindu had to hang to his seat with both hands in order to keep from being hurled out of the car. His turban was jolted down over his eyes, and after he had tried to knock it back into place half a dozen times, he flung it down on the floor of the car.

"We come close, closer!" he breathed, leaning forward in his seat and peering steadily at the big touring-car. "Naboob sahib be big mad at dis. We save Dick sahib!"

Matt could see that they were rapidly overhauling the Red Flier, but, as he measured the gain, he knew they would have only a scant margin, at best, if they kept Ferral and the car from shooting into the chasm.

Flinging across the road a dozen feet behind the Flier, Matt brought the runabout closer on that side.

"I'm going to jump from this car to the other one, Tippoo," he shouted, "as soon as we get where I can do it. The minute I jump, you be sure and grab the steering-wheel and take care of the runabout. Understand?"

"*Jee, sahib!*"

Ferral was able to twist his head around and keep track of the gallant race the runabout was making. He must have been astounded to see the white car, with

Matt and the Hindu, trailing after him.

"You're coming, mate!" he yelled. "Let 'er out for all she's worth! The brink of the precipice is right ahead!"

Matt was aware of their nearness to the abyss. A few rods farther and they would be at the turn of the road. The touring-car, of course, being lashed to run on a straight line, would plunge to destruction unless halted.

With a final spurt, Matt drove the runabout abreast of the Red Flier. The two cars were now running side by side, and not a second could be lost if Matt was to transfer himself to the Flier in time to be of any assistance to Ferral.

As he took his hands from the wheel, Tippoo leaned sideways and gripped the rim. For an instant Matt was poised on the foot-board, steadying himself by holding to the seat. A moment more and he had thrown himself across the gap between the two cars.

It was his second daring leap for that day, but this jump was more dangerous than the other one, for, if he had slipped, he would have had two cars to reckon with, instead of one. Both cars were racing furiously, and the Red Flier, with no hand to hold it, was taking all inequalities of the road and plunging and swaying as it rushed onward.

But Motor Matt never put his mind to anything that he did not accomplish. Ferral drew back in the seat to give him every chance, and Matt sprawled with a jar that made the car shiver from crank to tail light.

Whether he was hurt or not did not appear. In a flash he was up, cutting off the power and bearing down on the emergency-brake.

It was a stop such as Matt hated to make, for fear of wrenching the machinery, but it was either that or go

over into the chasm. As it was, the Red Flier ran across the curve and quivered to a halt, with the front wheels on the very brink. Matt and Ferral, from their seats, could look over the hood and down into the dizzy, swirling depths below.

Ferral's face was white as death, and he relaxed backward, limp and gasping. Matt backed the Flier away, and turned around, then drew his knife from his pocket and cut the ropes that bound Ferral.

"Who did this, Dick?" he asked huskily.

"Two of my cousin's friends," replied Ferral, drawing his hands around in front of him and rubbing his chafed wrists. "Toss us your fin! What you've done this day, messmate, Dick Ferral will never forget."

A shiver ran through him as he gripped Matt's hand.

"The murderous scoundrels!" muttered Matt, his eyes flashing.

"They didn't mean it to be as bad as it was, I'll have to give 'em credit for that. They had about three tots of grog aboard, and aimed only to run the flugee into the rocks and stave it in. They didn't know about that jumping-off place, or else they'd forgotten about it."

"It's bad enough, all right. No matter if the Flier had only smashed into the rocks, you might have been killed, tied as you are. They sneaked up on you, back there in that patch of timber?"

"Aye, and it was all my fault. I was mooning, and that gave them a chance. If they hadn't caught me from behind, I could have bested the two of them, for they had been topping the gaff strong. I was careless, Matt, and you might have lost the machine on account of it."

"Bother the machine, old fellow! It was you that brought my heart in my throat. In a pinch like that, it's

the man that counts, not the machinery he happens to have along with him."

"Right-o! If there hadn't been a whole man in that white car, I might as well have been sewed in a hammock and slipped from a grating, with a hundred-pound shot at my pins."

Tippoo had halted the runabout and had watched with wide eyes while Matt made his hair-raising jump and stopped the big car. He now leaped down from the runabout and hurried to Ferral. Catching one of his hands, he bowed over and pressed it to his temples.

"Sink me, but the fix I was in fair hid the curious part of the rescue," went on Ferral. "Where'd you get hold of Tippoo, Matt? And how did you come to have the white car handy?"

In a few words Matt straightened out the situation so it was clear to Ferral.

"I'm a Fiji, Matt," breathed Ferral, "if you ain't chain-lightning when it comes to doing things. Tippoo, where's Uncle Jack?"

"Me no say, Dick sahib," answered Tippoo, dodging the question.

"You can tell me whether he's dead or alive, can't you?" roared Ferral.

"Me no say, Dick sahib," persisted Tippoo. "You come 'long La Vita Place—come 'long with Tippoo."

"I was ordered away from there by Sercomb. If I go any place, it will be to Lamy after an officer. I'll raise a jolly big row with that gang at La Vita Place, scuttle 'em!"

Tippoo stared blankly at Ferral.

"Ralph sahib order Dick sahib away?" repeated the

Hindu, as though he scarcely believed his ears.

"He said he had found Uncle Jack's remains, and the will, and that the will left everything to him, and he ordered me and my mates away."

Tippoo bent forward and gripped his forehead.

"*Joot baht, joot baht!*" he mumbled.

"Blast his lingo!" growled Ferral. "It takes Uncle Jack to get the lay of him."

"Dick sahib, you go with Tippoo back to La Vita Place?"

The Hindu was so deeply in earnest that he compelled Ferral's attention.

"What do you want me back there for?"

"You go, you learn all—ever'thing," and Tippoo flung his arms out in a comprehensive gesture.

"Now, strike me lucky, the beggar knows something. Yes, we'll go, if for nothing more than to walk in on my dear cousin Ralph and face Mings and Packard. Get into your old catamaran, Tippoo, and bear away. We'll hold you hard during the run, if I'm any judge of Motor Matt."

Tippoo went back to the runabout, got into the seat, and started for La Vita Place.

"Old Chocolate certainly is an A. B. at running that craft," mused Ferral, watching the ease with which Tippoo handled the runabout. "But what was the good of all that Flying Dutchman business? Why did Tippoo want to tuck himself away in the locker behind when he could ride up in front in comfort and like a gentleman?"

"I suppose," answered Matt, "that we'll find all that out when we get back to La Vita Place."

A glint came into Ferral's eyes.

"Will we?" he cried, bringing his fist down on his knee. "Aye, mate, even if I have to take Ralph Sercomb by the throat and shake the whole blessed truth out of him. If it's a game of dirks they're playing, I warrant you they'll find me handy with mine."

"Go slow, Dick, whatever you do," counseled Matt. "You've held yourself pretty well in hand, so far, and you'll be the gainer for it."

They had been wheeling along the road at a good clip, and came finally to a place where Carl was waiting for them.

"Vell, vell!" cried Carl, as Matt stopped for him to hop into the tonneau, "vot kindt oof a rite vas dot you dook mit yourseluf, Verral?"

"The kind, mate," answered Ferral, "that I hope I'll never take again."

"Yah, I bed you! Modor Matt chumped in und shtopped der car, hey? I knew dot he vould. Ven he geds dot look in his eyes, py chincer, like vat he hat, you can bed someding for nodding his madt vas oop. How did it habben, Verral?"

And while Ferral was rehearsing the whole story for Carl's benefit, the white runabout and the Red Flier came to a halt in the road in front of La Vita Place.

Tippoo jumped down and motioned for those in the rear car to follow him.

"Tippoo is the boss, Dick," said Matt; "get down and we'll trail after him. Don't let your temper get away from you when we're in the house."

"The way I feel now, matey," answered Ferral, "I'd like to sail in and lay the 'cat' on the whole bunch. A precious crew they are, and no mistake."

Tippoo led the way along the foot-path, and Ferral, Matt, and Carl followed him closely.

Voices could be heard in the house, and it was clear Sercomb and his companions had not noticed the approach of the two cars.

Standing by the door, the Hindu motioned for the boys to pass in ahead of him.

CHAPTER XV.

A STARTLING INTERRUPTION.

The parlor at La Vita Place, as has already been stated, covered half of the first floor of the house. The distinctive feature of the large room was an immense fireplace, which, after the Mexican fashion, was built across one corner. Above the fireplace, on the angling surface that reached from wall to wall, was a dingy, life-size painting of a saint. The painting was in a heavy frame, which was set flush with the wall.

There were a few things about the old adobe *casa* which had been left exactly as they had come into Mr. Lawton's hands from the original Mexican owners of the place. This picture of the saint was one of them.

The parlor was finely furnished. The floors were laid with tiger and lion-skins, trophies of the chase, and on every hand were curios and ornaments dear to the eccentric old Englishman because of their associations.

In this room Sercomb and his Denver friends were gathered. They had had their breakfast—Mings and Packard had just finished theirs—and all were excitedly discussing what Mings and Packard had done, and what they had seen.

Mings and Packard, it may be stated, had been sufficiently sobered by their experiences, and not a little frightened.

"Confound the luck, anyhow!" cried Sercomb. "Nothing seems to go right with me. If you fellows had got hold of Ferral last night, all this couldn't have happened to-day."

"If we'd done that, Ralph," said Mings gloomily, "we don't know what would have happened to-day. Motor

Matt and that Dutch pal of his would have been left, and they'd have kicked up a big ruction when they found Ferral had disappeared."

"We could have taken care of Motor Matt and the Dutchman," snapped Sercomb, "and Mings and Packard could have run Ferral away in the automobile and dropped him so close to the quicksands that he'd have wandered into them in the dark. He'd never have shown up here to make me any trouble." Bitterness throbbled in Sercomb's voice. "That fellow has been a drawback to me ever since we were kids, and now he's got to step in and try to knock me out of Uncle Jack's money!"

"You wasn't a favorite of your Uncle Jack, eh?" queried Balt Finn.

"No, blast the old codger! He never seemed to like me, and I was always around him. Dick, who never came near, was the one he had always in mind."

"Well, has the old fluke cashed in?" asked Packard. "That's the point."

"Of course he has! He was always a high liver, and it's a wonder apoplexy didn't take him long ago. Feeling that he was about to die, he made his will, put it in his pocket, and tucked himself away somewhere, just to see whether Dick or I would be first to locate him. Precious little I care about the old juniper, if I could lay hands on the will."

"The one you've made out, Ralph," said Packard, "is pretty well gotten up. You've imitated your uncle's signature in great shape."

"The deuce of it is," returned Sercomb, "I don't know just what property he's got, so I can schedule it. If I could find the original will, I could copy that part of it."

"Maybe," suggested Finn, "this is only a tempest in a teapot, and that the old man left you all his property,

after all."

"I don't know, of course, but I'm afraid he's given Dick too much. I don't want him to have a cent."

"Well," growled Mings, "I'm hoping you'll make good your claim to the estate, Ralph. You've promised to remember us all around, you know."

"That promise goes!" averred Sercomb. "Once I get my hooks on Uncle Jack's money, you can bet I'll do the handsome thing by you fellows. Just now, though, what we've got to think about is this: Dick was started toward the cliffs in that car of King's, and King showed up in that confounded white runabout and chased after Dick and the touring-car. What I'd like to know, did King save Dick? Everything hangs on that. If Dick got smashed against the cliffs, he can't tell about that Lamy business, nor about Mings and Packard tying him in the car. You fellows," and here Sercomb turned to Mings and Packard, "ought to have hung around to see how it came out."

"Oh, yes," returned Mings sarcastically, "we ought to have hung around and given them a chance to nab us. I guess not! We got back here as quick as we could. But you take it from me—King never saved Ferral."

"You fellows went too far," continued Sercomb. "I told you to smash the car, but I didn't tell you to smash Ferral along with it."

"That's what you meant, Sercomb, whether you said it or not," spoke up Packard. "You wanted him taken away last night and dropped in the quicksands—"

"I wanted him put out of the car close to the quicksands," qualified Sercomb, "so that he'd have got into them himself."

"It's all the same thing," said Balt Finn. "Call a spade a spade and don't dodge."

"Who was that fellow with the queer head-gear we saw in the car?" asked Packard.

A look of dismay crossed Sercomb's face.

"If that was Tippoo—" he began, but got no farther.

Just then there were steps in the hall, and Ferral entered the room, followed by Matt and Carl. Sercomb and his guilty associates jumped to their feet.

"Why—why, Dick!" exclaimed Sercomb, staring.

"Yes, you cannibal!" shouted Ferral; "it's Dick, but no thanks to you and your gang of pirates that I'm here, alive and kicking. Now, Mings, confound you, you and Packard have got a chance to tell me whether my dear cousin put you up to that job over toward the cliffs."

"We've got a chance to run you off the place, that's what we've got," answered Mings.

"Heave ahead!" cried Ferral, squaring himself. "I'd like a chance at you, just one."

Mings glared at him, but remained sullenly silent. Ferral turned to Sercomb.

"I'm here to sink a lead to the bottom of this, my gay buck," said he, "and before I turn my back on La Vita Place I'll know the truth. What have you done with Uncle Jack? A scoundrel who'd treat me as you have wouldn't hesitate to deal foully with—"

"There, there, Dick," interrupted Sercomb, fluttering his hand, "that will do you. You're judging me by yourself."

"I'm judging you by your actions," stormed Ferral. "It's been tack-and-tack with you ever since I knew you, and you never yet shifted your helm without having something to gain for Sercomb. You cozzened around Uncle Jack, toadying to him for his money; when he disappears, you bear away for here, rip things

fore and aft looking for a will, and, when you fail to find one, fix a document up to suit yourself. You're as crooked as a physte's hind leg, and you couldn't sail a straight course to save your immortal soul. Now, here's where I stand, Ralph Sercomb: Either you'll tell me the whole of it about Uncle Jack, or I go to Lamy and come back here with an officer. If I do that, I'll round-up every man Jack of you, and give you the hottest time you ever had in your lives; but tell me the truth about Uncle Jack, and I'll leave here and stay away."

"Uncle Jack is dead," declared Sercomb. "How many times do you want me to tell you that?"

"That's still your play, is it?" scoffed Ferral. "Then, between you and me and the capstan, my buck, you lie by the watch!"

A hoarse cry escaped Sercomb. His hand swept under his coat, and when it appeared a bit of steel glimmered in his fist.

"Put up your gun," ordered Ferral. "You took one shot at me with it last night, and if you try it again I'll turn a trick you'll remember."

"Get out of here!" ordered Sercomb. "You can't come into my place and talk to me like that."

He lifted the weapon, the muzzle full upon Ferral. Matt and Carl stepped up shoulder to shoulder with Ferral, and Mings, Packard, and Finn drew nearer to Sercomb.

A tense moment intervened, followed by a quick, pattering footfall. Tippoo glided in and placed himself resolutely between Ferral and the leveled weapon.

"Tippoo!" gasped Sercomb, stepping back and letting the revolver drop at his side.

"*Jee!*" answered the Hindu.

His eyes were not fixed on Sercomb, nor on any one else in the room, but on the dingy saint in the frame

over the mantel. He waved his arms sternly, separated Sercomb and his friends, and passed through their gaping ranks toward the fireplace.

The he salaamed, calling loudly: "Naboob sahib! Is de time not come? *Dekke!*"

Thereupon a most astounding thing happened. While those in the room stared like persons entranced, the great frame that enclosed the pictured saint quivered against the wall. Slowly it moved outward at the top, dropped lower and lower, until it had passed the mantel and its upper edge was resting on the floor. The inner side of the picture, now disclosed, was arranged in a series of steps, so that a stairway was formed from the mantel downward. At the top of the short flight, gaping blackly over the fireplace, a square recess was disclosed in the angle formed by the two walls of the room.

For an instant the blank gloom was undisturbed; then, slowly, a tall, gray-haired form showed itself. The form was erect and soldierly, clad in black; the face was fine, the forehead high, and the eyes quick and keen.

For a space this figure stood in the opening, the eyes sweeping the room and finally resting on Ferral. While still gazing at Ferral, the figure stepped over the mantel with military decision and descended step by step until it reached the floor.

The stairway lifted itself, when relieved of the weight, swung upward, and closed the opening. Once more the pictured saint was in the accustomed place.

"Dick!" called a voice.

The figure in black stepped forward with outstretched hand.

"Uncle Jack!" exclaimed Ferral, starting forward.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRICE OF TREACHERY.

This most astounding event had left everybody gasping. A ghastly pallor had rushed into Sercomb's face. His three companions were hardly in better case. All four realized that the unexpected had happened, and that it boded ill for them.

But Sercomb was not long in pulling himself together.

"Why, uncle!" he exclaimed, forcing a laugh; "this is a tremendous surprise, and a glad one. I have been worried to death about you!"

He offered his hand. Mr. Lawton looked at him steadily. Under that look Sercomb's assurance faded, his hand dropped, and he fell back.

"I would like you better, sir," said the old Englishman, "if you showed the courage to acknowledge what you have done and face the consequences. You must know that I am aware of all that has taken place here; and yet you have the brazen insolence to step forward and offer me your hand!"

"I guess we'd better be going, Sercomb, old chap," said Mings.

"I think so, too," spoke up Balt Finn. "It's getting along toward noon, and we'll get out the car and start north."

"Come on, boys," urged Packard.

They started toward the door. At a gesture from Mr. Lawton, Tippoo stepped in front of the door and drew the revolver from his sash. The Denver man fell back in

trepidation.

"You'll start north very soon," said Mr. Lawton keenly, "and when you go you'll take Sercomb with you. First, however, there is something to be told, and you'll wait to hear it.

"Ever since I came to America I have had Ralph and Dick in mind. Either I was to divide my property between them, or else I was to cut off one and leave all to the other. In some respects I am a particular man. What property I have collected I want to fall into hands that will do the most good with it. With that end in view I have tried to make a study of Ralph and Dick.

"It was easy for me to study Ralph. Whenever I asked him to come here and see me, he came; and he remained, as a rule, until I asked him to go. He had ways about him which I did not like, but I feared that was merely a prejudice. I like the youth who is open and aboveboard, who says what he means and who is frank and fearless. Ralph did not seem to be that.

"Dick I never could get to come to me." Mr. Lawton lifted his hand and rested it on Ferral's shoulder. "I couldn't understand this, for by making a little of me he had everything to gain. He was serving his king afloat—I liked that—but I felt that he might take a little time off for a visit, every two or three years, with the forlorn old man 'way off here in the American wilds.

"When Dick wrote me from Texas, I conceived a plan. By this plan I hoped to bring both my nephews here, and to find out, beyond all cavil, just which was the better entitled to what I shall some day leave.

"With the Lamy lawyer to help, the little conspiracy was hatched. Identically the same letters were sent to Ralph and Dick, each stating that I was tired of living alone, that I was going to get out of the way, and that wherever I was found my *will* would be found with

me."

A grim smile hovered about the bristling gray mustache of the old man.

"I did not say what the will was," he went on, "but I will remark here that it was purely the mental process by which I intended to judge which of my nephews was the more worthy.

"Ralph lost no time in coming to La Vita Place. He brought with him these friends of his"—Mr. Lawton swept his hand about to indicate Finn, Mings and Packard—"and they carried on with liquor and cards, spending their time sleeping, eating, gambling and hunting for the will. There was never any concern about Uncle Jack—their interest was all in the will and Uncle Jack's money. Everything that went on in this house I knew about—as well as everything that went on outside. Tippoo, with the aid of the runabout, kept me informed of events beyond the walls; and, as for the others, I heard and saw for myself.

"This old adobe house is like a medieval castle. In the old times, when settlers were even fewer in this country than they are now, lawless Mexicans used the place for nefarious purposes; and, back beyond their time, the old friars who were here under the Spaniards made this their retreat. The walls are honeycombed with passages, and every room can be reached secretly and secretly watched. I discovered these passages for myself, and have passed many a lonely hour unearthing the mysteries of the place.

"Ralph, during one of his visits here, found the passage leading from the bushes to my sleeping-room, up-stairs. He knew of that, but none of the others.

"One thing I did not know about until now was Ralph's plan to have Mings meet Dick in Lamy, when he was coming here, and steal his money. It is hard to

think one of my blood is a thief—"

"Uncle!" gasped Sercomb.

"Stand as you are, sir!" cried Mr. Lawton sternly. "Let us name the truth as it should be! It was not your hand that struck Dick down, and his money is not now in your pocket, but yours was the plan, and you are even more guilty than Mings. Although I could not protect Dick from that danger, yet he was equal to it himself.

"When he came here, I was watching Ralph and his friends playing cards up-stairs; I saw them put out the light and retreat noiselessly to my bedroom; and I heard the shot that was fired at Dick before the young rascals left the house by the secret way.

"All the rest that followed, during the night, I understood, save that I did not know, until I heard Matt talking with Carl and Dick in my room, how he had been able to spy upon Sercomb and his friends and gather a clue to Sercomb's duplicity.

"The ruffianly attack on Dick and Carl by Mings and Packard, who, under orders from Sercomb, were plotting to carry Dick off to the quicksands, horrified me. I would have shown myself then and there had not Dick and Carl protected themselves so valiantly and turned the tables on Dick's would-be abductors.

"Tippoo, in the car, was watching the automobile in front, and he disabled the machine so that Dick could not be carried off, in case Mings and Packard succeeded.

"The most contemptible act of all was that where Mings and Packard followed Dick and his friends, when they had been ordered away, and attempted Dick's life—"

"I did not sanction that!" cried Sercomb desperately.

His hopes were crumbling in his grasp like a rope of sand. "I did not tell Mings to tie Dick in the car and set the car toward the cliffs! Uncle! I—"

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Lawton. "I will have no false excuses. I know what you wanted! You wanted to get Dick out of the way. In your greed to get all of my property you shut your eyes to the heinousness of your conduct and struggled only to achieve your aim.

"Here, in this house, Ralph, I have watched barefaced duplicity and murderous resolve battling with frankness and fearlessness! I have seen you deliberately, and with three unscrupulous friends to help, play every card you could in an attempt to beat your own cousin. And I have felt shame that one of our line could act so like a cur.

"Had I known, in the beginning, just how far your greed would lead you, had I even remotely imagined all the dangers that would encompass Dick when he tried to follow out my last request, I would never have proceeded in the way I did.

"But now it is over. I have seen you both when you could not know I was near; I have watched your actions, weighed even your words, and I am able to judge between you."

A certain grimness of resolve came into the fine old face as Mr. Lawton went on.

"Ralph, you can expect from me—nothing. When I leave this place for good and all, and go to Denver—which will be in a few days—there will not be even a deed to La Vita Place to go to you. Considering my present mood, not a shilling of my money, sir, will go to you. To whom it *does* go, I will leave you to guess. Go back to your racing; and if, before I die, you have come nearer making a man of yourself, perhaps I will reconsider. You and your friends have an automobile

in the barn. Take it, at once, and leave here."

A deep silence fell over the room. Tippoo stepped away from the door and tucked the revolver back into his sash. Mings, Packard and Finn bolted—glad, no doubt, to get away so easily. Sercomb started after them, but hesitated.

"Uncle," he began tremulously, "if you will—"

"Go!" ordered Mr. Lawton sternly.

Then Sercomb's true character came uppermost. Halting in the door he shook his fist at Matt and Dick.

"I'll play even with both of you for this!" he gritted, then whirled and darted after his crestfallen companions.

"Come, Carl," said Matt, hurrying toward the hall door, "we'll go and keep an eye on the car."

"You bed you," exulted Carl, running after Matt. "It vas easy for Verral to be jeerful now, hey? Aber id don'd vas so easy for dose odder chaps. Donnervetter, vat a surprise!"

When the other touring-car whisked out of the barn, through the grove and into the road, there were four very gloomy passengers aboard. Hardly looking at Matt and Carl, they kicked up the dust toward Santa Fé and Denver.

Tippoo appeared, as soon as the car had vanished.

"Sahib," said he to Matt, "you go to de house. I take care of bot' cars. Naboob sahib say so."

"Napoo sahip cuts a goot deal oof ice mit us, Tibboo," said Carl, "und I guess dot ve go, hey, Matt?"

"Sure, we will," replied Matt. "But be careful of this car, Tippoo. It has had so many close calls lately that I am scared of my life when it's out of my hands."

"Me take good care, sahib," answered Tippoo reassuringly.

Matt and Carl, full of wonder and satisfaction because of the way the affair had ended, started back along the foot-path to the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LUCK OF DICK FERRAL.

Mr. Lawton and Ferral met Matt and Carl in the parlor. They had been having a brief talk together, and there was a pleased look on Lawton's face and a happy light in Ferral's eyes.

Mr. Lawton stepped forward and caught Matt cordially by the hand.

"Matt," said he, "you have been a stanch friend of Dick's in the little time you have known him, and you have twice saved his life. He is indebted to you, but I am under an even greater obligation. But for your aid, the little plan I conceived for getting at the relative merits of my two nephews might have ended disastrously and given me something to regret till the last day of my life. I thank you, my lad; and you, too, Carl," he finished, turning to the grinning Dutch boy.

"Oh, vell," said Carl, "it don'd vas noddin vat I dit. Matt vas der vone. He iss always der vone dot geds dere mit bot' feets ven anyding iss bulled off."

"You both did nobly, and perhaps some time, somewhere, I can show you that I am not insensible of the debt I owe," went on Mr. Lawton. "Just now," he added, turning away and walking to the end of the mantel, "Dick has expressed a desire to see the place where I have lived for several days, and I presume you and Carl, Matt, are also interested."

He pressed a spring under the end of the mantel and the great frame descended and presented its flight of steps.

"I will go first, as I know the ropes," said Mr.

Lawton. "The rest of you will follow."

He ascended the stairs. Dick, Carl and Matt went after him and the frame closed and left them in a narrow space in the dark. Mr. Lawton lighted a candle and flashed it across the inner side of the picture and above the last step.

"The eyes of the picture, you will see," he observed, "are cut out. That gave me an opportunity to note what took place in the parlor. A very old device which I have seen in old castles on the Rhine, and even in one or two houses in Delhi. Now," and he faced about, "we will go on."

The passage wound around the house through the hollow wall. Two steps led up and over the front door. In the sitting-room there was a niche with a crucifix and candles. Holes in the back of the niche enabled one to look out and observe all that took place in the sitting-room. In like manner, there was a concealed place for keeping track of what went on in the kitchen.

In the kitchen wall a dozen steps led upward to the second floor, and in the two upper rooms there were also peep-holes cleverly arranged.

"The passage Ralph knew about," explained Mr. Lawton, "has no connection whatever with this other burrow. It is entirely distinct and apart. The only way to get directly into the house from these corridors is by the opening over the parlor mantel. Now we will descend to the subterranean part of the establishment."

A continuation of the steps that led upward in the kitchen wall conducted the explorers downward into a place that was a sort of basement, although having no connection with the cellar of the house.

Here the boys were surprised to find the white

runabout.

"Here's a point I'm twisted on, Uncle Jack," said Dick. "What in the name of the seven holy spritsails, did you ever let Tippoo go spooking around the country for?"

Mr. Lawton laughed.

"Dick," said he, "this country is full of scoundrels who would not hesitate to get the better of an old man and his Hindu servant if there were a few dollars to be gained. Now, rascals of that ilk are superstitious, and I have kept them at bay by this harmless deception. This old, ill-favored shell of a house is supposed to be haunted, for dark deeds are known to have taken place here. That auto is my own idea. Tippoo has made regular trips with it every night up the gully, around on the cliff road, through the cliff and so back to the house. La Vita Place, by that means, has lived up to its unenviable reputation, and the thieves have left me severely alone.

"The auto came in very handily during this play of Ralph's. Ralph knew nothing about the car, and during his visits here I was careful to keep a knowledge of it away from him. Tippoo would take a trip abroad and watch events outside; then he would come back and report to me. When Matt jumped into the car, there on the cliff road, Tippoo was willing enough to be discovered, for he knew that I was planning to show myself very soon, anyhow. Tippoo, however, had orders from me to say nothing about what I was doing. Here," added Mr. Lawton, stepping off along the rock-walled room, "is the way the car left its quarters whenever it wanted to make its ghostly round."

Matt, as he followed Mr. Lawton, noticed a supply of gasoline and oil, and congratulated himself on the fact that there would be no difficulty in getting the Red

Flier fit for the road when the time came for Carl and himself to start.

A wide passage led for a hundred feet or more beyond the end of the stone room, a gentle grade, at its farther end, leading upward. A door, flush with the earth, was pushed upward by Mr. Lawton, and the blinding light of day flooded the passage.

"We might as well get out here," said Mr. Lawton, and the rest followed him into a brushy covert in the grove.

On one side of the covert the brush had been cleared away to leave a smooth track for the car.

"The road," explained the old man, "leads directly to the gully. Tippoo, when he desired to make his round, had only to push up the door, take his ghostly ride, and then come back again."

"That idea of a crank in the machine for turning over the engine," said Matt, "is a mighty good one and ought to be patented."

"You may have it, Matt," said Mr. Lawton. "I am too old to bother with patents."

The door was closed and the little party wandered back through the grove to the house. Tippoo, in the kitchen, was busily at work getting a meal ready.

"This," observed Mr. Lawton, as they all seated themselves on a bench in the shade, "is one of the happiest, as well as the saddest, days of my life. I have discovered what Dick really is, and that's where the bright part comes in; but I have also found out that my sister's son is a contemptible scoundrel—and I would rather have lost everything I own than to have discovered it. This racing-game must be demoralizing."

"It isn't the game, Mr. Lawton," interposed Matt

earnestly, "but the character of the fellows who take it up. There isn't a thing in a speed contest to demoralize any one."

"You may be right, Matt," answered Mr. Lawton, "but it's hard to understand how Ralph could prove so false to all the Lawton ideals. His father was a gentleman in every sense of the word; and his mother—there was never a finer woman on earth."

After a short silence, Mr. Lawton turned once more to Matt.

"You are going to Santa Fé?" he queried.

"Yes," replied Matt, "and then to Denver. Mr. Tomlinson, who owns the Red Flier, has a place for me on the racing-staff of a firm of automobile-makers."

"Ah! I would have spoken differently a moment ago, if I had known that you intended entering the racing-field. You'll never go wrong. But, when you get to Denver, beware of the rascally crew who just left here. They are very bitter against you."

"They'll not bother me, sir," said Matt stoutly.

"Oof dey dry it on," spoke up Carl, "py chincer dey will ged somet'ing vat dey don'd like."

"Dick and I will be in Denver soon," said Mr. Lawton, "and then we shall look you up. You will hear from us again, Matt. The debt we are under to you cannot be easily canceled."

"I've been repaid already," returned Matt. "What I have done has given me a friend in Dick Ferral—and that's worth everything."

"Your fin, mate," said Ferral, reaching over and clasping Matt's hand.

Just then Tippoo appeared in the kitchen door.

"Tiffin, sahib!" he called, and they all filed into the house—Carl, as usual when there was eating in prospect, leading the way.

THE END.

The next number (8) will contain another rousing motor story, in which Matchless Matt and some of his friends figure, and a stirring drama is unfolded in a fashion to delight the reader. It will be entitled:

Motor Matt's Triumph

OR,

THREE SPEEDS FORWARD

The White-caps—Motor Matt's Foes—Suspicious Doings—A Villainous Plot—Matt Goes Trouble-hunting—Higgins Tells What He Knows—Brisk Work at Dodge City—Matt Interviews Trueman—No. 13—Where Is Motor Matt?—Running Down a Clue—Forty-eight Hours of Darkness—At the Last Minute—The First Half of the Race—Well Won, King!—Conclusion.

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BILL, THE BOUND BOY.

Bill Bradley was a blacksmith boy. He was an orphan, and had been apprenticed to old Carnahan the day Lincoln was elected, and had pumped the bellows and swung the sledge every day since. Old Carnahan was a stern task-master, and got out of his bound boy all the law would allow. We used to pass the shop every time we drove from our farm in the country, and there was nothing in the county seat, the greatest town we had ever seen, so notable as the great shock of fiery red hair displayed by Bill Bradley. He always stood at the door of the shop as we passed at noon-time and nodded at us with the cheeriest sort of a smile. It was a thing to remember with pride when a town boy honored us with recognition.

Money was mighty scarce in our house those days. Dimes were things to treasure carefully; and dollars, when they came, were something spoken of with bated breath and hidden away—or paid out grudgingly. And iron was in demand. The cannons made those first years of the war called into requisition it seemed to me all the fragments of old cast iron there was in the country. Blacksmiths were paying first a cent, then two cents, and finally two and a half cents a pound; though they did not make a difference whether you "took it out in trade" or demanded cash.

We boys in the country used to gather up every bit of metal that would sell, and carefully save it till we had a hundred pounds or more, and then take it to town and convert it into the infrequent cash or the almost as acceptable and quite costly groceries.

One day when we took our plunder to town we found the streets in strange commotion.

"They're listing soldiers," said a nervous voice in our ears, and when we turned we found Bill Bradley, wide-eyed, excited, and reckless. We were surprised, for we knew it was time for him to be at the forge, and we knew how strict was his employer in the matter of time.

We drove to the blacksmith shop with the fragments of iron, and found Bill Bradley there before us. He was pumping the bellows, and old man Carnahan was rating him soundly for his absence. The red head was a trifle higher, the blue eyes a trifle wider, and the breath was quicker and more charged with warning. Carnahan should have known. But he didn't. He grew more enraged, till at a word of defense from the boy he lost his temper completely, and, in a fit of exasperation, struck his apprentice.

The blow was not a severe one, and Bill could not have suffered a twinge of pain. But his pride was hurt, and that blow ended for him, as that larger, later blow ended for four millions of others, his season of servitude.

"I'll quit you," he cried, trembling and almost weeping with excitement and rage. "I'll list for a soldier."

We left the iron in a pile on the shabby floor, and followed him with palpitating hearts to the little lobby of the post-office. He was greeted with a chorus of shouts, as was each new recruit, and a touch of ridicule must have mingled with the hailing, for it straightened him and stiffened him and sent him to the captain with as firm a front as ever was borne by a novice.

If the men were changed by the donning of the blue, what transformation was this wrought in our blacksmith boy? He was inches taller and fathoms deeper. He was a man. He stood about with the

recruits, his brow darkening a little when Carnahan approached, for he did not yet understand the privilege of a warrior. But more than any other man in uniform he was severed from civil life. He was one of this wonderful legion that was filling the world with comment—and filling the homes with woe. We came to town that Saturday when the troops were mustered in, and watched them drilling. We saw our blacksmith boy, and wondered how we ever had addressed him, he was a being so different from all he had been before. We saw the march by twos and fours and company front, the double-quick and the charge; and we heard the fledgling officers swear with strange oaths at the men they were later to push into conflict. We fancied Bill Bradley would not stand much of that. We saw them march to the depot, and then wept, I fear, at the passionate good-bys. There were fathers and younger brothers and desolate wives; but the saddest of all were the partings from mothers. It was so piteous, the hopelessness of their despair, the utter abandon of their tears.

And then after much shaking of hands and waving of hands the train was away. We saw load after load go by on the cars after that, and always looked eagerly for the sight of some face we knew. But the faces which we knew were swallowed and lost in a sea of strangeness—a sea, we pray, which never may grow familiar.

We read of the terrible battles that Western army fought; we read of their victories, and the far too frequent defeats. We read the lists of killed and wounded, and saw at last in the longest column the name of Private William Bradley. How far that name removed him from us! He was William now—not common Bill; not Bill the blacksmith's bound boy. We wondered if there was anything we could do for him, and in the next box that went from our town mother sent underclothes and stockings to the youth; for there

was no one near us by blood or friendship who weathered that winter in the South, and no one near Bill to remember him. And one day toward the dawn of spring a letter came from the hospital, written in the clumsy hand of the orphan, acknowledging the receipt of the clothes, and thanking for them with the clumsy, genuine feeling of one who seldom speaks and never forgets a favor. He was well again, he said, and would be returned for duty in the morning. They looked for another hard battle, for the enemy was massing, and this new general that had won in the past believed in sledge-hammers and decisive measures. At the end of the letter was the sentence:

"Tha have mad me a corprl."

How proud he was of that—prouder of it than were the thousands who had other things to comfort them. And how near us he seemed to come as the weary months went by and the fighting began again. Once fix your mind on a man in the distance and a man who stands front face with danger night and day and never flinches; and it is wonderful how completely he will fill your sky. You imagine all manner of great things about him, dread all manner of terrible things, and end at last by loving him. So, when that other battle was fought by the general who believed in sturdy blows, and when Vicksburg laid down her arms at the feet of a victorious army, we read again in the terrible lists of the killed and wounded the name of our blacksmith boy. This time, too, it was among the wounded—in the longest column; but it bore a prefix that surprised us. It was "Sergeant Bradley" now. The meager details of that time did not help us to all the information we wanted. We did not know how badly he was injured, but we sent a box of jellies and pickles and things that are not issued with the rations; and got another letter telling of the battle. And it makes no difference how many of these reports you read in the paper, this letter

from a man who was in the thick of the fight was far more authentic. It was far more real.

But Sergeant Bradley was sorely wounded this time. We found more about it later when a letter from the captain was printed in the county paper, detailing the events that had been important from a subaltern's standpoint and boasting of the prowess of his men. In this was told the story of a Mississippi regiment, those tigers of the South—a charge that was met by the tattered remnant of the Indiana brigade. He told of the clashing of man against man, and the loss of the banner over and over again—that banner that went down to the army with the blessings of a thousand women when Corinth fell. And it told how, when the howling, shouting, slashing, shrieking legions swept the Northerners back for a moment, and the guns were taken and not a thing could live in the sea of triumphant assault, Corporal William Bradley had wrapped his shattered arms about the flag and rolled with it right under the guns that were turned against his brethren.

"I knew you would come back again," said the hero, when the charge was repulsed and the battery was recaptured. "I knew you would come back, and I saved the flag."

He had, and he wore a sergeant's chevron for his heroism. But the hurt would not heal. The sulphurous smoke, the fearful concussions of earth and air as he burrowed under the guns and waited for rescue, the sword thrusts and bayonet pricks, the white flesh torn by whistling ball, and the two bones broken by the shattered shell—all this was tribulation which would not pass away. Sergeant Bradley lay long in the hospital.

One night in the autumn, as we sat there under a waning moon and listened to the shrill complaint of a

hidden cicada, we were conscious of a figure making slow progress along the path by the roadside. It was a man, and even in the darkness of night we could see it was not familiar. For the matter of that, the figure of a man at all those days was not a common thing. Men were away in the South, as a general rule. But this figure grew stranger as it came nearer. Presently the gate swung open, and the watch-dog gave challenge. We silenced him and rose to meet a limping, swaying figure in Federal blue. He said nothing, and seemed, with that grinning insistence of the uncouth man, to wish we might remember him. We had filled our thought with Bradley, no doubt; but this could not be he.

It was, however, and when we were sure of that we gave him a welcome and hearty cheer. But he was very weak. It seemed, after the first timid acceptance of our greeting, he began to fail, and to take less and less of interest in the things about him. We thought he would like to hear news from town. He had forgotten all about the town. We hoped a little later he would enjoy a word of cheer from the front. There was no army for him now. He lay there so white on the pillow, his red hair making the whiteness more vivid; his blue eyes looking so steadily, yet so listlessly, at a single point in the wall; he stirred so slightly at the passing of day and night—and then he closed his eyes.

It was long before he opened them again. When he did he saw mother beside him. She was cooling the cloth she laid on his forehead.

"I thought I wanted to come home," he said, and then closed his eyes again. There was no relevancy in the remark. No one had spoken to him, and there had never been a thought of this or other place as a home for him. It must have been on his mind all the time.

But there was youth to support him, and the

blessings of twenty years to pour their vigor into his veins. His mending was slow, but it was sure. He walked about the farm at Thanksgiving, and returned to duty at Christmas. He was a different man. It seemed impossible he ever could have been a bound boy. He was dignified, self-reliant. He spoke easily and without embarrassment, no matter if it was a general addressed. And he was a lieutenant when the war was done.

No, he didn't die. He lived to remember twenty battles and a dozen wounds. He lived to make a modest beginning in business, and to follow it to comfortable success. He owns his home now and under his broad hat hides red hair that will never be quite gray. He stands to-day with his children at the graves of the men who were with him in the army, who were with him in danger and suffering and success. He stands with those children and tells them the story and the lesson of the day.

To him it was the working out of a problem, the right solution after years of wrong. To him and to me his record typifies the average of that darker period. Thousands and tens of thousands went in with a whim to come out with a halo. They enlisted under the spur of example, of banter, of pique. Yet they fought like Greeks, and forgave like Christians. It was the hand of the common man that left home duties and home obligations to take up the greater cause of a nation. It was the triumph of simplicity—that silent legion which boasted little before the war, and never complained when hardship came. It was the triumph of all that is good in the American who lives to see the realization of dreams that were not bold enough to paint their horoscope when prophecy was loudest.

A WINTER STORY OF COLORADO.

The wild beasts upon Hicks Mountain were limited almost entirely to the coyotes; these persisted, in spite of advancing settlement, but in this section of Colorado the grey wolf, the mountain-lion, and the bear had been practically exterminated. For five years the stock had run the hills quite unmolested. A coyote will kill sheep, but its depredations are confined otherwise to the poultry, barring now and then a sick and abandoned calf.

However, in the winter of 1905, rumors spread that the grey wolves had returned. Calves were being killed and eaten, sows mutilated, and even large steers torn about the legs and chest. One rancher discovered in the timber across the pasture from his house the remains of a yearling heifer killed only that night; whatever had attacked it had devoured it, hide and all, to the very largest bones, leaving only the scattered remnants of a skeleton.

Now, a mountain-lion would have eaten part and buried the rest; a bear would also have eaten part, and saved the rest for later; coyotes would only have gnawed and mangled the carcass; the great grey wolf alone would have worked a destruction so complete.

The ground was bare of snow, and covered with pine-needles, thus being unfavorable for tracks. Mr. Jeffries had heard no howling. Nevertheless, the grey wolf, the stockman's scourge, was blamed.

Traps were set, and poisoned meat was discreetly put out, but only the coyotes suffered, apparently. Then Ned Coswell, early one morning, while searching

for a lost milk-cow, came over a little rise, and saw below him in a hollow in the park a number of wolfish animals collected about a dead body, tearing at it. Ned was unarmed, but, spurring his horse, he rode down upon them recklessly, whooping.

"There were about a dozen of them," related Ned, "and I knew they weren't wolves, because they were colored differently, more like dogs. They looked at me coming, and, boys, I didn't know for a minute whether they were going to get out of the way or not. Old Medicine Eye"—his horse—"wasn't a bit afraid; just pricked his ears and kept on, which made me think all the more they weren't wolves.

"They were dogs, boys, nothing but dogs. There was a brindled one that looked like a bulldog, and several woolly dogs, like sheep-dogs, and one big black-and-white shaggy fellow, biggest of all. They all lifted their heads, and stood staring at me, and I was beginning to think that maybe I'd been in too much of a hurry. But first one sneaked off, showing his teeth, into the brush, and another and another, and they all went, and I was mighty glad to have them go. They'd been eating at a dead steer—mine, too—but I don't know whether they'd killed it or not. I wish I'd had a gun."

After that the ranchers made it a habit again to carry a gun of some kind when out on the range. However, for a long time nobody, when armed, caught any glimpse of the wild dogs. That is likely to be the case in hunting; the unprepared frequently have the opportunities.

For instance, Frank Warring, while on his way home from town in his wagon, toward evening of a cloudy day, beheld the pack cross the road right in front of him, the animals in single file, one following another, silent as specters, noses outstretched, the big, shaggy black-and-white fellow leading. In the rear were two or

three puppies, perhaps nine months old. Frank had no gun. Somebody else also saw the pack.

The brutes' depredations continued, being limited, so far as we could ascertain, to our vicinity, as if they had selected Hicks Mountain for a hunting-ground. They hunted without howling. A spasmodic, rabid bark was the only sound that we could attribute to them, but it was sufficient.

We were afraid of this wild pack; more afraid than of wolves. There is something uncanny about a dog gone wild, for he combines the lessons taught by domesticity with the instincts of savagery.

As nobody from our section had missed dogs, we concluded that this band had come down upon us from Wyoming, a hundred and fifty miles north. Up in Wyoming wild dogs had been bothering the sheep-range. Probably energetic measures adopted by the irate sheep men had driven the marauders to seek new fields.

Finally, Sam Morris had a chance to retaliate. He was hunting deer afoot. The day was dark and snowy. As he was sitting motionless beside a boulder, watching the slope below and the ascent across the draw, the dog-pack suddenly streamed out from the pines down there, and all at a lope threaded the bottom of the draw, onward bound. The shaggy black-and-white was leading, as usual.

Sam's gun was loaded with buckshot, and he waited greedily, that he might get more than one dog with his charge. But the animals were too shrewd to travel bunched; they left intervals, as do the wolves when trailing, and when at last Sam would desperately have "whanged away," his gun missed fire. Rather chagrined was Sam, telling his tale afterward. He confirmed the previous statements that the pack was variously

colored, made up of different breeds; a strange invasion surely.

The trail through the draw remained unobliterated, for no snow fell for two weeks thereafter. We found that the dog-pack was utilizing this draw for a pass. It appeared to lead from one favorite point to another. The trail grew more distinct, but it scarcely widened; the dogs stepped always, so it seemed, in the same spots. It was vain to set traps; the disturbance of the snow was noticed at once. Poison was disregarded. The pack kept on ranging the country and attacking stock.

Sam was anxious to retrieve himself, and he and I agreed to put in our time watching that trail until we should "fix" some of those outlaws. I remember that it was the tenth day of January, and toward four o'clock in the afternoon, when, for perhaps the sixth or seventh time, we ensconced ourselves between two boulders on the slope overlooking the trail below.

The sky was cloudy; a snowstorm was evidently approaching. Cloudy days seemed to be those upon which the dog-pack was most likely to be sighted. Probably upon such days it emerged earlier on account of the waning light. This afternoon we had been in ambush only a half-hour when the pack appeared.

In silent, single file the pack came trotting out of the timber on our right, and across before us, following the trail in the draw. The big, black-and-white, shaggy fellow was the first; next to him was the brindle. I recognized them, for every narrative had contained them.

I don't know exactly why, but the sight of them all, trotting so silently, so swiftly, business-bent, thrilled me with a little chill. About their steady gait was something ominous, unreal. A pack of wolves I could have surveyed without special emotion, for I should

have known what to expect, but a pack of dogs, gone wild—ugh! They are neither dogs nor wolves, but, as has been said, an uncanny blending.

We had agreed what to do. Sam only nudged me, and levelled his gun. There was an instant of suspense, and we fired practically together.

We had rifles, and were using black powder, and the smoke was momentarily thick. When it cleared, the shaggy leader was kicking in the snow, and the brindle was lying still. My bullet had not sped quite as truly as Sam's; his aim had been the brindle. The rest of the pack were racing madly onward, and although we fired twice more, we did not hit any of them.

We went down to our victims. The brindle had just life enough in him to snarl at us ere he died. The big black-and-white was gasping.

Then a strange thing occurred. As I stood over him, he wagged his bushy tail; his eyes were not wild, but soft, suffering, appealing. He was now all dog and would turn to his chosen friend, man, for sympathy and aid.

"Poor old chap!" I said.

His eyes were glazing fast; he hauled himself on his side over the snow toward me.

"Look out!" warned Sam.

But there was no need. With a final effort, the animal just managed to lick my boot-toe, and with his head upon it, he shivered and was still. I declare, a lump rose in my throat.

As I bent to pat his coat—I love dogs, and he had struck me right to the heart, marauder though he had been—I felt a collar round his neck, concealed by his long, curly hair. Upon the collar was a plate, engraved

"Prince." Somebody's "Prince" had he been, somebody's pet. But whose?

A more perfect example of atavism, reversion to type—call it what you will—would be hard to present.

The dog-pack never again, as far as there was evidence, traversed that trail. Nor was it seen again upon Hicks Mountain. It seemed almost as if it had been composed of weird phantoms, like the spectral packs of German and Provençal legend, and had dissolved at our gunshots.

THE BEST OF THEM ALL!!

MOTOR STORIES

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