

THE COPPERHEAD TRAIL MYSTERY

A
HAL KEEN
Mystery
Story

HUGH LLOYD

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THE COPPERHEAD TRAIL MYSTERY



“RED!” HE GASPED. “WATER!”

A HAL KEEN MYSTERY STORY

THE COPPERHEAD TRAIL MYSTERY

BY

HUGH LLOYD

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"KIDNAPPED IN THE JUNGLE," ETC.

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THE COPPERHEAD TRAIL MYSTERY

CHAPTER I DISASTER

A long, grinding shriek suddenly shattered the silence. Sparks flew as the groaning trucks slid to a standstill and for a moment the forward coach heaved in the center as if the engine would telescope it. And as the terrific impact threw Hal bodily out of his seat, he heard a significant roar from the direction of the rear coach. Horrible, muffled cries of trapped men mingled with the sounds of crashing, splintering wood and breaking glass. Then all was still.

Hal raised a sore and aching head from the hard, dusty floor and looked up and down the aisle. Things were all awry. Broken glass glittered on the twisted backs of seats while the wooden coach had resolved itself into a snake-like position with its forward and rear vestibules lying at distinct angles from the center of the car.

He grinned grimly and presently was aware of the conductor rising uncertainly from a pile of debris. The man thrust off a shattered arm rest that had been lying across his ankle, then felt of his cut and bleeding face.

Hal struggled to his feet. "You hurt, conductor?" he asked solicitously.

The man looked up, bewildered for a moment, then smiled. "Guess not," said he with some effort. "Just cut and bruised like yourself. The others—where are they? I wonder..."

As if in answer to this query, three men rose ever so slowly from the litter at the rear of the car. One, a tall, slim young man, scrambled to his feet and chuckled. His brown eyes danced as he looked toward Hal.

"And I'm alive to tell the story," he said whimsically.

"And how!" Hal agreed laughing. He experienced a feeling of relief that this ruddy-cheeked fellow passenger was apparently unhurt. It struck him as odd to feel such concern—the fellow was a comparative stranger. And as if to hide this solicitude, he added: "Your friends look kind of down though, huh?"

"Huh?" the young man returned, puzzled for a moment. Then with a nod of comprehension, he smiled at the two flashily dressed men at his elbow. "Well, buddies, are the old bones holding together? I guess they must be—you're both standing on them pretty well. Atta boy, Perry, flick off the dust from that nice suit. You and Doyle look as if you saw ghosts."

"*Who wouldn't!*" muttered Perry, his dark countenance looking drawn and white.

"Yeh," said the little man named Doyle, between chattering teeth, "that's what I say, Todd!"

At this juncture, a disheveled looking creature crawled through the battered remnants of the forward vestibule and appeared before them. It was the engineer.

“Great Scott!” exclaimed the conductor. “You?”

“It’s me,” the engineer answered. “Fireman ain’t got but a few scratches and a broken leg, neither. I just turned my ankle. We jumped after I pulled the emergency. Do you notice that the rear coach ain’t with you?”

The conductor peered around. “Not down....”

“Down in the canyon,” interposed the engineer grimly. “Every mother’s son of ’em. How many passengers?”

“Six,” answered the conductor. “We’re all alive and on our feet in here—the five of us.”

“And you’re lucky!” the engineer murmured turning toward the door. “It’s more than those poor sons can say down there. C’mon, boys! There’s work to be done before dark!”

The conductor was fast on the heels of the engineer and Hal had turned to follow when the smiling, ruddy face of the young man appeared at his shoulder.

“Just a sec, big boy,” said he, lazily, “we’ll pair together, eh? Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle will probably join us later. They’ve accumulated quite a lot of dust on their nice....”

“Aw, shut up, Mac!” Mr. Perry growled. “I ain’t got over the shock of this thing yet, that’s all. It ain’t that I’m frightened.”

“That’s what I say,” Mr. Doyle agreed, his teeth still chattering.

Ruddy-faced Mac took Hal’s arm cordially as they scrambled down to the ground. “Well, old top,” he said in an undertone, “I was frightened plenty. I’ll admit it. But there’s a difference; a fellow can be frightened white and a fellow can be frightened yellow. Perry and Doyle almost trampled me under in order to save themselves.”

“Oh, I understand,” said Hal. “They friends of yours, Mac?”

“No. Just met them at the junction, that’s all. We happen to have a common purpose up in this country—Perry and Doyle and myself. They seem to be all right except that they’re strong on self-preservation; every man for himself is their motto, I guess.”

“Looks like it,” Hal observed.

Perry’s deep mumble came to them. “Whew! I’m glad we’re out of that trap,” he was saying to Danny Doyle. “Now to get out of here as quick as we can.”

Hal wheeled around and glared down at the would-be shirker. “Not so fast with your plans, Mr. Perry,” said he emphatically. “We’re all working together down in that canyon and the quicker the better, huh?” he added, shaking his

thick red hair vehemently.

Hal's towering frame and broad shoulders overcame all objections. He stood, like a commanding young giant, even head and shoulders above tall Mac. Together, they waited until the two objectors had scrambled over the track where the engineer and conductor were waiting. A certain tilt of the suave Perry's shoulder bespoke resentment.

"He'll never forgive you for this, Red," said Mac in a whisper. "I've got him all figured out. Kid him along but don't tell him, that's the kind he is."

"There isn't any time to kid even his kind," Hal said indifferently. "I told him and I'll tell him again if he shows any signs of backsliding. We don't know what we're going to be up against down there."

The next moment they were standing with the others contemplating the grim disaster that hugged the stark, silent depths of the canyon.

CHAPTER II AFTERMATH

"We got to do this thing systematic like," said the engineer briskly. "The conductor's going to fix up the fireman's best he kin before dark—he knows one thing or the other 'bout this first aid business. 'N' soon's I fetch a rope from the cab two of us kin go down and see what's what. It'll take three of us to hold on up here, I guess."

"Easily," Hal observed. "Mr. Perry and I will go down first." And as a gleam of anger flashed in that gentleman's eyes, he added: "We'll take turns. All of us."

"Righto," Mac agreed with sparkling eyes. "Mr. Doyle and I will take the next because Mr. Engineer's cliff-climbing days are over. Am I not right, sir?" the young man asked respectfully.

"Quite right, son, quite right," answered the veteran railroad man. "My arms will hold the rope all right, but I couldn't promise you how I'd be on my legs."

Perry eyed the engineer sullenly. "How do I know you ain't going to let the rope slip, hah? Look what you did to the train—did you hold on to that, hah?"

The old man scrutinized his questioner quietly. "These are the first lives I've ever lost, young feller," he answered sadly and nodding toward the ravine, "and I guess if you saw the size of the spike that jumped my engine you wouldn't ask such questions. Satan himself couldn't o' held on the way we jumped."

"You mean the rail was spiked on purpose?" Hal asked incredulously when the engineer returned with the rope.

"It's the truth, son, it's the truth," the man answered. "And if it wasn't that I let her jump a little before I give her the emergency, both coaches would be down there instead of one. You'd of all crashed into silence the same as them poor sons!" The little group was silenced with the awful import of the engineer's revelation.

Hal divested himself of his coat, ready for duty, and so intently was he thinking of the malicious cause of the disaster that he did not see the gray ghost of fear upon the craven Mr. Perry's countenance.

And as if to comfort his friend, Mr. Danny Doyle said, "Some close call, Todd! Some close call!"

"Shut up!" growled Mr. Perry. "Save your sympathy for when I come up from that hole down there. *If I do!*" he added fearfully.

Hal shrugged his shoulders and let them tie the rope about his waist. "I'll go first, Perry," he said disgustedly. "It'll give you time to sort of take hold of yourself."

Mac gave the rope a solicitous tug. "It'll hold, Red, old kid," he smiled. "Know how to make sure your foothold isn't false?" Hal shook his head.

"Kick in with your toes and press down with your heels good and hard," the other advised. "Don't let the rope come up until the ground you're standing on is firm enough not to yield under pressure. Sometimes this grass around here hides a gully. Have to be careful. All set, old top?"

Hal nodded and gave them the signal to lower him. He watched Mac and the engineer struggling at the first weight on the rope. Doyle was behind them. Gradually they moved back out of sight as the distance grew between them.

Unconsciously, Hal shut his eyes as he slid down, down the rocky wall. The pungent smell of wild flowers growing in the crevices floated about his nostrils and in a dreamy sort of way he was listening to the voices above him. Time enough, he thought, to put his mind in action when he was at last in the ravine.

"Know of anybody who has a grudge against the Laidlaw Branch Line or the railroad in general?" Mac was asking the engineer.

"Not a soul," came the reply, "not a soul that I know of."

"Funny," Mac observed in that lazy way of his, "I didn't know there was a soul up here who'd do such a thing."

"You ever lived round here, son?" asked the engineer. "You a Canadian?"

"No, no," Mac laughed with evident confusion. "Not so's you'd notice it."

Hal heard no more then for he had slipped out of the range of their voices. His senses were alert to the dangers of the canyon, but for a long time his mind echoed the confusion in Mac's laugh.

CHAPTER III SHADOWS

An hour passed before Hal again climbed over the single track of the Laidlaw Branch Line. The sun had set, leaving the western sky a profusion of coral patches and the range, rising on either side of the railroad cut, stretched its jagged peaks aloft in the mist of approaching twilight.

There was a tang of cedar in the air and despite sore muscles and a badly throbbing head, Hal sniffed it energetically. He wished heartily for a moment that he might lie down on the patch of moss that bordered the towering forest above the cut. But the conductor hailed him from the vestibule.

“No luck, eh?” he asked anxiously.

“No,” Hal answered a little wearily. “We could just about get ourselves up out of there and that’s all. As far as *they’re* concerned, there’s no hurry. I guess it’s just as the engineer said—not one spoke after that coach hit bottom. It’s in thousands of splinters—never saw anything like it. Awful!”

“Worse than that,” the conductor murmured. “Got the boy’s leg fixed up in a temporary splint and made him a sort of bed inside. Put a few of the broken backs of seats together and he’s restin’ a little easier, but it won’t be long.”

“No, not long,” said Hal. “Don’t you suppose that ticket agent at Laidlaw knows by this time that something’s wrong? Mac says it’s only six miles from here.”

“That’s all, but it’s far enough for that lazy coyote of an agent to forget about us. Like as not he thinks we’re broken down with engine trouble and he’ll wait ’til he hears if he has to sit in that station up there all night. That’s a one-horse branch line for you, young feller.”

“I suppose so,” Hal agreed. “Still the agent can’t help it. Who’d ever believe, anyway, that such a thing was going to happen?”

“I know—dirty work from some direction. Come on, feller, sit up on that vestibule step—or what’s left of it. You look kind of tired.”

“I guess I am,” Hal grinned, seating himself on the edge of the broken platform. “I’ll just get my breath and then hoof it to Laidlaw. We’ve got to have help!”

“Righto. I’d direct you through the forest, it’s shorter, but you’d get all twisted in the dark. It’ll be better to stick to the track, I guess. Where’s that other feller—Mac, I mean?”

“Down below,” Hal answered thoughtfully. “Darn nice feller he is, conductor. Not afraid of anything. He’s down there clearing the wood to one

side so's the men can be taken up as soon as we get help. The other two are with the engineer. They were as good as nothing. I had to send Perry up right away and Mac had the same trouble with that Doyle chap. Great, huh?"

"Yes. Funny, I liked them the least of all you boys when they boarded us at the junction. Just something about their manner, I guess. They're due at Laidlaw too, to snoop about this gold business."

"Too?" Hal repeated, shaking a thick lock of hair back from his forehead. "What is this gold business?"

"Oh, you don't know about it, eh? Well, you're the only passenger on the two coaches that didn't, then. Every mother's son that's lyin' dead in that canyon intended to hunt for that gold. Perry and Doyle and Mac are going up—I heard them talking about it. This trip has been a sort of miniature gold rush."

"It's news to me," Hal said, interested. "Gosh, there's something sad about those fellers down in the canyon dying before they ever got a chance to try for it, huh? Gold! I wouldn't mind trying for it myself. I'm on my way to visit Wainwright's camp up at Laidlaw—some friends of mine. Ever hear of 'em?"

"Yes, they come up every summer. Nice people. S'pose you'd like to hear the why and wherefore of this gold business, eh? Not much to it. Just some snoop reporter happened in on an old prospector, veteran of the Alaska rush. He's known as Old Timer 'round here and he happened to have some dust lyin' on the table in his cabin when the newspaper man came in. Of course he denied that he thought there was much more to be found like it up there but the reporter had a hunch there was. Next day every paper had the news, even through the States. Now you know why we had these amateur prospectors on this trip. Just two days since the papers gave it out."

"Man alive, that's one on me," said Hal. "I didn't even hear about it. Gosh, it's exciting, huh? Well, I'll go over and tell the rest I'm going. Miss Wainwright's to meet me and I bet she's good and worried right now. You say it's six miles from here to the station?"

"Just about."

Hal stepped down and stretched his long arms and legs. It had been a long and trying day. He stifled a yawn, held his head high and breathed deeply. A sudden movement between two majestic cedars up above the cut, caught his attention. For a flashing second he thought he saw a face, but then it was gone.

"See something?" the conductor inquired.

"Could have sworn I did," Hal answered, still staring. "I'm certain I saw a man's face up there between those two big trees. Something moved, I know that."

"Nothing there now," the conductor observed. "Maybe a deer. What else could it be?"

Hal wondered for a moment, then put it out of his mind.

CHAPTER IV FOLLOWED

At the last moment, Mac decided to go. "Two pairs of arms will carry more than one pair, huh?" he said. "We may be able to get a few things from the agent and kind of start things here before real help comes from the junction."

A murmur of general assent followed this suggestion. Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle looked genuinely relieved to get away from the activities around the canyon, and rest. In fact, they immediately fell to talking over a plan for getting a few of the broken seats out of the coach and arranging them in the same manner as the conductor had done for the suffering fireman. Hal and Mac left them still discussing it.

Mac was still chuckling when a sharp curve took them out of sight of the wrecked engine and coach. "Can you imagine those two birds prospecting?" he asked. "Or can't you?"

"I can't," Hal grinned. "What's more, I don't think I'd like to go with them. Too much milk and water kind to suit me."

"Oh well," said Mac blithely, "it takes all kinds you know. They'll fit all right in this prospecting business. They've got a lot of that quality that'll help to get them what they started out to get. An egg like Perry will do a whole lot for gold without risking his life."

"What about yours?" Hal queried glancing at his companion.

"I can take care of myself, Red," the young man answered quickly. "I've been doing it for ten years—since I was fourteen. Nobody to care much so I ran away from home."

There was a decisive tone in this latter declaration, one that did not invite discussion. Hal would very much have liked learning more about this carefree adventurer but he understood even then that Mac talked only when he wanted to. In point of fact, the young man was already whistling gaily, apparently absorbed in thoughts of a lighter vein.

After a while he stopped whistling and asked Hal what were his plans in Laidlaw. Then he listened intently while that young giant enthusiastically talked of the delightful summer that he was contemplating with Miss Jean Wainwright and her aunt at their camp.

"She told me it's about eighteen miles from Laidlaw station," he said. "In her last letter she described it as being situated on a sheltered slope and it looks directly down on a lake a half mile or so below. Sounds nice, huh?"

"Uh huh. Sounds like the same place we're headed for, Red. She didn't by

any chance mention the name of the lake?"

"Matter of fact, she did, Mac. Called it Copperhead Lake, and said there was something sad looking about it. Gosh, can you imagine that? Girls certainly are funny!"

"I'll say." Mac looked wistful for a moment, then: "That's where we're going, Red, so it looks as if you're going to have company."

"Great!" Hal exclaimed sincerely. "I'll like it, believe me, because there isn't going to be enough to do just with a girl and another lady. Now I've got something real to look forward to."

"You don't know the half of it," Mac laughed merrily. "Still a fellow your size ought to be able to hold his own."

"Now you're talking," Hal agreed with a deep chuckle. "I take it that you expect some difficulties with this gold rush, huh?"

"What gold rush doesn't have its difficulties!" Mac said whimsically. "History tells us that the gold miner is constantly beset with trials and tribulations so I guess we'll have our share."

Hal grinned. "In other words, it isn't all gold that glitters, huh?"

"Exactly!" Mac exclaimed heartily. Then, in an undertone, he said: "Don't turn around, Red—*someone is following!*"

Hal felt chilled for the moment. "How do you know?" he queried in a breathless whisper.

"Twice I've seen the shadow," Mac said between lips that seemed not to move. "He seems to be dodging behind the trees above this cut."

Hal's blue eyes lighted considerably. "That's funny," he whispered back, "I thought I saw a face above the cut just before we started. Conductor said it must be a deer, but somehow I knew it wasn't."

"Well, this isn't any deer, Red," Mac murmured. "It's a man, for he slows down when we slow down and he hurries when we hurry. I've been listening."

"Why didn't you say something before? How long have you noticed it?"

"I've sort of sensed it since we started, but I just wanted to make sure."

Mac then glanced above the cut slyly; it was no more than that, yet his expression spoke volumes.

They hurried on in silence for a while. Dusk was closing in—the snow-tipped peaks looked leaden-colored in the darkening sky.

Giant trees above the cut seemed to shrink gradually back into the shadows until only their huge outlines became visible, staring down upon the two young travelers like gaunt, unfriendly specters.

Hal, being a temperamental and sensitive young man, shivered slightly. He did not like the idea of being followed by this ghostly shadow of a man—there was something ominous and strange about it that gave him a feeling of foreboding.

“Why don’t you want to turn around and face this bird, Mac?” he asked presently.

“Hunch, I guess,” answered the other with a shrug of his shoulders.

“We’ve no reason to fear him or anybody else for that matter,” Hal reasoned. “We’ve a right to know why he’s following us!”

“Hush, not so loud, Red! If it was only curiosity, he’d come right out and ask us, wouldn’t he? In this country people are usually friendly and don’t sneak when they want to find out things. This way doesn’t look like friendliness, would you say so?”

“No. But why on earth—*why?*”

As if in answer to Hal’s question, came a sharp report and then the unmistakable whine of a bullet. In a flash, Hal and Mac had thrown themselves up against the high embankment and a moment later, a second bullet had lodged in the gravel at their feet.

CHAPTER V UNDER COVER

“Murder, huh?” Hal breathed in Mac’s ear. “This is just a little too much to swallow. I...”

“Quiet, Red!” Mac warned. “I want to listen where he is. He can’t see us where we are now and he may take it in his head to find out. Stay put a second.”

Hal’s heart beat against his chest like a triphammer. His feet slid a fraction of a yard in the gravel of the roadbed and it seemed to him a terrific noise. He fancied that the deep silence which followed was pregnant with sound. Mac gave his arm a warm, friendly tug and it gave him an idea.

“Listen, Mac,” he whispered. “It’ll be pitch dark in a very few minutes, huh?”

“It usually does get dark,” Mac breathed with an inaudible chuckle.

Hal grinned at the pleasantries and gave his companion a friendly nudge. “We can keep under cover here for those few minutes. He most likely will feel safer foraging down here than—same as us. There’ll be two against one, gun or no gun, and believe me, I’m anxious for it to happen.”

“Same here, Red. Great idea. He can’t possibly see us from up there anywhere. He *has* to come down here if he wants to take another shot at us—providing he has any pride in his marksmanship, of course.”

“And that’s a good argument,” Hal grinned, “considering the high price of ammunition.”

“Righto.”

They waited with tired, cramped muscles and watched the objects about them gradually covered by the great black cloak of night. Even the gaunt peaks dissolved into nothingness before their eyes. There was something appalling about it to Hal and as Mac’s genial features became a part of the night too, it gave him an odd, suffocating feeling. For a horrible moment, he had the thought that the black vaulted dome on high was conspiring against them and holding them helplessly in its grip.

“Gosh, Mac,” Hal said in a hissing whisper, “I can’t even see you.”

“Same here,” said the other, “but I can hear you, though. Breathing so heavily—what’s the matter?”

“Just funny thoughts I get. I don’t like waiting for unseen things when a night’s so black. Not a star—nothing! I’d just like to jump out on the track and declare myself. Invite that bird to come down and do his darndest, huh? Gosh,

it's the waiting and the darkness that gets on my nerves."

"I feel the same way, Red, yet I've always prided myself on steel nerves. Funny. It wouldn't have been a bad idea for us to have used our brains and got a lantern or two from the conductor. If we have the luck to hike in peace the rest of the way, we'll do it stumbling."

"And I've got three beauts of searchlights in my trunk," Hal mumbled regretfully. His right foot had gone to sleep and he stamped it impatiently on the gravel releasing hundreds of the little pebbles and causing them to shift with a distinct swishing sound.

He was immediately aware of the signs of activity up on the embankment. A rain of sand fell at his feet and in a moment he had jumped out on the track.

"Come down here like a man—*whoever you are!*" he shouted. "Come down...."

"*Listen!*" warned Mac.

But a few feet away they heard, then saw the shadow of a man jump down from the embankment and onto the roadbed. Hal squared his great shoulders and took long strides forward only to see the almost ghostly shadow dissolve into the darkness.

"Gosh, gosh!" Hal roared. "Ghost or no ghost, I'm good and mad. I'll bust him right...."

"Calm yourself, Red," Mac interrupted. "Did you ever hear a ghost run like that? Listen!"

The light tap, tap of retreating footsteps sounded against the ties. Each one echoed and reëchoed in the still mountain air until Hal impulsively took up the chase, calling Mac close upon his heels. Shout after shout they sent forth after the elusive would-be murderer until the narrow railroad cut reverberated eerily and the glistening rails answered with a challenging hum.

Hal hadn't the remotest idea how near he was to his quarry. He simply stumbled on blindly and breathlessly, urging the cautious Mac to keep up the chase.

"How do you know where he is?" asked Mac wearily.

"I don't know," Hal shouted in answer, "and what's more, I don't care!"

Mac chuckled. "Red, old top, you're all wool and a yard wide. Me for you every time. I won't stop until I drop."

"Atta boy, we'll both drop."

Perhaps this came nearer the truth than they guessed for after a time Hal was forced to stop and rest. Mac was soon stumbling up behind, weary but smiling and shrugging his shoulders with a gay nonchalance.

"I can't hear him now that we've stopped," said Hal, listening very intently.

"Neither can I," Mac agreed, allowing himself the luxury of sitting down

on the nearest rock. “And I was never so glad to say anything in all my life. Let’s forget about it, Red—we’ll have better health if we do,” he added with a chuckle.

Hal grinned but quickly grew serious. “That’s just it, Mac,” he reasoned. “We’ll have better health, but maybe somebody else coming along here won’t. And to make it safe for the other fellow I ought to have that bird by the neck right now. He ought to be made to give up that rifle if he’s a little off and just taking fly shots for the fun of it. Isn’t it funny, Mac—I can’t get it out of my head but what that bird’s a bug!”

“Same thought I had myself, Red. What sane person would pot shot at two strangers in the dusk as he did at us. For one thing....”

Suddenly a thin, cackling laugh rose out of the darkness beyond, and grew in volume until it became a shriek, weird and terrifying.

CHAPTER VI MYSTERY

For a space they stood rooted to the spot. A thin, chilling echo murmured eerily along the cut before it spent itself. To Hal's surprise, Mac jumped to his feet and ran, disappearing in the darkness after he had gone a few yards.

Suddenly he called, "Red, he's gone! He's gone, all right."

"How do you know?" Hal shouted. "How can you tell?"

"Because I just found out where we are—Echo Trail. It runs up from the cut here and goes through the forest and around to Laidlaw. Slices off about a mile but it's too dark for us to think of chasing him through there or to try and make it for our own benefit. I've not been through there in so many years I wouldn't chance it without a light. Funny how that bird's laugh brought it all back to me. I mean the trail."

Hal reached his side at this juncture. "You mean the trail has a way of echoing?"

"Yes, that's where it gets its name. That's why he waited and gave us the laugh here. He knew we wouldn't dare chase him around the trail at this time of a moonless night. Well, we might as well get on, Red. He won't bother us again, I'm certain."

"Gosh, Mac," said Hal, puzzled, "you know this country, huh?"

"Rather," Mac answered wistfully. "But let's not talk about it any more, Red. I'd rather not and besides I came up here for gold if I can get it—nothing else. I wouldn't have come if I hadn't known this country so well, believe me. It helps a lot to know one's mountains, when one's object is gold," he added with a rueful laugh.

Hal was mystified but followed him in silence the rest of the way. He had a keen sense of annoyance at knowing that he thoroughly liked his companion despite this shroud of mystery that had sprung suddenly about him. In point of fact, he had a strong premonition that danger would beset him in this friendship ... hadn't danger already overtaken them? He laughed off the queer presentiment while it was still in the process of formation and clasped Mac's arm.

"Almost there," Mac observed quietly. "In a few minutes we'll see the light of that dinky station. Wonder if your hostess will be waiting all this time—it must be after nine."

"I wouldn't blame her if she isn't. Our train was due at six ten, wasn't it?"

"Uh huh. Meggie, no doubt, is beginning to get worried by now. It would

take him a couple of hours to get worried.”

“Meggie?”

“Yes, Mr. Meggie’s his name. He’s station agent at Laidlaw—has been ever since I can remember. That’s the way they do things up here, Red. A man sticks at his job till he dies. Ten years wouldn’t mean much. I guess Meggie’s still here. We’ll see anyway and if he is, he’s not to see me or know you had anybody with you. He’s an awful talker, but then he hasn’t much else to do.”

Hal shrugged his broad shoulders but managed a grin. “I’ll admit you’ve got me buffaloed, Mac,” he said thoughtfully, “but then you know your own business.”

“Righto, that’s why I’ve told you as much as I have, Red. Well there’s Meggie’s light—see it? He’s there all right. I can tell by that!”

“Mm,” Hal answered staring at the little beacon shining through the dark. “If he hasn’t seen you in ten years, Mac, I shouldn’t think he’d know you now. There’s a whale of a difference between a fellow at fourteen and a man at twenty-four.” They halted at a narrow trail running due west.

“I know it, but Meggie wouldn’t see the difference, because that’s the way he is. Now I’ll hide around somewhere until you finish with him. I don’t think your Miss Jean Wainwright is there—no, she isn’t,” he added, peering ahead at the cheerful little area of light surrounding the station.

“Then you want to leave me here, huh?” Hal asked.

“Yes, and tell Meggie that Number Four was derailed between Coffin’s Bend and the canyon. Tell him to get those wires humming as fast as he can so’s the fireman can have his leg fixed up before morning. Don’t let him get your ear too long, Red. I’m kind of tired.”

With that he retreated along the trail and soon Hal could no longer see him. Somewhere in that dense foliage he was effectually concealed from Meggie’s prying eyes and ears. Ten years would not make any difference to the inquisitive station agent, he had said. And why not?

Hal wondered and set his steps toward the cheerful light in the station window.

CHAPTER VII FOREWARNED

Mr. Meggle, a wizened little bald-headed man, came hurrying out of the ramshackle station as Hal approached. He pushed his horn-rimmed glasses securely upon his nose and stood with his head to one side.

“Eh?” he called. “Thought I heard somebuddy. Who’s it?”

“My name’s Keen, sir—Hal Keen, and I’m an American. I was on Train Four and it’s been wrecked between Coffin’s Bend and the canyon. Derailed purposely, sir. Six men killed in rear coach and the fireman’s on his back with a bad leg. That’s the casualties and both the conductor and engineer asked me to have you get help to them as soon as possible. Do you understand what I’m talking about?”

Mr. Meggle blinked his eyes. “Yes, yes, yes,” he answered quickly. “I declare, young man, you’ve taken me completely by surprise! Come, step in, step inside! This is all very strange indeed, yes indeed!”

Hal followed the queer little man indoors, somewhat nonplussed. Once inside the dilapidated waiting room, however, this feeling was soon dispelled by the cheerful light. Here was reality, he felt, and for the time being, mystery had fled.

“Sit down, young man, sit down,” cried the agent, indicating one of the worn benches that rested against the primitive wall. He then hurried behind the ticket enclosure, muttering worriedly as he went.

Hal’s bright blue eyes followed him as he went back and forth from his ticket counter to a desk that stood in the center of the enclosure. Once, he caught the agent blinking thoughtfully at him from behind the bars of the ticket window.

Hal smiled that wide, winning smile of his and presently the man came hurrying out with a worried but apologetic smile.

“Scuse me, young man, ’scuse me,” he said, sitting down beside Hal. “I ain’t never been so upset, that’s a fact. You see I found a note on that there desk o’ mine when I come down for Number Four,” he said, waving a small piece of white paper from his withered looking hand. “At first, I jest natcherally thought ’twas some smart Aleck playin’ a joke on me—one o’ them summer boarders from over at Lake Echo. They like to tease me ’bout this branch line and how Number Four only comes twice a week up here and ’long about eight o’clock I began to think maybe it wasn’t one of their jokes at all. So I got hold of the junction ’bout quarter of nine and read them the note

so's they'll have help at the bend in an hour or so. Read it for yourself, young man, read it."

Hal took the proffered slip of paper and saw written in an almost illegible scrawl: "Don't expect Number Four tonight ... it won't be hear ... besides it won't ever be hear ... neither will anybody be that's rid on it."

Hal looked up, questioningly.

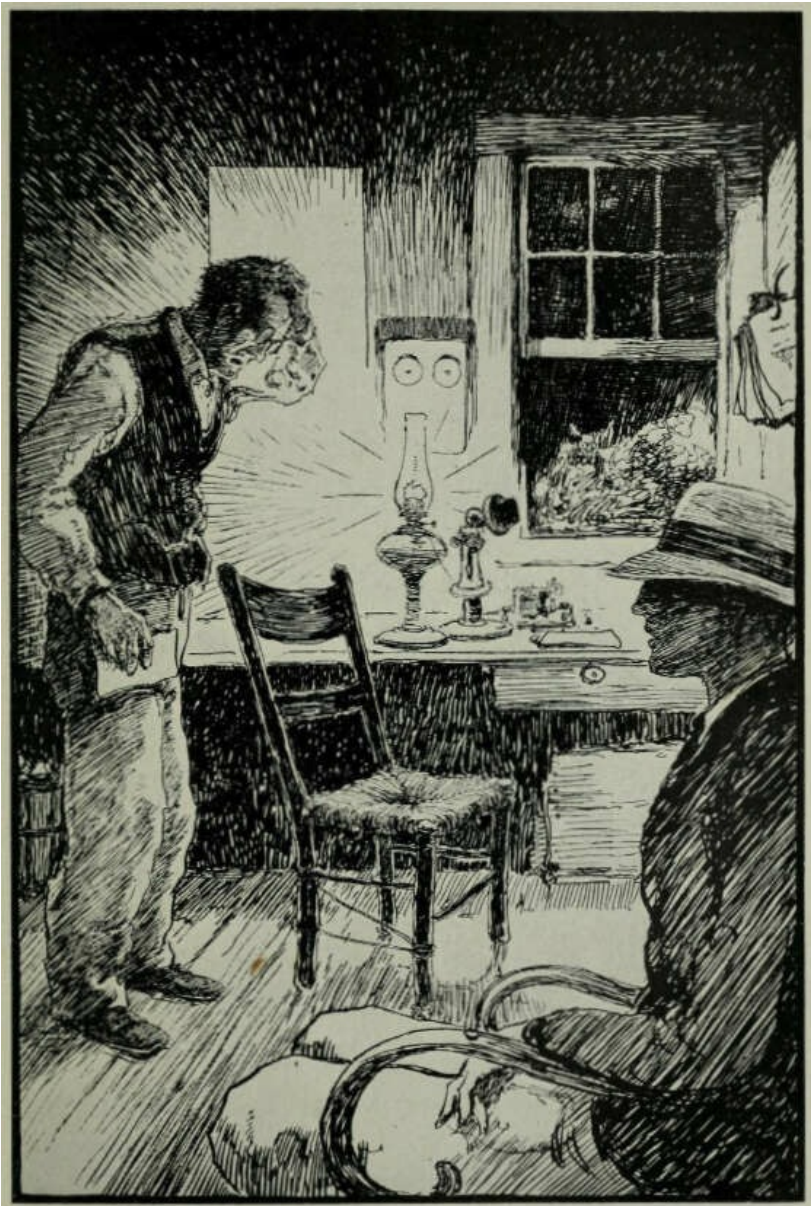
"That's what I found on my desk," explained the agent worriedly. "Things come to a pretty pass up here, eh?"

"Awful!" Hal exclaimed with a shiver. "Sounds like a fiend to me or a maniac. Who could it be, I wonder?"

"Hard tellin', hard tellin'," said Mr. Meggle staring across the room at the rusty stove in the corner. "How many of you come out of it, eh?"

"Three other passengers besides myself," Hal answered with a weary sigh. "And of course there was the conductor and the engineer—the fireman will get along all right, I guess. You see, sir, the engine took such a jump on account of that spike that we went along with it, those of us that were in the forward car. It was the rear car that got the worst of it and fell over into the canyon; it happened to back right over. Phew, I'll never forget it—never!"

Mr. Meggle scratched his bald head and rose. "Good you ain't hurt none, yessir."



“GOOD YOU AIN’T HURT NONE, YESSIR,” SAID MR. MEGGLE.

“But I’m so tired, I hurt,” Hal laughed. “I’ll just rest up my legs before I hike back to the bend and tell them the good news.”

“No need for that at all, none at all,” protested the agent. “They’ll have help from the junction an hour or two before you’d get there.” Then: “S ’pose

you come up a-lookin' for gold too, eh?"

Hal yawned. "Not me, sir," said he. "I've heard about it and I wouldn't mind trying my luck at it same as everybody else, but you see I came here to visit at the Wainwright camp. Know where it is, sir?"

Mr. Meggle turned slowly around, "Eh? You the guest that Miss Wainwright was expectin'?"

"Sure," Hal grinned. "Was she here?"

"No. She called me up early this afternoon over at my cabin and she told me that her aunt was quite sick and she didn't think she could come up to meet you so she sent that Jap cook of hers with a horse for when you arrived tonight. She give me orders to direct you myself when I went home 'cause I live 'bout six mile from here and she said you could come back tomorrer and pick up your baggage, eh?"

"Absolutely," said Hal good naturedly.

"And so the Jap isn't here either, huh?"

Mr. Meggle shook his head and sat down again. "He had to go right back to git supper on account o' Miss Wainwright had to tend her aunt. S'pose you might jest as well sit and rest till we see if them other passengers come along. They'll be wantin' to go the same way as you, so's we might as well all go 'long together. Old Timer's cabin's below Wainwright's so they'll expect to find the lode somewhere's 'bout there, I guess," he added with a chuckle. "Beats all how they 'spect to be sittin' on top o' the mother lode right off, eh?"

"Yes," Hal agreed with a confused grin. He knew none of the secrets of finding this yellow treasure. Indeed, at the time his only thought was that the search for gold had resulted in tragedy even before it had begun. There were six men lying in the ravine back there—six men who wouldn't sit on the mother lode, ever!

"It's taken Old Timer most all o' fifty years to sit on his," said Mr. Meggle as if reading Hal's thoughts. "Guess them young fellers wouldn' have such patience as that, eh?"

The gentle breeze blowing in through the opened windows suddenly brought with it a low, moaning sound. Mr. Meggle jumped to his feet and Hal felt chilled just as he had felt back in the cut. Had it come from the same ghostlike figure out of whose throat had issued that horrible, eerie laugh? Or....

Just then the telephone on Mr. Meggle's desk jingled merrily.

CHAPTER VIII

WAITING

"It's this here Miss Wainwright, young man," Mr. Meggle called from the enclosure. "She wants to speak to you."

Hal swung a long leg over the edge of the desk and took up the phone. "I feel like a ghost," he said to her laughingly, "but I'm pretty well, I guess."

Her deep voice, clear and frank, was full of concern. "Mr. Meggle was just telling me, Hal. You're very fortunate and I'm glad. But how about the other three—they'll have a wait for their baggage the same as you? Tell them it's my wish and also Aunt's, that they come with you."

"That's a pretty big order, Jean," Hal protested. "They can manage somehow for tonight and tomorrow they can get their camp together. They're on the trail for gold, you know."

"So I suspected. Old Timer, who's a neighbor of ours, said we could expect an advance guard of prospectors by tomorrow. He'll be quite shocked to hear that the number has dwindled down to three in such an awful manner. I'll be anxious to hear all about it. And don't worry about those three young men being too much of an order, Hal. You're in Canada, remember, and hospitality is a law. Aunt's just had one of her bad headaches today and I think a houseful will cheer her up. Tsu will be tickled to death to have a tableful for breakfast."

"All right, Jean. You win. Two of the fellows you won't like so well, but I'm sure you'll like Mac."

"I'm sure I will. Mac sounds like Canada, of which I'm very fond," she laughed. "I hope you get here before daylight." Hal said he hoped they could too, and rang off. His mind was weighing the suggestion of Mac sounding like Canada. It rang awfully true for some reason. But then Jean had a way of saying things that made them ring true. She was unusual and Hal liked her more than any other girl. But then he didn't much care for girls.

"She knows a good horse when she sees one," he explained to Mr. Meggle for want of conversation. Then he added: "Where's the horse the Jap brought for me, sir?"

"Oh, tethered outside o' the back door."

"Guess I'll stroll out and look it over," Hal said with studied nonchalance. He stopped at the door a moment. "Wonder how we can manage it with one horse?"

"Have to double up till we git to my place," said Mr. Meggle, eyeing him

curiously. “Got a mule there, and my own horse’s outside. You can have both if one or the other uv you bring ’em back come morning.”

Hal thanked him and went outside only to find that the loquacious agent was at his heels and soon deep in the merits of his old and weary stallion compared to that of the frisky gray mare owned by Jean Wainwright. He seemed loath to give up the topic and apparently did not notice Hal’s obvious inattention.

There wasn’t a sign of Mac. A brilliant moon was slowly making her way across the eastern skies and lighting up every tree and shrub about them. Hal was worried and sent furtive glances toward a certain trail beyond the railroad station. Mac was hiding somewhere in there, but where? Was he weary of waiting?

Hal had plenty of leisure during the next few hours to ask himself these questions a dozen times. He hadn’t any way of getting word to Mac; Mr. Meggle stayed at his side every moment. The way he stuck around was most provoking and by midnight when Hal was despairing of the situation, he heard the welcome sound of footsteps.

“Eh?” said Mr. Meggle. “That somebuddy comin’?”

“Yes, thank the Lord,” Hal sighed thankfully. “I wish there was an army coming—that’s just the way I feel.”

Presently Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle appeared at the doorway, bedraggled and weary.

CHAPTER IX

MR. PERRY AND MR. DOYLE

“So this is Laidlaw!” Mr. Doyle observed. “Todd, I’m tired.”

“Who ain’t!” Mr. Perry returned. “Here I pay this toy railroad a lot o’ my hard earned bucks and after they ’most kill me, don’t they make me walk a couple or a dozen miles on top o’ that! Some nerve!”

Hal saw Mr. Perry in a new light and laughed. “Save your complaints, fellow,” he said mirthfully. “You’ve got eighteen miles on horseback to go yet. And some horseback! Listen, my hostess, Miss Wainwright has asked you to her camp until your baggage can be straightened out. Does that sound good?”

“Even the eighteen miles on horseback sounds good when I think of sleeping in a civilized bed and eating real chow for breakfast,” Mr. Perry said in his high falsetto voice.

“You said it, Todd,” Mr. Doyle agreed. Then, to Hal he said: “Say, Bud, where’s Mac, do you know?”

Hal frantically flashed his bright eyes in answer, conscious of Mr. Meggle’s quiet, questioning gaze. But Mr. Doyle and Mr. Perry were guileless souls in matters of this kind; they had not yet heard of the Morse code in dots and dashes nor the eye code in nods and flashes.

And Mr. Perry maddeningly insisted, “Yeah, where’d Mac skip to?”

Mr. Meggle turned to Hal smilingly, “Somebuddy else that ain’t come yet, eh?”

“Looks that way, huh?” Hal returned with a forced grin. Then promptly he turned his back on the agent and fixed the two newcomers with a significant stare. “Mac got tired and went back to the bend—didn’t you fellers see him?”

Comprehension slowly lighted Mr. Perry’s sullen features. “Oh yeah—I mean maybe we didn’t see him on account o’ that relief train coming in and all that. There was a coupla doctors and nurses and a lot o’ them mechanics so I says to Danny we better hoof it for Laidlaw if we wanted to get a night’s sleep because the conductor says it ain’t likely they’ll git a clear way ’fore noon tomorrow. Anyways, I guess that’s why we didn’t see Mac—maybe he was stretched out and taking forty winks somewheres too. He’s that kind, Mac is.”

“Guess he’ll know where to find all o’ you come tomorrow,” said Mr. Meggle in a mildly equivocal tone.

“Guess he will, all right,” Hal countered and flashed the curious-minded agent a frank, triumphant grin. “Mac’s that kind of a feller.”

Hal had a moment outside with Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle, while Mr.

Meggle was hurriedly locking up the station.

“The truth is, Mac is hiding somewhere over on that trail,” he confided to the two would-be prospectors. “He’s got reasons for not wanting Mr. Meggle to see him. Now we can’t give Meggie the slip on account of wanting the horse. And when we get to his cabin he’s going to lend us his mule too. Gol darn, what’re we going to do about Mac, huh?”

“Hmph,” said Mr. Perry, “I ain’t never been through such a day in my life. Do I have to start at midnight and *think*?”

“That’s what I say, Todd,” Mr. Doyle agreed with an audible yawn.

“You two are a great help to me,” said Hal, disgusted. “He’s locking the outside door now—hurry! What would you do if you were me?”

“What you askin’ me for?” Mr. Perry returned whiningly. “Didn’t you agree with the old fogey yourself that Mac’d find his way tomorrow most likely? Besides five of us can’t ride on two horses.”

“Just what I was thinking, Todd,” said Mr. Doyle.

Hal swung a long leg over the mare’s back. “Come on with me, one of you, and I don’t wish you any worse luck than to fall silently somewhere along that trail. Silent enough so’s I wouldn’t hear you. The other of you can fall off Meggle’s horse too for all I’d care!”

Perry put his foot in the mare’s stirrup clumsily. “Guess I’ll ride with you, Keen. Danny can listen to that old fogey talk and keep his temper better’n me.”

“Whatever you say, Todd,” said Danny obediently.

“Eh?” said Mr. Meggle mounting his stallion.

“Nothing,” Hal snapped. “Mr. Doyle’s going to ride with you, if you don’t mind. Let’s get going.”

They rode silently and turned into the trail—Copperhead Trail, Mr. Meggle told them it was. “Leads right along an’ down to that lake where you’re aimin’ to go,” he said. “Right lovely lake an’ sometimes when the sun’s shinin’ down on it or the moon’s out full like it is tonight, a body’d swear it was chock full o’ dust. Old Timer swears he didn’t find his anywheres ’round there; he swears he didn’ find any at all and that them newspapers are liars. Anyways, nobuddy knows whether he found it or not.”

“Do you think he’s lying?” Mr. Perry asked, interested.

“Hard tellin’, hard tellin’,” Mr. Meggle answered, and urged his stallion in the lead. “Got to guide you folks,” he explained. “Most forgot about it. Trail gits pretty narrow ’fore we come to my place. G’long!”

Hal reined in the mare until they had dropped back considerably. Several times Mac’s name fell from his lips in a hushed whisper while he kept his eyes steadily searching every foot of the trail that they had traversed. But nothing could be heard in that dim, deep forest save the occasional rustle of leaves in the errant breeze.

“See, he ain’t here,” said Mr. Perry with evident annoyance. “I could o’ told you to save yourself the trouble.”

“Looks as if you’re right, Perry,” Hal admitted, disappointed. “Still I can’t imagine him feeling like turning back for the bend. He said he was tired the last thing and told me to be sure and hurry up. But what could I do with Meggle hanging at my heels! Well, giddap, sister!”

“Well, he ain’t losin’ no sleep over us, I’d like to bet,” said Mr. Perry. “Maybe he’s sound asleep somewheres in there.”

“We’ll pick him up in the morning all right,” said Hal confidently. “Mac’s a feller I’d always feel sure of.”

“That ain’t no sign he’s sure,” Perry mumbled. Then: “Say, can’t you step on the gas? I’m all in, that’s a fact.”

Hal laughed despite himself and gave the mare an affectionate pat on her neck. She responded with a friendly snort and kicking up her heels took them at a steady clip up, up the trail into a vivid and beautifully moonlit world. The higher they climbed, the higher did the mountains seem to rise, and always it seemed to Hal that on the next level they would be able to close their very fingers upon the stars.

Mr. Perry, however, was not imbued with any such lofty inspiration. In point of fact, he much preferred to keep his moist and trembling fingers upon real and substantial earthly matter—for instance, gold. Certainly, he did not fancy the idea of delving for the precious treasure at any such dizzying heights as they were now traversing. The thought gave him pause.

“Do you mean to tell me that this Copperhead hamlet is sitting somewheres around here?” he demanded indignantly, pulling nervously at Hal’s coat.

Hal choked back a hearty laugh. “How do I know, Perry? We haven’t even come to Meggle’s place yet and Copperhead is twelve miles further. Even if it was like this, it would be beautiful.”

“Ugh,” said Mr. Perry. “I can’t even get up a ladder so how do you expect me to stand this!”

The trail narrowed until it rounded a bend and they had to bow their heads quickly in order to avoid being struck by some overhanging branches. Hal gave them a playful swipe and the movement caused some loosened rocks to rattle back under the crag.

Mr. Perry groaned beseechingly. “I thought it was a lion or a bear or something,” he explained. “I just ain’t used to little noises. In Buffalo where I come from it’s all one big noise and a guy can stand that better than all these little squeaks and rattles.”

Hal indulged in a secret smile and took to watching Mr. Meggle and Mr. Doyle rhythmically bouncing on the stallion’s back. The agent kept up a continuous flow of talk and it echoed in the clear mountain air like some

magpie's chatter.

They descended for a distance into the cool of a canyon, but soon cantered out beside a little meadowy pocket whereon stood a small and low, rambling cabin. Just behind it stood an even smaller structure which Hal guessed to be Mr. Meggle's barn.

He had alighted and was hurrying through the mellow moonlight when the mare stopped with a snort at the stallion's side.

"Old man's gone to the barn to get the mule, Todd," said Mr. Doyle. "Then we can each ride alone."

"Meanin' I'll ride the mule, hah?" Perry flung back despotically. "You mean you'll ride it, Danny boy!"

"Whatever you say, Todd," said Mr. Doyle complacently. "I don't care one way or the other."

Mr. Meggle came hurrying back to them. "Looks like none o' you'll ride the mule," he said apologetically. "He's gone an' I like to bet that darn Japanese cook o' Wainwright's lamed his horse an' had to take it."

"That's too bad," Hal said. "But we'll have to make the best of it."

"Course ye will," said Mr. Meggle abruptly. "You kin tell Miss Wainwright for me to see it gits back to me, an' the stallion too, come mornin'. Got to git back to the station, you know. Well, good luck to you an' your pesky gold diggin'. Goo' night!"

"Kind of a nice, friendly feller at that, Todd," said Mr. Doyle after the agent had slammed his cabin door behind him.

"Don't talk to me," yelled Mr. Perry. "I'm tired out."

"Onward, sister," said Hal to the mare. "Looks as if there's going to be a hot time in the gold hills tomorrow."

"That's just what I was thinking, Mr. Keen," said Danny, and he urged the stallion into the liveliest trot he had had in years.

CHAPTER X

OLD TIMER

A half dozen times had they climbed and descended the worn, narrow trail until at last they came to a gentle slope. It was grassy and green and dotted with thick growths of cedar and spruce all the way down to the banks of a wide lake which shimmered in the moonlight like some vast pool of molten silver.

Copperhead, thought Hal, as he drank in the wild and rugged beauty of it all. And gradually as his sharp eyes sought out each new splendor of the landscape he became aware of a dim light glimmering through the trees. The next second he had spurred the mare around and out on the ledge and there in a little green valley lay the camp. The sight of it made him gasp—a sheltered oasis it looked, snuggling contentedly between the two frowning mountain walls.

Hal pointed. “That’s what I call a camp.”

Mr. Perry sniffed, “I’m glad it ain’t up so high as some of them places we just came through,” he said. “Come on, Keen, I’m most asleep sitting here.”

“So’m I,” said Mr. Doyle.

Hal was loath to leave the spot for he had made the further discovery of a tiny cabin to the west of the camp and on a direct trail to the lake. It stood partly in the mellow moonlight and partly in the shadow, presenting a sweet and homely picture.

“Must be Old Timer’s diggings,” Hal called, nodding toward the spot. “The old fellow must be deep in dreamland.”

“That’s where yore wrong, young feller!” came a high-pitched voice from the clump of spruce. “I wasn’t ever so awake in my life as I am right now, yes sir!” Hal turned the mare completely around in surprise. Mr. Doyle pulled the stallion alongside almost backing him off the ledge, and Mr. Perry gasped as a big, raw-boned looking man on the back of a mule rode out into the moonlight. His legs, long and lean, could have no use for stirrups for his feet hung idly but a few feet from the ground. Therefore, it seemed no effort for him to swing his left leg lazily over the animal’s head and suddenly stand with his feet on the trail.

“Howdy,” he said after a moment’s quiet scrutiny of the trio. “You seem to know who I am so’s it ain’t no use introducin’ myself. Reckon one o’ you is Miss Wainwright’s guest, eh?”

“That’s me,” said Hal with a grin. “My name’s Keen.”

The man contemplated him for a moment and sucked his cheeks into his

mouth so that his cheek bones looked like two vast ridges on either side of his face. He made a queer grunting noise presently, first scratching at his shaggy head and then at the back of his weatherbeaten neck where a few colorless strands of hair grew down to the very rim of his turned-in collar band.

“I hear th’ rest o’ ye come up for to find some dust, eh?” he said with a thin, unpleasant laugh. “Ye b’lieve what them lyin’ newspapers got out ’bout me, eh? Well, ye’ll be disappointed for I been here fifty years an’ I never found none yet!” he added with a hissing intonation in his voice.

“Then it’s true that you didn’t strike it rich, hah, mister?” Mr. Perry asked worriedly. “Then it’s true that the papers just lied?”

“That’s just what I was afraid of, Todd,” Mr. Doyle interposed with gloom.

Old Timer tucked the corners of his faded shirt in about his throat. The cool, mischievous breeze got in under the lower part of his ill-fitting trousers and puffed them out around his ankles with gay abandon. His aspect was nothing if not ludicrous and it would have moved Hal to smiles if it had not been for a strange, unfriendly smile on the old man’s features as he turned to Perry.

“What’d happen if you thought the papers wuz lyin’, eh?” he asked with a swiftness that was startling. “What’d happen if you thought I didn’t strike it rich, eh? Would ye go back where ye come from, eh, would you?”

“I ain’t so sure, mister,” said Perry thoughtfully. “It cost me plenty of bucks to come up here besides the worry of almost getting killed today so maybe I wouldn’t be in a rush to go back to Buffalo before I look the hamlet over. Maybe you ain’t been so lucky like the papers said, but sometimes a guy like me could strike it rich in a coupla weeks or months where you didn’t strike it in fifty years, hah?”

Old Timer’s small eyes narrowed down to mere slits. “Let me tell ye somethin’, smart Aleck,” he said in a voice so low that they could hardly hear him, “let me tell you one thing! If there’s any gold to be found ’round these here parts it’s goin’ to be found by Old Timer! I ain’t strove an’ waited fifty years to have a bunch o’ smart Alecks like you drive out here by the newspapers an’ take from me what’s mine! Understan’ that—I’m a-warnin’ ye an’ all the rest!”

With that he flung his leg back over the mule and started off down the trail. Perry, to Hal’s surprise, clapped the mare’s flanks and sent her down at the mule’s side, with Mr. Doyle, worried and anxious-looking, bringing the stallion up at the rear.

Once abreast of Old Timer, Perry leaned over. “Say listen, mister,” he said with a new note in his whining voice, “you ain’t scarin’ me if that’s what you’re after. If there’s gold in these here hills I got just as much right to hunt for it as you have and because you been doing it for fifty years ain’t my hard

luck—see! If Todd Perry finds gold he's going to take it, Old Timer be hanged! Let 'er go, Keen, I'm tired and that's a fact!"

Hal gave the mare a spur and as he did so he caught a queer, malicious glint in the old man's eyes. Half way down the slope, they turned instinctively, and to their astonishment saw the aged prospector shaking his fist at them malevolently.

Perry laughed grudgingly. "He ain't nothing but an old crab, that's what. Just a stingy, selfish old crab and he ain't nothing but a lot of hokum with that talk."

"That's what I say, Todd," said Mr. Doyle, though his nervous cough did not bespeak a very strong conviction.

"I don't know about that," said Hal musingly. "There's a great deal more than just talk with him, I'm afraid."

CHAPTER XI

MAC

They were a silent, thoughtful trio as they turned off from the trail and into camp. Hal's mind was so full of their recent talk with Old Timer that he scarcely noticed the three big barns and big rambling cabin that comprised the Wainwright camp. The bright light shining from one of the front windows, however, interrupted his train of thought.

"Looks like someone's waiting up for us," he remarked. "And it's after two o'clock," he added, consulting his wrist watch.

"Say," Mr. Perry whined, "ain't none o' youse stopped to think that we haven't ate since we left that junction at lunch time today, hah?"

"I've thought of it many times, Perry," Hal laughed, "but that's all the good it's done me. Don't worry, Miss Wainwright's a darn good hostess and she's not forgetting that our stomachs are empty, I guess."

"I even forgot we had any," said Doyle. "Well, here we are, Keen, and what I'd like to know is, what're we going to do with these animals?"

At this juncture, the wide front door of the cabin opened and Tsu, the little Japanese cook, came hurrying out, smiling. His white coat was flapping in the early morning breeze and he nodded his head delightedly to Hal.

"Mr. Hal, Missy say you go in—I take horses. Stablemen not get up yet."

"I suppose not," said Hal, dismounting. "It's very kind of you and Miss Jean to wait up all this time."

"Oh, that is not-ting," the little Jap protested. "We sleep some. When I hear a mule on the trail one, two hour ago I get up, then Miss Jean and Missy Wainwright get up too. You see! Pretty soon we eat breakfast and then sleep. I come back quick from stable."

"Well, that sounds like hospitality—breakfast and sleep," said Perry. "Who's Missy Wainwright, Keen?"

"Miss Jean's maiden aunt. Come on in, boys."

They could see the wide living room as they stood on the bear rug in the little entrance hall. A majestic elk's head with its enormous antlers stood guard over the fireplace, while a moderate fire gave forth a cheerful glow throughout the entire room. Then Hal was aware of the soft thud of footfalls coming across the thick, bright rug.

It was Miss Wainwright, prim, elderly and pleasant. Behind her, Miss Jean trod with a slim gracefulness and nodded her blond head with a welcoming smile. Presently a tall, thin shadow darted out from behind the door and they

heard a familiar laugh.

“Well, Red, welcome to Copperhead!”

“Mac—you old rascal! Where....”

“I got tired of waiting,” Mac chuckled, “so I walked as far as Meggie’s and borrowed his mule and here I am!”

Hal roared. “I ought to have known you’re the kind of a bird that would find a way. Gosh, I was worried.”

Jean laughed. “You would, Hal,” she said, taking his arm and walking into the living room with him, “but don’t you think it was a delightful trick for him to play on you? He has an amazing, mysterious way of doing things of that sort—I can guess that already.” She pushed Hal into an easy chair, playfully.

“He has an amazing way of being a plain nut if you ask me,” said Hal with a wink at Mac. “Don’t let him kid you about being mysterious, though.”

“You’d have thought I was some mysterious being if you ever saw the scared look on Sue’s face when he looked out the window and saw me bumping along on Meggie’s mule,” Mac chuckled. “Instead of the four horsemen there was just me.”

“Tsu, you mean?”

“Righto, Red, but I can say Sue easier.” Jean’s voice rippled with delight. “All right, Mr. Mac—is it plain Mac or what?”

“Plain Mac.”

Hal glanced across the room and for the first time that day felt an uneasiness about this ruddy-faced stranger. It struck him forcibly then that Mac’s secret must be a deep and serious one when he evaded telling his own name.

Presently Tsu stood in the doorway and announced breakfast. He bowed each one into the dining room, smiling and gracious, and as Mr. Perry caught sight of the steaming pancakes upon the table he groaned with pleasure.

“That’s the first thing I’ve seen to make me happy since yesterday, lady,” he remarked to the prim Miss Wainwright. “That an’ some sleep, an’ me an’ Danny’ll feel fit to start snoopin’ for gold.”

“Not if Old Timer sees you first,” Hal reminded him.

That brought them to a discussion of the old prospector and Hal told of their encounter with him just before they struck the down trail. Mac was sitting just opposite at the table and listened intently.

“So he thinks he owns the mountains too?” he said when Hal had finished. “Well, we’ll show him that we have some rights when it comes to that. Starting to threaten, huh? We’ll see about that!”

“You an’ me both,” snarled Mr. Perry between mouthfuls of pancake. “Gold is something I ain’t scared to go after.”

“That’t what I say, Todd,” said Mr. Doyle sipping at his steaming coffee.

“Still one must be careful,” Miss Wainwright remarked decisively. “Old Timer’s a testy old man and one whom, I imagine, it would not be well to incur the enmity of. Besides I cannot stand dissension—it brings on nervous spells to which I’m subject and for that very reason Jean bought this place. It has always been so peaceful and quiet....”

“That’s why I’d enjoy a little argument and a little scare now and then,” laughed Jean. “Things can get too quiet, you know! I’d have loved to have been in the cut with you boys when that apparition, or whatever it was, followed you.”

Mac nodded to Hal. “I was telling Miss Wainwright and Miss Jean about our near murderer.”

“Gracious, I don’t know what to make of things!” exclaimed Miss Wainwright. “And you say you’re positive the train was derailed on purpose? Why, we’re positively not safe here, Jean!”

Jean immediately went into gales of laughter. “With all these men here? Aunt, don’t get yourself worked up over nothing. We’re a good many miles from the bend where all this happened and besides we can face things if we have to.”

Hal looked at the girl admiringly. That’s what he liked about her—her nerve. Mac evidently felt so too for his glances at Jean bespoke a pleasant frame of mind. Hal smiled inwardly and glancing toward the window saw one of the stablemen blanketing the stallion and the mule. The moon and stars had long since disappeared and off to the east the sky looked not so dark. Dawn was not an hour away.

Miss Wainwright rose from the table assigning Hal and Mac to one room, Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle to the adjoining one, while she and Jean had the next. Tsu’s room adjoined the kitchen and, all the rooms being on one floor, the company dispersed very quickly, leaving the cabin steeped in silence within an amazingly short time.

Peaceful sounds of slumber emanated from the room which Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle were occupying. Hal, on the contrary, hadn’t the least desire to sleep, but sat by the window idly staring at the light streaming from the apartment over the barn which the stablemen occupied. Their own room was in darkness and Mac lay stretched out on the bed talking softly.

“You see, Red, I’d just like to keep clear of Meggie as long as I can,” he was saying. “I know I can’t keep it up because he’s bound to come down here sometime and most likely recognize me. But I don’t want to think about it or talk about it until I have to, that’s all. I’d just like to make good before I tell people who I am ’round here.”

“Mm,” said Hal thoughtfully, “how about Old Timer?”

“He’d never recognize me in a hundred years, I don’t think. He didn’t see

me but a couple of times when I was a kid—I was always kind of scared of him and ducked him like kids will. You see he was a queer kind of bird, always kept to himself and never visited a soul within a hundred miles. Just passes the time of day and goes on, but won't go inside any cabin but his own for love nor money. He was always snappy with Meggie and I gather there isn't much love lost between them. It was that way ten years ago, so it's probably worse now."

Just at that moment Hal's bright glance strayed up the trail and he saw a dark figure on a mule sitting quite still and surveying the Wainwright camp from that eminence. There was something arrogant about the man's posture, something that bespoke a terrific will behind that dark and frowning countenance—a veritable challenge to every seeker of gold in those hills.

"That's just where he's foolish, taking that attitude," said Hal, half-aloud and half to himself. "I feel sorry for him, but yet the world doesn't feel sorry for selfish people and I won't either then! He's selfish or he wouldn't have spent his whole life just waiting for gold!"

"Say, what the deuced are you talking about, Red?"

"Old Timer," Hal answered softly. "He's sitting on his mule way up there on the trail and he's staring down here as if to say, 'Just try and find the lode I'm not able to find—just try and I'll kill you!' Maybe I'm wrong, but that's the impression he gives me."

"Pure imagination, Red. If he's lived in Canada fifty years he'd know better than to try it, no matter what he'd like to do. He's old and a lot of hot air!"

"Maybe, but just the same it has me interested. So interested, in fact, that I'll take his dare and throw my lot in with you fellers. I'm going to help you search for gold, Mac. On the level!"

Mac smiled. "Now you're talking, Red. Atta boy, as they say in the States. Come on to bed now."

Five minutes later they were both sound asleep and unaware of the storm clouds gathering with the dawn.

CHAPTER XII IN THE STORM

It rained throughout the day with intermittent displays of lightning and loud rumblings of thunder. For a space, toward the close of the afternoon, the rain stopped but it was then too late and too wet to do much outside. Consequently, there was a great deal of talking and a great deal of card playing and at supper time a fresh downpour set in.

The stablemen had taken the buckboard (there were no cars at the Wainwright camp) to Laidlaw that morning when they returned Mr. Meggle's mule and stallion. And when they drove into camp toward middle afternoon the creaking wagon brought a great deal of baggage, the greater portion of it to be used in the pursuit of gold. They had little gossip from the loquacious station agent for no clue had been found to the tragic wreck and Train Number Four was scheduled again to chug its way up to Laidlaw on its bi-weekly trip the coming Saturday.

Miss Wainwright excused herself shortly after supper and went off to bed saying that the rain depressed her. Hal and Mac and Jean, however, were not at all affected by the sombre weather and talked and laughed over a half dozen games of rummy, while Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle sat in deep contemplation of the checkerboard at the far corner of the room.

Hal cast amused glances over at the pair, especially at Mr. Perry who was resting one elbow on the window sill at his side and studying the board with a dark frown. It was obvious that he was losing. From Tsu's room issued an occasional cackle of laughter for he and the stablemen were having a smoke and a friendly chat together—their duties for the day over.

There was that in the atmosphere of the cabin conducive to peace and quiet. Hal found it hard to believe that death had almost claimed them the previous day. He found it hard to believe that Old Timer's bitter warning was an ill prognostication; indeed, it seemed that the day just past refuted any such prediction. And the growing intensity of the storm outside added the more to their sense of security.

Hal sighed and puffed comfortably on his pipe and, while waiting for Mac to play his turn, watched the rain lashing against the window. Mr. Perry's head, nodding and shaking in frantic perusal of his game, made queer little shadows upon the board. Hal was so intent in watching it that he did not at once become aware of a restless shadow flitting back and forth outside of the wide, steamed window. And when he at last did see it the shadow also saw

him.

Hal jumped up with a warning yell, but not soon enough to save Mr. Perry from being cut on the cheek with a piece of flying glass. Indeed, his frightened cry drowned out the crash of the breaking windowpane, and it brought them all to their feet just in time to see a small rock hurtle into the room and land with a soft thud on the rug. Tsu and the stablemen came running into the room but were soon outside searching for the culprit.

Hal saw at once that it had not been used as a weapon but as a weight for a note that was fastened to it with a piece of string. He made a leap for it and picked it up while poor Mr. Perry looked on moaning.

“Say, listen,” he was whining, “what kind of a place is this anyways? There I was sittin’ nice an’ quiet and interested and *kerplunk*, I almost get my brains dashed out! Who’d o’ thought....”

“Come, Mr. Perry,” Jean interrupted sympathetically, “I’ll put some iodine on it immediately.”

She went out of the room and was back ministering to the victim before Hal had fully digested the contents of the oddly dispatched note. Mac was studying it too.

“What on earth is it, Hal?” she asked impatiently. “Who on earth....”

“Who on earth, is right, Jean,” Hal promptly replied. “Listen to this: ‘I see yor ready for gold if you can find it so I want to tell you you won’t live to find it long as I’m hear. So if you want to see yor homes again all of you you better clear out of these hear parts becawse if there’s gold round here I’m going to have it so take my advise.’”

Hal looked up. “Anonymous, of course—it would be. But what do you think of that?”

“It’s plain nerve!” Mr. Perry declared. “It even smells like murder if you ask me and what’s more the police or whatever they have around here ought to get that note!”

“The Royal Northwest Mounted Police attend to things like that in this territory, Mr. Perry,” said Jean. “And it wouldn’t be a bad idea at that to let them....”

“And perhaps have it turn out to be a joke,” Mac suggested smilingly. “Oh, I know that smashing windows on private property isn’t within the law, but the ‘Mounted’ are too busy to investigate things of such a petty nature as that. I wouldn’t be afraid of that note if I were you chaps. This is Canada and the citizen, whoever he may be, that wrote that bit of hot air knows what would happen to him if he ever tried to carry out such a threat. It’s a penalty from which there’s no appeal, believe me! A Canadian knows that the ‘Mounted’ get their man, dead or alive, so let’s get to bed and simply give that egg the laugh in the morning by getting out good and early and starting operations. I

guess we'll never hear from him again. He's just a cowardly, selfish person and he thinks he can scare us. Are we going to let him see he can?"

"Not me—not Todd Perry!" that person declared with a contemptuous sneer meant for his unseen foe.

"Same here, Todd," Mr. Doyle agreed, coughing nervously.

"How thrilling—how perfectly thrilling, Mac!" Jean exclaimed admiringly. "Don't you think it is, Hal? Don't you say so, Hal?"

"Sure," Hal grinned, but his voice was strangely low when he said, "At present, I say, let's go to bed. Here's Tsu and I can tell by his face that they haven't seen hide nor hair of our playful friend."

"You say that as if you fully expected beforehand that they wouldn't find him," said Jean.

"Right the first time, Jean," Hal grinned. "You don't suppose that feller was going to stick around here and let himself be caught, do you? He had his getaway well planned, you can bet. That's the reason I wouldn't go out and look."

Tsu smiled up at Hal admiringly. "Mister Hal is plenty right. Window-breaker man no where and we look up trail and down trail and behind trees. Now I see how I fix window."

"Do, Tsu," Jean said. "Aunt seems not to have heard the commotion and if the window's fixed before she sees it in the morning, I'll be awfully thankful. She'll be all for going home if she hears about this. So, mum's the word, boys!"

They agreed on this with silent nods and betook themselves to bed. Mr. Doyle was plainly distressed over the incident but made a brave and flourishing exit and could be heard a few moments later assuring his comrade that a further visit from the window-smasher was not to be feared. Hal, in the process of undressing, turned to Mac and smiled.

"You seemed pretty sure of what you were saying, Mac, huh?"

"You mean about that note, Red?"

"Mm—I mean the way you discouraged our handing it over to the 'Mounted'. Did you really mean that you think they're likely to consider it a petty affair—do you think they're likely to take a death threat lightly?"

Mac kicked off his shoes and looked straight at Hal. "Listen, Red, I meant just what I said out there about that egg who wrote the note and I have the courage of my convictions. No sane Canadian would carry out such a threat—we are great respecters of limb and life in this country."

"We?"

"Well, if you must know it, Red, I am a Canadian. I've tried forgetting about it since I lived in the States, because I knew I had to. But after something happened and I felt I had a right to come back and see if I could make good—

well, here I am and I feel as if I can call myself a Canadian again.”

“Mac, you’re as clear as mud,” Hal grinned good-naturedly. “Still I have a lot of faith in you—I don’t know why. I think you’ll mop up your mystery when the time is ripe and I know you’ll tell me the first one—am I right?”

“Righto, Red. You have my word on that. But please accept my opinion of that note and get to bed. We want to start first thing in the morning if it’s clear. And forget about Mr. Invisible—he smashed that window for a bluff just the same as his note’s a bluff. He wanted us to think he’s a red-blooded roughneck.”

“You think so?” Hal said, going over to the edge of the bed and sitting down thoughtfully. “What about that bird that I saw moving behind the trees when I was talking to the conductor down at the bend yesterday, Mac? What about the bird (and I think it’s the same person) who followed us in the dark and fired two shots at us and then ran away giving us that creepy laugh? What about a funny groan I heard when I was in Meggie’s waiting room last....”

“Calm yourself, Red,” Mac chuckled. “I’ll admit all of those things have me puzzled except the groan. I happened to do that myself. I got tired of waiting and I happened to think I could walk to Meggie’s shack and swipe his mule and beat you to it because I knew you’d have to wait for Perry and Doyle to come before you’d get away. So I groaned to try and draw your attention—a sort of signal to tell you I was going on. But it didn’t work and the telephone rang and you walked inside the ticket office, so I came on.”

“All right,” Hal admitted cheerfully, “that’s settled about the groan. But you know that note I told you Meggie got—the one he found on his desk predicting the wreck?”

“Yes, I remember, Red. I agree with you that that’s a deucedly funny thing. I haven’t the least idea....”

“Well, I have to this extent, Mac,” Hal interrupted. “I happen to be observant enough to see that the note I read in Meggie’s station and the note that came through the window tonight were written by one and the same man!”

“By Jove, Red! I’d never thought of that.”

“Well, I did, and furthermore, Mac, that same man’s had something to do with the wreck.”

“Oh, I say, Red! Now that’s stretching your imagination quite a bit, isn’t it?” Mac asked whimsically.

“Maybe,” Hal answered tumbling into bed, “but that’s my story and I’m going to stick to it.”

And he did.

CHAPTER XIII

PEACE, THEN:

Jean extracted a promise from them next morning before they started out, not to think of putting up their own camp unless the distance was too great for them to travel in a day.

“And I don’t think that’s going to happen for a little while,” she said confidently. “You know gold isn’t so easy to hunt for when you’re looking for it. I think it’s safe to say that Old Timer found his a long while back so it wouldn’t hurt you boys to find out where he’s been working it and then investigate in that vicinity. Jake, one of the stablemen who comes from over Lake Echo way, said it’s been common talk that the old man’s been digging it up for years and hoarding it somewhere in his cabin.”

“That’s good news, lady,” said Perry with a thoughtful frown. “And it wouldn’t be a bad idea to call on the old guy and kind of get him riled up so’s he’d spill the beans. That’s been done with these old guys—they get so mad they’ll tell all they know.”

“That’s a splendid thought, Perry, old top!” said Mac enthusiastically. “I’m with you on that.” Then turning to Jean, he said, “But it isn’t right—it’s too much to ask of your hospitality for the three of us to stay. Red’s your guest and....”

“And never mind,” Jean interposed blithely. “Please don’t worry your head over my hospitality. You see, Mac, Hal was a sort of fairy prince to me last year and brought me a good-sized fortune from a source my whole family had long despaired of ever hearing from. He came across it accidentally, but none the less heroically, and now I feel as if I’d like to do some good with it.”

“Aspiring to be a fairy godmother, huh?” Hal teased.

“In a sense,” Jean laughed. “But you know yourself, Hal, how aunt is. She doesn’t approve of my doing this and that and the other thing—she’s too conservative, but yet she’s so kind I wouldn’t grieve her for the world. She likes all of you boys and agreed with me that it would be nice to keep you on as long as you’re willing to stay—sort of a temporary family. She says it gives her a sense of security to have so many young men around, so please stay!”

“Lady, you don’t have to beg me, because I ain’t had an invitation like that for years,” said Mr. Perry frankly. “Me an’ Danny gave up our jobs on the bus line to come up here an’ we ain’t got much more than enough to go back an’ live on in case we’re not lucky.”

“Todd’s right, ma’am,” said Danny with a dignity that was almost comical.

“We ain’t exactly orphans of the storm, but free board’ll be a big thing to us for a couple of weeks or so.”

They had a great deal of merriment over that and after they had assured the solicitous Tsu that he had packed a very bountiful luncheon for them, they started off for the trail. Hal had taken the gray mare again; Mac selected a sleek brown colt and though they had the pick from Jean Wainwright’s well-filled stables, Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle preferred the mules, saying that they felt more at home with them.

“So Miss Wainwright said it gave her a sense of security to have so many young men around,” Hal murmured when he and Mac had cantered down the trail, leaving the two mule riders out of hearing distance. “She ought to have seen what two brave boys they were yesterday, huh Mac?”

“I should say, but then do you know, Red, Perry’s an amazing chap. He was craven yesterday, I’ll admit, but from what you told me of your conversation with Old Timer, he stood up to him right enough. Did you notice he wasn’t so bad considering that scratch he got last night?”

“I did notice,” Hal admitted. “He seems to think of nothing but getting that gold. Of course, Mac, it’s ten chances to a doughnut that none of you will get it. It takes more time than any of you fellows are allowing for. You know as well as I do, that even if there’s any of it around, it could easily take years or maybe never. That’s why I’m taking it as a lark; sort of a gay defiance of that crabby Old Timer.”

Mac clenched the edge of his saddle and looked off to the distance. “I’m not taking it as a lark, Red. Believe me! Neither do I give a hang about defying Old Timer—I’d sooner give him a punch, whether he’s an old man or not. I hear he’s just as husky and just as quick with his hands now as he was fifty years ago. And he used to do it plenty then. Jake, the stableman, told me people hate him around here as much as they ever did. But that’s neither here nor there—I mean to get some of that gold if it’s here and the sooner the better. And I happen to know just about where the old chap used to work. Like as not he’s never staked a claim there for fear of somebody getting wind of it. That’s how queer he is and furthermore it’s his funeral if he hasn’t. We’ll simply pitch in and see where the fairy cache is, eh, Red?”

“Can we do that?” Hal asked skeptically.

“*Can we*—we will! Slow down, Red, the old boy’s house is the other side of that clump of trees. Maybe we’ll have the chance to tell him we’re starting operations this morning.”

“Rather you than me, Mac,” Hal grinned. “My method would be silence. We’re going anyhow and I can’t see what good it’ll do to antagonize him further.”

Mac smiled. “You’re a good kid, Red,” he said sincerely. “I’ll do as you

say. We'll just smile archly as we go by."

They waited for Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle to catch up to them and cantered by the dilapidated shack of Old Timer in silence. There was not a sign of the prospector about, however, nor could they catch a glimpse of him hovering about the two dingy windows.

"Maybe he's going to pursue a policy of hands off, huh!" Hal remarked as they left the cabin in the distance.

"Maybe," Mac said, "but I doubt it. We'll have a little trouble, I'm afraid—a little."

"Well, if he troubles me he'll get all that's coming to him and I ain't sayin' how!" shouted Mr. Perry, darkly.

Mac and Hal roared.

"Go on, Perry," Hal teased, "if the old man said '*Puff!*' you'd blow right over."

"Yere? Well, don't fool yourself, Keen. I ain't so easy to blow over and besides I ain't stuck on stayin' in this lonely place any longer than I kin help it. I ain't goin' to let him take up my time with argyments."

As Mac had predicted there was not the slightest indication that Old Timer had ever staked his claim and the young Canadian bade them halt at a spot called Copperhead Notch on the banks of the placid lake. Mountain walls rose above them on every side and a thick forest, almost entirely comprised of cedar, stretched away to the left pushing its way northward. Hal inhaled the pleasant tang of the clear air and fell to unpacking their things.

"I'm giving the old bird about a half a mile margin," Mac told him a little while afterward. "Jake told me that this notch looks pretty good to him and he ought to know."

"You seem to know a great deal about it yourself, Mac. I notice that you fall to like an old hand."

Mac smiled. "I ought to know, Red. I used to hide behind trees and rocks and anything that offered a suitable hiding place and I was observant even then. I don't forget a move that the old bird used to make."

Hal scrutinized the place thoughtfully. "Then this isn't the spot that Old Timer worked?"

"Ten years ago he did, not now. Jake says he's working these days about a half mile from here so you see I'm trying to meet him half way. Before we start anything I mean to see him and ask him what's what so we'll know where we're at. Once we know definitely, Perry can go down and fix the legal end of it up for us. Jake says he'll take him down to Echo any time we're ready."

"That sounds better, Mac. A fellow can always put up a better fight when he's got the law behind him. Not that I'm afraid of Old Timer, but I feel lots easier when I know we're within our own rights." Then: "How do you suppose

it ever got in the papers that the old bird had struck it so rich, huh?"

Mac shrugged his broad shoulders. "They say some busybody reporter up here on a vacation saw Old Timer making his mysterious excursions. He used his imagination then, I guess, but perhaps he came nearer to the truth than he realized for Mr. Somers, the general storekeeper down at Echo, said that the old bird's been paying for his supplies in gold dust for years. He always thought it was dust that he had brought from Alaska but I don't swallow that, not after all this time."

"Hardly. Gosh, but it's interesting though, Mac. There's something about the whole business that makes my blood tingle. Adventure on a large scale, huh?"

"And perhaps gold enough to make the scale tip, eh Red?"

They laughed heartily and the hours passed pleasantly and speedily. Middle afternoon found their "gold camp" quite in readiness for work yet there was nothing more they could do until an interview with the old prospector had been accomplished. They started back for camp lighthearted and gay, feeling that the future was an open book to them. Hal shared this feeling except, that he hadn't any illusions concerning the gold and looked upon his companions with a sort of wonder. Perry and Doyle were plodding, unimaginative fellows and could not be expected to see what was on the other side of the rainbow, he reasoned. But with Mac, his sensitiveness and refinement put him in an entirely different light. His brightly painted future was nothing more nor less than a vivid, impractical day dream.

Hal was glad that he looked upon the expedition as a pleasant summer lark for there would be no regrets or disappointments when the thing fizzled out. He felt something akin to pity as he watched Mac cantering briskly ahead. The Canadian seemed to depend so much on it.

Hal halted the mare a moment and listened with humorous appreciation to an argument that was taking place between Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle. The mules were lagging so far in the rear, however, that it was almost impossible for him to hear the conversation in full.

He attempted to call ahead to Mac and draw his attention to it, but noticed that the sleek brown colt was shying strangely at some trees they were passing. Suddenly the animal reared up on its hind legs whinnying with evident fright and causing the surprised rider to topple headlong to the ground.

The next second the crack of a rifle was heard.



SUDDENLY THE ANIMAL REARED AND THE SURPRISED RIDER
TOPPLED HEADLONG TO THE GROUND.

CHAPTER XIV

ATTACK

Hal gave the mare a frantic spur, called loudly to the mule riders and was at Mac's side in an instant, fairly pushing him up on his own saddle. Another rifle crack was heard before he had time to remount but he dodged adroitly and saw the bullet bury itself in the trunk of a big spruce.

The mare kept her head like the little thoroughbred she was and bore her two riders away like a puff of wind. Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle lent raucous voices to the pandemonium but Hal had not time to turn and find out whether the maledictions were uttered upon the mules or their unseen foe. Sufficient it was for him to hear from Mac that the mules were past the danger zone and the bullets had obviously found no further mark on human targets.

"What do you mean?" Hal asked worriedly. "Do you mean..."

"Don't worry, Red. It just skimmed my arm and flew off somewhere in the trail. Just a flesh wound."

Hal spurred the mare harder than ever. "Just the same you need attention quick!" Then: "Mac, we shouldn't go out again without some means of protection. Either that or we ought to get the 'Mounted' on the phone the very minute we get back to the cabin."

"Please don't mention the 'Mounted' just yet, Red—please!" Mac pleaded weakly. "We'll find some other way to make that devil stop his ambush tactics ... here, we're coming to his shack now. He won't be there, of course."

"Then you do admit you think it's he, Mac!"

"Of course. Who else? We've only got to catch him at it, that's all. I've got a rifle in my trunk, Red, and we're going to call on him, perhaps tonight. I'm certain he'll pull in his horns all right."

Hal glanced worriedly toward Old Timer's shack as they passed and noted that the place looked as grim as it had that morning. It had a strange forlorn aspect not caused by deterioration, he thought, but by some slow insidious force that came from within. Certainly it had that resigned, weary look of the old—of one whose days are numbered.

The mare had them back at the camp in no time. Hal immediately put Mac into Jean's efficient care and hurried back to the barn where Jake was awaiting him expectantly.

"Thought I heard some ruckus," he remarked upon hearing Hal's story. "That sure is dirty business, eh? Who d'ye think would be likely to do such a thing?"

“Mac thinks it’s Old Timer and I’m beginning to think so myself. He warned us to keep out of Copperhead and the gold situation,” Hal said, “and it looks as if he means to carry out his threats. There wasn’t a sign of him at his shack when we passed so it does look damaging.”

“Hmph,” Jake commented thoughtfully, “that’s funny, ’cause I met him early mornin’ an’ he said he was on his way to Echo. That’s all he said—that’s all he ever says. In fac’ it was remarkable for him to say that much.”

“Couldn’t he have gone to Echo and come back by this time?” Hal asked.

“Could,” answered Jake, “and then again, he couldn’t. I mean I didn’ see him come by yet, anyway.”

“There’s more than one trail he could take without passing here, isn’t there?”

“Just one that’s fit to take even a mule through,” Jake reflected. “Most always though, when we see Old Timer go up this way to Echo in the mornin’, we see him come by again come evenin’.”

“He could change his mind.”

“Reckon he could.”

Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle came yelling into the barn and Jake was immediately pressed into service with the breathless and panting mules. Hal had to put up his hands for silence.

“One at a time, you fellows!” he pleaded. “What’s the matter now?”

“Matter?” whined Mr. Perry. “I say things are comin’ to a pretty pass and on top of it if Danny ain’t argyin’ with me about this cold-blooded murderer. I says anybody who can make a cackle like that after he near kills Mac ain’t right in the head, but Danny won’t have it that way and says the guy’s nothin’ but hot air an’ just tryin’ to scare us more with that cackle.”

“What cackle are you talking about? What are you trying to say, Perry?”

“You mean to tell me you didn’t hear that cackle?” Perry asked as if that were sufficient grounds to start another discussion with Doyle. “Danny—do you hear, they didn’t even hear it!”

“All we heard was the bullets,” Hal explained, “and when Mac saw that you were out of danger I spurred the mare because Mac’s arm was bleeding so.”

“So he got Mac, did he?” Perry asked between clenched teeth. “Well, the big....”

“It just skimmed the flesh, that’s all. But I’m glad it wasn’t worse,” Hal said.

“Now cut out your arguments and tell me about the cackle.”

“It was enough to make your hair stand right up on top of your head, Keen. That’s a fac’! Danny an’ me was just complimentin’ ourselves that we’d ducked them bullets when way behind us in the woods we heard that murderer

let out the creepiest laugh I ever heard in my life. Danny kin tell you—hah Danny? It was thin an' funny when it began but before he finished it sounded like a soprany-singer givin' us the haw-haw. Honest to goodness, it was the creepiest screech I ever heard!"

"Maybe a hyena," Jake grinned. "They say that's the way they do when they get good and mad."

"Mm," said Hal, "maybe. But come to think of it, Mac and I heard that same kind of a hyena the other night in the railroad cut."

CHAPTER XV A DISCOVERY

Hal and Jean took a stroll outdoors after supper. Mac was resting and reading and Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle had retired to the checkerboard in order to have something to argue about. The young men had all agreed upon a night's armistice, and acting upon Miss Wainwright's pleas for peace at some honorable price, Jake had been summarily dispatched to Old Timer's shack to see if amicable relations could not be brought about.

They strolled back of the barn through the sweet-smelling grass and in the direction of a little used trail that seemed to cut right into the face of the mountain. A few birds flew hither and thither for the sun still cast a faint scarlet glow in the western sky.

"Like it here, Hal?" Jean asked.

"Great," Hal said, unconsciously expanding his fine broad chest. "Air makes me feel like shouting every two minutes."

"Go ahead and shout," she laughed. "There's nobody here to stop you."

"Except...."

"Oh come now, Hal. You must admit that Aunt could not have selected a better mediator than Jake. He's almost as old as Old Timer and can talk without arguing. You know perfectly well that none of you boys, not even yourself, could talk with that horrid old man without losing your temper."

"I know, Jean," Hal said patiently. "Your aunt means well, but she doesn't seem to understand what grave possibilities that thing might have had this afternoon. It's all very well for her to say that she doesn't think he meant murder. It's all very well for her to say that he was probably trying to give us a good scare. If those bullets had really hit us and had found a fatal mark in Mac, then how would she explain it?"

"She thought of that, Hal. Really she did. That's why she told Jake to tell him what would happen if he ever did it again. Aunt takes into consideration that he's a fractious old man and probably hasn't a whole lot longer to live. She doesn't like to see him die in prison after all the years he's spent in this heavenly free outdoors. She wants him to be warned."

"Well, there's something in that," Hal relented. "If he'll only listen to Jake and agree to tell where or where not his own claim is, I'm sure the fellows will be satisfied. I'm only interested in this thing on account of Mac. I'd like gold if I could find it, I'll admit, but I don't give a gosh hang otherwise. Not to get all stewed up about it, anyway."

“You like Mac a lot, don’t you, Hal?” she inquired sweetly as they stopped before a clump of trees.

“Yes, I do, Jean. I don’t know why, either. He’s a fellow I’d do a lot for. But he’s a nut and a dreamer and as impractical as the deuce. But you needn’t talk about me liking him. What about yourself?”

Jean laughed and shook her blond, bobbed hair. “Why Hal! I think you’re jealous. But then, you can’t be—you only like me because I’m fond of horses.”

“I can like you and also like you for liking horses, can’t I?” Hal returned briskly.

“Mm. I like to see you so spirited, Hal. And as for Mac, I like him as I like horses too. He’s a thoroughbred, I’m certain, but he lacks your action and daring, Hal. I don’t think he’d be quick enough to push you up on a saddle when a rifle pointed at his back, and I don’t think I could look up to him as I do to you.”

Hal chuckled. “He’s within an inch of being six feet tall, young lady.”

“And you’re within a half inch of being six feet and two inches,” she countered smilingly. “Now are you jealous?”

Hal laughed and took her arm companionably. “We’ll renew that discussion when I get out of college, Jean. Now let’s see what’s behind this clump of trees.”

Jean held him back. “Not so fast, Hal. There’s a little grassy gully around behind these trees. That is, it’s grassy at the bottom but rather rocky on the way down. Here, let me show you.”

They skirted the trees and were presently standing looking down into the carpeted pit. It was a picturesque little spot, Hal thought, and noticed approvingly the lovely shade it enjoyed from the trees above. About twenty feet in depth and thirty feet in circumference, its rocky sides sloped gradually so that anyone could climb in and out of it with ease. The chinks and crevices from top to bottom were filled with sweet-smelling wild flowers.

Hal moved back a step, admiringly. “Ever been down there, Jean?” he asked.

“Nope,” she answered vehemently. “I’m terribly afraid of snakes and Jake says that there’s a nest of them there occasionally.”

“Fiddlesticks, I’m going to try it. Kind of inviting looking, huh?”

“Not to me, Hal. The thought of snakes is anything but inviting and if you go, it’s your own problem.”

He laughed at her anxiety. “I’ll take a stick,” he said picking up a young spruce bough menacingly, “and the first one that pops out, I’ll whack it and scoot.”

“Providing you see it first. All right, go on. But please be careful.”

“You can depend upon it,” he said, getting a foothold. “Here goes, Jean.”

She sat down in the grass and watched his progress, admonishing him every few feet to be careful. Finally he touched bottom, as he termed it, and after a thorough search found that there wasn't even the sign of a toad. There were some other things lying around, he informed her. A few odds and ends which he was going to take the time to look over.

"Keep one eye out, though, Hal!" Jean warned him anxiously. "There's lots of little nooks and crannies along the sides that the grass grows over and hides. That's where they usually make a nest. Now be careful because the light isn't so good!"

"I will," Hal promised playfully, "I just found an old pipe. It's a little too strong for me though, Jean. Here's the blade of an old bowie-knife and the broken head of some kid's doll—I'm scraping the mud from the poor thing's eyes. And, boy, here's something for Tsu—a rusty frying pan that belonged to some ancient prospector, I bet."

"Tsu would tell you to keep it with his compliments," she laughed. "Tsu is an artist, you must remember, not just a cook. I'd give anything to run a kitchen the way he does." And then with the domestic instinct prompting she said, "I must have Jake go down there some day and clean the place out if it's as full of junk as that." Hal was hardly aware that Jean had spoken for he had found something interesting in the form of a mud-smeared piece of white paper. It was torn and crumpled when he picked it up, rolled almost into an insignificant ball. Perhaps that is just what made it so significant for it had all the appearances of having been hurriedly discarded. Also its condition did not indicate any prolonged exposure to the weather. A thoughtful frown clouded his face as he smoothed it out and at sight of the familiar writing and wording therein, the frown deepened into a scowl. He read it half aloud: "I see yor ready for gold if you can find it so I want to tell you you won't live to find it long as I'm hear becawse..." That was all—the rest of the hastily written missive had been torn off, probably to be used in the rewriting of the discarded note.

He scrambled up out of the gully and showed it to Jean. "You see what it signifies, don't you?" he asked her.

"Of course," she answered excitedly, "it's the same paper on which the note was written that he threw in through the window last night."

"Of course it is. But that's not what I meant, Jean. Don't you see what my finding it down there signifies?"

"Why er—yes, yes, of course. He threw it down there, discarded it to rewrite the one..."

"Of course he did," Hal interrupted vehemently. "He discarded it down there because he happened to be hiding there himself—don't you see, Jean? He hid there before the note was written and he hid there until after Tsu and the

stablemen were sick and tired of searching for him last night!”

“Why, Hal! Why, certainly, that’s the mystery of how he got away so quickly afterward—that’s the mystery solved! Hal, you’re a peach!”

“And the gully’s a peach of a hiding place for our playful friend,” said Hal. “Now we know something he doesn’t know, so if he tries it again, we can beat him at his own game.”

A few moments later, hearing Jake returning to the barn, they retraced their steps, eager to hear the news.

CHAPTER XVI

AN APPOINTMENT

“He just said he didn’t do it, that’s all,” Jake stated simply. “I asked him right out and he said he wasn’t nowheres near the trail at that time.”

“Now ain’t that a liar for you!” Mr. Perry exclaimed indignantly.

“I couldn’t do better’n that myself, Todd,” said Mr. Doyle facetiously.

“Shut up!” exclaimed the irate Mr. Perry. “Since when is anybody askin’ you to put in your two cents!”

Poor Danny bit his lip and slid mentally into oblivion once more. Hal took an easy chair and bade Jake give them a specific account of the conversation between himself and Old Timer.

“O’ course, he was grouchy like he always is,” Jake explained. “He come to the door an’ grunted like, but didn’t ask me inside. He never did. Anyways, I told him what happened this afternoon and how Mr. Mac could have been killed.”

“Say, I was there too, don’t forget that!” snapped Mr. Perry indignantly. “I might o’ got it as bad as Mac.”

“Only you didn’t,” said Mac. “Calm down, Perry—we all know you were in it as much as we were—how could we forget?” Jake smiled good-naturedly. “Well, he did act kind of surprised like when I told him that you folks thought it was him firing that rifle. And he acted more surprised when I told him about that note coming in through the window with that rock, but he didn’t say anything until I most got through the whole business. He didn’t say anything until I told him how Miss Wainwright and Miss Jean was anxious to have things peaceable and that the young men were willin’ too. Then he said he was right anxious to have peace and not be bothered about folks disturbin’ him on his property when he was so old. He said there wa’n’t gold an’ if there was it was comin’ to him after all these years.”

“There you are, Red!” exclaimed Mac. “The old conniver! Just beating around the bush, that’s what he’s doing.”

“Not so fast, Mac,” Hal grinned. “Listen, Jake, how did he seem when you told him we want to find out about his claim?”

“He just grunted about that too,” Jake answered, “and he said it suited him because he’ll be home all day tomorrow and tomorrow night for that matter, he’s got his corn to hoe. But you can make up your mind, folks, he wouldn’t say that much if he didn’t want to hear what you wanted to say.”

“But on the other hand, he positively denied shooting at the boys or

throwing that note through the window last night?” Jean insisted.

“Yes, Miss, that he did,” Jake replied. “I told him what Mr. Hal said about the way he and Mr. Mac was followed comin’ up through the cut from the bend last night, and how they were fired on too.”

“And what did he say, Jake?” Miss Wainwright asked anxiously.

“He said, ‘I didn’t do it—I ain’t touched my rifle since las’ huntin’!’” Jake told them. “He seemed right sincere when he said it, ma’am. He said he come home ’bout six.”

“All right,” said Miss Wainwright nervously, “the man can’t be telling the truth, but naturally he wouldn’t go so far as to admit it. Perhaps though, now that he knows we’re aware of his criminal actions, it will teach him a valuable lesson.”

“It’ll take the kick out of his mystery anyway,” Mac commented. “A fellow of that type doesn’t feel so perky when he’s confronted with the truth.”

“Let us hope you’re right, Mr. Mac,” Miss Wainwright said. “When do you boys think it will be convenient to go and talk with the old gentleman?”

Hal jumped up. “I make a move we go tomorrow evening,” he suggested briskly. “There’s a few errands I want to do in that big town of Echo before we talk to him. For instance, I’d like to ask that general storekeeper what time the old fellow started back for home. General storekeepers have the name of knowing everything and seeing everything. If he can’t tell me, we’ll find somebody else that will.”

“That’s a topping idea, Red,” Mac agreed. “We can buy a few things that we’re going to need and make some inquiries about our own pursuits too.”

“How far is it to this berg, Echo, hah?” Perry inquired skeptically.

“Ten miles, that’s all, Mr. Perry,” Jean said with a smothered chuckle.

“Far enough, but I’ll try anythin’ oncet,” he complained.

“Would you like me to go, Todd?” Danny asked respectfully. “I just thought I’d ask.”

“I s’pose you got to go along,” Mr. Perry grumbled. “I can’t manage one o’ them horses, so’s if I got to ride a mule I might as well have you to talk to as anybody else. There ain’t anything else I can do!”

“Did I hear you say something about having Danny along to talk to, Perry?” Hal asked whimsically. “Or did you say somebody to talk to you?”

“Somebody to argue with, you mean, Red,” Mac put in.

“Danny’s all right only he ain’t got any brains and that’s what makes me mad,” said Mr. Perry seriously. “He ain’t got *much* anyways.”

“What I got, I got from you, Todd,” Danny admitted wistfully. “I’ll never forget that I’d still be a window-washer if it hadn’t been that you dragged me in your bus and taught me how to run it.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t forget some things,” Mr. Perry conceded

magnanimously, “and you got gratitude, I’ll say that for you anyways.”
So the day of chaos ended in good nature.

CHAPTER XVII

A CURTAIN LIFTED

Hal found it impossible to sleep, so he got up and dressed. It was either a case of too much confusion in one day or too much coffee at the evening meal. Be that as it might, he decided to go outdoors and see if the still, warm evening would not soon induce enough weariness to bring sleep to his restless brain.

The cabin was steeped in that silence that prevails where human beings slumber. And from the soft snores and quiet breathing that emanated from the several rooms he was assured that he had disturbed no one. Mac, he had left in the throes of a dreamless sleep, for the young Canadian hadn't stirred an inch when the door shut quietly.

Hal strolled around toward the nearest barn and saw that the stablemen's apartment was still lighted. Below, at the barn door, the two men were having a quiet pipe together.

"Don't mind if I join you, huh?" Hal asked cordially.

"Not 't all," said Jake. "Barney'll git you a box from inside."

Barney, who was a quiet, reserved man, knocked out his pipe and yawned politely. "No offense to you, young man, I hope," he said, "but I think I'll go up. Had a hard day hoein' Miss Wainright's garden an' got to be up early agin' tomorrer and dig right back where I left off. Take this here box o' mine, young man, an' no offense."

Hal assured him that he wasn't offended and took the proffered seat. He filled his own pipe, lighted it and sat for a few moments in silent contemplation of the glorious, starry night. Jake followed the line of his gaze and did some contemplating on his own hook.

"Queer people in this here world, eh, Mr. Hal?" he observed. "Barney's another one o' them folks what has little to say. He don't care much about talkin' an' I can say that after years o' experience, 'cause I've known him all my life. But he's the finest feller what ever lived, yessir."

"Most always they are the best, Jake," Hal said, puffing quietly on his pipe. "It's all right if they're not scheming while the other fellow is doing the talking, huh? Some have a habit of that. As my mother says, back home in New Jersey, not all the great men think volumes while the gossip does the talking. Some think volumes of devilishness or volumes of nonsense. And then there's the kind that run to the other extreme."

"Yessir, I agree with you there," Jake said vehemently. "Fer instance, take station agent Meggle! That man kin talk a body to death, yessir. Why, Barney

an' me could hardly drag ourselves away from him yesterday, he was that filled up with gossip about the wreck an' all that. And while we're on the subject, he told me something that I think I ought to tell you, seein' as how you and Mr. Mac seem such good friends."

Hal started. "What do you mean, Jake? Something Meggle has said to you about Mac?"

"Yessir, just that," Jake said, quietly puffing until his closely-shaven head was wreathed in smoke. "You see, he's got a cow and he supplies Miss Wainwright with milk an' he comes here every day 'long 'bout middle afternoon to deliver it. Miss Wainwright's goin' to get her own cows come next summer, she tells me. Barney an' me's got her a good garden started to supply the folks with vegetables now, so it'd be right economical to git her a cow or two an' some chickens."

"Yes, but what was that you were saying about Meggle coming here delivering milk? Did he come this afternoon?"

"Yessir, 'bout two hours before you fellers came back," said Jake. "But he came late yesterday afternoon in all that rain and Tsu let him go in the kitchen a minit to dry off a little. When he came out he let on as how he seen Mr. Mac pass through the dinin' room and into one o' the bedrooms. Mr. Mac didn't see him though."

"And what of it, if Mr. Meggle did see Mac, Jake?" Hal asked with an unaccountable nervousness. "What of it?"

"Just that Meggle recognized him as his nephew, Mr. Hal," Jake answered. "The nephew that ran away from him when he was fourteen. I half recognized him myself—I saw him many times when he was a lad."

Hal was breathing quickly. "Did he—did he say anything more—did he say why Mac ran away?" Hal asked, feeling mean and cheap at this seeming betrayal of a confidence.

"Why er—I never could quite credit it myself," Jake replied with some hesitancy. "I always sort of thought it was Meggle's gabby tongue that made him say it, but he told it all around after the boy went away that he took 'bout fifty pounds with him—stole it from his uncle's cash box in the Laidlaw station when the old man's back was turned. Matter of fac', I don't believe it yet, but Meggle said he reported it to the police an' said as how he'd turn the lad over to them if he ever stepped foot in Canada."

"Do you think he'll do it?" Hal asked, alarmed. "Did he say he would?"

"No, he said he wouldn't for a while yet. He said he was too busy after the accident and all—it seems he's got a lot of reports and things to make up before Number Four is back again come Saturday. After that, he said he'd act, but first he's set on facin' his nephew and confrontin' him with it."

Hal breathed a little more freely. That gave a little respite at least. Saturday

was the day after tomorrow. And after that....

“Do you suppose that after he confronts Mac, he’ll notify the police?” Hal queried anxiously.

“S’pose that’s what he’s reckonin’ on,” Jake replied with a contemptuous sniff.

“My way o’ thinkin’, he could uv afforded to let the lad have the money that time an’ forget about it. It’d cost him more’n that to keep the boy an’ educate him. ’Nother thing, I heard as how he treated the lad somethin’ terrible an’ drove him to do what he did. He’s been a bachelor an’ a cranky man to children all his life. ’Nother thing I heard, Mr. Hal—the lad came from nice people over in the old country—came over when he was ten years old or thereabouts.”

“You mean he came from England?”

“Yessir, he was left an orphan when he was younger’n that and had been livin’ with an aunt ’til she died. Mr. Meggle was some relative o’ hers, I understand, so the lad had to come over—there was no place else to go. An’ the sayin’ is that he brought a few hundred pounds ’long with him that the old lady left. Meggle says not, but you can’t tell, Mr. Hal. I just always took a likin’ to the lad and he’s grown to be a nice young man.”

Hal knocked out his pipe. “He’s a swell fellow, Jake. That’s the way I feel about him, and no matter what he did when he was a kid, it has nothing to do with him now. It’s a darn shame if you ask me, that a fellow like him has to stay out of a country like this, just because he stole some money when he was such a kid. Anybody that age isn’t responsible. Whether he took it or not, I like him. Besides I don’t believe he’d have taken it if he didn’t feel he had a right to it. I believe that other story that Meggle had some money belonging to Mac.”

“So do I,” Jake agreed stoutly. “But the law is strict here, Mr. Hal. Meggle’d get his if he pressed the charge an’ I take it that young Mac ain’t got much.”

“Less than that,” Hal said. “He’s got next to nothing, I guess. Do you really suppose that after all these years, Meggle would want to go to the trouble of making Mac pay it back?”

“When a body takes money from Meggle, he takes his heart,” Jake said vehemently. “I’d hate to see a body by the name of Larry McKnight go to jail, yessir, I would hate it. It’s too nice a name and Mr. Mac’s too nice a young man. He come of nice people in the old country, I hear.”

“Larry McKnight, huh?” Hal said half to himself. “Lawrence McKnight, I suppose it really is.”

“Yessir—Larry for short they called him as a lad ’round here.”

“Hmph!” Hal said, rising. “I’ll get his ear about this first thing in the

morning. Thanks a lot for tipping me off, Jake.”

“Yessir, not at all. Glad to save the young man trouble if I can.”

Hal stretched his long arms forward. “Say, do you know, Jake, I’d like to take a little ride before I turn in. I’d like a little more time to think this thing over before I talk to Mac in the morning. Got a horse in there that needs some exercise?”

“Yessir—indeed there is. Miss Jean’s white colt, Billy, ain’t moved a muscle all day. Wouldn’t hurt to keep him out a couple of hours if you wanted.”

“No, I wouldn’t do that. I’ll be sleepy before an hour and wanting to turn back. I’ll go in with you and see where his stall is, then I can fix him up when I get back.”

“Yessir, I’ll leave one lantern lit,” Jake said obligingly and went into the barn.

Billy whinnied with joy at being saddled and showed his great pleasure at this unexpected treat by whisking Hal along the gravel driveway and out to the trail in a breathtaking second.

Hal chuckled and patted the animal’s neck. “Not so fast, kiddo,” he said, pulling the rein tightly. “I want to think about Mac and lots of other things and I don’t want to worry about you—get that?” Billy snorted understandingly and turned north on the Copperhead Trail. Hal guided the animal quite unconsciously, for he was already head and shoulders in the perplexities of one Larry McKnight.

CHAPTER XVIII AT THE NOTCH

It was the colt that led Hal. They went along under the stars, and the sweet warm breeze seemed to keep pace with them. But the rider was not aware of anything until the beauty of the snow-tipped peaks in the north brought him out of his brown study. He came to with a start.

Old Timer's cabin was not fifty yards distant. Why he had come in that direction he could not have explained. But now that he found himself there he determined not to turn back. He would go on a little further at least. Also, the prospector's cabin was pitch dark and there was the possibility that he would not waken.

Hal squared his shoulders and whispered to Billy that he must not trot a bit faster. Old Timer, if he should awaken, was not to think that he had come on any sneaking, solitary spying expedition. He'd call with the rest when they had said they would—tomorrow.

They were soon past the cabin, however, and no light appeared. Hal settled himself in the saddle and was soon admiring the serenity of Copperhead Lake. Although it was a moonless night, it wasn't really dark for the stars were vivid. They twinkled down upon the clear, mirror-like lake and the young man thought of Jean's saying there was something sad looking about it.

He understood now what she had meant by it. There was something wistful and lonely about it and he wondered if events, and people themselves, had contributed that atmosphere. Somehow he believed that to be so. Certainly that clear sparkling water must have mirrored Mac's sad and wistful countenance many times when he was a child. Also, it must have frowned at the parsimonious expression of Mr. Meggle's face, and lapped despairingly against its banks when Old Timer's gold-grasping hands touched its pure waters.

Hal laughed at his own sentimentality, and urged Billy on a little further. He had lost all track of time. The night was entrancing and he felt not the least desire to sleep. Then all at once he realized that he had only to round the next bend and he would be at the notch. Why not, he thought? Wouldn't hurt to see that the boys' things were just as they left them.

He stopped a moment while considering this and to his astonishment heard the faint sounds of chopping. Certainly it was an ax. Chopping what at this hour? He got down from the colt and walked a few steps, then listened.

It sounded more clearly and gradually he was able to distinguish the

direction from which it came. The notch! What on earth, he thought, would anyone be chopping there? Instinctively he hurried back and led the colt under some trees where it could not be seen from the trail. Then he tied it securely and stepped noiselessly toward the next bend.

For some reason, his heart palpitated queerly. He was not afraid, he knew, yet his hands felt cold and clammy. His lips were dry and he kept telling himself that if he tried to speak he wouldn't be able to. Then his sense of humor put him in order. He chuckled.

"It's because it sounds so weird and ghostly," he told himself. "Things like that always sound spooky after midnight—I wonder why?"

He did not have long to wonder, for the actual scene of the chopping looked far more ghostly than it sounded. He saw it at once when he reached the notch. The first sight of it left his heart beating furiously and he retreated behind a tree to watch.

A lantern stood conveniently on Mac's brand new tool box and hacking away with a pickax at Old Timer's former claim stake was a man. His hat was on the back of his head and he was driving the ax at a furious rate as if his time was short.

"Maybe Mac's pickax too," was Hal's thought. He wondered what else this person had commandeered belonging to the three young men now asleep at the Wainwright cabin. As yet, Hal had not contributed anything to the expedition save his good will and services.

He tried to get a look at the man's face but found it impossible. There was only one thing to do and he determined to do it—walk out boldly and face this solitary worker. After all, what had he to fear? He would simply approach the man with a friendly greeting and tell him that they intended to stake that claim themselves. And if Old Timer wanted it again himself, well he knew the fellows would agree.

His mind whirled as he struck boldly out into the trail. He swished his riding boots purposely and experienced some elation when the man suddenly looked up and turned around. Was it Old Timer? Hal strained his eyes but was not near enough to see the man's features. Then he shouted.

"Hello there—that you, Old Timer? I'm Keen from down at Wainwright's. Couldn't sleep and..."

As he spoke the lantern was extinguished. He could see neither the man nor anything else at the claim then. He called once more.

"Please don't think I'm here for any funny business! I'd like to talk to you, really!"

No one answered him. He stopped in his tracks, intuitively. The man showed anything but a friendly disposition to his frank declaration. What was wrong? Should he go on to the claim?

Suddenly he heard the soft patter of footsteps in the distance. He could see no more than six feet ahead. The claim, the forest and the lower base of the mountains were swathed in darkness. He felt suddenly chilled again and angry at his utter helplessness in the face of such a situation.

“No gun, not a flashlight—what’s the matter with me?” he chided himself severely. “What can a fellow do without either of those things? Gosh!”

His mood softened when he realized that he had left his bed with one thought in mind—a pipeful of tobacco. He hadn’t anticipated going any further than the barn. And now?

He shrugged his shoulders hopelessly and went back around the bend to get Billy.

CHAPTER XIX

A FRIENDLY OFFER

It was three o'clock when he stole into his room again. Mac heard him close the door and was instantly alert, and it was a good half hour later when Hal finished telling Jake's story and his own.

Mac seemed more interested in Hal's queer experience at the notch. "What happened when you came by Old Timer's on your way home? Did you see anybody or hear anybody inside his shack?"

"Hardly," Hal answered softly. "It was dark as pitch both times I passed and not a sound."

"Then it was he up at the claim," said Mac confidently. "And I'd like to know why? Jake said Old Timer even told him that he gave up that claim years ago—just like I told you, Red. What would he be wanting there now?"

"Maybe he's buried his treasure in the spot where it was born," Hal said whimsically. "But let's talk about Larry McKnight. It's a pippin of a name, Mac."

"Forget it, Red. I like Mac better. But because you're burning with curiosity, I'll tell you. Jake was right. I did bring a couple of hundred pounds with me from the other side and even if I was a kid, I remember it well. The only thing where I'm stuck, I forget the bank in which my aunt kept her money. She drew it out before she died and sent it to Meggie to keep in trust for me. Beside that, she sent him enough extra to keep me until I was eighteen. But I never saw it again and he treated me as if I was such a burden, I simply waited till I could and made my getaway with the first money I could lay my hands on. That's all there is to the story."

"But what of him, Mac?"

"I'll face him whenever he's ready," Mac said with a yawn. "And if he's mean enough to send me to jail, why let him. That's one place I've never seen, anyway." He laughed bitterly.

"Well, you won't see it, if I have anything to say about it!" Hal declared. "If he's mean enough to want to send you, I'll give him the money myself. I have enough in the bank back home to do it, Mac. And you've got to take it—pay it back as you will—but take it!"

"Red, you're a good scout, but I can't take it. I'm not a borrower—never have been. Just couldn't get into the way of it. There'll be some way out of it. Don't worry yourself about it—we'll wait until Saturday and see how much Meggie makes good. Remember I'm a bigger bird than he'll ever be and I'll

wallop him whether he's an old duck or not. That's just how I feel right now."

"Mm, well, I better get to sleep or I won't feel like travelling ten miles to Echo tomorrow. I want to get up as early as I can and write a letter."

"Home?"

"I owe my Uncle Denis one," Hal answered evasively. "He's in Washington—a secret service man. Been in it for years."

"Hmph! Now listen, Red. Save your strength if you're planning to write for money on my behalf. There'll be some other way."

Hal gave him a friendly nudge. "Go back to your snoring, Mac. If I want to write home for money, I'd like to know who's going to stop me!"

CHAPTER XX

EVENING

Hal had rather an untoward accident as they were leaving Echo the next afternoon. He slipped and apparently did nothing more than turn his ankle but before they reached Copperhead it was swollen and painful and he had all he could do to keep it in the stirrup.

At supper time it was decided that he shouldn't make the call on Old Timer. Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle and Mac would be sufficiently representative. Jean made that decision and Hal was secretly thankful, for he couldn't bear the thought of standing on the bruised foot for a little time.

They had made no startling discoveries in Echo that day. The storekeeper had informed them that Old Timer left his store around middle afternoon, on the previous day. Further than that he did not know.

Mac, however, brought an interesting fact to light which delighted the heart of Mr. Perry. A visit to the surveyor's office had revealed that the old prospector had never filed any claim at the notch nor anywhere else in the vicinity of Copperhead.

So they set out for Old Timer's cabin that evening, quite elated. Mac promised Jean and Miss Wainwright that there would be no harsh words on their part and that no matter how querulous the old man was, they would treat him with all the consideration possible.

"Maybe we ought to take him a box of candy!" Mr. Perry complained with biting sarcasm. "Anyways, to be on the safe side, I'm going to strap my rifle onto the mule. Besides we'll be coming home through the dark and how do we know what may happen, hah? Keen said himself on account of what happened last night, a guy ought to have some kind of a war bonnet handy."

Miss Wainwright pleaded. "But it's so easy to use them when one has them handy, Mr. Perry. One is safer empty-handed, I'm certain. An argument may arise and the first thought in your head ... oh dear me! Promise me you won't use it unless it's absolutely necessary!"

"Lady, I'll promise you anything if you only don't discourage me from taking it," said Mr. Perry tersely. "What other protection has a guy like me got, hah? Danny ain't any more use than a totem pole—nor half so handsome."

Hal watched them move away down the trail. He was sitting in an easy chair before the living room window and could see them for quite a while. Mac's brown hair blew about mischievously in the breeze and it was evident by the toss of his head that he was laughing and teasing Perry.

After they were out of sight, Hal wished he had gone with them, sore foot or no sore foot, as he said to Jean. "Mac's so hotheaded no matter what he promised your aunt about harsh words. And Perry's a perpetual crab and likely to put his foot into the whole business the first words he speaks."

"What about Mr. Doyle?" Jean smiled. "Poor Danny. He's afraid to say he's alive, I guess. But it's evident that Perry's his hero as well as his boon companion. To Doyle, Perry can do no wrong, apparently."

"The poor little fellow," said Jean sympathetically. "Isn't it funny, Hal—I have a queer wistful feeling about Mac—and the rest of them too. I can't exactly explain it, but it occurred to me when I spoke of Mr. Doyle. I have the singular presentiment that I'm not going to see them again."

"Rubbish!" Hal scowled. "Come on, play me a game of rummy and I'll go to bed. I'm pretty sleepy—not much sleep last night, you know."

"Yes, you bad chap," Jean scolded. "I'll see that it is only one game. First thing you know you'll be in ill health. Ill health at Copperhead! That doesn't seem possible in a place like this, does it?" She pulled up the card table.

"Nothing seems possible here, and yet everything apparently is possible," Hal said. "Your play, Jean ..."

It was a sweet dreamless sleep that Hal fell into at nine o'clock. He closed his eyes with the promise to himself that he would wake at ten when the boys were due to return. They might possibly be a little later than that but not much, he was certain. And in any event, he would be awake.

Ten o'clock came and went and still he slept. All the house slept and the little apartment over the stable was also in darkness. Perhaps Hal had it on his mind that he should awaken, but the fatigue in his body held him fast in the realms of slumber. Several times he dreamed that he was trying to wake and couldn't—several times he dreamed that he was really awake and heard Mac and the boys softly shut the front door.

Somehow Mac didn't seem to come into his room in Hal's dreams. He heard Perry and Doyle moving about, but Mac didn't come. These dreams must have continued intermittently until midnight when suddenly he was awakened by Jean's voice calling outside his door.

"Hal! Wake up!" she was calling. "Someone's been knocking on the front door or trying to get in the front door. I'm terribly frightened and I called Tsu but couldn't get him up!"

Hal slipped on a dressing gown and hobbled painfully out of the room. Jean stood with a little night lamp in her hand just outside his door.

"What time is it?" he asked still dazed. "Where's Mac? and Perry?"

"Aren't they back yet?" she asked, astonished.

"No, don't ask questions. Where—what time is it?"

Jean looked at the living room clock as they passed through and into the

entrance hall. “Half past twelve! Oh, my goodness! Aunt’s up!”

Impulsively, Hal swung open the front door. A figure lay very still out on the narrow gravel path. Somehow, even before he approached it, he knew. Yet he dared not admit to himself the fear that welled up in him at the sight.

“Who is it, Hal?” Jean asked with a little cry. “Who? Why don’t you say something?”

“Jean—I can’t—I ... *it’s Mac*, Jean! He’s hurt or wounded or worse!”

CHAPTER XXI

TRAGEDY

The entire Wainwright household looked on as Hal and Tsu carried Mac's prostrate form into the room and laid him on the bed tenderly. Jake and Barney, half awake in ludicrous looking bathrobes, came in and awaited orders.

One glance at Mac told the story. Hal shivered as he felt the Canadian's soft shirt for a wide area of the material was red and sticky. Jake took one glance and shook his head hopelessly. Miss Wainwright, however, gave them all a pleasant shock. In the crisis, her "nerves" had evidently deserted her, for she stalked in primly and took immediate charge of the situation.

"Barney, you call up Dr. Waters in Echo and tell him he'll be well paid if he can get his Ford to come up the trail in less than an hour! And Jake, you wait around right outside the door here in case you're needed. Mr. Hal and I will make the poor boy as comfortable as we can until the doctor gets here. Tsu and Jean can go to the kitchen and get some hot water and things ready! Hurry, all of you!"

Order prevailed immediately and as soon as the bedroom door closed, Miss Wainwright fell into the role of nurse with surprising agility. Hal's spirits rose and he hobbled this way and that on his swollen ankle forgetting everything but that Mac had to be made comfortable.

"His pulse is weak," Miss Wainwright announced after they had him tucked under the covers. "It's loss of blood, Hal. See if that's Tsu with the hot water? Yes? Well, now you sit over in the chair and get off of your sore foot."

Hal sank into the chair by the window, gratefully. "What do you think, Miss Wainwright—do you think he'll..."

"We mustn't believe he won't!" she interposed cheerfully. "There's no reason why he shouldn't get along if the doctor hurries. His heart is still good." Then: "Where are Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle?"

Hal groaned, "That's what I'm asking myself. I'm in such a whirl I can't explain things to myself even! I dreamed they were all in long ago."

"They must be looked after," she said efficiently. "Someone will have to go and look them up. How in goodness' name did this boy get home in such a condition?"

"The stallion must have brought him home, ma'am," said Jake from outside the door. "We heard the animal makin' an awful ruckus by the barn—that's what woke Barney an' me up. We were just puttin' him away when we

heard Miss Jean call for help.”

Miss Wainwright bathed Mac’s wounded shoulder carefully. Suddenly the young man turned slightly and his lips moved. Hal jumped up.

“What did he say?” he asked anxiously.

“I think he’s delirious,” Miss Wainwright answered softly. “He said that somebody shot him, that was all. This is very serious business, Hal. If you can possibly manage it, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to take the buckboard with Jake and see if you can learn anything of Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle.”

Hal took his clothes into Perry’s room and donned them hurriedly. And it wasn’t until he was almost ready to extinguish the light that he noticed something peculiar. Then Jake called to him that the buckboard was hitched up and waiting and he forgot everything else.

He rested his sore foot on the dashboard and Jake urged the colt along. Vague explosions and peculiar mutterings could be heard in the distance and the stableman nodded his head sagaciously.

“That’s Doc Waters’ Ford,” he said simply. “Guess she’s havin’ a right hard time climbin’ the trail. Once a body’s up, it’s easy goin’. Miss Wainwright says she’s goin’ to get a good practical car up here before it comes autumn. Right handy things to have when a body’s in a hurry. Horses are all right, I say, but for speed....”

“Jake, have you any idea where those two birds could be?” Hal interposed anxiously.

“Just now the situation don’t look so pleasant, Mr. Hal, no sirree! I declare I never got such a scare as when I seen you carryin’ Mr. Mac into the house. Pore lad, I hope Doc Waters can fix ’im up, eh? Sounds like as if the Doc just made the top o’ the trail. He’ll soon be to the cabin—don’t worry!”

“I’ll never forgive myself if anything happens to Mac, Jake,” Hal said gloomily. “I had a feeling that I ought to have gone with them—maybe everything would have been all right. I could have taken the buckboard then just as well as now.”

“We never think of them things at the time, young man. Besides, we don’t know why things happen. Sometimes for good—sometimes otherwise. Mebbe this’ll bring McKnight’s uncle round to terms, eh?”

“If I thought so, I’d almost say I was glad.”

“Well, let’s hope for the best. We’ll be to Old Timer’s in a wink now. Always can tell by that old birch stump hid in between the trees. See it?”

Hal was too dazed to see anything. Mac was in his thoughts constantly and he rode the rest of the way to Old Timer’s cabin with fear uppermost in his mind.

A light gleamed from the prospector’s dusty windows. Jake made a peculiar, smacking noise with his mouth when first they came in sight of it.

“Looks like things are up and a-doin’ here too,” he observed.

“And the front door’s open, Jake. Look!”

“So ’tis. Kind o’ cool for to have the door open o’ nights, eh?”

“Mm. Still, I’d feel better about seeing everything open and aboveboard with that old fellow. He can’t shoot at us unless we see him first.”

Jake nodded thoughtfully and halted the colt about twenty-five yards from the cabin.

They tethered him to a tree and approached the open door cautiously for a strange, forbidding silence held the place in its grip.

“Not a sound or anythin’,” whispered Jake. “Take it easy on your sore foot, young man.”

“Jake, something’s darn funny. I haven’t heard a sound yet. Can you see anything from here? I can’t!”

Jake couldn’t and for some unaccountable reason they hesitated. Suddenly the stableman took a few steps forward.

“He’s in there all right,” he whispered. “I can see his back—he’s sittin’ in his armchair.”

Hal put out a detaining hand. “Jake, be careful. Why don’t you suppose he’s come out to see what the noise is?”

“He’s kinder deaf, Mr. Hal. Yessir, kinder deaf. I’ll rap good and hard on the door when we git there—you know he’s funny ’bout askin’ folks in.”

“Yes, and perhaps that’s why Mac is unconscious now,” Hal murmured menacingly. They got to the door but never knocked.

One look at the interior of that dilapidated shack told them that something was radically wrong. Hal forgot everything when he stepped up to the doorstep at Jake’s frantic yet silent command.

The stableman pointed with a shaking finger into the one room that the shack possessed. Each shabby piece of furniture that the old man had in it seemed awry or turned upside down. The rotted boards of the floor lay strewn in splinters all over the room and a gaping hole grinned up at them in the center.

Yet still the old prospector sat mute.

Hal hobbled into the room boldly, “Old Timer!” he shouted. “Old Timer!”

Jake jumped after him and was at his elbow when they walked around the chair and faced the old man. Hal grasped the stableman by the arm—he felt sick and faint yet he could not take his eyes from the silent figure.

“Dead?” he asked, though he knew it was so. “Stone dead—*shot*?”

Jake nodded grimly.

CHAPTER XXII

A CASE FOR THE "MOUNTED"

"This is a case for the 'Mounted'," Jake said quietly. "Robbery and murder!"

Hal nodded mechanically for he couldn't forget that Perry had strapped his rifle to the mule. An hour later, when they started back, the fear and suspicion had increased. And the question as to what part Mac had played in this awful affair made him feel sick.

"Still trustin' an' believin' that Mr. Mac is a nice feller?" Jake asked him when they were almost home.

"Yes, I do, Jake," Hal replied earnestly. "I know he's mixed up in it some way or other, but in an innocent way, I'm sure. How do you feel about him?"

"Matter of fac', I feel the same as you. Can't say how I feel about them other two. Strange—mighty strange. Can't make head or tail of it, no sirree!"

Doc Waters was still with Mac when they reached the camp and Jean was the first to tell Hal that the Canadian was out of danger and conscious.

"He's been asking for you almost an hour," she told Hal. "He wants to tell you something, but the doctor says he must keep quiet. He's weak."

"He must be," Hal said listlessly. "Can I go in?"

"As soon as Aunt comes out with the doctor. And what's the news from below, Hal?"

Hal told her.

"Merciful heaven!" she said when he had finished. "This is developing into an awful thing! Someone has to notify the 'Mounted'—wait, I'll call Barney. He knows how to go about such things."

"I'm glad somebody does," sighed Hal. "It's too much for me."

While Barney was 'phoning, Jake came in, excitedly.

"I just found the mules!" he said. "They were behind the barn."

"Mules?" Hal asked.

"Yessir, I found 'em browsin' away like as if nothing'd happened."

"What happened to them, now?"

"Nothin' happened to them, Mr. Hal. The question is, what happened to Perry and Doyle? They ain't no signs o' them 'round them mules, I can tell you that."

"Oh, my gosh!" Hal said, and put his hand to his head. "What next?"

Doc Waters and Miss Wainwright came out of the sickroom at that juncture and Hal was motioned in.

“Only five minutes or so, young man,” the doctor warned him. “He’s got to have sleep, but he won’t do it till he tells you what he’s got on his mind. Bad business, I hear?”

“Yes,” Hal admitted wearily; “Jake will tell you. I can’t!”

As he shut the door softly, Mac raised his head.

“Red? You? Thank heavens!”

“Calm down, Mac. I need a peaceful setting,” Hal said. “I can only talk to you five minutes, so let me put my leg up on the bed, huh? No, I’ll sit in the chair and just rest my leg on the bed. Comfortable? All right. Now tell me how you got home and why? But don’t get excited.”

“Don’t worry, Red, I haven’t got the ambition to,” Mac said with a weak smile. “I’ll never forget that as long as I live. We went up there, tied the animals and walked over the trail to the shack. A light was on and we could see the old bird sitting in his chair—we could see him from the window. Well, we knocked and knocked—maybe a dozen times, so I finally decided the old boy was deaf and I opened the door. That’s all I remember, Red—opening that door! I sort of remember hearing a shot, but everything came so thick and fast that I’m hazy about it. All I know is, that I kept whirling around and then it’s a blank.”

“Mm. Then you haven’t any idea about Perry or Doyle, huh?”

“As much as you have, Red. Jean told me that you and Jake went back to see if you could find them. And you couldn’t?”

“Not a sign, Mac.”

“What else is the matter, Red? Something is—I can tell it by your face.”

“Can you stand something, Mac? Bad news?”

“Do I look as weak as that? Come out with it!”

“We found Old Timer dead—Jake and I. He was sitting in his armchair just as you saw him and, Mac, whoever killed him, robbed him first, or tried to anyway.”

Mac looked steadfastly at him. “Bad business, Red,” he said thoughtfully. “Do you suppose he was dead when we first saw him?”

“I shouldn’t wonder. But I’ll admit, Perry and Doyle have completely buffaloeed me. Barney’s notified the ‘Mounted’.”

“Naturally,” Mac said calmly.

“But look here, Mac! What about yourself? You have to be considered and I’m afraid they’ll want to hold you for material witness or something!”

“Well, that’s all right. I’m willing. I can’t tell them any more than I have told you, Red.”

The doctor cut short their talk and Hal himself was ordered off to bed. Jean insisted and Miss Wainwright commanded it.

“You might as well sleep in the bed of the absent ones,” Jean said

cheerfully. “And if they suddenly turn up we can find some place else for them. I’ve had little snatches of sleep since you’ve been gone.”

Hal hesitated at the door. “When do you think the ‘Mounted’ will be here, Jean?” he asked anxiously.

“Perhaps not until evening. Meantime they’ll have someone up from Echo to take charge of the old man’s cabin. What’s the matter, Hal?”

“I’m worried, frankly. About Mac. I believe his story as much as I believe anything, but Jean, it’s the kind of a story that won’t hold a whole lot with a bunch like the ‘Mounted’.”

“I know, Hal,” Jean agreed. “He told Aunt portions of it. We all believe him, of course, but it’s so strange. And as you say, they’re likely to take him off when they come and move him to a hospital where they can keep their eyes on him. I’m worried, Hal, but try and not think of it until you get a little sleep.”

“I’ll try,” he promised, “but let me know if anyone comes.”

A moment later he was back at the door calling her.

“What now?” she asked.

“What else, you mean,” he answered significantly. “I’ve just discovered something, Jean—something I half noticed when Jake called me to go on to Old Timer’s with him.”

“What—*heavens!* What?”

“The few belongings of Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle have completely vanished from this room,” Hal answered.

“And their bags?” Jean asked breathlessly.

“And also their bags,” Hal replied.

CHAPTER XXIII

GONE

Hal had slept, dressed and breakfasted by ten o'clock next morning. He lingered at the table a while listening to Tsu's lengthy account of Mac's condition. In conclusion, the kindly Jap advised that the wounded young man should be spirited away before the "Mounted" arrived.

"This no place for him when pleeceman come," he explained. "Everything look black for him—like storm."

Hal was trying to comprehend the Jap's warning, when Jean came hurrying in. "I heard Tsu trying to tell you, Hal," she said mysteriously, "and I agree with him. We've talked it over a dozen times."

"We?"

"Yes. Aunt and the men and Tsu and of course, myself. You see, Hal, we've had two of the advance guard here this morning and it seems that they've got wind of poor Mac's search to find if Old Timer had a claim filed or not. They were triumphant about it—said it was the perfect motive. Now how do you like that?"

"I don't," Hal said between clenched teeth. "Mac isn't that type."

"As if we don't all know that. Very well," Jean paused, "whether we like it or not it's going to work against him and work against him badly. When small-townners like these Echo officers of the law fly at it, what do you suppose our natty 'Mounted' will do? Now think and think hard, Hal. Storm clouds are gathering on Mac's horizon and we've got to think of some means of clearing them away."

At this juncture, Jake came rushing through from the kitchen. "If you'll pardon my boldness, folks," he said, "I couldn't help but overhear."

"Certainly, Jake," said Miss Wainwright, joining them, "this is not a time to stand on ceremony. In point of fact, it would be wise for us to get our heads together and see what we can do about saving the poor boy from bearing the brunt of this ordeal."

"There's not been a word from Perry or Doyle, huh?" asked Hal.

"They might as well be in a tomb," replied Miss Wainwright contemptuously. "They've simply run off and left that poor boy alone. And they know something about this—they must know something!"

"Of course they do," Jean agreed spiritedly. "If they didn't, why has Mr. Perry's brand new Winchester rifle been found close by the cabin?"

"That's something I didn't know," Hal said indignantly. "When and where

did you hear that?"

"From the advance guard an hour or so ago," Jean replied. "They found it only a few feet away from the cabin door."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Hal. "That does look bad."

"That's how I take it," said Jake, vehemently. "It ain't anythin' to be laughed at, no sirree! 'Nother thing, it ain't fair to let that boy get in the clutches of the 'Mounted' before he's able to defend himself and tell a better story. I tell you, folks, that story of his won't hold water with them!"

"Jake's right," said Miss Wainwright briskly. "We ought to at least wait a few days until the boy's mind is clearer—the doctor said he's likely not to be himself for that length of time. If we can't get hold of those rascals in a few days and try to clear Mr. Mac with their cooperation, then we'll have to think up something else."

"I tink so too," said Tsu.

"It's wise, ma'am," said Jake. "Just don't let them see that young man 'til he's well enough to tell a story that'll get by their ears."

"But just a minute," said Hal thoughtfully. "May I step in and ask Mac one question?"

"Of course," Miss Wainwright answered. "That is, if he's not asleep."

Fortunately Mac wasn't asleep and when Hal opened the door he was able to answer a burning question.

"Mac," Hal asked anxiously, "did Perry take his rifle off that mule's back? Did he have it in his arm when you were knocking on Old Timer's door?"

"I'll say he did; *and how!*" Mac exclaimed feebly. "But don't try and pin it on to him, Red..."

"I'm not trying to pin it on him, Mac, so rest easy," Hal assured him. "I'll explain to you later—we're having a deep discussion out in the dining room. Be back in a sec to keep you company."

He went back to the dining room quickly. "Well, it's settled," he said more to Jean than to the others. "I've settled that question for myself."

"What question—what's settled?" Jean asked, puzzled.

"The question of Perry or Doyle ever coming back here. The answer is no—they never will."

"How do you know, Hal?"

"A little deduction and a good memory of certain observations I've made of Perry."

They all smiled, though not one in the room understood the remark. In point of fact, no one did understand until Mr. Perry himself explained it sometime later.

CHAPTER XXIV FOR MAC

Conspiracies and discussions followed in rapid succession all through that day. Toward middle afternoon, Doc Waters had agreed to thwart the minions of the law for a few days until his patient was sufficiently well to tell a coherent story. They were an able and determined body, this group—servants, physician, family and friends!

“And all for a rotter like me!” Mac exclaimed gratefully, upon being informed of the plan for his removal.

Jake was patrolling an eminence at the southern end of the trail and Barney was sentinel on the north. They were bound to nip the thing in the bud one way or the other, they were proud to tell afterward.

Their vigil continued on past sundown. Hal could see them from either end of the house for he and Tsu, as well as the stablemen, were posted at the windows to receive a given signal should the enemy appear. Jean and Miss Wainwright were settled in the living room to meet the foe graciously in the event that anything untoward happened to spoil their well laid plans.

That contingency did not come to pass, however, for it was toward dusk when Tsu observed Barney’s lantern swinging thrice in the shadows. That meant that the “Mounted” had arrived at North Copperhead and after inspecting the tragedy at Old Timer’s cabin, would proceed south within a short space of time.

A sort of hushed activity prevailed from that time on in the dimly lighted cabin. Tsu remained faithfully at his post awaiting Barney’s three remaining signals to tell them that the moment of action was at hand.

The minutes dragged by for Hal. He felt vexed and thoroughly out of sorts with the inglorious retreat of Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle. Whether they had actually done the awful deed or not, he could not even ponder over. Certainly, they had taken the one road to make their culpability stand out as vividly as the tragedy itself. Meanwhile they had left poor Mac to be burdened with it all.

“And he will be,” Hal realized. “We can only keep this up a few days at the most.”

It was practically dark when Tsu came rushing into the room, murmuring that the signal had been given. And a few minutes later they were carrying Mac tenderly out through the back doorway.

Barney and Jake were awaiting them in the gully holding lanterns aloft and giving them a lift with their burden. Mac protested gently.



BARNEY AND JAKE WERE AWAITING THEM IN THE GULLY.

“You’d think I was a regular invalid,” he laughed. “I bet I could stand if I tried to.”

“I bet you couldn’t,” Hal said decisively. “Now, no monkey business, Mac.

You just lie here quietly and don't squirm out of your blankets. I don't think we'll be long."

"One at a time we'll be questioned most likely," said Jake. "First one out, will be the first one to keep you company."

They hurriedly retraced their steps to the cabin, in order to tell white lies to Fogarty, of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police.

CHAPTER XXV

FOGARTY

Hal looked down into Fogarty's face unflinchingly. It was easy to lie for Mac, for he had not the feeling of telling untruths about him even then.

Fogarty was inscrutable and sat perfectly at ease in the armchair until Hal had finished. After that he looked indifferently, from one to the other of the Wainwright household, and his eyes settled finally on Hal.

"So you say that this McKnight chap just simply up and disappeared two hours ago," he said, placidly thrumming his fingers on the arms of the chair.

"That's what he did, Mr. Fogarty," Hal said smoothing an errant lock of hair back on his head.

"And yet he was wounded last night, only last night," said Fogarty, as if to himself. "He was even unconscious for a time, eh?"

"Yes, and we were quite worried about him, but Doctor Waters said he'd be all right. He's awfully weak." Miss Wainwright stopped thoughtfully, then went on: "We thought maybe he had it on his mind about Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle. Their disappearance has been so singular."

"Hmph," said Fogarty. "Guess he had them on his mind and more besides. But that's neither here nor there. The point is, if he was so badly wounded as you say he couldn't go very far. I'd like to take a little look around your camp, if you please."

Even Barney, the stableman, looked worried as Fogarty rose and went toward the door. Hal looked at Jean and a current of anxiety communicated itself to the others. Tsu's bland countenance resembled a dark cloud over the sun. Suddenly Jake spoke.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Fogarty, sir, Barney and myself have chores to do before bedtime. Are we excused, sir?"

Fogarty stopped, his short, thick hand on the door knob. "You're excused as far as any questioning goes," he said slowly, "but you're not excused otherwise. I'll thank all the male members of this household to accompany me on this little search."

Jean looked agonized as she stood up. "We'll all go," she said icily. "Mr. Fogarty evidently doesn't trust anybody. Come, Aunt, get a wrap and we'll help the man look around, also. Perhaps he'll miss a word if we stay behind."

Fogarty said nothing, but opened the door. Hal fancied that he saw the faintest gleam in his eyes, and that was all. But Jean had done it! If she had come right out with the secret of Mac's whereabouts she couldn't have told

Fogarty more. He'd not rest now until he did find out the truth and there was a dead certainty that he suspected much.

"Just like a girl," Hal thought as he followed the officer out of the doorway. He told himself that she was just like all the rest. Couldn't keep a secret if she tried. He did not know which he felt more, disgust or apprehension. And yet, how could Fogarty guess that Mac was in the camp?

It was not long before he was to know the answer to this question, for Fogarty made a significant move the moment he was out of doors. He turned and sauntered straight toward the barns and Hal saw a frown cross Jake's brow. Jean and Miss Wainwright hurried after them but there was not a word spoken and they looked not unlike a company of spectres stalking silently along the edge of light that streamed from the cabin windows.

Suddenly Fogarty turned. "Guess you people will need a lantern or two. I've got my flashlight."

Jake turned into the barn mechanically and came out with two lanterns lighted. He seemed more composed than the rest yet when he whispered to Hal his voice had an angry quiver.

"Looks like somebuddy tipped him off," he said, then fell into step with the rest.

Fogarty managed to keep a few feet ahead and led the way straight for the gully.

Hal felt cold, and a dull throbbing sensation was in his head. Every step he took was measured, for he felt that each one brought him nearer to being the instrument that would seal Mac's doom. When they were almost there, Jean stepped to his side and took his arm.

"I'm awfully sorry for that blunder, Hal," she whispered desperately. "He just annoyed me to the point of exasperation—seemed to be trying to see how much he could get us to lie. I can see it now."

"I guess all of us do," Hal murmured. "It came to me when Jake told me and he's right. Somebody's tipped him off and what I'd like to know is, who?"

"Hush!" Jean whispered softly. "Here we are."

And there they were indeed. Fogarty skirted the trees just as if he had been there before for he walked carefully and stopped at the edge of the place. Then he turned around and smiled a moment.

"You fellows lend me a hand with those lanterns, eh?" he asked. "One of you will have to give me a little assistance I guess—you probably are all much better acquainted with this place than I."

Hal clenched his teeth at this bit of sarcasm and stepped forward. "I'll give any assistance you want, Fogarty," he said angrily. "Never mind the sarcasm, we know when we're licked and you know that we know it. I'll go first because I happen to have Mac's interests at heart."

Fogarty stood aside, nodding gravely while Hal passed him and stepped over the side. Jake handed his lantern to Barney and climbed over next. “Hold it for me, Barn,” he said, “it takes more than two for this job.”

Fogarty had just started the descent when Hal reached bottom and shouted so desperately that the dapper mounted policeman almost lost his balance.

“Wait!” Hal was crying. “Wait! He’s not here—*he’s gone!*”

CHAPTER XXVI

SUSPICION

Jake jumped the rest of the distance and Fogarty was not far behind. They found Hal staring at the empty pit, wondering and wide-eyed. Two blankets rumbled and tossed aside was all the evidence that Mac had left, and the only indication that he had even been there.

Hal's distress was so palpable that Fogarty could not help noting it. He held his peace for a little while, examining each chink and crevice with his closely set eyes. Finally he bent down and picked up the blankets.

"There's no doubt that he's gone, Keen," he said simply. Then to Jake he said, "We'll go in the barn and see if any of Miss Wainwright's horses are gone."

He scrambled up, taking the blankets with him. Jake shook his head as if to say that he never had been so puzzled in all his life. Hal followed them out so dazed and baffled that he seemed not to have a lucid thought. It seemed impossible that Mac could have crawled out in his weakened condition without aid. Suddenly some malevolent spirit whispered two names, Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle.

Hal shivered. He could not believe it possible that he could be so deceived. And yet there was a faint irony about the affair. Had they placed Mac there only in order to make it easier for Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle to spirit him away?

Jean was having the same thoughts. She confided them to Hal when Fogarty and Jake were in the barn.

"Is it possible that Mac was shot by Old Timer and the old man killed by Mr. Perry?" she asked in an awed whisper.

"Just what I was thinking, Jean," interposed Miss Wainwright. "If that was possible, perhaps the poor boy unwittingly was a witness to something Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle would rather not have him questioned about."

"For instance—robbery?" Jean suggested.

Hal immediately visualized the scene that had confronted himself and Jake as they stepped into Old Timer's shack the previous evening. And somehow the thing that loomed largest in his mind was the splintered boards and the great gaping hole in the floor. Along with it came the unwelcome remembrance of many little threats and darkly uttered hints that both Mac and Perry had given voice to from time to time. Threats and hints concerning the person and property of the old prospector. Was it really true then—had they dared to carry them out?

“I can’t believe it’s true,” said Hal aloud. “Robbery, murder, none of it! I just can’t believe it’s true. Wolves in sheep’s clothing—it doesn’t fit *Mac* anyhow.”

Fogarty came out of the barn. “Your colt’s gone, Miss Wainwright,” he said in a passive voice. “Now we can go back to the house, by your leave, madam, and get to the bottom of this thing. If you people will consent to tell me the full truth, I’ll tell you some of the truths that I’ve learned today.”

Jean walked on at Hal’s side. “Don’t be so down, Hal,” she pleaded. “It isn’t your fault—we all did what we thought was for his safety. I’ll admit he didn’t seem that kind but you....”

“Don’t, Jean! This doesn’t prove anything against Mac—not to me. My uncle Denis has been a secret service man for twenty-five years, and he says that he only believes what he sees, and when he sees it he divides it in half, because he says we never really see but half anyway. And all I saw was Mac’s blankets.”

“Faith moves mountains, my boy,” said Miss Wainwright and gave him an encouraging pat on the arm. “Now let us see what happens when we tell this self-assured person the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“He hints an earful, anyway,” Hal said grimly.

Fogarty waited with an exasperating patience before he made good his promise. One by one, they told the strange story until Hal jumped in, as it were, and poured into the policeman’s ears a complete account of his acquaintance with Mac, Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle. He omitted nothing, from Mr. Perry’s craven behavior to Mac’s little mystery concerning his uncle and himself.

“I’m telling you that too,” he said in conclusion, “because it wasn’t such a mystery after all. Another thing, Jake, here, can verify it and he can tell you that everybody liked Mac when he was a kid. He hadn’t anything more against Old Timer than I did—he wasn’t even mad the other day when we were ambushed in the woods, although we all realized he could just as well been killed that time instead of having a bullet skim past his arm.”

“You all could have been killed,” said Jean stoutly.

Fogarty nodded gravely. “All of which proves,” he said quietly, “that if the old man fired at them when they were armed, they would probably retaliate. You admit that Mr. Todd Perry insisted on carrying his rifle and that has been found with one bullet discharged. The bullet which took the life of Old Timer came out of the selfsame rifle.”

“What about the bullet that wounded poor Mac, huh?” Hal asked.

“I was coming to that, Keen,” said Fogarty. “Doc Waters handed over that bullet to the proper authorities this morning. Singularly, it has proved to be the same size and type that killed the old man. But the baffling part of it is, we

cannot find that rifle.”

Hal laughed sardonically. “Still that doesn’t prove conclusively that Mac killed Old Timer.”

“No, but it makes him an accessory, young man, an accessory to the fact, and in Canada you know what that means if you’re an American. You can read the papers. His might be the same penalty as the actual perpetrator of the deed. Admitting that it is likely Mr. Todd Perry did it, McKnight would still have a pretty damaging bit of evidence to fight—the robbery.”

“Has it been proved that Old Timer was robbed?” Hal asked.

Fogarty nodded. “We can’t find two pence on the premises,” he said vehemently. “And we learned today that Old Timer is rich! Also we learned from his lawyer in Echo that the old man made a will ten years ago leaving his entire fortune to a certain Larry McKnight whom (as his will stated) he admired so for running away from his uncle, Mr. Meggle, who was the old man’s enemy, that he bequeathed his money to the lad as a gesture of spite.”

Hal sank into an easy chair. “*My gosh!* But listen here, Fogarty,” he said impulsively, “you can’t go and get the idea that Mac knew anything about that. *I know he didn’t!* He couldn’t have hidden such knowledge as that because he told me he was always afraid of Old Timer when he was a kid and that he didn’t believe the old fellow knew him now. He only saw him a few times in the four years he lived here before.”

“Hmph!” said Fogarty placidly. “We’ll find that out in time. Meanwhile, Miss Wainwright, may I use your telephone? Thank you—I’ll send out an alarm for these young men immediately. They won’t get far, not with a wounded man on their hands.”

Hal waited until Fogarty had sent the word that put a price on Mac’s blithe and ruddy countenance. When the policeman sauntered back into the room he was met with a direct and fearless question.

“Fogarty?” Hal queried. “You haven’t kept your promise fully—we’ve told you the truth; and how! What about telling us where you were tipped off about Mac being out there tonight?”

“Certainly,” said Fogarty obligingly. “There isn’t any need for secrecy about that. Mr. Meggle, like the good citizen he is, informed me that he saw you and Tsu and the stablemen transporting McKnight from the house just before I arrived. He approached me out on the trail right afterward. Also he said that he was willing to aid the law by testifying against his nephew. Certainly, McKnight hasn’t much in his favor as far as the law is concerned when he started out at fourteen with fifty pounds of stolen money. And stolen from the man that befriended him as an orphan! His own uncle!”

“It’s easy to see, sir, that that ole skinflint, Meggle, has been havin’ his way at your ear,” Jake said sharply. “I’m a law-abidin’ man myself, but I’d

think twice, sir, before I'd let *him* poison a body's mind agin young Mr. Mac—him that we all knew as a lad, and as a grateful lad, 'til that uncle o' his had made life unbearable for him."

Fogarty smiled. "It's easy to see that you don't like Mr. Meggle, Jake," he said with an irritating placidity. "After all, prejudice hasn't any place in law—it doesn't weigh anything with me either. What I'm out after is my man—*dead or alive!* And so, good evening, folks. If anything of special interest turns up, I'll be at Echo until noon tomorrow. But I hardly think you will 'phone for me, eh? Well, good night!"

"Don't be so sure we won't!" Hal shouted after him. "You may be surprised what'll turn up!"

Fogarty's horse could no longer be heard on the trail when Jean spoke. "Hal," she said, "what did you have in mind when you said that to him? What are you expecting to turn up?"

Hal laughed grimly. "Huh? Oh, nothing, Jean. That's just the funny part of it—it was just talk to Fogarty. I didn't know what I was talking about. I guess it's just my darn faith in Mac that was talking, that's about it."

CHAPTER XXVII ALONG THE TRAIL

They sat on for some time afterward, discussing things and getting nowhere. Not even to bed. No one thought of it, much less suggested it. Jake and Barney and Tsu, for the time being, had thrown off the reserve and dignity of servitors. All at once they had become co-plotters in the cause of Mac.

“Which way could they have gone if they did take him away?” Hal asked wearily. “None of us heard them while Fogarty was here.”

“There’s only one way that I can think of where they went,” said Jake thoughtfully. “That’s up the old trail back o’ the barns.”

Hal nodded and his eyes lighted with inspiration. “They must have been hiding there when we carried Mac out, huh? They could see us from there, I bet, huh, Jake?”

“Reckon they could. Meggle must o’ been spyin’ somewheres ’round too. Danged if I can make out what kind of a heart that man has! He ain’t got no more feelin’ for his kin than the rabbit what eats its young. He was just hoverin’ ’round here tonight like a vulture, yessir! Just waitin’ for his chance to get back at that poor lad after all these years.”

“How we must have been sleeping last night that we didn’t hear Mr. Perry and Mr. Doyle come in and get their baggage,” said Jean. “All I heard was when poor Mac banged up against that door. He must have fallen down away from it to make that terrible noise.”

“I heard Perry and Doyle come in,” said Hal dismally, “but I heard them in my dreams, I guess. Well, it isn’t doing any good to regret that now. I’ve got to concentrate on the present and Mac, believe me!” Miss Wainwright looked weary with the strain of the sleepless night and the nerve-wracking day. She went to her room after a few minutes and Hal envied her that she could sleep for he could not seem to fit the thought of rest into his scheme of things.

Jean sat on with them for a time too, worried and anxious. “I’d put it out of my head for tonight if I were you, Hal,” she said. “You look awfully tired and I notice your foot’s quite swollen again. Is it bothering you?”

“Mac’s the only thing that’s bothering me,” he replied evasively. “I’ve got plans, but first I’m going to ask Tsu if I can have a cup of coffee and a snack. Just to brace me up, sort of.”

Tsu was once more the smiling, willing servitor. He rose and bowed graciously. “I make plenty coffee and sandwiches. We all have snack before sleep, eh? I go right away,” he said softly. “Right away I call you. Not long.”

Jean coaxed the stablemen into staying and having a bite with them and soon they were out in the kitchen partaking of Tsu's refreshments. Hal's nerves were keyed up to an unusually high pitch by that time.

Every little sound inside the cabin and outside vibrated upon his sensitive mind. Consequently it was not strange that he should hear the distant sound of a horse's hoofs long before the rest did.

"I don't hear a thing," Jake said. "Trail's as quiet as the tomb."

At Hal's request, Barney lent an attentive ear. "Reckon I do hear it," he said at last. "Seems like it's most about where that last bulge is."

They all went out then, sandwiches in hand, and with anxious faces. Jake emerged last with a lantern, waving it cordially as the sound of the hoof beats came nearer. Suddenly the horse turned in from the trail and came straight toward the cabin at a light, easy trot.

"Don't seem to be in a hurry," Jake commented, waving the lantern wide.

As the animal trotted into the light they saw, to their amazement, that it was the colt—riderless!

CHAPTER XXVIII

A SUDDEN JOLT

An hour later, Hal shut the front door of the cabin softly and hobbled around to the barn. An infinitesimal glow in the darkness told him that Jake was there having his goodnight smoke and as he came nearer the smell of mellow tobacco mingled with the soft, sweet breeze.

The sky was starless and he couldn't see Jake's face until he got within three feet of him. "It's me," he announced. "Can't sleep, Jake."

"Thought you wouldn't," the old man remarked. "Could tell it by your face before. What you intend doin'?"

"I've had it on my mind ever since Fogarty went that I wanted to take a look up that old trail a way. It's a sort of hunch. Maybe it won't amount to anything. But that's the way I am, Jake. When I get an idea in my noodle I have to carry it out before anything else. Even if I had sleeping sickness. Gosh, in a case of this kind it won't help Mac for me to go to bed and sleep."

"I'd be just like you, young man, if I didn't have my chores to do tomorrow," said Jake. "'Nother thing, I ain't young any more to stand losin' my sleep. What you calc'latin' doin'—go up there now?"

"Mm. Want to take a lantern and snoop around. I've just got to go. Where does that trail lead to, Jake?"

"Three places," answered the man, puffing thoughtfully upon his pipe. "One way it goes to Laidlaw station, other way it switches off north all of a sudden and folks used to get lost that way. 'Nother way it comes right out on that trail b'low skinflint's cabin."

"Meggle's?"

"That's what."

Hal frowned in the dark. "He's the one person I don't care about seeing now. I'm as thoroughly disgusted with that bird as I'd be with the measles."

"Good thing Meggle ain't like the measles," said Jake sagaciously. "'Twould be a terrible thing if he was catchin'. Old Timer gone now, there ain't but one pesky old critter left in these here parts and that's him."

"Talking about Old Timer," said Hal, "he had a queer way of taking his spite out on Meggle, huh? Poor Mac—it would be a rotten trick if things went against him after being left that money legally. But he hasn't anything to do with that robbery—I feel it just as sure as I feel sure that morning will come."

"'Course he hasn't. He ain't that kind—can't I tell 'em? Even them two—Perry and Doyle, what you call 'em, there was somethin' that wouldn't go

'gainst them in my mind. Still things look bad the way they run away an' all. They'd had a better chance if they'd stayed an' talked to Fogarty 'bout it. So would Mr. Mac 'though I ain't holdin' it 'gainst him. I can't figger yet how he could be in a condition to go anywheres very far."

"Maybe he didn't," Hal suggested.

"Mean 'bout the colt?"

"Mm."

"Was thinkin' 'bout that myself. Why don't you try goin' up the trail a bit?"

"It doesn't appeal to me for some reason, Jake. I just have an insistent, crazy hunch to snoop up that old one." Hal patted the pockets of his coat in search of his pipe and feeling its bulk in the right pocket he pulled it out. A piece of paper came rattling out with it and he leaned forward, picking it up from the ground. "That's the famous note Old Timer tied around the rock and threw in the window that night," he explained. "Got the piece of the other one I found—the piece that you heard me telling Fogarty about tonight. It's in my pocket."

"Hmph." Jake murmured and knocked out his pipe significantly. "I'll get that lantern for you and then go to bed. Time I was there 'long ago. Barney's snorin' this long time."

He rose and went into the barn with Hal close at his heels. The tang of hay and well-kept horses seemed so much stronger in the darkness and the pawing of hoofs in the various stalls sounded homelike and secure.

Hal hated leaving it. He hated leaving Jake, for he had a curious feeling of insecurity and danger. Yet he knew that he would always regret it if he did not act upon this dominant impulse. He must go up that trail!

"Well, Jake," he said firmly, "it's goodnight this time, huh?"

"Reckon it ought to be for me. I'd look out for that ankle if I was you, young man. Notice you're not going so spry on it—kind of like it hurts more'n you let on."

Hal laughed. "I haven't even noticed it, Jake. It's really nothing. Just a nasty sprain."

"Should o' had Doc Waters look at it. Wouldn't hurt none. Well, keep off o' it much as you kin an' don't snoop long, eh? Was thinkin' over 'bout that note what you talked of before."

"Yes?"

"Funny, 'bout it. That's what I mean. You know, young man, I've known for a fac' thirty year or more, that Old Timer never had no schoolin'. He always said he got knocked aroun' as a lad and didn't have a relation to his name. Never got a letter that I know of."

"Poor bird," Hal murmured sympathetically. "Maybe he had a reason to

feel sore at people and at the world, huh, Jake. A lonely life he must have had—gosh!”

“Yessir, guess it didn’t suit him none even if he did stick at it so long. But then it was funny ’bout that note business, Mr. Hal. Can’t make it out.”

“Why, what’s so funny about it, Jake? What can’t you make out about it?”

“How Old Timer come to write notes when he couldn’ read or write. He told me once he couldn’ even sign his own name, that’s a fac’.”

CHAPTER XXIX

SEARCH

Hal thought about it as he stepped along through the wet of the dew-laden grass. Not once but a dozen times he turned it over in his mind. Then, once on the old trail, he reverted to his former thoughts and kept an observant eye upon each shrub and twig that the lantern lighted.

After about a quarter of a mile he went back a little way, then retraced his steps. A deer rustled through some shrubbery, frightening him. The beautiful creature was apparently as frightened as he, for she fixed her great, wistful eyes upon him for a moment, her head at a strikingly graceful angle. Then, blinking her eyes as if dazzled by the light, she leaped off with hardly a sound and disappeared somewhere in that vast darkness.

Hal hobbled on and for quite a time there was a curious gleam in his eyes. He studied the trail every inch of the way and determined that he would not turn back until he came to an end of the footprints he was following. They were the footprints of one person, a man walking east toward the Wainwright camp.

He ambled on in this manner for two hours before he realized that he was no longer following the same set of footprints as before. Also, the confusing fact presented itself that he was bewildered about the trail and he could not seem to get his bearings. And to add to his troubles, his foot pained him badly.

The only sensible thing to do, he realized, was to stay where he was until daylight. A soft-looking mound of dead, dry leaves invited him to rest and with a groan he tumbled into it, taking off his coat and using it for a partial covering. The lantern he left lighted and standing at his head to scare away any of the prowling night life that might chance to wander in his vicinity. And five minutes later he was lying motionless, sleeping the sleep of the exhausted.

The noisy twittering of birds he heard in sort of a half consciousness, but it was a rabbit jumping in panic fear across his inert body that finally awakened him. He chuckled and sat up and found at the first movement of his body that his foot was much worse. His ankle was swollen to half again its normal size and a dull throbbing pain set in as soon as he stood on it.

One glance at the sun told him that it must be seven o'clock and past. Another glance revealed the fact that he had been going north instead of south and that he had taken the very direction that Jake had warned him against. So, hungry and rather discouraged, he retraced his steps making rather poor progress with his crippled ankle.

He felt a sense of satisfaction, however, when at last he came back to a turn in the trail and discovered his footprints beside the ones he had followed last night. For a minute or two he looked along the trail that would have taken him back to camp within an hour, then he glanced south and decided to wait for his breakfast yet longer.

He had stifled both hunger and pain when he pushed out of the overgrown trail and came out before Mr. Meggle's tidy looking shack. Loathing and disgust rose in him at sight of the man's home and though he disliked coming face to face with the agent at this time, he squared his shoulders and resolved to see the thing out.

A queer feeling came over him as he knocked on the door and oddly enough he felt a sense of relief when no response came. After a moment's wait he hobbled painfully around the house intending to commandeer the mule if Meggle wasn't about.

As he passed the back window he glanced in covertly and noticed something inside that attracted him. The sun was gleaming brightly upon the glass so that he had to press his face close against it in order to distinguish one object from another in the dim interior. After a second he stepped back and knocked on the door as loudly as he could for he had seen someone lying on a cot and it struck him that there was something unnatural about it.

He knocked only once, then turned the knob. The door did not yield an inch—it was locked. A peculiar thing, indeed, for that country of open houses and hospitality. People didn't have locks on their doors in God's country, Jake had once told him. Then why, he asked himself, did Meggle have one on his?

A sort of desperation surged up within him. There wasn't any rhyme or reason to his behavior from that moment on. His every action was born of blind impulse, and the first movement he made was to smash the glass out of the back window with one sweeping blow of his powerful hands.

If he had felt a moment's fear or hesitation in doing this unlawful thing, it was soon swept away in the tide of a new emotion—anger. His first glimpse of the bound figure on the cot told him that it was not Mr. Meggle lying there.

It was Mac.

CHAPTER XXX

A NEW LIGHT

“Red!” he gasped. “Water!”

“Mac, you poor old scout!” Hal said and gulped, while his hands were flying and untwisting the rope that lashed the young man to the cot. “I’ll get you heaps of water in a sec, old boy. Just until I get this gosh-hanged rope undone!”

Mac smiled weakly and his white, drawn face seemed to relax. “Guess I must have been out half the night,” he whispered. “Clean out—I don’t remember anything after he dragged me up out of that place. I was too weak to yell, Red. He must be crazy the way he threw me over the colt’s back and brought me up here. He....”

“Keep quiet now, Mac,” Hal interposed with a ring of feeling in his voice. “My gosh, you’re as weak as a cat. Wait, I’ll get you the water.”

He rushed over to a table by the window where Mr. Meggle kept his drinking water pail and dipper. As he scooped the dipper full he noticed something half-revealed and half concealed behind the table. Being of a curious state of mind, he waited until Mac had drunk his fill and lay back on the cot in a state of exhaustion, then he investigated.

A few minutes later, he leaned over Mac. “Listen, old boy,” he said tenderly, “are you feeling any better? Stronger? Sure? All right, then. I want to ask you if you’re game enough to stay here for a little while longer—say two hours more. Maybe less. Just a minute, I’ll use Meggle’s ’phone and tell you then.”

He patted Mac’s burning head and went into Mr. Meggle’s sitting room. A few minutes later the connection was made and Jean’s voice came over the wire. Hal spoke in a low tone.

“Me, Jean,” he said. “I’m all right and time’s short. Just found Mac in Meggle’s cabin, strapped to a cot in the kitchen. Meggle’s out and I just happened to think it was Saturday and he’ll be up at the station to meet Number Four. Now listen, yell right away and tell Tsu to tell Jake and Barney to get that buckboard up here in less than nothing and the three of them must come. He’s in a bad way, Jean—fever and all that. Exposure and all. So ’phone Doc Waters ... what? He’s there?”

“He came a minute ago to make his morning call on Mac,” said Jean. “He didn’t know that the poor boy wasn’t here. Wait ... he said he’ll ride along with the men. They’re getting the buckboard ready now. Where on earth have you

been, Hal? I've been so worried...."

"Forget it," Hal said with a gentle chuckle. "Tell that egg, Fogarty, that I want to talk to him.... What? All right, I'll look for him. G'bye, see you later!"

Mac was half asleep when Hal took leave of him. "I've got an errand to do," he said. "Don't worry—things will turn out swell. Just sleep and first thing you know, you'll see lots of faces you like—not Meggle's."

Mac smiled drowsily and was sound asleep by the time Hal had stepped out on the trail. A small terrace of shale marked one end of Mr. Meggle's property and he sat down upon it to wait. Soon he heard the welcome sound of a horse and his heart skipped a beat or two when Fogarty came into sight.

The policeman drew up beside the terrace and his weatherbeaten countenance was dark and frowning. "So, you too, Keen, eh?" he asked.

"Wait a minute, Fogarty," Hal answered calmly, "just wait a minute! First, get down and take a hasty trip into that shack and you'll see Larry McKnight asleep and sick as a dog on a cot in the kitchen. I found him bound hand and foot a few minutes ago."

Fogarty's face lost some of its inscrutability in that moment. He might even have been said to look surprised. He said nothing, however, but hurried in, coming out just as hurriedly a moment later.

"The boy's done in," he said. "Feverish and sick and...."

"I 'phoned to the house and the men are coming after him with Doc Waters. Now listen, Fogarty, will you do something for me?"

Fogarty frowned. "What you got there?"

Hal smiled. "That's just what I wanted to talk to you about. First of all, you can have it with my compliments. The only kind of weapon I'd be interested in right now is a fork and knife and spoon. But that's neither here nor there, to use the phrase of a famous man."

Fogarty almost smiled. "All right, young man, get it off your mind. What's the trouble?..."

"The trouble comes later," Hal grinned. "Just now I want to have your ear, so listen...."

CHAPTER XXXI GHOST LIKE GHOST

Hal threw one long leg over the edge of Mr. Meggle's desk and looked down at the paper upon which the bald-headed station agent was writing.

"For the railroad, Mr. Meggle?" he asked indifferently.

"Um," Mr. Meggle grunted. "Reports an' I don't like to do 'em."

He went on writing, flourishing his pen with an exaggerated manner. Hal followed him as he wrote, reading aloud: "'on account of Train Number Four not coming hear on that day' ... Mr. Meggle, you haven't spelled *here*, right. It should be spelled, h-e-r-e, not h-e-a-r."

Mr. Meggle looked up, annoyed. "What business is it o' yours, young man, eh?"

"Nothing, none at all, Mr. Meggle," said Hal with a gentle smile. "I only thought you'd like to make a good impression with the railroad by spelling your reports correctly."

"Durn your imperdence!" Mr. Meggle exclaimed. "What you want here, eh? How did you come way from Copperhead without a horse or buggy, eh?"

"I didn't say I came without a horse or buggy, Mr. Meggle," Hal said still smiling. "It's a little secret how I came—it's enough that I came to call on you, isn't it? Just a little visit, then I'm going back."

Mr. Meggle frowned but his hand shook ever so slightly when he again took up his pen. He had no sooner begun to write than Hal spoke.

"Do you know what someone was telling me, Mr. Meggle?"

"Say, I got to git this ready 'fore Number Four comes, young man. *What* was someone tellin' you, eh?"

"I was lost in the woods last night when I went out looking for Mac. You know he ran away and the police are after him. Well, as I was saying, I was in the woods and I got so tired I lay down and I had a dream about a ghost."

"Rats!" said Mr. Meggle.

"It was so real to me, Mr. Meggle, that I sort of half woke up," Hal went on unabashed. "I dreamed that this ghost told me he was the ghost of vengeance of those six men that were killed down in the ravine back at the bend."

Mr. Meggle put down his pen. "More tosh," he said weakly.

"Just the same, this creepy creature told me that he was on his way here to invoke...."

"Here? What's 'at?"

"He said he was on his way here to bring down a curse upon the railroad

and this station in particular. I don't know why. Anyway, I woke up and in a flash I thought I saw Old Timer sitting on his mule. The next thing I knew it changed into Mac and before I realized what I was doing I went after him and followed him to your house."

"What?" the man asked.

"I said I dreamed I did all this," Hal said nonchalantly. "I even dreamed I woke up and followed Mac to your house. Gosh, it was awful!"

Mr. Meggle took up his pen, only to lay it down again with a hopeless gesture.

"Funny," Hal said, looking down at the half-written report, "I got a note and a half-written note in my pocket and the writing's just like yours. Even to the misspelled word, *hear*. It's also like the writing you showed me on that note the first night I came here."

Suddenly there came from the adjacent woods, a low moaning sound. Hal started and clutched Mr. Meggle. "That's just the way Old Timer did in my dream last night," he whispered.

Mr. Meggle shrank in his chair visibly. The moan came nearer and nearer, rose to a shriek and ended below the station window in a ghostly cackle. Suddenly the long gleaming barrel of a rifle slid ever so slowly up over the window sill while Mr. Meggle sat looking at it with a terribly fixed stare. "It's the rifle I saw Old Timer carrying in my dream last night," Hal said in measured tones.

Suddenly Mr. Meggle screamed. "It's him come—*it's him!*" he shrieked. "I did it 'cause I hated him with all his gold an' me none! I wrecked the train so's foreigners wouldn' come an' take the gold what I couldn't have! I did it—I did it!"

"And what did you do with your nephew?" came a voice from outside the window.

Mr. Meggle buried his face in his hands and sobbed out that he had dragged his nephew onto the colt and taken him home after learning from Fogarty that Old Timer had left his fortune to Larry McKnight.

"I was goin' to kill him, kill him so's I could get the gold after waitin' all these years," he screamed. "I tried to kill everybody that wanted that gold!"

At that juncture, Fogarty entered, confronting Mr. Meggle with the rifle that Hal had found in the kitchen. The little man seemed beaten and dazed at sight of the mounted policeman and admitted writing the threatening notes as a final indication of his surrender.

Fogarty nodded at Hal and smiled. "Good stuff, young man. How'd you come to think up the spook stuff?"

"Just a case of sauce for the goose," Hal answered. "I depended on his superstitious qualities. He gave us ghostly performances out of whole cloth so

I returned it in good measure.”

“I’ll say you did,” Fogarty said admiringly. “You’ve got a peach of a sense of deduction. When did it occur to you?”

“I don’t know. It’s been in the back of my head all along, I guess. But it didn’t hit me hard until last night. Jake told me that Old Timer couldn’t read or write and that did the trick. Well, if you don’t mind I’ll be going. I hear help coming already. I’ve got a bad foot and I’m some hungry.” The door opened and a half dozen men filed in. Fogarty turned to them quickly.

“Take charge of my prisoner, fellows,” he said gruffly. “Great Scott, can’t you see Keen’s fainting?”

CHAPTER XXXII

SOME LETTERS

Two weeks later, Hal was in a Quebec hospital and sitting up for the first time. A badly infected foot had driven him there and had brought his mother hurriedly on from the States. He was enjoying this first afternoon of convalescence and watched her as she opened some letters at his bedside.

“From Jean, Hal,” she said smiling upon her big son.

Hal grinned. “Read it, Mom,” he said.

She read: “So glad to hear that amputation wasn’t necessary ... I was worried ... it all came of doing too much on Mac’s behalf that night ... don’t worry, he’ll never forget what you saved him from ... Mr. Meggle died on way with Fogarty ... Doc Waters says he thinks the man’s been insane for years ... Mac gets his money, too, which is quite something, and oh, I forgot to tell you Old Timer’s fortune was found in a big flour sack he kept in his woodshed. What a joke! Mac is rich, but there isn’t any gold mine. Old Timer brought that all from Alaska and has hoarded it all these years! Surprise! Enclosing letter for you from the two lost sheep in Buffalo ... will be down next week with Mac and Aunt to bring you and your mother back here ... don’t say no. Good luck ... Jean.”

“Phew! Some news, Mom, huh?”

“Nice letter, son,” said Mrs. Keen. “I’ll love spending a few weeks there. Now, want me to read this letter she enclosed?”

“And how!”

“It begins: ‘Dear Keen ... writing to you because I can’t spell the names of them other people. Can’t remember Mac’s name either ... here in Buffalo me an’ Danny can think once more and feel we ain’t bein’ chased by maniacs or something ... anyways we got to that old guy’s cabin ... Mac goes to the door ... bang ... Mac falls and that maniac murderer cackles like that other day so Danny an’ me ran because we felt Mac’s heart and he seemed like dead ... glad to hear he ain’t ... I threw my brand new rifle to the ground ... that’s how excited I got ... it went off and so did we on the mules...!’”

Hal roared. “Mom, you’d have to meet those birds to appreciate them.”

“I dare say I would, Hal,” smiled Mrs. Keen. “And to continue: ‘We were too excited to say goodbye to youse or anythin’, but I told the lady in a note I thanked her for everythin’ ... we was scared all right, besides I hear they rope you in Canada for things like that whether you do them or not ... We didn’t stop till we got to Echo ... hired a guy to take us to a station where we got a

train to Montreal ... then home ... now it's peace and Danny and me got our old jobs back on the bus ... no more gold huntin' for Danny or me ... whoever finds it can have my rifle ... guess there ain't no more to tell you.... Best regards, from Danny and come see us sometime.... Toodle-oo.... Todd Perry.'”

“Mom, that’s a masterpiece! I’m going to frame it. Darned if I won’t.”

Mrs. Keen smiled. “It’s quite remarkable to say the least. Who were they?”

“That’s a long story, Mom,” said Hal reminiscently. “I’d rather wait and tell it to you when we get back up there in the place that Jake calls God’s country. I could tell it better when Mac’s around. You’ve got to see Mac to appreciate the story of Todd Perry and Danny Doyle.”

“Just as you say, Hal.”

And so for a moment they both turned their faces north. Mrs. Keen was thinking of the ordeal her son had just been through in that vast wilderness. But Hal was thinking of snow-tipped mountain peaks against a sunlit sky, and of a lake shimmering under a glorious moon. And perhaps, of Jean....

But that’s another story.

END

[The end of *The Copperhead Trail Mystery* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh (as Hugh Lloyd)]