

REXX

FULLERTON WALDO

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Title: Rex

Date of first publication: 1932

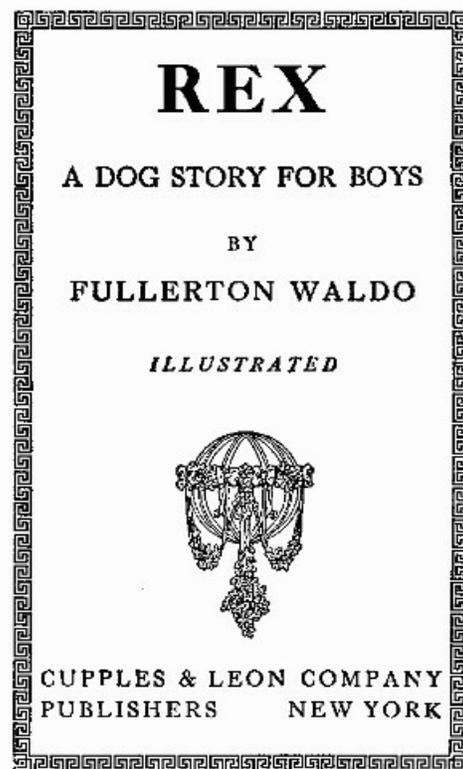
Author: Fullerton Waldo

Date first posted: July 4, 2013

Date last updated: July 4, 2013

Faded Page eBook #20130708

This eBook was produced by: David T. Jones, Mary Meehan, Mardi Desjardins & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpcanada.net>



REX

A DOG STORY FOR BOYS

BY FULLERTON WALDO

ILLUSTRATED

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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REX

Printed in U. S. A.



HERE WAS A CHALLENGE TO A BOY AND A DOG, AS WELL AS TO MEN GROWN!"

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REX

CHAPTER I

HOW REX GOT HIS NAME

"I wish you'd take the little feller home with you," said the village blacksmith, as he lifted the bay mare's left hind foot to pare the hoof.

"The little feller" was a small, inquisitive dog that promised to grow up from his present vest-pocket size into a fine, upstanding specimen of Belgian police-dog.

"I don't want him," said Farmer Alfred Mason, who had brought the mare to be shod. "I've got two dogs up at the house already. The question isn't so much what I'd do with him. What would they do with him?"

The blacksmith pulled the bellows and blew his forge-fire to a rosy heat that shone in his own face. "He's a fine little pup," he insisted. "I don't know who owns him or where he came from. He blew in here a coupla weeks ago and since then nobody's claimed him. He's always under my feet and I'm afraid one o' these here horses some day'll step on him an' squash the life out of him."

The small dog was certainly interested in everything that was going on. With no mother to guide him, this youngster, possibly six months old, was bound to learn for himself all he could about the great round world so full of a number of things.

"Now look at him," said the blacksmith, a note of real liking in his large, rough voice. The man of iron never ceased to drive the nails as he glanced sidewise at the pup. The little animal had an air of superintending and even criticizing the shoeing of the mare. He stood with his ears cocked up, his head on one side then on the other, his bright eyes agleam, now and then uttering a little quavering whine, a sound as small as the whistle of a peanut stand: and it didn't mean unhappiness; it was his way of trying to talk to the men and the mare.

The mare paid little heed: it was beneath her massive dignity.

But Farmer Mason was almost tempted to say: "I'll take him." Mr. Mason, bluff, bearded, hearty and middle-aged, was a great lover of animals. At the hilltop farmhouse a mile away where he lived with his wife and his fourteen-year-old boy Tom, he had a small zoo. It now included white rats and mice, two alligators, two terrapin, a bad-tempered parrot, a Maltese cat, a red squirrel and the two dogs mentioned, named Alphonse and Gaston because they were always pestering each other.

When Mr. Mason thought of taking the dog home, he had a mental picture of all that outfit already domesticated, and the bother one more dog would make. Of course Mother would say to the little stranger that there was plenty of room. But it would be imposing on Mother's good nature. No, no, it wouldn't be fair: Tom had brought home enough birds with crippled wings, enough homeless cats and dogs, enough ailing little creatures to be housed and fed already.

"Sorry," Mr. Mason said to the blacksmith. "I'd like ever so much to have him. But we're full up at home. You just ought to see what we've got there now. Tom brought back thirteen live crabs from the shore two nights ago and had them sleeping in his wash-basin."

"What became of them?" asked the blacksmith.

"We ate them," was the answer. "And Tom hasn't quite forgiven us. He had given them all names. He said he knew them apart."

"Well," sighed the good-hearted blacksmith, as he hung up his pincers and took off his apron, "I certainly would like to find a kind home for the little feller."

Mr. Mason rode the mare homeward up the long hill-road to the farmhouse, and as the freshly-shod hoofs clicked and clashed on the stones through the dust-clouds of a dry midsummer, he almost regretted that he had not brought the dog back with him.

"It would sort of make it up to Tom for losing those crabs," he reflected. "After all, one more dog when you've got two already isn't so many. But I guess it's all right as it is. Gid-dap, Jenny!"

Then he heard a soft whimper from the dust, and looked round.

It was the small dog, trotting after.

"Oho!" he exclaimed. "So you've taken matters in your own paws, have you, youngster? You just thought you'd tag along behind anyway, did you? Go home, sir, go home!" But the tone was not very threatening.

Perhaps because he had no home to go to, and the direction therefore meant nothing, the dog stood still, and looked at the man, irresistibly.

"Don't look at me like that, puppy," said Mr. Mason. "Honest Injun, we haven't any room for you. Unless maybe"—he weakened—"you were to go and sleep in the barn with the calves and the pigs. And just suppose our old Alderney bull got after you. He'd make mincemeat out o' you in no time! He'd just swallow you up in one mouthful! Go home, now, go home!"

But it didn't sound much like a threat—it was more like an invitation.

The little dog not merely stood his ground, but came closer, keeping his eyes fixed on the man's face, as if reading what the face meant and not greatly minding what the words said.

So Mr. Mason, being the man he was, had to give in and admit defeat.

"O well!" he exclaimed, "if you want to come along as much as that, I suppose it wouldn't do so much harm. There's a lot o' rats around the corn-crib lately, anyway, and Alphonse and Gaston are getting too fat and lazy to chase 'em off."

Then, more to the mare than to the dog, he added: "Come along!"

But the dog would have understood the permission, and taken it all for himself, if the man had said it to the clouds and the trees.

He seemed to grow inches taller in a second. No scraping on his stomach in the dust. No fawning, groveling and wheedling now. And no slinking along behind and stopping when the mare stopped.

"My, my, look at that dog run!" exclaimed Mr. Mason to the pointed ears of Jenny. For she was interested, too, as the dog sprang blithely ahead, and rummaged in the ditch to startle a frog this side of the fence or a meadow-lark on the other.

Then, as the dog came back to report to the disdainful Jenny what he had smelt and seen, Mr. Mason laughed aloud. "Why, the little rascal's actually grinning! He knows he's put one over on us!"

By the time they reached the house the dog had covered at least three times the distance the road made it. Could a dog wield a pencil, he could have drawn you a map showing every nest or hole for a strip a hundred feet wide on either side of the road. He could have told you where a woodchuck had lived last season. In this place somebody had crossed the field, crushing the thistles; here a man had slept—and why should he sleep out in a field, instead of under a roof like other men?

Perhaps Mr. Mason in his own thoughts had answered some of the dog's keen questions.

For the farmer had been saying to himself:

"Now a dog like this might be trained to be a mighty good watch-dog. He doesn't seem to miss much. Seems to have his eyes in the air and his nose on the ground at the same time. When you've got a farm a mile from everywhere, like this one of ours, and it's the open season for tramps, it isn't a bad idea to have a dog of this kind around. I don't know. Maybe he'd be too friendly. Some dogs are. It'd be ideal if we could train him so's he'd be amiable with Mamma and Tom and stand-offish with strangers till we told him they were all right. Maybe it'll work out that way. We'll see."

When they got to the house, there was more than a lukewarm welcome for the little new dog from Mother.

Mrs. Mason was the kind that loves to entertain people, and, to her, dogs and horses were people. She was fond, nearly to the point of foolishness, of almost every sort of animal. She was glad that a red fox in winter made his home in an old drain-pipe under the barn. There were bird houses on every other tree—little ones for the wrens, bigger ones for the robins or the cardinals—and there were bird-baths up and down the garden, which were used with a great flutter and spatter to the music of carols on a summer morning.

Man or boy,—dog or horse or bird,—you would have to answer the loving-kindness of Mrs. Mason's mild blue eyes. She mothered everybody, speaking or dumb, four-legged or two-legged.

So when her husband reined in Jenny at the horse-block and she saw the little new dog in Jenny's quivering shadow, she said, "Another dog, Alfred? How nice! He's a young police dog, isn't he? How did you get him?"

"I didn't get him," laughed her husband. "He got me." And thus the dog, still lacking a name, was adopted into the homestead, if not the household.

Tom, the only son, was unspeakably pleased with his new playmate. Tom never could get enough pets anyway, and was always begging his indulgent father and mother for more. At the age of fourteen, he was just a normal school-boy, freckled and shy, all arms and legs, always growing and always hungry, with no particular gifts or graces of which to boast. Dogs he liked better than most of his relatives, because dogs never asked him how he got on at school and which of his studies he liked best. They never gave him good advice, and they never told him things he mustn't do.

When summer came, and Tom was home from school, he was out and abroad over the landscape most of the daylight hours, usually with a string of animals trotting at his heels. When he went swimming in the pond, dogs' heads were about him like young seals. Alphonse and Gaston, fat and puffy, didn't care for swimming, but other dogs gladly reported for duty as boys might run to a fire, from near and far. On the other side of the pond was the railway, about two miles from the Mason farmhouse, and where the highway crossed the rails, outside the village of Waynesboro, was the hut of an Irishman, who had nothing to do but hobble out on the track when the trains came along and wave a red flag at motorists, who, he thought, had a poor right to be on the road anyway. Tom and this Irishman, whose name was Mike Farley, were great friends.

As the summer days went on, Tom and the latest addition grew to like each other better and better. At first, the dog went by the name of Tatters, but Tom wasn't satisfied with that. "He's too—well, noble!" he explained to his mother. "He's getting to look like a prince or something. I guess he's the best dog there is anywhere around here. When he gets to be a great big dog he'll be a wonder to take care of the farm at night and chase away thieves."

That was said just after Abner the hired man reported that thirty-four chickens had been stolen, and dozens of eggs, worth a dollar a dozen. Suspicious characters had been reported loafing about the nearest farm and Mike Farley's little sentry-box. Mike began to carry an old rusty pistol, which he showed with great pride to Tom, saying that his father had carried it in the Civil War and it had never been used since.

Tatters, as he grew in length and strength, and filled out amid-ribs, made friends right and left with dog and man for miles around, since he was a born explorer.

But Alphonse and Gaston were not pleased with him. Those ungainly King Charles spaniels scowled and growled at his most civil advances.

They forgot their standing quarrel with each other, and combined against the newcomer. In every way they knew they told him that they had no use for him, and that a farm of two hundred acres was too small to hold the three of them.

But the fact that he lived with the cattle at the barn, and they lived with the people in the house, saved him many a lashing of their pale pink tongues, many a curling of their snobbish lips over their gleaming teeth.

One day Mr. Mason went down to the barn to look at a new-born calf.

The mother had a pedigree as long as your arm. She was living at the time in a roomy box-stall that gave plenty of space for a calf to take lessons from its mother, spreading its legs and stumbling, falling down and getting up again, and standing astraddle and sprawly like Tom when he was learning to use stilts against the barn.

Mr. Mason let down the top bar of the gate to the stall and climbed over.

Mother cow looked at him with something like resentment in her eyes, and gave a low throaty moo of remonstrance.

"That's all right, Allegra," said her owner, soothingly. "No harm, old lady. Just want to see how your child is. Now be a nice old lady, and get out of the way." For the cow had given the calf some kind of signal only understood between the pair, and the calf had moved over into a further corner where it stood protected by the mother's heaving red bulk.

"Co' boss, co' boss, move over!" the farmer coaxed, in a voice that was mild enough to persuade any cow, at other times, in other places.

But Allegra was not herself to-day. Her calf was very young and she was very nervous. She didn't want anybody fooling round her child. Her trust in man had turned to suspicion deep and dark.

Mr. Mason reached round behind the mother, and took the calf by the short hair on its sand-brown neck. The calf squealed and wriggled, and beat on the floor of the stall with its slipper heels. All these were signals of distress to the mother.

Suddenly, without warning, the cow turned on the man. With a bellow of rage, Allegra lowered her head like a charging bull and in blind anger drove her great curving horns against his blue shirt-sleeves.

Thus taken unawares, Mr. Mason was borne to the floor and found himself unable to rise, for nearly a ton of beef was upon him.

He shouted for help. But the men were far afield with the hay. The farmhouse was two hundred yards off, and his voice would not carry past the closed doors, though he yelled and kicked with all his might.

But Tatters had fortunately set apart that morning for a rat-hunt in the barn. Just now he was resting up in the loft, in the dark, between the cider-mill and a discarded churn. He had killed six rats, and thought he would be lazy and let the next one come to be killed instead of going after him. As he lay with his head snuggled on his paws, he heard the uproar in the basement.

At first he wondered if it might be thieves who had come to steal the chickens. But no—it was the well-remembered voice of his master, uplifted in entreaty.

"Help, help! Mary! Tom! Help!"

The voice grew weaker, and such roaring sounds as a cow is not supposed to make almost drowned out the human cries.

The dog climbed down the ladder—a trick of which he was not a little proud—and raced to the basement.

A strange sight met his brown eyes—his master lying on the floor of Mother Allegra's stall, the cow belligerent and bellowing above him, thrusting and shoving with her horns and the calf trembling and crying in the far corner.

In his own language he flew at the cow, and if he had not been a dog of polite breeding—at least since he came to the farm—you would have said that he was swearing awfully.

Perhaps, therefore, it is just as well to translate his remarks, instead of leaving them in the original dog tongue.

He was saying: "Look here, you great big, silly, crazy cow! Don't you know that your master and mine is the kindest, gentlest master in the world, and wouldn't hurt your baby for anything? Just look what you've done! You've made an awful mess of it. Here he is, all bloody, and you've probably broken his watch and several ribs and——"

But the cow continued to bellow and roar in a mad red rage and wouldn't listen. Legs spread wide apart, eyes fairly aflame, her nostrils flaring and her tail swishing, she seemed to be saying:

"Just let anybody come and try to take my child from me, and I'll show him what's what! I don't care who it is. Get out of my way, you insignificant little worm of a dog, and let me get at him again! I'll fix him!" And with her horns she began again to hook the prostrate, bleeding body of her master.

Then Tatters had a flash of inspiration. A ton of angry cow was too much for two hundred pounds of man, but he would divert the mother's attention and give his master a chance to get to his feet and scramble out of the way. So he flew at the calf, and grabbed it by the nose, and held on. He wasn't really hurting the creature, but it yelled as if it were being murdered.

At once the mother cow deserted the man on the floor and gave her whole attention to the dog. Tatters had the first big fight of his life on his paws.

Whatever became of the human being, the furious cow was bound she would kill the dog ere he could escape from the stall. Plainly her child was begging her to do so. You could imagine the red-spotted nursling boo-hooing: "Mother! He tried to eat me alive! He did, mother, honestly he did. Look at me, mother! He bit me in the nose!"

And the mother was answering back: "Leave that to me! I'll show him, the wretch! He was going to help that wicked man take you away from me. He sha'n't get out of this place alive. Just you wait and see. Get over in your corner there and keep out of the way, and your mother'll tear him to pieces, in two shakes of your tail!"

So the cow lowered her head and rushed at the dog, and Tatters leapt nimbly aside so that she only came crashing against the opposite end of the stall and got several of the splinters of board in her nose. That made her angrier than ever. She lost her horned head completely. She went roaring and smashing about till her own child was afraid of her, and no matter where she poked and prodded, Tatters wasn't there. And what is more, the little dog was laughing at her. In his own fashion he taunted and plagued her, and if you could put down his talk on paper for him it might have been: "You silly old cow, you! You think you can kill me just because there's so much of you and so little of me! But in that little, there is

a brain in the top of my head, and I use it to keep out of your way. If I wanted, I could jump at your throat and hang on for dear life and you couldn't shake me off. But what's the use? Don't you see what has happened? While your back was turned, Mr. Mason has come to, and though he looks awfully white and weak and shaky, he has scrambled over the gate and got out of the stall, and you can't do him any harm at all. Now my advice to you is to take good care of your calf and don't think every time anybody comes to see it there's going to be a murder in the family. Anyway, as soon as the calf grows bigger you won't care about it at all. It'll be just the same to you as any other cow's calf. Now I'm going, in a hurry. This is no place for me. I hear Mr. Mason whistling to me, and I always obey his orders. Good-bye, cow! Good-bye, calf!"

And with a rush and a quick spring the dog was at and over the gate of the stall, and the cow lunged after him to prod him with her horns, but she was seconds too late.

Of course after that, they couldn't do enough for Tatters up at the main house. But the first thing they did was to change his name. Tom said: "Didn't I tell you, Mother, there was something kind of—kind of kingly about that dog?" He was beginning to study Latin and had learned that Rex was the Latin word for king. "You just can't call a dog like that any such name as Tatters. Let's call him Rex, 'cause he's a king of beasts. Anyway, Mother, do you know what I saw this afternoon? There he was, running all over the place, and Alphonse and Gaston after him. They were playing follow-my-leader: they were doing everything he wanted them to do. You never saw anything like it. Why, he's taken all the growl and snarl out of 'em, and all the kink out of their tails. They seem to take orders from him just the way he does from Father. Anything he thinks up they have to do—or they think they have to. If he doesn't lose patience with 'em, they may turn into pretty decent dogs after all."

And that was the way Rex got his name. After that, he moved away from the cows and the horses, the pigs and the chickens, and had his own lined box beside the kitchen stove, where Alphonse and Gaston always slept. Or if he liked—and he often did like—he came upstairs and lay in a corner of Tom's room. Once when Tom sprained his ankle he spent a lot of time lying on Tom's bed and—Tom said—talking to him, while the rats down at the barn became uproarious. Thus the boy and the dog fairly grew up together, and there were tragic times when Tom had to go back to school and couldn't take the dog with him. But with every vacation came a joyful reunion.

"When I go to Heaven, Mother," said Tom solemnly, "I mean to take Rex with me, and if they won't let him in, then I really don't want to go."

CHAPTER II

THE FIRM OF REX AND TOM

When Tom came back to the farm from school at the start of Rex's second summer there, the dog was nearly a year and a half old.

By this time Rex, a strong, big fellow, had become a noted character for miles of road and many acres of meadow and woodland round about, all the way to the lonely Blue Hills that rippled the horizon a few miles north of the farm. Nearly everybody except Abner the hired man liked Rex. But Abner shunned and feared him.

Abner came down to the little Waynesboro station driving a rickety Ford, with Rex running ahead of it, to meet Tom at the train. The dog, every nerve and sinew of his lithe body in perfect working order, could run rings around the creaking and infirm machine.

The dog and his young master hugged each other like two dancing bears. Standing on his hind legs, Rex licked Tom's face and ears, jumped up and down with frantic yelps of joy, and acted like a creature who had lost his reason.

Abner looked on, shaking his frowsy head in disapproval. "You hadn't oughta let a dog lick your face that way, Tom. It ain't healthy."

"Couldn't help myself!" laughed Tom.

Abner frowned. "Dogs an' cats is full o' germs. We been trainin' him different. We just got him broke so he don't scare the life outa people runnin' at 'em an' jumpin' up on 'em. You'll spoil him!"

"It's just his natural spirits, Abner," Tom pleaded, as man and boy clambered aboard the flivver. "That's what I like about Rex. He's lively. Always on the go, and ready to start something."

"Wisht he'd start this here car," said Abner, ruefully. "Most broke my arm a-crankin' her. Now I gotta do it again."

He got out of the rickety machine, and made further vain attempts.

"We ought to have a self-starter, Abner."

"We have. This ain't your father's machine. This is my machine. Wanted to show you how she'd run."

"Where'd you get her?"

"Over to the county fair. There was a feller from the city had a carload of 'em. They was a big bargain."

"What did you pay for her?"

"Fifteen dollars."

"How long have you had her?"

"Got her yistidday." Abner opened the hood and peered in. "I guess somethin's bust. I don't know how to mend it. Suppose we leave her here and walk home."

That was Abner's way. He was easily discouraged. He was fine with cows and calves, but ineffectual with mechanism out of order.

"Let me see," said Tom. He made a brief examination. "Well, I wonder that you got her this far. She's all out of whack!"

Abner chewed a straw pulled from his own hat. "Guess she wouldn't 'a' got here at all, if we hadn't been runnin' down hill," he answered, gloomily.

A man who had been sitting on a baggage truck on the platform of the almost deserted little station slouched up to the pair and muttered gruffly: "What'll you take for the old roller-skate?"

Tom looked at him. He looked like an out-and-out tramp. His hat was a rusted green, with holes where the black hair stuck through: it was evident that soap and razor had been strangers to his ugly face these many days. The narrow, evil eyes were bloodshot and the jaw protruded like a bulldog's, under a brick-red, scowling countenance.

Rex growled, and stepped critically round the stranger, sniffing and studying, as though he were taking notes that he might want to use on a future day.

"Be quiet, Rex!" Tom commanded.

Abner stalled, like the machine itself. "Where do you think you can go in it? 'Twun't be no good to you." That was a queer way to talk, if he wanted to sell it.

"I'm a mechanic," snapped the would-be buyer. "That's my trade. Anybody could see it ain't yours. Why," he went on, warming with enthusiasm for himself, "I bet I could fix her up in twenty minutes so she'd run!"

"Well, if you want her ez bad as all that," said Abner, "you can just give me twelve bucks for her, an' we'll call it square."

The stranger, to Abner's evident surprise, plunged his hand in his jeans and brought up a greasy wad of greenbacks, from which he slowly counted out the money.

It was paid and received in silence, except that each man grunted once, and Rex renewed his growling, as much as to say: "Who's your new friend? I don't like him. I think he's a crook."

And when the man went over to the shabby car, Rex pricked up his ears and watched him, every moment, as he tinkered with it.

"Wish you joy o' the ole wash-tub!" Abner cried as they walked away with Rex. But their customer was too busy fussing with the ruin to answer.

"Did you ever see him before?" asked Tom.

"No. That is, I don't guess so. Well, yes, come to think of it, I guess maybe I did. There was several of 'em. Maybe he was one of 'em and maybe he wa'n't. I can't say. I don't remember."

Abner had a lazy mind in the warm sun, and he hated to disturb its peaceful slumber. But when he once began to talk, he was often too lazy to stop.

"They was a bunch of 'em—five or six, I guess—came to the farmhouse one day lately and asked could they sleep in the barn. I said they'd better not, they might get chewed up. Then one of 'em—I guess maybe it was this one—says: 'What'd we get chewed up with, rats?' An' I says, 'No—dog!' An' then I whistled, an' for about the only time he ever done it, Rex came runnin' up to me, just like askin' me what I wanted. I was goin' to tell him to sic 'em, but I didn't have to. They said they guess'd they didn't wanta sleep in the barn, after all. Rex was lookin' at 'em just the way he looked at that feller just now. Once in a while Rex looks that way at me, and it kinda gives me the cold shivers. I never did see why your pap wanted to have a dog o' that kind. But I guess maybe it's just as well, with crooks like that foolin' around here. I dunno which makes me more nervous, that dog or them fellers."

They took a short cut homeward, along the railway embankment past the crossing where Mike Farley was stationed as flagman.

They found Mike placidly dozing, his chair tilted against his little sentry-box, although the afternoon freight was due in a few minutes. The whistle would have roused him if they hadn't.

"Mike!" shouted Abner, "Tom's home!"

Mike, though he did not rise, lowered his chair's two front feet and his own slowly to the ground, and opened his eyes to their widest blue.

"Welcome home, b'ye!" he exclaimed good-naturedly, as he put out his big hand. "We've missed ye. Glad ye're back. How's yer ma an' pa? They ain't been by here lately. Too busy, I guess. Or maybe I was asleep. I hope not. I hear you got a car over to the fair yistiddy, Ab."

"Yes," said Ab, glumly. "I did. But I sold it."

"To who?"

"A fellow I met down to the station jes' now."

"Why?" asked Mike, beginning to unroll his red flag to give warning of the train.

"It bust down."

"They always do, sooner er later, Ab!" Mike nodded his head sagely. "I told ye 'twas a waste o' money. Who was the

fellow ye stuck with it?"

"I dunno his name. I think it was one o' the bunch I told ye about that come to the house an' wanted to sleep in the barn."

"Oh!" said Mike. "Them iron-workers that was thrown out o' the Lamson foundry the other day. They're a bad lot. They was tryin' to wreck the machinery, is what I hear, 'cause the boss wouldn't give 'em any more money. They've been hangin' round here, expectin' him to give in, I s'pose. But he wun't. No, siree, he wun't. I know him. Used to work for him. His name's Jim Sparlin. Hard as the nails he makes. An' loves fightin'. They can't lick him. Ain't no use for 'em to hang round here any more, after he's told 'em to get out. Only I don't want 'em here when the pay-car comes along. Some of 'em's always rambling up an' down the track an' hauntin' round the station lookin' fer trouble. The new ticket agent told me several of 'em wanted to sleep in the station the other night. That was the night you wouldn't let 'em sleep in your barn, I guess. Or maybe the dog wouldn't. I tell you, that's some dog! Goo' boy, Rex, goo' boy!"

He hobbled to the middle of the road and stood there waving his red flag as the freight train hove in sight, chugging round the curve through a deep cut, with a pall of black smoke for the up-grade, and a shrill, long-drawn whistle for the station.

As it crashed and rumbled past, engineer and brakeman waved to Mike a friendly greeting.

"When the pay-car comes along does she always stop here?" Abner asked Mike, in a tone that was meant to sound indifferent and still betrayed a good deal of interest.

"You bet she does!" exclaimed the Irishman. "I go aboard her, too. Used to have to go up to the station to git my money. But since the rheumatiz took me so bad in the right leg they stop for me here. Just long enough to climb aboard an' sign the book an' git a good cigar outa Bill Sykes an' tell 'im a story an' git off again."

"Well, I guess we'll be goin' on upta the house." Abner turned to Tom. "I was goin' to give you a ride in my car. But she ain't no good to me now. Ne'mmind: I only lost three dollars on her. That ain't so much."

Tom whistled to Rex, who was rummaging among charred stumps on the other side of the track, and the trio started up the long, slow hill to the farm. Tom was full of stories of the life at school, to which Abner listened, poking in a "hum" or a "haw" now and then, to show that he heard. But he was not a very exciting audience.

Pretty soon he pulled a brown bottle from his left hip pocket.

"What's that stuff?" asked Tom.

"I hafta take it," answered Abner. "Doctor told me to. Tonic for my liver." He applied it to his lips. If it was medicine, it must have tasted unusually good, for he smacked lusciously and then he took what he called another swig, just for good luck.

At the farmhouse that evening, Tom told his parents about the accident to the car, and mentioned Abner's medicine.

Mr. Mason looked troubled. "It's awful stuff," he said. "It'll be the death of him. I've warned him often enough."

"He's been acting so queerly lately," Mrs. Mason remarked. "There's something curious about the way he got that car yesterday and sold it again to-day. Do you suppose it really broke down, or that he was only pretending he couldn't fix it?"

"Why should he be pretending, Mother?"

"I don't know. Maybe he was a friend of that man, and wanted him to have it."

"But Mother, they didn't act as if they knew each other at all. They didn't talk to each other like friends."

"Well, of course I don't know," Mrs. Mason admitted doubtfully. "I just had an idea, with this drinking and everything, and those queer men hanging round here, that maybe——"

"Maybe what?" Mr. Mason lowered his newspaper and looked at Mother over his glasses.

"Oh, I don't know," said Mrs. Mason.

"I wonder why he asked Mike Farley about the pay-car, Father?"

"What did he say to Mike about it?" inquired Mr. Mason.

"He asked if the pay-car always stopped at the crossing."

"O well," said Mr. Mason, turning to the next sheet of his *Wayne County Weekly Gazette*, "Abner and Mike have known

each other quite a while. I guess Abner just asked the question to make conversation. I told Abner to-day he could look for another place. He gets drunk too often. I'm sick and tired of him. I've lost all patience with him."

Mrs. Mason heaved a sigh of relief. "I'm glad of it, Alfred," she replied. "I never really trusted him. The sooner he goes the better.—Look at Rex. You'd almost think that dog takes in every word we're saying!"

Long afterward they recalled how Rex's eyes shone in the radiance of the new electric lamp that evening. There he lay, nose on paws, looking up at them—ready to caress a knee or nuzzle a hand if offered the least encouragement to do so.

"I tell you," confessed Mrs. Mason, "I'm getting as fond of that dog, almost, as though Tom had a four-footed brother. Tom, when you're away at school I get so missing you so much I'd almost die if Rex didn't comfort me. He's a big help. We're great pals, aren't we, Rex?"

The dog thumped his tail on the rag carpet, meaning yes with all his might.

That same night, about midnight, Tom in his third-story room was dreaming beautifully—all the nice things of which a boy could dream after his first day of summer freedom.

He dreamed, for one thing, that he was flying in a bi-plane with silver wings high over the hills. He was going in a spiral, up and up. Rex was sitting beside him in the cockpit of the plane, barking at all the world below, and especially at the dogs of the different countries they were crossing—Brazil and India and Africa and Japan, all in a few minutes. There were mountains with snow on their tops, and there were roaring seas, with ships that plunged ahead through gales and lashing water-spouts. And then the plane passed directly over the red-hot, flaming top of a volcano, and Rex was barking louder than ever. The smoke rose in choking billows, and Rex was tugging at Tom's sleeve as if to tell his young master that it was very dangerous to stay there, and they must fly away as fast as they could....

Suddenly, as if his plane had crashed to earth with him, Tom woke to find that whatever he had been dreaming, the fire was real.

Smoke was pungent in the air, and it poured into the room under the crack of the door so thick and strong that he could hardly breathe. He rushed to the open window.

Down below his father and mother, hidden by the smoke, were calling him, and Rex barked loudly.

"Coming!" Tom screamed. He snatched up coat and trousers and threw them on.

Then he sprang to the door of the room. It was locked.

Abner's room was next his own.

He ran back to the window, climbed along the rain-gutter, and found his way to Abner's room. Abner was not there.

The bed had been slept in, but Abner's clothes were gone, and his big carpet-bag was missing.

Tom sprang to the window. In the red glare his father caught sight of him, through the smoke-clouds.

"Tom!" Mr. Mason shouted. "Come down! Where's Abner?"

"I don't know!" Tom called back.

The boy wrenched open the door and ran into the hall. The house was full of smoke, and as he looked over the banisters he saw flames licking and leaping below.

That way of escape was cut off.

Once more he sought the window. There was no porch on that side of the house. The winter shutters had been removed. It would have been a drop of more than thirty feet from the sill to the ground.

His father, with Rex at his heels, ran into the house. At the foot of the stairs a wave of fire met them, as from a seething furnace, and Mr. Mason recoiled from it.

But Rex refused to stop for anything. Up the blazing stairway bounded the gallant animal several steps at a time.

"Rex, go back!" Tom cried—but the dog kept on.

And he came just in time.

For Tom was so choked and blinded by the smoke that he no longer knew what he was doing.

As Rex sprang to him, the boy fell upon the animal in a dead faint, his arms tightly clasped round the dog's neck.

Losing not a second, Rex put forth all the strength left in his stalwart frame, turned to the head of the stair and began to drag the half-conscious boy down the stairway.

Rex's hair was afire, and Tom's clothes were burning, too.

Step by step the dog tottered downward into the seething, writhing flames.

It was as if he walked directly to his own destruction.

He could go no faster, for at any instant the boy's fingers might relax their hold.

The flames leapt about him like devils that would snatch away the precious burden if they could.

Once Tom was roused, as they reached the landing, half-way to the second floor.

"Good—old—Rex!" Tom said, but he did not know that he said it.

Round the corner Rex dragged him, and the floor was all but burned through. The rafters sagged and at any instant might collapse into the living-room.

Just then Tom let go his hold and fell, rolling over and over to the bottom of the stair.

The dog stopped an instant as though he could not follow.

The fire was round him, in a high leaping ring, and the smoke coiled through its rage, in angry billows like sea-waves under the lashing of the storm.

With a defiant toss of his head, and the light of the fire gleaming in his eyes, Rex plunged on down to the foot of the stair, before the open front door of the house.

Then he seized the belt of Tom's Norfolk jacket in his teeth, dragged the boy out into the open, and fell over at the feet of Tom's father and mother as though dead.

When Tom came to, he was in his father's arms, by the lilac hedge. His mother was bathing his face and forehead from a tin dipper. Rex, revived, looked on anxiously. Round about them were scattered the few things that Mr. and Mrs. Mason and the faithful cook Martha had been able to save.

"How did it happen, Mother?"

"You know as much as I, dear boy."

"Did somebody set the house on fire?"

"I think Abner did it," Mr. Mason put in. "He wanted to pay me back for getting rid of him. When Abner gets drunk, he goes mad—he'll do anything.—God bless that dog!"

Mrs. Mason put her arm about the animal's neck, and he pawed her knee. "He saved Tom's life," she said in a low voice with tears in it.

"I don't know what happened, Mother. I just remember falling on Rex's neck, and holding on to him. Then I think I must have fallen down the stairs. He must have pulled me to the door when we got to the bottom. Isn't he a wonder?"

By this time a few of their distant neighbors had come, several in their cars and the rest afoot.

But there was nothing they could do. The ancient farmhouse was dry as a bone, and with such a rushing start it was a smoking ruin long before the summer dawn.

There was an old, abandoned house across the road, which Mr. Mason owned, and into it they promptly moved. They wasted little time in vain regrets.

"We've lost just about everything," was the way Mrs. Mason put it. "But things don't matter, compared with those we love. Thank God, only poor Alphonse and Gaston lost their lives. We'll make this house into the cosiest, happiest home that a father, a mother, a boy and a dog ever lived in."

And if you came by several weeks later, and saw the repainted house, with the crimson rambler over the door and the white curtains at the windows, you would say they were succeeding.

But Abner had not returned, and they often puzzled over the riddle of his disappearance.

CHAPTER III

THE HUNT

Two weeks after the fire, Tom and his father went hunting with Rex in the Blue Hills, six miles to the north of the farm. The Ford, kept in a shed next to the barn, had been saved from the fire, and Rex, who loved motoring in all its forms, hopped gaily aboard.

As they skimmed along the dusty road up which Rex came the first day he ever saw the farm, the dog was turning his head like the weather-vane on the barn, to make sure he wasn't missing anything.

He was full of the joy of life, and he was in such fine condition that the burns he got in the fire had healed already. He talked in his own way to the clouds and the breeze and the sun and the swift birds, hearing and seeing everything, it seemed.

Now and again he spied another dog by the road or in the distance, and—however far away—barked a greeting or a challenge.

The road went directly by the cabin of Mike, the switchman, and instead of a mere passing nod from the flivver they all got out to be sociable a minute with the genial, lonesome Irishman.

"Begorry," said Mike, "I hated to miss the fine big fire ye had. But I could bring ye nothin' to put it out, an' I didn't know till it was over. D'ye know who it was did it?"

"I think Abner must have done it, Mike," Mr. Mason answered. "He had a grudge against me. And I haven't seen him since."

"Well, I've seen him," Mike clenched his fists. "Entirely too much of him. Three times he's gone by here in an old car with one o' them fellers from the iron works—I guess it was the feller he sold the car to. They wanted to borrow money, an' cussed me because I gave 'em none. And I don't think they're hangin' around here for any good. Each time they asked me when the pay-car would be comin' along."

"When does it come?"

"Sh-h-h!" Mike held up a warning finger and looked round, as if telling a state secret. "Next Saturday afternoon about five o'clock."

"Maybe you'd better not be here alone when it comes, Mike," advised Mr. Mason.

"Don't you worry, sor! I'll have a coupla big-fisted fellers here'll make trouble for 'em if they try to start something. Anyhow"—he wiped his hot forehead on the sleeve of his blue-striped jumper—"the crew o' the pay-car could most stand off the German army, I guess, with all the guns 'n' things they got aboard."

Through Mike's valiant bluster you could detect the hollow ring of a shaken confidence.

"What's Rex doing?" Tom exclaimed.

Rex, nose down to the red clay, was making his own slow trail along the road in the direction of the hills.

When Mr. Mason called, the dog stopped, and when the call was repeated he returned, as though reluctant to leave off.

"Maybe he's got Abner's scent." Mr. Mason patted the dog's shoulder, and caressed him behind the ears.

"It's a pretty strong scent," Mike said. "He wouldn't have to go fur to git it."

Mr. Mason laughed and then looked serious. "Mike, I think maybe I'd better be on hand Saturday afternoon, in case you need help when the pay-car stops here."

"Oh, no, don't you bother." The Irishman tried to sound care-free. "Them pay-car fellers can look out for 'emselves."

"But suppose they came along after the pay-car left, and held you up?"

"They wouldn't get much," Mike grinned. "Are you goin' over to the Blue Hills?"

"Yes. The wildcats are getting pretty thick, and there are some bears, too, and they asked me if I wanted to come over and help thin them out." Mr. Mason was a famous shot, and not a hunt in the neighborhood, for many miles around, was

considered complete unless he and his faithful Winchester went along.

"Anyway," Mr. Mason continued, "I'm curious to see what the dog can do. He hasn't been to a big hunt yet with me."

"I bet he'd be a wonder in a man-hunt," said Mike. "Guess he knows 'bout everything you say, don't he?"

"He's a regular mind-reader!" put in Tom, eagerly. "He's been hunting a lot of times we don't know anything about."

"Well, daylight's precious: we must be getting on," his father exclaimed. "I want to get back to Mother by sundown. I don't suppose Abner will bother us again, now that we've lost pretty nearly everything in the fire. But it's rather lonesome for her with nobody but Martha.—Good-bye, Mike!"

The road passed into a lonely glen in the foot-hills, and narrowed. There were bold crags on either hand with young oak-trees jutting from the crevices. At a little old bridge they stopped to get water for the radiator from the loudly quarreling stream, while Rex hopped out and took a bath and a good long drink. He loved water, and never missed a chance to take a dip in pond or brook.

Round the first bend beyond the stream was a small house by the road, and Bill Adams, famous hunter, tall, grizzled and raw-boned, was sitting on the stoop waiting for them, his shotgun across his knees.

"Howdy, Mr. Mason! Howdy, Tom! Well, Rex, you've been gettin' a joy-ride, haven't you?" Dog and man were on the best of terms. Rex nearly wagged his tail off as Bill stroked his head. "It's a good day to go huntin', Mr. Mason. That dog o' yours'll be a big help. The animals is gettin' too thick around here."

"Done any damage to your chickens?"

"Yep. The pesky varmints! If there's anythin' a hungry wildcat won't take a fancy to, I'd jest like to know what it is! They come round here nights howlin' somethin' scandalous, like all the devils let out o' hell. Guess you could most make your way along this road by their bright eyes shinin' in the leaves o' the trees."

"Come now, Bill, we know you're a mighty hunter," protested Mr. Mason. "But that's laying it on a bit thick."

"That's the truth, sure as I'm six feet three in my stockin' feet.—Well, let's take the path from behind the chicken-house. That's the one the critters come along mostly. An' believe me, they do come!"

As the procession started, Rex in the lead, Bill kept up a running fire of his memories, most of them quite as tall as himself.

Bill's reputation for stretching the truth was about equal to his great name as a gunner. It was no use to contradict him with the facts—he could wiggle out like a weasel from a hen-roost.

"Yes, sir, as I was sayin', the wildcats certainly is thick in these parts.

"One winter night when I was comin' home from Waynesboro by the short cut through Perry's Woods, I had on a fur cap stood up on my head like a rabbit's ears.

"I come to a place where the branches hung down low over the path, all covered with ice. There was a wildcat settin' thar in the branches I didn't know about.

"Suddenly I see a gleam o' eyes like diamonds, an' out come a long paw with great hooks on the end.

"It was the wildcat reachin' for my hat, thinkin' it was a rabbit. I let the cat have it, 'cause I didn't have nothin' to argue with.

"My, how that cat did cuss an' snort an' rip and tear round with that hat! You could 'a' heard it yellin' an' screechin' from here to Kingdom Come.

"A few nights later there was an awful to-do bust out in the hen-roost, an' I rushes out there, an' what does I see?

"I see my hat, cavortin' in an' out among the chickens, an' every now an' then a paw reachin' out from under it an' killin' a chicken.

"I give a yell, the hat goes rip-snortin', toward the chicken wire, an' then that there ole cat wriggles outa it an' goes skedaddlin' away as fast as a airplane.

"Yessir, that cat had been usin' my cap just like it was a fur coat, it was so freezin' cold, an' if it hadn't 'a' come off, it woulda been wearin' it yet.

"I can prove it—'cause see, it's the hat I'm wearin' now. Feel it"—he handed it over to Tom—"and you'll find there's big holes in it, lots o' places, where the wildcat stuck his paw through.—Say, is your dog a tree-climbin' dog?"

"He can climb a little way," Tom asserted proudly. "There's a tree at home he goes up, as far as the first crotch in the branches."

"Well, I had a bird dog once," lied Bill cheerfully, "that didn't wait for the birds to come down to the ground. No sir-ee. He'd rush right up a tree after 'em, he would. He'd run right out on the end o' the topmost branches an' catch the birds fast asleep. Sometimes he'd catch 'em sittin' on their nests and wring their necks before they'd wake up. But I had to cure him o' the habit o' eatin' birds. Too messy.—Look a' that dog o' yours! Bet he sees a cat. You'd think he was froze stiff."

Rex was standing at the foot of a big, thick oak-tree—one of the patriarchs of the forest that had somehow outlived the fires that too often swept the mountain.

The dog did not bark to alarm the wild things near and far, but stood motionless as a pointer, like one of these cast-iron dogs people used to put on their front lawns.

"Bet I see the pesky varmint," Bill whispered huskily.

His big forefinger was held like a pistol toward a large dusky lump next the tree-trunk where a low branch projected.

Though there was plenty of sunlight above the canopy of the trees, little found its way into the leafy gloom below.

"The dog's a-goin' after him, blest if he ain't! Git ready to shoot!" commanded Bill, suiting the action to the word.

Rex ran back from the tree a little, in a half-circle.

Then he came rushing at the tree as if he were out for a record.

The trunk sloped, and the bark was heavily ridged. At the first attempt, his claws slipped, and he fell back from a point just below the branch at which he was aiming.

Then he tried again, and again he fell back on the stones and the roots. But he was not a dog to be easily discouraged.

A third time he tried, with might and main, and this time he scrambled up into the crotch.

The dusky lump had retreated, hissing and spitting, out toward the end of the branch till it bowed down and started to crack. Meanwhile the wildcat yelled like a pack of fiends, a cry between a moan and a groan, rising to a mad, derisive screech like the laugh of a hyena.

Bill raised his gun to shoot before Rex crawled out too far on the branch and came too close to the wildcat.

Then the cat leapt like a huge flying squirrel, and landed on Tom's head.

All Tom knew was that a mass of gripping white teeth and tearing nails had fallen on him like a fuzzy cloudburst of cat.

The others rushed to his aid, but the dog was ahead of them.

Without hesitating a second, Rex leapt from the branch on the raging animal below.

Then it was for the dog and the wildcat to settle the dispute between them, for no outsider could help Rex now.

The cat was smaller, but it was a most formidable foe.

For all the tiger was in the blood and claws and teeth. Here was no domestic pussy, playing Robin Hood for fun in the woodland. But it was fifteen spitting, fuzzy pounds of pure deviltry, with barbs and spikes—it seemed—on all sides and at both ends.

Dog and cat rolled over and over, and even Bill, hero of countless frays and forays, didn't try to pry them apart, and didn't dare to shoot for fear of hitting Rex instead of the wildcat.

Tom got to his feet, white and shaky, bleeding at several places, bruised and sore all over. His jacket was torn in shreds.

But all he cared about was Rex. If anything happened to the dog——!

Rex was very well able to take care of himself. The enraged screams of the wildcat grew weaker. Presently with a final howl of despair and defeat, the wildcat relaxed the hold of its jaws on Rex's thick pelt, quivered and lay still. Rex gave the creature a final shake or two by the neck to make sure, and then lay panting beside his prey, heeding little the caresses and congratulations.

Not a shot had been fired in the fight. The blood was all over the rocks and the gray dead leaves. There were bits of fur, some of them Rex's, some of them the wildcat's, scattered about as tokens of the fierce encounter.

"Mebbe that's about enough for this time," said Bill. "Shall we call it a day?"

But Rex wouldn't have it that way. His nose was always telling him strange tales that a man couldn't get—and it seemed to be telling him a new story now.

For already he was on his feet, and his nose was on the leaves close to the path.

"What's he got now?" Bill wondered aloud.

"I'll call him off if you say," Mr. Mason suggested. "He must have killed the king of them all. I think he's entitled to a good long rest before he goes up against another. Let's quit now, and come back another time."

But Rex had started into the deep woods, away from the path.

Bill pushed down the branches and watched the dog intently. "Do you know what he's got now?"

"What?" exclaimed the boy and his father together.

"I bet it's a bear. The way the branches is broken an' the ground looks, it must be a bear. They's been several of 'em around here lately."

"If it is a bear, it won't give him much of a fight, Bill."

"No—a ordinary bear wouldn't. But Tom Sykes told me they's a mother bear with little ones a-prancin' round these parts somewhere. He saw 'em once. If Rex meets up with that mother bear where them cubs are he'll be sorry. What happened just now won't be a patch on the scrap there'll be if he ever finds her."

Rex came running back as if to put a question.

"What is it, old boy?"

Rex nosed the ground, and then looked up eagerly.

"I think I know what he wants to tell us, Father. He means it's something strange and new, something different from the first trail that led to the wildcat. He just wants to ask our permission—and he wants to know if we're coming along."

"Forward march!" Mr. Mason cried.

The dog needed no other orders, and darted ahead, allowing himself a few joyful barks by way of exclamation points.

Over sharp rocks and shaggy windfalls of dead trees they clambered wearily, till they came to a den where several rocks were jumbled together under a projecting forehead of a cliff.

It would have served well as the lair of bear or wolf, or the rendezvous of pirates, a good place to hide their gold.

Tom got down on hands and knees and crawled in between and under the rocks at the entrance.

Then he backed out hastily. "Father!" he cried. "I saw two eyes shining in there!"

Rex, eager as he was, had stood aside to let the boy push his way in if he chose.

As the lad withdrew, Rex presented himself, a more than willing volunteer.

"Don't let him go in, Father!" Tom pleaded. "The bear'll kill him."

They all stood still and listened.

Then Bill spoke. "That ain't the old mother bear," he said. "It's the young uns, waitin' for the mother to come back."

Bill went to the entrance, stooped and peered.

"Great jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" he exclaimed. "There's somethin' in there that ain't no bear. It's a man!"

Mr. Mason came closer with his rifle. "Is he alive?"

"I dunno," answered Bill. "Mebbe he's drunk or asleep."

Then Bill lay flat and squirmed in, pushing his gun ahead of him. They could hear the bear-cubs beating a scrambling retreat, and calling for their mother, in a way that made Bill's venture very risky unless the Winchester should intercept

her.

But Bill did not go far. He backed out hauling with him the body of——

"Abner!" exclaimed father and son in the same breath.

"Looks ez if he was tryin' to make his home in the same place with the bear's family," said Bill, grimly. "Wonder if the rest of that gang was here? If they was, they got away, an' this poor feller didn't."

"You knew Abner, didn't you?"

"Sure I knew him. He come by my house yesterday, crazy drunk. Wanted another drink, and when I give him water he swore an' wanted to fight me. I laughed an' he went off mad as a hornet, sayin' he'd get me one o' these days."

Abner's face, hands and body were torn as though in a desperate encounter with the she-bear.

"I s'pose," said Bill, looking down on the body not unkindly, "he crawled in there an' she cotched him asleep."

Then Bill knelt. "Le's see what he's got in his pockets." He pulled out a gold watch and chain. "Why, that's Mother's!" Tom exclaimed. "She thought she lost it in the fire."

They found nothing else of value.

But on a torn bit of brown paper were these words scrawled in pencil:

"Don't ferget to Be at the Pay Car Satterdy five o'clock with the Car."

Bill whistled. "So that's it! He joined their gang. They're goin' to use that ole flivver I seen 'em in lately. Mebbe we can put a crimp in their style. We'll see!"

There was a sudden crashing in the bushes.

Bill grabbed his gun, ready to fire.

"Come back, Rex!" called Mr. Mason.

Then a great black head parted the thicket of birch bushes, and the mother bear raged into the clearing ready to tackle all who stood between her and her crying cubs in the den.

Bill let her have both barrels, and the Winchester spoke at the same instant.

But for once, Mr. Mason missed, and the shotgun's charge was no more than red pepper to the furious animal. Before they could fire again, Rex was on the bear.

Locked in the grip of wrestlers, dog and bear rolled over and over. Rex wasted no breath in reply to the furious grunts of his antagonist.

The bear had her talons out like boat-hooks—you could imagine that you saw them flash like the blue steel of the rifle in the sun.

But Rex fought with the wary cunning of a grizzled old stager. Where had the young dog won such wisdom? How did he know enough to keep out of the way of the foaming jaws and gnashing tusks of the old she-devil, that had already done for Abner?

Rex had his vise-like grip on the bear's throat, and there he hung for dear life, as the animal rose on her hind feet, tottered and swayed, and hurled him this way and that, striving in vain to throw him off.

The little cubs, hearing the fuss, had come to the mouth of the den, and there they stared and cried and tumbled, afraid to come any further, piteously squealing to attract the attention of their preoccupied mother. But nobody noticed them.

The fight did not last long. Bill Adams saw to that. As bear and dog fell to the ground again, Bill produced a huge clasp-knife from his jeans, closed in upon the struggling pair, waited for his chance and then drove the blade between the bodies into the heart of the bear.

With a groan that was almost human, the bear's great paws went limp all at once, but Rex did not relax his hold as the huge shabby carcass fell over and lay still. They had to haul the dog from his prey, and even when Rex had taken his fangs from the lacerated throat he still stood gazing at the creature he had killed as St. George might have looked at the slain dragon. He was not angry now.

"Come on, old scout," coaxed Tom. "You've done enough to-day. One wildcat and one bear."

"Guess that's as many as the law allows," was Bill's grim comment. "We'll put some rocks over Abner's body and tell the coroner about him. Then we'd better look in the den and see if we can find anythin' else, except bear cubs."

They hid the body securely against beast or bird, drove the little crying cubs away with pity in their hearts for the small creatures, and then Tom pushed his way into the den, but found no traces of human occupancy.

Evidently it was not the fixed rendezvous of outlaws, but merely a place that Abner had unluckily chosen for a night's refuge. They would have to continue their search if they wanted to find the permanent abode of the men who planned to hold up the pay-car.

As they rambled homeward with Rex in the lead, they wondered where in the wild and lonely glens of the Blue Hills the others were hiding. Abner was evidently on his way to find them when the bear killed him.

"Them bear-cubs," said Bill to Tom as they said good-bye at Bill's door, "is big enough to get along without their mother. You needn't worry about that. But I wisht I knew where the rest o' that gang might be. They're liable to pop out on us any time an' surprise us. It won't be the first time crooks has been hidin' in the Blue Hills. There's other things oughta be cleaned out o' them hills besides wildcats an' bears!"



CHAPTER IV

NARROW ESCAPES

Rex might have been a very busy dog, had the attack on the pay-car come off on the Saturday afternoon to which the scribbled note, found in Abner's pocket, had pointed.

But though Mr. Mason, Tom, Rex, the new hired man and eight other men from Waynesboro hid in the bushes near Mike's hut and waited for the robbers to appear, nothing out of the ordinary happened on that Saturday. The pay-car came as usual. Mike boarded it as he always did and got his money, and disembarked, and counted his money a second time as he sat in front of his sentry-box, and nobody appeared except a flock of extremely noisy crows, and a couple of chicken-hawks high against the blue.

Tom and Rex were really disappointed. Tom said it all, for both of them, in Rex's sympathetic right ear.

"Rex, old boy, those robbers were going to do it—we know they were, don't we? But when they found that Abner, who got the flivver for them, had been killed when he broke into the old she-bear's den by mistake, they thought they'd hold off for a while. Tell you what I believe, Rex. They're living somewhere in those woods near the bear's den, or else 'way back in the hills—and they mighta been snooping around the day we went on the bear-hunt, and I guess they thought we were looking for them. But you wait and see, Rex. One of these days when they think everybody's forgotten about 'em they'll come out of the woods and try to pull off the hold-up. Then we'll get them.

"You see," he went on, rubbing behind Rex's ears in the way the dog loved, "they aren't the kind that can live in the woods—they never were Boy Scouts. And they know that Abner's body was taken away to be buried, and they could be pretty sure that the note they wrote to Abner would be found on him.

"So we'd better sit tight and be all ready for 'em any time—especially on a Saturday afternoon when the pay-car's due. The railroad people and the people in Waynesboro that know about it probably think they've given up and gone away forever—but we don't think so, do we? No sir-r-ee!" And he threw his arms round Rex's neck as the dog barked a ready assent to all he said.

Tom and Rex had made a confidant of Captain Victor Austin, the young pilot in charge of the flying field that the Eagle Aircraft Corporation had located not far from the old house into which the Masons had moved after the fire. Captain Austin with his wife and four-year-old daughter lived in a small cottage near the hangar and were all frequent visitors at the Mason home. There was nothing Tom and Rex loved more to do than to walk over to the flying field and watch the Captain and his mechanic overhaul the shiny bi-plane,—the "Eagle," it was named,—"tune up" the roaring motor and "take off" for short trips around the near-by country with passengers who had come out from Waynesboro for the ride. Tom had even been up in the plane and had flown over the wild Blue Hills where he now felt sure that the robber gang was hiding. He had told Captain Austin all about the discovery of Abner's body and how some day soon he wanted to put Rex on the trail of the outlaws. They talked it all over one afternoon while Jack, the mechanic, was repairing a hole in the aluminum painted Irish linen of the lower wing where a lady passenger who had gone up for a ride with the Captain had nervously stuck her foot as she clambered out of the front cockpit.

"When the chase comes off," the Captain said to Tom and Rex, "I want to be in it, with my plane. I can do more in the air than a big crowd can do on the ground.

"If they use that old broken-down flivver I don't know what road they'll take, but I can see 'em wherever they go and beat 'em to it.

"And if they've got a nest in the hills,—well, we don't have to kill 'em by dropping things on 'em, like the Germans, but we can easily make the place too hot to hold 'em with a few bombs."

On his way home from the flying field that evening with Rex romping at his heels Tom tried to imagine the consternation in the robbers' camp when the shiny "Eagle" with its skilful pilot and cargo of destruction should begin to drop explosives around their hiding places.

Dinner was ready when they reached home, and as Tom and his father sat down to their meal Mrs. Mason came in from the kitchen with a plate of Irish stew that she had put in the ice-box the previous night for Rex.

"I gave some to a horrid man that came to the door to-day," said Mrs. Mason. "I could hardly get rid of him. He asked

what had become of the dog we used to have here."

"Did you tell him?" asked her husband.

"I did not." She put her lips firmly together, and seemed to be drawing away a little from the mental picture. "Then he asked for Abner—said he used to know him. I just said Abner had left us. He wanted to know if we had hired anybody in his place. What is the matter with Rex?"

For Rex, contrary to his usual habit of polishing off his plate rapidly, was sniffing dubiously at the meat.

"Are you sure the stew hasn't spoiled, Mary?"

"No, I put it in the ice-box over-night. Rex must be hungry. It's the first meal he's had to-day. It's all right, Rex."

Rex gazed at her as much as to say: "I'm sorry. I'd like to believe you. But if you knew what my nose tells me——"

"I wouldn't make him eat it, Mother," put in Tom. "He's a wise dog. Something may have happened to the meat that we don't know anything about. Maybe——"

"Well?"

"Do you suppose that man could have poisoned it?"

"No, because I stood by him every minute.... No I didn't, either. I stepped back into the pantry to see if the refrigerator door was shut. But I couldn't have been gone more than three or four seconds."

"Oh!" said her husband. "Did you leave the dish where he could put anything in it?"

"It was standing on the end of the bench, just outside the back door. I don't see how he could have."

Poor Rex! He sniffed hungrily at the savory dish set before him, but instinct told him not to touch it.

"There must be something the matter with it." Mr. Mason shook his head. "He knows better than we do. What else have we got that he can have for his supper?"

"There's a soup-bone I was saving for to-morrow," his wife reflected, her finger thoughtfully against her chin.

"Well, Tom'll give up his share and so will I! Won't we, Tom?"

"Of course!" the boy agreed, heartily. "Couldn't he have that rat that's in the trap in the barn?"

"He could," answered his father, "but I want that rat for something else. I'm going to put some of this stew in the trap and let the rat eat it and see what happens. For I think it's poisoned, and I'm pretty sure"—he paused significantly—"that man was one of the gang. Those fellows don't want work. They don't want their jobs back. They are a lot of crooks, that's all, bound to live off the country till we catch them and put them behind the bars. Maybe they killed Abner for fear he'd tell on them, and then left him in the bear's den to cover up their tracks, and make people think the bears killed him. I've heard of three burglaries lately at lonely outlying farms. We can't keep too close a watch. Mother, what did the man look like?"

"He had a very red face, and red hair, and a jaw that stuck way out."

"Did he have a scar on his cheek?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

"Then he was the man Abner and I saw that day at the station!" exclaimed Tom, excitedly. "Wonder what's become of the car he got from Abner?"

"He may have left it a little way down the road," his mother said. "Just after he left, I heard one starting up with a great splutter the other side of the hawthorn hedge beyond the hen-house. But I hardly gave it a thought, so many cars go by on this road."

Farmer Mason clapped on his hat. "Think I'll take a look at the hen-house."

The long summer evening made a lantern superfluous. But the sun was setting, and wise old mother hens were telling bedtime stories to fluffy nurselings tucked under their wings.

Fifteen minutes later he was back in the house, with a grave face.

"I had to nail up a hole in the netting big enough for a man to get through, and eight of my prize Plymouth Rocks were gone. I suppose the hunting yonder in the hills is not so good. Well, anyway"—he cast a meaningful glance at the shining barrel of his rifle in the corner—"it won't be long before we're hunting them. I was talking with Tod Rockwell to-day. They fired his hayrick, and he's jumping crazy to start after 'em any time and smoke 'em out, wherever they are. He's lost a couple o' pigs, too. Don't see how they got away with 'em: pigs are better than alarm-clocks in the night."

Rex took his soup-bone from the kitchen into the front yard, and Tom sat on the steps and they held their kind of conversation while the dog gave exercise to strong white teeth on the bone.

"Just suppose that was the bone of a man's leg, Rex!"

You could imagine the dog's answer. It would be something like this: "I'm not a man-eater, Tom. My duty is to chase thieves, and grab them, but not to kill them. Unless I had my orders to kill them. Then I suppose I'd have to."

The great teeth crunched and gritted on the bone: with patient paws Rex turned it over and over and clawed it, as though he was afraid of missing some tiny scrap of flesh that might still adhere to it.

"I think that bone's pretty well worn out, Rex. You might call it a day, and go to bed."

Perhaps Rex would have liked to reply: "I'm having such fun. It makes my teeth strong to do this. I think I ought to have more meat in my diet. I have work to do. Something tells me something's going to happen pretty soon—nobody can tell just when—that'll take all the nerve and strength and wits I've got. And I want to be ready for It, whatever It is, whenever It comes."

Mr. Mason came out of the house and called, "Tom!"

"Yes, Father."

"What do you think happened when I put that meat in the rat trap?"

"Did the rat eat it?"

"Yes. He nibbled at it. I watched him. Pretty soon he stopped eating, had a fit, and died. It must have been very strong poison to do that. Strychnine, I guess."

It was lamp-lighting time, and when they called to Rex to come in, he was like a child reluctant to leave a game. Looking up from the polished bone between his paws, it was as though he asked: "Can I bring it into the house with me?"

"You'd better leave it there, old boy. You'll find it there in the morning. I don't think anybody else will want it now.— Oh, Father!" The boy's face was very serious. "Just suppose it had been Rex, instead of that rat!"

Mr. Mason's face was hard as granite. Tom had never seen such a look in that usually kind and gentle countenance. "That settles it. We must get a posse as soon as we can and go after those fellows."

But the next day when he called up several of his neighbors on the telephone, though they praised the plan, and said somebody certainly ought to get the Sheriff to go after the thieves, they were too busy to promise they would let themselves be sworn in as deputy sheriffs. They had potatoes or tomatoes or grain or hay to look after, and so far the epidemic of robbery hadn't broken out in their section. Or else they said that the blame might belong to a band of gypsies that had recently passed through. Somebody had seen the gypsy king with a colt that belonged to Henry Martin. You had to be mighty sure you were right before you planned war on an armed gang of desperadoes. Better let the law take its course....

Then, late one evening, just after they had gone in the house and turned on the electric light, Tom heard a sound on the verandah as of stealthy footsteps.

"Listen, Father!"

There was silence, except that a long way off, at Simpson's Pond, they heard the lonely music of a whippoorwill.

Father had been reading aloud from "Huckleberry Finn." Rex was lying at his feet. When Tom spoke, Rex raised his head and his nostrils quivered as he scented what they could not see.

"Look!" Mrs. Mason screamed. "There! At the window! I saw a face!"

Whoever it was, he had vanished instantly.

The window was open because of the warm night, and mosquito-netting filled the frame, for the new screens that had

been ordered were delayed.

There was a streak of police-dog across the carpet—no time lost in growl or bark—and at a bound Rex cleared the sill, taking most of the mosquito-netting with him. The man, instead of running, had crouched under the window-sill. As Rex leapt over him, he rose, and when the dog stopped and whirled about and came at him furiously he discharged his revolver in the animal's face.

Rex, with an almost human groan, rolled over and lay still.

The brigand ran like a deer across the door-yard, leapt into a car that was waiting in the road for him, and was off like one of August's shooting-stars.

They rushed out on the verandah and knelt by the dog.

"He missed!" cried Mr. Mason, exultantly. "Missed, at that distance! Rex is only stunned. Go get some water."

In ten minutes Rex was on his feet again, shaken and staggering, indignant but unhurt.

"Thank Heaven he isn't blinded!" Mrs. Mason ejaculated. "It's a miracle his head wasn't blown off.—Who's that coming?"

It was Mrs. Austin, weeping uncontrollably, and in her agony of mind hardly able to make herself intelligible.

"They've kidnapped—my—baby!" she wailed. "What shall I do? What shall I do? I must go after them. I must—I must go to-night."

But happily it turned out to be a false alarm.

The baby, with a bandage wound about her face, was found lying under the hawthorn hedge close to the place where the robber got into the car.

The child was wrapped in a tattered horse-blanket, and her wrists and ankles were bound with rope.

When Mrs. Austin was able to talk of it reasonably, she told them that she had been sitting alone on the piazza. All doors and windows of the house were open, the child was upstairs, and the mother must have fallen asleep. How the little girl was spirited from the house she did not know: evidently the car had not been brought near, for fear of the noise, and the baby must have been carried toward the fields and laid under the hedge.

Then, in the hurry to get away, the would-be kidnapper had left the child behind.

CHAPTER V

THE KIDNAPPERS

Three days later little Susy toddled out of the house while her mother dozed in the hammock on the porch. Poor Mrs. Austin was a frail, nervous little woman, and had to spend much time in bed with one illness after another.

Susy loved to dig in the muddy ditch at the side of the road, where there was a rill that flowed from a watering-trough and she could build a dam with stones and grass to stuff the crevices.

It was a lovely blue sunny day, and she hummed a little song as she went about her work. Rex, her great friend, watched her gravely. He seemed a little troubled. No doubt he was thinking: "That's all very well, little missy. You're having a fine time. But how about your mother on the porch? She thinks you'd better stick pretty close to her for a while. You know what happened the other evening. That man wanted to take you away, and he nearly got you."

Then a brown rabbit ran across the road, his white tail bobbing up and down.

Like a shot Rex was after him. But the rabbit was no foolish little fellow, ignorant of the world. He was a sage veteran.

He darted this way and that in the underbrush. He got in between stones where Rex dug frantically to dislodge him and sprinted through clearings where trees had fallen in a tangle and he could run under but Rex had to climb over. And then, just as Rex thought he had caught up and was about to snap his jaws on a good meal, the rabbit vanished.

Then Rex saw a hole in red clay, with dead leaves about it, under a log. It would take half a day to dig him out.

"I must go back to Susy," Rex probably said to himself disgustedly. It was not a common experience with him to miss what he went after. But lately it had happened to him twice. The man who shot at him and nearly stole the baby got away and now the rabbit had escaped....

He jogged back to the roadway, finding the going harder among the rocks and the windfalls, now that the excitement of the chase was over.

But what was happening there in the road? A rickety old motor-car, a runabout, had stopped just where Susy was building the dam.

A man got out. Susy was standing close to the watering-trough, and the water running in and out made a noise that kept her from hearing his stealthy approach. Her back was turned, and before she could cry out he had thrown a burlap sack over her head and was tying a rope across her mouth.

"Not this time!" said Rex, if his actions could speak for him,—and indeed they often seemed to speak louder than human words.

He forgot his disappointment about the rabbit—he saw only Susy, and thought of nothing but saving her.

The car had a hundred yards the start of him, but he raced after it with might and main.

The man looked round. He had laid the child on the seat, and the car bounced so violently as he urged it forward at top speed that it wouldn't have been surprising had the sack fallen out.

It was like the old picture of the sleigh in Russia, with a wolf racing and raging after, and the traveller about to save himself by throwing a baby to the famished animal.

But Rex was not chasing horses—he had to outrun a motor-car. Luckily for him, it was an old and feeble machine. But it was still good for a speed greater than that of any horse against which Rex's wolf-brother in Russia had to run.

Could he do it, he wondered?

Since he got that blast of fire in his face from the revolver three days before he had been conscious of a swimming head and drumming ears and shaky legs. The rabbit had made him forget these things, and had helped him to recover his wind and his speed. That was fun. This was dead earnest. He was not sure that his strength would hold out much further.

Going down-hill the car gained on the dog. For a moment he was tempted to give up. He had done all that could be expected of any dog. He was not a child's nurse. It was the mother's duty to look out for Susy. After all, perhaps this man meant no harm....

He was tortured with thirst from the road-dust, and the sharp stones hurt his feet. Once he stumbled and fell, and when he got up blood trickled from his right forepaw.

But they came to the bottom of a long, steep slope, and Rex knew that now or never was the time to overtake the car, as it slowed down.

The old machine, however, had surprising life left in it. It seemed to bounce and rattle up the hill almost as fast as it went on the level.

Rex's tongue lolled far out, his eyes were blinded with sweat: had he been running through a city street, people would have yelled "mad dog!" and a policeman would probably have shot him.

It was a very lonely road—another route to the Blue Hills—and there was none to see the chase.

The man in the car, keeping his left hand on the wheel, tried to shoot with the revolver in his right. But the car as it rocked and swerved made an accurate aim impossible. The bullet nicked a stone ten feet away. It only made Rex angrier still. He would catch up with that car if he died for it.

Again the kidnapper tried to shoot. This time the revolver had nothing to say—for the simple reason that no cartridges were left in it!

The driver could not stop to load. He cursed the dog and the weapon and the car he drove, and wasted breath in doing so.

The car drew near to the top of the hill.

Rex's last strength was ebbing.

He summoned all that was left in him for the supreme effort.

As the car came out on the summit level, and Rex heard the grind of changing gears, the dog leapt like the spring of a rattlesnake, or as a tiger leaps on the back of an elephant, higher and farther than he ever dreamed he could jump before. He landed in the tonneau, then pounced on the sack in the front seat. His growl said to Susy: "Here's your friend, at last!"

The driver, turning, cursed and struck with his left fist while he strove to keep the car in the road, full speed ahead.

But it was not just to settle an argument with the driver that Rex had made the long and gallant run and the mighty leap.

Behind them in the road there was a swirl of dust, like white smoke from a factory chimney on a windy day.

It was Mr. Mason's car, in hot pursuit, as the thief in the fleeing machine knew well. He could not run the flivver and fight the dog and grasp the bag containing Susy.

He struck Rex on the nose with his revolver till the blood came, but Rex had the burlap bag in a vise-like grip. No St. Bernard dog—no war-dog in the trenches—ever clung to a human being more tenaciously than Rex to his precious burden.

All he had to do was get it over the side of the seat and let it drop into the road.

It would be hard for poor Susy, howling and struggling in her darkness, but it couldn't be helped. She could roll into the ditch—and she was at home there!

Sometimes one can only guess at what goes on even in the fine, clear brain of such a dog as Rex—but if it had been possible to discover his plan, no doubt he wanted to get Susy out of harm's way by dropping her over the side: and then he would be free to worry the life out of his arch-enemy, the driver of the car, the man who had sought to kill him and was now adding crime to crime by a second attempt to kidnap the child.

As Rex stood on the seat, trying to lift the bag, and drop it overboard, the car lurched violently, the dog lost his footing, and was thrown over the side.

But he did not let go.

The bag in which his jaws were so firmly set was dragged over the front of the seat as he tumbled out and rolled over into the ditch, the frightened little occupant screaming at the top of her lungs.

Rex welcomed the sound as proof that she was not killed by the fall.

But the man in the car did not stop. Instead he was making frantic efforts to increase his speed. A bend in the road, a

short distance ahead, hid him presently, with only a cloud of dust to show where he had gone.

Then the other car came storming up and jarred to a stop, the water in the radiator boiling—but it was not hotter than Mr. Mason and Tom, who leapt out to pick up the baby and comfort and praise the dog. Rex took it modestly, as was his custom.

"They've gotten away now with everything but murder," said Tom's father. "If this doesn't stir up this sleepy, good-for-nothing town to get those fellows, I'm going to move on to some place where there's a civic conscience and a public spirit that can be stirred to action."

Poor Susy was badly shaken up, and a little bruised. They must hurry her back to her mother as soon as they could.

Mr. Mason had seen the car go by with Rex after it, but he gave chase without knowing that Susy was in the precious bundle till he saw it go over the side, and heard her screams.

Rex got in the back of the car and stretched out luxuriously, as far as the space would let him. Tom sat on the front seat with the baby on his lap—an unaccustomed burden, but he made a fine nursemaid. Mr. Mason drove the car homeward lickety-split. He had a vision before him of Susy's mother who would be almost crazed with grief...

Meanwhile Susy, who was naturally full of fun, and a great admirer of Tom, began to sit up and take notice, and prattle and laugh again, as though she were already forgetting her harrowing adventure.

Tom let her stand on the seat and look over the back at Rex.

"Good dog!" she cried, approvingly, and reached down with her small pink hand. Rex's cold nose touched it, and then he put out his tongue and kissed it as if she were a fairy princess and he were her dumb, devoted servitor.

"Nice dog!" she exclaimed again. "Horrid bad man put Susy in a bag and try to take her away. Rex come and get her."

Rex thumped violently with his tail on the floor of the tonneau, as much as to say that he understood what she said and it was true.

"Please, please, Tom," Susy coaxed, "let Rex come and stay at Susy's house. Rex take care of Susy. Susy love Rex." She reached over as far as she could, and Rex sat up, to let her pat his head and gently pull his great pointed ears.

Tom was going to tell Susy that she could have anything else, but she couldn't have Rex. But he decided that she had shed tears enough for one day, and he had better break it to her gently, some other time. So he only smiled, and Susy smiled back happily, and Rex was laughing too. But on the elder Mason's face was a look as solemn as that of a judge about to pronounce a death sentence. He couldn't think of anything much, these trying days, except the way those rascals were terrorizing the whole countryside, and getting away with it. What was the law for? What was the use of a sheriff? What would be the end of it all, if prompt and vigorous action were not taken to put them behind the bars where they could do no more mischief?

Mrs. Austin's relief and gratitude when Susy was restored can be imagined. Tom and his father insisted that all the glory and the hero-medals belonged to Rex. But if Rex could have given tongue to what went on in his own quick brain, it would have been something like this: "Well, you see, I had no business to leave Susy and run after that rabbit. If I'd been on the job, that fellow would never have had a chance to run off with her like that. I'm really ashamed of myself,—yet here you all are, making a big fuss over me, as if I'd done something noble. Of course, the least I could do was to try to get her back again. Anyway, I owe that fellow one for trying to shoot me. I'll join a hunting expedition any time to go after him and bring him in—and if nobody will go with me, maybe I'll go all by myself. It wouldn't be right for me to forgive and forget, because it isn't safe to let fellows like him run at large."

CHAPTER VI

'CROSS-COUNTRY

One morning at breakfast Mrs. Mason said: "I wonder what can be keeping Rex. He's always so prompt at meal-times. And we have roast-beef hash this morning, too: he's very fond of it."

"I guess he'll be along soon." Mr. Mason with the *Weekly Gazette* was deep in a list of farm tools and other things to be sold at auction ten days hence. "Listen, Mary—there's a radio set we can get second-hand. It sounds like a good one. Do we want it?"

His wife was standing at the window pushing back the new white cheese-cloth curtains she had hemmed and put up herself. "Oh, I don't know," she answered, evasively. "We seem to have plenty of excitement as it is. We don't need to take in the rest of the world. If you and Tom want it——But really, I wish I knew where Rex was. I've been hunting and calling for twenty minutes, all over the place. It's not a bit like him to be away at eight o'clock in the morning."

"When did you see him last?"

"Just before bedtime. He went out to his kennel as usual."

"Well, don't worry, dear. He'll be along any minute now."

But Rex did not return till nightfall, and all day they were guessing and worrying vainly. When he finally put in an appearance at eight in the evening, after the late sundown, he was ravenously hungry and thirsty, and gulped down greedily enough meat and dog-biscuit soaked in milk to feed a dog-pound.

"Just as soon as he's had enough to eat we've got to fix up his poor old legs, Mother. Look at them!"

The dog's coat was matted with burrs, and his legs were scratched and clotted with blood. A great gash was torn in his right forepaw, as though he had wrenched it from the cruel teeth of a trap meant for a wild animal.

"I suppose he's been hunting over on the mountain," Tom said. "I wish he wouldn't. Those fellows'll get him one of these days. They know he's the only dog of the sort anywhere around here. Guess maybe he went to have it out with the fellow that tried to shoot him."

When Rex had eaten his supper, Tom got a box of cold cream and applied it tenderly to many wounds. Rex seemed grateful and licked Tom's hand repeatedly. His dark, deep eyes were unusually thoughtful—even sad, it seemed to Tom.

"Mother, Rex looks as if he was saying, 'I wish I could talk, for I've got a story to tell you.' I would like to know where he was last night, and what he's been doing!"

The story Rex had lived during the night and day, though he could not tell it, was this.

About midnight a fox had been rummaging in the hen-house and Rex, the policeman on his faithful rounds under the full moon, heard the disturbance and ran to the hen-house to see what it was all about.

Such a tempestuous squawking and flapping and clutter of feathers! Already the fox had murdered several Plymouth Rocks, and when Rex came up raging, Reynard was slinking away with a white pullet in his jaws.

But when he saw the dog, he dropped the fowl and ran for dear life.

Then came an endurance test and a battle of the wits.

Rex saw that the fox, like the rabbit, was mature and cunning. This was the best chance that had yet come to him, to put an end to the miserable thief and murderer, long a plague of small creatures on the farm.

Even in the full white blaze of moonlight, with eyes that were telescopes for distance and microscopes for every least thing underfoot, and with a sense of smell that could almost have led him through a woodland tangle blindfold, Rex found his wits were tense as a fiddle-string to keep the crazy trail along which the fox was doing his misleading best to get back to his mountain home.

The first place for which the fox made was a thicket by a rail fence, where raspberries and blackberries were splendid in due season—but the thorns were cruel now.

Rex shut his eyes and crashed in after the wriggling and twisting redskin. He came through, the way his nose told him to

go, and nearly broke his leg in a woodchuck's hole, a new one, with the red clay piled about the mouth of it.

The fox might have turned in there, but being a wily veteran he didn't. The family was at home.

Then came a stream, and the fugitive had the choice of stemming the current up-stream or following it more easily down—but he did neither—he jumped across with the agility of a flying squirrel.

By that Rex knew it would probably be a race, nip and tuck, all the way to the fox's burrow, wherever that might be.

So the dog settled down into a long, swinging run, as much as the underbrush and the stones, the fallen logs and the streams would let him.

They came out of black woods into a ploughed field, the fox not a hundred and fifty feet ahead. The field was thick in mud from recent rain, and the dog slipped and plashed, losing thereby a few lengths to the lighter animal that skipped airily over the muck. The points of stubble were upthrust into the pads of Rex's racing paws, for he could not stop to pick his way with delicacy.

The farther he went from home, the angrier he grew that Reynard should take him from sweet dreams in the soft straw of his own cosy kennel.

And then Rex thought of those poor young pullets, strewn about the floor of the hen-house. For the sake of that kind family at home, he must overtake the wretch and make him pay with his life for his crime. He was tired of losing his prey. He lost a rabbit, then a man—and this time he must win.

Then the fox, to make better time, left the woods and took to the road, six inches deep in dust, that rose and clogged the nostrils if you ran in it, but Rex kept to the soft grass at the edge. They sprinted pell-mell, helter-skelter past a farmhouse that slept with its one eye open, a lamp burning in the upper hallway. But the fox had no breath to waste in barking, and the dog none to lose in crying after. It was a grim business for them both.

When they came to the bridge at Baggs's millpond, the fox instead of running over thought he would try a sly dodge, and ran under. There was a board with nails in it, pointing upward, and Rex drove one of the nails directly between two claws in his right forepaw. After that each step was agony,—but he did not slacken his pace.

The fox found a section of water-pipe the workmen left behind when Baggs postponed the improvements at the mill. Craftily he told himself Rex was too wide at the shoulders to crowd in after him: he would crawl in and have a breathing-spell. In he squirmed, and he could hear Rex whining and clawing behind him uselessly. Then Rex ran to the other end, and looked in. He could imagine he saw two yellow eyes gleaming there and heard the fox's silly laughter.

"Well," thought Rex, "if you can wait, so can I." He tiptoed cautiously away, and hid on the other side of a big log, peeping out once in a while to see if the fox's snout protruded.

Pretty soon in the moonlight Rex saw Reynard's ears and nose—and even his whiskers. The fox was cautious—he was taking his time about coming out. Rex did not want to scare him and send him back again like a cork driven down into a bottle when one gets impatient.

The fox hauled himself out inch by inch, and then when quite free laughed a little and shook himself, and yawned.

Rex got ready to spring.

But Mr. Fox was hungry. Rex could see his long red tongue a-curl about his chops. Evidently he was thinking about that handsome white pullet he was forced to drop when Rex made him leave in such a hurry.

Reynard wasn't rested yet. He sat down on a large flat stone and began nuzzling his glossy pelt, picking burrs from it. Perhaps he was in no great hurry to go home after all. The word for lady fox—vixen—means one who has a sharp tongue. Reynard had often been scolded within an inch of his life for not being a good provider. There would be six young cubs with their ears pointed sharply upward wanting to know why, if father came home empty-handed. And mother might not let him come back to the lair—though he dug the burrow himself, and by this time a lot of his own hair lined the side of it where he had worn off the rough places and pushed the little stones into the ground with his own body, so his graceless young cubs and his thankless old wife might lie there comfortably.

Well, since he had failed in his attempt to bring home part of the barnyard, now that the dog had given up the chase, he would have to go after wild game. A partridge would do very well, and as soon as day came over yonder in the woods he meant to scare up a nice plump partridge. When they saw father with such a mouthful, they would yap with delight and forgive him, and mother would not even ask where he had been. All she cared about anyway was what he brought back.

He stretched out flat on his rock, to wait for better light before he entered the woods. That was Rex's opportunity. But unfortunately for the dog, and happily for the fox, there was the merest puff of a little breeze to carry the scent from Rex to Reynard, and the least hint was enough.

Up and away the fox sprang in less time than it took to flick his brush, and he did not even cast a glance over his red shoulder to see what was after him. How about the house of Mr. Baggs? There might be a hole under the piazza. Suppose there wasn't? He couldn't stop to dig one, with Rex's hot breath almost on the back of his head. But he must throw the dog off the trail.

On the chance of finding a hole into which he could scuttle, leaving Rex outside, he ran toward the barn. By this time the moon had gone below the horizon, and it was the dark hour before dawn. If he couldn't give Rex the slip, here and now, he would have a slim chance of escaping him after sunrise. By the barn was the dairy, and here close to the door the workmen had begun to dig a cistern, with a long and narrow conduit on the side toward the bridge. The mouth of the cistern, the fox thought, was too small for Rex, but this time he missed his guess.

When he flopped in, Rex fell upon him, and dog and fox struggled desperately in nearly three feet of water. Now the advantage was with Rex, for he could stand on his hind legs and lift his punishing jaws quite clear, while the fox must swim as well as fight.

At breakfast time Mr. Baggs said to his family: "Funny thing. Found an old red fox in the cistern this morning. Don't know how it could have got in there."

"Was it dead, Father?" asked the oldest boy.

"Dead?" chuckled the miller. "I should say so. It was twice dead! It was drowned, and a dog—I guess it was—had killed it, too. I'm mighty glad. I bet it's the fox that's been robbing our roost this long time back."

But Rex as he limped homeward was saying: "I don't think so much of getting that fox, because a fox steals chickens, and not children. I'm after bigger game than foxes and rabbits. I want to get that man that nearly stole Susy and almost shot me. I'm going to keep after him till I catch him, if I have to go all the way to the moon and if it takes the whole of my life!"

CHAPTER VII

WILD DOGS

There was a pack of wild dogs with whom Rex was compelled to have a final reckoning ere they would let the barnyard and the farmhouse alone. He was always afraid that they would come and find little Susy Austin some day when he wasn't at hand, and hurt her, because she was friendly and unsuspecting and wanted to be on good terms with every living thing. She was not even afraid of snakes, spiders and bees, and would gladly have made playmates of the woodchucks that darted into their holes when she ran out in the fields, and disappointed her. With her sick mother, Susy was a gypsy by nature, and the attempt to kidnap her did not seem to have taught her the lesson she needed to learn. No little red Indian girl was ever more restless within the four walls of a room. Instead of playing with a doll's house, she liked to build dams in the brook, or to wade among the cresses, always hoping to catch with her hands the tiny fish that were so still before she reached for them and then flashed under a water-logged stick or a clammy stone.

One bright day of midsummer the Masons and the Austins were picnicking together in the woods, a great treat for Mrs. Austin.

The faithful flivver carried them all, and the provisions included some of Mrs. Mason's delicious cookies and preserved peaches, chicken and sardine sandwiches, thermos bottles of milk and cocoa, and dog-biscuit and three chop-bones for Rex.

They chose a place by the side of a busy stream where the sun filtered through the leaves, and there was a moss-rimmed basin with gravel at the bottom, where Susy could go wading to her heart's content. And she did. She stayed in the water till her lips were blue, and Mrs. Mason exclaimed: "Clara, that baby ought to come right straight out of that cold water!"

Mrs. Austin hadn't noticed. She was reading a western novel and was so intent upon the hero's thrilling adventures that she was the whole width of the continent away from Waynesboro.

"Please, Mamma!" begged the little girl. "Please let Susy stay!"

But they made her come out and her mother dried her small pink legs and put on her shoes and stockings. Rex, who had been splashing and jumping about in the pool while she threw sticks for him to fetch, was reluctant to leave the water when the little girl called him.

"Mamma, Rex and Susy go get flowers."

"M-m-m," muttered Mrs. Austin, absorbed in her book; and Susy with Rex beside her wandered off toward an interval where the ground was swampy and the grass was long, and some irises grew where the brook meandered lazily, as if tired of leaping from rock to rock on its long course down-hill.

Mrs. Mason had propped herself against a mossy tree-bole and fallen asleep: Tom and his father were talking about college. They were agreeing that along with the books there ought to be plenty of baseball and football.

"And I want to be a good cross-country runner," Tom declared.

"Rex could give you lessons at that, Tom!"

"I wish I could take him back to school with me. He'd be popular with all the boys. I believe I could teach him to draw a sled. Maybe I could get up a dog-team, like the one that carried the plague serum to Nome. My, wouldn't it be fun to drive a team like that! A hundred miles a day or so."

"You know, Tom, you'd have to run along beside the sled. You couldn't just sit there and have them drag you along."

"But Father, I wouldn't have to carry any provisions on the sled. Why couldn't I ride?"

"When I was in the Canadian northwest we had to carry hundreds of pounds of whitefish in the box on the sled," Mr. Mason answered. "There was something soft or silly about a man who wouldn't trot behind his team while driving—unless he was the forerunner."

"What's a forerunner?"

"The one who goes on ahead to break out a path in the snow, for the dogs to follow in their moccasins."

"Do you mean to say the dogs wear shoes?"

"Of course. They'd cut their feet to pieces in the snow-crust if they didn't."

"Wouldn't I just love to spend a winter in the North!" sighed the boy.

It seemed indeed a far cry from that warm, still forest air to the nipping wind over white plains under the Arctic Circle. The song of the insects in the meadow-land yonder was trying to tell how hot the summer was, and would be for weeks to come. There was little temptation to stir from the soft pine needles and the shade above them. The conversation languished, and Tom put off from moment to moment his usual picnic business of taking the knives and forks and glasses to the brook, washing them with sand, and making a little bonfire of the wooden plates and the paper.

Meanwhile, Rex and Susy loitered on down-stream, and through the intervale. This was a favorite hunting-ground of the wild dogs, but they did not know it.

Father, up yonder in the woods, pulled his soft brown felt hat over his eyes, and fell fast asleep, till he began to snore like the rotary saw at Baggs's Mill gnawing its way through fragrant pine timber. A drowsy numbness stole over Tom's senses. The only wide-awake was Mrs. Austin—and that was only because the book had stirred her blood with adventure and romance. She was so tired of being ill!

Susy's hand was in Rex's shoulder-fur as they sauntered on, and she clung to the dog when her foot slipped and her bronzed kid shoes plashed into the water.

By now, child and dog were out of sight and earshot of the group reading and sleeping in the woods.

The sun was very warm on Susy's golden hair, and she stooped and scooped up a handful of water and threw it on her head where it sparkled in bright beads.

At that moment something that looked like a wolf appeared on the opposite side of the meadow, at the edge of the wood.

"Nice dog!" Susy cried. "Come play wiv Susy!"

But at sight of the "nice dog," Rex growled deep in his throat—a voice that surprised Susy, for she seldom heard Rex speak that way before. And Rex stood with his hair bristling, his ears pointed forward, tense and waiting, not for an instant taking his eyes off the wild dog.

For he knew the pack well. Long ago, after their own manner of sending messages, by long-drawn howl adown the wind, they had issued Rex an invitation to join their gang—or, if he did not want to come, then it would be a challenge, and he was to be the enemy of one and all.

They had never yet attacked him. But now and again Rex had seen one or more of them making wide circles, afar off, and had driven them away. Once, when three or four came at a time, Rex summoned his master, and Mr. Mason got a gun and scared them badly—one limping and yelping as he scampered away.

They were sure to be cowards, except in a crowd.

The wild dog disappeared in the underbrush.

But as Rex turned round, he saw that a strange thing was happening to Susy in the sand at the edge of the stream.

She began to cry, "Rex, Rex!"

For she was sinking. It was a quicksand. Already the child was in up to her knees.

As she struggled to free herself from the imprisoning sand, she sank deeper and deeper.

Rex scrambled down the bank to where she stood helplessly. She put her arms around his neck, as Tom had done in the burning house, and renewed her struggles with his willing aid. He was fast being imprisoned too, but his body rested on the sand after his legs were under, and though she was now hidden by the sand almost to the armpits she ceased to sink.

She wept bitterly, and Rex joined his voice with hers in a long-drawn howl to bring assistance.

Then the wild dogs, knowing what that cry meant, came on.

Luckily only a small portion of the pack of ruffians was within hail.

But Rex's signal to the human beings up yonder on the hill-rise meant to the dogs that their foe was caught at last. And they exulted in his helplessness.

This great snob that wouldn't help them rob roosts,—this big dog that was so silly as to let himself be playmate and

nursemaid of little children, this policeman that went and fetched a man with a gun to shoot at them—they had him now where they wanted him, and they would punish him for daring to stand out against them. They would show His Majesty Rex what was what and who was who. They would prove that they were rulers of the countryside, not he!

So they came on, howling a wild mob-chorus in their glee. And they were very hungry. There was the young child, caught in mud. When they had done with the dog, what a delicious morsel she would be! They bared their teeth and gnashed their jaws as they thought of it.

And they came on—three—six—nine—eleven of them. Rex knew if he let go of Susy she would in a few minutes be swallowed by the quicksand. Embedded as he was himself, he must free himself for the contest with the whole of the pack of cowards.

He told them what they were—in the lingo they could understand, he defied and taunted them. He denounced them as a miserable, contemptible lot of barnyard robbers, afraid to fight a dog or a man unless they were a whole army against one.

And even with his legs imprisoned in the sand, he looked so terrible that as they stood round him all in a ring, like the Spanish ships about the *Revenge* in Tennyson's poem, they were afraid to close in on him.

And still Rex mocked and dared them. He knew, if he could keep it up long enough, help would come. But he felt his strength, though not his courage, ebbing. His confidence turned to hope that yonder on the hillside they would hear him, and he lifted up his voice more mightily. Surely they must hear!

Then the wild dogs laughed at him. The whole pack of them—how could one dog, his legs buried in sand, hope to do anything against eleven running free?

By this time Susy was screaming in terror. "Rex—don't let 'em hurt me! Rex!" In the midst of her cries, and his own anxiety, the dog passed his long pink tongue twice across her cheek to comfort her.

But the wild dogs—cruel, treacherous, cowardly as they were—saw the chance of their sneaking lifetimes and came on.

There was the lean ruffianly bully who was the leader of the pack. No sense of chivalry or fair play in that gaunt, meager, high-swung body on its long thin legs.

At least he was a fighter. His nipped ears and his scarred sides said it. He limped badly, and his tail hung down in the middle like a broken feather. He loped and circled about Rex and Susy, awaiting their complete helplessness before he made a final rush. These dogs were like the savages in Africa who ran along the banks of the Congo River following Stanley's canoes and yelling "Meat! meat!" as they shot their poisoned arrows and expected the white men to fall into their hands and be eaten.

Rex threw his head back and repeated the call for help: then, saving his breath, renewed his struggle to free his own legs and drag Susy out of the sand with him. She managed to get her arms about his neck again: they had never yet seen fit to put a collar around his throat—it would have been as strange to him as a muzzle—for he gave thanks he was not born and bred a city dog, condemned to pavements.

Nearer and nearer came the enemy. These many days they had gone without a real, square meal. They had not found the part of the ranges where deer were plentiful. It was easier to skulk and snoop about the farms, but there were shotguns and watching men against them there.

This was the grand chance that had come to them after many lean days: they did not mean to lose it now. They seemed to be whimpering to their leader: "Why don't you rush in and kill them, and then let us go to dinner?"

They wanted him to assume all the risk from Rex's fangs, if there was any. They didn't care what became of their captain—they would just as soon polish off his bones, too, for one of their dinner courses. But he was canny, and didn't mean to find his grave in their maws.

He reached down from the bulrushes that overhung the bank and snapped at Rex's flanks. Rex's answer was a flash of white teeth and a deep gash in the throat which drove him back yelping, amid the derision of the pack.

Stung by their taunts, the leader tried again.

This time Rex caught him by the right hind leg with a grip that must almost have broken it. He drew back howling more loudly than ever, and limped away.

Then the other dogs, seeing their captain could do nothing for them, tried worrying tactics, coming from all sides at once, like jackals round a wounded lion.

Another came too near, and was sorry—but too late! Rex seized his bushy tail before he could whisk it away, and clung for dear life.

Thus most unwillingly the enemy found that he was drawing Rex out of the quicksand to the bank. But what of Susy? Rex had not forgotten her. A rail fence came down to the stream close at hand, and a rail was lying on the sod. Rex let the other dog run off complaining, rushed to where the rail lay, and dragged it to Susy, who was almost going under. He pulled it close to her, though he sank in again as he did so. She reached out and got it beneath her arms. She was too tired to do more.

Then the leader of the pack returned—in an evil moment for him! Rex was not caught too deeply in the sand to wrench himself loose and spring at the foe. Susy, with the rail under her arms, could now keep up without him, and help was surely coming from the hill at any moment.

Rex had decided that the other dog must die. But the wild leader knew that he must kill Rex or have his own grave dug by the teeth of his own tribe.

So they rushed into their duel, and the other dogs waited to see what the issue of the fight would be.

It ended in an unexpected way. It was no more work for Rex to drag a dog into the stream than it was to haul the fence-rail. In a few seconds, Rex had his rival by the throat, and then tugged him to the bank and over it, and into a deep eddy under the bank, where the current had cut into it to form an overhang.

Standing on a flat rock, Rex held the lost leader under the water one agonizing second after another, and then took breath and thrust him beneath the surface again as he struggled feebly to escape, till at last a limp and lifeless body floated on the surface of the pool.

Then Rex ran over to where Susy lay, and his paws were beside her arms upon the rail when help came at last.

Out of the wood they all came running—all but the sick mother, who moved slowly,—and in a jiffy they hauled the little girl out of her perilous prison in the sand.

"I'll never let Susy out of my sight again!" sobbed Mrs. Austin.

The wild dogs in the wood, their bright eyes watching, heard her, but they didn't believe what she said. She never saw them. But the next day the novel she had been reading came floating down-stream to them. They sniffed at it; and when they found it was no good to eat they let it go. They had already chosen a new leader, and had almost forgotten the battle and the funeral the day before.

CHAPTER VIII

TRAPPED

By this time the robbers in their mountain lair were almost forgotten. Of late they had kept remarkably quiet. Few clothes-lines in the outskirts of the town had been robbed, and few hen-roosts raided, except by foxes. The *Weekly Gazette* had little to tell of hold-ups on dark nights on lonely roads. Mr. Mason's enthusiasm for getting up a crusade to "smoke them out" was on the wane: he doubted whether he could muster enough of the neighboring farmers to make it worth his while. Perhaps the robbers had moved on to pester some other place. He fervently hoped this was true. He never wanted to see "hide nor hair" of them again. With his old, comfortable farmhouse gone, all that he wanted now was to be let alone, to build up the dairy business, send unsalted butter, milk and eggs by rail to New York, and get the best prices that he could, to make a comfortable home and—one day—send Tom to college.

Even the wild dogs were much less bothersome since the day Rex killed their leader. They must have had a hard time picking a successor. Instead of coming in bunches, they were now likely to be found alone, or roaming about the landscape in twos or threes at most.

One day Rex went on a hunt for rabbits in the hills. As he grew older and more experienced, the Masons ceased to worry about him. Nearly everything that could happen to him, they thought, had occurred: somehow he had always escaped and come home. Never was there a dog, it seemed, better able to look out for himself.

And Rex didn't worry. Those other dogs, even if the whole pack came on at once, couldn't scare him. The only way a man could put him out of business was to shoot him from a distance—and he would have to be very sure of his aim.

Rex, loving the water, took the straight route to the hills across Simpson's Pond. He was careful not to get tangled in the lily-pads where the deer came to feed. He did not like the soft black mud at the bottom—as it squdged up between his toes it put him in mind of that time at the brook, that horrible time when Susy was nearly drowned in the quicksand.

But out in the middle of the pond, where it was deeper, he loved to be. There were springs that made streaks or pools of cold; a pleasant chill spurred him to lash out still more vigorously, and he snorted as he threw up his head in the sun, almost as a horse might do—delighting in the play of every muscle, in the clearer, deeper water, and the sight of the green trees ahead of him, where the rabbits played and did not suspect that a mighty hunter would presently come ashore and make them scamper for their lives.

Tom would have been with him, but Tom had to go to the city to have the dentist look at his teeth before going back to school, and Rex had seen him off at the station that morning. It was too lonely to stay at the farm without Tom—but Rex told himself he would get back long before sunset, in time for guard-duty.

So he landed on the stony beach, and shook himself, and then lay down to rest for a moment on a warm red patch of gravel amid the pebbles.

Little whiteling butterflies played about his head, a crow called mockingly to him from the top of a blasted pine, but he disdained to answer. His tongue lolled out as he panted, and scanned the landscape for any token of a rabbit—or a squirrel. He was not particular: but swimming across the lake had made him still more hungry. He wondered if the wild dogs had killed most of the game.

Then he saw a man slowly crossing the intervale, where there was no road. He was going up into the woods. Rex did not know there was a path at that place. Who could it be?

He carried a gun—not over his shoulder, but lazily, carelessly, letting it at times drag upon the ground. Then he saw Rex, aimed the gun and fired. Too late. Rex had already slipped behind a boulder, and the bullet was harmlessly flattened upon it.

The man quickened his pace, and disappeared into the woods.

After a few minutes, Rex followed him.

There was a path. It was badly overgrown. Even a dog, close to the ground, could not see more than a few yards through the underbrush.

In the moist earth, Rex clearly saw the print of boot-heels: he was spared the trouble of nosing a scent.

Wherever the man was going, whatever he was doing, Rex was more interested in getting something to eat than in catching a fugitive.

But he must be a bad man. Rex fancied—though it was hard to tell at the distance—that it was the one who tried to steal Susy. If that was the case, he could afford to wait for his dinner till he had chased, captured and punished the rascal.

But his dinner came to him, just then, and he decided that if he was to engage in a successful man-hunt he had better have a square meal first.

The tidbit was a big gray squirrel—but it was not simmering in a pot, it was on four very lively feet. He would have to chase it if he wanted to catch it, and he knew it would flicker up a tree as soon as it caught sight of him. The squirrel had his back to the path, and was turning an acorn over in his paws, like a boy getting ready to drop-kick a football.

Eyes intent on the squirrel, Rex crept softly toward the little animal. He moved like an Indian, making less noise than the wind as it soughed through the pines, or two or three yellow-jackets that sizzled past his nose, and wanted to lodge in his fur if he would let them.

He was about to spring, over scarcely more than his own length, when something was sprung on him instead—a trap set close to the path, and probably put there to catch one of the wild dogs, his enemies.

It had him by the left hind leg as in a vise. Squirm and struggle as he might, he could not free himself. The twisting and turning only added to the pain. The squirrel at once had leapt to a tree, and climbed out on a branch above his head to mock him.

"See, you great big brute!" the little creature seemed to say. "You thought you'd make a dinner off of me, and now you're my prisoner instead. Presently men with guns will come and find you here and shoot you down. And don't expect me to shed tears for you!"

Rex did not need to be reminded in his pain of the great risk he ran of being found by those who had set the trap, and slain in his tracks. They would not know the difference between him and the wild dogs—for though he was tamed and drilled he looked like a wolf, as they did. If they found him here, they would not wait for a closer look—they would make an end of him. To bark might mean to bring back the man with the gun who was somewhere on the forest path a little way ahead of him. So he could not in his own way shout for aid. He must suffer and struggle alone.

But he did not lose heart for a moment. It was not in him to give up. If the trap was not chained to a tree, he might yet work loose—and his leg, though torn and bleeding, was not broken: bones and muscle were still his to command.

So he ceased to pull and agonize, and made a careful survey. No, the trap was not chained to the sturdy beech-tree on which the squirrel continued to jabber his defiance. It was secured only to a stake, set deep in the ground and covered up with leaves. That was because those wild dogs, their wits sharpened by the way they had to make their living, would have seen right away that something was wrong, if a chain round a tree-trunk was in sight.

Then Rex asked himself whether if he pulled slowly and carefully he might not pull the stake out of the ground and bear the trap away with him. If he could wrench it from the soil he did not care how far he would have to haul it—they could get it off him at home.

The trap was never meant for an animal of his heroic build. It was not much bigger than one that might be used for a squirrel or a rabbit. It would hardly be sure of holding one of the wild dogs. As Rex realized that it was rather a small and weak affair after all, his spirits rose: he was nerved to a fresh effort. But he knew he must be careful not to get excited, and wrench the leg suddenly: he must keep cool, and take his time, even though the man with the gun might come and find him helpless there.

With but one leg imprisoned, he could bring but a small part of his strength to bear on the short chain and the stake to which the chain had been attached for want of a fallen log.

But that little was enough.

Slowly, slowly in the soft, wet leaf-mold the stake leaned toward him, as he lay outstretched full length and pulled till it seemed as if the leg would come off, or be torn apart.

The whole weight of his body was now dragging upon those wiry muscles which had never failed him, and which must be saved for many a good fight to come.

If he could not pull the stake out of the ground, perhaps he could break it.

Suddenly, borne on the gentle breeze, he heard men talking as they came along the path toward where he lay.

Now he could see them—two or three—through the leaves of the hazel-bushes and the alders. He thought he saw the glint of gun-barrels in the sunlight.

Were they coming to see what was in the trap? If they were not, and he lay still, perhaps the gray of his own coat against the dead leaves would hide him from their prying eyes.

Vain hope! One of them raised a shout: "There he is! I see him! That's the fellow we wanted. He ain't going to get away from us this time!"

Then the other man spoke. "Le's shoot him."

"No, Aleck," the first objected. "Le's have a look at him first. He can't get away. That's a good thick stake, an' it's druv in deep. Le's make sure it ain't one o' them wild dogs."

"Wild dogs your grandmother!" was the scornful retort. "Don't you see the collar round his neck?"

"Sure enough. Well, anyway, le's move up on him an' have a look at him before the execution." They laughed and came closer.

It was now or never. Rex made a supreme effort. The stake was jerked loose from the earth and the broken leaf-mold flew as it came out. The chain slid off the pointed end. In a flash, chain and all, Rex was off through the underbrush, avoiding the beaten path, to the lake.

The men were too much surprised to bring their guns to their shoulders and aim instantly.

Then they wasted time in blazing away at him, for the thick foliage swallowed him.

"Anyway," said the man in front—the same man that bought the motor-car from Abner at the station—"he ain't a-going to get far with that thing hangin' to his leg. He can't swim across the pond—he's got to go round it. We can shoot him easy as a wink while he's runnin' along the bank. 'Cause he's got to run slow—he can't make no time with the trap on his leg an' the chain draggin' after."

They hastened along the path to the lake, sure that all they would have to do when they got to the shore of the pond would be to pick off the dog as he struggled alongshore.

But that was where Rex was too shrewd for them. He knew they would expect him to keep as near to the water as he could, in order to get home at the earliest possible moment. So he was determined to disappoint them, and he gave the pond a wide berth and limped along, as fast as he could, from field to field, on the other side of the stone wall which hid him from their sight.

They stood on the shore of the pond, deep in mud, and cursed the dog and the guns and then each other till they were blue in the face, but it did no good. They had no idea which way he went.

Then the man who bought the old flivver had a bright idea. "He's lay down to die, back there in the woods," he said. "He ain't a-goin' to bother us no more. He ain't never goin' to find out where we live. The wild dog's 'll eat him all but the collar."

"An' the trap and chain," said the other man, and, satisfied, they ambled back through the wood....

When Rex came home, with the trap and chain on his leg, it took Mr. Mason and Tom only a few minutes to free him from the encumbrance. In less than two days the lameness had gone, and he had nothing but another grudge to nurse against those villains about whom he could tell Tom and his father nothing. But every dog has his day—and Rex was waiting for his own!

CHAPTER IX

THE STORM BREAKS FROM THE HILLS

"Say, young feller!"

Tom was walking along the railway embankment because it was the shortest path from the post-office to the crossing beyond the station, where Mike was watchman.

It was one of the rare times when Rex was not with him. Rex was on guard at home that afternoon, while Mrs. Mason took a nap in a wide Mexican grass hammock between the pear-trees.

In the mail he got at the post-office, Tom had found a letter from his best school friend, Rob Hunter, telling all about his summer in the Adirondacks.

Tom was so deep in the account of Rob's ascent of Whiteface, and a swimming-race at Lake Placid, that he had not noticed the man walking along the embankment behind him, till he heard the shout.

The boy turned round. It was the man with the red, scarred face and bulldog jaw, who bought Abner's machine. Perhaps it was the man who shot Rex, too, and tried to kidnap Susy Austin.

Tom, for an instant, felt an impulse to take to his heels. But it was a long way to the station, and still further to Mike's hospitable hut at the crossing.

"Do you know me?" said the man, threateningly.

"No," said Tom, civilly enough. "That is, I don't know your name."

"Ever see me before?" was the next question.

"I think you're the man that bought our hired man's flivver."

"Yes, I was. And it wasn't no good. And I want my money back."

He glared at Tom, as if expecting the boy to hand over the money at once.

"I haven't got your money," Tom answered.

"Your father's got it."

"My father didn't buy the car and he didn't sell it. He doesn't owe you anything."

"I ain't arguin' with you," said the tramp, with a grin that had no mirth in it. "I'm tellin' you. Now, you go and get that money. I gotta have it. I need it."

"I won't do it."

The tramp gave a long, shrill whistle through his teeth.

At that another man came out of the woods and clambered up the bank.

"Rube," said the whistler, "this young feller says he won't go and get that money from his father." The evil grin returned.

"What'll we do with him? Tie him on the track, er what?"

"I guess that'd do all right."

Though he knew they were only bluffing, Tom's heart beat fast.

Then each man grasped him by an arm, and began to twist it.

"We ain't got much time before the ole pay-car comes along, Aleck!" said the second man. "Git a wiggle on!"

"Well, what'll we do with the kid? Tie him on the track or take him over yonder in the woods? Will ye go 'n' get that money or won't ye?" Aleck demanded fiercely.

"I'll tell my father what you said," Tom answered.

They let go of his arms. "Well, look here!" threatened Rube. "Don't you go anywhere near your friend Mike, do you hear? You cut across the fields yonder an' don't you let us see you around here any more to-day. Y'understand?"

But Aleck's face was redder and uglier than ever.

"It ain't safe to leave him go now. Better tie him up till we get through with the pay-car. He'll tell what he sees."

"You come along with us, kid!" commanded Rube. "We got a little business with the pay-car. We worked on the railroad wunct, an' we got word up to the post-office just now that they're sendin' us some money they owe us, an' to call for it down here to Mike Farley's crossin'. We been waitin' round fer that money most all summer, livin' anyway we could. They didn't care what become of us."

His voice had taken on soft tones of wheedling self-pity: the roughness had gone out of it.

Then Aleck added his persuasion. "We was only foolin' with you, youngster. We didn't mean no harm. You come along with us."

Tom might have believed what he said, had it not been for the cold, cruel eyes. The boy's swift instinct had already told him that these men had chosen to-day for the robbery.

Probably these two had been picked for the job by the rest of the gang, hiding in the woods, far back in the ravines and caverns of the Blue Hills yonder.

And now the pair of thieves wanted him with them, for fear he would run and bring help if they let him out of their sight. Or perhaps they meant to kidnap him.

For two hours, between afternoon trains, the station was closed, and generally deserted. Except for the agent, waiting for his pay, the nearest railway employee was Mike, sunning himself, smoking and reading his paper.

Aleck and Rube must have known that if Tom accompanied them it might help to keep Mike from suspecting that something was wrong.

Mike didn't need a detective, like those railway "fellers," Zane and Anders, to tell him what kind of men Aleck and Rube were.

Zane and Anders, the detectives, were always snooping up and down the line on the trains, smoking costly cigars and pretending to be looking for trouble, but finding very little. Mike had a hearty professional contempt for them. They always seemed to be locking doors after horses were stolen: coming along too late, fussing about a lot, and then turning in heaps of typewritten pages of beautiful language, giving all the good reasons why they hadn't been able to do most of the things the railroad paid them to do.

As Aleck and Rube and Tom came along the track past the station toward Mike's hut, Aleck and Rube were undoubtedly thinking how easy it would be to slip up behind Mike as he sat in his chair and clop him over the head with a coupling-pin.

But the vexing thing about Mike was that Mike had decided that he must keep awake and on the job, no matter whether Zane and Anders earned their pay or not. If the detectives were asleep, then Mike must sit up and take notice.

"Now I wonder," mused Mike, half aloud, "what Tom is doin' with those fellers. Mebbe they thought if they brung him I wouldn't be suspectin' nothin'. But I'd as soon trust a rattlesnake as I would any o' them fellers. They been hangin' round here all summer. We ain't exactly got anythin' on 'em yet. But we been so near to it, if them fellers Zane an' Anders was any good, they'd be behind the bars in the county jail a long time ago."

"Hullo, Mike!" called Aleck insolently.

Mike's sole reply was a grunt. He didn't care to have strangers take liberties with his Christian name. He would never have invited these tough customers to call him anything but Mr. Farley: and he much preferred their absence and their silence to their company and their conversation.

So he did not rise from his camp-stool when they came up. He nodded to Tom sociably and inquired: "Where's the dog?"

Tom would have liked to be able to say that Rex was chasing a rabbit in the next field and would be along any minute. "Rex is hunting, I guess," Tom answered. "He's keen about rabbits."

"I know that," agreed Mike. "He goes by here 'most every day, in a big hurry."

Then conversation languished. It was plain that two of those present were welcome to depart as soon as they liked.

In fact, Mike soon gave them a hint as broad as his own foot.

"What are you two waitin' for?"

Bill spoke up. "You see, before we was workin' for the Lamson foundry——"

"Before you was thrown out for not workin', you mean," interrupted Mike, fiercely.

Bill ignored the remark, and went on. "We worked for the railroad. There was still some money comin' to us. All we been waitin' here for, was to get word from the railroad. This mornin' at last we gets a letter. Him an' me, we each of us gets one. It says to show up at the pay-car at Mike Farley's crossin' this afternoon."

"I'm from Missouri," said Mike. "You got to show me. Let me see the letter."

"If you don't wanta believe me, you needn't," snarled Bill. "We got the letters all right. If we didn't have 'em, it wouldn't be no use for us to show up here, would it?"

"All you gotta do is show 'em," insisted Mike.

"Yes—but we don't have to show 'em to you," retorted Aleck. "You ain't no paymaster."

"The reason you don't want to," answered Mike, "is that you ain't got nothin' to show. You ain't nothin' but a couple o' lyin' thieves, that's all. We got the detectives after you now."

"Huh!" sniffed Aleck. "Detectives 've got to have somethin' to detect. They ain't got a thing on us. Nobody ain't got anythin'. Guess we got a right to live an' breathe, ain't we? All we been a-doin' is just waitin' to hear from the railroad."

"Well, you'll hear from the railroad, all right," Mike nodded grimly. "An' you won't like what you hear, either."

Far away, the whistle of a locomotive woke the echoes. The three men and the boy listened intently.

"That's the pay-car now, I bet—ain't it?" asked Bill.

"I ain't sayin' it is, an' I ain't sayin' it ain't." Mike feigned indifference. "It might be a special freight."

Round the corner came a locomotive with a single car behind it, and two white flags on the cow-catcher to assert its right of way.

"There she is," said Mike. He had on his best clothes for the great day that came but once a month. He rose from his basket-bottomed chair and cleared his throat as if about to make a speech, pulled his tie into a hard knot, and gave an extra twist to the cow-lick in his hair. He felt his importance. But he wanted Aleck and Rube to clear out. They might be quiet while the pay-car stopped. How was he to tell what they would do after it went on?

The brakes squealed, the bell rang once or twice, the engine ground and jarred to a halt. Then it breathed heavily and the engineer thrust a genial countenance from the cab window.

"Lo, Mike!"

"Lo, Jake!"

"How's the wife 'n' kids?"

"All right. Your folks all right?"

"Sure."

A brief dialogue it was, while Mike waddled past the big driving-wheels to the paymaster.

It was not easy for Mike to raise his stout body to the lower step, but willing hands helped him up. The back part of the rear car was arranged like a paying teller's window in a bank. The money was in envelopes piled on either side of the window. It would have been easy, but for two reasons, to reach in at the window and grab the money. The reasons were two men, supposed to be the armed guards of the window.

It was a very hot day, and because there was only one man to be paid at this crossing, the guards were careless. They had, in fact, put down their guns in a corner, and were at the moment engaged in eating their lunch. They invited Mike to have a cheese sandwich. He thanked them politely, but declined, since he had eaten his own cold potatoes and sliced ham a few minutes before.

"What's new?" asked the paymaster, as Mike appeared at the window, and began to sign the receipt in the big round hand of one to whom writing was a serious business.

"Nothin' as I know of," Mike answered. It was an effort to write his name and use his tongue at the same time.

"What became of those iron-workers that——"

"Hands up!"

Mike turned, the paymaster looked up from his book, the guards sprang to their feet.

Too late. There was nothing for it but to comply with the order. They were looking into the barrels of two revolvers, in the hands of Aleck and Rube.

But that was by no means the worst of it. In the twinkling of an eye, the place seemed alive with men—at the windows as well as in the door and on the steps.

There were really only six besides Aleck and Rube, but fear counted many more.

"Now then!" snarled Aleck. "You'll just kindly hand over all you've got there, Mr. Paymaster, and if you do as we tell you, that'll be all—for the present!"

Again he grinned, as if he had said something funny.

The paymaster was very slow about gathering up the envelopes.

"Now get a wiggle on, mister!" Rube snapped. "We can't wait around here all afternoon. We got a long way to go before dark. Just put them envelopes into them canvas sacks an' hand 'em over."

The paymaster, for the good of his health, did just as he was told. Once Mike, white and shaking, lifted his voice in feeble protest. "Say, look a' here, you! You'll all go to state's prison for this!"

"Shut your head, you!" cried Rube, with an oath.

"Give him a clop on the bean," suggested Aleck. "That'll shut him up!"

"Aw, he's a harmless old fool," growled the other. "Leave him be. We gotta work fast."

Aleck grabbed a canvas bag full of envelopes, and Rube seized another. As they did so, the paymaster jerked open a drawer where he kept a revolver. But he wasn't quick enough. Aleck knew at once what the gesture meant, and began to shoot. The paymaster dropped behind his counter like a log. Mike keeled over, crying out: "Ye've killed me!" The guards, before they could reach for their guns, were felled where they stood, by the fusillade.

"Now unhitch the locomotive an' cut loose, boys!" yelled Aleck.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before they were obeyed. Among the six confederates were men who knew how to fire and run a locomotive.

Aleck and Rube, lugging the canvas bags, boarded the locomotive, which was already in motion.

"Now let her go!" screamed Aleck. "Step on the gas! Bust the old boiler. 'Member we gotta go to the water-tower, seven miles the other side o' Waynesboro, where the flivver'll pick us up for the mountains."

The man at the throttle didn't need further directions. Two others were shovelling with might and main. The other three sprawled on the coal in the tender. The locomotive passed at moderate speed the little deserted station near Mike's cabin, but it swept past the depot at Waynesboro like a tornado. The pirate crew aboard, carefully timing their attack to avoid encountering the afternoon express from the west, didn't care what might happen after they reached the crossing and left the engine there and took to the flivver for the wild and lonely highlands.

CHAPTER X

ON THE TRAIL

Meanwhile, Tom was running as fast as his legs could carry him up the road toward the house to get help.

The blow had fallen—and it had found the countryside unprepared. Everybody's business had been nobody's business and now, because of the general indifference, robbery—and possibly murder—had been committed by this gang, who should have been put behind the bars where they could do no harm, weeks or even months ago.

Now Tom was glad of the hare-and-hounds runs in which he had taken part during the fall and the spring at school. They had put sound wind in his lungs and strong muscles in his legs. He needed all he had, and more—the hill never seemed so long, the road-dust so soft and deep. He knew just how the frog must have felt in his algebra example, when he tried to climb up the side of the well and after each spring slipped most of the way back.

He heard shots mingling with the shouts behind him, and turned to see if anybody was pursuing him.

A man broke loose from the group round the rear steps of the pay-car, and started toward him. Tom's heart, beating its fastest, seemed to stand still as he toiled and pounded on. He cast behind him another terrified glance—and saw to his relief that his pursuer had given over the chase, and was returning to the car.

Pictures were dancing through his brain, of what might be happening inside the car. He imagined that Mike had been killed when the shots were heard. Probably the robbers had taken all the money from the paymaster. It must be a lot—the wages for the whole division. To be sure, it was not one of the important parts of the railroad, but several thousand men and their families must live on what the pay-car brought, and would be ready to take part in the man-hunt for the rascals.

He had to rest a moment—his legs, though not his spirit, rebelled and called a halt.

As he looked down he saw that the locomotive had been uncoupled, and was under way, increasing its speed every second. Perhaps those left behind in the pay-car would bleed to death before he could obtain aid. Luckily, there was a telephone at the house. It would bring Dr. Benton in a hurry from the tiny village hospital in Waynesboro.

It was a comfort to think what Rex would do. Probably the robbers would stop before they had gone many miles, and jump out, and make for their refuge in the hills. What big fools those fellows were, Tom thought, as he ran on. With everybody for miles around on the warpath against them, what possible hope could they have of making their escape to Canada or Europe or Mexico with the money? Even supposing they had taken enough to pay for such a journey. He wondered how long they would stick together. Probably they would quarrel over the money before long. Such questions teased his mind, like mosquitoes round his head, while his sore and tired feet were pounding the red clay.

Father was in the front yard, cutting up the trunk of an old apple-tree which had blown down in a storm. Rex, with his head on his paws, was watching the process as if it were a woodchuck hole.

But Father dropped the axe like a hot potato, and Rex sprang to all his toes at once when they heard Tom's exhausted and almost breathless exclamation at the gate:

"Father! They've robbed the pay-car and gone off with the locomotive!"

While Mrs. Mason telephoned to the sheriff and the doctor, telling them to meet her husband at Mike's crossing, Mr. Mason, Tom and Rex ran to the barn, boarded the faithful runabout, and were off full-tilt, faster than the car ever leapt over the bumps and rocks before.

Rex seemed to understand what was in the wind—as if the great chance for which he had been waiting and training these many days had come to him at last.

They beat the doctor and the sheriff to the crossing by minutes.

Rex first, they fairly tumbled up the steps into the car.

There lay Mike by the door, groaning. The paymaster was insensible on the floor behind his counter. One of the guards lay white and limp in a corner, a sawed-off shotgun on the floor beside him. He was unconscious, in a dark pool of blood. The fourth man had crumpled where he fell, still clinging to his rifle.

Coins and bills and torn wrappers were strewn about in every direction. The door of the safe stood wide open.

"They—got—the money," gasped Mike, "and went off—on the locomotive. Get a doctor, and tell the sheriff!"

"They're coming right away," Mr. Mason reassured him, as Tom crouched beside Mike. "Where did they hit you, Mike?"

"Got—a bullet in my ribs," Mike panted. "Musta come close—to me heart."

The farmer tore open the blood-soaked jacket of the wounded man. As he was trying to staunch the flow of blood with his own blue bandana, the portly form of the doctor, with the sheriff and two deputies, filled the doorway.

Dr. Benton found that, as Mike had guessed, the bullet had narrowly missed his heart. But here he could do no more than make a hasty examination. He dressed the wound and then discovered that the paymaster's arm was broken and he had been shot in the neck, under the left ear. The man in the corner had fallen so that his head struck a steam pipe—and perhaps his skull was fractured. The wounds of the fourth were superficial, and would soon heal: he had only fainted from the shock, and cold water from the brook near by soon revived him.

The sheriff had had the presence of mind to telegraph to the city for a locomotive and crew to come and fetch the pay-car from where it obstructed traffic. Meanwhile, the wounded men were taken to Dr. Benton's hospital.

Tom and Rex—in his own language—begged for permission to go with them. But Dr. Benton gently forbade. "You can come and see Mike to-morrow," he promised.

"And can Rex go too?"

"I'm afraid not," said the doctor, firmly. "It's a rule at the hospital that dogs are not admitted."

Rex seemed disappointed.

"Well, anyway," Tom declared, "Rex and I are going after the men who did it—and we're going to get 'em, too!"

When, two days later, Tom was allowed to see Mike, he told him what he meant to do.

The newspapers in town—to say nothing of the *Weekly Gazette* at Waynesboro—had been using their biggest type to shriek to the world every detail of the story of the robbery, and when the facts gave out, fiction was drawn upon freely.

There were pictures of Mike and the paymaster and the clerks, and the rifled pay-car, with diagrams and dotted lines, drawn by an artist with a vivid imagination, to show how it was done.

A reward of \$1,000 had been offered by the railroad for the arrest of the fugitives or for information leading to their capture.

The stolen locomotive had whirled through the Waynesboro station with the gang aboard, to the astonishment of the station-agent and baggage-master, who, knowing that the pay-car was due, stood on the platform waiting for his money.

But instead, out of a whirlwind of dust and cinders as the locomotive roared past, a fusillade of shots sent the expectant one to cover in the wildest consternation.

Nobody else was on the platform, for no train was due at that hour from either direction.

This the raiders evidently knew very well when they laid their plans.

Throttle wide open, they had sped on down the track, a matter of seven miles or so.

There they had abandoned the locomotive, where a lonely country road crossed the track at grade. A farmer next day reported that a seedy motor-car had been waiting for the robbers at the crossing with a man to run it. It must have been the flivver Abner bought and sold to them.

The farmer had seen the locomotive come to a halt, and he saw men leap from the cab and the tender and board the motor-car, but he was too far away to give the alarm in time.

All he could tell was that they had started off pell-mell along the road in the direction of the big hills. Two miles from the railroad, where thick woods began, the car was found ditched and abandoned.

Here was a challenge to a boy and a dog, as well as to men grown! Besides, there was the reward of \$1,000 for the capture!

"My goodness!" said Tom to Rex's left ear, as he sat on his front steps again, with his arms full of the dog. "If you and I could only catch those fellows, there wouldn't be any question of my going to college four years from now, and becoming an engineer. Since the house burned down, Father doesn't think he can afford to send me. Maybe I'll have to go to work

'stead o' being an engineer. A thousand dollars would take me about half-way through college. I could earn the rest. Rex, would you like to help me get a college education?"

Rex, finding himself thus directly addressed, tilted his nose toward the sky and uttered a long, queer cry—half a wolf-howl—that seemed to say he would be more than glad to help Tom if he only had half a chance.

Zane and Anders, the detectives assigned to the case, visited Tom's father.

"You've got a fine dog there that might possibly be of use to us," Zane said, pompously. "We've got coats those crooks left behind them—and there are plenty of tracks besides railroad tracks round where the pay-car was. There has been no rain to wash them out. Let's take the dog down there and give him a smell of the place and the things. Then we'll take him to where they got off the auto. We'll see if the dog can pick up the trail where they left the car and started for the woods. It'll be about as severe a test as a dog's nose was ever put to, but some o' these here so-called police dogs have done wonderful things! Anyway, we might as well give him a try."

So Rex was taken down to the railroad again, near Mike's cabin, and led all over the ground of the trouble.

"Never saw a two-legged Sherlock take his job so seriously," said Zane, the tall, lean member of the partnership.

"He's a corker!" agreed Anders. He was the roly-poly, pink-faced one, fond of sitting down. "It makes me tired just to watch that dog at work."

Tom, they had to admit, was a big help. Rex was more obedient to him than to anyone else, and every now and then, as Rex sniffed about, he would lift his nose, brown with mud, as if to ask Tom:

"Is this right? Am I doing what you want me to do?"

And Tom would answer at once the unvoiced question, saying: "Yes, that's right, Rex. Go on—sic 'em, sic 'em! Attaboy!"

Then the dog would drop his nose once more and rummage ahead. It was a wonder to them all, the way he put his whole mind on his task. "My!" said Tom to his father—"if I study my lessons at college, when I get the thousand dollars, the way Rex is working on the robbery now, I'll surely be a great engineer!"

"The money would be a big help," said his father, soberly. "But I wouldn't set my heart on it too much. A great many people will try to get their hands on that reward."

After taking Rex wherever the feet of the miscreants had pressed the soft earth about the robbed pay-car, the detectives and Tom went with Rex to the lonely crossing outside the town and let the dog reconnoitre there.

"I believe he understands," said Anders to Zane. "He gets the idea. He almost talks. It would be better for some of us if we kept our mouths shut and used our think-tanks instead, the way he does. He's already done enough to deserve to be made an honorary member of the Detective Bureau! I've known two-legged chair-warmers who never got so close to crooks as he is already. Well—old boy!" He patted Rex's shaggy flanks. "Getting warm, are you? Now come up the road a piece, and see if you can find the place where they left the flivver and beat it for the hills—and which way they went."

This, of course, began the most difficult part of the program.

Tom's father had demurred at first to Tom's desire to go with Rex on the trail. Mrs. Mason was not well, so her husband remained at home. The detectives told him that the boy was a most important aid. In fact, the dog was so much of a one-master dog that whenever Tom was about it spelt an instant, electric difference. At last Mr. Mason reluctantly agreed to let Tom take part in the man-hunt. The detectives fervently promised that they would not let him get into danger. How they could help it was not clear. They did not explain.

Rex was slow and careful by the side of the road at the point where the motor-pirates were supposed to have abandoned the car.

He ran a little way—halted—and ran back again. He raised his ears with his old quizzical habit and looked at Tom for encouragement. Tom nodded his approval. "Good old Rex! Attaboy!" The dog wagged his tail and set to work again like a methodical man of business. He ran down in the ditch and plashed about in the weedy, muddy water. He loved water, but he was not wading in it for fun to-day. It was not the time for play.

"There's no scent there!" cried Zane.

But Rex knew better, and to contradict him presently fished out of the ditch the tattered cardboard covers of an account-

book.

The initials of the M. L. and T. Railroad were stamped on it in blue.

"That was one of the paymaster's books!" shouted Anders excitedly.

Rex seemed to be stimulated by this approval. He stood knee-deep in the ditch, ears up, wagging and barking—one of the very few times he had broken the silence as he worked.

"Zowie!" yelled the other detective. "We're on the right track now, for sure!"

Rex rummaged about on the farther side of the ditch, and for a long time his effort to pick up the trail beyond was fruitless.

Suddenly he ceased his erratic zigzags, and started slowly in what was almost a straight line for the hills.

The detectives and Tom followed. Then Rex stopped as if frozen suddenly, rigid as a cast-iron dog on a lawn. He seemed no longer aware of his comrades. His attention was given entirely to the ground before him.

Anders, who liked to keep his trousers creased, made a wry face and got down on his hands and knees.

"Look here!" he cried. "If these aren't men's footprints, I'll eat my hat!"

Sure enough, the earth was broken, ever so faintly, by the traces of broad soles and boot-heels.

"Now we've got it!" said Zane, in the tone of a referee. "All we've got to do is just follow him and keep on going."

"It's getting pretty late," objected Anders. "Why not call it a day? We'd better mark the place, I think, and come back tomorrow, with a lot more men and plenty o' guns."

Zane looked somewhat rueful.

"Too bad we've got to let anybody else in on this," he said. "There's a big crowd lookin' for 'em on the other side of the mountains. But the robbers didn't go in there. They went in here. If we could keep right on going to-night, we'd get 'em first."

"Well, we could come back to-night," said Anders, doubtfully. "Wonder if we could manage the dog without Tom, here? Do you think your father would let you come out with us to-night, Tom?"

Tom's pride was touched, and he flushed. "Rex obeys me better'n he does anybody else," he answered. "You'd better take me along. It won't be so easy when you get into the woods. I don't think he'd pay much attention to either of you. Call him now, and see how fast he comes."

For Rex had started on, and was several hundred feet away.

First Anders tried. He puckered his fat lips till he looked like a sunfish, and whistled vainly. Then he shouted, "Rex, Rex! Here, Rex! Goo' boy, Rex!" But the dog didn't even turn his head, as he trotted across the bare brown earth of the plowed field.

Then Zane tried, in a thin, high voice like the sound of a pumpkin-vine flute.

"Here, Rexy!" Nobody ever called him Rexy. "Come on back, old fellow!"

Rex paid no heed to him, either.

Tom shouted "Rex!" just once.

The dog immediately stopped. He faced his master. Even at that distance, you could see his ears go up.

Tom did not repeat the call. It was not necessary. After that instant's hesitation Rex obeyed like the Light Brigade. His master wanted him, and he had no will of his own to the contrary. The others might have bawled at him till the cows came home, and it would have done no good. Tom's was his master's voice. And that made all the difference in the world.

But Rex seemed low in his mind at the recall. He was doing the thing they brought him here to do. He had just found the trail—and now his own master forbade him to follow it. It was a severe test of a dog's faith. Yet he was equal to it.

He came soberly back, ears drooping, tail down, as though expecting punishment. Tom patted and fondled him, and Rex seemed somewhat cheered and reassured. He pressed against the boy's leg, and rubbed his muddy nose against Tom's

knee.

"You and the dog seem to understand each other pretty well," observed Zane, enviously.

"You bet we do!" exclaimed Tom. "We haven't got any secrets from each other, have we? Don't you care, Rex. You're a wonder. You've found the place. To-night we're coming out again, with lanterns."

CHAPTER XI

A BATTLE IN THE DARK

That night, at ten o'clock, with eight more men quietly collected, they took up the trail where Rex left off in the afternoon. How different it was now! There was a moon, but it was not much use, for it was new, and gave little more light than the stars. Vague in the distance was the black, rough silhouette of the trackless hills. The heavy dew of the early autumn was on the corn-stalk stubble in the furrowed land. There was a little whispering breeze. Far off a lonely dog howled. The pale lemon-yellow light of the town was reflected in the sky. Across the fields, the lights of several farmhouses made a chain of star-links with the settled places from which the robbers fled.

The dog was leading the file, and a lantern bobbed some distance behind him, as the men in their citified footgear stumbled over the furrows, talking in low voices.

Rex was the pathfinder. It was the luck of the dumb brutes of creation to do so much hard work for men and get no pay but care and food—if they got that. Sometimes for their reward they had but curses, kicks and blows.

Said Jim Hogan over his shoulder to Martin Lee: "They say Mike Farley's likely to pass out most any time now. He ain't sleepin' to speak of, and he can't eat. The wife sits by him, tryin' not to cry when she thinks of the kids. He's been worryin' about a puppet-show he was makin' for Tom Mason. Now, if he was to die, an' we was to catch these dirty vermin we're after, I say I'd give my share o' the money to Mike's widder an' the kids."

"Mike Farley has a heart as big as a cow-barn," Martin answered. "He sat up nights with me when I had pneumonia and held me down to keep me from bouncin' out o' bed when I was seein' things. Say, where do you suppose the robbers has got to, anyway?"

"Where could they hide?" asked Jim.

"Well, to my way o' thinkin', there ain't only just about one place they could hide. That's where Lost River goes under the rocks into the mountain."

"Too narrow," objected Jim. "Where the water goes in the rapids 'most fill up the opening. A boy like Tom or a dog the size o' Rex could just about wiggle through, if they wasn't dashed to pieces, and if they hadn't et too much beforehand."

"Several years ago," reflected Martin, "that time we had the awful dry spell, Si Perkins got in there, when the water was away down low. He could walk in—it was only up to his armpits. An' his armpits is closer to the ground than some. He said the water 'most bowled him over. About three hundred yards in there was a cave, with a lot o' bats. They flew round so they 'most blinded him. There was sandy places at the sides, wide enough for a man to lay down on. Don't suppose anybody ever was in there before, since maybe the Indians. Guess if those yeggs was hard up maybe they'd take a chance on goin' in there."

"Was it dark?" asked Jim.

"You bet. Black as sin. So dark that if you put your finger in your eye you couldn't see to take it out again."

"Well, it couldn't be much darker than we got it now, anyway."

They were passing into the woods. There was no path. The leaves over their heads spread a filmy black tracery like Spanish lace against the star-sprinkled sky, and the feet had to stumble over the rocks and the roots without much help from the eyes.

It was as though pixies and elves had gathered things from everywhere and thrown them down, to keep mortals out of their mysterious hill country, wild enough by day and pure chaos after dark.

"Gosh all tarnation!" said Martin Lee. "I've barked my shins more'n all there is on these trees, an' we ain't only just gettin' into the beginning of the wood. I bet that dog's nose is tellin' lies as fast as it can travel. Why does he keep takin' us into the worst places? If a feller was alone here now, an' was to bust his leg in these rocks, they wouldn't be able to find him an' gather him up in time for Judgment Day. Where is that confounded purp, anyhow? That there lantern ain't helpin' any, to speak of. Only dazzles your eyes when you do see it, so a body can't tell where his feet is walkin' him to."

All this time Rex had his mind and his nose on nothing but the business underfoot. He acted like a dog with one fixed idea and without a sense of humor. Sometimes he switched off suddenly, for a moment, on a blind lead: but he never was

long in doubt, and if the men were not too close upon him he corrected his course so quickly that they lost little breath or footwork on his errors.

Tom was nearest, and Tom kept up a running fire of encouraging talk like a coach to a base-runner.

"That's right, old boy. Keep a-going. Remember old Mike, and the hunks of meat he used to give you from his lunch? Mike's your friend. These fellows you're after were tryin' to kill Mike."

They had forgotten all about the other searching party from beyond the mountain, and the danger of running into it, till in a spot where the woods opened out and they splashed into a black marsh full of shaky tussocks there came a ringing voice of challenge from the further side of the swamp.

"Halt!"

"Why?" called Zane. "Who are you?"

No answer.

Zane took a wet step forward.

The man on the other side must have had an attack of nerves—like the "buck-fever" that agitates a green deer-hunter. For instead of verbal explanation or expostulation, he let his rifle speak for him.

The pinging bullet zipped a tree close to the detective's head.

Zane drew his revolver and fired. Then others began banging away recklessly, on both sides. Rex, hauled back by the tail, got behind a rock, and his master crouched beside him.

"Nice mess, isn't it, Rex?" said Tom. "I'll bet that's the other bunch huntin' for the robbers. Shinny on your own side, I say! They ought to stick to their own part of the mountain and let us work here."

From rock to rock the sharp-shooters—and there were some very dull shooters among them—blazed away at one another. The mountainside reverberated like a vast drum—sprurts of flame stabbed the dark like lightning-flashes. The noise must have been heard in the town, at least five miles away, tremendously. That was what Tom thought. And in town, Tom supposed, they were probably saying: "They've got the robbers! Listen at that shootin'! Any time now they'll be bringin' 'em in! Git ready to celebrate! Where's my old trombone?"

Rex talked under his breath in his own way about going on. Sometimes he stood, bristling with eagerness. Tom would put his hand on his taut and thrilled backbone, and push him down.

"Lie still, boy! They'll soon find out what a silly mistake they're making."

The fire of the other side was slackening. They were evidently withdrawing down the mountain-slope.

"Cease firin'!" shouted Jim Hogan. Then, in a lull, he yelled: "Hey, who are you, anyway? This is Jim Hogan."

"This is Bill Miller," was the response "What you firin' at us for?"

"You started it!" Jim shouted back.

"No such thing! It was you fellows began it."

"You're a liar!" bawled Jim. "You knew we were on this side the mountain comin' up. Anybody hurt?"

"No—nuthin' at all—only Ellis Rogers got a nick in his left ear. Any dead or dyin' on your side?"

"No," Jim answered, "but it's an amazin' mercy there's one of us alive. Why didn't you answer?"

"Why didn't we answer? How could we? You didn't give us time. Before we could say Jack Robinson you were bangin' away at us."

"Go on! You started it!"

"Get out! We didn't! You began." Then, as he spied Rex ghosting it in the dim lantern-light, Bill's sentence broke off in his mouth like a bit of tobacco. "Gosh all hemlock, that's some dog you got there! Will he bite?"

"You bet he will! That's what we brought him for. He'd take off a man's hand like it was a fly.—Say, don't knock over that lantern. Ain't you got one of your own?"

"Yes, we got one," confessed Bill, "only——"

"Only what?"

"We come away in such a hurry we forgot to put oil into it. Ain't you got an electric torch? That lantern o' yours can't hold out much longer."

"We got a torch," said Jim, "only we didn't bring no battery for it."

"Your dog ain't no good," sneered Bill. "We could 'a' brought along a hundred tykes better'n him if we'd 'a' wanted to. We could 'a' got a reg'lar A number one bloodhound."

Jim was loud in derision. "Huh! Bloodhound your grandmother. A bloodhound wouldn't 'a' been so good as what we got."

"Better, I tell you," Bill retorted.

Then Jim lost the last of his temper. "You're a fool!" he flared.

Bill thrust his chin close to Jim's face. "Wanna make somethin' out of it?"

"Yes—an' hurry up, 'cause the lantern's goin' out in a minute."

"I'll put you out before it goes out."

"Yes you will!"

"Yes I will! Look out for yourself!" Bill flung himself at Jim, and the pair grappled and strained, a ring forming round them.

"Go it, Jim! Attaboy!"

"Knock 'is block off, Bill!"

At last both Bill and Jim, tuckered out, could do no more than roll about on the mushy ground, taking it out in language when their fists would no longer serve them.

"Anyway, I licked you," gasped Bill.

"Anyway, you didn't," panted Jim. "I leave it to you fellows. Did he? Didn't I?"

The question never was settled. But a half-hour of moonlight (such as it was) had gone glimmering, and a lot of manly energy had been wasted.

"Well," said Jim, "I suppose we'd better be goin' on."

"Where'll we be goin' on to?" asked Tom Thurle, the garbage-collector, in his mosquito voice. He was one of Jim's following.

"Whaddaya mean, goin' on to?" growled Jim, bear-savage. "We're goin' where the dog takes us to."

"But there ain't no dog no more," complained Thurle, from the stomach up.

"Why ain't there? Where's the dog at?"

"He ain't at. He's went."

"Went? Where to?"

"I dunno. He didn't say. If I knew I'd tell ye, wouldn't I?"

"Why'd you let that dog run away? Where's Tom Mason?"

"He's went with the dog."

"He has, is he? Drat that kid!—Tom Mason! Where you at?" Jim yelled, and the rocks gave back his words. "Now we are in a nice mess. Who knows the way out o' here?"

There was silence.

"Lost in the woods, thass all!" exclaimed Jim, bitterly. "An' the lantern's out. Moon's no use. We gotta stick together now. An' we don't know where we're goin', an' we ain't even on our way. Drat that kid! I felt a few drops o' rain. That dog was

our latch-key to the woods. We can't smell our way outa here. Guess our best bet is just to sit here so's not to get any more lost'n we are till sun-up. What say? Anybody got a better idea? If so, out with it. Does anybody here present know where we're at?"

"I know where we're at," drawled the nasal voice of Hod Coogan, the semi-professional ball-player. "But it don't do any good just knowin' where we're at. What we wanna know is, how to move outa where we're at to where we wanna go to."

"Aw say, Hod Coogan, you make me tired. That's the way you acted last summer between first an' second base. You big, fat-headed lummo! We'll sit right here, that's what we'll do. Anybody got any matches?"

Tod Hardhack had matches and a pipe. Tim Varney had some cigarettes, but not enough to go round more than himself, which was a considerable distance. Two others had cigars, broken ones. A cheerless huddle it was that waited for dawn, with three or four red-glowing spots to show where their faces were, as if they were one-eyed wolves.

"If I ever catch that kid Tom Mason again," growled Jim, "I'll—I'll ... I bet that dog o' his ain't any good, anyhow. I never did trust those lean, rangy, slouchy police-dogs. They sure got a mean eye an' wag a mean tail—you never know which end to believe. As soon bite you as look at you. I didn't want the dog along, anyhow. I says from the very first, leave him behind, that's what I says. You all heard me. If that dog hadn't led us here, stands to reason we wouldn't be here now."

As Jim had shown himself so ready to defend his opinions with his fists, nobody rose up to contradict him. Instead, there were several snores, not timed or tuned together. All the "pep" had gone out of the party. They didn't want a prize—they were too sleepy even to discuss how they would spend it. All they wanted was the face of the sun, smiling down on their shortest way back. They could trust the old, familiar sun to help them out of the forlorn and pestilential spot this new-fangled, miserable, low-down, sneaky critter had led them into. No more police-dogs for them! Never again!

"If I had that dog here," quavered a voice in the dark, "I'd kick the stuffin' out o' him. Er else I'd tie him to a tree an' beat him to a frazzle. You don't wanna let one o' them dogs get your nerve. Just stand right up to 'em an' let 'em see you ain't afraid of 'em. The kid's gone back on us. He's got tired an' gone home. I knew he wouldn't stick: I knew he didn't have no guts. I knew 'long about midnight he'd wanna go home to his ma. An' the dog's the same kind. Quit cold."

"Anyway," put in another voice for the sake of argument, "the dog wa'n't responsible for us havin' no lights. He didn't forget the oil, an' the batteries for the flash-lamp."

"Shut your head, Lem Johnson, you crazy fool! I'm only blamin' on the dog what the dog did. That's all I'm talkin' about. I'll tell what I know about an' you can tell what you know about."

"Oh, shut up, you fellows!" put in Jim Hogan. "I'd most 'a' fell asleep if it hadn't been for you. You go on like a couple o' old women at a rummage-sale. What's the use o' scrappin' over what can't be helped? Ain't no use tryin' to go on, 'thout lights an' no trail. All we gotta do now is just sit tight an' keep cool an'——*What was that?*"

In the silence and the darkness, each man felt his heart beating, and his scalp a-creep, and imagined his neighbor could hear the loud thud-thud against his ribs as if he had swallowed a motor-boat. They could hear, too, the little, soft whimper of a rivulet feeling its broken way amid the rocks.

But above the diminutive music of the water, and the gentle rustle of the night wind in the leaves, there was the sense of something or someone stirring—something or someone that had nothing to do with the group of awestruck, spell-bound robber-hunters.

Nobody spoke. Nobody—that is, of their own number—moved a muscle. They sat tense as telephone-wires, mentally blaming one another for breathing, dreading lest anybody cough, or spit, or stir. The pallid remnant of the moon was not enough to see by—but it helped them to hear all sorts of things and imagine more.

Yes—there really was something—something moving, clumsily and stumblingly! It was a shape about the size and build of Rex, and whether it was wild or not it did not wait to be examined, but it was roaming about among the crouching and recumbent forms.

Could it be a bear? There were bears to be had in these mountains, but usually they did their best to get away from the sight and sound of men. Could it be a deer? Could it be some escaped circus varmint? Was it a calf, 'way off its beat, or a colt that strayed, whose mother didn't know it was out? Or was it merely Rex come back, with his young master somewhere behind him, to find out the reason why they had not followed his track whither he guided?

"Tom!" Jim Hogan shattered the stillness. "Tom!" he called again.

Instead of a vocal human answer, the dumb brute leapt on Jim, who screamed in terror.

"Take him off! Take him off! He's killing me!"

But then—his voice went flat as a tire, and his terror with it, as he discovered his mistake and felt ever so foolish.

"Goodness sakes alive! If it ain't—Why, Pete, what ever are you doin' here?"

His old, faithful house-dog, harmless as a bale of hay, was pawing and fondling and licking his master's hand. Old Pete, with his teeth worn down almost to the gums, the pet of children,—Pete, in whom these many years the spark of adventure was supposed to be utterly dead! Old Pete, not fit to be left in his kennel, for fear some daring squirrel might nip him in the nose while he slept! Who'd 'a' thought it, who'd 'a' thought it? Why, Pete, you ornery, low-down, lop-sided, drabble-tailed, wall-eyed, knock-kneed, chicken-livered old fraud, you! How ever did you break your rope and get here? But anyway, what a relief!

"Pete's a-goin' to take us right home now, ain't you, Pete?"

"What about the kid?" asked Zane.

"The kid? What kid?"

"Why, Tom Mason."

"O yes, I'd clean forgot about him. Well, I guess that confounded Rex can bring home what he brought out. They ran away from us, the both of 'em, didn't they? Let 'em run along home together, if they want to. Le's go with Pete. Pete, goo' boy, thass it, Pete—gwan ahead, Pete!"

Pete barked,—not the joyous and free bark of young dogdom. It was more like an old lady with a bad cold. However, his throaty effort would do to register joy. He flapped his bushy, burr-stuck tail—not very fast—against Jim's leg. He seemed to get the idea that the order was for home. But you could not hustle Pete. He picked his way so slowly that it was not hard for the party to keep up with him—their only trouble was to keep from falling over him and over their own feet.

By and by it occurred to them that Pete could not be leading them by the short way home.

He seemed to have ideas of his own as to where the town was.

They had been falling over things in the dark a long, long time, and it felt just as lonesome, just as far from the open fields as when they first began to follow him.

"I know what your dog's doing," Zane told Hogan, irritably. "He's following some animal or something. Probably it's Rex. We'll soon catch up with him."

Then Pete began to bark, and crashed into a thicket at the right. After some minutes, in the distance they heard him yapping and yowling; and then all was beautifully still again.

"Pete!" called Jim. "O-o-o-o Pete! Come here, Petey, come here!"

Pete returned, crash by crash, and Jim found he didn't want him after all. For as the dog came affectionately nearer, there came with him a rank, familiar odor that tainted the breeze and made him socially impossible. Pete had been chasing a skunk, and no one could afford to wait to welcome him. Instead, they threw sticks and stones at him, where they discerned him dimly moving, and the sorrowful animal slunk off and went home fragrantly some other way.

The eastern sky was brightening. Hod Coogan climbed a white birch tree and had a glimpse of the distant fields, and told the rest about it, before the tree broke under his weight and saved him much time and trouble in descending.

In the glimmer of gray dawn, with a thick and clammy ground-mist, through which the red ball of the sun looked presently, they issued from the woods into the fields, fit to go on duty at once as scarecrows, had there been crops to protect. They were ashamed to look one another in the face: and nobody said anything about the thousand dollar prize.

CHAPTER XII

TO THE RESCUE!

They were so tired they were all but walking in their sleep, when they shambled into the village in the broad middle of the morning: and though they meant to get rid of one another and disperse noiselessly to their homes, they found themselves unable to sidestep public interest in their return.

Too many people had seen them go away and were agog for a big, old-home-week welcome.

By common consent, the palm for the most satisfactory and veracious account went to Jim Hogan. He told it to the postmaster, right out loud so everybody could hear, on the dirt side-walk in front of the post-office. Jim was a popular man, and maybe some day he would be trying for the legislature, and would want them all to vote for him.

"We'd struck the trail and were going strong. The dog didn't seem to be very anxious to go on: an' the little kid" (Jim managed to make a kind of sob here) "was all tuckered out, too. I offered to carry him, but he said he wanted to go home to his ma. Finally the dog an' the kid, seein' we was bound we wouldn't turn back, give us the slip in the dark. We'd just met the other fellows who had come around Bald Knob from the other side. We set down to have a council of war.

"Up to that time the dog an' the kid had been pretty near useless, just a dead weight on our hands, though the dog helped some first off, when we were pickin' up the trail into the woods.

"We decided that probably the robbers had gone to the place where Lost River dives underground, so's if the water was low enough they could get in, an' hide in the cave.

"When we got up to go on, we couldn't find Tom an' Rex nowhere. We walked around for a long time, whoopin' an' hollerin', even at the risk of givin' the robbers warnin' we were on their trail. But no use. Never an answerin' holler did we hear. So then we made up our minds they had given us the slip—they musta got cold feet an' started back. We decided to come on back too, soon as it got light, an' get some more provisions, an' et cetera, an' make another try."

"But," put in the slow-speaking postmaster, "Tom an' Rex ain't come back yet. They musta kep' right on goin'."

"Well," said Jim, "seems like the only thing for us to do is to originize one o' these here relief expeditions an' go chasin' back after the kid."

Again the postmaster had to be unpleasant. "Say, who's goin' up to the Mason farm to break the news to Mrs. Mason?" he asked. "It'll take more nerve 'n any o' your relief expeditions. It won't bring her no relief, what you got to tell her."

Jim looked downcast, and heartily sorry for himself. "Is it—necessary?" He nearly swallowed his Adam's apple while getting out the last word.

"Sure. It's more'n necessary. Somebody's got to. 'F you won't, I will!"

"Let's 'point a committee," proposed Jim, evasively.

"Don't 'point me!" exclaimed several of his comrades, in alarm.

"I don't wanta be among those present when she gets the bad word," said Bill Miller. "Let me outa this. Our fellers wasn't with your gang, anyway. We was on the other side o' the mountain mindin' our own business. You ran into us accidental, an' we come along to be sociable. By request.—You an' your crowd go on up to the house an' straighten things out with Mis' Mason."

"Huh!" sneered Jim. "When it was a question o' dividin' up the cash proceeds you was one of us, all right. Now it comes to takin' your share o' the blame an' maybe goin' to jail, for losin' the kid an' the dog, you're tryin' to crawl out from under an' let us get soaked."

"Where's them two high-paid city detective fellers?" asked Tom Thurle, uneasily. "They can break the news. They get paid anyhow. They can go an' tell Mrs. Mason about her boy. They're slick speakers. It was their idea havin' Tom an' Rex come along. We didn't want 'em. It was them two sleuths—Zane an' Anders, that had to have 'em. If we hadn't taken 'em along, we wouldn't 'a' got into all this fix. Where are they, anyhow?"

"I know!" yelled a small boy whose voice was the biggest part of him. "I seen both the two o' them beatin' it down to the deepot for the train 'bout ten minutes ago. They musta jest caught it."

"Guess that was a good idee for them," said Jim, with a sarcastic stress on "them" that brought a guffaw from the crowd. "Fact is, if I was them, I think that's just about what I would be doin'. I don't think it'll be healthy for them to come round here for some time to come. We don't need none o' these imported city fellers showin' us how, thank you." There was a murmurous assent from the bystanders. Jim was fast regaining their esteem and his own. "Well, we'll get up a rescue exposition, thass what we'll do. Who wantsta volunteer?"

"Me! Me! Me!" shouted one after another, like frogs on a still night in the country. Jim was jostled by the host of eager applicants.

There hadn't been such excitement since the Rialto Motion Picture Corporation had movied into town, with its vanity boxes, bead bags and silvery laughter, and put out the drag-net for a crowd of extras to film a mob scene.

On that occasion about the whole population of Waynesboro, even to the dogs, cats and chickens, had mobilized for service. There was no money in it—only glory. Now it looked like fame and riches too. Each man and boy fluffed out his shirt and fancied himself part of the army driving the hill-brigands helter-skelter from their nest, and saving Tom and Rex from burning at the stake, or drowning at the bottom of a well, or death by slow starvation.

Too bad Tom and Rex weren't a beautiful girl, to add the dash of romance to the spice of danger. But here was a breeze of adventure freshly blowing, anyway, right off the scrub-oak crest of the hill-ranges. Even if the thousand dollars wouldn't go round, there would be excitement a-plenty for everyone.

"Where's my boy?"

The sharp edge of a voice of feminine anguish came from the outskirts of the throng.

The crowd made way, as snow yields to a plow, before the figure of a woman who evidently cared little for her personal appearance, in the shadow of the trouble that was hers.

Mrs. Mason's eyes were dark-ringed with sleepless anxiety.

"Jim Hogan, tell me, where is Tom? Why didn't he come back with you? What have you done with him?"

Jim spread out his hands like an auctioneer.

"My dear lady, 'f I could tell you, you bet I would. All I can say is, Tom an' Rex musta kep' right on goin'. It's a shock,—yes'm, shock ain't too strong a word,—to find they ain't come home."

"Why didn't you come and tell me?" demanded Tom's mother.

"Madam,"—Jim was all dignity,—"we just arrove back in town. We just this minute heard the tidin's. We was about to appoint a committee to let you know. Meanwhile we are gettin' up a rescue exposition to go back right away. O' course nothin' can't have happened to the boy."

"How do you know, Jim?" cried Mrs. Mason. Then she wheeled indignantly from him to his subdued associates. "You cowards! You left Tom to die there in the woods. You didn't care. We heard the sound of shooting. My husband and I followed you in our car to where the road runs nearest to the woods. Mr. Mason with a posse is his way back there now. He brought me home first, and told me to wait, and forbade me to follow: but I am going to disobey him. He took a short cut, and so you missed him.—I know what happened!" she blazed. "The robbers fired at you, and you ran away. You deserted my poor boy." The tears were rolling down her cheeks, and her sentences were punctuated with sobbing. "Don't tell me they shot him! No, no, don't tell me that!"

"Say, listen here, lady," said Jim, soothingly, as he put his saddle-leather hand on her throbbing wrist, "be ca'm, be ca'm. Confidentially, they was jes' a little—misunderstandin' between our two searchin' parties when we met in the dark, not knowin' who from whom. That was all. Jes' a few shots fired by accident. No damage done. Nobody hurt. Nobody hurt at all. Only jus' a little piece taken outa Ellis Rogers' left ear. Show the lady your ear, Ellis."

Ellis shambled forward to oblige, but Mrs. Mason was resentful. "I don't want to look at anybody's ear. I want to see my boy. If he wasn't—hurt, they've caught him, and taken him to their den. What shall I do?" She wrung her hands. "If you're going back, you must take me with you. I can't wait here. I'll go crazy. How soon are you going to start?" she demanded of Jim.

"Why, lady," he gulped, with the eyes of all upon him, "just as soon—as soon as you're ready. We'll go right back, right away. The whole bunch is rearin' an' snortin' to go. Ain't you, boys?"

It was a large caravan that deserted work of every description, unceremoniously, for the rescue expedition.

Of the many who started, even in cars, few persevered: a number parked their cars at the point on the clay road that was closest to the forest, and drowsily waited there for the news: a few pedestrians entered the woods, and a handful accompanied Jim on the rocky, swampy, mosquito-infested forest trail.

One villager had put his horse and wagon, with himself as driver, at Mrs. Mason's disposal, to go as far as the woods. Other searching parties, as Waynesboro learned by telephone, were looking for robbers behind the trees and under the stones on the other side of the mountain.

It was hard to imagine how the bandits could escape, unless they flew to Mars, or dug to China.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DEN OF THIEVES

Meanwhile, what was becoming of Tom and Rex?

They had slipped off before the fight was over, and had gone on in the dark, Tom's hand on Rex's collar.

Rex apparently had no need of eyes. A sixth sense told him what to do. He seemed more sure of himself in these dense woods than he had been in the open fields. Dog and boy had never felt their comradeship so keenly.

So intent were the pair on the trail that for a long time they went on and on without once pausing to rest. At any moment they might burst in upon the camp-fire circle of the men they sought.

At last Tom called a halt.

"Stop, Rex!"

Rex obeyed, prompt as a soldier.

The boy's arm round his comrade's neck, they sat and heard each other breathe—otherwise the woodland was asleep and soundless.

"We'll go ahead anyway till we find where they are, old boy," Tom said in a low tone. "Guess we'd better not try to rush 'em by ourselves. But we can bring the gang."

Rex seemed to understand. He was no longer the fearsome brother to the wolf—he was Tom's devoted friend and comrade, true to the last gasp and the last flop of his tail. He put his rough jowl against his master's cheek.

Tom was no coward. But he was glad to have Rex with him in this damp, chill solitude. He was beginning to feel the pangs of hunger. Probably Rex was hungry too.

He felt in every pocket for a piece of sweet chocolate. No such luck. There was everything except something to eat. There were several wire nails. There was a coil of twine. There was a ticket to the movies. A two-bladed jack-knife with one blade badly nicked and the other broken, the key to a tool-chest, and another to wind up a clockwork locomotive long ago discarded, a tin whistle and a cricket of the sort used for a signal to a magic lantern operator, a pencil-stub, three clay marbles and an agate, a handkerchief the worse for wear, a pocket-book containing eleven cents and two Newfoundland caribou postage-stamps, a small note-book that for three days had been a diary, five matches that were no good without the box to strike them on, a leaflet of radio instructions—these things were a fine equipment, surely, for a young gentleman adventurer and a dog going into the woods, like the Mounted Police, to bring back desperate villains dead or alive.

Rex, with no baggage at all except the burrs stuck on his chest and tail, was just about as well fitted out for the expedition.

In fact, it might be said that he was better prepared—for Rex had a sure means of getting home again, in that infallible nose of his: and not a thing in the rubbish Tom had in his pockets would help him in the least to find his way back.

"Rex, getting hungry?"

Rex licked Tom's hand.

"A nice big bone, with lots of meat on it, would taste good just about now, wouldn't it?"

A rough paw rested on Tom's knee.

"Well, I s'pose we might as well be going on."

Tom rose. To his surprise, Rex's teeth detained his jacket.

"What's the matter?"

Rex released his hold, but growled low.

"Hear anything?"

The boy listened. The leaves fluttered in the wind. There came the distant cry of a hoot-owl.

Rex ominously growled again.

Tom thought he heard the faintest sound of running water far away. Yes—it was the voice of a stream. It must be Lost River, hurrying on its lonesome way to earn its name by losing itself in a headlong plunge into its cavern in the mountain.

Suddenly the dog made a mighty leap at the black wall of darkness about them.

There was a yell of human terror.

Rex was snarling and tearing at his prey, and the man he had felled was imploring mercy.

"Lemme go! Lemme go!"

There was no energy to waste in words. The man was unequal to the battle with this huge animal. He was losing wind and ground and blood all at once.

Over and over the dog and the man rolled together, growling and swearing.

How soon would the others hear and come to the rescue? Wouldn't it be better to let Rex kill off this man at least?

He was pleading for mercy. "Call him off! Call him off! He's murdering me!"

"Rex!" shouted Tom. "Let him go!" He grasped Rex's collar, but the dog had already obeyed.

"Where are the others?" demanded Tom.

"In the river cave." The words were half gasped, half groaned, but Tom felt they probably told a lie. "How many you got with you?"

"Just myself and the dog," said Tom—and when he had said it, he wondered if he had been unwise. "But what are you doing here alone?"

"Guarding the trail," the robber answered feebly. "But I'm sick of it. I didn't want to get into it from the first."

"Have you got any matches?"

"Feel in my pocket."

Tom found the matches, gathered dead leaves and twigs and made a tiny blaze.

The wavering light showed him a young man, with a weak, rather good-natured face, and tired eyes.

"I couldn't have a fire," he complained. "It would 'a' given us away. They left me here to keep watch. I was drinkin' some, an' I lost my revolver. I fell asleep. Next thing I knew the dog was at my throat. Wish you'd look at it. Better not light up too much. Our fellows may see it and come here. I ain't so much afraid of your crowd as I am of them." His breath was going better, and his words flowed more evenly.

"They know just where I am," he went on. "I didn't want to come with 'em anyway." Now he was trembling, or pretending to do so. "See if I'm bleeding to death anywhere, will you?"

There were marks of Rex's teeth on his throat. But the teeth had not pierced the skin: there was no blood. It was his own imagination that had dealt a mortal wound.

"He didn't bite you. He only held you," explained Tom. "If I told him to kill you, he would in a minute." It seemed as well to let him remain afraid.

"I guess that's right," agreed the other ruefully, rubbing the side of his neck. "I couldn't breathe while your dog had a-holt of me. I was as weak as a baby. I didn't know what it was. I thought it was a bear. He had me choked before I could get my hands on him."

"He's awfully strong," Tom said. "And he's as brave as a lion. If I told him to, he'd as soon tackle a whole lot of men. He wouldn't stop for anything, as long as he was alive."

"Well, what you goin' to do now?" inquired the robber, curiously, as he leaned back on his elbow. "Going to leave me here?"

"Can't you move?" asked Tom. "What ever's the matter with you?"

"I twisted my leg—and I guess I sprained my ankle." He kneaded his right thigh with both hands, then rose painfully, and

tried to stand. Then he swore. "I can't walk!" he exclaimed. "I can't hop along on one leg. It's miles to anywhere. You better leave me here. Are there any more comin' on behind you?" He was almost crying—truly a heroic figure for a bold, bad highwayman!

"There are," Tom gladly admitted. He thought it prudent to say no more: it would be as well to let the brigand think strong reinforcements were at hand. This man was an outpost of the enemy. If Rex had not been with him, Tom might have stood a poor chance of getting away alive.

"They didn't trust me," volunteered the robber. "They were afraid I was going to peach on 'em. They said I got cold feet." He dragged himself painfully about, broke off more twigs and cast them on the feeble flame. "I didn't want to go to the river cave. I said if we got in there we'd be trapped. They wouldn't listen. They got tired of me. They got mad at me. They didn't care if I died. I'm through with the whole kit an' caboodle of 'em."

"Did they leave you anything to eat?"

"Not a crumb. You got anything, kid? Piece o' sweet chocolate, or somethin'?"

"Haven't a thing," said Tom. "And I'm awfully hungry. So's my dog."

"Say, this is a nice mess we're in, ain't it?" Tom did not fail to notice that he had said "we." The robber tossed a handful of dried moss at the fire. "If I only had somethin' to smoke, now, it wouldn't be so bad. What time is it?"

"I don't know." He thought it prudent not to let the other know that he carried a watch.

"They took my money," complained the bandit. "They took just about everything I had. I dunno how they came to leave me the matches.—But you can't eat matches," he added, gloomily.

"Which way is the cave from here?"

"Say, you can't go alone, kid! I don't know where it is."

"Isn't it the sound of Lost River we hear?"

The man listened as though for the first time his ear caught the sound. "Yes, I guess it must be. Say, bo, as man to man, I'm dyin' o' thirst. I got a paper cup in my pocket they didn't snitch off me. That stream must be just a little piece down yonder. You'd save my life if you'd fetch up some water. Take the dog with you, to find the way back. I'll keep the fire goin' till you come. You can see it quite a ways."

Tom took the cup and started, Rex with him. They had to pierce a mean tangle of windfalls. The old, fallen tree-trunks lay criss-crossed every which way, as though nature had been playing a game of jack-straws with them. The logs were thick with dew-soaked, slippery moss. They were gnarled and studded with sharp points, where branches had broken off. Tom caught and tore his clothes, and the edged rocks threatened to imprison and twist his leg in their unseen crevices. Rex slipped and scuffled along beside his master, panting heavily. The voice of Lost River, whimpering below, grew louder and louder.

For a few minutes the fire they left behind glared after them like the red, angry eyes of a beast watching in the mouth of its den. Then it was a faint, occasional flicker—at last it was blotted out completely.

They clambered down to the river. Here it was but a leaping, rushing mountain-torrent, a swirling chain of pools in whose eddies brook-trout might take refuge, rushing on to where the mountain barred its wayward, downward course and swallowed it whole.

Tom heard the dog eagerly lapping the water beside him. After taking a long, long drink with his face in the stream, Tom filled the paper cup, wishing it were ever so much bigger, and started back with slight hope of getting more than a few drops to the lips that were waiting and thirsting above.

It had taken about ten minutes to clamber down to the stream: it required at least fifteen to return. Tom, of course, expected to find the fire replenished and vigorous. But there were only a few smouldering embers making a glow barely visible at a few paces.

"Where are you?" the boy called.

There was no answer.

Could this be the place? Yes—as he built up the glow to a blaze he could see where he had broken the branches and torn

away the moss for fuel a little while before.

The brigand, with whom he had come to feel almost friendly, had crawled off—or else he had been carried away. Perhaps he had only shammed the lameness. If he had been taken away, the other men must have been guided by the fire. Perhaps it was a signal they had arranged.

The torment of thirst was gone, but that of hunger remained, with a great weariness. He was too tired to puzzle over the mystery. Rex, on guard, fierce and erect in the flickering light of the revived fire as it played on the tree-trunks, showed no sign either of fatigue or of fear.

They might be hiding there in the dark, somewhere, to pounce out upon Tom and Rex. Even that possibility, and the hunger, and the hardness of the ground, could not keep Tom from slumber. Presently Rex, too, lay down, his nose to the dying fire, and Tom pillowed his head on the warm body of the faithful beast and fell asleep.

When he woke, it was broad day. He felt in his pocket for his watch: it was gone. Had the robber picked his pocket before Tom went to the stream for the water?

It was child's play to find the way to the river, compared with the same journey in the dark.

The water was chill, black and sullen—a proper sort of stream to lead to a robber's den. Tom remembered the tale of Ali Baba and the forty thieves his mother read to him. He could hear her soft voice now, and he longed to be with her. It was a strong temptation to retreat. What good could the two of them do if they went on? They would only be killed or taken presently. At any moment the robbers might spring out on them from behind a rock, or a fatal shot might come.

They made their way down-stream toward the looming mountain-wall, plashing in the water, slipping on the rounded pebbles, worming a way through the clutter of driftwood everywhere at the edge of the swift torrent. After hard hours of such going, they came to a clearing, about half an acre in extent, with some little squatty bushes of half-ripe blueberries. While Tom laid about him among the berries, finding few that he could eat, Rex was busy getting his own food-supply. He came upon a dead partridge close to the water, and ate it all but the beak and the claws and a few feathers. With these poor meals inside them, Tom lay down in the brilliant sunlight among the blueberry bushes to take a nap, and the dog stretched out beside him. In spite of the buzzing gnats, the boy presently was asleep, but the dog remained awake a little while. Then Rex, too, laid his head on his tired paws and presently he was in a happy hunting-ground where squirrels, rabbits, birds and foxes abounded, to be run down and caught for dinner as he pleased.

And that is how the robber band caught Tom.

There came a shot pinging from the woods on the other side of the stream, evidently meant to kill the dog. It woke them both as it clipped leaves from a blueberry bush and flicked a chip from a stump and tossed up a spurt of hot yellow gravel close to where they lay. Tom's wits were with him in an instant.

"Go home, Rex!" he commanded in an undertone. "Home!" He pointed to the route by which they came, and gave Rex a violent thrust in that direction.

The dog hesitated.

Another shot whizzed past them as he stood, a figure of angry challenge, his master crouching beside him.

"Go home, Rex!" commanded Tom again, lying flat as he could to the ground.

Then Rex,—it must have been only because he knew it was his duty to fetch aid,—was off into the woods as though on wings. Tom could not tell if a bullet struck him ere the thick trees swallowed the gray streak of his swift passing.

The men, seven in number, wild, rough and loud, were over the river and upon the boy in the next two minutes. In the lead was the young man for whom Tom had fetched water in the night. But his expression and his manner were utterly changed.

"We'll get forty thousand dollars for you, kid!" he cried, exultant. "Too bad we didn't get that cowardly cur of yours, too! But by the time he's brought the posse, we're a-goin' to be where they won't think o' lookin' for us!"

Tom could do nothing against the seven. He did not struggle while they tied his hands behind his back.

"Had anything to eat?" said one, not unkindly.

The boy's pride was touched. He was bound he would take nothing at their hands.

"I don't want anything," he answered, and fell over in a faint, from sheer hunger and exhaustion.

When he came to, he was lying on hard, bare ground in a crevice between great walls of rock. There was no sign of the river. They must have carried him far into the mountain fastnesses. The bushy rock-walls were so high, the outlet to the sky was so narrow, that the pit was almost as dark and gloomy as a well.

One of the men was slicing a loaf of bread. Four were gambling and quarreling round a flat rock. Two others strutted about, their hands deep in their pockets, conversing in low tones. One of the card-players noticed that Tom was sitting up.

"Feeling all right again, kid?" It was the man he had befriended. The others called him Sam. His present mood was that of a noisy good-humor.

"Where am I?" cried Tom, wildly.

"Oh, that would be telling!" said the robber. "We're keepin' it a pleasant surprise for you. Lucky you passed out when you did, or we might 'a' had to put you to sleep. If they want to get you back, they got to pay big money. We ain't a-goin' to hurt you as long as you don't make a move to get away from here. But here you're a-goin' to stay till we git the money."

"My dog Rex'll bring 'em here to get me!" cried Tom, with a defiant toss of the head.

"Your dog?" the other sneered. "It'll take more'n a dog to get you out o' this place. Lost River ain't no dry trail through the woods. We walked in the water an' bust up the scent."

"Was it up-stream or down?" asked the boy.

"Huh!" was Sam's response. "I've given ye all the geography lesson I'm goin' to, kid. We don't intend to have you writin' home to your ma tellin' her where to come with the baby carriage. You're where it won't be no use to send you no birthday cake, er no Christmas present. Nor it ain't no use to cry. You jest gotta make up your mind to camp out here with us till the money comes an' a promise that they'll let us go free. We'll kill you if they don't!"

"There's a reward of a thousand dollars for capturing you!" Tom threatened. "Mike Farley is probably dying."

His captor laughed. "A thousand dollars? Is that all they think it's worth? Why, kid, do you know how much we're goin' to get for you? Forty thousand. That's our price. You see, we got a higher opinion o' you than they got of us. Just forty times as high. We think a lot of you, kid—so much, we ain't goin' to let you out of our sight a minute—not on your life we ain't!"

"How're you goin' to get out o' these mountains?" Tom retorted. "There are people with guns on every side of 'em, lookin' for you."

"Well," said Sam, slowly and meaningfully, "if they won't let us out, they can just bet you ain't a-goin' to get out either. Before you come along it was kind of a puzzle about our getaway. Now it ain't a puzzle no more. All we gotta do, I don't mind tellin' you, is hold you like a kind o' club over 'em. We write 'em a letter an' one of us sneaks out the back way an' puts it in the mail. 'You pay our price an' let us out,' we tell 'em, 'an' we hand the kid over to you safe an' sound. You shoot us up,' we tell 'em, 'an' we dispose of the kid as we please. If you wanta be sure o' gettin' him back, you put the money down the place we tell you, an' leave us make our getaway, an' no interference. Otherwise'"—he drew the side of his hand smartly across the knot in the red bandana round his throat—"we ain't responsible for what may happen."

If he thought to curdle Tom's blood with this talk, and the old-time piratical gesture, Sam had guessed wrong. He talked more like a parrot than a pirate.

"I'm not going to try to run away." Tom's voice was firm. "I'm not afraid of the whole bunch of you. You wouldn't dare do a thing to me," he taunted. "If Mike Farley dies, you're murderers. I don't mind sitting on a hard rock for a few hours as much as you're going to mind sitting in the electric chair for a few seconds. There's only one of me, and there's seven of you. But I'd rather be my one than all of your seven. You'd better give me a good big drink of water now, and a whole lot to eat. I'm awfully hungry and thirsty."

"Say, you sure have got nerve for a kid! Just listen at yourself, sittin' up an' sassin' us like a red squirrel on a branch! Lemme tell you here an' now, 'lectric chair er no 'lectric chair, 'f you try to make your getaway from us we're goin' to shoot your hide full o' holes like you really was a squirrel. 'F you get fresh, we'll tie you hand an' foot up to one o' these here trees. An' when we take your halter off, don't you try to climb up these rocks, either, an' go over the top up yonder. This place was made especially for boys like you. Boys that's too lively. Boys that needs to be sent off into the country

for a while to get some o' the devil larruped outa them. Anybody can see you're spoiled an' got the swelled head. We're goin' to do you good, kid. You stay with us a while, an' you won't know yourself. We're goin' to learn you a few things you never knew before. You betcha."

By this time, the other men had drifted off and disappeared, and Tom was alone with the talkative one.

"Sam!" came a voice from somewhere in the cliff above them, "don't holler so loud. This ain't no camp-meetin'. An' don't go exposin' yourself out there in the middle like a clown at a circus. Keep close in under the rocks—an' keep that kid outa sight. You can undo him now—but tie him up again any time you have to. Bash him in the coco if he gets too gay. It won't do him any harm to be knocked senseless once in a while."

The speaker had remained invisible. The man who had been talking too loudly to Tom untied the ropes as he was bidden.

The rough, craggy sides of the pit held young birches and beeches that made a bushy screen for men with rifles.

"What day is it?" asked Tom. "Did I come here to-day or yesterday?"

"That'd be tellin'," Sam answered, solemnly.

"What time is it?"

"Guess."

"I don't know. But my stomach feels like meal-time."

"Stay here," said Sam. "Don't move. If you do move, we can shoot you down, any minute, from any one of half a dozen places. That's all we've got to do just now—guard you, an' shoot you if you try to escape. You're worth more money to us than we got outa the pay-car. Keep back under the rocks, I tell you! Don't show yourself out in the open. I'll be back in a few minutes. You may get shot before you get outa here. But we'll do our best to fat you up. It wouldn't be no credit to us, to send skin an' bones either to Waynesboro or to Heaven.—Get back there, I said!"

The sudden outburst of energy told Tom that Sam had seen something out of the ordinary. Involuntarily Tom looked up. Through the foliage that almost lidded this gully where the robbers nested, he saw—an airplane hovering and questing, so near that the drone of the propeller was loud in their ears.

"Now you know why we're keepin' under cover, an' why you gotta keep outa sight too. They dassn't land here. They dassn't drop anythin' on us, if they spied us—on account o' you. But you can bet your bottom dollar we ain't a-goin' to take no chances. An' one o' these days if they keep up this snoopin' around they may get the surprise o' their young lives. If they bother us too much, we'll shoot their old tin Lizzie full o' holes an' bring 'em down."

The plane seemed in no hurry to move away. It hovered in circles, like a hen-hawk. A few bombs could have blown to bits the refuge in the rocks and everyone hiding there.

"I know what you're thinkin', kid." Sam gave an evil grin. "You're thinkin' what any kid with his head full o' the movies'd be thinkin'. You're thinkin' how easy for 'em to get wise to you an' just drop a rope ladder down over the side an' let you grab a-holt an' shinny up, like little Eva climbin' the Angels' Ladder to the sky. But it ain't a-goin' to be that way. No, sir, not at all. You ain't called on to show what you can do as a vaw-devil performer yet a while. This earth's the best place for you. When we get ready to say ta-ta to you, boy, we'll give you the high sign. Till then, you pick out a nice soft rock for yourself an' sit tight, down here on the ground. Don't you git to tamperin' with the sky. It ain't no place for kids to play. An' you keep back here in the shadder—er get shot."

The plane slid away, and its roaring died down: and Tom's heart sank. He was sure that it was Captain Austin to the rescue, and he felt as a sailor on a raft at sea must feel when a ship comes within hail, and misses his signal, and goes off again. He might as well be on a desert island among savages.

Sam, gliding along like a great lizard under the overhanging rock-wall, disappeared in the bushes that grew in the crannies.

No smoke issued anywhere. They must eat their rations cold: with air-scouts overhead and posses searching for them overland, the desperadoes would have to do without home cooking for a while.

Sam came sidling back with a burlap sack in his arms.

"Sam," said Tom, "you're not such a bad man at all, really, I don't believe. How did you come to get mixed up in such a business as this? Whatever put it into your head to rob the pay-car?"

"Well," Sam admitted, "if I had to do it over again, I don't believe I'd do it.—We didn't mean to do any real harm, y' see," he added, in a confidential tone. "All we wanted was the money. It was their own fault for raisin' a disturbance when we asked 'em for it. We asked 'em real polite, an' they tried to shoot. We only meant to bash 'em on the bean enough to lay 'em out. But they wouldn't take it lyin' down. There had to be a considerable muss before we got through. An' now we got you on our hands, an' instead o' gettin' a fat reward for you it looks like years in the pen for each of us. These other fellers are hard characters. Lots harder'n I am. No. You're right. I didn't wanta go into this business. I was happy enough, passin' the summer in me home-made villa by the railroad track. But the others said there wa'n't no future to that. They said I didn't have no ambition. So I said I'll show you. And I did. I came up here with 'em. And now look at all the trouble I got myself into! But whoever else croaks for it, there ain't a-goin' to be no 'lectric chair in mine. No siree, Bob! If anybody's dead or goin' to die, down there in Waynesboro, it ain't no doin's of mine. I jes' went along 'cause I didn't wanna spoil the sport. An' if they's any real fun in this game, I can't see it.—Say, kid, as man to man now, looka here—if I help you get away, will you help me stay outa prison?"

Tom did not answer immediately. The sky had clouded as for a shower since their talk began, and the large drops now began to fall. A fire would have been pleasant—but it would not do, for the smoke would betray them to the spying plane above them.

While waiting for the answer, Sam took from the sack a loaf of bread, some raw onions, a piece of cheese. A canteen hung at his side on a strap. He handed the boy the canteen, and let him drink a long, long draught.

"Will you?" Sam repeated, fiercely, bringing his swarthy, unshaven face and bloodshot, glittering eyes close to Tom's unterrified countenance.

"Thank you," said Tom, smacking his lips as he handed back the canteen. "I believe what you say. And if you help me, I'll tell them what you did for me. I know they'll make it easier for you. Perhaps they'll let you go."

"That dog o' yours," reflected Sam, "may bring 'em here before we can git away."

"That's true," Tom admitted, cheerfully. "He'll be in a big hurry to find me again. He cares for me more'n he does for anybody else."

"That bein' the case," said Sam, "looks as if I'd got to steal you away from this gang, an' do it pretty soon."

"I'll start whenever you say," Tom replied.

"They're in so deep now they don't care much what they do." Sam lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "They're gettin' reckless. They think they can clean up forty thousand dollars on you. They've even been throwin' dice to see who gets most o' the swag when they collect it. I threw dice with 'em. The way it came out I'd only get five hundred. It wouldn't really 'a' been worth my while, y' see. I know if I was to bring you back to your people they'd do the han'some thing by me. Wouldn't they now? They'd gimme a lot more'n five hundred dollars. Wouldn't they? Sure they would!" He cut off more bread with his big knife, and wrenched off a piece of the greenish, oily cheese with his horny fist. "I only did it to keep peace in the gang, so's they wouldn't suspect me. The longer I live with this outfit the sicker I get o' them an' their ways. I wisht I was shet o' the whole outfit. I surely do. I wish I'd 'a' put my boot down flat at the start, an' never seen the inside o' that dod-ratted old pay-car. Why—say, bo,"—he put his hand appealingly on Tom's knee, as Rex would have rested his paw,—“do you think my life up to now has been like this? If you do, you've got another think comin'. No sir: I had a fine job in the mill, as long as it lasted, averagin' about forty-five plunks a week with overtime 'n' all. Then the mill closed down on me—an' I was a changed man. I didn't have nobody dependin' on me, but I'd run through my money fast, an' I hadn't put any by, the way I should oughta ha' done. So I was all primed up, I guess, to go bad when these crooks come along an' give me the last push. Well, I've sworn off a'ready—but what's the good? Mebbe the law won't be able to see the difference between them an' me. If you ain't a-goin' to help me, I dunno who will."

"Do they trust you?" asked Tom.

"Sure. They think they've got my number all right. They think the forty thousand is as good as sewed up now—an' I'm to get only five hundred!" he lamented, bitterly. He kicked at a piece of quartz. "I say!" He brightened, as if in the light of the idea. "Le's give 'em the double cross an' beat it, bo! I don't want any reward. You can have it all. All I want is to get outa this. The more I think of it, the more I hate bein' in it. I dunno what I ever come along for. I was just a fool, thass all!"

In spite of Sam's apparent frankness, Tom found it hard to believe that Sam meant what he said and would help him get free. Something told him Sam was only playing a cruel cat-and-mouse game. For if he really wanted to help Tom get

away, why hadn't he taken the chance last night, up there in the woods, instead of betraying Tom into the hands of the robber band?

CHAPTER XIV

REX TAKES COMMAND

It was late in the afternoon of the same day, when Jim Hogan and the few that were left of his band of sleepy veterans and raw recruits came with Mrs. Mason and Rex to the bank of Lost River.

Rex had met them as they came to the edge of the woods. When Mrs. Mason saw the dog, her mind leapt at once to the most tragic inference. She thought, of course, that Tom had been killed, and Rex was the dumb messenger. She looked under his collar, but there was no message there. Oh! if a dog could only speak!

"Now excuse me, ma'am." Jim Hogan made another of his clumsy attempts to soothe her. "Take it from me, they ain't killed your boy. They ain't done nothin' to him. They'd be holdin' him for a ransom. That's the worst they'd do. They'd never in this world shoot a kid when they thought they could get money for him. They'll be sendin' word to us some way, some time soon, to leave the money in a tree or under a stone some place, or maybe meet somebody an' hand it over an' no questions asked. That's the way they do. The dog bust loose an' snook off, an' he's come to get help for Tom. But the boy ain't suffered no harm, ma'am, believe me. They wouldn't have no reason to do him dirt."

Mrs. Mason bit her lip and bravely struggled to control her distress. She patted Rex, who seemed to take in the conversation though he could not tell his story.

"We'll go where the dog leads us, and he'll take us where his master is. Won't you, Rex?"

The dog's eager, bright eyes and flailing tail were as good as an oral promise.

So they clambered upward and onward over the rocks amid the trees to the swirling onset of Lost River—a very different business by daylight from the toilsome pilgrimage of the night watches. Rex at their bidding scrambled and swam across. The breadth was hardly more than a hundred feet—the depth, in the darkest water, scarcely a man's ordinary height. But the current was so violent that it was not without a battle that the plucky animal got over.

Then he stood, seemingly nonplussed, while Mrs. Mason and her companions shouted their encouragement above the din of the rushing torrent, eddying into gnarled logs where dirty foam was puffed and leafy branches interlaced, dashing onward to throw up plumes of white spray as it met a fresh obstruction.

They watched Rex soberly nosing to and fro in the scrub-bushes on the sandy slope. The dog went some rods up-stream—and about the same distance down-stream—and returned to the place where he had crossed.

Then he looked over at them inquisitively. Why weren't they following him? he wanted to know.

"I tell you what!" cried the loquacious, cock-sure Hogan. "They went down-stream all the way to the cave. That's clear. We'll bring him back, an' we'll go down to where the water goes in, an' send him on ahead."

They recalled Rex to their side of the river. Had he been allowed to remain on the further bank, he would have picked up the scent on his way down-stream to the spot where the river entered the mountain.

Rex, this time, was slow to obey. It was not his young master who was giving him orders now. But he recognized submissively the authority of Tom's mother. When he heard her voice raised in symphony with the rest, he plunged into the torrent, swam back to them, and shook himself mightily all over Jim Hogan, who was not pleased at all.

The river widened as it neared the mountain and became more shallow. In a small pond were lilies, white and yellow, and through the middle the dark deep channel ran. On the sandy margin of the pool were the footprints of the deer that came shyly by nightfall to slake their thirst. Now and then the placid surface was shattered where a fish leapt at the glint of a brilliant insect. The shadows were fast gaining on the last of the sunlight.

"We'll have to be camping soon," warned Hogan.

"Let's go on as long as we can see," the mother urged.

"No use gettin' to the mountain when it's dark," objected her guide, politely. "We'll start at sun-up, ma'am. They won't be goin' any further to-night. They're settled in the cave till we drive 'em out. We've got to see what we're doin', for that. It's a-goin' to be a tough tussle. We may have to use poison-gas, like the war."

Reluctantly, Mrs. Mason consented to the bivouac.

"I wish my husband were here!" she said. "I don't believe he can find us."

"Who's that?" exclaimed Harry Quigley, the drug-clerk, at that instant, pointing to a group running toward them along the gravelled strand of the pond.

Hogan, startled, grabbed up his rifle. A friendly hail prevented his challenge: he laid the gun against a mossy tree-bole and ran forward to greet Mr. Mason and three comrades.

"O Alfred!" his wife cried, as she flung her arms about her husband. "I'm so glad! How on earth did you know where to come?"

"I used to fish all along here," explained her husband. "You really oughtn't to have come without me, Mary. But I'm not going to scold you, dear. I can't. All that matters is the boy." He turned to Hogan. "Going to spend the night here?"

"We thought this'd be the best place, sir. They ain't a-goin' to give up without a fight, and we gotta have daylight for that."

"I guess you're right," Mr. Mason agreed soberly. "Of course, we don't want to halt a minute longer than we have to till we find him. Has the dog tried the other side of the river?"

"Yes, sir. But he couldn't find the trail. He went up and down a ways. I called him back to this side. They must 'a' turned when they got into the stream, and waded in it to the cave, to throw the dog off the scent. When mornin' comes we can send the dog to see."

"What good would that do?" rejoined Mr. Mason, sharply. "It's a man's job to go into that cave. I'll go myself."

"Water'll be too high," objected Jim. "It's been rainin' a heap here lately. It'll be almost up to the roof o' the tunnel. It's so deep a man's gotta swim.—Couldn't carry a gun an' keep it dry."

"If it's like that, then the dog couldn't get back," retorted Mr. Mason.

"We can tie a rope to his collar, an' haul him back."

"The plan's preposterous!" Mr. Mason ejaculated. Usually self-possessed, he was nerve-racked by the plight of his boy. "The dog couldn't fight them alone: they'd kill him. We're not at all sure they're in there, anyway. It's just a wild guess on your part.—Well, let's get busy and arrange a place to sleep."

With little heart in the proceedings, the searching-party cut boughs and improvised shelters. They made a place for Mrs. Mason to lie down; spruce branches were carefully spread for a mattress, and two blankets were folded and laid on them that she might rest comfortably—but she knew, and they must have known, that it was little sleeping she would do that night. There could be no ease for the body till the mind was comforted. It fretted her to behold the purple mountain-wall so near in the deepening shadows, to hear the cool music of the river rushing by, under the beacon of the evening star, and to imagine in the solemn beauty of the eventide that her only son was prisoner of those unspeakable ruffians. If he was not with them, it was almost worse—he was lost somewhere in the houseless space of the mountain wilderness, untenanted save by the bear, the wildcat and the deer, and the careless birds that sang though human hearts were breaking.

The long pause and quiet of the night were harder to endure than the daylight hours, for it felt as though her brain throbbed with every heart-beat, in the strong desire to push on, and find her son.

"Just as soon as there's light enough to see by, we'll go on," her husband promised. "You must try to get some sleep, and save your strength, for the boy's sake. You may be very sure they won't hurt him—they'll hold him for ransom. We'll get into touch with them soon. They can't get out of these mountains: they're surrounded on all sides—and Captain Austin is scouting overhead."

He made a cup of tea for the weary woman, who had not tasted the supper they prepared. It seemed to soothe her, and she talked more calmly. By and by, setting aside the tin cup, she pillowed her head on the folds of a blanket. "I think maybe I can sleep a little now," she murmured. "Let me know if anything happens."

Giving her the blankets, her husband for his bed had heaped dead leaves close by, out of the range of any chance sparks from the fire, and presently she knew he slept, because when she softly said his name he did not answer.

Rex, paws and nose to the crumbling embers of the fire, was still as though he were cut in marble. Mrs. Mason took comfort from the fact. She felt sure that if Rex had been disturbed in mind for the safety of his master he could not go to sleep so peacefully.

But slumber did not come to her eyelids, weary as she was. She prayed, and peace came into her soul with the petition. Something told her that she would soon see her son again, and that she must be patient and self-possessed. Yet even as fear and anxious foreboding gave place to serenity and faith, her quick wit whispered that if she went on alone—or taking only the dog with her—it would be a safer and surer plan than if all these men accompanied her.

The worst desperadoes in the world would be ready to dicker with a mother in quest of her child, when they would have nothing but violent resistance for an armed force coming to capture them and put them in prison. And if it came to a pitched battle, Tom might be among the victims.

When night and the ashes of the camp-fire had grown old together, she rose with the least noise it was possible to make. In her black dress she was like a moving part of the night.

A light touch on his sensitive ears—as light as if she were arranging flowers—roused the dog, who sensed from her very finger-tips the warning she did not speak, and kept as still as possible.

Doubtless Rex was as little reconciled to the long halt as was his mistress. But he had eaten; he had slept; he was all of his strong and splendid self again. His love was great: it could not pass her own.

She would not mind if the robbers took her prisoner. For then she would share her son's captivity. She could not imagine that Tom and she might be tied in places far apart, and thus unable to approach each other, and minister to each other affectionately.

They might kill Rex. But the life of this dear dog—what was that to the life of her only son? She would think nothing of the death of Rex, much as she was learning to care for him, if he but led her to her boy.

A lantern? That could not be, without advertising to the others that she was going.

Rex's nose was better than a lantern.

She put several cakes of sweet chocolate in the pockets of her sweater jacket. Rex would have to forage for himself: squirrels and rabbits owed him a living.

Rex knew his marching orders without the telling.

He was transformed from the dispirited animal that had obeyed the command to halt, and wait, and rest.

But—chivalrously, discreetly—he knew better now than to run and reconnoitre far ahead.

He clung close beside the woman. He seemed instinctively to know that she could not follow as a man would follow, or go fast, as a man would go. He became at once her knight and her protector.

Her shoes were thin, and the stones hurt. The bushes put out detaining points, and tore at her skirt and her jacket; the trailing vines caught at her feet as though the ground were alive with fingers. Her stockings presently were soaked with the heavy dew. All these things were as nothing to the satisfaction of being on the move once more.

The dog led her back up-stream along the trail they had taken. Mrs. Mason did not try to change his mind. She trusted him utterly. Rex knew what he was doing. He never would have left Tom except to save him.

"Just suppose"—she said to herself—"the robbers caught Tom on this side of the river. And suppose Tom sent Rex away to fetch help, before he fell into their hands. Rex obeyed orders. But first he may have seen where they were taking Tom. Perhaps he even followed them for a while, before he came to fetch us. Anyway, I'll let Rex have his head. I'll follow where he leads. I'll not try to tell him anything."

Rex brought her back to the spot where the rescue-party, coming to the river, decided not to cross but to descend it to the cave.

In the glimmer of the morning gray, the dog plashed into the muddy current, and she waded after him. The water reached her waist: the torrent was strong: but she did not falter. Her feet slipped on the slimy pebbles, and she fell—her hands were cut and pierced on the flinty angles, upthrusting from the mud.

"They must have gone way down the stream before they left it," she told herself, as she watched Rex, nosing to and fro along the bank. "That was to destroy the scent in the running water. But Rex is too smart for them."

Suddenly the dog raised his head and looked round in the morning-glow to see if Mrs. Mason was still of a mind to follow him. Evidently he remembered the rebuke he had received when he was puzzling out the scent before.

Now it was different. He was master. She obeyed.

"Good dog!" she cried, and clapped her hands. "Good old Rex! Go on!"

He wagged his tail, in vigorous and pleased response. But he did not wait to be petted, or hear praise. He had his work to do: his duty called to him from the ground.

And now Rex came into his own, and took command of one who loved him, and trusted him, and would follow him anywhere.

He had heard the mistrust in the very tones of those cheap, loud-mouthed detectives, Zane and Anders, who failed and had quit cold. Since he was only a dog, he did not know that they had merely gone back to the city to make a preliminary report and to mobilize tardily a small army of railway police to help them.

And his feelings had been hurt by the sharp challenge and contradiction of everyone but Tom, while he was doing his best to find and follow the scent into the hills.

But Mrs. Mason, his devoted friend from infancy, believed in all he did. She would give him credit for uncommon sense, and not call him off because she did not agree with his reading of the leaves and branches.

His footing, even where they could see nothing but the starlight through the trees, was as sure as that of a mountain mule. Nothing that softly pattered in the underwoods or twittered overhead had power to deceive or to divert him. He was the image of concentration on four feet.

And he was so patient and considerate. Every few minutes like a gallant gentleman he stopped and let his mistress sit on a mossy log or a stone and pillow her head against his shaggy flanks if she chose.

Rex had never been what is often known as a woman's dog. He was a stranger to the life of pampered pets in cities—the cushioned ease of poodles that have a lacy basket in a boudoir, and go for an airing, haughty and sniffing, aboard a limousine. Most of his life had been hard training for the crisis he was facing now. Clearly he, not any man, was leader of the rescue expedition. When Tom's father woke, and came after, he would be welcome: in the meantime it was Rex's certain and grim satisfaction that he was proving himself not merely a king of dogs but a leader of men.

But he was not foolish, and he was not proud. He knew the danger, and walked warily. His experience with traps—and there were many in these woods—had warned him that at any minute he might stumble into one, or lead his kind mistress into pain and disaster. So he threaded the dark with nerves and subtle intuition on the alert for every point of contact.

As the sun came up, and the dark ground-mist lifted, the woods warmed and grew cheerful to the tune of bird-song. The spider-threads between the raspberry-bushes were flashing silver, the dew stood in pearls on the mullein-stalks in the burnt clearings, the insects danced and murmured in the sun.

Rex was not bounding far ahead as was his custom in playtime at the farm. His steps were slow and dignified, like those of a judge entering a court-room. His mind was single to the trail and to the mother following; the sun was drying the wet mud on his nose, which he kept close to the scanty soil most of the time. Every other moment he would halt, and turn, and look up in the woman's face with his deep, kind eyes of brown, as though to say: "Never fear, Mrs. Mason! Just leave it to me. We'll steal up on their hiding place as quietly as two snakes through the bushes. Trust me not to bark or make a noise. I'm not going to be such a fool as to attack them—yet. Our first business is to find where they are, and let the others know. But of course if we can get Tom away from them all by ourselves—well, we're not going to miss the chance, if we can help it!"

Then, seeing she was all but exhausted, Rex lay down, and looked at her with eyes that plainly said: "Rest here a little while."

She obeyed, and with her head on the mossy bole of a chestnut tree, fell asleep.

When she woke, the low sun told her it was late afternoon. How many hours she had been asleep she could not tell. She might have slept much longer, but Rex was licking her face.

She sat bolt upright, and instinctively put her hands to her hair, and pushed back the loose hair-pins.

Then she talked to Rex, chiding herself for the long delay.

"Rex, why did you let me?" she exclaimed in a tone of sharp vexation. Rex took the reproof to himself acutely. He nosed her hand. She put both arms about her loyal comrade's neck.

"No, no, you dear old thing! I don't mean that for you. It was all my own fault. I had no business to sit down—and now ... Well, anyway, we couldn't do anything in broad daylight—if we're near the place, as I suppose we are. We'd have had to wait for the dark again, to get Tom away. I wonder how long we've been here. My wrist watch has stopped. I'm so thirsty. Do you suppose there's water anywhere near here? I guess you'd like some, too, wouldn't you, you poor old fellow? Remember how we used to keep the big dishpan full outside your kennel? I'm ashamed we made you live out there under the cherry tree. If we get back, you shall have a cosy corner by the kitchen stove next winter. If we get back ..." She rose, as the dog seemed eager to go on, and followed him.

She was hungrier than she had ever been in her life—but that was nothing compared with the thirst.

The faithful dog knew what was the matter, when she pressed her face against a damp bank of moss, and then began to scoop away the moist black earth in the hope of finding a spring. He sprang to her aid, and the soil from his busy paws bespattered the gray, dead leaves. But no hopeful sign appeared.

Rex threw his head back suddenly, and seemed to hear a sound inaudible to her. Then he began to pull at her dress, to lead her down-hill, at right angles to the line they had been following.

"He hears running water!" she told herself, hope leaping up in her heart again. Willingly she obeyed him. Through a thicket of small pines and scrub-oaks they made their way, the branches plucking and tearing as they passed—but little did she mind their resistance, for now she heard the small voice of a rivulet trickling on its way to a greater stream below.

Rex, the gentleman always, would not drink till she lay down and slaked her thirst. Then he lapped as though he would leave nothing of the brooklet. He found a hole between the rocks where he could thrust down his head, and he tried to crowd his paws and body into the cavity too, but there was not room. Great lover of the water that he was, he was a new dog after this refreshment—his eyes bright, his tail a waving signal of courage revived, his ears up and his head back as if he had just had hours of sleep and a square meal.

He brought his mistress carefully back to the point at which they had diverged from the trail to seek the stream, and over the pitiless stones and through the punishing undergrowth, which caught at them like sharp-nailed, detaining fingers, they pressed forward.

The long, hard afternoon of struggle waned to dusk, and the cool dark of the night came on. The stars twinkled like fire-flies above the grass, and the dew was heavy as rainfall. Night came with its gift of sleep to villages and towns they saw far off, in the valley below, and a train whistled far away, as if out of a world they had left forever. She thought of children, who rested tranquilly, and the mothers who drew a coverlid over them, and soothed them if they woke in the dark and were alarmed. But her own boy beyond the reach of her love and care had fallen in strange and cruel hands. She must not let the thought of what could happen to him unnerve her. It was hard not to let her faith in Rex's leadership be shaken. She thought of disconcerting stories she had heard, of those who wandered in circles in the wood, and after weary hours came back to the very place they left at the beginning of the dazed and helpless round....

Then came at last—at last—the startling proof that Rex was right. It was not seen till they issued from the thick woods into a clearing, and ascended a bare rocky slope, and stood on an outcropping knoll at the edge of a chasm and looked down.

Dog and woman saw it together, and Rex rested then, the long trail ended. He rested—that is to say, his feet were still, but his body trembled with eagerness.

For what they saw below them was this.

In the deep cleft of a den like that of gypsies, shaggy with the bushes overhanging, sat a ragged, jovial crew about a fire. They dared to build it now. They had no fear that any would come by night, for there was no path: and the menace of the spying plane departed when the sun went down. So now they could afford to take their ease, and drink their fill, and make as much noise as they pleased.

Mrs. Mason saw the rest of the group as a mere blur—for there on a stone in the midst was the one clear figure of her boy, and it was as much as she could do to keep from crying out to him. He was not tied. He did not look as if he had been harshly used, in the short time they had him. His captors evidently had no fear that he would give them the slip. The mouse might as well try to dart beyond the circle the cat's paws describe. Here he was hidden. Here amid the crags they were secure; and the posse after them would go off on the obvious wild-goose chase, down the river to the cave, to find nobody at home, and nothing there. Cleverly, cleverly they had thrown the pursuers off the scent.

So near and yet so far! It was wonderful at last to be able to look down through a leafy screen and see Tom safe there at the bottom of the rocky bowl. A song without words, of thankfulness, sang itself over and over in her mother's heart. How she longed to rush in, guards or no guards, and claim her own! If she could only let Rex loose on the garrulous, unsuspecting ring like an avalanche! She had read tales of intrepid mountaineers, who tumbled boulders down upon the foe invading their highland fastnesses. What a satisfaction it would be to put them to flight in that fashion!

But if she brought part of the frame of the earth tumbling about their ears she would involve her son in the same destruction.

How could she drive them off, and do no harm to him?

At a word from her, Rex would have plunged down—somehow, somewhere—in a gallant effort to help his master.

CHAPTER XV

VICTORY

But her better judgment told her not to speak the word that would send him.

She must do the harder thing, and wait. Sooner or later they would tire of drinking, and quarreling, and topple off to sleep. Then her time—and Rex's time—would come. It took courage to be patient. But to act too soon would be to lose everything.

So in silence they watched, and waited. The man called "Sam" upreared his languid carcass now and then to feed the fire. They seemed to put off on Sam the things they did not care to do—he was the butt and the menial of the rest. Once or twice as he passed Tom he spoke to him not unkindly, calling him "kid": and he brought a coat and threw it over the boy's knees. Another time he came from somewhere in the shadow with a bucket of water, and a long-handled tin dipper: and Tom took a drink and thanked him for it.

When would they fall asleep, and let her get into communication with her son? Sam ceased to put wood on the fire and nobody objected. Very slowly and quietly she crept to a rock that overhung the spot where Tom was sitting, and Rex, crawling after, was as careful to make no noise as if he stalked shy birds.

Tom was now lying on the ground before the log on which he had been sitting. He was untied—they felt so sure of him. His pillow was a little heap of leaves. His head was close to the rocks: but through one narrow cleft bristling with scrub-oak it was possible to creep down close to where he lay. If stones were dislodged or bushes disturbed they would rouse the sleepers. How could she let the prisoner know that rescue was at hand, without making the rescue impossible?

When Tom was "a tiny tad," his mother used to amuse him—and herself—by imitating the sounds of various birds. One of these was the hoot-owl; another was the whippoorwill; others were the chickadee, the wood-thrush, the veery. These were given in a regular order, to the number of ten or a dozen, and if any came out of its turn, Tom would correct her, and she had to start again.

Then it would be his turn, and by and by he learned to do it almost as well as his mother. It never was a painful exercise: it was a game. They went out in the woods and played it. Whippoorwill, hiding in the trees, challenged the cry of the hoot-owl: chickadee, from the other side of an interval, called forth the loon's laughter: and so on down the list, each utterance the reply to that which went before it. A foolish, whimsical little game—but whether there was any sense to it or not, it meant salvation now.

With another whispered caution to Rex, Mrs. Mason uttered the lonely cry of the hoot-owl.

She looked down and saw that Tom raised his head slightly to listen.

Then she gave the whippoorwill's throaty refrain, and Tom rose on one elbow, like one asking himself if he dreamed.

She waited a moment, moving away from the spot a short distance, and then tried the insistent call of the chickadee.

Even if he suspected the source of the sound, he could not make answer. But perhaps, if she continued and repeated the fixed sequence, he would understand, and steal away, and through the cleft in the rock climb up to where she was.

She went to a greater distance, and lengthened the interval between the calls, and moved about, so that the risk of detection would be reduced. Her faith was rewarded. By and by, when she uttered the hoot-owl's cry the whippoorwill softly answered. Then she uttered the notes of the chickadee, and the loon—nearer still—responded. The short, sharp bark of the fox brought the croak of the frog—so near that Mrs. Mason heard a soft footing in the underbrush. She called in a low tone:

"Tom!"

"Mother!"

In a moment more, mother and son were locked in each other's arms.

The dog was joyful, but so near the brink of the robbers' rendezvous the least demonstration was untimely, and dangerous.

"My dear, dear boy!" was all she could say, with sobbing. She thought she would faint, but kept telling herself that she

must not. She must bear up for his sake: she must pretend the fatigue was nothing. There must be no rest for either till Rex had led them back to Tom's father and the others. They must start right away ... they must not wait.

Was she saying this aloud, or merely thinking it? She was so exhausted that she could not tell: her brain whirled, and she felt as though she were slipping—over a precipice-brink, down, down through clouds into chaos, away from the world.

"Mother, you've got to rest before we start back. You're all in." Tom's hand was soothing her forehead.

"No, Tom.... No.... I've got you. That's all I want. We can't stop here. They'll catch us. They may wake any moment and find you gone."

"They're all more than sound asleep, Mother. They're dead drunk, most of them. Not one of 'em saw me, or heard me climbing. I know they didn't. They were round the corner of a rock from me. That home-made hootch just paralyzed 'em. If a tree fell on 'em, or the rocks caved in, I don't believe they'd notice it any more'n a mosquito."

"Can't they hear us talking?"

"No, not a thing. Why, I just barely heard you making the bird-noises and the sounds of the animals. I couldn't believe my ears. I thought I was dreaming. But when I heard them in the same order we used when we played our game at home—I knew it couldn't be anybody but you."

"Tom, we must get away. We must start back at once. We must find the others. Rex'll take us."

"Not till you've rested. And, Mother, you must be thirsty. Aren't you?"

Mrs. Mason did not want to say yes. For she did not know what Tom could do to help it.

"I—I guess not," she answered, weakly. "Not ... not very." Then she fainted.

When she came to, Tom was holding a bottle of water to her lips, and his wet handkerchief was on her forehead.

"Where did you get the water?" she asked, feebly.

"Oh, I thought we'd be wanting it," Tom answered. "There's a spring down there that the men used. And there were plenty of empty bottles."

"Tom dear, did they do you any harm?"

"No, they took good care of me. They said they were bound to get a big reward for me."

Mrs. Mason struggled to her feet.

"I think we ought to be starting, dear."

"No, Mother, not till it's daylight."

"But I can go through the woods at night, Tom. I did it to get here."

"I know, Mother. It's just because you did, that I want you to take it easy now. You might sprain your ankle."

"Please, Tom. We're too near those men. When they find you're gone, they'll come after us. While it's still dark, and they're drunk and sleeping, we ought to get just as far away from them as we can. Rex will guide us to your father. Rex doesn't have to see. We'll just follow him back. Come on, dear. Let's get started."

She stood up shakily, and resting a quivering hand on Tom's shoulder, tried her best to smile cheerfully.

"Mother, you're trembling so!"

"I'm just a trifle chilly, from lying on the ground. It's nothing. As soon as I've been warmed up by a little exercise, I'll be all right. It'll do me good to try."

"Eat some of this, Mother." He thrust into her hands the end of a loaf of bread. He tossed a large piece of the remainder to Rex, who fell upon it ravenously.

With the first intimations of the new day streaking the spaces among the tree-tops, the trio began the retreat to the river. They well knew the danger. They knew they were retracing the way by which the robbers had come and were likely to be overtaken. But they were together, and they were going home.

They rested again in a clearing, with the gnats swarming about them. There was plenty of sunlight now, and it was

becoming uncomfortably warm. Rex, with his long tongue lolling through teeth that glistened like whetted knives, was just as keen a guardian figure as ever, his eyes and nose on the qui vive for danger.

Tom ran his fingers through Rex's pelt between the shoulder-blades. "Mother, I'll bet Rex could give pointers to Barry, that great old St. Bernard that saved all those travellers in the snow in the Alps, and is buried in the dog cemetery in Paris. I read about him in a book."

But Rex was giving all of his strained heed to the woodland out of which they came.

"He hears something, Mother."

They listened too. The gnats swarmed and buzzed. Over the droning undertone of the spiteful little insects, they heard sounds that, faint and distant as they were, could not be mistaken.

"They're coming after us."

"We must run, Tom!"

Rex stood and looked back, growling and bristling.

"Come on, Rex!"

The dog seemed reluctant to obey. It was as if he had made up his mind to hold back the pursuers, while Tom and his mother escaped.

"I can't keep it up much longer, dear."

"It isn't far, Mother. The——"

"Look, look, Tom!"

"What is it?"

"The airplane!"

"Yes, so it is. I hope it spots those fellows!"

They were ascending a slight rise over rocks, where it was scantily wooded. Rex had constituted himself rear guard. Tom was going ahead on guesswork.

"I wish I could get that dog to come here and take the lead. He's bound he'll stay down there behind us, to fight 'em off."

"I think he's—noble," panted Mrs. Mason. "He's just like a faithful soldier holding a pass—or a bridge—to let the rest retreat."

"Only trouble is we don't know where to retreat to," said Tom. "It's time we joined Father and the others. This is no place to get lost. I'm afraid we're way off the track now. I don't dare shout."

He tried once more, with a low whistle, to bring Rex up from the rear. But for almost the first time in his life, Rex saw fit to disobey.

The gallant dog ran back toward the pursuers, and disappeared in the woods.

"Do you see what he's going to do, Mother? He's going to lead them off on a false trail, so as to give us the chance to make our escape."

That was precisely Rex's plan. What was his life, to the safety of those he loved? The enemy were so near, that in a few minutes more they would have overtaken the worn-out woman, and recaptured her son.

Tom and his mother heard faintly the joyful shout of the kidnappers: "There he is! Don't shoot the dog! Follow him! He'll take us to where they are!"

Rex came just close enough to let them see the collar he wore of late to tell the world he was not one of the wild dogs, and then slowly, to be sure of diverting their pursuit from his master and mistress to himself, he led them in a long curve away from the track he had been taking into the wildest recesses of the hills. They panted and cursed after him. They were sure they knew just what he had done, and when they tired of swearing they told one another that the dog had come by night and led the boy away and was now going back to where he lay hidden.

"All we gotta do is just keep the dog in sight an' foller him up!"

Easier said than done. Rex played a tantalizing game of hide-and-seek, doing all he could to wear them out. And they were not in good training, for in their camp they had been idle and carousing these many days, waiting to enrich themselves from the pay-car,—with last night's final debauch to celebrate the ransom they were going to get for Tom.

So Rex would conceal himself behind a tree-trunk, and when they had wasted many minutes of wandering and wondering, he would dart out, bound across the landscape, and bring up behind a big stone or a blackened stump in a clearing, while they shouted in frantic chorus: "There he is!" and then they would plunge madly in the new direction.

It was lots of fun for Rex, for he was happy to believe that all the time he was playing this game, Tom and his mother were going as hard as they could in the opposite direction, lengthening the gap between the robbers and themselves, and getting nearer to friends, and that blessed place called home.

The dog kept it up for hours, and then his quick mind told him that he might safely make a long turn, and work his way back, with his perfect sense of direction, to his master and mistress. For even though they could not hold to the trail along which he meant to take them, he could follow first his own scent and then theirs, no matter what the windings of the way they took.

So he ran faster, and no longer let himself flit to and fro that the robbers might see him and give chase. In the thick woods he followed unerringly his own footprints of a few hours before.

But as he thought he must surely be on the point of overtaking Tom and Mrs. Mason, he discovered to his dismay that not all of the robbers had been chasing him.

For two of them, too lazy to give chase to Rex with the rest, had remained behind, and after he left had spied the fugitives on the far side of a clearing where they sat down to rest and wait for Rex to come back and lead them homeward.

Just as Rex caught up with his dear ones, and they were patting him, and telling him how glad they were to see him again, there came a puff of smoke from the opposite side of the clearing, and a rifle-bullet nipped a rock close to the dog's head.

So it seemed as if all his hard labor, and the mortal risk he ran, had been in vain.

If only they had kept on going homeward, as Rex meant they should do, while he misled their pursuers!

A second shot rang out. They glanced back while they clambered onward, and through the scrub-oaks they could see the two men coming after them. And now they almost gave up hope. But, heavy with drink and sleep as they were, the pursuers were not speedy.

Tom assumed a confidence he did not altogether feel. "They haven't helped 'emselves any by trying to shoot Rex. They've only given away where they are to Captain Austin in the plane, and to Father's party. We must be pretty close to Father now. It can't be far to the river."

They came to the top of a sandy hillock where there were tall, bare chestnuts that the blight had slain. "There's the river!" Tom cried. "Now all we've got to do is follow it down to the cave."

But it was no easy matter to get to the stream. The entanglements were worse than ever.

"Tom, it seems only the other day that you were a wee bit of a baby—and I had to carry you everywhere. Now it's as if I were the child, and you were a man grown. I'm so tired, Tom! I'm too much for you. You'd better leave me, and go on. Tell Father that——"

"When we get to the water we'll be all right, Mother."

"Is there a boat anywhere?"

"Oh, no! Nothing like that."

"Then what good will it do to get to the water? Why don't you just leave me here? If I can, I'll come on later. You go ahead, Tom dear. Never mind about me." She tried to smile.

"Mother, don't talk like that. I'm not going to leave you. I never could do that. But you wait here just a minute. I'm going down to the brook to get some more water for you. Don't you stir." He propped her against a deep and springy moss-bank at the base of a huge-pointed boulder that screened her from observation, and darted off for the stream to fill the bottle, Rex bounding ahead of him.

What was Tom's joyful surprise as he emerged from a blackberry thicket to the patch of yellow gravel at the stream's edge to find a loved, familiar figure there.

His father, sitting on a rock with his back to the boy, was putting on his shoes, apparently after wading in the mad torrent.

"Father!"

"My boy!"

Mr. Mason dropped the shoe he held in his hand and clasped his son.

"Where is your mother?"

"Up yonder. I came to get water. She's all in. The robbers are right after us. They shot at us. They nearly hit Rex."

Rex fawned and leapt about them both, for pure delight, then slaked his thirst, and lay down on the sun-baked gravel, panting.

Mr. Mason pulled on his shoes. "We must go right back and get her," he said, suiting the action to the word. As they toiled upward he explained. "We hunted everywhere. We went to the cave. We scoured the hills—or we thought we did. We sent a messenger back to town and got Captain Austin's plane. You saw it?"

"Yes. It flew right over the robbers' den. Where are your men, Father?"

"We're camping out in the cave. The water's very low. It's easy to get in."

When they came to where Mrs. Mason lay, her eyes were closed. A pallor as of death was in her cheeks.

"Mary!" called her husband, as he knelt beside her, and clasped her in his arms. "Speak to me!... Give me the water, Tom."

He poured a little on her forehead. Her eyelids fluttered. Then, with a happy little cry, she flung her arms about his neck.

Suddenly, remembering, in alarm, she cried: "Alfred! There's not a minute to spare! They're right behind us! Don't let them find you here!" She clutched him again, in a recurring spasm of terror.

As they looked up, they saw on the crest of the ridge their pursuers, preparing to descend. The rest had caught up with the forerunners—the seven were reunited.

"It's no use trying to hide here," said Mr. Mason. "And we can't hold them off. I lost my gun somewhere in the rapids when I slipped. We must go down along the stream to the cave where our men are. We'll send Rex ahead to fetch them."

They were now at the water's edge. He took his tobacco-pouch from the pocket of his olive-drab shirt, and scribbled on a bit of paper:

"Found Mrs. Mason and Tom. Come up-stream to fork. Robbers following us.

"MASON."

Then he placed the message in the pouch, and tied it to Rex's collar. He led the animal into the water, taking care to keep out of the range of vision of the pursuers on the height.

"This way, Rex!" He drew the dog's great frame several yards in the direction of the current.

"That's right! Go on! Go fetch them! Go on down the stream!"

The roil of the water, in the shadow of the bank, was so uproarious that there was small risk of speaking too loudly.

Rex understood. Without delay he plunged into the deeper channel, and was off down-stream, only his head visible above the tossing, churning froth of the waters. Strong swimmer that he was, the rapids buffeted him with no mercy, in a wild white anger, but he kept on, and as he struggled the five-mile current was bearing him along much faster than he swam.

"He'll bring help!" cried Mr. Mason exultantly. "Look!" he exclaimed, pointing aloft. "The plane has come back!"

The whirl of the man-bird was over them, dangerously close to the trees. They could see the pilot and the observer. They signalled with their handkerchiefs—but there was no answering token.

"Captain Austin doesn't know we're here," said Mr. Mason. "He's looking for the rendezvous of the thieves. He's given up the idea of landing with parachutes on Lost Pond, he told me. He's going to drop bombs—not to kill them, but to drive them out."

There was an outburst of rifle-fire from the ridge. The robbers, dividing their fire, were shooting at the plane, and at the dog in the river.

Keeping out of sight of the bandits, they crept along under the tangle of alders that overhung the stream. Now they were knee-deep in mud, and again they stumbled through black pools where slippery logs increased the danger of a twisted ankle. They passed the fork of the stream, but no one met them there.

After what seemed hours of such tortuous progress they came in sight of the cavernous pit where the stream churned like a mill-race into the mountain.

At the very mouth of the cave a great rock stood clear out of the water, basking in the waning sunlight—and along a ledge at one side of it Rex was running toward them.

Then a rifle spoke from the robbers behind and above them, near at hand: the bullet pinged over their heads against the top of the rock.

"Down, Rex!" called Mr. Mason. "Come here! Come here!"

The dog plunged into the stream, struggled zigzag across the swift, dark channel, and came to them.

Three of their own party appeared in the water, shoulder deep, at the cave-mouth. They were almost bowled over by the vehemence of the tumbling surf about them, as it choked into the narrow passage and fought against their onset. When they came through, Jim Hogan panted an explanation.

"We were away down inside the mountain when Rex came. We got your message. The dog started back and we've just caught up with him. The guns got full o' water an' sand. We lost the ammunition. I dunno what we're goin' to do. We can't catch 'em barehanded. Get behind this rock. Where's that dog goin' to now?"

Rex was picking his way along the bank, up-stream, under the alders, over the log-jams, through the windfalls. At the open spaces he flattened to the stones, and crawled lizard-wise.

Round the bend came one of the robbers.

Rex crouched and sprang on him.

The man, taken utterly by surprise, dropped his gun, seized the dog by the throat, and tried to choke him.

But the powerful brute wrenched his neck loose, and the man was borne to the earth, the dog atop of him.

Others came running to the rescue. One drew a knife. Tom saw the flash of the blade in the last rays of the sun.

But at that instant, high overhead, louder even than the voice of the waters, came the fierce roar of the propeller of the airplane.

Then the machine swooped low, so low that it almost brushed the tops of the trees.

They could see the observer put his hand over the side. Then there came the blinding flash and the terrific detonation of a bomb. It had been carefully thrown—not to kill, but to give warning, and to tell of help at hand.

Another bomb followed—an incendiary bomb that soon made a seething furnace of the patch of scrub-oak bushes and the ready tinder of the pines where the robbers lay in ambush. The driftwood high-piled on the banks of the river took fire also, and burned till it sizzled with blue steam at the water-line. The flames ran to the feet of the tall spruces, and climbed the trees as if alive, and licking tongues of fire crept up the trunks. Out on the branches red waves of flame were at play like the squirrels which had taken fright and fled. The breeze fanned the fire to an ever livelier fury—but fortunately it was blowing away from the cave. Thither all the members of Mr. Mason's party, except Rex, retreated pell-mell, as the fire-billows leapt to the stream and licked it and recoiled again.

They could see the robbers with their arms across their eyes staggering about in the clouds of smoke, hurdling the fallen flaming timber to break through the fire-ring to the river, even if it meant capture.

Rex waded into the stream, facing the billows of fire, and stood panting and waiting to attack any who might emerge and start down-stream toward the cave.

In the bright glare he was immersed in the water till only the top of his head and his nose were to be seen. Along the glittering surface of the torrent, pink with fire and sunset, burning brands swept down upon him—till the watchers in the cave-mouth feared he must be blinded or suffocated. Often the grimy smoke wreathed in between themselves and the dog and hid him altogether: they thought again and again that he was burned or drowned at last. But always it cleared away, and there his head was still, high and almost buoyant, as he struggled to maintain his foothold in the shallower water close to the bank, a sentinel bound to be faithful to the end, his bark forever a war-cry with the ring of victory.

One man out of the seven lunged and tottered down-stream toward the dog—a final act of madness and despair. He was a giant for size and strength.

"I know him!" cried Jim Hogan. "That's Aleck Quinn—the head o' the gang. Get him, an' it's all over!" It was the man who bought Abner's flivver, shot Rex, and kidnapped Captain Austin's little girl.

When Quinn saw that Rex had barred his path where the stream narrowed, close to the cave, he threw out his great hairy arms like a gorilla, as he floundered on breast-deep and groaning mightily. They could see his fingers tense and rigid with desire to clutch his canine adversary and tear him apart. The dog, so low in the water, was at a disadvantage. Quinn reached for him, and strove to get his hands about the gallant animal's neck.

The man for a moment had the dog's head under. Quinn seemed to be kneeling in the water, as though to hold the animal to the bed of the stream and drown him. Then Rex, squirming and thrashing, threw him off, rose on his hind legs, got his forepaws on Quinn's shoulders, and locked his jaws in a strangle-hold at last on the robber's throat.

Quinn's screaming agony and mortal terror were heard above the roar of the fire, the rush of the foaming current, the snarling savagery of the dog with all the wolf in his blood at white heat now.

Leafy branches ablaze were carried hither and thither at the mad will of the breeze and dropped upon the stream: some fell upon the desperate fighters, and scorched and seared them even while the rapids tossed the spray over them. Quinn wailed in agony at each fresh wound.

He now had one hand on the dog's lower jaw and the other on the upper, like Samson rending the lion. His face showed the twisting torture of a runner breasting the tape at the end of a race. Rex wrenched his own body out of the water, with Quinn still clinging to him, and scrambled to a slippery footing on a rock. Quinn could not get out of the stream to follow. Thus for a moment the dog stood higher than his adversary. That moment was enough. Rex savagely tore his jaws out of Quinn's grasp, and blood from the mutilated fingers reddened the fire-lit waters.

The watchers at the cave-mouth heard Quinn's groan of despair. He threw his arms upward and fell, like a tree, and the dog fell upon him. The current swept them together down-stream.

When dog and man swirled into the cave-mouth many hands made a prisoner of the wounded man. They lifted Rex from the water exhausted, yet triumphant.

The dog was seared and blistered: there were gaping, livid wounds where the hair was burned away: at first he could not stand, and he lay feebly licking Tom's hand, hardly able now and then to flop his tail in answer to the praise and the endearments showered upon him. The rest of the robbers threw away their guns and gave themselves up. Their ammunition was spent, they were outnumbered, and the fire-ring was between them and their rendezvous.

The plane had darted off when the last of the bombs was dropped, to summon fire-fighters, and the police brought from the city by Zane and Anders took care of the surrendered robbers, bringing a stretcher for the wounded man. A cordon, flung about the tract that was ablaze, cut down trees and with water from the stream brought the flames under control after hours of heroic endeavor.

Tenderly they washed the wounds of the gallant dog. Tom pulled off his shirt, and tore it in strips for bandages. Fortunately, no artery had been severed. The blood that crimsoned the first two or three windings of the bandages did not penetrate to the outer layers.

It was now so late in the day that Mr. Mason decided it was the best plan for his own party to spend the night in the cave. Willing hands prepared for Rex a luxurious bed of blankets just within the entrance. By morning, the great dog was himself again, and able to move stiffly. Mrs. Mason, who had insisted that they should care for him before they did anything for her, was little the worse for her own harsh experience. She had her son again, and that to her was the elixir of new life, the best of medicines.

The men prepared a litter, to carry the wounded animal.

But Rex settled the question for himself and them by refusing to lie in it when it was made.

Instead, as was his wont, he took his place once more at the head of the column. Several men, sent to the robbers' eyrie at the break of day, had found the stolen money, \$13,479, in flour-bags, stuffed in a crevice under leaves and stones. They came next to the dog in the homeward processional, carrying the recovered loot.

Toward dusk the weary but triumphant caravan emerged from the forest. Thence in a farmer's car Mrs. Mason was brought into town, with Rex and Tom beside her. The escort swelled till it included most of the able-bodied population, and the Boy Scout band was in its glory.

It was the greatest day that Waynesboro had known.

To Tom, the supreme joy of the home-coming was to hear that Mike was well on the road to recovery.

Said his father that evening, when the last congratulating villager had departed, and they sat talking it over by the fireside, with Rex in their midst:

"It's settled now about your going to college, Tom. They all agree that Rex ought to have the reward. So Rex is to go to Harvard or wherever he pleases, provided he can pass the entrance examinations. I think if you ask him maybe he'll take you with him."

THE END

[The end of *Rex* by Fullerton Waldo]