

The **HERMIT** *of*
GORDON'S CREEK

by
Hugh Lloyd

A stylized illustration of a man with a white beard and hair, wearing a light-colored shirt and a brown vest, leaning over a table. He is counting stacks of gold coins. In the background, another man is partially visible. The scene is set in a dimly lit room.

A
HAL KEEN
MYSTERY
STORY

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OF
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HUGH LLOYD

A HAL KEEN MYSTERY STORY

THE HERMIT OF GORDON'S CREEK

By
HUGH LLOYD

Author of
"THE COPPERHEAD TRAIL MYSTERY"
"KIDNAPPED IN THE JUNGLE," Etc.

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THE HERMIT OF GORDON'S CREEK

CHAPTER I GORDON'S CREEK

Hal saw the old man as the train rolled into Gordon's Creek. Tall, stoop-shouldered, with snow-white hair and beard, he stood well away from the waiting group, a profusion of rags. His eyes were fixed greedily upon the wiry little station agent who was hurrying toward the mail car.

In the next moment Hal and his Uncle Denis were claimed by their host, Richard Holliday, and his daughter Lee, who welcomed them with all the charm of her sixteen summers.

It was typical of the fiery-haired Hal to forget everything else when Adventure pointed his way. And somehow the picturesque old man seemed to embody that very spirit. He might have been the only figure on the Montana horizon as

far as the impetuous young man was concerned.

“What I’d like to know, Mr. Holliday,” Hal said with all the naïveté of his nineteen years, “is where Santa Claus hails from? Movie actor or hermit, which?”

“Hal has a weakness for odd-looking people,” Mr. Denis Keen explained to the ranch owner, whimsically. “The funny part of it is—they usually turn out to be as odd as they look.”

Mr. Holliday chuckled merrily and looked past the ramshackle old station down the mud-covered platform. “Humph,” he said in his pleasant bass voice, “you mean Old Man Winters, huh? I don’t know whether or not you’d call him a hermit. He avoids people as much as it’s possible—even me. No, he’s not a movie actor, either. To tell you the truth, no one in these parts can give you much information about the poor old fellow. He’s been living in a deserted old cabin up in the hills. It’s about five miles from my ranch. He just sort of dropped out of nowhere in particular about eleven or twelve years ago and he’s been up there ever since.”

“And as usual, Papa,” Lee said smilingly, “you’ve forgotten the most important thing about Mr. Winters. It’s the one thing that would interest Hal.”

3

Hal smiled gratefully at the khaki clad girl. “What?” he asked anxiously. “Murderer? Escaped convict?”

Lee Holliday’s brown eyes fairly danced and she laughed lightly. “Nothing as startling as that,” she said when her mirth had subsided. “The poor old man can’t furnish you with any such thrill; he merely comes down here looking for a letter.”

“Every day,” said a voice at their side. “But he never gits it. Now, shall I take the gentlemen’s luggage, Mr. Holliday?”

“Oh, so it’s you, Kip, eh?” said the ranch owner. “Yes, yes, take it and we’ll be going on. This is Kip, Denis— and Hal, you’ll be especially interested to know Kip. He can talk adventure with you by the hour—he and my other man, Pedro, were pals in the late war. Both airmen—Kip’s as good a pilot as you’d want and Pedro’s a mechanic. They’ve both a store of thrills to tell whenever you want to hear them.”

4

Hal shook the long, thin hand of Kip enthusiastically, and surveyed his tall, angular frame with youthful admiration. Nothing heroic looking to be sure, he was forced to admit to himself, but the fellow had an unusual smile, a perpetual one.

“Why does that old fellow come down here every day looking for a letter if he never gets it?” Hal insisted.

“That’s th’ mystery ’bout him,” Kip answered, picking up the luggage and going toward Mr. Holliday’s comfortable-looking car. “Don’t git all fussed up ’bout it, young feller. If yuh ask me, I think he’s jest a lazy hobo,” he added with a chuckle.

“Pedro may be a grouch,” said Lee when Kip was out of hearing, “but I prefer him any time. Kip takes everything as a joke. Even that poor old man.”

5

Hal stood straight and tall and still, and his light blue eyes blinked inquiringly as he watched the patient attitude of the old man just down the platform. “Oh boy,” he said with boyish sincerity, “that gets me—you know it? Every day—

looking for a letter he never gets. I'd like to ask him about it —you know it?"

"I've thought of that ever since he came here," said Lee. "I was quite a little girl then, but it affected me just the same way as it's affecting you now. I've never been able to get it out of my head but that somebody could gain his confidence and learn his secret of the letter."

Hal's great mass of wavy red hair tumbled precipitately down upon his forehead and he shook it back in place with a vigorous nod. "But nobody has, huh?" he asked.

"Nobody," she answered, looking toward her father's car. There was a gleam of defiance in her brown eyes for a moment, then: "Kip and Pedro came out here to Papa just before old Mr. Winters came. I think Papa would have believed that the poor old man really had terrible trouble if it hadn't been for Kip. But no, right away he talked Papa out of sympathy with the story and convinced him that it was all a pose and a bluff and that Mr. Winter's was nothing but a lazy old hobo. You heard him say that." 6

"Sure, I did," Hal agreed earnestly. "He couldn't make me believe that, though. Hang it all, I could see there was something sad about him when the train came in. Did he tell your father in the beginning that he had had terrible trouble?"

"Yes," said Lee, and nodded in response to her father's summons. "He said he came to Montana to forget his troubles and that all he wanted was a little work to do while he was waiting for a letter that he expected. That was twelve years

ago and as Kip told you the letter has never come, but he doesn't give up hope. You can see for yourself."

Hal was indignant. "And they call him a bluff when they can see how he comes down here every day. . . ."

7

"Kip says he does that because he isn't quite right," Lee interposed. "He and Pedro take turns in going up to the old man's cabin with food. They both say that Mr. Winters hasn't talked of that trouble again. Papa's kind to him, of course—he doesn't let him do any more work because of his feeble condition. And he sends up the best food we can get. But still, I don't know—I always have the feeling that they could have helped him out of his loneliness if they had really tried to show sympathy and interest in the beginning. Don't you think so, Hal?"

Hal did think so. "I'm going to talk to him—you know it?" he announced, warming considerably to the subject.

"I'll go with you tomorrow and show you the way," Lee said enthusiastically. "At last there's someone interested in my pet romance or whatever you want to call it."

"And how!" Hal agreed, unable to take his bright young eyes from the pathetic looking old figure on the platform. "Look, he's waiting for the station agent to sort over that mail—poor old guy."

8

"Yes, but I'm afraid we can't wait," said Lee at a second summons from her father. "Papa and Mr. Keen are getting impatient with our gossiping, I guess, and Kip's had the car started this long time. There's one consolation—we have the

whole summer in which to find out Mr. Winters' secret."

"I'll find it out," said Hal with youthful superiority, "and it won't take the whole summer either!"

And by this same token did Hal Keen enmesh himself in a strange web of mystery—the mystery of Gordon's Creek.

CHAPTER II

SHADOWS

“Hal, it’s deplorable that a level-headed looking boy like you should fall for such trash,” said Denis Keen whimsically. He stretched his long legs out to the veranda railing, then sat forward in his chair. “Lee’s built a sort of fiction out of what little is known of the old man. It’s just the sort of romance that a sixteen year old girl of her type loves. But go on up if it gives you pleasure.”

“Denis, he’s a chip of the old block,” said Mr. Holliday from a big willow chair nearby, “or a chip of the old uncle, eh? You got in the Department of Justice from just such a start—snooping and scenting mysteries.”

“Yes, but I snooped and scented real mysteries, Richard,” said Mr. Keen with a sly wink at his host. “But . . .”

10

“All right, Unk,” said Hal good-naturedly, “don’t rub it in. If I’m going to be fooled, all right. I’ll kind of like talking to Mr. Winters anyway—mystery or no mystery.”

“It’s too bad you promised Lee that you’d go with her then,” said Mr. Holliday. “You could have just as well gone along with Kip and Pedro—they’re going past that way to look over

the dam up the creek. I reckon they're taking a few goodies to slip in the old man's place. Here they come now—up from the corral.”

“Dam giving you any trouble, Richard?” Denis Keen asked his friend.

“The old man told Kip the other day when he was by that it was cracked clear through on one side,” Mr. Holliday answered. “I'd worry about it if it came a rainy spell. There's a powerful force o' water emptying into that creek.”

Hal watched the two horsemen as they came cantering up from the corral. Kip was smiling, but Pedro, in strong contrast, scowled fiercely, his dark, swarthy skin and piercing black eyes accentuating this ominous expression. 11

“Pedro's not as dangerous as he looks,” said Mr. Holliday, reading Hal's thoughts. “He's part Indian and part Spanish, I guess—he's never said what he really was. But he's a darned good mechanic and pilot too. Can do almost anything. Both fellows can—don't know what I'd do without 'em. That's why I let them have it pretty much their own way around here. They keep the cowboys in hand, stock—everything.”

“Did they take one of the planes out last night, Richard?” asked Denis Keen. “I was certain I heard one land in your hangar back there during the night.”

“Guess you did,” answered the ranch owner. “Kip goes down to the city almost every night. He's a movie fiend. Pedro has a girl, from what I can understand. They leave the plane at the airport.”

Hal was interested. “Got an airport out in this neck of the woods too, huh?” he asked smilingly.

12

“Gordon Field,” said the ranch owner, with true civic pride. “Do you think you easterners are the only ones to have fine airports?”

“It’s too early for arguments,” came Lee’s voice from the doorway. “Breakfast is about ready and there’s someone calling you on the phone, Papa. Don’t be long—we’ll wait for you.”

Mr. Holliday left the veranda hurriedly while Lee stepped out, flushed and fresh as the early morning. Her short hair was almost the color of her khaki riding habit and it tumbled down over one tanned cheek as she nodded a greeting to the arriving horsemen.

“Are you taking anything along for Mr. Winters?” she inquired perfunctorily of Kip, who was reining his horse in under the veranda.

Kip’s smile deepened. “Sure, we are. Cook said it was yore father’s orders. Well, we’ve got it here, all right,” he said, patting the saddle bags. “Want to send anything yoreself, Miss Lee?”

13

“No, thanks,” she said tersely. “Mr. Hal and I are going to ride up that way today and I just wanted to know.”

Kip chuckled. “So,” he said, blinking his closely set eyes upon Hal, “yore still set on seein’ the old bird, eh?”

“Sure, I am,” Hal answered determinedly. “And I bet I’ll find out whether or not he’s just a lazy hobo or something else.”

Kip laughed outright. “Don’t bet on that too much, kid,” said he. “I’ve known that old bird for a good many years now an’ he ain’t told me any sad story, so why should he tell you?”

“Why stand argu’n’ ’bout it,” snapped Pedro between his shining teeth. “Let him go and find out about it.”

The little fellow, having had his say, settled abruptly behind his scowl. Hal couldn’t make him out at all and after a few seconds of frank scrutiny decided that Pedro had a way of making one feel decidedly uneasy. Certainly he would prefer Kip’s disarming smile any time.

14

Mr. Holliday joined them at this juncture. “Bad news from the field, folks,” he said, clasping and unclasping his big, generous hands. And then directly addressing Kip and Pedro, he said: “Collins and his mail plane haven’t been heard from since he left the field on his regular run last night. We had a low-lying fog most of the night—remember?”

“Jest guess I do,” said Kip, interested. “No word that any one has seed him either, huh?”

“None,” said the ranch owner. “Did you boys see him before he took off last night?”

“I did,” said Pedro gruffly. “Plane was fine—he was fine too.”

“Too bad,” Mr. Holliday murmured sincerely. “Collins was

one of the nicest boys over at the field.”

“Yep,” said Kip, with a hint of shadow playing over his smiling lips, “but that’s the lot of the airman.”

15

The two horsemen drew rein and after a moment were galloping off toward the green foothills of the Rockies. The little group on the veranda stood watching their departure for a few moments until a sudden declivity in the rolling hills hid them temporarily from view.

“That Pedro chap is a grouch, Richard,” said Denis Keen. “Speaks very good English though, eh?”

“I believe he’s spent most of his time in the East,” said the ranch owner, gazing at the thin veil of dust that the riders had left behind. “Yes, Pedro’s not as pleasant as he might be, but then his health’s not the best. The war left him pretty well shattered—he got it far worse than Kip, I guess. And that’s not saying much, for their hospital reports weren’t so encouraging. Still they’ve picked up wonderfully in the years they’ve been out here with me. Kip seems to be able to stand pretty long flights and Pedro does better than he used to. Well, come on in to breakfast, folks—Cook will be mad as a hatter trying to keep things hot all this time.”

Hal lingered for a second after the rest had entered the house, looking off toward a trail that wound in and out among the pine trees. He could see the riders quite distinctly now for they had taken the trail and were climbing steadily. A keen pang of regret accompanied this observation for he was quite attracted to Kip and his warm smile.

16

“Here I’ll have a girl tied to me all day—maybe all summer,” said he, disgusted. “She’s all right as girls go, but dang it all, a fellow hasn’t the chance to ride every day of his life with an ex-aviator and war hero. I bet he could tell me things, all right—all right. And there’s that poor Collins fellow now—I could see Kip felt bad about that, too—we could have talked about that. Dang it—it’s just my luck!”

Hal ran his strong fingers through his flaming hair. He could just about make out the figures of the two riders now for they were all but hidden by the trees. The shadows of early morning still held the western slope in their grip and he found some comfort in the knowledge that when he and Lee started out the sun would have put those shadows to rout.

17

Perhaps Hal was just a trifle superstitious. Be that as it may, he loathed shadow of any kind, particularly the gloom upon which he was now gazing. He shuddered instinctively, even while he laughed at his own fears.

18

CHAPTER III

BITTER ROOT MINE

The Comet X-1 Ranch looked to be no more than a white speck from where they stood. Amidst the vast acres of buffalo grass the spotless outbuildings and main ranch house seemed to dwindle into nothingness. Off to the east on the rolling prairie and distant buttes herds of sheep moved lazily in the warmth of noonday. But on the lower slopes of Crosley Range, the sun shone gaily upon Hal and Lee who were nibbling upon the remnants of a light luncheon. Their horses were grazing contentedly in a small grassy hollow near by.

“That road that you see running northeast and east,” said Lee, waving her slim brown arm, “is one of the boundaries of Papa’s property. It’s a county road, Gordon Highway, and leads directly into the city, past the airport. Then there’s a little country road that branches from it running south and southwest until it dwindles into a trail that comes up from the lower slope and meets the creek trail just above Mr. Winters’ cabin. We can go home that way this evening if you like and it will give us a good excuse for going past forbidden territory.”

19

“Who forbids it?” grinned Hal. “The old man?”

“That’s what I meant, of course,” said Lee, kicking her spurs

against the rock on which they were sitting. “Mr. Winters has said time and again that he doesn’t like snooping strangers. And you are a stranger to him. But at one time about fifty years ago it was actually forbidden territory. A man named Crosley (after whom this range is called) discovered what he thought was a very rich copper mine. It’s a little above here on our way to Mr. Winters’ and I’ll show it to you. You’d never think to look at the entrance to the old shaft that tragedy ever took place there.”

Hal reached over to the basket between them and secured another sandwich. “I always eat when I’m interested,” he laughed. “Go on—that’s my weakness—tragedy.”

20

Lee’s laugh rang out in the silent noonday like the tinkling of a bell. “You’ve got a weakness for adventure, Hal,” she said, “but I guess it’s a good weakness.” Then, seriously: “This Mr. Crosley, as the story goes, slaved and stunted himself and his wife and child, putting every penny he could into the prospect. There came a time (I don’t know just how long it was) when another man, who was an enemy of his, put in a claim for the mine.”

“Man, that was tough,” said Hal, reaching for another sandwich.

Lee smiled and continued. “Well, it was pretty hard, that’s certain. Papa said that poor Mr. Crosley didn’t have a chance because his enemy bought his claim to it—whatever that means.”

21

“Pull,” said Hal. “Man . . .”

“Mr. Crosley’s enemy gave him notice to get out,” said Lee gravely. “The poor man had a cabin right near the mine too. But he wouldn’t give up the mine—he went crazy and forbade anybody to come up the trail past there. He put his wife and child behind him inside the shaft and they fortified themselves there for days, it is said. After the siege had ended and there came no sound from the shaft, his enemy and the sheriff and a posse crept up.”

“And found ’em dead, huh?” asked Hal, with a sandwich poised in mid-air and his mouth wide open.

“All three of them,” said Lee. “His wife and child had died from being down in the foul atmosphere of the mine all that time. Mr. Crosley, poor man, had killed himself. But that wasn’t all—two days afterward his enemy and some other men were trapped and drowned in the shaft when the dam broke up the creek and it came pouring its waters down the hills. Wasn’t that just too awful!”

“And how!” Hal agreed with a pretty big mouthful.

“And now I suppose they say the place is haunted, huh?”

22

“Of course it is,” Lee said with a wry smile. “When you’ve heard a story as many times as I’ve heard that why you’d come to believe it too. Papa doesn’t believe it, of course, but then he’s an easterner really. I’ve lived all but one year in Montana, so I’ve reason to be an honest-to-goodness westerner.”

“But that isn’t any reason to be superstitious,” said Hal. “All

westerners aren't superstitious, are they?"

"No, silly," Lee laughed, "but they have a lot of traditions that easterners haven't, I guess. Believe it or not, Bitter Root Mine hasn't an ounce of copper in it to this day and old prospectors say that Mr. Crosley proved that he had struck a rich vein when he first staked his claim."

Hal wanted to believe the old tale; certainly he was tremendously moved by it. But the thought of the mine being haunted brought a smile to his handsome features.

23

"How is the mine haunted—does Mr. Crosley's ghost parade in and out of it?" he asked laughingly.

"You can laugh," answered Lee good-naturedly, "but even Papa couldn't stay in it for more than a second. He said it was just as if something stifled him so that he was driven out."

"Just as I said," Hal observed whimsically. "It must have been the old timer's ghost."

"Well, I think it *was*. Everyone that's ever been in there has had the same experience and that's proof, isn't it?"

"Absolutely, positively. I'm never convinced, though, until I see the white sheet with my own eyes and hear the skeleton rattle," Hal told her with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

The girl looked at him searchingly for a moment, then frowned. "You're making fun of me, Hal, and I think you're just too awful," she said, trying to keep the mirth out of her voice. "For being so smart, I'm going to dare you to go

24

in it and see how long you can stay in it!”

Hal laughed outright. “I didn’t need that dare—I intended to see for myself anyhow. But I think it’s the bunk—you know it? But let’s get going, huh?”

Lee gave him a quizzical sort of smile and, without a word, rose and went to her horse. She wore an air as if to say, “It’s for me to know and you to find out.”

They cantered up the trail, leaving the lower grassy levels for the more heavily timbered stretches through which their trail wound. It was shady and pleasant and had it not been for the riotous medley of woodland birds and the rhythmic beat of horses’ hoofs upon the ground the vast range would have been deadly silent—a thing apart from the noisy work-a-day world.

Hal’s supersensitiveness caused him to be immediately aware of this silence underlying these natural disturbances. He whistled gaily until the sudden roar of an airplane motor sounded overhead. They could just about distinguish the clip of one glistening wing through the wide-spreading branches above their heads.

25

“They must be out hunting for poor Collins,” Lee observed, squinting her brown eyes skyward. “He carried a lot of valuable mail, I guess. I heard Papa say that yesterday. You know how those things get around. Pedro was over in the city early yesterday morning and he heard it from one of the men there. He told it to Kip and Kip told it to Papa. Well, they’ll have an awful hunt if the poor fellow floundered into a canyon. There’s a hundred of them on this range alone. Some

of them are so hidden, they say that they've never been really explored by man."

Hal shuddered visibly. "Maybe they'll never find him, huh?"

"Maybe not. The last airman lost that was reported last seen over this range has never been found. Part of the plane's wing was recovered a month ago in Ryder's Basin, about two miles from here. And it's two years now that the plane has been lost."

26

The trail narrowed considerably as they emerged into the open once more. Sunlight, dazzling and hot, shone steadily down upon the barren looking slope that they were ascending, giving its thin covering of mould a sickly greenish hue. A strange distant screech echoed faintly in the depths of the canyon below them.

"Do you have eagles around here?" Hal asked curiously.

"A few now and then. That was one, all right. He's been around here since the summer began," Lee answered, reining in her horse. Then, indicating a curious looking U-shaped gap in the massive rocky face of a higher level, she said: "I've an idea the old fellow keeps house in that wind gap up there. Every time I come up this trail I hear a yelp from him and there's always something glistening up in that gap. Do you see it?"

Hal did, though it meant no more than just a mere glisten to his city trained eyes. Lee's calm observance of it astounded him more than the knowledge itself. "Man, I should think you'd be kind of scared, wandering around here

27

with an eagle flying loose,” he said with true tenderfoot simplicity.

Lee laughed heartily. “I’d rather trust myself in the open with that eagle than down in the mine with the ghost.”

Hal couldn’t comprehend this sort of thing—he didn’t try to. Besides, Lee’s mirth-lighted eyes had suddenly become grave and frowning. The young man turned in his saddle inquiringly.

The girl nodded. “Do you hear a horse?” she asked.

“No. Whereabouts—coming or going?”

“Going. It sounds just about at the mine—around that next sharp turn. No, it’s getting farther away now. Let’s spur on and see who it can be.”

28

“Maybe it’s Crosley’s ghost,” Hal teased. “Did he ride a horse or a mule?”

Suddenly they heard a hoarse, muffled cry.

29

CHAPTER IV

WHO?

Hal spurred his horse up the trail despite Lee's entreaties. The excited animal swung his graceful body around the sharp, narrow curve where a misstep would have meant death to his rider and to himself. But the stallion's hoofs came down firmly upon the soft earth and with a leap they had rounded the bend, to safety.

Hal looked ruefully over his shoulder at the waterfall that rushed headlong over the precipice opposite and roared into the canyon below. The crystal waters foamed angrily into a glacial trough containing the long narrow lake basin that was popularly known as Lower Gordon's Creek. The young man grinned at the fate he had so narrowly escaped just as Lee guided her mare carefully and safely around the bend.

"Hal," she cried, upon seeing him rushing ahead, "don't be so reckless! It may be *something*! It may be anything! There's the mine. . . ."

30

Hal reined in the stallion and turned in the saddle as the girl indicated the dilapidated structure that formed the entrance to the old deserted mine. He got a flashing first impression of rotting boards and a great yawning gap in the side of the solid rock which overhung the trail. No sign of humanity in distress

was there; no indication that there had been distress.

Hal called lustily, craning his neck as he looked up to the next bend in the trail. A strange, ominous silence pervaded the slope and the shrill echo of his own voice sounded harsh and eerie. Lee reined in her mare behind him, breathless and grave.

“You can’t deny that it’s strange, Hal,” said she in an awed whisper. “We both heard that cry—the cry of a man, yet now there isn’t a sign of anyone.”

“A fast rider could have reached that bend,” said Hal thoughtfully, with his eyes cast on the ground. “Look! There’s the tracks of more than one horse—two horses, I’d like to bet anything. And there they are again up at the entrance to the shaft,” he added, throwing his reins to Lee and jumping to the ground. “It’s as clear as the nose on your face.”

31

Lee smiled at this inelegant simile, but only for a moment as Hal’s next move caused her face to darken with apprehension. He was headed straight for the entrance to the deserted mine.

“Now, Hal, what good . . . what . . . Can’t you ride up to the bend and see if there isn’t someone ahead of us? Come on, we haven’t an awful lot of time to stop at Mr. Winters’ place anyhow. Please!”

“We’ll have time enough for everything, Lee,” he said with a winning smile. “Besides, if anyone did reach the bend before I came in sight, they’re just that much further away now. I won’t be a minute—I just want to take a peek.” Then: “Do

you suppose it could have been Pedro and . . .”

“Of course not,” Lee interposed hastily. “This trail would take them three miles out of their way. They take a trail on the lower slope and work their way up-stream. This would be an awful roundabout way for them—they’d have absolutely no reason for doing it. And if they did, they would have been gone this five hours. Now, Hal, you haven’t even a search-light. They say it’s awfully dark in there.”

32

Hal grinned. “Most mines are, aren’t they? But don’t worry, Lee, I can’t go very far without a light. Besides, it may be that that was old Crosley’s ghost. He might have got tired being cooped up in one mine for so many years and ran away with a whoop, huh?”

Lee thrummed her slim brown fingers upon the edge of her saddle. “Hal, please don’t,” she pleaded. “I have a feeling about it somehow. A feeling that . . .”

“It was a ghost on horseback,” Hal interposed, laughing. He had sauntered up before the entrance and stepped forward determinedly. “Well, here goes, Lee. Do you think I ought to yell yoo-hoo or go right in and introduce myself to the ghost? On second thought I guess I’ll go right in,” he added as his bright eyes noted some curious tracks about the place. “Be out in a jiff.”

33

Hal felt not so gay as he had talked. His face looked drawn and perplexed when once he had turned his back upon the girl and entered the deep twilight within the rotted enclosure. He experienced no fear; certainly he apprehended no ghostly

situation, but he felt as did Lee, that the muffled cry they had heard had some mysterious relation to the forbidding looking mine. And being human and curious, he wanted to see for himself.

There was a passageway, long and narrow, that extended back further than his blinking eyes had the power of seeing. He supposed that the shaft must be sunk at the end of that, but he realized that it would be foolhardy to attempt to go too far. After all, he had but one reason for entering the dank-smelling place and that was to see if anyone was really hiding in there.

Suddenly he bethought himself of some matches he had in his pocket. He laughed softly as he secured them and lifting his foot attempted to strike one against the sole of his shoe. But it took three before he got the desired result. 34

“Anybody in here?” he called as he held the flickering match high above his head. “We thought we heard somebody cry just before. Oh, yoo-hoo!” he fairly yelled and then laughed at his own foolishness.

But the laughter was short-lived and ended by catching queerly at his throat as something ran over his foot. A rat? He couldn't tell for the flickering flame of the match lighted only a tiny area of the moldy wall and roof. The rest of the place was steeped in inky darkness. Then the match went out.

He tried to hum while striking another match, but the sounds that came from his lips sounded flat and artificial. He felt better when another little flame spurted out from under his palm and he advanced courageously some 35

fifteen feet.

“It’s the bunk,” he said aloud. “It’s . . . why . . .”

Without knowing why, he stopped. Something, someone was in that mine. He could almost feel it. Of course, the place was stifling, the dampness oppressive, yet withal he felt an occasional undercurrent of warm air. It was perplexing, unnerving.

Suddenly a rush of air extinguished the match and without warning something tugged at his feet pulling them clear from under him. The next second some terrific force seemed to strike at the back of his head and he immediately felt as if he were spinning down, down through space.

Then came oblivion.

CHAPTER V

A QUEER EXPERIENCE

Lee waited patiently at first, though she sat tense and alert for every sound. But as the minutes passed she dismounted and, leading the animals to a solitary clump of stunted red fir trees, hitched them to the nearest one. Then she walked toward the mine.

Within about six feet of the entrance she stopped, and in a small, nervous voice called, "Hal!" Then, louder: "HAL!"

The soothing voice of the warm, chinook winds whispered about her head, the raucous screech of the eagle taunted her from above, but no human sound issued from out the mine. The atmosphere became doubly still because of the sepulchral silence that hovered about the entrance to the ill-fated place.

Lee clasped and unclasped her hands, then let them fall at her sides clutching fearfully at her khaki riding-breeches. She advanced a few feet nearer until she could almost see into the dark place. She called once more, trembling and afraid.

37

The eagle screeched again, circling high above her head. In desperation, she stepped right up to the entrance and listened. Not a sound. It made her dizzy and faint to look into the black

depths of the place. The day was so bright and sunlighted and free. And the mine seemed to her like some vast, suffocating prison of darkness. Unconsciously, she took a step backward.

But Lee, at heart, was not a coward. Her fear for Hal soon overcame what she lacked in courage. The next moment she was stumbling past the enclosure, trembling yet brave. And though her heart thumped wildly she was able to stand calmly and contemplate how she could find her way through that long forbidding-looking passageway.

She reached out slowly. Her hand came in contact with the damp, slimy wall and the shock of it caused her to jump forward. Instantly, she recoiled, stifling a scream. Her small booted foot had stepped on the inert form of a human being.

38

She was so terrified that she never remembered clearly just how she managed to drag that dead weight out into the sunlight. She said she realized after a moment that it was Hal and that he was alive, though very still.

Little by little she managed to pull him down the trail and under the trees. Once there she set to work rubbing his forehead and wrists, but her heart misgave her at the sight of his bleeding head. With an almost blind dexterity she made a tight bandage for it by combining two of her handkerchiefs with one of his. Then she knelt by him, anxiously.

He stirred, bewildered and dizzy. "Where . . ." he began uncertainly.

"You're safe, Hal," she cried joyfully. "I dragged you out!

Oh, are you all right?”

“Hm-mm,” he answered feeling of his bandaged head and slowly rising. “I guess, I was out, huh? Man alive, something hit my bean—and how!”

39

“But you’re all right—you’re certain?” she asked frantically. “You haven’t a fractured skull or anything like that?”

Hal lay back on the ground for a moment. “It’s kind of hazy what happened—you know it? Somehow I just can’t remember what happened. All I know, I hit my head one awful bang. But I guess it isn’t fractured—I was just out, that’s all. I’m going back to see what happened.”

Lee got up. “You’ll do nothing of the kind, Hal Keen,” she said angrily. “You’re going to come right back home with me and have a doctor look at your head. You’ll not go back in that mine for anything. Not today!”

Hal grinned in spite of himself. “All right,” he said. “I was only kidding you, Lee—I’m grateful to you, honestly. You’re a brick for plucking up courage and going in after me like you did, considering how you hate the spooks. The next time I go poking around in deserted mines, I’ll have a flashlight with me.”

40

“And you’ll not go poking around alone,” said Lee seriously. “I know it isn’t brave to say so, Hal, but I’m afraid of that place and I can’t get over the feeling. I’ve never been past that enclosure until today and I hope I never get any further than just that. I would have died if I had had to go any further than that before I found you. Luck was with me that you fell there.

I didn't hear you cry or anything.”

“I guess I didn't say a word,” Hal admitted, allowing himself to be helped into the saddle. “I'm just a little dizzy. Guess I must have slipped, huh?”

“Well, you did something, that's sure,” Lee answered slipping into her saddle lightly. “Come on now, Hal, let's get away from this place just as quickly as possible. It's . . . it's . . . oh, I think it's just too awful. I hope you're cured now and believe what I say,” she added, spurring her horse.

Hal followed her quietly, allowing himself one curious glance at the mine before they took the curve. “It would take more than a bump on the head to cure me of anything, Lee,” he said whimsically. “I've got a bitter headache from Bitter Root Mine, but I'm not cured at all. In fact, I'm anxious to see what it was that made me slip. I don't think it was a ghost either!”

41

It was when they were in sight of the ranch once again that Hal remembered for the first time all that had transpired in the mine. Eagerly he told it to Lee, anxiously waiting for the effect.

“Don't you see,” he said in conclusion, “it was just as if someone pulled my feet right out from under me.”

“Of course,” she said simply, “and I'm glad it was nothing more than that. You just slipped and fell and struck your head, that was all. But it goes to prove that there's some spooky thing in that place. One either chokes or falls, it seems.”

“Well, one doesn’t fall all by himself, Miss Lee,” Hal said vehemently. “Not the way I did. Besides if you had listened closely you wouldn’t take my fall so calmly. You said you picked me up just past the enclosure, did you?”

42

“Yes, what of it?” she asked interested.

“I didn’t fall just past the enclosure. I had walked more than fifteen feet along that passageway before I fell. What do you make of that?”

“You probably stepped back a little way before you fell, don’t you think so?”

“Never fifteen feet,” Hal declared. “Someone upset me, and I don’t mean maybe.”

Suddenly the roar of a plane sounded overhead and Hal looked up in time to see it making a graceful turn at a remarkably low altitude. With the dip of its left wing he could plainly see the inscription COMET X-1 RANCH.

“Kip and Pedro must be back,” said Lee. “They’ve taken that short cut that I showed you before.”

43

Hal didn’t answer, but cantered hurriedly on toward the ranch house. Lee shrugged her shoulders. She supposed he was still thinking and wondering about his experience at the mine.

He was.

44

CHAPTER VI

HAL'S MYSTERIES

Mr. Holliday was greatly concerned upon learning of Hal's peculiar experience. He immediately signaled for Kip who had been warming up the larger plane and after listening to the young man's account ordered his trusted employee to fly over to the city at once and bring back a doctor.

"Aw, that isn't necessary, Mr. Holliday," Hal protested. "I think it's just a headache and that's all. Maybe I did just slip as Lee thinks, but honestly it felt more as if someone hauled off and gave me a good crack. But I guess it was the way I fell, huh?"

"I'm inclined to think so," Mr. Holliday returned. "Nevertheless, I want a doctor to see it, Hal. We can't have you neglected, not while you're a guest in this house."

Kip, meanwhile, was carefully inspecting the small wound. "I'm sure it's nothin' but a little bruise and skin abrasion, sir," he said to the ranch owner. "Jest the same, I'll hop over to th' city and get the doc." He patted Hal fraternally on the shoulder, then: "Never mind, young feller, the next time yuh go huntin' for any of Miss Lee's spooks, you'd better let me go with yuh. I know that mine pretty well; I gave my own head a crack somethin' like you have th' first time I

ever went snoopin' 'bout thar.”

“That’s so, you did, Kip,” said the genial ranchman. “The floor of that passageway is a mass of slimy clay and that may account for it. But, Lee,” he said with a smiling glance of admonition, “you must not be so superstitious and believe that crazy tale of the mine. There’s nothing to it. The least said about the dilapidated old place, the better. You get supersensitive people like Hal interested in it and of course they want to see it right away. What happens? I don’t believe in anybody snooping around such places. Nothing good comes of it, and in its present rotting condition there’s likely to be a serious cave-in one of these days. I wouldn’t want to be responsible for a human being caught in such a dreadful trap. I’m afraid you’re not a very good guide for a tenderfoot.”

Lee bit her lip and walked into the house, vexed and hurt. Hal rose from his comfortable position in the porch swing and looked after her, feeling himself equally culpable. He said so, too.

46

“She told me not to go,” he explained, “but my curiosity got the better of me, I guess. She was a brick, though—pulled me out—scared as she was.”

Hal’s Uncle Denis put down his cigar which he had been smoking throughout the discussion. “Nevertheless,” he said in his whimsical way, “you had better confine your exploratory excursions to the days when Kip can act as your guide, eh, Richard?”

“Just so,” Mr. Holliday answered amiably. “And as soon as you’re better, Hal, you can have Kip and Pedro all to yourself for a nice camping trip—say two or three days, eh? I can spare them.”

Hal grinned happily and forgot, for the time being, the strange presentiments that had so taken hold of him since his experience in the mine. “I’d like to climb up and find that eagle’s nest, for one thing,” he declared. “Think that can be done?”

“Sure enuff,” Kip smiled and hesitated at the door. “Pedro wouldn’t be very smilin’ ’bout it, I’m ’fraid. By the way, did either you or Miss Lee spot Pedro on yore way down?”

Hal turned. “No, why? Didn’t he come with you?”

“Nope. I sent him down the west trail to kind of get the low-down on how much water was toppling over the falls. That way we can savvy how big a crack the dam has. Well, I guess he’s stopped at the old man’s place for a chat or something. No tellin’ what Pedro’s likely to do. Now, for the city—see you later!”

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Holliday called after him. “We’ll take a spin over the range after we take the doctor back, Kip. I’ll go with you.” Then turning to his guests he said: “We’re getting terribly worried about the fate of poor Collins. We’ve promised Major Denton (he has charge of the field) that we’ll take a spin around and see if we can see anything. Now I’ll go and see if I can smooth things over with Lee—you know how girls are.” He smiled, a lingering thoughtful smile, and slowly

entered the drawing room.

Hal looked questioningly at his uncle. “What is it, Unk?” he said. “Mr. Holliday looks kind of down.”

Mr. Keen stared at the shining white threshold over which the ranchman had just stepped. Then he looked at his nephew. “He *is* down, Hal,” he whispered confidentially. “I didn’t tell you before, but that’s the reason I came out here to visit him. He has these vast acres—owns all this property up past the ill-fated mine and so on to the dam. All property and no money. Yes, he’s worried for Lee’s sake. It would be terrible for her to have to leave this beautiful place. But I don’t know what can be done about it—I can’t give my old friend much else besides sympathy. That’s what happens when you spend your life snooping out mysteries. I warn you, Hal—I can see you’re bent that way yourself—you’ll be poor or next door to it, if you follow in your old uncle’s footsteps.”

49

Hal smiled sympathetically. “You may be poor, Unk, but you don’t have to worry about any dams bursting or any spooky mines caving in. I’ll try not to follow in your footsteps as you say, but man alive—I kind of feel things—you know it? Maybe you think I’m crazy, but I can’t get that mine business out of my head. Lee and I both heard that fellow cry and we both heard hoofbeats. Besides I saw the tracks of two horses right at the entrance.”

“You didn’t mention that before,” said Mr. Keen, sitting forward in his chair.

50

“I know,” said Hal, lying back leisurely on the porch swing

again. “I just had a hunch not to say anything—you know, like you do when you get an important clue, Unk?”

Mr. Keen laughed heartily. “A sleuth in the making, eh, Hal, my boy? Well, it’s a pity, but it can’t be helped. You imply that you didn’t say it because of Kip’s presence—is that it? Now, as my first instruction in sleuthing, you’ll have to eliminate our genial, blond Kip. Richard said he was home two hours before you and Miss Lee. Then, there is the dark, taciturn Pedro. . . .”

“He isn’t home yet,” Hal interposed.

“And we have Kip’s own word for it that Pedro was to come home the Bitter Trail Way, as Richard calls it. Now, Hal, I take it that you are sifting matters down to a common denominator. You think some person or persons wilfully attacked you in the mine, eh?”

“Yep—I don’t know it for certain, of course. But I feel it —you know it? I think it was just one person.”

51

“Hm,” said Mr. Keen taking up his cigar and relighting it. “What reason would any one have for attacking you in that mine?”

“That’s what I’d like to find out,” said Hal thoughtfully. “And I mean to find out—and soon.”

Mr. Keen smiled. “Then you’ve entirely given up the idea of trying to fathom the mystery of old Mr. Winters, eh?”

“Who said I have?” Hal returned indignantly. “When I say a

thing, I mean it! No, I haven't given it up—man alive, I've just begun! There's two mysteries within a couple of miles of each other—some fun to unravel, huh, Unk? I'll make Kip stick to his word and take me up there just as soon as my head's in working order.”

“Heaven help you, Hal, my boy,” said Mr. Keen with mock-despair in every tone. “You talk like your poor old uncle did when he was nineteen years of age.”

CHAPTER VII

AND IN THE NIGHT

Hal's head was in working order in less than forty-eight hours. The doctor from the city had declared the trouble to be nothing more than a slight concussion and one from which he would suffer no after effects. And so, on the evening of the second day he hunted out the amiable Kip and sat with him on a stump facing the corral.

The rolling acres of the Comet X-1 Ranch were steeped in the silence of sunset. From where he sat, Hal could glimpse his uncle and the ranch owner sitting comfortably on the wide veranda enjoying after-dinner cigars. Lee had left but an hour before for Butte to visit a school chum for a few days—a concession which her father had made as an act of contrition.

“That’s just how Mr. Holliday is,” said Kip. “You’d think that he laid down the law somethin’ awful to her, that he has to go and make it up to her this-a-way. She’s wanted to go and visit thar since spring, so now she’s gone, and got the best of the mine argument in the bargain.” He threw back his head and laughed heartily.

53

“How?” asked Hal.

“She got her father to admit it wasn’t her fault that you got

hurt,” Kip said smiling broadly. “That’s gittin’ the best of it, eh? Anyways, it’s jest as good you didn’t get hurt for good or thet the mine didn’t cave in like he’s always fearin’ because he’d always kind of hold it agin himself and agin her for anything that would happen.”

“Well, maybe you’re right,” Hal said thoughtfully and thinking of the ranchman’s many financial worries. “He’s got enough to think about, I guess, huh? Man alive, I don’t want to be the one to worry anybody. After this I won’t go near the place.”

Kip’s smile deepened and for a moment he gazed upon the distant herd of cattle roaming peacefully about in the soft glow of sunset. Into this quiet came the blatant boom of two planes circling about the ranch and then making straight for the frowning crests of the range.

54

“Are they still hunting for that Collins fellow?” asked Hal.

Kip blinked his closely set eyes upon the blue vaulted dome overhead. “That’s what they’re a-doin’,” he said, watching the planes intently. “We look after dark so’s in case he’s stranded somewheres, he kin make a campfire and we kin spot him better. He’d be plain outa luck in some of them canyons daytimes. Well, I guess I’ll take a look around myself before we hop over to the city. It’s Pedro’s night to see his girl—I wait in the movies for him. I’ll take you ’long sometime soon’s yo’re feelin’ better.” He walked away, with long, easy strides.

“I’ll like going with you, Kip,” Hal called after him. “I’ve

learned quite a lot of planes, too.”

Kip turned and smiled. “Fine,” he said enthusiastically. “That’s what the boss likes, fer you to go plumb crazy over his planes.”

55

“How is it you didn’t take Lee to Butte?” Hal asked.

Kip ground the heel of his boot into the soft earth. “Miss Lee don’t ’xactly like me, young feller,” he answered with his wide, frank smile. “Don’t know why, but she never did—Pedro’s her favorite. But I don’t ever hold it agin her, young feller—girls sometimes cain’t give yuh good reasons for what they like or what they don’t like. They’re jest natcherally girls and that explains it, huh?”

Hal watched him stride off toward the hangar and thoughtfully agreed that Lee must be crazy not to like the tall, amiable Kip. To prefer the swarthy Pedro was something which he could not comprehend.

“But then she believes in spooks and that accounts for it,” he murmured whimsically.

He smiled amusedly at the thought, then strolled down toward the bunk house and mingled with some of the cowboys until dark. Mr. Holliday had given this part of his ranch quite an establishment, having a modern kitchen attached to the men’s quarters and superintended by their own personal cook. Neither Kip nor Pedro had anything to do with this department, but ate and slept at the main house to be always within easy reach of their employer.

56

Hal was old enough to realize with what terrible disappointment and regret would Mr. Holliday and Lee relinquish their claim to the fertile acres and picturesque hills that comprised the Comet X-1 Ranch. There was something tragic in just the mere thought of it.

It was, therefore, a great relief to him when Mr. Holliday suggested a week-end camping trip for Hal and his uncle with Kip and Pedro as guides. They would start in the morning and explore the higher levels to their hearts' content.

"I'm going to take one of the planes and fly to Helena on business," he said quietly. "I'll stop for Lee on my return and hope to hear you've had a rattling good time. I know," he added, turning to Mr. Keen, "that camping is not your long suit, Denis, but then neither is flying." 57

"Heavens, no," laughed Mr. Keen. "I'd prefer a little camping trip any time."

"Kip and Pedro can make you very comfortable," the ranchman said apologetically. "I have a camping outfit for four that leaves little to be desired—good beds, etc. Would you prefer staying here, though, Denis? Cook will look after you and see that you're not wanting anything."

"Aw, no, Unk—come on!" Hal pleaded. "It would be great having you along on something like that. I won't urge you to climb—*honestly!*"

Mr. Keen agreed to go, and without reservations. Indeed, he even seemed enthusiastic about it and Hal at once escaped to bed for fear his uncle would change his mind.

It was a moonless night and but a few stars twinkled in the dark heavens. Hal had stumbled sleepily from his bed to the window and looked out with blinking eyes at the amorphous outline of the range rising formidably in the distance. The buzz and hum of night creatures drifted in on the soft breeze and occasionally there came echoes of those mountain prowlers crying for their prey. Then like some dark, spectral web, a fog spread over the valley.

Hal pulled a comfortable rocker over and sat down. His uncle was snoring peacefully in the adjoining room. He listened almost enviously—no such peace of mind had induced sleep in him. Between the exciting prospects of the week-end and the continual whirring of the searching places he had entirely given up the thought of slumber.

About an hour before—it seemed easily that long ago—he thought he heard Kip make a landing and taxi into the hangar. A little while after that he fancied he heard a door shut quietly, followed by the sound of stealthy footfalls along the lower hall. There was a soft murmur of voices, then two doors closed simultaneously at either end of the upper hall.

Hal enjoyed sitting in the dark and just gazing through space. A considerable amount of time had elapsed when he again heard the murmur of voices and realized with a start that he had certainly been asleep in the chair. A faint glow was spreading across the eastern horizon—dawn was not far off and the fog was lifting.

He suddenly became aware that the voices were in the upper hall and, arising, tip-toed across the floor to his door. There he

pressed his head closely against the crack and listened.

“I demand to know, young man,” said the voice of Mr. Holliday, severely, “where you have been until this hour?”

“*Sh!*” came the answer, followed by some inaudible words. Hal couldn’t make out the voice at all, it was so muffled.

“The plane has been in since long before midnight,” whispered the ranch owner. His efforts to keep down his voice were evident. “Where were *you?*”

60

No answer followed this, but a door slammed as if caught by the breeze. Hal could tell by the sound that it was Mr. Holliday’s door and after listening vainly for a few more minutes he decided to look out.

He pulled open the door cautiously and without a sound, but as he stepped a little forward a figure creeping stealthily past him, stopped short. Hal gasped with surprise.

It was Pedro. He stood staring up at Hal, looking incredibly small in the ghostly shadow that was cast by the night light at the far end of the hall. His eyes, big and black, seemed all out of proportion in such a little head, yet they made one feel a pygmy to look into their brilliant depths.

“What—what,” stammered Hal with embarrassment, “is the matter? I thought I heard some noise?”

“Nothing matter—no noise,” Pedro answered sullenly.

61

He turned away and with a cat-like agility walked to the door

of the room that he occupied with Kip. Hal saw immediately that it was slightly ajar and that a faint light was burning inside, but Pedro did not give him time to learn anything further for he glanced back in his usual, taciturn manner, stepped out of sight and shut the door quietly.

Hal looked toward Mr. Holliday's room. A light was on in there, but no sound issued from that quarter. Perplexed and puzzled, the young man went back to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE MORNING

Mr. Holliday was waiting for them in the dining room the next morning. He looked tired and worried and after seeing that Hal and his uncle were in their places, sat down opposite.

“I’ve had a bad night of it,” he explained wearily. “And to make it worse there’s been more distressing news from the airport this morning. Major Denton ’phoned me that it looks as if they’re in for more worry. Bolton, one of their best pilots, started from the field at ten o’clock last night, bound for San Francisco with some mail. Well, he hasn’t reached there yet.”

“Did he carry valuable mail, too?” asked Hal, showing concern.

“Yes,” the ranchman answered, sipping at his coffee, “why?”

“I was just wondering,” Hal returned thoughtfully.

63

“I guess I’m just morbid about it,” Mr. Holliday said sadly. “After all, I’m not responsible except that both Collins and Bolton seem not to have been heard from over Waverly City—that’s the other side of the range, and a fair-sized community. That would indicate that they have been lost

between here and there, possibly in one of the canyons. Guess I'm getting as bad as Lee, eh? But it does seem as if all my property on the range is a sort of evil eye."

"What makes you think either of the pilots were lost on your property, Richard?" asked Mr. Keen, attacking his breakfast with healthy vigor.

"I don't think so, Denis," answered the ranchman, visibly brightening. "That's what I say—I'm just morbid about it. Two years ago a pilot was lost and after an endless search they found part of the plane's wing in Ryder's Basin. I own that place—I don't know why. Thought maybe I'd find some copper there too, like the Bitter Root, but they're all the same, nothing to them but the name."

"Lee told me about Ryder's Basin," said Hal. "They never found that pilot, she said."

64

Mr. Holliday looked at Hal from under his bushy eyebrows. "That's right," he said. "You see it does seem as if the property I own is as ill-fated to humans as it is to copper." He chuckled in something of his old humor.

"That sounds more like you," said Mr. Keen. "And I think it will do you good to get away from the range entirely for a few days. Forget your troubles in Helena and don't think about anything. Hal and I will make out splendidly with Kip and Pedro. Do we start soon?"

"Right after breakfast," answered Mr. Holliday. "Kip is waiting with the horses now. Pedro isn't going."

“Why?” asked Hal quickly, thinking of the talk he had heard the night before and Pedro’s subsequent behavior.

65

“Why, because it’s Pedro’s disposition not to want to do what one wants him to do,” answered the ranchman, obviously vexed at the thought. “Kip will take care of you, though, don’t worry about that.”

Hal frowned mentally for the situation was indeed a queer and puzzling one. A half dozen questions clamored for answer in his curious brain. Particularly did the remembrance of that one question asked of Pedro, confound him.

Why had Mr. Holliday asked him so severely where he had been until that hour of the night? Why had there been such suspicion and at the same time, condemnation, in the ranchman’s voice when he had demanded that he reveal his whereabouts since Kip had brought the plane into the hangar at midnight?

And then there had been Pedro’s evasiveness when Hal himself had confronted him and asked what had been the matter. The little fellow had deliberately lied in his sullen answer. Something had been the matter and there had been noise. Now, this morning he flatly refused to accompany his employer’s guests on the camping trip and Mr. Holliday had evaded giving the reason.

66

Hal was certain of one thing—Pedro had done something to arouse the ranchman’s suspicion last night. And that something was big enough to cause a breach between them. One could feel it in the atmosphere.

What was it? What was it all about? Hal was vexed and annoyed for there seemed to be nothing which he could lay his finger on.

CHAPTER IX

MESSENGERS OF THE SKY

They had not yet ascended the first slope and were still in plain view of the ranch, when Hal espied a familiar, diminutive figure riding off from the corral on a piebald horse and leading another. They were headed in the direction of the Gordon Highway.

“That’s Pedro, isn’t it?” Hal asked curiously.

Kip, who was riding at an easy trot and leading the over-laden mule, glanced over his shoulder. “Uh huh,” said he, “that’s Ped, all right.”

“Where do you suppose he’s going?” asked Mr. Keen, who brought up the rear of the little party.

“I guess to the old man’s place,” Kip answered tersely. And then, as if in apology, he said, “Pedro’s a-gittin’ on my nerves, like you easterners say. No mule was half as stubborn as him.”

68

“I didn’t think you could get mad or had any nerves,” said Mr. Keen laughingly. “But then every dog has his day, eh, Kip?”

“Yeh, then this must be my day,” answered Kip without his

usual smile. He caught his lip with his upper teeth and scowled.

It was not intended that Hal should see it, but he did, nevertheless. Kip's averted face and annoyed expression did not escape the observant young man, but he kept his thoughts to himself. One thing was certain, Mr. Holliday's amiable employee was thoroughly angry.

They rode on in silence for a while. Then Kip switched off abruptly, climbing straight up the Timber Track, as he called it. Hal was bewildered at first, but he suddenly realized where they were going.

"Up the Bitter Trail, eh, Kip?" he asked smilingly.

"Yep," answered Kip without turning in his saddle. "I'm going to leave you and your uncle eating your lunch in that nice, shady spot below the mine and while you're doing that I'll just take a run up to the old man's and see if I can see Pedro. There's something I want to say to him. He might as well go on up to the dam and see how things are progressin'. On your way down, day after to-morrer, young feller, I'll let yer stop in an' see th' old man—that's what yer cravin' ter do, huh? Well, I'll 'low yer plenty o' time ter see what mysterious story he's got hid in his life. Jes' now there ain't time ter do it. I want ter git there and back so's ter be well up above afore sundown."

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Kip left them as he promised about a mile below the mine and cantered off with the reminder that it would be just as well not to do any exploring until he returned. "I may be longer'n I

think for,” he called. “But don’t git worried—I’ll be back!”

Hal and his uncle watched him until his horse had carried him around the bend and out of sight. Silent and intent, they munched on the chicken sandwiches that Mr. Holliday’s cook had so skilfully prepared. Mr. Keen finished his first and breaking up the crusts walked over to the ledge and threw them down to a little company of birds which were chattering down in the depths of the canyon.

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“Hal,” said he strolling thoughtfully back, “you were right. Something’s all askew in the Holliday household—something besides poor Richard’s financial troubles. And somehow my mind revolves around the thought of that slinky little Pedro. I’m afraid he’s a bad egg. There’s a great deal more to it than what you overheard at your door last night—a great deal, I fancy.”

Hal studied his uncle’s face closely, then went on eating. In fact, he ate prodigiously, which was significant. He was interested and aroused and would have consumed the contents of the entire basket had he not been disturbed by a familiar screeching sound in the distance. Instantly he looked up.

“What is it?” asked his uncle.

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“An eagle,” Hal answered, sweeping his brilliant eyes the length and breadth of the range. “He’s an old fellow—one that Lee and I saw when we were up here. She’s seen him since the beginning of summer. Oh, there he is—see him, Unk? He’s sweeping down just like a plane with those great big wings of his. Now he’s dipping—*wait*—well, I’ll be

doggone if he hasn't disappeared just about where the mine is located! What do you suppose he's after?"

"Food, most likely," said Mr. Keen. "I dare say he's waiting in some sequestered gap for us to finish, or rather for you to finish, since you seem to have been intent on doing that to the poor basket. When we're gone he'll swoop over here like a flash and gobble up the crumbs—that's if you leave that much. Maybe I ought to try and signal him that it's futile to count on any crumbs from you, eh?"

"Man alive, what a crack!" laughed Hal. "But I'll fool you this time, Unk—I'm not going to eat anything else. The animals are having a good rest and Kip won't be back for two hours, so why not hike up around the bend and see where old man eagle is parking, huh? Oh, I'm not out to do anything—I just kind of want to show you around a little and settle the sandwiches at the same time." 72

"Well, that's not a bad idea," Mr. Keen admitted, "but please don't do anything rash, Hal. You're sure you haven't something in mind concerning the mine, eh?"

"Now, Unk, I'm not that crazy. The mine can cave in any time, but not with me inside. Little Hal wants to go places and see things a few more years, not be buried under tons of dirt and rock!"

Mr. Keen's twinkling blue eyes measured the six feet of bone, brawn and muscle comprising "little Hal" and laughed. "At that I think you'd come rising through tons of rock and dirt," he observed whimsically. "But I don't think it 73

would be such a bad idea for us to explore as far as this much-talked-of mine, eh? I'll admit I'm rather curious to get a look at it—from the outside, that's all. Certainly Kip can't object to us exploring that much.”

“I don't see why he should. If he does get back sooner than he expected we'll be bound to meet him either way for he has to keep on this trail, both to and from Mr. Winters' place. Lee told me that. Pedro took the Gordon Highway because he didn't like our company, I guess. It's shorter, of course, but man alive, I don't see why he should be in such a rush this morning. Well, it isn't our funeral, huh, Unk?”

“Not exactly, yet I feel like one of the mourners, somehow. One can't eat and sleep in such close proximity to these conditions without feeling something of the ill winds. Still, I know I'll feel better when I hear that Richard's accomplished what he's going after in Helena today. He's going to try and raise enough money to keep Lee and himself from financial disaster. And as for Pedro, if he's done anything lawless, I hope that Richard will dismiss him.”

“If he can prove anything, you mean.”

74

“Yes, of course. But Kip seems to be on the trail of something, eh? He's suspicious of Pedro—that much is obvious. Perhaps he's more than suspicious,” Mr. Keen added.

“And how!” Hal exclaimed. “Well, let's go, huh?”

They strolled up the hard, barren trail and just before reaching the bend, saw a pair of antlers protrude from around the

jutting rocks. Then the head and shoulders of a young buck appeared, but in a flash withdrew.

“Ah, he’s seen us,” said Mr. Keen.

A shrill scream broke in the still air and as they reached the bend, a strange beating sound was heard among the distant rocks. Suddenly from atop the rotting beams that formed the entrance to the mine rose the dark body of an immense eagle. Its head, neck and tail gleamed whitely in the sunlight and in its claws something dangled loosely.

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The big bird screamed again in defiance of these human intruders and spread his wings, chattering and scolding as he rose above the trail. Hal laughed and shouted, and shook his fists in mirthful retaliation after the departing creature.

The bird circled above the mine, still scolding vociferously. At intervals he would stretch his ugly neck downward as if he had not quite made up his mind whether or not to leave. Hal made a playful pretense of running forward in chase and the bird, apparently frightened, soared upward with a terrific screech.

He had attained an altitude of perhaps thirty or more feet above the mine when he made a last graceful swoop out over the trail. Just as he turned, the dark object which he held in his claws was suddenly released and came sailing down through the air, landing noiselessly directly at the mine entrance.

Clearly, it was an accident on the eagle’s part for he hovered, screeching, above the two spectators for a second as if considering whether or not he ought to make a

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triumphant swoop and retrieve his property. But, evidently he thought better of the situation the next moment, and made a noisy exit out of the neighborhood.

“I’ll be doggoned!” Hal exclaimed in astonishment. “I bet he was thinking it over whether or not to put up a fight.”

“It certainly looked that way,” Mr. Keen agreed, watching the creature climbing the clear, sunlit atmosphere to his eerie.

“I’ve never heard an authentic story to the effect, but I could have sworn that that big fellow was contemplating warfare with us.”

“I wish he had,” said Hal enthusiastically. “I’d like nothing better than to grab that homely old beak of his. Well, Unk, let’s see what that old guy dropped.”

He had in his hand an aviator’s helmet when his uncle came up. He had turned it over and suddenly espied a name written in red ink upon the under side of the hat. Wide-eyed and dismayed he thrust it forward for his relative’s inspection.

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“Read that name and get the shivers, Unk!” he exclaimed with bated breath. “The goggles are gone—looks as if they’ve been torn off.”

“T. K. B-o-l-t-o-n,” Mr. Keen read slowly. “Why, great Scott, Hal, it’s *Bolton*! The one that went out last night, eh?”

“And how!” Hal returned, examining the helmet again. “Now, what do you suppose . . .”

“Hal, Hal!” cried Mr. Keen, pointing westward. “No, the sky I mean . . . *Look!*”

Hal looked. “Buzzards!” he said in a hushed voice, and staring at the swaying, circling creatures that dotted the western horizon. “Do you think they could be coming here? *Here?*”

“I’m not clairvoyant enough to tell you that,” answered his uncle. “Certainly they are headed in this direction, but as to where—we’ll soon know whether it’s here.”

78

Instinctively Hal looked about him, out over the beaten path, straight to the ledge. But there was nothing. And back he came, his brilliant eyes exploring every object along the ground from an ant hill to a pebble. Suddenly, he spied some tell-tale tracks, grasped his uncle by the arm and pointed them out.

“The eagle, Unk—its claws,” he said tersely. “He’s picked that helmet up here and no other place. Now wait a second . . .”

He dragged his uncle forcibly past each imprint that the big bird had made with his jagged claws. Each imprint led them nearer to the entrance of the mine. Presently they were standing before it, staring at the glistening object that stuck out from under a bit of trampled grass. Hal leaned down and picked it up.

“The goggles,” murmured Mr. Keen admiringly. “Hal, you’re right—absolutely right. I’d wager a good deal that there’s dirty work been going on around here. Here’s the

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goggles and helmet belonging to Bolton, but no sign of a wrecked plane or a dead man.”

“Even if these goggles fell off of Bolton in mid-air they couldn’t very well land so neat and fine under the entrance here, could they, Unk?”

“Decidedly not,” Mr. Keen answered with professional thoughtfulness. “Hal, this is queer business,” he added and instinctively glanced toward the sky.

The buzzards, perhaps ten in number, were now directly overhead. They circled about each other, swaying patiently under the noonday sky. After five minutes, it was borne in upon the watchers that the gruesome-looking birds had come to the end of their journey.

CHAPTER X

MR. WINTERS

“Unk, this is getting terrible,” said Hal with something akin to horror in his voice. “You’re not dead and neither am I—neither are we sick—*neither do we think we’re going to be sick!*”

“I never felt better in my life,” Mr. Keen observed gravely. He looked at his watch. “We have been here just a half hour and they haven’t veered out of that circle by a half inch in all this time. Now Hal, there is only one construction to put on it.”

“I know, Unk—it’s in that mine.” The young man shuddered and looked up the trail at the ill-fated place. “I’m game to go in and see—those birds aren’t here for nothing—just like you say.”

“Hal, I wouldn’t let you go in that evil place for anything. Let’s get around the bend and away from the very sight of it until I can think.”

81

They walked slowly and silently back to their temporary camp, leaving the buzzards to their patient vigil. Hal was warm and cold by turns, for though he could see no more of the mine the repulsive looking birds kept themselves well

within his range of vision.

“To begin with—we aren’t armed. Neither have we a flashlight,” said Mr. Keen, taking a seat upon the rock nearest him. “Also we have Richard’s warning that the place is unsafe. Buzzards or no buzzards, I cannot see the logic of risking one’s own life for that of life extinct. Now we’ll have to think of a better plan. At that, it may be a dead bear or wolf, Hal. Such things have happened. They might crawl in there to die.”

“All right—but, what of the helmet? And the goggles?” Hal’s voice rose. “You admitted . . .”

“I know,” Mr. Keen interposed. “But one can’t jump at circumstantial evidence. Now just have patience. Kip ought to be here soon.”

82

“Well, he better be or I’m going to ride and meet him,” Hal declared earnestly. “Doggone, you can’t wait and wait while those things keep sailing around so dizzy and crazy all the time. I wonder where Kip’s got those flashlights packed?”

“That’s what I don’t know. He’s such a meticulous sort of person and he’s got everything packed so carefully in that box, that I don’t like to disturb it. Besides, Hal, we’re not going in without Kip’s advice—he knows the place and we don’t.”

“Cave in or no cave in, we’ll have to go when he comes, so what’s the diff? Oh, all right, Unk, but if he isn’t here in a half hour, I’m going to chase up to Mr. Winters’ after him. Man alive, I’m beginning to feel like a buzzard myself.”

Hal was as good as his word, for he was in the saddle and on the trail within the half hour. He stared curiously at the mine as he passed but did not stop. Time was precious and he didn't like leaving his uncle alone for any length of time.

83

He spurred the horse on and wondered just how far was Mr. Winters' place. To be sure, he hadn't any idea as to whether there were any other occupied cabins along that trail or not. So far he had not even encountered a bird. It was a queer, lonely sort of trail—one was almost inclined to believe, with Lee, that it was forbidden territory, a trail where only the ghosts of men would tread.

Hal ridiculed this idea immediately and whistled gaily in time with the motion of the horse. Soon they came to a fork in the trail and with an exclamation of surprise, he reined in the animal and stared.

“Doggone!” he said aloud. “Here I'm stuck. And I don't even remember if Lee said anything about a fork or not. Well, it's eenie meenie for me.”

And with a whimsical expression he proceeded to count. His chance fell upon the trail to the right and he took it—for better or worse, he thought smiling. At worst, he'd find out within a mile and a half if he had taken the wrong trail. From Lee's description, the old man's place wasn't farther than that from the mine.

84

At about a half mile along the trail he suddenly heard the unmistakable sound of rushing water and presently he espied

a wide rustic bridge just ahead. The creek, it must be!

He stopped the horse in the center of the little bridge for a moment and looked down into the clear, sparkling stream. It was about twelve to fourteen feet where it divided the trail, swerved around into a narrow gorge and thence down into the hidden canyon below.

Hal could picture in his mind's eye the course it took from there, swerving and tumbling gradually until, when it reached the bend just below the mine, it was to the right of the trail. He could easily understand how Crosley's would-be successor had been trapped in the place fifty years before, if those rushing waters suddenly went wild.

The trail was winding and precipitous from there on and after ten minutes of steady climbing Hal found that it made an abrupt turn and widened. To his right, was the dam trying vainly to hold back the turbulent body of water known as Gordon's Creek. 85

The creek was in reality a fair-sized lake running south and southwest where it had cut a trough for itself under the frowning mountain wall. The dam, a crumbling looking old structure, had obviously been intended to hold back the spring freshets of a once placid pond.

Time and Nature had taken a hand in this matter, evidently—the creek had spread and eventually burrowed a trough in the very mountain side. It was a creek no longer; it was a mighty force that now tumbled over the weak and crumbling dam. Yet to the old timers it would ever remain Gordon's Creek.

Hal turned his attention to the trail and saw what he had been suspecting for the past few minutes. The trail ended on the banks of the creek. Forking from it, however, was a steep precipitous trail running due east.

“Doggone, I did take the wrong trail after all,” Hal admitted aloud. Then, thoughtfully: “Yep, that one going down there must be the one that Kip and Pedro take past the old man’s place and so to the highway. Well, here goes,” he said, spurring the horse. “Let’s step on it.”

Ten minutes later he saw a tiny column of smoke rising from among a small clump of trees. Soon he came to a cross trail and turned into it feeling instinctively that he was right at last. And he was.

The old man was sitting on a broken stool in front of his cabin, whittling. He looked up as Hal approached and there was neither surprise nor curiosity expressed upon his lined and weather-beaten countenance. He merely laid down the piece of wood on which he had been working and waited with an air of resignation.

Hal jumped to the ground briskly and walked straight up to him, holding his hand out with a smiling cordiality. “I’m Hal Keen, Mr. Winters—a guest at Mr. Holliday’s ranch. Have you seen anything of Kip? I left my uncle down below the mine and came up here looking for him about something very important.”

The old man shifted about on the stool and for a moment ran his long, terribly thin fingers through his white, flowing

beard. “Ye took the crik trail and kinda went out o’ yore way, eh?” he said in a deep, mournful voice. Then he fixed his blue, deep-set eyes on his visitor. “Kip and Pedro left here together ’bout twenty minutes back. Ye’ll find ’em thar when ye git back.”

Hal smiled into the old man’s searching eyes. “I must have just missed them then when I took the creek trail. Well, I’m glad that they’re on their way. My uncle won’t be alone so long.” Then, after a moment: “So Pedro went back too, huh?”

88

The old man nodded violently and his soft, white hair tumbled down over his wrinkled forehead. But he made no attempt to brush it back in place; he just continued to stare searchingly into Hal’s handsome face.

Suddenly his eyes flashed. “Pedro’s good boy,” he said with spirit. “Do you like him?”

Hal was taken back for a second. “I hardly know Pedro, Mr. Winters,” he said. “I’ve hardly heard him speak. Maybe a half dozen words he’s spoken to me—not more.”

“Well, he’s good boy,” Mr. Winters reiterated. “He’s good to me all the time.”

“Doggone, that’s fine,” said Hal sympathetically. “I’d be good to you, too, Mr. Winters,” he added with a smile.

A faint smile lighted the man’s sad, haunting eyes. “I can tell that ye told me the truth,” said he. “Most men lie. The government lied to me ’n’ told me my boy was killed

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in the war. He wasn't. The government still tells me lies 'cause they say my boy never sends me letters. He does, but they won't give them to me. But they can't lie always—some day I'll get a letter from him telling me he wasn't killed."

Hal was filled with pity for the poor, shabby old creature. "Perhaps my Uncle Denis can find out the truth for you, Mr. Winters," he said. "He works for the government in the Department of Justice. He's a secret service man."

The old man rose from the rickety stool. But for the weary stoop of his shoulders he would have stood even with the six-foot Hal.

"Could he find out when my boy will write to me?" he asked falteringly.

"He'll find out all he can, Mr. Winters—I promise you that."

"And you're telling the truth. I can tell. You look like my boy did when he went away. He was only seventeen, but as smart a youngster as ye ever did see. He had your color hair only it wasn't curly. A good boy he was and not afraid of anything—that's how you are. I can tell it." He sat down on the stool again as if the remembrance of his son wearied him. Then: "My other two boys were killed in the war too, but the government didn't lie about them. They sent their bodies home, so I knew it was true and I knew where they were. Then my wife died suddenly and the next day after, the government wrote me that my youngest boy was missin' in action . . . that's just what they said. But they never sent his body home like the others, so it wasn't the truth. I waited a

month an' more an' then I couldn' stand it no longer where I'd had so much trouble. I finally came here."

Hal shook his head, pityingly. "Did you write and tell the government when you came here?"

The old man nodded violently again. "I told 'em to tell my boy I'd wait for him out here where it wuz nice an' peaceful an' where I wouldn' meet any more people who lie to me that he wouldn' come back to his pap. That's why I never tell folks 'bout it—they jes look hopeless like an' say how it's a shame, but that he won't come back ever. I didn't tell the townfolks I wuz a-comin' here 'count o' that. I wuz jes disgusted with 'em. An' the government too, they didn' answer my letter, but some day they'll git troubled 'bout lyin' to me an' they'll tell my boy where I am an' to write to me."

91

"What's the name of the town you came from, Mr. Winters?" Hal asked casually.

The old man stared straight at him for quite a time before answering. "It's Oaktown, Pennsylvania," he said confidentially. "Only yesterday I told all this to Pedro, too, but like you I know he won't tell, Pedro tells the truth too."

If Hal had any opinions to the contrary, he kept them to himself. Only one thing mattered, the old man had confided the tragic story to him in full detail and he felt duly honored. And being the young man he was, he meant to treat this honor accordingly.

92

"Now I must go back, Mr. Winters," he said extending his hand. "I'll have to tell all this to my Uncle Denis so's he can

look it up when he goes back to Washington. Nobody else around here will learn it from us, you can be doggone sure of that! We're going to stay two weeks longer at Mr. Holliday's ranch, and I'll come up and visit you from time to time. May I?"

"Yes, yes," the old man replied with that faint smile in his eyes returning. "Ye're good comp'ny." Suddenly he grew thoughtful, then asked, "What fer did ye want Kip when ye cum here?"

"Well, to tell the truth," Hal said frankly, "there's something wrong at the mine, I guess. My uncle and I found an aviator's helmet with that Bolton fellow's name written inside. That's the fellow that's been missing since last night. We found it where an eagle dropped it in front of the mine."

93

The old man gave a start, then stood up. His eyes looked almost frightened. "What did ye find?" he asked. "What else did ye . . ."

"Oh, nothing yet," Hal interposed. "But a flock of buzzards came along while my uncle and I were waiting for Kip. And you know what buzzards usually mean. We were suspicious that there's something dead inside the mine. We didn't know where Kip put the flashlight, so we couldn't go in. Besides, Mr. Holliday told me the other day that the place wasn't safe. He said that he was afraid of a cave-in there some day."

"The only thing could happen to that mine is if the dam ever breaks," the old man said dry-lipped and in

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measured tones. “I wuz a miner back in Pennsylvania an’ I ought to know. I been in that there Bitter Mine lots o’ times an’ I seed it was safe ’ceptin’ a bad storm cum ’long an’ throws th’ water down there frum the dam. Mr. Holliday’s jest nervous these days I guess.”

“I guess so,” Hal agreed thoughtfully. “Anyhow I’m glad to know that it’s safe enough for us to explore without having a coupla tons of rock and dirt wabbling all around us. Well, so long, Mr. Winters.”

Hal looked back twice to find that the old man stood right in the same spot staring after him with that queer, frightened look in his eyes. The third time, when he was just about to descend out of view, the lonely looking old creature nodded, then turned and walked slowly into his cabin.

“That poor old fellow’s not crazy,” Hal mused, “it’s the war that was crazy. Man alive, he was just hit so hard by it, he can’t get over it, that’s all. I *would* be crazy if it had happened to me. Doggone . . .”

The thought came to him in such a flash that the force of it must have conveyed itself to the horse, for the animal stopped instantly. Hal gave his ear a playful twist and patted him on his soft, sleek neck.

95

“Go on, old boy,” he whispered to the animal. “I was just wondering why the old man looked so funny and frightened when I mentioned that helmet and the mine. What do you suppose he *could* know about it, huh?”

The beautiful animal gave a soft whinny in answer. And

though it conveyed nothing as thoughts go, Hal seemed not so perplexed as before.

CHAPTER XI

EVIDENCE

Hal rode up to their temporary camp to find Pedro in sole charge of the place. No sign was there of Kip nor of Mr. Keen. The buzzards, however, were still keeping vigil overhead.

“Where’s everybody?” Hal inquired as he tied up the horse.

Pedro got up from the rock on which he had been sitting, and stretched his short arms and legs. “Kip, he have quick errand to make back to ranch. He come back coupla hours, so I wait. When we come from old man’s nobody is here and we find this on rock,” he said holding up a note and indicating a can of beans that had weighted it down.

It was in Mr. Keen’s handwriting and was hastily written.

Just going for little climb. Will be back shortly.

97

Hal crumpled it up and smiled. “My uncle wrote it,” he explained. “He probably got tired of sitting around watching those doggone undertakers up there in the sky. I don’t blame him either.”

Pedro's face lost some of its impassivity instantly. "What you mean *undertakers*?" he inquired and looking overhead. Instantly he stepped back a few paces muttering to himself in Spanish. "What for they there?"

"That's what little Hal wants to know," said the young man. He eyed Pedro closely. "Didn't you and Kip see them up there when you came along?"

"First time I see them is now," the little man answered quickly. "Kip he too excited to see them either. You not out walking with your uncle too?"

"No, I rode up to Mr. Winters' place after him, but I got mixed up at the fork and took the creek trail. Mr. Winters told me that you both started back here together. So I came. Do you mean to tell me that Kip didn't notice that one of the horses was gone?"

98

"He not notice nothing. He think you and Mr. Keen go for little walk so he tell me to tell you he back in coupla hours." Pedro let his gaze wander again to the waiting birds.

Hal suddenly noticed a sleek brown mare grazing with the other two horses and the mule. "Did you ride here on her?" he asked pointing to the mare.

Pedro nodded tight-lipped.

"I thought I saw you riding away from the corral on a piebald," said Hal simply. "You were leading another horse too, weren't you?"

“Piebald horse belongs to old man. He present from Mr. Holliday one Christmas,” the little man explained, staring at his interrogator with unblinking eyes. “I borrow piebald from old man other night when mare is lame.”

“I see—you took him back, huh? Well . . .”

99

“Here I am,” Mr. Keen’s voice interposed as he appeared from around the trees. “Ah, so you’re here too, Pedro, eh?”

Pedro grunted and Hal explained the situation. “I was afraid you got lost in the rocks somewhere.”

Mr. Keen laughed. “Not I,” he said. “I just wanted to see how high I could climb without getting tired. On one of those higher levels I found a nice shady spot under a projecting rock and I thought I was right in sight of this trail. I had an idea that when I saw you boys coming along I’d climb on down. But I waited and then decided it wasn’t the same trail.”

“Rocks below look like trail on higher levels sometimes,” Pedro explained with more graciousness than they had ever seen him display.

“Most likely,” said Mr. Keen heartily. He glanced significantly at his nephew, then looked heavenward.

Hal followed his uncle’s gaze and started with surprise.

100

“Buzzards, he gone, eh?” Pedro said complacently.

“That’s funny, huh?” Hal said turning to his uncle, and giving him a sly wink. “Let’s take a walk up to the mine and see

what the dickens they were after.”

“Not a bad idea,” Mr. Keen said innocently. “How would you like to let us take a peek just inside that mine, eh, Pedro?”

“Nothing but slippery and dirt in mine,” Pedro answered almost ingratiatingly. “Buzzards, he after dead bear or wolf maybe.”

“Yes, but they’re not after anything now,” said Mr. Keen. “We just want a peek in there anyhow, Pedro.”

Pedro shrugged his shoulders, but started on ahead to the bend. His very gait bespoke unwillingness.

“What about a flashlight?” Hal asked. He and his uncle had not moved away from the rock.

“Yes, that’s so—what about a light?” Mr. Keen asked also.

101

“I got enough big flashlight,” Pedro answered over his shoulder.

“Come on, Unk,” Hal whispered. “Do you notice—*he’s not crazy about going!*”

“*Sh, Hal!* He’ll hear us. Don’t reveal that we’ve found a thing. I’ve got the goggles and the helmet in my grip and the key’s in my pocket. Just use your eyes and act as innocent as you know how.”

Hal hurried on ahead of his uncle and caught up to Pedro in a

few strides. The little man managed to smile. “You walk mile with two steps, eh? Such long legs cover whole mountain.”

Hal was about to make a reply to this when the sound of racing hoof beats was heard. Pedro stopped short and listened. Hal ran ahead, however, and didn’t stop until he reached the bend.

A rider and horse were just disappearing around the next turn in the trail and going at a terrific speed. Hal fairly gulped and rubbed his eyes as if to clear from his mind what he was certain could be nothing short of a nightmare. But no, he was certain that that flashing glimpse was a daytime reality.

102

Who else but old Mr. Winters had flowing white hair and owned a piebald horse? Hal asked this of Pedro.

“What for old man want to ride fast, eh?” the little man returned evasively. “He too old to run fast on horse!” he added stolidly.

“Are you sure it was *he*, Hal?” Mr. Keen asked skeptically.

“It was a piebald horse—I could swear to that. And I’m certain I got a glimpse of white hair. Doggone, I’ve got pretty good eyesight and I’m not color blind. I know white when I see it!”

“But you say old man nice and friendly to you, huh?” Pedro asked with a little sarcasm. “What for would he run from you now, eh?”

Hal could not answer that question. There wasn't any answer to it. He could only follow Pedro along to the mine feeling puzzled and beaten. And when he and his uncle saw the unmistakable footprints of a man and a horse running to and from the mine entrance, he was perplexed to the point of anger.

CHAPTER XII

A HUNCH

“Now you have peek you see nothing is dead here,” Pedro said, holding the flashlight in such a way that his face was almost in the shadow. “We look back to the shaft; we look here.” He shrugged his shoulders, adding, “*Nothing!* Probabl’ wolf carcass or bear carcass. Live wolf or live bear come and drag away. Birds go way.”

“Yeah,” Hal snorted disgustedly. “Maybe the dead wolf or the dead bear dragged their own carcass away. It seems to me that almost any kind of a miracle can happen on Bitter Trail, eh, Unk? Now you see a piebald horse and a white-haired horseman and now you don’t! Maybe it’s the atmosphere. Oh, well, come on!”

Pedro walked back rapidly, leaving Hal and his uncle to stroll along by themselves. As soon as the little man had put a safe distance between them, Hal leaned over and whispered to his uncle, excitedly.

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“Did you see it, Unk?” he asked breathlessly.

“Those footprints? Certainly.”

“No, that long strip of fresh looking earth. Pedro didn’t keep

the light going anywhere near it so I had to examine it as best I could in the shadow. I looked at it while you and he were talking. It was fresh earth and looked as if it had been shoved back there in a hurry, believe me. I stuck my foot down in it as far as I could and before I touched bottom I was standing in a hollow that reached to the calf of my leg.”

“Nothing you touched, was there?”

“No. I swung my foot back and forth and it was all hollow—about six feet long I bet and I don’t know how many feet wide. I didn’t have a chance to find out. Pedro and you started toward me. Whatever was in it has been taken out. Now, what footprints were you talking about before?”

“They looked like those of a wolf,” answered Mr. Keen.

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“They were too small for a bear, certainly. And it looked to me as if the animal had been dragging something over that soft, slippery bed almost out to the entrance.”

“Whew! Didn’t I tell you? Those doggone buzzards weren’t fox-trotting around here just to show us some fancy flying. Could a wolf dig up some . . . something that was buried in a place like that?”

“If it’s buried near enough the surface for them to catch the scent of it. Let’s see—you say it was hollow up to about your calf, eh? Well, that’s three or a little more feet with a little fellow like you,” he said whimsically. “And that’s not very deep for a lasting purpose. Certainly, it’s not too deep for a wolf, or I might even suggest a coyote.”

“And you noticed all that without Pedro getting wise to it,”

Hal said admiringly. “Unk, you’re all to the mustard.”

“You didn’t do so badly yourself, Hal. I missed that prize exhibit entirely. And by that same token, here’s another little token I picked up on our way in—it was lying just inside the entrance.”

107

Hal took the torn half of a man’s soft collar out of his uncle’s hand. It was hard to believe that it had once been a well-laundered bit of man’s apparel, so covered was it with slime and dirt. And on the half of the muslin lining, the numerals 14½, were inscribed.

“Now let me have it before we reach Pedro’s roving gaze,” Mr. Keen said with lowered voice. “I’m going to watch my chance and pack it away with our other exhibits.”

“Unk,” Hal whispered breathlessly, “we’ve got to get up here somehow, some day soon, and give that dirty old mine the once over. And we’ve got to see that Major Denton when we get back—he ought to know that we’ve at least found Bolton’s helmet. And we ought to do everything *alone!*”

“Absolutely, Hal. And not a word to Pedro nor to that old man if you encounter him before this week-end trip is over. You’ve had to convince me that something foul is in the air up here—you’ve got the instincts of a true sleuth, my boy.”

108

“Well, it wasn’t instinct that guessed at that piebald horse before, I know that. It was just plain good eyesight. But I’ll be doggone if I can figure the thing out.”

Mr. Keen smiled. “You’ll figure it out, don’t worry. Anybody who can get on the trail of something as quickly as you have needn’t worry about the result. One and one will never make anything else but two.”

Hal grinned. “That’s what you say, but believe me, Unk, I’ve got a hunch that the answer to this is going to be two and a half. Little Hal represents the half. Half crazy at the finish.”

And with that remark they reached Pedro—and silence.

CHAPTER XIII

DEDUCTION

Kip returned from his errand to the ranch smiling but silent and immediately prepared to move on. He spoke to Pedro once or twice curtly, almost contemptuously, and commanded him to accompany them.

That Pedro complied was a source of wonder to Hal and his uncle for the little fellow's glances at the smiling Kip were nothing if not dangerous. And in this spirit they climbed toward the dying sun, stopping at last in a sheltered spot on one of the higher levels. Near by a spring bubbled through the rocks and into a trough running under the trail.

Hal and his uncle offered to go and search for firewood while Pedro and Kip were left to set up camp. Crosley Range is lacking in timber and firewood, therefore, is not plentiful, especially on the higher levels. Little else but a thin covering of green mold seems to thrive on its rocky bosom.

110

About a half mile from where they had set up camp, Hal sat down on the hard dry ground and took out of his pocket a little note-book. He made a few notations in it with his fountain pen, then put it back in its place.

Mr. Keen, armed with wood, looked on inquiringly. "Diary?"

he questioned curiously.

“Nope,” Hal grinned whimsically. “Memory. Whatever I’m afraid of forgetting, I’ve jotted down in that book. Especially the things that have been said, done and seen since we’ve come to visit the Comet X-1 Ranch. If anything comes of all this doggone mystery—I’ll have something to go by.”

Mr. Keen smiled and put down the wood. “Now that’s good sense, Hal. And while we’re on the subject, I want to tell you something. I was only about seven or eight feet behind those trees below when Kip and Pedro came along. I had been sitting up on those rocks where I could see the trail plainly way up above the mine. And I saw them as soon as they made that turn. Then I climbed on down and hid behind the trees just to hear what they would have to say to each other when they thought no one was around.”

111

“What about the note?”

“Oh, I had left that for you originally, in the event that you came back first. Naturally, I didn’t know what to make of it when I saw them returning without you.”

“Well, what did they say?”

“They had been quarreling pretty much before they came up, I guess. A whole lot had been said that I’d have given much to hear—I’ll wager that. Kip seemed terribly excited and upset—I guess that’s why he didn’t notice those buzzards. And when they dismounted here and had read the note, Kip told Pedro to tell us he was going to the ranch on an errand and that he’d be back in a couple of hours or as soon as

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possible. Then Kip got on his horse and gave the little fellow a terrible look and said, ‘Remember *you*, no more o’ these here doin’s! Ain’t you got better sense than tuh run yore neck right into trouble? Th’ boss cain’t help yuh if yuh keep a-goin’ on this-a-way, ’n’ neither kin I. What’s more, *I won’t!*’”

“And what did Pedro say?” Hal asked rising from the ground.

“He started to say a whole lot from the way he clenched his fists,” Mr. Keen answered. “But Kip cut it all short, with the warning, ‘Remember, *you*.’ Then he rode away and left Pedro shouting and muttering in Spanish and making malevolent gestures after him. I’d give anything to know what he was saying—can you speak or understand Spanish, Hal?”

“Sure,” Hal grinned mischievously, “high school Spanish. I speak and understand *adiós* fine!”

Mr. Keen laughed. “That won’t help except when it comes to *adiós*, will it? Well, it can’t be helped, but there’s one thing certain—Kip is trying to make a good citizen out of a lawless half-breed and it can’t be done I’m afraid. I must speak to Richard as soon as we get back—this kind of thing can’t go on. If the fellow has committed a crime he ought to be punished for it. And it looks as if Kip and Richard know Pedro’s weak points or suspect them anyway.”

113

“I’ll say it does!” Hal exclaimed thoughtfully. “The trouble, Unk, is that we’re both suspecting what kind of a crime has been committed, but neither one of us seems to be able to say what it is.”

“Exactly,” Mr. Keen agreed. “But then any delicate-minded

person would do the same, Hal, until they have conclusive evidence. And we haven't had anything like that. We've found a torn half of a man's soft collar, there was that incident in the mine and your imagined glimpse of Mr. Winters on the piebald. All half-clues, my boy—clues that would be laughed down in court. That goes for the buzzards, too. There's always something dying or dead in vast mountain wastes like these that vultures wait for. I know it seemed pretty obvious in this case, but it still remains a half-clue."

"You wouldn't call Bolton's helmet and goggles a half-clue, would you?" Hal countered. "Man alive, it seems to me that that's as plain as the nose on your face."

114

Mr. Keen smiled. "Now, you've said something interesting, Hal—I don't mean about the nose—I mean about the helmet. There's a clue for you. But to make it bear weight, we've got to find some trace of the missing plane, at least. And there hasn't been a sign of any. I've kept on the lookout ever since we left the house this morning."

"So have I." Hal helped his uncle pick up the wood and they started back. "And listen, Unk," he said, "it's darn funny that we can't even find the trace of a plane. Bolton's helmet proves that he must have come down somewhere in the neighborhood."

"Oh, I strongly suspect foul play, my boy. But the question is, how, where and why?"

115

Hal stumbled over a small rock in his path but took no notice of it whatsoever. His eyes flashed with excitement. "I'll tell

you what I've figured out," he said in hushed tones. "Collins was lost on a moonless, foggy night. So was Bolton, huh? All right. And both fellows were known to have carried valuable mail. Neither of the planes or part of 'em are lying anywhere around this range that we can see or that the searchers can see. Doggone, I should think that Major Denton over at the airport could figure out that there's something phoney in just that much. Besides there have been mail planes leaving that field every night since Collins has been lost and since Bolton's been lost."

"That's clever deduction, Hal," said his uncle. "I'm really proud of you."

"It's just one and one adding up two, that's all," Hal said, ignoring the compliment. "And I told you this afternoon that it'll be more than two—it'll be two and a half. Well . . ."

116

"Where are you going to get the other half to figure on?" Mr. Keen interposed humorously.

Hal smiled. "The next foggy night. And by that I don't mean land fog—I mean sky fog. Low lying ones—that's how they announce it over the radio, don't they? Well, all airmen know beforehand what their weather is going to be. Anybody that listens to the radio weather news knows too. So I've figured that there's somebody who takes advantage of those radio reports and does some fancy fog work on his own hook."

"Hal, you little rascal, I'm completely floored. That's deduction that I would never have worked out. You've shown

me something and I think I follow you perfectly.”

“Well, Unk, you’d have to be way ahead of me to know what little Hal’s got in his noodle just now. Just kind of let me have the chance to work this out alone, huh? Let’s keep it to ourselves and see if I can do it.”

117

Mr. Keen extended his hand. “That’s a go, Hal. Mum’s the word, until you can show me conclusive evidence. But you must remember, of course, that this has developed into a government matter and as its representative, it’s my duty not to let time slip through my fingers. How long a time do you want?”

“Just until the next foggy night, that’s all. And in this range, from what Lee’s told me, they come frequently.”

They closed the matter with a hearty handshake and hurried back to camp.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE CREEK YIELDS . . .

Late Saturday afternoon they pitched their camp alongside of Gordon's Creek. It was upon Kip's advice for Hal and his uncle were anxious to take back a fair-sized catch of trout, and the merits of the trout caught in the creek were known near and wide.

The sun lingered coquettishly above the crest of the mountain and on a rock rising out of the clear water a small group of wild ducks squawked with raucous voices. Now and then, one of them, a little more aggressive than the rest, would fly wildly about the creek scolding the intruders in true duck fashion.

Hal and his uncle sat on the soft clay bank, legs dangling awkwardly above the surface of the water. Kip and Pedro had started supper, each one going silently about his task, albeit Kip's smile was again in evidence.

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He was very much amused at the duck's antics and came down to the bank to watch it closer. "Yore duck friend is a-darin' yuh tuh take a pop at him, I guess."

"That's just it—he knows we won't," said Hal, feeling a tug at his line and drawing it in. "He's just showing off."

“He seems to be interested in something there in the center,” Mr. Keen said, shading his eyes from the glaring sunlight. “Look, boys, they all seem to be interested. What . . .”

Hal unhooked his catch, threw it in the basket beside him and stood up. His height stood him in good stead on that occasion for he saw immediately what was so interesting the ducks.

“*Man alive!*” he cried, horrified. “*It’s a man!*”

Mr. Keen jumped up, Kip stood on tiptoe, his face quite grave, and Pedro dropped the frying pan which he held in his hand. His diminutive size prevented him from seeing what the others were seeing. 120

“You mean you see man dead?” he asked in a queer strained voice.

“Yes,” Kip answered harshly. “That’s what we see.”

“It’s awful,” Hal said in little more than a whisper. “He looks as if he . . . wait . . . he’s being carried along to the dam. Yes . . . listen, we can run down to the bridge and stop it! Come on!”

Hal was off with Pedro at his heels. Kip managed to keep next in line, but Mr. Keen lagged far in the rear. It had been a long time since he had even hurried. Nevertheless, a shout from his nephew seemed to spur him on and when they reached the bridge he was only a few yards from it.

They stood by, seeming helpless and bewildered, while the efficient Hal kicked off his shoes vigorously. “Keep watch, all

of you, because when it comes down—*it comes down!*”

“Yo’re takin’ a chance, young feller,” Kip warned him. “Yuh don’t know th’ force o’ that water—yuh’ll be likely pushed ’long with it an’ find yoreself goin’ down through th’ gorge lickety-split.”

121

“Hal,” Mr. Keen pleaded, “Kip ought to know. Don’t risk your life for it, please!”

“Anyhow it won’t be lost,” said Kip. “In less than two hours it’ll be down in th’ basin—two miles below th’ ranch. We kin get it there an’ no harm done.”

Hal was to see the logic of this when the roaring falls emptied their grotesque looking burden into the rushing stream running under the bridge. The force of the water swept this once human thing along like a wisp of straw.

As it was hurtled along toward the bridge Hal let himself be guided by Kip’s advice and stayed with the others waiting to see whose face this once had been. No one spoke.

Suddenly the turbulent stream tossed the ill-fated creature about and as it was flung along under the bridge it came out face upturned to the dying sun. Hal’s eyes clouded and Pedro groaned audibly, his face a livid hue.

122

Kip shook his head. “Wa’al, that’s too bad, ain’t it!”

Pedro grasped the rustic rail as if for support. His eyes were wild and staring as he looked at his fellow-employee. “*Collins!*” he shrieked in awful tones. “*It’s Collins feller!*” He

turned away and ran back toward the camp shrieking and muttering in Spanish.

“Kip,” said Mr. Keen abruptly, “there’s been foul play with that poor dead boy. What do you suppose Pedro knows about Collins’ death, eh? No innocent looking bystander ever carried on in that manner. He’s got something on his mind.”

“Yuh took th’ words out o’ my mouth, guv’nor,” said Kip, staring after the departing figure of Pedro. “Looks kinda like he *has* got somethin’ on his mind.”

“Well, you get on back to the ranch as quickly as you can,” Mr. Keen said with true professional authority.

123

“Get the boys down to that basin with plenty of lights. It will be pretty dark by the time they get there. Then phone the airport and tell Major Denton that you’ve identified Collins—you did identify him, didn’t you?”

“After Pedro screeched ’bout it, I did,” Kip admitted thoughtfully. “I wa’n’t sure at first—he wuz so kinda disfigured. Wa’al, then I’ll be going, huh?”

“Yes, and I’d take Pedro with me if I were you,” said Mr. Keen. “It seems to me he ought to be kept under surveillance until we can get out a warrant for his arrest. The man’s guilty as sure as I’m alive.”

“Sure looks that way, guv’nor,” Kip agreed. “He’s been givin’ the boss an’ me a pow’ful lot o’ worry these last few days.”

As they hurried back along the trail they heard the stamping of a horse. Suddenly Pedro appeared riding a

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mare and came toward them seeming to be as highly agitated as before. His big black eyes in their dilated condition looked like deep, haunted caverns and the pallor under his swarthy skin gave him a peculiar, sickly look.

“*I go!*” he said waving his hands frantically. “I can’t stand no more. *I go!*” He spurred his horse and rushed past them with loud cries.

“Hurry!” cried Mr. Keen. “Get your horse, Kip. Don’t let him go whatever you do—you know the trail better than Hal, so go! We’ll clear up the place and get down sometime tonight.”

Hal propped himself against the mule and listened until he heard Kip’s horse rush over the bridge. Then he ran his fingers through his bright hair, withdrew them and drummed upon his forehead.

“Why so apathetic all of a sudden?” Mr. Keen asked, going ahead and picking up camp. “Why don’t you say something—*do something?*”

“Unk, I got a pile on my mind,” Hal answered comically. “I’m thinking so much that I can’t say a word—you know it? For instance, I can’t get all bothered about Pedro until I figure something else out.”

125

“What are you driving at, Hal?” his uncle asked irritably. “Pedro’s actions were a guilty man’s actions, you can’t deny that. He as good as confessed . . .”

“But he just didn’t confess,” Hal reminded his relative with spirit. “Oh, he’s got reason to be scared stiff about it and I

guess he knows more than he'd like to, but that doesn't tell the whole story."

"Hal, you're impossible."

"I'm not—I'm just a cautious gink. Unk, it was Collins that was buried in that mine; Some kind of an animal succeeded in digging part of that dirt away from the body. Maybe it even succeeded in dragging poor Collins out—it's hard to tell. Anyhow, those birds were there waiting for a good reason. Now this is where old Mr. Winters comes into this mess."

"For heaven's sake, *how?*"

126

"He's got a queer notion about Pedro!—I told you all that before. And I told you how frightened he acted when I told him about the buzzards up over the mine."

"Still, I don't see . . ."

"I do see," Hal interposed smilingly. "I see how Mr. Winters could have followed behind me, dashed into the mine and dragged Collins out, then brought him up here to the creek. Those buzzards flew off at the same time that I got the speedy look at the piebald horse and the white hair. Why couldn't Mr. Winters have a finger in the pie too? From his jumpy actions I wouldn't say that he seemed exactly ignorant of the way things stood."

Mr. Keen stood looking at his nephew thoughtfully. "I'll admit you're full of surprises, Hal. But what you say is not probable."

“But doggone, it’s possible!” Hal exclaimed and, strolling away from the mule, he began kicking at the dying fire and stirring it to life. “Don’t put away our eats and things, Unk, I’m going to eat.”

“But we’ve no time to lose, Hal!”

Hal grinned perversely. “We’ve got all night. Man alive, every cowpuncher on the Comet X-1 Ranch will be down at the basin. And Kip will probably keep a pretty good eye on Pedro. So what’s the rush, huh? Anyhow, let’s clean the fish and eat. Doggone, I was never so keyed up about anything as I am with this mess. I could eat a house and lot.”

Mr. Keen looked at his nephew and smiled. “You win, my boy,” he said. “I’ll clean the fish if you fry it.”

“Clean all we’ve caught, Unk—I’m trying to figure out whether Collins wore Bolton’s helmet on his last trip and what size collar he wore.”

“That’s so, I’d almost forgotten about poor Bolton for the minute,” Mr. Keen said. “I wonder where he is!”

“Maybe where the other half of the collar is. Collins had one on, such as it was, and a tie. Didn’t you notice—it was a red stripe and floated right on top of the water?”

“Now that you speak of it, I remember. It is positively uncanny, Hal, finding the apparel of one man and discovering the body of another.”

“Believe me, it’s the best cross-word puzzle I’ve ever worked

on,” said Hal thoughtfully. “Come on, Unk—everything’s ready.”

CHAPTER XV

SUSPENSE

Lights gleamed in the windows of the house from cellar to garret. The vast living room with its bright rugs and colorful Indian note was as orderly as ever, yet despite this, Hal and his uncle felt chaos in the very atmosphere.

Mr. Holliday was pacing up and down as they entered, his face drawn and weary. “Kip phoned me and told me,” he explained. “I returned not twenty minutes ago. It’s too terrible.”

“Did he tell you about Pedro?” Mr. Keen inquired immediately.

“Yes, and what’s worse, Pedro escaped him,” the ranchman answered despairingly. “He said there wasn’t time to hunt for him, and of course, there wasn’t.”

“What about Collins, Mr. Holliday?” Hal asked, curling himself up in one of the big chairs.

130

“Kip just phoned me from the station that they found him all right. Major Denton’s there and they were to start back for the airport. Kip’s going to spend the night over there.” Then he suddenly looked up and around the room: “Where’s Lee?”

“*Lee?*” Hal repeated.

“Yes, didn’t she come in with you?”

“Why, Richard . . .” began Mr. Keen. “Why, isn’t Lee still in Butte?”

Mr. Holliday sank down on the nearest chair, wearily. “As if I haven’t enough without that child worrying me now!” he moaned. “Listen, Denis, Lee came back from Butte late this afternoon. She had to cut her visit short because her school chum’s small sister was taken down with measles and Lee had to get out quickly before they were quarantined. The moment she came home she told Cook all about it and wanted to know where was everybody. Here’s Cook now, let her tell you.”

Cook stood in the doorway, the picture of dismay. Her round good-natured Irish countenance was drawn and puckered with worry. “Shure, an’ I couldn’ help hearin’ you, Mr. Holliday, an’ if I had a known that the little imp (she that I’ve seen toddlin’ aroun’ since she wuz knee high to a grasshopper) wuz in danger of not meetin’ the young gentleman and his uncle, I wouldn’ hev told her where they were.”

131

“Did she start out to try and find us?” Hal asked anxiously.

“And that she did, sir,” answered the good woman. “Shure, she said she couldn’ stand it alone in the house over Sunday and so she wuz bound to git on that fine big black mare that her daddy bought her last Christmas and start up the Bitter Trail after yez. She thought like I did, that that scamp Pedro didn’ go with yez an’ she wuz countin’ on sleepin’ on the

extra cot under the trees, the night wuz that warm. Them's her words, sir. She changed to her ridin' things and wuz off like a streak."

"Denis, you came down the Bitter Trail, didn't you?" Mr. Holliday asked.

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"Of course," Mr. Keen answered. "We didn't even hear another horse anywhere."

"She must have been crazy to climb the trail at that time of the afternoon, not knowing exactly where you were," Mr. Holliday said wearily.

"An' shure she said she guessed they'd be up at the dam, sir," said Cook, appealingly. "She said she heard the young gentleman say the other day that he'd like some trout to bring home when he went campin' an' she guessed that the dam wuz jest the place that Kip would take them if they were thinkin' o' comin' home the morrow."

"Then where in heaven's name can she be?" Mr. Holliday asked, looking from one to the other. "She knows those mountains like a book . . . it can't be that she's lost. Not that . . . not . . ."

"I'll go after her," said Hal, jumping up from his chair.

"I know that trail now. And if it's true that she was bound for the dam, why maybe she got mixed up there at the fork like I did yesterday on my way to Mr. Winters. Even if she does know the trail, things look mighty different in the dark. I've got a flashlight in my pocket and I'm all set."

133

“An’ shure ye better wear a raincoat, sir,” said Cook solicitously, “it’s started to rain, sir. I’ll give ye Miss Lee’s slicker and hat this minit.”

“And find her, Hal, but don’t do anything foolish,” Mr. Holliday said trying to smile. “Don’t come home with any bumps on that fiery head of yours,” he added.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Hal promised. “I’ll be too tired to do anything but make sure that I find Lee and bring her home safe and sound.”

Mr. Keen helped Hal into the saddle, gave him an affectionate slap on the thigh, and pushed something bulky into the young man’s pocket. “It’s a gun, my boy,” he explained in an undertone. “I don’t say that you’ll have to use it—I hope you won’t, but you can’t tell. Something tells me that Lee hasn’t lost her way—something tells me she’s met up with something she wasn’t expecting.”

134

“Exactly the hunch that I’ve got, Unk,” Hal said with a discreet look over at the veranda where Mr. Holliday was pacing back and forth. “She must have been on her way up when we were standing on the bridge watching poor Collins go past.”

“Just about the time when Pedro was on his way,” Mr. Keen whispered. “Do you realize that? He got away from Kip, but perhaps Lee didn’t get away from him.”

Hal looked off into the rainy night as if he hadn’t heard. Then he took the gun out of his pocket. “I’ve never fired one of these doggone things in my life, not even a popgun. Do I

press the trigger just like this?”

Mr. Keen glanced furtively toward the veranda, but was satisfied that his host had not heard. He then proceeded to show his nephew how to use the trigger. “Be sure you see your man distinctly before you pull it,” he explained. “And aim for one of his legs—that’s the safest. You incapacitate him without really injuring him. Let’s hope you bring Pedro home with you, too.”

135

“If I do, I won’t have to shoot him to do it,” Hal grinned. “What do you want to bet?” he asked, slapping his horse. “Giddap, brother!”

“What do you mean—*bet*?” Mr. Keen asked, puzzled.

“You’d be surprised, Unk,” Hal said perversely, and with a hearty laugh rose in the saddle and waved good-bye.

The next moment the darkness had closed about him and he was gone.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE RIDERLESS MARE

Driving wind and rain lashed against Hal's face and impeded his progress until after he was on the trail and under the protection of the high mountain wall. All creatures of the night were sheltered and secure—there wasn't a sound, save the moaning voice of the storm.

But Hal didn't mind. In point of fact, he seemed oblivious of it all, being intent upon his own thoughts. The rhythmic beat of the horse's hoofs were a perfect accompaniment.

He thought of many reasons that would have kept Lee from returning. Her horse might have gone lame. The eagle? No. He dismissed that thought, realizing that the eagle is seldom seen once the sun drops back into the western sky. Somehow he could not think as did his uncle that Pedro would wilfully hurt the girl—the little fellow had not made that impression upon him. Indeed he had many half-formed ideas concerning the half-breed that had not been expressed even to himself.

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He was using the flashlight constantly, although the horse seemed not to need any guidance up the trail. He trotted when it was safe and walked carefully when it was otherwise. It was only the sharp turns that Hal feared.

At last they left the deep silence of the forest, turning out on the main Bitter Root Trail. The rain lashed him again, but Hal preferred it to the tomblike atmosphere that prevailed on the timber trail. One did not feel the presence of furtive ghostly shapes behind rocks as one did behind trees. And yet the big wind-formed rocks along Bitter Root offered more than adequate shelter to any spectral train so inclined.

The big U-shaped wind gaps looked like ghostly sentinels on watch over the rugged slopes of the range. 138
And when a flash of lightning lighted the western sky, they seemed to scowl fiercely down upon Hal. Once, during one of these displays, the light played upon a glacial trough almost hidden in the canyon opposite, making it look like some mammoth prehistoric monster suddenly come to life.

“This isn’t exactly a cheerful place to be in a storm,” Hal said whimsically. “I can think of places much more cheerful. It makes a fellow think of ghosts and things whether he wants to or not. Doggone!”

At this juncture he became aware of the steady beat of another horse’s hoofs upon the lonely trail. He stopped the stallion and listened, eagerly. Gradually the sound came louder and nearer, louder and nearer. . . .

Hal reined the stallion in until they were well off the trail and almost hidden among the great bare rocks. He wasn’t taking any risks, he told himself. He would be prepared. And yet—“It must be Lee,” he murmured aloud. “Shall I call? No, don’t be a fool.” 139

Suddenly he bethought himself of a better way and extinguished the light. Then without a sound he dismounted, backed the horse a little further in among the rocks and crept out nearer the trail.

It was terribly dark and time and again Hal was tempted to use the light. He knew that the time to act would be when the approaching animal rounded the nearest bend. Yet, in the dark he could not be sure of just how he would know that. He would have to go by instinct, he decided.

Nearer and nearer came the beats, until during a lull in the wind, he distinctly heard the animal stumble over a bit of gravel that the storm had dislodged from the rain-soaked trail. Then a deer loped out of the darkness and swept past the waiting young man like a passing breeze. Hal saw the glitter of its beautiful eyes and the outline of its antlers, but that was all.

“That shows how dark it is,” he thought with beating heart. “I could hardly see its body and yet it passed so close I could feel its breath.”

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He shivered a little, but from the element of suspense and not from fear. He wanted it to be Lee and yet he would have welcomed the sudden exposé of the dark mystery that had enveloped the entire vicinity of Gordon’s Creek. And nearer and nearer came the horse.

Hal became aware of the peculiarity suddenly. Any experienced horseman can detect an irregularity in an approaching horse if he be a careful listener. A well-guided

horse walks regularly and trots regularly with distinctly measured beats. But a poorly guided one or one not guided at all is apt to run amuck, with its hoof beats sounding ill-measured and harsh upon the listener's ear.

And so when Hal leaped from his hiding place into the path of the animal he was not surprised to find that it was riderless.

He brought the horse to a full-stop, got it well under control and breathed more freely than he had for the past five minutes. Then, rubbing its nose, he led it off the trail and over where his own horse was patiently waiting.

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The flashlight gleamed warm and friendly once more. Hal played it over the animal's beautiful glistening coat, scrutinizing it closely. Then he frowned and bit his under lip, while a cold fear slowly gripped him.

“The big, black mare,” he said awed, and wondering. “*Lee's horse!*”

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CHAPTER XVII

FACE TO FACE

It took him almost two minutes to decide what to do about the mare. She would get back to the ranch safely, alone. Of that much he was certain. But Hal could readily foresee what a result that would have at the Comet X-1 Ranch. Mr. Holliday would jump at only one conclusion. The better way would be to take the horse along.

The storm grew in intensity with each minute, and the wind, though warm, moaned weirdly up and down the slopes and hidden canyons with all the velocity of a winter's gale. Up on one of the higher levels a lynx cried, and at intervals the sound was answered by other cries and moans of these hidden night creatures.

Hal had a difficult time of it, guiding his own stallion along the narrow trail and keeping the mare in check besides. Their progress was slow, for he had to keep a continual watch and was ever afraid that perhaps he had passed Lee's inert form somewhere, despite his vigilance.

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He fully believed that some terrible calamity had befallen her. Every step of the way he visualized her as lying unconscious and bleeding along the trail. Just how this would have happened to her he could not tell.

It was after midnight when Hal started and he had been gone about two hours when he heard the familiar roaring noise of the falls just below the mine. There was something comforting in hearing it then—something almost friendly after the lonely climb he had made. Truly, it sounded like the voice of a friend.

Soon he came to the mine, looking grim and forbidding under the powerful rays of his light. The rotting beams over the entrance looked distorted and strange and seemed to threaten a violent collapse with every gust of wind sweeping past.

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Hal dismounted and walked over to the entrance, every muscle in his body taut. His heart beat frantically, but he nerved himself to the task of peering into the entrance and shouting noisily.

“*Anybody here?*” he called. “*Lee? Lee!*”

He walked in boldly, though the sight of the slimy, evil looking place sickened him. No light, however bright, could lift the gloom from it. Along the passageway were great beads of sweat glistening in the dazzling rays. Clumps of mold were everywhere and at the back of the cavern he could see the shaft where there seemed to be a ladder.

He moved on with that as his objective. He far from welcomed a trip into the bowels of the earth at that hour, but find Lee he must. He couldn’t conceive of any reason why she should be there, but he must look everywhere . . . everywhere.

A rat scurried out from some dark crevice and after

eyeing him saucily, hurried on toward the entrance. Hal grinned. “Even the rats don’t like this place,” he said aloud. Then: “Why did I come here—there’s no real reason why she should be here! Oh, I don’t know . . . I don’t know.”

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Instinctively, he stopped before going any nearer to the shaft. Anything might lie hidden in wait—anything. That ladder might not have rungs enough to reach bottom. And at the bottom—then what?

He shuddered and was about to step forward when someone reached from behind and held him tight in a clutching grip. Before he could turn his head, the light was pulled forcibly out of his hand and he was in darkness.

Hal had strength and plenty of muscle and it took him but a second to tear himself out of his attacker’s clutch. But the pitch darkness put him at a disadvantage, for when he swung out his long muscular arms they struck at nothing more substantial than space.

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Suddenly he acted upon a brilliant inspiration. “I’ve got you covered, feller, whoever you are!” he said in scathing tones, “Don’t think you’re fooling me one bit.”

His voice echoed back and forth with chilling clarity, and died away toward the shaft in a kind of breathless whisper. There followed an appalling silence. Hal felt helpless and defeated for a moment. Then he decided on another tack.

“I’m looking for Lee,” he said menacingly. “If you don’t tell me where she is, I’m going to shoot, and I don’t mean *maybe*! I don’t care where I fire either—*remember that!*”

A second passed perhaps, without a movement of any kind. Then he felt someone move—the first suggestion of a human presence since first he had felt those arms about him.

“Three chances I’ll give you, feller!” he said grimly.

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“Three chances and no more. One . . . two . . .”

“She isn’t here!” said the voice. “That’s honest truth, young man!”

Hal started. Young man? Who’s voice?

“Where is she then?” Hal persisted severely. “Tell me where she is.”

“I don’t know,” the voice answered a little less firmly this time, yet none the less convincingly. “That’s honest truth, young man!” it said.

Hal felt his throat constrict. “How can I be sure you’re telling the truth, whoever you are? What are you doing in this hole at this time of the morning?”

There was such a long silence that he thought the speaker had gone. But no, he was still there for there was a sound of sudden movement.

“I’m tellin’ the truth, young man. I don’t know where Miss Lee is an’ that’s the truth!”

Hal recoiled with horror at the realization. “Mr. Winters—*it’s you!*” he gasped.

“What—what are you doing down here?”

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“Some day I’m going to get a letter from my boy,” the old man said by way of admitting his identity. “That’s why I come here! Some day I’ll get a letter!”

Hal was staggered and nonplussed. “But why—*here*?” he asked. “Why, *here*?”

“Some day I’ll get a letter from my boy,” the old man answered stubbornly. “Now you better go, young man. Miss Lee’s not here!”

“All right,” said Hal, feeling almost hysterical. “I believe you that much. But why are you here, Mr. Winters? Why do you want to get me out? What is there here, anyway?”

“I like you, young man, and I don’t want you should git killed,” answered the old man hoarsely. “So you better go and find Miss Lee! Here’s your light, young man.”

Hal felt something touch his hand and he accepted the light listlessly without even bothering to turn the switch and look into the old man’s face. He didn’t want to see it somehow—it was plain that he was demented. The whole business was idiotic, the workings of an abnormal mind.

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Hal stumbled to the entrance, eager for a breath of pure, wholesome air. He felt sick and apprehensive to the core of his soul. The old man was guarding something and guarding it with the force of the obsession that seemed to rule his very life—the letter from his boy.

“I could have forced him to tell me what it was,” Hal was telling himself as he floundered through the wet clay to his horses. “I could have forced him at the point of this gun.”

But Hal knew why he hadn’t forced him at the point of the gun. He knew that the old man wouldn’t have flinched at death. He would die willingly rather than give up that one mysterious chance that he thought would bring the long sought for letter from his boy.

Hal gulped and mounted the stallion. He must hurry on and find Lee and nothing else mattered. But tomorrow Mr. Winters must be given over to the proper authorities so that the mystery could be solved. And Hal knew that without finding further disclosures the old man’s obsession would prove to be the chief link in this horrible chain of events. Through him and him alone, would they learn the truth of Collins and Bolton.

150

A letter from his boy? The government are liars? Hal’s alert young mind was trying to piece this together—this bit from the old man’s conversation of the previous day. He gave the mare’s rein a tug and, pulled her forward as the stallion started.

Just as they swung past the entrance, Hal caught a glimpse of the piebald horse standing patiently in among a little cluster of rocks. Standing patiently and waiting.

Hal moved the light quickly away from it and played it directly up trail. As he did so the old man’s voice came to him from the dark, dank entrance of the mine.

“Yer better not say you were here, young man,” said he in those deep, sepulchral tones of his. “Yer might git killed an’ then I won’t git the letter frum my boy,” he continued.

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A lump of pity rose in Hal’s throat, but he did not look behind once. Instead he slapped the stallion gently on the neck and whispered, “Giddap, brother!”

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CHAPTER XVIII

LEE

Hal searched the creek trail right to the dam without results. Then, wearily, he turned and went down the path toward the old man's cabin. It was the only place he knew of where he could rest and wait for daylight in order to search more thoroughly those many canyons and gorges along the Bitter Root Trail.

It was well toward four o'clock when he turned in through the trees, his light flashing along the narrow path. But he suddenly realized that he had no need of the light, for there was light enough shining from Mr. Winters' cabin window. Someone was there.

For the second time within those few hours, Hal kept his hand well within reach of the gun pocket. He felt that he could expect anything and everything. And so, after he had noisily dismounted and tied the horses securely, he waited for a moment hoping to see someone or hear some voice from inside. But none came.

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Then he walked up to the door, knocked forcefully and was startled to hear Lee's voice call, "*Who's there?*"

"Doggone!" Hal cried with joy. "It's little Hal—and how!"

The door opened and Lee stood before him, smiling and a little disheveled in appearance. “Hal! Hal!” she cried and there was joy and relief in her voice. “You’re the one person I’m gladdest to see! Come in!”

“Hot dog,” said Hal, bubbling over. He strode into the bare looking cabin and looked around quizzically. “Man alive, Lee, where, what and how?”

“You’ve no idea, Hal, the night I’ve spent. And since I arrived here I’ve been trying to snatch some sleep in poor Mr. Winters’ only rocker. His bunk wasn’t terribly inviting looking, but then what can you expect of a poor old man like him?”

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Hal sank wearily down on the only other sitable thing in the poor cabin—Mr. Winters’ old stool. “Do you realize your father must be tearing his hair out by this time?” he asked her. “Do you realize I’ve been hunting for you since midnight? Are you all right? Not hurt?”

“Not hurt,” Lee smiled. “But one question at a time, Hal. I didn’t even know that Papa was back.”

Hal explained about Collins and with what excitement their camping trip had terminated. “And Cook told me how you said you were coming up here to find us and sneak off under the trees with the extra cot. Well, it’s lucky things happened this way or you would have been soaked through by this time. And, by the way, I’ve got your whole oilskin outfit strapped to your mare’s back. It scared me sixty ways to Sunday when I found her coming along without a rider. Whew!”

“Well, I’m sorry,” said Lee, “but I’m glad you found her. I didn’t tie her when I stopped at the mine because I didn’t intend to stay so long. And I guess she finally got tired and worked her way down gradually.”

“She wasn’t coming gradually when I pulled her up, believe me!” Hal said vociferously. “But what in the dickens happened at the mine? What else?”

“An amazing thing, Hal,” the girl explained. “I had no intention of ever stopping there, but I saw those horses standing outside when I came long and I thought surely it must be you and your uncle and Kip looking it over the way he promised you he would.”

“Wait a minute,” said Hal tersely. “What kind of horses did you see? How many?”

“Why, I think now there were two—I don’t know,” Lee said thoughtfully. “I know there was the piebald, Mr. Winters’ horse, and then there was the little brown mare that Pedro rides, sometimes. That’s all I noticed, I was so excited. I thought to surprise you, you know, so I rode up quietly, left my horse and walked on tiptoe to the entrance. Well, there wasn’t any answer to my call and I had distinctly heard talking when I first got there. I thought perhaps you wanted to fool me or something like that so I just stepped inside, just far enough away from the opening to be a little bewildered by the darkness in there.”

“It’s a rotten place, if ever there was!” Hal said firmly. “It’s hoodooed all right.”

“I’m glad you admit it,” said Lee with satisfaction. “Anyway, like a flash of lightning someone grabbed me from behind, tore the scarf from my neck and blindfolded me with it. Then when I fought and screamed, they grabbed my handkerchief out of my hand, gagged me with it, and last but not least tied my hands behind my back with this big handkerchief I had tucked in my blouse pocket.”

“Man alive!” Hal said in consternation. “That’s going too far! With a girl, too!”

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“Girl or no girl—I hadn’t done anything to receive such treatment,” she said indignantly. “Of course, I couldn’t see, but I could hear a man’s voice whisper, ‘Take her down an’ make it quick!’ Well, I felt myself being carried bodily. Just where I couldn’t tell you. But it felt as if I was carried down a ladder—you understand how I mean?”

“Doggone, I bet you were on that ladder in the mine!” cried Hal. “Go on.”

“Well, I can’t tell you how long I was down there if I was down, because I fainted, I know. I started getting my bearings when I felt myself being carried out into the air. Then someone released me from that terrible blindfold, freed my hands, ungagged me and supported me until I knew where I was at. It was Pedro!”

Words failed Hal. He just looked at her in amazement.

“The poor fellow was shaking all over and as soon as he saw I was all right, he said, ‘Horse go ’way—I don’t know where. Take you on my horse to old man’s cabin.’”

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“Was it dark?” Hal managed to ask.

“Of course. I couldn’t see a thing but Pedro, and he was so nice and gentle. He helped me up on the brown mare and climbed in front of me. He said, ‘I go and see you’re all right. Lock the door in old man’s cabin, but go home first thing it’s daylight.’ That was all he said. He rode me all the way here, helped me in, then drove away as soon as I locked the door. I’ll never forget him for that.”

“Didn’t he say a word about the treatment you got?” Hal asked anxiously.

“Not one word—that’s the queer part of it, isn’t it?” Lee answered. “I did notice though that he kept sort of muttering to himself and saying, ‘Crazy! It’s crazy!’”

Hal’s eyes sparkled. “Doggone, did he say that? Well, believe me, I’d like to shake hands with Pedro on that. I agree with him there all right. It is crazy—not only crazy—it’s mad!”

CHAPTER XIX

DETERMINATION

Hal and his uncle had breakfast together at ten o'clock that morning. Lee and her father, after a joyful reunion at six o'clock had retired for a much needed sleep, entreating their guests to do the same. Twelve o'clock would be time enough for them to have breakfast, Mr. Holliday had said.

“Catch me sleeping with so much on my mind,” said Hal, yawning sleepily in between sips of strong hot coffee. “You and I have a date with Major Denton before twelve o'clock, that's what. I'm going over and tell him the whole thing and I'd just like you to be along, Unk. We can go over in that Ford of Mr. Holliday's, huh? I don't think he'd mind. We can write a note and tell him that we thought we'd take a little trip over to the city and spend the day, so's he and Lee can rest.”

Mr. Keen drummed a piece of crispy brown toast against his plate. “You certainly are a bird at thinking about excuses, Hal,” he smiled. “But it's in a good cause and I think it's a good plan. Richard's had too much already and we can handle this thing alone. But tell me, why didn't you mention to him your experience with the old man at the mine while Lee was telling of hers?”

“I thought it was better to wait and tell Major Denton the

whole thing, that's all," Hal answered. "Anyway, Mr. Holliday was worked up enough over what had happened to Lee."

"Richard said he's going to have Kip go up there Monday and put up a good stout door at that entrance. He said it will end these mysterious rendezvous that Pedro and the old man have been holding there. A good thing, I say!"

"Posilutely," said Hal. "But there's something white about the way Pedro acted with Lee, don't you think so?"

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"Yes, of course," Mr. Keen admitted grudgingly. "But then you must remember he has a strain of Spanish chivalry in his blood. There's a warrant sworn out for his arrest. Major Denton engineered it on the strength of Kip's evidence."

"Mm. Well, it looks as if he flew the coop after he left Lee at the cabin. And I don't blame him."

Mr. Keen looked at his nephew in surprise. "I do believe you have a soft spot for the little fellow, with all his evil looks and manners."

"I don't think he looks evil at all, Unk. And as for manners, he's been pretty decent to me with all that he talks choppy-like. Doggone, you can't judge a fellow by the way he talks."

"That's true—look at you, for instance," Mr. Keen teased. "Now what are you going to do?"

Hal got up from the table and, going into the living

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room just beyond, turned on the radio. “Like to have music with my eats when it’s possible,” he explained as he seated himself at the table again. “Don’t get up, Unk—Cook’s going to bring me in some ham and eggs.”

“Great Scott, you’ll burst! Why, you’ve just finished a half a dozen griddle cakes, grapefruit and cereal. How can . . .”

“Now, Unk,” Hal interposed whimsically, “you mustn’t notice what I eat. After all, it isn’t what I eat—it’s how much good it does me!”

Mr. Keen laughed heartily. “Then you haven’t any complaint to make, I guess. No one would ever think you were undernourished. Listen Hal, to the radio . . . that’s a New York station.”

“I’m listening,” said Hal, jotting some notes down in his mysterious little black note-book. “Good music, huh?”

“Yes. What are you writing now?”

“Just some of the things the old man said to me. I’m still trying to figure how that one and one will make two and a half.”

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“You’re crazy. Eat your ham and let’s be going. That was a pretty number, eh? Listen, Hal, didn’t that man say something about weather reports?”

“Yes. He gives a long spiel about the east coast first. We’ve lots of time.” Hal put his little book carefully away in his pocket.

“Well, I hope he has something promising to tell us. I hate a rainy Sunday and it looks as if that’s just what we’re going to have. Just look at the way it’s teeming now, will you!”

“Sh, Unk! Listen. . . .”

“Rain today throughout the lower portions of Montana,” the weather man’s voice was distinctly saying. “Low lying fogs through the Rocky Mountain district and surrounding vicinity. Clear tomorrow and warmer.”

Hal got up, strode in to the living room and shut off the power of the radio. Then he grinned at his uncle. “Well, come on, Unk. We’ll write that note and get going, huh? Funny that that should just come in on the air like it did. Especially today.”

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“What’s so funny about it?”

“The fog that he said we’re going to have here tonight.”

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CHAPTER XX

A PLAN

“Well,” said Major Denton pleasantly, “I’m glad to have you folks drop in like this. Take a chair, both of you. It’s too bad Mr. Kip didn’t stay a few minutes longer, he could have gone home with you. One of the boys took him back to the ranch just a little while ago. We’re certainly indebted to him—he’s rendered us invaluable service so far.”

“I thought he would,” said Mr. Keen who had taken a seat near the window. “Quite a fine field you have, Major—quite a fine field.”

“Yes,” said the Major, twirling his little moustache nervously, “we have a fine field, as you say, but it’s had a shadow hovering about it this past week or more, eh?”

“Quite right,” Mr. Keen answered and nodded to Hal. “That’s what my nephew came to talk to you about.”

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The Major raised his finely arched brows and leaned forward over his desk. “Your nephew?”

“That’s me, Major,” Hal grinned winningly. “I’ve got a lot of dope on this whole mess that might interest you.” He took out his little book and consulted it with a semi-professional

attitude.

The Major smiled with Mr. Keen, but when Hal looked up, his face was frowning and grave.

“The first thing I want to know,” said Hal briskly, “is there a mail plane that goes out tonight—I mean one to Waverly City?”

“Why, yes,” the Major answered smilingly. “There’s one goes out every night. Why do you ask?”

“Will the one that goes out tonight carry valuable mail?” Hal asked, ignoring the Major’s query.

“All mail is valuable, Mr. Hal,” smiled the Major.

“Some happens to be a little more valuable than others, that’s all.”

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“But there is some that happens to be pretty valuable, huh?” Hal persisted.

The Major nodded.

“All right,” Hal continued eagerly, “Collins and Bolton both happened to carry some pretty valuable mail the nights that they went out.”

“Yes, the poor chaps—it happens that they did carry very valuable mail. Collins carried almost three hundred thousand in cash and Bolton had about ten thousand. We haven’t been able to trace as much as a mail bag or a piece of the wings.”

“Yes, I know all about that, and man alive, it’s terrible,” said Hal sympathetically. “I’ve been keyed up to this business ever since I heard about Collins and Major Denton, I’ve got a hunch. If you’ll let me carry it out I think I can find out Who the real bandit is—I think I can even recover Bolton’s body by doing it too! I’ve even got a hunch that maybe he’s not dead.”

“Heaven grant it,” said the Major with a ring of real feeling in his voice. “This has been a terrible ordeal for me. But what is this great hunch, Mr. Hal?”

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“It’s kind of simple,” Hal admitted naïvely. “But I want to ask you another question. Does it kind of leak out around the field when an air mail pilot’s going to carry a big sack of dough?”

“In other words, he means money, Major,” Mr. Keen interposed laughingly.

The Major laughed heartily. “It does leak out, Mr. Hal. For some strange reason, it always gets around the field. There’s a sort of underground channel that it spurts through, I guess. The more valuable the mail, the quicker it gets around.”

“Doggone, that’s just what I thought,” said Hal enthusiastically. “Well, if that’s the case could you kind of get it going through this channel that whatever man who goes out tonight is going to carry another big sack? Kind of tell a white lie about it, I mean.”

“That I don’t have to do, Mr. Hal. It happens that there is a big and valuable shipment to go out tonight—a pretty neat sum of cash from the City Bank here to the City

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Bank of San Francisco. In view of the two past episodes we had thought to not let the man make the Waverly City stop. Another man can do it with the local mail.”

“That’s O.K. and how!” Hal said vociferously. “Now all I want is your permission to ride in this plane that’s going to carry the big sack, huh, Major?”

Major Denton’s orderly moustache seemed almost to drop with his jaw, in astonishment. Mr. Keen too, wheeled around on his chair, bodily.

“What on earth are you scheming up now, Hal? What do you . . .”

Major Denton’s hand waved deprecatingly. “Just a moment, sir, we’ll see what the boy intends doing, eh?”

“Hot dog, that’s a point in my favor anyhow,” said Hal with a forced sigh. “Well, I’m going to get in that plane without anybody seeing me. Nobody at the field must know, but of course you’ve got to tell the pilot.”

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“I’m sure Duncan would like such pep and zip for company,” said the Major smiling.

“So his name is Duncan, huh? Well, that suits me: Unk, will you let me keep your revolver just for tonight, too?”

“Heavens!” exclaimed the Major. “What do you expect to do—start a gun battle in mid-air?”

“Posilutely, no,” Hal laughed. “I want it for safety’s sake and

I promise I won't do anything that I don't have to do."

"Accepted," said the Major. "Now what do you intend to do after you and Duncan take off?"

"Wait for developments. That's it—this is all a hunch. I don't know what I'm going to do or what's going to happen. But I'm pretty sure that if word gets around about the big sack, I won't be disappointed. Something will happen to throw the headlights on what happened to Collins and Bolton. You'd like to know, wouldn't you, Major?" 171

"Of course," said the Major, "but I don't like the idea of a young inexperienced fellow like yourself taking such terrible risks. If conditions are as bad as you have intimated why I can have a couple of competent men here tonight to accompany Duncan—Federal men who can apprehend the criminal right on the spot."

"Yes, and that's just the time this gink, whoever he is, would get wise," said Hal disgusted. "You can't hide a couple of men without somebody knowing it and besides nothing might happen—it might scare the gink away. I've got an idea that this Duncan and I won't be in danger because we're prepared like, where Bolton and Collins weren't. I can get word through to Unk if we're in danger—I'm sure I can."

"How?" asked Mr. Keen skeptically.

"Now that's the surprise I want for you," Hal answered with boyish appeal. "If I told you how it would spoil everything. I want to show you what I've done by deduction, huh Unk?" 172

“All right,” said Mr. Keen. “But remember, Hal, you have a very fine mother back in New Jersey, and she and I are sister and brother. She’d have my head, if she thought I was letting you do anything like this. And if anything happens . . .” Mr. Keen threw up his hands in horror.

“And nothing’s going to happen,” said Hal appealingly. “But listen, Major. I’ll tell you this thing from beginning to end and then you’ll see how important it is that this crazy gink should be caught in a quiet sensible way. If you go about it with a couple of Federal men you’ll never get Bolton, dead or alive, I can tell you that.”

“Very well, Mr. Hal,” the Major smiled. “The outcome of this and my willingness to let you go depend on the story. By just that much do you win or lose your chance.”

Hal won his chance.

CHAPTER XXI

DUNCAN

Hal peeked out from his hiding place in the storeroom back of the cabin. Night had long since fallen when the pilot first made his appearance, his long, lanky legs and angular-looking body popping suddenly over the door plate.

“Are you there, Sherlock Holmes?” he called whimsically.

“Yep,” answered Hal, without coming out. “Glad to meet you, Dr. Watson.”

“Same here,” said the pilot sitting down in one of the passenger seats. He twisted his helmet around in his hands and looked toward the storeroom with a smile. “You can come out, kiddo. No one’s around. Not a soul. They won’t be loading me up for an hour yet. I just came over here from the office to say hello and to tell you it’s O.K. with me. The Major gave me all the dope?”

Hal strolled out from the storeroom, ducking his head until he too found a seat. Then he grinned at his prospective companion and held out his hand. “Glad to meet you, Duncan.”

“Same here, Hal,” the pilot laughed. “But I apologize for

calling you kiddo—a guy your size isn't kiddo any more.”

“Except in age,” Hal lamented. “That’s the trouble. Doggone, they think I haven’t any sense about this thing. I had to talk my eye teeth almost out of my mouth before I sold the major.”

“Well, that’s some dandy scheme of yours to put nothing but paper in the bags that go on here. Even the loaders won’t know it, the Major said. And Corbett, the local guy, doesn’t know he’s going to carry all that heavy dough tonight. Nobody knows it but just us four. Corb won’t know it until a few minutes before he starts out.”

“And that’s at midnight, huh?” Hal asked thoughtfully.

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“Well, doggone, we ought to be high and dry, or dry and high by that time, huh Duncan?”

“Betcha. Say, I can’t see it very well in the dark, but you have red hair, haven’t you, Hal?”

Hal laughed softly and leaned over to show his companion the better. “That isn’t red,” he explained, “it’s just afire.”

“Same here,” laughed Duncan. “You can slap yours back in place pretty well. But I can’t—mine’s as straight as sticks.”

“You should worry,” said Hal. Then: “So you were in the war, huh?”

“Yeah. Major tell you? I was too young to know better. Seventeen.” He laughed. “Let’s not talk about it.”

Hal got a glimpse of the man's deeply set eyes as he moved his head into the range of the field beacon. "Say, I better kind of keep out of that light, huh? If there's anyone around to see you they could see me in it too."

Duncan looked around cautiously. "Nobody around, Hal," he said in a deep pleasant voice. "Still, it won't hurt to keep yourself down. If that's possible."

176

"Go on, you're only about an inch shorter than me," said Hal good-naturedly. "Say, you haven't seen anybody land here lately, huh?"

"Not since that Kip feller from over at the ranch," answered Duncan. "He seems to be a pretty decent sort of chap—was in the war too, poor devil. I understand he was shell-shocked three times. That's something to get over, believe me. And he isn't over it."

"What makes you think so?"

"That smile of his. When he isn't smiling his face gets all drawn and funny."

"Yeh, I've noticed that too. What did he say to you, huh?"

"Nothing more than he ever says. I've been seeing him around here for the last six months. That's when I first came out here. He said he came over tonight so's he could bang around the city for a couple of hours. Everybody's either asleep at the ranch or out, that's what he said. He thinks you met some chap in the city that you knew back home and that you're going to spend the night with him."

177

“Yeh, I thought that was a better one than to have Unk go back and say that I was going to stay with the Major. Then Mr. Holliday and Lee would know we’d been talking over things here and get all excited. Better wait until we’ve got the climax to show them, huh?”

“You said something.”

“That’s why I didn’t want Kip to know either. He’d laugh me down and go and tell Mr. Holliday right away. Kip thinks I’m as young as my age.”

“That’s his way, Hal. I tell you, what I know of him, he seems to keep up that smile, to keep himself up. He’ll break up into little pieces one of these days—you’ll see. He can’t keep smiling forever. Gosh, I’m glad they didn’t do that to me.”

Hal looked at him, interested. “I bet you are,” he said, sympathetically. “Were you shot up at all?”

178

“Never touched, but I spent the longest six months of my life in a German prison camp.”

“Hot dog, I’d like to hear more about that—you know it? I’d like to go some place where we could sit and talk a lot.”

“We’ll get the chance to do that, too, perhaps,” said Duncan amiably. “Maybe when you go back east, you’d like to go with me, eh?”

“On the level?” Hal asked delightedly.

“Absolutely,” Duncan promised. “My time is up here in

fourteen days and I've got a hankering to take a look at the old town. You know how it is."

"Do I! It's swell out west, there's no use talking, but the east is great, too."

"Especially Pennsylvania," Duncan laughed.

Hal grinned. "And especially New Jersey."

"We both win," Duncan said heartily. "Now skip back into your dungeon, big boy—the loaders are coming. Don't come out either until you hear the bus spinning for all it's worth. Between the two of us, something good ought to come of it, eh?"

179

"You said something," Hal agreed and ducked into the storeroom.

180

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERY PILOT

It seemed an interminable time to Hal before he heard the spinning motors. In point of fact, he had fallen into a doze, with his knees doubled up and his head resting against the wall of the stuffy, narrow storeroom and the whirring propellers shook him into wakefulness.

Suddenly he felt a rocking movement. Duncan was trying out the controls. He could hear no voices above all that noise and idly wondered who was standing by watching the big Dickinson B-52 take off, little suspecting that nothing more valuable than discarded yellow office paper and old newspapers filled the many mail bags loaded on her.

Hal looked back into the tiny dark passageway running up through the tail. In the storeroom proper, the flares were in readiness and needed only the touch of a lever to drop one into space, the signal by which Mr. Keen at the Comet X-1 Ranch would know that the expected was occurring. A second flare would indicate that help was needed, and upon which signal he would immediately telephone the airport. Three minutes at the most would bring the police to the rescue, and Duncan had decided that they could maneuver in mid-air that length of time, while waiting.

Hal sighed as upon the completion of a good day's work, and hoped prayerfully that Duncan would not have need of sending the third flare into space. That would mean that a landing was forced. A landing, where?

Hal did not like to think of that and so kept his mind occupied by adjusting his parachute. He'd be prepared anyway.

His heart leaped just a little when he felt the plane taxi across the field. Then just as it lifted off the ground he opened the door of the storeroom cautiously and peeked out. The mail bags lay propped up against the long side seats of the cabin.

182

Not a soul. The bobbing head and swinging arms of Duncan were revealed from the board lights up in the cockpit. The cabin and all the rest of the plane were in darkness. Hal crept out and for some reason the sight of the settling fog made icy little chills run up and down his spine.

He frightened the life out of Duncan when he dropped noiselessly into the dual seat. "You did that like a ghost," yelled the airman when he regained composure. "We almost took a nose dive."

"Sorry," Hal shouted back. "But I'm not taking any chances. I didn't know just how this gink would work."

"That's so, Sherlock," Duncan grinned. "I almost forgot. Did you think there were any bandits hidden in the mail bags?"

"I had to be sure first. They look like a lot of fallen bandits the way they're lying around back there."

“That’s the way yours will look when you get through with them, eh?”

183

“You said it,” Hal answered and looked out of the window at his side. They were up over the airport now and were turning for their westward dash. The lights of the field were all but invisible, so heavy was the overhanging fog.

“I hope Unk can see those flares if we use ’em, huh Dunc?”

“Just what I was thinking,” Duncan answered and reaching on his left pressed a button. “I’ll have to use those headlights whether or no. Now I’ll give her a little more altitude and see how things are up above.”

It was decidedly better and Hal looked down upon the low-lying fog with youthful scorn. “Be a hot one if nothing happens, huh?” he asked. “What’ll you do, turn back?”

“Absolutely,” smiled Duncan. “If at first, you know. I think we’re just about over the ranch, Hal.”

Hal sat up, but couldn’t see a thing. He sank back in the seat, disappointed. Suddenly Duncan reached over and touched him lightly.

184

“Hear that, boy?”

“Man, *what?*”

“A plane. It’s following me, Hal—right behind. It’s none of ours—Denton assured me that not one of ours would leave until your uncle phoned.”

“A visiting plane, maybe, huh?”

“Maybe. But just to be on the safe side, drop back into the cabin. Right behind me there. That’s it. Parachute O.K.?”

Hal shouted, “Yes.”

“All right, then don’t show your nose until I give you the high sign. Here she comes.”

Hal was stretched out in the narrow aisle, but could see the lights of the approaching plane through the cabin windows. Suddenly it swerved to the left of them, then swung ahead.

“I think she’s getting ready to signal me or something,”
Duncan shouted, ducking his head down under the controls for a moment. “Yep, she’s doing just that. Now, what’s next, I wonder.”

185

Hal could see nothing of these maneuvers but the roaring of the motors so close to each other was deafening. Duncan, however, managed to shout something now and again down to where he lay.

“Oh boy,” he called, “here’s a war trick for you. He’s waving his hand that he wants to give me a message,” he added and slid open his wind-shield.

Hal felt a blast of cool wind sweep through the cabin. “What kind of a plane is it?” he asked, creeping up as close to Duncan as he dared.

“Small, open mono,” answered Duncan. “Now duck, he’s

getting ready to aim the message in here on a weight. I'll shut the door so's it don't roll down the cabin if I don't catch it."

"Don't forget to open it again," Hal called.

The door shut to with a bang and left Hal in the darkness. He waited, nervous and distraught, while Duncan kept the big plane eased. Suddenly he felt the big bird turn and the door opened. Something fell with a thud at Hal's elbow.

186

"Read that and weep, boy," said Duncan, "but don't raise yourself into this cockpit nohow. He's still gliding around me, waiting to see if I savvy the note."

Hal spread out the paper and read:

If yer want to learn good news about Bolton follow me an land whare I land theres room enough for two. If yer don't want to it won't be so well cause I've got the potshot at yer wing if I want ter take it.

P.S. I promise yer an easy landin no fake.

"So that's his game, huh?" Hal cried. "Want to do it, Dunc?"

"Sure, do you?"

"Sure. We could force him down, but then the jig would be up with Bolton, huh?"

“Yes. Bolton’s got a mother that’s still waiting to hear that he’s alive. I’d like to be the one to make it possible for her to hear it. Still, you don’t know what this bird is up to.”

“Well, we know what we can do if he gets too fresh. We won’t act as if we’re armed unless he tries to search us.”

Duncan nodded and waved his hand toward the waiting plane. “All right, he’s turning. Now how about the flares, Hal? One, two or three?”

“Three at once, I’d say. Hot dog, that’ll get them after us. You’ll wait until he gets well ahead of us to do it, huh?”

Duncan nodded. He was hoarse.

Hal got up and crept into one of the passenger seats where he could look down into the fog-steeped valley. The bandit pilot was not letting them get too far behind, indeed it was soon obvious that he meant them to land first.

Duncan looked around. “Have you any idea where we are?”

“Doggone, I haven’t,” Hal admitted sheepishly. “That’s the only bad number on the program, huh?”

“Maybe not,” Duncan smiled cheerfully. “He’s going to make me land first. So here goes for Bolton.”

“Yeh, here goes for Bolton,” Hal said, with a queer sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Suddenly he saw Duncan lean forward, and in quick succession, three flares shot forth from the gleaming white tail of the plane and sped earthward.

CHAPTER XXIII

CAPTIVES?

“Where are we, do you know?” asked Duncan as he gave his controls a last, deft touch.

“Yes,” said Hal with beating heart. “We’re on the further end of the ranch, south of the Gordon Highway. Unk and I came home this way from the dam last night, or I wouldn’t have known where we were.”

“All right,” said Duncan as their follower taxied alongside of the big plane and stopped. “Lie low, for a minute, then surprise him. That chap’s used to this place all right. He’s landed like this before.”

“For Bolton and Collins,” Hal murmured.

“Sh!” Duncan warned. “I’ll go on to the door.”

But the door was opened before he could get there. The airplane bandit stood facing them calmly, and cleverly masked with a bright bandanna handkerchief. Without a word, he thrust a note forward into Duncan’s hand.

190

Hal rose from his lowly position on the floor—rose to his full height and bethought himself of the low ceiling just in time to

avoid cracking his head. He even had the temerity to laugh.

The fellow showed no sign of surprise, but stood half in and half out of the door. Certainly, Hal thought, this was the time for his uncle to be witness—he would have been sorely disappointed to learn that the bandit assuredly was not Pedro.

Duncan turned from the cockpit where he had gone to read the contents of the second note. “He must be deaf and dumb, this guy,” he said to Hal with a furtive wink. “The note bandit, eh? Well, he says if we follow him peaceably and reasonably or words to that effect, why we’ll learn where Bolton is and be released ourselves within a few hours. He says he has to take a few necessary precautions.”

191

Hal managed to give Duncan a significant look. “Well, it’s all right by me, Dunc. Little I thought when I met you this afternoon that we’d be running into air bandits, huh? Unk would have a fit if he even knew I went up in a plane with you.” He winked hard at Duncan this time and was relieved to see a smile in response.

“Well, this chap is pretty decent, I guess,” Duncan said. “He wants to look over the mail bags, so what am I to do.”

At that very moment “the chap” was looking over the mail bags very much indeed. He had pulled out several fists full of the yellow paper and an armful of the newspaper. With a hiss he threw them down, brought the gleaming barrel of a revolver into full display and made a commanding movement with his left arm for his prisoners to get out and get out quick.

As Duncan passed him he fairly hissed. “*A game, huh?*”

I'll fix you both!" Enraged as he was, he didn't raise his voice above a whisper, and prodded Hal in the ribs roughly with his gun.

As they descended into the field of short curly buffalo grass, they heard the whir of a plane coming near. Duncan was quickly ordered to step back into his cabin and put out his headlight. Both pretenders realized at this moment that the fellow was aware that he had been doubly fooled.

He hurried them into a path running beside the highway, prodding them occasionally as a reminder of haste. Then without warning a tall, stooped figure emerged from behind some trees and came straight up to them.

Hal gasped. "*Mr. Winters!*" he cried. "So this is the way, huh?"

The old man seemed almost not to have heard that accusation but hurried up to the masked man and after a few minutes' whispered conversation, looked fearfully at the sky. The planes were now circling over the highway—two of them.

Abruptly the old man took charge of the revolver, lowered it at the captives and ordered them to move on. The masked man hurried away through the trees and after a minute or two they could hear his plane starting away.

"He won't bother with that valuable mail—that's one sure thing," Duncan laughed.

Hal was deep in thought with every stride they took. He had

not had one real good look at the masked man—the fellow had cleverly seen to that.

“So this is the old fellow you were telling me about,” Duncan whispered. “Of course we could overpower him if we turned on him unawares.”

“Miss Lee Holliday said he’s not as old as he looks,” Hal whispered back. “She says he rides like a young fellow and that he has a lot of strength with all that white hair. He’s not so old as he looks, she said. Not much past fifty-five, I think.”

“Even so, we could put it all over him. We’re both armed. Do you still want to keep up this farce for Bolton’s sake?”

194

“Absitively,” Hal smiled. “I told the Major I’d get news of him dead or alive, or die in the attempt myself.”

“Atta boy,” Duncan applauded. “I’m with you.”

When they turned up the little trail, off the highway, Hal looked slyly over his shoulder. “You don’t have to keep that gun up that way if it tires you, Mr. Winters,” he said whimsically. “We won’t run away.”

“If I let you go, I’ll never git that letter frum my boy,” said Mr. Winters as if by rote.

Duncan looked at Hal inquiringly but the question went unanswered for the time being as the old man stepped swiftly among the trees for a moment, then came out leading the piebald horse.

He gave them their choice of one riding with him at a time or walking. Hal and Duncan decided that they'd rather walk.

195

“Too much weight for the horse, anyway,” said Hal, wisely.

They were a queer trio walking up the Gordon Trail that early foggy morning—two self-imposed captives and a half-demented old man.

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CHAPTER XXIV

A REUNION

“Now what do we do here?” Hal asked when they had reached Mr. Winters’ cabin.

“You wait here coupla hours,” the old man answered, looking sad-eyed and weary. “I gotta keep you here until *he* comes, or I don’t git that letter frum my boy.”

Duncan slumped wearily down in the half-broken rocker and Hal took the stool. The old man laid down the useless revolver on his bunk and sat beside it.

“Funny,” Duncan mused, looking over at the old man and back to Hal again. “It’s funny that his name is Winters, eh?”

Hal was tired and sleepy and not particularly interested at the moment. “Why?” he returned with a yawn.

“Why, because that’s my name too. Didn’t you know it?”

Hal straightened up. “I thought your name was Duncan?”

“So it is—Duncan Winters.”

“Well, I’ll be doggone!” Hal looked quickly at the old man. He too was looking. “War at seventeen—German prison camp and came from Pennsylvania, huh? Dunc, could it have been Oaktown?”

Duncan laughed aloud. “You’re a mind reader, Hal. How did you guess it?”

“What about your father, huh?” Hal asked on edge.

“He thought I was killed in the war or something and both my aunts who live in Oaktown said he just disappeared one day about a month after the War Department published my name missing in action. I came home six months later and have hunted and written all over the country for him since.”

The old man rose from the bunk and walked over to Duncan like one in a trance. Tears were in his eyes, yet he seemed not to comprehend the situation entirely. “Didn’t I say that they were liars and kept your letters away from me? Didn’t I . . .”

198

Duncan Winters jumped from the chair with a happy cry. “*Dad! Dad!*” he shouted. “Oh, what a find, oh what a find. And this is how I was meant to find you!” He put his arms on the old man’s shoulders, his face working with emotion. “I should have known it was you right away—the eyes like mine, the voice almost. But it was the white hair and beard. You didn’t have them then. No, you didn’t, Dad! It’s almost fourteen years.”

The old man smiled vaguely. “Now, I don’t need to go lookin’ fer any more letters, eh Duncan? Now the liars can’t

keep you from writin' ter me, eh Duncan?"

Duncan patted his father affectionately, then turned to Hal. "I've found him almost too late, Hal?" he said sadly. "He remembers more about the letters than he does about me."

"Don't give up hope, Dunc. Maybe if you take him back to Pennsylvania with you, it'll come back to him better, huh? Even the airplane ride might do it—man alive, it makes dumb people speak again, they say." 199

"I'll hope for it, Hal. But I'm thankful for even this much. I've found him through you and thank goodness he won't have to live like this any more."

Hal got up. "Dunc, listen," he said impulsively, "now's our chance to find out about Bolton. Time is going and that fellow will be up here quick. Your father knows about this—all of it!"

The old man looked from one to the other, frightened. "I didn't hurt Collins—I didn't hurt Bolton either. I helped carry the mail up here so's I could find out if my boy sent me a letter. He promised me that if I helped him, I'd find the letter some day myself. But instead he came himself."

Hal looked sympathetically at the old man. "Listen, Mr. Winters, Kip can't hurt you any more than he's going to hurt me. Tell us the truth quickly!"

Duncan wheeled around. "How do you know it's Kip?" he asked, astonished. 200

“I guess I’ve kind of known it all along, and I was so sure about it that I was willing to do that airplane stunt with you to find out. But never mind about that now.” He turned to the old man once more. “If you don’t tell us right away, Mr. Winters, why, Kip is likely to take your son away from you again.”

The old man didn’t stop after that until he had poured out the whole, queer story. Clutching at his rags he allowed himself to be gently pushed into the rocker, where he told of that rainy, foggy night, a week ago, when he was on his way home from the railroad station after a futile inquiry for a letter.

There were planes struggling with the fog, too, and one of them had a losing fight, having to make a forced landing on the far side of Gordon Highway. As soon as the plane struck earth she burst into flames. The old man said he ran to the aid of the pilot but he was too late for the plane had toppled on its side and trapped Collins long enough for him to be badly burned. 201

Collins died right there on the field and almost at his last breath, Kip taxied across in his plane, having seen the accident. He seemed solicitous enough at first, until suddenly his eyes lighted on the heap of mail bags that had rolled out of the plane’s cabin.

As Mr. Winters explained it, Kip didn’t seem the same after that. He saw what a fortune lay at his feet and he determined to have it. Also, as Hal surmised, he knew the poor old man’s obsession with the letter and he played upon that—threatening, cajoling and even warning a fatal penalty if he told.

He enlisted Mr. Winters' aid in burying what mail was of no use to them and also dug deep trenches for the non-inflammable parts of the plane, buried them and filled the hole with earth. And as the old man explained it, "there wasn't a sign of anything when they got through."

Bolton's unfortunate trip was not an accident, Mr. Winters told them convincingly. Kip had had a taste of easy money and ill-gotten gains and deliberately planned Bolton's forced landing as he did with Duncan and Hal. And on each occasion, he bargained with the old man to help him as before, promising that sooner or later the long-sought-for letter would be his reward. 202

"Then what of Pedro?" Hal asked, astounded with the whole revelation.

"He found out what Kip was gittin' an' he didn't like it, I guess," answered Mr. Winters innocently. "He didn' like it that Kip kept Bolton like he did. He wanted him to let Bolton go, but Kip was afraid he'd tell. Then he got mad at Pedro for scoldin' at him and he told Pedro he'd kill him too if he told."

"Who'd a thunk it?" Duncan asked with grim humor. "That smiling bird—who'd have . . ."

"I would," said Hal. "I never thought once that Pedro did it and that time we saw Collins' body go down the falls, I was surer than ever that Kip had a twist in his bean somewhere. Smile, smile, smile—that's all he did." 203

"Kip buried Collins in the mine, young man," said Mr. Winters, with the appeal of a child. "That day yer told me

about them buzzards, I got scared and I went and dug him out quick so Pedro wouldn't get blamed for it. Kip said that's what he'd do, if he thought people were going ter blame him. He tied Miss Lee up last night, he did."

"Some slick cowboy, he is," Hal murmured. "But now the big question is, what about Bolton?"

"That young man is down in the mine shaft," said Mr. Winters eagerly. "I've been good ter him, I have. I've taken food ter him an' even though he's been tied up these many days, I've been as good ter him as I could be. He's gittin' pale though frum that air."

That was like a bombshell to Hal. "Oh, why didn't you tell us that in the first place!" he exclaimed. "Doggone, I thought he was dead too. Listen, Mr. Winters, if you want to save that fellow get on your horse and ride as fast as you can to the ranch. Go straight to Miss Lee or my uncle and tell them that we want them up at the mine as soon as possible. Kip will be coming up the Bitter Trail so you go down the highway. Duncan and I will try and beat him to it at the mine." 204

It took a few more minutes of frantic reasoning with the old man to show him why the mission was so important and why haste was imperative. Duncan finally convinced him.

And before sun-up they breathed freely to see the piebald carrying him down the trail—a fine old figure, despite his rags and obsession. His flowing white beard and hair, catching the breeze, whipped about his head and as he turned

to wave to his son, the two young men took heart.

“Maybe some day,” said Duncan hopefully.

205

“It’s got to be some day!” said Hal enthusiastically. “Man alive, Dunc, people just naturally get sense as soon as they get air-minded.”

“And how!” Duncan laughed. “Look at me.”

“Sure, look at you.”

And by that time they were half way to the mine.

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CHAPTER XXV

TRAPPED

Hal looked up and down the trail. They took turns listening, but no sound of an approaching horse could they hear. Duncan laughed at Hal's fears, saying that the ubiquitous Kip was missing this time.

"All right," Hal said skeptically. "Maybe he is, and I hope so, but from my experience with that fellow, he can get around places and see things quicker than anybody I ever knew."

They hurried into the mine, and for the first time Hal felt no fear. He raced along the passageway, light in hand and calling joyously to the prisoner down the shaft. Duncan kept close at his heels so that they reached the ladder together.

Bolton was in a state of collapse at the sight of his two rescuers. Duncan, particularly, he welcomed with mute joy until Hal removed the cruel strips of material that had bound him for long periods on each day of his imprisonment. He could hardly speak and his hands and arms were stiff and sore from their confinement.

207

"I expected to die here—honest I did," he said piteously, as Hal untied the last strip from his ankles. "That Kip guy has absolutely no heart—absolutely! He could see how I was

dyin' for one breath of air. But no, he's kept me down in this dungeon for weeks, isn't it?"

"I guess it seems years, old chap," Duncan answered.

"All right," said Hal briskly. "Now let's get out of here. Dunc, we better let Bolton go up first and push him, huh? He'll never be able to pull himself up without help from us—not with those sore hands."

"No, nor any other hands," said a familiar voice from above. "Now whose got th' laugh—th' last laugh, huh? Wa'al, it's nobody other than yore frien' Kip."

Hal, Bolton and Duncan stood gazing up into Kip's smiling face. There was something almost maniacal in the expression for he seemed to be enjoying the situation immensely.

208

"Kip," said Duncan gravely, "this is a serious matter. Why treat a man like this when he hasn't done you any harm?"

"I'm treatin' you like this because you'll talk—all of you," Kip said, his smile growing deeper. "Yo're where yuh cain't talk down there, huh? An' I don't intend tuh spend my life in dark places—I let other people spend them for me."

Duncan tried another tack. "We're buddies, Kip," said he appealingly. "Can't you take that into consideration. Even Bolton here was a buddy of yours—do you realize that?"

Kip laughed outright. "Soft stuff," he said jeeringly. "Yuh jest want tuh know where I got th' money hid,

209

huh? Well, I'll tell yuh—it's right in Mr. Holliday's house. When I got them first bags frum Collins' plane I give th' boss a song an' dance 'bout that I inherited money suddenly. Then I offered to loan him a lot of it an' after he 'cepted it, I told him where I got it frum. Ha, ha. He couldn' say anythin' then an' that's how I got him under my thum, too."

"Kip, you're crazy!" Hal blurted out.

Kip's face grew serious instantly. "Do yuh think I am?" he asked gravely.

"It's a battle of wits, Hal," Duncan whispered. "We've got to outwit him somehow."

"Why don't you go up and get Mr. Winters?" Hal ventured. "He'd come down and keep guard here, if you don't want to let us out right away."

"I don't want to let you out any time," Kip said with the firm, hard smile returning. "The old man's too easy."

With a loud laugh he slowly drew the ladder up out of their reach, little by little. Gradually he pulled it over the top and disappeared from the shaft opening for a moment. Suddenly he reappeared.

210

"Now comes the big surprise," he chuckled. "I'm going up tuh th' dam and I've got a crowbar. All I need tuh do is tuh pound that crack a little and it'll do the trick. All the nice water will come rushin' down on yuh—mine an' all!"

He stood for awhile enjoying the baffled, almost hopeless

expressions on those upturned faces. Then with a low bow he backed away and as he walked toward the entrance they could hear him talking angrily to himself.

“He’s no more crazy than I am,” Bolton protested. “Maybe no criminal is exactly sane, but when they can plan and figure a thing like he did, he’s got some kind of sense anyhow. He’s just mad that you and Hal fooled him last night. He thought he was going to pile up a nice fortune in an easy way.”

“And he almost would have by now. Hal knew how to show him up, though,” said Duncan.

211

“Yes, but little Hal got a bad number on the program somewhere. Look at where you two fellers are for it, now!”

“Well, you’re here with us, aren’t you?” Duncan asked with good sportsmanship. “Anyway, what’s to be, will be. That’s the way of the airman.”

“Kip said something like that once,” Hal said reminiscently. “And even when he smiled, he sounded as if his words were like ice. That was the morning after Collins crashed.”

“Hm, and Kip was wealthy, eh?” asked Duncan. “Yes, he must have been, the morning after.”

Suddenly Bolton spoke up. “You don’t think that guy was really serious about flooding that dam down on us, do you?”

“Man alive, I hope not,” Hal said with a grin. “What can I do with this light—I’m tired of holding it.”

“Give it to me,” said Duncan with forced gayety. “I’ll hold the light as long as it’s light.”

212

They laughed, but the chill of the dank shaft was in it. Each gave a furtive look up toward the dark opening. Where had he put the ladder? Where? Hal even measured the distance from where they stood in the slimy earth—it couldn’t be more than thirty feet. So near and yet so far.

“How long would it take that geyser to come rushing down here?” Bolton asked with a lightness that didn’t deceive his companions.

“Ten minutes of fast stepping,” said Hal briskly.

“Ten minutes, eh?” Duncan declared rather than questioned.

“Ten minutes,” Bolton repeated dully.

“Yep,” said Hal with lowered tones. “Ten minutes.”

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CHAPTER XXVI

WAITING

None of them moved from the spot on which they were standing, although the level ran for more than a city block underground. Its dark cavernous depths looked even less inviting than the passageway above.

Hal had been staring at Bolton for a few minutes, when he became aware of the half collar on the man's neck valiantly holding the tie in place. "Unk's got the other half of your collar," he told him. "How did you lose it?"

"On account of Kip's gentle touch," Bolton laughed.

That started them talking again and soon they forgot themselves in talk. Each one had something to contribute as his share in the mystery of Gordon's Creek, it seemed, and each one wound up his story with but one person in mind—Kip.

"How long would it take my father to ride down to the ranch?" Duncan asked after a long silence.

214

"The way your father rides, it shouldn't take him many minutes," Hal answered cheerfully. "We ought to be getting help soon now."

“Oh yes, we ought to be getting help soon now,” Duncan repeated.

“How do they know we’re trapped down in this hole?” asked Bolton throwing cold water on their hopes.

“Unk knows about this shaft,” answered Hal. “He’d look for us here, don’t worry.”

“And my father’s been gone about four hours, don’t you think so?” Duncan asked anxiously.

“Not as long as that, Dunc,” Hal answered briskly. “Let’s think about something else. For instance, let’s count how many rats we hear jumping back in that cavern.”

Bolton shivered. “I’ve been listening to them for days —*weeks!* I don’t want to start in doing that all over again.”

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Poor Hal. He groped for the cheerful thing to say, yet always did he hit upon the wrong theme. The time seemed to be going so swiftly that they tacitly ceased to ask the hour.

Hal then took upon himself the prodigious task of studying how near the top they would get by giving each other a boost. He was figuring their measurements as a whole and visualized with clarity the human ladder that they could form. He never proposed this, however, for after asking Bolton his exact height he realized hopelessly that they would fall far short of the goal.

Once they thought they heard a plane far off in the distance.

In point of fact, it was flying directly over the mine, but they were blissfully ignorant of it. The shaft shut out all human sound and now indeed it seemed to threaten to shut out the freedom for which that waiting trio so intensely longed.

“You don’t suppose there’s any way we could dig our toes in that clay and boost ourselves up by degrees?” 216
Hal asked timorously. He stood up and minutely inspected the slimy walls of that yawning cavity. The grim look in his face as he turned away from it, told a full story.

And on top of that Bolton said, “You don’t suppose the Major will ever find out where that money’s gone, do you?”

“That’s a silly question,” Duncan answered irritably. “How will he know, unless Mr. Holliday spills the beans. And when a man’s in need of money like the way Hal says he is—I don’t know.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that at all,” said Hal with a display of temper that was unusual in him. “Don’t you suppose I’ve been watching that man long enough to know he’s honest? Just look at Lee and you’ll know her father isn’t . . . It’s that doggone cur of a Kip!”

“You said it,” Duncan agreed calmly again. “I shouldn’t have said it—I hardly know Mr. Holliday. That’s just the effect this place is having on me.” 217

“Same here,” said Bolton.

“And here,” Hal grinned, himself again. “Funny what a strain like this’ll do, huh? Let’s sing ‘Singin’ in The Rain’.”

“With my sore mouth?” Bolton asked indignantly. “You must be crazy! I ought to sing after being in this hole for weeks!”

Hal laughed. “Aw come on, fellers. It’s terrible, I know, but what’s the use . . .”

“Look!” Duncan exclaimed, with fear in his voice. “Where’s that water coming from?”

They all huddled together examining the stream of water that was oozing down into the shaft from the passageway. It was a goodly stream and trickled down to them with remarkable progress.

Bolton looked terror stricken. “Which way would the water come—if it was coming?” he asked falteringly.

“Now fellows, I don’t believe Kip’s that much of a skunk,” said Hal reassuringly.

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“But that isn’t answering Bolt’s question, Hal!” said Duncan. “Which way would the water come, if it was coming?”

Hal shrugged his broad shoulders hopelessly. “All right,” he said with finality, “if you fellows are waiting to hear the worst, I’ll tell it to you! That water could come any way and all ways if it broke loose over the dam. Haven’t you ever seen wild water?”

“No, thank goodness, I’m glad I’m an airman!” Bolton said wildly.

“Same here,” said Duncan. “The starry skies and wide open

spaces.”

“Well, if this is the starting of it,” said Hal, “I say, let it come! Are we going to stand crying around like a lot of girls? For one thing, I have a loaded gun and so has Dunc. We don’t have to stand and torture ourselves by watching it creep up on us or pour down on us either. We can beat the old girl to it—what do you say?”

Duncan grinned sheepishly at the fine-spirited Hal and took his hand. “Here’s beating the old girl to it and three cheers for Hal Keen!”

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“That’s what I say,” Bolton agreed. “Nothing like spirit. I hate a coward. But look, it’s coming down faster . . . this is awful!”

“Yes,” said Duncan immediately, “it sure is awful!”

Hal threw himself back against the slippery clay walls and laughed until he shook.

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CHAPTER XXVII

WILD WATER

Hal saved the day with that laugh, for Bolton was as near madness from his long confinement as he would ever be in his life. It seemed but the snapping of another thread and his reason would be gone, for when the trickling stream of water suddenly ceased its journeying down the wall, he laughed hysterically.

“That’ll do you good, doggone it,” said Hal. “I’ve just figured out where that water came from, anyhow. It was raining hard enough last night to drive it in everywhere. Maybe we’ve got a leaky roof on the castle, huh?”

There was a titter of hysterical laughter at this juncture and the despairing trio shouted, Duncan flashing the brilliant light steadily overhead. Another light shone down and behind it were welcome, rescuing faces.

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Mr. Keen was struggling over the opening with the ladder. “I know you’re all well by that shout, boys,” he said genially. “We’ve had a roundabout way of getting to you, for the old man insisted that you were in his cabin. That’s why we’ve been so long.”

“Didn’t seem like any time at all,” Duncan called up amiably

and really believed what he said at the time. “We had each other for company, that’s one thing. Not like poor Bolton here.”

“I’m as fine as you make ’em,” Bolton boasted, despite his emaciated appearance.

“Mr. Winters told us everything,” said Mr. Keen. “All the boys on the ranch came up with us. Richard was in the city so we left a note for him to come up as soon as he got in. He ought to be here soon.”

“How about Kip?” Hal asked, coming up last of the trio.

“The boys are on their way to the dam after him,” said Lee excitedly. “Mr. Winters aroused them. They’ve looked high and low along the trail—and they’re going up there as a last resort.”

222

“Well, it’s a darn good resort if they catch him at the trick he threatened to play on us,” said Hal. “And here’s the way it happened . . .”

There was a babel of voices coming up the woods path just as they crossed the bridge. Those sturdy cowboys of the Comet X-1 Ranch shouted hoarsely and a sudden dismal cry filled the air. Hal was the last to cross and he had made it just in time.

The roar no sooner sounded from the dam than the tumbling, mad waters raced helter skelter, carrying the quaint little bridge along with it. On down it went into the narrow little gorge, hurtling this way and that and rushing pell mell for the

mine.

Bolton, Duncan and Hal stood at the top of the narrow trail and looked on, thankful and with a feeling of gratitude for their rescuers. Mr. Keen edged his horse over to his nephew's side. 223

“Some luck,” Hal breathed. “Man alive, I’m glad I’m alive.”

“No less than I,” said his uncle. “Hal, you certainly gave us something to think about last night. And while your little plan worked to success in the long run, it wouldn’t have been so fortunate for you if Kip had been able to keep you where he wanted. I think the frustration of all his plans angered him to this dangerous point.”

“Wa’al,” said a little bow-legged cowpuncher from the Comet, “he got his’n an’ he might o’ known he would.”

“How did he act when he saw you fellows coming up the path after him?” Hal asked, interested.

“He acted like he wuz gone wild,” said the man. “Thar he stood with that crowbar diggin’ away and laughin’ an’ darin’ us ter come out an’ nab him. Wa’al sir, jest as me an’ one o’ th’ other boys started fer him he jumped inter th’ water. What did it, I don’t know—mebbe it wuz th’ heavy rains las’ night an’ mebbe it wuz resultin’ frum th’ way he pushed at that rotten old construction, but anyways yer heard it roar an’ by gum Kip roared as loud hissself, but it wuz too late fer he went smash bang ’long with everythin’.” 224

“Now you’ll admit that you didn’t like him, either,” said Lee.

“You thought Pedro was too quiet, but I always told you that Kip’s smile got on my nerves. Now, didn’t I, Hal?”

Hal wrinkled up his nose and frowned. “If that isn’t just like a girl,” he said mockingly. “The I-told-you-so kind. Anyway, I got suspicious of him almost right away and that’s more than Unk did and that’s his business,” he reminded her with a cold superiority.

“It’s my business to be suspicious of people, eh?” Mr. Keen laughed. “Well, now, that it’s all over, Hal, I’ll tell you. I too, was suspicious of Kip that first day when you hurt your head at the mine. I caught him smiling in that way that made so many people suspicious of him.”

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“But you kept harping on poor old Pedro!” Hal protested.

“Exactly,” Mr. Keen admitted, “but it was just a foil to see what you could do with deduction. I denounced him particularly at the bridge about Collins to try you and see if you could be swayed by another’s opinion. But I’ll give you credit, Hal—you’ve proven your worth. When my vacation is over I’ll take you on the first interesting case that comes along and see how you handle your deduction in really big things.”

“Hot dog, I wouldn’t want anything more mysterious than this last week has been!” Hal exclaimed vociferously. “But one thing I did, I put down every mysterious thing that happened, every mysterious word that was said.” He looked about cautiously, but noticing that Lee was chatting gaily with the two airmen, he whispered: “I even noticed how nervous Mr. Holliday was, Unk, when he talked

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to Kip. It was like as if he was afraid of him and was trying to hide it.”

“Lee doesn’t know, Hal, does she?” Mr. Keen inquired anxiously. “I’m glad. Poor little kid, it’s going to be hard for her to leave this place, but she’ll have to do it. Richard can make a clean breast of the mess now that Kip has gone. Peculiar what a power he held over the poor man.”

“Because he was afraid of his life, and the disgrace to Lee, that’s why.” Hal snorted contemptuously.

“Richard ought to be here this long time,” said Mr. Keen looking down the woods path. “The Bitter Trail will be impassible for weeks and I guess if he attempted coming that way, he’d have sense enough to turn back.”

“Unk, what if he was, say, half way or so when the water came rushing down?” Hal asked. “Would he have time to climb the rocks and duck it?”

“I hope so,” Mr. Keen said worriedly. “I wish you hadn’t suggested such a thing, Hal. Suppose he did come that way? Why, I can’t imagine what he would do. After all, Richard isn’t a son of Montana—he was born and lived all his young life in the east. He can’t scramble up rocks like these hardy mountaineers.”

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“Sh!” Hal warned him suddenly. “Here comes Lee.”

“I think we ought to go home right away,” she said worriedly. “Papa should have been here.”

“We’ll meet him on the way, I bet,” said Hal cheerfully. “You know your father doesn’t travel in high like we do. But come on, we’ll go.”

Lee smiled sweetly. “I’d give anything to be like you, Hal,” she said. “You never seem to get gloomy about anything. Now here, for some strange reason I’m all upset about my father. I wish I could laugh it off like you do.”

Hal leaned out of his saddle and patted her hand. “I don’t only laugh it off, Lee,” he said whimsically, “I shake it off. It’s easy after the first dose, but doggone, sometimes the first dose isn’t easy. The first hundred years are the hardest, huh?”

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Yet despite his seeming mirth, Hal was really worried. He felt for Lee, a strange sense of foreboding and feared, as did she, for the safety of her father.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

AND WITH THE MINE

Pedro had come home—he was there waiting for them and Hal was glad for Lee’s sake for Mr. Holliday’s absence struck a chill note. The cook declared that the ranchman had started up the Bitter Trail on his horse, but that was all she could tell—it was all anybody could tell.

Twilight came and darkness enclosed the ranch in its vast arms. They had given up hope, but Lee cherished a last lingering spark until midnight. She then held her head high and saying goodnight went off to bed with the ample arms of the cook folded tightly about her.

It was almost a week before they brought home the news—Pedro and the boys of the Comet X-1. They found him in the shaft of the mine, clinging to the ladder with a grip that even the rushing waters could not budge.

“Just like that,” Pedro explained, visibly moved. “Boss went down there—he know Bolton was there. He didn’t like that business. Ah, that Kip—he crazy and poor boss die from that.”

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“I left a note that Kip had trapped Hal,” said Mr. Keen, “and I said for him to meet us at the old man’s cabin. Perhaps he

guessed that if Kip trapped anybody it would be at the mine, and consequently he climbed down the shaft to the rescue, eh?”

“Hard tell, boss,” said Pedro respectfully. “Now I stay by Miss Lee and do good as I can, hah?”

“I believe you will, Pedro,” Mr. Keen answered and shook his hand heartily. “No matter what happens you see that no harm comes to her. She’s a fine girl.”

“Yes, boss,” said Pedro humbly. “I got what-you-call *debt*, to her. I make up for trouble.”

“And while we’re on the subject, Ped,” said Hal fraternally, “let me tell you that I didn’t think once that you did any of those things Kip did. I trusted you, even that night in the hall when you lied to me that there wasn’t any noise.”

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“Yes, I lie for boss that night. I ’fraid you go to his room an’ find out it was Kip. He got mad with Kip that night—not me. He push Kip in his room to find out about Bolton feller.”

“I guessed that was it,” Hal smiled. “Well, anyhow, Pedro, I wanted to tell you that if Miss Lee ever has to give up this ranch and comes east like Unk wants her to do (he’s her guardian now, you know), you’re to come with her. You’ll like it. My mother has horses and right near our house are the Ramapo Mountains—I suppose they look like a lot of peanuts compared to the Rockies, but you should worry, Ped, huh? Mountains is mountains!”

Pedro let a chuckle escape him. “Yes, Mr. Hal. Thank, thank,” he said with embarrassment. “You cat’s whiskers.”

“Doggone!” Hal laughed. “Now you *are* my friend.”

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And so it was in this friendly spirit that Hal and his uncle took their leave of the beautiful Comet X-1 Ranch. Lee promised to come and visit with Hal and his mother as soon as her father’s affairs were straightened out, and she bore her bereavement bravely.

“She doesn’t know what a terrible state her father’s affairs are in,” said Mr. Keen gravely. “I’ve left a fair allowance for her with Richard’s banker in the city, in case the poor child is left in pretty straightened circumstances. Also, your mother has wired that she is perfectly willing to keep her indefinitely in case she is without her beautiful ranch home.”

“Well, she’ll like Mom’s house, I guess. And then there’s the mountains. I’d like Lee around—she’s a good sport, after all. But what I’d insist on her bringing, too, is Cook and Pedro. Cook especially, because she makes the swellest ham and eggs. But here’s Dunc, coming for us now, Unk. Here’s where we fly the wide open spaces and starry depths, as Dunc says.”

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“And, believe me, I don’t mean maybe when I say wide open spaces,” said Duncan vehemently, after they had taken off for points east, via Washington. “I’ve been flying around the starry depths like a hen with its head twisted, since that mine experience. Whew! I don’t for the life of me see how anything good can come from mines. They’re the worst, creepiest holes

in the world.”

Hal agreed with him heartily, pondering the while on the wisdom of this Providence that had given back to Duncan an irrational father, and had taken away from Lee such a genial parent as Mr. Holliday had been. He could not understand it.

Yet Hal was to see a shining mercy even in this tragic fate.

CHAPTER XXIX

HAPPY ENDING

Hal was sitting on his porch toward the close of the summer, gazing idly up at the graceful sweep of the Ramapo Mountains that frowned down upon his mother's house. He was thinking of the many people and events of that eventful season, particularly Duncan and Lee.

Duncan he had seen twice since their successful flight eastward. He had excellent reports to give of his picturesque looking father and the last had been that he had finally admitted that the government were not liars! "And that," Duncan had said, "shows a decided improvement."

Hal decided that it did, too, and looked forward eagerly to the next time that Duncan should visit him.

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Meanwhile he awaited with a great deal of youthful impatience, his uncle who had arrived but ten minutes ago to pay his sister's family a Labor Day visit. He had hinted of much good news to tell after his luggage had been disposed of—much surprising news.

At last he came, leisurely sitting down in a porch rocker and inhaling the fragrant mountain breeze that blew along the veranda. Hal turned his chair around to face him.

“What is it, Unk?” he asked eagerly. “Got a hair-raising case or something?”

“Guess again,” Mr. Keen laughed. “It happens that I have a pretty hair-raising case to go back to, but that can wait until later. What I have to say should interest you, especially.”

“I’m all ears,” Hal laughed. “I always have been—I could have done with smaller ones. Now, come on . . .”

“All right, it’s about Lee.”

“Coming on?”

“Yes, and in great style, I guess.”

“*Style?* What do you mean, Unk?”

“She wrote me a long letter three days ago, Hal. The news was so good that I waited to come on here and tell it to you instead of writing. Well, it seems that Pedro and she were going over the ruins of the old trail, despairing, too.”

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“I bet.”

“She had learned how little money Richard had left her and I guess it was sort of a last trip that she and Pedro were making up there. They were talking over the strange history of the mine, she said, and finally she cantered on leaving Pedro snooping about the heap of timbers and dirt which had fallen into the cavity. She fully expected making arrangements to come on here and give over the ranch to satisfy her father’s creditors.”

“And now she isn’t coming, huh?” Hal asked disappointed. “I suppose she’d rather go to a place like Washington?”

“Now, wait, Hal. I didn’t say anything about her not coming here. I told you how she left Pedro snooping about things around the old mine? Well, that little fellow is nobody’s fool. She went on back home and he didn’t come in until almost dark.”

237

“What’s the matter—another ghost story of that doggone place, Unk?” Hal asked.

“*Ghost story!* I should say not. It’s the most realistic story I’ve ever heard. Pedro struck the biggest vein of copper in that old mine that you’d ever want to see.”

“*Huh?*”

“Just what I said. Pedro knew he had struck it rich immediately. Why, Hal, the child’s rich! The dam was a lucky break for that old place—it tumbled the earth down and revealed a vein of copper that surpasses Lee’s wildest dreams. Hal, wait until I tell you . . . where are you going?”

“I’ll be back in a minute, Unk,” Hal answered. “I’m just going in the kitchen to get a sandwich.”

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