WESTY MARTIN
IN THE LAND OF THE PURPLE SAGE

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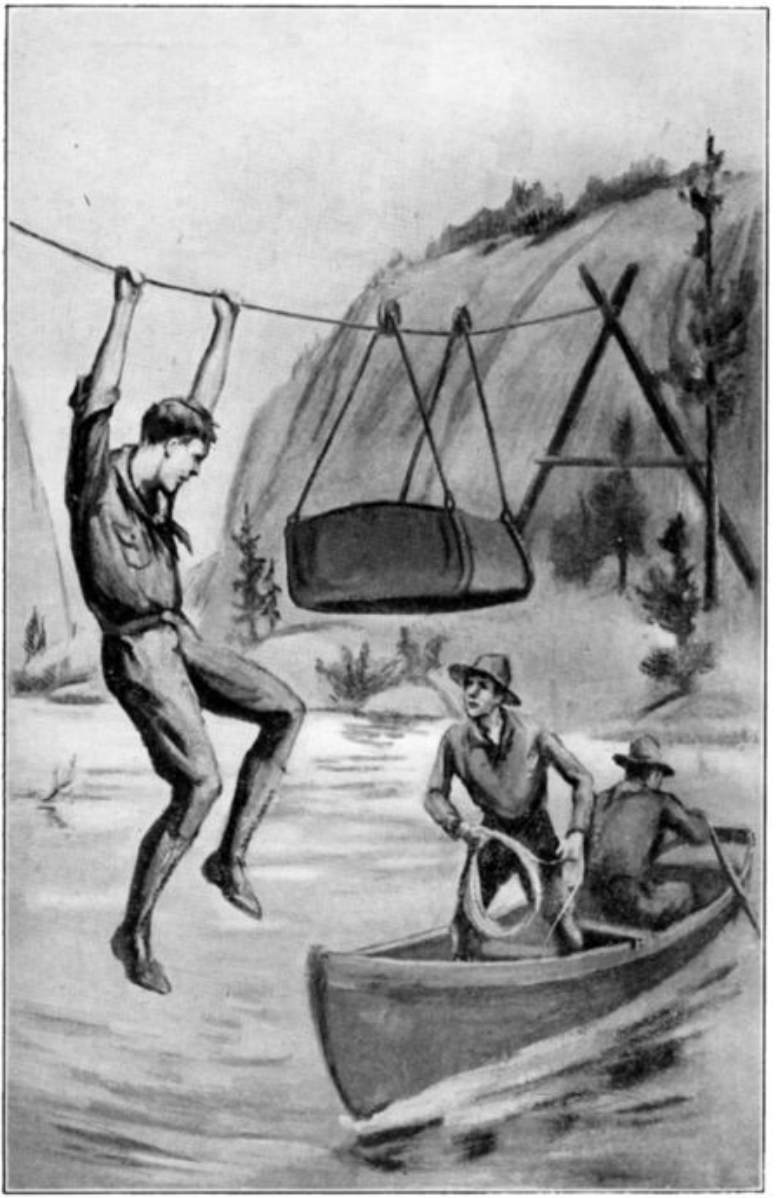

ONE OF THE BOYS ROWED OUT TO HIM.

WESTY MARTIN
IN THE LAND OF
THE PURPLE SAGE

BY
PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

Author of
THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE-WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS

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WESTY MARTIN IN THE LAND OF THE PURPLE SAGE

CHAPTER I
SQUATTER SAM

Westy Martin shrieked in utter panic. Yet he was not an impulsive, much less a cowardly, boy. He was a scout of the scouts who had braved danger, even courted danger. But this sudden scream which he uttered was terrifying even in the echo which reverberated from the wooded height that he had been approaching when this appalling thing happened.

That ghastly counterfeit of his own voice had none of the mellow quality of an echo; it was not softened by distance. So frantic was the boy's piercing cry of terror that the unspent echo sent back all the sense of maddening fright in undiminished volume on the balmy summer air. It was as if there were two catastrophes.

So sudden and awful was this startling echo from the sombre wall of forest that covered the precipitous side of Storm Cloud Mountain that the man who emerged from the outlandish hovel in the marsh gazed up into those dark heights as if expecting to discover there the cause of the shocking outcry. He even started in that direction in his shambling way. And that was so like the man! Always to start wrong.

Then the frantic boy screamed again, a kind of gurgling scream, and this time there was no echo for there was not sufficient volume to his voice. His mouth was almost level with the green scum and his face was strained upward to avoid it.

Thus, for a few terrifying seconds the sinking victim seemed to pause. Perhaps a rotten log below afforded momentary support. He did not know what was down there—except death.

The boy laid his arms flat upon the surface of the slimy, treacherous thing that was consuming him. No submerged support in that still, green area could serve him long. Then slowly he drew up one arm—a perilous thing to do, if indeed any movement could now retard his ghastly fate, and pulled some of the dripping, green scum out of his mouth so that he might give a last call.

Meanwhile the man started off toward the mountain.

To do him justice, he had not been very near to the scene whence the original cry arose; his hovel was some hundred yards distant. But it was characteristic of him to go the wrong way and in pursuit of nothing.

His bewildered air was not a thing of the moment; he always had it with him. He was so inadequate that, as the saying is, it stuck out all over him.

Even in this tragic emergency, a laughable spectacle he presented as he went loping off toward the lower reaches of the frowning mountain.

Yet he meant well, poor man. With nothing but the spirit of succor in his simple mind, he was hastening away from the wretched victim. And his funny, sideways gait seemed to bespeak his inefficiency.

But he did not go far, for Westy, having cleared the loathesome stuff from his mouth, gave a last piercing cry, and the man turned about, bewildered. Then, without any show of emotion he corrected his course and went galloping in his grotesque way toward the scene of impending tragedy.

In his panic fright, the boy watched the man's approach with a sort of fascinated horror. He could only wonder how this would-be rescuer expected to approach him in that deadly morass.

But the man came on without any sign of panic on his own part, and presented none of the fine appearance of resolute purpose and heroic abandon. There was something reassuring in his steady, albeit ridiculous, progress.

He did not even call. But he did better, for without the slightest hesitation (notwithstanding the terrible warning that the victim presented) he came on, wading through the less perilous edge of the marsh, deeper, deeper. Straight into that deadly area he went toward the sinking victim.

He made a little circuit as he approached, waist deep, as if he knew just where there was unseen support in that horrible, dank place. Yet he was up to his chest in green scum when he came in reach of the boy.

"Can—can you save me!" the wretched victim pleaded as the man reached over and tried to get a hold under the outstretched arms. "It's—it's going down—something under me. *Quick!*"

"Can you move your foot?" the man asked. "See can you push it forard."

"I can't move it," Westy said. "Don't let me go down—please don't let me go down!" he begged.

"I wouldn' leave yer go down," said the man, tugging at the boy's body. He succeeded in raising it just an inch or two. "Wriggle yer foot over towards me—what I'm standin' on. I wouldn' leave yer go down. Wriggle kinder, then mebbe yer can move it."

With new hope born of that just inch or two of lifting, Westy tried with all his restricted strength to move his leg in that thick, enveloping substance. He began by wriggling one foot while his rescuer clung desperately to his armpits, striving to raise him if ever so little.

At last, by dint of moving his leg and thus enlarging the area of his confinement, Westy was able to grope a little with his foot until, moving it in the direction of his rescuer, he struck something hard and felt the thrill of real hope as he got a foothold on this unyielding support. And it was none

too soon, for whatever uncertain obstacle to his descent had up to now retarded his sinking, it was already giving way under his other foot.

Now his rescue involved only a sideways jerking and hauling to help him onto the real support on which the man stood. And there he was on that solid substance chest deep in the morass and still dreadfully enmeshed, but safe—safe unless another groping step toward more complete safety should treacherously plunge him again into that deadly green hole.

He dared not move, only stood there beside his rescuer in a kind of suppressed hysteria. He was panting, trembling and his head thumped like a trip-hammer. Extrication from this spot of death and sickening stench was still to be gained and peril lurked in one misstep.

But the boy who stood there, appalled and tremulous from his nearness to an awful death, dared take a long, deep breath. The distance to safety seemed nothing now after that slow sinking into the consuming morass. If he had been sitting in his own home he could hardly have felt safer or happier.

Now he was sufficiently composed to greet his rescuer by name. He did not know his real name—no one seemed to know it, but he knew him as Squatter Sam. Some of the less fastidious scouts at camp called him Sloppy Sam. He had little pride and answered willingly to either name.

"Another minute," Westy panted. "One more minute and I'd have——"

"Yer got swamped certain," said the man, "but I knowed my way. Now you follow me."

Westy was too nervous and excited to talk. And he was afraid to move. Standing waist deep on something solid was far better than his recent predicament and he felt inclined to just stand there. Suppose he stepped and stepped off that solid....

"Wait—wait a second," he shuddered.

Then, fearfully he ploughed his legs through the green scum, each movement disentangling them from the network of slimy undergrowth. With four or five steps of this difficult progress he passed off the solid structure below and shuddered as his feet sank a little in the yielding network of marsh growth.

Evidently the simple man who had rescued him knew what he was about and Westy followed him confidently, plunging with every step and progressing with the greatest difficulty. But slowly the two emerged out of the perilous centre of the morass and were soon plodding knee deep on comparatively safe ground.

"Yer got a good skere, huh?" asked Squatter Sam.

"I sure did," answered Westy, his terror still lingering, so that he found it difficult to even think. "Gee, I thought I was a goner, sure. I feel sick—I

guess it's that blamed stuff that I got in my mouth. Jiminies, you saved my life, that's sure. You bet I'll do something for you if I ever get a chance. I—I guess I'm—I'm kind of all in. How—how did you know there was something solid where you stepped?"

"It was an ole door," Squatter Sam answered. "Only t'other day I throwed it there. It blowed clean off its hinges in the big storm and I fetched it over and chucked it in the marsh. I cud stand on it when I was ketchin' bullfrogs. But it got ketched in the weeds when the water riz up in the storm. That there was some wild storm, huh?"

"Well, I'm glad it blew off because it saved my life," said Westy, as they plodded along, making better progress now toward Squatter Sam's ramshackle abode.

"I chucked it there when it blowed off," said Sam; he had a dull way of repeating his remarks. "I fetched it over and chucked it there when it blowed down."

Yes, he had "fetched it over and chucked it there" instead of putting it back where it belonged. And there you have Squatter Sam all over.

CHAPTER II
A PEEK AT THE GREAT

Squatter Sam was a dubious character. If he had possessed ordinary intelligence he would have enjoyed the little triumph over Temple Camp involved in his rescue of the scout. For Temple Camp had forbidden him to visit its precincts.

He had been suspected of taking a couple of chickens from the little poultry yard maintained by the camp commissary. Moreover, he had entertained the scouts with reminiscences of his life as a sailor and smuggler, and these narratives had not been edifying.

At the time when these events befell, he was a sort of farmer, and a very poor sort. He lived on the edge of the marsh in a ramshackle house that he had built for himself out of discarded lumber, grocery boxes and barrel staves, and it was an astonishing triumph of architecture.

Within this hovel was a filthy bunk in which he slept. Two of the window panes were broken and had been replaced with greasy brown paper. There was a tiny and primitive chicken coop, but since the chickens had the run of the house they had no cause for complaint.

Squatter Sam also owned one poor cow which supplied the milk for pot cheese which he sold about the sparsely settled neighborhood. He caught and sold fish, and specialized in frogs' legs. These were his staple commodity for the spot abounded in frogs. Any night you might hear them in that dismal, scummy marsh, chanting their discordant chorus. He was somewhat like a frog himself, with long, ungainly legs and a sort of flat head with a mouth that reached from ear to ear.

Yet this poor, shiftless soul had saved Westy Martin from a horrible death. One of the scouts who had been forbidden to associate with him owed him his life. There was not one hint of the heroic in this wretched, inefficient man; a squatter upon worthless, unclaimed land. But even his shiftlessness and laziness had done Westy a good turn, for the old door which the man had been too indolent to rehang had enabled him to reach the victim sinking in that deadly marsh.

And the boy was grateful. "You bet I'll never let anybody say anything against you," he said almost threateningly. "Where would I be if it wasn't for you? Gee, that's what I'd like to know! You saved my life, you did, Sam." He did not say Squatter Sam—just Sam.

"Would you want ter come in and get a drink o' milk before you go back? And mebbe wash the dirt off your clothes, like?"

"I should worry about my clothes," laughed Westy.

"If you feel kinder like shaky I'll go 'long the road with you. I don't have ter go inter the camp."

"You don't need to go back with me," Westy said, and then with a note of indignation, he added: "Gee, if you did you come right up into camp; I'd like to see anybody stop you."

They paused just short of the rude abode where the poor man lived, quite alone. Westy could see where the door had blown down; it was the door of a makeshift shed, and its absence exposed the wretched interior where a solitary hen could be seen sitting on a woodpile. An old chair was there with a couple of empty burlap bags in the seat; it had the look of long and constant use.

Suddenly an impulse of prideful independence and retaliatory anger took possession of Westy. "Come on, I'll go in," said he. "I'll drink a glass of milk. Let anybody tell me I can't be friends with *you*—oh boy! Why, where would I be if it wasn't for you? If I can ever do anything for you, I'll show you! I should bother my head about Temple Camp."

"You'd best not say anything about it," said Squatter Sam.

"I'll tell the world, I will," said Westy.

"If you get in trouble you can come here."

"Leave it to me," said Westy.

He made his way up the road which was littered with fallen trees and broken limbs from the recent unprecedented storms. Here and there were little washouts. The rivulet in the gully along the roadside was swollen to the volume of a sizable brook and trickled over on the road in places making many puddles. The road was only a country byway and nothing had been done to clear away the débris.

The marsh in which Westy had all but lost his life was only another manifestation of the havoc caused by these recent rains which had terminated in a record breaking wind storm. Ordinarily the marsh was not a large or dangerous place. But all the low land had been excessively flooded and there was no way of identifying the well known danger spots. And it was into one of these that Westy had sunk as he waded toward the base of the mountain in search of huckleberries. He was doing penance to Roy Blakeley's Silver Fox Patrol for losing in a potato race and had been ordered to secure enough huckleberries to make a pie for its eight hilarious members. "Be thankful you don't have to get enough to feed Pee-wee Harris," Roy had said.

As Westy approached Temple Camp, the big scout community where he spent his summers, he saw a little group of camp councillors standing outside Administration Shack talking with a stranger whom he at first thought to be a visiting scout official. A Ford car stood in the trail which led up through the woods to the Catskill road and in this car sat two young men with surveyors' apparatus. The stranger seemed to be attracting considerable attention from the scouts for there were quite a number of them who stood about listening.

The man was of trim physique, about thirty-five years old, and wore a green khaki uniform with a pleated and belted jacket which fitted him to perfection. A hat of the Rough Rider type with a lead pencil stuck under its cord was tilted on his head in a nonchalant manner. He was tanned almost to the hue of a mulatto and he had a small mustache as black as ebony. A pair of good natured brown eyes sparkled through his rimless spectacles and Westy fancied that he was somewhat enjoying the consternation of the scouts who stood about. As for our hero, he quite forgot for the moment his recent mishap, though several scouts commented on his bedraggled appearance.

"Yes sir," said the stranger, "we'll have to tear down your whole camp and open up the lake two-thirds the way up that hill; carry it way down to that range of mountains and plug up that pass."

"What for?" a startled boy asked.

"Oh, just so some cities can get a drink of water," said the stranger, winking at one of the camp councillors.

"You're not going to tear up *this* camp—*no siree*!" spoke up a small boy with a voice like thunder. "Geeee whiz, you're not going to do that! That's no fair, I don't care who you are." This was Pee-wee Harris, mascot of the camp.

"Oh, is that so?" laughed the stranger, ruffling the little fellow's curly hair. "Well, we won't then; whatever you say, of course."

"Hey, Mister Captain, don't pay any attention to him," said Roy Blakeley, the most uproarious boy at camp. "He doesn't know anything about a drink of water because he lives on chocolate sodas."

"Well, I guess we'll let the camp be," said the stranger in his pleasant, bantering way. "We'll go back out west and kick up a rumpus. You've got a nice place here."

"Yes, and you needn't think you're going to spoil it, either," said the irrepressible Pee-wee, "because anyway my father knows a man that's a lawyer and he works for the government in Washington and he'll stop you—geee whiz!"

"That settles it," laughed the stranger. "Well, I'll say goodbye to you all. I've lived the outdoor life enough so that I can appreciate a place like this. Don't worry, you kids. You can stay here for a week or two yet." He gave another wink at one of the officials, shook hands all around, jumped into the Ford car and was gone. His unexpected call had been quite a diversion.

Tom Slade, the young camp assistant, who had been an attentive listener, gave Pee-wee a good natured shove, then turned on his heel and hastened off about his duties. Westy followed him.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"That's the man that's going to tear down the camp and build a reservoir," said Tom, hurrying along. "What's the matter with *you*—fall in the water? You'd better rustle in and change your duds."

"I'm going to—I got in the marsh and sank down and nearly got killed and Squatter Sam helped me out. But who was that man?"

"What were you doing with Squatter Sam?" Westy told him the whole story. It was characteristic of Tom that he took adventures rather lightly. "Well, I'm glad Sloppy Sam did something useful at last," said he. "Didn't you know enough not to go through the marsh when it was flooded?"

"You needn't say anything against him," said Westy, "because he saved my life and—and I won't let anybody say anything against him."

"That's the way to talk," said Tom, walking so fast that Westy had to run to keep up with him.

"Will you tell me who that man was?" Westy persisted.

"That man," said Tom, "is Captain Richard Winton, army engineer, who builds dams and all that kind of stuff. He's with the Reclamation Service of the government. Now is that all you want to know?"

"What was he doing up here?"

"Kidding Pee-wee Harris."

"No, honest, what was he doing here?"

"He was up here looking around. He's stopping down in Catskill. He's inspecting the Hudson River. He's not satisfied with North America and he's going to make it all over again. When he gets through, the Mississippi River is going to flow into the North Pole. He's going to bring Lake Michigan over and put it in Central Park. He talked about Black Lake as if he could put it in his pocket. Don't ask me what he's up to. I think he has an idea about using the Rock of Gibraltar to plug up the Grand Canyon of Arizona. Anyway he's doing something out in Arizona—a dam or something. He's got troubles of his own, that guy. He doesn't seem to be worrying. If you're asking me, I wouldn't trust him with the equator."

"Will you tell me what he came up here for? Are they going to really do anything with Temple Camp?"

“I wish they were; I’d like to see the whole place flooded with all you fellows included. Why weren’t you here for dinner today?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I don’t see what he came here for.”

“Who’s looking after the launch this week?” Tom snapped.

“I am—and I hiked down every day so far, too.”

“That’s what I thought. All right then, you’ve got the captain wished onto you and you’ll know more about him than I do by the time you’re through. What he wants to do,” Tom continued rather more seriously, “is to chug up and down the creek and squint around and size up the shores—that’s the big idea. Then he’s going to say whether it ought to be dredged or not and what other things they ought to do to it.

“It seems these birds like to pike around just after floods, hunting for trouble. You’d better go into the office and tell them that you’re the one that’s looking after the launch this week and they’ll probably let you take the captain joy riding. It’s all for Uncle Sam. Only don’t mention that you’ve tied up with Sloppy Sam. You’d better go and change your clothes first. Stick to the captain and some day you may help to dump the Rocky Mountains into the Pacific Ocean.”

He did not pause at parting with Westy. Off he strode in his hurried, preoccupied way, picking up a ball which a little tenderfoot had failed to catch and throwing it to the boy’s companion. He then disappeared around the cooking shack.

Westy hardly knew what to make of what Tom had told him in his customary boisterous and half-joking way. Was he indeed to be the one to pilot this stranger in an inspection of neighboring waters?

He hurried to his own patrol cabin, washed and changed his clothes, then went to Administration Shack which housed the office of Temple Camp.

CHAPTER III
A HAPPY START

The creek of which Tom had spoken ran from the camp lake and down into the Hudson at Catskill, a distance of about fifteen miles. But it was not navigable by a motor boat all of the way. For the first mile or two from the lake it was a mere brook; then it broadened into quite a sizable stream, and from this point down to the lordly Hudson a motor boat could be used by anyone who knew the channel.

But Camp Creek, as they called it, was by no means the quiet stream which it seemed. It had fits of temper and at such times would run utterly amuck. After heavy rains it would overflow its banks, and at points where there were abrupt turns it would go careering out of its wonted bed pursuing a gay, rebellious course through the low country.

That was the cause of the trouble down at Squatter Sam's marsh, for at Second Bend, as they called it, the swollen stream jumped its confines and instead of making the turn went straight ahead, flooding an area of farm country and turning Sam's harmless little marsh into a swampy lake.

Now, since Captain Winton and his men were making an inspection of the Hudson, several of the farmers had asked him to come up and look the creek over and say what might be done to prevent these occasional inundations. One of them had told him that the scout camp kept a boat on the creek and his call at Administration Shack had been simply to ascertain whether someone might chug him up and down the creek so that he might look it over.

The camp was very proud of this fine launch, the gift of Mary Temple, daughter of the founder. It was moored downstream a mile or more from camp, for that was as near as they could run it to the camp property.

It was the camp custom to appoint a boy each week to be responsible for the safe keeping of the launch, which was used mostly for fishing down on the Hudson. The caretaker's duty consisted simply of hiking or paddling down to it each day, bailing it out if necessary, and seeing that it was fast to its mooring. A tramp had once bunked in it, and this sort of thing had started the good precautionary custom of daily inspection.

It was Westy's week and naturally, as Tom had said, he would be the one to chug this interesting stranger up and down the creek. He fervently hoped that the vociferous rabble of Temple Camp would not intrude upon the privacy of this scientific cruise.

Westy was a serious boy, interested in big and serious projects. He had been to Yellowstone Park on an honor trip and became interested in the government's fine work of reclamation, game and forest conservation. Also he had been active in a scout campaign for the aid of the Mississippi flood victims. So in a superficial way he knew something of these big undertakings. He felt that now good fortune was more than making amends to him for his recent perilous mishap.

With this in mind he went into the office to lay claim to the privilege of piloting the interesting stranger up and down the creek. "I'm looking after the launch this week," he said, "so I suppose I can be the one to take that army engineer around—unless some grown up person is going to do it. I've run the launch a lot and once I fixed it. I'd like to be the one because there's some questions I want to ask him."

"I don't know anything to prevent," said Councillor Wainwright cheerily. "I suppose Tom Slade's too busy."

"If you leave it to Tom, I'll be the one," said Westy. "Some day I want to go out west and join in that kind of work, forest conservation and all that. I guess he knows all about those things, hey?"

"I think he's a reclamation expert," said the councillor; "irrigation and all that. He's a very interesting man."

"I'm afraid all the scouts will want to go tomorrow," said poor Westy.

"Oh, no, he's strictly business," laughed the councillor. "He's not conducting any Cook's Tours. I dare say he'll have a couple of his own young fellows along. But you can run the launch if you want to; I guess you'll be able to do that. Why do the boys all call you Grandpa, Westy?"

"I guess it's because—maybe—I'm kind of interested in grown-up things. I like to go round with men. I read a lot about forest conservation."

"Yes? Well then you ought to find the captain interesting. He's putting up a big dam somewhere out in Arizona."

"Gee, I'm glad I can be the one," enthused Westy.

"N—no. I hadn't thought about it but as long as you're watching out for the boat this week I suppose you're what we might call the logical choice. I'm glad you spoke of it, Westy. Suppose you get out of here good and early in the morning before any of the scouts are about. Good idea? Here, I'll give you a card to the captain and I'll try to get him on the 'phone tonight so he'll know you're coming. You'll find him at the Half Moon House. He's a bear for discipline, so don't keep him waiting."

Westy was too elated to speak, he just stood there beaming all over as he took the card on which the councillor had written:

CAPTAIN WINTON:

This will introduce to you, Westy Martin, one of our scouts, who will be at your service for the day. He is thoroughly familiar with running our launch.

Temple Camp is very glad to be of service to you in your work.

E. C. Wainwright, *Councillor.*

As Westy went down to camp fire he walked on air. He did not join his troop in its customary spot around the mounting blaze because he was afraid something might be said about the captain and he would have to resort to subterfuge, a thing obnoxious to his frank, honest nature. He was particularly afraid of the terrible Pee-wee Harris who he felt sure would be quite ready to take the whole Reclamation Service under his wing.

Consequently, he sprawled at the feet of old Uncle Jeb Rushmore, instructor in woods lore and pathfinding and gazed abstractedly into the fire, only half hearing the camp fire groups. He saw himself discovering and plugging up a tiny but growing leak in a great dam out west (for that is what heroes are supposed to do) and in his wakeful dreaming he caught a band of robbers out in Montana who were setting fire to a forest reserve. Also he saw himself riding on a wild mustang down the shores of the Mississippi to tell the people that a levee was crumbling!

Poor Westy, he was always thinking of such big things that he never got much pleasure from little things. Others could get a day's enjoyment "kidding" Pee-wee Harris or going on some nonsensical hike. But Westy was one of those boys who saw big and dreamed of participation in great achievements. And how he counted on this momentary, insignificant affiliation with a man who was busy altering the face of nature! How adventurous to follow him on his country-wide missions! Poor Westy, all he was going to do was pilot this miracle worker up and down the creek in the Temple Camp launch. But if he had been about to start to Arizona with him he could hardly have been more joyously elated.

He was up and out at exactly twenty minutes past four in the morning. He intended to hike down the creek to where the launch was moored and give it a thorough sprucing up in honor of his distinguished passenger. Then he would just sit in it till time to start off down the Hudson. He thought he might as well do this, since he had not been able to sleep.

The camp seemed quiet in the gray, early morn; it looked *different*. How strange the cooking shack looked with its big board shutters closed tight! How deserted the diving board, pointing out into the lake like a long, ghastly finger! The rowboats crowded together at the float, blown one against

another by the night breeze, seemed to seek warmth and company of each other like a huddled flock of sheep. And the clanking of their chains and oarlocks in the still and breaking light was strangely audible.

He followed the trail around the lake until he reached the outlet on the other side. Here the creek was just a tiny rivulet but after that it gradually widened and its winding course brought him to the point where motor boating became possible.

Around the next bend was the *Scout* tied up under an overhanging willow. He could spend about an hour there brushing off the cushions, sponging out the bilge, and tidying up the boat generally. He had it figured out that he could be at the Hudson Boating Club by eight o'clock and that would be about the right time. To make sure that his card of introduction was safe in his pocket he felt of it carefully. This he had done two or three times on his way down the creek. Never since the day he had been awarded his trip to the Yellowstone had he been so expectant, so happy.

He approached the bend, running, just from sheer exuberance. It was one of those sharp, freakish, treacherous bends where the creek overflowed after heavy rains. But now it flowed obediently in its channel.

There was the big spreading willow tree, reflected in the water which now shimmered in the early sunlight. But the launch was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER IV
AN EMPTY THREAT

Westy gazed about in blank wonder. The boat was gone. The heavy staple in the tree which held the chain and padlock had been wrenched out by a prying instrument; he could see where the bark was chafed by the pressure of the lever.

His first distressing thought was that of course this completed the obstacle to his much cherished plan. "*Be on time, don't keep him waiting!*" he remembered these words of Councillor Wainwright. Well, he could not go at all. "*He's a bear on discipline;*" he remembered those words also.

Westy thought of Captain Winton as an army man; one who would be intolerant of delays and excuses. Here was a fine climax of his happy expectations. He would just not show up and Captain Winton would give a little sneering comment about scout efficiency. Of all the men in the world, this was the one for whom Westy would have done almost anything rather than disappoint him. But what could he do?

Only one thing. He must go back to camp and report that the fine camp launch of which he was the temporary guardian, had been stolen. Of course he knew he was not to blame, yet he felt that he was responsible for the situation. Being a conscientious and earnest boy, he took all the responsibility of his appointment. Excuses, explanations; how futile and unavailing were these! Such men as Captain Winton were interested in results only, he thought. "Suppose I drop dead?" the sentinel put up to Napoleon. "You're not here to do that," answered the emperor.

Of course they would not be hard with him at camp. He had hiked down and inspected the boat each day. But it had never been stolen during Bert Winton's week—or Harry Benson's, or Charlie Carlysle's. Poor Westy sat down on a protruding root and buried his troubled face in his hands. His movement started a lazy turtle that went tumbling into the water, causing him to look up quickly, as if the sudden splash were a hopeful sign.

A shadow crossed his face—there was no sign of the boat. Well, no one would condemn him. Yet no one would say, "These scouts, they never fail." *Fail!* What a wretched word, whether one is to blame or not. That's the thing that people are supposed *not* to do—*fail*.

"All I did was be a sort of messenger boy," he said gloomily. "Why didn't I fix the chain around the tree after that bunch came in yesterday? Then he'd have had to pull up the whole tree, whoever he is—*Gosh blame*

him! I just didn't have sense enough. *Resources*, that's what Pee-wee Harris would say. I guess he's a better scout than I am at that! Well, I'll just go back and tell them—Wainwright will be decent enough about it."

But he didn't go back, he just sat there, throwing one pebble after another in the water. "I'm a false alarm," he growled; "I'm a flat tire." Then suddenly a forlorn hope came to him.

Perhaps Captain Winton and his men had come up and taken the boat! But he knew this was absurd. No, he might as well face the fact—it had been stolen. It was characteristic of Westy that he took full responsibility.

He did not take refuge in his limited duty as a sort of inspector. He said he had been responsible for the launch and he blamed himself for this sequel of his inefficiency. All things considered, it is pretty safe to repose one's trust in such a boy. He may fall once, but he is safe.

He felt utterly ashamed. But second to this feeling was his keen disappointment at losing his chance of having this adventurous engineer for his passenger, and improving acquaintance with him. "Serves me right," he said. "I'm a flivver. There's chain enough to go round the tree twice." Then, after a pause: "*I'd like to get my two peepers on the guy that did it!*" He could not bring himself to go back to camp, so he just sat there throwing stones in the water.

But Westy was not a "flivver." He had done one very good thing; he had given himself plenty of time. He had arisen very early. And in a difficulty, time is always priceless! He might (oh, how hard he thought)—he might hike down to Catskill and tell his story to the steward of the Boating Club, who perhaps would let him use a launch. Would he? Hardly. Westy was only a boy after all. Doubtless they would loan a boat to Captain Winton, but that would not help Westy.

Of one thing he was now resolved—he would not go back to Temple Camp—he would not just do nothing. He threw a big stone in the water to celebrate his resolution and the splash from it went all over him and aroused him to stand erect and think of action.

"I'm going to hike down to Catskill," he said with fine spirit. "I'll know what to do when I get there." He took out his card of introduction and read it for the dozenth time. "*This will introduce* Westy Martin, one of our scouts, who will....

"I will!" he shouted. "*I will!* I don't care how, but I *will*! Nobody—thieves or anything—can stop me. I'll dope out a way. And if I don't do anything else I'll find out who stole that boat and I'll have him *locked up*! I'll go back to camp and tell 'em that much anyway. I'll—I'll do something...."

By this time he had gotten around the bend and was following the trail which bordered the creek. Suddenly he stopped short. There, a short distance downstream was the camp launch crossways in the middle of the stream with a lanky figure standing on the forward deck apparently trying to pole it with the long boat hook. There was no mistaking that figure—it was Squatter Sam. Everything always went wrong with Squatter Sam and something was evidently wrong now.

"What are you doing in that—in the boat?" Westy called from the nearest point on shore. "Gee, that's a nice thing! What are you doing with her?"

"She ain't got no gas into her," called Sam, seemingly unperturbed at being caught red handed. "Ain't much use—these here things, without gas, I reckon."

"Pole it over this way," called Westy in mingled anger and elation.

"'Tain't so easy."

"Yes, it is," was the peremptory response. "Take one of the oars and get in the stern. Hurry up, she's going down on the current."

"Kinder thought she wuz," called Sam.

The simple task of overcoming the effects of the current was too much for Squatter Sam. But by dint of a vigorous use of the oar he did at last get the boat close enough to the shore so that the angry boy could catch hold of the long boat hook which Sam held out.

"It's good the channel's on this side," said Westy, "or you'd have beached her and I would have had to swim out. Let her alone now," he said coldly. "I'll fasten her."

"She ain't got no gas," said Sam. "I seed her floatin' down where I was bobbin' for eels an' she drifted over ter shore an' so I——"

"No, you didn't," said Westy sharply. "You pried out the staple from the tree. I suppose you thought nobody'd be down here so early."

It was characteristic of Squatter Sam that he offered no defence. Or perhaps he offered the best defence. "That was a close squeak you had yesterday, huh; me an' you. I knowed yer was the same youngster when I seed you on shore."

"Did you take it for fishing?" said Westy, almost gently.

"Yer know I'd put her back. You wouldn't go ter callin' me a thief. Why would I be sellin' fish fer an honest living? Yer ain't goin' ter tell on me up ter the camp?"

Westy paused just a moment. "No, I'm not going to tell on you," he said with unmistakable feeling in his voice. "I'd look nice doing that—after yesterday. Gee, I wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for you. But listen, Sam, you'd better get away from these parts——"

"You're goin' ter——"

"No, I'm not going to," said Westy with spirit. "You saved my life and I'm not going to tell on you—*never*! I'm saying it because kind of, I'm your friend—no matter when it is or where it is. But honest, Sam, you better beat it. Everybody around here is talking about you. The first thing you know you'll get in trouble. Don't worry about this, leave it to me.

"Here, I'll shake hands with you," he said, "and that shows I don't break my word—only everybody's got the knife in you, Sam. And I'm sorry if I sounded mad. You needn't worry, if I broke my word it would be worse than steal—taking the boat. Only if I were you I'd move away pretty soon, what do *you* care? I'm not like that swamp—treacherous."

"I knowed you wasn't," said poor Sam.

So they shook hands, these two, and the poor, ill-favored disciple of makeshift shambled off with that funny sideways gait that somehow seemed to bespeak his weakness and inefficiency. But one true thing he had said: "*Ain't much use, these things, without gas, I reckon.*" Ignorant and bungling always, he had in his vain attempt to get the boat started turned on and off every valve and lever and petcock in sight.

He had not begun these experiments until he had loosed the boat from shore. Then he had turned on the petcock under the gas tank and there was not so much as a drop of fuel left aboard. Truly, indeed, a motor boat is not of much use without gas.

CHAPTER V
RESOLVE

In ten seconds Westy had forgotten all about Squatter Sam. Yet later he often thought of this poor, shiftless soul and wondered to what pastures new he had resorted. By the man's own account he had been a smuggling sailor, a wandering farm hand, an unprosperous chicken farmer and the proprietor of a lunch wagon. Also he had been a professional raiser of mushrooms and at one time had great faith in bee farming: "If yer can only get a good start." Evidently he had always kept close to the soil; his shiftless bent ran that way.

Westy lost not a minute. Joyous at this sequel of his apparently hopeless predicament he pushed the launch off shore, put the oarlocks in their sockets, and essayed the difficult task of rowing the launch. The oars were carried only for emergency; it was almost impossible to get anywhere by such means. The heavy craft turned this way and that, and though it flowed with the current, it was out of the question to make headway because he could not keep a straight course. Now it flopped against one shore, then against the other. To go twelve or thirteen miles in this way was not to be thought of.

Yet Westy worked under the impetus of a towering resolve, and he strove like a galley slave. Soon he paused and cut the tiller ropes from the wheel inventing a device which would have done credit to Pee-wee Harris, the world's greatest boy inventor. He tied an end of the steering rope to either end of the thickest section of a fishing rod. The section was about three feet long and this he held midway in his mouth. Thus by moving his head to right or left he could central the rudder while he rowed. It made rowing much easier and saved the time involved in pushing off shore every minute or two.

But rowing a motor boat, even with the current, is a thankless task and his panting exhaustion soon told him that he could not hope to get far in this way. He had begun rowing because he could not just do nothing, and he could not, or would not, return to camp. But soon he had an idea.

If he could row this bulky craft (it had never seemed so big as now) for about three miles, he would come to Blackmeyer's farm. Then by cutting up across the fields he would, yes he was sure he would, come out on the country road just about——

He paused to think, weary, panting, his heart pounding like a hammer. “I’ll come out—that big, white house, sure I will! I’ll come out near that and then I’ll be near that hot dog stand where they have a gas pump—sure I will!”

The thought of it fired him with new hope and even stimulated his tired muscles. “I—I can get a can of gas there, all right. Gee, it’s good I’m not like most of the bunch at camp—never a cent in their pockets.”

He roused himself to continuous, intensive effort now. It is so much easier to work when there is light ahead! Hopeless effort is so deadening. “That’s a cinch,” he said. “Gee, but I’ll be stiff tomorrow—I should worry though.”

But it was not a cinch; it was grinding toil. His shoulders ached, even his mouth ached from holding the section of fishing rod between his teeth. But his fine buoyant spirit was not to be broken. “Three miles, maybe four,” he panted. “That—that isn’t so much.”

But it was enough. Motor boats are not made for rowing. Against the current he could hardly have made any progress at all. Even as it was, each tree that he passed receded, oh, so slowly. He seemed to acquire a thorough acquaintance with each little area of adjacent landscape. He was virtually abreast of an old icehouse so long that it seemed almost like home.

It was strange that through all this herculean effort he did not utter to himself one condemnatory word about Squatter Sam. “I like gasoline so much that I could drink it,” he panted. “If—if I could only keep my feet propped, blame it all.” There was no foot bar, of course, and with each stroke he slipped. Moreover the boat was too wide and he could not properly handle the oars. It was slow, laborious progress, but he kept at it. “I—I remind myself of—the—the Volga boatmen,” he gasped.

WESTY ATTEMPTS THE DIFFICULT TASK OF ROWING THE LAUNCH.

At the end of an hour he had gone about a mile and a half. He made this calculation from an old dead tree that he remembered. “Fifty-fifty,” he groaned; “half-way. I—I wonder what time Wainwright ’phoned him I’d be there. I’ll—I’ll do it—all right. It’s—cinch.” He paused for a few seconds to

rest and looked around downstream. “Good I remembered about that gas station—all—right.”

The sun was now flickering on the water with its full summer brightness. It would be a hot day. Here and there a silvery fish popped out of the water, a momentary glittering sheen, and went tumbling in again. Then a startled frog precipitately concluded his sunbath, and darted into the depths. And the birds made clamorous chorus in the trees as if they resented this intrusion into their domain.

The boy rowed on—on—on....

He was almost exhausted when he approached what they called Perch Hole Bend. His shoulders throbbed, his head ached, and the blisters were so bad on one hand that he had to wrap his handkerchief around the oar handle. Also, more dangerous to his purpose than anything else, he had a cruel stitch in his side which caused him excruciating pain with each backward motion. He was forced to pause and get some relief from this. But so soon as he resumed rowing, it began again, stabbing him like a dagger.

But in time, it seemed an age, he came abreast of the wide, green fields of Blackmeyer’s farm and tied the launch to a tree. For just a few happy moments he threw himself down on the grass, stretched out his arms and legs and rested. With every muscle sore and weary, he lay on his back looking up through the foliage at the little glint of blue sky. “*Oh boy!*” he ejaculated in heavenly relaxation.

In half a minute he was up and running across the fields. The stitch in his side returned when he ran, and he had to walk. But his arms were at rest and oh the joy of just letting them hang loose!

He knew now that he had time enough and congratulated himself that he had arisen early. He would reach Catskill at about nine o’clock. He felt again to make sure that his precious card was safe in his pocket. It would take him about ten minutes to reach the road and probably twenty to trudge back to the river with a five gallon can of gasoline.

He took a short cut through a bramble bush and tore his scout suit in several places. Also he got a cruel scratch on his bare arm. But what cared he? There, a quarter of a mile distant, was the road; he could see an auto speeding along. And there was the roof of the white house! All was well at last. Everything would be easy from now on. Soon he was upon the road and hurrying along toward the little refreshment stand with its solitary gas tank. Suppose it should be closed up, as such places in the country are apt to be on off days!

But it was open—there was the sign WAFFLES and HOT DOGS, the familiar sign. And there was the fat lady who presided at this roadside Paradise.

"I want to get five gallons of gas," Westy panted. "I've got a boat down at the river and it's out of gas—I rowed almost all the way down from Temple Camp. Will you please lend me a can? I've got to go down to Catskill, there's an army officer waiting for me down there. Here, I'll show you the card!"

"I don't know as I've got a can," said the lady.

"Sure you have, you *must* have!" said Westy, excitedly.

"Well, I'll see."

In a couple of minutes he was tugging a big five gallon can across the fields. He was too excited and elated to feel the brunt of his burden until his enthusiasm at having procured it began to wear off.

It was almost as strenuous as rowing a motor boat. It knocked against his leg and pained the already sore shoulder of whichever arm he used to carry it.

Soon he had to set it down every few yards and rest. It was slow and difficult work. It seemed that he would never reach the river. So he paused at a tree and with his jack knife cut off a branch with which to carry the can over his shoulder. He was about to start off in this comparatively comfortable fashion when someone hailed him and there was the lord and autocrat of the Blackmeyer acres striding down across the field.

"Well sir," said he with brisk anger. "I spose you know you're trespassin' on these here premises and committing vandalism too! What are you doing with that branch out o' one of my trees? Now look a-here, young feller. If you ain't got no respect for the property of others, I'll *learn* yer to respect them rights!"

"I was just...."

"I don't care a ginger cookie what yer wuz intendin' ter do," snapped the angry farmer. "I been patchin' up fences and fixin' grape vines—gol darn the whole pesky tribe of you, trampin' down corn and stealin' apples——"

"Will you please let me tell you?" Westy pleaded. "Then if you say I was wrong——"

"I say it *right now*, young feller! An' if you got anything ter say yer can say it to the justice of the peace, an' I'll hev my say too, by gol, and I'll have him to learn you a lesson. Now you set down that can and that there stick and come along with me."

CHAPTER VI
THE GOAL

The justice of the peace was a pleasant, easy-going sort of man who listened patiently to Westy and said, "Well, of course you mustn't trespass, but I suppose the flood waters trespass too when they overflow our lands. Isn't that so, Neighbor Blackmeyer? And if the engineers are going to try and do something to prevent that, why I suppose we want to do all we can to help them."

He smiled pleasantly at captor and captive. "So suppose we let our young friend from camp go on his way, and he'll give us his word not to trespass again. How'll that do?"

"When I say I'll do a thing—I'll do it," said Westy.

"All right then, we understand you to say that—sentence suspended. And tell the captain we hope he can give our county authorities a few good tips. Now you'd better run along my boy."

It had never occurred to Farmer Blackmeyer that water may be a more devastating trespasser than a boy scout. He seemed a little ashamed of his precipitous haste and anger. As for Westy, he had not lost much time, but he had suffered a serious scare at this interruption of his plans.

He was soon speeding down the creek under power and the chugging of the exhaust sounded like music to his ears. How delightful it was just to sit in the bow, steering! How luxurious he felt as the trim craft obeyed his slightest turn of the wheel!

She was not clumsy and balky now, but fleet and eager and buoyant under the inspiriting mandate of the great god, Gasoline. Westy even tooted the whistle as a token of his leisurely captaincy. The ripples from the *Scout's* speeding prow rolled over to either shore and gently stirred the undergrowth as she danced merrily along. Her flag waved gaily.

Holding the wheel with one hand Westy reached back and brushed off the cushions with a whiskbroom where the muddy oars had soiled them. The clock on the forward coaming showed half past eight. She was ploughing along at about twenty miles an hour. Everything was all right.

Westy chugged around into the wide bosom of the stately Hudson (how small the gallant little *Scout* seemed here) and up to the float of the Boating Club. "I'm going to tie her up here a few minutes; is it all right?" he said gaily to the steward.

In five minutes he presented himself at the hotel and waited, nervously expectant, while the captain was called. He thought ruefully that he would make a rather sorry appearance before this trim stickler; he bethought him how soldiers are subject to inspection and reprimand for carelessness in their attire. But Westy Martin never made a greater mistake, for indeed he presented a fine appearance.

Flushed and eager eyed, he was a splendid picture of briskness and energy. He had fortunately forgotten to roll down his sleeves and there was a long scratch on his brown arm. His scout suit was bespattered with mud, his shoes were covered with it. One stocking had been almost annihilated in its encounter with brambles and the rest of his clothes were in a sorry state.

His hat had blown off when he was on the way down and he had not paused to recover it. Also his hair was woefully dishevelled. And he knew so little about effects that he felt shaky as he saw the trim, uniformed figure of the captain approaching him. But he made the scout salute with fine spirit and dignity as he handed the card to him.

"I came to take you up the creek in the launch—it's over at the boat club. I hope I'm early enough, I had a lot of trouble. Somebody was using the launch and let all the gas out of the tank and I had to row it down to Blackmeyer's Farm—I'll show you where that is—some job! Then I went up across lots to the road and got some gas and carried it back and the farmer took me to a judge for trespassing and he let me off because he said that water trespasses too, so then I got started right and here I am—it's good I got up early. I guess I look like a hobo, hey?"

Captain Winton of the Reclamation Service seemed to like this exuberant explanatory outburst. "So you rowed the motor boat, huh? About how far was that?"

"Oh, about maybe five miles, but anyway that was better than going back. Go ahead, no matter what—that's what I say!"

"That's what *you* say, eh?"

"You can do a thing if you have to—*believe me!*"

"So?"

"Sure, and I'm glad I told the judge about floods, hey?"

"Y—yes, that was good." The captain was observing him amusedly, but shrewdly. He looked over at the hotel clerk and winked.

"I got all dolled up too, to take you," said Westy naively. "Now look at me."

The captain was looking. "You should see me when I'm building levees on the Mississippi," he said. "I think I've gotten you beat on rags."

"Oh *boooy*!" enthused Westy. "Do you think maybe I could ever go out there on that kind of work?"

“What would they do then if they had no gas, and nobody to row the boat five miles?”

“Honest, do you think I could ever go out there? You build big dams too, don’t you? That’s what I heard.”

“A few.”

“*Oh gee*, wouldn’t I like to go out and work on those!”

“Well, stranger things have happened. So you told the judge about floods, eh? I think we’ll have to get you to go and talk to Congress about appropriations.” He winked again at the hotel clerk.

“No sir, no indoor stuff for me,” said Westy.

“The big open spaces for you, eh? Well, shall we take a little run upstream and see what’s the matter?”

“Sure, and I’m to do anything you want me to do.”

“Well, I think I’d just like to have you talk to me a little while and give me your ideas.” Then for the third time, he winked at the hotel clerk, who stood behind his counter laughing.

CHAPTER VII
APRIL FOOLED?

Soon they were chugging up the creek, the captain sitting astern, smoking a cigarette. He seemed very leisurely and unconcerned for a man who built great dams and stopped floods. He did not talk as Westy had pictured an engineer talking. Perhaps the creek was a very small problem to him. He seemed rather more interested in Westy.

"Any fish in the stream?" he asked.

"Sure, perch and sunfish."

"Creek seems to jump the traces here and there, eh?"

"You ought to see it after it rains," said Westy. "What can you do to it?"

"Oh, throw up little levees at the turns. Didn't you ever notice how a railroad track tilts up where there's a turn? Best thing to do would be to let her make a new course for herself—path of least resistance. Know what that means? Only that would be trespassing, wouldn't it? We could do lots of things if we didn't have any farmers or any Congress, couldn't we?" He glanced about as he smoked his cigarette; he seemed very casual.

Westy thought he did not like Congress.

"There's where some of the wild water comes down," said the captain, pointing off to the mountain side. "Why don't they take that right straight into the Hudson? Old Henry's big enough to take care of it. This is like filling a teacup with a fire hose." He seemed to be talking to himself quite as much as to Westy, but Westy enjoyed it. Except that he had a quaint way of seeming to blame Westy for everything. "Why the dickens don't they carry all those freshets through that pass up there, and down over? What's the use setting a house on fire and then putting it out?"

Westy did not understand, exactly, but he was fascinated. "What's wild water?" he asked.

"Oh, it's water that comes down from the mountains and has to be diverted. You want to know what diverted means?"

"Does it mean, made to go a certain way?"

"Good!"

"How do they divert it?"

"Usually by having debates about it."

After this the captain withdrew within himself and concentrated his attention on the creek and the neighboring landscape. Westy sensed that he did not care to be disturbed, and he just chugged slowly upstream.

"This is as far as we can go," he said finally.

"All right, let's turn around and go back."

It was the same returning, the captain remaining silent, scrutinizing the creek and the neighboring mountains. Finally he aroused himself and relaxed into pleasantries.

"You catch any muskrats? They've got the shores all honey-combed, haven't they?" He seemed not to miss anything.

"Ought to be some trees planted here to prevent erosion," he said.

"What's erosion?" asked Westy.

"Loose earth—slides. Clogs up the streams."

"I don't see how trees would help."

"Now that's a fine thing for a scout to say! Don't you know that the roots hold the soil intact? Don't you know why they put straw in bricks?"

Westy was squelched. He waited until the captain seemed to have concluded his inspection, then said, "Honest, do you think maybe I could ever go on reclamation work? Are those big dams for irrigation?"

"That's what they are. How old are you?"

"I'll be seventeen."

"When?"

"This year."

"Well, there isn't any reason why you couldn't do it. Now you seem to me to be a pretty likely sort of boy. I like the way you blew in after all the trouble you had. If you're asking me for a job, I say no. But you said that when you start on a thing you always go ahead. Didn't you say that?"

"Yes, I did and I meant it," said Westy.

"All right, if that's so, how can I stop you? Now out in Arizona where they don't have enough rain to wash your face with, your old Uncle Sam is putting up a big dam in the mountains so the farmers down below can raise their crops. It's one great, big job. We're a big happy family out there—camping——"

"Oh booooy——"

"Now you keep still and let me talk. I've heard a good many words in my time, but words don't build dams. If you want to talk, go to Congress. There are one million different kinds of jobs out there, planning, surveying, draining, hauling, building, record keeping, errand running, inspecting—and you ask me if you could have a chance. Why that's what there isn't anything *but*—chances to work. But if you expect me to come and pat you on the shoulder like a boy in a story book, and offer you a job which will end by your saving the dam from being blown up by robbers, I can't hold out any such prospects."

Westy was sufficiently subdued, but he made bold to say, “I’m not crazy like that and I really mean it. I went to Yellowstone Park and——”

“All right now, I’ll call your bluff,” said the captain good humoredly. “And let me say first that I like you; you did a good job this morning. Now first, there’s no chance at all for Danny Darewell with Uncle Sam—get that? So if you’ve been reading story books, forget it. And I’ll make you a proposition—and I bet I’ll never see you again. Here’s where Deadwood Dick on the Big Dam falls down.”

“I bet I don’t—didn’t I——”

“Yes, you did and that’s why I’m wasting my time talking to you. Now here’s the real way to begin—do you want to know the real way to begin? All right. The way Dan Dreadnought would do would be to start with the President’s appointment. Nix. When you get back home you write to the Reclamation Service in Washington and ask ’em to send you the *Reclamation Record*—that’s a paper. You’ll get one each month and I want you to read it. You’ll see articles and pictures about the big work that’s going on out west. You’ll see pictures of me in overalls.”

“Oh boooy!” said Westy.

“Now here’s the proposition. I’ve got your card right here and I’m going to keep it. You’ve done a very good little job today and I won’t forget it. I never forget anything, strains, pressures, bags of cement, gasless motor boats—boys. Now you read the *Reclamation Record* all winter and you’ll find it’s better reading than Broncho Bill on the Ranch.

“In the spring, not later than the first of April you write to me and tell me you’ve been reading up and that you’ve made up your mind *good and sure* that you want to join the Reclamation Service. Have your father write me too, to say it’s O. K. And if you do that I’ll take you along out west with my gang and heaven help you if you don’t make good. If you send me such a letter on the first of April next, I’ll say I’m April fooled.

“Now I’ll keep your card and here’s mine—Reclamation Service, Washington, D. C. By that time you’ll be seventeen years old, and I bet six doughnuts I never hear from you again. Now let’s hear no more about the Boy Scouts in Arizona. Chug over there till I look inside that cove. If they dried these marshy places up they wouldn’t have so many mosquitoes.”

“Yes sir,” said Westy.

CHAPTER VIII
AS GOOD AS HIS WORD

Captain Winton was wrong for once. He was indeed April fooled for Westy had kept his promise. He had foregone a good deal of winter sport so that he could devote all his spare time to the *Reclamation Record* and before the blustery winds of March had died down he felt that he was capable of doing his bit with the captain's gang.

And so it was that on the fifteenth of April he found his dream beginning to materialize. He was sitting beside the captain in the train—actually sitting there and on the way. In a few moments it would no longer be a dream, it would be a reality. Arizona and——

"The next is Nancy—next stop Nancy."

The brakeman closed the door with a bang and came staggering through the car, grasping the seat backs to right and left of him and trying to accommodate his movements to the jarring and swaying of the train. It was just making the bend east of Lowland Canal and went rattling from there over to Nancy station.

Westy rose and stretched himself, then brushed some of the penetrating Arizona sand from his clothing.

"Are we nearly there?" he asked.

"In a few minutes," the captain answered. "Quite a distance from Bridgeboro, eh?"

"Boy, I never knew you could travel so far on one railroad. I sure didn't."

"You could take the rails we've traveled over and wrap 'em around Great Britain and tie 'em in a bow. See those slate-colored hills over there, Westy? Gray Mountain Reservation is up that way. Grab your suit case and I'll take the tripod. They'll be waiting to welcome you and me."

Westy felt in his pocket to make sure that the money his father had given him was intact. Mr. Martin had said something about holding on to it in case of a rainy day, though, to be sure, there are few enough rainy days in Arizona. He felt strangely excited, now that the end of the long journey was at hand.

A number of one-story frame buildings were grouped about the station at Nancy, and on one of these, evidently a hotel, was an enormous sign:

HOWDY, BUD!

"What'd I tell you?" laughed the captain.

"Does it— It doesn't mean——"

"Every stranger out here is Buddy, Bud for short. That's just to let you know you're welcome, no matter who you are. That's the way they do things in Arizona."

Nancy stood on land as flat as a checkerboard. To the east, great gray hills rose, with here and there some giant peak touched with the first crimson rays of sunset. And for a quarter of a mile or so, plain wooden houses could be seen standing well apart from one another and between them and beyond them a vast gray openness with isolated bushes here and there.

As they passed around the hotel another cordial sign attracted Westy's attention. It read, FREE BOARD EVERY DAY THE SUN DOES NOT SHINE. Obviously the people of Arizona had implicit faith in their climate for they made the most liberal offers on the weather probabilities, another sign reading FREE CIGARS WHEN IT RAINS.

In front of the hotel was a heavy wagon with a hooped canvas top. Upon it were painted the letters U. S., and Westy noticed that the pole was drawn out and no horses were visible.

Out from the hotel strode an enormous, smooth-faced man with eyes that twinkled in his expansive visage. His lips turned up at the ends in a shrewd, fixed smile and in the corner of his mouth was a cigar pointing upward which seemed almost to be one of his features, so necessary was it to his expression. He wore a gray flannel shirt and a cowboy hat. It seemed to Westy that he was singularly easy in his greeting of two people who had come such a long way and whose arrival ought to be something of an event.

"Hello, Bob!" said the captain.

"Howdy, Cap'n," the other drawled.

"Westy," said the captain, "this is Mr. Merton. He's water-master. You have to keep on the right side of him or you won't pull much of a stroke around here.

"This is Westy Martin, Bob. He's here to give us a hand but he's still an engineer in the chrysalis stage. He's seen something of the damage water can do, and now he's going to see the use it can be put to. I'll dump him on you, Bob."

Mr. Merton screwed his cigar farther up into the corner of his mouth and smiled down upon Westy. "Like to sleep in that thing, I bet, wouldn't yer now?" he drawled, amused at Westy's notice of the deserted wagon.

"Yes, I would," said Westy. "Are we going to the dam tonight, huh?"

"Tomorrer mornin'," answered the water-master.

Mr. Merton went his way and the captain stayed with Westy until he had been shown to a small, neat room in the hotel. “You won’t mind eating supper alone will you, Westy?” the captain asked. “There’s a lot to be done and I’m going to grab a bite and tend to things before dark. You can turn in whenever you like, but be down here at sunrise in the morning, unless you want to hike it for fifty miles.”

“No thanks,” Westy smiled and he watched the captain walk out the door and leave him.

After supper he returned to his room and felt for the first time since leaving home, a twinge of homesickness. During the long journey he had thought only of how his dreams were all coming true but now in this Arizona twilight he felt just a little bit alone. He had never been away and entirely alone and as he was a real every-day boy it was to be expected.

“I’ll get over it,” he smiled in the gathering dusk. “I won’t want to go home again—I’d like to bet I won’t.”

But it would take another day for him to get used to the solitude of sage and purple and he knew that sleep was out of the question for him that night. He stood looking out of the window at the vast, new country.

It was very quiet outside. There wasn’t the familiar springtime croaking of the frogs that he could hear in the marshes at home. Near at hand he heard the occasional stamping of horses in their stalls, and before the door of the hotel the lumbering old wagon still stood. Its hooped canvas roof looked like the sprayhood of a motorboat, and its tall pole stood up, spectral in the dim light.

Westy was attracted to that wagon. He thought it must be cozy inside and wished that they could start that night so that he could feel the thrill of rattling across the country roads in the darkness. He decided that he would just have to give it the once over.

Cautiously he tiptoed from his room and stole out into the night. No one was about so he boldly stepped up on the rear step of the wagon and peered inside.

There was straw on the floor and a heavy Indian blanket. He could see boxes and other articles stored on shelves, and two huge leather bags hanging in the corner. Two rifles and a fire-ax hung from the hoop ribs. It looked very inviting.

Westy lifted himself inside and peered about in the darkness. A hinged partition, forming a back for the driver’s seat, separated the body from the front part of the wagon. There was a suggestion of gypsy life about this rough but comfortable looking interior. It spoke to Westy of the old Wild West and of pioneers crossing the prairies.

He lay down on the straw and pulled the blanket over him—just to see how it would seem. He had no definite intention of remaining there for the balance of the night, but he must have fallen into a doze for presently he was half roused by the swaying and creaking of the wagon as some one climbed into the seat beyond the partition.

"Good place to sit as any," said a voice, and by the time Westy was sufficiently wide awake to realize that he was eavesdropping he had become so interested in the conversation that he could not bring himself to make known his presence.

"Well," said a second voice, "I don't see why you didn't tip him off."

"'Cause I knew him, that's why."

"He might have dickered with the Gov'ment for water, and no secret, and who could say the tunnel wasn't his to use?"

"I'd rother he'd pay me than the Government. When you hear of me telling a guy, you'll know he's the kind'll deal with *me*. Suppose I'd have told him, now? He'd of paid his rates, and been glad enough to do it. And every blamed desert-land entryman down that way would have to pay *his* rates, and where'd I be? I'd have 'bout as much out of it as the petrified mummies that dug the tunnel—that's how much *I'd* have. I'll get what the government owes me or know why."

"It's a pretty risky business," said the other.

"Risky when you're dealing with a dumb-bell, yes. But I know how to hold my cards, I do. Why, if I'd have sized him up right, you don't suppose he'd of been growin' cactus these six months, do you? He could have had the short-rations water six months ago. But he was for driving to church here in Nancy and shouting about Uncle Sam and starving to death on dry farming all the while. Well, he did it, and now he's east selling his land—that's where *he* is."

"All because you didn't like his looks, hey?"

"All because he caught the same bug as they've all got around here—shouting 'Uncle Sam, home builder,' and 'three cheers,' and all that junk. I had *my* experience with Uncle Sam."

"Uncle Sam's all right," said the other.

"All right for them up at Carey that's got pull, yes. They're getting their money right along. But *me*—I'm out with them for good and all."

"Well you know how the Cap is. He won't stand for your line. Between you and me——"

"Between me and Easy Street there's just about fifteen feet of earth," the principal speaker interposed. "And there it'll stay till I get the bucks." The other laughed. "It's kind of a grab-bag, it seems to me," he said. "You don't know who you'll get next. It may be ten years before he sells his land."

“Well, the tunnel’s waited a few years and none the worse for it, and it can wait a couple more. I’ll wait and take my chance on the next owner. If I pull a freak I’ll go on waiting and he’ll dry farm it, and shout ‘Uncle Sam’ like all the rest of ’em, and starve—like I’m doing and have his eyes blown full of sand like——”

“Did he clear away his sage?” the other interrupted.

“Every blooming bush of it.”

“Well,” said the other decisively, “I wash my hands of it. There mayn’t be overmuch water yet, but I reckon there’s enough for me to wash my hands of a deal like that.”

“Say, you’re on the level, ain’t you?”

“Oh, go ahead. You needn’t worry about me. We’re old friends, you ’n me—only your line ain’t my line. I guess I’m spoiled,” he added. “I worked for Uncle Sam too long and I guess the old guy’s got me in a rut. I reckon I couldn’t put one like that over on him.”

“Well, you’re the only one that knows,” said the other man, forcefully. “I’ve taken to carrying a gat—it sort o’ keeps me company—now that I’m on my uppers.”

This ghastly hint about closed the subject. After that they talked for a while on other matters and then climbed down and walked off beyond the freight station. Westy watched them with a curious feeling.

What did it mean? And who were they? He hadn’t any idea what they were talking about except that in a hazy sort of way he gleaned that there was some scheme afoot to swindle the government and the one man was too loyal to go into it. He wondered what the tunnel could be and who were the “petrified mummies” that had dug it.

It was all too much for him to think of, so he crawled out of the wagon and upstairs to his room. Five minutes afterward he was sound asleep.

CHAPTER IX
BOB MERTON TALKS

The chill of the night was not yet passed when the lumbering wagon, drawn by two horses, pulled out of Nancy. For about two hours and a half they journeyed over a desert where no vegetation was to be seen save ugly sage-brush and cactus.

"After we hit Oldfield," explained Mr. Merton, "we'll begin to climb upstairs, 'n' then you can see the valley. The valley b'longs to the farmers, and the gulch b'longs to the engineers 'n' smart Alecks. This summer the valley 'n' the gulch is goin' to have a ball-game 'n' we're goin' to wallop 'em."

"Which are you?" asked Westy.

"Me? Oh, I'm both—when I'm up to camp I repr'sent the farmers, 'n' when I'm down valley I repr'sent the construction bunch. Blessed is the peacemaker," he added.

"Do you work for the government too?" Westy asked.

"Betcha."

It was a tedious, dusty drive to Oldfield, where they had a second breakfast and where Mr. Merton piled some boxes of provisions and small hardware into the wagon.

Then began a ride over the most extraordinary road that Westy had ever seen. If he had gone in an airplane the experience could hardly have been more sensational. Before them was a range of rugged mountains, the jagged pinnacles of which rose straight up from the plains, and directly they were out of Oldfield the road began its winding ascent of the frowning uplands which were to usher them into the dizzy fastnesses beyond.

"There, now ye can look down 'n' see the project," said Bob Merton. "That's Cold River Valley where ye came from. Ye can see the river 'n' the Lowland Canal that ye crossed on the railroad. Up north'ard there's the long canal. There's Buckland where the land office is, 'n' where they make complaints 'gainst the cap'n. Hey, Cap'n? And down off that way is an Indian village."

As Bob pointed his whip, Westy saw the whole flat valley with the towns spread here and there upon it like toy villages on a carpet. The river ran through the center of the valley, and branching from it on either side were two winding canals, with other canals branching from them, until far in the distance they merged together, looking like a gigantic feather. Some of

these smaller canals ran out very far from the trunk lines, and these in turn had still other branch canals sticking out almost at right angles from themselves.

"Them's laterals," said Mr. Merton. "The government builds the canals 'n' the main laterals 'n' there it stops. Sub-laterals 'n' half-subs are built by the farmers. Now, see if ye can remember that, 'cause you'll want to know yer A B C's, won't he, Cap'n? First, comes the canals, the two long ones, 'n' there'll be more later. Then comes the laterals stickin' out from them; then the sub-laterals, the half-subs and the field furrows, or maybe free wash. Then there might be midget laterals. Now, where does the government take its stand," he said like a school teacher.

"At the end of the main laterals," Westy answered promptly.

"Right you are. Now look off to the south'ard there. See that brown speck? That's older 'n' you 'n' me or the captain. That's some ruins o' what was grand building of the prehistorics. That old heap o' stones is a thousand years old, maybe."

"*Boooy!*" Westy enthused, and with difficulty located the infinitesimal ruin.

"There was a feller out here from the Smithson[1] Institute down there in Washington 'n' he found an underground passage leadin' from that out a mile 'n' there it had all caved in—reg'lar soup tureen passage."

The captain laughed.

"All that valley there was irrigated once by the prehistorics, wasn't it, Cap'n?"

"Guess there's no doubt of that," the captain conceded.

"Yes, sir! They was like the Incoes down Peru way 'n' the Asticks here in Mexico. They was a kind o' branch of the Asticks, I reckon——"

"Sub-laterals," suggested the captain, winking at Westy.

"They had their ditches, miles on 'em, didn't they, Cap'n, 'n' their sub-irrigation——"

"I never saw any sign of that," said the captain.

"Well, that feller from the Geologic Survey, he had a chunk o' something he said was a clay tile—porous clay tile, they used in their sub-mains. But I never see no sub-mains myself. One of our fellers found one, 'n' it turned out to be a prairie-dog furrow."

"I guess so," laughed the Captain.

"But leastways, the government couldn't tell them nothin' 'bout agriculture. They had their cities and their schools and maybe their land office for all we know. Up here 'bove camp, if you go on a tramp of a Sunday, you'll see cliff dwellin's—dozens on 'em. It's my theory that they

was up there buildin' a storage lake. Maybe they had a construction camp too. G'long," he added to the horses.

The panorama of Cold River Valley was soon shut out from their view, though Westy could still catch glimpses of it now and then as the wagon wound its way up through the rugged heights. The sun was now well up and, lighting the cañons around which they passed, it painted their rocky depths in a hundred wonderful colors.

In places the road was carved in vertical cliffs and Westy looked into the appalling abysses which it skirted and instinctively tightened his grasp of the stanchion at his side. For a little while they were close to Cold River, and he heard its echoes as it found its troubled way through the rocky chaos far below them.

Westy looked about him in silent wonder. Not a sound could he hear save the steady tramp of the horses, sometimes echoed from the towering gray walls. High above them across the narrow strip of sky which was visible sped a great bird, hurrying to its home among the crags. And now and then he caught the distant sound of falling water.

After a while they passed a little group of Indians. It seemed to Westy that all the persons and properties were at hand for a stagecoach attack and massacre such as he had read of. But the whole picture was spoiled when the captain called, "Hello, Harry!" to one of the Indians.

"Apaches," said Bob Merton. "They helped build this road we're a-ridin' on."

About the middle of the afternoon they came out into a spot which was only less wild than the road they had traversed. Here, in almost complete isolation, stood Frazer's Road House, where they changed the horses and had dinner.

Other Apache Indians were lolling about the place and Westy was disappointed to find that they talked English very well and didn't call the white men "pale faces." One of them was trying to fix up a Ford that had seen better days. Westy wondered what he intended doing with it on that narrow road.

After dinner they followed for three hours a road which, if it had been drawn straight out, Westy thought would have reached across the continent. It traversed depths where grayish walls rose sheer on either side.

The stillness and sense of isolation was intense, and out from the semi-darkness of these places they would pass, as from a tunnel, along some giddy height, where the waning sunlight fell upon still higher places, bathing them in its crimson glow.

At last, amid the rocky chaos in the distance, Westy glimpsed a streak of white wedged, as it were, between high gray hills which rose and slanted

away from it so that it seemed only to fill the apex at their base, where it was thrown into bright relief against the dull grayness of the cliff.

"There she is, Westy," said the captain.

"The dam?" he asked eagerly.

"That's it."

Westy did not know whether to be disappointed or not. The white streak seemed out of all proportion to its surroundings. It spanned only the lower and narrower portion of a mammoth gulch, but whether the discrepancy was caused by his extravagant expectations or because of the rugged immensity of nature, he did not know.

In a little while he saw it again from another angle and a little lower altitude. Its impressiveness and the silent wonder of it began to dawn upon him. He had a good imagination and the huge structure standing there in that untamed gorge grew to seem nothing less than heroic. Not a sign of life was there—no house, no road, nothing but nature—wild, confused, tremendous, frowning, unspoiled nature—and the dam.

It stood there amid its wild surroundings, majestic and self-assured.

That was the view of the Big Four Dam that Westy always liked best.

Soon they were making the steep descent into the gulch, their wheels chained and the horses holding themselves back with supreme effort. Westy began to see the detail of the great structure as he looked down upon it.

It curved inward, seeming to brace itself as a wrestler braces himself. Its flanks bit into the cliffs, following tenaciously every curve and cranny of the huge bordering walls. In the form of a half-circle, the ends of which braced themselves in the cliffs, not sideways but frontways, it gave Westy the impression that it would push both cliffs out of the way before it would give way itself.

It was a good deal higher than a house, and upon its summit a little stone house was perched——a watch tower, Westy thought. Nestling under its shadow were several buildings of the same white granite, immaculately neat. And over it flew the Stars and Stripes.

"Them's the power-houses," Bob explained. "When the water's let to run through the spillway in the dam, it generates power and while it's flowin' down the valley to irrigate the farms, the power's chasin' 'long the wires to light up Nancy and chore around and make itself useful."

On their arrival, the captain was immediately beset by innumerable people, and there was a general air of bustle.

"Westy," said he, hurriedly, "I'm going to leave you to Mr. Merton. He'll take you up to the commissary—then you can look around and get your bearings. Come into the office first thing in the morning."

Westy felt a little jealous that his patron should desert him so soon after their arrival but his admiration for the captain increased when he saw how the khaki-clad men were clamoring for his attention. He was certainly in demand.

Luke led the way up the stone stairway to the top of the dam, where there was a yet unfinished stone coping. It was very still. Westy looked around through the vast, rugged valley, which was fast wrapping itself in shadow. The waters of the giant reservoir washed against the foot of the dam and extended far up through the big gorge, but as yet scarcely more than covered the floor of their mammoth prison. Here and there little islands and points of rock were visible.

Some thousand or more feet distant, on the more level reaches of the right-hand side of the valley, Westy saw tents and bungalows. Also there were a good many romantic-looking log cabins.

"That's the commissary," said Bob Merton, pointing. "There's the hospital and the one 'long side o' it is the office where you'll go in the morning. 'N' that big tent's the mess tent."

Westy stared at the scene before him. "What's that big thing down there in the lake?" he asked.

"That's a suction dredge, son," answered Bob. "It sucks the mud right up—what the engineers call silt, and chucks it off yonder somewheres. You'll learn all about it."

"I'll learn anything if I make up my mind to it," he said vehemently.

Bob Merton looked at him amusedly. "Well, yer got yer chance certain. Jest keep yer eyes and ears open and don't be afraid o' gettin' yer hands dirty. The captain's goin' ter break yer into ditch work 'n' then you can come down the valley as a canal rider. Meanwhile stick ter the captain—don't ever tell him a lie or talk to him when he's busy."

Westy grasped the big brown hand that Merton held out to him. "There's one thing I want to ask you about," he said. "Did those prehistoric people really have ditches and tunnels for irrigating? For a special reason I'd like to know."

Bob Merton looked down into Westy's frank, inquiring eyes. "Take my advice, son," he said, "and don't bother 'bout them prehistorics. They was there, sure enough, but the captain's got no use for all these tales ye hear of sub-irrigation and the like. So ye'll only queer yourself if ye let yer mind run on fossil-huntin'. That was the trouble with the lad that was doin' the work you'll do. He was a likely youngster, too, otherwise. So jest you think 'bout what you got to do."

Westy said he would, for indeed, he realized that it would not augur well for him with the practical captain if he showed himself a dreamer. And in

plain fact, Captain Winton took no stock in most of the astonishing tales of former civilization in the historic valley. He admitted that he thought there had been such a civilization but he said that the people who came from the Smithsonian Institution were a nuisance.

Westy resolved to remember that for future reference.

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[1] Smithsonian Institution.

CHAPTER X
IN HARNESS

Westy's room was small, but immaculately clean. It contained a single, iron bed, a plain table, a straight-backed chair, a rocking-chair and a dresser. The floor was covered with a grass carpet. On the wall the sole embellishment was a framed notice which read:

> LOYALTY TO THE GOVERNMENT IS THE KEYNOTE OF SUCCESS IN THE SEVERAL BRANCHES OF THE RECLAMATION AND CONSERVATION SERVICE. THE WORKERS ARE URGED TO GIVE NO INFORMATION TO REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PRESS, BUT TO REFER ALL SUCH INQUIRIES TO THE ENGINEERS IN CHARGE. COMPLAINTS IN REGARD TO MEALS AND ACCOMMODATIONS SHOULD BE MADE TO THE COMMISSARY.
>
> BREAKFAST AT 7 A.M. LUNCH AT 1 P.M. SUPPER AT 7 TO 9 P.M.

Westy wondered what complaints a fellow could make—if at all. What complaint could one make with that mighty dam down there guarding the outlet of this remote valley.

He felt as if he had been suddenly introduced into the delightful mysteries of boarding school life. He had read stories of fortunate youths who lived in rooms decorated with pennants, played football and baseball; suffered hazing and in turn hazed others; whose sanctums were mysterious retreats where mischievous plots were fomented and who apparently never had any lessons to do. The voices which he now heard downstairs seemed to make these delightful pictures a reality.

"Have you got my red necktie?" some one called.

"I wouldn't be seen on Broadway with it," the person addressed answered back.

"Well, it's blamed funny—it's gone."

"Maybe Dynamite Dan's using it for a blast flag," some one suggested.

"Did you see the new souvenir the captain brought?" some one else asked.

"That kid that was talking to Bob Merton?"

"Yeh. Every time the captain goes east he brings back a new toy."

"Well, he picks the winners, all right. I'll say that for him. He never liked Black Devlin much, you know."

"You don't suppose that kid's going to take Black's place, do you?"

"Looks that way."

"Don't worry. The cap can tell by the way a kid makes mud pies whether he'll make an engineer."

"Going to the concert at Contractors' Camp?"

"Mebbe."

"Well, come on over and eat."

The last sentence reminded Westy to stop listening and finish drying his face. Over in the mess tent were half a dozen long boards, lined with the manual workers. Somewhat apart from these were two smaller boards around which were seated mostly young fellows, some in khaki, others in white duck. Westy was given a seat among these and they greeted him very cordially.

"Hear about Farmer Collins on the Long Canal?" some one asked. "He's raising square green peas—can't roll off your fork. Shows what irrigation will do."

"That's nothing," said another. "A guy down in Oakdale is growing stuffed olives."

Westy knew that they were trying him out and he smiled, his frank, half-bashful smile.

"You going to take Black Devlin's place?"

"I don't know—but I heard so," Westy answered.

"Seen anything of Black Devil lately, Oregon?" some one asked.

Westy noticed that few of these fellows were called by their own names, but usually by the name of the town or state from which they came. He gathered that they were surveyors, draftsmen, and young engineers, some lately from college, engaged in detail work of more or less responsibility.

His exclusion from their familiar shop-talk made him feel very green and rather ill at ease. But they addressed him pleasantly now and then, and manifested a disposition to tease him, which he took in good part. Then and there he laid the foundation of his general popularity. And about Black Devlin, he was rather curious as that former member of this happy family now seemed to be the subject of sneering comment.

In the morning, he went to the office and was taken through a drafting-room, where blue-prints of the whole project decorated the rough board partition, and into a second room, where the captain and several other men sat at desks. A spectacled young chap in khaki was talking with the captain.

"Well, how'd you sleep, Westy?"

"All right, but I was kind of too excited to sleep so well," he answered frankly.

"Well, you'll be good and tired tonight and you'll sleep better," the captain laughed. "This is Van—Mr. Van Buren. He's going to start you in.

I'm going to begin you on what they call freshet diversion work, where you'll pick up some knowledge and get acquainted with the country. The one whose place you're going to fill—he fell down. You'll get seventy-five dollars a month and your living is furnished you. Now let's see if you can make good for one summer."

He swung around and continued with his work as if he left the future entirely to Westy.

Van and Westy started up through the valley, skirting the lake. Already the big dredge was uttering its diabolical clamor. Running from it a heavy pipe-line resting on pontoons was carried to shore and disappeared over one of the lower ledges of rock. They passed some men who were drilling a large rock for blasting.

"That's Dynamite Dan," said Van as they passed. "Hello, Dan!"

All about them men were busy. Westy felt at last that he was of some importance in the world. He was at least doing his share. A little farther on he was attracted by a white streak winding down around some cliffs.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing.

"That's what we call a concrete diversion. Devlin suggested that. He had some good ideas."

"Gee," Westy commented. He did not feel so important now. He was sure he could never think up such a suggestion as that. "Devlin must be a smart guy, huh?"

"He is," answered Van. "Only he doesn't use his brains in the right way—not all the time. He worked himself up here just about the same as you are. The captain let him plan trunk lines and outlets—you'll soon catch onto that. Black did some good diversion work—he cut out a lot of sandy ground and that's what counts. Rock channel is what you're after and I'm going to show you that."

"Was he—discharged?"

"Well, he was reduced and then they let him out. He got to hanging round the mines and panning for gold and loafing down at Frazer's. He was always knocking the government. The captain says he was smart enough, but he got the notion of making a fortune in a hurry. That was his bug. A good many fall for that notion out here."

"I kind of don't like the idea of taking the place of a guy that's been discharged. It—it seems to me I'll be thinking about it all the time."

"Don't let that worry you," said Van. "He got what was coming to him. You won't hear anyone in camp wasting sympathy on him. He's got only himself to blame."

"Did he do anything so—so terrible?" asked Westy.

"I wouldn't exactly say that Black was crooked," Van answered. "He had a vein of it though, as the miners say. He took photographs of those prehistoric ruins and sold them and he made a survey for the miners on the quiet. The government won't let you do outside work and he knew it. It's too bad because Leighton said he had a good future."

"Who's he?"

"Oh, he's one of the big engineers."

"Gee, it makes it seem worse because he was so smart! I'll never be able to do things like him."

"You won't right away—no. We wouldn't expect you to. I'm going to teach you your A B C's today on how to coax water."

Westy was relieved. "Did Devlin start that way?"

"Sure."

"Still, it doesn't seem that he was so terrible if that's all he did—taking pictures of the prehistoric ruins and things like that. I mean it don't seem criminal except that if you're working for the government and you're told not to do a thing, you shouldn't do it. You got to be loyal."

"That's it exactly. Another thing, Martin, if you want to get the captain's goat—talk about the ruins and the ancient civilization."

"I know. Mr. Merton told me that."

"Well, then I'm warning you again. Devlin sold some old pieces of junk to the tourists down at the project—said they were relics. When the captain heard it—*good night*! That was the end of Black."

"I wonder if I'll ever see him," Westy said. He felt that he would dread meeting the fellow whom he was to supplant.

"Sure, you'll see him. He'll blow in on the next tornado. He was down in Nancy last I heard."

After a tramp of ten or fifteen minutes they came upon a little trickle of water falling among the rocks.

"Here we are," said Van. "Now you follow this trickle for a mile or so and you'd find that it flows into a concrete trench. Now you're to make its path easy."

"I get you," said Westy.

"For the first few yards there's nothing to do and you don't want to be rooting into the stream-bed with your lifter just because you have it handy. Don't touch it unless you have some good reason for it."

Westy watched and listened intently.

"Here's a bend and a rock. See how she goes to the left of the rock and plows her way through the soil? Now let's move the rock a little." He edged the hoe-like implement under the rock and pulled it three or four feet. "Now,

you see, the stream runs off to the right there—tumbles down that rocky crevice. That's so much less——"

"Less silt for the dredge to pump out," Westy interposed, with a sudden inspiration.

"That's the idea," said Van. "Get a short cut whenever you can. Remember that a mile of rock is better than ten yards of soil, so go after the rock channel every trip."

Westy tried his hand at it and soon they came to another bend. "Wouldn't that jump its traces some day here?" he asked. "I heard the captain say that once."

"That's right—that's good," said Van. "Cut off the bend—that's the stuff. She'll flow easier—see? Sometimes when the Old Lady does that of her own accord the people in a village wake up and find that instead of the river passing their door, it's a mile away."

"Who's the Old Lady?"

"The Mississippi."

They followed the stream in all its windings and Westy led it among the rocks whenever possible. At last they reached the concrete trench at a point not far up the slope from the prospective high-water mark of the reservoir.

"Now here I'll leave you," said Van. "Follow it on and use your judgment—first your brain and then your lifter, as the captain says. You can get down to mess for lunch today, but when you have to take the freshet-beds farther up you'll be taking your grub. You might even have to bivouac now and then. Ain't afraid to sleep outdoors, are you? Don't forget to get a pocket compass in the commissary."

"I'm a scout," said Westy proudly. "I won't forget that."

Van left him and Westy started up the trench with his lift. He found the work fascinating and almost regretted to leave it when he heard the bugle sounding the dinner hour.

At the long tables, Oregon called over to him and asked him how he liked his little game of solitaire. Westy answered, "Fine."

"Don't let down like your predecessor did, though," Dynamite Dan said in a voice of friendly warning. "He hasn't even got the wherewithal to go home."

"Don't worry," Westy smiled. "I stick to a thing when I start it."

"That's the stuff," said Oregon.

Westy could not help wondering about Black Devlin.

CHAPTER XI
BLACK DEVLIN

They called it Forest Slope because if you followed it far enough away from the storage site you would come to an arm of national forest. The somber border was visible in the distance even from where Westy worked.

He often paused and looked up that way, wondering what the lives must be of those who lived amid its dim recesses. Occasionally it sent him some token of itself, a leaf or broken twig, carried down along one or the other of the tiny tributaries. He had now learned to distinguish "forest water" by its coolness and by the scantiness and character of the silt which it bore.

He had never supposed that there were more than two kinds of water—salt water and fresh water. But he learned from Van that there were a half-dozen different kinds distinguishable by the government's engineers. And he, too, soon came to distinguish it by instinct.

Captain Winton occasionally made him a flying visit and usually showed him where the wild water had stolen a march on him. But he was always cordial and apparently satisfied. And of Bob Merton, Westy saw nothing. He wondered whether he drove up from the valley very often.

Sometimes the talk which Westy had overheard that first night in the wagon at Nancy recurred to him and it troubled him a lot to feel that some one was plotting to swindle the government. At first he had thought about telling the captain of it, or at least Bob Merton. But in the prosaic light of day the talk of the two men seemed to lose much of its significance. After all, he had been half asleep at the time, and the hints he had overheard justified only the very vaguest inferences. There was really nothing definite to tell, and the captain would probably take no stock in it anyway.

One thing did stick in his memory, and that was the tunnel mentioned by the strangers. He could not disassociate it with Bob Merton's mention of ancient underground ruins, though not for worlds would he have mentioned those ancient irrigators to the captain. But he wondered about the tunnel just the same.

One evening he drove a stake in the ground far up beyond the second ledge of Forest Slope and trudged, weary and dirty, down to Carey after the hardest day's work he had ever known. He would not go farther without bivouac equipment, and he intended asking Van whether he should go so equipped the next day and trace an elusive creek farther.

The next day he started out with provisions for one night. As he went along he marked with chalk the rocks which the laborers who came later must move. Then a little before dusk he lost the narrow stream in a rocky crevice not a quarter of a mile from the edge of the forest.

He made his way up through the sparse tree growth into the forest, resolved to camp in its solitude and work back along another stream in the morning. Scarcely had he opened his duffel-bag and prepared to kindle his fire when a sound made him look up.

He saw a pony winding its way toward him among the trees. Its rider—a young fellow in a red shirt and cowboy hat—was not even holding the reins.

"Hello," said Westy. "It's all right for me to camp here, isn't it?"

"All right enough to camp," the stranger drawled in a mild, easy tone. "I can't let you start a fire, though. Who are you?"

His manner was so gentle and his voice so soft, that he seemed to be a natural part of the wilderness, and to have acquired some of the calmness of the forest.

"I'm working down at the reservoir," Westy answered. "Doing some work on the small streams on the slope. I was going to camp all night and then work down. Is it all right to stay here?"

"B'longs to you much as it does to me."

"Are you a guard?"

"That's what they call me. I hear them blastin' down yonder," he added. "They must be getting along."

"The lake is rising," said Westy. "They're distributing a little already. I didn't know it was against the rules to start a fire or I wouldn't have tried it."

"If you burn the trees it means clogging up the canals," said the guard.

"Sure, I bet it does," said Westy.

"You'll have to eat, though."

"I don't mind not eating. I got some bacon. Maybe I could eat it raw."

"Better come along to my cabin," said the guard quietly. "Me and Gracie is always glad to see folks. Ain't we, Gracie?" he added stroking the pony.

"It—it wouldn't be against the rule?" asked Westy.

"No, indeed. We got one visitor already."

Westy was glad enough to follow him and the pony, unguided, threaded its way through the forest till they came upon a clearing where stood a small cabin and a corral.

Within the cabin it was very cozy. A young man was seated in one of the bunks with his knees drawn up, playing a harmonica. He was rather shabbily dressed in a pair of patched trousers and a faded gray flannel shirt. His seediness seemed to concern him little, however, and he greeted Westy cordially before the latter had so much as crossed the threshold of the cabin.

"Hello, kiddo!" he said and proceeded with his music.

Westy returned the greeting and noticed that the fellow had curly, glossy red hair. His face was thickly freckled and his eyes were gray with a kind of dancing recklessness in them.

"When we going to eat, Bailey?" he asked of the guard.

"Soon as I can get it ready. This fellow comes from Carey—he's workin' on the slope. That's what you were doing, wasn't it? I don't know what your name is," he said turning to Westy, "but this is Devlin—Black Devlin they called him down Carey way. That's on account of the color of his hair."

They all laughed. "You working up the streams?" Devlin asked Westy at length.

Westy felt very ill at ease. He did not like to admit that he was even attempting the work which Black Devlin had so skilfully done.

"It's just the—A B C of it," he answered. "Of course, I couldn't plan things—it isn't even the regular work I'm doing."

"What were you going to do, start a fire?" Devlin asked, glancing at the duffel-bag.

"Yes, but——"

"Didn't get away with it, hey? You should have waited another hour. Then Bailey'd have been in bed. Wouldn't you, Bailey?"

"I'd rather be here, anyway," said Westy.

"You on auto leave?"

"I don't know what that is," said Westy.

"Guess Bailey can tell you," Devlin laughed. "It's leave you give yourself. When I used to work up this far I'd always spend a day with Bailey 'fore I worked down. Nobody knows the dif." He went back to playing his harmonica.

"Not with me," said the guard. "Anybody can rest here. Don't drag me into it."

"Bailey's all right," said Devlin. "Only he's got patriotitis."

Westy felt out of place with this sophisticated stranger. But Devlin was so offhand and pleasant that he could not dislike him.

After they had eaten the simple meal which Bailey had prepared, he and Devlin fell to playing checkers while Westy watched them. He was amused at the wry faces which Devlin made and greatly flattered when the latter winked at him whenever he got Bailey into a tight place. "Hey, kiddo?" he would say and screw his face up with an exasperating look of triumph.

He insisted on sleeping in a hammock under the trees, so that Westy could have the extra bunk. He blithely announced, winking at Westy, that if he was cold in the night he would kindle a fire.

In the morning Bailey went off on his circuit. Devlin volunteered to accompany Westy down toward the lake and "put him next to a few tricks."

"Bailey's a good skate," he said. "He's everybody's friend."

"I guess you kind of get so you feel friendly toward everybody when you live in the forest. Don't you think so?" asked Westy.

"You get to feel darn lonely—I know that. It's a long way from Broadway. Bailey's dead and he doesn't know it."

Westy looked at him and smiled. "I heard about you," he smiled. "But I like you and I didn't know about you when they put me on this work. I mean I didn't know I'd like you so much."

Devlin laughed so heartily that the echoes rang throughout the forest.

CHAPTER XII
A DEBT

"Well, it ain't for the government that I'm going to put you hip," said Devlin. "I'm through with that bunch. I'm just hanging 'round now till I turn over a little deal. I know where there's a negative well down Nancy way. I'll turn that into more money than you'll make here in a year. It'll irrigate three or four farm units with something left over. There's more money in knowledge than there is in shoveling dirt."

"What's a negative well?" Westy asked, feeling very ignorant.

"You know what an artesian well is, don't you? Well, a negative well is an artesian well that doesn't shoot up. You've got to bring it up with a hydrant or a mill."

"And do you mean you'll tell the farmer about it and get him to pay you money?" Westy asked, a light beginning to dawn upon him.

"Soon as he gets here and I get a squint at him. The farm's vacant now, but they'll be flocking out by the hundreds soon—soon as distribution begins in earnest. That's all I'm waiting for."

"There isn't much skill in having a secret and selling it," said Westy. "You don't feel as if you had done anything, kind of. If I knew as much as you do about engineering, gee! I'd stick to it."

Devlin laughed.

"If an artesian well is on a public land homestead," Westy asked, "wouldn't it be the government's water, just the same as the storage water?"

"Maybe, and maybe not. But this farm is private land and the water's private and can be used—used and sold. It'll wash six farms."

"Then they wouldn't have to pay the government, would they?" Westy asked.

"That's what they wouldn't, kiddo. You hear talk about the government charging rates for water just till the construction work is paid for, and then giving it free. You'd think they were keen for the farmers, but I say they're not. There's dozens of them that's been sitting in their homesteads for two years now and the lake's nothing but a big mud puddle yet."

"Well it won't be long now," Westy defended the government.

"Yeh, that's an old story," said Devlin. "Take that land I've been telling you about south of Nancy. There's two full units there and in one of them is that little old negative well of mine. My cue is to see the new owner before he gets to the government. With my proposition he can irrigate his whole

hundred and sixty acres and keep it and he can sell water to the other unit if he wants to—anyway, he can beat the government's price. Now just suppose I unload my little secret for five hundred bucks?"

Westy said nothing. Devlin was evidently well posted and he was very convincing. Westy could not answer his arguments. His reply was strong or weak, as you choose to view it, but it was very characteristic of him.

"Well, whatever you do about it, I hope you do right."

"You're a queer kid," laughed Devlin. "I can see you don't exactly approve of my proposition."

"Well, I like you anyway. Maybe I don't understand about that well. Anyhow, I can see you know a lot."

"Don't worry about me, kiddo. And if I can pass you any tips you're welcome to them."

"There's one thing I want to ask you," said Westy. "I guess you got a right to sell that—that secret. And just because I'd rather work and get money that way isn't saying a fellow hasn't got a right to do what he wants. But what I was thinking about was—would that water be as good as the storage water?"

"Better—it would have soil richness."

"Because it would be different and I wondered if it would be as good."

"What makes you think it would be different?" Devlin asked, eyeing him closely.

"'Cause it would. I could tell the difference. I couldn't tell if it would be better 'cause I don't know anything about farming—yet. I haven't been in the valley except to Nancy. But I could tell the difference if I tasted it."

Devlin stopped short and stared at him. His eyes were so brilliant and penetrating, with a momentary suspense, that Westy felt quite uncomfortable.

"No, you couldn't," said Devlin.

"Yes, I could," Westy answered, determinedly.

Westy followed Devlin along and much of the time he seemed preoccupied. At other times he made cynical remarks about the government and sneering observations about its workers. This annoyed Westy, particularly as his companion seemed so well posted and it was impossible to answer him.

He was nothing if not clever and showed Westy how to pond a brook to prevent its flooding—carrying out in miniature the principle of the whole gigantic project. Whatever his grudge against the government, he certainly cherished no resentment against Westy and the boy more than liked him—he was captivated by him.

It was almost dark when they reached the border of the lake. The lights of Carey shone on the slope beyond. The cheerful illumination of the big mess-tent reminded Westy that he had been away from it for two whole days, and he hoped that the merry company assembled there had missed him a little bit. It made him wonder too, where Black Devlin would spend the night.

The big dredge was moored on the opposite side of this bay and its long train of huge piping, resting on pontoons, extended across the waters, disappearing beyond a minor hill. The dredge was running and sending its unearthly din up into the quiet night. The roar of a lion is a whispering zephyr compared with the screech of a suction dredge. The floating pipe-line vibrated in unison with the machinery, the pontoons rocking like boats.

"Well," said Devlin, "here you are, and just in time for eats. Think you can waltz along that line? That's the way we used to do. Shorter than going around the lake."

"Where are you going?" asked Westy.

"Me? Oh, nowhere in particular. Down to Frazer's, maybe."

"You couldn't get there till midnight."

"Not by the road, but I can cut off ten or a dozen miles."

"Another secret?" Westy asked.

"I know the hills," said Devlin.

Westy hesitated a moment. "Maybe you could come to my room with me. I could bring you some supper," he said. "If—of course, it's none of my business—but if you won't get any money till you can sell that secret—maybe—anyway, I've got fifty dollars. It's two twenty-dollar bills and a ten, and there's no way to use it up here. You can't even buy a soda. Maybe you'd like to have at least ten and when you sell your secret——"

Black Devlin clapped him on the shoulder and laughed. "You're a little prince, kiddo, but don't worry about me. Go over and fill up on the government. I can't go over there, but you're a brick. Don't say you know me—it won't help you any with that crew. And don't mention the secret—don't say anything about it to anyone. I told you because—oh, just because you happen to strike me right."

Westy picked up his duffel-bag. "Well, goodbye,—Black—Devlin," he said.

"Goodbye, sport, and don't worry about whether I'm right or wrong. Don't worry about me at all. You're aces up—that's what counts."

He watched Westy as he stepped gingerly along the quivering pipe-line, his duffel-bag strapped on his back. Once he turned his head to look at Devlin.

"Don't turn! Keep your eyes ahead, kiddo!" the latter called.

Westy had gone but a few feet farther when he lost his balance, righted himself, lost it again and went head over heels into the water.

He was never fully conscious of what happened immediately afterward. For a few seconds he was floundering in the water, trying vainly to clutch one of the pontoons. Then he went down and there was a sensation of being drawn with terrible rapidity. His hands, grasping spasmodically, clutched stones and mud. Then he was dragged, as it seemed by some tremendous power, against something hard and hollow.

He fought it off with all the desperation of blind instinct. He was sideways against this awful thing, and its edges pressed and cut into his sides, bending him like a twig. There was a tremendous roaring, intermingled with a muffled rattling and clanging. Things struck him in the face, and the merciless submarine monster kept bending him—bending him ——

Then, suddenly, he was drawn sideways across those edges that were pressing him. As his feet passed by one there was a terrific wrenching and pulling at his legs. If his mind had been capable of thought he might have supposed himself contended for by two rival monsters and being wrenched apart in the conflict. Then the awful pulling lessened—ceased—and he was breathing free air.

He lay on one of the pontoons, all but unconscious. His head and clothing were covered with mud, his face bruised and bleeding and his side throbbing. He opened his eyes languidly, half-consciously.

Some one covered with mud like himself was seated astride him. He felt the sharp pressure and release of the person's hands below his ribs.

"Take a long breath when I push—that's right."

"Is—is it you—Devlin?"

"Yes, it's me, kiddo. You were up against the suction-pipe. Keep breathing. That's right. Draw your breath when I let go my hands. That'll help."

He pressed cruelly, then released the pressure—steadily, regularly, scout fashion.

"I told you not to be thinking about whether I was wrong or not, didn't I, kiddo?"

"I wasn't," Westy answered weakly. "I—I was just thinking how—oh, I like you Bla—Blacky!"

"Atta kid!"

CHAPTER XIII
THE BETTER PART OF VALOR

No one expressed any surprise that Black Devlin had dived into the very jaws of the great suction-pipe. None was disposed to question his recklessness or bravery. He was as hard of comprehension in many ways as Westy himself. The horrible death which he had challenged was hardly realized in its full significance until the excitement following the affair was over. Some said he was crazy.

What people did express surprise at was that Westy had been in his company. Since the boy had been absent from camp for two days they wondered how long he had been with Devlin.

Westy's injuries were serious but not grave. Besides his cuts and bruises and the terrific shock he had sustained, one of his ribs had been broken and his convalescence was slow and painful. He bore his suffering with the same stoical patience that he had shown on that day so long ago (it seemed to him now) when he had rowed the camp launch down to Blackmeyer's farm.

He was delighted, however, with the friends that he realized he had made in Carey. No one forgot him and Oregon dropped in on him almost every night with some amusing tale from the valley. Dynamite Dan and Van were daily visitors also and the captain stopped in whenever he had a spare moment.

The visit he enjoyed most of all was that of Bob Merton who had come up from Nancy with a load of commissary stores. He sat down, causing the cot to creak with his huge bulk. It was a tonic to Westy just to look at him.

"Well," he drawled, "when yer comin' down the valley? Things is sprucin' up down there now. You boys sent us enough water already fer three cuttin's o' alfalfa this season. Yer mustn't bust no more ribs.

"Yer wouldn't know things 'round Nancy. All that land south o' the station's been reclaimed. We got fifty-three miles o' new laterals. Both the canals is runnin' 'bout a third full. Ain't so bad, hey?"

"Are there many new people coming?" Westy asked, interested.

"Standin' on line at the office. I don't know what's goin' to become o' Noo York 'n' Chicago if it keeps up."

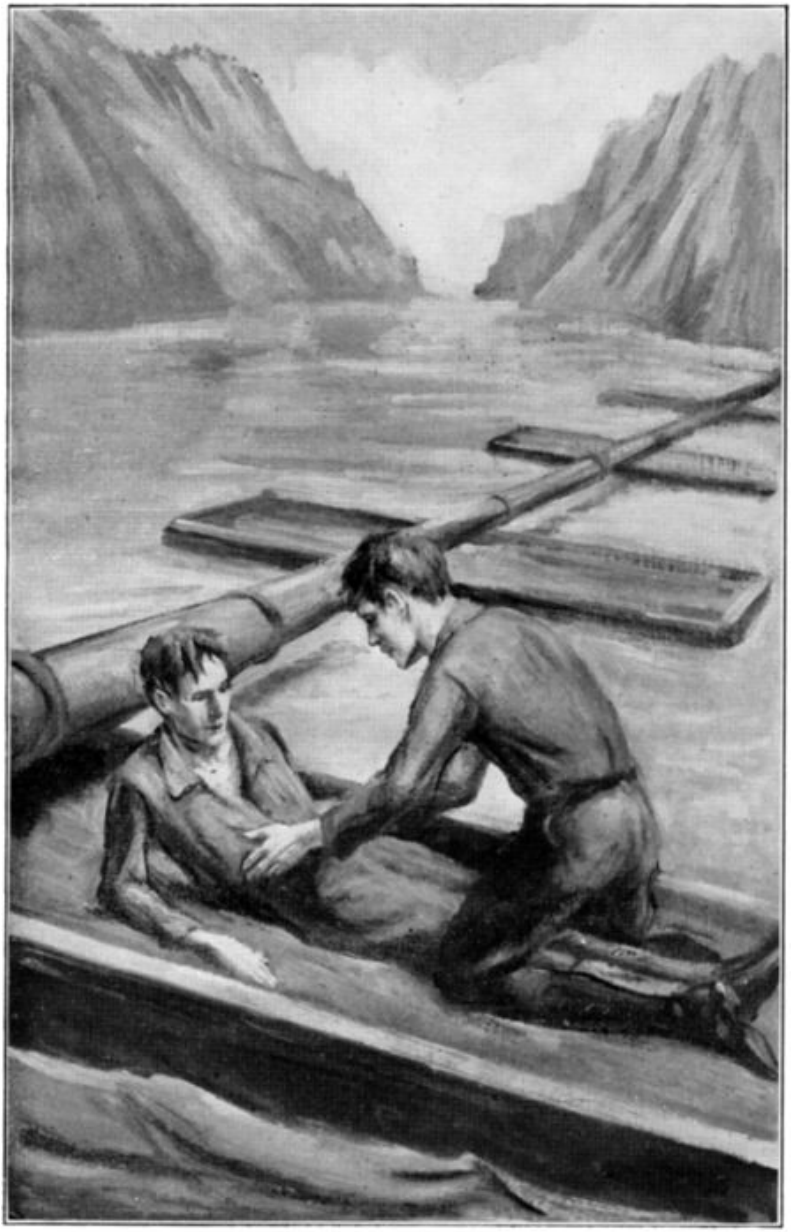
Westy thought that was fine.

"After they get through with you up here, I'm goin' ter put you on the south ditch, and you'll hey ter sleep with one eye on the sluice-gates. They're growin' lemons down that way. They'll want lots o' water.

’Member them farm tracts south o’ Nancy you seen on the way up here? Government’s got an experiment farm started there—growin’ dates.”

Westy was delighted with the picture painted by Bob Merton. He imagined the land below, which had once been desert, flowing with milk and honey, and he longed to go down there and give the burly water master a hand. His visit did him no end of good.

He often thought of Devlin and realized that the outcast would not come to pay him a visit. Sometimes he mentioned him to others but it troubled him and hurt him when they spoke unfavorably of the fellow who had saved his life. Van went so far as to advise him to shun Devlin’s company and he decided not to mention the name again.



HE OPENED HIS EYES LANGUIDLY, HALF-CONSCIOUSLY.

Then came the day when he was allowed to go back to his own little room in the Survey Bungalow. It was on a Thursday and the doctors thought it best for him to wait until Monday before beginning work.

He wandered about during this period of idleness and found himself down at the dam. The spillway was almost completed. One of the gigantic sluice-gates was open so that a little of the flood water might pass and the vast growing lake lapped higher against the mighty dam.

"I don't see why Devlin won't believe that the government will stop the water rates some day. I don't see why the man that buys that farm can't—I don't understand at all...."

Here and there about the valley sloping areas of soft land had been faced with concrete. Every creek which poured its water and the water of its tiny tributaries into the great lake had its concrete delta. Thus the whole valley was besprinkled with little dots of spotless white, contrasting oddly with the dull gray of the land.

On Sunday night just before he was ready for bed, Oregon blew into his room. "In a hurry to go to bed? How do you think you feel?"

"Fine," said Westy. "Only I get a kink in my side once in a while."

"Good," he said genially. "What you want is a course of treatment from old Doctor Oregon. The captain told me to take your case, so here I am. How's your appetite?"

"My appetite is all right," said Westy, a little annoyed. "I'm going back to work tomorrow morning, as you may know."

Oregon, who had been holding his left hand behind his back up to this point, now brought it around. He was holding a curious looking apparatus which looked to Westy like a toy airplane with an attachment similar to the electric vibrators and massage instruments that he had seen in drug stores.

"Sleep all right?" Oregon continued.

"Sure," said Westy, curious about the instrument.

"Ever fall asleep without knowing it?"

"Sure. What's that thing?"

"It's a current wheel which is Latin for water-meter."

"Oh."

"We have to take an affidavit of Ponto Creek and we want you to take it down. The captain and Doc Morris think you better not strain yourself yet awhile, so they suggested I put you in the crow's nest and let you measure stream velocity. I told them you were just the cheese, because you're small and don't weigh much. What do you say?"

"As long as I can go back to work——"

"This is high-brow work—take it from me. Are you with us?"

"Sure."

"All right, then. Meet me at north footbridge at eight and bring that thing with you."

He disappeared as informally as he had come in, and Westy felt as if a cool breeze had just passed over him.

When he examined the instrument more closely he saw that it consisted of a tiny metal paddle-wheel. The paddles were in the shape of cups, with a four-winged rudder to hold the instrument steady in the water and a weight to keep it in the right position. A long coil of twisted wire was attached to it. Connected with the axis of the little paddle was a simple make and break device which opened and closed the electric current furnished by a couple of dry cells attached to the other end of the wire.

Then there was a battery box and fastened to it was a little buzzer and it needed only a few moments' study for Westy to discover that every revolution of the little paddle-wheel was accompanied by a quick, short buzz at the other end of the wire. By keeping count of them and using a watch, the operator could readily determine the number of revolutions per minute. How this would enlighten him as to the stream's velocity, Westy did not know.

The chief contributor to Cold River was Ponto Creek, and it was to ascertain the speed of the creek that Oregon and a couple of other boys were now going to follow its winding course above the valley. Westy soon learned that it was slow and tedious work, though interesting and with an element of adventure.

Oregon and the two fellows were waiting for him with a wheelbarrow containing a coil of rope, some hemp pulleys, turnbuckles and something which looked to Westy like a packing-case taken apart.

"I know something about that already," said he, "because I know about the make and break system. But how do you tell?"

"Well," said Oregon, "four revolutions a second is equal to a speed of seven feet per second. How's that strike you?"

"Do you have to drop it in more than once?" asked Westy, as they made their way up the creek.

"You have to drop it in 'bout 'steen million times."

"I don't see why."

"Because water's got all kinds of different speeds in it. Ever hear of fluctuating quantities?"

Westy had not.

"Well, it's this way, kid. A river doesn't move all at the same speed. Some of it goes fast and some of it goes slow and some tangoes around. In toward shore it goes slow and out in the middle it goes fast. It flows faster on top than it does on the bottom.

"So we take her measure every few feet," he continued. "Near the bottom, near the top, near shore and at the bend. Then we do some

arithmetic and there you are. All we're after now is an average. We just want a general idea till spring."

They stopped at a part of the creek where there was a boat moored and a stake driven into the shore. There also were some rough beams. Two of these they raised in tripod form from the ground, adjusting them by a brace and a rope which they tied to a stake in the ground.

Two of the boys rowed across the creek, taking an end of wire cable with them and raised a similar support on the opposite bank. From one to the other of these the cable was brought taut, and the whole thing looked to Westy exceedingly like the apparatus erected for a tight-rope walker. Next they fitted and clamped together the several parts of the box and Westy saw that it was a little car with pulleys above it, which rolled back and forth across the stream. It was moved by a rope to either shore.

In this Westy stood, lowering the meter into the water at points about a yard apart, once just below the surface and so on as they moved the little car across the stream. It was very interesting and the sensation of being suspended on the yielding cable above the rapid-flowing creek was delightful. He kept his watch in one hand, timing the buzzer and calling the results to Oregon, who wrote them down.

Whenever he had crossed the stream he got out of the car, and without disturbing the apparatus they moved it to a point where the stream was narrower or wider or made a bend. And sometimes, having started Westy on a fresh trip across and adjusted the rope so that he could move the car himself, the crew would go forward hunting for new places to take the apparatus. At such times, Westy would note down his own findings.

It was at one of these times that he met with a novel experience. He was on one of his trips across the creek and was holding the meter in the water. When he pulled it up it was unusually heavy, and he saw that something muddy was attached to it. It was on the very edge of the car when the muddy object made a sluggish movement which showed it to be alive. Losing all presence of mind, Westy dropped the whole business into the bottom of the car.

Instantly the creature opened its mouth and raised itself on its front legs in a ridiculous attitude of defiance at nobody in particular. It was a sort of lizard, nine or ten inches long, with a horrible rough skin which looked as if it were covered with black beads. It had little beady eyes and a great mouth with a kind of yellowish liquid around its edges. As soon as Westy stirred it started around the bottom of the car in an aimless, lumbering fashion, and, stopping, seemed about to spring.

Westy had not been in Arizona long before he had heard of the awful Gila monster, and he was in a state of panic fright. He grasped the cable

above the car and lifting himself, rested his feet on its edges and looked down at his unwelcome guest.

The creature was as still as a statue, its fore legs stiffened up, its dreadful mouth gaping, its tail moving significantly. Westy had heard that if one of these reptiles had something to brace its powerful tail against it could make a most phenomenal spring. And this one seemed now to be making a sort of blind exploration backward for this purpose.

Westy was no coward, but an encounter with one of these unspeakable reptiles had never been anticipated in his most adventurous dreams. So resolving that discretion was the better part of valor, he vacated the car completely and hung by his two hands from the cable.

Scarcely was he free of the car than he heard a rap and felt sure that the creature had either made a spring or administered a rebuke to the car with its muscular tail. At all events, it still remained within and Westy remained without.

The cable cut his hands cruelly and he realized now that he had by no means regained his full measure of strength. His head began to swim—his arms seemed pulling out of their sockets. He took out his handkerchief to make a pad for one hand and nearly let go the other one while doing so. Then he tried to go hand over hand to shore but could not. It required less exertion to hang just where he was, and he did so, meanwhile crying lustily for help.

Below him, the creek flowed rapidly in moderate flood and he knew that it was deep. Ever since his accident, he had dreaded the water. It gave him a sensation of faintness to see it flowing beneath him and to know that even a fairly good swimmer could hardly buck the current.

Soon his unprotected hand began to bleed. Moreover the insects which had pestered him all day, seeing him deprived of his two best weapons, instituted an assault and drove him distracted. He would have given all he possessed to swat his face with one fatal and resounding swat, but he dared not let go the cable.

He looked at the car, some few yards distant. It seemed preposterous that the abhorrent creature should reign in silent possession of the car while he was hanging outside with life and death in the balance.

At last his friends came. It seemed hours that he had hung there, and the most welcome sound he had ever heard was their voices as they came into view, a few hundred feet distant.

“There’s a thing in that car!” he said. “Hurry! I’m going to fall.”

They were none too soon. He fainted as soon as he dropped into the boat which one of the boys rowed out to him.

“That makes one adventure under water and one above water,” said Oregon, as Westy came to. “What’s the matter, couldn’t you and the lizard get along together?”

As for the reptile, he had a ride as far as shore and there his career of glory ended. Oregon said he was a Gila, all right—the others were not so sure. At all events he got a bullet.

Westy went home after that first day’s experience greatly wrought up and with a cruel cut on his hand. Still that was much better than to be bitten by a Gila monster.

He never forgot it—never.

CHAPTER XIV
A WARNING

Westy started back to Carey one night along the beaten path which they called Precipice Lane. He had not gone far when he came face to face with Black Devlin.

"Hello!" said he, surprised. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Waiting to see you," said Devlin. "How are you, kiddo?"

He had not seen Devlin since his rescue from the dredge, and the change which had come over him was pitiful. He wore no coat and his shirt, which had once been gray, was now of no color at all. Worse than this, his cheeks were hollow and his face had the unmistakable look of worry and deprivation. But his eyes were still vivacious, and Westy noticed that the trusty harmonica, his only companion, stuck out of his pocket.

"Wandering minstrel, hey?" he laughed, noticing Westy's glance.

"I'm glad to see you, Blacky," said Westy. "I've often thought about you—especially when I was so sick. I got to feel thankful to you more than to anybody else, that's one sure thing. And I wanted to see you so as to tell you so. They've got to admit you were a hero, and they do—even Van does."

Devlin sneered.

"That's the truth," said Westy. "Everybody knows if it wasn't for you that I wouldn't be here—I don't care what they say."

"Gettin' sun-dried a mile away at the end of the pipe-line, hey?" Devlin laughed.

Westy shuddered at the very thought. He shuddered too at Devlin's way of speaking about it.

"Well, anyway, I know you're a hero even if you don't. You can talk kind of joking about it, like. But I know. If you'd waited that time they'd have told you."

"Told me I was a crook, yes. I suppose you heard all those lies about me. Must have come hard to admit I could swing a stunt."

"They knew it was brave—they had to admit it!"

"Gang of yaps," sneered Devlin. "Clapping at a little dive."

"Well, anyway, I know, and I'm grateful to you."

"You know why I did it, don't you, kiddo?"

"Because you're a hero."

"Because you're a little prince. You feel friendly to me after all you've heard? Or maybe you don't believe the things."

Westy hesitated. “I don’t know anything about those things. But I do know you’re wrong about some things, Blacky. Anyway, it hasn’t anything to do with what I feel about you.”

“Kiddo, you’re one little brick.”

“I’ve still got that money. And I’ve got some more at the Postal Bank. If you want some of it until— Did you sell your secret yet?”

“Don’t worry about me, kid. I’m worrying along all right and you keep your money. But you’re wasting your time working for the government—they’ll never appreciate you. I got wise to them all right—Winton and the rest.”

“That’s the only thing I don’t like about you, Blacky.”

Devlin reached out and tousled Westy’s hair. “Well, that’s one thing I do like about you. Come on, walk along. I want to talk to you.”

“I wish you’d tell me where you live, Blacky.”

“Frazer’s, Settlement House in Nancy, the Indian village and freight cars ____”

“Tell me.”

“Well, three or four months from now I’ll have my own bungalow. Maybe in Phoenix.”

“I’ll be working in the valley in the spring,” said Westy. “I’ll come and see you if you want me to.”

“Want you to! I’ll grab you by the collar and drag you there. I’ll kidnap you, that’s what I’ll do. I’ll be on Easy Street then.”

“Did you sell your secret?”

“Practically, yes. I haven’t the simoleans yet, but it’ll be a nice little bag of coin when it comes. Somewhere around three hundred.”

Westy noticed that the amount had gone down since their last meeting. “Couldn’t you get the five hundred like you said?”

“Doubt it. This hayseed is a stingy old crab, but he’ll come across for three all right. He’s busted and needs money for his house. I’ve got other balls in the air, kiddo. I’m in with a movie concern—we’re going to do a flood and a lot of other junk—going to show irrigation. Think that sounds good, hey?”

Westy said he thought so.

“I’ll have another four or five hundred out of that,” said Devlin.

They paused at the edge of the big camp. Devlin would not go further.

“Been up to Pine Hill Cove yet?” asked Devlin.

“No,” answered Westy. “I think I’m going up there this Sunday though. They’re going to do some work there next week and the captain said Billy and I could take up some of the stuff. I’d like to camp there.”

“They ought to face it up. She’s breaking down and throwing silt all the time,” commented Devlin. “There’s going to be trouble if they don’t fix it.”

“Blacky—I—I wish you’d come back and work for the government. I can see you know such a lot—gee, it’s a shame!”

“Aw, I can show them a trick or two, but not for mine. But never mind, kid, hunt me up when you come down. You’ll hear from me.”

“I hope I surely will, Blacky. So long!”

THEN AMID THE UPROAR, ANOTHER TREE STAGGERED OVER THE PRECIPICE AND INTO THE WATER.

Westy watched him as he went back along Precipice Lane and into the wildness and darkness. Then he hurried along to his room.

Devlin was right about the cove at Pine Hill—it was one of the little things which the government had neglected for bigger things. And very shortly something did happen there which involved Westy and Billy, who was a sort of office boy and general errand boy in Carey.

Pine Hill Cove, or Cliff Dweller's Cove, was one of the show places of the great storage site. It vied with the dam in popular interest and was the kind of place to get itself on a postcard at sometime or other. It was said to have been the exclusive section of a once thriving prehistoric town of cliff dwellers. It was also reputed to have been the hiding place of a band of train-robbers. And it is a fact that when the storage survey was made a skeleton was found on the mound which was now a tiny island.

But the government was planning to face it with concrete and to let the river through above so that it would enter the reservoir as a fall. The place was two or three hundred feet in diameter with precipitous walls all around it so that you could no more get out of it than you could get out of a well, except by the way you had come in. Before the dam was built the cove had, of course, been dry land.

The cliffs nearest this little islet were of jagged earth, and the roots of the trees which grew above stuck out like wriggling snakes. And once upon a time the bank here had evidently fallen away and it was said that the mound constituting the islet was formed in that way. Just above, a tributary of the river passed, making a sharp bend.

On Saturday, commissioned by Captain Winton, Billy and Westy set out in the camp launch with some wire netting, a lot of thin rope, some bags of cement and other things which they left on the islet. Then they made a second trip with a skiff and brought some more material and their own bivouac outfit.

It was getting on toward dusk when they hauled the bow of the skiff up on the islet. If they had been on an oasis in the desert they could not have seemed more remote from civilization. The high, gray cliffs surrounding them were duller in the twilight and the trees on the precipice above cast their shadows like specters down into the black waters.

"This is where they found the skeleton," said Billy. "It must have been a lonely place to die in."

"Or get killed in, more like," said Westy. "Gee, that's one thing I'd like to find—a skeleton."

"Oregon says there's treasure buried in here," said Billy.

"Don't believe half he says."

"Look at the sky," said Billy. "It's the same color as the cliffs."

"Like rain, huh?" asked Westy. As he spoke a little short gust of air rustled the trees above and rippled the water. Then it was gone.

Westy's fire had not been burning more than five minutes when a strong wind blew—enough to blow his hat into the air and land it on the cliff. At the same time the water was churned up so that it wet the cliffs a foot or so above the water line.

"What do you know about that?" said Westy.

"No sooner had our young hero——"

"Our young hero had better look out for the boat," said Billy suddenly, and jumped up. "Look!"

The boat was rocking violently and Westy jumped to haul its bow farther up on the shore but he was too late. It went dancing and rocking away from the islet and began rubbing itself like a cow against the cliffs.

"Maybe it'll come back," said Westy.

"Suppose it doesn't?"

"If it isn't back by morning I'll chuck a stone into it with a rope attached and haul it back. Are you getting cold feet?"

"No, but I'm going to get wet feet pretty soon and so are you. If you expect to get that boat at all, you'd better do it now." He held his hat on as he spoke, for the wind was blowing quite hard.

The fire had scattered into little particles all over the islet and the wind began blowing furiously. The trees on the precipice turned this way and that as if they did not know what they were supposed to do. A wooden plate which Westy had taken out in preparation for their meal blew straight up into the air and came down again.

"Can you beat that?" said Westy.

The air was of a blue color and all the surrounding scenery was the same. There was something very uncanny and portentous in the whole appearance of things.

"Maybe it's going to be a cyclone," said Billy.

"Well, it can't blow us away," said Westy. "We've got the cliffs all around us."

"Yes, and the cliffs have water all around them, too."

Above them was a sound of crashing and rending. A tree near the edge of the cliff seemed to stagger, then came tumbling pell-mell into the cove, the black earth dripping from its bare roots like water.

It was growing steadily darker and the water seemed to be as black as ink. Suddenly there came a tremendous gust which caused the boys to reel and brace themselves where they stood. The trees above them were lashing violently, great branches breaking from them and some falling into the cove.

"We're a pretty good target," said Westy. "If one of those should hit us...."

"Look!" said Billy. "There against the cliff!"

As Westy looked he saw the naked tentacles of root wriggling like snakes and disappearing one by one as a serpent disappears into a hole. Every minute came a fresh rending and falling of some tree above as the triumphant wind tore those tortuous, resisting arms out of their earthy homes.

Then amid the uproar, another tree staggered over the precipice and into the water.

"We'd better get the boat if we can," said Billy. "We'd better get away from here. We'll get our heads knocked in or something."

"Where could we get?" asked Westy.

They had to shout to make themselves heard.

"I'd rather be drowned than have one of those fall on me. Just keep your eyes on the top of the cliff. That's all we can do. It usually doesn't last long."

Westy turned and saw that the boat was broadside against the entrance to the cove and half inverted so that it formed a sort of dam. Wedged into the opening above it was one of the fallen trees, its great, earthy root squeezed between the cliffs and the other tree was bobbing right by it. Above this the cliffs met, roofing the opening so that now it was all but closed.

Scarcely had Westy noticed this when Billy's voice sounded in his ear above the hubbub. "Look! The cliff! It's the river, Wes. She's jumped!"

They stood speechless with dismay and terror as a mighty volume of water, bearing tree limbs and huge boulders, came tumbling over the precipice.

"We're done for!" Westy shouted.

Black Devlin was right. The river had taken matters into its own hands and the water, as Westy realized, was pouring into the little cove ten times faster than it could possibly get out.

CHAPTER XV
TRAPPED

Westy tried hard to keep his courage and sought to cheer Billy. The whole body of the river seemed to be pouring in upon them. Its riotous spray dashed against their faces and soaked them through and through.

"We have a chance," said Westy. "But we've got to step on it."

He looked anxiously at the cove entrance to see if the obstruction was gone or moving, but he could not distinguish anything. Doubtless much water was getting out, but not enough to count and Westy was conscious of this fiendish act of nature.

To tear an opening for a river and to use the very material wrenched out of that opening to make a dam to wall it up again—here was the blind, heartless ingenuity of nature shown with a vengeance. In this crazy, contradictory act, she would blot out two human lives. Surely, the science which aims to circumvent and throttle her is the science of warfare and engineers are strategists and heroes after all.

"Feel for the rope?" Westy shouted into Billy's ear. "It isn't washed away, is it?"

"Here it is," Billy answered in a strange voice.

"If you hear a crash," said Westy, "edge out into the water. If you're under a falling tree, it's better to be in the water. Try not go far and if anything falls on you or near you, hang onto it. It'll be fifteen or twenty minutes before the water's high enough to cover us and we can work till it's up to our waists, I guess. The principal danger is from the trees. Hand me one of those picks, quick!"

In a couple of seconds the rope was fast to the pick-ax handle.

"Is the rope good and fast?" Billy asked.

"Scout bow-line."

Outside of a bulldog there is nothing in the world like a scout bow-line knot.

Bracing himself as well as he could in the mushy, submerged ground, Westy gathered all his strength and hurled the pick-ax up through the darkness. He heard it splash in the water and hauled it in.

"Throw it to the left of where the water's falling," called Billy. "The bank will be more solid there and besides there's trees standing."

"I can't see what I'm doing," said Westy. "That's the trouble."

Again he cast the pick up into the darkness, and again it came down without touching anything solid.

"It's too heavy," said Westy. "Hand me one of those survey rods."

He tied the rope midway of the survey rod and cast it up, spear fashion. It came down, and he cast it up again. He was sure it had landed on the cliff, for he pulled it over slight obstructions, but nothing held it. He had hoped that by jerking it he might bring it crosswise to the rope and that it would lodge itself between the trees or rocks above.

Their predicament was becoming desperate. Billy, almost unnerved with fear and suspense, held the rest of the rods lest they be carried away. He stood on the bags of cement to keep himself out of the water, which was almost up to Westy's knees.

"Don't get rattled," Westy said to his companion. "We've got more than fifteen minutes, I guess. The trees that are standing now will stick it out, I think." The roar of the wind above was deafening although they did not feel its force so much where they were. Now and then they could distinguish black objects in the water. These floated clear of the islet and were carried over against the cove entrance by the force of the incoming water.

"Why don't you throw a pick over into that stuff?" asked Billy.

"I thought of that," said Westy, "but the water would carry us against it too fast. We'd get our brains dashed out. Don't get scared. Here she goes again. I wish Blacky was here."

This time the rod went well over the cliff, but when he pulled it dragged a little and then broke. "Give me three or four of those rods," he shouted. "We'll get out of this, yet. My side begins to sting." He worked frantically and climbed up on the cement bags alongside of Billy. He had the clumsy spear ready. "Here goes!" he shouted.

It seemed to carry the last hope of those two despairing boys as it sailed up through the storm and darkness. Westy jerked it slightly and there was a little yielding above, then the rods seemed to settle themselves more firmly against the obstructions which held them.

"There's a little spring in the rope," he said, "and I'm afraid the rods are only holding by something against the two ends. It may snap. I can't test it standing here, but I'm going to take a chance."

The water was lapping his chest and the precious end of the rope was in his hand. "Billy!" he cried, "If I go first and test this thing I can fix it secure. But while I'm trying, the water may take you off your feet. And if you go first the rope may bust and it'll be the end of you. It's a question of which way you'd rather die. Maybe it might be best for me to go first because I'm lighter. But you can decide. I wouldn't want you to think I put myself ahead of you, and I don't want to be saved unless you are too. What do you say?"

Billy wanted to put off the fatal moment and said that he would wait. Then, hand over hand, Westy swung into the volume of water that poured over the cliffs and raised himself steadily. In a few seconds he was under the descending sheet, between it and the cliff.

Presently he felt the dash of the water again and he knew that he was near the summit of the cliff. He had thought that surmounting the precipice would be his great difficulty and might prove his Waterloo. But the water had already washed away so much of the earth and the chasms left by the uprooted trees had so broken the surface that, instead of the difficult feat which he had dreaded, he found himself plowing waist deep in mud which would certainly have engulfed him except for the rope to which he clung.

Suddenly there was a terrific crash and the rope was jerked through his hands from behind. Its knotted end with the splintered rods attached struck him and was gone. He stood knee-deep in oozing mud and utter darkness. There was no sound now but the steady swish of water.

"Billy!" he called. "Are you down there? Are you all right?"

There was no answer; he stood stark still, listening.

"Hey, Bill—Billy!" he called again. "Why don't you answer? Billy! What's happened?"

There was no sound but the steady roar of the falling water. Occasionally a limb of a tree would crash into the chaos about him.

He knew not whether to turn back or go forward. Indeed he could not see where he was going. His blood ran cold and he had a strange feeling in his throat. He called again, not expecting an answer but just to relieve his tense nerves.

"Billy, what's the matter?"

He crept slowly through mud and darkness into shallow water, from which he backed out, stumbling over fallen trees. His hand was cut from the quick passage of the rope through it and his side ached cruelly—the one lasting reminder of his encounter with the dredge. Everything was confusion —mud, fallen trees, boulders and here and there he encountered the vagrant stream as if it too, were lost and knew not where to go.

At length he came upon comparatively solid land and, stumbling over a tree trunk, he sat down upon it to rest and collect his senses. The wind had subsided, but the darkness was intense.

He did not know what new act of treachery nature might play upon him if he moved. His frightened imagination saw cliffs and pitfalls and quagmires on every hand. He laid his throbbing head against a limb which kindly counterfeited a reclining back. And there he decided to stay until the grateful daylight should come.

He did not care much what happened now. He told himself that he had sacrificed Billy's life for his own safety. He could not go back to camp alone. Black Devlin had saved *his* life and went away scorning praises.

Blacky had sneered at his own reckless bravery and at those who were childish enough to praise it. Now he, Westy, having saved himself, would have to go back to Carey and tell how he had sacrificed Billy.

"Devlin wouldn't be doing what I am," he said, listlessly. "I'm—I'm just hopeless. I couldn't be a hero if I tried."

And thus the night wore on.

CHAPTER XVI
BILLY

Westy did not know whether he slept at all. He only knew that when dawn came he was wide awake. And he found that he was on the brink of the deserted channel just where the stream had turned and he saw how the water had indeed jumped its races.

It had made a new and straighter path for itself and rushed headlong for the edge of the cliff. The turn had been so sharp that the trees had not been sufficient to withstand the water's natural inclination to flow in a straight line.

He crept carefully to the point where the water fell into the cove. It rather flowed than fell, since the loosened earth of the precipice had been all but washed away. Besides the water almost filled the cove. He would not have been afraid to make the descent in a boat.

The rocky cliffs, of course, stood firm, but the section of earthen wall had given way as soon as its allies, the trees, had surrendered. It was the wind which had made the first assault, the river merely following up its advantage. Westy could see that the waterfall had moved across the cove, as one might say. It was now tumbling over the cliffs above the entrance into the lake beyond.

What surprised him was the rapidity with which water can change the whole face of things and make a familiar scene unrecognizable. The cove was gone—there wasn't any cove. And the islet had vanished like the magic carpet in the Arabian Nights. He could not show anybody what he had done, for he was the only part of the affair that was left. Somewhere in that neighborhood he had stood on an island and thrown a rope. That was all he knew.

He pushed around a little in the bruised ground adjacent to the new river-bed. Great roots lying sideways dripped black earth when he touched them. Sticking out from under one of these was something which startled him and when he went closer, he saw; it to be a blood-covered hand.

In the ragged chasm left by the uptorn root, lay a form, half covered with earth, which Westy saw to be that of Billy.

For a moment the discovery quite unnerved him, not only because of the unnatural position of the body and the ghastly look in the face, but because he could not in any way account for his companion's presence there.

However, Westy had not taken the scout oath for nothing. His brief experience of first aid work helped him now.

He circled Billy's wrist with his hand and found that life was not extinct. Then he examined the other hand and discovered that a jagged wound near the wrist was bleeding freely. The boy was quite unconscious, his hands cold and his lips blue. Whatever else was the matter with him, he had almost bled to death. Westy was sure of that.

He broke a stout twig from the tree, knotted two corners of his handkerchief together and slipped it over the wrist and up on to the forearm. Running the twig into it, he began to turn.

Pretty soon the bleeding lessened and ceased. He opened Billy's shirt, straightened his legs carefully, lest they be dislocated, then pulled him gently out of the damp chasm on to drier land. He knew of nothing that he could bring water in except his shoe so he removed one and started for the river. After he had filled it and soused the boy's face with it he sat down and waited.

After a little while he fancied that he heard a faint sound in the distance. He ran along the cliff for some little way and looked anxiously across the vast lake. The sun was rising over the water and flickered the surface with its brightness.

The sound was a little clearer now, and unmistakable.

Tk, tk—tk—tk——

It was the little one-cylinder kicker, glorying in its unmuffled freedom and skipping according to its wont. Never did the dreadful skipping of an unmuffled engine sound so welcome to Westy's ears as then. In a few minutes she came around Indian Point, taking the short turn, and headed across Ponto Valley, skipping brazenly.

The sight of the lonely boy on the edge of the cliff was a welcome one to the occupants of the government launch. And now, more than at any other time, did the whole affair seem to Westy like a nightmare.

"Are you both all right?" Whiskers, the foreman, called through the megaphone.

Westy made a funnel of his hands and called back: "I'm all right, but Billy's hurt. The cove's gone."

The boat had to run up-shore to a place where the banks were lower in order to take the boys on. The rescuers had not expected any such condition as they found. They had come partly to bring some material and partly to assure themselves that the campers were all right after the rough night.

Later, when Billy was able to talk, he told of his own miraculous escape out of the doomed cove. He believed that it was just after Westy had reached the top of the cliff that a tremendous crash came. Instinctively he had raised

his arms when something struck him on the wrist and though dazed, he became aware of a tree directly at his side, extending up diagonally to the summit of the cliff.

He had no knowledge of the breaking rope, which the tree had doubtless encountered in its fall, tearing it away from its anchorage above. Mustering all his strength, for he felt weak and giddy, he had succeeded in scrambling up the trunk to comparative safety.

He said he believed he heard Westy's voice but was too weak to answer and fainted, he thought, immediately. He remembered regaining consciousness and staggering forward till he fell into a hollow and that was all he knew.

The strange part of the whole thing was that he had lain there with his life ebbing away while Westy was scarce a dozen yards distant.

CHAPTER XVII
BLACKY'S WINDFALL

The day came when Westy was ready to leave Carey. The work was done there—the captain did not need him any more but there was still plenty for him to do in Nancy.

He stood outside the little post-office window in the commissary musing about it when the clerk hailed him. "Letter for you, kid," he remarked.

It was postmarked Phoenix, and Westy thought he knew whom it was from, but he did not open it until he got to his room. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and read it.

> Dear Kiddo—Don't say a word—I turned my trump card. Pulled old What's-His-Name across for three hundred bucks, but I thought I'd have to give him chloroform to get it. Says he's clean busted. I told him he'd have to shovel out a thousand or two on storage water before Uncle Sam got through with him. Then he fell for it. He's going to have a hydrant or a windmill. I've got another pie in the oven, too. It's coming out brown, believe *me*. Movies! That'll mean five hundred more. So the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior can rot, for all I care.
>
> Well, kiddo, I haven't forgotten about you, you little son of trouble. We're going to get together. So bring your baggage and your conscience (if it isn't too big to carry) just as soon as you're through up there. There's an old ranchhouse near Nancy that I've hired and we're doping out some pretty good stuff for the films. If you don't come straight here when you hit the valley, I'll kill you.
>
> Now, kiddo, there isn't anything else to tell you except that you've got to come right here and stay with your old college chum. Don't try arguing about it. I want to get another squint at that sober map of yours. I'll show you whether your old wandering minstrel friend knows a brick when he sees one and can pay up a debt of gratitude.
>
> Drop me a line to the post-office in Nancy, so I'll know when to kill a couple of ostriches.
>
> Yours for a good time,
> Blacky.

(How's that sound, hey?)

P.S.—I chucked the harmonica and got a mandolin.

The letter struck Westy like a cool breeze. It was just like him. He liked Blacky better than he had allowed any one to know. There was something so gay and worldly and reckless about him. And he was brave and clever. Yes, he was clever. Westy was glad that he was also brave, for that in itself made an excuse for liking him.

He read the letter several times, then he wrote an answer.

> Dear Blacky:—I got your letter and I am glad. Especially because I was feeling kind of homesick like. It makes me feel good the way you say things. I am glad you're not going away. Everyone else up here I know (except the captain) is. But not Bob Merton either.
>
> I'm glad you sold your secret, Blacky. I had to laugh at what you said about giving him chloroform. I think it must be fine to be in the movies. The fellows where I live—my home I mean—they had their pictures in Pathe news once.
>
> I don't like what you said about the Department of Agriculture and the other department, though. That's one thing I don't like about you, Blacky.
>
> I would like to come and stay with you in your ranchhouse. I don't see why you say that about a debt of gratitude that you owe me. I owe you one—that's one sure thing!
>
> I'll surely come and visit you and I'll let you know when.
>
> Your friend,
> Westy Martin.
>
> P.S.—I like to hear a mandolin. A fellow I knew used to have one.

When he went over to what was his last mess in Carey, he took the letter with him. The place was deserted—almost all the fellows had gone to other projects in other places. And now it was his turn.

Just before he went into the commissary to mail his letter he saw Bob Merton driving up—for him.

CHAPTER XVIII
A BADGE AND PONY

Westy's departure from Carey was not as regretful as he thought it would be. The captain had left just an hour before and was on his way to another new camp in Colorado. He had told Westy that he was going to keep tabs on him.

"Sorry ter leave, son?" Bob Merton asked him as they drove along the mountain road over which he had first come.

"Not so much now," said Westy frankly. "I'm anxious to see the valley now, I've heard so much about it."

He had been a little afraid that Bob would suggest his making his home with him, or would have arranged some other accommodations for him. But he was greatly relieved when the water-master accepted as a matter of course that he was going to stay for a while with a friend. This was one difficulty over, although he was not altogether comfortable at the concealment which Bob had made so easy.

As they passed Frazer's road-house, the loiterers there, who had been much at Carey, waved goodbye to him. That was the last reminder of his life there.

They finally arrived at their destination and the country was as flat as a pancake. It was covered with a fluffy kind of growth which Bob told Westy was alfalfa. The landscape was dotted with bright new houses.

Bob pointed out to Westy "his lateral" and he informed an inquiring farmer that, "None o' ye can touch a regulator above the subs, 'cept the rider. He has the keys."

Westy began to feel quite important.

They finally managed to reach the Federal Building where the land office was and where Bob presented Westy as Captain Craig's chief assistant, which caused much laughter. Then he took Westy into his own office adjoining on the door of which were the words "Water Users' Association." Inside were a couple of clerks.

"Well, here we are," said Bob. "Now to get yer entered and outfitted."

Before Bob Merton had been in town two minutes, a half-dozen raw-boned, tanned individuals were lolling around, waiting to talk to him.

"Now son, you can see I'm pretty busy and so it'll be most all summer more'n like. So I'll tell yer brief what yer got ter do. Yer workin' fer the 'Sociation but it's mixed up with the government so it's all the same thing.

"Yer'll git the same money as ye got up Carey, and mebbe more in a little while. Anyhow yer responsible fer that lateral. Yer s'posed to cover that twice a day—seven miles. Fer the present yer to lock yer head-gate every night at sundown—and don't let nobody tell yer when sundown is. Close yer head-gate immedjit if yer lateral overflows.

"If any complaints are made to yer jot 'em down on one o' them blanks and send it here. Come here yourself on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Don't let anybody use a canvas dam along the lateral on the main subs. 'Course, goes without sayin' yer have ter cover the subs too. But yer don't need ter ride up all the subs every day. See that all the head-gates and regilators is workin'. Look out fer spite work and never take sides."

"I'll sure remember that," said Westy.

"See that yer do. Yer can phone here any time if there's trouble or anything yer ain't sure of. Remember ye've got no business beyond the subs—that b'longs ter the farmers. And if a farmer wants to raise alkali instead of crops, let him, only don't give him any extra water ter do it with. Ye're just a kind of policeman workin' fer the water-master 'n' lookin' out fer the lateral 'n' its subs.

"Yer duty takes yer to the end of the concrete and no farther. As far as ye can see concrete ye got authority. Now the rest ye'll have ter learn as yer go and the main danger with a likely youngster like you is yer make friends too easy and mebbe do little favors—raise yer head-gate up fer a quiet midnight wash or something like that. It's been done before. So look out! Take my advice and don't take too many apples or oranges from the farmers."

"Do I have to walk back and forth twice a day?" Westy asked.

"Yer don't have ter walk at all. Here, Harry, this is Westy Martin, from up Carey. He's goin' on that there new lateral—you see he gets a badge and pony."

In fifteen minutes, Westy was riding through the main street, wearing proudly his badge of authority and astride a shaggy little pony. It was not yet noontime and it is doubtful if he had ever in his life felt so happy.

The little pony trotted amiably along over the road between the vast flat fields, intersected by the white streaks of the government ditches and the branching furrows of the farmers. The bright sun shone overhead, the sky was cloudless. Cattle glanced up and away again as he passed, children hailed him and men waved to him from the fields, knowing him to be the new "rider."

He caused quite a furore all along his route. The natural cordiality of the westerners was increased because of a desire to ingratiate themselves with the new ditch rider. He reined his pony in at the government experimental

farm and showed his badge and asked for the head-gate keys, which were given to him. Then he asked if they could tell him where Devlin lived.

"Red-headed feller?" one of the men asked.

Westy nodded.

"Lives out about a mile along the Nancy road. Ye'll see an old stone ranchhouse with a wooden roof that don't fit it. That's whar he lives. Roof blew off another house in a sand-storm and they laid it on top o' that."

Westy thought it must be quite an ambitious storm which could blow the roof clean off a house.

"Yer kin make yer headquarters here any time," they told him as he drove away.

After twenty minutes' ride he came in sight of the place. There was no mistaking it. It stood alone on an unirrigated section—where a lateral was later to be carried—and was, from the agricultural standpoint, a most undesirable house. The little stone house was hardly better than a ruin, and upon it rested askew a pointed shingle roof. The whole structure reminded Westy of a man wearing a hat entirely too big for him and rakishly tilted into the bargain.

Within a small, fenced enclosure, a couple of ostriches poked their gaunt necks in the direction of the approaching rider. Several Indians were lolling about, smoking. In the doorway presently appeared Black Devlin himself, in typical cowboy garb, and greeted Westy like a long lost brother.

"Kiddo, you old reclamation water baby—put it there!" he said extending his hand. "How's the Lord High Engineer? I was just going to send a posse of Apaches after you!"

"I'm a ditch-rider now, Blacky," said Westy, dismounting.

"You're a little old mascot, that's what you are. Here, let me introduce you to part of my family. Chief Mud-in-the-Neck and Chief Cinder-in-the-Eye—famous movie heroes. We were just rehearsing *The Trials of a Cliff Dweller*. Takes you back three thousand years."

"Well, I'm glad you sold your secret, Blacky," Westy laughed.

"Got another three-fifty coming in a couple of weeks from Chicago," said Devlin. "I'm taking care of the realistic end for the Back to Nature film people and arranging scenes on the spot. We're paying union wages to real Indians, kiddo. Come on in."

Inside it was very frontier-like and cozy. Westy sat down while Devlin talked on. He told him that he was a brick and a fool to work himself to death for the government.

"Well, I've liked it and I like you," said Westy in that quaint way of his.

"And I don't forget how you offered me money when I was on my uppers. So we won't let old skinflint Uncle Sam come between us."

Westy smiled. “He’s been good to me, Blacky.”

“Well, anyhow, you’re going to bunk here and trot around on your little pony and you’re one fool if you make two trips a day—take it from me!”

“That’s the rule, Blacky.”

“We don’t have any rules around here—happy-go-lucky.”

“I’m going to pay you board.”

“If you ever mention that again I’ll throw an ostrich egg at you. You’re my mascot.”

“I’ll stay for a while. But——”

“No, ‘but’ about it. Here you are and— Oh, wait till I strum up a tune for you.”

He sat on the couch just as he had done in Bailey’s cabin and began to play.

“Do you know my lateral, Blacky?” asked Westy.

“Do I? Didn’t I make the survey for it? I did more work on it than you’ll ever do. And what did I get for it? Yes, kiddo, I know that lateral like a book. So when you’re trotting up and down that lateral hunting for trouble and spying on farmers, you can think of me.”

“I always said you were smart, and brave too. I always said that.”

Devlin strummed for a while in silence. Then: “What did I get, huh? Just because I found some old prehistoric junk in the excavation and sold it to a couple of souvenir hunters, Winton gave me the black eye in Washington.”

“Never mind, Blacky,” said Westy sympathetically. “Tell me about your movie play.”

Devlin was only too glad to be switched off the subject and soon he was suggesting supper.

Westy went outside and got the water from a dilapidated, caved-in well.

“If anyone can get water in this way,” he said. “I don’t see why they can’t irrigate with it. I don’t see how there can be any secret.”

“A well is one thing, kiddo, and an artesian well is another. There’s artesians in Colorado will irrigate a thousand acres.”

“But I shouldn’t think a negative artesian would give water enough for several farms as you said.”

“Oh, wouldn’t you? Well, you’ve got another think coming, kiddo. When you get down to the end of your lateral look off east a little ways on that dry section. You’ll see the corn-stalks bobbing good morning to you before the summer’s out.”

Westy made up his mind that he would certainly look.

CHAPTER XIX
DOUBT

As the weeks passed, Westy liked his work more and more. Devlin was occupied with his movie work and one morning he took his little company off up to the storage site to do "some construction stuff." This trip, as it happened, marked a turning-point in the pleasant life at the ranchhouse. For when Devlin returned he was worried and preoccupied.

"They say a lot of silt's washing down and getting through into the canals," he said. "Did you ever hear of such nonsense? Now they're talking about closing all the head-gates and running the canals and laterals dry for inspection."

"Who told you that?" Westy asked.

"Oh, the reservoir guards and the power-house men," sneered Blacky. "They say a lot of water is escaping through the canals through cracks in the concrete. Can you beat that?"

"Well," said Westy. "I could see that when I was on the Forest Slope. The concrete ditches were always cracking."

"That's different."

Westy could not see the difference. "I never had much to do with concrete work," he said.

"Then what's the use in talking about it?" Devlin snapped.

Westy looked at him surprised. "But I know there are cracks in my lateral, Blacky. And as for silt, I know there is a pile of it at the end of the lateral."

"Well, what more do you want?" he snapped again. "If it washes through to the end, what more do they want?"

"The farmers wanted it down there," said Westy. "They say it's pretty rich."

"Did you give it to them?"

"I'm going to ask Mr. Merton, Saturday."

Devlin threw down the piece of rock he had been tossing about from one hand to the other. Then he jumped off the cot with an air of utter disgust.

"You make me sick," he said. "What's the use of running to Merton with every little tattle tale. The farmers are all kidding you now. If they want the silt let them have it. What good is it?"

"Well, I don't see what difference it makes to you, Blacky."

"I hate to see you make a fool of yourself. You claim to be interested in the project. Why can't you let the farmers alone? As soon as the farmers begin paying their rates Merton and that bunch up at the dam begin to talk about draining the canals for cracks and silt and all such nonsense. The farmers won't get any water for a month."

"Yes, they would."

"No, they wouldn't. It's a swindle."

"It isn't, Blacky. If you keep on talking like that I won't stay here. I can go over to the experiment farm any time I want. I——"

"Look out!" said Devlin sarcastically. "You'll fall off if you get excited. Just like you fell off the dredge pipe."

Westy subsided. "I know you saved my life. You don't need to remind me, because I'll never forget it. And do you suppose I'd care what you said about the government if I didn't like you so much?"

"Well, then," said Devlin, less angry. "I've been hearing about that for the last year too—how I saved your life. And I'm sick of hearing it."

"It's only because I can't forget it, Blacky."

"Well, actions speak louder than words. If you think so much of it as all that, see if you'll do me a little favor."

"I will, Blacky, and—I didn't mean to get mad. I know I don't know as much as you do about concrete—or silt either, if it comes to that. Gee, I don't know anything about concrete. I know mostly about water. But I guess you don't think I'm a brick any more, huh?"

"Yes, you are a brick, too," said Devlin, slapping him on the shoulder.

"I like you better than any of them that I knew up there."

"You're all right, kiddo. All I want you to do is keep your mouth shut. That isn't much, is it? I don't take much stock in this talk up at the lake—it may be a year before they do anything about it. But if you start shouting about cracks in the concrete and about silt at the end of the lateral, Merton will get busy. He'll have it drained and a bunch of men shoveling it out while I'm trying to get my irrigation films ready. The farmers are satisfied. Why shouldn't you let well enough alone? They've got the water, haven't they?"

"Yes," said Westy doubtfully.

"And you say yourself the silt is good fertilizer. Well, tell the farmers down that way to bring their wheelbarrows and shovel it up. That's what you're for. Don't bother Merton with it. See?"

"I see," said Westy.

"Say nothing till I get my stuff on the way. Let the water flow. Then if you want to start something, go to it. I'll probably be in Europe by then." Westy stood in the doorway. He was just about to start on his afternoon trip.

“I’ll do it,” he said, “if you’ll do something for me—I’ll do it if you say you won’t go to Europe.”

“It’s a go, kiddo,” Devlin laughed. “Come back early.”

Westy rode along the beaten path beside his lateral, heavy-hearted. The fields on either hand were filled with waving wheat and corn and the great, symmetrical stacks of soft alfalfa showed that the first cutting had already yielded a good harvest. Several children hailed him as he passed but he did not respond in his usual manner.

He was troubled. He knew well enough what his plain duty was. It was to add his contribution of information about the state of the canal lining and to report to the water-master the pile of silt which had accumulated at the lateral end.

He tried to soothe his conscience by telling himself that water was the most important thing just now and that later when the crops were in would be time enough for repairs. But his conscience refused to be quieted. He knew that the pile of silt belonged to the government and he did not know why he had said what he did to Devlin.

Away back in Westy’s mind was something else which troubled him, now that Blacky’s plausible talk could not be heard. Was the reason which Devlin gave for not wanting the canals and main laterals emptied, his real reason?

Somehow there wriggled into his mind odds and ends of that strange talk now only vaguely remembered—that talk which he had heard in Nancy. It troubled him that this should come back now like a ghost to haunt him.

The pony stumbled over one of the sub-lateral bridges and aroused Westy from his preoccupation.

“What am I getting mixed up in?” he thought and it led him off into all sorts of preposterous suppositions.

He dismounted, resolving to forget all such impossible nonsense, and by way of being very carefree he put his arm around the pony’s neck as he often did. In this fashion they ambled on together.

“It’s only for a little while,” said Westy. “Just till Blacky gets his pictures made. Gosh, a guy’s got to have water if the thing is to look real. The next pile of silt there is, I’ll report it. I don’t believe I’ve got any business with concrete, anyway.”

So he came to the end of his lateral. His clothes were liberally sprinkled with clinging particles of the bordering growth.

He looked off to the east where the desert lands were and where a few hopeful souls were dry-farming it. It was makeshift farming at best, and if there was one feature of it which more than another distinguished it from

Westy's own farms—he called them *his* according to the riders' custom—it was an absence of paint.

The nearest of these farms was the one which Westy always called Blacky's farm because it was to the proprietor of this farm that Devlin had sold the precious secret. It was at no great distance and its chief feature was the advertising matter which disported itself upon the barn addressing itself to the railroad nearby.

The public was here commanded, in brazen colors, to buy somebody or other's breakfast food, and somebody else's herb-tonic. Westy always rested at the end of the lateral and he was so utterly weary of the sight of the signs that he could not have eaten the breakfast food if he had been starving.

Another distinguishing feature of this farm was the predominance of grocery boxes in the domestic architecture.

Westy knew Devlin well enough to know his weakness for glowing pictures. And he had come to know conditions well enough to know that no negative well could irrigate two or three farm units, or even two or three farms. It would take a pretty active "spurter" to do that. Something was lacking on Blacky's farm—whether water or care and industry he did not know. The chief crops were barrel-staves and grocery boxes and stray cows.

The boundary of the farm was quite near the lateral end and more than once Westy had driven some gaunt cow back into its own domain. This he did now, and, thinking there would be no objection to his repaying trespass with trespass, he strolled up into the second field to get a drink of water from the hydrant.

Here was the usual elevated pond for miniature storage, such as one sees on an artesian-irrigated farm. In the vicinity of the well the land was soggy and ill-drained. The rest was desert.

Westy gave the pony a drink, then took one himself. He was not very thirsty but something prompted him to take a second draught. Then he looked puzzled. Again he drank, sipping the water slowly, then tried it again, taking a long gulp.

Then he tried a little trick which Van had taught him of letting it go down the wrong way and of catching some elusive suggestion of flavor as he coughed. He closed his eyes and took another drink. Then he hung the cup methodically upon its hook and tightened his lips.

"That's government water," said he.

When he got back to the lateral he tried some of the water there and then he was certain about the water from the hydrant.

It was the same water that had lapped against the Big Four Dam in Carey.

CHAPTER XX
A SEARCH

Westy's first impulse was to go straight home and to decide, on the way, what he should do next. His mind was in a whirl. But one thing was clear to him—Devlin was involved in this business.

Then he reflected that he had but very doubtful evidence to support his conviction. So far as he himself was concerned, he was satisfied. He had seen the character and source of the water determined in this way and he knew what he knew. But in a criminal matter, would it be enough? It was enough, anyway, to justify a diligent search for more evidence.

Riding down the lateral a little way, he tied his pony and sat down on the concrete edge to wait for nightfall. Then, working his way back to the farm, he stole cautiously across the fields to the well. A dim light glimmered in the distant house, but there was no one about.

Adjacent to the hydrant was a canted circular treadmill with removable connection, presumably for some unfortunate dog to tread his monotonous course upon and so fill the storage puddle. In this makeshift affair, the predominance of barrel-staves was noticeable.

The hydrant itself stood on a little board platform about three feet square, hinged at one side so that one could tilt the whole business to an angle of possibly thirty degrees—as far as the piping below would allow. A loose-hanging weight-latch locked the platform down, though this was at present thrown back and evidently never used.

Westy tilted the hydrant slightly; then, holding the platform up, looked into the well. He could learn nothing that way, so he broke an end from the long stick he had brought and propped it under the platform to keep it up.

He began poking around in the well with his stick and found that its depth did not exceed four feet. It was no artesian, that was certain. Then he felt around the wall with his stick for an opening at the side. This was unsatisfactory so he squeezed himself under the tilted platform, feet first, to let himself into the well.

He had managed to wriggle in and was dangling his feet in the water about to let go his hold, when the stick which held the platform up snapped and the thing came down with a bang. Fortunately it did not fit closely on the top of the well lining or Westy's fingers would have been crushed. As it was, they got a smart pinch. He was not sorry, however, that the platform

had come down, for its former position would certainly have attracted attention if anyone from the house had chanced that way.

He was standing chest-deep in water in a circular well about three feet in diameter, with his head touching the platform above. His position was not a very pleasant one, and he resolved to have done with this stifling grave without delay. So he felt around with his hands below the surface of the water and discovered a circular opening, possibly eighteen inches in diameter.

He thrust his arm into it and could not reach its end. Its edge was rough and rather crumbly and he pulled a piece of something, broke it off and put it into his pocket. Then he tried to determine in what direction this passage ran, but he had not his bearings in this watery vault and was uncertain.

However, he had learned enough. This was no artesian well at all. It was not even an ordinary well, but just a hole by which the hydrant might be connected with this little tunnel coming from somewhere. There in the stifling tomb-like darkness of his prison vault, Westy hardly realized the discovery he had made, or rather confirmed. He could think better when he was out of this dreadful place.

He straightened himself to raise the platform a little with his head, and get his hands on the top of the wall. But the platform did not budge.

A momentary feeling of fright came over him at the thought of how it would seem if he were really locked in this awful subterranean vault with no elbow room. Water was up to his chest and there was an insufficiency of damp air which he was forced to breathe.

He shuddered then laughed to himself and raised his hands against the platform. But it did not budge. He was not really frightened, for he knew the hydrant was heavy. He braced himself and with his hands and head pushed against the planking with all his might.

The platform rose an eighth of an inch or so, then caught hard. He could rattle it within this limit, but that was all. He paused, dismayed, then terror-stricken as the awful truth came to him.

The latch must have been thrown over by the impact when the platform fell. He was shut fast in that frightful hole.

CHAPTER XXI
SUSPENSE

Westy was panic stricken. For one thing, he had lost all sense of direction and it gave him a hopeless feeling of isolation which could not have been greater if he had been lost in the wilderness.

To strike that cold, hard, clammy wall with his hands and to feel that it held him in—the thought filled him with horror. To know that he could not stand up straight, but must knock his head against that cruel planking above, and if he lay down he would just drown like a kitten under an inverted bucket. It drove him almost to the point of madness.

He did not believe he could stand there until morning. But if he did and some one came and found him, what would that person do, seeing that the secret was discovered? The man who could take his water this way, who could go the length of bargaining for this means of stealing the government supply, was a criminal—probably a man who would take big chances and if need be, safeguard his practice with murder.

These were the thoughts which revolved in Westy's mind. He would die, and after a day, a week, a month, maybe, would be hauled out and buried. Or he would be dragged out next morning and made away with if he wasn't quite dead. Then he thought of his pony grazing near the lateral and waiting for him.

He wrung his hands at his utter helplessness and beat his head wildly against the boards above, and the low, hollow echo in the still place sounded sepulchral.

He got control of himself in some measure and realized that he would be the worse handicapped with every minute that he waited. There was but one hope, and that was in a fight against time, and increasing weakness and suffocation.

The boards, though thick, were soft and punky from continued dampness. They were softer than they would have been under the preservation of continual immersion. If he knew exactly where the drop-latch was he might cut a hole there with his jack-knife, reach through and lift it.

It was in the middle of one of four sides, he knew. But which side? The hinges were on the outside, so he could not tell which side was hinged. Of course, the latch would be on the opposite side from the hinges and he rattled each side but all four sides seemed equally loose.

Then he pressed against the corners, thinking that the hinged side would hold more tightly at its end, and that the side with the latch would give somewhat at that end because the latch was in the middle. These were only theories and they did not work out because the platform was too heavy. The cover did give perceptibly upon pressure, and, using this as a basis, Westy selected the side where he thought the latch must be, and decided to bore a hole in its center.

A good deal hung upon his decision, for it was largely a question of blind luck. So giving the cover a few final pounds with his fist, he jabbed his knife into a place midway of one side and began boring. It was difficult to do, especially as he could not stand up straight. Before he got very far every bone in his body ached.

He succeeded in making a hole through which he could thrust his little finger. It was something to be able to project even that much of himself into the world above. His strained position and the fact that he was standing chest deep in water caused his head to swim. More than once he felt as if he should drop. Then he twisted his neck and writhed his arms to get relief. He felt that if he could only stand straight up and stretch himself once, it would give him strength for another hour.

He began the slow process of enlarging the hole. He had no idea of the time but after what seemed an interminable period his work was in such a stage that every minute or so he tried to get his hand through the hole he had made. At last he succeeded.

Out of sheer fear and nervousness, he refrained for a minute or two, from reaching out for the drop-latch. Then he made a quick, sudden reach, as one may take an unpalatable medicine over which he has hesitated.

The latch was not there!

The anguish of despair seized him and he beat the wall and cried aloud. Oh, if he could only straighten his neck just once. Then he would sink down into the water and die.

Again he pushed his hand through the hole and let it bask for a moment in the fresh, free air. Then something took hold of it—something soft and clammy. Westy pulled his hand back in terror.

“Who’s there?” he gasped.

There was no answer, but he fancied he could hear a faint sound of receding footsteps as if some one were tiptoeing away.

He was now so thoroughly upset that he could not think. Who had been there? How soon would he come back? What was going to happen?

Then, suddenly, with new spirit born of his desperate plight, he pushed his hand through the hole again, reached about and found the broken stick that had propped up the platform. With this he could poke around above, and

presently he found that the catch was on the side next to the one where he had made the hole.

If he could get his arm through the hole as far as the elbow, that would give him strength to manipulate the stick and force the latch. To touch the lock where it lay on top of the planks would avail him nothing. He must get his stick in such a position as to pry it away from the side.

This he tried to do, fearing every minute to hear the cautious footfalls again or have the stick pulled away from him by some unseen presence.

At last, after a half hour or so, he succeeded in winning the exasperating game of pushing and prying and bending and slipping. He pushed the stick carefully with the slight weight of the iron precariously upon it and succeeded in lifting the wooden cover.

He emerged from his waking nightmare, writhing and stretching with untold delight. He looked toward the house and listened. Once out of that frightful hole, his courage came back to him with a rush. He was no more afraid of a rascally water-thief than he was afraid of a worm. He noticed a cow grazing near by and he realized with a laugh that it must have been this kindly animal that had licked his hand.

He did not know what time it was—there were no lights in the house, but he resolved to see this thing through. He believed that to wait around would be his best bet. So he walked to the lateral and rubbed his pony's nose.

"You're about the only real friend I got now, Gip," he said with a wistful note in his voice. "Come on, now. I'm going to take a little snooze."

He walked along one of the sub-laterals a little way and burrowed a place for himself in the alfalfa. It was warm but he did not sleep much for now the full significance of his discovery forced itself upon him and he saw it all as plain as day. He had been living on money stolen from the government! Blacky had fooled him with his secret and made him a sharer in his dishonest gains. Blacky who had saved his life and made possible his creditable career and all his high hopes.

He put Blacky out of his thoughts then and he determined that the government should know about the silt and about the cracks in the lateral lining. The canal should be drained and the other end of the secret tunnel revealed, let come what might.

His indignation was now toward the farmer who had bought this wretched means of stealing his supply. He was the real culprit, Westy told himself, and he should be dragged out into the light and sent to jail.

The morning found him cold and stiff. He ran down to the lateral and bathed as best he could and saw to it that the pony was all right. Then he started across the fields, heading for the farm. His khaki uniform was muddy

and wrinkled and he was a sorry figure. Yet the conscious air of authority was all over him and his lips were set.

When he reached the well he took out a little wallet of paster notices which he carried. He detached one and slapped it on the hydrant. It was a form used on head-gates and regulators and read:

HANDS OFF
BY ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES
GOVERNMENT

He next started for the house, removing his rider's badge from his shirt and placing it conspicuously on the khaki pleat of his uniform. Suddenly he swung back for the lateral.

"Come on, Gip," he said, unfastening the pony. "I want you to go with me."

He wanted the stimulus of every vestige of authority which he possessed although he could hardly have anticipated any assistance from the little animal.

But he did not have much cause for timidity. The past year with its vigorous, outdoor life had done wonders for him. He had grown like a cactus and rugged strength was suggested by his every movement.

There were barrel-staves laid lengthwise to guide one over the oozy area and there were boards and more staves to guide one over the yielding sand. The proprietor of this shabby place had adopted the lazy man's habit of ponding his water and using free wash so that the small part of his land where irrigation had been tried, had had all its vitality drowned out of it and was simply mud.

Westy had rather a contempt for the farmer who hires out his barn and even his house-side for advertisements. As he and the pony made their way through the fields toward the slipshod looking house he felt a contempt for the owner of such a place. Here was a man, he thought, who had been dishonest and had gained nothing by it. Nothing at all.

Reaching the house door, he gave it a sounding rap and waited resting his arms on the pony's neck.

The door was opened by a youth of his own age.

"Is the owner of this farm around?" said Westy.

"He ain't up yet," the young fellow answered and eyed Westy keenly.

"Well, I want to see him. You'll have to tell him to *get up*!"

"He ain't got no call to get up yet," the boy protested. "He ain't got nothin' to do with government water," he added looking at Westy's badge. "We've got private supply."

“Oh, you have, have you?” asked Westy. “Well, tell him I want to see him and if he’s asleep, wake him up. You don’t suppose I plugged up through this mud to sit around and wait, do you?” he added with a note of peremptoriness.

The boy shook his head incredulously. “I wouldn’ dast to call him. He’d be mad.”

“Well then,” said Westy, “tell him his water is posted.”

That announcement went home.

“You can’t post our water,” said the young fellow.

“I can do more than that,” said Westy. “I’m going to take him up to the land office right now. Tell him that too!”

For a moment the boy hesitated, then, shaking his head, he went in and upstairs.

Presently Westy heard footsteps and, turning, saw a thin man coming around the corner of the house, hoisting the single strand of suspender which he wore on to his shoulder. He approached with a kind of sideways gait which somehow struck Westy as very familiar.

“Well sir,” he drawled, “what yer doin’ here?”

Westy stared at him, first puzzled then dismayed. Then he reached nervously for the pony’s rein, fumbled with it and stood rooted to the ground in speechless amazement.

For it was his old friend and rescuer, Squatter Sam, who stood before him.

CHAPTER XXII
PAID IN FULL

Yes, it was Squatter Sam in all his glory, exuding the very atmosphere of incompetence and slovenliness. Here he was, farming in the Far West, as ever, the typical shanty man. He squinted his weak eyes and scrutinized Westy while the boy recovered from the shock.

"I kinder think I seed you afore—" he began.

"Yes, you saw me before," said Westy coldly.

"My, how you growed up since I hauled you up outer the marsh away back in Jersey! 'Member? And them scout youngsters—ain't yer in with 'em no more?"

"I came out here to work for the government," said Westy. "I'm going on river work and forestry next year. I have charge of the lateral here now. Yes, I do remember how you saved my life. Didn't I tell you I'd never forget it? I—I didn't know it was you who was living here. I came to see you about the water."

"I always got troubles, my water or somethin'," the man said, with pitiful apprehension in his face. "It was you told me ter git away outer Jersey, so I comes out here after readin' 'bout the lands in the farm journal, and it ain't no good. Now it seems I got troubles with my water."

"It isn't *your* water," said Westy. "It's water that you're stealing, just the same as you stole the boat to use. You're getting it through a tunnel."

"A tunnel? Well now, if that ain't news!"

"Come and I'll show you what I found," said Westy.

For a few minutes the wretched ne'er-do-well gazed at Westy as if he could not make up his mind whether to defy him or wheedle him. He fell back on the only decent thing he had ever done in his wandering, shiftless life.

"And now, after I save your life, pullin' yer out o' a marsh, an' you one o' them kids as was told not to speak to me——"

"I never told you that," Westy said with a flush upon his cheeks.

"Now you got a good start that I give yer. Now yer must be makin' trouble for me, earnin' my livin'. Is that what you came fer—ter start a lot of trouble?"

"Yes, that's what I came for," said Westy, with a tremor in his voice. "But I'm not going to do it. I know I wouldn't be here at all if it wasn't for you. I know what I promised you, too. You needn't think I'll get you into

trouble. I'll even save you from trouble because I can tell you that the lateral is going to be emptied and cleaned out and then everything will be discovered. I know who you bought the secret from because I live in his house. I know you gave him three hundred dollars for it. He's a friend of mine. He saved my life just like you did. Now I'll do you a good turn for what you did for me."

He held out his hand and the poor wretch grasped it. "And yer ain't a-goin' ter tell?" he asked incredulously.

"No, I'm not going to tell," said Westy. "I don't know yet what I'll do, but I'm not going to tell."

As he rode away he saw his rescuer of the old Temple Camp days, gazing after him. And he bore him no malice. As for Blacky, he tried not to think of him at all. Yet he could not entirely forget him.

"Some muddle," he mused as he rode along.

Blacky was not in the ranchhouse when Westy entered, but there was a note, evidently scribbled hurriedly, which read:

> Kiddo—Waited for you last night. Where were you? Have to go away for a few days. Will write.
>
> Blacky.

He was rather glad of Blacky's absence for he knew not how he would face him or what he would say. He somehow suspected that Devlin had no intention of returning.

After changing his clothes and feeding the pony, he made himself a cup of coffee and ate what food there was on hand. Then he rode in to see Merton. The water-master greeted him cordially.

"Well, how's the water flowin', son? I hear Willis down your way is experimentin' with dates!"

"It's no experiment," said Westy. "It's a fact."

"Well, yer got a wide-awake lot along yer ditch, son. Yer got the north main canal beat a mile. That's what I tell the boys up there."

"Yes," laughed Westy. "You tell each one the same thing."

Bob laughed too. "Well, what's new, son?"

"Oh, one or two things," said Westy trying to speak carelessly. "There's a pile of silt at the end of my lateral—about a wagon-load, I guess. The farmers down there want it."

"What'd you tell 'em?"

"Nothing, yet."

"Guess the government'll use that silt, Westy."

“That’s what I thought. There’s some long cracks in the concrete along my lateral. I don’t know how it is under water, but I suppose it’s just the same.”

Bob Merton rooted under some papers on his desk and handed Westy a pad of printed notices which read:

NOTICE

ON FRIDAY, THE 15TH INST., THE HEAD-GATES AND REGULATORS WILL BE CLOSED AT SUNDOWN AND WILL REMAIN CLOSED FROM FIFTEEN TO THIRTY DAYS PENDING THE CLEANING AND REPAIRING OF THE CANALS AND MAIN LATERALS.

“Glad yer spoke o’ it, son,” said Merton. “I almost forgot. Yer better post those notices on the poles and gates and hand ’em ’round to the farmers. Tell ’em we figger it’ll take three or four days for the canals to exhaust. Out o’ twenty-seven riders yer the only one that’s noticed them cracks enough ter report ’em. Guess that’s the trainin’ yer got up ter Carey, hey?”

Westy rode back to Squatter Sam’s as quick as his pony could carry him. The shiftless man was waiting for him, nervously expectant.

“I knew yer’d come back,” the wretched man said. “I knew yer’d not do nothin’ ter me.”

“What did Devlin tell you, Sam—when he sold you the secret?” Westy asked as he seated himself on the edge of the dilapidated porch.

“Wa’al, he told me how that there tunnel was used by ancient people and that it began down near my well and ran almost out to the government canal. He said he’d connect it with the canal. He kept after me till I bought it frum him. Dern him, anyway.”

“Well,” said Westy. “It’s all over with. The whole thing will come out, so you’ve got to scoot again, Sam. And this time see that you get into something honest. You ought to see by this time that the way you live doesn’t pay.”

“I’m all over the country,” said Squatter Sam as if he was groping for words.

“Well, I don’t know how much water you’ve used, Sam. All I know is it hasn’t done you any good. Your rates for a year would be about two hundred and fifty dollars. I can’t go asking about it, because they’d know. So we have to guess, kind of. I’ve decided to say that you owe the government about one hundred and fifty dollars.” Westy looked straight at the man.

Sam squinted. “The gov’ment’s rich. They can afford to lose it better’n me.”

Westy ignored the remark. “You haven’t any money yourself, have you?” he asked.

“Not a cent, s’help me,” Sam answered.

“Well then, I’ll tell you,” said Westy. “I drew out some money before I came up here. I thought you’d be broke. Now get a piece of paper and write what I tell you.”

Squatter Sam stared at Westy, but turned obediently away and went into the house. When he returned he sat down on the porch, pencil and paper in hand.

“There’s something the government has, Sam,” Westy said. “It’s called a conscience fund. People that cheat the government out of money can send it in without signing their names to it. They just send the money when it troubles their conscience. So that will be the best for you—you won’t have to sign your name or anything. Then I’ll give you a hundred and fifty dollars to go away with. I’ve saved the money because I was working all the time and didn’t go anywhere to spend it.”

There was almost a mist in Squatter Sam’s squinty eyes. He seemed not able to talk. But he took the paper and with the pencil wrote at Westy’s dictation.

“Address it to the Reclamation Service, Washington, D. C,” said Westy.

“I used some water that I had no right to, and it comes to about a hundred and fifty dollars as near as I can figure. So I send you that amount. If I knew what it was exactly, I would send it. I am sorry I cheated you, especially because it is such a fine thing you are doing.”

Westy read the note over, then pulled out of his pocket three hundred and twenty dollars which he had saved. Very methodically he counted out a hundred and fifty, rolled the bills up with the letter and returned them to his pocket. He then detached two ten-dollar bills from the other pile and handed the hundred and fifty to Squatter Sam.

“You can write to me, Sam,” he said. “Only don’t write and say you’re in trouble. I won’t have any sympathy for you then. Now I have. You saved my life and I didn’t forget it. Did I?”

Squatter Sam was actually crying. “I’ll send it back to yer, boy,” he said. “I—I won’t fergit this in a hurry. No siree! I’ll send it back to yer some day.”

Westy held out his hand to the wretched man, grasped his and was gone. He started back across the farm—through the sand and sage—and so back to his lateral.

He had divided his little fortune between his two friends, the one who had rescued him and the one who had made a man of him—given him a start in life.

Perhaps he had not followed the cold requirements of the highest duty. He could not tell. He had never expected anything like this, but he had thought it out and done the best he knew.

It was not so bad.

END

[The end of *Westy Martin in the Land of the Purple Sage* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]