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Title: The Motor Boys on the Pacific

Author: Clarence Young

Release Date: February, 2004 [EBook #5004]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on April 7, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, THE MOTOR BOYS ON THE PACIFIC *****

This eBook was produced by Jim Weiler, xooqi.com

THE MOTOR BOYS ON THE PACIFIC

or

The Young Derelict Hunters

by CLARENCE YOUNG

PREFACE

DEAR BOYS:

I believe it is not necessary to introduce the Motor Boys to most of my readers, as they have made their acquaintance in the previous books of this series. To those, however, who take up this volume without having previously read the ones that go before, I take pleasure in presenting my friends, Jerry, Ned and Bob.

They are booked for quite a long trip, this time; across the continent to the Pacific coast, where they are destined to have some stirring adventures, searching for a mysterious derelict.

Those of you who know the Motor Boys from their past performances know that they will meet emergencies in the right spirit, and that they will do their level best to accomplish what they set out to do. Whether they did so in this case I leave it for you to determine by reading the book.

Though their own motor boat, the Dartaway, was destroyed in a train wreck, they managed to get the use of a powerful craft, in which they made a cruise on the Pacific ocean. Their old friend, Professor Snodgrass was with them, and, if you care to learn of his search for a horned toad, you will find the details set down here.

Yours very truly,

CLARENCE YOUNG.

CHAPTER I

SOME BAD NEWS

"WELL, she is smashed this time, sure!" exclaimed Jerry Hopkins, to his chums, Ned Slade and Bob Baker.

"What's smashed?" asked Ned. "Who's the letter from'?" for Jerry had a slip of paper in his hand.

"It isn't a letter. It's a telegram."

"A telegram!" exclaimed Bob. "What's up, Jerry?"

"She's smashed, I tell you. Busted, wrecked, demolished, destroyed, slivered to pieces, all gone!"

"Who?"

"Our motor boat, the Dartaway!"

"Not the Dartaway!" and Ned and Bob crowded closer to Jerry.

"That's what she is. There's no mistake about it this time, I'm afraid. You know we thought once before she had gone to flinders, but it wasn't so. This time it is."

"How did it happen?" asked Ned.

"Yes, tell us, can't you?" cried Bob. "What are you so slow about?"

"Say, Chunky," remarked Jerry, looking at his fat chum, "if you'll give me a chance I'll tell you all I know. I just got this telegram from the Florida Coast Railway Company. It says:

"Jerry Hopkins. Motor boat Dartaway, shipped by you from. St. Augustine in freight wreck just outside Jacksonville. Boat total loss, buried under several freight cars. Will write further particulars. J. H. Maxon, General Freight Agent."

"That's all there is to it," added Jerry, folding up the telegram.

"All there is to it! I guess not much!" exclaimed Bob. "Aren't you going to sue 'em for damages, Jerry?"

"Well, there's no use being in such a rush," observed Jerry. "Maybe they'll pay the claim without a suit. I'll have to make some inquiries."

"Let's go down to the freight once here and see Mr. Hitter," suggested Ned. "He can tell us what to do. The poor Dartaway! Smashed!"

"And in a land wreck, too!" put in Jerry. "It wouldn't be so bad if she had gone down on the Atlantic, chasing after a whale, or in pursuit of a shark--"

"Or with the flag flying, out in a storm, with Salt Water Sam," interrupted Ned. "But to think of her being buried under a lot of freight cars! It's tough, that's what it is!"

"That's right," agreed Bob. "Just think of it! No more rides in her! Say, we ought to get heavy damages! She was a fine boat!"

"Come on then," cried Ned. "Don't let's stand here chinning all day. Let's go see Mr. Hitter. He has charge of all the freight that comes to Cresville, and he can tell us how to proceed to collect damages."

"Yes, I guess that's all that's left for us to do," decided Jerry, and the three lads started for the railroad depot.

They lived in the town of Cresville, Mass., a thriving community, and

had been chums and inseparable companions ever since they could remember. Bob Baker was the son of a wealthy banker, while Jerry Hopkins's mother was a widow, who had been left considerable property, and Ned Slade's father owned a large department store.

You boys who have read the previous volumes of this "Motor Boys Series" do not need to be reminded of the adventures the three chums had together. To those of you who read this book first, I will say that, in the first volume, called "The Motor Boys," there was related a series of happenings that followed the winning of a certain bicycle race in Cresville. After their victory in this contest the boys got motorcycles, and, by winning a race on them, won a touring car.

In this automobile they had many adventures, and several narrow escapes. They incurred the enmity of Noddy Nixon, a town bully, and his crony, Bill Berry. The three chums then took a long trip overland in their automobile, as related in the second book of this series and, incidentally, managed to locate a rich mine belonging to a prospector, who, to reward them, gave them a number of shares. While out west the boys met a very learned gentleman, Professor Uriah Snodgrass, who was traveling in the interests of science. He persuaded the boys to go with him in their automobile to search for a certain ancient, buried city, and this they found in Mexico, where they had a number of surprising adventures.

Returning from that journey, they made a trip across the plains, on which they discovered the hermit of Lost Lake. Arriving home they decided, some time later, to get a motor boat, and, in the fifth volume of the series, entitled, "The Motor Boys Afloat," there was set down what happened to them on their first cruise on the river, during which they solved a robbery mystery. Finding they were well able to manage the boat they took a trip on the Atlantic ocean, and, after weathering some heavy storms they reached home, only to start out again on a longer voyage, this time to strange waters amid the everglades of Florida.

They had recently returned from that queer region, and, as they had done on their journey to that locality, they shipped their boat by rail from St. Augustine to Cresville. Or, rather, they saw it safely boxed at the freight station in St. Augustine, and came on up north, trusting that the Dartaway would arrive in due season, and in good condition.

They had been home a week now, and as there was no news of their boat, Jerry had become rather anxious and had written to the railroad officials in St. Augustine. In response he got the telegram which brought consternation to the hearts of the motor boys.

"It doesn't seem possible," remarked Bob, as the three lads hurried on toward the freight office.

"I guess it's good-bye to the Dartaway this trip," said Jerry. "Too bad! she was a fine boat."

"Well, we'll make the railroad pay for it, and we'll get a better boat," spoke up Bob.

"We couldn't get any better boat than the Dartaway, Chunky," said Ned.

"We might get a larger one, and a more powerful one, but never a better one. She served us well. To think of her being crushed under a lot of freight cars! It makes me mad!"

"No use feeling that way," suggested Jerry. "Just think of the good times we had in her, not only on this last trip, but on the previous cruises."

"This last was the best," remarked Bob, with something like a sigh. "It was lovely down there in Florida."

"I guess he's thinking of the Seabury girls," put in Ned, with a wink at Jerry.

"No more than you are!" exclaimed Bob. "I guess you were rather sweet on Olivia, yourself."

"Or was it Rose or Nellie?" asked Jerry with a laugh. "They were all three nice-- very nice."

"That's right," said Ned, fervently.

The three young ladies the boys referred to were daughters of a Mr. Nathan Seabury, whom the boys met while cruising about the everglades and adjacent rivers and lakes. He was in his houseboat Wanderer, traveling for his health. Mr. Seabury owned a large hotel in Florida and his meeting with the boys, especially with Jerry, was a source of profit to Mrs. Hopkins.

She owned some land in Florida; but did not consider it of any value. It developed that it adjoined Mr. Seabury's hotel property and, as he wished it to enlarge his building, he purchased the lot for a goodly sum.

The three boys, after the return of the Dartaway and Wanderer from the strange waters, had stopped for a week at Mr. Seabury's hotel, before journeying north.

"I'd like to see them again," said Bob, after a pause, during which the boys turned into the street leading to the depot.

"Who?" asked Ned.

"The Seabury family."

"Mr. Seabury-- or-- er-- the girls?" asked Jerry.

"All of 'em," replied Bob quickly.

"I had a letter the other day," remarked Jerry quietly.

"You did!" exclaimed Ned.

"From them?" asked Bob eagerly.

"Well, it wasn't exactly a family letter," answered Jerry, with just the suspicion of a blush. "It was from Nellie, and she said she, her sisters and father were going to lower California."

"To California?" exclaimed Bob and Ned.

"Yes; for Mr. Seabury's health. You know they said they expected to when we parted from them. The climate of Florida did not do him any good, and they are going to try what California will do. She asked us to call and see them, if we were ever in that neighborhood."

"I guess our chances of going to California are pretty slim," remarked Bob. "Our motor boat's gone now, and we can't make any more cruises."

"I don't see what that's got to do with it," declared Ned. "We couldn't very well cross the continent in her, even if we had the Dartaway, and she was rather too small to make the trip by water, even if the Panama Canal was finished."

"Oh, well, you know what I mean," retorted Bob, who did not exactly know himself. "We can't go anywhere right away. School opens soon, and it's buckle down and study all winter I suppose. But--"

Bob's remarks were interrupted by the arrival of the Boston Express, which rumbled into the Cresville station, where the boys now were and, after a momentary stop, steamed on again. A man leaped from the steps of a parlor car and ran into the freight office, first, however, looking up and down the length of the train to see if any other passengers got off.

"He seems in a hurry," observed Ned.

"Yes, and he must have some pull with the railroad, for the Boston Express never stops here," said Jerry. "Maybe he's the president of the road."

The boys kept on to the freight office. When they reached it they found the stranger in conversation with Mr. Hitter, the agent. The chums could not help overhearing the talk.

"Have you several packages here, addressed to X. Y. Z., to be held until called for?" the stranger asked.

"There they be," replied the agent, pointing to several small boxes, piled near the door.

"That's good," and the man seemed much relieved. "Now I want them shipped by fast freight to San Francisco, and I want to prepay them so there will be no delay. How much is it?" and he pulled out a pocketbook, disclosing a roll of bills. As he did so he hurried to the door and looked up and down the depot platform, as if afraid of being observed. He saw the three boys, and, for a moment, seemed as if he was about to hurry away. Then, with an obvious effort, he remained, but turned into the freight office and shut the door.

"He acts as if he was afraid we would steal something from him," said Bob.

"Or as if he didn't want us to hear any more about those boxes," supplemented Jerry. "He's a queer customer, he is."

"Well, it's none of our affair," remarked Ned, but neither he nor his chums realized how, a little later, they were to take part in an adventure in which the mysterious man and the queer boxes were to figure importantly.

In a short time the man came out of the freight office. He did not look at the boys, but hurried off down the street, putting some papers into his pocket book, which, the boys could not help noticing as he passed them, was not so full of money as it had been.

"Let's go in and ask Mr. Hitter what to do about our boat," suggested Ned.

They found the agent counting over a roll of bills.

"Been robbing a bank?" asked Bob cheerfully. "Guess I'd better tell dad to look out for his money."

"That was paid by the man who was just in in here," replied the agent. "Queer chap. Seemed as if he didn't want to be found out. First he was going to ship his stuff by fast freight, and then he concluded it would be better by express, though it cost a lot more. But he had plenty of money."

"Who was he?" asked Jerry.

"That's another funny part of it. He didn't tell me his name, though I hinted I'd have to have it to give him a receipt. He said to make it out X. Y. Z., and I done it. That's the way them boxes come, several days ago, from Boston. They arrived by express, consigned to X. Y. Z., and was to be called for. I thought of everybody in town, but there ain't nobody with them initials. I was just wondering what to do with 'em when in be comes an' claims 'em."

"What's in em?" asked Jerry.

"Blessed if I know," responded Mr. Hitter. "I couldn't git that out of him, either, though I hinted that I ought to know if it was dynamite,

or anything dangerous."

"What did he say?" inquired Ned.

"He said it wasn't dynamite, but that's all he would say, an' I didn't have no right to open 'em. He paid me the expressage, and seemed quite anxious to know just when I could ship the boxes, and when they'd arrive in San Francisco. I could tell him the first, but not the last, for there's no tellin' what delays there'll be on the road.

"He was a queer man-- a very queer man. I couldn't make him out. An' he went off in a hurry, as if he was afraid some one would see him. An' he shut the door, jest as if you boys would bother him,-- Well, it takes all sorts of people to make a world. I don't s'pose you or I will ever meet him again."

Mr. Hitter was not destined to, but the boys had not seen the last of the strangely acting man, who soon afterward played a strange part in their lives.

"What you chaps after, anyhow?" went on the freight agent, when he had put the money in the safe.

"Our motor boat's smashed!" exclaimed Bob. "We want damages for her! How are we going to get 'em?"

"Not guilty, boys!" exclaimed the agent holding up his hands, as if he thought wild-west robbers were confronting him. "You can search me. Nary a boat have I got, an' you can turn my pockets inside out!" and he turned slowly around, like an exhibition figure in a store show window.

CHAPTER II

A DESPERATE RACE

"WELL," remarked Mr. Hitter, after a pause, during which the boys, rather surprised at his conduct, stood staring at him, "well, why don't you look in my hip pocket. Maybe I've got a boat concealed there."

"I didn't mean to go at you with such a rush," apologized Jerry. "But you see--"

"That's all right," interrupted the freight agent. "Can I put my hands down now? The blood's all runnin' out of 'em, an' they feel as if they was goin' to sleep. That'll never do, as I've got a lot of way-bills to make out," and he lowered his arms.

"Do you know anything about this?" asked Jerry, handing Mr. Hitter the telegram.

"What's that? The Dartaway smashed!" the agent exclaimed, reading the

message. "Come now, that's too bad! How did it happen?"

The boys explained how they had shipped the craft north.

"Of course the accident didn't happen on the line of railroad I am agent for," said Mr. Hitter, after reading the telegram again. "If it had, we'd be responsible."

"What can we do?" asked Bob. "We want to get damages."

"An' I guess you're entitled to 'em," replied the agent. "Come on inside, and I'll tell you what to do. You'll have to make a claim, submit affidavits, go before a notary public and a whole lot of rig-ma-role, but I guess, in the end you'll get damages. They can't blame you because the boat was smashed. It's too bad! I feel like I'd lost an old friend."

Mr. Hitter had had several rides in the Dartaway for he had done the boys many favors and they wished to return them, so he was given a chance to get intimately acquainted with the speedy craft.

Taking the boys into his office, Mr. Hitter instructed them how to write a letter to the claim department of the Florida Coast Railway, demanding damages for the smashing of the boat.

"Be respectful, but put it good and strong," he said. "I'll write on my own account to the general freight agent. He's a friend of mine, and we have business dealings together-- that is his road and my road," and Mr. Hitter spoke as though he owned the line of which he was the Cresville agent.

"That'll be good," said Bob. "Maybe it will hurry matters up. We're much obliged to you, Mr. Hitter."

"That's what we are," chimed in Jerry and Ned.

The boys lost no time in sending in their claim. Then there was nothing to do but to wait. They knew it would take some days, and they did not expect an answer in less than a week, while Mr. Hitter told them that if they got money in payment for the destroyed boat within three months they would be lucky.

"Well, since the Dartaway's gone, I guess we'll have to go back to the automobile for a change," suggested Jerry one afternoon, early in September, about a week before school was to open. "Let's take a little jaunt out in the country, stay a couple of days, and come back, all ready to pitch in and study."

"Fine!" cried Bob. "We'll stay at a hotel where they have good dinners--"

"Of course!" retorted Ned. "That's Chunky's first idea-- something to eat. I've been waiting for him to say something like that."

The boys were at Jerry's house, talking over various matters. The auto was kept in an unused barn back of his home, but, since the advent of the motor boat, had not seen much service, though occasionally the boys went out in it. Now, it was likely to come into active use again.

"Let's look the machine over," proposed Jerry. "It may need some repairs. It got pretty hard usage, especially in our trips to Mexico and across the plains."

The boys soon found that, beyond two tires which needed repairs, and some minor adjustments to the engine, the car was in good shape. It was in running order and, at Bob's suggestion, they got in it and made a trip to the town garage, where they intended to leave it to be overhauled.

As they were turning a corner, near the automobile shop, they heard a sudden "Honk-honk!" that startled them. Jerry, who was at the steering wheel, shut off the power and applied the emergency brake.

And it was only just in time for, a moment later, from a cross street, there shot out a big green touring car, very powerful, as they could tell by the throbbing of the engine. It almost grazed the mudguards of the machine in which the three boys were, and, skidded dangerously. Then, with what seemed an impudent, warning toot of the horn, it swung around and sped off down the road.

"That was a close shave!" remarked Jerry, as he released the brake.

"I should say yes," agreed Bob. "That was a six-cylinder car. Bur-r-r-r! If she'd hit us--" He did not finish, but the boys knew what he meant.

They proceeded to the garage, leaving their machine to be repaired. It would be ready for them the next day, the man said, and they arranged to call for it, and go for a trip in the country.

"Let's go to Riverton," suggested Bob, naming a summer resort about a hundred miles away. "The season is just about to close there, and, as it isn't crowded, we can get better attention and--"

"Better meals, he means," finished Ned. "All right, Chunky, we'll go."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," agreed Jerry. "We could make it in one day easily, and wouldn't have to hurry. We could stay there a couple of days, making little side trips, and come back Saturday. That would put us in good shape for Monday, when school opens."

There was no dissension from this plan, and, having secured the consent of their parents, the boys, early the next day, started off on their journey. It was a short one, compared to those they had been in the habit of taking, but they did not have time for a longer jaunt.

They arrived at Riverton in the afternoon, having stopped on the road for dinner. They found the place rather livelier than they expected, for there had been an automobile meet the day previous, including a big race, and several lovers of the sport still remained, for the weather was very pleasant. The sheds about the hotel were filled with all sorts of cars, so that the boys had hardly room to store their machine.

"This is a little more exciting than we counted on," remarked Jerry, as he and his chums entered the hotel to register. "I'm afraid we'll not get such good attention as Bob thought."

"Oh, it's all the better," was the answer of the stout youth. "They'll have all the more to eat, with this crowd here."

"Chunky can argue it any way he likes," declared Ned. "No use trying to corner him, Jerry."

"No, I guess not. But I'm hungry enough to eat almost anything."

As they were turning away from the clerk's desk, having been assigned to rooms, the boys saw a youth, about their own age, standing near a bulletin board fastened on the side wall. The youth was tacking up a notice and, as he turned, having finished, Jerry exclaimed in a whisper:

"Noddy Nixon! What's he doing here?"

At the same moment, Noddy, the long-time enemy of the motor boys, saw them. His face got red, and he swung quickly aside to avoid speaking to the three chums.

The last they had seen of the bully was when he started to accompany them back to Cresville, after his disastrous attempt to make money from a Florida cocoanut grove. Noddy was wanted as a witness by the government authorities, in connection with the attempted wreck of a vessel, in which Bill Berry was concerned; but, after the motor boys had rescued Noddy from an unpleasant position in Florida, and he had agreed to return to Cresville, he suddenly disappeared in the night. This was the first they had seen of him since. They had learned that the government no longer desired his testimony.

"Let's see what notice he put up," suggested Ned. "Maybe he has lost something."

They walked over to the bulletin board. There, in Noddy's rather poor handwriting, was a challenge. It was to the effect that he would race, on the track near the hotel, any automobilist who would choose to compete with him, for money, up to five hundred dollars, or merely for fun.

"Noddy must have a new car," remarked Ned. "His old one couldn't go for a cent. We beat it several times."

"What's the matter with trying again?" asked Jerry, a light of excitement coming into his eyes. "I'd like to have a race. Maybe several cars will enter, and we can have some fun out of it. Our machine has a lot of 'go' left in it yet."

"That's the stuff!" exclaimed Bob. "I'm with you. But let's get supper first, maybe--"

"I guess he's afraid there won't be any left," remarked Jerry. "But come on, I can eat a bit myself."

As the boys left the office of the hotel, they saw several men reading the notice Noddy had tacked up.

"A race on this circular track here!" exclaimed one man to a friend as the boys passed him. "It's very risky! The turns are not banked enough. I wouldn't do it, but I suppose some will take the chance."

"Yes, it will be a dangerous race," responded the other. "Who is this Noddy Nixon?"

"A son of that rich Nixon over in Cresville, I believe. His father made a lot of money in stocks lately, and, I guess the son is helping spend it. He has a powerful car."

The motor boys did not stay to hear more, but went to their rooms to change their clothes, and were soon eating supper. There was talk of nothing but automobile topics in the hotel corridors and office that evening. Many motorists were planning to leave the next day, but some said they would stay and see if the Nixon race would amount to anything.

"Let's accept the challenge," suggested Jerry.

"I don't want to have anything to do with Noddy," objected Ned.

"We don't have to," replied Bob, "I was talking to the clerk about it. All we have to do is register our names, and the name of the car. It's an informal affair, only for fun. They won't race for money. Come on, let's go in it."

Hearing this, Ned agreed, and the boys put their names down. As Noddy had stipulated there must be four passengers in each car it would necessitate the motor boys getting some one else to ride with them. This the clerk agreed to arrange.

There were six entries in the race, which was to take place the next day. Early in the morning, before breakfast, Ned, Jerry and Bob went out in their car to try the course. When they were half way around it they heard a car coming behind them. In a moment it had passed them, and they recognized it as the same machine that had nearly collided with them in Cresville.

"Look who's in it!" cried Bob.

"Who?" asked Ned.

"Noddy Nixon. If that's his car, we haven't any show."

"Humph! I'm afraid not," answered Jerry rather ruefully. "Still, I'm not going to give up now. He's got a new car, but maybe we can beat him. He's a poor driver."

Several other autos soon appeared on the track to have a "tryout," and, though none of them seemed as speedy as Noddy's new machine, there was no talk of dropping out on the part of those who had entered. That gave the boys more courage, and they decided to stick, even though their chances were not good.

Noddy did not speak to them, though he passed them several times. Nor did he appear very popular with the other autoists. He had several young men with him, and they made things rather lively about the hotel, occasionally giving what seemed to be college yells.

"They're regular 'rah-rah' boys," said Bob, in contempt.

Early that afternoon just before the race Bob, Jerry and Ned spent an hour in going over their car, making some adjustments, and seeing that the tires were in good shape. Almost at the last minute Jerry decided to put the non-skidding chains on the rear wheels.

"Those turns, which are not banked much, are dangerous," he said, "I'm not going to take any chances. We don't want to turn turtle."

There was much activity about the hotel as the hour for the contest arrived. Noddy's car seemed the finest of the six that lined up at the starting tape. The motor boys had drawn a position next to the bully and his cronies.

Noddy glanced contemptuously at them.

"You must think it's winter, putting chains on," he remarked to Jerry, who had been chosen to steer.

"It may be a cold day for somebody before we get through," was all Jerry replied.

"You haven't the ghost of a show," called one of Noddy's companions. "You'll think you're standing still when we start."

The others laughed at this joke, and Noddy seemed pleased. There was a short consultation among the judges and other officials, and, a moment later, a white puff of smoke was seen hovering above the uplifted revolver of the starter. Then came a sharp crack, and the panting machines, the engines of which had been put in motion some time

previous, started off together, as the drivers threw in the high speed gears.

The race, which was truly a dangerous contest, was on, and, with eager eyes the motor boys looked ahead on the course.

CHAPTER III

NEWS FROM THE WEST

THE track was a half-mile one, and, as the length of the race was five miles it would be necessary to make ten laps or circuits. The course was in the shape of an ellipse, with rather sharp turns at either end, where the contestants, if they did not want a spill, or a bad skid, must slacken their pace. It was on the two straight stretches that speed could be made.

At the report of the pistol Noddy's car shot off as an arrow from a bow, the explosions of the cylinders sounding like a small battery of quick-firing guns in action. But the others were after him, the five cars bunched together, that of the motor boys a little behind the other four.

"We've got to catch him, Jerry," whispered Bob.

"Easier said than done," replied Jerry, as he shoved the gasoline lever over a trifle, and advanced the spark, thereby increasing the speed of the car. "Noddy's got a powerful machine."

"They should have had a handicap on this race," said Tom Jennings, the young man whom the hotel clerk had asked to be a fourth passenger in the motor boys' car, so that the conditions of the contest would be met. "It's not fair to have a high power auto race one of two cylinders."

"Ours has four," spoke Ned. "Of course its not as up-to-date as Noddy's is, but--"

"We'll beat him!" exclaimed Bob. "We've done it before and we can do it again."

"I'm afraid not," went on Tom. "That big green car of his will go ahead of anything on this track."

And so it seemed, for Noddy was spinning around the course at fearful speed, his car looking like a green streak.

"Let's see how he takes the turn," suggested Bob. "He'll have to slow up if he doesn't want a spill."

Noddy was wise enough to do this, though even at the reduced speed at which he went around the bank, his rear wheels skidded rather alarmingly.

But Jerry was not idle during this time. As he found his car responding to the increase of gasoline and the advanced spark, he shoved the levers still further over. The auto shot forward, distancing the yellow car immediately in front of it, passing one with an aluminum body and closely approaching a purple auto which was behind Noddy.

Suddenly a loud explosion sounded back of the motor boys.

"There goes a tire!" exclaimed Bob.

"Hope it isn't one of yours," said Tom.

"If it was you'd be sliding along the track on your face instead of sitting here," responded Bob. "No, it's one on the aluminum car. She's out of the race," he added as he gave a quick glance back. A few minutes later there was another noise-- a crashing sound-- and the motor boys, by a quick glance, saw that the rearmost car in the race had, by injudicious steering, been sent through a frail fence which surrounded the track. The radiator was broken and, though no one was hurt the car was put out of business. That left but four cars-- Noddy's green one, the yellow, the red one of the motor boys', and a purple affair. They were speeding along in that order, and, a few seconds later something went wrong with one of the cylinders of the purple machine, leaving but three contestants. Then the yellow car shot ahead of the red one containing the motor boys.

By this time one circuit of the track had been completed, and a start made on the second lap.

"Think we're catching up?" asked Bob, as Jerry cautiously fed the engine a little more gasoline.

"Well, we're holding our own," was the answer of the steersman, "and I think we're catching up to the yellow car again. If we pass that I'm not so sure but what we can come in a close second to Noddy."

"I don't want to come in second," spoke up Ned. "I want to beat him."

"So do I," replied Jerry, "but it's not going to be so easy. Our car's doing well, but we can't expect wonders of it."

"The race isn't over until you're at the finish tape," said Tom Jennings. "Keep on, boys, I'd like to see that Nixon chap beaten. He thinks he owns the earth."

For two miles there was no change in the position of the cars. Then slowly, very slowly, Jerry saw that his red machine was overtaking the yellow car. Inch by inch it crept up, the steersman of the rival car doing his best but failing to get more speed out of the engine.

"Too bad we have to pass you!" cried Jerry, as he careened past the

yellow machine.

"That's all right," sung out the steersman good-naturedly. "Beat that other one, if you can."

"We're going to try!" yelled Ned, above the noise of the exploding cylinders.

They were on a straight stretch then and, as Noddy looked back and saw the red car closer to him than it had been before, he put on more speed. His green auto shot forward but Jerry still had something in reserve, and he let his machine out another notch.

"He's got to slow up for the turn!" cried Ned. "Maybe we can pass him!"

"Yes, but we've got to slacken up too, if we don't want a spill," replied Bob.

"That's so," admitted Ned.

Noddy did slow up, but not much, and his car skidded worse than at any time yet. It looked as if it was going over, and a cry from the spectators showed that they, too, anticipated this disaster. But, with a sharp wrench of the steering wheel, Noddy brought the car back toward the center of the track.

Jerry swung around the turn at reduced speed, and, because of the chains, his machine did not skid more than a few inches.

"Good thing you have those chains on," commented Tom. "They may come in handy at the finish."

"That's what I put them there for," answered Jerry.

For another mile there was little change in the relative position of the cars of Noddy and the motor boys. Jerry thought he had cut the bully's lead somewhat, but he still felt that he was far from having a good chance to win the race. Still, he was not going to give up.

"Two laps more and it's all over," said Bob, as they began on the final mile. "Can't you hit it up a bit more, Jerry?"

"I'll try."

Just a degree faster came the explosions of the cylinders of the red car. But also, still faster, came the reports from Noddy's auto. He was not going to be beaten if he could help it.

Around the two machines swung, the yellow car having given up and dropped out. There was a confused shouting from the spectators, and Bob could distinguish cheers for the red auto.

"We've just got to win!" he cried. "Win, Jerry! Win!"

Try as he did, by "nursing" the engine, Jerry could not gain an inch on Noddy's car. The red machine was fifty feet behind the green one, both going at top speed. Only an accident, it seemed, could make the motor boys win.

As they swung into the last lap Ned cried:

"Noddy isn't going to slow down for the turn!"

"Neither are we!" cried Jerry fiercely. "Quick boys! All of you get out on the inside step! Crouch down! That will help hold us as we go around the bank, or, otherwise, we'll go over."

They all knew what he meant. By hanging out on the runboard or step, nearest the inside of the track, more weight would be added to that side of the car. It was what automobilists call "shifting the center of gravity," and aids in preventing spills.

Giving one glance to see that the boys were in their places, Jerry grasped the steering wheel firmly, and sent the car at the dangerous turn at full speed. Noddy was doing the same, but he had not thought of having any of his passengers hang out on the step.

"Look out now, boys!" called Jerry, as they took the turn.

"Swing out as far as you can, boys, but hang down low!" called Tom Jennings, who had been in races before.

Even with this precaution, and aided as they were by the chains on the rear wheels, the red car skidded or slewed so that Jerry thought it was going over. But it did not. By the narrowest margin it kept on the bank.

Not so, however, with Noddy's green dragon. As soon as his car struck the turn it began to skid. He would not shut off his power, but kept on the high gear, and with the engine going at top speed.

There was a cry of alarm, and then the green car left the track, mounted the bank, slid over the top, and came to a halt in a pool of mud and water on the other side of the field. It went fifty yards before Noddy could stop it.

"Go on! Go on!" yelled Ned. "We win! We win!"

Jerry had all he could do to hold the steering wheel of his slewing car, but, by gripping it desperately, he swung it into place, and the red machine started up the home stretch, crossing the tape a winner, for it was the only car left on the track.

A burst of cheers greeted it, and men crowded up to shake hands with the plucky boys.

"Glad you beat the 'mud lark,'" said the owner of the yellow machine, thus giving Noddy's car a name that stuck to it for some time. "That Nixon chap thought he was going to walk over every one. You taught him a much-needed lesson."

Nothing was talked of in the hotel that night but the race, and the motor boys were the heroes of the occasion. Noddy did not appear, and it was learned that he had to hire men and teams to get his car out of the mud.

The motor boys started for home the next day, and thought they were going to make it in good time, but they had a tire accident on the road, when about twenty-five miles away, and decided to stay in the nearest village over night, as they had no spare shoe for the wheel.

As they left their car by the roadside, and tramped into the town, to send word to the nearest garage, they saw a cloud of dust approaching.

"Here comes a car," said Bob. "Maybe we can get help."

As the machine drew nearer they saw that it was painted green, and, a moment later, Noddy Nixon had brought his auto to a stop, and was grinning at them.

"Had a break-down, eh?" he asked. "That's a fine car you have, ain't it?"

"We can beat you!" exclaimed Ned.

"Yes you can! Not in a thousand years if I hadn't gone off the track! Want any help? Well, you'll not get it, see? Bye-bye! I'll tell 'em you're coming," and, with an ugly leer, the bully started off.

"I wouldn't take help from him if I had to walk ten miles without my supper," said Bob firmly, and that was a strong saying for the stout youth.

The motor boys found a good hotel in the village, and the next day, when their car had been repaired, they resumed their journey, arriving at home about noon.

"There's some mail for you, Jerry," said Mrs. Hopkins, as her son came in, after putting the auto in the barn. "It's from California. I didn't know you knew any one out there."

"Neither did I, mother. We'll see who it's from."

He tore open the letter, read it hurriedly, and gave a cry of mingled delight and surprise.

"It's from Nellie Seabury!" he said. "She says they are in lower California, traveling about, looking for a good place to stay at for a

few months for their father's health. When they locate she wants-- that is Mr. Seabury-- wants us to come out and see them. Oh, I wish I could go-- I wish we could all go!"

"Perhaps you can," suggested his mother with a smile. "California is not so far away. But I suppose you'll have to wait until next vacation."

"Yes, I suppose so," admitted Jerry. "And that's a long ways off-- a long ways."

"The time will soon pass," said his mother. "But tell me about your auto trip. Did you have a good time?"

"Fine, and we beat Noddy Nixon in a great race."

"I wish you wouldn't have anything to do with that young man," said Mrs. Hopkins. "You have nothing but trouble when you do."

"I guess he'll not want much more to do with us," returned Jerry. "We manage to beat him every time. But I must go find the boys. This will be great news for them-- this letter from the Seabury family."

"I thought it was from-- Nelly."

"So it is-- but it's all the same," answered Jerry with a blush.

CHAPTER IV

MORE LETTERS

JERRY found Ned, his nearest chum, at home, and told him of the news from the west.

"That's fine!" cried Ned. "Come on and tell Bob."

"Don't have to," said Jerry. "Here he comes now."

The stout youth was, at that moment, walking along the street toward Ned's house.

"Come on in!" cried Ned, as he opened the door while his chum was still on the steps.

"That's what I was going to do," responded Chunky. "Did you think I was going to sit out here? Of course I'm coming in. What's the matter?" for he saw by Ned's face that something unusual had occurred.

"Jerry's got a letter from Nellie Seabury-- they're in lower California-- we're going-- I mean they want us to come and pay them a visit-- I mean--"

"Say, for mercy sakes stop!" cried Bob, holding both hands over his

ears.

"I guess Ned's a little excited," suggested Jerry.

"You guess so-- well, I know so," responded Bob. "Are you all done?" and he cautiously removed his hands from his ears.

"Tell him about it, Jerry," said Ned, and Jerry told the news.

"It would be fine to go out there," said Bob, reflectively. "But there's school. We can't get out of that."

They all agreed they could not, and decided the only thing to do was to wait until the following summer.

"Too bad," remarked Bob with a sigh. "Winter is the best time of the year out there, too."

In spite of the fact that they knew, under the present circumstances, they could not go for several months, the boys spent an hour or more discussing what they would do if they could go to California.

"Oh, what's the use!" exclaimed Ned, when Jerry had spoken of how fine it would be to hire a motor boat and cruise along the Pacific coast.

"Don't get us all worked up that way, Jerry. Have some regard for our feelings!"

"Well, let's talk about school. It opens Monday."

"Don't mention it!" cried Ned. "I say-- hello, there's the postman's whistle. He's coming here."

He went to the door, and returned carrying a letter, the envelope of which he was closely examining.

"You can find out from who it is by opening it," suggested Jerry.

"Here's a funny thing," spoke Ned. "This letter is addressed to my father, but, down in one corner it says, 'May be opened by Ned, in case of necessity.'"

"Well, then, open it," suggested Bob. "This is a case of necessity. Where's it from?"

"Boston, but I don't recognize the writing."

"Open it," called Jerry.

Ned did so, and, as he read, he uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Well if this isn't a queer thing," he said. "Did you ever see such a coincidence? This letter is from Professor Uriah Snodgrass, and listen to what he says: 'Dear Mr. Slade, or Ned. I write thus as I want one

of you to read it in a hurry, and one of you may be away from home. You remember the last I saw of you and your chums (this part is for Ned) was in Florida. There I secured the rare butterfly I was looking for, and, through that success I was able to obtain a position with a Boston museum, to travel all over the world for them, collecting valuable specimens. I have been here for only a few weeks, but I already have a commission. I am soon to start for California, in search of a Cornu batrachian."

"A 'Cornu batrachian!'" exclaimed Bob. "For the love of tripe, what's that?"

"California!" murmured Jerry. "I guess the fates want to pile it up on us."

"Say, is that 'Cornu batrachian' anything like a mountain lion?" asked Bob.

"Wait," counseled Ned. "He explains. 'The Cornu batrachian,' he says, 'is what is commonly called a horned toad. I must get several fine specimens, and I thought you boys might be making another trip, and could go with me. I would be very glad of your company. Please let me hear from you. My regards to Mrs. Slade.'"

"Well, wouldn't that tickle your teeth!" exclaimed Bob, more forcibly than elegantly. "And we can't go!" he added with a groan.

"Think of the fun we'll miss by not being with Professor Snodgrass," went on Ned.

"And with the Seabury family," chimed in Jerry.

"It's tough!" exclaimed Ned. "And school opens Monday!"

At that moment there was a whistle out in the street and a ring at the door bell.

"The postman again," said Ned. "I wonder what he wants?"

He went to the door.

"Here's a letter I forgot to give you," said the mailcarrier. "It got out of place in my bundle, and I didn't discover it until I was quite a way up the street."

"That's all right," answered Ned good-naturedly. "From the Board of Education," he murmured, as he looked at the printing in the upper left hand corner. "I wonder what they are writing to me about?"

He opened it and drew out a printed circular. As he re-entered the room where his chums were he gave a cry of delight.

"Listen to this!" he called, and he read:

"To the pupils of the Cresville Academy. It has been discovered, at the last moment, that a new heating boiler will be needed in the school. The tubes of the old one are broken. It has been decided to replace it at once, and, as it will be necessary to do considerable work about the building, thereby interfering with the proper conducting of studies, the school will not open for another month, or six weeks, depending on the length of time required to install a new boiler.

"Therefore pupils will kindly not report on Monday morning, as originally intended, but will hold themselves in readiness to begin their school work shortly after the receipt of another circular, which will be sent out as soon as the building is in proper shape. The faculty earnestly recommends that all pupils apply themselves diligently to their studies during this unlooked-for, unfortunate, but wholly necessary lengthening of the vacation season. By applying to their respective teachers pupils will learn what studies to continue."

"Whoop!" yelled Bob.

"O-la-la!" cried Ned after the fashion of some Eastern dervish.

"Say! That's great!" exclaimed Jerry. "A month more of vacation!"

"Now we can go to California with Professor Snodgrass, and help him catch horned toads!" added Ned.

"And visit the Seabury family," supplemented Jerry. "Oh, boys, this is simply immense! Things are coming our way after all!"

CHAPTER V

PROFESSOR URIAH SNODGRASS

THE sudden and unexpected news that they need not begin their school studies on Monday morning fairly startled the boys, at first. They read the circular over again, to make sure they were not mistaken.

"Why didn't I get one?" asked Bob, rather suspiciously.

"Probably it's at your home now," suggested Ned.

"And I ought to have one, too," said Jerry.

"You came away before the letter carrier arrived," went on Ned. "Maybe you'd better go see. It might-- it might be a mistake-- or a joke."

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Bob. "I'm going to see if I have a letter like yours."

"So am I," decided Jerry. "It might, as you say, Ned, be a joke,

though it looks genuine."

To make sure, Jerry and Bob hurried to their homes. There they found awaiting them circulars, similar to the one Ned had. To further convince them, as Jerry and Bob were returning to Ned's house, they met Andy Rush, a small chap, but as full of life as an electric battery.

"Hello!" he exclaimed-- "Great news-- no school-- boiler busted-- thousands of teachers killed-- great calamity-- fine-- horrible-- terrible-- don't have to study-- longer vacation-- steam pipes blown out-- clouds of steam-- no heat-- freeze up-- burn to death-- great-- Whoope-e-e!"

"Did you ever take anything for that?" asked Jerry calmly, when Andy had finished.

"Dasn't! if I did I'd blow up! But say-- it's great, isn't it? Did you get a circular too?" and Andy showed one. "It's fearful-- terrible-- no school--"

"Come on," urged Jerry to Bob. "He'll give us nervous prostration if we listen to him any longer," but they need not have hurried, for Andy, so full of news that he could not keep still, had rushed off down the street, hopping, skipping and jumping, to spread the tidings, which nearly every Academy pupil in Cresville knew by that time.

Now the motor boys could discuss a Californian trip in earnest, for they knew their parents would let them go, especially after Mr. Seabury's invitation, and the letter from Professor Snodgrass. In the course of a few days Jerry received another missive from Nellie Seabury.

This letter informed Jerry, and, incidentally, his two chums, that she, with her sisters and father, had settled in a small town near the coast, not far from Santa Barbara, and on a little ocean bay, which, Nellie said, was a much nicer place than any they had visited in Florida.

"Father likes it very much here," she wrote, "and he declares he feels better already, though we have been here only a week. He says he knows it would do him good to see you boys, and he wishes-- in fact we all wish-- you three chums could come out here for a long visit, though I suppose you cannot on account of school opening. But, perhaps, we shall see you during the next vacation."

"She's going to see us sooner than that," announced Bob, when Jerry had read the letter to him and Ned.

"Did you write and tell her we were coming?" asked Ned, his two friends having called at his house to talk over their prospective trip.

"No, I thought we'd wait and see what Professor Snodgrass had planned. Perhaps he isn't going to that part of California."

"That's so," admitted Bob. "Guess we'll have to wait and find out. I wish he'd call or write. Have you heard anything more about damages for our smashed boat, Jerry?"

"No, I saw Mr. Hitter the other day, and he advised me to wait a while before writing again. Something queer happened while I was in his office, too."

"What was it?"

"Well, you remember the man who got off the Boston express that day, and acted so strange about his boxes of stuff he wanted shipped to the Pacific coast?"

"Sure," replied Ned and Bob at once.

"Well, through some mistake one of the boxes was left behind. Mr. Hitter, had it in his office, intending to ship it back to the man, for it wasn't worth while to send one box away out west, but it fell and burst partly open. The box was in one corner of the room, and, while I was there Mr. Hitter's dog went up to it and began sniffing at it. All at once the dog fell over, just as if he'd been shot. He stiffened out, and we thought he was dead, from having eaten something poisoned he found on the floor."

"Was he?"

"No, after a while he seemed to come to, and was all right, but he looked sick. Mr. Hitter said there must be something queer in that box, to make the dog act that way, and he and I smelled of it, taking care not to get too close."

"What was in it?" asked Ned.

"I don't know. It was something that smelled rather sweet, and somewhat sickish. Mr. Hitter said it might be some queer kind of poison that acted on animals, but not on human beings, and he put the box up on a high shelf where his dog couldn't get at it. But I thought it was rather queer stuff for a man to be sending away out to the coast."

"It certainly was," agreed Bob. "That man acted in a strange manner, too, as if he was afraid some one would see him. I wonder if there is any mystery connected with him?"

There came a time when the boys had good reason to remember this incident of the box filled with a strange substance, for they were in great danger from it.

"Well, I don't know that it concerns us," mused Ned. "I guess we'll

not get any damages from the railroad company in time to use the money on our California trip, so we might as well take some cash out of our saving fund. I do wish we'd hear from the professor. It's several days since I wrote to him, saying we would go with him."

"I suppose he is so busy catching a new kind of flea, or a rare specimen of mud turtle, that he has forgotten all about writing," suggested Bob. "If he doesn't--"

What Bob intended saying was interrupted by a commotion at the front door. The bell had rung a few seconds before, and the servant maid had answered it. Now the boys heard her voice raised in protest:

"Stop! Stop!" she cried. "Don't do that! You are a crazy man! I'll call the police!"

And, in reply came these words:

"Calm yourself, calm yourself, my dear young lady. All I desire is to capture that spider crawling on your left arm. It is a very valuable variety of the red spotted species, and I must have it for my collection. Now just stand still a moment--"

"Professor Snodgrass has arrived!" cried Ned, as he made a rush for the door.

CHAPTER VI

A STRANGE CONVERSATION

WHAT the boys saw made them stop short in amazement, and they had hard work not to burst into laughter at the sight of the professor, but they knew he would be offended if they made fun of him.

Professor Uriah Snodgrass had dropped his valise on the doorstep, and the impact had caused it to open, thereby liberating a number of toads and lizards which were crawling about the steps. In his hand the scientist held a large magnifying glass, through which he was staring at something on the arm of the servant. She had her sleeves rolled up to her elbows, for she had been busy sweeping when she answered the door bell.

"Let me go!" cried the young woman. "You are crazy! I'll call the police!"

"One moment! One moment!" pleaded the professor eagerly. "I must have that spider. There!" and with a sudden motion he captured the small insect and transferred it to a tiny glass box. "I have it! Oh, this is a most fortunate day for me. The museum will be very glad to get this. It is a perfect specimen," and he peered at it through his magnifying glass, as it crawled around, a captive in the box.

"Hello, Professor!" greeted Ned. "Glad to see you."

"Oh, Ned, how are you?" asked the scientist, without glancing up from his inspection of the spider. "Luck seems to be with me as soon as I arrive at your house. I have a spider--"

"Yes, but you'll not have any of those other specimens long, if you don't get busy," put in Bob. "They're all hopping or crawling away!"

"Oh, my goodness!" cried Professor Snodgrass, as he glanced down at the liberated toads and lizards. "Oh, my goodness! That is too bad. I brought them with me to compare with the horned toads and web-footed lizards I hope to secure. Now they are getting away. Please, my dear young lady, help me to save them!"

But the servant maid had fled into the house as soon as the scientist released her arm. She was convinced that she had just escaped the clutches of a madman.

"Come on, boys!" called Ned. "Help the professor!"

"Here are some small butterfly nets," the scientist said, producing them from his pocket. "Don't injure the toads or lizards."

The boys were glad enough of these aids in catching the professor's specimens, that were rapidly seeking hiding places about the stoop and sidewalk. Though they had acquired a certain familiarity with strange insects and reptiles, from seeing the museum collector handle them, they did not fancy picking up a toad or lizard bare-handed. With the nets, however, they managed, with the assistance of the scientist, to capture most of the specimens, returning them to their cases in the valise.

"There!" exclaimed Mr. Snodgrass, when, after a close scrutiny of the porch he could see no more of the creatures, "I think we have them all. Now boys, permit me to ask how you are. I am sorry my visit was attended with such excitement, but I could not miss the chance of getting that spider. That young woman may consider herself in the light of having advanced science several degrees. There are very few persons a red spider of that variety will get on."

"For which we ought all to be very thankful," announced Jerry. "I beg to be excused from helping the cause of science in that way. But, Professor, we're glad to see you. Are you all ready for your trip to California?"

"I could start to-night," was the answer. "I suppose you have matters all arranged?"

"Nearly so," returned Ned. "We thought of starting at the end of this week," and he explained how they hoped the destination of the scientist would be such that they might visit the Seaburys.

"That locality suits me all right," declared Mr. Snodgrass. "I am not

particular where I go, as long as I can get a specimen of a horned toad, and some web-footed lizards. I understand there are some to be had in the southern part of California, and so I will go there. I see no reason why you boys can not go with me, and also visit your friends. Only I should like to start as soon as possible. The toads may disappear."

"Hope not," said Bob, "for your sake. I haven't any use for them, myself."

"Oh, my dear young friend!" exclaimed the professor. "Some day you will see the real beauty of a horned toad. It is a most wonderful creature!"

"I'll take your word for it," murmured Bob. "But now come in and let's see about our arrangements."

The professor, who had been invited to be a guest at Ned's house, pending the start for the west, entered, placing his valise of specimens in a safe place in the hall. Then he and the boys discussed matters. Mr. Slade came in, soon after the arrival of the scientist, and announced that he had, in accordance with a previous arrangement, purchased the boys' tickets.

"All you've got to do is to pack up and start," said Mr. Slade. "I'm not going to give you any advice, for you ought to be able to take care of yourselves by this time. I know you will be safe as long as you are with the professor."

"Thank you," said the scientist with a bow.

The professor's arrangements for the western trip were complete and it did not take the boys long to get ready. By the end of the week the last valise had been packed, trunks were checked on ahead and, one morning, the boys started.

They were to proceed to Los Angeles, and from there were to go down the coast by land to the small town of San Felicity, where Mr. Seabury and his daughters had rented a bungalow.

"Now for a good time!" exclaimed Ned, as the train pulled out of the Cresville depot. "I've always wanted to visit California, and now I'm going to."

"We certainly ought to enjoy ourselves," agreed Jerry.

The travelers made good time to Chicago, little of incident occurring on the trip. When they got to the Windy City, they found they would have to wait several hours for a connecting train, and they put in the time seeing the sights.

When they returned to the depot they found the professor busy over some scientific book, sitting as undisturbed in the station, filled as

it was with shifting crowds, as if he was in his quiet study at the museum.

"The train will be here in about fifteen minutes," he informed the boys. "Better sit down and wait."

The three chums were rather tired, and were glad enough to take their places on the comfortable benches.

"Chicago is a great place," announced Bob. "That restaurant, where we had dinner--"

"Can't you say something that hasn't got any eating in it?" asked Ned. "You're the limit, you are."

"Well," said Bob, "they certainly had fine pie in that place. I wish--"

He stopped suddenly, as Jerry held up his hand to indicate silence.

"What's the matter?" asked Ned in a whisper, as he leaned forward. "See some new kind of a bug for the professor?"

"I overheard that man back of us speaking," replied Jerry in a low tone, nodding his head to indicate where he meant. The benches were arranged so that travelers occupying them sat back to back. "His voice sounded like one I've heard before, but I can't place it. I thought maybe you'd remember. We may have met him on our travels. I can't see his face until he turns around."

As he finished speaking, the man to whom he referred said something to his companion beside him. There came a momentary lull in the noises of the depot, and the boys heard him remark in low, but clear tones:

"We can make everything look regular. Derelicts are not uncommon, and I think we'll be able to fool him so that the cargo--"

"Hush!" cautioned the other man. "Not so loud!"

The noise in the station again drowned what the two men were saying, but the boys had heard enough. All three of them knew at once that the man who had spoken was the stranger who had acted so queerly in the Cresville freight office. If they had any doubts of it they were dispelled a moment later when the doorman called out:

"All aboard for the western express!"

As the man and his companion arose, the boys saw he was the same individual who had been so particular about the boxes of stuff he shipped to San Francisco.

Before the three chums could make any comment the man and his companion were lost in the crowd that thronged to the door.

"Come, boys," said the professor, closing his book. "That's our train."

CHAPTER VII

A BAD BREAK

"THAT was queer, wasn't it?" said Jerry to his chums when they were seated in the train, moving swiftly toward the great west. "I wonder what he meant, and what he was doing out here?"

"And I guess you can keep on wondering, for all the good it will do," commented Bob. "I couldn't make anything out of what they said, except that some ship might be lost. That's common enough."

"I wonder what that stuff was that he shipped from the freight office?" mused Jerry.

"Rat poison, maybe," replied Ned with a laugh. "I've heard there are lots of rats on ships, and maybe he has a patent stuff for getting rid of 'em."

"It might be," agreed Jerry. "Well, as Bob says, there's no use wondering. Say, but this is pretty nice scenery," and he pointed to the view from the window, as they were passing along the shores of a lake.

"Fine!" exclaimed Ned. "It ought to have some mountains around it, and it would look just like Lost Lake, where we found the hermit, that time."

"Seems as if that was a good while ago," commented Bob, "but it wasn't so very."

For several hours the boys discussed their past adventures, some of which were brought to their minds by views of the western country through which they were passing. Professor Snodgrass took no interest in anything except a big book which he was studying carefully, at times making notes on slips of paper, which had a tendency to drop into the aisle, or under the seat when he was not looking. In consequence the car, in the vicinity of where the professor sat, looked as though a theatrical snow-storm had taken place.

One morning the boys awakened to find the train making fast time over a level stretch of country, with rolling hills here and there, covered with tall grass. Occasionally glimpses could be had of herds of cattle.

"We're on the prairies!" exclaimed Bob, as he went to the lavatory to get ready for breakfast. "Say, now we're in the wild and woolly west, all right."

"Well, it's not the first time," replied Jerry. "Still it does look good to see it again. It's a little different, traveling this way, than it was scooting along in our auto."

"Yes, and I think I prefer the auto to this," spoke up Ned, yawning and stretching. "This is too lazy a way of journeying. I'd like to rough it a bit."

"Rough it!" exclaimed Bob. "Wait until we get out in California, and we can sleep out doors, while the folks back home are tending the furnace fire."

The three boys were just about to enter the lavatory when the train gave a sudden lurch, and then it began bumping along over the ties, swaying from side to side. Every window in the car rattled as if it would break, and the boys were so shaken up, that, to steady themselves, they had to grasp whatever was nearest.

"We're off the track!" cried Ned.

"This-- is-- roughing-- it-- all right!" said Jerry, the words coming out in jerks. "There's-- been-- an-- accident!"

"A-- whole-- lot-- of-- 'em-- by-- the-- way-- it-- feels to-- me," declared Jerry. "I-- wonder--"

Just then the train came to a stop, the car the boys were in being tilted at quite an angle.

"Let's see what happened," suggested Bob, going to the door. His companions followed him, and, from various berths the passengers began emerging, in different stages of undress. They looked frightened.

"Well, at any rate, none of us are killed," said Professor Snodgrass, as he came down the aisle, fully dressed, for he had arisen early to continue his reading about horned toads. "What is the matter, boys?"

"We're just going to find out," said Jerry, as he went down the steps and walked along the track toward the engine, about which a crowd of passengers and train men were gathered.

"What's the trouble?" asked Bob of a brakeman who was running toward the rear end of the train with a red flag.

"I don't know exactly. Something wrong with the engine; I guess. I heard the conductor say it was a bad break."

"Come on," said Jerry to his chums. "There doesn't seem to be anybody hurt, but it looks as if we were in for a long wait," and he pointed to several cars that were off the track, the wheels resting on the wooden ties.

HEMMED IN

THE boys found a group of worried trainmen gathered about the engine, and it needed but a glance to show what the trouble was. The piston rod had broken while the ponderous engine was going at full speed, and the driving rods, which had broken off from where they were fastened to the wheels, had been driven deep into the ground. This had served to fairly lift the engine from the rails, and, in its mad journey it had pulled several cars with it.

The piston rod, threshing about with nothing to hold it, had broken several parts of the engine, and some pieces of the driving rods had been hurled up into the cab, narrowly missing the engineer.

"It sure is a bad break," said the fireman as he got down from the cab, after opening the door of the fire box, so that the engine would cool down. "Never saw a worse."

"Me either," fairly growled the conductor.

"Why couldn't it have held off a couple of hours more and we'd been near some place where we could telegraph for help."

"You don't mean to say we are away out on the prairies not near a telegraph station, do you?" asked an excited man.

"That's just what I do mean to say," replied the conductor. "I've got to send a brakeman on foot eight miles to wire the news of this accident."

"You ought to have a telegraph instrument on the train," said the excited man. "This delay is a bad thing for me. If I don't arrive on time I'll sue the road. Why don't you have a telegraph instrument on the train?"

"I don't know," replied the conductor wearily, for he realized he was now in for a cross-fire of all sorts of questions.

"How long will we have to wait here?" asked another man.

"It's hard to say. The brakeman will go as fast as he can, but it will take some time to get the wrecking crew here with a new engine, and then it will take some time to get all the cars back on the track."

"Railroads oughtn't to have such accidents!" declared the excitable man. "I'll sue 'em, that's what I'll do. What made the piston rod break, conductor?"

"Oh-- I guess it got tired of going in and out of the cylinder," retorted the conductor, starting towards the baggage car.

"Humph! I'll report you for impertinence!" declared the now angry

passenger, taking out his notebook and making a memorandum lest he forget the conductor's retort. "It's a disgrace the way this road is managed," he went on to the crowd of passengers that had gathered. "I'm going to write to the newspapers about it. They're always having accidents. Why, only last week, they run over a steer, somewhere in this locality, the engine was derailed, two cars smashed, the road bed torn up, baggage and express stuff scattered all over, everything upside down, topsy-turvy and--"

"Was the steer killed?" asked a little boy, who was listening with opened mouth and eyes to the story the excited passenger was telling.

"What!" fairly roared the man, and then, as he saw who had asked the question, he turned away, and there was a general laugh.

"Do you think we'll be here long?" asked Bob of the colored porter of the sleeping car they had occupied.

"Oh, yes, indeedy!" exclaimed the attendant, "If we gits on de move befo' night we'll be mighty lucky."

"Then we've got to stay out here on the prairie all day," exclaimed Jerry.

"Dat's what," spoke the negro as cheerfully as though that was the regular program.

The other passengers were returning to their berths to finish dressing, and soon the excitement that followed the accident had almost disappeared. Breakfast was served, and there was nothing to do but to wait for the arrival of the wrecking crew.

"What's the matter with taking a stroll across the prairie?" suggested Jerry, when the boys and the professor had finished their morning meal. "There's no fun sitting here in the car all day."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Ned. "I'm with you. Maybe Chunky will be afraid to come, for fear train robbers will carry off the dining car while he's gone."

"Oh, you let up!" retorted Bob. "You like to eat as much as I do."

"Not quite as much, Chunky, but I admit I like my three square meals a day."

"Where are you going, boys?" asked the professor, looking up from his book, as he saw the three chums leaving the car.

"Out for a walk across the prairie," replied Ned.

"Wait, and I'll go with you. I might get some new specimens. I must never waste an opportunity," and, placing in his pockets several small boxes to hold any possible captives he might get in his butterfly net,

the scientist was ready.

It was pleasant on the vast plain that stretched away in every direction from the derailed train. The sun was shining brightly, but not too warm, and there was a gentle breeze.

"This is fine!" exclaimed Jerry.

The boys and the professor strolled on for several miles, the three chums enjoying the walk very much, while Mr. Snodgrass was continually finding some new insect, or a flower, until his specimen boxes were full.

"Well, we've come quite a distance," said Ned, as they got on top of a small hill and looked about. "We can't see the train anywhere. I guess we'd better be thinking of starting back."

"Maybe we had," agreed Jerry. "But what's that dark line out there?" and he pointed to the horizon.

"A cloud isn't it?" asked Bob.

"It's too low, and it doesn't move like a cloud," objected Jerry.

They watched it for some time, as it got larger and larger.

"Why it's all around us!" suddenly exclaimed Bob.

And so it was. The travelers were hemmed in by a peculiar, moving ring, that seemed to get smaller and smaller.

"What do you think it is, Professor?" asked Ned.

"That? Why-- er that is-- um-- curious, I can't just say what it is," replied Mr. Snodgrass.

"I have a small telescope," said Ned, producing it from his pocket, "We'll take a look through it," and he adjusted it, focusing it on the dark ring, that was, every moment, growing closer and closer to the little group on the hill.

CHAPTER IX

A LUCKY ESCAPE

"WHAT do you make it to be?" asked Jerry, as Ned was staring through the glass.

"Cattle!"

"Cattle?"

"Yes, steers. Thousands of 'em. And they seem to be headed this way."

"Let me take a look," said Jerry. "You're right," he added, after an inspection. "They seem to be coming on rather fast, too. I guess we'd better get out of here. Cattle on the prairies don't like to see persons who are not on horseback. They are not used to a man unless he's mounted, and I've read that a man on foot may cause a stampede."

"I hope they don't run in this direction," remarked Bob. "It's going to be unpleasant for us if they do."

"We'd better get out of here," advised Ned. "Come on, fellows."

"That's easier said than done," retorted Jerry.

"The cattle are all around us. I don't see how we're going to get through them. If we go too close we may stampede 'em at once, whereas, if we stay here, they may pass by us, or change their direction."

"What's the matter with the cowboys?" asked Rob. "Why don't they head the animals the other way when they see we're right in the path?"

"Probably the cattlemen are on the outer edges of the herd," said Jerry. "The cowboys can't see us, and they're simply driving the steers on."

"But what makes them go in a circle?" asked Bob.

"Probably the men are driving them all in to a central point to take account of stock, or something like that," was Jerry's answer. "But, instead of standing here talking of it we'd better be doing something. What do you advise, Professor?"

Uriah Snodgrass, who had discovered some queer kind of a jumping bug in the grass, had lost all interest in the approaching steers, but, at this question, he looked up.

"What did you ask?" he said, making a grab for the bug, and catching it.

"What do you think we'd better do?" asked Ned. "This is getting serious."

"What is? Oh, the steers. Why, they are getting a little too close, aren't they?"

They were, for a fact, and the animals in the foremost ranks, catching sight of the little party on the hill, broke into awkward gallop. As far as the boys could see, they beheld nothing but waving tails, heaving heads, armed with long sharp horns, and the movement of brown bodies, as the thousands of steers came on with a rush.

"We'd better--" began the professor, who was walking slowly along, his eyes fixed on the ground, in search for another of the queer bugs.

"Look out!" he suddenly cried. "Stand back boys!"

Hardly had he spoken than there sounded, high and shrill above the dull rumble of the oncoming cattle, a queer, buzzing noise.

"Rattlesna " exclaimed Ned.

"Yes, a whole nest of them, in a prairie dog's hole," added the professor. "I nearly stepped into them. There must be thirty or forty."

The boys looked to where he pointed. There, in a sort of depression, near a little hollow, on the edge of what is called a prairie dog village, they saw an ugly wiggling mass, which, as their eyes became more used to the colorings, was seen to be a number of the deadly rattlesnakes.

Several were coiled to strike, and had, in accordance with their habit, sounded their rattles. This had aroused the whole den, many snakes appearing from under ground, or crawling from beneath stones.

"Come on! They'll chase us!" cried Bob.

"Nonsense," replied the professor. "Rattlesnakes never attack man unless they are first disturbed. It wouldn't be advisable to go too close, but, as long as we don't molest them, we have nothing to fear from the snakes. I'd like to get a few specimens if I had the proper appliances for extracting their fangs. But I never saw so many in one place, before. It is quite interesting to watch--"

The professor broke off suddenly, for the thunderous noise of the approaching steers was now louder.

"They're coming right at us!" exclaimed Jerry.

"Yes, and they've stampeded!" cried Ned. "We're in for it now!"

The situation of the boys and the professor was extremely perilous. They were right in the path of the now frightened steers. The circle had been broken, by many animals, which had been approaching from the rear of the travelers, joining the beasts on either side, so that now a compact, dark mass of cattle, nearly a quarter of a mile wide, was surging ahead with great speed.

"Run!" called Ned. "There's an opening at our backs now!"

"You couldn't go a hundred feet before they'd overtake you!" shouted Jerry. "Let's see if we can't frighten 'em. Take off your hats, jump up and down, and yell like mad. If we can force 'em to separate and go on either side of us, we'll be all right!"

He started to swing his hat in the air, and prepared to let out a series of yells in imitation of an Indian war-whoop.

"Don't!" cried the professor quickly.

"Why not?" asked Jerry. "It's the only way to stop 'em."

"I know a better, and a surer way," replied the scientist. "Get the rattlesnakes between ourselves and the cattle! Those steers will never go near a rattlesnake den, no matter how frightened they are, nor how badly stampeded! Quick! Here they come!"

The cattle were scarcely two hundred feet away, and were maddened by the sight of unmounted persons, something to which they were unaccustomed, and which thoroughly frightened them. The ground was trembling with their hoof-beats, and the rattle of the horns, as they clashed together, was like the murmur of cannibal tom-toms.

The professor grabbed Bob, who was nearest him, and swung the boy around, so as to get the nest of rattlesnakes between them and the steers. Ned and Jerry followed. The snakes, now all aroused, were rattling away like half a hundred electric batteries working at once.

Would the professor's ruse succeed? Would the steers be afraid to come over the deadly reptiles, to trample down the little group, which the animals probably took for some new species of enemy? These were questions which the boys waited anxiously to have answered. Nor did they have to wait long.

The foremost of the steers came within a few feet of the rattlers. Then something seemed to stiffen the cattle. They tried to stop short, but the press of the beasts behind them would not permit of this. For a few seconds it looked as if the impetus of the cattle in the rear would shove the others on, in spite of their desire to stop.

But now more of the foremost steers became aware of the den of snakes. Their instinct, their sense of smell, and, above all, hearing the rattling, told them the terrible danger that was in their path. More of the animals braced their forelegs to bring themselves to a stop, and all bellowed in terror. Then, almost as though an order had been given by some one in command, the ranks of steers parted, right at the point where the snakes were reared ready to strike.

To right and left the cattle passed, increasing their speed as they became aware of the danger they were escaping. The boys and the professor stood on the little eminence of land, as if they were on an island in a sea of cattle. The angry snakes hissed and rattled, but did not glide away, or what had proved a source of safety for the travelers, might have been instrumental in their death.

Right past them rushed the cattle, raising a dust that was choking. The four were enveloped in a yellow haze, as they stood huddled together. Then, the last of the steers galloped past, with a band of excited cowboys in the rear, vainly endeavoring to understand the cause of the stampede, and halt it. As they rode on like the wind,

they waved their hands to the boys and Mr. Snodgrass.

"Well, I guess we can move on now," said Jerry, as the last of the steers and cowboys was lost in a cloud of dust that accompanied them. "I've seen all the beef I want to for a long time."

"That's the first time I ever knew rattlesnakes were good for anything," remarked Ned, as he backed away, with his eyes on the den of reptiles, as if afraid they would spring at him.

"They are more feared by animals than any other snake in this country, I believe," said the professor. "Luck was certainly with us to-day."

The professor successfully resisted a desire to capture some of the snakes for specimens, and soon, with the three boys, he was on his way back to the stalled train, though he did not make very fast progress for he was continually stopping to gather in some strange insect.

It was long past dinner-time when the travelers got back, but they found they were not the only ones in this predicament, for a number of the passengers had beguiled the tediousness of the wait by going off across the prairie.

"Let's get the porter to get us some sandwiches, and then we'll watch 'em get the train back on the track," suggested Jerry.

CHAPTER X

AT THE SEABURYS'

THE wrecking crew had arrived shortly before the boys and the professor got back, and there was a big crowd of passengers and train men around the laborers.

"Never mind eating," called Ned. "Come on, watch 'em. We can get a bite afterward."

"Not for mine," sung out Bob, as he made a dive for the dining car. "I'll be with you pretty soon."

"There he goes again," remarked Ned with a sigh. "I couldn't eat when there's any excitement going on. I want to see how they get the cars on the track."

"So do I." said Jerry.

They pressed on to where, by means of powerful hydraulic jacks, men were busy raising up the engine, which, because of its weight, had sunk quite deeply into the ground. The jacks were small, but one man worked the handle, which pumped water from one part of it to another, and elevated a piston, that, in turn was forced up with terrible pressure, thus raising one end of the ponderous locomotive.

When the wheels were clear of the earth other men slipped under them some peculiar shaped pieces of iron, so arranged that when the locomotive was pulled or pushed ahead by another engine, the wheels would slip upon the rails.

In turn each of the wheels of the engine and tender were so fixed. Then word was given the engineer of the relief train to back down and haul the derailed locomotive back on to the track.

"All ready?" called the foreman of the wrecking crew.

"All ready," replied the engineer.

Jerry and Ned, in common with scores of others, were straining forward to watch every detail of the task. They wanted to see whether the locomotive would take to the rails, or slip off the inclined irons, and again settle down upon the ground.

"Let her go, Bill," called the foreman to the engineer of the wrecking crew.

There was a warning whistle, a straining of heavy chains, creakings and groanings from the derailed engine as if it objected to being pulled and hauled about, then the ponderous driving wheels began to turn slowly.

"Stand clear, everybody!" cried the foreman.

At that moment Bob came running up, using the back of his hand as a napkin for his lips.

"There she goes!" was the loud cry.

As the crowd looked, they saw the derailed and helpless engine give a sort of shudder and shake, mount the inclined pieces of iron, and then slide upon the rails, settling down where it belonged.

"Hurrah!" cried the passengers, in recognition of a hard task well accomplished.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," announced the foreman. "Now boys, hustle, and we'll get the cars on, and the line will be clear."

It did not take long to get the cars on the rails, as they were lighter. The damaged engine was switched off to one side, some rails, which had been displaced when the train bumped off, were spiked down, and the wreck was a thing of the past.

"All aboard!" called the conductor. "All aboard! Step lively now!"

The relief engine was not a fast one, being built more for power than speed, and the train had to proceed along rather slowly. But the boys did not mind this, as they had plenty to talk about, and they were

interested in the country through which they were traveling.

They arrived at Los Angeles somewhat behind their schedule, and did not leave there as soon as they expected to, as Professor Snodgrass wanted to call on a scientific friend, to learn something about the best place to hunt for horned toads.

"It's all right, boys," he announced, when he returned to the Los Angeles hotel, where the three chums had put up. "My friend says the vicinity of San Felicity, where you are going to call on the Seaburys, is a grand place for horned toads. Come, we will start at once."

They found, however, that they would have to wait until the next day for a train. They started early the following morning, traveling through a stretch of country where it seemed as if it was always summer. Back home there had already been evidences of fall, before they left, but here there seemed to be no hint of approaching winter.

"Oh, isn't this fine!" exclaimed Ned, breathing in the sweetly-scented air, as he stuck his head from the car window. "It's like reading about some fairy story!"

"It's better than reading it," said Jerry. "It's the real thing."

They arrived at San Felicity, shortly before noon. It was a very hot day, though the morning had been cool, and the boys began to appreciate the fact that they had come to a southern climate. There seemed to be no one at the little railroad station, at which they were the only passengers to leave the train. The train baggage man piled their trunks and valises in a heap on the platform, the engine gave a farewell toot, and the travelers were thus left alone, in what appeared a deserted locality.

"There doesn't seem to be much doing," observed Jerry. "Let's see now, Nellie wrote that we were to take a stage to get to their house, but I don't see any stage. Wonder where the station agent is?"

"Hark!" said the professor, raising his hand for silence. "What noise is that? It sounds as if it might be a horned toad grunting. They make a noise just like that."

"I would say it sounded more like some one snoring," ventured Ned.

"It is!" exclaimed Bob. "Here's the station agent asleep in the ticket office," and he looked in an open window, on the shady side of the platform. From the interior came the sounds which indicated a person in deep slumber.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the professor. "I took him for a horned toad! I hope he didn't hear me."

"No danger," remarked Jerry. "He's sound asleep. Even the train didn't wake him up."

The four gazed in on the slumbering agent. Perhaps there was some mysterious influence in the four pairs of eyes, for the man suddenly awakened with a start, stared for a moment at the travelers gazing in on him, and then sat up.

"Good day, seæors!" he exclaimed, and they saw that he was a Mexican.

"Do you wish tickets? If you do, I regret to inform you that the only train for the day has gone. There will be none until to-morrow," and he prepared to go to sleep again.

"Here!" cried Jerry. "We don't want any, tickets! We want to find the way to Mr. Nathan Seabury's house, and to learn if there's a stage which goes there."

"There is, seæor," replied the agent, yawning, "but I doubt if the driver is here. He seldom comes to meet the train, as there are very few travelers. Will it not do to go to Seæor Seabury's to-morrow, or next day, or the day after?"

"Hardly," replied Jerry, who, as did the other boys, began to appreciate the Mexican habit of saying "mananna" which means "to-morrow," for the Mexicans have a lazy habit of putting off until to-morrow whatever they have to do to-day. "We want to go to-day, right away, at once, now!"

"Ah, the seæors are Americanos-- always in a hurry," answered the agent, but in no unfriendly manner. "Very well, I will see if Hop Sing has his stage here."

"Hop Sing?" questioned Ned.

"Yes, seæor, he is a Chinaman. You will find him a very slow and careful driver."

"Slow? I guess everything's slow down here," said Ned in a low voice.

The agent came leisurely from his office, walked to the end of the platform, and, pointing toward a low shed, remarked:

"That is where the stage is kept. I will call, and see if Hop Sing is there."

Then he called, but in such a low tone, as if he was afraid he might strain his voice, that it did not seem as if he could be heard ten feet away. Jerry stood it as long as he could and then said:

"I guess Hop Sing must be taking his noon nap. I'll go over and wake him up."

"Ah, the seæor is in a hurry," and the Mexican agent smiled as though that was a strange thing. "If he would wait an hour, or perhaps two, Hop Sing might awaken. Besides, to-morrow--"

"Not for ours," said Ned. "We've got to go to-day."

The agent shrugged his shoulders, and went back into his little office to resume his nap. Jerry walked over to the shed.

"Hey! Hop Sing!" he called, as he approached. "Where's the stage?"

"Want stage? Take lide? All lite! Me come! Chop-chop! Give number one, top-slide lide!" exclaimed a voice, and a small Chinaman jumped down from the stage seat, where, under the shade of the shed he had been sleeping, and began to untie the halters of the mules that were attached to the ram-shackle old vehicle.

"Be lite out!" Hop Sing went on. "Me glive you click lide. Me go fast! You see! Chop-chop!"

"All right, if the old shebang doesn't fall apart on the way," said Jerry with a laugh, as he saw the stage which the Celestial backed out of the shed. Certainly it looked as if it could not go many miles.

"Come on!" called Jerry to Ned, Bob and the professor, who had remained on the platform. "I guess it's safe. The mules don't look as if they would run away."

They piled into the aged vehicle, and Hop Sing, with a quickness that was in surprising contrast to the indolence of the Mexican agent, put their trunks and valises on top.

"Now we glow click, you sabe?" he said, smiling from ear to ear. "Me know Mlister Seablury. Him number one man, top-slide," which was Hop Sing's way of saying that anything was the very best possible.

The boys soon found that while Hop Sing might be a slow and careful driver, it was due more to the characters of the mules, than to anything else. The Chinese yelled at them in a queer mixture of his own language, Mexican and American. He belabored them with a whip, and yanked on the reins, but the animals only ambled slowly along the sunny road, as if they had a certain time schedule, and were determined to stick to it.

"Can't they go any faster?" asked Ned.

"Flaster?" asked Hop, innocently. "They Mlexican mules. No go flast. Me go flast, mules not," and he began jumping up and down in his seat, as if that would help matters any. He redoubled his yells and shouts, and made the whip crack like a pistol, but the mules only wagged their ears and crawled along.

"I guess you'll have to let matters take their course while you're here," suggested the professor. "You can't change the habits of the people, or the animals."

They did manage, after strenuous efforts on Hop's part, to get to the Seabury bungalow. It was in the midst of a beautiful garden, and a long walk led up to the house, around which was an adobe wall, with a red gate. Over the gate was a roof, making a pleasant shade, and there were seats, where one might rest.

In fact some one was resting there as the stage drove up. He was a colored man, stretched out on his back, sound asleep.

"Well, I wonder if they do anything else in this country but sleep?" asked Jerry.

"Why-- that's Ponto, Mr. Seabury's negro helper," said Ned. "Hello, Ponto. All aboard the Wanderer!"

"What's dat? Who done call me?" and the colored man sat up suddenly, rubbing his eyes. "Who says Wanderer? Why dat boat--"

Then he caught sight of the travelers.

"Why, I 'clar' t' gracious!" he exclaimed. "Ef it ain't dem motor boys an' Perfesser Snowgrass!"

"How are you, Ponto?" sang out Bob.

"Fine, sah! Dat's what I is! Fine. I 'clar' t' gracious I'se glad t' see yo'! Git down offen dat stage! It'll fall apart in anoder minute! Go long outer heah, yo' yellow trash!" and Ponto shook his fist at Hop Sing. "Wha' fo' yo' stan' 'round heah, listen' t' what yo' betters sayin'."

"I guess I'd better pay him," said Jerry, and settled with the Celestial, who drove slowly off.

"Now come right in!" exclaimed Ponto. "I were-- I were jest thinkin' out dar on dat bench-- yais, sah, I were thinkin', an' fust thing I knowed I was 'sleep. It's a turrible sleepy country, dat's what 'tis, fer a fact. I'se gittin' in turrible lazy habits sence I come heah. But come on in. Massa Seabury, he'll be powerful glad t' see yo'. So'll th' young ladies. Dey was sayin' only las' night, dat it seemed laik dem boys nevah goin' t' come. But heah yo' be! Yais, sah, I were jest thinkin' out on dat bench--"

But Panto's rambling talk was suddenly interrupted by a glad cry from the shrubbery. Then there came a rush of skirts, and the boys saw three girls running toward them.

"Here they are, dad!" called Nellie. "Here are the boys and Professor Snodgrass! Oh, we're so glad you came! Welcome to 'The Next Day'! That's what we've christened our bungalow, in honor of this lazy country. Come on in," and she ran up to Jerry, holding out her hands.

AFTER HORNED TOADS

OLIVIA and Rose, as had Nellie, warmly welcomed the boys and Professor Snodgrass, and, Mr. Seabury coming up a moment later, from his usual stroll about the garden, added his greetings.

"We're very glad to see you," said the gentleman. "Come right in and make yourselves comfortable. We have more room than we had on the houseboat Wanderer. I'll have your baggage-- where is that black rascal, Ponto?-- Ponto!"

"Yais, sah, I'se coming," called a voice, and Ponto who had gone back to the gate appeared, rubbing his eyes.

"Ponto, take these-- why, you-- you've been asleep again, I do believe-- Ponto--"

"I-- I done gone an' jest dozed off fo' a minute, Massa Seabury," said Ponto. "I 'clar' t' goodness, dis am de most sleepest climate I eber see. Peers laik I cain't do nuffin, but shet mah eyes an'--"

"Well if you don't do something mighty quick with this baggage I'll find some way of keeping you awake," spoke Mr. Seabury, but he was laughing in spite of himself.

"Yais, sah, I'se goin' t' take keer of it immejeet, sah," and the colored man went off in search of a wheelbarrow, on which to bring the trunks and valises up to the house from where they had been put off the stage.

"I never saw such a chap," said Mr. Seabury. "Before we came down here he was as spry as I could wish, but now he does just as the Mexicans do. He sleeps every chance he gets. But come on in. I know you must be tired and hungry."

"Bob is," said Jerry. "I heard him say a while ago--"

"No, you didn't hear me say anything," exclaimed Bob quickly, fearful lest he might be put to shame before the girls. "I'm not a bit hungry."

"Fibber!" whispered Ned, though not so low but what they all heard, and the girls burst into laughter.

"Never mind," spoke Olivia. "Come on, Bob. I'll take care of you. The cook and I are great friends," and the girl and Bob walked on ahead.

"I suppose you came out here to study some new kind of plant or flowers, didn't you?" asked Mr. Seabury, of the professor.

"Not exactly," replied the scientist, "though I shall examine them with much interest. What I came down for was to secure some specimens

of horned toads for the museum. I--"

"Horned toads!" exclaimed Nellie, who was walking with Jerry, while Rose had volunteered to show Ned the beauties of the Mexican garden. "Horned toads! Ugh! The horrible things. I hope you don't bring them around where I am, Professor. Horned toads! Why don't you search after something beautiful, like the wonderful butterfly you found in Florida?"

"A horned toad is just as beautiful as a butterfly," said Mr. Snodgrass gravely. "The only difference is, people don't appreciate the toad. I do, and, some day, I hope to write a history of that creature. I have my notes ready for the first volume, which will be a sort of introduction."

"How many volumes do you expect to write?" asked Mr. Seabury, curiously.

"Twelve," replied the scientist calmly. "Even then I will have to omit much that is of interest. But I hope, in twelve, large books, to be able to convey some idea of horned toads, as well as some information about the other species."

"Twelve volumes! I should hope so!" murmured Mr. Seabury.

By this time the travelers were at the bungalow. It was a well-arranged affair, quite large, and set in the midst of a beautiful garden, with rambling paths, and shady bowers, while the whole place was enclosed by a mud or adobe wall. All around the bungalow was a wide veranda, and in the center courtyard was a small fountain, with a jet of water spurting up from the middle of a large shell.

"Isn't this fine!" exclaimed Jerry, and the other boys agreed it was.

"Yes, we like 'The Next Day' very much," said Nellie. "It was my idea to call it that. From the very moment we arrived, and wanted something done, about the only answer we could get was 'to-morrow,' 'Mananna' or 'the next day,' so I decided that would be a good name for the bungalow."

"Indeed it is," declared the professor. "But you have a most delightful place, and I should like to spend many 'next days' here. I hope your health is better, Mr. Seabury?"

"Considerably so, sir. I find the air here agrees with my nerves and rheumatism much better than in Florida. I have hopes of entirely recovering. But let us go inside, I think luncheon is ready."

It was and, in the cool dining-room, within sound of the tinkling fountain, they ate a hearty meal, Bob demonstrating in his usual fashion that he was quite hungry.

The girls took turns in explaining their experiences since coming to

California. The bungalow, which they rented, was on the outskirts of the village of San Felicity, which was part of what had once been an old Mexican town. It was located on the shores of a secluded bay, and the bungalow was about ten minutes' walk from the water.

"Do you think there are any horned toads around here?" asked the professor, when the meal was finished, and they had gone out on the veranda.

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied Mr. Seabury. "I'll ask Ponto, he knows everything there is to be known about this place. Ponto! I say, Ponto!"

"Yais, sah, I'se comin' sah!" and from somewhere in the depths of the garden the voice sounded. A moment later the colored man appeared, trying to hide a broad yawn.

"Ponto, do you know-- well, I declare, if you haven't been asleep again!"

"I-- I-- er-- I jest was weedin' de garden, Massa Seabury, an' I done felt so warm dat I jest closed mah eyes, jest fo' a second, not a minute longer, no sah, not a minute. Guess I knows better dan t' go t' sleep when yo' got company sah!" and Ponto looked very much hurt at the accusation.

"Well, Ponto, I suppose you can't help it. Do you happen to know where there are any horned toads?"

"Horned toads! Good lan', Massa Seabury! No sah! I ain't got none!"

"I didn't suppose you had. Do you know whether there are any around here?"

"Well, I doan know ef dey has horns or not, but de oder day, when I were comin' home from goin' t' ole Mexican Pete's shanty after some red peppers, I seen some horrible kind of thing hoppin' along ober de sand. I-- I didn't stop t' look an' see ef he had horns, but I s'pects he had, cause he were kind of diggin' in de sand."

"That's the toad all right!" exclaimed the professor, joyfully. "Where is the place? Take me out there right away, Ponto."

"Take you out dere, Perfesser?"

"Yes, right away."

"I-- I s'pects I'd better go back an' 'tend t' mah weedin'!" exclaimed Ponto, looking as pale as a colored man can. look. "Weeds grow powerful fast in dis climate. Dey'll choke de flowers in about an hour. I'se got t' 'tend t' 'em immejeet, sah. I ain't got no time t' go huntin' horned toads. I hopes you'll 'scuse me, sah," and with that Ponto was gone, walking faster than he had at any time since the

travelers arrived.

"He's afraid," said Rose, with a laugh. "I'm not. Come on, Professor, I'll show you where Ponto means, and maybe we can find some horned toads."

"Let's all go," proposed Jerry.

"I will, if you'll promise not to let the horrible things come near me," said Nellie, and Jerry promised.

Mr. Seabury declared he would rather rest on the veranda than hunt horned toads, so the three boys and the trio of girls, with the professor, who armed himself with specimen boxes and a small net, set off after the curious reptiles.

A short distance from the bungalow there was a sort of sandy stretch, where little grew in the way of vegetation, and there, Rose explained, was probably where Ponto had seen the toads. They headed toward it, the scientist eagerly looking on the ground, for a first sight of the specimens he had come so far to seek.

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGE MEETING

"I GUESS Ponto must have been asleep when he was walking along here, and dreamed he saw those toads," commented Ned, after the party had covered a considerable part of the sandy stretch without getting a glimpse of the ugly reptiles.

"That's too bad!" exclaimed the professor. "I had hopes of finding one here."

"Oh!" suddenly screamed Rose. "There's one!"

"Where?" asked the scientist eagerly.

"Right there, by that stone. I saw it jump. Oh, girls, I'm going to run!"

"And she said she wasn't afraid of them!" cried Nellie.

The professor cautiously approached with his net outstretched. With a long stick he turned the boulder over, and made a quick movement with his net, imprisoning something beneath it.

"I've got it!" he cried. "I have the horned toad!"

Holding his captive down beneath the net, he leaned forward on his knees, to get a better view. Over his face came a look of disappointment.

"It's only a harmless lizard," he said, "and not one of the web-footed variety, either. That's too bad. I thought I had my toad."

"I'm glad, Professor," said Rose. "Oh, no," she added quickly, "I'm sorry for you, but I'm glad it wasn't a horned toad so close to me."

The professor raised the net and the lizard scurried away, probably very much frightened, and wondering what all the excitement was about.

"Let's go over this way," suggested Ned.

"That looks as if it might be a good place for toads," and he pointed to where there was a clump of trees.

"Can you tell where horned toads like to stay?" asked Olivia.

"No," replied Ned, in a low voice, "but it's shady over there, and this sun, beating down on the sand, is very hot. I wanted to get where it's cool, and, anyhow, there's just as liable to be horned toads there as anywhere. If he doesn't find a toad he'll find something else that will make him nearly as happy, so it's all the same."

"Isn't he a queer man," said Olivia, as they followed along behind Mr. Snodgrass, who was walking ahead, closely scanning the ground.

"He is, but he's a good friend of ours," replied Ned. "He is very much in earnest over his collection of insects and reptiles, and, though he acts queerly at times, he is one of the best men in the world."

"I'm sure he must be," agreed Olivia. "I like him very much. I hope he stays a long time, and I hope you boys do also. It's quite lonesome here, with nothing but Mexicans and Chinese for the main part of the population."

"We'll stay as long as you let us," said Ned.

"We can have fine times," went on the girl. "We can go boating on the little bay, and take trips off into the country. We, ourselves, haven't seen much of it yet, as papa was not feeling well when we first came, and we had to stay home and care for him. But he is better now, and we can go on little excursions."

Ned's harmless trick to get the party to a shady spot was successful. The professor headed for the little clump of trees looking, the while, for a horned toad, but he saw none of the queer creatures.

"My, but it's hot!" exclaimed Bob, as he sat down on the ground.

"Oh, it will be worse than this, some days," said Rose. "We are getting used to it. But suppose we go down to the seashore? It's not far, and there is a very pretty view."

"Perhaps I can get a horned toad there," put in the professor

hopefully.

After a short rest in the shade the little party headed for the beach. As they came in sight of it from a small hill, the boys uttered exclamations of delight, for a beautiful expanse of water was stretched out before them,-- the Pacific ocean sparkling blue in the sun.

"Oh, for our motor boat!" exclaimed Jerry. "Oh, for the Dartaway! Couldn't we have fine sport in her, out on that bay!"

"Don't speak of it!" said Ned with a groan.

"What, is the Dartaway lost?" asked Rose.

"Gone! Busted! Smashed!" exclaimed Bob, and the boys all tried to talk at once, telling of the disaster that had befallen their craft.

"It's too bad," declared Olivia. "But never mind. We have a couple of rowboats, and maybe you can hire a little sailing skiff."

"It wouldn't be the Dartaway," answered Bob, with a sigh. "That boat had the nicest little kitchen in it--"

"So, that's all you cared about her for-- the kitchen-- where you could cook something to eat!" exclaimed Jerry. "Chunky, I'm ashamed of you; that's what I am!"

"Well, I-- er-- I--" began Bob. "Oh, come on," he continued, and led the way down to the beach, where there were some bathing pavilions and several houses. The professor was walking along behind, in the vain hope of yet discovering a horned toad, perhaps on its way to get a dip in the surf or drink some salt water.

"I think you'll like some chocolate," said Nellie, as the boys were in front of a little refreshment booth. "It is made by a Mexican--"

She stopped, for she saw that the boys were not listening to her. Their attention was drawn to a man who was just coming from the place they were going in. The boys could not help staring at him, for he was the man who had acted so strangely in the freight depot at Cresville.

CHAPTER XIII

A QUEER STORY

FOR several seconds the boys and the man stared at one another. The stranger did not seem to be the least bit embarrassed but, on the contrary, was smiling in a genial manner.

"Is he a friend of yours?" asked Nellie, of Jerry.

"Well, not exactly what you could call a friend," was the answer. "We

don't even know his name," and he spoke in a low voice. "We saw him back in Cresville, just before we started out west, and he was acting in a strange manner. We thought--"

"Excuse me," suddenly interrupted the strange man, advancing toward the group of boys and girls, "but haven't I seen you lads before? Your faces are very familiar."

"We saw you in the Cresville freight office," declared Ned boldly.

"Exactly! I knew it was somewhere. I remember now. I was there attending to some goods that had to be shipped in a hurry. I'm glad you remembered me. To think that I should meet you away out here! It's a small world, isn't it?" and he smiled, but there was something in his smile, in his looks and in his manner that the boys did not like. Neither did the girls, for, as Nellie said afterward, he acted as though he wanted to make friends so you would not be suspicious of him.

"Shake hands, won't you?" asked the man, advancing closer to the boys. "My name is Carson Blowitz, and though it sounds foreign I was born in this country. I travel around so much I can't give you any particular place as my residence."

There was no way without being rude of avoiding shaking hands with the man, and, though there was something in his manner that caused the boys to feel a distrust of him, they were not going to be impolite on mere suspicion.

They shook hands with Mr. Blowitz, and Jerry introduced himself, his chums, the young ladies and Professor Snodgrass, and told, briefly, the object of their trip.

"Well isn't that nice, now," said Mr. Blowitz, when Jerry had finished. "The professor comes out here to hunt horned toads, and you lads come to hunt adventures, Mr. Seabury comes out here in search of health and I-- well, I'm out here on a sort of hunt myself."

"Are you interested in science?" asked Mr. Snodgrass eagerly. "Perhaps you and I might go off together after horned toads and web-footed lizards. Or, if you care for snakes, or insects, I think I can show you where there are plenty."

"No, no," said Mr. Blowitz, with a laugh, which he tried to make sound hearty by the mere noise of it. "No, I'm on a different sort of a search. In fact it's quite a queer story-- perhaps you would like to hear it. In fact, I'm hunting for a lost ship."

"A lost ship!" exclaimed Bob.

"Well, one that was abandoned just before she sank, and that's about the same thing. It was abandoned quite a way out, but off this part of the coast. There is a current setting in towards shore, at this point,

I'm told, and I thought I might get some news of her, or find some of the wreckage floating in on the beach. That's why you find me here."

"What ship is it?" asked Ned, interested in spite of the aversion he and the others felt toward Mr. Blowitz.

"It is a brig, Rockhaven by name. But suppose we go inside'? It is rather warm out here in the sun, and I'm not quite used to this climate yet. Won't you come in and have some chocolate with me? They have a very nice drink in here, and I--"

"It's my treat," interrupted Bob.

"No; if I may be so bold as to insist, you must be my guests this time," went on Mr. Blowitz. "It is not often that I see lads away off east and meet them a little later, in California, so I must have the pleasure of their company for a little while. The young ladies too-- I'm very fond of young ladies," and Mr. Blowitz smiled in a manner that Rose characterized later as "ugly," though just why she thought so she couldn't explain.

There was no way of getting gracefully out of the invitation, and so the crowd of young people and the professor accompanied Mr. Blowitz into the refreshment booth.

They went out into the shaded courtyard, where a fountain of splashing water at least gave the effect of coolness, if it did not really make it so. They sat at small tables, and were served with cold chocolate and sweet cakes, by a pretty Mexican girl. Bob wanted to pay for the treat but Mr. Blowitz would not hear of it. In fact he played the host in such a genial way, and seemed so anxious to make every one have a good time, that the boys were rather ashamed of their first opinion of him.

Even Rose whispered to Bob that "he was not so bad, when you got acquainted with him."

"Now I suppose you would like to hear the story of the abandoning of the brig Rockhaven," said Mr. Blowitz, and the boys nodded.

"I hope no one was drowned," exclaimed Olivia.

"Not as far as we know," replied Mr. Blowitz. "The whole affair is rather mysterious, and I am seeking information about the fate of the ship as much as anything else."

"I would like to ask you one question," said Professor Snodgrass, who had been more interested in the antics of a small bug, walking on the table, than he was in his chocolate.

"What is it?" inquired Mr. Blowitz.

"Did you, or any of your men notice whether, just before the ship

sank, that all the rats on board deserted it?" asked the scientist. "I have often heard that rats will desert a sinking ship, and I would like to know whether it is true. If you made any observations to that effect I wish you would tell me about them, and I can put them into a book I am writing about rats and mice."

"I thought you were writing about horned toads," said Bob.

"So I am, but this is another book. This will be in seventeen volumes, with colored plates. I want to get all the information I can, about rats."

"I'm sorry that I can't help you," replied Mr. Blowitz. "In fact I know little about the abandoning of the brig, except what I heard. I was not aboard, and I don't know whether the rats left it or not. All I know is that the vessel is lost, and with a fortune aboard."

"A fortune aboard?" inquired Ned.

"Yes, worth about a quarter of a million."

"Is it gold or diamonds?" asked Rose, who was very fond of jewelry and precious stones.

"Neither one, my dear young lady," said Mr. Blowitz, with as happy a smile as he could assume. "It is valuable merchandise. Of course there was some money, and some valuable papers, but the main part of the cargo was costly merchandise. I'll tell you how it happened. But first, let us have some more chocolate," and he called to the Mexican girl waiter.

When the cups had been filled Mr. Blowitz resumed his story.

"I am interested in many enterprises," he said, "and I and some other men went into a venture to ship some valuable goods to the Santa Barbara islands, which are not far off this coast. I was the principal owner, having bought out my partner, and it looked as if I would make a large sum.

"The vessel sailed from San Francisco, and as the weather was fine, we looked for a quick trip. I was attending to some of my other business affairs, having just arrived on this coast from Boston, when I received a telegram from the captain of the brig, telling me that she had been abandoned with everything on board. Of course there must have been an accident. Probably there was a collision, or fire on board, so that the brig was in a sinking condition. At any rate the captain, and, I suppose the crew, also, left her. That's why I can't tell whether they were all saved, though I assume so, as nothing was said about any one being lost.

"The captain, it appears, was picked up by another vessel, and landed at a small coast town. He sent me the telegram from there, and I forwarded him money to come to San Francisco, to meet me. But, for

some reason, he did not arrive, and so I decided to come down here, and see if I could get any news of the ship and the valuable cargo. Of course, if the ship sank at once that is the end of her, but, if she broke up, there is a chance of some parts of her, and perhaps some of the cargo, being washed ashore. At any rate I would like to get some news of her, that I might collect the insurance, if nothing else.

"So that's why I'm here. I arrived yesterday, but, so far, I have been unable to obtain any news of the brig. I left word for the captain to join me here, and he may arrive at any time. I am glad to have met you, for it will not be so lonesome now."

"I hope you have good luck," said Nellie, as she arose to leave the place. "I think we must be going now," she added to her sisters. "Papa might worry about us."

"Give Mr. Seabury my regards," said Carson Blowitz, "and tell him I shall do myself the honor of calling on him soon, to pay my respects. As for you young people, I shall see you again, I hope. I am going to hire a boat and cruise about in search of my brig-- if I don't get some news soon-- and perhaps you might like to go along."

"Perhaps," replied Jerry, as he and his chums followed the girls out of the place.

Mr. Blowitz remained in the courtyard, drinking chocolate, and, as the little party was leaving Ned looked back. He saw their recent host pull a bundle of papers from his pocket, and, spreading them on the table in front of him, closely scan them.

"I don't like that man," declared Nellie, when they were out of hearing. She was very frank in her statements.

"Neither do I," said Jerry, "though he was nice enough to us."

"He has a strange manner," commented Olivia.

"And that was a queer story he told of the abandoning of the brig," went on Bob. "I wonder if he made it up, or if it's true? It seems strange that the captain would leave his ship, and not give a reason for it."

"There's some mystery back of it, I think," was the opinion of Rose. "The less we have to do with Mr. Carson Blowitz, the better it will be, I think."

"Well, we're not likely to see much of him," said Jerry. But in this opinion he was mistaken. They were to see and hear much of him, as later events proved.

CHAPTER XIV

IN A MOTOR BOAT

SEVERAL days after this, during which time the boys had, under the escort of the three girls, visited many places of interest, Rose suggested they make a trip on the bay.

"But what can we go in?" asked Bob. "We haven't any boat."

"We have several rowing skiffs," said Nellie. "I know they are not as fine as your Dartaway, but you can have a nice time. The fishing is good, and it is very pleasant on the water."

"It would be pleasant wherever you girls were," said Ned, with an attempt at gallantry.

"Thank you!" exclaimed Nellie, making a low, bow.

"You're improving, Ned," remarked Jeer, critically. "In time you'll be able to go out in polite society."

"Oh, is that so?" remarked Ned, sarcastically, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," retorted Jerry, bowing low.

"Oh, stow that away for use at some future time," advised Bob. "Come on, if we're going out in a boat."

There was a little wharf, at which the Seaburys kept a couple of rowboats, and, as six were too many to go into one craft, Nellie and Jerry occupied the smaller, while Bob and Ned, Olivia and Rose, got into the other.

"Where shall we go?" asked Ned.

"Oh, row around anywhere," replied Jerry. "We'll have to get used to oars, we haven't handled 'em in quite a while."

The boys soon found that the skill with which they had formerly used the ashen blades, before the era of their motor boat, was coming back to them, and they sent the skiffs around the bay at fairly good speed, the two crafts keeping close together.

"This is something like work," announced Jerry, as he rested on his oars, and let the boat drift with the tide, which was running in.

"That's what it is," declared Ned. "I wish--"

"Thank you!" exclaimed Olivia. "I'm sure we're very sorry that we have given you so much work. We didn't know we were so heavy; did we girls?"

"No, indeed!" chimed in Rose. "If you will kindly row us back to shore, we'll get out and you boys can go where you please. Work! The idea!"

"Oh, I say now!" cried Ned, alarmed at the effect of his words. "I didn't mean-- Jerry didn't mean-- we--"

"Of course not!" added Jerry. "I only said--"

"You said it was hard work to row us around," declared Nellie in rather icy tones.

"Well I meant-- you see since we had a motor boat-- that is I-- we-- it's rather--"

"Now don't try to get out of it and make it worse," advised Olivia.

"We know what you said, and what you meant."

"I didn't say anything," put in Bob, with an air of virtue.

"Good reason," declared Jerry. "You're so busy eating that cocoanut candy that you didn't have time to speak. Besides you're not rowing."

"Oh, has he got cocoanut candy!" cried Nellie. "Give me some and we'll forgive you for the rude way you and Ned spoke, Jerry. Won't we girls?"

"Of course," chorused Olivia and Rose.

"I-- I didn't know you cared for cocoanut candy," declared Bob, rather ashamed that he had not, before this, offered the girls some.

"Oh, don't we though!" exclaimed Nellie. "Just you pass some over and you'll see, Bob," for the two boats had drifted close together.

Bob, who had purchased a big bag full of the confection, before they had started for the row, passed it over, and the girls helped themselves generously.

"Take it all," advised Ned, who, perhaps, felt a little vindictive at Bob, because of that youth's lucky escape from displeasing the girls by unfortunate remarks.

"No, thank you, we don't want to rob him," said Olivia.

At that moment a shrill whistle sounded just behind the rowboats and the girls turned around to see what it was. Ned and Jerry, from the position in which they sat to handle the oars had seen a motor boat approaching, and they had stopped using the blades to watch its approach.

"Oh, that's the Ripper!" exclaimed Rose. "And Charlie Farson is all alone in her. Maybe he'll give us a ride."

"Who is Charlie Farson?" asked Jerry of Nellie.

"He's a friend of Rose. He lives in San Francisco, but he is staying with his uncle at a bungalow about two miles from where we are. He owns that motor boat, and it's the biggest and fastest on this part of the coast. Sometimes he takes us out with him. I hope he does so now. He's headed right this way."

"Um," grunted Jerry, not altogether pleased that a young fellow with a motor boat should come along, and claim the girls who, of course, would naturally prefer a power craft to one propelled by oars.

Rose waved her handkerchief and, in answer the captain of the Ripper sent out three shrill blasts as a salute.

"Oh, isn't that fine! He's coming over here!" exclaimed Rose. "I'll introduce you boys to him."

Neither Ned nor Bob looked very pleased at the prospect of meeting a youth who might be a rival in entertaining the girls, but there was no help for it.

On came the Ripper, and, as she approached, the motor boys could not help admiring her. The craft was powerful and swift, much more so than the Dartaway had been. It was considerably larger, too, and had an enclosed cabin.

"That's a dandy!" exclaimed Jerry in spite of himself.

"It's a peach!" was Ned's half-spoken comment.

"All to the mustard!" came Bob's characteristic comment.

"Want a ride, or a tow?" called Charlie Farson, when he got within hailing distance, and he slowed down his craft.

"I guess we'll ride, if you'll tow our boats," replied Rose, for she knew the young fellow fairly well.

"All right, come aboard."

By this time the Ripper was quite close, and, in another moment it had come alongside of the boat containing Rose, Olivia, Ned and Bob.

"These are some friends of ours from the east," said Rose, introducing Ned and Bob, "There's another one, in that boat with Nellie," she went on, telling Jerry's name.

"I'm sure I'm glad to meet you all," said Charlie Farson, with such good nature, that the boys could feel no resentment toward him. "Come aboard, and we'll go for a spin. I guess it will be best to anchor your two boats here and you can pick them up when we come back. We can make better time then."

"Oh, your boat always makes good time," complimented Nellie, as she

made her way to the cabin of the Ripper. "That's the only objection I have. You run her so fast that if you ever hit anything it would sink your boat before you had time to jump overboard."

"But I'm not going to hit anything," declared Charlie.

He tied the two rowboats together, the other boys helping him, and then anchored them with a small, spare kedge he carried on his craft.

"All ready?" he asked, looking to see that his passengers were comfortably seated.

"Already, Captain Charlie," answered Rose.

"Here we go then," and Charlie threw in the dutch of the engine, that had not ceased working,

The Ripper fairly flew away, so suddenly that Bob, who was near the stern, nearly toppled overboard.

"Look out!" cried Charlie.

"Oh, I'm looking out now," said Bob. "Say, but she can go!"

"Yes, she has some speed," modestly admitted Charlie.

He turned on more gasoline and advanced the spark still further, so that the boat increased her rate, piling up waves of white foam on either side.

They had a fine trip about the bay, the girls and boys thoroughly enjoying themselves, the latter being particularly interested in the engine part of the craft. The motor boys told the other lad of the Dartaway and how the craft had been destroyed.

"My, but I certainly would like to run this boat," announced Jerry with a sigh. "She's a dandy!"

"Maybe you'll get the chance," said Charlie.

"The chance? How? What do you mean?" asked Jerry, while his two chums eagerly waited for Charlie's answer.

CHAPTER XV

CAUGHT IN THE FOG

"WELL," replied Charlie as he sent the Ripper around in a big circle, "you see it's this way. I came down here expecting to stay with my uncle until Spring. I was going to learn how to raise oranges. I received word this morning that I would have to go back to my home in San Francisco. My father needs me there, because of a change in his business, and I've got to go."

"That's too bad!" exclaimed Rose.

"I guess you are thinking more of his motor boat than you are of Charlie," said Nellie, with a laugh at her sister.

"I was not!" declared Rose, indignantly.

"Well, I've got to leave my boat here," went on Charlie.

"Leave it here!" repeated Olivia.

"Yes, and I'm looking for some one to take charge of it while I'm gone."

"Take charge of it!" exclaimed Ned and Bob at once, while a joyous look came into Jerry's eyes.

"What I mean," said Charlie, "is that I would hire it out. I think that would be a better plan than merely to loan it to some one, for there is a chance that it might be damaged, and would have to be repaired, and, if I got a reasonable rent for it that would cover such a mishap."

"Would you hire it to us?" asked Jerry anxiously.

"I was thinking of that," answered the owner of the Ripper. "I heard from my friend, Rose," and he looked at the girl, "that you boys had had some experience with motor boats. I had rather hire mine out to some one who knew about machinery, than to persons who would have to learn. So, if we can make some deal, you may have a chance to run this boat. I've got to go to San Francisco in about a week."

"We'll take the boat," said Jerry quickly, "that is--"

"Oh, you needn't be afraid I'll ask too much money for her," interposed Charlie. "All I want is enough to pay for any possible damages, and for reasonable wear and tear. We'll talk it over later."

"Say, isn't that glorious!" whispered Ned to Bob. "Think of having a motor boat, and cruising on the Pacific! We're getting to be like Sinbad the sailor, making voyages all over."

"Yes, but maybe he'll want a small fortune for the hire of the Ripper," objected Bob. "We haven't any too much money, for this trip was rather costly."

"If we could get damages for the Dartaway, we--"

"Yes, but 'if' is a big word, even though it only has two letters," replied Bob quickly. "However, we'll do our best to get the Ripper during our stay here, and we'll take the girls out for some nice rides."

"That's what we will."

Charlie speeded his boat about the bay for some time longer, and then; as the girls said they thought they had better go home, he put back, picked up the anchored boats, and the motor boys and their hosts were soon rowing to shore.

"Come over any evening, Charlie," called Rose.

"Yes, come to-night," urged Jerry. "We can talk over the boat proposition then."

"I'll be there," replied the Ripper's skipper, as he put about and went whizzing over the blue waters of the bay.

When the young people entered the gateway they saw Ponto stretched out on the bench in the shade, fast asleep.

"Wait a minute," said Rose. "I'll play a trick on him."

She stole softly up, and, with a long piece of grass tickled the old colored servant on the ear. He put up his hand and sat up with a start.

"I 'clar' t' goodness!" he said, "I were jest waitin' fo' yo', an' I close mah eyes, jest fo' one little second, but dis atmosphere am so slumberous dat, 'fore I knows it, I'm sort of noddin'."

"I guess you were more than nodding," said Olivia. "But why were you waiting for us, Ponto?"

"'Deed an' I didn't no mo' dan nod, Miss Olivia, dat's what I didn't. But I'se been waitin' heah a pow'ful long time, an' I jest natcherly done gone an' fell t' noddin'."

"But what were you waiting for?" persisted Olivia.

"Dis letter," replied the colored man. "Massa Seabury done tole me t' give it t' one ob de young gentlemen what had de motor boat. He say it come from Cresville, an' it might be important, so I done set heah waitin', but I done forgot which young gentlemen he tole me t' gib it to."

"Let me see it," said Rose, and she looked at the envelope.

"It's for you, Jerry," she declared, "and it's from some railroad company. It's been sent on here from Cresville."

"Maybe it's about damages to our boat," said Bob.

And so it proved. The letter announced that an investigation had been made of the wreck in which the Dartaway was smashed, that the claim

department of the Florida Coast Railway Company admitted their liability, and were prepared to pay damages. They enclosed in the letter a check for the value of the boat, as declared by Jerry at the time of the shipment.

"Hurrah!" cried Ned. "That's the stuff!"

"Well, it's the end of the Dartaway," observed Jerry. "Poor old boat! I suppose we had better accept this sum, and not sue, eh?" and he looked at his chums.

"Sure," replied Bob. "If we sued it would take a good while to collect, and if we got a larger sum we'd have to pay the lawyers. Let's take this money and hire the Ripper."

"I don't believe you'll need all that," interposed Rose. "That's quite a sum, and Charlie will surely not ask as much as that for the hire of his boat."

"Well, if he does we'll pay it," decided Jerry. "I want to cruise on the Pacific, and this seems to be the only way we can do it. We'll have a motor boat trip, even if the Dartaway is out of commission."

Charlie came over to "The Next Day" bungalow that night and in a short time he and the motor boys had arrived at a business arrangement regarding the hiring of the Ripper. Charlie only asked a small sum as rental, much less than the amount of damages received, so that the travelers had plenty left for other purposes.

"And now the boat is yours, as long as you stay here," said Charlie, when the final details had been arranged. "I know you will take good care of her."

"Of course we will," answered Jerry, "and, if you find, after you get to San Francisco, that you have a chance to come back, we'll give her up to you."

"There's no such good luck as my coming back this season," said Charlie.

Early the next morning he brought the craft to the Seabury dock, where it was run in the small boathouse. Then, having explained to the boys some minor details of the engine, which was different and more powerful than the one they were used to, Charlie took his departure, having had another letter from his father asking him to hurry to San Francisco.

"I hope you will have a good time," said the Ripper's owner, as he bade the boys and girls good-bye. "Don't get into any dangerous adventures, especially with the girls on board."

"We'll not," promised Jerry, but he did not know how soon Charlie's warning was to be fulfilled.

"Well, what do you girls say to a ride?" asked Jerry when Charlie had gone, and they stood looking at the powerful boat.

"Do you think you boys can run her?" asked Nellie.

"Run her? Well, I guess we can," declared Ned.

"Didn't we tackle the Atlantic in the Dartaway, a smaller boat than this?" asked Bob, "and isn't the Atlantic worse than the Pacific?"

"I don't believe it is, a bit," said Olivia. "Everyone thinks the Pacific ocean is very peaceful, because the name indicates that. But old fishermen here have told me there are terrible storms, which come up quite unexpectedly, and that at times there are dreadful fogs."

"Well, we're not afraid," boasted Bob. "Are we fellows?"

"Oh, I guess we can manage to run the boat," replied Jerry, who was critically examining the machinery. "If you girls want to go for a spin, I think I can guarantee to get you safely back."

"Oh, we're not afraid on a day like this," replied Nellie. "There's no sign of a storm. Come on girls."

She and her sisters got in, followed by Ned and Bob. Jerry was already in the small cabin, set aside for the engineer. He was testing various wheels and levers, seeing that the oil feed cups worked well, and looking to the sparking system.

"All ready?" he asked.

"Let her go, Captain Jerry," called Bob, as he cast off the lines, and the Ripper, with her new commander and crew, started off.

Jerry found he could manage the engine about as well as the one that had been in the Dartaway. He soon had the motor going almost at full speed, and the way the boat cut through the water was a revelation to the boys. They had never ridden so fast in a motor boat before. Straight out to sea Jerry headed the craft, and the weather was so pleasant, the water so calm, and the sense of swift motion so enthralling, that, before they knew it, they had gone several miles.

"Oh!" suddenly exclaimed Rose, as she came from the small cabin, and glanced back toward the shore, "I can't see anything."

"It is a bit hazy," admitted Ned.

"Must have blown up a little fog," spoke Jerry. "I guess we'll put back. It didn't look as it was going to be thick weather when we started."

He swung the boat around and headed for what he supposed was the

shore. As the boat speeded on the mist became thicker, until they could scarcely see two hundred feet ahead of them.

"Better slow down; hadn't you?" suggested Bob. "We might hit something."

"Yes, for goodness, sake, don't have a collision," begged Nellie.

"We ought to be pretty near shore," remarked Jerry. "I'll keep on a little longer, and we'll come pretty near the dock, I think."

He tried to peer ahead into the fog, but it slowly settled down in lazy, curling wreaths, that made it as hard to see through as though a white blanket had been hung in front of him.

"Hark! What's that'?" asked Olivia, holding up her hand.

Out of the mist there came the dismal clang of a bell.

"Dong! Ding! Dong!"

"A vessel!" cried Bob. "Look out, Jerry, or we'll be run down."

"That isn't a vessel," said Rose, with a worried look on her face.

"That's the bell of the shoal buoy. We are quite a way out to sea!"

"And lost in the fog," added Nellie.

CHAPTER XVI

ON THE ROCKS

WITH a quick motion Jerry shut off the power, and the Ripper drifted through the mist, slowly losing headway. The sound of the bell became more distinct, and in a little while something dark loomed up before the anxious eyes of the boys and girls.

"Lookout! She's going to hit!" cried Ned.

"That's the buoy," declared Nellie.

"What's its location?" asked Jerry. "Can't we get our bearings from it?"

"Well, it's about eight miles off shore, I've heard the fishermen say," replied Nellie, "and it's about four miles down the coast from San Felicity."

"It doesn't seem as if we came as far as that," said Bob.

"This is a very fast boat," commented Rose.

"Is the buoy anchored to rocks?" asked Ned.

"No, it's on a dangerous shoal," answered Olivia "But there is no harm from that source to be feared to this boat, as it doesn't draw much water."

"It ought to be easy enough to start in the right direction for San Felicity, with this buoy to guide us," suggested Bob. "Can't you, Jerry."

"I guess so, if you think it will be safe to travel in the fog."

"No, don't," urged Nellie. "I'm afraid we might have a collision. I don't know much about this bay, and there are dangerous places in it, I've heard the fishermen say. We had better stay here until the fog lifts."

"That's what I think," agreed Rose and Olivia.

Bob and Ned, however, were for going on, but Jerry rather sided with the girls.

"Well," he finally said, in answer to the urging of his two chums, "Which way would you say the dock was, Ned?"

"Off there," and Ned pointed over the port rail.

"No, you're wrong," declared Bob. "It's there," and he indicated the opposite direction.

"There, you see," remarked Jerry. "It can't be both ways. The fog has you puzzled, just as it has me. We should have looked at the compass when we started out. Maybe the girls can advise us."

But they, too, were equally at loss regarding in what direction San Felicity lay.

"We'll have to drift around a bit," decided Jerry. "It's not very pleasant, but it's better than running any chances."

In spite of their dismal situation the boys and girls managed to extract a good deal of fun out of their experience. They laughed, joked, told stories and sang songs.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Jerry, looking at his watch. "Here it is noon, and we're not home for dinner."

"No, and not likely to be," added Ned rather gloomily. "I'll admit I'm as bad as Bob this time. I want something to eat."

"Do you?" asked the stout youth.

"Sure, Chunky."

"Then, maybe you'll quit making fun of me," was Bob's answer, as, from one of the lockers he drew out a bulky package.

"What is it?" asked Jerry.

"Sandwiches and cake. I bought 'em in the little booth where we had chocolate with Mr. Blowitz the other day. I thought we might be hungry, so I got 'em while you were tinkering with the engine. Now, maybe you wish I hadn't."

"Not a bit of it, Chunky," declared Jerry heartily. "You're all right!"

"It was very thoughtful to provide for us," said Rose.

There was fresh water in a cooler, and the young people made a merry meal. They ate everything to the last crumbs, and, as Bob said, they could probably have gotten away with more, for the salt air gave them good appetites.

"The fog's lifting!" exclaimed Ned suddenly. "Now we can start for home. I can just make out the coast."

True enough, right ahead of them was a low, dark line.

"Well, if that isn't queer," remarked Bob. "I would have said the shore was off there," and he pointed in the opposite direction.

"I guess we must have turned around when we drifted," said Jerry. "We're quite a way from the buoy now."

Once it began to lift, the fog dispersed rapidly, and Jerry soon had the engine going, and the boat headed for the shore. He speeded the motor up to as high a pitch as was safe, in unfamiliar waters, and soon the town of San Felicity came into view.

"Get near the shore," advised Ned, "then, if the fog shuts down on us again, we'll know where we are."

Jerry decided this was good advice, and steered the Ripper straight in, intending to run up along the coast to San Felicity. It was well that he did so, for the lifting of the fog was only temporary. When they were about a quarter of a mile from the shore the white mist closed in again, worse than before. But Jerry had his sense of direction now, and decided it would be safe to continue on at half speed, as there did not appear to be any other craft in sight, when he took a rapid survey of the bay just as the fog settled down.

Peering through the almost impenetrable white mass of vapor ahead of him, Jerry sent the Ripper slowly on her way.

"You'll have to be careful," cautioned Rose. "The tide is running out, and there's not much water along here at the ebb. I hope we don't go

aground."

"So do I," answered Jerry.

Just then there was a shock, and the boat quivered, hesitated for an instant, and then resumed her course.

"We struck bottom that time," said Ned. "Luckily it seemed to be mud."

"There are rocks along here," declared Nellie. "Go slow, Jerry."

The steersman, who could manage the boat from the engine cockpit, as well as from the bow, further slowed down the motor, until the Ripper was barely moving through the water.

Suddenly there was a grinding sound, the boat heeled over to one side, and came to a stop.

"The rocks!" cried Rose. "We're on the rocks!"

"Reverse!" yelled Ned, and Jerry did so, as quick as a flash, but it was too late.

"We're aground," he announced grimly.

"Will we sink?" asked Olivia in alarm.

"I guess there's no danger of that," announced Jerry, as he went forward, "but I hope we haven't stove a hole in her," he added, peering anxiously over the side.

"How about it?" asked Ned.

"Well, it might be worse," answered Jerry. "We have run right on the cleft of a rock, and we're held there. Can't get off until high tide, I suppose. Say, we seem to be up against it on our first trip."

"Oh, as long as we're not sinking we're all right," said Olivia. "We can wade ashore. It's not far."

"Yes, it's quite a way, and I don't want to spoil my shoes," objected Nellie. "We should have brought our bathing suits. Oh, dear! Isn't it unfortunate? I'm afraid father will be worried about us."

"One of us will wade or swim ashore, and tell him," said Ned. "We can easily do it."

"Boat ahoy!" suddenly called a voice out of the mist. "Who are you?"

"The Ripper," answered Jerry. "Who are you?"

A moment later a rowboat appeared from behind the white curtain of fog, and the boys and girls saw that Mr. Carson Blowitz was in the

craft.

"Well! Well!" he exclaimed. "You're in trouble, aren't you?-- and I'm just in time to effect a rescue," and he smiled at the boat load of boys and girls.

CHAPTER XVII

NEWS OF THE BRIG

"OH!" exclaimed Rose, rather excitedly, "take us off please! Our boat is sinking!"

"No, it isn't," declared Jerry. "We're all right only we're aground. Can't get off until high tide I suppose."

"Then perhaps I had better take the young ladies ashore," proposed Mr. Blowitz. "I have a large boat here, and they will be more comfortable than sitting there waiting for the tide to rise. Besides, you'll heel over quite a bit, I should judge by the way you're listing now."

There was no doubt of this, as the Ripper was, even now, far from being on an even keel. The boys did not relish having this man, whom they disliked, take off the girls, but there was no help for it.

"Say, we ought to go to some kindergarten and learn to run a motor boat," grumbled Ned in a low voice, as the girls were getting into Mr. Blowitz's craft. "We're peaches, we are!"

"It was my fault," admitted Jerry, rather embarrassed over the accident.

"Not in particular," remarked Bob. "Any one of us would have done the same thing. Lucky the boat isn't damaged any, but I hate to be under obligations to him," and he nodded toward Mr. Blowitz, who was helping Nellie into his boat. "I don't like him," he went on in a low voice. "There's something queer about him."

"We oughtn't to feel that way," said Jerry. "He's doing us a favor."

"Of course," admitted Bob. "I know it, and I suppose I shouldn't feel that way, but I do, and I can't help it. I don't want any favors from him. He's the kind, who, if he does something for you, will want you to do twice as much for him in return."

"Well, I'll be more careful next time I run this motor boat," said Jerry. "It's too bad."

"Might be worse," said Ned as cheerfully as he could.

"Don't you want to go ashore, boys?" called Mr. Blowitz.

"I guess we'd better," murmured Bob. "The water is quite deep except

for the place where the Ripper went on the rocks."

"The motor boat will stay there all right until high tide," the man went on. "Better anchor her well, however, it might come on to blow."

Jerry attended to this, throwing over a strong anchor which was aboard. Then the three boys joined the others in the rowboat.

"Can you find your way to shore, through this fog?" asked Rose.

"Oh, yes, we're not far from the beach," replied Mr. Blowitz. "I've been out to see an old fisherman, on business, and I was slowly coming back through the fog, when I saw your boat. I didn't know you owned that."

"We don't," replied Jerry shortly, for he did not want to get too friendly with Mr. Blowitz, even if that man did show a desire to do so. "We hired it."

"I thought I'd seen it in the bay before," went on the man. "It's a fine boat. I suppose you could go out quite a way to sea in her."

"You could," said Bob. "It's big enough to weather quite a gale, and you could carry provisions enough for two weeks."

"It certainly is a fine craft," went on Mr. Blowitz, as if he was thinking of something. "A fine craft."

"Did you ever hear anything more of your brig, the Rockhaven?" asked Nellie.

"Yes, I did," was the unexpected answer. "In fact that was why I went out rowing to-day. I had a telegram from the captain of the brig last night. It seems she did not sink as at first supposed, but is a derelict, drifting about somewhere off this coast."

"Has any one seen her?" asked Ned.

"Yes, the captain of a fishing smack. He was the man I went to interview to-day. He says as he was cruising along, day before yesterday, he sighted what he took to be a small boat. When he got closer he saw it was an abandoned brig. From his description I knew it was the one I was interested in."

"But if you only got a telegram from the captain of the brig last night, telling you it had not sunk, how did you know the fishing smack captain had sighted her, and how did you go out to see him to-day?" asked Jerry, for he thought there was something queer in the story Mr. Blowitz told, while the man's manner did not favorably impress him.

"Oh, that," and Mr. Blowitz glanced sharply at Jerry, and then resumed his rowing toward shore. The fog had lifted a bit, and the beach could be made out. "Well, that was rather queer," admitted the man, slowly,

as if searching about for a good answer. "You see I didn't know the fishing captain had seen the derelict. When I got the telegram, telling me the brig was still afloat, I thought it might be a good plan to go about among the fishermen, making inquiries."

"And you happened to strike the right one?" asked Jerry.

"I-- that is-- well, I had inquired among several before I met Captain Deckton of the smack Sea Girl. He saw the derelict. But I'd like to have a talk with you boys, when you are at liberty," added Mr. Blowitz, quickly. "I have a proposition to make to you. I think you will be interested."

"Please put us ashore first, before you talk business," begged Olivia. "It is long past noon, and I'm afraid my father will be worried about us."

"We'll land at the dock in ten minutes," said Mr. Blowitz. "I'll talk to the boys later."

"I wonder what he wants?" thought Jerry. "Something of a favor, I'll bet. I know his kind."

"Let me take the oars and relieve you," proposed Ned, who saw that the man was having rather hard work with the boatload of young people.

"Thank you, there's another pair in the stern, if you want to try them," said Mr. Blowitz, and Ned got them out. They made better time after that, and were soon at the dock.

"We must hurry home," said Rose.

"Perhaps you boys had rather talk with me later," suggested Mr. Blowitz. "There is no special hurry. Some time this afternoon will do as well, and you might like to go home with the young ladies."

"I guess it would be better," decided Jerry. "Where shall we see you?"

"If you will call at the refreshment booth here about five o'clock this evening, I'll be taking my usual afternoon drink of chocolate there, and I'll be pleased to have you join me."

"We will be here," promised Jerry, as, with his chums, he followed the girls along the dock and toward the bungalow.

"Why didn't you ask him what he wanted?" inquired Ned, when they were beyond hearing distance.

"Because, I want a chance to think some matters over," replied Jerry. "I believe Mr. Blowitz is up to some game, and I want to see if I can't discover what it is."

"It seems a mean thing to say," added Rose, "but I don't like that

man, in spite of the fact that he has been kind to us. I'm sure we ought to appreciate what he did for us to-day, in saving us a wetting, but I can't feel that he is sincere."

"I, either," admitted Olivia and Nellie, while the latter added:

"I hope you boys don't go into any business dealings with him. Perhaps you had better consult with my father, before you do."

"I guess it would be a good plan," said Jerry. "I hope Mr. Seabury will not be angry at us for taking you out and getting fog-bound, as well as involving you in a shipwreck."

"Oh, no!" answered Rose with a laugh. "He knows we are all right, for we have been on the water, more or less, all our lives. He sometimes worries a little, but, when we get home safe, he's so glad to see us that he never scolds." Nor did he this time. He inquired about the trip, and expressed his regrets at the mishap to the Ripper.

"It will be all right if we don't get a storm before high tide," he said. "I'll inquire of Ponto what the weather signs are. Ponto! I say Ponto! Where are you?"

"Comin' Massa Seabury! I'se comin'," answered a sleepy voice and Ponto came from the garden to the veranda, where Mr. Seabury, his daughters and the boys were.

"Do you think we are going to have a storm?"

"Storm? No, sah. No storm to-day."

"How can you tell?"

"Easy, Massa Seabury. When it's goin' t' storm, I cain't never sleep well, an' now, I can fall asleep as easy as a baby."

"I believe you. Well, that's what I wanted to know. He's a very good weather prophet," he added in a low voice to the boys. "I guess the boat is safe. Have you seen Professor Snodgrass lately, Ponto?"

"Yais, sah, I done saw him 'bout half an hour ago. He were huntin' around de' lower end ob de garden, after some web-footed grasshoppers, I t'ink he said."

"Web-footed lizards," corrected Ned.

"Yais, sah, dat's what it were. Web-footed lizards an' horned toads. Golly, I hopes he don't cotch none when I'se around!"

The boys told Mr. Seabury of Mr. Blowitz, and their host advised them to be careful about entering into any arrangement with the man.

"I don't know him," he said, "but I have heard from different persons

here that there is something queer about him. However, he may only want some favor that you can easily do."

Shortly before five o'clock the three boys started to keep their appointment with Carson Blowitz. Professor Snodgrass had not succeeded in finding any horned toads, and announced his intention of making a search near the bed of a dried-up river that evening, as he had heard there were some there. The girls were too tired to care for further excursions that afternoon, and they remained on the shady veranda, as the boys started off.

"I wonder what Blowitz can want?" mused Ned, as he and his chums neared the chocolate pavilion.

"We'll soon know," said Jerry.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT MR. BLOWITZ WANTED

THE boys found Mr. Carson Blowitz in the little courtyard of the pavilion, calmly sipping some cold chocolate.

"Ah, you are right on time, I see," he remarked, as pleasantly as he could. "That's what I like, boys. It shows your American spirit. Bright, hustling lads, all of you. Just the kind I have been looking for."

"Did you want to see us on business?" asked Jerry, for he did not care for the man's too obvious flattery.

"Yes, I did, but first let me order some chocolate for you. It is a hot day and you'll feel better after it. I never talk business unless I am eating, or drinking something like chocolate or lemonade. It calms the nerves."

Jerry was about to refuse, as he wanted to get the interview over with as soon as possible, but he looked at Bob, and that youth showed an evident desire to have some refreshment.

"Well, we'll take a little," Jerry said.

"I thought so. Here!" and he clapped his hands to summon the waitress, who soon returned with some cups of cold chocolate.

"Now to business," went on Mr. Blowitz, after a pause. "Did I understand you to say you had hired that large motor boat?"

"We have; for several weeks," answered Jerry, who, by consent of Ned and Bob, had been elected spokesman.

"And do you think it could go to sea-- say for a couple of weeks?"

"Yes, I think so. But did you think of hiring her from us? Because if you did I don't believe we can consider it, as we have no authority to let any one but ourselves run it."

"Oh, no, I was not thinking of running it," declared Mr. Blowitz. "I wouldn't know how if I wanted to. But I was thinking I might engage the motor boat and you with it, as a crew, to go on a cruise for me."

"A cruise?"

"Yes, out on the Pacific, but not too far from shore, say not more than twenty miles."

"What for?" asked Jerry.

"To search for that derelict-- the brig Rockhaven!"

"The Rockhaven!" exclaimed Ned and Bob together.

"Yes, as I told you it has a valuable cargo aboard, and, in addition a supply of gold, in money, and some important papers."

"Do you think we could find her?" asked Ned.

"I think so," answered Mr. Blowitz. "I made some particular inquiries of the captain of the fishing smack, whom I saw to-day, and I got her longitude and latitude, as near as he could give it to me. Of course it would be a rather hard search, and might consume considerable time, but I would be willing to pay for that. What I want to know is, if you boys would care to go out in that boat, the Ripper, and search for the derelict? If you find her I will pay you prize money."

"If we found her, and she was quite a way out to sea, how would we get her in?" asked Jerry.

"You could tow her, unless there was a bad storm. That motor boat is very powerful."

"Then there isn't anyone on board now?" asked Bob.

"Not a living soul," answered the man. "It's queer how they came to desert her, but I guess the captain and crew got scared and went off in a hurry, without making a proper investigation. The brig is a small one, and if she hit on a rock, or was in a collision, it would not take much to knock her out."

"Now here is my proposition. You are to take the Ripper, get her in good shape for the cruise, and start out. The sooner the better. I will pay all expenses, such as for provisions and supplies. If you return with the brig I will pay you two thousand dollars. If you don't succeed in finding her, after say a two weeks' search, you are to return, and I will pay you five hundred dollars, and all expenses. What do you say?"

"That sounds good to me," replied Bob.

"Suppose we got the vessel, made fast to her, and started to tow her in and had to abandon her because of a storm?" asked Jerry.

"Well, of course that might happen, though it's not likely, for we seldom have bad storms on this coast this time of year. Still if you couldn't bring the derelict in, you couldn't that's all. But if you found her, you could get the papers and gold, and if you had to abandon her, you could go back after the storm was over. I think you boys could do what I want, and, as I say, I'm willing to pay well. I'd go with you, of course. What do you say?"

Mr. Blowitz seemed quite anxious. In fact he was so anxious that Jerry was suspicious.

"I wonder why he doesn't hire some larger boat, or a small steam tug to go for that derelict?" thought Jerry. "He could get men, who are regularly engaged in the business of saving vessels, to go out for that price. Why should he prefer us, when we have had no experience in that line, and hardly know him? There is something back of all this, that he is not telling us. I wonder what we had better do?"

"Well?" asked Mr. Blowitz, as none of the boys spoke. Ned and Bob were waiting for Jerry to reply and the latter was turning it over in his mind, seeking to find a reason for the strange request.

"When would we have to start?" asked Jerry, at last.

"I'd like you to go to-morrow, or the day after, at the farthest. It would not take long to provision the boat for the cruise."

"Will you put your offer in writing?" asked Jerry.

"In writing-- why, isn't my word good? Well, of course-- Oh, I see-- you think I am a stranger here and might-- Oh, well, I have no objection to drawing up an agreement. Perhaps that will be the best way."

Mr. Blowitz looked a little annoyed that Jerry should have suggested such a thing, but he quickly covered his confusion by speaking rapidly.

"I'll draw up a paper right away," he said, taking a fountain pen from his pocket. "I'll have the waitress get me some blanks, and you can have them witnessed before a notary public, if you wish."

"There's no hurry," said Jerry. "Suppose you draw up the papers, and we can meet you here to-morrow to talk things over further. I think we should take a little time to consider this. It is rather a queer proposition--"

"Oh, of course, I don't want to hurry you into it," declared Mr. Blowitz, in rather a nervous manner. "Of course I could get some other boat and a regular crew, but I saw you boys, and I took a liking to you. I thought you might like to earn some money and, if you have good luck, it oughtn't to be hard work."

"Oh, we'd like the money all right enough," interposed Bob.

"We'll think it over," put in Jerry quickly, for he was afraid Ned or Bob might say something that would commit them. "We'll meet you here to-morrow at ten o'clock and you can have the papers with you."

"All right," agreed the man, and Jerry thought he seemed disappointed that the matter was not settled at once. "Don't forget now," he urged them, as they left the pavilion, Mr. Blowitz remaining there to drink more chocolate.

"Why didn't you agree to it, Jerry?" asked Bob, when they were outside. "That would be a swell cruise. Just the thing! And think of getting two thousand dollars!"

"That's just it," replied Jerry. "We want time to think it over, and I guess we had better tell Mr. Seabury. Boys, I believe there is something wrong back of all this, and we don't want to run into danger."

"Danger!" exclaimed Ned. "Do you think there is danger?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to be on the safe side. I don't like Mr. Blowitz, but he may be all right. If we find he is, and Mr. Seabury advises it, we'll go on that cruise, and try to find the derelict. I asked him to make out the papers so we could have a chance to consider it."

"Well, maybe you're right," admitted Ned. "But I do hope it's all right. It would be great, to take a voyage on the Pacific in the Ripper."

The boys hurried back to the bungalow, intending to tell Mr. Seabury the result of their talk with Mr. Blowitz before mentioning it to the girls.

"Father has gone out," said Rose. "He has gone to dine with a friend, and he'll not be back until late to-night. We'll have supper together, and go for a trip on the bay. It's going to be a nice moonlight night."

"The very thing!" exclaimed Ned. "But we must see to the Ripper. She's on the rocks yet."

"That's so," exclaimed Jerry. "I nearly forgot about her. Bob and I will get her and take her to the dock. She must be afloat by now."

"It's almost supper-time," said Nellie, "hurry back."

"Oh-- it's near supper-time, is it?" asked Bob, with a woe-begone look on his face. "I-- er--"

"Come on, Ned," called Jerry. "Bob's afraid he'll get left on the eating proposition. You come with me."

Ned and Jerry rowed out to the motor boat. They found her floated, and riding easily, and, after towing her to the dock, they returned to the house. Partaking of a hasty supper the young folks, leaving Ponto and the servant in the bungalow, went down to the beach, and started for a moonlight ride in the Ripper.

CHAPTER XIX

A CRY FOR HELP

"ISN'T this perfectly delightful," remarked Nellie, as she reclined on some cushions in the little cabin. "I just love to be on the water!"

"Well, it's better than being out in the fog," admitted Jerry, as he adjusted the oil feed on the engine, and glanced over the moonlit waves.

"There don't seem to be many boats out tonight," observed Olivia.

"Maybe the owners are afraid of a storm," suggested Rose. "Sometimes a storm will follow a fog. I wonder if it's safe for us to go out?"

"We're not going far, and we'll keep near shore," replied Jerry. "It does act as if it was going to blow a bit, but I guess it will not amount to much."

There was quite a swell on as they got further out, and the Ripper rolled some, but the boys and girls were too good sailors to mind that.

"I wonder if we'll meet Mr. Blowitz again," came from Nellie, after a period of silence. "He's always turning up most unexpectedly."

"I don't believe we'll see him to-night," said Ned. "What do you think he wanted of us? Shall I tell 'em, Jerry?"

"Might as well, I'm going to tell Mr. Seabury as soon as I see him."

Thereupon Ned related the interview with Carson Blowitz, and the latter's desire to have the boys search for the derelict Rockhaven.

"I hope you don't go," spoke Nellie.

"Why not?" asked Bob.

"Because-- well, because," and she laughed a little uneasily.

"That's just like a girl," remarked Jerry, good-naturedly. "They don't want you to do a thing, but they can't tell you why."

"Well, it's just an uneasy feeling I have toward Mr. Blowitz, that's all," went on Nellie. "I can't explain it, but I feel, whenever I am near him, that he is planning something mean, or that he is up to some trick."

"Well, it's just how I feel," declared Rose, and Olivia admitted that she, too, did not trust the man.

"Well, we haven't decided to go," said Jerry, "and we're going to have a talk with your father about it. I admit I'd like to make the trip and find the brig, but, as you say, I don't quite trust Blowitz."

"Oh!" suddenly exclaimed Rose, as a wave, larger than any that had preceded it, sent a shower of spray over the boat. "Don't go out any farther, Jerry. It's getting quite rough."

"Yes, I guess it is," admitted the steersman, as he put the boat about. "There's quite a swell on. Wouldn't wonder but we'd have a storm by morning, though it's bright enough overhead. I don't believe Ponto is a good prophet."

There were only a few clouds in the sky, and the moon was shining down like a big silver disk, making objects unusually bright, for the southern moonlight is wonderful.

Jerry put the boat over near shore, and steered along the coast, which, at that point was quite rocky, cliffs rising here and there to a considerable height above the water.

"Look out you don't run her on the rocks again," cautioned Ned.

"I'll be careful," replied Jerry. "Maybe you want to run her a while. I don't want to be the whole show."

Ned was glad of the chance to take the wheel, and he and Jerry changed places. They were proceeding at slow speed, the girls occasionally humming the chorus of a song, and the boys joining in when they knew the air. The beauty of the night, the fine boat, and delight of moving along with scarcely a sound, had them all under a sort of magic spell, and they felt they could thus go on forever.

It was when they came opposite a range of low cliffs, close to the water's edge, that Bob suddenly called out in a low voice:

"Look at the men on the rocks!"

"Where?" asked Jerry.

"Over there," and Bob pointed. Ned steered the boat nearer to where two black figures, sharply outlined in the moonlight, could be seen in bold relief on the cliff.

"They are men, sure enough," replied Jerry, "but you needn't get excited over it."

"I'm not," went on Bob. "Only one of them is Mr. Blowitz, that's all."

"Mr. Blowitz?" queried Jerry sharply.

"Hush! He'll hear you," cautioned Rose. "Sounds carry very easily over water."

"It is Mr. Blowitz," admitted Jerry. "I wonder what he's doing out here."

"Probably getting some more information about the brig Rockhaven," suggested Ned. "Maybe that's a seaman who has some news of her."

By this time the motor boat was quite close to the two men, who, however, did not seem to notice the Ripper. There was no question about the identity of Mr. Blowitz. The other man was a stranger to the boys and girls. The two were apparently talking earnestly, and, occasionally Mr. Blowitz could be seen to be gesticulating violently.

"He's mad about something," declared Ned.

"It does look so," agreed Rose.

All at once the boys saw Blowitz take a step toward the other man, who retreated, as if afraid. Blowitz raised his hand as though to give a blow.

"Look out!" cried Ned involuntarily, as if the man could hear him.

"You'll go over the cliff!"

With a quick motion he turned the boat, steering toward the foot of the rock, above which the men stood.

At that instant a black cloud came over the moon and the scene was plunged in darkness. It was just as if it had been blotted out, and a murmur of surprise, at the suddenness of it, came from those in the Ripper.

At the same instant a cry rang out-- a man's cry-- and it seemed to be one for help.

CHAPTER XX

BLOWITZ IS ANGRY

"QUICK!" called Jerry. "Put us over there, Ned!"

"I will! Something has happened. I wonder--"

"Oh, why doesn't the moon come out from behind that cloud," exclaimed Rose, for she and the other girls were nervously afraid.

"Maybe they have both toppled over the cliff," suggested Nellie.

"More likely only one of them did," said Bob. "I only heard one cry. What's the matter, Ned?"

"Something's gone wrong with the engine."

"Here, let me have a look," called Jerry, and he went to the cockpit.

There was a lantern aboard, and, by the light of it, Jerry saw that one of the battery wires, leading to a spark plug, had become loosened, breaking the circuit, and preventing the gas from exploding in the cylinders. He soon had it fixed and the engine started, sending the boat toward shore.

By this time the moon was out again, flooding the scene with radiance. Eagerly the boys and girls looked toward the spot on the cliffs, where the odd scene had taken place. To their surprise they saw Mr. Blowitz standing there, and they were close enough to note that he was smoking a cigar.

"Well!" exclaimed Nellie, for that was all she could say, so great was her astonishment.

"Guess nothing happened after all," added Ned. "We have had our fright for nothing."

"There certainly was another man there," declared Jerry, "and he's gone now."

"And I'm certain I heard a cry for help," said Bob.

"We all heard a cry," admitted Jerry, "but it might have been a call for a boatman, or something like that. However--"

He did not finish what he was going to say for, at that instant, Blowitz heard the noise of the approaching motor boat. The muffler was not working just right, and the usually noiseless engine of the Ripper was making quite a fuss. Blowitz was in a listening attitude, standing in bold relief in the moonlight, and, having, apparently, satisfied himself as to where the boat was, he started to descend the cliff.

"He's coming down," said Ned.

"Is that the Ripper?" called Blowitz suddenly.

"Yes," replied Jerry, wondering how the man knew.

"I thought I recognized her engine. Are you coming ashore? If you are, I'd like to speak to you."

"We're coming," answered Ned.

"Don't come too close then, for there are dangerous rocks. Make for that little point up there," and the man pointed so that the boys could see where he meant. "There's deep water right up to the edge. It's a sort of natural dock, but go slow. I'll meet you there, I want to tell you something."

"Shall we ask him about the man?" inquired Bob in a low voice.

"No, don't," advised Nellie quickly. "It might make trouble. See what he has to say, and then let's hurry home. I'm afraid of him."

"What? With we three aboard?" asked Jerry with a little laugh. "We are complimented."

"Oh, I don't mean that," Nellie hastened to say. "I mean that Mr. Blowitz is a dangerous man."

She spoke low for she did not want him to hear her, and they were quite near to shore now.

Ned steered for the little point of land, and found he could send the boat quite close with no danger of hitting the rocks. Presently Blowitz, who had momentarily vanished amid the shadows at the foot of the cliff, appeared.

"Good evening, boys," he said. "I--" he stopped suddenly, "I didn't know you had young ladies aboard."

"Yes, we have been taking a moonlight run," Jerry explained. "We saw you up there on the cliff, and--"

"I was there with a friend of mine," Blowitz spoke quickly. "We were talking about the derelict brig. I was to meet a sea captain there, but he did not come. My friend had to leave in a hurry, and just then I heard the noise made by your boat, so I called to you. Did you hear a call?"

"We heard some sort of a call," spoke up Bob, "but we thought it was--"

"That was me," interrupted Blowitz, "I recognized the Ripper by the peculiar sound of the exhaust. I have quite a trick of recognizing boats that way. I was afraid you'd get past, so I called. But I didn't know you had the young ladies with you, or I would not have bothered you."

"That's all right," said Jerry. "We were coming ashore anyhow."

"You were? What for?" and Blowitz looked sharply at the boys. "Oh, I suppose you saw me and wanted to tell me you would accept my offer-- but excuse me, perhaps the young ladies--"

"Oh, we have told them of it," answered Ned. "You can speak before them."

"All right then. I was going to say perhaps you came in after seeing me, to tell me you had accepted my offer and would search for the derelict. Is that it?"

"Well, we hadn't quite decided," replied Jerry.

"What! Not decided!" exclaimed Blowitz. "Why I want you to start at once-- or-- that is-- to-morrow morning. I have just received news that makes it important that the search begin at once. I am depending on you. You will go at once, won't you? Come, I'll increase my offer," he said. "I'll pay you two thousand dollars for your time and trouble, stand all expenses, and, if you find the brig, and tow her in, I'll give you three thousand dollars. That's a fair offer. Now you can start to-morrow morning, can't you, boys?"

"I don't know," began Jerry, slowly.

"Isn't that money enough?" and Blowitz seemed much excited.

"Oh, yes, the offer is a very good one. But I think we should consult with some one-- We--"

"No, there is no need of consulting with any one," interrupted Blowitz. "I have the papers all made out. We can go before a notary-public to-night, for it is not late yet, and sign them, and you can start by to-morrow noon. What do you say? Will you go?"

It was a hard question to decide. The trip was alluring to the boys, even had there been no prize money connected with it. But there was something about Blowitz that made them hesitate. His very eagerness to have them start, almost at once, made them feel there was something queer back of it all. Still they had undertaken, before this, more difficult and risky tasks. Why not this one?

"Well, I must have your answer soon," said Blowitz, approaching nearer to the boat.

"Will you wait just a moment?" asked Jerry. "My chums and I will go in the cabin and talk it over. We'll let you know right away."

"I'll wait five minutes," said the man. "Time is precious to me. I have lots to do. But I know you'll go. I'll raise the offer five hundred dollars. Now, that's the best I can do. But you must start as soon as possible to-morrow."

"Come in here," called Jerry to his chums, entering the small cabin, where the three girls had already gone as they did not wish to seem to listen to the talk between Blowitz and the boys.

Jerry closed the sliding doors, and, by the light of a small lantern which hung from the cabin ceiling, looked at his companions. Outside they could hear Blowitz pacing up and down on the rocky shore.

"Well, what do you fellows say?" he asked.

"I'd like the trip," said Ned, wistfully.

"The money is a large sum," added Bob.

"Then you want to go?" asked Jerry. "I'll do just what ever you do. I'll tell him we'll go."

"No! Don't!" cried Nellie in a tense whisper. "Jerry-- boys-- don't have anything to do with this man. He may be all right, but there's something mysterious about him. Why should he want to hire you when, for the same money, or less, he could get a company of fishermen, who know these waters well, to make the search? Take a girl's reason, for once, and don't have anything to do with him!"

She had risen to her feet, her eyes were flashing and her cheeks flushed with the excitement of the moment. The boys looked at her in admiration.

"I admit there is something queer in his offering to increase the prize money," spoke Jerry, after a pause. "He must be very desperate."

"And why this sudden rush?" inquired Ned. "This afternoon he was in no such hurry. Something must have occurred in the meanwhile-- I wonder if it was the man on the cliff--"

"Now don't let's go to guessing at too much," cautioned Jerry. "The question to be settled now is: Do you want to go on a search for the derelict brig? Yes or no? That's what we've got to settle now."

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the tick of the clock in the cabin. Involuntarily Nellie glanced at it. The hands pointed to the hour of nine, and she felt that she and her sisters should be home. Jerry looked at his two companions.

"I guess we'd better not go," said Bob slowly.

"I hate to give it up, but maybe it will be for the best," added Ned.

"I'm suspicious of him. Tell him we'll not go, Jerry."

"Very well."

Jerry stepped to the cabin door and slid it back. At the sound Blowitz

came eagerly forward.

"Well?" he queried. "Are you going? Can you start at once'?"

"We have decided not to go," replied Jerry, slowly. "I-- that is my chums and I-- do not feel just right about it. It is not our boat, and--"

He hesitated, for he did not want to give the main reasons that had influenced him and his chums. But Blowitz did not give him a chance to continue.

"Not go!" the man fairly cried. "Why I'm surprised at you! You led me to believe, all along, that you would go. Here I've gone and wasted a lot of time on you, gone to a lot of trouble, made all my arrangements, expecting you would go, and--"

"We never gave you any reason to think we would go," declared Jerry very positively. "You are wrong, there, Mr. Blowitz. We only said we would consider it. We have done so, and have concluded not to go. I am sorry--"

"Sorry? You'll be sorrier than this before I'm through with you!" threatened the man. "You'll wish you had gone before very long, let me tell you. You've spoiled all my plans. I depended-- Oh! I'll get even with you for this!" and the man, in a fury threw his cigar down on the rocks, whence it bounded up amid a shower of sparks. "You'll regret this!" he cried in angry tones, as he turned away and started off up the cliff, muttering to himself.

"You've made him mad," said Bob.

"Can't help it," replied Jerry. "I'm glad we are not going to have anything to do with him. I believe he is a dangerous person. Certainly he had no right to talk about us as he did."

"Oh, I'm so glad you're not going!" exclaimed Nellie, as she and her sisters came out of the cabin. "I was afraid you would give in when he got so angry. But let's get away from here. Somehow, I don't like this place. Besides we should have been home some time ago. Papa may have returned, and we always try to be in before ten o'clock. We'll hardly get home by that time now."

"Yes, we will," said Ned. "I'll send the Ripper along at a good clip."

He started the engine, and, as the boat swung out from beside the rock dock, the form of Blowitz could be seen going up the cliff in the moonlight. In less than an hour the boat was at San Felicity and the girls were put ashore. They found Ponto down at the dock to meet them.

"Massa Seabury done got worried after he got home," said the colored man, "an' he sent me to see if yo' was heah."

"Ponto," asked Jerry, "do you think you can take the young ladies safely home, without falling asleep?"

"Suttinly I can," Massa Jerry. "Fall asleep! I gess I doan't fall asleep at night. I'se only sleepy when de sun shines, I is."

"Then I guess you'll do all right. See that they get home safe."

"Why, aren't you boys coming too?" asked Nellie, in some surprise.

"Not now," replied Jerry.

"Why not?"

"I think we'll go back to the foot of the cliffs and see if we can't find the man to whom Blowitz was talking. I don't like the way he acted, for that certainly was a cry for help, and there may have been foul play!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAN ON THE ROCKS

JERRY'S announcement was news to his chums, for he had given them no hint of his intentions as the Ripper was nearing the boathouse.

"Do you mean you are going to hunt for that man on the rocks?" asked Ned.

"Yes, I think he fell; or was pushed over by Blowitz. There was no mistaking that call for help. Blowitz says it was he who called to us, but I know better. That was a cry of fear."

"Oh, don't get into any danger," cautioned Nellie. "Maybe you had better take Ponto with you. We're not afraid to go home alone. It's nice and bright, and there is no danger."

"Deed an' there be, Miss Nellie," interrupted Ponto, who did not relish going off on a strange hunt with the boys. "Some ob dem horned toads might git after yo', an' if Ponto wasn't along dey'd bite you. I shorely am gwine home wid yo'. Massa Seabury, he done 'specially stipulate it, an--"

"Yes, I guess Ponto had better go with you," said Jerry. "We can do better alone. It won't be the first time we've had a midnight hunt, though never before one just like this. We'll come back as soon as we can, and tell you all about it. We can make quick time in the boat."

"And, if you find the man?" asked Rose.

"If we do, and he needs help, we'll see that he gets it; I think if we do find him we'll learn more about Mr. Carson Blowitz than we know now."

"Shall I tell my father?" asked Nellie, as the boys were preparing to make the return trip. The dock was deserted, save for the young people and Ponto, but in the chocolate refreshment place, and other booths on shore there was plenty of life.

"I think it would be a good plan," agreed Jerry. "You know the whole story, about the brig and the offer Blowitz made. Tell Mr. Seabury that we would have consulted him before, only he was out when we got back this afternoon. Now, Ponto, lookout that no horned toads or web-footed lizards get the young ladies, and, above all, don't lie down alongside the road and take a nap."

"Hu! Guess I ain't gwine t' sleep when I's 'scortin my massa's daughters home," declared the colored man, rather indignant that such a slur should be cast on him.

"Don't worry," called Jerry, as the girls walked along the dock to shore. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

"Do you really think we'll find anything?" asked Ned of Jerry when they were some distance out, and speeding along toward where they had seen Blowitz and the other man on the cliff.

"I don't know," Jerry frankly admitted. "It looks suspicious, and the way Blowitz acted made it more so. Maybe the shadows deceived us, and the man did not fall, for the cloud over the moon made things black. But it will do no harm to take a look, and then we'll be satisfied."

"If we find him, what will we do with him?" asked Bob, who had a habit of looking ahead.

"Let's find him first," said Jerry. "Maybe it is some man who works for Blowitz, and who would not do just as his boss wanted him to. Blowitz can get angry very easily, as was proved by his actions when we refused to make that trip. Maybe he hit the man in a fit of passion, and the man cried out in surprise, and ran away."

The sky was more cloudy now, and the moon was oftener obscured by masses of dark vapor. Still, there was light enough for the boys to make out landmarks, and distinguish objects when they came near the low cliff, on which they had seen Blowitz and the other man.

"There's the place," called Ned suddenly, from his position near the wheel.

"That's right," admitted Jerry. "Better put us in near that rock where we talked to Blowitz. We can fasten the boat there and go ashore. There's no swell in here."

In a short time the three boys were on the rocky shore. Jerry carried a lantern and Ned had a coil of rope, as he thought if the man had fallen over a cliff, and was unable to help himself, they might need a

line to hoist him up.

"Go easy now," cautioned Jerry, as they moved forward. "We don't want to send out notice that we have arrived. Blowitz may still be sneaking around."

As cautiously as possible they advanced. They found there was a rough path leading from the beach up the cliff, on top of which the two men had stood. With Jerry, holding the lantern to guide them, Ned and Bob followed. They paused now and then to listen, but the only sound they heard was caused by the waves of the Pacific breaking on the rocky shore, the rattle of the pebbles on the beach, and the soft swish of the seaweed.

"It was right over there that he seemed to fall," said Ned, pointing to indicate where he meant.

"That's where I made it out to be," agreed Jerry.

It was not easy walking, as the rocks were slippery, and some of them were thick with weeds, for, at very high water, they, were covered by the ocean. Several times Bob slipped and nearly fell.

"Look out," cautioned Jerry. "We don't want two wounded persons to look after."

They paused a moment to get their breath, after a stiff bit of climbing, and, as they stood there in the silence of the night, with the moon fitfully showing through the clouds, they suddenly heard a groan.

"What's that?" whispered Ned, tensely.

"It must be the man we're looking for," replied Jerry. "He's hurt. Where did the sound come from?"

Ned pointed to a dark spot at the foot of the cliff. The three boys hastened toward it, Jerry flashing his lantern.

When they got to the place they saw, lying huddled up on a bed of seaweed, the form of a man.

As the light flashed on him they noticed that there was blood on his pale face, and one arm was doubled up under him in a strange manner.

"He's dead!" whispered Bob softly,

"No; he's breathing," answered Jerry, as he bent over the man on the rocks. "Get me some water in your cap, Ned. I'll try to bring him to."

CHAPTER XXII

DE VERE'S STORY

NED ran down to the shore, slipping and stumbling over the rocks, and once falling and bruising himself considerably. But he did not mind this. He wanted to get the water, for it might save the man's life. It looked as if some crime had been attempted, and evidence pointed to Blowitz.

Making as quick progress on the return trip as the carrying of a cap full of sea water would permit, Ned held it so Jerry could sprinkle some drops on the man's face. He stirred and seemed to be murmuring something.

"We ought to have some fresh water for him to drink," said Bob. "I'll get some from the cooler on the boat."

Off he hurried, returning presently with a pitcherful of fresh water and a glass, and with this the man was given a drink, when Jerry held up his head.

The water seemed the very thing needed for the sufferer, as they could see by the light of the lantern, opened his eyes, and gazed wonderingly about him.

"What-- where am I?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"You're at the foot of the rocks-- on the cliff near the ocean," said Jerry. "You had a fall. Are you badly hurt?"

The man groaned in reply. Then an angry, light shone in his eyes.

"No! I didn't fall!" he exclaimed. "I was shoved over the cliff. He wanted to get me out of the way so he could claim everything! He's a villain!"

"Who?" asked Ned quickly.

"Who? Who else but Carson Blowitz! I suppose he thinks I am dead, and he can have all that is on the ship! But I'll--"

The man stopped suddenly, and a spasm of pain passed over his face.

"What is it?" asked Jerry.

"My arm-- Oh, I'm afraid it is broken!"

The boys remembered how the left arm of the man was doubled up under him in a peculiar manner. He had doubtless fallen on it.

"Wait a minute and we'll lift you up so that you will rest more comfortably," said Jerry, and, with the aid of his chums he made from their coats and some seaweed a rude sort of bed for the man.

There was no doubt that the stranger's left arm was broken. It hung

limply down, and the least motion of it produced terrible pain. Fortunately the man did not again lose his senses, and he directed the boys how to bandage the arm close to his side, with their handkerchiefs tied together, so that the injured member would not swing about, and further splinter the broken bones.

"Do you think you can walk down to our boat?" asked Jerry. "We can take you to a doctor, for I think you need one."

"Need one? I should say I did," replied the man. "It is a wonder I was not killed by that fall. I'm afraid my ankle is sprained, but, after I rest a bit, and get over this dizzy feeling, I'll try to walk to the boat. It's lucky you boys happened to come along, just when you did."

"We didn't 'happen' to come along," said Jerry. "We were looking for you."

"Looking for me'?"

"Yes, we saw you and Blowitz talking on the cliffs in the moonlight, and then we saw you disappear. We thought it was queer at the time," and Jerry related the subsequent events.

"I'm glad you witnessed that," said the man, when Jerry had finished. "This will be additional evidence against that scoundrel who intends to rob me, and who tried to get me out of his way. However my time of reckoning will come. But would you mind telling me your names?"

Jerry introduced himself and his companions, briefly, telling the reasons for their presence in California.

"My name is De Vere," said the man. "Maurice De Vere. I was in partnership with Blowitz, in several ventures, including the one in which a brig named the Rockhaven is concerned."

"Are you interested in that?" asked Jerry eagerly. "Why that is the derelict Blowitz wanted us to go in search of in the motor boat."

"He did? Now I understand why he wanted to get me out of the way!" cried Maurice De Vere, quickly. "He was afraid I would meet you boys."

"Yes, and that's why he was in such a hurry for us to start," added Ned, and they told of their dealings with Blowitz, and his anger at their refusal to take part in his schemes.

"I can't be thankful enough to you boys," said the wounded man. "I don't know what would have become of me if you hadn't happened to have seen Blowitz push me from the cliff. I-- I wish--"

Mr. De Vere seemed overcome by a sudden weakness, and fell back on the pile of coats and seaweed.

"We had better get him to a doctor," said Ned. "He may be more injured

than we suppose."

"I-- I'll be all right in a little while-- that is all but my arm," said the injured man faintly. "It was just a little weakness. If you will give me some more water--"

They gave him some and he seemed to feel better after that. Then he tried to rise, but he had to fall back again.

"My ankle-- I think it's sprained," he said.

"Then let us carry you to the boat," suggested Jerry.

"I'm afraid you can't."

"Well, we can try."

They did, but it was hard work. By dint of carefully picking their steps over the rocks, however, the three boys finally managed to get Mr. De Vere into the cabin of the Ripper, where they made him comfortable on the cushions.

"Now speed her up for the doctor's," said Jerry to Ned, who had taken charge of the engine. "That is if you know where to find one."

"There is a physician whom I know, not far from the main wharf at San Felicity," said Maurice De Vere. "If you run the boat there I can get into a carriage and drive right to his house. Then after he has set my arm, I should like to tell you my story. That is, if you care to listen."

"We certainly do," said Jerry. "We will be very glad to help you in any way that we can."

"Will you?" asked the man eagerly. "Then, perhaps, I can get ahead of Blowitz after all."

Quick time was made to the dock, and, though it was quite late, the boys found several public hackmen on hand. Mr. De Vere was put in one of the vehicles and driven to the doctor's office, whither, after they had secured their boat, the boys followed.

It took a little time to set the broken arm, and, after some restoratives had been administered, and the sprained ankle, bandaged (though that hurt was not as severe as at first supposed) Mr. De Vere received the boys in his room, which his friend, the physician had provided.

"I do not want to detain you boys too long," he said, "and it is not necessary to go into all the details of my story now. I will tell you a little of it, and then I have a request to make of you. I have been making plans while the doctor was working over me. It helped me to forget the pain."

"We'll do anything we can for you," promised Jerry, and the other boys nodded in assent.

"Well, Blowitz and I have been associated in many enterprises," said Mr. De Vere, "but, of late, I have had my suspicions of him. I began to fear he was trying to get the best of me, so that he would control all the interests. Now I am sure of it.

"We went equal shares in loading the brig Rockhaven with valuable merchandise, for trade among the Santa Barbara Islands. There was also, aboard the brig, some valuable papers, and a considerable sum in gold, that was to go to a client of ours. After the ship was loaded I learned that Blowitz sent some mysterious boxes aboard. They came from Boston, I understand. I--"

"Those are the boxes we saw in Cresville!" exclaimed Bob.

"What's that?" asked Mr. De Vere, and the boys explained the curious actions of Blowitz in connection with the boxes.

"Very likely they were the same," said Mr. De Vere. "What they contained I do not know, but I--"

"Excuse me for interrupting you," said Jerry, "but I think at least one of the boxes contained something poisonous," and he related how the dog, in the Cresville freight station, had been affected by smelling at the broken package.

"That's it!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. De Vere, after a moment's thought. "I see it all now. I can understand his actions. But I will explain later, for I want to be very sure of my facts. At any rate, not to burden you with too many details, after the brig had sailed, Blowitz wanted to purchase my interest in her. As he offered me a large sum I consented, and I transferred all my rights to him.

"As soon as I had done so he left town, and then I learned that he had cheated me, for he had pretended to give me certain property for my share in the ship, and this property he gave me was utterly worthless. I then considered the deal off, and I knew that I still had a right to my half of the ship and the cargo. But, more than this, I also learned that Blowitz had cheated me in another way, by taking property and money that belonged to me. I consulted my lawyers, and they told me I had a right to the entire ship Rockhaven and all that it contained. I am the sole owner, and Blowitz has no right to the brig nor anything on it. It is all mine, though he is trying to get it.

"This all happened before the brig was abandoned and became a derelict, but I can't understand how that happened, as she was a very stout vessel, though small. There has been no collision, as far as I can learn. It is all something of a mystery, but I am going to solve it. As soon as I learned what a scoundrel Blowitz was, and of the wrecking of the brig, or, at least, the reported wrecking of it, I

came here for further news.

"When I met Blowitz I accused him of cheating me, and I claimed the brig, when she should be found. He wanted to argue with me, and talked of seeing lawyers, but I knew I was right. Then he asked me to meet him on the clips to-night, to talk matters over. He said we might get some news of the ship from the captain of a fishing smack.

"Rather foolishly I consented to meet him, and talk the thing over. We quarreled, and he attacked me, with what result you saw. He pushed me over the cliff, and fled, leaving me, I suppose he thought, for dead.

"Now what I am going to ask of you boys is this: Will you go with me in your motor boat and search for the brig? Wait; do not give me an answer now. I think I can prove to you that I have a right to the abandoned ship, and I will pay you well for your time and trouble. Better than Blowitz offered to. But do not decide in a hurry. I must get in a little better shape myself, and then I have some arrangements to make. But I hope you will decide to go. Of course, if you don't care to, I can hire some one else, but I would rather have you boys. Now you can go home and think it over, and let me know at your leisure."

The boys did not know what to say. Events had happened so rapidly that they did not exactly understand all of them. They realized, however, that they had another chance to go on a cruise on the Pacific, in the Ripper, and they felt that they ought to take advantage of it, and aid Mr. De Vere.

"I think I shall have to break up this little party," said the physician, coming in just then. "I can't have my patient getting a fever. You boys will excuse me, I know, if I ask you to let him get some rest now."

"That's all right," spoke Jerry. "We'll see you to-morrow, Mr. De Vere."

"Very well," was the answer, and the boys left the injured man to the care of the doctor.

"Well, what do you think of that?" asked Ned, as he and his chums were on their way to the Seabury bungalow. "Isn't it simply great?"

"Great? It's immense!" exclaimed Bob. "We're going, aren't we, Jerry?"

"If you fellows say so, and outvote me, I suppose you are."

"But you want to go, don't you, Jerry?"

"I didn't say I did not. I think we have a different man to deal with, in this Mr. De Vere, than we had in Blowitz. I think we shall go derelict hunting, boys."

"And maybe we'll not have sport!" exclaimed Ned.

They were soon within sight of the bungalow. The storm clouds had continued to gather, and the moon only shone at brief intervals. The wind was blowing considerable, and there was every evidence that it would rain before morning.

"Guess we got in just in time," said Ned, as they entered the gateway. As he spoke Ned came to a sudden stop. He was looking at a dark figure which seemed to be stealing up to the bungalow.

It appeared to be that of a man, advancing so as to make no noise, and attract no attention. The fitful gleams of moonlight showed him to be stooping over, and, now and then, glints of light about him, indicated that he carried a dark lantern, which he flashed at intervals to enable him to see his way.

"Look!" whispered Ned, grasping Jerry's arm.

"I see," was the low answer.

"It's a burglar," spoke Bob. "Let's creep up on him, and make a capture!"

CHAPTER XXIII

OFF ON A CRUISE

CAUTIOUSLY the boys advanced. They did not stop to think what they were going to do, nor how they would capture the man, who, if he had evil designs, was probably armed and desperate. With the sole desire of protecting from loss their friends in the bungalow, they determined to prevent the man from breaking into the place. That this seemed his intention was almost certain to the boys, for they saw him approach one of the low windows, stop under it, and flash his light several times.

"Now's our chance!" whispered Ned. "Let's creep up and jump on his back. Then yell like mad and Ponto, and some of the servants will come and help us."

With light footsteps, hardly making a sound that was not covered by the noise of the wind in the trees, the boys advanced until they were within a few feet of the man. He did not suspect their presence. The three chums were trembling with nervousness and excitement.

Suddenly the man flashed a bright beam of light on the ground, and made a quick motion.

"Now!" whispered Ned. "Jump boys!" for it looked as if the intruder was about to open a window, and spring inside.

The chums leaped together, and fairly bore the man to the earth. Down

they came upon him, as if they were stopping a halfback, with a football, running around right end on the second down.

"We've got him!" yelled Bob.

"Help! Help!" shouted Ned.

"Murder! Thieves! Robbers! Fire! Police! Help!"

These were cries coming from the man who was struggling to get rid of the crushing weight of three healthy, sturdy boys.

"He's trying to get away!" called Jerry: "Hold him, fellows!"

"Let me go! Help! Help! I haven't any money!" pleaded the man underneath!" Fire! Police! Help!"

"What is it?" cried Mr. Seabury, opening a window just over where the struggle was going on, and thrusting his head out. "What's the matter?"

"We've caught a burglar!" cried Bob.

"A burglar? Hold him until I get my revolver! Ponto! Where are you? There's a burglar below! Hurry up and help the boys! Where is that black rascal? I'll bet he's gone to sleep again!"

"Comin'! I'se comin' Massa Seabury," answered Ponto's voice from the far distance. "I were jest takin' a nap--"

"Do you take me for a burglar?" suddenly asked the wriggling man, as he succeeded in getting his head from under Bob's stomach where it had practically been out of sight. "Did you think I was trying to rob the house?"

"Of course; aren't you--" began Jerry, when a light flashing from one of the windows, as Ponto approached, shone full on the prostrate man's face. Upon the startled view of the boys there burst the vision of the peaceful, though sadly surprised, face of Professor Snodgrass.

"Pro-fes-sor Snodgrass!" exclaimed Ned weakly.

"Pro-fes-sor," stammered Bob, rolling over in his astonishment.

"Well, if we--" began Jerry but he could not finish.

He let go his hold of the scientist's arm, and Ned at the same time loosened his grip on the supposed burglar's leg. The professor arose, smoothed out his rumpled clothing, and remarked in a sad tone:

"I suppose it's got away, now."

"What?" asked Ned.

"The horned toad. I was chasing one through the garden by the light of my portable electric lantern. I cornered him under the window, and I was just casting the net over him when you jumped on me. The toad got away. It's too bad, but of course you didn't know it. I must continue my hunt, for at last I am really on the track."

"Whar am dat bug'lar man?" suddenly demanded Ponto, opening the side door a crack, and thrusting a gun out. "Whar am he? Jest hold him up agin this yeah shootin' iron, young gem'mens, an' Ponto'll make him wish he done gone stayed home? Whar am he?"

"Lookout for that gun," cautioned Ned. "It might be loaded. There's no burglar, Ponto. It's all a mistake. It was Professor Snodgrass, hunting for horned toads."

"Yes," added the scientist. "I heard they were always out just before a storm, and so I went after them. I saw a fine specimen, but he got away. However I shall catch him."

"No bug'lar, eh?" mused Ponto, in disappointed tones. "Golly, it shorely am lucky fo' him dat dere ain't. I shorely would hab plugged him full ob holes, dat's a fact!"

By this time Mr. Seabury had dressed and come down, and the girls were calling in anxious voices to know what all the excitement was about. Matters were soon explained, and the awakened household prepared to return to its normal state. That is all but the professor; he decided to continue his toad hunt, and, probably would have done so, but for the fact that it began to rain just then, and there was such a down-pour that it was out of the question to search in the garden.

"Anyway," the scientist consoled himself, "I don't believe the toads would be out in the rain. I shall probably find one to-morrow," and, with that comforting reflection he went to sleep.

Though it was rather late Mr. Seabury insisted on hearing from the boys the rest of the adventure, part of which his daughters had told him. He was much surprised at the disclosure of Blowitz's acts, and congratulated the boys that they had had nothing to do with him.

"Do you think it would be safe to go with Mr. De Vere?" asked Ned.

"I think so," replied Mr. Seabury. "Of course you want to make an investigation, but, if you find him all right, I see no reason why you should not go off on a cruise after the derelict."

"Oh, I wish we could go," spoke Rose wistfully, but she knew it was out of the question.

Mr. De Vere was much better the next day. The swelling in his ankle had gone down, and he could walk around, though he had to carry his arm in a sling. He sent for his lawyer, who soon proved that what the

injured man had said was true. The boys consulted further with Mr. Seabury during the next two days, and made up their minds to go on the cruise.

"Now, when can you start?" asked Mr. De Vere, after this point had been settled. "Or, rather, when can we start, for I intend to go with you, though I can't do much with this broken arm

"We can go whenever you are ready," replied Jerry.

"Then I'll give orders to have the Ripper provisioned, for I am going to pay all expenses. By the time we get ready I think this storm will have blown over," for the wind and rain had continued for three days.

Under Maurice De Vere's directions preparations for the cruise were soon completed. On the fourth day the storm blew away and there was the promise of settled weather, though some old sailors, down at the dock, said there were liable to be high winds for some time yet.

The Ripper was overhauled, a plentiful cargo of provisions and supplies had been stowed aboard, and, having bid good-bye to their friends, the Seaburys, the boys were ready for their cruise.

"When will you come back?" asked Rose, as she and her sisters went down to the dock to see the party off.

"When we find the derelict," answered Jerry.

"Good luck!" said Nellie.

"Don't let a sea serpent catch you," cautioned Olivia, as she waved her hand.

Jerry threw on the switch, Ned turned the fly wheel over, there was a throbbing of the cylinders, and the Ripper was off on her long cruise after the derelict brig.

CHAPTER XXIV

HUNTING THE DERELICT

"WELL, now that we're under way," said Jerry, who had assumed charge of the engine, "in which direction do you propose going, Mr. De Vere? We are under your orders you know."

"There are to be no special orders given on this cruise," was the answer. "I regard you boys as my partners in this enterprise. We will all do our best to find the brig, and if any of you have any suggestions, I hope you will not hesitate to offer them. To be frank with you I do not know where to look for the Rockhaven. She is somewhere in this vicinity, floating around, but at the mercy of wind, wave and cross currents. All we can do is to cruise about, hoping to get a sight of her."

"I thought when you searched for anything on the ocean you had to have the longitude and latitude," said Rob.

"So you do usually," replied Mr. De Vere, but, in this case it is impossible to get those figures. If it were it would be an easy matter to pick up the brig. But, in the case of a derelict, that is floating about, going in no particular direction, and making only such speed as the wind or the currents give it, there is no telling where it will drift to. It might be at one spot at night, and many miles off the next morning."

"We are prepared for a long cruise," spoke Ned, "and it doesn't matter which way we go. How would it do to go about in big circles, taking a new one every day?"

"That's a good plan," said the owner of the Rockhaven. "We might try it, at any rate."

So this was done. With chart and compass Mr. De Vere, who understood the science of navigation, worked out a plan of traveling about in big sweeps, that took in a goodly portion of that part of the Pacific. They had some strong marine glasses aboard and, with these, they would take an observation, every now and then, to see if there was any sight of the brig. As they did not expect to come upon her close to the harbor of San Felicity, this work was not undertaken until the afternoon of the first day.

In the meanwhile the Ripper's cabin had been put in ship-shape, bunks were arranged for sleeping and, at his request Bob was put in charge of the galley, to prepare the meals and be cook.

"And mind," cautioned Jerry, "don't eat all the things yourself. Give us a chance, once in a while."

"Of course; what do you think I am?" asked Bob indignantly.

"I don't think-- I know," replied Jerry with a laugh.

Mr. De Vere could not do much to help the boys as, with his broken arm in a sling, he had to be careful how he moved about so that he would not be tossed against the side of the boat and injured. The Ripper was a large boat, for one of the motor class, but, when it got outside the harbor, and felt the full force of the Pacific swell, it was not as easy riding as the boys had imagined. At first they were a little inclined to be seasick, as it was some time since they had been on such a big stretch of water, but, after a while, they got used to it.

The approach of night found them many miles from the harbor, but they had had no sight of the derelict, nor, did they expect to. If the deserted brig was anywhere in the vicinity, it must be pretty well out to sea, Mr. De Vere told them. So when it got dark, and lights were set aglow in the cozy cabin, it was with light hearts that the boys

and their friends gathered around the supper table, Bob had prepared a good meal, and they enjoyed it very much.

They took turns at the night watches, the boat continuing to steam on ahead, and the person on the lookout taking occasional observations of the dark horizon through powerful night glasses.

Morning found them upon a waste of waters, out of sight of land, and with not a sail in view.

"Say, but it's lonesome," remarked Bob when he went to the galley to get breakfast. "What a big place the ocean is."

"I suppose you expected to find a lot of excursion boats out here," remarked Jerry.

"I did not!" exclaimed Bob. "But I thought we might see a ship or two."

For two days they cruised about, moving in great circles and keeping a sharp watch for any sight of the derelict. Several times one of the boys, after peering through the glasses, would call that they had sighted her, and the motor boat would be rushed in that direction. But, each time, it only resulted in disappointment for what they saw turned out to be only a bit of wreckage, a big dead fish, or some floating box or barrel, thrown overboard from some ship.

"It looks as if our search was going to be longer than I at first thought," said Mr. De Vere on the fifth day. "It is a good thing we are well provisioned and have plenty of gasolene."

"Yes, we could stay out for three weeks if necessary," replied Jerry.

"I hope we don't have to," went on the owner of the brig. "A week ought to bring us within sight of her, if she still floats. But there is no telling what that scoundrel Blowitz may have done. He is capable of having some one of the crew bore holes in the ship before they deserted her, so she would slowly sink, and he could collect the insurance. In fact he may have done so, and only be pretending that she is a derelict. I wish we would get sight of her. A great deal, so far as my fortune is concerned, depends on the result of this search."

The boys, no less than Maurice De Vere, were anxious to sight the derelict, not so much for the prize money, but because they wanted to be successful, and have their cruise result in something.

Another day went by, and, though they sighted several vessels in the distance, no water-logged craft or slowly drifting derelict greeted their eyes.

"We'll hope for better luck to-morrow," said Mr. De Vere as darkness began to fall, "though from the weather indications, I would say we were in for a blow."

"It does look as if getting ready for a storm," admitted Jerry.

There was a curious stillness to the air, and the ocean had a queer oily look, the waves heaving restlessly as though they were impatient at their slow motion, and wanted to break into a wild revel.

Off to the west there was a murky, yellowish look to the sky, and, now and then, there came puffs of wind that had in them a hint of great force and power.

"We had better make everything as snug as possible," advised Mr. De Vere. "If it comes on to blow in the night we'll have our hands full to manage the boat."

CHAPTER XXV

IN A BAD STORM

SHORTLY after midnight, Jerry who was to take the last, or dog-watch was awakened by Ned shaking him in his bunk.

"What-- what's the matter?" asked Jerry sleepily.

"You'd better get up I think. The boat is pitching something fierce, and it's beginning to blow great guns."

"Um!" exclaimed Jerry, as he got out of his bunk, and was thrown up against a bulkhead by a roll of the boat. "I should say it was pitching some. Where's Rob? Where's Mr. De Vere?"

"I didn't call them. I thought I'd tell you first and see what you thought."

"Wait until I take a look outside," said Jerry, dressing as best he could while swaying to and fro with the motion of the Ripper.

"Here! Quit your fooling!" suddenly exclaimed Bob, as he rolled from his bunk, and barely saved himself from a bad shock by landing on his hands and feet in a crouching attitude, as does a cat. "What did you do that for?"

"You'll have to ask Father Neptune," answered Jerry. "We're not guilty, Chunky."

"Didn't you pull me from my bunk?" asked the stout youth.

It needed no answer from his chums to assure him to the contrary. The motor boat was now pitching and tossing violently, and, as the boys stood in the cabin, they had hard work to prevent themselves from being thrown from partition to partition. Had it not been for their forethought in making everything secure earlier in the night, the boat might have been damaged.

"What's the matter, boys?" asked Mr. De Vere, looking out from his small stateroom. "Oh, it's the storm. Arrived strictly on time, I guess, and it's a hummer too! How's the engine working?"

"Fine," declared Ned, who had just left the motor cockpit. "Runs like a charm, and hasn't missed an explosion since I took charge."

"That's good," commented Mr. De Vere. "We'll need all the power we can get, to keep her head on to the waves, if this gets any worse."

As he spoke there was a thundering crash on the deck above them, and a rush of water told that a big comber had come aboard, nearly burying the small craft in a swirl of green water.

"Are the hatches closed," asked Mr. De Vere anxiously, "and the sliding doors fastened?"

"Yes," replied Ned. "I saw to that when I noticed the wind was getting worse, and the waves higher."

The boat was fitted with a cabin over the full length, but amidships, where the motor was, were sliding partitions that could be taken down, thus making that part of the craft open. Ned had put these slides in place, securely fastening them, and closing the top hatches. The derelict hunters were thus completely shut up in the Ripper, and could manage the engine, and run the boat without exposing themselves. Only for this the big wave might have swamped them.

Maurice De Vere quickly dressed and, with the boys went to the engine compartment. The motor was humming and throbbing, and, at Jerry's suggestion, Ned gave the wheels and cogs an additional dose of oil.

The storm rapidly increased in fury, and the boat was pitching and tossing in a manner that made it difficult to get from one part to another. But the Ripper was a substantial craft and though her nose, many times, was buried deep under some big sea, she managed to work her way out, staggering under the shock, but going on, like the gallant boat she was.

The engine, from which one or another of the boys never took his eyes, worked to perfection. If it had failed them, and they had gotten into the trough of the sea, there probably would have been a different story to tell of the motor boys on the Pacific.

"This is getting fierce!" exclaimed Bob; after a particularly big wave had deluged the boat.

"Getting fierce?" repeated Jerry. "It's been fierce for some time. I hope it doesn't get any worse."

But, if it did not increase in violence, the storm showed no signs of ceasing. The wind fairly howled around the frail boat, as if angry

that it could not overwhelm it, and beat it down under the waves, which were altogether too big for the safe or comfortable riding of the Ripper.

There was nothing to do save watch the engine, keep the wheel steady, and the boat pointed head on to the waves. The three boys took turns at this, for no one would now venture back to his bunk. Mr. De Vere could do little, for his broken arm hampered him, and, in order that he might suffer no further injury, he braced himself in a corner, where he would be comparatively safe from the pitching and tossing.

"Wow! That was a bad one!" exclaimed Bob, as another heavy wave thundered on the deck, and ran hissing along the scuppers.

"I think you had better get out the life preservers," suggested Mr. De Vere, when several more tremendous waves followed in quick succession.

"Do you think we are in danger?" asked Ned.

"No more than we were some time ago," was the rather grave answer. "But it is best to be prepared. We seem to be running into the center of the storm, instead of away from it."

"I'll get the cork jackets," volunteered Jerry, going to the lockers where the preservers were kept.

They were placed where they could be quickly put on in case the boat foundered, and then, with white, set faces the boys prepared to watch out the remainder of the night, looking to the engine occasionally, and hoping fervently that they would weather the storm.

It was not cold, for they were in the latitude close to perpetual summer, and there was no rain, only that never-ceasing wind which piled the waves up in great foam-capped masses. On and on the boat staggered, now scarcely making any progress at all, and, again, during a lull shooting through the water at great speed. Sometimes the screw would be "racing," as the stern lifted clear of the water, and again the powerful motor would be almost at a standstill, so great was the pressure of the waves on the blades of the propeller.

"It doesn't seem to be getting any worse," remarked Bob after a long silence, broken only by the howl of the wind. "We haven't been boarded by any seas lately."

"No, I think we have gone through the most dangerous part of it," agreed Mr. De Vere. "But we're still far from being out of danger. There is a very heavy sea on."

They waited and hoped. The throb of the engine became a monotonous hum and whir, and the crash of the waves like the boom of some big drum. Rob, looking through one of the cabin dead-eyes, exclaimed:

"See!"

The others looked out.

"It's getting morning," spoke Jerry, with a sigh of relief. "The night is almost gone."

Gradually it became lighter, the pale gray dawn stealing in through the thick bull's-eyes, and revealing the rather pale faces of the young derelict hunters. They looked out on a heaving waste of waters, the big waves rising and falling like some gigantic piece of machinery.

"The wind is dying down," announced Ned in a low voice. Somehow it seemed as if they ought to talk in whispers.

"Yes, I think it will stop when the sun comes up," said Mr. De Vere. "It looks as if it would be clear."

In the east there appeared a rosy light. A golden beam shot up to the sky, tinting the crests of the waves. Then the rim of Old Sol appeared, to cheer the voyagers.

"Look there!" suddenly called Jerry, pointing straight at the disk of the sun, which, every second, was becoming larger.

They all looked and saw, laboring in the waves, about a mile away, a powerful tug, that seemed to be following them.

CHAPTER XXVI

RIVAL SEARCHERS

"WHAT boat is that?" asked Ned.

"Hand me the glasses," requested Mr. De Vere, as he went nearer to the cabin port. He peered through the binoculars for some time, then announced:

"It's the steam tug, Monarch, from San Pedro. I wonder what it can be doing out this way?"

"Perhaps it was blown out of its course by the storm," suggested Jerry. "I'm sure we must have been."

"Very likely," admitted Mr. De Vere. "Still that is a very powerful boat, and the captain must have some reason to be keeping after us the way he is doing."

"Do you think they are following us?" asked Ned.

"It certainly looks so. We're headed straight out to sea now," he added, after a glance at the compass. "If the tug was out of its course it would be turned about and going the other way. Instead it is

coming right after us."

This was very evident, for, as the Ripper was laboring through the waves, the other vessel kept in her wake, and seemed to be overhauling the motor boat.

"Well, it's a free country; I suppose they have a right to be here," spoke Jerry.

"Yes," said Mr. De Vere, watching the tug through the glasses, "but I don't like their actions."

"Why not? Do you think--" began Jerry.

"I don't like to say what I think," was the answer. "We will have to wait and see what develops. But I propose that we have some breakfast, or, at least, some hot coffee, if Bob can manage to stand in the galley. It has been a hard night for us."

Bob soon demonstrated that he could get up a breakfast under rather adverse circumstances, and the derelict hunters were soon drinking hot coffee, though they had to hold the partly-filled cups in one hand, and maintain their balance by clinging with the other to some part of the cabin.

The day was clear, and, save for the high waves, there were no evidences of the storm. The big sea, however, was not likely to subside soon, and the Ripper had to stagger along as best she could, which task she performed to the great satisfaction of the voyagers.

Maurice De Vere seemed much worried by the appearance of the tug, which hung on the wake of the Ripper, maintaining a speed that kept it about a mile to the rear. The owner of the Rockhaven kept the glasses almost continually on the steam vessel, and the anxious look did not leave his face.

"Can you slow down the engine a bit?" he asked of Jerry, who had relieved Ned at the motor.

"Yes, if you want me to, Why?"

"I'd like that other boat to come closer to us. I want to see if I can make out who is aboard. If we slacken our speed they may approach before they see the trick, and I can form some opinion of what this strange chase means."

"What do you think it means?" asked Ned.

"I'm afraid it indicates that Blowitz is after us," replied Mr. De Vere. "I think he has heard of our voyage after the brig and has hired this tug to try and beat me. But slow down, and let us see what happens. The waves are not so high now, and you can do it with safety."

Accordingly Jerry reduced the speed of the motor. The Ripper at once began to lose headway, and Mr. De Vere, watching the oncoming tug through the binoculars, announced:

"She'll be closer in a little while, and I can make out the man on deck, who seems to be directing operations."

The boys anxiously waited. Their employer kept the glasses to his eyes, though it was tiresome work, holding them with one hand. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"I can see him quite plainly, now!"

"Who is it?" asked Jerry quickly.

"Carson Blowitz! He, too, is after the derelict! He is going to try and cheat me again!"

Nearer and nearer approached the steam tug, for the pilot had, evidently, not taken into consideration the fact that the Ripper was going ahead at reduced speed. Soon it was close enough for the boys, without the aid of the glasses, to make out the figure of Blowitz.

"I must go outside," announced Mr. De Vere. "Give me a hand, Jerry, so I won't stumble and hurt my broken arm."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to ask Blowitz what he means by following me; and whether he is trying to find the derelict that belongs to me."

Jerry assisted Mr. De Vere out on the small deck in front of the cabin. By this time the Monarch was within hailing distance, those in charge of her evidently having decided to give up trying to remain in the rear.

"Ripper ahoy!" called Carson Blowitz, waving his hand at the little group on deck.

"What do you want, you scoundrel?" asked Mr. De Vere angrily. "What do you mean by following me?"

"Rather strong language, my dear partner," was the taunting answer from Blowitz. "Besides I don't know that I am following you. The ocean is big enough for two boats, I guess."

"Do you deny that you are following me, and seeking to find the derelict Rockhaven?" demanded Mr. De Vere.

"I deny nothing-- I admit nothing, my dear partner."

"I am no longer in partnership with you, since you tried to cheat me,"

was the answer. "I consider our relations at an end."

"Very well. But I am sorry to see that you are hurt. I hope it is nothing serious."

"No thanks to you that I was not killed! You meant to end my life when you pushed me over the cliff, and, as soon as this business is settled I intend to see that you are punished for your crimes. You have gone too far, Carson Blowitz."

"Not as far as I intend to go!" suddenly exclaimed the other, with a change in his manner. The two boats were now side by side, not twenty feet away. "You have guessed it," he went on. "I am after the derelict brig, and I intend to get her. I am going to finish you before I am through. That ship is mine, and all the cargo on her. If you attempt to touch it I shall have to take stringent measures to prevent you. I warn you not to interfere with my property!"

"Your property!" cried Maurice De Vere. "That brig and all on it is mine, by every legal claim, and I shall maintain my rights to the uttermost."

"Very well then, it is to be a fight!" answered Blowitz. "We are to be rival seekers after the derelict. Possession is nine points of the law, and I intend to take possession."

"First you'll have to find it."

"Never fear. I am on the track. Good-bye, my recent partner. Sorry I can't keep you company."

Blowitz waved his hand, as though in friendly farewell, but Mr. De Vere turned aside, refusing to notice him, for the scoundrel had greatly wronged him, and was now adding insult to injury.

There was a ringing of bells on the tug, and the powerful vessel forged ahead, leaving the Ripper astern.

"Shall we speed up?" asked Jerry. "We can easily beat them, for ours is the faster boat."

"No, let him go," replied Mr. De Vere. "He has no more idea, than have I, where to look for the derelict. He is taking the same chances we are, but I'll not follow him. As he says, we are rivals now. I hope I win, for my whole fortune depends on it."

"We'll do our best to help you," said Bob.

"That's what we will," added Jerry, and Ned nodded an assent.

"Bear off to the left," suggested Mr. De Vere, as a cloud of black smoke from the funnel of the tug showed that the engineer was crowding on steam. "We'll part company from them."

Speeding up the engine Jerry steered the Ripper out of the course of the Monarch. The hunt of the rivals to locate the derelict brig was now on.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DERELICT

"THEY don't seem to be following us now," observed Ned, after they had watched the tug continuing on her course.

"No, it looks as if they were taking another tack," said Maurice De Vere. "I wonder if he can have private information as to the location of the brig? If he has he may get ahead of me and discover her first."

"I don't believe he has," was Jerry's opinion. "I think he is on a blind search, just as we are."

"I hope so. It means a great deal to me to find that derelict."

"What had we better do?" asked Bob. "Can't we get ahead of him in some way?"

"I know of no other way than to cruise about until we find the brig," replied Mr. De Vere. "It is only a chance, but luck may favor us first. That is all we can hope for."

All that day they cruised fruitlessly about, and the next day was equally barren of result.

"I'm afraid you'll think we're not very good derelict hunters," remarked Jerry on the morning of the third day after the storm, when they took an observation, and saw nothing but a vast extent of water. The weather was calm, the sun shone brightly and the Ripper was making good time.

"No," was the answer. "It isn't your fault. This was in the nature of an experiment, and I do not expect immediate results. I figured on being three weeks on this search, and we have only spent about a third of that time. We are yet on the safe side, although I admit it is rather disappointing."

After breakfast they resumed their observations. It was nearly eight bells when Ned, who had been stationed in the bow with the powerful glasses, cried out:

"I see something."

"Where?" asked Mr. De Vere eagerly.

"Off the left."

Mr. De Vere took the glasses and peered long and anxiously through them at a small speck which Ned pointed out as it rose and fell on the crest of the billows.

"Is it the derelict?" asked Jerry, appearing in the companionway.

"I don't know," answered Ned. "It looks like some sort of a ship, but I'm afraid to be positive, because we've had so many false alarms."

"It's some sort of a ship," remarked Mr. De Vere suddenly as he passed the glasses to Jerry. "I make it out to be a brig, and, from the way it is jibing about, it seems to be under no control. See what you think."

Jerry took a careful look.

"It's a brig, sure enough," he declared, "and I can't see any sign of life on her."

"Put us over that way," requested Mr. De Vere, of Ned, who was steering and running the engine. "When we get a little nearer I may be able to make out the name."

There were anxious hearts beating in the breasts of those aboard the Ripper. Could it be possible that the ship they saw was the derelict for which they had been searching? They all hoped so.

Ned speeded the motor up to the highest notch and the boat fairly flew through the calm sea. Near and nearer it came to the ship, which could now plainly be made out. There was not a sail set, and this was peculiar in itself. The brig idly rose and fell on the long, heaving swells.

"It's my ship!" suddenly cried Mr. De Vere, after a lengthy observation through the binoculars. "I can make out her name. It's the Rockhaven! Hurrah, boys! We have found her at last!"

"And Blowitz and his tug are nowhere in sight!" cried Ned. "We have beaten him!"

"Indeed we have," went on Mr. De Vere. "Now, Ned, see how soon you can put us alongside."

"It will not take long," declared the young engineer. "It's only a few miles."

The Ripper proved worthy of her name, for she fairly "ripped" through the waves, and, in a short time, was so close to the derelict that they had to slow up.

"Put us up under the port quarter," advised Mr. De Vere. "Luckily there is not much of a swell on, and we can easily get aboard as she sets low in the water. She must be leaking."

With skillful hand Ned brought the motor boat alongside. The anchor chains were hanging low from the hawse holes and as they approached Jerry prepared to catch hold and swing himself up. He had reached out his hand, and was just going to grasp the links, when, from the deck of the deserted brig there came savage growls and barks. Jerry jumped back in alarm and Ned, who had jammed a boat hook in the side of the brig, to hold the Ripper steady, looked up.

"It's dogs!" he cried. "Two of 'em!"

As he spoke two savage looking creatures thrust their heads up over the low rail. They were large dogs, of the wolf-hound variety; great shaggy creatures, and they growled in a menacing manner.

"They must have left the dogs aboard when they so strangely deserted the ship," said Mr. De Vere. "I suppose they're glad to see us. They must be lonesome. Try again, Jerry. I would, if I had the use of my two arms."

Once more Jerry prepared to ascend by means of the chains, but the dogs almost leaped over the rail at him, showing their teeth, while the hair on as much of their backs as could be seen stood up in ridges. Foam dripped from their jaws.

"Look out!" cried Bob. "Those dogs are mad! Be careful!"

Savage growls and barks from the angry beasts emphasized his words. There was no doubt of it. The dogs were mad from fear and hunger. They disputed the advance of the voyagers, and would not let them aboard.

"Try on the other side," suggested Mr. De Vere.

The boat was worked around to the other side of the bow, but the dogs followed, and stood on guard there.

"Maybe we can get up at the stern," said Jerry. "Perhaps the dogs can't make their way aft."

But it was the same there. The maddened animals were ready to fly at the throats of any one who should attempt to board the derelict.

"What's to be done?" asked Ned. "We didn't count on this. Those are fierce dogs."

"Indeed they are," replied Mr. De Vere. "It would not be safe to risk getting too close to them."

"But what can we do?" asked Jerry. "If we wait here too long, Blowitz may appear."

"We've got to do something," said the boy's employer. "The only thing I can see to do is to shoot the dogs. I'll get my rifle," and he went

into the cabin, where he had left his weapon, one of several he had brought aboard.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A MYSTERIOUS INFLUENCE

"ONE of you boys will have to do the shooting," said Maurice De Vere, as he came out on the small forward deck with his rifle. "I'm a pretty good marksman, but I can't do anything when I have this broken arm."

"Let Jerry try," suggested Ned. "He's the best shot of us three."

"Oh, I don't know," spoke Jerry modestly, but Mr. De Vere handed him the rifle.

"We have no time to lose," he said. "Blowitz may be here at any hour, and, as he said, possession is nine points of the law. I want to get aboard."

Jerry looked to the loading of the weapon, and then, at his suggestion the motor boat was backed off some yards.

"I want to see to get a good shot, and put the poor things out of their misery as soon as possible," he said.

The dogs acted more wild than ever as they saw the motor boat moving about. They almost leaped overboard, as they raced about the derelict and finally, they both jumped on the quarter deck, where they stood in bold relief.

"Now's your chance, Jerry!" cried Ned.

Jerry took quick aim, steadying himself as best he could against the motion of the boat. The rifle cracked, and, at the same instant one of the dogs gave a howl, a convulsive leap, and, a second later was floundering in the water.

"There's one of the poor brutes gone," remarked Mr. De Vere. "Now, once more, Jerry. I hate to kill the dogs, for they are valuable animals, but it is a question of their lives or ours, and it would not be safe to let them live."

The remaining dog, startled by the rifle shot, and the disappearance of its companion stood in mute surprise on the quarter deck. He offered a good shot, and Jerry fired. The dog howled, and began whirling about in a circle, snapping its jaws.

"You've only wounded him!" exclaimed Bob.

Before any one else could speak Jerry had fired the repeater again. This time the bullet went true, and the dog fell to the deck, gave a few convulsive struggles, and was still.

"That settles him," remarked Mr. De Vere.

"Now, boys, we'll go aboard, and I'll get what belongs to me. Then we'll see if we can tow the ship in."

The Ripper was once more put alongside the brig, cork buffers were adjusted to prevent damage being done, and, in a few minutes Jerry had scrambled up on deck.

"That's a fierce brute," he remarked to Bob who followed him, as they stood looking at the dead dog. "I'm glad I didn't have to tackle him at close quarters."

"Let's heave him overboard," suggested Bob, and they did so, though it took all their strength to drag the body to the rail.

"I guess you'll have to lower the accommodation ladder for me, boys," said Mr. De Vere. "I don't believe I can scramble up by way of the chains, as you did."

"Wait until I get up there and I'll give you a hand," called Ned, who had been left in the motor boat.

"No, you had better stay here and help fasten the ladder when Bob and Jerry lower it," answered Mr. De Vere. "I'll need your aid."

After some little difficulty, for part of the tackle had fouled, Bob and Jerry succeeded in lowering over the ship's side an accommodation ladder, somewhat like a short flight of steps. It hung above the Ripper's deck, and when some ropes had been strung for hand rails, Mr. De Vere was able to ascend, holding on by one hand, and was soon on the deck of the brig.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "Here we are! I was afraid we'd never find her, and, if we did, that Blowitz would be ahead of me. But, thanks to you, boys, I have beaten him. Now I must see if my papers are safe."

"Where will you look for them?" asked Jerry.

"They must be somewhere in the captain's cabin. That is where the gold will likely be. I suppose we'll have to hunt for it."

"Shall we help you?"

"Yes, if you will. Let's go below. Is the motor boat securely made fast?"

"I'll guarantee she'll not drift away," declared Ned, as he and his companions followed Mr. De Vere to the main cabin.

On every side were evidences of a hurried abandonment of the brig. Some of the sailors had gone off without taking all their clothing,

for garments were scattered here and there. Things were in confusion below decks, and the captain's cabin showed signs of having been ransacked.

"There is something queer about this," said Mr. De Vere as he surveyed the scene. "The ship is not sinking, and I don't believe it has leaked a drop, though at first I thought so. There was no collision, for there is no sign of damage. Yet there is every indication that captain and crew deserted the brig in a hurry. Now what made them do that? Why did not Blowitz give me some reason for that? What caused the abandonment of the brig?"

"Perhaps the sailors got superstitious, I've often read that they do," suggested Jerry.

"I hardly think so."

"Maybe they were afraid of the mad dogs," said Bob.

"I don't believe the dogs went mad until after the sailors left," was Mr. De Vere's answer. "No, there is some strange secret connected with the brig, and I'd like to solve it. But I must first find my papers and the gold."

"Suppose the captain took them with him?" remarked Ned.

"He did not know about them. That is he did not know of what the valuables consisted. The gold and papers were put in a safe, and only Blowitz and myself had the combination. The safe was placed in the captain's cabin, and he was instructed to deliver it, unopened, to a certain man. When they deserted the ship in such a hurry I do not believe they took the safe with them. It must be somewhere on board. We'll search for it."

The cabin was rather large, and contained a number of lockers and other places that might serve as a hiding place for the safe. The boys and Mr. De Vere made a careful hunt. While they were in the midst of it a sudden noise startled them.

"What was that?" asked Bob.

"The cabin door slid shut," answered Jerry, who had seen what happened. "I'll open it."

"Here's the safe!" suddenly called Mr. De Vere, as he opened a small locker, in an out-of-the-way corner. "Help me get it out, boys, and we'll open it."

The closed door was forgotten, and the three lads, at their employer's suggestion, fastened a rope about the safe and pulled it out. It rolled on small wheels.

"Sorry I can't help you much," spoke Mr. De Vere, "but this arm of

mine prevents me."

"Oh, we can manage it all right," declared Jerry, and after a while, they succeeded in wheeling the safe out into the middle of the cabin.

"There is some other stuff in the locker," announced Bob, as he peered within. "It looks like those small boxes Mr. Blowitz shipped from Cresville."

"That's what they are," added Jerry, taking a look. "Now we have a chance to see what is in them."

"Wait until we get the safe open," advised Mr. De Vere. "Then we'll see if we can't get at the secret of the ship."

He sat down in front of the strong steel box, and began to turn the combination. It was quite complicated, and took some time.

"Um-m-m-m-m!" exclaimed Bob, with a lazy stretch. "I'm beginning to feel sleepy. Guess I'll lie down on this couch and rest."

He did so, and, somewhat to his companions' surprise, was soon apparently asleep.

"He must be pretty well played out," remarked Ned. "Funny, but I feel a little drowsy myself. We haven't been getting any too much sleep, of late, I suppose."

Mr. De Vere was working away at the combination of the safe. Something seemed to have gone wrong with it, and he twirled the knobs and dials, first this way and that.

"What a curious ringing sound they make," Jerry was thinking, as he sat in a chair and looked on. "It's just like bells away off somewhere. I wonder if it's my ears? I feel as if I had taken quinine for a cold. There seems to be some sort of a haze in the cabin. I wonder--"

But Jerry never knew what he wondered, for the same mysterious influence that had overpowered Bob had made Jerry succumb. His head fell forward on his breast, and he was unconscious.

Ned began to imagine he was in a boiler factory, of which Mr. De Vere was the foreman. The latter seemed to be hammering on a big steel safe, and soon, in Ned's ears there echoed the noise of the blows. Then the boy's eyes closed, and he joined Bob and Jerry in falling under the mysterious spell.

Seated on the floor in front of the safe Mr. De Vere wondered what made his fingers move so slowly. With his one good hand he could scarcely turn the dials of the combination. His head, too, felt very heavy, and once there was such a mist before his eyes that he could not see the figures on the shining disk of the safe.

"This is queer," he murmured. "It is very close in this cabin. I wish the boys had opened the door. I wish-- I--"

Mr. De Vere fell over backward, unconscious, while, around the silent forms in the cabin wreathed a thin bluish vapor that came from the locker where the safe had been, and where there were some small boxes-- the same mysterious boxes that Blowitz had shipped from Cresville.

In the tightly-closed cabin the derelict hunters were now at the mercy of the mysterious influence-- an influence they could not see or guard against, and from which they were in deadly peril.

CHAPTER XXIX

A COMMAND TO LAY TO

STRANGE things happen on the ocean. Sometimes slight occurrences lead to great results. When the sailors deserted the brig Rockhaven, provisioning their boats in a hurry, one water cask was left behind. The mate had intended stowing it away in the captain's gig, but found there was no room for it, so he allowed it to remain on deck, where he set it.

In due time, by the motion of the abandoned brig in the storm, the water cask was overturned and rolled about at every heave of the waves, first to port, and then to starboard, Now aft, and again forward. As luck would have it, not long after those in the cabin fell under the deadly influence of some queer, stupefying fumes, the water cask was rolling about close to the trunk roof of the cabin, a roof that had side windows in it.

With one lurch of the ship the water cask nearly crashed against these windows, but, by the narrowest margin missed. Then the cask rolled toward the scuppers. Those in the cabin were more than ever under the influence of the fumes. They were breathing heavily, the veins in their necks began to swell, their hearts were laboring hard to overcome the stupefying influence of the fumes. But it was almost too late.

Suddenly a long roller lifted the brig well up into the air. Then it slid down the watery incline. The cask started to roll toward the cabin windows. Straight for them it came, turning over and over.

With a resounding blow the cask shattered the frame, and sent the glass in a shower into the cabin below. Through the opening thus Providentially made, the fresh air rushed. The deadly fumes began to escape. Once more the cask rolled against the window, breaking another glass, and more fresh air came in.

Jerry stirred uneasily. It seemed as if some one had a hammer, hitting him on the head. That was the blood beginning to circulate again. His

veins throbbed with life. Slowly he opened his eyes. He became aware of a sweet, sickish smell, that mingled with the sharp tang of the salt air. By a great effort he roused himself. He could not, for a moment, think where he was, but he had a dim feeling as if some one had tried to chloroform him. Then, with a sudden shock his senses came back to him. He became aware of the need of fresh air, and, hardly knowing what he was doing, he opened the cabin door.

The inrush of a fresh atmosphere completed the work the water cask had begun. The poisonous fumes were dispersed, and, with their disappearance, the others regained their senses. Mr. De Vere was the next to arouse.

"What-- what happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Jerry, "unless Blowitz came aboard and chloroformed us."

"He couldn't do that-- yet-- the safe is not tampered with-- but this drowsy feeling--"

Mr. De Vere stopped suddenly. His eyes were fixed on the closet or locker, whence the safe had been wheeled, and where the little boxes were. From the locker a thin, bluish smoke arose.

"Quick!" he cried. "I understand it all now! We must get them overboard or we'll all be killed!"

Ned and Bob had been aroused by this time, and were sitting staring stupidly around them. They did not realize what had happened.

"I'll throw 'em overboard," volunteered Jerry.

"Don't go near them," cautioned Mr. De Vere. "If you breathe too deeply of those fumes, you'll be killed. Get a boat hook, poke them out of the locker, spear them with the sharp point, and thrust them up through the broken cabin window."

Jerry hurried to the Ripper, which safely rode alongside the brig. He got a sharp boat hook, and, with the aid of Bob and Ned, the boxes, with their deadly contents were soon out on deck, whence they were knocked into the sea. Then a hunt was made in other parts of the brig and more boxes were found and cast into the ocean.

"What was in them?" asked Ned, when the task was finished. "Was that what made us fall asleep?"

"It was," replied Mr. De Vere. "What was in them I do not know exactly, but it was some chemical that Blowitz put there to accomplish his purpose. I see through his scheme now. After the brig was loaded he sent these boxes aboard. They were distributed in different parts of the ship, some in the quarters of the crew, some where the mates slept, and others in the captain's cabin. They were properly adjusted

to give off a vapor at a certain time and he counted either on the fumes killing the men, or making them unconscious so they would die of heart failure. Then, very likely, he intended to make a search for the brig which would have no captain or crew, and claim the vessel. But his scheme did not work as he intended. The crew and captain were probably frightened by feeling some mysterious sleepy influence at work, and they hastily deserted the ship. Probably the commander did not like to acknowledge the real reason for his seemingly un-called-for act, and he did not tell Blowitz the cause for the abandonment. The stuff in the boxes remained on board, ready to render unconscious any persons who came within reach of the fumes. Maybe it made the dogs mad.

"The accidental closing of the cabin door deprived us of air. The fumes filled the cabin, and rendered us all unconscious. I do not yet understand how we were revived."

"It must have been the water cask," declared Jerry, who had seen it on deck, and his theory, which was the correct one, was accepted.

"Now I will finish working the combination, and open the safe," said Mr. De Vere, when they had breathed in deep of the fresh air, and felt the last influences of the fumes vanish. "We must have been unconscious an hour or more."

It did not take him long after this to open the strong box. From an inner compartment he drew forth a bundle of papers, and a small box, that seemed quite heavy. This he opened.

"The gold is safe, at any rate," he announced. "Now to look at the papers."

A hasty examination of these showed that they were all there.

"This is good news for me, boys," announced Mr. De Vere. "My fortune is safe now, and that scoundrel Blowitz can not ruin me as he tried to do!"

"Hark! What was that?" asked Jerry suddenly.

From somewhere out on the Pacific there sounded a whistle, long drawn out.

"It's a steamer!" cried Ned. "It has probably sighted the derelict!"

"A steamer," murmured Mr. De Vere. "If it is not--"

He did not finish, but the boys knew what he meant.

Mr. De Vere hastily thrust the papers into an inner pocket of his coat.

"Distribute the gold among you," he told the boys. "When we get it

aboard the Ripper we can hide it. There is no telling what might happen. If that steamer--"

"It's the tug Monarch!" cried Jerry, who had hurried up on deck. "It's coming this way full speed!"

"Then we must leave at once!" decided Mr. De Vere. "I think our boat can beat theirs. I did hope to be able to tow the brig into harbor, and save the cargo, but that is out of the question now. I do not want a fight with Blowitz. Come, boys, we must escape!"

The boys hurriedly divided the gold among them. It made their pockets bulge out, and was quite heavy. Mr. De Vere had his papers safe.

As the derelict hunters all came out on deck they could see the Monarch was much nearer. In bold relief stood a figure in the bow.

"It's Blowitz!" exclaimed Mr. De Vere, "and he's shaking his fist at me. He's angry because I have beaten him at his own game. But come on, I don't want a clash with him. I am in no shape for another fight. We'll have to retreat."

It was the work of but a few seconds to get into the motor boat. The lines were cast off, and, with one turn of the wheel Ned started the engine, and ran her up to full speed after a few revolutions.

"Now let them have the brig," said Mr. De Vere. "I've gotten the best out of her."

But Blowitz and his men seemed to have lost interest in the derelict. Instead of continuing on their course toward it they were now coming full speed after the Ripper, the tug being steered to cross her bows. Probably Blowitz took it for granted that De Vere had the papers and gold.

"They're after us!" cried Jerry.

"Yes, but they've got to catch us!" declared Bob.

An instant later a puff of white smoke spurted out from the side of the Monarch, something black jumped from wave-crest to wave-crest. Then came a dull boom.

"What's that?" asked Bob, in alarm.

"A shot across our bows. A command to lay to," said Mr. De Vere.

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF BLOWITZ-- CONCLUSION

"ARE you going to stop?" asked Ned, of Maurice De Vere.

"Not unless you boys are afraid. I don't believe they can hit us. That's only a small saluting cannon they have, and it's hard to shoot straight when there's as much sea on as there is now. Do you want to stop and surrender?"

"Not much!" cried the three motor boys in a breath.

"Then may it be a stern chase and a long chase!" exclaimed Mr. De Vere. "Crowd her all you can, Ned, and we'll beat him."

Ned needed no urging to make the powerful motor do its best. The machinery was throbbing and humming, and the Ripper was cutting through the water "with a bone in her teeth," as the sailors say.

"Swing her around so as to get the tug in back of us," advised Jerry. "We'll be in less danger then."

Ned shifted the wheel, but, as he was doing so there was another shot from the Monarch, and, this time, the ball from the cannon came uncomfortably close.

"Their aim is improving," remarked Mr. De Vere, as he coolly looked at the pursuing tug through the glasses, "but we are leaving them behind."

The chase had now become a "stern" one, that is the Monarch was directly astern of the Ripper, and the varying progresses made by the boats could not be discerned so well as before. Still it seemed that the motor boat was maintaining her lead.

It now settled down to a pursuit, for, stern on as she was, the Ripper offered so small a mark for the tug, that it was almost useless to fire the cannon.

There were anxious hearts aboard the motor boat, as they watched the tug pursuing them. They knew there would be a fight if Blowitz and Mr. De Vere met, and, in the latter's crippled condition, it was not hard to imagine how it would result.

"How's she running, Ned?" asked Jerry, as he looked at the engine.

"Never better. She's singing like a bird. This is a dandy boat."

"I think we'll beat him," declared Mr. De Vere.

For an hour or more the chase continued, the Monarch seeming to gain slowly. Mr. De Vere looked anxious, and kept his eyes fixed to the binoculars, through which he viewed the pursuing vessel. At length, however, a more cheerful look came into his face.

"Something has happened!" he exclaimed.

"Happened? How?" asked Jerry.

"Why aboard the tug. Blowitz went off the deck in a hurry, and the steersman has left the pilot house. Maybe something is wrong with the machinery."

That something of this nature had happened was evident a few minutes later, for the Monarch had to slow up, and the Ripper was soon so far in advance that to catch up with her was out of the question.

"I guess the chase is over," announced Mr. De Vere. "I think they've had an accident. Still Blowitz will not give up. I must expect a legal battle over this matter when I get ashore. He will try to ruin me, and claim these papers and the gold. But I will beat him."

The Ripper, urged on by her powerful motor, soon lost sight of the tug, which, from the last observation Mr. De Vere took, seemed to have turned about, to go back to the brig.

Two days later, having made quick time, and on a straight course, the voyagers sighted the harbor of San Felicity a few miles away.

"Now for home!" cried Ned.

"And the bungalow 'The Next Day,' Ponto and a good square meal!" added Bob.

"And the girls," came from Jerry. "I guess they'll be glad to see us."

"If Blowitz doesn't turn up to make trouble for me," put in Mr. De Vere, rather dubiously.

The Ripper docked that afternoon, and, Mr. De Vere, promising to call on the boys and pay them their prize money as soon as he had seen his lawyer, and deposited the gold and papers in a safe place, bade them good-bye at the wharf, and hurried off. He was fearful lest he should be intercepted by some agent of Blowitz, though there was no sign that the tug had arrived.

The three boys were warmly welcomed by the girls and Mr. Seabury, when they got to the bungalow.

"I congratulate you," said the elderly gentleman. "You deserve great credit for what you did."

"Well, we had good luck," admitted Jerry. "But where is the professor?"

"Out searching for horned toads and web-footed lizards," said Nellie. "He has enlisted the services of Ponto, and they are continually on the hunt. I hope he gets what he wants."

"He generally does," said Bob. "If he doesn't he finds something else nearly as good."

Some days later Mr. De Vere called at the bungalow. He had finished up his business affairs, and brought the boys the prize money, as their reward for the parts they had played in the finding of the derelict.

"But this is too much," protested Jerry, when Mr. De Vere had given him and his comrades nearly half as much again as was originally promised.

"Not a bit of it," was the reply. "I can well afford it. Those papers were more valuable than you supposed, and I find I will be able to collect insurance on the cargo of the abandoned brig. I have heard from the captain of it, and he tells me, just as I supposed, that he and the crew left her because of the peculiar fumes, so that my theory was right, after all. They tried to take the dogs, which belonged to the first mate, but could not."

"Did you hear anything more of Blowitz?" asked Ned.

"Yes," replied Mr. De Vere, rather solemnly. "Blowitz was killed shortly after the tug gave up the chase."

"How?"

"The boiler blew up when the tug was trying to tow the derelict in, and he and several of the crew were burned to death. The survivors floated on the wreckage until they were picked up. So I have nothing more to fear from Blowitz. But I called to know if you boys, and the young ladies, Mr. Seabury and Professor Snodgrass, would not be my guests at a little dinner I am to give at the hotel. I want to show you that I appreciate what you did for me."

"I think you have already done so," said Jerry.

"Perhaps I have, but I would like you to come to my dinner. Will you?"

The boys promised. So did the girls and Mr. Seabury, whose health was much improved by the California climate. The professor, with a far away look in his eyes, said he would be there if he could.

"What's to prevent you?" asked Bob.

"Well, I haven't found that horned toad yet, and I'm still searching."

The dinner came off three nights later. It was a grand affair, served in the best of style of which the San Felicity hotel chef was capable. The girls and the boys were there, dressed in their best, and Ponto was taken along as a sort of chaperon, which gave him great delight. He did not once fall asleep.

"But where is Professor Snodgrass?" asked Mr. De Vere, when it was nearly time to sit down. "Isn't he coming?"

"He promised to be here," announced Mr. Seabury. "Probably he is on his way now."

At that moment a commotion was heard outside the private dining-room which Mr. De Vere had engaged. A voice was saying:

"I tell you I will go in! I'm invited! My clothes? What about my clothes? All mud? Of course they're all mud. I couldn't help it!"

Then the door flew open and a curious sight was presented. There stood the professor, his coat split up the back, his trousers torn, and his hat smashed. Splashes of mud were all over him.

"What is the matter?" cried Mr. Seabury, in alarm.

"Nothing," replied the professor calmly. "I have caught two horned toads, that's all. I saw them as I was on the way here, and I had to go into a mud puddle to get them. I fell down, but I got the toads," and he held up a small cage, in which were the ugly creatures.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Nellie.

"Good for you, Professor!" cried Jerry. "You got the toads and we got our prize money!"

"Yes, but I would rather have these toads than all your prize money," replied the professor. "They are beauties," he added, fondly.

The dinner was a joyous affair, and it is a question who was the happiest, the professor, over the capture of the horned toads, the boys over the successful outcome of their cruise on the Pacific, or Mr. De Vere, who had recovered his fortune. At any rate they all had a good time.

"Well," remarked Bob, when the supper was over, and they were on their way back to the bungalow, "I suppose we'll soon have to think of getting back east, and beginning school. They must have the pipes and boiler fixed by now."

"Don't think of it," begged Ned. "It's too awful. I'd like to go on another long cruise in the Ripper."

"Well, I don't know that we can do that," said Jerry, "but I certainly hope we have more adventures soon." How his wish was gratified will be told in another volume of this series, to be entitled, "The Motor Boys in the Clouds; Or, A Trip for Fame and Fortune." In that book we shall meet many of our old friends again, and learn something more of a venture in which the motor boys were already interested.

"Boys, this has been an interesting trip for me," said Professor Snodgrass. "I have the two horned toads, seven web-footed lizards, and over fifty other valuable specimens to take back with me. I would not have missed this trip for a great deal."

"So say we all of us!" cried Jerry.

"Let us go out for another trip in the motor boat to-morrow," said Ned. "I mean a short trip."

"Take us along!" pleaded the girls in concert.

"Sure thing!" answered the boys.

And they went out-- and had a glorious time-- and here we shall have to say farewell.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, THE MOTOR BOYS ON THE PACIFIC ***

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