

# THE WHISTLEPUNK



BURNITA COLLINS



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THE WHISTLEPUNK







NAT RETURNED WITH HIS PET.--Page 188



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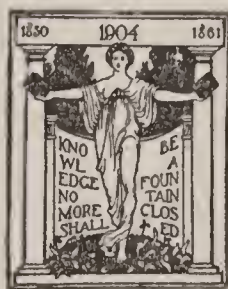
*Nat's Adventures in a Redwood Camp*

BY

BURNITA COLLINS

ILLUSTRATED BY

THE AUTHOR



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THE WHISTLEPUNK

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# THE WHISTLEPUNK

## CHAPTER I

### A MYSTERIOUS LIGHT

“One to go ahead,  
Two to come back;  
Three for an easy pull,  
Four for the slack.

Nat Taylor, helper in the Camp Redwood cook-house, headquarters of the Shannon Lumber Company, hummed the song of the Whistlepunk as he dropped heavy white china plates and saucers into a deep sink of steaming, soapy water. “Whew!” he whistled, as he glanced at the clock. “Six-fifteen! Guess I’ll have to hurry, or I’ll not get a ride up the mountain to my line of traps this morning.”

“What’s your hurry?” asked Scotty McLean, waiter and handy man, who was busy brushing up the range on the opposite side of the kitchen. “The train won’t be here for twenty minutes.”

“But see all the dishes I have to wash! And that pile of mush bowls, too!” Nat plunged his arm deep into the water, swirled the dishes, lifted them

out, dipped them into an adjoining sink of clean hot water, and stacked them shining and dripping upon the drain-board.

At fifteen, Nat was a boy of the mountains. Looking at him for the first time you might have thought him plain; but when he spoke, the jolliest kind of smile came into his eyes, whose heavy black lashes made their blue seem the brighter as he squinted shrewdly to note the direction of a sharp wind, or listened for a sound in the woods. His nose and mouth were generous, but two rows of even white teeth made amends for his other more common features. His light hair was closely cut, but on his forehead was an awry lock that never stayed neatly combed.

Nat was an orphan. When he was seven years old his father had died in Camp Redwood. His mother passed away seven years later. Since then Nat had worked in the company's cook-house because he wished to be near the steward, Higgins, and his wife, who had befriended him, and because he had a definite object in view.

Nat frowned now as he looked at the stacks of mush bowls.

“How many men did we feed this morning, Scotty?”

“Seventy; but we won't have so many when the new cook-house at Camp 25 is finished, for some of



them will move up there.” Scotty twirled his drooping sandy mustache and looked musingly at Nat. “Why? Are you tired so early in the morning?”

“Tired!” Nat pointed with dripping fingers at the mush bowls. “Tired! You *bet* I’m tired. Seventy plates, seventy cups and saucers, and seventy mush bowls, three times a day! Dishes for *seventy* men!” His elbow rested on the edge of the sink and his chin sank into his cupped hand. He looked wistfully at Scotty. “Say, I’d like to be a whistlepunk out in the woods. Wouldn’t it be great to sit on a stump, pull on the old whistle wire, make the donkey engine go ‘Toot, toot, toot’, and watch the logs being pulled into the landing?”

Emma, the waitress, called from the dining-room to Nat: “I do wish you’d finish those dishes so I can wash the knives and forks and set the tables for dinner.” Though she spoke sharply, her voice was sympathetic. She often felt sorry for Nat and sometimes helped him, but this morning she had extra work to do.

The boy sighed and his hands went quickly into the sink. “Don’t worry, Emma. I’ll help you when I get back from my trap line.”

At this moment Adams Cluff, the cook, stepped into the kitchen from the meat room.

“I’ve got extra things for you to do, an’ you’ll

have all you can 'tend to to do your own work an' do it right," he said. "I want you to clean the pantry an' sort the cans of fruit an' vegetables." He picked up a paring-knife and started to peel onions and slice them over the top of the meat. Adams Cluff was stockily built, dark and stern-featured, and rarely talkative.

"All right," drawled Nat. His day seemed dimmed, for he hated to work in the pantry. He hated it more than washing dishes, for at the sink he could look through the window; but the pantry was different. It had only one small window and that was so high that all he could see was a tiny patch of sky. "May I do it this afternoon?" he asked. "I have to 'tend to my traps this morning."

"Yes, but you'll have to make up the time you're off." Cluff opened the oven, shoved in the pan of meat, closed the door with a bang, and went out for other duties.

Nat gave him a sidelong glance and turned from the window as two far-away blasts of a whistle came to his ears. "Hear that, Scotty? Six-thirty whistle. Some day I'll be blowing that out there on the mountain top."

"Sure, that would be fine," Scotty agreed. "But I thought you wanted to go to school."

"Well," Nat dipped a long slender forefinger into the dishwater and drew wet circles upon the

drain-board. "I do. But I'd make more money punkin' whistles and could save more and go to school sooner. Don't you see?"

Scotty was fond of Nat, and wished him every success; but he had lived so long the life of the lumber camps that he could not quite understand the boy's ambition to gain an education and so fit himself for a better future. Mr. Harrison, superintendent of the camp, was Nat's ideal, but Nat knew that he could never become such a man without a more substantial foundation than he was then acquiring. And it was with this in mind that he worked and saved—and looked ahead.

So it was with no wish to hurt the boy that Scotty answered, laughingly: "I reckon you could punk whistles all right, but I think some of your dreams have just about as much chance to come true as my songs about Paul Bunyan." His gray eyes sparkled under his bushy eyebrows as he stood very straight, with chin held high, and sang in a loud, brisk voice:

"Did you ever hear of Paul Bunyan,  
And Babe, his ox of blue?  
His deeds are spiced with mystery,  
And the loggers say they're true.

"This Paul was an ideal logger,  
Who had through the land renown;  
For he logged off a big mountain  
That was growing upside down.

“He scooped out lakes and rivers,  
And gained a lasting fame;  
They needed help on the Western coast,  
So down from the North he came.”

“Paul Bunyan was a great logger, wasn’t he, Scotty?” Nat dropped a stack of mush bowls into the sink, and went on with his task as he talked. “When did he come down here?”

“I don’t know exactly.” Scotty looked thoughtful. He was himself a dreamer, and delighted the lumberjacks with his Paul Bunyan jingles. His stories of this giant logger and Babe, his blue ox, had been told and retold around the bunk-houses.

“Well, how did he get here?” Nat demanded.

Scotty smiled broadly as he sang his reply:

“Down to the stately Redwoods  
Paul Bunyan made a trail,  
Many miles long and ten feet wide  
With one swish of Old Babe’s tail.

“The trail was so rough and so crooked,  
Babe was hitched to one end in surprise;  
And with one mighty jerk he pulled it  
As straight as the black crow flies.”

Nat’s eyes danced as he learned more of the mythical hero of the lumberjacks. But even the prospect of some new adventures of Paul Bunyan, told in Scotty’s own way, could not hold his attention as he heard a whining and scratching at the kitchen door.

"I'm afraid Micky is going to get into trouble with a wildcat or some other wild animal and not get back home some of these nights," he said, as he went to open the door.

"Has he been gone all night?" Scotty asked.

"He sure has."

"You ought to lock him in your cabin before dark."

"Yes, but he's just wise enough to stay out of sight at bedtime." Nat stooped to pick up his little pet coon, which was huddled in the dark on the porch. "Micky, by rights I ought to punish"—as he straightened up he left the sentence unfinished, and stood staring out into the night in the direction of the Lone Pine trail, which zigzagged up the side of the mountain directly back of Camp Redwood and led to the Lone Pine Lumber Company's camps in the woods ten miles away. With an exclamation he glanced at Scotty, then again looked steadily toward the mountain. "Well, that's funny," he said musingly. "There it is again!"

Scotty came and peered out over his shoulder. "What is it? I don't see anything," he said.

"It's a light. A dim greenish one that shone twice, out there on the trail." With Micky in his arms, Nat walked to the edge of the porch. "It must have been more than halfway down. I can't tell exactly in the dark."

"Aw, I think you're just seein' things," Scotty scoffed. "The loggers have all gone to work, and anyway they're all working at Camp 25 and you know they go across the river and up the other way."

"Sure. That's why it's funny. Nobody ever uses the old trail unless some of the men go hunting. And nobody would be out hunting so early in the morning; and besides, it is almost covered up with weeds and underbrush. I was up there hunting rabbits not long ago. Look, Scotty! Quick! See it?" Nat grabbed his companion's shoulder. "It's gone now. Did you see it?"

"Naw, I didn't see anything."

"You didn't look quick enough. I tell you there is something or somebody out on that trail. Seems to me if it was a man he'd leave his flashlight on steady instead of just flashing it. It wasn't exactly a flash, either. It was a sort of greenish glow."

"Glowworm! That's what it is. The woods are full of 'em this time of year," laughed Scotty. "Whoo-o! It's clear and cold this morning. Frost an inch thick, I'll bet." He turned and went inside.

"Just as if you could see a glowworm that far away! That's impossible, Scotty. It couldn't have been that." Nat had followed him in and had set the little coon on the floor at the end of the range. "Micky, you're a sight!" he exclaimed. "Mud all

over you and your fur is soppin' wet. Where've you been all night, anyway?"

Finding a piece of old cloth he began vigorously to rub the coon's fur. But the incident of the light was not forgotten. As he rubbed and scolded he wondered who was out on the Lone Pine trail.

Emma came in from the dining-room. "Say Nat, it's a good thing Cluff stepped out or you wouldn't be loafing and playing with the coon in the kitchen," she smiled.

"Maybe you think I don't know it? But I'm not loafing, Emma. I'm cleaning Micky." Nat liked to work but he did not like to be driven, and the cook, he thought, was unreasonable. It was always, "Clean up the cellar! Straighten up the pantry! Go to the store. Bring me this and bring me that!" During the day the boy seldom had a chance to go even to his bunk-house to study or to read some of the few books he had been able to accumulate. And he always had to promise to do extra work to make up the hour or more that it took to look at his trap line every morning.

"If you're goin' to ride up the hill this morning," interposed Scotty, "you'll have to ramble, for I hear the train coming now."

"Well, I guess I will have to go or get left," Nat exclaimed, as a train slowed down and came to a stop beside the cook-house. Taking up a small

paper sack containing fish heads and fins, selecting an apple from a box in the pantry, and picking up Micky, he hurried to his one-room cabin, put the coon on the foot of his cot and gave him the apple. He then grabbed his sweater and his hat, reached for his squirrel rifle hanging on the board wall, and ran out and climbed into the engine cab.

“Hello, Nat!” Shorty Burke, the engineer, greeted him and moved forward in his seat. “Get up here behind me. It’s pretty cold this January morning.”

“How’s trapping?” the fireman at the other side of the cab asked the boy.

“Not very good. Haven’t made as much as I expected to.” Nat thought of his little tobacco sacks hidden in his trunk in the bunk-house. Two were brimful of paper dollars, but the other five were only half full of pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and half-dollars—his savings since he had been compelled to give up school and go to work. A year’s savings, and only \$65.45. That wouldn’t go very far toward gaining the education for which he hoped. He’d have to do better than that.

Shorty reached for the whistle-cord and blew two shrill blasts. He pulled open the throttle and the wheels of engine Number 33 squeaked over the joints of the frosty rails as she started to crawl on her daily trip to the four logging camps, with her



string of empty log-cars dragging behind. Each morning she went to the various camps, leaving some of her cars at each to be loaded with logs. At night she returned to Camp Redwood with the logs and left them there to be taken by another engine on their twenty-mile journey to the mill, on Humboldt Bay, where they were sawed into lumber.

Nat looked ahead. The sky in the east was just beginning to turn light and the stars were disappearing. He gazed across Little River, which ran through the center of the valley, parallel to the railroad track. Camp Redwood was waking up. Flickering lights appeared in the windows of the unpainted cottages where the loggers lived. Whiffs of smoke from their chimneys mounted straight up in the still air.

The long bare limbs of the alder trees along the sandy banks of the river took on grotesque shapes in the semi-daylight. Tall stumps, some blackened and scarred from the ravages of forest fires, some bleached and gray, left standing after loggers had felled their neighbors, towered above the clumps of small second growth that dotted the mountains. Huge logs, found to be rotten in the heart and useless for lumber, were lying about in disorder, like the pictured ruins of an old temple Nat had once seen in a book.

As the train reached the top of the mountain

where the track was almost level, Nat looked down into the valley below. He could see the frost-covered roofs of the cottages in Camp Redwood, and spied the cook-house with the two rows of bunkshanties behind it, his own among them. His eyes followed the muddy waters of Little River northward and he glimpsed the house of Harrison, the Superintendent, set farther back from the railroad track. Then he saw the line of a trail along the track and across the swinging bridge that spanned the river north of the camp. On a hilltop he saw two cattle-sheds, each as long as a city block, and a tiny cabin where lived Jake Hansen, the man who cared for the cattle, pack mules, and horses. He thought of the times when he had gone with Jake and the pack train far into the forest, with provisions for surveyors and cruisers.

As "33" stopped at Camp 25, Nat jumped down from his seat, grabbed his squirrel rifle, and swung down from the steps of the cab.

"Well, s'long, hope you caught a grizzly bear in one of your traps last night," Shorty called after him.

"I hope I didn't catch one," Nat smiled. "I don't think I could kill it with this '22.' Anyway, my traps are all small ones and he'd have walked away with any one of them. S'long."

He started down the mountainside where his line

of traps was set. Upon reaching the first three, which he had set around a sluggish pool of water, he was disappointed to see that not a trap had been sprung. He searched at the edge of the water for tracks. "Jiminy!" he cried, as he discovered what looked to him like a large cat's tracks. "They sure are tracks," was his thought, as he laid his gun on a log and surveyed the find. "Hm-m, bobcat tracks; great big ones. Almost as big as the palm of my hand. This is where he came this morning to get a drink. And he was here not very long ago, for his tracks in the mud aren't frozen. I'll set a trap right here and wire it to this willow tree. Maybe I'll catch this fellow to-night. I hope I can. Oh, boy, I'd like to walk into camp with him slung over my shoulder! Wonder how much I would get for his pelt."

Taking up one of the unsprung traps and moving it to the new location, he scraped away some twigs and leaves at the foot of the tree, hastily dug a little hole about three inches deep, placed the trap in the hole, and carefully scattered fallen leaves and dry grass over it. "Now, that's a good setting. Bet I get him, all right," he assured himself.

He picked up an old can from beside a log, dipped it into the pool, and threw water all around the trap to wash away his tracks. Then he took his rifle and bag of bait and started down the mountain.

Nat hurried along to where he had set traps for three months, trying to catch the wary mink whose pelt was so valuable that it would give him a big help toward his schooling. Reaching the river, he climbed upon an old log that served as a bridge from the bank to the top of the jam. There he could peep through a little open space at a sand-bar, where one of his traps was set. But he had no luck here, either, for not a sign of a mink was to be seen. He sat down on the log and watched the water.

A rustle of dry leaves attracted his attention and he reached for his rifle. Creeping out from the river bank was a mink, making ready to pounce upon a water ousel that was standing on a rock near the end of the log.

Nat raised his rifle and fired. The mink leaped into the air, turned a couple of somersaults, and dived into the river, as the frightened ousel skimmed the water and flew out of sight downstream. Nat fired again at the mink, which ceased its wild plunging and sank out of sight, presently to rise to the surface and be carried by the current to the edge of the pond, where it became fast among the rushes, and was within reach.

Nat waded in and grasped the mink, holding it at arm's length for inspection. "Boy! What a beauty!" he exclaimed. "Dark brown fur with big bushy tail; must be two feet from tip to tip, and the

fur is well set. Sixteen dollars for good dark mink pelts, and this is a good one!"

In his hurry to show the pelt to his friends at the cook-house, Nat forgot to look at the rest of his traps, and hastened toward the camp with his rifle on his shoulder and the mink swinging by his side.

As he came to the swinging bridge he saw Jake, the packer, walking toward camp, and shouted, "Hey! Jake, look what I've got!"

The man saw his prize and whistled, as Nat ran across the bridge and stood expectantly, waiting for him to speak.

"Where in the world did you find that animal, Nat?"

Nat glanced up the river. "On a log up there," he said.

"Did you trap him?" Jake lifted the mink and looked it over closely.

"No, shot it."

"That was a pretty good shot."

"Oh, I practise a lot. Got a target in the alders back of the bunk-shanty."

As he led the way along the trail and up the embankment to the railroad track Nat related his adventure, hurrying on with head held high and eyes shining above his frost-reddened nose and cheeks.

When they reached the cook-house Jake started on down the track, but he first cautioned Nat: "Bet-

ter be careful and not cut the pelt when you skin that mink, Nat."

"You bet I will!" Nat answered, then proudly walked into the kitchen.

"My stars! What's the boy got?" Emma exclaimed. "Take it away! Don't you bring it into this kitchen." She shook her head vigorously.

Nat laughed as he stepped back on the porch. "Can't hurt you, Emma. Isn't it a dandy?"

Mrs. Higgins, the steward's wife, hurried from her cabin and joined Nat on the porch. "My! what beautiful fur!" she praised, as she gingerly touched the mink with the tips of her fingers.

Higgins, coming from the post office, rounded the corner of the cook-house with a bundle of newspapers under his arm. He was a man of medium height, dark-complexioned, and of a very gentle disposition. His brown eyes opened wide when he saw what Nat had. "A mink? That's a fine pelt, Nat," he said, as he stepped forward and took the mink in his hands. "Fur's shiny and soft as silk, ain't it?"

"Sakes alive!" cried Mrs. Higgins. "The boy's all wet. Look at his overalls and boots. Come in this minute and change your clothes, Nat, or you'll catch a mighty bad cold." Taking him by the arm, she led him to his cabin to put on dry clothes.

"Well, Micky," Nat said to the little pet coon

that was curled up on the foot of his cot, "we got him that time, didn't we? Soon's I change we'll go out and skin him, and we'll sure take good care of that pelt!"

Micky blinked his beady black eyes and playfully clawed at Nat's hand.

After the boy had changed his clothes he took the mink, a hammer, and some nails, and went to a clump of alders, where he nailed the mink by its hind feet to the trunk of a tree. He then quickly slashed the pelt along the under side of the hind legs and prepared to remove it.

He heard a rustle in the dry leaves behind and turned sharply. "Micky!" he called. "What are you after?"

But Micky didn't seem to hear. He bounded around, jumping, hopping, and throwing the leaves wildly about.

"What's the matter with the coon?" Jack Irving, camp boss at Camp 25, stopped and looked musingly at Micky. "Has he gone crazy?" he asked.

Nat laughed and started to peel the mink pelt downward, inside out. "Naw, he's just playing. He likes to throw the leaves around to hear them rattle."

Micky stopped suddenly, turned his head to one side and looked inquiringly at Irving, then scampered up the trunk of an alder tree, with his sharp

claws making a clicking noise on the bark. As he reached the first limb he huddled up into a ball, with his bushy black and white ringed tail curled around his paws.

“Where’d you get the mink, Nat?” Irving watched the boy as he skillfully removed the pelt.

“Up the river.” Nat’s face wrinkled in a smile as he turned to see Scotty coming toward him.

“By George! You did get a mink, didn’t you? How much will you get for it? I guess you’ll be leaving us now for the big city.” Scotty said it all in one breath.

“Yes,” drawled Nat, “if I catch a lot more of these right away.” He held the pelt up so that he might look at it more closely. “Pretty neat. Never cut one hole in it.” He started toward his cabin, taking long strides and swinging the pelt at his side. “Come on, Micky.”

With one leap Micky landed on the ground in front of Scotty, who jumped back with an exclamation. “Micky, you’re some jumper! Just like Jim Liverpool, one of Paul Bunyan’s loggers.” Picking the coon up he tossed him to his shoulder, and walked along behind Irving and Nat, while he sang:

“Jim Liverpool was awful swift  
And sprightly, and beside,  
He could jump across some rivers  
That were mighty big and wide.



“Now Jim would never lose a bet  
Paul’s men were always trumps ;  
’Cross any river in the world  
He’d jump in three big jumps.”

Irving burst into a ringing laugh, but Nat looked thoughtful. He liked to pretend to himself that Paul Bunyan and his lumberjacks were really great men, who lived and worked and accomplished gigantic tasks. He glanced at Scotty and Irving. The top of Scotty’s head reached only to Irving’s shoulder. Scotty’s shoulders were thin and drooping, with his head held slightly forward. Irving’s shoulders were broad and straight, with his head and sturdy neck set proudly upon them. His short canvas coat made them seem even broader. As he took long strides it seemed to Nat that his legs were twice as long as Scotty’s. He thought to himself, “Paul Bunyan’s lumberjacks were just like Irving.”

“Let’s see you stretch that pelt, Nat.” Irving stopped by Nat’s door. “Nice lot of skunks you’ve caught.” He looked at the four skunk pelts stretched on the outside wall of the cabin.

“You don’t stretch the mink like those, do you?” Scotty asked.

“No.” Nat went into the cabin and brought out a small board two feet in length and five inches wide at one end, the other end tapering to a point. “You see, the skunks are all cut so that they can be

stretched flat, just like a bear rug. But this is different. I didn't cut it in two underneath and strip it back. I turned it inside out as I took it off, so I wouldn't have to cut it, for I can get more money if it's round, just like when it was on the mink." He slipped the pelt down the tapered end of the board and fastened the nose to the point, then carefully stretched and pulled it farther down on the wide part of the board.

"Say, by the way," said Irving, "some one's been stealing my chickens. I lost one last night and one the night before last. Do you think it could be a mink?"

"Skunks," said Scotty, as he pulled a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and started to fill his pipe.

"It may be, but I don't think so." Irving shook his head doubtfully. "Some of these nights I'll sit up for that thief and pepper him good with shotgun lead. Well, I've got to go now. Hope you catch some more minks, Nat," he said as he walked away.

"Yep, I hope so, too, kid. And I've got to get to work." Scotty walked into the cook-house, while Nat picked up a hammer and some tacks and started to tack the pelt to the board so that it would stay stretched until dry.

At this moment Adams Cluff, the cook, came out with a long butcher-knife in one of his broad red-

knuckled hands. "Say, I thought I told you I had extra work for you to-day," he said threateningly. "You've been loafin' all mornin', but now you're goin' to work, and I don't mean maybe!"

Nat looked up and said easily, "Trapping is not loafing."

"Now none of your back-talk! You're not gettin' paid to run around in th' woods all day, an', besides, I'm about fed up on your neglectin' your work. Here it is 8:30, an' you ain't even started to peel th' potatoes for dinner. I've got a good mind to put a stop to all this trappin' business!"

Before Nat realized what Cluff intended to do, he saw a downward flash of the sharp knife. He grabbed at the board over which he had stretched the beautiful mink pelt, but it was too late. A V-shaped hole had been slashed down the center of the back, letting the board show through the fur.

Nat said nothing, but points of light flashed in his eyes as he stared at Cluff, who had turned and was walking away. He picked up the pelt, examined it, and walked slowly into his cabin, where he laid it on the table. "Ruined, that's sure. That was a dirty trick, a measly, low-down trick!" He was aghast to think that Cluff could have done such a thing. "Micky," he said sadly to his little coon, "for three months I've been trying to catch a mink, and now look at that. I'll not get much money for it

now. Scotty would give that cook a good trouncing if he knew about this. And I'll bet Mr. Higgins would fire him if he knew. But I won't let them see it for they'd ask how it happened, and we can't lie to 'em, and we'd hate to tell 'em the truth. That would be too much like tattletales. No, we can't tell 'em, can we?"

The little coon whined and pawed at Nat's boots in a beseeching way.

"That's right, Micky. You can go play around now. I've got to get to work." He looked sorrowfully at the ruined pelt as he took off his sweater and hat, then stepped out to the water faucet, where he washed his hands thoroughly.

Mr. Higgins, the steward, and Mrs. Higgins came along just as he had finished. "Did you get your mink skinned all right, Nat?" the former asked.

"Yes, sir," the boy said quietly, and walked into the cook-house.

Cluff lifted a wire basket of puffy, golden brown doughnuts from a pot of smoking hot fat and dumped them into a pan of sugar. "Peel a quarter-sack of potatoes for dinner, and don't be all day about it, either," he ordered.

Nat went into the pantry, got the potatoes, and began his task. "Potatoes!" he grumbled. He was tired of peeling potatoes.

His thoughts, however, were soon interrupted by a voice asking, "Well, hello there, who are you, stranger?"

"Why-er, I'm Nathaniel Taylor; Nat, for short," he answered, as he looked up at the tall, dark stranger.

"G-N-A-T? It should be M-O-S-Q-U-I-T-O, skeeter for short." The stranger laughed boisterously at his own joke. "Where's the cook?" he asked.

Nat pretended not to hear and continued his work.

Stepping up on the porch, the man scowled and asked, "What's the matter? Where's the cook? Are you deaf?"

"Why, no,—that is, I don't think so," said Nat, stiffly. "I suppose he's in the cook-house. I'll call him." He jumped up, accidentally tipping over the bucket of peeled potatoes, which rolled and spread out like a fan. Some stopped, as if reluctant to run away, but the more adventurous ones went on across the porch, dropped down from the edge, and proceeded to explore the ferns and shrubbery.

With narrowed eyes and set jaws Nat stooped and grabbed wildly for the potatoes, just as Peggy, age 12, Patsy, age 10, and June, age 9, Mr. Harrison's three little daughters, came along on their way to school.

Peggy stopped and looked at Nat, with just the suspicion of a smile at the corners of her mouth. Her short light hair curled up around the edge of her red tam. She wore a dark blue skirt and a white middy-blouse with a red silk tie.

“Why, Nat, what has happened?” she asked, demurely.

The stranger thrust his hands into the pockets of his trousers, kicked a potato across the porch, and laughed noisily.

Patsy, round-faced and jolly, laughed outright; her big blue eyes sparkled and the white pompon on the side of her blue knitted cap, which matched her blue sweater, danced up and down as she shook her head and giggled. “Don’t hurry, Peggy, let’s stay and watch Nat play Irish marbles,” she urged.

Nat’s face reddened to the very roots of his sun-streaked hair. He glared at Patsy and closed his lips tightly as he glanced at the potatoes lying among the ferns and rocks at the edge of the porch.

The stranger made the place ring with his loud guffaws as he doubled up and slapped his knees. Nat turned his back on him, and, frowning at the giggling girl, said, “Aw, you think you’re pretty wise, Miss Patsy Harrison, now, don’t you?”

With hands on her hips and one shoulder held slightly higher than the other, Patsy asked, far too sweetly, “Oh, Nat, won’t you let me help you?”

Cluff had seen the accident from the doorway, and shouted, "Get busy and pick up those potatoes right away!"

Nat started to gather them and the girls walked away. He heard Peggy scolding Patsy and June, and he resolved to give the former the finest whistle he could make as soon as the sap began to run in the willow trees.

Cluff looked sourly at the stranger. "Who do you want to see?" he asked.

"I'd like to see the cook."

"I'm Cluff, the cook."

"Well, my name's Darrow, and I'm one of the timber cruisers. We are going out to get an estimate of the cedar timber and Harrison sent me to you to see about provisions to take with us. You're to help me make a list of rations for three men to last three weeks—the pack train of mules goes out that often, don't it?—I'm to have the list filled at the company store."

"When do you leave?" Cluff asked.

"Early to-morrow morning."

"I'll have the list ready in about an hour. Will you call for it?"

"All right." Darrow turned away and the cook hurried into the kitchen, just as Scotty stepped out on the porch to watch the stranger leave. "Hm-m, I don't like that fellow," he muttered. "He may

be all right but I wouldn't trust him. Would you, Micky?"

Micky ignored Scotty's question because he was very busy pawing and rolling potatoes around on the porch.

"You start peeling, kid," Scotty said to Nat. "I'll pick up the rest of these."

"Cluff might not like it." Nat resumed his task of peeling and Scotty, picking up the corners of his big white apron to use as a basket, started to gather the potatoes. "What of it?" he grinned, and shrugged his shoulders.

After Scotty had picked up all of the potatoes, he fetched a paring-knife and sat down on the bench beside Nat and helped him.

Nat wished that the superintendent's daughters had not come along just as they did. He felt grateful to Peggy for scolding Patsy and June, but he could not forget how the three had laughed at him before the disagreeable stranger.

It seemed to him as if he and Scotty had been peeling potatoes for hours when he picked up the last one. Cluff saw that Nat had finished his task. "Get in there in th' pantry, now, an' straighten up things," he ordered.

All that morning Nat worked in the pantry, lifting heavy cans, sacks, and boxes of fruit and groceries. In the afternoon he cleaned out the cellar.



When he had finished that, it was supper time, and that meant more work, carrying heavy dishes of food from the kitchen to the dining-room and waiting on the loggers.

It was eight o'clock when he had finished washing the supper dishes and had put them away on the shelves. He dragged himself to his cabin, switched on the light, and sank down on his cot. "Gee! I'm dead tired!" Then his eyes fell upon the mink pelt, still on its stretcher.

The boy stepped out on the walk and looked up and down the two rows of cabins. He could hear the lumberjacks in most of them. Some were talking, some were singing. He whistled shrilly. Suddenly a door flew open. "Hey! what do you want?" a deep bass voice boomed. "Oh, it's you!" the man said as the light fell upon Nat.

"I'm just looking for my coon," Nat told the huge, red-haired, square-jawed man in the doorway.

"Well, he ain't in here! Beat it! Shake a leg an' make it snappy!"

Nat went back to his cabin. "Huh! Dillon! No wonder they call him Snappy Dillon. He's always ordering people around, just like Adams Cluff. And he's always saying, 'Make it snappy!' I guess he's the sourest and meanest man I know, exceptin' Cluff and that fellow Darrow, who laughed at me this morning," he said to himself.

Nat undressed, turned off the electric light, and crawled under the blankets on his cot. "Wish Micky would come," he thought drowsily. "Boy, I'm tired! Wish I didn't have to work in that old cook-house. Can't save much money. Wish I was a whistlepunk. Funny about that light on the Lone Pine Trail this morning. It was a light all right. I'd give a million to know who it was. Oh well. . . ."

He was so tired that his subconscious thoughts, before he dropped off to sleep, were a jumble of beautiful mink pelts, Paul Bunyan and his huge loggers, peeled potatoes rolling around, and green lights on the Lone Pine Trail.

## CHAPTER II

### NAT LEADS THE PACK TRAIN

Nat was aroused the next morning by repeated rappings at his door, where Higgins was calling, "Nat, Nat, my boy, wake up!"

He drowsily answered, "Yes, all right," as he turned over and prepared to go to sleep again. But Higgins continued rapping as he called, "Nat, Nat, let me in, it's important."

Important! Thump! Nat was out of bed in a jiffy and quickly opened the door.

"You'd better dress in a hurry," Higgins spoke abruptly. "Old Jake's rheumatism's worse this morning and he can't take the pack train over the mountains with that timber-cruiser's outfit. You'll have to take his place. He says you know the trail and can do it."

Nat stared at him in amazement. It was unbelievable! "Do you mean that I'm to take Jake's mules to the cedar timber with the cruiser's outfit?" The light suddenly leaped into his eyes. "*Alone?*"

"Exactly," replied Higgins. "The mules are

packed and the men are eating their breakfast now, so get your clothes on. I'll have your ham and eggs ready for you before you can say 'Jack Robinson.' ”

Nat hurried. The thought of leading the pack train over the mountains was glorious. It would take two days and one night for the trip, and that would mean two days away from Adams Cluff, the cook-house, and potatoes! And he would be his own boss, too! The only disappointing thing about it was the fact that he was leaving so early, and when he should ride by the Harrisons' Patsy would be sound asleep and wouldn't see him. Oh, well, when he came back he would manage to have her see him and his grand entrance into Camp Redwood.

“Better take my '22',” he told himself. “Might get a chance at some rabbits or do some target-shooting at Hector's.” He reached for the rifle that was hanging on the wall and ran his hand along the barrel. “Kind of bulky to carry on the saddle. Wish I had a small automatic '32'. Gee, that would be just the thing to take on trips like this. Some day I'll buy one.” He opened the table drawer and found two bars of chocolate. “I'll take these to Hector. I've got to go, Micky, old boy,” he said aloud, as he went to the cot where his pet lay curled up like a cat. “You sly rascal!” Nat rubbed the coon's head and playfully pulled his ear. “Don't you get into trouble while I'm gone. Give me your

paw." He took a forepaw in his hand and shook it gently. "Good-bye, old fellow," he said affectionately, and went out, leaving the door ajar.

At the same moment he heard another door close, and quick footsteps sounded on the board walk behind him. He turned and saw a man dart around the corner of "Snappy" Dillon's cabin. There were only two dim electric lights to brighten the walk between the rows of bunk-houses, but Nat had plainly seen the man. "Darrow. That's who it was," he thought. "Now what do you suppose he was doing in Dillon's cabin? Or maybe he was in Adams Cluff's. I couldn't tell exactly which. What'd he sneak around the corner for? S'funny."

The fragrance of hot coffee and sizzling ham greeted Nat when he entered the cook-house. Taking a plate of buttered hot cakes that Scotty had prepared, he flipped the ham on top of them and went into the dining-room.

The electric lights were shining brightly but the window shades had been raised and the pink-flowered curtains waved slowly in the fresh, soft wind. He looked out and saw a line of sunlight along the top of the mountain across the river, and his face beamed.

"Fine day for a trip into the woods, isn't it, Emma?"

"Yes, it is." Emma clattered heavy platters of

doughnuts as she set them on the table. "I believe we're going to miss you, Nat," she said, in a kindly tone.

Nat's glance went around the dining-room; the loggers had not yet come in for breakfast, but two timber-cruisers were already eating. The one nearest Nat was tall and slender, with a sharp, hawklike nose and small eyes set close together. He wore a green and black plaid mackinaw, and his brown corduroy pants were tucked into his high-top shoes. He had flung his broad-brimmed hat on the bench beside him.

The other cruiser was short and full-faced. He wore a dark checked mackinaw, khaki army pants, and high-top shoes.

The boy had just started upon his hot cakes when Darrow came in, making a loud clumping noise with his heavy shoes. He scowled at Nat and exclaimed, "Hurry up, there, kid. We can't wait all day for you!" And as he sat down beside the tall cruiser he said, "We'll be goin' right now, Carl." He helped himself to three fried eggs, a large slice of ham, and five or six hot cakes, eating very fast.

The three men had finished and gone, when Higgins came in and sat down beside Nat. "That man Darrow seems to be an awfully ill-tempered fellow," he said quietly. "I wonder where he got his authority to give orders. You'd better keep an eye

on him.” Then in a louder voice, “Scotty’ll look after your traps, and I’ll take good care of Micky ’till you get back.”

As Higgins went into the kitchen Nat heard him remark, “No business sending that boy into the mountains with an outfit like that. They look like a bad lot to me.”

“Harrison’s order, wasn’t it?” he heard Scotty ask.

“Yes,” answered Higgins. “Harrison said they had good recommendations, and he thinks Nat will be able to take care of himself. The Shannon Company is anxious to sell their cedar timber to The Beckman Company. That’s why they are in such a hurry to have it cruised.”

Nat was thoughtful. He didn’t like Darrow, either, and he did feel a bit shaky about going miles into the timber over a lonely trail with him and his two men. But he forgot all that when he heard the horses restlessly stamping and pawing the ground outside.

When he went into the kitchen to explain the location of his traps to Scotty he found him flipping hot cakes for his own breakfast and singing:

“Twelve husky flat-footed flunkies,  
 With hams strapped to their feet,  
 Helped in Paul’s big kitchen  
 To cook good things to eat.

“Across the smoking gridirons  
They skated to and fro,  
To keep them slick and greasy  
For hot cakes the men loved so.”

When Nat went outside he found that Darrow and his men had mounted their horses and were impatiently waiting for him. He was delighted when he saw that he was to ride Dick, Jake's old bay horse. The horse looked beautiful to Nat. He was reddish and shiny, with a white stocking on his left hind leg and a white diamond in the middle of his forehead. He had a black mane and a long black tail.

The three mules—one brown and two black—with their long ears twitching, were impatient to go. They didn't seem to mind their heavy pack saddles as they stepped lightly about, swishing their short tails that always reminded Nat of large paint brushes because Jake cut them off squarely at the ends.

Nat went up to the mules and pulled the ropes that held their packs, to see if they were drawn tightly enough to prevent slipping. The pack on one was loose, and, as Nat adjusted the ropes, Darrow leaned forward in his saddle and said sarcastically, “Take your time, boy, take your time.”

Mrs. Higgins, plump and round, was standing near. “I'll call Higgins to help you, Nat,” she said, as she looked with indignation at Darrow.



“Here I am. And here are the latest papers for Hector, and his mail, too,” Higgins said, as he hastened to help Nat fasten the ropes securely. At the corner of the cook-house, Pinkie, the iron-gray bell-horse, was nibbling at a tuft of new grass. Though she was old and her hoofs were cracked and clumsy, she was just as cautious and trustworthy as Dick. Jake always took her along to lead the mules over the trail with a cowbell fastened around her neck.

“Are you ready to go, Pinkie?” Nat patted her neck. “How’s your pack?” he asked as he tied the rifle, the newspapers, and the letters into a safe place on her saddle.

After inspecting her pack Nat went over to Dick, stroked his black mane, then swung himself into the saddle. “Get up, Dick! Come on, Pinkie!” he shouted.

Pinkie took her place behind Dick, while the mules fell in and Darrow and his men followed.

The cruisers were quiet as they rode along, and the only noise that Nat could hear was the creak of saddle leather and the thud of hoofs on the hard path. Occasionally the clang of Pinkie’s cowbell was heard.

After they had passed the Harrisons’ house and the last cabins at the edge of Camp Redwood, Dick turned down the embankment and into a trail beneath the tall alders that grew along the river.

Pinkie and her followers moved carefully behind in a straight line. It was gradually coming light.

Nat liked to go through the alders. He liked to look at their clean, smooth trunks, and he liked the musty odor of the rotting leaves that lay thickly beneath them.

A half-hour later, when the pack train arrived at the bridge that spanned Little River, he said, "We'll go down to the river for water."

While the animals were drinking, Nat watched the muddy water seep into the impressions left in the sand by Pinkie's hoofs. He crossed his arms and rested them on the horn of his saddle. A warm breeze was blowing through the alders and willows along the banks of the river. A trout leaped and caught a fly that had flown too near the water.

An angry kingfisher circled overhead, dashing up and down the river, and calling out in his harsh voice. He was an unfriendly bird and resented any intrusion upon his premises. Perhaps, Nat thought, he had led his pack train to drink in the kingfisher's favorite fishing hole.

After the mules and horses had finished drinking, Dick turned and headed up a steep bank to the bridge.

Darrow, reaching up, broke a branch from a willow at the edge of the water and, as he started up the trail, cut his mount sharply. The horse lurched for-

ward, and, with a backward swing, reared up on his hind legs and slipped in the soft sand. Regaining his footing, he crashed through the underbrush beside the trail and headed for the river. The mules bolted, and scattered into the alders in a panic as Darrow swore loudly and cut the horse again, more viciously than before.

Nat's face reddened. Gripping the reins so tightly that his knuckles were white, he shouted, "Don't do that, Darrow! Don't you do that again! We never have to whip Jake's horses!"

"I'm ridin' this horse, boy," Darrow snapped, "and I'll ride it the way I want to." He dug his heels into the horse's flanks. As it started wildly into the river, Dick, at Nat's command, wheeled, crashed through a thick growth of salmon-berry bushes, dashed in a half-circle, and closed in upon the frightened animal so Nat could reach its bridle, jerk its head downward, and lead it up the trail.

His eyes narrowed as he looked at Darrow with disgust. Turning to the cruisers who had been watching the stampede, he said, "You wait here while I round up the mules." With Pinkie following, he started back along the trail.

The mules had not gone far, for he found them in the trail waiting for the bell-horse. As she came up to Dick, Nat leaned forward and rang her bell. The mules came confidently toward him and he had no

further trouble getting them to follow him back to the bridge.

The pack train passed slowly over the bridge and along the trail after leaving the river. The grade was very steep, and large rocks jutted out into the pathway, but the animals, cautious and sure of foot, went onward up the side of the mountain.

Nat often looked back to see if the packs were slipping. Darrow was sullen and slouched in his saddle, but the other cruisers were more alert and seemed worried that their horses might make a misstep and fall over the bank.

Nat smiled to himself. "Hm-m, just wait till we get to Devil's Curve. I'll bet they'll be afraid to round it."

It was uncomfortably warm; Nat took his bandanna from his pocket and mopped his forehead, unbuttoned his blue cotton shirt, and took off his brown sweater and laid it across the saddle. "Anyway," he thought, "I'm glad it's not frosty, like it was yesterday, or the trail would be more slippery and harder to pass over." Though he was responsible for the pack train and had to keep a watchful eye on it, he thoroughly enjoyed riding. He looked at the mountains in the distance, covered with great redwood trees, and at Little River, rushing and booming far below.

When they arrived at a level stretch of trail near

the top of the mountain Nat called, "Whoa!" All the animals stopped, as Pinkie's bell ceased clanging at the command.

Darrow sat bolt upright. "What's the matter now?" he growled.

Nat dismounted and started back along the line. "Got to see if these packs have been loosened. Sometimes the jolts cause them to slip. We'll be at Devil's Curve pretty soon now."

"Devil's Curve!" exclaimed the cruiser who rode at the end of the train. "What's Devil's Curve?"

"Oh, just a curve down there a little ways." Nat spoke indifferently.

After finding that the packs were secure he mounted Dick and started on. The downward trail was so steep that he had difficulty in staying in his saddle, which was so large that he kept slipping forward and from side to side. Pinkie's bell dangled as she followed closely at Dick's heels, and the other animals carefully picked their way after their leader.

Around a point Nat saw a huge boulder jutting over the trail. He turned and shouted to the men, "There's Devil's Curve."

Darrow scowled. The cruiser behind him looked ahead at the dangerous line of the trail. "Do we have to cross that?" he asked.

"We sure do!" Nat leaned forward to keep from bumping as Dick passed under a projection of

the boulder. "Come on, Pink," he said, as a tiny pucker appeared between his eyes, for he was not sure they could pass. Recent storms had loosened rocks and washed out gullies, and the narrow path was dotted with mud-holes and slippery clay. He knew that the horses and mules, however, had gone over the trail many times and were familiar with the dangers ahead.

He looked almost straight down at the river, two hundred feet below, and to his right at the rocky bank where water was seeping through the crevices, and called over his shoulder, "Ride carefully and let your horses have the reins."

Suddenly Dick stopped, and Nat saw ahead a large rock that had been washed directly into the pathway. Darrow flicked a half-smoked cigarette over the bank and roared, "What's all the delay?"

Nat pointed to the obstruction. "The trail is blocked and we can't pass until we roll that rock off." He dismounted and started forward. "I'll need help," he called, and the cruisers slid from their saddles and followed him, gingerly picking their way along.

"Hm-m, that's a good-sized boulder. Big as a barrel. We'll have to get a couple of strong poles and pry it over the bank," he told the men.

Nat and the cruiser called "Jim" found a pole and started to pry it loose. The soft earth began to

crumble away. Nat looked anxiously at the edge of the trail and wondered if it would all slide and leave the path so narrow that they could not pass over. If it did, they would have to return to Camp Redwood. He thought of Harrison and Jack Irving, for whom he wanted to work. He'd hate to return to camp unsuccessful. Gritting his teeth, he bore down with all his might, as he cried,

"Now, all together. Over she goes!"

The rock slipped; then, with a crash it fell through the brush and over rocks and logs to the muddy river below.

Nat was very sober as he watched the chunks of earth slide away from the edge of the trail. He pushed some of the loose dirt with his foot, then examined the trail more closely. The main pathway appeared to be still solid. He walked across it. It was quite solid but narrow.

"Well, how about it?" Darrow demanded.

Nat was thoughtful. "We'll go over it, of course."

The men mounted and sat waiting.

Nat patted Dick's neck. "Steady, boy, steady," he said quietly; then, louder, "C'mon, Pinkie!"

After Dick and Pinkie were safely across, Nat watched the other animals uneasily, but they carefully followed in Pinkie's tracks and soon were past the danger point.

The pack train moved slowly down and around the curve. When Nat lost sight of the river he called back, "We're around all right, now, and can take a rest."

"Well, I'm sure glad of that," shouted Jim, as he came into view. "It's just about the worst trail I ever saw."

Darrow and his men dismounted and sat down on a log to smoke; but Nat walked briskly along the trail to exercise his legs. As he came back the three men were talking earnestly in low voices and did not see him. Nat paid no attention to what they were saying, but he could not help hearing Carl ask, "Are you sure . . ."—he mumbled a name, but Nat did not get it— ". . . understands when and where to meet you?"

"Sure, of course I am," Darrow said. "He'll take 'em to Eureka and . . ." —Nat heard something about "records for Beckman. . . . Great Scott! If Harrison should get a hold of those!" Then he saw Darrow frown, and a quick look pass between the men, as if they thought he had been listening.

To himself he said, "They needn't think I'd try to listen. I'm interested in this pack train, not them, that's sure." But a few months later he wished that he *had* listened very closely.

Nat looked at his watch. "Eleven o'clock.



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Guess we better be on our way. It's easy going now, across this little valley, until we meet the river again and start climbing the mountain above it."

Leaving the logged-off area, the pack train entered the cool forest, where it was always twilight and silent during the day.

Nat had real affection for the redwoods. *His* redwoods, he called them,—his real Paul Bunyan trees that raised their mighty heads almost three hundred feet into the blue sky. He was impressed with their tremendous age, and thought to himself: "Three thousand years old!" These very trees, Harrison had told him, were the oldest living things in the world. To him they were solemn and appalling; he noted their bare columnar trunks, the red bark, deeply furrowed, with ridges curved and twisted, and far aloft their branches, short and irregular, with flat rigid leaves. "Yes," Nat thought, "old—wrinkled and old."

Ferns as tall as a man fringed the trail. Wild blackberry vines, spreading out over fallen logs and stumps, had clambered up to the lower limbs of the giant trees, forming a network of festoons.

Nat led the train across the timbered valley, along a ravine, and up the mountain to a high plateau, where a small spot of ground had been cleared and a log cabin had been built near the edge of a deep gorge, the walls of which were almost perpendicular.

Little River, swollen by the winter rains, rushed through a narrow channel, making a booming noise as it dashed over the rocks.

Stopping at a moss-covered watering-trough, Nat looked expectantly toward the cabin for his friend Hector, the mountain hermit.

The invigorating odor of bay leaves filled the air. The boy pulled a handful, crushed them, and breathed deeply of their peppery fumes. He watched a little stream of water, cold and clear as crystal, that bubbled out to the sunlight through a crevice in the rocks and splashed into the trough.

He heard the tinkle of bells as a herd of shaggy goats came trooping up; then he straightened in his saddle and his eyes sparkled as he saw white-haired Hector, old but stalwart, standing in the cabin door.

The old man motioned for Nat to enter the pasture. The boy waved a reply, lifted the bars, and let Darrow and his men pass in. The cruisers dismounted and walked toward the cabin, but Nat did not join Hector until he had taken the mules and horses to the shed, filled nosebags with barley, and slipped them over the heads of the animals. He then took the bundle of papers and letters from Pinkie's saddle and went to the cabin.

"Well, my boy," Hector said, as he grasped Nat's hand and placed an arm around his shoulder, "I'm glad to see you. But where's Jake?"

“Jake has rheumatism again, so Mr. Harrison sent me. Here’s some papers and mail that he told me to give you.”

Hector took the bundle of papers and laid them on a bench near the door.

Darrow blew rings of smoke into the air as he sat on the edge of the porch with his feet hanging over. One of the cruisers, Jim, stood leaning against the corner of the cabin while he smoked and gazed at Little River rushing through the gorge. Carl sat down on a low bench, with elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands.

Hector looked inquiringly at Nat. “I don’t suppose you’ve had dinner?”

Nat shook his head. “No, not yet. I thought we’d eat by the spring on the other side of the pasture. Higgins gave us some roast-beef sandwiches, doughnuts, and cake.”

“You’d all better eat with me. I’ve cooked a pot of brown beans and I’ll make some coffee.”

Darrow raised his bushy black eyebrows. “Why, yes, we’ll do that.” He dropped his cigarette, got up, and said curtly to Nat, “Go get our lunch and we’ll eat here.”

Hector looked quickly at Darrow. His clear blue eyes narrowed and his scraggy white mustache bristled. “Hmp! You’ll find water and a wash basin on the back porch if you men want to wash

up.” His heavy boots thumped as he walked across the porch and into the cabin.

Nat hurried to the shed for the lunch. He was delighted to eat with Hector and even though he could not talk confidentially with him about his plans as he was accustomed to, because Darrow and his men were there, he could at least look at him. He liked to do that, for he was so friendly and wise. Hector had taught him much, and always encouraged him to save his money for schooling.

As Nat started back to the cabin he looked over the mountains toward Camp Redwood and wondered if Micky were all right and if the Harrison girls knew about his leading the pack train. His eyes turned to the northwest. “ ’S funny, the sky is turning dark out over the ocean,” he told himself, as he hurried to join the men for dinner.

As he stepped upon the porch he glanced at the bundle of papers which lay open on the bench. His eyes grew suddenly wider, for in bold black letters across the top of the front page was printed:

LONE PINE LOGGING CAMP ROBBED

and in smaller type:

MONEY AND VALUABLES TAKEN FROM MEN WHILE  
THEY SLEPT

Nat looked at the date. “Yesterday’s paper! It happened the night before last. The night I saw

the green light on the Lone Pine Trail! I'll just bet a million that light had something to do with it. Just wait 'till I see Scotty! Hey, Hector!" he shouted as he went inside with the papers in his hand. "Did you see this? A robbery at the Lone Pine outfit! You know that's about ten miles over the mountains from Camp Redwood!"

The men were sitting on benches around the oil-cloth-covered table. A big bowl of steaming bean soup, a smaller bowl, and a plate had been placed before each man. Nat laid the box of sandwiches, doughnuts, and cake on the table beside Hector's plate. "Look, Hector! A big robbery!" he said loudly, as he spread the paper out before the old man.

"Can't read without my glasses, Nat. A robbery, you say? That's too bad. I hope they catch the rascals."

"A robbery?" asked Darrow. "Prob'ly was an inside job. Can't tell who's around them lumber camps."

The other men said nothing. Hector motioned Nat to sit at his right.

"Better eat now, Nat. Will you have coffee or milk?"

"Milk." Nat slipped down on the bench, picked up a pitcher, and poured milk into a cup.

The meal was eaten in almost absolute silence.

## CHAPTER III

### THE STORM

After dinner the men went outside and were surprised to find a change in the atmosphere.

“It looks like a storm’s coming.” Hector squinted at the dark clouds massing over the mountain in the west. “Maybe you all better stay with me tonight.”

“No!” exclaimed Darrow. “We’re not afraid of a little rain and we’re in a hurry to fix camp before night. Let’s move on.” He started across the pasture to the sheds.

Nat wanted to stay with Hector, for he had heard the loggers tell about the terrible storms in the mountains and the danger from falling trees and limbs. But he did not want to appear timid, and bravely leaped into the saddle.

Hector stepped up, patted Dick, and whispered to the boy so that the others could not hear, “Nat, go as fast as possible, unpack your mules, and hurry back here before dark. We’re going to have a terrible storm. Hurry!”

Nat nodded and urged the pack train onward. "C'mon Pinkie," he said loudly, as he looked at his watch. "One-thirty now, and a four-hours' ride before us. I guess we'll have to hurry, all right."

They had not gone far when Darrow called out, "What's that noise?" All stopped their horses and listened.

"Sounds like a fiddle," said one of the men.

"Fiddle?" asked another. "Funny place for a fiddler. By George! It is a fiddler, and he's playing 'Turkey In The Straw'!"

Nat merely smiled to himself and said, "Get up, Dick!"

They soon saw an old man with straggling hair, and whiskers that reached almost to his waist, coming up the trail. He had a fiddle under his chin and a bow in his outstretched hand. He wore an old broad-brimmed slouch hat. The legs of his overalls were loosely tucked into the tops of his boots, which were run over at the heels and wrinkled at the ankles. His faded blue shirt was open at the neck and rolled to his elbows, revealing the sleeves of his red flannel undershirt, which flashed up and down and back and forth as he drew the bow across the strings of his fiddle.

A shaggy little burro came jogging along a few paces behind him.

"Hello there, Old Timer!" shouted Nat.

The fiddler stopped, pushed his hat back from his forehead, and exclaimed, "Well, I'll be blest if it ain't my old friend Nat! How are y'?"

"Fine, Old Timer! How are you?"

"Oh, tolerable, jist tolerable. What 'er y' doin' away out here? Ain't y' lost?"

"No," Nat motioned to his right. "I'm heading for the cedar country with the cruisers."

Darrow shifted impatiently in his saddle. One of the cruisers leisurely rolled a cigarette and the other one stared curiously at Old Timer.

"Well, y' better hurry and git there 'cause it looks like a storm a-brewin'. I'm figgerin' on stayin' with Hector to-night. Move over, Jubilo, and let these fellers past."

Jubilo stepped aside and looked indifferently on as he hugged the bank while the pack train passed by.

"See you later." Old Timer spat vigorously over the bank and started on.

"All right." Nat straightened in his saddle. "Get up, Dick."

"Who in thunderation is that?" Darrow called to Nat as Old Timer and his burro went out of sight.

"Oh, he's Old Timer, a prospector. He lives on French Creek, over in Trinity County, about thirty-five miles on over the trail."

"What's he doing over here? Prospecting?" Darrow's black eyes looked keenly at Nat.





“BLEST IF IT AIN’T MY OLD FRIEND NAT!” --Page 58



“No, he always comes this way to Eureka. That’s thirty miles west of Camp Redwood and makes about eighty miles in all for the old fellow, when he wants to sell his gold.”

“Does he have much gold to sell?” Darrow glanced slyly at the cruiser behind him.

“I don’t think so,” answered Nat. “He works the tailings. You know the hydraulic mines take out most of the gold and Old Timer just finds a little that they couldn’t catch.”

Some ten miles farther on the party left the redwood forest and followed a ravine through tall firs and hemlocks, and then started up the mountain. At the top Nat had a clear view of the thickly growing cedars, firs, and pines, with here and there a hemlock, and thickets of tan oak stretching as far as he could see to the southeast.

Darrow called loudly: “This is where we’ll camp. Right here in this flat by the creek.” He dismounted and looked about. “Hurry up, there, kid! We want to get the tent up before it starts to rain.”

Nat was untying the ropes that held the canvas tent to the pack saddle. He thought to himself, “You bet I’ll hurry! Fifteen miles back to Hector’s, and it’s five thirty right now.” He said aloud, “Where do you want the tent?”

“Right here by this pine tree, and we’ll build a log shack for a kitchen over there under that big cedar.

One of you fellows build a fire and cook supper." Darrow started to unroll the tent while one of the men helped Nat unpack the cooking utensils and the food. The other cruiser laid two flat rocks on the ground, about six inches apart, then gathered dry twigs and made a fire between them. At the creek he filled the coffee pot, and set it upon the fire. "Where's the bacon?" he called.

"Right here." The boy took a side of bacon from a gunny sack and tossed it to him.

Hearing a rumble of thunder in the northwest, Nat stopped unpacking for an instant and looked in that direction.

Darrow shouted at him. "Great guns!" he flared. "Didn't I tell you to hurry and help us fix camp?"

Nat's face flushed as he untied the ropes on one of the mule packs. His heart thumped against his ribs as he thought, "What will Darrow do when he finds out I'm going back to Hector's to-night. And I'm not going to wait to help fix camp."

He sniffed the air. The pungent fragrance of cedar trees filled his nostrils. He liked the fresh odor of the woods just before a storm. He breathed deeply and glanced toward the camp fire. The frying bacon and boiling coffee tempted him, for he was hungry and felt lonely. He thought of Old Timer and Hector. They probably were sitting by

the big fireplace in Hector's cabin. He swallowed hard as he took the pack off the last mule and smoothed the blankets under the saddles. "I'll have to go and go quick!" he thought. He stopped and listened. Drops of rain were falling through the branches of the trees.

"Think we should have stayed with the old man back there to-night," Jim said uneasily.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" Darrow angrily faced him. "If you're afraid of a little rain, go back with the kid to-morrow."

"To-morrow? Why, I'm going back to-night," Nat said quickly.

"Well, I guess you ain't. You're going to stay here and help us fix camp." Darrow walked toward the mules.

"Hector expects me to stay with him to-night. He has sheds for the mules and horses. And that's where I'm going." Though Nat spoke evenly, his hands trembled as he tightened Dick's saddle girth. His heart beat faster as he hurriedly stepped up to Pinkie to see if her bell was secure.

He saw Darrow watching him through narrowed eyes. "So you think you're going?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm going." Nat swung into his saddle and dug his heels into Dick's flanks as Darrow leaped forward. The horse jumped and snorted in surprise but did not take more than a step in ad-

vance and Nat felt strong fingers grip his shoulder. He tried to shake them off and struck wildly at the arm that was dragging him to the ground. As he landed heavily on his feet beside Dick, Darrow loosened his hold and his lips curled in a sneer. "By George, you've been boss all day, but now it's my turn. When I say stay, it's stay!"

Nat threw back his head and clenched his fists. "You may be boss of the cruisers, but you've nothing to say to me. I'm boss of these animals, and I'm going back to Hector's!"

Darrow laughed.

"Aw, let the kid go," Carl spoke up. "What's the use of making him stay? We can get along without him. Harrison may not like it."

Darrow looked thoughtful for a moment. "All right, move on." He turned to Nat and motioned in the direction from which they had just come.

Nat quickly took an oil lantern and his rifle and fastened them to Dick's saddle. He glanced at the tent, which looked ghostly white against the background of darkening forest. The fire crackled and snapped, and shone with a red glare upon the faces of the cruisers, who were sitting around it preparing to eat. The trees swayed back and forth and drops of rain fell with a hollow sound upon the tent. The boy buttoned his sweater, pulled his slouch hat down tightly and swung into the saddle. "Get up, Dick,"

he said quietly, and turned to see if the other animals with their empty saddles were following.

The train started down the mountain at a trot, with Pinkie's cowbell jingling with every step. The wind whistled mournfully through the trees. Bits of moss and twigs were blown helter-skelter.

Nat groaned aloud. "Fifteen miles to Hector's and it's growing dark fast. I'm glad I brought my '22'." Then he laughed ruefully. "Guess a squirrel rifle wouldn't be much protection from the wild animals that live in these forests." He almost wished he had not come. Then he thought of his tobacco-sack savings, and wondered if Scotty had found anything in his traps that morning.

Nat stopped at the edge of the fir and hemlock forest; he dreaded to enter the redwoods. A streak of lightning zigzagged across the sky, followed by the rumble of thunder and a downpour of rain. The animals pricked up their ears and sniffed the air, as the howl of a distant coyote was carried to them on the wind.

Nat was sick with fear. Should he turn back and spend the night with the cruisers and be laughed at by Darrow, or should he face the dark forest alone? He leaned forward, stroked his horse gently, and said aloud, "Dick, shall we turn back or go on to Hector's?"

Dick tossed his head to the right, up the trail.

“You’re right, Dick. We won’t turn back. What was it that Hector told me to remember? Oh yes, ‘Whatever you resolve to do, do it quickly.’ ”

Nat drew a match from his pocket and lighted the lantern. He sat very straight in his saddle, with his jaws tightly set, as he started into the redwoods. It seemed as if he were entering a black tunnel, where the tall trees might crash down any minute.

The trail was becoming slippery. Small rocks were loosened by the storm, and the footing was not secure. Dick slipped and fell to his knees, regaining his footing with difficulty. The rain was falling in torrents. Flashes of lightning and the rumble of thunder filled the sky. The animals became excited but Nat talked encouragingly to them and urged them onward.

The air turned colder. The rain suddenly became sleet, and then large hailstones fell with such force that they stung painfully. The mules switched their tails and humped their backs. Nat could go no farther in such a fusillade of frozen bullets. He turned his train from the trail to find shelter under a thicket. His teeth chattered as he sat drenched and shivering in the saddle.

The light in the lantern flickered, sputtered, and then he was in darkness—the impenetrable darkness of dense foliage!

The animals, with their backs humped, stood



huddled together, frightened and dripping. Nat crouched closer to Dick. The smoke from the smouldering lantern wick stung his nostrils. The wind howled more wildly and the storm broke with terrific force. It seemed to Nat that he was traveling in a topsy-turvy world, where the lightning and thunder had ripped the sky wide open and the ocean was falling through. Huge limbs were torn from the trees and fell crashing.

At last the storm abated, the lightning grew less frequent, and the peals of thunder more distant. The wind lessened.

Nat, numb from cold, drew a match from his pocket and lighted the lantern. He blinked his eyes and grinned as he said aloud, "Boy, that isn't much light but it sure looks good to me."

He counted his mules and horses. All were there. The clouds were breaking away and he could faintly see the moon and a few stars.

"Good old Dick; let's go, c'mon Pinkie." The jingle of Pinkie's bell sounded very cheerful to Nat as he started on. The trail was almost impassable in places. Large rocks had been washed into the pathway. Broken branches had fallen across it. The rain had cut ruts and gullies. For two hours Nat rode along, straining his eyes on the trail, dimly lit by the sputtering lantern. He shuddered to think what might happen if one of his animals

stumbled and fell over the cliff to the rocks below. If Dick slipped and fell, well—he raised his face and gazed off into the blackness. There was a yellow dot of light.

“Get up, Dick, get up!” he shouted. “There’s the cabin.”

Hector and Old Timer rushed out, dragged Nat from the saddle, and pulled him into the cabin.

Nat felt that he was a sorry sight as he stood by the big fireplace, bedraggled and tired; but his mouth twitched and spread into a grin as he flung down his soggy hat and ran his fingers through his wet hair.

“By ginger, boy! We thought somethin’ terrible had happened to y’,” said Old Timer, as he rubbed his weather-beaten hands together.

“Hurry and get those wet clothes off, Nat,” Hector said anxiously. “I’ll get something for you to put on.”

Nat rubbed his stomach vigorously. “Got anything to eat? I didn’t stay for supper with the cruiser gang and I’m mighty hungry.”

“Eat? You bet we have! Jump into yer dry clothes and I’ll have somethin’ ready fer y’ in a jiffy.” Old Timer’s heavy boots thumped on the board floor as he shuffled in the tiny kitchen.

Nat, warm and dry, dressed in Hector’s clothes, which were so large that they touched him only in a

few places, and sat down to a supper of fried rabbit with thick brown gravy, squares of corn bread, baked potatoes, and a pudding with big fat raisins bursting through the brown crust.

Hector fed the animals and put them under the sheds, and after Nat had finished his supper he and the two old men went into the living-room and the boy told of his experience with Darrow.

“Why didn’t y’ hit ’im, Nat? The old bluffer!” Old Timer shook his fist in the direction of Darrow’s camp.

“My boy,” said Hector, slowly shaking his head. “William Penn said, ‘Return no answer to anger, unless with meekness, which often turns it away,’ and he was right.”

“Ah, bosh, humbug, and nonsense!” rejoined Old Timer, and he gave vent to his feelings by kicking the end of a log into the fireplace.

Old Timer, rugged and educated by the hardships of pioneer life, and wise Hector, educated by books, as well as by living, talked on and on until Nat became drowsy and crawled into the pallet of blankets that had been prepared for him on the floor.

Finally, Old Timer picked up his fiddle and played a merry tune. Hector yawned and went to bed.

With half-closed eyes, Nat thought of his cabin and of Micky, and wondered if his little coon was all

right. He guessed Scotty would let him sleep in his cabin.

Old Timer finished his tune. Nat heard him tip-toe over to him, felt him tuck the blankets snugly around him, then closed his eyes as he heard him step over to the table and blow the light out with a loud puff.

## CHAPTER IV

### MAD RIVER

Snow, white and soft as down, lay everywhere, with still more coming, as Nat, delighted, stood in the doorway of Hector's cabin, watching the falling flakes.

"Oh, boy!" he thought, "I can't go back to Camp Redwood to-day. Hector says it isn't safe. This is great!" He put on his hat and sweater and walked leisurely to the sheds to feed and water the animals.

At the goat sheds he filled the feeding-racks with hay and fed the horses, mules, Hector's two burros, and Old Timer's burro. Then he went to the cow shed at the side of the barn and fed the Jersey cow.

He walked around the barn to the chicken house, fed the chickens, and, filling his pockets with wheat, returned to the shed, where he tossed the wheat out into the snow for the sparrows that flitted about. He spent the entire morning loitering around the sheds and barn. Finally Old Timer called him to dinner. Old Timer sat down upon a bench and

absent-mindedly ran a long forefinger through a little heap of trinkets that Nat had taken from his pockets the night before, when he had hung his overalls up to dry. The heap consisted of a wad of tin foil, a bright button, a piece of colored string, a jack-knife, a couple of rubber bands, a cap from a soda water bottle, and an odd-looking stone. Taking the stone in his hand Old Timer looked it over closely and asked, "Where did y' git this?"

"I picked it up down by the river one day. Why?"

"Don't y' know what it is?"

"Yes, it's a stone."

"A stone, fiddlesticks! It's an arrerhead!"

"Arrowhead?" Nat quickly looked at the stone with surprise and new interest.

"Sure, it's an arrerhead." Old Timer turned it over in the palm of his hand. "See th' leetle chipped places on it. See here, ther's where th' Injun that made it accident'ly broke off a corner, never finished it, an' throwed it away."

"Just think." Nat took the arrowhead carefully in his fingers. "Maybe a brave Indian warrior made it."

"Yep, there was lots of Injuns around here in th' early days. They had ranches down on th' prairies along th' Mad River." He was silent for a time; then he said, "I'll tell y' what I'll do. Git yer hat

an' coat on an' I'll go huntin' with y'. It's nice an' quiet outside now 'cause it's stopped snowin' an' th' wind ain't blowin' a bit."

"You bet!" Nat turned to Hector. "Want to go with us?"

"Thank you," smiled Hector, as he turned a page in the book he was reading. "I prefer to stay inside this kind of afternoon."

Old Timer broke a trail through the snow, and Nat, with the small rifle in his hand, trudged after, trying to step in his footprints. But Nat's legs were somewhat shorter than Old Timer's and would not reach so far, so he finally gave up and just walked on behind. They were very quiet. The only sound was the "drip, drip" of the melting snow as it fell from the trees, and the "scrunch, scrunch" of heavy boots in the snow.

Suddenly there was a loud "Wh-s-s-s-s," the whistling alarm signal of the quail, as dozens of them flew out of the thicket and down through the trees.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot!" Nat quickly grabbed Old Timer's arm. "Those quail are Hector's; he feeds them all winter. They might starve when the snow covers all the seeds if Hector didn't have feeding places for them. He and I never shoot quail."

"Me, neither." Old Timer nodded understand-

ingly. "I wouldn't harm a poor little helpless bird."

The hunters followed the tracks of rabbit, coon, and wildcat, but they could not find their makers. They had about lost hope of getting any game when Nat discovered deer tracks. These they followed down the mountain and along the river, then up over ridges and across ravines.

"I think we're purty close to him now." Old Timer handed his six-shooter to Nat. "Be awful quiet an' y' might git a shot. Keep yer eyes open now fer I think he'll be in that clump of myrtle over there. Here, gimme yer 22. Y' got more chance to git 'im with this six-shooter."

They went quietly along, Nat's heart beating faster as they neared the brush; but on reaching the thicket of myrtle they found that the deer had gone. They decided to return to Hector's, and retraced their steps slowly and without enthusiasm.

They came out on a rocky point near the river and Nat sat down upon a log. "Boy, Old Timer, I'm dog-tired. Let's rest a while," he said.

Old Timer dropped down beside him and lighted his pipe. When he had finished his smoke he got up, tilted his head back, and looked at the sky. "We must be gittin' on to Hector's now, 'cause it's gittin' late. Looks like th' storm's over an' we might be able to go to Camp Redwood to-morrow."

When they arrived at Hector's, Nat went directly



to the sheds. Hector, holding a pitchfork heaped with hay, stepped from the barn door. "Well, did you get anything?" he asked.

The boy shook his head. "Not even a jack rabbit. May I help you feed the mules?"

"Yes, if you're not too tired. I've fed the goats and chickens. You feed the mules and horses and I'll go in and get supper." He handed the fork to Nat as he turned away.

Nat stepped into the barn, thrust the fork into a pile of loose hay, lifted it, and walked back to the shed. Before he had time to toss the hay into the feed-racks, the brown mule stretched his neck over, grasped a mouthful, and started to chew noisily, while he switched his short tail back and forth.

Pinkie snorted, tossed her head, and held her ears back.

"All right, Pinkie." Nat started back to the barn for more hay. "You and Dick are next."

It was growing dark, and a wisp of fog hung low over the river, hiding the cliffs below the cabin. Raising his eyes to the mountains, Nat looked long at the redwood trees, their tops piercing through the occasional blue blotches of mist that seemed to cascade down the mountains' sides. The horizon was dotted with snow-covered trees that stood out softly against the grayish-blue sky. Nat patted Dick sharply. "It looks like a city, Dick!" he said with

sudden feeling, "a big city!" He stepped from under the shed into the snow. "San Francisco," he thought, "looked just like that from the ferryboat, the evening that Father and Mother and I crossed the bay on our way to Camp Redwood." He smiled to himself. "We saw the shore line through the fog, and the great buildings, some that looked as if their tops had been squarely sliced off, and others with tall towers. Paul Bunyan buildings, that seemed to reach the sky!"

Jamming his fists into his pockets, he shook his head slowly and started to the cabin, kicking the snow with the toes of his boots at each step.

## CHAPTER V

### NAT RETURNS

It was clear and cold the next morning when Nat started on his return trip to Camp Redwood. Old Timer, with his fiddle in his hand, and with Jubilo following, led the way. He preferred to walk, and went nimbly down the narrow trail. He did not wear a coat, for by walking rapidly he could keep warm. He lived much in the open. With his burro to carry the food, a couple of blankets, a shovel, a pick, and a pan, he had prospected every sand-bar, niche, and cranny along the Trinity River and its tributaries. He slept wherever he happened to be when night came. Like a fox he had dug burrows beneath logs, beside boulders or between the roots of huge stumps, where, rolled in his blankets, he would pass the night.

Nat wondered at Old Timer's agility. "Good Old Timer," he thought. "Always happy, isn't he, Dick?" He shifted in his saddle and looked back to see if the pack train was following. He was glad to be taking the animals back with their packsaddles

empty, for the trail was slippery and dangerous. His eyes sparkled as he listened to the crackle and snap of the crust of the snow as the hoofs of the animals broke through.

The trail through the valley under the redwoods was beautiful to Nat. He saw windfalls, some leaning upon other trees and some lying under drifts of snow, with here and there a patch of green moss showing through. The ferns, some green, some old and brown, were bent to the ground by the weight of the snow. The wild blackberry vines looked as if they were long streamers of white lace draped over the logs and underbrush.

At Devil's Curve the travelers found that the recent storm had widened the breach left by the boulder that had been forced over the bank. The ground was soft, but after working for an hour, during which the upper bank was dug away and filled in with rock, Nat decided that it was safe to cross. They did so and went on toward the top of the mountain.

At noon, when they halted to eat their dinner, Nat had difficulty in finding enough dry wood to start a fire, but finally dug some out from under a log. Old Timer unpacked his frying pan and coffeepot, opened two cans of beans, cut some jerked venison, and busied himself preparing the meal.

After dinner they rested for an hour while Old

Timer played a merry tune on his fiddle. When they started on again Nat pulled his hat far down over his eyes to protect them from the glare of the sun upon the snow.

Coming out on a point at the top of the mountain, he raised his head and looked eagerly in the direction of Camp Redwood, where he could plainly see the cottages along each side of Little River and the cook-house with two rows of cabins behind it. He gave Dick a sharp pat as he said aloud, "We're almost home, Dick, and now we'll have a chance to ask Scotty what he thinks about that Lone Pine robbery. Bet he has been thinking about the green light, too! I know that had something to do with it."

Nat was anxious to talk with Scotty, for he thought that possibly the ones who had committed the robbery had been caught. This, he felt, might clear up the mystery of the light on the trail.

His heart beat faster as he thought of Micky. He wondered if Scotty had composed any new Paul Bunyan jingles, and, of course, he was anxious to know if anything had been caught in his traps during his absence.

He was disappointed when they reached the railroad track, where he had a clear view of Patsy Harrison's home, for not a soul was in sight, and he had wanted to make a grand entrance into camp. Probably Patsy and Peggy would never know that he

had taken the cruisers' outfit to the woods. Oh, well—

Suddenly he heard voices, and gazed hopefully down the track. Then he sat bolt upright, with his head held high, as he saw Peggy run out to the gate when she saw Old Timer.

“Oh, girls, here's Old Timer!” She pushed the gate open and thrust her fists into her sweater pockets. “And, O my gracious! Look who's coming along behind him!”

Three or four girls came shouting and running from a knoll behind the house, where they had been making a snow man, and all stared open-mouthed at the sight that greeted them.

Nat, sitting erect on Dick, with eyes shining, was looking straight ahead, as he led his string of mules and horses. He did, however, glance at the group to see whether Patsy, with her big blue eyes and rosy cheeks, was there. Yes, she was swinging on the gate, and she was looking straight at him with round eyes and with mouth pursed in surprise.

When Dick came in line with the gate the girls called out, “Hello, Nat!”

The boy turned his head slightly toward them and tried to seem casual in his answering salute—  
“Hello, girls!”

Patsy stopped swinging and asked, “Where've you been, Nat?”

He crooked his thumb over his shoulder and with a backward jerk of his head answered carelessly, "Over the ridge. Giddap, Dick!"

That was all. He did not look to the right nor to the left again but sat straight in his saddle as he passed Old Timer, who had stopped to talk to the girls.

At the cook-house he was given a rousing welcome. Higgins hurried to him as he swung down from Dick and stepped upon the back porch. "We're glad you're back, Nat!" he exclaimed.

Mrs. Higgins stepped through the doorway and put a plump arm around his shoulder. "Where were you during the storm?" she asked quickly. "We hoped you were with Hector. Were you, or did you stay out in the woods with the cruisers?"

"I told them you'd get back all right," interrupted Emma, who had come from the dining-room. "Did you have a good time?"

"Sure! Is Scotty here?" Nat peered through the door, then turned as he heard him running up the steps from the cellar.

"Right here!" Scotty bounded through the door at the other end of the porch and shouted, "Missed you a lot, partner. Sure am glad you're back!"

"I'm glad I'm back, too!" Nat laughed. He looked through the door to see Adams Cluff, quiet and stern in his big white apron and white cook's

cap, stirring something in a big kettle on the range.

Scotty hastened to tell him that two skunks had been caught in his traps during his absence.

“Good luck, Scotty. But where’s Micky?” Nat anxiously looked around for his pet.

“Oh, he’s here some place, I guess.” Just then Old Timer joined the group.

“Well, here’s Old Timer!” Scotty brushed a flour-covered hand upon the corner of his white apron and shook Old Timer’s hand vigorously, as he slapped the old man upon the back, exclaiming, “You wise old owl! How are you? Did you walk in through all this snow? How’s mining? Found any pockets full of gold yet?”

Old Timer tilted back his hat and scratched his ear thoughtfully. “No-o, haven’t found any pockets.” He hesitated a moment, then added, “And minin’s tolerable, jist tolerable.”

“You must be cold and tired,” interrupted Mrs. Higgins. Then turning to Nat, she continued, “You and Old Timer come in and have some hot gingerbread. We just took it out of the oven.”

“Gingerbread! Um-m, you bet! C’mon, Old Timer!” Nat and the old man followed Mrs. Higgins into the kitchen. The boy spoke to Adams Cluff as he passed him, and the cook, without even a glance, answered almost inaudibly. Just as Nat stepped into the dining-room there was a thud on



the floor, as Micky, recognizing his voice, bounded through the kitchen, with his little pointed nose held high and black eyes shining.

“Hello, Micky.” Nat reached down to pick him up. “Did you miss me?” He held the coon in his arms and gazed around. “Everything looks about the same.”

“So it is, Nat.” Mrs. Higgins took up a pan of gingerbread and started to cut large squares. “You’ve been gone quite a while, but we haven’t made any changes.”

Nat couldn’t wait any longer to find out about the robbery, so when Old Timer, Emma, and Mrs. Higgins went into the dining-room, he went over to Scotty, who was slicing bread for supper. “Did they get caught?” he asked quickly.

“Who?”

“Why, the bandits, of course! Didn’t you read the paper day before yesterday?”

“Why, yes. I guess so. I always read the paper,” Scotty said with surprise. “Why?”

“Didn’t you read about the robbery?”

“Oh, yes, sure! You mean the Lone Pine outfit?”

“Yes.” Nat nodded and waited for Scotty to say something more, but the latter, without another word, went on slicing the bread.

“Well, don’t you remember?” the boy questioned impatiently.

Scotty turned his pale eyes upon Nat.

“Remember what?”

“The green light!” Nat whispered with a secretive look.

Scotty nodded slowly. “By George, I do remember you seein’ a light out on the trail that morning. I wonder if there is any connection between that and the robbers.”

“I think so. Have they caught ’em yet?”

“No, and they’re not likely to, for those fellows are all pretty slick; and you know, Nat, there are a lot of men in these woods—men of all kinds and descriptions, bad men and good men. And once in a while we run across an ex-convict or a man out on parole. Naw, they won’t catch ’em.”

“Do you know what I’m going to do?” Nat asked. “I’m going to take a walk up there in the morning to see if I can find any tracks or anything!”

“I guess you’re the boy that could find ’em if anybody could. You’ve had enough experience hunting for tracks along the river. It always was beyond me how you could trail animals and things and see tracks where there didn’t seem to be any. But I guess it wouldn’t do any good to go up there now. The storm probably washed the trail slick and clean.”

“Yes, I guess that’s right,” Nat agreed thoughtfully.

Just then Emma ordered Nat and Old Timer to sit down while she brought them a big pitcher of milk. "You know, Nat," she said, "Scotty can peel potatoes very well, but not nearly so well as you can."

"Potatoes! Hm-m!" He had forgotten all about potatoes, and now Emma had to go and spoil everything. But, after all, he really didn't care, for he was home! The cook-house was the only home he had; and there was Micky, and a limitless supply of gingerbread. He heard Jake, the packer, coming into the dining-room.

"Hello, there! I see you got back all right," said Jake, as he walked to the table at which Nat and Old Timer were eating and sat down beside them.

Nat passed a plate of gingerbread to the packer. "Have some? It's right out of the oven."

"No, thanks, don't think I will. Have any trouble with the mules?"

"Not a bit!" Nat answered heartily.

When Nat and Old Timer had finished eating they went with Jake to the back porch.

Jake stepped up to Dick and patted him gently on the nose. "You and Nat got along pretty well didn't you, boy?" Turning to Old Timer, he said, "Better let me take Jubilo along to the sheds for the night. Pretty cold for him out in the snow under a tree."

“B’lieve I will, Jake. Much obliged. I’ll walk along with y’. C’mon, Jubilo!” He started up the railroad track with his burro jogging along behind. “See you after a while, Nat,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

The mules switched their tails and the horses pawed the ground as they impatiently waited for Jake to take them to the stable.

As the latter mounted Dick and started away he called, “You’re all right, Nat. Couldn’t have done better myself.”

Nat stood on the porch until they had turned up the track and then hurried to his cabin with Micky bounding after him. He found everything just as he had left it. He hung his “22” on the wall above his cot. The other one he called Old Timer’s cot, because the old man always slept there on his visits to Camp Redwood.

Nat lifted the lid of an old trunk, took out a clean white and blue cotton shirt and blue denim overalls and laid them upon the unpainted table at the end of the room. He then built a fire in the heating-stove so that the cabin would be warm for him after taking his bath in the shower room across the board walk.

After his bath, Nat combed his hair and put on clean clothes, then picked up Micky and went into the cook-house. In the pantry he put on his big

white apron, put the little coon outside, and regretfully closed the door. As he went into the kitchen, Scotty, who was slicing a steaming brown pot-roast that he had taken from a large kettle on the stove, paused a moment and looked at Nat in surprise. "We don't expect you to work to-night," he said quietly.

"Why not?" the boy asked.

"Aren't you tired?" questioned Scotty.

"No, not very."

"But Mrs. Higgins will help, just as she has been doing since you left."

"No," Nat shook his head slowly. "I'd just as soon. And I know Cluff expects me to," he whispered.

Cluff came out of the pantry with several cans of peaches in his arms. "Scotty, I'll 'tend to th' meat an' you open these cans," he ordered. "Nat, you wash the kettles as we dish up, just as you always do, an' don't forget that th' dishes have to be washed after supper." Picking up a pan of sliced meat, he shoved it into the middle one of the three ovens to keep it warm until supper-time.

Nat dragged the big kettle off the range, carried it across the kitchen, and set it upon the drain-board. He turned the hot water into the sink full force, and the steam rose in a cloud; then he reached for the bucket with the perforated bottom which

held the soap, and plunged it into the water until a thick soapy foam rose almost to the brim of the sink. As he turned off the water there was a footstep at the kitchen door and he heard Harrison say, "Hello, Cluff, is Nat—oh, here you are; I didn't expect you to be working, Nat."

Harrison, the superintendent, tall and thin, in khaki breeches, tan shirt, and high-top laced boots, went hurriedly across the kitchen. He was clean shaven, tan of face, and had dark hair with a sprinkling of gray at the temples. "Jake told me you were here," he said in a low, smooth voice. "When did you get back?"

"About an hour ago," Nat told him.

"Did you have any trouble on your trip?"

Nat hesitated, but only for an instant. "No!" he shook his head.

Harrison looked at him quickly.

"Where'd Darrow fix camp?"

"About fifteen miles beyond Hector's, near Fir Creek."

"Did they get fixed up before the storm?"

"Got one of the tents up. I didn't stay with them that night."

Harrison raised his eyebrows. "You didn't?" he said, in a troubled voice.

"No, I went back to Hector's. You know he has sheds for the animals."

“Hm-m. Sure. That was all right, Nat.” Harrison turned away, but halfway across the kitchen he paused and glanced back over his shoulder at the boy.

“By the way, Nat, to-morrow I’ll tell the time-keeper to give you the same wages as Jake gets for his trip. Let’s see. How long were you gone,—three days? That’ll be about fifteen dollars.”

Fifteen dollars! Nat’s eyes opened wide. “Thank you!” he said gratefully.

“That’s all right, Nat. You earned it.” Harrison smiled as he went out.

Nat grabbed a scrubbing brush and started briskly to scrub the kettle. “Fifteen dollars! Whew! That’ll make my savings come up to seventy-five dollars. Just wait till I get a hundred! Boy, when I do I’ll go right in to Eureka and put it into a bank and get one of those little books like Mr. Higgins’ that they give you to keep track of your money. Fifteen dollars for three days! Did you hear that, Scotty?”

“Sure. That’s fine,” Scotty answered heartily.

Nat glanced at the clock on the shelf above the sink. He thought to himself, “It’s nearly supper-time and Higgins and Mrs. Higgins’ll be here in a few minutes. Just wait till I tell them! And Old Timer, too!” His mouth broadened into a grin, and he sang loudly:

## THE WHISTLEPUNK

“Said the sailor to the soldier,  
‘Won’t y’ gimme a chew?’  
Said the soldier to the sailor,  
‘I’ll tell y’ what to do.’

“ ‘Save up yer money  
An’ wash out yer socks,  
An’ y’ll always have tobacccy  
In yer ole tobacccy box!’ ”



## CHAPTER VI

### IN THE COOK-HOUSE

The last day in February was a stormy one. The rain, falling in a steady downpour, caused Little River to rise over its banks.

As Nat looked out through the kitchen doorway he could see old logs and brushwood carried along by the muddy, swift-running water that had risen within five feet of the narrow foot bridge which spanned the river from the railroad track beside the cook-house to the opposite bank. He was very thoughtful. Four of his mink traps, which he had set at the edge of log jams, had been washed away. During the three weeks since he had returned from his trip into the woods with Darrow and his men, nothing had been caught in his traps. He wished he could make more extra money, as he had by packing the cruisers' outfit; or, he mused, if he could have a whistlepunk job he could save more and go to school sooner. He had talked about it to Jack Irving, boss of Camp 25. Maybe Irving had forgotten. Well, he would mention it again!

He stepped out on the porch. It had stopped raining, and ragged clouds were racing across the sky. The sun shone brightly in irregular spots on the mountain in the distance. The small new trees in the logged-off area glistened in the sunlight and looked very green. The tall weather-bleached stumps, some a hundred feet high, looked ghostly white and unreal. It seemed to him that the scurrying clouds, by casting their tattered patches of shadows upon the mountains, were trying to drive the sunlight away.

Nat stepped to the edge of the porch and looked toward Hector's. He thought of Old Timer, who had gone to Eureka, sold his gold, and returned to stay overnight with him. He had wanted him to remain until the storm had passed, but the old man was anxious to get home and had left the day before, promising to stay with Hector if it continued to rain.

Cluff's coarse voice rang unexpectedly through the cook-house. "Where's that boy? Have you seen him, Scotty? It's eleven thirty an' th' train crew'll be here fer lunch! He hasn't got th' milk on th' tables yet!" Then, in a louder voice, he called, "Hey, Nat!"

Nat hurried in, took down from the shelves four white pitchers, and went over to the big milk cans standing just inside the door.

“Well!” Cluff looked sourly at him. “Where’ve you been? Dreamin’ as usual, I s’pose. You’d better hurry or you’ll not have th’ milk on and th’ bread sliced before dinner.”

Scotty grinned. “I’d help you, Nat, but I’ve got to make this salad dressing, and I’m late now.”

As Nat went about his task, Scotty watched him sympathetically. “Hey, Nat!” he called, after a time, “How do you like this one?” Without waiting for a reply, he recited:

“It took six dozen good-sized hens  
 Just three weeks long, and then,  
 They laid an egg that was big enough  
 For Paul’s gigantic men.

“It stood on end in the kitchen,  
 Then each morning regularly  
 The men marched by with dippers,  
 And helped themselves, you see.”

Emma came in from the back porch. Her small brown eyes widened and her hands flew up. “Land sakes alive! And I see somebody helping himself to some sugar.” She hurried through to the dining-room but was not quick enough to catch the culprit before he had knocked a sugar bowl and a pitcher of milk over in his haste to get away. A stream of milk and sugar ran down the center of the table. Salt and pepper shakers rolled off, and catsup flowed in a red circle upon the white oilcloth.

"Git, you scallawag!" Emma cried. "You'd better keep out of my dining-room." She grabbed at Micky as he bounded past her into the kitchen, where he pawed at Nat's boot for protection.

"Micky," exclaimed Nat, "how did you get in here, and what did you do that for, anyway?" He picked up the little coon and after shaking him soundly went out and locked him in his cabin, after which he hastened into the dining-room to help Emma reset her table.

Emma was very angry. "Nat," she said sharply, "you'll have to keep that animal out of the dining-room. He's a regular nuisance. We surely will be late to-day!"

"I'll help you, Emma." Nat picked up the sugar bowl and pitcher and started into the kitchen to refill them.

"You'll help! Who's going to do *your* work while you're helping me? Who's going to slice the bread and fill the milk pitchers?" Red catsup splashed on the bib of her short white apron and the sleeve of her blue gingham dress. "Now look at that! Ruined! The stain'll never come out!" She dabbed at it quickly as she glanced through the dining-room door and into the pantry. "Hm-m!" She stood with hands on her hips. "Look!" she said, through narrow lips.

Nat stepped to the pantry door and peered in.

He saw Micky carefully step along a shelf from can to can without knocking any over, then hop down to the floor. For a moment he was amazed. "How in the world did you get back here?" he said. Then he recalled that he had left the cabin window open. "Oh, I know now!" he exclaimed, as he picked up the coon.

Cluff growled, "Take him to your cabin, and don't let me catch him in this kitchen again!"

"All right, Mr. Cluff." Nat glanced at Scotty, who was rapidly beating eggs and oil in a bowl, and again went out, put his pet in the cabin, and closed the window and the door just as Engine 33 pulled up to the cook-house and stopped. He ran into the kitchen, reached for the dipper, and started to fill the milk pitchers.

"Gracious sakes!" exploded Emma. "Here's the train crew now. Thank goodness the crew of Number 30 is going to eat at Camp 24 to day."

Bill Fleming, the conductor, was the first to enter for dinner. "Hello, there!" he said, as he walked past Nat. "How's the boy?" He flung his coat and hat on the floor behind the range. "How's chances for something to eat, Cluff?" He hitched up his blue denim overalls and took his short-stemmed pipe from his mouth, slipping it into a pocket of his green and black plaid shirt.

"Well, you're early, but guess we can fix you

something.” Cluff turned a sizzling thick steak on the top of the range. “Got a table ready fer th’ train crew, Emma?”

“No, not quite,” answered Emma from the dining-room.

Shorty, the engineer, and the rest of the crew, two brakemen and the firemen, were not long in following Fleming into the kitchen. Shorty pulled his watch from the bib of his overalls. “Eleven forty-five. Dinner pretty near ready, Scotty?”

Scotty stepped to the range and lifted the lid of a big aluminum kettle. “The soup’s ready; good substantial soup, just like that which Pea Soup Shorty made for Paul and his loggers.”

“What kind of soup is that, Scotty?” Shorty peered into the kettle. “Smells good. Must be a good soup if Paul and his men et that kind, for Paul certainly fed his men well.”

Nat looked up and grinned as Scotty stirred the soup with a long-handled spoon. “But Pea Soup Shorty didn’t stir his soup that way,” he said knowingly.

“Gosh, no!” exclaimed Scotty, as he raised his bushy eyebrows and sang in a deep voice:

“In Paul’s enormous kitchen  
There was a great big lake,  
Brimful of steaming pea soup  
That Shorty loved to make.

“It was no easy task to stir  
This soup lake so gigantic;  
To find a ladle big enough  
Poor Shorty was quite frantic.

“He thought it out in every way  
And planned it con and pro,  
And then an idea crossed his mind  
Quite reasonable, and so

“A Mississippi River boat  
With paddles on its side  
Was bought to stir the lake of soup  
So deep and long and wide.

“The plan proved most efficient,  
The peas swirled far and fast;  
And when the soup was ready  
The whistle boomed a blast.”

“What whistle boomed a blast?” Emma called from the dining-room.

“Why, the whistle on the boat that stirred the lake of soup in Paul Bunyan’s kitchen,” Scotty told her.

Then Shorty asked, “Do you folks happen to know who always pulled the whistle cord on the boat?”

Nat, with a milk pitcher in each hand, stared inquisitively at Shorty. “No,” he said, slowly. “Who?”

Shorty patted himself on the chest as he took a deep breath. “I did!” he said grandly.

“Oh, is that so!” Scotty’s sandy mustache bristled. “I suppose that’s why you’re so handy at tootin’ the whistle on the old 33, eh?”

“Yes, sir! That’s it. You know I worked several months for Paul when he was loggin’ off the—”

“Say,” interrupted the fireman. “How about eats?”

“Go ahead and eat.” Cluff turned to Emma. “Get th’ soup on fer these fellows, they’re in a hurry as usual.”

Nat helped Emma carry the heavy pitchers of soup from the kitchen to the dining-room, while Scotty mashed potatoes and sang:

“When spuds were served to the loggers,  
All mashed and heaped in a pile,  
They were dipped with a big steam shovel  
And served in mighty fine style.”

“And how about the gravy?” Fleming asked. Like a flash Scotty struck a low note and went on:

“A great big heavy water tank  
Was filled plumb brimmin’ full  
And fixed with wheels upon it  
For old Blue Babe to pull.

“Then around the loggers’ table  
He made one trip a meal,  
And served the steaming gravy  
With ardor, zest, and zeal.”



“Some ox!” Fleming said as he walked into the dining-room and sat down at a table.

Scotty snorted: “Why, that mountain-blue ox was just exactly forty-two axe handles and a plug of chewing tobacco wide between the eyes. When he ate his bales of hay, it kept six men busy picking the baling wire out of his teeth.”

“Yeh? I guess so.” Fleming reached for some small round crackers and dropped them into a bowl of soup.

Shorty, the engineer, sat directly across the table from Fleming. “Yes, sir, that’s correct!” And as Nat brought in two large bowls of mashed potatoes, he asked, “How about it, Nat?”

“Sure thing!” Nat grinned. “Say, ever hear about the time Paul sent the logs down the Mississippi River?”

Shorty took a ladleful of soup from a pitcher to his right, then looked up sharply. “No, tell us.”

“Well,” Nat said, as he stood at the end of the table with his arms crossed, “one year Paul rafted his whole season’s cutting of logs down the Mississippi River, but when they arrived at New Orleans the prices had gone down so low that it looked as though he were going to lose a lot of money on them. Paul felt awful bad about it because you know he was pretty thrifty and he didn’t want to sell at such a loss. He couldn’t leave them there, so Brim-

stone Bill, Babe's keeper, just led old Babe right into the river (it wasn't even knee deep to old Babe), and that blue ox just drank so much water that the logs all floated back to Paul's camp again."

"Boy!" exclaimed Shorty. "Babe sure was a great help to Paul!"

"You bet!" Nat agreed. "Y'know, Paul nearly lost Babe once. When he was logging in Oregon he had two honey bees, Buzz and Fuzz. They were as big as mules and he always kept them caged, excepting in honey season, when he let them out to gather honey." His eyes swept the group of men as he went on jubilantly. "One day, a flunky accidentally left the door of their cage open. They flew out, made straight for Babe's shed, and just naturally stung him almost to death. It made him so sick that Brimstone Bill couldn't find any food to agree with him and they all thought he was going to starve to death. Finally Paul thought of an idea. He waded right out into the ocean and herded a school of whales into Coos Bay; and they fed whale's milk to Babe. But that didn't seem to help him any, and he just kept wasting away. Paul and Brimstone Bill were almost crazy with worry and anxiety and they didn't know what to do. By this time, the bees had been caught and put back into their cages. Then Brimstone Bill happened to think that Babe was awful fond of honey. Well,

they just naturally made those bees work so hard, day and night, gathering honey for Babe that they wore their wings all ragged and couldn't fly any more until they had sprouted new ones. The honey agreed with Babe so well that it wasn't long before he was back at work again as strong as ever." Though Nat's eyes twinkled with mirth, he spoke very seriously, for he knew that all Paul Bunyan yarns must be told with perfect earnestness.

"By George!" exclaimed Shorty, "I remember that well! That was the time that Buzz and Fuzz had to check their stingers with Sourdough Sam so they couldn't sting any more."

"Yes, that's it!" Nat went on quickly. "And after they had sprouted new wings Sourdough Sam made them gather honey for the lumberjacks to put on their knives when they ate, to keep the peas from rolling off!"

Shorty snickered and the rest of the crew laughed outright, but Nat hurried into the kitchen, for just then Scotty called, "It's twelve, Nat. Ring the gong."

Nat hurried out to the steps at the front door, where a six-foot iron rod, bent into the shape of a triangle, had been hung by a rope from the roof. With a small iron rod he struck the triangle a series of sharp blows. Ding, dingity, ding, dangity, ding!

Nat liked this best of anything, for he tried to

play different tunes on the triangular rod at each meal, as the men filed into the dining-room. He said that his tunes were the loggers' favorite music because they meant "food."

At the first tap of the gong Snappy Dillon, tall and stern-featured, without even a glance at Nat, shuffled into the dining-room, and several dozen stalwart lumberjacks hurried from their cabins where they had been waiting. Nat liked to watch them as they crowded into the enclosed porch, where they hung their soggy rain-hats before entering the dining-room. He looked longingly at their short canvas rain-coats, their bright plaid mackinaws, and their heavy canvas pants, with the legs turned up to form wide cuffs just below the tops of their high-top waterproof shoes. All the lumberjacks had calks in the soles and heels of their boots, that made tiny holes in the board floor as they walked along.

Nat looked at the badly worn center of the steps, where the sharp calks of many heavy boots had worn a trail. He thought that if he should ever get the whistlepunk job, he, too, would wear calks in his boots to keep from slipping off the stumps and logs. Several of the men spoke to Nat and the boy smiled and answered each one.

As the last logger filed in, Nat gave the gong a final bang with the rod and followed. He liked to hear the clumping and scraping of heavy boots

as the men walked to the tables, and to see the men take their places and pull the long benches to the tables with loud bumps.

For the next few minutes he was very busy helping Emma and Scotty wait on the loggers. As quickly as the dishes were emptied he carried them to the kitchen, where Cluff refilled them, to be carried back again. He refilled bread plates and vegetable dishes and carried empty soup bowls to the sink, where he stacked them upon the drain-board, to be washed later. He listened to the clinking and clattering of heavy dishes as the men ate hurriedly so that they might rest a few minutes before going to work after they had returned to the woods, a mile from Camp Redwood.

Shorty, the engineer, was the first to finish and to go out. The rest of the trainmen soon followed him to the engine, which was standing on the track beside the cook-house.

Nat heard three short blasts of the whistle, which, he knew, was the signal to back up; then came the familiar clang of the bell as the fireman pulled the bell cord, and the "33" went out of sight.

After all had finished their dinner and gone, Nat took a small uncooked fish, an apple, and a generous slice of cake into his cabin for Micky. Just as he came out of the doorway he met Mrs. Higgins.

"Is dinner ready, Nat?" she asked.

“Yes, m’am, and the men have all gone.”

Mr. and Mrs. Higgins and the cook-house crew always ate after the others had finished, so Mrs. Higgins went into the dining-room, where Emma had set one end of a table for them.

A little later Nat stood at the sink, washing dishes.

He looked out of the window. It was raining. He heard a long, loud blast of a donkey engine’s whistle at Camp 25 on the top of a mountain across the river, and said to himself, “One o’clock. The loggers are going to work. Wish I was with ’em out in the rain. It’s better’n this, and anyway if it rains too hard they can all come in. I’ll say washin’ dishes is no job for a man. Wish I was a whistle-punk.” He looked longingly toward the mountains.

Scotty interrupted his musings: “I’ve lost my turkey wing. I know I left it right here on this shelf but it’s gone, and now I haven’t anything to dust my range with. Anybody seen it?” he asked.

“I haven’t,” Nat said in a far-away voice, for although he was busy swishing plates around in the foamy dishwater, his mind was out of doors as he went on with his work, washing the cups and piling them upside down upon the towering irregular piles of plates and soup bowls.

Suddenly the bowls began to slide! Nat grabbed wildly at them, but his hands were wet and the dishes

were slippery. With a loud clatter some of the plates and soup bowls slid over the edge of the drain-board into the sink and some slid out on the table where Cluff was kneading dough. Others fell with a crash to the floor, breaking into pieces as they landed. The cups followed the other dishes to the floor, their handles flying in every direction. One of the cups rolled to the cook's feet and others made a crooked line to the range.

For an instant Nat stood with narrowed eyes and tightened lips. Then, as he felt his face flushing, he stooped to pick up the pieces.

Scotty turned quickly at the first crash. "Guess your check this month won't amount to much after the money for all those dishes is deducted," he said, as he raised his bushy eyebrows and pursed his lips.

Emma bounded through the dining-room door. "For land's sakes, what's the matter?" And, as she looked at the broken dishes, she cried, "Well, that's a pretty mess, I must say!"

Nat glanced from Scotty to Emma, then back again, as Jake, the packer, stepped into the kitchen.

"What's all the racket? Looks like a cyclone's struck the kitchen," said Jake.

"Nat," roared Cluff, "this'll haf to stop! You're on duty in th' kitchen now; not out in th' woods punkin' whistles. If it ain't that coon of yours causing a rumpus in th' kitchen, why then it's you.

An' I say it's got to stop. An' I don't mean maybe!"

Nat bit his lip. "Yes, sir," he said, sheepishly.

Emma hurried to the back porch for a dust-pan and broom. "Wait a minute, Nat, we'll sweep up the pieces."

Scotty stooped to help, while he sang in a deep baritone:

"Sourdough Sam made some doughnuts,  
Each the size of a reel of cable;  
Then Babe was hitched to a thousand-ton sled  
And hauled them to the table."

"A what?" Jake stepped up beside the range. "A thousand-ton sled? That's a good-sized sled, I'll say!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir!" Scotty held the dust-pan while Emma swept the pieces of china into it, and continued:

"Ole, the blacksmith, made this sled,  
It took him just a minute  
To make it big enough for Babe,  
With a billion rivets in it."

Jake rubbed his chin. "You don't say!" he said soberly.

Nat smiled, for he thought there was no end to Scotty's cleverness in composing Paul Bunyan jingles.



After the broken dishes had been cleared away, and Emma and Scotty had gone back to their work, Jake stepped to the sink, where Nat had begun carefully to wash the remaining stacks of dishes.

“Say, Nat,” he said, “just where’d that fellow Darrow make camp?”

Nat looked at him quickly. “It *is* time for you to take supplies out, isn’t it? Are you going in this rain?” He thought with distaste of the night when he had been caught in the storm in the redwoods, and wondered how the cruisers fared.

“Yes, I’ve got to go, rain or shine. But it looks like it might clear off to-night.” Jake peered out the window.

Nat picked up a knife and started to trace, upon the drain-board, the trail which they had followed. “Of course, you remember we went to Hector’s? Here’s Hector’s.” He pointed to a small round stain on the drain-board. “You take the trail around the pasture and down the canyon. Just follow along until you come out of the redwood. You know the place.”

Jake nodded.

“Don’t take the left-hand trail.”

“By George! That’s just what I’d have done. I thought they went northward!”

“No.” Nat shook his head. “Take the right-hand, southward trail up the ravine, clear up to the

top of the mountain, to the headwaters of Fir Creek. That's where you'll find the camp."

"All right, thanks, Nat." Jake turned to Cluff. "Have you got a list of the grub for Darrow?"

"Yes," Cluff answered. "I'll git it. It's in th' pantry." He got it and handed it to Jake.

"You jist as well keep it, or leave it with th' store-keeper."

"Sure. I'll do that. Guess I'd better be gettin' down to the store now so the clerk can put up the order this afternoon."

As Jake started out, Nat called.

"Be careful at Devil's Curve. You know the trail slid out while I was at Hector's, but Old Timer and I fixed it the best we could on our way back."

"All right, s'long."

"Good luck, Jake." Nat thought of his trip into the mountains and of the check which he had received for leading the pack train. He frowned and his mouth was grim. He estimated that the money he had made on that trip would just about pay for the dishes he had broken. He sighed, then looked out of the window. A heavy mist was falling in the narrow valley, but as he raised his eyes he saw a ragged spot of sunlight upon the tall stumps and the green young trees across the river. He smiled ruefully.

## CHAPTER VII

### RUNAWAY

The next morning, when Nat went up the river to look over his trap line, he found that the water had fallen about two feet, leaving a rim of mud on each bank. More logs had been washed down to the already crowded masses of crisscrossed timber that formed the occasional log jams. Brushwood and bark floated around in the swirling ponds of muddy backwater, dammed by the jams.

He found no trace of the four mink traps that had been washed away, but all of the skunk and wildcat traps which he had set on the mountainside, between the railroad track and the river, were safe. He decided to leave them all in their places until later, when he should bring fresh bait, reset them all, and take four down to the river, where he thought he could catch another mink.

The sun shone brightly and was very warm as the boy walked back to Camp Redwood. When he reached his cabin he found Micky sound asleep on the foot of his cot. "Wake up!" he scolded. "Why

don't you sleep nights and keep awake days? You've no business roaming around nights, anyway. Wake up! wake up!" He playfully cuffed the little coon and rolled him around on the cot, but the little animal just growled and whined.

"All right, I'm going out in the sunshine."

Micky bounded to the floor and was right behind Nat as he started out.

"I thought so!" Nat exclaimed laughingly, as he walked around the corner of the cook-house to the front steps. "Now here's a good place to sleep, right here on the step in the warm sun. C'mon, Micky."

He took off his sweater and sat down on the top step. "Here, lie down on this if you're so sleepy." He folded the sweater and laid it upon the step near his elbow. Leaning back against a porch-post he started to whistle the "Song of the Whistlepunk," but Micky was wide awake now, and pulled and clawed at his master's shirt sleeve.

Just then the dispatcher, who dispatched all the logging trains and speeders over the logging railroad, called from his office across the track, "Oh, Nat, come here a minute, will you? And bring Micky along."

Nat, wondering what could be wanted, lifted Micky to his shoulder and went to the office, a small building of two rooms, built over the embankment

and supported by large piling driven into the river.

“Nat, Mr. Shannon wants to see you.” The dispatcher, a tall young man, wearing horn-rimmed spectacles and a green celluloid visor over his eyes, smiled pleasantly as the boy entered.

“Mr. Shannon!” Nat exclaimed delightedly. “I didn’t know he was here!” As he stepped through the doorway, he said, “How’d do, Mr. Shannon.”

Mr. Shannon, president of the Shannon Lumber Company, shook Nat’s hand warmly. He was well past middle-age, smooth shaven and slightly stooped; but there was a certain ruggedness about him that made Nat think of a man whose life had been lived in the open. He was very kindly and was always interested in the welfare of his employees, for he had worked most of his life in the woods, climbing up from whistlepunk to president and majority owner of the Shannon Lumber Company. Though his home was in San Francisco he often went to Mallard, on Humboldt Bay, where his large saw-mill was situated. From there, whenever he wished, he could easily make the twenty-mile trip on a speeder to Camp Redwood.

“How’s Micky? Does he know any new tricks?” Shannon asked.

“Yes, sir, he does,” Nat said proudly, as he dropped Micky down on a table. “Now shake hands with Mr. Shannon.”

Micky sat up on his haunches, blinked his little black eyes, and offered a paw.

Shannon took the paw in his hand. "Well, well," he said, very much pleased. "You're a fine fellow, and not afraid of strangers, are you?"

"Sometimes he doesn't like strangers, and bites and growls, but I think it's because they tease him. He never gets angry with anyone who's good to him," Nat said.

Micky jumped when the telephone rang sharply. The dispatcher stepped to his desk to answer the call. Micky growled loudly.

"S-s-h, Micky, be quiet while the dispatcher's talking." Nat's glance went around the room, and he thought that he, too, would like to have a big office just like this, when he finished school and was established in something worth while,—perhaps Superintendent of a Redwood Camp, like Mr. Harrison, whom he admired.

The dispatcher, having finished his conversation on the telephone, picked up a report and went over to the adding machine.

Nat turned to Shannon. "Would you like to hear Micky speak?"

"What!" Shannon stared at the coon in surprise. "Can he speak?"

"Yes, sir, he thinks he can; and he can cry, too!" Nat took Micky's forepaws in his hand and helped

him to stand upright on the table. "Now, speak, Micky, speak!" he ordered.

Looking straight at him, Micky uttered a long, growl that ended with a sharp note.

"Well, I'll be blessed!" ejaculated Shannon.

Nat chuckled proudly. "Now cry, Micky, cry loud!"

Micky whined a pitiful note that resembled a moan.

"And he can wash his face, too! Wash your face!"

Micky put his paws up to his face and rubbed them over his eyes and nose and up over his ears, just like a kitten.

"That's pretty good!" Shannon smiled.

"Oh, he always washes his face with water when I give it to him." Nat was always pleased when anyone seemed interested in Micky.

As the telephone bell rang again the dispatcher looked up from the adding machine. "Answer that, will you please, Nat? You're nearer to the 'phone than I am."

"Sure!" said Nat, taking the receiver from the hook. "Hello! Who is it? Just a minute, please." Then, turning to the dispatcher, he said, "It's Mr. Harrison. He's home and he wants to know if Mr. Shannon is ready to go with him to see the camp bosses."

Mr. Shannon spoke up. "Tell him yes, I'm waiting for him now."

Nat squared his shoulders and spoke very distinctly into the transmitter. "Yes, sir. He's here in the office and says he's waiting for you." Hanging up the receiver very carefully, he said, "Mr. Harrison says he'll be right down."

"All right, thanks, Nat." Shannon sat down in the swivel chair at the desk to wait.

A little later Nat heard a speeder stop in front of the office, and presently Harrison entered. "Hello," he smiled, "how's the coon?"

"Fine!" Nat answered, cheerily.

Turning to Shannon, Harrison said, "I'm ready to go with you to see the camp bosses now. Any trains on the road, dispatcher? We want to go to camp 25."

"Number 33 will be coming in soon," the dispatcher replied.

"All right, we'll wait at the switch-back this side of the Twin Bridges until she comes in. I'll call in for a clearance from there."

As Shannon followed Harrison out he said, "Good-bye, Nat. Take good care of Micky."

"Yes, sir, I will. Good-bye." He slipped into the chair that Shannon had just vacated.

The telephone rang again and the dispatcher answered it. "Hello! Engine 30," he repeated;



“how many loads? 22? O.K. Clear road, come in all the way.” He jotted down the information on his record sheet.

Nat glanced at the sheet. “Twenty-two loaded cars? That’s pretty good, isn’t it?”

“You bet!” The dispatcher picked up a bundle of letters and snapped a rubber band around them. “Just about time for Fleming to call in from Camp 25. I’ll have him wait at—Oh, here he is now, I guess.” He answered the telephone once more. “Hello, Fleming?—Engine 33 with 18 loads. O.K. to the Twin Bridges switch.” He hung up the receiver and spoke to Nat. “Will you stay in the office for a few minutes? I don’t think there’ll be any more calls now; if there should be, you take the message and make note of it.”

“All right,” the boy replied, feeling very important and looking hopefully at the telephone. “You behave, now, Micky,” he said, as Micky started to paw at the typewriter.

The dispatcher had been away but a little while when the bell rang. Nat jumped for the receiver and heard Fleming’s voice shouting, “She’s running away! She’s running away! Shorty can’t stop her!”

“The train’s—”

Again Fleming shouted, “33 with a string of loads! What’s the matter? Can’t you under-

stand?" He swore wildly. "30's coming in from Camp 24 and they'll crash at the Twin Bridges switch!" Then Nat heard him hang up the receiver with a bang.

For an instant the boy stood as if petrified. He remembered the orders the dispatcher had given both conductors. His teeth came together with a click. A runaway! A collision! Both engine crews would be killed! What should he do? His brain was in a whirl. He heard a series of loud "toot, toot, toots" coming from the direction of Camp 25. Suddenly he thought of the Twin Bridges switch and the abandoned logging road up the river! He sprang to the door, then out to the track.

"Runaway!" he shouted, "Higgins! Scotty! Runaway!" He hesitated no longer but ran swiftly up the middle of the railroad track, past the cookhouse, past the Harrisons'. He pictured the Twin Bridges, and the railroad, to his right, coming down the mountain from Camp 25, and across the lower bridge, where it met the road upon which Number 30 was coming in from Camp 24, to his left. "But the other bridge!" he thought desperately. "The upper bridge! And the switch!" This raced through his brain. If he could only get there before the runaway, turn the switch, and send the racing cars across the other bridge and up the abandoned road!

He heard the rumble of heavy cars and could already see them racing down the mountainside. The thought of Shorty and the rest on the runaway train made him fairly leap forward.

A short cut! Down the embankment would help! Along a trail through the soggy brown leaves beneath the alders. A huge black stump loomed up before him, but he dashed madly around it, only to run against a large fallen alder. Leaping over this he ran on and on. It was only a quarter of a mile from the office to the Twin Bridges, but Nat felt as if he had gone miles. His muscles were tired and his lungs ached so badly he could hardly breathe.

Suddenly a terrifying thought took possession of him. *What if the switch were locked?* Sometimes switches are locked, and the train crews carry the keys. He groaned aloud. "It's got to be unlocked!" he prayed. "It's *got* to be unlocked!"

The rumble of the oncoming cars grew louder. Nat's breath came in gasps as he ran on. The river to cross! He thought of an old log where he had crossed many times while making the rounds of his trap line. But what if it had been washed away! He ran up the river a little way. It was there, covered with slippery moss, but the farther end had rotted and broken off, leaving it jutting only two-thirds of the way across the swirling water.

Nat's mouth was firm. He would jump it! He

*must* do it! He hesitated a moment for breath, then running out almost to the end of the log, he leaped. His heart stood still for a moment as he hung in mid-air above the treacherous whirlpools. Then he landed on his hands and knees in the ooze and slimy rocks at the edge of the river.

Frantically grabbing a root he pulled himself from the water, but his body ached so that he could hardly move. He gazed despairingly at the Twin Bridges, only fifty yards away. With a hopeless gesture he cried, "I can't make it! I can't!" But the next moment he whispered, "Shorty, I—I will make it!" He staggered to his feet, then up the embankment. He had yet to cross the railroad to reach the switch!

The steady roar had now grown into a bedlam, and the whirling wheels and squeaking brakes screamed an ominous challenge. For a breathless instant Nat looked up at the heavily loaded, rocking, rushing cars that were almost on him—then leaped across the rails, grasped the handle of the switch, and pulled with all his might.

"Unlocked!" he panted, as he turned the handle, slipping the switch points into place against the rails. There was a deafening roar as he crouched against the bank, barely three feet from the spinning wheels, from which the rush of air, laden with sticks and rocks, almost swept him under the cars.

With one hand he clung desperately to the switch handle, while the other was hooked around a branch of a fir tree growing on the bank.

A piece of flying bark grazed him. He laughed crazily. "Safe!" he shouted. He laughed again—but the laugh froze on his face. A look of terror came into his eyes, for as the first car shot upon the bridge it jumped sidewise, seemed to poise in the air for a second, then dropped with a crash, followed by a medley of roars and loud thuds as car after car leaped through space and tons of logs tore down the mountainside, sending up clouds of dust as they dug deep through the mud to the dry earth. Splintered, death-dealing missiles were hurled into the air as the last cars piled up at the end of the bridge and engine 33 crashed into the tangled mass of wreckage not two hundred feet away. Then all was still—save for the "s-s-s-s" of escaping steam.

Nat didn't stop to think of the danger to himself from the steam, or from a possible explosion, as he bounded down the track, wildly calling, "Fleming! Shorty!" He could think only of his friends, and that he might be able to help them.

The engine was lying on its side, with the pilot jammed against a splintered flat-car. Steam rose from the front of the boiler and drifted away in a cloud. Fortunately for Nat, no steam was escaping into the cab. He bounded to the engine, clam-

bered over the oil car so he could peer down into the mass of wreckage. His heart seemed to stop as his glance hurried from the fireman's seat down to the engineer's seat, crushed and broken. "Shorty!" he shouted. His eyes glistened with joy, for his friends were not there. "They're not even here!" he said, incredulously. "I thought *sure* they'd been killed!" For a moment he was overcome, as he fully realized that his friends had escaped.

But when he heard engine 30, with its string of loaded cars, coming down the grade and around the turn on the opposite side of the river, he jumped down and walked back to the switch. Not until then did he think of the awful mass of wreckage he had caused by turning the switch that sent the train of logs over the bridge. He groaned aloud as he glanced back. He was sickened. He felt empty, and his body was limp; he crawled under the fir tree, closed his eyes, and tried to lie back against it. But, unable to lie quietly, he sat with his elbows on his drawn-up knees and his head in his hands.

He felt something soft and furry rub against his leg. Reaching out he picked it up and held it tightly in his arms. "Micky!" he cried, chokingly. "You followed me here! Micky—old pal—we're in for it—now."

The brakes squeaked, the train stopped, and the slack was taken up with a clanking noise. Nat heard

it all, but did not move. He heard running feet, excited voices, and muttered oaths, as frightened men ran across the lower bridge to search for the crew of the 33 in the wreckage. They found no one.

“By George, they must’ve all jumped off!” exclaimed a brakeman.

“You didn’t think they were fools enough to stay on, did you? I didn’t think we’d find them here.” The engineer joined the fireman, the conductor, and the brakeman, not far from Nat. He could see them through the branches of the little fir tree and could hear them talking, but he did not move.

“Wonder what Harrison’ll say about this?” The conductor looked sorrowfully at the mass of débris.

“What *can* he say?” the fireman asked. “Here comes a speeder. I’ll bet it’s Harrison now!”

Nat looked over to the railroad across the river. He could hear the loud “put-put-put” of a rapidly driven speeder, and as it shot from behind some trees he heard the brakeman say, “It *is* Harrison!” Then, “Who’s that with him? Good glory! It’s *Shannon!*”

Nat’s face whitened and his hands trembled as he stroked Micky. He feared he had done wrong. “Maybe it would have been better if I had not turned the switch,” he thought; “. . . but the other train, the 30 coming down the other side . . .” He didn’t know.

The speeder whizzed across the lower bridge and stopped. Harrison jumped off and ran up the track to the group of men. "Quite a mix-up, boys!" he said quickly. "How'd it happen? Anyone hurt? No? Where's the other crew? Anyone go up the track to find them? They might have jumped and injured themselves!"

The conductor glanced up the track. "We don't know anything about it. We just came."

Shannon stepped from the speeder and joined them. "No one hurt? Good!" he exclaimed feelingly.

"We don't know for sure. Maybe the crew jumped!"

Harrison turned to the engineer. "Take my speeder and run up toward 25. Keep going till you find them."

The engineer started at once. "All right, I'll hurry!" he said.

"Say, what I'd like to know," the conductor looked around, puzzled, "is this: Who turned that switch?" He walked to the switch to examine it.

Nat's heart pounded as he sat very still with his head in his hands.

The other men followed the conductor. Harrison nodded; "Some one certainly did turn it, for it's always lined up for the lower bridge!"

"That's very queer," Shannon said gravely.



The brakeman grasped the handle of the switch and turned it, and the speeder whizzed by.

Micky whined.

The five men turned abruptly.

“Nat!” ejaculated Shannon. “How’d you—”

“Say, kid,” broke in the conductor, as he hurried to him, “you weren’t on that train!”

“How’d you get up here? You’re not hurt, are you?” Harrison took Nat by the arm and lifted him to his feet.

“No, sir. I’m not hurt a bit.” Nat rubbed his mud-covered hands on his overalls and, stooping, tried to brush the mud from his knees.

“But I thought we left you in the dispatcher’s office!” exclaimed Shannon.

Nat looked at him very soberly. “You did, sir,” he said quietly.

Harrison looked thoughtful for an instant. “Nat,” he asked, “did you throw that switch?”

Nat stood very straight. “Yes, sir, I did,” he answered in a tremulous voice, as he looked sidewise at the pile of logs and the wreck of the 33. “I’m-m mighty glad no one was killed.”

“But how’d you get here?”

“I ran over the short cut through the alders.” He explained briefly about answering the telephone in the office.

“Do you realize, boy,” Harrison said quietly, “that

you probably saved the lives of the engineer and fireman on Number 30?"

"I was riding in the engine, too!" broke in the conductor. "Those logs sure would have done for us! —You're all right, Nat!"

"I'll say he is!" the fireman spoke up in a quivering voice.

Shannon stroked his chin slowly. "Hm-m! Unusual! Very unusual," he said thoughtfully.

"It wasn't anything." Nat felt better now. He ran his fingers through his hair. "'Most anybody've run to turn the switch so's to send the runaway over the old track up the river."

"Yes," Harrison said, "I guess so, if they'd thought of it!"

"That's it," the fireman added, gravely, "if they'd thought of it."

A little later the speeder returned with the crew of the 33 all safe and sound. Nat, Harrison, and Shannon hastened to them to find out just how the train happened to run away.

As Fleming stepped from the speeder Harrison asked sharply, "How'd this happen, Fleming?"

"Well," Fleming replied, "we shoved into 25 siding with five loads, and coupled into thirteen loads. While I was talking to the dispatcher at the telephone, getting a clearance into Camp Redwood, one of the brakemen knocked off the brakes. Shorty

was busy as usual, oiling around, when all of a sudden the loads started. Shorty jumped into the cab and set the air brakes, but the brakeman had failed to cut in the air when he coupled into the thirteen loads, so he couldn't hold eighteen loads with only five cars with air in them. Shorty whistled for hand brakes, but it would be useless to set them on a train of eighteen loads after it had started down that six per cent grade, so the crew jumped, and I guess it's a good thing for them that they did."

"Yes," Harrison said slowly, "I guess it was the only thing to do." Turning to the conductor of engine 30, who had joined the men at the switch, he told him to have his engineer whistle for the section men to come and fix the track, and then take his train into Camp Redwood and tell the dispatcher to send out the "Gallopig Goose," a huge locomotive crane, to pick up the wreckage.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE GALLOPING GOOSE

Nat went over to the pile of débris. Some of the logs had rolled into the river but most of them had piled up in a mud-splattered, tangled mass of car wheels, brake rods, and splintered planks. He drew a deep breath as he stood there thinking about the terrible destruction. He shivered at the thought of how such a seemingly trivial blunder as failure to connect the air hose on one of the cars could result in such disaster.

He heard a step behind him, and turned to see Shorty. "She's an awful mess," said Shorty.

"Yes." Nat shook his head sadly. "It certainly is a heap of rubbish."

"Oh, I don't mean the logs and cars. I mean the old 33. Her boiler's caved in, her headlight and sand dome are missing, and—gosh—there's nothing left of her a'tall."

"And her cab's in splinters and her oil tank's smashed into smithereens," Nat added. "D'you think," he questioned, "she'll ever run again?"

“Uh-huh. They’ll fix her up in the shops at Mallard, but it’ll take a little time.”

Nat still felt a little uneasy for fear he hadn’t done the right thing, and a tiny pucker appeared between his eyes when he saw Harrison coming toward him.

“Mr. Shannon and I are going back to Camp Redwood before we go up to the logging camps. Want to go with us?” the superintendent asked him.

“I’d like to stay and watch the Galloping Goose for a while. I don’t have to be at the cook-house till eleven,” Nat answered.

“All right. But be sure to stay in the clear, for a cable or something might break. It’s never safe to be too close when she’s picking up logs.” Harrison hesitated a moment and he appeared thoughtful. “Do you know, Nat,” he went on, as he placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder, “I think it was mighty fine of you to run up here and turn that switch. You saved the lives of several men.” He turned and quickly walked away.

Nat heaved a sigh of relief as he watched Harrison go toward the speeder. He had been terribly worried for fear the superintendent would think he had done the wrong thing, but it all seemed different now, and not such an awful disaster, after all, for no one had been killed.

How he did like to watch that old Galloping Goose pick up logs and swing them around in the air, just

as if they were straws! He sat on a big log, with Micky beside him, humming softly as he waited for the enormous crane. He had not long to wait, for it soon came slowly up the railroad track, chugging and rattling. Nat smiled to himself and thought the lumberjacks had given it a most appropriate name, for it really did look like a gigantic black goose, wobbling and lumbering along.

The two flat cars that it pushed were filled with steel rails and ties with which to fix the track.

Nat sat very still as he watched the Goose come clanking and rumbling across the lower bridge, pushing the flat cars past him and above the switch, where it stopped.

The section gang, eleven men and the foreman, soon followed on their speeder, which pulled a small trailer loaded with picks, shovels, claw-bars, and sledge-hammers. The speeder stopped directly in front of Nat, who watched the men as they slid from their seats, picked up their tools, and laid them beside the track. At a signal from the section boss they formed a circle around the speeder, and taking firm hold, waited for another signal.

“Now, all together, boys!” The boss motioned with his hand and in a low, emphatic voice called, “Hip!”

They lifted the car and set it down on a small flat beside the track. After the trailer also had been

lifted from the rails and set in the clear, the boss, with his gang, walked over to the bridge.

“This track’s spread! Bring four claw-bars.” He pointed at four bent rails. “These have to be taken up. Pull up the spikes!” He went on toward the Galloping Goose. “Hey,” he called to the engineer of the huge crane, “swing that boom around here with about thirty ties, will you?”

Nat watched the engineer and his helpers—or “swampers,” as they were known around camp—as the ties were lifted high into the air. He was greatly interested in their work, and as he pulled his watch from his pocket and glanced at it he frowned regretfully. “Ten to eleven!” He looked around for Micky but could not see him anywhere. He whistled shrilly, and the coon jumped down from a sunny stump where he had been asleep. Tossing him to his shoulder, Nat said aloud, “Jiminy, I’ll have to hurry!” He started across the lower bridge, running and jumping from tie to tie.

After dinner he saw the section men take their places on the speeder, which was started as soon as the last one had taken his seat.

“Wish I could go with them and watch the Goose pick up logs,” Nat thought, as he looked longingly at them. “Hope Cluff hasn’t anything extra for me to do this afternoon; then I’d have time to walk up and watch them for a while.”

But, as usual, Cluff did have extra work for Nat. After he had carried boxes of canned fruit and vegetables from the back porch, where the trainmen had left them, into the storeroom, Mrs. Higgins sent him on an errand to the company store, which was at the other end of the camp. He walked so fast on the way back that he was breathless as he went into the kitchen, where Cluff was working.

“Anything else for me to do now, Mr. Cluff?” he asked anxiously.

“Hm-m. Let’s see.” Cluff appeared to consider deeply.

Nat shifted uneasily. He hoped Cluff would not keep him waiting long. “I’d like to go up and watch the Goose a while, if you’ve nothing for me to do,” he ventured.

“Go ahead,” the cook said sharply, “but you’ll have to make up the time to-night.”

Nat hurried out, jumped off the back porch, and whistled the Song of the Whistlepunk as he started up the track, without even stopping to look for Micky, wondering in what way he would have to make up the time.

At the Twin Bridges he found that the track had been fixed and the section men had gone. Engine Number 30 had taken away the cars of rails and ties and had switched three empty flat-cars in their place. The Galloping Goose had turned around again with



its boom swinging out toward the upper bridge, as the swamper turned the switch, and it "chugged" down the track to the huge pile of débris, pulling the empty cars along behind.

Nat went up on the bank, where he could have a clear view of the logs and demolished cars as they were lifted by the boom and loaded upon the flat-cars.

Taking the large hook which was fastened to the end of the wire rope that dangled from the boom, the helper walked around the old 33 and down a few feet to one of the flat-cars which had been crushed and was lying upon a crisscrossed pile of logs and wreckage. It took him several minutes to pull the end of the wire rope under and around the broken car and fasten the hook to the rope as close to the car as possible, so that when it should be lifted it would be held tightly by its own weight. After making sure that the hook was secure he jumped from log to log until he had reached a place far enough below the wreckage to be in the clear if pieces of the car should fall, or the rope should break.

Nat's eyes widened as he watched. He saw the swamper climb upon a boulder that jutted out over the river, and heard him shout, "Hey, Nat!"

Stepping forward, Nat answered loudly, "What do you want?"

"Get up on that stump back of you and pass the

signals to the engineer; I can't see him from here."

Nat climbed to the top of the redwood stump and called out, "Ready?"

The swamper passed him a signal which he knew meant to "go ahead easy." Turning to the engineer he held both of his fists, with forefingers up, out in front and shook them slowly.

The engineer moved a lever, the slack in the rope was taken up, and the Goose roared and puffed as it started to lift the heavy car. Though Nat signaled the engineer, his eyes were glued to the swamper, for he did not want to give the wrong signal. The car cracked and began to slip. Nat's arms shot straight out as the swamper gave the signal to stop. The car was let down upon the pile of logs and the swamper ran to fix the choker around it in a stronger place.

Nat grinned to himself and wished that Scotty could see him working with the Goose. And the Harrison girls, too! He had not forgotten how Patsy had laughed at him right before Darrow when he accidentally kicked over the bucket of potatoes. He wished she would come along now. He guessed she wouldn't laugh now!

After the choker had been fixed the swamper again gave the "go ahead easy" signal to Nat, who passed it on to the engineer. This time the car was lifted high above the other wreckage, swung around, and

dropped upon a flat-car, where the other swamper unhooked the line. The Goose turned back again, the boom was lowered, and another wrecked car was loaded.

And then came the logs.

Nat's eyes were shining as he watched the logs, each in its own turn being choked with the end of the cable, made fast with the hook, lifted high into the air, swung around, and laid aside in a neat pile to be loaded later and sent on its interrupted journey to the mill.

He hoped he could get through with his work early so that he might return and watch longer. But he was soon disappointed, for Cluff told him that he must help clear the tables so that the benches could be piled upon them, for it was scrubbing night. "Scrubbing night!" He had forgotten all about that.

Nat was very quiet as he helped Emma clear the tables. He helped scrub the floor but hurried through the task as fast as possible. Then he ran to his cabin, switched on the light, hung up his sweater, and glanced around for Micky. But the little coon was not there. "Wonder where he is," he thought. "Wish he'd stay in the cabin nights."

## CHAPTER IX

### A SURPRISE

“Come on, Micky. Want to take a walk?” Nat had hurried through his work the day after the wreck and had two hours off before supper time. “We’ll go up and see what the Goose is doing this afternoon. Maybe she’s got the 33 on the track. Hey! Wait a minute,” he called, for Micky had bounded past him and was running up the track as fast as his little legs could carry him.

Nat followed, half walking and half running. “I wonder what he wants?” he thought to himself. Suddenly he saw Micky dash to a little shallow pool beside the track. “Micky!” he exclaimed. “What’s the matter with you? What’re you after, there?”

Micky did not stop to answer but bounded around and around, only occasionally stopping to dip his paw into the water.

Nat investigated, then laughed loudly as he discovered the cause of the little coon’s excitement.

“Why, Micky,” he said, “there’s not a frog in that pool. They’re only tadpoles and haven’t even lost

their tails yet. It'd take you all day to catch enough of those to make a meal. C'mon with me. I'll show you where you can find some nice frogs over in the willows."

Nat walked on to a small marshy flat, surrounded by pussy willows, their reddish-brown limbs covered with velvety silver catkins. In its center was a pond of clear water, almost hidden by tall cat-tails and tufts of marsh grass. He heard a loud "cr-rock-ett," and was quick enough to see a slim green frog drop into the water and glide quietly down, to disappear in the green frog spit at the bottom of the pond.

"Here, Micky!" he called excitedly. "Hurry!" He picked up Micky and tossed him to a tuft of grass near the end of the log. Dozens of big and little frogs leaped from tuft to tuft and down into the water, with Micky jumping after them. He became so excited on seeing so many of the little hopping creatures that he ran around and around in bewilderment until all the frogs had found places of safety.

Nat laughed as he looked at Micky sitting in the center of a tuft of grass, gazing about in astonishment, and wondering how they had vanished so quickly.

"You're a fine coon. Didn't even catch one! Here's one for you!" Nat reached under the log

upon which he was standing, pulled out a frog, and held it up by its hind leg. Just as he tossed it to Micky he heard laughing voices in the Harrisons' yard at the upper end of the marsh. He listened intently. "Guess I'll walk past there on my way to the wreck. C'mon, Micky." Whistling softly to himself he started across the marsh.

He stopped for a moment outside the picket fence, for he found that the voices were coming from Patsy's playhouse, an old redwood stump, twenty feet in diameter, which had been hollowed and blackened by fire. It had ridges and shelves and realistic seats and benches, and, in places, holes which served as windows. A potted geranium adorned one window, and a crude window-box, overflowing with yellow violets, was nailed to the stump beneath another. Carpets of green oxalis grew between the stump house and the fence.

Patsy was just reaching through the window to pick a violet as Nat was passing.

"O-oh!" she exclaimed. "Here's Nat!"

Nat heard Peggy ask, "Where?" And then Peggy, Patsy, June, and their little three-year-old sister ran out to the fence, followed by four or five other children.

"We're going to play show. Want to play with us?" Peggy asked, smiling at him.

Nat shook his head. "No," he laughed.

“Oh, come on, Nat,” urged Patsy. “You won’t have to act. Honest you won’t. You can be in the audience. Honest and truly, cross my heart, hope to die if I should tell a lie!” With a quick motion of her forefinger she marked an imaginary cross over her heart.

“Where’s Micky? Didn’t you bring him?” Little Sister peeked through the pickets of the fence and looked around, as Nat whistled shrilly and Micky came bounding from a thicket of salmon berry bushes near by.

“We’ll have Micky in the show; may we, Nat?” Peggy patted Micky as his master lifted him to a fence post. “Isn’t his gray fur soft and fluffy? And the little black stripes across his face make him look so cute. He’d be a fine actor. Please, Nat.”

“And, oh, gracious,” said June, “I’ll go and get my cat. He likes to play show. He’ll say ‘Meow, m-e-o-w’ every time I tell him to. Not the gray one, but the black one with white trimmings.”

The little sister laughed and a dimple appeared above each corner of her red mouth and her blue eyes sparkled as she cried, “I’ll go catch Ichabod Crane, my little red rooster, for the circus.” Running and skipping, she followed June around the corner of the stump house.

But not even all that could tempt Nat to stay. “I’m going on up to the wreck,” he said. “Maybe

they'll need me to pass signals again to-day! S'long." With a glance at Peggy and Patsy he turned and started across to the railroad track. But presently he stopped, for he saw Darrow going out of the front gate. He frowned, and his eyes narrowed as he thought, "I wonder what he's doing here? And how'd he get here? With Jake? That's it. Jake would be back from the woods to-day with the pack train."

Just then Harrison called from his office, a small room built on to the front of his house. "Nat, come here, will you?"

"Yes, sir." Nat dropped Micky and started toward the office. "Now, I wonder what *he* wants." For a moment his heart beat wildly. "Maybe about the wreck, or Darrow. That's just about it." He passed Darrow as he went on, but the latter did not look at him so Nat did not speak.

For a moment the boy stood on the porch. The office door was open and he could hear the superintendent talking with Jack Irving.

"Y'know," Harrison was saying, "this sure surprises me. Thought there'd be lots more cedar out there than Darrow specifies here in this report."

"Well, he's hardly got a good start cruising the timber yet," Irving answered.

"Yes, but this gives us an idea, anyway. Shannon will be disappointed."



“Yes, you bet! But I’d not worry till it’s all cruised. Oh, hello Nat!” Irving got up from his chair and towered above the boy as he entered.

“Hello; sit down!” Harrison, in his swivel chair at his desk, turned to Nat. “I called the cook-house on the telephone and Scotty said you were going up to the wreck. We’ve been watching for you. Irving has been having a lot of trouble with the whistle-punk at 25 and he’d like to know right away if you’ll take the job. Good chance for advancement as you grow older. ’Most every one working in the woods started out punking whistles.”

Nat’s heart leaped as he thought, “Will I take it!” He answered quickly, “I’ll sure take the job!” He grinned as he went on delightedly, “That’ll be great! I’d sure like to work in the woods! Thanks, Mr. Harrison, and you, too, Irving.” And then he thought, “No more white aprons, no more potatoes to peel or dishes to wash. Gee! Wait’ll I tell Scotty and Emma!”

Harrison smiled as he watched the boy and sensed his pleasure. “You may keep your cabin here and board at the cook-house,” he told him.

“Board at the cook-house? Won’t that be great! I’ll be working *with* the lumberjacks instead of waiting on ’em. And I can wear real men’s clothes. Calked boots, canvas pants and rain-coats, plaid

mackinaws, and overalls with the legs fringed at the bottom!"

"We'll make a lumberjack out of you, Nat. You'll start in the morning?" Irving questioned.

"You bet!" Nat exclaimed, as he started to leave.

Harrison followed him to the door. "I hope you'll like your new job. Of course you'll get a raise."

"Thank you. I'll like it. That's sure!" Nat whistled for Micky, who came bounding around the house. He took him in his arms and hurried through the gate. "We'll not go to the wreck now, Micky," he said aloud. "We've got a new job. Got to get ready to go to work in the woods to-morrow. What do you think of that? Pretty good, I'll say!"

## CHAPTER X

### THE WHISTLEPUNK

After leaving Harrison's office Nat went directly to the cook-house. "Scotty! Emma!" he shouted as he ran in, "I've got a new job."

"What's that?" Cluff demanded, from the table where he was kneading dough.

"What!" exclaimed Scotty. "You've got what?"

Nat stood very straight, with eyes shining. "I've another job, out in the woods!"

"Out in the woods?" Cluff looked mystified.

"Helping the Goose pick up the wreck, eh?" Scotty asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

"No, sir," Nat grinned. "Punking whistles!"

"Well, I swan!" Scotty gave the boy a sound pat on the shoulder. "That's all right, sure enough, but we'll miss you a lot in the kitchen."

"Where's Emma?" Nat asked suddenly.

"I think she's in the cabin with Mrs. Higgins. About time she's getting into the kitchen, too!"

"Call her, Scotty!" ordered Cluff, who then surprised Nat by saying, "Did you know that Hector is here?"

“Hector? No! Where is he?”

“I think he’s in your cabin.”

“Boy!” Nat exclaimed. “Wait’ll I tell him!”  
And he hurried out.

“Well, well!” Hector exclaimed as they shook hands. “How are you, Nat?”

“Fine! How’re you? Been waiting long? I didn’t know you were here.” The boy gazed affectionately at Hector, old and dignified, his clear blue eyes always friendly, his mouth, under his shaggy white mustache, rather firm but always ready with a smile.

“No, not long. I followed Hank in. That man Darrow came in, too. He’s going back with me to-morrow.”

“I saw him.” Nat was eager to tell Hector about his new work, and the light leaped into his eyes as he said, “I have a new job, Hector.”

“Is that so?” Hector said in surprise. “You’re not working in the kitchen any more?”

Nat shook his head vigorously. “No, not after to-night. This is my last day there. I’m going to work at Camp 25, punking whistles! Won’t it be great, Hector?”

“I should say so!” agreed the old man. “I’m glad to hear it.”

After supper Nat went down to the company store. The storekeeper was busy, and Nat joined

the loggers in the back end of the room. As he did so he saw Darrow come in and stop at the tobacco stand.

Nat glanced over his shoulder at him, then busied himself looking at some overalls and rain-coats, until the storekeeper could wait on him. Presently he heard the latter say, "Well, Nat, what can I do for you?"

"Boots!" Nat said emphatically, "with calks—"

He was interrupted by loud tappings upon the cigar case. "I'd like to get waited on!" Darrow said darkly.

The storekeeper looked up in astonishment. "Why, er—Nat, here, came in first."

Darrow grumbled, "Well, what of it? I'm in a hurry!"

"Maybe the kid's in a hurry, too!" replied the other.

"You got only one clerk in this store?" Darrow scowled and went out, muttering something about lumber camps' stores and clerks in general.

"Who's that bird?" the storekeeper asked.

"Oh, he's one of the men cruising the cedar timber for the Shannon Lumber Company," Nat replied, indifferently.

"Hard-boiled, eh?" He took down a box of shoes. "Is this what you want?"

Nat pinched the heavy black leather and ran his

fingers over the sharp calks in the thick soles. "Sure!" he exclaimed. "That's what I want."

"Try 'em on?"

"No, I'll wait till I get to the cabin. If they don't fit I'll exchange them. Let's see some socks."

He bought some heavy white woolen socks with wide red stripes around the top, overalls and suspenders, a red and black plaid mackinaw, and a brown canvas rainproof hat with a narrow brim that turned up all around. Then he hurried to his cabin. "Look, Hector," he said, as he unrolled the bundles on his cot. "No more white aprons for me. See my overalls? No bib." He held them up to his waist. "I've got suspenders. Good ones, too. See?" Picking up the striped suspenders he stretched them and let them snap.

Hector took up one of the shoes. "What's this? Calked soles?" he asked.

"Sure!" Nat chuckled as he unlaced his shoes and kicked them off. "To keep from slipping off the logs."

"That's right," Hector agreed. "All lumberjacks wear calked boots." Then he examined the mackinaw. "That's a fine one. Good and heavy. It'll be warm."

Nat put on his new boots, laced them, and stood up very straight. He could feel the sharp calks sinking into the wooden floor. Stepping forward,

he glanced over his shoulder to see the holes left there as he walked. "All right, aren't they, Hector? Just a fit!"

"Better waterproof them. They'll last longer," Hector suggested.

The next morning Nat dressed with care. As he stood before his small mirror he smiled proudly. He put on his new canvas hat and turned the brim up all around.

Just then the gong rang for breakfast.

"There's the gong, Hector, come on!" Nat quickly put on his plaid mackinaw. Then he and Hector walked over to the cook-house, entered the dining-room, and sat down beside Axel, a big Norwegian who worked on the rigging crew at Camp 25, and who occupied a cabin with Scotty.

Mrs. Higgins, looking shorter and plumper than ever in a pink and white gingham dress and a short white apron, set a platter of bacon and eggs upon the table. "I see you're ready for the woods, Nat. Fine outfit you have on. Come in the kitchen and show Higgins before you go," she said, smiling at him.

"Yes, m'am. Are you going to work in my place here?"

"Yes, I think I'll work all the time now. I like it."

Nat was eager to get to the woods. He ate

quickly, but took time to look around at the lumberjacks. He was one of them. He was eating with them, instead of waiting on them. They were going to the woods, and when the whistle blew this morning he would be with them.

After Higgins, Scotty, and Emma had admired his outfit, he said good-bye to Hector and went across the foot-bridge. On the other side of the river he met Jack Irving, starting up the trail through the redwoods.

“Hello! Ready for work?” called Jack.

“You bet!” Nat was inexpressibly happy as he followed the camp boss along the narrow trail through the forest of stately redwood trees that had been standing there for ages. Hector had told him the history of the trees, and as he walked along he seemed to appreciate more fully the awe-inspiring story.

Hector had not called them redwoods, but “*Sequoia Sempervirens*” which, he said, meant “always green.” And he said that the only place in the world where they grow is on the coast of California. “They are living remnants of former types of vegetation now almost extinct,” had been Hector’s words. Nat had said them over to himself afterwards, for he liked their sound, and the thought of anything thousands of years old thrilled him.

He wondered about the strange animals that had



walked beneath these trees, the queer birds that had nested in their branches, the strange reptiles that had crawled through the dense underbrush, and the people! Hector had told him about the Indians. But before the Indians—?

For five years Nat had lived in the redwoods and admired them, but he had never realized their majesty until Hector had told him of their age. Now that he was going to work in the woods he felt like one of the pioneers Old Timer told about.

Irving turned to his right and Nat saw before him, lying about in confusion, acres of trees, cut and sawed, and ready to be hauled to the mill. Bark, chips, and sawdust were lying about in heaps.

He had come out of the virgin forest to the area where he was to work. He stopped suddenly.

Irving looked surprised. "Come on," he said. "What's the matter?"

Nat gazed at the fallen trees. "Gee whillikens! I never realized before what an awful job it is to get the logs out to the mill. And I have to pull the whistle wire and make the whistle on the donkey engine go 'Toot!' to start every one of those logs on its journey!"

Irving laughed. "You're not sorry you took the job, are you?"

"No, siree!" exclaimed Nat. "C'mon, let's go!" A thrill went through him at the thought of really

doing a man's work. As they went along the crest of a ridge Nat looked out over a deep, timbered basin to the ocean, seven or eight miles away. He could see Humboldt Bay, where the town of Mallard was situated.

"What's that? Smoke from the mill?" he asked, looking at a streamer of smoke that seemed to hang over the town.

"Sure. Have you ever been to the mill?" Irving asked.

"Yes, Mr. Higgins took me down there once. While I was there the old 33 pulled up to the mill pond with a string of loads, and I saw the crew poke the logs off. Say! There must have been hundreds and hundreds of logs in that pond."

Irving nodded. "They've got to have lots of logs there to keep the mill going. If the mill closed down for one day it'd cost the Shannon Company lots of money. And that's where we come in, Nat; we've got to get the logs to keep the mill going."

Nat remembered the big mill, built at the very edge of the water. To his mind it resembled a monster with wide-open mouth and long tongue of steel reaching for the logs as they were floated up by men with pike poles.

"There's a steamer just leaving the docks now!" Nat exclaimed. "At least it looks like one. See the smoke?"

“Sure, that’s a lumber boat. It’s just been loaded and is starting on its long journey, maybe halfway around the world!”

“Where’s it bound for?”

“Australia, probably.”

“What do they do with it over there?”

“The lumber?” Irving was thoughtful. “Why, they build homes with it, and they use it in the mines.” For a moment he hesitated, then added, “Deep down in the dangerous shafts the safety of the miners depends upon strong timbering.”

“Where else is it shipped?” Nat queried.

“Some of it to New Zealand, some to Singapore; for that matter, it goes all over the world. It’s shipped to the west coast of South America to be used for railroad ties. Some is sent to Mexico for the same purpose. They ship it through the Panama Canal to the eastern coast of the United States and by rail to the interior.”

Nat was thoughtful as he watched the steamer, which looked very small in the distance, turn its bow toward the ocean and start on its long journey.

Suddenly Nat realized that he, a whistlepunk, would be an important factor in the lumber industry. He would pull on the whistle line and start all the logs on their way from the woods to foreign countries! He looked at the hundreds of them, cut, peeled, and ready to be pulled by the donkey en-

gines into the landings. "Australia! Singapore!" he said to himself. What magic words of adventure and life. And Irving had said them in so simple a way.

The boy suddenly felt older, as though a great responsibility were resting on him, and he vowed that he'd do his work well.

"Well, here's your whistle line, Nat," said Irving. "You see, the wire is stretched from the donkey engine to that snag, where it passes through a ring, then over to that stump," he motioned to his right, "where it passes through another ring and is anchored out here. Your place is always near the rigging crew, where you can hear them call their signals. When the logs have been pulled in to the landing you'll have to move back as the rigging crew moves. The whistle line is unreeled from the donkey engine, and when you move all you have to do is loosen the end of your line here and take it farther out to another stump."

"Looks like a series of clothes-lines that zigzag from the donkey out here." Nat grinned as he sat down beside Irving on a stump and ran his hand lightly over the whistle wire.

"Do you know anything at all about logging? You ought to. You have been around here long enough," Irving said, as he rolled and lighted a cigarette.

“Yes,” Nat said slowly, “but knowing a thing in my head and doing it with my hands might be different.” Both he and Irving laughed. “Of course,” he continued, “I know the whistles. Scotty taught me the Song of the Whistlepunk.”

“Yes? What is it?”

In a clear low voice Nat sang:

“One to go ahead,  
Two to come back;  
Three for an easy pull,  
Four for the slack.

“Go ahead easy,  
Come back slow;  
She’s a haywire outfit,  
And a darn poor show.”

“That’s it!” Irving laughed. “I learned that when I was a kid, punking whistles!” He looked at his watch. “Six thirty. We’re early, and it’s not time to go to work yet, so I’ll explain the layout. You see that pole over there?”

Nat nodded as he looked at a pole near the donkey engine, rising one hundred and seventy feet in the air. “You bet! That’s the high pole. I know you always pick out the soundest tree in a suitable place in the area to be logged. High poles always look sort of lonesome standing up so, without any top, bare and alone, after all the other trees have been felled and trimmed.”

“That’s right,” Irving agreed. “But they’re not lonesome after the high climber gets busy and puts up the blocks and lines.”

“I know how that’s done,” Nat said. “I watched him up at 24 one morning when I had my traps set there. He puts on his spurs, his wide leather belt, and the steel corded rope that goes around the tree and is fastened to his belt. As he climbs he pulls the rope up, clearing knots and obstructions.” He gazed thoughtfully at the high pole. “Yes, sir, I saw him do it. You’d think he’d get dizzy, wouldn’t you?”

“Get’s used to it,” Irving answered.

Nat went on. “And he takes a small block up with him, hangs it at the top of the pole, and passes a light rope through the block, to the ground, and back again. A small line is pulled through to be used later to pull the climber to the top of the pole, so he won’t have to bother climbing with his spurs, when changing and greasing the blocks. The high lead block, the one nearest the top of the pole, weighs sixteen hundred pounds. It’s a sure enough Paul Bunyan pulley, isn’t it?”

“You said it!” Irving laughed. “It has got to be big and strong to stand the strain. The main line, a big steel cable, one and three-eighths inches thick and seventeen hundred and fifty feet long, unreels from the donkey engine, through the block,

and out to the timber to be hauled in. That cable would hold one hundred thousand pounds with all the line out.”

“Whew!” Nat whistled. “That cable would pretty near hold Babe, Paul Bunyan’s blue ox.”

“You see that small block underneath the high lead block,” Irving went on. “That’s the trip line block. The trip line is small and runs reverse to the main line. It runs out in the woods around the layout—we set corner blocks for it to run through—and is attached to the main line. Going back light, the trip line pulls the main line and the rigging. Going in with a log, the trip line follows. You see how it is.

“And now for the whistles. The head rigger is responsible for the proper choking of the logs, and sees that they run free of stumps and snags upon which they might hang up, until they are in the territory of the chaser, the lumberjack who unhooks the chokers around the logs after they have been dragged to the landing. The head rigger is the one, as a rule, who gives the signals. When he yells, ‘Hey!’ he means to start, and you jerk the line once. But if he yells, ‘Hey!’ when they are pulling, he means to stop, and you pull the line once. When he yells, ‘Hey! hey!’ he means for the donkey engineer to pull on the trip line, and you pull the line twice.”

Nat nodded slowly. "I think I understand it pretty well."

"All right, Punk! It's about time to go to work now, and I'll have to leave you. I'll send a man off the rigging crew to help you for a while, until you get used to the whistles. And say, don't be afraid of that head rigger. I had some words with him yesterday when I sent the kid who was punking whistles here to camp 24. More than likely he'll try to bluff you. He's hard-boiled." And as Irving started away he added, "And remember, Nat, everything wrong that happens is blamed to the whistlepunk as a matter of course."

The head rigger—burly, red-haired, and square-jawed Snappy Dillon! Nat had forgotten that the ill-tempered Dillon was head rigger at camp 25. And he was going to work for *him*! "But I'll not let that spoil my day," the boy thought. He watched eagerly as the men prepared for the day's work, but frowned a little as he saw Dillon coming toward him.

"So yer goin' to be whistlepunk, huh?"

Nat assured him that he was.

"Wal, y' might as well understand right here an' now that when y' work in th' woods y' got to work, an' no foolin'. An' when y' hear a signal yelled y' got to make it snappy! Y' understand?"

Nat nodded.



Dillon walked over to examine a tail block; the rigger whom Irving had sent to help Nat sat down beside the boy.

“Do you know the whistles? You’ve been around the woods a lot and I don’t think you’ll need much coaching.”

“I have watched from a distance lots of times but I never did know exactly how it all works. Irving explained some of it to me.”

“You’ll learn,” said the rigger. “Just watch every time you have a chance. Come on, we’re ready to start.”

“Hey!” a voice rang out.

Nat almost stopped breathing as he grabbed the wire more tightly and looked at the rigger to make sure he was doing the right thing.

“Jerk it, Punk,” said his companion.

Nat gave a pull, but there was no response from the whistle.

“Pull it hard,” ordered the rigger.

Nat pulled hard. “Toot!” The whistle on the donkey engine sounded clear and loud.

“Now you’re loggin’!” The rigger laughed.

Nat had an increase in height. He had started his first log on its journey. Down the mountain side it swept, taking brushwood, bark, and chips with it, and leaving a clean trail behind, until it crashed into a tall spindly sucker that trembled for

an instant and then went down with a splitting noise.

“Hey! hey!” yelled the rigger.

Nat jerked the wire twice. “Toot, toot,” shrieked the whistle.

Nat had a second increase in height. He sat straight as a ramrod. He liked to hear the clear sound of the whistle. He liked to hear the shouts of the men, the crash of the logs, and the rumbling of the exhaust of the engine. He was working. He was part of the working world and he liked it.

That evening, just before the whistle blew, he saw engine 34 pull the loaded cars out and shove the “empties” in, to be loaded the next day.

After the empty cars had been switched into the landing, the “34” whistled, and Nat saw the train of logs go around the mountain and out of sight. The logs that he had helped to move were started on their journey to the mill.

## CHAPTER XI

### A REDWOOD TREE FALLS.

Nat was very happy during the days that followed. There was no more washing of dishes or peeling of potatoes unless he wanted to. Sometimes he helped Scotty after supper; sometimes he helped Emma set her tables for breakfast; but it was because he liked Scotty and Emma and not because he had to do it. He was free after the five o'clock whistle blew. He had taken up his traps because he didn't have time to attend to them. Every morning he walked up the trail through the redwoods to where they were logging. He and Irving became fast friends.

"I see the choppers are about ready to begin sawing the big tree," Nat said, one morning.

"Yes, just about," Irving replied.

For three days, as Nat went to and from his work, he had watched the two choppers who were going to fell, near the trail, a large redwood, twenty feet in diameter. He had listened to the echoes of the dynamite blasting, as all the knolls, stumps, and

large rocks were blown out to make a smooth place for the tree to fall. Suckers and underbrush had been used to make a bed so that there would not be so much danger of the tree breaking to pieces when it struck the ground.

For a moment Nat stood in the trail, looking up at the huge tree, and then climbed up a little way so he could have a closer view. Irving followed him.

“They’ve got the undercut all ready,” said Nat, walking around to the upper side of the giant tree. “It leans uphill a little, doesn’t it?” He looked up along the bare trunk into the rugged limbs. “If it was leaning downhill they’d have chopped the undercut on the lower side and they’d have had to cut it deeper, wouldn’t they?”

“Sure. The depth of the undercut depends upon the diameter of the tree and the direction in which it leans.”

“Too bad Paul Bunyan isn’t here,” Nat smiled. “If he was, they wouldn’t have to go to so much trouble. He’d cut that tree down with one swing of his axe.” He was thoughtful for a moment. “They ought to begin sawing the first thing this morning.”

Irving looked about them. “The staging’s all ready. I’d like to see that tree fall. It’s so big, and redwood is so brittle, I’m afraid it’ll crack in

hundreds of places. And when they'd try to run it through the saws at the mill, it would crumble."

Nat wished that he, too, could see that tree fall, but he supposed he'd be working and the trees around it would hide all but the top from his view. He looked up at the staging, a temporary structure of boards, upon which the choppers were to stand while sawing. Notches had been cut around the trunk several feet from the ground and drivers had been placed in them, to support the staging.

"C'mon, Nat." Irving glanced at his watch. "It's almost time for the whistle."

"And here come the choppers." Nat saw two stalwart loggers swinging up the trail, ready to begin the day's work.

As Nat and Irving went on, the boy wondered how many feet of lumber were in that tree. He guessed at its height and diameter. Taking a scratch pad and pencil from his pocket, he tried to figure how many houses could be built from it. He became so absorbed in his calculations that he was oblivious to his surroundings.

"Hey!" shouted the rigger.

No answering whistle from the donkey.

"Hey!" Still there was no answer.

The rigger came over to the stump where Nat was sitting, and snapped, "Hey, Punk! If you want to sleep, why don't you go in and go to bed?"

“Wh-why, what’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter?” shouted the rigger. “Where are your ears? Can’t you hear? Didn’t you hear me yell?”

“No,” Nat said meekly, as he hung his head.

“Well, get on the job, Punk, get on the job.”

Nat vowed he would not be caught dreaming again, because he knew that the head rigger would be glad to have him sent back to the cook-house to work, for he wanted the job for the boy who had been sent to camp 24. “No, sir, I bet I won’t be caught napping again,” he thought, as he hummed the old tune:

“One to go ahead,  
Two to come back;  
Three for an easy pull,  
Four for the slack.”

The third day after the choppers had begun sawing the big tree, Nat and Irving started home together after work, and stopped at a spot from which they could have a clear view of the tree a few yards above them. “I thought sure they’d fell it to-day,” Nat said, as he looked up at the choppers standing on the staging, one at each end of the huge saw.

“Working overtime to-night, ain’t you?” Irving called to them.

“Yes. Since this wind’s come up, Harrison

wants us to go ahead and fell it to-night," the head chopper replied.

"They could brace it, couldn't they?" Nat asked Irving.

"It's too fine a tree to take a chance on."

Nat looked thoughtful. "They'll have to finish the job, for if it blows over, the whole tree'll be cracked and ruined. How I'd like to see it go over!" He looked expectantly at Irving.

"You'd be late for supper."

"But I could get my own supper if I'm late."

"All right," Irving replied. "We'd better find a safe place farther on." He called to the choppers, "It'll be about a half-hour before she falls?"

"Just about," answered one of them.

Nat and Irving found a safe place upon an old stump where there would be no danger of being hit by falling limbs, not only from the tree as it fell, but from surrounding ones with which it must come in contact as it went over. Then in thoughtful silence they watched the choppers draw the saw back and forth through the huge butt.

Suddenly the tree cracked ominously. The choppers pulled the saw away and looked up along the tall, columnar trunk of the three-hundred-foot giant.

Nat watched breathlessly as he saw the tree tremble slightly. Then it was still.

The choppers swung their sledges, and their sharp ring upon the steel wedges changed to a hollow sound. Their arms worked faster and faster, and the sounds came more and more rapidly.

The tree trembled once more. The wedges were driven still faster. "It's going over" Nat exclaimed.

"Not yet," Irving answered, his eyes never leaving its top.

The rugged old tree seemed reluctant to fall, and stubbornly stood erect as the choppers swung their sledges with feverish haste.

The hollow sound changed to a deep muffled note that echoed through the forest. The choppers threw their sledges aside. One tore away the staging upon which they had been standing, while the other shouted, "Tim-ber, up the hill!" Both then ran down to the stump from which Irving and Nat were watching.

Nat saw the top of the giant tree tremble and sway. Twigs from the topmost branches snapped and flew out into the air. The muffled noise grew louder and sharper as the tree descended slowly at first, then, with a weird moan, crashed to the ground. As it fell, limbs from the near-by trees were torn off by its spreading branches. A cloud of dust hung over the scene for a few moments and then drifted away. All was quiet. The lofty tree that had



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lived hundreds upon hundreds of years lay in its bed, felled in six days by two men.

Nat was silent for a moment. Then he said solemnly, "The old tree'll rise again."

"What d'you say?" Irving asked in amazement.

"I said," Nat repeated, "that the tree will rise again."

"What d'you mean?" Irving questioned again.

"I mean that it'll rise again,—not as a tree, but as a building of some sort, maybe as houses for people to live in."

"That's right. I never thought of it in that way before," Irving said as he started on.

It was almost dark. Nat looked out across the little valley. On the summit of the mountain opposite he could see a tall pine rising high above the underbrush and small second growth. It marked the place where the trail led over the mountain to the Lone Pine Company's woods. He looked down to Camp Redwood. Lights were shining in the windows of some of the cottages.

He was very hungry when he arrived at the cook-house and went in to get his supper. The work in the kitchen had all been done and no one was there, but he could hear Emma in the dining-room. He called to her, "Got anything to eat?"

"Well, for land sakes, where'd you come from? We all thought you got lost or something."

“Irving and I stayed to watch a big tree fall. I’m hungry.”

“Oh! We had steak for supper, but I guess you can find some cold roast pork left over from lunch, and you know there’s always beans. They’re prob’ly hot yet.”

Nat picked up a bowl and ladle, went to the range, and laid his hand on the big aluminum bean kettle. “Boy, I’ll say they’re still hot!” He lifted the lid and sniffed. “Um-m-m.”

Just then Adams Cluff entered. “Say, what do y’ think this is? A beanery or something, where y’ can get meals at all hours? If y’ can’t get here at meal time, y’ don’t eat!”

Nat turned quickly. “But I pay my board.”

“That don’t cut any ice. Y’ heard what I said.”

Nat was hungry, and he hated to go without his supper. And he was angry, too. “The section men and the train crews come in late lots of times and you have to feed them!” he said.

Emma came into the kitchen and, with a disgusted look at Cluff, said, “Aw, let him—” but the cook cut her off.

“This is none of your affair. Your place is in the dining-room.” And turning to Nat in a threatening manner, he added, “An’ besides, Scotty’s got everything washed up an’ he don’t—”

“Scotty’ll speak for himself, Cluff.” The words

rang through the kitchen as the speaker came in from the porch. "Th' dishwashin' part of this layout is none of your affair. I'm th' dishwasher here an' if I want to wash Nat's dishes that's my business. If you 'tend to th' cookin' you'll have all you can do!"

Cluff glowered at Scotty and started to speak. But he thought better of it and went out without a word.

"Gee, he's mad!" Nat said, looking after the retreating man.

Scotty nodded. "Eat your supper, kid, and forget him. He's enough to give anybody indigestion. Beans? Here, gimme your bowl." As he ladled the beans into the bowl, he sang in a deep voice:

"Sourdough Sam was awful wise,  
 Joe Mufferton was wiser ;  
 He emptied wagon-loads of beans  
 Into a spouting geyser.

Now this is true, the loggers say,  
 But seems all out of reason.  
 It boiled up beans enough to last  
 Throughout the entire season."

The boy laughed loudly. "You needn't stay to wash my dishes, Scotty," he said, as he sat down at the table. "I'll do it."

"Just as soon stay here with you. Got nothin'

else to do. I'll go in th' pantry an' make you a roast pork sandwich." Scotty started to leave, but suddenly stopped to rub his eyes. "Say, come here kid, quick!" He stared out into the darkness. "Do you see th' same thing I do, or am I goin' bugs?" he asked, as Nat stepped up beside him.

"Where?"

"On the Lone Pine trail, about halfway down. There it is again, kid, see it?"

"It's the green light! Scotty, I see it, as plain as can be! Now it's gone." Nat whispered excitedly as he clutched the man's sleeve. "There's been another robbery!"

Scotty shook his head. "Not this early in th' night."

"Well, there'll be one then, you just wait and see."

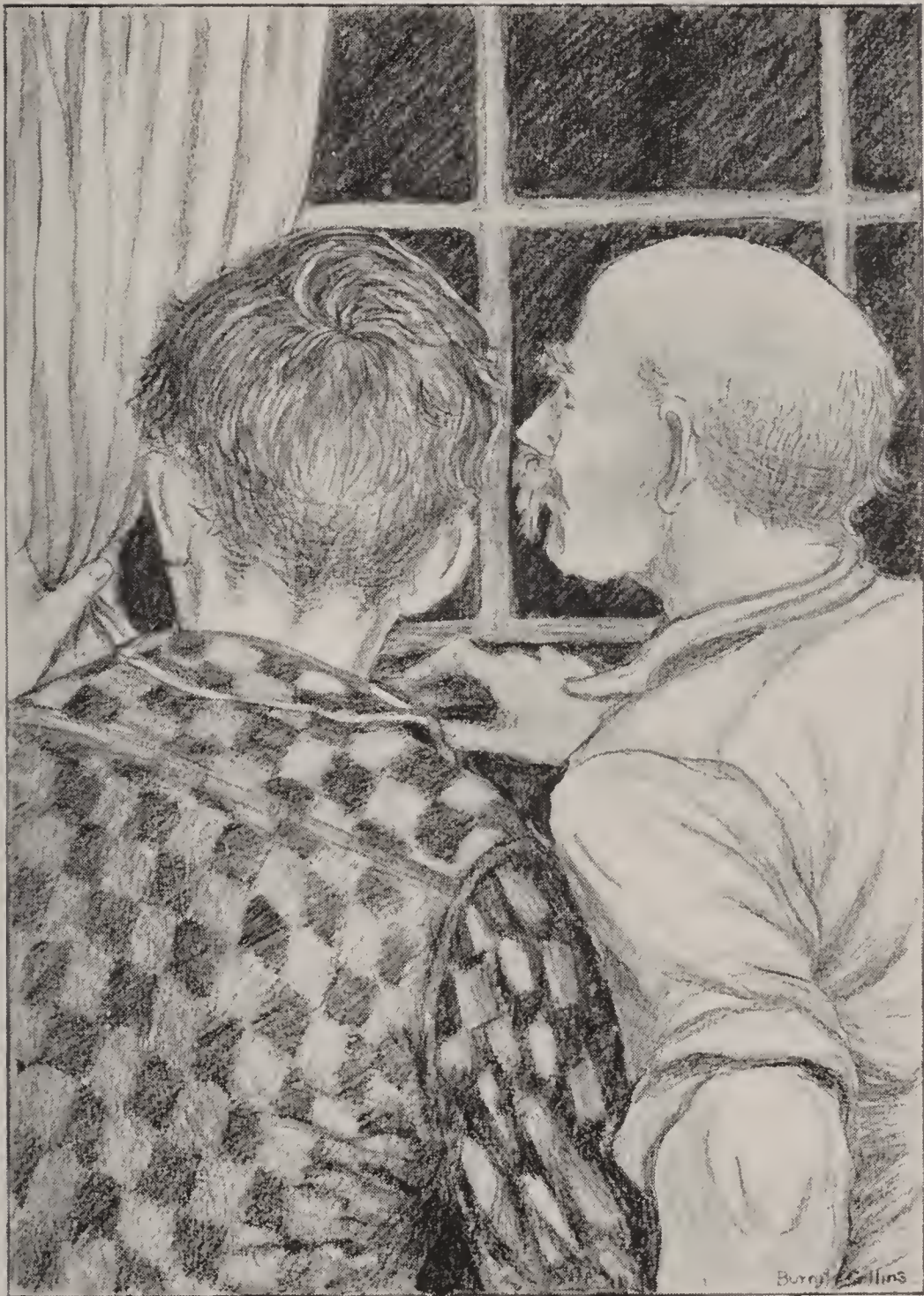
"Hm-m. That gets me, all right." Scotty looked mystified. "Can't imagine who it could be. Nobody ever takes that trail any more. It's lots shorter around the point since the Lone Pine outfit moved farther back into the woods."

"Maybe it's a signal to some one down here."

"Maybe."

Just then Emma came in from the dining-room. "What's the matter with you two? What's all the excitement?" she asked hurriedly.

Nat and Scotty exchanged a secretive look, and



“DO YOU SEE THE SAME THING I DO?”--Page 164



the boy spoke up. "Oh, nothing, I guess." But the minute Emma was out of hearing Nat said swiftly, "I'm going up there in the morning and see if I can find any tracks. I'll find something. You just wait and see!"

"Wouldn't be a bad idea. If there's another robbery it'll be in the paper to-morrow."

"Not till the day after to-morrow, Scotty."

"Yes, that's right. They wouldn't get the news soon enough for to-morrow's paper."

The two stood for a few minutes looking in the direction of the Lone Pine trail, but they did not see the light again. Scotty started to make the sandwich, and Nat went back to the table. "There'll be a robbery to-night," he said with finality.

## CHAPTER XII

### A CLUE

As Nat awoke the next morning, his first thought was of the light on the Lone Pine trail, and he remembered that he was to look for signs of anyone who might have been there. He jumped into his clothes and slipped quietly out. He did not go along the board walk for fear of attracting attention, but went through the alders instead. Leaving the thicket, he started up the mountain through small second growth and around redwood stumps crowned with green sprouts.

“Now this is just about where the Lone Pine trail begins,” he said to himself, as he forced his way through a tangled mass of vines and brush to a small open space. Time and storms had almost obliterated the old trail. Brush and thickets of myrtle had grown across it, yet it could be followed without difficulty. The red earth was hard and clean, and Nat carefully searched for marks that calked boots might have left upon it. “Hm! Nothing here. I’d swear to that,” he mused, as he stood for a mo-



ment looking up the trail to find a spot where he thought a light could be seen from the back porch of the cook-house and from the pantry window.

“Right about where that low bluff is. A fellow would sure need a light to keep from falling.” He started to the bluff, some two hundred yards above him, but he had gone only a little way when he suddenly dropped to his knees to examine a mark at the foot of a small rock.

“Boy!” he exclaimed aloud, “if that isn’t the print of a man’s right shoe, and going toward Camp Redwood! Lookit! He stepped on that rock and then down here, and that’s how he left the print. He stepped awful light, ’cause his heel print isn’t here,” he thought quickly, “just the sole. And say! Look at that!” He bent over closer. “He had a worn place right in the middle of his sole. What do you know about that! And no calks in his shoes, either, ’cause the print hasn’t any little holes in it.” Nat squinted his blue eyes and gazed at the impression, then burst out, “I’ll find who it was by this print; just like the men in Old Timer’s story, who tracked the Indians by the white man among them who had a crack in the sole of his shoe! But this man,” he again looked at the track, “didn’t have a cracked sole. He had a worn sole. I’ll find out who he is!”

At that moment Nat heard the gong ringing at

the cook-house. He leaped to his feet and started to run down the mountain, for he knew that there would be only twenty minutes before the second bell, which meant breakfast. And he had not forgotten that he had almost missed his supper the night before. He did not want to go to work without breakfast.

The next evening Nat helped Scotty with his work after supper. He had told Scotty about the clue he had found, and the latter was interested and agreed that there might be a connection between that and the robbery. He had listened to the men talking around the cook-house, thinking that he might catch a word about another robbery; and when the newspaper came, early in the morning, he was surprised that there was no mention of any robbery.

Of the two, Nat had been the more surprised. He had listened to the men in the woods, and that morning, when he went to work, and again in the evening, he had carefully looked over every yard of the trail for a footprint that might have been made by the same man.

“Every day,” Nat told Scotty, “I’ll look for a track just like the one I saw. I remember it exactly. The worn place was two inches long and a half-inch wide. But I forgot,” he added slowly, “I’m not liable to find the track out there, for no

calks were in the shoe which made that print. And all the loggers wear calks!”

“That’s right,” Scotty agreed.

“The man’s here, Scotty. He’s right here in this camp now! All the loggers change their shoes after work. That makes it easier for me to find him. I’ll watch every footprint in this camp and I’ll get a look at every man’s shoes. You just wait and see; and then if there’s another robbery we’ll know just about who to suspect.”

“I believe you’re right,” Scotty nodded.

They had just finished their work. Suddenly there was a great commotion in the dining-room. Emma screamed and ran into the kitchen, with Micky bounding after her, scratching at her white apron with ink-covered paws. Then he ran back into the dining-room, leaving a trail of black tracks on the floor.

“Micky!” Nat called in astonishment, hurrying into the dining-room just as the dispatcher entered the room. “How in the world did you get that ink all over you?” He picked up Micky and held him at arm’s length, for the little coon was covered with ink from his head to his bushy ringed tail. What mischief had he been doing?

“Go look at my office and you won’t wonder where he got it!” the dispatcher exclaimed angrily. “I worked all day on the payroll and he’s spilled

ink all over it. Now it's got to be done over again to-night!"

"And look at my clean apron," cried Emma. "Ink spots all over it! Micky, you're the biggest nuisance I ever saw!"

Scotty slipped off his white apron and hung it in the pantry as he said dryly, "Emma, do you know that in Paul's dining-room it was so far from one end of the tables to the other that the waiters wore roller skates. If you'd had skates on, you could have got away from Micky."

The dispatcher flared. "By George! Something's got to be done with that coon. He's a pest." He turned and stalked out, letting the screen door bang.

Nat knit his brows. "Here, Micky," he said, in a troubled voice, "what'd you do that for?" Then he turned to Scotty. "You don't suppose he'll tell Harrison, do you? I might lose my job over it. Payrolls are awful important."

Scotty nodded gravely. "Give Micky to me and go over and see what damage he's done. It might not be so bad. Maybe you can help him."

Nat went into the dispatcher's office. He was very quiet as he looked around. The ink had been turned over and splattered about in little black pools and blotches upon the dispatcher's desk. Micky, however, had not tried to cover up his iden-

tity. Little black paw-prints profusely decorated the books, papers, and reports. Then a trail stretched across the floor to the door.

The dispatcher was trying to wipe up the ink on his desk.

Nat took a deep breath. "Can I help you any?" he asked, anxiously.

The dispatcher turned sharply. "What do you know about payrolls?"

"Nothing," Nat answered, in a low voice.

"Of course you don't. How'd you expect to help me then?"

Nat stirred uneasily. "I'm sorry," he ventured.

"Well, here." The dispatcher tossed a cloth at him. "Wipe up those marks on the floor."

Nat dampened the cloth at a faucet and started to wipe up the tracks. By rubbing very hard he could get most of the stains out, leaving only a dim, grayish blur.

When he had finished he went back to the cook-house to wash Micky, but Scotty had taken him away. Upon the back porch he listened for a moment as he heard men talking in Scotty's cabin. He went over, rapped on the door, and called, "Oh, Scotty!"

"Come in." Scotty opened the door quickly.

"Where's Micky?" Nat looked at the three loggers in the cabin; then he discovered Micky, curled

up and fast sleep on the warm floor beside the stove.

“Oh, you washed him,” said Nat delightedly.

“Sure! He was an awful mess.”

Nat sat down on the foot of Scotty’s cot.

“Vell now, vat’s th’ matter vid you, Punk? Iss you hafing troubles vid de coon?” Axel, the lumberjack, who occupied the cabin with Scotty, got up from his chair, took his pipe from his mouth, and blew a puff of smoke ceilingward. He was a tall, powerful Norwegian, who had drifted down from the north woods to the redwood lumber camps. He had big, homely features and thick, corn-colored hair that grew straight out from his head.

Nat frowned. “I don’t know what to do about him,” he said.

One of the loggers on Axel’s cot turned from the magazine he was reading. “Chain him up,” he suggested.

“Naw!” A logger at the table put his newspaper down. “That’d make him meaner than a wild-cat.”

Snappy Dillon came in, followed by Adams Cluff, who, without a word, sat down beside Nat on Scotty’s cot and began to read. Dillon pulled a bench to the stove. “Throw him in th’ river. He’s nuthin’ but a nuisance, anyhow!” He had heard the men talking about the coon as he entered.

“Well,” Scotty said, “the dispatcher ought’a had

a contraption for his ink like Paul Bunyan's book-keeper had, and then Micky couldn't have spilt it."

Axel's homely mouth spread into a grin. "Yah? How vas dat?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Turning to Axel in surprise, Scotty inquired, "Didn't I ever tell you about Johnny Inkslinger?" And he hastened to recite:

"Paul had a thrifty bookkeeper,  
Johnny Inkslinger was his name;  
'Twas awful hard to save on ink,  
But he did it just the same.

"In a year just fifty barrels  
Johnny saved, now if you please,  
By omitting all the dots on i's,  
And crosses on the t's.

"And Johnny never wasted time,  
With ink his pen to fill;  
He rigged up a contraption  
That he used with utmost skill.

"A hose he deftly fastened  
From pen to barrel, and then  
He had a steady flow of ink  
From the barrel to his pen."

"Yah!" Axel drew deeply on his pipe. "I heerd about dat over in Nort Dakota."

"Were you in North Dakota when Paul Bunyan was logging that country off into a prairie?" The

logger lying on Axel's cot laid aside his magazine and started to roll a cigarette.

Axel shook his head vigorously. "No-o," he said, "I vas in Minnesota dat time. But I vorked for Paul Bunyan ofer in Nort Dakota once. Yah!" Axel was very serious as he went on. "In Nort Dakota's Paul's mans vas yust so crazy for sugar! Dey nefer had sugar dishes on de tables in de eating-rooms in hes camp. Dey yust took'd vun pair of oxes to vun beeg vagon fulled vid sugar an' den dis oxes yust vould pull an' pull it oup an' down on de meedle uf dat table from vun end to de odder. It keep'd two yaitors just so beesy shoffling de sugar in dem curfee cups. Yah!"

"Some table!" Scotty laughed heartily.

"And, oh, boy!" Nat said. "They were awful fond of prunes, too. It kept two freighting outfits busy hauling the prune pits away from the cook-house. Somehow, the chipmunks around camp got hold of the pits and ate them. And they grew so big that in later years the people killed them for tigers.

"When they were here, the fleas pestered them nearly to death; and these just kept growing and growing, and got so bothersome that the men couldn't sleep nights, and old Babe was just about eaten up by 'em. They got to be such a nuisance that Paul had to set traps to catch 'em. Finally,



when he caught 'em all, he crated 'em up and shipped 'em to Australia, where they are now known as kangaroos."

Scotty's mustache bristled as he laughed uproariously. And Axel said in his loud voice, "Yah! I bat day vas!"

The loggers, excepting Cluff and Dillon, doubled up with laughter, but one of them managed to say, "I think you're mistaken about Paul shipping them all away. There's plenty left in the woods. Maybe not so big as kangaroos, but they're plenty big enough!" And they all laughed again.

Nat liked these men. They were powerful men, like Paul Bunyan and his loggers. And they accomplished gigantic tasks, just as Paul Bunyan had. They felled giant trees, which were shipped away to be made into lumber, and eventually into buildings. They helped to build indirectly, for if there were no lumberjacks there would be no lumber. They were a part of the working world. He liked them, and felt proud to think that he was working with them.

Suddenly he thought of the Lone Pine robbery, and of the footprints leading to Camp Redwood. "But," he thought, "they're not *all* honorable. There's at least *one* around this camp who is a thief. And I'm going to find out who he is." He looked around at the loggers. "I'll watch the shoes of

every man in this camp till I find the one that made that mark on the trail!" His heart thumped faster and his eyes were bright, as an unaccountable feeling swept over him that the man was in the cabin at that very moment. He glanced warily about, trying to see the sole of the shoe on the right foot of each of the men, except Scotty and Axel. "I know *them*; they're my friends," he said to himself.

Cluff and Dillon and the other logger sitting at the table had their feet squarely on the floor. He looked at the shoes of the logger lying on Axel's cot. "'Twasn't him. He has new half-soles."

For fifteen minutes Nat sat listening to the men and trying to see the soles of their shoes. Finally he got up and went over to the stove. "Micky, wake up," he said loudly, as he shook his little pet.

"Going, Nat?" Scotty asked.

"Yes. Thanks for washing Micky. He's dry now and there's not a trace of ink on him. Well, g'night fellows." He picked up Micky and went out, as Axel and Scotty answered, "S'long, Nat."

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE SKY-LINE

The following days were busy ones for Nat. The evenings were long, and sometimes he joined the men in the bunk-houses, or out in a clump of alders beside the cabins, and listened to their yarns.

The forest was filled with the fragrance of the sweet-smelling trillium lilies. Ferns, growing in the crevices of rocks and old logs, uncurled new green fronds.

Every day, on his way to and from work, Nat stopped to look at a huge old maple, growing on the bank of Little River. Ferns grew in a fringe on one of the moss-covered limbs that jutted out high above the water. White dogwood flowers bloomed on a tall tree beside the footbridge. Yellow pansies grew in little patches at the edge of the forest.

He often took Micky frog-hunting in the marsh in back of Camp Redwood, where he found golden swamp buttercups and red columbines and orange-red leopard-lilies.

On the mountain he found feathery plumes of

squaw grass. Purple iris and scarlet paint-brushes grew in the brushy open places. He loved to look at the wild flowers, but he seldom picked them. He thought they looked more beautiful in the woods where they grew than in his cabin. When he found the tiny everlasting blossoms growing in clusters, and the azaleas covered with heavy waxlike blossoms, he knew that summer had come; and always, with the beginning of summer, came the danger of forest fires. To guard against them, all brush and logs lying near the track were cleared away. A newly painted barrel, filled with water, was put on each end of all wooden trestles. Water tanks at each camp were kept filled.

Every pay-day Nat cashed his check and put most of his money away in his trunk. By the first of June he had saved seventy-five dollars out of his pay, bringing the total amount of his savings, including the money received for his furs, up to \$165.85. He was thrilled to think that he had saved so much, and was very anxious to send his money to a bank in Eureka, where it would be safe. He had mentioned it to Mr. Higgins, who had promised to take it in for him on his next trip to town.

The boy still believed that the green light he had seen and the footprint on the Lone Pine trail were connected with the Lone Pine robbery. He had carefully watched for a similar footprint in Camp

Redwood; and, though he had expected to find one, he was startled when he really saw a print made by the same shoe. It was in a dusty spot by the steps leading into the dining-room. He showed it to Scotty, who was greatly surprised.

The area around the landing at Camp 25, where Nat worked, had been logged off as far as the main line would reach. Across the canyon, and on top of the mountain opposite, the timber had been felled and was ready to be hauled in. It was impossible, however, to build a railroad track there without building a very high bridge.

Harrison had decided on a cheaper and equally efficient way. A tree on the mountain was topped and rigged, to be used as a high-pole. A donkey engine was moved across the canyon to pull the logs in to the landing. Then a steel cable, called a "sky-line," was stretched across the canyon from pole to pole.

The logs were taken across by a carriage hanging from the skyline, this, in turn, being pulled by the donkey at the landing in Camp 25.

Nat strung his whistle wire from the donkey engine to a large stump. He had a fine view of the surrounding country now, and could watch the logs as they were dragged down the mountain, bumping, sliding, and then thundering along up the other side to the landing where they were loaded.

He liked to watch the carriage as it ran along, high in the air, and he wished that he could ride on it.

One Monday evening in the latter part of June, a week after they had started to log with the skyline, Nat heard a strangely familiar whistle as he and Irving were going home from work.

“What’s that?” he said, as he stopped to listen.

Irving stopped, also. They were standing at the top of the mountain where the trail started down to Camp Redwood, and they could look far out over the forest in the direction from which the whistle sounded.

“Too-oo, too-oo, toot-toot!”

“Sounds to me like old 33.” Nat’s eyes were round as he cupped his hand behind his ear.

“I’ll bet it is,” Irving said.

“Sure it is!” Nat exclaimed jubilantly. “Let’s hurry and see her when she comes into camp.” He started on, with Irving swinging along behind.

Just as they joined Higgins, Mrs. Higgins, Emma, and the men, who had gathered on the cook-house porch, a trail of white smoke was seen above the trees in the lower end of camp, and a series of short whistles announced that “33” was coming back home.

She came proudly up the track, elegant in her shiny black paint. Bright yellow figures were

painted on her number plates and tender. "Clang, clang!" Her bell rang out clear and loud as Shorty brought her to a stop. No child was ever prouder of a new toy than Shorty was of his reclaimed engine, as the men gathered around to admire the old favorite in her renewed youth.

"How's she running, Shorty?" Nat asked.

"Slick as a whistle, and she hums like a new top. Climb in the cab and look her over."

Nat accepted the invitation. "Pretty neat," he exclaimed, touching the shining brass handles on the air valves. He pulled the whistle cord with satisfaction, and then, stepping over to the fireman's seat, pulled another cord that rang the bell.

The fireman laughed. "Want to be a fireman, Nat?"

"No, I think I'd rather be the engineer."

"What do you think of her?" asked Shorty.

"She's a beauty now, isn't she?" The boy pulled the bell cord again.

"Want to take a ride to the roundhouse?" Shorty went to his seat at the right-hand side of the cab.

"If you'll let me run her! Will you?"

"All right." Shorty moved back in his seat and Nat climbed up in front of him. The fireman rang the bell and the boy tooted the whistle, released the brakes, and opened the throttle. His chest swelled

with pride as he felt the engine slowly start. He almost wished he were an engineer.

“Oh, Scotty,” he asked later, “did you ever see a skyline?”

“Sure,” Scotty answered. “Why?”

“Interesting, aren’t they?”

“Why, yes. Are they working a skyline now?”

“Yes,” Nat replied. “We finished that one place up and have started with a skyline on the other side of the canyon.”

“I don’t understand,” Scotty said, cocking his eye at the boy, “why Harrison don’t do like Paul did in Minnesota. You know, when Paul was logging off that country over there, and they were getting short of logs in the pond, he just hitched Babe to a great big cable and drove him around the area, dragging the cable behind him. When he got it all laid out he made Babe give that cable a jerk, and those trees were just naturally jerked right out of the ground, roots and all, and pulled into the mill.”

“But I don’t think that’d work very well here in the redwoods,” Nat laughed. “They’re so brittle they’d be broken all to pieces by the time he got them to the mill.”

“That’s right, Nat; mebbe they would,” Scotty agreed.

When Nat went to work the next morning he



walked up the trail alone, for Jack Irving had been called to Mallard, where the Shannon Company's mill was, to attend a meeting of camp bosses. He felt somewhat lonely as he climbed to his seat on the stump to which the whistle wire was stretched.

The hooktender, a big, square-jawed lumberjack, had never been very friendly. He and Snappy Dillon were unlike most of the other loggers.

The whistle blew and the men started to work. A log was encircled by a choker and hooked at the end of the main line.

"Hey!" shouted the hooktender.

Nat was alert, and jerked the whistle wire once.

"Toot!" The whistle on the donkey engine sounded, and the log started across the canyon.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!" shouted the hooktender.

"Three for an easy pull," Nat thought to himself, as he jerked the whistle wire three times. After a few logs had been pulled in, the hooktender, who always attended to the camp boss's duties when the latter was away, walked over to the high-pole at the railroad track, where men were loading logs on cars, leaving Dillon, the head rigger, to give the calls.

Nat was very busy that morning. He had heard the men talking about not getting out enough logs, and knew that was the reason the bosses had been

called in to Mallard. "And now," he thought, "the hooktender and Dillon want to make a good showing while Irving's away. I guess they want a camp boss's job, too!" He jerked twice on the wire as he heard Dillon shout, "Hey! hey!" "Well," he mused, "I guess I can jerk this old line just as fast as he can give the signals."

He listened to the whistle on the yarder, a donkey engine being used to yard the logs in to the landing across the canyon. "Bet I can blow the whistle on my donkey engine louder than the punk on that yarder can," Nat thought to himself. Every time the rigger shouted, he grinned, and pulled with all his might. In the afternoon the trip line broke, and, while the rigging crew was splicing it, Nat stretched out on the stump to rest.

"Hey!" came the strident call of the rigger, and Nat's arm reached up mechanically and pulled the whistle wire. "Toot!" Suddenly there was a snap, and the skyline broke in the center. With a loud singing "whang-g-g," the ends flew through the air with terrific force, curling around the donkey engine and high-pole like a spring. Most of the landing crew ran to clear, but two men who were not so quick narrowly escaped being killed by the huge snakelike cable.

Springing to his feet, Nat stared in amazement. The hooktender shouted to Dillon, who was coming

out from behind a stump. He swore violently. "Did you give that 'go ahead' signal? What's th' matter, haven't you been in th' woods long enough to—"

"I yelled twice, a 'come back' signal, but that kid pulled the whistle only once. Go after him, he's the one that caused this mix-up!"

A bewildered expression swept over Nat's face as he saw the hooktender whirl and come toward him, with the rigger following.

"What's the big idea? What're you tryin' to do, kill all us men, besides tyin' up th' works fer th' rest o' th' day?"

Nat's eyes flashed. "I heard him yell once and I pulled the line once!" he said with emphasis in his voice.

"Say," Dillon spoke up, "you're dreaming, kid! I yelled twice. C'mon down off'a that stump an' go home. We don't need th' likes o' you in th' woods. You'll have plenty a time fer tomfoolery from now on!"

For a moment Nat did not know what to do. It had all happened so suddenly. He stared at the two men as they went over to the broken line. Then his face flamed as he thought of having lost his job. He got down from the stump and walked toward the trail. His eyes smarted and tears hung in his black lashes as he passed the redwood stump where

he and Irving had watched the choppers fell the twenty-foot tree.

His thoughts were bitter. "I'm just like that tree. I've lost my job. I've fallen down. Now I never'll be able to save enough money to go to school. I'll have to go back and work in the cook-house. But will they take me back? I'd hate to ask Higgins for my old job again since I've quit once. And I'd sure hate to work with Adams Cluff again!" His throat tightened as he started down the mountain. He'd hate to tell Scotty and Higgins and Emma about losing his job. And all the loggers, his friends, and Jack Irving and Harrison and Patsy!

"I won't go home!" He stopped suddenly. Looking over the tops of the trees below him, he saw the cook-house. He smiled sorrowfully. "I'll run away, that's what I'll do!"

He slipped his hand into his overalls pocket. "Hm-m-m! Two nickels," he said aloud, "won't take me far. I'd have to go to my cabin and get my money. And there's Micky! Guess there's no use in running away right now, 'cause they'll all know I feel sorry. Gee, I don't want them to know how I feel! I won't let on. I'll just act as if it's nothing and I don't care. That's what I'll do." He walked on down the trail. When he came to the foot-bridge he looked at the dogwood tree with

its blossoms, but it seemed only a huge white blur. Pausing a moment, he brushed his shirt sleeve across his eyes, swallowed hard, straightened, and hurried across the bridge.

As he neared his cabin he heard music inside that sounded very familiar. He started to run, and bounded through the doorway. "Old Timer! Gee! I'm glad to see you! When did you come? Haven't seen you for ages."

"Jist a while ago. I struck pay dirt an' made a clean-up, so thought I'd better be gittin' to Eureka an' shippin' all my gold to th' mint. T'ain't safe to have too much aroun'."

"Did you get very much, Old Timer?" Nat asked, eagerly.

"Oh tolerable, tolerable. Say, Nat, I fetched my fishin' hook an' line, an' we'll go fishin' in th' mornin' before y' go to work. Hector tole me y' had a new job."

Nat's gaze fell. "You bet we will," he said, without enthusiasm.

"Why, what's the matter?" Old Timer stroked his long beard and stared at the boy. "Y' look sort o' crestfallen."

"Old Timer," Nat said quietly, "I lost my job to-day."

"You don't say! How'd that happen?"

Nat sat down on his cot and Old Timer dragged

a chair up, sat down, and started to fill his pipe. Nat explained just what had happened. When he had finished the old man asked, incredulously, "An' yer goin' to let them fellers pin that on y'?"

"Well," Nat answered, "I don't know what to do about it."

"Crickety, boy! I don't either; but we'll see, we'll see."

Nat got up and walked to the door. "How's Jubilo?" he asked, as he looked out toward the alder trees in back of the cabin, where the burro was standing.

"Jist as pert as ever! How's Micky? I stopped up the crick a ways, threw my hook an' line in, an' caught a trout fer 'im, but I ain't seen hide nor hair of 'im since I got here."

"I suppose he's in the cellar. He sleeps down there where it's nice and cool all day and then prowls around at night. I'll go and get him."

When Nat returned with his pet, Old Timer gave the coon his present, and both laughed when Micky took the fish straight to the little pool under the dripping faucet beside the cabin, where he washed it, as was his custom.

Nat did not leave his cabin until the supper bell rang. He didn't want to go in to eat. He said he had a headache. But Old Timer refused to go without him, so he followed the old prospector in

and sat down in his place beside Axel at a table near the kitchen door.

The lumberjacks had all taken their places at the long tables, and Nat could see Dillon and the hook-tender who had fired him, sitting to his right. He glanced at them, and then, as he felt the color mounting to his face, turned his head.

Mrs. Higgins poured a glass of milk for Old Timer, then filled Nat's glass. "How are you tonight, Nat?" she asked.

"Fine," the boy answered calmly, but as he raised the glass to his lips his hand trembled and he spilled some of the milk. He set the glass down again. Though he had tried to seem casual, he was certain that Mrs. Higgins had noticed something wrong, for when she went into the kitchen he saw her speak to Higgins, and then both turned and smiled at him. He tried to eat, but it was of no use. He was glad when Axel finished his supper, got up, and walked out, followed by three or four other loggers. "Now I can go," he thought, "and no one will think anything about it." He got up slowly and went to his cabin.

In a few minutes Mrs. Higgins came in. "Aren't you feeling well, Nat?" she asked anxiously, as she sat down on his cot beside him.

"Yes, I'm all right." Nat did not look at her and his voice was a little shaky.

“You didn’t eat any supper,” the friendly woman said in a tone of anxiety.

Nat tried to smile. “I didn’t want much. I’ve a little headache.” And then he thought quickly, “I’d better tell her. They’ll all know it, anyway.” He said aloud, “I’m not going to work in the woods any more. I got fired to-day.”

“Fired!” Mrs. Higgins frowned, as she said in a troubled voice, “Why, Nat! I can hardly believe it! How did it happen?” She listened anxiously as Nat explained exactly what had happened. When he finished she spoke consolingly. “Well, never mind. Don’t worry. I’m sure there must be a mistake.” She gave his hand a friendly pat and left the cabin.

It was quite late when Old Timer came in, for right after supper he had gone to the company store, where he had ordered supplies to take home with him.

Nat did not mention his trouble again that evening, nor did Old Timer. They talked about mining, and the prospector promised the boy that some day, if he had a chance, he would show him how to hunt for gold.

After the old man had played a tune on his fiddle he undressed, dropped into one of his boots at the foot of his cot the chamois sack of gold he had brought, and went to bed.



Nat switched off the light and sank down on his cot, with his head in his hands and his elbows on his knees. His throat ached, and his heart was filled with hopelessness.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A ROBBERY

Early the next morning Old Timer opened his eyes, stretched and yawned. Glancing across the cabin he said loudly, "Hi, there! Are y' ready to go fishin'?"

There was no answer.

He got up and looked at Nat's cot. "Well, that beats me," he said slowly. "The boy's gone. Guess he's eatin' breakfast. S'funny he didn't call me." Reaching for his boot, he ran his hand down into the foot where he had left the sack of gold. He straightened quickly, grabbed the other boot, and turned it upside down. He peered closely into one boot and then into the other. He shook them both, but found nothing. His gold was gone!

For a moment he sat stroking his shaggy beard, then scratched his head thoughtfully. "Purty queer. There's been a thief here last night, or else th' lumberjacks are playin' a joke on me." He slipped on his overalls and shirt, pulled on his boots, and started to the cook-house. He met Axel and

three other loggers on the walk near Nat's cabin. "Say, which one o' you fellers been playin' a joke on me?" he inquired, looking at them sharply.

Axel looked mystified. "By yiminy, vare dey iss I know nott." He felt in his pockets and looked around at the other men.

"Where's what?" Old Timer asked, suspiciously.

"I yust did not fine my votch und mine moneys ven I luke for dem. I tank I ban robbed. Dit any you fellas miss sometings?"

"Miss something? Well, I guess I did. I looked all over the cabin for my watch and check," said one of the loggers.

Old Timer burst out, "Y' don't mean to tell me ye've all been cleaned?"

"By yiminy, I tink so. Yah." Axel searched his pockets again. "You miss sometings?"

"My gold!" Old Timer exclaimed; and shaking his fist threateningly, he added, "If I find th' low-down sneak that took it, I'll fix 'im good an' plenty." His heavy boots clumped on the board walk as he went on to the kitchen, with Micky following.

Scotty stood at the big range, frying cakes, while Emma was stacking them on platters.

Old Timer looked around for Nat but did not see him. "Anyone here seen Nat?" he asked.

"Nat?" Emma looked around. "Why I suppose he's in his cabin."

“No,” Old Timer shook his head and said slowly, “I jist came from there.”

“He’s just around somewhere,” Scotty said indifferently.

Old Timer was not satisfied. He didn’t think that Nat would go fishing without his breakfast and without waiting for him. He looked very grave as he asked, “Where’s Higgins? Mebbe he knows where th’ boy is.”

Just then Higgins came in. But he had not seen Nat.

Cluff stepped up to take Scotty’s place at the range. “Scotty, go ring the gong,” he commanded.

“Yes, we’re late now. That ought to bring him in,” Higgins said.

But Nat did not come in. The lumberjacks, however, filed in and noisily took their places at the table, talking excitedly about the robbery. Old Timer quietly took his seat, leaving Nat’s place, between himself and Axel, empty.

The hooktender from Camp 25, sitting at a table at his right, looked up from his cakes. “He sure cleaned me good; got about seventy-five dollars and my watch.”

“I guess he cleaned the camp!” exclaimed Snappy Dillon, who was sitting beside the hooktender.

One of the lumberjacks suddenly roared, “What th’ ——?” As he looked under the table he shouted,

“Get that coon out of here!” He gave a kick, and Micky came bounding out. The man called out, “Hey Punk!” Then looking at Nat’s empty place, he asked, “Where’s that kid?” As he spoke, all eyes were directed to the vacant place.

The hooktender cocked his eye at the rigger. “Yeh,” he said, “where’s that kid?”

Dillon sneered, and said loudly, “He wanted to go to school pretty bad, didn’t he?” His meaning was clear.

The lumberjack stared at him, and Axel started to get up. But Old Timer had already risen. His eyes never left Dillon as he took long strides, reached his man, grasped him by the shoulders, and pulled him to his feet.

Dillon shrugged and tried to sit down, but Old Timer jerked him up again, roaring, “Take that back! Eat yer words, y’ ornery critter!”

Dillon was not afraid of Old Timer himself, but he *was* afraid of Axel and Nat’s friends, and he hastily whined, “I didn’t mean a thing wrong. Just naturally inquired, that’s all.”

Old Timer gave him a shove and let him go.

After that the men quietly ate their breakfast, and the robbery was not mentioned again. Those who had been robbed, after they had finished eating, walked to the main office to report what had been stolen.

But Old Timer hastened to Nat's cabin. He wondered if Nat really had gone fishing without him. But he shook his head as he found his fishing pole standing in the corner of the cabin. "By ginger!" he said aloud. "I'm afraid somethin' turrible's happened to the boy." He stood in the door, not knowing what to do, when Jack Irving and Axel stepped up.

"Nat come back yet?" Irving asked. "Axel, here, tells me that he's missing."

"He's not here!" Old Timer shook his head.

Irving frowned. "Strange," he said. Then he added, "That hooktender and Dillon are responsible for this. I've learned from Axel that they run Nat off the job yesterday, through no fault of his own. Axel was there and heard the rigger give the 'go ahead' signal that broke the skyline when he should have given the 'come back' signal, and they are trying to pin it on Nat. Axel didn't know at the time that the hooktender had fired the kid, but this morning before breakfast he heard the rigger talking to some of the men about it."

"By yiminy, yee, dat's right! Yah!" Axel felt in his pocket for his watch, and frowned. "Someboddies yust tak my votch!"

Irving pulled his watch from his pocket, glanced at it, and said quickly, "You'd better go on to work, Axel. I want to see Harrison before I go." Turn-

ing to Old Timer, he added, "I'll be back after a while. You're not going right away, are you?"

"No, siree! Not till that boy's found!" Old Timer asserted.

Soon he heard Scotty calling, and when he went to the cook-house he found Harrison, Hank, Irving, and the cook-house crew, standing on the back porch.

Harrison, tall and slender, his face clean-shaven and tanned, asked Old Timer, "You don't suppose Nat's gone to Hector's, do you?"

"T'ain't likely," was the slow answer.

Emma's eyes filled with tears, as she said, "I'm afraid he's lost in the forest, and if he is he'll never be found!"

"Something's got to be done! I'll not rest a minute till that boy's back here safe and sound." Mrs. Higgins clasped her hands and twisted them nervously. "Higgins," she asked chokingly, "can't you do something?"

"Oh, he'll probably come drifting in after a while." Though Higgins spoke consolingly, he frowned and his mouth was grim.

Scotty did not say anything. He was unable to speak. With his arms folded, he walked slowly back and forth across the porch.

"I don't think he is lost," spoke up Irving.

"Naw," Hank said. "He knows the trails well.

He's gone on many a trip with me. And he knows better than to get off the trail. He ain't lost."

Irving looked at his watch. "I've got to go. Everything sure went haywire when I was away yesterday. If Nat turns up, send him back to work; if he doesn't, why, I'd be glad to help look for him."

He started away, but Harrison said, "Just a minute, Irving. Send the hooktender and the head rigger to my office right away." He was thoughtful for a moment, and then added, "Be a good idea to put Axel on as hooktender. What d'you think?"

"You bet!" Irving said emphatically, as he went swinging down the track toward the footbridge.

Harrison looked worried as he turned to Higgins. "Good grief!" he said. "I don't know what to do about Nat."

"We-ell," Old Timer suggested, "if he ain't here in a few hours I'd better go out to Hector's. He might be there, an', if he ain't there, t'wouldn't be a bad idee to go to th' cruiser's camp an' look aroun'." The old prospector had not forgotten the treatment that Nat received from Darrow the night of the storm.

"All right, Old Timer, I'll go down the track to the main office and see what was taken from the men last night." Harrison frowned. "You can just believe that the robbery was the work of experienced thieves. No amateur could go through the



cabins without waking up some one. I'll be back after a while."

Scotty sighed deeply as he followed Higgins and Mrs. Higgins into the kitchen.

"Guess I better take Jubilo up to th' cattle sheds, till we find out what Harrison wants t'do," Old Timer said, as he turned to Jake.

"Sure!" exclaimed Jake. "Why didn't you bring him up last night?"

"I left him in the alders 'cause I wanted to git an early start to Eureka this mornin'. But they's no sense in goin' now. I lost my gold." He got Jubilo, and then the two went up the track to the cattle sheds.

It was almost noon when Old Timer and Jake returned to Nat's cabin. As they stepped inside they surprised Harrison and Higgins, who were sitting on Nat's cot, talking earnestly.

Harrison spoke. "We've searched everywhere for clues, but we can't find a thing. Thought Nat might have left a note, but there's none here. His bed's been slept in, for it's all rumped up. I've gone through his trunk and I can't find his money anywhere." He made a hopeless gesture with his hand.

"Hm-m," Old Timer said, "I'm goin' t' Hector's."

Jumping into action, Harrison stood up and

turned to Jake. "Saddle Dick and bring him here for Old Timer to ride," he ordered. "And if he isn't there I don't know what we'll do, but I do know this: I'll have to notify the sheriff of his disappearance, and of the robbery!"

"Dinner's almost ready, Old Timer. I'll fix some for you before you go," Higgins offered.

"By ginger! I'm not goin' to stop for dinner. I can eat at Hector's." Old Timer turned to Jake. "Saddle Dick fer me an' I'll start out right now, I mustn't lose any time!"

Harrison smiled. "All right, Old Timer; but be sure to get word back as soon as possible."

It was noon, and very warm, when the old man mounted the horse and started to Hector's. As he went across the swinging bridge and started up the mountain on the other side of Little River, he thought of the time that he and Nat had come along the same trail after the boy had taken the cruisers to the woods. And he kept his shrewd eyes on the trail, hoping that he would find a footprint or a clue which would prove that the boy had gone to Hector's.

The trail was steep and rocky and the horse could not go very fast until it reached the ridge where Nat and Old Timer had, six months before, scraped away the snow and built a fire to cook their dinner. Then he gained time, as the ridge was almost level, and

in mid-afternoon he rounded the dangerous Devil's Curve.

Though Old Timer had made the trip from Camp Redwood to Devil's Curve in one-third the time that he usually did, he felt that he had been riding all day, for he was very anxious to see whether Nat was at Hector's. He thought, however, that he would gain time by letting the horse, which was dripping with sweat, rest at the edge of the dense forest which covered the floor of the valley beyond Devil's Curve.

His heart beat faster and his hands shook with eagerness when he resumed the journey. "If Nat ain't at Hector's," he promised himself, "I'll not stop till I find 'im!"

He passed through the valley and climbed the mountain, at the top of which was Hector's cabin. He did not stop at the watering-trough outside Hector's fence, but went on through the gate and into the pasture, where he had caught sight of the old hermit, mending the roofs of the goat sheds. "Hi, there, Hector!" he shouted, waving his arms.

Hector gave an answering wave and started to climb down.

"Have y' seen anything o' Nat?" Old Timer questioned at once.

"Why, no." Hector was mystified. "Isn't he home?" he asked.

Old Timer shook his head gravely. "He's not in Camp Redwood. He disappeared last night. The camp was ransacked and a lot of money and watches was stole. I lost my gold, too! There ain't no connection between the robbery and Nat's disappearance, though," he hastened to add.

"No!" Hector exclaimed, shaking his head vigorously. "That's unthinkable. But it's mighty strange—"

Old Timer interrupted him, explaining that the boy had lost his job and had been feeling very badly about it when he went to bed.

Hector whistled softly. "You come up to the cabin and get a drink of spring water and I'll make you some sandwiches. We'll talk this over and decide what to do about Nat."

He started across the pasture, but turned as Old Timer said, "No, thanks, Hector. I got to go on to the cruisers' camp. I'll come back and stay all night with y'. It'll probably be late."

"All right! I'll stay out here and keep a sharp lookout for any one who might happen to pass," Hector volunteered, as the old man rode off without another word.

Old Timer urged his horse on. He was very quiet as he rode on and on down the trail, and past the place where Nat and the pack train had stopped during the terrible storm on the boy's return from

the cruisers' camp. He thought the trail had never before seemed so long.

Shadows began to creep up the mountain, and the air turned cooler. A dove cooed mournfully and was answered by its mate. Old Timer looked around at the darkening forest with its impassable undergrowth, and shuddered. "What if that boy is lost in th' woods?" he voiced his thoughts. "He might have started fer Hector's an' lost th' trail in th' valley, th' other side of th' mountain. It's pitch dark in them trees at night."

The old man looked straight ahead. His heart ached for the missing boy, and he was filled with a strange loneliness. The forest grew dark as he urged his horse on toward the cruisers' camp.

## CHAPTER XV

### THROUGH THE BLACK FOREST

Long after Old Timer had fallen asleep on the night of the robbery, Nat lay on his cot, turning restlessly from side to side. He got up once to let Micky in when he heard him whining at the door. Then he went back to bed, with his pet curled up on the foot of his cot, and finally dropped off into fitful slumber.

In the middle of the night something aroused him. He stirred uneasily. Two balls of light appeared for an instant before his half-closed eyes. He lay very quiet, slowly opening his eyes. The cabin was pitch-dark and deadly still. He closed his eyes again, and waited.

The two balls of light flashed again. Nat was chilled with fear for he knew that a strange person was in the cabin, some one who had twice flashed a light in his face. His heart beat wildly. He opened his eyes again, and without moving his head, looked around the room. He tried to pierce the blackness. Suddenly a bulky object loomed up near the foot of Old Timer's cot and assumed human form.

The boy tried to scream, to warn the old man, but could not make a sound. His throat was tense, and he felt that hammers were pounding on his brain, as the object dimly but surely took the form of a man.

Nat's eyes were wide open now.

The man straightened. A faint light from the open window above Old Timer's cot fell upon him, and a wave of terror swept over the boy as he hoarsely cried, "*Darrow!*"

Immediately the man leaped across the room. A heavy hand covered Nat's mouth and another dragged him to his feet. He struggled to free himself, but he soon realized it was useless.

In a hoarse whisper Darrow said, "Cut it! You're goin' with me. No use tryin' to get away!" Taking a handkerchief from his pocket, he tied it tightly over the boy's mouth and around his head. "Dress!" he ordered.

Micky whined and clawed at Darrow's boot. With a vigorous kick the man sent him spinning across the cabin. Nat kicked at Darrow, but knew that he could not hurt such a powerful man.

"You dress," Darrow commanded, "or you'll go without any clothes."

Slowly Nat pulled on his overalls and shirt. "If I only could wake up Old Timer," he thought. But the old prospector was sleeping soundly. Nat

could hear him breathing. "Or if I could get my hand on Old Timer's six-shooter." He knew that the gun was under the old man's pillow, and that the least move he made would bring Darrow upon him.

"Hurry!" Darrow jerked him by the shoulders. The boy pulled on his boots, laced them, and reached for his mackinaw, which was hanging beside the door.

Darrow pushed him through the doorway. Micky growled and pawed at the man's boots, then leaped to Nat. For a moment the boy held him tightly, but Darrow forced the little animal from his arms. Micky scratched and fought with his sharp claws. As Darrow threw him into the cabin and swiftly closed the door, Nat heard his pet whine painfully. He knew that the coon's paw had been pinched in the door.

He was furious, but helpless. Angry tears filled his eyes. The handkerchief across his mouth was stifling. He could hardly breathe. It was very dark as Darrow quietly but roughly pulled him along by the cabins and started up the track.

Nat thought quickly. "If I could break away I'd run into the brush." But Darrow's hand gripped his shoulder and not once did the strong fingers relax.

He tried to call out as they passed the Harrisons'



and the last few cabins at the edge of Camp Redwood. But it was useless. He could not make a sound.

Darrow stopped near the swinging bridge. He stooped down on a log at the edge of the trail, dragged Nat down beside him, and took the gag from his mouth.

“No use tryin’ to get away,” he growled. “I’ve got a gun here on my hip and I’ll use it if you try to start anything funny.”

Nat did not answer, for his mind was working fast. He said to himself, “If he’d just loosen his hold for a second, I’d break away. It’s so dark he can’t see, and only by chance a bullet could hit me. I’d take the chance on that.” The terrible fear that had swept over him on finding Darrow in his cabin had left him. He was calm as he planned action and sat quietly waiting for his captor’s next move.

Soon he heard some one walking on the dry leaves behind them, and two men stepped around the end of the log. One of them called out in a low voice, “Darrow?”

“Yes,” replied Darrow.

“Any luck?”

“The gold an’ a few trinkets.”

The gold! Nat started, and his teeth came together with a click, for now he knew what Darrow had been doing near Old Timer’s cot. He had

taken the old prospector's gold! And he knew that the two men were the other cruisers. He turned cold as he thought that Darrow might have his money.

"We sure cleaned the camps," one of the men spoke up. "All but 25. Big Alex got that."

"Where's Alex now? He was supposed to meet us here, to give in the stuff," Darrow growled.

"He thought he'd better get back to his cabin in Redwood. He'll meet us at the same place on the Lone Pine trail, day after to-morrow. We got his haul."

Nat was struck dumb. He couldn't believe his ears. The man had said cabin in Redwood! Lone Pine trail! With a sharp intake of breath he thought, "*I am* right. One of the robbers *is* in Camp Redwood. But who is he?" Nat knew all the men living in Camp Redwood but he did not know anyone called Big Alex.

Suddenly the two men, startled, jumped back. "Who's that!" one of them demanded.

Darrow stood up, pulling Nat to his feet. "That kid from the cook-house," he said dryly. He explained that Nat had recognized him, and that he felt that the safest way for all of them was to bring the boy along, to prevent him from squealing.

One of the cruisers swore. "This is a pretty kettle of fish," he said.

“Yeah, Darrow, you’re a peach!” exclaimed the other. “First time I ever went kidnapping. What’re you going to do with the kid?”

“Do with him? I’ll get rid of him all right. It’s a fifty-foot drop from the swingin’ bridge to the river,” Darrow threatened.

“Yeah, but yo’ better not try that.”

Darrow hesitated a moment, then started across the bridge. He pushed Nat on in front of him, holding firmly to his shoulder.

“Did you get much?” he asked the cruisers.

“Don’t we always?”

Darrow snorted and went on.

Nat was alert and watched for a chance to escape as they stumbled along the dark trail up the mountain; but when they turned and went down a ravine which he knew led to Little River he lost hope, for he knew there would be no chance if they were going to cross the river and go through the forest on the other side. And he knew he would be safer with the cruisers than without them in that forest, for they probably had blazed a trail. If not, they would all surely be lost.

On reaching the river, he found that his suspicions were correct.

Darrow spoke up. “Guess it’s safe to use our flashlight, now that we’re off the main trail.” He threw a beam up and down the river until it fell

on an old windfall that reached across the black swirling water to a huge boulder on the opposite side.

“Here’s the log. Get across there!” Darrow ordered.

Nat scrambled up. As he started across the slippery log he was thankful for the calks in his boots, which bit into the wood and kept him from falling into the river that he could hear sullenly booming below.

“It’s a good thing we blazed a trail through this forest. It sure cuts off several miles. If we’d had to go around by that old hermit’s place, we’d be all day to-morrow getting to camp,” one of the cruisers said, when they all were safely across and had started up the mountain.

Nat was very quiet as he walked along in the pencil of light that pierced the darkness for only a few yards ahead of him. Sometimes he had to walk on wet, moss-covered logs and through thick entanglements of bracken and vines, with Darrow close behind, roughly forcing him on.

After about three hours the party came to a densely wooded plateau, where fire had burned the underbrush, leaving a smooth floor. Darrow was in the lead now, for he knew that Nat would not try to escape in the forest.

Nat followed Darrow, with the others in the rear.

It seemed to the boy that the black forest was ominously closing in around him. Looking up he could see nothing through the inky darkness. The thickly growing, densely covered limbs formed an impenetrable mass above him.

Suddenly a twig snapped to their right.

Darrow whirled, flashed a beam of light in that direction, and asked swiftly, "What's that?"

The men behind Nat threw their lights to the same spot, but they could see only the forest.

"Nothin', I guess." Darrow answered his own question and started on. The man who had been walking behind Nat stepped up between the boy and Darrow.

They had gone only a few yards when they again heard the noise to their left. They stopped and listened, and heard a low growl that could not be mistaken.

"That's a cougar," Darrow whispered tensely.

"Yes," Nat tried to speak calmly, "that's what it is. Jake told me about them."

The men stood close together. "What'll we do?" one of the cruisers asked nervously. "First time I ever run up against anything like that."

"Say," the other cruiser spoke in a hoarse whisper, "let's run!"

"Ah, dry up!" Darrow pulled a revolver from the holster on his hip.

The animal growled again, but this time it seemed a little farther away.

"We'll go get 'im." Darrow started to move forward.

"Meaning *you*, not *we*," one of the men replied.

"No, sir!" exclaimed Nat. "Jake said he's been followed by a mountain lion several times, and unless you're sure of killing it, don't shoot. It's liable to spring and get you if you just wound it."

Darrow laughed. "Aw, we're wastin' time. C'mon." He put the revolver back in the holster and started forward.

The three men were now walking ahead of Nat, and he could see only dimly where to step, as they hid the light from the path. As he stumbled along he thought, "I'll not step up between those men. No, sir, not even if I have no gun and no light." Hearing the low growl again, he turned his head and saw, a few yards directly behind him, two balls of glowing fire. He stopped, trembling with fear. His teeth chattered, but he made no sound.

"C'mon, what's the matter?" Darrow said roughly; then, looking back, he also saw the glaring eyes. He swore, and the other men looked.

"Let's run!" one of them suggested in a quivering voice.

"No, don't run!" Nat found his voice. "If you

run, he'll run after you. The only thing to do is be calm and walk right on."

Darrow didn't seem anxious to go after the animal now, but started on in a fast walk, the other men following close behind him.

Though Nat was quaking, not once did he try to step between the men. With a desperate effort he overcame his impulse to run. Twice he looked back to see if the animal was following, but he did not see or hear it again.

He was weary but hopeful, an hour later, when the party reached the edge of the forest. He wondered how he could escape. It was lighter now, and the sun would soon come up over the mountains. He thought, "If they all keep walking in front of me I'll dash into the thick brush just as soon as I can see a good chance—I think I know just about where we are—and I'll hide out till daylight and then hunt for the trail to Hector's." He smiled grimly as he thought of the cougar, but he thought, "I'd just about as soon take a chance on that as to go on with this gang of thieves." He remembered that Darrow had said, at the swinging bridge, that he would get rid of him. He wondered, "How will he get rid of me? And when?"

## CHAPTER XVI

### FLYING LEAD

The sun was shining brightly when Nat and the men arrived at the cruisers' camp on Fir Creek. For a moment the boy stood looking out over thickly timbered mountains and deep canyons. Every moment since daylight he had watched for a chance to escape, but Darrow had kept strict watch over him as they covered the last few miles.

Nat glanced at the tent, which stood near a large pine tree. The cruisers had not changed it since they had made camp on the evening, six months before, on which he had taken them to the woods. Near a giant cedar they had built a rough log-shack.

"Get inside, there!" Darrow spoke roughly as he motioned toward the door of the hut.

The other two cruisers had already gone in and were taking things from their pockets and piling them upon a heavy table that had been made from a hand-hewn slab of fir. A makeshift fireplace of stones had been built in the end of the shack. Three narrow shelves beside the fireplace held provisions,



and a sack of flour stood in the corner beneath them. There was one cot in the farther end of the shack. Nat walked across the room and sank down upon it. He supposed it was Darrow's cot. The other cruisers, he thought, probably slept in the tents.

As he sat down and looked at the things on the table his eyes narrowed and he held his lips firmly together. He could hardly overcome the impulse to gather them up and run, for he had recognized checks, watches, and trinkets which he knew belonged to his friends in Camp Redwood.

Just then Darrow came and placed the small chamois sack, containing Old Timer's gold, with the rest of the plunder. With a sidelong glance at Nat, he then slowly took eight small tobacco sacks from his pockets and laid them beside the sack of gold. "How's that for a haul?" he bragged. "Pretty good for one night's work, eh?" The corners of his big loose mouth turned up, and the sharp black eyes under his bushy eyebrows shone as he untied the chamois sack and dumped out its contents.

Carl, the tall cruiser, pursed his thin lips as he looked at the gold greedily. "About how much is all this, anyway," he asked with a grin.

"Oh, probably fifteen hundred or two thousand dollars." Darrow held up a watch by its chain. "Look at this! Some timepiece, eh?" he laughed.

Nat stared at Axel's big watch, clenched his fists, and bit his lip to keep from shouting, "You thieves, you sneaks, to steal things from honest working-men! And poor Old Timer," he thought, "worked hard in rain and snow to get that gold." The boy was more worried about Old Timer's gold and Axel's watch than about his own savings in the tobacco sacks. He thought, "Oh, if I had a gun I'd soon get these things back for the men in Camp Redwood! If I just had one of those little '32' automatics!" For a moment he sat with his head bowed in his hands. "The only thing I can do is to escape and get to Hector's," he decided.

Darrow started to divide the plunder. As the three men stooped over the table Nat suddenly straightened up. "Now's my chance!" he said to himself. "If I can just make it to the door, they'll never catch me!" He was breathless as he measured the distance with his eyes, and his heart thumped as he quietly inched himself forward until he was barely sitting on the edge of the cot. Suddenly he ducked, then fairly flew across the room. But Carl had seen him, and pounced upon him just as he reached the door, dragging him back into the room.

Darrow reached out and swung him down on the cot, growling, "Pretty smart, kid, but don't try it again. You stay here till I tell you to move, or, by

the Great Guns, I'll finish you!" He finished dividing the booty, and then started to build a fire in the fireplace. "Let's eat," he said.

The other two men left the shack—to hide the gold and watches, Nat thought,—and returned to cook breakfast. Darrow sat sullenly at a small table near the door, with a watchful eye on the boy.

At first, Nat refused to eat the bowl of oatmeal and the ham and eggs that the men offered him; but on second thought he decided that it would be better to eat, for if a chance of escape turned up he would be better able to meet it on a full stomach.

All that day he restlessly paced to and fro across the cabin, always with an eye on the door. But only once did the three men all leave the shack. Then Nat peered out through a chink in the wall and could see them standing a few feet away. By placing his ear against the tiny hole he could catch a few words. He knew that they were talking about him, and surmised that they were arguing about what to do with him. Darrow was angry and made threatening movements at the others, but they, in turn, sneered and answered sarcastically.

Finally, they seemed to come to a decision, and came back into the cabin.

After supper the boy was not allowed to go outside, where the cruisers had built a roaring fire; but Darrow had left a log burning in the fireplace.

The sun had gone and Nat sat on the cot, with his elbows on his knees and his jaw in his hands, looking through the doorway at the deep canyons and the black forest which surrounded the camp. It was quite dark in the shack now, and the blazing log threw grotesque streaks of light across the floor. He listened to the rippling of Fir Creek as it hurried down the mountain. He thought it sounded like Little River, which ran through Camp Redwood. He was homesick, even though he had lost his job in the woods, and Mrs. Higgins had said nothing about his going back to work in the cookhouse. An overwhelming loneliness took possession of him. He listened to the men outside, and wondered what they would do to him. He knew they would never let him go back to Camp Redwood. He had seen too much.

Suddenly the talking ceased. Nat sat up and listened. He heard Darrow swear violently. Then the latter rushed into the shack and grabbed a small towel. Before the boy could cry out, he had wound it around his head and over his mouth, and had tied it tightly.

Nat fought madly, but Darrow held him on the cot until Carl ran in, grabbed a piece of rope, tied his feet together, and bound his hands behind his back. Suddenly he ceased struggling, for he had heard Jim's voice. He was saying, "Hullo, Old

Man, where'd *you* come from? I thought you went to Eureka."

Nat's body stiffened and a thrill shot through him when he heard Old Timer's laugh. "Danged if a funny thing didn't happen!" he answered.

Darrow stepped to the door, while Carl roughly threw Nat on the floor at the end of the cot. Then Nat heard Darrow say, "Well, this *is* a surprise, Old Timer. You made a quick trip."

"Yup! Y'know I was jist tellin' this fellow here that a funny thing happened."

"Yeh? What happened?" Nat heard Carl step to the door and ask the question.

"Well, sir," Old Timer went on, "y' know I was takin' a little stake to th' bank in Eureka and stayed overnight in Camp Redwood."

"Well, what's funny about that? You always stay in Redwood don't you?" Darrow growled.

"Yup. But danged if some bandits didn't rob th' camp an' take my gold an' a lot of other things."

"Hm! That's too bad," returned Darrow.

"And you think that's funny?" Carl asked.

"We-el, not exactly, but th' funny part is this: that kid, Nat, has scooted out!"

"Maybe he cleaned the camp," Darrow said.

Nat held his breath and listened intently to hear the old man's answer. He heard Old Timer laugh. "Mebbe," he said.

Nat could not hear the men so plainly now. He guessed they had moved over to the camp fire, and wished that they had remained nearer.

He heard Jim ask where Jubilo was, but he could not hear the old man's answer. He lay there, huddled in the darkness, his face against the wall. Tears filled his eyes and he groaned aloud, but his friend did not hear him. He wondered why Old Timer had come to the cruisers' camp. If the old man suspected that Nat was there, why didn't he come into the cabin. The boy could hear them all talking, but he could not understand what they were saying. If only Old Timer would stay all night! Then he heard some one approaching the shack. "We-el, I guess I better be gittin' on. It's a long ways home."

Nat tried to call out but could not make a sound. Twisting from side to side, he tried in vain to free himself. He heard Old Timer say, "S'long!" He listened intently, and could hear him shuffle away through the woods.

Then the three men rushed into the shack. Darrow gave an order. "Carl, follow that old bird. Something queer about him coming back so soon. And it's pretty queer about him leaving his burro in Redwood. Sick, he said. Huh! Beat it, Carl, an' don't let him out of your sight till you're sure he's on the way to Trinity County!"

Darrow turned to the other cruiser. "And you, Jim, get things ready for a quick getaway."

"Aw, there ain't anything to get excited about. Y' know very well Alex will put us wise if we're suspected."

"I said get things ready! I didn't say we're going! And bring me those records for Beckman! If Harrison should get hold of them!" Darrow swore under his breath.

Nat started. With a flash he remembered the day on which he had taken the cruisers to the woods and had heard Darrow make the same remark.

Jim left the shack for a moment and returned with a large envelope, which he handed to Darrow, who put it in an inner pocket of his mackinaw. He then went over to Nat, pulled him up on the cot, cut the ropes that bound his hands and feet, and untied the gag.

Nat silently watched Jim filling knapsacks with food, while Darrow sorted letters and papers. He threw some in the fire and put others in his pockets.

In an hour Carl returned. "Well, the old man's gone. He sure led me a merry chase. He took a short cut through the ravine and started due east, so I guess he's on his way home, all right." He sat down beside Nat on the cot. "What's the idea of the packed knapsacks?"

"Nothin' like bein' ready to move an' move quick

when the time comes." Darrow seemed to be worried. "If Alex comes, we want to be ready to make a getaway."

"Aw, he's losin' his nerve," Jim laughed; and Carl joined him, to be silenced by a growl from Darrow.

"For my part, I think they'll suspect the kid as long as they won't be able to find him," Carl ventured presently. He looked at Nat and laughed, "Eh, kid?"

Nat was silent.

For half an hour the men quarreled. Finally Darrow ordered the two out of the shack to their tent. He promised to keep watch at the door.

Nat watched him pile logs upon the fire and then sit down on a bench at the table. The boy was very tired, and felt hopeless. He wished he could escape and go to Hector's, but he knew it was impossible as long as Darrow sat between him and the door. He became drowsy and slumped down on the cot, half sitting and half lying. He thought to himself, "I've got to stay awake. Maybe Darrow will fall asleep, and I can get away! But—" his eyes closed "—I wonder who Alex is." He dozed off.

The two cruisers rushed into the shack, and instantly Nat was wide-awake. He felt rested and knew that he must have slept, for the fire had died



down. He heard Carl say, "Get goin', Darrow, Alex is outside. He says Harrison's wise but ain't got the goods on us. We're clearin' out right now, to-night, before he can get an officer out here."

For a moment Nat was thrilled. Alex, the man with the worn sole, whom he had been hunting for weeks, was outside! He leaped to his feet and started to go out, but Darrow grabbed him. "Not so fast, kid," he snapped, as he flung the boy back on the cot. "Watch him, Jim." He hurried out, and Nat heard excited voices, but he could not tell what they were saying, nor could he hear the stranger's voice well enough to recognize it.

In a moment Darrow returned. "Alex is gone, and we're following right now," he said swiftly.

"Yeh! How about the kid?" Jim asked.

"He's goin' with us. You can bet on that!"

Nat gritted his teeth as he said, "Like fun I am! If I go you'll have to carry me, for I won't budge an inch from this shack to-night!"

Darrow yanked him to his feet. "C'mon!" He shook the boy roughly. "We're goin', and we're not goin' to lose any time by arguing with you!"

Nat was wide-awake and alert. His body stiffened. "I didn't come here willingly, Darrow."

"That's true, but you'll go with us willingly enough when you hear my plans," the cruiser said, cajolingly.

“What do you mean?” Nat leaned forward hopefully.

“Just this. You want to go to school pretty bad, don’t you? Well, we’ll take you to San Francisco and see that you get started right.” Darrow smiled, but there was a strange look in his shrewd black eyes. “C’mon, stand up! We’ve got to hurry, for it’ll be a long walk through Trinity County to a railroad.”

“You mean that you’ll pay my way through school, and I won’t have to work?”

“Exactly! C’mon, we can’t waste time.”

“Yes, come on,” said Jim. He and Carl were standing near the door, with knapsacks over their shoulders. Carl started out. “I’m not waiting any longer,” he said, as he turned toward the trail, followed by Jim.

The boy and Darrow were alone in the dimly lit shack. The flashlight, lying on the table, cut a pencil of light through the darkness toward the door. The logs in the fireplace had burned down to a bed of red embers and were casting a semicircle of eerie light out on the earthen floor.

For a moment Nat stared at the cruiser, who was standing in the center of the shack, with his mackinaw on and his knapsack over one arm. Then, as the significance of his offer began to be understood, the boy sprang to his feet and pointed

an accusing finger. "You think that I'd do that? Why, that's bribery!"

Without a word Darrow slowly advanced.

Nat thought quickly: "I may be turning my back on a chance, but I'd rather work as a flunky in the kitchen all my life than to accept such an offer!" He met the cruiser's eyes squarely. "Darrow," he said, "I'm *not going!*"

Darrow advanced closer and said hotly, "Oh, yes, you are!"

"You let me alone!" Nat's fist shot out and struck Darrow in the stomach. Darrow swore violently, and, reaching out, slapped Nat on the cheek with so much force that he sent the boy reeling against the stone fireplace.

For only an instant Nat stood there. Then, going closer to Darrow, he said, "You leave me alone! Get me? I'm not going, and you can't make me!" He was not tall enough to reach Darrow's face, but he managed to strike another blow in the stomach that made the man groan. Then he ducked under his arm and sprang aside as the other struck out, hitting nothing.

Darrow started around the table as Nat moved for the door, so that he stood between the boy and his avenue of escape.

Nat thought swiftly, "If I don't let him get hold of me I'll be all right. I'll just stay out of his way."

He retreated to his place between the table and the fireplace.

Darrow was furious. "You wildcat!" he thundered. "When I get hold of you you'll know it."

Nat was a bit frightened, but his mouth was firm as he glanced at Darrow's huge hairy wrists and powerful arms. He met his glaring eyes, thinking of the cougar which had followed them through the forest. The thought came swiftly, "He looks like a beast, a monster ready to spring!" He again started to run, but Darrow lunged forward and clutched his shoulder. Nat, feeling the strong fingers bite into his flesh, wrenched himself free, leaving part of his shirt in his assailant's grasp.

"You fool!" Darrow snarled. He sprang at Nat again, but the boy managed to keep the table between them.

Then Darrow's loose mouth slowly spread into a grin, and his eyes narrowed as he grasped the edge of the heavy table and moved it slowly toward Nat. But the boy was alert. Reaching down to the fireplace, he grabbed the bar of iron that was used as a poker. Standing erect, with the poker behind him, he watched Darrow move the table, turn it at an angle, and begin to back him into the dark corner.

"Guess you'll come now and no foolin'!" The man glowered.

Nat grasped the bar tightly. His face paled and he felt the perspiration standing on his forehead, for he knew that he would not have a chance if Darrow forced him into the corner.

“What you goin’ to do with the poker?” Darrow sneered.

Nat was past words. He was frightened now, and trembling. But suddenly, with the swiftness of a shot, he swung the iron bar.

Darrow dodged, but Nat struck him a blow that glanced off his skull. The man lunged forward, knocking the table over, and the bar from the boy’s hand. The flashlight rolled to the floor, but the coals in the fireplace gave out enough light for Nat to see him reach out wildly for the poker. The boy ran, but Darrow leaped after him, always between him and the door, and again tried to drive him into a corner. He advanced with the quickness of a cat, grabbed Nat’s arms, and twisted them behind him.

Nat groaned with pain as the man dragged him across the shack and out into the darkness.

Suddenly the crack of a six-shooter rang out! Darrow whirled, and a flash of fire streaked the blackness as he sent an answering shot into a thicket beside the shack. For a second, his hold on the boy loosened and Nat jerked himself free. At the same moment a familiar voice sounded near-by.

“Drop that boy an’ reach fer th’ sky, y’ varmint! Danged if I don’t let th’ daylight into y’, y’ sneakin’ heathen!” But the cruiser was making his getaway. Lead flew all around him, as he dashed into the underbrush and was gone.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE SEARCH

“Nat, me boy!” Old Timer ran to Nat and caught him in his arms. “T’was a good fight you put up, boy, t’was a good fight! I was hid in th’ thicket over there. Had a idee all th’ time that you was in that shack, but had to wait a chance to surprise ’im, an’ then,” the old prospector grinned, “I let ’im have it!”

“Old Timer, I’m glad enough to see you!” Nat’s voice trembled and he could hardly talk. Tears ran down his cheeks, leaving shiny streaks through the dirt. He dabbed at them with his fists.

“There, there, boy, what’s th’ matter? Yer all right. Brace up.” The old prospector drew Nat to him and patted him on the shoulder.

Suddenly Nat straightened. “Let’s go after them! Quick, Old Timer, they can’t be very far away yet.”

“That’s th’ stuff! That’s th’ way to talk! But we can’t follow ’em in th’ dark. It’ll soon be daylight. Another half-hour or so, an’ then, if y’ say

so, we'll go! C'mon in th' shack now an' we'll see if we can't scare up somethin' to eat. I'm 'bout starved."

In the shack they found bread, coffee, eggs, ham, and flour. While Old Timer straightened the benches and the table, Nat, with the aid of Darrow's flashlight, made flapjacks and fried ham and eggs. He excitedly told about his recent experiences, about the green light on the Lone Pine trail, and about Big Alex. "And," he added, "I've got to find out who that man is. He's been living right in Camp Redwood, and if we don't capture him, or find out who he is, he'll go right back and rob camps again. And we've got to get back your gold and the things they took from all the loggers!"

The old man was solemn. "Yup! I'd like to have my gold all right, and danged if I ain't goin' to get it! We'll trail 'em soon as it's light 'nough. Y' lost yer savin's, too. An' we'll sure get 'em back!"

When they sat down to the table Nat was so anxious to get started that he could hardly eat. "Did you have any idea that I was in here when you were here last night," he asked, between mouthfuls.

"O' course I didn't know y' was, but I thought somethin' was wrong. An' when that fool Carl trailed me—guess he thought I didn't know it—I knew somethin' was wrong, an' I had to keep on



toward Trinity County so as he wouldn't suspect anything. Crickety! I was afraid they'd hear Dick!"

"Dick!" Nat was surprised. "Where is he?"

"I left 'im down th' trail a quarter-mile or so last night when I came up here."

"Oh, I hope he's still there. We can get him and he'll carry double, and we can make up for the time we'll lose waiting for daylight."

It was just getting light when Nat and Old Timer found Darrow's trail through a thicket of salmon-berry bushes and out to an open space beside Fir Creek, where the tracks led into the water.

"Bet he ran down the middle of the creek so we couldn't trail him." Nat said. "But we can get Dick and do the same thing and pick up his trail where he left the water."

They easily found footprints where Carl and Jim had started eastward along the trail, and then the marks suddenly disappeared in a bank of rock and brush. They looked for footprints of the man whom the cruisers called Alex, but he had left no sign that he had been there.

After hurriedly making up some ham sandwiches to take with them, the old man and the boy walked back along the trail through the giant firs, and found Dick where he had been left.

Nat was delighted to see the horse. "You're all

right, Dick, old boy," he said feelingly. "If it hadn't been for you, Old Timer wouldn't have got here so soon."

But the time was not wasted in conversation, for the old man immediately mounted, and Nat climbed up behind him. They rode up the middle of Fir Creek, anxiously looking on both banks for signs to show where Darrow might have left the water.

Finally, without any luck, they found themselves back in the cruisers' camp. Then they rode on as fast as possible over the trail leading into Trinity County, about ten miles distant.

It was a sultry day. Nat folded up his mackinaw and laid it across the saddle, unbuttoned his shirt at the neck, and rolled up his sleeves. The hot rays of the sun beat down upon the mountain. Not a leaf on the tall trees was moving. The grass in the open spaces was dry and yellow. Lizards scurried from the tops of the warm rocks where they had been sunning themselves, to hide in the crevices.

A hawk circled over them and swooped almost to the ground, in search of prey. Buzzards soared and swept past so close that the travelers could hear the swishing of their wings.

As they jogged on through hot avenues of manzanita and pines, following cow trails, deer trails, or no trails at all, Nat wished for the cool and refreshing shade of the redwoods.

At eleven o'clock they stopped at a creek, to rest and to eat their lunch. Nat, sitting on a small sandbar at the edge of the water, suddenly stared open-mouthed at an impression in the sand, just at the edge of the creek. Then he burst out excitedly, "There it is, Old Timer, there it is!"

"What is?" The old man joined Nat, who had fallen to his knees and was examining the impression.

"The footprint, the very same one I saw on the Lone Pine trail! Look at that! I'd know it in a million. See, the worn place is a little larger. The man has been wearing it, and the wear would make it a little bigger. It's the one, all right! There it is, as plain as day!"

Old Timer carefully scrutinized the place indicated by Nat.

"Can't see a thing, boy. Guess you're just excited."

"No, I'm not. Not a bit of it! See here? Right under the water. Now look. The water has almost washed away the marks, but there's enough left for me to know what it is. Y'see the hole in the sole would leave that little raised place!"

"Yer right, boy!"

Nat leaped to his feet and searched for more tracks but found none. Then he crossed the stream. On the farther side he found where the dry grass had

been mashed down. "See that?" he asked. "Do you know what caused it?"

"Yup! A man been sittin' or lyin' there. Crickety, boy! There's been two o' 'em! Lookie here!" He pointed to another depression in the grass.

"Boy!" Nat exclaimed, as he dived under a thicket of willows. "Here *is* a find! Don't touch it!" The two looked eagerly at the gray ashes of a cigarette which had burned down to the cork tip.

"I'll say that is somethin'! A man has been 'long here an' not so turrible long ago, either, or th' breeze would have spread that ash," said Old Timer.

Nat got to his feet. "We're hot on the trail of Big Alex, the thief who was on the Lone Pine trail!" The boy did not waste time, but sprang into action. "C'mon, we've got to get 'im, for his capture might mean Darrow's capture, and we got to get Darrow to see what those records are that he didn't want Harrison to see! And I'd sure like to know about that green light, and a lot of other things. We got to get your gold. C'mon!"

He was already back on the other side of the stream, running to the horse.

The old man was soon beside him. "An' y' still want t' go after 'em?" he asked seriously.

Nat exclaimed in surprise, "You bet I do!"

"Y' realize they're desperadoes and they're armed?"



Burnita Collins

“THERE IT IS, OLD TIMER, THERE IT IS!” --Page 233



“Sure!”

“An’ y’ ain’t got a gun?”

Nat shook his head. “But you got a six-shooter, and I know you’re a good shot.”

“Y’ better take th’ gun boy. I can look out fer myself.” The old man drew the gun so quickly that Nat hardly saw his hand move.

“And leave you without one? Not on your life.”

Old Timer solemnly put the gun back in his pocket, saying, “I think we’d better walk an’ lead Dick from now on, so we can keep on their trail easier.”

“Yes! We got to walk now,” Nat assented.

The two started across the stream with Nat leading, the horse following behind. At the crest of a ridge they stopped to look around, for they had lost the trail. In back of them were mountains, covered with forests of pine and small fir trees, giving way in places to scraggy oaks and large patches of manzanita. Below were chaparrals and patches of dry grass, stretching down to the willows and thickets of fir that bordered the stream where they had found the footprints.

“Hm!” Nat walked around under the scraggy oaks. “We *got* to find their trail again. No telling which way they went from here. Just which way would be Trinity County, Old Timer? You know, Darrow mentioned Trinity County and a railroad.”

The old man motioned due east. "Right over them mountains is th' Trinity River an' Trinity County. I figger this way: 'Twasn't much chance of findin' 'em anywheres in this part of th' country we've jist come over, fer they'd have walked this fur, 'cause they had sech a good start. I know ev'ry step of these here hills an' I know what I'm talkin' 'bout. But from here on, look out!" He stroked his long gray beard, and a shrewd look came into his eyes. "O' course they'd pick th' shortest ways to a railroad an' that'd be this way. They prob'ly figger'd that out when they planned th' robbery, an' they prob'ly figger'd that by th' time th' robbery was found out an' if they was suspected an' Harrison notified th' sheriff an' if a posse was sent out, why, they'd be so fur away from here that they'd never git caught. Over them ridges, yonder, to th' south, is Blue Canyon, an' th' walls is purty near straight up from th' river. They could climb down into that canyon but they'd haf to go clean through it to th' south end to git out. That's a good place fer desperadoes to hide. In th' early days many a outlaw stayed in there, an', by crickety, many a outlaw got caught in there, too! There's tunnels an' caves in th' walls of th' canyon an' brush. Th' more I think o' it, th' more I think they might lay low in there till they think th' robbery has blowed over, an' then strike out fer Mexico or Canada."



Nat looked disappointed. "But we're not going back. You're not giving up? We can't let them get away!"

Old Timer chuckled. "Nope, we ain't agoin' t' give up after we come this fur. We'll look aroun' fer more tracks. I'll look aroun' over in th' oaks an' you look down through th' manzanita."

Nat walked a few paces across an open space. Soon he darted back to the old man. "I've found 'em again! Come quick!"

At the same moment Old Timer said in a low whisper, "I got 'em too, by dang! They're headed north!"

"No, sir! They're headed south!" Nat exclaimed.

"Come 'ere, boy, an' cast yer eyes over these fresh tracks. They didn't even try to cover their trail here. A blind man could see that!"

Under the small scraggy oaks a half-dozen tracks could easily be seen. "See here?" Old Timer spat brown tobacco juice into a pile of rocks. "One of 'em fellers had smaller shoes than t'other."

"That must've been Carl and Jim! I'll bet it was! They're sure headed up that way, but now lookit down here!"

They walked through the oaks to a clump of manzanita, where Nat showed the old man distinct tracks made by two men. "See here? This is the

track of Big Alex!" Nat exclaimed. "And I'll bet a million Darrow is with him. I'll go after them! You follow the other tracks."

"But you got no gun, boy."

"I won't let them see me. I'll follow their trail and see which way they're going; then I'll come back here and meet you. In the meantime, you can follow the other trail. Is it a go?" The boy looked expectantly at the old man.

"Yup. It's the only way," Old Timer agreed.

"We'll have to leave Dick here. It's the only thing to do. I'll tie him to one of these small oaks." Nat walked over to Dick, patted the horse, and talked to him. "Don't worry, Dick. I'll be back pretty soon. You stay right here, old boy."

"Nat, don't foller 'em too fur. Y' might get lost," cautioned Old Timer. "'Bout three mile to th' south o' Blue Canyon is a leetle store, right alongside th' highway. Ben Howe is th' owner o' th' store an' he's a deputy sheriff. Don't go past that highway, but if y' stay on their trail that fur, come on back an' we'll both go down an' see Ben an' then go on into Blue Canyon. Y' understand?"

Nat nodded, and the old man started away.

The boy hurried through the oaks and glided into the thicket of manzanita, with his sharp eyes on the trail of the bandits.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE BLAZING FOREST

Nat crept down through dense thickets of manzanita and scraggly oaks, until he lost the trail about a mile up the stream. He glided along on the bank, looking sharply for a bit of crushed moss or grass where a man might have stepped, a burnt match, a cigarette butt, or newly fallen leaves that might have been broken off by a man forcing his way through entanglements.

For an hour he hunted without finding anything. He decided to climb to the crest of the ridge on the opposite side. He crossed over and started up the steep bank. When about halfway up, he noticed that an eerie yellowish light shone against the bank. Suddenly he became rigid, as he sniffed the air. He held his breath for an instant. Then, in a frightened voice, he said aloud, "That's fire!"

He ran out to an open space and saw clouds of thick, yellowish smoke rising over the opposite mountain, where he had left his horse. The terrible realization that he had tied Dick there swept over him.

“Old Timer!” he called, as he ran wildly down the steep ridge. He sickened at the thought that his friend might be caught in the forest.

A quarter of a mile downstream he came to an opening between willow thickets and dashed across it, only to run into thickets of chaparral. He was breathing in gasps. His lungs ached, but he ran as fast as he could. He now heard a steady roar, and thought, “It’s the wind!” Then he realized that it was the fire. It was the roar of giant flames sweeping through the forest.

A cloud of smoke enveloped him. He coughed spasmodically and drew his arms across his smarting eyes. He knew what that meant. The wind was coming up and soon the whole country would be on fire. He staggered out to a rise, looked up, and saw the tops of the clumps of oaks, not far away. It gave him new energy and hope. He bounded on.

At his right, new flames broke out in the thickets through which he and the horse would have to pass! He ran swiftly toward the oaks. And then he saw Dick! The horse was wild. He was rearing and pulling in an attempt to loosen the rope. Nat pulled his knife from his pocket and opened it as he ran. “Dick! I’m coming, I’m here! Dick! Good old Dick!”

The horse was plunging wildly. Nat had to leap

for the bridle to bring him down so that he could mount. He fairly flew into the saddle, and, with the open knife, slashed the rope. The horse plunged and was off like the wind, thundering down through aisles of burning brush, and crashing through the chaparral.

Nat lay low, clinging desperately to the horn of the saddle and to the horse's mane. "We've got to find Old Timer," he thought, as he tried to turn Dick in the direction the old man had taken. But the animal raced on and on. It raced down to the stream, splashed into the water, and headed upstream. Nat clung like a burr, never raising his head lest he be caught by overhanging limbs and snags. Dick plunged out on the bank and galloped into a forest of tall pines.

At last Nat managed to turn the horse in the direction which his friend had taken. His heart was filled with fear, though he knew that the old man was a pioneer and had fought scores of fires.

He felt that he had ridden miles, when finally the horse came out upon a highway and stopped.

Nat heard some one approaching on horseback. Soon he was able to recognize the rider as a forest ranger.

"Hello, there. Are you Nat?" the ranger shouted, pulling up beside Dick. "I'm looking for you. Old Timer told—"

“Is Old Timer safe?” Nat leaned forward eagerly.

“You bet! But he was awful worried about you, and came to Camp Carlson to get out a searching party. He’s coming along in a truck with some fire-fighters;—here they come now!”

Nat turned and saw two large trucks with men in them. A third truck full of fire-hose, gunny sacks, shovels, and axes followed closely. A broad grin spread over his face when he saw Old Timer beside the driver of the first truck.

“Nat, me boy!” the old man shouted, as he leaped to his feet when the truck stopped near the horses. “Danged if y’ ain’t a sight fer these old eyes. Thought maybe y’ got mixed up in th’ fire!”

“No,” Nat could laugh now, “but I thought maybe *you* were lost.”

The old man laughed loudly. “Nope, I’m still here.”

The ranger spoke up. “Now that the boy is here, I’d like to have you and the ten men who were going to search for him help fight the fire, Old Timer. What do you say?”

“Sure!” the old man exclaimed. “Never failed y’ yet, did I, Tom?”

“That’s right. You’re always on the job. How about the boy?”

“Let Nat speak fer himself.”

“Yes.” Nat spoke emphatically. “But I can’t take Dick along.”

“We’ll manage that, all right,” said the ranger. “Just tie him to one of those trees till I come back, which will be in a half-hour or so. Then I’ll take him down to my cabin. He’ll be safe there.”

Nat agreed. He knew that the horse would be safe this time, for all the men would be working between this place and the fire. After tying him, he climbed into the truck beside Old Timer. Tom gave the signal to start, and turned his horse off the road onto a trail which led through the timber. The three trucks started on.

Old Timer was anxious to know how Nat and Dick escaped the terrible fire. After the boy had related his adventure, the old man told how he had followed the trail of the two bandits to within a quarter of a mile of Camp Carlson, a lumber camp, and had decided to ask there if anyone had seen strange men. As he arrived at the camp, Tom, the ranger, received a telephone message about the fire from a lookout station on the top of one of the highest peaks. The old man explained how worried he had been about the boy, and that he picked ten men to help search along the line of the fire. The other men were preparing to fight the fire, so Old Timer and the searchers started with them in the truck.

For a few minutes Nat was quiet. He looked

out over the tree tops and saw great billows of yellow smoke rolling up.

"I'm afraid we've lost track of the bandits," he said to Old Timer. "The fire will wipe out all traces of them."

"Nope, I think yer wrong," the old man said. "It'll wipe out th' tracks, all right, but I think we'll git two of 'em yet. Remember what I tole y' about Blue Canyon?"

Nat nodded.

"We-el, it's down to th' south, 'bout eight mile, an' th' fire prob'ly won't burn down that fur 'cause it's comin' this direction. To-morrow mornin', bright an' early, you an' me will strike out fer th' Blue Canyon country."

It was mid-afternoon when the party arrived at the place where it was to leave the trucks. Nat and Old Timer were the first ones to grab shovels and axes.

Through the pines they could now see the blaze of burning trees and brush, a mile distant. The low, rolling hills between the edge of the forest, where the boy stood, and the main wall of fire were dotted with new flares of burning brush.

Tom ordered the men to start a fire trail a quarter of a mile from the edge of the forest. Two other rangers led the way through the brush to the place where they were to start the trail. "She's headed



this way, men," one of them exclaimed. "We'll have to work fast. Clear a trail about fifteen feet wide. Half of you work down toward that canyon the other side of the ridge and the rest of you over this way toward the creek."

At once all went to work cutting brush, and felling and dragging trees to the side of the trail nearer the fire. The boy and the old man worked side by side. One of the rangers stepped up and said, "We'll have good luck if the wind doesn't come up."

In some places there was little brush, and after an hour had passed they had made great progress. The ranger's idea, Nat knew, was to keep the fire out of the dense forest behind them. "If the trail we are clearing is wide enough, the fire will stop when it burns up to it," he thought. Pausing a moment, he looked at the blazing brush. The fire was coming toward them rapidly, and the smoke was stifling. Ashes and sparks fell around the men, who had now worked up to the creek. Nat wetted a gunny sack and ran about trying to extinguish the sparks, but they soon came in such numbers that it was impossible to put them all out. Soon all the men had to throw aside their axes and shovels and work with him.

As far as Nat could see, to his right and to his left, the men were working frantically as they retreated before the advancing irregular wall of fire.

He was very tired, but he continued to work with all his strength.

Steadily the flames sent the men farther back from the trail. With their gunny sacks they beat the sparks, burning twigs, and leaves that fell between the fire trail and the forest.

Tom came up and said to Nat, "I've fed your horse and he's safe at my cabin."

"Thanks," Nat said gratefully, and the ranger turned to Old Timer. "We've brought provisions. You can build a fire down by the road and eat."

"All right! C'mon, Nat." And the two, tired and hungry, started back through the forest.

## CHAPTER XIX

### NAT FIGHTS FIRE

When they arrived at the road where the trucks were waiting they found that the drivers had already unloaded bread, canned meat, sardines, doughnuts, and pies.

Old Timer built a fire in a safe place and made coffee, while Nat made sandwiches. As the men straggled in, three or four at a time, Nat and Old Timer gave them food. After all had eaten, they went back to work.

Tom said to Old Timer, "You take as many of the men as you need and start a trail along the ridge, this side of Brown's ranch. There's a new outbreak in the pine forest and the wind's blowing this way. And you," he wheeled his horse and spoke to another, "take twenty men and—" Nat didn't wait to hear more but followed Old Timer as he went along the line of men, hurriedly picking out his helpers and ordering them to take their tools and to follow.

Arriving at the crest of a ridge, the men fell to

work, chopping trees, clearing brush, and making a clean trail fifteen feet wide, just as they had done a few hours before.

Nat worked like a man, only occasionally stopping to look at the smoke rising from the fire but two miles distant, where Tom and dozens of men were clearing another fire trail.

The wind increased. Old Timer was worried. "I don't like that wind at all. Th' fire'll jump the trail that Tom an' his men are makin' if it keeps up!"

He was right. The fire did jump the trail. Tom was driven back, and, with his men, joined the others. This made the line of fighters a half-mile long.

"She's sure comin' fast," Old Timer shouted to Nat. "I'm afraid it'll wipe out Brown's ranch an' Carlson's Lumber Camp and go clean to the Trinity River. Tom sent Brown and his son home to git all th' livestock off'n th' place."

As the excitement settled down into terribly hard and dangerous work Nat began to feel nauseated. His face burned and his throat was parched from breathing the hot air. His hands were blistered from the axe and his eyes felt as though they were full of sand.

The heat was so intense, as the fire came still closer, that the men staggered, almost exhausted, as they worked to make the trail wider so that the flames could not jump across.

Old Timer dared not subject them longer to such danger. He ran along the line, shouting, "Run fer your lives! Run fer Brown's Ranch!"

The men lost no time in obeying the order. As all ran to the ridge opposite, Nat glanced back to see long tongues of fire dart across the trail that he had worked so hard to help clear.

At Brown's ranch three auto trucks had been filled with household goods. A number of women and children were in the trucks, also. Just as Nat and Old Timer came upon them one of the drivers called, "Here, Old Timer, you and the boy ride with me."

They accepted the invitation, and soon the trucks started away, leaving a half-dozen men who were going to make a desperate effort to save the house by keeping the rear wall wet. They had no hopes of saving the stable and the barn, which were at the edge of the forest.

"Where you goin'?" Old Timer asked the driver.

"Lane's meadow. The women and children'll be safe there. Even if th' fire burns through Carlson's Camp, it can't reach 'em there."

"Yup, that's right."

The truck started down a road, crossed a creek in the bottom of a ravine, and soon came out upon a mile-long green meadow, stopping near the bank of the Trinity River.

“We’ll help ’em unload, Nat, fer they’ll need th’ trucks at Carlson’s,” said Old Timer. Nat nodded and went to work with a will.

It was dark when he and the old man went up the hill to the ranger’s cabin. After taking Dick down to Lane’s meadow, where he would be safe if the fire should burn the lumber camp, they hurried along the ridge to Carlson’s. There they found several hundred men swarming around the cabins, gathering up their belongings and getting ready to leave, for they had almost given up hope of saving the camp. Most of them had been fighting the fire all afternoon, just as Nat and Old Timer had done.

Looking across the ravine, Nat saw that Brown’s barn, stable, and house were in flames, and that the fire had swept down almost to the creek.

Old Timer went into the camp store, but Nat stood on the porch to look around. The whole surrounding country was illuminated by a reddish light from the fire. At first glance, Camp Carlson recalled Camp Redwood to the boy’s mind. To his right stood the long unpainted cook-house, with rows of cabins and several cottages behind it. But, unlike Camp Redwood, this camp had been built on a ridge, and many small cabins perched on the bank above a scraggly forest of pines and oaks. Beyond the cottages he saw thousands of peeled logs ready to be hauled away.

Old Timer came out on the porch. "Here, Nat. I bought a leetle joolery fer y'. I got a idee y'll need it to-morrow," he grinned.

"Oh, boy!" Nat was surprised as the old man handed him a brand new .32-calibre automatic. "That's a beauty! I've wanted one of those for a long time." He looked it over carefully. "This sure *is* a gem!"

"Put it in your pocket, boy. An' here's a handful of shells. Put 'em in yer other pocket."

Nat grinned as he slipped the gun into his hip pocket. "Thanks an awful lot, Old Timer."

Tom swung around the corner of the store with a dozen men, carrying reels of hose. "Old Timer," he said, "we've got to save this camp. Will you see that these men string out the hose? I've got to get back on the ridge. We got a chance of checking the fire out there. If we save this camp, we'll save all the felled timber."

Old Timer ordered one of the men to fasten the hose to the hydrant beside the store and to unreel it to the cabins on the cliff above. "And you other men," he said, "hurry and string yer hose,—one from th' cook-house hydrant and th' other from that at the lower end of camp."

"Anything I can do?" Nat asked. "I'd like to help!"

"Well, we're jist goin' to play th' water on these

cabins nearest th' fire. There's no puttin' it out now b'fore it gets here. We can save th' camp if these is saved, but if these catch, it's th' end of th' cook-house, store, an' everything, an' it'll take in th' felled timber clean down to th' other side of th' mountain. You take that hose there at th' end cabin an' play th' water back an' forth along th' wall. Soak it good, boy."

The steady roar of the fire grew louder. The flames leaped down into the ravine and across the creek, and jumped from tree to tree. "In a few minutes it'll be right here," Nat thought, fearfully. The flames attacked the pitchy trees, and clouds of black smoke rolled up over the camp. The heat was terrific, for the forest right below had become a red-hot furnace, a thing of torture.

"If it reaches here, we'll never save the camp, and there's no telling where the fire'll stop." Nat sickened at the thought. The water shot from the nozzle he was holding and beat against the cabin, sending back a spray that soaked him to the skin.

A few minutes later the ranger looked out over the ridge, where the men were still working furiously with wet sacks, smouldering new outbreaks in the sparsely growing brush and timber. "I believe they'll check it out there. Not much there to burn. Brush, a few scrawny pines, and scrub oak. And oak burns slow."



One of the other rangers came up. "I believe it's under control. If these cabins had caught, we'd never have been able to check the fire. It would have wiped out this camp and got into the felled timber on the other side of the mountain."

"Yes, then it would have been impossible to save the rest of the camp. Well, it's under control now," said the ranger.

"Whew! I'm sure all in." Tom drew a long breath as he wiped the perspiration from his face. "What d'you say to going down to the cabin, washing up, and getting supper? How my face burns! And boy, we'll go to bed early!"

"Yup! Guess they'll be no objections!" Old Timer and Nat followed the ranger down the trail toward the cabin. "I'll go get Dick. I left him down by the river," Nat said.

He found Dick where he had left him beside one of the trucks. He rode him back to the ranger's cabin, led him to a little shack, took off his bridle, and unsaddled him.

Tom was making coffee and preparing something to eat. Old Timer was taking off his boots.

"I'll say I'm tired. This bed sure looks good to me," Nat said, as he sank down on a cot. Glancing into another room he could see a white iron bed with a clean spread and two big white pillows. "I'll sleep here on the cot and Old Timer can sleep

in the bed with Tom," he thought to himself. He noticed a telephone on the wall and said aloud, "I think we ought to telephone to Mr. Harrison and let him know where we are."

"Yup," Old Timer agreed, "but we can't git 'im from here. We'll go up to Carlson's Camp in th' mornin' an' phone."

## CHAPTER XX

### NAT UNDER FIRE

“Wickety-wick-wick-wick.”

A noisy and friendly flicker hopped from branch to branch in a tree outside the window of the kitchen where Nat was sleeping, and then down to the ground, where an ant-hill furnished the nicest kind of breakfast food. He busily licked the little creatures out of the hill with his long sticky tongue until he was satisfied, then flew to the window-sill, cocked his eye, and sang something that sounded like:

“Wick up, wake up,  
Yarrup, Yarrup!  
Wick up, wake up,  
Get up, you’re up!”

“All right, Mr. Yellow-hammer Flicker, I’m getting up now, so stop your scolding. I’m not a whistlepunk to-day, so there!” Nat jumped out of bed, and away flew the flicker with a loud, “Yarrup, yarrup, yarrup!”

“Are you up, Nat?” called Old Timer from the bedroom.

“Yes, I’m up now. I’d like to go to the river and take a swim. Could I?”

“Sure! We’ll go up th’ south fork. It’s jist up th’ river half a mile. There’s a deep hole there. We’ll go on Dick.”

“Oh, boy, that’ll be fine and dandy. I’ll be right there.”

The sun was coming up when Nat went to the shed to feed his horse.

Old Timer hurriedly dressed and followed. When the horse had finished munching his hay Nat swung the saddle into place. Then they mounted and Dick started up the trail with them.

At the river, Nat fairly tore off his clothes, so impatient was he to get into the smooth, green water.

“Here’s th’ best place to swim,” said Old Timer. “Nice deep hole with a sandy bottom; not many rocks, either.”

Nat ran out on a windfall lying over the pool, steadied himself for an instant, and then dove head-first to the bottom of the hole, coming out of the water at the other side.

“Yer a regular fish, Nat. That was as purty a dive as I ever did see,” exclaimed Old Timer.

Nat swam across the narrow river several times. Then he lay down to sun himself on a sand-bar.

For a few minutes he lay there quietly. Then

he jumped up, dived into the water, swam back to where he had left his clothes, and dressed. Then he said, "C'mon, Old Timer, we can't lose any more time if we're going down to Blue Canyon to hunt for Darrow and Big Alex."

Tom had breakfast waiting for them. After eating they went outside so that Nat might try out his new gun.

Old Timer picked up a small tin can, stepped off twenty yards, and set it on a stump. The boy, holding the automatic at arm's length, aimed and fired three times. The first two shots missed, but the third sent the can flying.

Tom was astonished. "Nat, you sure are a crack shot!" he exclaimed. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Oh, I practice target-shooting a lot. Mr. Higgins thinks it's all right for a boy to have a gun if he's careful and learns how to handle it." He snapped on the safety catch and put the gun in his pocket. "I don't think we'd better wait till the store opens, to telephone to Camp Redwood. Maybe Tom could telephone for us later," he said.

"Sure." Tom took a pencil and pad from his shirt pocket. "Who shall I call, and what's the message? I'll be glad to do that for you."

Nat and Old Timer had told Tom, the night before, about the robbery, and had revealed that they

were hunting the bandits. They had inquired at Carlson's Camp about any strangers, but no suspicious-looking persons had been seen.

Tom promised to tell Mr. Harrison that Nat was safe, and that he and Old Timer did not know how soon they would return to Camp Redwood.

After bidding Tom good-bye, the two mounted Dick and resumed their journey. Camp Carlson was just waking up when they passed through. Several men were on guard, watching for new flares of fire. Ugly black skeletons of trees and smoking stumps were all that was left of the beautiful forest below the camp. Clouds of thin smoke were rising from the mountains in the distance and drifting away.

The travelers rode south along the crest of the ridge at the edge of the smouldering brush. Presently an avalanche of ashes and rocks slid under Dick's feet. When the horse had regained his footing, Nat and Old Timer decided to walk and to lead the animal.

"You know," Nat said, as he walked along beside the old man, "Carl says that Harrison's wise. What do you suppose made them suspect the cruisers?"

Old Timer shook his head. "Beats me. They didn't suspect 'em before I left for Hector's. Harrison telephoned th' sheriff. Maybe one of his

men went out to Camp Redwood and found a clue. That's possible."

"And I'm still wondering what that green light on the Lone Pine trail was for, and what those papers that Darrow didn't want Harrison to see were all about."

"Beats me."

"And I'd sure like to know which one of the men in Camp Redwood was Big Alex."

The old man said nothing.

"Say, do you think we got a chance at all to catch 'em?" Nat asked.

"Yup. But we can't capture all four of 'em. That's impossible, fer two went north an' two—I got a idee they're yer Big Alex an' Darrow—went south. Y' see they started southeast, an' we wasn't fur behind 'em when th' fire started. They wouldn't take chances on meetin' any o' th' fire-fighters so 'bout th' only thing they could do was to turn south, away from th' fire. See?"

"Yes, and they'd travel at night and hide out in the daytime."

"An' the best hideout place in th' whole country is Blue Canyon!"

Nat nodded, and fingered the new gun in his hip pocket.

The travelers did not follow the highway for fear of being recognized if any of the bandits should see

them. They sought instead a zigzag course across a level stretch, thickly timbered with pine. The floor of dry pine needles was soft and springy and their footfalls could not be heard, but Dick's iron shoes made a soft beat. Occasionally dry twigs would snap under his weight.

"We'd better climb up to the ridge, there, and look around," Nat said, as they came to an open space.

Old Timer nodded. "Yup, that's th' best thing to do. But we'll have to be awful quiet an' keep under cover of th' trees an' brush."

"If we could just find their trail again." The boy shook his head gravely. "Just one footprint, a burnt match, or a cigarette—anything to tell us that they came this way." He was quiet and thoughtful as they started up over a rise which led to the foot of the ridge. "I just can't believe that they were so far ahead of us yesterday that the fire didn't stop them. Of course, they could have headed north and not even tried to get to the railroad, but I don't think so." Nat spoke more to himself than to his companion.

For an hour they labored up the mountain. It was hot and sultry. Nat's face was red and burned from the terrible fire, and the perspiration that ran in little beads over his forehead and down his cheeks smarted uncomfortably.



He had been intently searching for tracks, with only an occasional quick glance upward. When he came to a thicket of manzanita on a small level stretch at the crest of the ridge, he was struck speechless. He stood on the very edge of a sheer precipice that dropped almost perpendicularly to a mass of rock so far below that he felt as though he were standing on the edge of the world. It was the wildest country he had ever seen. Directly across the canyon the tree-choked gorges and bare cliffs rose to the ragged notches of the summit, sheering off southwardly into a wavy mountain range. To the north, a blue haze clung loosely to the crags that topped the red-streaked, sparsely timbered wall.

“That’s an awful gorge,” Nat said in an awed tone.

“Yup. That’s Blue Canyon.” The old man’s sharp eyes peered out through the manzanita bushes. “It’s pretty near impossible fer anybody to git out through th’ upper end. Y’ have to turn south an’ go down along th’ crick.”

“It’s not much of a stream, is it? I can’t even see any water from here. But there’s a few little patches of green grass.”

“There’s a spring there, but the river’s about all dried up now.”

While they talked the two scanned the bottom and

the walls of the canyon. After a minute's rest they headed south, keeping to the brush and thickets of pine, carefully avoiding all open places. Nat led the way. Once in a while the horse would stop to nibble dry grass but Nat urged him on and promised him green grass as soon as they should arrive at the floor of the canyon.

Two hours passed before they reached the last steep bank of rocks and red earth, at the foot of which was the dry bed of the river. Nat motioned for Old Timer to go ahead, while he waited to pat Dick on the neck. "It won't be long now, boy, till you get water and good grass," he said quietly. "Come on, follow me down this bank. Take it easy, an' don't use yourself up."

Nat was thirsty and tired. His shirt was wet with sweat and his heavy overalls were dusty and hot, but not for a moment did he forget that they were hunting the gang who had robbed Old Timer and his friends in Camp Redwood. Every clump of chaparral had dead branches that stuck out as sharp as thorns. Often they had to break through paths that were closed with brush and dead vines. Progress was very slow. Suddenly Nat dropped to his knees to look at a small mud-caked rock. He motioned for Old Timer to come cautiously. "Lookit!" he whispered, as the old man dropped down beside him. "Some one stepped on that rock.

See here, the dry mud is all crumbled right on top. They've been here, sure as you're livin'!"

The old man nodded his head. "Yup! Somebody's bin here. Might not be them. I reckoned they'd come down through th' pass. This could be one o' their tracks leavin' th' canyon. If it is, we'll never catch 'em now. Anyway, they wouldn't be likely to leave a track like this."

"They're not going to leave any tracks at all, if they can help it. This was just an accident. They've been here. I feel it in my bones." Nat was thrilled to think that at last he might have found their trail again. He and Old Timer quietly slipped back into the shelter of the manzanita bushes beside Dick.

"But we don't know whether they were going up into the canyon or coming out. Do you suppose we could find any tracks on the other bank?" Nat talked quickly, but very quietly. "I'll scout around a little, while you and Dick wait here." He darted across to the other bank, but he found nothing and soon rejoined the old man.

"The thing to do," continued Nat, "is to go on up to the spring. We might find them there, so we'll sure have to be careful. It would be best to leave Dick here, but of course we can't do that. He's got to have water; and, besides, they might see him and make a getaway on him."

"Yup. Dick goes along with us. But dang, his hoofs do make a noise." The old man looked troubled as he fingered the six-shooter in his hip pocket.

"I've got it!" Nat exclaimed. "I'll go on ahead. Do you see that boulder jutting out over the bank up there a quarter of a mile?"

"Yup. Th' spring is right under it."

"Good! You watch that rock. I'll wave once if I don't see them, and twice if I do! You'll have to watch close, for I'll keep under that little pine."

Nat plunged beneath a scrub manzanita and crawled on his hands and knees under the thick bushes. Dry leaves covered the ground, but he scarcely made a rustle as he crept along. He advanced slowly, stopping often to look for tracks, and keeping a watchful eye on the opposite bank. Finally he reached the end of the manzanita thicket; then he kept close to the trunks of pines which grew along a low bluff. He walked to the edge of the bluff and could see that he was approaching two huge rocks, one on each side of the bed of the river, that reared themselves above a mass of smaller ones. For ten minutes the boy lay flat under a shrub, listening intently, and scanning the walls and the bottom of the canyon as far as he could see.

To the north he saw a deep narrow gorge dividing the wall of the canyon, where the rushing waters of

many storms had cut a channel. Far above was the crest of the ridge where he and Old Timer had stopped a few hours before. Along the river bed stagnant water lay in little pools between dry, mud-caked rocks.

Suddenly Nat had a vague premonition—a sense of coming disaster: His hand went back to his hip pocket and he felt the automatic, which helped him to regain some assurance. He crept back into the shelter of the pines and worked his way along the bluff to the huge rock from which he was to give the signal to Old Timer. For a few minutes he was very still, as he once more scanned the walls of the canyon. Then he looked back and raised his arm once. Soon he saw the old man, followed by the horse, emerge from the thicket.

Nat started to slide down the bank. But he was only halfway down when the sharp crack of a six-shooter stunned him into immobility. For only a second he stared at the prostrate figure of the old man, who had suddenly dropped on the grass. He drew his gun and, with a rash impulse, started to scramble down the bank and across the canyon to aid him. But he saw Old Timer barely raise his right hand, in which a six-shooter glinted in the sun, and motion him to stay where he was. The boy was reassured when he saw him creep slowly through the grass to the base of the rock.

Old Timer then acted quickly. Again he motioned Nat to lie still. Then he rose to his knees and took off his black slouch hat. Picking up a small piece of wood, he hung the hat on the end of it. Nat lay close against the protecting cliff. He was anxious to join Old Timer, for he knew that at last they would have a battle with a bandit. And he hoped there were two bandits. "An old trick," he thought, when he saw the old man cautiously move to the edge of the rock and stick out the hat, so that a part of it could be seen from the other side.

Instantly a shot rang out, and immediately the canyon echoed with an answering shot from Old Timer.

Nat watched the old man examine the hat; then, with a quick motion, he made the boy understand that the bandits were shooting from a position directly in line with the open place between the two boulders. There was another shot from the bandits.

"That's a Luger. Sounds more powerful than a six-shooter. There's two of 'em, all right! Boy! It must be Darrow and Big Alex!" The boy was tense as he thought, "At last I'm going to see the mysterious bandit!"

With a glance at the old man, who was kneeling on one knee behind the protecting rock, intently waiting for a chance to fire, Nat slid down behind the pile of boulders at the edge of the channel. He

had a definite plan to join Old Timer and was thankful for the irregular line of boulders that crossed the river bed at an angle. Torrents of water had washed them down to form a low, overlapping wall.

The boy lay flat on his stomach in the gravel and worked his way, a few inches at a time, across to the willows opposite. He was well aware of the danger from glancing bullets and he knew he would be directly in the line of fire from the bandits' guns. And there was a chance that they could see him, as the boulders in places were less than two feet high. He knew that the men were desperate and would not hesitate to fire at him. "They're trapped!" he said to himself. "They can't climb the walls of the canyon and they can't go through that gorge! This is the only way out, and if Old Timer can hold them there long enough we'll have 'em!" He pulled himself slowly along. The sun beat down upon him relentlessly, while gnats and mosquitoes from the sluggish pools of water swarmed around him.

When he was about a third of the way across, the crack of the Luger rang out again. Old Timer returned the fire. A bullet whined through the air and glanced off a rock a few feet in front of Nat. He lay like a lizard, flat in a niche of sand. He barely breathed. A gnat bit his scorched face, but he dared not move. Soon he decided to proceed, as the firing had ceased.

He felt like shouting for joy when he safely reached the other side and worked his way into the thicket of willows, where Dick was munching the green grass. He was sure the bandits could not see him now, for the rock, at the base of which Old Timer was kneeling, reared its head above the willows and obstructed their view. He leaped to his feet and ran swiftly. Once he looked back and was glad to see that Dick was not following him.

“We’ve got ’em!” he whispered excitedly, as he dropped beside Old Timer.

“Not by a long shot, me boy!” The old man did not turn his eyes from a crevice in the rock through which he could look up the river. “That was pretty slick, the way y’ got over here, but y’ took an awful chance.”

“And I’m going to take a bigger chance!” Nat spoke very low, close to the old man’s ear. “I’m going up over the ridge—this first little one—and work my way along the other side, farther up the canyon than the bandits, and then down into the canyon behind ’em. Boy, they’ll be surprised!”

Old Timer shook his head warningly. “Y’ can’t do it, Nat! They’d have y’ cornered. Y’ might slide down into th’ canyon, but y’ could never climb out; an’ if they decided to retreat, there y’d be—caught! An’ anyways, y’d be under fire from my gun.”



“That’s just it! You could hold ’em with the fire from your gun till I get up there.”

The old man was doubtful. “They’re desperate men,” he said.

“And I’m desperate, too! Old Timer — I *am* going!”

Nat bounded to his feet and clambered up the bank behind the sheltering rock. He reached the top and hid behind a clump of manzanita as he looked around. A tributary of Blue River had cut a groove four or five feet deep that ran almost parallel to the main river. Bending over, so that he could not be seen from the point where the bandits were, Nat ran up the dry bed of the tributary for a hundred yards. But from here to the top of a second ridge was an impenetrable mass of brush and rocks. He retraced his steps a few yards and, under cover of thickly growing chaparral, ran to the crest of the ridge. Gliding swiftly along, he was soon at least two hundred yards up the gorge above the bandits. He crawled out of the forest and found himself on the edge of a precipice, several hundred feet directly above the bed of Blue River. For an instant he felt dizzy, but he gained courage when he saw that the bed of the river was a mass of big and little boulders and slabs of black bedrock, dotted with pools of water. “If I can get down there,” he said to himself, “I’ve got a good chance to capture

them. I've got to do it when they're busy with Old Timer." He looked down the canyon in the direction of the bandits, but he saw no one.

Then he heard a shot.

"Old Timer's six-shooter!" he thought. "Now's my chance!" He scrambled over the edge of the precipice and landed six feet below on a shelf of rock. For a moment his eyes searched for a downward course. "I'm in here now, and there's no going back!" he said with finality. "Anyway," he laughed to himself, "I wouldn't go back if I could."

Picking his way down, he managed to reach a small ledge. Leaping across a crevice, he landed on another narrow shelf. For a second he swayed dizzily but did not lose his balance. Dropping to his hands and knees he crawled on down, holding to jagged rocks and vines.

Soon he reached a shelf from which he could jump to a sand-bar below. He breathed easier as he crouched against a large boulder at the edge of the river bed. His eyes searched narrow sand-bars and boulders as far as he could see.

The canyon echoed with a barrage of shots.

Nat leaped to his feet, drew his gun, and was ready for action. He realized that if the bandits should retreat under Old Timer's fire they would catch him. He disliked to think of what they would do to him.

A crack from a six-shooter sounded loud and uncomfortably near. A shot from Old Timer's gun struck a boulder not twelve feet away. The sharp crack of the bandit's six-shooter and the louder crack of the Luger again echoed through the canyon.

Old Timer answered with a barrage of shots that whistled past Nat.

He went on. He knew that the bandits could not be more than twenty or thirty feet from him. He held his breath and listened. He heard voices! At the same instant he saw a mass of débris in the middle of the river bed, not twenty-five feet away, but, as it happened, small boulders hid most of it from his view.

"They're on this side of the jam!" His heart pounded against his ribs. "I'll sneak up closer behind these rocks. I've got to surprise 'em."

He glided to the next big boulder, for he knew he could see the bandits from there. For a moment he stood with the gun in his hand, then slowly peered around a jagged corner of the rock.

"Jiminy! *Holy smoke!*" he breathed, as he jerked himself back. "It's Dillon! Snappy Dillon! And Darrow!" His heart seemed to stop beating, then started again with a mad rush. He saw the two bandits kneeling against the brush jam which they were using as a rampart. Both men had their backs to him.

Another shot rang out, but there was no answering fire from Old Timer.

Nat wondered. "Maybe he's out of shells," he thought, with a sickening feeling.

The men stopped firing. He heard them talking in low tones.

"Now's my chance. I'll take 'em by surprise." With the gun in his hand covering the bandits, he stepped from behind the rock and said in a loud, steady voice, "Don't move! Throw away your guns, and up with your hands!"

Darrow dropped his gun in the sand at his feet, but Dillon flung his into the brush. Darrow then whirled, facing Nat. An amazed expression passed over his face. Then he grinned foolishly. "Well, if it ain't th' kid! Th' *kid!* What do you know 'bout that!"

He quickly reached down for his gun. But Nat was quicker. He fired, and a puff of dry sand rose where the gun lay.

"Leave it alone, Darrow," he shouted. "I mean business! One more move from you and down you go!"

The instant that Nat fired Dillon leaped around the end of the rampart, only to be stopped by Old Timer. "Not so fast, me fellar. *Not so fast!*" The old man's hand was steady, and there was a twinkle in his eyes as he covered the bandits.

Dillon stepped back, and Darrow's face turned white when he saw who it was.

Old Timer stepped closer. "I've got 'em covered, Nat; pick up their guns!" he said.

The boy breathed more easily as he picked up Darrow's six-shooter and the Luger which Dillon had flung into the brush.

## CHAPTER XXI

### HOME-COMING

It was a strange procession that started down through Blue Canyon. Red-haired, square-jawed, aggressive Snappy Dillon and black-eyed, heavy-browed Darrow led the way, while Nat, with his automatic ready for any emergency, was at their heels. Old Timer followed close behind, his own six-shooter in his hand. Dillon's Luger and Darrow's six-shooter were in his hip pocket.

When they arrived at the spring in the willows Dick came trotting up. Nat covered the prisoners while Old Timer took the rope from the horse's bridle, cut it in two pieces, and ordered the bandits to hold their arms out so that he might tie their wrists together. At first the prisoners refused, but a threatening motion of Nat's automatic made them change their minds.

The procession then started on. All were tired, and very quiet, and there was no conversation. When they arrived at an opening in the wall of the canyon, Nat asked Old Timer, "Do we have to take

them clear back to Camp Carlson and leave them there?"

"No, siree! Don't you remember I tole y' up in th' oaks when we parted yesterday that Ben Howe keeps store up there on th' highway?"

Nat smiled. "That's right. I do remember. Is that where we're going now?"

"Yup. It's only a couple o' miles, but pretty hard traveling."

After toiling up ravines and over ridges, the party came out on the highway directly across from Ben Howe's store.

Old Timer called, "Hello, Ben," to a man who got up from a bench beside the door.

"Well, Old Timer," Howe said, with a surprised look at Darrow and Dillon, "what's the idea? Where in thunderation did you pick up these fellers, and what you got 'em all tied up for?"

The old man hurriedly told his friend his unusual experience, and Howe ordered the bandits inside. Nat followed and saw the deputy sheriff slip handcuffs upon them and order them to stand up while he searched them.

"Hm! I guess this is some of your gold, Old Timer," Howe said, as he took the chamois sack from Darrow's pocket.

"Yup," Old Timer smiled. "I hope we git th' rest o' it. That's Nat's. Ain't it, Nat?" he said,

when the deputy took a tobacco sack full of greenbacks from another pocket.

“Yes,” Nat nodded solemnly. After he had taken everything from the prisoners’ pockets Howe found a large envelope tucked away in Darrow’s mackinaw, which was lying on the bench.

Darrow objected. “That’s nothing!” he growled. “Just some private papers. I’ll keep them myself.”

Howe shook his head. “No, I’ll turn everything over to the sheriff.” He laid three watches, four tobacco sacks full of Nat’s savings, some of Old Timer’s gold, three of Shannon Lumber Company’s checks and a roll of greenbacks on the counter.

Nat was glad that the deputy had found the envelope, for it was the one that contained the papers that Darrow did not want Harrison to see.

Howe turned to Old Timer. “I’ll telephone the sheriff in Eureka to come out; in the meantime, I’ll get something for you men to eat.”

“By crickety,” Old Timer grinned, “I believe I am hungry. How about you, Nat?”

Nat nodded vigorously. “I’ll tell the world I’m hungry. And I’ll be glad to help Mr. Howe fix something.”

“All right, Nat.” Howe motioned for the old man to look after the prisoners, while he and Nat busied themselves in the kitchen.



A half-hour later Nat and Old Timer mounted Dick and started back to Camp Redwood.

Nat was delighted at the idea of getting back to his cabin and to Micky and to his job as whistlepunk. He wondered whether Micky had missed him. As for Patsy and Peggy and the rest—well, strange as it might seem, he was so anxious to see them again that he felt he could hardly wait. And Old Timer was just as happy to think of getting back to Jubilo and his fiddle.

In an hour they had passed around the burnt area, which was about five miles square. Nat was glad when they came to the cedars. But he was very sober when they passed the cruisers' camp and started down the mountain into the redwoods. He thought of the night on which the cruisers had tried to make him go away with them.

It was almost dark when they arrived at Hector's. Nat quickly slid from Dick's back and ran into the cabin, shouting, "Hey, Hector, here we are!"

Old Timer dismounted and followed him in, but Hector was not there. The boy ran out again, calling loudly, "Hector! Here we are!" Then he saw the old hermit coming and ran across the pasture to meet him. Hector did not try to hide his emotions but clasped Nat tightly as he said, "I have been mighty worried and am surely glad you're back."

While Hector shuffled around in the tiny kitchen,

cooking waffles for supper, Nat told of his thrilling adventure.

The next day it seemed to Nat that he had been away from Camp Redwood for years. He thought of the time he had come over the same trail, after his journey to the cedar timber with Darrow and his men. He had been proud to have the camp see him. Now he had really done much more, but he thought only of his seeing the camp, and not of how the camp would see him. He felt much older—almost a man.

When they came to the top of a mountain, from which they could see the cabins of Camp Redwood down in the valley, Nat looked for the cook-house. Yes, it was still there, nestling among the alders. The shining rails of the railroad track were still winding down the mountain and across the valley, and Little River flowed gently on its way to the ocean not far distant, where they could see white-caps breaking along the rocky shore.

The hillsides were dotted with masses of pink rhododendrons, purple iris, and creamy, heavily perfumed azaleas. Butterflies sailed through the air with dainty outspread wings. A gorgeously colored, ruby-throated humming bird darted by, fluttered in mid-air for an instant, then dipped down to the sweet-smelling flowers. Grasshoppers jumped here and there. "Look at the fish bait." Nat tried to catch a big green fellow that landed on

Dick's mane. "I'm going fishing in Little River the first thing in the morning before I go to work," he said.

Nat became a bit nervous as he neared home. He was glad to be near, yet he felt strange. He was sure of one thing: Micky would be glad to see him again. He hoped they had taken good care of the coon. His heart beat faster as he came up the embankment and saw the superintendent in his yard with his two daughters. Peggy's light curls shone in the sunlight as she came up to the gate beside her father. Patsy, in a blue gingham dress that matched the blue of her eyes, stood back near the porch.

Harrison came to meet them and explained that he had received a telephone message from the sheriff, telling about the capture of Darrow and Dillon. He grasped Old Timer's hand and congratulated him for the part he had played in capturing Darrow. Turning to Nat, he said proudly, "Nat, my boy, we're glad to see you. You're the bravest boy I know. Come here, girls, and tell Nat how happy we are to see him."

Peggy smiled as she stepped forward and offered her hand. Off came Nat's hat in a flash as he awkwardly took the hand and stammered that he was glad to be back.

Patsy slowly walked through the gate and out to the track. "Hello, Old Timer and Nat," she said

quietly. She gave her hand to Old Timer, and then to the boy, who smilingly replied, "Hello, Pat."

"Did you get the robbers?" asked Patsy, with a serious look.

"Yes, Old Timer and me," Nat replied.

"Weren't you afraid?"

"No, not much. I was a little bit afraid when they took me away. Not afraid of them, but afraid I'd never get home again."

"Oh!" Patsy said, as she looked at him with admiration.

"Nat," said Harrison, "will you come in a moment? I want to tell you something."

"I'll be gettin' on," Old Timer said. "See you later. Git up, Dick!"

"Hello, Little Sister." Nat stepped up on the front porch and took the chair offered by Mr. Harrison as the baby of the family came running out of the house and tried to climb on his lap.

"Hello; where you been?" she asked. "I didn't see you for a long time."

"I've been away, over to Trinity County."

"Micky's dead!" said Little Sister, hanging her head and biting her lower lip to keep the tears back.

"What! What does she mean?" Nat asked, turning to Harrison.

Peggy grasped Little Sister by the arm and pulled her into the house, as the latter stammered,

half crying, "Nat-can-have-my-wooster, my-Ichabod Cwane."

Nat's eyes smarted as he thought, "Something terrible's happened to Micky." He turned his head away from Mr. Harrison and from Patsy, who was sitting on the top step with her elbow on her knees and her jaw in her hands, looking across the river toward the Irvings' cottage.

Harrison broke the silence. "Nat, I didn't want the news told you in such a heartless way, but Little Sister evidently was very anxious for you to know." He then told him that for a long time Jack Irving had been missing his chickens. "Every so often an animal, which he thought was a skunk or a mink, would go into his chicken-house at night to steal them. Night before last he heard the same noise, and ran out to find that his big red rooster was missing. Under the chicken-house he saw two shining eyes. It was the first chance he'd had to get rid of the animal, so he shot it. In the morning, when he went out to get the skunk, he found that it was your coon. He feels pretty badly about it, and wants to get another one for you."

Nat feared that he was going to cry. He swallowed hard, and twirled his hat in his hand. He grinned—with tears in his eyes—and said, "But I don't want another one." He remembered that Irving had told him that something was stealing his

chickens, the morning that he caught the mink. "I guess I'd better be going on down and see Mr. and Mrs. Higgins." He didn't want to talk about his little pet.

"All right, Nat, they are anxious to see you." Harrison got up and walked with him to the gate.

"I'd like to go back to work in the morning," the boy said.

"No, I think you'd better wait. Mr. Shannon is in Mallard and wants to see you to-morrow. He'll be out about ten o'clock."

"Mr. Shannon! I'll be glad to see him." Nat put on his hat. "Why, I haven't seen him since the day of the wreck."

"He'll be here in my office, so you had better come up here, Nat."

"All right, I'll watch for the speeder and come up as soon as he gets here." Nat turned and walked slowly down the track.

As he neared the cook-house he saw, through the alder trees, that the lumberjacks had just finished supper. Axel, the Norwegian, sat on the steps of the porch, smoking his big pipe and talking to Jake the packer, who leaned against a corner of the cook-house.

Several Mexicans and Indians, who had always been Nat's friends, and a number of Swedes and Danes sat on the ground under an alder, smoking

and talking. Other loggers stood around, while some were sitting on the edge of the porch.

Suddenly Axel jumped to his feet. "He iss here!" he shouted, in a booming voice. "We yust bane vaiting, Nat!" He grabbed the boy and swung him around, bumping into Jake, who had stepped up to give Nat a resounding pat on the back. The loggers crowded around, shouting and clamoring to see the boy who had captured the robbers, and to shake his hand. The Indians and Mexicans hung back at the edge of the crowd, but their eyes and broad smiles plainly showed their pleasure.

Nat was surprised, and a little embarrassed. He did not expect that every one would be so glad to see him. All that he had thought was that he would be glad to see them. He smiled broadly and said, "Hello, everybody!"

Scotty, in his long white apron, ran out from the cook-house, with Higgins, Mrs. Higgins, and Emma hurrying after. Mrs. Higgins chuckled quietly, but Emma laughed outright and grabbed the boy's hand as Axel swung him up on the porch.

Just then Old Timer appeared. "What in thunderation's all th' racket about?" he asked.

"An' der's de ole man!" Axel grabbed him and pushed him up the steps beside Nat.

"Speech, speech, Old Timer!" shouted the men.

Old Timer sputtered and spat tobacco juice into

a blackberry vine at the edge of the porch. He did not know what to say. He thrust his hands into his overall pockets and shifted from one foot to the other. Finally he began:

“We-el, sir, boys, I ain’t use’t to makin’ a speech—th’ fact is I guess I ain’t never spoke b’fore—an’ as fer takin’ any credit fer catchin’ that ornery, thievin’ skinflint, Darrow, an’ th’ other varmits that is jist like ’im, why, I don’t want none. This young ’un here”—pointing to Nat—“is th’ very one that did th’ catchin’.”

The men howled, “Speech! Speech, Nat!”

The boy looked at the crowd, at Old Timer, and then back at the crowd. He thought, “I don’t know what to say.” He looked inquiringly at Higgins.

“Come on Nat, just anything,” Higgins whispered.

He was glad Patsy could not see him now. But even if she could not see him she would hear all about it. Wouldn’t she be surprised if he did make a good speech! The thought gave him courage, and he stepped forward.

“Friends and fellow loggers . . .”—to him his voice sounded shaky and strange. He started again. “Friends and fellow loggers, I’m very glad to be here on the cook-house porch talking to you.” He paused, for that was not altogether true. But he decided that he could not take back his words.



“Darrow and Dillon are safely locked in jail,”—this was greeted by shouts from the loggers—“and I hope the other two robbers get caught, and I know that your watches and checks and Old Timer’s gold will be returned.” There was more shouting. “It’s mighty fine of you to treat Old Timer and me this way, and I think I’ll go and eat, now. Oh, boy, I’m hungry!”

“Of course he’s hungry,” shouted Higgins, as he took Nat off with him to the kitchen, amidst shouts and laughter and handclapping.

## CHAPTER XXII

### MYSTERIES EXPLAINED

“To brew the coffee for his men  
Paul Bunyan had a kettle,  
Two miles wide and one mile deep;  
It took a month to settle.”

Scotty sang loudly as he scoured the big aluminum coffeepot, the morning after Nat's return, while Nat helped Emma and Mrs. Higgins carry the heavy dishes from the dining-room into the kitchen.

“I'll wash the dishes as soon as you get that pot scrubbed, Scotty,” he said.

“Go ahead, I'm all through now.” Scotty lifted the kettle from the sink. “Better get an apron, though!”

“You bet!” Nat went to the pantry, where he found one of Scotty's big white aprons. He put it on, then rolled up his shirt sleeves to his elbows. “Might just as well help Scotty,” he thought. “Old Timer's gone to the store to get supplies to take back home with him.”

“Sure you haven't forgot how to wash dishes?” Adams Cluff managed to smile.

Emma, tall and thin, in a pink gingham dress and a short white apron, set a stack of mush bowls on the drain-board. "I'll bet he hasn't," she said, "and I'll bet he hasn't forgotten how to peel potatoes, either."

"Well, he doesn't have to peel any potatoes nor wash dishes unless he wants to," said Mrs. Higgins, bustling around and rattling plates as she set them down on the table.

"I don't mind. I want to do it." Nat grinned, for the things that were once dreadful tasks had become fun. He turned the faucet and hot water poured into the sink, sending clouds of steam to the ceiling.

"Scotty, you know I'm just dying to find out some things," he said.

"What things?" Scotty asked.

"Well, for instance, the green light on the Lone Pine trail, and how Mr. Harrison got wise to Dillon, and what those records or papers are that Darrow didn't want Harrison to see, and—"

"Hold on, wait a minute. Didn't Harrison tell you all about that?"

"Why, no." Nat looked mystified.

"Well, he'll prob'ly explain it all to you to-day. Anyway, I guess I can tell you that it's a darn good thing you told me about that green light. I don't see why I didn't think of it, myself."

As Nat went on with his work he looked out of the window to the mountains across the river. Though he had been gone only a few days, it seemed months since he had worked as a whistlepunk at the top of that mountain. He thought of that day when he lost his place. "I'm glad Dillon's not there now. I'll be working for Jack Irving and Axel when I go back. I'll be glad to get to work and start making money again, for I'll have to save a lot in the next few weeks to make up for the time I've lost." He thought of his little coon. "Poor little Micky. But he had no right to steal chickens."

Jack Irving had gone to Nat's cabin the night before and had told him how sorry he was that he had killed the little animal. He offered to get another, but the boy decided that it was best not to have a pet around the cook-house. "I miss him, though." He bit his lips to control himself, and swished the dishes around in the hot, soapy water.

Scotty stepped up with a large kettle of uncooked brown beans. "Let me have some water to cook these in, will you?"

"Sure!" Nat peered into the kettle as Scotty turned the water in. "Do you still have to cook beans every day?"

Scotty's pale blue eyes twinkled and his sandy mustache bristled. "Yes, sir. Beans is our special

dish, and it's the special dish Paul Bunyan feeds his loggers."

The boy chuckled. Then, as he glanced at the clock above the sink, he mused, "It's just an hour till ten o'clock. Wonder why Mr. Shannon wants to see me. About Darrow, I s'pose. Gee, it makes a fellow feel kind of queer to be called to the office when he doesn't know what it's all about. Hope they haven't changed their minds about giving my job back."

After he had washed the dishes he went to his cabin. He had been there only a few minutes when he heard a speeder coming up the track. "There's Mr. Shannon now," he thought. "I didn't know it was ten o'clock. I'll have to hurry!" He ran out in time to see the speeder run past in the direction of Harrison's.

Whistling the "Song of the Whistlepunk," Nat hurried after it. As he passed through the superintendent's gate he hesitated a moment, then walked up the steps and across the porch. The office door was open, and Mr. Shannon, gray-haired, tall, and slightly stooped, stepped out to meet him. "Nat, m'lad, how are you?" He greeted the boy warmly. "Come into the office."

Mr. Harrison, who was sitting at his desk, turned. "Hello, Nat," he smiled, "how's the boy this morning? All rested up from your trip?"

"Yes, sir, and I feel fine."

"Here, sit down." Shannon motioned to a chair beside Harrison's desk. Nat's eyes were round when he saw on the desk the big envelope that had been in Darrow's mackinaw. "Those are the papers Darrow didn't want you to see!" he exclaimed excitedly.

Harrison nodded. "I guess he *didn't* want us to see those reports." He picked up several sheets of paper and looked at them. "Nat," he said, "these papers have proved to be very important. They have uncovered a conspiracy involving the Beckman Cedar Company of San Francisco, which bribed Darrow and his men to deliver an incorrect estimate of the cedar timber to the Shannon Lumber Company, thereby stealing millions of feet of lumber."

"Why, I didn't know they were that important!" Nat exclaimed. A thrill raced through him as Harrison went on:

"Frank Dillon, alias Alex Brock, who is wanted up north for burglary, was the man on the Lone Pine trail with the green light."

Nat asked eagerly, "What was the light?" He barely breathed as he waited for the answer.

"The green light was Dillon's flashlight, with a green globe instead of a white one. The green globe gives a softer light and is not so glaring. You see how it is."

“Oh!” Nat said thoughtfully. “But what was he doing on that trail?”

“He went out there to meet Darrow, who gave him reports similar to these to send to Beckman in San Francisco. They didn’t want to risk sending them in the Camp Redwood mail sack.”

Nat nodded. “That was pretty clever.”

“Yes. But thanks to you, we’ve caught them,” said Mr. Shannon.

Nat was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “But I don’t understand how you got wise to Dillon.”

“Well, Nat,” Harrison answered, “we have to thank you for that, too! If you had not seen the green light and told Scotty about it we wouldn’t have suspected Dillon.”

“How’s that?” Nat was a bit impatient to understand what he had suspected so long.

“When Scotty went to Dillon’s cabin to make up the beds he found a green flashlight globe on the floor in back of the bed. He became suspicious and took it to his cabin to try out in his flashlight. It cast a light that was exactly the same color as that which he had seen on the trail. Then he went to your cabin and searched it thoroughly. He found nothing. But outside he saw a small folded paper with a few numbers written on it. That paper was a piece of the cruisers’ report. He suspected the cruisers of the robbery.”

Nat laughed loudly. "Old Scotty! I'll say he ought to be a detective." The two men laughed with him, but stopped suddenly when the telephone on the superintendent's desk rang.

Harrison answered it. When he had finished his conversation he turned to Nat and Shannon. "That sure is good luck! It was the sheriff's office in Eureka. They've had a wire from Siskiyou County saying that the other two cruisers, Jim and Carl, have been taken into custody and will be brought back to Humboldt."

"How'd they catch 'em?" Nat asked quickly.

"Well, you see, Nat," Harrison told him, "just as soon as we discovered the robbery I telephoned to the sheriff, and he sent a deputy out here who looked over the clues Scotty had found. He took three of our men and went out to the cruisers' camp, but, as you know, no one was there. It was dark when they got back to Camp Redwood. Neither you nor Old Timer had returned, and I can't tell you how worried we were. So I ordered all the loggers in all the camps to search the country between here and Hector's for you. I thought maybe you had started for Hector's and got lost. But just after daylight, when the men were ready to start out, we received a message from the Forest Ranger at Carlson's Camp telling us that you and Old Timer were safe. The sheriff had already telephoned to all the neighbor-



ing counties to watch out for the bandits. And, by George, they've caught the other two! That's pretty good!"

"You bet!" Nat exclaimed.

"Now," Harrison smiled, "I think Mr. Shannon has something to say to you, Nat."

"M'lad," the president of the Shannon Company said slowly, "I'll not keep you waiting any longer, for I know you're wondering why we called you to the office."

Nat was wondering so much that he felt he could not wait. But he quietly said, "Yes, sir."

"I think," Shannon went on earnestly, "that a boy as brave as you are, who saves his money for schooling, knowing that it will take years to save enough, should have a chance." He paused a moment, and the thought came swiftly to Nat: "Bet I'm going to get a raise in wages." But he was wholly unprepared for what followed, as Shannon went on in a smooth, even voice:

"Mrs. Shannon and I want you to come to San Francisco, live with us, and go to school."

Nat was breathless as he looked first at Shannon, then at Harrison.

"You know," the latter explained, "Mrs. Shannon and I live alone in a big house, and we think it would be great to have you with us, and to help you get the education that I know you are so eager to

have. Will you come?" He leaned forward, with his hands on the arms of the chair.

For an instant Nat was speechless, but when he found his voice he spoke in a quick rush of words. "Mr. Shannon, I'd like awful well to go. I've always wanted a chance to study. But—" he paused and his gaze fell to the floor, "—I'd like to work, too. You see," he looked from one man to the other, "I haven't saved such a great deal of money. I think I'd feel lots better to have money of my own."

His meaning was clear, for Shannon nodded. "I see," he said seriously. "We'll find something for you."

"Why not let him work in your office after school hours?" suggested Harrison.

"The very thing!" agreed Shannon. "Would you like that, Nat? Will you go?"

"Yes, thank you. I'd sure like to! When shall I pack my things? It won't take me long to get myself ready!"

"I'm going to Mallard on the four o'clock logging train. You come along and we'll leave there on the evening train for San Francisco."

"Yes, sir, I'll be ready!" Nat jumped to his feet, walked swiftly across the porch, and out to the railroad track.

"San Francisco—an education—a home!" He

started to run, but slowed a little as a sobering thought came to him. "My mountains, my redwoods, my wildflowers, Old Timer, Hector—they will all be gone!" He looked long at the huge stumps and the young growth. "But how many times I have wished for a chance to go to school! My dreams are coming true!"

Nat's face was wreathed in smiles, his eyes were shining, and traces of dimples appeared in his cheeks as he ran to the cook-house and bounded through the doorway into the kitchen.

"Scotty! Emma!" he shouted. Scotty came running from the pantry. Emma, Higgins, and Mrs. Higgins hurried in from the dining-room.

"I'm going away down south! To San Francisco!" Nat exclaimed, as he grabbed Scotty by the arm. "I told you I'd go to school some day, and now I'm going!" He laughed joyously as he thought of his future.

"For land's sakes!" Emma interrupted as she stood staring at the excited boy. "Are you dreaming or have you just gone plumb crazy?"

"Neither, Emma," Mrs. Higgins said. "He's going to leave us."

"Yes," Higgins said, "I've an idea he is."

"Well, if you're going south," Scotty said, "you want to send word first, like Paul Bunyan did." Then he sang in a deep voice:

“When Paul’s men finished in the west  
And north and also east,  
He sent word to his friends down south  
By the fast migrating geese,

“That he’d be with them very soon  
To log off cypress trees.  
It stormed and the snow was awful deep  
So they had to wear their skis.

“The skis worked fine on ice and snow,  
But when they crossed the desert hot  
They warped and grew all out of shape,  
Till the men were a sorry lot.

“They slipped and slid in circles round.  
Across the gritty sands they darted,  
And then at last they found themselves  
Right back where they had started.”

“All right, Scotty, but a few years from now I’m not going to find *myself* right back where I started! Bring on the geese and I’ll send ’em to tell the whole world I’m coming! Got to go and pack now. Has Old Timer come back from the store yet?” He didn’t wait for an answer but hastily went in search of the old man, whom he found in his cabin.

The old prospector was astounded at the good news. “You don’t mean to tell me that yer leavin’ us fer good?”

“We-ll, not exactly for good, for I think Mr. Shannon’ll let me come up here for my vacations. Won’t that be great?”

“Yup! Maybe we can go prospectin’ together!”

“You bet! I’ve got to pack now, Old Timer.”

“I’ve got Jubilo all packed an’ I’m all ready to strike out fer Trinity County an’ home.”

“Aren’t you going to wait for dinner?”

“Nope. I want to git as fer as Hector’s to-night.”

Nat was thoughtful for a moment. “I’d sure like to see Hector again, but there’s no chance. I’ll write a note and tell him the news. Will you give it to him?”

“Yup!” Old Timer waited while Nat wrote a short note and gave it to him. “Wish you could wait till after dinner,” said Nat.

“I’d better go now.” The old man took the boy’s hand and held it firmly. “We had some awful good times together, Nat,” he said, with a note of sadness in his voice. “I’ll miss you a turrible lot. Take good keer o’ yerself, an’ write as soon’s you git there.”

“You bet I will!” Nat followed him to the door and watched him walk to the clump of alders where he had left Jubilo. He sighed deeply as the old man turned and waved, and then started off, with his shaggy little burro jogging along behind.

After dinner Emma and Mrs. Higgins bustled around, pressing Nat’s only white shirt and suit of clothes.

At noon, when the loggers came in for dinner, Nat

told them the news. They were surprised, and sorry to see him go away, but they all wished him good luck and told him that they hoped he would come back next summer for his vacation. Jack Irving and Axel promised him his old job during vacation months if he wanted it.

As the time for him to leave drew near, Nat half wished he were not going. He thought of poor little Micky, and of Patsy and Peggy, and wondered if the girls would miss him. Soon he heard the rumble of heavily loaded cars and looked out to see engine 33 pull up to the dispatcher's office and stop. His heart seemed to miss a beat as he glanced around the bare cabin. He heard footsteps on the board walk, and turned to look.

"Your trunk ready, Nat?" Fleming, the conductor, followed by Shorty, the engineer, came in. Nat motioned to the trunk.

"So you're leavin' us?" Fleming asked.

"Yes," Nat said slowly.

"By Glory!" exclaimed Shorty. "We'll miss you."

"Yep." Fleming started out with the trunk. "We've all got kinda used to seein' you around."

"Is '33' taking the loads to Mallard to-night?" Nat took a last hasty glance around his cabin and followed Shorty to the front porch, where he found Scotty, Higgins, Mrs. Higgins, and Emma waiting

for him. After they had all said good-bye and told him that they would expect to see him the next summer, he walked around the engine to the dispatcher's office.

"Here's the lad now," he heard Shannon say as he stepped out of the office. "Mr. Harrison was just going to see if you were ready."

"Hello, Nat. Peggy and I came down to say good-bye," Patsy said, as she and Peggy and their father came out of the office.

Nat laughed and talked with the girls until the caboose, at the rear end of the train, stopped opposite the porch, and the brakeman put the trunk in the car.

"We'd better get aboard, Nat," Mr. Shannon said.

They all followed. After shaking hands warmly with Harrison, Patsy, and Peggy, Nat stepped up on the platform beside Mr. Shannon, ready to begin his journey.

In a few minutes he waved a last good-bye to the cook-house crew on the porch and to Patsy, Peggy, and Mr. Harrison, standing near the track. As the train rounded a curve they were lost to his view. He smiled to himself. "It was nice of Patsy and Peggy to come down," he thought. "I'll miss them. But I'm glad to get this chance!"

He smiled as he looked around at the mountains. Then he sang softly:

“One to go ahead,  
Two to come back;  
Three for an easy pull,  
Four for the slack.

Go ahead easy,  
Come back slow;  
She’s a haywire outfit  
And a darn poor show.”

THE END









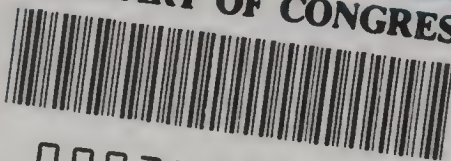








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