

Otis James

Ralph Gurney's Oil Speculation



James Otis

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CHAPTER I. THE "CHUMS."

The puffing, panting engine that dragged the long train of heavy cars into the busy little city of Bradford, in the State of Pennsylvania, one day last summer, witnessed through its one white, staring eye, sometimes called the head-light, many happy meetings between waiting and coming friends; but none was more hearty than that between two college mates – one who had graduated the year previous, and the other who hoped to carry off the honors at the close of the next term.

"Here at last!" exclaimed George Harnett, as he met his old chum with a hearty clasp of the hand. "In this case, if the hope had been much longer deferred, the heart would indeed have been sick."

"It was thoughtless in me, old fellow, not to have sent you word when I concluded to remain at home two days longer, but the fact of the matter is that I did not think you would be at the depot to meet me, but would let me hunt you up, for I suppose you do have some kind of an office."

"Yes," laughed the young man, "I have an office; but since my work just now is several miles from here, I am seldom at home, and was obliged to come for you, or run the chance of having you spend a good portion of your vacation hunting for me."

"And are you sorry yet that you chose civil engineering for a profession?"

"Sorry! Not a bit of it! Up here there is more excitement to it than you are aware of, and before you have finished your vacation, you will say that the life of a civil engineer in the oil fields of Pennsylvania is not by any means monotonous. But come this way. My team is here, and while we are talking we may as well be riding, for we have quite a little journey yet before us, over roads so bad, that you can form no idea of them by even the most vivid description."

"But I thought you lived here in Bradford."

"I live where my work is, my boy, and since it happens just now to be out of town, my home, for the time being, is in as old and comfortable a farm-house as city-weary mortals could ask for."

"Well, I can't say that I shall be sorry to live in the country – for awhile, at least."

"Sorry! Well, I hardly think you will be, when you learn what I have to offer you in the way of enjoyment. I am locating some oil-producing lands, in a valley where game is abundant, where the fish prefer an artificial fly to a natural one, and where the moonlighter revels with his harmless-looking but decidedly dangerous nitro-glycerine cartridge."

"What do you mean by moonlighter?" asked Ralph, as he seated himself in the mud-bespattered carriage which George pointed out as his.

"A moonlighter is one who shoots an oil well regardless of patent rights or those owning them, save when, by chance, he finds himself gathered in by the strong arm of the law."

"I thank you, Brother Harnett, for your decidedly clear explanation. I almost fancy that I know as much about moonlighters now as when I asked the question, which is saying a good deal, for you very often contrive, in explaining anything, to leave one even more ignorant than when he consulted you."

"If you are willing to listen to as long and as dry a dissertation on oil wells in general, and illegally-opened ones in particular, as ever Professor Gardner favored us with on topics in which we were not much interested, I will begin, stopping now and then only to prevent my teeth from being shaken out of my head as we ride over this road."

The two had hardly got out of the "city," and the thoroughly bad character of the road was already apparent. Riding over it was very much like sailing in a small boat on rough water – always down by the head or up by the stern, but seldom on an even keel.

"Go on with the lecture," said Ralph, "and while I try to hold myself in the carriage, I will listen."

"Because of my friendship for you. I will make it as brief as possible. In the first place, you must know that before oil is struck, the operator finds either a rock formed of sand or of gravel. This is the strata just above the deposit of petroleum.

"Of course this must be bored through, if possible, and in the pebbly rock there is no trouble about it. The drills will go through, and the gravel will be forced to the surface without much difficulty. But when the sand-rock is met, it clogs the drills, making it almost impossible to bore through. A heavy charge of nitro-glycerine makes short work of this rock, and out comes the oil.

"Now, this method of blasting in oil wells has been patented, or, at least, the cases for the glycerine and the manner of exploding it has, and the company, which has its office in Bradford, use every effort to discover infringements of their patent. Like all owners of patent rights, they charge an extra price for their wares, and the result is that there are parties who will, for a much smaller amount of money, shoot a well and infringe the patent at the same time. These people are called moonlighters, and the risk they run of losing their lives or their liberty is, to say the least, very great. The lecture-hour has now been fully, and I hope I may say profitably, employed."

"If it profits one to learn of your friends, the moonlighters, then your lecture has been a success. But how do you find excitement in anything they do? Surely they do not make public their unlawful doings."

"Oh, everything save the shooting of the well is done legally, and with many even that is questionable! The cases are to be tried, and many believe that the owners of the patent have really no rights in the premises. The owners or prospective owners of the land whereon the wells are to be sunk, employ me to survey their tracts, and by that means I frequently make the acquaintance of those people who, for the almighty dollar, will peril their lives driving around the country with nitro-glycerine enough to blow an entire town up."

"Let me trespass once more on you for dry detail, and then I will learn anything else I may want to know from observation. What is nitro-glycerine?"

"I will answer your question by quoting as nearly as I can from what I read the other day. It is composed of:

Aqueous vapor	20 parts
Carbonic acid	58 "
Oxygen	3.5 "
Nitrogen	18.5 "

"Until 1864 it found no practical application, except as a homeopathic remedy for headache, similar to those which it causes. In that year, Alfred Nobel, a Swede, of Hamburg, began its manufacture on a large scale, and, though he sacrificed a brother to the terrible agent he had created, he persevered until in its later and safer forms nitro-glycerine has come into wide use and popularity. It is a clear, oily, colorless, odorless, and slightly sweet liquid, and can, with safety, only be poured into some running stream if one wishes to be rid of it. Through the pores of the skin, or in the stomach, even in small quantities, this oil causes a terrible headache and colic, while headaches also result from inhaling the gases of its combustion. It has thirteen times the force of gunpowder,

exploding so much more suddenly than that agent does, that in reality it is much more powerful, and it is this same rapid explosive power that prevents it from being used in fire-arms."

"You would make a first-rate professor, George," said Ralph, laughing, "and you may refer to me in case you should desire to procure such a position. Now I think I am armed with sufficient knowledge to be able to meet your oily friends, the moonlighters, and have some idea of what they mean when they speak."

"If I am not mistaken we shall meet some of them very soon, without trying hard; but if we do not, I will take you to one of their cabins as soon as we may both feel inclined to go."

"Don't think that I have come here to spend my vacation simply with the idea that I am at liberty to make drafts at sight on your time," replied Ralph, as an unusually rough portion of the road necessitated his exerting all his strength to prevent being thrown out of the wagon. "I intend to be of every possible assistance to you, and when I cannot do that, if you are still obliged to labor, I will extract no small amount of enjoyment out of your farm-house and its surroundings. But at any time that you have a few hours to spare, I will be only too well pleased to meet with any adventure, from nitro-glycerine blasts to the perils of trout-fishing."

By this time the conversation ceased, owing to Ralph's interest in the scenery around him, and the curious combination of oil-tanks and derricks with which the landscape was profusely dotted. From Bradford to Sawyer the road winds along at the base of the hills through a lovely valley, that seems entirely given over to machinery for the production and storage of oil. On every hand are the tall, unsightly constructions of timber that form the derricks, looking not unlike enormous spiders, as they stand on the sides of the mountains or in the ravines, while the network of iron pipes, through which the oil is forced by steam-pumps from the wells to Jersey City, are fitting webs for such spiders.

Huge iron tanks, capable of holding from twenty to forty thousand barrels of oil, dot the valley quite as thickly as do the blots of ink on a school-boy's first composition, and form storage places for this strange product of earth, when the supply is greater than the demand. It is truly a singular scene, and he who visits this portion of the country for the first time cannot rid himself of the impression that he has, by some mysterious combination of circumstances, been transported to some remote and unknown portion of the globe.

George, to whom this scene was perfectly familiar, did not seem inclined to allow his friend to remain in silent wonder, for he persisted in supplying him with a fund of dry detail, which effectually prevented any indulgence of day-dreams.

Although Ralph would have preferred to gaze about him in silence, George told him of the Pipe-Line Company, who owned the greater portion of the huge iron receptacles for oil; who also owned the network of iron pipes, through which they forced the oil to the market at a charge of twenty-five cents per barrel.

He also told him that this company connected the main line of pipes with each tank owned by the oil producers, supplying a small steam-pump at each connection, and, at stated times, drew off from private tanks the oil. He even went into the particulars of the work, explaining how each man could tell exactly the number of barrels the company had taken from his tank by measuring the depth of the oil before and after the drawing-off process.

Then he described how these huge receptacles were frequently struck by lightning, setting fire to the inflammable liquid, and causing consternation everywhere in the valley; of the firing of solid shot into the base of the tanks to make a perforation that would allow the oil to run off, and of the loss of property and danger of life attending such catastrophes.

So much of dry detail or interesting particulars of the oil business had the young engineer to tell, that he had hardly finished when the horses turned sharply into a narrow road, over which the trees formed a perfect archway, that led to just such a farm-house as suggests by outside appearance all the good things and comforts of life.

"This is to be home to you for a while," said George, breaking off abruptly in his dissertation on the price and quality of oil, in which Ralph was not very much interested, "and I can safely guarantee it to be a place which you will be sorry to leave after once knowing it."

"It certainly does not seem to be a place around which anything exciting can be found," thought Ralph; but, since it was only rest from study he was in search of, he was content with that which he saw.

CHAPTER II. A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

Ralph Gurney was one who thoroughly enjoyed everything in which pleasure could be found, and even while George was caring for his horses, of which he was very fond, Ralph had already begun a survey of the farm on which he was to spend his vacation.

The cattle, poultry, horses, dogs, and even the cat, had received some attention from him, and he was on his way to the sheep-pasture near by to make the acquaintance of the woolly members of the flock, when the sharp ping of a bullet was heard as it whistled by his head, while, a second later, the report of a rifle rang out sharply.

There was something so entirely unexpected and so thoroughly startling in this mode of salutation in so peaceful a place, that Ralph leaped two or three feet in his fright, and at the same time saw the hole in the brim of his hat, which showed how near the deadly missile had come to him.

Almost any one would be alarmed at such a visitor, even though he might have been expecting this attention, and Ralph came very near trembling with fear as he realized how narrow had been his escape from death.

He looked quickly around to see who was using him as a target; but no one was in sight. The sheep had been quite as much startled by the report as he had by the proximity of the bullet; therefore, there was no reason to suspect that they had had anything to do with this decided frightening of the new boarder.

Ralph was on the point of calling out to George for an explanation of this apparently reckless shooting, when a voice from amid a small clump of trees shouted:

"Hold out your hat and I will put a bullet through the center of it."

Even if Ralph had not been angry because of the danger he had been forced to run, he would not have accepted any such cheerful invitation, and, instead of replying, he looked carefully around in search of the speaker.

"Hold out your hat, and I will show you what I can do," continued the voice, while its owner persistently remained hidden.

"I don't know who you are," said Ralph, speaking sharply; "but from what I have already seen of your reckless shooting, I consider it to be some one's duty to teach you how to handle fire-arms."

"And you propose to do it, eh?" was the question, as a boy eighteen or nineteen years of age, with a face that was the perfect picture of good humor, walked out of the thicket. On his shoulder he carried a rifle, and in his left hand some partridges and a fox-skin. "That was a nasty shave for you," he continued, in a half-apologetic tone; "but, you see, I hadn't any idea there was any one around. Farmer Kenniston is down on the meadow, and Harnett went to town this morning; so you see that, by rights, you ought not have been here."

"And because, in your opinion, I should have been somewhere else, you concluded to send me away by the most certain and effectual method?" asked Ralph, having by no means subdued his anger, although it was vanishing quite rapidly before the pleasant tone and face of the boy who had come so near killing him.

"Well, you see, I didn't know you or any one else was within a mile of the place. I had a charge left in my rifle, and I wanted to see if I could knock a knot out of that second board in the barn. Just as I pulled the trigger, you came from behind the shed, and then I couldn't call the bullet back. I am sorry that I startled you so, and I was in hopes you would hold out your hat, so that you could have seen how handy I am with a rifle, which would have made you feel easier."

"I must confess that I can't understand how I could be soothed by any proof of your skill as a marksman," replied Ralph, with a smile, his anger now almost completely gone. "Of course, I

know that you didn't intend to shoot so near me; but in the future I advise you to empty your rifle before you come so near to a house."

"But I have wanted to put a bullet into that knot from the trees back there ever since I have been here, and now let's see if I struck it fairly."

As if he considered that he had made all necessary apologies for the shot which had startled Ralph, the boy started towards the barn, and in another instant he was pointing triumphantly to the offending knot in the board, which had been completely shattered by the bullet.

"There!" he cried. "Harnett said I couldn't hit it from that dead pine tree, and that even if I did succeed in hitting it, I couldn't split it. Now we'll see what he has got to say to that."

Ralph had nothing to say as to the argument between his friend and the stranger, and in the absence of anything else to say, he asked:

"Do you live here?"

"I am living here just now, and shall for some weeks longer, I suppose. You are Ralph Gurney, whom Harnett has been expecting, I fancy?"

"Yes; but if George has told you who I am in advance of my coming, he has not been so liberal to me in regard to yourself."

"That probably arose from the fact that I am no one in particular, while, on the contrary, you are to become one of the particularly bright and shining lights in the medical world. I am only Bob Hubbard."

Who Bob Hubbard might be Ralph had no idea; but even though the young gentleman spoke of himself in such a deprecating way, it was easy to see that he did not consider himself of slight consequence in the world. He was a bright, jovial, generous looking boy, with a certain air about him which made the shot, fired so dangerously near Ralph, seem just such a reckless act as might be expected of him.

"Do you like hunting and fishing?" he asked, after he found that Ralph was not disposed to say anything about the profession of medicine he had chosen, and which George had evidently spoken of.

"Indeed I do," was the decided reply. "Is there much sport around here?"

"All you want. I have only been out about two hours, and I have got these," he said, as he held up his game. "And as for fishing, you can catch trout until your arms ache – providing they bite rapidly enough."

"Indeed!" replied Ralph, dryly. "I fancy I have seen as good almost anywhere. Do you go fishing very often?"

"Nearly every day."

"Then, if George has any business to attend to this afternoon, suppose you and I see if the fish will bite fast enough to make our arms ache pulling them in."

Bob hesitated in what Ralph thought a very peculiar way, and said, after a pause of some moments:

"I'd like to, but I have an important engagement this afternoon, and I hardly see how I can arrange it."

There was certainly nothing singular in his not being at liberty to accept the proposition made so suddenly, and Ralph would have thought his refusal the most natural thing in the world had it not been for his evident embarrassment when none seemed reasonable. However, the young pleasure-seeker attached no importance to what seemed like singular behavior on the part of this newly-made acquaintance, and was about to make another proposition for a fishing excursion, when Harnett suddenly made his appearance.

"Hello, Bob!" he cried, "you've been making the acquaintance of my chum, have you?"

"Yes, after a fashion. I fired at that knot in the barn you said I couldn't hit from the pine tree, and came near putting a bullet through his head. But I hit the knot, and what's more, I split it."

"And here is a hole in the brim of my hat, to prove that he did fire at it," said Ralph, laughing, as he held up his perforated hat to display the mark of the bullet.

Harnett looked with no small degree of alarm at the evidence of Bob's shooting, and said, sternly:

"I think it is quite time that you became a trifle more careful with your fire-arms, Bob. You have already had several narrow escapes, and will end by killing some one, if you don't stop shooting at every promising mark you see."

"I'm not half as careless as I might be," said Bob, earnestly. "This is the first time that I have ever really come near hurting any one."

"What about the time when you came near hitting Farmer Kenniston, and killed a lamb? Have you forgotten the untimely death of Mrs. Kenniston's favorite duck, or your adventure with the red calf in the pasture?"

"Oh, those don't count – at least none except the lamb scrape are worth talking about, Harnett, so don't read me one of your long-winded lectures; and, now that I have hit the knot in the barn, I promise not to shoot at anything within half a mile of the place. I'm going down to town for a while, and when I get through with what I have on hand, we'll make some arrangement to show your friend the oil region."

As he spoke Bob went into the stables, and when the two friends were alone again, George asked:

"Well, Ralph, how do you like what you have seen of the moonlighters? Not very ferocious, eh?"

"What do you mean? I haven't seen any moonlighters yet."

"Indeed! You have been talking for the last ten minutes with the most successful of them. Bob Hubbard enjoys the rather questionable distinction of being the most noted one in this section of the country."

Ralph looked at his friend in speechless astonishment for several minutes; this careless, good-natured boy was very far from being the famous moonlighter his fancy had conjured up, and it is barely possible that he was disappointed at not having seen some more savage looking party, for he had speculated considerably about these people who explode nitro-glycerine in an illegal manner.

"If I am not mistaken," continued Harnett, "he is going to shoot a well to-night, and I guess there will be no difficulty in getting his consent for you to be present. Wait here, and I will talk with him."

George hurried away toward the stables, leaving Ralph in a curious condition of mingled wonder and surprise that in this very peaceful-looking place there could be found such an evident fund for adventure.

The gaining of Bob's consent for Ralph to be present at the shooting of the well was not such a difficult matter, judging from the very short time George found it necessary to talk with him. When Harnett came from the stable, he told Ralph that the necessary permission had been given, and that they would start for the cabin of the moonlighters at once, in order that none of the details of the work might be lost.

While they were speaking, Bob drove out of the stable behind a pair of small gray horses, which were so spirited that their driver could pay no attention to anything but them.

"I'll see you again very soon," he shouted; and hardly had he uttered the words before he was tearing along the rough road at a rate of speed that threatened a rapid dissolution of the light carriage.

If George had any business to attend to on that day, he evidently made up his mind to neglect it, for he began to make his arrangements for the journey with quite as much eagerness and zest as displayed by Ralph.

Since it was by no means certain that the well would be opened that night, owing to the vigilance of the owners of the torpedo patent, George made preparations to remain away from Farmer Kenniston's all night, taking blankets, food, fishing-tackle and rifles, as if their excursion was to be one simply of a sporting nature.

"It wouldn't do for us to drive out to the moonlighters' cabin as if we were going to see a well shot," he said, in reply to Ralph's questions of what he proposed doing with rifles and fishing-rods; "for, if we were seen, it would be quickly reported in town, and Bob would have the whole posse of Roberts Brothers' force upon him. Now, there would be nothing thought of our going out fishing, which fully accounts for my preparations. I have known Bob to wait for a week before he dared explode a charge, and I don't care to get mixed up in any encounter between these two sets of torpedo men."

"I don't want any harm to come to him through me," replied Ralph, gleefully, "but I should not be at all sorry to see just a little excitement in the way of a chase of the moonlighters."

"There is every chance that you will be fully satisfied before you leave this portion of the country," said George, grimly; and then, as his horses were ready for the road once more, he added: "Get in, and, if nothing happens, I will show you the cabin of the moonlighters in less than an hour."

CHAPTER III. THE CABIN OF THE MOONLIGHTERS

Bob Hubbard had been away from the Kenniston farm-house nearly half an hour when Ralph and George left it, but the latter was so well acquainted with the country that he did not need any guide to the cabin, and could not have had one, had he so desired, for Bob was far too cautious to be seen leading any one to his base of operations.

It was well known by the owners of the torpedo patents that Robert Hubbard was the most skillful of all the moonlighters, and whenever he was seen traveling toward any of the wells that were being bored, he was followed, but, thanks to the fleetness of his horses, he had never been seen at his work by any one who would inform on him.

Bob believed, as did a great many, that the firm holding the patent had no legal right to prevent any one from exploding nitro-glycerine by the means of a percussion cap placed in the top of a tin shell or cartridge. Several cases were before the courts undecided, and until a decision was reached, the owners of the patent would do all in their power to prevent any one from interfering in the business which they proposed to make a monopoly. Therefore, when Bob went about his work, he did so with quite as much mystery as if he had been engaged in some decidedly unlawful act.

The ride from Sawyer, among the mountains, was quite as rough a one as that from Bradford, and Ralph found that he had about as much as he could attend to in keeping the guns, fishing-rods and himself in the carriage, without attempting to carry on any extended conversation with his friend. It was, therefore, almost in silence that the two rode along until George turned the horses abruptly from the main road into the woods, saying, as he did so:

"If I am not mistaken, this path will lead us directly to Bob's headquarters."

He was not mistaken, for before they had ridden a mile into the woods, they emerged into a clearing, in the midst of which stood a small log-house and stable.

Instead of windows, the hut had stout plank shutters, which prevented any one from looking in, even if they did prevent the occupants from gazing out, and the door had more the appearance of having been made to resist an attack than simply to keep the wind or cold out.

The stable was in keeping with the hut, so far as an appearance of solidity went; and as its one door was closely shut, with no bars or locks on the outside, one could fancy that when it was occupied, a guard remained on the inside, where the fastenings of the door evidently were.

"I guess we have got here too soon," said Ralph, as George stopped the horses in front of the hut, without any signs of life having been seen.

"There is a smoke from the chimney," said George, as he pointed to the clumsy affair of mud and sticks from which a thin, blue curl of smoke could be dimly seen, "and if they are ready to let us in, we shall soon see some one."

The two sat patiently in the carriage several moments, and at the end of that time the door of the hut was opened by a young man standing in the doorway, to whom George said:

"Well, Dick, hasn't Bob got here yet?"

"Yes, he's here; but we didn't open the door at first because we were not sure but that you had been followed." Then turning toward the barn, the young man shouted, "Come out here, Pete, and take care of these horses!"

In response to this demand the stable door was opened as cautiously as if the man behind it feared a dozen were ready to pounce upon him, and then, much as if he were unfolding himself, a tall negro came out, leading the horses away without speaking, almost before Ralph and George had time to leap to the ground.

"Get into the hut as quickly as possible," George said to Ralph; and as the three entered, the door was securely barred behind them with two heavy beams that would have resisted almost any ordinary force that might have been used against them.

The hut boasted of but one room, in which were to be seen piles of blankets that had evidently been used as beds, cooking utensils, provisions, sheets of tin, tools such as are used by tinsmiths, and, in fact, as varied an assortment of goods as could well have been gathered into so small a compass.

In one corner of the room the floor of earth had been excavated, until a space about six feet square and four deep had been formed, and into this excavation was packed a number of square tin cans, which Ralph felt certain contained that powerful agent, nitro-glycerine.

Bob was at work soldering together a long tin shell, about six inches in diameter and fully ten feet long, and he called out, as his friends entered:

"Come right in. Don't be afraid that you will be shot at, for we drop all that kind of business here for fear we might all go up together. This, Mr. Gurney, is the moonlighters' cabin, and I am free to confess that it is not the most cheerful place in the world."

"I don't find as much fault with the cabin as I do with what you keep stored in those innocent-looking tin cans," replied Ralph, as he seated himself on a pile of blankets at a respectful distance from the glycerine.

"Oh, that's harmless enough so long as you leave it alone!" replied Bob, carelessly, and then as he resumed his work of soldering, he asked: "Did you see anything of Jim as you came in?"

"No; where is he?"

"Out by the road somewhere. We heard that our particular friends in town had got wind of the fact that we were going to put in a charge to-night, so Jim is doing guard duty outside, leaving Dick Norton and I to do the tinker's work. We expected to have gotten our shells all made in town; but they are looking out so sharp for us just now that it was entirely too much of a risk to bring them out here."

"How did they learn that you were going to work to-night?" asked George.

"That's more than I can say, unless old Hoxie was fool enough to let it out that we were going to shoot his well for him," replied Bob, working savagely with the soldering iron, much as if he would have been pleased had he been using it on Mr. Hoxie's too ready tongue.

"Do you anticipate *much* trouble?" asked Ralph, with just a shade of anxiety, beginning to realize that it would not be the most pleasant thing in the world to commence his vacation by being arrested as a moonlighter.

"That's just what I can't say. We may have it, and we may not; but there's one thing certain, and that is that I'll shoot that well if I don't get back to the Kenniston farm for three months."

"I don't believe that they are even looking for us. They think we went out of the business two weeks ago," said Dick Norton, as he, in a very unworkmanlike manner, attempted to aid Bob. "You see, Jim is nervous, and the least thing frightens him."

"Something has startled him, at all events!" exclaimed Bob, running to the door as a low, quick whistle was heard from the outside.

Dick, despite the rather contemptuous way in which he had spoken, also appeared to think something serious had happened, for he joined Bob at the door, looking very serious as both of them quickly unfastened the bars, opening the door just as a young man ran in from the woods, breathless and excited.

"What is it, Jim? What has happened?" asked Bob, replacing the heavy bars instantly the newcomer was inside the building.

"Newcombe and five men have just turned into the path, coming down here as if they knew just what they should find."

For a moment Bob and Dick were silent, and Ralph had an opportunity to ask George:

"Who is Newcombe?"

"A man in the employ of the owners of the patent, and one who has threatened several times to secure the arrest of Bob."

Dick's first act, after he fully realized what Jim had said, was to cover the fire, at which they had been soldering, with ashes, in order to prevent any smoke from escaping through the chimney, and by that time Bob had recovered all his presence of mind.

"Even if they have at last found the hut, they will be puzzled to get into it, or to get us out," he said, as he noted the fastenings of the window-shutters, and uncovered a small aperture which served as a loop-hole through which everything that occurred outside could be seen.

"You ought to have warned Pete," said George, not feeling remarkably well pleased at the chance of being besieged as a moonlighter, but yet anxious that his friends should elude arrest where the cartridges and explosive fluid would be sufficient proof against them.

"There is no need of that," replied Bob. "He wouldn't show himself under any circumstances unless we called him, and from the loft of the stable he can see all that is going on."

Ralph was the most uncomfortable of the party. Not being so familiar with the doings of the moonlighters, nor acquainted with the general feeling of the public against them, the idea of being thus hunted like a criminal was very repugnant to him.

It was as if his companions were engaged in some crime, instead of simply infringing a patent, the legality of which had not been fully tested, and, if he could have had his choice, he would have been miles away from that spot just then.

"There they come!" exclaimed Bob from his post of observation, and, looking out for a moment, Ralph saw six men riding into the clearing directly toward the house.

Almost before he had time to regain his seat, and just as Bob held up his hand as a signal for silence, a knock was heard at the door, as if some one was pounding with the butt-end of a whip.

No one made any reply, and it seemed to Ralph as if he could hear the pulsations of his own heart, so oppressive was the silence.

Again the summons was repeated, and a gruff voice cried:

"Open the door a moment. I wish to speak with Mr. Robert Hubbard."

Then there was a long silence, and, seeing the look of anxiety on Ralph's face, George said, in a low whisper:

"Don't look so distressed, my boy. Those men have got no more right to enter here than you have to go into another man's dwelling. If they should succeed in getting in, however, they would find sufficient to prove that Bob was about to infringe their patent; but, as it is, they have no authority to do anything, although Bob will hardly get a chance to shoot the Hoxie well to-night."

"That's just what I will do," whispered Bob, who had heard George's remark. "I will put in that charge if they camp where they are all night."

The men on the outside waited some moments in silence, and then the request was repeated, while at the same time footsteps could be heard as if some of them had gone toward the stable.

"They might easily batter in one of the windows," said Ralph, as the pounding at the door was continued.

"They would hardly try that plan," replied George, with a meaning smile. "There are a hundred or two quarts of nitro-glycerine stored here, needing only the necessary concussion to explode them. Those men know quite as well as we do how unpleasant such liquid may become, and I assure you that they will strike no very heavy blows on the building."

It was a singular position for any one to be in, and Ralph was far from being comfortable in his mind, as he awaited the result of this visit to the cabin of the moonlighters.

CHAPTER IV. A REGULAR SIEGE

Ralph, simply a visitor to the cabin of the moonlighters, felt far more uncomfortable than did his hosts, to whom alone there was any danger.

As the party waited silently for any move by those outside, Ralph had plenty of time to review his own position, and this review was far from pleasant or reassuring.

In that section of the country the fact of being arrested as a moonlighter did not imply either disgrace or crime; but in Ralph's home, where nothing was known of such an industry, save when occasionally a newspaper item was read but not understood, the news of his arrest while trying illegally to "shoot" a well, would cause as much consternation and sorrow as if he had attempted to shoot a man. It was far from being a pleasant beginning to his vacation, and he would have been much better satisfied with himself if he had not made any attempt to penetrate the mysteries of the moonlighters' dangerous calling.

While these uncomfortable thoughts were presenting themselves to Ralph, Bob Hubbard was standing on a rudely-constructed table, in order that he might keep a watch upon Newcombe and his men, and from time to time he whispered to his companions of that which he saw.

"They've got tired trying to find out anything at the stable, and now they're coming this way. If we keep perfectly quiet they will begin soon to believe that no one is here, and then, very likely, they will go away."

It was in the highest degree necessary that these men should be thrown off the scent if possible, and each one in the hut remained motionless as statues, but, as was shown a moment later, their silence was fruitless, owing to the defective construction of their furniture.

"Now they are gathering close around the door," continued Bob, from his post of observation; and then, fearing he might betray himself even through the loop-hole, he began cautiously to descend.

It was as if his very efforts to move without noise hastened the catastrophe he was trying to avert, for as he started to lower himself from the table, the entire structure gave way, and he came to the floor with such a crash as could have been heard many yards away.

There was no need of question as to whether Bob's downfall had been heard by those outside, for at the moment a low, involuntary cry of triumph was heard, which did not detract from the unfortunate moonlighter's discomfiture. Had Bob cried out his name he could not have proclaimed his presence any more plainly, and as he disentangled himself from amid the wreck of the table, his face spoke eloquently the anger he felt, either at his own carelessness or the weakness of the table.

"It's all up now," said Jim, despondently. "There was a chance that they might get tired in time, and go away; but now they will stay here until they see us leave."

"Well, let them stay," said Bob, savagely. "I have come here to get ready to shoot the Hoxie well, and I'll do it before I go home again."

"Perhaps you will, and perhaps you won't," said Jim, doubtingly; "but if my opinion's worth anything, you won't."

Bob made no reply to this; but attacked the tin cartridges on which he had been working with an energy that told plainly of his determination; although how it might be possible for him to do more than to get ready for the work, no one could imagine. He no longer tried to be silent, but made so much bustle with his work that George said:

"What makes you so careless, Bob? Even if they did hear you when you fell, there is no reason why you should advertise the fact that you are making cartridges."

"What difference does it make what they hear now?" asked Bob, not even looking up from his work as he spoke. "Do you fancy that Newcombe, finding us here, does not know just as well as we do what there is inside here? If we remain quiet, he will say to himself that we are all ready for the shot, and only waiting for him to get out of the way before we let it off. If we work, he will know no more, and we may as well take things comfortable."

"It isn't any use for us to try to do anything," said Dick, disconsolately. "Newcombe will stay right where he is until we go out, and the best thing we can do is give the thing up for a while."

"Yes," interrupted Jim, "let's go home, and wait until we can give him the slip and get out again."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," replied Bob, doggedly. "I agreed to shoot Hoxie's well to-night, and I'm going to do it."

"You can't without Newcombe's seeing you, and you know that your arrest would follow as soon after that as he could get out a warrant," said George, thinking it was high time for him to interfere with advice. "They have never been able to get any proof against you yet, and you don't want to give them the chance now just through spite."

"I'm not going to give them the chance," said Bob, calmly. "I am going to take what I need out of this place while they are guarding it, and without their seeing me. If any of you fellows are afraid, and want to go home, you know how to get there; but I am going to stay, and do just as I have said."

Bob could have used no better argument, if he had been anxious to have his companions remain with him, than when he proposed they should go home if they were afraid. Much as Ralph would have liked to, he did not think of leaving, when to do so was to be considered proof that he was afraid, and he, as well as the others, settled themselves down to await the result of Bob's plan, whatever it might be.

Those on the outside, however, were not as contented in their waiting, as they showed in a short time, when Newcombe's voice could be heard addressing those whom he believed he had "run to earth."

"Say, boys!" he cried, "you know very well that I shall stay here until you come out, and the best thing you can do is to give the job up for a while, for I promise you that you will get no chance to do the work this time."

It was quite evident that Mr. Newcombe had no more desire to remain outside of the hut on guard than Ralph and George had to remain inside, and that he was anxious to put a speedy end to what had every appearance of being a long job. It was plain to be seen that he neither understood nor relished this singular behavior on the part of those whom he had no authority to arrest until they had committed some overt act, and that he was anxious to bring the case to an issue at once.

The others looked at Bob, expecting he would make some reply to the proposition, but he made no sign that he had even heard what had been said. He worked industriously at the long tin tubes, neither speaking nor looking up.

"You know that I have got wind of what you are going to do to-night," continued Newcombe, from the outside, "and you know that I shall stay right here until you leave; so what's the use of acting so childishly about it? Come right out like men, and begin the thing over at some other time."

Even Ralph could understand that, in his eagerness to be away, Mr. Newcombe was making a great mistake in thus pleading with those over whom he could have no control until after their work was done, and Dick's face lightened wonderfully as he began to hope the "torpedo detective," as Newcombe was called, might tire of his watching and go away.

All the inmates of the hut appeared to share the same hope, and Jim at once began to replace the broken table with some empty boxes, in order that he might have access to the loop-hole.

"What will be the result of all this?" Ralph asked of George, as the two seated themselves comfortably in one corner of the room, where they would at the same time be out of Bob's way, and see all that was going on.

"That I can't say. It may be forty-eight hours before Bob gives up the scheme he has evidently formed, and in the meanwhile here we are prisoners, for we cannot ask to leave the hut until the others do. It promises to be a tedious thing for us; but you remember that you wished there might be some excitement other than the mere shooting of the well."

"Yes," replied Ralph, with a laugh, "I remember that I was foolish enough to make some such remark, and I am in a fair way to get all I wanted."

By this time Jim had built up a shaky sort of a platform, by which he was enabled to climb to the loop-hole, and he at once gave the result of his outlook to his companions.

"They are unharnessing the horses," he cried, in a tone of disappointment; for he had almost persuaded himself that they would leave the place at once. "Newcombe's team is directly in front, and the other two are drawn up on either side, about fifty yards from it. They are preparing for a regular siege."

"Which is the most fortunate thing for us that could have happened," said Bob, contentedly.

"Why? I don't see how we can do anything when they are all ready to follow us the moment we show ourselves out of doors," said Dick.

"If you can't, I can," replied Bob, working leisurely at his cartridges, and with as much precision as if the "torpedo detectives" were miles away.

"Tell me what you intend to do."

"I'll show you when everything is ready, Dick, and not before. You have said that we couldn't do anything while they were here; therefore, whatever my plan may be, it is better than giving the whole thing up. Now, if your fears will permit, suppose you take hold and help me while Jim watches our friends outside."

It was as if Dick understood for the first time that while they were bewailing their fate that Newcombe should have found their hiding-place, Bob was working industriously at the task on hand, and he began to help him at once, which employment had the effect of dispelling his fears in a wonderful degree.

"Three of the men are watching the house from the front, while Newcombe and the other two are going towards the stable," said Jim; and then he added, excitedly: "I believe that rascal Pete is talking with them, for they are standing there now, looking up towards the roof as if they saw or heard some one."

Dick was disposed to leave his work at this startling announcement but Bob's industry had a quieting effect upon him, and he continued in his office of helper, although with evident mental anxiety.

"Now they have called one of the other men over, and all four of them are going through the motions of a conversation. Now Newcombe has taken some money out of his pocket, and is holding it up in his hand."

There was a moment of silence in the hut, during which all the boys, even including Bob, awaited in anxiety the result of this evident bribe, and then Jim said, excitedly:

"Pete has shown himself, and is reaching out with the pitch-fork for the money. He is selling us to Newcombe, who will know now exactly what we were going to do."

CHAPTER V. BOB'S SCHEME

From what Jim could see from the loop-hole, there was every reason for the young moonlighters to believe that the negro Pete, whom they hired, was betraying them to Newcombe, and each one felt more than uneasy when Jim reported that the detective had fastened some money on one of the prongs of the hay-fork. But they were somewhat relieved when Bob said:

"If you weren't all a good deal frightened, you would remember that Pete hasn't been told where we were going. He doesn't know anything more than Newcombe himself does, and if he can make a few dollars for nothing, why let him."

"But what are they giving him money for?" asked Jim, who was even more disturbed by this apparent treachery on the part of their servant than were the others.

"For an answer to that question, I shall be obliged to refer you to the worthy Pete himself. At all events, the only harm he could do us would be to let Newcombe know when we leave here – in case he don't want to wait – and that is just what I fancy Pete himself won't know."

As soon as the boys realized that Pete had no secrets of theirs worth the purchasing, they grew more easy in their minds, and were inclined to look upon this giving of money by Newcombe as a very good joke.

Jim had nothing of interest to report for nearly ten minutes after this, during all of which time the detective and his men had been engaged in earnest conversation with the negro, and then he announced that they were returning to their wagons.

They had not unharnessed their horses, but had slipped the bridles from them that they might make a dinner from the rich grass, and yet be ready for a start at a moment's notice.

After their return to the front of the house, one of the men drove away with one of the teams, after having received some instructions from Newcombe, and as it was nearly dark, the boys believed that the detective had sent for food, since there was no longer any doubt about his having regularly besieged the house.

All this time Bob had continued his work, assisted by Dick, and it was not until the setting sun had distorted the shadows of the trees into dark images of giants that he announced its completion.

"There!" he cried, triumphantly, as he laid the last tin tube by the side of the other two, "we are all ready, and in two hours more we will start."

"In two hours Newcombe and his men will be there just as they are now," said Jim, rather impatiently, for he thought Bob was assuming to be able to do very much more than was possible.

"I suppose they will," was the quiet reply, "and I should not be very much surprised if we should see them there twenty-four hours later."

"What is it you propose doing, Bob?" asked George, who, thoroughly tired of the inactivity as was Ralph, was only anxious to know when their irksome captivity would come to an end.

"I'll tell you. In the first place, how far is Hoxie's well from here in a straight line?"

"Directly through the woods, I suppose it is not more than half a mile. I surveyed the next tract to it, and I fancy that is about the distance."

"And if we should start from the back of the hut, traveling in a straight line, we should come to it?"

"Yes; there would be no difficulty about that."

"Then I propose that we simply go out through the back window, unless Newcombe has sufficient wits about him to station one of his men there. We can, by making two trips, carry enough glycerine to shoot the well in good style, and by midnight we should be all ready for the work."

The plan was so simple, and with so many elements of success about it, that Bob's audience testified to their appreciation of it by vigorous applause, which must have mystified the worthy Mr. Newcombe considerably.

"In an hour from now we can begin work. Ralph, who might possibly have some compunctions about carrying a couple of cans of glycerine through the woods, where to strike one against a tree might result in his immediate departure from the world, shall carry the cartridges. Then there will be four of us, each of whom can carry eight quarts. Two trips will give us sixty-four quarts, and that will be enough to start the oil from Mr. Hoxie's well, if there is any there."

Bob's plan was quite as dangerous as it was simple. To carry eight quarts of glycerine through the woods when a mis-step might explode it, was such a task as any one might well fear to undertake. But the desire to leave the detective on a weary vigil while they pursued their work unmolested was such an inducement, as caused each one, even Ralph, to be anxious to try it.

The night was not as favorable for the scheme as it might have been, for the moon was nearly full, and objects could be distinguished almost as readily as at noonday, save when under the veil cast by the shadows.

This moonlight, Bob thought, would not interfere with their plan, since from the back of the house to the forest was but a few yards, and unless Newcombe should station one of his men there, the building would screen them from view.

In case they got safely away from the house, the light would aid them, both in their journey through the woods and in their work after they arrived at the well.

For some time the boys enjoyed thoroughly the anticipation of fooling Mr. Newcombe, and they might have continued to do so until it would have been too late to accomplish the work, had not Bob reminded them that they had no time to lose.

Then they made their preparations for the journey or flight, whichever it might be called. The long, tin cartridges were tied together securely, with wads of paper between to prevent them from rattling; the cans of nitro-glycerine were placed by the window, where they could be gotten at readily, and Bob produced a three-cornered piece of iron, about four feet long, which weighed twenty or thirty pounds.

"It will be quite an addition to your load; but I fancy you will feel safer carrying it than you would one of the cans," he said to Ralph.

"What is it?"

And the tone in which the question was asked showed that the newcomer to the oil fields looked upon this carrying a useless piece of iron through the woods as very unnecessary work.

"That's the go-devil," replied Bob; and then, as he saw that Ralph did not understand, he added: "It is to drop through the hole to explode the cartridges after they are placed in position."

Still Ralph could not fully understand its importance; but he stationed himself by the window, resolved to carry the go-devil and the cartridges any distance, rather than take the chances of being obliged to burden himself with the dangerous oil which the others appeared to regard with so little fear.

Everything was in readiness for the start, and Bob clambered up to the peep-hole that he might be sure the enemy were yet in their position, which was so favorable to the plans of the moonlighters.

"They are all there except the one who drove away some time ago, and – here comes the other now. He had been for food, and they are pitching into it as if they were hungry. Now is our time to start. They will be at their supper for the next half hour, and by the end of that time we shall be ready to come back for a second load."

Bob looked once more to the fastenings of the doors and windows to be certain that they could not be loosened by any one from the outside, and then he cautiously unbarred the window at the back of the house.

Knowing that the detective and all his force were in front, he spent no time in looking around; but, leaping out, was soon busily engaged in taking out the cans of glycerine which Jim and Dick handed him.

Less than ten minutes sufficed for this work, and then each member of the party was out of doors, Ralph with the cartridges over his shoulder and the go-devil under his arm, while the others carried a can of the dangerous liquid in each hand.

It had been decided that George, being accustomed to traveling through the woods in straight lines by his work as engineer, should lead the party, as the one most likely to keep a direct course, and Ralph had decided that he would remain as far in the rear as possible; for, when he saw the boys swinging the terrible explosive around so carelessly, he felt that the further away one could get from that party the safer they were.

George was not as much at his ease as he might have been, for he had not grown familiar with the explosive, as the others had, and he uttered many a word of caution when they came to those portions of the woods where the trees stood more thickly together.

Their progress was necessarily slow, owing to the care they were obliged to use in walking; but before Mr. Newcombe and his friends had finished their supper, the moonlighters were at Mr. Hoxie's well, where they found their arrival had long been expected.

Mr. Hoxie could understand, from the manner in which the moonlighters had come, that they had run some risk of detection in getting there, and when he learned that they were obliged to make a second trip for more glycerine, he offered either to accompany them or send some of his men with them, as they should prefer.

Bob refused all these offers of assistance, however, for he believed that it was owing to Mr. Hoxie's incautious remarks that the detectives had paid them a visit, and he did not propose to run any more risks than were absolutely necessary.

Since four of them could carry all the glycerine needed to make up the charge, and since Ralph had such a wholesome fear of the dangerous compound, Bob insisted that Ralph remain at the well, while the others paid a second visit to the hut in the forest, a proposition which Ralph eagerly accepted, for carrying nitro-glycerine through the woods in the night was a task he was not at all anxious to perform.

The return through the woods was made in a very short time, the boys walking on at full speed until they were near the hut, when the utmost caution was used. By making quite a detour through the woods, Bob was able to get a full view of the watchful detectives, all of whom were seated on the grass in front of the hut, gazing at it so intently that there was no question that any suspicion had been aroused in their minds.

Before they had left the hut Bob had placed the glycerine near the window, so that it could be reached from the outside, and, after it was learned that the enemy were still in blissful ignorance, but little time was lost in getting ready to return to Mr. Hoxie's well.

Perhaps the boys were no more careless in carrying the glycerine this second time than they were the first, but they certainly walked faster, and when they arrived at their destination, they had been away such a short time that Ralph could hardly believe they had been to the hut in the woods and back.

Everything was now in readiness for the important work, and the question that troubled the young moonlighters was whether the worthy Mr. Newcombe and his assistants would remain looking at the empty hut until the charge was exploded.

CHAPTER VI

TORPEDOING AN OIL-WELL

It is safe to say that Ralph, who was interested in the shooting of the well only as a spectator, was the most nervous one of all that party who were about to show Mr. Hoxie whether he had "struck oil" or not.

Bob set about the work with the air of one perfectly familiar with what he was doing, and the others aided him whenever it was possible, George alone remaining inactive, since he considered himself entitled to a seat with the spectator.

The well had, of course, been bored down as far as the bed-rock, leaving an opening from eight to ten inches in diameter and quite twelve hundred feet deep, which was nearly filled with the water that had flowed in and the oil that had been poured in to give some slight resistance at the top of the cartridge.

Over this, grim and weird-looking in the moonlight, rose the framework of the derrick, formed of heavy timbers, and apparently solid enough to resist any pressure that might be brought to bear upon it. Near by were scattered pieces of machinery, tools and such debris as would naturally accumulate around a place of the kind.

A large reel, wound with heavy cord, capable of sustaining a hundred pounds' weight, and with a shallow hook, which would easily become detached when the pressure was removed, was fastened at one of the uprights of the derrick, while directly over the well was a block for the cord to pass through. This was to be used to lower the cartridges into the well.

After this portion of the work had been completed – and all three of the moonlighters moved as rapidly as possible, lest Mr. Newcombe should put in an appearance – the task of filling the shells was begun. The tops of the long tin tubes were removed, and into these rather frail shells the glycerine was poured, Bob handling it as if it was no more dangerous than the petroleum they hoped to find.

As fast as each tube or cartridge was filled it was lowered into the well by the stout wire bail that was fastened to the top, and just under the cover was the hammer which would explode the percussion cap when struck. These cartridges were pointed at the head, and since the point of the second would rest on the top of the first, and the third on the second, the blow which exploded the first would naturally be communicated to the other two.

It was in lowering these cartridges into the well that Bob showed his first signs of caution in handling the explosive liquid, for the least jar or concussion, as the tin tubes were being let down into the well, would have resulted in a premature explosion, which might have had the most deplorable results.

Ralph, seeing that at this point even Bob was willing to admit that there might be some danger in the work he was doing, proposed to George that they move a short distance further away, lest there should be an accident, and the reply he received was not well calculated to soothe his nervousness.

"If one of those tubes should explode on the surface here, we should stand as good a chance of being killed a quarter of a mile away, as here. So we might just as well stay where we are."

And Ralph remained, although he was far from feeling as comfortable as he would have felt at a more respectful distance.

"All ready, now," said Bob, as the last cartridge was lowered into position, and the reel removed from the derrick. "Now in order to honor Harnett's guest, I am going to allow him the distinction of exploding the charge."

For a moment Ralph thought of what an experience it would be, to explode sixty-four quarts of nitro-glycerine, and what an adventure would be his to relate when he returned to college; therefore he marched boldly up to the well, at the bottom of which was such a dangerous agent ready to do its work. But when he saw the others seeking places of safety from the gases, and possibly fragments that would follow the explosion, and when he stood upon the platform of the derrick which afforded so insecure a foot-hold, because of the oil upon it, his courage failed him.

"It may be a big thing," he said to Bob, "to drop this piece of iron through the hole, and be the remote cause of such a powerful effect. But if, when I attempt to get out of the way, my foot should slip, I should hardly be in a condition to care for glory. I am greatly obliged to you for the proposed honor; but think I had better decline it."

"Just as you please, my dear boy," replied Bob, carelessly. "Just find a good place where you can see her when she shoots, and I'll drop the go-devil."

Ralph lost no time in obeying the young moonlighter's instructions, seeking a refuge near the corner of a small tool-house to the windward of the well, and about a hundred yards from it.

"Look out for your mouth and nose just after the explosion," cautioned George, "for the gases which will come first to the surface are very poisonous."

"All ready!" shouted Bob, as he looked around to see that every one was in a safe position, and then approached the well with the go-devil in his hands.

There was an instant's pause as the boy stood with the heavy iron poised over the aperture, and then dropping it, he sought shelter by the side of Ralph and George.

Perfect silence reigned for what seemed a long time while the go-devil was falling through twelve hundred feet of oil and water; but the time was hardly more than a minute, and then Ralph, who had expected to hear a deafening noise, simply heard a crackling sound, much as if two small fire-crackers had been exploded. It had not occurred to him that but little could be heard from such a distance beneath the surface.

"Look out for the gases!" cried George.

And as Ralph covered his nose and mouth with his handkerchief, he could see a black vapor, almost like smoke, arising from the mouth of the well.

"There is no oil there," he said to himself, as second after second went by and there was no appearance of anything save the gases of combustion. He was almost as disappointed as Mr. Hoxie would have been at finding a "dry well;" for after all his tedious waiting he hoped to have been rewarded by seeing the "shoot" of the oil.

He was rather surprised that Bob's face showed no signs of disappointment, for he surely must have wanted to see oil after his dangerous work. But Bob simply looked expectant, with his gaze fixed on the mouth of the well, and Ralph turned again just in time to see a most wonderful sight.

From out of the mouth of the well arose what appeared to be a solid column of greenish yellow, rising slowly in the air like one of the pillars of Aladdin's palace as it was formed by the genii. The top was rounded, and the sides of this marvelous column, held together only by some mighty force, shone in the moonlight like a polished surface of marble, while all the time it arose inch by inch without fret or check, until the top wavered in the night wind. Then one or two drops could be seen rolling off from the summit, and in an instant the entire appearance changed.

With a mighty bound the oil leaped into the air, tearing asunder the summit of the derrick as if it had been of veriest gossamer, dashing the heavy timbers aside like feathers, and spouting in the pale light drops as of molten gold.

For a radius of twenty feet around the well the air seemed filled with this liquid gold that was coming from the very bowels of the earth.

The oil poured out in torrents with a sharp, hissing noise that told how great was the volume of gas imprisoned beneath the rock, which was sending this oily deluge out, and the question of the value of the well was decided.

"It's good for two hundred barrels a day!" cried Bob.

And Mr. Hoxie, who would reap this rich harvest, insisted that it would produce very much more than that.

The damage done to the derrick was not heeded by the owner since the destructive agent was worth just so much money per barrel to him.

After spouting to a height of fully two hundred feet, for nearly ten minutes, the volume of oil, or, rather, of the gas that was forcing it to the surface, appeared to be exhausted, and lower and lower sank the torrent, spreading out in a fan-shape as it lessened, until finally it ceased entirely.

"What is the matter?" asked Ralph, who fancied that oil-wells flowed incessantly. "Your two-hundred-barrel well will hardly produce as much as you thought."

"Indeed it will," replied Bob. "You don't think wells go on flowing like that all the time, do you? They have breathing spells, like men. They spout anywhere from five to fifteen minutes, and then remain quiet about the same time, or longer. You see the gas in the reservoir of oil forces it to the surface; the escape of the oil lessens the pressure under the rock, and it remains inactive until sufficient gas has gathered again to force more up. This well is as good a one as I have ever shot."

Then Bob and his partners began to make their preparations for departure, since, for them to be found with their tools near a newly-opened well, would have been almost as dangerous as to have been caught in the very act of "shooting it."

Ralph would have been only too well pleased if he could have waited long enough to see the second spout, but being a guest of the moonlighters, he could not offer any objection to their movements, and he also made ready for the journey back to the hut.

Bob had settled his business with Mr. Hoxie, which was simply to get the agreed amount for the work performed, and was just getting the reel into shape to carry, when the clatter of hoofs was heard far down the road.

"The detectives!" shouted Mr. Hoxie, as he started toward the tool-house, where, in a very few seconds, he would be counterfeiting the most profound slumber.

"The detectives!" shouted the workmen, as they sought convenient places for hiding; and the moonlighters were left to dispose of themselves as best they could.

"Come this way!" cried Bob, as he caught up the reel, which might be recognized as his, regardless of how he carried it, and dashed off into the woods at full speed, followed by his partners and guests.

It was a flight which would be presumptive guilt, if they were overtaken, but, under the circumstances, it was the only course the moonlighters could pursue.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. NEWCOMBE'S CERTAINTY

Varied and many were Ralph's thoughts, as he followed his friends at full speed through the woods, and none of them were complimentary to the business of the moonlighters. He had hoped there would be some excitement attending the shooting of the well, other than that incident to the regular work, and he had every reason to be satisfied; but he had seen a trifle more than was necessary to his comfort or happiness, and this race through the woods was quite sufficient to take the last bit of romance from the business. The work had been done; but if those who had been heard on the road were the officers, the chances were that they might succeed in finding sufficient proof as to who had done the job.

Ralph understood fully that by aiding the moonlighters, even in the slight way he had, he was, for the time being, one of them, and this thought was far from reassuring. Without any reason, other than to see the sport, he had, perhaps, infringed the rights of those who were using every effort to protect them, and what the result might be perplexed him in no slight degree.

But one thing was certain, and that was, now that he had become involved with his new acquaintances to a certain extent, it was necessary for him to continue with them until he could leave without either compromising himself or injuring them.

Of course, every one believed that the noise made on the road immediately after the well was shot was occasioned by Newcombe's men, who, having discovered that the hut was empty, had started at once for the probable scene of operations.

Under this belief, Bob dashed on toward the hut at full speed, never thinking of making any investigations to learn whether they were correct in their surmises, until, when they were but a short distance from the clearing in the woods, George called out:

"Before we show ourselves, it would be well to find out whether Newcombe has really left."

"That would be only a waste of time," objected Jim, "for, of course, it was he whom we heard."

"I believe it was," replied George; "but, at the same time, it is well to be sure. It will only take a few moments longer, and, since Ralph and I have got mixed up in this thing, I insist that you find out whether any one is there before you attempt to go into the hut."

Bob thought, as did both Dick and Jim, that Harnett was foolishly particular; but, since the young engineer was so decided about the matter, he thought it best to do as he was requested.

When, therefore, they arrived at the edge of the clearing, the party waited within the shadow of the trees, while Bob stole cautiously around as before, with no idea that he should see any one in front of the hut.

While he was absent, Dick and Jim were disposed to make sport of what they termed George's caution, and this merriment caused so much noise that Harnett found it necessary to remind them very sharply that both he and Ralph, without any interest, other than curiosity in the matter, and after they had been of no slight service, might be obliged to pay dearly for the part they had taken; in consideration of which, the least that could be done would be to follow out this very reasonable request.

After this, the boys quieted down considerably, and when Bob returned, they were thankful that they had done so.

Bob startled them all, even George and Ralph, by the information that Newcombe and his men were still on guard in front of the hut, and that, to all appearances, they had not left the stations they were occupying when the party started out to shoot Mr. Hoxie's well.

If this was the case, who, then, was the party that had disturbed them at the completion of their work? This was the question that agitated them decidedly, and they were beginning a very animated discussion on the subject, when George said:

"It can make no particular difference just at this moment who they were. Some one was coming, probably other torpedo detectives, and we ran away. Newcombe and his men are still here on guard. Now the most important thing for us to do is to get into the hut as quickly and silently as possible, and if those others were detectives, perhaps our friend, Mr. Newcombe, will be able to swear that we have not been outside during the night."

There could be no answer to such an argument as this, save in action, and each one started for the hut, Dick and Jim feeling decidedly ashamed of the sport they had made of George's excess of caution.

To enter the building silently was as easy as to leave it, and in five minutes more the party were inside, with the shutters of the back window carefully barred.

Then they gave way without restraint to their mirth at having accomplished their work, while Newcombe watched their hut for them, and they might have continued at this amusing occupation during the remainder of the night, if sounds from the outside had not told them that other visitors were arriving.

"Now we shall find out who it was that disturbed us," said Bob, gleefully, as he clambered upon the improvised platform, that he might see what was going on outside from the peep-hole.

The boys, believing as Bob did, that these newcomers were the same ones whose arrival at Mr. Hoxie's lately-opened well was the cause of their hasty flight, awaited expectantly the result of Bob's survey.

"Three men are riding up," said Bob, "and now they are stopping their horses as Newcombe goes toward them. They all appear to be talking excitedly, and every few seconds Newcombe points this way. Now they are coming right toward the door."

There was no longer any need for Bob to describe the proceedings, for the noise made by the carriage could be plainly heard by all as it came toward the house, and in a very few moments even the conversation of the men could be distinguished.

"The well had just been shot as we got there," one of the newcomers could be heard to say, "and you know that Bob Hubbard was to do the work. You have allowed the boy to fool you, Newcombe, and while you have been here, he has been working at Hoxie's."

"But I tell you that I heard him in here early in the afternoon, and the darkey told me his team was in the stable. Now, how could he have gotten the glycerine or cartridges out of here while six of us have been on duty all the time?"

And from the tone of Newcombe's voice it was easy to understand that he was very angry with these colleagues of his for doubting his ability to watch three boys.

"Are you certain it was Bob whom you heard?" asked the first speaker. "He may have left some one here, and been at Hoxie's before you arrived."

"I am certain there was some one here," said Newcombe, speaking less decidedly than before, "and I would be willing to bet everything I own that it was Bob Hubbard."

"Betting is a very bad way to settle disputes, Mr. Newcombe," said Bob, laughingly, shouting so that every one outside could hear his voice, "and I would advise you to give it up in the future; but in this particular case you would win the money."

"There! What did I tell you?" cried the detective to his visitors; and it is very probable that just at that moment he looked upon Bob as a true friend.

"Yes, Bob is there," said the man, reluctantly; "but Jim and Dick were at the well."

"Here's Dick!" shouted that young gentleman; "and when you two want to hold an animated conversation about either one of us, try not to start it at night, nor so near the door of a sleeping-room as to disturb those who may need a little rest."

"And here is Jim!" shouted that young moonlighter. "So now that you know we are here, where Brother Newcombe has been watching for the last dozen hours, suppose the whole posse of you drive back to Bradford, where you belong."

For a moment there was a profound silence outside, as if this last astute detective was too much surprised to be able to speak, and then Mr. Newcombe burst into an uncontrollable fit of triumphant laughter. He knew that it was impossible for any number of boys to fool him, and very likely he almost pitied his brother-detective for being so simple.

From the sounds, the boys judged that the men were moving away from the hut, and Bob once more had access to the peep-hole as a point of observation.

"They are harnessing their horses now," he said, after he had looked out a few moments, "and I guess Newcombe has convinced his friend that we must have been innocent of the shooting of Hoxie's well."

"The question among them now will be as to who the other moonlighters are," laughed Dick.

And all of them found no little cause for merriment in the idea of Newcombe and his friends pursuing these imaginary moonlighters.

"They have started for the stable again," continued Bob. "I suppose they want to make sure that there is no chance for us to get the horses out by any way other than the front door. What muffs they are not to think how easy it would be for us to do just as we did! They have walked entirely around the stable, and are now coming back again."

It was evident that Mr. Newcombe's friend needed some further proof to assure himself that it was not the boys whom he had disturbed, for Newcombe said, as he came near the hut:

"Bob, I don't suppose you have any especial love for any of us, but you know that what we are doing is all fair in the way of business, and nothing as especially against you. Now, just as a favor to me, I want you to tell us what we have done since we came here."

It was apparent to Bob, as it was to all in the hut, that the question was asked simply to convince the newcomers that the boys could not have left the hut during the night, and Bob, after having descended from his perch, in order that his voice might not betray the fact that he had been on the lookout, answered, readily:

"I didn't know that you had been doing much of anything. You paid Pete for some information which could hardly have been worth the money, and passed it up to him on the hay-fork, for he wouldn't open the door to you. Then you sent one of your party somewhere for food, and since you had your supper, you have amused us by sitting in front of the hut. Is that enough?"

"Plenty, and thank you!" was the reply, made in such a cheery tone that there was no question but that it had been sufficiently convincing.

Then Bob scrambled upon his rather shaky perch once more, in order to give full information to his companions of the movements of those outside.

He reported from time to time as to what they were doing in the way getting their teams ready, looking around the premises, but without taking more than a casual glance at the rear of the house, however, and then he said:

"Now they are getting into their wagons. Now they are driving out on the road, and now," he added, as he leaped down with a loud shout, "they have disappeared to find the parties who shot the Hoxie well, perfectly content that we could have had no hand in the business, since it is a certainty in Newcombe's mind that we have not left the hut since he drove up here. Hurrah for Bob Hubbard's scheme, and Newcombe's belief in his own ability as a detective!"

CHAPTER VIII. NEW QUARTERS

Until nearly daylight the boys remained awake, laughing over Newcombe's credulity, or congratulating each other on the success of that night's work, and then Bob, who for half an hour had been studying some plan, said:

"It isn't best for us to spend all our time laughing at Newcombe, or we may find out that he's smarter than we give him credit of being. If we expect to shoot any more wells in this vicinity, we must change our quarters, for we can safely count on this being watched."

"What if it is?" cried Dick, their success having made him very bold. "Wasn't it watched to-night, and didn't we shoot the Hoxie well in spite of them all?"

"Yes, we fooled Newcombe well; but we might find it difficult to do so the second time. Then again, all our work would not be as convenient to the hut as this was, and if it had been necessary for us to get our horses out, you must admit that Newcombe had us very foul."

And Bob, while he felt thoroughly elated by their victory, did not want that his partners should come to believe that all difficulties could be surmounted as readily.

"But what do you mean about changing our quarters?" asked Jim, who looked upon their hut as something particularly convenient and well located.

"I mean that we have got to build another shanty somewhere, if we can't find one ready-made."

"Nonsense! there's no more use of our leaving this place than there is of our trying to fly!" said Dick. "I ain't afraid that Newcombe will come here again very soon."

"But I *know* he will," persisted Bob. "Just as soon as he suspects that we are about to do any work, he will have so many men around here that we can't show our noses out of doors without being seen. You think I'm right, don't you, Harnett?"

"Well, now, see here," replied George, with a laugh, "I think Ralph and I have had all the moonlighting that is good for us, without going still further by aiding and abetting you with advice."

"But you can tell us what you think," persisted Bob.

"Well, I suppose I may venture that far, after having participated in the shooting of the Hoxie well. I don't think that this place is safe for you any longer, and if I was a member of this firm, I should move everything from here as soon as possible."

It was plain to be seen that Dick and Jim had great faith in Harnett's advice on any subject, for as soon as he had spoken all argument was at an end, and, after a brief pause, Dick asked:

"But where could we go?"

"I think I know of a place as good as this, about five miles up the valley, where by working a couple of days we could fix things up as well as we have them here."

"Then let's see to it at once," said Jim, who thought, if they were obliged to move, the sooner the disagreeable job was over the better.

"I'm ready to start now, if George and Gurney will help us," replied Bob, quietly.

"If we will help you!" echoed George. "You believe in using your friends for your benefit, don't you?"

"Well, in this case, it seems as if you might be of great assistance to us, and yet not do very much violence to your own feelings. You know as well as I do that the chances are Newcombe or his men are or will be scouring the country to-day for those who shot Hoxie's well. Now, if Dick, Jim and I start out alone, and they see us driving about the country where we presumably have no business, they will follow us, and good-by to our chances of getting settled very soon. But if you

and Gurney will take your fishing-tackle, Pete and I will go with you in our double wagon, and while he and I are attending to work, I will show you as good trout fishing as you ever saw."

It was a skillfully-prepared bait, as he intended it should be, for he knew that the two friends were fond of fishing, and they knew that he was an authority on the subject of trout streams.

At first George attempted to excuse himself on the score of having business to attend to, but it was easy to see that he wanted to go, and equally plain that Ralph had forgotten all the unpleasant experiences of the night, in his desire for sport.

"You see, you won't be doing anything in the way of moonlighting," said Bob, persuasively, "for you will honestly be going out fishing. You need know nothing whatever about what Pete and I are doing, and since we have a supply of food sufficient to last at least two days longer, you will have no better chance than this."

Whether George really had any work to which he should have attended or not, he evidently put all consideration of everything save sport aside, for he asked:

"Well, what do you think of it, Ralph?"

"I think it is just as Bob says. We shan't be doing anything but that which we have a perfect right to do, and if you can remain away from your business so long, I say let's go."

Bob waited only long enough to hear this decision, and then he went at once to the stable, where he ordered Pete to harness his horses into the double wagon, in which they carried their materials when out on professional business.

The old negro did not hesitate to tell his employer all that Newcombe had said to him. The detective had offered him ten dollars if he would answer certain questions, and, understanding that he did not know anything which could compromise those who hired him, had not thought it a breach of confidence to take the money.

Newcombe had asked who were in the hut, and Pete had told him, for he knew the detective was quite as well informed as he was; but when Newcombe questioned him as to what the boys were about to do, where or when they were going, he was truly unable to give the desired information.

This was all the detective had received for his expenditure of ten dollars, and the old darkey chuckled greatly over the ease with which he had earned the money.

When the team was ready, Dick and Jim started out for the purpose of having their horses harnessed, since they had no idea but that they were to accompany the expedition, but such was not a portion of Bob's plan.

"You must stay here and get the traps ready to be moved," he said, "for if we should all go, it would be quite as bad, if we were seen, as if we hadn't George and Ralph with us. Besides, your horses must be fresh for to-night, for we will hitch them into the torpedo wagon, and it is necessary that they should be able to get away from anything on the road, in case Newcombe should take it into his head to chase us."

Both the boys knew Bob was right, and, much as they disliked remaining at the hut while the others were enjoying themselves fishing, they quietly submitted to what could not be avoided.

Pete put a few tools into the wagon, Bob added enough in the way of eatables to last the party twenty-four hours, and, just as the sun was rising, the real and pretended fishermen started.

The road led directly back through Sawyer, and on the opposite side of the creek, a fact which showed how necessary it was for Bob to have some one with him who would give to the journey the semblance of sport, rather than business.

The horses were driven at a brisk trot, despite the roughness of the roads, and in less than an hour from the time of leaving the hut Bob turned his horse into what apparently was the thick woods, but in which a road, that was hardly more than a path, could just be discerned after the thicket by the side of the highway had been passed through.

Over logs, stumps and brushwood Bob drove, with a calm disregard to the difficulties of the way, or to the comfort of himself and his companions, until a small hut, or, rather, shanty, was reached, when he announced that they were at the end of their journey.

"Well," said George, as he alighted from the wagon, "so far as being hidden from view goes, this is a good place; but I fancy it will be quite a different matter when you try to bring a load of glycerine here. It would be a job that I should hesitate to undertake."

"We can make the road all right with a few hours' work, and then we will put up some kind of a shelter for a stable. But just now fishing, not a roadway for torpedo wagons, is your aim, and, if you and Ralph will follow right up on this path, you will come to a stream, from which you can catch as many trout as you want."

Taking a generous lunch with them, and wishing Bob success in his work, George and Ralph set out for a day's fishing, believing that their connection with the moonlighters was very nearly at an end.

After leaving Bob, neither of the boys had very much to say about their adventure of the previous night, for it had terminated so happily that it no longer worried them, and the thought of the enjoyment they were to have drove everything else from their minds.

The stream was as promising a one as the most ardent disciple of Walton could have desired, and but little time was spent, after they arrived at its banks, before they had made their first cast.

The fish were as plenty as Bob had promised, and, when the time came for their noon-day lunch, they had nearly full baskets of speckled beauties, that would weigh from a quarter to three-quarters of a pound each.

During the forenoon they had fished up stream, and, when their lunch was finished, they started down with the idea that they would reach the path they had started from just about the time Bob would be ready to return to the other hut.

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