

Young Clarence

**The Motor Boys on the Wing: or,
Seeking the Airship Treasure**



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CHAPTER I TWO QUEER MEN

“Don’t try it Jerry, you can’t make it.”

“Yes, I can Bob. There’s more room than you think. Besides, the hay is soft.”

“No, don’t, Jerry. We’re in no hurry,” put in the third member of a trio of boys in a big touring car that was skimming along a pleasant country road behind a load of hay. “Don’t do it!”

“Say, I’m tired of taking in all that fellow’s dust,” returned Jerry Hopkins. “Hold fast fellows, here we go!”

He pressed down the accelerator pedal of the machine and headed the car for a narrow space that showed between the load of hay and the side rails of a bridge that the farm wagon was just crossing.

It was a rather small opening to get through but Jerry was a skillful steersman, and, as he had said, he had traveled behind the load of hay so long, breathing the dust kicked up by the plodding horses, that he was tired of it. The driver had been obstinate and would not pull over, and this was the first chance Jerry had had to pass.

“You’ll have a smash!” predicted Bob Baker.

“Not on your life, Chunky!” called back Jerry.

“Hug the hay – not the bridge – those side rails may be rotten,” advised Ned Slade, as he took a firm grip on the lap-robe rail in front of him.

“Right you are,” admitted Jerry. “Here’s where we hit the red top and timothy. All ready now!”

The big car shot ahead. The farm wagon was rumbling over the bridge, which was none too strong, and when the auto also reached the clattering planks it sounded as if a thunder storm had broken loose.

With quick eyes and ready hands Jerry guided the car. Close up against the sides of the billowy hay he sent the machine to avoid hitting the bridge rail, yet so narrow was the space that the hub caps raked a furrow in a retaining plank, while the hay whipped the faces of the autoists.

“Look out!” yelled Bob.

“Farther over – farther!” cried Ned.

“Oh, all right. Don’t get excited,” advised Jerry calmly. “We’re safe now.”

They would have been, in another instant, for with a quick turn of the steering wheel the tall lad on the front seat was about to send the car cutting in ahead of the horses, having nearly passed the wagon. But whether the steeds were frightened by the shouts of Ned and Bob, or whether the driver unconsciously or intentionally turned toward the auto was not known. At any rate only by a rapid shifting of his course was Jerry able to avoid a collision. He screwed the wheel around to the left, and then, as he saw that he was running the front tires into the bridge rails he twisted his “helm” once more to the right. By this time the end of the bridge was reached, and Jerry saw an open road ahead of him, having emerged from behind the hay wagon.

He cut sharply into it, so sharply in fact that the mud guard on the right rear wheel scraped the high horse, causing the animal to swerve against its mate in fright.

“Whoa there! Hold on! I’ll have th’ law on you fellers!” cried the driver of the hay load.

“Say, you *did* hit his horse,” remarked Bob in a low voice.

“Better pull up and see if he’s going to make trouble. Otherwise he may take our number and report us,” advised Ned.

There was a grinding and shrieking of brakes and the auto came to a stop just ahead of the farm wagon, the driver of which had now quieted his horses.

“What do you mean?” he roared, as he dismounted, whip in hand. “What right you got to smash into me that way?”

Jerry stood up in the machine, and looked at the steeds before replying. A quick glance told him that beyond a mere scratch that had not even drawn blood, the horse he had struck was not injured. Then the tall lad replied.

“Look here, Mister Man. I don’t want any of your talk!”

“Oh you don’t; hey? Wa’al, I’m goin’ to give you some, an’ then I’m going to make a complaint agin ye!”

“No, you’re not,” declared Jerry with easy assurance. “In the first place you’re a road-hog of the worst type. We kept behind you for nearly a mile, swallowing your dust, and, though there were several places where you could have turned out, and let us pass, you wouldn’t do it. I got tired of tooting my horn, and when I saw a chance to slip by I took it. I wouldn’t have barked your horse, if you’d kept to your own side of the bridge, and you know it.

“As it is, your animal isn’t hurt a bit, but you were nearly the cause of something serious happening to us. Now go ahead and make a complaint if you dare. We’ll come right back at you with a worse one for obstructing the road. That’s all I’ve got to say to you, and you can put it in your pipe and smoke it! Hold fast, fellows, here we go!” And with that Jerry threw in his gear, let the clutch slip into place and they were off down the road before the angry and chagrined farmer could think of anything to say.

When he did get his brain to working all he could ejaculate was:

“Wa’al, I’ll be gum-swizzled! Them auto fellers is gittin’ wuss an’ wuss every day. I wish I’d upspot ’em!”

Jerry and his chums were too far off, however, to hear this uncharitable wish, and it would probably have given them little concern had it come to their ears.

“Whew! That was hot while it lasted,” remarked Bob, breathing easily for the first time since the beginning of the little scene.

“You certainly had his number all right, Jerry,” said Ned.

“Yes, there are too many farmers like him,” retorted the tall steersman. “We autoists don’t want any more than our rights on the road.”

“Yes, and that’s one disadvantage of traveling in an auto,” went on Ned, when they were once more skimming peacefully along the highway. “Now if we’d been out in our motorship *Comet* we shouldn’t have had any trouble at all. There’s no blockading of the roads up there,” and he motioned to the blue sky above them.

“No, it’ll be some time before we have to take anybody’s dust up in the air,” was Bob’s opinion.

“Still the upper regions are more crowded than when we first took to ‘sky-larking,’” spoke Jerry. “Especially at an aviation meet. Which reminds me that I saw something in a paper I bought back there in Hammondport about a big gathering of birdmen that’s to take place soon.”

“Where is it?” asked Bob.

“Didn’t have time to look,” replied Jerry. “Here, you and Ned have a peep at it. If the meet is anywhere around here we might take it in.” Jerry reached in his pocket, and pulled out a folded newspaper. He passed it back to Ned, who exclaimed a moment later:

“Say, fellows, we ought to take this in. It’s going to be great, and maybe we can pull down one of the prizes.”

“Where’s it to be?” asked Jerry.

“At Colton.”

“And where’s Colton?” demanded Bob.

“Not far from the city of Harmolet. We stopped there once to fix up after a blowout.”

“Oh, I remember that place!” exclaimed Bob. “It was there we had such a jolly chicken pot-pie dinner.”

“Hum! Yes! Trust Bob to remember anything that had ‘eats’ in it,” came from Jerry, with a chuckle. “But Colton isn’t so far away. We could take it in. What do you say?”

“I’m for it,” declared Ned.

“Same here,” added Bob. “But, speaking of chicken pot-pie makes me hungry. There’s a good hotel just ahead and what’s the matter with stopping there for dinner?”

“Nothing, I guess,” conceded Jerry. “We’re out for a good time, and we might as well have it. We’ll stop for grub, fellows, and then we can talk about this meet.”

A run of five minutes more brought them to a small country town called Freedom, where they ran their car under the hotel shed, and were soon arranging for dinner.

While waiting for the meal to be served the boys sat in the hotel lobby, which contained quite a few persons; farmers who had come in on business, or to sell produce, traveling men, and one or two well dressed persons, apparently auto tourists like our heroes.

Two men in particular attracted the attention of Jerry and his chums. They were dark-complexioned chaps, evidently used to being out of doors, and their quiet but expensive clothes betokened that they were well off, or posed as being in that condition.

But it was neither the clothes nor the appearance of the men that attracted the attention of the boys as much as their manner. They sat together, not far from the hotel clerk’s desk, and sharply scrutinized every person in the lobby. Nor did our friends escape observation. The dark, eager, shifting gaze of the two men rested on the boys from time to time, and then darted off toward newcomers.

“Have either of you seen those two men before?” asked Jerry of Ned and Bob, in a low voice.

“No,” replied Bob, who because of his fleshiness was still panting from the exertion of climbing the hotel steps.

“How about you, Ned?”

“I agree with Chunky,” was the other lad’s reply, giving his stout chum his often-used nickname. “But they certainly will know us if they see us again.”

“They sure will,” came from Jerry. “But now let’s have a look at that paper. I want to read about the meet. Where did you say it was to take place Ned? I mean that aviation meet.”

“At Colton, near Harmolet. We could put up at Harmolet I think, for there are not likely to be many accommodations in Colton. I know there is a good hotel in Harmolet.”

“Then Harmolet for ours!” exclaimed Bob in rather a loud voice. “I think – ”

At the mention of the name of that city the two queer men, as if moved by the same impulse, stared straight at our heroes. The eyes of Jerry met first those of the man nearest him, and then shifted to the face of his companion. The two men hastily glanced away, and then, as Bob, who had noticed their strange action and who had interrupted himself, resumed his remarks about the desirability of Harmolet as a stopping place, the two strangers whispered eagerly together.

“Hum,” mused Jerry. “That’s rather odd. They must know something about Harmolet.”

“That’s not strange, seeing that it’s a good-sized place,” observed Ned. “But I don’t believe I’d care to have anything to do with those chaps – especially after dark,” he added in a low voice. “I don’t like their looks.”

“Same here,” agreed Jerry. “But we’re not likely to have anything to do with them. Now about this meet. If we’re going we’ll have to give our motorship *Comet* an overhauling,” and with that our friends fell to talking of air travel, in which they were well-nigh experts.

Dinner was presently announced, and the boys went up to the hotel desk to register. Just in front of them were the two strange men, whose conduct had been the cause of some speculation among the three lads. The men put their names down on the books just ahead of Jerry Hopkins.

“Hum – James Brown and John Black,” mused Jerry as he looked at the signatures. “Couldn’t be any more common names than those I guess.”

“Where are they from?” asked Bob, for Jerry had registered for his two chums.

“It might be almost any place,” was the answer, “for it’s such a scrawl that I can’t read it. Brown and Black; eh? Well, they’re both dark complexioned enough to be called ‘black.’ However let’s go in to dinner. I hope we don’t sit anywhere near them. It would spoil my appetite to be stared at the way they have been looking at us.”

“It’ll take a good deal to spoil *my* appetite,” observed the stout lad with a heart-felt sigh.

The fears of our heroes were groundless, for they were seated well away from the two odd men, and they managed to do ample justice to the meal.

CHAPTER II

WARNED AWAY

“Well,” observed Bob, after an eloquent silence, during which knives and forks had been industriously plied. “Now I’m ready to talk business. When do you think we can go to that meet, Jerry?”

“As soon as we like, or, rather, as soon as it opens, which isn’t for two weeks.”

“Will you try for a prize?” asked Ned.

“I don’t see why we can’t,” was the opinion of the tall lad. “I wish they had some water there, so we could do some stunts with our hydroplanes, as we did when we rescued Mr. Jackson. That was a trip worth taking.”

“It sure was,” agreed his chums. “Maybe we can soon take another like it.”

And they fell to talking of their adventures in the past, and of those hoped for in the future.

While they are thus engaged I will take the opportunity of telling you something more about the boys, for I may not get another chance, as they are such rapid-fire chaps. Those of you who have read the previous books in the series need no introduction to the motor boys, but new readers may wish to be formally presented to them.

The boys were Jerry Hopkins, the son of Mrs. Julia Hopkins, a wealthy widow, Bob Baker, whose father, Andrew Baker, was a prominent banker, and Ned Slade. Ned’s father, Mr. Aaron Slade, owned a large department store. The boys had been chums ever since they were in the primary school, and when they were old enough to have motorcycles their friendship was more than ever firmly cemented, for they had many adventures together, as told in the first volume of this series, entitled “The Motor Boys.” Later they got an auto, and made a long trip overland, and some time afterward, in company with Professor Uriah Snodgrass, they went to Mexico to discover a buried city.

Coming home from Mexico across the plains they had more adventures. With some money they had made in a gold mine they had located, they bought a fine motor boat, and in that they spent many pleasant hours. The fifth volume of our series, entitled “The Motor Boys Afloat,” details some of them. In their craft the *Dartaway*, they took quite a trip along the Atlantic coast, and also down in the everglades of Florida. Later they voyaged on the Pacific ocean, in search of a mysterious derelict.

But staying on the earth, or afloat on the water did not long content our heroes. Airships were coming more and more into prominence, and it was not long before our friends had a fine motorship called the *Comet*.

You will find this air-craft fully described in the ninth volume of the series, entitled “The Motor Boys in the Clouds,” so I will not take up space to tell of it here. Sufficient to say that it was a combination of a dirigible balloon and an aeroplane, and could sail for many miles without coming down. In it our friends had many adventures, nearly always accompanied by Professor Snodgrass, who was an enthusiastic collector of bugs, reptiles, and scientific specimens of various kinds, for a museum.

It was not always easy sailing for our heroes, for in their town of Cresville, not far from Boston, there lived a bully, Noddy Nixon by name, who with his crony, Bill Berry, made much trouble for them. But our friends generally got the best of Noddy in the end.

The motor boys made a long trip over the Rockies in their motorship, and helped to rescue a band of white persons who were held captives by a strange tribe of Indians. Later, Jerry and his chums, as told in the eleventh book of the series made a flight over the ocean, and succeeded in rescuing a Mr. Jackson, who with some friends and a crew were unconscious in a dirigible balloon that had become disabled at sea. Mr. Jackson, as told in the story “The Motor Boys Over the Ocean,” was being sought by Mr. Slade, to aid him in his department store business, which was on the verge

of failure. And Ned and his chums rescued Mr. Jackson just in time, not only to save his life, but to prevent the ruin of Mr. Slade's business.

The boys had been back from this trip over the ocean some time now, and, after a winter spent at their studies, they were, with the arrival of summer, ready for fresh adventures.

They had been out for a spin in their auto when the events narrated in the first chapter took place, and now we will resume their acquaintance in the hotel where they are just finishing dinner.

"Well, shall we go on?" asked Jerry, as he and his chums arose from the table.

"Oh, let's sit around a while and rest," proposed Bob. "It's bad for digestion to hustle around right after a meal."

"There's nothing the matter with *your* digestion," declared Jerry with a laugh. "But I guess it won't hurt us to sit around a bit. Who's got that paper about the aviation meet?"

"Here it is," replied Bob, passing it to his tall friend.

"I see you are interested in airships," remarked the hotel clerk, for the lads were talking in front of the desk where they had paid for their meal. "We have other guests here today who are what you call 'birdmen' I guess."

"What, some aviators here?" exclaimed Ned, and he and his two chums showed the interest they felt.

"Who are they?" demanded Jerry. "I didn't see any one in the dining room that I've ever met in a dirigible or aeroplane."

"Well, perhaps these fellows are amateurs, but they came sailing here all right in one of those air machines – I don't know enough about 'em to tell whether or not it's a dirigible balloon or a monoplane," said the clerk with a laugh. "But they're here."

"Who are they?" asked Jerry again.

"Those two dark-complexioned men standing over near the door," replied the clerk, nodding his head in that direction.

"What? Not Brown and Black?" exclaimed Ned.

"I think those are their names," went on the clerk, as he looked at the register. "We had quite a crowd here to-day – yes, it's Brown and Black all right, though I don't know which is which."

"Brown and Black," mused Jerry. "I never heard of their doing any great stunts in a dirigible balloon or aeroplane."

"No, they're only amateurs, they told me that when they arrived," went on the clerk. "They came out from Boston, and are going back soon. It's a trial flight for them."

"Where's their machine?" asked Bob eagerly.

"Yes, could we get a look at it?" put in Jerry.

"I don't know," spoke the clerk doubtfully. "They told me they didn't want to be bothered with a crowd, and they stored their machine in an enclosed lot back of the carriage sheds. There is a high fence all around it, and the gate is locked. But as long as you boys are air navigators yourselves I guess Mr. Brown and Mr. Black won't mind if I let you look at their machine. They are busy talking now, anyhow, so you can slip out and take a peep at it. Here's the key to the gate. Go out this back door, down the alley, and open the first gate you come to. Don't let any one else in."

The boys eagerly promised, and making sure that the two strange men were deep in a conversation, our friends slipped out of the hotel rear door, Jerry taking the key.

"Who'd ever think those fellows were birdmen?" asked Bob, as they went along.

"No one," agreed Ned. "There's something mysterious about them. Why are they so afraid of any one seeing their machine?"

"Give it up," answered Jerry. "We'll soon have a peep at it, and perhaps we can tell then. But I don't blame them for not wanting a lot of farmers crowding around when they're trying to land or make a flight. You know what trouble we've had at times."

"That's right," agreed Ned. "Well, there's the gate in the fence. Now for a look."

In the midst of a small enclosure they saw the air machine – a large-sized biplane of an up-to-date model. It took but a glance to disclose this, and with expressions of admiration the boys hurried up to it, to inspect it more carefully.

“Say, that’s a beaut all right!” declared Bob.

“Some class to it,” exclaimed Ned. “Look at that engine! Why it’s almost as powerful as the first one we had.”

“Yes, it’s a good machine – of its kind,” admitted Jerry. “Of course it isn’t like ours, but it’s got a lot of speed and power, I’ll wager. And look at that gasolene tank. Why they could go several hundred miles with one filling.”

“The *Silver Star*,” read Bob, as he saw the name of the aeroplane painted on one of the side planes, and on the vertical rudder. “Rather a classy name; eh?”

“It sure is a good machine,” went on Jerry, as he took in the various details. “I wonder if those fellows – Brown and Black – made it themselves, or who did? There are some points about it that are worth copying, if they aren’t patented.”

“Let’s ask ’em,” proposed Bob.

Jerry did not answer. He was looking at the double seat of the aeroplane – for it was built to carry two – and near one of the improvised chairs was a small box, evidently for tools.

The cover of the box was partly raised, and with pardonable curiosity Jerry tilted it all the way back. He was anxious to see all the details possible of the machine that had so interested him and his chums.

As he got a glimpse inside the tool box Jerry uttered a half-suppressed cry of astonishment.

“Look here, fellows!” he exclaimed. “See these queer tools? First time I ever knew an aeroplane operator to carry anything like them.”

“What are they?” asked Bob, peering over his chum’s shoulder.

“Why here’s a powerful drill, some lead hammers, another of copper, and a drill, to be attached to an electric light circuit. And here’s some sort of a fusing torch, to melt or fuse a hole through steel. What in the world can they want with these tools in an aeroplane?”

“Maybe they’re afraid of a break-down,” suggested Ned.

“What good would an electric drill or a fusing torch do even if they did get a break-down?” demanded Jerry. “No, there’s something queer here, and – ”

“Hi there! Get away from that machine!”

“Clear out, you fellows! What are you doing there?” interrupted two angry voices, and our heroes looked up to see the two men – Brown and Black – running towards them across the enclosed field.

CHAPTER III

A SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE

Startled, the boys moved back somewhat from the aeroplane, and waited, not without a little apprehension, the arrival of the two strange men. The strangers increased their speed, and came up on the run, their faces showing the evident anger they felt.

“What – what are you doing at our machine?” panted Black, the taller of the twain.

“Just looking at it,” replied Jerry calmly. “We haven’t done any damage. We’re aviators ourselves.”

“We’ve made lots of flights,” put in Ned.

“And we know enough not to monkey with another man’s apparatus,” added Bob. “We were only looking at it.”

“What right had you to come in here?” demanded Mr. Brown, in surly tones.

“Yes, who let you in?” added his companion.

“The hotel clerk,” answered Jerry, for the key of the gate in his hand was rather incriminating evidence. “He didn’t mean any harm, but we were very much interested when we heard that you had come in a biplane, and we wanted to see what type it was. We saw you were busy talking, so we didn’t bother you. We just came out here to have a look.”

“It was mighty fresh of you!” growled Mr. Black.

“Yes, and we’ll report that hotel clerk, too,” added Mr. Brown. “He had no business to give you the key.”

“Oh, it – it wasn’t altogether his fault,” said Bob, hoping that their friend at the desk would not be blamed.

“We know whose fault it was, all right,” snarled Mr. Black. “Now you fellows clear out of here. We arranged, when we put up at the hotel, that we shouldn’t be annoyed by snooping crowds, and now – ”

“We’re not a crowd,” remarked Ned with a smile.

“None of your back-talk!” exclaimed the shorter of the aeroplanists. “We know our own business best. Now make tracks out of here, quick – give me that key!” and he fairly snatched it from Jerry’s hand. The tall lad seemed about to say something, but he thought better of it, and held his tongue.

“Go on – move!” ordered Mr. Black, as the boys showed no inclination to walk away. “Get a hustle on you!”

By this time Mr. Black had caught sight of the opened tool box. A flash of rage seemed to pass over his face.

“Who opened that box?” he snarled.

“I did,” replied Jerry calmly.

“Did you – did you take anything out?” demanded the man, striding toward our hero.

“I did not,” was the quiet rejoinder.

“Did you dare unlock it?” demanded Mr. Brown.

“It was unlocked, and the cover was partly raised when we got here,” went on Jerry. “We wanted to see what kind of tools you carried, so I opened it. We meant no harm, and I trust we did none. We are sorry you take our harmless investigation in this spirit.”

“Are you sure the box was open?” persisted Mr. Black.

“It was,” declared Jerry, his face flushing at this implied doubt of his word.

“I – I guess I unlocked it, and forgot to close it,” put in Mr. Brown.

“Huh! Mighty careless of you – Jake – I mean James,” said Mr. Black, hastily correcting himself. “Now you fellows clear out,” he went on. “We’s going to make a flight, and we don’t want to be bothered.”

Silently Jerry and his chums left the enclosure. Mr. Black followed, and locked the gate after them. Our heroes returned to the hotel lobby.

“Say, they’re regular fire-eaters,” declared Ned.

“Yes, they get on their ears mighty quick,” said Jerry.

They found the hotel clerk quite disturbed.

“Say, did they make much of a fuss?” he asked anxiously. “They came for the key of the gate directly after you boys left, and I tried to put them off. But they wouldn’t have it, and then I told them some aeroplanists were out looking at their machine. Whew! They ran out as though the sheriff was after them. Did they raise much of a row?”

“Oh, not an awful lot,” said Ned, not wanting to make the good-natured clerk worry any more than was necessary. “I guess it’ll blow over.”

“I hope so,” murmured the hotel man.

The queer aviators did not seem disposed to make any further trouble, for presently a stable man appeared with the gate key, saying that the two men were about to leave in their airship.

“They hadn’t time to come in an’ bring the key,” he explained. “I’m goin’ out an’ see ’em fly.”

The news soon spread around through the hotel that an airship was going up, and a crowd rushed out to see the start. The high fence of the enclosure prevented the ground-maneuvers from being viewed, but presently there was a clatter as the motor started, and soon a bird-like shape arose above the fence.

“There they go!” cried the throng, and our heroes and the others saw the two men seated in their machine mounting rapidly upward.

“I hope we’ve seen the last of ’em – they’re so unpleasant,” remarked Jerry. But he and his chums were destined to meet the two strange men again, and under queer circumstances.

Discussing their encounter with Messrs. Brown and Black, talking of the aeroplane *Silver Star*, and planning what they would do when they took their own motorship *Comet* to the coming aviation meet, Jerry and his chums were soon speeding back toward Cresville in their auto.

“Maybe we’ll see Brown and Black at the Colton doings, fellows,” suggested Bob. “They seemed to be on the alert as soon as we mentioned Harmolet.”

“Well, they may be there,” agreed Jerry. “They certainly have a good machine of its class, though I believe ours would beat it in a race.”

“I’m sure of it,” declared Ned, who took great pride in the *Comet*. “But I can’t get over the queer tools those fellows carried.”

“Me neither,” went on Jerry. “It looked to be a lot of useless weight.”

This gave a new turn to the conversation, and one thing led to another, so that almost before our friends realized it they were near Cresville.

As they approached a turn in the road, they heard behind them frantic tooting of an auto horn, and the loud throbbing of a cut-out muffler.

“Some one’s in a hurry,” observed Jerry, steering over to one side.

“Maybe it’s a doctor on an emergency case,” suggested Bob.

“Doctor nothing!” retorted Ned, after a look to the rear. “It’s Noddy Nixon, and he’s coming on at a terrific clip. Look out Jerry! He’ll do something spiteful just for fun. Keep over.”

“I’m over as far as I dare go,” replied the tall lad. “I don’t want to slide into the ditch,” for the road at this point was bordered by deep marshy gutters on either side. It had rained that morning, and the hollows of the road were filled with muddy water.

On came Noddy, his horn wildly tooting, and his cut-out muffler thundering like a battery of small guns. His machine was increasing its speed every moment.

“He’d better look out on the turn,” said Jerry to his chums, as he slowed up.

With a whizz and a roar the machine of the bully passed the one containing our heroes. This was at a point on the road where there was a big puddle. Into it splashed the big-tired wheels of Noddy’s car, and instantly a shower of dirty water was sprayed all over our friends, drenching them, and soiling their trim car.

“Wow!” yelled Noddy in derision as he passed. “Wow! Look out for me! I’m a terror!”

“You’re a sneaking coward! That’s what you are!” shouted Ned, wiping the muddy drops from his face.

“By Jinks! Look at my clothes!” wailed Bob.

“The sneak!” burst out Jerry. “I’ll fix him for that!”

“Take after him!” urged Ned. “We can beat his car all to pieces! Overtake him, and we’ll haul him out and rub his nose in the mud! The cad!”

“I’ll catch him all right!” declared Jerry grimly. “We’ll get even with him for this, all right.”

It was the work of but an instant to turn on more power, and the speedy car of our motor boys shot ahead down the road after the fast-disappearing vehicle of the bully.

“There! He made the turn!” cried Ned.

“And on two wheels,” murmured Jerry. “He’s taking chances.”

On thundered the pursuing auto. Jerry slowed up at the turn, but even then he took it at such speed that the machine skidded unpleasantly.

Once more they swung out into a straight stretch, and as they did so there came a simultaneous cry of surprise from the three boys.

For there before them, off to one side, and stuck deep in the muddy road-side ditch, was the car of Noddy Nixon. But the bully was not in it, nor was he in sight. He had suddenly disappeared.

CHAPTER IV

NODDY NIXON'S PLIGHT

“What can have happened to him?” asked Ned.

“That’s his auto; isn’t it?” demanded Bob.

“Surely,” answered Jerry. “No mistaking that; but Noddy isn’t in it – that is unless he was knocked unconscious and has slipped under the seat.”

“Let’s look,” proposed Ned. Jerry had brought their own car to a stop, and as the three lads alighted, peering anxiously toward the stalled machine for a sight of the bully, they were startled by hearing a groan of distress.

“What’s that?” cried Bob.

“It sounded like – him!” declared Jerry.

“Oh – Oh fellows – help me – Oh I’m – I’m stuck!” exclaimed a woe-begone voice.

Simultaneously our friends turned their gaze in the direction of the cry. It came from a slimy black pool of mud and water, off to the left of the Nixon car, which was in the slough over the hubs. The sight that met the gaze of Jerry and his chums was enough to excite their pity, even though the victim was their worst enemy.

Noddy Nixon was standing in the mud puddle which came considerably over his waist, and from the condition of his face, it was evident that he had been flung in head first, and had, after a struggle righted himself. He was covered, streaked, spotted and speckled with the black, slimy mud. It dripped from his shoulders, dripped from his extended hands, and even oozed from his chin in a slimy stream.

For a moment our heroes gazed at him without speaking, then Jerry uttered an expression combining surprise, dismay and pity.

“Well, what do you think of that?”

“He certainly is all in,” was Ned’s opinion.

“Good and proper,” murmured Bob.

Probably the hardest thing Noddy Nixon ever had to do was to appeal for help to the three boys whom he had, many times in the past, used so meanly. Yet there was no way out of it.

“Oh – oh, fellows,” he faltered. “See if you can’t help me out of here. I – I’m stuck.”

“How’d you get there?” asked Jerry for want of something better to inquire about.

“I – I stopped my car too suddenly,” replied the bully trying to wipe some of the mud from his face with a still muddier hand. “It skidded, and I put on the brakes hard, and I was flung out.”

“You didn’t pick out a very good place to land in,” grimly remarked Bob.

“Guess he didn’t have time,” suggested Ned.

“Oh, aren’t you going to help me out?” begged Noddy.

“Do you mean help you out, or your car?” asked Jerry. “Why can’t you wade over to solid ground? Then we’ll help you pull out your car. That’s stuck pretty bad too.”

“No, I – I can’t wade out,” replied Noddy helplessly. “I’m in a sort of muck, or quicksand. Everytime I try to take a step I go in deeper. I need a board or a fence rail, or – or something to help me. Oh, please, fellows – I know I’ve been mean to you – but forgive me and help me out!”

“It’s about time you got wise to the fact that you did us some mean turns,” spoke Ned. “How about splashing mud on us a little while ago?”

“I’m sorry I did that.”

“Yes, you are now, but the next time you get the chance you’d do the same thing,” declared Jerry.

“No, honest I won’t!” promised Noddy, and he was in earnest – at least for the time being.

“Well, you don’t deserve to have us help you out, but we can’t see you in this plight without doing something,” went on Jerry. “Try once more to pull yourself out. I don’t fancy getting all covered with mud.”

Noddy tried, but it was of no use. The more he struggled to free himself, the deeper he sank, and he was evidently very much alarmed – so much so that he began to blubber.

“Oh, now, stop bellowing, and we’ll help you,” cried Ned, much disgusted by the cowardice of the bully. “Come on, fellows, get some fence rails, and we’ll see what we can do.”

The rails were brought, and extended to Noddy in a sort of criss-cross platform to support him. In placing them our friends got in the mud over their shoes, but there was no help for it. Presently Noddy was able to bear part of his weight on the rails, and then, by a vigorous effort, he managed to pull his legs loose from the grip of the sticky mud. He crawled out on the firm ground, a worse looking sight than Jerry and his chums had seen for many a day.

“Look at me!” gasped Noddy in dismay, as he glanced down at his legs. “Look at me – Oh! – Oh! It’s – it’s – awful!”

“Better look for a clean puddle of water and roll in it,” advised Ned, trying not to smile.

“If you had a lot of newspapers you could wipe some of it off,” added Bob.

“Or some rags from your auto,” put in Jerry. This mention of the car recalled to Noddy the plight of his machine. He looked over to where it was firmly imbedded in the slough, and said:

“Will you help me get it out, fellows?”

“It’s in pretty deep,” observed Jerry, going closer and taking a critical observation.

“We’ll have to get some wide boards and put them under the wheels,” was Ned’s opinion.

“Maybe we could pull it out with our car, if we had a long rope,” suggested Bob.

“That’s the very thing!” exclaimed Jerry. “I guess we can pull it out, Noddy – but next time, don’t go so fast – especially around a curve.”

“I’ll not,” promised the miserable bully.

“And don’t steer out of your way to splash mud on people from whom you may want help afterward,” suggested Ned significantly.

“I – I won’t,” declared Noddy. “Oh, fellows if you’ll only pull my car out for me I’ll pay you well. My father said if I had any more accidents I couldn’t run it again this summer. I’ll do anything you say if you’ll pull it out.”

“We don’t want any of your money,” half growled Jerry. “There’s one thing about it though, you’ve got to wade in there yourself to attach the rope; that is if we can get one.”

“I’ve got a long rope in the car!” exclaimed Noddy eagerly. “I always carry one, for I was stuck in the sand once. I’ll go in and get it, and fasten it to my car. Then I’ll bring the end out here, and you can attach it to your machine.”

“Yes, I guess you’d better do the wading,” said Ned, for to get to Noddy’s stalled car it would be necessary for some one to go in the muck up to his knees, and none of our heroes relished this. “You can’t be much muddier than you are Noddy,” finished the merchant’s son.

“I’ll do it,” promised the bully eagerly, and having gotten rid of some of the muck on his face and hands he stepped into the miniature swamp, and was soon attaching the rope to the rear of his car. Then he brought the free end out to firm ground where Jerry received it. Then, having turned his auto around, the tall lad made the cable fast to the rear of his machine.

“Come on now, fellows, get in our car to hold it down when the strain comes,” suggested Bob to his chums.

“All ready?” asked Ned of Noddy, a little later.

“Yes,” was the faltering answer.

Jerry threw in the gear, and let the clutch slip into place. The car of our heroes went forward a little way, and then began the strain on the rope. The strands straightened out, there was a creaking sound, but Noddy’s auto did not budge.

“Try more power, Jerry,” suggested Ned.

The tall lad turned on all the gasolene he dared. The rear wheels of his auto spun uselessly around in the wet dirt of the highway.

“Wow! Stop!” cried Bob. “You’ll rip off our tires.”

“I guess we can’t stir you, Noddy,” called Jerry, as he shut off the power.

“Oh, try! Try once more!” begged the bully.

Jerry did not relish his task much, but he did try. Once more the rope became taut. There was a great strain on it. Once more the wheels of the pulling auto spun around. Still Jerry kept the power on.

Noddy’s car quivered in the mud that held it fast. It moved not an inch, however.

“Go on! Go on!” yelled the bully encouragingly.

“You’ll ruin our tires!” cried Ned.

Jerry, with a grim look on his face turned on the least bit more gasolene. Then, with a crack like that of a revolver the rope snapped, and one end of it flew dangerously close over the heads of our heroes in their car. For when a rope on which there is a great strain breaks suddenly, it is a dangerous missile.

“Look out!” yelled Ned, as he saw the end of the cable hurling toward himself and his chums. They ducked just in time. The other end flopped down in the mud behind Noddy’s car.

The bully looked disconsolate.

“Have to try it again, I guess,” he suggested.

“Not much!” declared Jerry decisively.

“Wha – what?” gasped Noddy.

“No more tries for us,” went on the tall lad. “You’ve stuck too fast for us to pull you out, Noddy. What you need is some pulleys and a derrick. We can’t risk breaking our car, and ripping off the tires. You’ll have to stay there until you can get some one else to pull you out.”

Jerry detached the broken rope from his car, and got in again.

“You – you aren’t going away and leave me; are you?” faltered Noddy.

“You guessed it,” declared Bob.

“Oh, please pull me out!” pleaded the bully.

“We can’t,” spoke Jerry, not unkindly. “It’s impossible, Noddy. That mud has too firm a hold on your wheels. The best we can do is to stop at the nearest garage and tell them about you.”

The bully begged and pleaded by turns, and offered the boys a large sum of money; but though our heroes would have helped him, in spite of his former meanness, it was out of the question. They could not afford to damage their own car, and risk getting hurt by a breaking rope.

“Sorry to leave you, but we must,” called Jerry, as he sent the auto slowly ahead. They turned toward Cresville, leaving Noddy standing on the brink of the muck-hole, gazing disconsolately at his stalled auto, while the mud and water dripped from him at several points, and formed little puddles at his feet.

CHAPTER V

A SIGHT OF THE BIPLANE

“Say, things haven’t done a thing but happen to us today,” remarked Bob, when they were nearing the broad, smooth highway that led directly into Cresville.

“That’s right,” agreed Ned. “Meeting those two queer men, having them nearly take our heads off because we looked at their aeroplane, and then this mix-up with Noddy.”

“Noddy got *his* all right,” observed Jerry grimly. “I don’t believe, even if we’d caught him, and given him a well-deserved licking, that he’d be any worse off.”

“It was retributive justice with a vengeance,” was Ned’s further opinion. “But, speaking of queer happenings, what do you make of Brown and Black?”

“Can’t make much of them,” spoke Bob.

“I’d like to know what those tools were,” came from Jerry. “They were the queerest combination I ever saw on an aeroplane. We carry a lot on our *Comet*; but nothing like those, and we’ve got twice as much complicated machinery as those fellows have.”

“Sure,” agreed Ned. “Well, we’ll soon be out in the motorship again if we conclude to go to the aviation meet; and maybe they’ll have some new tools on exhibition there.”

“We’ll certainly go,” agreed Jerry. “Automobiling is all right if you’ve never sailed in the air, but once you have skimmed along above the clouds – ”

“You want to keep at it,” finished Bob. “But say, we mustn’t forget to stop, and send help out to Noddy. He’s human, even if he has done us many a mean turn.”

“That’s so. We’ll stop at Mason’s garage and tell them,” suggested Jerry. “I think – ”

But what he was thinking about he never mentioned, for at that moment he and his chums were aware of a curious throbbing and humming sound in the air, far above their heads. With one accord they gazed upward, and the sight they saw caused Jerry suddenly to shut off the power, and bring the auto to a stop.

“An aeroplane!” exclaimed Ned.

“A biplane,” supplied Bob.

“And going fast, too!” added Jerry. “Say, but they’re eating up the air-space all right!”

“I wonder if that can be Mr. Jackson?” ventured Ned.

“He’s far enough from here,” declared Jerry, referring to the millionaire whom they had so thrillingly rescued from his disabled dirigible balloon over the ocean.

“Whoever it is, he knows how to handle the craft all right,” declared Ned. “Look at that spiral dip he’s making.”

As he spoke the air machine came down a little way in a corkscrew curve.

“Wait!” exclaimed Jerry impetuously as he reached back in the tonneau and took from a pocket in the side a pair of powerful field glasses. “We’ll see what these show,” he went on, as he focused them on the distant aeroplane.

No sooner had he gotten the aircraft in his range of vision than he uttered a startled cry.

“What’s the matter?” demanded Ned.

“Some one you know?” asked Bob.

“I don’t know that we have the honor of their acquaintance,” spoke Jerry slowly, “but if that machine isn’t the *Silver Star* I’ll buy you fellows ice cream sodas – that’s all! Here, Ned, have a look.”

Jerry passed his chum the glasses, and no sooner had the merchant’s son gotten a good view than he exclaimed:

“You’re right! It’s Brown and Black sure enough.”

“You don’t mean to say you can make out faces at that distance,” exclaimed Bob incredulously. “Let me have a peep.”

“I can’t see their faces,” declared Ned, “but I’m sure it’s them, for it’s their machine, and they’re so touchy that they wouldn’t let any one else run it. It’s them sure.”

“I believe you,” commented Jerry. “Those are the two mysterious men we met at the hotel.”

“I wonder where they’re going?” mused Bob, as he took another look. “They’re flying high for amateurs.”

“They’ll reach Harmolet if they keep on in that direction long enough,” declared Ned. “It may be that they’re going to the meet at Colton.”

“It’s too soon for that,” was Jerry’s opinion. “But it certainly is odd that we should see those fellows again. Let me have another look, Bob.”

It was difficult now, even with the powerful glasses, to discern the aeroplane, for it was almost hidden in the haze of the upper regions. In a few seconds more it had entirely disappeared, and Jerry putting up the field glasses, started the auto.

The boys discussed the curious sight, speculating on the destination of Brown and Black, and then branched off on matters connected with their own motorship. By this time they had reached Cresville, and stopped at a garage, the owner of which promised to send out a powerful car, with ropes and pulleys, to haul Noddy from the ditch.

“Well, that’s over,” remarked Jerry, as they turned toward the home of the tall lad, where the auto was kept. “We’ve had plenty of excitement.”

“Enough for one day,” added Ned.

“But it isn’t over yet,” said Bob quickly.

“Why not?” demanded his chums together.

“There comes Andy Rush, and he acts as though he had something to tell us,” went on the stout lad.

Standing on the sidewalk, just ahead of them, and waving his arms about like those of a miniature windmill, was a small lad, bearing every evidence of great nervousness. He was jumping up and down, now running forward a few steps, and then coming to a halt.

As soon as the motor boys were within hailing distance he called to them:

“I say – stop – wait a minute – great excitement – maybe somebody killed – mine blown up perhaps – all the gold gone – maybe someone wants to buy your motorship – special message – don’t know what’s in it – fortune for you – maybe – here is it – saw you coming – ran out to stop you – I have it – open it quick – whoop! up in the air – down again – start over – here you are!” and with that Andy Rush, for it was indeed he, passed over to Jerry a yellow envelope – a telegram.

“Are you sure that’s all, Andy?” asked the tall lad gravely.

“Sure – that’s all – agent just gave it to me – I was at the station when it came in – messenger boys all out – I said I’d take it to you – he gave me a dime – bought an ice cream soda – maybe it’s bad news – I don’t know – whoop!”

Andy was wiggling about like an uneasy snake, and he only had one foot on the ground at a time. Jerry looked at the telegram, saw that it was addressed to himself, and tore it open.

“Are you sure you’ve got all that out of your system?” inquired Ned of Andy.

“All of what?” asked the small, excited boy.

“All that talk. Because if you keep any in you might explode,” went on the merchant’s son.

“Better get another ice cream soda and cool off,” advised Bob, handing Andy a dime.

“I will – thanks – no bad news I hope – mine all safe – motorship not busted – I’ll cool down soon – go to the store – drug store – half a dozen flavors – I always take vanilla – lots of ice cream – here I go – whoop!” and down the street Andy started on the run.

“Thank goodness he’s gone,” murmured Ned with a sigh of relief. “He gets on my nerves. But what’s the news, Jerry?”

“Professor Snodgrass will arrive to-morrow,” replied the tall lad folding up the message. “He’s on the track of some new kind of bug or beast I suppose. He wants us to meet him at the station.”

“Good!” cried Bob. “Now we’ll have some more fun, and go off after a mosquito that plays the piano, or something like that, I suppose. Three cheers for Professor Snodgrass!”

“Say, you’re getting almost as bad as Andy Rush,” commented Jerry, as he once more started the machine, and steered it into the driveway of his home.

CHAPTER VI

“HOLD THE TRAIN!”

“What time will the professor get here?” asked Ned, as he and Bob sat on the broad porch of Mrs. Hopkins’s house.

“On the afternoon train, he says,” replied Jerry.

“And what sort of a bug is he after now?” demanded Bob.

“He doesn’t say. Not that it makes much difference. All is grist that comes to his mill, and if he can’t get an ant with pink legs, he’ll take a June bug with purple wings. But be on hand to meet him, fellows, and we’ll go down to the station together to-morrow afternoon.”

“Say, if he doesn’t get in until then we’ll have time in the morning to make a flight in the *Comet*,” suggested Bob.

“That’s right. Then we can see what we have to do, to get it in shape for the Colton meet,” added Ned.

“I’m with you,” declared the tall lad. “Let’s go on out now and have a look at it. And say – you fellows stay to supper at my house, and we’ll go all over the *Comet* this evening.”

“Good idea,” commented Bob, with a sigh of satisfaction. He knew of old the skill of the Hopkins cook.

“Very good – especially the supper part; eh, Chunky?” put in Ned with a laugh. “I’ll telephone home, and tell mother that I’m going to stay.”

Bob did the same thing, and after the meal, which Bob declared was the best he ever ate (though he was always saying that) the boys went out to the aeroplane shed which was in a large field, owned by Mrs. Hopkins, and some distance from her house.

“Now Jerry, be careful,” the widow cautioned them as they left. “You remember once you had trouble at the shed, when Noddy Nixon bound Sud Snuffles, the watchman, and took the aeroplane away. Look out for bad characters there. I wish it was nearer the house – especially when night comes on.”

“Oh, there’ll be no danger from Noddy Nixon to-night mother,” declared Jerry with a laugh. “Noddy is stuck in the mud too fast to get out in a hurry,” and he told of the bully’s plight. “But we’ll be on the lookout. We don’t keep Sud on guard any more.” For following his unscrupulous theft of the motorship, the bully had been more careful how he interfered with the property of our heroes, and there was no necessity of a watchman at the shed.

The boys spent some time going over the motorship. They had not used it in the past two weeks, on account of bad weather; but they found it in good shape, and, after a few adjustments and a tightening of the guy wires, it was ready for service.

“We’ll take a flight in the morning,” decided Jerry, as he and his chums left the shed, making sure that the doors were securely fastened.

“And maybe we’ll meet that other aeroplane – the *Silver Star*,” suggested Ned.

“Not much likelihood of that,” declared Bob. “Those fellows are up to some game, I think.”

“What game?” demanded Jerry quickly.

“Oh, I don’t know,” was the somewhat uncertain reply of the stout lad, “only I have my suspicions of them.”

“So have I,” admitted Ned, “only I don’t know what I’m suspicious of.”

“Well, I’m going to get to bed,” announced the tall lad with a yawn. “Be on hand early fellows, and we’ll go off on a little flight.”

Jerry and Ned were on hand in good time at the aeroplane shed the next morning. They wheeled the craft out into the broad, level starting place, and proceeded to tighten the few wires they had overlooked the night before.

As has been told in previous books of this series, the *Comet* was a combined dirigible balloon and aeroplane. By means of a powerful gas, forced into a container above the aeroplane proper, it could ascend as a balloon, or it could scud along over the ground on bicycle wheels and, when sufficient momentum had been obtained it could rise by means of the tilted forward lifting planes, and maintain itself as long as it was in motion.

“What’s the matter with Bob, I wonder?” remarked Jerry as he went in the engine room, to look at the motor.

“Oh, probably he’s eating his second breakfast,” replied Ned, who was inspecting the gas machine.

“She isn’t making vapor very fast,” spoke Jerry, as he looked at the dial of the containing tank, and noted how much of the lifting gas was in storage.

“No, it needs a new valve,” decided Ned. “But we can go up as an aeroplane, and by the time we get up a mile or two there’ll be gas enough.”

The *Comet* was a roomy craft. There was a good-sized dining room, plenty of sleeping apartments, a storeroom, a large motor compartment, a neat little galley or kitchen, where Bob spent much of his time, and a living room, where they all gathered during the day to read, talk or make observations as they scudded through space, high above the earth.

“I wish Bob would come, if he’s going to get here,” went on Jerry. “He is always more or less late. We won’t have time to get anywhere before we have to be back again to meet the professor.”

“There he comes now,” exclaimed Ned, as he caught sight of a stocky figure hurrying across the field. “And by Jove, if he isn’t swallowing the last of his breakfast on the run! He must have overslept.”

“What’s the matter, Chunky?” asked Jerry, as his chum approached, panting from his unusual speed.

“One of our rabbits got loose – had to chase it – might eat up the neighbors’ fruit trees – never saw such a rabbit – thought I had it in the cage half a dozen times – but it got out – that’s what made me late.”

“But you stopped to get your breakfast,” observed Ned, as he saw traces of egg on Bob’s fat good-natured face.

“Sure I did! What do you think I am? Going off on a flight without something to eat! I had a good breakfast, and I brought along a package of grub – I was afraid you fellows would forget it.”

“Oh, Chunky!” cried Jerry with a hopeless laugh. “Will you ever get over your appetite?”

“I certainly hope not,” declared Bob earnestly.

He stowed away in a locker the food he had brought, and then helped his chums in getting the *Comet* ready for a flight. This was soon done. The sharp nose of the craft was pointed down the long smooth starting slope, and the motor started. The big propellers whirred around like the blades of an electric fan, and the motorship quivered from end to end. The engine increased its speed under the skilful handling of Jerry Hopkins, and then, with a rush, the trim air machine glided forward.

Faster and faster it forged ahead, the motor thundering with its rapid explosions. Just as Jerry was about to tilt the lifting planes, there came a faint hail from back near the shed.

“Hold on – wait – give me a ride – I’ve got some news!”

“It’s Andy Rush!” exclaimed Ned.

“We can’t stop now!” shouted Jerry. “Here we go!”

He yanked the plane lever toward him. Up went the nose of the *Comet*, and the next instant she was sailing gracefully through the air, mounting higher and higher.

“Works better than ever,” was Bob’s opinion.

“Yes, I wish we had time to go to the lake, and try the hydroplanes,” said Jerry, “but we haven’t. I rather like landing on the water and starting from the surface. It’s smoother than a land start.”

The hydroplanes, as I related in a previous volume, were a new feature of the *Comet*, and worked well.

It was no novelty to our heroes to sail about through the air, and as soon as they were up sufficiently high they settled back to enjoy themselves. The gas machine had by this time generated enough vapor, so that they could float lazily along if they wished, or even hang in space without moving, save as the wind blew them.

“Let’s look around and see if we can sight the *Silver Star*,” proposed Ned, as he took down from the rack a small but powerful telescope.

“Oh, you’ll have your trouble for your pains,” declared Jerry, and so it proved. The strange biplane containing the two mysterious men was not in sight. In fact no other air craft was visible, and, after sailing around for several hours, and having their lunch about three miles above the earth, our heroes descended, and stored their craft in the shed once more.

“Wonder what Andy wanted?” mused Jerry.

“We’ll soon know,” said Bob. “Here he comes now.” The excitable lad was observed hurrying toward the three chums.

“Why didn’t you wait?” he demanded. “I had something to tell you – great news – he’ll smash all to pieces – whoop! up in the air – down again – race you motor boys – whoop!”

“He? Who are you talking about?” demanded Ned.

“Noddy Nixon. He’s going to get an aeroplane and race you fellows – big excitement – going to some balloon meet – whoop!” and Andy hopped up and down on one foot.

“Hump! Noddy must be up to some more of his tricks!” exclaimed Jerry. “Well, if he bothers us as he did once before he’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“I shouldn’t think he’d want to risk any more air flights,” ventured Ned, “especially when he can hardly run his auto.”

“Well, we’ll see what happens,” went on the tall chum. “Whew!” he whistled as he looked at his watch. “We haven’t more than time to get down to the station before the professor’s train will be in. We don’t want to disappoint him. Sprint for it, fellows, and we’ll get to my house and go down in the auto. Come along Andy, if you like.”

“Sure I’ll go – anything for excitement – I can run – let me steer – blow up a tire – whoop!” and the excitable lad was off on a run with the older boys.

They reached the station a little before the train pulled in, and waited on the platform while a crowd of passengers alighted. Among them was a little man, rather slight in build, wearing a pair of very strong glasses. He had on a broad-brimmed soft hat, and around his shoulders and hanging down his back were a number of insect specimen boxes, held by straps or cords, while in one hand he carried a large butterfly net.

“There’s Professor Snodgrass!” exclaimed Jerry. “Now to hear what new quest he is on.”

“He looks the same as when he caught the flying-singing fish,” remarked Ned.

“He never changes – he’s like a mummy,” declared Bob.

The little scientist caught sight of his three young friends, and gaily waved his hand, smiling a greeting. He advanced to meet them, passing close to the panting locomotive. As he did so there came two shrill blasts of the air whistle, indicating to the engineer that he was ready to start.

At that instant Professor Snodgrass happened to glance beneath the big driving wheels. In a moment he was all excitement. His face lighted up, off came his big hat, and, rapidly divesting himself of his many boxes he dropped on his knees close beside the rails.

“What’s the matter?” cried Jerry.

“He’ll be killed!” yelled Bob.

“Look out!” shouted Ned.

“The man has been taken with a fit! Pull him away from the engine!” begged the station master.

The professor heeded none of the cries. Raising himself slightly, he waved his hand to the engineer who, after pulling the throttle partly open, was leaning from the cab window. The ponderous locomotive was moving slowly.

“Stop the train! Stop it!” commanded the scientist. “Stop it or you’ll kill him! Stop it I say!” and he fairly shook his fist at the astonished engineer.

CHAPTER VII

A CURIOUS RACE

“What’s the matter?”

“Is anybody killed?”

“Oh, there’s some one under the locomotive! A child!”

“I’m going to faint! I know I’m going to faint!” exclaimed a very fat lady, making her voice heard above the others who had given utterance to the excited expressions. “Catch me, some one!”

But as no one seemed capable of sustaining her weight, the fat lady concluded not to faint. Meanwhile there was considerable excitement, for the professor continued to kneel beside the locomotive, making signals to the engineer to bring the ponderous machine to a stop.

And the engineer did. With a face that went white under its coating of oil and grime he slapped on the air brakes with a suddenness that brought the train up with a smashing bang. Then, as the released air hissed through the valves, the driver leaned from the cab window and hoarsely asked:

“How’d he get under there? I didn’t see him. Did I run over him?”

“Not quite, but almost!” exclaimed Professor Snodgrass, as he reached under the great driving wheels and lifted something out. “It was a narrow escape. If you had run over this bug you would have killed it sure, and it’s worth at least seven dollars for my collection.”

“Bug!” fairly yelled the engineer. “Do you mean to say you made all that fuss, and stopped the train on account of a bug?”

“Certainly,” replied the scientist coolly. “It is a very rare specimen of a red beetle, seldom seen in this part of the country. I saw it on the track just as you were about to run over it. Fortunately I stopped you in time,” and he carefully put the beetle in one of his specimen boxes, and looked around for the boys.

“Stopped me in time! I should say you did!” gasped the now angry engineer. “I slapped on the emergency air when I heard you yelling that way. I thought it was a kid under the machine. And all for a bug – a bug! I guess that ain’t the *only* bug around here, either,” and he looked significantly at the professor who, however, was calmly unconscious of the glance. “Can I start now?” sarcastically enquired the engineer, “or is there more live stock under my driving wheels? Hey?”

“No more – unfortunately,” replied the professor, with great good nature, after a glance under the locomotive, to make certain. “I wish there was, but I will have to be content with this one. Now boys, I’m glad to see you,” and he turned to greet the three chums, who up to this time had been too surprised at the sudden and odd turn of events to speak to their friend.

“We’re glad to see you!” exclaimed Jerry, holding out his hand.

“And I you!” cried the scientist. “I always have good luck when I’m with you boys, and it has started early this time.”

“So we see,” observed Ned.

“You haven’t changed any since our last trip,” remarked Bob. “You’re still after specimens.”

“And I will be, as long as I can see, and handle my butterfly net,” declared Mr. Snodgrass. “Ah, there is our little excitable friend, Andy Rush. Glad to see you, Andy.”

“How are you Mr. Snodgrass? My – a bug on the rail – almost run over – great excitement – woman nearly fainted – slam on the breaks – blow up the boiler – hold down the safety valve – sand the tracks – get the bug – whoop!”

“Yes – er – ah – um!” murmured the professor, looking over the top of his spectacles at Andy. “You haven’t changed either.”

“We’ve got the auto all ready for you,” explained Jerry, as he led the way to the waiting car. “You came in good season, Professor Snodgrass, as we’re about to start off on another little air-trip.”

“Not over the ocean I hope this time,” exclaimed the scientist, “for the specimen I am now after is not to be found at sea. So if you’re going over the water I’m afraid I can’t be with you.”

“What are you after this trip?” asked Ned.

“A green flying frog,” explained the professor gravely. “The museum by which I am employed needs one of these rare specimens, and I have engaged to spend my entire vacation looking for it. They are only to be found inland, however, and, so far as is known, such frogs only exist in Java. But I have made a study of the creature, and I see no reason why it should not be discovered in this country, especially farther west, in some of the great forests.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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