

eBook

Boy Scouts on Motorcycles

For the online version of BookRags' Boy Scouts on Motorcycles eBook, including complete copyright information, please visit:

<http://www.bookrags.com/ebooks/11469/>

Copyright Information

© 2000-2014 BookRags, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Boy Scouts on Motorcycles

With The Flying Squadron

By G. Harvey Ralphson

CHAPTER I

BOY SCOUTS IN A STRANGE LAND

"Fine country, this---to get out of!"

"What's the difficulty, kid?"

Jimmie McGraw, the first speaker, turned back to the interior of the apartment in which he stood with a look of intense disgust on freckled face.

"Oh, nothin' much," he replied, wrinkling his nose comically, "only Broadway an' the Bowery are too far away from this town to ever amount to anythin'. Say, how would you fellers like a chair in front of the grate in the little old Black Bear Patrol clubroom, in the village of N. Y.? What?"

The three boys lying, half covered with empty burlap bags, on the bare earth at the back of the apartment chuckled softly as Jimmie's face brightened at the small picture he drew verbally, of the luxurious Boy Scout clubroom in the City of New York.

"New York is a barren island as compared with this place," one of the boys, Jack Bosworth by name, declared. "Just think of the odor of the Orient all around us!"

Jimmie wrinkled his nose in disdain and turned back to the window out of which he had been looking. The other boys, Ned Nestor, of the Wolf Patrol, and Jack Bosworth and Frank Shaw, of the Black Bear Patrol, all of New York, pulled their coarse covering closer under their chins and grinned at the impatient Jimmie, who was of the Wolf Patrol, and who was just then on guard.

It wasn't much of a window that the boy looked out of, just an irregular hole in a bare wall, innocent alike of sash and glass. Away to the east rolled the restless waters of the Gulf of Pechili, which is little more than a round bay swinging west from the mystical Yellow Sea.

To the south ran the swift current of the Peiho river, on the opposite bank of which lay the twin of Taku, Chinese town where Jimmie stood guard. Tungku, as the twin village is named, looked every bit as forlorn and disreputable as Taku, where the boys had waited four days for important information which had been promised by the Secret Service department at Washington.

The gulf of Pechili and the Peiho river glistened under the October sun, which seemed to bring little warmth to the atmosphere. Junks of all sizes and kinds were moving slowly through the waves, and farther out larger vessels lay at anchor, as if holding surveillance over the mouth of the stream which led to Tientsin, that famous city of the great Chinese nation.

"Look at it! Just look at it!"

Jimmie pointed out of the opening, his hand swinging about to include the river and the gulf, the slowly moving boats and the picturesque streets.

"'Tis a heathen land!" the boy went on. "They wear their shirts outside of their trousers an' do their trucking on their shoulders. Say, Ned," he added, "why can't we cut it out? I'm sick of it!"

"Cut it out?" laughed Jack Bosworth, "why, kid, we've just got to the land of promise!"

"Most all promise!" replied Jimmie. "We've got nothin' but promises since we've been here. Where's that Secret Service feller that was goin' to set the pace for us?"

"Perhaps he's lost in the jungle," laughed Frank Shaw. "He certainly ought to have been here three days ago. What about it, Gulf of Pechili and the Peiho river Ned?" he added, turning to a youth who lay at his side, almost shivering in spite of his shaggy burlap covering.

Ned Nestor yawned and threw aside his alleged protection from the growing chill of the October day. The boys, fresh from a submarine in which they had searched an ocean floor for important documents as well as millions of dollars in gold, had arrived at Taku five days before this autumn afternoon.

After concluding the mission on the submarine, Ned had been invited to undertake a difficult errand to Peking, in the interest of the United States Secret Service. Even after landing at Taku, he had confessed to his chums his utter ignorance of the work he was to do.

He had been requested by the Secret Service man who had engaged him for the duty to wait for instructions at the old house on the water front which, in company with Frank, Jack, and Jimmie, he now occupied. The house was old and dilapidated, seemingly having been unoccupied for years, so the lads were really "camping out" there.

Their provisions were brought to them regularly by a Chinaman who did not seem to understand a word of English, and, as the boys knowledge of the Chinese tongue was exceedingly limited, no information had been gained from him. The Secret Service man had not appeared, and Ned was becoming uneasy, especially as the curiosity of his neighbors was becoming annoying.

"I guess this is a stall," Jimmie grumbled, as Ned arose and stood at his side. "You know how the Moores, father an' son, tried to get us on the submarine? Well, I'll bet they've got loose, an' that we're bein' kept here until they can do us up proper without attractin' the attention of the European population."

Ned laughed at the boy's fears. He had no doubt that the man who had promised to meet him there had been delayed in some unaccountable manner, and that the information he was awaiting would be supplied before another day had passed.

"Anyway," Jimmie insisted, "I don't like the looks of things hereabouts! There's always some pigtailed Chink watchin' this house from the street. I woke up last night an' saw a snaky-eyed Celestial peering in at this window. I guess they've got rid of the man we are waitin' for."

"If we only knew exactly what we were to do in Peking," Frank said, approaching the little group by the window, "we might jog along and report to the American legation. I'm like Jimmie. I don't fancy this long wait here---not a little bit!"

"As I have told you before," Ned replied, "I don't know the first thing about the work cut out for us by the United States Secret Service people. There was some talk about following a brace of conspirators to Peking, the conspirators who tried to discredit the United States in the matter of the gold shipment but that was only incidental, and I was ordered to come here and await instructions. So I'm going to wait--- until the moon drops out of the sky, if necessary."

"Oh, we'll stick around!" Frank put in. "Don't think, for a minute, that any of us thought of quitting the game. Still, I'd just like to know how much longer we have to remain here, and just what we are to do when we get to Peking, if we ever do."

"Of course we'll stick!" Jimmie exclaimed. "All I'm kickin' on is the delay. We might have remained on board the submarine, where we had cozy quarters an' somethin' to eat besides this Chink stuff."

"Whenever you want to bump Jimmie good and plenty," laughed Jack, "all you need to do is to tamper with his rations. What's the matter with this rice, kid, and this meat pie?" he added, as the man who had served their food since their occupancy of the old house approached with a large, covered basket on his arm.

Jimmie wrinkled his freckled nose again and laid a hand on his stomach, as if in sympathy with that organ for the unutterable Chinese concoctions it had been called upon to assimilate of late.

"Rat pie!" he said, in a tone of disgust.

"I'll bet a dollar to a rap on the nose that it's rat pie! I can hear the rats squeal nights when I'm tryin' to sleep an' can't."

"Say, Chink," Jack said, seizing the Chinaman by the shoulder and facing him about so that a good look into his slanty eyes might be had, "what do you know about this chuck?"

"No chuck! Pie!"

"Of course it's pie!" answered Jack. "It would be pie if it was made of old shoes, if it had a crust on. What I want to know is, where did you catch him, and who pays you to bring it to us, and who pays him to pay you to feed it to us? Where does he live, and is he black, white, or red? Come on, old top. You know a lot if you could only think of it."

The Chinaman, an evil-looking old fellow with a long cicatrice across his left cheekbone, shook his head and regarded his questioner craftily.

"No spik English!" he said.

"You spoke it then," Jack retorted. "I'll bet a pan of pickles that you know what we were saying when you came in here."

"Let him alone," Frank advised. "That head of his is solid bone. He would think his foot hurt if he had the toothache."

"What a filthy, yellow, toothless, wicked old devil it is!" Jack went on. "Some day when he comes here with that basket of rats I'm going to cut his pigtail off close behind his ears."

"I think he's the foulest old geezer I've ever met," Frank went on. "If I had a dog with a mug like that I'd hire him out to the man who manufactures nightmares."

The Chinaman stood looking stupidly about for a minute before placing his basket on the floor, then dropped it with a jar which rattled the few dishes within and scuffled out of the door. Jimmie followed to see that he did not loiter around the house listening, and came back with a mischievous grin on his face.

Long before the appearance of the Chinaman the boys had planned to use such uncomplimentary language in his presence as would be likely to excite his anger, if he understood what was being said. They did not believe he was as ignorant of the English language as he pretended to be.

"Well," Jimmie asked, of Ned, "did he tumble? What did you see?"

"I saw as evil a look as ever burned out of a human eye," Ned replied. "Looked to me like he would enjoy feeding Jack and Frank to the rats."

"Then he understood, all right?"

"Of course he did," Jack, answered. "I could see that with one eye. He's been coming here with his grub for four days, and picking up a word here and there every time. We ought to have had sense enough to have been on guard against such treachery."

"What's the answer now?" asked Jimmie, turning to Ned.

"I'm afraid we're in a bad predicament," Ned replied. "This shows me new light. The messenger we are expecting should have been here long ago, and I'm now sure that we've just got to do something. I'm getting afraid to eat the food they bring us, and I lie awake at night, listening for hostile footsteps."

"That sounds a little more like Manhattan!" Jack cried. "Sounds like action! We're off in a heathen land, surrounded by enemies, and not likely to get anything like a fighting chance, but I'm for doing something right now. I'm not going to lie still here and be poisoned, like a rat in a sewer!"

"I'm for going on to Peking," Frank said. "We can report to the American ambassador there, and, at least, get something to eat besides rat pie and something better than a bare floor to sleep on. If we only had the Black Bear, the motor boat we cruised with on the Columbia river, we wouldn't be long on the way."

"Huh!" Jimmie observed, taking out a minute memorandum book, "it is seventy miles by the river from Taku to Tientsin, and only twenty-seven by the road."

"And how far to Peking by the road?" asked Jack.

"It is seventy-nine Miles from Tientsin to Peking," was the reply, "and the roads ought to be good."

"That's more than can be said of the natives!" Jack said.

"The allied armies marched over the road to Peking in 1900," Frank explained, "and I rather think the inhabitants of strip of country have a wholesome respect for foreigners. With our high-power motorcycles, ought to make Peking before daylight, if we start right after dark."

"And don't run across any cutthroats on the way," added Jimmie.

"Let's see," grinned Frank, "we were to have a flying squadron of marines with us? What? I reckon they're flying so high that they are out of sight!"

"Suppose we see if the horses are in good shape," Ned said, going to an adjoining apartment.

He made his appearance again in a minute trundling a magnificent motorcycle. It was built expressly for army use, with a long, powerful stroke 10 h. p. motor. It was as indestructible and as auto machine as could well be designed. With a perfect muffler, automatic carburetor and lubrication, it was a machine to cover miles silently and with little danger of delay.

The open door behind Ned revealed three machines arranged along the wall, and the boys rushed to the examination of them. In second all were in the room, bending over their steel pets.

"Say!" Jimmie cried, presently, "we'll get Peking to-night---not! This machine has been tampered with, and some parts are missing."

"Yes, I reckon the Yellow Peril is on deck!" said Frank.

CHAPTER II

A DISQUIETING DISCOVERY

The four boys regarded each other in silence for a moment. Jack was the first to speak.

"How badly are the machines damaged?" he asked.

"Mine is all right," Jimmie reported, after a careful examination of his steel steed, "except that a couple of burrs are missing."

"And mine," Frank hastened to say, "is all right except that the oil feed is blocked and the electric battery is shut off---that is, it is so arranged that the machine will spark for a short distance and then buck. Great doings!"

"And yours, Jack?" asked Ned.

"Just a few burrs gone."

"And mine is o.k.," Ned went on, "except that the carburetor has been tampered with. I think we'll get off for Peking before long."

"How?" demanded Jimmie. "We can't make burrs out of wood, or patch up with rat pie, which seems to be about the only thing we have plenty of. I don't suppose we can get repairs in this yellow hole."

Ned took a handbag from under the burlap. "I am carrying my own repair shop with me," he said, taking out a box of burrs and a pair of pincers. "I've got all the small parts right here in duplicate, and some of the larger ones are in the big suitcase."

"You're a wonder!" Jimmie cried, dancing about his chum and wrinkling his nose until it looked like that of a comedian in a motion picture. "I wonder if you haven't got a hunk of Washington pie in that keyster!"

The lads fell to work on their machines, and in a very short time all were ready for the road. Then Ned put away his handbag and began an examination of the large suitcase, which contained the larger repairs for the motorcycles. It had not been molested.

"There's one thing certain," he said, "and that is that the Chinese who are watching us expect us to make a dash for Peking. They took the pains to leave our machines in such shape that their tampering with them would not be suspected. I'd like to know just when this mischief was accomplished."

"Yes," Frank observed, "they wanted us to get out of Taku and break down on the road to Tientsin. They would have us at their mercy out there--- or they figured it out that way."

"The work on the machines must have been done sometime during the day--- or last night," Ned replied. "Possibly while we were dozing."

"I don't believe it!" Jimmie insisted. "I've had me eyes open every minute to-day."

"Well," Ned went on, laughing, "we had a high wind yesterday, didn't we? A wind that tumbled the dust of the streets in upon us? Well," pointing to a portion of his machine frame which he had been careful not to touch, "here is some of the dust which fell upon the motorcycle then. The person who did the job brushed a lot of the dust away, so, you see, he must have worked since the dust fell."

"Did he brush it all away?" asked Jimmie.

"No," Ned replied, pointing, "here is a brace which he touched with his hands but did not wipe off. In a short time I'll tell you just what sort of a chap it was that did the trick."

The boy got his camera out of the suitcase and took a picture of the spot on the machine frame where the print of human fingers showed. The motorcycle owned by, or in charge of, Jimmie also showed a similar mark, and this, too, was photographed.

This completed, Ned laid the films aside for a time while he made a circuit of the old house, walking slowly as if out for chest exercise, but really seeing every square inch of the earth's surface where he walked. Once he dropped a pocketknife which he carried in his hand and stooped over to pick it up.

The boys thought he was a long time in securing the knife, although it was plainly in sight. When he stood up again and continued his circuit of the house there was a strange, inscrutable smile on his face.

"What is it?" asked Jack, the instant Ned entered the house.

"We've been blind and deaf since we have boon here," Ned answered. "Hostile influences have been operating all around us. Now," he continued, as Frank opened his lips to ask a question, "we'll see what sort of a tale the camera has to tell."

As he looked at the films his face hardened and his eyes snapped. In a moment he put the telltale sheets away.

"European fingerprints," he said, quietly, "and European footprints out there. It is not Chinamen that we have to look out for."

"What the Old Harry---"

Jimmie checked himself as a figure darkened the doorway. Ned stepped forward to greet the newcomer.

The visitor was a youngish man with black hair, growing well down on a narrow forehead, small black eyes, a straight-lipped mouth, and hard lines about his deep-set eyes. His manner and carriage was that of a man trained to military service.

"You are Mr. Nestor?" he asked, extending his hand as Ned approached him. "I have come a long distance to meet you," he added, before Ned could answer the question.

"From Washington?" asked Ned.

The visitor nodded; glanced sharply about the apartment, where the motorcycles were still lying, and then squatted on one of the burlap bags. Jimmie shook his fist behind the newcomer's back. It was evident that the boy did not like his appearance.

"I am Lieutenant Rae, of the Secret Service," he said, in a moment. "I have been delayed on my way here. You were about to start on without your final instructions?" he asked, lifting a pair of eyebrows which seemed to make his little black eyes smaller and more inscrutable than ever.

Ned looked at the man, now lolling back on the burlap, and for a moment made no reply. Then he lied deliberately---in the interest of Uncle Sam and human life, as he afterwards explained!

"No," he said, "we were merely overhauling the machines. We are in no haste to be away."

"I see," grinned the other. "You are taking life easily? Well, that is not so bad. However, you are to start on your journey early to-morrow morning."

"I shall be ready," Ned replied. "You have just landed?"

For just a second Lieutenant Rae's eyes sought the ground, then he lifted them boldly. Ned was watching his every movement.

"No," he said, then, "I came in three days ago, but I was obliged to await the movements of others before reporting to you."

Jimmie caught Frank by the arm and drew him out of the house. Out in the deserted garden---which was only a yard or two of hard-packed earth--- he whispered:

"That feller's a liar!"

"What makes you think so?" Frank asked.

"He's no Englishman," Jimmie insisted. "He's a Jap. You bet your last round iron man that's the truth. Now, what do you think he's doin' here?"

"Well," Frank replied, "I think you are right. He's not an Englishman. The nerve of him to put that up to us!"

"Perhaps he's the gazabo that monkeyed with our machines," suggested Jimmie. "Wish I'd 'a' caught him at it!"

"But Ned says that was an European," Frank said.

"Then they're thick around us," Jimmie went on, "and we're up to our necks in trouble. I wonder what instructions this Rae person will give Ned?"

"Suppose we go inside and see," Frank answered.

When the lads reached the interior of the house again Ned and Rae were bending over a road map of the country between Taku and Peking. The visitor was indicating a route with his pencil.

"Very well," Ned said, as if fully convinced of the honesty of the other, "now about the private orders. You understand, of course, that I know little concerning the work cut out for me."

"You are to receive final instructions at Peking."

Ned smiled, but there was something about the smile which told the boys that he was of their way of thinking.

"He's on!" Jimmie whispered in Frank's ear.

"You bet he is," was the reply.

"I'll come here in the morning," the visitor said, looking at his watch, "and go out with you. The chances are that we'll have to make a quick run. Machines in good order?" with a glance at the motorcycles lying against the wall.

"We haven't as yet looked them over carefully," Ned lied again, "but presume they are in good shape. As a matter of fact," he continued, hardly able to suppress a smile as Jimmie looked reprovingly at him, "as a matter of fact, we know little about the machines. This is new business for us."

Lieutenant Rae bowed himself out of the door, and the boys gathered in an inner room to discuss the situation.

"We may as well face the truth," Ned said, calmly. "The man who was to meet us here has fallen into the hands of our enemies. We are alone in China without instructions and surrounded by foes. Now, what shall we do? We may be able to reach the water front and get off to one of the British ships in sight."

"And go back?" demanded Jimmie. "Not for me! I'm goin' to stay an' see this thing out."

"That's me!" Frank said, and Jack echoed his words.

"Well, then," Ned went on, with a smile of satisfaction at the attitude of the lads, "if we are going on, we've got to get to Peking without delay. I'll tell you what I think. The conspirators are aware that we are trying to run them down. If they can stop us before we fully identify them, their part in the plot against Uncle Sam will never be known." Rest assured, then, that they will stop us if they can."

"Then it's us for the road to-night!" said Jimmie. "That is fine."

In referring to conspirators, Ned indicated the men who had been involved in a plot to get the United States into trouble with a foreign government over a shipment of gold to China. This shipment had gone to the bottom of the Pacific.

It had been claimed that the gold shipment, which was marked for the Chinese government, had really been intended for the revolutionary party, now becoming very strong. It was now insisted that the revolutionists had been posted as to the shipment, and that it was on the books for them to seize it the moment it left the protection of the American flag.

These claims having been made, and believed, in the state department of a foreign government, none too friendly to the government of the United States. A ship had been sent out to watch the transfer of the gold. At least, that was what had been claimed, but this ship, so sent out, had, by an "accident," rammed and sunk the treasure boat. If the Chinese government did not get the gold, neither did the leaders of the revolutionary party.

It had been claimed at Washington that the whole thing was a plot to discredit the United States government in the eyes of the nations of Europe, and Ned Nestor and his chums had been sent out to search the wreck for papers which would disprove the statements made. The papers had been secured.

The point now was to connect the foreign statesmen who had burned their fingers in the plot with the affair. Ned knew that the papers would establish the falsity of the charges, but he wanted to place the blame for the whole matter where it belonged. He wanted to track the man who had conferred with known conspirators back to his home. He wanted to be able to point out the treacherous government which had so sought to belittle the United States in the eyes of the world.

The boy had no doubt that this was actually the mission upon which he had been sent when ordered by the Secret Service department to report at Taku and there await instructions before proceeding to Peking. He did not understand why he had been instructed to make the trip to Peking on a motorcycle when there were easier ways, but he was quick to obey orders. Later on he learned just why this order had been given.

"Yes," Ned replied to Jimmie's remark, "I think we may as well set out for Peking to-night. If we wait until morning, we may not be at liberty to start out."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Jack.

"Study it out," smiled Ned, "and you may be able to find an answer."

While the boy was speaking, he bent over and looked keenly at a footprint on the earthen floor of the room. It was not such a print as the foot-covering of a Chinese man would leave. It had been made by the long heel of an European shoe.

When Ned looked closer, he saw that the ground was stained a deep red, that there were dark crimson spots on the window casing. Then he saw that a struggle must have taken place in the room, for the few things it held were in disorder.

"Boys," he said, "perhaps our Secret Service man got here before we did."

CHAPTER III

A SHOE AND A SURPRISE

"What do you mean by that?" asked Frank. "If he had reached the old house first, he would have waited here for us, wouldn't he?"

"Look what's here," Ned replied. "There has been a fight in the room. The combatants fought from the inner wall to the window, then a knife was used. These stains are by no means fresh, but they tell the story. And to think that we've been

here all these days and never found them!"

"Well," Frank hastened to say, "we weren't suspicious; and, then, we had no occasion to visit this room."

"We should have been on our guard," Ned replied, "but there is no help for it now. This discovery may block our going on to Peking to-night."

"I don't see why," Jack said, in a disappointed tone.

"If the man who was wounded here and carried out of the window," Ned replied, "is really the messenger we are waiting for, we ought not to go away and leave him in the hands of the enemy. It may not be the one I fear it is, but we ought to find out about that."

"It might have been only natives fighting," urged Jack.

"Of course," Ned insisted, "but we ought not to leave if there is any possibility of our friend being in trouble. Besides, Jack," he went on, "a native fight here would hardly be umpired by a man wearing European shoes! Here are the tracks, and I found others like them on the ground outside not long ago. We may as well go out now and try to follow them."

Accompanied by Jimmie, Ned went out and made a closer examination. The tracks crossed the yard and ended at the street in the rear of the old house.

"Now," Ned said, as he stepped out on the beaten course of the unpaved street, "we shall have to take chances. The trail has disappeared, and we can only depend on our enemies for guidance."

"That's fine!" said Jimmie. "We may as well go back!"

Ned pointed to a little group of Chinamen standing not far away, at the corner of a street lined with miserable huts.

"We'll walk about here," he said, "and if we get somewhere near any point of information to us or danger to the others, I have a notion that that nest of Celestials will begin to buzz."

Jimmie laughed and the two passed on, merely looking in the direction of the group as they passed it. They moved on down the street on the opposite side. The Chinamen did not move.

When they turned back, however, on the other side of the thoroughfare and stopped, on speculation, for an instant before a hut somewhat larger and more dilapidated than the others, a pair of the watchers suddenly detached themselves from the group and hastened away in opposite directions. Two more strolled toward the boys.

"What next?" asked Jimmie, in a whisper.

"Seems to me that our halting here indicates that there may be something doing in this house," Ned replied. "Suppose we go in and ask some ordinary question?"

"An' get kicked out!" grunted Jimmie.

"That will be all right, so long as they let us out at all," Ned replied with a smile. "I just want to know why our stopping here excited the Chinks who were watching us."

As Ned turned toward the house the little fellow caught him by the sleeve and held him back.

"You look out," he said, "there's a snake in there, that black-eyed snake who claimed to be Lieutenant Rae! Do you want him to know that we are wise to his game?"

Ned turned and started away from the house, but there came a call from the structure, and the next instant two men were running out to greet him. More by gestures than by words they informed the boys that there was a man in the house wished to see them.

In a moment they stood facing the man who had called himself Lieutenant Rae. He advanced to meet them and pointed to chairs as they entered the room.

"Out for a walk?" he asked, with a smile.

Ned nodded and Jimmie grinned.

"The owner of this house," Rae went on, "is an old friend of mine. We met first, years ago, in San Francisco. I'm staying here while in the town. By the way, I was about to visit your quarters."

"Come along," Ned said. "We must be getting back."

Rae left the room, saying that he would bring a raincoat, and Jimmie pointed to a rear apartment where an old Chinaman with a long, sinister cicatrice on his left cheek was bending over a table.

"That's the Chink who brings our grub," he said. "What is this Rae person doing here? I don't eat no more grub that Chink brings."

Ned made no reply, for a swinging closet door attracted his attention at that moment. Inside the narrow closet, on the rough floor, lay a pair of European shoes. Ned slipped forward and seized one. When Rae returned it was hidden in a capacious pocket.

"What is it?" whispered Jimmie.

"If I'm not much mistaken," was the reply, "it is the shoe that made the tracks we have been following."

"Then this Rae person didn't always enter the old house where we are stopping by the front way," commented Jimmie. "Gee," he added, "I'll bet he umpired that fight, and the man the Chinks carried off is in this house now."

There was no more opportunity for conversation between the two boys at that time, for Rae stood watching them closely, a sneering smile on his face. Ned turned toward the door.

"Why venture out in the storm?" asked Rae. "Surely, there is no need of haste. Your friends will not lose themselves during your absence."

"You were ready to go, a moment ago," Ned said.

"It is the storm," the other observed, with a shrug of the shoulders. "It is increasing in violence every moment."

Glancing into the rear room, Ned saw the old Chinaman leave his work and pass through a door to the west. The boy thought he recognized a significant signal as the fellow disappeared,

The lads never knew exactly how it all occurred. They only knew at the time that there was a quick rush, a flash of weapons, a desperate struggle, then momentary unconsciousness.

They decided afterwards that their enemies had rushed upon them from every direction, and that the sneering face of Rae had gloated over their capture.

"Don't injure them," Rae ordered, as ropes were knotted about the wrists and ankles of the prisoners. "I'll go out now and see that the two Black Bears," with a double sneer in his voice, "are taken into camp in short order. Bad climate, this, for school boys who imitate wild animals," he added, with a malicious smile. "A bad climate."

"You're all right!" Jimmie called out, as Rae paused in the doorway for an instant. "You're all right! But let me give you a pointer. You keep the Bears and Wolves you get in strong cages! If they get out, they'll eat you up!"

"Oh! I'll pull their fangs!" laughed the other, and then he was gone.

"This China seems to be a nice country," Jimmie said, turning to Ned. "Some people would break our crusts in instead of tyin' us up."

"I rather think," Ned replied, "that they have planned to do that a little later on. We ought never to have taken such chances."

"You can't have a chicken pie," grinned Jimmie, "unless some one kills a chicken! No more can you find out what's goin' on by sittin' down in an old house an' waitin' for someone to bring you the news in a New York newspaper! We had to keep cases on this chap, didn't we?"

"I think you would talk slang if you were drowning," Ned smiled. "Anyway," he added, "we've caused Rae, if that is his name, to show his hand. That is something."

"If we never get away," laughed Jimmie, "we can leave the information to our friends in a will! I wonder if this gazabo will get Frank and Jack?"

"Possibly," Ned answered.

"They seem to be puttin' most all the Americans in China out of circulation!" said the little fellow. "Wonder if that old gear-face thinks he can guard us an' sleep, too? Say, you watch your chance, Ned, an' I'll roll over and geezle him an' you get out of the house. Roll out, tumble out, any way to get out! There," with a sigh of disappointment, "there's another Chink in the game. Listen to what they are saying!"

CHAPTER IV

TWO BLACK BEARS IN TROUBLE

Jack and Frank sat long by the window, waiting for Ned and Jimmie to return. The doors of the adjoining rooms were wide open, so they had a full view of the lower floor.

There were windows, unglazed like that which looked out on the Gulf of Pechili, too, and the lads could see for some distance along the street which ran parallel with the one upon which the miserable old structure faced.

Presently a mist crept over the sky, and black clouds rolled in from the threatening canopy over the gulf. There was evidently a storm brewing, and, besides, the night was coming on.

In spite of the fact that they had a good view all about them, so far as the house and its immediate vicinity was concerned, both boys felt that almost indescribable sensation which one experiences when being observed from behind by keen and magnetic eyes. They were not exactly afraid, but they had premonitions of approaching trouble.

"I wonder what's keeping Ned?" Jack asked. "Hope he hasn't gotten into trouble."

"Oh, he'll look out for that!"

"Of course! Ned's no slouch!"

While the boys cheered themselves with such remarks as these, the rooms grew darker and the black clouds from off the gulf dropped nearer.

"What an ungodly country!" Jack exclaimed. "I feel as if I were surrounded by snakes, and all kinds of reptiles. How would you like to take a New York special, just now?"

"I'm not yet seared of the job we are on," Frank replied, "but I'd like a half decent show of getting out alive. I feel like we were in a hole in the ground, with all manner of creeping things about us. The very air seems to be impregnated with treachery and cunning."

"That's the breath of the Orient," smiled Jack, not inclined to continue in the vein in which the conversation had started.

"I don't know why the breath of the Orient should differ from the breath of the Occident," replied Frank, well pleased at the change of subject. "It wouldn't, if the natives of the far East would put bathtubs in their houses and garbage cans on the street comers."

"Well, there certainly is an odor about the East," grinned Jack. "Perhaps it is the hot weather."

"Hot weather has nothing to do with the sanitary conditions of this part of the world," Frank went on. "Peking is in the latitude of Philadelphia, or New York. You wouldn't think so to hear people talk about the Orient back home, but you'll change your mind if you don't get out of this before winter sets in."

"Somehow I never associated cold weather with the East," Jack said.

"Why," Frank continued, "this river freezes over about the middle of December and they run sledges on the ice until the middle of March. In summer it is often 106 above zero, while in the winter it drops to about 6 degrees below. If the natives were half civilized, you might get the idea that you were in Ohio, because of the fields of corn."

"We don't know much about China, do we?" mused Jack.

This was Frank's opportunity. Before reaching the coast he had spent many hours studying up on the history of the strange land he was about to visit. His father was owner and editor of one of the most powerful newspapers in New York

City, and the boy had had plenty of inspiration for historical research from the time he was old enough to read. His father's library had supplied him with all the facilities necessary to the carrying out of his inclination, and his travels with the Boy Scouts had brought him into contact with many of the countries whose history he had studied so enthusiastically.

Now he saw an opportunity of talking China to Jack, and started in at once. Jack listened eagerly, for, while interested in the past of the strange land, he was too busy a young man to spend much time in any library. His father was one of the leading corporation lawyers in New York, but the boy's inclinations pointed to mining as a future profession---when he had investigated the wilds of the world!

"We don't know much about China," Frank began, "because for centuries China has shunned what we call civilization. This is said to be the most ancient and populous nation in the world, although it seems to me that history goes back farther on the banks of the Nile and the Euphrates than on the western shore of the Yellow Sea.

"The authentic history of China goes back 2207 years before the birth of Christ, while Egyptian records and the data found along the Euphrates and the Tigris point to a much older organization of men into communities. However, it is said by some that Fuh-hi founded the Chinese empire eight hundred years before the date given, when Yu the Great began to make history.

"One reason why the story of China is so short, comparatively, is that Ching Wang, the old fellow who caused the Chinese wall to be built to keep out the Tartars, ordered all books and records previous to his time to be destroyed. This was to dispose of the stories of wars, in which China, before his time, was always engaged.

"China has always been at war with the Mongolians. In 1300 A.D., Genghis Khan raised a Mongolian army and captured Peking. Later, one Kublai Khan overthrew the Sung dynasty and established a Mongolian empire. The members of the defeated royal family drowned themselves in the river at Canton. This Mongolian dynasty lasted until the middle of the fourteenth century, when it was overthrown.

"The Chinese governed their own land, then, until 1644, just before which time the emperor was murdered by native sons. Then the Tartars got to Peking, in spite of the Great Wall, and established the dynasty now on the throne.

"One cause of the growing revolt in China is the fact that the Tartars are still in power. But the Tartars who were warlike enough when China lay before them for conquest quieted down as soon as Sun-chi took the throne. Peace has been the rule since then.

"It seems strange, but it is true, that China has not progressed, has not been given the respect conferred on other nations, because she would not, or could not fight. Talk about peace all you like, but it is the fighters that win whether in private or national life.

"China has been kicked about by all the nations of the world, large and powerful as she is, because it was understood that she could be insulted with impunity. England put the opium curse on her against only feeble resistance. She has stood for peace, not conquest, and had been treated condescendingly, like a big booby of a boy at school who is afraid of lads half his size. The secret organization now forming in this country may overthrow the Manchu dynasty, but if it does it will build a Chinese republic and not a new Chinese empire.

"It is claimed by some that the United States is favoring this new Chinese party of liberty, that the gold recently lost in the Pacific was our contribution to the cause---by the roundabout way we have heard so much about---and that the Washington government will be the first to recognize the new republic.

"I don't know whether all this is true or not, but father says it is, and he ought to know. Anyhow, there will be plenty of fighting before the present rulers release their grip on the royal treasury. It may be that our mission here is to find out something more about this new movement.

"You see," he added, "if our government is for the new movement, the nation which rammed the gold ship, which set the conspirators at work, which sent a great statesman, as we believe, to negotiate with the conspirators, is against it, and Uncle Sam possibly wants to know what power it is that is likely to assist the present Emperor of China in holding his job. If Ned can get the proof he needs to establish what he already knows and suspects, he will do a good piece of work."

"I wish he would return," Jack said, with an apprehensive look about the room. "I don't see what is keeping him."

"Here he comes, now!" Frank cried, "or it may be Jimmie," he added, "blundering through the window."

Both boys arose and hastened to the door of the room from which the sounds of approach had been heard. The apartment was dark and still, save for the whipping of the wind at the open casement. While the boys stood there, expecting every instant to hear the voice of one of their chums, rain began to fall, and a sharp zigzag of lightning cut across the sky.

By this natural searchlight the lads saw a figure crouching just under the window. The illumination lasted for an instant only, and it was not possible for them to see whether the visitor was dressed in native or European costume. His face was not in sight, and only the barest outlines of his figure were discernible.

Jack was for rushing forward on a tour of inspection, but Frank took a firm grip on his friend's arm and held him back. He not only prevented him springing upon the crouching figure, but drew him away from the open door-way, believing that both had been observed by the intruder.

"We ought to get him!" Jack panted, in a whisper. "We ought to find out if he is one of our enemies or only a common thief."

"Much good it would do to capture him!" Frank whispered back. "We couldn't force the truth out of him, and the things they call courts of justice here would soon be after us."

"Then what can we do?" demanded Jack.

Frank did not reply, for footsteps, now plainly heard above the sweep of the wind and rain, were approaching the room where the boys were standing, with automatic revolvers in their hands.

"He's got his nerve!" Jack said. "Why doesn't he come into the place with a brass band? Shall we sneak out of a window, or remain here and find out what he wants?"

"I'm for getting out!"

Frank leaped from the window as he spoke, and in a second Jack came piling out on top of him.

"Gee whiz!" Frank whispered. "Why don't you knock a fellow over?"

"What are you trying to do?" demanded Jack.

"Not a thing," was the reply. "Say, but we'll get a nice soak if we remain here."

"You'll get a nice soak on the coco, if you don't stop pulling me around," came back from Jack.

"Then keep your hands off me!" Frank responded.

But in a moment both boys knew that they were not struggling with each other. A brilliant flash of lightning cut the sky, and by its light they saw each other lying on the ground under the window, each with a couple of men in native costume perched on top.

Jack fired, but the pressure on his back was not lessened. Instead, he felt a snaky hand slip down his arm, seize his fingers and twist the gun away.

"Frank!" he called out. "Frank! Shoot at the heathens! I missed, and one of them has my gun."

Frank obeyed the suggestion, and three reports were heard. Jack, though not naturally bloodthirsty, was overjoyed at the sound of a groan which came from the spot where Frank lay.

"Don't try that again, son!"

"That will be enough!"

Both sentences were spoken in English. Then the boys were carried bodily into the house and sat down against a wall. Then a lighted lantern was brought in, and the prisoners saw six sleepy-looking Chinamen grinning at them.

CHAPTER V

A COLLECTION OF WILD ANIMALS

"Well, what do you think of it?"

The voice was that of an Englishman, and the words were spoken in the room, but the struggling prisoners could not discover where the person who uttered them stood. It seemed to them that there were only the six sleepy-looking Chinamen and themselves in the apartment.

Frank ceased his useless struggling with the rope which held both feet and hands in its strong coils, and glanced along the row of stupid faces.

"What did you say?" he asked, hoping that the speaker would say something more and so locate himself.

"How do you like it?"

That was the same voice, and it was in that room, but, still, there were only the six Chinamen and Jack in sight. Frank looked at his chum with a smile on his face. In that moment he resolved to meet whatever Fate might have in store for him with a cheerful heart. He had little doubt that both Ned and Jimmie had been caught in the trap into which Jack and himself had fallen.

There was no knowing what the fate of himself and his friends would be, but whatever had been planned for them by their enemies, there would be no relief in sighs and pleas for pity. They were alone in the land of mystery. Owing to the necessity for secrecy regarding their movements, no one with whom they had been associated in the Secret Service work

knew of their whereabouts, save only Lieutenant Scott, who had sent them on to Taku, and who had failed to keep his promises to them.

And Lieutenant Scott? Frank believed him dead or in the clutches of the conspirators.

Otherwise, he would have kept his appointment at the old house on the water front. The view ahead was not a long one, as the boy considered the matter, nor a smooth one, but he decided that nothing was to be gained by subserviency.

"I like it!" was Jack's quick reply. "Who is it that is doing the talking?"

"One of the six in front of you," came the answer in English.

Jack cast his eyes quickly along the row of faces, but failed to catch the movement of a lip, the twinkle of an eye.

"You're a funny bloke," Jack went on. "How much will you take for a month in vaudeville?"

"He'd make a fine spirit medium," Frank cut in. "Can you make the talk come from behind me?" he added, with a grin.

"Of course I can!"

Although the boys watched closely, there were no signs of motion in any one of the six yellow, foxy faces, still the words seemed to come from the wall directly back of Jack's head.

"If I had you on the Bowery," Jack continued, "I'd give you a hundred a month. Come on over and get busy in the little old United States!"

"I think I'll wait until the boys bring in the other two wild animals," replied the unknown speaker. "I rather want to see the finish of you Wolves and Black Bears before I see the Bowery again."

"You'll find more wild animals of our stripe on the Bowery than you will want to meet," Jack replied, "especially when it is known that you've been mixed up with Boy Scouts, to their harm, in China."

"I'll take my chances on that," was the reply. "You have been very successful, you wild beasts, in butting into the business of other people, and getting out again uninjured, but it is going to be different now. There are two black Bears and two Wolves that I know of who will never get back to New York again."

"All right," Frank said. "We've had fun enough out of the Secret Service work we have done to pay for whatever trouble we have now. Ned will be along presently, and then you'll have another think coming."

"Sure, he'll be along directly," was the reply. "In fact, he's right here now!"

But it was not Ned who was pushed, bound hand and foot, into the circle of light in the room. The little fellow came near falling as he was thrust forward, but he regained his equilibrium, and turned around to face his tormentor.

"You're a cheap skate!" he said. "If I had you on Chatham Square I'd change your face good and plenty!"

Then he saw that he was speaking to empty air. There was no one in the doorway. The person who had brought him there and hustled him into the room had disappeared.

"Now, what do you know about that?"

Jimmie chuckled as he asked the question of the six silent figures ranged along the wall. As yet his eyes had not fallen on the figures of Frank and Jack, farther back in the shadows.

There was, of course, no answer to his question, and the boy leaned forward, a grin on his freckled face.

"Say, but you're a bum lot!" he cried. "Why don't you go back to the Pyramids and sleep for another thousand years? There ain't no nourishment in sitting up there like a dime museum, for there's no one sellin' tickets at the door."

"Look behind you!"

That was the English voice again, seemingly out of the heavy air, or out of the storm outside. Jimmie turned quickly and saw his chums nicely tied up.

In a moment he turned back to the row of six, without even exchanging a look with his friends.

"Who's doin' the talkin'," he asked.

Frank and Jack were now too impatient to know what had become of their leader to delay longer. The latter asked:

"Where's Ned?"

"Ask this lineup," Jimmie replied. "I don't know. Gee! If I had a face like that man on the end, I'd sell it to the wild man of Borneo, its an improvement on anythin' he could get up. Say, Old Socks!" he added, "where is Ned?"

"Packed up, ready for delivery," was the reply. "Say, how would you wild animals like to take a jaunt on your motorcycles to-night? Nice cool night for a ride! You might reach Peking by morning and report to the American ambassador!"

"We'll get there in due time," Frank answered.

"I've drawn the teeth of this collection of wild animals, at all events," said the voice. "No more Wolves and Black Bears will be apt to come to China. Such collections are not popular here."

Jimmie dropped back to where his chums were seated. Serious as the situation was, the boy could not restrain a smile as he threw himself down beside Frank. The storm was still thundering outside, and splashes of rain now and then whirled in at the open casement.

The lantern which illuminated the interior of the room showed only a round blotch against the darkness. In this circle sat the six silent men, watchful but motionless.

"It might be a scene in a play!" Jimmie exclaimed.

Frank nodded and whispered:

"Did they get Ned, too?"

Jimmie nodded. His face was grave in an instant.

"Where is he?" Frank whispered.

The little fellow shook his head. Then the voice which seemed to come from nowhere was heard again:

"You'll meet him in due time," it said.

A long silence followed. The lantern which gave out the light flickered in the wind and the beat of the rain increased in violence. In all the adventurous lives of the Boy Scouts nothing so weird, so uncanny, as this had ever occurred.

"Well," Jack said, more to break the strange silence than for any other purpose, "why don't you say something?"

Then, through the clamor of the storm, came the sharp ring of steel. It sounded to the listening boys like the purring of two swords directed against each other by strong hands.

Instantly the light was extinguished, and the shuffling of feet told the captives that the watchful six were getting into upright positions.

"Hello, the house!"

The challenging call came from the street outside.

"That's good, honest United States!" Jimmie whispered. "Shall I risk an answer?"

"You'll probably get a knife in your side if you do," Frank answered. "The Chinks are still in the room."

"Show a light!"

The voice was nearer than before, and the three boys lifted to their feet and moved toward the window, which was just above where they had been sitting. Frank was about to throw himself out into the storm when a muscular hand seized him by the arm.

"Nothing doing!" a voice said in his ear.

"If you move again, or try to answer the call, that will be the last of one Black Bear. Remain silent while I talk with your friends."

"Our friends?" repeated Frank.

"Certainly," was the reply---given with a chuckle. "Your very good friends from the American ship in the harbor."

There was torture in the words, in the fierce grip on the arm. The promised assistance had arrived and the boys were powerless to make their perilous situation known!

But a hopeful thought came to the brain of the boy as he was dragged away from the open window. It was barely possible that Ned had escaped, that he knew of the peril his friends were in, and would arrive before the Americans were, by some treacherous falsehood, sent away.

"Nestor!" cried the voice outside. "Are you there? Show a light."

There was a rustle in the room, then black silence.

CHAPTER VI

WITH THE FLYING SQUADRON

"Go around to the front and come in," a voice said---a voice from the room where the boys were. "I've just got here, and am trying to find a light."

There was a rattle of arms outside, then the heavy tread of men still making some pretense, even in the darkness and the rain, of moving in marching order. The men who had come to the assistance of the Boy Scouts were preparing to enter the house.

How would they be received? This was the question uppermost in the minds of all the boys as they waited.

Would they be greeted with treacherous words, or with a murderous fusillade of bullets and knives stabbing in the darkness? It would seem that the Chinamen would hardly dare attack an American military squad, yet these men were outlaws, and there was no knowing what they might do.

The lads heard the marines, as they supposed the newcomers to be, pass around an angle of the old house and stand for an instant talking in the doorway to which they had been directed by the voice of the man on the inside. Frank was preparing to set up a cry of warning, let the consequences be what they might, when the rattle of arms told him that the marines had surrounded the house, and that every door and window was guarded! The men who were guarding the boys evidently knew what was taking place, for they released their clutches on the lads and moved away.

Next came a struggle at the window, and then a strong electric light swept into the room. Jimmie jumped forward and bumped into Ned, who was clambering over the decayed window sill.

There were several shots exchanged on the outside, followed by shouts of both rage and pain, then three men in the uniform of the United States marine service entered the room. One of them picked up Ned's searchlight, which had fallen to the floor when Jimmie bunted its owner, and turned its rays on the mix-up under the window.

There was a flutter of arms and legs, as Frank and Jack, half choking with laughter at the manner in which tragedy had so suddenly and unexpectedly been changed into comedy, pulled Ned and Jimmie apart. Jimmie sat up, wrinkling his nose until one would think it never would smooth out again, and gazed at Ned with provoking grin.

"Gee!" he cried. "I thought I was mixing it with six Chinks! Wonder you wouldn't knock before entering a private room!"

"I did knock," laughed Ned, rising from the floor and taking the flashlight.

"Yes, you knocked me down," grunted Jimmie.

The three marines, standing in the middle of the room with amused faces, regarded the four boys curiously for a moment and then moved out of range of the window. Also Ned was asked to shut off the light.

"We're not out of it yet," one of them said. "Our men chased the Yellow Faces into a bad part of town, and they are likely to be chased back, not by a few, but by a mob! These Chinks like Americans about as much as brook trout love the desert."

"Perhaps I'd better go out an' see what's comin' off," suggested the little fellow.

"You'll only get captured again," Jack suggested, provokingly.

"I ain't got nothin' on you in getting tied up with ropes," Jimmie retorted. "You looked like one of these mummy things when the light was turned on."

The officer in charge of the marines motioned to Jimmie to remain where he was, but the order came too late. Having been relieved of his bonds by Ned's quick fingers, he fairly dived out of the window into the darkness.

"Now there'll be trouble catching him again," complained the officer. "If he doesn't get a hole bored through him, we'll have to hunt the town over to get him out of the Chinks' hands. Why can't you boys behave yourselves?"

"Ruh!" Jack retorted, annoyed at the tone of superiority adopted by the officer. "I guess we've been doing pretty well, thank you! I reckon you fellows must have followed off a cow path! We've been waiting here for you long enough to walk to Peking on our hands!"

"That's the fact!" the officer replied, speaking in a whisper in the darkness. "We were the first ones to fall into the snares set by the Chinks. Only for Ned, we would still be waiting for you in a house something like this one, in a distant part of the town. How the boy found us I can't make out, but find us he did."

"What are you going to do about that runaway kid?" asked Frank of Ned. "Shall I go get him?"

It was not necessary for Ned to reply to the question, for at that moment a figure came tumbling through the window and a voice recognized as that of the little fellow cried out:

"Gee!" he said, feeling about in the darkness, "what do you think of my ruinnin' into a sea soldier an' getting chucked through the hole the carpenter left?"

"If you boy will get ready now," a voice said, "we'll be on, our way toward Peking."

"How many of the Chinks did you catch?" asked Ned.

"Not a blooming one," was the disgusted reply. "They ran away like water leaking into the ground."

"If you'd only let me alone," wailed Jimmie, "I'd have got one. I want to soak the man that tied me up."

The marines, a full dozen of them, now gathered in the old house and all made ready for departure. Directly a motorcycle for every man was wheeled up to the door.

"We have been practicing riding while waiting for you," the officer in charge explained, "and the fellows think they can go some!"

"It is a wild night for such a ride," Frank suggested.

"Couldn't have been better for our purpose," said the officer.

"Do you know why we are going on motorcycles?" asked Ned.

"I think I do," was the reply.

"Why don't you out with it, then?" asked Jack.

"You'll learn of the reason soon enough!" replied the other. "Before we go to Peking you may understand why you are going with a flying squadron of Uncle Sam's men!"

"Who directed you to the house where I found you?" asked Ned.

"A chap who called himself Lieutenant Rae," was the reply.

"Japanese-lookin' chap?" asked Jimmie.

"That's the fellow."

"There's one more question," Ned went on. "Are all the men you took from the ship with you?"

"Every one of my men is here," answered the officer, "but there was a fellow, a friend of yours, with us at first who is not with us now. Queer chap he was, too! German, I think, and a master at tangling up the United States language. He came on board the ship, and managed to get off with us when we left. In two days he disappeared."

"That was Hans!" cried Jack.

"Who's Hans?"

"A German Boy Scout we picked up on an island. A member of the Owl Patrol, of Philadelphia, he said. We left him on the submarine."

"Well, he asked after you boys, and looked disappointed when we did not find you, owing to the misleading statements of that fraud, Rae. He left us without a word of explanation, and is probably looking for you. Did he know where you were going?"

"Yes," admitted Ned, "I told him we were going to Peking by way of Tientsin. I should not have done that."

"Oh, it can do no harm, and may be for your benefit. If the lad was not killed by the Chinks, he is doubtless on his way to Peking."

"Then you think he knew there was something wrong because we did not meet you?" asked Ned.

"Yes; he acted queerly."

"There are evidences of a struggle in this house," Ned went on, "and we thought the messenger we were waiting for had been attacked, but it may have been Hans after all. I hope he is not in serious trouble."

"I am the only messenger sent to you," the officer said, "so, as you say, it might have been the German who was attacked, though no one knows how he ever found this house, or why, when attacked, he didn't make himself heard."

The rain was now falling heavily, and it was decided to remain under shelter for a time, so the flashlight was brought into use again.

"If your men can keep up with us," Jack said to the officer, "we can get to Peking in six hours, so there is no need of hurrying."

"If you get to Peking in six weeks you'll be doing well," laughed the officer.

"What do you mean by that? Demanded Ned, who was anxious for a start.

"I can't tell you," was the answer. "But it was never believed you could make a quick jump to the capital city. There maybe things to do on the way there. That is why you have to escort. I don't like this diplomacy game, but have to obey orders."

"What I want to know," Jimmie broke in, "is how Ned got away. They had him tied up plenty last time I saw him. And, after he got away, how did he happen to blunder into the company of our escort? China is a land of mystery, all right!"

"They didn't watch me closely," Ned replied, modestly, "after they took you away, and when I did get out of the house I had only to follow one of my captors. Believing that I was safely tied, my captors talked a lot about having the marines waiting in the wrong house while they disposed of the Boy Scouts!"

"This man Rae?" asked the officer. "Was he there with your captors? That's one of the men we must take."

"Oh, he is the man that caused us to be taken," Jimmie cut in. "I'd like to break his crust for him. I'm gettin' sick of bein' tied up in every case, like the hero in a Bowery play!"

"Was there a Chink who spoke English like a native?" asked Jack.

"There were two."

"Dressed in native costume?"

"Yes, and looking bored and weary."

"Then they're the men that sat with the others in a grinning row up against the wall," Frank exclaimed. "Do you think they are Chinamen?"

"Disguised Englishmen," Ned replied.

"That's my notion," Frank went on. "Oh, we'll get this all ironed out directly! If we could find Hans we might start off with a thorough understanding of how the game was carried out here."

The rain now slacked a little, and here and there stars showed through masses of hurrying clouds. The boys led their steel horses to the door and prepared to mount.

"Plenty of mud," Jack suggested.

In the little pause caused by the marines getting out their machines a dull, monotonous sound came to the ears of the party. It was such a sound as the Boy Scouts had heard on the rivers of South America, when the advance of their motor-boat was blocked, and hundreds of savages were peering out of the thickets.

"What is it?" asked Jack.

"Sounds like the roaring of a mob," answered the officer. "You understand that a word will stir the natives to arms against foreigners. As there is no knowing what this fake Lieutenant Rae and the men we drove away from this house may have said to the Chinks, we may as well be moving. It may be safer out on the road!"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Jack. "We can't fight a whole nation, can we? Look there! That was a rocket, and means trouble."

The distant murmur was fast growing into a roar, and rockets were flecking the clouds with their green, red, and blue lights. Shadowy figures began to show in the darkness, and a group was seen ahead, in the street which led away toward Peking.

"More dangerous than wild beasts!" exclaimed the officer. "Be careful to keep together and in the middle of the road, when we get under way, for if one of us gets pulled down there's an end of all things for him!"

"It is too bad we can't stay long enough to find Hans," Ned said.

"If we remain here five minutes longer," the officer replied, "someone will have to come and find us. Are you ready?"

All were ready, and the next moment sixteen motorcycles shot out into the street and headed northwest for Tientsin, which city lay in the direct path to Peking. The group in the road ahead parted sullenly as the squadron pressed on its outer circle and the company passed through without mishap.

That was as wild a ride as any living being ever engaged in. Nothing but the speed of the motorcycles saved the boys, for enemies sprung up all along the way. Some mysterious system of signaling ahead seemed to be in vogue there.

The sky cleared presently. The road was muddy, but the giant machines made good progress, especially through little towns, through the doors and windows of which curious eyes peered out on the silent company, marching, seemingly, to the music of the spark explosions.

After a run of two hours the officer halted and dismounted.

"Now," he said, "we've got a bit of work cut out for us here. If we make it, we may go on in peace. If we fail, all must keep together and take chances on speed."

CHAPTER VII

THE MIDNIGHT CALL OF AN OWL

Ned glanced about keenly as he left his seat on the machine and stood awaiting further instructions. There was little rain in the air now, but it was still dark except for the faint reflection of a distant group of lights.

"Where are we?" Ned asked.

"Near Tientsin."

"So soon? Why, I thought we'd be a long time on the way."

"I reckon you don't know how fast we have been traveling," said the officer. "Fear led me to take risks. I'll admit that."

"I want to look through the city before I leave the country," Ned remarked.

"You are standing now where the allied armies encamped in 1900," the officer went on. "You doubtless recall the time the allied armies were sent to Peking to rescue the foreign ambassadors during the Boxer uprising? That was an exciting time."

"Hardly," laughed Ned, "although I have read much about that march. I must have been about eight years old at the time."

"Well here is where the American brigade encamped on the night before the start for Peking was made. At that time it was believed that the foreigners at Peking had all been murdered. I was here with the boys in blue."

"Then you ought to know the road to Peking."

"I certainly do."

"What are we halting here for?"

"There is a dispatch from Washington due you here," was the reply.

"Telegrams in China?"

"Certainly. Why, kid, this city has over a million of inhabitants, and thousands of the residents are foreigners. Of course they have telegraph facilities."

"But how am I to get it to-night?"

To the east lay a great cornfield, to the west a broken common upon which were a few houses of the meaner sort. The corn had been cut and was in the shock. In the houses the lights were out. But far over the poverty-stricken abodes of the poor shone the reflections of the high lights of the city.

Tientsin is a squalid Oriental city, its native abodes being of the cheapest kind, but the foreign section is well built up and well lighted. These were the reflections, glancing down from a gentle slope, that the boys saw.

The officer pointed to the north, indicating a low-roofed hut half hidden in the corn shocks.

"We are to remain there," he said, "until you receive your instructions from Washington."

"But why were they not given me before?" demanded Ned.

"Because the man in charge of this matter for the Secret Service department doubted your ability to make the trip to Tientsin. That is the truth of it. If you had failed back there at Taku, I should have taken the message from the office and mailed it, unopened, back to Washington. You have made good, so you get it yourself."

"They never put me to such a test before," grumbled Ned.

The officer turned, gave a short order to his men, and passed his machine over to one of them.

"I am going into the city with Mr. Nestor," he said; "see that none of these youngsters gets away during my absence."

"I'm goin' to get away right now," Jimmie exclaimed. "I'm goin' with Ned to the city. I guess I'm not visiting China to live in a cornfield. I want to see the wheels go round!"

The officer glanced at Ned questioningly, while the little fellow made a face back.

"Let him come along," Ned said. "He'll come anyway, whether we give him permission or not. How far must we walk?"

"Walk?" repeated Jimmie. "I'm goin' to take my motorcycle."

"That may be a good idea," admitted the officer. "I had not thought of that."

"We may have to make a run for it, judging from the experiences we had at Taku," Ned suggested.

"Nothing of the kind here," the other said. "You are as safe in this city as you would be in New York, under the same conditions, of course. You know there are sections of New York which strangers do well to keep out of at night."

So, mounting their cycles again, the three set off for the foreign section of Tientsin. At first the streets were very bad, but in time they came to smoother running and good time was made.

It was now approaching midnight, but the city, was still awake and stirring. The streets were well filled with pedestrians, and many of the small shops were open.

Naturally the three motorcycles, speeding through the streets of the ancient city, attracted no little attention. Here and there little groups blocked the way for an instant, but on the whole fair progress was made.

Jimmie, by no means as anxious as were his companions, enjoyed every moment of the dash. He was thinking of the stories he would have to tell when he returned to the Bowery again!

It is quite possible that the way would have been more difficult for the riders only for the uniform of the officer. Foreigners are not given much consideration by the street crowds in China---especially by such crowds as enliven the thoroughfares at night---but, since the march of the allied armies to Peking, uniforms have been held in great awe.

At last the telegraph office was reached, and Ned was glad to see that lights still burned within. His night ride would at least prove of avail. He would receive instructions directly from Washington, and that would be more to the purpose than traveling along like a blind mole in the earth, receiving his information by bits from underlings in the Secret Service.

Besides, the boy was wet and cold, for the night was growing more disagreeable every moment, and he would now have an opportunity to warm himself by a blaze such as foreigners ordinarily insist on in the cold months in China.

The man at the desk bowed courteously as the three entered the office. He was evidently a native of China but seemed to have profited by a foreign education.

When Ned gave his name and asked for a message, the operator, who appeared to be the sole employee there, coolly surveyed him critically from head to foot. Then he turned questioning eyes to the marine.

"It is all right," the officer said. "This is the person brought here by the flying squadron."

"A boy!" cried the operator. "Only a boy!"

"Aw, cut that out!" cried Jimmie, always ready to resent any seeming discourtesy to his chum.

The operator scowled at the little fellow and turned to the officer with the remark that he should be obliged to consult with his superior.

"All right," was the officer's reply. "Only make haste."

The operator entered a back room and presently returned with a boy who evidently served as messenger during the daytime. After receiving whispered instructions, the lad passed out of the office, with a furtive glance over his shoulder at Jimmie.

Then the operator went back to his desk, while the officer and Ned stood waiting. There was no fire in the outer office, but a wave of warm air came from the rear room.

"We have been riding in the rain," the officer said, seeing that they were not to be invited into the heated apartment. "May we go back to the fire?"

The operator scowled, but the uniform won the day, and the three were ushered into a small room where an American oil stove was sending forth a generous heat. Then the grouchy operator slammed the door and left his guests to their own reflections.

"Say," Jimmie whispered, in a moment, "I don't believe that chump is on the level!"

"Well," Ned replied, "he's got to give me the dispatch. He can't get out of doing that."

"Perhaps he knows what the message contains," the officer suggested, "and is not inclined to deliver it."

"I hardly think he knows what it contains," Ned answered, "for it is undoubtedly in cipher."

"And you have the Secret Service code?" asked the officer, amazement showing on his face.

"Certainly."

"Well, they have a lot of confidence in you, then," said the other.

At the end of half an hour a man said to be the assistant in charge of the station entered the room and eyed all three occupants keenly. His glances were met frankly by Ned and the officer, but Jimmie could not resist an inclination to wrinkle his nose at him.

"Which is Ned Nestor?" the man asked, addressing the officer.

The marine pointed toward Ned.

"Do you know him to be Ned Nestor?" was the next question, and Ned thought he felt a hostile spirit in the tone.

"Certainly I do, else I would not be here with him."

"This is important business of state," suggested the other, "and I have to be cautious."

"Your conduct seems more like curiosity than caution," the officer declared. "Have you the message with you?"

"Yes, but I can't deliver it except in the presence of the manager."

"Is it in the code of the Secret Service?" asked Ned.

"It is in some code unknown to me."

"If you don't deliver it in five minutes," declared the officer, "I shall call the American consul!"

The official made no reply.

"You can read this code, I suppose?" he asked of Ned.

"Certainly."

"Well, I'll communicate with the manager, and if he says it is all right I'll give you the message and take your receipt for it. Will that answer?"

"It must, I suppose," replied the officer.

The obdurate official left the room.

"Gee, but it's close in here!" Jimmie declared, in a moment. "Seems like a hop joint in Pell street."

"There is opium in the air," the officer said. "See if you can find a window."

Jimmie found a window opening on a large court and lifted the lower sash. Then he called to Ned.

"I don't like the looks of this," he said. "If they should try to hold us here, what?"

"They won't do that."

"Oh, they won't tie us up, I guess," said the little fellow, "but they may delay our departure."

"Go on," smiled Ned.

"An' communicate with the ginks that have been chasing us ever since we left the submarine," concluded the boy.

"In time, Jimmie," Ned answered, "you may even get into the thinking row. I have been wondering ever since we came in here if we were not with enemies instead of friends."

"I can soon find out," declared Jimmie.

"Yes? How, may I ask?"

"I'll rush out into the other room an' try to get to the street. If there's anythin' in the notion we have, they'll turn me back."

"You might try that," smiled Ned, and the officer clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder and declared that he was a "brick."

So Jimmie hustled out into the front office. The listeners heard sharp words, and then a slight scuffling of feet. Then next instant the boy was pushed back through the doorway.

"What is the trouble?" asked the marine of the assistant, whose flushed face showed in the half-open doorway.

"You'll all have to be identified before you can leave here," was the curt reply. "You have asked for important state dispatches, and we want to know what your motive is."

"My motive is to get them," replied Ned, coolly.

"Wait until you prove your right to them," said the other, and the door was slammed shut. Ned stepped back to the window and looked out into the court. The walls were four stories high, and there seemed to be no passage out of the box-like place. The officer suggested that he force his way through the outer office and reach the American consul, but Ned did not approve of this. He thought there must be some other way. Then a hint of that other way came from the court in the call of an owl.

"That's a Boy Scout signal, and not a bird!" almost shouted Jimmie.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MESSAGE FROM WASHINGTON

"Surely," the marine officer said, in answer to the boy's exclamation, "that is a genuine, feathered owl. No boy could make so perfect an imitation."

"It's Dutchy, all right," insisted Jimmie. "I've heard him make that noise before. Now, how did he ever get to Tientsin, and how did he locate us?"

"It doesn't seem possible that it is Hans," Ned said. "How could he make the journey on foot, through a country suspicious of every foreigner? And how comes it that he chanced on this building?"

"Didn't he know that you were expecting instructions from Washington while on the way to Peking?" asked the officer.

"I did not know, myself, that I was to receive instructions while on the way until I met you," Ned replied. "If Hans is indeed here, he has either blundered into his present position or gained pretty accurate information from some one unknown to me."

"If he is here?" repeated Jimmie. "Of course he is here. I'm goin' out in the court an' give him the call of the pack!"

"What does he mean by that?" asked the officer of Ned. "Call of the pack?"

"The call of the Wolf pack," answered Ned. "We both belong to the Wolf Patrol, of New York."

"And you think Hans, if it is he, will understand?"

"Of course!" scorned Jimmie.

The little fellow was about to step out of the low window to the floor of the court when a mist of light appeared at one of the glazed windows on the opposite side. The three watched the illumination with absorbing interest for a moment.

"Hans must be up there," Ned, muttered, "although I would almost as soon expect to find him up in a balloon."

"I reckon you'll find an owl with wise eyes and feathers up there, if you wait," said the officer, with a smile. "The boy you refer to never could have traveled here alone."

"You just wait," advised Jimmie.

Presently the mist of light centered down to three small flames, apparently coming from three narrow twists of paper, burning in a row in front of a window on the second floor. Jimmie grasped Ned's arm as the three tiny columns of flame showed for an instant and then vanished.

"There!" he said. "Do you know what that means?"

"It is a warning of danger," Ned muttered.

"Say that again," exclaimed the officer. "What kind of a game is this?"

"It is a Boy Scout warning," Ned replied. "In the forest three columns of smoke express the warning. How did this German boy learn all this?" he continued, turning to Jimmie.

"Don't you ever think the Philadelphia Boy Scouts are slow!" answered the boy. "Hans has been out in the forest with them, and knows all about woods work, an' signs, an' signals. Give it up, now?"

"Yes," replied the officer, "I give it up. You boys must have a wonderful organization."

"We certainly have," Ned replied.

The three waited for a moment, but no more signals came from the window. Instead a heavy footfall sounded outside the door and a man they had not seen before stepped into the room.

He was a heavily built man, with broad shoulders, black hair and eyes, and a wicked mouth. His face looked hard and repulsive, like the face of a reckless, intolerant, whisky-drinking captain of police in a graft-ridden district. He closed the door with his back as he entered.

"You are Ned Nestor?" he asked of the officer. The latter pointed toward Ned.

"That child!" exclaimed the newcomer.

Jimmie restrained himself with an effort, for he knew that this was no time to engage in a quarrel. He turned his back to the group and looked out of the window into the court.

There was now no light at the window from which the warning had been given, but there were flickers of uncertain candles at some of the others. The hooting of the owl had undoubtedly attracted the attention of the occupants of the building.

As Jimmie looked, however, the sash of the window he was watching was pushed up and a tousled head appeared. Other sashes were pushed up in an instant, and pigtailed heads and slanting, evil eyes were in view.

"I guess they're keepin' cases on the kid!" Jimmie thought, as he made an almost imperceptible motion toward Hans. "It would be pretty poor, I reckon, if I could get up there," he added, not meaning that it would be "pretty poor" at all, but, on the contrary, a very good move indeed.

While the lad watched the window, from which the tousled head had now disappeared, some of the other windows closed. The natives were evidently in no mood to lose their sleep because of a foreign-devil noise in the middle of the night.

The little fellow was certain that the head he had for a moment seen was that of Hans, the Philadelphia Boy Scout who had been so strangely encountered during the visit of the submarine to an island off the coast of China. He knew, too, that the German understood that something unusual and hostile to his friends was going on below.

He did not stop to consider the means by which Hans had reached the city of Tientsin and that particular building. He accepted it for granted that he was there, and wondered just what steps he, the German, would be apt, or able, to take in the emergency which threatened the failure of the mission to Peking.

Presently the voices of the marine officer, the official who had been summoned by the assistant manager, and Ned reached his ears. The officer was clearly in an angry mood and Ned was trying his persuasive powers on the newcomer.

"Are you an officer of the telegraph company?" the officer asked, in an angry tone.

"I am not," was the equally discourteous rejoinder. "I am a private detective employed, by the manager here. It is my duty to look after just such cases as this."

"Well," Ned said, calmly, "ask any questions you desire and we will answer them frankly. I came to China at the request of the Washington government, and am to receive instructions here. The operator tells me that there is a cablegram here for me, but refuses to deliver it on the ground that I may be an impostor."

"I think he has you sized up right," grated the detective.

"Then we may as well be going," Ned said, still coolly. "There is nothing for us to do now but try to establish our identity before the American consul."

The boy moved toward the door as he spoke, but the brawny detective obstructed his passage to the outer room. Ned drew back with a smile on his face.

"You can't leave here just at present," said the detective. "You will remain in custody until morning."

"Why morning?" asked Ned, with a light laugh.

"Because your accuser will be here then."

"Why didn't you say something of an accuser before?" asked Ned.

"It was not necessary."

"What does the accuser say?"

"He only warns us against delivering important papers to a youth answering your description."

"Now I understand why all this rumpus has been kicked up!" cried the marine officer. "The man who warned you is Lieutenant Rae?"

The detective nodded.

"Then he is causing us to be delayed for purposes of his own," the officer stormed. "He aims to get to Peking in advance of us. We must be permitted to depart immediately."

He moved toward the door, but the detective stood in his way. Without a word he seized the fellow by the shoulder whirled him around, put his beery face to the wall, and passed out of the room. Ned was about to follow him when the strange attitude of the detective caught his attention and he stood waiting while a scuffle on the outside told of a physical complication there.

"Much good that break will do him," said the detective, straightening out his twisted coat collar. "He will find a squad of police at the street door."

"European police?" asked Ned.

"Native police," with a snarl of rage as the commotion in the outer room continued.

Knowing that it would be no trouble at all to secure the release by any American officer taken into custody by Chinese police, Ned turned to the window and looked out on the court. He understood, too, that his own arrest would mean a long delay in prison while his identity was being established. So he thought best to keep out of the squabble the hot-headed officer had engaged in.

How sane this decision was only those foreign citizens who had been arrested and cast into prison in China or Russia can appreciate. While an accredited officer of a foreign power may almost instantly regain his liberty, a plain citizen, such as Ned was forced to appear, might be kept in jail for any number of days, weeks, or months.

The detective stood glaring at the two boys for an instant, as if anxious to inflict physical punishment upon them, but, as they remained at the window and said no more to him, he was obliged to take a different course. After rapping out several insulting observations concerning school children who ought to be spanked and put to bed, he flung himself out of the room.

"You saw Hans?" asked Ned, then.

Jimmie opened his eyes in amazement.

"Did you?" he asked.

"I saw the tousled head you saw," replied Ned.

"I thought you were looking another way," commented the little fellow. "That was Hans, all right."

"But why does he remain inactive? He knows there is something doing down here, else he would not have shown the signal of warning. He ought to be out of that window by this time."

"This is a country of hard knots," laughed Jimmie. "They may have tied up his fat little trotters."

In spite of the serious situation, Ned laughed.

"The tying up in this case makes it seem like a cheap drama on the lower East Side in New York," he said.

"I think I might get up to that window," Jimmie suggested.

"How?" asked Ned.

"By the lower window frames an' castings. If you'll manage to keep the Chinks off me I'll try."

"It is worth trying," Ned mused.

The other windows opening on the court were now closed. The sleepy natives, possibly doped with opium, had wearied of watching the figures in the rear room of the telegraph office and tumbled back into bed, or back on such miserable heaps of dirty matings as they chose to call beds.

The sounds of conflict had already died out in the front office, and another visit from the evil-faced detective was momentarily expected, so Jimmie was urged to make the proposed attempt to reach Hans at once.

He passed out of the window, crossed the beaten earth floor of the court, and began to climb. Ned was pleased to see that he had little difficulty in ascending to the window. Once there he heard him rap on the pane. There was a pause, and then the boy pushed up the sash and clambered inside.

Ned was glad to see that the boy had the good judgment to draw the sash down, as soon as he was in the room. What he would discover there the watcher had no idea.

He might find Hans there under guard. He might discover, when it was too late, that the German had been, unwillingly, used as a decoy by cunning natives into whose hands he might have fallen.

Still, there were the signals! The natives could not have known of the Boy Scout system of warnings, and Hans would certainly have volunteered nothing in the way of allurements.

He watched the window for what seemed to him to be a very long time. The pane remained dark.

"If the lad finds the situation favorable," Ned thought, "he may not return here at all. I should have instructed him to leave the room by the main stairway, if possible, and return to the marines. It would look comfortable, just now, to see that file of bluecoats marching into the telegraph office."

However, there was now no help for the omission, and Ned waited with varying emotions for some sign from the window. None came, but presently the door of the rear room was opened and the detective blustered in.

"Where is the other prisoner?" he demanded, looking keenly about the room. "He was here not long ago. Where is he?"

"Didn't you see him crowd out with the marine officer?" asked Ned.

"He was here after that fellow left," was the reply. "But he can't escape from the building," he added, "for every avenue is guarded, and the chap the cablegram belongs to has just asked for it!"

CHAPTER IX

TRICKS THAT WERE VAIN

Ned eyed the bullying detective keenly. He did not believe that the cablegram had been demanded by another. That was only a pretext on the part of his enemies to make their attitude of delay appear more reasonable. If, as was claimed, the message was now claimed by two, the holders would certainly be justified in using great caution in delivering it.

He did not believe, either, that the telegraph officials had been nerved enough to resort to police protection. That would be to bring the matter into the courts, and he did not think those who were opposing him would care for that.

"You are not telling the truth," he said, coolly, to the detective. "No one here could honestly claim the message, because no one in Tientsin, previous to my arrival, knew there was such a message here, if I except the telegraph people and the man who sent it. If a claimant has shown up, he is acting under instructions from you."

"You are deceiving yourself!" snarled the other.

"Where is Captain Martin, of the marines?" asked Ned, not caring to dispute the point. "If you have arrested him, you'll be having his men after you before morning."

"You mean the men you left in the cornfield?"

"Certainly, the United States marines."

"Then you don't know that they have gone back to Taku?"

"No; neither do you," replied Ned. This was too cheap!

"But, they have," insisted the detective. "At least, they have disappeared from the camp in the cornfield."

"You seem pretty well posted as to our doings," said the boy.

"We are pretty well informed as to all crooks who come here," was the reply.

"What are you going to do about delivering the cablegram?" Ned asked, ignoring the insult.

"Wait until morning and deliver it to the American consul."

"In America," Ned said, with a provoking smile, "we elect men of your slant of mind to the Ananias club."

"You'll see," was the reply. "In the meantime, you are in custody."

Where was Jimmie? Had he escaped from the building, or was he detained in the room he had surreptitiously entered? If he had indeed escaped, would he have the good sense to hasten to the camp instead of trying to assist his chum single-handed?

Ned asked himself these questions, but could find no answer. He saw that the detective was not inclined, not yet desperate enough, to march him off to prison, however, and took courage from the fact. If he could secure a short delay all might yet be well.

Directly the assistant manager entered the room, frowning and red of face. Ned saw that something, perhaps something of importance to himself, was in progress on the outside.

"The American consul is out there," he exclaimed, storming about the little room.

"That's fine!" cried Ned. "I presume I can see him?"

The detective glared at the boy and shook his head.

"No, you can't," he declared. "You'll stay here."

"And in the meantime you'll tell him that I have gone away?"

"We'll tell him what we choose."

Ned made a quick dash for the door, tipped the assistant manager over a broken-backed chair which stood in the way, and passed into the outer office. The detective grabbed at him as he sped past, but the boy eluded the ham-like hands which were thrust forward.

There were three persons in the office, when Ned bolted into it. These were the operator, the American consul, and Hans! The German grinned in an apologetic way as Ned hastily greeted him.

The American consul was a pleasant-faced gentleman of middle age. He was dressed in rather sporty clothes, and there was just a hint of a swagger of importance in his walk and manner as he extended his hand to Ned. Dressler-Archibald Hewitt Dressler, to be exact---was a pretty fair sample of the keen, open-hearted corn-belt politician rewarded with a foreign appointment for rounding up the right crowd at the right time.

Ned was glad to see that the consul recognized him as the lad in whose interest he had been pulled out of bed. He took the official's outstretched hand and shook it warmly.

"I never was so glad to see any person in my life!" Ned exclaimed, while Hans stood by with that bland German smile on his face.

"Oh, we'll have this mess straightened out in no time," the consul said. "These people," with a gesture toward the operator, the assistant manager, and the detective, "are all right. They mean to do the fair and honorable thing, but they have troubles of their own. We'll have this all ironed out in no time."

"This kid is an impostor!" shouted the detective.

"No hard names, please," said the consul. "Let us get at the facts of the case. You claim to be Ned Nestor?" turning to the boy.

"That is my name, sir."

"And you claim a cablegram which is here? A cablegram in cipher---the cipher code of the Secret Service of the United States government?"

"Yes, it would naturally be in cipher."

"You have the key to the code?"

"Certainly."

"Be careful, young man," laughed the consul, "for I was in the Secret Service department before I came here, and know the code."

"I'm glad you do," replied Ned.

"Hand me the cablegram," ordered the consul, turning to the assistant manager.

The detective stepped forward with a frown on his face. He glared at the consul and at Ned for a moment, and then broke out:

"You can't have it unless you will promise not to reveal its contents to this impostor."

"Can't I?" said the consul, coolly. "Hand me the cablegram."

The operator and the assistant manager drew back. The consul stood for an instant regarding them angrily.

"One, two, three!" he said. "At the word three, pass it over!"

"Goot sphort, dot feller!" whispered Hans.

During the dead silence which followed Ned watched the face of the consul for some sign of weakening, but found none. He knew that he had come upon an official who would stand by his guns, no matter what took place.

There was a little crowd in front of the office, and half a dozen faces were pressed against the windows and the glass panel of the door. Ned thought he saw a face there he had last seen in the old house at Taku where he had been captured. The fellow carried a long cicatrice on his left cheek.

"What do you mean by coming in here and giving orders?" demanded the detective. "I'll put you out if the manager says the word."

Ned, standing close to Hans, felt the muscles of the German's great arm swell under the sleeve. Hans was evidently anticipating trouble.

"Will you deliver the cablegram?" asked the consul.

"I will not."

As the assistant manager spoke the detective reached his hand up to the electric light switch. Ned saw in an instant what his intention was. If the room should be suddenly thrown into darkness, the operator might escape with the cablegram.

The consul, too, saw what was meditated and sprang forward. The detective struck at him, but before his blow reached its intended mark, Hans struck and the detective went down as suddenly as if he had been hit with an ax. Then, from unseen places, from beneath counters and out of closets, came a horde of Chinamen. The room was full of them.

"Soak um!" cried Hans.

The German was about to adopt his own suggestion by passing a blow out to the nearest Chinaman when the consul stepped before him. For an instant the threatening natives stepped back. The attacking of the American consul was a thing to be seriously considered.

"Once more!" warned the consul. "Give me the cablegram."

At a motion from the assistant manager the brown men closed threateningly about the American again. There was malice in their eyes as they pressed closer and closer.

"This looks like another Boxer uprising!" exclaimed the consul. "Mr. Nestor," he added, "if you will assemble yourself at my back, and our German friend will stand by, we'll give 'em a run for their white alley. Hit hard and often."

There is no knowing what might have happened then had not an interruption fell. Ned saw the crowd at the door vanish, and the next instant the friendly popping of motorcycles rang a chorus in the air.

Then came the rattle of guns and sabers, and a line of bluecoats stood before the door. At their head stood Jimmie, wrinkling his freckled nose as if for dear life.

Ned sprang to the door and opened it.

"Quick!" he cried. "Don't let a man now in the room get away."

"Where is Captain Martin, the officer in charge?" asked one of the men.

"The Chinks can tell you," Ned answered. "Close up at the doors," he went on, gazing about excitedly, "so that no one can leave."

This was done instantly. In fact, the natives and the men of the telegraph office were not in a fighting mood now. The guns and sabers of the marines had brought them to a peace-loving state of mind!

They huddled about in the center of the room, the natives milling around like cattle in a storm. The assistant manager pushed out of the press and handed the consul the cablegram.

"Understand that I am doing this under protest," he said. "Your conduct in invading my office with armed men shall be reported."

"I shall welcome any investigation," the consul replied, with a smile, "because I want to know something of your motives in doing what you have done to-night. You know very well that the cablegram is of no importance to any person except the one to whom it is addressed. I can read the code, it is true, but you doubtless overlooked the fact that I have received such dispatches here. So, let us look at the matter in a reasonable light. What inducements were offered you to keep the cablegram away from this young man? Speak up!"

"You are insulting!" gasped the assistant manager.

"Come down to cases!" commanded the consul.

"I don't understand your Bowery slang."

"How much money was offered you to hold this message?"

There was no answer, but the operator glanced slyly in the direction of the consul with a frightened look in his eyes.

"Were you to withhold the message altogether, or were you merely to delay this young man?"

"You are insulting!" repeated the other.

"Who bribed you?" came the next question, snapped out like the crack of a lash.

"You have the message," the assistant manager said. "Get out."

"Only for the marines you'd put me out!" laughed the consul.

"Indeed I would!"

Hans made a threatening gesture toward the fellow and he hastened to the protection of the counter.

"My office is only a short distance away," said the consul, turning to Ned. "We may as well go there and size this extraordinary situation up. I hardly know what to make of it."

"There is one thing you, perhaps, do not understand," Ned said, "and that is that Captain Martin, in charge of this squad, has been taken into custody by order of the detective Hans knocked out a moment ago."

The consul's face turned red with anger. He seized the assistant manager by the shoulder and shook him, over the counter, as a dog shakes a rat.

"Where is he?" he demanded. "Tell your hirelings to bring him here, not soon, but now."

"He assaulted me!" complained the manager.

"Produce him! One, two, three. At the third word he comes!"

Obedying a motion from the frightened man, a native opened a door back of the counter and Captain Martin was pushed out into the room, smiling and evidently enjoying the situation.

"I could have butted out at any moment," he said, "for these Chinks are not fighters, but I heard what was going on out here and thought I'd let events shape themselves. If I had been out here a short time ago I am afraid I should have made trouble for myself and for you."

"It is nice to watch a game that you can't lose at," laughed the consul. "Come along, with your men, to my office. This lad wants a chance to read his message."

"Sure," was the reply. "I want to know how that Dutchman come to bring you here, and how my men managed to get here just in time. There are mysteries to explain. What?" he added, with a laugh.

"I guess we'll have to wait for explanations until we know what is in this message," Ned said. "Come along to the office, Mr. Consul, for we have lost a lot of time already."

"I am anxious to know what the message contains," said the consul.

CHAPTER X

THE DARK ROAD TO PEKING

Half an hour later the American consul, Captain Martin, and Ned sat in a private room at the consulate. The marines and Jimmie and Hans were in the large outer room.

The cablegram from Washington lay open on a table with a translation by its side. It read:

"Proceed to Peking immediately and report to the American ambassador. Keep within reach of the flying squadron. Avoid complications with the natives. Look out for plots to delay your party. Important that you should reach Peking at once. Wire conditions."

"Not much news in that," said Ned. "Guess we've met all the trouble the Washington people anticipated."

"Shall you go on to-night?" asked the Captain.

"Certainly."

"It is a dark, rainy night," the consul warned, "and the highways of China are none too safe, even in daylight, for American messengers who are insufficiently guarded."

"We'll look out for our part of the game," Captain Martin laughed.

"We'll, keep close together," advised the consul. "You will meet trouble on the way. The men who bribed the telegraph people will not get into the discard now. You'll find their hirelings waiting out on the dark road to Peking."

Ned pointed to the dispatch.

"We've got to go," he said. "I can't tell you how thankful I am to have met a true American here," he added, extending his hand to the consul. "I shall tell the story of to-night in the State department at Washington when I get back."

"Well, get it straight," laughed the consul. "Say that a blundering German boy, who said he was a Boy Scout from Philadelphia, nearly dragged me out of bed about midnight and informed me that other Boy Scouts were in trouble at the telegraph office. I knew that Ned was expected here, and so lost no time in getting down. That's all. The marines did the rest."

"Save for that beautiful bluff of yours!" laughed Ned. "But how in the Dickens did Hans ever get to you? How did he know where to go? How did he get to Tientsin, anyway?"

"Give it up!" smiled the consul. "You might as well ask me who got the marines out just in the nick of time."

"Jimmie did that, of course," replied Ned. "I think I know all about it now," he added. "We saw Hans in a room opening on the court. The little fellow burglarized the window and found Hans. I don't know how Hans got there, but Jimmie found him, anyway. Then the kid told his story and Hans went to the consul and Jimmie went after the flying squadron. I have a notion that this is the way it came about."

In this supposition Ned was exactly right, for Jimmie had found Hans in the room off the court and the two had planned their movements just as Ned explained. The only mystery was as to how Hans got to the Tientsin house and the room where he was found.

"We'll learn all about that in time," Ned added. "Now we must be off. By the way, I wonder where Jack and Frank are? I haven't seen them since I left the camp. In the rush of events I quite forgot to ask for them."

"Just wait until I talk with one of the boys out here," the Captain said. "Probably Jimmie is already telling them of his adventures."

But when the door was opened and Jimmie questioned he opened his eyes wide in wonder. The Captain drew him into the private room.

"Say," the boy said, excitement in voice and manner, "didn't you leave Frank and Jack at the camp when you left?"

"Why, I left when you did," was the reply. "They were there then."

Jimmie sprang to the door and beckoned the second in command into the room. By this time both Ned and the consul were on their feet.

"Where did you leave Frank and Jack?" asked Ned, as the officer entered the apartment.

"They left us," replied the officer, with hesitation. "We made our beds of blankets and tumbled in, leaving one man on guard. When I turned in the boys were in their bunks. When Jimmie awoke us, they were nowhere to be seen. They probably sneaked off to have a look at Tientsin by night---and a beautiful time they will have."

"Didn't you see them when you went back?" asked Ned of Jimmie.

"No; I looked for them, and one of the marines told me they had gone on ahead. I'm goin' out an' dig 'em up!"

"You'll make a sweet fist of digging them up in this man's town, at this hour of the night," the consul declared, anxiety showing on his face. "You'll have to leave them, Mr. Nestor," he went on, "and I'll rake the city with a fine tooth comb but I'll find them."

Ned hesitated. There was the cablegram on the table. A delay of an hour or two might not prove serious, but this search for Frank and Jack might occupy days, if not weeks!

It was inconceivable that the boys, disregarding all instructions from the Captain and all warnings from Ned, should have stolen off into the city for a night ramble. They both knew how much depended on the party keeping together and keeping prepared for action.

"They must have had some reason for leaving the camp," Ned said, after a long pause. "They never would have gone away without some object other than amusement, or love of adventure in their minds."

Captain Martin went to the door and stepped out into the main office, facing the marines.

"Boys," he said, in as matter-of-fact tone as he could assume, "what did Frank and Jack say when they left the camp?"

Nine of the men looked up in wonder, but the tenth hastened to answer the question.

"Not a word," he said. "I was on guard, and I saw a young chap come into the little bit of light there was about the old house where we were stopping."

"Who was it?" Ned interrupted.

The marine shook his head.

"I didn't ask him who he was," he said. "He asked where the boys were, and said he was a Boy Scout from Boston, and wanted to see some one from home. I knew that the lads would be as glad to see him as he would be glad to see them, and showed him where they had bunked down in a little dog-house of a shack just outside the house."

"And they went away with this fellow?" asked Ned, anxious to get the story in as few words as possible. "Why didn't you notify the officer then in charge of the squad?"

"I didn't think it was necessary," was the reply. "Well, the kid went to the shack where Frank and Jack were, and I saw them talking together there for a few minutes. Then I saw the three of them pass through the circle of light, walking toward the city, and that's all I know about it. I wasn't under orders to tell them when to go, or where to go, or when not to go. It wasn't for me to interfere."

"Bonehead!" exclaimed Jimmie.

The marine glanced up at the little fellow with a frown.

"Don't you go to abusing me," he said. "I won't stand for it. I was raised a pet!" he added, with a smile, as the boy grinned.

"Stop that!" commanded the Captain, sharply. "If you have told all you know about the matter you may go."

"Wait," Ned said, as the marine moved toward the door, "I would like to ask a question. Would you know this lad you speak of if you should see him again?"

"I don't think so. It was dark, and he didn't look me squarely in the face."

"That's all," Ned said, turning to the consul. "You'll do what you can to find them?" he asked.

"Sure I will!"

"I can't remain and help you," Ned went on, and there was a tremble in his voice. "I've got my work to do."

"I understand."

"And we'll start right away," Ned continued, "if you are ready, Captain. We ought to be in Peking early in the morning."

"It is a bad road," the consul said, "and you'll find, echoes of the scrap you had here waiting for you along the way. In the language of the cablegram, keep together!"

When all were mounted there were still two vacant cycles---those the missing boys had ridden. Ned pointed to one and spoke to Hans:

"Can you ride?"

"Sure!"

"Then you may take one of the machines and come along with us."

Hans sprang onto one of the motorcycles just as he had observed the others do. Under the impetus of the leap the machine trundled along for a few feet and tipped over, landing Hans on his back with the rear wheel scraping acquaintance with his nose.

"Ouch!" he shouted. "Dake him off! He bites! Vot issit if I hand himone? Vot?"

While the others were laughing at the plight of the German, he made an effort to arise and the machine promptly slid down an incline and sparked and gyrated until Hans' hair fairly stood on end with fright.

"Catch heem!" he shouted. "Catch heem! He runs py the road away! Dunner! Vot a streets!"

"You mustn't tickle his ribs with your heels when you get on," advised Jimmie. "That always makes him buck. It is a wonder he didn't tramp you when you were down."

"Holy schmoke!" cried Hans. "Vot a nose I vill haf! Me for the walks to Peeking!"

"I guess you'll have to give up going with us!" laughed Ned. "You may remain with the consul until we return. And help him hunt Frank and Jack, will you?"

Hans willingly agreed to this, and, with many handshakes and well-wishes from the consul, the boys were off for Peking. By this time the streets were rather quiet, although they knew that before they could pass beyond the limits of the great, sprawling town with its million of inhabitants dawn would be showing in the sky.

The swift ride through the city was a revelation to the American boys. All was strange with an atmosphere of age and decay. The habitations, save those occupied by foreigner---and these were grouped together---were mostly old and mean. The streets were in bad condition---worse than usual because of the softening effects of the rain---and the lights were, in places, infrequent.

Watchmen patrolling the thoroughfares in the idle manner peculiar to all alleged guardians of the night, gazed menacingly at the machines as they whirled by, talking in their spark language, as Jimmie expressed it, but the uniforms kept them at a respectful distance. Here and there were little tea shops, and before these were groups of natives, circled close together.

It seemed to Ned like a ride through a cemetery, the occupants of which had been awakened to life for an instant and would go back to their graves and their dreamless sleep again as soon as the machines had passed. The weight of ten thousand centuries seemed to hang over the place.

There was a faint line of dawn in the direction of the Yellow Sea when the boys came to the suburbs of Tientsin. Before them lay nearly eighty miles of rough road to the capital city. With good luck, they figured that they could make that in four hours.

Now, at dawn, the road which curved like a ribbon before them, started into life. From field and village streamed forth natives carrying and drawing all kinds of burdens. In that land the poor are obliged to be early astir, and even then the reward of their labors is small.

It was autumn, and the produce of the field was ripe for barter. There were loads attached to horses and loads drawn in carts; there were 'rickshaws, and bundles on backs, and on long poles carried over bent shoulders.

The strange procession of the motorcycles and the marines caused many a surprised halt in the procession of industry. Chinamen stood at one side while the steel horses shot by them, and then gathered in little groups by the wayside to discuss this newest invention of the foreign devils.

The sun rose in a cloudless sky and the earth steamed under its rays, sending back in eddying mist the rain which had poured upon her with such violence the night before. It would be a hot day, notwithstanding the lateness of the season, and the eyes of the boys soon turned to a shaded grove not far from the highway.

"Me for breakfast!" Jimmie declared, and the marines looked as if the lad had echoed their own thoughts.

"We may as well halt a little while," Captain Martin said to Ned, "as my boys are beginning to look empty. They have had a hard night of it, and we can't afford to cultivate any grouches!"

Ned, although he was anxious to go forward, saw good judgment in this and ordered a halt. In five minutes little fires were burning in the grove and the odor of steaming coffee soon rose softly with the mists of the morning.

CHAPTER XI

THE MYSTICISM OF THE EAST

"You remember what the consul said regarding trouble on the road to Peking?" asked Ned of Captain Martin as the two took seats under a tree not far from the cooking fires.

"Yes, and I wondered at his expressing such gloomy predictions. He gave me quite a scare."

"I think I understand, now, why he did it," Ned said, with a smile. "He was following instructions."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that he had been communicated with by the Washington office, during the day, and given instructions."

"To scare you?"

"No; to keep me up to the mark in caution."

"I don't think you needed that."

"Well," Ned went on, "this is a queer case. At first I could not make up my mind why the Secret Service people insisted on my making this trip to Peking on a motorcycle, guarded by soldiers like a passenger in time of war. Now I think I know."

"Then you have the advantage of me," said the officer. "I've been thinking that over quite a lot, and the answer is still to find."

"Unless I am mistaken," Ned replied, "I am expected to do my work on the way to Peking."

"Come again!" smiled the Captain.

"In other words," replied Ned, "I'm set up on a motorcycle as a mark for the diplomats of Europe to shoot at."

"Then I must be a mark, also," grumbled the Captain.

"Exactly. How do you like it?"

"Oh, it isn't so bad!" smiled the other, won into better humor by the laughing face of the boy. "But why should the Secret Service department put you in such peril?"

"It is my notion," Ned hastened to say, in defense of his superior officers, "that they give me credit for sense enough to take care of myself. The same with regard to you."

"But why---"

"It seems to me," Ned interrupted, "that the department is up against a tough proposition. The matter is so delicate that no foreign government can be accused of mixing this conspiracy for Uncle Sam. What remains to do, then, is to spot the tools being used by the power that is most active."

"That's good sense."

"Well, we can't spot them in Washington, nor in Tientsin, nor yet in the American embassy at Peking. Where, then, but on the road---on the road where they are striving with all their might to block the progress of the agent who is trying to land them?"

Captain Martin mused a moment and then broke into a laugh.

"And so," he said, "you think we are spread out along this road for the conspirators to grab off?"

"If they can, of course; but that is not stating the case right. We are spread out along the road to Peking to catch the men who will try to stop us. See? We are here to watch for those who will try to catch us, and to catch them! What do you think of that?"

"Clever!" exclaimed the Captain.

"The system is an old one in detective work," Ned explained. "It is no unusual thing for an officer to permit a prisoner to escape in order that he may be traced to his confederates. Only this case is somewhat different, of course. We don't know exactly who the criminals are, but we expect them to reveal their identity by their own acts."

"Then we'd better be on double guard?"

"Of course. You know how the consul reiterated the warning he gave us. He couldn't tell us that it was the notion of the Secret Service department that we would be attacked on the way to Peking, but he could tell us to look out, and he did."

"Perhaps he thought the truth would frighten you off?"

"Perhaps," laughed Ned.

"Well, I'm glad to have the puzzle solved," Captain Martin said. "Now we know just what to look out for. When do you expect to meet with these foxy chaps?"

"They will appear in due time, if I am right," Ned replied. "Look out there on the road," he added, "they may be coming now."

The Captain looked and saw four men in the garb of priests, approaching the grove. Their robes were long and of a dirty slate color, and there was a great star on the breast of the man in the lead.

"A queer bunch," the officer said, "but not diplomats. They are Taoist priests, and the chances are that they have a tumble-down temple in this vicinity. They are not very popular in China just now."

"Never heard of them," Ned said, watching the men turn from the road into the grove.

"As you know," the officer explained; "I have been on Chinese stations a long time. Well, I've taken a fancy to study up the religion of the people. Or, to put it right, the three religions. First, there is the Confucian religion, which is not really a religion, for it does not deal with the spiritual. It is a philosophy, which teaches the brotherhood of man.

"Second, there is Buddhism, with its ruined temples and begging monks. This religion is an importation from India. Aged people and women are its chief devotees.

"Third, there is Taoism, scarcely less popular than Buddhism. The priests live with their families in ruined temples and practice all sorts of fool things. They have a mystic alchemy, prepare spells and incantations, and claim to hold communion with the dead. It is said that worthless foreigners travel about in the disguise of Taoist priests, just for the money there is in it, as fake spiritualist mediums travel about in our own country.

"The people coming are Taoist priests, all right, for they have the drums, and gongs, and fifes of their trade with them. Their ruined temple may not be far away. If we have time we may witness some of their foolish ceremonies."

Ned's face looked thoughtful for a moment, then cleared. There was a smile on his face as he asked:

"Do Taoist priests accost strangers on the highway?"

"Yes; when there is a show of getting money. They are a rank lot, as you will soon see."

"These may not be so rank," Ned replied, meaningfully.

"Why," began Captain Martin, "you don't suppose---"

"It seems odd that Taoist priests should arrive here just at this time."

"If these chaps really are spies---the spies we have been warned against---the fellows we were sent forth to meet, why, there may be a bit of action here."

"Well," Ned went on, "let them take the initiative. We shall soon be able to give a good guess as to what this visit means."

As the four strangely clad figures moved across the little patch of field which separated the highway from the grove, Jimmie came running over to where the two were sitting, an egg sandwich in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. As he ran the hot liquid jolted out of the cup and came in contact with his hand.

"Gee!" he shouted. "Just look what's comin'!"

Then he dropped the hot cup on the ground and began to dance up and down, shaking his blistered hand as he did so.

"I got it!" he said. "There was only one hot cup in the lot, an' I got it! Say, Ned, what do you know about them callers you're goin' to have? Look like busted washee-washee geeks from Pell street. Look at 'em!"

By this time the marines were watching the advancing priests with curious eyes. Breakfast was nearly over, and some of the men were preparing for a brief rest in the shady spot they had found.

The priests, if such they were, entered the grove, passed through the group of men without a glance to the right or left, and approached the spot where Ned and the Captain sat. Here they drew up in a line, much as the fakirs of the East Indies perform, with their crude drums, gongs and fifes in full view.

"Hello, Sports!" Jimmie cried.

Ned motioned to the boy to remain silent.

The Captain addressed the priests in a couple of Chinese sentences, but received no immediate answer. One of the fellows, the one with a great star painted, or worked, on the breast of his gown, soon advanced and stood directly in front of Ned.

"We have had warning of your approach," he said. "We have been waiting for you for many days."

Ned started, for the words were spoken in English. The Captain muttered under his breath:

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"What do you want?" asked Ned.

The four bowed to the ground.

"Attention. The mysticism of the East is open to you if you are brave and strong."

"Bunk!" whispered Jimmie.

"Where do you live?" asked the Captain.

The leader pointed to a pile of broken stones at the edge of the grove. A closer inspection of the heap told the officer that it was what time had left of a temple.

"Tell him to get busy," whispered Jimmie. "Can he make a tree three hundred years old in a minute?"

"Where is this mysticism of the East located?" asked the Captain, unable to get the original notion that they were not what they seemed out of his mind.

Again the leader pointed to the ruined temple.

"Come!" he said.

"Now is your chance!" whispered the Captain.

"You are convinced that these are the people who were sent out to defeat the purpose of our mission?" asked Ned.

"Sure," was the reply. "These fellows are not priests. I don't believe the chap who speaks is even a Chinaman."

Ned did not hesitate long. If he was correct in his interpretation of the orders of the Secret Service department, it would be the right thing for him to go with the strange visitors.

If, as he really believed, they had designs on his life or his liberty, no better place or time for the test of cunning and strength could have been selected. It was early morning, and the highway just beyond the grove was never long vacant of travelers. Indeed, groups of five or six were constantly in sight.

The travelers were Chinese, of course, and not likely to assist him out of any difficulty into which he might tumble, still the fact that they were there was something. Even conspirators do not seek audiences for their crimes.

Besides, there were the marines. Ned understood that they would not be permitted to enter the ruined temple in a body, but he knew that they would be within call.

"What's your notion?" Ned whispered to the Captain.

"Go, and take me with you."

"Of course you'll go if I do."

"And what's the matter with me goin'?" demanded Jimmie, who was near enough to catch the impression that Ned was going somewhere and was intending to leave him behind.

"Perhaps the hosts won't welcome three," suggested Ned, in a whisper. "Such people, like those who present communications from dead friends, at a dollar per, like to work in private."

Jimmie did not wait to argue the question with Ned. As usual, his answer was direct and to the point. He advanced upon the priests and demanded:

"Will you take me along?"

The four regarded each other in perplexity.

"Come, now," urged the boy, "be good sports. Be good fellers, for once!"

It was finally arranged that Ned, Jimmie and the Captain were to proceed to the ruined temple with the four and there learn something of the mysticism of the East! Ned was positive that the time for his test of courage had come. Still, he did not waver, for he was prepared. The marines were instructed to gradually encircle the old temple, and to listen for orders from the inside.

While satisfied that he had now come to the turning point in the case, Ned wondered, while on the way to the temple, if he ought to take the risk, whether it might not be wiser to arrest the fakirs, strip them of their disguises, and take them, by force of numbers, to the embassy at Peking. Still, if he took that course, he would have no proof against them---would not be able to connect the fellows with the conspiracy.

The only thing to do was to take the risk.

So, with a premonition of danger in his heart, he turned down the steps which led to the temple.

For the temple was, as has been said, in ruins. There was a heap of hewn stones on top of the earth, and that was all that showed from above. In front a stone staircase led down into a damp and evil-smelling place.

After a minute's descent Ned found himself in a long, narrow hall, which had at some time in the distant past formed the lobby of the temple.

There was a cold wind blowing from somewhere in advance, and bats flew croakingly against it in their retreat from the intruders. Ned heard the clang of a heavy door behind him. Then the current of air was shut off.

"This old barn of a place hasn't been used for a hundred years!" Jimmie whispered, clutching Ned by the arm.

"What makes you think so?" asked Ned.

"If in use, there would be something here to show it," was the reply. "See, they haven't even got lights here. The ones they are now carrying were taken from the folds of their robes. And there would be no bats if the place was in constant use."

"Right you are, boy," Ned whispered back. "But we knew what we were getting into. Hark!"

It was the dull, rolling sound of a drum that caused the exclamation. One of the men, far in advance, was evidently giving a signal. In a moment the shrill notes of a fife reached the ears of the boys.

They waited for a moment, wondering, and then a burst of light came from some unseen quarter and the four men were seen standing in line on a rock which lifted above the sloping floor.

"Now for the ghosts!" whispered Jimmie. "Who's first?"

CHAPTER XII

NIGHT IN AN ANCIENT CITY

Frank Shaw and Jack Bosworth, suddenly awakened from a sound sleep in the little mud shack in the cornfield, in the suburbs of Tientsin, were not a little astonished at finding themselves rolled deftly out of the blankets in which they had wrapped themselves before lying down.

"What's coming off here?" demanded Frank, rubbing his eyes and gazing blankly about the hovel. "What kind of a hotel is this?"

"What did you do that for?" asked Jack, edging newer to Frank. "Why this midnight industry? What did you pull me out of me covers for?"

"I didn't!" cried Frank. "You pulled me out!"

"Not me!" Jack answered. "I was catching German carp, in the upper lagoon in Central Park, N.Y., just a second ago. Sorry I woke up before I got a mess!"

"Who did it, then?" asked Frank. "Some one gave me a thump in the wind and then rolled me out of the drapery of me elegant couch."

"Search me!" Jack replied. "I got something like that, also. I'll bet it's the blooming marines, playing an alleged joke! I'm going out to heave a rock at them."

"Wait!" whispered a voice. "Don't make so much noise, either. You're pinched!"

"That's Bowery!" cried Jack.

"Come on and show yourself!" Frank commanded. "What are you hiding back there in the darkness for? Who are you, and where did you come from? What did you wake me up for, anyway?"

"Black Cat Patrol, Chicago!" was the reply that came through the darkness. "You're both Black Bears, New York," the voice went on. "I saw the badges on your vests."

Both boys sprang to their feet instantly. This was something worth while. A Boy Scout in China!

"Got a light?" asked Frank. "I'll just like to see whether you're a Black Cat or not."

"Nix on the light," was the reply.

"That's South Clark street, below Van Buren," laughed Jack.

"All right," Frank said, in answer to the boy's negative, "I've got a flashlight."

"Then keep it out of sight," advised the other. "I don't want to stir up these soldiers. Perhaps they won't let you go with me."

"Oh, they won't?" Jack grumbled. "We'll see! Turn on your light, Frank, old top!"

Frank, "old top," turned on his light, and the two saw a boy of apparently fifteen standing immediately in front of them. He was slender but muscular, and his red hair and blue eyes betokened anything but Asiatic ancestors.

The lad extended his right hand in full salute and waited.

"Correct!" Jack said. "Turn out your light, Frank. Sit down, kid, and tell us why this surprise party."

"I came down to tell you that there's doin's up town," was the quick reply. "You'd better get a move on!"

"We're ready," Frank said, then, "but we'd like to know what we're going to move against."

"Your friends are in trouble. That's the answer."

"How do you know?"

"I have just left them at the telegraph office."

"That's where they went."

"Well, that's where they're gettin' theirs," declared the lad. "So buck up!"

"Who---what---"

"Aw, come along!" the boy cut in. "They're goin' to be arrested, an' they won't get their cablegram, an' there'll be worse if you don't wake up. See?"

"You'll have to explain to us," Frank observed.

"You go tell that to the marines!" Jack exclaimed. "They're right outside there."

"All right!" the lad answered. "I'm goin' back. You can all go to Halifax for all me."

"Wait," said Frank. "Where did you get this information you're favoring us with? What's your name? How did you get to China?"

"I'm a delivery boy at the telegraph office," the lad answered. "I loafed around there tonight to see you folks, for I knew that the cablegram would be called for. Before showing myself, I heard what was going on an' ducked. Now, come on."

"What's your name?"

"Sandy McNamara."

"How did you get to China?"

"Hid in a ship an' got caught an' beat up."

"A stowaway, eh?"

"You bet! I'd do it again to get back to South Clark street, in little old Chi."

"What they doing to Ned and Jimmie?" asked Jack.

"Oh, come along!" Frank exclaimed. "The boys may be in need of good advice and exclusive society! We'll go and see."

"Well," Sandy put in, "this ain't no case for the bulls. You've got to get to them without makin' any show of fight. You'd be eat up in this town with them few soldiers."

"What do you propose?"

"Why, we'll go to the American consul an' get him out."

"You seem to be almost human in your intelligence," Jack cried. "Let go your anchor and heave ahead!"

"We'll have to make good time," said Sandy. "Can you run?"

"We're the original record-breakers when it comes to working our legs!" Jack said, and the three, after moving quietly through the lighted circle, so as not to attract the attention of the guard, broke into a run which fast lessened the distance between the camp and the telegraph office. At the end of half a mile Sandy drew up against a mud wall. The rain was still falling, and the boys were soaked to the skin and shivering with cold, notwithstanding their exertions.

"I'm winded," Sandy explained, panting.

"I'm frozen stiff," Jack declared.

"I'm wet enough to swim home," Frank put in.

"Well," Sandy continued, "there's a little shack behind us---looks like one of the squatter shacks on the Lake front---an' we can go in an' rest up. Here's where the only friend I have in China lives."

"Go on in, then," Jack replied, his teeth chattering with the cold.

"We ought to keep on," Frank advised. "This is no time to rest and get dry when Ned is in trouble!"

"That's right," from Jack. "Trot ahead, little one!"

"I've got to go in here, anyway, an' get my uniform," the boy explained. "I'll be more protection to you boys if I have it on."

"Protection to us!" laughed Jack. "You're a joker!"

"Hurry up, then, and get it," Frank urged. "We've got to be getting along toward the telegraph office."

"Ain't you comin' in?" asked Sandy.

"No; we'll want to remain if we go in. Hurry."

"Do you think he's on the level?" asked Jack, as the boy disappeared through the low doorway.

"I don't know," was the reply. "It doesn't seem as if an American lad, and a Boy Scout at that, would play a treacherous game against his own countrymen."

"No, it doesn't; yet what is he stopping here for? He ought to be as anxious as we are to get over the ground."

Then Sandy came stumbling to the door, on the inside, and asked the boys, through the rough boards, to come in with their lights.

"There's somethin' mighty strange here," he said.

"This may be a trap!" Jack said. "Shall we go in?"

"We may need this boy as a guide," Frank observed.

"All right, then. In we go."

There was only one room to the shack, which was of mud, with thick walls and a leaky roof. There was a table, a chair, a heap of clothes in a comer, and nothing else, save for a puddle of water on the floor.

Sandy stood in the middle of the floor, his feet in the puddle, when Frank's searchlight illumined the bare room. His eyes were staring in a strange way and his face was deadly pale.

"Look there!" he exclaimed, his lips forming the words badly. "The old woman who fed me when I was broke an' sick lies under the clothes, stupid from some dope. The house has been poked over. I saw a face at the little hole in the wall as I came in. What does it mean?"

Whisperings were heard at the door. Frank extinguished his light and the boys stood in darkness as complete as ever fell since the dawn of creation.

"What do you think?" asked Jack, of Frank.

"Looks like a trap."

Sandy sprang forward and seized Frank by the arm, and his voice shook as he began.

"No! It ain't no trap! I didn't bring you here to get rolled for your wads, or anythin' like that. I stopped here to get me telegraph messenger uniform. I can go anywhere in the city with that on, and not be molested. I don't know what this means, but there are Chinks all around this house."

"Perhaps you've been followed ever since you left the office," Frank suggested. "Where is your uniform?"

"Gone," replied Sandy, "an' everythin' else I had in that old box in the corner."

Frank walked to the door and opened it a trifle. There was no need to open it wider to see what kind of trouble they were in. In front, patient in the downpour, stood six Chinamen.

The flashlight dwelt on the silent row for an instant and was then turned off. Frank closed the door and stood with his back against it.

"Is there another way out?" he asked.

Sandy pointed to a small door at the rear. Frank opened it a trifle, as he had the other, and again the flashlight bored a round hole in the night. There were six Chinamen there.

"They mean to keep us here!" Jack cried. "I'll show them."

"I hear them all around the place," Sandy almost sobbed. "You'll think I brought you here for this. I didn't! I'm on the square with you boys. I wanted to help you."

"Perhaps they'll go away soon," Jack suggested.

"Never!" Frank replied. "This is purely an Oriental shut-in! They will wait out there until the hot summer tans their hides if they are told to. The patience of the Orient is something awful to run up against."

"But why?" asked Jack.

"Oh, they got next to me!" Sandy observed.

"They want to keep you from goin' to the assistance of your friends. They'll let you go after they've found some mysterious way of disposing of the others. If I could get out, I'd go to the camp."

"Dig around! There may be some way of getting out. These slant-eyed peoples are slant-eyed in their ways. There may be a hole under the hut that leads somewhere."

"I've seen the woman go down cellar," said Sandy.

"Then you go down cellar," advised Frank, "and see if there is no way out from there. I'm bound to get to Ned and Jimmie if I have to begin operations with my gun."

Presently Sandy's voice was heard from below. He said that he felt a current of air, as if there were a passage leading outside.

"Come on down an' see," he said.

The boys went down a steep ladder, after fastening both doors on the inside, and soon found themselves on the cellar bottom. Frank turned on his flashlight and looked about. There was a hole in one of the walls which seemed to lead downward, in the direction of the river.

"I'm going to try it," Jack exclaimed, taking out his light. "When I say for you to come on, come a-running."

He said for them to come on in a moment, and Sandy and Frank soon found themselves in a square subterranean room which must have been cut near the surface and just outside the wall of the hut. It was a comfortless place, and they lost no time in looking for a way out.

"Here it is!" Sandy called out, directly. "Here is a tunnel. Say, but I never knew about this before. Come on!"

Frank led, but proceeded only a short distance. Then his light rested on the grinning face of a Chinaman.

The tunnel was guarded. The boy turned back and looked into the tunnel by which they had entered the chamber. Within a foot of the muzzle of his searchlight he saw the grinning face of another Chinaman.

He stepped back to the mouth of the tunnel and motioned Jack to guard the exit, explaining, briefly, that they had been trapped, not in a hut on the street level, but in a subterranean chamber where they could not be heard, and where no one would ever think of looking for them.

"Oh, no," Jack cried, regarding Sandy angrily, "you didn't know anything about this---not a thing! You treacherous dog!"

"I didn't! I didn't!" shouted the boy. "Call them men in an' ask them if I did."

"You wait a minute," Jack gritted out, "and I'll see if the Chinks will stand quiet while I beat their accomplice up!"

"Quit it!" Frank commanded. "We're in trouble enough now, without bringing the Chinks down on us. I'd give a good deal to know if Ned and Jimmie are still alive!"

CHAPTER XIII

A VANISHING DIPLOMAT

Ned turned to the Captain as the men in slate-colored robes lifted their hands after the manner of fake mystics the world over. He was not uninterested, but he was anxious.

They were now some distance from the grove in which the camp breakfast had been prepared, and the grove, in turn, was some distance from the highway. They were also some feet under ground, where any calls for assistance that might be necessary would be muffled by the hewn stone and the damp air and earth.

Besides, the alleged priests had mapped out this scene before the arrival of the boys, as Ned believed. Therefore they might have half a hundred natives within call, prepared to do murder if necessary.

The marines had been ordered by the Captain to gradually surround the temple, to guard every entrance that could be discovered, and to force their way in if anything of a suspicious nature occurred. Ned did not know the men as well as he knew the Captain, therefore he asked:

"The men will obey your orders to the letter? You see, we are in a box here!"

"They will obey," said the officer. "What do you make of the mummery now going on?"

The "mummery" consisted in slow, gliding motions, in whirlings about intended to be graceful, in slow liftings of the hands upward, and in the beating of the drums.

"I don't make anything of it," Ned replied. "I take it they are waiting for time. Perhaps they got us in here with less trouble than they had figured on, and are waiting for confederates."

"What a land!" mused the Captain. "What a way to seek the destruction of any enemy! An Italian would have stabbed us in the back on the way in here, a Frenchman would have set a band of bullies upon us in the grove, an American would have walked up and made observations with his bare fists!"

"This is Oriental!" smiled Ned. "I wish we were well out of this hole in the ground!"

"I see," began the man with the star on the breast of his dirty gown, "that you are in trouble of mind concerning the loss of two companions."

"Correct!" shouted the irrepressible Jimmie. "Come across with them--- right soon, old hoss!"

"I see," continued the other, not noticing the interruption, "that you are here in a weighty matter---a matter affecting the peace of nations."

Jimmie was primed for another outbreak of conversation, but Ned caught him by the arm and ordered him to remain silent.

"I see," the alleged seer went on, "that you have met with difficulties and perils on the way. Is this true?"

"All true," Ned answered.

"Then approach. Enter the holy room and receive instruction which shall be of benefit."

Ned hesitated a moment.

"And my friends?" he asked.

"The spirit speaks to but one," was the reply.

"What a lot of rot!" whispered Jimmie. "You go on, an' I'll be there in a second if there is anything like rough house."

With a warning look in the Captain's direction, the boy advanced to the platform of rock. From there he was directed to a door cut in what, seemed to be soft earth and framed with timbers. The timbers were new. He saw that at a glance, and drew his own conclusions.

Ned was glad to see that the man who had done all the speaking was the only one to accompany him into the side room. In a contest of muscles, he thought he could hold his own pretty well with this fellow.

Ned was prepared for almost anything, but what took place next filled him with astonishment. The room was just a hole out in the earth. It did not appear to have been a part of the old temple. There were in it a board table, roughly put together, two chairs, and a square box, perhaps five feet in length by one and a half in the other proportions.

As soon as the door was closed the alleged priest threw aside his slate-colored robe, snatched a wig and beard from his head and face, and stood forth a handsome man, dressed in the costume of a modern Englishman or American. At first Ned did not recognize the smiling face which confronted him.

Then there came to his mind the memory of a time in Canton when he had watched a meeting of men he believed to be in conspiracy against his country. This face certainly had been there.

The voice was low, smooth, musical. Ned stood looking at the subtle countenance, but said not a word.

"You are caught at last!" came next.

Still Ned stood silent, saying not a word, only wondering if the time for final action had arrived---if the Captain outside was in such peril as threatened himself.

"Rather a bright boy," sneered the other, "only not bright enough to understand that men of the world are not to be defeated in their long-cherished plans by the kindergarten class. Do you know where your two friends are---the two who accompanied you here?"

"I presume that they are quite capable of taking care of themselves," Ned replied.

"They are on the road to a dungeon in Peking."

"From first to last," Ned said, "from my first connection with this case up to this hour, I have come upon only bluffers and liars. You seem to be making good in both lines."

"Not so rude, kid," laughed the other. "You've certainly got nerve to address such words to one who holds your life, and the lives of your friends, in his hand."

"If you do," Ned said, "if you really have the power of life and death you claim to have, there is no hope for any of us."

"Figure it out in your own way," said the other, "but, so far as the power of life and death is concerned, you hold the lives of your friends in your own hands."

"I understand what you mean," the boy replied, "but I'm not for sale. Go ahead with your procession! Death looks pretty good to me, as compared with the disgrace of asking a favor from one of your stripe."

Ned's words, purposely designed to enrage the fellow, struck fire at last, and he said what he never would have said in calmer moments.

"I'll show you that death is not so pleasant a thing as you seem to imagine!" he almost shouted. "I'll show you how to learn the lesson of supplication! When the future of a nation is at stake, human lives do not count. What are the lives of a dozen or more to the prosperity of millions? You have information which is needed, in the interest of humanity, and even torture shall be resorted to if it can be obtained in no other way."

"And so," Ned replied, calmly, "you are not merely a tool. As I supposed, you are one of the men at the head of the conspiracy. You are the man I came upon at Canton. You are the wretch who is trying to involve two continents in war. Well, I hope to meet you under less trying circumstances!"

The other laughed harshly and walked to the door. Listening with his ear against the rough boards for an instant, he opened it a trifle and glanced out. Ned heard sounds of a struggle there, and was about to spring forward when his captor faced him with a provoking smile.

"By the way," he said, "I neglected to inform you that one threatening movement will mean instant death to you. I am opposed to any bully-like display of weapons, preferring to discuss this question with you without coercion, but I took the precaution to place a rifleman at an opening in one of the walls of this room. He has you 'covered,' as the saying is, and so it is advisable for you to remain passive."

"What is going on out there?" demanded Ned.

"Your people seem to be protesting against leaving the place under escort," laughed the other. "The two you left at the camp in the cornfield were not so hard to control."

"You seem to have a good knowledge of our movements," said Ned. "You have a spy system well in hand here."

"That is refreshing, as coming from the mouth of a spy," retorted the other. "If you are ready to talk business," he added, closing the door, "I am ready to make a proposition."

"If your time and your breath are worth anything," the boy replied, "you may as well save both."

"You have possession of certain documents taken from a certain wreck in the Pacific Ocean?"

Ned made no reply.

"You possess certain information concerning an alleged plot."

Still no response from the boy.

"Without you, your government can make no headway in the investigation now on foot."

Ned dropped into a chair and turned his face away with a well assumed air of indifference. Really, he was anxious for the man to go on, to say just how important were the papers and the information.

"We have it in our power to prevent the information you possess ever reaching your government, but the documents you have we cannot get in the usual way. Therefore we are offering you terms."

"Naturally," Ned smiled.

"Promise to restore the papers and forever remain silent as to what you have learned since you undertook this case, and you shall all go free, with more money than you ever dreamed of having in your hands."

"You have not stated the case fully," Ned said, when the other concluded, with a superior air. "You have not mentioned a certain alleged diplomat. You want me to forget all that he has said and done in the matter."

"Naturally. I said that you were to forget everything connected with the case."

"I prefer," Ned replied, "to see you on the gallows for murder."

The other started violently.

"Then this is final?"

There came a sound resembling the report of firearms from the outer room. At the same time Ned caught a movement behind the south wall of the room. The gunman mentioned by the diplomat was evidently leaving his post for the purpose of joining in any struggle which might be taking place.

The boy thought fast for a moment. If the marines had fought their way into the outer room they would soon be knocking at the rough door that separated the two apartments. In that case the man before him would do one of two things.

He would try to fight his way out of the room, or he would try to escape by some exit not at that time in sight. In the first instance he might wound or kill one or more of the marines. In the latter, he might be able to conceal himself in some underground passage and finally escape.

It seemed to Ned that the one thing for him to do was to attack the fellow and endeavor to disarm him. The noises of conflict in the outer room grew more distinct, and Ned, observing that the diplomat was glancing restlessly about, as if seeking some means of escape, sprang upon him.

Instead of turning and defending himself, the fellow struggled to release himself from the boy's hold, and to make his way toward a section of the wall on the south. The statement that a rifleman had been stationed somewhere there now came back to the boy's mind, and he knew that there must be a passage behind that wall.

The man with whom Ned was struggling was evidently unarmed, for he fought only with his hands and feet. He tried by all the tricks known to wrestlers to break away from the boy, or to hurl him to the floor, but Ned had skill as well as strength, and all such efforts proved unavailing.

While this silent struggle was going on, the rough door came crashing in and a score of Chinamen, evidently fleeing from an enemy, rushed in and flocked toward that south wall. Ned and his enemy were trampled under foot for a moment,

then the room was clear save for a half dozen marines who stood in the doorway, their smoking guns in their hands.

Ned's head whirled from a blow he had received, and there was a numb feeling in one of his arms, but he arose to his feet and glanced around. Jimmie stood with the marines, a grin on his freckled face.

"Gee whiz!" he shouted, "how that man did go!"

"Which man?" demanded Ned. "Why didn't some one follow him?"

"He just went through that wall," Jimmie answered. "When I tried to follow him I bumped me nose! Say, but he went right through that old wall!"

"Where did the Chinks go?" asked Ned.

"Down through the floor!" was the reply. "But, say, did you ever see anythin' like that vanishin' priest? I'll bet a pie he's forty miles away right this minute."

When Ned and the marines took up the search for the diplomat and the Chinese, it did seem that they were forty miles away! There were numerous passages under the old temple, and in these the fugitives must have hidden.

"How did you know?" asked Ned of the marines who had broken into the underground rooms. "How did you know there was danger inside?"

"That little imp of a Jimmie," one of the men said, "came to the entrance and shouted fit to wake the dead. They were trying to carry the Captain and the kid away. Bright boy, that!"

Two of the marines had been slightly wounded by knives in the hands of the Chinese, but they declared themselves quite well enough to go on with the journey.

"The Chinks didn't fight," one of them said. "They just threw knives and ran! We never hit one of them! Sheep, that's what they are! Just sheep!"

"Well," Ned said, "we've lost our chance on the road to Peking, the fellow we want having escaped, so we must go ahead and set the rat trap once more."

"You'll walk if you do," one of the marines said, showing from the outside, "for the Chinks have made off with the motorcycles!"

CHAPTER XIV

SANDY PROVES HIS CASE

"They'll be dead if you don't get out of here an' do somethin'!" said Sandy. "The Chinks'll eat 'em up!"

Frank looked around the dismal subterranean chamber and a cynical smile came to his lips.

"We might get out of here," he said, "if we had a ton of dynamite. I don't know but I'd take a chance on getting injured myself in order to see these Chinks sailing into the sky."

Jack, still suspicious of Sandy, turned toward him with a frown. The lad met the other's eyes steadily.

"Do you know the way out of this?" Jack asked.

"No," admitted the boy. "Never was in here before. Never knew there was such a place."

"Well," Jack went on, "the longer we remain here the longer we'll be in finding our chums. I'm going to make a break."

"If you have a gun," Sandy said, calmly, "I'll go ahead with it. If I get plugged, or anythin' like that, you boys may be able to get away. These Chinks are quick to run if there is danger ahead, and I think I can scare them off. Give me the gun!"

Sandy reached out his hand, but Frank did not extend the gun he had taken from his pocket.

"You're nervy, all right," he said, "but you don't have to take all the risk. Suppose we wait until daylight and then make a rush?"

"Why daylight?" asked Jack.

"There may then be some friendly face in sight, if we are able to get to the street."

"There's force in that," Jack replied, "but this is no palace car to wait in."

"You let me go and try," Sandy urged.

Frank shook his head gravely.

"No use," he said. "There are probably a score or more of Chinks around this old shack. We've got to wait until morning before we try to get away. The only question in my mind is this: Will they let us alone until daylight? If they don't, then it will be a scrap."

The boys sat down against the earth wall of the chamber and waited. Now and then they could hear whispers in a tongue they could not understand. Occasionally they heard a wagon creaking along the distant street. Then they knew that the doors connecting the mud hut with the outer world were open.

"I wonder if old Chee is still asleep from the dope?" Sandy asked, after a long time had passed.

"Why did they dope her?" asked Jack. "I don't see any nourishment for them in that."

"Guess they thought I'd be apt to help you boys," Sandy replied, "and made up their minds to catch me and chuck me away somewhere. Chee's a nervy old lady, an' probably scrapped when they searched for me. I'd like to help her."

"Why do you call her Chee?"

"Because she's so cheerful, an' because I don't know her name," was the reply.

"It must be pretty near dawn," Jack said, after a long silence, with a prodigious yawn.

Frank looked at his watch and found that it was six o'clock. It had been a long night. The sun would rise shortly after six.

Five minutes later sounds of trouble of a physical nature were heard along the tunnel by which the chamber had been reached. There were blows, grunts, and ejaculations of rage. Then they heard a voice they knew:

"Donner! I make your face break! Come py mine punch of fives. Oh, you loaver!"

"Hans!" cried Jack. "How the Old Harry did he get here?"

"He'll soon be able to tell you himself," Frank said, "if he keeps on coming."

Indeed, the German's voice came nearer every instant, nearer and more emphatic. He was panting, too, and the sound of blows reached the ears of the listening boys.

"Get in there!"

The words were spoken in English, but not by Hans.

"There's that gink who rounded us up back in Taku," exclaimed Jack. "He seems to be winning all the tricks. I wonder how he got hold of Hans?"

"I thought Dutchy was back with the submarine," Frank replied. "How he got to Tientsin is a mystery to me."

The next moment Hans' broad face, now red from anger and exertion, appeared at the mouth of the tunnel, looking like a full moon, and then his bulky figure was projected violently into the chamber. He scrambled in on his knees, but arose instantly and swung his fists in the direction of the tunnel, shouting imprecations on some out-of-sight person.

There were numerous cuts and bruises on his face from which blood was oozing, and his clothing was torn and dirty, as if it had been dragged through the mud.

"Loaver! Loaver!" he shouted, still shaking his clenched fist at the entrance. "Vait a liddle, yet! I eats dern alife!"

"I wish you would!" cried Jack.

"Give me a bite while you are at it," Sandy cut in.

Hans gazed around in bewilderment for a time, and then his face brightened as he caught sight of Frank and Jack. It did not take the lads long to arrive at a mutual understanding of the happenings of the night.

Hans had been followed from the place where he had left the other boys and captured. He did not know what had become of Ned and the others any more than Frank and Jack did.

His story brought some relief to the others, for it was presumable that their chums were now well on their way to Peking. Once there, the imprisoned lads knew that every effort for their release would be made--- then the whole power of the United States government, through the ambassador, would be exerted in their behalf.

"But what's the use of all that," Jack asked, grumblingly---for he was getting hungry! "What's the use of all that if the Chinks sit out there like blooming cigar-store images and never give a hint as to where we are? We are likely to starve before the American ambassador can act with success."

Hans rubbed his stomach protectingly.

"Empty!" he said. "I could eat a Schinks!"

"Eat one for me," advised Jack.

Sandy, who had been listening in silence to the explanations which had been made, now asked:

"How many Chinks are there out there?"

"Army!" answered Hans.

This was discouraging, for, as has already been stated, the boys were meditating a rush as soon as the city was astir. They did not anticipate much help from bystanders, even if they should gain the street, but they knew that such a ruction as they would be able to put up would attract the attention of the authorities, and so bring the matter before the courts.

While they talked the chances over, another breeze of trouble blew in from the entrance tunnel. An argument of some kind was in progress between the men stationed there.

Sandy moved forward to the mouth of the dark hole and listened. The argument was being carried on in the language of the country, but now and then a few words in English were heard.

"I tell you they got away, slick and clean!" the Englishman said, as Sandy listened.

A mumbling of native talk, and then another sentence:

"And some one will be here directly."

Jack, who had heard the words, turned to Frank with a grin.

"Is that a promise or a threat?" he asked.

"I think our friends are coming," Frank replied.

"They can never find us in this hole," Jack complained. "Suppose we make a little noise?"

"If they are headed this way, they know where we are," Frank said, "and it seems as if we ought to wait for them."

"I'll starve!" muttered Jack. "I could eat a fried telegraph pole, and like it!"

"I eat since yesterday only plue sky!" Hans contributed. "My pelly makes argument mit my koscience! But?"

Sandy sat dejectedly by the wall and said nothing. He knew that he was still suspected of leading the boys into the trap in which they now found themselves, and was studying over plans to assist them out and at the same time establish his

innocence.

It seemed to the lads that a whole day passed without a single thing to break the monotony, but Frank's watch insisted that it was only eleven o'clock. It was dark most of the time in the chamber, for the boys were saving of their flashlight batteries.

Finally one of the plans which had been slowly maturing in Sandy's brain brought the lad into action. Noiselessly he crept away from the little group and moved on his hands and knees, along the tunnel leading to the cellar of the old mud house.

He reasoned that that point would not be so closely guarded as the exit would be; also that Ned and his companions, if they returned to the city in quest of the boys and sought the mud house, would be more apt to be watching the house itself than the exit, which was some distance away from the road.

After proceeding a few feet, Sandy stopped and listened. There were no indications of human presence in the tunnel ahead, or in the cellar, which was not far away now, and from which a faint light shone.

When the boy reached the entrance to the cellar he saw three Chinamen lying on the earth floor, either asleep or under the influence of opium. It did not take the lad long to make up his mind as to which one of the causes, sleep or opium, had put his guards off their guard.

There was a strong odor of opium in the cellar, and a closer examination of the place showed him that the watchmen had been "hitting the pipe," as the boys on South Clark street, Chicago, would have expressed it. However, the way did not seem to be clear, for there were soft footsteps on the patch of board floor which covered a part of the cellar, and then a Chinaman backed down the ladder.

He came down slowly and stood for an instant on the cellar floor before looking around. When at last he saw the men asleep on the floor he muttered some jargon which Sandy could not understand and turned back to the ladder again.

Sandy believed that the man he saw was the only one the "pipe" had left on guard. If he could prevent him reaching the street, he might be able to get the other boys out of the trap in which they had been caught.

The Chinaman seemed large and strong, but Sandy would have taken even greater chances in order to convince the boys that he was not their enemy, so he sprang upon him. The struggle was a desperate one for a time, for Sandy was not very strong as compared with his opponent, and the man he was fighting with fought viciously.

Sandy did not dare cry out to the boys in the chamber for help, for that might bring other enemies into the fight. The only way seemed to be to conquer the Chinaman and then get the boys into the street as silently as possible. Once there, they would have little difficulty in making their way out of the city.

It is quite probable that Sandy would have come off second best in the encounter if Jack had not heard the racket the two made and came into the cellar with a bound. The two boys soon had the Chinaman down and well tied up.

"You're a brick, Sandy," Jack said, as the boys faced each other in the dim light. "While we sat in there waiting for some one to get us out, you got a move on and did something! Say," he added, with a grin, "ain't this tie-up game getting stale? Suppose we knock this fellow on the head? He may get away if we don't. And these others? Think they are sufficiently soused with opium?"

"They won't make any trouble for a long time," Sandy answered. "It is a wonder they got into such a trance! There must have been something stronger than opium in their pipes."

"Didn't know there was anything meaner than opium," Jack said.

"There is a drug that is used by old soaks after the poppy stuff gets too mild for them," replied Sandy. "Perhaps these men got some of that. Keep quiet, boys!"

This last as Frank and Hans came through the tunnel and stood staring at the men on the floor and their chums.

"Who did it?" asked Frank.

"Sandy did it!" answered Jack. "Ain't he the broth of a lad? Sure he's the goods."

"Perhaps we'd better be getting out," Sandy observed. "I hear some one upstairs. They're comin' down here, too."

CHAPTER XV

WHY ESCAPE WAS SO EASY

As Sandy finished speaking two figures dropped down the ladder, not stopping to descend rung by rung. As they landed on the floor the boys sprang toward them, ready to make a battle for their liberty. Then came another surprise.

Instead of making hostile demonstrations, the two newcomers, Chinamen so far as appearances went, threw up their hands and dropped back against the wall. Then shouts of laughter echoed through the place.

Directly the newcomers seemed to forget to keep their hands up, for they gripped their waists with them and roared. There was something about the laughter, too, which was not at all like the Orient.

"Go it!" Jack exclaimed.

"Have your fun before we come to settlement with you," Frank threatened.

"Let me soak heem!" Hans pleaded.

Sandy stood by with wonder showing in his face.

"What kind of a play house is this?" he asked. And still the others laughed, bending over, now, and covering their faces with their hands. The change from tragedy to comedy had been so sudden that for a time the boys did nothing at all to solve the mystery of the sudden outbreak of laughter.

Then Frank stepped closer and peered down at the larger of the two figures. Then he turned his searchlight on the bowed head.

Then a smile came over his face and he reached out a hand and took the bobbing pigtail into his hand and gave it a quick jerk. The result was amazing.

The pigtail came away in his hand, and with it a bunch of coarse hair and an odor!

"Look here, kids!" Frank cried. "Look who's here!"

It was Ned, and the shaking figure by his side was that of Jimmie. In a moment both were out of their disguises and making an inspection of the tunnels and the underground chamber.

"You've got Herlock Sholmes beaten to a frazzle," said Jack, as Ned stooped over to examine the knocked-out Chinamen.

"How did you do it?" demanded Frank. "We thought you were on the road to Peking until we heard some of the Chinks talking, not long after daybreak, then we thought you might be in trouble."

"It was long after daybreak when we mixed with the bunch," Jimmie answered. "Anythin' you heard before eight o'clock was fright an' not fact."

Sandy was now presented and his share in the adventures of the night given proper recognition.

"I thought he was a sneak at first," Jack explained, "but he showed us the way out in the end."

"What did you go an' sit down there an' wait for?" asked Jimmie. "Why didn't you get a move on?"

"They did the very thing they should have done," Ned remarked. "If they had tried to fight their way out they might have been killed,' as there was, I am told, a strong guard here at daybreak."

"But how did you get here?" asked Frank.

"When we got out of the old temple," Ned replied, "we had no motorcycles to go on with, so we came back to hunt up more. There was little use in going on by any way other than the one mapped out for us.

"The scamp we almost captured had been kind enough to tell us that you boys were in trouble and perhaps that had something to do with our coming back."

"But how did you get here?"

"Easy," laughed Ned. "We knew that you boys had been captured, and it was easy to see who had had a hand in it. The people at the telegraph office would know more about the matter than any one else.

"So we went to the American consulate and got into these disguises. The consul says he never saw anything smoother, though he must be prejudiced in our favor, for he helped get up the disguises himself.

"Then we went to the vicinity of the telegraph office and waited. In a moment we saw that something unusual was going on. Directly a messenger started off in this direction and we followed him. I knew then, as well as I know it now, that you boys had been detained in the hope of keeping us all out of Peking, so I bought some strong opium on the way and doped the pipes of the guards after I mixed with them."

"How could you mix with them?" asked Jack. "You know about as much Chinese as a robin."

"Oh, they thought we were sullen brutes sent down from their headquarters, and took us into their confidence all right. We were just ready to explore the underground places when we heard the scrap below."

"And now what?" asked Frank.

"Now, we're goin' to Peking!" cried Jimmie.

"You said that before!" Jack taunted.

"Well, we didn't get tied up in a hole we couldn't get out of," retorted the little fellow.

"I guess you'd have been in the old temple until now if you hadn't traveled with an escort," Jack cut in.

The boys, laughing and "roasting" each other, passed up the ladder and to the half earthen, half-board floor of the mud hut. There they found the woman Chee moving about with a swollen face.

She tried to talk with Ned, but as neither could understand what the other said, little progress was made. However, she finally managed to make Ned understand that she wanted him to take the unconscious men out of the cellar, also the man who had been tied up by Jack and Sandy.

Ned finally made her understand that she could call the police half an hour after their departure. This seemed to satisfy her, and the piece of silver Ned presented was received with many gestures of gratitude.

"Won't the finding of them men there get her into trouble?" asked Sandy, as the lads walked away.

"I'll explain the matter to the American consul," answered Ned, "and ask him to inform the authorities. You see, these people who are making us all this trouble are about as afraid of the officers as they are of us. The government is keeping a sharp lookout for the revolutionary leaders, and some are captured every day."

"What do they do with them?" asked Jack.

"They are never heard of again."

"Murdered? Without trial?"

"That is the belief."

"Then why don't we ask this good, wise, benevolent, sane, and all the rest of it government to keep the revolutionary party off Uncle Sam?" asked Jack. "We represent Uncle Samuel, you know."

"Because," was the reply, "there are spies in every branch and department of the government. While the traitors who are serving the government while seeking its destruction may not be powerful enough to secure the release of such confederates as are caught, they are undoubtedly able to send out reports calculated to assist their party."

"And every move we made under the protection of the Chinese government would be noted and reported," mused Jack. "I see how it is! Guess the people at Washington knew what they were about when they issued instructions regarding the trip to Peking."

"Yes, I think they did," Ned replied. "Observe how they tested us. We did not know about the cablegram at the office here when we started on our long ride. If we had weakened in any way we never should have known about it, but would have been ordered back home."

"Land flowing with milk and honey, and breakfast foods, and choice beef cuts at a dollar a pound!" Jack exclaimed now. "Are we never going to get anything to eat?"

"I haf one vacancy!" observed Hans, laying a hand on his stomach. "I haf a misery!"

"You had a good breakfast, Jack!" reproved Frank.

"What! Where! What was it? Yes, I haf a breakfast two days ago. This morning I haf cellar air for breakfast. It isn't nourishing. Where is there an eatery?"

Before long Ned stopped at a little tea house where an American sign hung in a window, and the boys ordered such viands as the place afforded. It was not much of a meal, as Jack insisted, but just a teaser for a dinner which would be procured later on.

"Where are the marines?" asked Frank, as he and Ned seated themselves at a little table apart from the others.

"Encamped in the grove," was the reply.

"They will not be attacked there?" asked Frank, in some amazement.

"Certainly not. All Chinamen hate us, but we are safe except when the revolutionists take a hand in the game. The marines are probably surrounded by a crowd of sullen curiosity seekers, but they will not be molested unless the revolutionists decide to take another chance with them."

"And the machines are gone for good?"

"No, the American consul is getting them back, or was when I left his office, one by one. The men who were fighting were too frightened to take the machines with them, but the mob got them. They were taken by individual thieves, and will soon be restored."

"We ought to have come over in our aeroplane," smiled Frank.

"That would have defeated our purpose," Ned replied. "We are here to catch the leaders of this conspiracy, and the only way we can do it is to wait until they show themselves.

"Just see how foolish they are!" Ned went on. "If they had been content to wait, to manufacture such evidence as they needed to show their innocence, we could never have located them. They would have lied us out of countenance if we charged any one man with being the leader, or any one nation with fostering the conspiracy.

"But they tried to make a clean record for themselves by wiping us off the face of the earth and so showed themselves to us. I am told by police officers that if criminals would keep away from women, away from the scenes of their crimes, and keep their mouths shut when given the famous---and disgraceful---third degree, not one in twenty would ever be convicted."

"Well," Frank said, "here's hoping that the man we want will come within reach again!"

After breakfast the boys headed for the American consulate, where they found the machines which had been stolen.

"That was quick work," Ned congratulated. "How did you do it?"

The consul laughed.

"Why," he replied, "you might as well try to bide a fifty story building in China as one of those machines! The natives believe the devil is in them!"

"I've known Americans to express the same opinion," laughed Frank.

While they talked with the consul a message was brought him from the telegraph office. It read:

"Report progress."

Ned laughed.

"Nothing to report but disaster," he said.

"Well," the consul replied, "we expected something of the kind. You have gained the very point we expected you to gain. You know exactly who is at the head of this mess. Thinking he had you where you would never get away, he talked too much."

"I think I should know him in any disguise," Ned said. "I should know him anywhere, and under any circumstances. Do you think he would have kept faith with me if I had given up the documents and promised never to implicate either his country or himself in the trouble?"

"Certainly not. The fact that he revealed himself to you shows that he meant to have you murdered there. Only for the marines breaking in just as they did, it would have been all off with you, my boy."

"He must be a treacherous old chap!" Ned commented.

"His life and everything he loves is at stake."

"Then he should have kept out of the mess! Why should he want to get us into a war?"

"My boy," replied the consul, "we are sure to have a war with some great European nation before many years."

"Because the people are getting too thick over here. Because they are going to America in droves. Because the governments of Europe desire to retain control of their people after they leave the confines of their own countries. They want English, German, Russian, Italian, French colonies held under their hand instead of a mass of their subjects doing reverence to a foreign flag."

"And they will fight for that?"

"Of course. The only way we can keep out of a great and disastrous war is to abandon the Philippines, throw our island possessions to the dogs, and tumble the Monroe doctrine into the sea. Then these foreign nations can buy, steal, or conquer all South and Central America. We don't want the land there, and we can't afford to fight for the dagoes who live there."

"There is too much jingo in our country to ever do what you suggest," Ned suggested.

"I'm afraid you are right," the consul replied. "But now to business. Get your machines here and mount them! You are to leave for Peking to-night."

"And I'll not come back until I reach the town!" declared the boy.

"By the way," said the consul, "where are the papers you took from the captain of the Shark---the boat you fought with your submarine?"

"I have them here," was the reply.

"Better leave them in my safe."

Ned consented to this, and later, on the march to Peking, he was very glad that he had done.

At twilight the boys joined the flying squadron, and were all off for the imperial city, little suspecting that the perils before them were greater than any they had encountered.

CHAPTER XVI

A BIT OF SEALING WAX

The night grew clearer as the flying squadron advanced toward the imperial city of China. The roads were rough in places, but the superb machines carried the boys and their companions at good speed.

It may well be imagined that the party created something of a sensation as it whirled along. The constant popping of the engines, the strong lights which flashed ahead, and the voices of the marines brought many a sleepy-faced Chinaman to the door of his home.

Now and then the boys were hailed from the roadside, but little attention was paid to these calls. Finally, however, a voice addressed the party in English.

"Where are you going?" it asked.

Ned instructed the Captain to proceed a few paces with his company and then halted to see what manner of man it was that spoke to him in that tongue. He found an old Chinaman, a wise-looking old fellow with a keen face, leaning over a rude gate in front of a small house.

"Did you speak?" he asked, advancing to the gate.

"I did," was the reply. "I was curious to know where you were going in the middle of the night."

"You speak English remarkably well," Ned said, not in any hurry to satisfy the old fellow's curiosity.

"I ought to," was the reply. "I have just come back from New York. I owned a laundry there for a good many years."

"And have returned to China to live in peace and comfort?"

"I don't know about the peace," replied the Chinaman, with a sigh.

"You think there will be a war?"

The Chinaman nodded.

"The coming revolt," he declared, "was conceived more than two hundred years ago. For fifty years organization has been going on. For six years the revolutionists have been working as a whole."

"And they are strong?" asked Ned.

"Wherever in the world Chinamen live, in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, London, Berlin, St. Petersburg, anywhere, everywhere, there are funds being collected for the coming civil war."

Ned wanted to ask the loquacious old fellow what his private ideas about the justice of the struggle were, but he decided not to do so. He thought he might find out in another way.

"And the revolutionists will win?" he asked.

"God forbid!" was the reply, and the boy had the answer he thought he would receive.

Still, he was not satisfied that the old fellow was telling the exact truth regarding his sentiments. It was the revolutionists he had to battle with, and not the federalists. This retired laundryman might know that!

"Anyway," the boy thought, "the fellow seems desirous of keeping me here as long as possible. This, of course, may be because of a desire for the companionship of one of the race he has lived with so long, but I do not think so."

Pretending to be deeply interested in what the Chinaman was saying, he excused himself for a moment and beckoned to Jimmie.

"Lead your motorcycle noiselessly up that rise of ground," he directed, "and when you get there keep your eyes wide open."

"What for?" demanded the boy.

"For whatever comes in sight," replied Ned. "Keep the line of vision from this house to whatever may be beyond unimpaired if it is possible to do so. If you observe anything unusual, report to me."

"All righto!" cried the boy.

Ned saw Jimmie making a noiseless progress up the little hill and turned back to the man at the gate. Instantly the latter offered refreshments, for the entire party, and seemed disappointed when the offer was declined.

"You're going to Peking on business?" the Chinaman finally asked.

"Yes," was the short answer.

"Why do you ride in the night?"

"Because we must get there in the morning."

"But there is another day."

"Always there is another day in the Far East," Ned smiled, "but we of the West count only on what we can do before that other day arrives."

The two talked on for half an hour, while the marines muttered complaints and Frank and Jack rolled themselves in blankets and tried to pay a visit to Dreamland. The previous night had been a hard one, and they felt the need of more rest than they had been able to get during the afternoon.

After a time Ned became anxious. He had sent Jimmie on ahead with the notion that something was going to happen there within a short time. But all was still about the house and the small fields which surrounded it. Jimmie did not return.

"I wonder if the little scamp is in trouble again?" thought Ned.

This seemed to be the natural solution of the puzzle of his long absence, and Ned was about to send Frank on after him when the little fellow came up to him.

"The Captain wants you to get a move on," the boy said.

Ned saw that Jimmie had something to say to him which was not for the ears of the Chinaman, and walked away, followed by the urgent voice of the former laundryman, who besought him to return and partake of refreshments.

"In honor of old New York!" he added.

"Gee!" Jimmie muttered, as the boys stood alone together. "I was thinkin' I'd struck the fourth of July."

"Where?"

"Up on the hill."

"So, they were using rockets?"

"Yes."

"Where did they ascend from?"

"From the other side of the hill, at this end, and from an old house at the other end."

Ned stood for a moment without speaking. So the Chinaman had been holding him in conversation while his tools had been signaling to some one farther up the road!

This was practically what he had suspected. From the first he had believed that the old fellow's purpose was to hold him there as long as possible.

Signals would naturally be the outgrowth of such a plan, and Ned had sent Jimmie on ahead---silently---in order to see where the other party answered the signals from, if they were answered at all. As from the opening of the case, he had planned to secure his information from his enemies---from their actions and their presence or absence from the position he occupied.

Directing the marines to follow on slowly, Ned awoke Frank and Jack. The four climbed the hill slowly, watching the sky as they advanced. The clouds lay low to the east, but in the west was a patch of clear sky.

When they gained the summit of the rise, they saw a light in a little grove some distance away. It seemed like a lantern moving out and in among the trees.

"There," Jimmie explained, "when I got to the top of the hill, I saw a rocket shoot out of that thicket. It did not ascend the sky, but follow the line of the earth and died out in the road."

"Of course," Ned said. "A rocket sent up in the usual way would have been visible from where we were standing."

"And, in a minute," the boy went on, "there came a rocket from that house, the house where the light was a minute ago. That, too, followed the ground line."

"Talking together in low tones!" grinned Jack.

"They were talkin' together, all right," Jimmie said.

"Dollars to dumplings," Frank exclaimed, "that the funny chap we met in the old mud house at Taku has a room in that shack."

"He might have been hiding there," Ned said.

"An' that old stiff signaled to him to make his getaway?" asked the little fellow.

"Looks like it," Ned replied.

"Huh!" Jack objected. "The signals might have told the men at the other end of the line to get their soldiers out and bump us off the continent."

"Which idea," responded Frank, "causes me to want to approach that house with all due caution and respect."

"Suppose we four surround it," suggested Jimmie.

"That's the idea!" Jack commented.

"Just what I was about to propose," said Ned. "We'll leave the marines within call and go up to this temporary signal station and see what about it."

The Captain was communicated with, and then the four left the road and moved around toward the rear of the house, keeping in the shadows of the trees. Not until they reached the very door of the place were there any signs of life there.

The lantern they had observed from a distance was seen no more. The windows were dark and silent. But when they came to the door they found it unlocked.

As the crude latch was lifted, with a very slight creaking sound, a movement was heard inside, and then a heavy body was heard striking the ground at the rear. Then a was as silent as before.

"Someone jumped out of a window!" Jimmie whispered. "I hope he broke his crust!"

There was to be no defense of the place, then! Whoever the inmates had been, they were deserting the house.

Ned stationed Frank and Jack at the front and moved around to the rear with Jimmie close behind. A rustle in the undergrowth told him that the former occupants of the place were still about.

Jimmie darted in the direction of the noise, but was back again in a minute.

"Might as well try to chase a ghost!" he said.

"Got clear away, did he?" asked Ned.

"You know it!" grunted the little fellow.

Frank and Jack were now heard in the house, and the rays of a searchlight showed at a window, showed very faintly in cracks, for there was a heavy wooden shutter to the window on the inside. Ned tried the rear door. It was not locked and he entered.

The house was deserted, but it was not unfurnished. Indeed, articles of furniture scattered about the rooms, which were in great disorder, denoted not only wealth but a refined taste.

There were velvet rugs on the floors and great easy chairs and lounging divans. A pantry revealed unwashed dishes, showing that food had been served there recently.

"Who was it that ran away?" asked Jack, as the boys met.

"A ghost!" replied Jimmie. "I chased him until he hid in a tree."

"Why didn't you pull him out?" grinned Jack.

"Because he turned into a green cow with purple wings!" the little fellow replied.

Jack whirled his arms around in the manner of one turning a crank and laughed. The boys delighted in such by-play.

"If it's all the same to you, boys," Frank was now heard saying, "I'll just devour such few things as are left here. I see a ham and a box of canned vegetables. Must have intended a long stop here, whoever he was."

Leaving the boys to search the remainder of the house, Ned entered what had evidently been a reading room and turned on his light. The room was handsomely decorated, and there were scores of books lying around on tables and chairs.

Calling to the boys, he directed them to bring up the marines and station them around the house.

"I want to know that I'll not be disturbed," he said.

"Found somethin'?" asked Jimmie.

"Look at the books," Ned replied.

Jimmie read half a dozen titles and cast the volumes aside.

"They don't look good to me," he said. "All about international law and treaties!"

"Exactly!" Ned said, and then Jimmie opened his eyes.

"I'll bet there's been some of them statesmen livin' here!" the little fellow almost whispered. "Say, do you think you have run 'em down at last?"

"I don't know, son," was the reply. "Look on that table and see what you discover."

"Bits of torn paper an' some red wax."

"The paper," Ned explained, "is parchment, such as is used in important official transactions, and the wax is of the kind used by lawyers and diplomats. Here is a seal!"

Ned's face turned pale as he looked at the seal. Could it be possible that the nation to which it belonged had been engaged in this conspiracy? It did not seem possible.

Ned put the telltale seal away in his pocket without permitting Jimmie to see it and picked up some loose pieces of sealing wax which lay on the table near where the seal had been found.

"Do you see the fine work done with the seal which made this impression?" Ned asked.

"Fine seal!" Jimmie replied. "Was that stamp made by the seal you just hid away?"

"No," Ned replied, "thank God it was not!"

Wrapping the wax very carefully, so that it would not crumble, and securing every bit of paper in sight, Ned made a little bundle and stowed it away in a pocket. Then he began a search of the rug on the floor.

Jimmie was on his knees, in a moment.

"Finders keepers?" he asked.

"That depends!" Ned said.

"Well, some one's been payin' out money here," the boy went on. "See what I found!"

What he had found was a gold piece of the denomination of twenty dollars. And it bore the stamp of the American eagle!

CHAPTER XVII

BOY SCOUTS IN A LIVELY MIXUP

Ned took the gold piece into his hand and examined it.

"It is American money, sure enough," he observed, "and was made at the San Francisco mint."

Frank and Jack now joined the little group in the library and regarded the piece with interest.

"What does it mean?" Frank asked.

"Why," Jack volunteered, "it means that some American man is mixed up in this dirty affair."

"Perhaps that gold came out of the wreck," Jimmie suggested. "Say, are we ever goin' back after that gold?" he added.

"Ned's got all the gold he can attend to right here," commented Frank. "He's got to find out how that came here."

"Why, there was an American in the bunch, and he lost it out of his pocket," Jack ventured.

"That's the very point," Frank observed. "What was an American doing in that bunch?"

"It might have been the American who planned to send the gold to the revolutionary leaders by way of a shipment to the Chinese government," Ned said, thoughtfully. "You know some American had to send the gold."

"Of course."

"Well, suppose he is now here trying to get something in exchange for the gold which lies at the bottom of the Pacific?"

"He naturally would be doing business, with the revolutionary party," Frank exclaimed. "What a trick that was!"

"I haven't got it through my head yet," Jack said. "I don't know any more about the plot than a robin."

"Look here," Frank said, in a superior tone, "there are a lot of Chinese in the United States who want to assist the revolutionary party. Got that?"

"You know it!"

"These men arrange with the Chinese government to send over a cargo of gold."

"That's easy. What were they to get for the gold?"

"I don't know," Frank answered. "But they arranged to send the gold right out of the subtreasury at San Francisco---or was it New York?---to the Chinese government."

"All right," laughed Jack. "I see daylight."

"Then they notify the rebels-to-be that the gold will be shipped on such a vessel at such a time."

"Warmer!" grinned Jimmie.

"And the rebels undertake to have a ship ready to snatch off the gold when the right time comes. So the Chinese government will have to pay for the yellow stuff and the rebels will have the good of it."

"Great scheme!"

"Yes, well, some other nation gets wise to what is going on, and sets out to burst up the combination."

"Naturally."

"So this foreign nation sends out a ship to ram the vessel carrying the gold."

"Oh! I got that long ago!"

"And the vessel is rammed and the gold goes to the bottom. Then this other government, thinking to kill two birds at one shot, gives it out, in certain diplomatic circles, that Uncle Sam shipped that gold directly to the Chinese government from the subtreasury, with the full knowledge that the rebels were to get it."

"Yes, I've heard about that."

"So Uncle Sam sends Ned over here to dig up that gold and see if the shippers didn't put documents in the bags or boxes which would prove out the whole transaction."

"An' Ned found the documents!" cried Jimmie. "Good old Ned!"

"Yes, he found the documents which prove that the United States had nothing to do with the matter, but which do not show who started the slander."

"And then Ned is sent out to track the statesman who had been doing business with the rebels down to his hiding place. It is thought that his nation is the one that tried to mix Uncle Sam in the matter."

"But why should this man be doing business with the rebels?" asked Jack.

"That is what we don't know," was the reply. "Still, we know that he is allied with the rebels. We met him at Taku. Ned met him at the ruined temple. He may be treacherously in the company of the men who lead the revolutionary party, but he is there."

"You have that figured out correctly," Ned cut in. "If the man we are after had been doing business with the Chinese government, we would have had officers of the law after us at Tientsin and Taku, instead of men who ran when it came daylight."

"What national seal made that stamp on the wax you have in your pocket, Ned?" Jimmie asked.

Ned made no reply.

"Was the stamp made with the seal you have with you?" was the next question.

Still Ned did not answer. He was in a quandary. It did not seem possible that the two nations pointed out by the seal and the wax could be engaged in such dirty business. He hoped to prove to his own satisfaction that they were not.

"The only way to find out what we want to know," he said, "is to go on to Peking."

"Your proof will assist you when you get there?" asked Frank.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Ned answered, tentatively.

"I don't understand that reply," Frank observed, with a serious face. "You must have discovered something in this house which is not to your liking."

"Time will show," Ned said.

Captain Martin, of the marines, now entered the room where the discussion was going on. His face was pale, and his eyes showed greater anger than Ned had ever seen reflected there before.

"Just a moment, Ned," he said, and the two stepped into another room. The Captain dropped into a chair.

"We have struck the hornet's nest," he said.

"Do you hear them buzzing?" asked Ned, with a smile.

"Worse than that," was the reply. "I am feeling their stings. Two of my men have been attacked in the dark."

"And wounded?"

"Yes; one of them seriously."

"I'm sorry for the poor fellow," Ned said. "Do you think we can get him on to Peking?"

Captain Martin shook his head.

"It is a bad wound," he said. "The man was on guard not far from the edge of the grove when a figure loomed up before him. He challenged and was about to shoot, for no reply came, when he got the knife in his back. He can't be moved."

"The trouble is," Ned replied, "that we got here too soon."

"What's the answer to that?"

"We did not give the plotters time enough to finish their business. When that old Chink, back there at the gate, signaled to them with his rockets, they cut and ran, leaving important evidence behind them."

"And you think they will hang about the flying squadron until they recover what they have lost?"

"They certainly will try to recover it. Now you see the wisdom of the Washington people in sending me to Peking on a motorcycle! You see that I was right in saying that we were being set up as marks for other nations to shoot at!"

"Yes," said Martin, "you never could have got to the fellows in the old way. It was right to plan it so that they would come to you, although it was placing you in great danger."

"But the danger has rippled off our backs like water off the feathers of a duck! If we meet no more peril than we have now encountered, we'll get back to New York fat and healthy."

"One thing I fail to comprehend," Captain Martin said, "and that is why a flying squadron was sent with you."

"To attract attention," laughed Ned.

"To get you out of scrapes, I should say," the Captain retorted.

"Well, then, both!"

"I don't get it yet."

"We might have reached Peking without our presence in the country being known to our enemies," Ned said, "but that was not the idea of the Washington people. I have already explained to the boys that we were to do our real work in identifying the man we want while on the way."

"Oh, all right," replied the officer, "but it seems to me that you might have made the trip in a quieter way with the same result. These chaps would have found you, depend on that."

"Yes, but we needed help," replied Ned, "and we got it in the nick of time. Guess the Secret Service people at Washington are all right."

"Perhaps," the Captain said, then, "we would better get the wounded men into the house and look after their wounds. The others I'll leave on guard."

The injured marines were carried into the house and given such attention as could be bestowed in the absence of a surgeon.

"What next?" asked Frank.

"Peking!" answered Jack. "We can't heal these wounds by remaining here, and we can help by going on and sending a surgeon back."

"But my orders are to remain with you," Captain Martin said.

"Then leave most of your men here and come on," Ned replied.

This plan was agreed upon, and would have been carried out at once had not something not on the program of the night intervened. Captain Martin had detailed two men to sit with the wounded and stationed the others in a circle about the house when a shot was fired off to the east.

"I didn't think they would have the nerve to attack the house openly before we got away," Captain Martin remarked.

All listened intently, but there was no more shooting.

"That sounded to me more like a signal than anything else," Ned observed. "I wonder if they are out in force?"

"I think I'd better call the men in," Captain Martin remarked.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a skulking form appeared in the dim light which now fell from the stars. The fellow was creeping from the house outward.

"A spy!" Jack whispered. "Shoot, some one. I haven't my gun with me. Shoot!"

The skulking man appeared to hear the words, though they were spoken in a very low tone, for he sprang to his feet and dashed away at full speed. In a second he was lost to view in the thicket.

"Say, but that chap is some runner!" Jimmie cried. "He went so fast I never thought to wing him!"

"Where did he come from?" asked Frank. "I'm certain he was not in the house. Perhaps he was up to some deviltry."

"He wasn't here with any bouquets," Jimmie answered. "I'm goin' out an' run around the house. Perhaps I can find out where he was hidin', an' find his mate there."

No objections being offered to this, the little fellow left the group and started in on a tour around the old house. He was gone perhaps two minutes, then came dashing back, his face white and horror-stricken in the circle of light which met him.

"Grab 'em! Grab 'em an' get out!" he shouted.

"Where did you get it?" demanded Jack.

"You're scared stiff!" Frank laughed.

"Grab the wounded men an' beat it!" Jimmie repeated. "This ranch will go up in the air in a second!"

"That's cheerful!" Jack cut in, half believing that Jimmie was up to another trick.

Jimmie dashed into the house, seized one of the wounded men by the shoulders and tried to drag him off the improvised bed on which he had been laid.

"All right!" he yelled. "You boys may stay here an' get shot up into blue sky if you want to, but I'm goin' to get these men out."

"Why don't you tell us what the danger is?" demanded Ned, shaking the little fellow by the arm.

"You listen!" Jimmie replied.

There was dead silence for an instant. Then, seemingly from underneath the floor, came a low, sinister hissing sound which every one of the boys recognized.

A great fuse was burning below, and might at any moment reach the explosive to which it was attached. The Chinese tools of the man at the head of the conspiracy were taking desperate chances.

In order to destroy the clues which Ned had found in the house, and also to prevent the boy ever discovering any more, they were taking the long chance of murdering the soldiers of a friendly power and bringing on international complications. Ned was by no means idle while these thoughts were swarming in his brain.

In fact, all the boys sprang to action instantly. Captain Martin was told to order his men farther away from the point of danger. In less time than the result of their activities can be written down the wounded men were lying in the grove, surrounded by their fellows, and the boys were waiting for what seemed inevitable, the complete destruction of the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BROKEN MATCH SAFE

"Why don't she go up?" asked Jack, as the boys crouched in the grove. "I don't mind seeing a little fourth of July!"

"She's coming," Frank answered. "Do you see the light in the cellar? That's the fuse burning."

"It must be a long one," Jimmie said. "Gee, but I was scared stiff when I saw it burnin' right under where you all were!"

"How did the sneak who set the fuse on fire ever get down there?" wondered Jack.

"Must have been there all the time," Jimmie volunteered.

"But he didn't have the powder, or the dynamite, or whatever thing he figured on blowing us up with, in his pockets, did he?" asked Jack.

"I guess the old Chink down the road, the fellow who kept me talking at the gate, had something to do with storing the explosive there," Ned remarked. "I presume the plot was laid to blow us up the minute the effort to destroy us at the ruined temple failed."

"Merry little time we're having," Frank laughed. "Here, kid, where are you going?" he added, as Jimmie moved away.

"I'm goin' to see why that don't go bang!" answered the boy.

Ned tried to stop him, but the little fellow dodged away and disappeared around an angle of the house.

The boys waited in suspense for a moment, expecting every instant to witness the explosion, then Frank and Jack darted around the corner, in quest of Jimmie.

"Come back!" Ned called, but they paid no heed.

Both Ned and the Captain sprang after the lads, the latter expressing in very vigorous language his opinion of boys who would take such risks out of curiosity.

"I'd rather wait an hour for an explosion than go up to see why it didn't come off in time," he said. "That Jimmie needs a good beating. He'll get it, too, if he doesn't behave!"

Ned laughed, serious as the situation was, at the thought of what would be apt to happen if the Captain should lay hands on the little fellow in anger. He would have the other boys on his hands in a second!

When Ned rounded the corner he saw Jimmie's heels half blocking a cellar window. Thick smoke was oozing out around him, and Frank and Jack were trying to pull him back.

"You let go!" they heard the little fellow shout. "I guess I know what I'm doin'. You let go!"

"Wait!" Ned said, then he stooped over and called out to Jimmie:

"Is the fuse out?"

"Sure!" was the reply. "Sure the fuse is out, but before it went out it set fire to something on the cellar bottom, an' the blaze is workin' its way up to the powder, or whatever it is. Ouch!" he added, as Jack gave a pull at his foot. "You let go!"

"Let him go," Ned advised. "Perhaps he can get in there in time to prevent the explosion."

"The little gink!" Jack exclaimed, "I wanted to see the thing bust up. Now he's spoiled it!"

In a moment the boy was in the cellar, and Ned was not far away when the creeping flame was extinguished. While Frank and Jack looked in at the window, shielding their eyes and faces from the smudge as well as it was possible to do, Ned called out to them:

"Tell Captain Martin to keep his men on guard around the house. The scamps who did this may be up to some other trick. They're determined that we shall never get to Peking!"

Frank crawled through the window and stood by Ned's side, searchlight in hand. Just about underneath the center of the house, was a half barrel of gunpowder.

"That would have done the business," Frank observed, and Jimmie made a wry face. "If this little nuisance hadn't seen the fuse burning, we might have been killed."

"Aw, go on!" Jimmie said. "The fuse went out, didn't it? Gave us a good scare, anyway. I'm six inches shorter than I was before I saw the blaze creepin' along like a bloomin' snake!"

"How did it affect your appetite?" asked Frank.

"If you mention anythin' to eat," Jimmie answered, "I'll have a fit. I don't know how people live in China, but I've been starved ever since I struck the country."

Flashlight in hand, Ned now devoted his whole attention to the floor of the cellar. There were marks of shoes here and there, and half-burned matches.

"It looks as if whoever did this job did it in a hurry," Ned said. "If the fuse had been set right it would have done its work. Do you see why it went out?"

"Well, there's a break in it, and the break is over a damp spot on the floor. The powder stuffed line burned to the break and there the flame went out. It burned slowly, anyway, which probably accounts for our being alive at this time."

Ned took a rule from his pocket and measured the shoe tracks on the floor. There were numerous tracks, but one was very distinct. This had been made by the man who rolled the half-barrel of powder to the place where it had been found.

The barrel had come upon a slight obstruction, and the man had evidently lifted and pulled at it until his shoe, by reason of the extra weight put upon it, had sunk deep into the light soil.

"That wasn't any Chink shoe," Jimmie said.

"No, it was a shoe made in America," Ned said. "It is comparatively a new shoe, too. I am wondering now why the American, or Englishman, or Frenchman, whatever he is, didn't hire some of the Chinks to do this work of laying the explosion."

"They're afraid," Jack volunteered.

There was a litter of half-burned matches near the barrel and Ned bent over and gathered them up. As he did so something bright lying on the ground, caught his eye. It was a gold rivet, or wire, not more than an inch long and about as thick as a knitting needle.

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"I should say," replied Ned, "that the fellow lost the cover to his match box here. This looks like the rivet which served for a hinge. The cover itself may be here."

But a close search did not reveal the cover, nor anything else of moment, in fact, and the boys soon left the cellar. Frank laughed as Ned placed the gold wire in his pocketbook.

"You are making quite a collection," he said.

"Yes," Jack added, "he has a state department seal, bits of broken sealing wax, and now a piece of a broken match safe. He'll set a trap with them directly!"

"The trap is already set!" Ned replied.

The long delay at the house made high speed necessary during the remainder of the run to Peking. The machines sparked and roared through that ancient land, bringing sleepy-eyed natives to doors and windows, and setting villages into whirls of excitement.

Captain Martin and one marine were with the boys, the rest having been left with the wounded men.

"My flying squadron is just beginning to fly," Ned said, as the machines rolled noisily down a hill from which the towers of the distant city showed. "And the smaller it becomes as we approach the end of the journey!"

"Suppose the Chinks attack the men left behind?" asked Jack.

"No danger of that," Ned replied. "They are not after the marines, but the Boy Scouts who had the nerve to cross the Pacific for the purpose of bringing a rascal to punishment."

This view of the case proved to be the correct one, as the marines were remarkably well treated by the natives, who gathered about them with many gestures and questions, all unintelligible to the warriors. The boys who were slowly drawing a slowly closing circle around the guilty ones were the persons in demand!

It was the middle of the forenoon when Ned and his companions reached the suburbs of the wonderful city. They attracted a great deal of attention as they wheeled through the straggling streets. They had not yet come to the wall, so the population was principally agricultural. Maize and millet are the principal products of the soil here, as the staple crops, wheat and rice, do not flourish well.

They had no difficulty in passing the gate which gave into the southern or "Chinese City." It is the northern part of Peking that is known to foreigners as "The Forbidden City." Here the rulers live in wonderful palaces. This is the old "Tartar City," too.

The second division of Peking is the business section. Here the boys drew up at a most uninviting native inn and asked a clerk who claimed to speak English for an interpreter. A snaky-looking fellow was finally produced, and Ned proceeded to question him about the show places of the town.

"Let him think we are American tourists," Ned said to his chums, "and we'll stand a better chance of getting into the diplomatic section of the town. Anyway, while we are here, we may as well see the sights."

After a midday luncheon Ned and Jimmie started out to look over the place. They were now in what is known as the general city, where the streets are from 140 to 200 feet wide. The thoroughfares are mostly unpaved, and the shops which line them are continuous, some green, some blue, some red, but all bustling with business.

The shops in this section of Peking are decorated with huge, staring signs, resplendent with Chinese characters highly gilt. Before the boys had traveled far they were forcibly reminded of the lower East Side of New York. The great thoroughfares roared with the rush of commerce.

Shopkeepers, peddlers, mountebanks, quack doctors, pedestrians rushing to and fro, all reminded the lads of the lower part of the big city on Manhattan island. The theaters and public places of amusement are situated in this part of Peking.

When Ned and Jimmie returned from the stroll they found Frank and Jack waiting for them with anxiety depicted on their faces.

"What have you been doing?" Frank asked. "I thought you came here to interview the American ambassador."

"All in good time," Ned replied, with a smile. "I want to pick up the American shoe print before I present my letter to the ambassador."

"Fine show you stand of picking up a shoe print in a crowd like that one out there!" Jack said. "It's worse than Coney Island on a midsummer Sunday."

"Perhaps I didn't use the right words," smiled Ned. "I might have said I was waiting for the American shoe man to pick me up."

"He's done that now, all right," Captain Martin said. "You had not been out of the house five minutes before the spies were thick as flies in the old Eighth ward. They are all about us now. Watch and see if we are ever alone."

Ned glanced about carelessly and nudged Frank with his elbow.

"That waiter?" he asked. "How long has he been loitering about the room?"

"Ever since we arrived. The men who have been entertaining us on the way were evidently waiting for us."

The boys were not in a private room, but in a public apartment where there were tables and refreshments.

"But that chap belongs here," Ned replied.

"Well, if you watch him, you will see that he is attending strictly to the wants of this party. If we call he'll wait on us. If any one else calls, another waiter glides over to him. Nice to be so exclusive, isn't it?"

"If you are right," Ned said, "it is time for us to move on."

"To the embassy?" asked Captain Martin. "You see," the Captain went on, "I'm rather anxious to land you boys under the protecting folds of the American flag, for there my responsibility ends."

"No, not to the embassy," Ned replied. "As yet I have nothing of importance to confide to the ambassador. I can only tell him that we are here, that we had numerous nibbles on the road from Taku, but that all the fish got away."

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed Jack. "I hope you don't think of staying out in the open until you can convey a couple of diplomats to the embassy! You can't catch your man single handed. You're not in New York now, but in a heathen town, a town where the life of a foreign devil is not worth a grain of rice."

"Just the same," Ned replied, "I'm going to stick around this town until I get what I want."

"In this dump?" asked Jack.

"No; there's an American hotel up the street---an American hotel operated by Chinks! We'll go there and take rooms and wait for something to turn up."

So, in spite of the protests of Captain Martin, the change was made, and late that night Ned awoke to find himself sitting up on the edge of his bed, automatic in hand, listening to the steady boring of a tool of some sort around the lock of his door!

CHAPTER XIX

A BOY SCOUT SURPRISE PARTY

When Ned heard the assaults of the midnight visitor on his door he looked at his watch, then slipped over to the window facing the street. Twelve o'clock and the thoroughfare below still teeming with life. Peking has something over three millions of population, according to the records, but, as a matter of fact, no one knows the exact size of the town as to humanity, for the Chinese live in densely-packed districts, and there are no census reports given out.

The city is many centuries old. It was a thriving capital three thousand years before Christ was born and during all the years of war and starvation and intrigue it continued to grow.

The hardy races from the North, which overran the country and kept a Tartar on the Chinese throne for centuries, are virile and pertinacious. It has been the fate of every civilization we know anything about to be wiped out by hardy races. Rome went down before the Northmen, and England had its oversea conqueror. Greece and Italy succumbed to the might of brawny arms, and civilization shrank back for hundreds of years. So China fell before the men of the mountains, and her records were destroyed.

As in all large cities, there is a night side to the life of Peking. If you traverse the streets at night you will find shops which have been closed all day opening for the trade of the night workers. You will see people who have slept through all the daylight hours walking through the streets to their nightly toil. You will see about the same things, only on a smaller scale, that you see in the daytime.

This night was no different from any other, except that there were more men who did not appear to have any particular business there lounging along the streets. Now and then these loiterers, walking slowly along the business ways, slipped unostentatiously into alleys and narrow by-ways and so on into basement and garret halls where others of their kind were assembled.

When Ned looked out of his window, listening meanwhile to the steady boring sound at his door, he saw a light at a window opposite to the building in which he stood waving slowly to and fro. There was a long vertical motion, and then the light moved from side to side again.

Ned counted the slow strokes. Left to right, right to left, back again and yet again!

"Six," he mused, "and all in action!"

The mouse-like gnawing at his door continued, the sounds seemingly louder than before. The intruder was evidently gaining courage!

Presently the boy leaned out of his window, which was on the third floor of the hotel, and watched the entrance below. There appeared to be a great rush of customers at that time. At least a score of natives passed in at the large door.

Then Ned turned to the right and studied the window of the room next to his own on that floor. There was a light in that room, too, but it seemed to be a red light. Then it changed to white, then to blue.

Ned laughed and began drawing on his clothes. Still the boring continued, and Ned bent over to see if he could discover any holes in the stile of the door.

There being no light in his room and, presumably, one in the corridor outside, he thought he might be able to see when a cut through the stile had been made. There were no indications of a break yet, and Ned settled back on his bed to wait.

Just at that moment he hardly knew what he was waiting for. He had been very busy all the afternoon, laying plans and conferring with a man who came from the police bureau, and who appeared to be working under instructions from the boy. Ned considered his plans as near perfect as any human plans can be, still he did not know exactly what would happen at a quarter past twelve.

At ten minutes past midnight the boy heard a rush of footsteps in the corridor. They passed his door and the boring ceased. Then they faded away in the distance and the gnawing was resumed. There was a little more noise in the hotel than before.

Ned smiled at the crude efforts that were being made to enter his room. In New York man disposed to enter for the purpose of robbery would have a skeleton key. He would be inside the room in three seconds after entering the corridor and finding the apartment he sought wrapped in darkness.

"But this isn't New York," the boy mused. "This is the Orient, and the patience of the Orient, and the stupidity of the Orient!"

At exactly a quarter past twelve there was a commotion in the corridor. Several people seemed to be moving toward the door of Ned's room. Once there was a little cry of alarm.

Ned looked out of his window. The panes where he had observed the signals, across the street, were dark. There was no light in the window next his own which had shown red, white and blue but a moment before.

The clamor in the corridor increased, and Ned walked to the door and undid the fastenings. Then it swung open, almost striking Ned in the face.

Facing the boy, in the corridor, were six Chinamen, or men in native dress, rather. Back of them were a score of stern-faced Chinese policemen. To the right, and struggling with all their might to get into the room were Frank, Jack, and Jimmie, the latter with his nose wrinkled and wrinkling to such an extent that it resembled a small ocean with the wind undulating its surface.

"Trap's closed!"

That was Jimmie, of course. Frank and Jack stood by laughing. The faces of the six men who stood before the door were anything but pleasant to look upon.

They expressed hate, despair, desperate intents. As they stood there Frank reached forward and snatched a queue-wig from the head of the man nearest him.

"There he is!" Jimmie cried. "There's the old boy, Ned---the smooth gink we saw at Taku, at Tientsin, and at numerous places on the road. I wonder how he likes the scene?"

Ned motioned to the six to step into the room. Three of them objected, then swords flashed in the light of the corridor and they moved on.

They were followed by the three boys and half a dozen policemen, all with automatics in view. At a motion from the leader of the officers the six were searched and ironed. Jack nudged Frank in the ribs with his elbow as the handcuffs clicked on the wrists of the man who had so persistently followed them from the coast of the Yellow Sea.

"That's a good sport," he said. "I like to see a fellow play the game!"

The prisoner turned a pair of treacherous eyes on the boys and a cynical smile curled his thin lips.

"You have the cards now," he said, in English, "but look out for the new deal. I'll keep you busy yet."

"Go to it!" laughed Jack. "Go as far as you like, only I fail to see how you're going to get into the game again. Looks like you were all in, just now!"

"Wait!" said the other, scornfully.

There now came a knock at the door and Ned opened it to admit Captain Martin, who looked as if he had just left his bed after an unsatisfactory sleep. He cast his eyes about the room with amazement showing in every glance.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"Surprise party!" Jimmie cried.

"Who are these men?"

The Captain pointed to the six prisoners lined up against the wall of the room.

"Our friends from Taku, from the ruined temple, from Tientsin, from the farm house loaded with gunpowder, and from the tea house," laughed Ned. "Do you recognize the fellow with his disguise off? Jimmie gave him a haircut and shave just now."

"And you have captured them?"

"It doesn't look as if they had captured us," Jimmie broke in.

"But how, when, why?"

"All of that!" grinned Jimmie.

Ned spoke a few words to the officer in charge of the squad and in a moment the room was occupied only by the handcuffed prisoners, the four boys, and Captain Martin. The latter stood looking at Ned with a question in each eye.

"When you get time," he said, "I'd like to have you tell me how you brought this case to a close so suddenly."

Ned motioned to the man who had been stripped of his disguise to take a chair at the table. The fellow did so reluctantly, turning his face this way and that, as if seeking some opportunity of escape.

"Well," he said. "You have the floor. Go On."

"You were at Taku?" asked Ned.

"I deny everything!"

"You will deny your own fingerprints, the shoeprints?" asked Ned.

"Well, supposing, for the sake of argument, that I was at Taku, what has that to do with this brutal and illegal arrest?"

"You placed the powder under the house where the wounded men lay?"

"No."

"I have something I want to show you," Ned said, taking a paper from his pocket. "Have you a match?"

Almost involuntarily the fellow put his hand to his right vest pocket and brought forth a gold match safe. Ned took it into his hand and touched the spring which lifted the top.

"There seems to be a new wire in the hinge," he said.

"Yes, the old one wore out."

Ned opened his pocketbook and took out the gold wire he had found in the cellar by the side of the powder. The prisoner started violently when he saw it.

"Is this yours?" Ned asked.

"No!"

"All right!" Ned said.

With the point of his knife he pushed the sale and put the old new hinge from the match safe and put the old one in its place.

It fitted exactly.

"There!" Ned said, "you see the old one did not wear out entirely. It wore away so that it dropped out. Do you know where I found it, my friend?"

"It is immaterial to me where you found it."

"Even if I found it in a cellar by the side of a half barrel of gunpowder to which a lighted fuse had been attached?"

"Hadn't you better make your case---if you can make it at all---in the courts?" asked the prisoner.

Ned took the state department seal, the sealing wax, and the bits of parchment from his pocket.

"Who met you in the library at the house you attempted to destroy?" he asked.

There was no reply.

"Were these men present?" with a sweep of the hand toward the other prisoners.

"What has this to do with my case?"

"This," Ned replied. "You were still conspiring to fix upon my government the crime of interfering in the private affairs of another nation---with the crime of providing, by a treacherous and despicable route, the money needed by the revolutionary party of China. You were doing business in that house with the representatives of another nation. Who were they? What nations did they represent, or pretend to represent?"

"I have nothing to say to that."

Ned held up the seal.

"This was not used?" he asked.

"It was not used."

"Why not?"

"Because the representative of that nation refused to consider the terms offered him."

Ned held forth the sealing wax.

"This shows that the seal of another nation was used. Where is the paper to which the seal was attached?"

"Destroyed!"

"Is that true?" asked Ned.

"It is true, they all deserted me. They all ran away when they knew you were in the country, but I brought them back, and held them until the incident at the house where you found those things."

"So you are now the only one to look to for the history of this bit of devilry?"

"I stand alone," was the reply. "Alone, with the exception of these men I who were arrested with me. The plot has failed, and we know what to expect."

The prisoner was about to say more, but just then a clamor in the street below attracted the attention of all in the room.

CHAPTER XX

THE EMPEROR TAKES A HAND

Ned stepped to the window and looked out. The street in front of the hotel was filled from curb to curb with an excited mob.

That the efforts of those below were directed toward the building and its occupants there could be no doubt. Many a shaking fist was thrust up to the lighted panes where Ned stood.

The boy turned to Jimmie, spoke a few words in a whisper, and the little fellow left the room. With him went the interpreter who had been engaged that day.

Shouts, howls and groans of rage now came up from the street, and Ned stepped away from the window. As he did so the prisoner who had been making a partial confession when the uproar came, moved forward, as if to show himself to those below.

Seeing his intention, Ned seized him by the shoulder and hurled him to the back end of the room. The prisoner smiled and again seated himself in the chair he had occupied before.

"Your friends are excited," Ned said, drawing the curtain at the window.

The other nodded in the direction of the window and smiled.

"My friends?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"Why do you attribute this outbreak to me?"

"Because those not in league with you and your cause would hardly threaten American tourists, in the face of the law."

"American tourists!" snarled the other, and Ned laughed.

Jimmie now came bustling into the room, his eyes staring with excitement. The interpreter was only a trifle less moved by the information which had been gained.

"What is it?" Jack asked.

"He's crazy with fear again!" Frank put in.

"Say," Jimmie cried, "you'd all better be gettin' out of this place. The people out there are goin' to raid it in a minute!"

The prisoner uttered a defiant laugh and again started for the window. Again Ned forced him back.

"What's the trouble?" asked Frank.

"Why," was the reply, "this gink here," pointing toward the prisoner whose disguise had been removed, "this gazabo hadn't much confidence in his own ability to win this fight, so he appealed to the revolutionary leaders."

"That's fine!" Jack said. "We may have the luck to see a full-fledged revolution doing business."

"You are quite likely to."

This from the prisoner, now standing with the others at the back of the room.

"You arranged for this demonstration in case you should be taken?" asked Ned.

The prisoner snarled out some ugly reply.

"You planned this?" demanded Ned, resolved to know the truth.

"Yes," almost shouted the other, "and you will soon discover that it is something more than a demonstration."

The interpreter drew Jimmie aside and whispered in his ear. Then the boy turned to Ned.

"This boy says he saw a signal given from a window as soon as this bunch was taken," he said. "Then crowds began forming. Say, but we'd better be gettin' out!"

"Save yourselves the exertion," the prisoner said. "They will find you, wherever you go!"

"Possibly," Ned said.

Then he walked to the window and again looked out on the mob. The street was packed. Faces showing rage and desperate bravery were uplifted. Fists were shaken at the window where he stood. In a moment a stone came hurtling against the wall of the house.

Here and there, on the outskirts of the crowd, policemen in the funny uniforms the police of Peking wear, were seen trying vainly to force their way to the door of the hotel. The main entrance seemed to be guarded, for the mob did not succeed in forcing its way in.

Presently, however, Ned saw long ladders being carried forward on the shoulders of the rioters. Then they were dropped against the wall and men with bloody faces---bloody from the acts of their own fellows---fought to be first to climb.

"In three minutes," the prisoner said, "you will be torn limb from limb if I am not released."

"Your friends certainly do insist on something of the kind," Ned replied.

"Remove these irons and place me before the window," commanded the other. "That will quiet them."

"And make terms with a pack of rioters?" smiled Ned.

"You can save your life, and the lives of your friends, in no other way," insisted the other.

Ned went to the window again, although bricks and stones were flying quite freely. The ladders swarmed with excited men, but no one seemed able to gain entrance at the windows which were attacked.

Instead, a ladder now and then went toppling backward, carrying dozens of rioters to death or injury. When the ladders began falling the mob moved away from that side of the street.

"You see," Ned said to the prisoner, "that we were on the lookout for something like this."

"How could you have been?" gasped the other.

"Our interpreter heard some of the messages sent out by mouth by the revolutionists. I connected your possible capture with the gathering. We were warned and made ready."

"But my men will soon be here!" shouted the other. "They are sworn to go to death for the cause if necessary."

"But I don't see them doing anything of the kind," Ned replied. "On the contrary, they seem to be taking pretty good care of their yellow old hides!"

"You'll see!" howled the other.

Directly the heavy beat of marching feet came up to the window, heard above the roar of the mob below. Far down the street Ned saw the advancing line, bearing the colors of the Emperor.

The rioters saw the line, too, and the crowd in front of the hotel began to thin. Then the soldiers arrived and the thoroughfare was empty save for their presence. By this time the prisoner was in a condition of collapse. He had planned this thing carefully, and was now in the meshes of failure.

The street below soon cleared of the few who gathered about to witness the arrival of the soldiers. The few prisoners, who had been taken marched sullenly to prison. In ten minutes the city of Peking was as quiet as if the machinations of the conspirators had never stirred the people to riot.

"Well?" Ned said, facing the prisoner. "What do you think we ought to do with you?"

"After all," was the reply, "you have no charges against me. My government alone can discipline me for what has been done."

"Your government will deny any knowledge of the conspiracy," Ned replied. "From this time on, you have no government."

"And yet I acted under instructions."

"What was the motive?" asked Frank, who saw a fine cablegram for his father's newspaper in the story.

"The purpose," replied the other, weakly, "was to so entangle your government that it would not dare lend aid to the revolutionary leaders."

"And you were engaged in it?"

A nod of the head was the only reply.

"Yet you pretended to be assisting the revolutionary party. You were present at their councils. Can it be possible that you were treacherous to both sides?"

There was no answer.

"Suppose," Ned said, "suppose I turn you over to the revolutionary leaders, with a statement of what you have just said? What would be your fate? Remember that the men of the revolution were ready to fight for you not long ago."

Still no reply. The prisoner only looked sullenly down at the floor.

"What government do you represent?" asked Frank. "What nation is it that is protecting the imperial government of China?"

"You need not answer that question," Ned said, with a sigh.

Frank laughed.

"I see," he said. "You don't want to further implicate matters by giving out the name of the power whose seal shows on the wax! All right, old boy, I'll get it yet!"

"No good can come of a representative of the United States Government presenting charges of such a character against another power," Ned replied.

Captain Martin now arose from the chair where he had been seated for a long time. He glanced keenly into the faces of the six prisoners and then turned to Ned.

"Shall I take them in charge?" he asked,

"That would be useless."

"Then what can be done with them?"

"I am going to turn them over to the authorities on the charge of attempted murder, based on the effort they made to kill us in the old house."

"Very well," the Captain said, "now will you tell me how you set this trap so, cleverly?"

"It was only a matter of detail," Ned replied. "I took good care to let the native waiters here know that I had the clues I had found secreted in my room. I also let it be known that I was a heavy sleeper.

"My interpreter, who is by no means as treacherous a chap as his looks would indicate, heard the robbery of my room planned. He heard the hour fixed—a quarter past twelve. So all the rest was easy."

"Oh, yes, easy, but how did you do it?"

"Frank, Jack and Jimmie helped," added Ned. "Jack was at a window over the way. He told me by signals just how many men were to take part in the attack on me.

"Frank, in the next room to mine, told me when the time came to be on guard. I really do not wake easily, and he rigged a cord through the wall so I could rest comfortably until the time for action came.

"Then when all was ready, he told me by means of colored light that all the six were in the corridor, and that the officers I had engaged during the afternoon were on hand."

"And you went to sleep with all this on your mind and slept up to within a quarter of an hour of the time set for action?" asked the Captain in wonder.

"Why, certainly," was the reply. "You see, we have been having some exciting nights, and I needed rest. The other boys slept a good deal this afternoon, so I left them to wake me at night. Nothing odd about that, is there?"

"Nothing save the nerve of it."

Two high officers now made their appearance in the room and beckoned to the prisoners. All arose save the man from whom the disguise had been stripped. He remained in the chair into which he had dropped, seemingly in a stupor.

"Come," said the officer.

The man arose, desperation in his eyes, and moved toward the door. A few days before that miserable night he had been one of the leaders in the statecraft of the world. Now he was being marched to a prison like any ordinary criminal.

The speaker was interrupted by a quick movement on the part of the prisoner, the man he had addressed as Count. There was no one between the desperate man and the still open window. Ned was at the door, Captain Martin was out in the corridor, and Frank, Jack and Jimmie were talking together in a corner.

Handcuffed as he was, the Count leaped to the window and shot down to the hard pavement below. There was a shrill cry as his body hurtled through the air, then a crash.

Below passersby drew away from what lay in a bloody heap on the pavement. A little crowd gathered, at a distance, but none knew that the body of one of the most distinguished statesmen in the world lay there.

"It is finished!" Ned said, with a sigh. "The whole story of the conspiracy will never be told. It is the story of a treacherous government and a treacherous statesman.

"The documents I have will fully prove that the United States had no hand in the gold shipment, and that is all that we care for. The old world may take care of its own political messes."

"It is a mess indeed," Captain Martin, said. "In less than a year China will be red with blood, and the streets of Peking will witness the retreat of the royal family."

How true this prophecy was the readers of the daily newspapers now know.

"Well," Jack said, with a yawn, as the boys and the Captain were left alone in the room together, "I presume it is us for little old New York to-morrow. How do you like this motorcycle-flying-squadron business, boys," he added. "We seem to have flown ahead of the flying squadron."

"Then we ought to fly back and look after the ones who were wounded on the road," Frank said. "Suppose we all go back on our machines, and really see something of the country?"

This was agreed to, and the party separated for the night. In the morning Ned paid his respects to the American ambassador, who greeted him courteously, but wanted to know all about the events of the trip from the coast.

"You have gotten Uncle Sam out of a bad mess," the ambassador said, when Ned had finished his narration, "and you will find that you will be well rewarded when you return to Washington."

The ambassador also requested the boys to visit the other legations, but they did not care to do so.

"Well," he said, then, "you must take a letter from me which may help you on your way. I have been expecting you here all the week, but it seems that you completed your work without my assistance,"

"Just what I was figuring on," Ned replied.

"I worked under surveillance all the way here, and I desired to show that I could do something on my own account."

The boys left Peking early the next morning, and were not long in reaching the house where the powder trap had been set for them. There they found Hans and Sandy! The boys had followed them on from Tientsin in an automobile which an English merchant was taking through.

Both boys were riding motorcycles, and were already proficient enough to proceed with the others, using the machines which had been ridden by the wounded marines, who were sent on to Peking in charge of Captain Martin.

A week was spent on the road to Taku, and the lads enjoyed every minute of the time. The letter given them by the American ambassador brought them every attention at Tientsin and Taku.

It was late in the fall when they reached New York. On the night of their arrival there were many joyful meetings in the clubroom of the Black Bear Patrol. The next day Ned went on to Washington to file his report. When he returned it was with a very substantial reward.

"Now," he said, with a laugh, "I'm ready for the next trip. I wonder where it will be?"

THE END