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The Mascot of Sweet Briar Gulch

By HENRY WALLACE PHILLIPS

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But the deer gave up the struggle and lay quiet, looking up with great pleading eyes.

"Yes, you devil!" cried Jim. "You look meek enough now, but if you weren't a handful of hard luck ten seconds ago I never ran across one. You hurt, Ches?"

"I got a lovely tump on me smeller, but I'm in it yet. Do I let go or don't I?"

"Not on your life! Wait a moment." He worked his weight over on the deer's body. "Now!" he said. "Quick! Jump loose!" Again the deer glanced up reproachfully, as though to say, "How suspicious you are!"

The instant Ches jumped clear so did Jim. They watched their late antagonist who sprang to his feet and went off with frisky leaps, apparently as fresh as ever.

Then they looked at each other. Ches was rubbing his stomach with his left hand, while he wiped the blood from his nose with the right. Jim's coat and trousers were torn, he had a deep scratch across his chest, a gouge in his leg, and he trembled from the exertion.

"Well—Ches!" he panted. "We've had a—nice—rest—haven't we?"

"Wouldn't it 'a' been turble if yer hadn't caught him?" replied Ches. And then they simply whopped.

They were just of an age. Any one would have said so on seeing them approach the cabin, arms flying, tongues wagging, bruised, tired and happy.

"Jim!" said a very sleepy little boy after supper, gorged like an anaconda, "yer don't see 'tings like dat in N'York, not much yer don't. If dat racket had come off in der Bowerly dere'd be headlines—dines—on der extries—more'n a mile!"

Jim picked him up and tucked him into his bunk. "More'n a mile long, G'nigh," sighed Ches.

Jim lit his pipe and went out for an evening smoke. It was some little time the next morning before he could realize what he was doing out there under the tree.

He had been in some ways a graver man of late. What he had undertaken as an experiment, a generous impulse, had been turned into a lasting responsibility.

CHAPTER V.

ON the second day after Ches' arrival Bud had come through with the mail and before leaving drew Jim aside out of the boy's hearing.

"The little feller's yours ag'in all comers now, Jim," he said.

"What's that?" asked Jim, surprised by the meaning in the tone.

"He's yours," repeated Bud. "That sweet scented blossom that called himself the boy's dad filled his skin with red eye farther up the line and settled the fuss he had with his dame."

"Hurt her?"

"Man," said Bud slowly, "he used a knife a foot long; gave it to her a dozen times as hard as he could drive. What's your opinion?"

"Great Caesar! Did he get away? But no; of course he couldn't, being on the train."

"He didn't get away. The con. wired the news to Kimballa. What was he to do when a small army of punchers boarded the train and took the prisoner? He couldn't do nothing, and he never loved that black muzzled whelp from the time he sassed him in the depot. The punchers took our friend out and tried him."

"Tried him?"

"With a rope. In three minutes by the watch he was found wanting. Your boy now, Jim, as I was telling you. Going to say anything to him about it?"

"Why," said Jim, bewildered—"why, I don't know, Bud. Guess not just yet on general principles."

"Great little papoose, ain't he?" said Bud, turning in his saddle before his starting rush. "Makings of a man there, all right. The boys in town are dead stuck on him. I'll have to give a complete history when I get back. I must get a gait on, or I'll have Uncle Sammy on my neck ag'in. Inspector started out with me this morning."

"The devil he did!" cried Jim indignantly, well knowing the hardships and dangers of the big rider's route.

"Oh, it's all right," replied Bud, with a wave of his hand. "Come out fine. When the lad first told me he'd been sent out to see why the mails was so late on this line I told him I'd show him right on the spot, but he said

there was no use getting hot about it, as he was only doing his duty, so I quieted down.

"Two miles out of town we ran into a wild eyed gang from somewhere who was going to make us dance. We didn't dance, and I'll say for that inspector that he stood by me like a man, but he was awful sick at his stomach later on from the excitement."

"Next thing the bridge was down at Squaw creek, and we swum her. He'd have gone down the flume if I hadn't got hold of his bridle. 'Nice mail route, this,' says he as he got ashore. 'Oh, you'd like it,' says I. 'If you got used to it.' I'd begun to wonder what was next myself. Ain't many people swimming Squaw creek, as you perhaps know."

"Well, next was about ten mile along, just before you come to the old Tin Cup camp. We was passing the bluff there, and all of a sudden—rip, thump, biff!—down comes what looked like the whole side a-top of us. It weren't, though. It was only a cinnamon had lost his balance, leaning over too far to see what we was. That bear landed right ag'in brother inspector's horse, and brother inspector's horse tried to climb a tree. Inspector himself fell a-top of the bear. I dashed shoot, for the devil himself couldn't have told which was inspector and which bear. Finally bear shakes himself loose and telescopes himself up the canyon the worst scared animal in the country. 'If you'll ketch my horse I'll amble back ag'in,' says the inspector. 'I've investigated this route pretty thorough and find it's just as you say. Lampposts 'll do me all right for awhile.' Come out fine, didn't it?"

"Whish there! Untie yourself, you yaller bone heap!" And the mail was a quarter of a mile up the trail.

Jim pondered the information concerning Ches carefully, only to adhere to his original determination. He could not see any way in which the boy would be benefited by hearing the news. Still, the miner hated anything that savored of concealment or deception.

"I wish Anns was here to help me," he thought. "She'd know what to do."

He sat long, looking down, his hands clasped about his knees, drinking with old Tantalus. But the reverie ended.



"GREAT LITTLE PAPOOSE, AIN'T HE?" SAID BUD.

as it always did, in action. There was nothing for it but the claim. Success there meant success everywhere.

It was the knowledge that Anne, the boy and all he wished to do for both depended on the pay streak which had urged him to such a fury of effort.

His carelessness of his own life that led him to slap his timbering up any way was born of that same fury. And the consequences came, like most consequences, without a moment's warning.

It was a still and beautiful noon. Ches had pulled out the last car before dinner and started for the cabin.

A curious groaning and snapping from the tunnel halted him. It was the giving of the tortured timbers. On the heels of that came a dull, crushing roar. A blast of dust shot from the tunnel mouth, like smoke from a cannon, preceded by a shock that nearly threw the boy off his feet.

Then all was still again. The sun shone as brilliantly as before, blazing down upon the ghastly face of a little boy, who after one heartbroken cry of "Jim! Oh, Jim's killed!" sank down upon the ground, chewing the fingers thrust in his mouth that the pain might make the black wave keep its distance.

For Ches knew that he was alone; that there was no human being within miles to help the man caught in the hand of that mischance but himself, so frantically willing, but so impotent.

"I must git me wits tergedder, I must." And down came the teeth with all the strength of the boy's jaw. "Oh, what will I do? What will I do?" The little head waved from side to side in its agony, and a sudden sob struck him in the throat.

(To be Continued)