THE MOTOR RANGERS ON BLUE WATER

Or

THE SECRET OF THE DERELICT

BY

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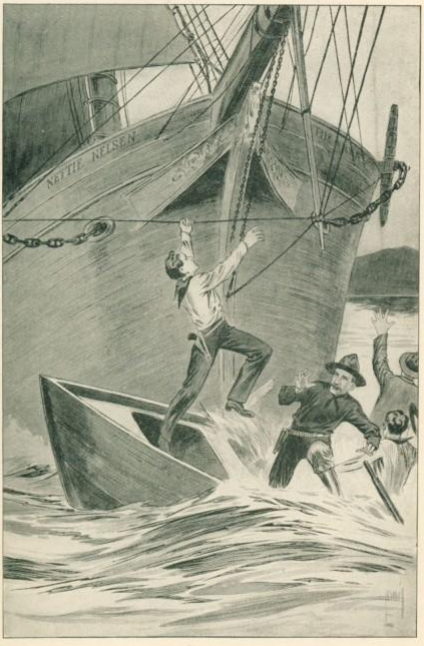
The Motor Rangers on Blue Water
or The Secret of the Derelict



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THE MOTOR RANGERS ON BLUE WATER

CHAPTER I.
THE WATCHER OF THE TRAIL.

A party of horsemen, riding in single file, was making its way down the steep, rugged trail leading from the interior to Santa Inez. Although they had not as yet glimpsed the little mission town, which was their destination, the blue, sparkling glint of the Pacific had, for some time, been visible through the columnar trunks and dark foliage of the red woods.

The four persons composing the little cavalcade seemed to be in the best of spirits as their sure-footed cayuses ambled along. Their voices rose high amid the hush of the densely wooded slopes. Squirrels, blue-jays, and other denizens of the Coast Range, fled incontinently as they heard the high, boyish tones intruding into their domains.

But they need not have been afraid. Fond as the Motor Rangers, all three, were of exercising their "twenty-twos" on any "small deer" that came in sight, their minds, just then, were far too much occupied to think of hunting.

"See the boat yet, Nat?" inquired Joe Hartley, a stalwart, sun-bronzed lad of about seventeen. He addressed a boy of about his own age, who rode slightly in advance of the rest. Like Joe, Nat Trevor was attired in typical mountaineer's costume, set off by a jaunty sombrero with a leather band round the crown.

Nat turned in his saddle.

"I could hardly sight her yet, Joe," he rejoined. "But she'll be there on time. Captain Akers would not disappoint me, I know."

"Y-y-y-y-you've go-go-got acres of f-f-f-faith in him, so to speak," came from the third young rider in line, Ding-dong—otherwise William,—Bell, of course.

Nat shook his quirt at the stuttering lad with mock anger.

"If you don't stop your everlasting punning, Ding-dong, I'll—I'll——"

"Have ter leave him behind. I reckon that would be the worst punishment for him," struck in a loosely built, bronzed man, who rode behind Ding-dong and sat his horse with the easy grace of the practised rider. His leather "chaps," blue shirt, and red handkerchief, carelessly knotted about his sun-burned throat, also proclaimed him a typical westerner of the Sierran region. And so he was, for most of our readers will by this time have recognized in him Cal Gifford, the former driver of the Lariat stage, who had so materially aided our young Motor Rangers in their adventures in the wild region which now lay behind them. All of these stirring incidents were related in a previous volume of this series, "The Motor Rangers Through the Sierras."

By a hair rope, which was "half-hitched" round the horn of his saddle, Cal led an exceedingly small burro, with sagely flapping ears. The animal bore a big canvas pack, which, besides containing the provisions of the party on their dash from the mountains to the coast, carried also the object of their expedition—namely, the box of sapphires found in the dead miner's—Elias Gooddale's—cabin.

On the return of the boys to Big Oak Flat from their Sierran excursion they had found themselves facing the problem of the safe conveyance of the precious stones to a community of law and order where they might be placed in the proper hands till Elias Gooddale's heirs could be found.

But, as will be recalled by the readers of "The Motor Rangers Through the Sierras," Colonel Morello's band was still at large, and it had been decided that as the outlaws already knew of the existence of the sapphires, and the identity of their custodians, that it would be dangerous to attempt to transport such a valuable freightage through the lonely mountains by automobile.

The car, therefore, had been left in charge of Herr Muller to take through to Santa Barbara. The boys, for their part, adopted with all enthusiasm Nat's plan, which was to tell Captain Akers to bring Nat's motor boat "Nomad" from Santa Barbara and meet them on the coast at Santa Inez, an old mission town with a passable harbor. It was agreed that transportation of the sapphires in this way would offer few difficulties and no dangers, and as Herr Muller politely but firmly declined to go a-cruising, the boys were relieved of the task of finding some one to take their fine touring car through to their home town.

As for the "Nomad," she was a sixty-foot cruising motor boat of thirty horse-power. Nat and his chums had seen her keel laid before they set out for the Sierran trip, and when the question of moving the sapphires came up, as has been said, Nat at once hit on the idea of combining business and pleasure by sending word to her builder, Captain Akers, to bring her up to Santa Inez. Thus they would experience the delights of a trial trip and at the same time feel that the sapphires were safe and sound.

Lest it be wondered at that a lad of Nat's age could own such a fine craft, we must refer our new readers to the first volume of this series, "The Motor Rangers' Lost Mine." In this book it was told how Nat and his chums routed some rascals in Lower California, and how Nat came into his own. Inasmuch as his chums had also, by his generosity, been made sharers in his good fortune, none of the boys was short of pocket money. In fact, had they not all three been steady-going, well-balanced lads it might have been said they had too much.

But the Motor Rangers, instead of expending their money foolishly, preferred to lay it out in healthy, exciting expeditions, and that they had already been recompensed by a goodly share of adventures we know. Possibly a word further in relation to the sapphires they were transporting may not be amiss.

The gems, then—which were all in the rough—had been found by Nat and his chums in what had at first appeared an abandoned hut in the Sierras. On investigating the place, however, they discovered the body of the former occupant of the hut, a miner named Elias Gooddale. He had evidently succumbed to the rigors of the preceding Sierran winter. Although everything else in the hut had been pretty well devoured by mountain rats, a tin despatch box had escaped mutilation. Opening this the lads found papers therein, telling of the hiding place of some sapphires under the hearthstone. Gooddale, with a dying effort, had also penned a will, leaving the gems to his unnamed next of kin. It was recalled by Cal Gifford that Gooddale had come to the community some years before and had engaged on a quest for sapphires. He was adjudged crazy by the other miners, but he kept steadily on his strange hunt. Judging by the boys' find, it appeared that death must have overtaken him in the very moment of victory.

However that may have been, it so happened that while the party was examining its strange find a face appeared at the window. It was the countenance of Ed. Dayton, one of Col. Morello's principal lieutenants. The boys had had trouble with him in Lower California—as related in "The Motor Rangers' Lost Mine"—and he had had no reason to love them. As ill luck would have it, he saw the sapphires as they were spread out before the finders' wondering eyes.

The sequel was the pursuit of the Motor Rangers by Col. Morello and his band, whose cupidity had been excited by the rich discovery. The outlaws surrounded the boys and their friends in a hut in a canyon and escape seemed to be impossible. But Nat, by a bit of clever strategy, managed to slip out, and after a wild ride through an abandoned lumber flume reached Big Oak Flat. A posse was formed and arrived in time to rescue Cal Gifford and the rest. But Morello and his band escaped, only one or two minor members of the rascally organization being wounded in the battle that followed the arrival of the posse.

Leaving the sapphires in the care of Sheriff Jack Tebbetts, of Big Oak Flat, the boys and their party continued their motoring trip through the mountains. At its conclusion they returned to the primitive settlement only to hear that Morello had been committing fresh depredations. Sheriff Tebbetts strongly advised against the gems being carried through the mountains by auto on that account. Thus it came about that our party came to be riding to the little coast town of Santa Inez, the trail to which laid through comparatively settled, orderly country.

But we have deserted our friends altogether too long while we have taken this lengthy but necessary digression. Let us now return

and accompany them as they round a turn in the trail and find themselves zigzagging down the mountainside in full view of Santa Inez and the glorious Pacific.

"What a queer little town!" exclaimed Nat, as the panorama below suddenly burst upon them.

He gazed in an interested way at the collection of red-tiled roofs and adobe walls below them. Several modern cottages mingled with the ancient Spanish architecture without detracting a bit from its quaintness. Above the other roofs, and some little distance removed from them, imposed a tower pierced with numerous openings, within which swung ancient bells. This was the tower of the old mission of Santa Inez. It had been long abandoned, but still remained a pathetic monument to a great religious movement.

Situated as it was, at the foot of the mountainside, which was clothed with pungent bay and madrone trees, and facing a blue bay of horseshoe shape, a more picturesque little place it would be hard to imagine.

"But the boat?" exclaimed Joe, as they advanced down the steeply pitched trail. "I don't see a sign of her."

It was true. The sparkling, deep blue bay was empty of life. That is, if a fair-sized black schooner, which lay at some little distance offshore, be excepted.

All the party showed their disappointment. They had confidently expected to behold the trim outlines of Nat's "Nomad" as soon as they came in full view of Santa Inez. Blank looks were

exchanged. Even Cal, who had had no experience of the sea and indeed rather mistrusted it, looked downcast.

"Maybe a whale swallered yer ship, Nat," he ventured.

In spite of his chagrin over the non-arrival of the "Nomad," Nat had to laugh, for Cal had made the remark just recorded in no joking sense. The mountaineer, who had hitherto obtained only distant glimpses of the ocean, fully believed it was inhabited by monsters capable of devouring whole vessels.

"There are some big whales in the Pacific, all right, Cal," said the boy, shoving back his sombrero, "but I hardly think that any one has yet heard of one capable of absorbing a sixty-foot motor boat. And—hullo—what's that? Hurray!"

His cheer was speedily echoed by the others who had fixed their eyes on him when he broke off so excitedly in the middle of a sentence.

Coming round the southern point of the horseshoe-shaped bay was a trim and trig white craft with one slender mast, but no funnel. She was coming swiftly, too. The white foam at her bow showed how she was cutting through the water.

"'Nomad,' ahoy!" shouted Nat, standing erect in his stirrups and waving his sombrero, utterly oblivious of the fact that at that distance it would have been quite impossible to have seen, much less heard, him.

The others caught his enthusiasm. Indeed the "Nomad" was a sight to make the veriest landsman wax enthusiastic. As she cut round the point and neared the land they could catch the glint of polished brass and wood work when she rolled to the Pacific swell.

Presently the lone figure on her bridge could be seen to issue an order to another man, who was on the forward part of the little motor craft. There was a splash at the "Nomad's" bow, and she came to a standstill.

"Anchored!" cried Nat.

At the same instant the figure they had descried on the bridge was seen running aft. In a moment, from the jack-staff astern, appeared something that made all their hearts beat a bit faster—Old Glory! The land breeze caught the flag's folds and whipped them out splendidly.

"Well, boys, there's the gallant little craft that will take us all safe to Santa Barbara and give us many a jolly cruise beside!" cried Nat, a note of exultation in his voice.

"Our dream ship!" cried Joe poetically.

"Our ter-ter-ter-treasure ship you mean," sputtered Ding-dong. "She'll get the sapphires safely through and Morello can hang about all he wants to, waiting for us to show up in the good old automobile."

"Yep, I reckon we've fooled the old coyote this trip, smart as he is," chuckled Cal, leaning over to adjust a stirrup leather.

As he did so, from the brush which grew close up to the trail on either side, there came a sharp snap—a breaking branch evidently.

In the silence that had followed the former stage driver's remark, the sudden noise sounded as loud and as startling as a pistol shot. Cal straightened up instantly. But quick as he was,

whoever or whatever had caused the sudden noise did not further reveal their presence. The boys searched about for a bit, but their investigation was only perfunctory, for they were too eager to get on board the "Nomad" to spend much time at anything else.

"Guess it must have been a deer, or a rabbit, or something," said Nat, as they remounted and set off once more.

The others agreed, and thought no more of the matter. But Cal belonged to a school that finds cause for suspicion in any unexplained noise. It is an instinct descended to such men from the harassed pioneers of the Pacific Slope.

He frowned to himself as they rode forward, although he said nothing to the lads of what was passing in his mind. But to himself he muttered seriously enough:

"That warn't no rabbit, nor it warn't no deer. Critters don't bust branches; they're too wise.

CHAPTER II.
COLONEL MORELLO CHARTERS A SCHOONER.

Cal Gifford had been correct in his guess. The watcher of the trail was a man, and probably the last man in the world the boys would have wished to have in their vicinity just then. For it was Ed. Dayton who had stepped upon the branch, much to his chagrin, for the accident came just at the very moment that he was pretty sure of overhearing something interesting, provided he remained silent.

Dayton had been rabbit hunting along the trail when his quick ear had caught the sound of the approaching party. With an instinct entirely natural to a man of his character he had hastened to conceal himself immediately. This was partly, as has been said, by instinct, and partly from a reasonable sense of prudence; for Ed. Dayton knew as well as any one else that a reward had been offered for the capture of any of the leaders of Morello's gang, and he was naturally wary of encountering strangers of any kind.

He had never dreamed that the boys were in that part of the country, and his astonishment at recognizing their voices first, and then their faces as he peered through the bushes, was colossal. The former chauffeur was as quick of wit as he was lacking in principle, and it had not needed more than Ding-dong's stuttered hint about the "treasure ship" to apprise him that he had by, for him, a lucky accident stumbled once more across the trail of the sapphires.

When the branch had cracked, Dayton, knowing that a search might ensue, had thrown himself flat on his stomach and wiggled

off across the ground at a surprising rate. By the time the boys had remounted and continued their journey he had been some distance off, and far on his way to his destination. This was a camp well concealed in a brush-grown cañon up the mountainside above Santa Inez.

On his return he found Colonel Morello himself gloomily seated in front of his tent, gazing seaward, for a good view could be obtained of the ocean from the mountain cañon without danger of the observers being themselves observed. Near the leader of the gang which Nat and his chums had broken up, sat a man in a greasy, well-worn buckskin suit. His lank, black hair dribbled over the collar of his upper garment and his mahogany-tinted face was shaded by a big cone-shaped sombrero. This man was Manuello, whom our old readers will recall as one of Colonel Morello's aides in the mountain fortress from which the boys' efforts had evicted the lawless crew. Half a dozen other men lounged about, smoking and talking. But an air of dejection hung about the camp. It was perceptible in the men's attitudes no less than in the tones in which they talked.

In fact, Colonel Morello's position was a precarious one. It is true that he was well enough concealed in the cañon above Santa Inez, but it is equally true that unless he remained there indefinitely he ran grave risk of being captured by the indignant authorities. But Colonel Morello was not a man who did things without due thought and preparation. He was in the vicinity of Santa Inez for what were, to him, good and sufficient reasons. What these were we shall presently see. He raised his head from his reverie as Dayton's step sounded, and looked quickly up.

"Well, here you are back again," he said. "Have you any news to give us?"

The others gathered about eagerly.

"Yes; is there any vessel in the harbor we can charter?" asked one eagerly.

"I'm sick of sneaking and hiding about here," put in another. "You promised us, Morello, when you brought us here that you would charter a vessel of some sort on which we could all go to that island you know of, and keep quiet till things blew over."

"Yes," put in another, a tall, strapping fellow, in a red shirt, well-worn mackinack trousers, and much-battered sombrero, "that was the excuse you gave for retaining possession of the money we managed to obtain from the fortress before the pursuit began. If you don't mean to do something pretty quick, you had better divide it up and let us separate and each take our chances alone."

A chorus of assent greeted this proposal.

"That's the talk, Swensen," put in one of the group, Al. Jeffries, the man who had impersonated a traveler at the Lariat Hotel. "We want action, Colonel. Your plan to get a vessel at this quiet, out-of-the-way place was a good one. What we want is to have it put into practice."

"That schooner lying in the bay is the first vessel to put in here in a week, isn't she?" growled Colonel Morello, although he was too wise to adopt anything but a mildly argumentative tone with his followers.