

TOM SWIFT AND HIS ELECTRIC RUNABOUT

or

The Speediest Car on the Road

by

VICTOR APPLETON

Tom Swift and His Electric Runabout

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TOM SWIFT AND HIS ELECTRIC RUNABOUT

CHAPTER I

TOM HOPES FOR A PRIZE

"Father," exclaimed Tom Swift, looking up from a paper he was reading, "I think I can win that prize!"

"What prize is that?" inquired the aged inventor, gazing away from a drawing of a complicated machine, and pausing in his task of making some intricate calculations. "You don't mean to say, Tom, that you're going to have a try for a government prize for a submarine, after all."

"No, not a submarine prize, dad," and the youth laughed. "Though our Advance would take the prize away from almost any other under-water boat, I imagine. No, it's another prize I'm thinking about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I see by this paper that the Touring Club of America has offered three thousand dollars for the speediest electric car. The tests are to come off this fall, on a new and specially built track on Long Island, and it's to be an endurance contest for twenty-four hours, or a race for distance, they haven't yet decided. But I'm going to have a try for it, dad, and, besides winning the prize, I think I'll take Andy Foger down a peg."

"What's Andy been doing now?"

"Oh, nothing more than usual. He's always mean, and looking for a chance to make trouble for me, but I didn't refer to anything special. He has a new auto, you know, and

he boasts that it's the fastest one in this country. I'll show him that it isn't, for I'm going to win this prize with the speediest car on the road."

"But, Tom, you haven't any automobile, you know," and Mr. Swift looked anxiously at his son, who was smiling confidently. "You can't be going to make your motor-cycle into an auto; are you?"

"No, dad."

"Then how are you going to take part in the prize contest? Besides, electric cars, as far as I know, aren't specially speedy."

"I know it, and one reason why this club has arranged the contest is to improve the quality of electric automobiles. I'm going to build an electric runabout, dad."

"An electric runabout? But it will have to be operated with a storage battery, Tom, and you haven't—"

"I guess you're going to say I haven't any storage battery, dad," interrupted Mr. Swift's son. "Well, I haven't yet, but I'm going to have one. I've been working on—"

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed the aged inventor with a laugh. "So that's what you've been tinkering over these last few weeks, eh, Tom? I suspected it was some new invention, but I didn't suppose it was that. Well, how are you coming on with it?"

"Pretty good, I think. I've got a new idea for a battery, and I made an experimental one. I gave it some pretty severe tests, and it worked fine."

"But you haven't tried it out in a car yet, over rough roads, and under severe conditions have you?"

"No, I haven't had a chance. In fact, when I invented the battery I had no idea of using it on a car I thought it might answer for commercial purposes, or for storing a current generated by windmills. But when I read that account in the papers of the Touring Club, offering a prize for the best electric car, it occurred to me that I might put my battery into an auto, and win."

"Hum," remarked Mr. Swift musingly. "I don't take much stock in electric autos, Tom. Gasolene seems to be the best, or perhaps steam, generated by gasolene. I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. All the electric runabouts I ever saw, while they were very nice cars, didn't seem able to go so very fast, or very far."

"That's true, but it's because they didn't have the right kind of a battery. You know an electric locomotive can make pretty good speed, Dad. Over a hundred miles an hour in tests."

"Yes, but they don't run by storage batteries. They have a third rail, and powerful motors," and Mr. Swift looked quizzically at his son. He loved to argue with him, for he said it made Tom think, and often the two would thus thresh out some knotty point of an invention, to the interests of both.

"Of course, Dad, there is a good deal of theory in what I'm thinking of," the lad admitted. "But it does seem to me that if you put the right kind of a battery into an automobile, it could scoot along pretty lively. Look what speed a trolley car can make."

"Yes, Tom, but there again they get their power from an overhead wire."

"Some of them don't. There's a new storage battery been invented by a New Jersey man, which does as well as the third rail or the overhead wire. It was after reading about his battery that I thought of a plan for mine. It isn't anything like his; perhaps not as good in some ways, but, for what I want, it is better in some respects, I think. For one thing it can be recharged very quickly."

"Now Tom, look here," said Mr. Swift earnestly, laying aside his papers, and coming over to where his son sat. "You know I never interfere with your inventions. In fact, the more you think of the better I like it. The airship you helped build certainly did all that could be desired, and—"

"That reminds me. Mr. Sharp and Mr. Damon are out in it now," interrupted Tom. "They ought to be back soon. Yes, Dad, the airship Red Cloud certainly scooted along."

"And the submarine, too," continued the aged inventor. "Your ideas regarding that were of service to me, and helped in our task of recovering the treasure, but I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed in the storage battery. You may get it to work, but I don't believe you can make it powerful enough to attain any great speed. Why don't you confine yourself to making a battery for stationary work?"

"Because, Dad, I believe I can build a speedy car, and I'm going to try it. Besides I want to race Andy Foger, and beat him, even if I don't win the prize. I'm going to build that car, and it will make fast time."

"Well, go ahead, Tom," responded his father, after a pause. "Of course you can use the shops here as much as you want, and Mr. Sharp, Mr. Jackson, and I will help you all we can. Only don't be disappointed, that's all."

"I won't, Dad. Suppose you come out to my shop and I'll show you a sample battery I've been testing for the last week. I have it geared to a small motor, and it's been running steadily for some time. I want to see what sort of a record it's made."

Father and son crossed the yard, and entered a shop which the lad considered exclusively his own. There he had made many machines, and pieces of apparatus, and had invented a number of articles which had been patented, and yielded him considerable of an income.

"There's the battery, Dad," he said, pointing to a complicated mechanism in one corner.

"What's that buzzing noise?" asked Mr. Swift. "That's the little motor I run from the new cells. Look here," and Tom switched on an electric light above the experimental battery, from which he hoped so much. It consisted of a steel can, about the size of the square gallon tin in which maple syrup comes, and from it ran two wires which were attached to a small motor that was industriously whirring away.

Tom looked at a registering gauge connected with it.

"That's pretty good," remarked the young inventor.

"What is it, Tom?" and his father peered about the shop.

"Why this motor has run an equivalent of two hundred miles on one charging of the battery! That's much better than I expected. I thought if I got a hundred out of it I'd be doing well. Dad, I believe, after I improve my battery a bit, that I'll have the very thing I want! I'll install a set of them in a car, and it will go like the wind. I'll—" Tom's enthusiastic remarks were suddenly interrupted by a low, rumbling sound.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Mr. Swift. "The storm is coming, and Mr. Sharp and Mr. Damon in the airship—"

Hardly had he spoken than there sounded a crash on the roof of the Swift house, not far away. At the same time there came cries of distress, and the crash was repeated.

"Come on, Dad! Something has happened!" yelled Tom, dashing from the shop, followed by his parent. They found themselves in the midst of a rain storm, as they raced toward the house, on the roof of which the smashing noise was again heard.

CHAPTER II

MR. DAMON'S STEERING

Tom Swift was a lad of action, and his quickness in hurrying out to investigate what had happened when he was explaining about his new battery, was characteristic of him. Those of my readers who know him, through having read the previous books of this series, need not be told this, but you who, perhaps, are just making his acquaintance, may care to know a little more about him.

As told in my first book, "Tom Swift and His Motor-Cycle" the young inventor lived with his father, Barton Swift, a widower, in the town of Shopton, New York. Mr. Swift was also an inventor of note.

In my initial volume of this series, Tom became possessed of a motor-cycle in a peculiar way. It was sold to him by a Mr. Wakefield Damon, a wealthy gentleman who was unfortunate in riding it. On his speedy machine, which Tom improved by several inventions, he had a number of adventures. The principal one was being attacked by a number of bad men, known as the "Happy Harry Gang," who wished to obtain possession of a valuable turbine patent model belonging to Mr. Swift. Tom was taking it to a lawyer, when he was waylaid, and chloroformed. Later he traced the gang, and, with the assistance of Mr. Damon and Eradicate Sampson, an aged colored man who made a living for himself and his mule, Boomerang, by doing odd jobs, the lad found the thieves and recovered a motor-boat which had been stolen. But the men got away.

In the second volume, called "Tom Swift and His Motor-Boat," Tom bought at auction the boat stolen by, and recovered from, the thieves, and proceeded to improve it. While he was taking his father out on a cruise for Mr. Swift's health, the Happy Harry Gang made a successful attempt to steal some valuable inventions from the Swift house. Tom started to trace them, and incidentally he raced and beat Andy Foger, a rich bully. On their way down the lake, after the robbery, Tom, his father and Ned Newton, Tom's chum, saw a man hanging from the trapeze of a blazing balloon over Lake Carlopa. The balloonist was Mr. John Sharp and he was rescued by Tom in a thrilling fashion. In his motor-boat, Tom had much pleasure, not the least of which was taking out a young lady named Miss Mary Nestor, whose acquaintance he had made after stopping her runaway horse, which his bicycle had frightened. Tom's association with Miss Nestor soon ripened into something deeper than mere friendship.

It developed that Mr. Sharp, whom Tom had saved from the burning balloon, was an aeronaut of note, and had once planned to build an airship. After his recovery from his thrilling experience, he mentioned the matter to Mr. Swift and his son, with whom he took up his residence. This fitted right in with Tom's ideas, and soon father, son and the balloonist were constructing the Red Cloud, as they named their airship. It was finally completed, as related in "Tom Swift and His Airship," made a successful trial trip, and won a prize. It was planned to make a longer journey, and Tom, Mr. Sharp and Mr. Damon agreed to go together. Mr. Damon was an odd individual, who was continuously blessing some part of his anatomy, his clothing or some inanimate object but, for all that, he was a fine man.

The night before Tom and his friends started off in their airship, the Shopton Bank vault was blown open and seventy-five thousand dollars was taken. Tom and his friends did not know of this, but, no sooner had the young inventor, Mr. Sharp and Mr. Damon sailed away, than the police arrived at Mr. Swift's house to arrest them. They were charged with the robbery, and with having sailed away with the booty.

It appeared that Andy Foger said he had seen Tom hanging around the bank the night of the robbery, with a bag of burglar tools in his possession. Search was immediately begun for the airship, the occupants of which were, meanwhile, speeding on.

Tom and his two friends had trouble. They were nearly burned up in a forest fire, and were fired upon by a crowd of people with rifles, who, reading of the bank robbery and the reward offered for the capture of the thieves, hoped to bring down the airship. The fact that they were fired upon caused Tom and the two aeronauts to descend to make an investigation, and for the first time they learned of the bank theft. How they got track of the real robbers, took the sheriff with them in the airship, and raided the gang will be found set down at length in the book. Also how Tom administered well-deserved thrashing to Andy Foger.

Mr. Swift did not accompany his son in the airship, and when asked why he did not care to make the trip, said he was working on a new type of submarine boat, which he hoped to enter in the government trials, to win a prize. In the fourth volume of the series, called "Tom Swift and his Submarine," you may read how successful Mr. Swift was.

When the submarine, called the Advance, was finished, the party made a trip to recover three hundred thousand dollars in gold from a sunken treasure ship, off the coast of Uruguay, South America. They sailed beneath the seas for many miles, and were in great peril at times. One reason for this was that a rival firm of submarine builders got wind of the treasure, and tried to get ahead of the Swifts in recovering it. How Tom and his friends succeeded in their quest, how they nearly perished at the bottom of the sea,

how they were captured by a foreign war vessel, and sentenced to death, how they fought with a school of giant sharks and how they blew up the wreck to recover the money is all told of in the book.

On their return to civilization with the gold, Mr. Swift, Tom, and their friends deposited the money in the Shopton Bank, where Ned Newton worked. Ned was a bright lad, but had not been advanced as rapidly as he deserved, and Tom knew this. He asked his father to speak to the president, Mr. Pendergast, in Ned's behalf, and, as a result the lad was made assistant cashier, for the request of a man who controlled a three hundred thousand dollar deposit was not to be despised.

In building the submarine Tom and his father rented a large cottage on the New Jersey seacoast, but, on returning from their treasure-quest they went back to Shopton, leaving the submarine at the boathouse of the shore cottage, which was near the city of Atlantis. That was in the fall of the year, and all that winter the young inventor had been busy on many things, not the least of which was his storage battery. It was now spring, and seeing the item in the paper, about the touring club prize for an electric auto, had given him a new idea.

But all thoughts of electric cars, and everything else, were driven from the mind of the young man, when, with his father, he rushed out to see the cause of the crash on the roof of the Swift homestead.

"There's something up there, Tom," called his father, as he splashed on through the rain.

"That's right," added his son. "And somebody, too, to judge by the fuss they're making."

"Maybe the house has been struck by lightning!" suggested the aged inventor.

"No, the storm isn't severe enough for that; and, besides, if the house had been struck you'd hear Mrs. Baggert yelling, Dad. She—"

At that moment a woman's voice cried out:

"Mr. Swift! Tom! Where are you? Something dreadful has happened!"

"There she goes!" remarked Mr. Swift, as he splashed into a mud puddle.

"Bless my deflection rudder!" suddenly cried a voice from the flat roof of the Swift house. "Hello! I say, is anyone down there?"

"Yes, we are," answered Tom. "Is that you, Mr. Damon?"

"Bless my collar button! It certainly is."

"Where's Mr. Sharp? I don't hear him."

"Oh, I'm here all right," answered the balloonist. "I'm trying to get the airship clear of the chimney. Mr. Damon—"

"Yes, I steered wrong!" interrupted the odd man. "Bless my liver pin, but it was so dark I couldn't see, and when that clap of thunder came I shifted the deflection rudder instead of the lateral one, and tried to knock over your chimney."

"Are either of you hurt?" asked Mr. Swift anxiously.

"No, not at all," replied Mr. Sharp. "We were moving slowly, ready for a landing."

"Is the airship damaged?" inquired Tom.

"I don't know. Not much, I guess," was the answer of the aeronaut. "I've stopped the engine, and I don't like to start it again until I can see what shape we're in."

"I'll come up, with Mr. Jackson," called Tom, and he hastily summoned Garret Jackson, an engineer, who had been in the service of Mr. Swift for many years. Together they proceeded to the roof by a stairway that led to a scuttle.

"Is anyone killed?" asked Mrs. Baggert, as Tom hurried up the stairs. "Don't tell me there is, Tom!"

"Well, I don't have to tell you, for no one is," replied the young inventor with a laugh. "It's all right. The airship tried to collide with the chimney, that's all."

He was soon on the large, flat roof of the dwelling, and, with the aid of lanterns he, the engineer, and Mr. Sharp made a hasty examination.

"Anything wrong?" inquired Mr. Damon, looking out from the cabin of the Red Cloud where he had taken refuge after the crash, and to get out of the wet.

"Not much," answered Tom. "One of the forward planes is smashed, but we can rise by means of the gas, and float down. Is all clear, Mr. Sharp?"

"All clear," replied the balloonist, for the airship had now been wheeled back from the entanglement with the chimney.

"Then here we go!" cried Tom, as he and the aeronaut entered the craft, while Mr. Jackson descended through the scuttle.

There came a fiercer burst to the storm, and, amid a series of dazzling lightning flashes and the muttering of thunder, the airship rose from the roof. Tom switched on the search-light, and, starting the big propellers, guided the craft skillfully toward the big shed where it was housed when not in use.

With the grace of a bird it turned about in the air, and settled to the ground. It was the work of but a few minutes to run it into the shed. Then they all started for the house.

"Bless my umbrella! How it rains!" cried Mr. Damon, as he splashed on through numerous puddles. "We got back just in time, Mr. Sharp."

"Where did you go?" asked the lad.

"Why we took a flight of about fifty miles and stopped at my house in Waterfield for supper. Were you anxious about us?"

"A little when it began to storm," replied Tom.

"Anything new since we left?" asked Mr. Sharp, for it was the custom of himself, or some of his friends, to take little trips in the airship. They thought no more of it than many do of going for a short spin in an automobile.

"Yes, there is something new," said Mr. Swift, as the party, all drenched now, reached the broad veranda.

"Bless my gaiters!" cried Mr. Damon. "What is it? I hope the Happy Harry gang hasn't robbed you again; nor Berg and his men tried to take that treasure away from us, after we worked so hard to get it from the wreck."

"No, it isn't that," replied Mr. Swift. "The truth is that Tom thinks he has invented a storage battery that will revolutionize matters. He's going to build an electric automobile, he says."

"I am," declared the lad, as the others looked at him, "and it will be the speediest one you ever saw, too!"

CHAPTER III
THE MOTORCYCLE WINS

"Well, Tom," remarked Mr. Sharp, after a pause following the lad's announcement. "I didn't know you had any ambitions in that line. Tell us more about the battery. What system do you use; lead plates and sulphuric acid?"

"Oh, that's out of date long ago," declared the lad.

"Well, I don't know much about electricity," admitted the aeronaut. "I'll take my chances in an airship or a balloon, but when it comes to electricity I'm down and out."

"So am I," admitted Mr. Damon. "Bless my gizzard, it's all I can do to put a new spark plug in my automobile. Where is your new battery, Tom?"

"Out in my shop, running yet if it hasn't been frightened by the airship smash," replied the lad, somewhat proudly. "It's an oxide of nickel battery, with steel and oxide of iron negative electrodes."

"What solution do you use, Tom?" asked Mr. Swift. "I didn't get that far in questioning you before the crash came," he added.

"Well I have, in the experimental battery, a solution of potassium hydrate," replied the lad, "but I think I'm going to change it, and add some lithium hydrate to it. I think that will make it stronger."

"Bless my watch chain!" exclaimed Mr. Damon. "It's all Greek to me. Suppose you let us see it, Tom? I like to see wheels go 'round, but I'm not much of a hand for chemical terms."

"If you're sure you're not hurt by the airship smash, I will," declared the lad.

"Oh, we're not hurt a bit," insisted Mr. Sharp. "As I said we were moving slow, for I knew it was about time to land. Mr. Damon was steering—"

"Yes I thought I'd try my hand at it, as it seemed so easy," interrupted the eccentric man. "But never again—not for mine! I couldn't see the house, and, before I knew it we were right over the roof. Then the chimney seemed to stick itself up suddenly in front of us, and—well, you know the rest. I'm willing to pay for any damage I caused."

"Oh, not at all!" replied Tom. "It's easy enough to put on a new plane, or, for that matter, we can operate the Red Cloud without it. But come on, I'll show you my sample battery."

"Here, take umbrellas!" Mrs. Baggert called after them as they started toward the shop, for it was still raining.

"We don't mind getting wet," replied the young inventor. "It's in the interests of science."

"Maybe it is. You don't mind a wetting, but I mind you coming in and dripping water all over the carpets!" retorted the housekeeper.

"Bless my overshoes, I'm afraid we have wet the carpets a trifle now," admitted Mr. Damon ruefully, as he looked down at a puddle, which had formed where he had been standing.

"That's the reason I want you to take umbrellas this trip," insisted Mrs. Baggert.

They complied, and were soon in the shop, where Tom explained his battery. The small motor was still running and had, as the lad had said, gone the equivalent of over two hundred miles.

"If a small battery does as well as that, what will a larger one do?" asked Mr. Damon.

"Much better, I hope," replied the youth. "But Dad doesn't seem to have much faith in them."

"Well," admitted Mr. Swift, "I must say I am skeptical. Still, I acknowledge Tom has done some pretty good work along electrical lines. He helped me with the positive and negative plates on the submarine, and, maybe—well, we'll wait and see," he concluded.

"If you build a car I hope you give me a ride in it," said Mr. Damon. "I've ridden fast in the air, and swiftly on top of, and under, the water. Now I'd like to ride rapidly on top of the earth. The gasoline auto doesn't go very fast."

"I'll give you a ride that will make your hair stand up!" prophesied Tom, and the time was to come when he would make good that prediction.

The little party in the machine shop talked at some length about Tom's battery. He showed them how it was constructed, and gave them some of his ideas regarding the new type of auto he planned to build.

"Well," remarked Mr. Swift at length, "if you want to keep your brain fresh, Tom, you must get to bed earlier than this. It's nearly twelve o'clock."

"And I want to get up early!" exclaimed the lad. "I'm going to start to build a larger battery to-morrow."

"And I'm going to repair the airship," added Mr. Sharp.

"Bless my night cap, I promised my wife I'd be home early to-night, too!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. Damon. "I don't fancy making the trip back to Waterfield in my auto, though. Something will be sure to happen. I'll blow out a tire, or a spark plug will get sooty on me and—"

"It's raining harder than ever," interrupted Tom. "Better stay here to-night. You can telephone home." Which Mr. Damon did.

Tom was up early the next morning, in spite of the fact that he did not go to bed in good season, and before breakfast he was working at his new storage battery. After the meal he hurried back to the shop, but it was not long before he came out, wheeling his motor-cycle.

"Where are you going, Tom?" asked Mrs. Baggert.

"Oh, I've got to go to Mansburg to get some steel tubes for my new battery," he replied. "I thought I had some large enough, but I haven't." Mansburg was a good-sized town, near Shopton.

"Then I wish you'd bring me a bottle of stove polish," requested the housekeeper. "The liquid kind. I'm out of it, and the stove is as red as a cow."

"All right," agreed the lad, as he leaped into the saddle and pedaled off down the road. A moment later he had turned on the power, and was speeding along the highway, which was in good condition on account of the shower of the night before.

Tom was thinking so deeply of his new invention, and planning what he would do when he had his electric runabout built, that, almost before he knew it, he had reached Mansburg, purchased the steel tubes, and the stove polish, and was on his way back again.

As he was speeding along on a level road, he heard, coming behind him, an automobile. The lad turned to one side, but, in spite of this the party in the car began a serenade of the electric siren, and kept it up, making a wild discord.

"What's the matter with those fellows!" inquired Tom of himself. "Haven't I given them enough of the road, or has their steering gear broken?"

He looked back over his shoulder, and it needed but a glance to show that the car was all right, as regarded the steering apparatus. And it needed only another glance to disclose the reason for the shrill sound of the siren.

"Andy Foger!" exclaimed Tom. "I might have known. And Sam and Pete are with him. Well, if he wants to make me get off the road, he'll find that I've got as much right as he has!"

He kept on a straight course, wondering if the red-haired, and squint-eyed bully would dare try to damage the motor-cycle.

A little later Andy's car was beside Tom.

"Why don't you get out of the way," demanded Sam, who could usually be depended on to aid Andy in all his mean tricks.

"Because I'm entitled to half the road," retorted our hero.

"Humph! A slow-moving machine like yours hasn't any right on the road," sneered Andy, who had slowed down his car somewhat.

"I haven't, eh?" demanded Tom. "Well, if you'll get down out of that car for a few minutes I'll soon show you what my rights are!"

Now Andy, more than once, had come to personal encounters with Tom, much to the anguish of the bully. He did not relish another chastisement, but his mean spirit could not brook interference.

"Don't you want a race?" he inquired of Tom, in a sneering tone. "I'll give you a mile start, and beat you! I've got the fastest car built!"

"You have, eh?" asked Tom, while a grim look came over his face. "Maybe you'll think differently some day."

"Aw, he's afraid to race; come on," suggested Pete. "Don't bother with him, Andy."

"No, I guess it wouldn't be worth my while," was the reply of the bully, and he threw the second gear into place, and began to move away from the young inventor.

Tom was just as much pleased to be left alone, but he did not want Andy Foger to think that he could have matters all his own way. Tom's motor-cycle, since he had made some adjustments to it, was very swift. In fact there were few autos that could beat it. He had never tried it against Andy's new car, and he was anxious to do so.

"I wonder if I would stand any chance, racing him?" thought the young inventor, as he saw the car slowly pulling away from him. "I think I'll wait until he gets some distance ahead, and then I'll see how near I can come to him. If I get anywhere near him I'm pretty sure I can pass him. I'll try it."

When Andy and his cronies looked back, Tom did not appear to be doing anything save moving along at moderate speed on his machine.

"You don't dare race!" Pete Bailey shouted to him.

"Wait," was what Tom whispered to himself.

Andy's car was now some distance ahead. The young inventor waited a little longer, and then turned more power into his machine. It leaped forward and began to "eat up the road," as Tom expressed it. He had seen Andy throw in the third gear, but knew that there was a fourth speed on the bully's car.

"I don't know whether I can beat him on that or not," thought the lad dubiously. "If I try, and fail, they'll laugh at me. But I don't think I'm going to fail."

Faster and faster he rode. He was rapidly overhauling Andy's car now, and, as they heard him approach, the three cronies turned around.

"He's going to race you, after all, Andy!" cried Sam.

"You mean he's going to try," sneered Andy. "I'll give him all the racing he wants!"

In another few seconds Tom was beside the auto, and would have passed it, only Andy opened his throttle a little more. For a moment the auto jumped ahead, and then, as our hero turned on still more power, he easily held his own.

"Aw, you can never beat us!" yelled Pete.

"Of course not!" added Sam.

"I'll leave him behind in a second," prophesied Andy. "Wait until I throw in the other gear," he added to his cronies in a low voice. "He thinks he's going to beat me. I'll let him think so, and then I'll spurt ahead."

The two machines were now racing along side by side. Andy's car was going the limit on third gear, but he still had the fourth gear in reserve. Tom, too, still had a little margin of speed.

Suddenly Andy reached forward and yanked on a lever. There was a grinding of cogs as the fourth gear slipped into place, for Andy did not handle his car skillfully. The effect, however, was at once apparent. The automobile shot forward.

"Now where are you, Tom Swift?" cried Sam.

Tom said nothing. He merely shifted a lever, and got a better spark. He also turned on a little more gasoline and opened the muffler. The quickness with which his motorcycle shot forward almost threw him from the saddle, but he had a tight grip on the handle bars. He whizzed past the auto, but, as the latter gathered speed, it crept up to him, and, once more was on even terms. Much chagrined at seeing Tom hold pace with him, even for an instant, Andy shouted:

"Get over on your own side there! You're crowding me!"

"I am not!" yelled back Tom, above the explosions of his machine.

The two were now racing furiously, and Andy, with a savage look, tried to get more speed out of his car. In spite of all the bully did, Tom was gradually forging ahead. A little hill was now in view.

"Here's where I make him take my dust!" cried Andy, but, to his surprise Tom still kept ahead. The auto began to lose ground, for it was not made to take hills on high gear.

"Change to third gear quick!" cried Sam.

Andy tried to do it. There was a hesitancy on the part of his car. It seemed to balk. Tom, looking back, slowed up a trifle. He could afford to, as Andy was being beaten.

"Go on! Go on!" begged Pete. "You'll have to keep on fourth gear to beat him, Andy."

"That's what!" murmured the bully. Once more he shifted the gears. There was a grinding, smashing sound, and the car lost speed. Then it slowed up still more, and finally stopped. Then it began to back down hill.

"I've stripped those blamed gears!" exclaimed Andy ruefully.

"Can't you beat him?" asked Pete.

"I could have, easily, if my gears hadn't broken," declared the bully, but, as a matter of fact, he could not have done so. "I oughtn't to have changed, going up hill," he added, as he jammed on the brakes, to stop the car from sliding down the slope.

Tom saw and heard.

"I thought you were so anxious to race," he said, exultantly, as well he might. "I don't want to try a contest down hill, though, Andy," and he laughed at the red-haired lad, who was furious.

"Aw, go on!" was all the retort the squint-eyed one could think of to make.

"I am going on," replied our hero. "Just to show you that I can go down hill, watch me."

He turned his motor-cycle, and approached Andy's stalled car, for Tom was some distance in advance of it, up the slope by this time. As he approached the auto, containing the three disconcerted cronies, something bounded out of Tom's pocket. It was the bottle of stove blacking he had purchased for Mrs. Baggert. The bottle fell in the soft dirt in front of his forward wheel, and a curious thing happened. Perhaps you have seen a bicycle or auto tire strike a stone at an angle, and throw it into the air with great force. That was what happened to the bottle. Tom's front wheel struck the cork, which fitted tightly, and, just as when you hit one end of the wooden "catty" and it bounds up, the bottle described a curve through the air, and flew straight toward Andy's car. It struck the brass frame of the wind shield with a crash.

The bottle broke, and in an instant the black liquid was spattered all over Andy, Sam and Pete. It could not have been done more effectively if Tom had thrown it by hand. All over their clothes, their hands and faces, and the front of the car went the dreary black. Tom looked on, hardly able to believe what he saw.

"Wow! Wup! Ug! Blug! Mug!" spluttered Sam, who had some of the stuff in his mouth.

"Oh! Oh!" yelled Pete.

"You did that on purpose, Tom Swift!" shouted Andy, wiping some of the blacking from his left eye. "I'll have you arrested for that! You've ruined my car, and look at my suit!"

"Mine's worse!" murmured Sam, glancing down at his light trousers, which were of the polka-dot pattern now.

"No, mine is," insisted Pete, whose white shirt was of the hue of a stove pipe.

Andy wiped some of the black stuff from his nose, whence it was dropping on the steering wheel.

"You just wait!" the bully called to Tom. "I'll get even with you for this!"

"It was an accident! I didn't mean to do that," explained Tom, trying not to laugh, as he dismounted from his motor-cycle, ready to render what assistance he could.

CHAPTER IV

TALK OF A NEW BANK

The three cronies were in a sorrowful plight. The black fluid dripped from them, and formed little puddles in the car. Andy had used his handkerchief to wipe some of the stuff from his face, but the linen was soon useless, for it quickly absorbed the blacking.

"There's a little brook over here," volunteered Tom. "You might wash in that. The stuff comes off easily. It isn't like ink," and he had to laugh, as he thought of the happening.

"Here! You quit that!" ordered Andy. "You've gone too far, Tom Swift!"

"Didn't I tell you it was an accident?" inquired the young inventor.

"It wasn't!" cried Sam. "You threw the bottle at us! I saw you!"

"It slipped from my pocket," declared the youth, and he described how the accident occurred. "I'll help you clean your car, Andy," he added.

"I don't want your help! If you come near me I'll—I'll punch your nose!" cried Andy, now almost beside himself with rage.

"All right, if you don't want my help I don't care," answered Tom, glad enough not to have to soil his hands and clothes. He felt that it was partly his fault, and he would have done all he could to remedy matters, but his good offers being declined, he felt that it was useless to insist further.

He remounted his motor-cycle, and rode off, the last view he had of the trio being one where they were at the edge of the brook, trying to remove the worst traces of the black fluid. As Tom turned around for a final glimpse, Andy shook his fist at him, and called out something.

"I guess Andy'll have it in for me," mused Tom. "Well, I can't help it. I owed him something on account, but I didn't figure on paying it in just this way," and he thought of the time the bully had locked him in the ballast tanks of the submarine, thereby nearly smothering him to death.

That night Andy Foger told his father what had happened, for Mr. Foger inquired the reason for the black stains on his son's face and hands. But Andy did not give the true version. He said Tom had purposely thrown the bottle of blacking at him.

"So that's the kind of a lad Tom Swift is, eh?" remarked Andy's father. "Well, Andy, I think you will soon have a chance to get even with him."

"How, pop?"

"I can't tell you now, but I have a plan for making Tom sorry he ever did anything to you, and I will also pay back some old scores to Mr. Swift and Mr. Damon. I'll ruin their bank for them, that's what I'll do."

"Ruin their bank, pop? How?"

"You wait and see. The Swift crowd will get off their high horse soon, or I'm mistaken. My plans are nearly completed, but I can't tell you about them. I'll ruin Mr. Swift, though, that's what I'll do," and Mr. Foger shook his head determinedly.

Tom was soon at his home, and Mrs. Baggert, hearing the noise of his machine, as it entered the front yard, came to the side door.

"Where's my blacking?" she asked, as our hero dismounted and untied the bundle of steel tubes he had purchased.

"I—I used it," he answered, laughing.

"Tom Swift! You don't mean to say you took my stove polish to use in your battery, do you?"

"No, I used it to polish off Andy Foger and some of his cronies," and the young inventor told, with much gusto, what had happened. Mrs. Baggert could not help joining in the laugh, and when Tom offered to ride back and purchase some more of the polish for her, she said it did not matter, as she could wait until the next day.

The lad was soon busy in his machine shop, making several larger cells for the new storage battery. He wanted to give it a more severe test. He worked for several days on this, and when he had one unit of cells complete, he attached the motor for an efficiency trial.

"We'll see how many miles that will make," he remarked to his father.

"Have you thought anything of the type of car you are going to build?" asked the aged inventor of his son.

"Yes, somewhat. It will be almost of the regulation style, but with two removable seats at the rear, with curtains for protection, and a place in front for two persons. This can also be protected with curtains when desired."

"But what about the motors and the battery?"

"They will be located under the middle of the car. There will be one set of batteries there, together with the motor, and another set of batteries will be placed under the removable seats in what I call the tonneau, though, of course, it isn't really that. A smaller set will also be placed forward, and there will be ample room for carrying tools and such things."

"About how far do you expect your car will go with one charging of the battery?"

"Well, if I can make it do three hundred miles I'll be satisfied, but I'm going to try for four hundred."

"What will you do when your battery runs out?"

"Recharge it."

"Suppose you're not near a charging station?"

"Well, Dad, of course those are some of the details I've got to work out. I'm planning a register gauge now, that will give warning about fifty miles before the battery is run down. That will leave me a margin to work on. And I'm going to have it fixed so I can take current from any trolley line, as well as from a regular charging station. My battery will be capable of being recharged very quickly, or, in case of need, I can take out the old cells and put in new ones.

"That's a very good idea. Well, I hope you succeed."

A few evenings after this, when Tom was busy in his machine shop, he heard some one enter. He looked up from the gauge of the motor, which he was studying, and, for a moment, he could make out nothing in the dark interior of the shop, for he was working in a brilliant light.

"Who's there?" he called sharply, for, more than once unscrupulous men had endeavored to sneak into the Swift shops to steal ideas of inventions; if not the actual apparatus itself.

"It's me—Ned Newton," was the cheerful reply.

"Oh, hello, Ned! I was wondering what had become of you," responded Tom. "Where have you been lately?"

"Oh, working overtime."

"What's the occasion?"

"We're trying out a new system to increase the bank business."

"What's the matter? Aren't you folks getting business enough, after the big deposits we made of the bullion from the wreck?"

"Oh, it's not that. But haven't you heard the news? There is talk of starting a rival bank in Shopton, and that may make us hustle to hold what business we have, to say nothing of getting new customers."

"A new bank, eh? Who's going to start it?"

"Andy Foger's father, I hear. You know he was a director in our bank, but he got out last week."

"What for?"

"Well, he had some difficulty with Mr. Pendergast, the president. I fancy you had something to do with it, too."

"I?" Tom was plainly surprised.

"Yes, you know you and Mr. Damon and Mr. Sharp captured the bank robbers, and got back most of the money."

"I guess I do remember it! I wish you could have seen the gang when we raided them from the clouds, in our airship!"

"Well, you know Andy Foger hoped to collect the five thousand dollars reward for telling the police that you were the thief, and of course he got fooled, for you got the reward. Mr. Foger expected his son would collect the money, and when Andy got left, it made him sore. He's had a grudge against Mr. Pendergast, and all the other bank officials ever since, and now he's going to start a rival bank. So that's why I said it was partly due to you."

"Oh, I see. I thought at first you meant that it was on account of something that happened the other day."

"What was that?"

"Andy, Sam and Pete got the contents of a bottle of stove blacking," and Tom related the occurrence, at which Ned laughed heartily.

"I wouldn't be surprised though," added Ned, "to learn that Mr. Foger started the new bank more for revenge than anything else."

"So that's the reason you've been working late, eh?" went on Tom. "Getting ready for competition. Do you think a new bank will hurt the one you're with?"

"Well, it might," admitted Ned. "It's bound to make a change, anyhow, and now that I have a good position I don't want to lose it. I take more of an interest in the institution now that I'm assistant cashier, than I did when I was a clerk. So, naturally, I'm a little worried."

"Say, don't let it worry you," begged Tom, earnestly.

"Why not?"

"Because I know my father and Mr. Damon will stick to the old bank. They won't have anything to do with the one Andy Foger's father starts. Don't you worry."

"Well, that will help some," declared Ned. "They are both heavy depositors, and if they stick to the old bank we can stand it even if some of our smaller customers desert us."

"That's the way to talk," went on the young inventor. "Let Foger start his bank. It won't hurt yours."

"What are you making now?" asked Ned, a little later, looking with interest at the machinery over which Tom was bending, and to which he was making adjustments.

"New electric automobile. I want to beat Andy Foger's car worse than I did on my motor-cycle, and I also want to win a prize," and the lad proceeded to relate the incidents leading up to his construction of the storage battery.

Tom and Ned were in the shop until long past midnight, and then the bank employee, with a look at his watch, exclaimed:

"Great Scott! I ought to be home."

"I'll run you over in Mr. Damon's car," proposed Tom. "He left it here the other day, while he and his wife went off on a trip, and he said I could use it whenever I wanted to."

"Good!" cried Ned.

The two lads came from Tom's particular workshop. As the young inventor closed the door he started suddenly, as he snapped shut the lock.

"What's the matter?" asked Ned quickly.

"I thought I heard a noise," replied Tom.

They both listened. There was a slight rustling in some bushes near the shop.

"It's a dog or a cat," declared Ned.

Tom took several cautious steps forward. Then he gave a spring, and made a grab for some one or something.

"Here! You let me be!" yelled a protesting voice.

"I will when I find out what you mean by sneaking around here," retorted Tom, as he came back toward Ned, dragging with him a lad. "It wasn't a dog or a cat, Ned," spoke the young inventor. "It's Sam Snedecker," and so it proved.

"You let me alone!" demanded Andy Foger's crony. "I ain't done nothin' to you," he whined.

"Here, Ned, you hold him a minute, while I make an investigation," called Tom, handing his prisoner over to his chum. "Maybe Pete or Andy are around."

"No, they ain't. I came alone," said Sam quickly, but Tom, not heeding, opened the shop, and, after turning on the electric lights, procured a lantern. He began a search of the shrubbery around the shop, while Ned held to the struggling Sam.

CHAPTER V A MIDNIGHT ENCOUNTER

The moment Tom disappeared behind his machine shop, Sam Snedecker began a desperate struggle to escape from Ned Newton. Now Ned was a muscular lad, but his work in the bank was confining, and he did not have the chance to get out doors and exercise, as Sam had. Consequently Ned had his hands full in holding to the squirming crony of Andy Foger.

"You let me go!" demanded Sam, as he tried to twist loose.

"Not if I know it!" panted Ned.

Sam gave a sudden twist. Ned's foot slipped in the grass, and in a moment he went down, with Sam on top of him. Still he did not let go, and, finding he was still a prisoner Sam adopted new tactics.

Using his fists Sam began to pound Ned, but the bank employee, though suffering, would not call for help, to summon back Tom, who was, by this time, at the rear of the shop, looking about. Silently in the dark the two fought, and Ned found that Sam was getting away. Then Ned's hand came in contact with Sam's ear. It was the misfortune of the bully to have rather a large hearing apparatus, and once Ned got his fingers on an

ear there was room enough to afford a good grip. He closed his hold tightly, and began to twist. This was too much for Sam. He set up a lusty howl.

"Wow! Ouch! Let go!" he pleaded, and he ceased to pound Ned, and no longer tried to escape. Tom came back on the run.

"What's the matter?" he cried. Then his light flashed on the two prostrate lads, and he understood without asking any further questions.

"Get up!" he cried, seizing Sam by the back of his neck, and yanking him to his feet. Ned arose, and secured a better grip on the sneaking lad.

"What's up?" demanded Tom, and Ned explained, following it by the question:

"See any more of 'em?"

"No, I guess he was here all alone," replied the young inventor. "What do you mean by sneaking around here this time of night?" he demanded of the captive.

"Don't you wish you knew?" was Sam's answer, with a leer. He realized that he had a certain advantage.

"You'd better tell before I turn you over to the police!" said Tom, sternly.

"You—you wouldn't do that; would you?" and Sam's voice that had been bold, became shaky.

"You were trespassing on our property, and that's against the law," declared Tom. "We have signs posted, warning people to keep off."

"I didn't mean any harm," whined Sam.

"Then what were you doing here, at this hour?"

"I was just taking a short cut home. I was out riding with Andy in his auto, and it broke down. I had to walk home, and I came this way. I didn't know you didn't allow people to cross your back lot. I wasn't doin' anything."

Tom hesitated. Sam might be telling the truth, but it was doubtful.

"What happened to Andy's auto?" the young inventor asked.

"He broke a wheel, going over a big stone on Berk's hill. He went to tell some one in the repair shop to go after the car, and I came on home. You've got no right to arrest me."

"I ought to, on general principles," commented Tom. "Well, skip out, and don't you come around here again. I'm going to get a savage bull dog, and the first one who comes sneaking around here after dark will be sorry. Move along now!"

Tom and Ned released their holds of Sam, and the latter lost no time in obeying the injunction to make himself scarce. He was soon lost to sight in the darkness.

"Think he was up to some mischief?" asked Ned.

"I'm almost sure of it," replied Tom, "but I can't see anything wrong. I guess we were too quick for him. I believe he, Andy and Pete Bailey tried to put up some job on me."

"Maybe they wanted to damage your new battery or car," suggested Ned.

"Hardly that. The car hasn't been started yet, and as for the battery, no one knows of it outside of you and my friends here. I'm keeping it secret. Well, if I'm going to take you home I'd better get a move on. Wait here and I'll run out Mr. Damon's car."

In a short time Tom was guiding the machine over the road to Shopton, Ned on the seat beside him. The young assistant cashier lived about a mile the other side of the village, and the two chums were soon at his house. Asking his friend to come and see him when he had a chance. Ned bid his chum good night, and the young inventor started back home.

He was driving slowly along, thinking more of his new invention than anything else, even more than of the mysterious visit of Sam Snedecker, when the lights on Mr. Damon's car flashed upon something big, black and bulky on the road just ahead of him. Tom, brought suddenly out of his fit of musing, jammed on the brakes, and steered to one side. Then he saw that the object was a stalled auto. He had only time to note this when a voice hailed him:

"Have you a tire pump you could lend us? Ours doesn't work, and we have had a blowout."

There was something about the voice that was strangely familiar, and Tom was wondering where he had heard it before, when into the glare of the lamps on his machine stepped Mr. Foger—Andy's father!

"Why, Mr. Foger!" exclaimed Tom. "I didn't know it was you."

"Oh, it's Tom Swift," remarked the man, and he did not seem especially pleased.

"Hey! What's that?" cried another voice, which Tom had no difficulty in recognizing as belonging to Andy. "What's the matter, Dad?"

"Why it happens to be your—ahem! It's Tom Swift in this other auto," went on Mr. Foger. "I didn't know you had a car," he added.

"I haven't," answered the lad. "This belongs to Mr. Damon. But can you see to fix your tire in the dark?" for Mr. Foger and his son had no lamps lighted.

"Oh, we have it all fixed," declared the man, "and, just as we were going to pump it up our lamps went out. Then we found that our pump wouldn't work. If you have one I would be obliged for the use of it," and he spoke somewhat stiffly.

"Certainly," agreed Tom, cheerfully, for he had no special grudge against Mr. Foger, though had he known Andy's father's plans, perhaps our hero would not have so readily aided him. The young inventor got down, removed one of his oil lamps in order that there might be some light on the operation, and then brought over his pump.

"I heard you had an accident," said Tom, a chain of thoughts being rapidly forged in his mind, as he thought of what Sam had told him.

"You heard of it?" repeated Mr. Foger, while Andy was busy pumping up the tire.

"Yes, a friend who was out riding with you said you had broken a wheel on Berk's hill. But I see he was slightly wrong. You're a good way from Berk's hill, and it's a tire that is broken, not a wheel."

"But I don't understand," said Mr. Foger. "No friend has been out riding with us. My son and I were out on a business trip, and—"

"Come on, pop. I've got it all pumped up. Jump in. There's your pump, Tom Swift. Much obliged," muttered Andy hastily. It was very evident that he wanted to prevent any further conversation between his parent and Tom.

"But I don't understand," went on the banker, clearly puzzled. "What friend gave you such information, Mr.—er—Tom Swift?"

"Sam Snedecker," replied the lad quickly. "I caught him sneaking around my machine shop about an hour ago, and when I asked him what he was doing he said he'd

been out riding with Andy, and that they broke a wheel. I'm glad it was only a blown-out tire," and Tom's voice had a curious note in it.

"But there must be some mistake," insisted Mr. Foger. "Sam Snedecker was not riding with us this evening. We have been over to Waterfield—my son and I, and—"

"Come on, pop!" cried Andy desperately. "We must hurry home. Mom will be worried."

"Yes, I think she will. But I can't understand why Sam should say such a thing. However, we are much obliged for the use of your pump, Swift, and—"

But Andy prevented any further talk by starting the car with the muffler open, making a great racket, and he hurriedly drove off, almost before his father was seated, leaving Tom standing there in the road, beside his pump and lantern.

"So," mused the young inventor, "there's some game on. Sam wasn't with Andy, yet Andy evidently knew where Sam was, or he wouldn't have been so anxious to choke off talk. Mr. Foger knew nothing of Sam, naturally. But why have Andy and his father been on a midnight trip to Waterfield?"

That last question caused Tom to adopt a new line of thought.

"Waterfield," he mused. "That's where Mr. Damon lives. Mr. Damon is a heavy depositor in the old bank. Mr. Foger is going to start a new bank. I wonder if there's any connection there? This is getting mysterious. I must keep my eyes open. I never expected to meet Andy and his father to-night, any more than I expected to find Sam Snedecker sneaking around my shop, but it's a good thing I discovered both parties. I guess Andy must have had nervous prostration when I was talking to his father," and Tom grinned at the thought. Then, picking up the pump, and fastening the lantern in place, he drove Mr. Damon's auto slowly back home.

Tom said nothing to his father or Mr. Sharp, the next morning, about the incidents of the previous night. In the first place he could not exactly understand them, and he wanted to devote more time to thinking of them, before he mentioned the matter to his parent. Another reason was that Mr. Swift was a very nervous person, and the least thing out of the ordinary worried him. So the young inventor concluded to keep quiet.

His first act, after going to look at the small motor, which was being run with the larger, experimental storage battery, was to get out pencil and paper.

"I've got to plan the electric auto now that my battery is in a fair way to success," he said, for he noted that the one cell he had constructed had done over twice as much mileage in proportion, as had the small battery. "I'll soon start building the car," mused Tom, "and then I'll enter it in the race. I must write to that touring club and find how much time I have."

All that morning the young inventor drew plan after plan for an electric runabout, and rejected them. Finally he threw aside paper and pencil and exclaimed:

"It's no use. I can't think to-day. I'm dwelling too much on what happened last night. I must clear my brain."

"I know what I'll do. I'll get in my motor-boat and take a run over to Waterfield to see Mr. Damon. Maybe he's home by this time. Then I can ask him what Mr. Foger wanted to see him about, if he did call."

It was a fine May morning, and Tom was soon in his boat, the Arrow, gliding over Lake Carlopa, the waters of which sparkled in the sun. As he speeded up his craft, the lad looked about, thinking he might catch sight of Andy Foger, for the bully also owned a boat, called the Red Streak and, more than once, in spite of the fact that Andy's craft was the more powerful, Tom had beaten him in impromptu races. But there was no sign of his rival this morning, and Tom kept on to Waterfield. He found that Mr. Damon had not yet returned home.

"So far I've had my run for nothing," mused the youth. "Well, I might as well spend the rest of the morning in the boat."

He swung his craft out into the lake, and headed back toward Mansburg, intending to run up to the head of the body of water, which offered so many attractions that beautiful morning.

As Tom passed a small dock he saw a girl just putting out in a rowboat. The figure looked familiar and, having nothing special to do, the lad steered over closer. His first view was confirmed, and he called out cheerfully:

"Good morning, Miss Nestor. Going for a row?"

"Oh! Mr. Swift!" exclaimed the girl with a blush. "I didn't hear you coming. You startled me."

"Yes, the engine runs quite silently since I fixed it," resumed Tom. "But where are you going?"

"I was going for a row," answered the girl, "but I have just discovered that one of the oar locks is broken, so I am not going for a row," and she laughed, showing her white, even teeth.

"That's too bad!" remarked the lad. "I don't suppose," he added doubtfully, "that I could induce you to accept a motor-boat as a substitute for a rowing craft, could I?" and he looked quizzically at her.

"Are you asking me that as a hypothetical question?" she inquired.

"Yes," said Tom, trying not to smile.

"Well, if you are asking for information, merely, I will say that I could be induced to make such a change," and her face was nearly as grave as that of the young inventor's.

"What inducement would have to be used?" he asked.

"Suppose you just ask me in plain English to come and have a ride?" she suggested.

"All right, I will!" exclaimed the youth.

"All right, then I'll come!" she retorted with a laugh, and a few minutes later the two were in the Arrow, making a pretty picture as they speeded up the lake.

CHAPTER VI BUILDING THE CAR

"Well," remarked Tom to himself, about two hours later, when he had left Mary Nestor at her dock, and was on his way home, "I feel better than I did, and now I must do some hard thinking about my runabout. I want to get it the right shape to make the least resistance." He began to make some sketches when he got home, and at dinner he showed them to his father and Mr. Sharp. He said he had gotten an idea from looking at the airship.

"I'm going to make the front part, or what corresponds to the engine-hood in a gasoline car, pointed," he explained. "It will be just like the front of the aluminum gas

container of the airship, only built of steel. In it will be a compartment for a set of batteries, and there will be a searchlight there. From the top of some supporters in front of the two rear seats, a slanting sheet of steel will come right down to meet the sloping nose of the car. First I was going to have curtains close over the top of the driver's seat, but I think a steel covering, with a celluloid opening will be better and make less wind resistance. I'll use leather side curtains when it rains. Under the front seats will be a compartment for more batteries, and there will be a third place under the rear seats, where I will also carry spare wheels and a repair kit. The motors will be slung under the body of the car, amidships, and there will also be room for some batteries there."

"How are you going to drive the car?" asked Mr. Sharp. "By a shaft?"

"Chain drive," explained Tom. "I can get more power that way, and it will be more flexible under heavy loads. Of course it will be steered in the usual way, and near the wheel will be the starting and reversing levers, and the gear handle."

"Gears!" exclaimed the aged inventor. "Are you going to gear an electric auto? I never heard of that. Usually the motor directly connected is all they use."

"I'm going to have two gears on mine," decided Tom.

"That's a new idea," commented the aeronaut.

"It is," admitted the lad, "and that's why my car is going to be so speedy. I'll make her go a hundred miles an hour, if necessary!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed his father.

"I will!" cried the young inventor, enthusiastically. "You just wait and see. I couldn't do it but for the gears, but by using them I'll secure more speed, especially with the big reserve battery power I'll have. I know I've got the right idea, and I'm going to get right to work."

His father and Mr. Sharp were much interested, and closely examined his sketches. In a few days Tom had made detailed drawings, and the aged inventor looked at them critically. He had to admit that his son's theory was right, though how it would work out in practice was yet to be demonstrated. Mr. Swift offered some suggestions for minor changes, as did Mr. Sharp, and the lad adopted some of them. Then, with Mr. Jackson to help him, work was started on constructing the car.

Certain parts of it could be better purchased in the open market instead of being manufactured in Mr. Swift's shop, and thus Tom was able to get his new invention into

some sort of shape sooner than would otherwise have been the case. He also started making the batteries, many of which would be needed.

Gradually the car began to take form on the floor of Tom's shop. It was rather a curious looking affair, the sharp forward part making it appear like some engine of war, or a projectile for some monster gun. But Tom cared little for looks. Speed, strength and ease of control were the chief features the lad aimed at, and he incorporated many new ideas into his electric car.

He was busy in the shop, one morning, when, above the noise caused by filing a piece of steel he heard some one exclaim:

"Bless my gizzard! If you aren't as busy as ever!"

"Mr. Damon!" cried Tom in delight. "When did you get back?"

"Last night," replied the eccentric man. "My wife and I stayed longer than we meant to. And whom do you think we met when we were off on our little trip?"

"Some of the Happy Harry gang?"

"Oh no. You'd never guess, so I'll tell you. It was Captain Weston."

"Indeed! And how has he been since he went in the submarine with us, and helped recover the gold from the wreck?"

"Very well. The first thing he said to me was: 'How is Tom Swift and his father, if I may be permitted to ask?'"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed the lad, at the recollection of the odd sea captain, who generally tagged on an apologetic expression to most of his remarks.

"He was getting ready to take part in some South American revolution," went on Mr. Damon. "He used most of his money that he got from the wreck to help finance their cause."

"I must tell Mr. Sharp," went on the lad. "He'll be interested."

"Anything new since I've been away?" asked the odd man. "Bless my shoe laces, but I'm glad to get back!"

Tom told of the prospect of a new bank being started, and of Sam's midnight visit, as well as the encounter with Mr. Foger and Andy.

"I went over to see what Mr. Foger wanted of you," went on the young inventor, "but you weren't home. Did he call?"

"The servant said he had been there, not once, but several times," remarked Mr. Damon. "That reminds me. He left a note for me, and I haven't read it yet. I'll do so now."

He tore open the letter, and hastily perused the contents.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "So that's what he wanted to see me about!"

"What?" inquired Tom, with the privilege of an old friend.

"Mr. Foger says he's going to start a new bank, and he wants me to withdraw my deposit from the old one, and put it in his institution. Says he'll pay me bigger interest. And he adds that some of the old employees have gone with him."

"I hope you're not going to change," spoke Tom, thinking of his chum, Ned.

"Indeed I'm not. The old bank is good enough for me. By the way, doesn't a friend of yours work there?"

"Yes, Ned Newton. I'm wondering how he'll be affected?"

"Don't you worry!" exclaimed Mr. Damon. "Bless my check book! I'll speak to Pendergast about your friend. Maybe there'll be a chance to advance him further. I've got some mortgages falling due pretty soon, and I'll deposit the money from them in the old bank. Then we'll see what we can do about Ned."

"They'll make you a bank director, if you keep on putting in money," remarked our hero, with a smile.

"Not much they won't!" was the quick answer.

"Bless my stocks and bonds! I've got trouble enough without becoming a bank director. My doctor says my liver is out of order again, and I've got to eat a lemon every morning before breakfast."

"Eat a lemon?"

"Well, drink the juice! It's the same thing. But how is the electric runabout coming on?"

"Pretty good."

"Have you entered it in the races yet?"

"No, but I've written for information. I have until September to finish it. The races take place then."

"Let's see; they're on Long Island; aren't they? How do you calculate to do; run from here to there?"

"No, Dad still has the cottage he rented when we built the submarine and I think I'll make that my headquarters during the race. It's easy to run from there over to the Long Island track. They're building a new one, especially for the occasion."

"Well, I hope you win the prize. I must go to town now, as I have to attend to some business. I don't s'pose you want to come in my auto. I'm pretty sure something will break before I get there, and I'd like to have you along to fix it."

"Sorry, but I'm afraid I can't go," replied the lad. "I must get this car done, and then I've got to start on the batteries."

Mr. Damon rather reluctantly went off alone, looking anxiously at his car, for the machine got out of order on every trip he took.

It was a few days after this that Tom received a call from Ned one evening. The bank employee's face wore a happy smile.

"What's the matter; some one left you a fortune?" asked Tom.

"Pretty nearly as good. I've got a better position."

"What? Have you left the old bank, and gone to the new one?"

"No, I'm still in the same bank, but I'm one of the two cashiers now. Mr. Foger took several of the old employees when he opened his new bank, and that left vacancies. I was promoted, and so were one or two others. Mr. Damon spoke a good word for me."

"That's fine! He's a friend worth having."

"That's right. Your father also recommended me. But how are things with you? Has Andy made any more trouble?"

"No, and I don't believe he will. I guess he'll steer clear of me."

But Tom was soon to learn he was mistaken.

CHAPTER VII

TOM IS CAPTURED

Meanwhile the young inventor, aided by his father, Mr. Sharp and Garret Jackson, the engineer, worked hard over his new car, and the powerful batteries. A month passed, and such was the progress made that Tom felt justified in making formal entry of his vehicle for the races to be held by the Touring Club of America.

He paid a contingent fee and was listed as one of the competitors. As is usual in an affair of this kind, the promoters of it desired publicity, and they sought it through the papers.

Consequently each new entrant's name was published. In addition something was said about his previous achievements in the speed line.

No sooner was the name of Tom Swift received by the officials of the club, than it was at once recalled that young Swift had had a prominent part in the airship Red Cloud, and the submarine Advance. This gave an enterprising reporter a chance for a "special" for the Sunday supplement of a New York newspaper.

Tom, it was stated, was building a car which would practically annihilate distance and time, and there were many weird pictures, showing him flying along without touching the ground, in a car, the pictorial construction of which was at once fearful and wonderful.

Tom and his friends laughed at the yarn, at first, but it soon had undesirable results. The young inventor had desired to keep secret the fact that he was building a new electric vehicle, and a novel storage battery, but the article in the paper aroused considerable interest. Many persons came a long distance, hoping for a sight of the wonderful car, as pictured in the Sunday supplement, but they had to be denied. The news, thus leaking out, kept the Swift shops almost constantly besieged by many curious ones, who sought, by various means, to gain admission. Finally Tom and his father, after posting large signs, warning persons to keep away, added others to the effect that undesirable visitors might find themselves unexpectedly shocked by

electricity, if they ventured too close. This had the desired effect, though the wires which were strung about carried such a mild charge that it would not have harmed a child. Then the only bothersome characters were the boys of the town, and, fearless and careless lads, they persisted in hanging around the Swift homestead, in the hope of seeing Tom dash away at the rate of five hundred miles an hour, which one enthusiastic writer predicted he would do.

"I've got a plan!" exclaimed Tom one day when the boys had been particularly troublesome.

"What is it?" asked his father.

"We'll hire Eradicate Sampson to stand guard with a bucket of whitewash. He'll keep the boys away."

The plan was put into operation, and Eradicate and his mule, Boomerang, were installed on the premises.

"Deed an' Ah'll keep dem lads away," promised the colored man. "Ah'll splash white stuff all ober 'em, if dey comes traipsin' around me."

He was as good as his word, and, when one or two lads had received a dose of the stuff, which punishment was followed by more severe from home, for having gotten their clothes soiled, the nuisance ceased, to a certain extent. Sam Snedecker and Pete Bailey were two who received a liberal sprinkling of the lime, and they vowed vengeance on Tom.

"And Andy Foger will help us, too," added Sam, as he withdrew, after an encounter with Eradicate.

"Doan't let dat worry yo', Mistah Swift!" exclaimed the darkey. "Jest let dat low-down-good-fo-nuffin' Andy Foger come 'round me, an' Ah'll make him t'ink he's de inside ob a chicken coop, dat's what Ah will."

Perhaps Andy heard of this, and kept away. In the meanwhile Tom kept on perfecting his car and battery. From the club secretary he learned that a number of inventors were working on electric cars, and there promised to be many of the speedy vehicles in the race.

After considerable labor Tom had succeeded in getting together one set of the batteries. He had them completed one afternoon, and wanted to give them a test that

night. But, when he went to his father's chemical laboratory for a certain powder, which he needed to use in the battery solution, he found there was none.

"I'll have to ride in to Mansburg for some," he decided. "I'll go after supper, on my motor-cycle, and test the battery to-night."

The young inventor left his house immediately after the evening meal. Along the road toward Mansburg he speeded, and, as he came to the foot of a hill, where once Andy Foger had put a big tree, hoping Tom would run into it and be injured, the youth recalled that circumstance.

"Andy has been keeping out of my way lately," mused Tom. "I wonder if he's up to any mischief? I don't like the way Sam Snedecker is hanging around the shop, either. It looks as if they were plotting something. But I guess Eradicate and his pail of whitewash will scare them off."

Tom got the powdered chemical he wanted in the drug store, and, after refreshing himself with some ice cream soda, he started back. As he rode along through the streets of the town he kept a lookout, and those of you who know how fond the lad was of a certain young lady, do not need to be told for whom he was looking. But he did not see her, and soon turned into the main highway leading to Shopton.

It was dark when he reached the hill, where once he had been so near an accident, and he slowed up as he coasted down it, using the brake at intervals.

Tom got safely to the bottom of the declivity, and was about to turn on the power of his machine, when, from the bushes that lined either side of the roadway, several figures sprang suddenly. They ranged themselves across the road, and one cried: "Halt!" in tones that were meant to be stern, but which seemed to Tom, to tremble somewhat. The young inventor was so surprised that he did not open the gasoline throttle, nor switch on his spark. As a consequence his motor-cycle lost momentum, and he had to take one foot from the pedal and touch the ground, to prevent himself from toppling over.

"Hold on there!" cried another voice. "We've got you where we want you, now! Hold on! Don't go!"

"I wasn't going to go," responded Tom calmly, trying to recognize the voice, which seemed to be unnatural. "What do you want, and who are you?"

"Never mind who we are. We want you and we've got you! Get off that wheel!"

"I don't see why I should!" exclaimed Tom, and he suddenly shifted his handle bars, so as to flash the bright headlight he carried, upon the circle of dark figures that opposed his progress. As the light flashed on them he was surprised to see that all the figures wore masks over their faces.

Tom started. Was this the Happy Harry gang after him again? He hoped not, yet the fact that the persons had on masks made the hold-up have an ugly look. Once more Tom flashed the light on the throng. There were exclamations of dismay.

"Douse that glim, somebody!" called a sharp voice, which Tom could not recognize.

A stone came whizzing through the air, from some one in the crowd. There was a smashing of glass as it hit the lantern, and the road was plunged in darkness. Tom tried to throw one leg over the saddle, and let down the supporting stand from the rear wheel, so the motor-cycle would remain upright without him holding it. He determined to have revenge for that act of vandalism in breaking his lamp.

But, just as he was free of the seat, he was surrounded by a dozen persons, and several hands were laid on him.

"We've got you now!" some one fairly hissed in his ear. "Come along, and get what's coming to you!"

Tom tried to fight, but he was overpowered by numbers and, a little later, was dragged off into the woods in the darkness by the masked figures. His arms were securely bound with ropes, and a handkerchief was tied over his eyes. Tom Swift was a prisoner.

CHAPTER VIII

A BLINDING FLASH

Stumbling on through the dark woods, led by his captors, Tom tried to pierce the gloom and identify the persons who had firm grips on either side of him. But it was useless. A little light sifted down from the starlit sky above, but it was not sufficient.

The young inventor was beginning to think, after all, that he had fallen into the hands of the Happy Harry gang, and he knew that if this was so he need expect no mercy.

But two things were against this belief. One was that the principal members of the gang were still in jail, or at least they were supposed to be, and another was that there were too many of the captors. Happy Harry's crowd never numbered so many.

"Maybe they're highwaymen," thought our hero, as he was dragged along "But that can't be," he reasoned further. "If they wanted to rob me they'd have done it back there in the road, and not brought me off here in the woods. Besides, I haven't anything for them to steal."

Suddenly Tom stumbled over a projecting root, and nearly fell, dragging along with him the person who had hold of his left arm.

"Look out there! What's the matter with you?" exclaimed one of the throng quickly, and at the sound of the voice Tom started.

"Andy Foger!" cried the young inventor, as he recovered himself, for he had recognized the voice of the red-haired bully. "What do you mean by holding me up in this way?" he demanded.

"Quiet!" urged a voice in his ear, and the tones were unfamiliar. "Mention no names!"

"I'm on to your game!" retorted Tom. "I know you're here, Andy, and Sam and Pete; and Jack Reynolds and Sid Holton," and he named two rather loose-charactered lads, who were often in the company of Andy and his cronies. "You'd better quit this nonsense," Tom went on. "I'll cause the arrest of all of you if you make trouble for me. I know who you are now!"

"You think you do," answered the voice in his ear, and the young inventor concluded that it must be some lad whom he did not know. "Nor is this nonsense," the other went on. "You are about to receive the punishment due you."

Our hero did not answer, but he was doing some hard thinking. He wondered why Andy and his crowd had captured him.

Suddenly the blackness of the woods was illuminated by the fitful gleam of a distant fire. Tom could see more plainly now, and he managed to count about ten dusky figures hurrying along, four being close to him, to prevent his escape, and the others running on ahead. The light became stronger, and, a moment later the prisoner and his

captors emerged into a little clearing, where a fire was burning. Two figures, masked with black cloth, as were all in the crowd, stood about the blaze, putting on sticks of wood.

"Did you get him?" asked one of these figures eagerly.

"Yes, they got me, Sam Snedecker," answered Tom quickly, recognizing Sam's tones. "And they'll wish they hadn't before I'm done with them."

"Quiet!" ordered an unknown voice. "Members of the Deep Forest Throng, the prisoner is here!" the lad went on.

"'Tis well, bind the captive to the sacrificial tree," was the response from some one in the crowd.

Tom laughed. He was at ease now, for he recognized that those who had taken him prisoner were all lads of Andy's character. Most of them were Shopton youths, but some, evidently, were strangers in town. Tom felt he had little to fear.

"Bring him over here," ordered one, and Tom cried out:

"You wouldn't be giving those orders, Andy Foger, if my arms weren't tied. And if you'll untie me, I'll fight any two of you at once," offered the young inventor fiercely, for he hated the humiliation to which he was being subjected.

"Don't do it! Don't untie him!" begged some one.

"No danger, they won't. They're afraid to, Pete Bailey," replied Tom quickly, for he had recognized the voice of the other one of Andy's particular cronies.

"Aw, he knows who we are," whispered Sam, but not so low but that our hero heard him.

"No matter," was Andy's retort. "Let's go ahead with it. Tie him to that tree."

It was useless for Tom to struggle. He was bound too tightly by the rope, and the crowd was too many for him. In a few minutes he was securely fastened to a tree, not far from the camp-fire, which was replenished from time to time.

"Now for the judgment!" called one of the masked lads, in what he meant to be a sepulchral tone. "What is the charge against the prisoner? Brother Number One of the Deep Forest Throng, what is your accusation?"

"He's a regular snob, that's what's the trouble," answered Andy Foger, though whether he was "Brother Number One," did not appear. "He's too fresh and—and—"

"I'll make you wish you felt fresh when I get hold of you, Andy," murmured Tom.

"Quiet!" cried a tall lad. "What's the next charge?"

"He keeps an old colored man on guard at his place," was the answer, and Tom had no difficulty in recognizing the voice of Sid Holton. "The coon throws whitewash all over us. I got some of it."

"You wouldn't have, if you'd minded your own business," retorted Tom. "It served you right!"

"What is the verdict on the prisoner?" asked one who seemed to be the leader.

"I say let's tar and feather him!" cried Andy suddenly. "There's a barrel of tar back in the woods here, and we can get some feathers from a chicken coop. That would make him so he wouldn't be so uppish, I guess!"

"That's right! Tar and feathers!" exclaimed several.

Our hero's heart sank. He was not afraid, but he did not relish the indignity that was proposed. He resolved to fight to the last ounce of his strength against the masked lads.

"Can we get a kettle to heat the tar in?" asked some one.

"We'll find one," answered Sam Snedecker. "Come on, let's do it. You'll look pretty, Tom Swift, when we're through with you," he exulted.

Tom did not answer, but there was fierce anger in his heart. The tar and feather proposal seemed to meet with general favor.

"Members of the Deep Forest Throng, we will hold a consultation," proposed the leader, in his assumed deep voice. "Come over here, to one side. Brother Number Six, guard the prisoner well."

"There ain't no need to," answered a lad who had been instructed to mount guard over Tom. "He's tied so tight he can't move. I want to hear what you say."

"Very well then," assented the leader, "But look to his bonds."

The lad made a hasty examination of the ropes binding the young inventor to the tree, and Tom was glad that the examination was a hasty one. For he feared the guard might discover that one hand had been worked nearly free. The young inventor had done this while he leered at his captors.

Tom was not going to submit tamely to the nonsense, and from the moment he had been tied, he had been trying to get loose. He had nearly succeeded in freeing one hand when the crowd of masked boys moved off to one side, where they presently began to talk in excited whispers.

"I wonder how they came to catch me," thought the prisoner, as he worked feverishly to further loosen the ropes. "This looks as if it was a put-up job, with the masks, and everything." Later he learned that the idea was the outcome of a proposal of one of the new arrivals in town. He had organized the "Deep Forest Throng," as a sort of secret society, and Andy and his cronies had been induced to join. It was Andy's proposal to capture Tom, though, and, having seen him depart for Mansburg on his motor-cycle, and knowing that he would return along a road that ran near the woods where the Throng met, suggested that they take Tom captive. The idea was enthusiastically received, and Andy and his cronies thought they saw a chance to be revenged.

Tom, while he picked at the ropes, listened to what the boys were saying. He heard frequent mention of tar and feathers, and began to believe, that unless he could get free, while they were off there consulting, he might be forced to submit to the humiliating ordeal.

He managed to get one hand comparatively free, so that he could move it about, but then he struck several hard knots, and could make no further progress. The conference seemed on the point of breaking up.

"One of you go for a big kettle to boil the tar in," ordered the leader, "and the rest of you dig up some feathers."

"I must get loose!" thought Tom desperately. "If they try to tar and feather me it will be a risky business. I've got to get loose! They may burn me severely!"

But, though he tried with all his strength, the ropes would not loosen another bit. He had one hand free, and that was all. The crowd was moving back toward him.

"My knife!" thought the captive quickly. "If I can reach that in my pocket I can cut the ropes! Once I get loose I'll fight the whole crowd!"

He managed to get his free hand into his pocket. His fingers touched something. It was not his knife, and, for a moment he felt a pang of disappointment. Then, as he realized what it was that he had grasped, a new idea came to him.

"This will be better than the knife!" he thought exultantly. The crowd of lads was now surrounding him, some distance from the fire, which burned in front of the captive.

"Sentence has been passed upon you," remarked the leader. "Prepare to meet thy doom! Get the materials, brothers!"

"One moment!" called Tom, for he wanted the crowd all present to witness what he was about to do. "I'll give you one chance to let me go peaceably. If you don't—"

"Well, what will you do?" demanded Andy sneeringly, as he pulled his mask further over his face. "I guess you won't do anything, Tom Swift."

"I'll give you one chance to let me go, and I'll agree to say nothing about this joke," went on Tom. "If you don't I'll blow this place up!"

For a moment there was a silence.

"Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho!" laughed Sam Snedecker. "Listen to him! He'll blow the place up! I'd like to see you do it! You can't get loose in the first place, and you haven't anything to blow it up with in the second. I'd like to see you do it; hey, fellers?"

"Sure," came the answering chorus.

"Would you?" asked Tom quickly. "Then watch. Stand back if you don't want to get hurt, and remember that I gave you a chance to let me go!"

Tom made a rapid motion with the hand he had gotten loose. He threw something toward the blazing fire, which was now burning well. Something white sailed through the air, and fell amid the hot embers.

There was a moment's pause, and then a blinding flash of blue fire lighted up the woods, and a dull rumble, as when gun-powder is lighted in the open followed. A great cloud of white smoke arose, as the vivid blue glare died away, and it seemed as if a great wind swept over the place. Several of the masked lads were knocked down by the explosion, and when the rumble died away, and deep blackness succeeded the intense blue light, there came cries of pain and terror. The fire had been scattered, and extinguished by the explosion which Tom, though still bound to the tree had caused to

happen in the midst of the Deep Forest Throng. Then, as the smoke rolled away, Andy Foger cried:

"Come on, fellows! Something's happened. I guess a volcano blew up!"

CHAPTER IX TOM IS RESCUED

The Deep Forest Throng needed no urging to flee from the place of the mysterious explosion. Their prisoner, helpless as he had seemed, had proved too much for them. Slipping and stumbling along in the darkness, the masked lads had but one thought—to get away before they saw more of that blue fire, and the force of the concussion.

"Gee! My eyebrows are all singed off!" cried Sam Snedecker, as he tore loose his mask which had been rent in the explosion, and felt of his face.

"And my hands are burned," added Pete Bailey. "I stood closer to the fire than any of you."

"You did not! I got the worst of it!" cried Andy. "I was knocked down by the explosion, and I'll bet I'm hurt somewhere. I guess—Oh! Help! I'm falling in a mud hole!"

There was a splash, and the bully disappeared from the sight of his companions who, now that the moon had risen, could better see to flee from their prisoner.

"Help me out, somebody!" pleaded Andy. "I'm in a mud hole!"

They pulled him out, a sorry looking sight, and the red-haired lad, whose locks were now black with muck, began to lament his lot.

"Dry up!" commanded Sid Holton. "It's all your fault, for proposing such a fool trick as capturing Tom Swift. We might have known he would get the best of us."

"What was that stuff he used, anyhow?" asked Cecil Hedden, the lad responsible for the organization of the Deep Forest Throng. "He must be a wonder. Does he do sleight-of-hand tricks?"

"He does all sorts of tricks," replied Pete Bailey, feeling of a big lump on his head, caused by falling on a stone in the mad rush. "I guess we were chumps to tackle him. He must have put some kind of chemical in the fire, to make it blow up."

"Or else he summoned his airship by wireless, and had that balloonist, Mr. Sharp, drop a bomb in the blaze," suggested another lad.

"But how could he do anything? Wasn't he tied fast to that tree?" asked Cecil, the leader.

"You never know when you've got Tom Swift tied," declared Jack Reynolds. "You think you've got him, and you haven't. He's too slick for us. It's Andy's fault, for proposing to capture him."

"That's right! Blame it all on me," whined the squint-eyed bully. "You was just as anxious as I was to tar and feather him."

"Well, we didn't do it," commented Pete Bailey, dryly. "I s'pose he's loose now, laughin' at us. Gee, but that was an explosion though! It's a wonder some of us weren't killed! I guess I've had enough of this Deep Forest Throng business. No more for mine."

"Aw, don't be afraid," urged Cecil. "The next time we get him we'll be on our guard."

"You'll never catch Tom Swift again," predicted Pete.

"I'll go back now to where he is, if you will," agreed Cecil, who was older than the others.

"Not much!" cried Pete. "I've had enough."

This seemed to be the sentiment of all. Away they stumbled through the woods, and, emerging on the road, scattered to their several homes, not one but who suffered from slight burns, contusions, torn and muddy clothes or injured feelings as the outcome of the "joke" on the young inventor.

But our hero was not yet free from the bonds of his enemies. When they scattered and ran, after the vivid blue light, and the dull explosion, which, being unconfined, did

no real damage, Tom was still fast to the tree. As his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness that followed the glare, he remarked:

"Well, I don't know that I'm much better off. I gave those fellows a good scare, but I'm not loose. But I can work to better advantage now."

Once more he resumed the effort to free himself, but in spite of the crude manner in which the knots had been made, the lad could not get loose. The more he pulled and tugged the tighter they seemed to become.

"This is getting serious," Tom mused. "If I could only reach my knife I could cut them, but it's in my pocket on the other side, and that bond's fast. Guess I'll have to stay here all night. Maybe I'd better call for help, but—"

His words, spoken half aloud, were suddenly interrupted by a crash in the underbrush. Somebody was approaching. At first Tom thought it was Andy and his cronies coming back, but a voice that called a moment later proved that this was not so.

"Is any one here?" shouted a man. "Any one hurt? What was that fire and explosion?"

"I'm here," replied Tom. "I'm not hurt exactly, but I'm tied to a tree. I'll be much obliged if you'll loosen me."

"Who are you?"

"Tom Swift. Is that you, Mr. Mason?"

"Yes. By jinks! I never expected to find you here, Tom. Over this way, men," he added calling aloud. "I've found him; it's Tom Swift."

There was the flicker of several lanterns amid the trees, and soon a number of men had joined Mr. Mason, and surrounded Tom. They were farmers living in the neighborhood.

"What in the name o' Tunket happened?" asked one. "Did you get hit by a meteor or a comet? Who tied you up; highwaymen?"

"Cut him loose first, and ask questions afterward," suggested Mr. Mason.

"Yes," added Tom, with a laugh, "I wish you would. I'm beginning to feel cramped."

With their knives, the farmers quickly cut the ropes, and some of them rubbed the arms of the lad to restore the circulation.

"What was it—highwaymen?" asked a man, unable to longer restrain his curiosity. "Did they rob you?"

"No, it wasn't highwaymen," replied the youth. "It was a trick of some boys I know," and to Tom's credit be it said that he did not mention their names. "They did it for a joke," he added.

"Boys' trick? Joke?" queried Mr. Mason. "Pretty queer sort of a joke, I think. They ought to be arrested."

"Oh, I fancy I gave them what was coming to them," went on the young inventor.

"Did they try to blow ye up, too?" asked Mr. Hertford. "What in th' name of Tunket was that blue light, and that explosion? I heard it an' saw it way over to my house."

"So did I," remarked Mr. Mason, and several others said the same thing. "We thought a meteor had fallen," he continued, "and we got together to make an investigation."

"It's a good thing for me you did," admitted Tom, "or I might have had to stay here all night."

"But was it a meteor?" insisted Mr. Hertford.

"No," replied the lad, "I did it."

"You?"

"Yes. You see after they tied me I found I could get one hand free. I reached in my pocket for my knife, but instead of it I managed to get hold of a package of powder I had."

"Gunpowder?" asked Mr. Mason.

"No, a chemical powder I use in an electrical battery. The powder explodes in fire, and makes quite a blue flash, and a lot of smoke, but it isn't very dangerous, otherwise I wouldn't have used it. When the boys were some distance away from the fire, I threw the powder in the blaze. It went off in a moment, and—"

"I guess they run some; didn't they?" asked Mr. Mason with a laugh.

"They certainly did," agreed Tom.

CHAPTER X
TOM HAS A FALL

The young inventor told more details of his adventure in the woods, but, though the farmers questioned him closely, he would not give a single name of his assailants.

"But I should think you'd want to have them punished," remarked Mr. Mason.

"I'll attend to that part later," answered Tom. "Besides, most of them didn't know what they were doing. They were led on by one or two. No, I'll fight my own battles. But I wish you'd lend me a lantern long enough to find my motor-cycle. The moon doesn't give much light in the woods, and those fellows may have hidden my machine."

Mr. Mason and his companions readily agreed to accompany Tom on a search for his wheel. It was found just where he had dismounted from it in the road. Andy and his cronies had evidently had enough of their encounter with our hero, and did not dare to annoy him further.

"Do you think you can ride home?" asked one of the farmers of the lad, when he had ascertained that his machine was in running order.

"Well, it's risky without my lantern," answered Tom. "They smashed that for me. But I guess I can manage."

"No, you can't!" insisted Mr. Mason. "You're stiff from being tied up; and you can't ride. Now you just wheel that contraption over to my place, and I'll hitch up and take you home. It isn't far."

"Oh, I couldn't think of troubling you," declared Tom. At the same time he felt that he was in no condition to ride.

"It's no trouble at all," insisted Mr. Mason. "I guess your father and I are good enough friends to allow me to have my way. You can come over and get your choo-choo bicycle in the morning."

A little later Tom was being rapidly driven toward his home, where he found his father and Mrs. Baggert, to say nothing of Mr. Sharp, somewhat alarmed over his absence, as it was getting late. The youth told as much of his adventure as he thought would not alarm his father, making a sort of joke of it, and, later, related all the details to the balloonist.

"We'll have to get after Andy again," declared the aeronaut. "He needs another toning down."

"Yes, similar to the one he got when we nearly ran away with his automobile, by catching the airship anchor on it," added Tom with a laugh. "But I fancy Andy will steer clear of me for a while. I'm sorry I had to use up that chemical powder, though. Now I can't start my battery until to-morrow." But the next day Tom made up for lost time, by working from early until late. He went over to Mr. Mason's, got his motor-cycle, procured some more of the chemical, and soon had his storage battery in running order. Then he arranged for a more severe test, and while that was going on he worked at completing the body of the electric runabout. The vehicle was beginning to look like a car, though it was not of the regulation pattern.

For the next week Tom was very busy, so occupied, in fact, that he scarcely took time for his meals, which caused Mrs. Baggert no little worryment, for she was a housekeeper who liked to see others enjoy her cooking.

"Well, Tom, how are you coming on?" asked his father one night, as they sat on the porch, Mr. Sharp with them.

"Pretty well, Dad," was the answer of the young inventor. "I'll put the wheels on to-morrow, and then set the batteries. I've got the motor all finished; and all I'll have to do will be to connect it up, and then I'll be ready for a trial on the road."

"And you still think you'll beat all records?"

"I'm pretty sure of it, Dad. You see the amperage will be exceptionally high, and my batteries will have a large amount of reserve, with little internal resistance. But do you know I'm so tired I can hardly think. It's more of a job than I thought it would be."

Tom, a little later, strolled down the road. As he turned back toward the house and walked up the shrubbery lined path he heard a noise.

"Some one's hiding in there!" thought the lad, and he darted to an opening in the hedge to reach the other side. As he did so he saw a figure running away. Whether it was a man or a boy he could not tell in the darkness.

"Hold on there!" cried the young inventor, but, naturally, the fleeing one did not stop. Tom began to sprint, and as it was slightly down hill, he made good time. The figure ahead of him was running well, too, but Tom who could see better, now that he was out from under the trees, noticed that he was gaining. The fleeing one came to a little brook, and hesitated a moment before leaping across. This enabled Tom to catch up, and he made a grab for the figure, just as the man or boy sprang across the little stream.

Tom missed his grip, but he was not going to give up. He scarcely slackened his speed, but, with the momentum he had acquired in racing down the hill, he, too, leaped across the brook. As he landed on the other side he made another grab for the figure, a man, as Tom could now see, but he could make out no features, as the person's hat was pulled down over his face.

"I've got you now!" cried Tom exultantly, reaching out his hand. His fingers clutched something, but the next instant the young inventor went sprawling. The other had put out his foot, and tripped him neatly and, Tom throwing out his hands to save himself in the fall that was inevitable, went splashing into the brook at full length. The unknown, pausing a moment to view what he had done, turned quickly and raced off in the darkness.

CHAPTER XI CROSSED WIRES

More surprised than hurt, and with a feeling of chagrin and anger at the trick which had been played on him, Tom managed to scramble out of the brook. The water was not deep, but he had splashed in with such force that he was wet all over. And, as he got up, the water dripping from his clothes, the lad was conscious of a pain in his head. He put up his hand, and found that contact with a stone had raised a large lump on his forehead. It was as big as a hen's egg.

"Humph! I'll be a pretty sight to-morrow," murmured Tom. "I wonder who that fellow was, anyhow, and what he wanted? He tripped me neatly enough, whoever he was. I've a good notion to keep on after him."

Then, as he realized what a start the fleeing one had, the young inventor knew that it would be fruitless to renew the chase. Slowly he ascended the sloping bank, and started for home. As he did so he realized that he had, clasped in his fingers, something he had grabbed from the person he was pursuing just before his unlucky tumble.

"It's part of his watch chain!" exclaimed Tom, as he felt of the article. "I must have ripped it loose when I fell. Wonder what it is? Evidently some sort of a charm. Maybe it will be a clue." He tried to discern of what style it was, but in the dark woods this was impossible. Then the lad tried to strike a match, but those in his pocket had become wet from his unexpected bath. "I'll have to wait until I get home," he went on, and he hastened his steps, for he was anxious to see what he had torn loose from the person who appeared to be spying on him.

"Why Tom, what's the matter?" exclaimed Mrs. Baggert, when he entered the kitchen, dripping water at every step. "Is it raining outside? I didn't hear any storm."

"It was raining where I was," replied Tom angrily. "I fell in the brook. It was so hot I thought I'd cool off."

"With your best suit on!" ejaculated the housekeeper.

"It isn't my best," retorted the lad. "But I went in before I thought. It was an accident; I fell," he added, lest Mrs. Baggert take his joking remarks seriously. He did not want to tell her of the chase.

The chief concern of the lad now was to look at the charm and, as soon as Mrs. Baggert's attention was attracted elsewhere, Tom glanced at the object he still held tightly clenched in his hand. As the light from the kitchen fell upon it he could hardly repress an exclamation of astonishment.

For the charm that he held in his hand was one he had seen before dangling from the watch chain of Addison Berg, the agent for Bentley & Eagert, submarine boat builders, which firm had, as told in "Tom Swift and His Submarine," tried unsuccessfully to secure the gold treasure from the sunken wreck. Berg and his associates had even gone so far as to try to disable the Advance, the boat of Tom and his father, by ramming her when deep down under the ocean, but Mr. Swift's use of an electric cannon had broken the steering gear of the Wonder, the rival craft, and from that time on Tom and his friends had a clear field to search for the bullion held fast in the hold of the Boldero. "Addison Berg," murmured Tom, as he looked at the watch charm. "What can he be doing in this neighborhood? Hiding, too, as if he wanted to overhear something. That's the way he did when we were building our submarine, and now he's up to the same trick when I'm constructing my electric car. I'm sure this charm

is his. It is such a peculiar design that I'm positive I can't be mistaken. I thought, when I was chasing after him, that it would turn out to be Andy Foger, or some of the boys, but it was too big for them. Addison Berg, eh? What can he be doing around here? I must not tell Dad, or he'd worry himself sick. But I must be on my guard."

Tom examined the charm closely. It was a compass, but made in an odd form, and was much ornamented.

The young inventor had noticed it on several occasions when he had been in conversation with Mr. Berg previous to the attempt on the part of the owners of the rival submarine to wreck Tom's boat. He felt that he could not be mistaken in identifying the charm.

"Berg was afraid I'd catch him, and ask for an explanation that would have been awkward to make," thought the lad, as he turned the charm over in his hand. "That's why he tripped me up. But I'll get at the bottom of this yet. Maybe he wants to steal my ideas for an electric car."

Tom's musings were suddenly interrupted by Mrs. Baggert.

"I hope you're not going to stand there all night," she said, with a laugh. "You're in the middle of a puddle now, but when you get over dreaming I'd like to mop it up."

"All right," agreed the young inventor, coming to himself suddenly. "Guess I'd better go get some dry clothes on."

"You'd better go to bed," advised Mrs. Baggert. "That's where your father and Mr. Sharp are. It's late."

The more Tom thought over the strange occurrence the more it puzzled him. He mused over the presence of Berg as he went about his work the next day, for that it was the agent whom he had pursued he felt positive.

"But I can't figure out why he was hanging around here," mused Tom.

Then, as he found that his thoughts over the matter were interfering with his work, he resolutely put them from him, and threw himself energetically into the labor of completing his electric car. The new batteries, he found, were working well, and in the next two days he had constructed several more, joining them so as to get the combined effect.

It was the afternoon of the third day from Tom's unexpected fall into the brook that the young inventor decided on the first important test of his new device. He was going to try the motor, running it with his storage battery. Some of the connections were already in place, the wires being fastened to the side of the shop, where they were attached to switches. Tom did not go over these, taking it for granted that they were all right. He soon had the motor, which he was to install in his car, wired to the battery, and then he attached a gauge, to ascertain, by comparison, how many miles he could hope to travel on one charging of the storage battery.

"Guess I'll call Dad and Mr. Sharp in to see how it works, before I turn on the current," he said to himself. He was about to summon his parent and the aeronaut from an adjoining shop, where they were working over a new form of dynamo, when the lad caught sight of the watch charm he had left on his desk, in plain sight.

"Better put that away," he remarked. "Dad or Mr. Sharp might see it, and ask questions. Then I'd have to explain, and I don't want to, not until I get further toward the bottom of this thing."

He put the charm away, and then summoned his father and the balloonist.

"You're going to see a fine experiment," declared Tom. "I'm going to turn on the full strength of my battery."

"Are you sure it's all right, Tom?" asked his father. "You can't be too careful when you're dealing with electricity of high voltage, and great ampere strength."

"Oh, it's all right, Dad," his son assured him "Now watch my motor hum."

He walked over to a big copper switch, and grasped the black rubber handle to pull it over which would send the current from the storage battery into the combination of wheels and gears that he hoped, ultimately, would propel his electric automobile along the highways, or on a track, at the rate of a hundred miles an hour.

"Here she goes!" cried Tom. For an instant he hesitated and then pulled the switch. At the same time his hand rested on another wire, stretched across a bench.

No sooner had the switch closed than there was a blinding flash, a report as of a gun being fired, and Tom's body seemed to straighten out. Then a blue flame appeared to encircle him and he dropped to the floor of the shop, an inert mass.

"He's killed!" cried Mr. Swift, springing forward.

"Careful!" cautioned the balloonist. "He's been shocked! Don't touch him until I turn off the current!" As he pulled out the switch, the aeronaut gave a glance at the apparatus.

"There's something wrong here!" he cried. "The wires have been crossed! That's what shocked Tom, but he never made the wrong connections! He's too good an electrician! There's been some one in this shop, changing the wires!"

CHAPTER XII THE TRY OUT

Once the current was cut off it was safe to approach the body of the young inventor. Mr. Sharp stooped over and lifted Tom's form from the floor, for Mr. Swift was too excited and trembled too much to be of any service. Our hero was as one dead. His body was limp, after that first rigid stretching out, as the current ran through him; his eyes were closed, and his face was very pale.

"Is—is there any hope?" faltered Mr. Swift.

"I think so," replied the balloonist. "He is still breathing—faintly. We must summon a doctor at once. Will you telephone for one, while I carry him in the house?"

As Mr. Sharp emerged from the shop, bearing Tom's body, an automobile drew up in front of the place.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed a voice. "Tom's hurt! How did it happen? Bless my very existence!"

"Oh, Mr. Damon, you're just in time!" exclaimed Mr. Sharp, "Tom's had a bad shock. Will you go for a doctor in your auto?"

"Better than that! Let me take Tom in the car to Dr. Whiteside's office," proposed the eccentric man. "It will be better that way."

"Yes, yes," agreed Mr. Swift eagerly. "Put Tom in the auto!"

"If only it doesn't break down," added Mr. Damon fervently. "Bless my spark plug, but it would be just my luck!"

But they started off all right, Mr. Swift riding in front with Mr. Damon, and Mr. Sharp supporting Tom in the tonneau. Only a little fluttering of the eyelids, and a slow, faint breathing told that Tom Swift still lived.

Mr. Damon never guided a car better than he did his auto that day. Several speed laws were broken, but no one appeared to stop them, and, in record time they had the young inventor at the physician's house. Fortunately Dr. Whiteside was at home, and, under his skillful treatment Tom was soon out of danger. His heart action was properly started, and then it was only a question of time. As the doctor had plenty of room it was decided to let the lad remain that night, and Tom was soon installed in a spare bedroom, with the doctor's pretty daughter to wait on him occasionally.

"Oh, I'm all right," the youth insisted, when Miss Whiteside told him it was time for his medicine. "I'm all right."

"You're not!" she declared. "I ought to know, for I'm going to be a nurse, some day, and help papa. Now take this or I'll have to hold your nose, as they do the baby's," and she held out a spoonful of unpleasant looking mixture, extending her dainty forefinger and thumb of her other hand, as if to administer dire punishment to Tom, if he did not obey.

"Well, I give in to superior strength," he said with a laugh, as he noted, with approval, the laughing face of his nurse.

Then he fell into a deep sleep, and was so much better the next morning that he could be taken home in Mr. Damon's auto.

"But mind, no hard work for three or four days," insisted the physician. "I want your heart to get in shape for that big race you were telling me about. The shock was a severe strain to it."

Tom promised, reluctantly, and, though he did no work, his first act, on reaching home, was to go out to the shop, to inspect the battery and motor. To his surprise the motor was running for the lad had established the connection, in spite of his shock and his father and Mr. Sharp had decided to let the machinery run until he came back.

"And look at the record it's made!" cried Tom delightedly as he glanced at the gauge. "Better than I figured on. That battery is a wonder. I'll have the fastest electric runabout you ever saw."

"If the wires don't get crossed again," put in Mr. Sharp. "You'd better make an examination, Tom," and, for the first time, the young inventor learned how he had been shocked.

"Crossed wires! I should say they were crossed!" he exclaimed as he looked at the switches and copper conductors. "Somebody has been tampering with them. No wonder I was shocked!"

"Who did it?" asked Mr. Sharp.

Tom considered for a moment, before answering. Then he said:

"I believe it was Addison Berg. He must have wanted to do some damage, to get even with us for getting that treasure away from him."

"Berg?" questioned the balloonist, and Tom told of the night he had been tripped into the brook, and exhibited the watch charm he had secured. Mr. Sharp recognized it at once. A further examination confirmed the belief that the submarine agent had sneaked into Tom's workshop, and had altered the wires.

"They were all right when I came out of the shop that night," declared Tom. "I left the old connections just as I thought I had arranged them, and only added the new ones, when I went to try my battery. The old connections were crossed, but I didn't notice it. Then when I turned on the current I got the shock. I don't s'pose Berg thought I'd be so nearly killed. Probably he wanted to burn out my motor, and spoil it. If it was Andy Foger I could understand it, but a man like Berg—"

"He's probably wild with anger because his submarine got the worst of it in the race for the gold," interrupted the balloonist. "Well, we'll have to be on our guard, that's all. What was the matter with Eradicate, that he didn't see him enter the shop?"

"Rad went to a colored dance that night," said Tom. "I let him off. But after this I'll have the shop guarded night and day. My motor might have been ruined, if that first charge hadn't gone through my body instead of into the machinery." The improper connections were soon removed and others substituted.

It was agreed between Tom and Mr. Sharp that they would say nothing regarding Mr. Berg to Mr. Swift. The aeronaut caused cautious inquiries to be made, and learned that the agent had been discharged by the submarine firm, because of some wrongdoing in connection with the craft Wonder, and it was surmised that the agent believed Tom to be at the bottom of his troubles.

In a few days the young inventor was himself again, and as further trials of his battery showed it to be even better than its owner hoped, arrangements were made for testing it in the car on the road.

The runabout was nearly finished, but it lacked a coat of varnish, and some minor details, when Tom, assisted by his father, Mr. Sharp and Mr. Jackson, one morning, about a week later, installed the motor and battery units. It did not take long to gear up the machinery, connect the battery and, though the car was rather a crude looking affair, Tom decided to give it a tryout.

"Want to come along, Dad?" he asked, as he tightened up some binding posts, and looked to see that the steering wheel, starting and reverse levers worked properly, and that the side chains were well lubricated.

"Not the first time," replied his father. "Let's see how it runs with you, first."

"Oh, I want some sort of a load in it," went on the lad. "It won't be a good test unless I have a couple of others besides myself. How about you, Mr. Damon?" for the old gentleman was spending a few days at the Swift homestead.

"Bless my shoe buttons! I'll come!" was the ready answer. "After the experience I've been through in the airship and submarine, nothing can scare me. Lead on, I'll follow!"

"I don't suppose you'll hang back after that; will you, Mr. Sharp?" asked the lad, with a laugh.

"I don't dare to, for the sake of my reputation," was the reply, for the balloonist who had made many ascensions, and dropped thousands of feet in parachutes, was naturally a brave man.

So he and Mr. Damon climbed into the rear seats of the odd-looking electric car, while Tom took his place at the steering wheel.

"Are you all ready?" he asked.

"Let her go!" fired back Mr. Sharp.

"Bless my galvanometer, don't go too fast on the start," cautioned Mr. Damon, nervously.

"I'll not," agreed the young inventor. "I want to get it warmed up before I try any speeding."

He turned on the current. There was a low, humming purr, which gradually increased to a whine, and the car moved slowly forward. It rolled along the gravel driveway to the road, Tom listening to every sound of the machinery, as a mother listens to the breathing of a child.

"She's moving!" he cried.

"But not much faster than a wheelbarrow," said his father, who sometimes teased his son.

"Wait!" cried the youth.

Tom turned more current into the motor. The purring and humming increased, and the car seemed to leap forward. It was in the road now, and, once assured that the steering apparatus was working well, Tom suddenly turned on much more speed.

So quickly did the electric auto shoot forward that Mr. Damon and Mr. Sharp were jerked back against the cushions of the rear seats.

"Here! What are you doing?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"I'm going to show you a little speed," answered Tom.

The car was now moving rapidly, and there was a smoothness and lightness to its progress that was absent from a gasoline auto. There was no vibration from the motor. Faster and faster it ran, until it was moving at a speed scarcely less than that of Mr. Damon's car, when it was doing its best. Of course that was not saying much, for the car owned by the odd gentleman was not a very powerful one, but it could make fast time occasionally.

"Is this the best you can do?" asked Mr. Damon. "Not that it isn't fast," he hastened to add, "and I was wondering if it was your limit."

"Not half!" cried Tom, as he turned on a little more power. "I'm not trying for a record to-day. I just want to see how the battery and motor behaves."

"Pretty well, I should say," commented Mr. Sharp.

"I'm satisfied—so far," agreed the lad.

They were now moving along the highway at a good speed—moving almost silently, too, for the motor, save for a low hum, made no noise. So quiet was the car, in fact, that it was nearly the cause of a disaster. Tom was so interested in the performance of his latest invention, that, before he knew it, he had come up behind a farmer, driving a team of skittish horses. As the big machine went past them, giving no warning of its approach, the steeds reared up, and would have bolted, but for the prompt action of the driver.

"Hey!" he cried, angrily, as Tom speeded past, "don't you know you got to give warnin' when you're comin' with one of them ther gol-swizzled things! By Jehossephat I'll have th' law on ye ef ye do thet ag'in!"

"I forgot to ring the bell," apologized Tom, as he sent out a peal from the gong, and then, he let out a few more amperes, and the speed increased.

"Hold on! I guess this is fast enough!" cried Mr. Damon, as his hat blew off.

"Fast?" answered Tom. "This is nothing to what I'll do when I use the full power. Then I'll—"

He was interrupted by a sharp report, and a vivid flash of fire on a switch board near the steering wheel. The motor gave a sort of groan, and stopped, the car rolling on a little way, and then becoming stationary.

"Bless my collar button!" ejaculated Mr. Damon.

"What's the matter?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"Some sort of a blow-out," answered Tom ruefully, as he shoved the starting handle over, trying to move the car. But it would not budge. The new auto had "gone dead" on her first tryout. The young inventor was grievously disappointed.

CHAPTER XIII
TOWED BY A MULE

"Bless my gizzard! Is it anything serious?" asked Mr. Damon. "Will it blow up, or anything like that?"

"No," replied the lad, as he leaped out of the car, and began to make an examination. Mr. Sharp assisted him.

"The motor seems to be all right," remarked the balloonist, as he inspected it.

"Yes," agreed our hero, "and the batteries have plenty of power left in them yet. The gauge shows that. I can't understand what the trouble can be, unless—" He paused in his remark and uttered an exclamation. "I've found it!" he cried.

"What?" demanded the aeronaut.

"Some of the fuses blew out. I turned on too much current, and the fuses wouldn't carry it. I put them in to save the motor from being burned out, but I didn't use heavy enough ones. I see where my mistake was."

"But what does it mean?" inquired Mr. Damon.

"It means that we've got to walk back home," was Tom's sorrowful answer. "The car is stalled, for I haven't any extra fuses with me."

"Can't you connect up the battery by using some extra wire?" asked Mr. Sharp. "I have some," and he drew a coil of it from his pocket.

"I wouldn't dare to. It might be so heavy that it would carry more current than the motor could stand. I don't want to burn that out. No, I guess we'll have to walk home, or rather I will. You two can stay here until I come back with heavier fuses. I'm sorry."

Tom had hardly ceased speaking, when, from around the turn in the road proceeded a voice, and, at the sound of it all three started, for the voice was saying:

"Now it ain't no use fer yo' to act dat-a-way, Boomerang. Yo' all ain't got no call t' git contrary now, jest when I wants t' git home t' mah dinner. I should t'ink you'd want t' git t' de stable, too. But ef yo' all ain't mighty keerful I'll cut down yo' rations, dat's what I'se goin' to do. G'lang, now, dat's a good feller. Ho! Ho! I knowed dat'd fetch yo' all. When yo' all wiggles yo' ears dat-a-way, dat's a suah sign yo' all is gwine t' move."

Then followed the sound of a rattletrap of a wagon approaching.

"Eradicate! It's Eradicate!" exclaimed Tom.

"And his mule, Boomerang!" added Mr. Sharp. "He's just in time!" commented Mr. Damon with a sigh of relief, as the ancient outfit, in charge of the aged colored man, came along. Eradicate had been sent to Shopton to get a load of wood for Mr. Swift, and was now returning. At the sight of the stalled auto the mule pricked up his long ears, and threw them forward.

"Whoa dar, now, Boomerang!" cried Eradicate. "Doan't yo' all commence t' gittin' skittish. Dat machine ain't gwine t' hurt yo'. Why good land a' massy! Ef 'tain't Mistah Swift!" cried the colored man, as he caught sight of Tom. "What's de trouble?" he asked.

"Broke down," answered the young inventor briefly. "You always seem to come along when I'm in trouble, Rad."

"Dat's right," assented the darkey, with a grin. "Me an' trouble am ole acquaintances. Sometimes she hits me a clip on de haid, den, ag'in Boomerang, mah mule, gits it. He jest had his trouble. Got a stone under his shoe, an' didn't want t' move. Den when I did git him started he balked on me. But I'se all right now. But I suah am sorry fo' you. Can't I help yo' all, Mistah Swift?"

"Yes, you can, Rad," answered Tom. "Drive home as fast as you can, and ask Dad to send back with you some of those fuses he'll find on my work bench. He knows what I want. Hurry there and hurry back."

Eradicate shook his head doubtfully.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to go?" asked Mr. Sharp, a trifle nettled. "We can't get the car started until we have some new fuses."

"Oh, I wants t' go all right 'nuff, Mistah Sharp," was Eradicate's prompt answer. "Yo' all knows I'd do anyt'ing t' 'blige yo' or Mistah Swift. But hits dish yeah mule, Boomerang. I jest done promised him dat we were gwine home t' dinnah, an' he 'spects a manger full ob oats. Ef I got to Mistah Swift's house wid him, I couldn't no mo' git him t' come back widout his dinnah, dan yo' all kin git dat 'ar car t' move widout dem fusin' t'ings yo' all talked about."

"Bless my necktie!" exclaimed Mr. Damon. "That's all nonsense! You don't suppose that mule understands what you say to him, do you? How does he know you promised him his dinner?"

"I doan't know how he know, Mistah Damon," replied Eradicate, "but he do know, jest de same. I know hit would be laik pullin' teeth an' wuss too, t' git Boomerang t' start back wid dem foosd t'ings until after he's had his dinner. Wouldn't it, Boomerang?"

The mule waved his long ears as if in answer.

"Bless my soul, I believe he does understand!" cried Mr. Damon.

"Of course he do," put in the colored man. "I'se awful sorry. Now if it were afternoon I could bring back dem what-d'ye-call-'ems in a jiffy, 'cause Boomerang allers feels good arter he has his dinnah, but befo' dat—" and Eradicate shook his head, as if there was no more to be said on the subject.

"Well," remarked Tom, sadly, "I guess there's no help for it. We'll have to walk home, unless you two want to wait until I can ride back with Eradicate, and come back on my motor cycle. Then I'll have to leave the cycle here, for I can't get it in the car."

"Bless my collar button!" cried Mr. Damon. "It's like the puzzle of the fox, the goose and the bag of corn on the banks of a stream. I guess we'd better all walk."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Mr. Sharp. "Is your mule good and strong, Eradicate?"

"Strong? Why dish yeah mule could pull a house ober—dat is when he's got a mind to. An' he'd do most anyt'ing now, 'ca'se he's anxious t' git home t' his dinnah; ain't yo' all, Boomerang?"

Once more the mule waved his ears, like signal flags.

"Then I have a proposition to make," went on the balloonist. "Unhitch the mule from the load of wood, and hitch him to the auto. We've got some rope along, I noticed. Then the mule can pull us and the runabout home."

"Good idea!" cried Mr. Damon.

"Dat's de racket!" ejaculated Eradicate. "I'll jest sequesterate dish year load ob wood side ob de road, an' hitch Boomerang to de auto."

Tom said nothing for a few seconds. He gazed sadly at his auto, which he hoped would win the touring club's prize. It was a bitter pill for him to swallow.

"Towed by a mule!" he exclaimed, shaking his head, and smiling ruefully. "The fastest car in this country towed by a mule! It's tough luck!"

"'Tain't half so bad as goin' widout yo' dinnah, Mistah Swift!" remarked Eradicate, as he began to harness the mule to the electric runabout.

Boomerang made no objection to the transfer. He looked around once or twice as he was being made fast to the auto and, when the word was given he stepped out as if pulling home stalled cars was his regular business. Tom sat beside Eradicate on the front seat, and steered, while the colored man drove the mule, and Mr. Sharp and Mr. Damon were in the "tonneau" seats as Tom called them.

"I hope no one sees us," thought Tom, but he was doomed to disappointment. When nearly home he heard an auto approaching, and in it were Andy Foger, Sam Snedecker and Pete Bailey. The three cronies stared at the odd sight of Boomerang ambling along, with his great ears flapping, drawing Tom's speedy new car.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Andy. "So that's the motive power he's going to use! Look at him, fellows. I thought his new electric, that was going to beat my car, and win the prize, was to be two hundred horse power. Instead it's one mule power! That's rich!" and Andy's chums joined in the laugh at poor Tom.

The young inventor said nothing, for there was nothing he could say. In dignified silence he passed the car containing his enemies, they, meanwhile, jeering at him.

"Dat's all right," spoke Eradicate, sympathizing with his young employer. "Maybe dey'll 'want a tow derselves some day, an' when dey does, I'll make Boomerang pull 'em in a ditch."

But this was small comfort to Tom. He made up his mind, though, that he would demonstrate that his car could do all that he had claimed for it, and that very soon.

CHAPTER XIV A GREAT RUN

Boomerang did not belie the reputation Eradicate had given him as a beast of strength. Though the electric runabout was heavy, the mule managed to move it along the road at a fair speed, with the four occupants. Perhaps the animal knew that at the

end of his journey a good feed awaited him. At any rate they were soon within sight of the Swift home.

Mr. Damon and Mr. Sharp refrained from making any comments that might hurt Tom's feelings, for they realized the chagrin felt by the young inventor in having his apparatus go back on him at the first trial. But our hero was not the kind of a lad who is disheartened by one failure, or even half a dozen.

The humor of the situation appealed to him, and, as he turned the auto into the driveway, and noticed Boomerang's long ears waving to and fro, he laughed.

The lad insisted on putting new fuses in the car before he ate his dinner, and then, satisfied that the motor was once more in running order, he partook of a hasty meal, and began making several changes which he had decided were desirable. He finished them in time to go for a little run in the car all alone on a secluded road late that afternoon.

Tom returned, with eyes shining, and cheeks flushed with elation.

"Well, how did it go?" asked his father.

"Fine! Better than I expected," responded his son enthusiastically. "When it gets to running smoothly I'll pass anything on the road."

"Don't be too sure," cautioned Mr. Swift, but Tom only smiled.

There was still much to do on the electric runabout, and Tom spent the next few days in adjusting the light steel wind-shield, that was to come down over the driver's seat. He also put in a powerful electric search-light, which was run by current from the battery, and installed a new speedometer and an instrument to tell how much current he was using, and how much longer the battery would run without being exhausted. This was to enable him to know when to begin recharging it. When the current was all consumed it was necessary to store more in the battery. This could be done by attaching wires from a dynamo, or, in an emergency by tapping an electric light wire in the street. But as the battery would enable the car to run many miles on one charging, Tom did not think he would ever have to resort to the emergency charging apparatus. He had a new system for this, one that enabled him to do the work in much less than the usual time.

With his new car still unpainted, and rather rough and crude in appearance, the lad started out alone one morning, his father and Mr. Sharp having declined to accompany him, on the plea of business to attend to, and Mr. Damon not being at the Swift house.

Tom rode about for several hours, giving his car several severe tests in the way of going up hills, and speeding on the level. He was proceeding along a quiet country road, in a small town about fifteen miles from Shopton, when, as he flashed past the small railroad station, he saw a familiar figure standing on the platform.

"Why, Ned!" called Tom, "what are you doing over here?"

"I might ask the same thing of you. Is that your new car? It doesn't look very new."

"Yes, this is it. I haven't had a chance to paint and varnish it yet. But you ought to see it go. What are doing here, though?"

"I came over on some bank business. A customer here had some bonds he wanted to dispose of and I came for them. You see we're enlarging our business since the new bank started."

"Has it hurt your bank any?"

"Not yet, but Foger and his associates are trying hard to make us lose money. Say, did you ever see such a place as this? I've got to wait two hours for a train back to Shopton."

"No you haven't."

"Why not? Have they changed the timetable since I came over this morning?"

"No, but you can ride back with me. I'm going, and I'll show you what my new electric car can do."

"Good!" cried the young bank cashier. "You're just in time. I was wondering how I could kill two hours, but now I'll get in your new car and—"

"And maybe we'll kill a few chickens, or a dog or two when we get her speeded up," put in Tom, with a laugh in which Ned joined.

The two lads, seated in the front part of the auto, were soon moving down the hard highway. Suddenly Tom pulled a lever and the steel wind-shield came sliding down from the top case, meeting the forward battery compartment, and forming a sort of slanting roof over the heads of the two occupants.

"Here! What's this?" cried Ned.

"We're going to hit it up in a few minutes," replied the young inventor, "and I want to reduce the wind resistance."

"Oh, I thought maybe we were going through a bombardment. It's all right, go ahead, don't mind me. I'm game."

There was a celluloid window in the steel wind-shield, and through this the lads could observe the road ahead of them.

As they swung along it, the speed increasing, Ned saw an auto ahead of them.

"Whose car is that?" he asked.

"Don't know," replied Tom. "We'll be up to it in about half a minute, though."

As the electric runabout, more dilapidated looking than ever from the layer of dust that covered it, passed the other auto, which was a powerful car, the solitary occupant of it, a middle-aged man, looked to one side, and, seeing the queer machine, remarked:

"You fellows are going the wrong way to the junk heap. Turn around."

"Is that so?" asked Tom, his eyes flashing at the cheap wit of the man. "Why we came out here to show you the way!"

"Do you want to race?" asked the man eagerly, too eagerly, Ned thought. "I'll give you a brush, if you do, and a handicap into the bargain."

"We don't need it," replied the young inventor quickly.

"I'll wager fifty dollars I can beat you bad on this three-mile stretch," went on the autoist. "How about it?"

"I'll race you, but I don't bet," answered Tom, a bit stiffly.

"Oh, be a sport," urged the man.

Tom shook his head. He had slowed down his machine, and was running even with the gasoline car now. He noticed that it was a new one, of six cylinders, and looked speedy. Perhaps he was foolish to pit his untried car against it. Yet he had confidence in his battery and motor.

"Well, we'll race for the fun of it then," went on the man. "Do you want a handicap?"

Tom shook his head again, and there came around his mouth a grim look.

"All right," assented the other. "Only you're going to be beat badly. I never saw an electric car yet that could do anything except to crawl along."

"You're going to see one now," was all the retort Tom permitted himself.

"Here we go then!" cried the man, and he gave his gear handle a yank, and shoved over the sparking and gasoline levers.

His car instantly shot ahead, and went "chug chugging" down the road in a cloud of dust. At the same moment Tom, in answer to a look from Ned, who feared his friend was going to be left behind, turned more power into the motor. The humming, purring sound increased and the electric car forged ahead.

"Can you catch him?" asked Ned.

"Watch," was all Tom said.

The hum of the motor became a sort of whine, and the electric rapidly acquired speed. It crept up on the gasoline car, as an express train overtakes a freight, and the man, looking back, and expecting to see his rival far behind was surprised to note the queer looking vehicle lapping his rear wheels.

"Well, you are coming on, aren't you?" he asked. "Maybe you'll keep up now!" He shifted the gears, using a little more gasoline. For a moment his car opened a wide gap between it and Tom's, but the young inventor had only begun to race. Still louder purred the motor, and in a few minutes Tom was running on even terms with his competitor. The man looked annoyed, and tried, by the skilful use of gasoline and sparking levers, to leave Tom behind. But the electric held her own.

"I've got to go the limit I see," remarked the man at last, glancing sideways at the other car. "I'll tell 'em you're coming," he added, "though I must say your electric does better than any of its kind I ever came across."

"I'm not done yet," was the comment of our hero. But the man did not hear him, for he was yanking into place the lever that enabled him to run on direct drive for fourth speed.

Forward shot his car, and, for perhaps a quarter of a mile it led. The racers were almost at the end of the three-mile level stretch of road, and if Tom was going to win the impromptu contest it seemed high time he began.

"Can you catch him?" asked Ned anxiously.

"Watch," was his chum's reply. "I haven't used my high speed gear yet. I'm afraid the fuses won't stand it, but here goes for a try, anyhow."

He threw over a switch, changed a lever and then, having pushed into place the last gear, he grasped the steering wheel more firmly.

There was need of it, for, in an instant, the electric runabout, with the motors fairly roaring, swept up the road, after the gasoline car that was almost hidden from sight in a cloud of dust. Faster and faster went Tom's car. The young inventor was listening with critical ear to the song of the machinery. He wanted to learn if it was running sweet and true, for that is how a careful mechanic tests his apparatus. Foot by foot the distance between the two cars lessened. Now the electric was lapping the rear wheels of the gasoline machine, but the driver did not know it. His whole attention was on the road ahead of him.

"Half a mile more!" cried Ned, naming the distance which yet remained of the straight stretch. "Can you do it, Tom?"

His chum nodded. He shoved the controller handle over to the last notch, and then waited an anxious second. Would the fuse carry the extra load? It seemed so, for there was a slight increase of power.

An instant later Tom gave a sudden twist to the steering wheel. It was well that he did, for he was passing the gasoline car dangerously close. Then he was ahead of it, and in a second he was three lengths in advance.

Desperately the man opened his muffler, and sought to gain by this advantage, but though his car gave off explosions like a battery of guns in action, he could not gain on Tom. The electric shot around a curve in the road, winner of the impromptu race by an eighth of a mile.

"Well," asked Tom of his chum, as he slowed down, for the road now was not so good, "did I do it?"

"You certainly did. Whew! But we did scoot along?"

"Eighty miles an hour there one spell," went on the young inventor, glancing at a gauge. "But I've got to do better than that to win the big race."

CHAPTER XV
ANDY FOGER'S BLACK EYE

Around the bend came the six-cylinder touring car. The driver, with a surprised look on his face, was slacking up. He ran his machine up alongside of Tom's.

"Say," he asked, in dazed tones, "did you take a short cut, or anything like that to get ahead of me?"

"No," answered the youth.

"And you didn't jump me in the air?"

"No," was Tom's answer, smilingly given.

"Well, all I've got to say is that you've got a wonderful car there, Mr.—er—er—" He paused suggestively.

"Swift is my name," our hero answered. "Thomas Swift, of Shopton."

"Ah, I've heard of you. My name is Layton—Paul Layton. I'm from Netherton. Let's see, you built an airship, didn't you?"

"I helped," Tom admitted modestly.

"Well, you beat me fair and square, and if I do say it myself I've got a fairly speedy car. Took two firsts at the Indianapolis meet last month. But you certainly scooted ahead of me. Where did you buy that electric, if I may ask?"

"I made it."

"I might have known," admitted the man. "But are you going to put them on the market? If you are I'd like to get one. I want the fastest car going, and you seem to have it."

"I hadn't thought of manufacturing them for sale," said the young inventor. "If I do, I'll let you know."

"I wish you would. My! I had no idea you could beat me, but you did—fair and square."

There was some more talk, and then Mr. Layton started on, after exacting from Tom a further promise to let him know if any electrics were to be made for sale.

"You certainly have a wonderful car," complimented Ned, as he and his chum took a short cut to Shopton.

"Well, I'm not quite satisfied with it," declared Tom.

"Why not?"

"Well, I've set a hundred miles an hour as my limit. I didn't make but eighty to-day. I've got to have more speed if I go up against the crowd that will race for the touring club's prize."

"Can you make a hundred miles?"

"I think so. I've got to change my gears, though, and use heavier fuses. I was afraid every second that one of the fuses would melt, and leave me stranded. But they stood pretty well. Of course, when the car, geared as it is now, has been run a little longer it will go faster, but it won't come up to a hundred miles an hour. That's what I want, and that's what I'm going to get," and the lad looked very determined.

Ned was taken to the bank, and, as Tom turned his machine around, to go home, he saw, standing on the steps of the new bank, which was almost across the street from the old one, Andy Foger, and the bully's father. The red-haired lad laughed at Tom's rough looking car, and said something to his parent, but Mr. Foger did not notice Tom. Not that this caused our hero any uneasiness, however.

But, as he swung away from the bank, he saw, coming up the street a figure that instantly attracted his attention. It was that of Mr. Berg, and Tom at once recalled the night he had pursued the submarine agent, and torn loose his watch charm. Mr. Berg was evidently going to enter the new bank, for, at the sight of the former agent, Mr. Foger descended the steps, and went to meet him.

Tom, however, had decided upon a plan of action. He steered his machine in toward the curb, ran up the steel wind-shield, and called:

"Mr. Berg!"

"Eh? What's that?" asked the agent, in some surprise. Then, as he caught sight of Tom, and recognized him, he added: "I'm very busy now, my young friend. You'll have to excuse me."

"I won't detain you a moment," went on Tom, casually. "I have something of yours that I wish to return to you."

"Something of mine?" Mr. Berg was evidently puzzled. He approached the electric car, in spite of the fact that Mr. Foger was calling him. "Something of mine? What is it?"

"This!" exclaimed Tom suddenly, extending the compass watch charm, which he always carried with him of late.

"That! Where did you get that. I lost it—"

Mr. Berg paused in some confusion.

"I grabbed it off your watch chain the night you were hiding in our shrubbery, and tripped me into the brook," answered the lad, looking the man squarely in the eye.

"Hiding? Tripped you? Grabbed that off my chain—" stammered Mr. Berg. He had taken the charm up in his fingers, but now he quickly dropped it back into Tom's hand. "I guess you're mistaken," he added quickly. "That's not mine. I never had one—I—er—that's not mine—at least—Oh, you'll have to excuse me, young man, I'm in a hurry, and I have an important engagement!" and with that Mr. Berg wheeled off, and joined Mr. Foger, who stood on the sidewalk, waiting for him.

"I thought sure it was yours," said Tom, easily. "Perhaps Mr. Foger will keep it in one of the safety-deposit boxes of his bank, until the owner claims it," and he looked at the banker.

"What's that?" asked Andy's father.

"This watch charm which I grabbed off Mr. Berg's chain the night he was sneaking around our house, and crossed the electric wires," went on the lad.

"Don't listen to him. He doesn't know what he is saying!" exclaimed the former submarine boat agent. "It's not my charm. He's crazy!"

"Oh, am I?" thought Tom, with a grim look on his face. "Well, we'll see about that, Mr. Berg," and, putting the charm back in his pocket, Tom swung his machine toward home, while the agent and the banker entered the new institution.

"So they're getting chummy," mused Tom. "Andy and Berg were friends when Andy shut me up in the submarine tank, and now Berg comes here to do business, and Foger and his associates are trying to put the old bank out of business. I wonder if there's any connection there? I must keep my eyes open. Berg is an unscrupulous man, and so is Andy's father, to say nothing of the red-haired bully himself. He had nerve to deny that was his charm. Well, maybe I'll catch him some day."

Tom spent a busy week making new adjustments to his electric car, changing the gear and providing for heavier fuses. He was planning for another trip on the road, as the time for the great race was drawing near, and he wanted the mechanism to be in perfect shape.

One evening, as he was preparing for a short night trip to Mansburg, where he had promised to call for Miss Nestor, Tom left his machine standing in the road in front of the house, while he went back to get a robe, as it threatened to be chilly.

As he came back to enter the car, he saw some one standing near it.

"Is that you, Ned?" he called. "Come, take a spin."

Hardly had he spoken than there sounded from the machine a whirr that told of the current being turned on.

"Don't do that!" cried Tom, knowing at once that it could not be Ned, who never meddled with the machinery.

A blinding flash and a loud report followed, and Tom saw some one leap from his car, and try to run away. But the figure stumbled, and, a moment later the young inventor was upon him, grappling with him.

"Here! Let me go!" cried a voice, and Tom uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Andy Foger!" he cried. "I've caught you! You tried to damage my car!"

"Yes, and I'm hurt, too!" whined Andy. "My father will sue you for damages if I die."

"No danger of that; you're too mean," murmured Tom, as he maintained a tight grip on the bully.

"You let me go!" demanded Andy, squirming to get away.

"Wait until I see what damage you've done," retorted the young inventor. "The worst, though, would be the blowing out of a fuse, for I had the gear disconnected. You wait a minute now. Maybe it's you who'll have to pay damages."

"You let me go!" fairly screamed Andy, and he aimed a blow at Tom. It caught our hero on the chest and Tom's fighting blood was up in an instant. He drew back his left hand, and delivered a blow that landed fairly on Andy's right eye. The bully staggered and went down in the dust.

"There!" cried Tom, righteously angry. "That will teach you not to try to damage my car, and then hit me into the bargain! Now clear out, before I give you some more!"

Whining and blubbing Andy arose to his feet.

"You just wait. I'll get square with you for this," he threatened.

"You can accept part of that as pay for what you did in the tar and feathering game," added Tom. Then, as Andy moved in front of one of the electric side lamps on the car, Tom uttered a whistle of surprise. For both of Andy's eyes were bruised and swollen, though Tom had only hit him once.

"Look at me!" cried the bully, more squint-eyed than ever. "Look at me! You hit me in one eye, and that explosion hit me in the other! My father will sue you for this."

As he hurried off down the road Tom understood. Andy coming along, had seen Tom's car standing there, and, thinking to do some mischief, had climbed in, and turned on the power. Perhaps he hoped it would run into the roadside ditch and be smashed. But as the gear was out, turning on the electric current had a different effect. As the bully pulled the handle over too quickly, throwing almost the entire force of the battery into the wires at once, the load was too heavy for them. A safety fuse blew out, causing the flare and the explosion, and a piece of the soft lead-like metal had hit the red-haired lad in the eye. Tom's fist had completed the work on the other optic, and for several days thereafter Andy Foger remained in seclusion. When he did go out there were many embarrassing questions put to him, as to when he had had the fight. Andy didn't care to answer. As for Tom, it did not take long to put a new fuse in his car, and he greatly enjoyed his ride with Miss Nestor that night.

CHAPTER XVI
TROUBLE AT THE BANK

Coming in rather late from his trip to Mansburg, and thinking of some things he and Miss Nestor had talked about, Tom was rather surprised, on reaching the house, to see a light in his father's particular room, where the aged inventor did his reading and his planning of new devices.

"Dad's up rather late," said Tom to himself. "I wonder if he's studying over some new machine."

The lad ran his auto into the temporary garage he had built for it, and connected the wires of a burglar alarm he had arranged, to give warning in case any of his enemies should seek to damage the car.

Tom encountered Garret Jackson, the aged inventor who was going his rounds, seeing that everything was all right about the various shops.

"Anybody with my father, Garret?" asked the lad. "I see he's still up."

"Yes," was the rather unexpected reply. "Mr. Damon is with him. They've been in your father's room all the evening—ever since you went away in the car."

"Anything the matter?" inquired the young inventor, a bit anxious, as he thought of the Happy Harry gang.

"Well, I don't know," and the engineer seemed puzzled. "They called me in once to know if everything was all right outside, and to inquire if you were back. I saw, then, that they were busy figuring over something, but I didn't take much notice. Only I heard Mr. Damon say: 'There's going to be trouble if we can't realize on those bonds,' and then I came away."

"Is that all he said?" asked Tom.

"No, he said 'Bless my buttons,' or something like that; but he blesses so many things I didn't pay much attention."

"That's right," agreed the lad. "But I wonder what the trouble is about? I must go see."

As he passed along the hall, out of which his father's combined study and library opened, the aged inventor came to the door.

"Is that you, Tom?" he asked.

"Yes, Dad."

"Come in here, if you haven't anything else to do. Mr. Damon is here."

Tom needed but a single glance at the faces of his father and Mr. Damon to see that something was troubling the two. The table in front of them was littered with papers covered with rows of figures.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom.

"Well, I suppose I ought not to let it bother me, but it does," replied his father.

"Something wrong with your patents, Dad? Has the crowd of bad men been bothering you again?"

"No, it isn't that. It's trouble at the bank, Tom."

"Has it been robbed again?" asked the lad quickly. "If it has I can prove an alibi," and he smiled at the recollection of the time he and Mr. Damon had been accused of looting the vault, as told in "Tom Swift and His Airship."

"No, it hasn't been robbed in just that way," put in Mr. Damon. "But, bless my shoe laces, it's almost as bad! You see, Tom, since Mr. Foger started the new bank he's done his best to cripple the one in which your father and I are interested. I may say we are very vitally interested in it, for, since the withdrawal of Foger and his associates, your father and I have been elected directors."

"I didn't know that," remarked the lad.

"No, I didn't tell you, because you were so busy on your electric car," rejoined Mr. Swift. "But Mr. Damon and I, being both large depositors, were asked to assume office, and, as I was not very busy on patent affairs, I consented."

"But what is the trouble?" inquired Tom.

"I'm coming to it," resumed Mr. Damon. "Bless my check book, I'm coming to it! You see we have lost several good customers, by reason of Foger opening the new bank. That wouldn't have mattered so much, as between your father and myself, and one or two others, we have enough capital to carry on the business of the bank. But there is a more serious matter. We hold a number of very good securities, but they are of a class hard to realize cash for, on short notice. In other words they are not active bonds, though they are issued by reliable concerns. Then, too, the bank has lost considerable money by not doing as much business as it formerly did. In short we don't know just what to do, Tom, and your father and I were discussing it, when you came in."

"Do you need more money?" asked Tom. "I have some, that is my share from the submarine treasure, and some I have allowed to accumulate as royalties from my patents. It's about ten thousand dollars, and you're welcome to it."

"Thank you, Tom," spoke his father. "We may use your cash, but we'll need a great deal more than that."

"But why?" asked the lad. "I don't understand. If you have good bonds, can't you dispose of them, and get the money?"

"We could, Tom, yes, if we had time," replied Mr. Damon. "But to throw the bonds on the market at short notice would mean that we would not get a good price for them. We would lose considerable."

"But why do it in a hurry?"

"Because there is need of hurry," responded Mr. Swift.

"That's it," joined in Mr. Damon. "We have to have cash in a hurry, Tom, to meet pressing demands, and we don't just see our way clear to get it. I am trying to raise it on some private securities I own, but I can't get an answer within several days. Meanwhile the bank may fail, because of lack of funds. Of course no one would lose anything, ultimately, as we could go into the hands of a receiver, and, eventually pay dollar for dollar. Your father and I, and some of the other directors, might lose a little, but the depositors would not. But your father and I don't like the idea of failing. It's something I've never done, and I'm too old to start in now, bless my cash ledger if I'm not!"

"And for the sake of my reputation in this community I don't want to see the bank close its doors," added Mr. Swift. "It would give Foger too good a chance to crow over us."

"And you need cash in a hurry," went on Tom. "How much?"

"Fifty thousand dollars at least," replied Mr. Damon.

"And if you don't get it?"

The eccentric man shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," remarked Mr. Swift musingly, "I don't see that we need worry you about it, Tom. Perhaps—"

Mr. Swift was interrupted by a ring at the front door. The three looked at each other. It was late for a caller, and Mrs. Baggert had gone to bed.

"I'll answer it," volunteered Tom. He switched on the electric light in the hall, and opened the door. He was confronted by Mr. Pendergast, the president of the bank.

"Is your father in?" asked Mr. Pendergast, and he seemed to be much agitated.

"Yes, he is," replied the lad. "Come this way, please."

"I want to see him on important business," went on the president, as he followed the young inventor. "I'm afraid I have bad news for him and Mr. Damon. Bad news, Tom, bad news," and the aged banker's voice trembled. Tom, with a chill of apprehension seeming to clutch his heart, threw open the library door.

CHAPTER XVII A RUN ON THE BANK

"Why, Mr. Pendergast!" exclaimed Mr. Damon, rising quickly as Tom ushered in the aged president. "Whatever is the matter? You here at this hour? Bless my trial balance! Is anything wrong?"

"I'm afraid there is," answered the bank head. "I have just received word which made it necessary for me to see you both at once. I'm glad you're here, Mr. Damon."

He sank wearily into a chair which Tom placed for him, and Mr. Swift asked:

"Have you been able to raise any cash, Mr. Pendergast?"

"No, I am sorry to say I have not, but I did not come here to tell you that. I have bad news for you. As soon as we open our doors in the morning, there will be a run on the bank."

"A run on the bank?" repeated Mr. Swift.

"The moment we begin business in the morning," went on Mr. Pendergast.

"Bless my soul, then don't begin business!" cried Mr. Damon.

"We must," insisted Mr. Pendergast. "To keep the doors closed would be a confession at once that we have failed. No, it is better to open them, and stand the run as long as we can. When we have exhausted our cash—" he paused.

"Well?" asked Mr. Damon.

"Then we'll fail—that's all."

"But we mustn't let the bank fail!" cried Mr. Swift. "I am willing to put some of my personal fortune into the bank capital in order to save it. So is my son here."

"That's right," chimed in Tom heartily. "All I've got. I'm not going to let Andy Foger get ahead of us; nor his father either."

"I'll help to the limit of my ability," added Mr. Damon.

"I appreciate all that," continued the president. "But the unfortunate part of it is that we need cash. You gentlemen, like myself, probably, have your money tied up in stocks and bonds. It is hard to get cash quickly, and we must have cash as soon as we open in the morning, to pay the depositors who will come flocking to the doors. We must prepare for a run on the bank."

"How do you know there will be a run?" asked the young inventor.

"I received word this evening, just before I came here," replied Mr. Pendergast. "A poor widow, who has a small amount in the bank, called on me and said she had been advised to withdraw all her cash. She said she preferred to see me about it first, as she did not like to lose her interest. She said a number of her acquaintances, some of whom are quite heavy depositors, had also been warned that the bank was unsound, and that they ought to take out their savings and deposits at once."

"Did she say who had thus warned her?" inquired Mr. Swift.

"She did," was the reply, "and that shows me that there is a conspiracy on foot to ruin our bank. She stated that Mr. Foger had told her our institution was unsound."

"Mr. Foger!" cried Mr. Damon. "So this is one of his tricks to bolster up his new bank! He hopes the people who withdraw their money from our bank will deposit with him. I see his game. He's a scoundrel, and if it's possible I'm going to sue him for damages after this thing is over."

"Did he warn the others?" inquired the aged inventor.

"Not all of them," answered the president. "Some received letters from a man signing himself Addison Berg, warning them that our bank, was likely to fail any day."

"Addison Berg!" exclaimed Tom. "That must have been the important business he had with Mr. Foger, the day I showed him the watch charm! They were plotting the ruin of our bank then," and he told his father about his disastrous pursuit of the submarine agent.

"Very likely Foger is working with Berg," admitted Mr. Damon. "We will attend to them later. The question is, what can we do to save the bank?"

"Get cash, and plenty of it," advised Mr. Pendergast. "Suppose we go over the whole situation again?" and they fell to talking stocks: bonds, securities, mortgages and interest, until the youth, interested as he was in the situation, could follow it no longer.

"Better go to bed, Tom," advised his father. "You can't help us any, and we have many details to go over."

The lad reluctantly consented, and he was soon dreaming that he was in his electric auto, trying to pull up a thousand pound lump of gold from the bottom of the sea. He awoke to find the bedclothes in a lump on his chest, and, removing them, fell into a deep slumber.

When the young inventor awoke the next morning, Mrs. Baggert told him that his father and Mr. Damon had risen nearly an hour before, had partaken of a hearty breakfast, and departed.

"They told me to tell you they were at the bank," said the housekeeper.

"Did Mr. Pendergast stay all night?" inquired Tom.

"I heard some one go away about two o'clock this morning," replied the housekeeper. "I don't know who it was."

"They must have had a long session," thought Tom, as he began on his bacon, eggs and coffee. "I'll take a run down to the bank in my electric in a little while."

The car was still in rather crude shape, outwardly, but the mechanism was now almost perfect. Tom charged the batteries well before starting out.

The youth had no sooner come in sight of the old Shopton bank, to distinguish it from the Second National, which Mr. Foger had started, than he was aware that something unusual had occurred. There was quite a crowd about it, and more persons were constantly arriving to swell the throng.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom, of one of the few police officers of which Shopton boasted, though the lad did not need to be told.

"Run on the bank," was the brief answer. "It's failed."

Tom felt a pang of disappointment. Somehow, he had hoped that his father and his friends might have been able to stave off ruin. As he approached nearer Tom was made aware that the crowd was in an ugly mood.

"Why don't they open the doors and give us our money?" cried one excited woman. "It's ours! I worked hard for mine, an' now they want to keep it from us. I wish I'd put it in the new bank."

"Yes, that's the best place," added another. "That Mr. Foger has lots of money."

"I can see the hand of Andy's father, and that of Mr. Berg, at work here," thought Tom, "They have spread rumors of the bank's trouble, and hope to profit by it. I wish I could find a way to beat them at their own game."

As the minutes passed, and the bank was not opened, the ugly temper of the crowd increased. The few police could do nothing with the mob, and several, bolder than the rest, advocated battering down the doors. Some went up the steps and began to pound on the portals. Tom looked for a sight of his father or Mr. Damon, but could not see either.

It was not the regular hour for opening the bank, but when the police reminded the people of this they only laughed.

"I guess they ain't going to open anyhow!" shouted a man. "They've got our money, and they're going to keep it. What difference is an hour, anyway?"

"Yes, if they have the money, why don't they open, and not wait until ten o'clock?" cried another. "I've got a hundred and five dollars in there, and I want it!"

More excited persons were arriving every minute. The crowd surged this way, and that. Many looked anxiously at the clock in the tower of the town hall. The gilded hands pointed to a few minutes of ten. Would the bank open its doors when the hour boomed out? Many were anxiously asking this question.

Tom sat in his electric car, near the front of the bank. The interest of the crowd, which under ordinary circumstances would have been centered in the queer vehicle, was not drawn toward it. The people were all thinking of their money.

Suddenly one of the two doors of the bank slowly opened. There was a yell from the crowd, and a rush to get in. But the police managed to hold the leaders back, and then Tom saw that it was Ned Newton, who stood in the partly-opened portal. He held up his hand to indicate silence, and a hush fell over the mob.

"The bank is open for business," Ned announced, "but there must be no rush. The building is not large enough to accommodate you all. If you form a line, you will be admitted in turn. The bank hopes to pay you all."

"Hopes!" cried a woman scornfully. "We can't eat hopes, young man, nor yet pay the rent with it. Hopes indeed!"

But Ned had said all he cared to, and, with rather a white face, he went back inside. The one door remained open and, with a policeman on either side, a line of anxious depositors was slowly formed. Tom watched them crowding and surging forward, all eager to be first to get their cash out, lest there be not enough for all. As he watched, the young inventor was aware that some was signaling to him from the big window of the bank. He looked more closely and saw Ned Newton beckoning to him, and the young cashier was motioning Tom to go around to the rear, where a door of the bank opened on a small alley. Wondering what was wanted, Tom slowly ran his machine down the side street, and up the alley. No one paid any attention to him.

A porter admitted the lad, and he made his way to the private offices, where he knew his father and Mr. Damon would be. In the corridors he could hear the murmur of the throng and the chink of money, as the tellers paid it out.

"Well, Tom, this is bad business," remarked Mr. Swift, as he saw his son. The lad noticed that Mr. Damon was in the telephone booth.

"Yes, Dad," admitted Tom. "It's a run, all right. What are you going to do?"

"The best we can. Pay out all the cash we have, and hope that before that time, the people will come to their senses. The bank is all right if they would only wait. But I'm afraid they won't and, after we pay out all the cash we have, we'll have to close the doors. Then there's sure to be an unpleasant scene, and maybe some of the more hot-headed ones will advocate violence. We have given orders to the tellers to pay out as slowly as possible, so as to enable us to gain some time."

"And all you need is money; is that it, Dad?"

"That's it, Tom, but we have exhausted every possibility. Mr. Damon is trying a forlorn hope now, but, even if he is successful—"

Before Mr. Swift had ceased speaking, Mr. Damon fairly burst from the telephone booth. He was much excited.

"I've got it! I've got it!" he cried.

"What?" asked Mr. Swift and Tom in the same breath.

"The cash, or, what's just as good, the promise of it. I called up Mr. Chase, of the Clayton National Bank, and he has agreed to take the railroad securities I offered him as collateral, and let me have sixty thousand dollars on them! That will give us cash enough to weather the storm. Hurrah! We're all right now. Bless my check book!"

"The Clayton National Bank," remarked Mr. Swift, and his voice was hopeless. "It's forty miles away, Mr. Damon, and no railroad around here runs anywhere near it. No one could get there and back with the cash to-day, in time to save us from ruin. It's impossible! Our last chance is gone."

"How far did you say it was, Dad?" asked Tom quickly.

"Forty miles there, over forty, I guess, and not very good roads. We would need to have the cash here before three o'clock to be of any service to us. No, it's out of the question. The bank will have to fail!"

"No!" cried the young inventor, and his voice rang out through the room. "I'll get the cash for you!"

"How?" gasped Mr. Damon. "You can't get there and back in time?"

"Yes, I can!" cried Tom. "In my electric runabout! I can make it go a hundred miles an hour, if necessary! Probably I'll have to run slow over the bad roads; but I can do it! I know I can. I'll get the sixty thousand dollars for you!"

For a moment there was silence. Then Mr. Damon cried:

"Good! And I'll go with you and deliver the securities to Mr. Chase. Come on, Tom Swift! Bless my collar button, but maybe we can yet save the old bank after all!"

CHAPTER XVIII AFTER THE CASH

Tom's proposal as a way out of the difficulty, and the prompt seconding of it by Mr. Damon, seemed to deprive the other bank officials, Mr. Swift included, of the power of speech for a few moments. Then, as there came to the room where the scene had taken place, the sound of the mob outside, clamoring for cash, Mr. Pendergast, the president, remarked in a low voice:

"It seems to be the only way. Do you think you can do it, Tom Swift?"

"I'm sure of it, as far as my electric car is concerned," replied the young inventor. "If we get the cash I'll have it back here on time. The runabout is all ready for a fast trip."

"Then don't lose any time, Tom," advised his father. "Every minute counts."

"Yes," added Mr. Damon. "Come on. I've got the securities in my valise, and we can bring the cash back in the same satchel. Come on, Tom."

The eccentric character caught up his valise, and started from the room. Tom followed.

"Now, my son, be careful," advised his father. "You know the need of haste, but don't take unnecessary risks. You'd better go out the back way, as the crowd is easily excited."

Little more was said. Mr. Swift clasped his son's hand in a firm pressure, and the bank president nervously bade the lad good-by. Then, slipping out of the bank, by the rear entrance, the porter closing the door after them, Tom and Mr. Damon took their places in the electric machine.

"Just imagine you're racing for that three-thousand-dollar prize, offered by the Touring Club of America, Tom," observed Mr. Damon, as he deposited the valise at his feet.

"I don't have to do that," replied the youth. "I'm trying for a bigger prize than that. I want to save the bank, and defeat the schemes of the Fogers—father and son."

Tom turned on the power, and the machine rolled out on the main street. As it turned the corner, leaving the impatient crowd of depositors, now larger than ever, behind, Mr. Damon glanced over at the new bank, and, as he did so, he called to Tom:

"There are the Fogers now."

The young inventor looked, and saw Andy and his father on the steps of the new institution.

At the sight of the electric car, speeding along, Andy turned and spoke to his parent. What he said seemed to impress Mr. Foger, for he started, and looked more intently at Tom and Mr. Damon. Then, as Tom watched, he saw the two excitedly conversing, and a moment later Andy ran off in the direction in which Sam Snedecker and Pete Bailey lived.

"I wonder if he's up to any tricks?" thought Tom, as he turned on more power. "Well, if he is, I'll soon be where he can't reach me."

The young inventor did not dare send his car at full speed through the streets of the town, and it was not until several minutes had passed that they could go at more than the ordinary rate. But once the open country was reached Tom "opened her up full," and the song the motor sung was one of power. The vehicle quickly gathered headway and was soon fairly whizzing along.

"If we keep this up we'll be there and back in good time," remarked Mr. Damon.

"Yes, but we can't do it," replied his companion. "The road to Clayton is a poor one, and we'll soon be on it. Then we'll have to go slow. But I'll make all the time I can until then."

So, for several miles more they crept along, at times having to reduce to almost a walking pace, because of bad roads. Mr. Damon looked at his watch almost every other minute.

"Eleven o'clock," he remarked, as they passed a milestone, "and we're not half way there. Bless my gizzard, but I'm afraid we won't make it, Tom. We left about ten, and we ought to be back by two o'clock to do any good. That's four hours, and it will take some time to transfer the securities, and get the cash. Every minute counts."

"I know it," answered Tom, "and I'm going to count every minute."

With eager eyes he watched every inch of the road, to steer to the best advantage. His hands gripped the wheel until his knuckles showed white with the strain, and, every now and then his right hand adjusted the speed lever or the controller handle, while his foot was on the emergency brake, ready to stop the car at the first sign of danger.

And there was danger, not infrequently, for the road was up and down hill, over frail bridges, and along steep cliffs. It was no pleasure tour they were on.

When a little over half the distance had been made they came to a better road, and Tom was able to use full speed ahead. Then the electric went so fast that, had it not been for the steel wind-shield in front, Mr. Damon, at any rate, would have been short of breath.

"This is going some!" he cried to Tom. The lad nodded grimly, and shoved the controller handle over to the last notch. Then came a bad stretch and they had to slow down again. As they were about out of it there came a little flash of fire and the motor stopped.

"Bless my overshoes!" cried Mr. Damon. "What's that; a fuse blown out?"

"No," replied Tom, with a puzzled air. "But something has gone wrong." Hastily he got out, and made an examination. He found it was only one of the unimportant wires which had short-circuited, and it was soon adjusted. But they had lost five precious minutes. Tom tried to make up for lost time, but came to a hill a little later, and this reduced their speed.

"Do you think we can make it before twelve?" asked Mr. Damon anxiously. "We've got to, if we're to get back before three, Tom."

"I'll try," was the calm answer, and Tom's jaw was shut still more tightly. Once again came more favorable roads and pushing the car to the limit the occupants were rejoiced, a little later, as they topped a hill, to come in sight of a fairly large city.

"There's Clayton!" cried Mr. Damon.

Ten minutes later they were rolling through the main street, and as they stopped in front of the bank, the noon whistles blew shrill and noisily.

"You did it, Tom!" cried Mr. Damon, springing out with the valise of securities. "Now be ready for the return trip. I'll be with you as soon as possible."

He went up the bank steps three at a time, like some boy instead of an elderly man. Tom looked after him for a second and then got down to oil up his car, and make some adjustments that had rattled loose from the rough road. Unmindful of the curious throng that gathered he crawled under the machine with his oil-can.

He had finished his work, and was back in his seat, ready to start, but Mr. Damon had not reappeared.

"It's taking him a good while to get that cash," thought Tom. "Maybe the securities were no good."

But, a few minutes later, Mr. Damon came hurrying from the bank. The valise he carried seemed much heavier than when he went in.

"It's all right, Tom," he said. "I've got it. Now for the trip home, and I hope we don't have any accidents. It took longer than I thought to check over the bonds and receipt for them. But I've got the cash. Now to save the bank!"

He took his place beside the young inventor, holding the valise between his knees, while Tom turned on the power and sent his car dashing down the street, and toward the road that led to Shopton.

CHAPTER XIX
STOPPED ON THE ROAD

"Did Mr. Chase make any objection to giving you the cash?" asked Tom, as he shoved the controller over another notch, and caused the motor to make a higher note in its song of speed.

"Oh, no, he was very nice about it," replied Mr. Damon. "He said he hoped our bank would pull through. Said if we needed more cash we could have it."

It was nearly one o'clock, and they had the worst part of the journey yet to go. Thirty miles of stiff roads lay between them and Shopton, the last five and the first five being fairly good, with, here and there, soft spots.

Up hill and down went the electric auto. At every opportunity Tom let out all the speed he could draw from the motor, but there were many times when he had to slow down. He had just made the ascent of a steep hill, and was turning into a fairly good road, skirting the edge of a steep cliff, when there came a sharp report.

"Bless my soul! That's a fuse, I'm sure of it!" cried Mr. Damon.

"No," announced Tom, as he quickly shut off the power. "It's a puncture. One of the inner tubes of the tire has been pierced. I was afraid of that tube."

"What have you got to do; put on a new tire?" asked Mr. Damon.

"No, I'm going to put on a new wheel. I carry two spare ones with tires all ready inflated. It won't take long."

But the process of changing wheels consumed more time than Tom anticipated for the nut was stuck, and he and Mr. Damon had to exert all their strength before they could loosen it. When the new wheel was in place ten minutes had been lost.

"Hold on now, I'm going to speed her!" cried Tom, when they were once more in their seats, and speed the machine he did. The road was rough, but despite this the lad turned on almost full power. Over the bumps they went, around curves and into rain-washed ruts careening from side to side, and throwing Mr. Damon about, as he expressed it afterward, "like a bean inside of a football." As for the young inventor his grasp of the steering wheel, and the manner in which he could brace himself against the foot pedals, held him more firmly in place. On and on they rushed, covering mile after mile, and approaching Shopton where so much depended on their arrival.

Good and bad stretches of the road alternated, but now that Tom had seen of what mettle his car was made, he did not spare it as much as he had on the first trip. He saw that his machine would stand hard knocks, and the way the battery and motor was behaving was a joy to him. He knew that if he could make that eighty-mile run in safety he stood a good chance of winning the prize, for no harder test could have been devised.

But the race was still far from won. There was a particularly unsafe stretch of road yet to be covered, and then would come a smooth highway into Shopton.

"Ten miles more," observed Mr. Damon, snapping shut his big gold watch. "Ten miles more, and it's a quarter of two now. We ought to be there at a quarter after, and that will be in good time, eh, Tom?"

"I think so, but I don't know about this piece of road we're coming to. It seems worse than when we passed over it this morning."

As he spoke the auto began to slow up, for the wheels had struck some heavy sand, and it was necessary to reduce the current. Tom turned back the controller handle, but watched with eager eyes for a sign that the roadbed was harder, so that he could increase speed.

As the car turned around a curve, passing through a lonely stretch of country, with woods on either side of the highway, Tom glancing up, uttered a cry of astonishment.

"What's the matter; something gone wrong?" asked his companion.

For answer Tom pointed. There, just ahead of them, was a big load of hay, and it was evident that the driver, was in no particular hurry.

"We can't pass that without getting in over our hubs!" cried Tom. "If we turn out the side ditches are so soft that we'll need help to pull out, and the road is so narrow for several miles that we'll have to trail along behind that fellow."

"Bless my check book!" cried Mr. Damon. "Are we going to lose, after all, on account of a load of hay? No, I'll buy it from him first, at double the market price, tip it over, set fire to it, toss it in the ditch, and then we can go past!"

"Maybe that will answer," retorted Tom, smiling grimly.

He put on a little more speed, and was soon close up behind the load of hay, ringing his electric bell as a warning.

"I say!" called Mr. Damon to the unseen driver, "can't you turn out and let us pass?"

"Ha! Hum! Wa'al I guess not!" came the answer, in unmistakable farmer's accents. "You automobile fellers is too gol-hanged smart, racin' along th' roads. I've got just as good a right here as you fellers have, by heck!" The driver did not show himself.

"We know that," responded Tom, as quickly as he could, for he did not want to anger the man. "But our machine is so heavy that if we turn into the ditch I'm afraid we'll be mired."

"Huh! So'll I," was the retort from the unseen driver.. "Think I want t' spile my load of hay?"

"But you have wide tires on, and you wouldn't sink in far," answered the young inventor. "Besides, it's very necessary that we get past. A great deal depends on our speed."

"So it does on mine," was the reply. "Ef I git t' market late I'll have t' stay all night, an' spend money on a hotel bill."

"I'll pay it! I'll pay your bill if you'll only pull out!" cried Mr. Damon. "I'll give you a hundred dollars!"

He suddenly ceased speaking. From the bushes along the road sprang several ragged, masked figures. Each one, aiming his weapon at Tom, said in a low voice, that could not have been heard by the driver of the hay wagon:

"Slow up your machine, young feller! We want to speak with you, and don't you make a loud noise, or it won't be healthy for you!"

"Why of all the—!" began Mr. Damon, but another of the footpads leveling his weapon at the eccentric man growled:

"Dry up, if you don't want to get shot!"

Mr. Damon subsided. Discretion was very plainly the better part of valor. Tom had shut off the current. The load of hay continued on ahead. Tom thought perhaps the driver of it might have been in collusion with the thieves, to cause the auto to slow up.

"What do you want with us?" asked the young inventor, trying to speak calmly, but finding it a hard task, with a revolver pointed at him.

"You know what we want," exclaimed the leader, in a low voice. "We want that cash you got from the bank, and we're going to have it! Come, now, shell out!" and he advanced toward the automobile.

CHAPTER XX

ON TIME

Close around the electric auto crowded the members of the hold-up gang. Their eyes seemed to glare through the holes in their black masks. Instantly Tom thought of the other occasion when he was halted by masked figures. Could these, by any possibility, be the same individuals? Was this a trick of Andy Foger and his cronies?

Tom tried to pierce through the disguises. Clearly the persons were men—not boys—and they wore the ragged clothes of tramps. Also, there was an air of dogged determination about them.

"Well, are you going to shell out?" asked the leader, taking a step nearer, "or will we have to take it?"

"Bless my very existence! You don't mean to say that you're going to take the money—I mean how do you know we have any money?" and Mr. Damon hastily corrected himself. "What right have you to stop us in this way? Don't you know that every minute counts? We are in a hurry."

"I know it," spoke the leading masked figure with a laugh. "I know you have considerable money in that shebang, and I know what you hope to do with it, prevent the run on the Shopton National Bank. But we need that money as much as some other people and, what's more, we're going to have it! Come on, shell out!"

"Oh, why didn't we bring a gun!" lamented Mr. Damon in a low voice to Tom. "Isn't there anything we can do? Can't you give them an electric shock, Tom?"

"I'm afraid not. If it wasn't for that hay wagon we could turn on the current and make a run for it. But we'd only go into the ditch if we tried to pass now."

The load of hay was down the road, but as Tom looked he noticed a curious thing. It seemed to be nearer than it was when the attack of the masked men came. The wagon actually seemed to have backed up. Once more the thought came to the lad that possibly the load of fodder might be one of the factors on which the thieves counted. They might have used it to make the auto halt, and the man, or men, on it were probably in collusion with the footpads. There was no doubt about it, the load of hay was coming nearer, backing up instead of moving away. Tom couldn't understand it. He gave a swift glance at the robbers. They had not appeared to notice this, or, if they had, they gave no sign.

"Then we can't do anything," murmured Mr. Damon.

"I don't see that we can," replied the young inventor in a low voice.

"And the money we worked so hard to get won't do the bank any good," and Mr. Damon sighed.

"It's tough luck," agreed Tom.

"Come now, fork over that cash!" called the leader, advancing still closer. "None of that talk between you there. If you think you can work some trick on us you're mistaken. We're desperate men, and we're well armed. The first show of resistance you make, and we shoot—get that, fellows?" he added to his followers, and they nodded grimly.

"Well," remarked Mr. Damon with an air of submission, "I only want to warn you that you are acting illegally, and that you are perpetrating a desperate crime."

"Oh, we know that all right," answered one of the men, and Tom gave a start. He was sure he had heard that voice before. He tried to remember it—tried to penetrate the disguise—but he could not.

"I'll give you ten seconds more to hand over that bag of money," went on the leader. "If you don't, we'll take it and some of you may get hurt in the process."

There seemed nothing else to do. With a white face, but with anger showing in his eyes Mr. Damon reached down to get the valise. Tom had retained his grip of the steering wheel, and the starting lever. He hoped, at the last minute, he might see a chance to dash away, and escape, but that load of hay was in the path. He noted that it was now quite near, but the thieves paid no attention to it.

Tom might have reversed the power, and sent his machine backward, but he could not see to steer it if he went in that direction, and he would soon have gone into the ditch. There was nothing to do save to hand over the cash, it seemed.

Mr. Damon had the bag raised from the car, and the leader of the thieves was reaching up for it, when there came a sudden interruption.

From the load of hay there sounded a fusillade of pistol shots, cracking out with viciousness. This was instantly followed by the appearance of three men who came running from around the load of hay, down the road toward the thieves. Each man carried a pitchfork, and as they ran, one of the trio shouted:

"Right at 'em, boys! Jab your hay forks clean through the scoundrels! By Heck, I guess we'll show 'em we know how t' tackle a hold-up gang as well as the next fellow! Right at 'em now! Charge 'em! Stick your forks right through 'em!" Again there sounded a fusillade of pistol shots.

The thieves turned as one man, and glanced at the relief so unexpectedly approaching. They gave one look at the three determined looking farmers, with their sharp, glittering pitchforks, and then, without a word, they turned and fled, leaping into the bushes that lined the roadway. The underbrush closed after them and they were hidden from sight.

On came the three farmers, waving their effective weapons, the pistol shots still ringing out from the load of hay. Tom could not understand it, and could see no one firing—could detect no smoke.

"Are they gone? Did they rob ye?" asked the foremost of the trio, a burly, grizzled farmer. "Bust my buttons, but I guess we skeered 'em all right!"

"Bless my shoe buttons, but you certainly have!" cried Mr. Damon, descending from the automobile, and wringing the hand of the farmer, while Tom, thrust the bag of money under his legs and waited further developments. The pistol shots rang out until one of the men called:

"That'll do, Bub! We've skeered 'em like Mrs. Zenoby's pet cat! You needn't crack that whip any more."

"Whip!" cried Tom. "Was that a whip?"

"That's what it was," explained the leading farmer. "Bub Armstrong, my nephew, can crack it to beat th' band," and as if in proof of this there emerged from behind the

load of hay a small lad, carrying a large whip, to which he gave a few trial cracks, like pistol shots, as if to show his ability.

"It's all right, Bub," his uncle assured him. "We made 'em run."

"But I don't exactly understand," spoke Mr. Damon. "I thought you were in league with those thieves, stopping us as you did with your big load."

"So did I," admitted Tom.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed the farmer. "That's a pretty good joke. Excuse me for laughin'. My name's Lyon, Jethro Lyon, of Salina Township, an' these is my two sons, Ade and Burt. You see we're on our way to Shopton, an' my nephew, Bub, he went along. We thought you was some of them sassy automobile fellers at first when you hollered to us you wanted to pass. Then when we looked back, we seen them burglars goin' t' rob you, at least that's what we suspicioned," and he paused suggestively.

"That was it," Tom said.

"Wa'al, when we seen that, we held a sort of consultation on thet load of hay, where they couldn't see us. It was so big you know," he needlessly explained. "Wa'al, we calcalated we could help you, so I jest quietly backed up, until we was near enough. I told Bub to take the long whip, an' crack it for all he was wuth, so's it would sound like reinforcements approachin' with guns, an' he done it."

"He certainly done it," added Burt.

"Wa'al," resumed Mr. Lyon, "then me an my sons we jest slipped down off the front seat, an' come a runnin' with our pitchforks. I reckoned them burglars would run when they see us an' heard us, an' they done so."

"Yep, they done so," added Ade, like an echo.

"I can't tell you how much obliged we are to you," said Mr. Damon. "We have sixty thousand dollars in this valise, and they would have had it in another minute, and the bank would have failed."

"Sixty thousand dollars!" gasped Mr. Lyon, and his sons and nephew echoed the words. Mr. Damon briefly explained about the money, and he and the young inventor again thanked their rescuers, who had so unexpectedly, and in such a novel manner, put the thieves to flight.

"An' you've got t' git t' Shopton before three o'clock with thet cash?" asked Mr. Lyon.

"That's what we hoped to do," replied Tom "but I'm afraid we won't now. It's half past two, and—"

"Don't say another word," interrupted Mr. Lyon. "I know what ye mean. My hay's in the road. But don't let that worry ye none. I'll pull out of your road in a jiffy, an' if we do go down in th' ditch, why we can throw off part of th' load, lighten th' wagon, an' pull out again. You've got t' hustle if ye git t' Shopton by three o'clock."

"I can do it with a clear road," declared Tom, confidently.

"Then ye'll have th' clear road," Mr. Lyon assured him. "Come boys, let's git th' hay t' one side."

The farmers pulled into the ditch. As they had feared the wagon went in almost to the hubs, but they did not mind, and, even as Tom and Mr. Damon shot past them, they fell to work tossing off part of the fodder, to lighten the wagon. The young inventor and his companion waved a grateful farewell to them as they fairly tore past, for Tom had turned on almost the full current.

"Do you suppose that was the Happy Harry gang, or some members of it who were not captured and sent to jail?" asked Mr. Damon.

"I don't believe so," answered the lad, shaking his head. "Maybe they didn't really want to rob us. Perhaps they only wanted to delay us so we wouldn't get to the bank on time."

"Bless my top knot, you may be right!" cried Mr. Damon.

Further conversation became difficult, as they struck a rough part of the road, where the vehicle swayed and jolted to an alarming degree. But Tom never slackened pace. On and on they rushed, Mr. Damon frequently looking at his watch.

"We've got twenty minutes left," he remarked as they came out on the smooth stretch of road, that led directly into Shopton.

Then Tom turned all the reserve power into the motor. The machinery almost groaned as the current surged into the wires, but it took up the load, and the electric car, swaying more than ever, dashed ahead with its burden of wealth.

Now they were in the town, now speeding down the street leading to the bank. One or two policemen shouted after them, for they were violating the speed laws, but it was no time to stop for that. On and on they dashed.

They came in sight of the bank. A long line of persons was still in front. They seemed more excited than in the morning, for the hour of three was approaching, and they feared the bank would close its doors, never to open them again.

"The run is still on," observed Mr. Damon.

"But it will soon be over," predicted Tom.

Some news of the errand of the automobile must have penetrated the crowd, for as Tom swung past the front entrance to the bank, to go up the rear alley, he was greeted with a cheer.

"They've got the cash!" a man cried. "I'm satisfied now. I won't draw out my deposit."

"I want to see the cash before I'll believe it," said another.

Tom slowed up to make the turn into the alley. As he did so he glanced across the street to the new bank. In the window stood Andy Foger and his father. There was a look of surprise on their faces as they saw the arrival of the powerful car, and, Tom fancied, also a look of chagrin.

Up the alley went the car, police keeping the crowd from following. The porter was at the door. So, also, was Mr. Pendergast and Mr. Swift, while some of the other officers were grouped behind them.

"Did you get the money?" gasped the president.

"We did," answered Tom. "Are we on time, Dad?"

"Just on time, my boy! They're paying out the last of the cash now! You're on time, thank fortune!"

CHAPTER XXI
OFF TO THE BIG RACE

From their task of handing out money to eager depositors, the wearied tellers looked up as Tom and Mr. Damon entered with the big valise crammed full of money. It was opened, and the bundles of bills turned out on a table.

"Perhaps you'd better make an announcement to the crowd, Mr. Pendergast," suggested Mr. Swift. "Tell them we now have cash enough to meet all demands, and that the bank will be kept open until every one is paid."

"I will," agreed the aged president. His announcement was received with cheers, and had exactly the effect the inventor hoped it would.

Many, learning that the bank was safe, and that they could have their money whenever they wanted it, concluded not to withdraw it, thus saving the interest. Scores in the waiting crowd turned out of line and went home. Their example was contagious, and, though many still remained to get their deposits, the run was broken. Only part of the sixty thousand dollars Tom and Mr. Damon had brought through after a race with time, was needed. But had it not been for the moral effect of the cash arriving as it did, the bank would have failed.

"You have a great car, Tom Swift," complimented Mr. Pendergast, when the excitement had somewhat cooled down, and the story of the hold-up had been told.

"I think so myself," agreed the young inventor modestly. "I must get ready for the races now."

"And as for those farmers, I think I'll send them a reward," went on the president. "They deserve something for the trouble they had with the load of hay. I certainly shall send them a reward," which he did, and a substantial one, too.

Of course the hold-up was at once reported to the police after the run had quieted down, but Chief Simonson surprised Tom by saying that he had expected it.

"The gang that held you up," said the police officer, "was one that escaped from a jail, about twenty miles away. I got a tip after you left, that they were going to rob you, for, in some way, they learned about the money you and Mr. Damon were to bring from the bank. The unfortunate part of it was that the tip I got was to the effect that the hold-up would take place just outside of Clayton. I telephoned to the police there, just after you left, and they said they'd send out a posse. But the gang changed their plans; and held you up near here, where I wasn't expecting it. But I'll get 'em yet."

Chief Simonson did not arrest the gang, but some other police officers did, and they were taken back to jail. They were not prosecuted for the attempted robbery of Tom, as it was considered difficult to fix the guilt on them, but they received such a long additional sentence for breaking jail, that it will be many years before they are released.

When Tom reached home that night he found some mail from the officials of the Touring Club of America. It was to the effect that arrangements for the big contest had been completed, and that contesting cars must be on the ground by September first.

"That gives me two weeks yet," thought our hero.

He read further of the regulations covering the race. Each car must proceed from the home town or city of the owner, and go to the track under its own power. This was a new regulation, it was stated, and was adopted to better develop the industry of building electric autos. Two passengers, or one in addition to the driver, must be carried, it was stated, and this one would also be expected to be in the car during the entire race.

Regarding the race proper it was stated that at first it had been decided to make it a twenty-four hour endurance contest, but that for certain reasons this was changed, as it was found that few storage batteries could go this length of time without a number of rechargings. Therefore the race was to be one for distance—five hundred miles, on the new Long Island track, and the car first covering that distance would win. Cars were allowed to change their batteries as often as they needed to, but all time lost would count against them. There were other rules and regulations of minor importance.

"Well," remarked Tom, as he read through the circulars, "I must get my car in shape. It will be quite a trip to Long Island, and I think my best plan will be to go direct to the cottage we had when we were building the submarine, and from there proceed to the track. That will comply with the rules, I think. But who will I get to go with me? I suppose Mr. Damon or Mr. Sharp will be willing. I'll ask them."

He broached the matter to his two friends that night, and they both agreed to go to Long Island in the car, though only Mr. Sharp would accompany Tom in the race. The next two weeks were busy ones for Tom. He worked night and day over his car, getting it in shape for the big event.

The young inventor made some changes in his battery, and also adopted a new gear, which would give greater speed. He also completed the exterior of the auto, giving it several coats of purple paint and varnish, so that when it was finished, though it was different in shape from most autos, it was as fine an appearing car as one could wish. He arranged to carry two extra wheels, with tires inflated, and, under the rear seats, or

tonneau, as he called it, Tom fitted up a complete tire-repairing outfit. Mr. Sharp agreed to ride there, and in case there was need to use more than two spare wheels during the race, the rubber shoes or inner tubes could be mended while the car was swinging around the track.

Mr. Damon would ride in front with Tom on the cross-country trip, and occasionally relieve him at steering, or would help to manage the electrical connections. Spare fuses, extra parts, wires and different things he thought he might need, the young inventor stored in his car. He also found means to install a small additional storage battery, to give added power in case of emergency.

Tom learned from the racing officials that if he made a trip from Shopton to the cottage on the coast, near the city of Atlantis, and later traveled from there to the track, it would fulfill the conditions of the contest.

Finally all was in readiness, and one morning, having spent the better part of the night going over his machine, to see that he had forgotten nothing, Tom invited Mr. Damon and Mr. Sharp to enter, and prepare for the trip to Long Island.

"Well, Tom, I certainly hope you win that race," remarked Mrs. Baggert, as she stood in the doorway, waving a farewell.

"If I do I'll buy you a pair of diamond earrings to match the diamond ring I gave you from the money I got from the wreck," promised the lad with a laugh.

"An' ef yo' sees dat Andy Foger," added Eradicate Sampson, while he rubbed the long ears of Boomerang, his mule, "ef yo' sees him, jest run ober him once or twice fer mah sake, Mistah Swift."

"I'll do it for my own, too," agreed Tom.

The youth shook hands with his father, who wished him good luck, and then, after a final look at his car, he climbed to his seat, and turned on the power. There was a low hum from the motor and the electric started off. Would it return a winner or loser of the big race?

CHAPTER XXII

IN A DITCH

Through the streets of Shopton went Tom Swift and his friends. News of the big contest the young inventor was about to take part in, had circulated around town, and there were not wanting many to wish him good luck. The lad responded smilingly to the farewells he received. As they passed the bank, Ned Newton came out on the steps.

"Wish I was going along," he called.

"So do I," replied Tom. "How's everything? Is the bank all right since the run?" for he had not had time to pay much attention to the institution since his memorable race against time, to get the money.

"Stronger and better than ever," was Ned's answer, as he came to the curb, where Tom slowed up. "I hear," he added in a whisper, "that the other fellows are going out of business—Foger and his crowd you know. They loaned money on unsecured notes to make a good showing, and now they can't get it back. But we're all right. Hope you win the race."

"So do I."

"What will a certain person do while you're away?" went on Ned, with a wink.

"I don't know what you mean," replied Tom, trying not to blush. "Do you mean my dad or Mrs. Baggert?"

"Neither, you old hypocrite you! I meant Miss Mary Nestor."

"Oh, hadn't you heard?" inquired Tom innocently. "She is going to Long Island to visit some friends, and she'll be at the race."

"You lucky dog," murmured Ned with a laugh, as he went into the bank.

Once more the electric auto started off, and was soon on the quiet country road, where Tom speeded it up moderately. He hoped to be able to make the entire distance to the shore cottage on the single charge of current he had put into the battery at home, and, as there was no special need for haste, he wanted to save his power. The machine was running smoothly, and seemed able to make a long race against time.

The travelers ate lunch that day at Pendleton, a town some distance from Shopton. They had covered a substantial part of their trip. After a brief rest they started on again.

Tom had planned to spend two days and one night on the road, hoping to be able to reach the shore cottage on the evening of the second day. There, after recharging the battery, he would spend a night, or two, and proceed to the track, ready for the race.

They found the roads fairly good, with bad stretches here and there, which made it necessary for them to slow down. This delayed them, and they found the shadows lengthening, and darkness approaching, when they were still several miles from Burgfield, where they intended to sleep.

"Will it be all right to travel at night?" asked Mr. Damon, a bit nervously.

"Why, are you thinking of hold-up men?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"No, but I was wondering about the condition of the roads," replied the eccentric man. "We don't want to run into a rock, or collide with something."

"I guess this will light up the road far enough in advance, so that we can see where we are going," suggested Tom, as he switched on the powerful electric search-light. Though it was not dark enough to illuminate the highway to the best advantage, the powerful gleam shone dazzlingly in front of the swiftly moving auto.

"I guess that will show up every pebble in the road," commented the balloonist. "It's very powerful."

Tom turned off the light, as, until it was darker, he could see to better advantage unaided by it. He slowed down the speed somewhat, but was still going at a good rate.

"There's a bridge somewhere about here," remarked the lad, when they had gone on a mile further. "I remember seeing it on my road map. It's not very strong, and we'll have to run slow over it."

"Bless my gizzard, I hope we don't go through it!" cried Mr. Damon. "Is your car very heavy, Tom?"

"Not heavy enough to break the bridge. Ah, there it is. Guess I'll turn on the light so we can see what we're doing."

Just ahead of them loomed up the super-structure of a bridge, and Tom turned the searchlight switch. At the instant he did so, whether he did not keep a steady hand on the steering wheel, or whether the auto went into a rut from which it could not be turned, did not immediately develop, but the car suddenly shot from the straight road, and swerved to one side. There was a lurch, and the front wheels sank down.

"Look out! We're going into the river!" yelled Mr. Damon.

Tom jammed on the brakes and shut off the current. The auto came to a sudden stop. The young inventor turned the searchlight downward, to illuminate the ground directly in front of the car.

"Are we in the river?" asked Mr. Sharp.

"No," replied Tom in great chagrin. "We're in a muddy ditch. One at the side of the road. Wheels in over the hubs! There should have been a guard rail here. We're stuck for fair!"

CHAPTER XXIII THE POWER GONE

"Bless my overshoes!" cried Mr. Damon. "Stuck in the mud, eh?"

"Hard and fast," added Tom, in disgust.

"What's to be done?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"I should say we'll have to stay here until daylight, and wait for some other auto to come along and pull us out," was Mr. Damon's opinion. "It's might unpleasant, too, for there doesn't seem to be any place around here where we can spend the night in any kind of comfort. If we had the submarine or the airship, now, it wouldn't so much matter."

"No, and this won't matter a great deal," remarked the young inventor quickly. "We'll soon be out of this, but it will be hard work."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Sharp.

"I mean that we've got to pull ourselves out of this mud hole," explained the lad, as he prepared to descend. "I was afraid something like this would happen, so I came prepared for it. I've got ropes and pulleys with me, in the car. We'll fasten the rope to

the machine, attach one pulley to the bridge, another to the car, and I guess we can get out of the mud. We'll try, anyhow."

"Well, I must say you looked pretty far ahead," complimented Mr. Damon.

From a box under the tonneau Tom took out a thin but strong rope and two compound pulleys, which would enable considerable force to be applied. Mr. Sharp detached one of the powerful oil lamps, and the three travelers took a look at the auto. It was indeed deep in the mud and it seemed like a hopeless task to try to get it out unaided. But Tom insisted that they could do it, and the rope was soon attached, the hook of one pulley being slipped around one of the braces of the bridge.

"Now, all together!" cried the lad, as he and his friends grasped the long rope. They gave a great heave. At first it seemed like pulling on a stone wall. The rope strained and the pulleys creaked.

"I—guess—we—will—pull—the—bridge—over!" gasped Mr. Sharp.

"Something's got to give way!" puffed Tom. "Now, once more! All together!"

Suddenly they felt the rope moving. The pulleys creaked still more and, by the light of the lamp, they could see that the auto was slowly being pulled backward, out of the mud, and onto the hard road. In a few minutes it was ready to proceed again.

The rope and pulleys were put away, and, after Tom had made an examination of the car to see that it had sustained no damage, they were off again, making good time to the hotel in Burgfield, where they spent the night. They had an early breakfast, and, as Tom went out to the barn to look at his car, he saw it surrounded by a curious throng of men and boys. One of the boys was turning some of the handles and levers.

"Here! Quit that!" yelled Tom, and the meddlesome lad leaped down in fright. "Do you want to start the car and have it smash into something?" demanded the young inventor.

"Aw, nothin' happened," retorted the lad. "I pulled every handle on it, an' it didn't move."

"Good reason," murmured Tom, for he had taken the precaution to remove a connecting plug, without which the machine could not be started.

The three were soon under way again, and covered many miles over the fine country roads, the weather conditions being delightful. On inquiry they found that by

taking an infrequently used highway, they could save several miles. It was over an unoccupied part of country, rather wild and desolate, but they did not mind that.

They were whizzing along, talking of Tom's chances for winning the race when, after climbing a slight grade, the auto came to a sudden stop on the summit.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Sharp. "Why are you stopping here, Tom?"

"I didn't stop," was the surprising answer, and the lad shoved the starting lever back and forth.

But there was no response. There was no hum from the motor. The machine was "dead."

"That's queer," murmured the young inventor.

"Maybe a fuse blew out," suggested Mr. Damon, that seeming to be his favorite form of trouble.

"If it had you'd have known it," remarked Mr. Sharp.

"There's plenty of current in the battery, according to the registering gauge," murmured the lad. "I can't understand it." He reversed the current, thinking the wires might have become crossed, but the machine would move neither backward nor forward, yet the dial indicated that there was enough power stored away to send it a hundred miles or more.

"Perhaps the dial hand has become caught," suggested Mr. Sharp. "That sometimes happens on a steam gauge, and indicates a high pressure when there isn't any. Hit it slightly, and see if the hand swings back."

Tom did so. At once the hand fell to zero, indicating that there was not an ampere of current left. The battery was exhausted, but this fact had not been indicated on the gauge.

"I see now!" cried Tom. "It was those fellows at the hotel barn! They monkeyed with the mechanism, short circuited the battery, and jammed the gauge so I couldn't tell when my power was gone. If I had known there wasn't enough to carry us I could have recharged the battery at the hotel. But I figured that I had enough current for the entire trip, and so there would have been, if it hadn't leaked away. Now we're in a pretty pickle."

"Bless my hat band!" cried Mr. Damon. "Does that mean we can't move?"

"Guess that's about it," answered Mr. Sharp, and Tom nodded.

"Well, why can't we go on to some place where they sell electricity, and get enough to take us where we want to go?" asked the odd character, whose ideas of machinery were somewhat hazy.

"The only trouble is we can't carry the heavy car with us," replied Tom. "It's too big to pick up and take to a charging station."

"Then we've got to wait until some one comes along with a team of horses, and tows us in," commented Mr. Sharp. "And that will be some time, on this lonely road."

Tom shook his head despondently. He went all over the car again, but was forced to the first conclusion, that the reserve current had leaked away, in consequence of the meddling prank of the youth at the hotel. The situation was far from pleasant, and the delay would seriously interfere with their plans.

Suddenly, as Tom was pacing up and down the road, he heard from afar, a peculiar humming sound. He paused to listen.

"Trolley car," observed Mr. Sharp. "Maybe one of us could go somewhere on the trolley and get help. There it is," and he pointed to the electric vehicle, moving along about half a mile away, at the foot of a gentle slope.

At the sight of the car Tom uttered a cry. "I have it!" he exclaimed. "None of us need go for help! It's right at hand!" His companions looked curiously, as the young inventor pointed triumphantly to the fast disappearing electric.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE TRACK

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Damon. "Will the electric trolley pull us to a charging station?"

"No, we'll not need to go to a station," answered the youth. "If we can get my car to the trolley tracks I can charge my battery from there. And I think we can push the auto near enough. It's down hill, and I've got a long wire so we won't have to go too close."

"Good!" cried Mr. Sharp. "But attach the rope to the front of the car, Tom. Mr. Damon and I will pull it. You'll have to ride in it to steer it."

"We can take turns at riding," was Tom's answer, for he did not want his companions to do all the work.

"Nonsense! You ride," said Mr. Damon. "You're lighter than we are, and can steer better. It won't be any trouble at all to pull this car down hill."

It proved to be an easy task, and in a short time the "dead" auto was near enough to the electric line to permit Tom to run his charging wire over to it.

"Why bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Damon, looking up. "There's no overhead trolley wire. The car must run on storage batteries."

"Third rail, more likely," was the opinion of Mr. Sharp and so it proved.

"I can charge from either the third rail or the trolley wire," declared Tom, who was insulating his hands in rubber gloves, and getting his wires ready. In a short time he had the proper connections made, and the much-needed current was soon flowing into the depleted battery, or batteries, for there were several sets, though the whole source of motive power was usually referred to as a "storage battery."

"How long will it take?" asked Mr. Damon.

"About two hours," answered the lad. "We'll probably have to disconnect our wires several times, whenever a trolley car comes past. By my system I can recharge the battery very quickly."

"Do you suppose the owners of the road will make any objection?" asked the balloonist.

"I'm going to pay for the current I use," explained the young inventor. "I have a meter which tells how much I take."

The hum of an approaching car was heard, and Tom took the wires from the third rail. The car came to a stop opposite the automobile, the passengers, as well as the crew,

looking curiously at the queer racing machine. Tom explained to the conductor what was going on, and asked the fare-collector to notify those in charge of the power station that all current used would be paid for. The conductor said this would be satisfactory, he was sure, and the car proceeded, Tom resuming the charging of his battery.

Allowing plenty of reserve power to accumulate, and making sure that the gauge would not stick again, and deceive him, the owner of the speedy electric was soon ready to proceed again. They had been delayed a little over three hours, for they had to make several shifts, as the cars came past.

They reached their shore cottage late that night, and, after seeing that the runabout was safely locked in the big shed where the submarine had been built, they all went to bed, for they were very tired.

Tom sent word, the next day, to the managers of the race, that he would be on hand at the time stipulated, and announced that he had made part of the trip, as required, under the power of the auto itself.

The next day was spent in overhauling the machinery, tightening up some loose bearings, oiling different parts, and further charging the battery. Tires were looked to, and the ones on the spare wheels were gone over to prepare for any emergency that might arise when the race was started.

On the third day, Tom, Mr. Sharp and Mr. Damon, leaving the cottage completed the trip to Havenford, Long Island, where the new track had been constructed.

They reached the place shortly before noon, and, if they had been unaware of the location they could not have missed it, for there were many autos speeding along the road toward the scene of the race, which would take place the following day.

Several electric cars passed Tom and his friends, whizzing swiftly by, but the young inventor was not going to show off his speed until the time came. Besides, he did not want to run any risks of an accident. But some of the contestants seemed anxious for impromptu "brushes," and more than one called to our hero to "speed up and let's see what she can do." But Tom smiled, and shook his head.

There were many gasoline and some steam autos going out to the new track, which was considered a remarkable piece of engineering. It was in the shape of an octagon, and the turns were considered very safe. It was a five mile track, and to complete the race it would be necessary to make a hundred circuits.

Through scores of autos Tom and his friends threaded their way, the young inventor keeping a watchful eye on the various types of machine with which he would soon have to compete.

There were many kinds. Some were larger and some smaller than his. Many obviously carried very large batteries, but whether they had the speed or not was another question. Some, in spurts, seemed to Tom, to be fully as fast as his own, and he began to have some doubts whether he would win the race.

"But I'm not going to give up until the five hundredth mile is finished," he thought, grimly.

They were now in sight of the track, and noted many machines speeding around it.

"Go on in and try your car, Tom," urged Mr. Sharp.

"Yes, do," added Mr. Damon. "Let's see how it travels."

"I will, after I notify the proper officials that I have arrived," decided the lad.

The formalities were soon complied with. Tom received his entry card, after paying the fee, made affidavit that he had completed the entire trip from home under his own power, save for the little stretch when the car was pulled, which did not count against him, and was soon ready to go on the track. Only electric cars were allowed there.

As the young inventor guided his latest effort in the machine line onto the big track there were murmurs of surprise from the throngs.

"That's a queer machine," said one.

"Yes, but it looks speedy," was another's opinion.

"There's the car for my money," added a third, pointing to a big red electric which was certainly whizzing around the track. Tom noted the red car. Behind it was a green one, also moving at a fast rate of speed.

"Those will be my nearest rivals," thought the lad, as he guided his car onto the track. A moment later he was sending the auto ahead at moderate speed, while the other contestants looked at the new arrival, as if trying to discover whether in it they would have a dangerous competitor.

CHAPTER XXV
WINNING THE PRIZE

After making two circuits of the track at moderate speed, Tom turned on more power, deciding to see how the machine would behave on the turns, going at a fast speed. As it happened he forged ahead just as the big red car was coming up behind him. The driver of it took this for a challenge and threw his controller handle forward.

"Come on!" he cried to our hero, when even with him.

Tom did not want to decline the invitation, and the impromptu race was under way. Soon the green car came rushing up, and for two miles the three kept almost in line. It was evident that neither the green nor the red car drivers wanted to "open out," until they saw Tom do so.

He was willing to oblige them, and suddenly increased his speed. They did the same, and went ahead of him. Then Tom turned on a little more juice and got the lead, but the two men were right after him, and they see-sawed like this for two more miles. Then, with a cry the man in the red car, with a sudden burst of speed, left Tom and the green car behind. The green car was soon up to its rival, but Tom decided he would not spurt.

The lad and his friends spent the early part of the night in making a final inspection of the machinery, finding it in good order. Then, with his head filled with visions of the race on the morrow Tom went to bed. He had made inquiries, by telephone, of the friends of Miss Nestor, and learned that she had not arrived. Tom felt a distinct sense of disappointment.

The day of the race could not have been better. It was ideal weather, and conditions at the track were just right. Tom was up early, and went over every inch of his car with a nervous dread that he might find something the matter.

The final details of the race were completed, and the entrants given their numbers and places. Tom drew a good position, not the best, but he had no reason to complain. Half an hour before the start he again telephoned to see if Miss Nestor had arrived, but she had not, and it was with rather gloomy thoughts that the lad entered his car, in which Mr. Sharp had already taken his place. Mr. Damon went to the grandstand to watch the race.

"I wanted Mary to see me win," thought our hero, for he had grimly set his mind on coming in ahead.

There was a great crowd in the grandstand and scattered about the big track, which took in a large extent of territory. In spite of its size—five miles around—it seemed solidly packed for the entire length with autos, containing gay parties who had come to see the electric contest. There was a band playing gay airs, as Tom guided his machine through the entrance gate, and onto the track.

The judges made their final inspection. There were twenty cars entered, but it was obvious that some of them would not last long, as their battery capacity was not large enough. Their owners might have relied on recharging, but how they could do this under the usual slow system, and hope to win, Tom could not see. He hoped to run the entire distance on the single charge, but, if by some accident part of his current should leak away, his battery could be charged in a short time, by means of his new system, to run for a considerable distance, or he could install a new one already charged, for he had two sets on hand. Tom glanced over the cars of his competitors. They were to be sent away in batches, the affair being a handicap one, with time allowance for the smaller powered cars. Tom noted that his car and the red and the green ones were in the same bunch. Tom's car was purple.

"Are you all ready?" asked the starter of the first group of races.

"Ready," was the low-voiced response.

"Crack!" went the pistol, and there followed the hum of the motors as the current set the mechanism to work. Forward went the cars, amid the crash of the band and the cheers of the crowd. The big race was under way.

"Do you feel nervous, Tom?" asked Mr. Sharp.

"Not a bit," replied the lad.

Around and around the track flew the speedy electrics. It was evident that the holding of a meet solely for cars of this character had brought out many new ideas that would be to the benefit of the industry. Some cars were "freaks" and others, like Tom's, showed a distinct advance over previous styles of construction.

A five-hundred mile race around a track is rather a monotonous affair, except for what happens, and things very soon began to happen at this race.

As Tom had expected, several of the machines were forced to withdraw. Tire troubles beset some, and others found that they were hopelessly out of it because of low power, or lack of battery capacity.

Tom determined not to let the red or the green car gain any advantage over him, and so he watched those two vehicles narrowly. On the other hand, the red and the green electrics were evidently afraid of one another and of Tom.

They all three kept pretty much together for the first thirty miles. By this time the race had settled down into a steady grind. There was some excitement when the steering gear of one car broke, and it crashed into the fence, injuring the driver, but the race went on.

The young inventor was holding his own with his two chief rivals, and was feeling rather proud of his car, when there came from it a report like a pistol shot.

"Blow out!" yelled Tom desperately, steering to one of the several repair stations on the inner side of the track. "Be ready with the extra wheel, Mr. Sharp!"

"Right you are!" cried the balloonist. The car was scarcely stopped when he had leaped out, and had the lifting jack under the left rear wheel, where the tire had gone to the bad. He and Tom labored like Trojans to take off the wheel, and put on the other. They lost five minutes, and when they got under way again the red and the green cars were three quarters of a lap ahead.

"You've got to catch them!" declared Sharp firmly.

But the red and the green car drivers saw their advantage, and were determined to hold it. Tom could not catch them without going his limit, and he did not want to do this just yet. However, he had his opportunity when about two hundred miles had been covered. Both the red and the green cars had tire troubles, but the red one was delayed scarcely two minutes as there was a corps of mechanics on hand to take off the defective wheel and put on another. Still Tom regained his lost ground, and once more the race between those three cars was even.

In the rear of Tom's car Mr. Sharp was mending the blown-out tire, though there was still one spare wheel on reserve. Tom, in front, peered eagerly at the track. Nearly side by side raced the red and the green cars, the latter somewhat to the rear.

It was at the three hundred and fiftieth mile that Tom had another blow-out. This time it took a little longer to change the wheel, and the red and green cars gained a full

lap on him. The track was now so dusty that it was difficult to see the contesting cars. Many had dropped out, and more were on the verge of giving up.

With the odds against him, Tom started in to regain the lost ground. Narrowly he watched his electric power. Slowly he saw it dropping. Would he have enough left to finish out the race? He feared not. The hours were passing. Still there was a hundred miles yet to go twenty circuits of the track. Some of the spectators were getting weary and leaving. The band played spasmodically.

Suddenly Tom saw the red car shoot to one side of the track, toward a charging station; The green car followed.

"That's our cue!" cried the young inventor "We need a little more 'juice' and now is the time to get it."

The lad ran to the shed where his charging wires were, and they were connected in a trice. He allowed twenty-five minutes for the charging, as he knew with his improved battery he could get enough current in that time to finish the contest. Before the red and green car drivers had finished installing new batteries, for they could not recharge as quickly as could our hero, Tom was on the track again. But, in a little while, his two rivals were after him.

It was now a spectacular race. Around and around swept the three big cars. All the others were practically out of it. The crowd became lively airs. Mile after mile was reeled off. The day was passing. Tired and covered with dust from the track, Tom still sat at the steering wheel.

"Two laps more!" cried Mr. Sharp, as the starter's pistol gave this warning. "Can you get away from 'em, Tom?"

The red and the green cars were following closely. The young inventor looked back and nodded. He turned on more power, almost to the limit—that he was saving for the final spurt. But after him still came the two big cars. Suddenly the red car shot ahead, just as the last lap was beginning. The green tried to follow, but there was a flash of fire, a loud report, and Tom knew a fuse had blown out. There was no time for his rival to put in a new one. The race was now between Tom and the red car. Could the lad catch and pass it?

They were now only a mile from the finish. The red car was three lengths ahead. With a quick motion Tom turned on the last bit of power. There seemed to come a roar from his motor and his car shot ahead. It was on even terms with the red car when what Tom had been fearing for the last five minutes happened: his fuse blew out.

"Too bad! It's all up with us!" cried Mr. Sharp.

"No!" cried Tom in a ringing voice. "I've got an emergency fuse ready!" He snapped a switch in place, putting into commission another fuse. The motor that had lost speed began to pick it up again. Tom had pulled back the controller handle, but he now shoved it forward again, notch by notch, until it was at the limit. He had fallen back from the red car, and the occupants of that, with a yell of triumph, prepared to cross the line a winner.

But, like a race horse that nerves himself for the last desperate spurt, Tom's machine fairly leaped ahead. With his hands gripping the rim of the steering wheel, until it seemed that the bones of his fingers would protrude, Tom sent his car straight for the finishing tape. There was a yell from the spectators. Men were standing up, waving their hats and shouting. Women were fairly screaming. Mr. Damon was blessing everything within sight. Mr. Sharp, in his excitement, was pushing on the back of the front seats as if to shove the car ahead.

Then, as the pistol announced the close of the race, Tom's car, with what seemed a mighty leap, like a hunter clearing a ditch, forged ahead, and crossed the line a length in advance of the red car. Tom Swift had Won.

Amid the cheers of the crowd the lad slowed up, and, at the direction of the judges, wheeled back to the stand, to receive the prize. A certified check for three thousand dollars was handed him, and he received the congratulations of the racing officials. The driver of the red car also generously praised him.

"You won fair and square," he said, shaking hands with Tom.

The young inventor and his friends drove their car to their shed. As Tom was descending, weary and begrimed with dust he heard a voice asking:

"Mayn't I congratulate you also?"

He wheeled around, to confront Mary Nestor, immaculate in a summer gown.

"Why—why," he stammered. "I—I thought you didn't come."

"Oh, yes I did," she answered, laughing. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I arrived late, but I saw the whole race. Wasn't it glorious. I'm so glad you won!" Tom was too, now, but he shrank back when Miss Nestor held out both daintily gloved hands to him. His hands were covered with oil and dirt.

"As if I cared for my gloves!" she cried, and she took possession of his hands, a proceeding to which Tom was nothing loath. "Are you going to race any more?" she asked, as he walked along by her side, away from the gathering crowd.

"I don't know," he replied. "My car is speedier than I thought it was. Perhaps I may enter it in other contests."

But what Tom Swift did later on will be told in another volume, to be called, "Tom Swift and His Wireless Message; or, The Castaways of Earthquake Island"—a strange tale of ship-wreck and mystery.

The run back home was made without incident, save for a broken chain, easily repaired, the day following the race, and Tom later received a number of invitations to give exhibitions of speed. Several automobile manufacturers wanted to secure the rights to his machine, but he said he desired to consider the matter before acting. He did not forget his promise to Mrs. Baggert, regarding the diamond earrings, and bought her the finest pair he could find.

"Come on, Mr. Sharp," proposed Tom, a week or so after the big race, "let's go for a spin in the airship. I want to see how it feels to be among the clouds once more," and they were soon soaring aloft.

The new bank, started by Mr. Foger, did not flourish long. It closed its doors in less than six months, but the old institution was stronger than ever. Mr. Berg disappeared, and Tom never learned whether the agent really was the man he had chased, and whose watch charm he tore loose, though he always had his suspicions. Nor did it ever develop who crossed the electric wires, so that Tom was so nearly fatally shocked. Andy Foger disliked our hero more than ever, and on several occasions caused him not a little trouble, but Tom was able to look after himself.

THE END

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