

Eagle Cliff



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Eagle Cliff

by Maristan Chapman

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Also by Maristan Chapman

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1. Sadler Needs Help

SADLER JONES was in disgrace. He had been shut in his room and made to promise he would not go out. Aunt Sarah had not locked him in, because she trusted his promise, so all he could do was to lean half out of the window and look at the empty town.

On this hot July afternoon the little mountain town of Glen Hazard was bare of people, for every one had gone to Miser Jones's funeral. Everybody except Sadler.

"He's my own great, great uncle," he said half aloud, "yet I'm not let go, because Aunt Sarah thinks I stole his gold watch. Oh, me! I wish Dale and Ves hadn't gone and left me."

Sadler thought it hard that his best friends should turn their backs on him. They must have heard about his disgrace, and he had expected them to come and stand by him.

He stared across the railroad tracks that ran between his house and Gillow's General Store. He looked southward to Mrs. Travett's Hotel, and northward as far as the lumber mill. He counted the houses that stood every which way in town's center, and tried to guess how tall the water-tower might be. It would be fun to climb up the ladder and get on top of the black iron tank. It would be cool up there. Sadler turned back restlessly into his hot bedroom and ran his fingers along his bookshelves. For the first time in his life he did not want to read. He was too unhappy. He had been punished often before, but this was the first time he had been shut in his room for something he had not done. He felt sore and aching all over.

Sadler roamed over to the long mirror in the door of the wardrobe and looked at himself curiously to see whether he was really as miserable as he felt. He was sure that his hurt feelings ought to show. But all he saw was a fat, twelve-year-old boy in a crumpled shirt and khaki shorts; a boy with sleek black hair, dark brown eyes and a snub nose. He was rather pleased with his glum expression, for it looked just as sulky and wretched as he was.

The three o'clock freight train rumbled past and shook the house, which stood on the lower slope of Red Hill northward of the depot. Sadler ran to watch it and counted the cars. He waved to a brakeman who was walking easily along the top of the train and wished he was a brakeman on the railroad.



When the caboose had trailed out of sight, Sadler looked across town again and suddenly cheered up, for he saw Dale Gillow and Vester Lane coming his way. In the distance they looked like two pairs of overalls walking, for they were bare-headed and bare-footed in this hot weather. The loose-jointed, cheerful hound, Rock Bottom, was galloping beside the boys. Soon all three were under Sadler's window, calling him to come out.

"Can't," Sadler said, from his perch on the window ledge.

"Are you locked in?" asked Vester.

"No. Only I gave Aunt Sarah my harsh promise not to go out, and that's the same as a turned key."

"Then we'll come in," said Vester. "She never gave us any orders. Or did you promise not to have company?" And without waiting for an answer Vester ran round to the front door and into Sadler's room, followed more slowly by Dale and Rock Bottom.

"Thought you'd gone with the crowd," said Sadler.

"When did any of us go places without all of us?" Dale asked gruffly. "Martin told us you were shut in. Told some mix-up about you stealing a watch. He heard Aunt Sarah telling Mom."

Martin Morgan was the other member of their gang. He was a clerk in the General Store.

"We weren't let come sooner," said Vester. "We're knowen you never did it."

"You couldn't have helped any," Sadler answered.

There did not seem to be any more to say, or else nobody could think how to begin. Dale Gillow spread himself full length on the bed, Sadler sat on the windowsill, and Vester strolled about and fidgeted.

Vester Lane's nervous wiryness was getting some muscle back of it, and his cheerful brown eyes were on the look-out for excitement. His hair was a sun-bleached scrub, his freckles had deepened in the summer sun, and his feet and hands were too big for the rest of him.

Rock Bottom flumped hotly on the floor, with one of his long, floppy ears folded inside out. Rock was a commonplace, chewing-gum-colored dog that no one would notice especially unless they looked at his eyes, which were sensible as a person's. He was an obliging and reasonable dog, and just now was settled down as if he would as soon be in Sadler's hot bedroom as racing over the hills. He was called Rock Bottom because the boys had got him cheap out of a fight with a marble trade and their last pocket money.

Dale Gillow was the first to speak. He sat up, with his long legs folded tailor-wise, ran a hand through his untidy yellow hair and fixed serious blue eyes on Sadler. "Do you aim to tell us the rights of it?" he asked. "You don't have to."

"Because we're knowen you never did it," Vester chipped in.

"Wish Aunt Sarah would believe me," Sadler answered miserably. "Seems to me she couldn't believe I'd *steal*."

"There's something she got wrong, owing to being deaf," Dale said. "Must be that, because she still trusts your word. Efn she didn't she'd have bolted you in."

Sadler brightened up. Then he shook his head dolefully. "There's no explaining," he said. "I've yelled out all I'm knowen about that old watch, and she just says, 'You'll stay in this room till I get the rights of the matter.'"

"Hit's serious," agreed Dale. "A person can't reason at her by shouting, and it's nowise her fault that she's lost the use of her ears."

"Let's do something," said Vester. "You can't stay here the rest of your life. D'you suppose, efn we all shouted at once, she'd understand?" Vester's patience was no larger than need be. "Let's *do* something," he repeated. "Come out o' that window, Sad, and let in some air. Dale, do some thinking."

"You stop twitching and maybe I can," said Dale calmly. "Sad, you tell how it all came to pass. Tell it slowly, from the start. There's bound to be some answer." He stretched out again, with his hands clasped behind his head, and his eyes fixed on the ceiling. "Go on."

Sadler hunched himself into a chair, clutched his head with his hands, and began to go over the story. Rock Bottom got up and came to lie down against Sadler's feet, as if he knew all about it and was ready to help.

“The start of it,” said Sadler, “was me and Aunt Sarah being the last ones up there. We carried some soup and stuff to Uncle Jones and visited a long while. He was just like usual, except his voice was weaker. Used to be he could holler loud and Aunt Sarah heard every word. That day he was feeble, and he talked to me mostly and I passed the words along to her.”

“Was his gold watch there then?” Vester asked.

“Coming to that. Aunt Sarah started to set the house neat, and was brooming around, in and out the back room. I stayed by the bed, and it was then he said he craved me to have his watch. Said I’d as well take it right then. It was on the table. I fooled with it and lifted it into my pocket and pulled it out, just feeling what it was like. Aunt Sarah noticed and said to leave it be. Uncle Jones said, ‘I’ve given it to him. I’ll not be needing it much more and me over ninety-eight years old.’ She failed o’ hearing, and I was sort of ashamed to be taking it from him, so I never passed on what he said. I just put the watch back on the table.”

“Then what?” said Vester. “Did ever anybody see it after that? What happened next?”

“Nothing,” Sadler halted, “We started home. Soon’s we got back in town Aunt Sarah told me to run up to Doc Peters and ask him to go up and see after Uncle Jones. Early yesterday morning Doc Peters came over to tell that Uncle Jones had died that same night. Aunt Sarah went up to the place. She got back all in a dither about the watch. Seemed the old man had gone to sleep and just failed of waking up, owing to being so close to a hundred years old. Aunt Sarah said that no person had been up there since we left, yet that gold watch was gone, and said what had I done with it. I’m not knowen where it got to. All I’m knowen is I’ve not got it now.”

“What do you mean by ‘now’?” Dale asked sharply. “Did you have it *ever, any time*?”

“You leave me alone,” Sadler sulked.

Dale was puzzled about why Sadler should get out of temper and he was unhappy at the crooked answer—about not having the watch ‘now.’ Yet he could not believe that Sadler had taken the watch and hidden it some place else, for Sadler was forthright as noonday. If it had been Vester Lane who was accused, Dale would not put it past him to play a trick, for the fun of exciting everybody and then producing the watch. But that was not Sadler’s habit.