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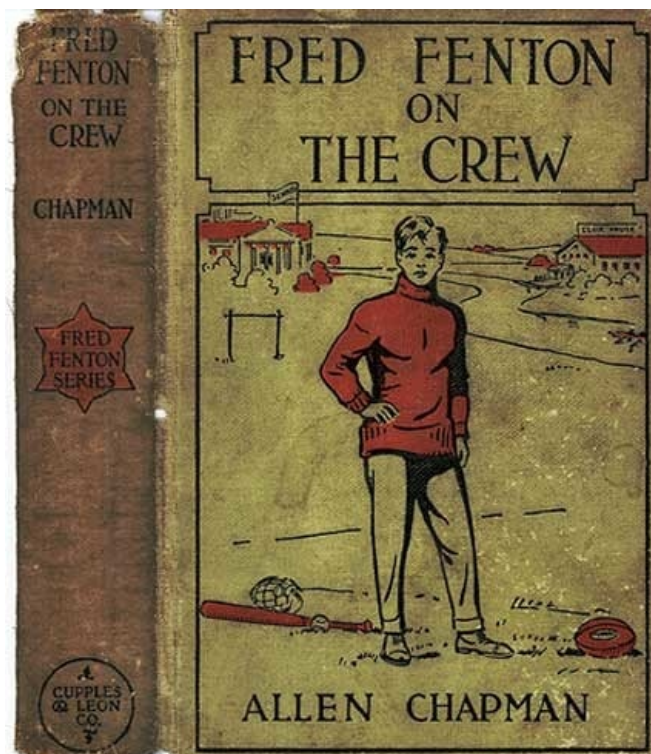
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRED FENTON ON THE CREW; OR,
THE YOUNG OARSMEN OF RIVERPORT SCHOOL ***





"WE WIN! WE WIN! RIVERPORT TAKES THE RACE!"
Fred Fenton on the Crew Page 196

FRED FENTON ON THE CREW

Or

The Young Oarsmen of Riverport School

By

ALLEN CHAPMAN

OF "FRED FENTON THE PITCHER," "FRED FENTON IN LINE," "TOM FAIRFIELD
SERIES," "THE CHUMS SERIES," "BOYS OF PLUCK SERIES," ETC.

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FRED FENTON ON THE CREW

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. The Finger of Suspicion	1
II. The Tricky Canoe	9
III. A Boat Club Meeting	17
IV. In Camp on the Mohunk	26
V. Hoofs and Horns	33
VI. A Sudden Awakening	41
VII. Ice Cold Waters	49
VIII. A Surprise	56
IX. A Lucky Win	63
X. Fred's Home Coming	71
XI. News From Over Sea	79
XII. Bristles Has an Idea	87
XIII. A Call for Help	96
XIV. The Missing Opals Again	104
XV. Fred's Brave Stand	113
XVI. The Trial Spin	121
XVII. Snagged and Wrecked	130
XVIII. Lying in Wait	138
XIX. Nipped in the Bud	147
XX. In the Hollow Oak	156
XXI. A Plan to Catch the Thief	165
XXII. Telling the Good News	173
XXIII. The Start of the Race	181
XXIV. A Great Victory	189
XXV. Bright Skies	198

FRED FENTON ON THE CREW

CHAPTER I

THE FINGER OF SUSPICION

"Hello! there, Bristles!"

"Hello! yourself, Fred Fenton!"

"Why, what ails you this fine summer morning, Bristles? You don't look as jolly as you might."

"Well, I was only waiting to see if you cared to speak to me, Fred."

"Why in the wide world shouldn't I, when you're one of my chums, Bristles Carpenter?"

Andy Carpenter was known far and wide around the town of Riverport as "Bristles," on account of the way in which his mop of hair stood upright most of the time, much after the manner of the quills on a fretful porcupine.

Usually he was a very good-natured sort of a chap, one of the "give-and-take" kind, so universally liked among schoolboys. But, on this particular early summer morning, with the peaceful Mohunk river running close by, and all Nature smiling, Bristles look glum and distressed, just as his friend Fred Fenton had declared.

"You haven't heard the latest news then?" remarked the boy with the thick head of stiff, wiry hair; and he made a grimace as he spoke.

"If you mean anything about *you*, then I haven't, for a fact," Fred replied, his wonder deepening into astonishment; for he now saw that Bristles was not playing any kind of a joke, as he had at first suspected.

"Huh! didn't know you had an awful *thief* for a chum, did you, Fred?" the other went on, laying emphasis on that one suggestive word, and frowning.

"Rats! what sort of stuff are you giving me now, anyway, Bristles?"

"Well, some people think that way, Fred; you ask Miss Alicia Muster, f'rinstance," grumbled the other, shaking his head dolefully.

"But she's your rich old aunt, Bristles!" cried Fred, more surprised than ever.

"That doesn't make any difference," complained the boy who was in trouble; "she believes I took 'em, all the same; 'cause, you see, I just *happened* to drop in to see her twice inside the last week, worse luck for me; and, Fred, each time one of 'em disappeared the funniest way ever."

"Go on and tell me what you mean; I can only guess that your aunt has met with some sort of loss. But why should she try to lay it on you, Bristles?"

"Huh! you don't know how good that makes me feel, Fred, just to think that one feller isn't goin' to believe me a thief," the other boy went on, drawing a long breath. "Why, even over at our house I seem to notice 'em all lookin' kinder suspicious-like at me; just as if they couldn't quite make up their minds whether I might 'a been tempted to take 'em or not."

"Take what?" demanded Fred, determined to learn the cause of his chum's trouble.

"Why," Bristles went on, "don't you remember that time I took you over to see my queer old maiden aunt, who's got the rheumatics so bad, and lives in the big house all alone with a colored woman, and all her silly pets,—cats, squawkin' crows she cares for like they might be humans; and with that big bulldog chained under her window?"

"Sure, I remember all that; keep going, now you've got started?" Fred broke in.

"And don't you remember her showin' us that collection of pretty stones she said were opals from a Mexican mine she had an interest in long ago?" the other asked, almost

breathlessly.

"That's right, Bristles; and you said they just about caught your eye the worst kind," Fred observed. "Fact is, the old lady seemed to be tickled because you showed such a fancy for those milky stones that looked like 'moonlight,' as she called it."

"Gee! you remember too much, Fred," complained the other, with a grimace. "Because you see, it was that silly remark of mine that's gone and got me into a peck of trouble. I really didn't care so much for the things as I let on; but you know, my aunt is as rich as all get out; and it's kind of the fashion over to our house to make her feel good when we can. That was why, I reckon, I made out to admire her collection of opals like I did, though they were pretty enough. Wish now I'd kept my tongue between my teeth; or that it'd been you who took that notion to make out you was interested in 'em."

"And you mean she's lost some of the opals; is that it?" asked Fred.

"Two of 'em gone, she told me yesterday afternoon, when mother sent me over to take her a cake she'd made," Bristles continued.

"And did she really have the nerve to accuse you of stealing them, Bristles?"

"Well, hardly that," replied the other boy, gritting his teeth; "if she had, I reckon I'd a flamed right out, and told her what I thought of old maids that had vinegar natures—I've heard my mom say that, though she told me never to repeat it to Aunt Alicia for anything. You see she acted like she suspected me."

"Oh! and you felt bad on that account, eh?" questioned Fred.

"She told me she'd just been saying to Sallie Kemper, when she was in, that it was the *queerest thing ever* that twice her lovely little opals disappeared when I visited her on my own account. And Fred, you know as well as I do what Sallie is."

"Sure I do," returned the other, promptly; "I hadn't been in Riverport a great many moons when I learned that she was considered the biggest gossip in the place."

"That's right," Bristles went on. "Sallie went around right away, and told how the rich Miss Muster suspected her own nephew of actually taking some of her beautiful and valuable jewels. It kept gettin' bigger as it was told from one to another, and I just guess my sister Kate brought it home. Mom asked me if I'd done anything wrong, and I said point blank that I'd sooner cut my hand off than steal Aunt Alicia's opals, or touch anything she owned."

"Well, didn't that end it?" asked Fred, who had troubles of his own, and could feel for his chum.

"Oh! nothin' more was said; but I saw mom and pop talkin' together after supper; and when I went out I just know they rooted all around in my room, 'cause things was upset. But Fred, it's just *awful* to feel everybody lookin' at you with a question in their eyes. I'll never be happy again till I find out what did become of those silly jewels of my aunt's."

"Oh! I wouldn't worry so much as that," counselled Fred. "Perhaps by now she's found where she put the things. Cheer up, Bristles, and think of the great times ahead of us boys of the Riverport school, with that jolly shell coming to us, and the river in fine shape for rowing this summer."

As they walked along the bank of the Mohunk, with Fred trying to cheer his companion up, a few words concerning the young fellows might be in place.

Fred Fenton had come to Riverport within the year. He lived with his father and mother, together with three smaller sisters, in a cottage not far removed from the bank of the river.

Mr. Fenton was employed by a concern in the town. He had at first been connected with a large manufacturing firm in Mechanicsburg, which was located some three miles up the river; but lost his position through the influence of Squire Lemington, who had a reason for wishing him to feel the biting pangs of poverty.

An uncle of Fred's had left some valuable property up in Alaska, which would make the Fentons comfortable if they could only get hold of it. Unfortunately a big syndicate, with which Sparks Lemington was connected, pretended to have a claim on this mining property, and was doing everything possible to keep Mr. Fenton out of it.

An important witness, whose evidence would have undoubtedly proved the Fentons to be the genuine owners, had been mysteriously carried off. His name was Hiram Masterson, and he was really a nephew of Sparks Lemington. Mr. Fenton had gone to the city late in the preceding Fall, under the belief that the missing witness was found; but arrived too late,

since Hiram had been "shanghaied" aboard a sailing vessel belonging to the big syndicate, and carried away to unknown seas, perhaps never to return.

So hope had gradually dwindled down to a very faint spark in the breasts of the Fentons, though they still refused to utterly give up dreaming that some day all would be made right.

Fred had soon made many friends among the boys of Riverport, and some enemies as well. How he became the leading pitcher of the school team, and played his part in the great games against Paulding and Mechanicsburg, has been described in the first volume of this series, entitled "Fred Fenton, the Pitcher; Or, The Rivals of Riverport School."

The chief enemy of Fred was Buck Lemington, son of the Squire, who had planned to ruin the Fentons' hopes for fortune. And just how the bully of the town, taking pattern from his father's usual methods of procedure, tried to get Fred disgraced, so that he could not play on the football team that Fall, you will find described in the second volume called: "Fred Fenton in the Line; Or, The Football Boys of Riverport School."

During the Winter and early Spring Fred had continued to hold the good opinions of most of his schoolmates; and with the summer now at hand he was ready to join with a boy's enthusiasm in the new sports that the season brought in its train.

Talking earnestly, the two lads were still walking along the edge of the river some little distance above the town, when, just as they turned a bend in the stream, they heard a sharp scream, accompanied by much splashing in the water.

"Listen to that racket, would you, Fred?" cried Bristles, turning toward his comrade, his face filled with alarm; "as sure as you live, somebody's fallen into the river, and it sounds like a child, too."

"Come on!" was all Fred said in reply; indeed, even while throwing these two words over his shoulder he was leaping down the bank of the Mohunk.

CHAPTER II

THE TRICKY CANOE

Fred reached the edge of the water almost before his companion realized what was going on. Throwing off his coat and discarding his shoes he plunged headlong into the river.

A canoe had upset in the stream, and a small boy was struggling to maintain his desperate clutch on the sloping side of the craft floating with the current.

Fortunately the swift stream was bringing it toward Fred as he plunged into the water. Had it been otherwise he would hardly have been able to reach it before the boy sank for the last time.

Bristles Carpenter had by now recovered his wits, and about the time Fred gave that mighty splash, when going headlong into the river, he too was hurrying down the bank, trying in his clumsy fashion also to discard his coat and shoes.

The Fenton boy had, meanwhile, struck out straight for the canoe, with the little lad trying vainly to get hold of the bobbing gunwales, disappearing under the surface several times, to come up again spluttering, and choking.

Fred was a good swimmer, and never in all his past life had he known such an occasion for making speed as then. He saw that the small boy could not remain long above the water; and if he did go down, it might be next to impossible to find him in time to get him ashore while life remained.

Just as Bristles, panting for breath, and eager to lend a helping hand, arrived at the brink of the water, he saw his chum reach out, and grasp the sinking child by the shoulder.

"Whoo!"

That was Bristles, trying to give a cheer, but making a sad mess of it because of shortness of breath.

He saw that Fred, by a great effort, had raised the little fellow, and actually pushed him

into the canoe, which had not overturned when it threw its occupant into the treacherous river, though the craft was much waterladen.

And now the rescuer was starting to swim back toward the shore, urging the little craft along with him.

Bristles Carpenter had actually started into the river, and was already almost up to his waist when he chanced to remember that he was accounted one of the poorest swimmers among the Riverport boys.

"Don't come out, Bristles; stay there and try to give me a hand!"

From the way Fred called this, it was evident that his recent exertions must have quite exhausted him; and that he felt the need of some assistance, in order to get ashore with the canoe. The current was particularly strong at this place, it being accounted one of the danger spots of the Mohunk; and it seemed averse to letting its intended victim get away from its grip.

Once Bristles had caught hold of Fred's arm he braced himself, and soon the other was able to get his feet on the bottom.

Together they drew the canoe to the shore.

"Why, hello! here's a queer thing!" exclaimed Bristles, as, having clambered out of the river he bent down to look at the half-drowned lad in the canoe; "did you know it was little Billy Lemington you yanked out of the water?"

"Yes, I knew it all along," replied Fred, as he squeezed some of the water from his trousers, and then leaned over to see how the boy was coming on.

Considering what a narrow escape little Billy had just had, he seemed to be pretty well off. He had swallowed some water, it was true, and his face was ashen white; but he could get up on his knees, and was soon feeling better.

"It just kicked me out," he said, when Bristles asked him how the accident had happened.

"Say, that's a way all canoes have, I understand," Bristles chuckled. "They just watch till you're not lookin', and then chuck you overboard. Some of 'em are worse than a bucking bronco at throwing a feller. But looky here, Billy, how does it come you're in this cranky boat? I'd 'a thought your dad would have told you to leave Buck's canoe alone."

"He did," replied the little fellow, with a half sob; "but I thought I knowed how to manage it. But I'm never goin' to try again, no siree. But won't I get it when they hear all about me bein' in the water! Wish you wouldn't tell on me. Pop'll just give me hot cakes for not mindin' him. *Please* don't tell. I'll promise never to get in this old boat again, sure I will!"

Fred and Bristles exchanged glances.

"What do you say, Fred?" asked the latter; "ought we keep still about it?"

Under ordinary circumstances Fred would have said that the parents of the boy ought to know what chances he had been taking; but the conditions were rather peculiar just then. If he told, it would seem as if he might be trying to "draw the teeth" of his enemy, Buck Lemington, by boasting how he had saved the latter's little brother, of whom the bully was especially fond. And Fred's pride rose at the idea of his being considered that sort of a fellow.

"Oh! I'm willing to keep mum about it, Bristles, if you are," he said, slowly, after having duly considered the matter. "He promises never to get in this cranky canoe again. For the life of me I can't see how he ever paddled it all the way up here."

"I didn't," spoke up Billy, quickly. "Buck lent it to Bob Armstrong, and last night I heard him say he thought it funny Bob didn't drop down with his boat. So I just thought to-day I'd walk up to Bob's and if he was around, tell him I'd come for our canoe."

"And Bob was silly enough to let you have it, eh?" asked Bristles, indignantly.

Billy was rapidly recovering his nerve. He even made a wry face as he went on to answer the question put to him.

"Why no. You see Bob, he wasn't around; so, because I didn't want to have my long walk all for nothin', I just hunted up the paddle in his woodshed, and started for our house. I'd a made it, too, if I hadn't leaned too far over when a rock bumped into us, and the old thing just pitched me out."

"Well," said Fred, laughingly, "suppose you jump around a little, and dry off before you go home, Billy. And neither of us will let on what happened. I'll get the canoe down to your house in some fashion, though I hope Buck will be away this morning."

"He's gone off with some of the fellers to Grafton, to look at somethin' they want to buy," the small chap continued; "and he won't be back till noon. That's just why I thought I'd help get his boat down the river. You see Bob's with him, I guess."

So after they had seen Billy scamper away, keeping in the warm sun so as to get his clothes dried, and avoiding the road so that he might not meet inquisitive people who would wonder how he came to be so wet, Fred and Bristles together entered the canoe, the latter having recovered his shoes and coat.

They recovered the paddle and Fred pushed off, and went quietly along down the river until finally he was able to bring the craft to the shore at the place where Buck generally kept it housed in a small shanty he had built.

They tied it up, and sauntered away. By this time their clothes had dried fairly well.

They were just leaving the vicinity of the boat house where Buck kept the canoe, when Bristles caught sight of a boy staring hard at them from a little distance along the river bank.

"After all, Fred, I reckon that we'll hear something drop about this little matter," he declared; "because, you see, there's Sam Jinks watching us with his eyes just popping half out of his head. He wonders what we've been doing with Buck's canoe, because he knows right well we never borrowed it. And make up your mind Sam'll tell him all about it the first chance he gets, because he wants to get in with that bunch."

"All right," replied Fred, with a shrug of his shoulders; "I don't see where we've got any reason to worry about it. Just say we found the boat drifting on the current of the river, which is the truth, Bristles. Buck can carry on any way he likes; we won't give him any satisfaction. And now, let's get back to what we were talking about when all this rumpus came along; the chances for a boat club in Riverport."

CHAPTER III

A BOAT CLUB MEETING

"Great news, Fred! Our boat's come!"

"Come on down to the railroad yards, and see her, Fred!"

Two boys stood outside the Fenton cottage, and shouted these words up at Fred Fenton, who was leaning from the window of his room. It was several days after the events narrated in the preceding chapters, and Fred had meanwhile gone quietly on his way, saying not a word about the accident, whereby little Billy Lemington would have surely lost his life only for the good luck that brought Fred and Bristles to the river in time.

Fred had not happened to run across Buck Lemington since, and hence did not know whether or not the bully had been told about Bristles and himself arriving with the canoe.

Of course Fred made haste to rush out of the house at hearing the news brought by Bristles Carpenter and Sid Wells, the latter his most particular chum.

"When did it arrive?" he demanded, adjusting his cap as he came up, and immediately falling into step with the other eager fellows as they hurried off.

"Last night, I reckon," replied Sid. "I just happened to wander down there this morning, never thinking to run across a surprise, when what did I see but a long crate, and inside that a splendid eight-oar shell, just what we ordered with that money we earned in the winter, giving minstrel shows and gymnastic performances. It's a great day for Riverport school, fellows; and well have a dandy time this summer, believe me!"

"I wish Mechanicsburg or Paulding would get a boat like ours, and give us a race on the river," remarked Bristles, eagerly.

"Say, wouldn't that be just the best ever?" Sid went on; "we beat 'em out at baseball, and

on the gridiron; perhaps we might win another victory on the water. The Mohunk is a good stream for rowing, at certain times of the year."

"I suppose a lot of the boys are down there right now, all talking about what a great time this summer will be for the nine lucky fellows, and their substitutes?" remarked Fred, as they walked on into the town; for the Fenton's lived a little way outside.

"Why, nearly the whole school is down there, and such jabbering you never heard," laughed Sid.

Bristles tried to catch the eye of the third member of the group.

"Yes," he remarked, with emphasis, "and Buck Lemington, he's there on deck, big as ever. To hear him talk you'd think he was already made coxswain of the crew, and could lord it over the rest of us like a king."

"That's always his way, to claim everything at the first, and then give up a little, inch by inch," declared Sid. "There are just seventeen members of the rowing club, all picked out as being the best in the school. And who will be coxswain depends on the vote they'll take at the meeting to-night. I know one right now who'll never vote; for Buck Lemington."

"Make it two, just for luck," Bristles said, with a grin; "and there are others to be heard from, also. Between you and me and the lamp-post, boys, I reckon Buck will get just five votes, besides his own; and they'll come from his cronies, Whitey, Clem Shocks, Oscar Jones, Con Jimmerson and Ben Cushing. The rest will go in another direction that I won't mention right now."

He and Sid exchanged winks and nods as though there might be a secret between them; but Fred was paying no attention to this "wireless telegraphy."

"Tell me, did you run across Buck, yourself, Bristles?"

"Sure I did," replied the other; "and that was just what I was goin' to tell you about. He came swaggering up to me, just like he always does, you know, and wanted to know what business I had in *his* canoe—that he heard you'n me was seen fastening up alongside his boathouse t'other day."

"And what did you say?" demanded Fred, smiling at the aggressive manner of the boy who had the mop of hair.

"Me? Oh! I pretended that we'd found the little boat driftin' down the river, and waded in to get her," Bristles went on.

"Of course he didn't believe you?" Fred questioned.

"Not much. But I didn't get riled up worth a cent, Fred, just grinned in his face, and kept on saying it *was* so, and we *did* find the boat adrift. Then, what d'ye think, he says that Bob Armstrong told him the paddle was all the while in the woodshed, so if the canoe did break loose, however in the world could it have been with the boat, 'less we took it?"

"We know, all right; don't we, Bristles? Oh! never mind winking, and looking at Sid here, because I told him all about it, and he'll never peach; will you, Sid?"

"Not much," replied the other, promptly; "all the same, I think you're doing the wrong thing to keep so close-mouthed about it. I'd just glory in telling Buck how his little brother Billy would have been drowned if you hadn't happened to be nearby when he was pitched out of the canoe."

"Well, we made up our minds to keep quiet about it," Fred continued, quietly; "and what Buck believes cuts mighty little figure in it. But there's the railroad yard, and what a mob of boys and girls I've seen since school closed. Whew! I should think every fellow in town had got wind of it by this time; and I'm the last to know."

There was indeed great excitement around the spot where lay the long shell, cased in its stout crate, having been lifted off the car upon which it had come from the boat-building establishment.

Temporary quarters had been arranged for, until some later date, when possibly a new boathouse might be erected, provided the town people contributed the amount necessary.

That night, in the schoolhouse, there was called a meeting of the members of the Riverport Boat Club in order to transact business of great importance. Buck Lemington was more friendly than he had ever before been known. But those boys who knew him so well understood what his sudden conversion meant. He aspired to fill the important position of coxswain on the crew, and was figuring to gain the votes of a majority of those entitled to

pass judgment and select officers.

It was well known that Brad Morton, the same boy who had carried the football team to victory during the last season, as captain, had once rowed in a racing shell when visiting a relative in a college town. And his name had been mentioned pretty much in opposition to Buck, who also claimed to have had experience.

And as the coxswain was to have the power of choosing the members of his crew, it can be seen that the position was one carrying a certain amount of influence with it. As only eight fellows could be given places on the regular crew in the shell, and Buck's five cronies were all eager to be ranked as members, they electioneered for him most industriously.

Fred had been given the place as chairman of the meeting, and he tried to carry out the duties of his position without fear or favor. What he wished to see was a square deal, with the best man winning out.

After considerable talk, in which many of the boys joined, two candidates for the position of coxswain were put in nomination, Buck and Brad. And each had a noisy send-off when his backer started to tell what virtues as a coxswain the candidate possessed.

"Move we vote!" shouted Bristles Carpenter, anxious to get the agony over.

"Question! A motion that we proceed to vote has been made, Mr. Chairman!" called out Corney Shays, whose father was an old college man, and had once, many years back, rowed in a junior four-oared race.

"Any second?" asked the Chairman.

"I second the motion!" came from half a dozen throats.

It was carried with a rush; and then the tellers went around, giving each one a slip of paper on which he was to write the name of the candidate he preferred to serve as coxswain during the season that was at hand.

A few minutes later the tellers collected the slips, which were accurately counted, so that there should be no chance of fraud or mistakes. Then the result was announced by the chairman, as written out by the tellers.

"Whole number of votes cast, seventeen. For Buck Lemington, six votes; for Brad Morton eleven. Which, being a majority, makes Brad Morton the coxswain of the Riverport Boat Club."

Then a great uproar broke out, all of the boys shouting or cheering. Those who had voted for Buck Lemington, taking cue from their leader, declared that the election had not been fairly carried on; and that had all those interested in the club been allowed to vote, and not just those who expected to take part in the actual rowing, he would have carried the day.

Buck himself was crimson with rage. He never could take defeat in a manly way, but burst into a passion. Jumping up, he rallied his five cronies around him. There was mutiny in the air, Fred saw, nor was he in his heart at all sorry, for Buck had promised to be the disturbing element in the association from the start.

"Cheat me out of the position, will you?" he shouted, shaking his fist at the others, after the shouting had stopped, and everybody was staring at him; "make Brad Morton coxswain when I know more about the duties of the job in a minute than he can in a year! All right, I'm going to wash my hands of the whole bunch; and here's five husky fellers that'll go along with me. Keep your old boat, if you want to. I expected somethin' like this'd happen; and let me tell you, fellers, we've been up to Grafton to see an eight-oar shell that once won a college race. We've got an option on her, too, and just understand we'll buy her in, challenge your crowd to a race, and beat you to flinders! Come along, fellers, we don't train with this crowd any more," and the six stalked out of the building with sneers on their faces, amid a dead silence.

CHAPTER IV

IN CAMP ON THE MOHUNK

On the day following the exciting meeting in the schoolhouse, the members of the boat

club connected with Riverport school were in camp some miles up the Mohunk river, wishing to practice in their new shell, where curious eyes might not watch them.

It was expected that they would stay several days in camp; so tents had been taken along, as well as all sorts of supplies calculated to help the cooks in their work.

The rebellion of Buck Lemington had not bothered Brad and his friends very much. True, several of their best scullers had been lost by the mutiny; but some of the more promising substitutes were moved up into regular positions, and others taken on to fill the places thus vacated; for there was no lack of candidates among the boys of Riverport school.

Ever since Buck had let out his secret the talk had been about the possibility of the rival crew sending them a challenge, and an actual race taking place somewhere near Riverport, with hundreds of cheering people to watch the contest.

It thrilled the boys just to talk about such a happening.

"Don't get too gay, fellows," remarked a tall lad, whose name was Colon, and who had always been a good friend of Fred Fenton, from the day the latter first came to town. "Buck Lemington is a big bag of wind when it comes to bragging about what he's going to do. I think I can see him buying that shell over at Grafton, that Colonel Simms owns. His boy who went to college rowed in her, you know. There isn't money enough in Riverport to buy that boat."

"Oh! I don't know," broke in Dave Hanshaw, who had always been more or less of a crack athlete on Riverport's teams; "I heard my father saying only last night that the old Colonel had lost all his money, and was selling out over in Grafton. So you see, perhaps he might be willing to let that pet boat, in which his son rowed to victory, go for a certain sum."

"And Buck," observed Colon, "must have got wind of it a while back. Oh! he's a cute one, all right. He knows how to feather his nest. When he came to count noses he understood that there wasn't a show for him to be elected cox. in our club; so he gets ready to organize a little one on his own account. Wise old Buck, he knows which side his bread is buttered."

"Hey! look who's coming on his wheel over yonder!" called out Dick Hendricks.

"Who is it?"

"Why, it looks like Sandy Richards. But what can he want up here, when they all understood we didn't expect to have visitors?" Corney Shays observed.

Some of the boys began to show signs of sudden nervousness. They were not used to being away overnight from home, and could immediately picture all sorts of things as having happened since their departure very early that morning. Possibly to some of them it already seemed as though they had been off for a week.

The younger boy on the wheel soon arrived at a point close to the camp. Abandoning his bicycle at the roadside he climbed the fence, crossed the field, and came to the fringe of timber.

"Who's it for, Sandy?" asked Brad; and possibly there was just a trifling tremor in his own voice, though he tried to hide it in a fashion.

"Got your name on it, Brad; and she's addressed to the Coxswain of the Riverport Boat Club," answered the boy, promptly; looking around him curiously at the camp, where he would very naturally have liked to remain, simply because it was forbidden territory.

"A challenge, that's what!" yelled Bristles.

"Buck's made good already, just think of it!" cried Corney Shays, throwing up his cap, and then jumping on it when it landed; a habit he had of working off any excitement.

All eyes were turned on Brad as he tore off the end of the envelope. They saw his eyebrows go up in a manner to indicate surprise; and there also came a look of considerable satisfaction upon his honest face.

"Where'd you get this, Sandy?" he demanded, turning to the bicycle rider.

"Why, you see, Felix Wagner brought it over; and they wouldn't think of letting him come along up here, so I was sent with it," the boy replied, promptly.

"Felix Wagner!" ejaculated Sid Wells; "say, has Buck had to go and borrow a Mechanicsburg fellow to fill out his eight?"

"Hold on," interrupted Brad; "don't jump at things that way, Sid. This isn't a challenge

from Buck at all. It's from Mechanicsburg!"

"What's that?" shouted Colon; "are you telling me they've gone and got a boat up at that town, and want to race us for the championship of the Mohunk? That *would* be the best news ever, fellows!"

"That's just what's happened," Brad went on. "This paper is signed by Dub Jasper, who used to pitch for their baseball club, you remember fellows. Well, he's the coxswain of the Mechanicsburg Boat Club crew. He says they've got a shell on the way, and he hereby challenges us to a match, to be rowed within a month from date, and according to regular rules, the distance being marked off between their town and ours, in just what happens to be the best water at the time. How about that?"

"Accept it, Brad!" several shouted, in great excitement.

"Say, things in the boating line are picking up ground here," Corney Shays cried, laughingly. "Three shells on the river, to make things lively. If this keeps on the Mohunk will become the most famous boat course in this part of the country."

As a unanimous vote to accept the challenge followed, Brad retired to his tent, where he wrote out a reply to the proposal made by Mechanicsburg; details to be decided later on. Sandy was accordingly dispatched with this missive, and requested to drop in again after he had seen the rival young athletes of the neighboring town.

When Sandy returned, showing by the signs that he had made a swift passage from Mechanicsburg, some miles down the river, all the boys crowded around to ask him questions.

"Oh! they're all worked up over there about it," replied the panting boy. "Seems like every feller in the old town is wild with the news that they're a-goin' to have a boat like ours, a present from the big manufacturer, Mr. Gobbler; and they all say they expect to lick the stuffing out of poor old Riverport this time, because the boys in their town have always been more like water ducks than we have, rowing boats, skating, making ice-boats, and all such things."

"They're welcome to a think that way," laughed Corney Shays, apparently delighted with the prospect; "but perhaps we Riverport boys aren't so sleepy after all. We're just going to surprise 'em some; eh, fellers?"

Judging from the shouts that broke out, all of them believed the same as the confident Corney. Sandy was soon sent back to the home town to report that the members of the boat club were nicely fixed in camp, and that none of their folks need worry a minute about them.

So evening found them, with the several appointed cooks busily engaged in their work preparing supper. It was pronounced a fine meal, and as every lad had brought his vacation appetite along with him, the inroad they made upon the stock of provisions gave small hope that there would be anything to take back, when the little camping and training trip was over.

Afterwards they sat around the blazing logs, for the evening had turned a bit cool, and it was pleasant near a cheerful camp fire. The conversation changed from one thing to another; but always seemed to return again to the exciting event of that day—when the challenge was received from Mechanicsburg.

In imagination some of the young oarsmen doubtless already saw the scene that would take place upon the banks of the Mohunk when the rival towns cheered their pet crews on to victory, or defeat.

Into the midst of all this good-natured chaffing and chattering, Bristles Carpenter suddenly burst, with his hair more on end than ever, it seemed, and his face white with apprehension.

"Hey! wake up, fellers!" he cried. "There's some sneak down near our boat, and just as like as not he's been trying to cut a hole in her, so we can't row in any race! I saw him creeping around, when I stepped out just now!"

CHAPTER V

HOOFS AND HORNS

"Get a move on, boys!" yelled Colon, as he unlimbered his long legs, on which he had been coiled after the fashion of a tailor at work.

"Capture him!" shouted Corney Shays. "We ought to give him a licking if he's hurt our boat!"

"First catch your rabbit!" warned another.

Everybody was on the jump, and it was a furious crowd that went rushing down toward where the new shell had been laid, along the shore of the river, at a point where a little beach offered an ideal spot for launching.

"Where is he?" shouted several, as they drew near the spot, and failed to discover the skulking figure of any enemy, trying to get away.

"I see him, fellow's; right there in that shadow!" cried Corney, pointing.

"Surround the spot, boys; and if he makes a dash for it, Colon, we look to you, with your sprinter legs, to overhaul the coward!" declared Brad.

The lines were immediately extended so as to take in the dark spot indicated; and every fellow gritted his teeth, indignant at the mean trick being played by some unknown enemy, whereby perhaps harm was intended their boat.

"Make him out yet, Corney?" asked one who was further removed.

"Sure I do," came the exultant answer. "We closed in around so fast he didn't have sense enough to light out. Oh! we've got him cornered, all right, boys. And won't we make him sick of his bargain though!"

"We ought to tie him up to a stake, and make him tell who sent him here to stick a knife through our shell, ripping her wide open!" declared Dick Hendricks, warmly.

"Is there more'n one feller in all Riverport that would get down low enough to be back of a job like that?" asked Colon.

"Mebbe we don't know who you mean, but we think we do," sang out Sid Wells; who had always been at loggersheads with Buck Lemington, from the time they were, as Sid used to say, "knee high to grasshoppers."

"How about it now, Corney; is he there yet? Perhaps it was only a stump you set eyes on," called another from the opposite side of the circle.

"Do stumps move, and duck their heads up and down?" asked Corney, indignantly; "well, that's what this one is doing right now. Don't you see him too, Brad?"

"I sure see something in that shadow, and it keeps right on moving," the one addressed replied, positively. "Hey Colon, suppose, now, you run back to the fire and fetch us one of the blazing sticks you'll find handy? We'll give this thief in the night a little illumination. He thinks he can hide, does he; well, it's up to us to show him. Close up, boys, and don't you let him have a chance to sneak it."

"He's our prisoner, all right, Brad; just you count on that," remarked Corney, jubilantly. "Say, what we'll do to him will be aplenty. There, didn't you see the way he yanked his head up that time? Reckon he's beginning to get scared right now; and can you blame him."

"With all this crowd around," ventured Brad; "every fellow willing to give him a punch to pay him up for what he tried to do to our boat—well, I should guess not! Hurry along, Colon; that's the kind of torch for you; just look at her blaze, will you?"

The long-legged boy came hurrying up, holding the burning stick in his hand. And as he advanced closer to the spot where the suspected spy was believed to be, the circle gradually narrowed, as the eager boys began to push in.

"Wow! what do you think of that, now?" burst from Corney, as the light gave a sudden flash, and plainly revealed the spot that had up to now been in the shadows.

"It's an old red cow, and she's getting her dander up too, fellows, because of all this noise, and the torch there! Look out if she charges you; and run like everything! There she comes, fellows, like a tornado! Run, boys! Scatter, to beat the band!"

It was Brad who gave this advice. He himself did not hesitate to take it literally, for when the alarmed cow actually lowered her head, whipped her tail around several times, and then made a lunge toward the spot where Brad happened to be stationed, he whirled on his heels, and fairly flew to place a tree between himself and the frightened animal.

Then there was a wild scene, every fellow being for himself. Colon flung his blazing torch at the advancing beast, and with such good aim that it actually came in contact with the cow's flank. Perhaps it stung, or at any rate gave the beast a new spasm of fear, for there immediately followed a fierce bellow, and the lunges grew more violent.

With flying tail and lowered horns the cow went charging past the scattering boys. Luckily none of them was in her way, or they might have been flung high in the air; since the most expert athlete among them knew nothing about bull fighting.

"She's going to charge our tents!" shrieked Corney, who was part way up a tree, so rapid had been his action after being warned by Brad of the danger.

"Head her off, somebody!" whooped Colon, who, however, showed not the least intention of doing anything in that line himself; for he had found a convenient tree, that would afford plenty of shelter if necessary, against the charge of half a dozen frightened cows.

If the animal headed directly toward the camp it was because she had been so bewildered by the various shouts of the boys that she hardly knew which way to turn, in order to escape from what she doubtless considered an attack.

There came a crash.

"There goes one of the tents!" cried Colon; "that's because nobody would do what I said, and head her off. Lots of you were closer than I was. Anyhow, she's gone gallopin' away. Let's see what damage she did!"

Another torch was pulled from the fire; indeed, now that Colon had shown the way, several of the others made haste to secure flaming brands.

"Take care, there, and don't set anything afire!" warned Brad, seeing that a few were inclined to be reckless; "there's quite a lot of dead stuff around here, left over from last Fall. Look out how you handle that torch boys!"

A hasty investigation disclosed the pleasing fact that no harm had come to the racing shell through the wandering about of the grazing cow. Then the campers set to work to get up the tent that had been knocked over.

Of course the excitement died down presently, since there had been no particular damage done, and the boat was uninjured. The boys sat around for an hour or two, talking. Then some of them began to yawn, and to examine the places inside the three tents where they had stowed their blankets, carried along because the summer nights were apt to get cool toward morning.

One by one they crept off, until by degrees the ranks were thinned down to just three—Brad, Bristles and Fred. Even the captain of the club finally declared he was done up with the exercise of the day, and might as well "hunt up the soft side of a board," as he chose to remark; though a soft blanket, doubled on the ground, was really the kind of bed awaiting him.

Fred had a reason for waiting up. He had received a signal from Bristles that the other wanted to speak with him in private; and remembering that he had been made a sort of confidant before by the boy who was in trouble. Fred, though feeling very sleepy himself, sat it out.

Bristles waited a few minutes after Brad had crawled into the nearest tent. Apparently he did not want the others to overhear anything he said to our hero. This caution on his part told the other that Bristles must have more reason for feeling gloomy; though he had somehow kept from saying anything all day.

Presently Fred saw him get up, and start around the now smouldering camp fire, as if to join him; so he made a place on his blanket, which he had brought out some time before, to sit upon.

"Did you want to see me about anything, Bristles?" Fred asked, as the other dropped down close beside him.

"Yes, Fred," began the other, in a low voice; "you were so good to stand up for me when I told you about those pesky opals, that I just thought after all I'd let you know about some more that's happened."

Fred started, and looked uneasily at the other's long face.

"Does that mean, Bristles, your aunt has been missing more of her precious stones?" he asked.

Bristles nodded his head in a forlorn fashion.

"Two of 'em gone this time, Fred, and I guess I'm the unluckiest feller ever, because they disappeared yesterday afternoon; and mom sent me over with a message to Aunt Alicia about four o'clock."

CHAPTER VI

A SUDDEN AWAKENING

"Well, that's a funny thing, Bristles," Fred remarked, as he allowed the full force of the other's story to sink into his mind.

"Not so very funny for me, let me tell you, Fred," muttered Bristles.

"Why, of course I didn't mean it that way, you know, old fellow," Fred hastened to say; "I meant that it was queer. Three times now you've just happened to drop in to see your aunt, and every time one or more of her precious stones have disappeared, as if they went up in smoke?"

"Say, perhaps they did!" the other went on, moodily. "Always smells smoky to me in that house. Then again do you know, Fred, when I see that old black crow perched on the back of aunty's chair, it somehow makes me think of haunted houses, it's so spooky."

"Now what do you want me to believe—that the old colored woman sits on the back of your aunt's chair, and smokes her pipe?" Fred asked, chuckling a little.

"Oh! shucks! perhaps I am twisted up somehow in trying to tell you what happened; but then," and Bristles' voice sank into a half whine, "I just guess any feller would be rattled, if he'd bothered his head as much as I have the last few days. I meant the old tame crow Aunty's got, that talks sometimes to beat the band. Now do you know, Fred?"

"Sure I do," replied the other, promptly; "I've never forgotten how Black Joe looked, blinking his eyes at us when we stood there talking to your aunt. But you're wrong in one thing, Bristles; it isn't just a plain, everyday crow at all. She said it was a raven, one of the wise old kind you read about; and that she brought it across the water. They're more cunning than our crows; and goodness knows I've always found *them* smart enough, when you had a gun."

"Oh! well, crow or raven, what does it matter to me?" grumbled Bristles. "But as I was saying, Fred, my mom sent me over in the afternoon. I didn't want to go; not much! That house gives me the creeps; and aunty has such sharp, piercing eyes. But there wasn't any getting out of it, so I went. But let me tell you, I was determined to toe the mark, and not even give a think to the measly opals that once I was silly enough to admire."

"Well?" said Fred, encouragingly, as the other paused for reflection.

"I gave my little message, and came away as quick as I could," Bristles presently went on, with a big sigh. "All the rest of the afternoon I was patting myself on the back, Fred, and saying the old lady would have a chance to change her mind about little Andrew. But it didn't wash, Fred, not a bit of it."

"You said, I believe, that two more of the opals had vanished; when did you hear about that?" asked Fred, to hurry his chum along.

"Why, after I came in just before supper time, feeling better than for several days. I saw with one eye that mom was bothered again over something, and I understood what it was when she handed me a little note she'd got late that afternoon from Aunt Alicia."

He fumbled about in his pockets for several minutes, until Fred grew impatient.

"Never mind about the note," he remarked; "perhaps you handed it back, or you may have lost it, Bristles. I should think you could tell me the gist of it."

"You'd better guess I can!" burst forth the other, with renewed feeling. "It ran about this way, Fred: She had the unpleasant duty to perform of telling mother that two more of her opals had disappeared that afternoon, and could not be found, high or low. She was not accusing *anybody* of taking them, oh! no, not for worlds; but it was a *strange coincidence*,

that was all."

"Whew! that sounds hot off the bat!" remarked Fred, with a low whistle to indicate his feelings in the matter.

"Yes, she used that very word," Bristles went on; "and I guess it hit the case right well, for it *is* a coincidence, I give you my solemn word, Fred, and nothing more."

"I believe you. Bristles; I'm as sure of it as if she suspected me of taking her opals, and I knew I was innocent. But was that all the note said?"

"Well, not quite, Fred. She went on to say that she would be very much obliged to mom, if, after this, when she had to communicate with her aunt—for that's what Miss Muster is to mom, you know—she'd send my sister Kate; because you see, Andrew is an unpleasant boy to have around!"

Bristles tried to laugh as though his heart were steeled against showing any natural feeling; but Fred felt sure he was winking very fast, and he had little difficulty in guessing why.

"It is a hard problem you're up against, Bristles," he went on to say, while he laid a hand affectionately upon the other's quivering arm; "but just perk up, and make sure that it's bound to come out right, sooner or later. If you don't go to see your aunt again, after a bit, another of her opals will disappear; and then the quick-tempered old lady must see that it wasn't you after all."

Immediately Bristles raised his head, as though new life had come to him.

"Say, I never thought of that, Fred!" he exclaimed. "It's a good idea, too, and is sure to work, sooner or later. Whoever is taking her opals will get tired of waiting for me to come around again, to be the scapegoat; and crib another lot. Then won't Rome howl, though! If it turns out to be the old mammy, she'll lose her steady job all right; because Aunt Alicia is stern and unforgiving. I used to be her favorite; but never again for me, after this."

"Well, if you feel better now, Bristles, and there's nothing more to tell me, suppose we both crawl in, and get a little snooze? I'm as tired as all get-out; and I reckon you're in the same boat."

"Just what I am," returned the other, actually yawning; "but you've made me feel a hundred times better, Fred. It's a mighty good thing to have a chum like you, once in a while, and that's the truth. You've got a way about you that just makes the clouds seem to roll right off, and the sunshine come again."

"Oh! I'm glad if I've been able to do you any good, Bristles; but let me know if any more things come up, will you?"

"I just will, and no mistake," the boy who had found new hope replied, while his face beamed.

"But don't think I'm going to forget all about it. No siree; if there's any way I can learn whether a jeweler in Riverport or Mechanicsburg has been buying an opal lately, I'm bound to get on the track."

"Be careful, that's all, when you make inquiries," cautioned Fred.

"Now, I don't get on to what you mean?" remarked Bristles.

"Why, don't you see, if your aunt should also choose to look around, and heard that you were making inquiries about the value of opals, and all that, of course she'd jump to the conclusion that you wanted to learn how the market stood, so you'd be posted when you wanted to sell the ones you'd hid away!"

"Granny! I never once thought of that, Fred!" gasped the other, lost in astonishment.

"But it's so, don't you think now, Bristles?"

"That's right, it would look suspicious. But Fred, what ought I say if I wanted to find out?"

"Tell Mr. Rhinehart, our jeweler, the exact truth, and what your object is in asking about opals. He seems to be a pretty decent sort of a man, and like as not he'll feel for you, Bristles. Anyhow, he can prove to your aunt that you wanted to know if anybody offered opals for sale."

"That's just fine of you, Fred, and I'll do it as sure as anything. I'm going to crawl in now, and get a few winks. I need 'em the worst kind, because I rather think I didn't sleep any too

much last night, I felt so bad."

Both boys were soon under their blankets; and no doubt sleep quickly came to banish all thoughts of opals, boat races, and all such things.

Fred's sleep was broken by dreams, and they were pretty well mixed up. At one time he was swimming in the river again, trying to locate little Billy Lemington, who had disappeared from sight, and could not be found. Then again he seemed to be in a city, somewhere, when there was great confusion, a rushing of heavy vehicles over the pavement, and loud shouts that seemed to thrill him.

Fred sat upright.

For a second he believed his dream had been so vivid that it was haunting him still; for he fancied that he could hear the rumbling of engines over the granite blocks; and surely that was a wild alarm of fire that broke upon his hearing.

Then like a flash it came to Fred that there was nothing of a dream about it—some one was shrieking the startling word "fire!" at the top of his voice; and even in that dreadful moment the aroused sleeper believed he could distinguish the well known tones of Bradley Morton.

CHAPTER VII

ICE COLD WATERS

"Fire! Fire! Wake up, everybody! Help! Help!"

So Brad was shouting at the top of his lusty young voice. Such an upheaval as his thrilling cries brought about in the three tents! Every one of the sixteen inmates scrambled out from under the blanket in which he had been so snugly rolled.

They came flocking out just as they were, some in pajamas, others in all sorts of apparel suited to sleeping; and not a few about half disrobed, they having failed to provide for the night time.

Nobody needed to ask any questions, because they had eyes, and could easily see what was the matter.

A fire was blazing in the pile of dead stuff over near where the new boat lay. The sight gave every fellow a sensation of dread; for he naturally thought of what a disaster it would be should the racing craft be injured or destroyed.

"Save the boat, fellows!" shouted Fred, who seemed to be able to keep his wits about him better than most of the others.

"Yes, rush in, and get hold of her!" added Brad. "I don't believe she's been hurt yet. This way, boys! Everybody help!"

There was at least no lack of volunteers. It seemed as though everybody felt anxious to have a hand in saving the boat, for there was a concerted rush on the part of all.

One or two tripped, and fell down in their haste. Others stubbed their toes on stones or roots, and doubled up, groaning with pain. But all of a dozen managed to reach the vicinity of the shell, which rested there so dangerously close to the roaring blaze.

"Take hold, all that can!" called Fred, as he himself clutched one of the out-riggers, and made ready to lift. "All ready now? Yo heave 'o! and away we go! That's the way to do it, boys! We've saved our boat, and don't you forget it!"

With lusty cheers they carried the frail craft to a place of safety, each fellow proud to be counted among the savers.

"Bully for us!" cried Colon, who was limping around as if he had struck his foot against something hard.

"But look here, fellows, hurry and get some shoes on," Fred continued. "We've got to put that fire out, or it may spread. Anyhow, it'll make our camp a tough place if we let it burn itself out."

Several who had been wise enough to pull on their shoes before starting out at once volunteered to get busy under Brad; and the balance hurried to the tents to provide themselves with foot covering.

There were a couple of buckets in the camp, and these were immediately pressed into service by the enthusiastic young fire-fighters. One fellow stood down by the river, and dipped each bucket in as it came back empty. Then in turn it was relayed along from hand to hand, until finally either Brad or Fred received it.

They used their judgment as to where the water was to be thrown, and with such good results that after a short time it was seen that the fire did not burn so brilliantly as before.

"Hurrah! fellows, we're doing the business, all right!" shouted Corney, who had been working like an industrious beaver all the time.

"It's dying out, and that's a fact!" cried Colon, the one who dipped up the water at the other end of the line. "Getting much darker down here. About time, too, I reckon, because I've just about emptied the whole river!"

"Oh! quit your grumbling, Colon!" called out Sid, who was just above the bank, receiving each bucket that the tall boy reached up to him. "We ought to be sending up a regular chorus because we saved our boat."

"Don't believe for a minute that I'm growling, Sid," the long-legged Colon gasped, for he began to feel winded by his exertion. "I'm only bothered for fear there won't be enough river left for that boat race to be pulled off."

"Plenty more coming from above, Colon; so brace up. Perhaps it'll rain cats and dogs before the race comes off, and the river be bank full," and Dave Hanshaw tossed an empty bucket down to the boy at the brink of the stream.

"A few more and we can let up, boys!" came the cheering news from Brad, who, being close to the burning brush, ought to know.

And indeed, it did suddenly become gloomy as the fire failed to find any more dry fuel to feed upon, so that it gasped fitfully, and threatened to go out entirely.

So, presently, there was no further need of exertion on the part of the now weary passers of water; and the boys began to gather around their own blaze, which some one had rekindled with fresh wood.

Some of them were wet, and all more or less chilly after giving up their exertions; so that they were glad to gather around the fire, with coats on, or blankets thrown over their shoulders.

Sleep, for the time being, had been utterly banished from their eyes; for one and all were desirous of comparing notes as to the origin of the furious fire.

"Was it the work of some sneak, who wanted to burn our boat, Brad?" asked Dick Hendricks.

"That's hard to say, Dick," was the reply. "I'd hate to think anybody could be so mean as to want to do that."

"Huh! we happen to know one feller who wouldn't stop a minute," remarked Corney.

"There's another possibility that none of you seems to have thought of," said Fred, breaking in just then.

"What's that, Fred?" demanded Brad, turning toward the speaker, quickly.

"Why, perhaps it was an accident, after all," observed Fred.

"An accident!" echoed Colon.

"Well, *something* started that fire, we all know that," Fred went on, resolutely. "It never caught from a spark that came from the camp blaze, because in the first place there hasn't been a single spark flying for several hours; and then again you want to notice that the wind is right from the opposite quarter."

"Then how could it catch by accident, I want to know?" asked Dave Hanshaw.

"I'm on," sang out Sid. "He means Colon!"

All eyes were instantly turned on the tall boy.

"Well, I did throw that torch at the cow; I admit that much, fellows," he began; "but don't tell me it just kept on smouldering all this time in that brush heap, to take fire after everybody'd gone to sleep! Why, it must have been all of five hours ago. Shucks! you can't prove it; and I won't admit a single thing."

"Well, it might have happened; and that's as near as we'll ever get to finding out the truth," said Fred.

When they had talked it all over they began to feel sleepy once more; and one by one again crawled into the tents. There was no further alarm, and morning came to arouse the camp of the boat club.

The day promised to be a beautiful one, but rather sultry. Indeed, even in the early morning the waters of the Mohunk looked inviting to the boys, so that as they came out of the tents they made a bee-line for the bank, to plunge in.

Soon there was a great splashing and shouting, such as a dozen and more boys in swimming alone can produce. Bristles, remembering a promise he had made to himself, pursued his lessons diligently, and was making splendid progress, so that he began to grow quite encouraged.

"I'll be a swimmer right away," he told Fred, as the two of them sat on the bank rubbing down, after coming from the water. "I'm getting to have confidence in myself, Fred, and already I went more'n twenty feet without touching bottom."

"Good for you, Bristles; I said you had it in you to make a swimmer, if only you'd keep everlastingly at it. Every boy who goes on the water, either in a boat, or to skate, ought to know how to swim. It may save his life, or the life of a chum some day. But those fellows ought to come out, or they'll get blue around their lips, for the water is icy cold. Colon looked shivery the last time he was up on the bank for a high dive!"

"There he is now, swimming across the river again, Fred. He ought not to try that so often, seems to me. Why, look at him, will you; he's making believe he's got a cramp or something!"

Fred sprang to his feet excitedly, exclaiming:

"There's no make-believe about that, Bristles; Colon *has* got a cramp, and right now he's in danger of drowning away out there in the middle of the river. Quick! fellows, to the rescue! Colon is drowning!"

CHAPTER VIII

A SURPRISE

Fred's words created much excitement. Some of the boys stood and looked out to where Colon was struggling desperately in the deep water, seeming to be almost paralyzed with alarm. Others, who kept their wits about them, started after Fred, who, plunging in, was already swimming across the Mohunk.

Fred knew the danger that awaited them. When anyone is drowning, he or she seems to lose all the good sense which at another time he may have possessed. The instinct of self preservation is so strong that a drowning boy will clutch at his dearest friend, and hold frantically to him, not because he wants to pull the other down, but because he hopes to be himself buoyed up.

"Help! help!" Colon was trying to scream, though the water, getting in his mouth, muffled the sound considerably.

There was no need of his wasting what little breath he still possessed. His chums were doing everything in their power to assist him before it was too late.

Fred presently arrived close to Colon, who had been under water once, and sank again even as his camp-mate arrived on the spot. It gave Fred a sickening feeling to see the poor fellow thrashing wildly with his long arms, grasping at a floating chip, which, to his excited mind, was magnified into a log.

Fred had made sure to be above the other when he arrived. He wanted the benefit of the

current in carrying out the plan he had in mind.

One last look he took to locate Colon. Then he dove out of sight, so that the other might not see him coming, and try to clutch him. Once those frenzied hands closed upon any part of his person, Fred knew that he would have to strike Colon in the face, and stun him, before he could break loose.

But he had figured well, for he came up just behind the struggling boy, who was making one last effort to keep on the surface, ere going down for the last time.

Quick as a flash Fred threw his arm around Colon, who, just as he expected, tried desperately to seize him. This the other prevented with all his strength.

All he wanted to do now was to continue to hold Colon until some of the others arrived on the scene, when altogether they might be able to work him to the shore.

Had he been alone with Colon, Fred feared he must have resorted to other tactics if he hoped to get the other out of the river alive. But Brad and several more of the strong swimmers had by now reached a point close enough for them to ask what he wanted them to do. Even in that moment they recognized the fact that Fred was the one to whom they should look for orders, because he always knew just what to do in an emergency.

"Each one of you get a grip on an arm; and be sure you don't let him grab you," was what Fred said.

Brad readily carried out the instructions, and helped buoy up the helpless boy; while Sid Wells took the other arm.

"He's dead!" cried the latter, seeing that Colon no longer struggled, but lay like a log in the water.

"Don't you believe it," answered Fred, instantly. "He's swallowed a whole lot of water, and is pretty far gone; but let's get him ashore, and revive him!"

Others had by now come up, and between the lot poor Colon was hurried to the bank, up which he was carried.

"Lay him here, face down, so I can straddle him with my knees!" Fred called out. "Now, some of you begin, and work his arms back and forth regularly, while I press down on his lungs so as to induce artificial breathing. That's the only way to get things started, you see. A little harder, Brad, please. And don't the rest of you look so scared. He's going to come out of this. He wasn't under the water any time at all, but just gave way because of the cramp and the scare."

So Fred talked as he worked, and all the while he was building up the hopes of the fellows, who looked peaked and white, under the belief that they had seen the last of their chum, the good-natured Colon.

And Fred was right.

In a very short time one of the boys who were working Colon's arms like the piston rods of a locomotive cried out:

"He moved a little then, fellows!"

"And listen to that, would you?" exclaimed another delighted chum, as Colon plainly sighed.

In five minutes Colon recovered enough to be helped back to camp, where he was rubbed down until his skin fairly glowed, and then hustled between a pair of blankets, to rest, while the others dressed, and got breakfast ready.

Colon had learned his lesson. He would never again persist in remaining in ice-cold water when he was shivering, and his lips turning blue. Nature has a way of sending up a warning sign, that every intelligent fellow ought to heed.

That day passed all too soon, and another night arrived, the last they expected to spend in camp up on the Mohunk. The following day the wagon belonging to Judge Colon, an uncle of the tall boy, and put at the service of the young campers, would come to "tote" all the stuff back to town again, and some of the boys in the bargain.

Of course nine of them would go back, as they had come, in the boat. And this time there was no need of any secrecy, so they could expect to excite more or less curiosity when they shot past Mechanicsburg.

The mere thought inspired the boys with eagerness. In imagination they could already see the wondering faces lining the bank, and the people running to see as the word was passed hurriedly along that the new eight-oared shell of the Riverport crew was sighted up the river.

They had become very careful now about the boat, which was growing more valuable in their eyes every hour, as they developed its capabilities. Catch any of them throwing torches around promiscuously now; no one ever touched the fire so that the sparks flew, but half a dozen pairs of anxious eyes followed the course they took, and speculation arose as to the chances of their doing any damage.

During the morning another trial spin was taken, with Colon again in his place, and pulling a strong oar. Brad and Fred both declared that the crew was coming on famously, and would be able to give a good account of themselves when the time arrived to meet their old rivals of Mechanicsburg.

Along about three in the afternoon the wagon arrived. As the tents had been taken down, and all the camp things well packed, it took but a short time to load up. Then the wagon started, escorted by the eight fellows who could not find places in the boat.

The crew gave them a cheer for a send-off, and received as loud a salute in return. After which they took their places in the long, narrow boat, for the run of seven miles down the river home.

Brad was keenly alive to every little thing that took place. Like a wise coxswain he felt that he ought to know each man's weakness, if he had any, so as to build him up into a perfect part of the whole machine. For a boat crew must act as though it were one unit, at the nod and whim of the fellow who sits in the stern, doing the steering, and by his motions increasing or diminishing the stroke. If one cog fails to work perfectly, the entire thing collapses.

"Fine! Great work, fellows!" Brad was saying again and again after they had passed over a couple of miles down-stream. "You're doing yourselves proud; and honest now, I believe you could take a little faster stroke. We must be doing our prettiest when we spurt past Mechanicsburg."

Brad had just finished saying this when he received one of the surprises of his life. His eyes were the only ones that could see down the river, and as he happened to glance over toward the left bank, where there was something of a neck of land shutting a large bay out of sight, judge of his amazement when he discovered the pointed prow of a racing boat thrusting out, and headed toward the middle of the river.

And as Brad sat there, almost petrified, as he afterwards declared, the boat shot into view, containing a crew of eight, and a coxswain, in the latter of whom he recognized Buck Lemington.

CHAPTER IX

A LUCKY WIN

"Listen, boys!"

When the coxswain said this, every fellow as the oars strained his hearing, under the belief that Brad had something mighty interesting to communicate. Possibly some of them, having their eyes constantly on the coxswain, had seen by his manner that Brad must have discovered something down-stream. But no one dared try and twist his head around, in order to see for himself.

"Don't anybody try to look," Brad went on; "but we're going to have a little brush right now. Buck and his bunch have got that boat from Grafton, and, finding out that we are expected to pass down the river this afternoon, they've been lying in wait for us!"

Every fellow gave utterance to an exclamation, or a whistle, to indicate both his astonishment, and pleasure as well.

"Now, keep on working regularly as you are, and brace yourselves, every fellow, for a furious spurt, if we have to make one. Might as well learn what our boat can do, first as last. Take care how you dip in, because a crab would upset us all. They've struck the middle of

the river now, and are letting us catch up on them. I can see Whitey, Clem Shooks, Jones, Jimmerson and Ben Gushing, anyway. And they're grinning as if they meant to make monkeys of the Riverport Boat Club boys. Shall we stand for it, fellows?"

Evidently Brad knew just how to key his crew up to doing their best; for his question was instantly answered with a thunderous:

"Not much we won't!"

"Get ready, then, because we're bearing down on 'em fast now," the wary coxswain continued, in a husky voice, caused by the excitement, no doubt. "There, they've increased their stroke so that we will come up slower, and not take the advantage from them at the start. It's a race, fellows! Let's pitch in now, and overtake the outlaw crew!"

Brad knew that the greatest danger lay in one of the boys becoming so worked up that he would miss a stroke, and "catch a crab," in boating language. This would cause him to break the stroke of the entire crew, if it did nothing more serious; and give the race to their rivals.

And so he continued to speak warning words to them as he regulated his motions, and the stroke in turn.

"Easy there Sid, old fellow; don't try to rush things. Keep in line with Fred, because he's the stroke oar, you know. That was a fine one. Again and yet again, boys! Now we're on even terms with 'em, and we're bound to go ahead, believe me!"

"Like fun you are!" called out Buck Lemington, being close enough to catch what Brad was saying.

Perhaps Buck added just a little more speed to his motions, rendered desperate by the fact that thus far he and his fellows had not been able to keep the other shell from gradually cutting down the lead they had in the beginning.

No matter what he did, he must have helped stop this gain on the part of Brad's crew. Now the two boats were rushing swiftly down the river, neck and neck, as it were, and going at a speed that seemed marvelous to these boys, unused to anything of the sort.

For a short time both crews seemed to be working with clock-like regularity; and it would have won the praise of an old boating man just to have watched them. Of course this could hardly last, for they were both sadly lacking in practice; and at almost any second one of the sixteen lads was apt to be taken with a sudden cramp, or miss his stroke, throwing his crew into confusion, and perhaps upsetting the boat in the excitement.

But they could all swim now, even Bristles Carpenter; so the worst that could happen, should such an accident overtake them, would be the loss of the race, and the consequent disappointment.

To have those fellows with Buck Lemington crowing over them, would be a bitter pill to Brad's crew. And they were really doing their level best to avoid such a punishment.

There was the town of Mechanicsburg right ahead of them. Brad hoped that the river might be quite free of boats that would interfere with the passage of the two fleet racers. To have to dodge any pleasure craft would mar the sport, and give one or the other an unfair advantage.

It was a square race, and Brad wanted to see the best crew win. Naturally he hoped it would fall to his side to arrive at the Riverport bridge ahead; but it must be a clean, fair win to satisfy him; for trickery and Brad Morton did not pull together very well.

Of course the two boats did not always keep exactly on even terms. As one or the other crew exerted themselves a trifle beyond the ordinary there would be a little change. Sometimes it was the outlaw crew that made this gain; and then, on the other hand, Brad would do something to not only even up, but take them a quarter of a boat's length ahead.

It was what might be called a heart-breaking row, and seemed to be anybody's race at the time they shot past Mechanicsburg.

A few score of people were seen running to the river's edge, shouting their astonishment and delight. Nobody paid the slightest heed to them, however, for the warmth of the race occupied their attention.

And now there were only three more miles before they would arrive at the railroad bridge, which must be accepted as the final goal.

Going down-stream, and at the amazing speed they were now traveling, three miles could not take much time.

"Keep it up, fellows, and we win!" Brad said, again and again, almost unconsciously; for he was watching the river ahead closely for signs of a rock which he knew lay under the surface at a certain point, with an eddy betraying its presence.

He hoped Buck was also aware of its being there, for really it would be too bad if the other boat, with such a history back of it, should be finally wrecked. Brad was almost tempted to shout out a warning, when he saw with one look behind, that, judging from the change in course, Buck was fighting shy of the dangerous quarter. He had been brought up on the banks of the Mohunk, and ought to be acquainted with every foot of ground and water in the vicinity.

The pace had now reached the limit. Neither of the young crews seemed capable of doing any more. But Brad made a discovery that appalled him. Colon was weakening! The boy had received such a shock on the previous day, when he came so near being drowned in the river, that he was not in as good condition for bearing the tremendous nervous strain as the balance of the crew.

Brad recognized the signs, and feared the worst. Unless they could relax presently Colon would have to give up exhausted. And, of course, that would lose them the race.

It was too bad, and Brad, being a high-spirited lad, would feel the defeat keenly; but he was determined not to take too great chances. When he saw that Colon had reached the limit he meant to slacken the pace, no matter what happened, nor how much the crew shouted at him for a "quitter."

Buck's boat was coming on again now. Brad doubted whether they had been able to put any fresh vim into their efforts, for that seemed next to impossible, since already every fellow was straining his muscles to the limit. It must be that the growing weakness of Colon was beginning to make itself felt.

Well, what they could not cure they must endure. Colon was too good a fellow to take chances of doing him an injury that would put him off the crew indefinitely. They needed his strong back in that real race with Mechanicsburg.

The others had by now discovered that the outlaw boat was slowly forging ahead, and that, despite all their efforts, the gain continued. Slowly they could see each opposing oarsman creeping along; and it was discouraging to feel that after all Buck seemed to have the better "stayers" in his crew.

Already they could hear the low, taunting remarks which the others were calling out, and they stung. Defeat is hard enough to stand, when pitted against honorable, high-minded fellows, whose first thought is to give an encouraging cheer for their whipped rivals; but it is doubly painful when forced to listen to all manner of insulting remarks from rough lads devoid of decent feelings, and only bent upon "rubbing it in."

Brad had really lost all hope. He was even about to throw up the sponge, and slacken the pace to such an extent that the people of Riverport, seeing the two boats coming down the river so far apart, would never think they had been racing.

Then something happened, unexpectedly, as it always does in a boat race.

Brad heard a sudden loud snap. He saw that the crew in the other boat seemed to be floundering around in the utmost confusion. One fellow even toppled overboard, though he immediately clutched hold of the speeding boat, and was dragged along with it.

Like a race horse, the boat containing the regular Riverport crew shot past the disabled outlaw craft. Buck was shouting in his disgust. He even shook his fist at his rivals as they went on speeding down the river; and they caught the tenor of his remarks.

"We had you beat good and plenty, never fear, only for that pesky outrigger bustin' on us! Next time we'll rub it in all the harder. You fellers had all the luck to-day. Just wait, that's all!"

And so good fortune saved the day for Brad and his crew, when all seemed lost.

CHAPTER X

FRED'S HOME-COMING

"We win! We win!"

The shouts of the fellows who wielded the oars in the leading boat came floating back to those who were still scrambling around in the cranky outlaw craft.

Buck put his hands to his mouth, in order to make his voice carry the better, and yelled disdainfully after them:

"Yes, you win, but only through a foul! Run into us, and broke one of our outriggers to flinders! But just wait till we get a new one made, we'll beat you to a frazzle! Wait!"

"It wasn't so, was it, Brad?" demanded Corney Shays indignantly; "we never touched his boat, did we?"

"Well, I like his nerve!" cried Sid Wells, for all of them were taking things easy, now that the race was over, and the victory won. "Why, hang it, I don't believe we were within thirty feet of their old boat any time."

"And you're right, Sid," added Brad. "I ought to know, because I was in a position to see everything. When that outrigger smashed they were a quarter of a length ahead. Anybody with half an eye can see that it was the second oar that got in trouble. And boys, believe me, that outrigger was away up opposite our stem, far out of reach of our oars, end on end. It's too silly for anything!"

"But I think, from all I know of the fellow, that it's just like Buck to say a thing like that?" suggested Fred.

"You're right there, Fred," declared Dick Hendricks; "he never yet lost a game but what, quick as a flash, he made it a point to claim that it was a foul, and the beat an unfair one. Isn't that so, fellows, all you who've known Buck since he was a kid, and always a fighting bully?"

"You never said truer words, Dick," declared Sid. "And I ought to know, because I've had a dozen fights with Buck in as many years. Fact is, they say we went at each other before we were able to walk, and that he pulled the only tuft of yellow hair out that I owned about then. He used to joke me, and boast that he had that yellow lock at home, tied with a string, just like an Indian would an enemy's scalplock. Oh! we've been at it, hammer and tongs, ever since. And just as you say, Dick, he never yet lost a fight or a race or a game but what he set up a howl that the other fellow cheated, or took an unfair advantage of him."

"But by this time the people of Riverport ought to be on to Mr. Buck, and know how little truth there is in his whine," remarked Fred.

"Well, a lot of them do," answered Brad, scornfully, for he was indignant over the small trick of the beaten coxswain; "but you know how it is, Fred. You'll always find a certain percentage of people in every place only too willing to think the worst of you, given half a chance."

"Oh! well, we don't have to bother our heads about it, I suppose," remarked Sid. "It's the same old story, nine-tenths believing in our side, and the others backing up Buck. But, fellows, we know what we know. That race was won through a streak of luck for our side, perhaps, and I'm sorry to even admit that; but there wasn't the first hint of foul play on our part."

"And given half a chance," said Corney Shays, "Buck would have easily punched a hole in our boat, if he really believed he was going to be licked. I've known him to do things twice as bad as that, and get away with it too, in the bargain. Accuse him of it, and he'd laugh in your face, and ask how you could prove anything."

"Let's drop Buck and his ways for a while, and think of our chances with those husky Mechanicsburg chaps," observed Brad, as they came in sight of the outlying houses connected with the home town, scattered along the river front.

"Oh! I know what you mean, Brad, all right," spoke up Colon, sensitive to anything like criticism; "every one knows that I weakened toward the end, and that's what threw us out of gear. Couldn't help it, if you killed me. That little trouble I had with the river yesterday must have still bothered me. Never had such a queer feeling grip me before, and hope never to again."

"Oh! I wouldn't bother myself about that, Colon," Brad hastened to say, consolingly; "given a few days to rest, and you'll be as tough as ever. That strain was heart-breaking, and nobody could blame you for wilting under it, after what you passed through yesterday. If I'd known we were going to meet that bunch, all primed to give us a race, perhaps I'd have thought it good policy to put Joe in the crew for the run home. But it all turned out right

after all."

"And we won, which was the best part of it!" crowed Corney.

"I differ with you there, Corney," declared Brad. "To me the best part of it was the game quality the whole crew showed. That was an eye-opener to me. I know now what you can stand; and next time won't be so much afraid to push you to the limit, if I feel that every fellow is fit."

"Another thing," remarked Fred, "that is pleasant to know, is the fact that luck broke in our favor. It's been my experience always, in nearly every game, when the teams are about even, that when luck takes to turning one way, that side always wins out. Everything comes their way. It's begun to like us, boys."

"And we sure have no kick coming," remarked Corney, with emphasis.

There were quite a few people waiting to see what was going to happen. They had known of Buck and his outlaw crew going up the river in their boat; and since the regular crew was expected down that afternoon, by putting things together, they rather guessed a race might result.

Some of these people had field glasses, and from the wild way they cheered Brad and his interested spectators of at least the conclusion of the race; for the river ran about straight for some distance up toward Mechanicsburg.

"Hello!" Brad called out to a party of five or crew, it might be suspected that they had been six schoolboys who seemed to be trying to crack their voices yelling, as they waved their hats, and one of them a pair of glasses; "did you see us trim Buck's bunch, Lossing?"

"You just bet we did, and you showed 'em up handsomely too," came the reply; "but what happened in their boat when they were in a dead heat with you?"

"Why, they were a quarter of a length ahead at the time," answered Brad, frankly. "We'd been sea-sawing it all the way down, first one leading, then the other. All at once one of their outriggers snapped off short, and that threw them into all sorts of confusion."

"Oh! that was it, eh? I had the glasses, but couldn't make out just what happened. But you *did* beat them anyhow, Brad?" called the other, jubilantly.

"You'll hear a howl from Buck, all right, Lossing," Brad went on, as they came in to the shore gently enough, this being their landing place.

"Well, we reckoned on that," laughed the other. "It wouldn't be Buck Lemington if he didn't make a kick. What was he yelling out after you, Brad?"

"Had the nerve to say we fouled his boat, and broke that outrigger, Lossing."

"Hasn't he the colossal nerve though?" the boy ashore shouted. "Why, I know for a dead certainty that the boats were at least three lengths apart at the time. That sure does make me snicker, Brad."

And before evening it might be set down as certain that two versions of the race would be circulating all through Riverport, one believed by nearly all the better element, and the other taken as truth by a few select persons who, from various reasons, thought it policy to back up anything done by Buck Lemington; or his father, the rich Squire, who had interest in several factories, and was moreover quite a politician in the community.

Fred waited around the boathouse until the Colon wagon arrived, bringing the rest of the boat club, and all their ordinary clothes as well.

Like the others of the crew, Fred dressed then, and along about dusk started for home, knowing that it was well on toward supper time, and his father must be in from his work.

Once more Fred was thinking of his own troubles, and heaving more than one sigh, as he found himself wishing again and again that something might happen to bring a new joy into the lives of his mother and father. They seemed to be losing hope; and the cares that gathered were beginning to make them look old before their time.

Oh! if only they could hear *something* from Hiram Masterson, the miner from Alaska, who had been so mysteriously spirited away just when he had determined to testify against his own rascally uncle, Sparks Lemington, and put the Fentons in possession of such information as would enable them to win the suit for the mine.

"But I suppose that would be too great happiness," he mused, as he drew near his home, in the window of which he could see the light placed there by his mother.

He opened the door, and then stood there transfixed, because of what he saw; for his mother was in the arms of his father, her head pillowed on his shoulder, and she seemed to be weeping.

But when she raised her head at Fred's entrance the astonished and delighted boy saw immediately that it must be great joy that brought those tears, and caused this deep emotion, for upon that dear face he could read a new-born happiness.

And again he remembered what he had said to his mates on the crew about luck having chosen to hunt them out as favorites; for it even seemed to wait him at home.

CHAPTER XI

NEWS FROM OVER SEA

"Oh Fred, it's come!" exclaimed his younger sister, Kate.

"What, news from Hiram?" demanded the boy, his heart beating rapidly with the sudden excitement.

"That's it; and he says——" began the impulsive girl, when her mother's voice restrained her:

"Wait, and let Fred read the letter for himself, Kate; he will understand it much better, I am sure; for in your present condition I doubt whether you are capable of making anything clear."

Releasing herself from the arms of her smiling husband, she held out a crumpled sheet of paper to the eager Fred. He saw that there were only a few lines of writing on it, and that even this was done unevenly, as though the one who used the pen wrote under unfavorable conditions, perhaps on the edge of his bunk aboard a sailing vessel.

This was just what Fred read:

"On the way home by easy stages, and under an assumed name, so as not to arouse the suspicion of those who have kept me away. Determined to right a great wrong that has been done you. Willing to testify in your behalf. Be sure and keep secret, especially from the one you have to fear.

"YOU KNOW WHO."

"Where is the envelope this came in, mother?" Fred asked the first thing; for he found nothing about the letter itself to indicate from what part of the world it might have come.

"I was very careful to keep it, Fred," Mrs. Fenton replied; "for I knew you would want to see it."

No sooner had Fred glanced hastily at the postmark than he whistled to indicate his astonishment.

"Why, it was mailed at Hong Kong, and a whole month ago," he cried.

"Yes, away at the other side of the world," his father remarked. "And from the tone of the letter I feel satisfied that our troubles will soon be of the past; for Hiram Masterson is tired of being kept away from his native land, just because he wants to tell the truth; and he is coming soon to testify for us."

"This is great news, mother, father!" declared Fred, tears standing in his eyes as he contemplated the joyous faces of those he loved so well, for the careworn expression had fled from the countenances of his parents; and he thought both of them looked ten years younger, such is the mission of happiness.

"I'll never hear the name of Hong Kong again in school, but what I'll just love it," declared Kate, laughing and crying by turns; "because it sounds so good right now."

"A month ago he wrote this," continued Fred, reflectively. "Why right at this time Hiram must be on the way to America on his vessel, and may show up here any old time. He says he

is sailing under another name, so they won't know him. After all, Hiram has turned out to be a good friend of ours, father, even if he does belong to that Lemington family that has given us so much trouble."

"Oh there may be good branches on even the poorest tree," remarked gentle Mrs. Fenton. "So it is with families. There's little Billy, now, Buck's brother; didn't you say he was as nice a youngster as you ever met, Fred?"

"That's so, mother; and I'll try and not forget again. But I suppose we ought to do what Hiram says, and keep quiet about this latest news. Why, I believe that if people only knew we had a letter postmarked Hong Kong, they'd talk about it; and if that suspicious Squire Lemington heard, he'd put things together, so as to make out a true story."

"How that imagination of yours does take wings, son," said Mr. Fenton, with a laugh. "But you're right about one thing; we must tell no one. Remember, Kate, not a single word to your closest chum."

"Oh! don't be afraid I'll tell, father!" declared the girl.

"And I promise that not even Sid shall know," Fred put in; "though I'd trust any secret with him, for he's as close-mouthed as an oyster, Sid is."

"But even Sid might talk in his sleep, or let a hint fall," Kate insisted; "and you know he's got a sister, Mame, who loves to gossip a little—I kind of think all girls do," she added, with a little giggle, and shrug of her shoulders.

"Won't Hiram have a story to tell when he gets back again?" observed Fred, who, boy-like, thought of the adventures the kidnapped miner must have passed through during his long enforced absence.

"I imagine," Mr. Fenton observed, "that the harsh treatment he has endured at the hands of those who are in the pay of the company his uncle controls must have had just the opposite effect upon Hiram to what they intended. He feels very bitter toward them, and is more determined than ever to beat them at their game. I was always told that when evil men fall out honest ones get their due, and I believe it now."

"I don't believe Hiram can be so very wicked," interposed Mrs. Fenton, gently. "When he came down here from Alaska to help his uncle by giving false testimony, he must have been laboring under some wrong notion of how things stood. Since then he has seen a great light, and his better nature has come to the front."

"Then it was what Fred did for him when he first came, that opened his eyes," declared Kate. "You remember, mother, if it hadn't been for our Fred, Mr. Masterson would have found himself in serious trouble."

"Yes, that must have been the entering wedge," Mr. Fenton remarked, nodding his approval of the girl's idea. "It set Hiram to thinking; and once a wavering man does that, the good in him gets a chance. But come, this doesn't look like supper. I didn't think I was one bit hungry; but now I'm fairly ravenous."

"And the splendid news has taken my desire to eat away," Mrs. Fenton said; but she immediately started to get the meal on the table, her face radiant with the new happiness that had come.

At the table Fred was seized with a sudden thought, pursuing which he turned to his sister to ask a few questions.

"Do you remember who gave the letter to you at the office, Kate; was it that red-headed clerk, Sam Smalling?"

"Why, to be sure; he always hands out the mail at the General Delivery window," she replied, without hesitation.

"He's an inquisitive sort of a fellow, I've found," Fred went on; "and I've even seen him reading post cards that pass through. Stop and think, Kate, did he mention the fact to you that you were getting a *foreign* letter this time?"

"Why, yes, that is just what he did, Fred," Kate answered quickly; "how could you guess such a thing now?"

"Oh! I just remembered hearing him make remarks to several persons when they came for mail, which told me Mr. Sam Smalling kept tabs on about all that went on in Riverport. It must keep his brain working all the time, trying to remember when Susie Green expects a letter from her aunt away up in Basking Ridge; and if Eph Smith has written home to his ma

regularly once a month. But joking aside, sis, what did he say to you about it?"

"Why, as near as I can remember, Fred, he only remarked that he noticed our far-away cousin in Hong Kong had finally taken a notion to write to us. I thought he was trying to be smart, you know; and to carry the joke along I laughed, and said it was too mean for anything the way Cousin Jim had treated us for a long time; and that it was about time he wrote."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Fred, laughing. "And what did he say to that, Kate?"

"I didn't wait to hear," she replied; "but when I went out of the door I looked back, and saw Mr. Smalling patting himself, as if he thought he had the greatest mind ever, to be able to just guess everything."

"Well, I reckon you've spiked his guns, then," Fred went on. "You see, he has a younger brother who trains with that crowd of Buck's; and I didn't know but that Sam might make some mention of the mysterious letter we got to-day from the other side of the world. And then, in some way, it might get around to the ears of Buck, who would carry it to his father; because, I guess every little thing about the Fentons is of *some* interest up there at the big house."

"Fred, if you make up your mind to be a lawyer, I think you have a future ahead of you," declared his father, proudly; "because your reasoning powers are first-class. But the chances of the post office clerk mentioning the fact now are so remote, that we need not give it a thought."

The evening that followed was one of the happiest the Fentons had known for a long time. There was much to talk about, and a spirit of coming joy seemed to pervade the very atmosphere of that humble cottage home, that certainly never brooded over the much more pretentious establishment of Sparks Lemington.

And when, rather later than usual, Fred went up to his small room close under the rafters, where rainy nights he could listen to the patter of the drops on the roof just over his head, he believed that he must be the happiest boy in all Riverport.

And in his new found joy his thoughts turned to the chum who was worrying so much over his troubles; so that Fred resolved on the morrow to try and do something to help poor Bristles Carpenter.

CHAPTER XII

BRISTLES HAS AN IDEA

The following morning, as Fred was tinkering around, fixing up some of his traps, he heard the whistle of one of his chums outside. Poking his head out of the window, and wondering why, if it should be Sid, he did not come upstairs without any knocking at the door, he saw to his surprise that it was Bristles.

"Hello! Fred! Can I climb up, or will you come down here?" the latter called out.

"Walk right into my parlor, said the spider to the fly," replied Fred, being in rare good humor himself, and wishing he could do something to help Bristles.

The other boy soon made his appearance in Fred's little den of a room; which, however, was mighty comfortable, and as neat as wax. Mrs. Fenton was a good housekeeper, and she had always trained her children to never leave things "at sixes and sevens," as she termed it.

Fred saw that Bristles was considerably excited over something or other. And of course the chances were that it must concern his own personal affairs. Having made a confidant of Fred, and gained more or less benefit because of his sympathy and advice, Bristles was rushing over the first thing with further news.

"You look worked up, Bristles," Fred remarked, as the other threw his cap on the table, and dropped down in the rocker.

"Well, I am, for a fact," the visitor replied, nodding his head to emphasize his remark.

"Anything happened to make you feel better?" suggested Fred; "has there been another

mysterious robbery over at your aunt's house, so that she can understand you didn't do it, because you were far away this time?"

Bristles heaved a big sigh.

"Huh! no such good luck as that, Fred," he remarked; "I only wish it was that way. P'raps it will be, just as you say. But an idea hit me in the night, when I was a-lyin' there, trying to get to sleep again. I don't like to be awake when it's only three o'clock, you know. Makes me feel bad in the morning. And I was tired as all get-out last night, after what we did yesterday up at camp and on the way down, when we beat Buck's bunch so neat in that race."

"Hold on, stick to the text," remarked Fred; "you're the greatest fellow to ramble all over the lot when you start to telling anything. Now you said you had run across an idea; let's hear it, then; for I reckon it must have something to do with your trouble, Bristles?"

The other actually grinned, showing that he was feeling more hopeful on this bright, sunshiny, summer morning, at any rate.

"That's right, Fred, it had a whole lot to do with it!" he burst out. "Say, I've discovered who's been cribbing all those pretty little stones up at my aunt's!"

"You don't mean it?" cried Fred, really taken aback.

"Yes, I do, now," went on the excited Bristles; "and you couldn't guess it in a year of Sundays. It just seemed to pop into my head while I was lying there on my back, grunting because I couldn't get to sleep, or take my mind off Aunt Alicia and her queer old house."

"Now, don't stop like that, and chuckle, Bristles; but go on telling, if you want me to sit here and listen." Fred prodded his chum with his finger as he said this, to bring him to his senses.

"It's playing a mean game on the old lady, too, to take those opals so slick, and give her all that bad feeling; but if she *will* keep such tricky pets, why she's got to pay for it, that's all, Fred."

"Pets!" burst out the other.

"Sure thing," laughed Bristles; "that wise old crow's the guilty thief!"

"The black raven that she brought over from England, you mean?" Fred went on, rather staggered himself by what Bristles had said, and yet discovering an element of possible truth in it.

"Yes, the old chap that cocks his head on one side when you come in, and examines you over from head to foot, just like he meant to say, 'If you're not good looking you're not wanted here!' Oh! he's a gay old villain, I just tell you! And, Fred, mark my words, he's the scamp who's been taking Aunt's opals."

"Why, I do remember reading, more than a few times, that crows and ravens have been known to fly away with bright spoons, and all sorts of things that seem to catch their fancy; but I never heard of a bird stealing from its mistress, and opals at that."

"Well, that's what this one is doing, you mark me," Bristles said, positively. "Why, just see what a great chance the old boy has. He finds the door open into the parlor once in a while, and just hops in, takes up one of the shiny stones, and carries it away to some place where he keeps his treasures. I just bet you now he's been carryin' on that way a long time, and Aunt never noticed that things were disappearing till I began to come over to see her."

"You think so, do you, Bristles?" remarked Fred, still pondering over the matter, and wondering in his mind whether it could really be an explanation for the peculiar little mystery that had given his chum so much heart-pain.

"Why, it's a dead open-and-shut cinch that the answer to the conundrum lies in that silly old black bunch of feathers," declared the other, conviction in his voice. "I looked up all about ravens in our big 'cyclopædia as soon as I got downstairs this morning; and the more I read, the stronger my mind got that Black Joe *must* be the guilty one."

"Will you go and tell your aunt, and ask her to make a search for his hiding-place?" Fred inquired.

"Well—er—no; not just that," answered the other, slowly, and watching Fred out of the tail of his eye; "fact is, I'm afraid she'd laugh at me, and say it was only another excuse for me to get inside her house. Now, if *you* could drop in to see Aunt Alicia on some excuse or other, Fred, perhaps you might get a chance to look around, and find out where Black Joe keeps his little crop of treasures hid."

Fred burst out into a laugh.

"Oh! I see, you want me to be the one to take chances; is that it, Bristles?" he demanded.

"Well, I didn't think you'd mind doing a little more for a poor fellow, as you've been such a help already to me, Fred; and then, she won't accuse you of wanting to do anything wrong like she might me. Fact is," he went on eagerly, so as to better carry his point, "she once said she kind of liked your looks, after you'd been in there with me. I sure believe you made a hit with Aunt Alicia; because, as a rule, she doesn't care much for boys, you know."

"Hold on, Bristles," said Fred, laughingly; "that won't wash a bit. You're giving me some taffy now, just to make me agree to visit your aunt. But, honest, I don't care to take the chances. My reputation is pretty good up to now; but it might go to flinders if anyone said I was taking things that did not belong to me."

"But, good gracious! Fred, she wouldn't have any reason to accuse you!" Bristles burst out, very much disappointed because his pet scheme promised to meet with a hitch so early in its development.

"You forget one thing?" said Fred, soberly.

"Perhaps I have, because, you see, I'm all excited; and it isn't apt to leave a fellow in decent trim for thinking. But what was it I forgot, Fred; tell me that?"

"Why, perhaps one or two of the balance of those opals might take a notion to disappear about the same time I dropped in to see your aunt, without any invitation to do it. And in that case she'd just naturally think you'd put me up to keeping the queer business going. I'd hate to have her think that of me, and much worse send word to my father and mother that I was a thief!"

"I should say so," declared Bristles, gloomily. "Bad enough to have her say that I was; and that's all in the family, you see. I never once thought of that, believe me, Fred. Wouldn't have asked you to take such chances, if I had. 'Course it wouldn't be fair, and I'm a selfish feller for hinting at it."

"I don't think so, Bristles," Fred went on, consolingly. "It looked good to you, because you never thought of the chances of another raid being made on your aunt's opals. But perhaps you might have your mother go over and see Miss Alicia. She could mention what you thought, and even if the old lady did pretend to scoff at the idea, it would put a flea in her ear, so perhaps she'd keep an eye on Black Joe."

"I'll think about it, Fred. I don't fancy dragging my mother into the game if it can be helped. I'd like to lift the lid myself, and then have the laugh on Aunt Alicia. Some day, perhaps, she'll be sorry she thought so mean of me, and wouldn't listen to my defense. You wait and see. I'm going to get at the bottom of this thing if it takes me all summer."

"Well, General Grant got there in the end, and let's hope you'll be as lucky, old fellow," said Fred, cheerfully. "Anyhow, that was a bright thought about Black Joe; and it would be a jolly story to tell if it did turn out that way."

"Why, right now you more'n half believe it yourself, Fred!" cried Bristles.

"It's worth thinking about," was the noncommittal answer Fred made.

"Oh! by the way," his visitor suddenly exclaimed, "while I was on my way over here I met Corney, who said he'd heard the Mechanicsburg fellows got their boat last night."

"Good for that," remarked Fred, with satisfaction. "Now both crews can get busy, and whip themselves in shape for that big race later on. I expect we'll do much better next time. Colon wasn't himself at all, after being nearly drowned only the day before. But he'll come around all right; and when he's in trim there isn't a huskier fellow in the Riverport school."

"We practice again this afternoon, don't we?" asked Bristles.

"That was the programme last night, Brad told us," replied Fred.

"Well, I only hope I get relief from this cloud that's hangin' over my head all the time," Bristles went on, sighing again. "It's just like the toothache, Fred; you suffer, and know it means goin' to the dentist's chair; but how you hate to go and get her yanked out! But once you make up your mind, and the job's done, how glad you feel you went; eh? Well, some bright day, I'm hoping, I'll feel just as happy as if I'd had a tooth drawn," and Fred was compelled to smile at the homely way his chum illustrated the condition of his feelings, though he understood just how Bristles felt.

CHAPTER XIII

A CALL FOR HELP

"I hope you take a notion to get your mother to go around there some time to-day," Fred went on to say, as his visitor got up to leave.

"Perhaps I might," Bristles admitted; though he shook his head as if the idea did not wholly appeal to him.

"She could smooth things over a whole lot, you see," Fred continued; "and then, if by some luck, another of the little gems has disappeared since your aunt sent that note over, your mother would be able to show Aunty how unjust she had been when she hinted that you'd taken the others."

"Yes, it looks that way, Fred; and I'm obliged to you for giving me the hint," said Bristles. "But I want to think this over again. I'm going back home and stay there the whole morning, doing some high and lofty work with my head. What's the use of having brains if you can't make 'em work for you. So-long, Fred. You're sure the handy boy when it comes to making a feller see things in a new light. But I still believe it's old Black Joe, the little villain!"

After he had gone, the matter was often in Fred's mind, and he really began to grow quite excited while thinking about it.

"It may be stretching things a whole lot to believe a bird could be so smart as to take those stones," he said to himself, seriously; "but anyhow, the opportunity was there before Black Joe, if he wanted to try it. I remember that when the old lady showed me those opals, and told me how they were taken from a mine in Mexico where she had sunk a heap of money, she put them back on the cabinet shelf, and they were just lying in a little bowl with some other curiosities she had. Yes, Black Joe could fly up there, and pick out what he wanted, sure enough."

Somehow the thought was still strong in Fred's mind when, later in the morning, he started out to go over to see what Sid Wells might be doing. And it even took him out of his way, so that instead of making his usual short cut across lots to his chum's house, he passed along the street where Miss Muster (the boys called her Miss Mustard on account of her peppery temper) lived.

He even turned his head while passing, and looked in toward the rather expensive building (for a small place like Riverport) where the old maid lived alone with her colored "mammy" and her several pets.

He could see the big bulldog that was chained to his kennel, placed under the windows of the room the maiden lady slept in. Yes, Beauty was asleep on the top of his box then, curled up as if not "caring whether school kept or not."

"Boy! boy, come over here! I want you!"

Fred at first thought that it was the talking bird calling to him in this way, for he had heard Black Joe rattle along just like an educated poll parrot. Then he recognized the shrill tones of Miss Muster; and at the same moment caught sight of the maiden lady.

She was standing on her broad porch, and beckoning to him.

Being close to the gate, he pressed the latch, and passed through into the yard, where there were a great many flowers. Possibly Fred felt a queer little thrill as he walked toward the porch, where Miss Muster awaited him. He remembered the proposal Bristles had made, and which he had seen fit to turn down.

The old lady was peering at him through her glasses.

"Oh! you are the boy who was in here with my—er—nephew that time?" she remarked; and at first Fred thought she was about to say she had no use for anyone who would keep company with Bristles, but she did not, much to his relief.

"Yes, ma'am, I remember being in here with Bris—er—Andy Carpenter, once," Fred remarked. "And you were kind enough to show me a lot of mighty interesting things, too, Miss Muster. What can I do for you this morning, ma'am?"

The sharp face softened a little, and the faintest shadow of a smile crept over the old maid's features.

"Let me see, what's your name?" she asked.

"Fred Fenton, ma'am. We have not been in Riverport much more than a year. I think my mother said she met you a while ago, down in the grocery, and had a nice talk with you."

"I remember, and a fine little lady Mrs. Fenton is, to be sure. If she is your mother, boy, you've good cause to be satisfied. And I wouldn't say that about many women, either. But I was just wanting a little assistance, and called to the first person who happened to be passing along the street. My old servant is laid up to-day with an attack of lumbago; and the gardener is off on an errand that will take him two hours. Could you give me a few minutes of your time, Fred?"

"Why, yes, ma'am, sure I can. I was only going over to look up a chum, and talk about the chances we have in a boat race that is going to come off soon. What do you want me to do, Miss Muster?"

She looked at him again, with that suspicious gleam in her eyes. Somehow, Fred could not help feeling a little indignant. Because she chose to think the worst of her poor innocent nephew was no reason why Miss Muster should believe ill of every fellow.

He was almost tempted to say what he thought, and free his mind. Perhaps, then, she might understand that even a boy has feelings, and can suffer mentally, as well as bodily.

But on second thought Fred wisely kept his peace. There might be a better way to teach the old maid a needed lesson than by sharp talk, which would only serve to make her feel more bitter toward "upstart boys" in general.

Evidently Miss Muster must have gained a favorable impression from her survey of the lad, whom she had called inside.

"I guess after all there *is* a difference in boys," she muttered, much to the secret amusement of Fred, who could easily imagine that she was comparing him with poor Bristles, and evidently much to the disadvantage of the latter.

He waited for her to speak, and wondered whether she wanted him to do something in the garden that possibly old Jake had neglected to look after, before going upon his errand; or if he would get an invitation to enter that big house again.

And as he involuntarily glanced toward the spot where the ugly-looking bulldog, called Beauty by his mistress, was now stretching his broad-beamed body, after his recent nap, Fred resolved to draw the line there. If she wanted him to approach the defender of the manse, he thought he would be showing the proper discretion if he politely but positively declined.

"Are your shoes clean, Fred?" she finally asked, looking down at his feet while putting the question.

"Why, yes, ma'am, they seem to be. There is no mud; and I'm in the habit of keeping my shoes clean at home," he replied, understanding from this remark that it must be the house, and not the garden, where his task awaited him.

"Then come into the house with me," she continued, as if thoroughly satisfied with her scrutiny.

Fred took off his cap and walked up the steps leading to the broad veranda. He would not have been a real boy had he not speculated as to what the lady wished with him. And it was in this frame of mind that he followed her into the wide hall of the house, which was to Bristles the home of mystery and the seat of all his trouble.

"Come right into this room, Fred," said Miss Muster, leading the way into what he remembered to be her living room, where she sat most of the time she was home, reading, writing letters, and paying attention to her business matters; for she had considerable money invested, and insisted on looking after the details herself, rather than trust a lawyer with them.

The first thing Fred saw upon entering was the pet cat, a big Persian, with long hair, and a handsome face. Then a restless movement from above called his attention to the raven, perched upon a curtain fixture, or pole, close to the ceiling, and, looking down wisely at them as they entered.

Fred immediately wondered whether he could be looking at the sly thief, who had been secretly making way with the old maid's treasures, as he noted the cunning aspect of Black Joe.

Miss Muster shook her finger angrily at the bird.

"Now we'll see whether you can defy me so impudently, you sly baggage!" she remarked, in rather a tart tone; and it burst upon Fred that, singularly enough, his unexpected visit to the mansion of the rich old maid was evidently in connection with something that had to do with Black Joe.

Why, it really looked as though the luck that had come to the Fentons only the day before might still be following him, even in his desire to do his chum a good turn.

Perhaps the golden opportunity to find out something about Black Joe's tricks might be close at hand. How little he had dreamed of this when leaving his home only a few minutes before.

"Once in a great while," the lady went on to explain, "Joe gets a stubborn fit, and refuses to mind when I tell him to come to me. It always exasperates me; and twice before I've sent for the gardener to come and get the step-ladder, so that he can chase the rascal from pillar to post until finally he would fall into my grasp. I punish him by chaining him fast to that perch for a week; and as a rule he seems to amend his ways for a long time. But the last occasion failed most miserably, I must confess. Do you think you are strong enough to carry the step-ladder up from the basement, Fred?"

Fred had some difficulty in keeping his face free from a smile. The idea of her doubting his muscular ability, after all the athletic exercises he practiced; but then of course Miss Muster would not know that; so he only replied that he believed he would have no difficulty in doing all she required.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MISSING OPALS AGAIN

Following out the injunctions of Miss Muster, Fred easily found where the step-ladder was kept in the basement. Nor did he have the slightest difficulty in carrying it up the stairs after he had discovered it.

He noticed that the lady was very particular to keep the door of the living room closed; and remembered that it had been in that condition at the time of their first arrival.

"The artful rogue," Miss Muster explained; "would be only too glad to fly out, and scour the entire house, laughing at me, and mocking me as though possessed of the spirit of evil our great poet Edgar Allan Poe gave to the raven. But now that you have succeeded in getting the ladder, we shall soon corner him."

Fred was highly amused at the comical way the old raven watched the preparations being made, looking to his capture. He would cock his head on one side, as he looked down, and occasionally utter some droll word that seemed to fit the occasion exactly.

Having had considerable experience in chasing the mutinous bird all over the big room, Miss Muster seemed to know just how to manage things in order to get results with as little waste of time as possible.

"Fred, you take the ladder, and place it under this picture," she went on to say; "he always comes back there after each little flight. Then, with the broom I will shoo him off that curtain pole. He does get so excited, and goes on at such a terrible rate. Why, I sometimes seem to suspect that some of those strange words he uses may be what that Portuguese sailor, from whom I purchased him while over in England, taught him."

And indeed, once she started the bird flying wildly about, Black Joe did shriek out all manner of phrases, some of which Fred could understand, while others he was able to make nothing out of.

Fred knew the part he was expected to take in capturing the rebellious raven. He crouched there on the step-ladder, waiting for his chance. Trust a lively, wide-awake boy for being able to outwit any raven that ever lived. Black Joe may have believed himself smart, but he could not match wits with an up-to-date lad.

Fluttering his feathers indignantly, and still giving vent to a volume of angry cries, the raven presently, just as his mistress had said would be the case, settled on the top of the big picture frame.

Instantly a hand shot upward, and there was a squawk that seemed to be choked off, as Fred's fingers closed around the body and neck of wily Black Joe.

"Oh! please don't hurt him any, Fred!" cried the lady, dropping the broom, and hurrying over to take the bird from Fred's hands.

Indeed, the boy was not sorry to get rid of the savage creature, which was trying its best to give him vicious pecks, and struggling with wings and claws to break away.

Once in the possession of Miss Muster, however, it seemed to become very meek. She stroked it, murmuring endearing words, and proceeded to fasten a nicked chain about one of its legs, so that it could not fly away from the perch over in the corner by one of the windows, that were covered with wire mosquito netting.

"That was very cleverly done, Fred," remarked Miss Muster, in a tone that rather caused the boy to alter the opinion he had formed concerning her. "Poor old Jake is so clumsy he makes half a dozen attempts before he is able to catch the speedy bird. Once he upset the step-ladder, and sprawled all over the floor. And upon my word, I have always believed that sad wretch there laughed at him. It sounded like it, at any rate."

She was beginning to thaw out, and Fred found himself wondering if, after all, under the surface, Miss Muster might not have more feeling than she chose to let people believe.

He actually began to like her. And more than ever did he hope that something might come along to enable him to bring about a better understanding between the rich old maid and her once favorite nephew, now under an unmerited cloud.

"Sit down a few minutes, Fred," she continued. "And get your breath back after all the exertion of lugging that heavy ladder up here. Then I'd like you to take it back to where you found it. And I think I've got a book you'd like to own. I did mean to give it to Andrew on his birthday next week, but I have changed my mind."

Fred did not exactly like the way she pursed up her thin lips when she said this. She was doing Bristles an injustice, he felt sure. Of course he could not decline to take the book she meant to present him with, as pay for his services; but in his mind, as he was carrying back the ladder, Fred was determined that he would consider that it belonged to Bristles, and not himself.

Once more he entered the living room, where he found Miss Muster waiting for him, seated in her easy chair. The raven sat on his perch, with all his feathers ruffled up, as though he knew he was in disgrace with his indulgent mistress.

"Here is the book I want you to accept from me, Fred, and I hope you will enjoy reading it," and as she said this she held out a volume, which he saw was just such as a boy who loved athletic games would most enjoy.

"Thank you, ma'am," he hastened to say, seeing his opening. "I know I will like it; but I feel bad because you meant it for Bristles—I mean your nephew, Andrew."

She frowned at once.

"Please forget all about him just now, Fred," she said, decisively. "It's hard work for me to keep him out of my mind; but I never could bear deception; and, as for a sly little rascal, who looks you in the face, and denies everything, when you know he is *positively* guilty, bah! I wash my hands of him forever. I could never believe him again, never!"

"But Miss Muster, he is innocent," said Fred; at which she started violently, and looked keenly at him.

"Then he has fooled you as well as me," she snapped. "I warrant you he is chuckling in his sleeve right now because he managed to deceive me so handily. Much he cares about my feelings, when I was beginning to have a foolish old woman's dreams about Andrew inheriting all my money, and making the name of Carpenter famous one of these days. Oh! it did hurt me cruelly, boy."

"But you are mistaken, ma'am, when you think he doesn't care," Fred went on hastily. "Why, he can't sleep nights, thinking about it."

"Well, that doesn't prove anything," Miss Muster remarked sarcastically. "A guilty soul often writhes when being punished; and I suppose my last note to my niece, his mother, brought him into a peck of trouble. I suppose now he does lie awake nights, thinking. Perhaps he wonders what he can do with my lovely opals, now he's got them. Or he may be scheming how to lay hands on the balance."

"He was in to see me this morning, ma'am," Fred observed.

"Oh! is that so? And do you think, Fred, that nice little mother of yours would like it, if she knew you were keeping company with a boy who was suspected of abusing the confidence of, his fond aunt, and helping himself to her possessions."

"I think," said Fred, stoutly, "that if she heard all Andy had to say, and saw how he suffered, she'd believe just as I do, that he is innocent, and never touched your opals, Miss Muster."

"Well, somebody did;" the old lady snapped; though evidently more or less affected by the staunch way Fred stood up for his chum; "does he have any idea who could have done it? Perhaps he thinks my old black Mammy did; or poor, but honest, Jake Stall. He was always a fanciful boy, and it might be he suspects I walk in my sleep, and go around secreting my own property?"

"No, ma'am he has never hinted at any such thing; but he says, while lying awake at three o'clock this morning, thinking and thinking how he could prove his innocence, he suddenly seemed to guess who it might be taking your pretty stones."

Fred turned and pointed toward the blinking raven as he spoke.

"Well, now," remarked Miss Muster, looking surprised, and then smiling disdainfully; "if that isn't just like Andrew for all that's out, to accuse my poor pet of doing so mean a thing. It is true, I know they will steal, and secrete such things as they particularly fancy; but I watch Joe closely. Besides, there is another good reason why he couldn't have taken those opals."

"Yes, ma'am," said Fred, when she paused as if for breath.

"He has been chained to that perch for more than a week past, and I only set him free this very morning. So you see how Andrew's brilliant theory falls to the ground. He must think up something else, if he hopes to prove his own innocence. I wish he could, indeed I do. My heart feels very heavy these days, for I was beginning to have some faith in boys. But say no more. If you are going, Fred, please come into the other room with me. I want to show you a splendid specimen of a saw, taken from a sawfish down in the West Indies, and sent to me. It is more than three feet long. You will be interested, because nearly all boys like everything pertaining to fishing."

So Fred followed her across the wide hall. She opened the door of the parlor, in which he remembered he had been on that former visit, at the time she showed him the little bowl containing the opals, and other valuable curios.

After opening the door Miss Muster passed in, Fred followed, but remained a respectful distance behind her, a fact for which he afterwards had reason to be thankful.

Some sudden notion seemed to take possession of the old lady for quickly crossing over she took down the little Japanese bowl, as if to count the opals remaining. Fred heard her give a startled cry. Then she hastily looked again, after which she set the bowl down on a table with a hand that trembled violently, and turning angrily upon Fred, she cried in her sharpest tones:

"He sent you here to follow up his miserable trick! All boys are thieves, and in spite of the lovely little mother you have, Fred Fenton, you are as bad as the rest of them!"

Fred could hardly believe his ears when thus accused. He stood there for several seconds, no doubt turning red and white by turns, as he tried to restrain the indignation that swept over him like a great wave.

CHAPTER XV

FRED'S BRAVE STAND

"Excuse me, ma'am, but surely you do not believe that," Fred managed to say in another minute; and his voice may have trembled a little with emotion; though his manner was as frank and fearless as ever, as he looked straight into the snappy black eyes of the angry old lady.

"Three more of the gems are gone, and they were here this morning, because I took them out in my hand, and counted them," she declared, furiously; yet beginning to feel uncomfortable under his steady look.

"But why should you even think that I took them, Miss Muster?" he demanded.

"Because—you are the only person besides myself who has been in this room the entire day. Mammy has been sick in bed since nine o'clock; and Jake Stall did not put a foot inside the house to my personal knowledge," but although she said this as if to signify that her mind was made up, Fred could detect a little hesitation.

She already began to realize the absurdity of the accusation.

"Stop and think, ma'am, and I'm sure your own sense will tell you that you are wronging me when you say that," the boy argued, with the same positive air of conviction that had made his father declare he would make a good lawyer, if ever he felt inclined to study for the bar.

"In what way, boy?" Miss Muster faltered.

"Because in the first place you called me into your house of your own accord, when I was passing. I wouldn't have come, only that you said you were in some sort of trouble, and needed help. Then, think again, Miss Muster—you opened this door which had been shut all the time; you hurried into this room, and over to that stand. You know, ma'am, I was never within six feet of that little bowl. Right now I am half way between the table and the door. My arms would have to be pretty long to reach over there, wouldn't they now, Miss Muster?"

She saw his point. And indeed, even before he clinched the fact in this ingenious way the old lady was ready to admit that she had been unwisely hasty in making that passionate accusation.

"I beg your pardon, Fred," she hastened to say, holding out her hand, which he did not hesitate to take. "I was entirely wrong, and acted from a foolish impulse when I found that, in spite of all my precautions, more of my opals had mysteriously disappeared. You could not have taken them had you wanted to; and I do not believe you would touch them if you had a dozen chances."

That was saying a good deal for Miss Muster; and Fred, who knew considerable about her sharp tongue, felt that he could hardly have been paid a higher compliment.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, smiling in a satisfied way. "If you please, then, we'll consider the thing closed. But that doesn't explain where the opals have gone to; does it?"

"Indeed, it does not," she replied. "I have been deeply stirred by this mystery; but Fred, believe me, it was not the value of the jewels one quarter so much as the shock given to my faith in human nature. I believed that the boy had been tempted beyond his power of resistance. Perhaps he wanted a certain sum of money for some purpose, and conceived the wicked idea that he could sell the stones, and get it that way. Oh! I would have gladly given him five, yes ten times their value, if only he had not given way to temptation."

"But Miss Muster," said Fred, quick to take advantage of his splendid opportunity; "you were just as sure, right now, that I was the thief; and yet how easy it was for me to prove my innocence. Wouldn't you be glad if I could do the same for my chum, Brist—I mean Andy?"

"Indeed, I would, Fred," she replied, warmly. "Do that, and there will be a whole shelf of boys' books come to your house, and an old woman's blessing in the bargain. But I'm afraid you'll find it a harder task than clearing your own skirts."

"But give me the chance, won't you, please, ma'am?" Fred insisted.

"Do you want to speak now about it, Fred?" she asked, eagerly enough.

"Why, yes, if you don't object, ma'am," he replied. "You know there's an old saying that 'it's best to strike while the iron is hot'."

"And you think that I'm pretty warm just now; is that it?" she asked, smiling a little in a way that made her thin face look almost friendly to the boy's imagination.

"Well, while we were on the subject I thought I'd like to call your attention to just one thing," Fred continued, persistently. "And after you've heard what I want to say, I think you'll agree with me that Brist—er, Andy, couldn't well have been guilty of taking these last opals. Why, he surely hasn't been in your house this whole day, has he, Miss Muster?"

"N—no, not that I know of, for a fact, Fred," she said, slowly.

"You keep the doors locked, don't you, ma'am, so Bristles, or any one else for that matter, couldn't have come in this morning, *after* you counted those things?"

"Yes, the doors are always locked. I am very particular about that. When the grocer's boy or the one from the butcher, come for orders, they wait in the kitchen while Mammy comes to me here, and we talk over what we need."

"Did that happen this morning, ma'am? Were both those boys inside here to-day?" Fred asked.

The old lady looked sharply at him when he said this.

"Ah! now I see in what direction your suspicions lie, Fred," she remarked, her face lighting up. "And if you can prove to my satisfaction that one of those boys took my opals, and they are returned to me, I will say nothing, do nothing, to prosecute the guilty one. Perhaps I was foolish to leave the door of opportunity open; the temptation within their reach. In that case the fault was partly mine."

"But I haven't accused anybody, ma'am; only I wondered whether one of those tradesmen's boys could have done it," Fred went on. "I'm going to look them up right away, and if I can recover the opals, and make the thief confess before you, then that will end the affair, will it?"

"So far as he is concerned, it will," the old lady answered; "but I shall never forgive myself for suspecting my niece's son of such a thing. Fred, do you suppose he would come to see me if you took him a message?"

"Who, Andrew?" exclaimed the delighted Fred. "Why, I'm as sure of it as that I draw breath. He'd almost fly here, he'd be that glad you believed him innocent. Do you want me to tell him, ma'am?"

"Wait, let it go for a little while. When I send you word, you may tell him all that has occurred here to-day, and how a silly old woman had her eyes opened to the truth by a clever boy. Meanwhile, please do not say a word to any one, will you, Fred?"

He was a little disappointed, because it would have given him so much pleasure to carry the joyful news to Bristles; but then, a little more delay could not hurt. And besides, it would give him a chance to look around, find out just what the habits of both the grocer's and the butcher's boy were, and possibly make the guilty one confess, on promise of immunity from punishment.

"I'll promise to do just whatever you say, ma'am, though I hope for the sake of poor Bristles you won't keep me waiting long," he answered.

"Fred, shake hands with me again," said the old maid, surveying him with kindling eyes. "I take back a lot of the mean things I've been thinking about boys these few days. There *is* something worth while in some of them. My better nature told me so right along. They're not all bad. I reckon now, you'd sooner do most anything than to break the fond heart of that fine little mother of yours; wouldn't you, Fred?"

"Oh! I haven't always been above suspicion, ma'am," Fred hastened to say, in confusion. "I'm no better than the average fellow, and I'm afraid I haven't always been just the boy I ought to be, either. I suppose I've made her feel bad a lot of times. But as to doing anything real wicked like stealing things—the worst I ever did was to get in some neighbor's orchard at night, when we had plenty of good apples at home."

Miss Muster laughed at that frank admission, as though she thought it quite an original plea for the boy in general.

"Oh! I understand all boys have failings like that," she said; "and sensible people wouldn't have them grow up like little saints. But Fred, I'm sure you'll never either as a boy, nor yet as a young man, do anything that would grieve your mother's heart. I'm ashamed of what I wrote my niece, and when I can muster up enough courage I'm going right over to her house, and explain. It makes me feel that it's worth while living, now that, through you, I've found that Andrew is innocent."

The way she said that last word told Fred that she was near the breaking-down point, and he thought he had better leave. He went away from that place with a heart that was considerably lighter than when he first started to pass the fence behind which the property of Miss Muster lay. He had had a wonderful experience, and from that time on must feel differently toward the old maid, whom the boys of Riverport always looked upon as hateful. She had shown him that, under the surface, she was a lovable woman after all, and possessed of a woman's heart, somewhat starved it is true, but still there.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TRIAL SPIN

"Which way are we going this afternoon for a practice spin?" asked Corney Shays, as he came alongside Fred Fenton.

There was a lively crowd around the long, low shed in which the new boat was temporarily quartered, while the new building, a start upon which had already been made, was being erected.

Several score of persons had gathered to see the boys row, for it began to look as if the whole community was going wild over the prospects of another school victory coming to Riverport. Baseball and football, it seemed, did not wholly satisfy the appetites of the now aroused Riverport athletes. They had beaten both of their rivals again this season on the diamond; and now, with Fall a long way off, this boating fever had seized upon them in its full strength.

Of course most of those present were boys and girls, enthusiastic believers in the fellows who carried the honor of good old Riverport school in their hand. It goes without saying that every member of the crew probably had at least one fair admirer present, who believed that without *him* the chances of victory must be mighty small indeed.

"Oh!" replied Fred, turning to greet Corney, who was a bit late in arriving, but was now dressed ready for business; "down-river, of course."

"Why do you say 'of course,' Fred?" persisted the other, who always wanted to understand everything he talked about, and who would go into details indefinitely until everything was plain. "There's a fine course up-river. You remember we rushed it with Buck's crowd. And I understand that it will like as not be made the official course when the great boat race is pulled off."

"That's true, Corney," Fred continued; "but there are several reasons why Brad has picked out the other side of the town for all our trial spins. First of all, you know the big, broad channel the Mohunk has for three miles between here and Paulding?"

"Sure I do; and a splendid place to make good speed, too," the other admitted.

"Then, again, if we kept going up the river we'd be apt to interfere with the practice of the Mechanicsburg fellows, who have no other course but that one between the two towns."

"And they'd be more apt to get a line on what sort of time we were making; isn't that so, Fred?"

"Just what I was going to add, Corney. Now you know about all the reasons Brad has for going down the river to-day, and other days as well."

"And is it true that he's got a three mile course all marked off?" asked Corney.

"Brad says he was down there with Colon on their wheels this morning," Fred went on to say. "They carried a long tape line, and as the road runs close to the bank of the river, they marked every eighth of a mile."

"How did they do it?" questioned the other. "You see I want to be posted, so I can get a pointer on our speed if I happen to look along the bank while we're making a spurt."

"That's the time you'd better keep your eyes glued on the coxswain, and the stroke oar, and not bother trying to find out for yourself what the speed is. Brad will look out for all that, Corney."

"But if you know, you're going to tell me, I hope?" pursued the tireless one.

"Oh!" Fred replied, with a laugh, "if you really want to know, I understand that every eighth of a mile is marked with a single small white rag; each quarter has a blue one; while the mile shows a plain red one. I hope some meddlesome fellow doesn't go to changing the signals on Brad, and make him think he's doing a record stunt. But I believe he's got some other secret sign of his own to depend on besides the flags."

He managed to break away just then; and as Corney saw that it was a very pretty girl who had beckoned Fred over, he made no attempt to question him further. In fact, Fred would have firmly declined to stay, because it was Flo Temple who had signalled.

Flo was the prettiest girl in all Riverport. She and Fred had long been the best of friends. It was he who always took her to singing school in winter, and to the school dances, sometimes given in country barns, where a long sleigh ride was necessary to reach the scene.

Once Buck Lemington had aspired to keep company, girl and boy fashion, with Flo. She and Buck used to squabble frequently, and then come together again for a short time. But with the arrival of Fred Fenton in town all this had been changed. Which was another reason for the enmity of Buck toward Fred.

Like some of the other girls Flo waved a little flag which was made of purple and gold silk, the adopted school colors for Riverport. This she used to considerable advantage; and Fred thought that when it came up against her face the contrast with her rosy cheeks and sparkling hazel eyes made her look prettier than ever.

"I suppose you will be getting away soon now, Fred?" she asked as he joined her.

"In five minutes we will launch the boat, and be off," he replied; "you see, all the subs are on hand, and ready to jump in if any one of the regulars fails to show up, or is taken sick. They'll wait around an hour or two while we're down-river. When we get back Brad's promised to take them off for a spin, and some exercise."

"Yes," she remarked, with a merry laugh, "I've been listening to some of them talking here. They do hope so much, poor fellows, that a chance will come along to put them on the regular crew. Why, I fairly believe they'd be happy if some of the rest of you had to leave town on vacations. But Fred, take care!"

She raised her forefinger as if in warning, and looked about her in quite a mysterious way when saying these last words in a low tone.

"What about, Flo?" he asked, not at all worried.

"I understand that the other crew went down the river an hour or two ago," she continued; and he could guess who was meant without asking.

"Well," he answered, "there's plenty of room for half a dozen crews to practice without interfering with each other. You remember the river gets very wide between here and Paulding. In fact lots of people always refer to it as 'the lake.'"

"But it would have to be an ocean that would be wide enough to keep Buck Lemington from carrying out any of his pet schemes, Fred. And somehow he seems to have picked on you as his especial enemy. It seems so strange, when I know you've never gone out of your way to do him the least harm."

The demure lassie looked at Fred out of the corners of her merry eyes when she said this, and it was hard for him to refrain from declaring that she ought to know that Buck's hatred for him began when she started to bestow her favors on the new boy in Riverport. However, Fred held himself in, and only remarked:

"It has happened that lots of times Buck and myself have been up against each other in what should have been friendly rivalry. Because fortune was generally kind to me, and allowed me to carry off undeserved honors, he has made up his mind that I'm always trying to do him out of everything he wants to win. And he never loses a chance to let me know what he thinks of me."

"You haven't been the one to suffer *very* much, up to now, Fred, if half that I hear is true," Flo went on to say, with a pride in her voice that somehow thrilled the boy, and made him very happy.

"Oh! I've had lots of good luck, I must say. But there's Brad beckoning, and I'll have to be going, Flo. Will you be here when we get back?"

"Perhaps," she answered. "I've an invitation to go in Judge Colon's new auto, to watch the practice from the shore down below. If you happen to see us waving, why please do your best to give us confidence. They say those big Mechanicsburg boys are fearfully strong, and can pull a professional stroke. And they have a coach, too, you know, Fred."

"We're going to have one too after to-day, for Corney's father used to be on a big college crew, and has consented to train us."

With this Fred had to hurry off, but he turned and waved his hand to *somebody* in the crowd just as he took his place, a few minutes later, in the eight-oared shell; nor did any one seem to doubt for whom the good-bye signal was intended; at any rate there was an unusual flutter to Flo Temple's purple and gold flag just about that time.

The crew quickly fell into the swing, and the boat fairly flew down-stream under their vigorous strokes. Brad, however, was keeping them down. He did not want to let everybody know just what Riverport could do. Doubtless more than a few of Mechanicsburg's admirers would be ready to take every opportunity possible to time the rival crew, so as to get a pointer with regard to their capacity. That could not be helped; but Brad was determined to be as cautious as possible.

Soon they were down to the broad stretch, where the little fluttering rags of various hues close to the edge of the water told the parts of the mile.

Here the coxswain thought it good policy to increase the stroke, and they were soon hitting up a lively pace. How splendidly the delicate boat flew over the water, just for all the world as a swallow skims along the surface of a pond! The boys were enthusiastic over their work, and Brad did not hesitate to give them the praise they deserved.

"We'll turn here, and pull up-stream," he said, as they rested for a few minutes. "That will come harder, and try you more. But it's all a part of the game. Once more, now, my hearties, with a will!"

They covered the distance up to what Brad had marked as the turning point, in better time than he had believed possible. A buoy had been floated to serve as the upper end of the course. Rounding this they shot down the river with tremendous velocity, as though striving for victory on the home stretch.

For some reason Brad took them down further than before, so that they even drew near the sharp bend before he gave the signal to stop rowing. The boat continued to glide along with the current, though gradually easing up.

And it was just at that moment, when the young oarsmen of Riverport were breathing hard after their recent exertions, that they heard a sudden crash as of splintering wood, immediately accompanied by a conglomeration of shouts, all in the plain, unmistakable voices of boys.

Startled, they stared at each other, as if not knowing what to make of it; and thrilled by the knowledge that danger must be threatening some fellows around the bend just below.

CHAPTER XVII

SNAGGED AND WRECKED

"What in the world's that?" exclaimed Dave Hanshaw.

"Sounds like some fellows might be in a pickle. Listen to 'em howl; would you?" cried Corney Shays.

"Isn't one of the lot whooping it up for help?" asked Fred.

"You're right, Fred; and we've got to get a move on, and turn that bend yonder, when we can see what's what. Ready, boys!" called out Brad, at which every young oarsman dropped back into his place; for they had been turning half around at the time, desirous of seeing what it all meant.

"Must be that Buck Lemington bunch!" sang out Sid, who perhaps had recognized one of the loud voices; for he and the bully of Riverport had been in conflict so often in the last twelve years, that it would be very strange if the excited tones of the other might not be known when heard.

"Then it's good-bye to that old college shell," declared Corney.

"You're right," asserted Dick Hendricks; "because that smash must have ended its days of usefulness forever."

As the signal to drop oars and pull was given, the boat once more took on new life, and

rushed down upon the nearby bend. When they shot around this, of course the coxswain was the only one who immediately saw the exciting scene presented. And it certainly spoke well for the discipline under which that novice crew labored that not a single one of them tried to twist his head around, in order to gain advance information.

They left details to Brad, knowing that they would quickly be upon the scene, and able to see for themselves, without a breach of discipline.

What Brad saw was just what he anticipated, but all the same it must have given the boy a thrill. Sure enough, the delicate boat which had once won a big college race, and had been kept for some years by the gentleman over in Grafton, simply because his dead son had rowed on the winning crew, was piled up on some sort of a hidden snag, or concealed rock, at a point where the swirling water must have warned any cautious coxswain to keep away.

Several boys were clinging to the wreck. Others were swimming around like rats deserting a sinking ship, two being already on the way to the nearest shore. And about every fellow was letting his lungs give full vent to his feelings; so that the racket was tremendous.

"Help! help! I can't keep up much longer! This way, fellers! Get hold of me!" one of those in the river shouted; spluttering over the words, as though he might already have swallowed a considerable quantity of water.

"Aw! let up on that squawk, Clem Shooks; can't you?" shouted Buck angrily, as he swam toward the fellow who declared that he was exhausted, and sinking. "Want any of that bunch to give you a hand? I'd see myself asking favors of Brad Morton or his crowd. We'll get you ashore, all right, never fear. Hi! there, Whitey, this way, and you too, Oscar. Give this ninny a helpin' hand and tow him to dry land."

Apparently Buck was in a towering rage. He had been steering the boat when it struck the snag, and hence must be held responsible for the accident that would deprive the outlaw crew of a racing craft for the remainder of the season.

There was not one of Brad's chums, however, but who felt sure that sooner or later the bully would try to put the blame on one of his companions. That seemed to be the natural way with him; a scapegoat was as necessary to Buck's manner of doing things as it was for him to take all the credit when success came along.

Some of those who clung to the wreck were, however, not averse to accepting assistance from the regulars of the Boat Club. Brad directed them how to hang on, and in this way towed them close to the shore.

When the water shoaled enough to admit of their standing up, with it only waist high he stopped the boat.

"That'll do for you, fellows," Brad said, pleasantly; "and we'll go back now for the other pair."

"Aw! you needn't bother yourselves about them," broke out Buck, who had managed, with the assistance of Whitey and Oscar, to get the weak-kneed Clem Shooks in the shallow water; "they're on the way right now."

It turned out to be as Buck said. The last pair, realizing that they would be apt to incur the anger of their leader if they waited to accept favors from those Buck hated so bitterly, had indeed abandoned the wreck, and were even then swimming toward the shore.

None of Brad's crew laughed, though the aspect of the wrecked ones was most forlorn, and doubtless they wanted to make merry.

"We're sorry for your accident, Buck," Brad ventured to say, in as pleasant a tone as he could ever use when addressing the boy he detested so much deep down in his heart.

"Nobody wants you to be sorry!" grated the other, in an ugly humor.

"We've been talking about that race your bunch gave us yesterday, and honestly we hoped it would be repeated," Brad went on to remark; for he fancied he could understand how such a disaster must upset any fellow; and he tried to make excuses for the surly temper Buck was displaying.

"Oh! let up on that sort of talk; won't you?" growled the other. "I s'pose you'd just want to use us as a practice crew; hey? Well, it's off, anyhow; and all owin' to Clem Shooks here taking a crab, just when I was starting to steer clear of that nasty snag!"

"Why, I nev——" the astonished Clem started to exclaim, though he had swallowed so much water that it was difficult for him to get his breath as yet; when the irate bully turned

on him like a flash, and shook his big fist threateningly.

"Don't you go to denyin' it, now, Clem Shooks!" he roared, furiously. "I ought to know, hadn't I, when I saw the whole thing? And didn't you get throwed further than any of the rest? That was because you didn't have any oar left to hold on to. You ought to be made to pay for the boat, that's what. No back talk now, or else I'll show you who's boss here. Button up your lips, d'you hear, Clem Shooks?"

And poor Clem, who was doubtless as innocent as he claimed, dared not speak further. By degrees the blame would be settled on his shoulders, without his venturing to protest in the hearing of the bully.

Fred and his chums exchanged significant looks. It was as much as saying: "Didn't I tell you Buck would fix it all right?" They knew the ways of the bully to perfection. And if Buck noticed the nods and sly grins, he thought it good policy to pay no attention to them just then.

"Well, since we're not wanted here any longer, let's be going, boys," remarked Sid, as usual thoroughly disgusted with the actions of the bully.

"Good-bye then!" sneered Buck, and Bristles noticed with a sudden thrill that he looked at the trim boat belonging to the regulars with a malicious gleam in those black eyes of his.

They once more backed into the deeper water, and were soon alongside the wreck.

"Shall we tow it ashore for them, boys?" Asked Dick.

"What say?" Brad remarked.

"Better leave it alone, if you know what's good for you," Sid spoke up. "Once you touch it, and there's no telling what Buck will try to tell people. Perhaps he'd even say we ran into him, and did the damage. But I reckon some people ashore saw it all; for there's Judge Colon's auto, standing up yonder; and they've got their field-glass leveled this way. It's Flo Temple, too, who's doing the looking."

"Better leave it alone then, fellows," Brad went on to say, being convinced by the logic of Sid that it was dangerous business meddling with anything belonging to Buck Lemington, even in a spirit of sporting fairness. "It's so smashed anyway, that it'll never again be worth fixing up. Too bad, too, for it was a boat with a history."

"How d'you reckon it happened?" asked Colon; "for of course Clem Shocks never caught that crab, or some of the other fellows would have jumped on him? Didn't you all see how silly they looked when Buck was accusing Clem? They knew, as well as he did, that it wasn't so, but not a single fellow had the grit to declare the truth."

"Oh!" Brad went on to remark, "Buck may have heard us coming around the bend, and forgot for a few seconds to keep as bright a lookout for snags as he ought. So they ran on this one at full speed. Say, wasn't that a fierce crash, though?"

Once more rounding the bend that shut out all sight of the wreck, and the forlorn members of the outlaw crew, who would have a walk of five miles and more before they could get to town with their sad news, the regulars put in some time in diligent practice.

"You're rounding out in fine shape, fellows," Brad declared enthusiastically, as they finally started up-river, bound for home. "To-morrow we're promised the valuable assistance of Mr. Shays, who knows the ropes from beginning to end. He'll be apt to give us a heap of valuable information, and correct a lot of our blunders; for I know we can do better work than this, once we get on to the right swing."

It was in this happy frame of mind that they came in to the little float that had been made by using a number of empty water-tight oil barrels; and from which the boat was to be launched, as well as taken from the water.

Every one of them felt thankful it had not been their craft that had met with disaster on this sunny afternoon.

Of course, when the startling news was told to the crowd that lingered around the boat shed, it created a big sensation. As Buck really had no admirers present, few felt very sorry for him. He had long been the terror of the town, and every decent boy and girl went in his company as little as possible.

CHAPTER XVIII

LYING IN WAIT

Fred, after some time, saw that Bristles was lingering nearby while he chatted with Flo and some of the others. He fancied that the boy with the mop of hair was trying to catch him alone, as though he wanted to say something in private.

That caused Fred to remember that he knew something which Bristles would give considerable to hear; and it also pained him to think that his promise to Miss Muster would prevent him from telling, until she gave the word.

But then perhaps it might be something not so personal that Bristles wished to say to him. Fred had noticed the way the other looked, at the time they were leaving Buck and his shipwrecked crew down the river. And perhaps he had made the same discovery that Bristles had.

Flo Temple, about that time, declared she must be running home, and left, accompanied by some of the other girls, her chum, Cissy Anderson, whom Sid liked; and Mame Wells, the little hoyden sister of Sid, who seemed to be more than, half boy, because she dearly loved to play baseball, ice hockey, go fishing, and even aspired to go hunting when she got older, and her father would buy her a gun.

Thus Fred saw no reason why he should any longer hold aloof from Bristles, who immediately came bustling up to him, with a mysterious wink, and drew him aside.

"I made up my mind I ought to say something to a few of the fellows, Fred," he began, by remarking; "and you're one of the select. Colon and Corney I've seen already, and they're of the same opinion as myself."

"Well, what's all this row about, Bristles?" asked Fred, somewhat amused; and at the same time pleased because the other did not seem about to put questions to him which he might find it difficult to dodge, without arousing suspicion.

"Why, about Buck, to be sure," replied the other, confidentially.

"But since his boat has gone to flinders, isn't he out of the game altogether?" demanded Fred.

"That's just it, Buck being out of business is the kind of a fellow who can't bear to see anybody else prospering. He won't have a boat for the whole summer; and we have. All the fun's going to come our way. That makes Buck grit his teeth, and feel ugly. Are you following me, Fred?"

"Sure I am, and it might be I understand what you're going to say better than you think I do," answered the one addressed, with a smile on his face.

"Looky here, did you see how Buck glared at our boat when we started off, and did you notice the cunning expression, almost like a grin, that came over his face? Tell me that, Fred Fenton."

"Yes, I saw all that," answered Fred.

"And what did you think it stood for?" queried Bristles.

"Oh! I just kind of thought Buck was wishing we'd run on a snag, the same way he did, and lost our boat, too, replied Fred, promptly; at which Bristles chuckled.

"I see you're on, all right, Fred," he continued; "but as you don't know Buck quite as well as some of the rest of us, you're not on to his curves as much. Now, I'm willing to risk my reputation on it that when Buck eyed our boat, and then let that half grin come on his black face, he was thinking how easy it would be to make sure that something *did* happen to upset all our calculations."

"Do you mean he'd put a snag in the course, so that Brad would run on it, never dreaming there was such a thing there?" asked the indignant Fred.

"Huh! worse than that," pursued Bristles with vehemence; "Buck wouldn't stop a minute to hack our boat to pieces, or even set fire to that old shed, if he believed he could do it on the sly, and not be caught!"

Fred saw that his chum meant every word of what he said. The idea was startling.

"That's a pleasant lookout then, we've got before us, Bristles," he observed.

"All right, it's what I believe, just the same," the other went on, firmly. "If we let things just slide along I give you my word some fine night we'll be aroused by the fire whistle, and get down here in time to find the boathouse ablaze, and our new shell ruined for keeps."

"If that seems to be the opinion of several of the boys, we ought to do something to prevent it," Fred declared, positively.

"That just brings me to the point," ventured Bristles. "Are you in with our little bunch—Colon, Corney, perhaps Sid, and me?"

"I'm ready and willing to do anything I can to defend the boat, if that is what you mean," came the ready response.

"Shake on it, then. Wait here till I send the other fellers around. Then we'll just have a little confab, and see what we can fix up. I'll sound Sid while we're coming along; though if you're in, he's sure to say yes, because he always sticks by you like a plaster."

A minute later Colon arrived, wearing a serious look; and then Corney followed. The three had just got started talking when Bristles hove in sight, bearing Sid along with him.

"Here we are, now, the whole big five," Bristles said, loftily, as he came up. "Now, let's go all over this thing, and see if we agree."

He again told what he had seemed to read upon the malignant face of Buck at the time they left him standing knee-deep in the river. Afterwards he called on Fred to describe what he had seen, and the impression it made on him at the time.

"You see!" Bristles cried, triumphantly, in conclusion; "both of us thought about the same thing. Buck is up to some meanness. He would be just delighted if we lost our boat, because he doesn't like to see anybody having a good time when he can't be doing the same. And as it isn't likely we'll hit a snag, or set fire to the old shanty ourselves, why, he might think to save us the trouble."

"Then there's only one thing to be done," said Colon, with set lips.

"We five must guard the boat each night!" declared Bristles.

"Right along?" exclaimed Corney, with something like dismay in his voice; "sure I'm willing to do all I can, but I must sleep once in a while!"

At that the others laughed.

"Don't be silly, Corney!" burst out Bristles. "Of course we'll take the job by relays. We can draw for to-night, the two getting the short straws bunking out in the house. After it gets dark blankets can be smuggled down here. Don't say a single word to anybody, not even Brad just now. Fred, you've got the key to the door; haven't you?"

"Yes, Brad asked me to keep it at our house for the present," replied Fred.

"Now, let's draw, and see who has the honor of keeping the first watch," and as he spoke Bristles hunted around until he had found five straws, which he broke off until they were all different lengths.

Each of the other four drew, after Bristles had concealed one end in the palm of his hand.

"Now measure and see. Oh! slush!" he continued, eagerly; "you left me the longest, after all, when I was hoping it'd be me. And it turns out to be Colon and Fred. Well, fellows, here's wishing you luck. To-morrow night I'm just bound to do the camping-out act, anyhow."

When Fred got home he explained to his folks the necessity of some of the crew guarding the boat. His father quite agreed with him, and readily gave permission that he spend the night out.

So, a little later, Fred bundled up a blanket, and made his way down along the river bank unseen. In due time he came to where the old building, squatty and dilapidated, stood under the bank.

A dark figure arose in front of him. He heard the low whistle that he and Colon had agreed upon as a signal each might recognize in the dark.

"Glad you came along," Colon declared; "was just getting tired waiting; been here half an hour, 'cause I heard the church clock strike; but it seemed like five times as long."

Fred opened the door carefully, and they entered the shed. A lantern hung on a hook nearby, ready for use. They would need its light so as to get things in readiness for passing the night. Besides, Colon had a little idea of his own he wanted to put into practice; and which had been suggested by the sight of a big empty hogshead that stood outside the door, on the shelving beach.

"I'm going to lay a neat little trap, and see what luck I have," he chuckled as Fred asked why he wanted the lantern, after they had fixed their blankets and made ready for taking things easy.

Colon was gone quite some little time. Fred could hear him working away like a beaver at something. And as a rope seemed to figure in the affair he felt a little curiosity to know what sort of a trap the ingenious fellow could be constructing, all by himself.

Finally tall Colon came in again.

"It's all fixed, and the door locked once more, Fred," he said.

"Then the quicker you blow that glim out the better," remarked the other; "for you see, one of those fellows might come around to spy out the land, and noticing a light in here, he'd be suspicious."

Colon took the hint, and put out the lantern, which, however, was kept near, so that in case of a sudden alarm it could be quickly brought into use again.

After that the two lads made themselves fairly comfortable, though they did not remove their shoes. In case of trouble they wanted to be in condition for active and immediate work.

Fred had filled several old buckets, so as to be ready to fight fire. And for a little while they lay there, occasionally whispering to one another.

Finally Colon went to sleep. Fred knew this from his steady breathing; and since he was feeling more or less tired himself, after the strenuous labor of rowing in the afternoon just passed, he too allowed his senses to be lulled into the land of Nod.

How time passed Fred had not the remotest idea, when he was suddenly awakened by a terrific clamor, that, to his excited imagination, sounded like a railroad train running off the track, and smashing into a kitchen, where the walls were lined with all manner of tinware.

Both he and Colon sat up suddenly.

CHAPTER XIX

NIPPED IN THE BUD

"Hear that, Fred?"

Of course it was foolish of Colon to ask such a question as this of his companion. That racket was enough to awaken the soundest sleeper. But then he was so excited he just felt that he had to say something.

Fred threw his blanket aside. Then he reached out for the lantern, and his handy match-safe, so that they could get some light on the subject.

As soon as this little task had been accomplished, he and Colon started for the door full-tilt. Opening this, they passed out.

The noise of falling tinpans had by now entirely ceased. Of course the artful Colon had piled up all the waste cans he could find, so that if they were toppled over they would make considerable racket. Once upon a time there had been some sort of manufactory connected with the shed; and back of it Colon had discovered a regular mine of what he wanted in the way of rusty cans, large enough to suit his purpose, and make all the noise heart could wish.

"Look! I got one!"

Colon pointed excitedly as he said this, and as Fred looked he burst out into a loud laugh. Evidently Colon's trap had worked. A boy was dangling by the heels, held up in the air by the loop of a rope, which seemed to pass over a post connected with the building, and then extend to the hogshead, partly filled with stones, and which was now half way down the

beach, the rope taut, and holding the victim in his elevated position.

"It's Conrad Jimmerson!" exclaimed Colon, as they arrived close to the boy, who was kicking furiously, and groaning dismally.

His coat hung down over his head in such fashion that he could not see what was going on; Colon must have recognized him by his clothes, or through some boyish instinct.

"Oh! get me down, quick!" moaned the trapped prowler. "All the blood's agoin' to my head, and I'll be a dead one soon! Please cut me down, fellers! I won't run!"

"I'm right sure you won't," remarked Colon, drily; "but while I've got you held up so neat, I might as well make it doubly certain."

With, that he secured the other flourishing leg so that when Conrad was lowered to the ground he could not move without their permission.

"Give us a hand here, Fred, and we'll get him out of the trap," remarked the proud inventor of the running-barrel game. "You see, he stepped right up on this box, just as I figured, and touched the trigger. With that he started the heavy barrel rolling down-grade; and the loop caught him by one leg, instead of both, as I meant it should."

"But what was all the fierce noise that woke us up?" asked Fred, as he assisted Colon to take the victim down, by dragging in on the rope, so as to slacken the loop around the leg of the trapped one.

"Oh! shucks! just a pile of tin cans I built up, to be knocked over when the barrel got to turning around. You see, I was a little afraid that we mightn't hear when the trap was sprung, and I wouldn't want to miss this funny sight for anything. Here, you are, Conrad; lie there now, till we can drag you inside the house."

The boy was evidently very much frightened. He had thought his ankle in the grasp of some unseen giant, when the loop tightened, and snatched him upwards. No wonder he trembled and wheezed as he cowered there.

"We'd better go in right now, then," remarked Fred. "Some of that crowd might take a notion to come back and see what has happened to Conrad. Take hold of him on that side, Colon, while I look after this one."

"Oh! what you a-goin' to do with me?" queried the prisoner. "I haven't done a single thing, fellers, cross my heart if I did. Just wanted to see if anybody was a-sleepin' in the old shed. Buck told me to be sure and not hurt the boat. He says that its bad enough because we lost ours, without anything a-happenin' to yours. I wouldn't do a little thing, sure I wouldn't. Hope you believe me boys. Don't lick me! I got about all I ought to have already. I'm shiverin' to beat the band. Quit jerkin' me that way, Chris Colon; I ain't hurt you!"

"Oh! come along, you silly!" said the tall boy, who had a contempt for so great a sneak and coward as Conrad Jimmerson.

Fred closed and locked the door again after they had entered. The sound of the key being turned in the lock started the frightened boy into protesting again. He judged others by Buck's standard, and the bare thought of finding himself alone and a prisoner, in the power of those he would have injured, seemed to give him a case of the "trembles," as Colon called it.

"Now I want you to take a look into his pockets," the tall boy remarked.

Immediately he uttered a triumphant exclamation.

"See here, Fred, he had a whole lot of matches with him!" he called out. "Looks like he was ready for business, all right."

"Say, I always carry matches with me, and you know it, Chris Colon," protested the alarmed prisoner, vigorously.

"Perhaps you do, but never so many as these," Colon went on. "I kind of reckon you thought you'd have good need of 'em this night. But what're you carrying under your arm that way, Fred? Saw you step over, and pick somethin' up outside there. Find anything worth while; another feller's cap, maybe?"

"No, it was this," and Fred held an object up.

"What's that? Looks like a bundle of old rags!" remarked Colon, quickly; while the prisoner gasped and shivered worse than ever.

"There was something more; what do you think of this?" and for the second time Fred elevated his hand, containing an object that made Colon utter a cry of rage.

"A bottle!" he ejaculated. "What's in it, Fred? Three to one I c'n guess. Kerosene!"

"That's just what it is," returned the other, gravely. "Some fellows came here to-night prepared to throw this stuff over one end of the old shed, and start a fire going. Perhaps they even meant to break in, and scatter the oil over the boat, so nothing could save it, once the fire got started. We've nipped as mean a little game in the bud as I ever heard about."

Colon turned on the prisoner with a black face, and gritting teeth.

"Who set you on to this thing, Jimmerson?" he demanded. "You never thought of it by yourself, because you haven't got the brains. Tell me now, wasn't it Buck Lemington who got you to come here, and try to set the shed afire?"

Conrad tried to look defiant, but somehow he lacked the spirit. He saw those two frowning lads on either side of him, as he stood there leaning against the wall of the boathouse, his ankles tied with the rope; and he began to weaken.

"I never would a' thought of coming here to spy if it wasn't for——" he had just started to say, when there came a loud whistle, twice repeated, from outside, which must have been recognized by the fellow as a terrible threat of what would happen to him if he opened his lips to betray his cronies; for he shivered as if he had been showered with ice water, nor could they influence him after that, either by threats or promises, to say another word.

Fear of what Buck would do seemed to have a greater influence over him than the possibility of punishment because of what he had tried to do. One was sure, while the other might be set down as only a chance.

Besides, perhaps the fellow began to realize that Fred and Colon really could not prove that he had been carrying that bundle of old rags, as well as the bottle containing the kerosene. No court would decide that because they had been found there on the ground, he had brought them.

Fred understood this and it was what made him say presently:

"Well, we might as well let this fellow loose, Colon. After all, the proof, if there is any, must rest in these rags and this bottle. If we can find out just where they came from, we'll be satisfied in our own minds whom we have to thank for this midnight alarm."

"Just as if there could be any doubt about it!" scoffed Colon. "Didn't we hear that whistle, and don't I know who gave it? Buck carries a little silver whistle and likes to communicate with his bunch that way. They've got a regular code, I've heard tell. And didn't you notice how quick Conrad, here, buttoned up his lips when he heard that order to keep mum?"

"Another night," said Fred, threateningly, "we'll have a shotgun handy; and it'll go hard with prowlers, if we get a sight of them. Unfasten his legs, Colon, and then show him the door."

The prisoner seemed to regain a little of his lost courage upon finding that they did not mean to hurt him any.

"And you just stop pinching me when you do untie this rope, Chris Colon," said Conrad. "I want you to know you don't own the earth. A feller what lives in Riverport all his life ought to have the right to walk along the river here without having tricks played on him, and bein' yanked head-down up in the air. You'll pay for your fun yet, see if you don't, Chris Colon."

"Shut up!" roared the exasperated Colon, shaking the other, whom he was now escorting to the door, with the intention of ejecting him, just as Fred had directed. "You ought to be tarred and feathered, if you got your dues. Like to see our boat go up in smoke; would you? And Buck aims to keep us from using the river, just because he was foolish enough as to smash his own boat? You tell him to come himself the next time. We'll be glad to see him; and perhaps he might meet with a surprise worse than the one I sprung on you, Conrad. Now don't forget to tell him; you hear me!"

Colon had managed to get the door open while speaking. Then he gave the other a little push, as if to start him going. Conrad somehow seemed to suspect what was coming, for he tried to hug close to the tall boy, who, however, gave him a shove. So Conrad, thinking he had a chance, made a bolt; but that long leg of Colon shot out, and caught him fairly and squarely, sending him flying.

The boy who was thus thrown out picked himself up, and thinking he heard his enemy coming toward him, fled into the darkness, howling in mingled pain and fear.

Colon, laughing heartily, closed and fastened the door, after which he rejoined his watch-mate, to see out the balance of the eventful night in Fred's company.

CHAPTER XX

IN THE HOLLOW OAK

After that there was no further alarm, and the two watchers secured quite a fair amount of sleep before the coming of dawn warned them to hie away home. They left the blankets at the boathouse, for they had purposely brought old ones; and hence, when it came time for the next watch to take up their duties, there would be no occasion for them to duplicate.

On second thought the boys had come to the conclusion that it might be wise for them to tell Brad what had happened. The fact that the vengeful Buck had not stopped at such a grave thing as setting fire to the shed, worried them both.

So a little later they both met again, having had breakfast. Together they hunted up the other three who were in the game; indeed, Bristles was meanwhile searching the whole neighborhood for Fred, having called at his house after he had gone.

"Well," he remarked, after he had caught up with Fred, Sid and Colon, on their way to get Corney and himself; "seems to me you fellows are in a big hurry this same morning."

"We are," replied Fred. "We wanted to get the entire committee together, and go in a body to see Brad. He ought to know that the boat is always going to be in danger unless something is done to curb Buck Lemington."

"Say, was I right?" cried Bristles, exultantly.

"You were," replied Colon, solemnly.

"Then he *did* try to break in, so's to cut the boat, and injure her?" the other went on, eagerly.

"Worse than that!" said Colon.

"Far worse!" Fred added, looking mighty solemn himself.

"Oh! come, let up on that sort of thing; open up and tell me what happened!" the excited boy demanded.

When they did give him the whole story he could hardly contain himself, between his natural indignation because of the meanness of the act, and his delight over the success of Colon's little trap.

"Caught that sneak Conrad Jimmerson, and strung him up like a trapped 'possum, did you?" he cried, clapping his hands in glee. "Gee! what tough luck that I wasn't around to see it. Always my bad fortune, seeing lots of game when I haven't got a gun; and never a thing when I'm heeled for business."

"You see Colon and myself got to talking it over," said Fred; "and we made up our minds that it was hardly fair to keep the thing from Brad. He's our head in the boat club, and ought to know all that's going on. Besides, when toughs begin to want to burn down houses just for spite, that's going pretty far. Something ought to be done to stop it."

Brad was of course duly impressed when he heard the story. He laughed heartily at the comical element connected with Colon's man-trap; but took the other part seriously.

"I'm going over and see my uncle about it," he declared in the end. "Being a lawyer, and a judge at that, he'll tell me what to do. I think he'll say he wouldn't mention a single name; for you know all lawyers are mighty cautious how they give cause for a suit for slander. But he'll tell me we ought to scatter the story all over town, and also let it be known that from now on there'll be somebody in that house every night, armed, and ready to fire on trespassers. See you later, fellows."

Fred found a chance a little later to get away from his other chums. He really did have an errand for his mother in one of the stores, but he remembered something besides that he had intended doing at the earliest opportunity, and it was this that swayed him most.

Now, it chanced that the place he had to visit to leave an order was the largest grocery store in Riverport. And one of the boys employed there was Toby Farrell. Fred knew that he was generally sent out each morning on a wheel, to visit a line of customers, and take down their orders; though most of them had telephones for that matter, and could have wired in their necessities.

Still, this grocer was enterprising, and instructed his boy clerk to tell each customer just what new and attractive goods they had received fresh that morning, possibly strawberries, vegetables and the like.

And in the course of his wheeling about Toby was accustomed to visit the establishment of Miss Alicia Muster each and every day. In fact, Toby was one of the two boys hired by trades-people whom Fred suspected of being the person guilty of taking the old maid's opals from the parlor.

Both of them were allowed to cool their heels in the kitchen for possibly ten minutes at a time, while the aged "mammy" consulted her mistress in her private room. And an inquisitive half-grown boy might become so familiar with the premises that, in a spirit of curiosity, or from some other reason, he would look around him a little at such times.

Mr. Cleaver, the grocer, was in a good humor, and when Fred mentioned that he knew someone who had shown an interest in his young clerk, he immediately broke out in Toby's praise.

"Best boy, barring none, I ever had, Fred," he declared. "Never late in the morning, neat in his work, obliging in his manners to my customers, and willing to stay after hours if there is a rush. In fact I'm so well satisfied with Toby that I expect to add a couple of dollars to his wages this very next Saturday. And I'm told he's the idol of his mother's eye. She's a widow, you know, with three small children, Toby being the eldest. He shows signs of being like his father; and Matthew Farrell was one of our leading citizens up to the time of his death. I hope she gets his pension through; it'll mean several thousand dollars for her. He died really of wounds received long ago in the war. Never would apply for the pension he was entitled to. Toby's all right, you tell your friend; and he's promised to stick right here. Some day he might be a partner in this business, who knows?"

Well, after that, Fred was ready to throw up his hands in so far as Toby was concerned. He felt that he could never strike pay dirt in that quarter. There never was, and never would be again, quite such a paragon as Toby Farrell. It would be wasting time to try and bark up this tree. The scent had evidently led him in the wrong quarter.

Accordingly, he turned toward the butcher's, and here he fully anticipated getting on the track of something. Gabe lived in an outlying quarter, and when he went home in the evening, or at noon, he took a short-cut through Ramsey's woods, where there was a convenient path.

Now it happened that Fred knew this fact, for he had many a time seen the butcher's boy going and coming. Gabe had a big whistle, and used to amuse himself as he walked to and from home in trying to get the airs from the popular ragtime songs of the day.

Fred had heard it said that the boy who whistles is generally an honest fellow, and that guilt and this disposition seldom, if ever, go hand in hand. How much truth there was in this saying he did not know; but it was on his mind now to try and find out.

Perhaps the fact that it was about ten minutes of twelve influenced Fred in what he set out to do.

First he passed all the way through the strip of woods. It was not very thickly grown, and there was really only a stretch of about one hundred feet where he did not find himself in sight of some house or other.

Fred secreted himself about midway here. It was rather a gloomy spot, considering that it happened to be so near a town. The trees grew pretty thick all around the rambling path; and one big, old, giant oak in particular caught Fred's attention, on account of the fact that it seemed to be rapidly going into decay, being full of holes, where perhaps squirrels, or it might be a raccoon, had a den.

Then he heard the whistle from the factory in town, immediately followed by the ringing of the church bells. Noon had come, and if Gabe carried out his regular programme he would soon be coming along the trail.

Yes, that must be his whistle right now, turning off the latest air that had caught his fancy. Fred wanted to see him at close quarters. Perhaps he even had some faint idea of stepping out, and walking with Gabe, to judge for himself whether the other had a guilty air or not.

But if such were his plans he soon found cause to change them. Gabe came whistling along, looking behind him occasionally, and then all around. Fred became deeply interested. He fancied that this must mean something; and it did.

Suddenly the whistling stopped. Looking, he saw Gabe hurry over to the old tree trunk. He seemed to thrust his hand in, and draw something out. Fred, watching sharply, noticed that the boy was deeply interested in what he had taken from the hollow trunk; and he could give a pretty good guess as to what this must be.

But Fred did not move from his place of concealment. Lying snugly hidden he saw Gabe replace the little package, after which he stepped out into the trail, picked up the ragtime air just where he had dropped it, and came walking smartly along, a satisfied grin on his face.

Waiting until he had passed out of sight around a bend in the path, and his loud whistle began to grow fainter in the distance, Fred hurried over to the big tree.

He had noted that particular crevice in the hollow trunk too well to make any mistake now. A minute later and he had fished up a little cardboard box, not over four inches in length, and secured with a rubber band.

With trembling fingers Fred took this fastening away, and raised the lid; just as Gabe had recently done, no doubt being consumed by a desire to feast his eyes once more on the contents.

Fred gave a satisfied sigh. It was all right, and Bristles' reputation had been cleared; for in that little cardboard box which Gabe Larkins had secreted so carefully lay seven milk-white opals, doubtless of considerable value.

CHAPTER XXI

A PLAN TO CATCH THE THIEF

"That settles it!"

Fred was saying these three words over several times to himself as he stood and stared at the seven little opals. They had appeared rather pretty when he looked at them in Miss Muster's best room, on the occasion of his visit there in company with Bristles. They gave him a shiver now; just because he knew that they had tempted weak Gabe Larkins to commit a terrible wrong.

What had he better do about it?

Fred had, in fact, about made up his mind that there was only one course open to him in case he found the opals. This was to go to Miss Muster at once, and let her know what had come to pass.

She would be glad, for the sake of Bristles and his parents—yes, Fred began to believe the old maid really had a heart of her own, and would herself rejoice over the vindication of her nephew.

But should he take the opals along with him? He decided against this as unwise. To fully prove his case, he should be able to catch Gabe in the act of handling the precious stones, and with a witness present.

So he put the small cardboard box back into the cavity of the hollow oak, just as near where he had found it as he could. Then, with a cautious look along the trail, to make sure Gabe was not already returning, Fred hurried away.

He was unusually quiet at lunch time, his mother and sister noticed. They even asked him if he felt unwell; but Fred laughingly replied that he never was better in all his life.

A little while later Fred took his way to the large house in which Miss Muster lived. His heart beat high with satisfaction, because of the fact that he had in so brief a time fully proved the innocence of Bristles.

At sight of Fred it was remarkable what a sudden look of expectation flashed over the thin face of Bristles' aunt. Apparently, then, she had come to place considerable confidence in

the boy, whose manly bearing must have impressed her, as it did nearly everyone with whom Fred came in contact.

"You are bringing me news, Fred!" she exclaimed, as she put out her hand toward him. "Your smiling face tells me that, for you cannot hide it. Oh! I hope I am not mistaken. Have you found my opals?"

"Yes, ma'am, the whole seven that you said you'd lost," he answered, promptly.

"That is good news," the lady went on; "but tell me more; have you learned who the thief is, Fred?"

A vein of anxiety might have been noticed now in her voice; for she could not help fearing that after all it might prove to be her nephew.

"I saw him take a little cardboard box out of the hollow of a tree," Fred started to say, "look at what it held, and then stick it back. After he went away, ma'am, I examined that same box, and found the opals there."

"W—who was the boy?" she faltered, her hands shutting tightly as she kept her eyes fastened on Fred.

"Gabe Larkins, ma'am!"

"Oh! the butcher's boy!" and she gave a great sigh, as of relief.

"Yes, ma'am. On the way home from the shop to get his lunch, he had to stop and take a look at his treasures," Fred continued.

"He did not see you watching him, I suppose, Fred?"

"Oh! not a bit of it," replied the boy, smiling. "I looked out for that."

"Have you the opals with you now, my dear boy?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," replied Fred. "You see, I thought it would be better if you could see Gabe handling the things, and know by the evidence of your own eyes he was the guilty one."

"That sounds very clever of you, Fred," Miss Muster remarked, with a look of sincere admiration. "Perhaps now you may even have figured out some sort of plan that would allow of my doing such a thing?"

"I have; that is, if you don't think it too much bother," he answered.

"Too much bother?" she echoed; "after what I have done in my haste to bring sorrow into the happy home of my niece, nothing could ever be too much trouble for me to attempt. And, besides, I should really like to face that unhappy boy, to reproach him for his wrongdoing. I know his mother, and she is a very good woman. Yes, tell me, Fred, what is your plan?"

"It's simple enough, to be sure," observed the boy. "Just give Gabe an extra chance tomorrow morning to slip into that parlor again. He's got the habit, I guess, and can't resist, if he sees an opening. Then, at noon, on his way home, why, of course, he'll stop at the big oak to add what he took to the others. You will be hiding right there with me and we can give Gabe the surprise of his life."

"I should think that would be a splendid idea, Fred," Miss Muster said, nodding her head approvingly. "I suppose that it would be what they say in the newspaper accounts of an arrest in the big cities, 'caught with the goods on!'"

"Then you'll agree to do it, ma'am?" asked Fred, eagerly.

"Yes. I will give Master Gabe the finest chance he ever saw to slip into my best room; and then about half-past eleven will meet you wherever you say. And, Fred, after it is all over, you will have full permission to tell Andrew; for my part, my first duty will be to go to his home, and ask his mother to forgive a foolish old woman because of her unjust suspicions."

The particulars were soon arranged. Fred mentioned a place where he would be on hand the next day, rain or shine, at eleven-thirty; and Miss Muster promised just as faithfully to keep the appointment.

After that they separated. Just as luck would have it, as Fred came out of the house he heard his name called; and looking up saw his chum, Bristles. Surprise was expressed upon the face of the other, to discover Fred issuing from his aunt's home. A dozen questions could also be seen there; but Fred put a damper on all these.

"Don't ask me a single thing, Bristles," he remarked mysteriously. "I've taken hold of your case, and things are working splendidly. All I'm going to tell you right now is that there's great hope you'll hear something, say by to-morrow afternoon. You ask me when we meet, about two or three, and perhaps I'll have some; news that'll surprise you. Now let's talk about the race that's going to be pulled off pretty soon. Have you had a line about what Mechanicsburg's doing?"

In this way, then, he closed his chum's mouth. Bristles was puzzled to account for the actions of his friend; but at the same time he had so much confidence in Fred Fenton that he accepted his explanation, and even began to take on a more cheerful appearance.

That afternoon the boys had the benefit of a coach; for Corney's father, the old college grad. and oarsman, gave them an hour of his time. He corrected numerous little faults that, as amateurs, they had naturally fallen into, and when finally Brad took his crew for a three-mile working-out spin, he was tremendously pleased at hearing the compliments bestowed upon them by Mr. Shays.

"You are doing finely, boys," declared the coach, in a tone as though he meant all he said. "The improvement in your style of rowing is decidedly worth seconds to you; and they count big in a race, you know. I shall come out again the next time you want me, and show you some more little faults in the way you recover after giving the stroke. I can save several of you more or less unnecessary exertion, which in turn means a concentration of energy for the final spurt that accompanies every boat race."

The boys thoroughly enjoyed having so pleasant a coach, and went home that evening convinced that their chances for victory in the coming struggle had been increased fully twenty per cent.

"Don't forget your promise, Fred," said Bristles, rather pathetically, as he parted from his chum where their ways separated.

"Depend on it, I just won't, Bristles," answered the other, positively.

It seemed a very long time until eleven o'clock the next morning; and Fred kept around the house, for he did not want to run upon Bristles, and have the other look at him in that eager way.

When he reached the place appointed for the meeting with Miss Muster he found her there, a heavy veil hiding her face. Together they made their way along the path that Gabe was accustomed to take as a short cut home.

"Do you think he took another of the opals, ma'am?" Fred asked, as they drew near the big hollow oak.

"I really had not the heart to look," she replied. "I gave him all the opportunity he could ask; and when he talked with me later on, I thought the boy looked confused; but I felt so sorry to think he had a mother who would be heart-broken, that I would not go into the parlor to examine. But guilt was written large on his face, or I am a poor judge of boy nature. Perhaps I am, after the mistake I made about my own nephew."

Fred soon found a spot where both of them could hide, and yet be very close to the big tree; indeed, a few steps would carry them alongside when the time came for action.

Then they settled down to wait. After a time the sound of bells told that noon had come. A few minutes later, and Fred touched the arm of his companion.

"That's Gabe coming now," he remarked.

And the trembling old maid could distinctly hear a very boisterous whistle that kept getting louder and louder as the butcher's boy strode jauntily along the path, heading in their direction.

CHAPTER XXII

TELLING THE GOOD NEWS

Gabe Larkins' big whistle suddenly stopped. The boy was looking craftily around him, up and down the winding path, as though anxious to make sure that no person was in sight.

Convinced of this act, he quickly stepped over to the big oak, and thrust his arm into the hollow. Miss Muster fairly held her breath with excitement as she saw him take out the little cardboard box, and opening it, drop something in, which he had drawn from the depths of a pocket.

Fred arose; and the lady, taking this as a signal, did likewise. Together they began to advance upon the crouching Gabe. The boy seemed to be so intent upon his business of admiring the gems that he was unaware of the presence of others, until possibly the rustle of the lady's dress startled him.

Then Gabe looked up, and his face turned ashy pale when he saw Miss Muster. In that one terrible moment he knew that his thievery had been found out. Nobody could ever know the thoughts that flashed through the boy's mind with the rapidity of lightning.

"Give that to me!" said Miss Muster, holding out her hand toward Gabe.

He dared not refuse; and as she received the little cardboard box the old maid, glancing in, counted ten of her opals there, just half of the entire collection. Gabe had increased his "take" that morning, and added three to his plunder. His apparent success was making him daily bolder.

He tried to face the indignant, yet sorrowful, lady, but his eyes quickly fell before her look.

"Have you ever stopped to think where you are going to land, if you keep on this way, Gabe?" she asked slowly.

The boy made no reply. Perhaps he was inclined to be ugly and sullen; but, on the other hand, as he was a young offender, his conscience began to awaken. And Miss Muster believed that, since she meant to let him off this time, she at least ought to impress a lesson of some kind on him.

"It means the penitentiary for a boy who begins to steal, as you show signs of doing, Gabe; yes, and a broken heart for your poor mother. Oh! I do hope this will be a warning that you will keep before you always. Because of that mother I am going to let you off this time, my boy; but unless you mend your ways there is only one end before you. Fred here will keep your secret also; you can depend on him. And make up your mind, Gabe, that even though you think you have succeeded in doing some evil deed in secret, the truth will sooner or later come out. Now you can go. I shall not speak to your employer, nor tell your mother; but from time to time I am going to have something to say to *you*, my boy. I want to be your friend."

Gabe had never opened his mouth to utter a single word, and when he hurriedly took his departure Fred was not sure but what it was a wide grin that appeared on his face; as though he fancied that he had gotten off cheaply after all. Whether Gabe would take his lesson seriously and reform, was a question in Fred's mind.

"That ends it, thank goodness!" remarked Miss Muster, after they had seen Gabe turn the path in the direction of his own home. "And now, Fred, you get your lunch. After I've had my own I shall drop in to see my niece, and confess all my shortcomings. I fancy she will be too happy at learning her boy is innocent to hold any grudge against her wretched old aunt."

"Thank you," said Fred, laughing; "I do feel kind of hungry now. Just knowing what bully good news I've got for Bris—I mean Andy—seems to give me an appetite. I'll get there just in time to sit down with mother and Kate; because father doesn't come home at noon from the works."

"And, Fred, believe me when I say that I'll never forget what you've done for me and mine," were the parting words of the old spinster, as she squeezed the boy's hand.

"I'm glad, because I just know you'll make it all up with Bris—that is, Andy," he said; and she nodded her head in the affirmative.

And at the lunch table, after making them promise that it should go no further than the head of the Fenton family, Fred interested his mother and sister by a recital of the strange case of the disappearing opals.

"And remember, Kate," Fred went on, shaking his linger at his younger sister; "you must never, under any circumstances, mention a single word of all this to even one girl. Just forget you ever heard it I'm going to make poor Bristles mighty happy this afternoon; and the thought of it gives me so much delight that I guess I'll be off now to find him."

He hurried out of the room, followed by the admiring glances of those who knew only too well what pleasure it gave Fred to be of value to a chum.

Bristles was not at home, it turned out, having gone down to the river to hang around the boat-house, and wait for Fred to join him; because something seemed to tell him the other was going to bring good news.

But Fred did see Miss Muster coming down the road as he turned away; and from what she had said, he understood that the determined old maid meant to "eat humble pie," as Fred called it, by asking Bristles' mother to forgive her mistake.

None of the other boys happened to be around when Fred came upon Bristles. The latter was sitting on a pile of boards which were going to form part of the new house being erected for the Riverport Boat Club. As he heard the sound of approaching footsteps Bristles looked up, and smiled broadly to see Fred.

"Now tell me what's on the bills, Fred," he entreated. "I just feel it in my bones that you've got news for me. Have you found out where the opals went?"

"That's right," replied Fred, promptly.

"Say, you don't mean to tell me you've got 'em back for Aunt Alicia?" gasped Bristles, turning red, and then pale, by rapid turns, and leaning weakly against the pile of boards.

"Every one," declared the other; "your aunt says there isn't a single opal missing."

"And was it that cunning old bunch of feathers, Black Joe, after all; was my guess good, and did you find out where the old bird was hiding them?" continued Bristles, possibly pluming himself a little on having conceived a very brilliant idea.

"Not for Joseph, not for Joe," sang Fred, merrily. "Fact is, when I told what you had in your mind to Miss Muster she said it was a fine thought, but she was sorry to say in this case no raven need apply. 'Cause why—well, she'd chained Joe to his perch for a week because he got sassy, and wouldn't mind; and so you see, if he had to stay there all the time he couldn't hop or fly into the other room and get away with the opals every other day or so."

"Shucks! I should say not," replied the grinning Bristles; "but do take pity on a poor fellow, Fred, and tell me the whole story. Who stole the opals?"

"Gabe Larkins, the butcher's boy," replied the other, soberly.

"You don't say?" was Bristles' comment, after he had given a whistle to emphasize his astonishment. "And yet, after all, I oughtn't to be much surprised, because I happen to know he's always reading the sporting page of the city paper his mother takes; and I've heard him even talking about horse races and betting. But, however in the wide world did you get on to him; and does Aunt Alicia know it all?"

"I think she's with your mother at this minute, telling her how sorry she is for suspecting you; and also what she means to do for you in the future to make it up. Now listen, and I'll make your eyes open a little, I reckon, Bristles."

"Never heard the like of it in all my life!" declared Bristles, when the narrative had reached its conclusion with the detection of Gabe in the act of adding his morning's spoils to the balance of the plunder which he had hidden in the old hollow oak. "I'll never pass that tree without thinking of what you've just told me. Gee! I'm glad I wasn't in Gabe's shoes when Aunt Alicia caught him. I can just see the look of fury in her snapping black eyes."

"You're wrong there, Bristles," said Fred, quickly. "Unless I'm mighty much mistaken there were tears in her eyes, when she looked down at Gabe cowering there. Your Aunt Alicia is a different woman these days from what you used to believe her. She's seen a light. She knows there are boys, and then again boys; and that not all of them are alike in everything."

"But what can I say to you, Fred, for getting me out of this pickle?" continued Bristles, with a quiver in his voice, as he squeezed the hand of his chum. "Only for you, look what would have come to me? I owe you a heap, sure I do; and I only hope the chance will come some day to show you how much I feel it."

"Oh! let up on that sort of talk, Bristles," said Fred, laughingly. "You'd have done just as much for me, or any of your chums, if the chance came your way; and you know it."

"You just better believe I'm going to keep on the watch to pass this along," declared the other, fervently.

"That's the way to talk," Fred remarked, looking pleased at being given the opportunity to bring happiness to one he thought so much of as Bristles; "and perhaps you'll be able to pull a better oar, now that this load is off your mind."

"Why, Fred, believe me," said Bristles, soberly, "I feel right now as though I'd be able to

put more vim into my work than ever before in all my life. Wow! if I had wings I could hardly seem more like flying, my heart is that light!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE START OF THE RACE

The great day of the boat race between Riverport and Mechanicsburg opened with a clear sky. This made happy the hearts of the hundreds of young people belonging to the two towns on the Mohunk River.

Daily the husky crew of the town up the river had been busily engaged in practicing; and all sorts of ominous rumors were current among the more timid Riverport boys and girls as to the astonishing speed they had shown.

But when those who had faith in the ability of their own crew to come in ahead heard these tales, they only laughed, and nodded, as though they felt no fear. As to the ability of their rivals to "make circles" around the boys of Riverport, did they not realize that these stories were being industriously circulated for the very purpose of making them count the race lost even before it was started?

The clever coach, Corney Shays' father, warned them against believing anything of this sort. He said it was an old trick, and had been used by college men as far back as he could remember.

"Just believe you can do the job up clean, and pay attention to everything your coxswain tells you; and it'll come out right," he declared.

Early in the afternoon crowds began to assemble along the banks of the river, where the course had been marked off. Those in charge, being a committee of older pupils from each school, had taken all necessary precautions looking to having a clear course. They had also marked the turning point, where the rival boats must start on the return trip toward the home goal.

This latter was a boat anchored in the middle of the river, and bearing a large red flag, with the words "Stake Boat" in white. Each contestant had to turn this, without fouling, in heading for home; and the one capable of accomplishing this with as little waste of time and distance as possible would gain an advantage that might count heavily in the final result.

It was indeed a gay scene about half-past three that afternoon; the time of the race being scheduled for four exactly. Thousands of people lined both banks of the river, for the entire country had become deeply interested in the result, and taken sides, one way or the other.

While Paulding had no proper boat club as yet, evidently every boy and girl attending school there, together with many older persons, had flocked to witness the sight of a river regatta so near at hand.

School flags were waving everywhere, and class cheers accompanied their appearance, as the young people gathered in groups, the better to chant their patriotic songs.

When the long shell from above came speeding down to the starting point, the occupants were given a rousing welcome from friends and foes alike. For everybody admired the game, sportsmanlike qualities of those Mechanicsburg fellows.

"Who are they all, Flo?" asked Cissy Anderson, as she cuddled down alongside her chum, who was using a field glass; the girls being in the midst of a group that had a particularly fine place for witnessing the start and close of the race.

"Oh! we know everyone of them, because they've figured in the battles on the diamond and the gridiron," replied Flo.

"Wagner, of course, is among them; they say he has been made the coxswain of the Mechanicsburg crew; and then there must be Sherley, who was such a dear captain in their football games last fall; yes, and Waterman and Gould, too."

"That's right, Cissy," the girl with the glasses continued; "and Hennessy is stroke oar, for I can tell him by his big, bushy crop of hair. He makes me think of Bristles Carpenter, who, they say, is pulling a wonderful oar these days. Let's see, there's Harkness, too, and Boggs—"

how many is that, Cissy? Just six oarsmen, you say? Well, I can see Smith there, I'm sure; and the other, why, of course it's that fussy Bob Jones. Don't they look splendid; and how evenly they pull."

"You don't think now, for a minute, do you, Flo, that they can beat our boys?" the other girl asked, somewhat fearfully.

"Of course I don't, silly," replied Flo, who had the utmost confidence in the sterling ability of Fred and his fellows to hold their own, no matter whether on the football field, the baseball diamond, in a hotly contested hockey match on the ice, a snowball battle, or in athletic sports; and consequently in aquatic matters as well.

"There comes Sid and the rest!" exclaimed Cissy; just as though, in her eyes at least, the whole chance of success for the Riverport boys lay in the stalwart figure of Sid Wells alone.

As Brad Morton led his eight sparsely-clad young oarsmen from the new building, bearing the glistening and carefully kept shell on their shoulders, a cheer started that gained force as it ran along the crowds lining the banks of the river, until it died away far in the distance.

It had been decided to use the up-river course. And as the stake boat, which was to mark both the start and finish, was directly opposite Riverport, the turning point upstream must be just a mile and a half away; for the course was intended to represent exactly three miles, which was considered a long enough pull for young crews.

The first half would be against the strong current of the Mohunk, now pretty high for the beginning of summer; but when the two rival boats had made the turn, they could come down with greater speed. It was this rush along the home stretch that all of the spectators were most anxious to witness. And this accounted for the throngs on both shores of the river near where the boat containing the judges of the race was anchored.

It was now getting very close to four o'clock, and everybody began to breathe with eagerness, and possibly a little anxiety. No matter how loud the adherents of each school may have shouted for their colors, when it came right down to a question of supremacy the opposing crew began to loom up as a very dangerous factor; and they felt a faintness come into their hearts while watching the splendid way the rival eight carried themselves.

"They're getting them placed in line!" shouted a small fellow, who carried a megaphone almost as long as himself, and through which his voice carried as far as a mile, when he strained himself to give a yell.

This was a cousin of tall, long-legged Colon, and whose name of Harrison had long ago given way to that of Semi-Colon, to distinguish him from his big relative.

"Look at poor old Buck Lemington; would you?" remarked another, close to the bevy of girls around Flo Temple and Cissy Anderson. "He's in an ugly humor to-day, because he threw away his chance to be pulling an oar in our boat, and went off to get up a boat club of his own."

"And then smashed his shell on a snag the first thing," continued Semi-Colon, who had heard what was said.

"Wasn't it just like him to try and say poor Clem Shooks was to blame, when everybody knows it must have been only Buck's fault, because he didn't remember about that stump under the water," one of the girls remarked.

"And I even guess he'd have cared precious little if our boat had been burned up, when some of those tramps, they say, tried to set things on fire," a second girl broke out with; which remark appeared to amuse Semi-Colon very much, for he roared through his megaphone the word:

"Tramps! Ha! Ha!"

Evidently, while officially it had been decided to keep secret the facts connected with the finding of the bottle of kerosene and the rags, at the time Conrad Jimmerson was caught in Colon's trap, enough had leaked out among the boys connected with Riverport school to give them a pretty fair idea Buck must have been the leading spirit behind the miserable game.

"Silence there! the referee wants you to keep still while he says something to the crews!" roared a heavy voice through a megaphone.

"He's going to advise 'em what not to do," broke out Semi-Colon, for the benefit of the girls; "and that a willful foul with carry a penalty. There goes Coach Shays in that little launch; he's going to get in that car belonging to Judge Colon, and be whirled along the road, which keeps pretty near the river all the way. So you see, he can every little while

shout out his directions to the coxswain."

"There, the referee is talking to them now," said Flo Temple, plainly excited, since the critical moment was at hand. "Oh! don't I just hope our boys will leave them away behind right in the beginning! Because, they say that the first one around the turning boat will have a big advantage. Every second on the down-current will put yards between them, that the second boat may never be able to make up."

"Brad Morton knows that, make up your mind, girls; and he won't let those Mechanicsburg fellows turn first, if he can help it," Semi-Colon advised.

"That's it, if he can help it!" mocked a girl near by, who was boldly waving the banner of the up-river town right in the stronghold of the rival school.

"Watch, they're going to start!" cried Cissy Anderson, shrilly.

Every sound seemed to cease like magic, as doubtless thousands of eager eyes saw that the decisive moment was at hand.

Then suddenly there came the sharp report of a pistol, which they all knew was to be the signal that would send those two boats forward with all the power that sixteen pairs of trained and muscular arms could bring to bear in exact unison!

Immediately a roar arose.

CHAPTER XXIV

A GREAT VICTORY

"They're off!"

"Mechanicsburg leads!"

"Yes, she does, smarty; better look again! They're tied, neck and neck!"

"But watch that stroke, will you; did you ever see anything so fine? Oh! you poor Riverport, get your tear-rags ready to weep!"

"Wait a little. You'll be laughing out of the other side of your mouth, Crabtree!"

So the various backers of the two teams bantered each other as they kept their eyes fixed on the rival shells. The boats were pushing up against the strong current of the Mohunk, steadily biting into it, and increasing the distance between them and the stakeboat that was presently to mark the closing scene of the river drama.

Steadily they kept on, nearing the bend that would shut them out from the sight of the great crowds gathered on either bank near the judges' boat. If the cheering diminished in volume at that point, it was taken up above, until one long wave of sound arose, every conceivable noise being used to create an uproar, from horns and whistles to megaphones, and class yells from the various schools.

It was a time long looked forward to, and which would last for so short a period that everyone seemed to think it necessary to exhaust himself or herself as speedily as possible.

"There they are, turning the bend now!" declared the anxious Cissy. "Oh! which one leads, Flo; tell me, please?"

"As near as I can make out, they seem to be running evenly," the other girl replied, with the glasses to her eyes, as though she could not drop them, or even gratify the curiosity of her best chum by allowing her a peep.

"And do you see Sid, and is he showing all the others how to keep cool, and hold himself in reserve against the last home quarter-stretch?" demanded Cissy.

"Well, I like that, now!" exclaimed the indignant Flo, who, as we chance to know, also had someone she admired in that school crew; "just as if there didn't happen to be seven other fellows rowing alongside Sid Wells. I know one at least who plays second fiddle to nobody."

"There they go around the bend!" cried another girl.

"And listen to the roars above there; will you?" called a boy passing by, who was decked out in Riverport colors. "Why, there must be a whole mob of people up to see 'em turn the other boat. I'd like to be there right now, if I could jump back here to see the finish."

"Watch the signals!" now arose on every hand.

Everybody knew what this meant, and consequently the eyes of the entire multitude began to be fastened on a particular place up at the bend. Here arrangements had been made by those in charge of the race, whereby the news would be flashed to those far down the stream which one of the rival boats had managed to make the turn ahead.

"Which are the signals?" one boy asked, as though he had become slightly confused, owing to the excited condition of his mind; and which, after all, was not to be wondered at, with all that racket around him, and his pulses thrilled with the hope he hugged to his heart that Riverport might win.

"Red if Mechanicsburg is ahead, and blue if Riverport turns first!" someone obligingly called out.

"There goes the flag up!" shrieked a voice just then.

There was a tall pole at the bend, and they could see some dark object mounting rapidly upward. The flag was bunched in some manner, to be released when it reached the top of the mast. And how those few seconds did seem like hours to the anxious hearts of the onlookers, who were holding their very breath in suspense.

Then a mighty shout broke out that was like the great billows dashing on a rock-bound coast:

"It's blue! Riverport turns first!"

"Oh! you Mechanicsburg, how we pity you right now!"

"A runaway! They'll never be in sight when we cross the line!"

"The easiest thing ever! Football, baseball, and now rowing; why, you're not in it at all, Mechanicsburg!"

"Sure they are—in the soup!"

However, in spite of all this brave talk, those who taunted the up-river boys understood that it was quite too soon to do much crowing. What if Riverport had succeeded in getting the inside track of their rivals, so as to turn the upper boat first, that did not mean the others would lie down, and allow their old-time enemies of many a hard-fought game to triumph over them. Mechanicsburg players had the reputation of being stayers, who would not admit defeat until the last man was out, or the concluding yard been passed over.

Doubtless both boats were even now coming down the river at a marvelous pace. The question remained to be seen whether Mechanicsburg could throw enough power into their strokes to cut down the lead their rivals had obtained, and forge ahead as they drew near the goal.

"Will Colon overdo himself again?"

That was the question one white-faced Riverport boy put to a mate as they stood there, with their eyes glued on the bend above, around which the boats must come flying at any second now.

"Aw! come off with you, Tatters," was the immediate and scornful reply; "you know mighty well what made him drop that other time. Hadn't he been pretty near drowned the day before, so that his nerves shut up on him like a jack-knife? He's fit as a fiddle now, they say; and Bristles Carpenter is pulling like a race-horse. You watch and see. We're bound to win this race in a walk."

"There they come!"

The boats shot around the bend, and it was seen that while Riverport still held the lead, it was only by a margin of part of a length. As yet, then, it might be called anybody's race, since a very slight thing would serve to turn the tables.

On the river road could be seen the car belonging to Judge Colon, racing along from point to point; and above all other sounds the spectators could hear the sharp, shrill voice of Coach Shays as he shouted words of cheer to his crew; or warned them against some possible fatal blunder.

Despite the gruelling pull against the current that had marked the first half of the fiercely contested race, both young crews seemed to be keeping in perfect rhythm with the movements of their coxswains. And doubtless those shrewd leaders were keenly on the alert for any advantage that might come to them through either a quickening of the pace, if they thought the rowers capable of standing it, or some other change in the existing conditions.

Louder grew the shouts and songs as the two boats came flying down the stream, the young oarsmen pulling like mad to either retain or secure an advantage. Hope flickered up again in the hearts of the loyal Mechanicsburg rooters, who had well nigh taken a slump when they learned that their favorites were behind at the half-way boat.

How they did cheer their boys on! It was enough to almost make any fellow try to perform impossibilities, and strain himself to the breaking point, to hear how his comrades were banking all their hopes on him in particular. Loud and dear sounded each name of the Mechanicsburg rowers through a megaphone, backed by a voice that had Semi-Colon's put out of the running:

"Hennessy—Sherley—Harkness—Gould—Smith—Boggs—Waterman—Jones— Wagner
—*everybody pull!*"

And they did certainly pull for all they were worth, desperately anxious to overcome that half boat-length that still lay between them.

But, on the other, hand, an equal number of young athletes in the other shell were just as doggedly determined not to yield one inch, if it could be held by any power of theirs. Brad believed he could call for just one more little advance in the stroke, and he was only waiting until they reached a certain spot marked in his mind as the place where the final spurt must be made.

"Now, Riverport, once more, and for the last time, *give way!*" came in the shrill tones of the coach.

Immediately the final spurt was on. Mechanicsburg, too, had been holding just a mite in reserve for this killing last quarter of a mile. As a consequence, the two boats seemed to retain about the same relative position as before, despite this change of stroke to a faster one.

The excitement ashore, as they drew rapidly nearer the line, was tremendous. Some fellows jumped up and down, waving their hats, and shrieking; while girls swung their colored banners frantically any way, in order to add to the confusion.

But there was not a single one who would remove their eyes for even a second from the stirring spectacle of those two shells, spinning side by side down the river, with only the little space of a second, as it were, marking the difference between victory and defeat.

Now they were close on the line, and Mechanicsburg gave one mighty pull, as if hoping to send their boat at least level with that of their antagonists, so that the chances of a tie might be improved.

"Look at Riverport, would you? They've been keeping it back all the time!"

"Oh! my, what a spurt! See 'em go, boys! We win! we win! Riverport takes the race! Hurrah! whoop! R-i-v-e-r-p-o-r-t! Siss! boom! ah!"

Amidst the roar of uncounted voices, the booming of several cannon held in readiness for just this very purpose, the bleating of horns, and everything else that could be utilized to create a racket, the Riverport shell shot pass the deciding stakeboat, fully a length ahead of their rivals.

It had been a clean race, with not a single note of discord. Although beaten, Mechamcsburg had carried their colors with honor; and a mighty shout from friend and foe alike attested to the satisfaction felt by all who had witnessed the close contest.

CHAPTER XXV

BRIGHT SKIES

Riverport went fairly wild that night over the success of the school crew in the race

against the crack oarsmen of Mechanicsburg. Perhaps there were a few fellows who took little or no satisfaction in the great victory. Buck Lemington might be set down as one of these; because, as a rule, Buck never enjoyed seeing his school win, unless he could be the central attraction, the hero to whom the plaudits of the cheering throngs were mainly given.

But no one cared much what Buck Lemington thought. Surely Fred Fenton was of a mind that the Lemingtons, father and son, were soon to be routed, horse, foot and artillery, when the long missing Hiram Masterson returned, as he had promised to do in that letter from far away Hong Kong, and tell all that he knew about the scheme of those in the syndicate to cheat Mr. Fenton out of his just rights.

And Bristles, too, was a happy fellow those days. He had known what it was to taste of the bitterness of having unfounded suspicion cast upon him. The pleasure of feeling that his name was fully cleared made him secretly resolve that if he knew it, his mother would never have to experience the sorrow that was evidently in store for Gabe Larkins' parent, unless that tricky boy changed his ways.

Nor was Bristles apt to forget that he owed most of his present condition of satisfaction to the earnest efforts of his good chum, Fred Fenton. Who but Fred would have taken it upon himself to interview Miss Muster, and get acquainted with the facts in the case? And who but he could have guessed the identity of the guilty party; which he later on proved so wonderfully well, in the presence of the old maid who had met with the loss of her precious jewels?

Bristles never told what a siege of suspense he had passed through. And if there were any curious ones among his mates, who took it upon themselves to wonder why their usually lively, wide-awake comrade moped, as he had done for a time, they had to take it out in guessing.

Fred did have one very pleasant little surprise sprung upon him, and which made him feel more drawn to the old maid than ever.

On the very night of the boat race, when the atmosphere of all Riverport was vibrating with parading crowds, and bonfires were already springing up, to celebrate the great victory of the young oarsmen, Fred, returning home about supper time, found a little packet beside his plate.

It had not come by mail, and undoubtedly his mother knew something about who sent or brought it; for there was a glow in her eyes as she watched him handle it, with a questioning look in his own.

"Suppose you open it, Fred, instead of trying to guess," proposed his sister Kate.

"Well," he replied, laughingly, "that does seem like a sensible thing for you to say, Kate. Perhaps I am a little dazed or rattled; who wouldn't be after taking part in such a grand race as that? You were there, Mom; for I noticed you waving your pocket handkerchief; and I wager now, you never saw anybody but the Fenton boy who was on the crew. I say, now, what's all this mean?"

Father, mother, and sister all watching him, Fred had opened the little packet; and out upon the table rolled three handsome opals, that seemed to take on all the hues of the rainbow as the light of the evening lamp fell upon them.

He also unrolled a sheet of paper on which were a few lines in a rather crabbed hand; which Fred would once have said was just like the character of the whimsical old maid herself, but which he now knew must be caused by age.

"DEAR BOY:—I want you to accept these few tokens of my esteem, to know that I shall never forget what you have done to show me how necessary it always should be to look well before you leap. You will make me happy by keeping these, and saying nothing about the folly of

"Your Old Maid Friend,

"ALICIA MUSTER."

"Just to think, she sends me these valuable opals, because I happened to help prove that Bristles didn't take her gems," Fred said, wonderingly, as he looked down at the handsome present that had been given to him.

"Well, I think you earned them," remarked Mrs. Fenton, proudly; "and when your father hears the whole story, which I have only kept from telling him because I wanted you to have that pleasure, I'm sure he'll agree with me. Yes, you ought to be a lawyer, Fred. You are cut

out for a successful one."

"And then to think that he was on the crew that beat those smart Mechanicsburg fellows," Kate declared, as though to her mind that fact dwarfed everything else; "but, Fred, they are beginning to talk already how they mean to get even with Riverport this Fall. You know they had a fine gymnasium given to them by a rich man, and already they have started to practice all sorts of track events. I understand they mean to challenge Riverport to a meet; and having the advantage of that gymnasium, they expect to pay us back for the times we've beaten them."

"Oh! they do, eh?" remarked Fred, as though not greatly worried; "well, there will be two who must have a say in that, Riverport as well as Mechanicsburg. Perhaps they may turn out to have the better all-'round athletes; time will tell."

And time did tell; for the proposed athletic meet came to pass in the Fall. What stirring things happened along about that time, as well as the inspiring incidents connected with the great meet itself, will be recorded in the next story of this series, to be called: "Fred Fenton on the Track; Or, The Athletics of Riverport School."

Of course the Fentons were looking eagerly forward to the time when Hiram Masterson would redeem his promise to return and testify against the overbearing syndicate that was endeavoring to get possession of that rich Alaska mine, which had once belonged to Fred's uncle.

Days might pass, but each one meant in all probability that the missing witness, abducted by orders of the powerful combination of capitalists, was drawing closer; and every night on his return home Mr. Fenton fully expected to find the man from Alaska sitting at the table awaiting his coming.

True, he seemed to have so much knowledge of the almost unlimited powers of the syndicate, with which Squire Lemington was connected in some way, that Hiram had declared his intention of coming in some sort of disguise, so that he could give his evidence under oath before his unscrupulous uncle even knew that he was on this side of the ocean.

And so, on the whole, those summer days were times of almost unlimited pleasure to Fred Fenton. After his unsuccessful attempt to burn the racing boat of the Riverport schoolboys, Buck Lemington had remained a long time quiet. Possibly he feared that his crony, Conrad Jimmerson, when he was caught in Colon's quaint trap, might have told something of the truth before his mouth was closed by hearing that threatening signal outside. And Buck was waiting now to learn if anything was about to be done, in order to bring him to punishment.

Of course such a nature as his could not remain very quiet for any great length of time; and as the days grew into weeks doubtless his resentment toward Fred would once more become hot.

Then there would be more exciting times; for when Buck really worked himself up to a certain pitch, things were apt to happen.

The boys and girls of Riverport always did manage to have a good time during the summer holidays. True, there could be no singing school, and dances in the barn, such as winter brought along in its train; no skating on the river, sleighing over country roads with a pretty girl alongside, and the merry chime of bells in the air; but then picnics were held every little while; and as for the group of boys who somehow looked upon Fred as a sort of leader, there was hardly a weekday during the entire vacation that they did not go fishing, or at least pay a visit to the old "swimming hole."

When together, Bristles and Fred often talked about the affair of the opals. The latter said that his aunt kept in constant touch with Gabe Larkins, and seemed to be gaining considerable influence over the wild lad.

"I don't just know whether he means to reform, or is only pulling the wool over Aunt Alicia's eyes," Bristles declared; "but, anyhow, he seems to be walking a straight line now. Why, his mother told mine just yesterday that she didn't know what had come over Gabe, he was that considerate of her feelings nowadays. She wondered if he could be feeling ill, and expectin' to die. But maw just told her not to worry; that she reckoned he was only feelin' sorry because he'd been so bad in the past."

"I hope he means it," said Fred, with considerable earnestness in his voice. "It's a pretty hard thing for the leopard to change his spots, father says; but if Gabe does turn over a new leaf, he certainly ought to be helped by everybody."

"Oh!" said Bristles, quickly, "I stopped and shook hands with him the last time we met. And say, Fred, there did seem to be something a little different about his eyes; looked me square in the face, and you know he used to be seeing somethin' over your head every time

before. I wonder now does it mean anything?"

But that again was another thing that only time could prove. Whether Gabe did really see a light, and mean to change his ways, or was playing a foxy game for some purpose, there could be no way of telling, until he chose to come out into the open.

Here, with the horizon looking so bright for those in whose fortunes we have come to feel such a deep interest, it may be as well for us to say good-bye for the present, and leave a further recital of their adventures and contests to another time.

THE END

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