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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE PORTER AND THE RUNAWAYS; OR,
LAST DAYS AT OAK HALL ***



HE SAW AN ARM AND A HEAD COME UP.—*Page 240.*

Dave Porter Series

DAVE PORTER
AND THE RUNAWAYS

OR

LAST DAYS AT OAK HALL

BY

EDWARD STRATEMEYER

Author of "Dave Porter at Oak Hall," "The Lakeport Series,"
"Old Glory Series," "Pan-American Series," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY H. RICHARD BOEHM



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DAVE PORTER AND THE RUNAWAYS

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PREFACE

"DAVE PORTER AND THE RUNAWAYS" is a complete story in itself, but forms the ninth volume of a line issued under the general title of "Dave Porter Series."

In the first volume of this series, entitled "Dave Porter at Oak Hall," the reader was introduced to a typical American lad, and the particulars were given of his doings at an up-to-date boarding school.

There was a cloud over Dave's parentage, and in order to solve the mystery of his identity he took a long voyage over the ocean, as related in the second volume, called "Dave Porter in the South Seas." Then he came back to his schoolmates, as told of in "Dave Porter's Return to School," and then took a long trip to Norway, to hunt up his father, the particulars of which are given in "Dave Porter in the Far North."

Having settled the matter of his identity to his satisfaction, our hero came back to Oak Hall and had a number of strenuous contests, related in detail in "Dave Porter and His Classmates." Following this came the summer vacation, and the youth made a trip West, the happenings of which are set down in "Dave Porter at Star Ranch."

When Dave returned to Oak Hall once more he found the school rivalries as bitter as ever, and what these led to has been related in "Dave Porter and His Rivals." His enemies tried hard to do our hero much injury, but he exposed them and they were forced to flee, to escape the consequences of their actions.

The winter holidays found Dave homeward bound. He had anticipated some jolly times among his relatives and friends, but a robbery upset all his plans, and, almost before he knew it, he found himself bound southward, as related in "Dave Porter on Cave Island." On the island he had many adventures out of the ordinary, and he came home more of a hero than ever, having saved Mr. Wadsworth, his benefactor, from ruin.

In the present story Dave is back once again at school. There are some queer happenings, and then some lads run away. How Dave proved his common sense, and brought the runaways back, I leave for the pages which follow to tell. I trust the reading of this volume will do all my young friends good.

EDWARD STRATEMEYER.

February 1, 1913.

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DAVE PORTER AND THE RUNAWAYS

CHAPTER I

DAVE AND HIS CHUMS

"I say, Dave, here's an odd piece of news."

"An odd piece of news, Roger? What about?"

"A wild man in the woods back of Oak Hall," answered Roger Morr, who held a letter in his hand. "Queerest thing you ever heard of."

"I should say it was, if it's about a wild man," returned Dave Porter. "Who sent that letter?"

"Shadow Hamilton."

"Maybe it's another one of Shadow's innumerable yarns," suggested Dave, with a faint smile. "If he can't tell them by word of mouth, he writes them down."

"What has Shadow got to say about the wild man?" asked Phil Lawrence, looking up from the suit-case he was packing. "Has he been trying to clean out Oak Hall, or anything like that?"

"No, not exactly," returned Roger, turning back to the letter, which he had not yet finished. "He keeps in the woods, so Shadow says, and scares everybody who comes that way."

"How does he scare them?" asked Dave, pausing in the act of stowing a suit of clothing in a trunk.

"Shadow writes that he and Lazy were out walking one day and the wild man came after them with a big club. He wears long hair and a long beard, and his clothes are in tatters."

"What did they do?" questioned Phil.

"They ran back towards the school. The wild man followed 'em as far as the bridge over the brook, and then jumped into the bushes and disappeared."

"Humph!" muttered Phil. "Is that all?"

"Oh, no! The day before that, Chip Macklin and two other of the smaller boys went out, along the river, and the wild man came after them and shoved Chip into the water. He yelled to them never to come near him again. The other fellows ran away, and as soon as Chip could get out of the water he went after 'em. Then, three days later, Doctor Clay sent out Mr. Dale and Horsehair, the driver, to look into the matter, and the wild man met them at the bridge and threw mud balls at 'em. One mud ball hit the teacher in the arm, and one struck Horsehair in the nose and made it bleed. Horsehair was afraid to go on, because the wild man jumped around and shouted so furiously. Mr. Dale tried to catch him, but he ran away."

"Poor chap! He must be crazy," was Dave's comment. "He ought to be taken care of by the authorities."

"Yes, but they can't catch him," continued Roger. "They have tried half a dozen ways, but he slips 'em every time."

"Who is he?" asked Dave, as he continued to pack his trunk.

"Nobody has the least idea, so Shadow writes."

"Say, that will give us something to do—when we get back to Oak Hall!" cried Phil. "We'll organize a posse to round up the wild man!"

"I think we'll have plenty of other things to do when we get to school, Phil," remarked Dave. "Just remember that we have lost a lot of time from our lessons, and if we want to make up what we have missed, and graduate from Oak Hall with honor, we've got to buckle down and study."

"Oh, I know that," answered Phil, and gave a little sigh. "Just the same, I'm going to have a try at the wild man—if he comes my way."

"So am I," cried Roger. "And Dave will try with us; won't you, old man?" And Roger caught his chum affectionately by the shoulder. "You are the fellow to solve mysteries!"

Dave was about to answer when there came a knock on the bedroom door. He opened it to find himself confronted by a middle-aged lady, who was smiling but anxious.

"How are you getting along, boys?" she asked.

"First-rate, Mrs. Wadsworth," answered Roger. "We'll soon be finished now."

"Are the girls getting anxious?" questioned Dave.

"Say, what do you think?" burst out Phil. "We are going back to Oak Hall to capture a wild man who--"

"Phil!" burst out both Dave and Roger, and the other youth stopped short in confusion.

"A wild man?" cried the lady of the house, in consternation. "Oh, Dave, I hope--"

"Oh, don't let him worry you, Mrs. Wadsworth," responded Dave, quickly. "There is a wild man up there, but I don't think he will bother us any, and we've got too much to do to hunt for him." And the lad gave his chum a look that said as plainly as words: "What did you want to mention it for?"

"Oh—I—er—I was only fooling," stammered Phil. "Of course, if there is a wild man he won't come near us. Tell the girls we'll be ready in five minutes—at least I will," he added, and resumed his packing.

"Can I do anything for you?" asked the lady.

"You might try to find my striped cap," answered Dave. "I can't seem to locate it."

"It is in the library—I saw it a while ago, Dave."

"And my baseball bat—the new one with the black handle."

"That is in the back hall, in a corner. How about your books?"

"I've got all of them. Send Laura with the bat and cap, will you, please?"

"Yes;" and Mrs. Wadsworth hurried off, anxious to be of all the assistance possible.

"Say, that was a bad break for me," murmured Phil, as the door closed, and before Dave or Roger could speak. "I didn't want to worry her, Dave. I'm sorry I mentioned the wild man."

"And the man may be caught before we get back to Oak Hall," said Roger. He crossed the room and peered into a closet. "Has anybody seen my baseball shoes?"

"You left those at the Hall, Roger," answered Dave.

"Did I? All right, then. I came away in such a hurry I can't remember what I took and what I didn't."

"I guess we've got about everything now," resumed Dave, looking around the bedroom. He glanced at his watch. "Ten minutes to twelve. We are to have lunch at a quarter past, and start at one, sharp."

"Provided the auto is ready," interposed Phil.

"It will be—trust my Uncle Dunston for that," answered Dave. "My, but isn't it jolly to think we are going back to school in the auto instead of by train!"

"Yes, and to think that the girls and your uncle are going with us!" added Roger.

"Dave, look out for Roger, he's got his eye on Laura!" said Phil, slyly.

"Oh, you give us a rest, Phil Lawrence!" burst out Roger, growing red. "I guess you've got an eye on her yourself."

"Poor me! Poor me!" murmured Phil, as if talking to himself. "Roger will talk to nobody but Laura, and Dave will see and hear and think of nobody but Jessie, and I'll be left in the cold! Oh, what a cruel world this is! If only—wow!" and Phil's pretended musings came to a sudden end, as Dave shied a pair of rolled-up socks at him and Roger followed with a pillow. In another instant a mimic battle was on, with pillows and various articles of clothing for ammunition. Then came another knock on the door and Laura Porter appeared, with a baseball bat in one hand and her brother's cap in the other.

"Oh dear me!" she cried, and then stopped short, for a red sweater, thrown by Roger at Phil, had missed its aim and landed on her head.

"I beg your pardon, Laura, really I do!" gasped Roger, as he sprang forward and took the sweater from its resting-place. "I—I didn't mean that for you."

"Oh, Roger, of course you did!" cried Phil, with a twinkle in his eye. "That's the way he salutes girls always, Laura."

"Is this the way you are packing up?" demanded Dave's sister, with a little smile, while poor Roger grew redder than ever.

"Oh, we were only waiting for you to bring my things, Laura," answered her brother, coolly. "We'll be ready in three minutes and a half by the factory whistles."

"Say, what is this I hear about a wild man?" continued Laura, as she sat down on a chair Roger shoved towards her. "You've made Mrs. Wadsworth and Jessie all excited over it."

"Oh, it isn't anything," burst out Phil, quickly. "I made a mistake even to mention it."

"She came down and told Jessie and me that she was afraid you'd have more trouble, when you got back to school. As if you haven't had troubles enough already!" And Laura looked affectionately at her brother, and then at his chums.

"Oh, this won't amount to anything, Laura," said Dave. "So tell Mrs. Wadsworth and Jessie not to worry about it."

"But I want to know what it means?" demanded the sister; and in the end Dave and his chums had to relate what they knew about the wild man. As they finished the girl shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't like that a bit," she said. "I am sure you'll get mixed up with that wild man somehow. Why, he might attack you and try to kill you!"

"We'll be on our guard—when we go near the woods," answered Roger.

"You had better not go alone," insisted the girl.

"We seldom travel alone," said her brother. "Generally Roger, Phil, and I are together, and very often some of the other fellows are with us. But don't you worry, Laura, and tell Jessie and her mother it will be all right."

"And there is another thing to be careful about, Dave," went on Laura, as she prepared to leave.

"What is that?"

"Be careful of how you treat Nat Poole."

"Why, what do you mean?" cried Dave, and then he added quickly, as he saw that his sister had something on her mind: "What has happened now?"

"I don't know exactly, Dave. But I got word through Ben Basswood's cousin that Nat had told Ben he wasn't going to let you ride over him this term. I think Nat is jealous because you were so successful in that trip to Cave Island."

"Did you learn of anything Nat intended to do?" questioned Roger, curiously.

"No, excepting that he said he wasn't going to play second fiddle to your crowd any longer. He tried to get into a quarrel with Ben, but Ben would have nothing to do with him."

"Did Nat go back to the Hall when it opened?" asked Phil.

"Yes, the same day Ben went back."

"I am not afraid of Nat Poole," declared Dave, stoutly. "He is a bully, always was, and I suppose he always will be. I tried to do him a favor the last time I saw him—but he doesn't seem to have appreciated it."

"Laura!" called a musical voice, from the stair landing.

"Coming, Jessie!" answered Laura. "Now you boys, hurry—lunch will be served in a few minutes;" and she left the room.

"So Nat Poole wants to make more trouble, eh?" mused Dave, as he resumed packing. "What a chap he is! Why can't he be decent and mind his own business?"

"Because he isn't that breed, that's why," answered Phil. "He hates to see another fellow become popular. Dave, you take my advice and watch him, when we get back to school."

"I'll do it," answered Dave, thoughtfully.

CHAPTER II

A GLIMPSE AT THE PAST

"Everything ready?"

"Yes, so far as I know."

"Then we are off! Good-by, everybody!"

"Good-by! Take care of yourself, Dave!"

"I will!"

There was a tooting of an automobile horn, a chorus of cries and cheers, a waving of caps, and then the big touring car that had been drawn up in front of the Wadsworth mansion rolled from the piazza steps through the spacious grounds; and Dave Porter and his chums were once more on their way to boarding school.

To those who have read the previous volumes of this line of stories Dave Porter will need no special introduction. For the benefit of new readers allow me to state that Dave was a wideawake American lad, now well along in his school years.

When a small child our hero had been found one day, walking along the railroad tracks near the town of Crumville. He could tell nothing about himself, and as nobody came to claim him, he was taken to the local poorhouse, where he remained a number of years. Then he was bound out to a broken-down college professor named Caspar Potts, who was farming for his health. The professor did what he could for the lad, but soon got into difficulties with a mean money-lender named Aaron Poole, and would have lost his farm had it not been for something out of the ordinary happening.

On the outskirts of the town lived a wealthy jewelry manufacturer, Oliver Wadsworth. Mr. Wadsworth had a daughter named Jessie, and one day, through an explosion of an automobile tank, the little miss was in danger of being burned to death, when Dave came to her assistance. This so pleased the Wadsworths that they came not only to the boy's aid but also helped Caspar

Potts.

"The lad shall go to boarding school and get a good education," said Oliver Wadsworth. And how Dave was sent off has already been related in the first book of this series, entitled "Dave Porter at Oak Hall." At the school he made many warm friends, including Roger Morr, the son of a United States senator; Phil Lawrence, the offspring of a wealthy shipowner; Buster Beggs, who was fat as he was jolly, and Maurice, otherwise "Shadow" Hamilton, who would rather spin yarns than eat. He also made some enemies, not the least of whom were Gus Plum, a great bully, and Nat Poole, son of the money-lender already mentioned. Plum had since reformed, but Nat was as overbearing and dictatorial as ever.

The great cloud resting over Dave in those days was the question of his identity, and when some of his enemies spoke of him as "that poorhouse nobody" he resolved to find out who he really was. Getting a strange clew, he set forth on his travels, as described in "Dave Porter in the South Seas," where he found his uncle, Dunston Porter. Then he came back to Oak Hall, as told of in "Dave Porter's Return to School," and next went to the Land of the Midnight Sun, as set forth in "Dave Porter in the Far North," where he was gladdened by a long-hoped-for meeting with his father.

"They can't say I'm a poorhouse nobody now," he told himself, and went back to Oak Hall once again, as set forth in "Dave Porter and His Classmates." Here he made more friends than ever, but he likewise made enemies, the most bitter of the latter being one Link Merwell, the son of a ranch-owner of the West. Merwell did his best to get Dave into trouble, but in the end was exposed and had to leave the school.

Vacation time was now at hand, and through Laura Porter, our hero's newly-found sister, Dave and his chums were invited to visit some of Laura's friends in the Far West. Laura Porter and Jessie Wadsworth went along; and what a grand time the young folks had can be realized by reading "Dave Porter at Star Ranch." The boys went hunting and fishing, and learned to do some broncho-riding, and they likewise fell in with Link Merwell again and showed that bully up in his true colors.

"Back to the grind now!" said Dave, after the vacation was over, and back he did go, to Oak Hall, as told of in "Dave Porter and His Rivals." That term was a lively one, for some lads came there from another school, and they, led by Nat Poole, tried to run matters to suit themselves. But when the newcomers lost an important football contest, Oak Hall woke up to the true condition of affairs, and Dave and his chums quickly regained their places on the eleven, and then won a grand victory. During this time Link Merwell, in company with another bad boy named Nick Jasniff, became a student at Rockville Military Academy, a rival institution of learning. Both bullies did their best to make trouble for our hero, but, as before, he exposed them, and this time they had to flee to escape arrest.

When the Christmas holidays came around Dave went back to Crumville, where he and his family and old Caspar Potts now lived with the Wadsworths. At that time Mr. Wadsworth had at his jewelry works some rare diamonds, waiting to be reset. Directly after Christmas came a startling robbery. The diamonds were gone, and it was learned by Dave that if they were not recovered, not only would Mr. Wadsworth be ruined, but that his own father and his uncle would be seriously crippled financially, as they had gone on a bond for the return of the gems.

At first, clues to the robbers were scarce, but soon Dave made a queer discovery, and followed this up by another, as set forth in the volume preceding this, entitled, "Dave Porter on Cave Island." He and his chums became satisfied that Link Merwell and Nick Jasniff had committed the theft, and they followed the evil pair, first to Florida and then to Cave Island, so named because of the numerous caverns it contained. The evil-doers were caught and the diamonds recovered, but, at the last moment, Link Merwell managed to escape.

"Let him go," said Dave. "He acts as if he wanted to turn over a new leaf."

"I am glad it wasn't Jasniff," returned Phil. "He is the worse of the pair."

"Right you are," agreed Roger.

The senator's son and Phil had accompanied Dave to Crumville, and all had received a warm reception at the hands of those who were waiting for them. Mr. Wadsworth was delighted to get back the jewels, and thanked Dave over and over again for what he had done. Dave's father and his uncle were also happy, and as for Laura, she had to hug her brother over and over again. Jessie wanted to hug him, too, but her maidenly modesty prevented this, but she gave Dave a look and a hand squeeze that meant a good deal, for our hero was her hero, too, and always had been.

The boys knew they had to go back to Oak Hall, but the older folks had insisted that they rest up a bit, after their traveling. So they "rested" by going skating and sleigh-riding for the last time that season, taking the girls along.

"I've got an idea," said Dave's uncle, one morning, after the snow had cleared away. "The roads are so fine just now, what is to prevent my taking you to Oak Hall in the touring car? We can make it in a day, I think."

"Grand!" shouted Dave.

"Just the thing!" added Phil.

"Couldn't be better," supplemented Roger.

"You can ship your baggage on by express," went on Dunston Porter, "and then we'll have room enough to take Laura and Jessie, if they want to go along."

"Fine!" burst out Roger, so quickly that it made Phil wink, and then the senator's son grew red. "Isn't it all right?" he demanded.

"Sure thing," responded the shipowner's son.

The matter was talked over; and that night it was arranged that the two girls should go along on the trip, returning later to Crumville with Mr. Porter. Not to tire Laura and Jessie too much, it was decided to leave after lunch the next day, stopping over night at Ryepoint, and finishing the trip to Oak Hall the morning following.

"If only the good weather holds out," said Roger, wistfully. And then he added suddenly: "Who is going to sit in front with your uncle, Dave?"

"Why, you are, of course," broke in Phil, with a grin.

"Why—er—I—" stammered the senator's son.

"Now, Phil, you know you said you'd like that seat," broke in Dave. "He's only fooling you, Roger." And then Roger looked quite satisfied, for, it might as well be confessed, Roger and Laura were very friendly and liked greatly to be in each other's company. The senator's son had a manly regard for Dave's sister—the same kind of a feeling that our hero had for dear little Jessie.

The trunks and suit-cases had been shipped off, and the big six-cylinder car—a new machine belonging to the Porters—had been brought around, with Dunston Porter at the wheel, for the old hunter and traveler had taken a strong liking to autoing. The girls and boys had piled in, after much handshaking and some kisses, and now the car was rolling out of the grounds, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Wadsworth, Dave's father, and old Caspar Potts standing on the piazza, waving the travelers adieu.

"Take care of yourself, my boy!" shouted Mr. Porter.

"I will, Dad!" called back Dave. "You take it easy till I get back," he added, for he knew that his parent had been working hard of late.

"I hate to see Dave go—he is so full of life and good cheer," murmured Mrs. Wadsworth, with a sigh.

"Best lad in the world," added her husband.

"Yes, yes! The very best!" came in a quavering voice from old Caspar Potts, and the tears stood in his glistening eyes.

"I trust he comes through this year at Oak Hall all right," resumed Mr. Porter, as, the automobile having disappeared, those left behind reentered the house. "He wishes to graduate, you know."

"Don't you think he'll come through?" asked the manufacturer, quickly.

"I'm not sure about it. He has lost so much time—on that trip he and the others took—you know."

"That is true."

"Oh, Davy will come through, never fear!" cried Caspar Potts. "I know the lad. If he makes up his mind—well, it's as good as done," and he nodded his whitened head several times. To the old college professor who knew him so well, there was no youth quite so clever and manly as Dave Porter.

In the meantime the big touring car was leaving Crumville rapidly behind. On the front seat, beside Mr. Porter, sat Phil, waving an Oak Hall banner and cracking all kinds of jokes. In the back were the two girls with Dave and Roger. All were well bundled up, for the air, though clear, was still cold.

"Here is where we make fifty miles an hour!" cried the shipowner's son, gayly.

"Oh, Phil!" burst out Laura. "Fifty miles an hour! Uncle Dunston, don't you dare--"

"Phil is fooling," interrupted her uncle.

"That's it—I made a mistake—we are to go at sixty miles an hour, just as soon as we pass the next chicken coop. We won't dare do it before, for fear of blowing the coop over. We--"

"Why not make it seventy-five miles while you are at it," broke in Dave. "Nothing like going the limit." And at this there was a general laugh.

"There is a bad turn ahead," said Dunston Porter, a minute later. "They have torn up part of the road around the hill. We'll have to take it pretty slowly."

The touring car crept up the hill, past several heaps of dirt, and then started to come down on the other side. Here there was a sharp curve, with heavy bushes on both sides. Mr. Porter blew the horn loud and long, to warn anybody ahead that he was coming.

"Look out!" yelled Phil, suddenly. But the warning was not necessary, for Dunston Porter saw the danger and so did the others. A horse and buggy were just ahead on the torn-up highway, going in the same direction as themselves. The horse was prancing and rearing and the driver was sawing at the lines in an effort to quiet the steed. It looked as if there might be a collision.

CHAPTER III

A TALK OF THE FUTURE

The girls screamed and the boys uttered various cries and words of advice. Dave leaned forward, to jam on the hand-brake, but his uncle was ahead of him in the action. The foot-brake was already down, and from the rear wheels came a shrill squeaking, as the bands gripped the hubs. But the hill was a steep one and the big touring car, well laden, continued to move downward, although but slowly.

"Keep over! Keep over to the right!" yelled Dunston Porter, to the driver of the buggy. But the man was fully as excited as his horse, and he continued to saw on the reins, until the turnout occupied the very center of the narrow and torn-up highway.

It was a time of peril, and a man less used to critical moments than Dunston Porter might have lost his head completely. But this old traveler and hunter, who had faced grizzly bears in the West and lions in Africa, managed to keep cool. He saw a chance to pass on the right of the turnout ahead, and like a flash he let go on the two brakes and turned on a little power. Forward bounded the big car, the right wheels on the very edge of a water-gully. The left mud-guards scraped the buggy, and the man driving it uttered a yell of fright. Then the touring car went on, to come to a halt at the bottom of the hill, a short distance away.

"Hello!" exclaimed Dave, as he looked back at the turnout that had caused the trouble. "It's Mr. Poole!"

"You mean Nat's father?" queried Phil.

"Yes."

"Hi, you! What do you mean by running into me?" stormed the money-lender, savagely, as he presently managed to get his steed under control and came down beside the touring car.

"What do you mean by blocking the road, Mr. Poole?" returned Dunston Porter, coldly.

"I didn't block the road!"

"You certainly did. If we had run into you, it would have been your fault."

"Nonsense! You passed me on the wrong side."

"Because you didn't give me room to pass on the other side."

"And your horn scared my horse."

"I don't see how that is my fault. Your horse ought to be used to auto-horns by this time."

"You've scraped all the paint off my carriage, and I had it painted only last week," went on the money-lender, warming up. "It's an outrage how you auto fellows think you own the whole road!"

"I won't discuss the matter now, Mr. Poole," answered Dunston Porter, stiffly. "I think it was your fault entirely. But if you think otherwise, come and see me when I get back from this trip, which will be in four days." And without waiting for more words, Dave's uncle started up the touring car, and Aaron Poole was soon left far behind.

"If he isn't a peach!" murmured Roger, slangily. "It's easy to see where Nat gets his meanness from. He is simply a chip off the old block."

"He's a pretty big chip," returned Phil, dryly.

"I don't see how he can blame us," said Dave. "We simply couldn't pass him on the left. If we had tried, we'd have gone in the ditch sure. And the scraping we did to his buggy amounts to next to nothing."

"I am not afraid of what he'll do," said Dunston Porter. "A couple of dollars will fix up those scratches, and if he is so close-fisted I'll foot the bill. But I'll give him a piece of my mind for blocking the road."

"But his horse was frightened, Uncle Dunston," said Laura.

"A little, yes, but if Poole hadn't got scared himself he might have drawn closer to the side of the road. I think he was more frightened than the horse."

"He certainly was," declared Phil. "When we scraped the buggy his face got as white as chalk, and he almost dropped the lines."

"He'll hate all of us worse than ever for this," was Dave's comment.

"I am not afraid of him," answered the uncle.

On and on sped the big touring car, and soon the stirring incident on the road was, for the time being, forgotten. Crumville had been left far behind, and now they passed through one pretty village after another. On the broad, level stretches Dunston Porter allowed the boys to "spell"

him at the wheel, for each knew how to run an automobile.

"Twenty miles more to Ryeport!" cried Dave, as they came to a crossroads and read a signboard.

"And it's just half-past five," added the senator's son, consulting his watch. "We'll get there in plenty of time to wash up and have a fine dinner."

"And, say, maybe we won't do a thing to that table!" murmured Phil, smacking his lips.

"Oh, you boys are always hungry," was Jessie's comment.

"Well, you know, we've got to grow," answered Phil, with a grin.

"I think I'll enjoy eating after such a long ride," said Laura. "The fresh air certainly does give one an appetite."

"I think I'll order bread and milk for all hands," remarked Dunston Porter, with a sly smile.

"Bread and milk!" murmured Jessie, in dismay.

"Sure. It's famous for your complexion."

"A juicy steak for mine!" cried Dave. "Steak, and vegetables, and salad, and pudding or pie."

"Well, I guess that will do for me, too," said his uncle, simply. "You see, I suppose I'll have to eat to keep you company," and he smiled again.

"Uncle Dunston, what a tease you are!" murmured Laura. "Your appetite is just as good as that of any of the boys."

Dave was at the wheel, and he sent the touring car along the smooth highway at a speed of twenty miles an hour. He would have liked to drive faster, but his uncle would not permit this.

"The law says twenty miles an hour, and I believe in obeying the law," said Dunston Porter. "Besides, you can never tell what may happen, and it is best to have your car under control."

The truth of the latter remark was demonstrated less than five minutes later, when they came to another crossroads. Without warning of any kind, a racing car came rushing swiftly from one direction and a coach from the other. Dave could not cross ahead of the racing car, and the approach of the coach from the opposite direction cut him off from turning with the car. So all that was left to do was to jam on both brakes, which he did, and then, as the racing car shot past, he released the wheels and went on, just ahead of the coach. But it was a narrow escape all around, and the girls and Roger leaped to their feet in alarm.

"Phew! see them streak along!" was Phil's comment, gazing after the racing car, which was fast disappearing in a cloud of dust.

"They ought to be arrested!" was Laura's comment. "Why, we might have been smashed up!"

"Good work, Davy!" cried Dunston Porter. "You did just the right thing."

"Even if that coach driver is shaking his fist at us, eh?" answered Dave, and he bobbed his head in the direction of the coach, which had hauled up but was now going on.

"If you had been going a little faster it would have been all up with us," said Phil, with a grave shake of his head.

"Let me take the wheel now," said Dunston Porter, quietly, and Dave slid out of the driving-seat willingly enough, for the excitement had left him somewhat limp.

Half-past six found them in Ryeport, and a few minutes later they rolled up to the National Hotel, and the girls and boys got out, while Mr. Porter took the car around to the garage. They had sent word ahead for rooms, and all soon felt at home. The girls had a fine apartment on the second floor, front, with Dunston Porter next to them, and the three boys in a big room across the hallway.

When the young people assembled in the dining-room, after brushing and washing up, a surprise awaited them. They had a table to themselves, ordered by Dunston Porter, and decorated with a big bouquet of roses and carnations. A full course dinner was served.

"Oh, this is lovely!" cried Jessie, as she caught sight of the flowers.

"Just grand, Uncle Dunston!" added Laura. And then she added, in a lower voice: "If there wasn't such a crowd, I'd give you a big hug for this!"

"And so would I," added Jessie.

"All right, that's one you owe me, girls, remember that," answered the old hunter and traveler.

They spent over an hour at the table, enjoying the bountiful spread provided, and telling stories and jokes. The boys were in their element, and kept the girls laughing almost constantly.

"We'll be back to the grind day after to-morrow, so we had better make the best of it," was the way Dave expressed himself.

After the meal, Dunston Porter went out to give directions concerning the touring car, and Phil accompanied him. This left our hero and Roger alone with the two girls. They sought out the hotel parlor, which they found deserted, and Dave and Jessie walked to the far end, where there was an alcove, while Roger and Laura went to the piano.

"Dave, won't it be hard work to go back to the grind, as you call it?" questioned Jessie, as both stood looking out of the window.

"In a way, yes, but it's what a fellow has got to expect, Jessie," he returned. "A chap can't get an education without working for it."

"I trust you pass with high honors," the girl went on, with a hopeful look into his face.

"I'll try my best. Of course, I've lost some time—going to Cave Island and all that. Maybe I'll flunk."

"Oh, Dave, that would be—be—" Jessie could not go on.

"As soon as I get back I'm going to buckle down, and get to be a regular greasy grind, as they call 'em. I've made up my mind to one thing I'm afraid the others won't like."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to cut the baseball nine, if I can. It takes too much time from our studies."

"Won't that be easy?"

"I don't know. I made quite a record, you know. Maybe the crowd will insist on it that I play. Of course, I don't want to see Oak Hall lose any games. But I guess they'll have players enough—with all the new students coming in."

"And if you do graduate, Dave, what then?" asked Jessie, after a pause. This question had been on her mind a long time, but she had hesitated about asking it.

"To tell the honest truth, Jessie, I don't know," answered Dave, very slowly. "I've thought and thought, but I can't seem to hit the right thing. Your father and Professor Potts seem to think I ought to go to college, and I rather incline that way myself. But then I think of going to some technical institution, and of taking up civil engineering, or mining, or something like that. Uncle Dunston knew a young fellow who became a civil engineer and went to South America and laid out a railroad across the Andes Mountains, and he knew another young fellow who took up mining and made a big thing of a mine in Montana. That sort of thing appeals to me, and it appeals to Dad, too."

"But it would take you so far from home, Dave!" and Jessie caught hold of his arm as she spoke, as if afraid he was going to leave that minute.

"I know it, but—er—but—would you care, Jessie?" he stammered.

"Care? Of course, I'd care!" she replied, and suddenly began to blush. "We'd all care."

"But would you care very much?" he insisted, lowering his voice. "Because, if you would, I'd tell you something."

"What would you tell me?" she asked.

"The young fellow who went to South America as a civil engineer took his wife with him."

"Oh, Dave!" and for the moment Jessie turned her head away.

"If I went so far off, I'd want somebody with me, Jessie. A fellow would be awfully lonely otherwise."

"I—I suppose that would be so."

"If you thought enough of a fellow, would you go to South America, or Montana, or Africa with him?" And Dave looked Jessie full in the face.

"I'd go to the end of the world with him," she answered, with sudden boldness.

Then Mr. Porter and Phil came back, and the conversation became general.

CHAPTER IV

MR. JOB HASKERS'S DOINGS

"And now for Oak Hall!"

It was Dave who uttered the words, the next morning, after a good night's rest and an early breakfast. The big touring car had been brought around by Dunston Porter, and the young folks had climbed in and stowed away the limited baggage they carried. All felt in excellent spirits, and Dave was particularly gay. What Jessie had said the evening before, and the way she had said it, still hung in his mind. She was a splendid girl, and if it was in him to do it, he was going to make himself worthy of her. He was still young, so he did not dwell long over these things, but his regard for her was entirely proper, and likely to make him do his best in his endeavors.

Phil had asked for permission to run the car for a while and took the wheel as soon as Ryeport was left behind. The shipowner's son knew how to handle an automobile almost as well as any of them, but he had one fault, which was, that he did not steer out of the way of sharp stones and like things calculated to bring on punctures and blow-outs.

"My, what a glorious morning!" exclaimed Laura, as they bowled along over the smooth roads.

"Couldn't be better," answered Roger. "Wish we were going on all day!" he added.

"So do I," added Dave. They expected to reach Oakdale by noon, get dinner there, and then run up to the school.

"Not too fast, Phil," warned Mr. Porter, as the shipowner's son "let her out a bit," as he expressed it. "You don't know what sort of a road you've got beyond the turn."

"We'll soon be coming to some roads we know," answered Phil. "Those we used to travel on our bicycles."

They passed through several towns and villages. Then they reached a crossroads, and here some men and a steam roller were at work, and the road was closed. One of the workmen motioned for them to take the road on the left.

"Must be a road around," said Dunston Porter. "It doesn't look very good, but you can try it. Shall I take the wheel?"

"Oh, I can run the car easily enough," answered Phil.

For half a mile they went on without trouble, through a rolling country where the scenery was very fine. Then they reached a point where the road was full of loose stones.

"Be careful!" cried Mr. Porter.

They rolled on, past a pretty farmhouse and some barns. They were just on the point of making another turn when there came a sudden bang! from under the car, and the turnout swayed to one side of the road. Phil threw out the clutch and put on the brakes, and they came to a standstill. Then the driver shut off the engine.

"What is the matter?" queried Jessie.

"A blow-out, I guess," answered Dave. "We'll soon see."

Dunston Porter and the boys got down to the ground and made an examination. The shoe of the rear left wheel had been badly cut by the sharp stones and the inner tube had been blown out through the cut.

"We'll have to put on one of the other shoes," said Mr. Porter. They carried two with them, besides half a dozen inner tubes.

"All right, here is where we get to work!" cried Dave. "Somebody time us, please," and he started in by getting off his coat and cuffs and donning a working jumper. His uncle quickly followed suit, while Phil and Roger got out the lifting-jack and some tools.

The girls stood watching the proceedings for a while and then strolled back towards the farmhouse. The boys and Mr. Porter became so engrossed in putting on a new inner tube and a shoe that they did not notice their absence. The new shoe fitted the rim of the wheel rather tightly and they had all they could do to get it into place.

"Phew! this is work and no mistake!" murmured Roger. "I wonder why they can't get tires that won't blow out or go down."

"Maybe some day they will have them," answered Dunston Porter.

"I reckon this is all my fault," put in Phil, ruefully. "I must have gone over some extra sharp stone, and it cut like a knife."

"Oh, such accidents are liable to happen to anybody," answered Dave. He looked at his watch. "Twenty-five minutes, and we haven't blown it up yet! No record job this time."

"Thank fortune we've got a patent pump to do the pumping for us," remarked his uncle. Pumping tires by hand he found a very disagreeable task.

At last the shoe and tube were in place and the pump was set in motion. Dave watched the gauge, and when it was high enough he shut off the air. The tools were put away, and they were ready to go on again.

"The girls went back to that farmhouse," said the senator's son, pointing to a small cottage.

"Let us run back and pick them up, and wash our hands at the well."

Once in front of the house, Dunston Porter, who was at the wheel, sounded the horn. At the same time the boys made for the well, which stood between the house and one of the barns.

"Maybe the girls went inside," remarked Dave, as he looked in vain for them.

"Must be somewhere around," returned Phil.

All washed up, using soap and towels carried in the car. Then Dave went to the door of the farmhouse and knocked. In answer to the summons Laura appeared.

"Oh, Dave, come in!" she cried. "I want you to meet the lady here."

Wondering what his sister wanted, our hero stepped into the sitting-room, which was small and plainly but neatly furnished. In a rocking-chair sat an elderly woman, pale and careworn.

"Mrs. Breen, this is my brother," said Laura. "And these are his school chums," she added, nodding towards Phil and Roger.

"How do you do, boys?" said the woman, in a thin, trembling voice.

"We just told her we were bound for Oak Hall," said Jessie, who was also present. "And she says she knows somebody there."

"She knows Mr. Job Haskers," finished Laura.

"Mr. Haskers!" repeated Dave, mentioning the name of one of the teachers—a dictatorial individual nobody liked, and who was allowed to keep his position mainly because of his abilities as an instructor. The chums had had more than one dispute with Job Haskers, and all wished that he would leave the school.

"Yes, yes, I know him," answered Mrs. Breen, nodding her head gravely and thoughtfully. "He is a great scholar—a very great scholar," and she nodded again. She was not well and her mind did not appear to be overly bright. She lived alone in the cottage, a neighboring farmer taking care of her few acres of ground for her.

"Dave, come here," whispered Laura, and led her brother to a corner of the room. "Mrs. Breen tells me that Mr. Haskers owes her money—that he used to board with her and that he borrowed some—and she says he writes that he can't pay her because he gets so little salary, and that sometimes he has to wait a long while himself."

"How much is it?" asked Dave, with interest. He remembered how close-fisted Job Haskers had been on more than one occasion.

"Nearly two hundred dollars, so she says."

"He ought to be able to pay that, Laura. I think he gets a fair salary—in fact, I am sure of it—and I am also pretty sure that Doctor Clay doesn't keep him waiting for his money."

"It is too bad! She looks so helpless and so much in need," murmured the girl.

"I'll find out about this," answered Dave.

He sat down, as did the others, and soon had the elderly lady telling her story in detail. It was not very long. Job Haskers had boarded with her one summer, just before obtaining his position at Oak Hall, and he owed her sixty dollars for this. During the time he had spent with her he had spoken of a school-book he was going to publish that would bring him in much money, and she had loaned him a hundred and twenty-five dollars for this. But she had never seen the school-book, nor had he ever paid back a cent. His plea, when she had written to him, had been that his pay was poor and that he had to wait a long time to get money, and that his publishers had not yet gotten around to selling his book.

"I never heard of any book he got out," said Roger. "And I think I would hear if there was such a book."

"That's so," added Phil. "Old Haskers would be so proud of it he would want everybody to know."

"It is certainly a shame he doesn't pay this lady, if he has the money," was Dunston Porter's comment. "Did he give you a note?" he asked of Mrs. Breen.

"He wrote out some kind of a paper and was going to give it to me. But I never got it."

"He's a swindler, that's what he is!" murmured Phil, wrathfully.

"It looks that way," answered Dave, in an equally low tone.

"He knows this lady is next to helpless and he intends to do her out of the money!"

"He ought to be sued," exclaimed Roger.

"You have no note, or other writing about the money?" questioned Mr. Porter.

"I have his letters," answered the elderly lady. "They are in the bureau yonder." And she pointed to an ancient chest of drawers.

"Shall I get them?" asked Jessie, for she saw that it was a task for the old lady to move around.

"If you will, my dear. I am so stiff it is hard to get up."

Both girls went to the chest of drawers and brought out a small box of letters. Mrs. Breen put on her glasses and fumbled them over and brought forth three communications which were, as the boys recognized, in Job Haskers's well-known jerky handwriting. She passed them over to be read, and all present perused them with interest.

The contents, however, were disappointing, especially to the boys and Dunston Porter, who had hoped to find something by which legally to hold the school-teacher. Not once did Job Haskers mention that he owed Mrs. Breen any money. He simply stated that he regretted he could do nothing for her, that times were hard, and that his income was limited and hard to get. He said as little as possible, and the tone of the communications showed that he hoped he would hear no more from the old lady who had done what she could to aid him.

"I think this is the limit!" said Dave to his uncle. "Don't you think he ought to be sued?"

"I don't know about suing him, Dave; but I think this ought to be put in a lawyer's hands."

"He makes money enough to pay this lady," said Phil. "Say, I've a good mind to give him a piece of my mind!" he added, hotly.

"I'll look into this when I come back this way," said Dunston Porter, after a little more talk. "Perhaps I can get one of our lawyers to prod this Haskers a little, and also state the case to Doctor Clay."

"Oh, will you do that, Uncle Dunston?" cried Laura, brightening, for she, as well as all of the others, felt sorry for Mrs. Breen, who seemed so poor, old, and lonesome.

"Yes, I'll do it. And now we had better be on our way,—if we want to reach Oakdale by noon," went on Mr. Porter.

The boys went out, followed by Jessie. Laura lingered, to whisper something in her uncle's ear. Dunston Porter nodded, and then Laura joined the others.

"Mrs. Breen, I will be back in a day or two, to see you about this money affair," said Mr. Porter, when he and the old lady were alone. "In the meantime, as you were so kind as to take the young ladies in while we were mending our machine, allow me to make you a little present," and as he finished he placed a five-dollar bill in her lap.

"Oh!" she cried, taking up the banknote. "Why, it's five dollars! I—I can't really take all that money!"

"Oh, yes, you can," said Mr. Porter, smiling. "Use it as you see fit, and remember that I'll be back, and we'll do what we can to get that money from Mr. Haskers."

"You are very, very kind!" murmured the old lady, and tears stood in her eyes. The past winter had been a severe one for her, and she had had a hard struggle to get along.

"Good-by!" shouted the girls and boys to her, and she waved her hand to them. Then the automobile started off once more, in the direction of Oakdale.

CHAPTER V

AT OAK HALL ONCE MORE

"Hurrah! here we are at Oakdale at last!"

"Old town looks natural, doesn't it?"

"So it does, Roger. See any of the fellows?"

"Not yet, Dave. But we are sure to meet somebody, even if it is a school-day," went on the senator's son.

"Uncle Dunston, let me take the auto around to the hotel," said our hero. "I know the streets better than you do. We have to make several turns."

"All right, Dave," was the ready answer, and Dunston Porter arose and allowed his nephew to crowd into the driver's seat.

The run to the town in the vicinity of which Oak Hall was located had been made without further incident. On the way the party had talked over Mrs. Breen's affairs, and Dunston Porter had promised to take the matter up, through his lawyer.

"I think it best that our names don't appear in the case," said he. "Otherwise, Mr. Haskers might not treat you so well during the term."

"He never treats us well, anyway," grumbled Phil. "But you are right, don't mention our names."

On this late winter day the town looked rather dreary, but the young folks were in high spirits, and Dave, with a grand flourish, ran the car up to one of the best hotels the place afforded. As before, word had been sent ahead that they were coming, and the host of the resort came out to meet them.

"We'll have dinner ready inside of quarter of an hour," he said. "Come in and make yourselves at home."

The repast was fully as good as the dinner served at Ryeport, and everybody enjoyed it greatly.

"And now for the Hall!" cried Dave.

"Glad to leave us?" asked Jessie, half-reproachfully.

"You know better than to ask such a question," he replied. "But if we have got to get back to the grind, why, we might as well do it."

"And I'm a bit anxious to see how the old place looks," added the senator's son.

"Dave, you can run the car to the Hall, if you wish," said Mr. Porter, feeling sure the youth would like to do that very thing.

"All right."

The touring automobile was brought around, and they were just getting in when there came a sudden hail from across the way.

"Hello, there, everybody!"

"It's Dave Porter, and Roger, and Phil!" said somebody else.

"Why, how are you, Shadow!" cried our hero. "And how are you, Buster?" he added, as Maurice Hamilton and Buster Beggs came across the road to greet them.

"Fine!" puffed Buster, who was very fat and jolly. "Only Shadow has been walking the feet off of me!" And then the stout youth shook hands all around.

"Now, just to hear that!" cried Shadow, as he, too, shook hands. "Why, all we did was to walk from the Hall to here."

"And up one street and down another for half an hour," burst in Buster.

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story!" cried Shadow, who was noted for his yarn-spinning weakness. "Once two men started to walk--"

"Stow it!" came from three of the other lads in concert.

"It's too early yet to tell stories, Shadow," said Dave, with a smile. "You can tell them to-night. Tell us now, is there anything new at the Hall?"

"There sure is."

"What?" asked Phil and Roger.

"The wild man."

"Oh, has he turned up again?" asked the girls, with interest.

"Twice—yesterday morning and this morning," said Buster.

"He didn't turn up at all, Buster," interposed Shadow. "When you start to tell a story, why don't you tell it straight?"

"Oh, you tell it," grumbled the fat boy. "You have that sort of thing down to a science."

"There isn't very much to tell," went on Shadow Hamilton. "He left his mark, that's all."

"Left his mark?" queried Dave.

"That's it—wide, blue marks. He must have about a ton of blue chalk."

"Say, Shadow, you are talking in riddles," burst out the shipowner's son. "Give it to us in plain United States, can't you?"

"Sure I can. Well, this wild man visited the school yesterday morning and this morning, before anybody was up. The first time he went into the big classroom and took some books, and the next time he visited the kitchen and pantry and took some grub—I beg the ladies' pardon—I should have said food—a ham, a chicken, and some doughnuts."

"And the blue chalk--?" queried Mr. Porter.

"I was coming to that. In the classroom he left his mark—a big circle, with a cross inside, in blue chalk."

"And how do you know that is the mark of the wild man?" asked Laura.

"Oh, we found that out some time ago," answered Shadow. "He seems to have a mania for blue chalk, and even puts it on his face sometimes, and he chinks down that circle with the cross wherever he goes."

"Then, if he does that, why can't they trail him down?" asked Dave.

"Because he is like a flea—when you try to put your hands on him he isn't there," answered Shadow. "And say, that puts me in mind of another story. Once three boys were--"

"That will do, Shadow!" cried Roger. "About the wild man is enough for the present."

"Have they any idea who he is?" asked Dunston Porter.

"Not the slightest," answered Buster. "And they don't know where he keeps himself, although it must be in the woods near the school."

"Oh, Dave, I hope he doesn't harm anybody!" cried Jessie, with a shiver.

"Are you boys ready to go back to the Hall?" asked Dunston Porter.

"I am," responded Buster, readily.

"So am I," added the story-teller of the school.

"Then we'll take you along, provided you don't mind being crowded."

"We won't mind, if the young ladies won't," returned the fat youth.

"Oh, come in by all means!" cried Laura.

"We'll make room somehow," added Jessie.

A minute later the big car started on the way to Oak Hall, with Dave at the wheel and his uncle beside him.

"Looks familiar, doesn't it?" called out Roger, as they spun along the turnpike.

"It certainly does!" answered Roger, and then he added, "What do you say to the old school song?"

"Fine!" came back the answer, and then the senator's son commenced a song they all knew

well, which was sung to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne." The girls knew the song, too, and readily joined in.

"Oak Hall we never shall forget,
No matter where we roam;
It is the very best of schools,
To us it's just like home!
Then give three cheers, and let them ring
Throughout this world so wide,
To let the people know that we
Elect to here abide!"

Loud and clear over the cool air sounded the song, and it was sung several times. Then, just as the car rolled into the grounds of the school, the boys gave one of the Hall yells, and Dave honked the horn of the automobile loud and long.

"Hello! It's the Porter crowd!"

"Welcome to our city!"

"How about Cave Island, Dave! Did you bring it with you?"

"Heard you caught Jasniff and Merwell, Roger. Good for you!"

"Say, Phil, you're as sunburnt as if you'd been to the seashore for a summer."

So the talk ran on as half a dozen students flocked up to the car. The afternoon session was over, and despite the chilliness many lads were out on the campus. Many knew the girls—having met them at some athletic games and at a commencement—and those that did not were glad of a chance for an introduction.

"I am real glad to see you back, boys," said Doctor Hasmer Clay, the head of the institution, as he appeared and shook hands. "Glad to see you, Mr. Porter, and also the young ladies," he added. "So you came all the way by automobile, eh? It must have been a delightful trip."

"It was," answered Dave's uncle.

All went inside, and the visitors were permitted to accompany Dave and his chums to their dormitory. The boys' baggage had already arrived, so it did not take the lads long to settle down.

"And now we'll have to start back," said Dunston Porter, a little later. "Dave, take good care of yourself, and make a good record."

"I'll do my best, Uncle Dunston."

"And don't let that wild man get you," added Jessie, as she took his hand and allowed him to hold her own, perhaps longer than was necessary.

"And don't forget to write," put in his sister.

"Oh, I'll not forget that!" answered Dave, with a smile, both to his sister and to the girl whom he regarded so warmly.

It was a trying moment—this parting—but it was soon over, and, with Dunston Porter at the wheel, and the girls and boys waving their hands, the touring car left the Oak Hall grounds, on its return journey to Crumville.

"Well, here we are, as the pug dog said to the looking-glass, when he walked behind it to look for himself," remarked Phil, dropping into a chair.

"I suppose it will take us a few days to get settled down," answered Dave, resting on the top of a table. "I don't feel much like unpacking yet, do you?"

"No, let us wait until to-night or to-morrow," returned Roger, dropping on one of the beds. He was still thinking of how clear and deep Laura's eyes had appeared when she had said good-by to him.

"I really hope you will not be homesick," said a girlish voice, and Bertram Vane, one of the students, appeared from the next room and sat down on a chair. "Homesickness is such an awfully cruel thing, don't you know."

"No homesickness here, Polly," answered Dave. "I guess we are just tired out, that's all. We've done a lot of traveling since we left Oak Hall."

"So I understand. Wasn't it dreadful that Jasniff and Merwell should prove such villains!" went on the girlish student. "Weren't you really afraid to—er—to touch them?"

"Not much!" cried Phil. "I am only sorry Merwell got away."

"But you got the diamonds, I heard?" put in Sam Day, who was another of the chums.

"We did."

At that moment came musical sounds from another room near by—the sounds of somebody strumming on a guitar.

"Hello, there's Luke Watson!" cried Roger. "Hi, come in with that guitar and give us a tune, Luke!" he called out.

"Thought I might cheer you up," said Luke, appearing. "How would you like me to play 'The Girl

I Left Behind Me,' or something like that?"

"Make it 'Oh, Those Eyes So Tender!'" suggested Buster.

"Or else that beautiful ditty called, 'He Loved, But Had to Leave Her,'" suggested Shadow. "Say, that puts me in mind of a story," he went on. "This is true, too, though you may not believe it. A young man went to call on his best girl and took a bouquet of flowers along. The bouquet was done up in several thicknesses of tissue paper. Some of his friends who were jokers got hold of that bouquet and fixed it up for him. He gave it to the girl, and when she took off the tissue paper what do you suppose she found? A bunch of celery and some soup greens! He was so fussed up he didn't know what to say, and he got out in a hurry."

"Hurrah for the chaps who fixed up the bouquet!" cried Phil. "But start up, Luke. Something in which we can all join."

"But not too loud," cautioned Roger. "Old Haskers might not like--"

"Oh, hang old Haskers!" interrupted Phil. "He can't--"

"Sh-sh!" came from Dave, suddenly, and silence fell on the group of boys. All turned towards the doorway leading to the hall. There, on the threshold, stood the instructor just mentioned, Mr. Job Haskers.

CHAPTER VI

PHIL SHOWS HIS STUBBORNNESS

Not one of the boys knew how to act or what to say. All wondered if Job Haskers had heard his name mentioned.

If the ill-natured instructor had heard, he made no mention of it. He looked sharply about the apartment and waved his hand to Luke.

"Watson, how many times have I told you that you make too much noise with your musical instruments?" he said, harshly. "You disturb the students who wish to study."

"I thought this was the recreation hour, Mr. Haskers," answered the lad, who loved to play the guitar and banjo.

"True, but I think we get altogether too much of your music," growled the instructor. He turned to Dave, Roger, and Phil. "So you are back at last. It is high time, if you wish to go on with your regular classes."

"We told Doctor Clay that we would make up what we have missed, Mr. Haskers," answered Dave, in a gentle tone, for he knew how easy it was to start a quarrel with the man before him. As Phil had once said, Job Haskers was always walking around "with a chip on his shoulder."

"And how soon will you make up the lessons in my class?" demanded the instructor.

"I think I can do it inside of ten days or two weeks."

"That won't suit me, Porter. You'll have to do better. I'll give each of you just a week—one week, understand? If you can't make the lessons up in that time I'll have to drop you to the next lower class."

"Oh, Mr. Haskers!" burst out Roger. He knew what that meant only too well. They would not have a chance to graduate that coming June.

"I'll not argue the point, Morr. I'll give you a week, starting to-morrow. When you come to the classroom I will show you just what you have to make up." Job Haskers looked around the room. "Now, then, remember, I want less noise here." And so speaking, he turned on his heel and walked away.

For a moment there was silence, as the boys looked at each other and listened to the sounds of Mr. Haskers's retreating footsteps. Then Phil made a face and punched one of the bed pillows, savagely.

"Now, wouldn't that make a saint turn in his grave?" he remarked. "Isn't he the real, kind, generous soul!"

"He ought to be ducked in the river!" was Buster's comment. "Why, how can anybody make up the lessons you've missed in a week? It's absurd! Say, do you know what I'd do if I were you? I'd complain to the doctor."

"So would I," added Sam Day. "Two weeks would be short enough."

"I'll not complain to the doctor," returned Phil. "But I know what I will do," he added, quickly, as though struck by a sudden idea.

"What?" came from several.

"Never mind what. But I'll wager he'll give us more time."

"I guess I know what you think of doing," said Dave. "But take my advice and don't, Phil."

"Humph! I'll see about it, Dave. He isn't going to run such a thing as this up my back without a kick," grumbled the shipowner's son.

"Well, wait first and see if he doesn't change his mind, or if we can't get through in the week," cautioned Dave.

"What was Phil going to do?" questioned Luke, strumming lowly over the strings of his guitar.

"Oh, don't let's talk about it," cried Dave, before Roger could speak. He did not wish the Mrs. Breen affair to become public property. "Tell us about the wild man, and all the other things that have happened here since we went away."

"And you tell us all about Cave Island and those stolen jewels," said Buster.

Thereafter the conversation became general, Dave and his chums telling of their quest of the Carwith diamonds, and the other students relating the particulars of a feast they had had in one of the dormitories, and of various efforts made to catch the so-called wild man.

"I don't believe he is what one would call a wild man," said Ben Basswood, Dave's old chum from home, who had just come in from some experiments in the school laboratory. "He is simple-minded and very shy. He gets excited once in a while, like when he threw those mud-balls."

"Well, you ought to know," remarked Buster. "Ben is the only fellow here who has talked to the man," he explained.

"When was that, Ben?" questioned Dave.

"That was when the man first appeared," answered the Crumville lad. "I didn't find out until yesterday that he was the wild man, and then it was because of that blue chalk he uses. I met him in the woods when I was out during that last snow, looking for rabbits with my shotgun. I came across him, sitting on a rock, looking at an old newspaper. He had some of the blue chalk in his hand and had marked a circle with a cross on the rock. He asked me where I was going, and told me to look out and not shoot a star, and then he asked me if I used chalk for powder, and said he could supply a superior brand of chalk cheap. I thought at first that he was merely joking, but I didn't like the look in his eyes, and then I made up my mind he was not right in his head, and I left him. When I came back that way, an hour later, he was gone, and I have never seen him since."

"Where was this, Ben?"

"Up in the woods, where the brook branches off by the two big rocks."

"I know the spot!" cried Roger. "Say, maybe he hangs out around there."

"No, we hunted around there yesterday, but he wasn't to be seen. I don't believe he has any settled place of abode, but just roams through the woods."

"Poor fellow! Somebody ought to catch him and place him in a sanitarium," was Dave's comment.

Various matters were talked over until the supper hour, and then the boys filed down to the dining-hall. Here our hero met more of his school chums, including Gus Plum, who had once been his enemy but who was now quite friendly, and little Chip Macklin, who in days gone by had been Plum's toady.

"Very glad to see you back, Dave!" cried Gus. "And, say, you've certainly made a hero of yourself," he added, warmly.

"It was great, what you and Roger and Phil did," added Chip, in deep admiration.

Everybody was glad to see Dave back, and after supper it was all he could do to get away from many of his friends. But he managed it at last, and he, Roger, and Phil went upstairs, to put away their things and get out their schoolbooks.

"We have got to study and that is all there is to it," said Dave, firmly. "Fun is one thing and getting ready to graduate is another. We have got to get down to the grind, boys."

"That's right," answered the senator's son.

"But don't forget what old Haskers said," grumbled Phil. "He'll make us sweat, just you wait and see!"

"Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof," quoted Dave. "I think we can get through if we buckle down hard."

"Supposing Mr. Dale and the other teachers pin us down as old Haskers did?" demanded Phil.

"They won't do it," declared our hero. "Take my word for it, Mr. Dale will give us a month, if we want it. I know him. And the others will do the same."

"Well, maybe we can get through, if that's the case," said the shipowner's son, slowly. "Just the same, I think old Haskers the meanest man alive."

The following morning, after a good night's rest, the boys went to their various classes. As Dave had predicted, Mr. Dale, the head teacher, treated them with all possible consideration, for he loved boys and understood them thoroughly. The other teachers were likewise very lenient.

"Old Haskers is the one stumbling-block," said Roger. "Dave, maybe we had better see Doctor Clay about him."

"Not much!" cried Phil. "We've got a club we can use on Haskers. Why not use it?"

"You mean, go to him and tell him we know about that Mrs. Breen affair, and that we will expose him if he doesn't let up on us, Phil?" said Dave.

"Yes."

"Do you think that is a—well, a gentlemanly thing to do?"

"It's what old Haskers would do, if he was in our place."

"Perhaps. But I'd rather not do it. Let my uncle's lawyer try to collect that money without our appearing in the case. We have had trouble enough in the past with Haskers. Let us buckle in and study up. I am sure we can get through," added Dave, earnestly.

"All right," growled Phil; but his manner showed that he was not satisfied.

Two days went by, and the boys settled down to the regular routine of the school. The lessons to be made up were exceedingly hard, and Dave found he had to study almost constantly to do what was required of him.

"But I am going to make it!" he murmured, setting his teeth hard. "I am not going to disappoint the folks at home."

One afternoon the three chums had a very hard lesson in Latin to do. It was a clear, sunshiny day and they had one of the windows wide open to let in the fresh air. Dave and Roger were bending over their books when they heard a sudden exclamation from Phil.

"I'll be hanged if I'm going to do it!"

And then of a sudden a Latin book was hurled across the room, to land on a bureau, just missing the glass.

"Hello!" cried Dave, raising his head. "What's wrong now?"

"I'm not going to do it!" cried Phil, stretching himself. "It's an outrage and I won't submit to it."

"You mean this boning away for Haskers?" queried Roger.

"Just that," answered the shipowner's son. "Why can't he treat us as fairly as the other teachers did? It wouldn't hurt him a bit to give us more time."

"Phil, what's the use of talking it over again?" asked Dave. "I thought we had settled it once for all."

"No, I won't stand it, I tell you," cried Phil, stubbornly. "He can't make a pack-mule of me."

"Well, then, speak to the doctor about it," advised Roger.

"I don't have to speak to the doctor," stormed Phil; and walking over to a rack, he caught up his cap and marched from the room.

"He is certainly in a bad humor," was Dave's comment. "I am afraid he'll put his foot into it, Roger."

"So am I. He's been aching to get back at old Haskers ever since he put all this studying up to us."

"Do you know, Ben is just as angry at Haskers as Phil is?" went on our hero, after a pause, during which both had hoped that their close chum would return. But Phil had stalked down the stairs and out of the building.

"Ben?"

"Yes, so he told me this noon."

"What about?"

"Oh, Ben talked in class and old Haskers penalized him heavily—gave him a lot of extra Latin to do. It nearly broke Ben up."

"You told Ben about that Breen affair, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Maybe he and Phil will both go to Haskers about it."

"I hope not, Roger. I don't think it is just the right thing to do—to use that as a club over Haskers to get him to let us off. I don't like that kind of dealing."

"Neither do I. But it's just what such a mean-spirited fellow as Haskers deserves. He has never treated us squarely since we came here. I think this school would be a good deal better off without him, even if he is well educated."

Dave heaved a deep sigh. He was on the point of replying, but changed his mind. He took up his book again, and soon was trying his best to study. Roger followed his example.

But both boys made slow progress. Each was thinking about Phil. What would be the outcome of their headstrong chum's actions?

CHAPTER VII

PHIL AND BEN MAKE A MOVE

So far Dave and Nat Poole had not met face to face. Our hero had seen the money-lender's son a number of times, but Nat had always been with some of his cronies and had, apparently, not taken any notice.

But on the morning following the conversation just recorded, the pair came face to face in one of the narrow hallways.

"Good-morning, Nat," said Dave, pleasantly.

"Morning," grumbled the other student. He was about to pass Dave, but suddenly changed his mind. "So you got back, eh?"

"Yes, I've been back several days."

"I heard that Link Merwell got away from you?"

"That is true."

"Humph! If I had the chance to nab him that you had, I'd not let him get away."

"We held Jasniff."

"Maybe you let Merwell go on purpose," continued the money-lender's son, shrewdly.

"Not at all, Nat. He gave us the slip, clean and clear."

"Humph!" Nat paused for a moment. "I got word from my dad that you almost smashed him up on the road with your auto."

"Hardly as bad as that."

"He is going to make your uncle pay for the damage done."

"It wasn't much."

"It was enough. You want to be more careful with your car after this. You auto fellows seem to think you own the whole road."

"What about your motor-boat, Nat?" asked Dave. He remembered how the money-lender's son had played more than one mean trick while running the craft.

"Oh, my boat is all right, Dave Porter!" sniffed Nat; and then he moved on, with a scowl on his face.

"The same old Nat," soliloquized our hero. "Too bad that he can't make himself a bit more agreeable."

That day was a particularly trying one in the classroom. The lessons were unusually hard, and Dave had all he could do to pass, especially in those studies presided over by Professor Haskers. Roger made one miss in his Latin and poor Phil made several, while Ben Basswood's recitation was a complete failure.

As was usual with him, Job Haskers was exceedingly dictatorial, and said some cutting things that brought the blood to Dave's face.

"You must do much better than this, Porter and Morr," said the professor. "Otherwise I shall have to place you in the next lower class. You, Lawrence and Basswood, have failed so utterly that I will have to take your cases under immediate consideration. The class is dismissed."

"The old bear!" growled Ben, under his breath.

He looked inquiringly at Phil, and the latter nodded knowingly.

Dave did not know what to do. He did not wish Phil and Ben to get into further trouble, yet he did not know how to interfere. Besides, he was suffering himself and hardly knew what to do on his own account.

"This is the worst yet," cried Roger, as he and our hero came out of the classroom side by side.

"There go Phil and Ben," returned Dave. "Roger, they have got some plan up their sleeve."

"I believe you, Dave. I wish I knew what to do. Shall we go to Doctor Clay?"

"I've been thinking of that, Roger. But I hate to do it. I'd rather fight my own battles."

"So would I."

"Let us wait until to-morrow and see if things don't take a turn for the better."

"All right, just as you say. But it's a shame, the way old Haskers treats us," grumbled the senator's son.

In the meantime Phil and Ben had gone on ahead. Both were exceeding angry and consequently not in a frame of mind to use their best judgment.

"It's an outrage!" burst out the shipowner's son. "An outrage, Ben! I am not going to stand for it!"

"Well, I am with you, Phil," returned Ben. "But what can we do?"

"You know what I spoke about last evening?"

"Yes."

"How about doing that?"

"I am with you, if you are game."

"Of course we may make old Haskers tearing mad."

"We'll only face him with the truth, won't we?"

"Yes."

"Then, let us do it. And the sooner the better."

"Yes, but we must see him alone."

"Of course. I think we can manage it just before supper—when he goes up to his room to fix up for the evening."

The two chums talked the affair over for a long time.

"I don't suppose Dave will like this," ventured Ben, presently. "What do you think?"

"He isn't hit as hard as we are," answered Phil, lamely. "If he was—well, he might look at things in a different light."

"That's so," answered Ben. But deep down in his heart he was afraid that our hero would not altogether approve of what he and Phil proposed to do.

The boys took a walk, and purposely kept out of the way of Dave and Roger. They did not return to the Hall until fifteen minutes before the first bell for supper. Then they came in by a side entrance and passed swiftly up the stairs and along the hallway to the room occupied by Job Haskers.

"Who is it?" asked the teacher, sharply, when Phil had knocked.

"Mr. Haskers, it is Phil Lawrence," was the reply. "Ben Basswood is with me. We wish to see you."

"Ah, indeed!" said the teacher, coldly. "You come to me at an unusual hour. You may see me tomorrow, before class."

"Mr. Haskers, we wish very much to see you now," put in Ben.

"We have got to see you," added Phil, warmly.

There was no immediate reply to this. The boys heard Job Haskers moving around the room and heard him shut a bureau. Then the door was flung open.

"You insist upon seeing me, eh?" demanded the professor, harshly.

"We do, Mr. Haskers," returned Phil, boldly.

"Very well, young gentlemen; step in." And Job Haskers glared at the boys as he stood aside for them to enter.

"We came to see you, sir, about those Latin lessons," went on Phil, finding it just then difficult to speak. He realized that Job Haskers was in no humor for being lenient.

"Well?" shot out the professor.

"We feel that we are not being treated fairly," put in Ben, believing he should not make Phil do all the talking.

"Not treated fairly? I believe I am the best judge of that, Basswood."

"Mr. Haskers, I hate to say it, but you are a hard-hearted man!" cried out Phil, the door being closed, so that no outsider might hear. "You are not giving us a fair chance. The other teachers have given me and Dave Porter and Roger Morr several weeks in which to make up those lessons we missed while we were away. You wish to give us only a week."

"And you didn't give me a fair chance to make up," added Ben.

"See here, who is master here, you or I?" demanded Job Haskers, drawing himself up. "Boys, you are impudent! I will not stand it!"

"Yes, you will stand it," cried Phil, throwing caution to the winds. "All we ask is a fair deal, and you have got to give it to us. We'll make up those lessons, if you'll give us a fair amount of time. I don't intend to be put in a lower class for nothing."

"And I'm not going to stand it either," came from Ben.

"Ha! this to me?" snarled Job Haskers. "Take care, or I'll have you dismissed from the Hall!"

"If you try it, it will be the worst day's work you ever did, Mr. Haskers," warned the shipowner's son.

"What, you threaten me?"

"We are going to make you give us a fair chance, that is all. And if you'll do that, we'll give you a

fair chance."

"Why, why—you—you--" The irate instructor knew not for the moment how to proceed.

"Mr. Haskers, I think you had better listen to me," pursued Phil.

"I have listened to all I care to hear."

"Oh, no, you haven't. There is much more—and you had better listen closely—if you care at all for your reputation here at Oak Hall."

The professor stared at the boy and grew a trifle pale.

"Wha—what do you—er—mean by that, Lawrence?"

"I hate very much to bring this subject up, Mr. Haskers, but you practically compel me to do it. If you will only promise to give us a fair chance to make up our lessons, I won't say a word about it."

"Just what do you mean?" faltered the teacher.

"I know something about your doings in the past—doings which are of no credit to you. If you disgrace Ben and me by degrading us in classes, we'll disgrace you by telling all we know."

"And what do you know?" demanded Job Haskers, hastily.

"We know a good deal," put in Ben.

"All about your dealing with the poor widow, Mrs. Breen," added the shipowner's son. "How you still owe her for board, and how you borrowed money to publish a book that was never issued."

"Who told you that?" cried Job Haskers, stepping back in consternation. "Who told you that I had borrowed money from her, and that I owed her for board?"

"Never mind who told us," said Ben. "We know it is true."

"And you went to that lawyer, eh?" stormed Professor Haskers. "You got him to threaten a suit, didn't you? I got his letter only this afternoon."

"We went to no lawyer," answered Phil.

"I know better! I see it all now! You want to get me into trouble—to disgrace me here!" Job Haskers began to pace the floor. "It is—er—a mistake. I meant to pay that lady but it—er—slipped my mind. And the book has been issued, but the publishers have not—er—seen fit to push it, that is why you and the world at large have not heard of it."

"Mr. Haskers, we haven't told anybody about this," went on Phil, pointedly. "You can settle with that lawyer, whoever he may be,—and we'll not say a word to anybody—that is, providing you'll give us a fair chance in our lessons."

"Ha! maybe you wish me to pass you without an examination," cried the teacher, cunningly.

"No, sir!" answered Phil, stoutly.

"We simply ask for more time, that is all," added Ben. "We don't ask any favor. We can make up the lessons if you will give us as much time as the other teachers would give us."

"You have not told anybody of this—this—er—affair of Mrs. Breen?"

"No."

"It is all a mistake, but I should not like it to get abroad. It would hurt my reputation a great deal. I shall settle the matter in the near future. I do not owe that lady as much as the lawyer says I do,—but that is not your affair." Job Haskers continued to pace the floor. "Now about your lessons," he continued, after a pause. "If I—er—thought that I had really been too hard on you—" He paused.

"You certainly have been hard," said Phil.

"And if you really need more time--"

"Give us two weeks more and we'll be all right," put in Ben.

"And if—er—if I should decide to do that, you will—er--"

"We'll make good—and keep our mouths shut," finished Phil.

"Very well. I will think it over, young gentlemen, and let you know to-morrow morning, before class. And in the meantime--"

"We won't say a word to anybody," said Ben, with a little grin.

"So be it;" and Job Haskers bowed. "There is the supper-bell. You may go now. Come to me just before class to-morrow," he added; and then the two students passed out of the room, and the teacher shut the door after them.

AN UNUSUAL COMPACT

"He'll do it—he is bound to do it!" cried Ben, as he and Phil hurried down to the dining-room.

"I think so myself, Ben," answered the shipowner's son. But, for some reason, he did not seem as joyful over the outcome of the interview as might have been expected.

"He won't dare let this news become public property," went on the other student. "He is too afraid of public opinion."

"Ben, he thinks we got that lawyer to take the case up."

"You told him we hadn't."

"But he didn't believe it—I could tell that by his manner. And, Ben, do you know, after all, this looks to me as if we had, somehow, bribed him to be easy on us," continued Phil, with added concern.

"Oh, don't bother your head about that, Phil. We only asked for what is fair, didn't we?"

"Yes, but—" And then the shipowner's son did not finish, because he did not know what to say. In some manner, Phil's conscience troubled him, and he wondered what Dave and Roger would say when they heard of what had occurred.

During the meal that followed but little was said by any of the boys. Once or twice our hero looked at Phil, but the latter avoided his gaze. As soon as the repast was over, Phil rushed outside, followed by Ben; and that was the last seen of the pair until it was time to go to bed.

"They have been up to something, that is certain," was the comment of the senator's son.

"Well, we can only wait and see what turns up," answered Dave, thoughtfully. "I don't think I care to ask them."

In the morning, when Dave got up he looked over to where Phil was in the habit of sleeping. The bed was empty, and the shipowner's son was gone.

"Dressed half an hour ago," said another of the dormitory inmates.

"Went off again with Ben, I'll wager," murmured Roger. Ben was in another room, across the hallway, that term.

Dave and Roger had been hard at work the evening before, doing their best to make up the lessons they had missed while away from the school. They doubted if Phil and Ben had studied at all. With considerable curiosity they awaited the opening of the morning classes, to see what might happen. They felt that something was "in the air."

Just before the last bell rang Phil and Ben appeared, their faces wreathed in smiles.

"It's all right, fellows!" cried the shipowner's son, merrily. "It's all right!"

"Now we can take our time making up those missed lessons," added Ben.

"You went to old Haskers?" queried Roger.

"We sure did," answered the shipowner's son.

"And told him about—" began our hero.

"Never mind what we told him, Dave," interrupted Phil. "We did tell him that we wanted to make up the lessons but couldn't do it in the time he had allotted. He argued it, at first, but now he has agreed to give us the same time Mr. Dale did, three weeks."

"Good!" exclaimed Roger.

"You, or all of us?" asked our hero.

"All of us. I think he'll speak to you at recess—he said he would."

"What did he say when you—when you mentioned Mrs. Breen?" asked Roger.

"Hush, somebody might hear you!" returned Phil, in a whisper. "We have promised to keep that quiet."

"But the poor woman—" began Dave.

"Will get her money, never fear. A lawyer has already written about it, and old Haskers says he will pay up. He claims it is all a mistake. But he doesn't want anybody at Oak Hall to get wind of it."

There was no time to say more, and evidently neither Phil nor Ben felt in the humor to discuss the affair. The early morning lesson proceeded as usual, but it was noticed that Professor Haskers was much subdued in his manner towards the students.

"Porter and Morr, I wish to speak to you at recess," said he, coming down to where the two lads sat. "Kindly remain here."

When the other students had left the classroom the instructor came to our hero and his chum and motioned for them to follow him to a private room close by.

"I wish to speak to you about the lessons you are to make up," said Job Haskers, after clearing his throat several times. "I understand that you want more time."

"We would like to have more time, yes," answered Dave, briefly, and looking the teacher full in the face.

"Can you do the lessons in three weeks?"

"Yes, Mr. Haskers," said Dave, and Roger nodded his head.

"Then you can take that much time. But, remember, I shall expect you to—to—er—to make up the lessons."

"Yes, sir," came from both students.

"If you need more time—or any assistance—possibly I can arrange it," went on Job Haskers, eagerly.

"Thank you, if you give me three weeks I am sure I can make up the lessons to your satisfaction, Mr. Haskers," came from our hero.

"And so can I," added the senator's son. "Anyway, I'll try my level best."

"Very well, then, we will let it stand that way." There was a pause and the instructor bit his lip several times. "By the way, I—er—understand that there is a very unpleasant rumor going around concerning me," he proceeded. "It is all a mistake which I shall try to clear up without delay. I trust that you will not attempt to—er—to circulate that rumor any further."

"Mr. Haskers, do you mean about that affair with Mrs. Breen?" demanded Dave, bluntly.

"Yes. I have already explained to Lawrence and Basswood that it is a mistake, and that the widow will be paid all that is due her. But if this should—er—be mentioned here—" The teacher stopped short and looked sharply at Dave and Roger.

"Mr. Haskers, let us understand each other," answered Dave, quickly. "I have no desire whatever to get you or anybody else into trouble. Nor do I want to ask you for any favors. I think we are justly entitled to more time in which to make up those lessons, and now that you have granted that time, I shall do my best to make good. As for that Mrs. Breen affair, I think that poor old lady ought to have her money. I understand some lawyer is going to try to collect it for her. Well, if you settle the matter I shall feel very glad; and you can rest assured that I will not say a word about the matter to anybody in this school, or anywhere else."

"You—er—you give me your word on that, Porter?" demanded the instructor, eagerly.

"I do."

"And you, Morr?"

"Yes, sir," answered the senator's son.

"Who else is there who knows about this—er—unpleasant affair?"

"Phil Lawrence and Ben Basswood," answered Roger.

"No other students?"

"Not that I know of."

"Very well, then." Job Haskers drew a breath of relief. "See that you keep your word. And about the lessons—if three weeks are not long enough, I may—er—be able to give you a little more time."

"That time will be enough," replied Dave.

"We'll make it with ease," added Roger.

"Then that is settled, and you may go," and so speaking, Job Haskers left the room. The two boys followed him, and went out on the campus.

"How did you make out?" questioned Phil, as he ran up to them.

"We got our time," answered Roger.

"But let me tell you one thing," said Dave. "After this Haskers is going to hate us worse than ever."

"I don't see why," declared the shipowner's son. "I think we are letting him off mighty easy."

"He feels as if he had been forced into doing what we want," went on Dave. "I think he looks at it as if you had used that Mrs. Breen incident as a club over him."

"Well, it was a club in one sense, Dave."

"I know it, Phil, and, although I am glad we have won out and gotten that extra time, still I am sorry that you and Ben went to him as you did."

"Humph! did you think I was going to sit still and be put back into a lower class?"

"Maybe it might have been better if you had gone to Doctor Clay."

"I don't think so," replied Phil, shortly; and then the school-bell rang again and all the boys had to go to their next classes.

In spite of the cloud that thus hung over the affair, every one of the chums was glad of the extra time in which to make up the lost lessons. Not one of them had to grind away as hard as before, and Dave took a little time off, in which to send a letter to his father and another to Jessie.

The next day was warm and pleasant and, after school-hours, Roger proposed to Dave that they

take a walk up the woods road back of the school.

"All right, a walk in the woods will do us good," was the answer. "Shall we ask some of the others?"

"If you wish," and in the end Phil went along, and also Buster Beggs and Gus Plum.

"My, but I had a run-in with old Haskers this afternoon," said the stout youth. "I came close to carrying the matter to the doctor."

"What was it about?" questioned Dave.

"Oh, nothing at all, to my way of thinking. I went to the library to get a book and he accused me of wasting my class time. He was very ugly. I won't stand for much more of it," grumbled Buster.

Dave said no more, but he and Roger exchanged glances. Evidently the irate instructor was going to "take it out of somebody," as the saying goes.

The boys walked on and on, along the road, until Oak Hall was left far behind. Soon Buster forgot his troubles, and the crowd were chatting gayly of many things.

"Call for candidates for the baseball team next Saturday," announced Gus Plum. "I hope we get up a team this year that knocks the spots out of Rockville Military Academy and all the other institutions we cross bats with."

"Are you going to try for the nine this term, Gus?" questioned Dave.

"Sure! Why not? You'll try, won't you?" went on the big youth, in surprise.

"No, I've decided not to go into athletics this term, Gus. I want to give all my time to my studies."

"Yes, but the nine needs you, Dave!" put in Buster. "I heard some of the fellows talking about it only yesterday. They had you slated for your old position."

"Well, if Gus wants to play, he can fill the box," answered Dave.

"But we need more than one pitcher," insisted Buster.

"There are plenty of new students coming along. I hear Thomas is a good one, and so is Ennis."

"I'm not going to play, either," said Roger. "I want to graduate with all the honors possible."

"How about you, Phil?"

"I—I think I'll play," answered the shipowner's son, rather lamely. "I'll see about it later."

"Well, I don't want to neglect my studies," said Gus Plum. "But I have done some hard work this winter and so I am pretty well ahead. I didn't lose time going to Cave Island, you know," he added, with a smile.

"Well, it was worth it—losing that time," answered Dave. "It saved Mr. Wadsworth from ruin, and that's a good deal."

"If the baseball nine--" commenced Buster, and then broke off short. "What was that?" he demanded, as a cry from a distance broke on the ears of all.

"It's a woman's voice!" cried Dave, quickly. "She is calling for help! Come on and see what is the matter!" And he started off on a run, with his school chums at his heels.

CHAPTER IX

THE KING OF SUMATRA

The boys had been traveling along a broad highway that ran to a town on the other side of the woods. The trees were thick and so were the bushes, with here and there a big rock, covered with the dead vines of the summer previous.

At one point some distance ahead was an old stone house, standing where another road ran in the direction of the river. This house had not been inhabited for years, and the doors and windows were gone, and the falling of the chimney had smashed in a large portion of the sloping roof.

It was from in front of the old house that the cries for assistance came, and now the boys heard two voices, both somewhat girlish in tones.

"Oh, let me go! Please, let me go!" came, wildly.

"You have no right to touch us!" was added, in another voice.

"What's the matter?" called out Dave, as loudly as he could. But in his mind there had already flashed an inkling of what was going on. For some time past the wild man of that locality had

not shown himself. Now, perhaps, he was again at his old tricks.

"Oh, make him go away!" screamed a girlish voice, and then, as our hero made a turn of the road, he caught sight of two girls standing near the old stone house. Back of them was another figure, that of a tall, powerful man, but this figure disappeared as if by magic, behind the ancient building.

"Why, Miss Rockwell!" exclaimed Dave, as he recognized a young lady from town whom he knew well. "And you, too, Miss Feversham! What is the matter?"

"That man—the wild man!" panted Vera Rockwell. "He—he—stopped us!"

"He wanted our purses!" added Mary Feversham, the other young lady.

"Where is he?" asked Roger and Phil, in a breath.

"He just ran behind the house—I saw him," answered Dave. "Did he hurt you any?" he went on, anxiously, for he and Vera and Mary were good friends.

"No, but he—he scared us so!"

"Let us go after him!" put in Phil, quickly. He had taken Mary Feversham out a number of times and the two were well acquainted. "Come on!" and he started around the house.

All of the others were not slow to follow. Behind the building they came upon a mass of weeds and bushes and in their midst the remains of an old well, long since caved in. What had once been a path led to the side road before mentioned.

"That's the way he must have gone—down the side road!" cried the shipowner's son.

"Supposing we see if we can catch him?" suggested Dave. "But somebody ought to go back, and stay with the girls," he added thoughtfully.

"I'll go back," answered Phil. He was only too glad of a chance to talk to Mary, not having seen her for a long time.

"If that fellow comes back, whistle for us," advised Roger.

Dave was already on the side road with Buster and Gus beside him, and the senator's son quickly followed.

"Don't go too fast or I—I can't ke—keep up with you!" panted Buster.

"Do you see anything of him, Dave?" queried Roger.

"Not yet, but there is a turn just ahead. When we make that we'll be able to see almost to the river."

All of the students sped on, the stout lad doing his best to keep up with the others. They reached the turn with Dave a step or two in advance.

"There he is!"

"I see him! Say, he's wild-looking enough!"

"He is making for the river!"

"We ought to be able to catch him. We are four to one."

Dave and Roger pressed forward with increased speed and poor Buster fell somewhat behind.

"I'm coming as fa—fast as I ca—can!" blurted out the fat youth. "Go on—I'll get there sooner or later!"

"Pick up a stick, if you see one," cried Dave, to Roger and Gus. "We may have a hot fight on our hands. That man ought to be in jail, or in an asylum."

As they sped along, the three kept their eyes open and each presently armed himself with a fair-sized club. The wild man was running like a deer, pausing occasionally to turn and brandish his long arms at them savagely. They could see that his clothing was in tatters and that his hair and beard were long and unkempt.

"Hi! stop!" called out Dave, although he had but little hope of causing the man to halt. "We want to talk to you."

"Go back! Beware! Go back, or it will be the worse for you!" called the wild man. "Leave the King of Sumatra alone!"

"The King of Sumatra?" repeated Roger. "Say, he's crazy sure enough, to imagine himself that!"

The boys continued after the wild man and urged him to stop. But instead of heeding them, he ran on the faster.

"He's an athlete, when it comes to running," remarked Dave, as he tried in vain to get closer to the man.

"They say crazy people are always strong," answered the senator's son.

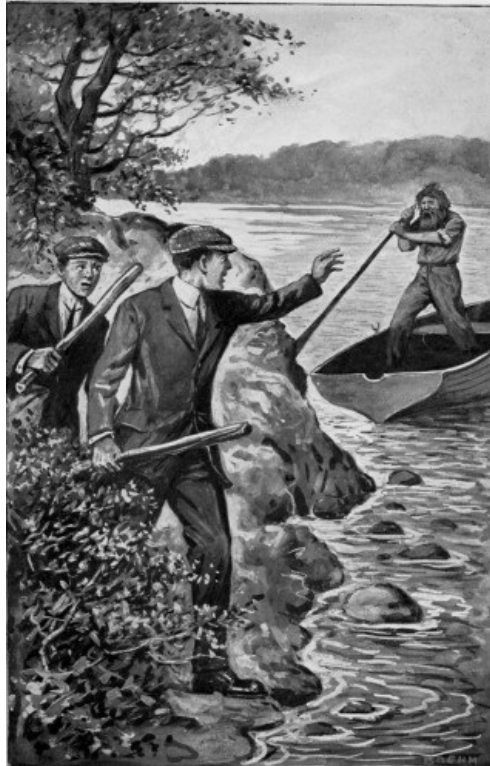
"I've go—got to gi—give up!" panted Gus, and came to a halt. "Go—got a pa—pain in my side!" And he put his hand over his hip.

"All right, we'll manage alone!" cried Roger. "I don't think we can catch that fellow anyway," he added, half under his breath.

Another turn of the woodland road brought the Leming River into plain view, at a point where

the stream was both wide and deep. The wild man kept sprinting along and it was impossible for the boys to draw any closer to him.

"Shall we threaten to shoot him if he won't stop?" asked Roger. Neither of the lads carried firearms.



"STOP!" CRIED DAVE.—Page 87.

"No, he might do some shooting on his own account,—if he is armed. Come on, he may fall, or something like that."

Inside of three minutes more the wild man gained the shore of the river and disappeared around a point of rocks and brushwood.

"Be careful, Dave," warned Roger. "He may spring out at you with a club."

"I've got my eyes open," was the ready reply.

Both advanced with caution, and soon came up to the nearest of the rocks. With clubs ready for use, the two youths continued to move forward. Then they came to a sudden halt. The wild man was no longer in sight. What had become of him?

"Maybe he ran into the woods," suggested Roger.

"Perhaps, but—hark!" And our hero held up his hand. From a distance came a scraping sound, like something sliding over a rock.

"Look!" called out the senator's son. "He's got a boat! There he goes!"

Dave turned in the direction pointed out by his chum. Both saw a small rowboat sweep out from under some brushwood. In it stood the wild man, using an oar as a pole on the rocks.

"Stop!" cried Dave. "Stop, or you may be sorry for it."

"You can't catch the King of Sumatra!" yelled the wild man, and flourished his arms and made a hideous face at them. Then he sat down on the middle seat of the craft, placed the oars in the rowlocks, and commenced to row rapidly down the stream.

"Well, that's the end of the chase," remarked Dave, in some disgust.

"That's right, since we haven't any boat," returned Roger. "Wonder where he got that craft? I don't think he bought it."

"It isn't likely. Probably he saw it somewhere along the river and simply appropriated it." And this proved to be true.

The boys watched the wild man until a bend of the stream hid rower and craft from view. Then they turned back in the direction of the old stone house.

"Did you get him?" demanded Buster, who was waiting with Gus at the point where he had dropped out of the race.

"No," answered Roger, and told why.

"He sure is a cute one," went on the stout youth. "Say, if they don't catch him soon, he'll have this whole neighborhood scared to death."

The students soon reached the old house. Here they found the two girls and Phil, the latter with

a heavy stick in his hand, ready for any emergency. The girls had calmed down a little, but were still much agitated.

"We were to come home in my uncle's carriage," said Mary Feversham. "But the horse got a lame foot and so we decided to walk. We had heard of the wild man, but did not think we would meet him. Oh, it was dreadful!"

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" asked Dave.

"Oh, no, but he frightened us so! He danced around us and caught us by the arms, and he wanted us to give him money! Oh, it was dreadful!"

"He ought to be in an asylum," said Dave. And then he and Roger related how the wild man had escaped.

"I sha'n't go out alone again," said Vera Rockwell. "That is, not until that man is captured."

"We'll take you both home," said Phil, promptly, looking at Mary.

"But we don't want to keep you from what you were going to do," said Vera.

"Oh, we were only out for a walk," replied Dave. "We'll walk to town with you. Maybe we'll hear something more of this strange fellow."

All turned back on the road that led close to Oak Hall, and after discussing the wild man from various points of view, the conversation turned to other matters. The girls told of what they had been doing during the past holidays and asked the boys about themselves.

"I heard that that horrid Jasniff is under arrest," said Vera to Dave. "I am glad of it. It is a pity that Merwell got away."

"Perhaps," answered our hero. "But, somehow, I sometimes think that Link Merwell will turn over a new leaf."

Vera looked back, to make sure that none of the others were near.

"Just like Mr. Plum, I suppose you mean," she whispered. "Oh, it was splendid, what you did for him, Dave!"

"Oh, I didn't do much for Gus."

"My brother thinks you did. He heard the whole story. It was brave and noble of you, it was indeed!" And Vera's face showed her earnestness.

"Well, Gus has turned out a nice fellow. I wish Merwell would turn out as good."

"But he helped to take those jewels."

"That is true—and that will always be a black mark against him," said Dave, soberly.

Soon all reached the outskirts of Oakdale and there, at one of the corners, the boys left the girls.

"Pretty late!" cried Gus Plum, consulting the watch he carried. "We'll have to hike back lively, if we don't want to be marked up for tardiness."

"We can get an excuse, if we tell about the wild man," said Buster. "I've hurried all I'm going to."

"We'll certainly have a yarn to spin when we get back to the school," was Phil's comment.

At the entrance to the campus the boys, who were a little late, met the first assistant to Doctor Clay. As my old readers know Mr. Dale was as pleasant as Job Haskers was disagreeable.

"Had a fine walk, boys?" he asked, with a smile.

"We had an adventure," answered Dave, and then he and his chums told what it was.

"Well! well! that wild man again," mused the instructor. "This is getting truly serious. I was hoping he would leave this neighborhood. And so he calls himself the King of Sumatra? That is strange."

"It certainly is strange," answered Dave.

But how strange, our hero was still to find out.

CHAPTER X

NAT POOLE WANTS TO KNOW

That evening Dave was on his way to the school library, to consult a certain work of reference, when he ran into another student who suddenly grasped him by the shoulder. It was rather dark where the pair confronted each other, and for the instant our hero did not recognize the fellow.

"What do you want?"

"I want to speak to you for a minute, Dave Porter," said the other, in a voice that trembled a trifle.

"Oh, it's you, Nat," answered Dave, as he recognized the son of the Crumville money-lender. "What do you want?" He rather imagined that the youth wished to pick another quarrel with him.

"I—I want to talk in private with you," returned Nat, and looked around, to see if anybody else was near.

"What about?"

"You were out walking this afternoon and met that wild man, so I heard."

"That is true."

"You tried to catch him, didn't you?"

"Yes, Roger Morr, Buster Beggs, Gus Plum, and I did our best to collar him, but he was too fast for us. He ran down to the river, got into a rowboat, and rowed away."

"So I heard. And I heard something else," continued the boy from Crumville. "When you called to the man to stop he answered back, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Will you please tell me what he said?" And Nat's voice had an eager ring in it.

"He told us to beware and go back, or we'd get into trouble."

"Didn't he say something more than that?"

"Oh, yes, a great deal more."

"He called himself something, didn't he?"

"Yes. Look here, Nat, what is this to you? Why are you so interested?" queried Dave, for he could easily perceive that the other youth was more than ordinarily anxious to know the particulars of what had occurred.

"I—I—want to—er—know, that's all. Did he call himself anything?"

"Yes; he thinks he is the King of Sumatra."

"He called himself that?" asked Nat, with increased excitement.

"Yes, two or three times. But see here, Nat--"

"Will you please tell me how he looked? Was he tall and rather thin?"

"Yes."

"And what kind of hair did he have?"

"Brownish-red, as near as I could make out, and very long. And he had rather a long beard and a large nose," went on our hero.

At this brief but accurate description of the wild man, Nat Poole paled a trifle and uttered something of a gasp.

"Whe—where did he go?" he faltered.

"He rowed down the river just as fast as he could. I don't know how far he went, for the bend hid him from view," answered our hero. "Say, Nat, do you think you know that man?"

"Why—er—know him? Of course I don't know him," was the stammered-out reply. "But I—I think—maybe—I've met him." And then, to avoid further questioning, Nat Poole hurried away. Our hero could do nothing but stare after him.

"That is mighty queer," mused Dave, as he turned into the library to consult the reference book. "If Nat doesn't know the man, why was he so anxious? He acted scared to death when I said the fellow called himself the King of Sumatra."

Dave remained in the school library for a half an hour and then joined Phil, Roger, and the others in Dormitory Number Twelve. He found the students discussing a talk Roger had had with Nat Poole only a few minutes before.

"Nat called me out in the hallway," said the senator's son. "He wanted to know all about that wild man, and he wanted to make dead certain that he had called himself the King of Sumatra."

"That is certainly queer—on top of what happened to me," said Dave, and told of the interview he had had.

"Well, this is a puzzle," declared Phil, slowly. "What do you make of it, Dave?"

"I think Nat imagines he knows the wild man."

"That's the way it looks to me," added the senator's son.

"Say, you don't suppose that wild man has anything to do with the fellows Nat used to train with—Jasniff, Merwell, and that crowd?" questioned Buster.

"It's possible, but I don't think so," returned our hero. "He is surely a crazy individual, and as nobody around here seems to know him, he must be a stranger to these parts."

"But what would make Nat so interested?" asked little Chip Macklin.

"Give it up," answered Roger.

"Maybe he has something to tell, but won't tell it to us," ventured Phil. "He may go right to the doctor."

But if Nat Poole went to the master of Oak Hall, or to anybody else at that institution, the boys did not hear of it. He asked no more questions about the wild man, and when any of our friends came near him he immediately walked away, thus avoiding an interview.

The proposed meeting of the athletic committee of Oak Hall was held on Saturday afternoon in the gymnasium and was well attended. An even twenty names had been put up for the regular baseball nine of the institution. Of these names, fifteen belonged to old students and five were those of newcomers to Oak Hall. As he had said he would do, Gus Plum had handed in his name, and so had Sam Day and some of our other friends. But Dave, Phil, and Roger were conspicuous by their absence.

"See here, Porter, you're going to play, aren't you?" asked the former manager.

"No," answered Dave, quietly but firmly.

"Why not?"

"Well, in the first place, I have too many back lessons to make up, and in the second place, I hope to graduate this coming June, and I want to make a record for myself, if possible."

"But you can do that and play on the nine, too," urged the manager.

"I don't think so. I'd like to play," continued our hero, wistfully, "but I don't see how I can."

"This isn't fair, Porter. We really need you."

"Oh, it isn't as bad as that," returned Dave, with a faint smile. "You've got Gus Plum to pitch, and some of the others. There are plenty of good ball-players here this term."

"I don't know about that," answered the manager, with a grave shake of his head. "I wish you'd come in."

"Not this year," said Dave; and then the two separated.

Phil and Roger were likewise urged to try for the nine, but they followed Dave's example. Then a tentative nine was formed, with Gus Plum as pitcher, and also a "scrub" nine, with one of the newcomers to Oak Hall in the box. Practice was to start on Wednesday afternoon of the following week.

"Too bad we couldn't take part," sighed the shipowner's son. "I'd like to wallop the Rockville Military Academy fellows just once more!"

"Well, we can't have everything," answered Dave. "I want to graduate with the highest possible honors, and that means plenty of hard boning."

"And a fellow can't bone and play ball, too," added Roger.

"We might—if old Haskers would be easy on us," murmured the shipowner's son.

"Now, see here, Phil," said Dave, almost sternly. "Don't ask Haskers for any more favors. He has done all that can reasonably be expected of him."

"All right, just as you say," grumbled Phil. But his manner showed that he was not altogether satisfied.

A week went by, and Dave and his chums applied themselves diligently to their studies. During that time nothing more was heard of the wild man, and the excitement concerning that strange individual again died down. But the folks living in the vicinity of the woods back of Oak Hall were on their guard, and it was seldom that women and children went out alone.

The boys were doing very well in their studies, and Dave received warm words of encouragement from Andrew Dale. He had made up nearly all the back lessons imposed upon him by Job Haskers, and that dictatorial teacher could not help but be satisfied over the showing made. Roger was also doing well, and poor Phil was the only one who was backward, although not enough to cause alarm.

"I'll get there, but it comes hard," said the shipowner's son. "I should have asked old Haskers for more time."

"Don't you do it," answered Dave. "Come, I'll help you all I can." Which he did.

One day there came a letter to our hero which gave him great satisfaction. He read it carefully, and then hastened off to communicate the news to Phil, Roger, and Ben.

"It's a letter from my Uncle Dunston," he explained to his chums. "If you will remember, he said he would hire a lawyer to take up that Mrs. Breen case against Professor Haskers."

"What does he say?" asked Roger, quickly.

"I will read it to you," answered Dave, and read the following:

"You will be glad to learn that Mr. Loveland, one of our lawyers, has gotten a settlement for Mrs. Breen out of your teacher, Mr. Haskers. He had quite a time of it, Haskers declaring that he did not owe as much as the widow said he did. The lawyer said he would sue for the full amount, and then Haskers came to see him. Mr. Loveland says the teacher wanted to learn who had hired him to stir the matter up, and mentioned some students' names. But

the lawyer gave him no satisfaction at all, and at last Haskers paid up in full, took his receipt, and got out. I instructed Mr. Loveland to put his charges for services on our bill, so Mrs. Breen will get the entire amount collected. I am going to take it to her in person, and see to it that it is wisely invested for her benefit."

"Good!" cried the senator's son. "That will help the old lady a great deal."

"Say, I'll bet old Haskers was sore when he forked over that money," was Ben's comment. "No wonder he's been looking like a thundercloud lately."

"Yes, and he'd let out on us—if he dared," said Phil. "But he doesn't dare."

"Don't be too sure of that, Phil," said Dave, seriously. "There is no telling what he will do—later on, when he thinks this affair has blown over."

"Humph! I am not afraid of him," declared Phil, recklessly.

"If he tries any of his games we'll expose him," added Ben.

"Better go slow," advised Roger. He, too, felt that Job Haskers might become very vindictive.

Spring was now at hand, and a week later came the first baseball game of the season. It was a contest with Esmore Academy from Daytonville and held on the Oak Hall grounds. Quite a crowd was present, including some of the town folks. Gus Plum was in the pitcher's box for the Hall, and Sam Day was on first base, and Chip Macklin on third.

"I hope we win!" cried Dave.

"I hope you do," answered Vera Rockwell, who was present with some other girls. "But why are you not playing?" she went on.

"Not this term," said our hero, with a smile, and then he spoke of his studies.

"I suppose it is noble of you to give up this way," she said. "But—I'd like to see you play."

The contest proved a well-fought one, and was won by Oak Hall by a score of eight runs to five. At the conclusion there was a great cheering for the victors.

"This means bonfires to-night!" cried Roger, as the gathering broke up.

"Yes, and a grand good time!" added Buster Beggs.

CHAPTER XI

BONFIRE NIGHT AT THE HALL

It was certainly a night long to be remembered in the annals of Oak Hall,—and for more reasons than one.

At the start, several bonfires were lit along the bank of the river, and around these the students congregated, to dance and sing songs, and "cut up" generally. None of the teachers were present, and it was given out that the lads might enjoy themselves within reasonable bounds until ten o'clock.

"Let's form a grand march!" cried Gus Plum. "Every man with a torch!"

"Yes, but don't set anything on fire," cautioned Roger.

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story," came from Shadow. "A fellow went into a powder shop to buy some ammunition. He was smoking a pipe, and the proprietor--"

"Whoop! Hurrah for Shadow!" yelled somebody from the rear, and the next instant the story-teller of the Hall found himself up on a pile of barrels which had not yet been set on fire.

"Now then, tell your yarns to everybody!" came the cry.

"Speak loud, Shadow!"

"Give us all the details."

"Tell us the story about the old man and the elephant."

"No, give us that about the old maid and the mouse."

"Let us hear about the fellow who was shipwrecked on the Rocky Mountains."

"Or about how the fellow who couldn't swim fell into a flour barrel."

"Say, what do you take me for?" roared Shadow. "I don't know any story about the Rocky Mountains, or a flour barrel either. If you want to hear--"

"Sure we do!"

"That's the very yarn we've been waiting for!"

"Say, Shadow, won't you please tell it into a phonograph, so I can grind it out to my grandfather

when I get home?"

"Is that the story that starts on a foggy night, at noon?"

"No, this one starts on a dusty day in the middle of the Atlantic."

"Say, if you fellows want me to tell a story, say so!" grumbled Shadow. "Otherwise I'm going to get down."

"No! no! Tell your best yarn, Shadow."

"All right, then. Once two men went into a shoe store--"

"Wow! That's fifty years old!"

"I heard that when a child, at my grandson's knee."

"Tell us something about smoke, Shadow!"

"And fire. I love to hear about a fire. It's so warm and--"

"Hi! let me get down! Do you want to burn me up?" yelled the story-teller of the school, suddenly, as, chancing to glance down, he saw that the barrels were on fire. "Let me down, I say!" And he made a leap from the barrels into the midst of the crowd.

Shadow landed on the shoulders of Nat Poole, and both went down and rolled over. In a spirit of play some of the students near by covered the rolling pair with shavings and straw. Shadow took this in good part and merely laughed as he arose, but the money-lender's son was angry.

"Hi, who threw those dirty shavings all over me?" he bawled. "I don't like it."

"Don't mind a little bath like that, Nat!" called one of the students.

"But I do mind it. The shavings are full of dirt, and so is the straw. The dirt is all over me."

"Never mind, you can have a free bath, Nat," said another.

"I'll lend you a cake of soap," added a third.

"I don't want any of your soap!" growled the money-lender's son. "Say, the whole crowd of you make me sick!" he added, and walked off, in great disgust.

"Phew! but he's touchy," was the comment of one of the students. "I guess he thinks he's better than the rest of us."

"Let's give him another dose," came the suggestion, from the rear of the crowd.

"Shavings?"

"Yes, and straw, too. Put some down his neck!"

"Right you are!"

Fully a dozen students quickly provided themselves with shavings and straw, both far from clean, and made after Nat, who was walking up the river-front in the direction of the boathouse.

Before the money-lender's son could do anything to defend himself, he found himself seized from behind and hurled to the ground.

"Now then, give it to him good!" cried a voice, and in a twinkling a shower of shavings, straw, and dirt descended upon poor Nat, covering him from head to foot.

"Hi! let up!" spluttered the victim, trying to dodge the avalanche. But instead of heeding his pleadings the other students proceeded to ram a quantity of the stuff into his ears and down his collar. Nat squirmed and yelled, but it did little good.

"Now then, you are initiated into the Order of Straw and Shavings!" cried one merry student.

"Just you wait, I'll get square, see if I don't," howled Nat, as he arose. Then he commenced to twist his neck, to free himself from the ticklish straw and shavings.

"Come on and have a good time, old sport!" howled one of his tormentors; and then off the crowd ran in the direction of the bonfires, leaving Nat more disgusted than ever.

"I'll fix them, just wait and see if I don't!" stormed the money-lender's son to himself, and then hurried to the Hall, to clean up and make himself comfortable.

In the meantime the march around the campus had begun, each student carrying a torch of some kind. There was a great singing.

"Be careful of the fire," warned Mr. Dale, as he came out. "Doctor Clay says you must be careful."

"We'll take care!" was the cry.

The marching at an end, some of the boys ran for the stables and presently returned with Jackson Lemond, the driver of the school carryall, commonly called Horsehair, because of the hairs which clung to his clothing.

"Come on, Horsehair, join us in having a good time."

"Give us a speech, Horsehair!"

"Tell us all you know about the Wars of the Roses."

"Or how Hannibal crossed the Delaware and defeated the Turks at the Alamo."

"I can't make no speech," pleaded the carryall driver. "Just you let me go, please!"

"If you can't make a speech, sing," suggested another. "Give us Yankee Doodle in the key of J minor."

"Or that beautiful lullaby entitled, 'You Never Miss Your Purse Until You Have to Walk Home.' Give us that in nine flats, will you?"

"I tell you I can't make a speech and I can't sing!" shouted out the driver for the school, desperately.

"How sad! Can't speechify and can't sing! All right, then, let it go, and give us a dance."

"That's the talk! A real Japanese jig in five-quarter time."

There was a rush, and in a twinkling poor Horsehair was boosted to the top of a big packing-case, that had been hauled to the spot as fuel for one of the bonfires.

"The stage!" announced one of the students, with a wave of his hand. "The World-Renowned Horsehairsky will perform his celebrated Dance of the Hop Scotch. Get your opera glasses ready."

"What's the admission fee?"

"Two pins and a big green apple."

"I can't dance—I ain't never danced in my life!" pleaded the victim. "You let me go. I've got to take care o' my hosses."

While he was speaking Buster Beggs had come up behind Horsehair and placed something attached to a dark string on the box, between the driver's feet. It was an imitation snake, made of rubber and colored up to look very natural.

"Oh my, look at the snake!" yelled several, in pretended alarm.

"Where? where?" yelled Horsehair.

"There, right between your feet! He's going to bite you on the leg!"

"Take care, that's a rattler sure!"

"If he bites you, Horsehair, you'll be a dead man!"

"Take him off! Take him off!" bawled the carryall driver, and in terror he made a wild leap from the packing-box and landed directly on the shoulders of two of the students. Then he dropped to the ground, rolled over, got up, and ran as fast as his legs could carry him in the direction of the stables. A wild laugh followed him, but to this he paid no attention.

"Well, we are certainly having a night of it," remarked Dave, after the fun had quieted down for a moment. He spoke to Roger.

"Where is Phil?" asked the senator's son.

"Went off with Ben, I think."

"Where to?"

"I don't know."

"It's queer how much they keep together lately; isn't it?" continued Roger.

"Oh, I don't know. Of course that affair with Haskers may have something to do with it," answered our hero, slowly.

"I wish Haskers would leave this school, Dave."

"Oh, it won't make much difference to us, if we graduate, whether he stays or not."

"I know that. But, somehow, I don't think he is a good man to have here, even if he is a learned instructor. He never enters into the school spirit, as Mr. Dale does."

"Well, we can't all be alike."

"Would you keep him, if you were in Doctor Clay's shoes?"

"I hardly think so. Certainly not if I could find another teacher equally good."

The boys walked on until they found themselves at the last bonfire of the line, close to where the school grounds came to an end. Here was a hedge, and beyond were the woods reaching up from the river.

"Nobody down by this bonfire," remarked Dave. "Say, this is careless work," he added. "The wind might shift and set the woods on fire."

"I didn't think they'd start a fire so far from the others," answered his chum.

"Let us kick it into the water," suggested our hero, and this they started to do, when, unexpectedly, a voice hailed them, and they saw a student sitting in a tree that grew in the hedge which separated the campus from the woods.

"Let that fire alone!" the youth called, angrily.

"Why, it's Nat Poole!" exclaimed Roger, in a low voice. "Whatever is he doing in that tree?"

"I am sure I don't know," returned Dave.

"Is he alone?"

"He seems to be."

"Do you hear what I say?" went on the money-lender's son. "Leave that fire alone."

"Did you build it?" asked Dave.

"I did, and I want you to leave it alone."

"All right, Nat, if you say so," answered Roger. "We thought it had been abandoned and that it might set fire to the woods."

To this Nat Poole did not reply. Plainly he was annoyed at being discovered in his present position. Dave and Roger looked around, to see if anybody else was in the vicinity, and then, turning, walked in the direction of the other bonfires.

"What do you make of that, Dave?" asked the senator's son, presently.

"It looked to me as if Nat was waiting or watching for somebody, Roger."

"So it did. The question is, Who was it?"

"I don't know. But I've got something of an idea."

"Some of the students?"

"No. That wild man."

CHAPTER XII

PLANS FOR A SPREAD

"That wild man?" exclaimed the senator's son, stopping short to stare at Dave.

"Yes."

"How do you make that out?"

"Because I think Nat is interested in the fellow, although just how I won't pretend to say. But you'll remember how excited he got when he found out that the wild man called himself the King of Sumatra."

"Oh, I see. You think he knows the fellow and thought that the bonfire might attract him to the place."

"Yes. I've heard it said that crazy folks were sometimes attracted by the sight of fire. Maybe Nat has heard the same and wants to see if it will work in the case of this man."

"Shall we go back and see what happens?" suggested Roger.

Dave mused for a moment.

"Would it be just right to play the spy, Roger?"

"Well, this isn't playing the spy in the ordinary sense of the term, Dave. That wild man ought to be locked up."

"But it may not be the wild man he is looking for."

"Oh, let us go back a little while, anyway," urged the senator's son.

They retraced their steps until within fifty feet of the bonfire and then walked to the shelter of the hedge. They thought they had not been seen, but they were mistaken.

"Humph! so you think you are going to spy on me, after all!" cried a voice, and Nat Poole came towards them, with a deep frown on his face.

"It's rather queer you are in the tree," answered Roger, somewhat sharply.

"It's my affair, not yours, Roger Morr!" roared the money-lender's son. Then, without another word, he walked to the bonfire, kicked the blazing sticks into the river, and strode off in the direction of the Hall.

"He's good and mad," was Roger's comment.

"And we didn't learn anything, after all," added our hero.

Dave and his chum rejoined the merry throng at the other bonfires. But the celebration in honor of the baseball victory was practically at an end, and a little later the students retired, to skylark a little in the dormitories, and then settle down for the night.

A week passed, and Dave stuck to his studies as persistently as ever. During that time he sent off several letters, and received a number in return, including one from Jessie, which he treasured very highly and which he did not show to his chums.

"Here is news of Link Merwell," said Luke Watson, one day, as he came along with a letter. "It's from a friend of mine who knows Merwell. He says he saw Link in Quebec, Canada, at one of the

little French hotels in the lower town."

"What was Merwell doing?" questioned Dave, with interest.

"Nothing much, so my friend writes. He says Link was dressed in a blue suit and wore blue glasses, and he thought his hair was dyed."

"Evidently doing what he could to disguise himself," was Phil's comment.

"My friend writes that he saw Merwell only one evening. The next day he was missing. He made inquiries and says he was at the hotel under the name of V. A. Smith, of Albany, New York."

"He does not dare to travel around under his own name," remarked Shadow. "Say, that puts me in mind of a story," he went on, brightening up. "Once a chap changed his name, because--"

"Say, cut it out," interrupted Phil. "We want to hear about Merwell."

"There isn't any more to tell," said Luke. "My friend tried to find out where he had gone but couldn't."

"He must be having a lonely time of it—trying to keep out of the hands of the law," murmured Dave.

"And maybe he hasn't much money," said Buster. "His father may have shut down on him."

Gus Plum listened to all this conversation without saying a word. But down in his heart the former bully of Oak Hall was glad that he had cut away from Merwell and Jasniff, and turned over a new leaf, and he resolved then and there that, come what might, he would never again turn aside from the path of right and honor.

"Say, why don't you listen to my story?" pleaded Shadow, and then related a somewhat rambling tale of a man who had changed his name and, later on, lost some property because of it.

Another day slipped by and it was one of particular interest to Dave and Roger, for in the morning they made up the last of the back lessons imposed upon them by Job Haskers. They had done exceedingly well, but the harsh teacher gave them little credit. Phil and Ben had still three days' work, but Professor Haskers said nothing of this.

"He doesn't dare," declared the shipowner's son.

"That's right," chuckled Ben. "We could give him a good black eye before this whole school if we wanted to."

Dave had already finished up the back lessons for the other teachers, so he was now free to spend his time on what was ahead of him. He was as enthusiastic as ever to make a record for himself, and pitched in with a will, and his enthusiasm was caught by Roger, who also resolved to do his best.

"Whoop! hurrah! What do you think of this?" came from Phil, late one afternoon, after the mail had been distributed. "Somebody hold me down! I guess I'm going to fly! Or maybe I'm only dreaming!" And he began to caper around gayly.

"What is it all about, Phil?" asked Dave. "Hit your funny-bone?"

"Money, boys, money! That's what it is about," replied the shipowner's son. "I've got five thousand dollars, all my own!"

"Five thousand dollars!" gasped Buster.

"All your own?" queried Gus Plum.

"Where did you get it?" asked another.

"Why, it's this way," answered Phil, when he could calm down a little. "About two years ago a great-uncle of mine died, leaving considerable money. He was interested in various enterprises and his death brought on legal complications and some litigation. He left his money to a lot of heirs, including myself. My father and I never thought we'd get anything—thought the lawyers and courts would swallow it all. But now it seems that it has been settled, and yours truly gets five thousand dollars in cash."

"When do you get it, Phil, right away?" asked Buster.

"Well,—er—I, of course, don't get it until I am of age. It's to go in the bank."

"Oh!"

"Won't you get any of it until then?" asked Shadow. "Your dad might let you have a little, just to celebrate--"

"That's just it—just what he has done!" cried Phil. "I've got-- But wait," cried the shipowner's son, interrupting himself. "I'll plan this thing out. You shall all be my guests later on," he added, mysteriously.

"Will you give a spread?" asked Chip Macklin.

"Don't ask questions, only wait," returned Phil. And that was all he would say on the point, although he talked freely about his inheritance.

The next morning Phil and Ben were seen in earnest conversation, and that afternoon the two boys left the school as soon as they could get away, bound on an errand to Oakdale.

"We ought to get a dandy spread for a dollar or a dollar and a half a head," said Phil, as they

hurried along. "And twelve at a dollar and a half will be only eighteen dollars."

"The music will cost something," said Ben.

"Yes, I'm counting on two pieces, a harp and a violin, for ten dollars. That's the price Professor Smuller charges."

The boys were bound for the Oakdale Union House, a new hotel which had just been opened by a man named Jason Sparr. It was a nice resort, without a bar, and catered to the better class of people, including the students at Oak Hall and at the Military Academy.

The boys found the hotel proprietor glad to see them, and willing to set any kind of a spread that they were able to pay for. Trade was not yet brisk, and Jason Sparr said he would do his best to serve them. He was a smooth, oily man, and a fellow who wanted all that was coming to him.

"I can set you an elegant table for eighteen dollars for twelve," said he. "I'll give you oysters, fish, two kinds of meat, several vegetables, salad, ice-cream, coffee, and also nuts, cake, olives, celery, and other fixings."

"That's the talk!" cried Phil, enthusiastically. "Just make a nice spread of it, and you can have all our trade in the future."

"You'll be well pleased," answered Jason Sparr.

"Can we have a private dining-room?"

"To be sure—the blue room over yonder," and the hotel man showed the boys the apartment.

"I want some flowers, too," said Phil. "You can put two dollars' worth of roses on the table."

"Very well—that will make an even twenty dollars."

"When do you want me to pay?"

"Such spreads are usually paid for in advance," answered Jason Sparr, shrewdly. He did not intend to take any chances with schoolboys.

"All right, here is your money," answered the shipowner's son, and brought forth one of the two crisp twenty-dollar bills his father had mailed to him, with the good news of his fortune.

"Tell him about the music," suggested Ben.

"Oh, yes, I thought I'd have Professor Smuller furnish some music—harp and violin."

"Fine! They can sit in the alcove, and we'll put some of our palms around them," returned Jason Sparr.

"Remember, this is for next Saturday night, seven o'clock sharp," said Phil.

"I've got it down," returned the hotel proprietor, as he wrote in his book.

"And don't say anything to anybody about it. I want to surprise my friends."

"Very well, mum's the word," and the hotel man looked very wise and knowing.

Leaving the place, Phil and Ben sought out the home of Professor Smuller, a violinist, who, with a friend who played the harp, often furnished music for dances and other occasions.

"Yes, yes, I can furnish music," said the violinist. "Just tell me what you want." Business was slow and he was glad to get any sort of an engagement.

The matter was explained, and the professor promised to be on hand and bring the harpist with him. He said he could play anything the students desired, including the well-known school songs. He would fill the engagement for the boys for eight dollars, although his regular price was ten. But he would have to have cash in advance.

Again Phil paid out his money, and then, the business concluded, he and Ben left the professor's home and hurried along the road leading to Oak Hall.

"Have you made up your list yet?" asked Ben, when nearing the school.

"Not quite. I'll have Dave and Roger and Shadow and Buster, of course. I'll have to leave out some fellows, but that can't be helped. I can't afford a spread for the whole school."

"Of course you can't."

"I think I'll have Luke and Sam, and maybe Gus and Chip."

As the boys drew closer to the school Ben had to stop to fix his shoe. Both sat down on some rocks, at a turn in the road. They were about to go on again when somebody made the turn of the road, coming from the town. It was Nat Poole.

"Hello! you been to town?" cried Ben, good-naturedly.

"Yes," answered the money-lender's son. "Haven't I a right to go if I want to?" he added, and then hurried on ahead of them.

"Rather peppery," mused Ben. "Say, Phil, there is one fellow you won't invite, and I know it."

"Right you are, Ben," was the ready answer. "All I ask of Nat Poole is, that he leave me alone."

But Nat was not to leave Phil alone, as events were quickly to prove.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CABIN ON THE ISLAND

"Dave, come on out for a row. You haven't been on the river this year."

It was Gus Plum who spoke. He was out in one of the craft belonging to Oak Hall, and hailed our hero as the latter was strolling along the river-bank.

"All right, Gus!" Dave cried, cheerily. "I don't know but that a try at the oars will do me good, after the hard studying I've been doing."

"You are bound to get a high-water mark this term, aren't you?" went on Gus Plum, as he brought the rowboat up to the dock, so that Dave might get in.

"I'd like to graduate with honor, yes."

"What are you going to do after you leave here, Dave?" went on the big youth, as the two rowed up the river.

"I don't know yet. Have you made up your mind?"

"Oh, I think I'll go into business, but I am not sure."

"You won't try for college?"

"No. You see, I don't make much of a fist at learning, so what's the use? But I love business—buying and selling things."

The two boys continued at the oars until the vicinity of Oak Hall was left far behind.

"If we only had a power-boat we might run up to Squirrel Island," remarked Gus.

"Perhaps Nat Poole will lend you his motor-boat," suggested our hero, with a little grin.

"Humph! I'd not ask him," returned the big youth, promptly. "I am done with Nat Poole. I want to stick to my new friends." And the former bully of the school fairly beamed on Dave, who had done so much to make him reform.

"Have you seen the motor-boat this season, Gus?"

"Yes, Nat got it out two days ago. I think he is on the river now."

The boys rowed on, until they came to a bend where there was something of a cove. As they rounded the point they heard the steady put-put! of a gasoline engine not far off.

"There is Nat's craft now!" cried our hero, and pointed ahead.

"He's all alone," was Plum's comment. "He can't have many friends these days, or he'd have some of them along."

"I'd hate to be without friends, Gus, shouldn't you?"

"Yes, indeed! But it's Nat's own fault. If he'd only drop his important airs and be more sociable, he'd get along all right."

On and on rowed the two students. It was a clear, balmy day, and they hated to return to the school until it was absolutely necessary.

"Let us row around Smith Island," suggested our hero, mentioning a small place in the middle of the stream, so named after a farmer who owned it. It was a rocky and somewhat barren spot, and seldom visited by anybody but fishermen.

"All right, but we want to beware of the rocks," cautioned the big youth.

The rowboat was headed up the stream, and soon they came in sight of the island. On one side were a number of bushes, overhanging the river.

"Hello! look there!" cried Dave, a few minutes later, and pointed to the bushes.

"What do you see?"

"A motor-boat. I think it is Nat Poole's."

"Is that so? What brought him here?" questioned Gus, with interest.

"I am sure I don't know. But it's his boat, I am sure of that," went on Dave, after another look at the craft.

"See anything of Nat?"

"No, the boat is empty."

"Let us row in a little closer and see what he is doing," suggested Gus.

"He'll say we were spying on him."

"Humph! Haven't we as much right as he has to visit the island?"

"Of course."

"Then what is the use of keeping away? He may be waiting to play some trick, or something like that."

"Oh, I think not, Gus. Probably he just visited the island out of curiosity. But I'll go in if you say so."

Slowly, so as to avoid the many rocks in that vicinity, the two students brought the rowboat close up to the motor-craft. They looked into the bushes and along the rocks beyond, but saw nothing of Nat.

"Shall we call to him?" asked Gus.

"What for? I don't want to see him."

"Neither do I. His boat is tied good and fast. He must expect to stay on the island quite a while."

The two boys rowed on, past the motor-boat. Then, as they turned a point of rocks, Dave gave a start.

"Well, of all things!"

"What is it, Dave?"

"Look yonder—in between those bushes!"

"Why, it's a rowboat."

"Exactly, Gus, and do you see how it is painted, drab with blue stripes?"

"Of course—a pretty ugly boat, I think."

"Gus, that is the very rowboat used by that wild man—the one he was in when he got away from us that day!"

"Do you really mean it?" gasped the big boy, staring hard at the craft.

"I certainly do—I'd know that boat in a hundred. I never saw another just like it."

"If that's the case, maybe the wild man is on the island!"

"Just what I was thinking," answered Dave. "And I was thinking, too, that—" He stopped short.

"What?"

"Don't you remember how Nat was so anxious to know all about the wild man? And how upset he seemed to be when he heard that the fellow called himself the King of Sumatra?"

"Yes, I remember that. Do you think he came here to find the man?" demanded Gus, quickly.

"It looks so to me."

"My gracious, Dave, I think you are right! Say, there is something mysterious about all this!" cried Gus.

"Exactly."

"Let us go ashore by all means and see what Nat is up to," urged the big youth.

Dave was more than willing, now that he had discovered the rowboat used by the wild man. Perhaps this island was the home of that mysterious individual. If so, what was the money-lender's son doing there? Had he business with the strange creature?

"Maybe we'd better not make any noise," suggested Gus, as the boat was turned in to a convenient landing-place. To this Dave did not reply, but they landed as silently as possible. Then the rowboat was hauled up out of sight between the bushes.

From the craft used by the wild man a rude path ran up from the shore to the rocks beyond. A short distance from the shore the boys saw the marks of a wet foot, coming from the direction where lay the motor-boat.

"That was made by Nat—he got his left foot wet," said Gus.

"I think so myself," answered our hero.

They followed the marks left by the wet foot over the rocks. They headed for the upper end of the island, where there was a small grove of straggly cedar trees. Here the marks faded away completely.

"Well, we know he came this way, anyhow," remarked Gus. "He can't be very far off, for the island isn't very big."

"I see a rude log cabin!" exclaimed Dave, and pointed through the cedars. "Maybe that is where the wild man lives."

"If it is, we want to go slow, Dave. He may attack us."

"But what of Nat, if he is there?"

"He may know the man and have some influence over him."

"I hardly think anybody could have any influence over that man. He is as crazy as can be, and not to be trusted."

The two youths approached the old log cabin slowly, keeping as much as possible in the shelter of the trees. Nobody was in sight, nor did any sound reach their ears.

Presently the students found themselves within fifty feet of the cabin, the door of which stood

half open. Each looked at the other.

"I'm going ahead," said Dave, resolutely. He and his companion had provided themselves with sticks, and Gus had also picked up two stones.

"Oh! oh! oh!" came of a sudden, to their startled ears. "Oh dear me!"

"It's Nat!" ejaculated Dave. "Something has happened to him!"

"Maybe the wild man attacked him," added Gus.

"We'll soon see," cried Dave, and started forward on a run.

Soon our hero was at the door of the cabin, which he pushed wide open. Inside all was dark, for it was growing late, and the rude structure boasted of but one small window, stuffed with cedar boughs to keep out the wind.

"Nat, where are you?" cried Dave, as his eyes sought to pierce the semi-darkness.

"Who—who is that calling me?" came, in surprise, from the center of the cabin.

"It is I—Dave Porter! Where are you, and what happened? Where is the wild man?"

"Oh, I'm caught fast—in a trap!" groaned the money-lender's son. "Oh, help me out! My ankle is almost broken!"

"But the wild man—?" queried Gus, who was close behind our hero.

"I—I don't know where he is," gasped Nat. "Oh, say, won't you please help me? My ankle is fast in a trap! Oh, how it hurts!"

"Wasn't the wild man here?" asked Dave, as he got out his match-box to strike a light.

"No—at least, I haven't seen him."

Dave soon had a match lit, and with it set fire to a cedar bough placed in the rude fireplace of the cabin. By the glare of this light he and Gus looked around them and at their fellow-student.

The cabin was unfurnished excepting for a rude bench and a board placed on some piles of stones for a table. In the fireplace were a kettle and a frying-pan, and on the table the remains of a scanty meal of crackers, eggs, and apples. A tin pail, half filled with water, was also handy.

When Dave and Gus turned their attention to Nat Poole they had to stare in wonder. Nat sat on the floor, nursing a bruised ankle that was caught fast between the jaws of an old-fashioned steel animal-trap. The trap was chained to the floor, and the release chain ran to a corner of the fireplace, several feet beyond the sufferer's reach.

"However did this happen?" asked Gus, although he and our hero could easily guess the answer to the question.

"Help me get loose first," groaned poor Nat. "This thing is sawing down to the bone."

Dave saw the release chain, which was held firm by a hook. Stepping over, he unhooked it, and then it was an easy matter to pry the jaws of the steel-trap apart. As soon as this was done, Nat rose slowly to his feet, making a wry face as he did so.

"I'll be lame for life—I know I will!" he groaned. "Oh dear, how it hurts!"

"You take care that you don't get blood-poisoning from it," warned Gus. "When you get home wash it well, and put some peroxide of hydrogen, or something like that on it."

"Blood-poisoning! Oh dear!" and Nat gave another groan.

"Shall we help you back to your boat?" asked Dave.

"If you will."

"Where is the wild man?" questioned Gus, looking around.

"I don't know, and I don't care—just now," answered Nat Poole.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BANDANNA HANDKERCHIEF

Nat Poole could hardly walk on the injured leg, so Dave and Gus supported him as the three left the rude cabin and headed for the shore of the island.

"Do you know where the wild man is?" repeated Gus, who had not been satisfied by the reply given to the question before.

"I do not," snapped the money-lender's son, with a touch of his former tartness. "I haven't seen him."

"But you know that cabin is where he lives," put in our hero.

"I thought so—but I wasn't sure of it."

"Did you see him come ashore, Nat?"

"No—that is, not to-day. I saw him land here yesterday."

"And that is what brought you here to-day?" remarked Gus.

"Yes, if you must know," was the somewhat cold answer.

"See here, Nat, do you know this wild man?" asked Dave, abruptly.

"Me? Know him? How should I know him?" demanded the money-lender's son, but his apparent astonishment did not, somehow, ring nor look true.

"That is what I wanted to find out."

"I don't know him—at least, I don't think I do. I've never seen him close enough to make sure. Maybe he's some fellow who belongs around here. I wanted to find out about him—just as everybody else wants to find out, that's all."

"Want to have him caught and placed in an asylum?" asked Gus.

"It's not my business to place him anywhere," cried Nat, hastily. "For all we know, he may be harmless."

"Not when he stops young ladies on the road and catches folks in steel-traps," answered our hero, with a faint smile.

"Well, that's right, too," grumbled the money-lender's son. "Maybe he ought to be in an asylum."

"I think he is on this island now," went on Dave. "His rowboat is here, anyway."

"Say, I'll tell you what we can do!" cried Gus. "Take his boat with us! Then he can't get away, and we can send the authorities over here to get him."

"That's an idea, Gus!" cried Dave. "We'll do it."

"Would that be fair to the man?" asked Nat. "He—er—he might starve to death—or try to swim to shore and get drowned."

"He can't starve to death in one night, and I don't think he'll drown himself. The authorities can come over here early in the morning and round him up, if he is here."

"I—er—I don't think much of your plan," murmured Nat, and seemed much disturbed.

In about a quarter of an hour the boys reached the island shore, at the spot where Nat's motor-boat was tied up. They helped him get in and start up the engine. He had been told how they had come to the island.

"If you want to, you can tie your boat fast to the stern and ride back with me," he said.

"All right, Nat, we'll do it," answered Dave. "It is getting rather late and it's a pretty stiff row to the school."

The motor-craft was started up and sent along in the direction where the boys had left the Oak Hall rowboat. Their course took them past the spot where the wild man's boat had been tied up.

"Why, look, it's gone!" cried Gus, standing up and pointing to the place.

"True enough," answered our hero. "He must have gone off in it while we were up to the cabin."

"He can't be very far away, Dave."

The boys looked up and down the river, but could catch no trace of the missing rowboat or the wild man. In the meantime, the motor-craft was moving forward, where the other boat had been beached among the bushes.

"That is gone, too!" ejaculated Dave. "He has taken our boat!"

"Oh, do you really think so?" asked Gus. He felt that he was responsible for the craft, as he had taken it from the school boathouse.

"I certainly do think so," said Dave. "It was a neat trick to play."

"It's a wonder he didn't take the motor-boat, too."

"Maybe he didn't know how to run the boat and it was too heavy to start without the engine."

"I guess you are right!" came suddenly from Nat. "Look here!"

He had stooped down to pick something up from the grating on the motor-boat's bottom. It was a torn and dirty bandanna handkerchief.

"The wild man's!" cried Dave. "I remember it."

"I am glad he didn't get away with my boat," returned the money-lender's son, drawing a deep breath. "I'll keep this handkerchief to remember him by."

"Is it marked in any way?" questioned our hero. "Perhaps it has his name or initials on it."

"Oh, I don't think so," returned Nat. "Let us hurry up and get back to the school. If we are late, old Haskers will be after us."

"Go on and run the boat as fast as you please, Nat," answered Dave. "But I want to look at that handkerchief."

Rather unwillingly, the money-lender's son passed the bandanna over. It was now growing so dark that Dave could see but little.

"Wait, I'll light a match," suggested Gus, and did so, and by the protected but flickering flare our hero looked the handkerchief over. In one corner there was a faint stamping.

"Looks like 'Rossmore Sanitarium' to me," said Dave, slowly. "Or it may be 'Bossmore' or 'Crossmore.' The beginning is too faded to be sure."

"Bossmore Sanitarium?" queried Nat, and then he became silent and thoughtful. A little later he asked for the bandanna and placed it in his pocket.

The run in the motor-boat to the school dock did not take long. As soon as Nat's craft was properly housed, Dave and Gus assisted the money-lender's son up the walk and across the campus.

"I suppose I've got to report the loss of the rowboat," said Gus, ruefully.

"It wasn't your fault, Gus," answered Dave. "I'll go with you to Doctor Clay."

"I can't go with my lame foot," put in Nat, and he hobbled up to his dormitory, eyed by several curious students, who wanted to know how he had gotten hurt.

The boys found the master of Oak Hall getting ready for supper. He looked at them inquiringly as they entered his study, in answer to his invitation.

"Well! well!" he exclaimed, after listening to their story. "This is certainly odd! I trust Poole was not seriously hurt."

"I think he was more scared than hurt," answered Dave. "The trap scratched his ankle, that's all. I am sure it is not sprained or broken."

"But the rowboat--" put in Gus. "I didn't mean--"

"Do not worry about that, Plum. It was not your fault. I am glad the wild man did not harm you. I think you got off well. After this you must be careful about how you go out after this remarkable creature."

The master of the school then asked for more particulars of the occurrence, and said he would notify the town authorities about the loss of the rowboat, and ask that a general hunt take place for the wild man.

"They ought to be able to round him up sooner or later," he added.

There was considerable excitement in the school when it was learned that the wild man had been heard of again. The boys looked for the strange individual and so did the town authorities and many farmers, but nothing came of the search. Nat was called on to exhibit the bandanna handkerchief and did so. Nobody could make out the first part of the name on it, for the handkerchief showed a small hole where the letters should be.

"That is queer," said Dave, to Roger and Phil, when he heard of this. "That handkerchief did not have a hole there when I looked at it."

"Maybe Nat put the hole there," returned the senator's son.

"Why would he do that?" questioned Phil.

"So that nobody would know what the name of the sanitarium really was. I believe with Dave that Nat knows the man, or knows about him, and is trying to keep something a secret."

"Hum! Maybe you are right," mused the shipowner's son.

Phil had perfected all his arrangements for his spread at the hotel, and his guests for that occasion had been duly invited and all had accepted the invitation. It had been arranged with Mr. Dale that the boys should drive to the hotel in the school carryall, and Horsehair was to have his supper in town and, later on, bring them home. No secret was made of the affair, for this was not necessary.

"I am only sorry for one thing," said Phil to Dave. "That is that I can't have the whole school there. But that would go beyond my purse."

"Well, you'll have enough, Phil, to insure a good time," answered our hero.

The night was clear, with numberless stars glittering in the heavens, when the carryall drove around to the Hall door and the boys piled in. All were in the best of humor, and they left the campus in a burst of song.

"I've been saving up for this!" cried Ben. "Haven't eaten a mouthful for two days!"

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story," cried Shadow. "Once a poor street-boy was invited to a Sunday-school picnic. The ladies fed him all he could hold and then some. At last, when he couldn't eat another mouthful, and saw some cake and pie and ice-cream going to waste, what do you suppose he said?"

"Give it up, Shadow."

"He said, 'Say, missus, please save it fer me, won't yer? I won't eat fer a week, honest, an' then I'll come an' finish it all up fer yer!'"

"Good for the street-boy!"

"Say, Phil, you won't have to save anything for me! I'll eat my share right now!"

"I've been in training for this feed!"

"Shove the horses along, Horsehair; we don't want the soup to get cold."

"I'm a-shovin' 'em along," answered the carryall driver. "We'll git there in plenty o' time."

"Say, Phil, as far as I am concerned, you can have this affair pulled off once a month," remarked Buster.

"Make it once a week," piped in Chip Macklin. And then Luke Watson commenced to sing a popular negro ditty and all joined lustily in the chorus.

On and on rattled the carryall until the lights of Oakdale shone in the distance. The boys continued to sing, while one or two blew freely on the tin horns they carried. Here and there somebody would come rushing to a window, or door, to learn what was doing.

"It's them Oak Hall boys!" cried one old farmer. "My, but they do have high times!"

"So they do," returned his wife. "But they are good boys," she added, for some of them had once aided her in capturing a runaway bull.

With a grand flourish the carryall swept around the last corner and came to a halt in front of the hotel. Phil had hoped to see some extra lights lit and was somewhat disappointed to see only the regular lantern burning.

"I told him to light up freely and he said he would," he whispered to Dave.

"Maybe he thought you meant the dining-room, Phil."

The students piled out of the carryall and waited for Phil, as host, to lead the way into the hotel. All marched up the steps and into the broad hallway. There they were confronted by the hotel proprietor, who came to meet them in his shirtsleeves. He looked completely bewildered.

"Well, we are here for that supper, Mr. Sparr!" cried Phil. "I hope you are all ready for us!"

The hotel man looked at the boys in amazement. His jaw dropped. Then he gasped out the words:

"Well, I'll be jiggered!"

CHAPTER XV

AT THE HOTEL

At once Dave and all the other students who had come to the hotel with Phil, expecting a fine spread, saw that something was wrong. They looked questioningly at the shipowner's son and at the hotel proprietor.

"What's the matter?" demanded Phil, quickly.

"Matter?" repeated Jason Sparr. "That's just exactly what I'd like to know."

"You—you are ready for us, aren't you?" went on Phil, with a sudden catch in his voice.

"Why should I be ready, when you called the whole thing off?" growled the hotel man. "Fine way to do, I must say," he continued, with strong anger in his voice.

"Called the whole thing off?" repeated Phil. "Me?"

"Yes, you!" shouted Jason Sparr. "And after we had everything in fine shape, too! Say, don't you think my stuff is too good to send to the Old Ladies' Home?" he demanded.

"There must be some mistake here, Mr. Sparr," put in our hero. "Phil didn't call this spread off. We are here for it, as you can see."

"But he did call it off—this noon," returned the hotel proprietor. "And he wasn't a bit nice about it, either. When I asked him what I should do with the extras I had ordered he told me to do as I pleased—send 'em to the Old Ladies' Home, or throw 'em away! He didn't act a bit nice."

"Say, you chump, you!" shouted Phil, growing suddenly angry. "I didn't send you any word at all about calling it off. I--"

"Don't you call me a chump, you young rascal!" shouted the hotel man, in equal heat. "I got your message over the telephone--"

"I never sent any," interrupted Phil.

"It must be a trick," cried Roger.

"Who played it?" queried another student.

"Maybe this is the work of some of the Military Academy fellows."

"Like as not."

"But how did they learn that Phil was going to give the spread?"

"Give it up."

"Maybe some of our own fellows did it—some who didn't get an invitation to attend," suggested Chip.

"Would any one be so mean?" asked Buster.

"Some of them might be," murmured Gus.

"I didn't send you any word," went on Phil, in greater anger than ever.

"Well, I got word, and so did Professor Smuller. He was mad, too, because he lost another job taking yours."

"Why didn't you make sure the word was sent by Mr. Lawrence?" demanded Ben. "You could have done that easily enough."

"I didn't think that was necessary. This fellow said--"

"I tell you I didn't send word!" shouted Phil, growing more angry every instant. "You might have known it was a trick."

"Of course, he might have known," added Ben. He lowered his voice. "Say, Phil, if he doesn't give us the supper make him give your money back."

"Sure he's got to give me the money back," cried the shipowner's son.

"See here, you can't bulldoze me!" cried the hotel proprietor. "I've had trouble enough as it is. I got ready for this spread and then you called it off, and you were mighty sassy about it, too. I've lost a lot of money."

A wordy war followed, lasting the best part of a half an hour. Through this it was learned that the hotel man had prepared for the spread, and so had the professor of music. Just after noon telephone messages had come in, calling the whole affair off. Some hot words had passed over the wire, and the hotel man was considerably ruffled. The party talking to Jason Sparr had said that when the spread did come off it would be held elsewhere—intimating that a better place than his hotel could be found.

"It's all some trick, to get my business away from me!" stormed the hotel man. "I won't stand for it!"

"I didn't send the messages, and I either want the spread or I want my money back," declared Phil, stubbornly. And then more words followed, until it looked as if there might be a fight. Finally, in a rage, Jason Sparr ordered the students from his place.

"All right, we'll go, but you haven't heard the end of this!" cried Phil.

"You'll catch it, for treating us so meanly," added Ben.

"Don't you threaten me, or I'll have the law on you!" roared Jason Sparr.

"Perhaps I'll call on the law myself," answered Phil, and then, unable to control himself, he shook his fist at the hotel man. Then all the boys filed out of the place, some bystanders looking on in wonder.

"Well, what do you think of this!" cried Gus, when outside.

"Phil, I wouldn't say anything more just now—you are too excited," said Dave, catching his chum by the arm.

"Yes, but that fellow is as mean as—as dirt!" answered the shipowner's son.

"He hasn't any right to keep Phil's money," said one student.

"Then the feast is called off, is it?" said Buster, with something like a groan in his voice.

"And somebody is going to have the laugh on us!" added Shadow. "Say, this puts me in mind of a story," he added, brightening. "Once some boys were going--"

"Oh, stow it, Shadow!"

"This is no time for stories!"

"I'd rather go down to the cemetery and weep."

"Nobody is going to have the laugh on me," cried Phil. "We'll get something somewhere."

"Right you are!" cried Dave. "I've got it!" he added. "Let us drive over to Rockville and get something at the hotel there. I know the proprietor and he's a nice man."

"Better telephone to him first and make sure," suggested Roger.

"I'll do it," said Phil.

The carryall was brought around again and all piled in and drove down to a drug store where there was a telephone booth. Into the booth went Phil, to communicate with the hotel in Rockville. He came out smiling.

"It's all fixed up and I guess we'll have something this time," he said. "But just wait; I'll fix that mean Jason Sparr, see if I don't!"

"It's quite a drive to Rockville," protested Horsehair, when they told the driver what was wanted.

"Never mind, it will do the horses good," cried Roger. "They are getting too fat standing still."

"Say, Phil," whispered Dave. "If you haven't got money enough along, I can let you have some."

"Good," was the whispered return. "I was going to speak of that, as soon as I got a chance."

The affair at the Oakdale hotel had put something of a damper on the crowd, and all the talk was of how Jason Sparr had acted and who had been mean enough to play such a trick.

"Maybe it was Nat Poole," said Chip.

"What makes you think that?" asked Phil.

"Oh, he is mean enough for anything."

"If Nat did this I'll—I'll mash him!" cried Phil, with energy.

"Can't you find out?" asked Roger.

"I'll try—but most likely the fellow who did it took care to cover up his tracks. Sparr didn't know where the messages came from."

On and on rolled the carryall, until the lights of Rockville appeared in the distance. By this time all of the students were decidedly hungry. They rolled up to the little hotel and those with horns gave a couple of shrill blasts.

This time there was a warm welcome by the host. He came out, bowing and smiling.

"Did the best I could for you, on such short notice," he said, as they entered. "Next time, if you'll only give me a little more time--"

"That's all right, let's have what you've got," cried Buster. He was hungry enough to eat anything.

They were ushered into what was usually the private dining-room of the little hostelry. The table had been spread out and was tastefully decorated with paper chrysanthemums, made by the hotel man's daughter. A parlor-lamp and several others shed light on the scene.

"This looks good!" murmured Roger.

"Wait till you see what we get to eat," answered Sam. "It may be slim—on such short notice."

But he was agreeably mistaken, the spread was all that could be desired. There were oysters on the half-shell, tomato soup, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, lettuce salad, olives, and also coffee, pie, and various cookies. It was served in home style, by the hotel man's daughter and a hired girl.

"Say, this is fine!" cried Buster, smacking his lips.

"Better, maybe, than if we had stayed at the other place," added Dave.

"Only we haven't got the music," said Phil. He was glad that matters had taken such a nice turn, but still angry over what had gone before.

As they had already lost so much time, the boys did not dare linger too long over the spread. Horsehair was given something to eat in another room, and then they set out on the return. Songs were sung and jokes cracked, and Shadow was permitted to tell half a dozen of his best stories. Yet, with it all, the edge had been taken off the celebration, and Phil knew this as well as anybody, and was correspondingly chagrined.

"I'll make that man square up with me, see if I don't," he said to Dave, as they arrived at the school. "I'm not going to lose all that money."

"Well, be careful of what you do, Phil," warned our hero. "Don't get into a fight."

The next day the shipowner's son sent out two sharp letters, one to Jason Sparr and the other to Professor Smuller. He stated that he was not responsible for the trip-up that had taken place, and demanded his money be returned to him, otherwise he would put the matter in the hands of the law.

To these letters came speedy replies. The musical professor said he was sorry a mistake had been made, and he returned the amount paid to him, and he further stated that if he could discover who had played the trick he would make that party settle up.

"That's decent of him," said Phil. "I am going to send him back five dollars for his trouble." And this he did, much to Professor Smuller's satisfaction.

The letter from Jason Sparr was entirely different. He berated Phil for the stand taken, and stated that he would pay back nothing. He added that he had learned how the crowd had gone to Rockville to dine, and said he was satisfied that it was all a trick to get patronage away from his hotel. He added that he had had trouble enough with people from Oak Hall school and he wanted no more of it.

"I guess I'll have to sue him," growled Phil, on showing the letter to Dave and Roger.

"I don't think I'd bother," answered Dave. "Put it down to Experience, and let it go at that."

"If you sued him it would cost as much as you'd get, and more," added the senator's son.

"Humph! I don't feel like swallowing it," growled Phil. "I'll get it out of him somehow."

"He must have lost something—if he got ready for the spread," said Dave.

"Oh, I don't think he lost much. He's a close one—to my way of thinking," responded the

CHAPTER XVI

THE BLOWING UP OF THE BRIDGE

"Say, this is something fierce, Dave!"

"I agree with you, Roger. I don't see how we are going to do such a long lesson."

"Old Haskers is getting worse and worse," growled Phil. "I think we ought to report it to Doctor Clay."

"Just what I think," came from Ben. "He keeps piling it on harder and harder. I think he is trying to break us."

"Break us?" queried our hero, looking up from his book.

"Yes, make us miss entirely, you know."

"Why should he want us to do that?" asked Roger.

"Then we wouldn't be able to graduate this coming June."

"Would he be mean enough to do that?" asked Dave.

"I think he would be mean enough for anything," responded Phil. "Oh, I am not going to stand it!" he cried.

The boys had just come upstairs, after an extra hard session in their Latin class. All were aroused over the treatment received at the hands of Job Haskers. He had been harsh and dictatorial to the last degree, and several times it had looked as if there might be an outbreak.

The next day the outbreak came. Phil sprang up in class and denounced the unreasonable teacher, and Ben followed. Then Dave and Roger took a hand, and so did Buster and several others.

"Sit down! Sit down!" cried Job Haskers, growing white in the face. "Sit down, and keep quiet."

"I won't keep quiet," answered the shipowner's son. "You are treating us unfairly, Mr. Haskers, and I won't stand for it."

"Neither will I," added Ben.

"Sit down, I tell you!" stormed the instructor.

But none of the students obeyed him, and in a minute more the room was in an uproar. One of the under-teachers heard it, and quickly sent for Doctor Clay.

As the master of Oak Hall strode into the classroom there was a pause. He mounted the platform and put up his hand, and soon all became quiet.

"Young gentlemen, be seated," he said, in his strict but kindly fashion, and instantly every student sat down. Then he turned to the teacher. "Mr. Haskers, what is the trouble?" he asked.

"The trouble is that certain students will not learn their lessons," answered Job Haskers, sourly. "I had to take them to task for it."

"Who are those students?"

"Lawrence, Basswood, Porter, Morr, Beggs--"

"That will do for the present. Lawrence, stand up," ordered Doctor Clay.

Phil did as requested, and the eyes of the entire class were fastened on the shipowner's son.

"Now, Lawrence, what have you to say for yourself?" went on the doctor.

In a plain, straightforward manner, Phil told his side of the story. Several times Job Haskers wanted to interrupt him, but Doctor Clay would not permit this. Then Ben was questioned, and after that the master of the school turned to Dave.

"Is your complaint the same, Porter?"

"Yes, sir."

"And yours, Morr?"

"Yes, sir."

"What have you to say, Beggs?"

"The same. The lessons lately have been altogether too hard—we simply can't get through them. We never had such long lessons before."

"I have given them only the regular lessons," put in Job Haskers.

"Ahem! Let us go over them and see what can be done," responded the doctor. "If the students are willing to work we do not want to overburden them, Mr. Haskers."

A discussion lasting over a quarter of an hour followed, and in the end the lessons were cut down, much to the satisfaction of the whole class, who felt like cheering the head of the school. The only person who was not satisfied was Job Haskers. He was invited to go out with the doctor to his private office, and came back some time later, looking anything but happy.

"I'll wager he got a calling down!" whispered Phil to Dave. "I hope he did."

He was right about the "calling down," as he expressed it. The master of Oak Hall had spoken very plainly to the instructor, and given Job Haskers to understand that he must get along better with the boys in the future, and treat them with more consideration, or he would be asked to resign from the staff of the school.

Several days slipped by and during that time Dave paid close attention to his lessons. He had also a theme to write on "The Future of Our Country," and he devoted considerable time to this, hoping it would receive at least honorable mention, even if it did not win the prize offered for the best production.

"Come on down to town!" cried Roger, one afternoon, as he rushed in, "Big excitement on! Going to blow the railroad up!"

"Blow the railroad up?" queried our hero. "What sort of a joke is this, Roger?"

"No joke, at all. You know the old stone bridge over the creek?"

"Sure."

"Well, the railroad wants to get rid of it and do it quickly, so they can build another, so the contractors are going to blow the old bridge up with dynamite at half-past four o'clock."

"Let's go!" burst out Phil. "It will be a great sight—to see that old bridge go up."

"Right you are!" cried Ben.

All the boys were enthusiastic, and in the end fully fifty students got permission to go down to Oakdale to see the old stone bridge destroyed.

"None of you must go very close," warned Doctor Clay, "for dynamite is powerful stuff—eight times more powerful than gunpowder."

"We'll keep away, don't fear about that," answered several.

"Dynamite isn't to be fooled with," added Dave.

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story!" cried Shadow. "A Dutch laborer working on the railroad was much annoyed by the other laborers coming along and knocking his stiff old derby hat over his eyes. At last he got good and mad and when he saw a chance, he stole a stick of dynamite from the shanty where it was kept. He stuck the dynamite in his hat and then went around to the other laborers. 'Now, chust hit dot hat vonce again of you dare!' he said."

"And nobody dared," added Roger, as a general laugh went up.

"I once saw a fellow take a stick of dynamite and burn it like a torch," remarked Ben. "It gave me a cold chill to see him do it."

"And it didn't explode?" queried Roger.

"No. But I heard afterwards that if he had struck it ever so lightly, it might have blown us all as high as a kite."

"It sure is great stuff," remarked Phil. "Say," he went on suddenly, "I wish they were going to blow up old Sparr's hotel instead of the bridge."

"So do I," added Ben. "He's about as mean as they make 'em."

"That man ought certainly to have something done to him," was Roger's comment.

"Well, he won't make a success of his hotel if he treats everybody as he treated Phil," said Dave.

"He doesn't deserve any success," growled the shipowner's son.

When the students arrived in the vicinity of the old bridge they found a large crowd assembled, including many acquaintances from Rockville Military Academy, and people from the town. Red flags had been placed around, and nobody was allowed to get very close to the old structure.

"There is where they have the dynamite stored," said Phil, pointing to a shanty not far away. "See the sign?"

"That's a good spot to steer clear of," returned Dave, with a grin.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of the stuff," answered the shipowner's son.

In the crowd of men and boys the students became more or less separated. There was a great thrill when the word was passed that everything was in readiness for the blowing up of the old bridge.

"She's going!" cried Roger to Dave.

Boom! came the dull, heavy roar, and the boys saw the stones of the old bridge flying upward in all directions. The ground shook all around them, and the water from the creek was splashed on high. A great cloud of smoke and dust filled the air. Then came silence, followed by a wild

cheering from the younger element.

"Certainly a great sight," was Dave's comment.

"Too bad it didn't last longer," sighed Buster.

"It wasn't quite as big as I thought it would be," said Luke. "I thought some of the stones would fly about a mile high."

"Good enough for a free exhibition," put in Gus. "Beats fireworks all hollow."

The boys walked down to the ruins of the old bridge and hung around for the best part of a half an hour. Then, in groups of five or six, they walked to town, to look around there before returning to Oak Hall. Dave and his chums passed Jason Sparr's hotel. He was on the veranda and scowled at them, and Phil and some of the others scowled in return.

"Have you done anything about that Sparr matter yet, Phil?" asked one of the lads.

"No; but I will soon, you wait and see," was the growled-out reply.

On the main street of the town some of the boys separated, to do a little shopping, and then some walked to the school, while others got in the carryall that happened to be at hand. As a consequence some of the students did not get back to Oak Hall until some time after the supper hour.

Dave was alone when he entered the dining-hall and he was surprised to see that neither Phil nor Roger was present. Ben was also absent and likewise Shadow.

"Didn't some of them come in with you?" he asked of Buster.

"Gus and Luke did," was the reply. "I don't know where the others are."

The meal was almost at an end when Phil, Ben, and Roger made their appearance. They had but little to say, but Dave could see that something was wrong.

"Had another wrangle with Jason Sparr," explained Phil, after the meal. "He followed me to one of the stores, and I told him just what I thought of him."

"And he threatened to have Phil arrested for defamation of character," added Ben.

"But he didn't dare to do it," declared the shipowner's son.

"Better let him alone," advised Dave. "You'll gain nothing by keeping in hot water over it, Phil."

That night all of the boys had to study hard, and consequently they retired to their dormitories early. The only exception was Polly Vane, who had to go to Oakdale to meet a relative who would stop off but who was going away again on the midnight train.

The boys studied until ten o'clock and then retired. Dave was completely tired out and his head had hardly touched the pillow when he was sound asleep.

He was awakened about two hours later by the sounds of excited talking. He opened his eyes to behold Polly Vane standing in the dormitory fully dressed, while Phil was sitting on the edge of the bed, and Ben and Roger and some others were just rousing up.

"What's going on?" Dave asked, sleepily.

"A whole lot, if what Polly says is true," answered the shipowner's son.

"But it is true, upon my word!" cried the girlish student. "I heard the explosion myself."

"What explosion?" asked several.

"An explosion in Oakdale, to-night," answered Polly. "Somebody tried to dynamite Jason Sparr's hotel!"

CHAPTER XVII

A SERIOUS ACCUSATION

Instantly there was great excitement in the dormitory, and all of the students crowded around Polly, to learn what he might have to say.

"It was this way, don't you know," said the scholarly youth. "I went to Oakdale to see my uncle, who stopped off on his trip from Portland to St. Louis. He wanted to ask me about some family matters, and he didn't have time to come to the Hall. I went down in the buggy--"

"Oh, never mind that, Polly, tell about the explosion," interrupted Roger.

"Well, I had just seen my uncle to the midnight train and was getting into the buggy to come back when I heard a low boom! coming from the direction of Sparr's hotel. The station-master and I were the only people around, and I asked him what the noise meant, but he said he didn't know. Then he jumped into the buggy with me to find out. We drove to the hotel, and there was

excitement enough, I can tell you. The girls and women folks were screaming wildly and Mr. Sparr and some men were running around, not knowing what to do. Soon a crowd began to collect, and then we found out that a wing of the building—where the dining-room is—had been blown up. Some men from the railroad said it had been done by dynamite—the kind used for blowing up that old bridge.”

“Was anybody hurt?” asked Dave.

“Nobody but an old man who was sleeping in the house next to the addition. He got so scared he jumped from an upper window and sprained his ankle. Oh, that dining-room is a sight, I can tell you! One end is completely gone—the wall away from the main house—and all the tables and chairs and ornaments smashed! And the roof is full of holes!”

“How was it done?” questioned Gus.

“The dynamite was placed at the side of the dining-room foundation, according to the railroad men, and it was set off by some sort of clockwork,” answered Polly.

“And who did it?” asked Shadow.

“They don’t know, yet. But Sparr suspects Phil. That is why I woke him up as soon as I came in,” continued the girlish student.

“Suspects me!” exclaimed the shipowner’s son.

“Yes. He says you are the only one who would do such a thing—you and the crowd who have been backing you up.”

“Well, I never!”

“Maybe he means me, too,” murmured Ben.

“He does, and all the others in the crowd, too. He thinks it’s a plot to get square because he wouldn’t give Phil his dinner money back.”

“I had nothing to do with it,” declared Phil, stoutly.

“Nor I,” added Ben.

“Well, I am sure I wasn’t in it,” said Dave. “I didn’t dream of such a thing.”

“Nor did I,” added Roger and some others.

The news soon spread through several dormitories, and the boys discussed the startling happening in whispers. Phil was greatly disturbed.

“I didn’t do it, but I know he’ll try to fasten it on me,” he told Dave. He did not add that he had written to his father about the affair of the feast and his parent had sent a warning letter back, ordering his son to have nothing more to do with Jason Sparr.

The next morning the news was all over the school. Nat Poole heard of it, and he and some of his cronies declared it as their opinion that Phil and some others were to blame. This brought on a fistic encounter between Ben and the money-lender’s son, and the latter got a black eye in consequence.

“You sha’n’t say I did it—or had anything to do with it,” said Ben, when Nat backed away, having had enough of the battle.

“Humph! just wait till the law has its say!” retorted Nat. “Then maybe you’ll get what is coming to you!”

Some of the boys wanted to go to town—to see the damaged hotel—but Doctor Clay would not permit this. In the meantime the wreckage was being cleared away, and the authorities and Jason Sparr were doing their best to locate the author or authors of the crime.

Then came a great surprise, in the shape of a letter delivered in a mysterious way to the hotel-keeper. He was seated in the hotel office in the evening, talking to one of the town constables, when a missive was hurled at him through an open window. He dodged at first, fearing more dynamite, but when he saw it was only a letter, he picked it up and turned it over. It was addressed to him and marked “Private and Personal.”

“Wonder what this is?” he mused, and walked over to the light to read the letter. It was written on a single sheet of paper, in lead pencil, and evidently in a disguised hand. It contained but a few lines, as follows:

“If you want to catch the fellows who blew up your hotel have these boys of Oak Hall school arrested at once, Philip Lawrence, Benj. Basswood, David Porter, Roger Morr, and Joseph Beggs. They were together when it was done, and one or more of them surely did it.

“One Who Knows.”

The hotel-keeper read this letter several times and then stuffed it into his pocket. Then he went into the next room and drew from a drawer several things wrapped up in a newspaper.

“I am going down to see the squire,” he said, to the constable. “You can come along, if you want to.”

“What was in the letter?”

“The names of the rascals who blew up my hotel.”

“What! You don’t mean it, Jason!”

"Yes, I do."

"Who sent the letter?"

"That's a secret. But come on, we'll talk it over with Squire Thompson. Ain't no time to waste." And then the hotel man went off to interview the leading legal light of the town.

The conference at the squire's office lasted the best part of two hours. At this Jason Sparr produced the contents of the package, several things picked up near the hotel at the time of the explosion—a tan glove, somewhat worn, two iron rings, an empty paper box marked, "L." in one corner, a whip handle, and a clock-like contrivance which had been used to set off the dynamite. He told of his trouble with Phil and his chums, of the threats made, and produced the letter received so mysteriously.

"Looks kind of plain to me, Squire," he said. "Don't you think so?"

"It isn't for me to say," replied the squire, cautiously. "But if you want to swear out warrants for those boys' arrest--"

"Ain't I justified?"

"Sure you are," put in the constable, who happened to be the squire's brother-in-law. "I wouldn't waste no time on it." He thought he saw in this a job for himself, with some fat fees.

"If you have them arrested, you've got to prove your case," said Squire Thompson, slowly. "It's a serious business, Sparr."

"But this letter says they are guilty."

"Lock 'em up and make 'em confess!" broke in the constable. "Give 'em the third degree!" he added. He had read something of how city criminals were occasionally treated and he wished to air his knowledge.

"I'll do it!" cried Jason Spar. "I'll show 'em they can't insult me and take away my trade and then try to blow up my hotel! I'll have 'em all locked up! Then we can examine 'em one by one, and get 'em tangled up and make 'em confess."

After much trouble, the warrants for the arrest of Phil, Ben, Dave, Roger, and Buster were made out. The constable wanted to serve them at once, but it was decided at the last moment to wait until the next morning, to see if any new evidence regarding the crime might be forthcoming.

The constable went home, sworn to secrecy, but he had to tell his wife and her sister of the affair, and the news got to the ears of a man who boarded with them. This fellow, who was named Andy Prime, chanced to know Dave quite well, our hero having once done him a favor. Early in the morning Prime drove past the school, and seeing Dave on the campus, hailed him.

"Come over here, I want to tell you something, Porter," said Prime, mysteriously.

"What do you want?" asked Dave, good-naturedly.

"Ride a bit with me, will you? I don't want nobody to hear us," went on the man, lowering his voice.

Wondering what was coming, Dave got up on the seat of the man's wagon and they drove to the far end of the Oak Hall grounds. There Andy Prime told of all he had learned.

"Please don't say I told ye!" he pleaded. "It might git me in trouble. But you did me a good turn onct an' I ain't forgot it."

"Thank you, Prime, I won't tell who told me," answered Dave.

"Thet old skinflint o' a Sparr deserved to have his buildin' blown up."

"Perhaps. But we didn't do it, I can assure you of that. If Mr. Sparr has us arrested, he'll get in hot water," answered our hero; and then he got out of the wagon and Andy Prime drove on.

Dave at once carried the news to those immediately concerned. All were very indignant, and some were scared.

"Say, I won't stand for being arrested!" cried Phil, in horror. "It's too much of a disgrace!"

"My folks would never get over it," added Ben.

"It would just about kill my mother, if I was locked up," came from Buster.

"Well, I'll stand it if I have to," said Roger. "But I'll make that fellow suffer for it later!" he added, bitterly.

All thoughts of going to school that morning were abandoned by the five boys. They talked the situation over, and determined to go down the road and await the arrival of the constable, Andy Prime having said that Hickson would come by ten o'clock.

"This is awful!" gasped Phil, shaking his head dolefully. "Say, Dave, I can't stand it!"

"Wait until we hear what the constable has to say."

"He won't say anything—he'll just drag us to the Oakdale lockup!" put in Ben.

"I wonder what my dad will say to that, when he hears of it?" murmured Roger. "The newspapers are bound to make a spread of it. 'Son of a U. S. Senator Jailed for Blowing Up a Hotel!' or something like that. Oh, it makes me sick!"

Plainly the majority of the students were very nervous. The only one who kept calm was Dave,

and even he was much disturbed. All walked along the road, keeping a sharp eye out for the appearance of Paul Hickson.

"Here he comes!" cried Phil, as a covered wagon came along the road, driven by the keeper of the Oakdale jail. On the front seat beside the driver were the constable and Jason Sparr.

"Hi, you boys!" shouted the constable, as the wagon came closer. "I want to see you!"

"What do you want?" demanded Dave, stepping to the front.

"We want you, for one!" cried the hotel-keeper. "Be careful, Hickson, that none of 'em get away!" he added.

"I don't know one from tudder," said the constable, doubtfully.

"This is just the bunch we are after, unless I am mistaken," went on the hotel man. "That is Lawrence there, and Basswood, and this is Porter, and I think that is Morr," and he pointed to the various students.

"Good enough. Boys, in the name of the law, I call on you to halt," declared the constable, pompously.

"Mr. Sparr, what does this mean?" demanded Dave.

"It means that I am going to have the whole bunch of you arrested!" shouted the hotel man, harshly. "You blew up my hotel, and I can prove it! I've got the evidence against every one of you! I am going to have you arrested right now and sent to prison!" And he shook his fist at the boys.

"The evidence against us?" faltered Phil.

"Yes, sir, the plain, clear evidence," went on the hotel-keeper, dramatically. "I've got you just where I want you. I am going to send every one of you to prison for five or ten years!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MEETING ON THE ROAD

There was an intense silence, following the announcement of Jason Sparr that he intended to send Dave and his chums to prison for attempting to blow up the hotel. In the meantime the hotel man and the constable got down from the seat of the covered wagon.

"I've got the warrants fer the arrest, boys," said Constable Hickson, somewhat importantly.

"Mr. Sparr, I'd like a word with you," said Dave, as calmly as he could speak under the circumstances.

"I ain't got no more to say than I've said," returned Jason Sparr, stubbornly. "You done it, and I can prove it! The constable is going to do his duty and arrest you!"

"Dave, I—I won't stand for it!" whispered Phil, hoarsely. "It's terrible! I—I can't stand it!" And he began to back away.

"Hi, there! stop!" yelled the hotel man. "Stop him, Hickson! Don't let him get away!"

"You sha'n't arrest me for nothing!" cried the shipowner's son, and like a flash he turned around and started off on a run.

"Come back here, Phil!" called out Dave. "Come back! You are making a mistake by running away!"

But Phil did not hear, nor did Ben and Buster, who had also taken to their heels. Roger ran a few steps, then halted, and came back to our hero's side.

"You are right, Dave," he said. "It's best to face the music."

Phil, Ben, and Buster had turned towards Oak Hall. Phil was in the lead, but the others soon caught up to him.

"Wha—what are you go—going to d—do?" panted Ben.

"I'm not going to let them arrest me!" answered Phil. "I didn't do it, and I'm not going to jail."

"Let us hide until we can get our folks to help us," suggested Buster. The thought of going to a lockup filled him with dread.

"I'm going to notify my folks, too," said Ben.

"The trouble is, I don't know where my folks are just now," came from the shipowner's son. "My father went on a trip on one of his vessels and mother is visiting relatives."

The boys had kept on running on the road. But now, as they saw the constable after them, they turned and dashed into a side-path leading to the river.

"A motor-boat!" cried Ben, a few seconds later.

"It's the Kingsley boat," added Buster. "I know Tom will let us use it—he said I could do it once. Let us go across in it."

All leaped on board, and Ben started up the engine while Buster took the wheel. There came a put! put! as the fly-wheel was turned over, and the little craft, which belonged to a boy living on the river-bank, headed out into the Leming River.

In the meantime, while Constable Hickson was running after the fugitives, Jason Sparr and the driver of the covered wagon confronted Dave and Roger.

"Don't you try to run!" bawled the hotel-keeper.

"I'm armed," added the keeper of the town lockup, suggestively.

"I don't intend to run, Mr. Sparr," answered Dave.

"Why should we run, since we have done nothing wrong?" added the senator's son. He tried to follow Dave's example and remain calm, but he was tremendously disturbed.

"Did those three fellows do it alone?" queried the hotel man, eagerly. "If they did, you had better confess to it, and clear yourselves."

"None of us are guilty," answered Dave.

"I know better."

"You do not. Since we didn't do it, Mr. Sparr, I don't see how you can prove that we did,—unless you have manufactured some evidence against us," went on our hero, pointedly, a new idea coming into his head.

"I ain't manufactured no evidence!" bawled Jason Sparr. "Didn't that young rascal of a Lawrence say he'd get square with me, and didn't all of you say the same? Wasn't you down to the blowing up of the bridge, right where they had all that dynamite stored? Wasn't some of the dynamite sticks stolen? Didn't you fellows come right by the hotel afterwards? Wasn't the blowing up done by clockwork, made to go off hours after it was set? You can't tell me! You are guilty. Besides, I got other evidence—I got a letter," added the hotel-keeper, shrewdly.

"A letter? About us?"

Jason Sparr nodded.

"Saying we were guilty?"

"Yes."

"Who wrote it?"

"Never mind that. You're guilty, and you know it. Just wait till Hickson comes back with them others and I'll show you a thing or two," continued the hotel man, harshly.

"Mr. Sparr, I said I wanted to talk to you, and I do want to," said Dave, after a pause. "You will find it to your advantage to listen to me. You have got this whole thing settled in your own mind, but you are dead wrong. You intend to have us locked up for something we didn't do. To have us locked up will blacken our characters and blacken the reputation of Oak Hall. My folks are respectable people, and so are the folks of the other boys. Do you think they will stand for this sort of thing? And do you think Doctor Clay will stand for it? If you do, you are greatly mistaken. If you have us arrested on this charge, which is absolutely false, I'll get my folks to sue you for false imprisonment and defamation of character, and I know the other fellows will do the same. And you can rest assured that the charges against you will be pushed to the limits of the law."

At this plain talk Jason Sparr's jaw dropped. Several times he was on the point of interrupting, but thought better of it.

"Well, now—er—" he stammered when Dave had finished.

"My father is a United States senator," said Roger. "You don't suppose he will let a matter like this pass unnoticed? If you do anything to besmirch our family name, you'll take the consequences."

"Your father is a United States senator?" faltered Jason Sparr.

"He is, and Dave's father is a rich man, and so is Phil Lawrence's father. Of course, our money has nothing to do with it, excepting that it will enable us to stand up for our rights in the courts, and get able lawyers to defend us. We are innocent of all wrongdoing. If anybody is in the wrong it is you, for you cheated Phil Lawrence out of the money he advanced to you for that spread we were to have at your hotel."

"Cheated him!" cried the hotel-keeper.

"That is what it amounted to, for you took his money and gave him nothing in return."

"He called the spread off—"

"He did not, and we can prove it," said Dave, following up what he thought looked like an advantage. "Why, if he wanted to do it, Phil could have you locked up for swindling."

"What, me? Locked up?" cried the hotel man.

"Certainly. Why not? It's as reasonable as your charge against us—more reasonable, in fact, for you kept his money and gave him nothing in return," went on our hero, warmly.

"Well, now what do you know about that?" grumbled Jason Sparr, turning to the driver of the covered wagon. But the lockup man merely shrugged his shoulders. Privately he was of the opinion that the boys were not such rascals as had been pictured.

"If those fellows wasn't guilty, why did they run away?" continued Jason Sparr, after an awkward pause.

"Because you scared them," responded Roger. "I would have run away myself if it hadn't been for Dave."

"Humph!"

All looked along the road. Constable Hickson had disappeared, having followed the runaways down to the river. Presently he came back, out of breath from his exertions.

"Did you get 'em?" queried the hotel-keeper, eagerly.

"No, they got away in a motor-boat."

"A motor-boat!" repeated Dave and Roger, and looked at each other in astonishment.

"Yes, went up the river out of sight," said Paul Hickson. "Too bad! But we've got two of 'em, anyway," he added, looking at our hero and the senator's son.

"I wanted Lawrence more than I did the others," grumbled Jason Sparr. He was doing some deep thinking and his face showed that he was much disturbed.

"Mr. Sparr, just remember what I said," remarked Dave, pointedly. "If you go ahead, take my word for it, it will cost you dear."

"Say, Hickson, we'll drop this matter for the present," said the hotel-keeper, in a low tone.

"Drop it?" ejaculated the constable. "Ain't you goin' to have these two took up?"

"Not just now. I—er—I want to get more evidence first, if I can. We can get them any time we want them."

"But who is going to pay me for my trouble? I've got them warrants to serve right in my pocket, and--"

"I'll fix that up with you," answered the hotel man, in a whisper. "Come on. We can come back later." And then the hotel man said something to the driver of the wagon. The latter merely nodded and got back to his seat. Jason Sparr climbed up beside him, and the constable slowly followed.

"I don't understand--" went on the constable; but Jason Sparr merely pinched his arm, and he stopped short.

"Just remember, this ain't settled yet!" cried the hotel-keeper, to Dave and Roger. "I'm going to look into it a bit deeper before I make a move, that's all. I know some of you done it, and I'll have you in prison for it yet, see if I don't!" And he shook his head grimly; and then the covered wagon was turned around, and the three men drove off in the direction of Oakdale.

"Oh, Dave, do you think they'll come back?" cried Roger, when the men were out of hearing.

"There is no telling what they will do, Roger. But you can make up your mind to one thing—Sparr won't come back until he has more evidence than he has at present."

"But how can he get evidence? Surely you don't think Phil and the others guilty, even if they did run away."

"No, I think Phil and the others are as innocent as we are. But I can't understand some things. Somebody used that dynamite and somebody wrote a letter to Sparr about us. The question is, Who was it?"

"Could it be Nat Poole?"

"I don't think Nat would be bad enough to try to blow up a hotel."

"It certainly was an awful thing to do." Roger drew a long breath. "What shall we do now, go back to school?"

"We might as well. If we don't, old Haskers will be after us again."

"Do you think Phil and the others will come back?"

"Why not? As soon as they have time to think it over they'll realize it is best to face the music," answered Dave.

He and Roger returned to Oak Hall. They had missed one class, but fortunately that was one presided over by Mr. Dale, and he readily excused them when they said they had had some personal matters of importance to attend to, and would explain later.

"It is bound to come out, sooner or later," said Dave to his chum. "So we might as well take Doctor Clay and Mr. Dale into our confidence."

"I suppose you are right," answered the senator's son. Nevertheless, he heaved a deep sigh, as he thought of what might be the outcome of the trouble. What if, after all, Jason Sparr should concoct some sort of evidence against them and send them all to prison?

CHAPTER XIX

LOOKING FOR THE RUNAWAYS

When Dave and Roger went to the midday meal in the dining-room they looked all over for Phil, Ben, and Buster, but the three were not in sight.

"Dave, they haven't come back yet."

"So I see," returned our hero, and he was much disturbed. He ate sparingly, and the senator's son also had but little appetite for the meal.

"Say, what's become of those chaps?" questioned Shadow.

"I'll tell you later," answered Dave. "Don't say anything now—and tell the others to keep quiet, too."

But such a happening could not be kept quiet, and soon it was whispered around that Phil, Ben, and Buster were missing. This presently got to the ears of Andrew Dale, and the head assistant teacher sought out Dave for an explanation.

"I understand you went out with Lawrence, Basswood, and Beggs this morning, Porter," said the teacher. "They are not yet back. Do you know where they went?"

"They went off in a motor-boat, that is all I know about that part of it, Mr. Dale. Roger Morr and I would like to speak to you and Doctor Clay in private. It is very important," went on our hero.

"Very well. Come at once to the office and I will call the doctor."

A little later found the two youths in the office with Doctor Clay and his head assistant. There, as briefly as he could, Dave told his story, and Roger corroborated what was said. The head of the school was deeply interested and not a little alarmed.

"This is certainly serious," he declared, with a grave shake of his head. "It reflects not only on you but on this school. I must look into this at once." And then he asked many questions, and Andrew Dale did the same.

"Running away makes it look bad for Lawrence, Beggs, and Basswood," remarked Mr. Dale. "They should have stood their ground, as Morr and Porter did."

"That hotel man and the constable probably scared them so they did not know what they were doing," returned Doctor Clay. He turned to the boys. "You have no idea where they went?"

"No, sir, excepting that they went up the river in the Kingsley motor-boat. They know Tom Kingsley quite well and he lets them use the boat once in a while."

"Do you think you could find them, if I let you off to do so?"

"We could try, sir."

"Then you may go at once. Tell them it was very foolish to run away, and urge them to come back at once," added Doctor Clay.

A little more conversation followed, and then Dave and Roger left the office and started on the search for the runaways.

"We ought to have a motor-boat ourselves, to follow them up the river—that is, if they went any distance," said the senator's son.

"We might try to borrow one, Roger."

"Not Nat Poole's—he wouldn't lend it to us."

"I know that."

The two students walked to the river and looked up and down the stream. A rowboat and a sailboat were in sight, but that was all.

"There is Jack Laplow in his sloop," cried Dave, mentioning a riverman they knew. "The wind is blowing up the stream. Maybe he'll take us along."

They hailed the riverman, who made a living by doing all sorts of jobs on the stream. He did not have much to do just then and readily agreed, for a small amount, to take them up the river and bring them back.

"We want to find some fellows who are in the Kingsley motor-boat," explained Dave. "Have you seen anything of them?"

The riverman had not, but said he would help to watch out for the lads. Dave and Roger hopped aboard the sloop, and soon the little craft was standing up the Leming River, with Jack Laplow at the tiller.

It was a warm, clear day, and had the boys not been distressed in mind, they would have enjoyed the sail immensely. But as it was, they were very sober, so much so in fact that the old riverman at length remarked:

"What's wrong—somebody hurt, or are ye going to a funeral?"

"No funeral," answered Dave, with a forced laugh. "But we are in a hurry to find those three fellows."

"Well, I don't see no motor-boat yet," answered Jack Laplow.

"One thing is certain: if it went up the river it's got to come down," said Roger.

"They may get out and send it back," answered our hero.

"But, Dave, surely you don't think—" But Dave put up his hand for silence and nodded in the direction of the boatman; and the senator's son said no more.

A mile and a half were covered, and they were just passing one of the many islands in the river, when Jack Laplow gave a shout.

"There is the motor-boat now!"

"Boat ahoy!" shouted Dave, and then, as they drew closer, he saw that it was really the Kingsley craft. He was chagrined to see that only a man was on board, a fellow who was running the boat very slowly.

"Where are those boys who were aboard?" demanded our hero, as the motor-boat came closer.

"Is this your boat?" asked the man on board, in return.

"No, but my friends were on that boat. Where are they?"

"Left the boat at Snog's Point, and hired me to bring her back. I don't know much about motor-boats, so I'm running kind o' slow," explained the man.

"Snog's Point?" repeated Roger. "Where were they going?"

"Don't ask me, for I don't know. They was in a tremenjous hurry, I know that. It's all right, ain't it?" went on the man, quickly.

"Oh, yes, it was all right," answered Dave. And then they allowed the man to go on his way.



"THERE IS THE MOTOR-BOAT NOW!"—Page 186.

"Want to go up to Snog's Point?" asked the man of the sloop.

"Yes,—and as quickly as you can get there," replied Dave.

As the wind was in the right direction, it did not take long. The Point was a rocky cliff with a stretch of sand at its base. Here the boys jumped ashore.

"Want me to wait for you?" asked the riverman.

"Wait for half an hour," said Dave. "Then, if we are not back, you can go back;" and so it was arranged.

In the sand our hero and Roger could plainly see the marks of the motor-boat and many footprints. They followed the footprints to a road leading through a stretch of woods, and then came out on a highway leading to Barrelton.

"The town is about half a mile from here. Wonder if they went there?" mused Roger.

"Maybe we can learn something at the nearest farmhouse," suggested Dave.

They hurried on, and presently reached a farmhouse set close to the road, with a barn on the other side. At a grindstone a tall, thin boy was sharpening a sickle.

"Yes, I saw them fellers," he drawled, when asked about the runaways. "They was walking to town to beat the cars. I thought they must be in one o' them cross-country races, or something like that."

"Come on!" cried Dave to his chum. Then he turned back suddenly. "Do you know anything about the trains from Barrelton?"

"Ain't many trains from there," answered the youth at the grindstone.

"But do you know what there are?"

"There's a train north jest about due now."

"And what is next?"

"A train south a leetle after four o'clock. An' the freight goes through at seven."

"Hurry, Roger!" cried Dave.

"Do you think they'd take a train, Dave?"

"I don't know—I hope not."

The two boys set off on a run, taking it easy at first, so as not to get winded. They passed a number of farms and presently came in sight of Barrelton, so called because of the barrel factory located there. From a distance they had heard the whistle of a locomotive, and knew that the north-bound train had stopped at the station and gone on.

"There is the station!" cried Dave, pointing up the railroad tracks. They continued to run and did not stop until they gained the platform. Here they met the ticket agent.

"The train just went, didn't it?" asked Dave, and as the agent nodded, he went on: "Did three young fellows like ourselves get on?"

"If they did, I didn't see 'em," answered the man.

"Oh!" cried Roger, "maybe they didn't take the train, after all."

"Let us hope so."

Somewhat out of breath, the two boys tramped around Barrelton, looking for Phil and the others, and asking about them. But nobody appeared to have seen the runaways, and not a trace of them was to be found anywhere.

"All we can do is to get something to eat and take the other train for Oakdale," said Roger, after they had satisfied themselves that the runaways were nowhere in that vicinity. The walking around had made him hungry.

They procured some pie and milk at a little stand near the station, and shortly after four o'clock took the way train for Oakdale and walked to the school. They went directly to the doctor's office. The master of Oak Hall listened patiently to what they had to tell.

"I am sorry you did not find them," he said, gravely. "It was very foolish of them to run away, very. I trust they will come back of their own accord soon."

"Will you see Mr. Sparr about the matter?" asked Dave.

"Yes, Porter. And I wish you and Morr to go with me."

The interview took place that evening, the boys and the doctor driving down to the hotel after supper. Jason Sparr treated the master of the Hall politely but said very little.

"When I make my next move I'll have a lawyer," he said. "I know somebody tried to blow up my hotel, and I think it was some of your boys—that Lawrence boy especially. But I ain't going to have 'em arrested until I can prove it."

"Very well," answered Doctor Clay. "And in the meantime, you had better keep quiet, or you may have a suit for damages on hand."

On the day following there was something of a sensation. The weekly newspaper issued in a nearby town came out with a thrilling account of the dynamiting of the dining-room of the hotel. In the account appeared the following:

"There is strong evidence pointing to the fact that the outrageous deed was perpetrated by some schoolboys who held a grudge against Mr. Sparr. They are known to have been present at the blowing up of the old stone bridge, and were seen near the shanty where the sticks of dynamite were kept, and one boy of the town says he saw a young man coming from the shanty with something in his hand. Mr. Sparr has the authorities at work and is piling up his evidence, and the arrest of the rascally schoolboys may be hourly expected. It is said that some of the boys have run away, but the authorities have an idea where they can be located. The town committee is thinking of offering a reward for the capture and conviction of the rascals. For the safety of our citizens, the Weekly Globe-Leader hopes the evil-doers will soon be apprehended."

No names were mentioned in this account, but everybody in Oakdale and vicinity knew that the boys of Oak Hall were alluded to, and there was much talk over what might be done. Doctor Clay felt the disgrace keenly, and Dave and Roger were equally affected.

"What are we going to do, Dave?" asked the senator's son.

"I don't know," returned our hero. "But we've got to do something, that's certain."

CHAPTER XX

THE WILD MAN AGAIN

"Roger, I have an idea!"

"What is it, Dave?"

"I may be mistaken, but I've been thinking that perhaps that wild man did the blowing up at the hotel."

"What makes you think that?" questioned the senator's son, putting down the book he had been trying to study.

A day had passed after the events recorded in the last chapter, and so far no word had come in concerning Phil and the other runaways. Doctor Clay had sent for a private detective to assist in locating them and also to try, if possible, to clear up the mystery concerning the hotel affair.

"Well, in the first place, it would be just like a crazy man to do such a thing, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps."

"In the second place, I have heard that the wild man was seen around when the bridge was blown up."

"Is that so? Who saw him?"

"Mr. Tyson, the farmer who lives near the bridge."

"Why didn't he try to capture the fellow?"

"He did, but in the excitement of the blowing up the wild man slipped him. And that isn't all. Mr. Tyson saw him coming from the vicinity of that shanty where the dynamite was kept."

"Say, that is certainly interesting!" cried the senator's son. "When did you learn all this?"

"Less than an hour ago. Mr. Tyson brought some vegetables to the school and I had a talk with him."

"Did he think the wild man blew up the hotel?"

"No, he didn't connect the two."

"Hum! What do you think of doing about it?"

"I hardly know. I wish we could round up the wild man."

"Plenty of folks wish that."

"I think he hangs out somewhere along the river, or on one of the islands."

"Maybe Nat Poole knows."

"I hardly think so—although I am sure Nat wants to find the fellow—why, I can't imagine."

During those trying days, Job Haskers was as harsh and dictatorial to Dave and Roger as ever, and several times he passed sneering remarks about those who were missing.

"You may think as you please, Doctor Clay," said he to the master of the Hall. "I feel sure in my mind that Lawrence and those other boys are guilty. I do not think Mr. Sparr would accuse them if he was not pretty sure of his ground."

"Well, he has not dared to have those warrants served," replied the doctor, dryly.

"Because he is afraid there will be a great deal of money used in the case to fight him."

"Mr. Haskers, do you stand up for Mr. Sparr? I thought you had had some difficulty yourself with him once?"

"That was but a small affair. I think he is perfectly honest and that he wants to do what is right."

"Possibly. But he did not treat Lawrence very fairly in the matter of that dinner that was ordered."

"That was a mistake, and Mr. Sparr lost as much as he got. Yes, I think those boys guilty, and in the end you will find out that I am right," added Job Haskers as he went off, smiling grimly to himself, as if it was a pleasure to him to have the boys thus accused.

The next morning came another surprise. On getting up Dave noticed that something was missing from the dormitory. Phil's suit-case was gone, likewise a portion of his clothing, and also the valises of Ben and Buster, and part of their outfits.

"Well, this beats the Dutch!" exclaimed Roger, on learning the news. "Who took them, do you suppose?"

"Don't ask me, Roger."

"Maybe they came themselves and got them," suggested Sam.

"If they did, wouldn't we hear them?" asked Gus.

"Talk about a mysterious disappearance," cried Shadow. "Say, this puts me in mind of a story. Once some fellows--"

"Oh, stow it, Shadow!" cried the senator's son. "Let's get busy and try to find out what this means. Maybe they are back at the school."

All of the boys dressed hastily and took a look around. But they could find no trace of the runaways. Yet the traveling-bags and the clothing were certainly gone.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say the place was haunted!" cried Luke.

"Oh, don't say that!" exclaimed Polly Vane, looking scared. "I don't wish to see any ghosts."

Doctor Clay was informed of what had occurred, and he had another search conducted. But it was all to no purpose—the things were missing, and that was all there was to it.

It may well be imagined that with so much going on it was next to impossible for Dave and Roger to study. Yet they did their best, not wishing to drop behind again as they had during the trip to Cave Island. Job Haskers did not let up on them, and many a time they wished he would leave Oak Hall and that they might never see him again.

One afternoon Roger came to Dave in great haste and beckoned for him to come outside.

"I think we had better follow Nat Poole," said the senator's son. "I think there is something in the wind."

"What makes you think that?"

"Nat has been packing a valise and he has put in the strangest things—some clothing, some bottles of medicine, some rope, and a thing that looks like a crown made of brass."

"A crown made of brass? Oh, Roger, maybe that wild man—who calls himself the King of Sumatra--"

"That's the idea, Dave, I see you've caught on. Come on, before Nat gets away from us."

Our hero needed no further urging, and soon he and Roger were on their way to the gymnasium, where the senator's son had, by pure accident, seen Nat Poole packing the things mentioned in his handbag.

As they approached, they saw the money-lender's son trundle out a bicycle he owned and mount it, swinging his valise over his shoulder by a strap. He looked back to see if he was being observed, but Dave and Roger were on guard and quickly dove out of sight behind some bushes.

"We'll have to follow on our own wheels," said Dave.

Their old bicycles were still in the gymnasium. They were not in very good condition, but the tires were air-tight and that was enough. Without delay, they trundled the machines out, and leaping into the saddles, pedaled after Nat.

The course of the money-lender's son was along the river road, and he followed this for the best part of a mile. Then he branched off on a side-road leading to what were known as the Chester Hills. It was hard work pushing the machine up the hills, but Nat kept at it steadily, and Dave and Roger followed. Strange to say, the money-lender's son did not once look back after leaving the school. Evidently he was of the opinion that nobody had observed his departure, or, if so, had taken no particular notice of it.

From the top of one of the hills, Nat struck off on another side-road, leading to a little valley. Here was a brook, and at a point where it widened out, a small and really beautiful island. In the center of the island a cabin had been built by some sportsman, and a rustic bridge connected the resort with the shore.

Reaching the rustic bridge, Nat dismounted, and with his valise still over his shoulder, walked towards the cabin. As he did this Dave and Roger came quite close and they, too, dismounted, keeping in the shelter of some trees near by.

"Stop! I command you, in the name of the King of Sumatra, to stop!"

The call came from the cabin, and a second later the wild man appeared. He was clad in a blue pair of trousers and over his shoulder was thrown a big red blanket. On his head rested a crown made of a tin pail cut into sharp points.

"I salute you, King of Sumatra!" called out Nat, making a low bow.

"Ha! it is my servant that speaks," said the wild man. "Bow low, bow, I tell you!" and he flourished a wooden sword that he held in one hand.

"It is the wild man, sure enough!" whispered Roger, in great excitement.

"And evidently he has been expecting Nat," returned Dave. "Let us get closer and see what is up."

They advanced with care until they were behind a tree at the very foot of the rustic bridge. In

the meantime Nat had gone forward, bowing low at every step.

"I have brought you something, my king!" cried the money-lender's son. "Something of great importance to you."

"What is it?" demanded the wild man, his curiosity excited.

"A new crown. It is of gold, a beautiful crown."

"Ha! ha! that is well! The King of Sumatra needs a new crown!" cried the wild man, strutting up and down in front of the cabin. "Give it to me, that I may see if it fits." And he held out his empty hand.

"Let us go into the cabin, and you can sit in your chair of state while I place it on your head," said Nat, in a soothing, persuasive voice. "You will like it, I know."

"Did you bring your army with you?" demanded the wild man, suspiciously.

"No, I am all alone—the army is at Oakdale," answered Nat.

"Again 'tis well. Come in, and I will sit on the throne," and with a sweeping gesture of welcome, the wild man stepped back into the cabin, and Nat Poole followed.

"Now, what do you make of this?" whispered Roger, looking at Dave in wonder.

"I have an idea, Roger," answered our hero. "Nat knows that man; in fact, he is well acquainted with him. I think he is going to try to make him a prisoner."

"A prisoner? Oh, I see; for the glory of it, eh?"

"No, to get him back to some sanitarium as quietly as possible. I think Nat would like to do it without anybody around here being the wiser."

"Oh! Then maybe the fellow is some relative of the Pooles."

"Possibly, or a close friend. But come on, let us see what happens. We ought to try to capture the man ourselves."

"To be sure. But I don't see how we are going to do it. We are unarmed, and they say crazy folks are fearfully strong."

"We'll have to watch our chances."

The cabin had a window as well as a door, and to the former the two boys crawled. Peering through a vine that grew over the opening, they saw that the wild man had seated himself on a rude bench which he called his throne. It was covered with a tattered carpet and some cabalistic signs in blue chalk. Nat had placed his valise on the ground and was opening it. He brought out the crown and also the rope, but took care to conceal the latter under his coat.

"Now you must close your eyes and sit perfectly still while I place the crown on your head," said the money-lender's son. "I will have to do it from behind, for that is the way they do it in England and Germany."

"Do they do it in Russia that way, too?" demanded the wild man, and his eyes took on a glowing look as he gazed at the brass crown.

"Of course."

"Then let it be so." And the wild man sat back on the bench and closed his eyes, and stroked his straggly beard.

Quickly Nat stepped behind the man, and while he fumbled with the crown with one hand, he brought out the rope with the other. He was greatly excited and his hands trembled.

"Now sit perfectly still while I count fifty," said the money-lender's son. "Then when I--"

He did not finish, for at that instant the wild man let out a sudden yell and leaped to his feet. He ran to the doorway; and the next moment came face to face with Dave and Roger.

CHAPTER XXI

SOMETHING OF A CLEW

"Ha! ha! you are the army sent to capture me, are you? But I am not to be captured! Take the cannons away! Bring up the artillery! Forward the light brigade! Victory for the King of Sumatra! Oh, if only I had a company of trained monkeys I would show you how to fight!"

Thus speaking, the wild man danced around before Dave and Roger, swinging his wooden sword close to their heads. Indeed, our hero had to dodge back, to keep from being hit.

"Hello, you here?" cried Nat, coming from the cabin. "You followed me, did you?" He scowled deeply. "It's just like you, Dave Porter!"

"Nobody shall follow the King of Sumatra!" went on the wild man, with a cunning look at the three students. "Away! Out of my sight!" he yelled.

He dashed past Dave and Roger, moving towards the rustic bridge. Our hero caught him by the arm, but received a blow in the face that staggered him. Roger also tried to catch the man, but he was too quick, and a second later was on the bridge.

"Come back!" bawled Nat. "Come back, Uncle Wilbur! Don't you know me? Come back, please! We won't hurt you!" And then he set off after the wild man, who was running along the road beyond the bridge.

"Dave, did you hear that?" gasped the senator's son. "He called the wild man Uncle Wilbur!"

"Yes, I heard him," returned our hero. "No wonder he has been after him, Roger. Come on, let us see if we can't catch him."

The chums started after the wild man and the money-lender's son. The way was along the road, but presently the wild man turned into a stretch of woods. He could run like a trained athlete, and easily outdistanced Nat, who kept calling after him.

When Dave and Roger came up they found the money-lender's son leaning against a tree, out of breath and much disgusted.

"Couldn't get him, eh?" queried Roger.

"No, you fellows scared him off," growled the money-lender's son.

"I am sorry if we did that," said Dave.

"You had no right to butt in," grumbled Nat. "What did you follow me for, anyway?"

"Because we thought you were after the wild man, that's why," answered Roger.

"Humph!"

"So he is your Uncle Wilbur," went on our hero, after a pause, and he turned a look of sympathy at Nat as he spoke.

"Who told you that?"

"You called him Uncle Wilbur."

"I—I guess you are mistaken," stammered Nat, growing red in the face.

"No, we heard you as plain as day," put in the senator's son.

"You haven't any right to pry into my affairs, Roger Morr! You nor Dave Porter either!"

"Perhaps not," answered Roger.

"Look here, Nat, if we can help you we'll do it," came from Dave. "I suppose, if that man is your uncle, you wish to get him back to the—er—the sanitarium as quickly and as quietly as possible; is that so?"

"Wouldn't you want to do that, if he was your uncle?" asked the money-lender's son, flushing deeply.

"Certainly. But it looks, now, as if you couldn't do it alone."

"I might have done it, if you hadn't come up and queered my game."

"He didn't see us until he ran out of the cabin," said Roger. "He just got a wild streak on, that's all. I don't think you could have managed him alone. He wouldn't let you tie him up with that rope."

"Well, he's gone, that's sure," grumbled Nat. "I'm going back to the cabin for my valise."

"He may come back," suggested Dave.

"I don't think so. But I'll wait and see. I hung around once for him—on that island—but he never came back. It isn't often he visits the same spot twice. That's the reason the authorities around here haven't caught him."

"What is his name, Nat?"

"Wilbur Poole, if you must know. He is my father's half-brother."

"Where did he come from?"

"From the Blossmore Sanitarium, in New York state. It's a private place, near Lake Erie. He lost a lot of money several years ago in a speculation in Sumatra tobacco and that made him crazy, and that is why, I suppose, he calls himself the King of Sumatra."

"Did you know he was missing when you heard of the wild man?" questioned Dave, with interest.

"No, I did not, for the sanitarium people did not notify us that he had gotten away. I suppose they thought he would stay near the institution and that they would be able to get him again. I can't imagine what brought him away out here, excepting that I went to see him once, when he was somewhat better, and I told him about Oakdale and our school. I knew he called himself the King of Sumatra, and that is why I got interested in the wild man as soon as I heard you mention that name. Then, when the handkerchief was found, I was sure the man was my uncle."

"And you put the hole in the handkerchief," said our hero.

"Yes, because—well, I didn't want folks to find out from the Blossmore authorities that the man was my uncle," answered Nat, casting down his eyes. "I thought I might be able to catch him and send him back on the quiet. I didn't want the whole school talking about it."

"I can understand your feelings, Nat," said our hero, kindly. "And if I can help you in the matter, I'll do it."

"I suppose you'll tell everybody he's my uncle," came bitterly from the money-lender's son.

"No, I won't. But I think Doctor Clay ought to know it."

"And what of your folks?" asked Roger. "Do they know?"

"I sent my dad a letter about it last week. But he is away on business, so I don't know when he'll get it or what he'll do. I didn't let the Blossmore folks know because I don't think my uncle ought to go back to that place. He ought to be put in an institution where they are more strict, so he can't get away again."

"You are right there," said Dave.

"Nat, don't you know it is highly dangerous to allow that man at large?" asked the senator's son, after a pause, during which the three boys turned their footsteps towards the island cabin.

"Oh, I don't think he is as dangerous as some folks imagine," was the reply. "He has never actually harmed anybody yet. But he scares 'em."

"He may have committed some deeds of which you know nothing."

At these suggestive words from the senator's son Nat turned pale.

"What do you mean? Have you heard anything, Roger?"

"I hate to hurt your feelings any further, Nat, but I must be honest with you. Dave and I have an idea that he was the one who blew up the dining-room of Sparr's hotel."

"Oh, impossible!"

"What Roger says is true," said Dave, gravely. "I am sorry for you, Nat, but that is the way it looks to us. He was seen around the old stone bridge when it was blown up, and around the shanty where the dynamite was kept, and he has been in Oakdale several times, so we have heard."

"Oh, he wouldn't do such a thing! He couldn't!" cried the money-lender's son, in genuine distress.

"An insane man is liable to do anything, Nat," said Roger. "Why, he might have set off that dynamite without realizing the consequences. The best thing we can do is to organize a regular search for him, and round him up as quickly as possible."

"I suppose that is so," groaned Nat. "But, oh, how I do hate the exposure!"

"You mustn't take it too hard, Nat," said Dave. "Remember, neither you nor your family are responsible for his condition of mind."

It did not take the three students long to reach the little cabin. While Nat was packing up the things he had brought along, Dave and Roger looked over the place. The wild man had had but few things, none of them worth mentioning. There was a newspaper and an old magazine, showing that Wilbur Poole occasionally indulged in reading.

"Hello, look here!" cried Roger, as he turned the magazine over. "Well, I declare!"

"What is it?" asked Dave and Nat, in a breath.

"Here's a picture, drawn in blue pencil. It is marked Fort, but it looks like Sparr's hotel."

"And look what it says!" cried Dave, eyeing the crude drawing. "'Powder House to be blown up! That's the dining-room, as plain as day!'"

"And down here it says, 'Dynamite will do it easily,' and signed, 'King of Sumatra.' Dave, he did it, and this proves it."

"It certainly looks that way, Roger."

"Let me see that drawing!" burst out Nat, and would have snatched it from Roger's hand had not Dave stopped him.

"You can look at it, Nat, but you must give it back," said our hero.

"What for? My uncle drew that and I have a right to it."

"No, I am going to hand this over to Doctor Clay and then to the Oakdale authorities. It may be needed to clear Phil, Ben, and Buster."

"Hurrah, Dave, that's the talk!" cried Roger, with sudden enthusiasm. "I didn't think of it, but that is just what is needed to clear 'em! We'll knock Jason Sparr's accusations into a cocked hat!"

"You let me see that drawing!" shouted Nat, making another grab for it. "I've got a right to it—if my uncle made it."

"You can look at it, but you can't handle it," said Dave, and he gave Roger a look that the senator's son well understood. Both knew that the money-lender's son could not be trusted with such an important bit of evidence.

The drawing was held up, but Nat was not permitted to get too close to it. He looked it over carelessly and then his lip curled.

"Huh! I don't think my uncle drew it," he said.

"And we think he did," returned Dave.

There was a sudden silence after this. Each boy was busy with his thoughts. Dave felt particularly light-hearted.

"This ought to clear Phil and the others," he reasoned. "And they can come back to school without delay and finish the term and graduate."

Having packed up his things, Nat got out his bicycle and prepared to ride back to Oak Hall, and the others did the same.

"Going to give me that drawing?" asked the money-lender's son, just as he was ready to start off.

"No, we are going to turn it over to Doctor Clay," said Roger.

"All right, have your own way," growled Nat.

As in coming to the cabin, the money-lender's son took the lead in the return to Oak Hall. Dave and Roger kept close behind and occasionally spoke of the happenings in guarded tones. When the school was reached all left their bicycles in the gymnasium.

"Going to Doctor Clay now?" demanded Nat.

"We might as well," said Dave. "The sooner he knows of this, the better for everybody."

"All right."

Doctor Clay was somewhat surprised to see the three boys, dusty and tired-looking, enter his private office. He listened with close attention to their tale of visiting the cabin and encountering the wild man, and looked completely astonished on learning that the man was Nat's uncle.

"I am sorry for you, Poole," said he, kindly. "But such things will happen and you must make the best of it. It is not your fault."

Then Dave and Roger told of the finding of the old magazine with the drawing and writing, and Doctor Clay shook his head sorrowfully.

"Too bad! Too bad!" he murmured.

"But this clears Lawrence, Basswood, and Beggs," cried Dave. "And it clears Roger and myself."

"Yes! yes! so it does, Porter!"

"Don't you believe it, Doctor Clay!" cried Nat, leaping to his feet. "It does nothing of the sort! That paper is no kind of evidence at all!" And thus speaking, the money-lender's son glared defiantly at Dave and Roger.

CHAPTER XXII

AFTER THE RUNAWAYS

"Why, Nat, what do you mean?" demanded Dave.

"I mean just what I say!" declared the money-lender's son. "This is a frame-up, nothing more! I understand it all now, although I didn't at first."

"What do you mean by 'a frame-up,' Poole?" demanded Doctor Clay.

"I mean that they took this magazine and the drawing to the cabin, that is what I mean, Doctor Clay. They found out somehow that my—er—that the wild man was there, and they got up this scheme to make it look as if he had blown up the hotel,—and they did it just to clear their cronies and themselves."

"Nat, you know that is not true!" exclaimed Roger. "I found the magazine with the drawing on a shelf in the cabin."

"Yes, that is what you said, but I don't believe it, Roger Morr. I think you put the magazine there yourself—you or Dave Porter."

"We did nothing of the kind," cried our hero.

"I think you did—and I think Jason Sparr will think so, too, when he hears the story. It's a frame-up, just to clear yourselves and your cronies," added Nat, with a sneer.

"Nat, you ought to be—" began Roger, in high anger, when Dave stopped him. Our hero looked at Doctor Clay.

"What Roger says is the absolute truth, Doctor Clay," said our hero. "He found that magazine on a shelf in the cabin where the wild man was staying, and that drawing and the wording were on it, just as you see. More than that, we can prove that the wild man was around the old shanty where the dynamite was kept, and that he was seen in Oakdale several times."

Dave was interrupted here by Nat, and a wordy war lasting several minutes followed. Finally Doctor Clay said he would take the magazine and keep it, and that he would notify the authorities in what locality the wild man might be found, provided he had not gone away further than expected.

"I am inclined to believe the story told by Morr and Porter," said he somewhat sternly to Nat Poole. "But this matter cannot be cleared up until we find your uncle. When captured, the unfortunate man will most likely speak of the blowing up in some way or another, if he is guilty."

"I don't think so," answered Nat; but his manner showed that he was much disturbed. Then Dave and Roger were dismissed, and the master of the school took Nat with him to Oakdale, to see what could be done towards rounding up Wilbur Poole in the near future.

"Well, Dave, what is the next move?" asked the senator's son, as the two were alone in the lavatory, washing up after the long bicycle ride.

"I wish I could find Phil and the others and get them to come back here," responded our hero. "It is a great mistake for them to stay away."

"I believe you—it looks just as if they were guilty. I wonder that they don't come back on their own account, now they have had a chance to think it over."

"I think they saw that article in the newspaper, Roger, and it scared them worse than ever. Maybe they imagine the officers of the law are waiting to gobble them up."

"If we only had some trace of them!"

"I've got an idea I am going to follow up."

"What sort of an idea?"

"I was thinking of that baggage that left here. Maybe it was shipped to some point."

"You'll have a job tracing it up."

"I can try it, anyway," answered our hero.

A day slipped by and nothing more was said about the affair by Doctor Clay or Nat Poole. Then Nat left the school, telling some friends he was going home for a week's rest.

"Most likely he is after his uncle," was Roger's comment, and Dave agreed with him.

As soon as he could get the time Dave went to Oakdale to see if he could find any trace of the baggage belonging to Phil and the others who had run away. He made many inquiries but without success, and was on the point of returning to the school when he happened to think of an old man named Dowling, who did some trucking and who knew Buster Beggs very well.

"We'll go around to Dowling's place," said he to his chum.

They found the old man in a little shanty behind his house which he called his office. It had an old easy-chair and a desk, and on the wall was a telephone.

"How do you do, boys," he said, politely. "What can I do for you? Want some baggage shipped?"

"No, I came for some information, Mr. Dowling," said Dave. "Have you shipped any baggage for Buster Beggs lately?"

At the mention of the fat student's name the old expressman started.

"What do you want to know that for?" he demanded.

"I've a very good reason, Mr. Dowling. I want to do Beggs a favor."

"Reckon you want to find him, eh?"

"Yes."

"So do some other folks;" and the old man chuckled.

"Well, we are his friends, and we want to find him for his own good."

"Who be you, if I may ask?"

"I am Dave Porter, and this is Roger Morr. Buster Beggs is our friend, and so are Phil Lawrence and Ben Basswood. They ran away and it was foolish for them to do it. Now we want to find them and get them to come back here."

"It was foolish for 'em to run away—I said thet all along," murmured the old expressman.

"Then you know where they are?" put in Roger quickly.

"No, I don't."

"But you took their baggage away, didn't you?" questioned Dave, for he could see that the old man was holding something back.

"I allow as how I moved some things for 'em, yes," was the cautious reply.

"When they ran away?" pursued Dave.

The old expressman nodded.

"Who got those bags from Oak Hall?" asked Roger.

"That's a secret," and now the old man really chuckled, as if he thought it was a good joke.

"You did!" declared Dave, bound to get at the truth.

"No, I didn't. Buster did—carried 'em down on his back, one at a time, in the middle o' the night, an' nobuddy knew it! Say, they could walk off with yer hull school if they wanted to!" And the old expressman chuckled again.

"You were waiting for him?" continued Dave.

"Might be as I was."

"And you took the baggage to the depot?"

"Maybe I did."

"And had them checked on railroad tickets?"

"No, Buster went one way, and the bags went tudder—leas'wise so I was given to understand. Maybe he done it to put me off the track," continued Isaac Dowling.

"But where did the bags go to?" demanded Dave. "Come, out with it, Mr. Dowling. I give you my word that I am acting for Buster's good. I wouldn't get him into trouble for the world. He is my chum, and so are those other boys my friends."

"Well, you look honest, boy, so I'll tell ye. The baggage was sent by express to a place called Camptown Falls, in Maine."

"Camptown Falls!" cried Roger. Then he looked at Dave, who nodded, to show that he understood.

"Did Buster say he was going elsewhere?" queried Dave.

"He didn't say so, exactly. But he mentioned Boston, an' I thought he was goin' there."

"He left on the train?"

"No, he didn't! He went off in the darkness, an' that's the last I see o' him," concluded Isaac Dowling, as a hail came for him to come into the house.

"Camptown Falls," said Dave, when he and Roger were alone. "Can they have gone to that out-of-the-way spot?"

"It would be the place Buster would pick out, Dave. He has often spoken of going camping up there."

"He must have mentioned Boston just to throw old Dowling off the track."

"More than likely. And to think he took those bags away while we slept!"

"I wonder where Phil and Ben were at the time?"

"I don't know. Maybe they were at that camp."

Much excited over what they had learned, Dave and the senator's son returned to Oak Hall. They had expected to interview Doctor Clay and were chagrined to learn that he had gone to New York on important business and would not return for two days. Mr. Dale had been left in charge of the school.

"Roger, do you know what I think of doing?" said our hero. "I've a good notion to get permission to leave the Hall and go after Phil and the others. I think I can get them to come back."

"Want me to go along?"

"That will hardly be necessary. Besides, I'd like somebody to stay here and watch Nat Poole, if he comes back. Do you know, I've a notion that Nat knows more about this affair than he would like to tell."

"He certainly acts that way."

"I am going to see Mr. Dale."

Our hero had a long talk with the head assistant, and the upshot of this was that he got permission to go to Maine, to look for the runaways. He was to be gone no longer than was absolutely necessary.

It did not take our hero long to prepare for the trip. He packed a few things in a suit-case and then he was ready. He consulted a map and some timetables, and found he could leave Oakdale on the first train in the morning, and by making two changes, reach Camptown Falls about two o'clock in the afternoon. Nobody but Roger and Mr. Dale knew that he was going away.

"Got money enough, have you, Dave?" questioned the senator's son.

"Yes, Roger."

"It's a wild kind of a spot, so Buster told me."

"I am not afraid of that—if only I can locate the boys," answered our hero.

"How are you going to look for them?"

"I don't know yet—I'll find out after I get there."

It must be confessed that Dave slept but little that night. His mind was filled with what was before him. He felt that he had quite a mission to perform, first in locating the runaways and then in persuading them to return to Oak Hall to face the music.

He had an early breakfast, Roger eating with him, and then the buggy, driven by Horsehair, was brought around and he got in, and a minute later he was off, the senator's son waving him an adieu from the porch of the school.

Dave found the first train he rode on but half filled with passengers, and he had a double seat to himself. He changed at the Junction, and about noon reached Lumberport, where he was to take the train on the little side-line for Camptown Falls. At Lumberport he got dinner, at a hotel frequented by lumbermen. He sat at a long table with half a dozen men and listened to their talk with interest when he heard Camptown Falls mentioned.

"Yes, they tell me there is great danger of the dam giving way just above Camptown Falls," one of the men said. "Doxey reported it hasn't been safe for a week."

"Say, if that dam gave way it would do a lot of damage below the Falls," said another.

"It certainly would," replied a tall lumberman. "It would wipe out some of those camps on Moosetail Island. I rather guess the water would cover the whole island."

"Somebody ought to warn the campers," said another.

"Oh, I guess they know it already," was the answer.

Dave arose from the table feeling very uneasy. He remembered the name, Moosetail Island, now. Buster had once mentioned it, stating he had camped there and would like to go again. Were the runaways there now, and in danger of the dam, should it break?

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE CAMP

At last the train came that was to take our hero to the railroad station of Camptown Falls. It was merely a flag station, but the conductor said he would stop there for any passenger who might wish to get off. The railroad was a single-track affair, running through the woods and across the country stretches, and the train consisted of one passenger car and several freights.

Dave looked at the passengers and counted them. There were just an even dozen, and of these, ten were men, farmers and those in the lumber business. One, a bright young fellow, sat near our hero, and Dave resolved to ask him if he knew anything about Camptown Falls and the summer camps in that vicinity.

"Yes, I know all about the Falls," said the young lumberman. "I work not over three miles from there—at Cropley's—the station this side of Camptown. There ain't any town, not since the Jewell Lumber Company busted up. Some folks camp out there, down along the river and on Moosetail Island, but there aren't near as many as there used to be."

"Somebody said the dam above Camptown Falls was dangerous?" said Dave.

"I think it is myself, and I can't understand how they allow folks to camp along the river and on that island. If that dam ever broke it would be good-by to anybody on the island, I'm thinking."

"Have you been up to the island lately?"

"I was there about a week ago."

"Who were there then, do you know?"

"A couple of men from Portland and half a dozen young fellers from Springfield. There was another camp, with some women in it, but I didn't get around to that, I only heard of it. There are half a dozen camps along the right bank of the river, but they are on high ground, and if the dam broke it isn't likely the water would reach 'em," continued the young lumberman.

The train rolled along at a rate of twenty miles an hour, making stops at stations and crossroads. Here and there a person got on or off, and by the time Camptown Falls was reached Dave had the passenger car almost to himself.

The train halted for but a minute and our hero alighted, suit-case in hand. Much to his surprise, not a soul was about the little depot, which looked old and dilapidated. There was a stretch of fields beyond the track, and farther on he made out the glistening waters of the river, and in the center the woodland stretch known as Moosetail Island.

"Well, this surely is Lonesome Land!" Dave murmured to himself, as the train rumbled out of sight and he was left utterly alone. "And not another train until eight o'clock to-morrow morning! I'll have a fine time of it to-night if I don't meet those fellows, or run across some camp where they will take me in."

Dave looked at the sky and this did not tend to increase his good spirits. When he had left Oakdale it had been warm and clear; now dark clouds were forming overhead and it looked as if it might rain before long.

"Well, I've got my raincoat and a waterproof cap, and that is one comfort," he told himself. "But I had better hurry up and see if I can't find Phil and the others before it gets too dark. I wish there was somebody here who could tell me where to go."

He looked around for a sign of some habitation. Far across the river he saw a column of smoke, coming up from among the trees, but that was all. The only building in sight was the deserted depot.

There was something of a path leading from the depot to the river, and Dave followed this. But soon the path seemed to divide, and the various branches became more indistinct at every step, especially as it was rapidly growing darker and darker.

"I'll strike a straight course for Moosetail Island," Dave said to himself. "I'll surely find some people camping out there, and they may be able to tell me about the boys, if they are here."

As he approached the river, going down a small hill, the way became stony, and he had to walk with care, for fear of going into some hole, or twisting an ankle. It was hard work, especially with the suit-case, and he half wished he had hidden the baggage somewhere near the depot.

"I was a big chump that I didn't bring some lunch along," he reasoned. And then he had to smile at himself, as he remembered how he had imagined that he might put up at some hotel in Camptown Falls! He had not dreamed that the place would prove such a lonely one. It was certainly an ideal spot for runaways who wished to remain undiscovered.

Presently Dave found himself at the bank of the river, a wide but shallow stream, filled with sandbars, rocks, and piles of driftwood. Not a great distance off was the end of Moosetail Island.

It was now so dark that our hero could see but little. As he stood at the edge of the river, he heard a patter on the leaves of the trees and knew it had begun to rain.

"Wonder how they get to the island?" he mused. "They must either use canoes, or else wade across, or ford along the stones."

He moved along the river-bank, and soon came to a point where the stones in the river seemed to stretch in a line from the bank to the island.

"I guess I'll try it here," he told himself. "But I think I had better leave the suit-case behind."

He placed the case in a tree, sheltering it as much as possible from the rain, which was now coming down at a lively rate. Then, donning his raincoat and waterproof cap, he set out over the rocks in the river, leaping from one to the next and heading for the island.

It was no easy journey, and when but half-way to Moosetail Island Dave slipped and went into the stream up to his knees. He floundered around for a moment, splashing the water into his face and over his coat and cap.

"Phew! this is lots of fun!" was his grim comment, as he at length found himself on a flat rock, catching his breath. "Well, I am half-way over, anyway."

The remainder of the distance proved easier traveling, and ten minutes later our hero stood on the island. It was now raining steadily, and the darkness of the storm had settled everywhere.

"I guess the best thing I can do is to move right around the shore of this island," he reasoned. "By doing that I am bound to strike one of the camps, sooner or later."

He moved along as rapidly as the rocky shore of Moosetail Island permitted. He had to proceed with care, for there were many dangerous pitfalls.

At length his heart was gladdened by the sight of a rude log cabin, set in the trees a little back from the water. He hurried to it and found the door and window closed. Evidently the spot was deserted.

"Nobody here," he murmured, and his heart sank for the moment, for he could see that the camp had not been used for a long time. Then he went on, the rain in the meanwhile coming down harder than ever. The downfall made him think of the dam that was said to be weak. What if the present storm should make that structure give way?

"I wish we were all out of this," he murmured. "I wonder if it would do any good to call?"

He set up a yell and listened, and then he yelled again. From a long distance came an answering cry.

"Hurrah, that's somebody, anyway!" he exclaimed. "I hope it was one of the boys!"

He stumbled in the direction of the cry. Then he yelled once more, and again came the answering call. But now Dave was sure it was a man's voice, and he was somewhat disappointed.

"Where are you?" he called out, a moment later. "Where are you?"

"This way! Come this way!" was the reply, and soon Dave passed through a patch of timber and around some rocks and reached a spot where there was a tiny cove, with a stretch of fine sand. Facing the cove was a neat log cabin with a small lean-to, the latter containing a tiny stove.

A tall, good-natured man stood in the lean-to, peering out into the rain. He watched Dave's approach with interest. He looked to be what he was, a camp-cook and general worker.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, as Dave hurried in out of the rain and shook the water from his cap. "I thought you were one of our crowd."

"What camp is this?" questioned our hero, eagerly.

"Well, it ain't no camp in particular," answered the man, with a grin. "It's jest a camp."

"But who is stopping here?"

"Three young fellers and myself."

"Are their names Beggs, Lawrence, and Basswood?"

"You've struck it. Maybe you are a friend to 'em?" went on the man, inquiringly.

"I am, and I have come a long distance to find them," returned Dave, and his tone of voice showed his relief. "Where are they?"

"They left the camp right after dinner an' they ain't back yet. When you called I thought it was one of 'em, although they didn't expect to be back much before supper-time. But now it's rainin' I guess they'll come back sooner."

"How long have they been here?"

"Most a week now, I guess. I didn't come till day before yesterday. I didn't have nothin' to do an' they give me a job, cookin' an' like that," returned the man.

He invited Dave to make himself at home, and our hero was glad enough to go inside and take off the wet raincoat and also his shoes and socks. The baggage belonging to Phil and the others was in the cabin, and he helped himself to dry garments and a dry pair of slippers.

"We are all school chums," he told the man. "My name is Dave Porter."

"Oh, I heard 'em talkin' about you!" cried the camp-worker, and then said his own name was Jerry Blutt, and that he was from Tegley, just across the Canadian border.

"We are not far from the border here, are we?" asked our hero.

"About six miles, that's all," answered Jerry Blutt, and this reply gave Dave another idea. More than likely Buster and the others had chosen this spot so that, if pursued by the officers of the law, they could flee into Canada.

Jerry Blutt said the three lads had spent their time in various ways, occasionally going fishing and swimming. They had also written some letters and gone to the railroad station to mail them in the box placed there for that purpose.

"Have they been having a good time?" asked Dave, curiously.

"I can't say as to that, Mr. Porter. They did seem mighty worried over something," answered the camp worker, and from this our hero felt certain that the man had not been let into the secret of why the runaways were there at all.

Half an hour went by and it continued to rain as hard as ever, while the sky remained dark and the wind blew with more or less violence. Time and again Dave went to the cabin door, to peer out into the storm, but each time he turned back disappointed. His chums were not yet in sight.

"They'll be surprised to see me," he thought. "I wonder if they will listen to reason and go back with me? Supposing they refuse to return? I'd hate to go back alone."

Then he questioned Jerry Blutt about the dam above the Falls. The man shrugged his shoulders.

"It ain't safe, so they tell me," he said. "But it's been that way a long time, so maybe it won't break away yet awhile. But I'd hate to be on the river when she does go."

"Are there any other camps on this island?" went on our hero.

"Not now. There was some other folks, two or three parties, I was told, but they all moved out yesterday an' the day before. Maybe they got afraid o' the dam," concluded the camp-worker.

CHAPTER XXIV

OUT IN THE STORM

"This is getting to be something fierce!"

It was Dave who uttered the words, about five o'clock in the afternoon. He was looking out of the door of the cabin, and beside him stood Jerry Blutt.

The storm had kept up without intermission, the rain coming down in a perfect torrent, and the wind blowing in fitful gusts from the east. It was raw and depressing, and our hero could not help but shiver as he looked out on the turbulent waters of the river.

"It's a pity them fellers ain't got back," said the camp-worker, with a slow shake of his head. "It

ain't nice to be out in sech a downpour as this, an' with sech a wind! Might a tree blow down on 'em!" And he shook his head again.

Dave was even more distressed than the man. He could not get that dam out of his mind. Such a heavy fall of rain would certainly cause a great flow of water, and if the structure was weak, most anything bad was liable to happen.

"As soon as the boys get back I'll urge them to leave here," he told himself. "If that dam breaks we want to be on high ground, where the flood can't reach us."

"'Pears to me like the river was gittin' putty high," remarked Jerry Blutt, a little later, as he watched the water in the cove closely.

"Well, it would rise some with all this rain coming down," returned Dave.

"So it might,—but I don't know. I wish this camp was on the shore, instid o' this island."

"So do I," answered Dave, bluntly.

A fire had been started in the stove and a lantern lit, and Jerry Blutt rather reluctantly began preparations for the evening meal. But he kept peering out of the doorway of the cabin, and from the lean-to, and his eyes always rested on the river, with its rain-swept, swollen surface.

"I don't like it at all!" he said, finally. "I wish we had moved over to the shore."

"Don't you think it is safe to stay here?"

"It ain't as safe as it might be. If I was alone—" The man stopped short.

"What would you do?"

"I hate to say it, but I think I'd go over to the shore, till the storm was over and I knew jest how thet dam was a-goin' to act."

"Well, I don't blame you," answered Dave. "And if you want to go, go ahead."

"Want me to go alone?"

"If you wish to go, yes."

"But it ain't no safer fer you than it is fer me."

"That's so, too. But I want to see those other fellows—in fact, I must see them. If I went to the shore I might miss them."

"You could come back later on."

"But I want to warn them of the danger from the dam."

"You could write a letter and stick it up where they couldn't help but see it. Then-- What's that?"

The camp-worker stopped short, as a distant cry reached their ears, sounding out above the wind. An instant later the cry was repeated.

"That is Ben Basswood's voice!" cried Dave. "They must be coming back!"

Soon another voice sounded out, and our hero recognized Buster Beggs's tones. He ran to the cabin door. All was dark outside, and the rain was being driven in sheets by the wind.

"Hello! hello!" he yelled, and catching up the lantern, he swung it out in one direction and another. Then he saw two forms approaching on the run, each dripping with water.

"Ben! And Buster!"

"Why, if it isn't Dave!"

"Where in the world did you come from?"

"Where is Phil?" demanded our hero.

"He is somewhere behind us," answered Buster. "Oh, what a time we've had!" and entering the cabin, the fat youth sank down on a bench all but exhausted.

"We've had to tramp for over two miles in this rain," explained Ben. "And of course we had to ford to the island. Say, the current is something fierce now! And the water is getting higher every minute!" he added.

"Did you say Phil was behind you?" demanded Dave. He still held the lantern on high.

"I thought he was—sure, he must be," answered Ben. "Give him a hail, will you? I'm too tired," and he sank on the bench beside Buster.

"Phil! Phil!" yelled our hero, at the top of his lungs. "This way! This way!" and he swung the lantern to the right and left.

"Did you say the river is rising?" demanded Jerry Blutt. "How high is it? Over the White Bar yet?"

"Yes, the Bar is a foot under water," answered Ben. "Oh, this is a great storm!"

"A foot under water!" murmured the camp-worker. "Say, we better git out! First thing you know this hull island will be under! An' if thet dam breaks--"

"Oh, the dam!" gasped Buster. "I forgot about that! They say it isn't safe at all! That is why all the other campers got out! Yes, we must leave the island and go to the shore." He turned to

Dave. "Did you come alone?"

"Yes, Buster. I'll tell you all about it later. But now we must find Phil."

"I thought he was right behind me," came from Ben. He looked greatly distressed. "I wonder if anything happened to him? Maybe he slipped off the rocks into the river!"

"We must look for him!" cried Dave, and reached for his coat and cap. "Show me the way you came, Ben."

Ben was nothing loath, and side by side the two chums ran outside into the storm, and in the direction of the upper end of the island. They had gone but a short distance when they reached a low spot and here suddenly found themselves in water several inches deep.

"Hello, you are taking me into the river!" cried Dave.

"This isn't the river!" answered Ben, with a gasp. "Gosh! how the water is rising! This was dry when I came over it before!"

"Dry!" ejaculated our hero. "Ben, are you sure?"

"Positive! Say, the water is rising to beat the band! I guess we had better get out! If we don't we'll have to swim for it!"

"Phil! Phil! Where are you?"

Standing in water up to his ankles, our hero called again and again, and Ben joined in the cry. The lantern was flashed in all directions. But nothing was seen or heard of the missing student.

"I am sure he started to follow us across the river," said Ben. "Buster was in front, I came next, and Phil was in the rear. I asked him twice if he was all right and he said he was. Then it blew so hard, and the rain got so heavy, none of us said any more. Oh, Dave, what shall we do?"

"I don't know Ben—wish I did."

"Do you think he slipped off the rocks and was—was—drowned?"

"I hope not."

"If he was, wouldn't it be terrible?"

"Yes."

A cry came from behind them, and Buster appeared, followed by Jerry Blutt.

"Where is Phil?" demanded the stout youth.

"We don't know."

"The water is terribly high, and Jerry thinks we had better move to the shore. He says we might be drowned if that dam should break."

"Don't you think we ought to find Phil first?"

"Sure—if we can. Maybe he went back, when he found out how the water was rising," went on the stout youth, hopefully.

"I don't think he'd desert us," answered Ben. "That isn't Phil's style."

"You're right, Ben," said Dave.

All splashed around in the water for several minutes, but without making any discovery of importance. The river was now rising more rapidly than ever, and the camp-worker showed increased nervousness.

"Ain't no two ways about it—the dam's bust!" he cried, at last. "I'm goin' to git out, an' I advise all o' you to do the same. If you want me to carry anything to shore I'll do it."

"We can't carry any trunks in such a hurry," said Buster.

"Let us carry our suit-cases and bundles," said Ben.

With heavy hearts, Dave and the others returned to the cabin. The water in the cove had now risen so high that it swept the edge of the lean-to.

"Can we get to shore?" asked Buster. "We haven't any boat," he added, turning to Dave.

"We can if you'll hurry," replied Jerry Blutt. "Every minit lost makes it jest so much more dangerous."

In great haste Ben and Buster and the camp-worker gathered together such belongings as they could conveniently carry. The other things were placed in a trunk and hoisted by ropes into a big tree. Then a lantern was tied on a post in front of the cabin and to it was fastened a brief note, for Phil's benefit, stating they had gone to the shore.

"Oh, I hope he is safe!" murmured Dave, anxiously.

"So do I," added his chums.

Jerry Blutt led the way along the shore of the island and then out into the stream. They had the second camp lantern with them, one belonging to Jerry. He led the way from rock to rock, and they followed in single file, Dave bringing up the rear. Ever and anon our hero looked back for some sign of Phil, but without avail.

Once out in the river, all were certain that the dam above Camptown Falls had burst. The water

ran with great rapidity and was filled with dirt and débris of various kinds. On the rocks that were low they had all they could do to keep their footing.

The most dangerous part of the river had yet to be passed—a section close to the shore, where the water was deep and the rocks for fording few.

“Mind your footin’ here!” sang out the camp-worker. “An’ if you slip, look out that you don’t hurt yourselves!”

He was splashing along in water up to his knees, sometimes on the rocks and then again on a sandbar running in that direction. Then he had to make a turn, to avoid a deep portion of the stream, where the current was rapid.

Ben was behind the man and Buster was just ahead of Dave. As all struggled along, there came an extra heavy blast of wind, followed by a perfect deluge of rain.

“Oh!” screamed Buster, an instant later, and peering through the rain, Dave saw him suddenly throw up his arms and slip from a rock. There was a splash, and poor Buster disappeared from view.

“Buster is in the river!” yelled our hero, and then he leaped for the rock from which the stout youth had fallen. He looked down and saw an arm and a head come up.

“Help! hel--” came from the unfortunate one, and then the swift current caught him and turned him over, out of sight.

“Help!” yelled Dave, to attract the attention of those ahead. And then, as he saw Ben turn back, he slipped down on the rock and into the swirling river and struck out after Buster.

CHAPTER XXV

PERILS OF THE FLOOD

“Dave! Dave!” yelled Ben, as he saw our hero disappear into the swiftly-flowing river. “Look out, or you’ll both be drowned!”

“What’s the trouble?” yelled Jerry Blutt, as he turned back for the first time since leaving the island.

“Buster slipped in, and Dave went after him,” answered Ben. “Oh, what shall we do?” he went on, despairingly.

“Here—we’ll throw out the rope!” answered the camp-worker, and took from his shoulder a rope he carried.

In the meantime Dave had come up and was striking out with might and main for his chum. Our hero realized that Buster must be hurt, otherwise he would swim to save himself.

“Must have struck on his head, when he went over,” he thought, and he was right, poor Buster had done just that and now lay half-unconscious as the current swept him further and further from his friends.

It was too dark to see much, and Dave had all he could do to keep in sight of the unfortunate one. But presently the stout youth’s body struck against a rock and was held there, and our hero came up and seized the lad by the arm.

“Buster! Buster!” he called out. “What’s wrong? Can’t you swim?”

“Hel—help me!” gasped the fat youth. “I—I got a knock on the head. I’m so—so dizzy I do—don’t know what I—I’m do—doing!”

The current now tore Buster away from the rock, and he and Dave floated along on the bosom of the river for a distance of fifty yards. It was impossible to do much swimming in that madly-rushing element and Dave wisely steered for shore. He continued to support his friend, who seemed unable to do anything for himself.

At length, when our hero was all but exhausted, his feet struck a sandbar. At once he stood up, finding himself in water that reached to his waist. He caught up Buster and placed the weakened lad over his shoulder. In a dim, uncertain way he saw the shore loom up in front of him, and struck out in that direction.

It was a short but hard struggle. Twice Dave went down, once losing his hold on his chum. But he got up each time and went after Buster in a hurry. Then he made a final dash, came in contact with some bushes, and hauled himself and his burden to temporary safety.

All was dark around the two boys, and the rain came down as pitilessly as ever. But for this they did not, just then, care. They had been close to death, and now they were safe, and that counted for everything.

Poor Buster had received a severe bump on the forehead and had a swelling there of

considerable size. But the stunning effect was passing, and he was able to sit up and peer around him.

"Oh, what a crack I got, when I fell over!" he murmured, and then he added, gratefully: "It was a fine thing for you to jump in after me, Dave!"

"Well, I couldn't stand there and see you drown, Buster," answered our hero. "I had to do something."

"Where are the others?"

"Up the stream—unless they went overboard, too."

"Then I suppose we ought to walk that way."

"We will—after we get our breath and you feel strong enough."

"Maybe you can call to them?"

"I'll try."

Dave yelled at the top of his voice, not once but several times. Presently an answering hail arose from a distance, and then Ben came running up, followed by Jerry.

"Dave! Buster! Are you safe?"

"Yes," answered both.

"Oh, I am so glad! We were afraid you were both drowned! How did it happen?"

The two told their story, and then the others told how they had thrown out the rope and had seen Dave disappear in the darkness after Buster.

"I would have jumped in, too, but I didn't see how I could do any good," went on Ben. "Jerry said we had better come ashore and look for you down here. So we did that. My! but it's a fearful flood, isn't it!"

"Yes. I wish we knew where Phil was," and Dave heaved a deep sigh. Had their chum lost his life in that rapidly-rising river?

"Ain't no ust to stay here—gitting wetter an' wetter," said the camp-worker, after a pause. "Besides, if that flood gits wuss it is bound to come up here. We better git further back—up the hill."

"Is there any shelter around here? I mean on high ground?" asked Dave.

"Yes, I know of a cabin up on the hill," answered Buster. "I don't know if I can find it in the rain and darkness, but I can try."

He walked along, through the trees, until he reached a footpath running up from the shore. They followed the path for about a hundred yards, and then came in sight of a long, low, rambling cabin, the home in years gone by of some lumbermen. It was in a dilapidated state, with doors and windows gone, but it would provide a roof over their heads, and that was something.

Entering, the lantern was hung on a nail, and they looked around them. There was a fireplace, with some dry sticks handy, and soon they had a fire started, which added much to the comfort of the surroundings. They hung up the majority of their wet garments and sat close to the blaze, drying themselves.

"If I only knew where to look for Phil, I'd go after him," said Dave. "But to look for him in the darkness is like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack."

"We'll have to go out first thing in the morning," returned Ben.

"Yes, as soon as we can see," added Buster.

The boys who had run away were anxious to learn what Dave had to say about affairs at Oakdale, and in a low voice, while the camp-worker was preparing hot coffee and something to eat, he related what had happened since their departure.

"You made a big mistake to run away," he said, earnestly. "Just because you did that, many folks feel sure you must be guilty. You ought to go right back and face the music."

"I guess you are right, Dave," answered Ben, shamefacedly. "But when Phil said 'run,' I didn't stop to think, but just got out."

"And that is what I did, too," added the stout youth. "But I don't blame Phil any more than I blame myself," he added, hastily.

"Nor do I," said Ben. "We made a big mistake. We should have stood our ground, like you and Roger did."

"Well, you come back with me, and we'll face this to a finish," went on our hero. "But, of course, we've got to find Phil first."

Only the camp-worker slept well that night. The boys were restless, and several times one or another got up, to go to the doorway and listen, thinking he had heard a call from Phil. But the calls were only imaginary, and morning dawned without a sign of the missing one.

It was still raining, but not so hard as before, and by eight o'clock the clouds broke away and the sun commenced to shine. All had an early breakfast, from the stores brought along, and then the party hurried down to the river.

That the dam above Camptown Falls had broken was plainly evident on all sides. During the night the river had risen seven or eight feet, bearing on its bosom many trees and bushes, with here and there the remains of camps that had been located on low ground. Moosetail Island had been swept from end to end, only the higher spots escaping the flood. The waters were now going down, the rush from the broken dam having spent itself.

The boys gave scant heed to the destruction effected by the rain and the broken dam. All their thoughts were centered on Phil. What had become of their chum? Was he dead or alive?

"I wonder if it wouldn't be best to get over to the island and look around?" suggested Dave. "Most likely he went there—thinking you would be at the cabin."

"But how are we to get to the island?" asked Buster. He had no desire to fall into the turbulent stream again.

"Oh, the water is going down rapidly, Buster. I think we can make it by noon."

All walked up and down the river bank, looking in vain for some trace of the shipowner's son. Once they met some people from another camp and asked about Phil. But these folks shook their heads.

"Didn't see a soul," said one of the men.

Jerry Blutt had been looking the situation over carefully, and he said he thought they could get to the island by going up the river a distance.

"Then the current will help us along, and we won't have to fight so hard," said the camp-worker. He did not like the idea of crossing the water, but did not wish to desert the boys.

On the trip they carried the rope, with Jerry at the head and Dave at the rear. All took tight hold, so that if one slipped the others might pull him up.

"Now, take it easy," cautioned the camp man. "This water is runnin' putty swift, even yet."

He had mapped out a course with his eye, and proceeded slowly and cautiously. Once away from the shore, they felt the full force of the onrushing waters and were all but swept from their feet. It was well that they were a good distance above Moosetail Island, for to reach this spot by going straight out in the stream would have been impossible.

It was a long, hard, and dangerous trip, and all drew a deep breath of relief when they finally set foot on the island. At times they had been in water up to their waists and it had looked as if they must surely be swept away. Once a tree branch, coming swiftly along, had caught Dave and literally carried him off his feet for several yards.

They landed at one end of the island, at a point where the bushes were still two feet under water. The evidences of the flood were on every hand, and the water was muddy and filled with broken-away brushwood and trees.

"I guess we had better strike out for the camp," said Dave. "Phil would go there if he went anywhere."

As they advanced one or another gave a loud call. But no answer came back, and this made them look gravely at each other. Was the perilous trip to the island to prove a vain one?

In a quarter of an hour they came in sight of the camp. The cove had been blotted out, and the water was eddying around the cabin to a depth of several inches. Mud was everywhere, inside the place and out, and this showed that the flood had swept the spot at a height of several feet.

"We might have stayed here," was Buster's comment. "It didn't hurt the big tree."

"But we didn't know how bad it was going to be," answered Ben. "It might have washed away the whole island."

"Let us go up to the high ground and look for Phil," suggested Dave. "Maybe he went to the highest spot he could find."

The others agreed, and leaving the camp-worker at the cabin, the boys, led by Buster, tramped through the wet and mud to a little hill. Again they set up their calls, but, as before, no answer came back.

"I don't believe he came here," said Ben, at last. "If he was here he would surely hear us."

"Unless he was hurt and couldn't answer," returned Dave.

From the top of the little hill they could see both ends of Moosetail Island and also both shores of the river. As they gazed about them, Dave suddenly gave a shout.

"Look! look!" he cried, pointing to the shore which they had left but a short while before. "There is somebody waving a handkerchief at us!"

"It's Phil!" returned Ben.

"Are you sure?" questioned Buster. "I can see it is a man or a boy, but that is all."

"It looks like Phil," said Dave. "Oh, I hope it is!"

CHAPTER XXVI

BACK TO THE SCHOOL

They waved frantically to the person on the shore, and he waved frantically in return, and at last all were convinced that it must really be their missing chum.

"He must think I am Jerry," said Dave. "Won't he be surprised to see me!"

"He will be, unless he was at the cabin last night and read the note," returned Buster.

"The note wasn't touched," said Ben. "I noticed that it was exactly as we left it."

All gave a parting wave and pointed to the shore, and then left the hill. They made their way down to the cabin, and told the camp-worker what they had seen.

"It must be Lawrence," said Jerry Blutt. "Maybe he'll come over here, instead of waiting for us to go to him."

"Gracious, I never thought of that!" cried Buster.

"We'll be like the men in one of Shadow's stories," said Ben. "One was upstairs in a big office building and one downstairs. The man upstairs went down, and the downstairs man went up, and they kept that up until both stopped, tired out, one upstairs and one down." And the others had to smile at the brief yarn.

All journeyed to the lower shore of the island, where they could get a better view of the spot where the person they thought was Phil had been. They saw the party walking up the river bank, looking for a good place to ford. All shouted loudly and waved their hands to keep him where he was, and he nodded his head deeply, to show that he understood.

"It must be Phil," said Dave. "Oh, how thankful I am that he wasn't carried away by the flood!"

The boys were impatient to get back to the shore, and Jerry Blutt did not blame them. To carry any of the stuff over was still out of the question, and they did not attempt it.

"You can come and get it some day, Jerry," said Buster. "You can ship it to us by express, and we'll pay you for your trouble;" and so it was arranged.

It was as hard to gain the shore as it had been to reach the island, and all were well-nigh exhausted when they finally left the water, not to return again. Phil saw them coming, and when he made out Dave he was almost dumfounded.

"Where in the world did you come from?" he demanded, as he caught our hero by the hand.

"From Oakdale, Phil."

"Did you run away, too?" demanded the shipowner's son.

"Hardly," answered Dave, with a grin. "I came to bring you fellows back. But first tell us, how did you get out of the flood last night?"

"Oh, I had a fierce time of it. I tried to get back to the camp, but stumbled over some tree-roots and went down in a hole and hurt my ankle. When I got up I couldn't see the others, and I must have lost my way. Then it began to rain and get dark, and I didn't know which way to turn. I yelled dozens of times, but I didn't hear any answer. I tried to locate the cabin, but I must have been completely turned around, for I came out on the shore. Then the flood came along, and before I knew it I was floating down the river. I hit a tree and clung to that, and we drifted a mile or more before the tree got stuck on a sandbar. I stayed there, in the rain and darkness, until morning and then waded and swam ashore. I was so tired out I had to rest for awhile, and then I came up here, to try to find out something about our crowd. I was thinking of getting over to the island again when I saw you on the top of the hill. Of course, I thought Dave was Jerry."

"We were scared to death, thinking you had been drowned," said Ben.

"Well, I came pretty close to it," was the serious reply. "No more such flood for me!"

All turned towards the cabin where four of the party had spent the night, and there Jerry was called on to prepare the best meal their limited stores afforded. On the river-bank they had picked up some fish cast up by the flood, and these were broiled, making a welcome addition to the meal.

While the meal was being prepared, and after it had been eaten, Dave had a serious talk with Phil and the others, and all realized the folly they had committed in running away from Oak Hall. Phil in particular, was much disturbed and said he had been thinking of coming back.

"But we saw that article in the newspaper, and it scared us," went on the shipowner's son. "Of course, it didn't mention any names, but we knew it was meant for us. I know now, just as well as the others, that it was a mistake to run away."

"Then, you'll go back with me?" questioned Dave, eagerly.

"Yes."

"And you'll go back, too, Ben and Buster?"

"Yes."

"I am mighty glad to hear it—and I feel that this thing will come out all right in the end," returned Dave.

"By the way, there is one thing I haven't told you, Dave," said Buster, a minute later. "The general excitement drove it clean out of my head. We know who it was that spoiled the feast Phil got up for the crowd."

"You do?" asked our hero, with interest.

"Yes. It was Nat Poole. He went to Rockville and sent those telephone messages to Jason Sparr and that musical professor, calling the whole affair off. He did it because he wasn't invited to take part."

"How did you learn this?"

"I heard it the night I went to the Hall to get our baggage. When I was in hiding, waiting for a chance to go to the dormitory, I saw Nat Poole come in, along with that new student, Will Fasey. They had been out somewhere having a good time, and Nat was telling Fasey how he had sent the telephone messages and queered the feast. I would have pitched into him then and there only I didn't dare expose myself," went on the stout youth.

"But he'll get what is coming to him from me, when I get back to the school," put in Phil. "It was a contemptible piece of business, and I want everybody to know it. Besides, he has got to pay for what I lost by the transaction."

"If it wasn't for that, maybe we wouldn't have been suspected of blowing up the hotel," said Ben. "Then you really think the wild man did it, Dave?"

"Yes."

"But what of that letter Jason Sparr got, saying our crowd was guilty?"

"I don't know what to make of that, Ben. I don't think the wild man could write that."

"Would Nat Poole be bad enough to do it?"

"Maybe. But it was an awful thing to do. I didn't think Nat would be as mean as that."

The boys had dried and pressed their clothing as best they could, and put on clean collars, cuffs, and neckties, and therefore looked quite presentable once more.

"As soon as we get to town we can get cleaned up a little better," said Dave. "So we won't look quite like tramps when we return to the Hall."

"I hate to face Doctor Clay," remarked Phil, dubiously.

"So do I," added Ben and Buster.

"Well, it has got to be done," answered Dave. "So make the best of it. The doctor understands the situation, so I don't think he'll be hard on you."

"I hope they have got the wild man, and that they prove he blew up the hotel," said Phil, wistfully. "That is the only thing that will really clear us."

"Oh, they are bound to get the wild man sooner or later," answered Dave, hopefully.

It was decided to take the one afternoon train from Camptown Falls, and at the proper time the boys walked to the little depot, Dave with his suit-case, and the others with some hand baggage. Instructions were left with Jerry Blutt regarding the other baggage, and the man was paid for his services. He said he was glad that nobody had been drowned in the flood, and added that he was going up to the broken-away dam later on to see how matters looked.

It was a rather quiet crowd that got aboard the train when it came along. The conductor wanted to know how they had fared in the flood, and they told him. At Lumberport the boys had to wait an hour for the next train to Oakdale Junction, and they spent the time in getting a good supper, and in having their shoes shined, and in brushing up generally.

"I'll be glad to get back late at night," said Phil to Dave. "I'd hate to have the whole crowd staring at us when we came in."

At the Junction they waited but a few minutes, and the run to Oakdale did not take long. They were the only ones to get off at the depot, and the spot was all but deserted. But they had telegraphed ahead, and Horsehair was on hand, with a carriage, to meet them.

"Glad to see you young gents back, indeed I am," said the school driver.

"Any news, Horsehair?" asked Dave, as they piled into the carriage.

"Not as I know of."

"Have they got that wild man yet?" questioned Phil.

"No, sir. But they seen him—along the river—day before yesterday. He was sleepin' in a barn. But he got away before the farmer and his man could git him."

"Where was that?" questioned Ben.

"Up to the Morrison place."

"The Morrison place," mused Buster. "I know that family. When I get a chance I am going to ask them about this," he added.

When the boys arrived at Oak Hall they found Doctor Clay sitting up to receive them. He smiled

at Dave, but was somewhat cold towards the others.

"It is too late to listen to what you have to say to-night," said he. "All of you may report in my office directly after our opening exercises in the morning."

When the boys went upstairs there were a good many exclamations of surprise, and Roger and the others wanted to ask innumerable questions. But a monitor cut all talk short, and Dave and the runaways got to bed as quickly as possible.

All were up early, and Dave, Phil, and the others had to tell their story before going down to breakfast. Roger and those who had been left behind with him listened eagerly to the tale of the flood and the other happenings.

"I guess Dave got there just in time," said the senator's son. "How about it, Buster?"

"He sure did," said the stout lad, and shuddered to think how close he had been to drowning.

It can well be imagined that Phil, Ben, and Buster did not have much appetite for breakfast. Phil looked around for Nat Poole, but the money-lender's son had not yet returned to the school.

"Now, tell me everything," said Doctor Clay, when the boys at length filed into his office. "As they say in court, we want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"And that is what I'm going to give you, Doctor Clay," answered Phil. "I made a big mistake in running away, and I am glad Dave came to bring us back. I haven't done anything wrong, and I am here to face the music, as the saying goes."

"And so am I," came from Ben and Buster.

Then the boys told their story in detail, omitting nothing, and Dave related how he had gone to Camptown Falls, and how the flood had caught him. In the midst of the narrative came a sharp knock on the door.

"Come in," said the doctor, and one of the servants entered.

"A man to see you, sir," said the servant. "He says it is very important—something about that wild man, sir! He's terribly excited, sir!"

"The wild man again!" murmured the master of the school, while the boys looked at him and the servant with interest. "Show the visitor in and I will hear what he has to say."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TRAIL THROUGH THE WOODS

In a minute the servant ushered in a farmer whom the boys recognized as Henry Morrison, a man who had a farm along the river-front, about a mile from Oak Hall.

"Good-morning, sir," said the farmer, bowing to the doctor and then to the boys. "Excuse me for being in such a hurry, but I thought you would like to know."

"I'll be glad to hear what you have to say, Mr. Morrison," replied the master of the school. "Sit down," and he pointed to a handy chair.

"It's about that wild man, Doctor Clay!" exclaimed the farmer, dropping into the seat and mopping his forehead with his handkerchief. "It's something terrible, the way he carries on. He 'most scared my wife to death!"

"He has been to your place again?"

"Yes, sir, last night. He was in the barn, and he jumped out at my wife and said he was going to blow the fort to pieces! She got so scared she dropped her pailful of milk and ran to the house. I got mad and got my shotgun, but the fellow had skipped out before I could catch sight of him."

"What time was this?"

"Just about six o'clock. But that ain't all. This morning I started for town, intending to tell the constable and the justice about it, when all of a sudden, when I was passing the end of your property, I see the wild man down there, behind a tree."

"Just now?" asked Dave, eagerly.

"Not more'n a quarter of an hour ago. That's why I stepped in here. He's a dangerous man, Doctor Clay, and I think he ought to be rounded up!" went on Henry Morrison, earnestly.

"You are right, he certainly ought to be put under restraint," answered the master of Oak Hall. "I will see to this at once. Will you assist in the hunt, Mr. Morrison?"

"Of course—if I don't have to go alone. I don't think it is safe for anybody to tackle him alone, he's that wild and dangerous."

"Can we take part in the search?" asked Phil, eagerly. "Oh, do let us do it, Doctor Clay!" he

pleaded.

"I suppose so, if you will promise to be careful. Mr. Morrison, can you point out the exact spot where you saw the man?"

"Of course I can."

"Then we will at once make up a searching party."

Doctor Clay could act quickly when the occasion demanded, and inside of ten minutes a searching party was made up, composed of Dave and his chums, Mr. Dale, Horsehair, and several men who chanced to be working around the grounds.

"Oh, I hope we catch him and are able to prove that he blew up the hotel dining-room," said Phil to Dave.

"So do I, Phil."

Henry Morrison led the way, and it was not long before the spot was gained where he had seen Wilbur Poole. From that point a path ran from the river back into the woods.

"Maybe he took that path," suggested our hero, and several thought the same.

"I think we had better scatter," suggested Mr. Dale, who had been placed in charge by the doctor. "By doing that we can cover a wide range of territory in a comparatively short space of time. And keep as quiet as possible, for should he hear us he will most likely start and run."

"If he didn't run when he saw Mr. Morrison," murmured Buster. "He may be miles away already."

The crowd separated into pairs, Dave and Phil going together and Roger going with Ben, and Buster with Horsehair. All had armed themselves with sticks, and Mr. Dale carried a pair of handcuffs, and one of the hired men had a rope.

Deeper and deeper into the woods went the party, spread out in a long line. They had examined the river-front and felt fairly certain that the wild man had not left by boat.

"Looks like a wild-goose chase," remarked Phil, with a sigh, after a half an hour had passed.

"Oh, we don't want to give up yet," answered Dave. "Why, it isn't much after ten o'clock. We can stay out till noon, at least."

"I'd stay out all day, if I thought we could catch him," returned the shipowner's son, promptly.

Presently the boys espied a small stone house, standing beside a brook which flowed through the woods into the river. In the house lived an old man who made his living by making baskets and fancy articles of birch bark.

"Let us see if old Herick is around," suggested Dave. "He may be able to tell us something."

They found the old man hard at work on a fancy basket. He looked surprised when thus suddenly confronted by the students.

"Did I see a wild man?" he queried, in reply to their question. "I guess I did,—at least he acted queer enough. He danced up here, made a deep bow, and told me the army would be along in four minutes. Then he made another bow and walked off, as stiff as a drum-major."

"When was this?" demanded Dave.

"About half an hour ago."

"And which way did he go?" put in Phil, eagerly.

"That way," and the old basket-maker pointed up the brook. "Walked right in the water, too. I was going to follow him at first but then I didn't think it was any use."

The boys waited to hear no more, but telling old Herick to watch for the other searchers and tell them about the wild man, they set off up the brook as fast as they could travel.

As the chums progressed they looked to the right and left, wondering if Wilbur Poole had kept to the tiny watercourse or taken to the woods, which were now exceedingly dense.

"I see his footprints!" cried Phil, as they passed a sandy stretch. "Anyway, those marks look fresh."

"I fancy you are right, Phil, and if so, he can't be very far ahead of us."

They went on, following the windings of the stream until it became less than a foot wide. It came to an end at a number of springs among the rocks.

"Fine, cold water," announced Dave. "Here is a chance for a good drink, Phil."

Both were drinking their fill when a loud voice suddenly challenged them.

"Ha! What are you doing at my fountain?"

Both looked up hurriedly and saw the wild man standing on the highest of the rocks. He had his arms folded and was glaring at them sternly.

"Oh!" murmured Phil. "Say, Dave, there he is! What shall we do?"

"Let us try to make friends with him," suggested Dave. "If we don't, he may run away, and he can easily do that in these thick woods."

"If we could only notify the others!"

"You can go back if you wish, while I talk to him."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Oh, I reckon I can take care of myself," answered Dave.

"Do you not know I gave a million dollars for these fountains?" went on the wild man.

"Well, they are worth it," answered Dave, calmly. "It is very good water. Why don't you have it bottled, Mr. Poole?"

"Who calls me Poole? I am the King of Sumatra. My army is following me."

"To blow up another fort, I suppose," said Phil, as he commenced to back away.

"Yes."

"Then I must go, for I don't want to be blown up," and, so speaking, Phil commenced to retreat.

"The fort is not here—it is in Oakdale, close to the other fort," said the wild man, and now he came down from the big rock and stood quite close to Dave. There was a strange look of cunning in his eyes, and Dave had to shiver, although he did his best to keep calm.

"In Oakdale," said Dave, slowly. "Say, you blew up that hotel fort in fine shape, didn't you?"

"Ha! ha! so I did! But I was discovered, worse luck, I was discovered!" continued the wild man, with a sad shake of his head. "The enemy saw me!"

"Somebody saw you?" queried our hero, with interest.

"Yes, worse luck. But it shan't happen again. Next time I shall go masked. I have my mask here." And Wilbur Poole pulled from his pocket a mask made of a bit of blue cloth. "I will show you how I wear it." And he fastened it over his face by means of a couple of strings.

"Fine! fine!" cried Dave, in pretended delight. He wished to humor the man until Phil returned with the others. "It couldn't be better. You ought to patent that kind of a mask."

"I will patent it soon, after the other fort is down."

"You just said somebody saw you when you blew up the other," continued our hero. "Who was it?"

"Ha! that is a state secret. Only the cabinet must know of it—the cabinet and the man who makes shoes."

"I am sorry you won't let me in on your secrets," said Dave. "I want to help you. Won't you hire me as a clerk?"

"How much do you want a week?" demanded the wild man, in a business-like tone.

"How much will you give?"

"To a good clerk forty dollars."

"Then I'll take the job."

"Very good. Your name is Crusoe, isn't it—Robinson Crusoe?"

"You've got it."

"If I give you the job, you must have your hair shaved off," continued the wild man, looking at Dave's hair critically.

"All right, I'll have that done when we reach a barber shop."

"It isn't necessary to wait!" cried Wilbur Poole. "I am a barber."

"You?"

"To be sure—I have a certificate from the Emperor of Siam. See here!"

The wild man put his hand into an inner pocket and suddenly brought forth a pair of long shears.

"I can cut your hair and shave you," he announced. "Just sit down on yonder throne and I'll start to work." And he pointed to a flat rock.

The sight of the sharp-pointed shears was not a pleasant one, and when the wild man invited him to sit down Dave felt very much like running away. The man evidently saw how he felt, and suddenly caught him by the arm.

"Sit down!" he thundered. "I won't hurt you. I am an expert barber."

"Let us talk about the job first," said Dave, trying to keep his wits about him, although he was terribly disturbed. He wondered how long it would be before Phil would return.

"What do you want to know?"

"Will you cut my hair in the latest fashion?"

"I never cut hair in any other way."

"And will you curl the ends? I like curls."

"If you want them, although they make a man look girlish," answered the wild man.

"And will you—" went on Dave, when Wilbur Poole suddenly grabbed him by both arms and forced him backwards on the flat rock.

"I'll go to work at once!" cried the wild man. "Sit still!" And he flourished the shears before our hero's face.

Dave felt a chill run down his backbone. But a moment later he felt a thrill of relief, as from the bushes behind the wild man stepped Phil, Mr. Dale, and several others.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CAPTURE OF THE WILD MAN

"Now then, you may go to work," said our hero, as he saw Mr. Dale come up close behind the wild man. "But sharpen the scissors first, please."

"I will," was Wilbur Poole's answer, and he opened up the shears and commenced to stroke them back and forth on a rock near by.

An instant later the wild man was jerked over backwards and the dangerous shears were snatched from his grasp. He commenced to struggle, but the whole crowd surrounded him, and before he could realize the situation his hands were made fast.

"It is treachery, base treachery!" he groaned. "My army has betrayed me!" And he commenced to weep.

"What a terrible state of mind to be in!" murmured Roger. "He is certainly as crazy as they make 'em!"

"I guess you are right," answered Phil. "But I am glad we have got him."

"He spoke about the blowing up of the hotel," said Dave. "And he said somebody saw him do it."

"Who was it?"

"He didn't mention any names."

"Maybe he was simply wandering in his mind," suggested Ben.

"I don't think so," returned Dave. "I think, if he was questioned long enough, we could get the truth out of him. He doesn't seem to be crazy all the time."

"It's a terrible thing for the Poole family—to have such a crazy man in it," was Buster's opinion; and the other lads agreed with him.

The prisoner was marched along the brook, past the home of old Herick, and then down the river-road. By this time all the searchers had come together, including Henry Morrison and some outsiders.

"I'm mighty glad you've got him," said the farmer. "And I hope he don't get away from you."

"He won't get away," answered Mr. Dale.

"The women of this district have been afraid to go out alone," went on Henry Morrison. "They'll be glad to know he's been captured."

"We'll have to let the Pooles know right away," said Dave.

"I fancy Doctor Clay will send a telegram," answered Mr. Dale. "And in the meanwhile we'll have to take the prisoner to the Oakdale lockup."

It was nearly noon when the crowd reached Oak Hall. The wild man had but little to say. His capture had evidently broken his spirit, and he was inclined to cry. But when Doctor Clay asked him if he would like to have something to eat, he brightened up wonderfully.

"It is a sad case," said the master of the Hall. "But under proper treatment I think he can be cured."

The news quickly circulated throughout the school that the wild man had been caught and that he was Wilbur Poole, an uncle to Nat, and all the boys were anxious to catch a sight of the strange individual. The teachers and servants were likewise curious, and looked at him as he ate his dinner in a corner of the dining-hall, surrounded by those who had captured him and who were watching, to see that he did not get away. He was not allowed to use a knife and fork, but his food was cut up for him and served with a spoon.

The only person at Oak Hall who did not come in to see the wild man was Job Haskers. When asked about this, the dictatorial teacher shrugged his shoulders.

"Some of the boys are wild enough for me," he said. "I want nothing to do with the insane."

"It is a sad case," said the teacher who was addressing Job Haskers.

"There are many just as bad," responded the other, coldly. "It is up to the Poole family to look after that man and see that he doesn't break out again."

It was decided to take the wild man down to Oakdale in the school carryall, to be driven by

Horsehair. Mr. Dale was to go along, and so were Phil, Dave, Ben, Buster, and Doctor Clay.

The carryall was brought around to the side entrance of the school, and Wilbur Poole was told that he was about to take a ride through the country. He walked through the hallway willingly enough, but suddenly, on turning a corner, set up a shout.

"You! you! I have found you at last!" he cried, rushing forward. "You are the one who exposed me! Base soldier that you are! You have ruined the whole army!" And in a sudden fit of passion he ran up to Job Haskers and caught him by the throat.

"Le—let g-g-go!" gasped the teacher, and tried to shake the man off. Then the others ran up, and Wilbur Poole was dragged back and handcuffed.

"Do you know that man?" asked Dave, struck by a sudden idea.

"Yes! yes!" groaned the wild man. "He exposed me! The army is lost!"

"How did he expose you?"

"He saw me do it."

"Do what?"

"Blow up the fort-hotel. Oh, what a base villain he was to look on!" groaned the wild man, and suddenly commenced to weep.

"What is—the—er—man talking about?" stammered Job Haskers, and all saw him turn pale.

"He says you saw him blow up Sparr's place," said Dave, pointedly.

"It is false, absurd!" said the teacher. "I—er—I never saw the rascal before."

"He isn't a rascal, Mr. Haskers. He is simply out of his mind," remonstrated Mr. Dale. "He is not accountable for his actions."

"Well, he ought not to say such things," returned the dictatorial teacher.

"You saw me—you know you did!" cried Wilbur Poole. "You spoiled everything! I might have blown up many forts if it hadn't been for you!" And he shook his head dolefully.

"Take him away," said the teacher, and turned his back on the wild man.

"Dave, I think the wild man speaks the truth!" whispered Phil to our hero.

"Possibly, Phil. I think the matter will bear investigation."

"And if old Haskers saw the thing done, why didn't he tell about it. Do you think that letter—"

"It struck me that such might be the truth, Phil. But don't say anything until you are sure."

"He was down on us—ever since we mentioned that affair with the Widow Breen," went on the shipowner's son.

"I'd like to see that letter Jason Sparr got—saying we were guilty," returned our hero. "Maybe Doctor Clay can get hold of it."

All the way to Oakdale the boys spoke of the case in whispers. Phil was quite sure Job Haskers had seen Wilbur Poole blow up the hotel and equally sure that the dictatorial teacher had written the letter to the hotel-keeper stating he, Dave, and their chums were guilty.

"He thought we'd be locked up, or at least that we'd be sent away from the school and he would be rid of us," said Phil. "He is growing afraid of us! Oh, if we can prove that he did it, I'll make it hot for him!"

"If he did such a thing as that, he ought to be discharged from Oak Hall," was Ben's comment.

"I'll get my father to sue him for damages," put in Buster.

"Well, don't be hasty," advised Dave. "There may be some mistake—although I think not."

At Oakdale, Wilbur Poole was turned over to the authorities, who placed him in a comfortable room attached to the lockup. As it was known that he was insane, he could not be counted a criminal, and the majority of the people pitied him and hoped that some day he would be restored to his right mind.

A telegram was sent to the Poole family, and the next day came a reply that some men would come to take Wilbur Poole away to a sanitarium. It was established beyond a doubt that he had used the dynamite to blow up the dining-room of Sparr's hotel, and, consequently, our hero and his chums were cleared of that charge, much to their satisfaction.

"I wonder if Nat will come back?" said Shadow. "I should think he would hate to do it."

"I don't think he will," said Luke.

"What will you do if he does come back, Phil?" asked Gus.

"I don't know, Gus. Of course, I'll let him know what I think of him for spoiling my plans for a spread. But I hate to be hard on him, because of this disgrace about his uncle."

"Yes, that's a terrible thing," was Chip Macklin's comment. "I'd hate to have a crazy man in my family."

"Well, such things can't be helped," put in Polly Vane. "The Poole family will have to make the best of it."

It was several days later when Nat Poole showed himself. Phil and Dave did not see him until later, and both were struck by the change in his appearance. He looked haggard and much older, and his arrogance was completely gone.

"Got back, eh?" said Phil, walking up to him.

"Yes," returned the money-lender's son, and his voice sounded hollow.

"What have they done with your uncle, Nat?" asked Dave, kindly.

"Put him in another sanitarium, where he will have the best of care and doctoring."

"I hope he gets well."

"We all hope that." Nat swallowed a lump in his throat and then looked gloomily at Phil. "Well, you got the best of me," he said, shortly.

"How the best of you?" demanded the shipowner's son.

"I understand you found out about that spread."

"I did."

"Well, I'll pay for the damage done—as soon as I get the money. I haven't any now—Dad's got too much to pay on Uncle Wilbur's account." Nat swallowed another lump in his throat. "I'm sorry I did it now, Phil, honest I am," he went on, brokenly.

"Well, if that's the case, let us drop the matter, Nat," was the instant reply. "I don't believe in hitting a fellow when he is down. You haven't got to pay me anything. The whole thing is past and gone,—and that ends it."

"Thank you." Nat wanted to say something more, but his voice suddenly broke and he turned away to hide his emotion, and then walked away.

"He's hit and hit hard," said Roger, in a low voice.

"And you did well to drop that matter, Phil," added Dave. "Maybe Nat has learned a lesson he won't easily forget."

Dave was right about the lesson Nat Poole had learned. He was deeply humiliated, both by the exposure concerning the feast and by what had been learned concerning his insane uncle, and for a long time was quite another boy.

It may be added here that at a new sanitarium, and under first-class medical treatment, a marked change came over Wilbur Poole, and in less than a year he was completely cured of his weakmindedness. With a nurse as a companion he went into the country to rest both body and mind, and later on came out into the world again as well as anybody. Strange to say, he remembered nothing of calling himself the King of Sumatra, nor of blowing up Jason Sparr's hotel. But others did not forget about the blowing up, and the damage done had to be settled for by Mr. Aaron Poole, who was his brother's guardian and manager of his estate for the time being.

CHAPTER XXIX

A BIT OF EVIDENCE

"Dave, what do you make of this?"

"Well, to tell the truth, Phil, I don't think much of it."

"You don't think it is a clew?"

"Do you?"

"It's rather faint, I must confess."

"Oh, I don't think there is anything to it," declared Ben.

"There is something, but not a great deal," came from Roger. "I don't see how you are going to follow it up."

This talk between the boys occurred after Dave, Phil, Ben, Roger, and Buster had called upon Jason Sparr and the justice and insisted on seeing the letter the hotel man had received which stated that the boys were guilty of blowing up the dining-room of his hostelry.

The hotel man had treated them kindly, for he was in dread that the boys would get their folks to sue him for damages. He had offered to pay back the money taken from Phil for the spread, and the shipowner's son had taken the amount, to which he was justly entitled.

The examination of the letter had revealed next to nothing. It was evidently written in a disguised hand, but some of the letters looked like Job Haskers's handwriting. In the corner of the paper some sort of an advertisement had been torn off, only the letters, "*blisher*" showing.

"I think those letters are part of the word, '*Publisher*,'" Dave had said. "This letter was evidently penned by somebody who used some publisher's blank."

"Maybe Job Haskers had those blanks," Phil had exclaimed. "Remember, he said he published or was going to publish something once upon a time."

The boys talked it over, but could reach no conclusion. Jason Sparr told how the letter had come to him, but this added no new light on the subject.

"Well, it was a nasty trick, no matter who played it," said Dave.

"I sha'n't rest until I find out who did it," retorted Phil.

All were resolved to watch Job Haskers and also Nat Poole. But while doing this they had to turn once more to their studies. Phil, Ben, and Buster had to work harder than ever, and so did Dave, to make up for the time lost during their absence. But Doctor Clay was kind to them, and for once Job Haskers did not say anything, although he showed that he expected them to "toe the mark," as Roger expressed it.

Several weeks slipped by, and during that time Oak Hall played several games of ball. One game of importance was won, and this was celebrated in a befitting manner. Dave attended the games, and so did Phil and Roger, but none of the three allowed the sport to interfere with their studies. All were "in the grind," and resolved to graduate that coming June with the highest possible honors.

During those days Dave received many letters from home. His folks and friends were glad to know that the wild man had been captured and the mystery of the blowing up cleared away. Jessie sent him a very warm letter in particular, congratulating him for bringing back the runaways, and saying she hoped he would have no more trouble during the final term at Oak Hall. She added that she and all the others expected to come to the school at graduation exercises.

"Now it is up to me to make good," said Dave, after reading this letter several times. "Dad expects it, and Jessie, and everybody, and I am not going to disappoint them."

But it was no light task to remain at the top of the senior class, or even near it, for there were bright seniors in plenty, including the studious Polly Vane, who seemed the brightest of all. But Dave plugged away, day after day, resolved to keep at it until the very last. He was writing on his theme and had it about half finished.

"One month more and it will all be over but the shouting," said Roger one day, as he came into the room where Dave was studying.

"All over but the shouting or weeping," returned Phil, who was present. "I am afraid some of the fellows will do more weeping than cheering," he added, grimly.

"Let us hope that everybody passes," said Dave, looking up with a quiet smile.

"Such a thing has never been done," said Ben. "Somebody is bound to drop by the wayside—I hope it isn't yours truly," and he sank his head again into his book.

"I think old Haskers is commencing to tighten the screws again," said Buster. "He let up for a while, after the wild man was caught, but yesterday and to-day—phew! we caught it, didn't we?"

"We sure did!" cried Phil. "I can't understand that man. Why is he a teacher when he just naturally hates boys?"

"That's a conundrum that can't be answered," said the senator's son.

"Well, we won't weep on leaving him," remarked Luke, dryly.

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story," said Shadow. "Once on a time a man in an auto ran into a boy carrying a cat in a basket. He didn't hurt the boy much but he killed the cat. Says he, 'I am sorry, my boy, and I'll pay you for the cat. How much?' 'I—I don't know,' blubbered the boy. 'Will two dollars do?' asked the man. 'Yes,' says the boy, and took the money. 'Were you taking the cat home?' asked the man, when he was ready to drive on. 'No,' said the boy. 'I was going to take him down to the canal and drown him!'" And there was a smile over Shadow's yarn.

It had been a blustery day, and as night came on the wind increased in violence, until it fairly howled around Oak Hall. It tore through the branches of the oaks that gave the place its name, until it looked as if some of the trees might be broken off by the fury of the elements.

"My gracious! I never saw such a wind!" cried Roger, as he came in from a trip to the gymnasium.

"It must be fierce at sea," returned Dave, who was with him. "I am glad I am on shore. The newspapers will tell about wrecks along the coast to-morrow."

Nobody thought of going out that evening, and the boys put in the time studying and reading. The windows rattled, and occasionally a shutter banged, and a good night's rest seemed out of the question.

"My, what a night for a fire!" remarked Phil, while he and his chums were undressing.

"Don't mention such a thing!" returned Ben, with a shiver. "It would burn down everything!"

At last the boys retired. A few dropped off to sleep, but Dave was not one of them. He had studied hard and was restless, and the fury of the elements added to his nervousness.

At last he could stand it no longer to remain in bed, and got up to sit in an easy-chair for awhile.

He was just crossing the dormitory floor when there came an extra heavy blast of wind outside, followed by a crash, as one of the giant oaks standing close to the school building was broken off near the top. Then came another crash, a jingling of glass, and a sudden wild cry for help.

"Hello, something's gone through a window!" Dave muttered. "Maybe it's in the next room!"

He ran to the window and looked out. Just below the window-sill he saw some branches of the broken tree. He looked down and noted that the tree-top had gone into the window of the room below.

"What's the row?" cried Roger, springing up and rubbing his eyes.

"Is the roof caving in?" asked Phil.

"Some tree-branches came down and went through the window right below us," answered Dave. "Listen!"

All did so, and heard the cry for help repeated.

"It's Job Haskers calling!" said the senator's son. "He uses the room below us now."

"Let us see if he is hurt," suggested another of the boys.

Clad in their pajamas, the boys flocked out into the hallway, there to be joined by others. Word was passed around of what had occurred, and all made their way to the door of the instructor's apartment. They heard him yelling for help with all his might.

The door was locked, and Dave and some others put their shoulders to the barrier and forced it open. All was dark in the room, and the wind was rushing around, sending books, pictures, and other things in all directions.

Several matches were struck, and at last a sheltered light was lit. Doctor Clay, Mr. Dale, and some of the other teachers had now arrived, and instructors and students gazed curiously at the scene before them.

The top of the tree had come straight through the big window of the apartment, crashing down on a bureau and a writing-desk, smashing both flat. Some branches of the tree rested on the side of the bed, pinning Job Haskers against the wall, as if in a cage.



"HELP ME! SAVE ME!" SPLUTTERED THE TERROR-STRICKEN TEACHER.—Page 287.

"Help me! Save me!" spluttered the terror-stricken teacher. "I am being crushed to death!"

"All hands to the tree!" shouted Mr. Dale, and showed what he meant. Boys and men took hold of the tree-branches and pulled them to one side.

"Are you much hurt, Mr. Haskers?" asked Doctor Clay, kindly.

"I—I don't know, I think so!" gasped the teacher. His face was white and he was shivering from fright.

"Can't you crawl under the branches?" asked Mr. Dale. "Here, come this way."

He showed how it could be done, and trembling from head to feet, the scared teacher got out from under the tree-top. His face and one shoulder were scratched, but otherwise he appeared to be unhurt. But all were forced to acknowledge that he had had a narrow escape.

"You had better take one of the spare rooms, Mr. Haskers," said Doctor Clay, as another blast of wind swept through the room. "You cannot remain here, with this tree-top in the room. And I am afraid we shall have to saw it up to get it out again. You can be thankful that your life has been spared."

"The furniture is smashed!" murmured the teacher.

"Never mind the furniture, so long as you are not hurt. It can be mended, and all the window needs is some new sash."

"My things have been scattered," grumbled the teacher. "A perfect mess!"

"Leave it until morning—you can do nothing to-night," said the doctor; and so it was finally decided, and teachers and pupils trooped off to bed. The broken-in door was closed, but it could not be locked.

The boys had scarcely gotten back to the dormitories when Dave called Phil, Ben, Roger, and Buster to one side.

"Now is our chance," he whispered. "Did you notice that the bureau and the writing-desk in Haskers's room were smashed? It may not be the most honorable thing to do, but I think we are justified in looking his things over and seeing if we can't find some clew to that letter Jason Sparr received."

"Right you are!" declared Phil, promptly, and the others said practically the same.

They waited until the other boys had retired once more, and then, at a signal from Dave, all filed silently into the hallway again and tiptoed their way to the room below. Soon, they were inside and had the light lit, and also a lantern which belonged to Ben's bicycle, and which he had chanced to have on hand.

Silently and with great care the boys went over the many things that had been scattered over the floor—wearing apparel, books, pads, papers, and various articles of more or less value. Presently Phil gave a low cry.

"Look at this!" And he held up several sheets of paper. In one corner were the words:

LATIN MADE EASY
JOB HASKERS, Publisher,
ALBANY, N. Y.

"It's the same paper!" cried Dave. "He tore the corner off so that just the letters '*blisher*' remained."

"That's pretty good evidence," said Roger.

"I should say it was!" cried Ben. "Wonder what he will have to say about it, when we confront him with it?"

"Let us look for more evidence, while we are at it," came from Buster. And then the midnight search continued.

CHAPTER XXX

THE EXPOSURE—GOOD-BY TO OAK HALL

"Doctor Clay, we must see you about something that is very important."

Thus spoke Dave, the next morning, as he and his chums filed into the doctor's private office after the opening of the school. Job Haskers was not at his class, but in his room, straightening out his things, while some men had been sent up, to get rid of the tree-top and repair the window. The storm was a thing of the past, and no other damage of importance had been done.

"Very well, boys," returned the master of the school, kindly. "Come in and let me know what it is."

The students came in, rather awkwardly it must be admitted, for they had much on their minds and did not know just how the worthy doctor would take it. But they had decided on a course of action, and they had given their word to stick together to the end. Dave, as the natural leader, had been chosen spokesman.

"Doctor Clay, we want to bring up a subject of great importance," said Dave. "Important to us, and to you, and to the whole school. The boys have asked me to speak for them and for myself."

"About what?" demanded the master, somewhat shortly.

"About Mr. Haskers and how he has treated us."

"What has he done now?"

"It isn't what he has done now, Doctor Clay, it is what he did some time ago—did his best to get us into grave trouble," answered Dave, warmly. "You'll remember the letter Mr. Sparr got, stating we were guilty of trying to blow up his hotel. We are now satisfied that Mr. Haskers penned that letter—in fact, we have the evidence to prove it."

"Impossible!"

"No, sir, it is true, and I dare him to deny it. It is an absolute fact, Doctor Clay, and we have come here this morning to inform you that we can no longer attend a school where he is a teacher," went on Dave, firmly.

"But—but you—er—you astound me, Porter! Tell me what you know, or think you know."

In a plain, straightforward manner Dave mentioned the letter and the printing that had appeared on it. Then he told how he and his chums had searched the bedroom after the tree-top crash and found the sheets of paper with that same printing, and he produced them.

"And we also found these, in a corner of the broken writing-desk," he continued. "Some writing by Mr. Haskers, in which he practiced backhand. This writing is just like that which appears in the letter Mr. Sparr got. Compare the two and you will see we are right. Wilbur Poole said Mr. Haskers saw him blow up the hotel, and he told the truth, even if he is weak-minded."

"But why should Mr. Haskers do such an outrageous thing?" asked the master of Oak Hall.

"I will tell you why, sir," returned Dave, and related the affair of the Widow Breen. "That made him very sore on us, and he wanted to get us out of the school. At first he tried it by overworking us in our lessons, and when he found that that didn't work he tried this game of making out that we were criminals."

"Yes, but—but would a teacher of mine stoop so low?" murmured the worthy doctor, shaking his head doubtfully.

"No ordinary teacher would, Dr. Clay. But Mr. Haskers is not an ordinary man—he is very dictatorial and harsh, and he hates boys even though he has to teach them. He isn't a bit like Mr. Dale, or the others."

"We never had any trouble with any teacher but Haskers," put in Phil.

"And if we have to leave Oak Hall I'm going to get my father to sue Haskers for damages," added Roger.

A talk lasting the best part of an hour followed, and at last the worthy doctor had his eyes opened to the unworthiness of his assistant. He scanned the sheets of paper and the writing the boys had brought with interest.

"You are right—this is Mr. Haskers's hand," he said, slowly. "But is it the same hand that wrote that villainous letter to Mr. Sparr?"

"Compare the two and you will see that we are right," answered Dave.

"I will," answered the doctor; and a little later he set off for Oakdale in his buggy, going alone.

The boys walked down to the gymnasium, resolved to keep out of all classes until the matter had been settled. They had impressed it on Doctor Clay's mind that either Job Haskers must leave the school or they would do so.

It was nearly noon when the master of Oak Hall came back, driving slowly and looking very thoughtful. The boys met him at the entrance to the grounds and he told them to come to the office, and closed the door carefully behind them.

"You were right," he said, almost brokenly. "I have been deceived by this—this—I do not know what to call him! It will make a great stir when the truth is known—and it will hurt the school," he added, with a sigh.

"Why should we make a stir about it?" asked Dave, quickly. "Let him go, that is all we ask. He can resign."

"No, the truth must come out," was the firm reply. "He shall not shelter himself behind you, even for the benefit of the school. I have already told the authorities the facts in the case. If they wish to arrest him they can do so, and you may appear against him, if you wish."

"When will you tell him?" asked Phil, as there came a brief pause.

"At once! And I wish you to be present and hear what is said," returned Doctor Clay. He rang a bell and a servant appeared. "Tell Mr. Haskers to come here immediately."

There was silence after this, the boys not knowing what to say, and the master of the school being busy with his thoughts. Presently the door opened and Job Haskers came in, with a look of curiosity on his face.

"You sent for me, Doctor?" he inquired.

"I did, Mr. Haskers," was the cold reply. "I want your resignation, and I want it at once!"

The master of Oak Hall had gotten to his feet and the two men stood facing each other. Doctor Clay had his jaw set, and never had the students seen him look so determined. He was no longer a kindly schoolmaster, he was a judge, and a stern judge at that.

"You—you want my resignation?" faltered Job Haskers.

"Yes, and at once."

“Why?”

“Because you are not fit to teach here—you are not fit to teach anywhere!” thundered the doctor. “I want your resignation, and then I want you to leave just as soon as you possibly can.”

“But—but—I want you to explain. I want--”

“It is not necessary for me to explain, Haskers. You have been found out. You are a despicable villain, and you ought to be in jail. I trusted you, and you have deceived me. More than that, you have tried to get these young gentlemen into serious trouble. Don’t deny it, for it will do no good. We have the absolute proof against you, and those proofs are also in the hands of the law. If you don’t want to be arrested, you will leave this school as soon as you can get your baggage packed.”

“Sir, I want you to know--” commenced Job Haskers, but stopped short, for Doctor Clay had taken a stride forward and was shaking a finger in the teacher’s face.

“I will not argue with you, Haskers. For a long time I have not been satisfied with your work, for you did not seem to have the students’ interest at heart. You have a good education. But a teacher must have more than that—he must have a heart for his work. Now you are found out, and I want nothing more to do with you. I will give you a check for what is due you up to to-day, and you will sign a receipt in full, and also your resignation, and then I never want to see or hear of you again.”

“And suppose I won’t resign?” snarled the teacher. “I have a contract--”

“If you don’t get out, you’ll go to jail.”

“And we’ll sue you,” Dave could not help putting in.

“That’s right, we’ll push the case as far as the law allows,” added Phil.

“Ha! you think you are smart, but you don’t know it all,” snarled the teacher, but his manner showed his uneasiness. He attempted to argue, but Doctor Clay would not listen, and when he said he would send for a constable, Job Haskers quickly capitulated, signed his resignation, took his check, and hurried away to pack his baggage. He left about an hour later, by the back way, so that none of the students saw him go. An hour after that a man came for his trunks and bags; and that was the last seen or heard of him at Oak Hall.

“Hurrah!” cried Dave, when the affair was at an end. “How glad I am that Haskers is gone! I feel as if a weight had been taken from my head!”

“I guess everybody will be glad,” returned Roger, and he was right. Some of the students wanted to get up a celebration in honor of the unpopular teacher’s departure, but this was not permitted. But the boys had a time on the quiet, and thoroughly enjoyed it.

With the going away of Job Haskers, and the clearing up of the mystery surrounding the letter, Oak Hall settled down once more to its normal condition. Another teacher came to take the place of the man who had left, and he proved popular all around, and made Doctor Clay wonder why he had not made a change long before.

With their minds free from worry, Dave and his chums buckled down to their lessons, and our hero spent much time over his paper on “The Future of Our Country.” Soon the examinations started, and then the boys fell to worrying over how they would fare in this final test.

“Well, I hope I pass,” remarked Phil, when the last examination was over. “I don’t expect to be near the top. I lost too much, going to Cave Island, and when I ran away.”

“Me for the passing mark, too,” chimed in Ben.

“Well, I am hoping for something better,” said Roger.

“What about you, Dave?” queried Buster.

“I am like Roger, hoping for something better,” answered our hero, with a smile. “But I’m prepared to take what comes,” he added.

At last came the day when the announcements were to be made. Dave had sent in his theme and he expected to hear from this as well as from his studies. In the meantime, preparations were going forward for the graduation exercises, and visitors were expected from far and near. Nearly all the folks from Crumville were coming, and also the parents of Phil, Roger, and the other seniors.

The big assembly room was crowded when the announcements were made. The passing mark was seventy-five per cent., and many of the boys dreaded to think that they might be below that.

“I will read the names in the order of merit,” said Doctor Clay, after the opening exercises. “Only two boys have failed to pass for graduation, and they will be conditioned, if they so desire. I am proud of the record.” And then the master of the school proceeded to read the list. Polly Vane and Dave had each ninety-six per cent., Roger had ninety-four, Shadow ninety, Sam and Luke each eighty-eight, Phil eighty-seven, Gus eighty-six, and so on down to Buster, who squeezed through with seventy-eight. The boys who had failed to pass were Nat Poole, who had only sixty-eight, and one of his cronies, who was marked sixty-nine.

“It ain’t fair! I did as well as lots of ‘em,” said Nat, when the reading was over. But nobody listened to him, for all knew that the examinations had been just in every particular.

“I will now announce the prizes for the best themes on the subject, “The Future of Our

Country," went on Doctor Clay. "The reading of the nine papers handed in has afforded me great pleasure, for all are good and many of them excellent. But I think the best of all is that written by David Porter, and the committee of teachers who have examined the papers agree with me. Porter, I congratulate you, and I will now ask you to come forward and read your meritorious composition to your fellow-students."

And amid a general handclapping our hero went to the platform and commenced to read the theme. Everybody listened with close attention, and loud was the applause when he had concluded. It was certainly a fine paper, and later on Doctor Clay had it published in one of the school journals, where it attracted not a little attention.

Dave was certainly happy and he had good reason to be. He sent word home that night of how he had fared and the next day received several messages of congratulation. One message from Jessie he prized very highly, for she wrote, "You deserve a big hug for coming through so finely. My very best wishes." The other boys also got congratulations; and that night and the night to follow were "bonfire nights," in more ways than one.

"Well, we are rid of Haskers, and also Merwell and Jasniff," remarked Roger to Dave. "We ought to be happy, eh, Dave?"

"Yes, and especially over coming out so well for graduation," answered Dave.

"Do you think we'll ever see Haskers or Merwell again?" questioned Phil.

"I don't know—I trust not," answered our hero. But his wish was not fulfilled. He did meet the pair, and in a most unexpected fashion, as will be related in the next volume of this series, to be called "Dave Porter in the Gold Fields; or, The Search for the Landslide Mine," in which we will learn how Dave went West with some of his chums, and joined an old prospector in a hunt for a lost mine that had been willed to Roger Morr's mother.

The graduation exercises at Oak Hall that year formed a gala event long to be remembered. The school and the campus were crowded, and Dave and his chums surprised even Doctor Clay by "chipping in" and hiring a brass band to play outside, after the exercises were over. The boys also presented their teachers and the master with some volumes of history and poetry, and received numerous gifts in return. From his father Dave got a bank-book, with an amount written therein that was a complete surprise. His sister gave him a neat stickpin and his uncle a set of books, and from Jessie and her folks came a desk set, of solid silver, suitably engraved.

"Well, I think I ought to be the happiest boy alive," said Dave, after the exercises were over, and he had his diploma, tied with a broad ribbon. "I feel just as if I was walking on air."

"And I am glad, too," said his sister Laura, warmly.

"We are all glad," put in Jessie, and gave him her brightest smile.

"Glad and proud, Dave," said his father. "My boy, you have done very well."

And then the whole party went down to the gymnasium, where refreshments were being served to the visitors. And here let us leave Dave Porter, wishing him well.

THE END

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