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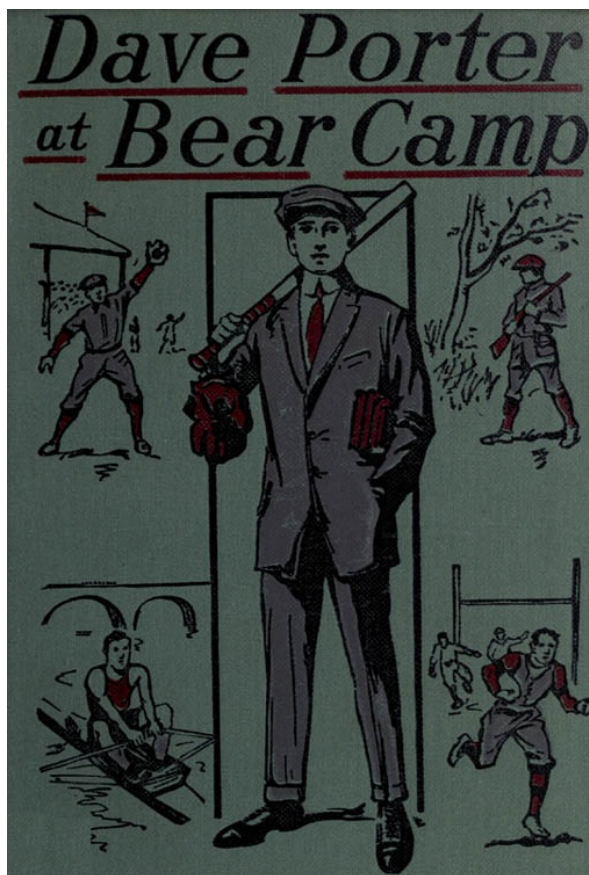
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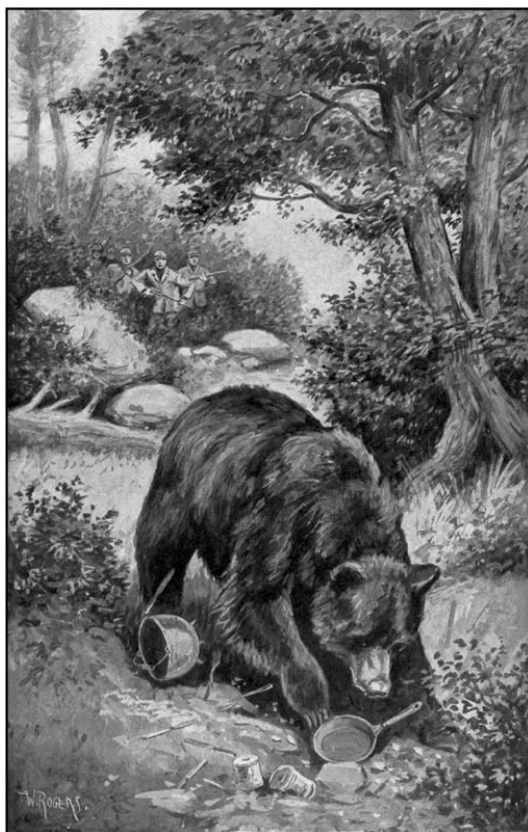
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVE PORTER AT BEAR CAMP; OR, THE WILD MAN OF MIRROR LAKE ***

Dave Porter at Bear Camp



Edward Stratemeyer



OUT CAME A KETTLE, A FRYING-PAN, SOME KNIVES AND FORKS.

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Dave Porter Series

DAVE PORTER AT BEAR CAMP

OR

THE WILD MAN OF MIRROR LAKE

BY

EDWARD STRATEMEYER

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

ILLUSTRATED BY WALTER S. ROGERS



**BOSTON
LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.**

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DAVE PORTER AT BEAR CAMP

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PREFACE

"DAVE PORTER AT BEAR CAMP" is a complete story in itself, but forms the eleventh volume in a line issued under the general title of "Dave Porter Series."

As I have mentioned several times, this series was started a number of years ago by the publication of "Dave Porter at Oak Hall," in which my young readers were introduced to a typical, wide-awake American lad at an up-to-date American boarding school.

The publication of this first volume was followed by that of "Dave Porter in the South Seas," whither the lad journeyed to clear up a question concerning his parentage. Then came "Dave Porter's Return to School," telling of more doings at Oak Hall; "Dave Porter in the Far North," in which he went on a second journey looking for his father; "Dave Porter and His Classmates," relating more happenings at school; "Dave Porter at Star Ranch," in which our hero participated in many adventures in the wild West; "Dave Porter and His Rivals," showing how he outwitted some of his old-time enemies; "Dave Porter on Cave Island," giving the particulars of a remarkable voyage on the ocean and strange doings ashore; "Dave Porter and the Runaways," in which the youth taught some of his chums a much-needed lesson; and finally "Dave Porter in the

Gold Fields," in which the lad and a number of his chums went in quest of a gold mine, all traces of which had been lost through a landslide.

The present volume tells the particulars of a thrilling rescue from fire at sea, and how the boys and girls, along with some of the older folks, went for a vacation in a camp on the shore of a beautiful lake. Here, most unexpectedly, Dave fell in with one of his old enemies. The youth and his chums had some strenuous times, the particulars of which are given in the pages which follow.

Once again I avail myself of the opportunity to thank my young readers for all the pleasant things they have said regarding my stories. I trust that the reading of this volume will benefit them all.

EDWARD STRATEMEYER.

March 1, 1915.

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DAVE PORTER AT BEAR CAMP

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I

THE BOYS ON SHIPBOARD

"Phil, your father seems to be a good deal worried this morning. I hope it isn't on account of the way we cut up on this ship last evening."

"Not at all, Dave," returned Phil Lawrence. "I don't believe he noticed our monkey-shines. He is worried over the letter he received in the mail we got at our last stopping-place."

"No bad news I hope?" said Roger Morr, another one of the group of boys seated on the forward deck of a small coastwise steamer.

"Well, I think it is rather bad news," answered the son of the vessel's owner. "Poor dad stands to lose between twenty and thirty thousand dollars."

"Twenty or thirty thousand dollars!" exclaimed Dave Porter. "Why, how can that be, Phil?"

"Did he make a bad investment?" asked Ben Basswood, another youth of the group.

"You can hardly call it a bad investment, Ben," returned Phil. "Buying the land was all right enough in the first place. It's trying to get rid of it that's the sticker."

"You are talking in riddles, Phil," said Roger Morr. "Won't you explain?"

"Maybe Phil doesn't care to explain," broke in Dave Porter, quickly. "It may be his father's private business, you know."

"Oh, I don't think he'll object to my telling you the details," responded the shipowner's son. "It isn't very much of a secret where we live, or in East Haven."

"East Haven? Is that the place across the river from where you live?" queried Dave Porter.

"Yes. It's quite a bustling little town, too, although when my father and his older brother, Lester Lawrence, bought the tract of land there it didn't amount to much, and they got the ground for a song."

"I'd like to buy some land for a song," put in another youth of the group. "Then I might sell it and make a handsome profit. Say," he continued, his face brightening up, "that puts me in mind of a story. Once there was a man who wanted to——"

"Hold on, Shadow. It isn't your turn to tell stories now," interrupted Dave. "We want to hear what Phil has to say."

"This story wouldn't take but a minute," grumbled Maurice Hamilton, otherwise known as "Shadow." "It's a dandy one, too."

"All right, we'll listen to it later," returned Roger Morr. "Let us first hear what Phil has to tell."

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"It isn't so much of a story," said the shipowner's son. "You see, years ago my dad and his older brother purchased a tract of land at East Haven, along the waterfront. For some time it was idle, and then it was leased to a lumber company, who used it for a number of years as a lumber yard. At that time East Haven had no railroad, but the L. A. & H. line came through that way and wanted to cross the river at East Haven, and wanted to locate their railroad repair shops along the waterfront there. They have made my father an offer for the land, and if that tract could be sold my folks would stand to make a profit of twenty to thirty thousand dollars."

"Well, why not sell the land then—unless you think it is worth more than the railroad company is willing to pay?" asked Dave.

"My father is willing enough to sell, and has been for some time; but he can't give the railroad a clear title, and consequently the deal is at a standstill."

"Oh, I see, Phil," said Roger Morr. "That is the worst of buying land that has a flaw in the title."

"There wasn't any flaw in the title when my father and my Uncle Lester purchased the ground," returned the shipowner's son. And now his face clouded. "The trouble has all come up within the last five years—that is, it wouldn't have come up at all if it hadn't been for what happened about five years ago."

"Oh, I think I know to what you refer, Phil," cried Dave, quickly. "I remember now that you told me about your old Uncle Lester. Didn't you ever hear from him?"

"Not a word, Dave. And that is why my father can't sell the land."

"I don't understand this," said Ben Basswood.

"And neither do I," added Shadow Hamilton.

"Well, it's this way: About five years ago my folks were connected with a trust company in the town where we live. My Uncle Lester was one of several men who had charge of certain funds, and these funds were kept in a safe-deposit vault belonging to the company. One day it was found that some of these funds had disappeared. Suspicion pointed to my uncle, and although he protested his entire innocence, some of the other trust company officials were in favor of having him arrested. A warrant was sworn out, but before it could be served my uncle left home and went to another State. Then the local paper came out with an article which stated that the bank officials had evidence that Lester Lawrence was undoubtedly guilty. My uncle got a copy of this paper—it was found later in the room he had occupied at a hotel—and this evidently frightened him so much that he disappeared."

"Do you mean to say that he disappeared for good?" queried Ben.

"Yes, he took a train out of town, and that was the last seen or heard of him. My father did all he could to locate Uncle Lester. He had men searching for him, and he advertised in the newspapers. But up to the present time he hasn't heard a word from him or of him. He is half inclined to believe that my uncle is dead."

"Perhaps he went to some foreign country," suggested Dave.

"But how does that affect the title to the land?" questioned Shadow Hamilton.

"Easily enough," was the reply of the shipowner's son. "My uncle held a one-quarter interest in the tract. In order to give a clear title to the railroad company it would be necessary for Uncle Lester to sign the deed. The railroad company—nor any one else for that matter—won't buy the land without a clear title."

"I don't wonder that your father is worried," said Dave, sympathetically. "I suppose he feels just as bad over the continued absence of your uncle as he does over the fact that he can't sell the land and make a profit on it."

"That's just it, Dave," answered Phil. "We'd give a good deal to know what has become of Uncle Lester."

"I suppose he doesn't dare come back for fear of being arrested," was Shadow's comment. "Even if he is innocent they may be able to convict him."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you about that," burst out Phil. "Less than four months after my uncle disappeared, some men were arrested in Springfield, for a theft committed at one of the banks there. During the trial it came out that one of these criminals had been in our town during the time when the funds disappeared from our trust company. This rascal's movements were traced by the authorities, and then he was given what they call 'the third degree.' At that examination he broke down, and admitted that he had taken the funds which my Uncle Lester was supposed to have stolen. The affair created a great stir, and those who had proceeded against my uncle made all sorts of apologies to my father. They also did their best to locate Uncle Lester."

"And didn't they hear anything at all?" asked Ben.

"Not a word. We got what we thought were clues, but every one of them proved false."

"Maybe he is dead."

"That may be. But if we can't prove it, it leaves the matter of the land just as unsettled as before."

"If your uncle is alive he must remember about the land, and must know that the matter will give your father a lot of trouble," suggested Roger.

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"That is true, Roger. But when a man is accused of a grave crime like that, he isn't apt to think about other things."

"You say he is older than your father?" queried Dave.

"Oh, yes, a good deal older—ten or twelve years, at least. If he is still alive he must be well advanced in years."

"What does your father propose to do about the land?" questioned Ben, after a pause in the conversation.

"He doesn't know what to do. He's at a complete standstill."

"Won't the railroad company lease the land?" questioned Dave.

"No. They told dad that they wanted to buy and build. They prefer his land to any other in East Haven, but at the same time, if they can't get his property, they are going to look elsewhere."

"Twenty or thirty thousand dollars is a heap of money to let slip through one's fingers," was Shadow's comment. "It's a shame you can't find out where your uncle is, or what has become of him."

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"Why not advertise again?" suggested Dave. "If your uncle is still alive he must read some newspapers, and he might possibly see the notice."

"Father thinks something of doing that, Dave, but it looks like rather a hopeless case," returned Phil Lawrence. He arose from the camp-chair on which he had been sitting, and stretched himself. "But come on, fellows," he continued. "There is no use of your worrying over our troubles. We came on this little trip to enjoy ourselves, and I want all of you to have the best time possible."

"And we certainly have had a good time!" cried Dave. "Just as good a time as we had out in Yellowstone Park."

"That is, Dave, considering the girls are not along," remarked Ben, with a wink at the others.

"Well, of course that makes some difference, Ben," returned Dave, his face flushing a trifle.

"Sure it does! A whole lot of difference!" declared Roger. "Just the same, we are having a dandy time, Phil," he added hastily. "The first outing of the Oak Hall Club is a big success."

"It sure is!" broke in Shadow Hamilton. "Only I did hope we'd see a whale or some sharks or something like that," he added, regretfully.

"I suppose if you saw a shark, Shadow, you'd jump right overboard to interview him, wouldn't you?" queried Ben, and gave a snicker.

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"Say, speaking of sharks puts me in mind of a story!" cried Shadow. "Once there was a sailor who had traveled all around the world. He met a lady in Boston who wanted him to tell her a shark story. Says the sailor: 'Madam, I've seen sharks in the Atlantic an' the Pacific an' the Indian Oceans, but all of them sharks wasn't a patch to the shark I once met on land.' 'On land!' cried the lady from Boston. 'Do you mean to say that you met a shark on land?' 'I did, Madam,' answered the sailor. 'I met a shark right in New York, and he did me out of every copper I had in my pockets. He was a hotel-keeper who played cards.'" And at this little yarn there was a general smile.

"Pretty good for a fish story," was Roger's comment. "Just the same, I don't want to fall in with any sharks whether on land or at sea."

"Before we land to-night, I want to settle about this outing we expect to take at Mirror Lake," said Dave. "If you fellows are going along, we'll have to make the necessary arrangements."

"Well, you can count on me, Dave," returned Roger, promptly. "I told you at the start that I'd be glad to go with you."

"And so will I be glad to go," added Phil.

"I've got to find out what my folks want me to do first," said Shadow. He looked curiously at Dave, who was gazing far out to sea. "What are you looking at, Dave?" he asked.

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"I'm watching that smoke out there," was the answer.

"That's only the smoke from some incoming steamer," returned Ben. "I noticed that a few minutes ago."

"Maybe it is from a steamer," returned Dave, "but I don't think it is coming from any funnel."

"What do you think it is—a fire?" cried Phil. And at these words all the boys on the deck rushed to the rail.

"It looks that way to me. Let us get the glasses and find out."

"I'll get them!" cried Roger; and lost no time in disappearing into the cabin.

A minute later he reappeared with a pair of powerful marine glasses which he handed to Phil. The glasses were quickly adjusted, and the shipowner's son took a hasty look seaward.

"It's a small steamer, all right," he announced. "Just as sure as you're born, there's a fire on board."

"Fire!" repeated Roger.

"If she's on fire we ought to go to the rescue!" exclaimed Dave.

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING ABOUT THE PAST

"What's this I hear about fire?"

The question came from a burly, pleasant-faced man, who had just appeared on deck, close to the boys. It was Mr. Lawrence, the owner of the steamer.

"Why, Dad, there's a steamer out there, and we think she's on fire," answered Phil, quickly. "Here, take a look at her." And he handed over the marine glasses.

"On fire!" exclaimed Mr. Lawrence, and raised the glasses to his eyes. "By Jove, boys, I think you're right! Phil, call Captain Bradley, and be quick about it. You'll find him in the after cabin. I just left him there."

The son darted off, and while he was gone Mr. Lawrence and the boys took turns in looking through the glasses at the distant vessel. The smoke was now increasing, and as it did not come from the funnel of the steamer, there was no doubt but that the vessel was on fire.

"You sent for me, Mr. Lawrence?" inquired the captain of the steamer, as he hurried up with Phil at his heels. [Pg 12]

"Yes, Captain. There's another steamer out there, and we are pretty sure she's on fire," answered Mr. Lawrence. "Change your course and put on speed." And as he spoke the shipowner turned the glasses over to the captain.

Captain Bradley gave one searching look. "It's true! She's on fire, and we had better get to her as soon as possible!" he cried, and then hurried away to give the necessary directions. Soon the bow of the *Eaglet*, which was the name of the steamer, was headed in the direction of the craft that seemed to be in trouble.

"If she's really in danger, I hope we get there soon enough to help those on board," said Dave.

"Captain Bradley will do his best; you can rely on that," answered Mr. Lawrence, gravely. "But that steamer is farther off than some of you may imagine. Distances over the water are rather deceptive."

Many of my young readers are doubtless already well acquainted with Dave Porter. For the benefit of those who are now meeting the youth for the first time, something of an introduction may not be out of place.

When but a child of tender age, our hero had been found one day walking along the railroad tracks near the town of Crumville. He could tell nothing about himself or where he belonged, and was taken to the local poorhouse, where he remained for a number of years, finally being bound out to a retired college professor, named Caspar Potts, who was then running a small farm for his health. The professor did what he could for the lad, giving him a fairly good education. But Professor Potts was no farmer and soon got into financial 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. [Pg 13]

One of the main industries of Crumville was a large jewelry factory, owned by Mr. Oliver Wadsworth. Mr. Wadsworth had a beautiful young daughter, named Jessie, and one day through an explosion of an automobile gasoline tank, the young miss was in danger of being burned to death when Dave came to her rescue. This so pleased the Wadsworths that they came not only to the aid of the boy, but also assisted Caspar Potts, who was discovered to be one of Mr. Wadsworth's former instructors at college.

"The lad shall go to boarding-school and get a good education," said Oliver Wadsworth. And he accordingly sent Dave away from home, as related in the first book of this series, entitled "Dave Porter at Oak Hall." At that school our hero made many warm friends, including Phil Lawrence, the son of a wealthy shipowner; Roger Morr, the offspring of a United States senator; Shadow Hamilton, who was known far and wide for his yarn-spinning qualities; and many others. [Pg 14]

In those days the great cloud resting over Dave had been 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 clue, he set out on a remarkable ocean voyage, as related in "Dave Porter in the South Seas," and was gratified to fall in with his uncle, Dunston Porter, a great hunter and traveler. Then the lad came back to Oak Hall, as related in "Dave Porter's Return to School." He next went in quest of his father, as told in "Dave Porter in the Far North."

"Now they can't say that I'm a 'poorhouse nobody,'" he told his chums, after having met his father. And then, with a light heart, he came back to boarding-school once again, as related in "Dave Porter and His Classmates." Here he made more friends than ever, but likewise some bitter enemies, including one Link Merwell, the son of a ranch-owner of the West. Merwell did all he could to cause Dave trouble, but in the end was exposed and had to leave Oak Hall.

"I hope I never fall in with Link Merwell again," Dave said to his school chums, but this was not to be. Dave had not only found his father and an uncle, but he had also found a sister, Laura Porter, who was very dear to him. Laura had a young lady friend, named Belle Endicott, who lived in the Far West, and through this friend Dave and his chums, and also Laura, as well as Jessie Wadsworth, received an invitation to spend some time at the Endicott place. They had a great deal of fun and not a few adventures, all of which have been set down in "Dave Porter at Star Ranch." Not far from the Endicott place was the home of Link Merwell, and that young man, as before, tried to make trouble, but his efforts were frustrated and he left home under a cloud.

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From the ranch Dave and his chums returned again to Oak Hall, as recorded in "Dave Porter and His Rivals." Then came the Christmas Holidays, and Dave went back to Crumville, where he and his folks were now living with the Wadsworth family in their elegant mansion on the outskirts of the town. Directly after Christmas there was a thrilling jewelry robbery at Mr. Wadsworth's factory. It was Dave, aided by some of his chums, who got on the track of the robbers and trailed them to the South and then to sea, as related in "Dave Porter on Cave Island."

When our hero and his chums went back to Oak Hall they imagined that their adventures were at an end. But soon came in news of a strange man who was terrorizing the neighborhood. Some very unusual things happened, including an attempt to blow up a neighboring hotel. Some of the students were thought guilty, and fearing arrest, they fled in terror, as told of in "Dave Porter and the Runaways." Dave was not one of those who ran away, but he did go after the others, and made them come back to face the music, and also helped to clear up what had been a great mystery. Then all the boys graduated from Oak Hall, Dave receiving high honors.

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It is needless to say that our hero at that time was one of the happiest boys in the world. His folks and Jessie Wadsworth came to the graduation, which was celebrated with big bonfires, music by a band, and refreshments in the gymnasium.

Dave had promised Roger Morr that he would pay the Senator's son a visit. He did so, along with Phil and some others, and on that occasion heard about a gold mine which had been willed to Mrs. Morr, and which had been completely swallowed up by a landslide. Numerous searches had been made for this lost mine, but up to that time without result.

"Let us go in search of the lost mine," Dave had said. And how he and Roger and some of the others made the trip to the West and went on a hunt for the mine has been told in detail in the volume entitled "Dave Porter in the Gold Fields."

While the lads were on this quest, they again fell in with Link Merwell, who with Job Haskers, a former teacher at Oak Hall, was also trying to locate the lost mine. The two parties had many adventures, and when at last the missing mine was relocated, there came another landslide which nearly cost Dave and his friends their lives. When they finally reached a place of safety they were joined by a man from the other party who had suffered severely, and who told them that Link Merwell and Job Haskers, as well as a third person of the party, had been swept away to their death. Later on Dave and his friends had looked for the missing persons, but had been unable to locate them.

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The finding of the Landslide Mine, as it was called, had been of great financial benefit to the Morr family, and they had been so pleased that they had given Dave and some of the others a share in the holding. In the meanwhile our hero and his chums, along with their friends, had finished their outing in the West by a grand tour through Yellowstone Park, on which they were accompanied by Dave's sister, Jessie and Belle, and some others.

"Now you fellows have got to come on a little trip with me," Phil had said, after coming East, and had explained that a small steamer belonging to his father was then tied up at Philadelphia, getting ready for a trip to Portland, Maine, and back.

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"That will be fine," Dave had answered; and a little later a party had been made up, including Phil, Dave, Roger, and Shadow, and also Ben Basswood, who, as my old readers know, was one of Dave's old friends from Crumville. With the boys went Mr. Lawrence. When embarking on this trip, none of those on board had dreamed of the strenuous time now so close at hand.

"I wonder how long it will take us to reach that vessel?" observed Roger, after Mr. Lawrence had followed the captain.

"A quarter of an hour at least," replied Dave. "It will depend somewhat on how much steam the firemen can get up. I don't believe we are running at full speed now."

"This steamer used to be a pretty good boat," said Phil, "but she is getting old now, and I heard dad say something about laying her up for repairs next Fall."

"Wonder if we'll get a chance to do any rescue work," observed Ben.

"I guess we'll do all we can," returned Shadow.

"Look! Look!" cried Dave, pointing with his hand. "The smoke is getting thicker than ever!"

"Maybe the poor people on that steamer will have to jump overboard before we can reach them," said Phil. "A fire like that must be pretty hot."

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Soon the youths knew by the pounding of the engine that the *Eaglet* was running at increased speed. The course had been changed, and now the craft was headed directly for the burning boat.

"She's a rather small affair, that's certain," remarked Roger.

"Looks to me as if she might be a pleasure boat," remarked Phil, who, taking after his father, knew considerable about sea-going matters. "She's a private steam yacht, to my way of thinking." And later on this proved to be the case.

As the *Eaglet* drew closer to the burning vessel, the boys saw that there was great excitement on board the steam yacht. Sailors and others were rushing to and fro over the deck, and two streams of water from hoses were being directed to one part of the vessel, down a hatchway. The smoke was as thick as ever, and sometimes, as the wind shifted, the steam yacht was hidden entirely from view.

Fortunately the sea was comparatively calm, there being only a slight breeze from the northeast. As the *Eaglet* drew closer, the boys heard Captain Bradley giving directions to some of the sailors to get ready to launch two of the small boats.

"Dad, why can't we take another small boat and go out?" asked Phil of his father. "We know how to row. We did lots of it on the river up at Oak Hall."

"Very well," answered Mr. Lawrence. "But I want all of you to keep out of danger."

Soon they were within hailing distance of the steam yacht. They could now see the persons on deck plainly, and made out fully a score of men, and three or four women, and also one or two children. The smoke was as thick as ever, but so far no flames were visible.

"Save us, oh, save us!" screamed some one aboard the burning vessel. "We are burning up!"

The words had scarcely been uttered when there came from the interior of the steam yacht a dull explosion. Then, of a sudden, something that looked like a bunch of rockets flew up into the air. With a loud hissing and with sparks flying in all directions, the bunch of rockets described a graceful curve and then headed directly for the deck of the *Eaglet*!

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CHAPTER III

THE RESCUE AT SEA

"Look out there!"

"Don't let those rockets hit you!"

"Say, this is like a Fourth of July!"

Such were some of the cries that came from the boys on the forward deck of the steamer when they saw the bunch of rockets flying swiftly toward them. They had barely time to leap to one side when, with a loud hissing, two of the rockets fell on the deck not far away. The others just grazed the rail and swept overboard.

"We've got to put them out!" yelled Phil, and started to rush forward, intending to stamp on the rockets, when Dave hauled him back.

"Look out, Phil! They may be on the point of explo——"

Bang! Bang! Dave did not have time to finish what he was saying when the rockets went off in rapid succession, hurling the bits of fire in all directions. Phil was burnt a little on one cheek, and Dave and Roger each had a hand scorched, but that was all. Then, realizing that the worst was over, all the boys rushed forward and stamped out what was left of the flames.

"Anybody hurt up there?" It was a cry from Captain Bradley, who came forward on a run, followed by Mr. Lawrence.

"No. We're all right," gasped Phil. "But we might not be if it hadn't been for Dave;" and he gave our hero a grateful look.

The explosion on the steam yacht had caused a wilder panic than ever, and in a twinkling a number of those on board leaped into the water.

"Man the boats!" was the order from Captain Bradley.

The *Eaglet* had already heaved to, and two rowboats manned by the sailors and commanded by the first mate and a boatswain were soon lowered to the water. While this was being done, the boys, led by Phil and Dave, rushed to a third rowboat.

"Now be careful, boys," warned Mr. Lawrence. "Perhaps I had better go with you."

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"Just as you say, Dad," answered Phil. "We can take care of ourselves though."

"All right then, I won't go, for you may want the room for those you pick up," answered the shipowner; and a moment later the rowboat was in the water and following the other small craft to the side of the burning vessel.

Seeing those from the *Eaglet* coming to the rescue, several others leaped overboard, so that those in the rowboats had all they could do to move without hitting any one. [Pg 23]

"Save me! Save me! Don't let me drown!" yelled an elderly man, and caught hold of one of the oars.

"All right, we'll save you. Take it easy," returned the first mate of the *Eaglet*; and soon those in the mate's rowboat had the man on board. In the meantime, the boat in command of the boatswain pulled in a woman and a little boy.

Dave and his chums had their craft headed to where they had made out the forms of a woman and a girl struggling in the water. They soon reached the first of the pair, and after considerable difficulty managed to drag her on board.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" gasped the woman, as she sank down on the stern seat. "Now save Della! save Della!" she cried, and then suddenly collapsed.

Dave had his eyes on the girl, and was on the point of reaching for her when she suddenly threw up her arms and disappeared.

"She's gone under!" gasped Roger.

"Will she come up again?" asked Shadow, anxiously.

"There she is! Over there!" yelled Phil, and pointed to a spot several yards away.

A hand and an arm had shown themselves, but that was all. In less than two seconds they disappeared again. [Pg 24]

Dave had done some rapid thinking. Before leaving the steamer the boys had thrown off their coats. Now standing up, Dave cast his cap to the bottom of the boat, and made a quick dive overboard.

"He's gone after her!"

"Good for Dave! It's the only thing to do if that girl is to be saved."

"Row on and keep your eyes wide open," directed Phil. "I don't think they'll get very far away."

Dave had calculated the distance as closely as possible, and once under water he pushed ahead with all speed in the direction where he had seen the hand and arm. While at Oak Hall he had learned the trick of swimming under water with his eyes open, and this now stood him in good stead.

"There she is," he thought, as he caught sight of something white passing just to the left of him. He made a quick turn, and a few seconds later had the girl by the hand. Then Dave caught her under the arms, and treading water, brought both her and himself to the surface.

"There they are!" he heard Phil cry, and the next moment the rowboat came up close.

"Oh, oh! sa—sa—save m—me!" spluttered the girl; and breaking loose, she swung around and caught Dave tightly by the neck.



DAVE CAUGHT HER UNDER THE ARMS, AND, TREADING WATER,
BROUGHT BOTH HER AND HIMSELF TO THE SURFACE.—Page 24.

ToList

It was the strangle-hold of a drowning person, and our hero might have fared badly had not assistance been at hand. But as it was, Roger and Phil reached out, and while Shadow and Ben balanced the rowboat, this pair hauled the girl on board. Then they aided Dave in getting in.

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"Oh, oh! Is sh—she d—dead?" gasped the girl, as she looked at the woman who had collapsed on the stern seat.

"No, she has only fainted," answered Roger. "She'll soon be over it."

"How brave you are to come to our rescue!" went on the girl, turning to Dave. "I—I thought I was going to drown!" and she shuddered.

"It was a pretty close call," answered Phil. "My friend here jumped overboard just in the nick of time."

There was just then little time to say more, for others were in the water crying for assistance. In the meantime, there was another cry from the deck of the steam yacht.

"Don't jump overboard! It isn't necessary. The fire is out!"

"Hello! Did you hear that?" queried Dave. "Somebody said the fire is out."

By this time the two other rowboats had picked up eight of those who had leaped overboard. The boys succeeded in getting on board two others, a short, fat man who was puffing like a porpoise, and a young man.

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"That settles it," snorted the fat man, as he sank down on one of the seats. "No more ocean pictures for me! All the dramas I act in after this will be on dry land."

"And I sha'n't go to sea again for Mr. Appleby," answered the girl who had been rescued. She was rapidly recovering, and so was the woman on the stern seat.

"Got everybody?" yelled a man from the deck of the steam yacht. And by his cap and uniform the boys knew he must be the captain of the vessel.

"I think so," answered the first mate of the *Eaglet*.

"It was foolish of them to jump overboard," grumbled the captain of the steam yacht. "I told all of them there was no danger."

"No danger!" snorted the mate of the *Eaglet*. "How do you make that out, with all that fire?"

"It wasn't fire—that is, not much of it," was the answer. "It was mostly smoke. We have a moving picture company on board, and they had a lot of fireworks, some of 'em tied up in old sail cloth. The fireworks started to go off—why I don't know—and they set fire to the cloth, and when we wet that down it made an awful smoke. But all the stuff was in a zinc-lined compartment, so there wasn't much real danger. The worst was when those rockets went off and shot up right out of the hatchway."

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"And are you sure the fire is entirely out?" asked the mate of Mr. Lawrence's vessel.

"Just about. We'll have the men make a search, so that there won't be any further danger."

After a little more conversation the three rowboats were brought close to the steam yacht, from the side of which a ladder had been lowered.

"O dear! Are we to go back to that boat?" queried the girl Dave had saved from drowning.

She was a miss of perhaps eighteen years, tall and slender, with brown hair and big brown eyes. She appealed to our hero as she spoke.

"I don't see what else there is to do," he answered, "unless you want to be taken to our steamer."

"What place is your steamer bound for?"

"We hope to make Portland some time this afternoon."

"Oh indeed! Then I think I would rather go aboard that steamer than back on the yacht," answered the young lady. "What do you think, Aunt Bess?" she went on, appealing to the woman in the rowboat, who by this time had recovered from her plunge into the sea.

"I think I would like to get ashore as soon as possible, Della," returned the aunt. "I just hate the water, anyway, and I don't think I'll take another sea trip in a hurry." [Pg 28]

"Oh, say, Miss Ford, you might as well go back on the steam yacht. I guess the danger is all over," put in the fourth person who had been picked up—a young man about Dave's age. "Didn't you hear the captain say that the fire was out?"

"Yes, I know," answered Della Ford. "But I'm so afraid, Mr. Porton," and the girl looked rather helplessly at those around her.

"Where is that steam yacht bound for?" questioned Phil.

"We were going somewhere outside of Cape Cod," answered the stout man who had been rescued. "But I guess Mr. Appleby will have to give the trip up for the present. He's the manager of our company, you know," he added, by way of explanation.

"What sort of a company is that—a theatrical company?" asked Shadow.

"Oh, no. This is a moving-picture company—one belonging to the Appleby Film Corporation."

"Oh, then you are all moving-picture actors!" cried Ben, with interest.

"Yes," answered the young man. "But we didn't come out to get into any such scene as this," he added, with a short laugh. [Pg 29]

By this time a number of those in the rowboats had been assisted to the deck of the steam yacht, and those above were calling down to those in the rowboat manned by Dave and his chums.

"Say, young men, I'm very much obliged to you for what you did for me," cried the stout man, heartily, as he prepared to ascend the ladder. "I guess I was foolish to jump overboard when there was no great danger."

"It's too bad Case didn't get a picture of that scene," said the young man named Porton. "It would have been a dandy to work into one of the sea dramas."

"I guess that's right," returned Dave, with a grim smile.

"Much obliged to all of you," went on Ward Porton. "If there are any charges, send the bill to Mr. Thomas Appleby, the manager. He ought to reward you handsomely for saving a part of his company." And with these words he followed the stout man to the deck of the steam yacht.

"Aren't you folks coming up?" came a call from the manager of the moving-picture company, as he leaned over the rail.

"Oh, Mr. Appleby, I don't want to stay out here!" cried Della Ford, "and neither does my Aunt Bess! The young men here say their boat is going to Portland. Maybe we had better go there and take the train to Boston." [Pg 30]

"Oh, there is no use in doing that, Miss Ford," answered the manager. "The fire is out, and it is perfectly safe on board now. You had better come up here. I will help you," and he reached down with his hand.

"I don't suppose it will be just the right thing to do, to desert the company," said Mrs. Ford, the girl's aunt. "We still have to act in several scenes on the ship, you must remember."

"Very well, Aunty, just as you say," returned the girl. "But oh! I must thank this young man for what he did for me!" she went on. And at the danger of causing the rowboat to tip, she bent over and caught Dave's hand in both of her own. "Won't you please tell me your name?"

"It's Dave Porter," was the answer. "Come, let me help you up the ladder."

"My name is Della Ford, and I belong in Boston. You are a very brave young man, and I shall never forget you. Some time when you are in Boston you must come to see me."

"Thank you, Miss Ford, perhaps I will," answered Dave. And after a word or two more, he assisted the young lady up the ladder. Then the boys helped Mrs. Ford, who was still so weak that she could hardly stand.

The first mate of the *Eaglet* was on the deck of the steam yacht, talking to the captain. In the meantime several sailors were at work putting out the last sparks of the fire. Quite a quantity of [Pg 31]

fireworks had gone off, and the burnt portions were thrown overboard. The moving-picture manager explained that the fireworks had been brought along to be used in one of the film dramas.

"Might as well get back to the steamer," suggested Roger, after several minutes had passed, during which time the boys had been calling to those on the deck of the steam yacht. "We can't do anything more here."

"All right," returned Phil, and gave orders to pull away.

"Good-bye, Mr. Porter!" called out Della Ford, waving her hand. "Thank you ever so much for what you did. And don't forget to call and see me when you come to Boston."

"Good-bye," returned Dave; and a moment later the rowboat shot out of hearing and was headed toward the *Eaglet*.

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CHAPTER IV

BACK TO CRUMVILLE

"I think those on board that steam yacht can congratulate themselves because the fire was no worse," remarked Roger, when the boys had returned to the *Eaglet*.

"Yes indeed," answered Dave. "Some fires at sea are terrible things, and cause a great loss of life."

"Seems to me Dave was the hero of the occasion!" burst out Ben. "He did the really-and-truly rescue act."

"Come now, don't start anything like that!" interrupted Dave, hastily. "I only did what any of you might have done."

"I know one thing," remarked Phil, closing one eye suggestively. "Dave made some hit with the young lady he pulled out of the water."

"That's right!" agreed Shadow. "Why, do you know I thought Miss Ford was going to throw her arms right around his neck."

"Oh, cut it! cut it!" said Dave, growing red in the face. "Shadow, your imagination will be the death of you."

"Oh, I don't know," replied the former story-teller of Oak Hall, coolly. "She certainly was smitten, Dave."

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"Not at all. She was grateful, that's all."

"Just the same, Dave, if we get to Boston you'll have to call on her," remarked Roger, with a grin.

"We can all call if you feel that way about it," answered our hero. "I rather think some of you were smitten pretty badly." And at this sally there was a general laugh.

It was some time before the last of the rowboats returned to the steamer. The first mate brought a report to Captain Bradley and Mr. Lawrence, to which the boys listened with interest. The mate said that it was thought on board the steam yacht that the fire had started from a cigarette thrown away by one of the moving-picture actors, a young man named Ward Porton, but that this could not be proved. The mate stated that the captain of the steam yacht was quite upset over the occurrence, as he considered that the fire was due to carelessness, and nothing else. He had told the mate privately that it would be a long time before he would take out another moving-picture company on his vessel.

"He says they are doing all sorts of stunts on the ship, and taking pictures of 'em," went on the mate. "He says some of the actors and actresses are pretty good people, but the rest of the bunch act like wild Indians."

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"Ward Porton!" exclaimed Dave, turning to his chums. "Why, that is the young fellow we hauled out of the water!"

"That's right," returned Phil. "Maybe he got scared when he found out that his cigarette had started the fire and that was one reason why he jumped overboard."

"I didn't like the manner of that fellow at all," was Shadow's comment. "He looked like a pretty loose sort of a character."

"Well, I don't know. I thought he looked like——" began Ben, and then stopped suddenly, in

some confusion.

"Looked like what, Ben?" asked Dave, curiously.

"Oh, it doesn't matter, Dave," answered his Crumville chum. "Just the same, I can't help but think that—Oh well, never mind, let it go."

"But what did you think he looked like, Ben?" put in Phil. "Come, what are you so mysterious about?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter, I tell you," answered Ben, and now looked more confused than ever.

"Hello! Ben is trying to hide some deep and dark mystery," put in Shadow. "Come now, little boy, unlimber your mind and let us know what it is."

"Well; if you've got to know, I'll tell you. I was thinking that in some way that Ward Porton looked something like Dave." [Pg 35]

"Say, that's right!" burst out Phil, and then added quickly to our hero: "No offense, old man, but he did resemble you—only of course he was not so good-looking."

"Yes, there was some resemblance," said Roger, "but I don't think it was enough to count; so Dave needn't worry."

"I guess Mr. Ward Porton has a perfect right to his looks," remarked Dave calmly. "And if he and I resemble each other, that is nobody's fault. I don't suppose I'll ever see that fellow again." But in this surmise our hero was very much mistaken; in the weeks to come he was to see a great deal of Ward Porton.

It was not long after this when the *Eaglet* resumed her run for Portland. As the other vessel was headed in the opposite direction, they soon passed out of sight of the craft. Then Portland Light came into view, and before long the *Eaglet* was passing the numerous islands of Casco Bay.

"This would be a dandy place to pass the rest of the summer," was Roger's comment, as he and Dave stood by the rail, watching the beautiful scene as it was unfolded before them. The bay was very calm, and the numerous islands dotting it in all directions made the spot one of unsurpassed beauty. [Pg 36]

"From all accounts, Roger, I think we'll find the vicinity of Mirror Lake just as beautiful as this," answered Dave. "I have never been there, but they tell me the scenery is simply grand."

"We certainly ought to have a good time, scenery or no scenery," answered the senator's son, "with such a fine bunch of people as are going."

"Right you are!" broke in Phil. "We ought to have the best times ever at the lake."

It had been arranged by Mr. Lawrence that they should stop for three days at Portland, the owner of the steamer having a number of business matters to transact. During that time the boys continued to sleep on board, but spent the days in visiting Old Orchard Beach, Cape Elizabeth, Peak's Island, Orr's Island, and various other nearby resorts.

"It certainly is a great place," remarked Dave, on the evening of the second day. "I think a fellow could spend his whole summer here, and have a dandy time."

It had been a question whether they would stop at Boston on the return trip, but at the last minute Mr. Lawrence decided to go direct to New York City, as he had been informed that a cargo was waiting there for the steamer. [Pg 37]

"That cuts Dave out of his visit to Miss Ford," remarked Roger, after this announcement was made.

"I think it cuts you out just as much as it does me, Roger," returned our hero, with a smile. "I think, behind it all, you would like first-rate to call on her."

"I'll tell you what I would like," answered the senator's son. "I'd like to see how they take moving pictures—I mean the kind indoors."

"We may get a chance at that some day," said Phil. "I know one or two men who are in that business."

The run to New York City occurred without special incident, and soon the boys found themselves saying good-bye to Mr. Lawrence and Captain Bradley. It had been decided that Phil should accompany Dave and Ben to Crumville, he to remain with our hero at the Wadsworth mansion.

"Take care of my boy," said the shipowner, as he shook hands with Dave.

"Oh, we'll take care of him, Mr. Lawrence, don't fear," answered our hero. And then, leaving Mr. Lawrence to look after matters concerning his various vessels, the boys hurried to the Grand Central Terminal, and were soon on a train which was to take them to their various destinations. [Pg 38]

As my old readers know, Crumville was rather a small town; the only industry of importance being Mr. Wadsworth's jewelry works. The Wadsworth mansion stood on the outskirts, a large and well-constructed building, set among a number of trees and bushes. When Dave, Phil, and Ben alighted at the railroad depot, they found the Wadsworth touring-car awaiting them. Dunston Porter, Dave's uncle, was driving the car, and he had with him Dave's sister Laura, and Jessie Wadsworth.

"Oh, here they are!" cried Laura, and leaped out to embrace her brother and to shake hands with the others. Then Jessie shook hands, giving Dave an extra bright smile as she did so.

"Back from the salt, salt sea!" cried Laura, merrily. "I'll wager you were all dreadfully seasick."

"Nothing doing on that score, Laura," answered her brother. "We didn't have time to get seasick; we had too much fun."

"And too many adventures," added Phil. "Oh, I can tell you, girls, we are heroes!" and he stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, and began to strut around.

"Adventures, eh?" queried Dunston Porter. "What sort of adventures—a shipwreck?"

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"Oh, Mr. Porter, please don't talk about a shipwreck!" pleaded Jessie, agitatedly. "Why, you don't want anybody to be drowned, do you?"

"They don't look very much as if they had been in a shipwreck," responded Dave's uncle, dryly. "I was only fooling."

"We weren't in any shipwreck. But we saw a fire at sea, and we helped to pull some folks out of the water," said Ben.

"You did!" burst from both of the girls.

"Do tell us all about it," added Laura.

"Was anybody lost?" asked Jessie. And now even Dunston Porter looked much interested.

"Nobody was lost, and not even hurt, so far as I could find out," answered Dave; and then he and the others gave a few details concerning the conflagration aboard the steam yacht.

"And to think those poor people had to jump overboard!" came from Jessie, sympathetically. "Oh, Dave, wasn't that dreadful!"

"Jessie, you ought to have seen Dave playing the really-and-truly hero act!" burst out Ben.

"Now, Ben, quit it!" interrupted Dave.

"Not much, Dave! You deserve some credit, and I want the girls to know what a real, genuine, dyed-in-the-wool hero you are."

"What did he do, Ben?" asked Laura.

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"He jumped into the briny deep, and rescued the beautiful heroine of the moving-picture company," was the answer. "Oh, you just ought to have seen it, Jessie. The poor girl was going down for the last time when Dave, with a do-or-die look on his handsome face, leaped into the flying spume, and struck out boldly——"

"Ben, will you please stop?" pleaded Dave. "I never heard such foolish talk before in my life!"

"But he did jump overboard, and he did save the girl," broke in Phil. "If he hadn't gone after her she might have drowned."

"Who was she?" asked Laura; while Jessie, wide-eyed, showed her interest.

"The leading lady of the film company—a Miss Della Ford," answered the shipowner's son. "A mighty nice young lady, too—real stylish—golden-brown hair, dreamy brown eyes, and all that sort of thing, you know."

"Oh, Dave, that was splendid of you to save her from drowning!" said Jessie.

"Indeed it was!" added Ben. "And she was mighty grateful, too," he went on. "She grabbed Dave's hands for all she was worth, and, at one time, I thought she was going to throw her arms right around his neck."

"Oh, Ben!"

"Well, it seemed that way to me, anyway—and she was a stunning looking girl, too, I can tell you!"

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"She was not going to do anything of the kind, Jessie! Don't pay any attention to him," broke in Dave, and now his face was decidedly red. "Come on! Let's get into the auto and get to the house; I'm hungry," and he started to help the two girls into the tonneau of the automobile.

"We'll have to hear more of this later on," said Dunston Porter, as he started the car.

"Yes, I'd like to hear more about Miss Ford," added Jessie, in a somewhat uncertain tone.

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CHAPTER V

DAVE AT HOME

Mirror Lake was a beautiful sheet of water nestling among the mountains of the Upper Adirondacks of New York State. At the lower end of the lake, where there was a well-defined trail running to several fashionable summer resorts some miles away, were located two beautiful bungalows, one of six rooms and the other of eight rooms. They were built on a plot of ground bordering on a small cove of the lake, and extending about a thousand feet back into the woods of the mountain-side.

As my old readers will remember, Ben Basswood's father was interested in real estate, and, a year or two before, he and Mr. Wadsworth had gone into a land deal of considerable proportions. Several important transactions had resulted, and in making one of the deals Mr. Wadsworth and Mr. Basswood had become possessed of the two bungalows on Mirror Lake, the two gentlemen owning both jointly.

At first, on acquiring the property, the jewelry manufacturer had been in favor of selling it at public auction; but to this Mr. Basswood had demurred. [Pg 43]

"I think, Mr. Wadsworth," he had said, "if we hold that property for a few years it will be far more valuable than it is now. The State road has been built to within a few miles, and there is strong talk of its being carried directly past Mirror Lake. Not only that; there is also talk of the railroad putting in a spur through that district, and of course that will help a great deal."

"Very well, Mr. Basswood. If you think we ought to hold the land, we'll do it," had been Mr. Wadsworth's reply. "But what are we going to do with the bungalows in the meantime?"

"We can either use them or rent them," had been the answer.

For the past season, and also during the early part of the present summer, the two bungalows had been leased to some people from Rochester. But now both bungalows were unoccupied.

It had been Dunston Porter's suggestion that they go up to Mirror Lake on the return from the trip to Yellowstone Park, and this idea had been quickly seconded by the young folks, especially by Laura and Jessie, who had never as yet spent any time in the Adirondacks.

"They tell me the mountains are lovely, especially during the autumn," said the daughter of the jewelry manufacturer. "Oh, let us go, by all means!" [Pg 44]

"I am sure I would like it," Laura had answered. "But who will go with us?"

The matter had been talked over while the young folks were returning from Yellowstone Park, and also while Dave and Ben were at home, as well as during the voyage on the *Eaglet*. As a result it had been arranged that Mr. and Mrs. Basswood were to go up for part of the time, and also Mr. and Mrs. Wadsworth. Laura and Jessie, as well as Belle Endicott, who was coming East, were to go, along with Dave and Ben and a number of their chums. Mr. Dunston Porter and Dave's father said they would make several trips back and forth during the time the others were up there. It may be said here that the bungalows were fully furnished, so our friends had no anxiety on that score.

"We'll have the best time ever, Jessie," said Dave, in talking the matter over the day after his arrival home. "I am sure you will like it."

"Have you your things packed, Dave?" questioned his sister, who was present. "You don't want to leave that until the last minute."

"Oh, packing is getting easy to me, Laura. I feel like a regular traveler since I took those trips to Cave Island, and after the runaways, and to the Landslide Mine and Yellowstone Park."

"Oh, it was splendid, the way you relocated that gold mine, Dave!" cried Jessie. "How glad Roger and his folks must have been." [Pg 45]

"They surely were glad," answered the youth. "I never saw Roger look so happy in my life. It took a big weight off his shoulders."

"And, just to think that they are going to give you and Phil an interest in that mine!" remarked Laura. "Why, Dave, if you keep on, you'll be a rich man some day."

"Well, I sha'n't complain if I am," answered the brother, coolly.

It had been arranged that the start for Mirror Lake should be made on the following Monday morning. Some of the folks were to go as far as they could by train, but the young people had demurred, stating that they wanted if possible to make the trip by automobile.

"We can take our machine and the Basswood car," said Dave. "It won't take us more than two or three days, and it will be lots of fun."

"But what are we going to do with the automobiles after we reach Carpen Falls?" asked Dunston Porter. "You can't go any farther in an auto than that."

"Isn't there some sort of garage at Carpen Falls?" questioned Ben, who was present.

"Probably there is. Anyway, I know there is a livery stable there."

"Then we could leave the machines there until we were ready to bring them back," replied Dave. [Pg 46]

"We'll see about this later," said Dave's father, with a shake of his head. Automobiling did not appeal to him quite as strongly as it did to his son and his brother.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and Dave and Ben had arranged for a little run in the automobile, taking Laura and Jessie along. Dave ran the car, with Jessie on the seat beside him. Their course

was out of Crumville, and then over the distant hills to a winding road which ran beside the river.

"It seems so strange, Dave, to think you are not going back to Oak Hall this fall," remarked Jessie, when the automobile was bowling along over the smooth highway.

"It does seem strange," was Dave's somewhat grave reply. "Do you know, sometimes I wish I were going back again."

"Why?"

"Well, if I had to do that I wouldn't have to bother about anything else just now, Jessie. As it is, I've got to make up my mind what I am going to do. One minute I think I want to go to college, and the next I have a notion of going into some sort of business."

"What does your father say, Dave?"

"He is leaving it entirely to me. He says if I want to go to college I can do so."

"What would you like to do best of all?"

"Oh, as for that, I'd like to travel, just as Uncle Dunston does. I'd like to see the world."

"I suppose that would be nice, Dave. But still a person can't be traveling all the time," and Jessie's face clouded a trifle.

"I shouldn't want to be traveling all the time, Jessie. Some day I'll want to settle down." He gave her an earnest look. "I thought that was all settled."

"Settled? What?" And the girl gave him a quick look in return.

"Why, that I was going to settle down some day, and that you were going to settle down with me."

"Oh, indeed! That's the first I ever heard of it."

"Oh, but you know, Jessie——"

"Dave, do you know that Laura and Ben are sitting right behind us?"

"Yes, but they are busy with their own talk."

"Maybe you only think so."

"All right. But it's settled; isn't it, Jessie?"

"I don't know that anything is settled." Jessie was gazing straight ahead at the road. "How about that beautiful young lady you rescued from drowning?"

"Oh, say! Please don't bring that up," pleaded Dave, hastily. "That was all some of Ben's nonsense."

"But you did pull her out of the water; didn't you, Dave?"

"What if I did? You wouldn't have me let her drown; would you?"

"Oh, of course not. But still Ben said——"

"Oh, there you go again! Didn't I tell you that was only some of Ben's nonsense? You mustn't believe a word he says."

"Indeed! I always thought Ben was a very truthful boy."

"Oh, well, if you're going to make a mountain out of a molehill——"

"I haven't made a mountain out of anything, Dave."

"Say, who's talking about mountains on the front seat?" interrupted Ben. "I thought we were going down on the river road."

"So we are," declared Dave, somewhat sharply.

"I hope we can go up to the Adirondacks in the autos," said Laura, eagerly. "It will surely make a splendid trip."

"If we go in the autos who is going to drive?" questioned Jessie.

"I'll run our car, and I suppose Dave will run this one," answered Ben. "But we can change off with the other fellows if we want to."

The top of a small hill had been reached, and now the automobile glided down the other side in the direction of the river road. Here the way narrowed a trifle, and Dave had to give all his attention to the running of the car. As the automobile turned in toward the stream, they passed several other touring-cars, and then came in sight of a horse attached to a buggy, the two wheels of which were deep in a ditch.

"Hello! That's Mr. Aaron Poole's buggy!" exclaimed Dave.

"Yes. But it is Nat who is driving," returned Ben.

Mr. Aaron Poole was a rich money-lender, who lived not far from Crumville, and who had a son Nat, who had gone to Oak Hall with Dave and Ben. Mr. Poole was a very grasping man, and in the past he and the Porters had had a number of differences. Nat had been almost as overbearing as his father, but during the early part of the summer he had told Dave that he was going to turn over a new leaf. And since that time our hero had heard that the money-lender's son was quite a different sort of a boy, and growing better every day.

"Hello, Nat! What's the trouble?" questioned Dave, as he brought the automobile to a standstill beside the buggy.

"Trouble enough!" grumbled the money-lender's son. "Did you notice those automobiles that just went by?"

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"I certainly did. They were going at some speed."

"They were racing, that's what they were doing!" explained Nat Poole. "They were racing, and they made such a racket that it scared my horse and he landed me here in this ditch."

"It's a good thing they didn't upset you, Nat," said Ben.

"If they upset me, I would make them pay for the damages," retorted the youth in the buggy.

"Did you know them, Nat?" asked Laura, kindly.

"I know one of them. He's a high-flyer from Pittstown. The next time I see him I'll give him a piece of my mind. They've got no right to use this road for a race-track."

"Did they hurt you at all?" queried Jessie.

"I don't know as they did. But this mud in the ditch is mighty sticky, and I don't see how I am going to get out of it," grumbled the money-lender's son.

"Maybe we can give you a lift, Nat," said Dave, and got out of the automobile, followed by Ben. "Here, I'll hold the horse while you get out."

"Be careful. He's mighty skittish," warned the other. "If he gets to kicking he'll smash the buggy into kindling-wood."

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"I'm not afraid of him," answered Dave, and took a firm hold on the horse's bridle. Then Nat leaped from the buggy, and he and Ben took hold of the wheels and pushed, while Dave led the horse forward. By this means, in a minute more, the turnout was safe in the middle of the roadway.

"Much obliged to you fellows for this," remarked the money-lender's son, when all danger seemed past.

"Don't mention it, Nat. I am glad to help you," returned Dave, quickly.

"And so am I," added Ben.

"Funny thing," went on the money-lender's son. "I was coming around to your house to see you," and he glanced quickly at our hero.

"Well, you'll have to come, Nat, some time when I am home," answered Dave. "We are going off on another trip next Monday."

"Is that so? Then I'm glad I met you as I did, because I wanted to see you before you went away. I've got some strange news to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Link Merwell is alive. He wasn't killed in that landslide at all," was Nat Poole's astonishing reply.

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CHAPTER VI

NEWS OF IMPORTANCE

"Link Merwell!"

"Nat, you must be fooling!" put in Ben.

"Why, we couldn't find a single trace of him after that awful landslide!" went on Dave. "We made a thorough search, too."

"I don't know anything about that," returned the money-lender's son. "But I know Link Merwell is alive. I got a letter from him yesterday."

"Are you sure that it was not an old letter delayed in delivery?" queried Ben.

"No, it was not an old letter. It was dated only a few days ago. It was sent to me from Boston."

"Boston!" cried Laura. "Then he must not only be alive, but he must have followed us East."

"Did he say anything about Job Haskers?" queried our hero.

"He said he didn't know what had become of Haskers. He said they had separated a short while

before the big landslide struck them. He was pretty well bruised up, and had to rest in a little mining camp up in the mountains for two weeks."

"This is certainly the strangest news yet," was Dave's comment. "I thought sure that he and Haskers had been swallowed up in that landslide, along with that miner who was with them. Nat, what caused him to write to you? I thought you told me that you had destroyed his last letter without answering it."

"So I did destroy it, Dave, without answering it," returned the money-lender's son. "I was as surprised to hear from him as you would have been. I thought he would know enough to let me alone."

"What did he have to say, Nat?" questioned Ben. "Of course you haven't got to tell us if you don't want to," he added, hastily.

"That's all right. Didn't I tell you I was coming to see Dave? I was going to show him the letter. I've got it in my pocket. Here it is," and Nat brought forth the communication.

The letter was a long and rambling one which need not be reproduced here. In it Link Merwell told something of how he had been caught in the landslide, and how he had escaped and had been carried by some miners to their camp. A search had been made for Job Haskers and the man named Blugg, but without results. Then Merwell had obtained some money (probably from his father), and had come East, where he expected to obtain a position. He added that he was still as bitter as ever against Dave and his chums, and would do his best some day to "square accounts." As in his previous communication to Nat, he wanted to know if the money-lender's son would not aid him in making trouble for our hero.

"The same old Link Merwell!" remarked Dave, after he had read the letter, with Ben looking over his shoulder.

"Wouldn't you think a fellow who had been so close to death would want to reform?" said his chum. "But I suppose Link doesn't know what the word, 'reform,' means."

"Oh, Dave, aren't you afraid he will make you a lot of trouble?" cried Jessie, and her face showed her deep concern.

"I never was afraid of Link Merwell, and I don't believe I ever shall be," returned Dave, quickly. "At heart I think that fellow is a big coward."

"Yes, but you must be careful," warned his sister. "Even cowards know how to strike in the dark, and that would be Link Merwell's way of attacking you."

"I don't know how he is going to hurt Dave when he is away off in Boston," was Ben's comment. "The chances are he has got to go to work and earn his living. Probably his father is sick of putting up money for him."

"Merwell mustn't forget one thing," said Dave. "He is still responsible for his part in that jewelry robbery. If the authorities get hold of him, they will certainly send him to prison. So far as that affair is concerned, he was no better than Jasniff."

"What makes me mad is his trying to connect-up with me," burst out Nat. "I've told him twice now that I was done with him, and I want him to leave me alone."

"Were you going to answer this letter, Nat?" questioned Ben.

"No. I was going to tear it up, the same as the other. It's only got 'Boston' for an address, anyway."

"It seems to me, Nat, it might be a good thing for you to write to Link and tell him exactly what you think of him," said Dave. "Tell him you are done with him forever, and that you don't want to get any more letters. Perhaps that will settle him. Send the letter to the General Delivery."

"That's what I was going to ask you about, Dave. I don't want to have that fellow bothering me. I told you I was going to turn over a new leaf." And now for once in his life, Nat Poole looked Dave and then Ben squarely in the face.

"Then, by all means, write to him and tell him exactly where you stand," went on our hero. "Make the letter good and strong, Nat, so that there won't be any mistake about it."

"I'll do it," answered the money-lender's son. And then after a few words more, he replaced the letter in his pocket and drove on, and Dave and his party resumed their automobile trip.

"That certainly is news," was Ben's comment, as they rolled along the river road. "I thought from what you said, Dave, he must have been buried alive."

"So we all thought. His escape must have been nothing short of a miracle."

"I don't begrudge him his life, but I don't want him to bother Dave any more," said Laura. "He is such a wicked fellow."

"Dave, didn't you say, after you came from Cave Island, that Link said something about reforming?" asked Jessie.

"Yes, he did talk that way. He was very humble, and sorry that he had gone into the robbery with Jasniff. But I guess now that what made him humble was the fact that he was in danger of going to prison. As soon as he got away, his ideas changed."

"I hope he doesn't come here to bother you, Dave," sighed Laura.

"Oh, please don't think of such a dreadful thing!" cried Jessie. "If he is in Boston, I hope he

stays there." But this wish was not to be fulfilled, as we shall see later.

The ride along the river road and over the hills beyond was much enjoyed by the young folks, and it was after dark when they returned to Crumville. All told, Jessie made it very pleasant for Dave, but she could not forget the fact that the youth had rescued Della Ford from the sea, and she asked several times about the young lady and the moving-picture company to which she belonged.

"I don't know much about the picture company," Dave had answered. "I think there were about a dozen people in it, including Miss Ford's aunt and the young fellow and the fat man we picked up."

"But you said you would call on her in Boston; didn't you?" queried Jessie.

"I said I might call if I was in the city," Dave replied.

"And I suppose you'll go up there the first chance you get," pouted Jessie.

"Maybe," he answered, not altogether liking her tone. And then before anything more could be said the automobile swept up in front of Ben Basswood's home, and the conversation became general.

Ben had been on the back seat with Laura, and now as he left the party, Jessie came into the tonneau to keep Dave's sister company, so that on the journey to the Wadsworth mansion the talk between Jessie and Dave could not be renewed.

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The next two days were busy ones for our hero. He had several matters of business to attend to for his father and his uncle. Added to this, old Caspar Potts asked the youth if he would not accompany him to the old farm where the pair had spent so long a time together.

"Why, certainly, I'll go to the farm with you, Professor," replied Dave. "But what are you going to do there, if I may ask?"

"I want to get a box of books that was left in the garret there when we came away," answered the old, white-haired gentleman. "I would have brought them here before, but it slipped my mind entirely. Perhaps you remember the box?"

"Do you mean that old blue box that stood in the back of the garret?" questioned Dave.

"That's the one, David. I don't think the books in it are of very great value, but they might as well be added to the library here," went on the old professor. The Wadsworth library comprised many hundreds of volumes, and was a source of great pride to Professor Potts, who had spent many days in classifying the books and getting out a private catalogue. To please the old gentleman, Mr. Wadsworth had, from time to time, added various books and pamphlets which he might not otherwise have purchased.

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Since Dave and Caspar Potts had left the old farm, the place had been leased to another party, but now it was unoccupied, and the cottage and stable were locked up.

"Looks natural," remarked Dave, as he stood on the tiny piazza of the cottage and looked around on the familiar scene. Then his thoughts went back to the past. What tremendous changes had taken place since he had left that home! He had found a father, a sister, and an uncle, and had made a host of friends. Not only that; he was rich, and had received a good education, and was on the fair road to success.

"David!" It was Caspar Potts who spoke, and his voice trembled. "How different it is from what it used to be! Certainly your folks and Mr. Wadsworth have been great friends of mine," and the old gentleman blinked away the tears that stood in his mild eyes.

Unlocking the door of the little cottage, Dave went inside and lost no time in throwing open a number of windows, so that the fresh summer air from outside might dispel the dampness within. Then Caspar Potts entered, and both ascended the narrow stairway to the upper floor. Here was a tiny garret, which in the past had been given over mostly to the storage of old furniture and other articles not in use.

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"I trust none of the tenants have disturbed that box," remarked Caspar Potts, when Dave had lit a candle which he had thoughtfully brought along.

"I see the box, Professor," answered the youth. "Here, if you will hold the candle I will get it out." And then Dave worked his way over to a corner under the eaves, and from behind a broken rocking-chair and a dilapidated couch, dragged forth a small wooden box, painted blue. He threw back the cover, exposing to view thirty or forty books, covered with dust and yellow with age.

"Good! good!" murmured the old professor, as he brushed one of the volumes off with his coat sleeve. "Some of these books are not very valuable, David, but a few of them will add quite a little to our library. I had those volumes when I was a student at college," he added proudly.

"I'll carry the box downstairs," said Dave.

Caspar Potts, candle in hand, led the way to the floor below. As he came out into the kitchen of the cottage, he was somewhat surprised to find two persons on the porch, talking earnestly.

"Hello, you've got visitors!" said Dave, as he set the box of books down on a bare table. "Some one out for a look around, I suppose," he added.

"Maybe it is some one who would like to lease the farm," returned Caspar Potts. "Let us go out and see," and he extinguished the candle.

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Brushing the dust and cobwebs from his coat, Dave followed the old professor to the porch of the cottage. The two visitors were so busy talking that, for the instant, they did not notice the others.

"Hello there!" exclaimed Dave, in some surprise, as his eyes rested on the face of one of the visitors. "How in the world did you get here?"

"I—er—I—er—It's Mr. Porter!" stammered the fellow addressed, and he leaped quickly to his feet.

It was Ward Porton, the young man Dave and his chums had rescued from the sea when the steam yacht was on fire.

"Dave Porter! Here!" came from the other fellow who had been seated on the stoop, and now he too leaped up. "—I guess we had better leave," he stammered.

"Link Merwell!" ejaculated our hero. It must be confessed that now he was all but dumfounded. He had thought that Link Merwell must be in Boston, and to find him here on the outskirts of Crumville, and in company with Ward Porton, the fellow he had rescued, was almost beyond belief.

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CHAPTER VII

LINK MERWELL AGAIN

Link Merwell showed signs of both suffering and dissipation. His face was thin and careworn, and his eyes had an uncertain, restless look in them. He had on a business suit much the worse for wear, and his tan shoes were worn down at the heels. Evidently he had not fared well since Dave had met him in the West.

"I once thought you were dead, Link," went on Dave, after a pause, during which Link Merwell had taken several steps away from the cottage. "I thought you had been buried by that landslide."

"I know it," was the bitter reply. "It would have pleased you immensely if I had been buried alive."

"That isn't true. I wouldn't like to see anybody lose his life in that fashion," declared Dave. And then he went on quickly: "Did Job Haskers escape?"

"I don't know anything about him—and I don't want to know," returned Link Merwell, and his tone was as bitter as before. "Haskers didn't treat me right, and we separated before we got caught in the sliding rocks and dirt."

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"I didn't know that you knew Merwell," said Dave, turning to Ward Porton.

"Oh, yes. I have known him for some time," was the reply of the young moving-picture actor.

"I think we had better be going," broke out Link Merwell, who had retreated a step or two further. He showed very plainly that he was afraid Dave might lay hands on him.

"Oh, don't be in a hurry," answered Ward Porton. "Now we've got the chance, I'd like to talk to Porter."

"I don't think I'll stay," and Link Merwell moved still farther away. "I'll meet you later, you know where."

"See here, Link! Don't be in such a hurry," cried Dave, advancing toward the youth. "I want to talk to you."

"I know your game, Dave Porter! You want to catch me and hand me over to the authorities!" exclaimed Link, and showed more fear than ever.

"What makes you think that?"

"Never mind, you're not going to catch me this way! Don't forget, Porton. I'll see you later," and thus speaking, Link Merwell turned and started away on a swift walk. Then, as Dave went after him, he broke into a run, and reaching the roadway, dived into the woods beyond.

"My, my!" came from old Professor Potts. "David, why did he run away?"

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"He's afraid of being arrested; that's why, Professor," explained our hero. "Don't you remember, he is one of the villainous fellows who robbed Mr. Wadsworth's jewelry works a year or so ago?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure!" murmured the old gentleman. "I remember now. What an awful thing for a young man like that to be such a criminal!"

"You say he is a criminal?" asked Ward Porton, curiously.

"He certainly is," answered Dave.

"Hum! I didn't know that," returned the young moving-picture actor, and for the moment looked quite thoughtful.

"May I ask what brought you to Crumville?" queried our hero. "I thought you and your company were bound for Boston."

"We did go to Boston, and the company is there now, unless it has gone up into the woods. I had a little business in this vicinity, and so I came here before going on the next trip with them."

"Did you come to Crumville with Merwell?"

"I did, but I didn't know he was a criminal."

"Then you must have met Merwell in Boston?"

"No, I met him on the steam yacht."



THEN, AS DAVE WENT AFTER HIM, HE BROKE INTO A RUN.—Page 63.

ToList

"The steam yacht! Do you mean the one that caught fire?"

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"Of course."

"Then Link Merwell was on board that vessel?" cried Dave, in added wonder.

"Yes."

"Was he a member of your company?"

"He was. Mr. Appleby, our manager, took him on the day before we went on the trip. I don't know where Mr. Appleby met him."

"That certainly beats the Dutch! Of course, Merwell must have seen me and my friends in the rowboat."

"He said he did."

"He took good pains to keep out of sight!"

"I don't know anything about that, Porter. But he was on the boat, you can take my word for that."

"And is he a regular member of your company?"

"He is to be, provided he can make good at the business. I think he came to Mr. Appleby with some sort of a hard-luck story, and the manager said he would give him a chance. Privately, though, I don't think he's very much of an actor. But then you know, a fellow has got to do something for a living."

"He can probably act as well as the majority," answered Dave. "But I am surprised to learn that he was on the steam yacht and didn't show himself to us. Still, he was probably afraid to do so, and glad enough to keep out of sight. I suppose he brought you to this farm?"

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"Oh, we just took a walk up this way," returned Ward Porton, with some hesitation. He gave Dave a keen look. "You see, I was on my way to the Crumville poorhouse. By the way, Merwell told me that you had once been connected with that institution," and he gave Dave another keen look.

Our hero's face flushed, and for the instant he did not know what to say. Caspar Potts, too, showed confusion.

"David was not—er—connected with that institution, sir," said the old gentleman, hurriedly. "He was placed there when he was a child by those who found him wandering along the railroad tracks here. They did not know who he was, and——"

"I don't think Mr. Porton will be interested in that story, Professor," interrupted our hero.

"Well, to tell the truth I am interested," answered Ward Porton. "I once lived in a poorhouse myself."

"Indeed! Is that so?" murmured Caspar Potts. "How interesting!"

"It wasn't anywhere around here, though," went on the young moving-picture actor. "It was 'way down East. And believe me, it was a hard life! I don't really see how I pulled through," and he smiled, grimly.

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"I can't say that I had such a very hard time of it," said Dave. "They treated me fairly well, and as soon as I got old enough to work, Mr. Potts here took me and not only gave me a good home, but also the beginning of a good education. Then, after that, I found my folks—I had been stolen away from them you see when a baby—and since that time I have had an easy time of it."

"You're the lucky one then," answered Ward Porton. He seemed on the point of saying something more, but evidently changed his mind. "Well, if it's all the same to you, I'll be going," he concluded.

"Better take my advice, and drop Link Merwell," said Dave, as the young man moved away. "If you don't, sooner or later he'll get you into hot water. The authorities want him, even though they got back the things he stole."

"I'll remember what you say," was the answer, and then the young moving-picture actor walked away, and soon disappeared around a bend of the road.

"It is very strange that they should have come here," remarked Caspar Potts, when he and Dave re-entered the cottage to get the box of books.

"I should say it was!" answered our hero. "I don't understand it at all. I believe Link Merwell is up to another one of his tricks. I'm going to keep my eyes open for him."

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When Dave returned home he told the others there of having met Link Merwell and Ward Porton. Mr. Wadsworth was, of course, particularly interested in Merwell, and he at once telephoned to the authorities to be on the lookout for that individual. But Link Merwell had probably taken warning, and did not show himself again. Nor, for the time being, did Dave see anything further of Ward Porton.

On Friday Belle Endicott, Laura's friend from the West, arrived, and was followed on Saturday morning by Roger and Phil. Ben brought word that he had written to Luke Watson and Shadow Hamilton, and that those two former pupils of Oak Hall had also signified their willingness to accompany the party to Mirror Lake.

"And say, Dave, what do you think!" cried Ben. "This place that we are to go to at Mirror Lake is known as Bear Camp. They tell me the bears just love that vicinity."

"Bear Camp!" shrieked Jessie, who was present. "Oh, Ben, you are fooling!"

"Not a bit of it, Jessie. My father got a letter from Tad Rason, an old hunter and guide who lives in the vicinity of Mirror Lake. He says that that place has been known as Bear Camp for years. He told about shooting a big black bear there only a year or so ago."

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"O dear, if there are bears up there I don't know that I want to go!" said Laura. "Just think of having a big bear chase you!"

"Oh, you mustn't mind that, Laura!" cried Dave, gaily. "Just think of the nice hug he could give you," and then he dodged, as Laura threw a fancy pillow at him.

"I think those bears will spoil everything," came from Jessie, her face clouding. "I didn't know any wild animals were left in the Adirondacks."

"Bear Camp," mused Laura. "What a queer name that is!"

"I think it's a fine name," answered Ben. "It suits me, anyway."

The boys were glad to see Belle Endicott, who was a large, well-built girl, with a bright, breezy, western air about her. Belle had much to tell concerning matters at Star Ranch; and Dave asked her about many of the friends he had made among the cowboys at the place.

"Oh, I'll just love to see bears," said Belle, when told about the camp. "They are such funny, clumsy creatures. Why, I once saw a little cinnamon bear climbing up a tree, and he was the funniest fellow I ever looked at."

"Oh, Belle! Weren't you frightened?" asked Jessie.

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"Frightened? What, with Sid Todd with me? No, indeed! We just watched him until we got tired of it, and then Todd up with his rifle, and that was the end of Mr. Cinnamon Bear."

"Good for Sid!" cried Dave. "He was always on hand when wanted. I'd like to see him again."

"Well, he sent his regards to you, Dave," was Belle's rejoinder.

Shadow Hamilton and Luke Watson, the latter carrying a case containing his guitar and his banjo, arrived on Saturday afternoon. They came to Ben's house, and, having been notified by telephone, Dave hurried over to see them.

"Dave, you're a sight for sore eyes!" said Luke Watson, as he gave our hero's hand a grasp that made him wince. "My gracious, it seems to me that I haven't seen you in a year of Sundays!"

"One thing's sure, Luke," answered Dave, with a twinkle in his eyes. "You haven't seen me since I've seen you," and at this remark both laughed.

"Luke has brought his instruments along," said Ben, "so we'll be sure to have plenty of music up at the camp."

"It suits me, and will surely suit the girls," returned Dave. "We can sit out in the moonlight nights, and have fine times singing," he added.

"Say! talking about singing in the moonlight, puts me in mind of a story," burst out Shadow. "Once on a time a young fellow went to serenade his girl, and——"

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"Never mind the yarn now, Shadow," said Ben. "I've got something to tell you that is more interesting than a story. It's about Nat Poole's uncle."

"Nat Poole's uncle?" queried Dave. "You don't mean Wilbur Poole, the wild man we caught in the woods back of Oakdale?"

"That is the man."

"What of him? I thought they had taken him to a sanitarium, and that he was getting better."

"So he was getting better—in fact he was almost well, so Nat said. But now what do you think has happened?"

"What?" came from all of the other boys.

"He has disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"That's it. He has run away, and nobody knows where he went to."

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CHAPTER VIII

OFF FOR BEAR CAMP

"Who told you this, Ben?" asked Dave.

"I just got the story from Nat. He and his family are very much worried. They had an idea that Wilbur Poole was practically well again, and that is the reason why they did not watch him very closely."

"Of course they are searching for him?"

"Sure! Nat said the authorities and also several other people were after him. Nat himself was going to look for him to-morrow."

"Maybe we'll run across him," said Luke Watson.

"I hope we don't, Luke!" exclaimed Dave. "That man gave us trouble enough up at Oak Hall."

"Right you are there!" burst out Shadow. And then he added: "I wonder if he'll call himself the King of Sumatra, as he did before?"

"A man who is out of his mind is apt to call himself anything," said Dave. "I feel sorry for Nat. This must worry him and his family a good deal."

It was not long after this when all the boys went over to the Wadsworth mansion, there to complete their preparations for the trip to Mirror Lake. Ben had had the Basswood automobile thoroughly overhauled, and Dave had likewise had the Wadsworth touring-car put into the best possible running shape.

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"My, but there is going to be quite a bunch of us!" was Dave's comment, as he looked at the boys and girls who were present.

"Mamma says we must finish all our packing to-night or else do it Monday morning," said Jessie. "She doesn't want any of it done on Sunday."

"My things are all ready, and so are Belle's," returned Laura. "But I don't know how it is with the boys."

"We'll be all right; don't you worry," answered Dave.

"We never got left yet," added Ben, with a grin.

Luke had brought along his banjo, and the others insisted that he play a tune or two. Then they sang a couple of songs; and after that the Wadsworth phonograph was started, and the young folks enjoyed an hour or so of dancing.

Sunday morning most of the young folks went to church, and in the afternoon some of them spent their time in writing letters. Dave and several of the boys took a walk around the town. At the railroad station they ran across Nat Poole. [Pg 74]

"I am off to look for my Uncle Wilbur," said Nat. "We've an idea that he went to Plattsburg, New York. He used to have some friends there, and we think he started off to visit them."

"I certainly hope you find him, Nat, and that he's all right," answered Dave, kindly.

"By the way, I heard Link Merwell was in town," went on the money-lender's son.

"Yes. I met him at our old farm."

"I should think he'd be afraid to show himself, fearing arrest."

"He's a strange fellow, Nat, and there is no telling what he will do. He has been knocked around so much the last few months that I suppose he doesn't care very much what happens next."

"I don't want to see him. I've got troubles enough without running into Link Merwell," grumbled Nat; and then his train came in and he was off.

During their spare time the boys had studied an automobile road-map of New York State, and especially of the Adirondack Mountains. They had figured out that they would have good traveling nearly the whole of the distance, although there were a few bad stretches here and there to be covered, and also a number of mountains to be climbed. [Pg 75]

"But the mountains won't bother us," said Dave, in reply to a question from Luke. "Our car can go up almost any hill, and the Basswood auto is just about as good. Of course we'll have to do some of the traveling on low or second gear."

"The reason I asked was this," returned Luke. "A couple of years ago some friends of mine started to tour the Adirondacks in a runabout. They went up the side of one mountain, and then down on the other. They then found themselves in a valley, and couldn't climb the grade on either side. They tried for two days to get out, and then had to get a team of horses to pull them a distance of several miles."

"We'll watch out that nothing like that happens to us," answered Dave. "We won't go down into any hollow until we know something about how we are going to get out of it."

As both touring-cars were large, it had been decided that Mr. and Mrs. Basswood, as well as Dunston Porter, should accompany the young folks on the automobile trip. As all the baggage had been packed and either shipped forward by express or strapped on the touring-cars, it did not take long on Monday morning to get ready to start. It was a clear and fairly cool day, and a slight shower Sunday night had laid the dust. [Pg 76]

"All aboard that's going!" cried Dave, gaily, when the Wadsworth car had been run around to the front of the mansion.

He had hardly uttered the words when there came the sound of an automobile horn from the road, and a few seconds later the Basswood car came into sight with Ben's crowd on board.

"You'll say good-bye to us here, but we'll be at Mirror Lake before you get there," said Mrs. Wadsworth, as she kissed her daughter and the other girls.

"Now look out for accidents!" cautioned Dave's father.

"We'll be careful," answered Dunston Porter, with a smile. And then he added to Caspar Potts: "Professor, don't forget to take good care of the place while we are away."

"It shall be well taken care of, rest assured of that, sir," was the old gentleman's reply. "I trust all of you enjoy the outing," he went on, his kindly face beaming.

Dave was at the wheel, with his uncle beside him, and the others packed rather tightly in the tonneau behind. With many a shout and merry word, the Wadsworth touring-car left the grounds, followed by the Basswood machine, and passed out along the highway leading north from Crumville. [Pg 77]

"Now Dave, do look where you are running," cautioned Laura. "We don't want any punctures or blow-outs."

Soon Crumville was left behind, and the automobiles were passing along the river road where some time before Dave and his chums had assisted Nat Poole. Then they began to climb the distant hills, and presently were on the highway leading to Poughkeepsie, where they were to cross the Hudson River.

"If only this lovely weather holds out I'm sure we'll have a splendid trip," said Jessie.

"I suppose, Belle, you'd rather be on horseback than in an auto," remarked Phil.

"Well, I won't go back on horseback-riding," returned the western girl, "I love it too dearly. But this is very nice," she added, quickly. "Very nice indeed!"

By noon they reached the city on the Hudson River, and there stopped for lunch. Then they passed over the high bridge spanning the stream and struck out northward once more. Mr. Dunston Porter was now running the car, and this gave Dave more of a chance to talk to those behind him.

That evening found them in Albany, where it had been decided to spend the night. Dunston Porter had already telegraphed ahead for hotel accommodations, so there was no difficulty on that score. The older folks were glad enough to rest during the evening, but the young people went out for a walk up the hill leading to the Capitol building.

In the morning the tourists were rather alarmed to see that the sky had clouded over, and there were some indications of rain.

"Well, if it rains we can put on our raincoats and put up the tops," said Dave. So far they had been traveling with the tops folded down.

Noon found them well up in the heart of New York State. They stopped only for a short while at lunch time, wishing to cover as much ground as possible before the storm might break.

"If possible we want to make Rayville to-day," announced Mr. Basswood, when the two cars had come to a standstill at a crossroads. "I've got some friends living there, and I want to make a call on them. Besides, there's a good hotel there, where we can stop for the night," for they had made no arrangements beyond Albany.

There had been a signboard at the crossroads, but this had fallen down, so the tourists did not know which of the forks of the road to take. Finally a man, coming along in a runabout, told them to take the highway on the left.

"That other road is the regular one," he explained, "but it is pretty well torn up, and you'll make time by taking this one. But be careful of the hill, it's just a little bit dangerous."

"We'll be careful," answered Dave, who was now running the car once more.

"Want me to take the wheel?" questioned his uncle.

"Oh, no, I guess I can get along all right."

The Basswood car, with Ben in charge, had already taken to the highway on the left, and the other turnout followed it at a distance of several hundred feet. Ben had put on considerable speed, and Dave had to watch closely to keep the other car in sight.

"Take it easy, Davy," said his Uncle Dunston. "We don't want any accidents away out here from any garage."

"I want to keep Ben in sight. He's going it pretty lively," answered Dave.

"Yes, it's a wonder his father doesn't hold him back a little. But Mr. Basswood said he was anxious to reach Rayville, and that's at least twenty miles farther."

Ahead were several turns in the road, and at these Dave lost sight of the car ahead. Being cloudy, it was quite dark on the roadway, especially where the trees lined the highway, and soon Dave found it necessary to turn on the headlights. Then he sounded his horn, expecting to get a reply from Ben, but to his surprise none came.

"Do you know what I think he's trying to do?" said our hero, hastily. "I believe he's trying to run away from us."

"It's a foolish thing to attempt, Dave, on a strange road like this," answered Dunston Porter, gravely. "I should think Mr. Basswood would stop it."

Presently they were climbing a long hill. The road wound in and out among the trees, and at one place the grade was so steep that Dave had to throw the clutch into low gear. He and his uncle listened intently, and from a distance heard the chug-chug of the other car a long way ahead.

"Say, this is some climb, believe me!" cried Roger, as they made another turn, and Dave found it advisable to come down to low gear.

"What will you do if you can't make it, Dave?" queried Phil.

"Oh, we'll make it—don't worry," was the answer. "I threw into low gear just for safety's sake. This road twists so a fellow can't see fifty feet ahead of him."

"I don't hear the other car any more," declared Roger, a moment later.

To this Dave did not reply. There was another turn ahead, and a particularly hard climb over some rather rough rocks. Then, with a jolt, the big touring-car came out on the top of the hill. Here was another turn, and then began a sharp descent.

"Stop here a minute, Dave!" ordered the youth's uncle, and then, as our hero brought the machine to a standstill, he added: "That's rather a bad road ahead, and you had better give the other car a chance to get down before we try to make it."

"A good idea, Uncle Dunston. We'll wait," answered Dave.

As they stood there all strained their ears to catch some sound from the other car.

"I don't hear it at all," said Roger.

"All I hear is the breeze in the trees," put in Laura.

"They must be running without power," answered Dunston Porter.

"If they are going down a really steep hill, it's a wonder we don't hear some squeak from the brakes," was Phil's comment.

"Listen!" cried Dave, suddenly, and held up his hand.

All strained their ears once more, and now far below them they heard several cries mingled with a shriek. Then came a sudden crash, followed by more shrieks.

"They've had an accident!"

"Wonder what it was?"

"We'll have to go and see!" cried Dave, and put on the power once more.

"That's right!" cried Dunston Porter: "Get down there as fast as you can, Dave. But be careful—we don't want to run into them, or have any accident of our own. There must be something wrong down there!"

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CHAPTER IX

ON THE ROAD

"Perhaps they have gone off into some ditch!"

"Maybe they bounced off a rock and hit a tree!"

"A fellow could easily break a wheel on this rough road!"

"Oh, I hope none of them have been hurt!"

Such were some of the remarks that came from those in the tonneau of the touring-car, as Dave put on the power and started down the winding road which led to the bottom of the long hill.

"Better keep her in low gear, Dave," said Dunston Porter, as the car struck a rather steep incline. "The engine will help hold her back."

"I think I can hold her with the brakes, Uncle Dunston," answered the youth, who had already thrown off the power. He had the foot-brake well down, and now he threw in the emergency as well.

On and on slipped and slid the big touring-car, bumping over a road which seemed to grow worse as they progressed. All of the lights were on full, and they were needed, for the road turned and twisted in such a fashion that but little could be seen ahead. In some places the highway seemed extra narrow, this being caused by the heavy trees and bushes lining both sides. At one point the water had caused quite a washout, and into this and out again they bumped with such violence that all the girls shrieked in alarm.

"Some bump that!" was Roger's grim comment.

"O dear, I thought sure I'd be jounced out!" cried Jessie. "Dave, can't you go a little slower?"

"I'll try," returned the youth, and jammed down the foot-brake as hard as he could. For an instant the touring-car came almost to a standstill, but presently they slid onward again, coming a moment later to another bend.

"Look out! Don't run into us!" It was a yell from in front, and now Dave saw Luke Watson standing in the roadway, waving his handkerchief.

Down in the darkness beyond Dave made out the red, rear-light of the Basswood automobile. As the second touring-car came on Luke leaped to one side, but his warning had had its effect, and now Dave jammed on both brakes with all the force at his command, at the same time swerving slightly to the left. He just grazed a trunk strapped to the back of the first machine, and then came to a halt on a water-break a short distance beyond.

"Somebody get out and put a few stones under the wheels!" cried Dave, who could not leave his seat because of one foot on the brake.

"All right, we'll fix it!" cried his uncle, and leaped out, followed quickly by the boys in the tonneau of the car.

Loose stones were to be had in plenty, and soon the car wheels were well blocked. Then Dave was able to join those on the ground.

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"Shall we get out?" asked Laura, anxiously.

"Suit yourselves," returned Dunston Porter, who was already moving in the direction of the other car.

The Wadsworth machine contained a hand flashlight, and getting possession of this, Dave and his chums hurried toward the other automobile. They had already seen at a glance that the Basswood touring-car had swung around to the side of the road, and that one front wheel was held fast between a large rock and a fair-sized tree. Apparently the car was not hurt, and no one seemed to be injured.

"How did it happen, Ben?" sang out Dave, when he saw that the accident was not a serious one.

"Funniest thing you ever heard of," returned his chum. "You couldn't possibly guess it."

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"Didn't you slip on the rocks?" queried Phil.

"It was a cow put us here," said Mr. Basswood, gravely. "Just a plain, every day, red cow." And in spite of the accident his eyes had a twinkle in them.

"A cow!" came from several of the others, in wonder.

"Yes, a cow!" answered Ben, and his tone showed his deep disgust. "I was going down the hill just as nicely as you please when along came a cow. A man was driving her, and when he saw us coming he did his best to get the cow out of our way. But that mooly didn't budge from the middle of the road, so I had to turn to one side—and this is the consequence."

"But I am so thankful that no one was hurt," broke in Mrs. Basswood. "Think of what might have happened if the car had turned over!" and she shuddered.

"But where is the cow?" questioned Roger.

"Oh, as soon as she had put us in this hole she turned tail and ran down the hill as fast as she could, and the man went after her," explained Mr. Basswood.

"I guess the man ran away because he was afraid we might hold him responsible for damages," remarked Shadow. "Say! this puts me in mind of a story," he added. "One time a cow got on the front piazza of a house, and——"

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"For gracious sake, Shadow! I guess you'd want to tell stories at a funeral," burst out Ben. "Never mind your yarn now. Let us see if we can get this machine out from between this rock and that tree."

"You didn't break the steering-gear, did you?" asked Dave, anxiously, as he allowed the flashlight to play over and around the touring-car.

"I don't believe I hurt anything, Dave. But of course I can't be sure until I try to run the car," answered Ben. "What's worrying me is: How am I going to get out of this fix? I don't believe I can back out—in fact it wouldn't be safe."

"Looks to me as if we'd have to chop the tree down to get out of here," commented Luke, who had come back from where he had signaled the other car.

"I think I see a way of aiding you," said Dunston Porter, who was examining the rock that held the wheel to the tree. "I think if we dig under the edge of this rock, we can loosen it and roll it down the hill. Then we'll be able to lift the front of the automobile around—that is if we can keep the machine from sliding down on us."

"We can easily fix that part of it," answered Dave. "All we've got to do is to take that towing-rope we brought along and fasten it to a tree and the back axle of the car."

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"That's the talk, Dave!" cried his uncle. "Get the rope and make it fast at once."

While our hero and several of the other boys were adjusting the towing-line which had been brought along for emergencies, Dunston Porter and Mr. Basswood set to work to loosen the rock which held the wheel. This was no easy task, but finally, with the aid of a hammer and a small crowbar, it was accomplished, and the rock slid down the roadway. Then the automobile began to start forward.

"Look out there!" cried one of the boys. "This line may not hold!"

"That will hold two cars like that," answered Dave. The rope strained and creaked, but did not break, and soon those in front of the car had the machine jacked around once more in a straight position, headed down the road.

"Now Ben, I guess you're all right again," said Dave.

"Provided I don't meet that cow again," was the retort. "How about that rope?"

"I'll unfasten it for you just as soon as you are ready to start."

"I think I'd rather walk to the foot of the hill," remarked Mrs. Basswood, timorously.

"Let us all walk down. I'll be glad of the exercise," cried Belle, who was tired of being cramped up in the tonneau of the automobile.

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"Oh, but maybe that cow will get after us," exclaimed Jessie.

"Pooh! who's afraid of a cow!" cried the western girl, who had been brought up to face hundreds of animals on her father's ranch.

"Well, I think we had better let the automobiles go first, anyway," suggested Laura. "We don't

want them to come along and run over us," she added, playfully.

Soon Ben and his chums were in the first of the touring-cars. Dave released the rope, and the automobile resumed the descent of the hill. Then the towing-line was wound up and thrown into the tonneau of the second car, and that also resumed its journey.

Down at the foot of the long hill they met the cow and her owner, a tall, cadaverous-looking individual, who eyed our friends frowningly.

"I see you got your cow all right enough," remarked Ben.

"So I did, but I'd a mighty long run to stop her," growled the man.

"You put us in quite a hole; do you know that?" went on Ben.

"Tain't none of my fault," replied the owner of the cow, quickly. "I have as much right on this road with my cow as you have with that there autymobile." [Pg 90]

"Just the same, you had no right to let your cow keep to the middle of the road," cried Ben. "If we had had a worse accident we might have held you responsible."

"Huh! Hold me responsible, eh? Well ye wouldn't have got a cent out of me," said the owner of the cow, and then he passed on up the hill once more, driving the animal before him. The cow was contentedly chewing her cud, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened to disturb her.

A quarter of a mile further on our friends came to a small stream spanned by rather a shaky-looking bridge, over which each machine was run with great care. On the other side of the stream they came to another fork of the road.

"Here's a signboard anyway!" cried Dave, whose car was now in advance. "*Rayville Four Miles.*" We'll be there soon if this road holds out."

"I think you'll find the roads around Rayville all right," called Mr. Basswood to him. "My friend told me that they were in good condition, especially those on the other side of the town."

A quarter of an hour later found the two touring-cars in the village where Mr. Basswood's friend resided. Here, as the gentleman had said, was located a fairly good hotel, where accommodations for the night could be had. [Pg 91]

"Now, I'm going to go around and see my friends," said Mr. Basswood. "Ben, you and your chums can stay here at the hotel. We'll be back before it's time to retire," and then he set off in the touring-car, taking his wife with him.

As the hotel at Rayville made a specialty of catering to automobile parties, our friends found the accommodations there both ample and satisfactory. After the hard run of the day, the girls and the boys were glad to rest awhile. Then they fixed up for dinner, which was served to them in a private dining-room, apart from the other patrons of the house. As might be expected, they had a good deal of fun, and Shadow was allowed to tell several of his stories, much to his own satisfaction if not to that of his listeners.

"By this time to-morrow night we ought to be at Bear Camp," said Dave, after they had finished dinner and gone out on the hotel veranda to watch what little was going on in the town.

"I guess it will be a good deal more lonely than it is here, Dave," observed Jessie.

"There will be too many of us to be lonely," he answered. "I'm looking forward to some splendid times."

"Oh, so am I, Dave, and I am sure the others hope to have good times, too."

It was about ten o'clock when Mr. and Mrs. Basswood came back to the hotel, having spent a very pleasant evening with their friends, who had wanted them to remain over night. [Pg 92]

"I've got some news that I want to telegraph to Crumville," announced Ben's father, as he came in. "News that may interest Mr. Poole."

"What is that, Dad?" questioned his son, curiously.

"Why, Mr. Dobson spoke about a strange sort of man who called on him yesterday. He thought the man was out of his mind. He said the fellow asked for work first, but then said he didn't care whether he got a job or not, because he had to take the night express for Sumatra."

"A strange man who wanted to take the night express for Sumatra!" exclaimed Dave. "It must have been 'The King of Sumatra'—Wilbur Poole!"

"Just exactly what I think, Dave," answered Mr. Basswood.

CAUGHT IN A STORM

"Did you ever know this Wilbur Poole, Dad?" questioned Ben.

"Yes, I met him years ago at Aaron Poole's home. But of course he was in his right mind then. Poor chap! I pity him very much."

"I think we all pity him," answered Dave. "Nobody can be responsible after his mind breaks down."

"I feel sorry for Nat Poole and his folks," said Laura. "This will give them a great deal of trouble, not to mention the expense."

"If Wilbur Poole was anywhere around Rayville it might pay to start a hunt for him," suggested Roger.

"I don't think you'll find him anywhere around here," answered Mr. Basswood. "But it won't hurt to take a look around, if you boys care to take a walk."

Ben's father went off to send his telegram to Aaron Poole, and all the boys set off on a hunt for the wild man. They covered the streets of the village and some of the roads on the outskirts, but without success. They met three people who had talked to the strange individual, and from what had passed Dave and his chums were sure that the man must have been Wilbur Poole.

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"I guess we'll have to give it up," said Phil, when it was getting late. "I'm tired out. And remember, fellows, we have a hard ride before us to-morrow if we expect to reach Carpen Falls in time to hit the trail for Bear Camp before it gets dark."

When the boys reached the hotel the girls were anxious to hear what they might have to tell.

"It's too bad," said Jessie, soberly. "I am glad it is not one of my relatives who is roaming around like that."

Both Dunston Porter and Mr. Basswood had suggested an early start on the following morning, so the entire party were downstairs and to breakfast by seven o'clock. In the meantime the two automobiles had been overhauled, and provided with oil and gasoline, as well as with water.

"I've got rather a bad cut on one of the rear wheels," said Ben. "Perhaps I had better change the shoe before we start."

"Oh, take a chance on it!" cried Luke. "I think you'll get through all right enough."

"Perhaps Luke; but if I don't, that blow-out will cost me a fine inner tube. However, I'll take the chance. Get in everybody, and we'll be off!"

As Mr. Basswood's friend had said, the road leading from Rayville northwestward was in fine shape, and they were able to cover the next thirty miles at a fair rate of speed. But then they got in among the hills, and here the road became as winding and dangerous as ever.

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Not knowing much about the stopping-places ahead, the grown folks had had the hotel people put up a substantial lunch for the tourists, packed in two hampers.

"It will be jolly fun camping out this noon," said Laura. "It ought to just suit you, Belle."

"It certainly will!" was the answer from the western girl. "I'd rather eat in the open than in the stuffy dining-room of a hotel any time."

"There may be one drawback to having lunch outdoors," said Phil. "It looks like rain."

"Phil, if you say rain again I'll throw you out of the car!" cried Roger.

"I must admit it does look a little like rain," said Laura, casting her eyes skyward. "That's an awfully black cloud over yonder. O dear, rain would spoil it all! I do hope it holds off!"

Dave had been running the car, but now his uncle insisted upon taking the wheel. Then Roger climbed over onto the front seat, giving the one he had been occupying beside Jessie to our hero. They were in the lead, with the Basswood turnout not far behind.

"This is more like," said Dave, in a low tone to Jessie.

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"Oh, well, I suppose you had to do your share in running the car, Dave," she replied, giving him a bright look.

"I don't believe Uncle Dunston cares as much for driving as he pretends," went on the youth. "Behind it all, he is a good deal like Belle—he prefers to be on horseback. He was brought up to it."

"He has certainly been a great traveler, Dave."

"Yes, indeed! And I would like to be just like him. I'd love to travel."

"And where would you go if you had the chance?"

"I don't know. Maybe around the world," and Dave's eyes lit up as he spoke.

"Around the world! And would you go all alone?"

"All alone? Not if I could get anybody to go along with me! Wouldn't you like to take a trip like that, Jessie?" and he gazed at her fondly.

"Oh, Dave!"

"Well, it would be a great trip for both of us; wouldn't it?"

"Dave, don't be silly," and Jessie blushed deeply. "We are not going around the world yet, we are going to Bear Camp, and that's plenty far enough."

"Yes, I know, Jessie. But you see"—and Dave lowered his voice—"I want to make sure that when I go you'll go with me. It will then be the finest trip that ever anybody—"

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Bang! It was a report like that from a small cannon, and came from close beside them. Jessie gave a scream, and so did Laura and Mrs. Basswood, while cries of wonder and alarm came from the boys. The Basswood car had come up alongside of the other automobile, and just at that instant the tire which Ben had said was cut blew out, sending a shower of dirt and stones in all directions. Mr. Basswood, who was at the wheel, brought the car to a quick stop, and Mr. Porter also halted.

"Well, it went, just as I thought it might," remarked Ben, grimly.

"Too bad!" returned Luke. "I reckon it was my fault. I should have let you put on that other shoe before we started."

"It's nobody's fault!" cried Mr. Basswood, quickly. "Now then, boys, we'll see how soon we can get another shoe on."

Many hands made the labor of jacking up the car and changing the tire a light one. Fortunately the automobile was equipped with a pump attached to the engine, so that blowing up the tire by hand was unnecessary.

"This is only a little exercise to get up an appetite for that lunch," remarked Dave, gaily. "We want to do full justice to the stuff in the hamper."

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"As if there was ever anything the matter with your appetite!" cried Phil, dryly.

"Why Philip, my son, you know I never eat more than a bird!" retorted Dave, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Humph! A bird, eh? I guess you must mean an ostrich," retorted the shipowner's son, and at this sally there was a general laugh in which even Dave joined.

"Just eleven o'clock," remarked Luke, consulting his watch. "When do we stop for that lunch?"

"At twelve o'clock precisely," answered Mrs. Basswood. "That is, of course, if we happen to be in the right kind of a place. We don't want to stop just anywhere."

"Might eat the lunch while we were running," suggested Roger. "It would make it last so much longer."

"Wow! What a joke!" cried Phil.

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story!" burst out Shadow. "A fellow named William took his best girl for a trip by train to another town, and on the way they went into the dining-car for lunch. He said afterwards that it was the longest lunch he had ever eaten, and as the girl had ordered nearly everything on the bill of fare it was also the longest bill he had ever paid."

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"A long bill but a short story, Shadow!" cried Luke.

"I'd like to know one thing, Shadow," observed Dave. "Was it William who paid the bill or was it Bill who had to put up several Williams to pay for it?"

"Good gracious, Dave! What are you talking about?" queried his sister, with a puzzled look on her face.

"Oh, that's easy, Laura," answered Roger. "William—Bill, Bill—William. Don't you see the joke?"

"Yes, of course! How thick I am!" returned the girl, quickly.

Soon they were once more on the way. They had a long hill to ascend, the road winding in and out among the trees and around the rocks. It was a hard pull, and several times they had to change to second gear and even to low.

"O my, what a beautiful view!" cried Belle, when the top of the hill was gained. And in her excitement she stood straight up in the automobile to look around her.

"It certainly is beautiful," returned Jessie. "One can see for miles and miles in every direction!"

"Oh, Mrs. Basswood, don't you think this would be a lovely place to have lunch?" cried Laura.

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At the mention of lunch, Luke, Shadow, and Phil brought out their watches simultaneously.

"Seventeen minutes of twelve," announced the shipowner's son.

"I've got quarter of," cried Luke.

"You must both be off," put in Shadow. "I'm only fourteen minutes and a half of twelve," he announced, gravely. "Have we got to wait till twelve o'clock?" he continued, anxiously.

"I guess it'll be twelve o'clock before we get anything to eat," answered Mrs. Basswood, with a smile. "I think this would be just an ideal spot to rest."

"Oh, we've just got to stay here for a while, whether we eat or not!" cried Belle. "I'm going to get out and run up on to the rocks over there," and suiting the action to the words, she leaped out of the automobile and started to make her way to the spot she had indicated.

"Look out that you don't fall over into the hollow," cautioned Dave, as he assisted Jessie and his

sister to alight.

To one side of the roadway was something of a cleared space, and into this the two automobiles were run. The boys got out the hampers and other things, and took them over to the spot which Belle's quick eyes had picked out. Here there was a patch of green grass shaded by several large trees, and in front of it a flat rock, beyond which was spread out a vast panorama of hills and valleys stretching for many miles.

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"It's a perfect picture!" cried Jessie. "I must get a photograph of it."

"Yes. And we must take a photograph of the crowd at lunch," returned Dave.

"Let's eat before we start to take any photographs," put in Luke, who seemed to be extra hungry. "I never did look well in a picture taken before eating," and at this there was a general laugh.

While the boys brought the various things from the cars, the girls and Mrs. Basswood spread a lunch-cloth partly on the grass and partly on the flat rock, and on this placed the various good things which had been brought along.

"First call for lunch!" sang out Dave, loudly, when all was in readiness.

"I guess your first call will be the last, too, Dave!" exclaimed Jessie. "Here! what will you have—a ham sandwich or one with chicken?"

"I think I'll try the chicken," he answered.

"Oh, don't be backward about coming forward, Dave!" cried Luke. "Why don't you try them both?"

"I will before I get through."

"We all will," declared Roger. "There is nothing the matter with this air for giving one an appetite," he added. "I believe after we have been up at Bear Camp for a while we'll all be eating like wolves."

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"Why not like bears, if we are going to Bear Camp?" suggested Phil.

"Say, I can't bear a joke like that!" broke in Roger.

"It was a little barefaced; wasn't it?" commented Dave.

"Oh, quit your joking, I'm hungry," pleaded Luke. And then all the young folks fell to eating with great gusto, and it must be admitted that the older heads followed suit.

The lunch lasted the best part of half an hour, and was thoroughly enjoyed by every one. Then the young people got out their cameras, and various snap-shots and time-pictures were taken, to be developed and printed later on.

"Now then, let us pack up as quickly as we can, and finish this trip," said Mr. Basswood, presently.

As he spoke he looked up at the sky, and the others did the same. Off to the westward they saw a number of black clouds rolling up rapidly.

"Say, Dave, that looks like a real storm to me," remarked Roger, anxiously. "What do you think of it?"

"It's a storm, all right," was the answer. "And if we don't catch it before we reach the end of our journey we'll be lucky."



AND THEN ALL THE YOUNG FOLKS FELL TO EATING WITH GREAT GUSTO.—*Page 102.*

ToList

As quickly as possible, the various things were packed up and placed in the two touring-cars. Then they started off once more, with Mr. Porter and Mr. Basswood at the steering wheels. They had covered less than five miles when they heard a rushing of wind through the woods. It seemed to come by fits and starts, but steadily increased in volume. The sky grew darker, and soon some large drops of rain fell.

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"We'll have to put up the tops!" cried Dave.

The Basswood car had already come to a stop and those in it were hurrying to put up the top. As Dave unfastened the straps on the Wadsworth automobile, the drops of rain came down faster than ever.

"We didn't get that up any too soon," remarked the boy's uncle, when the job was finished.

"Hadn't I better put up the side curtains, too?" queried Dave.

"You'll have to put up everything you've got, Dave!" cried Roger. "Just look at what's coming!"

There was no need to look, for already the rain was driving in on them. Working with all possible speed, the boys soon adjusted the curtains.

"Uncle Dunston, we can't run without chains if the road gets wet," cried Dave.

"I am going to run under yonder trees. We can put the chains on there," answered Dunston Porter, and they started forward once again, with the rain pelting down upon them furiously.

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CHAPTER XI

FROM ONE HARDSHIP TO ANOTHER

"I guess I was right about the rain," remarked Phil, grimly, as the drops pattered unceasingly on the cover of the automobile.

"You sure were, Phil!" cried Belle. "It's coming down just as hard as ever it can."

"If only the wind would stop blowing!" said Jessie. "Do you think there is any danger of our being blown over?"

"Oh, it isn't as bad as all that," answered Dave.

A few minutes later Mr. Porter espied a suitable place under several large trees, and here he brought the touring-car to a standstill. Then the Basswood car come close alongside.

"Going to put on the chains?" called out Mr. Basswood, to make himself heard above the noise of the elements.

"I think we had better," returned Dave's uncle. "I imagine we've quite a hill to descend a little farther on."

There were raincoats in each touring-car, and these were now donned by Dave and his uncle, and by Ben and his father. Then the chains for the back wheels for both automobiles were brought forth. [Pg 106]

Even under the thick foliage of the trees the rain was coming down, although of course not nearly as hard as on the roadway beyond. The chains were straightened out on the grass, and each automobile was backed up a little so that the articles might be fastened on. The task took but a few minutes, and then those who had accomplished it got back into the machines.

"I'll lead the way," called out Mr. Porter. "You had better not follow me too closely."

"Very well, I'll watch out," answered Mr. Basswood.

"Uncle Dunston, don't you want to let me drive?" queried Dave. "I've had a little more experience at it than you have had."

"I can do it, Dave," was the reply. "But, at the same time, if you think it would be safer, take the wheel. I must own up that I'd rather be on a horse or behind one than steering a car like this in such a storm."

Dave squeezed himself into the driver's seat, and a moment later they were off again over the plateau of the hill, and then down the other side.

The wind was blowing as furiously as ever, and now from a distance came the low rumble of thunder.

"O dear! What is that?" cried Laura.

"I guess it was thunder, but I don't think it will amount to anything," returned Roger. [Pg 107]

The bottom of the hill gained, they traversed a narrow valley for a distance of seven or eight miles. Then came another climb over a winding highway, which at certain points was filled with loose stones and dirt.

"Be careful, Dave. We don't want to do any skidding," cautioned the youth's uncle.

"I'm watching out all I can," was the grim reply. Dave was bending over the steering-wheel, trying his best to see through the windshield. "I guess I'll have to open it a little," he went on, nodding in the direction of the glass.

"I'll do it for you," answered Dunston Porter, and threw out the upper side of the shield.

By this means Dave was able to get a clear vision of the roadway directly in front of the machine. But the opening of the windshield let in considerable of the driving rain.

"Oh, Dave, you'll get wet from the knees down!" cried Jessie, solicitously.

"Can't help it," he replied. "I can't see with the windshield closed."

The rumblings of thunder had increased, and now from over a distant hill came various streaks of lightning. The sky was much darker, and in order to see better, Dave turned on the electric lights. Looking back, those in the tonneau of the forward car saw that the Basswood machine was also lighted. By the time the top of the next hill was gained, a distance of fully a mile, the thunderstorm was on them in all its fury. The wind tore through the woods, sending leaves and small branches flying in all directions. From the north and the west came vivid flashes of lightning, followed by sharp claps of thunder, which rolled and rumbled across the hills and mountains. [Pg 108]

"O dear, if we only had some place to stop!" cried Jessie, timorously.

"There isn't any sort of a building in sight," replied Dunston Porter, who had been looking on all sides for some time. "If there was I'd have Dave head for it pretty quick."

"According to the map we ought to be within a few miles of Simpson's Corners," said Roger. "How about it, Dave?"

"Just what I was thinking," answered our hero. "I was wondering if it wasn't on the other side of the next rise."

They were running along another small valley, at the end of which was a sharp turn to the left and a rise of several hundred feet. Here the downfall of rain had flooded the road for a considerable distance. Coming to this place Dave had to slow down, but he still kept on some power, not wishing to get stuck.

"Can you make it, Dave?" asked his uncle, anxiously, as the chains of the automobile ground deeply into the mud and loose stones. [Pg 109]

"We've got to make it, Uncle Dunston!" cried the boy, grimly.

The car proceeded more and more slowly even with the power turned on. Dave had been

running in second gear, but now he came down to low. Mud and stones flew in all directions, while the water was splashed out on both sides as if coming from geysers. Then, with one last effort, the automobile left the level roadway and started up the hill beyond.

The Wadsworth car was almost at the top of the rise when a turn in the road enabled its occupants to see the second car.

"Look!" burst out Roger. "I do believe they're stuck!"

"Stuck! Do you mean in that wet place?" asked Dave, quickly.

"That's it," put in Phil. "They are stuck just as sure as you're born!" he added, a second later.

The forward car had now reached a spot on the side of the hill which was comparatively level, so that Dave had no trouble in coming to a halt. It was still raining as furiously as ever, and the thunder and lightning were just as incessant. Looking down on the wet portion of the road below them, they saw that the Basswood car was standing still, with water and mud half way up to the hubs.

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"He has shut off the power! That's no way to do!" cried Dave. "He ought to keep his engine going, and either try to go forward or backward. If he stands still he will sink deeper than ever."

"He's trying to back now, Dave," returned Phil, and he was right.

Soon they saw the wheels of the Basswood car revolving rapidly, and the turnout itself moved slowly to the rear. Then Ben must have reversed the power, for the car came forward, but this time headed for the left side of the road.

"I don't think he'll gain much by that move," observed Dave. "I tried it, and found it rather soft over there."

"Look, he is backing again!" cried Laura. "O dear! Whatever will he do if he gets stuck fast?"

"Let us hope that nothing like that happens," answered her uncle, gravely.

But that was just what did happen, and although both Ben and his father did their best to free the car from the mud, it was without avail. They managed to get to within fifteen feet of the end of the wet place, and there they stayed, unable to budge either forward or backward.

"Listen! he is sounding his horn!" cried Roger, during a brief lull in the storm.

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"I guess he wants us to come back and help pull him out," answered Dave, and sounded a reply to show that he had heard the call of distress.

"What are you going to do, Dave—try to turn around here or back down?" asked Roger.

"Oh, it's too narrow to turn here!" cried Laura, in alarm.

"You'll have us all over in the ditch if you don't look out!" came from one of the others in the car.

"I see a little wider spot further ahead," answered Dave, and turned on the power once more.

Soon he had reached the place in question, and there, by skillful maneuvering, he managed to turn the touring-car the other way. Then he came down the hill slowly until within a few feet of the bad spot in the highway.

"Hello there!" called out Mr. Basswood. "I guess you'll have to get out that towing-rope again and give us a lift."

"Just what I thought," answered Dave. "We'll have it out in a jiffy."

He and his uncle alighted once more, taking with them the towing-rope that had been used before. Mr. Basswood was already out of the car, standing in water and mud over his shoe-tops.

"Here, catch the rope!" called out our hero, and sent one end whirling toward the other car in true cowboy fashion—a trick he had learned while staying at Star Ranch.

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Mr. Basswood caught the rope, and soon had it adjusted to the front axle of the car. In the meanwhile Dave and his uncle fastened the other end to the rear axle of their own turnout.

"Now then, turn on your power when I sound my horn," directed Dave.

"Right you are!" yelled back Ben, who was at the wheel.

Mr. Porter remained on the ground to watch proceedings, while Dave re-entered the Wadsworth machine and turned on the power. Then our hero sounded the horn and began to advance. The towing-rope strained and cracked, and threatened for a moment to snap. Slowly the Wadsworth car went ahead inch by inch. The rear wheels of the Basswood machine churned the water and mud furiously.

"Say! we don't seem to be getting out of this very fast," remarked Shadow, who was in the rear car beside Mrs. Basswood.

"Put on all your power, Ben. It's the only thing you can do," ordered the lad's father.

The rear wheels of the second machine ground deeper into the mud and loose stones, throwing them and the water up into the air and even onto the cover of the machine. The towing-rope continued to creak ominously.

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"Be on guard, everybody, if that rope breaks!" cried Mr. Basswood, warningly. He knew that if the towing-line parted near one end or the other there was grave danger of the flying rope coming back to damage one of the machines.

Inch by inch the second car moved forward. Dave had not dared to turn on all power, fearing to snap the towing-line, but now, as the second machine gained a little headway, he added power steadily.

"Hurrah! Here we come!" shouted Luke, in a tone of relief. And a few seconds later the Basswood car rolled out of the water and mud to the comparatively dry roadway ahead.

"Say, that was some stunt—to get out of there!" was Shadow's comment.

"I'm mighty glad the other car was here to help us," answered Ben. "If it hadn't been here I guess we would have stayed there for a while," he added, grimly.

"I think both our cars will need washing after this trip," observed Dave, with a grin, as he coiled up the towing-line once more and stowed it away.

"This sure is some ending to this trip!" observed Ben, making a wry face.

"We haven't seen the end of it yet, Ben," answered Dunston Porter. "There may be worse roads than this ahead. I don't believe they are very good around Carpen Falls." [Pg 114]

With the rain pelting down unceasingly, the two cars proceeded on the journey. The thunder and lightning had let up a little, but now, as the top of the next hill was gained, it seemed to become more violent than before.

"Oh, this is dreadful!" cried Jessie, as a particularly bright flash lit up the interior of the automobile. "What if we should be struck!"

"Let us hope that nothing like that happens!" answered Laura. Her face, too, showed her alarm.

"I think I saw some sort of a village ahead," cried Dave, who had been peering intently through the windshield. "I think I saw the white steeple of a church."

"Maybe it's Simpson's Corners," suggested Belle.

"I hope there is a hotel there and a garage," said Dunston Porter. "We'll want to have a chance to dry ourselves and get supper."

"Then you don't think we'll reach Carpen Falls to-night?" questioned Phil.

"I don't know what to think, Phil. Perhaps we may——"

Mr. Porter did not finish what he was saying. Just at that instant came a vivid flash of lightning that nearly blinded them. It was followed by an ear-splitting crash of thunder. Then came another crash closer by, and an instant later Dave and his uncle saw a large tree fall directly toward the roadway in front of them! [Pg 115]

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CHAPTER XII

A STROKE OF LIGHTNING

"Look out!"

"We are going into that tree!"

"Jam on both brakes, Dave, just as hard as you can!" cried Dunston Porter.

Even before his uncle had spoken Dave had pressed down both feet hard, thus putting on the foot-brake and releasing the gear-clutch. Now his hand shot over to the emergency brake, and this came up with all the power at his command. But the grade was downward, and the road slippery from the rain, and instead of stopping, the touring-car went on, sliding through the mud and over the rocks until it was practically on top of the tree. Then came a jar that threw everybody forward. The steering-wheel saved Dave, but his uncle's elbow struck the windshield, cracking it in several places.

"Look, we've run into a tree!"

"Did the lightning hit the machine?"

"Say, Roger, take yourself off my feet; will you?"

This last cry came from Phil, who was huddled up in a corner of the tonneau. [Pg 117]

"It isn't me, it's the handbag, Phil," gasped out Roger, who hung partly over the front seat of the touring-car.

"Anybody hurt?" questioned Dunston Porter quickly, as soon as the shock had come to an end.

"I—I—think I am all right, Uncle Dunston," panted Laura. "But dear me! wasn't it awful?"

"I thought I was going to fly right over Dave's head," wailed Jessie, who had come up behind the youth with a great thump. "Oh, Dave, did I hurt you?"

"Knocked a little of the wind out of me, Jessie; that's all," he answered. "But I won't mind that if only you are not hurt."

"Say, that was some stop, believe me!" was Phil's grim comment, as he managed to straighten up and look ahead. "Stuffed mackerel! what did we try to do, Dave—climb a tree?"

"No. We tried to take a running jump and go over it," replied Roger, with a faint attempt at humor.

"Sound the horn, Dave, as loudly as you can!" cried his uncle, quickly. "We must warn the others." And thus admonished, Dave put his finger on the button of the electric horn and held it down for some time. Looking backward, those in the Wadsworth car soon saw the Basswood machine come into sight and then slow down. The heavy clap of thunder was now followed by another fierce downfall of rain, while the sky grew blacker than ever. In the midst of this outburst the second touring-car came slowly forward.

"Did the lightning strike you?" yelled Ben.

"No. But we had a close call of it," answered Mr. Porter. "It hit this tree when we were less than one hundred and fifty feet away. Then the tree came down as you see, and we ploughed right into it."

"Phew! That's some escape!" was Mr. Basswood's comment. "Anything broken?"

"We don't know yet," answered Dave.

He alighted from the car, and his uncle did likewise. An examination showed that one of the mudguards in front had been badly bent, and that a headlight had snapped off, but beyond this, and the windshield, the big touring-car seemed to be undamaged.

"I'm thankful it's no worse," remarked Dunston Porter.

"It's too bad the light had to go," returned Dave. "It will make running at night rather dangerous until we can get it fixed."

"Oh, let us be thankful that no one was hurt!" cried Laura.

While Dave and his uncle had been examining the car, Mr. Basswood and the others had been looking for some way around the tree, which covered the roadway completely.

"I think I see a path through yonder trees," said Ben, pointing to his left. "The ground seems to be pretty good there, and I think the opening is plenty large enough for our cars."

Mr. Basswood moved forward in the direction his son indicated, and soon called to Ben to start the car. He led the way on foot, and the machine followed slowly. They passed in and out among several trees, and then emerged once more on the highway, some distance beyond the obstruction.

"Hurrah! That's the way to do it!" cried Luke. "Now the others can back up and follow us."

"So they can," answered Shadow. "But what about leaving that tree in the roadway? It's mighty dangerous, and will be more so after dark."

"We can notify the authorities at Simpson's Corners," said Mr. Basswood. "They can send somebody up here with a lantern."

He went back to tell the others of what had been accomplished, and soon the Wadsworth car was backed out from between the branches of the tree that shut off the highway.

"Well, I think the rain is letting up a little, anyway," announced Roger, after the two touring-cars were once more under way. And he was right. That last downfall seemed to clear the sky, and soon they saw the clouds scattering.

Wet from end to end, and covered with mud, the two automobiles rolled into the little settlement that went by the name of Simpson's Corners. Here an old man named Simpson kept a general store to which, in the rear, was attached a small livery stable and garage.

"You certainly must have had some trip over the hills in this storm," remarked Mr. Simpson, after the party had trooped into his place. "It's about as heavy a rainfall as we have had in some time. Where are you bound?"

"We wanted to get to Carpen Falls if we could," answered Dunston Porter. "But perhaps we'll stay in Simpson's Corners, if there are any accommodations."

"Ain't no hotel here," answered the storekeeper. "Used to be one some years ago, but it didn't pay, so the feller that run it gave it up. But Mrs. Whittle serves lunch to travelers if you are hungry."

"Me for Mrs. Whittle's!" whispered Phil.

"Good gracious, Phil! You seem to be hungry all the time on this trip," was Belle's good-natured comment.

"Maybe if we stay here an hour or two it will clear off," said Dave, who was examining the sky closely. "I think the storm is shifting very rapidly."

"I believe you're right, Dave," answered his uncle. "Yes, we'll stay here and get dried out a little, if nothing else."

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It was learned that Mrs. Whittle's place was just across the street, and the lady said she would be very glad to furnish them with a hot supper, and added that they could come in and dry themselves in her sitting-room, where she started an open fire. The machines were placed in Mr. Simpson's garage, and they purchased from the storekeeper some gasoline and oil.

"Only a little after five o'clock," announced Roger. "I think by six o'clock the storm will be over," he added.

While they were eating the supper provided by Mrs. Whittle, it stopped raining, and a little later they saw the setting sun over the hills to the westward.

"How many miles is it to Carpen Falls from here?" asked Luke.

"Fourteen by the automobile blue book," answered Dave.

"And what of the road?" questioned Ben.

"Mr. Simpson said it wasn't so bad but that it might be worse," answered Dunston Porter, who had been interviewing the storekeeper and who had told the man about the fallen tree, having learned that Mr. Simpson was the head of the township committee.

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"We don't want to get stuck, especially after it gets dark," said Ben.

"I wish we could stay here," sighed Mrs. Basswood. "But there don't seem to be any accommodations."

"Oh, we'll get through; come ahead!" cried Dave. "If we don't reach Carpen Falls to-night Mr. and Mrs. Wadsworth will worry about us."

Feeling in somewhat better spirits after having eaten, and after having had an opportunity to dry themselves, the tourists brought out their automobiles again, and soon Simpson's Corners was left behind. They had a long hill to climb, and then the road wound in and out among some particularly rough rocks. Then they came out along the edge of a cliff with a vast panorama of woods and waters below them.

"Oh, isn't it perfectly lovely!" cried Belle.

"If I'm not mistaken, Mirror Lake lies off in that direction," said Dunston Porter, pointing with his hand. "That sheet of water away off yonder may be it."

Leaving the cliff, the road wound in and out of the forest for a distance of several miles. Then they came to another little valley, in which the highway was wet and, in some spots, suspiciously spongy.

"Now then, Dave, be careful," warned his uncle. "We don't want to get stuck if we can possibly help it."

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"I'll do my best, Uncle Dunston," was the answer.

With the wheels sucking and sousing in the mud, the Wadsworth machine moved forward as rapidly as the conditions would permit. Close behind was the Basswood car, and this time Ben took care not to let the engine slow down too much. Once Dave was afraid that he was going to be stuck, but in a few seconds the danger was past, and in two minutes more they were out on the solid roadway once more.

"We are coming to some sort of a settlement!" cried Mr. Porter, after several miles more had been covered. "See, there it is—right down at the foot of this hill!"

"It must be Carpen Falls," announced Dave. "See, there are the Falls off to the right!" and he pointed to where a fair-sized stream of water came down between the trees and fell over the rocks. The Falls were fifteen to twenty feet high, and made a beautiful sight.

Carpen Falls was a settlement of some importance, for the campers on the lakes for miles around came there to do their trading. There were two general stores, one containing the post-office, and also a blacksmith's shop, livery stable and garage combined, and a small summer hotel.

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"Oh, look! My father and mother!" cried Jessie, as the two machines rolled up to the hotel.

To the surprise of all, Mr. and Mrs. Wadsworth stood on the piazza watching their approach.

"Oh, we thought you would never get here!" cried Mrs. Wadsworth, in relief. "We thought sure you had had some sort of accident on the road."

"And how is it you are here?" asked Dave, quickly.

"We came in this morning to do some trading at the store," answered Mr. Wadsworth. "We were going back, when it began to storm so hard that we decided to stay here until the rain let up, and until you arrived. It certainly was a hard downpour!"

"We came pretty near having several accidents," answered Ben. And then after the party had alighted, they told of the various happenings on the journey.

"We can remain here all night if you want to," announced the jewelry manufacturer. "But if you would rather go on to the bungalows I think we can make it. There are two old stages here, and the drivers are perfectly willing to make the trip."

"Now we have gotten so far, let us finish the trip," urged Laura. "I think I would rather be at the bungalows than at this hotel," she added, with a look around that hostelry—a place that was not particularly inviting.

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"But you'll want supper first; won't you?" questioned Mrs. Wadsworth.

"We had something to eat at Simpson's Corners," answered her daughter.

The stages that Mr. Wadsworth had mentioned were certainly old-fashioned and dilapidated, but each was drawn by a pair of sturdy horses, and the drivers said that they were perfectly safe and could make the journey to Mirror Lake without trouble. So, having transferred the baggage from the automobiles to these ancient vehicles, and having placed the touring-cars in the garage, with orders to have the damaged car repaired, our friends piled into the turnouts, and then, with various calls to the animals and loud crackings of the whips, the two stages started for Bear Camp.

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CHAPTER XIII

AT BEAR CAMP

"Talk about the old-time coaching days!" remarked Dave. "I don't believe they were any worse than this."

"Oh, Dave, you mustn't find fault!" cried Jessie. "We'll soon be there, I hope."

"Providing we don't go down in some hole and break off a wheel," put in Roger. "Say, this road is some rough!"

"I'll have it rolled down for you the next time, Roger!" cried Phil, gaily. "Just imagine yourself in the wild West, in one of the old-time overland coaches, with the Indians in full pursuit. How about that, Belle?"

"It sounds good enough for a dime novel," answered the girl from the West. "Personally I never saw any Indians in pursuit of a stage-coach or anything else. The Indians around Star Ranch were as peaceable as one could wish."

Over the rough and rather narrow trail bumped the two stage-coaches. Our friends frequently found themselves bounced off the seats, and more than once they were in danger of cracking their heads against the roofs of the turnouts. It was growing dark, and the only lights the drivers had were their smoking lanterns. Inside of the stage-coaches the boys had their hand flashlights, which they used occasionally to illuminate the scene.

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"Never mind! Don't you care!" cried Phil, and then added: "What's the matter with a song?"

"Let's give them our old Oak Hall song!" exclaimed Dave, and a moment later he started their old favorite, sung to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne."

"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!"

"Oh, how splendid!" was Belle's comment. "Please sing it again," and they did.

Then they followed with a number of familiar songs. The sound was caught up by those in the second coach, and soon they too were singing lustily.

"Gosh-all-hemlock!" was the comment of the stage-driver of the forward coach. "That there singin' is better'n a nigger minstrels!"

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"Better join in," suggested Dave, and then started up with "The Suwanee River," and to the surprise of all the old stage-driver broke in with a heavy bass voice which really balanced the others quite well.

The storm was a thing of the past, and as night came on the thin crescent of the new moon and numberless stars showed themselves.

"O my, look!"

"Isn't that perfectly grand!"

"I don't wonder they call it Mirror Lake!"

Such were some of the cries from the girls as the first of the stage-coaches rolled out on the

edge of the sheet of water by which the bungalows were located. Here, at a certain point, they could gaze down the full length of the lake. In spite of the rain that had fallen the surface of the water seemed unusually smooth, and it glistened in the light of the moon and the stars like silver.

"Oh, it's just too splendid for anything!" exclaimed Jessie, as she clapped her hands in delight. "What a beautiful place to come to!"

"I don't see how it could be any prettier than it is," added Laura.

"Why, it's just like a scene from fairyland!" declared Belle. "Oh, I know I'm going to have just the nicest time ever while I'm here!"

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"I see the bungalows!" cried Roger, and he pointed to a number of lights twinkling between the trees.

"I told Mary, the hired girl, to light up so we could see where we were going," said Mrs. Wadsworth.

"This is about as far as we can go with the stages," announced the driver of the first turnout, as he came to a halt. "You'll have to walk the rest of the distance. Bill and me will help you with the traps."

Soon the other stage came up, and all on board alighted. The two stage-drivers took the heaviest of the suitcases, while the boys and Mr. Porter and Mr. Basswood carried the others. Mr. and Mrs. Wadsworth led the way along a trail that was still somewhat wet and slippery.

"It's right in the woods, that's sure!" declared Roger.

"What do you think of it?" asked Dave, as they approached the two bungalows, which stood only a short distance apart.

"Oh, I like it very much. I think we ought to have a dandy time here, Dave."

"Just what I was thinking."

Their approach had been noticed by the servant girls, and this couple came out to meet them. Then the two drivers were paid, and they returned to their stages and started back for Carpen Falls.

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"I'm glad that journey is ended!" remarked Jessie, as she sank into a rustic rocking-chair. "My! but it was quite an adventure; now wasn't it?"

"It certainly was, Jessie," answered Dave. "I don't suppose you'll want to go back by automobile?"

"Not unless you guarantee the weather, Dave," she answered, with a smile.

The Basswood family, along with Shadow and Luke, had gone off to the second bungalow, leaving the others at the one over which Mrs. Wadsworth was to preside. The lady of the bungalow showed the girls and the boys the various rooms which they were to occupy. As all of the other baggage had arrived from the railroad station two days before, the tourists lost no time in getting rid of their damp garments and donning others more comfortable. After that all made an inspection of the bungalow, and then trooped over to the other building.

"Say, this suits me down to the ground!" said Luke. "It couldn't be better."

"I noticed a number of canoes and rowboats at the dock," said Shadow. "We are bound to have some fine times out on that lake."

"And did you notice the bath-houses?" added Ben. "That means good times swimming."

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"Providing the water isn't too cold," said Phil. "In some of these lakes among the mountains it gets pretty cold, don't you know, especially if the lake happens to be fed by springs."

"Oh, pshaw! who's afraid of a little cold water?" cried his chum, disdainfully.

"Any danger of a bear coming to eat us up?" queried Luke.

"Oh, don't say bears again!" cried Jessie. "I don't want to hear of them, much less see them."

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story!" cried Shadow, eagerly. "Once a bear got away from his keeper and wandered around a little New England village until he came to a cottage where an old lady lived. All of the villagers were scared to death, and some of them started to get their shotguns and rifles with which to kill Mr. Bruin. But the old lady had her own idea of what to do. She grabbed up a broomstick and began to hammer that bear right on his nose, and would you believe me? Mr. Bruin got so scared that he ran away and then went straight back to his keeper and allowed himself to be chained up again!"

"Shadow, is that a true story or a made-up yarn?" asked Laura.

"It was told to me down East, and they said it was absolutely true," was the answer. "They even gave me the name of the old lady."

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"Say, Shadow, it was a wonder they didn't give you the name of the broomstick," said Dave, and with that there was a short laugh.

Dave, Roger, and Phil had been given two rooms between them. One was considerably smaller than the other, and this Dave occupied. On the other side of a little hallway were the girls, while Mr. and Mrs. Wadsworth and Dunston Porter occupied large chambers next to the living-room. In the rear were two tiny rooms for the hired help. At the other bungalow Ben and his friends occupied three little rooms, while Mr. and Mrs. Basswood had a large apartment off to one side.

At this bungalow there was an extra large living-room in which was placed, among other things, a small upright piano, somewhat out of tune but still usable.

"Now don't you boys dare to play any tricks to-night!" said Laura, when she and her girl friends were about to retire. "You just keep your tricks for some other time."

"All right, Laura, I'll make Roger and Phil be good," answered her brother. "I guess we are all tired enough to sleep soundly." And he certainly spoke the truth as far as he personally was concerned, for hardly had his head touched the pillow than he was off to the land of dreams.

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The boys were up bright and early on the following morning. It was a beautiful day, with the sun shining brightly and a gentle breeze blowing from the West. To be sure, the forest back of the bungalow was still wet, but it had dried off down at the shore of the lake, and at the dock where were located two rowboats and several canoes.

"Let us all go out for a row after breakfast," suggested Dave. "It will limber us up."

The aroma of freshly-made coffee and of sizzling bacon filled the air between the bungalows, and soon the young folks who had gone down to the dock to look at the lake and the craft on it, came trooping back for their breakfast.

"Don't you think it would be more pleasant if we could all eat together, Mrs. Wadsworth?" said Laura, while they were partaking of the repast.

"Perhaps so, Laura, and maybe we'll be able to arrange it," answered the lady. "Mrs. Basswood spoke about it. They have a large living-room there that might be utilized as a dining-room for all, and in pleasant weather we might all eat out on our wide porch."

"That's the talk!" cried Dave. "I'd rather eat outdoors any time, if the weather would permit."

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"Oh, yes, let us eat on the porch!" cried Jessie. And so, later on, it was arranged, the entire party eating indoors only when it was wet.

The canoes had been turned over and were perfectly dry, but the two rowboats had to be bailed out. Various parties were made up to go out, and presently Dave found himself in one of the canoes with Jessie as his sole companion.

"Any particular place you'd like to go?" questioned our hero, as he dipped his paddle into the lake, and with a firm sweep sent the long and graceful canoe gliding away from the little dock.

"Supposing we go along the shore, Dave?" answered the girl. "I would like to see how it looks beyond this cove."

"All right, I'll keep as close to shore as possible," he replied. And then they set off, leaving the others to go where they pleased.

"You don't suppose there's any danger of our upsetting?" queried Jessie.

"We won't upset if you keep perfectly still," answered Dave. "I think I can manage this craft all right."

On and on they went over the smooth surface of the lake, passing at times close to the shore and under the overhanging branches of trees, which at some points were very thick. In spots the water was shallow, and so clear that they could see the bottom with ease and occasionally catch sight of fishes darting in one direction or another.

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"I think we're going to have some fine times fishing up here," declared the youth, as a beautiful trout flashed by only a few feet away.

They were coming around a long curve of the shore. Just ahead was a high point of rocks, on which somebody had erected a rude summer-house of untrimmed tree-branches.

"What a cute little place!" declared Jessie, in delight.

"It must belong to some of the cottages around the bend," answered Dave. "I believe there is quite a colony somewhere up here."

They passed around the point of rocks, and a few minutes later came in sight of several rustic cottages set in a grove of trees. In front of the cottages was a long, narrow dock, at which rested several craft, including a fair-sized motor-boat.

"Hello, I didn't know there was a motor-boat on this lake!" exclaimed Dave. "Whoever owns it must have had some job getting it here."

No one was at the dock or on the motor-boat, and passing that point, Dave sent his canoe along another picturesque bit of the lake shore. Then, as they made another turn, they came in sight of a log cabin which had evidently been erected many years before.

"Well, I never! Dave, what in the world are those folks doing?"

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The cry came from Jessie, and not without reason, for they had suddenly come in sight of three or four men and several ladies, all stationed in front of the old log cabin. One of the men was dressed in the garb of a woodsman; and he held a large ax in his hands, raised over his head as if to strike down one of the younger ladies. Then another of the ladies rushed up, and fell on her knees with upraised hands in front of the man.

"Hello, I know these people!" cried Dave, in astonishment. "They are the moving-picture actors who were on board that burning steam yacht!"

CHAPTER XIV

SOMETHING OF A QUARREL

"The moving-picture actors, Dave?" queried Jessie, in wonder.

"Yes. Don't you see the man over there with the camera? He is grinding out a picture of that scene."

"O my! is that the way they do it?" returned the girl, with interest. "I've read about it, but I never had a chance before to see how it was done."

Dave brought the canoe to a standstill, and both watched the little drama being enacted before the old log cabin. Our hero saw that the young lady in the scene was Della Ford, and the elderly lady the one she had called Aunt Bess.

"All over!" exclaimed a man, who stood beside the individual at the moving-picture camera. The latter had stopped turning the handle of the machine, and now he proceeded to cover the whole outfit with a black cloth.

"Well, I'm glad that's over!" those in the canoe heard Della Ford exclaim. "Come, Aunt Bess, let us go back to the water." The young lady turned from the group, and as she did so she caught sight of the canoe and its occupants. She stared for an instant, and then her face lit up. [Pg 138]

"Mr. Porter! is it possible!" she exclaimed. "I certainly didn't expect to meet you up here. Aunt Bess, here is the young gentleman who saved us from drowning."

"You don't tell me!" came from the aunt, and then both hurried their steps toward a tiny dock beside which the canoe was resting.

"I certainly didn't expect to meet you again, and away up here in the Adirondacks," answered Dave, with a smile. And then, as the young moving-picture actress came closer, he introduced the girls to each other.

"This is my aunt, Mrs. Bess Ford," announced Della, to Jessie. "I suppose you saw us acting just now?"

"We did," answered Jessie. "It was quite interesting."

"I suppose it is, to an outsider," responded the young actress. "It gets to be an old story with us; doesn't it, Aunt Bess?"

"Oh, I don't mind it," returned the aunt. "I'd rather be up here in the woods acting for the movies than down in some stuffy theater in this warm weather."

"Did Mr. Porter tell you what a grand hero he is, Miss Wadsworth?" asked Della Ford, turning to Jessie. "Oh, he's just the grandest hero I ever met!" and she beamed on Dave. [Pg 139]

"Come now, Miss Ford, please don't mention it again," expostulated Dave. "I didn't do so very much, and you know it."

"Isn't saving my life a good deal?" demanded the young actress, archly.

"Oh, I don't mean that. What I mean is that anybody could have done what I did."

"But you did it, young man, and you ought to have credit for it," put in Mrs. Ford, bluntly. "It was certainly a brave thing to do."

"It was; and I shall never cease to thank Mr. Porter for it," went on Della Ford, and she gave Dave another warm look, at which he blushed more than ever.

This look was not lost on Jessie; and she bit her lip in a way that showed she was not altogether pleased. Then Mr. Appleby, the manager of the moving-picture company, came forward, followed by several others.

"This certainly is a surprise!" said the manager. "First we meet on the Atlantic Ocean, and next in the heart of the Adirondacks."

"It's like some of your changes in the movies," answered Dave, smiling. "You show us a shipwreck, and then, presto! you transfer us to an office in Wall Street. You must have to jump around pretty lively to get all the scenes of a drama."

"We don't take just one drama," explained Mr. Appleby. "We sometimes do half a dozen or more. For instance, while we are up here we are going to take the outdoor scenes to fifteen or twenty dramas. Then we'll go back to the city and finish up with a number of interiors." [Pg 140]

"Wouldn't you like to be a moving-picture actor, Mr. Porter?" asked Della Ford, eagerly. "You could go into a nautical rescue scene very nicely."

"There you go again, Miss Ford!" returned Dave. "Just the same, it must be some fun being in a moving picture."

"Oh, Dave, don't you go into any moving picture," interrupted Jessie, quickly.

"Why, what would be the harm?" he questioned.

"Oh, no particular harm, I suppose. Only I shouldn't like it," she answered, in a low tone.

"You might get into our next scene," went on Della Ford, ignoring Jessie's remark. "We are going to have one that will show several canoes besides the motor-boat tied up at the dock around the bend."

"Well, I'll think about it," answered Dave, hesitatingly; and then he went on to Mr. Appleby: "By the way, is Ward Porton still with you?"

"He is with my company, yes; but he is not here just now," was the reply. "I expect him in a week or so."

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"I met him in Crumville, where I live."

"Is that so? I thought he had gone to his old home down East. However, it doesn't matter; he has a right to go where he pleases."

"By the way, Mr. Appleby, I would like to speak to you in private for a moment," went on Dave, and leaping ashore he drew the manager to one side.

"What is it?"

"You have a new member of your company, a young fellow named Link Merwell."

"Yes, what of it?"

"Link Merwell is a criminal—a fugitive from justice," answered Dave. And then he gave the man some of the particulars already known to my readers.

"If what you say is true, Porter, I don't want that fellow in my company," said Mr. Appleby, warmly. "What do you want me to do when he comes, hold him a prisoner?"

"I wish you would do that, and let us know. Mr. Wadsworth will take care of Merwell."

"All right, I'll do it—if he shows up. But he may not do that—if he has found out that you are in this vicinity," added the manager.

"I'm thinking he will make himself scarce," returned Dave, with a grim smile.

In the meantime Della Ford had come down to the side of the canoe.

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"Where are you staying, Miss Wadsworth?" questioned the young actress.

"At a bungalow near the end of the lake," returned Jessie, and explained about the location and who were in the party.

"Oh, how delightful! You will surely have a splendid time here. We are located in the cottage around the bend where you perhaps saw the motor-boat tied up. I am sure we'll be very glad to have you call on us."

"Thank you; perhaps we'll get this way again some time," returned Jessie, somewhat coolly.

"You must come and see us, Mr. Porter, by all means," went on the young moving picture actress when our hero returned to the side of the canoe. "And bring the others along, too. I liked the appearance of your chums. You all seemed to be so jolly."

"Dave, don't you think we ought to be going?" questioned Jessie.

"Just as you say," he answered, and dipped his paddle into the lake.

"Then you don't want to stay and take part in that other picture?" called out Della Ford, as the canoe began to leave the dock.

"Not to-day, Miss Ford," called back Dave. "But I may get into one of your pictures just for the fun of it."

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"Do! And don't forget to call at the cottage," returned the young lady; and then the canoe passed out of hearing of those on the shore, and a dozen strong strokes of the paddle sent the frail craft out of sight around another headland.

"That certainly was a surprise," was Dave's comment, as they passed along under some overhanging trees. "I never dreamed of coming across that moving-picture company in such a fashion as that."

"What did you get out for?" asked Jessie, curiously.

"I wanted to ask Mr. Appleby about Link Merwell. He didn't know Link was a criminal. He says if Link shows himself up here he will make him a prisoner and notify us."

"Isn't it queer that Link should join that company!"

"Rather, although I suppose he has got to do something for a living,—and I guess he isn't the fellow to pick out hard work. Acting in the movies must be easy—and lots of fun in the bargain."

"You are not going to act with them, are you, Dave?" questioned Jessie, with her big round eyes full upon him.

"Oh, I don't know. I think perhaps it might be sport."

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"I don't think so."

"Miss Ford tried to make a regular hero out of me. I wish she wouldn't do that."

"Well, it was a grand thing for you to do—to pull her out of the water, Dave, and she ought to be exceedingly grateful. Just the same, I don't think I like her very much," and Jessie pouted a little.

"Is that so? Why, I thought she was real nice."

"She's awfully forward."

"I didn't notice that. But maybe it's her calling makes her so. An actress can't be just like other people."

"I think she might be when she wasn't acting. Anyway, I think she was too—well, too gushing."

"I noticed that you didn't give her any invitation to call when she invited you," went on Dave, after a pause, during which they left the vicinity of the shore and swept out into Mirror Lake.

"Why should I? Mamma might not approve of it. I don't think she has a very high opinion of moving-picture actors and actresses."

"And I guess you haven't either, Jessie," returned Dave, somewhat bluntly.

"Oh, I don't know about that," and the girl tossed her head. "They have a right to act in the movies if they want to. They've got to earn their living some way, I suppose. Don't you think we had better be getting back, Dave?"

"Why, it's early yet, Jessie!"

"Never mind, I think I would rather go back. Now that the sun is overhead it is quite warm."

Dave started to answer, and then suddenly shut his mouth tightly. The paddle went deeper into the water, and the canoe shot around quickly in a long semicircle.

"Oh, Dave! don't tip us over!"

"Don't fear. The canoe won't go over if you sit perfectly still," he replied, in a tone that was somewhat unsympathetic.

"Are you going back to the bungalows?"

"Why, certainly. That was what you wanted—to go back; wasn't it?"

"We haven't got to race back, have we?"

"I'm not racing; but I thought you wanted to get out of this hot sun."

"Dave, I think you're angry with me," returned Jessie, reproachfully, but she did not raise her eyes as before. Instead she kept them fastened on the bottom of the canoe.

"Angry? What foolishness! What is there for me to be angry about?"

"Oh, you know well enough."

"I don't see why you should feel so cut up over Miss Ford. I can't help it if she is grateful—as you put it—for my saving her from drowning; can I?"

"Oh, it isn't that, Dave. Of course she ought to be grateful. But you—you——" Jessie's voice broke a little and she could not go on.

"Me? I haven't done a thing! Didn't you hear me tell her to quit it?"

"Oh, it wasn't what you said. It was——But never mind, let us get back to the bungalow." And Jessie kept her eyes on the bottom of the canoe, refusing to look at her companion.

"And I'm sure I didn't do a thing either. Now please don't be silly and——"

"Dave! Silly!"

"I didn't mean that exactly, Jessie. But you know——"

"It's not a bit nice for you to call me silly!" retorted the girl, her face flaming.

"I didn't mean just that, Jessie. I meant——"

"You did mean it! You think I am silly, do you? All right, you can think so! Please paddle straight for our dock."

"Now, Jessie——" began Dave, entreatingly.

"I don't want to hear another word! Take me straight to the dock," retorted the girl.

"Very well, if you won't listen to me you don't have to," answered Dave; and now he, too, showed that he was completely out of sorts.

He struck the paddle deeper than ever into the water, and with long, telling strokes the canoe shot forward over the lake in the direction of Bear Camp.

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CHAPTER XV

VISITORS

Several days went by and during that time the coldness that had sprung up between Dave and Jessie increased, although both did their best to hide it from the others.

One afternoon while the girl was off with Laura and Belle for a tramp along a brook that flowed into the lake not far from the bungalows, Mr. Appleby came into the cove in his motor-boat, bringing with him an old hunter and guide of that vicinity, named Tad Rason, and also Della Ford and her Aunt Bess. They found Dave, Roger, and Phil at the dock, fishing.

"Any luck?" called out the manager of the moving-picture company, cheerily.

"Some, but not a great deal," answered Dave, and he and the others pulled in their lines, so that they might not become entangled in the propeller of the boat.

"You'll have to go to the other shore for good fishing," said Tad Rason, who had already shown himself at the bungalows and made himself known.

"The fish are mighty scarce around here."

"I'd like to go fishing sometime!" exclaimed Della, with a smile and a nod to Dave and his chums. "I never caught a fish in my life. Mr. Porter, couldn't you show me how to do it?" she asked, sweetly.

"I might, if the fish was willing to be caught," answered Dave, with a grin.

"Oh, I am sure I could catch one if you would only show me how," returned the young actress.

"Well, if you are going to fish with worms you've got to first learn how to put one on a hook," said Phil.

"O my! I'm sure that I don't want to put a squirming worm on any hook!" cried Della, with a slight shudder. "I want to fish with one of those beautiful flies, it's so much more interesting."

"I came down on a peculiar errand," broke in Mr. Appleby, after he had tied up at the dock. "I would like to borrow a little furniture from you for one day only."

"Furniture?" queried Roger.

"Yes. You see, we have an interior scene up at our cottage, but we haven't got just the furniture that the drama calls for. I noticed when I stopped at your bungalows yesterday that you had several pieces that are just the ones required. If you will lend them to me to-day, I will see that you get them back safely by to-morrow."

"You'll have to see Mrs. Wadsworth and Mrs. Basswood about that," returned Dave. "Not but that I think it will be all right," he added, hastily.

"Come up here to do some shooting, I suppose, just as soon as the season opens?" remarked Tad Rason, to the boys.

"Well, we won't object to bringing down a deer or two if we get the chance," answered our hero. "But I rather imagine deer are scarce around here. I haven't seen any of them yet."

"Oh, you'll find plenty of deer up at the head of the lake," returned the old hunter. "They don't come down here much. They always left this spot for the bears."

"The bears! Oh, Mr. Rason! you surely don't mean that?" cried Della Ford.

"But I certainly do, ma'am. This was always a great place for bears. That's why they call this end of the lake Bear Camp. I shot one of 'em here last winter, and I got an old she-bear and her two cubs here two years afore that."

"We haven't seen any traces of bears," said Phil.

"You'll see 'em sooner or later," returned the old hunter, with conviction. "They are bound to come here."

"What makes you say they are bound to come?" questioned Dave, curiously. "Is there any particular reason for it?"

"I think there is, young man. So far as I can understand it, I think the bears come here in the fall to get certain roots and herbs that they like to eat. I think they find more of 'em around here than they do anywhere else, and that's what fetches 'em."

"And do you think the bears keep the deer away from here?" questioned Roger.

"I don't know as to that. But I do know that bears and deer don't mix very well," answered Tad Rason.

While Mr. Appleby was negotiating with Mrs. Wadsworth and Mrs. Basswood for the loan of several pieces of rustic furniture which the bungalows contained, Della Ford and her aunt visited with the boys. The young actress wanted to know all about what the young folks at the bungalows had been doing, and expressed her delight at the cosiness of the place, and its beautiful

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surroundings.

Mr. Appleby, aided by Tad Rason, carried the borrowed furniture down to the motor-boat. There was more of it than the manager had at first anticipated taking, and, as a consequence, the craft was well loaded.

"I don't see how we are going to sit in there with all that furniture packed around us!" exclaimed Della, in dismay, as she viewed the situation.

"You might sit in that rocking-chair on the bow," suggested Phil, with a broad smile; and at this suggestion there was a general laugh. [Pg 152]

"No, thank you. I have no desire to be spilled overboard. I went overboard once, and that was quite enough," answered the young actress.

"I'll tell you what we might do," answered Dave. "We could take you and your aunt in one of the rowboats, and have the motor-boat tow it."

"Oh, that would be lovely!" cried Della. "What do you say, Aunt Bess; shall we do it?"

"I'm willing, if it is safe," answered the aunt, "I don't want to go to the bottom of this lake any more than I wanted to go to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean."

"It's perfectly safe," answered Dave. "The boat's a good broad one, so there is no danger of its tipping over—not unless Mr. Appleby makes a quick turn, and I don't suppose he will do that."

"If I pull your rowboat I'll be as steady as an old freight engine," was the manager's reply. "It's very kind of you boys to do this."

The best and broadest of the rowboats was brought around, and Della Ford and her aunt were assisted into the craft. Then, after the boys had procured a pair of oars, they, too, embarked, and the motor-boat headed back for the moving picture company's camp.

"Hello! hello! Where are you going?" [Pg 153]

The cry came from the shore at a point where the brook ran into the lake, and looking in that direction, those in the rowboat saw Jessie, Laura, and Belle just emerging from behind some brushwood and rocks. The girl from the West was swinging her broad hat vigorously.

"We are going to take these ladies home!" yelled Dave. "We'll be back soon."

"Oh, see; the motor-boat is loaded with furniture!" exclaimed Dave's sister. "What a funny sight!"

"I didn't know those folks were going to visit us to-day," was Jessie's comment, and her face showed she was not at all pleased.

"See! they have Miss Ford and her aunt with them," said Belle. "Miss Ford is a stunning girl; isn't she?"

"She certainly is quite good-looking," returned Laura. "What do you say, Jessie?"

"Oh, I don't think she is any better-looking than lots of other girls I know," returned Jessie, rather coldly. "Come on, let's get back to the bungalows; this long tramp has tired me dreadfully."

"You do look rather pale," said Belle, kindly. "Don't you feel well?"

"I've got a little headache, that's all. I think I'll go back to the bungalow and rest," returned Jessie; and went on ahead, soon disappearing within one of the buildings. [Pg 154]

"Do you know, Laura, I don't believe Jessie likes that Miss Ford a bit," was the comment of the western girl, when she was alone with Dave's sister.

"Why shouldn't she like Miss Ford, Belle? She seems to be a nice enough girl, and I don't think the fact she acts in the movies ought to be held against her."

"I don't think it is that, Laura. It is something else."

"Something else? What do you mean?"

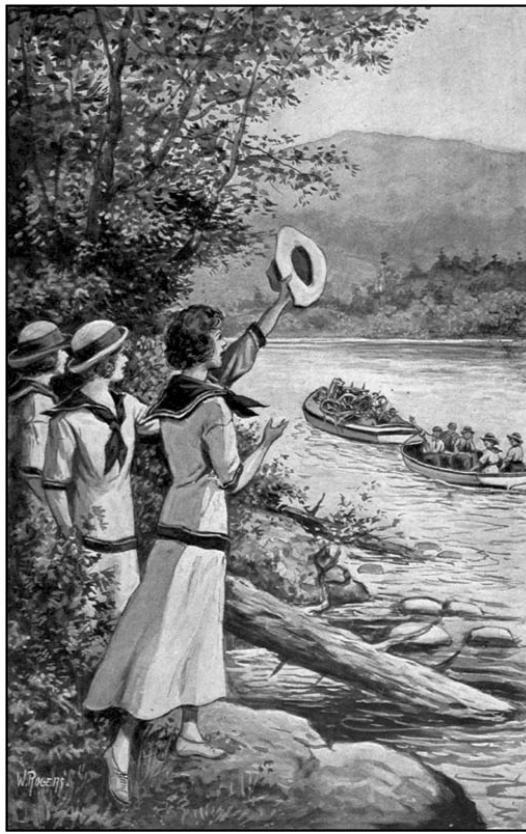
"Oh, I don't know that I ought to mention it. Come on, let us get up to the bungalows."

"But, Belle, do tell me what you think," pleaded Laura. "You know you haven't any right to keep back anything from me," and she caught her chum around the shoulder and held her tightly.

"Well, if you must know, it's this: Jessie can't forget that Dave saved Miss Ford from drowning."

"Oh, I see what you mean, Belle! You think that because Dave did that Jessie thinks he might get more interested in her than would otherwise be the case."

"Not exactly that, Laura. Jessie may imagine that Miss Ford is quite interested in Dave."



"HELLO! HELLO! WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"—Page 153.

ToList

"Oh, I see!" Dave's sister was silent for a moment. "But you forget one thing, Belle; Dave saved Jessie's life, too. Don't you remember that I told you of it? A gasoline tank exploded, and she was in danger of being burned to death when Dave jumped in and——"

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"Oh, yes, I remember that very well, and you may be sure that Jessie remembers it, too. But then this rescue was so much more recent."

At these words Laura grew more thoughtful than ever, and suddenly she caught her western chum by the arm and pulled Belle into a path leading to the dock.

"What now, Laura?"

"Oh, Belle! do you really think there is anything in that? Do you think that is what has made Jessie act so queerly for the last couple of days? I noticed she was not herself at all; and Dave seemed to be different, too."

"If you want the truth of it, I do think there is some sort of a quarrel between them. Of course, I am not sure it is on Miss Ford's account. But they don't act as they used to."

"It's too bad!" and Laura's face showed great seriousness. "I wouldn't have anything come between Dave and Jessie for the world!"

"It would be a great shame, there is no doubt of that," answered the girl from the ranch.

When the pair entered the bungalow they found that Jessie had gone to her room. She was lying on a couch, and though the light was dim, Laura could see quite plainly that her friend had been crying.

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"You poor dear!" said Dave's sister, going up and placing her hand on Jessie's forehead. "Is your headache worse?"

"Not much, Laura," was the answer. Jessie turned over with her face toward the wall. "I just want to be left alone awhile, and then I'll be all right."

"Don't you want me to get you anything at all?"

"No. Just leave me alone, that's all."

Laura stood by the side of the couch for a moment. She was on the point of speaking again. She wanted very much to relieve her mind, but concluded that it might not be a wise thing to do. She tiptoed to the doorway, where she encountered Belle, and both walked to another part of the bungalow.

"And do you really think it was a headache, Laura?" whispered Belle, when the two were safe out of earshot of any of the others.

"She may have a headache, but I think it is more than that," was the reply from Dave's sister. "Oh, Belle, if matters are as you think they are, what in the world are we going to do?"

"I don't know of anything to do, Laura. I don't believe it would be a wise thing to say anything to Jessie."

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"Then suppose I talk to Dave?"

"You can suit yourself about that. But if I were you I'd be very careful. Boys are as touchy as girls when it comes to a subject like that."

"Do you really think so?"

"I certainly do."

"Then I will be very cautious. But I've just got to say something," declared Laura.

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CHAPTER XVI

A STRANGE COMMUNICATION

The three boys had quite some sport going up the lake with Della Ford and her aunt as passengers. Being towed by the motor-boat, they had nothing to do but take it easy, and they spent the time in chatting of things in general, and of moving pictures and fun on Mirror Lake in particular.

"We would be pleased to have you come up some evening and take dinner with us," said Della Ford, after consulting with the manager of the moving-picture company. "Come up and bring that boy with his banjo, and we'll have a lot of fun."

"All right, we'll be up some time," answered Phil.

"And don't forget, Mr. Porter, that some day you're to show me how to catch a fish," called out the young actress.

"All right, I won't forget," answered Dave; and then the three boys pushed the rowboat away from the dock, and started upon the return to Bear Camp.

"She's a mighty pleasant girl, that's sure," remarked Phil, as he took it easy on the stern seat, while Dave and Roger plied the oars.

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"I think Dave has made a hit with her," responded Roger, with a sly wink at the shipowner's son.

"If you don't look out I'll make a hit with somebody in this boat," declared Dave, his face flushing. "You attend to your rowing or we won't get back in time for dinner."

"I thought you said that fellow, Ward Porton, was going to join the company up here," remarked Phil, by way of changing the subject.

"All I know about it is what Mr. Appleby told me," returned Dave. "I'd like first-rate to see him again and ask him some more about Link Merwell."

"Do you think Link will come up here?" asked Roger.

"I don't know what to think. He is likely to do almost anything. But I doubt whether he will want to place himself in any position where we can get hold of him."

"What a fool Link has been," was Phil's comment.

When the rowboat returned to the dock at the camp, the boys found only Laura and Belle on the veranda of one of the bungalows.

"Where's Jessie?" asked Dave.

"She has a headache and is lying down," answered Laura, and looked at her brother closely.

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"That's too bad," he answered. "Can't you do anything for it?"

"She wanted to be left alone, Dave."

"I wonder if I can't do something?"

"I don't think so."

Roger and Phil sat down on the veranda, and were soon joined by Luke and Shadow.

"Where is Ben?" questioned Roger.

"He went to Carpen Falls with his father and Mr. Porter for the mail," answered Mrs. Basswood, who had joined the group.

"I hope I get a letter from daddy," cried Belle. "Why, just think! I haven't had a letter for three days," she pouted.

"I'd like a letter, too," put in Phil. "I haven't had a word from home since I left," and his face

clouded, as he remembered his father's troubles over the land question.

Dave had been seated on the end of the piazza, but now he arose and walked over to the other bungalow. Here he met Mrs. Wadsworth just coming from Jessie's room.

"It's only a slight headache, Dave," said the lady, in answer to his question. "I think Jessie will be all right in the morning. She thought she had better stay where she is this evening."

"I wish I could help her, Mrs. Wadsworth," returned the youth, quickly. "Isn't there something I can do?"

"Nothing that I know of," was the reply, and then Mrs. Wadsworth walked out of the bungalow to join her husband, who was smoking a cigar in a little pavilion that overlooked the lake.

Dave took a turn or two across the living-room. He was very much disturbed in mind, and felt that he ought to do something.

"I'll take a chance, and knock on the door anyhow," he told himself, and moving to the door of Jessie's room, he tapped lightly. Then, as there was no response, he tapped again.

"Who is it?" came from the girl.

"It is I, Jessie. Can't I do something for you?"

"No, I don't think you can," she returned, quickly.

"The others told me you had a headache. I'm very sorry to hear that. I wish I could do something to make you feel better."

"You can't do a thing."

"I might get a hot-water bottle, or some chopped ice, or—or—something," he faltered, not knowing how to go on.

"Oh, Dave, don't be silly!"

"Silly! So now I'm the one who's silly; am I?" he returned. But there was more of slyness than bitterness in his tone.

"Dave Porter! Was there ever such a boy! Now you must go away and leave me alone!"

"All right, Jessie, if you want me to go away I'll go. Just the same, I want you to know that I'm awfully, *awfully* sorry that you have a headache. I'd rather have it myself."

"Would you indeed?" There was a creaking of the couch, as if Jessie had turned and was sitting up. "Well, I don't want you to have a headache. They are not a bit nice! They are horrid!"

"Are you lying down?"

"I was lying down."

"Well, if you're not so very, very sick, Jessie, won't you just come to the door a minute? I want to tell you something," went on Dave, after a moment's hesitation.

The girl came slowly to the door, and opened it several inches, showing a mass of disheveled hair, and cheeks that had traces of tears on them.

"What do you want to tell me?"

"A good many things, Jessie," returned Dave, in a low tone. "First of all, I don't want you to be angry with me. I simply can't bear it. And besides, I don't think you have anything to be angry about."

"Oh, indeed!"

"No, I don't. I think you misunderstand me. Why, Jessie, I wouldn't have anything come between us for the world, and you know it!"

"Do I?" The door opened a little wider.

"Yes, you do. You know there isn't any one that I care for one-tenth part as much as I care for you. I didn't go up the lake this afternoon because I particularly wanted to; and those people came here of their own accord."

"Yes, Dave——"

"And I don't want you to act so cold, Jessie. Why, it cuts a fellow to the heart! If I thought——"

A wild yell, followed by several screams of terror from outside, interrupted the conversation. Dave stopped short to listen, and Jessie threw wide-open the door to do likewise. Another yell rang out, fierce and penetrating, and then came several more screams, and a rush of footsteps.

"Oh, Dave! what can it mean?" cried Jessie, in sudden alarm.

"I don't know. I guess I had better find out," he returned, and ran toward the front doorway.

"Be careful, Dave! be careful!" cautioned the girl, pleadingly. "Maybe it's a bear!"

"In that case I'd better get one of the guns," he returned.

The party had brought a number of firearms with them, and several of the pieces were hung up on the walls, loaded and ready for use. Catching up a double-barreled shotgun, Dave ran outside with Jessie at his heels. The commotion had continued, and now the youth found himself confronted by his sister and Belle.

"What is it, Laura?"

"I don't know, exactly. But it certainly was something awful!"

"I think it must have been a wild man," broke in Belle. "Anyhow, if it wasn't, I don't know what else it could have been."

The other boys had left the vicinity of the bungalows, and were running toward the woods, with Mr. Wadsworth following them.

"They saw something, but they don't know what it was," said Mrs. Wadsworth, who was plainly much agitated. "It let out the most awful yells you ever heard."

"Maybe it was that wild man, Wilbur Poole!" exclaimed Dave. "He might have followed us to this place, you know."

He ran on, and soon joined the other boys and Mr. Wadsworth, who had come to a halt at the edge of the clearing on which the bungalows were located.

"I think he disappeared over here!" cried Shadow.

"And I think he went this way!" returned Luke.

"When I saw him last he was by yonder bushes!" were Roger's words.

"I think he went over there, just as Shadow said!" came from Phil.

"Who was it?" asked Dave. "Wilbur Poole?"

"Whoever he was, he had the most outlandish rig on a fellow ever saw!" exclaimed Luke. "I think he must have borrowed it from some scarecrow."

"If that was Wilbur Poole we had better keep our eyes open for him," said Dave, seriously. He had not forgotten the trouble which the wild man who called himself the King of Sumatra had given him and his chums in the past.

"We were all sitting there enjoying ourselves when we heard the fellow give an awful yell or two," explained Phil. "Then he came dancing out from behind some bushes, waving a sort of sceptre in the air. He nearly scared the girls into fits, and that is what made them scream. Then he caught up a stick of wood from the pile yonder, and disappeared between the trees. I guess he must have imagined he was a wild Indian on the warpath."

"I am afraid if that poor fellow isn't captured he will cause us a good deal of worry," was Mr. Wadsworth's comment. "As long as he is at large there is no telling what he will do."

"If it really is Wilbur Poole, we ought to let the Pooles know about it," said Dave.

The matter was talked over for some time, and then, after another search through the edge of the woods and among the rocks and brushwood of that vicinity, the boys and Mr. Wadsworth returned to the bungalows. They found all of the girls and Mrs. Wadsworth on one of the verandas, discussing the situation. Even Jessie had joined the group, declaring that the alarm had scared most of her headache away.

"Oh, I was so frightened when I first saw the man—if it really was a man!" cried Laura.

"He looked more like an orang-outang," declared the girl from the West. "If I had met him out on the range, and if I had had a gun with me, I surely would have shot at him!"

"I brought a gun along," returned Dave, exhibiting the weapon; "I thought it was a bear scare."

The scare was the topic of conversation all through the dinner hour, and it was decided that a letter should be posted to Mr. Aaron Poole the following morning, acquainting him with what had occurred.

"It's queer that my husband and Ben and Mr. Porter don't come," remarked Mrs. Basswood, when the meal was nearly over and it was growing dark.

"It's quite a walk to Carpen Falls," said Dave. "And you must remember the trail isn't any too good in some spots."

"I think I see them coming now," announced Roger, a minute later; and he was right. Soon Ben and his father and Dunston Porter came into full view near the end of the lake.

"Talk about an adventure!" cried Ben, as they came up. "Who do you think we met?"

"The wild man!" burst out several of those present.

"Oh, then he was here, was he? Was it Wilbur Poole?"

"We are not so sure about that. We didn't get a very good look at him. He had on such a queer outfit that he was completely disguised."

"That's just it!" broke in Dunston Porter. "We couldn't tell who he was, either. He appeared right in front of us on the trail, flourishing a big stick. He let out a whoop like an Indian, gave a leap or two into the air, and then dashed out of sight behind some bushes."

"He didn't attack you, did he?" questioned Mrs. Basswood, anxiously.

"No," returned her husband, "but, all the same, I didn't like his actions. He might have done some serious damage with the stick he carried."

"That man, whoever he is, ought to be put under guard," declared Phil, and then he added quickly: "Did you get any letters, Ben?"

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"Oh, yes, several of them. Here they are," and placing his hand in the pocket of his jacket, the youth brought forth over a dozen epistles.

There was a wild scramble, and the letters were quickly distributed.

"Oh, good! Here's a letter from dear dad!" exclaimed Belle. "Excuse me while I read it," and she quickly tore open the communication.

All of the girls had letters, and there was also one for Dave and another for Phil. As our hero looked at the communication addressed to him, he could not help but start. He thought he recognized the handwriting as that of Link Merwell.

"I wonder what he has got to say now," he mused, and then as the others began reading their letters, he opened the envelope and took out the single sheet it contained.

In a large, heavy hand were scrawled these words:

"I think before long you will be getting what is coming to you, you poorhouse nobody."

There was no signature.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE SWIMMING RACE

Dave read the brief communication over several times. As he did so his face showed both perplexity and anger. Roger, who had received no letter and who therefore had nothing to read, looked at him curiously.

"No bad news, I hope?" he said, as he came up to Dave.

"I think it's another communication from that good-for-nothing Link Merwell," returned Dave. "Here, you can read it for yourself," and he passed the letter over.

The senator's son read the scrawl, and his face showed his disgust.

"I guess you're right, Dave, it must be from Link Merwell."

"Link Merwell!" broke in Shadow, who sat on a bench near by. "What about that rascal; have you heard something further of him?"

"Oh, it doesn't amount to anything," returned Dave, hastily, and taking the communication he thrust it into his pocket. "Don't say anything about it," he added to Roger, in a low tone.

"All right, I won't if you want it that way," answered his chum. "Just the same, Dave, this looks to me as if Link was plotting once more to do you an injury." [Pg 170]

"If so, Roger, would he be fool enough to notify me beforehand?" queried our hero, as the pair walked a little distance away from the others.

"There is no telling what a fellow of Link's stamp might do. He is just fool enough to brag about what he hoped to do rather than go and do it. It's an outrage that he should call you a 'poorhouse nobody.'"

"I'd thrash him for it if I could get my hands on him," returned Dave, quickly, and his face showed deep resentment. He had not forgotten how, in years gone by, his enemies had taunted him with being a "poorhouse nobody," and how he had had to fight his way through until his identity had been established.

"Anyway, Dave, this gives you a chance to be on your guard," went on Roger. "If I were you I'd keep my eyes wide open for Link Merwell."

"I certainly shall, Roger. And if I can lay my hands on him I won't be as considerate as I was on Cave Island," was the answer. "I'll hold him until I can turn him over to the authorities. He ought to be keeping company with Jasniff in jail."

The girls were chattering among themselves over the letters they had received, and Shadow and Luke soon joined in. As was to be expected, the former story-teller of Oak Hall had his usual anecdote to relate, to which the others listened with interest. Phil had drawn apart from the crowd, and was now reading the letter he had received a second time. His face indicated unusual concern. [Pg 171]

"Well, I hope you got good news, Phil," remarked Dave, as the shipowner's son came towards him and Roger.

"No, it's just the opposite," was the somewhat doleful reply.

"What? Do you mean it's bad news?" broke in Roger, quickly.

"It certainly is! Instead of losing twenty to thirty thousand dollars, my dad stands to lose about fifty thousand dollars on that land deal I mentioned to you some time ago."

"Why, how is that?" queried our hero, curiously. "Has the land gone up in value since then?"

"I don't know about the value of the land itself, but it's this way: Since that railroad made a bid for the acreage, another railroad has come into the field. They are going to run a rival line through that territory, and so they bid against the L. A. & H. Then the L. A. & H. railroad increased their bid, and the other folks did the same, so that now, if my father could give a clear deed to the land, he could sell it for about fifty thousand dollars."

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"And hasn't he been able to get any trace of your Uncle Lester?"

"He has something of a clue, but so far he has been unable to locate my uncle. It certainly is a strange state of affairs."

"Won't the railroad company take the land without your uncle being represented in the deed?" questioned Roger.

"I don't think so. If they were willing to do that my father would put the deal through without delay. It certainly is too bad!" added Phil, with a sigh.

"It seems to me if I were you I'd get on the trail of your Uncle Lester somehow," was Roger's comment. "I wouldn't let that fifty thousand dollars get away from me. I'd hire detectives to scour the whole United States for the missing man."

"My father's doing all he can, Roger." Phil turned to our hero. "You got a letter, didn't you?"

"Not much of a one, Phil." Dave hesitated for a moment: "Here, you might as well see it. I showed it to Roger. But don't say anything to the others about it, especially the girls. There is no use in worrying them. As it is, they have had scare enough from that wild man."

The shipowner's son read the letter Dave had received with interest.

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"Sure, that's from Link Merwell! I know his handwriting almost as well as I know my own," he declared. "He always makes those funny little crooks on his capital letters. I guess that shows what kind of a crook he is," and Phil grinned at his little joke. "What are you going to do about this, Dave?"

"I don't see that there's anything to do about it. As I told Roger, if Link shows himself around here I'll do all I can to place him in the hands of the authorities and see to it that he goes to jail."

"It's a beastly shame that any one should write such a note as that," went on the shipowner's son. "You are not a 'poorhouse nobody,' and everybody knows it."

"I've been wondering what Link Merwell can have up his sleeve," came from Roger. "He certainly must be up to something, or he wouldn't send such a letter as that."

The matter was talked over for a little while longer by the three boys, and then they rejoined the others.

Jessie declared that her headache was now gone completely, and the young folks spent the rest of the evening in the Basswood bungalow, where Belle played the piano and Luke favored them with several selections on his banjo and his guitar. They also sang a number of songs, and altogether the evening ended quite pleasantly. The cloud that had come up between Dave and Jessie seemed to have vanished, much to their own satisfaction, and to that of their friends.

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On the following morning Mr. Basswood announced that he had to return to Crumville for a few days on business. He said that as soon as he arrived home he would get into telephone communication with Mr. Aaron Poole and acquaint him with the fact that some sort of a wild man had visited the vicinity of Bear Camp.

"Of course we may be mistaken as to the identity of that individual," said Ben's father. "He may not be Wilbur Poole at all."

"You want to be sure, Dad, and let Nat's father know that," said Ben, "because if Mr. Poole spent money up here looking for his brother, and then found out that the wild man was somebody else, he would never forgive either himself or you for the outlay." And at this frank statement those who knew how miserly the money-lender of Crumville was laughed outright.

Mr. Basswood departed for Carpen Falls in the middle of the forenoon. As it promised to be a warm, clear day, one of the young folks suggested that they go in bathing at a little sandy beach a short distance below the bungalows. This suggestion was eagerly seconded, and as a consequence, a little later on, the young folks donned their bathing outfits and soon were having great sport in the water, with the older folks sitting on a fallen tree not far away watching them.

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"Oh, but it's cold!" declared Jessie, after her first plunge.

"You'll get used to it after a bit," returned Dave. "Just strike out lively, and that will help to keep your blood in circulation."

"Come on for a race!" shouted Luke, who was splashing around in great shape.

"A race it is!" called back Phil.

"Where shall we race to?" questioned Roger.

"If you are going to race, I'll be the referee and timekeeper," announced Dunston Porter.

It was decided that the boys should swim from the beach to a rock standing out of the water on the far edge of the cove.

"First fellow to stand up on the rock wins the prize," announced Phil, and then he added quickly: "Girls, what's the prize?"

"A fresh flapjack to the boy who bakes it," announced Belle, gaily.

"Say, speaking of flapjacks puts me in mind of a story," came from Shadow, who was wading around in water up to his ankles. "Once there were two old miners who were in a camp in the mountains. They got to disputing as to who could make the best flapjacks. Says one of them——"

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Shadow did not finish the story he had started to tell. Unbeknown to him, Roger had come up behind, and was now on his hands and knees in the water. Luke gave the would-be story-teller a quick shove; and over went Shadow backwards, to land in the shallow water with a resounding splash.

"Flapjack number one!" cried Luke, gaily. "Say, Shadow, what are you making so much noise about?"

"I'll noise you!" roared the former story-teller of Oak Hall, as he scrambled to his feet.

Then he started to rush after Luke, but Roger caught him by his ankle, and down he went into the water with another splash, this time sending the spray flying clear to those sitting on the fallen tree.

"Here! Here! You boys stop that!" cried Mrs. Wadsworth. "We haven't any umbrellas."

"Oh, excuse me, I didn't mean to shower you," pleaded Shadow. "Anyway, it was Roger's fault."

"If you are going to race, start in!" ordered Dunston Porter.

"Well, what's the prize?" queried Roger, doing his best to keep out of Shadow's reach.

"The fellow who wins gets the hole in the doughnut," returned Dave, gaily.

"All ready! Line up!" ordered Dunston Porter, and after a general scramble and amid much merriment, the boys lined up. Then came the order "Go!" and all of them struck out lustily for the rock that marked the goal.

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At first Ben, who had taken but little interest in the horseplay just enacted, kept well to the front. Ben had always been a good swimmer, and many a time he and Dave had raced each other in Crumville Creek.

"You fellows won't be in it!" he shouted merrily.

"Don't you be too sure of that," returned Luke. "This race isn't over yet."

"You fellows had better save your wind," spluttered Phil, who at that instant came up alongside of Shadow. There followed a great splashing of water, and suddenly Ben disappeared from view.

"Hey, you! Who fouled me that way?" roared the leader. "Whoever caught me by the foot ought to be put out of this race."

"Must have been a whale, Ben," answered Roger, mischievously.

"I'll whale you if you do it again," was the answer. And then all of the boys stopped talking and with renewed vigor bent to the task of trying to win the race.

Soon half the distance to the rock was covered. Ben was still in the lead, with Roger and Phil close behind him. Luke and Shadow had dropped so far to the rear that they gave up all hope of winning.

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"Here is where I leave you fellows," announced Phil, and made a sudden spurt that soon placed him slightly in advance of Ben.

"Hi! hi! don't leave me this way!" yelled Roger, and he, too, put on a burst of speed, followed a second later by Dave.

On and on, through the cool, clear waters of Mirror Lake plunged the four boys. The goal was now less than fifty feet away.

"O my, see how hard they are swimming!" came from Laura.

"Ben was ahead, but I think Roger is up to him," announced Mrs. Basswood.

"Those four lads are pretty well bunched up," remarked Dunston Porter.

"Shadow and Luke have dropped out of it," announced Belle. "Gracious, how those others are swimming! Wouldn't you think it was for a prize of a thousand dollars?"

The four who had remained in the race were now less than five yards from the goal, a large flat rock that was joined to the mainland by a series of other rocks.

"Here is where I win!" declared Ben, and threw himself forward with all the strength left to him.

"Not much!" came from Phil.

"Count me in!" panted Roger.

"Also yours truly!" added Dave.

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And then the four, lining up side by side, struck out fiercely, each doing his level best to touch the rock first. It was a neck-and-neck race, and in a moment more four hands went up on the rock at practically the same time.

"I win!"

"Not much, my hand was here first!"

"Oh, look!"

"Don't climb up on that rock!"

"What's the trouble?"

"What is it?"

"It's a snake, and a big one!" yelled Dave. "Back away from the rock, boys, just as fast as you can!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A CRY FROM THE CLIFF

"It's a snake sure enough!"

"My, what a big one!"

"No climbing on that rock for me!"

Such were some of the cries which rent the air as the four youths dropped back into the lake and lost no time in getting away from the spot which had been the goal of the swimming race.

"Say, Dave, what sort of a snake do you suppose that was?" queried Roger.

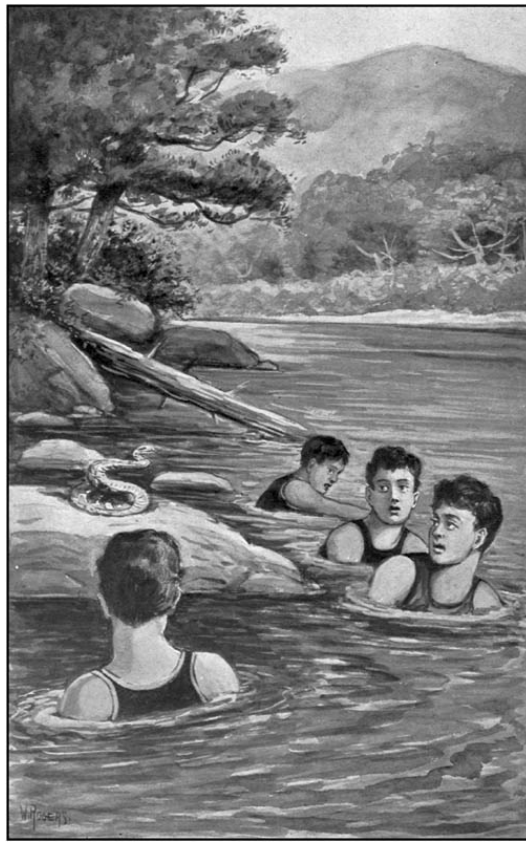
"Did he drop into the water?" questioned Ben, anxiously. "If it's a water snake maybe it's after us."

"I don't know what kind of snakes are to be found around here," returned Dave. "But it was dark in color and I think all of four or five feet long."

"Say, who won this race, anyhow?" came from Phil, as the boys swam around not far from the rock.

"I should say the snake did," laughed Dave.

In the meantime Dunston Porter, noticing that something unusual was going on in the vicinity of the goal, had leaped up and was running along the edge of the cove.



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"What's the matter over there?" he yelled.

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"A snake, Uncle Dunston," called back Dave. "Better get a shotgun and go after it."

"O dear! did you say a snake?" came from Laura, in dismay.

Acting on Dave's suggestion, Dunston Porter hurried back to one of the bungalows. He reappeared with a shotgun, and lost no time in making for the vicinity of the rock where the reptile had been seen. In the meanwhile the four boys rejoined Luke and Shadow, and all swam back to the dock.

"Oh, Dave, are you sure the snake didn't drop into the water after you?" questioned Jessie, and her face showed her anxiety.

"No, it retreated to the rocks further back," was the answer.

"Was it a poisonous snake?" asked Mrs. Basswood.

"I am sure I don't know."

"If there are snakes in these woods I don't think I'll care to go out very much," commented Laura, with a shiver.

"Snakes will just spoil everything," added Jessie, dismally.

While the boys and girls were dressing the report of a shotgun rang out.

"If that was Uncle Dunston shooting, he must have found Mr. Snake," were Dave's words.

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"I hope he did find the snake," answered Roger. "If that reptile was left prowling around in this vicinity, none of the ladies would want to go out."

"And I wouldn't care much about going out myself," added Luke.

Having finished dressing, the boys lost no time in following Dunston Porter toward the rock which had been the goal of the swimming race. They found the old hunter and traveler searching through the brushwood back of the rocks.

"Did you get it, Uncle Dunston?" questioned Dave.

"I did," was the reply. "What's left of that snake is over yonder," and Mr. Porter pointed with his hand. "I'm looking around here to see if there are any more of them, but I rather fancy that is all there is."

The charge from the shotgun had fairly torn the reptile to pieces, for when Dunston Porter had fired the snake had been coiled up, evidently ready for an attack.

Arming themselves with clubs and stones, the boys joined Dunston Porter in the hunt for more reptiles, but their search was unsuccessful; and a little while later all returned to the bungalows.

"Did you find any other snakes?" asked Jessie, after she had been told about the one that had been killed.

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"No, and I don't think there are any others," answered Mr. Porter.

"Well, I hope there are not," put in Laura, "but if there are I wish you had found them."

"We can't find what isn't there," said Luke, with a grin.

"Say, that puts me in mind of a story," burst out Shadow.

"Wow!" ejaculated Roger. "Here comes another!"

"Oh, say! this is a good one," pleaded the would-be story-teller. "It's about an old college graduate who was a regular fiend for football. He would undergo almost any hardship for the sake of getting to a game. Well, one time there was a great contest on between two of the big colleges, and although old Bixby nearly broke his back to get there, he didn't arrive until late. 'Say, how is it going?' he puffed to a gate-keeper. 'Nothing to nothing, middle of the second half,' answered the gate-keeper. 'Is that so?' returned old Bixby. 'That's good! I haven't missed anything,' and he passed in." And at this anecdote there was a general laugh.

In the afternoon while the young folks were enjoying themselves in various ways around the bungalows, they heard the put-put of a motor, and looking out on Mirror Lake, saw the craft belonging to the moving-picture company manager approaching, loaded with the furniture that had been borrowed.

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"Here they come with our things!" cried Ben. "Looks like a house moving; doesn't it?"

They saw that the boat was in sole charge of Mr. Appleby, and as the craft drew closer the moving-picture manager gave them a cheery hail.

"Going into the moving business instead of moving pictures, eh?" cried Dave.

"I thought I might as well bring this stuff back while I had a chance," answered the manager, and soon brought his motor-boat to a standstill beside the dock. Then the boys made short work of taking the furniture back to the bungalows.

"I've got news for you, Mr. Porter," announced the moving-picture man, after the job was finished. "I've seen that young rascal, Link Merwell."

"You have!" exclaimed Dave, eagerly. "Up at your camp?"

"That's it."

"Did you make him a prisoner?" asked Phil.

"I didn't get the chance. He was evidently on his guard, and as soon as I told him what I knew, and that I was going to hand him over to the authorities, he ran straight into the woods, and that was the last of us saw of him. He even left his suitcase and a light overcoat behind."

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"Well, it's too bad he got away," returned our hero. "I thought sure if he had the audacity to show himself here we'd get a chance to capture him."

"I was foolish not to make him a prisoner as soon as he appeared," answered Thomas Appleby. "But I didn't think he would run away in that fashion, leaving his outfit behind. Besides, what he'll do in the woods behind our camp is a mystery to me. I asked old Tad Rason if there were any roads back there, and he said not within a couple of miles; so Merwell stands a good chance of losing himself completely."

"Great Scott! Supposing he should get into the woods and be unable to get out again!" burst out Roger.

"Well, such things have happened," answered Luke. "I heard only last winter of a man who was lost in the Maine woods."

"Yes, and Tad Rason told of two brothers who were lost up here in the Adirondacks for over three weeks," returned Mr. Appleby. "When they were found they were almost starved to death and next door to crazy."

"If anything like that should happen to Link, he will have nobody to blame but himself," announced Roger.

"Did he know we were up here?" queried Dave.

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"He knew you were somewhere in this vicinity, but he did not know that the camps were so close to each other. I think if he had imagined such to be the case he would have steered clear of this vicinity."

"Was that young actor, Ward Porton, with him?"

"I really don't know whether they came together or not. Porton showed up about two hours before Merwell arrived. Of course, they may have separated just before the camp was reached—Porton not wanting to appear in the company of a fellow you had told him was a crook."

"Is Porton at your camp now?"

"Yes. But he doesn't intend to stay very long. He says he has something else in view, although what it is I don't know. To tell you the truth," and Mr. Appleby lowered his voice a trifle, "I think he is sweet on Miss Ford, and as she doesn't care for him at all and has told him so, it has put his nose out of joint."

"When you spoke to him about Merwell did Porton stand up for the fellow?" continued our hero. He was anxious to learn if possible just how close the companionship of the pair had been.

"He didn't have much to say after I told him all I knew," responded Thomas Appleby. "Previous to that, he remarked that you might be mistaken regarding Merwell—that Merwell had said that

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Jasniff and somebody else were guilty of the jewelry robbery."

"Humph! he can't put it off on anybody else like that!" cried Phil. "We know beyond a doubt that he and Jasniff committed that crime."

"Perhaps I ought not to blame Ward Porton for sticking up for Merwell," answered Dave. "Link is a mighty slick talker, and he probably told his story to suit himself and got Porton to swallow it. Just the same, Porton is very foolish to chum with him."

"I'll be rather sorry to lose Porton, for he is a clever fellow in the movies," went on the manager. "He wanted to leave in a few days, but I persuaded him to stay for a week at least, so we could finish several dramas in which he is an actor. After he is gone I'll have to get some one to take his place. Any of you young fellows want to have a try at it?" and Mr. Appleby looked full at Dave.

"Oh, I don't know," returned our hero, slowly. And then he saw that Jessie's eyes were turned upon him and that they showed she was troubled. "I don't think I care to take the matter up. You see, I came here for a rest and a good time."

"I wouldn't mind taking a hand at it!" cried Luke.

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"You can count me in, too!" added Shadow. "I'd like first-rate to see myself on the screen in a moving-picture show," and his eyes lit up in anticipation.

"Well, you fellows come down some time and we'll talk it over," concluded the manager. "I've got to get back now. We are getting ready to put on quite an important drama to-morrow, and we have got to rehearse a number of scenes. If you folks want to come up and look on, you'll be welcome," he added, to the crowd in general.

When the moving-picture manager had departed, the boys set out to fish along the brook that flowed into Mirror Lake. While getting ready for the sport the conversation drifted around once more to Link Merwell.

"If he is in this vicinity, Dave, you can make sure he'll try to get in on us somehow before he leaves," remarked Phil.

"I don't see what he can do," returned Luke.

"Oh, a fellow like Link can do lots of things!" burst out Ben. "Why, he might even try to burn down the bungalows!"

"Do you think he's as bad as that?" questioned Shadow.

"Yes, I do!" was the flat answer.

Fishing in the vicinity of the lake was not very good, so the boys pushed further and further up the brook, until they reached a point where there was a little waterfall and a pool of considerable size. Here fishing was better, and soon they had quite a number of specimens of the finny tribe to their credit.

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"Come on, Dave, let's go up a little farther," pleaded Phil. "I'd like to see what this brook looks like beyond the falls."

"All right, I'll go," answered our hero. "What about you fellows?" he asked, of the others.

"I'll stay here and rest," announced Roger. "I'm tired of scrambling over the rocks."

"So am I," agreed Ben. Shadow and Luke also said they would remain in the vicinity of the pool.

Dave and Phil found it no easy task to follow the brook, which wound in and out among the rocks and brushwood. At one point they had to do some hard climbing, and once the shipowner's son slipped and came close to spraining an ankle.

"Say, I don't believe I'll go much farther, after all," declared Phil. "This is rough and no mistake!"

"It is better walking a little farther on, Phil," announced Dave. "Come on, don't give up this way! Maybe we'll find some extra large fish up there."

Once more they set out, and soon found themselves in a small clearing, backed up by a cliff fifteen or twenty feet in height, and overgrown with brushwood and trailing vines.

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"Hark! What was that?" exclaimed Phil, as both came to a halt preparatory to casting their lines into the stream.

"I think it was a shout," answered Dave. "Maybe the others are calling to us."

"No, I think the call came from up on the cliff, Dave. Listen, there it is again!"

Both strained their ears and soon heard another cry. This time it was much closer.

"Stop! stop! let me alone!" Such were the words that floated to their ears. "Please don't hit me! Let me alone!"

Dave and Phil looked at each other curiously.

"Who can it be?" questioned the shipowner's son.

"I don't know, but I guess we had better try to find out," answered our hero.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CAPTURE OF LINK MERWELL

"Where did that cry come from, Dave?"

"I think it came from the top of the cliff, Phil. Listen! there it goes again."

Both boys strained their ears once more, and now heard another voice, heavy and threatening.

"Leave this place! Leave at once, I command you! No one has any right to disturb me!"

"Don't hit me, I'll go!" returned the one who had first spoken, and a few seconds later he came into view at the edge of the cliff.

"Hello, it's Link Merwell!" burst out Dave, in amazement.

"Yes, and see, that wild man is after him!" added the shipowner's son.

He was right. Following closely upon the appearance of Link Merwell the boys at the foot of the cliff had seen some brushwood thrust aside, and now appeared the strange fellow who had so frightened the girls some time previously. He was dressed up more fantastically than ever, and had his face smeared with red and yellow. Over his shoulder, suspended by a strap, he carried an old-fashioned fowling piece, and in his hands was a heavy club.

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"Go away from here! Go away, I say, and never come back!" cried the strange individual, dancing around wildly and flourishing his club close to Link Merwell's head.

"All right, I'm going! Please don't hit me!" pleaded the youth, who was plainly in terror of his life. And then, in his haste to escape, he took several steps forward.

"Look out there, or you'll have a bad fall!" yelled Dave, in quick alarm.

The warning, however, came too late. Deceived by the brushwood and vines growing at the edge of the cliff, Link Merwell lost his footing, and the next instant came tumbling headlong.

"Ha, ha! I told you to keep away! Now don't come back!" yelled the fantastically-dressed man in the bushes behind the cliff; and then with another yell he suddenly disappeared from view.

Dave and Phil rushed forward fully expecting to find Merwell seriously hurt. But in falling the youth had been fortunate enough to catch hold of some of the trailing vines, and these had stayed his progress somewhat, so that all he received was a violent shaking-up.

"Don—don't let—let him sho—shoot me!" spluttered Link Merwell, as he turned over and scrambled to his feet. Then, for the first time recognizing those who stood before him, his face showed more concern than ever.

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"Who's that fellow who attacked you, Link?" asked Dave, quickly.

"I don't know—some crazy old lunatic, I suppose," muttered the former student of Oak Hall. "Is he—he—coming after me?"

"No, he just dashed out of sight," answered Phil. "He's the same chap who nearly scared the girls to death," he added to Dave.

"How do you know? He didn't look like that fellow," returned our hero.

"I recognized him by his voice, even though he is dressed quite differently, Dave. He must be as crazy as they make them."

"Oh, so you know him, do you?" put in Link Merwell, questioningly. He had gotten to his feet and was now straightening out his apparel.

"I must say, Link, I didn't think I was going to have the pleasure of meeting you so soon," said Dave, with a little bit of pardonable sarcasm.

"Humph!" Link Merwell was on the point of saying more, but bit his lip and kept silent.

"So you were on board the steam yacht when she took fire," put in Phil.

"I was."

"Why didn't you show yourself; were you afraid?"

"That was my business. I didn't have to show myself if I didn't want to."

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"We know well enough why you didn't show yourself, Link," broke in our hero. "And we also know why you left Mr. Appleby's camp so suddenly. You were afraid of arrest."

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody told us. We know it," went on Dave. "You have escaped several times, but I guess we've got you now."

"Hi! don't you dare to touch me!" exclaimed Link Merwell, in fresh alarm. "You haven't got any right to put your hands on me."

"Right or wrong, Link, we are going to make you a prisoner," declared Phil, and advancing he caught the youth who had helped to rob Mr. Wadsworth's jewelry works by the arm.

"You let me go, Phil Lawrence! If you don't it will be the worse for you!" bawled Link, and tried to wrench himself loose.

"Here, none of that!" broke in Dave, quickly, and stepping forward, he caught the evildoer by the other arm. "You just march along with us!"

"I won't go!" bawled the boy who had gotten himself into trouble. "Let go of me, I tell you!"

He started to struggle, and for a minute or two Dave and Phil had all they could do to hold him. Then, in sudden viciousness, Link kicked out, taking Dave in the shin.

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"Oh, so that's your game, is it?" cried Dave, his anger rising. And then, as Link kicked out once more, he caught the foot and gave the youth a shove that sent him sprawling on his back. Before Link could arise, Dave rushed in and sat down heavily on him.

"Oh!" grunted the fallen one. "D-don't cru-crush my ribs!" he panted. "L-let u-up!"

"I won't let up until you promise to behave yourself," answered Dave, sternly. "For two pins, Link, I'd give you the thrashing of your life. You deserve it. What right had you to send me that note and call me a 'poorhouse nobody'?"

"That's right, Dave. Pitch into him! Give him what he deserves!" agreed Phil. "Maybe a good licking would knock some common-sense into him."

"D-don't you dare to—to t-touch me," panted the boy under Dave. "If you—you do, I'll ha-have the l-law on you!"

"Don't talk about the law!" cried Dave. "The law will take care of you. When I caught you down on Cave Island, and you said that you were sorry that you had joined Jasniff in that robbery and that you were going to reform, I felt sorry for you. But you are a faker, Merwell, and I don't believe you ever will reform, and that's the reason I'm going to do my best now to place you in the hands of the law."

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"You—you—you let me u-up!"

"I won't let you up until you promise to behave yourself and come along with us."

"A-all right, I pro-promise."

"Very well, then, you can get up," answered Dave, arising. "But remember, you have given us your word, and if you break it, I'll guarantee that Phil and I will come down on you like a ton of bricks. Now, if you know when you are well off, you'll do exactly as we tell you to."

"I've got a scheme, Dave," broke in Phil, bringing out an extra piece of fishline from his pocket. "Let's tie his hands behind him with this. Then I don't think he'll care to run away—not very far, anyhow."

"Humph! can't you let me walk along without having my hands tied?" grumbled the prisoner.

"We are not going to take any chances, Link," answered the shipowner's son. "Now that we have caught you we are going to see that you get where you belong—in prison."

"You send me to prison and my father will make it hot for you!"

"You stop threatening us, Link!" ordered Dave, sternly.

"All right. But you'll see!"

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Much against his will, Link Merwell was forced to place his hands behind him, and in a few minutes Phil and Dave had secured the fishline around his wrists. Then they picked up his cap, which had fallen off, and placed it on his head.

"Now then, march!" ordered Dave. "And no funny work!" And he led the way back along the brook, with Merwell following and Phil bringing up the rear with the fishing outfits.

"Say, how do you expect a fellow to get over these rocks with his hands tied behind him?" grumbled Link Merwell, after he had slipped several times.

"You'll have to do the best you can," returned Phil, coldly. "A jailbird like you can't expect much consideration."

"Bah, you make me tired, Phil Lawrence!" growled the prisoner. "I don't think you'll be able to send me to prison; not for long, anyhow! My father's got plenty of money; he'll get me out some way."

"If he spends any money on you he'll be foolish," returned the shipowner's son. "Now go ahead, we are not going to waste all our time on you."

It was not long after this when they came in sight of the other boys. Ben and Roger were still fishing, while Luke and Shadow were resting on the rocks, the latter telling one of his favorite stories.

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"Hello! What luck?" called Ben, looking up. And then he added: "Great Cæsar's ghost! if it isn't Link Merwell!"

"Where did you run across him?" cried Luke, leaping to his feet, followed by Shadow.

"We found him running away from some kind of a wild man," answered Dave.

"The wild man who scared us into fits the other day?" queried Roger.

"We don't know if it was that fellow or somebody else," answered Phil.

Link Merwell was much crestfallen to confront so many of his former schoolmates of Oak Hall. He realized that he was "in the camp of the enemy" in more ways than one. At one time or another he had played each of them some sort of a scurvy trick, and he realized that not one of them would have a good word to say for him.

"Well, I see they have made you a prisoner," remarked Luke, as he noticed that Link's hands were tied behind him.

"Humph! they had no right to do it," growled the prisoner. "Where are you going to take me, anyhow?"

"We are going to take you to our bungalows," announced Dave. "There you will have the pleasure of talking the matter over with Mr. Wadsworth."

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At the mention of the name of the man he had robbed, Link Merwell winced and his face paled. Evidently he did not relish what was in store for him.

"Say, having his hands tied behind him puts me in mind of a story," began Shadow. "Once there was a fellow——" and then, as the would-be story teller saw a look of disgust coming over the faces of his chums, he added hastily: "Oh, well, never mind. I'll tell you that story some other time."

"Is Mr. Wadsworth staying up here with you?" asked Link, while Ben and the others prepared to return to the bungalows.

"He is," answered Dave.

"Is his family with him?"

"Yes, we are all up here for a short vacation." Dave looked at his enemy squarely in the eyes. "Link, do you think you are treating me just right? I never put a straw in your way, and yet you have done everything you could to make things unpleasant for me. I tried to help you down on Cave Island, and in return for that you have been sending letters to Nat Poole asking him to help you in hurting me. And then the other day you sent that note calling me a 'poorhouse nobody.'"

"Oh, don't preach to me, Dave Porter!" growled the youth who had been made a prisoner. "I hate that kind of talk. You always tried to set yourself up as being better than any one else. Maybe you could get on the soft side of Gus Plum, but you can't play any such game as that on me. I know what I am doing."

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"Link, I'm sorry to hear you talk that way," went on Dave, earnestly. "Do you want to spend all your life in prison?"

"Bah, don't talk to me! Didn't I tell you I don't want any preaching? If I've got to go to jail I'll go, but it won't be for long, mark my words! My father has got lots of money, and I guess the lawyers will know what to do. But let me tell you something, Dave Porter"—and now Link Merwell's face showed both cunning and hatred—"you found fault with that note I sent to you calling you a poorhouse nobody. Well, that is all you are; a poorhouse nobody!"

"See here, Link——" began our hero, his temper rising.

"Oh, now, just wait, Dave Porter! Just wait a little, and you'll find out what I mean. You are a poorhouse nobody and nothing else. Dave Porter? Why, you are not Dave Porter at all! You are a poorhouse nobody; that's all you are!"

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CHAPTER XX

BACK IN CAMP

"What's this you are saying, Link?" demanded Phil, who had overheard the conversation just recorded. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself to talk that way. Just because Dave spent part of his life in the poorhouse after he was stolen away from his parents is no reason why you should speak as you do."

"And that isn't the reason why I am talking this way," retorted the prisoner. "I've got another reason, and Dave Porter will find out what it is before very long."

"You just said that I was not Dave Porter," remarked our hero. "What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind what I mean; you'll find out sooner or later," answered Link, with an expression of cunning on his countenance.

"Oh, don't listen to him!" broke in Roger; "he is only trying to worry you, Dave. Let us get back to the bungalows and tell Mr. Wadsworth about this capture."

"I'm not going back with you," retorted Link Merwell. And now, with his hands tied behind him, he made a leap over the rocks in the direction of the woods. [Pg 202]

The sudden movement on the part of the prisoner, surrounded as he was by all of the boys, came somewhat as a surprise. But Dave, Roger and Phil were quick to recover, and away they bounded in pursuit of the fleeing one.

Terror lent speed to Link Merwell's feet, and soon he gained the edge of the growth, which at this point was quite heavy.

"Hurry up or he'll hide himself!" called Dave, who was in advance of his chums.

The runaway might have made good his escape had it not been for the fact that his hands were so tightly bound behind him. As he dashed between the first of the trees, his foot caught on an outcropping root. Unable to throw out his hands to save himself, he came down heavily, striking his forehead on another tree root.

"I've got him, come on!" cried Dave, and in a few seconds more was beside the fallen one. To his surprise Link Merwell lay motionless.

"Collar him! don't let him get away again!" yelled Roger, as he came up with Phil beside him.

"I think he hurt himself when he fell," answered our hero. "How about it, Link?" and he bent over his enemy as he asked the question.

There was no reply, and getting down on their knees, the three boys raised Link Merwell up and turned him over. He was unconscious, and the blood was flowing from a cut on his left temple.



"YOU JUST SAID THAT I WAS NOT DAVE PORTER," REMARKED OUR HERO. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?"—Page 201.

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"He came down pretty hard, I imagine," said Dave. "Let us carry him down to the brook." [Pg 203]

Not without some difficulty, the three lads raised the unconscious form and carried it toward the brook, meeting the other boys on the way.

"Hello! what did you do; sock him one?" queried Luke.

"No, he fell, and as he couldn't use his hands he hit his head on a tree root," answered Dave. "Get a little water, somebody, and we'll see if we can revive him."

The water was soon brought, and with this they washed off the wound, after which they bound up Link Merwell's head with several handkerchiefs. The sufferer groaned and gasped several times, and finally opened and closed his eyes.

"Say, he may be hurt worse than we think," remarked Roger, gravely.

"I guess he ought to have a doctor," added Dave. "But where to get one around here I don't know. I don't believe there is one at Carpen Falls."

"I know there isn't, because I heard my mother asking about it," added Ben. "But I think we ought to get him down to the bungalows."

All of the boys were agreed that this was the best thing to do, and so, after putting up their fishing outfit, they began the return to the lake shore, taking turns at carrying the unconscious youth. [Pg 204]

"O dear! who is hurt?" cried Laura, as she saw the party approaching.

"It's Link Merwell," answered her brother. "Call Mr. Wadsworth; will you?"

"Oh, Dave! so you've caught him; have you?" cried Jessie, while Laura ran off on her errand. "Did you have a fight?"

"Not much of a one, Jessie. He got hurt through a fall."

"What a very foolish boy he has been!" was Belle's comment. "But I think his father is partly to blame. He always allowed Link to do as he pleased on the ranch, and when Link went to the city he always gave him more spending money than was good for him, at least, so my father said."

"It was up to Link to do the square thing on his own account," broke in Roger. "He had all the chance in the world to make a man of himself. But he preferred the company of fellows like Jasniff. And this is the result."

Mr. Wadsworth was in his bungalow writing a letter. He was surprised and gratified at the news brought by Laura, and quickly followed her outside. A little later Mrs. Wadsworth and Mrs. Basswood joined the group. The boys had unbound Link, and now they placed him on a large hammock with a comfortable pillow under his head. As the jewelry manufacturer approached, the sufferer opened his eyes and then struggled to sit up. [Pg 205]

"Hello! I guess he isn't hurt as much as we thought," remarked Shadow, in a low tone.

"Maybe he's only playing 'possum," was Luke's comment.

"No, he was hurt, that's sure; the cut on his forehead shows it," answered Dave.

"Well, Merwell, so they have caught you; have they?" began Mr. Wadsworth, as he stepped up in front of the youth. "I thought we would get you sooner or later."

"I—I can't talk to you no-now," faltered the prisoner.

"I don't think it will be necessary to do much talking, Merwell," went on the jewelry manufacturer. "We can do our talking later—possibly in the police court."

"All right, have your own way about it," growled the prisoner. "You've got me and I'm down and out, so you can do your worst." And with this he rolled over on the hammock once more and again closed his eyes.

"Talk about nerve!" whispered Ben. "Doesn't that take the cake!"

"I'd like to know whether he is really hurt so much, or only shamming," added Phil. "He always was a sly one." [Pg 206]

"Tell me how you came to capture him," said Mr. Wadsworth.

Thereupon Dave and Phil related how they had gone up the brook to the vicinity of the cliff, and there heard the words between Link and the so-called wild man.

"O dear! is that awful creature around here again?" cried Jessie.

"Yes," answered Dave. "And I wish he would keep away."

Then Dave and Phil related how Link Merwell had plunged over the cliff and had been made a prisoner, and then how, later on, he had tried to escape, struck his head on the tree root, and how all of the boys had brought him to the bungalows.

"I am glad he didn't get away from you," said Oliver Wadsworth. "I think he ought to be in prison to keep Jasniff company."

"How will you get him to jail?" questioned Phil.

"I don't know what we can do except to march him down to Carpen Falls. But we can't do that to-day, for he seems too weak. Perhaps we can take him down there to-morrow, or else some of us can go down and get an officer to come up here and take charge of him."

The matter was talked over at some length, and it was finally decided that nothing more should be done that day. Link Merwell did not join in the discussion, nor even open his eyes to look at them. But by close observation, Dave became satisfied that the prisoner was listening intently to every word that was said. [Pg 207]

"What will you do with him to-night?" asked Roger.

"We might lock him up in one of the rooms in the bungalow," suggested Dave.

"I don't think we'll give up one of our rooms to that fellow!" put in Mr. Wadsworth. "I think a bunk in the woodshed will be plenty good enough for him."

"Oh, Pa, wouldn't that be rather hard on him?" questioned Jessie, who did not want to see even a rascal like Merwell suffer physical discomfort.

"I dare say he has been putting up with worse than that in the woods here and while he was on Cave Island and in the far West," returned her father. "We'll place an old couch and some blankets in a corner of the shed, and that will be plenty good enough for him."

"But somebody will have to watch him," answered Dave. "I'll do it if you want me to."

"That wouldn't be quite fair, Dave," broke in Phil. "If he has got to be watched, let us take turns at doing it."

"We might bind him fast to the cot," suggested Mr. Wadsworth.

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"He's so slick I'd be afraid to risk that," answered Dave. "I'll not mind staying up watching him."

"Let us all take a hand at it," broke in Ben. "Every fellow can go on guard-duty for two hours, and call the next fellow." And so, after a little discussion, the matter was arranged.

"I suppose I'm not to have anything to eat?" grumbled Link Merwell, a little later, when they were arranging to place him in the woodshed, which was a small lean-to of the Wadsworth bungalow. This place was used for the storage of firewood, but just now was almost empty.

"Oh, yes, we'll see to it that you get something to eat," answered Mrs. Wadsworth, quickly.

"I haven't had a square meal for twenty-four hours," went on the prisoner.

"Give him all he wants, but nothing fancy," said Mr. Wadsworth. "He deserves nothing but the plainest kind of victuals."

"Where have you kept yourself since you ran away from Mr. Appleby's camp?" questioned Phil, curiously.

"Oh, I just roamed around in the woods," was the somewhat sullen answer.

"Did you meet that wild man more than once?" questioned Roger.

"No. If it hadn't been for that fellow, whoever he is, you wouldn't have caught me," added Link, bitterly.

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"I wonder what the Pooles will do when Mr. Basswood tells them what we think, that it is Mr. Wilbur Poole," came from Dave. "Perhaps they will send some of the sanitarium authorities up to try to catch him."

"I hope they do catch him!" came from Jessie. "I'll never feel safe as long as that man is at large."

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CHAPTER XXI

THE ESCAPE

Mr. Dunston Porter had been down to Carpen Falls for a walk and to get the mail. He returned late that evening, bringing several letters with him. He was of course much surprised to learn of the capture of Link Merwell, and listened with interest to the details concerning the affair.

Among the letters which his uncle had brought along was one for Dave, which he read with deep interest. It was from Nat Poole, who evidently had not yet heard anything regarding his missing uncle.

"I want to tell you of what has happened here lately," (wrote Nat). "I have received two visits from a young fellow named Ward Porton, who is, I believe, a moving-picture actor, and the same fellow that you helped to rescue from a burning steam yacht. This fellow was in town once with Link Merwell, and then came here alone. He has been visiting a number of people who are well acquainted with you, and also visited the poorhouse here and talked to several of those in authority, and those who used to have the running of the poorhouse years ago, when you were an inmate there. This Ward Porton acted as if he had something of great importance on his mind, but what it was he would not tell, but he did let slip that it was something concerning you—that there was a big surprise in store for you. He also let slip that he, too, had been in a poorhouse when he was a little boy, and that he had never been able to learn where he had really come from.

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"I am writing this to put you on your guard in case he should show himself either at your camp or at the Wadsworth mansion after your return. I must confess that I don't like the fellow's manner, and I rather surmise he is laying pipes to play you some trick."

Dave read this letter over several times, and was much perplexed. He had not forgotten what Link Merwell had said to him shortly after being captured, nor had he forgotten the fact that he had seen Link and Ward Porton in Crumville at the old Potts farm.

"Those fellows are certainly up to something," our hero told himself. "Link said that I was not Dave Porter. Now, what did he mean by that? Those fellows must be hatching up some plot against me."

"Dave, you look rather worried," remarked Phil, as he caught the youth reading the communication for the third time. "No bad news I hope?"

"I can't tell whether it is or not, Phil," was the reply. And Dave handed the letter to his chum.

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"Phew! This looks like a mystery," was the comment of the shipowner's son. "Dave, do you think this had anything to do with what Link Merwell said when we caught him—that you were not Dave Porter?"

"That's the way it looks to me, Phil."

"But that's rank nonsense. We all know you are Dave Porter."

"Well, I've always thought I was Dave Porter, ever since I met my Uncle Dunston out in those South Sea Islands."

"Why of course you are! Don't you look just like your Uncle Dunston? This is some game, Dave."

"I think so myself."

"What are you fellows confabbing about?" asked Roger, walking up.

"We're talking about a letter I just received," answered Dave. And then the senator's son also read the communication.

"Say, this is a mystery and no mistake!" was Roger's comment. "And so Nat thinks that Ward Porton is mixed up in it, eh? That is strange."

"What do you suppose he has to do with it, Roger?" questioned Phil.

"I am sure I don't know. But come to think of it, he did look like——" And then Roger broke off in confusion.

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"Look like what, Roger?" asked Dave, quickly.

"Oh, never mind, Dave, let's drop the subject and talk about what we are going to do with Link Merwell."

"I think I know what you were going to say," went on our hero, and he tried to speak calmly although his heart gave a sudden jump. "You were going to say that Ward Porton looked like my Uncle Dunston and like me."

"Well, if you must know it, Dave, that is what did come into my mind. I don't think he resembles you quite as much as he resembles your uncle, to be really honest."

"Oh, say, Roger, drop that!" interposed Phil, hastily. "I think Dave looks a good deal more like his uncle than Porton looks like Mr. Porter."

"It's a queer mystery, that's certain," returned Dave, slowly. "I don't like it, I must say," and his face showed more concern than it had for a long while.

"Don't you take this too seriously, Dave!" cried Roger. "I believe at the most it's only some game gotten up by Link Merwell. Now that we have him a prisoner and can send him to jail for that robbery, more than likely you won't hear anything further about it."

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"I sincerely hope you speak the truth," was our hero's sober reply.

After a plain but substantial meal, Link Merwell was taken to the woodshed and told he would have to remain there until morning. Then the boys cast lots to find out who should go on guard first.

"I'm number one," announced Phil, after drawing one of a number of slips of paper placed in a cap.

"And I follow you," announced Luke.

"I'm guard number three," came from Ben, and the other boys announced what slips they had drawn.

Usually the woodshed was dark, but now a lantern had been hung on a nail to illuminate the place. There were two doors, one connecting with the bungalow proper, and the other leading into the backyard of the place. There was also a small window, over which in times past several stout wooden bars had been nailed to keep out prowling wild animals.

"Think I'll run away, eh?" remarked Link Merwell, as he sat down on the couch which had been placed in the woodshed.

"You'll not get the chance," returned Phil, who had armed himself with one of the double-barreled shotguns. "If you try to get away, Link, you'll get a dose of shot in you, just as sure as fate."

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"Humph! I don't think I'll want to run away," grumbled the prisoner. "There is no place to run to in this forsaken section of the country. What you folks can find here to make it pleasant is a mystery to me."

The door leading to the outside had been closed and bolted. The other door leading to the bungalow proper was left open for ventilation, and Phil sat on a low stool beside it, with the shotgun across his knees.

"Are you quite sure you can manage him, Phil?" questioned Mr. Wadsworth, as he came to the doorway after the others in both bungalows had retired.

"Yes, I can manage him easily enough," returned the shipowner's son. "I've got this, you see," and he tapped the shotgun suggestively.

"Well, don't have any shooting unless it becomes absolutely necessary," answered the jewelry manufacturer; and then he, too, retired.

For a short while Link Merwell lay down on the couch and turned over as if to go to sleep. But he was restless, and presently, when all was quiet, he turned over again and sat up.

"What are you going to do with me when you get me to Carpen Falls?" he questioned.

"We are going to hand you over to the authorities."

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"Is Dave Porter going along to the Falls?"

"I don't know about that. That's for Mr. Wadsworth to say," answered Phil. "By the way," he continued, "what did you mean by telling Dave that he was not Dave Porter?"

"Never you mind, you'll find out soon enough," grumbled the prisoner.

"Very well, Link, if you don't want to tell me you don't have to. Just the same, if you are trying to hatch out some plot against Dave, I warn you to be careful. He has stood about as much as he intends to stand."

"This is no plot; this is something real," grumbled Link Merwell. "Just you wait, that's all," and then he lay down on the couch once more and pretended to go to sleep.

At the proper time Luke came to relieve Phil, and was followed by Ben, and then by Shadow.

"Say, it's cold to-night," remarked the former story-teller of Oak Hall, as he took the shotgun and sat down on the stool. "If this weather keeps on, before long we'll have frost up here, and we'll all be thinking of going home."

"Better put on an extra coat; here is one," answered Ben, and passed the garment over. Then he returned to the other bungalow, for he was tired.

Shadow had expected to have quite a talk with the prisoner, but in this he was disappointed, for Link appeared to be asleep, and he did not have the heart to awaken the prisoner. He sat on the stool, thinking over several of the stories he had told from time to time, and trying to invent one or two new ones.

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In the midst of his reverie a sound from outside startled him. It was the hooting of an owl, and so close that the mournful sound made Shadow shiver.

"I'd like to shoot that owl," he told himself, as the hooting continued. "If I brought him down I could have him stuffed," he thought, with some satisfaction.

Shadow looked at the motionless form on the couch, and then arising from the stool, tiptoed his way into the big living-room of the bungalow. One of the windows was wide open, and he looked out of this to see if he could locate the owl. The hooting was now closer than before and seemed to come from a tree not twenty-five feet away.

"Say, there's a chance for a shot," murmured the youth to himself. "If I could only spot that owl I'm sure I could——"

Thump! Shadow received a staggering blow in the back of the neck, and then felt himself hurled to one side, while the shotgun was wrenched from his grasp. Then, before he could recover from his astonishment, a figure leaped through the open window and dashed across the moonlit dooryard.

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"Hi! Stop!" yelled Shadow, as soon as he could recover his breath. "Stop! Help!"

"What's the racket?" The cry came from Roger, and then he and Dave burst into the room, followed by Phil.

"Merwell! He's escaped! He got the gun away from me, and jumped through the window!" panted poor Shadow. "Oh, what a fool I was to think he was asleep!"

"Where did he go?" questioned Dave, and at the same time bounded back into the bedroom, to don his shoes and part of his clothing.

"He jumped out of the window with the gun. That's all I know about it," answered Shadow.

"Didn't you have a fight?" questioned Phil.

"No, I came to the window to look at an owl that was hooting around here. Link came behind me and gave me a fierce crack in the neck. Then he grabbed the gun and went through the window like a flash. And I thought he was asleep!"

By this time Dave had returned, partly dressed, and catching up another one of the fowling pieces in the bungalow he, too, leaped through the window, followed by Shadow. A few seconds later the other boys joined them.

"Have you any idea which way he went?" questioned our hero.

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"I don't know exactly, Dave, but I think he went that way," and the former story-teller of Oak Hall pointed with his hand.

"Let's scatter a little," ordered Dave, and while he passed in the direction pointed out, the other boys separated to both sides of him. All advanced to the edge of the woods and there came to a halt. While the moon made it fairly bright in the open space surrounding the bungalows, beneath the trees it was dark, and consequently little could be seen.

"Might as well look for a pin in a haystack," grumbled Roger. "If he got into these woods it's good-bye to him. We might search all night and not get a trace of the rascal."

"I guess you're right, Roger," answered Dave, "but let's search around a little anyway."

Long before this the alarm had become general, and now Dunston Porter and Mr. Wadsworth appeared, followed shortly by Mrs. Wadsworth and Mrs. Basswood and the girls.

"Let us take the flashlights and lanterns and see if we can't get on the track of him," ordered the jewelry manufacturer. "We must capture him if it is possible to do so."

And then the search began in earnest.

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CHAPTER XXII

MORE OF A MYSTERY

"Did you see anything of him?"

"Not a thing. Did you?"

"I saw something move under the trees, but I guess it was a wild animal."

"He's gotten away, and that is all there is to it," said Dave, as he looked at his chums and at the men, who had also joined in the search for Link Merwell.

"This is certainly too bad!" remarked Mr. Wadsworth, with a shake of his head.

"And it was all my fault!" broke out Shadow, bitterly. "Oh, I could kick myself full of holes every time I think of it!"

Over an hour had been spent in the woods surrounding the clearing on Mirror Lake. During that time the men and the boys had stirred up several small wild animals, but that had been all.

"He must have legged it for all he was worth after he jumped through the window," was Roger's comment. "For all we know he may be miles away from here by now."

"If he ran straight into those woods it was a hazardous proceeding," said Dunston Porter. "He'll become hopelessly lost in the darkness, and when daylight comes he won't know how to turn to get out."

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"Oh, perhaps he'll climb a tree and locate his surroundings that way," suggested Dave. "You must remember that Link isn't like a city fellow. He was brought up in the wild West, and knows how to do for himself in the open."

"We may as well give up the hunt," said Mr. Wadsworth, and turned toward Bear Camp, followed by the others.

"Oh, Dave, did you catch him?" The cry came from Jessie, who stood on the porch with the others, awaiting their return.

"No, he got away."

"That's too bad!"

"You should have kept him bound, Dave," said Laura.

"That's it, Dave," added Belle. "In the West they would tie a rascal like Link fast to a tree with a lariat. If you secured him properly he would stay there until you freed him."

"Well, there is no use in crying over spilt milk," remarked Mrs. Basswood. "I suppose we may as well go to bed again." And on this the others agreed.

Several days, including Sunday, passed, and nothing more was seen or heard of Link Merwell or Ward Porton. During that time the young folks went out on the lake several times, and also went fishing. Swimming was mentioned, but as the weather was getting colder rapidly, only Dave and Phil went in for a plunge. One day they planned to visit the moving-picture people, but it rained and they did not go.

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"It will soon be time for hunting," announced Roger. "I hope we do get a chance to bring down something before we have to go back."

"Well, I'd like to have a crack at a deer, myself," answered Dave, who had not forgotten the sport he had had on Squirrel Island and at other places in the vicinity of Oak Hall.

"What's the matter with a crack at a bear?" interposed Phil. "A great big shaggy fellow that would weigh eight hundred or a thousand pounds."

"Say, Phil, you don't want much in life!" cried Ben. "Why don't you make it a two-thousand-pound bear while you are at it?"

"Say, speaking about heavy bears puts me in mind of a story I heard!" cried Shadow, his face lighting up for the first time since the escape of Link Merwell. "This yarn was told by an old western hunter and trapper, and he said it was strictly true. He said he was out on the ranges one day when he found himself suddenly pursued by three Modoc Indians. He shot at them several times without hitting anybody, and then, to his consternation, he found that his ammunition had given out. He legged it up a mountain-side, and the three Modocs came after him, yelling to beat the band. Just as they were following him up the steep trail, he saw a monstrous bear come plunging out from a thicket near by. He was so upset that he hardly knew what to do, but he grabbed up a big rock and sent it at the bear. It struck the monstrous animal on the head and keeled him over, and the bear rolled down the steep mountain-side, and knocked over the three Modoc Indians, smashing every one of them."

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"Wow! That's some bear story!" exclaimed Luke.

"Shadow, how could you bear to tell such a story?" asked Dave, reproachfully.

"That knocks out all the dime novels ever written," said Ben.

"Why, Ben! do you mean to say you have read them all?" cried our hero, in pretended surprise.

"All? I don't read any of them!" snorted Ben. "Just the same, that's the biggest whopper I ever heard."

"Well, I'm not vouching for the story," interposed Shadow, dryly, "I'm just telling it as it was told to me."

"Speaking about being frightened by a bear puts me in mind that it's queer we haven't seen or heard anything more of that wild man," remarked Roger.

"We don't want to see or hear anything more of him!" burst out Laura. "One scare was enough."

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"It's queer that the Pooles don't send some one up here to look for him," remarked Jessie. "If he were my uncle I certainly wouldn't want him to be roaming around in the woods that way."

"If he is just roaming around I wonder how he manages to live," said Dave. "And where does he get all that outlandish outfit?"

"He must have some sort of a habitation here," returned Phil. "Maybe he has taken possession of some bungalow or cabin that was locked up. If he has, won't the owners of the place be mad when they find it out, especially if he is using their things!"

"I wonder if we couldn't go up to that cliff and track him in some way from there?" said Phil. "He may have left some sort of trail behind him. Unless he follows some kind of paths through the woods he would be apt to get lost, just like anybody else."

"If he really is Wilbur Poole, I'd like to capture him and send him back to the sanitarium; where he belongs," remarked Roger. "I think Nat would like us to do it."

"What do you say about starting on a regular hunt to-morrow?" asked Dave. "We might go out directly after breakfast and carry our lunch with us. Who knows but what in looking for the wild man we might run across some trace of Link Merwell."

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"Oh, Dave, you mustn't get into any trouble!" cried Jessie, hastily.

"If we go out we'll go armed and be on our guard," he replied.

The matter was talked over for some time, and at last it was decided that the boys should start out in a body directly after breakfast the following morning, provided it remained clear. They were to carry a shotgun and a rifle, and also a substantial lunch, and were not to return to Bear Camp until evening.

"I'd like to go on such a tramp myself," announced Belle. "It would be lots of fun climbing over the rocks and up the mountains."

"I think you girls had better remain around the bungalows," said Mrs. Wadsworth. "You can go out some other time, when the boys are not looking for that wild man and Link Merwell."

During the past few days those at Bear Camp had seen but little of the moving-picture company. That afternoon the old hunter, Tad Rason, stopped at the dock in his rowboat, and made the announcement that the company had gone to the other end of the lake, to take pictures for several more dramas.

"Mr. Appleby wanted me to tell you that that young feller, Ward Porton, ain't goin' to be with 'em no more," announced Tad Rason to Dave. "He says the young feller writ a letter sayin' that he was on the track of his parentage, and he guessed as how he'd have plenty of money of his own when he could prove who he was."

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This announcement was of great interest to Dave, and he immediately questioned Tad Rason, to

learn if the old hunter knew anything further. But that was all Rason could tell. He even did not know how long Ward Porton had remained with the moving-picture company after his arrival in the Adirondacks.

"The huntin' season will be openin' to-morrow," announced Tad Rason, in reply to a question from Phil. "I'm bound down the lake now to meet a party of hunters comin' from Albany. I take 'em out every season, actin' as guide."

"Perhaps we'll get you to go out with us some day," said Roger.

"All right, boys. I'll be glad to go, if I ain't got any job with them other fellows," announced the old hunter.

Although he was not willing to admit it to the others, Dave was greatly worried over the news brought by Tad Rason. Coupling it with what he had heard from Link Merwell and Nat Poole, he could reach but one conclusion, which was that in some way Ward Porton was going to try to prove that the boy from the Crumville poorhouse was not the real Dave Porter.

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"Maybe he'll come along with a story that he is the real Dave," thought our hero, bitterly. "He said he was raised in a poorhouse, just like myself, but he also said it was away down East and not anywhere near the vicinity of Crumville. How he is going to get around that is beyond me. I don't think he'll be able to make anybody believe his story. Just the same, I wish this thing hadn't come up. I'd like to forget those poorhouse days entirely." And at the remembrance of those bitter times, Dave sighed deeply.

"Dave, you look awfully worried," said Jessie, that evening when the boys were getting ready for their next day's tramp. "What is the trouble?"

"Oh, it isn't much," he answered, evasively. "I was just thinking over what Link Merwell said."

"Dave, don't let him worry you so!" cried the girl, sympathetically. "He is a bad boy, and everybody knows it."

"But he said some things that I don't like at all, Jessie. I don't like him to call me a poorhouse nobody."

"Dave, don't you mind him! I don't care if you did come from the poorhouse. I think just as much of you anyway," and Jessie's eyes showed her earnestness.

"It's splendid of you to say that," he returned, in a low tone, and catching both her hands, he squeezed them tightly. "It's a grand good thing to have somebody who believes in you."

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Early in the evening there was a slight shower, and some of the boys thought they were in for a steady rain. But soon the clouds passed, and the moon and stars came out as brightly as ever.

"A perfect day!" announced Roger, on arising the next morning. "Just cool enough to make mountain climbing a pleasure."

The servants had an early breakfast ready for the boys, and by the time the girls and the others appeared they had partaken of the repast and were ready to depart. Dave carried the rifle and Roger the shotgun, while the others were loaded down with several knapsacks of provisions and some extra wraps and a blanket or two.

"You want to take plenty of things with you," Dunston Porter had cautioned them. "You may get farther away from home than you anticipate, and may have to stay out all night."

"That's true, Uncle Dunston," Dave had answered. "And that being so, if we don't turn up at a reasonable hour, don't worry about us."

"But what will you do if you capture that wild man?" asked Mrs. Basswood.

"If it's Wilbur Poole, we'll make him a prisoner and bring him with us," announced Dave.

"Well, good luck to you!" cried Dunston Porter, as the boys prepared to leave. "Remember the hunting season opens to-day, so if you get a chance at any game don't let it slip you."

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"Trust us for that, Uncle Dunston!" cried Dave.

With shouts of good-bye, the boys turned away from the bungalows, and a few minutes later disappeared along the path running beside the brook.

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CHAPTER XXIII

SHOOTING A WILDCAT

Less than half an hour later, the boys found themselves at the top of the cliff where Dave and

Phil had seen the encounter between Link Merwell and the so-called wild man. A brief look around convinced them that the locality was deserted.

"Now to find the wild man's trail, if he left one," announced Dave, and the boys scattered in several directions, looking at the ground and the brushwood with great care.

"If we only had one of those Reservation Indians with us, he might help us pick up the trail," declared Roger. "As it is, I must confess I'm not much of a trail-finder."

"Oh, don't give up so soon," returned Dave. "Remember we have the whole day before us."

Presently Ben and Luke, who had turned southward on the cliff, let out a shout.

"Here is something of a trail," announced Ben, when the others came hurrying in that direction, and he pointed to footprints which led through some soft soil between a number of low bushes. A little further on they could see where somebody's shoes or boots had carried some of the mud up on to the rocks beyond.

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"That certainly does look like a trail," declared Dave. "Let us follow it up a bit, and see where it leads to."

This was considered good advice, and soon, led by our hero, the whole party was moving through the brushwood and over the rocks. Then they came once again to the woods, and here discovered a well-defined trail running southwestward.

"This may be an animal trail for all we know," remarked Shadow. "For my part, I can't tell one kind of trail from another."

"It's quite likely that a fellow like that wild man would use any trail he came across, and so would anybody else trying to move around in a wilderness like this," answered Dave. "I don't think it will do any harm to follow it for some distance."

"Better keep your eyes open, Dave," cautioned Phil. "It may lead us into danger."

"I've got my eyes wide open, and I've got the rifle handy, too," answered our hero, as he once more led the march forward.

The trail was very narrow in places, so that they had to walk in single file. It made a long curve through the forest, and then came out in a little clearing, backed up by a series of jagged rocks. Here there was a small stream, and behind it a spring of pure, cold water.

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"It looks to me as if the animals used this trail when they wanted a drink," was Luke's comment. "That water looks pretty good to me," and bending down, he took a deep draught. "It's fine," he went on; "try it!"

The others did as requested, and agreed with Luke that the water was as good as any they had ever tasted. Then began more searching, and before long they found another trail, this time veering to the westward.

The boys pushed forward once again, Dave still in the lead; and thus a half mile more was covered. Then they found themselves between a number of rocks where, presently, the trail seemed to lose itself.

"Say, Dave, we don't seem to be getting anywhere," announced Phil, as having climbed over several very rough rocks, he stopped to regain his breath.

"That's right!" broke in Luke. "And say, we had better go slow unless somebody wants to sprain an ankle. This is the roughest ground I ever tried to get over."

"It is easier walking just ahead," announced Dave, who now stood on the top of one of the rocks, gazing forward. "Come on! I think I see the trail too," and he made a leap from one rock to another and was soon some distance in advance.

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The rough rocks left behind, the boys came out on a trail which seemed to come from the north and lead directly up a steep hillside well covered with tall trees. Here the shade was very thick, and the slight breeze that was stirring made the atmosphere decidedly cool.

"Wonder what time it is?" remarked Luke, and drew out his watch as he spoke. "Well, I never! Only ten o'clock! I thought it must be about noon!"

"Getting hungry already?" laughed Dave. "If you are, we might stop for a bite."

"That's it! let's have a bite to eat, and rest at the same time," cried Phil. "We brought plenty of lunch along—enough for several meals."

The boys sat in a sort of circle on some rocks and a fallen tree, and while thus resting partook of a light lunch from one of the knapsacks. Then they moved forward, up the hillside, and presently found themselves on the top of the rise.

"Here is quite a view!" announced Shadow, and they spent a little time in taking in the panorama spread before them. On one side they could see Mirror Lake, and on the other the nearby mountains and also a faraway wagon-road, which they rightly guessed was that running to Carpen Falls and the villages beyond.

"See anything worth looking at outside of the scenery?" questioned Roger of our hero.

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"I see some smoke down in yonder hollow," announced Dave. "That must come either from some campfire or else from some cabin, and whether it is from a campfire or a cabin it means that some human being must be there."

"Right you are, Dave! And that human being may be that wild man, or Link Merwell," answered Ben, quickly.

"How far do you think it is to that smoke?" asked Phil.

Various guesses were made, and the consensus of opinion was that the smoke was not over half a mile distant.

"Let us take the trail leading off in that direction," said Dave, and a few minutes later the boys struck out once more.

Much to their surprise, getting down into the hollow between the hills and the nearby mountain was by no means as easy as they had anticipated. The way proved exceedingly rough, and more than once one or another of them was in danger of a serious tumble. As it was, Shadow slipped on the rocks and scraped his hands in several places. Then Luke gave a grunt, announcing that he had barked his left shin.

Dave was still in advance, and now he made a leap from a rock into some low brushwood. As he did this there came a sudden cry and a snarl, followed by the movement of some body through the brushwood a short distance ahead. [Pg 235]

"Hello! what was that?" cried Phil, who was nearest to our hero.

"I didn't get a very good view of it, Phil," answered Dave, who now had his rifle ready for use, "but unless I was much mistaken, it was a wildcat."

"A wildcat! Great Cæsar! We don't want to run into any such beast as that, Dave."

"Did you see a wildcat? Where is it?" demanded Roger, quickly, as he, too, reached Dave's side.

"It went off in that direction," answered Dave, pointing with the barrel of his rifle. "See! There it is!"

As Dave uttered the last words, Roger and Phil saw a small, tawny-colored body creep out of some distant bushes and make a leap onto a flat rock. The beast was indeed a wildcat, and as it came from cover it swung around for a brief instant to gaze savagely at the boys. Then it crouched low, preparatory to making a leap to another rock higher up.

Crack! It was Dave's rifle that rang out. And following the report the wildcat was seen to leap into the air and then fall back on the rock, where it whirled over and over several times.

"You hit it, Dave!" yelled Phil and Roger, simultaneously. [Pg 236]

"What did you shoot at?" called out Ben, as he came plunging forward, followed by Luke and Shadow.

"A wildcat! See, there it is on the rocks!" cried Roger.

"A wildcat! I didn't know there were any left around here," returned Ben, and then he added, quickly: "There it goes! You didn't kill it after all, Dave."

As Ben spoke, the wildcat gave another whirl on the rock, and then slipped off through the bushes out of sight of the boys.

"I'll give him a shot from my gun if he needs it," announced Roger, as he hurried forward.

"Be careful that he doesn't get at you first!" cried Dave, warningly. "If he's only slightly wounded he'll be a dangerous customer to tackle."

The other boys followed Roger, and, having reloaded his weapon, Dave followed suit. Soon all were standing close to the flat rock where the wildcat had been hit.

"Where is it?"

"I don't see him anywhere."

"Be careful, he may land on you before you know it!"

"There! There! Look yonder!" The last cry came from Luke, and at his words all turned quickly, to see the wildcat crouch between two trees growing close to the rocks. With a snarl, the beast leaped out toward them, the blood flowing from a wound along one forequarter. [Pg 237]

Roger had the shotgun ready, and without taking time to bring the weapon to his shoulder, he pulled the trigger.

Bang! went the piece, and then, with a final leap, the wildcat sprang toward the boys, only to drop dead at their feet.

"Good! That's the way to do it!" cried Phil, enthusiastically. "That wildcat won't bother us any more."

"Dave hit him in the forequarter," announced Roger, after an examination of the dead animal. "More than likely the beast would have died from that wound."

"I don't know about that," returned our hero; modestly. "You are the one who settled him. That was a fine shot, Roger. It couldn't have been better." And on this the others agreed.

As no one cared to take the trouble to skin the wildcat, the beast was left where it had fallen, and the boys once more took their way along the trail leading to the spot where they had seen the smoke. Soon the trail made another turn, and then came out on a path which was wider and showed considerable usage.

"Here are footprints," said Ben, pointing to them. "I believe we are getting close to some sort of [Pg 238]

a house or cabin."

A few minutes later the broad path they had discovered made another turn, and then in the distance they saw a neat log cabin, located on the bank of a small mountain torrent. From the chimney of the cabin a thin wreath of smoke was curling.

"That's the smoke we must have seen," announced Dave. "Now the question is: Who lives there?"

"And how will they take our arrival," added Phil.

"Wait a minute!" ordered Dave, and put out his hand to stop his chums from advancing. He had seen a man come limping from the mountain torrent with a bucket of water in his hand. Now the man stopped in front of the door to the cabin as if to look around before entering.

"Well, that isn't the wild man; that's sure! And it isn't Link Merwell, either," announced Roger.

"Say, I've seen that man before!" cried Phil, in sudden excitement.

"You have, Phil?" questioned Dave. "Who is he?"

"Who is he? Unless I am greatly mistaken, that is my missing uncle, Lester Lawrence!"

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAN AT THE CABIN

"That man is your uncle?"

"Do you mean the man who disappeared so mysteriously after that robbery?"

"That's the man." Phil's manner showed increased excitement. "Isn't this the strangest thing that ever happened? To think of my running across my uncle in this out-of-the-way place!"

"You want to make sure that he is your uncle first," warned Dave. "Perhaps he is only somebody who looks like your relative, the same as that Ward Porton resembles me," added our hero, with a grim smile.

"Oh, I am sure that man is my uncle," declared the shipowner's son.

"Do you think he is the same fellow we saw before—the wild man?" queried Roger.

"I don't know as to that. Maybe he is," and Phil's face now showed worry. "I do hope my uncle hasn't lost his mind!"

"Well, he might do that because of his troubles," was Shadow's comment. "It was trouble that affected Wilbur Poole, if you'll remember." [Pg 240]

During the course of this conversation, the boys had withdrawn to the shelter of some trees and brushwood. In the meantime the man with the bucket of water had disappeared within the cabin.

"I noticed he limped considerably," remarked Dave.

"Yes, and he had his left foot bound up," announced Luke. "More than likely he hurt it in some way."

"It would be an easy matter for somebody to hurt his foot if he cut up like that fellow who nearly scared the girls and Link Merwell to death," remarked Ben.

"I am going to the cabin and see what he has to say for himself," declared Phil, resolutely starting forward.

"If you go we had better go with you," announced Dave. "But be careful, Phil. If that man is out of his head he may be dangerous."

"I don't think my Uncle Lester would hurt me even if he was out of his mind," answered the shipowner's son, as he moved toward the cabin, followed closely by the others.

The boys were still a hundred feet or more away from the habitation when the man reappeared at the doorway. On catching sight of the newcomers he uttered a sudden cry of dismay, and then disappeared like a flash, banging the cabin door shut behind him. [Pg 241]

"Evidently he's not very sociable," remarked Luke, dryly. "I guess he doesn't want any visitors."

Advancing to the door, Phil knocked loudly.

"Go away from here! I don't want to see any of you!" cried a heavy voice from within. "Go away, I tell you!"

"Open the door, please. I want to speak with you," answered Phil, as calmly as he could.

"I won't talk to you! I don't want any one around this place!" came angrily from within the cabin. "Go away, or I'll shoot!"

"Say, I don't like this!" cried Shadow, in a low voice. "I guess we had better get out," and he started to retreat, followed by Luke and Ben. Phil, however, stood his ground, and not to desert their chum, Dave and Roger did the same.

"We are not going to molest you," called out Phil, after several seconds of silence. "All I want to do is to talk to you."

"I won't talk to anybody, I tell you! Go away! If you don't I'll use a shotgun on you!" returned the man in the cabin.

"Aren't you Mr. Lester Lawrence?" demanded Phil.

"What's that?" And now the voice of the man showed sudden interest.

"I say: Aren't you Mr. Lester Lawrence?" repeated Phil.

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"Who said I was Lester Lawrence?" demanded the man, suspiciously.

"If you are, I must talk to you. I am Phil Lawrence, your nephew."

"Phil Lawrence!" the boys outside heard the man mutter to himself. "Phil Lawrence? Oh, it can't be!" Then he raised his voice: "You are trying to play some trick on me," he shouted.

"It isn't any trick," put in Dave. "This young man here is Philip Lawrence, and he is looking for his uncle, Lester Lawrence. He has good news for him."

"Good news? I can't believe it! It is some trick. I want you all to go away."

"Uncle Lester, it isn't any trick. I am Phil, your nephew. I want to talk to you. I've got the best kind of news for you; something that you'll be glad to hear. Won't you please open the door and let me talk to you?"

"It's a trick, I know it's a trick," came from the man, in almost a whine. Nevertheless, he advanced toward the door, and with trembling hands threw off the bolt that had been shot into place. Then, with great caution, he opened the door several inches and peered out.

"Who says he is Philip Lawrence?" he questioned, sharply.

"I am, Uncle Lester," announced the shipowner's son. "Don't you remember me? You used to think the world and all of me some years ago, when you lived across the street from us."

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The man opened the door a little wider, and gazed sharply into Phil's face. Then his manner seemed to change, and, allowing the door to swing wide open, he tottered back and sank down on a bench.

"It's Phil—little Phil, sure enough," he murmured. "How in the world did you come to follow me to this faraway place?"

"I didn't follow you, Uncle Lester," returned the youth. "I and my friends were looking for a wild man who is roaming around in this vicinity, scaring people, and we reached this place by accident. We saw you coming to the cabin with a bucket of water, and I easily recognized you at once."

"I thought I was safe here—safe from the whole world," muttered Lester Lawrence. "But you said you had good news for me," he added quickly. "What is it?"

"It's the best kind of news, Uncle Lester. Don't you know that shortly after you disappeared the bank authorities and the police found the guilty parties?"

"They did?" And now the man's face showed his amazement.

"Why, sure they did! And then, of course, they knew that you were innocent."

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"Oh, Phil! can this be true?"

"It certainly is true, Uncle Lester, every word of it! You are an innocent man, and everybody at home knows it. Father has been trying his best to get into communication with you. He inserted personals in the newspapers, and even put detectives on your track; but, as you know, without avail."

"Then the world knows that I am innocent! Thank God for that!" exclaimed the man, with fervor. "Oh, how I have suffered! And for such a long time, too!" And tears stood in his eyes.

"But why didn't you communicate with father?" asked the nephew. "You ought to have known that he would be tremendously worried about you."

"I was bitter, bitter against the whole world. I didn't think I had a friend left!" cried Lester Lawrence. "I didn't want to see anybody, and I didn't want anybody to see me. I was afraid that they might catch me and put me in jail, and then if I could not prove my innocence—and there was to my mind no way of doing that—they would send me to prison for a long term of years. That's why I made up my mind to disappear."

"And you've been up here ever since?" asked Phil.

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"No, I've been here only since last Summer. Before that I was in another section of the Adirondacks."

Lester Lawrence looked at Dave and Roger, who had followed Phil into the cabin, and at the

other boys, who were crowded around the doorway.

"Who are these; some of your school chums?" he questioned.

"Yes, Uncle Lester," answered the shipowner's son, and introduced his friends one after another. "They are all good fellows, and I hope you will consider them as friends."

"I will do that, Phil, if you want me to," was the reply. "Your revelation has lifted a great weight from my shoulders. Tell me all the particulars."

Sitting down beside his relative, the shipowner's son related all that he knew of the occurrences of the past. Mr. Lawrence listened to the recital with close attention and asked many questions, his face meanwhile showing his intense satisfaction.

"What you have told me makes me feel ten years younger," he declared. "If all this is true—and I have no reason to doubt your word—I can once more face the world and those who are dear to me."

"Phil has got another surprise for you, Mr. Lawrence," put in Dave, when the recital was at an end. "You will not only be a free man when you return to your former home, but you will also have a good deal of money coming to you."

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"Indeed! And how is that?"

"It's this way, Uncle Lester," answered Phil, and thereupon gave a few of the details concerning the land which the rival railroads wished to purchase from the uncle and Phil's father.

"That certainly is splendid news!" declared Lester Lawrence, his eyes lighting up. "What a wonderful change the last hour has brought! Before you came I thought I was doomed to live here, unknown and alone, for perhaps the rest of my life."

"But how have you managed to live?" asked Dave, curiously.

"Oh, that has been easy. You see, when I left home I had quite a little money that belonged to me. I buy necessary provisions down in one of the towns, and also do some hunting and fishing. This cabin belongs to the daughter of an old hunter who lived here for years, and as she did not wish to occupy it she let me have it at a very reasonable rental."

"Do you know anything of that wild man who is in this vicinity?" queried Roger.

At this direct question Lester Lawrence dropped his eyes and showed much confusion.

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"I am afraid I do," he answered, shamefacedly. "The fact of the matter is, it was I who played the wild man, dressing myself up in some old outfits that were left in this cabin by those who used to live here."

"But what was your purpose?" questioned Luke.

"I wanted to scare the folks in this vicinity, so they would not come near this cabin. I was afraid if too many people came to this neighborhood, sooner or later somebody might recognize me and inform the authorities."

"You nearly scared the ladies and girls in our bungalows to death," said Ben, bluntly.

"I am very sorry for it, now," was the reply. "But you see, what Phil has told me has put an entirely different face on the matter. I looked at all strangers as enemies. I was very bitter against everybody."

"Well, I guess you had a right to feel bitter, Uncle Lester," returned Phil, who could realize how his relative had suffered. "But it's all past now, and you must give up your life here and come home with me."

"I am willing to go home, now that I know my name is cleared," answered Lester Lawrence. "But I can't travel just yet," he added, ruefully, looking down at his bandaged foot.

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"What is the trouble?" questioned Dave, kindly.

"I sprained my ankle the day I followed one of you boys—that is, I suppose it was one of your crowd. I mean the chap who fell over the cliff."

"Link Merwell!" ejaculated Phil. "He is no friend of ours, he is an enemy. By the way, Uncle Lester, have you seen him since then?"

"He is an enemy, you say!" cried Mr. Lawrence. "Is that so? Yes, I saw him. He was here early this morning, and I chased him away."

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CHAPTER XXV

TWO DEER

"He was here, and you chased him away!" exclaimed Dave. "Have you any idea where he went to?"

"I think he took the trail back of the house; the one leading to Carpen Falls," answered Lester Lawrence. "I slipped on my most outlandish costume, and I must have scared him out of his wits, for he ran like a deer," he added, with a smile.

"In that case there is no use in our looking for him around here," announced Roger.

"I think I'll give the hunt up," said Phil. "Finding my uncle has changed matters completely. What I want to do is to send word to my father that my uncle is found. Then, as soon as he is able to travel, I'll leave you fellows and take him home."

"I think I'll be able to walk on the foot in a day or two," answered Lester Lawrence. "You see I can already hobble around. But that sprain was a pretty bad one, I can assure you!"

After this the situation was discussed for some time—in fact, until well after the noon hour. Then one of the boys suggested that they have dinner, and while Phil and his uncle continued to talk over their personal affairs, Dave and his chums set about getting ready the meal. [Pg 250]

While all in the cabin partook of the midday meal, the boys told the hermit about their life in camp, and also of their adventures at Oak Hall and in other places. Lester Lawrence listened interestedly to the recital, and asked innumerable questions concerning their doings, and also questioned Phil regarding conditions at home.

"I'll leave the matter of that land deal entirely to your father," he said to his nephew. "He always had a better head for business than I've got. He'll know the right thing to do."

After the meal it was decided that Phil should remain at the cabin with his uncle, while the other boys returned to Bear Camp. Phil wrote out a message which he asked Dave and the others to send to Carpen Falls, from which point it might be transmitted by telephone and telegraph to his parents, announcing the finding of the long-lost uncle.

"Now that I have found Uncle Lester, I don't want to leave him," said Phil to Dave and Roger, as he drew his two particular chums to one side, out of hearing of the others. "Uncle Lester may be all right in his mind—in fact I hope he is—but at the same time, he has acted so queerly that I don't want to give him any chance to get away from me. Besides, I think he ought to rest so that his lame ankle can get well. I'll do all the work around here and stay until some of you get back, which I suppose will be in a day or two." [Pg 251]

"All right, Phil. You stay with him, by all means," answered our hero. "We'll attend to this message, and we'll wait to see if any message comes back from your father."

The boys to return to Bear Camp had thought they must go by the way they had come, but Lester Lawrence told them to follow the mountain torrent for a distance of a quarter of a mile, and then they would reach a broad and well-defined trail leading to the brook which flowed into Mirror Lake.

"It's a much shorter route," he said, "and you will find the traveling much easier."

It was about half an hour later when Dave and the others bid Phil and Mr. Lawrence good-bye, and set out on the return to Bear Camp. Our hero still had possession of the rifle, and Roger carried the shotgun. Under the heavy trees it was both dark and cold, and the boys hurried along as rapidly as possible, not only to make time, but also to keep warm. Dave and Roger were in advance, discussing the finding of Phil's uncle.

"I'm mighty glad on Phil's account that his uncle has been found," remarked Dave. "The selling of that land at a handsome profit will be a big lift for the Lawrence family." [Pg 252]

"Yes. And how it will please Phil's parents to have Mr. Lawrence's brother back!" responded Roger. "As it was, they did not know whether he was dead or alive. It's a terrible thing to—"

Roger broke off short, for at that instant Dave clapped his hand over his chum's mouth and drew him quickly behind a nearby tree. They were well in advance of their friends, and now our hero motioned the others to keep back.

"What is it? What is the trouble?" called out Ben.

"It's a deer, keep quiet!" answered Dave, in a low tone.

"A deer! Where?" questioned Roger.

"Over yonder, by the white birch."

The senator's son looked in the direction indicated, but for the moment saw nothing out of the ordinary. Then, however, a head appeared from between some bushes back of the white birch, and presently a beautiful deer stalked into view.

"I see him," whispered Roger, excitedly. "There is your chance, Dave, plug him!"

Our hero already had the rifle raised. He was about to pull the trigger when he paused, for he had seen the bushes back of the deer move.

"What's up? Why don't you shoot?" whispered Roger, his voice betraying excitement. [Pg 253]

"I think there's another deer there, Roger," whispered our hero, in return. "Yes, there he is! Now then, you will have a shot yourself. Take the one on the left and I'll take the one on the right."

"All right," returned the senator's son, and raised the double-barreled shotgun. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. When I say 'three,' fire," answered Dave, quickly. "One, two, three!"

Crack! Bang! The two pieces rang out in quick succession, and as the reports echoed through the forest both deer gave a wild leap into the air. Then the animal at which Dave had shot plunged forward on its knees and fell into some brushwood, kicking wildly. The other deer whirled around and started to run for cover.

"Give it the other barrel, Roger!" yelled Dave, as he ran forward.

There was no need of this advice, for while Dave was yet speaking the second barrel of the shotgun was discharged at the flying deer. Roger's aim this time proved to be better than before, and plunging forward, the deer ran full tilt into a tree and then pitched over on its side, where it soon breathed its last.

Long before Dave reached his quarry he was ready for a second shot should the game require it. But when he reached the deer's side he found that the end of the animal was close at hand. Then he rejoined his chum, who was watching the other deer.

"Is he dead, Roger?" he asked, quickly.

"I think he is, Dave," was the answer, and Roger's tone showed his exaltation. "My! but this is luck; isn't it?"

"I should say yes! Two deer at a clip!"

"How about the one you hit; is it dead?"

"Just about," was Dave's reply, and then he hurried over to the game, to note that it was breathing its last.

"How did you make out?" The cry came from Ben, as he came running forward, followed by Luke and Shadow.

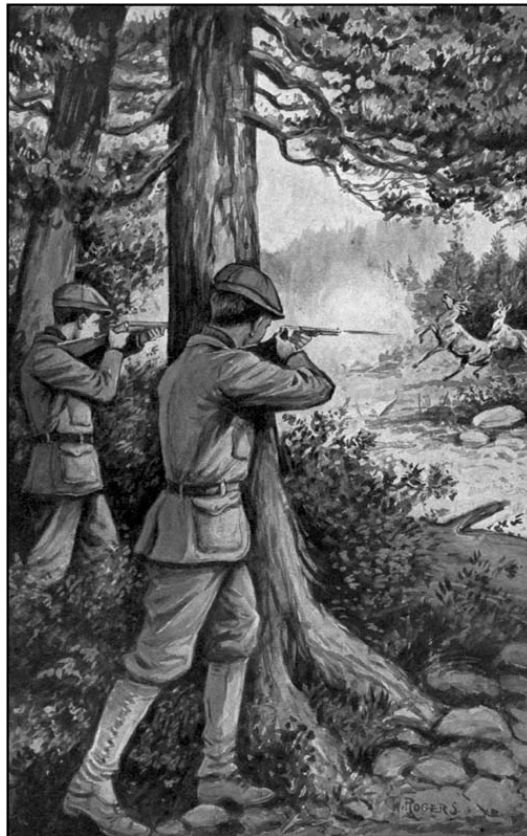
"Did you hit anything?" queried the former story-teller of Oak Hall.

"Did they hit anything!" yelled Luke. "Say, this is great, they got two of them!"

"This is what I call wholesale hunting!" announced Ben.

"You fellows certainly opened the hunting season in great shape," was Shadow's comment. "A wildcat and two deer all in one day!"

The boys dragged the two deer together, and it must be confessed that Dave and Roger looked at their quarry with great pride.



CRACK! BANG! THE TWO PIECES RANG OUT IN QUICK SUCCESSION.

"How are we going to get those down to the bungalows?" asked the senator's son.

"I think the best thing to do will be to tie their feet together and slip each of them on a long

pole," returned Dave.

A small hatchet had been brought along for possible use in cutting firewood, and with this the boys cut down two long and slender saplings. Then they tied up the deer as our hero had mentioned, and a sapling was thrust between the front and hind legs of each of the game, allowing the body to hang below.

"Here, Ben, you can carry the rifle," announced Dave. "I'll take one end of one load."

"And I'll help carry with you," announced Luke.

"I'll carry my share of the load," offered Roger, and he picked up one end of the second sapling, while Shadow took the other. Thus carrying the loads between them, and with Ben going ahead with the rifle, they continued on the return to Bear Camp.

Progress with such heavy loads was necessarily slow, and several times the boys stopped to rest. It was well toward nightfall when they reached the stream flowing into Mirror Lake.

Having gained the watercourse, it was an easy matter for them to continue onward until they reached the vicinity of the two bungalows. As soon as they came in sight of the camp, several set up a shout, which quickly brought Laura and Belle into view.

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"Home again, and with lots of good news!" cried Dave, swinging his cap.

"Oh, look, they have two deer!" exclaimed the girl from the West. "Isn't that grand?"

"It certainly is," returned Laura; but her voice had little of enthusiasm in it.

"Where is Uncle Dunston?" cried Dave. "I want him to look at what Roger and I shot."

"Your uncle has gone home," answered Belle. At the same time Laura turned away.

"Gone home!" repeated Dave, in bewilderment. "Why, what made him do that? I didn't know he was going until next week."

"He went with Mr. Wadsworth," continued Belle. "They had some very important business to attend to."

"What was it? Laura, do you know?"

"Yes, I know, Dave," answered the girl, and now her voice had a curious, uncertain ring in it. "Oh, Dave, it's the most awful thing I ever heard of! I don't see how I am ever going to tell you!" she burst out; and then, of a sudden, began to cry and ran into the bungalow.

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CHAPTER XXVI

STARTLING NEWS

Dave was so surprised that for the moment he knew not what to say or do. His eyes followed Laura as she disappeared within the bungalow, and then he turned in bewilderment to Belle.

"Laura takes it awfully hard, but I don't think she ought to—at least not yet," said the girl from Star Ranch. "There may not be a word of truth in the story. Anyway, I'm not going to believe it until they prove it."

"But what are you talking about, Belle?" questioned Dave, his face still showing his perplexity. "What is it all about? Has anything happened at home? It isn't my father; is it?"

"No, there is nothing wrong at your home, Dave—at least not in the way you think." Belle paused for a moment as if not knowing how to go on. "You remember what Link Merwell said; don't you?"

"About me?"

"Yes. Of course I don't believe it at all. But this young fellow, Ward Porton, sent word to your father, and that has upset him a great deal, so that he sent word to your Uncle Dunston and Laura, as well as to Mr. Wadsworth. The word came in this morning, a couple of hours after you had left; and after talking the matter over, your uncle and Mr. Wadsworth made up their minds to return to Crumville without delay."

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"And what did this Ward Porton have to say?" questioned our hero, and it was with an effort that he steadied his voice.

"I can't give you all the particulars, because Laura did not show me the letter. Poor dear! it just broke her up completely, and I've had an awful time with her—and I've had an awful time with Jessie, too."

"But you must know something," went on Dave, while the others gathered around, their faces showing their intense curiosity.

"Well, as near as I can make out, this Ward Porton has been investigating matters connected with himself and with you, and he claims that he is the real Dave Porter and that you are somebody else."

"Oh, say, that's nonsense!" burst out Phil, quickly. "Why, we proved Dave's identity beyond question, when we came back from our trip to the South Seas."

"Sure we did!" added Roger. "Dave's uncle went into all of the details with the Crumville poorhouse authorities, and also got the particulars of how that fellow named Sandy Margot, the good-for-nothing husband of that crazy nurse, Polly Margot, abducted Dave and took him on a railroad train, and then got scared and put him off at Crumville."

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"I am sure I hope what you say is true, Roger," responded the girl from the West. "What this Porton bases his claim on I don't know. As I said before, I didn't read the letter Dave's uncle turned over to Laura."

"I must go in and find out about this," said Dave, in a curiously unnatural voice. His mind was in a whirl, and for the time being his good luck at hunting, and the finding of Phil's uncle and the clearing up of the mystery of the wild man, were completely forgotten.

He found Laura in one of the bedrooms of the bungalow, sitting in a chair by the window, with her hands clasped tightly together and her face firm-set and drawn. As she looked up at him, two fresh tears stood out on her cheeks.

"They tell me that Uncle Dunston got a letter about me," said the youth, doing his best to steady his voice. "Will you let me see it?"

"It's on the table," returned the girl, motioning with her hand. And then she added impetuously: "Oh, Dave, I can't believe it's true, I simply can't! Why, it's the most dreadful thing that ever came up! I am sure there must be some mistake!"

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"I—I can't understand it," Dave stammered in return, and then picked up the communication which had been sent by special messenger from Carpen Falls. The letter ran as follows:

"DEAR DUNSTON:

"A most astonishing thing has come up, and I wish you would return to Crumville at once; and it might be well to bring Mr. Wadsworth with you.

"I cannot go into all the details because I am completely upset. Briefly stated the matter is this: A young man named Ward Porton—the same fellow who was in Crumville some time ago with Link Merwell—has written to me, stating that he has every reason to believe that he is the real Dave Porter, and that our Dave is somebody else. His story is that he was left in a poorhouse at Lumberville, Maine, by an old woman who obtained him from Sandy Margot, who told her the child had been under the care of Polly, his wife. The claim is also made that Sandy Margot had in reality stolen two children, little boys, at about the same time, and the theory is advanced that the other boy was the one dropped from the train at Crumville. The young man states that he has gone into the matter very carefully, and has a number of proofs which he will submit whenever called on to do so. He adds that he feels sorry for Dave, but hopes that I will find in him as good a son, and also hopes that Laura will like him as well as a brother.

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"I am so upset that I hardly know what to think or what to do. If this young man's story is true, then all of us have made a sad mistake, and what Dave is to do in the matter I don't know. Come on as soon as possible and help me to get to the bottom of this terrible mix-up.

"Your affectionate brother,
DAVID BRESLOW PORTER."

Dave read this letter with care, and then allowed the communication to slip from his fingers. If his mind had been in a whirl before, it was more so now, and for the moment he could hardly think straight. If he was not Dave Porter, who was he? A thousand ideas ran riot through his brain.

"Oh, Dave! it can't be true; can it?" came half-pleadingly from Laura.

"I don't know," he answered dumbly. "I don't know."

"But, Dave, I thought that you and Uncle Dunston proved your identity completely, even before you found father and met me."

"I always supposed we did prove it, Laura," he answered. "We went into the matter very carefully at that time. Nothing was ever said about Sandy Margot stealing two little boys. I always supposed he had taken only one child."

"And to think this other young man is a perfect stranger," went on Laura, dolefully. "There is no telling what sort of a person he is."

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"He's no stranger to me. I helped to pull him out of the water when the steam yacht was on fire," answered Dave. "I guess he's all right as far as that goes, although I don't think much of his keeping company with Link Merwell."

"Do you suppose it can be a plot hatched up by Link Merwell?"

"I don't know what to think. This news stuns me. I've got to consider it. Maybe I had better go back to Crumville, too."

"No, Uncle Dunston said you had better stay here—at least for the present. He said if they wanted you they could send you word."

"Oh, all right," and now Dave's voice showed a faint trace of bitterness. "Maybe they don't want me around, if they have really settled it that I am not the real Dave Porter."

"Oh, Dave! Don't want you around!" Laura sprang to her feet, and coming over to him, caught both his hands in her own. "Don't talk that way. Even if they should prove that you are not my brother, I shall always think just as much of you."

"Thank you for saying that, Laura," he returned, with much emotion. "It's nice to know that there is somebody who won't go back on me."

"I don't believe anybody will go back on you, Dave—you have always been so good. Oh, I think this is dreadful—just dreadful!" and Laura showed signs of bursting into tears once more. [Pg 263]

"Where are Jessie and Mrs. Wadsworth, and Mrs. Basswood?"

"I think Jessie went over to the other bungalow with her mother. She was as much upset as I was."

"Does she think the story is true?"

"She hopes it isn't. But of course she can't do anything—and I can't do anything either."

"Well, I don't see what I can do." Dave took a turn up and down the room, and then sank on a chair. "This just knocks me endwise. I can't even seem to think straight," he added, helplessly.

"You poor boy!" Laura came over and brushed back the hair from his forehead. "You don't know how this hurts, Dave. Oh, it can't be true!"

"I wonder how long I've got to wait before I hear from Crumville?"

"I am sure I don't know. I think, though, we'll get word just as soon as they know anything definite."

At that moment came a timid knock on the door, and Laura opened it to admit Jessie. The appearance of the girl showed that she was much upset. Her face was tear-stained and her hair awry. [Pg 264]

"Oh, Dave!" was all she said. And then coming straight toward him, she threw her head on his shoulder and burst into a fit of weeping.

"There, there, Jessie! Don't you cry so," he said, soothingly. "I am sure it will be all right."

"But Da-Dave, hasn't Laura to-told you?"

"Yes, she has told me."

"And did you read that letter?"

"Yes."

"But it can't be true, Dave! Oh, tell me it can't be true!" went on the girl, pleadingly.

"I can't tell you whether it is true or not, Jessie, for I don't know," answered the boy, as bravely as he could. "I suppose they'll investigate the matter at Crumville and at that place in Maine, and let me know." He looked at her curiously. "What if they prove I am not the real Dave Porter, Jessie—will you care very much?"

"Care? Of course I'll care, Dave! But don't misunderstand me," she added, quickly. "Even if they prove you are not the real Dave Porter, it won't make any difference to me. I shall think just as much of you, no matter who you are."

"Do you really mean that?" and he clutched her tightly.

"I certainly do! What difference will it really make? You will be yourself, no matter what your name is." [Pg 265]

"I know, Jessie, I'll be myself; but who will I be? Perhaps I'll be a 'poorhouse nobody' after all," and he smiled bitterly.

"Never!" returned the girl, emphatically. "You'll never be a nobody, Dave. You are too true, both to yourself and to those around you. You'll make a name for yourself in this world even if they take your present name away from you;" and as she spoke the girl's words rang with earnestness.

A great and peculiar joy seemed to creep over Dave, and despite the blackness of the situation, his heart for the moment felt light. He gazed with emotion at both Laura and Jessie.

"If that's the way you feel about it—and Laura says she feels the same—I'm not going to worry just yet," he answered.

CHAPTER XXVII

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT

That evening the sole topic of conversation at Bear Camp was the news concerning Dave. The other lads could not bear to question Laura or Jessie on the subject, knowing how badly both of them must feel; but they asked Belle to tell all she knew, and also quizzed Mrs. Wadsworth and Mrs. Basswood.

"It's the worst state of affairs I have ever known," was the way the jewelry manufacturer's wife expressed herself, in private to Roger and Phil. "We, as you know, think the world and all of Dave, and we don't want him to drop back and become a nobody, even in name. He is a splendid boy, and no matter what happens we shall always think as much of him as we ever did."

"I think all his friends will stick to him," answered Roger. "At the same time, this will cut him to the heart; and what he'll do if they really prove he isn't Dave Porter, I don't know."

"Maybe the Porters will continue to keep him in the family as an adopted son," suggested Phil. "That is, if this report really proves to be true, which I don't believe will happen."

"I have always thought a great deal of Dave, ever since he saved Jessie from that gasoline explosion," returned Mrs. Wadsworth. "Should they find out that he is not a Porter, I think I would be strongly in favor of my husband adopting him." [Pg 267]

"Say, that wouldn't be half bad!" burst out Phil, "and the suggestion does you credit, Mrs. Wadsworth. Personally, I think Dave is the finest fellow in the world."

"I am sure we all think that," added Roger. "Since he went to Oak Hall he has made a host of real friends, and I don't think one of them will desert him."

While this conversation was going on, the other boys were talking to our hero, doing their best to cheer him up and to convince him that, no matter what happened, they would stick to him.

"You take it from me," declared Luke, "this is some scheme gotten up by Link Merwell and this other fellow!"

"Certainly it's a scheme!" added Shadow. "It puts me in mind of a story I once heard about a fellow down South who stole three watermelons, and——But, oh, pshaw! what's the use of trying to tell a story now? I'm going to cut them out until we get this thing settled," he added, in disgust.

"Don't you worry, Dave. I am sure it will come out all right in the end," was what Ben said, speaking with an apparent conviction that he did not by any means feel. [Pg 268]

"You're all kind, fellows, and I appreciate it very much," answered Dave. "But this is a blow to me. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to take a little walk by myself and think it over." And thus speaking, the youth withdrew from the crowd, and walked slowly to the lake and along a footpath bordering the shore.

"It's the rankest shame I ever knew!" declared Ben, when the others were left to themselves. "If I had that Ward Porton here I'd wring his neck."

"I guess we'd all like to do that," responded Shadow. "Nevertheless, if he is the real Dave Porter you can't blame him for trying to prove it."

"There is only one thing about it that troubles me," said Luke. "Don't you remember that all of those who saw this Ward Porton agreed that he looked very much like Mr. Dunston Porter?"

"Yes, but Dave looks like Dunston Porter, too," came quickly from Ben.

"It's queer that he resembles his uncle more than he does his father," was Shadow's comment. "Maybe this Ward Porton resembles Mr. David Porter."

"Well, it's fierce; that's all I've got to say," declared Ben. "And what Dave is going to do if they prove he isn't the real Dave Porter is something I don't like to think about. In those days when we first went to Oak Hall, you'll remember how bitter he felt when some of his enemies referred to him as that 'poorhouse nobody,' and how eager he was to clear up the mystery of his identity, even though it cost him a trip to the South Sea Islands." [Pg 269]

Dave walked on and on along the lake shore, paying little attention to where he was going. His mind was in a state bordering on bewilderment. In a faint, uncertain way he had anticipated some such calamity, but now that the blow had fallen, the matter looked almost hopeless to him. Had he followed his own inclinations, he would have made preparations to return to Crumville at once.

"But evidently they don't want me there," he told himself, bitterly. "They want to solve this mystery without my interference. And if they do make up their minds that I am not the real Dave Porter, I wonder how they will treat me? Of course, they may be very kind to me—the same as Laura and Jessie and the others up here. But kindness of that sort isn't everything. I don't want any one to support me if I haven't some claim on him." And then Dave shut his teeth hard, clenched his hands, and walked on faster than ever.

Finally tired out because he had been on his feet since early morning, Dave sat down on a flat rock to rest. As he did this, he heard the put-put of a motor, and presently around a bend of the shore showed the headlight of Mr. Appleby's motor-boat. [Pg 270]

"I wonder if they are simply going down to the end of the lake, or whether they are going to stop at our place," said Dave, to himself. "I'd rather they wouldn't stop at Bear Camp to-night, when everything is so upset."

As the motor-boat swung around, the headlight flashed full upon our hero and there followed an exclamation from the manager of the moving-picture company, who was at the wheel of the craft, with two men beside him.

"Hello there, Porter! What are you doing—fishing?"

"No, I just came down here to sit on the rock and do a little thinking," answered Dave.

"We are making a little trip around the lake," went on Mr. Appleby. "I was going to stop at your dock and deliver a letter that came in our mail by mistake. It's a letter for you, so I might as well give it to you now."

"A letter for me, eh?" answered Dave.

"Yes, here you are!" went on Mr. Appleby, as the motor-boat came to a standstill close by. "I'll put it in the newspaper and you can have that too, as we have read it;" and suiting the action to the word, the man placed the letter in the folds of the paper and tossed the latter ashore.

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"Will you stop?" questioned Dave.

"Not to-night. We are going to make a call on the other side of the lake. I just thought I'd give you the letter, that's all," and then, with a pleasant good-bye, the manager steered his motor-boat out into Mirror Lake again.

It was too dark to read the letter without a light, and as Dave did not happen to have even a match, he walked back to the bungalows. The lanterns were hung out on the porches as was the custom, and under the light of one of these he looked at the communication he had received.

"It's from Crumville!" he exclaimed to himself, eagerly, as he looked at the postmark. But then, as he recognized the handwriting, his face fell. "It's only from Nat Poole."

The communication from the money-lender's son was a long one, containing much news which it will be unnecessary to give here. There was, however, one paragraph in the letter which Dave read with great interest.

"I am sorry if you put yourselves out trying to catch that wild man thinking he was my Uncle Wilbur. As I told you, my uncle got away from the sanitarium and they had quite a job to locate him. They found him up in the vicinity of Oak Hall, at one of the houses where he had once stayed. They got him to return to the sanitarium without any trouble, and the doctors think that he is now doing finely."

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"Hello, Dave! what are you reading?" remarked Roger, coming up.

"Here's a letter from Nat Poole," and our hero told how he had received it. "You can read it for yourself. They have found Wilbur Poole, and have put him back in the sanitarium."

"Is that so? Well, I am glad they caught him." And then Roger read the letter, and went off to spread the news among the other boys.

The next day was a long one for Dave. While Ben and Luke went to Carpen Falls with a letter directed to Phil's father, he spent part of the time dressing the two deer. But his heart was not in the work, and his friends noted his absent-mindedness. Several times he looked down in the direction of the trail leading to Carpen Falls, and they knew he was hoping for some messenger to appear, summoning him to come to Crumville.

"It makes me sick to see Dave so downcast," whispered Ben to Roger, that evening. "I wish we could cheer him up."

"I don't see how we are going to do it. We can't lift that burden from his mind. We have simply got to wait until some word comes from the Porters at Crumville. I don't believe they'll keep Dave waiting any longer than necessary."

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"But think of the terrible suspense!"

"I know it. It's too bad!"

The afternoon had been cloudy, and late in the evening it began to rain. Then the wind came up, moaning through the forest in melancholy fashion and sending thousands of whitecaps across the surface of the lake.

"It isn't Mirror Lake to-night," said Belle, with a little shiver. "It's more like Foamy Lake."

"I don't think I'd want to go out in a canoe to-night," returned Phil, who was beside her.

"I think we are going to have quite a storm," said Laura. "Just listen to that wind!"

With fitful gusts tearing around the bungalows, no one felt much like going to bed. About ten o'clock came a hard downpour, lasting for half an hour. Then the wind died away, and gradually the rain ceased.

"I guess the worst of it is over," announced Mrs. Wadsworth, presently. "I think we may as well retire." And shortly after that all of the inmates of both bungalows were in bed.

For a long while Dave could not sleep. As had been the case the night previous, he tumbled and tossed on his couch, thinking of the trouble that had come to him. But at last tired nature claimed its own, and he sank into a profound slumber, from which he did not awaken until some time

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after sunrise.

"Hello! I must have overslept," he declared, as he leaped up, to see that his chums were almost dressed.

Dave was just finishing his toilet, and the other boys and some of the girls had started to walk down to the dock to look at the lake, when a cry came from the kitchen of the bungalow.

"Mrs. Wadsworth! Mr. Porter!" came a call from the hired girl. "Please come here!"

"What is it, Mary?" asked Mrs. Wadsworth, as she appeared from her own room.

"Sure, ma'am, a whole lot of things are missing!" declared the girl.

"Missing! What is missing?"

"Sure, ma'am, almost everything in the kitchen is missing, ma'am!" and the girl pointed around in a helpless sort of fashion. "All the knives and forks and spoons are gone! And so are some of the pots and pans and kettles!"

"Is that possible?"

"Yes, ma'am. And that ain't all, ma'am. Sure, and most of the things in the pantry and in the ice-box are gone, too!" announced Mary, running from one place to another. "Sure, ma'am, we've been burglarized, ma'am!"

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CHAPTER XXVIII

DELLA FORD'S STATEMENT

"Burglars!"

"Did they take any of our valuables?"

"Oh, I wonder if they were in our rooms!"

"Mary, were all the things here when you went to bed?" questioned Mrs. Wadsworth, of the servant girl, who was now in the wildest possible state of excitement, wringing her hands and running from one room to another.

"Yes, ma'am, when I went to bed everything was in its place. I'm sure of it, ma'am."

The boys as well as the girls crowded into the kitchen, and then looked into the pantry, in a corner of which was located the ice-box.

"How about this pantry window, Mary? Did you leave it open last night?" asked Dave, pointing to the window in question.

"Sure, sir, I did not! I always lock up well before I go to bed," answered the girl.

"You didn't open the window this morning?"

"No, sir."

"Then that is where the thief must have come in," remarked Roger.

"I think we had better take a look around and see just how much is missing," advised Phil. "The thief may have cleaned us out more than we imagine." [Pg 276]

Upon this, a systematic search was made through all the rooms of the bungalow. In the midst of the work Ben came running over from the other place.

"Say, what do you know about this!" he called out. "Somebody visited our bungalow last night and took nearly all our victuals and our tableware and our kitchen utensils!"

"The same thing happened here, Ben," answered Dave. "We are just sizing up the situation, to find out how much is gone."

"The others are at that now over at our bungalow. I thought I'd run over to tell you. I'll go back and tell them you are in the same fix. This is fierce; isn't it?" And then Ben hurried away.

An examination of the premises showed that all the tableware of value had disappeared, along with two rings which Laura had left on the mantelpiece in the living-room. From the kitchen nearly everything used in cooking was gone, and likewise almost everything from the pantry and the ice-box.

"Oh, my two rings!" burst out Laura. "The diamond that dad gave me and the beautiful ruby from Uncle Dunston!"

"It's too bad, Laura!" declared Jessie.

"That's what it is!" said Dave. "We'll have to get after that burglar, whoever he is."

"This looks to me like the work of some of these people who are camping out in the Adirondacks," announced Roger. "What would an ordinary burglar do with a lot of kitchen utensils, not to mention canned goods and stuff from an ice-box?"

"Maybe they took the stuff from the ice-box to eat," suggested Dave. "It might be that they would rather camp out than run the risk of going to Carpen Falls, or to some of the hotels, for their meals."

Having completed the search in the bungalows, the boys, followed by the others, went outside. Here they discovered a great number of footprints leading back and forth from the pantry window to the edge of the forest. Among some jagged rocks, the trail was lost.

"Looks to me as if there must have been half a dozen fellows in this raid," announced Roger. "What do you think of it, Dave?"

"Either that, or else the fellow who did the job made a dozen trips or more. To me, the footprints look very much alike."

Presently the crowd went over to the Basswood bungalow, and there learned that, among other things, some solid silver tableware which Mrs. Basswood had brought along had vanished.

"I was foolish to bring such expensive silver," declared the lady of the house. "But I thought we could use it if we happened to have visitors. I never dreamed of being robbed up here."

At the Basswood bungalow an entrance to the kitchen and pantry had been effected through the woodshed, the door of which had been broken open. From this shed a trail led up to the jagged rocks previously mentioned.

"The same rascal or the same crowd that did one job did both," declared Dave.

"I don't know what we are going to do for breakfast," declared Mrs. Wadsworth, rather helplessly. "We have next to nothing to cook, and nothing to cook it in."

"We are in the same fix," answered Mrs. Basswood. "It certainly is a terrible state of affairs. I wish my husband was here to tell us what to do."

"Oh, don't worry about something to eat!" cried Dave. "We can go down to Carpen Falls and get whatever we want, and also get some extra kitchen utensils, and don't forget the deer-meat. What worries me is the loss of Laura's rings and Mrs. Basswood's silverware."

"We might go up into the woods and look around," suggested Ben, "although it's mighty wet up there from the rain."

The matter was talked over for a while longer, and in the meantime the ladies and the girls, aided by the hired help, made an inventory of what was left in the way of eatables.

"We can give all of you some coffee and some fancy crackers," said Mrs. Wadsworth.

"And we have found two cans of baked beans," added Mrs. Basswood. "They'll go some distance toward filling up the boys," and she smiled faintly.

"I'll tell you what we might do!" cried Roger. "Supposing four of us fellows jump into the four-oared boat and row up to the Appleby camp? I am sure they have plenty of provisions, and they'll lend us some until we can get in a new lot from Carpen Falls. And maybe they'll lend us a few cooking utensils, too."

"That's the thing to do!" returned Ben. "Come on, let's go up there at once;" and so it was settled.

Dave and Luke accompanied Ben and Roger on the trip; and as the four youths had often rowed together on the Leming River at Oak Hall, they soon covered the distance to the camp of the moving-picture people. They saw the crowd getting ready to depart for the enacting of the final drama in that locality.

"Hello, you're out bright and early in your boat!" cried Mr. Appleby, as he waved his hand to them. "Taking a little exercise, eh?"

"No, we came for assistance," called back Ben.

"Assistance!" repeated the manager. "What's the trouble?"

"We have been burglarized, and we have hardly anything left to eat!" broke in Luke, and at this announcement all of those in the Appleby camp came down to the dock to learn the particulars of what had occurred.

"In one way you have come at just the right time to get those things," said the manager of the moving-picture company to the boys. "We are going to leave here to-morrow to go back to Boston, so we shall want but little of the food that is on hand. And you'll be welcome to use our tableware and kitchen utensils. They belong here in the cottage, so all you'll have to do when you get through with them will be to bring them back."

While rowing to the Appleby camp, Dave had been giving serious thought to his own affairs. He remembered what he had heard concerning Ward Porton and Della Ford, and resolved to question the young lady and the other members of the moving-picture company about the young man who claimed to be the real Dave Porter. Our hero's chance came when the other boys were busy placing some provisions and cooking utensils in the rowboat. He motioned Della Ford and

her aunt to one side, and the three walked out of hearing of the others present.

"If you don't mind, I would like to ask you something about Mr. Ward Porton," said our hero, to the girl.

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"O dear, I thought I was done with that young man!" cried Della, with a toss of her head.

"He bothered my niece so much while he was a member of the company she got quite sick of him," declared Mrs. Ford. "He was a very forward young man."

"I'd like very much to find out about his past history: where he came from, and all that," went on Dave. "It's something very important."

"I know more about Mr. Porton than he thinks I do," announced Della. "That's one reason why I dropped him."

"But Della, you don't want to get into any trouble," interposed the girl's aunt, quickly.

"If you'll tell me what you know about Ward Porton, I'll promise that it won't get you into any trouble," answered Dave, quickly. "I want, if possible, to find out where he came from, and who brought him up."

"Who brought him up?" queried Mrs. Ford. "Didn't he live with his parents?"

"He says not. He claims to have come from a poorhouse in a town down in Maine."

"Why, you don't tell me, Mr. Porter!" exclaimed the lady, in astonishment. "He told me once that he had lived with his folks up to the time he was about ten years old, and that then his parents had died and he had gone to live with an uncle."

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"Yes, and he did live with an uncle—or at least some man he called his uncle," added Della.

"Are you certain of this?" asked our hero, eagerly.

"I am, Mr. Porter."

"And may I ask what the thing was that you knew about him that caused you to drop him?" continued Dave.

"Wait a minute, Della, before you answer that question," interposed Mrs. Ford, hastily. "I think we ought to know why Mr. Porter is after this information."

"Since we have gone so far, I may as well tell you," returned Dave. And in as few words as possible he related how it had come about that Ward Porton was now claiming to be the real Dave Porter.

"Why, what a queer story!" declared Mrs. Ford. "It sounds like some novel."

"I don't believe it's true, Mr. Porter!" cried Della Ford. "I believe he is a faker! At first I thought he was quite nice, but I soon discovered otherwise. He is addicted to gambling, and when he gets the fever he gambles away the very clothing on his back."

"Then that is why you broke with him?"

"That was one reason. But as I said before, I know more about Mr. Porton than he imagined. One day we had been out walking, and after he left me I picked up a letter which must have dropped from his pocket when he pulled out his cigarette case. As the letter had no envelope, I did not know whose it was, and read it. It was evidently written by a very angry man. The writer, who signed himself Obadiah Jones, said that he was sick and tired of putting up for Ward; that Ward could no longer expect any assistance from him; that he cast the young man off, and never wanted to hear from him again."

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"And you say that letter was signed by a man named Obadiah Jones?" asked Dave, eagerly.

"Yes. Rather an old-fashioned name; isn't it?"

"Did the man give his address?"

"No, there was no address of any kind on the letter," answered Della Ford.

"Was this Obadiah Jones the man he said was his uncle?" continued our hero.

"I don't know about that," answered the girl.

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CHAPTER XXIX

THE BIG BEAR

Dave was very thoughtful as the four boys rowed back to the bungalows with the things

procured from Mr. Appleby. His talk with Della Ford and her aunt had lasted until the others were ready to depart, but he had gained little information beyond that already known to the reader.

"If only I had the address of that Obadiah Jones, I might go and see him and listen to what he has to say about Ward Porton," he told himself. "Of course he may not be Porton's uncle at all—I know lots of children taken from poorhouses and orphan asylums who call the folks aunt and uncle. But even if he isn't, he may be able to give me some information that will put me on the right track regarding this affair."

The morning was spent by those at the bungalows in getting settled once more. The provisions brought from the Appleby camp were divided between the two places, and likewise the kitchen utensils.

"I'd like to set some sort of a trap and catch those burglars," declared Ben.

"I don't see how you're going to do it," returned our hero. "I doubt very much whether they will show themselves in this vicinity again. More than likely they are miles away."

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"Dave, do you think Link Merwell had anything to do with this?"

"It's possible, Ben, although I don't see how he would have the nerve to come back here after what happened. I should think he would feel like quitting this territory entirely."

Another day went by, bringing no word from Crumville. Our hero and Roger had tramped all the way to Carpen Falls, hoping for letters, but the only one to come in was a re-directed epistle for Ben, inviting him to become a subscriber to some local charity.

"O shucks! I suppose the charity is all right," said Ben, when he got this letter, "but I'd like to get some real news from dad or somebody else at home."

Dave said little, but he felt more downcast than ever. He had thought that a letter would surely come by now. Roger noticed how he felt, and placed a kindly hand on our hero's shoulder.

"Don't you worry, Dave, old man," he said feelingly, "this will come out all right in the end."

"I hope so, Roger," was the answer. "But this suspense wears on a fellow."

"Perhaps if you went to Maine to that town where the poorhouse is located that Ward Porton says he came from, you might be able to find out something about that Obadiah Jones," went on the senator's son, who had been told of what the Fords had revealed.

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"I was thinking something of that, Roger, and if I can't get on the track any other way, I'll go there," was the reply. "But I hate to think of leaving here until I get some kind of word from Crumville."

"Well, some things move slowly, Dave, don't forget that. More than likely your unc—I mean the folks down in Crumville—are doing all they can to get to the bottom of the matter. Most likely they are investigating the proofs that Ward Porton said he was willing to present."

On the following morning there was something of a surprise. About eleven o'clock, while some of the lads were fishing, and Dave had Jessie out in a canoe, there came a shout from up the brook, and looking in that direction our hero saw Phil approaching, with his uncle beside him, leaning on the youth's shoulder.

"Hello, Mr. Lawrence's ankle must have got better quickly!" cried Dave.

"And is that the so-called wild man?" returned Jessie. "He doesn't seem to be very wild now."

"You've heard us tell why he acted in that outlandish way," was the answer, as Dave paddled toward the dock.

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Soon the boys were surrounding the new arrivals, and Mr. Lawrence was led to a couch, upon which he was glad to sit down and thus rest his injured ankle. The ladies and the girls were introduced, and the man shook hands with them rather shamefacedly.

"I'll have to apologize to you for acting so rudely," said Lester Lawrence, after the introductions were over. "I suppose the boys have told you why I did it?"

"Yes, Mr. Lawrence," answered Mrs. Wadsworth, kindly. "And under the circumstances we are quite willing to let bygones be bygones."

"Can we do anything for your ankle?" questioned Laura, who was a natural-born nurse.

"I guess about all it needs is rest," answered Lester Lawrence. "It was quite a journey from my shack to this place. But I saw that Phil was getting anxious to rejoin you, so I told him we might as well make the venture to-day rather than wait. He has been hoping that you would have some word for him from my brother."

"No word yet, Phil," answered Dave, "but there may be in the mail to-day."

"Say, we had some scare this morning just before we left the cabin!" declared the shipowner's son. "I was nearly frightened into a fit!"

"What was that?" came from several of the others.

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"I was cleaning the dishes after breakfast, and I went outdoors to throw some scraps in a heap behind some bushes. Just as I got there with my panful of stuff, up jumped—what do you think?—a great big bear!"

"A bear!" shrieked the girls.

"Did you shoot him?" broke in Shadow.

"Shoot him? What with—a frying-pan?"

"Then the bear got away?" asked Roger.

"I don't know whether the bear got away or I got away. I dropped that frying-pan, and I legged it for the cabin for all I was worth. In the meantime the bear disappeared among the trees just back of the cabin. I got my uncle's rifle and went out to look for him, but it was no use."

"O dear, a bear!" murmured Jessie. "Suppose he comes down here?" and she gave a slight shiver.

"Why, that would be fun!" declared Belle. "I'd like to see that bear, and get a shot at him, too," went on the girl from Star Ranch.

"If that bear is anywhere in this vicinity we might organize a hunt for him," suggested Luke, who, on the day previous, had gone out with Ben and Shadow and brought down a partridge.

"That's the talk!" cried Roger. "Come on, let us go on a hunt! It will give us something to do."

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The matter was discussed for a quarter of an hour, and during that time Roger and Ben managed to take Phil to one side and tell him about the news from Crumville. The shipowner's son was, of course, much astonished.

"I believe it's a fake!" he declared, flatly. "Dave is Dave Porter, and no mistake! We cleared that matter up directly after our return from the South Seas."

"Just what I said, Phil," responded Roger. "At the same time, I suppose the Porters have got to listen to Ward Porton's claim."

"Bah! it's a conspiracy I tell you—a conspiracy gotten up by this fellow, Porton, and by Link Merwell! You can't tell me any different!" and Phil's face showed his earnestness.

It was decided that all of the boys should go out directly after lunch, in a hunt for the bear. The number of shotguns and rifles on hand was enough to go around, so that each of them would be armed. They also provided themselves with some provisions, not knowing how late it would be before they got back.

"Oh, Dave, do be careful!" pleaded Jessie, when the boys were ready to depart. "Don't let that bear eat you up!"

"Don't worry," he answered. "I'll take care of myself." And then he added with something of a sigh: "I hope you have good news for me when I get back."

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"I hope so too, Dave. But just remember what I said," she went on, looking him straight in the eyes. "I'll think just as much of you even if they prove that you are not Dave Porter."

Phil was with the crowd, and all headed up the brook, and then along the trail leading to the cabin which had been occupied by Lester Lawrence. Arriving there, a hunt was made through the forest back of the cabin.

"It's a good deal like hunting for the proverbial needle in a haystack," remarked Roger.

"Where did you see the bear last, Phil?" questioned Luke.

"Just about here," was the reply, and the shipowner's son pointed with his hand. "I think he went in that direction," he added.

The boys spread out in a long, straight line, and in this fashion proceeded through the forest for the best part of a mile. During that time they thought they saw a deer in the distance, and Roger might have taken a shot, but Dave imperatively stopped him.

"We can't shoot at anything if we want to get close to that bear," announced our hero. "Bears are very scary creatures, and if you make too much noise that beast will run for miles and miles before he stops."

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Late afternoon found the boys still on the search. They had seen nothing to shoot at, and some of them were growing disheartened. Luke was limping slightly, having caught his foot between a crevice in the rocks.

"I move we rest and have something to eat," announced Ben, and this suggestion was quickly seconded by the others. Then, when the sun was well down in the west, they decided to turn back toward the bungalows.

It was a tramp of over a mile and a half, and as the footing in many places was uncertain, they had to proceed with great care.

"Such a hunt!" grumbled Ben. "It's been all hunting and no shooting."

"Which puts me in mind of a story!" cried Shadow. "Oh, this is a short one, so you needn't frown at it," he went on quickly, glancing around. "It's about a fellow who came along and saw an old man fishing in a lake. 'How's fishing?' he asked of the old man. 'Couldn't be better,' was the answer. 'Catch anything?' 'No.' 'Then what do you mean by saying the fishing is good?' 'So it is. I didn't say anything about the catching.'" And at this a grin went around.

"We ought to be getting in sight of the bungalows soon," remarked Roger, after they had climbed over some rough rocks and were walking through a dense patch of the forest.

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"Say, this is a fine place to get lost in," remarked Phil.

"It will be all right as long as the sunlight lasts," answered Dave. "I am using that for a compass."

Soon they came to the edge of a clearing, on the other side of which were a series of rocks with vines and brushwood. The boys were about to advance across the clearing when suddenly Shadow's arms went up into the air.

"St—st—stop!" he spluttered, in a low tone. "Dr—dr—drop down, all of you!"

The others saw that he was much in earnest, and immediately sank down behind the trees and rocks. Then all gazed inquiringly at the former story-teller of Oak Hall.

"It's the be—be—bear!" spluttered Shadow. "Sa—say, don't you think we had be—be—better run for it?"

"The bear! Where is it?" demanded Dave.

"I saw him just lift his head up among the rocks yonder," returned Shadow. "Say, he looked like an awful big fellow!"

"Well, if he is there, you bet we are not going to run away from him!" declared Phil. "Come on, let's see if we can't shoot him."

"Wait a minute, Phil," advised Dave. "If the bear is among yonder rocks, as Shadow says, we had better spread out a little, and thus get a better chance at him."

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Seeing that his companions were not frightened, Shadow regained some of his composure and followed them, although keeping a little to the rear. With great caution, and holding their firearms ready for use, the whole crowd of boys crossed the clearing and gained the first of the rocks beyond. Fortunately, the breeze was coming from ahead of them, thus carrying their scent away from where the bear was supposed to be.

It had been agreed that when necessary Dave should give the signal to fire. He was slightly in advance, and now with great caution he looked over some rocks just ahead of him. The sight that met his gaze was an interesting one. There was a slight depression there, partly filled with brushwood, and in the midst of this stood a big bear. He had his head down in a hole, and was digging out various things with his forepaws, flinging them to one side and behind him. Out came a kettle, a frying-pan, some knives and forks, cups, saucers, a pie-plate, a dishpan, and numerous other articles, which clattered over the rocks.

"Great hambones, Dave! what kind of a noise is that?" asked Phil, who was beside our hero.

"It's our stolen stuff, that's what it is, Phil!" cried Dave. "Those burglars must have thrown the stuff in that hole!"

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"But what would the bear be doing among that stuff?" questioned Luke.

"He's after grub," answered our hero. "They must have thrown some of the food in there with the other stuff. Come on, boys, get ready to fire!"

Fortunately for the lads, the bear was so interested in what he was trying to accomplish that he did not notice their approach. The noise of the flying kettles and pans drowned out the voices.

"What's the matter with all taking a shot at him at the same time?" questioned Phil.

"All right, I'm willing," responded Dave, quickly. "We might as well all have the glory of killing him—if we have that luck."

Every rifle and every shotgun was quickly raised and aimed at the bear. Just as Dave was on the point of giving the order to fire, the beast came out of the hole and looked around. Then in alarm he raised up on his hind legs, a truly terrifying animal to behold.

Bang! Crack! Bang! went the rifles and shotguns in an irregular volley. And then, as the report died away, the huge beast gave a leap into the air, and coming down, sprang directly toward the boys.

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CHAPTER XXX

GOOD NEWS—CONCLUSION

"Here he comes!"

"Give him another shot, boys!"

Crack! Bang! Crack! Again the shotguns and rifles rang out.

Whether the shots were absolutely necessary or not it would be hard to say, for just as the boys discharged their various weapons the huge bear was seen to stumble and fall. He gave several convulsive shudders, and then lay still.

"Is he—is he de—dead?" gasped Shadow, who was still a few feet in the rear of the others.

"I think he is," responded Dave. "Load up again as quickly as you can and we'll watch him," and then he proceeded to take care of his own firearm.

But watching was unnecessary, for the huge beast had breathed his last. It was a proud crowd of boys that surrounded the game.

"Say, that's some shooting!" declared Phil, his eyes glistening. "Won't the others be surprised when they hear of it?"

"He certainly is a big one!" said Ben. "I don't believe they grow them much bigger than that anywhere around here." And this assertion proved true, as the boys learned when, later on, Tad Rason saw the game at the bungalows. [Pg 296]

"Well, we've got our kitchen utensils and most of the tableware back, anyway," declared Roger, after an inspection of the hollow where they had first discovered the bear at work. "Hello, here's the stuff Mr. Bruin was after!" he added, holding up a chunk of meat which still lay in a pan in the hollow. This meat had been taken from the Wadsworth ice-box; but why it had been placed in the hollow was a mystery.

"But it's a good thing the burglars put it there," declared Luke. "That is what attracted the bear and made him dig."

A careful search of the hollow revealed nearly everything that had been taken from the two bungalows except Laura's rings and Mrs. Basswood's silverware.

"I guess they thought those things too valuable to leave here," was Dave's comment. "I am convinced of one thing," he added.

"What is that?" questioned Ben.

"I believe Link Merwell is at the bottom of this. No ordinary burglar would bother his head about that kitchen stuff. Merwell did it, just to cause us trouble. Maybe he thought we'd have to give up camping here for the time being."

"By Jove, Dave, I think you have solved it!" declared Roger. [Pg 297]

"All of which doesn't give my mother her silverware nor Laura her rings," returned Ben.

A sapling with some stout branches attached was cut down, and on to this the boys rolled the bear and tied him fast. Thus they managed, after a good deal of hard labor, to haul the carcass down to the bungalows.

"Oh, here they come, and they've got a bear!" shrieked Belle, who saw them first, and all the inmates of the bungalows hurried to the scene, even Mr. Lawrence hobbling up with the aid of a cane.

"Yes, we got a bear, and we got more than that!" cried Ben, excitedly. "We've found all the kitchen stuff!" and he and the other youths gave the particulars.

A little later some of the boys returned to the hollow and transferred the stolen stuff back to the bungalows. A good deal of the canned provisions was still in perfect condition. The other things, including the meat the bear had scented, were thrown away.

"Oh, Dave!" cried Jessie, as soon as she could motion our hero to one side, "I've got something I want to tell you! I think maybe it will be of assistance in proving your identity," and the girl's eyes glowed with anticipation.

"What is it, Jessie?" he asked, quickly. "Have you heard something from home?" [Pg 298]

"No, but I've heard something from Mr. Lawrence, Phil's uncle. Isn't it the strangest thing ever! I was talking to him after you left, and told him what trouble you were having, and mentioned Ward Porton and that man the Fords told you about, Obadiah Jones. And, would you believe it! years ago Mr. Lawrence had some business dealings with a man named Obadiah Jones, and he is quite sure that man had a nephew who was named Ward!"

"Jessie! can this be true?" exclaimed Dave, with pardonable excitement.

"That's what Mr. Lawrence told me. I think you had better speak to him, and without delay."

"I certainly will!" declared our hero, and going up to the crowd that was still around the bear, he touched Phil's uncle on the arm.

"What is it, Porter? Oh! I suppose you want to see me about that man, Obadiah Jones. Well, I'll tell you all I know. Come on back to where I can sit down. This lame ankle of mine is still rather weak." And thus speaking Mr. Lawrence led the way around to the front porch of the bungalow.

"What I want to know is if this Ward Porton was really a nephew of Obadiah Jones," said Dave.

"Yes, that's what Miss Jessie wanted to know, too. Of course I don't know for sure, but I do know the boy's name was Ward and that he called Jones, Uncle Obadiah. You might write to Obadiah Jones and find out. He lives in Burlington, Vermont, and that's not so very far from here—just on the other side of Lake Champlain. His full name is Obadiah L. L. Jones. We used to always call him Old L. L. About everybody in Burlington knows him." [Pg 299]

"Perhaps I'd better go and call on Mr. Jones," suggested Dave. "I'd hate to wait for an answer to a letter."

It was not long before the others in the camp knew what Dave had learned concerning Ward Porton and his supposed uncle, Obadiah L. L. Jones. The boys agreed with Dave that it might pay to make a trip to Burlington to see him, and Phil and Roger volunteered to go along.

"You might want a witness or two," declared the senator's son.

The upshot of the matter was that the following day found the three boys bound for Burlington. The other lads helped to row them to the upper end of the lake, and there, at a camp belonging to a rich New Yorker, they managed to obtain a horse and buckboard on which they rode to the nearest railroad station. They were in time to catch the midday train for Plattsburg, where they had to remain over night. Then they caught the first boat across Lake Champlain to the city for which they were bound.

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Dave had been told by Mr. Lawrence where they might find Obadiah Jones, who was interested in a coal, lumber, and real estate business. Our hero, accompanied by his two chums, found the man in his office, a small, dingy coop of a place surrounded by huge piles of lumber. He was a short, stout, bald-headed individual, wearing large spectacles, and he looked up rather uninvitingly as they entered.

"Is this Mr. Obadiah Jones?" questioned Dave, politely.

"That's my name, young man. What can I do for you?" demanded the lumber dealer, brusquely.

"I came to get a little information from you, Mr. Jones, if you'll give it to me," went on our hero. "My name is Dave Porter. I came to see if you have a nephew named Ward Porton."

"Well, I did have a nephew by that name, but he's a nephew of mine no longer!" cried Obadiah Jones, his face showing sudden anger. "If you came here in his behalf, the sooner you get out the better! I wrote to him and told him I never wanted to see him nor hear from him again!"

"I didn't come in his behalf, Mr. Jones. I came on my own account," answered Dave. "All I want to know is: Is he a real nephew of yours or not?"

"Yes, he's my real nephew—the son of my youngest sister, who married a good-for-nothing army man. But that doesn't make any difference to me, young man. I won't do a thing more for him, nephew though he is. He's a young scamp, and as I said before, I never want to see him nor hear from him again."

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"The reason I ask is, because there has come up a question regarding Ward Porton's identity," continued Dave, who could scarcely conceal his satisfaction over the turn the conversation had taken. "Porton declared to me that he had been brought up in a Maine poorhouse."

"That's all tommy-rot, young man! It isn't so at all!" stormed Obadiah Jones. "After his father ran away, to join some revolutionists in Mexico, his mother was hard put to it to support herself, and when she took sick and died, he was placed in the Lumberville poorhouse by some neighbors. As soon as I heard of it I sent for him to come to Montpelier, where I was then doing business. After that I brought him here. I gave him a good education and did everything I could to set him on his feet, but he began to smoke and drink and gamble, and get into bad company generally, and finally he left here and went on the stage as an actor. I heard he didn't do very well at that business, and so he got into the moving-picture business." Obadiah Jones looked sharply at Dave. "But what do you want to know all this for?" he questioned, quickly.

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"I'll tell you why, Mr. Jones," answered Dave. And without waiting to be invited he sat down on a chair beside the lumber dealer and told the man the particulars of the trouble Ward Porton had caused him.

"Humph!" snorted Obadiah Jones at the conclusion of the recital. "That sounds just like one of Ward's fairy tales. Don't you take any stock in that story, because there is absolutely nothing in it. I have disowned him, it is true, but, nevertheless, he is my nephew, the son of my youngest sister, Clarice Jones Porton. Her good-for-nothing husband was Lieutenant Jarvey Porton of the army, who was discharged because of irregularities in his accounts. I never wanted her to marry the lieutenant, but she wouldn't listen to me for a minute."

After this a conversation lasting the best part of half an hour ensued. The lumber dealer became quite interested in Dave's case, and readily consented to sign a document stating the facts concerning Ward Porton as he knew them. Roger, Phil and an office clerk witnessed the lumber dealer's signature, and then the boys bade Obadiah Jones good-bye and left.

"Dave, let me congratulate you!" cried Roger, grasping our hero's hand warmly.

"Oh, I knew it would all come out right in the end!" cried Phil, as he placed a loving arm over Dave's shoulder. "Say, you'll have one on Ward Porton when you show him that document!" he continued, with a chuckle.

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"You don't know what a weight this has lifted from my shoulders," murmured Dave. And despite his efforts to control himself, two tears stood in his eyes. "The thought that I might not be the real Dave Porter after all was something terrible!" he murmured.

"What will you do; send word to Crumville and then go back to camp?" asked Roger.

"I suppose that would be best," answered Dave. "I'll first send word home and wait in Burlington for a reply."

It was not long after this when they entered a local telegraph office, and there Dave wrote out a

telegram addressed to his father at Crumville. He asked that a reply to the communication be addressed to a leading hotel of Burlington, where the three lads afterwards went for dinner.

"A telegram for Mr. David Porter!" called out one of the hotel boys, just after the lads had finished eating; and he passed the communication over to our hero.

"It's from Crumville, and from my father," said Dave, as he glanced at the communication, which ran as follows:

"Your telegram received. Glad to know the truth. We had suspected Porton of trickery. Merwell is in the game."

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"It's just as I thought," said Dave, when he allowed his friends to read the communication. "Link Merwell told Porton about how I had come from the poorhouse, and then the pair hatched up this game between them. I only hope my folks catch them and give them what they deserve."

That afternoon found the lads again on the way to Plattsburg, and early on the following morning they set out on the return to Bear Camp.

"Oh, Dave! did you learn anything?" cried Laura, when the boys appeared.

"Yes, Laura, it's all cleared up!" he exclaimed, in a voice filled with joy. "Ward Porton is nothing but a faker. He is the real nephew of Obadiah Jones, and the son of Jones's youngest sister. I've got a document in my pocket to prove it."

"Oh, Dave, I'm so glad! so glad!" was the cry of the sister, and she threw herself into his arms and kissed him several times. Then Jessie came up and kissed him too, and so did Belle, followed by Mrs. Basswood, and finally Mrs. Wadsworth, who held him closely to her.

"I'm very, very glad for your sake, Dave," said the wife of the jewelry manufacturer. "But if you hadn't proved to be Dave Porter, I should have been only too glad to have adopted you as my son."

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It was certainly a happy return, and that evening both bungalows were lit up brightly in honor of the occasion. Shadow was allowed to tell some of his best stories, Luke played on his banjo and his guitar, and the young folks sang one familiar song after another.

Three days, including Sunday, passed, and then came another surprise. Late in the evening Dave heard a well-known whistle on the trail leading to Carpen Falls, and a little later one of the old stage coaches came into view. All in the bungalows ran out to meet the newcomers, who proved to be Dave's father, his uncle, Mr. Wadsworth, and Mr. Basswood.

"Dad!" yelled Dave, and rushing to his parent he caught him tightly in his arms.

"My boy! my boy!" murmured Mr. Porter. "How very glad I am that this black cloud has passed away. But, Dave, don't think that I believed that story. I thought it was a fake from the start."

"And so did I," said Dunston Porter. "There couldn't be any Dave Porter but you!" and he gave Dave a good-natured thump between the shoulders that nearly knocked the wind out of the youth.

"We've got more news," declared Mr. Wadsworth, as he, too, came up for a handshake, followed by Ben's father. "They have collared Link Merwell at last."

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"Is that so!" cried our hero.

"Yes, they caught him in a pawnbroker's shop," said Mr. Basswood. "And the best part of it is that they caught him trying to pawn my wife's silver spoons and Laura's two rings. The pawnbroker got suspicious, and as he happened to be an honest man, he called in a detective. This detective remembered the picture he had seen printed of Link at the time he and Jasniff stole the jewelry, and he at once placed Link under arrest."

"And then I went to see Link in prison," broke in Dave's father. "I had a long talk with him, about the burglary up here, and he admitted that he had thrown all that other stuff in the hollow just to inconvenience you. Then I made him confess that he and Ward Porton had concocted this scheme concerning Porton's identity between them. Merwell tried to bribe me by saying he wouldn't tell the truth about Porton unless I aided him to get clear of the charge made against him by Mr. Wadsworth. Of course I wouldn't agree to do that."

"It won't be necessary to have Link Merwell testify against Porton," declared Dave. "I've got a document here that shows up Porton for just what he is;" and later on he allowed his father and the others to read the paper which he had had Obadiah L. L. Jones sign.

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"Oh, to think I'm to have my rings back, and Mrs. Basswood is to have her silverware!" cried Laura, with satisfaction. "Isn't it perfectly lovely?"

The days to follow at Bear Camp were happy ones indeed. The boys went hunting and fishing to their hearts' content, and often took the girls out in the boats or in the canoes. In the meanwhile some of the men folks returned to Crumville, and Phil took his uncle home.

It may be stated here that Phil's father and mother were filled with joy to have Lester Lawrence once more with them, and later on the land that the rival railroads wanted was sold to one of the roads for an even sixty thousand dollars, three-quarters of which amount went to Phil's father and the other quarter to the boy's uncle.

"I don't believe Ward Porton will ever bother you again, Dave," said Roger, one day, but the surmise of the senator's son proved incorrect. When Ward Porton learned that our hero had visited Obadiah Jones he lost no time in disappearing for awhile. But then he got back to his old

tricks, and what he did will be related in another volume, to be entitled, "Dave Porter and His Double; Or, The Disappearance of the Basswood Fortune."

When Link Merwell was brought to trial, his father came forward and did everything he could for the wayward son. But it was proved beyond a doubt that Merwell had been as guilty as Jasniff, and he received an equal sentence of imprisonment.

"Poor Link! I feel sorry for him," was Dave's comment. "He might have made quite a man of himself."

The weather was now growing colder every day, and soon there was a trace of snow in the air.

"We'll have to leave Bear Camp very soon unless we want to be snowed in," declared Mrs. Wadsworth. And then after a conference, it was decided by all hands to pack up and go home.

"Well, in spite of our troubles, it's been a grand outing!" declared Roger.

"One of the best ever!" added Phil.

"I've had a perfectly lovely time!" came from Jessie. "But I do hope Dave never again runs into such trouble as he had up here."

"Well, a fellow has got to take things as they come," answered our hero.

And here, with the future looking cloudless and bright, we will leave Dave Porter and say good-bye.

THE END

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Typographical errors corrected in the text:

Page 43 Dunton changed to Dunston
Page 89 western changed to western
Page 124 manufacturer changed to manufacturer
Page 132 room changed to room
Page 187 committted changed to committed
Page 195 fakir changed to faker
Page 203 soak changed to sock
Page 266 manufacturer's changed to manufacturer's
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