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**Title:** Fred Fenton Marathon Runner: The Great Race at Riverport School

**Author:** Allen Chapman

**Release Date:** September 26, 2009 [EBook #30094]

**Language:** English

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Produced by Jim Ludwig

## **FRED FENTON MARATHON RUNNER**

The Great Race at Riverport School

By Allen Chapman

File uses: *italic* notation

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## CHAPTER I

### IN THE SNOW

"Now then, let's see who can put a shot through that round hole in the tree-trunk up there. Take a try, Sid."

"Must be twenty yards away from here, if a foot, eh, Bristles?"

"More like twenty-five to me, Colon; and looks farther than from first base to third, on the diamond."

"Line up, everybody, and we'll soon find out who takes the cake at making a center shot. But hadn't we better bar out Fred Fenton?"

"What for, Bristles?"

"Why, because he's the regular pitcher on the Riverside High School nine: he's used to putting 'em over the plate for a steady diet."

"That's a fact, and Fred, you'll have to consider yourself handicapped in this little contest of skill."

"Anyhow, wait till we've had our fling, Fred; and then if nobody seems to get a bull's-eye, you might show us how to do the job."

"All right, boys, that suits me. And while you bombard that poor old tree, I'll be amusing myself making one good firm snowball, against the time my turn comes."

"Go at it, fellows! There, did you see me smack one just a foot below the hole? Gee! that was a sure-enough dandy hit of yours, Bristles; closer by six inches than mine. Everybody put your best licks in!"

The hard balls flew thick and furiously, for it happened that the rather heavy fall of snow was just moist enough to be easily pressed into the finest of missiles for boyish use.

Many of these swiftly thrown balls missed the tree-trunk entirely. Others splattered here and there against the bark, leaving a tell-tale white mark. A few came dangerously near the yawning opening; but not a single one thus far had managed to disappear within the gap.

The boy who had been called Fred Fenton, having manipulated a single snowball in his hands, stood there watching the onslaught, and occasionally speaking words of encouragement to those who were taking part in the spirited contest.

"That was a corker, Sid Wells, and it would have done the business if you'd only put an ounce more of speed in your throw, so as to have raised it three inches. Good boy, Brad, you left a mark just alongside the hole, so some of it must have spattered in the hollow! Not quite so fierce, Bristles; that one would have landed, if you'd been a little less powerful in your throw!"

Presently some of the boys began to grow weary of the sport.

"What's the use of our trying to hit that mark so far away?" grumbled Bristles; which expression of defeat was something strange to hear from his lips, because the owner of the shock of heavy hair that stood upright, and had gained him such a peculiar nick-name, was as a rule very stubborn, and ready to

stick to the very end.

"Let Fred show us how!" suggested Sid Wells, who was known as the particular chum of the pitcher, he being the son of a retired professor, now engaged in wonderful experiments which might some day astonish the world.

The rest of the boys seemed ready to join in the chorus, and make way for the ball flinger. They had watched this same Fred send his dazzling shots over the plate with such wonderful speed and accuracy that he held the strike-out record for the high school league.

"Remember I'm hardly in practice just now," Fred told them, laughingly; "though Sid and myself have been putting over a few, just to warm up these days when it feels as if Spring might be flirting with Winter. On that account I hope you won't expect too much from me; and give me three chances to make a bull's-eye."

"Sure we will, Fred!" exclaimed Bristles.

"Take six if you want to," added the generous Colon, who was a very long-legged fellow, a magnificent sprinter, with a peculiar habit of leaping as he ran, that often reminded people of the ungainly jumps of a kangaroo. But he nearly always "got there with the goods."

"No, three ought to be plenty!" declared Fred, as he prepared to send his first one in.

It struck just below the edge of the opening, being really a better shot than any of the scores that had marked the tree-trunk up to that time. The rest of the half dozen boys gave a shout.

"Clipped the edge of the plate that time, Fred!" cried Bristles, whose real name was Andy Carpenter.

"Two inches higher, and it would have gone straight in. Now you've found the rubber, strike him out, Fred. You can do it! I ought to know, because haven't I been your backstop many a time, and watched them spin straight across?" and Sid Wells handed his chum a ball he had squeezed into a shape that was as nearly round as anything could be, and also as hard as ice.

Bristles, too, presented his contribution, so that the candidate for honors stood there with a missile in each hand. He looked carefully at the trees as though measuring the distance and height with that practiced eye of his. Then they saw him draw back his arm after the same manner in which he delivered the ball during an exciting part of a hotly contested game of ball.

The shot went true to the mark, and as they saw it vanish in the cavity, a shout arose from the five boys. This burst out in redoubled violence when, as quick as a flash, Fred sent the second snowball exactly after the first, so that it too went straight into the dark hole.

While they continue to express their delight, by shouts, and slapping Fred on the back, perhaps it might be well to say a few words concerning Fred Fenton and his friends.

They were all Riverport boys, and attended the high school there. Fred and two of the others were taking a post graduate course, meaning to enter college during the following season.

In the pages of the first volume of this series, entitled "*Fred Fenton, the Pitcher*," we had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of most of the boys who were to play prominent parts in the events taking place along the banks of the Mohunk River, where two other towns, Mechanicsburg, three miles up, and Paulding, seven miles down the river, were rivals of Riverport.

Turning from baseball, as the Summer waned, the boys of Riverport naturally took to the gridiron, and their struggles for supremacy with rival teams are to be found in the second story, called: "*Fred Fenton in the Line*."

When Summer came again, other sports took the energetic lads of the river town by storm. With such splendid opportunities for boating, as were presented by the Mohunk River, of course they availed themselves of the chance to again enter into competition with those whose one ambition seemed to be to defeat Riverport. These lively encounters are set forth in the pages of the third volume, entitled "*Fred Fenton on the Crew*."

The next Winter the three towns became so filled with enthusiasm over the great advantages of athletic training, that fine gymnasiums were organized through public subscription. In time a meet had been organized, and there were some fierce struggles for supremacy between the rival towns. Just how the boys of Riverport carried themselves in these exciting happenings, and what measure of success perched on their banner, you will find narrated in the pages of the fourth volume, just preceding this

book, under the title of "*Fred Fenton on the Track*."

The Winter had now almost reached its conclusion, though some of the boys who claimed to be weather-wise declared that they would very likely have just one more cold snap before the final break-up.

They hoped it might be severe enough to give them a last chance to skate upon the Mohunk, and use their ice-boat again. The ice had become pretty "punky," as Bristles called it, with numerous airholes that threatened disaster in case one went too close, so that for several days Fred and his chums had avoided the river.

This trip up into the woods on Saturday afternoon had been taken just to enjoy the first real tramp of the season, and to get together to talk of plans for the coming Spring athletics. As boys can never resist the temptation to throw snowballs when the moist white covering seems just suited to such conditions, every little while one of them discovered some sort of target at which they could exercise their skill.

Once it had been a venturesome bluejay that had wintered near the Mohunk; but the wary bird was awing before the first snowball struck near its perch. Then a crow dared them, and fled amidst a shower of missiles and uproarious shouts, each fellow claiming that it must have been his shot that had struck the limb just where the cawing bird had been sitting.

They were possibly two miles from town, and in the midst of the Budge woods, a section that always had a certain charm for the boys of both Riverport and Mechanicsburg, as it lay half-way between the two towns, and not far from the river.

Which brief but necessary digression again brings us to the occasion when Fred's chums were applauding his double hit, after he had sent two successive snowballs so cleverly into the hole Bristles had selected as a mark.

"Same old accuracy," chanted Colon.

"I'm sorry for poor Paulding, and the other town above us, when Fred steps into the box again this year. He's got 'em as straight as a rifle ball. No trouble for him to put three over when he's in a hole."

Sid Wells had hardly said this when something came to pass that was entirely unexpected by the six Riverport boys. Through the air a cloud of solid icy balls came hurtling with what seemed like an angry hiss. Some struck around them, spattering against the tree-trunks with loud thuds; but several, being better aimed, came in contact with the persons of the astonished boys, producing more or less of a stinging sensation, as icy balls are apt to do.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE BATTLE BETWEEN OLD RIVALS**

"Hey! What's all this mean?" shouted Bristles, as he dodged another shower of smartly-thrown missiles that came from a point close at hand.

There was hardly any use asking, because all of the lads had by then discovered the flitting forms of half a dozen boys about their own age, who must have piled up plenty of ammunition, to judge from the reckless way in which they were hurling snowballs in the direction of Fred and his chums.

"The Mechanicsburg crowd, that's who it is!" snapped Colon, who, being so much taller than the others, had a better chance to see over the tops of the bushes.

"They're in for a snowball fight, fellows!" exclaimed Brad Morton, who was the captain of the football team, as well as track manager in all athletic meets.

"Give 'em Hail Columbia, fellows! Riverport High to the fore! Now, altogether, and send 'em in as hot as you can make 'em!"

That was Dave Hanshaw whooping it up. Dave had always been known as the heavy batter when he was feeling right, and many a time had he knocked out a home run, to the wild delight of the Riverport rooters.

The scene immediately took on a lively air. Fred and his five chums were feeling in just the right trim for a warm scrimmage with their Mechanicsburg rivals, who had always managed to give them a hard task before confessing to defeat, and were said to be breathing all manner of threats with regard to evening up the score at the very next available opportunity.

It seemed as though there were about the same number of lads on the other side, and they had one advantage in the fact that, knowing of the presence of the Riverport fellows, they had secretly prepared an enormous number of fine round balls, so firmly pressed as to be almost as hard as stones.

Preparation is all very good, but there is something that, as a rule, proves even better. This is organization and leadership, backed up by pluck; and here the Riverside boys were in a class by themselves.

Somehow, when an emergency like this suddenly arose, they were accustomed to looking to Fred Fenton as leader. It may have been because Nature had fashioned him in such a way that others readily believed in his ability to win; past experiences had considerable to do with it, and they had known him to carry off the honors for the home school on many a hotly contested field.

For a short time the air was filled with flying snowballs, most of which were fruitlessly thrown, though the better marksmen managed to now and then get in a telling hit, that gave them more or less satisfaction.

Fred soon saw, however, that this sort of play would lead to nothing. One side or the other might become exhausted, and call a truce; but there would be little satisfaction in such a tame victory. What he wanted was an exhibition of strategy, by means of which the enemy would be fairly routed.

"Brad, take Colon and Dave, and work off to the right, while the rest of us turn their other flank!" he explained to the track captain, as they dodged a new flurry of deftly thrown missiles.

"That's the ticket, and we're on to the game, Fred!" came the immediate response, showing how ready the others were to follow up any scheme which Fred proposed.

"Lay in a stock of ammunition first of all," cautioned Fred; "and when I sing out, make your start. We'll round up that lively bunch in a hurry, mark me."

His confidence filled his mates with enthusiasm, as it always did. A belief in one's self goes a great way toward winning the battle, no matter how the odds may seem to stand against success.

There was a hasty making of half a dozen balls apiece, all they could conveniently carry, and when Fred had managed to supply himself with that many rounds, he gave Brad the order to advance.

With new shouts that were intended to strike alarm to the hearts of the Mechanicsburg boys, the two detachments now pushed along, making something of a swinging movement, with the idea of turning the flanks of the enemy.

Of course the other fellows understood just what was up, and could also divide their force, so as to meet the conditions; but when they found themselves between two fires, with hard snowballs striking them in the back, their valor began to give way to uneasiness, that was apt soon to merge into a regular panic.

That was what Fred called strategy. It was of a different kind from that of the great Napoleon, who used to plan to divide his enemy's army, and then strike quickly at first one-half, and then the other, before they could unite again.

In this case the main idea Fred had in mind was to be able to pour in showers of missiles from two opposite quarters. In this way, while his own men would be scattered, and could dodge any shot that seemed likely to cause trouble, the enemy remained bunched, and presented a splendid target.

The thing that was likely to tell most of all was the fact that even though a snowball happened to miss the boy at whom it had been aimed, there was always a good chance of its finding a mark in the back of another fellow, who, being struck so unexpectedly, must cringe, and feel like running away.

Loud rang out the cries of the rival fighters, and all the while the attacking force kept working closer and closer to the group of almost exhausted fellows from up-river way.

"Soak it to 'em!" pealed Bristles, who was surely in his element, as he dearly loved action of any sort; "three hits for every one we've taken, and then some. Put your muscle into every throw, fellows! Rap 'em hard. They started it, and we'll do the winding up, and make the peace terms. It's a surrender, or run away. Now, all together again!"

By this time the Mechanicsburg boys had had quite enough. Every one of them was nursing some wound. One had indeed even started off through the woods, holding a hand to his eye, as though he had failed to dodge a throw quickly enough; several others were hugging the tree-trunks closely, and showing that they had had about all the snowball fight they wanted.

There was one heavy-set but athletic looking chap who appeared to be the ringleader of the assailants. His name was Felix Wagner, and in times gone by he had given the Riverport boys many a hard tussle to subdue him; though he had a reputation for square dealing second to none.

Seeing that his side had given up the fight, since he was the only one still hurling missiles, at the advancing enemy, Felix knew it was folly to try to keep it up any longer.

"Hi! hold your horses, you Riverside tigers!" he called, laughingly, as well as his almost exhausted condition allowed; "guess we've had about all we want of this sort of thing for once. My cheek stings like fun, and I think I'll have something of a black eye to-morrow. I only hope I gave as good as I took, that's all."

"Do you own up beaten, then, Wagner?" demanded the pugnacious Bristles, "because we're still as fresh as daisies, and bound to put it over on you, now that you've started the fight?"

"Oh sure! With such a crippled army, what else can a fellow do?" replied the leader of the other crowd. "We throw up the sponge, and wave the white rag. You're too much for us, that's what. I reckoned it'd be that way when I saw Fred Fenton was along. He put you up to that game of dividing your forces, and getting us under a cross-fire, I'll be bound. And that rattled us more'n anything else you did; for when you get a crack on the back of the head, it sort of knocks your calculations silly, and you can't pay attention to what you're doing. We surrender, all right."

Besides Wagner there were some of the other baseball stars in the defeated set—Dolan, who guarded the middle garden, Sherley whose domain was away off in right, Boggs, the energetic shortstop, Hennessy the catcher, who had taunted Fred and his chums so persistently whenever they came to bat, in hopes of making them nervous, and Gould the agile second baseman.

A number were rubbing their heads, or their faces, where red marks told of a "strike," and while one here and there grumbled, wanting to know if the Riverport boys put stones in their snowballs, the majority took their punishment in good part.

"It was a lively scrimmage while it lasted, let me tell you," Fred remarked, as he rubbed his icy hands together in order to induce circulation.

"As fierce as any I've been in this year," admitted the big Hennessy, whose favorite feat of throwing out runners at second had gained him a great name, and who must have been responsible for a number of hits which the Riverport boys had suffered during the "late unpleasantness."

"Getting to be an old story to have you Riverport fellows crow over us," grumbled Boggs, who had been the one to walk away while the battle was still on; he had his handkerchief crushed in his hand, having wet it with melted snow, and in this fashion was trying to relieve the smarting, as well as prevent his eye from becoming discolored—something the average boy dislikes more than almost any other punishment that can be imagined.

"Is there anything that we can beat you in?" demanded Sherley, frowning; "because I'd give something to know it. We've tried our level best, and for two years now only picked up a few crumbs of comfort, while the feast's been spread for Riverport. And yet Mechanicsburg has just as good athletes as you can boast. We manage to win now and then, sometimes by sheer hard work, and again by a fluke. But they seem to be only the minor events; all the big plums go to your crowd."

"That's Fred's diplomacy, Sherley, don't you understand?" said Bristles, with one of his wide grins. "He looks out for it that we get our best licks in the things that count. We've got a billiard and pool table at our house, and when we play pool don't we go after all the big balls first? what's the use knocking the One in a pocket, except it's your only shot, and gives you a chance to get at larger game?"

Felix Wagner looked at the speaker, and gave a low whistle.

"Shucks! I believe that's what's been the trouble all along," he went on to say, presently, as though he had been awakened from a sound sleep; "and to think none of us got on to that racket before. Sure, we've been chasing after the Number One ball just as hard as we have after the Fifteen. All looked alike to us. Much obliged for giving me the tip, Bristles; we'll see if we can't do better next time. And if all the talk about having a regular Marathon race this Spring turns out right, that's where Riverport is going to run up against her Waterloo!"

"Glad to hear you talk so smartly, Wagner," said Fred, cheerfully, for such methods never had the slightest weight with him, or affected his own confidence. "If you go at things that way, there's a chance we'll have a glorious run, in case that Marathon race does come off. All of us are pulling the hardest we know how to get it fixed up; and we hope you fellows and Paulding will put in your oars. It will be a great event, if we can spring it this season."

"Chances look pretty bright up our way," said Wagner, as he and his friends prepared to start toward their home town; "and after the tip Bristles was so good as to hand us, I wouldn't be surprised if Mechanicsburg managed to show you down-river fellows her dust, this time for keeps. So-long, everybody!"

"Good talk, Wagner; may the best man win, we all say!" called out generous Bristles.

## CHAPTER III

### UP THE MOHUNK ON AN ICE-BOAT

As Fred and Bristles, as well as Sid Wells, were all taking a post graduate course, they got out much earlier than any of the other scholars. This was how on Monday afternoon Bristles turned up at the Fenton home close to the river, he having arranged with Fred to have a last spin on the ice-boat which the Carpenter boy had made himself, and used with more or less success during the past Winter.

The weather had indeed hardened over Sunday, so that the slush was turned into ice again. The surface of the river was not as smooth as they could have wished, but then since it promised to be their very last chance to make use of the *Meteor* that year, the boys could not complain, or let the opportunity pass by.

"We'll have to be careful about some of the blowholes in the ice," Bristles was saying, as they headed for the bank where he kept his craft in a shed he had built for the purpose, and which was close to Fred's home. "Everybody says the ice seems to be thin around where the water bubbles up. I'd hate to drop in and have to go home wringing wet, to scare ma half out of her wits."

"Oh! no need of doing that, even if we should have the hard luck to get wet," Fred told him. "I always carry a waterproof matchsafe, so we could go in the woods somewhere, start up a bully hot fire, and dry off. All the same, here's hoping we don't have to try that stunt out. It sounds well enough, but in this cold air a fellow'd shiver so he'd think his teeth were dropping out. We'll keep a bright watch for those same blow-holes, believe me, Bristles."

Fred was a careful hand at everything he undertook, from driving a horse or a car, to manipulating an ice-boat. So Bristles, who had the utmost confidence in his superior merits, did not feel the slightest uneasiness as he led the way down the bank to the shed that sheltered his home-made but very satisfactory ice craft.

Of course he had a padlock on the door. This was not because the sprawling craft was so very valuable; but Bristles had expended considerable time and money in fashioning the flier; and he did not mean to put it in the power of any malicious boy to injure or steal, if a mere padlock could prevent such a catastrophe.

There were some pretty mean boys in Riverport, as indeed you can always find in any town. The leading spirit among this class of young rascals was Buck Lemington, who had once been the bully of Riverport, until Fred, coming to town, succeeded in breaking up the combination that had so long held sway.

Ever since that time the Lemington boy had lost no opportunity to try to get back at Fred Fenton. He had played several tricks on the other, and his chosen friends, who also came under the condemnation of Buck; but as a rule the vicious leader of the bad set had had these things recoil on his own head.

Still, knowing how gladly Clem Shooks, Oscar Jones, Conrad Jimmerson and Ben Cushing, the cronies of Buck, would seize upon a chance to destroy his pet ice-boat, Bristles had always kept it under lock and key when not in use.

"Everything seems to be lovely," said Bristles, opening the door of the shed. "Somehow I never count

on finding my things as I left 'em, because often I've seen one of that bunch hanging around the river here, as if he were only waiting for half a chance to get even with me. Why, each time the fire bells have rung at night time this Winter, I've climbed into my duds with the feeling that it was good-bye to my bully old *Meteor*."

"Oh! I hardly think they'd dare do anything as bad as that, after the lesson they had before," Fred went on to say, as he bent over to help the owner drag the rather clumsy craft out toward the nearby shore.

"Well, when you're dealing with such a tough gang as that," explained Bristles, "there's only one thing to do, and that's believe 'em equal to anything. I warrant you now that many a time it's only been the fear they have for our hustling little fire eater of a police officer, Chief Sutton, that's kept Buck and his crowd from trying a heap more stunts than they did. Remember when they cut the wires, and left that big meeting in pitch darkness? Yes, and that other time they turned loose a dozen mice at the bazaar, and set the ladies to shrieking and fainting? But thank goodness I've got through the Winter without losing my boat, and I'm calling myself Lucky Jim."

They soon had the queer craft ready for service, with its mast rigged, and the few ropes in place. Bristles secured a couple of old comfortables to serve them in place of cushions, which more elaborate ice-boats carried. These were tied on the boards in a way to suit the needs of those who would soon be sprawled out under the swinging boom.

"If the ice were only a whole lot smoother, I'd call this a jolly day for a spin," the skipper of the craft went on to say, while continuing his preparations.

"Yes," added Fred, standing there, and having completed his arrangements to his complete satisfaction, "the sun shines with just a taste of Springtime about it; and the breeze is neither too hard nor too squally. It comes from the best quarter we could wish for, across from the west, so we'll be able to run up or down the river without trying to tack, and that's always a hard job on a narrow stream, when you're booming along so fast."

"Well, everything's ready, Fred, so hop aboard."

"Is it up or down this time?" demanded the other.

"Whichever you say, it doesn't matter a pin to me either way," Bristles continued.

"On the whole, I rather think we'd better head up-river this time," said Fred. "We went down the last trip we made, yes, and the one before that too, because of a poor wind, and the river being wider below, so we could tack better. I'd like to go past Mechanicsburg and as far up as we can, for the last time this year."

"Call it settled then, Fred. Let's point her nose that way and get a move on us in a jiffy."

Some small boys were skating near the shore, and had come around to watch the starting of the iceboat, which was a familiar sight with them, though they never seemed to grow weary of watching it go forth on its swift cruise. Bristles had waited only long enough to make use of the padlock again, so that no one might meddle with such things as he kept in the shed. Then he was ready to raise the sail, and spin up the river like the wind.

Just as Fred had said, they were apt to have an unusually hazardous trip on this particular afternoon, partly on account of the rough ice opening up chances for an upset, and then again because of the presence of so many weak places, where the recent thaw had started blow-holes.

Of course the very swiftness of their passage would be one means of safety; for the ice-boat could skim across a small stretch where a skater would most surely break in. But Fred did not mean to take any more chances than necessity demanded; and Bristles, though commonly known as a reckless fellow, had promised to steer clear of any spot which his companion told him was unsafe.

Both of the boys were very fond of this sort of sport. It was a delight to them to feel themselves being carried along over the ice at a merry clip, with the steel runners singing a sweet tune, and the wind humming through the dangling ropes.

The shore fairly flew past them, once the iceboat got fairly started; and it seemed almost no time before they glimpsed the smoke from the factories of Mechanicsburg, which was just three miles above their home town, and on the same bank of the frozen Modunk.

"Keep a bright outlook while we're passing!" called out Fred; "they may have been cutting ice up here, as they were early in the Winter, though the openings froze over again."



"Looks a bit suspicious over to the right, and I'll hug this shore. Give me a call if you see any hole ahead, so I can sheer off, Fred."

"That's what I will, Bristles, you can depend on it!"

Already they had come abreast the lower houses. The breeze had even freshened a little, or else the bank was somewhat lower, so they caught its full force. At any rate, they fairly rushed past the busy manufacturing town, where there were a number of big mills and factories, giving employment to hundreds of hands.

"Somebody's waving his hat to us on the bank up there, and shouting in the bargain," called Bristles, who was too busily engaged in looking straight ahead to turn his eyes aslant.

"Yes, and I think it's Felix Wagner," admitted Fred. "Looked like his figure, but I can't squirm around so as to see again. Doesn't matter much anyway. Hi! there, turn out a little more, Bristles; you're heading for a hole! Not too far, because there's another just as bad stretching out from the other side. Careful now, boy; a little too much either way, and we're in for a ducking!"

"Just room enough to get through, I reckon, Fred. Whee! that's going to be a tight hole for us. I hope we can make the ruffle, all right!"

"Steady, a little bit more to the left; now a quick swing the other way, and we're over safely enough. Say, that was as pretty handling of an ice-boat as I ever saw done. You deserve a heap of credit for that job, Bristles, and that's straight!"

"Thanks, awfully, Fred," said the other, in rather an unsteady voice; "but all the same, I'm glad we're well across the narrow pass. My heart seemed to climb right up into my throat. I tell you I never would have made it only for you tipping me off the way you did."

"Yes you would, Bristles, even if you'd been alone, because you must have seen how the lay of the ice ran for yourself. But I hope we don't strike another place like that above. I don't think we shall, though they cut ice and let it float down till it gets opposite the town; but that's done only on one side, as a rule."

They had quickly left the smoky town far behind them, and on both sides of the river could now be seen snow-covered farms, patches of woods, sloping hillsides, and now and then little hamlets. Once they passed what seemed to be a lumber camp, at which some sturdy men were at work, getting logs ready to float down the river with the usual Spring freshet.

Occasionally it was not so easy to make progress. This was when the crooked river took a sudden turn, and they had the breeze from a different quarter. But since Bristles knew how to manage his strange craft very well, they overcame all such difficulties, and continued to make rapid headway for some little time.

"The holes seem to be getting worse up around here," remarked Bristles, after he had had to execute several speedy movements in order to avoid running into dangerous spots.

"Yes, and as it's getting rougher in the bargain, as well as narrow between the banks, perhaps we'd better call a halt, and start back," suggested Fred.

"Let's make that turn up yonder," urged the skipper. "I remember there's something of a wider span there, and I'd like to try swinging around without stopping, if I can. Last time I made a stab at doing the same, I piled up ashore in a wreck; but the wind's in my favor to-day. You can't down a Carpenter, that's all there is to it."

"Just as you say, Bristles; I'm game to stick it out with you. Swing over a little farther, so as to get all the space you can for turning. Listen, wasn't that somebody screaming; or could it have been a locomotive whistling for a crossroad?"

"I heard it too, Fred," said Bristles, hastily, "and give you my word for it I think it came from around the bend there. We'll turn in before you can count twenty. There it is again, Fred, and worse than before. Somebody's in, the chances are, and I only hope we get on hand in time to be of help."

As the flying ice-boat turned the bend and they could begin to see the wider stretch of the Mohunk, both boys eagerly waited to discover what the cause of all that screaming could be.

# CHAPTER IV

## THE RESCUE, AND A MYSTERY

"Look there, Fred!" cried Bristles, "over nearer the shore, to the left!"

"I see them!" replied the other, almost instantly.

"It's a girl, and she acts as if she might be trying to get at somebody in the water," the skipper of the ice-boat shouted, as he headed the flying craft straight toward the spot.

"Be ready to bring up in the wind, so we can tumble off, Bristles!" advised Fred, taking in the whole situation at a glance, in his comprehensive way.

Bristles was already so excited that he came near upsetting the ice-boat by being too speedy about making the turn. Both boys scrambled to their feet as soon as they possibly could, and hurried toward the place where a girl of about ten years of age was wringing her poor little hands, and trying to reach a boy who was clinging to the crumbling edge of the ice. He was up to his neck in the cold water of the river.

"Hold fast, and we'll get you out of that!" cried Fred, as they drew near. His quick eye had already taken note of the fact that a rail fence came down close to the water's edge just beyond, and it was straight toward this that he was now hurrying. Bristles knew what he was going for, and he kept near the heels of his chum.

The frightened girl thought they were deserting her, and redoubled her cries.

"Help! Oh! help us! Please don't go away! My poor brother will be drowned! He can't hold on much longer! Oh! come back and help get him out!"

By that time Fred had reached the end of the fence, which ran into the water so as to keep the cows from straying out of their pasture. He struggled with one of the rails, and managed to break it loose.

"Get another, and chase after me, Bristles!" he shouted, as he once more turned and hastened toward the hole in the rotten ice, where the boy, who could not be more than twelve years of age, was trying as best he could to keep from being drawn under by the sucking force of the strong current.

Once close up, Fred dropped on his knees, shoving the rail ahead of him. In this fashion he was able to push it directly to the imperiled boy. Bristles had been so rapid in his actions that he was hardly ten seconds behind the leader. He immediately copied Fred's example, so that there were now two rails reaching out in the direction of the hole, their further ends actually overtopping the gap in the ice.

"Stay here, Bristles, and do whatever I tell you!" Fred told his chum, when, having arranged the rails as he wished, he started out along them.

His weight being now distributed over a wide surface there was no danger of the rotten ice giving way under him. That is the essential point about nearly all rescues on the ice, and what every boy should bear in mind the moment his services are needed in order to save an imperiled companion.

Fred was now enabled to approach the very edge of the hole, so that he could hold out his hand to the boy in the water, who had been constantly telling the girl to keep back lest she too fall in. Between them it was possible to accomplish the rescue, for while Fred pulled, the boy also exerted himself to the utmost, and presently crawled over the edge.

"Keep your weight as much as you can on the rails, because with your clothes soaked, you weigh twice as much as I do," Fred kept telling him; and yard by yard he drew the other along until finally they could get to their feet, and make for the shore.

The girl was crying hysterically now, although she had shown considerable bravery before.

"Oh! Brother Sammy, what if you had let go, and the current had drawn you under the ice! I think I'd have wanted to jump in, too, because I'd have nothing left to live for then!" she kept repeating, as she patted his cold hand tenderly, and tried to warm it.

Fred knew that unless something was done immediately, the boy would be very apt to be taken down sick, after all that nervous exhaustion, and the cold bath he had suffered. The air was chilly, and must strike him keenly.

"Here, you can't go home in that way, no matter how near by you live," he went on to say, in his cheery way.

"Home!" repeated the girl, and her eyes exchanged a strange look with her brother. "But what can we do, for there isn't any farmhouse around here? We were coming across the river, and Sammy went too near a hole. Then the ice broke, and all I could do was to scream. He wouldn't let me come near him, but kept trying to climb out himself. Every time he got up on the ice it broke again, and he went in. Oh! it was just terrible, terrible! But he'll freeze now, mister, if we don't find a house soon."

"No he won't, not if we know it," said Fred. "Here, slap your arms about you this way as hard as you can, and jump up and down as if you were crazy. Never mind how it looks, if only you get the blood to circulating good. Bristles, it's up to you and me to start a fire booming in a hurry."

"Here's as good a place as any, Fred, for there's plenty of loose wood around."

Fred was already busily engaged in hunting all manner of small bits of dry fuel under the sheltered sides of the logs, and in hollow stumps. As soon as he had gathered a few handfuls of this tinder, he drew out a match, and started it burning.

Fred was a clever hand at making a fire, and this one did not fail him. Bristles had in the meantime brought an armful of wood, and, selecting the smaller pieces, the two soon had a fine, large blaze going, that began to send out a considerable amount of welcome heat.

"Back up here, and see how this feels, Sammy," Fred told the shivering lad. When the other had done so, he added, "Now, just as soon as you feel warm on one side, change to the other. You know what they say, 'one good turn deserves another,' and here's where it applies. Keep up your exercising, because all that is going to help prevent you from taking cold. If I only had some hot tea or coffee, I'd give you some, but we'll have to do without it, I'm afraid."

He kept talking to the boy and girl as he worked at the fire, and Bristles continued to carry fresh supplies of wood, laboring like a good fellow. In this way Fred managed to learn that the name of the boy they had rescued was Sam Ludson and that he lived with Corny Ludson; though when he asked how far away it was they lived the answer was an evasive one.

"A good distance away," was about all the boy would say, and Fred could not help noticing that he again exchanged uneasy looks with his sister.

There was certainly something very queer about these two, though Fred could not understand why they should feel backward about telling where they lived, and especially to a couple of boys who had just done them a great favor.

Still, Fred was not unduly curious about it. If the brother and sister did not want to take him into their confidence, he was not the one to persist. So far as he could remember, Ludson was a name he had never heard before, so it did not seem as though they could ever have lived around Riverport. Bristles later on also declared that it was strange to him, and he had been born there, while Fred was comparatively a newcomer, having arrived only a couple of years previous to this time.

His particular business, as Fred saw it, was not to poke into other people's private affairs, but to get the clothes of Sam dry as soon as possible. Then he would feel that he and Bristles had finished their duty.

So he continued to keep the fire burning, and have Sam turned around every little while. At first the child steamed at a tremendous rate, but as by degrees the moisture was absorbed by the heat, he began to feel much more comfortable.

"I guess I'll go now, mister," Sammy remarked, finally, as though anxious to get away from these kind friends before they took to asking him any awkward questions.

"Just hold up a little while longer, and then you'll be all right, Sam," he was told by Fred, and like a great many other fellows, the boy fell into a habit of observing the wishes of this leader among the scholars at Riverport High.

"Whatever you say, mister, goes," he observed, with humility. "You've sure done me a great service, and I ain't going to forget it, either. I don't reckon it'll happen that I c'n pay you back, but if the chance ever does hit me, I'm agoin' to do it, sure thing."

"Are you feeling as good as ever again, Sammy?" asked his sister, who was rather a pretty girl, Bristles thought, as he looked her over, from the wretched little hat she wore on her bonny brown hair, the odd cheap pin at her throat, the faded dress, to the coarse shoes that gaped badly at the toes.

"I certainly am," he responded, caressing the hand she had laid on the sleeve of his ragged jacket. Somehow it struck Fred right then and there that mutual suffering must have drawn these two frail looking beings closer together than the average brother and sister.

"Well, then you can make off home if you feel fit," Fred told them, "and let me tell you my friend here and myself both feel mighty glad we happened to be as close by as we were. It taught you a lesson, I expect, Sam, and you'll fight shy of blow-holes in the rotten ice after this, won't you?"

"You bet I will, mister; and say, I guess I'm gladder'n you c'n be about that same thing; because the river is awful swift around here, and I kept getting colder and weaker all the while. Couldn't have held out much longer. I want to thank both of you for what you did. I ain't goin' to ever forget it either, see if I do, though, shucks! I don't 'spect I'll ever have a chance to pay you back."

He shook hands with both Fred and Bristles, as did also the little girl, now looking both grave and pleased. Then they walked away, making for the nearby road that led from Mechanicsburg to some other town many miles away, and leaving the vicinity of the Mohunk.

Fred and Bristles prepared to seek once more the ice-boat, and resume their interrupted cruise, this time heading for home. Both of them were thrilled with a deep satisfaction on account of having been given such a splendid chance to effect a rescue, for nothing pleases the average boy more than to realize that he has been enabled to play the part of a hero.

They were not the ones to boast of such a thing as that. Indeed, neither of them considered that they had been in the slightest danger at any time. Had one of them found it necessary to jump into the cold waters of the Mohunk in order to save the drowning boy, that might have been a different matter.

"This fire does feel pretty fine," Bristles remarked, as they got ready to depart, "and I kind of hate to leave it, because, as you know, Fred, I always worship a camp fire. No need to put this one out, is there? because it couldn't set these woods afire if it tried its best, while everything's covered with snow.

"Ready to make the start? What'd you think of Sam and his sister, Sadie Ludson, eh? Mysterious sort of pair, weren't they? Didn't want to tell us anything about themselves, at all. I'm trying to knock my head and say where I've heard that name before, but so far it gets me. Well, we never may see them again, so what's it matter? I'm glad, though, you pulled Sam out of the river. He owes his life to you, Fred."

"To us, you mean, Bristles, for you had just as much to do with it as any one," insisted Fred; and afterwards, whenever he told the story, he always maintained that Bristles had stood by him, and done his share of the rescue work.

They managed to make the return trip safely, and Bristles took it upon himself later on to try to find out if anybody knew the Ludsons, but he met with little success, and with Fred was compelled to put the thing down as a mystery that could not be solved.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **LOOKING OVER THE COURSE**

"One thing sure, Fred, we couldn't have a better day for taking a spin over the ground, and finding out what we'll be up against on the great day."

"Yes, we're in luck that far, Bristles. The only thing I'm sorry about is that Sid couldn't come along. What was it he told you, when you ran across him early this Saturday morning in Bramley's sporting goods store?"

"Why, you see," continued Bristles, as he trotted easily alongside his friend, for they were in their running togs, and out upon the country road at the time, "when I went to look over my outfit, I found my shoes were partly worn, and that I needed a new pair. I'd been looking at some cross-country running shoes Bramley got in last week, and liked their style. They have a low broad heel, and spikes only in the sole. Feel as easy as anything I've ever worn, and don't seem to rub my heels like the old ones always did."

"You're getting there, Bristles; keep going right along," laughed Fred, because the other had a reputation for being what boys call "long winded." It sometimes took him double the time to tell a story that any other fellow would have consumed.

"Oh! I was only going to say Sid was in there doing something, and he asked me to tell you to excuse him on our trial spin to-day, as his father had laid out a little trip for him. Sid looked mighty disappointed, I could see. He'd like to be along, for even if this run of ours is only to spy out the land, it may count big."

"Well, we may have another chance to go over the route, after we know just what the committee has mapped out," said Fred.

"This is only guess work on our part, of course," continued the other, "but then everybody seems to think that it's bound to be the course chosen in the end."

"Yes," Fred added, reflectively, "because it offers a great variety of country—level roads, then trails through the woods, crossing creeks, and after that a stretch over country roads made up of soft dirt."

"Of course they'll have stations all along the route, as usual?" ventured Bristles.

"No question about it," Fred told him. "That's done so every runner may register in his own handwriting, and mark down the time he stopped at each station. In such a way the committee will have a complete record of what every contestant did, and there can be no suspicion of cheating."

"Whew! you don't think any fellow would be so small and mean as to try a thing like that, do you, Fred?"

"I'd hate to think so," returned the other, "but this is done in order that no one may even be suspected by outsiders. It's what you might call an insurance against any rank work."

"How could a runner cheat, tell me?" asked Bristles.

"Well," replied Fred, "there's likely to be one or more places where he could cut across lots and never show up at some advanced station at all. In that way he'd be saved a mile or two of the gruelling run, and that might be enough to give him a big lead on the home stretch."

"Then I only hope they have every kind of safeguard against cheating, that can be used," declared Bristles, indignantly, "because for one I'd die before I'd try to win a thing by trickery."

"I reckon everyone knows that, Bristles," Fred told him, "because there never was a boy with a straighter record than you. You've got faults, as who hasn't, but being sly and tricky, like Buck Lemington, isn't one of them."

"I hear the scheme has created no end of excitement over at Mechanicsburg," Bristles hastened to say, turning a little red though with pleasure, at those words of confidence which Fred gave him.

"And at Paulding I'm told the whole town is on edge, with boys in running togs spinning along every country lane, in pairs or singly," Fred observed.

"Well," the boy with the mop of bristly hair went on to say, "once again will good old Riverport have to hustle for all that's going, to hold her own at the head of the procession."

"We mustn't expect too much," said Fred, modestly. "Up to now we've been pretty lucky to pull down the plums, but there may come a change any day, and we've got to show that we can stand defeat just as well as victory."

"They've got some good long distance runners over there in the mill town," Bristles remarked, seriously.

"Equal to anything we can show, I should say, and it's going to take a head, as well as flying feet, to beat them at the game, Bristles."

"Of course," added Fred's companion, "none of us have ever gone as much as twenty-five miles in a single run, so we don't know what we can do, but, for that matter, I don't believe a Mechanicsburg or Paulding fellow has, either."

"But we mean to cover the course in a trial run before the great day comes, you know," Fred told him. "I'm laying great store on one fellow we've got."

"Of course you mean long-legged Colon, Fred?"

"Yes," replied Fred, "our fastest sprinter, a fellow who can hump himself like a grayhound or a kangaroo in action, and cover more ground at the finish than anybody I ever saw."

"But the most Colon's ever gone is ten miles," remarked Bristles, "and we don't know what his staying qualities are. He may give out before fifteen miles have been covered. If anybody asked me, I'd say we had more chance with a husky fellow like you, for instance, who never has been known to get tired, and can use his head as well as his heels."

"Then there's Sid and Brad," remarked Fred, hastily, "who have made up their minds to be in the line when the signal is given; both of them are known to be stayers. Of course I'll do my level best, but I hope none of you pin your faith to a single runner. A little team work, or strategy, sometimes helps out in cases of this kind."

"How can that be, when everyone has to run for himself, until hopelessly distanced, if I read the rules straight?" asked Bristles.

"Only in this way," replied Fred. "If there are three entered from a school, one of them might take the lead, and set the pace for a while. When he had covered, say a third of the distance, he would fall back, and a second forge to the front, leaving the last fellow to cover the home stretch. It's been done in other races, though I believe some people frown on it. Still, there's no ban on the practice."

"Why, no, this is a race between rival schools," said Bristles, "and every fellow is supposed to be willing to sacrifice individual chances for the good of the lot, just as team-work pays in baseball or anything else."

"Well, let's cut out the talk for a while, and put on more steam," advised Fred. "Here's a good chance for a spurt, down the grade, and then along two miles of level road."

"Go you, Fred!"

The two runners went flying along like the wind until they had reached the foot of a steep hill, which it would be folly to attempt to climb at more than a walk. Once beyond this, a fine stretch of country opened before them, with farms and woodland on every side.

Fred had a pretty fair map of the region, which he had made from picking up information on every side. One of his motives in making this tour on Saturday morning, was to verify its truth. Once the route of the Marathon race had been issued, all those who expected to compete would have the privilege of going over the ground as often as they pleased. If any fellow were smart enough to discover how he could cut off a hundred yards or two, and yet report at every station, he was at liberty to do so.

A knowledge of the course often counts heavily in a Marathon race, as it does in many other things. That is why most baseball clubs play better on their home grounds, where they know the lay of the land, the presence of treacherous little hillocks, the usual slant of the wind, the value of sending their balls toward a certain fence where home-runs count heavily, and all that sort of thing.

Five miles farther on, and the boys had come to a place where Fred, on consulting his map, observed:

"The road runs away around, and by cutting across the woods here as much as two miles can be saved. I understand that the contestants will have that privilege offered to them if they choose to take it.

"Why, of course everybody will grab the chance," remarked Bristles.

"I'm not so sure about that," he was told by his companion, "and for this reason: while the shortcut saves considerable distance, it's bound to be harder going, and some runners might even get lost in the undergrowth, so they'd be cut out of the race."

"Gee! I never thought of that, Fred; but you're right."

"Then if they have a hard time breaking through," continued Fred, "and finding the other road above the registering station, they may be winded, so that the other fellow who's gone all the way around would be in much better shape for a gruelling finish."

"It all depends, then, on knowing your ground?" pursued Bristles.

"And that's what we want to make sure of as we go through the woods here right now," continued Fred. "Both of us must take our bearings from certain trees as we push along. If we strike a trail that leads to the right quarter, we'll manage to blaze it in some fashion that other fellows would never

notice, though we can put our own crowd wise to the signs.

"Here's where the head work comes in, eh, Fred?"

"Only a small sample of it," laughed the other, "and there'll be plenty more to follow before we win this Marathon. If any of the opposition crosses the tape ahead of Riverport, it'll be because they're better runners and managers than we are, that's all there is to it. But come on, let's break away from the road."

Upon that the two boys entered the woods, carefully marking the spot in their memories by noticing a certain bunch of white-barked birches that drooped over in a peculiar way, different from anything they had thus far seen.

Fred had his little compass with him. He had laid out his course exactly, so as to strike the other road at a certain spot, which it was believed would be just above the toll-gate, where he knew one of the registering stations was bound to be placed.

Of course they could not expect to go in a straight line, or as the crows fly. All sorts of obstacles interfered with such a scheme. Now it was a deep gully that barred their progress; a little further on they came to a stretch of swampy ground, where a runner would find himself bogged and placed in a desperate condition, if he attempted to push through. But wise Fred had early discovered what seemed to be a fairly well worn trail that seemed to lead in the direction they were intending to go. At times it was exceedingly difficult to see the track, but both these boys had keen eyes, and used good judgment, so they managed to come upon it frequently.

All the time they continued to make note of certain landmarks that would aid them later on, when again passing through this strip of woodland and jungle. Possibly there would be a mile of it, against three by the road. Plainly then, if a runner could get through in fairly decent shape he would have saved more or less time in so doing.

The two Riverport lads had perhaps gone half way, and were feeling well satisfied with the progress made, when Fred stopped and held up his hand.

"Listen, Bristles!" he exclaimed, "what's all that racket do you think?"

"Sounds like dogs barking and snarling, to me, Fred."

"But away out here in the woods you wouldn't expect to hear a pack of dogs, unless they were running wild," urged Fred, still listening.

"Whew! that reminds me of what I heard an old farmer tell in the market one day last week," exclaimed Bristles. "He said he had lost three sheep this Spring from dogs, and that a pack of sheep killers was loose up around his section!"

## CHAPTER VI

### THE WILD DOG PACK

"How's that, Bristles, a pack of wild dogs running around, and killing sheep?" Fred demanded, appearing to take uncommon interest in what his companion had just said.

"Yes, and Fred, I honestly believe that farmer lives somewhere up in this region, because I heard him tell about having a runaway near the Belleville tollgate, and you know that's where we expect to fetch out on the road ahead."

"Then that settle it, Bristles. And there's no doubt we're hearing the yelping of that same pack right now. I reckon they're on some track or other."

"Whew! I hope it isn't *our* track then!" exclaimed the other lad, as he began hurriedly to look about him for a stout club, and eye the neighboring trees, as if an unpleasant alternative had forced itself upon his notice.

"The sounds seem to come from back yonder, where we passed along," remarked Fred; and as though

in his mind an ounce of prevention might be better than a pound of cure, he too hastened to pick up a heavy billet of wood, that was as large as an ordinary baseball club.

"But what makes dogs act that way, and go wild?" asked Bristles. "I never knew of any doing such a queer stunt."

"It's this way," explained the other, quickly, as though he had recently been reading the matter up, and was full of information. "Dogs are kin to wolves and foxes, you know. Fact is, many a wolf I've seen looked just like a dog."

"Yes, that's a fact, Fred!" admitted Bristles, nodding his head, and still noting the fact that the chorus of barks, yelps and snarls seemed to be gradually approaching all the time.

"Well, every once in a while some dog seems to hear the call of the wild. He takes a dislike to confinement, hates human beings, and the first chance he gets puts out for the woods, where he lives just as a wolf would do, by the chase. Sometimes farmers' watchdogs that are thought to be honest get this sheep-killing habit, and play tricks, covering their tracks so they go a long time without being found out, and then only by accident."

"Yes, I've heard all about that, too, Fred, but because one dog goes wild, why should a whole lot of others follow after him, I want to know?"

"Well," continued the other, "as far as I understand it, here's the reason. Every dog has that same nature about him. I've seen it proven many times. We had an old dog named Mose, who was never known to chase anybody. He used to lie there asleep on our front porch by the hour. Then next door there was a little cur that somehow took to chasing after wheels and wagons. You've heard how dogs yap-yap whenever they do that, haven't you, Bristles?"

"Lots of times," assented the other, nodding, and still earnestly listening.

"It's about like some of that racket we hear now," Fred went on to explain. "They say it excites a dog like everything. When that little cur next door would start down the street with a yap-yap-yap, I've seen our poor old Mose jump up, as if he'd had a signal no living dog could resist, and go rushing out of the yard, to join in with the cur and some others that gathered like a flash. That's what it means."

"And these other dogs have got the fever in their veins by this time too, eh, Fred?"

"Yes, and they are satisfied to chase around after the leader, perhaps taking an humble part in his kills. But Bristles, I'm afraid we're going to see for ourselves what the pack looks like."

"You mean they're coming this way fast now?" observed Bristles, tightening his grip on the club he had selected from many that lay under a tree shattered by a bolt of lightning the previous Summer.

"There's no doubt about it!" declared Fred, steadily.

"Course we could shin up a tree if we wanted to, Fred, but that'd go against my grain. I feel like standing my ground, and trying to get a whack at that sheep-killing leader of the pack. Gee! wouldn't the farmers give us a vote of thanks if we did manage to put him out of the running?"

"We may have the chance sooner than we expected," Fred went on to say, grimly, for the tempest of sounds seemed to be very close now, and they could actually hear the rush of the advancing pack.

"How many are there, do you think?" asked Bristles, and if his voice trembled a little, Fred believed it was from excitement rather than fear, because he had seen this local comrade tested many times, and knew that he never flinched.

"At least four," Fred replied, "because I can make out that many different yelpings, and there may be six, with some small runts coming along in the rear."

"I only wish I had more duds on, and a pair of leather leggings in the bargain," muttered Bristles, glancing rather ruefully down at his bare shins, which of course were wholly unprotected.

"Here they come!" announced Fred, suddenly.

There was a rush of pattering feet, together with a fierce series of yelps, and then through the thicket came pouring a string of hustling animals, heading directly toward the two boys.

"Whew! he *is* a dandy, sure enough!" exclaimed Bristles, referring of course to the large animal in the lead.



This was a dun-colored beast about the size of a wolf and not unlike one in many of his attributes. He presented a really terrifying front now, with his open jaws that disclosed shining fangs and a red tongue, and his blazing eyes, together with the bristles that stood up on his neck very much like those of a wild hog.

"Give 'em a shout!" exclaimed Fred, who remembered at that moment that most dogs have learned to respect the sound of a human voice, and this might serve to bring about a halt in the onrush of the savage pack.

Accordingly both of the young men started swinging their clubs wildly about their heads and yelling at the top of their voices. This threatening demonstration did have some effect on the milder elements of the pack, those dogs that had been lured into wrong-doing, and were not viciously inclined. Three immediately fell back, and one of these even turned tail and started to run away at breakneck speed as though the sight of those cudgels inspired him with respect, on account of a recollection of some previous beating.

There were three, however, that still kept on, the leader of the pack, and a couple of others. If ever Fred Fenton in all his life wished heartily for a gun of some kind it must have been just then, when, with only a single companion to stand alongside, he found himself about to be attacked by a trio of furious dogs gone wild, and running through the woods.

It would not have been so bad had there been only two, for then each of them could manage an adversary; but that odd beast bothered him.

"Tackle the leader, and leave the others to me; I'll help you as soon as I send them flying!" was what Fred exclaimed, as the three dogs bore down upon them.

"All right; I'm on, Fred!"

There was no time for another word, because the animals were upon them. They came with a rush, as though furious at seeing the bare-legged boys in their hunting preserves. That leader must have taken a decided hatred of all human kind, and when backed by his followers, seemed ready for any deed of daring.

Fred and Bristles had their hands full from the very start. It was their object to do all the damage they could without allowing any of the dogs a chance to sink their teeth into their legs, or leap upon their backs, as they appeared desirous of doing.

Luckily both boys were sturdy and agile. More than this, they realized the desperate nature of their position, for no help could reach them there. If they hoped to come out of the fight with credit, they must depend wholly upon their own valor and ability.

Bristles whacked the dun-colored beast soundly, as he made a ferocious leap up toward his throat, and had the satisfaction of seeing him whirl headlong. It was only a temporary backset, however, for as soon as the animal recovered his feet he made another mad rush, so that the boy was kept busy prodding him, using his club right and left as an Irishman might his shillalah, and in every way possible trying to beat the brute off.

All the while Bristles kept up a shouting that was intended to nerve his own arm, and possibly help to strike terror into the hearts of the four-footed assailants.

"You will, eh? Take that for a starter, and plenty more where that came from! Try to catch me off my guard, will you? Whoop! that was a beauty of a crack! Hope I made you see stars that time, you snarling beast, you! Get back there! Shinny on your own side, can't you?" and he gave a sudden kick at one of the smaller dogs, that, taking advantage of the row, had tried to creep in and nip him on the leg.

While all this was going on, Fred had his hands full with the other two dogs. If they lacked some of the ferocity and daring of the leader of the pack, it was made up in the fact of their being a pair to watch, and keep from closing in with him.

Fast his club flew, and hearty were the whacks he gave right and left. One after the other he had sent his assailants headlong, thanks to lucky shots. When they returned to the scrap, they began to give evidence that this sort of thing had begun to pall upon their liking, and this encouraged the boy to work harder than ever.

Just then, imagine the delight of the two hard pressed boys when they heard a cheery shout close by, and saw a lithe figure, also in running trunks, come leaping toward the spot.

No need for them to ask themselves who this could be, for well did they know the most remarkable

method of getting over the ground peculiar to Colon, and which some people likened to the singular hopping of a kangaroo.

He already had a club in his hand, and he immediately started in to wield it with telling effect on one of Fred's assailants. The consequence was that this particular dog turned tail, and ran off at top speed. Its mate, as though realizing the folly of keeping up an unequal combat, hastened to do the same.

This left the savage leader of the pack alone to face three antagonists. Fred could not help but feel something akin to admiration for the defiant beast as he attacked first one and then another of them. Evidently the idea of running, and saving his hide, had not as yet appealed to the enraged dog.

"Keep knocking him, everybody!" shrieked Bristles, now more than ever determined on finishing the terror of the neighboring farmers. "We've just got to nail him, boys. Don't let him shoot past you! Pound him on the head! Knock him galleywest! That was a socker, Fred; you've got him down, I tell you! Now, everyone pile in and we'll end his sheep-killing career for him!"

There was a concerted rush from three sides. The half dazed beast could not recover in time to leap upon anyone of his foes, though he snapped his jaws together so that his terrible teeth met with a clicking sound.

For a short time the clubs rained blows on his head, until Fred finally called out:

"That's enough, fellows; he's thrown up the sponge!"

"Hurrah for us; we've cleaned the ugly pack out, boys!" cried Bristles, thought so short of breath after his exertions that he could hardly stand erect.

Yes, the sheep-killing dog had been slain, and while Fred was of course very well pleased over the outcome of the fight, at the same time he looked down with considerable respect upon the dun-colored beast that could exhibit such desperate courage, and put up such a game defense against three foes.

Bristles insisted upon shaking hands with each one of his mates, and then he and Fred turned upon the long-legged Colon with a look of wonder on their faces, as though they could not understand how it was he had shown up at such a lucky moment.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SHORT-CUT WAY

"Now, where did you drop down from, Colon?" asked Bristles.

"Me?" exclaimed the tall chum, with a broad smile on his face. "Why, straight from town, if you want to know. You see, I found out, after all, I could get off, and hurried to where you said you'd start, but Fred's ma told me you had half an hour the lead of me. Still, as I happened to know the layout of the trip, I made up my mind I'd follow along, and hump myself a little to overtake you fellows.

"But how'd you know where we left the road, and started across the woodland, tell me, Colon?" asked Bristles; whereupon the other nodded his head, and looked wise.

"Oh! well!" he explained, "you see, Fred told me about where he expected to break away and so of course I kept looking; and I saw that you'd turned out just about under that bunch of birch trees. Why, you left a plain track in the dust on the road. After that I used my eyes and my head, and kept pushing right along. I'm reckoned something of a scout in the woods, you must know."

"You certainly have done a big thing in that line this time, Colon," asserted Fred, vigorously; "I never would have believed him, if someone told me you'd done it. And let me remark that you certainly came in on us at the right time."

"I should say he did," assented Bristles, joyfully. "I was getting tired of swinging my club, and whacking that terrible critter. Talk to me about being able to stand punishment,—I never before saw a dog that could come up fresh every time you keeled him over. Most curs would run away, howling like mad, but he just set his teeth, and took a fresh grip. Whew! I'm sure glad it's all over."

"Either of you get nipped anywhere?" asked Colon, anxiously.

"I hope not," Fred replied, "it's a dangerous thing to have a dog bite you, because you never know what's going to happen. Often the scratch from the claws of a tiger or a lion is followed by blood poisoning, because they tear their prey, you know. I was sent over once, and seem to have a few scratches on my shins, but they came from the stones and thorns. How about you, Bristles?"

"I kicked one of those smaller runts that tried to bite me, but I don't think he got his teeth in my leg. Those blood marks are scratches, where I ran into the thorn bush while I was jumping around so lively. Oh! it's all right, and no damage done, boys. Everything's lovely, and the goose hangs high!"

"But what does all this rumpus mean?" Colon wanted to know. "Whose dogs were they, and what had you done to make the push mad?"

Bristles undertook to tell him, passing on some of the information which he had received from Fred.

"Now I'm posted. I seem to get a grip on the business," Colon confessed, "and I want to tell you I'm mighty glad I made up my mind to follow after, and see if I couldn't come up before you got back home again."

"And believe me we're happy to know you did, Colon," Bristles assured him, "because there's no telling what sort of a hard time we'd have been up against, with that pack trying their level best to pull us down. We might have had to climb up in a tree, and sit there all night, for all we know. But Fred, what'd we better do about it now?"

"About what?" asked the other.

"This dog here," continued Bristles, pointing down at the animal that looked so fierce even in death.

"I was just thinking," Fred told him, "whether we had better lift him into the fork of a tree, so he could be found if we let the farmers know about it, or try to drag him along to the tollgate house."

"It can't be so very far away, I should think," observed Colon, "and I'd be willing to take my turn at dragging him there."

"Nothing like showing the proof, when you tell a whopping big story," declared Bristles, "and I know a lot of fellows who'll like as not lift their eyebrows, and grin to beat the band when they hear about this warm time we've had. We want to be able to stamp the yarn as true as anything that ever happened. So take hold of one leg, Colon, and I'll manage the other. Sho! that's easy enough going, and for one I don't mind it a bit."

"Call on me to take my turn any time, boys," announced Fred, as he started off in the lead.

The wild dog pack had evidently been effectually broken up by the energetic action of the Riverport runners. Not a single bark or yelp was to be heard in any direction. Scattered to the four winds the dogs were apt to return to their respective homes, and change their bad habits. With the loss of their savage ringleader, the impulse to live a wild life would possibly leave them all.

Fred once more began to figure on their course. He knew that the faint trail he and Bristles had been following through the woods had begun to bear away in a quarter that made it impossible for them to pursue it any longer, if they expected to come out near the Belleville tollgate.

Thanks to his possession of the compass, and something of a knowledge of the general conditions, Fred was able to decide on this without much trouble.

They did not make any attempt at speed indeed, that would have been utterly impossible, while they continued to drag the slain dog along after them. Colon finally gave a hint that he was ready to abandon the idea of showing the result of their encounter to the toll-gate keeper, notwithstanding that through him all the farmers in that neighborhood would eventually learn of their good luck.

"But I don't like to quit anything I've started on," objected Bristles, when the long-legged runner had thus casually mentioned that it was no fun dragging the big beast over rough ground. "Think how far we've kept it up already. Huh! want to have that work just wasted? Not much for me! If you're tired, Colon, just say the word, and I'll lug him along by myself, or else Fred ahead there might lend me a helping hand."

"Me tired? Why, whatever put that silly notion in your head, Bristles? I didn't know you set such great store by showing the old thing; but since I see you do, why of course I'm game to hold out to the finish. Hope you don't want to get the blooming dog stuffed, and keep him mounted in your den at home."

"Well, that'd be the limit!" exclaimed Bristles, laughing at the idea. "I feel right now that he's going to visit me lots of times in my dreams, with all that double row of white teeth showing, and his red lips drawn back! Ugh! I'll not forget in a hurry how he looked, I tell you, Colon. And didn't he take the punishment I heaped on him, though? I used up every ounce of strength I had in slinging my club. You notice that I'm toting that along, don't you?"

"Oh! that's the racket, is it? A bow of blue ribbon tied to the club, and hang it on the wall of your room at home? Well, Bristles, I don't blame you much, because he was an ugly customer. If he'd ever gotten you down, it'd been tough on you."

"Here, let up on that style of talk, will you, Colon? It makes me have a cold chill run up and down my spinal column. Let's talk about something more cheerful. What d'ye think about this shortcut through the woods? Fred says it's going to save a lot, and that nearly every fellow will like as not take to it. A mile of this goes against three by the road."

"So long as every contestant knows the ground, it might pay to take the cut-off," Colon remarked, "but I noticed some swampy ground that I'd hate to get lost in. If any runner fails to show up at the tape, they'll have to send out a searching party to look for him through this section."

"That'll be his lookout, then," observed Bristles, calmly. "Everybody shinny on his own side. Preparation is part of the battle. The fellow who is too lazy to go over the course in advance will have to take big chances, that's all. He won't deserve to win."

"This is certainly a dreary place, all right," the tall runner went on to say, as he looked to the right, and then to the left. "Why, I didn't know there was such a desolate stretch of woodland within twenty miles of Riverport. Some of it's good farming land too, if part is boggy, and even that would make a cranberry marsh, if anyone wanted to try it out."

"It's all second growth timber, though," called back Fred, who was still just a dozen paces in the lead, and pushing his way through brush that often entirely concealed the ground.

"Sure it is," Bristles went on to say. "Long ago the original timber was cut down, and sent to the sawmills. Listen to the frogs croaking over that way; must be a pond somewhere around."

"I was going to ask you if you'd run across any snakes yet?" Colon inquired, with considerable show of interest, because, as well known among his friends, the tall runner had always felt a decided antipathy for all crawling things, and would never handle even an inoffensive garter-snake; indeed, slimy greenbacked frogs he abominated, claiming that they had the same clammy feeling as snakes.

"Why, yes, a couple whipped across the trail back there," Bristles admitted.

"Not rattlers, I hope?" ejaculated Colon, coming to a sudden stop, as he turned an apprehensive look upon his companion.

"No," Bristles told him, with a scornful inflection in his voice, for he did not share Colon's antipathy toward crawling reptiles, and could not understand how any fellow could be so foolish as to shiver at sight of a mere wriggling object. "Fred says it's too early for rattlers to show out of their dens. One was a fair-sized black snake, and the other might have been an adder; he was short and stumpy, and had a flat head."

"Just as poisonous as anything that crawls," said Colon, with a shudder, and an involuntary hasty look around him. As a rule, he was far from being nervous, and yet when a stick that had bent under Fred's weight suddenly sprang back into shape again, the tall runner gave a low cry of alarm, and even dropped the leg of the dog that he had been clinging to so sturdily all that distance.

Not liking to be joked about his fears, Colon made out that a thorn had jabbed him in the leg, and bending down he started to rubbing vigorously at his ankle. Bristles, apparently, was aware of the true state of affairs, for he grinned as he waited for the other to assist him once more.

"These thorns do stick you right smart when they get a chance at a bare shin, for a fact, Colon," he went on to observe, grimly, "but so long as they don't draw blood, the damage's not apt to amount to much, I reckon. There's Fred disappeared from sight, and we'll have to hurry if we want to catch up with him before we strike that road, which I calculate can't be a great way off."

It happened that they were passing over some rather rough country just then, with a number of dark-looking gullies intersecting their course. In places it was even necessary for them to drop down into these and then climb up on the opposite side. This took time, but the boys fancied they must be close to the road they had been aiming to reach.

"See anything of Fred, yet?" asked Bristles. "You're such a tall fellow you c'n spy a heap farther than me."

Colon looked, and then shook his head.

"He's nowhere around, as far as I c'n see," he remarked, and dropping his share of the burden, Colon sprang back in alarm, as a voice seemed to come up out of the very earth at their feet, saying:

"Keep back there, you fellows, or you'll be tumbling down on top of me!"

"Hello! there, Fred, where under the sun are you?" demanded Bristles, looking around him in sheer amazement.

"I've fallen into some sort of cave here, that's all!" came back in a muffled voice.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE TELL-TALE PIN

Colon and Bristles stood there, and looked at each other in dismay, upon hearing Fred say that he had met with such a strange misfortune.

"Well, if that doesn't beat my time!" the latter exclaimed. "And to think that while you and I talked back there, our chum was lying down in some old black hole. What if he's broken his leg, or even sprained an ankle,—Riverport will miss a good man in this Marathon race, believe me!"

"Let's see if we can find the hole where Fred slipped down," suggested Colon.

"And be careful we don't go the same way, too," added Bristles, drily.

At that they started to move carefully forward, closely examining every foot of the way as they went. In a short time Colon uttered a cry.

"Found it, have you?" demanded Bristles, with a disappointed grunt, for he had hoped to be the lucky one himself.

"Look there where that root sticks up!" the other called out, pointing as he explained. "Seems to me there might be a gap of some sort. Let's creep a little closer and find out. Yes, that's the hole, and no mistake, Bristles. And Fred—he must have slipped down so fast he just couldn't grab hold of anything. If he did, it gave way, and went down along with him."

They accordingly crept forward, and began to stare down through the opening.

"Why, what's this I see?" ejaculated Bristles. "Somebody's got a light working down there, Colon!"

"It's our chum, I reckon," the tall boy told him, after another look.

"What, Fred?" persisted Bristles. "But whatever would he be striking a match for, I want to know?"

"To look around, I should say," Colon informed him, and the statement seemed so simple that it apparently convinced Bristles on the spot, for he hastened to remark:

"Well, that sure would be just like Fred now, to think of finding out what sort of a coop he'd dropped into, the first thing. Hello! down there!"

"Hello! yourself, Bristles!" came back the cheery answer.

"First of all, tell us if you got hurt any, Fred!" called Bristles, who could not get the notion out of his head that the other may have been seriously injured.

"Why, no, nothing to mention," came the ready answer. "A few more little scratches, it might be, but then they don't count. Kind of knocked the breath out of my body at first, and took me a little while to recover, but no damage done, boys."

"What are you doing with the light, Fred?" Colon wanted to know.

"I only wanted to see what sort of a place this is, that's all," Fred told him, as his match expired, and the darkness came again.

"And did you find out?" continued Bristles, eagerly, possibly his mind beginning to wrestle with all sorts of strange ideas concerning hidden treasure vaults, and, mysterious hiding-places where counterfeiters carried on their illegal trade.

"It seems to be only an ordinary cave, like others we've run across," Fred told them. "If you felt like coming down, I think it would be easy enough."

"Not the way you tried it, Fred; you'll have to excuse me," laughed Bristles. "But I think I can feel the rough rocks here, and seems as if a fellow as spry as Colon might manage to shuffle down. Anyhow, I'm going to try it. I've got a few matches of my own in my pocket, that we could use to look around with."

"Take it slow, and no hurry, boys," warned Fred, at the same time moving out of the way, so that if a stone were dislodged in their passage, it would not come in contact with his head.

For a couple of minutes there could be heard a scraping noise, as the two boys lowered themselves down into the opening. Fred struck another match, which he held up in order to give them the benefit of the feeble illumination. Assisted by this light, both of the newcomers managed to reach the side of their chum without encountering any serious difficulty.

"Well, here we are, fellows, all down!" Bristles declared, with a sigh of relief. "I only hope that when we try to climb up again, it won't be an all day job."

"Much easier than coming in," Colon told him. "It always is, when you're mounting a steep cliff; because then you can see just where you're going. When starting down you hardly know where to put each foot, and when you look to see, it makes you giddy to find how far below the bottom lies."

"Did you see anything when you looked around, that made you want to take a second peep, Fred?" asked Bristles, still clinging to his suspicion.

"I don't know," replied Fred. "It's like this. The match was going out when I thought I glimpsed something on the rocky floor that looked like the ashes of a dead fire! And after that I thought I'd like to make sure before I left here,—just to satisfy my curiosity, you know, boys."

"A fire, eh?" ventured Bristles. "Well, since no wild animal was ever known to start such a thing, that tells us this same cave must have sheltered human beings some time or other."

"Hoboes, most likely," observed Colon; "trust them for finding such a snug hiding-place, after they've gone and robbed some country postoffice, or a farmer's chicken coop."

"I'll strike a light, then, and Fred, you show us where the ashes lie," and with these words Bristles drew a match hastily along the seat of his trousers, causing it to burst into a bright flame.

"Over this way, boys," Fred told them, as he stepped across the rocky floor of the cave that had been found in such a queer way.

It was just as he had said, for there on the stones they could see the plain marks of a fire. Colon knew a thing or two about woodcraft, and the very first indication of this was when he thrust his hand into the ashes.

"As cold as they can be," he observed, immediately.

"Which shows that the fire hasn't been burning lately at all," Bristles hastened to add, to prove that he understood what Colon meant to infer.

"Whoever camped in here cooked a meal or two, that's plain," Fred remarked, as he pointed to some chicken bones that were strewn around.

"Tramps, as sure as anything, and they've been raiding the hencoops around this region, too," Colon ventured to say.

"And that poor old wild dog had to stand the blame for it all," said Bristles. "It's nearly always that way; give a dog a bad name, and everybody condemns him. For all we know, some of the sheep that have been killed might have been pulled down by an innocent looking shaggy dog belonging to the farmer himself, but it's so easy to saddle the blame on the wicked one. What was that you picked up, Colon?"

"As near as I can make out it looks like one of those tin biscuit boxes you see at the store," the tall boy replied, holding the object up. "It's got a rubber band around it. Queer thing for tramps to buy. Only imported biscuits are put up this way, Miss Fletcher told me, and she ought to know because she's English, and won't eat any other kind."

"Let me see that tin, will you please, Colon?" asked Fred, suddenly.

After he had looked sharply at it, inside and out, he nodded his head.

"I thought it might be like that," Fred remarked, mysteriously. This manner of talking caused his comrades to stare, and Colon cried out:

"Now, whatever is there about that old tin to make you speak like that, Fred? If you'd picked up a clue to some robbery, you couldn't look more pleased.

"Perhaps we have," said Fred, meaningly. "Take another look at this tin box, both of you. Notice how the heavy rubber band has been fastened underneath, so it couldn't get lost. You never heard of such a thing being done where there were just plain crackers in a tin, did you? Of course not. Well, don't you see that this would make a splendid receptacle for papers, or securities? And just before your match went out, Bristles, I thought I could see a little scrap of paper sticking in a corner. That would prove it had held such things."

Bristles could be heard uttering a series of exclamations, as he started to get another match going.

"If this doesn't take the cake! Why, all of us ought to remember how old Mr. Periwinkle complained that someone had entered his house and hooked a sum of money, as well as some papers he kept in a tin box in his desk. Why, this must be the same tin box, fellows! We ought to keep it, and show it to him."

They examined the thing once more, while the match was burning.

"Guess you're right, Bristles, and this is the box old Periwinkle kept his valuables in," Colon pursued, "but mighty little comfort it's going to do him to set eyes on the same again. Would you care to have the shells turned back to you, after somebody'd gone and gobbled up the fat kernel of the nut?"

"It will settle the fact that the robber, whoever he could have been, must have stayed in this cave lately," said Fred, seriously. "I don't think these ashes are very old, perhaps not more than a couple of days, at most. So you see that tells us the thief must be around here still."

"Watching out for a bigger haul, more'n likely!" Bristles declared, somewhat excitedly. "I don't believe he got much at Periwinkle's place, because the old man is poor as Job's turkey; leastways he makes out to be, though some folks say he's a sort of miser. But there are farmers that keep quite a sum of money around, and it might be this hobo is waiting to get a chance at a big haul."

"How do we know but what he aims to clean out the Riverport bank some fine night; that sort of thing has been done lots of times in other places?" remarked Colon.

"All of which makes our duty the plainer, boys," Fred told them, "which is to keep this tin box, and show it to Chief Sutton. He'll know what to do about it, and if he says we ought to tell Mr. Periwinkle, why, we'll take a turn up there to-night. I heard that he'd offered a small reward for the return of the papers, and no questions asked; which was a bid to the thief to send the same back, and get paid for doing it."

"And to think of you falling down into this cave the way you did, Fred," Colon continued. "Do you reckon that hole up there might be the only way in and out?"

"Well, as far as I could see around, it's only a small affair, so I wouldn't be surprised if that turned out to be the case," was the reply Fred made.

Bristles apparently had brought a bountiful supply of matches along, and did not mean to spare them, if by striking successive lights he could satisfy his curiosity.

The others saw him bend forward, and act as though he had picked some small object from the rocky floor of the cave.

"What did you find, Bristles?" demanded Fred.

"Share and share alike," called out Colon. "If you've discovered a diamond, why we all ought to have a part of what you get for the same. What's that, Bristles? Well, I declare, if it isn't a sort of breastpin, as sure as you live! But such a cheap affair isn't worth ten cents. If that's the stuff this robber has got his

pockets lined with, it won't pay the Chief much to chase him down. Only a flimsy little old plated breastpin, with a red stone in it. Huh!"

But the face that Bristles turned on Fred Fenton expressed a vast amount of uneasiness, surprise and concern.

"Gee! I wonder now, if that could be?" he was muttering, so that even Fred began to see that Bristles had struck some sort of clue calculated to stagger him more or less.

"What ails you, Bristles?" Fred asked him, pointedly, as the match went out.

"Why, Fred, as sure as my name is Andy Carpenter, which I sometimes hear it is, I've seen this same silly little pin before!"

"Where?" demanded Fred, almost holding his breath as though he anticipated the answer that was coming.

"That little girl had it on the day we pulled her brother, Sam Ludson, out of the river," was the startling reply.

## CHAPTER IX

### AT THE TOLL-GATE

"Are you sure of that, Bristles?" asked Fred, upon hearing his chum make such an astonishing assertion with regard to that tawdry breastpin picked up in the cave.

"Fred, you c'n see for yourself that while this is a mighty cheap old thing, it's made in a queer shape," Bristles went on to say.

"All of which is true, I admit," the other confessed.

"Well, you know I've always been a great hand for noticing things," said Bristles.

"Sure you have," interrupted Colon, who was listening intently, although it was all "Greek" to him; "and 'specially when they happen to be connected with a pretty girl."

Bristles grinned as he turned on the tall chum.

"Oh! rats!" he exclaimed, "you're off your base this time, Colon, because she was a homely little thing, and with clothes on that I'd hate to see a sister of mine wearing. But I say again, and I'll keep on saying it—Sadie, if that was her name, was wearing this same brooch the day we pulled her brother Sam out of the river, when he'd broke into an airhole."

"You understand what that might mean, don't you, Bristles?" pursued Fred.

"Why, I reckon now you're trying to make me see that the boy'n girl might have had something to do with the stealing of Mr. Periwinkle's money and papers," was the way Bristles answered him.

"If the girl was here, the boy must have been, too," said Fred.

"But gee whiz! Fred, that youngster didn't look as if he had half enough nerve to do a thing like that," urged Bristles, scornfully.

"Oh! he had nerve enough, never fear," Fred went on to remark, "for you may remember he never gave a single peep himself, and it was the girl who did the shouting for help."

"Might have been scared too much," suggested Colon, wanting to have some say in the matter.

"No, I don't think he was," replied Fred, "because the girl told us he kept urging and demanding that she hold back and not try to help him, because his one fear seemed to be she would fall in too. But there's one thing we haven't seemed to figure on before, Bristles."

"Say, I just bet you're going to spring that uncle on ne," remarked the other, with surprising



quickness.

"Why not," demanded Fred, "when we have learned that Corny Ludson has charge of the boy and girl, and must have been here in this cave with them. There was a man here, because I've found signs of his smoking several cheap cigars, throwing the stubs around afterwards."

"What's that?" cried Colon, just then; "say that name again for me, won't you?"

"Why, Corny Ludson, a man who seems to be uncle or guardian or something to the boy we pulled out of the Mohunk, the last time we ran my iceboat up river," Bristles informed him.

Colon looked happy. No longer was he to remain "sitting on the fence," without feeling he had any particular interest in the game. Circumstances had managed it so that he could now enter the free-for-all race, and take his place in line.

"Now that's a rather odd name, you'll admit, boys," he started to say in his slow, shrewd fashion, "and it's not likely that there'd be two Corny Ludsons around this section of country; likewise having a couple of half-grown kids along in the bargain."

"Go on, Colon; it begins to look like you knew something we want to hear the worst way," Bristles urged.

"Here's the way it stands, then, fellows," the obliging Colon continued. "At first I didn't just catch the last name when you spoke about Sam and Sadie. That is why I didn't break in sooner. But Ludson gives it away. He's the same man Mr. Peets the butcher was talking about one day some little time ago."

"Yes, but tell us what he said, can't you?" urged Bristles.

"You see, I was in there waiting to be served, and the butcher was talking with Judge Wallace. I don't know how it came about they got to arguing, but seemed that Mr. Peets wanted to back up something he said, and so he started in to tell about a man that had just left the shop, having two children along, after buying the cheapest kind of a cut. Said his name was Corny Ludson, and that once he used to be a rich man over in New Brunswick, but he'd lost all he had, and now depended on his wits for a mighty poor living."

"That all sounds pretty, interesting, Colon; but if there's any more, suppose you get along and give us the same," Bristles told him.

"I remember I heard Mr. Peets say he didn't like the looks of the man," continued the one who was giving the story; "and then he went on to explain that he considered himself a good reader of character, which allowed him to size the said Ludson up as a trickster who wouldn't stop at taking things belonging to other people, if he believed he could do it without getting caught!"

"Bully!" exclaimed Bristles; "that covers the bill to a dot, doesn't it Fred? Sure Corny must have believed he saw a good chance to grab this tin box belonging to Mr. Periwinkle, and not get the hooks in him. He did it, too, and has been living on the proceeds of the robbery ever since."

"There must be something mysterious about the man, then," remarked Fred. "And it might pay for someone to get in touch with the people over in New Brunswick, so as to find out whether he did live there once, a rich man, and why he cleared out."

"That's right, Fred," observed Bristles. "When people fight shy of their native place, it pays to learn the reason. Course sometimes they have a good cause for keeping away, but lots of 'em do so because they dassen't go back. But I'm meaning to keep this queer little pin."

"And if you happen to run across Sadie Ludson again, you'll give it back to her, won't you?" Fred asked him.

"Just what I had in mind, to a dot," admitted Bristles. "I might tell her where I picked it up, too, and see what she'd say."

"Well, even if you did get her to admit that she'd been here, that wouldn't prove anything, would it?" queried Colon.

"We'd know Corny had been camping in this cave," said Bristles, sturdily, "and from the fact that we picked up this same tin box, *empty*, it'd look pretty much as if he ought to know something about it."

They'd call that circumstantial evidence."

"And if the boy and girl had to be questioned by Judge Wallace they might be coaxed to confess that they'd seen their uncle handling this tin box," added Fred. "That would fix the blame without any question."

"Something may come of our find," Colon went on to say, now feeling that he had a perfect right to count himself in the game, "and on that account I reckon you'd be doing the right thing to keep both the pin and the box, boys."

"And all we ask of you, Colon," Bristles suggested, "is that you stick mum. Let Fred run the thing. If he wants any help, he'll tell us, so we c'n assist."

"Oh! I'll be a clam," asserted the tall runner with a chuckle, "and once I give my word, nobody ever knew me to break it. But say, doesn't it feel kind of chilly down here? Remember we haven't any too much on in the way of clothes, and for one I was a little heated after my run to catch up with you fellows."

"That's where your head is level, Colon," Fred told him, "and so we might as well climb out of this. I'm happy to know I didn't even sprain an ankle when I dropped down through that hole."

They found no great difficulty in gaining the outside world again, for the stones offered a substantial footing. So it came about that presently the three chums were once more moving along at a fair pace, being desirous of throwing off that chilly feeling.

It turned out that Fred's calculations were correct "to a hair," as Bristles triumphantly declared, when they burst upon the road just fifty yards above the Belleville toll-gate.

"That's figuring some for you!" he exclaimed, as soon as they had sighted the inclined pole that signified the presence of the barrier where every vehicle had to halt and pay the regular tariff, according to the number of wheels, or of the horses it took to draw the load.

They had hung on to the defunct dog in spite of all their hurrying, for that plan to let the farmers of the community know they were rid of their greatest pest still clung to the boys' minds.

Bristles was looking ahead as they advanced along the road, and about this time was heard to give vent to an exclamation.

"Would you believe it?" he cried. "If there isn't the wagon at the toll-gate belonging to that old farmer I heard telling about the dogs that'd played havoc with his sheep! And I reckon now, he'll be right glad to see the leader of the pack laid out as we've got him!"

## **CHAPTER X**

### **BRISTLES' SURPRISE PARTY**

"That's a queer coincidence, if you'd care to call it by that name," remarked Colon, who liked once in a while to make use of some long word.

"It simply shows that we had long heads when we made up our minds to lug this old tramp dog all the way here, just to prove our story," Fred observed.

"That was your scheme, Fred, all right," Bristles quickly asserted.

"No more than the rest of you," he was instantly told, for Fred never liked to be given sole credit for anything unusual, when he had chums along. "All the same, I guess the old farmer will be tickled half to death to know the sheep-killing pack has been broken up for good."

"You think our knocking the leader out is going to do that, do you, Fred?" asked Colon.

"In nine cases out of ten that's the way things go. There's a keystone to every arch, and when you remove that, the whole thing tumbles down."

"My idea to a dot," asserted Bristles, doggedly. "Chances are the rest of those curs have started on the run for their old homes before this; and unless another leader springs up, which isn't likely, we've seen the last of the sheep-killers. But hold on, fellows, perhaps we can have a little fun with the old farmer."

"How?" asked Colon, not at all unwilling.

"He doesn't seem to be about his wagon just now, you notice?" ventured Bristles.

"Knows the toll-gate keeper right well," explained Colon, "because he's been coming past here, year in and year out, a long time now. Like as not he's stepped in to sit and talk, or else sample something wet. But I hope now, Bristles, you don't mean to start the team off on the run, or something like that, just to see an old man rush after 'em?"

"What d'ye take me for?" demanded the other, indignantly. "I leave all such mean tricks to Buck Lemington, Clem Shooks, Ben Cushing and that crowd. Here's where we might play an innocent little joke on the farmer, and he'll laugh as hard as we do when he catches on. It's the dog—let's sneak up back of the wagon, and lift the thing in. Then you leave the rest to me."

Colon waited to hear what Fred said. He was accustomed to depending to some extent on the opinion of this chum, to whom the boys usually looked as their leader.

"I should think that was fair enough, Bristles," Fred quickly announced. "We're intending to give the farmer a pleasant little surprise party, that's all. Have it your way, then. Here, let's move around a little, so they won't sight us from the open door of the toll-gate house."

It was a very simple matter to do this, and presently they had deposited the already stiffening body of the sheep-destroying dog in the bed of the wagon, where it certainly presented a very gruesome appearance, with its four feet sticking up in the air.

This done, the boys walked around, and onto the little porch that was spread out before the door of the cottage.

Voices reached their ears, and it was evident that their presence had been discovered, for two men immediately came out. Bristles noticed that the old farmer was even then brushing the back of his hand across his lips, thus indicating that he had been sampling a glass of hard cider, a specialty of the toll-gate keeper.

"Hello! Mr. Jenks!" remarked Bristles, who, it seemed, knew the keeper. "We're up here to look over the ground for the big Marathon race that's coming off before long."

The farmer had started toward his team, but hearing this, he stopped to listen.

"I reckoned as much as soon as I see you boys in your running togs," the tollgate keeper went on to say, affably enough, "because there was a gent up here only yesterday that said he represented the committee, and that they expected to have what they called a registering station here at the toll-gate, though I don't just know what that really means."

"Why, you see, in a long gruelling run of twenty-five miles," explained Bristles, "it's necessary to have certain places a few miles apart, and especially at turns in the course, where every contestant enters his name in his own handwriting, as well as the time he passed there."

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed Mr. Jenks. "But what's all that tomfoolery for? Strikes me they go to a heap of trouble for next to nothing."

"Why, you see," continued Bristles, "these races have to be above suspicion. The committee doesn't want anybody to be able to say there was any crooked work about the run. The fellow who wins must have beaten every competitor fairly. And by this system of registering they have a complete record of the race. No one can cut across lots and cheat, without its showing in the record."

"Oh! now I understand you, my lad, and I guess it's a good thing. That gent was a fine one, and he said I had the best—but never mind what he said. How far have you come this time, boys?"

"This is over half the distance," explained Fred, "and we're on the home stretch right now. But we're not trying for a record to-day. Fact is, we're just feeling out the ground. The next time we come we'll stop only a minute, as if we were registering, and be off, for that's when we'll be trying it out to see what our time is."

"Oh! excuse me," said Bristles, as he saw the old farmer once more turn toward his rig, as though he felt he must be going on, "but didn't I hear you telling someone in the market the other day that you'd lost a number of sheep lately?"

The old man frowned, and shook his head sadly.

"Three of my best, and I reckons that if things keep on the way they're goin', I won't have any flock left purty soon, boy," he replied.

"And you said the damage had all been done by a pack of wild dogs, didn't you?" continued Bristles.

"Anybody with one eye could see that, by the way the sheep was mangled, and the pad of the prints around. They're gettin' to be a terror up here. Jenks kin tell you how he's heard the lot carrying on like Cain over in the woods there nights."

"Did you ever see the pack, mister?" asked Bristles.

"Well, I can't say as I really and truly has, son, but I do believe I knows what the wust of the lot looks like," the farmer told him.

"How was that, sir?" asked the boy, eagerly. He saw the old man shrug his broad shoulders, while a whimsical look appeared on his sunburned face.

"Jest because I set on a limb, and looked down at the critter three whole hours, till he got so pizen hungry he slunk off, and let me get home. He come nigh ketchin' me afore I cud git up in a tree; and from the looks of them ugly fangs, chances are he'd a-tore me right bad."

"Then I should think you'd know that dog again if ever you saw him?" suggested Bristles, with a wink toward his chums.

"I hopes I'll never have the bad luck to see him alive again!" declared the old farmer, as he started to climb up to the seat of his wagon.

"Now watch the circus!" hissed Bristles.

The farmer had just about drawn himself up when they heard him give utterance to a startled exclamation, for he found himself facing the uninvited passenger in the back of his open wagon bed. Had Bristles been more inclined to be cruel, he might have fixed the dog so that he would appear lifelike, and in the attitude of springing.

The farmer remained there as though turned into stone. Then he managed to recover his wits, and burst out into a shout.

"It's the same pizen critter!" he exclaimed joyously, "and keeled over at last! But I'd like to know—say, you don't meant to tell me now, boys, 'twas you that done for that turrible beast?"

"Well," said Bristles, trying hard not to look too important, "they tackled us in the woods, and it was either us or him, so we managed to pound the leader until he kicked the bucket, and the rest of the pack lit out. I guess that combine's broken up for good, mister. You won't lose any more of your sheep, believe me."

The old man got down, and insisted upon shaking hands all around, he felt so delighted over the new turn affairs had taken.

"And the next time I go to Riverport, I'll tell what a fine thing you boys did up here," he remarked, as the three runners prepared to start down the road, heading for the home town.

On the way it was finally decided that they would go to the office of the Chief of Police and tell him about finding the empty tin box, but not say a thing in connection with that pin. Afterwards, Fred said, they might see Mr. Periwinkle, So as to learn whether the tin box was really his property.

They felt uncertain as to just what their duty might be in a case like this, for while it seemed only right that the guilty one should suffer, at the same time both Fred and Bristles remembered what sorrowful faces that brother and sister had, and they could not find it in their hearts to do anything likely to add to the burdens the children already had to bear.

So the case rested as the days passed. Though unknown to the boys, a time was coming, and near at hand, when the mystery of the tin box was bound to be explained.

# CHAPTER XI

## ON THE GREEN CAMPUS

A group of merry boys and girls, after school hours, had gathered on the campus, and were chatting at a lively rate. This was a week after Fred and his two companions had gone over the course that previous Saturday, to judge of the difficulties they were likely to encounter when the great race came off.

Preparations had gone steadily on, and the time that must elapse before the Marathon was run could be measured in days. The greatest excitement reigned among the young people of Riverport, and it was said that both the neighboring towns were worked up to fever-heat on account of the prospective race.

Mechanicsburg welcomed another chance to even the score, which had too often been in favor of her closest rival, and even Paulding boasted that long distance running might be called her "best hold," since she had several lads who were apt to prove wonders at that game.

On the whole, such intense interest had never before been aroused in school circles in the three rival towns. Hundreds could hardly wait for the day to come when, in the presence of unequaled crowds, the question of supremacy would be decided once for all.

There was Flo Temple, a very pretty, attractive girl, whom Fred always took to dances, and skated with on the river; her chum Cissie Anderson, a little addicted to slang, though witty, and "fetching," as Sid Wells was heard to admit many a time, even when she had rubbed it into him pretty hard; and last, but not least, that energetic sister of Sid's, Mame Wells, a girl who could play almost any game that boys did, and fairly well at that.

The girls seemed to be having no end of fun about something or other, and the crowd laughed at their sallies. Even the victims themselves, took it goodnaturedly, knowing that it was all in good sport.

"The chosen few who are going to do the honors for Riverport in this wonderful race!" Cissie was saying, with a look of pretended concern on her pink and white face. "Don't we pity them, though, girls? They say they're at the training table now, and have to give up pies, and all sorts of other good things. Look at their faces, and see what a woebegone expression has settled there. Every time I glimpse at Sid and Fred, I have to think of a funeral, or a famine."

"Yes, it must be a dreadful thing to have to actually starve yourself, and all for the sake of getting in what they call condition," Mame Wells remarked. "Why, for the first time in all his life, Sid has to get up from the table before the dessert comes on. He says he just couldn't stand for it to stay, and see us all enjoying ourselves while he's shut out. Poor boy, I wish it was over for his sake."

"Why, they'll all be like walking skeletons if this keeps on much longer," Flo Temple, the doctor's daughter, broke in with. "I even told Fred he'd have to walk with a heavy cane, like an old man, before long, and I offered him one of father's, but he must have felt ashamed to take it, though I just know he wanted to."

"Oh! well," observed Corney Shay, slyly, "a heavy stick like that is a mighty nice thing to have along with you, when you're coming home awful late at night," and of course that caused a great laugh, as well as the blushes to flash up in the cheeks of pretty Flo.

"But don't any of you try to pity us, and think we're suffering for want of a decent meal," Fred told them. "Training table simply means that you've got to drop pastry, and all such silly things as that. We eat beefsteak and chops and eggs just as much as we want to, most vegetables, fish and fruits, and even plain cake. Why, it's the finest thing a boy can do, to try training for a month, and every fellow would be better off for doing it."

"Then the daily runs we take, and the other exercise in the bargain," added Sid, "is making our flesh as hard as nails. Just feel that muscle, will you?" and he flexed his arm as he held it out toward the gray-eyed Cissie, who of course, after duly feeling of it, gave Sid a sly pinch that made him jump.

Everybody knew that Fred and Flo were good chums, and were nearly always together. It was that very fact that had made Buck Lemington dislike Fred so much in the beginning. Buck had aspirations in that quarter himself, and there had been a time, before the other boy came to town, that he acted as escort to the doctor's pretty daughter, when they were all much younger than now.

"I hear that the course has all been laid out at last," remarked a small but lively high school boy, a

cousin of Colon. He really had a first name, though most people seemed to have forgotten to say "Harrison," for everywhere he went by the appellation of Semi-Colon, as compared with the lengthy one.

"We were told the same thing," Flo ventured to say, "but twenty-five miles seems a terribly long way to run. My father is to examine every applicant, because they say it would be dangerous for any boy not in the best of condition to start out, and undergo the strain that a long race causes. So if any of you has a weak heart I'm sorry for you."

"Don't waste your pity on Fred, then, Flo," said Cissie, "because you ought to know his heart's all right. Besides, we've seen him put to the test, and feel sure he'll do good old Riverport High credit. So will they all. There isn't a girl in town but firmly believes the race is bound to come to our school," and she gave Sid an arch look that caused him to nod his head in delight.

"One thing sure," said Fred, gallantly, "every fellow is bound to make the greatest effort of his life, after learning how the Riverport girls have faith in him. I can speak for myself and Sid here, as well as Bradley Morton and Colon, who are absent. If we all fail to land the prize, it'll be because there are better long distance runners in the other towns, and not on account of our flunking."

"They say that to-morrow the four who have been selected to be Riverport entries expect to make the run from start to finish, just to get acquainted with the course, and time themselves; is that so, Fred?" asked Mame, who undoubtedly sincerely mourned the fact, as she had often done before, that she was a girl, and hence debarred from all these glorious times.

"Yes, we expect to do something like that, if the weather allows," Fred admitted, "but of course time isn't going to cut much of a figure in it with us. We'll leave all that to the big day, and content ourselves by getting familiar with the lay of the land, finding out all the bad places, and figuring how best to save a minute here or half of one there. That's what is going to count in the final reckoning, the chances are."

"Yes, and it stands for the Fred Fenton type of highest strategy," said Sid, who could praise a friend without feeling the slightest touch of envy. "Being prepared means a heap, in war or in sporting matters. That's one reason we're dieting right now, so as to put ourselves in the finest possible physical condition."

"And lots of people just think when there's a Marathon race like this," ventured little Semi-Colon, "that a pack of crazy boys just strip to their running togs and start pell mell across country without a particle of system whatever. It's all wrong, because every move is mapped out beforehand by the wise ones. They know just what they can do in the way of speed, and how much reserve they're holding back against the rush over the home stretch. That last is where the agony always comes in, 'specially if the race is a close one. Many a fellow's been known to just crawl under the tape, too weak to stand up, yet wild to win."

"Well, let's hope nothing like that happens in our Marathon," said Mame, with a solicitous look toward her handsome brother, of whom she was very fond.

"Oh! well," Sid hastened to explain, to allay her fears, "this is only a boys' run, you know; when regular athletes compete they set a faster pace than any of us can show; and then the distance is generally much further than twenty-five miles."

"Here comes Colon now," remarked Cissie, who often tormented the tall athlete with her witty remarks.

"He looks more mysterious than ever," remarked Mame Wells, "and I shouldn't be surprised now if Colon were hatching up some bright game for that glorious day of the long race. Not that he'd play any trick that wasn't honest, but you all know how he likes to pretend to be beaten until close to the end, and then fairly fly ahead of every competitor."

"Colon is going to make Riverport proud of him, you mark my words," said Fred, lowering his voice, for the object of their conversation was now close by, and covering ground at a tremendous pace with those long legs of his, which some of the boys had often compared to a pair of architect's dividers.

"Hello, everybody!" Colon called out, as he came up. Then, crooking his finger toward Fred, he went on to say, "Would you mind stepping aside, Fred, and giving me just a minute or two? Something important, or I wouldn't bother you."

Of course the group of boys and girls laughed, and called them a pair of conspirators, planning some sly game whereby victory might perch on the purple and gold banner of Riverport High.

"What's up, Colon?" asked Fred, as soon as they were beyond earshot of the noisy crowd, for he saw that the tall fellow looked quite serious indeed.

"Remember what we said about that Corny Ludson, don't you, Fred?"

"Why, yes, we concluded to let matters rest, and wait to see if anything new would turn up," replied the other, "but why do you say that, Colon?"

"Oh! because Corny's shown up in Riverport again, and it might mean he's got another sly robbery in view," Colon calmly remarked.

## CHAPTER XII

### LAYING PLANS

"Did you see him yourself, Colon, or did some one tell you?" Fred inquired calmly, although he rubbed his forehead, as though bothered a little by this latest news.

"Well, you know strangers don't come to town in droves these days, and so when I happened to set eyes on a party I didn't recognize, who had just been talking with Hi Jimmerson, the livery stable man, I asked him who it was. Don't know just why that bumped into my head, but I had an errand with Hi, anyhow, you understand."

"And he told you it was Corny Ludson, did he?" asked Fred.

"Yes, that's what he did," came the ready reply. "It seems he used to know the man over in New Brunswick years ago. If you and Bristles had run across Hi when you were trying to find out something about Corny, you'd have struck a gold mine. He told me a lot of queer things about him, and none of 'em that were to his credit, either."

"What did Corny want with the livery man?" asked Fred.

"Oh! tried to strike him for a little loan on account of old times," the other replied. "Said he'd been up against it harder than flint, and had a couple of kids to feed, left to him by his brother. Hi is an easy mark, you know, with a great big heart, and he staked Corny to the extent of a dollar, though he did tell him money was scarce, and that would be the limit."

Fred seemed to be pondering, for he was somewhat slow about speaking again.

"Well, it may be we've been wronging Corny by making up our minds he stole that stuff from old Mr. Periwinkle," he finally went on to say, "though the miser did tell us he would recognize the tin box among a thousand. I hardly know what we ought to do about this thing."

"If you told the Chief all you know, what d'ye reckon he'd do?" inquired Colon.

"He's such a peppery and ready-to-act little chap," answered Fred, "that I'm of the opinion he'd round Corny up in a rush. That might turn out to be the right thing. And again there's a chance it'd play him a mean trick. What if he were innocent after all? We'd feel that we'd done him a great wrong."

This thought worked upon Colon's mind at once, for he had a very tender heart.

"Yes," he added, reflectively. "And then, how about that boy and girl? Like as not they're in some place out of town, right now, depending on their uncle to fetch home the bacon. They'd have to go hungry a long time if Corny were locked up in the cooler. I'd hate to think of that same happening, from what you and Bristles told me about the poor kids."

"That leaves us up in the air, you see," pursued Fred. "We don't know what our duty is—to tell the Chief, or wait to see what happens."

"Now, by that I reckon you mean wait and see if anything is pulled off again in town, or around here?" suggested Colon; "that is, in the way of a robbery like old Mr. Periwinkle's loss of his money and papers. Whew! I must say it's getting interesting all of a sudden."

"I was wondering," Fred ventured, "if Corny, provided he did rob the old miser, and has spent the small sum of money that was taken, could have heard that Mr. Periwinkle has said he'd pay a certain sum, and no questions asked, for the safe return of his papers!"

At that Colon puckered up his thin lips, and emitted a soft whistle, as if to thus display his surprise.

"Queer I never thought of that idea, Fred," he said, nodding his head in a way to indicate that on the whole he was inclined to agree with what his companion had advanced.

"It's always possible, you know," he was told. "If only the papers could be returned without Corny showing his face! Now, he may have some sort of a plan like that to play, which would account for his coming to town again. I wonder if it'd be the right thing for me to see Mr. Periwinkle, and kind of put him on his guard?"

"Could you do it without telling him all about Corny?" demanded Colon.

"That's the question," admitted Fred. "That's where the hitch seems to come in the scheme. The old miser is apt to jump at conclusions, if he sees a chance to get his papers back, and bag the thief at the same time. Once he suspects that I know who was in that cave where the empty tin cracker box was found, he'll insist on sending for Chief Sutton, and laying some sort of clever trap."

"Well, if Corny is really guilty, he ought to suffer for it; and I wouldn't care a single pin only for that boy and girl. If we knew where they were kept right now, so we could bring 'em into town, and get folks interested in putting both in good families, I'd say go ahead and have Corny caught."

"I wonder what Bristles would say about it," mused Fred.

"Huh! I c'n tell you that," grunted the tall boy, immediately.

"Then suppose you do, Colon."

"Bristles," continued the other, confidently, "would hunch his shoulders this way, as he nearly always does, and then he'd say: whatever you think is the right caper, Fred, count me in. I'm ready to sneeze every time you take snuff! That's the way Bristles would talk, mark my words."

Fred laughed. He could not help feeling flattered at such an evidence of confidence on the part of these two chums; yet he feigned to disagree with Colon.

"I don't know about that, Colon, Bristles has a mind of his own, and sometimes it takes a lot of argument to convince him. You've got to batter down his walls, and knock all the props out from under him before he'll throw up the white flag. If I get half a chance to run across lots to-night, I'll try to see him. He ought to be put wise to what's going on.

"That's only fair, Fred, because he was there when we struck that cave. And if I remember aright, Bristles was the first to discover about Corny having been the one who used that cooking fire."

"Don't pass the word around, Colon, mind," cautioned Fred.

"You didn't need to say that, my boy," remarked the other, with a vein of reproach in his voice, "because you ought to know I'm not one of the blabbing kind. I c'n keep a secret better'n anybody in our class. They might pump me forever and never learn a thing."

"When was it you saw Corny?" Fred asked, as though desirous of obtaining the fullest information possible.

"Why, just a little while ago," Colon confided. "Fact is, my first thought was to look you up, and tell you. I went to your house first, because your hours are a heap shorter than the regular scholars, at school, and they said you'd gone off an hour before. And then, well, I kind of guessed Flo Temple would be starting for home about this time, and it might be you'd happen along to carry her hooks, as you always used to. And I was right," with a sly glance at the little packet Fred had at that very moment under his left arm.

"Oh that's all right, Colon," he remarked, laughingly; "just from force of habit, you know. Flo kind of expects me to drop around, and seems sort of disappointed when anything keeps me away. That's the way we spoil our girl friends, you see. But let's speak of serious things. I don't see that we're called on to inform about Corny, with only circumstantial evidence against him. If there did happen to be another robbery while we knew he was close by, of course then it would be another thing. We just couldn't keep quiet any longer."

"That's what you've decided on, then, is it, Fred?"



"Yes, to hold off, and wait," he was told in a decisive way.

"All right then, and I want to say that I think you're playing safe in the game. You're holding off on account of that pair of poor kids, I know you are. Corny c'n thank them for being let alone. And Fred, seems to me you're going on the policy of the old saying that tells you to give a rascal rope enough, and he'll hang himself."

"If anything happens, I promise to go straight to Chief Sutton and put him in possession of all the facts I know," affirmed Fred. "And in case I'm not able to get over to Bristles' place to-night, I'll call him up on the wire, and tell him how the case stands."

"You'll have to be careful what you say, then," remarked Colon, with a grin; "if you happen to have any curious old maid on your party wire, as we have."

"Well, it saves the cost of the weekly paper, you know," laughed Fred. "But you can make sure, Colon, if I do talk with Bristles over the wire, I'll fix things so no one could tell what it was all about, and yet he'll understand what I mean."

"Say I wanted to tell you, Fred, about that same Corny," Colon observed, taking hold of his chum's sleeve, as he thought he detected an uneasiness about Fred's actions. Flo was looking their way, and frowning, as though she considered that this mysterious consultation had gone on about long enough, even if it did concern important plans for the coming Marathon run.

"I'd be glad to hear it then, Colon," the tall boy was told.

"I didn't like his looks a little bit," Colon continued, seriously.

"By that style of talk I should imagine you thought he'd just as soon steal from a miser as eat a square meal; is that what you mean?" Fred demanded.

"He looks mean as dirt," the other went on to say. "There's a slick way he's got of rubbing his hands together when he's talking, and looking up from the tail of his eye, to see how you're taking his patter. Now, I'm only a boy, and I don't make out to be able to read character any great shakes, but, Fred, I'd be willing to eat my hat if that Corny isn't a bad egg every time."

"Everybody seems to think the same way there," he was told, "and I've yet to hear the first word in his favor. We'll consider that settled, then, Colon. And if you get wind of anything being pulled off around Riverport to-night, or later on, don't let the grass grow under your feet about giving me a tip."

"You just bet I won't, Fred. But I hope there'll be some way of finding out about that pair of kids. Somehow I seem to have cottoned to 'em just from what you'nd our other chum told me, and without ever havin' set eyes on either the boy or the girl that I know about. I'm meaning to sound my ma about how it could be fixed, so they'd have decent homes, in case anything happened."

"That sentiment does you credit, Colon, and I promise that when the time comes, if it ever does, I'll back you up to the limit."

"Shake hands on that, Fred!" exclaimed impulsive Colon, and then and there they exchanged a grip that cemented the bargain.

"I certainly do hope that finishes the wonderful consultation!" called out a clear girlish voice, and Flo Temple came toward them, with a little pout on her pretty red lips. "We've grown tired of standing here, and waiting, while you laid out your great plan of campaign. I should think there was plenty of time for all that between now and the day of the Marathon race. And Fred, you forget you promised to walk out in the woods with me, and see if the first wild flowers hadn't popped up. This is the only chance I've had so far this week, and it'll be late before we get fairly started."

Of course Fred declared that nothing stood in the way of their immediate departure, and as Sid and Cissie had agreed to go along, it may be assumed they had a merry time of it.

## **CHAPTER XIII**

## THE MUFFLED VOICE

"Fred, someone wants you on the 'phone!"

"All right, Sis, tell him I'll be right down, and to hold the wire!"

At the time his younger sister, Josie, called him. Fred was sitting in his own room at home. It was around eight o'clock, and he had just been studying, so as to get such matters off his mind until Monday swung around again. The next day being Saturday, he and the other selected contestants for honors in the big race expected to cover the course at a pretty good pace, so as to familiarize themselves with its numerous shortcomings and advantages.

Not wishing to keep anyone waiting, and suspecting that it must be either Colon or Bristles who had some sort of communication to make, Fred hurried down to the lower hail where the 'phone hung.

"Hello!" he called.

Evidently the other party was waiting, for immediately there came an answer.

"That you, Fred?"

"Yes," replied Fred, at the same time wondering who it could be, because there did not seem to be anything familiar about the half muffled tones.

"This is Bristles!" came the voice.

"What's that?" exclaimed Fred, wondering if his friend could be trying to play some trick on him by pretending to change his voice.

"Bristles, don't you know? Wait a minute till I cough," and then followed a series of explosive barks that sounded wonderfully realistic over the wire, after which the muffled voice continued: "Seem to have taken a beastly cold somehow, after school. Sneezing to beat the band, in the bargain. But I want to see you, the worst way, Fred. Can't you come over to my house, for I oughtn't to go out in the night air with this cold?"

"Now, you mean, Bristles?"

"Sure, right away. It's only eight o'clock, and I've got something to tell you that'll make you sit up and take notice. Excuse me while I bark a few times, Fred," which he accordingly did in a way that made the other remove the receiver from close contact with his ear.

"Well, you do seem to have a good dose of it, Bristles," Fred remarked, laughingly, when the bombardment had finally ceased. "I'm almost afraid that cold will be catching over the wire. Hope it won't be anything serious, old fellow."

"Oh! I'm not bothering about that, Fred," he was told, "but I'm just aching to tell you something great. You'll be tickled half to death when you hear what it is. Never mind asking me, either, because I won't whisper a word over the wire."

"All right, then, Bristles."

"You'll sure come, Fred?" anxiously asked his unseen chum.

"Why, of course I will," Fred hastened to assure him. "I meant to run over to your place to-night, anyway, because I've got a little news you ought to hear."

"And Fred, you'll take the short-cut, of course?"

"It's mighty seldom I go any other way, Bristles. Why do you ask?"

"I was only afraid you might have some errand down-town that'd take you the long way around, that's all, Fred. Now, hurry up, because I'll bust if I have to hold this great thing in much longer. So long, Fred!"

As the thick voice ceased to come over the wire Fred put the receiver on the hook, and there was a little frown on his face.

"Now I wonder if he's happened to learn about that Corny Ludson, and means to explode it on me?" Fred was saying, as he picked up his hat. As he did so, his glance happening to fall upon a heavy cane with a crooked handle belonging to his father, he took possession of it.

Perhaps it was the recollection of what pretty Flo Temple had said when jokingly telling him that he would presently be needing a walking stick, if he kept on dieting for the Marathon race, that suddenly tempted Fred to take this cane, for he had certainly never done it on any previous occasion.

Later on he was inclined to believe there might be some truth in that fable of the sea, to the effect that there is a "little cherub aloft, looking after the affairs of poor Jack," and keeping him in times of sudden peril. At any rate the sudden whim of Fred's, when he thought to play a joke on Bristles, and pretend that he needed a crutch or a cane, since he was becoming lame and decrepit, was fated to turn out one of the finest things he ever did.

When Fred stepped out of the front door, he found that it was fairly dark, as the moon happened to be past its full, and consequently had not as yet appeared above the eastern horizon.

When Fred and Bristles wished to exchange visits they were in the habit of taking a short-cut, that saved considerable distance. It wound in and out over the open lots, though there was only one fence to climb. So frequently had the boys made use of this way, in their endeavor to save themselves from needless steps, that they knew every foot of it like a book. Indeed, a plain trail had been worn by these innumerable trips.

Bristles had often declared he could go from his house to that of Fred with his eyes bandaged, and never once get off the track. No doubt it was the same way with the Fenton boy, who had impressed every little peculiarity of that short-cut on his mind.

Swinging the heavy walking-stick around by the crook, Fred hurried along, climbing the fence on the other side of the road. Just at that moment he chanced to notice a figure coming up the street, and while astride the topmost rail of the fence he stopped to see if his suspicions were confirmed, for he thought he ought to know that peculiar gait.

When the other started in at the Fenton gate Fred called softly:

"Hello there, Colon!"

The tall figure turned around at being thus addressed from across the street.

"That you, Fred?" he asked, starting to cross over.

"Nobody else," replied the other, with a chuckle, "and you happened along just in the nick of time, let me tell you. I'd have been gone in three shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Going across lots to Bristles's shack, I reckon?" ventured the tall boy, as he reached the side of his friend.

"Just what I'm meaning to do," he was told. "Bristles called up before I was ready to start across, and wanted me to hurry over. Said he had something to tell me that was simply great."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Colon.

"And I've been wondering whether he could have learned about that man being in town," continued Fred.

"Meaning Corny?" queried Colon.

"Yes," Fred replied, still sitting on the rail of the fence. "If you saw him, there'd be a chance that Bristles might have heard something along those lines. You know he's the greatest fellow going for picking up information about all sorts of things."

"It might be," mused the other, "and we could have some fun with Bristles by springing the racket on him before he got a chance to let the cat out of the bag."

"You'll go over with me, then?" asked Fred.

"That's my present intention," said Colon. "Fact is, I strolled around to see if you expected to drop in on Bristles, and put him wise. Didn't have anything else to do, this being Friday night, you know. And I'm that full of the race I seem to want to talk it over all the time. But what are you carrying that heavy walking-stick for? Hope there wasn't any truth in what Flo Temple said, and that you're getting weak in the knees, Fred?"

"I just happened to remember all that joshing," Fred told him, "when I saw dad's stick. So I picked it up, thinking I'd play a joke on Bristles, and make out to be lame. But looks a little as if we mightn't have Bristles along with us to-morrow."

"How's that?" Colon wanted to know, instantly.

"Why, it seems he's gone and taken a terrible cold all of a sudden," Fred told him. "You'd never have guessed who it was talking over the wire to me. He had to tell me who it was."

"When was this?" asked Colon, "because I called him up after I got home this evening, to sort of say we *might* be around, and I didn't notice anything out of the way with him then."

"Is that so?" remarked Fred, as though a little puzzled. Then he added, "Oh! these colds in the head come on with a rush, sometimes. He barked like a dog, and I even had to hold the receiver away from my ear. I told him he'd give it to me over the wire. But chances are he'll not be in a fit state for a twenty-five mile run to-morrow, more's the pity. It's queer about that heavy cold taking him so sudden, though, come to think of it."

"He wanted you to come over, you say?" continued Colon, as he threw one of his long legs across the top rail, and prepared to follow Fred, who had already dropped down on the other side of the fence, and was in the field that was to be crossed first of all, in following the short-cut to the Carpenter home.

"Yes, that was why he called me up," replied Fred. "And he kept urging me not to hold off a minute, because he said what he had to tell was so important he'd just burst if he held in much longer. And then he wanted to make sure I'd take this path across lots."

"But why would he say that, Fred?" continued the tall boy, as side by side they started off, with Fred keeping on the path, which could be seen readily enough in the starlight, once his eyes had become accustomed to the night.

"He said, Colon, he was afraid I might try to kill two birds with one stone, and go down-town first, to do some errand, and he just couldn't wait a minute longer than was necessary."

"Huh! that's funny," grunted Colon, as though he failed to understand exactly why the said Bristles should have been so very particular.

They walked along, with Colon clutching the left arm of his chum, for he depended upon Fred to show the way, not being very familiar with the crooked path himself.

They kept on talking as they walked, for there were any amount of things that interested them jointly, from the mystery concerning the actions of Corny Ludson, to the plans they had in mind concerning the winning of the glorious Marathon.

Here and there clumps of bushes caused them to turn aside, but that was the way the trail ran, very much like what Fred called a "cow-path." Indeed, it meandered along in a zigzag fashion, though always heading for the opposite side of the field.

The two boys were just in the act of passing the densest patch of bushes that the cow-pasture boasted, when without the slightest warning three figures suddenly confronted them. They leaped from the covert where they had been lying concealed, and, as though all their plans had been arranged beforehand, two of the figures instantly sprang past, so that from all sides of a triangle Fred and Colon found themselves furiously assailed.

## **CHAPTER XIV**

### **A PLOT THAT FAILED**

Although taken completely by surprise Fred and Colon were not the kind of boys to flinch, or run from sudden danger.

They could see that the three fellows who surrounded them were gotten up just as might have been expected under such circumstances. When men or boys lay out to do a mean thing, they generally try to arrange it so that their identity may not be disclosed. These fellows had their hats drawn low down, their coat collars turned up, and, unless Fred's eyes deceived him, they also had handkerchiefs or some other kind of disguise fastened over the lower part of their faces, just as they may have read of desperate footpads doing out West, when holding up stage coaches.

There was really no time to note anything more. Uttering all sorts of angry cries in falsetto voices, the assailants bore down upon the two chums.

"Whoop! give it to 'em, Fred!" cried Colon, his long arms immediately taking on the appearance of a couple of old-fashioned flails, such as farmers used before the time of machine threshers.

Fred was already busily engaged. A thrill of satisfaction seemed to fill his boyish heart over the inspiration that had caused him to pick up that heavy walking-stick before sallying forth to cross over to Bristles' house.

It was certainly a handy thing to have around just then, with the odds against them, and that whirlwind attack on in full force.

After Fred had swung his stick a few times, and several loud thumps told that it had landed on each occasion, grunts began to change into groans. Of course it hurt, no matter where it landed, and once a fellow ran up against such punishment, the chances were he would not feel just the same savage inclination to press the attack that he had before "taking his medicine."

Colon, too, was doing gallant work, though he possessed no club or cane, and had to depend upon his fists alone. He was tall, and had a terrific reach, so that he could land his clever blows without being severely punished in return.

One thing the two chums were careful to do,—not separate. Although they had had no chance to settle on any plan of campaign, they seemed to just naturally understand that in their case union meant strength. Accordingly they kept back to back, and in that way managed to hold off all assailants.

Afterwards Colon used to say that their defence had been conducted along the famous "hollow square" plan, peculiar to British troops for centuries, in that they kept their faces to their foes, and their lines intact.

Of course this sort of vigorous work could not last very long. It was too one-sided, with Fred pounding two of the unknown fellows with his father's walking-stick, as though that might be the regular mission of such heavy canes.

There was a final scramble, in which blows were given and taken on both sides. Then a gruff voice, considerably the worse for wear and lack of breath, gasped out:

"Scoot, fellows! it's all off!"

Immediately the three mysterious assailants turned and ran away. Fred noticed with more or less satisfaction that a couple of them seemed to wobble considerably, thanks to the whacks he had managed to get in with his heavy stick.

"Go it, you cowards!" shouted Colon after them. "For three cents I'd give chase, and hand you a few more good ones. But unless I miss my guess, one of you'll have a black eye to-morrow, for I plunked you straight. Whew! I'm out of wind with all that rapid action work, Fred!"

Fred himself was breathing rather hard, because of the way in which he had been compelled to exert himself in the melee. So neither of them made the slightest move to advance any further, content to stand there, puffing heavily.

Then Colon began to chuckle, louder and louder, until he broke out into a hearty laugh, at the same time doubling up like a hinge, after an odd way he had.

"Got 'em going and coming, didn't we, Fred?" he wanted to know, when his merriment had subsided in some degree. "They caught us napping, that's right, but say, did it do 'em much good? Not that you could notice. Let me tell you that's a sore lot of fellows to limp all the way home to Mechanicsburg to-night."

"What makes you say that, Colon?"

"About Mechanicsburg, you mean?" remarked the tall boy. "Why what else would we think, but that the trick was planned, and carried out by some of that gang of up-river fellows? Haven't we run up against the same lot before, and would you put it past them to try to lame a fellow, so he couldn't take part in a race, and let their side have a clear field? Huh! easy as falling off a log to see how the ground lies."

"But Colon," objected Fred, "remember what Felix Wagner said to us about playing the game fair and square? I don't believe he'd descend to any such mean dodge as this, nor most of the other fellows up

there—Sherley, Gould, Hennessy, Boggs and then some. If this was a set-up job, I'd rather believe it originated nearer home than Mechanicsburg."

"A set-up job!" roared Colon. "You never heard of one with more of the ear-marks of a lowdown game than this has. Why, they planned to get you to cross here all by yourself, and then lay you out so you couldn't run for a month. Didn't I see how they kept kicking at my shins all the time, and I reckon that's what they did with you. I've a welt on my leg right now from a heavy brogan; and I'd like to bet you they put on that sort of foot-wear so as to make their kicks hurt like fun."

"Yes, they did seem to keep kicking at me, every chance they found," admitted Fred, as though partly convinced by the other's argument.

"See?" flashed Colon. "I told you how it was. They had that all laid out, and after it was carried through you'd be laid up and lame for the whole of the Spring. When a fellow means to run a twenty-five mile race, he's got to keep in tiptop condition right along, or he'll get soft; and if you couldn't practice every day, why what would be the use of your starting in? Five miles would make your ankle so sore you'd have to be carried home on a hayrick."

"They tried their level best not to give themselves away," continued Fred.

"Hardly ever used their voices,—only when they just had to grunt and groan, after you touched 'em up with that bully walking-stick. Fred."

"And," continued Fred, "they had their hats pulled down over their faces, collars turned up, and some sort of thing over their chins, so their best friend wouldn't have recognized one of them."

"Oh! it certainly was a pretty smart trap, and it failed to work on account of a few things the plotters hadn't thought of," observed Colon, with a vein of satisfaction in his voice.

"One of which was my great luck in having you along with me, Colon."

"Oh! I don't know that that counted any to speak of," objected the other. "Why, when I saw the way you slung about you with that walking-stick, Fred, I knew as sure as anything they were in the soup. And chances are, it'd have been just the same if you'd come along here by yourself. The biggest piece of luck you had was when you took that notion to carry your dad's heavy cane."

"Perhaps you're right, Colon," admitted Fred, as he felt of the heavy stick, and then remembered with what a vim he had applied it without stint wherever he could get an opening. "And I ought to really thank Flo Temple for that, oughtn't I? Only for the way she joked me about needing a crutch or a cane, I'd never have thought of playing it on Bristles. And I want to tell you I'd hate to have this thing laid on me, good and hard. Wherever I struck, it's raised a whopping big welt, I calculate."

"Well, if you could tell from the way they hollered every time it struck, that goes without saying," laughed Colon. "And I'll have lots of fun out of this, every time I think of it. Did you hear what that leader said when he knew they'd have to own up beat? 'Scoot, fellows! it's all off! I guess it was, for if they'd held out much longer, we'd have floored the whole bunch.'"

"I was wondering what his voice sounded like," said Fred.

"Oh! I'd take my affidavit that he had a hickory nut in his cheek right then, so as to disguise his voice, if he did have to speak any," Colon went on to say, and in this way proving that he was ready to give their unknown assailants credit for utilizing every possible device that would insure the successful carrying out of their miserable scheme.

"I knew a fellow who did that same thing once upon a time," Fred hinted.

"Yes, and it was somebody we happen to know right well, too," agreed Colon; "in other words, Mister Buck Lemington, the clever and unscrupulous son of Sparks Lemington, one of Riverport's leading citizens, and a chap who lies awake nights hatching up plans for getting the better of a friend of mine."

"Hold on, Colon, go a little slow about accusing anybody before we've got the least bit of evidence. This might be a different crowd. Perhaps it'll turn out they're from Paulding, where I've heard there's a certain sporting element that's taken to betting on baseball games and athletics and such things, now that horse racing and making pools have been knocked out by law."

"Shucks! now, I hadn't thought of that before," assented the tall boy, in a grudging fashion, as though he disliked giving up any cherished idea that may have seized upon his mind with conviction. "And if they've gone and put up money on Paulding breasting the tape first, why, of course they might plot to

do something to lame the best runners in Riverport and Mechanicsburg. But Fred, in that case they'd be apt to send men here to knock you. These were boys!"

"Yes, that's so, Colon, and it looks like a weak link in the chain, doesn't it? But since the game didn't pan out the way they thought it would, perhaps these fellows will fight shy of trying anything like it again. We'll take a look around to-morrow, and see if we can notice any signs of their being on the hurt list among Buck's crowd."

"That's the ticket, Fred!" said Colon, jubilant. "That black eye would tell the story, wouldn't it, now? And then if Clem Shooks or Oscar Jones is seen to limp painfully, and grunt every step he takes, that ought to mark him as one of your poor victims."

"The whole three of them galloped off, didn't they?" asked Fred just then.

"I should say they did, and as fast as they could skip. But what makes you ask that, Fred?"

"I thought I heard a movement in this patch of bushes here, that's all; but it may have been a bird or a rabbit. Shall we start along now, Colon?"

"Just give me half a minute, will you, Fred?" begged the tall chum, who was fumbling in his vest pocket.

"What do you want to do?" asked Fred.

"Oh, strike a match, and take a little peep around," he was told. "Never know what you might strike. Remember picking up a sleeve button once, after I'd been set on by a couple of fellows in the dark; and it gave the game away. Oh! yes, I returned the button, but my bruises felt a heap better after I'd given the fellow a double dose."

He immediately snapped the match off, and began moving around close to the bushes. Fred heard him sing out before half a dozen seconds had passed.

"Well, this is great luck, Fred!" Colon exclaimed. "Here I've found a hat trampled in the dirt. Maybe now that will tell the story. Hold it, please, while I strike another match. Let's look inside. What's this I see? First thing is the well known trademark of our enterprising Riverport hat dealer. Then here's some initials in gold fixed inside. What d'ye make 'em out to be, Fred?"

## CHAPTER XV

### CLINCHING EVIDENCE

"As near as I can make out, they're C.J.," said Fred, after he had taken a look, before the match flickered, and went out in the night breeze.

Colon burst into another laugh.

"Told you so, Fred!" he remarked, triumphantly. "You don't need to guess twice to know whom that set belongs to. Let me mention his name to you—Conrad Jimmerson, and this is what proves it. I'd just keep that old hat, and make him eat it, if I were you."

There was another rustling in the bushes, and Fred glanced that way as though a trifle suspicious, but made no move to investigate.

"Oh! I don't know that I'll go as far as that," Fred observed, "because, while a fellow may have to eat crow once in a while, swallowing his own hat would be asking too much of him. But there's another way to rub it in."

"How?" asked Colon.

"Suppose now I took this hat to school Monday," continued Fred, seriously enough, "and told the story of how we were waylaid by three mysterious chaps, who did their level best to injure us about the shins, and without any doubt meaning to knock us out from taking part in the big race? Don't you think nearly everybody would be warm about it?"

"Hot about the collar as they could be, and ready to take it out of the hide of the three guilty ones, if only they knew who they were," the other boy affirmed in his positive way.

"Well, I might put this old hat on exhibition, and ask every boy to take a good look at it before seeing the tell-tale initials inside. Then we'd hear what they thought, and if any of them recognized the same. In that way, Colon, it ought to be easy to run down the rascal."

"Yes," added the tall boy, "and once you nailed him, it wouldn't be so hard to make him own up who his cronies were. He's a coward, when you pin him down. I'd dare him to stand up and have it out with me. Then p'raps it was C.J. who rammed his old eye so hard against my fist, trying to feaze me. Oh! the evidence is going to accumulate against him like a regular old mountain. There's that rabbit of yours moving again, Fred. Queer all this row didn't start him off, isn't it?"

"I just happened to think," remarked Fred, "that we're on a false mission, after all."

"Right now, you mean, don't you, Fred?"

"Yes, because it wasn't Bristles at all I was talking with, but one of this same crowd. No wonder his voice sounded so queer to me, and muffled." Then Fred had to laugh, after which he went on to say, "And to think how sly he was making out the cause of it to be that sudden cold he'd taken."

"That was a mighty clever dodge, let me tell you," Colon went on to say. "You see, he knew you'd notice the difference in voices, for even over the wire it's easy to recognize a friend's way of speaking; so he fixed it up, with a nut in his cheek, and then told you about the cold."

"And that cough, why, I tell you it was splendidly worked, and whoever carried it out was a sharp one, Colon."

"However do you guess it was done?" asked the tall chum.

"Well, there must have been a fourth member of the gang, who had his part of the game to play. Chances were he was to go into some place downtown where they have a public 'phone booth, at exactly eight o'clock, and call me up. The other three were to be hiding here before that time, waiting for me to cross over. And I must say it worked out to a charm—only for the walking-stick, and you, Colon. They didn't figure on my receiving such important reinforcements at the eleventh hour, as to turn the tide of battle."

"Talk to me about Blucher coming up to help Wellington at Waterloo, you were in just as good luck to-night. And the French didn't feel any more sore when they had to run, than Buck and his pals do right now. I'd give thirty cents to see what the lot of them are doing this very minute; rubbing their bodies, and saying everything mean about us they can think of. Ho! ho! ho!"

Colon seemed to extract a considerable amount of amusement out of this unexpected happening. He evidently considered that he had been in for more or less luck simply because he happened to be in Fred's company when the other ran into the ambush. Colon was not averse to an occasional measure of excitement, and although not all considered a pugnacious fellow, he could at the same time hold his own when difficulties arose.

"Of course," pursued Fred, "if I thought it worth while I could easily find out who sent that message to me, and played the part of Bristles."

"You mean by going to telephone headquarters, and learning who connected with your number tonight about eight; is that it, Fred?"

"And after they had told me it was, say, Dudley's drug store," Fred continued, as if figuring it all out, "I could step in there and ask Gussie Lightly what boy used the booth about that time."

"Easy enough, because of course Gussie knows all the boys about town, and if it was Ben Cushing or Clem Shooks or Oscar Jones, he could tell you right off the reel. Why don't you do it, Fred?"

"I may when I get home, because it can all be done just as well over the wire you know," the other replied. "Gussie is a good friend of mine, I feel sure, and if only he knew what a mean game had been set up on me, he'd do anything to square matters."

"And at school Monday," Colon suggested, "it might be a good thing for you to be able to prove it was one of Buck's cronies that talked with you, making out to be Bristles, who hasn't any cold at all."

"I'm glad of that, too," Fred observed, "because I was feeling that he couldn't go along with us tomorrow on the trial spin."



"It was a dirty trick, Fred, but I must say pretty well worked out. I can see the fine hand of our old friend, Buck, back of it all. There isn't another fellow in all Riverport who could get up such a combination. Buck's as full of schemes as an egg is of meat. That's why the others all flock after him. He's got the brains, and carries the money too."

"Now, while it seems that Bristles didn't call me up, and beg me to come over, as we're already part way there, we might as well finish the lap, Colon."

"Oh! you know I gave him to understand that maybe we might run in on him," he was told by the other.

"But it's too bad," remarked Fred, grinning broadly.

"About what?" demanded his friend.

"We're going to be badly disappointed, I'm afraid."

"We are, eh? I'd like to know how that comes, Fred?"

"Why, we laid out to hear the most thrilling thing that ever happened, you see," the other told him, in a voice of mock disappointment. "When Bristles with the muffled voice and the bad cold told me he'd just burst if he didn't have someone to confide in right soon, he got me worked up to fever pitch. Now I've had to cool down. There isn't going to be any development. Our hair won't have to stand tip on end like the quills of the fretful porcupine. In so many words, Colon, it's all off, you know."

"I'm afraid it is, Fred," admitted the other, sadly, "and I'm some disappointed, too, because you had my curiosity whetted up. Why, I couldn't begin to tell you all I expected to hear when Bristles got busy. Course, knowing about that Corny as you did, it was easy to figure out how he might be the one Bristles meant to tell about. Well, that ends it, and Fred, hadn't we better be hunching out of this, if you think there's no more hats or other trophies of the great victory lying around?"

"Yes, we'll be over at Bristles' place inside of five minutes more," Fred announced.

"If he happened to have his window open I wouldn't be surprised if he heard us carrying on high over here in the field," suggested Colon, and there was an air of expectancy in his voice, as though such a thing would not have been at all unpleasant to him.

"One thing sure," Fred asserted, confidently, "he'll kick up an awful row just because he didn't happen to be in the little affair. Bristles never wants anyone to get ahead of him, when there's action stirring."

"No more he does," Colon echoed. "Here, suppose you keep this old hat. I'm given to being careless, and I'd be apt to drop it somewhere. No danger of you doing that, Fred; you're always as particular about such things as an old maid."

"You can make your mind tip that when the evidence is needed to show up the owner of this hat at school, it will be forthcoming. I'll take it home with me, and keep it safe and sound."

The two boys were already moving off, heading across the field. They could easily see the lights in the Carpenter house, which was only a short distance away, though if one went around by the road it would take some fifteen minutes to make the journey.

They did not bother to look back after they had quitted the vicinity of the big cluster of bushes. Had they done so, and the starlight been strong enough for them to see as a cat does at nighttime, Fred and Colon might have discovered a bare-headed figure that came creeping out of the bushes. This wretched person looked after them with more or less grumbling and complaining, as though not at all relishing some of the things so recently spoken by the two chums.

## **CHAPTER XVI**

### **TELLING BRISTLES**

"Hello there, Fred, and you too, Colon; glad to see you both! Step in, and come upstairs with me to

my den, won't you?"

In this fashion did Bristles meet the two visitors at the front door, and convinced by the warmth of the reception that they were going to be welcome guests, Fred and the tall boy fell in behind the one who had admitted them. Presently they found themselves comfortably seated in such chairs as decorated the so-called "den," which was a small room on the top story, where Bristles kept his belongings and did his studying.

"Glad to see your bad cold is a lot better, Bristles!" remarked Colon, with a sly wink over toward Fred, who chuckled.

Bristles of course looked puzzled.

"I suppose that's, some sort of a poor joke," he ventured, cautiously, glancing from one to the other of his visitors; "but me, I'm groping all around in the dark, and don't seem to catch on. S'pose you open up, and explain how it works, Colon."

The tall boy allowed his eyebrows to go up as though tremendously surprised.

"Do you mean to tell me, Bristles Carpenter, that you didn't call up Fred, here, a little while back, and while begging him to hurry over, as you had something important to explain, say you'd taken such a cold you could hardly speak plain?"

"What, me? Say, you're dreaming, Colon. I never said a word of that, and right now I haven't got the least bit of a cold!" exclaimed the other, indignantly. At the same time he began to show a certain amount of curiosity, for his good sense warned him there must be a story back of Colon's strange accusation.

"And you didn't interrupt yourself several times to say, 'Oh! excuse me, while I cough!' and then start in whooping it up so hard Fred here had to take the receiver down from his ear or go deaf?"

"Oh! Come off, and tell me what all this silly stuff means!" demanded the still more mystified boy. "Has anybody been playing a rousing good joke on Fred, and making out to be me?"

"That's about the size of it, isn't it, Fred," Colon assented, eagerly enough. "It was a rousing enough joke, while it lasted, but the trouble is that it turned out to be one of those back-action, kicking jokes, that turns on the jokers, unexpected like. This one left a black eye, and a whole lot of black and blue marks behind it—that is, we believe so, and have a pretty good reason, too."

"All right, now tell me what it all means, please," Bristles pleaded, seeing that the tall chum was really in earnest.

Colon explained, and as he finished, the astonished listener demanded:

"But what d'ye reckon it all means?"

"Both of us noticed that their main plan seemed to be to kick at our shins every chance they got," explained Fred, "and Colon says they had heavy brogans on, too. It's a hard thing to say, Bristles, but we honestly believe they meant to lame us, so we couldn't be in shape to run to-morrow, and perhaps at the time of the great Marathon, too."

Bristles clenched his hands, and looked savage.

"Well, what d'ye think of that now for a savage trick?" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't believe it of those Mechanicsburg athletes, who've always seemed a pretty decent bunch of fellows."

"Hold on," said Fred. "Go a little slow, Bristles."

"What for?" demanded the other, impetuously and fiercely.

"Because you're making the same mistake Colon here did at first," he was told.

"About the boys up the river, you mean, Fred?"

"Yes. It isn't fair to accuse them without any proof," the other told him.

"But the Paulding crowd—" stammered Bristles, evidently taken aback.

"Get closer home," warned Colon. "What d'ye want to go climbing all over the country for, when you've only got to use your nose to smell a rat right in old Riverport!"

"Jupiter Pluvius! you must mean our old friend, Buck!" ejaculated Bristles, his elevated eyebrows indicating his astonishment. "Tell me about that, will you? Has he actually come to life again, and been up to his old tricks?"

"We're dead sure of it," Colon told him, nodding his head at a lively rate.

"Then chances are you recognized one of the bunch?" suggested Bristles.

"No," said Fred, "we couldn't do that very well, because they changed their voices, and had their faces hidden by their hats, coat collars, and even some sort of cloth that seemed to be tied about their jaws. But after the scrap was over, we picked up a clue that we think will give the game away."

"What, Fred?"

"Take a look at this old hat, Bristles," continued the other, as he drew the article in question from his pocket.

"Well, I'm looking at it," he was told.

"Ever see it before?" asked Colon, eagerly.

"Of course I wouldn't like to raise my hand, and swear to it," remarked Bristles, slowly, "but I want to say this looks mighty like a yellow-colored hat I've seen a certain fellow wear, time and again."

"Suppose you go a little further, then, and mention his name," proposed Fred.

"Conrad Jimmerson!" promptly replied the other.

Colon laughed gleefully.

"Now turn the hat around, Bristles," he cried, "and look inside!"

Upon doing so the other uttered an exclamation.

"Here they are, two letters that give the thing away—C.J. as plain as print could be!" was his cry.

"Glad that you think the same way we do," Colon told him. "And now, I reckon you wonder what Fred's going to do about it."

"If it were myself, I'd take this hat to Cooney, and ask him if it was his," Bristles went on to say, in his fiery fashion. "Course he'd have to acknowledge the corn, and then I'd proceed to give him the licking he deserves."

"We'd kind of expect that of you, Bristles," remarked Colon, magnanimously, "but you see, Fred'n me, we made up our minds that we'd given that bunch a pretty good layout as it was. What they need is something to show the people of this town what a tough lot that Buck Lemington is dragging around with him."

"But how could you do that?" the other asked.

"Fred thought of taking the hat to school, and telling the story around, to the teachers and the pupils," Colon explained, in his accommodating way. "When they learned how these toughs meant to injure Riverport's chances of winning the great Marathon, just to gratify a little private spite, the town would soon get too hot for Buck and his cronies. They'd have to emigrate for a little while, till the storm blew over."

"That sounds good to me!" declared Bristles, changing his way of thinking, for while a very determined boy, he could always be reached by argument, and was open to conviction, "and I hope you carry the plan out, Fred. I'd just like to see those boys put under the ban for a while. Some of them by rights ought to be in the State Reformatory, according to my notion. They're getting too fresh with what they call their pranks, and don't even stop at endangering human life."

"Well, of course we're glad that you haven't such a terrible cold, Bristles," remarked Fred, "but all the same Colon here is sorry for one thing."

"What might that be?" asked the said Colon.

"You see," continued Fred, "after I told him about how you called me up, and wanted an interview right away, because you had something important to tell, Colon here began to get terribly excited. He kept wondering what it was you meant to explain; and I know that after we'd run that mob off, nearly

the first thing he said was that he felt cheated out of a sensation, because you didn't want me so bad after all."

At that Bristles laughed loud and long, at the same time looking queerly at his guests out of the tail of his eye.

"Too bad to disappoint you, isn't it, fellows?" he went on, in a tone of mock sympathy, "but say, maybe I might scare up some little news after all, that'd kind of take the place of the thrilling story they hatched up for me."

"Let it be on the strict level then, Bristles," warned Colon, severely, as he shook his forefinger at the other; "we don't want you to invent any old yarn just to please us."

"What I'm going to tell you," began Bristles, very solemnly, "is straight goods, believe me. I don't know whether Fred here will think it of much importance, but late this afternoon I chanced to run across an old acquaintance. Guess who it was, boys."

"Huh! I bet you it was Corny Ludson!" exclaimed Colon, quick as a flash.

Bristles started, and looked keenly at the long-legged chum.

"Well, you hit mighty close to the bull's-eye, then, Colon," he remarked; "but you forget I never saw that same Corny Ludson in my life that I know of, and so how could he be an old acquaintance. But he's got a little girl named Sadie, a niece, or ward, or something like that, you may remember."

"Then you saw her?" asked Fred, eagerly enough, for he had been wondering lately what could have become of those two children.

"Not only saw her," continued the other, "but talked with her."

"Tell us about it, Bristles," urged Colon.

"Why, it was this way," began the other, complying briskly. "She was just coming out of the cheap grocery, and had several bundles in her arms, as if she might have been buying bread, and some such things. I knew her just as soon as I set eyes on her, for she wore that same old frowsy red dress, and had a little tad of a shawl pinned over her shoulders. The poor thing looked like a wind'd blow her away, with her thin, pinched face, and big startled eyes."

"Oh! let all that drop, Bristles," expostulated Colon. "What we want to know is, how did you come to speak to her, and did she remember you?"

Bristles was bound to tell his story in his own way. Without paying any attention to this nagging on the part of the tall chum, he kept facing Fred, and went on deliberately.

"There was a horse and buggy standing at the curb, and say, you never in all your life saw such a dilapidated outfit. Talk to me about the famous 'one hoss shay,' it couldn't have been a circumstance beside that rig. Everywhere the shafts were tied up to hold, the harness patched till it looked all strings, and the animal, well, he was a walking skeleton. Any other time I'd have laughed myself sick, but I couldn't do that then, with that poor little thing being the one that drove such an outfit."

"What did you say to her?" asked Fred.

"Oh! I said 'howdy-do, Sadie, don't you remember me?' and she looked scared at first, and then she actually smiled. She said she hadn't forgotten the two boys on the river, who had been so kind to Sam and her. I asked her where she'd been all this time, and she looked kind of confused and said, 'Oh! around everywhere!' as if they might be a pack of regular Gypsies, and never knew what it was to have a home of their own."

"But you say she had some sort of a rig with her," expostulated Colon at this point of the narrative, "and wouldn't that look as if they'd squatted down somewhere or other, for a spell?"

"Maybe it would," replied Bristles, "but the chances are they only borrowed the outfit for the occasion from some poor farmer, paying for its use by fetching him home some supplies from town. But just then I remembered about that pin we found in the cave, and I took it out of my pocket, unwrapping the paper, and all of a sudden holding it before her."

"Did she recognize the breast pin?" Colon asked.

"You'd have thought so by the way her little face lighted up," said the other, "and reaching out the hand that didn't carry a package, she took bold of it. Then I made a fool move, just like my silly ways. I

sprung the trap too soon!"

"You told her where you'd found it, said you thought it might be hers, just because you remembered her wearing something like that, didn't you?" asked Fred.

"Sure I did, and you just ought to have seen the scared look that came over her face," Bristles admitted. "She looked all around as if she was afraid that Corny'd be popping up, and then shook her head again and again, saying the pin wasn't hers. But, Fred, I know the poor little girl was telling a fib, because she was afraid if she owned up to the old piece of fake jewelry that she seemed to value so much, it might get somebody in a peck of trouble; and we know who that is, don't we?"

"We certainly do!" replied Fred; and he started to tell Bristles how Colon learned Corny Ludson had also been in Riverport that afternoon, acting in a suspicious manner.

## CHAPTER XVII

### LINING UP FOR THE TRIAL SPIN

The next morning opened cloudy, and rather warm for the season, much to the regret of all those fellows who had planned to take a spin over the twenty-five mile course laid out by the committee of arrangements.

So long as it did not rain, they were not to be kept from carrying out their ambitious plans. About eight o'clock Bristles and Colon, standing in front of the picket fence that divided the Carpenter garden from the road, saw Fred coming up the street.

"There's Fred," announced Colon, "and I hope Sid shows up soon, because we'd better be making an early start."

The way in which he looked up at the sky when saying this caused Bristles to instantly remark:

"Now, I reckon you're thinking it's going to rain on us before we get back home again. That left leg of yours that you got hurt once, is a regular old barometer, it seems, Colon."

"I don't know just how it comes," admitted the other, "but nearly every time it gets to itching and burning, we do have a spell of bad weather. Over at my house when they see me rubbing that leg, they begin to hunt up rubbers and raincoats to beat the band. It's gotten to be next door to infallible, dad says."

"All right, we'll forgive you if you do bring a dash of rain to-day," warned the other, "but be mighty careful how you let that leg get to itching toward the end of next week. Why, a rain'd play the dickens with all our plans for that glorious long run."

"You don't smash a thermometer every time it tells you how hot or cold it is, do you?" demanded Colon. "Then why d'ye want to blame things on my leg barometer? Just as if it had anything to do with the weather, 'cept to warn you ahead. Seems to me I ought to have a gold medal, instead of abuse. But here's Fred, and looking as if he was in apple pie trim for making the grand rounds to-day."

Of course all of them were in their running outfits, which consisted of trunks, sleeveless jerseys, shoes with spikes in the soles, and an excuse of a hat, though Bristles declined to wear anything on his mop of hair.

"All here but Sid, now, Fred," announced Colon, as the other joined them.

"We're a little ahead of the time that was set," remarked Fred, who seemed to be unusually sober it appeared to the sharp-eyed Colon, "and Sid will be along soon. I saw him heading for town, and he called across lots that he had a little errand, but would join us as soon as he could get back home, and pile into his running togs. Let's sit down somewhere, and take it easy, boys."

"A good idea, too," commented Bristles, "because, with a twenty-five mile run before us, we'll have all the standing on our feet we want. Chances are it'll be a pretty tired bunch of boys that'll turn up here some hours from now."

They found a place to settle down, and after a little talk about the weather, during which Colon was called upon to once more prophesy as to the chances for rain, he suddenly turned to Fred, to say:

"What's bothering you this morning, Fred?"

"Why do you ask me that?" returned the other, with a little smile.

"Well," Colon continued, "I'm used to watching faces, and it struck me when you came up, there was a worried look on your face. Hope you're not feeling anyway off?"

"Never felt in better condition in my life," Fred assured him. "One or two little bruises from that business of last night, but nothing to mention, and I don't expect to even think of them again."

"What happened, then?" asked Bristles.

"Only that our house was entered last night!" Fred observed, calmly.

The other boys gave expression to their astonishment in various exclamations.

"Burglarized, you mean, Fred?" cried Colon.

"Well, yes, I guess you might call it that, though it seems only one particular thing was carried off," Fred replied.

"You've got us guessing good and hard," said Bristles. "Was that your dad's pocketbook, his watch, the piano, or what could it be?"

"A hat," explained Fred.

Bristles and Colon fairly gasped upon hearing this.

"D'ye mean to tell us, Fred, that a desperate burglar would take all the chances of breaking into a house where he might get shot, just to steal a hat!" Colon demanded, as though suspecting they were being made the victims of a joke, although as a rule Fred seldom allowed himself to attempt anything of the kind.

"Sometimes even a hat may be a mighty important thing, if you stop to think of it, fellows," he informed them.

"Great smoke! Fred, do you mean that hat?" exclaimed Bristles, suddenly remembering something.

"The one we picked up on the battlefield!" added Colon, helplessly.

"That's the one I mean," they were told by the other, with a positive tone that could not be mistaken. "When I got home I tossed it onto the hall table. It wasn't there this morning, and I asked the girl, and everyone about the house if they'd seen it, but nobody had. And what was plain evidence of a robbery was the fact that a window was found open in the sitting-room, which my dad says he is sure he shut and locked before he went to bed."

"It was Cooney Jimmerson, of course?" suggested Colon.

"He's always been too clever with his fingers," Bristles gave as his opinion. "Maybe you remember, Colon, because it was before Fred's time here, how Cooney used to sneak into the coat-rooms at school, and go through the pockets of our reefers looking for pennies or tops or any old thing. He got in a peck of trouble on account of his sly tricks. If anybody could turn the catch of a window, and crawl in, I'd put it up to him."

"But Fred, how would he know you'd found his old hat?" asked Colon.

"We'll have to guess at that," he was told. "Look back, Colon, and you'll be likely to remember that several times we heard a rustling sound in that clump of bushes, while we were standing there talking, after finding the hat."

"Yes, and you thought it might be only a rabbit, or a chipmunk, or something like that," assented Colon, promptly.

"Now that the hat we were keeping as evidence has been stolen from my house," Fred continued, "I'm more than sure that must have been Cooney himself. He'd missed his hat, and afraid that we might find it, he came creeping back to get into that bunch of brush, where he could hear every word we spoke. So he knew I was keeping his hat to prove who was in the crowd that tackled us unawares."

"He just knew that if his hat were ever shown, he'd be in the soup," observed Colon, "so he thought it worth while to take all kinds of chances in the hope of copping it again. But let me tell you, the boy who'd open a window, and creep into a neighbor's house night times, is pretty close to the line. He's on the road to being a regular professional thief when he grows up, because it shows he likes that sort of thing."

"You know they say, 'as the twig's inclined, the tree is bent,'" Bristles told them, ponderously, "and we all can guess what'll become of Buck Lemington some day. He'll either make a striking figure in finance, or else head some big swindle that'll send him up for twenty years."

"But with the evidence gone," Colon remarked, "of course that ends the plan to show Cooney up at school?"

"Yes, and that was what he took such big chances for," Fred admitted. "We might tell the whole story, but without any positive evidence there would always seem to be a weak link in it. Some folks might even say we were prejudiced. They'd rather believe the attack came from one of the other towns. People always like to believe bad things about rival places rather than the home town. So we'd better shut down on that hat part of the story, and keep it quiet."

"Course it doesn't matter if we let it be known we were set upon, only we mustn't say we suspect any particular boys," Colon went on to remark, with a little confusion that told Fred he must have already been telling something about the encounter, though not mentioning names.

"Call that settled, then," Bristles added, "but it's too bad, when you had the case framed up against Cooney for fair and keeps. He'd have found himself the most unpopular fellow in Riverport, that's, right."

"The main thing with me," Fred explained, "was the hope that when everybody got to pointing the finger of scorn at Cooney, he'd feel so mean and small that, not wanting to stand for all the abuse alone, he'd up and confess that it was Buck who had started the racket. But as our plans have missed fire, we'll have to forget all about it. We've got our hands full as it is with this race, and getting ready to do our level best to win."

"I think I see Sid coming," Colon told them just then, and as he had an advantage over the rest by reason of his long neck, nobody disputed his word.

"We haven't forgotten anything, I hope?" Bristles observed, as they arose to their feet, and began to stretch themselves, boy fashion.

Fred carried a little pouch at his side that he did not believe would interfere at all with his running, though of course even this would be discarded when the great Marathon test was on. In this he carried matches, a small but reliable compass, and a few simple remedies that might come in handy in case any of them happened to be seized with colic or cramps from drinking water when overheated.

"Nothing that I know of, Bristles," Fred announced, as he touched this small pouch which, in the woods among old hunters would probably be called a "ditty-bag," and contain all manner of little odds and ends likely to be needed from time to time.

Sid was now running. The mere fact that he might be a little behind time would hardly seem to be sufficient excuse for his starting off in this way. Fred eyed the newcomer as he approached them. He fancied that Sid was bringing news of some kind.

Sid was breathing a little fast. That was to be expected in the start, though when he got his "second wind" he would very likely be good for a long, hard run.

"Give me five minutes, fellows, to rest up in, so we can all start even," Sid went on to say, "and besides, I've got something to tell you."

All of them dropped down again on the fresh green grass that the recent warm weather had caused to sprout forth luxuriantly in places.

"We're listening," Bristles told him, placing the cup of a hand back of his ear, as though he wanted to make sure of not losing a single word, while Colon assumed an eager attitude, with his eyes glued on Sid's flushed face.

"None of you happened to go down-town this morning, I reckon?" was the first thing Sid said, and as three heads were vehemently shaken in the negative, he continued, "Well, then it'll give you something of a surprise to know that it's happened again."

"Not a fire in the high school?" exclaimed Colon, for a serious event of this kind had taken place in the near past, that had created something of a panic in Riverport.

Sid shook his head in the negative.

"This was a robbery," he went on to say, in a way that gave the other three a severe shock; "just as when old Periwinkle was robbed. This time it was Mrs. Merriweather, the rich widow, who owns so many houses, and gets her rents in on the first. Somebody broke in there, and she never knew till this morning that her desk had been pried open, and three hundred dollars taken!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### CAUGHT BY THE STORM

"That settles it, boys!" said Fred, compressing his lips.

"Some more of Corny's smart work, I guess you mean?" ventured Bristles.

"Well, we happen to know he was in town again yesterday afternoon, and putting things together, it looks bad for Corny," Fred explained.

"And I take it you mean to do what you said," Colon remarked; "that is, you promised us if there was another robbery, and that man was seen around, you'd tell everything to Chief Sutton and let him start a hunt to find Corny? Have I got it straight, Fred?"

"You certainly have, Colon, and that ought to be attended to before we start out on our run," Fred continued.

"Sure thing, because when a fellow has broken open a house and taken as much as three hundred dollars in cash, he's likely to get busy right away, and hide somewhere. That other time it was in a cave, and now Corny may have another secret den. It'll be up to the Chief to locate him."

"But I say, Fred, I hope now this won't interfere any with our plans to-day?" expostulated Bristles, while both Sid and Colon immediately looked anxious.

"Only to hold us back ten minutes or so," Fred told them.

"You won't bother going to town, and seeing the Chief personally, will you, Fred, when we've got a 'phone handy right here?" demanded the Carpenter boy, starting in the direction of the front gate close by. The others followed.

"I could answer all the questions he'll want to ask, over the wire just as well as if I were down at headquarters," Fred announced, at which an expression of relief was seen to sweep over three eager faces.

Fortunately the head of the local force was at his desk, engaged in his customary morning duties. Fred lost no time in getting down to facts, and from what the other boys, listening close by, heard him say, his astonishing communication must have created quite a lively panic at headquarters.

For some time after telling what they had learned when passing through that particular stretch of woods the week before, Fred was kept busy answering questions. He explained just why they had seen fit not to mention the matter before, and the reason that ban of secrecy was now removed.

When finally Fred hung up the receiver, and turned around with a smile on his face, as though perfectly satisfied with what he had done, not more than ten minutes had elapsed since their entering the house.

"Thank goodness that business is over with," he remarked, "and now it's up to the police to find the thief,—if they can."

"Huh! my opinion is that this same Corny is a heap too smart to be nabbed by a country cop," asserted Colon, and Chief Sutton, who was a very consequential little officer, would have felt terribly hurt could he have heard the disdainful laugh that went around at these scornful words.



"But let's be making a start!" begged Colon, anxious to be up and doing, for he had told the others he felt like a wild colt that morning, being fairly crazy to get to running.

In five minutes they were far beyond the town limits, running two and two along the road, and taking things fairly easily in the start.

A wise athlete never pushes a willing horse to begin with. After getting well warmed up, it is safe to increase the pace, always holding in the very best for the emergency that is apt to come in every race, some time or other.

Several miles were soon put behind them. Fred and Colon led, with the other two at their heels, and all running easily. Indeed, though it is not considered the best thing to do when running, the two leaders occasionally exchanged a few words, cutting their sentences down to as brief a span as possible. As a rule they maintained silence, each having his teeth set, and breathing through his nose as much as he possibly could.

These lads had learned all the known rules affecting long distance running, and they had also found more or less benefit from practicing them. Time did not enter into their calculations on this occasion, to any great extent at least. Of course they sprinted occasionally, and the minutes were noted at such times in an effort to learn a little about the probable period between certain points, where they figured on making their gains.

Possibly of the four Bristles showed more signs of being pressed than any of them. He had always been a short distance runner, like Felix Wagner of Mechanicsburg, but this year both boys hoped to break into the long distance class. Neither Bristles nor Sid happened to be built just right for such a task. On the other hand, Colon was long and rangy, and capable of tremendous speed, while Fred had the staying qualities so necessary in Marathon runners.

As a rule it will be found that the best long distance runners are the stocky, small men, like the wonderful Englishman, Shrubbs, who astonished everybody in our own country by his great record some years back. While hardly reckoned small, Fred Fenton was in just that same class, for his muscles were as hard as they could possibly be, and he always kept himself in prime condition for work.

When, after a certain length of time, the four boys arrived at the birch trees by which Fred had marked the place where they could turn into the woods in attempting that short-cut, they had seen no other competitor on the road. No doubt at some time during the day all of those who meant to take part in the great run expected to cover the whole course, so as to get familiar with its peculiarities, but Fred and his mates were just as well pleased not to run across any of them thus early in the morning.

"Now, here's where we want to keep our eyes about us," remarked Fred, "so as to know the trail by heart. All of us but Sid have already been across to the other road, but on that account don't think you know it all. Observe everything around, and make a mental map of the course. It'll be a great help, I tell you."

"Point out the blazes you were speaking about, so I can watch for them," Sid asked them, as they stood there in a bunch, breathing hard, and cooling off, for it had been a warm run, and the atmosphere felt unusually heavy.

"There's one good thing," Fred went on to say, "we don't have to pay any attention to the other side of the trail. What I mean by that is this: lots of fellows can take notice of how a trail looks, and think they've got it down pat in their minds, but let them start back over it, and the landmarks will never be the same, so it's the easiest thing going to get lost on the return trip, where the blazes you made fail to show. It happens that we have to pass through here only one way."

"Great Caesar! wasn't that a growl of thunder?" cried Colon in dismay.

"Nothing more nor less than that," replied Fred, "and if thunder stands for anything, we're going to get that rain after all."

"Shucks! why couldn't the measly old storm have held off till we reached home?" Bristles wanted to know. "Here we are more'n ten miles away from town, and dressed in the airiest duds going. If we get soaked, we'll be shivering like fun."

"What's the answer, Fred? Tell us your opinion, and whether we'd better turn back, or try to push on through this neck of woodland and marsh?" When he put this question, Colon betrayed a trace of uneasiness, for the prospect was not a very pleasant one, no matter how they looked at it.

"There's no use turning back," the leader explained, "because the nearest house would be several

miles away. I don't know just how it might be if we kept along the road here. But there's that tollgate and shanty on the other road; if we could only make that, we'd find shelter."

"Move we try," snapped Bristles, who was for action all the time, and liked to settle questions as Alexander is said to have cut the Gordian knot, decisive work, rather than sitting down to unravel problems.

There being not a single dissenting voice raised, the proposition was declared carried, and with that the four runners plunged immediately into the heavy undergrowth alongside the road.

Fred used his eyes and his memory to advantage. He knew that it would not do to make any mistake, and be lost in that jungle. With a storm coming on, the fierceness of which none of them could more than guess, the one thing they must make sure of above all others was to stick to the trail through thick and thin.

"Say, it's beginning to rain!" called out Bristles, from the far rear, Sid being just in front of him, and Colon back of the leader's heels.

"What makes you say that?" asked Colon, who did not like to be told of so disagreeable a fact.

"Felt a drop on my face," Bristles explained, "and you could too, if you tried. There! that was another! It is starting in, boys, believe me!"

"He's right about that," Fred called back over his shoulder.

They could run only a small fraction of the time while threading the winding trail through the woods, so that hurrying was utterly out of the question. Thunder had been heard several additional times, and it seemed to be coming closer, if its increasing rumble counted for anything.

The drops began to fall faster and faster, and it became evident that in a few minutes they could expect a downpour.

"One good thing," said the cheerful Sid, "we won't be apt to ruin our best Sunday go-to-meeting glad rags by getting them soaked."

"Good for you, Sid!" called out Fred, "always seeing the silver lining of the cloud, no matter how dark it grows. Whew! that was close by," he added, as a loud crash of thunder sounded.

The rain fell in sheets for a short time; then the thunder died away, though there was no let-up to the fall of water.

"I think we're close to that poor farm," was the announcement Fred made, as he noticed several landmarks that he remembered well.

"Bless you, Fred, for saying that!" cried Colon, "because I'm shivering as if I'd drop to pieces. What do I see over there on the left right now?"

"It's the old rookery of a barn!" Fred told him. "Come on, we'll crawl in, for it's perfectly safe, now that the lightning has gone. By bunching together under the hay, we'll warm each other, more or less, while we wait for the rain to stop."

They saw no sign of anyone around, and as their necessity was very great, the four thinly clad and shivering runners crept under the hay, where they huddled together as Fred had advised.

## **CHAPTER XIX**

### **THE BOY IN THE HAYMOW**

"This is a whole lot better than out there in the downpour," Colon was heard to say, after they had been cowering in the hay for a short time, keeping as close to one another as they could so as to gain additional warmth.

"I should say it was," acknowledged Sid, "and Bristles here is a regular toaster in the bargain. He's as snug and warm as a stove. I'd like to come over and bunk with you, Bristles, some of the coldest winter

nights."

"Any boy ought to be warm that's got a decent amount of flesh on him!" declared the one in question; "now, here's Colon who's so thin he hardly throws a shadow at noon; you couldn't expect him to do anything but shake."

"I'd hate to try to sleep in this old place nights," observed Colon, who had been thinking of other things, it seemed, than warmth. "Chances are she's plum full of rats and mice. If you listen real hard, you'll hear 'em carrying on right now, squealin' and squawkin' like."

Accordingly all of them now turned their attention to listening, this avowal on the part of Colon having aroused their curiosity.

"There!" cried the tall boy triumphantly, "didn't you get it that time; and wasn't that a plain rat gurgle, though? They c'n make the queerest noises, seems like, when they want to."

Fred started to move.

"That was no rat, boys," he remarked, in a tone of conviction.

"Wasn't, eh?" exclaimed Colon; "then what'd you call it, Fred?"

"A groan!" replied the other, immediately, at which the others began to sit up, and in various ways denote newly aroused interest.

"A groan, Fred!" echoed Sid.

"Do you mean a human groan?" demanded Bristles.

"There it is again," Fred told them; "if you pay attention, you'll soon say what I do—that it is a human groan."

"But whoever would be grunting like that in this old rookery, I'd like to know?" Bristles continued as though unable to fully grasp the idea.

"For my part," said Fred, bluntly, "I can't explain it. How about you, Colon?"

"Yes, how is that, Colon?" Bristles hastened to add, as if to lend weight to the sudden demand.

"Me? What should I know about a groan, except that I happened to be the first one to notice the same, and thought it was rats fighting?" Colon expostulated.

"Well, for one thing," Fred told him, "we happen to know that some time ago you had a strong notion you could throw your voice, like the fellow on the stage who makes the dummies in the trunk talk, and say funny things. And it struck me that perhaps you might be trying it out on the dog, meaning your good and faithful chums."

That aroused Colon as few other things might have done.

"Give you my word of honor, Fred, I never thought of such a thing," he said, in the most tragic of ways. "You c'n put your ear close to my mouth, and wait till it sounds again, when you'll find I haven't got any hand in that grunting. Maybe it's a poor pig that's half drowned by the rain coming into its pen near by."

"I know how hogs grunt," Fred told him, "and it wasn't along that line at all. This must be a human being in pain!"

"Whew! if we don't just strike queer happenings wherever we go!" declared Bristles, though from his wide-awake manner it was evident that he did not feel at all averse to these lively episodes coming right along, but rather enjoyed the excitement they brought in their train.

"We ought to do something, oughtn't we, Fred?" asked Sid. "If it did turn out there was a sick man in this old shook, and we learned later that he'd died for want of a little attention, we'd feel mighty sorry."

"First of all, back out, everybody," said Fred. "Then once clear of the mow, we can talk it over, and lay some sort of plan. Push along there, Bristles, you're blocking the line of retreat."

Of course Bristles would not stand for this, and so he began to back out, following the line of least resistance, which in this case was the tunnel by means of which they had crept under the haymow.

Once free and clear, the four runners clustered together, and proceeded to listen attentively again, almost holding their breath in the effort to locate the sound that had startled them so.

"There it is, boys!" exclaimed Fred.

"And louder than before," added Colon, "though that may be caused by our coming out from under the hay."

"No, we're certainly closer to it than before," Fred affirmed, "and that proves it to be over this way."

He started slowly forward. The others followed, it is true, but strangely enough not one of them seemed overly anxious to outdistance Fred, and occupy the position of leader.

It quickly became patent that Fred was right when he said the sound came from that end of the old barn, because, as they continued to advance slowly they could hear it louder and louder. The rain had dropped to a mere drizzle, showing that the storm was about to cease shortly, possibly with the same speed that had marked its opening. As the big drops ceased pattering like hail on the roof, sending many a little rivulet through the holes, they could hear much more easily.

"I see something, Fred!" whispered Colon, in a hoarse tone.

He pointed with a trembling finger as he spoke, and directed by this sign-post all of the other boys were able to distinguish an object that seemed to be extended on the hay.

"Looks like a man or a boy!" gasped Bristles.

"I think it is a well-grown boy!" Fred declared. "And now let's find out what ails him, that he keeps on groaning like that."

He held back no longer, but made straight for the object that had caught their attention. As they came up, all of them could see plainly enough that it was a human being, a fairly well-grown boy, who was lying there on his face.

With every breath he seemed to groan, more or less, and occasionally this would rise to a louder key. This latter was the sound that had reached them while they were under the haymow.

Now Fred was bending over the recumbent figure. Gently but firmly he started to turn it over, when a yell broke out.

"My leg! Oh! my leg's broke all to splinters!" they heard the unknown shriek. Then he seemed to shut his teeth hard together, as though determined that not another cry should leave his lips if he died for it.

Fred had always taken more or less interest in matters pertaining to surgery, at least as far as it is desirable that a boy should dabble in such things. He had borrowed many books from Dr. Temple, and on two occasions had set a broken arm in a fashion that won him words of praise from the physician.

"Let me take a look at your leg, please," he said, soothingly, as he bent down over the half-grown boy, who might be the hand about the poor farm, for he looked thin, and illy nourished, as far as Fred could see at a glance. "Perhaps I can be of some assistance to you, poor fellow. I know a little about setting bones, and such things. And we promise to stay with you, and do what we can to help."

He proceeded to make an examination without any delay or squeamishness. The result was that he discovered a serious fracture of both bones of the leg. Fortunately the break was some inches above the ankle, and if properly attended to, would not result in any permanent injury.

Fred did all that was possible under such conditions, while his three chums hovered near, ready to lend a hand whenever he asked it. The injured boy cried out and moaned a number of times during the time Fred was working, but after Fred had made the rudest kind of a splint, and wrapped the leg with some rags torn from an old linen fly-net that was hanging from a hook near by, the wounded lad admitted that he felt a "heap better."

For the first time Fred began to take notice of him other than as a patient. He found that the boy kept his head lowered, as though endeavoring to avoid curious eyes, and Fred wondered why this should be so, when they had certainly proven themselves to be very good friends of his.

The mystery was, however, soon explained, when Colon was heard to give utterance to a sudden exclamation, and cry out:

"Why, what's this? I've sure met this chap before, or my name isn't Colon. It's Tom Flanders, don't you see, Bristles? He's been gone from home a long while now, and his folks didn't know what'd come

of him, and to think that he's been working on this measly little old farm in the bush here all the time."

Fred became intensely interested in his patient. He had not happened to know the Tom Flanders mentioned, but then he had heard more or less about him. It was easy enough now to know why the other was so embarrassed. He had been hiding from everybody, no doubt working here under another name, and hearing not a word as to how affairs in Riverport were progressing.

"Are you Tom Flanders?" he asked the other, quickly.

The wounded boy had turned white and then red several times under the flow of fear, distress and other emotions. He now looked into Fred's eyes boldly.

"I s'pose it ain't no use in denyin' that same, because Bristles Carpenter and Colon here know me," he went on to say, doggedly, after drawing a long breath. "Might as well own up anyway, 'cause I reckon I'm goin' to die. They can't send a dying boy to the Reform School, can they?"

"Have you been working here at this place ever since you disappeared from Riverport?" asked Bristles.

"Jest about all the time, and gettin' nigh starved in the bargain, 'case they ain't got enough here to feed us," the boy replied, dejectedly.

"First of all," said Fred, "get that idea out of your head that you're going to die, just because of a plain fractured leg. In a month from now you'll be walking around again, and before three months are gone, you wouldn't know anything had ever happened to you."

"That's right kind o' you to say such nice things, mister," Tom Flanders muttered, "but a feller that's headed straight for the Reform School ain't carin' much whether he lives or dies."

Fred looked around at his three chums.

"We'd better tell him, hadn't we?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Sure, the poor fellow's suffered enough as it is, I reckon," Bristles replied.

"Just what I say too," added Colon.

"So go ahead, Fred, and open his eyes. I only hope it'll be a lesson he'll never forget, and start him along a different road after this," Sid gave as his opinion.

"Look here, Tom," began Fred, "you've been hiding-out for weeks now, and all the time believing that they'd send you to the electric chair or the Reform School at any rate, just because you deliberately shoved that little Willie Brandon into the river, and it looked as if he had been drowned. But Tom, they worked over him long enough to bring him back to life again. You ran away before anyone could tell you, and your folks have been nearly crazy trying to find you. Tom, you can come home again, and nobody's going to punish you. It's all right, Tom, and we'll see that you get to where your folks can have you, before to-night!"

The wretched boy looked at Fred for a full minute as though he could hardly believe the glad tidings; then he began to cry like a baby.

## **CHAPTER XX**

### **WHEN THE CIRCUS CAME TO RIVERPORT**

"You'll go home if we can get you there, won't you, Tom?" asked Fred, after a little time had clasped, and the poor fellow on the hay seemed better able to reply, having mastered his emotions.

"I'd be a fool not to say yes!" he exclaimed, eagerly. "'Specially when you tell me my folks they want me home again. I've lived a dog's life ever since I run away. Hain't never dared to ask about news from Riverport, 'case I reckoned Chief Sutton he must be alookin' everywhere for me. I'll go home, and thank you, fellers; you jest better b'lieve I will!"

That settled one thing; Fred knew he could not expect to finish that run. Indeed, the roads were not

in the best of condition after the storm for anything like comfort, and perhaps it might be just as well for them all to give up trying to foot it along the rest of the course.

Having hastily considered this matter, he broached the subject to the others.

"Let's look at the thing, boys," he began, as they gathered around him, knowing that a plan of campaign was being considered. "What we wanted most of all was to get familiar with this cut-off up here."

"No trouble about the rest of the route," ventured Colon, "because it's going to be along the open roads, and every fellow can get it down pat from studying the map they've posted. But this cut-off is left blank."

"Meaning that you can go all the way around, making three miles, or else take your chance in cutting across country," Bristles added.

"Well, my plan is something like this," continued Fred. "Let's pick out the first good afternoon next week, get a car from somewhere, if we can borrow one, and run up here. Then we can cross over to the toll-gate, and back again. That ought to fix things so we'll never miss the way when the big date comes along."

"Hear! hear!" cried Bristles.

"We like your plan, Fred," replied Sid, "and for one I'm ready to call this run off. The weather is against us, and we'd have a high old time splattering through the mud for about thirteen miles."

"Besides," added Colon, "we think we ought to be along when you take Tom Flanders home to his folks. I happen to know how bad they've felt about his being gone!"

That seemed to settle the matter in so far as continuing the trial spin went. Fred was not sorry, because he felt that he would enjoy having his cheery chums along with him.

"Then the next question is, how we're going to get home?" and he turned to the injured boy, to say; "You haven't told us just how you came to break your leg, Tom, and why you didn't manage to crawl to the house so as to get help?"

"I knowed the old man an' his wife they was all away to-day, that's why," was the reply Tom made; "an' as for my accident, it happened so quick I couldn't hardly tell about it. Reckon I ketched my foot in some loose board up in that leetle loft, where I was adoin' somethin'. Fust thing I knowed I felt myself flyin' every which way, over the edge, and kim down on the ground, with my leg doubled under me. Then I jest seen things aswimmin' all around me. Guess I fainted, for next thing was when I kim to, an' found myself groanin' bad. When I moved ever so little it nigh made me jest scream."

"How long do you suppose you've been lying here?" asked Bristles, softly, for he had been much affected by what he saw and heard.

"Mebbe hours, for all I know, Bristles. They went off jest after daylight, meanin' to take the load to Peyton, where they deals in the grocery line. Wouldn't let me do it, 'case they meant to buy the old woman a 'frock, you see. Is it near night time, now, Bristles?"

"Oh! no, the morning isn't more than half over, Tom," replied Bristles.

"But how about some sort of rig we could borrow, to give you a lift to Riverport? Have the old couple taken the only outfit along. Tom?"

"I hear a horse munching hay over there somewhere," announced Colon.

"Yes, there is a critter in here," Tom admitted, with the nearest approach to a smile that had thus far come upon his wan and pain-racked face; "and under the shed stands what you might call a wagon, if you shut your eyes, an' didn't care much what you was asayin'. If old Dominick didn't keel over, and kick the bucket on the way, he might pull us ten miles or so; always providin' you give him some oats before you started him, and then kept temptin' him on the road with more of the same."

Bristles gave a shout.

"Oh! we'll fix old Dominick, never you fear, Tom. I'll look up the oats right away, and let him get busy, while the rest of you pull that wagon out of the shed, and find something in the way of harness. We don't care a red cent for looks, as long as we get there. The end justifies the means. You remember we learned that lots of times at school. Get a move on, boys; everyone to his duty!"

Thus inspired, and spurred on, the others hastened to do their part. Two of them hunted until they

found the lean-to, under which a ramshackle wagon stood that excited the laughter of Colon.

"If Bristles thought the vehicle that little girl had along with her in Riverport was a terror, what'll he ever say to this?" he remarked, after he had doubled up several times in explosive merriment. "Now, if the hoss is anything like what Tom says, I c'n see what a sensation we'll kick up when we strike town. Why, they'll ring the fire bells, and get the chemical engine out to parade after us. Guess they'll think the circus has struck Riverport early this year."

Meanwhile Bristles had succeeded in discovering a small amount of oats in a bin, and he emptied a generous lot of these in the trough of the antiquated looking horse. The animal had started whinnying the instant he heard the boy moving over in that corner, where he must have known the grain was kept, though he seldom had more than a handful at a time.

It was a whole hour before they managed to get the rig fixed up. Indeed, only by the united efforts of all the boys was the bony horse dragged away from his feed trough, where he had kept munching the oats delightedly.

Then they hunted up all the old horse blankets, and empty gunny-sacks they could find about the place, and made a soft bed in the wagon. A stretcher was also improvised from some boards, and when four of them took hold they managed to carry poor Tom to the nearby vehicle, and deposit him on the sacks.

Being guided by directions which Tom gave them, they found how a road wound through the woods to the road, striking the main thoroughfare just above where they had come out on their previous trip, and with the toll-gate in sight.

"Here's where we gain something, boys," Fred told them, "and this Good Samaritan job may count in our favor next week when we make that run."

Fred had been thoughtful enough to write a little note, addressed to the owner of the wretched outfit, whose name it seemed was Ezekial Parsons. In it he explained just how they happened to find poor Tom, and that they had borrowed the rig to get him to his home, where he could have proper care.

He had also promised that the horse and wagon should be returned in due time, and hinted that his father and mother might be expected to run up and make the acquaintance of the old couple who had been so kind to Tom, although not really able to keep a hand about the place.

The man at the toll-gate stared, as well he might, when that antiquated rig came in sight, with the four boys partly bundled in faded horse blankets and gunny-sacks. The weather had not yet cleared, and the air was chilly for fellows as devoid of clothing as runners always are.

When he heard about the accident that had happened to Tom, he was loud in his praise of the action of the boys in giving up their trial spin just to get the injured boy home.

"If I had a hoss myself, I'd gladly loan him to you, boys," he told them.

"Oh! never fear but we'll be able to get there before sun-down," laughingly declared Fred, while Bristles ran around in front, and held the measure of oats close to the nose of the horse, starting him to snorting wildly, and taking a step forward in the effort to obtain the feed, kept so tantalizingly just beyond his reach.

Bristles continued backing away, and always keeping just so far in front, so that the horse was impelled to move along quite briskly. If he lagged at any time the measure was moved closer, and once Bristles even let him thrust his nose into it.

On the wagon the boys had a very merry time of it, singing, and laughing at the actions of the poor old horse.

"Please don't excite him too much, Bristles," begged Sid, "for he's likely to strain so he'll smash this beautiful harness all to flinders."

So they kept up the work, Bristles and Colon between them dancing on ahead, and tempting the animal between the shafts to renewed exertions. With that measure of oats held within smelling distance of his nose he kept plodding steadily along, and mile after mile was placed in their rear.

Once they halted, and watered old Dominick at a wayside spring, besides letting him have a delightful five-minute communion with the oat crop. Then the forward movement was begun, again, and the boy who held the measure of oats continued to dance just ahead of the deluded Dominick.

It was about two o'clock on that Saturday afternoon when a great commotion broke out in the outskirts of Riverport. Boys and girls flocked to the spot, and loud cheers rent the air. Indeed, plenty of people actually made sure that the circus must have arrived ahead of time, and as this was an event in which every citizen was supposed to be interested, since he would be compelled to take his youngsters to the show, plenty of men were in the throng that gathered.

Dogs barked, chickens set up a cackling and crowing, and there was a perfect Bedlam of sounds along the main street. Down this came that wonderful vehicle with sundry creaks and dismal groanings, as though threatening to break down at any minute. Ahead strode a boy in running costume, tempting the tired old horse to walk along by holding a peck measure under his nose, and occasionally just letting him snap up a few of the oats.

Three other fellows sat in the wagon some of them trying to keep warm by covering themselves with gunny-sacks, and all laughing, and joining in the cheers of the crowd.

Of course everybody thought it was only a boyish prank, but when they saw the old wagon draw up in front of the Flanders home, and then those four boys start to gently lift a figure out from the bed of the vehicle, the noise ceased as if by magic.

"Why, it's sure enough Tom Flanders come back home, after his folks had given him up for lost!" one good woman told a new arrival. "They do say Fred and the running boys found him up-country, where he'd broke his leg. Poor fellow, he looks that peaked and pale I reckon he's had a terrible time. And see how his maw hangs over him, like she was the happiest woman in all Riverport this day. And we all hope that Tom'll turn over a new leaf after this, and make his folks proud of him. But wasn't it fine of Fred and his friends to bring him home that way?"

And certainly, when those four lads witnessed the wild delight of that mother and father at having their only son restored to them again, as well as noted how the erring boy cried when he allowed himself to be carried into the house, none of them had the slightest reason to regret that circumstances had caused them to take refuge from the storm in that old barn standing near the trail through the woods.

## **CHAPTER XXI**

### **THE GREATEST OF DAYS**

When the day set for the great Marathon race came around, everybody in Riverport agreed that the weather clerk had certainly outdone himself in order to give the runners an ideal occasion. There was not a cloud in the sky. Then, while the air was sparkling and inclined to be cool, the breeze was not so strong that it would make running difficult.

Early in the day crowds began to arrive from the two neighboring towns. They came in all manner of conveyances, from farm wagons to the finest of automobiles. Music could be heard in the air, for the Riverport Brass Band had decided to honor the great occasion by playing at intervals all day long.

Ample preparations had been made for seeing the grand finish, which, as with the start, was to take place on the great level commons bordering the town, and alongside of which the main road ran.

Here a grand stand had been erected for the use of the honored guests from Mechanicsburg and Paulding, as well as several other smaller places, each of which was also sending its quota of eager eyed strong-lunged boys to root for their favorite team.

The race was scheduled to start at exactly one o'clock. This had been settled on as the best hour, since it would allow everybody who expected to be present to reach town, and also give the runners plenty of time to cover the course.

No doubt that morning dragged along worse than any boy in Riverport had ever known time to drag before. They wandered back and forth in droves, all excited, and anxious to hear the latest reports concerning the condition of those who were expected to compete.

Several startling rumors were circulated. One was to the effect that Colon had been taken with cholera morbus in the night, and was a complete wreck that morning, which would eliminate him from



the race. Another went on to tell how Fred Fenton had cut his foot, when chopping wood just to keep himself in condition, and it would be utterly out of the question for him to enter the competition.

These things gave the loyal rooters for Riverport a terrible shock, and messengers were instantly dispatched to the homes of the two heroes to ascertain whether there could be any truth in the wild rumors. When they came back and reported that both Fred and Colon were in the pink of condition, and simply taking things easy so as not to tire themselves out before the time, the shouts that arose caused people to rush to their doors and windows, wondering if the race had been prematurely started.

Still the crowds kept pouring into Riverport, until the streets became fairly congested with the throngs. Business, except for feeding this vast multitude, and selling them little flags and buttons, seemed to be absolutely suspended, so that many stores were shut up at noon, not to be opened again until the question of supremacy had been fully settled.

Fred had not forgotten to get that forlorn rig back to the owners, and in so doing he had had occasion to make the acquaintance of the old couple. His father and mother drove up that very Sunday afternoon, and from what Fred heard them say after returning, he felt sure that things were going to improve very much with the Parsons. Mrs. Fenton expected to get a number of her friends interested in some fancy work she had examined, and there were numerous other ways by means of which the couple could be assisted without allowing them to feel that they were objects of charity to the community.

Of course the four boys had managed to secure a car, by means of which they ran up on Wednesday afternoon after school hours. There was time enough before the shadows began to gather for them to go over the cut-off several times. They examined every foot of the way, and just as Fred had said, it was found that by following the obscure road that led from the Parsons farm to the main highway above the toll-gate, they could save at least seven precious minutes.

This was bound to be of considerable importance to them, provided none of their rivals from the other towns discovered the same thing, for of course it was expected that nearly every contestant would take advantage of the cut-off. Indeed, very likely all of them had been prowling around before now, the idea being to become familiar with the ground.

Fred had called the others up over the wire about the middle of the morning, and what Colon called a "grand powwow" was held at his house. Sid, Bristles and Colon gathered there to talk matters over with Fred, and learn if any new development had taken place which might prove important in the result.

Of course, after the start it was supposed that every contestant would run his own course, and hence Fred believed it to be good policy that the Riverport contestants should be in full sympathy with the plan of campaign.

Some of the other high school boys, particularly chums like Brad Morton, who had expected to be in the race until he sprained his ankle and had to give up all hope of competing, Dave Hanshaw, Semi-Colon, Corney Shays, and Dick Hendricks, hung around the Fenton house, hoping to get an occasional glimpse of their representatives, who, they knew, were in consultation.

At half-past eleven Fred gave his three friends a little lunch, but he had exercised great care with regard to the character of the food, which his mother prepared with her own hands. It was calculated to give them endurance without any bad after effect.

"We're all invited over to Sid's house for dinner to-night, remember," Fred told them, as they sat around the table, with the rest of the family waiting on them just as though they might already be looked upon in the light of heroes, "and let's hope we'll have a jollification there, with the prize for winning the Marathon in the safe keeping of good old Riverport High for this year."

"So long as we win, and fairly at that," said Sid, "none of us cares very much who crosses the line first, though of course everyone hopes to have that great honor. But from what I know of this bunch, there isn't a single fellow present who would hesitate to eliminate himself, if by doing so he could advance the interests of the school!"

"Hear! hear!" cried Colon, "that's our sentiment, every time, Sid. Riverport High first, and self next in this sort of rivalry. And believe me, we're going to keep that Marathon prize right here in town this year."

## CHAPTER XXII

"THEY'RE OFF!"

"Somebody please give me the official list of entries; I'm not sure I have it right," and as Cissie Anderson said this she looked around her at the clump of enthusiastic school friends, both boys and girls, surrounding her seat in the grandstand.

There were Flo Temple, Mame Wells, and several other girls, as well as Semi-Colon, Cornelius Shays and a few other fellows who believed in being comfortable during the long wait, while the contestants were absent.

"That's me, Cissie," Semi-Colon spoke up, flourishing a paper proudly. "I've just come from the blackboard where they've posted the names of the entries. You know each school was to be limited to four contestants?"

"Yes, but please give me the list," said Cissie, impatiently. "They're beginning to gather around the starting line, and I want to be sure I've got everything correct. Just think how small I'd feel if I cheered the wrong one."

"You can cheer everybody," Flo told her, "until the time comes to welcome the first runner, and then Riverport hopes to do herself proud."

"Mechanicsburg has four entries," Semi-Colon announced, purposely raising his rather puny voice so that every one within a radius of twenty feet might profit by his knowledge, "and they are Dolan, Wagner, Waterman, and Ackers. The last named is called the Mechanicsburg Wonder, and they all say he's going to win this Marathon in a walk."

At that there were scornful exclamations from the faithful Riverport rooters.

"We've seen Ackers run plenty and good, when he played left tackle on their football eleven!" announced one boy, jeeringly.

"And if I remember rightly he didn't run fast enough to make many touchdowns, eh, fellows?" exclaimed another Riverport student.

"You wait and see, that's all!" they were told by an indignant girl nearby, who undoubtedly had her home in the up-river town.

"Yeth," added her companion, a boy who lisped terribly, but was not prevented by this affliction from speaking his mind in behalf of his native town, "they thay thosth that laugh lasth laugh loudetht. Justh wait, and thee which thide of your mouth you laugh from, fellowth."

"Well, I've got Mechanicsburg down all pat, Semi-Colon," observed Cissie, who had smiled sweetly while this side talk was going on, "and now how about Paulding?"

"Only three entries there," the answer came, "because Ogden was hurt on a practice run yesterday afternoon, and it was too late to grind a substitute into decent condition."

"Then they are Collins, Everett and Badger; is that right?" asked Cissie, as she poised her lead pencil over her little pad.

"Correct," Semi-Colon announced. "You all know who Riverport's boys are going to be, but all the same I'll just mention them. Their names seem to roll off my tongue as easy as anything—Sid Wells, Colon, Bristles Carpenter, and last hut far from least, our splendid all-around athlete, Fred Fenton."

There was a generous clapping of hands around that section of the grandstand; although the pair from Mechanicsburg looked scornful, and shrugged their shoulders in truly loyal style, for they were faithful rooters for their home town.

"There is no such thing as a handicap in this race, I understand?" remarked a gentleman who apparently was a stranger in the vicinity, for no one seemed to know him.

"Oh, no sir, such a thing isn't ever considered in a Marathon race," Semi-Colon immediately told him. "Every tub has to rest on its own bottom, and the fellow who can stand the gruelling run best is going to come in ahead of the string."

"There are eleven entries, I believe you said?" continued the gentleman, who was evidently looking

for general information, not being much of a sporting patron, "and if they all start out in a bunch, I should think there might be some little confusion."

"Not at all, sir," the boy assured him. "Each runner has a big number fastened to his breast and back, so that he can be known at a distance. In that way the judges can see any trickery that may be attempted. And besides, although they may start off in a clump, before three miles have been run the chances are they'll be strung all along the road, and with numerous little hot sprints to get the lead."

"And while waiting for them to come in sight, what is going to happen here?" continued the gentleman, waving his hand toward the open space before the grandstand where preparations had evidently been made for other entertainments.

"Oh! amuse the crowd, and keep them from getting too anxious," Semi-Colon told him, readily enough, for his greatest delight was to spread information. "The committee on sports has arranged several comical entertainments. There's going to be several sack races to begin with; climbing the greased pole for another thing; catching a greased pig for another; and a three-foot race to wind up with."

"A three-foot race!" repeated the gentleman: "I don't know that I've ever heard of that; would you mind explaining a little further, my lad?"

"Oh! the contestants are entered in pairs, you see," Semi-Colon told him. "They are bound together that way, one fellow having his left leg fastened to his partner's right. It's a great sight to see how they blunder along, and fall all over themselves. I know some fellows who have been practicing the stunt; but even then, in the excitement they're apt to get into a terrible muss."

"Well, all that ought to keep the people in good humor while the time is passing, I should think," the stranger remarked, laughingly. "And now, would you mind telling me a little about the rules of the great race? I understand that the course covers twenty-five miles in all?"

"Yes, sir, if any contestant chooses to go over the entire distance," he was informed by the willing Semi-Colon, who kept one anxious eye on the spot where the various runners were now gathering, as though the time for starting might be drawing very close now.

"What do you mean by saying that, please? Is there any way by which they may shorten the distance?" continued the gentleman.

"That's just it, sir; at the upper end they can cut off three miles by taking a short-cut through the woods and along the border of a marsh, coming out on the other road at the toll-gate, and then turning toward home."

"I understand what you mean, and I suppose that every one will undertake that shortening of the journey?"

"Well, I hear there's some talk of a Mechanicsburg fellow who means to run it out on the road all the way," Semi-Colon told his persistent questioner.

"What reason would he have for doing so, son?"

"The old one of the hare and the tortoise, sir," the Riverport student remarked, with a shrewd look. "You see, there's always some chance that the fellows who try to make that cut-off may get confused, and lose their way. If they strike the other road below the toll-gate, why they're compelled to go all the way back so as to register."

"Register!" exclaimed the other, in a puzzled tone.

"Why, it's this way," he was informed by the willing and talkative Semi-Colon, "the committee has laid out registering stations at certain places along the course, where every runner has to sign his name in his own fist, also the exact time of his arrival; then he is at liberty to shoot off again as he pleases. One of these is just below where the cutoff begins, and another at the toll-gate on the home road."

"Oh! I begin to grasp what you mean now," the stranger in Riverport remarked, as he nodded his head. "All this is done so that there shall not be the slightest taint of unfairness or cheating about the race?"

"You better believe there won't be, sir!" declared Cornelius Shays. "Nobody will ever be able to say Riverport won on a foul, or by taking any unfair advantage of her rivals. It's going to be a clean game and a great victory!"

"When they line up, please tell me the numbers of your friends, and also those from the other schools. I happen to have a pair of field-glasses with me, and when the first runner comes in sight away up the road yonder, I may be able to return your kindness by telling you positively what his number is before you could distinguish it with the naked eye."

"There they are lining up now, Semi!" exclaimed Cissie, eagerly, and as Sid Wells was a very particular friend of hers, it can be set down as certain that her eyes picked him out of the eleven just as quickly as his sister Mame could have done.

Accordingly, as the line swayed there, with the contestants listening to the last plain instructions from the master of ceremonies, warning them of what penalties would be sure to follow any fouling in the race, Semi-Colon told the stranger in Riverport just which number represented each entry.

"The first four numbers belong to Mechanicsburg, you see, Ackers leading as One, Dolan Two, Waterman Three, and Wagner Four. Then come our fellows, with Sid Wells Five, Fred Fenton Six, Colon Seven, and Bristles Carpenter Eight. Number Nine is Collins of Paulding, with Everett Ten, and Badger Eleven. There is no Twelve, you see, sir, because Ogden is knocked out."

"Hold up now, Semi-Colon, they're going to make the start, and we don't want to keep hearing you talking forever," a boy in the second row behind called out; at which the shortened edition of the Colon family cast an aggrieved glance back that way, but nevertheless held his tongue.

"Now, watch, he's going to fire the pistol!" gasped Cissie Anderson, with her eyes fairly glued upon the line of young athletes who expected to compete for the honor of winning the great Marathon.

Then came a spiteful little crack of the pistol the starter had been elevating.

"They're off!" shrieked hundreds of voices, and a tremendous billow of cheers rang out, to send the eleven runners on their way with a firm determination lodged in each and every breast to strain himself to the utmost in order to be the fortunate winner.

Up the road they went at a furious speed, bunched together in the beginning, yet with several already showing signs of breaking away, and taking the lead.

## **CHAPTER XXIII**

### **THE MARATHON RUNNERS**

The same general principles that might apply in a mile run, or a two hundred yard dash, would not be worth while attempting in this long race. Those contestants who managed to cover the entire distance were bound to be so exhausted when the last mile was reached that they could not be expected to have much stamina left, so as to make a "Garrison finish."

On this account there would be little holding back on the part of the runners. Besides, they knew that it would be desirable if there was a break in the bunch in the early stages of the game. There would thus be no crowding, the weaker falling back, though still keeping on in the hope that something might happen to the leaders when their chances would still be good.

Here and there along the first five miles little groups of schoolboys had assembled in order to cheer their favorites along. They did not string out any further than this because everyone wished to hurry back to the "Green" in order to see something of the humorous contests, as well as to be in position there when the first tired runner turned the bend half a mile up the road.

Some of these enthusiastic boys even ran alongside for a short time, as though in this way they could put fresh heart in their chums. To their credit be it said that not in a single instance did they offer to detain one of the rival runners, or interfere in the slightest degree with his free passage; though of course in their partisan fashion they managed to send out a few taunts after him, to the effect that he was only "wasting his time."

During that five miles those who remained in the lead could be counted on the fingers of one hand. They were Ackers, Colon, Fred Fenton and Badger; and this alignment at least gave promise of a keen competition between the three rival schools, since each of them was represented there.

About this time Fred picked up, and pressed Ackers hard. He was following out the plan that had been arranged between himself and his chums, whereby the one who was reckoned the most dangerous of all outsiders might be harried. Fred had never really run in a race against this so-called "Wonder," and he was anxious to discover just what he had in the way of speed.

Of course he knew at the same time that it was endurance that would be apt to win this race. Speed is all very well, and in part quite necessary, but with twenty-five miles to be covered the main thing is always staying qualities.

So he and Ackers had a merry little sprint, in which Fred gained until he passed the other. Upon that, Ackers, realizing that this sort of thing if persisted in would utterly ruin his chances, even though Fred dropped out also, fell back to his old style of plodding steadily along in a regular grid, just content to keep ahead of the other two.

Fred kept on increasing his lead until he had some little ground between himself and the Wonder. One of his reasons for doing this was to be able to register at the road station just short of where the cut-off came in. He hoped to be able to vanish under the marked birch trees before Ackers could sight him, and in this way make the other choose his own place for leaving the road.

If Ackers went in below, he would strike the marsh, and in this way block his own progress but no doubt Ackers knew this, since he and his friends had been down to examine the course, and must have done considerable prowling around here.

Upon arriving at the station, Fred lost not a second in seizing the pencil offered to him by the waiting keeper, and jotting down his name, as well as the time indicated upon the face of the little clock that was placed in plain view.

He did not say half a dozen words to the other, because he felt that he needed every bit of his breath. There was a runner just turning the bend below, and from his number being One he knew that it was the "terrible" Ackers.

So off Fred bounded, and the keeper, looking after him smiled with satisfaction, he being a Riverport gentleman, and reckoned very fair and square.

"In splendid shape after running more than ten miles, I should say," he told himself, "and this other fellow coming on like a whirlwind seems to be just as well off. There's a third close behind him, too. That makes it an interesting and exciting race. I'm only sorry I have to be up here, and wait for the last to come past before I can jump in my car and speed back to town to be in at the finish."

Fred had figured closely, for when he reached the birch trees Ackers had not as yet appeared around the bend above the station. In this way he was able to plunge in among the bushes without giving the other runner an opportunity to follow him, something Fred did not wish to have happen.

Once in the woods, Fred pushed on steadily.

He knew that speed was not of so much value to him now as accuracy. If he became confused in his bearings, and lost the trail, it would ruin his chances for coming in ahead of his competitors.

Accordingly Fred bent every energy to observing where he was going. Colon would be sure to follow in his track, regardless of what Ackers had done. By taking that road leading from the old farm of Ezekial Parsons, where they had found Tom Flanders lying in the haymow with a broken leg, they believed they could gain from five to eight minutes on anyone who pushed through the thickets and trailed around the tongue of the marsh.

One thing Fred was glad of,—the favorable condition of the weather. He could not help remembering how that early Spring thunderstorm had burst upon them at the time he and his chums were investigating this region for the first time. What a lucky thing it was the weather clerk had ordered up such a grand day for the long race, with the sun not too hot, and never a cloud in the blue sky overhead.

Fred, though keeping all his senses on the alert, so that he might see the "blazes" made on their former trip, and not lose his way, was nevertheless not blind or deaf to other things around him.

He loved the wide open woods, and was never so happy as when surrounded by their solitude. The cawing of the crows, the tapping of the sapsucker, the rat-tat-tat of the bold red-headed woodpecker inviting insects in the rotten limb to look out, and he gobbled up, the frisking of the red squirrel as he darted like a flash around to the other side of a tree trunk—all these and more he noted as he pushed sturdily forward.

Once arrived in the vicinity of the old, ramshackle barn where he and his comrades had sought shelter from the rain, Fred planned to leave the zigzag trail and take to the farmer's road. This would bring him to a point just above the toll-gate where the next registering booth was located.

As the old couple had been made aware of the stirring event of that particular day, Fred would not be surprised to see them on the lookout, ready to give him a cheery wave of the hand as he passed by.

He counted himself as lucky to get along over that rough section of his journey without any accident. There was always a possibility of catching his foot in some unseen vine, and finding himself thrown violently to the ground. Even a slight injury to his knee might work to his disadvantage, since it was bound to cripple him at some time during the remaining thirteen or more miles that must be passed over before the goal was reached.

Now he discovered a stump of a tree that had been cut down recently, and which he remembered lay close to where they were standing at the time they headed for the shelter of the old barn. This assured him that he must have covered the worst of the trail, and was about to strike easier going. Fred thought he would not be averse to this, since it had been hard pushing through the scrub, where lowhanging branches of trees continually threatened to strike him in the eyes, and all manner of hidden traps awaited the feet of the unwary.

He did not doubt in the least but that by taking the road he would so increase his speed over one who stuck to the crooked trails, that he must arrive at the toll-gate station quite a little time ahead of Ackers.

Well, every minute would be apt to count, for like each one of the other Riverport contestants Fred had been told all sorts of amazing stories about the ability of the Mechanicsburg "Wonder" to recuperate, and come in at the end of a long race apparently fresh. That had been one of the reasons for his brush with Ackers; he had tried to run him off his feet, and test this feature of his make-up.

There was the old barn at last. Fred saw its familiar outlines with the greatest satisfaction. So far as he could tell he had carried out every part of his work with clock-like fidelity, for he had counted on reaching this point at a given time, and expected to be registering again far in advance of all others.

Bursting from the shelter of the woods Fred gave a single glance back of him. He saw no sign of Colon, and yet felt positive that the other must even then be threading his tortuous way through the undergrowth, and would arrive within a few minutes at most.

Of course it was far from Fred's policy to wait for his chum. If Colon's wind and endurance stood the severe test, he would have the chance of overtaking any who might be ahead of him, during that run home. Otherwise he must "take his medicine;" but it would be the utmost folly for the leader to waste even five seconds for the privilege of exchanging a few sentences with his chum.

They had arranged all this in advance, and meant to keep strictly to the line of action laid out. Should Fred falter in the last mile, and the wonderful Ackers begin to overhaul him, Colon hoped to be within striking distance. If he were in fit trim, he could then outstrip the Mechanicsburg contestant by a display of some of that queer jumping style of running that had been likened to the progress of a kangaroo.

A shout told Fred that the old farmer and his wife were on the watch, and had recognized him. They were standing in the doorway of their humble cottage, and waved to him as he flitted past.

He only turned to answer their greeting, and having by then reached the private road which connected the farm with the main thoroughfare, started along it. Now it was possible for Fred to increase his pace to a regular run, though there was still a necessity for keeping his eyes about him, since the way was far from being smooth.

As he reached a point where a turn would shut out a view of what lay behind, Fred glanced back over his shoulder, wondering if Colon might be in sight. There was no sign of the long-legged runner, however. Fred whipped around the curve.

He was wondering how Ackers was running, and he really hoped that the Mechanicsburg runner might not lose himself, in his eagerness to shorten the distance across lots. That would take all the snap out of the race, making it a dead sure thing for Riverport, with two of their entries leading on the home stretch. Fred thought of those thousands of eager spectators, and how bitterly many of them were sure to be disappointed if there was no hot finish to the grand Marathon, with the winner just nosing in as it were, amidst the most intense suspense.

All at once Fred became conscious of a new sound nearby. This time it did not have any connection

with the voices of the woods. On the contrary he believed it to be the agonized cry of a child.

It grew louder as he ran along, proving that he must be rapidly approaching the spot where something was going on. Fred remembered that stirring event on the frozen river, when he and Bristles had been able to rescue the boy who had fallen in through the air-hole. Somehow it struck him that he was listening once more to the plaintive voice of little Sadie Ludson as she cried so pitifully for help.

Increasing his speed, Fred presently burst into full view of what was going on there under the trees, and his whole soul filled with indignation as well as anger as he comprehended the reason for those pleading cries.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### WHEN DUTY CALLED

"Oh! please don't strike him any more!"

That was what Fred heard in the shrill voice of Sadie Ludson, and every word seemed to be filled with frantic fear. One look had told the Marathon runner why the girl betrayed such terror. She was clinging desperately to the uplifted arm of a hulking man, who clutched a stick in his hand. This he had undoubtedly been bringing down with more or less force upon the writhing figure he held with his other hand, and which Fred immediately recognized as the unfortunate boy Sam Ludson.

Of course he did not need to be told that the man must be Corny Ludson, the uncle and self-styled guardian of the two wretched children. From his appearance it looked as though Corny might have been indulging a little too freely in strong drink. This probably had the effect of dulling his wits, and making him more of a brute than he might be when in his proper senses.

At any rate he was engaged in whipping poor Sam to his heart's content, possibly for some slight infraction of the law he chose to lay down for the guidance of the pair over whom he had control.

The girl tried her best to keep the angry man from continuing his rain of blows. He growled at her and shook her hand off, after which he proceeded to use the rod of correction again.

Fred could hear the writhing boy groan, and cry out, in spite of all his efforts to keep from giving tongue. The girl continued sobbing, and vainly trying to prevent further punishment. Even as Fred came in sight of the scene the infuriated man, as if bothered by the way she interfered with his wretched work, gave her a fling that sent the girl headlong to the ground.

When she struggled to her knees, she was holding a hand to her head, as though she had hurt it by rough contact with the stones.

Fred Fenton's blood fairly boiled. He forgot all about the fact that he was engaged in a great Marathon race, and that his school looked to him to do everything that was honorable in order to win the victory.

The sight of that great brute abusing these two children whom a misfortune had placed in his power was too much for him to stand. No matter if a dozen races had to be forfeited, Fred could never run past, and feel that he had done right.

None of the actors in the thrilling little drama had so far discovered him, for he had come pattering softly along the road. He immediately turned aside, and leaped straight for the spot, meaning to hurl himself on the man, and endeavor to overcome him. The fact that Corny had been drinking, and seemed a bit unsteady on his feet, was likely to aid Fred, he believed. It would have been all the same had other conditions prevailed, for the boy was fully aroused.

Although the girl had been crying so frantically, it had not been in hopes of anyone hearing and coming to the rescue. She was simply trying to influence the man to forego his use of that stick, with which he had amused himself, making cruel welts upon the tender flesh of the struggling and helpless boy.

Fred rushed upon Corny like a young whirlwind. The girl was the first to notice his coming, and she could not help giving a cry of delight. This it turned out was the worst thing that could have happened,

for it must have reached the ear of the man, warning him in time to turn and see Fred.

The runner had gone too far now to hesitate, and so he continued his forward progress. He sprang straight at Corny, and received a half-hearted blow from the other, who was really too much surprised at sight of the boy to get himself in full readiness.

They clinched, and struggled desperately. The man was of course much the stronger of the two, but his condition took away considerable of this advantage, so that after all the match was not so unequal.

Fred knew that his best chance was simply to push the other back by the sheer weight of his attack, in the hope that Corny might catch his heel in some upturned root, and measure his length on the ground.

The boy had been released, of course, for Corny needed both hands with which to defend himself. Immediately the girl threw a protecting arm around her gasping brother, and the pair crouched close by, watching with startled eyes as the terrible struggle went on.

As it began to look as though their young champion might fail in his attempt to subdue the ogre, the girl, who apparently had more spirit than her brother, crept out and tried the best she could to offer Fred a stout stick which she had picked up from the ground.

Desperately as he fought, Fred was himself beginning to believe that he might not be able alone and unaided to subdue the other, who was really next door to a giant in size. In his proper senses Corny Ludson would undoubtedly have been equal to several boys like Fred, but he had put himself in the power of a master inclined to weaken his resources.

Failing to run across a friendly projecting root that would do the business for the clumsy feet of the struggling man, Fred began to believe he would be compelled to accept the stick which Sadie was holding out, and use it on the other's head.

As he fought, Corny was wild with rage, and uttering all sorts of ugly threats as to what he would visit upon the head of this rash boy who had attacked him. It was plainly evident that the man was in a dangerous mood. This told Fred he would be justified in doing almost anything, in order to save those children, not to speak of himself.

In the struggle he had not come off without several knocks himself, and there was always a chance that the man might succeed in clutching him by the throat. The consequences of such a happening appalled Fred, and, resolved to end the battle once and for all, he watched his opportunity, and the next time they whirled close to the crouching figure of little Sadie, he snatched the stick out of her hand.

It took all of his nerve to be able to actually strike the man on the head. Indeed, the act sent a cold chill all through him, for never before in all his life could Fred remember of having struck anyone with a club.

Though the blow was hardly more than a severe tap, it crumpled Corny up, all the same. Fred felt him become immediately limp in his grasp, and as he drew back the man fell to the ground in a dazed condition.

"Good shot!" exclaimed a well-known voice close by, and Colon came limping up.

At sight of his chum Fred uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh! I'm sorry I did it," he declared; "if I'd only known you were so near by, I'd have held out a little longer, and that's right, Colon."

"Well, that would only have made me do the little act then," said the other with a grin, "and p'raps I'd have tapped him harder than you did. I guess his head's all fuddled anyway, and that just finished the mix-up."

He turned to look at the boy and girl, who were again clasped in each other's arms.

"I reckon now these must be Sam and Sadie, aren't they, Fred?" Colon went on to say, though besides being lame he was also rather short of wind, truth to tell. "I know the man all right, to be that ugly Corny. And what was he doing to make you jump him, Fred?"

"Beating the boy while the girl tried to hold his hand," the other replied as he frowned down upon the prostrate bully. "When he flung her to the ground, it was the last straw for me, and—well, you saw what happened."



"He'd been drinking pretty heavily, hadn't he?" Colon continued, "but able to put up a stiff fight for all that. Well, you got the better of him, Fred, and this ought to wind up his treating these children as he does. You know the police are looking out for him right now. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they could tell us all about the doings of Corny, and whether he did those jobs of robbery."

He limped toward the boy and girl, and as before it was little Sadie who spoke up without hesitation, to say:

"He is our uncle, and he treats us very bad. Yes, and he takes things that belong to other people. We know because we've watched him counting the money, and he always gets mad when he sees us looking on. He had some papers in a tin box too; they are in his pocket right now. Oh! we hope you can take us away from him, for he beats us cruelly."

"There, didn't I tell you so, Fred?" exclaimed Colon, triumphantly, "and between us now, we've got to fix it so this old scoundrel doesn't get a chance to beat Sam again, or rob another farmhouse. I'll manage to fix him up, somehow or other, and stay here to watch him. You go on and win this race for Riverport, Fred."

"But how about you, Colon?" Fred hastened to say, between his set teeth; "I'm sure you've set your heart on coming in ahead of the string, just as much as anyone."

Colon shook his head sadly.

"The game's all up with me, Fred!" he exclaimed, hurriedly; "I must have run a measly thorn in my foot just about the time I heard you scrapping with that man. Didn't you notice how I had to limp? Why, I couldn't keep up the pace for three miles more. No, you've just got to leave me to take care of this scamp. I saw some wood choppers coming through the Woods back there, and can call them up after you go."

"But I hate to do it, Colon; it's a terrible disappointment to you," Fred told him, knowing the other as he did.

"Forget all about me, and think only of winning that prize for Riverport High!" the tall chum exclaimed, and then actually pushing Fred away from him, he continued, "Now be off with you, Fred, and please, oh! please beat that Mechanicsburg Wonder over the line!"

Fred saw that there was nothing else he could do. The boy and girl were safe, and Colon had commenced making ready to tie the man's hands behind his back with a stout red bandanna handkerchief he carried. Then, too, Colon had seen several husky wood-choppers nearby, who could be depended upon to lend a helping hand.

Just as Colon had said, there was indeed need of haste. All these happenings had consumed more or less time, and possibly Ackers would have registered at the toll-gate station before Fred, reached there. So waving his hand to his chum in farewell, Fred shot away down the road, running with the speed of the wind.

Colon looked after him with a smile on his face. If he felt a keen regret that misfortune had tossed him out of the great race, he certainly failed to show it.

"I surely believe Fred will come in first, if anybody can beat that Wonder they boast so much about," he was telling himself, as he worked with the make-shift bonds.

Then as he caught sight of moving figures back among the trees, Colon shouted until the three woodchoppers came hurrying up. It did not take him long to let them know that if they helped get the man, now coming back to his senses, to Riverport, it would be the best day's work they had done that year.

And on seeing how happy Sam and his sister looked at the prospect of being forever relieved from the brutal guardian who had made life so terrible for them, Colon must have realized that there may be compensations, even for a fellow who has been cheated out of his chance to win a Marathon race.

## **CHAPTER XXV**

"Oh! there's the cannon! A runner must be in sight!"

When that great assemblage heard the deep boom of the big gun belonging to the local artillery company, every eye was instantly focussed on the bend of the road half a mile away. Yes, a runner had suddenly turned the corner, and was heading in a direct line for the finish!

He ran in a wobbly fashion, as though utterly fatigued, a fact that was apparent to everyone. They could hear the far-off howls of those who had waited up the track to welcome the runners. A crowd followed his progress, but was wisely prevented from breaking in upon the roadway, so that those in the grandstand were enabled to see all that went on.

"Oh! who is it?" cried Cissie Anderson shrilly, as she stood up, everyone being on tiptoe with excitement.

"Fred Fenton!" shouted Cornelius Shays, apparently taking it for granted that their favorite athlete would be the first to come in.

"No! no, it can't be Fred, because he was Number Six, and that seems more like a Seven!" another boy shouted; at which Flo Temple turned really pale with bitter disappointment, for she had hoped it would be Fred.

"Colon! Hurrah for Colon!" whooped several enthusiastic Riverport rooters.

"Look again, and perhaps you won't crow so loud!" the saucy girl from Mechanicsburg exclaimed, her eyes dancing with eagerness. "I've got pretty good sight, and that looks like a Figure One to me. Besides, I ought to know how Billie Ackers runs, for he happens to be my own brother!"

The stranger in town had raised his field-glasses meanwhile, and he hastened to remark, turning sideways toward Flo Temple and Cissie:

"Yes, that is a Figure One, most assuredly!"

As though the adherents of the up-river school had discovered this gratifying truth for themselves, wild cheers now began to be heard, coupled with the Mechanicsburg favorite school song, sung by a glee club that suddenly sprang into view, waving flags, and throwing up their hats in enthusiasm.

"It's the Mechanicsburg Wonder!"

"We told you he had their measure taken, didn't we?" shouted Sherley, the football quarterback.

Boom!

"Another runner has just turned the bend, and see him gaining on Ackers, would you? Why, what's this I see—that number looks like Eleven, and didn't Badger of the Pauldings carry that? Will you see him tearing off the space on your tired-out Wonder? It's good-night to Ackers, Mechanicsburg!"

"That may be, but where do you fellows here in Riverport come in?" shrilled the girl from up river whose brother was plainly being beaten.

Boom!

"Oh! there's a third runner in sight, and just see how he is tearing along like a scared wolf. We ought to know that style, Riverport, and nobody but Fred Fenton could show such terrific speed at the close of a twenty-five mile race. That's because he pays more attention to condition than speed!"

"Will he overtake the other runners before they get to the goal?" shrieked an almost crazy rooter, as he stood on his seat, and waved both arms wildly again and again.

Thousands of anxious eyes watched the approaching figures of the three contestants. It was still an open question who would come in ahead. The Wonder was evidently at almost his last gasp, while Badger, the Paulding runner, could hardly be said to show much better form, for he too wobbled constantly from side to side, as though kept going only by sheer grit.

Fred, coming strong from the rear, was speedily overtaking them both. When Badger, looking over his shoulder, saw this, he started a feeble little spurt, but it excited only derisive whoops from the frenzied crowd.

"No use, Badger, you've shot your bolt! Give way to a better man!" shouted the captain of the Riverport cheer squad through his megaphone.

"And look at the poor old riddled Wonder wobble, would you? There, if he hasn't taken a header in the bargain! It's all up, boys, all over but the shouting!"

"Oh! the poor fellow has gone down in a heap!" gasped Flo Temple, as Ackers after stumbling fell to his knees in his weakness.

"Look at him trying to get up, but he can't do it!" cried Cornelius Shays. "The tape is only thirty feet away, and Ackers is trying to crawl there on his hands and knees. Now Fred is on him, and has passed to the front, with poor Ackers rolling over like a log in a dead faint!"

Such a tumult of wild shouting as broke out when Fred Fenton, pale of face, and bearing the marks of his hard run in the agonized expression of his face, staggered past the judges, and fell into the arms of several friends who were anticipating some such collapse at the end of the fiercely contested Marathon.

Nor were the plucky Ackers and Badger forgotten by either friends or rivals in the many wild cheers that followed.

"Where's Colon?" a dozen people were asking anxiously, for a strange rumor had flashed around through the great crowd, to the effect that because the second favorite had not shown up at all, he had fallen and broken his ankle.

Fred quickly set these stories at rest by telling just what did detain Colon, and how having been injured by running a thorn in his foot, he had decided to stay there by the two children to watch the man who had been caught beating the boy.

Later on, of course, all of those who had been left up in the woods arrived in town, having been met on the way by Chief Sutton in a car, and given a lift. Colon saw to it that the three woodchoppers were well paid for their part in the affair.

Fred walked home with Flo Temple that evening, not a particle spoiled, she really believed, on account of all the praise showered upon him by the pleased partisans of Riverport High.

Other rivalries would likely have to be settled between these neighboring towns, with their lively high schools, but it would be a long time before the assembled crowds could ever experience such tremendous excitement as came about when Fred Fenton caught up with Badger and the Mechanicsburg Wonder on the home-stretch of the twenty-five mile Marathon, and managed to win by a scant fifteen feet.

Corny Ludson being taken in charge by the police was in due time placed on trial charged with serious offenses. There was no difficulty in proving him guilty of both robberies, and of course he received a long sentence, which would keep him from preying on the public, or annoying the children left in his charge by an unsuspecting brother.

Upon investigation by Judge Wallace it was found that while he had really been the legally appointed guardian of his nephew and niece, and had squandered all the spare money he could get his hands on, there was quite a snug amount in securities that he could not touch.

This would be ample to provide Sam and Sadie with all necessary comforts while they went to school, and grew up. They were speedily placed in a comfortable home with an old couple who would take the part of parents to them, and it may be easily understood how from that time on both of them rested in the belief that there was no fellow in all Riverport quite the equal of Fred Fenton, because he had had so much to do with bringing them their present happiness.

They do say that Flo Temple inclines the same way, for she and Fred continue to be good friends, and are seen together at all the dances, and other entertainments.

The End

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