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by Allen Chapman**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRANK ROSCOE'S SECRET; OR, THE DAREWELL CHUMS IN
THE WOODS ***

FRANK ROSCOE'S SECRET

Or, The Darewell Chums in the Woods

BY ALLEN CHAPMAN

AUTHOR OF "BART STIRLING'S ROAD TO SUCCESS,"
"WORKING HARD TO WIN," "BOUND TO SUCCEED,"
"THE YOUNG STOREKEEPER," "NAT BORDEN'S FIND," ETC.

1908

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FRANK ROSCOE'S SECRET

CHAPTER I

PLANNING A DINNER

"That's the way to line 'em out, Ned!"

"Go on now! Take another! You can get home!"

"Wow! That wins the game! Hurrah for Ned Wilding!"

Those were some of the shouts, amid a multitude of others, that came from scores of boyish throats as they watched the baseball game between the Darewell High School and the Lakeville Preparatory Academy. The occasion was the annual championship struggle, and the cries resulted from Ned's successful batting of the ball far over the center fielder's head.

It was a critical moment for the score was tie, it was the ending of the ninth inning, and there were two men of the High School nine out. It all depended on Ned.

But Ned was equal to the occasion. He had placed the ball well, and as soon as he heard the crack, when his bat struck it, he had darted for first. Then, running as he never had run before, he kept on to second. The encouraging shouts of his friends induced him to advance toward third, though by this time the center fielder had the ball and was throwing it to the baseman.

"Come on, Ned! Come on! Take a chance!" yelled Bart Keene, captain of the High School team.

Then Ned, from a baseball standpoint of safety, did what might be termed a foolish thing. He reached third base just an instant before the ball did. He heard it strike the baseman's glove with a loud "plunk!"

A second later, stooping to avoid being touched, Ned sprang up and ran toward the home plate. It was a desperate chance in a desperate game, for the Lakeville players were cool and experienced hands, and Ned was almost certain to be put out. However, he had chanced it. It was too late to go back now. He was running straight for home, as though there was no such thing as a baseman with a ball close behind him, waiting for a good chance to throw to the catcher and put him out.

Right at the catcher Ned ran. The third baseman drew back his arm to throw the ball. The catcher put out his hands to grasp it. Then Ned jumped up into the air, springing as high as he could.

This disconcerted the aim of the third baseman and he had to throw higher than he intended, to get the ball over Ned's head.

It was what Ned intended that happened.

The catcher was obliged to jump to reach the whizzing ball. He just missed it, the leather sphere grazing the tips of his fingers. Then it flew over his head, while there sounded a groan from the Lakeville supporters. The game was a High School victory.

An instant later Ned had passed the chagrined catcher and had touched the home plate, while the High School boys stood up on the bleachers and made themselves hoarse with cheers. Joining them came the shrill cries of the girls of Darewell, quite a throng of whom had come to see the game.

"Good, Ned!" cried Bart, as he ran up to grasp his chum by the hand.

"That's the stuff!" exclaimed Fenn Masterson. "I knew you could do it, Ned!"

"That's more than I knew myself," Ned answered, panting from his home run.

"Three cheers for the Darewells!" called the captain of the preparatory school nine.

The tribute to victory was paid with a will.

"Three cheers for the Lakevilles!" shouted Lem Gordon, pitcher on the High School team.

The winners fairly outdid their rivals in cheering. Then the diamond was thronged with girls and boys, all talking at once, and discussing the various points of the game.

"It was a close chance you took, Ned," remarked a tall, quiet youth, coming up to the winner of the game.

"I had to, Frank. I didn't risk much in being put out, but it meant a lot if I could get home, and I took the chance."

"Oh, Ned's always willing to take chances," said Bart Keene.

"Yes, and sometimes it isn't a good thing," replied Frank.

"Oh, you're too particular," came from Fenn Masterson. "What's the use of doing the safe thing all the while?"

"That's right, Stumpy my boy," commented Ned, "Stumpy" being Fenn's nickname because of his short, stout figure.

"Oh, I believe in taking chances once in a while," went on Frank, "but of course—"

He did not finish his sentence, and his three chums looked at one another, for Frank seemed to be dreaming of

something far removed from the ball game.

"He's getting stranger than ever," remarked Bart to Ned in a low tone. "We'll have to get his mind off of whatever it is that's troubling him."

"That's right," agreed Ned.

"We ought to celebrate this victory in some way," suggested Fenn, as a crowd of boys, including several members of the ball team, joined the chums. "We ought to get up a dinner and have speeches and things like that."

"Nothing to eat, of course," said Ned.

"Oh, sure; lots to eat," Fenn hastened to add.

"Where could we have it?" asked Lem.

"In our barn," replied Fenn. "There's lots of room, and we don't keep horses any more. It's nice and clean. We could put some boards over saw-horses to make tables, and have a fine time. We can make all the noise we want, and no one would say a word."

"That's the stuff!" cried Bart. "The very thing! Stumpy, you're a committee of one to see about it."

"I'm not going to do all the work!" objected Stumpy.

"I'll help," put in Ned. "Where'll we get the stuff?"

"I guess there's enough in the club treasury for a little spread," said Bart. "This is the last game of the summer season, and we might as well spend some of our cash. We don't want to get too rich."

By this time most of the High School pupils had left the ball grounds and were on their various ways home. It was a Saturday afternoon early in June, and the fine weather had brought a big crowd to see the game, which was played on the Lakeville grounds. The members of the High School nine, including a few substitutes, rode home in a big stage, but trolley cars took the other Darewell boys and girls back.

On the way home the dinner was discussed in its various details, and it was voted to have it a week from that Saturday night.

"Better not talk too much about it," suggested Bart

"Why not?" asked Stumpy.

"I've got an idea that if too much is known about it there may be trouble."

"Trouble? What do you mean?"

"Well, you know the first-year boys have formed a sort of secret society. They call themselves the Upside Down Club."

"What has that got to do with our dinner?"

"Nothing, maybe, and again it may have."

"Have they any grudge against us?" asked Ned.

"No, nothing special, but it's part of their game to play tricks on all the other school societies, from the athletic teams to the debating club. Archie Smith, a cousin of mine, belongs, and I got that much out of him before he knew what I was after. Then he wouldn't tell me any more. So that's why I think the Upside Down boys may make trouble for us."

"Well, if they wish to make trouble we'll give them all they want," put in Fenn.

"Yes, but we don't want the dinner spoiled," said Bart. "There's a big class of first-year boys this term, and they could make a 'rough-house' of our spread in short order. That's why I think it would be better to keep quiet about the affair, at least as to the place where we're going to hold it."

After some discussion Bart's suggestion was agreed to. Further details of the dinner were arranged, and it was planned that Ned should be toastmaster, an honor which he would gladly have declined.

"No, sir, you won the game for us, and you've got to preside at the dinner!" declared Bart, to which all the others on the nine gave their approval with a shout.

"Mind now," Bart added, as the team was about to disperse, having reached Darewell, "no talking about the dinner. Everyone keep mum or there may be no spread at all. If any one hears of the Upside Down boys getting wind of the affair, tell me and we'll arrange to fool 'em."

The club members left their uniforms and outfits in the basement of the High School, where they had improvised dressing rooms, and then the boys started for their homes. Frank, Bart, Ned and Stumpy, four chums who were seldom separated, went down the street together. As they were passing the drug store they saw two girls going in.

"There's your sister Alice, Bart," called Ned.

"Yes, and Jennie Smith is with her," added Bart. "Hi, Stumpy! There's a chance for you. Jennie looked back as if she wanted you."

At this the other chums laughed, for Fenn was rather "sweet" on the girls, and Jennie was an especial favorite with him. But Fenn did not like to have his failing commented on.

"You let up!" he called to Bart. "You're so afraid of the girls you don't dare speak to 'em!"

"You do enough of that for the four of us put together," joked Ned. "But come on. Let's hurry, it's almost supper time."

CHAPTER II

A CONSPIRACY REVEALED

By this time the four boys were in front of the drug store, from which Alice Keene and Jennie Smith came out.

"What were you doing in there? Having a Dutch treat of soda?" asked Bart of his sister.

"I was taking back some court-plaster I had," replied Alice.

"Court-plaster? For what?"

"I'll not tell you."

"I know," answered Bart, for he had a habit of teasing his sister.

"What for then?"

"You heard Stumpy had broken his heart over the way Jennie treated him, and you were going to mend it."

"Silly! I'll tell you what for, and you can see how far wrong you were. I bought a lot, thinking some one might get hurt at the ball game. When I found I didn't need it I took it back and got my money. I hadn't opened it."

"Well, if that isn't the limit!" exclaimed Bart. "I s'pose you're sorry some of us didn't get all cut up and bruised, so you could patch us up."

"Well, of course I don't want any of you to get hurt, but if you had been injured it would have been good practice for me," replied Alice. "Come on, Jennie."

Alice, who had a desire to become a trained nurse, for which profession she believed she was fitting herself by reading a book on "First-Aid-To-The-Injured," walked off with her girl chum, leaving the boys to stare after the pair.

"Alice would rather play nurse than eat her meals," commented Bart. "I wonder why Jennie didn't say something about poetry?" he added, for Jennie was of rather a romantic disposition, and was very much given to reciting verses.

"Probably the presence of Stumpy made her bashful," suggested Ned. "But I'm going. See you Monday, fellows."

The four boys resumed their walk toward their homes. With the exception of Frank Roscoe they all lived near one another. Frank resided about a mile out of the town, with his uncle, Abner Dent, a wealthy farmer.

The four boys, because of their close association, were known as the "Darewell Chums."

Darewell was located on the Still river, not far from Lake Erie. The lads had played together ever since they attended primary school, and their friendship was further cemented when they went to the High School. Attending which institution our story finds them.

There was Ned Wilding, whose mother was dead, and their father was cashier of the Darewell Bank.

Bart Keene was a stout-hearted youth, more fond of sports than he was of eating or sleeping, his father used to say. As for Stumpy, he was just the sort of a lad his name indicated. Happy, healthy, hearty and with a fund of good nature that nothing could daunt.

Frank Roscoe was rather different from his chums, but they were very fond of him. Spite of his occasional fits of strangeness. Frank had lived with his uncle as long as he could remember. He had never known his father or mother, and his uncle never spoke of them. In case Frank asked any question concerning his parents, Mr. Dent would manage to turn the conversation into some other channel.

There seemed to be some secret hanging over Frank. What it was he did not know himself. Nor did his chums. They only knew that, at times, it made him gloomy and morose, and they never referred to it in Frank's presence, because they did not want to hurt his feelings.

Those of you who have read the previous books of this series do not need to be introduced to Ned and his chums, but for the benefit of the boys and girls who get this volume first it may be well to tell something of the two previous ones that they may better understand our story.

In the first, called "The Heroes of the School," was told how the four lads succeeded in solving a rather queer mystery. They were going through the woods one day when they met a man behaving very oddly. From then on they were mixed up in a series of queer happenings, which only ended in some events that followed a trip in a captive balloon that broke away and took them above the clouds.

In the second volume, "Ned Wilding's Disappearance," there was told of the things that followed Ned's visit to New York. Ned undertook to put through a small financial deal on his own account, and the consequences, which were not his own fault at all. Made him a fugitive from the police, as he thought. His chums, coming to the city to pay him a visit, could not find him. Ned was located under peculiar circumstances, through the aid of a waif whom the boys befriended and saved from freezing to death in the snow.

After locating Ned the chums came home, to find they were much in the public eye. When they left they were under suspicion of having blown up the school tower with dynamite, but it was discovered that another youth had done this, and the chums were not only cleared, but the president of the Board of Education, who had cast suspicion on them, publicly apologized.

The chums had resumed their studies at the High School after the tower had been repaired, and had made good progress through the spring term. It was now summer, and the long vacation was close at hand.

Monday morning, following the sensational winning of the game by Ned Wilding, saw the four chums assembled on the school campus, waiting for the ringing of the gong that would call all the pupils to their classes. It was almost time to go in, when Sandy Merton, a former enemy of the chums, but who had become a friend because of a favor received, approached Bart. Sandy had left school because of a dispute he and Bart had had over a ball game, but had returned for the spring term.

"I've got something to tell you," Sandy said.

"I'm listening," Bart replied.

"I can't tell you here," Sandy went on, with a look about him. "I don't want any of the Upside Down boys to hear."

"Oh, ho!" said Bart softly. "Something in the wind, eh?"

"I think there is," Sandy replied. "I'll meet you after school down by the boathouse."

"I'll be there," Bart answered. "Don't say anything to any of the others."

Sandy promised; and then the gong rang and the boys and girls hurried into the school. All that morning Bart was wondering what Sandy had to tell him. That it had to do with the dinner the nine intended to hold was his belief, but he did not see how the first-year lads had found out about it so soon.

"If they're up to any tricks," said Bart softly, "I think we can play two to their one. Let 'em try; it's all in the game."

"Let's go for a swim, Bart," proposed Ned, when school had been dismissed for the day. "Frank and Fenn are going."

"Where you going?" asked Bart.

"Up by the Riffles, of course," the "Riffles" being a place in the Still river where the boys frequently congregated. Near the Riffles, which were a series of shallow places in the stream, was the swimming hole and a little further up was a good place to fish.

"I'll meet you later," Bart replied.

"What's the matter?" asked Ned, for Bart was usually the first one to join in sport of this kind.

"Got a little business to transact. You fellows go ahead, and I'll come pretty soon."

Ned had to be content with this. A little later, with Frank and Fenn, he went to the swimming hole. Bart remained about the school until he saw Sandy start off, then he followed a short distance behind, heading for the dock, where the four chums kept a boat they owned.

"Hello, Sandy!" exclaimed Bart, as he saw the boy on the dock when he arrived. Bart spoke as though Sandy's presence was accidental, and he did that for the benefit of any of the members of the Upside Down Club who might be in the vicinity.

"Going out rowing?" asked Sandy, and he winked at Bart.

"Yes," was the answer, as Bart comprehended what Sandy meant. "Want to go 'long?"

Sandy nodded, and, with his help, Bart got the boat from the house and rowed it out into the middle of the river.

"Now I guess we can talk without being overheard," said Bart, when they were well out from shore, and rowing up stream. "What's up, Sandy?"

"The Upside Down boys have a plot on foot to spoil the dinner."

"What dinner?" asked Bart, wishing to see just how much Sandy knew.

"Oh, the dinner the baseball nine is going to have. It's all over. Some one must have talked. I heard of it late Saturday night, but it wasn't until last night that I heard of the conspiracy."

"What are they going to do?" asked Bart.

"That I can't tell," Sandy replied. "You know that, though I'm in the first-year class, I don't belong to the society. I didn't join. One of the members thought I was in and before he knew what he was doing he had blurted out something about their going to take the dinner stuff from Fenn's barn. Then he found out I wasn't a member, and a lot of 'em got around me and made all sorts of threats if I told. I wouldn't promise not to, but I can't find out any more, except that they're going to make a raid on the place just before it's time for the dinner."

"How many?" asked Bart.

"About fifty of 'em."

"Whew!" exclaimed the captain of the nine.

"That means trouble!"

CHAPTER III

NED IS CAPTURED

For a few minutes after receiving this information Bart was busy thinking. Then, turning to Sandy he said "Will you help me row the boat up to the swimming hole?"

"Sure. But let me out just before you get there. If any of the Upside Down boys see me with you they'll suspect I've given the thing away. Are you going to do anything?"

"I rather think we will," replied Bart "But I don't know yet what it will be. Row fast now, Sandy."

In a little while the boat was near enough to the Riffles so that Bart could manage it alone for the rest of the distance. Sandy went ashore and disappeared in the woods that lined the bank while Bart tied the craft to an overhanging limb and got out.

He found his three chums were enjoying themselves in the water, splashing about and ducking one another. There were a number of High School boys with them, including several of the first-year class, from the ranks of which the secret society was made up.

"There's Bart!" cried Fenn. "Come on in!"

Anxious to tell his chums the news he had heard, but not wanting to awaken the suspicions of the Upside Down Club members, Bart prepared and went in swimming. He managed to get close to his three friends in turn, and quietly told them to go out, dress, and wait for him near the boat, which he told them was tied close at hand.

"Go out one at a time," Bart cautioned, "or they may suspect something."

In a little while the four boys were seated in their boat and were rowing down stream.

"Now what's up?" demanded Ned. "I declare you're as mysterious as though something had happened."

"Something's going to happen," said Bart.

"What?"

"The Upside Downs are going to spoil our dinner—if they can!"

"How did you hear of it?"

"Who told you?"

"What are they going to do?"

The three chums asked these questions of Bart all at once.

"What do you think I am, a lightning calculator?" demanded Bart. "One at a time, please! The line forms on this side."

Then he proceeded to tell them what Sandy had revealed.

"Good for Sandy!" exclaimed Ned. "He treated us pretty mean once, but he's making up for it now."

"Yes, it was a good stroke of business the day we helped him load the overturned sleigh," said Fenn, referring to an incident of the previous winter, as related in "The Darewell Chums in the City."

"What are you going to do?" asked Frank quietly.

"I haven't made up my mind," Bart answered. "I thought we'd better tell the rest of the nine, and then think up some plan to turn the joke on the Upside Downs."

"Maybe it would be just as well not to tell the others on the nine," suggested Frank.

"Why?"

"If you do, it will surely come to the ears of the first-year boys that we are onto their game. Then they may change their idea and be up to some dodge that we can't fathom. I guess we four can spoil their plans."

"Well, maybe that would be the best way," admitted Bart. "What do you propose?"

"Are there plenty of boards, planks and boxes around your barn, Fenn?" asked Frank.

"Lots of 'em."

"Then we'll set traps for our friends the enemy," said Frank. "They'll walk right into them."

Frank explained his plan more in detail as the boys rowed down stream. His idea was to build a series of traps all about the barn, covering every approach. The traps would be made of boxes and boards, so arranged that when a boy walked on them he would tumble off or slip into a box, and the racket made would apprise those on watch, in the barn, of the approach of the enemy. Then they could sally out, and, while the Upside Down boys were in confusion, could easily disperse them.

"That's fine!" exclaimed Bart. "The very thing! We must get right to work on it tonight."

That evening the four chums spent in the barn back of Fenn's house. There was considerable hammering and pounding and fitting together of planks, boards and boxes.

The next afternoon the four boys worked hard perfecting their arrangements. There were four entrances to the barn, consisting of large sliding doors in front and rear, and a small door that gave entrance to the stable proper. The way to each of these was so arranged that any persons passing along them would have considerable trouble in reaching the structure. It was impossible to walk along them and not step on a board, so fixed that it would tumble a box on the head of the enemy, precipitate the boys into a packing case, or upset a big pile of planks.

The fourth entrance to the barn was in the basement through an old cow stable, long unused. The door had not been opened in a number of years, and the hinges were rusty.

However, the four chums oiled the door so it would work easily, cleared away a lot of rubbish and then had a means at hand of getting into the barn of which they felt sure none of the conspirators knew. That the Upside Down boys were aware of the other entrances Fenn was sure, as several of the first-year pupils had been seen about the barn Monday. They did not, however, the chums thought, know of the traps.

Meanwhile preparations for the dinner went on. The food was purchased from a caterer in town, and was to be delivered at the barn Saturday evening.

The chums arranged to have it taken in through the large front doors, the traps leading to them having been temporarily removed. After the victuals were safely stowed away it was planned to have a guard of boys constantly on hand inside the barn to protect them. The rumor of the threatened attack on the spread was known to all the nine now.

"I rather guess they'll have all the trouble they want before they play any tricks on us," said Bart, as he surveyed the defenses.

"Can they break in the doors, in case any of them get past the traps?" asked Ned.

"I don't believe so," replied Fenn. "I've put extra hooks and bolts on, and there are heavy bars to the big front and rear doors."

Saturday evening the materials for the spread were duly delivered at the barn. Half a dozen boys volunteered as guards. It was arranged that the members of the nine and their friends, numbering in all about twenty-five, should come in through the cow stable door.

The guards were soon busy arranging the improvised tables, storing the food away in places where, in case the conspirators did manage to get in, they would have hard work to find it. Several were engaged in getting lanterns ready to illuminate the banquet table.

In fact they were all so much occupied that they did not notice three boys who had made a long circuit and brought up in the fields back of the Masterson barn. These three boys approached warily in the dusk of the evening.

"Is that the way they're going in?" asked one of the trio, as he saw the cow stable door.

"That's the way all but one of 'em is going in," was the answer. "There's going to be one vacant place at the dinner."

"Whose?" asked another of the trio, of the one who seemed to be the leader.

"Ned Wilding's."

"Are you sure he will come along alone so we can grab him?"

"Alone or not we'll get him. In fact we did think one time of making a rush through the cow stable door, after we found out about their traps at the other entrances. But that door is so narrow we couldn't get in quick enough but what they could stand us off. So we decided on this plan. We'll capture their presiding officer. It'll be like the play of Hamlet with Hamlet left out."

"What you going to do with him?"

"Denny Thorp has that in charge. I think he's going to carry him to some vacant house."

"What are we to do?" asked the member of the trio who had first spoken.

"We're to stay here until the rest of the crowd arrives, and watch what happens. But the main thing is to capture Ned."

All unconscious of the change in the conspirators' plans, and congratulating themselves on the success of their method in guarding against surprise, the members of the nine and their friends began assembling one by one in the

barn, as it grew dusk.

Most of them were on hand, and the tables, which were boards placed across saw-horses, had been spread with the good things to eat.

"Where's Ned?" asked Bart, as he noticed that the toastmaster was not yet present.

"He and Frank are coming together," replied Fenn. "Better take a look out, fellows, and see if you can spot any of the enemy."

Several boys mounted to the hay loft and looked out of the small door formerly used to take fodder into the barn. The watchers reported the coast clear.

They came down, and were standing about the table, waiting for Ned and Frank, who were the only absentees, when a loud cry came from the direction of the cow stable door.

"Rescue! Rescue! Darewells to the rescue! They're kidnapping Ned!"

"That's Frank's voice!" cried Bart. "Come on, fellows! They've played a trick on us and they've got Ned!"

CHAPTER IV

NED HEARS STRANGE TALK

There was a rush for the stairs leading from the barn down into the cow stable. The nine and their friends fairly jammed the narrow passageway, so eager were they to get outside.

"Easy!" shouted Bart. "We'll never get down this way! One at a time!"

The boys could hear the sounds of a struggle. There were confused cries, and the shuffling of many feet.

"Hurry! Hurry!" cried Frank.

At last Bart, Fenn and a few others managed to reach the outside small door, and rushed into the disused cowyard. There they saw a confusion of black forms. There were two knots of struggling boys.

One knot was grouped about Frank, and the other around Ned. From both groups came shouts and cries and the sounds of conflict, though it was all in fun, and there was no evidence of anger.

"To the rescue!" yelled Bart, making for one crowd. He was followed by several of his companions and then, others of the nine, and their friends, sailed in to help Frank, since Bart had tackled Ned's assailants.

But with the advent of the boys from the barn there appeared reinforcements of the enemy. The rescuers were fairly surrounded by a throng of the Upside Downs, who were shouting and laughing, and fairly overwhelming the ball players and their companions.

Suddenly the group surrounding Frank seemed to break apart. The members of the first year class, who had been pulling and hauling him this way and that, drew off. At the same time a cry sounded.

"This way, First Years!"

Off through the darkness, out of the cow-yard, moved a mass of boys.

"We've beaten them off!" cried Bart exultantly.

"Yes but they're taking Ned with them!" shouted Frank.

Only a few of the members of the nine heard what he said, so great was the shouting and confusion. Frank tried to make himself understood. He ran toward Bart, but several of the Upside Down boys got in his way and prevented him. When at last he was able to make Bart understand what had happened the group surrounding Ned was out of the yard.

"We must get them!" yelled Bart as he caught Frank's meaning. "Come on, fellows!"

There was a rush for the gate, but when Bart and his friends reached it they found it was fastened. All the Upside Down boys had disappeared. A dark mass of them could be seen hurrying across the fields, seeming to bear some burden in their midst.

"They've got Ned!" cried Bart. "After them!"

"Wait!" shouted Fenn. "Maybe it's only a trick to get us away from the barn, so they can steal the dinner!"

"That's so!" agreed Bart, much excited. "Are you sure they have Ned, Frank?"

"Sure! We both came in together, and they grabbed us. But it was Ned they wanted, because he was to be toastmaster. They must have gagged him, as I didn't hear him yell."

"What had we better do?" asked Bart.

"Some of us stay here to look after things and the rest try to get Ned," suggested Fenn.

"They're five to our one," objected Frank.

"That's nothing! We've got to get Ned! They'll have the laugh on us if we don't," said Bart.

There was a hasty consultation and the dinner party was divided into two forces. Some were left on guard, while the others set off on a run after the Upside Down boys.

But the delay had given the assailants the very chance they needed to get a good start. When the pursuers set off across the fields the captors of Ned were out of sight. There was a hasty search for them, but the first year boys had apparently hidden in some place that defied the efforts of the ball crowd to locate it.

"This is a pretty pickle!" exclaimed Bart, as he came to a halt in the middle of the big field that stretched out behind the Masterson barn. "They've beaten us all right enough. I wonder where they could have taken Ned?"

"I guess it's up to us to find out," replied Fenn. "Come on. We haven't half looked yet."

"Maybe that's just what they want us to do," put in Lem Gordon. "They think we'll let the dinner slide."

"That's so," agreed Bart. "It's bad enough to have 'em take Ned, but that shouldn't spoil the dinner completely. Let's go back, eat the grub, and then continue the hunt for Ned. Besides maybe he'll get away from them. He will if

he has half a chance."

This plan of proceeding was talked over, and, though they all disliked the idea of leaving Ned in the hands of the enemy, they felt it would be the wisest move.

"Ned would want us to do it, if he were here," said Bart. "Let's go back."

So the searching party went back, rather crestfallen, it is true, to report failure to those left on guard. However, there was no help for it, and the dinner had to be eaten without the presence of Ned, the toastmaster.

"It's a hard pill to swallow, boys," Bart announced, as he was voted into the position of presiding officer, "but we'll pay 'em back some day. It has taught us a lesson. I didn't believe that crowd had such a strong organization. We'll have to form a society ourselves and get even with 'em."

"That's what we will!" declared Fenn.

In the meanwhile Ned was being borne away by his captors. At the first sign of the attack he had guessed the object of it. He had fought valiantly against being taken, but was overpowered by the weight of numbers. He had given an involuntary call for help when first seized, but, after that, he resolved to fight alone as best he could. That was why he did not cry out when he felt the boys lift him to their shoulders, after binding his arms and legs, and carry him away.

Ned hoped his friends would rescue him, not so much that he minded being captured, as it was all in fun, but that he did not like the first-year boys to play such a trick on the older pupils. He had an expectation, when Bart sang out for aid to effect his recapture, that he would be taken from the hands of the enemy, but when he felt himself being carried further and further away, he knew the Upside Down boys had triumphed.

"At any rate," thought Ned, "they didn't get the dinner away from us, even if they did get me."

Hurrying onward, his captors carried him for nearly a mile. They then came to a halt in a dark thoroughfare. As he was being borne onward face upward, Ned could not tell where he was, nor to what part of the town his enemies had brought him.

"What are you fellows going to do?" he asked at length, when they had remained for several minutes, as if waiting.

"That's for us to know and you to find out," replied a voice Ned did not recognize.

"Here comes—" began another of the first-year lads, when a companion cautioned him with:

"No names!"

"This way!" someone called, and in obedience to the summons, those carrying Ned turned to the right. They went down a short lane, and, a moment later, Ned saw a doorway over his head. He was carried into a building and laid down on a pile of bags in one corner of a room. It was quite dark.

The captive heard his enemies running away, and then he knew their trick was complete. They had carried him away—had kidnapped him in fact—and taken him to some building where they left him bound and helpless.

For a few moments Ned did not stir. He was not uncomfortable, as it was a warm evening, and the pile of bags was soft. The cords hurt his hands somewhat, and his legs were cramped. By the smell of lime and mortar Ned could tell he was in some new building, one probably near completion.

He went over in his mind the location of all the new structures going up in Darewell. There were several, in different parts of the town, and so he could not decide where he was. Then, as he listened, he could hear the sound of running water, and he knew he must be near the river. All at once the locality became plain to him. He was in a new house, one of several in a row, on a street leading down to the stream.

"Now to get loose," said Ned, as he tugged and strained at his bonds. He felt the cords about his wrists giving somewhat and he redoubled his efforts. In their haste the boys had not used much skill tying the knots, and, in about five minutes, Ned was free. He rubbed his arms and legs to restore the circulation, and started to leave the building. As he did so he heard someone coming in, and noted the sound of voices.

"They're coming back!" thought Ned. "I'd better hide until they go. Then I'll hurry back to the dinner!"

The footsteps and voices sounded nearer. Some persons came into the house. They stumbled about in the darkness. Then a voice asked:

"Are you sure it's safe to talk here?"

"Those are not high school pupils!" Ned said softly to himself. "They're men!"

"It's the safest place in the world," someone replied, in answer to the first question. "No one here but ourselves. Now then, how far have you got with the plans?"

"I had a letter from the lawyers in New York. It seems they have heard from Wright & Johnson and they're going to fight us. Wright & Johnson have written to Frank, so I've heard, but he's puzzled over the whole affair and don't know what to do. Oh, it's safe enough. We've only got the boy to look after and he will never know how to proceed. Besides, old Dent, his uncle, has the wool pulled over his own eyes so thick he'll never make any trouble. I tell you it's safe, and in a few months the property will be ours."

"Where is his—" but Ned could not catch the end of the sentence before the other man replied:

"Good quiet place. In a sanitarium on—"

Just then a door shut, and Ned was unable to hear any further talk of the men, who had so strangely come to the vacant house. He could distinguish the hum of their voices, but that was all.

"I wonder what that means?" he asked himself, as he stood there in the darkness. "It sounds as if there was going to be trouble for Frank."

CHAPTER V

SUSPICIONS AROUSED

The voices of the men had sounded from a front room downstairs. Ned was in an apartment across the hall from them. They had shut the door leading from the hall to the room where they were. This gave Ned a chance to come out of the apartment into which he had been taken and he tiptoed to the closed door to see if he could hear any more.

But either the men were conversing in whispers or they had moved back to some remote corner where their voices could not be heard.

"I guess I'd better get out of here while I have the chance," Ned thought, and moving softly he left the building.

As he hurried along the street toward Fenn's house, determined to join his friends at the dinner, he could not help thinking of what he had overheard. It drove all thoughts of his capture from his mind.

"Wright & Johnson," Ned murmured to himself. "I've heard that name before, or else I've seen it somewhere. I wonder where. Wright & Johnson? Did I see their sign when I was in New York, I wonder. No! I have it! It was the name on the envelope of that letter Frank got the day we were in swimming. That's it!"

Ned had struck the right clue. He referred to an occasion, told of in the first volume of this series, when, as the four chums were in swimming one day, a special delivery messenger from the post-office had brought Frank a letter. On reading the epistle Frank had seemed much excited. He had immediately left his companions and, when they followed him from the water a little later, they found he had dropped the envelope, Bart had picked it up, and shown it to his companions. In one corner was the name of Wright & Johnson, lawyers, of 11 Pine Street, New York.

The boys had followed Frank back to town, and had seen him come from the office of Judge Benton, a lawyer, and mail a letter in the post-office. Bart gave Frank back the envelope, but the latter had told his chums nothing of his queer letter. Nor did he afterward refer to it, though the four friends had few secrets from each other. From that time on Frank's queerness had increased, until, on the return of the chums from New York, where Ned's disappearance was cleared up, his conduct caused his friends some anxiety.

"There must be some secret in Frank's life," thought Ned. "The letter from Wright & Johnson, his growing queerness, and now the strange talk of these men, all point to that. I wish I had found out who they were. Maybe they are going to do Frank some harm!"

He paused, with half a mind to go back and see if he could learn the identity of the men. Then he reflected it would not be wise to be caught by them playing the spy.

"I'll tell the fellows about it," Ned thought. "Maybe we can find out what it means. I wonder if I had better tell Frank? I guess I'll not until I consult Bart and Fenn. Frank didn't tell us about the letter, and perhaps he would not like it if he found out I had discovered something, though, to be sure, it's not much."

Thus pondering over what he had heard, Ned hurried on, and, in a little while was at the barn, where the feasting was still in progress. The crowd was making merry in spite of the damper which Ned's capture had cast on the dinner. At his entrance, however, there burst out a cheer and cries of welcome.

"I've been keeping your chair warm for you!" shouted Bart.

"Come on in! Tell us all about it!" sung out Fenn.

"Did you fight 'em off?" inquired Lem.

"Oh, I managed to get away," replied Ned, and he told of being taken to the vacant house, and of his escape. He said not a word of the two men.

With their toastmaster thus restored to them, the baseball boys and their friends went merrily on with the dinner. There was much laughter and every one seemed talking at once of the fight with the Upside Down boys.

"We've got to play a trick on them that will make this one fade out of sight," commented Bart. "We'll fix 'em!"

"That's what we will!" exclaimed Fenn. "I wish they had tried to take the dinner and had fallen into our traps."

"We didn't have much use for 'em, for a fact," put in Lem. "Never mind, we had some fun out of it, anyhow."

Ned joined with the others in talking over the episode but he noticed that Frank was unusually quiet. When he got a chance he slipped around to where his chum was sitting and asked:

"Anything the matter, Frank?"

"No. What makes you ask me that?"

"Why I thought you looked worried over something."

"No, I'm all right," replied Frank, with forced heartiness. After that he tried to join in the talk and fun, but it was too obviously an effort to deceive Ned.

"Something's wrong with Frank," Ned decided in his own mind. "We've got to find out what it is in spite of him, and help him. I must speak to Bart and Fenn as soon as I have the chance."

It was not until all the other boys, including Frank, had left the barn and gone home, late that night, that Ned found the opportunity he wanted. Then he told his two chums of what he had heard at the new house.

"What do you make of it?" asked Bart.

"I'll admit I'm suspicious," said Ned. "It looks as though Frank was mixed up in something."

"Do you mean something bad?" asked Bart.

"No, I don't know's I'd call it that. But something suspicious, anyhow. You remember that letter from Wright & Johnson?"

"The one of which we found the envelope?" Bart inquired.

"That's the one. Well, these men evidently are mixed up in the case. It seems to concern property. Maybe Frank has some property and will not give it up."

"If Frank has any property he has a right to it!" said Fenn with emphasis. "Frank's done nothing wrong, but he certainly is acting queer."

"Then I don't know what to make of that reference to a sanitarium. They shut the door at that point and I couldn't hear any more."

The three boys discussed the subject from all sides, but could come to no solution of the mystery. That the men had referred to Frank, Ned was sure, and his chums partly agreed with him.

"Of course there are a number of boys named Frank," said Bart. "But when they spoke of Frank's uncle, Mr. Dent,

it must be they meant our Frank."

"There's another thing," spoke Ned. "They mentioned pulling the wool over Mr. Dent's eyes. I wonder if we had better warn him."

"What could we tell him?" asked Fenn.

"I could tell what I heard," replied Ned.

"Which wouldn't be enough to do any good, and it might cause a lot of trouble," said Bart. "I think we'd better let this thing alone. Frank may tell us something that will give us an opening to talk to him about this matter, and you can then tell him what you heard the men say."

"I guess that's the best plan," admitted Ned.

"Perhaps we could learn something more of the men who were in the house," suggested Fenn.

"How?"

"By going down there and making inquiries. I know those buildings. There's a watchman hired to stay on guard all night. Perhaps he saw the men and could tell us who they were."

"It's a good idea," said Ned. "We'll go down and see him to-morrow night. That will be Sunday, and there's not likely to be any one around to hear us question him."

"We must not take Frank along," remarked Bart. "We'll have to keep this thing quiet from him, at least until we know more about it."

"It's the first time we haven't all been in a thing together," commented Ned. "It seems queer to have something on Frank doesn't know about."

"We're doing the best we know how," said Bart. "It's for Frank's interest we're working. I hope it will all come out right."

Sunday evening the three chums went to the building where Ned had been taken by the Upside Down boys. Frank had not called on any of his chums since the dinner the night before.

The boys found the night watchman, who had just come on duty. Ned knew him, for the man, James Rafferty, had once been employed as a porter in the bank of which Ned's father was cashier.

"Good evening, Mr. Rafferty," said Ned. "It's a fine night."

"It is that, me lad. An' what brings ye down here?"

"To see you."

"Sure, thin, an' ye must have some object. Few indade want's to see ould Rafferty now. He's gittin' too old fer much use."

"We wanted to ask if you saw anything of two strange men around these buildings last night?"

"Nary a wan did I see, Masther Ned. Sure there was a slatherin' lot of lads bint on some joke, an' I didn't interfere wid 'em, knowin' they was up t' no harm. But I saw no men."

"That blocks this end of the game," said Bart in a low tone, as he and his chums came away.

CHAPTER VI

FRANK GETS A LETTER

Somewhat disappointed at their failure to get any information from Rafferty, the three boys returned to Ned's house, where they had met that Sunday evening.

"Better let the thing drop until something turns up," suggested Bart. "We can't do anything, as I see."

"Only be on the lookout for strangers in town," said Ned. "I want to find out who those men were."

"And you'll have quite a job," spoke Bart. "I'm going home. See you at school to-morrow."

"There's one point we forgot to look up," Ned remarked.

"What is it?" inquired Fenn, as he prepared to accompany Bart.

"Those men spoke about someone being in a sanitarium. Do you know of any such place around here?"

"Never has been a sanitarium in this neighborhood," replied Bart. "There's the hospital, but I don't believe they meant that."

"I either," responded Ned. "There's some mystery in it all. Perhaps we can solve it and help Frank."

Little was talked of at school next morning but the contest between the ball team members and the Upside Down Club. The story was told over again, with all sorts of embellishments, and there were any number of versions; from one that Ned had escaped by leaping from the roof, to another that his friends had descended on the building and torn it apart to get him out.

As a matter of fact the victory of the Upside Down society was only a partial one, as Ned had been able to go to the dinner before it was more than half over. The first-year lads had hoped to keep Ned a prisoner until the affair was at an end, but, it developed, there was a misunderstanding in the plans of the conspirators, and those boys who were supposed to be left to guard the prisoner, went away, giving Ned a chance to escape. But the contest with the older students gave the first-years chance enough to crow, and they lost no opportunity to do so.

"What'll we do to pay 'em back?" asked Ned of Bart at the noon recess. "They're making all sorts of fun of us."

"Let 'em laugh. Our turn will come sooner or later."

Frank joined his chums that afternoon, when school had closed for the day, and all went swimming. There was quite a crowd of pupils at the river, including a number of the Upside Down boys, and there were several rather warm discussions among the members of the rival factions. Once or twice it looked as if there might be fights. Lem Gordon, in particular, was much incensed at the action of the first-years, and when Richard Kirk, a member of the

Upside Down Club, taunted Lem with belonging to the side that lost in the Saturday night struggle, Lem advanced toward Richard and acted as though he was going to strike him.

"Don't," advised Bart. "That will only make them keep the thing up longer. We'll fix 'em."

"We ought to do it pretty soon," growled Lem. "I'm getting tired of being laughed at. We ought to pay back the ringleaders anyhow. Who were the fellows that held you, Frank?"

"It was so dark I couldn't see well."

"You ought to have recognized some of 'em."

"I didn't," Frank answered, somewhat shortly, as he began to dress.

"What makes Frank act so queerly?" inquired Lem of Bart. "Has anything happened?"

"Not that I know of," Bart replied carelessly. He did not want other pupils to think Frank strange, even if the three chums did. When Frank had finished dressing he started away.

"Where you going?" Fenn called after him.

"I've got a little errand to do uptown," was Frank's reply. "I'll see you later."

Ned, Bart and Fenn looked at one another, but they said nothing. It was not like Frank to go off by himself, but they did not comment on it at the time, as they did not want their companions to take notice.

A little later the crowd at the swimming place began to disperse. The three chums walked away together, conversing in low tones of Frank's action. As they were going through the woods, along a path that led over the fields to the outskirts of the town, they saw a boy stretched out on a log. His eyes were closed and he seemed asleep.

"It's Jim Morton," said Bart. "What's he doing here? I thought he was too lazy to walk this far," for Jim had the reputation of disliking exertion of any kind.

"Hello, Jim!" called Ned. "What you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," replied Jim.

"For me?"

"All three of you. Got a message."

"What is it? Speak up! Don't be all day about it," exclaimed Bart.

"Judge Benton gave me a quarter to come out here and see if I could find any of you chums."

"What does he want? Whom does he want?"

"He wants Frank Roscoe," went on Jim, in drawling tones. "Wants to see him right away. Important business he said. That's all I know. I was to tell Frank if I saw him, or if not, any of you boys. I've done my part, and earned the quarter, I guess. Now don't bother me, I'm going to sleep," and Jim turned over on the log as if that was all there was to it.

"But what's it about? Why can't you tell us more?" asked Bart. Jim did not answer, and a snore seemed to indicate that he was slumbering.

"If he isn't the limit!" ejaculated Ned. "Come on, fellows. We'll see if we can find Frank and give him the message."

"Perhaps he was going to the judge's office," suggested Fenn.

"Well, we'll tell him what Jim said, anyhow," suggested Bart. "Frank can do as he likes then."

They hurried back to town, thinking they might overtake Frank before he reached Darewell, but he had evidently walked fast for they did not see him. As they were passing the post-office, Ned looked in, and caught sight of their chum.

"There's Frank," he said. Frank had just taken a letter from his uncle's box. He was reading it when the three chums entered, and he seemed surprised as they came up to him.

"Judge Benton wants to see you," spoke Ned. "Jim Morton went out to the swimming hole with a message, but you'd gone, so we came after you."

"Thanks," replied Frank, glancing up from his letter. "I was just going over there."

He folded the letter to put it back in the envelope, and Ned caught a glimpse of the name Wright & Johnson, New York, before Frank put the epistle into his pocket.

"See you later," called Frank to his chums, as he hurried from the post-office.

The three boys stood staring at one another as Frank walked out. It seemed so strange they could not understand it. Ned spoke of having noticed the name of the lawyers on the envelope; the same firm that had written to Frank before.

"I can't understand it," declared Bart, as he and his chums went out, in time to see Frank mounting the steps of a building opposite the post-office, where Judge Benton had his office.

"I don't know's it's any of our affair," put in Fenn. "Only I'd like to help Frank if he's in trouble."

"So would I," spoke Ned.

"Shall we wait for him?" asked Bart.

"It's hard to know what to do," declared Ned. "If we go away he may think we're mad. If we stay he might imagine we're trying to find out what Judge Benton wanted him for. However, I guess we'd better wait for him a little while."

They did not have to wait long. Frank came out, and he seemed more cheerful than he had been in some time. It appeared as though something, that had been troubling him, had been settled to his satisfaction.

"Glad you waited," were Frank's first words as he joined his chums. "I've got an idea."

"What is it?" asked Bart.

"We ought to get right to work and play a trick on the Upside Down boys. We haven't much time left this term."

"Good!" exclaimed Fenn. "That's what I say. But what shall we do?"

"I think I have a plan," said Frank. "You know Judge Benton's son belongs to that crowd."

"Does he?" asked Ned, for this was news to himself and his two chums.

"Yes. I didn't know it until a little while ago. I was talking to the judge about—er—about some private matters—and he asked me if I was going to the dance. I asked him what dance, and he said the one the High School boys were

getting up. That was the first I'd heard about it, but I pretended to know a little bit, and I learned that the Upside Down boys, of which his son is a member, are planning one for Saturday night in the hall over the drug store. Young Benton had to ask his father for some money to help pay expenses, so that's how the judge knew. Now what's the matter with us getting even with them for what they did to us, by playing some trick at the dance."

"Are there going to be girls there?" asked Ned.

"Of course."

"Then I think I know something that will break up the dance and not harm any one either," Ned replied.

CHAPTER VII

BREAKING UP THE DANCE

"What is it?" asked Bart.

"Let's get away from here, to some place where we can talk it over quietly," suggested Fenn. "We don't want them to know we're onto their plans."

The four chums moved off down the street. Frank seemed to have recovered his good spirits, and joined in the talk readily enough. They listened to Ned's suggestion, and the more they talked of it the more enthusiastic they grew over it.

"This'll beat their breaking-up of our dinner all to pieces," said Fenn. "It's all to the merry. They'll wish they'd let us alone."

"There's one point we almost overlooked," said Frank, just as the chums were about to disperse.

"What is it?" asked Fenn.

"To make the plan work right we've got to get on the floor where the dance is going on, and I don't believe we can. Those fellows will have every entrance guarded."

"Leave that to me," spoke Ned. "I know that old dance hall like a book. There's an entrance they'll never guard and we can use that."

For the next few days the four chums were busy at home every spare moment. Their folks wondered what was in the wind, but the boys kept their own counsel.

"Have you got any cheese?" asked Bart of his mother one evening.

"What for? Are you hungry?" asked Alice, looking up from the first-aid-to-the-injured book that she was studying.

"No, but I'm going to feed it to those who are hungry," her brother replied.

"Do you want it for some poor persons?" asked Mrs. Keene. "I think, Bart, I can give them something better than cheese."

"No; cheese is just what's wanted," Bart answered. "You see it's a secret."

"Oh, I guess he's going to have some sort of an initiation in a secret society!" exclaimed Alice. "Tell me about it, Bart, I'll never breathe a word of it, really I won't."

"I'd like to, Sis, but I can't," Bart replied. "It's very secret."

Bart got the cheese and took it to his room. Alice tried to tease him into telling her what he wanted of it, but Bart maintained a provoking silence.

"All right!" declared Alice. "I'll never tie your hand up again, if you hurt it with your shotgun," referring to an incident when Bart had slightly injured several of his fingers by the premature discharge of his gun.

"I don't intend to get shot again," Bart made answer. "Really, Alice, I'd like to tell you about this, but you'll hear about it soon enough."

"When?"

"Saturday night, maybe."

"But I'm going away Saturday night."

"Where?"

"To a dance."

"A dance, eh?" and Bart looked interested. "What dance?"

"Why one the first-year boys are getting up. I've got an invitation."

"You don't mean to say you're going to the racket the Upside Down Club is going to give?"

"Yes; why not?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Yes, there is something. I can tell by the way you act."

"Well, I didn't think a sister of mine would go to an affair given by the enemies of the Darewell baseball team."

"Oh, you're mad just because they played a trick on you about your dinner. That's nothing. I'm going to the dance just the same. So you'd better tell me now what you want the cheese for."

"Oh, if you go to the dance you may hear of it there."

"Now, Bart, I think you're real mean! Please tell me! How can I hear of it at the dance?"

"Run along now, Sis, I'm busy," and Bart, with a provoking smile, shut the door of his room. Alice waited a minute, and then, hearing her brother moving about among his possessions, and realizing that it was useless to tease him further, went downstairs.

"I don't care," she said to herself. "I'll have a good time at the dance, anyhow."

Preparations went on for the little informal affair the boys of the Upside Down Club were to give. They tried to

keep it a secret, but it was impossible. However, they took precautions to prevent any unbidden ones gaining access to the hall. The place was kept locked all day, and in the evenings, while the work of decorating it was under way, there were enough of the first-year boys on hand to prevent any untoward acts on the part of their enemies.

The four chums had taken a few of their closest friends of the nine into their confidence, but they kept matters so quiet that none of the Upside Downs suspected that a plot of vengeance was afoot. While the first-year boys did not ask any of the other male pupils of the school to the dance, they were not so strict with the girls, and a number from all the classes of the institution were bidden to the affair.

"The more the merrier," said Ned, when he heard of this. "It will be the talk of the town Monday morning."

"If it works out right," put in Fenn.

"Oh, it will work out right," Ned said confidently.

The night of the dance came at last. Alice put on her prettiest dress, and, as she was leaving she saw her brother, attired in an old suit of clothes, lounging in his room.

"I thought you were going to tell me about that secret to-night," she said.

"The night isn't over yet," Bart replied. "There's time enough."

So Alice went to the dance. She found many other girl acquaintances there, and scores of boy friends among the members of the Upside Down Club.

Bart, who had remained in his room all the evening, was started from a reverie about nine o'clock by a whistle out in the street.

"There are the fellows!" he exclaimed, and, catching up his cap, and taking a package, from which sounded a mysterious scurrying and squealing, he went out.

In front of his house he met Ned, Fenn and Frank. Each one had a bundle similar to the one Bart carried.

"Got plenty of 'em?" asked Ned.

"About two dozen," was the answer.

"You had better luck than I. I got fifteen."

"I have twenty and Fenn has ten," put in Frank.

"That's enough to break up a dozen dances," spoke Ned. "Come on now, we've got to do a bit of climbing."

The hall, where the dance was being held, was over the drug store. This was in the center of a business block, the drug structure being higher than any of the buildings amid which it stood. The ballroom was on the top floor.

"Have you arranged about getting in?" asked Fenn.

"We can't get in," Ned replied. "They've got every door doubly guarded, for they suspect we're up to something. In fact we don't want to get in. I have a better way. Come along."

Ned led the way, through back streets until he came to a certain high fence.

"One of us has got to climb over and open the gate," he said. "After that the rest is easy."

Bart, being a good climber, was soon over the obstruction, and admitted his companions to a yard in the rear of a group of buildings.

"Where are we?" asked Fenn.

"We're in back of Williamson's hardware place," replied Ned. "That's right next to the drug store. We're going to the roof of that, and when we get there we can go up a short ladder until we get to the roof of the drug store."

"How did the ladder get there?" asked Frank.

"I bribed a telephone lineman, who was stringing some wires on the buildings yesterday, to leave it there."

"But what are we going to do when we get on the roof of the drug store?" asked Fenn.

"You watch and you'll see," Ned answered.

By means of an outside stairway, and by climbing up on a rear porch, the boys reached the roof of the hardware building. Thence it was an easy task to get on top of the structure in which the dance was being held. They could hear the music below them, and the sound of merry feet tripping to the melody of a two-step.

"There's a scuttle near the center," Ned spoke. "Walk quietly now. It's a tin roof, and they may hear us, in spite of the music. Go easy!"

They found the scuttle, and it was unlocked. Ned had seen to that, by giving a judicious hint to the janitor of the place the day before. The boys cautiously removed the covering to a hole that led into a sort of attic or ventilating space. A few minutes later the four chums were in a dark loft, looking through the grating of a ventilator in the wall right down on the dancing floor.

"My, but they're having a good time!" exclaimed Ned in a whisper. "It seems a pity to spoil it."

"Pity nothing!" exclaimed Bart. "What did they do to us? Besides, there's no harm in this. There'll be a little screaming from the girls, but that's all."

"Have you got 'em in paper bags?" asked Ned, as he began to open the box he carried.

"Sure," replied Bart, and the others answered in the affirmative.

"When I open the grating just toss the bags out, right in the middle of the floor," Ned went on. "Do it quick, as I want to close the ventilator before they see where the things come from."

An instant later Ned had opened the ventilator grating, which he had previously loosened. Then, through the air, went sailing four paper bags. They struck almost in the middle of the ballroom floor and burst.

Then from the bags there scampered over three score mice, rushing, running, leaping and darting amid the dancers, with frightened squeaks and squeals.

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the noise of the rodents. Then every girl in the room, and there were forty of them, uttered a frightened scream and rushed for a place of safety.

"A mouse! A mouse! Oh, save me!" was the universal cry, and the music came to a stop in a crash of discord as the dance was most effectually broken up.

CHAPTER VIII

FRANK IS WARNED

All over the room ran the mice, and all about darted the frightened girls. The boys were, at first, too surprised to know what to do, but, at a rallying cry from someone, they started after the mice. However, they had no weapons to kill the rodents with, and had to be content with taking kicks at them as they darted past, seeking means of escape.

"Couldn't have worked better!" exclaimed Bart, as he and his chums watched the scene from where they were hidden.

"I hope none of the girls faint," said Fenn.

"Oh, Stumpy's getting worried about Jennie, I s'pose," remarked Ned.

"No danger of any of 'em fainting," said Bart. "They're too much afraid a mouse would bite 'em."

So it seemed, for the girls contented themselves with screaming and getting up on whatever offered in the way of chairs or benches.

Meanwhile the mice, bewildered by the lights, the noise and the strange place, were running about, squealing as loudly as they could. Every time one of the frightened creatures came near a girl, or a group of them, the cries of the damsels drowned the squeaks of the rodents.

The boys of the Upside Down Club were at their wits' ends, for they could wage no effectual warfare against the mice. One or two of the committee of arrangements scurried around until they secured brooms, but by this time the mice had hidden in corners, whence they scurried out occasionally, to the great fright of the girls.

The dance had come to a sudden end, for the girls, even after comparative quiet was restored, refused to venture on the floor. Even Alice, who was braver than most girls, stayed in a corner.

"Who did it?"

"Where did they come from?"

"How did it happen?"

These and many more questions were heard on every side. The paper bags from which the mice had burst were still in the center of the floor. Some of the first-year boys picked them up. From them dropped slips of paper on which were printed:

COMPLIMENTS OF THE DAREWELL BASEBALL NINE.

"I thought so!" exclaimed Walter Powell, the chairman of the arrangement committee of the dance. "The Darewell Chums had a hand in this. We must find 'em, fellows!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Ned to his companions in the ventilator space. "We'd better skip. They may find us."

They went out as they had come in, and soon were on their way home.

"Talk about getting even," remarked Fenn. "I guess we did it all right!"

"I caught all the mice in our house," said Ned. "Dad says he wishes I'd take the job steady, though he didn't know why I was doing it."

"Alice tried to find out one night what I was going to do with the cheese I got to bait the trap with," Bart remarked. "I guess she knows now."

Meanwhile the boys of the Upside Down Club, much chagrined at the unexpected ending of their entertainment, were trying to induce the girls to go on dancing. They said all the mice had gone, which was probably true, but they couldn't get the young ladies to believe it.

"I'm going home!" declared Jennie Smith, and several other girls decided to go with her.

The boys made an ineffectual search for those who had played the trick. They soon discovered that the bags had been thrown through the ventilator, but, by the time a committee of investigation had gone to the loft, the four chums were far away.

"We'll not say anything about this at school, Monday," Ned remarked as the chums prepared to separate that night. "Let it come from the other fellows."

"Oh, it will be town talk by to-morrow," declared Frank, as he started off down the road toward his uncle's house.

Mr. Dent's residence was about a mile outside of Darewell. The road leading to it was well lighted up to within half a mile of the Dent place, and then the lamps were few and far apart. Frank hurried on, thinking of many things besides the trick of the mice, for he had a real trouble, and one he had not yet shared with his chums. It was bothering him, and had been for some time. He wished he had someone he could take into his confidence.

As he neared his uncle's house he noticed there was a light in the sitting room. This was unusual, as his uncle and aunt were in the habit of going to bed early. They left no light for Frank, who had a key to the front door, and who carried matches to light the lamp always left on a table for him.

"I wonder if any one is sick?" the boy thought, as he approached the house.

He turned up a side path, as he wanted to get a drink at the well before going to bed, and the water in the house was not likely to be fresh. As he advanced cautiously through the darkness he heard voices, coming, evidently, from the direction of the front porch. Frank halted, and, as he did so, he heard his uncle's tones. Mr. Dent was saying:

"Of course it's too bad, but if he's violent, there's only one thing to do."

"That's all," the voice of a man replied. "We will have to keep him in the sanitarium for a while yet. I am just as sorry about it as you are. But we must not let the boy know. It might have a bad effect on him."

Frank started. All his troubles seemed to come freshly to his mind. He knew the man talking to his uncle had something to do with them, and he resolved to find out more about the matter. He remained silent, hoping to hear additional talk, but the two had concluded their conversation, and the stranger could be heard walking down the gravel path toward the front gate. That was what the light had meant. Mr. Dent had received a visitor, and Frank determined to find out who it was.

"Well, I'll see you again when necessary," the stranger called to Mr. Dent. "Good-night."

"Good-night," replied Frank's uncle, as he went into the house and shut the door.

Frank waited until the stranger was out on the path in front of the house. Then, keeping as much as possible in the shadows, the boy followed. He stole along, walking on the sod to deaden his footsteps, and soon found himself on the main highway. Just ahead of him he could see the figure of the man. He tried to see if he knew the stranger, but it was too dark.

"But I'll find out where you go," Frank declared to himself, "I'll get on the track of this mystery sooner or later, and I guess I've got a good start now."

All unconscious of being followed, the man hurried on. He seemed to know his way, for, though it was dark, and the path was uneven, he kept on at a good pace.

Frank was drawing closer, in the eagerness of his pursuit. He was not as careful as he had been to walk on the sod, and, after he had gone about half a mile, the boy suddenly stepped on a loose stone which made him slip. The sound was heard by the stranger, who was about one hundred feet in advance, and he turned quickly.

"Who's there?" he asked sharply.

Frank did not answer.

"Who's there?" the man inquired again, and there was menace in his tones.

Frank crouched down to get in the shadow of a big tree.

"I know someone is following me," the man went on, in a sharp voice. "Whoever it is I warn him he had better come no further. If it's money you're after I'll tell you I am armed, and I'll not hesitate to shoot. If it's a beggar I have nothing for you. If it is anyone else I warn him I will stand no trifling. I will say nothing to you, and if you follow me you do so at your peril. Be warned in time and go back. You must not meddle in this affair, whoever you are. I shall protect myself if I am attacked!"

The voice ceased, and there sounded a click in the darkness, that might indicate the man had cocked his revolver. Frank did not move. He hardly breathed. He did not know what to do, for he had not counted on being discovered.

"Remember! Follow me at your peril!" the man exclaimed again. Then, turning quickly he ran ahead in the darkness, and was soon lost to sight.

CHAPTER IX

A STRANGER IN TOWN

Dazed by the sudden ending to his chase, Frank remained a while standing by the tree. He had half a mind to ignore the warning and keep on after the man, but on second thought felt it would be an unwise thing to do.

"I must try another plan," the youth said to himself. "I will get at the bottom of this mystery concerning me. I did not know Uncle Abner was mixed up in it. I wonder if I had better ask him about it?"

Frank debated this question in his mind as he went back home. Then he decided he would say nothing about what he had overheard until there was a chance of learning more about it.

"Is that you, Frank?" his uncle asked him, as the boy went into the house a few minutes later.

"Yes, uncle."

"Well, be sure you lock up well. There have been thieves about, I hear, and we don't want 'em to get in here."

Frank wondered at his uncle's caution, for Mr. Dent was not usually nervous. It was also news to Frank to learn that there were thieves about.

"Have you seen any?" he asked his uncle.

"No, but Jim Peterson's hired man was over a while ago, and told me his dogs had barked at some tramps passing in the road. There are strangers in the vicinity, I guess."

Frank wondered if the dogs had barked at the stranger who had been at the Dent house a little while before, but he said nothing about it, and, soon went to bed.

As the chums had anticipated, the breaking-up of the Upside Down Club dance created more talk among the High School pupils than had anything else in the line of sports and fun since the institution was built. The members of the ball team, and their friends, who had been let into the secret, preserved a discreet silence about the affair, and would answer no questions.

Although it was generally believed that the four chums had been the prime instigators of the affair, they would admit nothing, and many were the conjectures about the mice.

As for the girls, after their first fright, they laughed as heartily as did the boys over the sudden ending of the dance. The only pupils who seemed angry over the matter were the boys on the dance committee, who were incensed at the breaking up of the affair.

"I know those Darewell Chums had the most to do with it," said Denny Thorp, who was the leader of the crowd that had captured Ned. "I'll get even with them."

"It looks to me as though they had gotten even with us," remarked Peter Enderby, Denny's chum. "They paid us back, good and proper."

"That's all right. What we did wasn't half as mean as letting those mice loose and spoiling the dance."

"Oh, get out!" exclaimed Peter. "It's all in sport. What's the use of getting mad?"

But Denny declared he was going to watch his chance to pay the Darewell Chums back with interest.

But, though the four friends heard of Denny's threat, they were not alarmed over it. They felt they could hold their own. From then on, however, there was open warfare between the Upside Down Club members and the baseball nine and their friends, and many were the tricks each side played on the other.

One afternoon, about a week later, Jim Morton, who was watching a crowd of boys playing on the school campus, hailed Bart, as the latter, in chase of the ball, ran toward where Jim was lying stretched under a shady elm tree.

"What is it?" asked Bart

"I've been waiting until someone would knock a fly over in this direction, so's you come close," Jim went on. "I wanted to speak to you."

"Speak ahead," Bart went on, as he threw the ball back.

"Do you want a job as guide?"

"Guide? What do you mean?"

"I met a man the other day, stranger in town, I guess, and he asked me if I'd show him the corduroy road through the woods. I told him I had to go to school, and he said Saturday would do. But I don't just feel like taking the job. I've got spring fever I guess. To-morrow's Saturday, and he expects me to go to the hotel after him, and show him the road. But I know I'll be tired tomorrow and I thought maybe you'd like the job. He says he'll give five dollars."

"Oh, I don't know," Bart replied, somewhat surprised at what Jim told him. "What sort of a man is he?"

"He has red hair, that's all I remember. I was sort of sleepy the day he met me, and I didn't take much notice."

"How'd he come to ask you?" inquired Bart, wondering why lazy Jim had ever been requested to do anything.

"Sandy Merton told the man about me. The man went to Sandy first, said he heard Sandy knew the woods pretty well. But Sandy works for a farmer every Saturday, and he couldn't go, so he recommended me. Said it would be easy work, but I don't fancy tramping through the woods. Do you want the job?"

"Sure, I'll take it," Bart replied. "It'll be fun. I wonder if he only wants one boy?"

"I guess he doesn't mind. Said I could bring a friend along if I wanted to. Here, I'll give you his card, and you can inquire for him at the hotel," and Jim extended a bit of pasteboard on which was printed the name:

JACOB HARDMAN.

"I'll go see him," Bart remarked. "Sure you don't want the job, Jim? Five dollars is a nice bit of money to pick up for just going to the corduroy road."

"I—got—spring—fever," murmured Jim, and Bart saw that the boy's eyes were closed as though he had gone to sleep.

"Queer he had energy enough to tell me that much," remarked Bart, as he moved off. "Just like him, to lie here and wait for a chance ball to bring me in his direction. Jim certainly is the limit when it comes to laziness."

That evening Bart went to see Mr. Hardman at the hotel. He found the stranger pleasant enough, and, as Jim had said, with a wealth of thick red hair.

"You're the third boy that has been engaged for this work," said Mr. Hardman with a smile, when Bart had explained his errand. "I hope you will not fail me. You see I am a stranger in this locality, and I'm thinking of buying land for a house, if I like the place. But I'm fond of solitude, and I have heard that the woods, through which the corduroy road runs, are just about what I want. I don't wish to get lost, so I thought I would hire one of the town boys to show me around. Do you know your way through the forest?"

"Quite well," Bart replied. "I have camped there. The road is easy to find, but it winds in and out, and you might get lost, as there are several branches to it. What time do you want to start to-morrow?"

"About nine o'clock. You might bring a couple of friends, if you like. I'm fond of company. Is it worth while to take lunch?"

"Well, we could hardly go there and back before dinner."

"Then we'll take something to eat," Mr. Hardman went on. "Here are two dollars. Get some sandwiches and things, and we'll have a little picnic in the woods."

In spite of the man's apparently hearty manner Bart felt an indescribable aversion to him. Mr. Hardman was pleasant enough, but he had a habit of shifting his gaze around as he talked and he did not look one squarely in the eyes. But Bart gave only a momentary thought to that. He was wondering whether he had better bring his three chums on the trip. He was about to ask the man if he would object to a party of four boys, but Mr. Hardman evidently considered the incident closed, for he bowed to Bart and opened the door of his room, where the interview had taken place.

"I'll bring 'em anyhow," Bart decided, as he went downstairs. "He didn't mention any special number. Besides, I don't know the road any too well, and the others can help me out."

Bart told his three chums of the matter that night. Fenn and Ned said they would go, but Frank declared he had to do some errands for his uncle and would not be through in time.

"I may walk out that way and meet you," Frank said. "I expect to be finished shortly after dinner. Are you just going to the road and back?"

"I don't know how far he may want to go," Bart answered. "We'll probably be gone all day."

"Wish I could go," Frank said, but, as he spoke, his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere.

"Frank's getting stranger than ever," remarked Ned, as the former left Ned's house where the four chums were talking that evening. "I wonder if he doesn't want to go?"

"I guess he'd like to, if he could," Bart replied.

"Do you know anything about this Mr. Hardman?" asked Fenn.

"Only what I've heard," Bart answered. "He came to the hotel about a week ago. Seems to have plenty of money. Treated me very nicely, but, somehow I don't like him, and I can't give any reason for it."

"Did you get the grub with the money he gave you?" asked Ned.

"Yes."

The next morning the three chums went to the hotel. They found Mr. Hardman waiting for them.

"On time I see," he remarked, as Bart introduced Ned and Fenn. "It's just the morning for a nice long tramp. I hope you boys are good walkers."

"I guess we can keep up with you," Bart replied, and they started off.

CHAPTER X

MR. HARDMAN'S QUEER ACT

It was about five miles from the hotel to where the corduroy road began to wend a tortuous way through the big woods back of the town of Darewell. It was the same road over which the chums had traveled the time they went camping just before the previous Thanksgiving, during which excursion they had shot considerable game.

They walked out through the suburbs of the town, and soon were in the open country. Then came a stretch of woodland, and, after a mile of this, the chums turned aside into a denser forest.

"Here's the corduroy road," said Bart, pointing to where the log highway began.

"Ah, indeed," remarked Mr. Hardman. "Quite interesting. Made of little logs laid side by side. To prevent wagons from sinking down into the mud, I suppose?"

"It isn't used much nowadays," volunteered Fenn. "It was built by the loggers when they were cutting some timber, but that was several years ago."

"Where does it lead to?"

"Right into the middle of the woods, and then it stops," replied Bart, thinking of the winter day they had last traveled over the road, and recalling what events had followed the discovery of the Perry family, suffering in the forest hut.

"We'll take a walk along it," Mr. Hardman went on. "It seems to be just the sort of locality I'm looking for. Quite lonesome enough to suit me."

It was pleasant in the forest that June day. On either side of the road grew tall ferns and there were many wild flowers. The birds were flitting through the branches, and, in spite of the rather queer expedition they were on, the boys enjoyed themselves. As for the man they were guiding, he was content to walk along, stopping, here and there, to look through the forest, or gather some flowers.

"Is there any particular place you want to go to?" asked Bart, when they had been walking on the road for perhaps half an hour.

"I thought you said the road did not lead anywhere."

"Neither it does, but there are paths through the woods branching off the road, and if you wanted to get to a certain spot I think we could take you there."

"No, I only want to see how the road runs. I am not looking for any particular place. But these paths you speak of, are they easy to find?"

"Not unless you know the woods pretty well," put in Ned.

"Ah! Then I suppose a person coming—say from the other side of the forest—would have difficulty in reaching the road and getting into Darewell?"

"It would be quite hard, I imagine," said Bart, "We have never been to the other edge of the forest. It is about ten miles in extent, and we have only been about half way through. It is pretty wild, the farther in you go."

"So much the better," Mr. Hardman murmured. "Now boys, are you ready for lunch? I confess the walk has given me an appetite."

"The same here," admitted Fenn with a laugh.

They sat down on a grassy bank, and ate the food Bart had purchased. Mr. Hardman seemed to be thinking of many things, for he hardly spoke during the impromptu meal, and, when he had eaten a couple of sandwiches he arose from the bank and wandered off a little way into the woods. When he came back he addressed Bart:

"Are you sure no one—er—say a sick person—could get from the other side of the forest to this road?"

"Well of course it's possible," admitted Bart, "but I don't believe a sick person, or a well one, either, could get here without a lot of trouble. There are no paths to speak of, so I've heard old hunters say."

"That's good," Mr. Hardman remarked, half to himself. "That's just what I want. Is this the only road leading into the woods from Darewell?"

"The only one," replied Bart.

"Then I guess I've seen enough."

"Do you think you'll build a house here?" asked Ned.

"Build a house here? What do you—Of course. Well, I like the place first rate. I must come again some day. I think we'll go back now. By the way, I must pay you," and he handed Bart the five-dollar bill.

"I'm much obliged," Bart said. "I'm afraid it was hardly worth so much. It was a regular picnic for us."

"So much the better," replied Mr. Hardman with a smile. "Now we'll go back."

They started to retrace their steps along the corduroy road, the boys wondering somewhat over the whim of Mr. Hardman. He had not acted like a man who had come to look for a place to erect a dwelling, and, though they expected some oddity in a man who preferred to live in the solitude of the forest, they could not account for his questions about whether or not a person could get from the farther side of the woods to the road.

For about an hour they tramped back over the way they had come. Mr. Hardman said little, and walked just ahead of the boys, who conversed among themselves. Just as they were nearing the end of the road he turned and asked:

"You are sure now there is no other way of going through the forest but this road?"

"Positive," replied Bart.

"You couldn't be mistaken?"

"Well, if there is a road no one in Darewell knows of it," put in Ned. "We've lived here a good many years, and have often been in these woods, and we never heard of any other road."

"That's good," Mr. Hardman responded, and he seemed well satisfied.

"I wonder if Frank will come to meet us?" asked Bart as Mr. Hardman resumed his position slightly in advance of the boys.

"You can't tell much about Frank lately," replied Ned. "I don't know what to make of him. I wish he'd tell us if he is in trouble, for we might help him. I know what it is to be worried about something and not have any one you can talk to. I found that out when I had to disappear in New York," and he laughed at the recollection, though at the time of his trouble he felt in a very different frame of mind.

"Well, we'll just have to let him alone until he's ready to tell us," said Fenn. "Hello!" he added, a moment later, "someone is coming along the road."

The chums stopped, as did Mr. Hardman. The sound of footsteps could be heard.

"Who is coming?" asked Mr. Hardman, and the boys thought he seemed alarmed.

"I don't know," Bart replied.

A moment later a figure appeared around a turn in the road.

"It's Frank!" exclaimed Ned.

"Who?" asked Mr. Hardman.

"Frank Roscoe; our chum," Bart said. "He has come to meet us."

"Frank Roscoe!" exclaimed Mr. Hardman, and the boys could see he was much excited.

"Frank Roscoe here! If I had known that!"

He turned suddenly and hurried past the boys, retracing his way along the corduroy road into the depths of the forest.

"I have forgotten some papers!" he exclaimed, not turning his head. "I must have left them on the bank where we ate lunch. I'll get them. Don't wait for me. I can find my way back."

Then he was gone, a curve in the road hiding him from sight. But by this time Frank had come up to his chums. He saw Mr. Hardman's sudden retreat, and had caught the words the man called back to the boys. At the sound of them Frank broke into a run.

"What's the matter?" cried Bart, surprised at his friend's action.

"I must catch that man!" exclaimed Frank, as he raced past his chums.

For a moment the three boys were so surprised they did not know what to make of it. The queer action of Mr. Hardman, in suddenly fleeing, was only equaled by Frank's pursuit.

"Let's go and see what it means," suggested Ned, as he turned to go back over the road.

The sun had gone under a cloud and the woods were quite dark, as the forest was dense at this point. The three chums hurried on in the semi-twilight. They had not gone far before they met Frank coming back.

"Did you catch him?" asked Ned.

"No. He must have turned off into the woods. What is his name? How did you fellows come to be out with him? What made him run back as soon as he saw me?"

"One at a time," suggested Ned. "We can't answer all those questions at once. What made you run after him?"

"Because I believe him to be a man who knows something I should know," Frank replied, for, though he did not tell his chums, he recognized in Mr. Hardman's voice the tones of the stranger who had been at his uncle's house one night and who had warned the boy back when Frank had attempted to follow.

CHAPTER XI

NEWS FOR FRANK

"Do you suppose he turned back because he saw you?" asked Ned.

"He said he had forgotten some papers," observed Fenn.

"Yes, and he said he must have left them on the bank where we ate lunch," responded Bart. "But did either of you observe him have any papers in his hands? I guess not. He didn't look at a single paper from the time we started. That was only an excuse."

"It's a queer mystery," remarked Bart, looking at Frank. "Can we help solve it?"

"I'm afraid not," Frank replied with a smile. "But come on, it's getting late."

"Perhaps we ought to stay and see if Mr. Hardman will come back," suggested Fenn. "He may get lost in the woods."

"I guess not," was Bart's opinion. "I think he knows these woods as well as we do."

"Then what was his object in having us show him the road?"

"Part of the general mystery," said Bart. "It's too deep for me. If Frank knows it, why perhaps he'll tell."

"I wish I could," their chum answered, and the boys noticed that he was quite solemn. "It's something that concerns me personally, and I am not in a position, yet, to tell any one. I have only suspicions to go on, and it would not be fair to tell them to any one, until I see how near the truth I am. I admit I must seem to be acting strangely, but I can't help it. I wish I had caught that man. I believe he holds the secret I wish to solve. Where did you meet him?"

Bart told the circumstances connected with taking Mr. Hardman to the woods, and of his curious questions.

"Tell me over again that one he asked about sick persons finding their way through the woods," Frank asked, and Bart repeated it. Frank seemed to ponder over it.

"I think I'll try to see him at the hotel," Frank remarked a little later. "He may come back tonight. If he does, and I can get any clues to what I want, I may have something to tell you."

"I think we can give you a piece of news now," Ned put in. "We have been keeping it a secret, thinking the time would come when you could make use of it. Well that time seems to have come now."

Then he related what had taken place the night he was kidnapped by the Upside Down Club, and detailed the

conversation of the two men in the vacant house.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Frank. "Are you sure they spoke about my uncle, and property and a sanitarium?"

"Positive," replied Ned. "Why?"

"It all fits in!" exclaimed Frank. "It bears out my theory. Now, if I could only find the place, I would have something to work on. Perhaps you fellows could help me!"

"We sure will, and you can depend on us!" cried Ned heartily.

"Thanks," replied Frank simply, but there was much meaning in the little word. "I may call on you sooner than I thought I could."

"Can't do it too soon for us," Bart made answer. "We want to get this thing cleared up. It's worrying you, Frank; isn't it fellows?"

"Yes, it is," admitted their chum. "It is worrying me and I want the secret cleared up, but I have to go slow. There are a number of persons involved, and I have to feel my way. The time may come when you will think I have done wrong, but when it is all explained you will say I'm right."

Frank's talk, his refusal to explain what he meant, and the strange scene, in which he and Mr. Hardman figured, was a great mystery to the three chums, but they felt they had no right to press Frank for an explanation. They could only wait until he told them what it all meant.

It was now getting dusk, and, deciding it was no use to wait for Mr. Hardman, the boys hurried back to Darewell. The first thing Frank did was to call at the hotel to make some inquiries regarding Mr. Hardman. But, beyond the fact that he was registered there as coming from New York, and that he seemed to have plenty of money, nothing could be learned. The man was not in, the clerk said, and was in the habit of going off and staying a day or two at a time. He had been at the hotel a little over a week, but seemed to have no acquaintances except Sandy, Jim and the three chums, if they could be so classed.

"Any luck?" asked Ned, as Frank stopped at his house that night, on his way back from the hotel.

"No, none," was the reply in hopeless tones. "But I'm going there again to-morrow. He may stay in, because it's Sunday, and I can get a chance to talk to him."

"Better not let him know you want to speak to him," suggested Ned. "If you do he'll make some excuse and slip out."

"I'll not send up my name when I inquire at the desk," Frank answered.

But his precautions were useless, for, when he called at the hotel the next morning, he learned that Mr. Hardman had come in at midnight, had paid his bill, and departed on the one o'clock train.

"Did he say where he was going?" asked Frank of the clerk.

"I don't know. The night man was on, but we don't generally ask our guests where they are going."

"I thought he might have left word where he wanted his mail forwarded."

"That's so, I believe he did," the clerk answered, for he knew Frank quite well. He looked in the letter rack, and found a slip the night clerk had left, directing that all mail for Mr. Hardman was to be sent to the general delivery, Lockport.

"Lockport," murmured Frank, as he left the hotel. "That is a town close to the other edge of the woods. I wonder what he can be doing there? Very well, if he's in Lockport I'll go there, but I'm afraid I'll have trouble finding him. However, I must try. He's likely to stop at a hotel, and there can't be more than two or three in Lockport."

Somewhat discouraged over his failure to find Mr. Hardman, Frank went back to his uncle's house. All that Sunday he remained indoors, though his chums called in the afternoon, and wanted him to go for a walk.

"Don't have any hard feelings," Frank said, when he declined the invitation. "I'm in no mood for walking or talking. I'll feel better tomorrow."

Then he went back to his room, to brood over his secret. He debated with himself whether or not he ought to tell his uncle what he had seen and heard, and ask for an explanation of the matter.

But Mr. Dent was rather a stern man, and, though he was very kind to Frank, he did not encourage confidences. So, after thinking it all over, Frank decided he would try, a little longer, to solve the mystery by his own efforts. He did not want to appeal to his uncle and be met with a refusal.

"I tell you what it is," Ned remarked, as the three chums walked away from Frank's house. "We've got to do something to cheer Frank up."

"What would you suggest?" asked Fenn.

"Let's have some sort of fun," replied Ned. "I've got an idea!" he exclaimed suddenly. "It will be a great joke! We'll play it on Jim Morton."

"Jim's too lazy to play jokes on," said Fenn.

"This is going to be a lazy joke," explained Ned.

CHAPTER XII

THE LAZY RACE

As they walked along, the three chums perfected their plans for some fun they hoped would take Frank's mind off his trouble for a while, and, at the same time, afford amusement for themselves.

"Besides it will be a sort of lesson for Jim," said Ned. "He's getting worse and worse. After a bit he'll be too lazy to draw his breath, and then he'll die and it will be our fault."

"I don't see how you make that out," declared Bart.

"Why, it's our duty to prevent him from dying by providing such contests as this I am about to arrange."

"Go ahead," put in Fenn. "We're with you."

The next Monday morning there appeared on the bulletin board in the boys' court of the high school this notice:

ATTENTION!

"Arrangements have been perfected for a grand free-for-all race, for the championship of the school. The affair will be in the nature of a handicap, and there will be three prizes, for the first, second and third winners. Any boy in the school may enter, and there will be no fee collected. The race will take place Saturday afternoon on the school campus. The distance and conditions will be made known at the time of the start. It is hoped that there will be a large number of entries. The more the merrier."

The notice was signed by the school athletic committee, of which Bart was chairman. At the noon recess Bart was besieged by a crowd of boys asking all sorts of questions about the contest, from the kind of prizes to be offered, to the distance to be run.

"I can't tell you any more than is in the notice," Bart answered. "All you have to do is to train for the race, and the committee will attend to the rest."

With this they had to be content. As Ned had suggested, this did serve to take Frank's mind off his troubles to a certain extent. He inquired about the contest, and, when he was sufficiently interested, his three chums took him to one side and explained that it was gotten up for the benefit of Jim Morton.

"Do you think you can get him to enter?" asked Frank.

"I guess so, if I talk to him right," Ned replied. Then he set to work to get Jim to become one of the contestants.

"Why, you know I can't run," Jim complained, when Ned broached the matter to him. "Besides, I don't believe in races. It takes too much time and strength. I'll live longer if I don't hurry so much," and Jim, slowed up in his walk, which was slow enough at best.

"But this is different," Ned went on. "You know you're giving the school a bad name by being so lazy."

"How?" asked Jim, in some surprise.

"Why, you've been made an honorary member of the athletic committee," Ned went on. It was a fact, but he had engineered the matter through. "Now how does it look to see one of our honorary members so lazy he won't even enter a contest? Besides, I think you could win this race, Jim."

"Me win? Why, you know I haven't ever run a race."

"But I think you can win this one," Ned went on, rather mysteriously. "If you'd only train a little bit I know you could beat lots of the fellows. Let me enter you as one of the contestants, and some of us fellows will practice with you nights."

"All right," Jim assented, rather flattered that the chums would go to so much trouble on his account. "I'll try, but I know I can't come in even third."

"You wait," counseled Ned.

The news soon spread that Jim had entered as a contestant in the race. And, what was more surprising, he had begun to train. Few of the High School boys believed it until they saw Jim speeding around the campus one evening, with Ned and his chums. Frank entered into the spirit of the joke, which only the four knew of, and there were impromptu brushes, in which Jim frequently came in ahead. This, of course, was all arranged to give the new athlete confidence in himself. As for Jim, he really seemed to be interested in running. At first he was so stiff, from lack of practice, that he ran like a lame cow. But in a few days he could pick up his heels to better advantage.

"We'll cure him when it comes to the final show-down," declared Ned. "We'll cure Jim of laziness, and it will be a fine piece of work."

"Best of all, though," said Bart, "Frank seems to have forgotten his troubles, and that's why we undertook this."

"If only he doesn't begin to worry, after the fun, we expect to have Saturday, is over," put in Ned, a little doubtful of his own experiment.

There were scores entered in the race, and that insured a good attendance at the event. In spite of many questions the chums refused to tell any details of the contest, and it was much of a mystery as ever Saturday afternoon, when all the boys, and quite a crowd of girls, were gathered on the campus. Ned got up on a box to make an announcement, and to tell the conditions of the race.

"Entries are not limited," he said. "We'll admit boys, girls, dogs, puppies or any animal that walks, flies or crawls."

There was laughter at what they all took to be a joke.

"I mean it," Ned went on. "If any of you have a dog or a goat you want to see race, put him in. We'll make the conditions and the prizes fit any person or animal," and there was more laughter.

"What's the distance?" inquired several of the boys who had donned racing trunks and spiked shoes.

"Five times around the campus," Ned answered. "That's about a mile."

"Where are the prizes?"

"They will be shown and awarded after the race. Now are you all ready?"

"Aren't you going to run this off in heats?" asked Lem Gordon. "There are too many to start at once."

"No, it's a free-for-all race, but those who have been in previous contests will have to start off first."

"Last, you mean, I guess," said Lem. "That's the proper way to handicap."

"Not for this race," Ned replied.

"Why not?"

"Because this is going to be a lazy race."

"A lazy race!" cried half a score of voices.

"Yes, a lazy race. The person or animal who comes in last, after making five circuits, wins."

"Are there going to be animals in this?" demanded Lem.

"Of course there are. This is free-for-all. Here is my entry," and Ned, turning over the box he had been standing on, disclosed a big mud turtle, that started to crawl away as soon as it got into the light.

"A mud turtle race!" cried Lem.

"Certainly! Why not?" demanded Ned, "This turtle has been trained against Jim Morton, champion lazy racer of the Darewell High School!" he went on in a loud voice, to make himself heard above the shouts of laughter. "Now, all ready. Come on, Jim, I believe you can beat the turtle if you half try!"

Such a yell as there was at this! The boys and girls realized the joke that had been played, and even Jim did not hesitate to join in the merriment, for he appreciated the trick which had been worked on him.

"One! Two! Three! Go!" cried Ned. "There goes the turtle!" and he pointed to where the animal was crawling along at a rapid rate. "Hurry up, Jim, or he'll beat you!"

"I guess not," Jim replied. "I'm going to take a rest. This training has tired me out," and he sat down on the grass.

"Any one want to compete against the turtle?" asked Ned. "Come on now. Remember, it's free-for-all."

But no one seemed to care to contest, and, amid yells and laughter at the manner in which they had been fooled, the boys began arranging impromptu races among themselves.

"You worked that pretty slick," Jim said, as the chums approached him. "You jollied me along in great shape. But I'll have to take lots of rest now, to make up for it."

CHAPTER XIII

VACATION AT HAND

"Well, you found out you could run if you tried," Frank remarked, as he looked at where Jim was sprawled on the grass.

"Oh, I knew it all along," Jim replied, "only I didn't want it to get out, for fear I'd have to enter all the contests. Maybe I'll go in the next real race," he added. "I've trained enough for three or four seasons I guess."

"I'm afraid you're not cured yet," commented Ned with a laugh. "It was all for your good, Jim."

"That's all right. I appreciate that, and I'm much obliged to you. Can I have that turtle?"

"What for?"

"Why, I thought maybe I could educate it," and Jim smiled.

"Go ahead; take it if you want to," Ned replied. "I had trouble enough catching it in the river."

Jim carried off the turtle, and the crowd of boys and girls, laughing and joking about the lazy race, gradually dispersed.

"Wonder what Jim wanted of the turtle?" asked Fenn, as the four chums walked along.

"Give it up," said Ned. "Going to train it to waltz maybe."

"More like he's going to play some joke on you for what you did," suggested Frank, who was in better spirits than his friends had observed him to be for some time.

And that was exactly what happened. When the chums got to school the next Monday morning, they were met with queer glances on every side. At last Ned demanded:

"What are you fellows grinning at? What's the joke? Tell us and we'll laugh too."

"Better go downtown and look in the drug store window," advised Lem Gordon.

The chums took the advice that afternoon. They found quite a crowd in front of the "Emporium," as the drug store was called. Working their way up to the window the four boys saw a queer sight.

A big box had been arranged to represent a pond, with rushes and grass growing around the edges. In the center was a little mound of stones, that were raised above the surface of the water with which the box was filled.

But what attracted more attention, than the accurate representation of a pond, was a big mud turtle resting on the stones lazily blinking at the crowds that stared at it, as though pleased with the homage paid. And, on a card hanging over the turtle, was this inscription:

"Winner of the Darewell High School annual lazy-race. Trained for the event by Ned Wilding, Fenn Masterson, Bart Keene and Frank Roscoe."

"I guess that's one on you," remarked Lem Gordon, as he joined the chums while they were looking in the window. "Jim got back at you all right."

"Yes, I guess he did," admitted Ned.

Nearly everyone in the crowd knew the four chums, and the boys were subjected to considerable chaffing over the notice about training the turtle. They took it good-naturedly, and when Jim Morton came strolling along, a little doubtful as to how the four lads would treat him, because of the joke he had played, Ned called out:

"That's a good one, Jim."

"Much obliged for that turtle," Jim responded. Then, as he walked a little way down the street with the chums he told them he had sold the animal to the drug store proprietor for a dollar and had suggested putting it in the window, to attract attention, and serve as an advertisement.

It now lacked but a few weeks to vacation time, and every boy in the school, including the four chums, was counting the hours until the classes would close for the summer.

"We haven't made our vacation plans yet," said Fenn one afternoon, when the boys were out on the river in their boat. "What are we going to do?"

"Let's take another boating trip, away up the river," suggested Ned.

"I was going to propose a walking trip, taking in the whole county and lasting three weeks," Bart put in.

"That's too much work," commented Fenn.

"You're getting so fat you're lazy," remarked Ned. "But I think myself walking is a little too tiresome."

"Oh, I only just mentioned it," Bart hurried to add. "I don't insist on it. Let's hear what Frank has to say."

"I'm in favor of going camping," was Frank's answer. "I think it would be fun to go to the farther end of the big woods."

"Away off there?" asked Ned in some surprise.

"That's a good distance," commented Bart.

"And lonesome," added Fenn.

"But it's just right for camping," Frank went on. "We don't want to put up our tent in the middle of a village. The wilder place we can find the better."

"There's something in that," Bart admitted. "I'd like to camp where we couldn't hear a railroad whistle or a factory bell. But what's your idea going so far into the woods, Frank?"

"Nothing in particular, I only happened to think of it," but Frank's manner showed that he had some reason for the suggestion, and did not want to tell his chums. Ned was the only one of the three who noticed it, however, and he concluded to say nothing, but to keep close watch over Frank.

"The far end of the big woods," mused Bart aloud. "That is the place Mr. Hardman was inquiring about. By the way, Frank, did you ever catch him?"

"No, he went to Lockport. I wrote to a friend there, as I didn't have time to go myself, and I got an answer that no one of that name was at any of the hotels. So I concluded there wasn't much use bothering any more. But I'll find him some day, and when I do—" Frank paused. His chums looked at him, wondering at the emphasis he put in his words. "But let's talk about camping," the boy went on. "What do you say? Shall we go to the woods?"

"Suits me," remarked Ned, and the others agreed that it would be as much fun, for the vacation season, as anything they could propose.

They were soon busy talking over the details, arranging about the tent and the cooking utensils, and discussing the best way of transporting their camp stuff. They made some inquiries the next day and learned that by going to Lockport they could enter the woods by an old trail, seldom used, and could travel much more easily than if they worked their way in by the corduroy road.

"That's what we'll do," decided Ned. "Then, Frank, maybe you can have a chance to find your friend, Mr. Hardman."

"I don't believe I'll look for him," Frank replied. "We'll not have much time in Lockport anyhow. I have another plan now," but he did not tell his chums what it was.

Two weeks later school closed, and the boys completed their preparations for going camping. They packed up their tent and other stuff and shipped it to Lockport. They followed it two days later, and one bright morning, having seen their things loaded upon a wagon, they started off for the depths of the big woods.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TELEPHONE WIRE

"Well, this is something like camping," observed Bart that evening, when, having pitched their tent in midst of a particularly lonely bit of the big woods, they sat down to rest. The selection of the spot had been Frank's, and, though his chums had wondered somewhat at it, they agreed with him that it was a good place.

There was a little stream running through the forest, not far from where they pitched their tent, and their first attempt was rewarded by a catch of several fine fish. Fenn, who had been elected cook, soon had them frying with some bits of bacon, and Bart, leaning back comfortably against a big tree, made the remark quoted above.

"Say, are you a visitor, or only a day boarder?" asked Fenn, as he looked up from his cooking and observed Bart. "There's lots to be done yet. Lanterns to fill, the cots to get ready, and a trench to dig around the tent to keep the water away when it rains. You'd better get busy."

"Just as you say," answered Bart good-naturedly. "I'm willing to do my share."

He got a shovel and began digging the trench. Ned was busy with the lanterns, and seeing that the guy ropes were tight, while Frank looked after putting the folding cots up, and getting out the blankets. In a short time the camp was in fair shape, and Fenn announced that supper was ready.

In the cool of the evening, after the meal, they sat about the tent, before the campfire, and felt very well satisfied with the place.

"To-morrow we'll take our guns and take a tramp through the woods," said Bart. "I don't s'pose there's anything much to shoot, but we may get a chance at a hawk or something."

"Hawks aren't good to eat," remarked Fenn.

"Who said they were? Just because you're cook you needn't think every time we take our guns we're going out to stock up the pantry. We'll kill the hawks and save the farmers' chickens. They'll appreciate that."

"I don't believe there's a farmer within two miles of here," commented Ned. "We're quite a way from civilization. It's five miles to Lockport, the nearest town."

Tramping through the woods the next day the chums found the forest even wilder than they had anticipated. There were no trails or paths to be seen, and it looked as though few, if any persons, ever visited the vicinity. But the boys liked it all the better on this account. As Bart had said, there were no sounds of civilization to be heard; no locomotive whistles or factory bells.

"I had no idea there was such a wilderness in this part of the country," remarked Ned, as they walked along,

looking in vain for something to shoot at. "I wonder if we'll come across a lonely cabin, where a hermit or a wild man lives?"

"It's lonesome enough for any sort of a hermit," said Fenn, as he paused and looked about him. The silence of the deep woods was broken only by the wind moving the branches of the trees, and by the songs of birds. "It looks like the jumping-off place. I guess—Hello! What's that?" and he pointed to something up in a tree.

"A hawk?" questioned Bart, raising his gun.

"No, it looks like a telephone wire."

"A telephone wire in these woods?" inquired Ned.

"That's what it is," Fenn went on, as he stepped back to get a better view, and caught sight of the two twisted strands of insulated copper. "There's no mistaking a telephone wire."

"That's queer," murmured Frank. "I wonder if—" then he paused. "Let's follow it and see where it leads to," he added, after a moment.

"What for?" asked Bart.

"Why, just to find out," Frank answered. "If there's a telephone wire there may be people near at hand!"

"I don't know's it makes much difference if there are," was Ned's comment. "These woods are open to any one who wants to come in, just as they are to us. Why should we bother to follow a telephone wire?"

"Oh, I just mentioned it," Frank hastened to add. "I'm not particular."

The wire was fastened to trees, about twenty feet above the ground, and ran in a zig-zag direction through the woods. It had evidently been put up by men not familiar with the telephone business, for no attempt had been made to go in a straight line, and, in some places the porcelain insulators were carelessly fastened to the trees. The wire was run through the branches with little regard for the safety of the conductor, and the boys noticed several places where better support might have been had for it, than was taken advantage of by those who put it up.

The chums tramped for an hour or more, coming across the wire several times in the course of their wanderings. Frank was generally the first one to see it, and finally Ned remarked:

"You must be very much interested in that, Frank."

"No, not specially. I'd like to know where it runs to, that's all."

"You can trace it this afternoon."

"Maybe I will."

Ned and Bart decided on a fishing trip that afternoon, and Fenn elected to stay in camp and fix his gun, which had gotten slightly out of order.

"What you going to do, Frank?" asked Bart.

"I think I'll take a nap in the tent."

Bart and Ned, taking their poles and lines, went up along the stream, to a deeper part which they had observed in their morning journey. Fenn brought his gun out in front of the tent and proceeded to take it apart. As for Frank, he stood about for a while, watching Fenn, and then, remarking that he thought he would stretch out on one of the cots, went inside the tent.

It was nearly two hours before Fenn had his gun fixed to suit him. Then, oiling and cleaning it, he took some cartridges and set up a mark to shoot at.

"Come on out and try your luck!" he called to Frank.

There was no answer from the tent.

"Come on out! It's too nice to sleep!" Fenn shouted again. He fired at the target, and made a bull's-eye, much to his surprise and delight. "I say, Frank!" he shouted. "Come on, I can beat you all to pieces!"

He ran to the tent and lifted up the flap. He expected to see Frank stretched out on one of the cots, but what was his astonishment to learn that the canvas house was empty. There was no sign of Frank, and none of the cots showed any signs of having been used since they were made up that morning.

"That's queer, I didn't see him come out, and I was in front of the tent all the while," said Fenn. "He must have slipped past when I was hunting for that little screw I dropped."

He felt a vague sense of uneasiness, for, though he tried to make himself believe that Frank had come out unnoticed by him, he was not as sure of it as he desired to be. He moved toward the back part of the tent, and saw something that caused him to utter an exclamation.

For there, plainly to be seen in the dirt floor of the tent, were marks, showing where someone had crawled out under the rear wall of canvas. The sod, which was not yet tramped down, was torn, and one of the tent pegs had been pulled up by the strain. There was a rear entrance to the tent, but it was tightly laced shut, and would have taken some time to open.

"Frank didn't want me to know he was going," said Fenn to himself. "He wanted to slip away for some reason. Now I wonder what it could have been? He's been acting very queer lately. I hope—"

Just then Ned and Bart came through the woods, carrying strings of fish.

"What's the matter?" asked Bart, as Fenn came to the flap of the tent, his face plainly showing something had happened.

"Frank's gone!"

"What do you mean? Off for a stroll in the woods? Well, that's nothing."

"No, he crawled out of the back of the tent while I was fixing my gun! He didn't want me to see him go! Boys, I'm afraid there's something wrong with Frank!"

SEARCHING FOR FRANK

For a few moments the three chums remained staring at each other. The news of Frank's disappearance came as a shock to Bart and Ned, just as it had to Fenn. And Fenn's last words set the others to thinking.

"What do you mean?" asked Ned.

"I mean that Frank's not himself lately," Fenn went on. "You must have noticed it as well as I."

"You're right," came from Bart. "There is something very strange about Frank, and I can't understand it. The more we talk about it the worse it seems."

"Unless—" began Fenn.

"Unless what?"

"Boys, I hate to mention it," said Fenn, with a strange air, and he looked all around as though he feared someone would hear him, "but I'm afraid Frank's mind is affected!"

"Do you mean he's crazy?" asked Bart, suddenly.

"No; not exactly that. But I think he has some secret trouble, and that he has worried over it so much he isn't quite himself. Don't you remember how interested he was in the King of Paprika," went on Fenn, referring to the incidents told of in the first volume of this series. "He thought the man was crazy, and he said he had been reading up a lot about insanity. I thought then maybe he had had some trouble in his family, and that might account for his not wanting us to seek to solve the mystery of the curious men."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ned. "Frank crazy? Why, he's no more crazy than I am!"

"I don't say he's crazy," Fenn went on, "but you must admit it looks queer the way he's been acting lately, and think of his escape through the rear of the tent. What did he want to run away for?"

"It certainly is odd," Bart admitted, "but I don't believe Frank's mind is affected. I think he has some secret which is worrying him, and, in time, he'll tell us all about it. Until then we can only wait."

"What had we better do now?" asked Fenn.

"Do? Why, nothing," answered Bart.

"When Frank gets ready he'll come back. Until then there's nothing to do."

The three chums talked over the matter from various sides. They agreed it would be better not to say anything to their comrade when he got back, as it might embarrass him to be questioned. As the afternoon waned away Fenn prepared to get supper, cooking some of the fish Bart and Ned had caught.

"Shall we eat, or wait until Frank gets back?" asked Fenn, as he noticed it was six o'clock.

"Let's eat," suggested Ned. "He wouldn't want us to wait."

The meal was not a very pleasant one, for, in spite of the assurances of Ned and Bart, to the effect that Frank was all right, and would soon rejoin them, all three felt a vague uneasiness they could not explain.

"Maybe he has lost his way," remarked Fenn, when it began to get dusk, and there was no sign of the missing boy.

"That's so," admitted Bart, more quickly than Fenn had supposed he would. "We'll take our guns and fire a few shots to give him the right direction toward camp. Come on."

Ned and Fenn got their weapons in a hurry. To do something was much better than to sit still and wait for something to happen. They put some logs on the campfire, more for cheerfulness than because it was cool, though it was a bit chilly in the woods after dark. Then they moved off from the tent, each one in a different direction, and began firing their guns. They stood, as it were, on the three points of a triangle, so that if Frank heard the shooting and came toward either angle he would strike camp.

But after half an hour of firing, at five-minute intervals, Bart suggested they wait a bit before shooting any more. It was now quite dark.

"If he's within a mile or two he's heard the guns," Bart said, "and he can find his way here easily enough. If he was so far off he couldn't hear them, we'd better wait until he wanders nearer before we fire any more."

"Do you think he's lost in the woods?" asked Fenn.

"I don't know what to think, Stumpy," replied Bart, who seemed to have taken charge of things. "It's rather funny, I must admit."

They waited about an hour and then began firing again. Between the shots they listened for a hail, but none came.

"If he heard us he'd fire an answering shot," remarked Ned, when, for a time, they had again desisted from their signaling.

"He couldn't," Fenn answered. "He left his gun in the tent."

"That's queer," Bart spoke. "If he knew he would be away after dark I'm sure he'd have taken his gun, though there's nothing worse than skunks in these woods."

"We'll fire some more, in about an hour," said Ned. "Then, if he doesn't come, we'll have to wait until morning and make a search. It's mighty strange, that's what it is."

"Probably he'll laugh at us for being worried," suggested Bart, with an attempt at a laugh that was rather mirthless. "Maybe he's night-fishing, or something like that."

"He didn't take any tackle with him," said Fenn. "All his things are in the tent. He just slipped out without a thing with him except his pocket knife."

Bart himself had not believed the suggestion about night-fishing, but he did not know what other explanation to make of Frank's absence.

Once more, toward midnight, the boys fired other signaling shots, but without avail. Then, with hopelessness, and something very much like fear in their hearts, they went back to the tent.

"We'll go to sleep, and make a good search in the morning," said Bart. "Why this is nothing after all. We've been in worse situations than this, a good deal worse. Look at the time we were hunting for Ned."

"But I was in a big city and Frank is in the big woods," put in Ned.

"I don't know but what the woods are safer than the city," observed Fenn.

The boys did not sleep much. They tried to, but every now and then one of them would awaken and, sitting up on his cot, would listen intently. He thought he had heard someone approaching through the bushes, but each time it was a false alarm. The fire was kept going brightly, in the hope Frank might happen to see it from a distance.

Morning came at last, and, with the first pale streaks of dawn filtering through the trees, the boys were up. They made a hasty breakfast, and then, taking their guns, and putting up a light lunch, they started off to search for Frank.

"Which way had we better go?" asked Fenn. "Shall we try separate ways, or all keep together?"

"Better keep together," replied Bart. "We have a compass, and can find our way back, but if we straggle off alone some of us may get lost, and none of us knows these woods well enough to chance that."

"But which way are we to go?" asked Ned. "There's no such thing as finding Frank's trail in these woods."

"I have it!" cried Fenn.

"What do you mean?"

"The telephone line! You remember how interested Frank was in that! Well, maybe he's following it up. Let's find that and maybe we'll find Frank!"

"Go ahead! It's a good suggestion!" exclaimed Bart.

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE FRANK WENT

No sooner had Frank entered the tent that afternoon when Fenn started to fix his gun, than he had slipped out under the rear canvas wall. He waited a moment after emerging, brushed the dirt from his clothes, and then started off through the woods.

"I guess I can get back before they miss me," he said to himself. "I must see where that line runs. It may be nothing, but I suspect it is one of the clues I am searching for."

He went forward at a rapid pace, and, in a little while, came to where the telephone wire was strung through the woods. Then he came to a halt and considered.

"Which way had I better go?" he thought. "Let me see, if I am right in my theory this line runs to Darewell and from there—That's what I have to find out. With the Darewell end I'm not concerned at present, but I must find where the other end is. Darewell is off to the left. To the right lies the unknown. I must go to the right."

With that he set off through the woods, following the telephone line. It was hard work, for the wire led through the thickest part of the forest, as though those who had strung it wanted to discourage curiosity seekers. Now it would cross some bog or swamp, and Frank had to make a wide circuit in order to avoid getting over his knees in water. Again it would wind in and out among the trees, as if the persons who put it up wanted to confuse any one who sought to trace where the wire ended.

But Frank was determined to solve the mystery, and he kept doggedly on. Several times he slipped and fell, and once he struck a stone that inflicted quite a cut on his forehead.

"If Alice Keene was here now," he murmured as he wiped the blood off, "she would get some of the practice she is so fond of. As it is I've got to doctor myself."

He washed the cut in a stream of water, and after resting himself kept on. Farther and farther he penetrated into the woods. He had a general idea of the direction in which he was going, and knew he could easily find his way back again, as he had but to follow the wire until he got to the point where he could strike back to camp.

"Maybe, after all my work, I'll find it leads to no place but a house in the woods where some rich man has come to spend the summer," Frank thought, but, even while he said this to himself, he did not believe it. He hoped the wire would lead him to something that would help him solve the secret that was so puzzling.

On and on he kept. It began to grow dusk, as the sun sank lower behind the trees, and the forest was quite dark. He could hardly see the wire now, and he was a bit worried. If he did not come to the end of it soon it meant he would have to stay in the forest all night, as he could not possibly find his way back after dark, for the wire would be invisible. It was, therefore, with a somewhat anxious heart that Frank watched the shadows lengthening and saw the wire becoming more and more faint to his view. Then, when he was about to give up, and look for a place where he might spend the night, though he doubted if there was one in the woods, he saw, through the trees, a large building. His heart gave a great thump, for, as he went on a little further he saw that the telephone wire ran to this building almost obscured from view.

"I have found it!" Frank exclaimed, half aloud. "Now to see what it is!"

He came to the edge of a clearing in which the building stood. He was about to press on, when he caught sight of a notice painted on a board and set up just at the beginning of the grounds. It read:

CLIFFSIDE SANITARIUM. PRIVATE GROUNDS.

"Sanitarium!" exclaimed Frank, as the memory of the conversation of the two men, of which Ned had told him, came to his mind. "I wonder if this can be the place. Sanitarium! Probably a place for mildly insane persons. That would be it. It says 'private grounds' and that likely means no trespassing; but what am I to do? I've got to stay somewhere to-night, and I can't possibly get back to camp. I'll make a circuit around the place and see how it looks."

Keeping in the shadow of the woods, Frank made a wide circle around the sanitarium. Then he came to a stop, when he was near the front, for he had come to the edge of a high cliff, on which the building stood.

"That's where the name comes in," thought the boy. "It's on the cliff. Well, I think I'll ask if I can stay all night. I

hope they don't take me for a lunatic, and perhaps some of the doctors or nurses can tell me what I want to know."

Frank was about to advance toward the front of the institution, up a path that led from the edge of the woods where he stood, when he saw a line of men leave the sanitarium, and start to walk around the paths about the building. At the first glance Frank knew what they were.

"They are the patients out for exercise," he decided. "I must get closer. They're coming this way. I'll hide in the woods," and, getting behind a big oak, the boy awaited the oncoming of the line of sad-faced men.

Slowly the patients filed past. They all seemed to be suffering from some ailment, mental or physical, and all had an unhealthful pallor. Walking ahead, in the rear, and on both sides, were men dressed in dark blue uniforms.

"Attendants," mused Frank, "though none of the patients look as though they were violent."

By this time the head of the line had turned and the sad little procession was moving away from Frank, as he stood behind the tree. The men in the rear were now passing close to him, and the boy, seeing that the end of the line was near, prepared to go forward when they all should have passed. As he was about to step from his place he caught sight of the face of one of the patients, and, as he did so, he uttered an involuntary cry. Before he was aware what he was doing, Frank had stepped from behind the tree.

Several of the patients saw him, and gazed curiously at the boy. One—the one at the sight of whom Frank had uttered the exclamation—did not look up. With his eyes bent on the ground he hurried on, following the man ahead of him. There was a little confusion, caused by some of the patients stopping to stare at Frank, and two attendants came up on the run. One of them saw the boy standing beside the big tree.

"Go away from here at once!" he commanded. "This is private property, and you are liable to arrest for trespassing. Don't let me catch you here again. Go, I say!"

The man's tone was so menacing, and he spoke with such authority that, for a moment, Frank was frightened. Then he began to realize that he had no right where he was.

With another glance at the patient, whose face had so startled him, Frank turned and went back into the woods. The march of the unfortunate one was resumed, and the keepers, seeing there was no further trouble, resumed their places. The one who had warned Frank remained for a few minutes, gazing at the spot in the woods where the boy had disappeared.

"Guess I can't stay there to-night," Frank murmured as he made off through the fast-darkening forest. "I wonder what I had better do?"

He paused and, through the trees caught sight of something that gave him hope. It was a big haystack in a little clearing, some distance from the sanitarium.

"There's my hotel for the night," Frank remarked, as he made his way toward it. In a little while he had burrowed down under the dried grass, and, trying to forget that he was hungry, he prepared to pass the night.

CHAPTER XVII

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

The three chums, starting on their search for Frank, soon found the telephone line.

"Now we're here, the next question is: Which way are we to go?" asked Bart. "It's all guess work."

"Not exactly," spoke Ned, and he used the same reasoning that Frank had, in deciding to follow the line as it led in the opposite direction from that of Darewell. "That's probably the way Frank would go," concluded Ned, pointing to the right, "and that's the way we want to go."

His companions agreed with him, and off they started. As they advanced they found the woods growing more dense, and, as had Frank, they had to make long circuits at times, to avoid bog-holes. They kept on for some time, but saw no signs of their chum.

"I wonder where he stayed all night?" asked Fenn.

"Trust Frank to look out for himself," remarked Bart. "He found a good warm place, I guess. But I don't see why he is staying away. If he was caught out after dark, and couldn't find his way back, he could see the trail by this time. I wonder why we don't meet him?"

"Maybe he's hurt," suggested Fenn.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ned. "There's nothing in these woods to hurt a fly. I don't believe there's even a fox."

"I didn't mean animals," Fenn went on.

"What then?"

"Why he might have fallen, or, he might have met some bad men."

"Of course he might have taken a tumble and sprained his ankle, or something like that," Bart said. "But as for men, if there are any in these woods, which I very much doubt, what reason would they have for harming Frank?"

"It might be in connection with that mysterious secret he seems bothered about."

"Oh, you're worse than a half-dime novel," cried Ned with a laugh. "Come on, and stop that dismal croaking."

Still following the telephone line, the boys went on. Now and then they stopped to listen for any sounds which might indicate that Frank, or any other person, was coming through the woods. But the forest was silent, save for the noise made by the wind and the birds.

Meanwhile Frank had awakened after a night of fitful slumber under the hay. His first act was to go to a place where he could observe the sanitarium. There was no sign of life about it, and the boy, after watching a few minutes, began to feel faint for lack of food.

"I'd better go back to camp," he said to himself. "I need some breakfast, and a good rest. Then I can start out again. But I can't tell the boys what I have seen. It is not yet time."

Waiting awhile, to see if he could detect any movement around the institution, but finding all was silence, Frank started back toward camp, following the telephone line.

He walked on for some time, pondering over what he had seen, and vainly speculating whether or not he was on the right track.

"I believe I'm on the trail," he said. "I thought he might know me, but, of course if it's true as it says in the letters, he could not. It might not have been the right time. I must try again."

Frank's meditations were interrupted by a noise in the woods just ahead of him. It sounded like someone coming through the bushes. Then he could distinguish voices.

"I wonder if I'd better hide?" he thought.

Before he could put that plan into execution there came around a turn in the trail he had made, in following the line, three boys. The next instant, with glad cries of welcome, the three chums hurried forward to greet their companion.

"Where in the world have you been?"

"What made you give us the slip that way?"

"Tell us all about it?"

Fenn, Bart and Ned, in turn, asked those questions. Frank looked from one to the other.

"I'm sorry, boys, but I can't tell you," he said. "I wish I could, and I hope you'll not think it mean of me not to. I may be able to very soon, and clear up all this mysteriousness, that is worrying me so. Until then—"

"Until then I think you'd better have something to eat," suggested Bart, noting how pale and tired Frank looked. "We brought along something, but we didn't expect to have the fun of sharing it with you. Sit down here and fill up. Fenn made the sandwiches so I guess they ought to be good."

"Yes, and if you'll wait a minute I'll give you a hot drink," Fenn cried.

From his pocket he produced a tin flask of cold coffee. He gathered up some dried sticks, and built a little fire. Then he placed the tin flask on it, and, in a little while there was a warm beverage ready. Frank sipped it from the collapsible cup Ned carried, and, after eating some sandwiches, felt better.

"Now for camp!" cried Bart, "unless," looking at Frank, "you have some other plan."

"No, I'm anxious to get back."

"Didn't sleep very good in the haystack I guess," commented Ned.

"Haystack! How did you know?" asked Frank, in excited tones.

"One look at your clothes, with hay sticking all over them, tells me that, as a detective would say. Also, your garments are as wrinkled as though you'd been put through a wringer. Am I right?"

"Yes, it was a haystack for mine last night," Frank admitted with a smile. "It was fairly comfortable, though it tickled my ears a bit."

The boys started back for camp. Though the three were, naturally enough, very curious as to where Frank had been, and his object in slipping away, they did not question him. On his part Frank did not again refer to his night's absence, but, when he reached the tent, he crawled into his bed and stayed there until late in the afternoon, for he was very tired.

"I wish we had our boat here," remarked Ned, as later on the four chums strolled off in the direction of the little stream.

"It would be too big for this creek," observed Ned. "If we had a smaller boat, or a canoe, it would do very well."

"Let's make one," suggested Fenn. "There's lots of birch bark here and we can do it in a few days."

"All right," agreed Bart. "We'll start it in the morning. I never made a canoe, but we can't do any worse than try, at any rate."

The boys found it harder work than they had expected, but they had plenty of time and knew something of boat building, for they had constructed several small craft.

They had their knives, and two small hatchets. They used young saplings for keel and the ribs, and, with patience, they managed to strip off enough of the birch bark to cover the canoe.

It took them two days to get all the materials together and then, when the canoe was roughly shaped, they had to spend much more time on it, rendering it water-proof by smearing the seams with pitch and gum which exuded from several trees near at hand. They had used withes of willow to bind the boat together, and, though it was a very crude looking affair, the boys thought it would serve for what they wanted.

They chopped out some rough paddles, and on the fifth day the boat was ready to try. They put it into the water in the evening, and, to their delight, it floated on an even keel, and would hold two of them at a time.

"We'll take turns making a trip to-morrow," said Bart. "It doesn't leak hardly any. It wouldn't take a prize, and it's not much on looks, but it's something to have made a canoe off in the midst of the woods, and with scarcely any tools."

His chums agreed with him, and that night they went to bed thinking of the fun they would have the next day.

Ned was the first to awake. He got up, in accordance with the rule that the earliest riser must build the fire. He looked over toward the cots where his companions slept. As he did so he gave a start.

"Frank is gone!" he called, and Bart and Fenn awakened.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CANOE TRIP

When the completed canoe had been set into the water that evening, a daring plan had entered Frank's mind. On

his visit to the sanitarium he had noticed that, at the foot of the cliff, there flowed a stream of water. He thought it might be the same one that ran past the camp, and he determined to learn if this was so.

"If it is, I can make the trip much more quickly than I did before," he said to himself. "I'll try it when the others are asleep."

Frank noted that the boat floated well on the water. It was light, and with one passenger could easily be propelled, so as to make swift time.

"I'll have the current with me going," the boy thought, as he noted that the stream ran in a general direction toward the sanitarium. "I'll have to paddle back against it. Of course maybe this is not the same creek or river that flows past the cliff, and there may be falls or rapids in it that I can't take the boat through. But it will do no harm to try."

He was all impatience for his companions to go to bed. Fortunately for him they were tired out with the day's labor on the canoe. They prepared an early supper, and, after talking a while around the campfire, discussing what they would do, now that they had a boat, the boys went to their cots.

Frank's bed was nearest the back wall of the tent, and he was glad of this, as it would make his exit easier. He thought his chums would never go to sleep, but at length their heavy and regular breathing told him they were slumbering.

Cautiously he gathered his clothes in a bundle and shoved them out under the tent. He had, unknown to his companions, made up a package of food, as he did not want to get caught again with nothing to eat. Making no noise, he crawled under the tent, as he had done before. He looked at his watch. It was a little after ten o'clock. He hurriedly dressed outside the tent, and then, securing the paddle, he made his way to where the canoe floated in the creek.

It was a bright moonlight night, warm, calm and still. Frank felt just a little uneasiness as he stepped into the boat and shoved off. It was rather a queer thing to do, he thought, and he wondered what his chums would say if they saw him. But, he reflected, it was important to him to solve the secret which bothered him so greatly.

Paddling cautiously, Frank sent the frail craft out into the middle of the stream. There was not much current, but what there was helped him along. He urged the boat forward more rapidly as he left the camp behind, and soon he was half a mile on his strange night journey.

Only for the light draught of the boat Frank would never have been able to get along. Even drawing but a few inches, the canoe several times touched sand bars over which it glided. Frank did not know the channel, and he had to trust to luck. But, as he went on he noticed that the stream was becoming wider and deeper, and he had no fear but that he might continue on for many miles.

"If only it goes in the right direction," he murmured. "It may be an altogether different creek than this which flows past the cliff. If it is I've had all my trouble for nothing. I want to get back before the boys wake up, if I can."

On and on he went. The moon threw fantastic shadows through the trees to the surface of the stream. Now the boat would glide along in the darkness, caused by the overhanging branches, and again it would forge ahead into a bright patch of silvery light.

"I wonder if the telephone line is anywhere in this locality," Frank mused, after he had paddled for an hour or more. "If I could get a glimpse of that I would be reasonably certain I was going in the right direction."

He glanced overhead several times, but could catch no sight of the wire. Now the boat was going at a more rapid rate as the current was swifter. The stream twisted and turned, until Frank did not know in which direction he was going.

Suddenly, as he was paddling, he heard a sound that made him draw the blade from the water, and listen intently. It was the noise made by water dashing on rocks, and it seemed but a short distance ahead.

"Falls!" exclaimed the boy. "I've got to get out and carry the boat."

He kept on until, in the moonlight, he could see where there came a break in the stream as it tumbled over a little cliff. Swinging the nose of the canoe ashore, Frank grounded the craft and got out. He walked to the edge of the falls and looked at them. They made a beautiful picture in the moonlight, but it was a scene the boy found little pleasure in gazing at. It meant that he would have to carry the boat around them.

"Well, there's no help for it," he said, with a sigh. "Luckily the canoe is light."

Frank picked it up, and put it over his head and shoulders, as the Maine guides carry their frail craft. The way was rough, and before he was half way past the falls, Frank began to fear he could not make it. But he kept on, and half an hour later he floated the canoe into the quiet waters at the foot of the waterfall. Then he began paddling again.

It was past midnight when the stream, which had now become a little river, took a sudden turn. As he rounded it Frank uttered a half-suppressed exclamation. There ahead of him, perched on the cliff, at the foot of which the river flowed, was the sanitarium.

"That's what I wanted to know," he said, as he steered the canoe over toward the cliff. "I can't do anything to-night, but I might as well go up and take a look around. It may come in useful later."

Frank tied the boat in a sheltered spot at the foot of the cliff. Then he began to look for a path to ascend. Luckily the moon shone brightly on the face of the rocky incline, and Frank observed a path that seemed to afford a way up. Cautiously he began ascending. Up and up he went, until he stood on the top. Before him was a fence, with high iron pickets, put there evidently for the double purpose of keeping certain persons out, and certain other persons from falling over the cliff.

"Too risky to scale that," Frank mused, as he noted the sharp-pointed palings. "I'll walk along it a bit."

He started to make a circuit, going along the edge of the cliff, for he thought there might be a gateway in the fence. As he was moving cautiously along, looking for an opening, he was startled by a sudden challenge:

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

Frank glanced up, to see a man looking at him. The fellow was attired in the uniform of an attendant at the sanitarium.

"What do you want?" the man repeated sharply.

Several plans flashed through Frank's mind. Should he make inquiries of the attendant concerning that which he

so desired to know? He half resolved to, and then he realized that the man was but a keeper, and, probably, could not enlighten him.

"I'm looking for a friend," Frank said.

"No one allowed around here," the man went on. "This is private property. Be off, now, before I set the dogs on you."

Frank knew he could gain nothing by staying. He had found out what he wanted to know, namely, that the stream near the camp ran to the sanitarium. He turned quickly, and made his way to where he had ascended the cliff. The man was watching him, but, when he saw the boy disappear he was, apparently, satisfied, and went on walking around his post on the grounds of the institution.

Frank reached the canoe, shoved off, and began rapidly paddling back. With long strokes he sent the frail craft against the current, and, in about an hour he came to the falls. He carried the craft around them, and then set out on the last stage of his journey back to where his chums still slumbered.

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE SANITARIUM

Ned's cry of alarm, which had aroused Bart and Fenn, brought his two companions out of their beds with a rush. They looked over at the cot in which Frank slept, and saw that it was empty.

"Frank's gone," Ned repeated.

"What makes you think so?" asked Bart.

For answer Ned pointed to the empty bed, and to the stool, on which Frank usually placed his clothes. The garments were missing.

"Maybe he got up early for a walk," suggested Fenn.

"Sure; that's it," chimed in Bart, glad to have an excuse for explaining Frank's seeming disappearance.

"He's not in the habit of doing that," Ned remarked. "He's usually the last one up. I'm going to dress and take a look outside."

Ned lost little time in putting on his clothes. The other boys followed his example, and soon the three were outside the tent, standing in the bright morning sunshine.

"I wonder how our canoe stood the soaking it got last night?" observed Fenn, "Let's go to the creek and take a look. Frank may be back by then."

They went to the shore of the stream, where they had left their boat, but, to their great astonishment, it was gone.

"Worse and more of it!" exclaimed Ned. "I guess Frank has gone off in the boat."

"No guessing about it," replied Bart.

"Why not?"

In answer Bart pointed down the stream. There, paddling along, was Frank in the canoe. He waved his hands to his chums and they shouted a greeting to him.

"There I told you he'd just gone out to get up an appetite for breakfast," declared Fenn, as the canoe drew nearer.

Frank was a little uneasy as to how to greet his chums. He did not know whether or not they were aware that he had been away all night. But, as he beached the boat, one glance at their tousled hair, and their eyes, still heavy from sleep, told him he had only recently been missed. He knew how to act now, and, to further his plans, determined to let his chums believe he had been gone a short time only.

"Did you get the worm?" inquired Fenn.

"What worm?" Frank retorted.

"The one the early bird always gets."

"No, someone else was ahead of me," answered Frank, as Fenn's question confirmed his belief that his companions did not know of his night trip. "I was just out for a little paddle on the creek."

"How does she ride?" asked Bart, looking the canoe over.

"Fine; like a cork."

"You look as though you were pretty tired," commented Ned, with a curious look at his chum.

"I didn't sleep much last night."

"And I suppose you thought getting up early and paddling would rest you," Ned went on, but Frank did not answer.

"Come on, Fenn, hurry up with breakfast!" cried Bart, and soon the aroma of coffee filled the air.

Frank went to the tent to make a hasty toilet, while Bart, who was going fishing that day, followed him. Ned remained near the canoe. A little bundle in it attracted his attention. He picked it up, and opened it. Inside were several sandwiches, and Ned knew they had come from the camp supply.

"Frank took them with him in the canoe," he half whispered. "He has been away all night, and he had them in case he couldn't get back. I wonder where he was? I'll say nothing about this now," and, as he heard Bart approaching, he tossed the little package of food into the bushes. Puzzling over what Frank's object could have been, Ned went up to the tent.

Breakfast over, the boys took turns trying the canoe. It was a stancher craft than the three churns had anticipated, though Frank had good reason to know the value of the rude canoe.

"I'm going fishing," declared Bart, as he dug some worms and put them in a can. "Any one else coming?"

"I'd like to take a trip in the canoe," said Fenn.

"That would suit me," put in Ned. "It will only carry two, though. What are you going to do, Frank?"

"I think I'll just lie around to-day. I'm a bit tired, and I need a rest. I didn't get much last night."

"I'm right," thought Ned. "He was away all night. I wonder when this mystery will end?"

Bart started off up stream, while Fenn and Ned, in the canoe, began to paddle down the creek. As for Frank, he stretched out on his cot, and, almost before the boys were out of sight, he was asleep. He did not awaken until dinner time, and then he got the meal. His chums were not yet back, but they came in a little while, with appetites that made Frank glad he had provided a bountiful repast. Bart had caught a number of fine fish, and Ned and Fenn were so enthusiastic over their canoe trip that they wanted to take another in the afternoon.

"Give me a show at it," said Bart. "I haven't been in it except the night we put it into the water. I want some fun. Frank and I will take it this afternoon."

"I don't believe I care to," Frank replied. "The truth is," he went on, "I was going to ask you fellows to loan the boat to me all day to-morrow. I want to go off by myself. Not that I don't desire your company," he hastened to add, as he saw his chums looked a little surprised, "but I have something to do and I've got to do it alone. Please don't ask me what it is. It's that same thing I'm mixed up in, and I think, if things turn out right to-morrow, I may be able to tell you something. Besides, I may need you to help me."

"We'll be only too glad to!" exclaimed Ned. "For we don't like to see you so worried, Frank."

"It's very good of you, I'm sure, to bother with me," Frank went on. "I hope you can help me, for I'll need it."

"Well, who's going with me in the canoe?" asked Bart, and, as Fenn did not care much about making another trip, Ned went, and Frank and Stumpy remained in camp, the latter busying himself over a wonderful pudding he set out to make with a combination of eggs, corn starch, sugar and raisins.

Frank set off in the canoe early the next morning. He took a lunch with him, and told his companions he might be away all night. He was going to try, however, to return by dark. Where he was going he did not say, nor did his chums ask him.

"Good luck!" exclaimed Fenn, as Frank began paddling.

"Thanks," he called back, and his companions waved their hands to him.

"It's very queer," murmured Ned, as he turned back toward the tent.

Frank reached the turn of the river, near the cliff, just before noon. Instead of taking the canoe to the foot of the rock, he hid it in the bushes near the bend of the stream, and then began tramping through the woods toward the sanitarium. He ate his lunch in the woods, and then took up his position near the big tree, whence, on his first visit, he had watched the sad-faced men.

He had to wait several hours. At length the little procession appeared, and Frank's heart beat so loudly he could almost hear it. He stood up and watched the men. Yes, the one he wanted to see was there. How was he to communicate with the man?

Chance, seemingly, gave him the opportunity he desired. There was a little disturbance at the head of the line. One of the patients insisted on taking a different path than the one the attendant designated, and there was a dispute. The guards at the end of the line ran toward the head, leaving the rear men unattended.

Frank ran from behind the tree, toward the procession which had halted. He approached the man, the sight of whom, on the previous occasion, had caused him such wonder. This man did not look up.

"I must have a talk with you in private!"

Frank said, in a low but tense whisper. The man looked quickly at him. His eyes seemed to see nothing.

"Who are you? What do you want of me?" he asked in dull tones. "I don't know you. I know no one in this world."

"I must speak to you!" cried Frank, as he saw the attendants returning.

CHAPTER XX

THE INTERVIEW

For a moment the man whom Frank addressed remained staring dully at the boy. Nearer and nearer came the attendants, for the little excitement at the head of the line had been quelled.

"Your voice reminds me of someone," the man went on, "but I don't know you."

"I will tell you who I am, if you will tell me where I can see you alone to-night," Frank whispered, for the other patients were gazing curiously at him.

"I can go to the little summer house in the garden at the back," the man went on, as though it was of no interest to him. "This is my well night. I will be there at ten o'clock."

"I will meet you," Frank whispered, and then, seeing an attendant coming on a run toward him, the boy made a dash for the woods and disappeared.

"Who was that?" asked the guard, coming up to where Frank had stood conversing.

"It was the king of the cannibal islands!" exclaimed one of the other patients with a silly laugh. "He came to get me to enter into an alliance with him. I'm Lord Nelson, you know, and he wanted my fleet of ships to make war on the Queen of Fairy Land. But I refused. I am going to capture the Pyramids!" and the man began capering about like a child, singing nursery rhymes.

"Come, 'Lord Nelson,' you must get in line. This is dress parade," the attendant said.

But "Lord Nelson," as the insane man imagined himself to be, was not going to be coerced so easily. He started to run, and the keeper took after him. It was several minutes before "Lord Nelson" was caught, and, by that time, the guard had forgotten about Frank, and made no further inquiries. The patients resumed their march.

Frank, hurrying through the woods, felt himself in a tumult of doubts and fears. He wondered if he had done right,

and what would be the outcome of the interview in the summer house. So much might depend on it, yet so little might come of it.

"I am sure I'm right," the boy murmured, as he went to where he had left his canoe. "If he only will recognize me! Oh! if he only will! But it is so many years!"

He reached his boat, and paddled up stream, thinking it best to hide, in case there might be a search made for him.

Frank remained in the seclusion of the woods, near the stream until dark. He still had some lunch left, and he ate that, meanwhile planning what he would say at the interview with the patient from the sanitarium.

"I must get him away from here," Frank thought. "Perhaps there may be a means of curing him, and then he can tell me everything connected with the secret. Oh! if he only could!"

How long the hours seemed while he waited! He thought ten o'clock would never come, but at last, looking at his watch by the light of a match, he saw it lacked but thirty minutes of that time. "I'll start," he said to himself. "He may be there a little ahead of me."

Frank reached the edge of the woods, where they marked the beginning of the sanitarium grounds. From there he took a cautious look. There seemed to be no one in sight, and he quickly ran across the open space to the summer house. This was a vine-covered arbor, situated at the back of the institution. Inside was a circular bench running all around, and it was a favorite place of such patients as were well enough to be allowed to roam about at will.

Frank looked inside the little house before he entered. There was no one there, and he sat down on the bench. Then, with eyes and ears on the alert for the first suspicious sight or sound, he waited. He could hear the distant tramping of the guards as they paced about the institution.

"It's just like a prison," the boy thought. "What a horrible place to stay in!"

A clock, somewhere in the institution, struck the hour of ten, the sound being plainly audible through the opened windows. Frank started to his feet. As he did so he heard someone approaching along the gravel path. His heart was beating with quick, hard throbs.

"Is the young man, who wanted to see me, here?" asked a voice.

"Yes, I am here," replied Frank.

"What do you want? You are a stranger to me. I do not know what whim made me agree to meet you here. I am not usually well enough to see visitors. Indeed I never have any. What do you wish?"

"I have come to take you away from here!"

"Take me away from here?" and the patient spoke the words as though they frightened him. "I can't go. I must stay. Sometimes, when I am feeling well, as I do now, I might wish that; but those times are rare. Mostly I am very ill. My head hurts me, and I cannot think. My mind becomes a blank. Then I am glad I am here, and do not wish to go away. But why should a stranger take so much interest in me? Why do you want to help me to escape? I do not know you."

"I want to help you, because—" began Frank.

"Hush! Someone is coming!" interrupted the man. "It is against the rules for the patients to talk to visitors. If you are found here they may arrest you. One of the guards is coming!"

"I don't care. I must tell you who I am."

"Hurry! Hurry away!" exclaimed the man.

"Not until I tell you what I came here for. I believe you are—"

"Who's there?" called the angry voice of one of the attendants, as he caught the sound of the voices in the summer house.

"You must go," the man pleaded with Frank. "You will only make trouble for yourself and me." He spoke in a whisper, and the guard who was running on the gravel path could not hear above the sound of his own footsteps.

"Can I see you again?" asked Frank.

"Yes. Sometime. But go now."

Frank saw it would be best to leave before the attendant arrived. He slipped out of the little house on the side that was in the deepest shadow, and hurried away. A few seconds later the guard entered the place, and Frank could hear him questioning the patient.

"Who was here?"

"The king of fairyland," was the response. "He came to bring me my golden chariot."

"Looney again," was the guard's comment which Frank heard. "Come on back to your room."

"I must try again," Frank said softly to himself as he hurried across the open space and into the woods once more. "I am on the right track!"

The boy made his way to where he had left the canoe. His mind was in a whirl at the scene he had just taken part in, and his heart, that had been filled with hope, was a little sad now at his failure. Still he had not given up.

"I'll go back to camp," he thought. "Then I can try again. I must have more time to talk to him, and we must get a chance when there will be no danger of interruptions. I will come again, but I must think up a new plan."

Then, setting the canoe into the water, he began to paddle back. Though it was approaching midnight he decided he would keep on, and get back to camp by morning.

CHAPTER XXI

FRANK LEAVES AGAIN

Frank reached camp in time for breakfast. He was weary with his long night journey, and his chums saw evidences

of the strain it had been on him in his eyes, heavy from need of sleep, and his arms, which trembled from the long paddling. But they did not question him.

"Here's some hot coffee!" called Fenn, as his chum drew the boat up on the bank.

"Thanks," replied Frank. "I think I'll go to bed if you fellows don't mind. I'm dead tired."

"We're going off fishing," said Bart. "You can do as you please, and lie around all day."

"We'll have to have some supplies this afternoon," put in Ned. "Camp stuff is running low. Someone has to go to some farmer's and buy some butter, eggs and bread."

"I'll go," volunteered Frank. "I'll take the trip this afternoon."

"All right," said Ned. "We may not be back until after dinner. We're going to take some grub with us. Go any time you want to. I guess the camp will look after itself for a while. We haven't been bothered with visitors since we came."

The three chums, having arranged their fishing tackle, started off, while Frank stretched out on his cot and was soon asleep.

It was noon when he awakened, and, after getting himself something to eat, he prepared to go for the supplies. The boys had arranged with a farmer, who lived about two miles from camp, to provide them with things to eat. Taking a big basket Frank was soon on the way.

"Wa'al, ain't you boys give up livin' in th' woods?" greeted Mr. Armstrong, when Frank had given his order for the camp supplies.

"No, we're still there. Bears haven't eaten us yet."

"That's strange, 'cause I seen a big flock of 'em headin' that way only th' other day. I says to my wife, says I, 'them b'ars is goin' to eat them boys, sure!'" and he laughed at his joke.

"Guess they got frightened," suggested Frank.

"Wa'al, now, mebbly they did. How long you goin't' stay?"

"We haven't set any special time. All summer maybe. Until we get tired, anyhow."

"One night would tire me," commented Mr. Armstrong. "I like a roof over my head, I do. Now you wait a minute an' I'll git th' eggs an' other things. I keep 'em down cellar where it's cool. There's a paper ye might like t' look at. It's printed in the village, an' it gives all th' news from tellin' of how Deacon Jones's cow ate green apples an' died, t' relatin' th' momentous fact that Silas Landseer has painted his barn red. Make yourself right t' home an' read all th' news."

Frank took the paper and sat down in a big rocking chair on the side porch, while Mr. Armstrong, with the basket, went down in the cellar. The boy looked over the sheet, which contained news of the doings in the village and nearby. There were a few advertisements, of horses and cows for sale, of auctions about to take place, and one or two legal notices. As Frank's eyes roved over the columns he caught sight of something that caused him to utter an exclamation. He eagerly scanned a notice, and had only read half through it when Mr. Armstrong came up from the cellar.

"There!" exclaimed the farmer. "I reckon you boys ain't goin' t' starve this week," and he set down the basket, which was quite heavy. "Can you carry that out t' camp?"

"I guess so," replied Frank, holding the journal in his hand. "By the way, do you want this paper? I'd like to take it back with me."

"Take it an' welcome. Must be kind of lonesome out there in the woods. I've got a lot of old papers if you want 'em."

"No, thanks, this one will do," the boy said, folding the sheet and putting it into his pocket.

Paying the farmer, Frank took up the basket and started back toward camp. The victuals were heavy but he did not mind that. He was thinking of the notice he had seen in the paper. As soon as he was out of sight of the farmhouse, he sat down beside the trail that led to the tent, and took the sheet from his pocket. Turning to the page that had so interested him he read:

"WANTED: at the Cliffside Sanitarium, a strong, capable young man, to assist in the general work. One of quiet habits preferred. Apply to Dr. Jacob Hardman."

"I wonder if I dare do it," Frank said softly to himself. "It would give me just the chance I need. I have a good notion to try, at any rate. They can't any more than say they don't want me. And, if they do take me—"

He paused to think over the possibilities should he get the position. A light came into his eyes. He seemed to have forgotten the troubles of the past few weeks.

"The worst of it is, though, that I can't tell the boys. They wouldn't understand. I've got to work alone for a while yet, until I get things where I want them. I think the best plan will be to slip off, and say nothing to them at all. Explanations, especially when I can't give all the facts, will only tangle the thing up worse than it is. No, I've got to disappear again, and they must think what they will. It's the only way."

He picked up the heavy basket and started on again, folding the paper so that the advertisement was outside. Then he put the journal into his pocket.

"I hope I get back before the boys arrive," was his thought as he trudged on. "I must get away this afternoon, and make application this evening. The place may already be filled."

Frank was glad to note, when he got back to camp, that his three chums were still absent. He placed the basket of food where they could see it, and then, putting on his best clothes, and making a bundle of some underwear and other of his possessions he started off through the woods, following the telephone line.

"I wish I could take the canoe," he thought, as he saw it drawn up on the bank. "I would get there more quickly, but I have no way of sending it back, in case I stay. It wouldn't be fair. No, I'll have to tramp it. Guess I'll put on a pair of smoked glasses for a disguise. Some of those attendants may recognize me," and he tried on a pair he had in his pocket. He decided to use them when he asked for the place.

He had gone on about a mile when he felt for the paper. It was gone.

"It doesn't matter though," he told himself. "I know what it says. All I've got to do is to ask for Dr. Hardman, and

tell him I think I'll fill the bill."

So he kept on through the woods, his mind filled with thoughts of many things, chief of which was the hope that he would get the situation, and be able to put his plan into operation.

It was well on toward evening when the three chums got back from their fishing trip, for they had tramped several miles. They had good luck, and brought back several beauties.

"Hello, Frank!" called Bart, when they were within hearing distance of the camp.

There was no answer.

"Maybe he's asleep yet," suggested Fenn.

"Hardly," commented Ned.

The boys reached the tent. The first thing they saw was the basket of provender Frank had left.

"Well, he's been to Armstrong's," remarked Bart. "Hello, Frank! Where are you?"

An echo was the only answer. Ned entered the tent. He came out in a hurry.

"Frank's run away!" he exclaimed.

"What makes you think so?" asked Bart, much surprised, while Fenn looked startled at the news.

"Because most of his clothes are gone."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Look!" and he pointed to where they were missing from the small trunk in which Frank kept them.

"This is getting serious," declared Bart. "Something is wrong with Frank. I wonder where he could have gone?"

"What's that over there?" asked Fenn, pointing to a white object at the foot of a tree.

"It's a newspaper," said Ned, picking it up. "And it is turned to display an advertisement. I wonder if Frank could have gone to answer this?" and he read the item concerning the sanitarium.

CHAPTER XXII

FRANK IS EMPLOYED

It was about seven o'clock that evening when Frank, wearing the smoked glasses, rang the bell at the front door of the Cliffside Sanitarium. He had hurried through the woods as fast as he could, munching on the way a sandwich he had made before leaving camp.

His ring was answered by a woman with iron-gray hair who inquired what he wanted. When he said he had come in answer to the advertisement, he was shown into a little room opening from the main hall, and told to wait until Dr. Hardman came.

"Guess the place is still open, or they wouldn't ask me in," thought Frank.

He had not been in the little room three minutes before he heard voices out in the hall. One was that of the woman who had admitted him. At the sound of the other he started.

"You'll find him in the small reception room, Dr. Hardman," the woman had said.

"Ah, yes, thank you Mrs. Robotham. I'll see him directly. I wish you'd look after ward six to-night. The regular nurse is away."

"That's the man who was at my uncle's house!" Frank thought, as he heard the doctor's voice. "That's the man who threatened me in the dark. I didn't recognize that name Hardman when I saw the advertisement, but he's the man the boys took to the woods. What shall I do? I must not tell my name, that's certain, and yet he may recognize me, from seeing me in the woods that day. But the glasses might puzzle him. It's a good thing I thought of them," and he felt to see if they were properly adjusted. He had no time to speculate further, for Dr. Hardman entered at that moment.

"So you've come to answer the advertisement," the man spoke in brisk tones. "Well, you're the first one. Help isn't as plentiful in this locality as I thought. Now we want a young man to make himself generally useful, to do as he's told, not to ask too many questions, and above all, not to talk, outside, of what he sees going on in here. For I may as well tell you, what you already know, I suppose, as everyone in this neighborhood does. This is a private lunatic asylum, and a sanitarium for the treatment of persons suffering from nervous ailments. We have only one or two violent patients, and they are looked after by special guards. Most of the men here are only mildly affected. Still, we do not like those employed here to form outside acquaintances, and if we engaged you you will have to submit to our rules."

"I will be willing to do that," Frank said, and he had great hopes of getting the place.

"I don't suppose you've had much experience in a place like this," Dr. Hardman went on. "We don't expect that. All you will have to do is to obey orders. The pay is ten dollars a week and board. Do you think you'd like it? You seem like a strong, smart young chap. Are your eyes weak? I presume they must be or you wouldn't wear smoked glasses. Never mind, that doesn't make any difference here."

"I think I would like it very much." Frank was wondering what to say when the doctor would ask his name. He was glad the physician had not recognized him. But he was somewhat in the shadow, and Dr. Hardman appeared to be thinking of almost anything or any one than the boy before him. Besides, Frank's hair had been cut short recently and that altered his looks somewhat.

"Very well, I think I'll give you a trial. We need someone right away. Can you begin work at once?" Dr. Hardman asked.

"Yes," replied Frank, much delighted that his plan was working so well.

"Very good. You can tell me something about yourself to-morrow, and furnish references I suppose. I see you have brought your valise with you. Your supply of clothing, I suppose?"

"Yes, I can stay here to-night."

"That's good. I'll not need to see much of you, as I am very busy. You'll be under the direction of Mrs. Robotham, my assistant. By the way, I presume you have no objection to being designated by a number?"

"By a number?" inquired Frank, somewhat puzzled.

"Yes. You see many of our patients have queer notions. Names are strange things to them. They often bring back painful memories. To avoid that we are all known by numbers here."

"I don't mind in the least." In fact Frank was glad. This might be the means of enabling him to keep his name hidden, and not necessitate him giving a false one, which he did not like to do, even to gain his ends.

"Very good, I'm number one, Mrs. Robotham is number two, and so on. You'll be number thirty-one."

"All right," Frank answered, and he was relieved when Dr. Hardman turned away, without seeking to question him further. Clearly the red-haired physician had not recognized the boy as the one who had followed him that night in the darkness from Mr. Dent's house, nor the one he had run from in the woods.

Mrs. Robotham came in at that juncture and, as he passed her in the doorway, Dr. Hardman announced that he had engaged the boy. He told his assistant to instruct Frank where to go and what to do.

"Come with me and I'll show you your room," said the woman, and Frank followed, wondering what he was going to do, now that he had the place at the sanitarium.

"Have you had supper?" asked Mrs. Robotham.

"Not very much," was the answer, as Frank thought of the sandwich in the woods.

"After you put your things away you can come down to the dining-room. Most of the nurses and attendants have finished, but there is plenty left."

"What are my duties?" asked Frank.

"I shall put you on corridor work. That is, you will walk up and down the corridors, and, if you hear any of the patients calling, or note any unusual noise, you are to ring the bell. I will show you about it."

After supper, which he ate alone in the big dining-room, Frank was taken upstairs by Mrs. Robotham, and instructed in his work. The sanitarium was a large one, and there were a number of corridors, from which opened the rooms of the patients.

"We have night and day shifts for this duty," Dr. Hardman's assistant explained, "but we are a little short-handed now, so you will have to work harder than usual. I am glad the doctor took you, as I have had to do some of this corridor work myself, and, with my other duties, it has made me quite played out. All you have to do is to walk around. I will give you a pair of felt slippers which you are to wear nights, as they make no noise. When you hear any unusual commotion in any of the rooms, go to the end of the corridor and press the push button the number of times to correspond with the number on the door of the room. Attendants will answer the bell, and do whatever is necessary. Do you think you understand it?"

Frank said he did, and, a little later, with his feet in a pair of soft slippers, which were rather large for him, he was patrolling up and down the corridors.

"Well, this is getting into a lunatic asylum in a hurry," he thought as he walked along. "How strange it turned out! The mere chance of Mr. Armstrong giving me that paper this afternoon brings me here to-night. I wonder if I can do what I set out to do? First I must find out which is his room. That I can't do until I see him again, for if I make inquiries of any of the attendants they will get suspicious and tell Dr. Hardman, and then I'll have to leave."

For an hour or more Frank walked up and down the corridors. He had three for which he was responsible. It was rather monotonous work, even though now and then nurses and attendants passed through. He was beginning to feel sleepy, and decided that a drink of ice water would rouse him. He walked to the end of the long hall to where the cooler stood. As he was passing room twenty-seven he heard a great racket within. It sounded as though the inmate had knocked over the table and chairs. At the same time, from the apartment, came the sound of a voice, pitched high in anger.

"There, knave! I have slain you at last!" was shouted in a man's voice. "Now, villains, do your worst! Ah! There is yet another scoundrel to slay!"

The noise of breaking wood increased, and Frank, in great alarm, ran to the push button and rang the signal, two strokes followed after a pause by seven others.

The noise of attendants, approaching on the run, could be heard. Frank hurried back to the room whence the noise was still coming. As he passed the apartment next to it, number twenty-eight, a man's head was thrust from the opened door. At the sight of it Frank could not repress an exclamation of astonishment. It was the man he wanted to find; the man with whom he had talked in the summer house. At the same instant the man recognized the boy, but, with a motion of his fingers to his lips, to enjoin silence, he shut the door of his room, and Frank heard the key turn in the lock.

CHAPTER XXIII

PLANNING A RESCUE

By this time the attendants were at room twenty-seven. Several of them entered, and the commotion that had gone on without ceasing since Frank first heard it, quieted down. As the boy passed the apartment he saw a little man, standing in a fighting attitude, grasping the leg of a chair for a weapon, and seemingly bidding defiance to a horde of imaginary enemies.

"What is the trouble, your majesty?" he heard one of the attendants ask the patient.

"Why, the rebels have risen against their liege lord."

"We will attend to them," the attendant replied. "Sir Knight," turning to one of his companions, "order out the

guard and take all the rebels to prison."

"That's the way to talk," interrupted his majesty with a laugh, not much in keeping with his assumed dignity. "Put the varlets in prison and I will have them beheaded to-morrow."

He was quieter now, and the attendants, pretending to drive before them a crowd of men who had defied the king, left the room. The head nurse, a strong man, who seemed to know just how to treat the patient, helped to set the room in order.

"Here, your majesty," he said, holding out a glass of liquid, "here is your favorite beverage; fresh buttermilk."

"It is very welcome," said the patient readily swallowing the liquid which looked like anything but the product from the churn.

"He'll be quiet for the rest of the night," the attendant observed to Frank, as he left the room, having seen the pretended king get into bed. "We call his sleeping medicine buttermilk, and he takes it like a baby. You're a new one, aren't you?"

"I came this evening."

"Well, you've seen one of our worst ones. Most of 'em are as quiet as the man in twenty-eight. He only gets real bad once in a while."

"Who is he?" asked Frank, impulsively.

The attendant looked curiously at the boy.

"Don't you know the rules?" he asked. "That's so, you're a new boy. Well, it's not allowed to talk about the patients, even among ourselves. No names are mentioned. In fact, I don't believe any of 'em would know their names if they heard 'em. This is a queer place. It hasn't been here very long. It was only built last year, but some of the patients have been with the doctor a long time. He transferred them from an asylum that he kept in New York."

By this time the patient, who imagined himself a king, was sleeping soundly, if his snores were any evidence. The guard went away with the other attendants, and Frank was left to patrol the corridors alone. There was one predominant thought in his mind. He must speak to the man in room twenty-eight.

He walked about through the long halls, listening for any further sounds of disturbance, but the sanitarium was very quiet. Every one but himself seemed slumbering, though he knew the attendants were ready to rush up at the sound of the bell.

"I wonder if he is asleep?" thought Frank, as he passed room twenty-eight. "I'm going to knock on his door. He recognized me once and he may again. Then maybe we can have a talk."

Cautiously he tapped on the portal. There was no answer. He waited, and knocked again. Then, through the keyhole, a cautious voice asked:

"Who is there?"

"It is the boy who spoke to you in the summer house," was Frank's reply. "Let me in."

The door was slowly opened and Frank entered the dark apartment. It was not without a little feeling of apprehension that he went in. He was alone in the room with a lunatic; a patient who became violent at times, the attendant had said. Suppose one of those fits should come on when Frank was with him? The boy did not like to think of this.

"What do you want?" the man in room twenty-eight asked, before he closed the door.

"I want to help you to escape."

"Hush! Don't let any of them hear you!" And the man, putting his hand over Frank's mouth, pulled him further inside and closed the door. Then they talked in whispers.

It was an hour later when Frank came out. There was a look of hope on his face as the gleam from an incandescent lamp, far down the corridor, illuminated his countenance.

"I'm sure I can manage it," he whispered to the man. "I'll have you out of here inside of a week, and then we can go away together."

"You may need help," the sanitarium patient said. "This place is closely guarded."

"I can get help," Frank replied, as he thought of his three chums. Then, with a hearty hand clasp, the man in room twenty-eight bade the boy go.

Frank resumed his walk up and down the corridors. But now he was wide awake, for he was planning to escape. Up and down he walked, arranging the details in his mind. At first it had seemed simple, but now, as he thought it over, unexpected difficulties arose.

"But I must do it!" he exclaimed to himself. "To think I have really found him, and that he is not insane at all. It's all part of a terrible plot. But I will solve the secret, and then—"

His thoughts were interrupted by a commotion in room twenty-eight; the apartment he had just left.

"They're killing me! They're killing me!" cried a voice in agony. "Don't let them! Take the cannibals away! I have come here to trade with the natives peaceably! Don't let them kill me!"

Sick at heart, and with nameless dread in his bosom, Frank ran to the bell and gave the signal for help.

CHAPTER XXIV

FRANK LOSES HOPE

Once more came the attendants, running up the stairs. Frank pointed to the room he had just left. His face was pale and drawn.

"You're not used to it yet," said the big guard, who had spoken to him before, as he passed the boy. "You'll not mind it in a week."

Then he, and the others, entered the apartment whence the frightened cries were still coming. Frank could not bear to stay where he could hear them. He went to the corridor below. In a little while the attendants came down.

"He didn't have it bad this time," the big guard said to Frank. "It was a mild attack. He always imagines he's an explorer in a savage country, and that the cannibals are going to kill him. Not very pleasant, but it's nothing to what some of 'em think. You're having quite a night of it. But never mind, I guess they'll quiet down now."

Frank was beginning to lose hope. All his plans seemed likely to come to naught. He was so sure the man in room twenty-eight was sane, yet, soon after conversing with him, during which time the man had talked as rationally as could be desired, he had suddenly turned into a raving maniac.

"I can't understand it," said Frank. "What shall I do? Oh, if I only had someone to help and advise me. I can't go to a soul. If the boys—" he stopped suddenly. "Yes, why not? Why not tell them the whole story? They could help me! That's what I'll do. I'll make one more attempt by myself, and then, if it fails, I'll ask them to aid me. I must see him again. Perhaps this fit was only temporary, and will not come again for a long time. I must have another talk with him."

The long night came to an end at last. Frank was relieved by a young man who told him to go and get breakfast, and then to go to bed.

"You'll have day work after to-night," he said, and Frank was glad to hear it. The darkness was made worse by the sudden alarms from the patients' rooms.

Frank slept late that day, and went on duty about four o'clock in the afternoon. That night passed quietly, but he did not dare knock on the door of room twenty-eight. He was afraid the man might be suffering from one of his insane attacks. The boy had almost lost heart but he had not altogether given up.

Not until the next day did he get a chance to talk with the patient on whom, for him, so much depended. He found the man anxious and waiting to see him.

"Come in, where we can talk quietly," the patient said, and Frank entered, looking to see that no one observed him, for he was breaking the rules. He removed the dark glasses when he was in the room, for they hurt his nose and ears.

The two had a long talk and planned many things. The boy's courage and hope came back to him, and he grew so enthusiastic in arranging to help the patient leave the institution, in order that the mystery might be cleared up, that he spoke louder than he intended.

"Quiet!" the man cautioned. "The attendants will hear you, and you will be dismissed."

Frank lowered his voice.

"I will come and see you to-morrow," he said, as he prepared to go.

At that moment there was the sound of several persons walking in the corridor. Then could be heard the voice of Dr. Hardman. He was showing a party of medical men through the place.

"You will find this up-to-date in every respect," he was saying. "I will just show you one of the patient's rooms," and he opened the door of the apartment where Frank was.

At the sight of the boy the head of the sanitarium looked much surprised. He knew there had been no excitement, and, in consequence, no excuse for Frank entering the room. Dr. Hardman glanced sharply at the boy, as Frank, putting on his glasses, hurried off down the corridor. But the physician said nothing, because visitors were present. Dr. Hardman went on explaining the system used at the sanitarium, but Frank, as he disappeared around a corner, felt that he would be dismissed as soon as the doctor was at liberty.

"Well, it's all over now," Frank thought "He recognized me and I've got to take the bull by the horns. However, I think I have things so arranged that I can carry out my plans without any trouble. I must get the boys to help me."

Fortunately for Frank, the visitors remained a long time. They stayed to dinner, and Dr. Hardman had to be with them. He had no chance to speak to Frank, though he sent a message by one of the attendants that the new boy was to go to the office, and wait there for the physician.

"If I go it means he'll dismiss me," thought Frank. "I'll keep out of his sight as long as I can. I must get a chance to enter room twenty-eight once more, to say that I am going away, but that I will carry out the plan of rescue. After that I will leave before Dr. Hardman gets a chance to discharge me, or ask questions."

But Frank's plans did not work out as he expected they would. He did manage to get to room twenty-eight again, at a time when that part of the building was deserted. Most of the patients had gone out for the usual afternoon exercise, but the one Frank wanted to see, had remained in.

He knocked at the door. It was opened on a crack, and a man peered out.

"Go away!" he exclaimed. "I don't know you!"

"Why! Why!" cried Frank, in great surprise. "Don't you remember. I am—"

"I know, you are the king of the cannibal islands, and you are trying to capture me. Go away, I say! I am only a poor explorer, but I will fight for my liberty!"

Then the door was slammed shut, and the man in the room began screaming and calling for help.

Frank gave way to despair. It was all over now. He had hoped the man would remain in a sane state long enough to be able to understand that a change of plan was necessary. Now he could comprehend nothing.

"I can never rescue him!" Frank exclaimed, as he ran to give the signal that one of the patients was violent.

With the attendants came Dr. Hardman. As he caught sight of Frank he cried excitedly:

"Where have you been? I have been waiting for you. Come to my office at once! You have broken the rules! I want an explanation!"

He turned, evidently expecting Frank to follow, but the boy was going to do nothing of the sort. He went down the corridor, until he came to where a flight of stairs led to the exercise yard. Then, running swiftly on his tip-toes so as to make no noise, he went down them.

"I'm going to leave," he said to himself. "It's time for action now. I'm going back to camp!"

In the meanwhile attendants had gone to the patient in room twenty-eight and had quieted him. Dr. Hardman reached his office, and waited for Frank to appear. He thought the boy was following him. When several minutes had

passed and Frank did not come the doctor sent for one of the attendants.

"Where is that new boy?" he asked.

"The last I saw of him was when he was going down the side stairs."

"The side stairs! I told him to come with me. He must have run away. Quick! Have a search made, and report to me!" As the attendant hurried away Dr. Hardman exclaimed:

"I see it all now. Why was I so foolish as to engage him without making some inquiries or asking his name. I wonder why I didn't recognize him that night I hired him. As soon as I saw him in the room without the glasses I knew I had seen his face before. It was in the woods that day. That boy was Frank Roscoe. I hope they catch him!"

In a little while the attendant came back to report there was no trace of Frank.

"We must give number twenty-eight a new room," said Dr. Hardman. "Change him to the north wing, and put him on the top floor."

The attendant left to carry out the instructions, and Dr. Hardman sat down in his office chair, obviously ill at ease.

"I should have been more careful," he murmured. "Well, it may not be too late yet. I will take all precautions."

Meanwhile Frank was hurrying away from the sanitarium. Having to leave so suddenly he had no time to go to his room for his belongings, and the clothes he wore were the only things he brought away with him. However, he did not mind that, as he was busy planning many things.

"I can't understand it," he said to himself. "At one time he is as sane as I am, and again, he is violent. I know they are detaining him here for a purpose. Perhaps they do something to him to make him insane at times."

The thought was a new one, and it came to Frank in a flash that perhaps that was the real explanation.

"If it is there is hope for him," he said. "Oh, I only wish I had him away from the horrible place!"

Then, late that afternoon, he made his way to the town of Lockport, where, with money he had brought with him from camp, he engaged a room at a hotel. The next morning he started back to join his friends.

CHAPTER XXV

FRANK'S SECRET DISCLOSED

When Ned had finished reading the advertisement in the newspaper which Frank dropped that afternoon as he was leaving camp, the three chums looked at one another, vaguely wondering what it meant.

"Do you suppose he's gone to get that place?" asked Fenn.

"I think so," Ned replied.

"But why would he want to do that?" asked Bart.

"I have a theory that Frank is much interested in the subject of insanity," Ned went on.

"You told us that before," interrupted Fenn. "What about it?"

"Well, I did think, at one time since all this queer business came up, that Frank's mind might be affected. Now I think he may be interested in someone who has gone insane. He certainly has some queer secret, and it's getting more and more of a trouble to him. Why, this is the third time he has run away from us!"

"It's only the second," interposed Bart.

"It's the third," insisted Ned, and he told of the time he suspected Frank had taken the canoe and remained away all night.

"Do you suppose he went to the sanitarium each time?" asked Fenn.

"I believe so," Ned replied. "That's what makes me think that someone is there in whom Frank is much interested. Now comes this advertisement. The paper is only a few days old, as you can see by the date. I believe Frank has gone to see if he can't get this position. Perhaps he wants to help someone, and this is the only way he can do it."

"It looks reasonable," admitted Bart. "What can we do?"

"I don't see that we can do anything," spoke Ned, "If Frank is there he certainly will not want us coming around, and, perhaps, give his plans away. On the other hand we are not sure he is there. We don't even know where the sanitarium is, but I suppose we could easily find out from Mr. Armstrong. Frank got the paper there, I guess."

"Maybe the telephone line runs to the sanitarium," suggested Fenn.

"That's it! I believe you're right!" exclaimed Ned. "I never thought of that. Why, it was by following the line that we met Frank before. Let's follow it again, and perhaps we shall come to the insane asylum."

"And suppose we do?" asked Bart.

"Well, we'll know where it is," Ned went on. "That's something. We may not see Frank, but perhaps we can find out if he is there. It's worth trying. I can't sit still and do nothing."

They started to follow the telephone line the next day. They found it did lead to the sanitarium but not wishing to show themselves near the building, they did not approach closely. They remained hiding in the woods, hoping they might catch a glimpse of their chum, but he did not show himself.

"I guess the only thing for us to do is to return to camp," suggested Bart. "We'll have to wait until Frank comes away and tells us what he has been doing."

Rather sorrowfully, they went back to camp. The two days that followed were lonesome ones. None of the three felt like doing anything. They did not fish, and even the canoe had lost its charm. They sat around under the trees, and, for the twentieth time, talked over the situation in regard to their missing comrade.

"It looks as if the Darewell Chums would number three instead of four, after this," said Fenn rather mournfully, on the morning of the third day of Frank's absence.

"Don't be a calamity howler!" exclaimed Ned. "Frank will come back to us. The chums can't be separated."

"I hope that's true," put in Bart, from where he was sitting under a tree, smoothing one of the canoe paddles. "All our fun will be spoiled if we have to break up the quartette.

"Hark! What's that?" asked Fenn, sitting up suddenly.

They all listened. There was the sound of someone approaching through the bushes.

"Cow, I guess," said Bart.

"It's Frank!" cried Ned, jumping to his feet, and, the next instant Frank was in the midst of his chums. He looked worn and tired, and his clothes were covered with mud and water.

"Where in the world have you been? What has happened to you?" cried Bart.

"I got in the swamp trying to take a short cut," Frank explained. "I'm clean beat out. Have you got any coffee?"

"Make you some in a jiffy," said Fenn, throwing some light wood on the smouldering fire.

"I suppose you're surprised to see me?" asked Frank to his companions.

"There's no use saying we aren't," spoke Ned.

"And I guess you were surprised to find me gone?"

"Right again. But we guessed where you were."

"How?"

Ned showed the paper with the advertisement in it.

"I wondered where I had lost that," Frank said. "Well, boys, I'm going to tell you my secret."

"Have some coffee before you begin," suggested Fenn, as he handed Frank a steaming cupful. "It's only warmed up, but it's good."

The exhausted boy drank it, and ate some bread. Then having changed some of his muddy clothes for garments loaned him by his chums, Frank began:

"You guessed rightly, I did go to the sanitarium, and I got the position. But I don't believe any of you can guess why."

"Was it to get experience about crazy persons?" asked Ned.

"I went there to plan to rescue my father," said Frank, quietly.

The announcement was so startling that the three chums could only look at one another. Then they glanced back at Frank to see if he was in earnest. Ned, for a moment, had an idea that his original theory was right, and that Frank's mind was affected. But one look at the boy showed that, though he labored under the stress of excitement, he knew what he was talking about.

"Your father!" exclaimed Bart. "I thought he was—"

"You thought he was dead; so did I," Frank broke in. "That is, until recently. It's a long story, and I haven't got it all straight in my mind yet. One thing I am sure of is that my father is detained in that asylum against his will, and I am going to rescue him!"

"And we'll help you!" exclaimed Ned.

"That's what we will," chimed in Bart and Fenn.

"I may need your aid," Frank went on. "Now let me tell you what I know, and how I found it out. Do you remember that special delivery letter I got when we were in swimming that day? The one John Newton brought me?"

The chums had no difficulty in recollecting the scene. They recalled it perfectly. It was from then that Frank's manner began to change.

"Well," Frank went on, "that letter gave me the first clue. It was from a firm of lawyers, Wright & Johnson, of New York. They said they were trustees for some property that was owned by a man named Roscoe and that they could not find him or his heirs. They wrote to me, asking if, by any chance, I might be interested in it. I did not want to say anything to you boys, for I could not tell how it would turn out. I went to Judge Benton with the letter, and he wrote me one to send to the lawyers. But I did not hear from them again for a long time, and I felt that there had been a mistake made.

"Later on I got another letter from them. They said they had been investigating and had learned that James Roscoe, the name of the man who owned the property, had been heard from, but that he was insane, and was in the custody of some unscrupulous men, who were not treating him properly. The law firm said they understood that Mr. Roscoe was not altogether insane, but that his mind was affected by the treatment he received at the hands of the men. With proper care he might recover, they said.

"At that time I did not know he was my father, or that he was any near relative of mine. I had always lived with my uncle and I never knew my father or my mother."

For a little while Frank's emotion overcame him. Then he resumed:

"I had some correspondence with Wright & Johnson and they tried to locate Mr. Roscoe. They found out where he was, but just as they were about to aid him the asylum was moved away.

"They tried to get on the track of the man who was in charge of it. Then they sent me a lot of papers and photographs connected with the case and I learned that James Roscoe was my father. He was an explorer, and soon after I was born he went on an expedition. He was captured and held prisoner by some savage natives for a number of years. Word came that he had been murdered and the shock of it killed my mother. I was taken to the home of my uncle, Mr. Dent, where I have lived ever since."

"But why didn't you go to your uncle and get him to help you?" asked Ned.

"I didn't think of it until too late," Frank replied. "The day I found out that James Roscoe was my father I went home to tell my uncle all about it and to ask his help. When I got there I heard someone talking to him. I listened and I found out they were conversing about my father. From what they said I knew he was still in a sanitarium, and when I heard my uncle agree with the man that he had better stay there I knew my uncle was in league with the plotters."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Bart. "Mr. Dent doesn't seem like that kind of a man."

"I am sure enough," replied Frank bitterly. "Well, I followed the man until he heard me after him, and told me to go back. Then I went to my uncle's house. I said nothing of my suspicions, but I resolved to find out all I could. Finally I found the man who had been talking to my uncle."

"Who was it?" asked Fenn.

"Hardman, the man you took to the woods. He is Dr. Hardman, in charge of the sanitarium where my father is held a prisoner."

"Are you sure of this?" asked Ned.

"Positive. I have not finished yet. When I saw Dr. Hardman in the woods that day you were with him, and noted that he ran away from me, I thought I was on the right track. He recognized me, it seems, and that's why he ran. Then I made inquiries and I learned there was an asylum, a new one, somewhere in this direction. Few persons have heard anything about it, as, though it is a legal institution, the proprietor does not want too much known about it.

"When we came camping here I decided to keep on trying to solve the mystery. I wanted to see my father and have a talk with him. I ran away from you, as you know, and I saw the patients at the sanitarium taking exercise. I recognized my father as one, for, though I had never seen him since I had grown up, I knew it was him from the picture the lawyers sent. He had not changed much, except that he was older. It appears he escaped from the cannibals and came to this country. But a fever had slightly affected his head, and he went to a sanitarium for treatment. There he got under the control of some evil men, who used him for their own ends. I do not yet understand it all, save there is some property involved. But I am going to solve the secret. I know where my father is, and the rest is comparatively easy."

Frank told how he had had several interviews with his father, who, after some difficulty, recognized his son. The two had planned the escape from the asylum.

"One thing I can't understand though," Frank went on, "is how he appears sane at times, and again is like a violent maniac and does not know me. I am afraid of this. I am sure my father's mind is sound and good, and the only way I can account for it is that they must do something to him at times, to make him violent. It is to their interest to make him altogether insane, so they can control the property."

"How do you account for those men I heard talking in the building the time I was captured by the Upside Down Club?" asked Ned.

"I don't know who they were," Frank admitted, "but I am sure they were in the plot. They were probably planning some details or they may have been in Darewell to see my uncle. I believe he's in the plot."

"There's where I don't agree with you," said Bart. "Mr. Dent may seem to be playing into the hands of the men, but I think you will find he has been fooled by them. In fact, they admitted as much, according to what Ned overheard."

"I hope so, but I will not trust him until I have my father safe," Frank went on.

He then related how Mr. Roscoe had told of his detention in the asylum, his despair at never seeing his son again, of how he had heard of his wife's death, and of his desire to escape.

"And what are you going to do now?" asked Bart, when Frank had finished.

"I am going to rescue my father!"

"Then count us in!" exclaimed Ned.

CHAPTER XXVI

ARRANGING AN ESCAPE

Frank's story was such an interesting one that the three chums felt as though they never could stop asking questions. They particularly wanted to know about Mr. Roscoe's detention among the cannibals, but of that Frank could tell little.

"We were too busy talking of the present to dip much into the past," he said. "Besides, I had only a very little time. I was interrupted so often. I don't know all of the story yet, but I will in time. This Dr. Hardman is one of the chief conspirators. It's lucky I wore the glasses so he didn't recognize me at first or I'd never have gotten as far along as I did. I guess he didn't have a good look at me that day in the woods."

"I wonder what his game was, having us take him to the forest?" asked Bart.

"Probably he wanted to be sure that none of his patients could escape from the sanitarium and get to Darewell that way," suggested Frank. "I believe Dr. Hardman had an idea my father might try to find me, and wanted to be assured that if he tried it he would get lost in the forest."

"I believe you're right," said Bart.

"Well, you certainly worked this up in great shape," commented Ned. "We couldn't understand what ailed you. I began to think you were a bit crazy yourself."

"I don't blame you," Frank replied with a smile. "I certainly did have a lot on my mind, and the way I acted must have seemed strange to you boys. But I'm glad part of it is over. When I have my father with me again I will be perfectly happy. Just think of it, boys, living all these years, and never knowing I had a father, and then suddenly to find I've got one! It's just like a story in a book, isn't it?"

"It beats lot of books!" declared Fenn. "I wonder if those cannibals tried to eat him?"

"He doesn't look as though he had been boiled or roasted," Frank answered, "though he is not a well man, from all the trouble he has had. But wait until we rescue him!"

"That's what I was going to ask you. How are you going to do it?" inquired Ned.

"I have a plan partly worked out," replied Frank. "He and I talked it over. I am to get a long ladder and place it at his window the first dark and rainy night we have. We agreed it would be better to try it when there was a storm, as, if we make any noise, it will not attract so much attention."

"That's a good idea," commented Bart. "Where are you going to get the ladder?"

"I guess Mr. Armstrong has one he would let us take."

"How are you going to get it to the sanitarium? It's a good way off."

"I thought maybe you'd assist me about that part," spoke Frank. "I've got to have help."

"Of course you have," declared Ned. "Now I have an idea. We can take that ladder to the woods near the sanitarium on the back of a donkey. Mr. Armstrong has one. It's about the only way we could transport it, as the trails are too narrow for a wagon. We can fix it on the donkey's back lengthwise, and he can go through narrow places that way."

"Then what?" asked Fenn.

"We'll hide the ladder in the woods, close to the edge of the asylum grounds, and, the first stormy night that comes we'll go there and rescue Mr. Roscoe."

"Do you know where his room is?" asked Bart.

"Yes, it's number twenty-eight; one of the outside apartments and easy to reach with a ladder. We agreed on a signal. When I throw three pebbles at his window, wait a bit and throw two more, he is to raise the sash. Fortunately there are no bars to his window, as he is not regarded as a violent patient. The only thing I am afraid of is that he may have one of his insane spells just as we are about to rescue him. That would raise an alarm, and the plan might fail."

"We'll hope for the best," said Bart, cheerfully, "Now let's go all over the details and arrange our campaign. This is the first time I ever helped in a raid on a sanitarium."

"I hope it will be the last," spoke Frank. "It's a sad-enough thing, and I only wish it was over."

"Cheer up," counseled Fenn. "You've had it pretty hard, carrying that secret all alone. Now we're going to help you; aren't we, fellows?"

"That's what we are!" chorused Bart and Ned, and at that Frank smiled. He seemed to have lost much of the gloom that had enveloped him for the past few weeks.

"Well, let's get to work," suggested Ned. "The sooner this thing is done the better. The weather has been fine for the past week, and it's liable now to rain soon. In fact, I think a storm is brewing," and he looked up through the trees to the sky.

It was becoming overcast, and the direction of the wind had changed. Ned's chums agreed with him it would be best to lose no time.

"Fenn and I will go over to Mr. Armstrong's house this afternoon," said Bart. "We'll find out about the ladder and the donkey."

"There's another thing to be thought of," said Ned. "What are you going to do with your father when you get him, Frank?"

"I did have an idea I would take him to the hotel in Lockport."

"I wouldn't do that," said Ned. "That will be the first place they will look for him. Why not bring him here?"

"It would be too long a journey through the woods," objected Fenn. "Especially if he isn't well, and it's raining."

"I have it!" cried Frank. "The canoe!"

"The canoe isn't built for land travel," remarked Bart.

"No, but it can go on the creek and river all the way to the sanitarium," said Frank. "I know, for I tried it." Then he told his chums of the night journey he had made.

"I was right then," commented Ned, and he related how he suspected Frank had made a journey in the craft.

"One of us might paddle the canoe to the foot of the cliff," went on Frank. "I can take my father to it, and put him into the boat."

"That's a good idea," agreed Bart. "I never thought our canoe would be of such service."

"It's a fine craft," Frank said. "It only leaks a little bit."

"Then you and I will patch it up this afternoon when Bart and Fenn go after the ladder," said Ned. "We can finish by night, and then, the first thing in the morning, we'll get the donkey and start through the woods. We'll have to do that part of it by daylight, as we can't see at night. But I guess it's safe, as there is no one in the woods."

Things were very different in the camp than they had been a few hours previously. Now there was hope and activity, while, before, there had been gloom and apprehension.

After dinner Bart and Fenn went to Mr. Armstrong's house, while Ned and Frank busied themselves over the canoe. They patched it up, strengthened it in weak places, and made it ready for the journey. It was decided that Frank had better make the trip in the boat to the foot of the cliff, as he knew the stream better than the other three.

"There, I guess that will do," observed Ned, as he daubed a bit of pine gum on a small crack. "I'll wager it doesn't leak a drop. The paddle is better than when you first made the trip, Frank."

"I'm glad of it. It was so rough before it blistered my hands."

In the meanwhile Bart and Fenn had reached Mr. Armstrong's house. They found the farmer had a long, light ladder, and was willing to let them take it.

"Hope you aren't going t' rob an apple orchard or raid a hen roost," he said with a laugh.

"Nothing like that," Bart assured their friend. "Now if you'll lend us your donkey we'll be much obliged."

"My donkey! Good land! Are you going t' start a circus and have the donkey do tricks?"

"Not exactly," Bart replied, and then, thinking it was only fair to explain why they wanted the ladder and the animal, the boys told Mr. Armstrong something of Frank's story. The farmer was in sympathy with them at once.

"I wish I could help you," he said eagerly. "Can't I go 'long?"

"We're much obliged," replied Bart, "but I guess we can do better alone. We're thankful for the ladder and the donkey."

"Maybe you'll be sorry you took the beast," Mr. Armstrong added. "He's tricky, but he can't do much with the ladder on his back. It's a great idea. Now if you want any more help let me know."

The boys promised that they would, and, bidding the farmer good-day they started off. The ladder was fastened to the donkey's back lengthwise, and rested on a pile of bagging so that it would not injure the animal. The front end

stuck well up into the air, while the rear nearly dragged on the ground.

The path from the farmhouse to the camp was a fairly good one, and the boys had no difficulty in leading the donkey along. The beast went quietly enough, and Fenn remarked:

"I guess Mr. Armstrong didn't know how to treat this donkey. He's as gentle as a lamb."

"You're not out of the woods yet," observed Bart, which was true in a double sense.

However, they reached the camp without a mishap, and found Ned and Frank waiting for them.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RUNAWAY DONKEY

That night the boys talked over all their plans. They agreed that if the next night was a stormy one they would try to rescue Mr. Roscoe. The donkey was tethered outside the tent, and seemed satisfied with his surroundings. The boys patted him and fed him on all sorts of dainties, from sugar to pancakes made from quick-raising flour.

"Might as well keep on the good side of him," observed Fenn. "He's got quite a trip ahead of him."

They decided to start off early in the morning and take the ladder to the edge of the sanitarium grounds, hiding it in the woods.

It began to rain that night. There was a regular downpour, so hard that it awakened the boys by pelting on the canvas roof over their heads.

"This is a storm, and no mistake!" exclaimed Fenn, sitting up in his cot. "If it keeps up tomorrow night we could rescue every inmate in the sanitarium."

Suddenly, above the sound of the rain, there came a startling noise. It was like the mingled roar of a lion and the snarl of a tiger.

"What's that?" cried Ned.

"It's the donkey braying!" replied Fenn, and, a moment later, when the sound was repeated, his companions knew Fenn was right.

"He doesn't like being out in the rain," Fenn went on. "I'm going to put him under the wood-tent."

This was a piece of canvas stretched between two trees and served to keep the camp wood, and some other effects, dry. Fenn put on his raincoat, slipped a pair of rubber boots on and went outside. He carried a lantern, and as soon as he emerged from the tent the donkey set up a bray that was twice as loud as the others had been.

"He's glad to see me," called Fenn, and he led the beast under the shelter. It seemed that this was what the donkey wanted, for he became quiet after that, and the boys went to sleep in spite of the noise the rain made.

It had not cleared when morning came, but they did not mind that. They all had raincoats, for Frank had not taken his to the sanitarium, and, with rubber boots, were ready to brave the elements.

Once more the ladder was fastened to the donkey's back and the boys started off. They closed the tent to keep the rain out, and put the canoe where it would be safe. They took a lunch along, for they felt they might have to undertake a longer journey than the boys had made in going to the asylum, as the animal could not follow over some of the places where the lads had tramped.

They followed, in a general direction, the telephone line. Frank told them he had learned this connected with the central exchange in Darewell, and had only been in use a short time. It had been strung by some of the asylum attendants and was a private wire.

For a while the boys trudged on through the rain, picking out the easiest paths for the donkey, which Bart was leading. Fenn walked ahead to see that there were no vines or trees that might catch the ladder, while Frank and Ned brought up in back to see that the rear end was kept clear. Occasionally they assisted in swinging the ladder around a short turn.

"This is easier than I thought it was going to be," remarked Bart. "We haven't had a bit of trouble yet."

"You're not out of the woods," called Fenn, repeating Bart's words of the day before.

They had reached a little clearing in the forest, and, as there was a good trail, the donkey increased his speed. Suddenly there came a smart shower, and the little deluge must have frightened the beast. For, as soon as the drops began to patter down on his back harder than usual, the donkey lifted up its heels, kicked the rear end of the ladder to one side, and began to run, braying loudly.

"After him!" cried Bart. "He'll smash the ladder!"

The boys started off after the animal but they were at considerable disadvantage. Bart had let go of the strap by which he was leading the donkey, and Fenn, who was also in front, had jumped to one side as he heard the beast break into a run. So the steed passed both of them. As for Frank and Ned, in the rear, they could not get ahead of the donkey because of the long ladder sticking out behind and swaying to and fro. By this time the animal was some distance in advance, running along one of the wider trails that led through the wood.

"We must catch him!" cried Frank. "He'll smash the ladder and we'll be in a fix then!"

The donkey seemed to be enjoying the sport. Faster and faster he ran, braying at the top of his voice. The ladder knocked against the tree trunks, sometimes throwing the animal to one side but this did not stop him.

"Cut ahead through the woods and try to catch him!" cried Ned to Bart, who was a little in advance.

Bart did so. He saw, through the trees, where the trail turned, and gliding between the bushes, he reached the path ahead of the donkey that was coming down it full speed. Bart braced his feet apart and stood ready to grab the beast.

But he reckoned without the ladder, which had become loose from the fastenings and was now resting evenly on the donkey's back, sticking straight out ahead like a long spear. It was this double-pointed lance that was aimed at

Bart, and the donkey's head was fifteen feet back of it. Bart saw that he could not grasp the bridle.

Right at him came the donkey, braying as though in glee at the trick he had played. To avoid being impaled on the ladder ends Bart had to jump to one side. Standing in the bushes that were along the trail, he reached forward and tried to grasp the swaying halter rope that was fastened to the donkey's head. But the beast avoided him and ran on.

"Grab the end of the ladder and hold him!" shouted Bart to Ned, who was still in the rear.

Ned and Frank both tried. They managed to catch hold of the swaying end nearest them, but the donkey had more strength than they supposed. They were dragged along through the mud, and water, and then, as the animal turned suddenly, they were flung to one side.

"There he goes," exclaimed Ned ruefully as the animal disappeared around the bend. Bart and Fenn took after him.

"Come on; we've got to catch him!" cried Frank, and he and Ned set off after their companions.

All at once there arose a shouting from the boys in the lead. Then sounded a crash in the bushes. It was followed by a series of discordant brays from the donkey.

"Something has happened!" cried Frank. "Hurry up!"

Something had happened, sure enough. The donkey had caught himself. For, in trying to pass between two saplings, the ladder had slewed cross-ways and had brought the beast up with a round turn. Surprised and, perhaps somewhat indignant at the sudden stopping of his run, the donkey struggled on. The ladder slipped up the small trunks of the saplings and they began to bend.

"He'll break 'em off and escape again!" cried Ned. "Grab him Bart!"

Further and further over bent the two saplings. The ladder was sliding up them. Then the donkey slipped. He lost his foot-hold in the mud and the next instant a curious thing happened.

The saplings, being no longer strained forward by the animal, sprang upward. The ladder began to slip back. It went until it caught on some branches of either small tree and there it stayed. But the donkey was fairly lifted from his feet, for the ladder was still fastened to his back, and there he hung, his hoofs threshing about and his brays coming quickly in indignant protest at the treatment accorded him.

"That settles Mr. Donkey!" cried Bart, as, laughing loudly, he grabbed the halter rope. The other boys came up, filled with merriment over the plight of the beast that had thus trapped himself. They cut the branches that held the ladder and the donkey came back to earth. He did not try to run away, and seemed so much ashamed of what had happened that he stopped braying. Then, the ladder having been fastened in the proper position, the boys took up their journey. The rain was falling steadily.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE RESCUE

Without further mishap they went on through the woods and reached the edge of the asylum grounds. There seemed to be no one moving about the place, not even a uniformed attendant. Frank looked at the institution where his father was a prisoner and thought of how much he must have suffered there.

"Here's a good place for the ladder," said Bart, pointing to a little ditch through which ran a small stream of water. "No one would ever think of looking there for it."

"If only the donkey doesn't bray now, and give the alarm," said Fenn.

"I know how to prevent him," remarked Ned.

"How?"

"Fasten his tail down."

The other boys laughed at Ned, but he got a piece of rope used to tie the ladder on the donkey's back, and attached it to the beast's tail. Then he put a stone on the rope. Whether this caused it or not the boys could not tell, but the donkey did not bray after that.

"I think we'd better make a little change in our plans," suggested Frank. "We were going to stay here until night, at least you three were. Now I think we had all better go back to camp and take the donkey with us. We have time enough, and it will be tiresome waiting here until dark. I've got to go back to get the canoe. You had better come along. We'll have something to eat and we can leave the donkey at the tent."

"When we have rescued my father you boys can wait until it's light enough to follow the telephone line back to camp. In the meanwhile I'll go on with him in the canoe."

"What about the ladder?" asked Ned.

"We'll hide it in the woods," said Frank. "We'll not try to take it back to Mr. Armstrong, but I'll pay him for it. I think it would be too risky to come back for it. If we get my father away from there they'll be sure to be on the lookout for hours afterward, and we can't always depend on the donkey not braying. Besides, it's a lot of work and risk, and it's better to pay for the ladder and leave it here. It's worth it to me."

The other boys thought this plan a good one. Accordingly, after the ladder had been put in the ditch, the boys started back for camp, taking the donkey with them. The animal seemed to have lost all desire to play any tricks.

The rain had stopped when the chums got back to their tent, and they made a fire to dry themselves out a bit. The donkey was tethered so he could go under the shelter canvas in case of more showers, that still threatened, and the boys, after getting themselves something to eat, and feeding the animal, prepared to start again for the sanitarium.

Frank got into the canoe, and, with a wave of his hand paddled off, calling to his chums that he would meet them about dusk at the ditch where the ladder was hidden.

It was now well on into the afternoon. The three chums, discussing the probable outcome of the affair, walked on through the woods. They carried light lunches with them, and some flasks of cold coffee, for they would not be back

at camp again until time for a late breakfast. Frank also took some food with him in the boat.

The three boys found Frank waiting for them at the ditch, at which they arrived at dark. It was raining again, harder than before, but they managed to find a clump of trees with thick leaves that served as a partial shelter.

"Did you have any trouble getting here with the boat?" asked Ned of Frank.

"None at all. I came faster than I ever had before, as the water was high from the rain. The current is swift, and that will make it hard going back."

"Maybe one of us could go with you," suggested Bart. "The canoe will hold three on a pinch."

"I think it would be a good plan," Frank replied.

"Then I'll go," Bart went on. The other boys did not dispute his right, as he was the best paddler.

It seemed that the time would never come for the attempt to be made. In the darkness and rain the boys waited, for Frank had said it would not be safe to try until ten o'clock. At that hour the night watch went on, and the sanitarium was more quiet.

"Let's get the ladder out and lay it along the edge of the grass plot," suggested Ned. "No one can see us, and it will be something to do."

They followed this advice, and the ladder was placed in readiness at the edge of the asylum grounds. Once more they resumed their waiting. How the rain pelted down! The wind too, had increased, and it blew through the trees with a mournful sound. It was dark and chilly in the woods, and, in spite of their raincoats, the boys were anything but comfortable. It seemed as though ten o'clock would never come.

Frank had a small pocket electric light with him, run by a dry battery, and, by pressing a button, a faint glow could be had. By means of this the boys frequently glanced at their watches.

"I'm not going to look again until I think it's ten o'clock," declared Frank. But he could not resist, and, after waiting what seemed like an hour he glanced at the time-piece again. It was half-past nine.

"Half an hour more," he announced. "That will be the longest of all."

It was, but ten o'clock came at last. Cautiously the boys stole from their hiding places. They picked up the ladder and looked toward the asylum building. It was dark, save where a faint light showed through one window, and Frank knew this was in a corridor.

"Do you know which is the window of his room?" asked Ned.

"Yes," replied Frank. "It's the third one from the right hand end of the building, in the second story. The ladder will more than reach, as the windows are low ones."

Foot by foot they advanced, listening every little while, to find out if their approach was noticed. But there was only the wind and rain to be heard.

"Here we are," whispered Frank, as they came to a halt beneath the window of room twenty-eight. "Now help me raise the ladder."

Four pair of sturdy young arms soon accomplished this, though it was hard work. While the three boys steadied the ladder at the bottom, Frank went up it. He held some pebbles in his hand and, when he could safely throw them at the glass he did so, making the signal agreed upon with his father. The little stones made more noise than he supposed they would, but he hoped no one but Mr. Roscoe would hear them. Frank, standing on the ladder under the window waited anxiously.

Suddenly the window sash, to the left of the one where he thought his father was, went up softly. A head was thrust out.

"I wonder if I have made a mistake," Frank thought. The next instant he heard a voice calling to him.

"They have taken the king of the cannibal islands away!"

Frank recognized the voice as that of the insane man who had caused a disturbance the first night he was on duty.

"Where have they taken him?" asked Frank, and he hoped the man could answer rationally.

"They have taken him away," the man went on. "I know! I'm crazy but I know. The cannibals have taken the king away. Ha! Ha! A good joke!"

He was speaking and laughing in low tones.

"I have come to rescue him. He is my father! Can't you tell me where he is?" pleaded Frank.

"Good boy! Rescue father," whispered the lunatic. "I know. My head is a barrel, and if I came down the ladder I would fall. I don't want to be rescued. I own this place. But number twenty-eight. Yes, he ought to go. He's all right. They give him bad stuff to eat. I'm a barrel, but I own this place. It's barreled up inside of me. This side up with care! C. O. D. you know. Pay all charges. Ha! Ha! Good joke! They took the king away."

"But where?" persisted Frank. Was his plan to fail? Had the asylum authorities found out about it and removed his father?

"What's the matter?" called Bart from below.

"Think!" whispered Frank to the lunatic. "Tell me where he is! I want to take him away!"

"That's right! Take him away. This is no place for him. This is a place for barrels. Listen," and the man leaned far out of the window. "He's on the north side, in a room just like the one he was in, only on the top floor. I know! They tried to fool me but I hid in a barrel and I found out. It was a barrel with the hoops off, and I saw them take the king of the cannibal islands away. It's a great joke! I'm a barrel!"

"Is it on the other side?" asked Frank, wanting to be sure.

But the lunatic had shut his window. It was all black and dark again, and the rain and the wind seemed a fitting accompaniment for the sorrow that was in Frank's heart. He came down the ladder.

"What's the matter?" asked his chums, and he told them.

"Let's try the other side. Try the third window from the end, on the top floor," suggested Ned. "It can't do any harm. Maybe the crazy man spoke the truth. Sometimes they do."

"It's worth trying, anyhow," said Bart, and, though Frank did not have much hope, he agreed with his chums.

The ladder was carried around the building. As the boys looked up they saw all the windows were in darkness save

one. That one was in the top row, and was the third from the end.

"It's against the rules for any of the patients to have a light in their rooms after nine o'clock," remarked Frank. "I wonder what that means?"

"Perhaps your father placed it there for a signal," suggested Fenn.

"I'm going to see!" exclaimed Frank.

Silently the boys raised the ladder to the casement. It was a little too short, but a person stepping from the window and hanging on the sill with both hands could just reach the topmost rung. Frank went up. He threw the signal stones at the glass. They rattled like hail. The next instant the sash went up. A head was stuck out.

"Is that you, Frank?" a voice whispered.

"Yes, father! Can you come down?"

"Right away. Is everything safe?"

"Everything. Be careful, you will have to make a long step."

"I can do it. I have done more difficult things than this on my travels."

Frank's heart beat high with hope, for he knew from the sound of his father's voice that the prisoner was sane.

Cautiously Mr. Roscoe crawled from the window. He hung by his hands until his feet touched the top rung of the ladder. Then, with Frank preceding him, he went down and was soon on the ground.

"These are my chums, father," said Frank.

"I can't tell how I thank you for getting me from that terrible place," said Mr. Roscoe. "But we must hurry away. The guard will make his rounds soon, and if he sees my room empty the alarm will be given."

"Come, boys," exclaimed Bart. "Hide the ladder."

They carried it through the rain back to the ditch and placed it away. Then Frank and Bart led Mr. Roscoe through the woods to the foot of the cliff where the boat was fastened. Ned and Fenn took their positions under the tree-shelter to wait for morning, when they could start back for camp.

"All aboard!" called Frank, as he helped Mr. Roscoe into the canoe.

At that instant the bell of the institution began to ring.

"What's that?" cried Frank.

"The alarm!" exclaimed Mr. Roscoe. "They have discovered my escape."

"Paddle! Paddle!" cried Frank, dipping his blade into the water.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CURE—CONCLUSION

The canoe, loaded down as it was, answered to the strokes of the sturdy arms of the boys. It shot forward, breasting the current, and was soon well away from the cliff.

"They'll never catch us now," Frank said. "They'll not think of looking toward the river. We're safe."

And so it would seem, for they heard no sound of pursuit. Afterwards Ned and Frank told their chums that the guards scoured the woods, but did not come upon those in hiding, nor did they find the ladder. It was well that the donkey had been taken back to camp.

Through the storm and the darkness the two boys paddled. It was hard work, but they gritted their teeth and would not give up. The rain had made the river, below the falls, higher, and the current was swift. They carried the boat around the cataract and led Mr. Roscoe through the woods. Frank offered his father food, but the rescued man said he had eaten at the sanitarium a little while before.

"I was afraid you would never find me after they changed my room," he said.

Frank told his father about the man in twenty-seven.

"He was a good friend of mine," Mr. Roscoe said. "A harmless man, though his mind was gone."

They reached the camp about two o'clock in the morning. In a little while Frank had several lanterns lighted and was starting a fire in the portable stove. The donkey was still under the canvas shelter, and Frank, going for some wood, saw the stone still tied to the tail of the beast.

"I guess you'll not bray now," he remarked as he cut the rope. The next instant the animal lifted up its tail and sent forth a loud note. It seemed as though he had been saving it up for many hours. The woods rang with it.

Immediately after it, and before the echoes had ceased reverberating, there came a cry of terror from the tent where Mr. Roscoe was with Bart. Frank recognized his father's voice.

"Save me! Save me!" cried the unfortunate man. "The cannibals are coming! They will kill me! Take me away! Hide me!"

Frank sprang toward the tent. Looking in he saw his father crouched under one of the cots, with Bart standing, badly frightened in a far corner. In the eyes of Mr. Roscoe was the gleam of insanity.

"Father! Father!" cried Frank in great anguish. "Don't you know me? I'm your son! I rescued you from the sanitarium!"

"I have no son! I am all alone in the world! I don't know you!" and the poor man tried to crawl further under the cot.

"Oh, what shall I do?" cried Frank.

Outside the rain came down harder than ever and the wind swayed the frail tent. Once more the donkey brayed.

"There they are! There they are!" cried Mr. Roscoe. "They are going to kill me!"

It was the cry of the beast that had sent his frail mind once more into the channel of insanity.

"Oh, what are we to do?" cried Frank again. "Perhaps he is really insane and I have made a mistake in taking him out of that institution."

"It wasn't your fault," declared Bart "Any one would have done the same. Perhaps it will pass over. He isn't violent."

Though they were much frightened, the two boys tried to coax Mr. Roscoe out from under the cot, but he would not come. At Frank's suggestion, Bart again tied the stone to the donkey's tail, to prevent the braying. Then they sat and waited for daylight and the arrival of their chums. The hours were long and full of terror. They did not know what to do. They could only wait for morning, and when that came they did not know that they would be any better off.

The rain stopped. Then a pale light began to diffuse among the trees. It grew stronger. Mr. Roscoe was quieter now, and came from under the cot. Frank persuaded him to lie down, and in a little while his father was asleep.

An hour later Fenn and Ned came in.

"Did you get here all right?" asked Ned, eagerly, but a sight of Frank's sad face sobered him. The two boys were told what had happened.

"I don't know what to do," Bart admitted as he and his two chums went outside, leaving Frank with his father.

"I've got an idea!" exclaimed Fenn eagerly. "I saw by that paper which Frank dropped, that Dr. Robertson was spending a few days at Forest Villa. That's the next place to Mr. Armstrong's house."

"Who is Dr. Robertson?" asked Ned.

"Why he's a great specialist on diseases of the brain. Why not go to him, and ask him to come and see Frank's father? I'm sure he would if we told him all the facts."

"Say!" cried Bart. "That's a fine idea! Hurry off and see if the doctor will come. If he wants pay we can give it to him."

But Dr. Robertson did not want any fee, when Fenn had breathlessly explained the circumstances to him. He questioned the boy closely, and then, taking his medicine case with him, set out through the woods. He was on his vacation, he explained, but he never missed a chance to study or treat a brain disease, and he was very much interested in Mr. Roscoe's case.

Dr. Robertson sent all the boys out of the tent, and told them to stay away while he examined the patient. How anxiously they waited for the verdict, Frank most of all! Was the case a hopeless one? At last the doctor came out. He was smiling, and the boys took that as a good sign.

"You can come in, boys," he said.

"Is he—can you—will he—" stammered Frank.

"He will get well, if that's what you mean," said Dr. Robertson. "He is much better now. The fact is," he went on, "his fits of insanity were only temporary, and they were caused by a drug, which was administered to him in his food. He ate something at the sanitarium just before you rescued him, and this last time the drug began to work as soon as he heard that donkey bray. The fit has passed now, and if he doesn't get any more of the drugged food he will probably have no more insane spells."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Frank, sinking on his knees at the side of the cot on which his father lay.

Mr. Roscoe opened his eyes.

"Frank! My boy!" he murmured. Then he dozed off again.

The doctor stayed at the tent until noon, and left some medicine, saying he would call again in the evening. Soon after the medical man had left Mr. Roscoe awakened. He declared he was much better, and in talking of his case he said he noticed that the strange spells came over him soon after he had eaten something. At other times he was as clear-headed as he had ever been.

In a few days, under the treatment of Dr. Robertson, Mr. Roscoe had fully recovered. It was thought best to keep him at the camp for a few days, as the rest would do him good.

"Then you'll come away with me and we'll make a home for ourselves," said Frank.

"Why not stay with your Uncle Abner?" asked Mr. Roscoe.

Frank told of his suspicions, that his uncle was in the plot with the men who held Mr. Roscoe a prisoner.

"No, you're wrong," said Frank's father. "Your uncle was deceived by the men. I understand it all now. He thought I really was insane, and he was doing what he imagined was right to keep me in the sanitarium. He was trying to hold the property for you. Those men fooled him, but now we will get the best of them."

Mr. Roscoe's theory proved correct, when a little later the boys broke camp and went home. Mr. Dent was much surprised when told the facts in the case, and confirmed what Frank's father had said. The property was gotten away from the men, and the plotters had to flee to escape arrest. Dr. Hardman was among them, and his sanitarium was taken in charge by the authorities, for he had many persons there who were really insane.

"And so that was Frank's secret," remarked Bart, one afternoon as the four chums were talking together over the strange case. "I would never have suspected it."

"I hardly believed it myself, at times," said Frank.

"Well, we had some fun with the donkey, anyhow," put in Ned. "That was about the only comic happening during our camping."

"I guess we've had enough of adventures to last for several vacations," spoke Frank. "I'm willing to settle down to a quiet life."

But a quiet life was not in store for the four boys, and why will be related in another volume, to be called "Fenn Masterson's Discovery." In that tale we shall learn the particulars of an interesting voyage on the Great Lakes, and the particulars of a revelation which came to Stumpy when he least expected it.

"Frank, I suppose you are happy now you have your father with you," said Bart one day.

"Happy?" repeated Frank, with a little lump in his throat. "I am more than happy. Why, I feel as if the whole world was nothing but pure sunshine!"

"Well, we all rejoice with you," came from Ned.

"Indeed we do!" added Fenn.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FRANK ROSCOE'S SECRET; OR, THE DAREWELL CHUMS IN THE WOODS ***

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