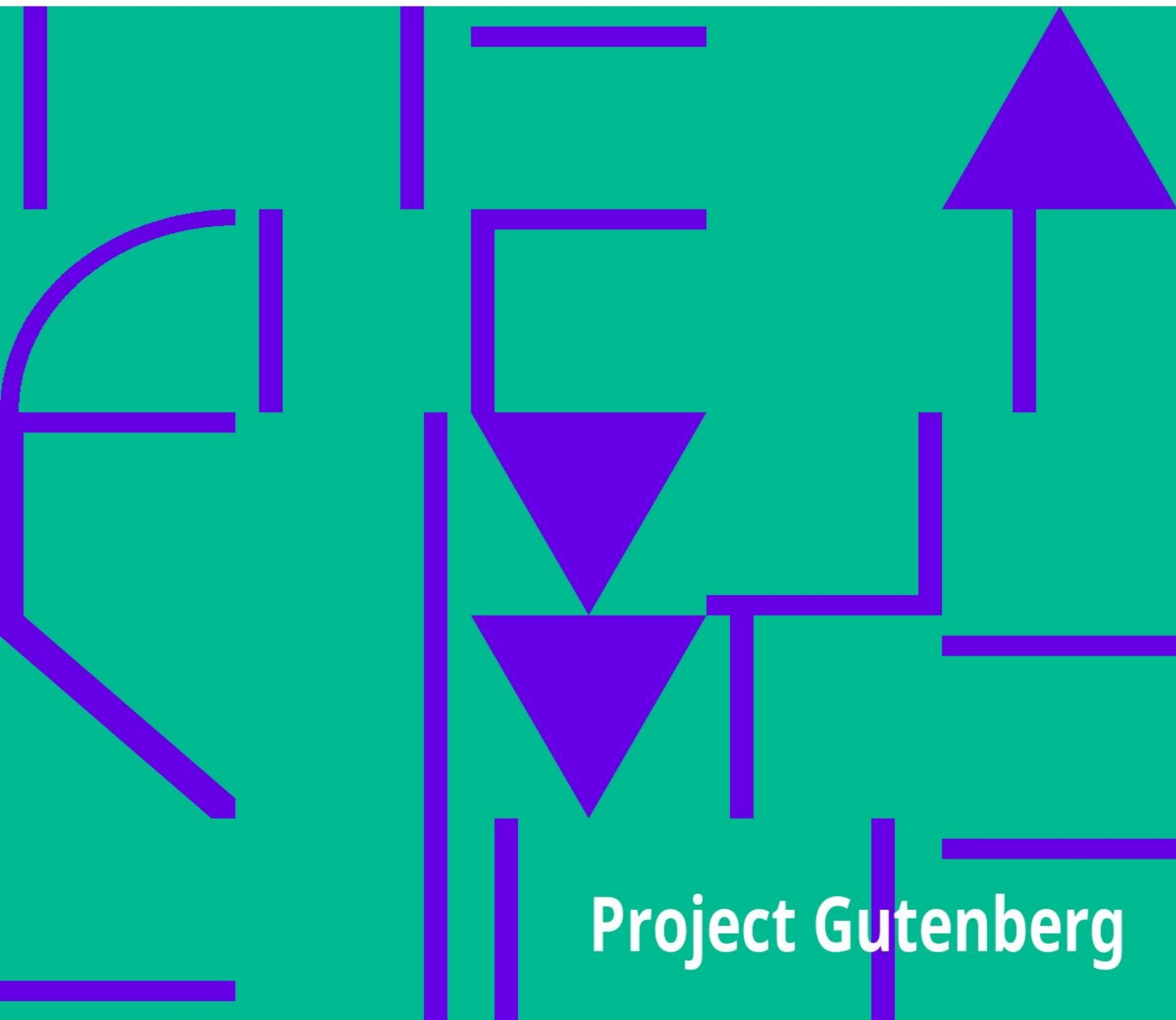


# The Auto Boys' Mystery

James A. Braden



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"Great heavens! It's Lew Grandall!" cried the stranger on the raft. (*Page 399*)

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# THE AUTO BOYS' MYSTERY

By JAMES A. BRADEN

AUTHOR OF  
"THE AUTO BOYS," "THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE,"  
"THE AUTO BOYS' CAMP," "THE AUTO BOYS'  
BIG SIX," "FAR PAST THE  
FRONTIER," ETC.

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# THE AUTO BOYS' MYSTERY

## CHAPTER I

### PROLOGUE

The Auto Boys had been camped on the unfrequented shore of Opal Lake for several days. At first hunting and fishing were the only enlivening features of this, their unusual summer outing.

Opal Lake, far up in the big northern woods, had at this time no other campers. True, there was an abandoned clubhouse on a nearby point not far from where Phil Way, Billy Worth, Dave MacLester and Paul Jones selected the spot for their Outing Camp. But, until within a day or two, even the clubhouse had seemed to be as it looked, deserted.

But a smoke being seen one day, the boys had become curious. Without actually entering the house itself, they had made individual or collective trips that way. Also strange sounds had been heard, and even human presence had been detected. Finally Paul, the youngest of the boys, made a cautious trip thither and even entered the house where he had heard voices, and otherwise had detected that real folks were undoubtedly there; though why they were there Paul could only guess. Perhaps they were in search of a bag of money, said to be twenty thousand dollars, stolen three years before and supposed still to be hidden somewhere in that region.

Strange men had been seen near the end of a gravel road which the Longknives Club (owners of the now abandoned clubhouse) were then constructing for their own use and convenience. The unexpected loss of this money caused the work to stop, while the workmen, including a Swedish foreman, Nels Anderson by name, remained unpaid to this day.

Aside from the clubhouse, the nearest inhabitants to the boys' camp were this same Anderson and his family, who lived in a small clearing five or six miles away on the trail leading to Staretta, a small town perhaps a dozen miles further on. This was the nearest town to Opal Lake which was, indeed, a veritable "Lake of the Woods."

When Paul Jones, finally escaping through the cellar window, left the clubhouse without being discovered, he ran across in the dark another somebody who

vanished, uttering strange and savage oaths. Paul also made himself scarce in another direction and happened upon Chip Slider, whose merry response to Paul's greeting caused both soon to become so friendly that Paul took Chip to their camp, where a warm meal soon loosened the boys' tongues and there was a general interchange of opinions about game, fish, the big woods, and at last the abandoned house on the point.

Here the boys learned from Chip that a man named Murky was also in the woods and supposedly after that lost or stolen satchel, thought by many to be hidden somewhere near. They learned from Chip more of the robbery of Grandall, the treasurer of the Longknives, by this same Murky; also that Murky himself, through the connivance of Grandall, was held up by Chip's father by the order of Grandall. The scheme seemed to have been for Grandall to get the money thus entrusted to his care in a way that would divert suspicion against himself and direct it elsewhere. After sufficient time had elapsed, then Grandall would manage to use that money, meanwhile placating Chip's father, supposedly by bribes.

So open, frank and friendless was young Chip that he won the Auto Boys' confidence, and stayed on at the camp, proving himself a valuable aid and an added link in their narrow social life.

Shortly before this Chip, encountering Murky in the woods, had been badly beaten by the other, and had been seen with a bandaged head by some of the boys. This induced much pity for the homeless lad, while Chip's knowledge of Murky and matters connected with the robbery just alluded to, made him serviceable in the matter of knowing more about what was going on in and about the house on the point. It appeared, too, that others of the boys during previous scoutings about the point had seen Murky, though they did not know who or what he was until Slider enlightened them.

The general conclusion was that the voices heard inside the house were more than apt to have indicated the presence of Murky and Grandall, still on trail of stolen money that must have, in some way, slipped into unknown hands. Still nothing was sure or settled in their minds except that Chip was a good fellow and Murky a bad one from almost any point of view one might take.

Another point occurred to Phil Way, the oldest and the leader of the Auto Boys; not one of suspicion against Chip, but for general enlightenment.

A recent visit to their camp when all the boys were away had occurred. Things had been taken, including provisions, bedding and dishes. Perhaps young Slider,

more familiar with the woods life nearby, might have some knowledge that would lead to the perpetrator.

Taken all round, the camp thought itself rather in luck that Paul had met this strange homeless lad in the way and under the circumstances he did.

Nels Anderson, the giant Swede, had also been seen under suspicious circumstances by some of the boys. Taken altogether, the whole matter was attractive enough to foster certain ambitions inside the lads, who were too apt to fancy themselves amateur detectives, a vocation they knew little or nothing about, rather than young woodsmen, hunters, or anglers, pursuits they really did have some knowledge of and also some skill.

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## CHAPTER II

### A QUIET, TRANQUIL SUNDAY

A great bull-frog whose hoarse croaking could always be heard above other sounds about the lake, "beginning at exactly eleven o'clock each night"—at least so Paul Jones positively stated—had started his unmelodious serenade a long time before the Auto Boys and their visitor prepared for bed. Paul's adventure, Chip Slider's whole story and the combined information thus afforded had proved a most fruitful field for speculation and conversation.

A bed for Slider was contrived by spreading over some hemlock boughs a tarpaulin used on the car for covering baggage. A bucket-seat cushion from the car served quite nicely as a pillow. Indeed Chip had not for a long while had so comfortable a resting place, crude as it was.

The plans for the night's sleeping arrangements were seized upon by Phil as an opportunity of finding out whether the strange boy had any knowledge of the recent robbery of the camp. With this in view his remarks about a scarcity of blankets and his inquiries as to where Chip had been managing to find accommodations were adroitly framed. Quite perfectly he succeeded in gaining the knowledge desired, nor did Slider ever suspect that the Auto Boys' suspicions might very easily have been directed toward him.

It was truly pitiable to hear Chip tell how in the night he had stood off a distance in the woods, taking note of the bright campfire of the four friends; how he had smelled their frying bacon when all he had to eat was a little dry bread; how he had been tempted to apply at the camp for food and shelter, but was afraid; how he had spent one whole evening within sight of the cheerful light about the shack, because it was a kind of company for him, and he slipped away and made his bed in the dead leaves beside a log when at last the campfire had quite died down.

Yet very interesting, too, was all that Chip told. One certain fact made clear was that he had nothing to do with the theft of provisions and other items from the camp. When this was fairly plain Phil Way ventured the remark that Murky had possibly fared better in the woods than Slider had done.



"No denyin' it," Chip assented. "I found his hang-out only yesterday. It would put you in mind of a bear's den, most, to see it."

"Tell all about it," urged Phil. "I'd like to smoke him out, like we would a woodchuck," he added with bitter earnestness.

"Nothin' much to it," answered Slider, but he went on promptly to report what he had seen and the manner of his discovery. He had been in search of berries, or whatever he could find for food, he said, for his slender store of provisions was nearly gone.

As he approached a marshy place where he thought he might find huckleberries, or blueberries, he discovered Murky there ahead of him. He had known the evil fellow was in the woods. He had watched him frequently, believing he might learn something of the stolen payroll money or at least what was going on so secretly about the old clubhouse.

Carefully keeping himself out of sight, Chip had followed when Murky left the marsh. The latter walked directly to a thicket on a knoll, went in among the bushes and disappeared. Then for a long time Slider patiently waited. He wondered if the treasure he was seeking might not be hidden in the copse.

Toward evening Murky left the thicket and slipped away in the direction of the point of land occupied by the clubhouse. Improving this opportunity Slider cautiously visited the brush-covered knoll. There he found the tramp's den—a nest of leaves and pine needles and branches between two logs. Poles laid across the logs and covered over with branches made a roof for the den. Merely as a place to sleep the nest looked snug enough, Chip said.

"Didn't see any blankets or dishes, did you?" Dave asked.

Indeed he had seen these very things, Slider answered, and had wondered how Murky came by them. He thought they probably had been taken from the clubhouse.

A complete quartette of voices answered this remark, setting Chip right as to the real ownership of the items mentioned. For not one of the four friends doubted now that it was Murky and no one else who had stolen their equipment and provisions. Considering the unscrupulous character of the fellow, they only wondered that he had not plundered the camp completely, leaving them nothing of value. It did not occur to them that probably the thief really wished to take more than he did, but could not conveniently carry a greater load.

It was a matter of congratulation among the boys that they had not, by leaving

the camp again unguarded, given Murky a chance to return. They were more certain than ever now that some one of them must be always in attendance about the shack, and it would have needed very little to persuade them, also, that despite Opal Lake's many attractive features their best course would be to pull up stakes and bid its shores good-bye.

Even after all were in bed this feature of their situation was discussed to some extent. Two main reasons for wishing to occupy the present camp, for yet a few days, were suggested. One was that in another week they must head the Thirty homeward and it was therefore hardly worth while to search out a more secure and less frequented locality for a camp site.

For reason number two there was the lively interest in the outcome of the search for the Grandall payroll money, and an earnest wish to help Chip Slider find the treasure, if possible, and return it to the rightful owners,—the members of the club which had been practically broken up by its twenty thousand dollar loss, as many a larger organization might be.

Quite as usual Paul's voice was the last one heard when the discussion closed and the quiet of midnight settled over the forest. All had been silent for some time. Slider had expressed in his grateful, however awkward, way his appreciation of the offer his new friends made to help him. And Phil Way, answering for all the boys, said there was no obligation at all and no thanks necessary,—that nothing had been done, as yet, at least.

"Anyhow, it seems to me," said Paul, after a long silence, "It seems to me as if we were all going to have our hands full. There will be Murky and Grandall and Nels Anderson digging into this mystery just as hard as we can, and maybe harder. And they are all bad ones, all of 'em, unless maybe Anderson might not be so really bad excepting for being hooked up with a bad outfit, and all that."

No comment being made by the others with regard to these remarks, Jones went on to say that if there was any advantage to be had by having right and justice on their side, fortune ought to favor Slider and his friends in the search to be carried forward. He reasoned it all out, too, to his own satisfaction, that in the end justice must prevail in all things or the whole world would ultimately go to smash. "And that's a fact, now, ain't it?" he asked.

There came no answer.

"Well, is it, or don't it, wasn't it!" inquired Paul, rather facetiously.

Still no answer. Jones raised himself up on his elbow. He listened. It was

perfectly evident from the heavy breathing all about him that every one of the other lads was sound asleep and had been for some time.

"Why! The bing-dinged mummies!" he exclaimed, "and me talking till I'm all but tongue-tied—and to no one!" he added indignantly.

Having heard how Slider slept in the open woods with not even a cover over him more than leaves, the Auto Boys would have been ashamed now to feel afraid in their snug shack, no matter what strange noises might come from the lake's dark shore lines. And though the sounds of various wild creatures coming to bathe or drink did reach the lads, as occasionally one or more of them awakened during the night, no heed was given the disturbers. It was enough to know that the exceeding drouth brought animals from long distances to the water's edge and that they were much more intent on drinking than having trouble with anyone or even among themselves.

Not because it was Sunday morning but due quite entirely to their having retired so late, the Auto Boys slept longer than was their custom. Poor Chip Slider awakened with the first peep of daylight, really tremendously surprised to find himself in such comfortable quarters. With a sigh of exquisite content and satisfaction he at once dropped off to sleep again. With the exception of the night at the bachelor's shanty he had not known such sweet and unbroken rest for—it seemed to him almost his whole lifetime.

And then again, if Chip had wondered whether there might be kindness, cheerfulness and plenty to eat somewhere in the world, as he most certainly often had done, he must surely have found the answer now. For when he awoke again the rich aroma of boiling coffee and cheering scent of frying bacon greeted him. From the beach down by the lake, too, there came lively laughter and a great splashing of water.

"Skip down and dive in! Paddle around some, then rub down lively!" urged Billy Worth, who, having had his plunge, was now nimbly getting breakfast. "Makes a man feel dandy!" he urged, really thinking that a bath would do Chip good, anyway. "And hold on!" he added. "Here's soap and a towel if you care for 'em."

Slider was by no means afraid of the water. He was glad of the chance to take a swim and had the sound sense to realize, as well, that he stood much in need of a vigorous scrubbing. He hurried down to the water zestfully, albeit rather lamely for his body was stiff and sore. Paul made him feel at home at once by turning a back flip-flop off the now completed raft for his especial benefit. He asked Chip to follow suit, but the latter only smiled and dove off forward, instead.

"Being around the woods as much as you have been, you'll hardly have a change of clothes with you, but here's a shirt I'll never need, and you can keep it if you'll accept it from me," said Phil Way in a pleasant, off-hand manner, when he and Chip were dressing. It was a friendly yet delicate way of getting the young stranger into one garment, at least, that was clean and whole.

The boy could not refuse nor did he wish to do so. Though he was sensitive, his feelings were not injured. Nor were his pride and manliness hurt at all. It was just because he was not permitted to feel that he was in any degree an object of charity.

True, Chip had begged for food along the road. One would think that did not indicate much pride on his part; but it should be remembered that asking for aid among strangers is very different from receiving anything as charity from those one considers his friends.

With such a beginning the Auto Boys and their new acquaintance found Sunday passing very pleasantly. They wrote letters, took long walks about the lake and Phil and Paul took Chip for a ride in the car, going almost to Anderson's cabin before turning back.

This put the boys in mind of the tree that had been shivered by the mighty blow of the great Swede. After dinner all but Dave walked out to the end of the gravel road improvement to inspect the spot again and particularly to see the slivered stump on which Anderson's sledge had fallen with such mighty force.

Here, it developed, Slider had made his headquarters, so far as he may be said to have had anything of the kind in the woods. He had kept his stock of food here, hidden in a weather-beaten cracker box, that some teamster had used in feeding his horses. But there was no food left now, Chip explained. Then he added that but for falling in with his new friends he would have been obliged to abandon, for the time, at least, his search for the stolen fortune. The few berries he could find would not have been enough to sustain him. He had eaten even the stray stalks of stunted corn that grew up where horses, used in the road building, had been fed.

MacLester had remained on guard in camp while the others were out upon the old roadway. The latter returned to find him perched on the log projecting over the water, scrutinizing the Point and the old house there closely.

"Hang it!" declared David forcefully, "I wish we hadn't agreed that we wouldn't go near the clubhouse today. I've seen a man moving about over there. He came out on the porch toward the lake, once, and after looking all around he stepped

down to that rotten old wharf and threw something into the water."

"Gee whiz!" Paul Jones burst forth, "was it the same man we saw before?"

"Yes, the one with the golf cap," MacLester said. "When he went inside he went upstairs and closed that window that has been open. He acted as if he was getting ready to go away."

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## CHAPTER III

### THE SEARCH IN THE OLD HOUSE

Paul's adventure in the old house somehow seemed to give importance to his opinions on all matters pertaining to that subject. So when he suggested that the act of throwing something into the water by the tenant of the abandoned building was for the purpose of destroying evidence, all the boys agreed that quite likely such was the truth.

What evidence this person, be he Grandall or not, wished to destroy and why, was the subject of vast discussion. Since the coming of Slider among them, particularly, the Auto Boys found the mystery of the stolen twenty thousand dollars to possess for them a strong personal interest. They talked over and over again, and with the greatest relish, everything that had come within their notice in and around the bleak old structure down there on the Point.

Finally—it was during the Sunday evening supper of cold hard-boiled eggs, bread and butter, bananas, graham crackers and coffee—that finally, and at last, Phil Way proposed that a really serious visit be made to the clubhouse the following morning. Of any person encountered—Mr. Murky excepted, of course—permission to use the vise and other equipment in the automobile shed would be asked. This would be a reasonable pretext for going to the clubhouse grounds. And being on those premises, everyone should look carefully about for some clue to the stolen money's hiding place.

It was not easy for Captain Phil to suggest this plan. He was not sure it was quite square and honorable—"on the level"—as some would say,—but he called it a stratagem in a worthy cause and so felt better over it. But really, since the cause was that of helping Chip Slider, as against such villains as Murky and Grandall, no one could blame Phil, or blame any of the lads that they welcomed his proposal heartily.

The day had been hot and close. Contrary to the usual condition, also, the air grew little if any cooler as night came on. A dive from the projecting log into the lake to cool off was in order then, as the boys prepared for bed.

"Just goes to show what a nuisance clothes are, anyway," observed Paul Jones,

as he dried himself. He was rejoicing exceedingly that he had only to jump into his nightshirt to be clothed to all necessary extent, following his swim. "Heap fine idea if we had clothes for day time as simple as for night time!" he added.

"Yes sir, it's just such fellows as you, Jones, that would sooner or later drift right back to the stone age if there weren't more energetic ones to drag you along forward, making you wear clothes and things—keeping you civilized," was MacLester's answer. A good-natured grin accompanied his remarks.

"Well, I s'pose it takes clothes to give some folks an appearance of being civilized," was Paul's warm rejoinder, yet with utmost good-nature. "But for my part—well, I'll go on wearing 'em, David, for your sake."

"And it would make your appearance more civilized still if you made more civil use of your tongue," MacLester retorted.

Then Jones had recourse to his usual, "Tush, tush, Davy! You've tired yourself all out. You'll feel better tomorrow."

This sort of language, in a fatherly tone that from Paul's slender size, in contrast with Dave's large frame, was really grotesque, always provoked a mild laugh. Usually, too, it closed the wordy clashes in which the two boys frequently engaged.

MacLester made no further response. He was ready for bed now, Billy had already crept in and Phil and Chip Slider were following him.

"Last is best of all the game," chirped Jones in his own blithe, self-complacent way as he saw that he was bringing up the rear, as often he had done before. But in another moment he likewise was in bed. The boys were feeling now the late hours of the night before. Undoubtedly they all would "feel better tomorrow."

The probability that the amiable Mr. Murky would discover Chip Slider's presence in the woods had been discussed before, but the talk was renewed at breakfast Monday morning. Chip was quite sure the old fellow did not suspect that he was near. He had been very careful to keep out of Murky's sight and was more anxious than ever to do so now, being quite sure there would be serious trouble for himself and his new friends as well, were he discovered.

It was so apparent that Slider stood in great dread of the tramp that Phil had no hesitancy in suggesting that he might better remain at the camp while the others visited the old house. Chip agreed readily. He said he could be of no use elsewhere, and his presence with the Auto Boys would but inflame Murky as much against them as himself if they chanced to meet him.

With the exception of the upstairs window being closed, the clubhouse and its surroundings looked exactly the same as on their former visits to the Point, the Auto Boys found. The air of loneliness, melancholy and excessive quiet impressed them all just as it had done before. The sound of their own footsteps appeared to ring in a hollow and unnatural way. Their voices, though low and subdued, seemed loud and harsh in their ears in the foreboding calm of this haunted atmosphere.

"I don't see *why* it should always feel so here—as if a fellow was just going to be scared to death," remarked Billy in an undertone.

"If you figure it out, though, it's all in your mind," replied Phil thoughtfully. "Trouble is, to make yourself believe it."

But notwithstanding his reasoning, sound enough, undoubtedly, despite the awful tragedy the Point was so soon to witness—Captain Phil carried his philosophy rather gingerly, as it were, when he stepped up on the porch to knock. In other words, he stepped very lightly. Still his rapping was right sharp and it should have brought a response had there been anyone within hearing, willing to make answer.

Peering in at the windows, the boys could see nothing in any way different than when they had been at the house the first time.

"I tell you whoever *was* here has gone," said MacLester for the fourth or fifth time, and he tried the door. It was locked. The door at the rear,—that is, the one opening upon the high porch facing the lake, was likewise tightly secured.

"Now then," said Phil, resolutely, "we're face to face with the question that has been in my mind all night. What are we going to do next? And I'll tell you what we *are* going to do. We have no right to go into the house—no right at all, one way you look at it. But that isn't the answer. We are helping Chip Slider with his search for money that was stolen and hidden, and that ought to be found and returned to its owners. Then it's *necessary* that we go in this clubhouse and *we're going in.*"

"Paul knows the way up through the cellar! Let him get in at the window he got out of and so go up the cellar stairs and open the door for us. There's a key inside, likely," proposed Billy.

"Say! how'd you like to take a run and jump off the dock?" answered young Mr. Jones with more fervor than elegance. "No, sir! We can find some other window open!"



And Paul was right. A surprise awaited the boys when they reached the west side of the house. (The path from front to rear passed on the east of the building.) The brush and a couple of tall trees grew very close to the walls at the westerly side. Phil was foremost as the friends ventured in that direction.

"Look!" he cried suddenly. "A window open, and more than that, it's smashed to smithereens!"

Quite true it was. The fragments of glass littered the parched and stunted grass. The sash of the window was raised to its fullest height. A freshly broken branch of a low bush, close by, was evidence that the mischief had been done but recently.

The boys could only guess by whom and for what purpose the window had been shattered. The thought came to them that Murky might have been doing some investigating inside. Possibly he was in the house at this very minute. The idea was not a pleasant one to contemplate.

"Gee whiz! I'd fade *away*—I'd shrink up to a pale shadow and perish—actually perish, if ever that fellow got hold of *me*!" said young Mr. Jones. His voice indicated that perhaps his exaggerated statement might not be so overdrawn as it appeared.

"Come on! Give me a lift, somebody," exclaimed Way impatiently. Then, ignoring Billy's prompt offer of a hand to boost him, up he clambered and the next moment stood within. Billy, Paul and Dave followed.

The air in the house was close and oppressive. Outside the sun shone hot. Not even a zephyr stirred the leaves. A bluejay shrieked noisily, as if in protest at the visitors' conduct. With something of that "fading away" feeling Paul Jones had mentioned, the boys proceeded, however, from room to room.

Downstairs they found everything to be quite as has been described heretofore. The bucket on the kitchen table beside which, on a former occasion, the boys had seen a tiny pool of water, was now empty and turned upside down. Other little things, such as the tin dipper being inside a cupboard and every drawer and every door closed, suggested that whoever had occupied the house had indeed gone away.

A door opened upon the stairs that led to the second floor. It was closed but not locked. Up the dusty steps the boys went. They found themselves in a hall off of which opened six small bed-rooms. In each was a bedstead of one kind or another, some of iron, some built of pine lumber. There were mattresses on all

the beds but on only one was there other bedding. This was in the room the window of which the boys had more than once seen to be open.

A couple of blankets and a pillow were thrown loosely over this mattress. The latter was quite out of its proper position as if it had been placed on the bedstead hurriedly. Looking more closely the lads discovered that the other mattresses were awry. Dave suggested that someone had pulled them this way and that to see if anything was hidden in or under them. There was no telling whether he was right.

Between two of the tiny bed-rooms was a bath-room. It contained a tub and washstand only, but was quite nicely finished in painted pine as, indeed, was all the second floor. There were no towels, soap, brushes or any of the usual paraphernalia of a bath-room in sight but on a little shelf beneath the mirror were a shaving-mug and brush.

"See! this has been used just lately! The soap is still wet on the brush," Phil Way observed, picking up that article. "Mr. Grandall forgot it, I reckon."

"Grandall—your grandmother!" exclaimed Worth quickly. "Look at the initial B, big as life, on the cup!"

"Just the same, it was Grandall who was here and the only questions are, what did he come for and where has he went?" said Paul Jones more positively than grammatically.

"Anyhow the shaving cup or the initial, either one, is no sure sign of anything except that someone was here, and we knew that before," said Way reflectively. "Quite likely the reason the mug was left here was that it had been here all along and did not belong to Grandall," he reasoned.

"Now you're shouting," spoke Jones with emphasis.

At the end of the narrow hall was a small room with a door opening upon a balcony. Here the boys stepped out. The view of the lake from this point was extremely pretty. Under the glow of the sun the water shone like silver. The green shores looked cool and delightful—far cooler than they really were.

But they were lovely to the eye. Only one tall, dead pine whose naked top and branches rose gaunt and ghostly above the foliage of its neighbors offered the slightest omen of the impending danger in a scene so tranquil.

A high trellis on which the roses or some vines had at some time clambered to this balcony or porch roof where the boys now stood, offered them an opportunity to climb down to the ground. Only Billy chose this route. He quickly

reached the earth and went out to the decaying remnants of the wharf while the others resumed their search through the house. But if he thought to discover any sign of whatever the strange man threw into the water the day before, he was disappointed.

Worth rejoined his friends in the clubhouse living-room. Striking many matches to find the way, they all descended the steep steps into the cellar. Very little light entered this dark place. One small window only was there beside the one whose presence Paul Jones had found so convenient.

"Here's the place to look carefully," observed Billy. "But I say, we are a pack of mutton-heads! What if someone should come into the house this minute? Tell you what! You fellows dig around here and I'll stand guard upstairs."

"I did think of such a plan but after seeing that broken window, I concluded it wasn't necessary," said Phil. "Whoever there might be to disturb us now, has been through the house ahead of us, I'm thinking. And it's my opinion that we are too late coming here, anyhow. The man who most likely found the twenty thousand dollars is the one who cleared out last night."

Still Billy Worth insisted on going upstairs to stand guard while the search of the dark cellar went forward and the bluejay outside harshly screamed its protests while the gaunt, bare top of the old dead pine frowned ominously across the lake.

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## CHAPTER IV

### A GUEST AT NELS ANDERSON'S

In vain did the youthful searchers examine every foot of the cellar's earthen floor. The thought that there, if anywhere, the treasure might be buried, impressed them strongly and right diligently did they apply themselves to their task.

A few old boxes, a heavy pine table and a combination cupboard and ice chest were substantially all the cellar contained. All these were explored and the ground beneath them thoroughly inspected. "Nothing doing," was the way Jones summed up the result, and if he meant by this that every effort was fruitless, as would appear likely, he was quite correct.

All through the automobile shed and all about the club grounds the boys carried their exploring and their minute inspection of whatever had the appearance of being a likely hiding place for a suit-case containing twenty thousand dollars of currency. Despite the temptation to experiment with the engine that had been used for pumping, to try the tools of the workbench, or to put afloat the fishing skiff they discovered, partly covered with lumber at the far end of the shed, they molested nothing. They only looked, but this they did thoroughly.

It was noon and Chip Slider, keeping camp alone, had become anxious and worried for the safety of his new friends before the latter made their appearance at the lean-to. He looked wistfully from one to another and read in their faces the answer to the question in his mind.

All hands fell to with preparations for dinner. Chip had busied himself with the gathering of an immense quantity of dry wood, but fresh water must be brought from the well in the sandy beach, potatoes must be washed, peeled and sliced for frying; bacon must be sliced; eggs and butter brought from the "refrigerator," also,—something for everyone to do, in short, under Chef Billy's competent direction.

Whether Murky, as well as the wearer of the golfing cap, that is, the recent tenant of the clubhouse, had departed from the woods, was a question all tried in vain to answer satisfactorily as the boys sat at dinner. And if one, or both, had or

had not really gone for good, was also an inquiry, the answer to which could not be discovered.

Paul Jones proposed that a visit be made to the den Murky had made for himself. Slider could show the way. Approaching carefully, it might be quite easy to discover the tramp's presence or absence without danger of being seen by him. Billy Worth interposed with the suggestion that a trip to Staretta was more important. Provisions were needed, there would surely be some mail at the office and the letters written yesterday should be posted.

"Yes, and stop at Anderson's, too!" put in MacLester. "I'm mighty suspicious of that individual, *myself*,—'specially after Jonesy's experience!"

With these good reasons for going to town confronting them, together with the fact that the use of their car was always a source of keen enjoyment to the Auto Boys, it seems quite needless to state what they decided to do.

Paul inspected the gasoline supply and added the contents of a ten gallon can kept as a reserve, not forgetting to put the now empty can in the tonneau to be refilled at Staretta. Dave looked to the quantity of oil in the reservoir and decided none was needed. Phil in the meantime was examining nuts and bolts with a practiced eye—a hardly necessary proceeding for every part of the beloved machine had been put in the pink of order on Saturday afternoon.

"Worth's turn to drive," said Jones. "So go on, Bill. I'll wash dishes. Gee whiz! If there's anything I'd rather do than wash dishes—"

"Yes, the list would fill a book!" Worth broke in. "You go ahead, Paul, I'm going to stay in camp. Going to cook up a little stuff and all I ask of you fellows is to bring these things from Fraley's."

Worth passed over a list he had been writing and, with a show of an extreme reluctance he did not feel, Paul climbed up to the driver's seat. Phil Way meantime was protesting that he would remain to guard camp. Billy would not listen, but said in an undertone that Way must go along to make Chip feel comfortable and contented.

For Slider had shown for Way a fondness that was both beautiful and pathetic. It was as if he realized that he had truly found the answer to the musing questions of his lifetime at last. This was true with regard to all four of the chums but most especially was Chip already devoted to Phil.

With MacLester up beside Paul, and Way and the now clean and well-fed boy of the woods in the tonneau, the graceful automobile threaded its route among the

trees. With roads averaging from fair to good, an hour would have taken the travelers to Staretta easily. With six or seven miles of woodland trail, then an equal distance of but moderately good going before getting fairly out of the forest, Paul took an hour and a half for the trip. There was no need to hurry, he said, but just the same as soon as the wheels struck the good, level earth not far from town the speedometer shot up to "30."

Link Fraley was found, busy as usual, this time packing eggs into a shipping case; but for once he stopped working the moment he caught sight of his callers. Sometimes he had allowed his father to wait on the boys as they did their buying, but today he told the senior member of the house he would attend to them himself.

"Been wantin' to see ye," said Link cordially. "Anything new back in the timber?"

The young storekeeper's voice had a peculiar inflection and his face bore an expression that answered "yes" to his own question.

"A little; that is, we have something to tell and something to ask about, as usual," Phil replied. "Here's the list of things Billy wanted. If you'll get them ready while we go over to the post-office—we want to have a good, old talk with you."

"Been annexing part of our lumber country population, I see," remarked Fraley in an undertone, glancing toward Slider who had waited at the door.

Phil nodded.

"Want to look a little out," Fraley continued, with a shake of his head and a tone of doubt; but he turned away at once to find the baking soda, item number one in Billy Worth's list, and his young friends betook themselves to the post-office.

At the rear door of Fraley & Son's establishment was a platform to facilitate the loading and unloading of freight. It was roofed over with pine boards that gave protection from sun or rain and, as whatever slight breeze there might be blowing was to be found here, there was no better place in Staretta for a chat on a hot day. Seated on kegs of nails on this platform, upon their return to the store, the Auto Boys told Mr. Fraley, Jr., the main facts of their discoveries since last seeing him.

Link listened with the most sober attention.

"I honestly don't know," said he at last, "whether to take much stock in the story of the suit-case full of swag or not. But it does look as if things in general pointed in that direction. I didn't believe, at first, that your neighbor up there by

the lake was anything more than one of these vacation tourists that often go tramping 'round, even if he wasn't just a chap doing some shooting out of season. But I'm pretty well satisfied now that a lot more than ever *I* suspected has been going on. Listen here!"

With this Link took from between the leaves of a notebook a neatly folded clipping from a newspaper. Clearing his throat, while he opened the clipping and smoothed it over his knee, he proceeded to read aloud.

The newspaper item was an Associated Press dispatch dated from —, the home city of the Longknives Club. Its substance was that Lewis Grandall, teller of the Commercial Trust & Banking Company of that city, was missing from his home. His absence was supposed to be on account of an investigation the Grand Jury had been making in connection with certain city contracts in which he had been interested, not as an officer of the bank, but personally. The disappearance of Grandall, the dispatch stated, had caused a small run on the bank and general uneasiness among the depositors and stockholders. This had later been quieted by a signed statement from the directors stating positively that the company's interests were not involved in any of the missing teller's personal business affairs.

"From which it would seem to a man up a tree that one certain Grandall was finding Opal Lake atmosphere good for his constitution," remarked Link Fraley as he finished reading. "But," he went on, "it looks to me a lot more as if he had come up here for his health, so to speak, than to hunt for a bag of the coin of the realm that somebody stole three years ago. The point is, that if the twenty thousand dollars that the road builders should have got, but didn't, was put through a nice, neat and orderly system of being stolen here and there till it all got back to Grandall again, he ain't been letting it lie around the woods and drawin' no interest nearly three years now."

"By ginger! I knew that fellow at the clubhouse was Grandall, all right," spoke up Paul Jones. "And you must have hit the nail on the head when you told us in the first place that Nels Anderson was mixed up with him in cheating that whole army of men out of their pay," the boy added briskly.

"That doesn't dovetail with what we already know about Murky getting the money first and then Slider taking it from him and its getting back to Grandall again," said Paul thoughtfully.

"Oh, no! that wouldn't make much difference," said Fraley. "Grandall was playing everybody against everybody else for the benefit of Grandall. That was

his general reputation, too—downright deceitful! Never knew just where he'd hook up or how long he'd be either one thing or the other—your best friend, or your worst enemy."

Whether Grandall had been frightened away from the clubhouse by finding Murky to be in the vicinity, or for other reasons had deemed the lake an unsafe hiding place, the boys and Fraley debated for some time. As they at last prepared to go, Link called Phil to one side. He did not like the notion of Chip Slider being taken up by the Auto Boys in any very intimate way, he declared. He had known the elder Slider, he said, and there were a lot of better men in Michigan than he and a lot of better boys than his son was likely to be.

Phil told Fraley he was surely mistaken with regard to Chip, at least, but promised he would be on his guard in case he found any deceptive tendencies developing in the young gentleman in question.

Meanwhile Paul and Dave had driven to the general repair shop at which their gasoline was purchased and all were soon ready for the road. With a steady purr their quiet, powerful car left the town behind. What a perfect machine it was! And what its owners would do were anything to happen to deprive them of its ever-ready services—the very thought would have been quite unbearable. It is a wise plan, indeed, that none of us can see even a few short hours forward, or know certainly the changes a single day may bring.

An adequate excuse for stopping at the lowly home of the Andersons had not been forgotten by the chums while in town. Choosing to call there on their homeward way rather than when on the road in from the woods, they now had with them an extra half dozen of bananas.

Mrs. Anderson sat on a rickety chair at the shady side of the little house vainly trying to get a breath of fresh air while doing some mending, as the Thirty came to a stop near her. Hastily she arose and went around to a back door.

Phil was already out of the car and was walking up to the low front step—the dwelling was without a porch—when through the open doors he saw Mrs. Anderson enter at the rear. She spoke some words in her native tongue the boy did not understand; but directly Nels Anderson stepped forward from the kitchen to meet him while at the same time another man glided silently out of the door at which the woman had just come in. The man wore a golfing cap. If he was not the identical person who had lately occupied the clubhouse then Phil Way was vastly mistaken.

"Wouldn't you like some bananas?" asked Way pleasantly. "We thought likely



you did not get to town often and maybe would relish a taste of these," and with a friendly smile he tendered his offering.

With only a word of thanks and that spoken rather indifferently, Phil thought, the great Swede accepted the fruit. Still holding the paper sack under his arm he said he wished the camp at the lake only good luck but he thought it dangerous for the boys to stay there. It would be more so as time went on, unless a pouring rain came very soon to wet the ground and foliage. The probability of forest fires near by was becoming serious. Two severe blazes had already occurred. He pointed away to the west and south, calling attention to smoke that he said he could see over the distant tree tops.

Oddly enough Phil could see no smoke, at least nothing more than usual. The horizon in this region had always a hazy, smoky tinge, he had observed. Nevertheless he said he appreciated the suggestion and added that a few days more would see the breaking of camp at the lake, anyway. It was in his thoughts to ask what Anderson himself would do in the event of a forest fire. The tiny clearing, he thought, would be very little protection if the flames came near it.

But Way refrained from speaking of this. There was a matter of more importance about which he wished to inquire. "Do you know if there is anyone staying at the clubhouse at the lake, Mr. Anderson?" Thus did the boy frame his question. Receiving no answer but a shake of the head, Phil then continued. "Because," said he, "it would be right convenient if we could get permission to use the workbench in the automobile house. We'd do no harm to anything."

"I tank yo better let him bay," Nels answered, the least bit sharply. But more kindly he went on to say that he knew of no one being at the clubhouse now and that while the property was not his, the best advice he could offer was not to meddle with anything in the buildings or on the grounds.

Quite baffled by the Swede's apparent friendliness, yet certain that he was practicing deception, Phil returned to the machine. He told fully of the conversation with Anderson while the car purred forward.

Without exception the boys agreed with him that the talk of forest fires was like the denial of all knowledge of the clubhouse being occupied—simple deception, and nothing else. Clinching the soundness of this reasoning also, was the certain fact that the recent clubhouse tenant was now Anderson's guest.

"Grandall! He saw Murky or Murky saw him! He must have guessed that Murky has found out how he had been given the double cross, and was after him in dead earnest. Result: Grandall, in cahoots with Anderson for some bad business or

other, packs his little satchel and goes to the Swede's to stay."

So did Dave MacLester reason the whole matter out. Chip Slider nodded his endorsement of these conclusions.

"They've got that stolen money, so they have!" he said. "We could have them arrested," he added, only the word he used was "pinched."

"And we will! *Mark that!*" said Phil Way.

Yet it often does happen that young gentlemen, and older ones, too, make assertions which, in the end, lead not where it was thought they would do at all.

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## CHAPTER V

### "WHO SAID I WAS AFRAID?"

For Billy's information the developments of the afternoon were told and retold when all were again together in the camp. There was much discussion, too, concerning the advisability of causing the arrest of the man in the golfing cap and, possibly, Nels Anderson as well.

Meantime Billy had announced supper. It was a most tempting little meal with warm soda biscuits and honey as the chief items. The former Chef Worth had prepared during the afternoon and the latter he had caused to be brought from Fraley's in anticipation of his having the biscuits ready.

No doubt it was at the comfortable old farm home of Tyler Gleason that the four chums had developed a marked fondness for the delicacies mentioned, as readers of "The Auto Boys" will remember; but be that as it may, they enjoyed the change from the usual camp fare hugely.

As has been stated, there was no little discussion as to whether the Staretta officers should be asked to arrest and hold the stranger at Nels Anderson's until he could be positively identified as Grandall, the dishonest Longknives' treasurer. Phil Way declared firmly that this must be done.

"Personally, I don't see any sense in mixing up in an affair that doesn't really matter much to us!" exclaimed MacLester. He had been quiet for a long time. When he did speak it was with hard emphasis in his voice. "Murky and Grandall and the whole outfit that got away with the cash the road builders should have had—well! we don't usually have much to do with such people and no good will come of our beginning now," the boy added.

For a moment Chip Slider's face wore a look of anger. Perhaps he thought Dave's latter remark was aimed at him. But he said nothing.

Phil looked at MacLester in a significant manner, as if he would caution him against speaking so. Yet, "No use growling, Davy," were the words he said. Then he added that such a thing as duty must be taken into consideration; that one who has knowledge of a crime and conceals it is regarded by the law the same as if he actually shielded the wrong-doer.

"Gee whiz! I should say so," piped Paul Jones with shrill emphasis. "We'd be a pack of softies if we let Grandall and Murky, and the rest, get away, after all we know now!"

When Billy also joined heartily with Phil and Paul in urging that the Staretta officers be notified of the presence of both Grandall and Murky, MacLester no longer held back. How best to go about the matter, however, became immediately a problem.

Dave wanted to telegraph the police in Grandall's home town and learn if the man was really wanted by them. The hearsay evidence possessed by Slider, with regard to the stolen twenty thousand dollars, he declared, wasn't worth much until it could be backed up by more hard, cold facts than were thus far in hand.

"Suppose we were to go back to Staretta and have a talk with the sheriff or chief-of-police or constable—whatever they have there in the brass buttons line—tonight," proposed Billy. He was resting comfortably, his back against a tree, while Phil and Dave, with Slider's help, were washing the dishes.

Having had a quiet but busy afternoon young Mr. Worth was quite ready for an evening out.

"Sure pop!" Paul Jones exclaimed. "How do we know but that Grandall fellow is right on his way now to fly the coop?—and that's just what he is, most likely."

"Go ahead! I'll keep camp—Slider and I," put in MacLester quickly. Perhaps Dave was anxious to show Chip some friendly attention to make amends for the unpleasant words spoken a little while before. Perhaps Chip, as well, wished to show that he harbored no ill feeling. At any rate, "Yes, let him an' me do up the rest of them dishes an' the rest of you get started sooner," the lad proposed.

The thought that Slider's presence, to tell the officers in person what he knew of the stolen payroll money, would be highly desirable, did not occur even to Phil, usually quick to see such things. The plan was put into effect at once. With headlights throwing a long, white glow before them Billy, Phil and Paul said good-bye. Worth was at the wheel, one finger on the throttle, and at truly hazardous speed he sent the steady Thirty in and out among the trees that bordered the narrow trail.

"Goodness, Bill! What's the hurry?" ejaculated Phil, alone in the tonneau and getting more of a shaking up than he relished.

"Oh, he thinks there's so many trees around it won't hurt if he does tear out a few of the big, old ones *that are all done growing anyway*," Paul added grimly.

For it most generally is true that the driver is much less nervous than his passengers. A chuckle was Worth's only answer, but he did retard the throttle some and with less gas the machine at once slowed down.

The evening was close and warm as the previous night had been. The moon had not yet risen but, knowing every part of the road, Billy let the car pick up speed again directly he reached the broader, straighter path.

"We'll get this robbery business into the hands of the bluecoats; then home for us," called Phil from his seat behind. He would not willingly have admitted it, but he believed he smelled smoke. Also he was thinking of a clipping enclosed from home that morning telling of very destructive forest fires in other sections of this northern part of Michigan.

"I guess so," Worth answered. "It's a shame to punish a car on such roads as these. The lake is all right and being by ourselves is just what we wanted, but—"

The sentence was not finished. It was a way Billy had of leaving some things unsaid. In this case the road told all the driver had left unspoken. It was certainly "no boulevard," as young Mr. Jones had expressively remarked the first time the chums traversed it.

The dim glow of a kitchen lamp was the only sign of life the boys noticed at Nels Anderson's little house as they passed. They did not pause. There would be no occasion for them to visit the place again, they had decided, but whether correctly or not will in due time be apparent. Just now the main thing was to reach Staretta before everyone, Link Fraley in particular, would most likely be found in bed.

True it was that the little town fell asleep early. "And what's to stop it?" Paul Jones had once asked. Yet the lights were still burning in Fraley's store and at the post-office, which was in the little shoe store opposite, when the Thirty rumbled down the main street.

Mr. Lincoln Fraley, standing in the doorway, went down the steps to meet the boys as they drove up. Something had happened, he was quite sure, to bring them back so soon; for, not being familiar with the rapid traveling an automobile affords, he had no idea of the lads having been to Opal Lake and back since he last saw them.

"It's time to close up anyhow. Come take a ride," Billy invited.

Mr. Fraley said his father would attend to closing the store and, going in leisurely for his hat—lest he be suspected of a too lively interest in the prospect of

an automobile ride if he hurried, perhaps—he presently seated himself in the tonneau beside Phil. As Billy drove slowly forward Way told of the discovery of Grandall at Anderson's. Briefly he stated the intention of causing the man's arrest and the capture of Murky, as well, which, he was certain, could be quite readily accomplished.

"Well now!" said Mr. Fraley in a musing tone, and, "if it don't beat me!" he slowly added in the same slow and reflective manner.

"But great land of belly aches!" Paul Jones chirped protestingly, "don't you see what we want? We want to know whom we must see—sheriff—judge—chiroprapist—whoever it may be to get these chaps into jail and nail down those twenty thousand pieces of eight!"

"Don't be in a hurry," spoke Fraley with greater animation. "What I had in mind was that Nels Anderson surely is consorting with Grandall and probably has been all along. I'm the more sure of it because the Swede was in the store early this morning and bought a lot more stuff than we've ever sold him at one time before. I didn't wait on him and didn't know of it at the time you were here this afternoon. My father just happened to mention it at supper. Pretty plain now where Nels got the money and plain as daylight, as well, that he expects to have company for some time, which accounts for the stack of provisions he took back with him."

"All the more reason—" Phil began, meaning to continue, "that we should get in touch with the officers at once."

Link anticipated what he would have said. "No," he interrupted, "You don't need be in any hurry. And you do want to bring that Slider boy with you when you come to talk with the sheriff. Your evidence is mostly second-hand anyway. You don't want to give it to the county officers third-hand and fourth-hand when it ain't necessary. I'm watchin' the papers every day and I'll get some more news about Grandall's running away from the Grand Jury and his bank. Just you wait."

There was a lurking suspicion in Billy Worth's mind that Fraley wished to wait until he, himself, could communicate with the officers, but he said nothing. Phil and Paul were disappointed, too, that their friend would not advise immediate action.

The boys talked of those matters after they had left Link at his home,—the large, plain house with flower beds in front, near the store. But they had headed the car toward Opal Lake now and their conclusion was to continue homeward. They would do nothing until the next afternoon, at least, at which time, it had been

agreed, they were to see Fraley again. They would find out, meanwhile, and be able to inform the officers, whether Mr. Murky was still "at home" at the rude shelter where Chip had seen him.

The light was yet burning at the humble Anderson dwelling as the friends passed on their homeward way. They thought they saw the figures of two men sitting just outside the door where a faint breath of air might now be stirring, but could not be sure. They were quite satisfied the guest of the family was still there and for the present this knowledge was sufficient.

As the headlights' glare swept the camp at Opal Lake Chip Slider was for a moment seen making frantic gestures. He seemed to wish the boys to hurry. Phil almost fell over the excited youth as he jumped down from a forward seat a few seconds later, for Chip had seized a front fender as if he would thereby help to halt the car more quickly.

"I can't help it," cried Slider with anxiety, "and I don't want to be scared over nothin'—but it's Dave! He went over the lake in the boat an' that's the last I seen him. It was somebody hollerin'—somebody hollerin' from t'other side!"

With real alarm the three friends heard the disconnected words of the frightened Chip. In a chorus they demanded to know all about the matter, their own language hardly more clear than Slider's. Phil was first to gain composure enough to call for quiet. Then he said:

"Now, Chip, tell us precisely what happened and how long ago. I guess Mac could get himself out of any kind of pickle he'd be likely to get into," he added with vastly more confidence than he felt. "Go ahead now, and don't be so rattled."

It was only a half hour or thereabouts after the automobile had gone, the boy stated, his tones still filled with alarm, when he and MacLester heard cries from across the lake. They had washed and put away the dishes left to their attention, and were sitting down by the water, thinking it cooler on the beach. Some refuse they had thrown on the campfire blazed up, making quite a bright light. Like a distant whistle of a railroad engine there came a little later a long, loud cry, "Hello-o!"

"Well, hello!" MacLester cried in answer, Chip stated, telling his story clearly, but so slowly Paul was fairly bursting with impatience. There was more "hollering" of hellos, the lad went on, then the voice from over the water asked, "Could ye put me up fer the night?" Dave answered, "Yes, come on over." Replies came back, "Have ye a boat?" and "Could ye not kindly row across fer

me?"

The outcome of the whole matter was that MacLester remarked to Chip that they would wait until Phil and the others returned.

"'Would you be afraid to cross over alone?' I asked him," said Slider, "an' I meant just a fair question, but he turned quick as a cat.

"'Who said I was afraid?' he spoke pretty sharp. Then he hollered out to the party that had been yellin', 'Keep singing out to guide me an' I'll paddle over to you.'

"He got in the boat and started and never a word he said. Every minute or two I heard the other one and Dave hollerin' out to each other till about the time when the boat could have touched t'other shore. Then it was still an' I ain't heard a word since. I've yelled an' yelled an' kept the fire blazin' up to steer 'em straight to this here side, but never a word of answer did I get an' hide nor hair of 'em I ain't seen."

"Could it have been that fellow Murky? Would you know his voice?" asked Billy.

Chip shook his head. He was quite sure the voice was not that of the person mentioned.

"He could disguise his voice easy enough," spoke Paul dejectedly. "Dave could swim all night, but the other fellow—"

"Now wait a minute!" interrupted Phil briskly, feeling that he simply *must* face the situation with courage, bad as it might be. He hurried down to the beach. Loudly and again and again he called, "Oh! Dave," and "Oh, David MacLester!"

No answer came to his despairing cries. Softly the water lapped the sand at his feet. In the distance the frogs were croaking. Darkness too deep to let even the outlines of the farther shore be seen hung over Opal Lake and distinctly on the light breeze now springing up came the odor of burning pine.

"If we only had another boat!" murmured Paul. "There's the skiff down by the clubhouse," he meekly suggested.

"Why," said Billy, "our old boat was safe enough! I can't believe they ever left the other side. That's where we've got to get to. We can go around the east end of the lake in about half an hour's walk."

Phil Way was never so perplexed—never so at a loss to know what to do. Looked to as the leader and the captain in all things, he usually was quick to suggest, quick to decide and quite generally for the best. His heart—his nerve—whatever it



is that keeps the mind steady and alert at such time—came nearer failing him now than ever before.

All the boys, Chip included, were on the beach. Several times Phil's cries had been repeated by the others. At last—

"We must get the skiff," Way declared. "If Dave's on dry land we can find him when daylight comes, if not before. But if he's holding on to an upset boat, though too weak to answer us, maybe, we've got to find him right off."

Leaving Paul to guard the camp and keep a bright fire burning, Billy and Phil, with Chip accompanying them, were soon running toward the old clubhouse. They carried the oil lamps from the car and thus made good progress. But the skiff was found dry and seamy. It would be necessary for one or another to keep bailing constantly, they saw, the moment they launched her.

And where were the oars? In their excitement the boys had not noticed the absence of this very necessary equipment until the boat was in the water. With frantic haste they searched here and there. The rays of their lamps were far from powerful and close inspection of each nook and corner must be made to see what might be there.

The excessive stillness, the atmosphere of loneliness and melancholy that hung always about the Point and its deserted buildings seemed intensified tonight. The shadows cast by the two lamps seemed unnaturally gaunt and ghostly. With all their activity the three lads could not but be impressed by these things, but they were too occupied to be frightened by them.

"At last!" Phil's voice came low but quick. In another moment he drew a pair of oars from behind an unused door whose lower panels a charge of buckshot had shattered, apparently, and which was now stored in a corner of the automobile shed.

"Whatever will we bail with?" asked Billy, finding the skiff already to have taken considerable water.

"I know," came a prompt answer and Slider disappeared in the darkness. From behind the garage he brought in a few seconds two empty tin cans. "There's no end of 'em among some weeds back there if we need more," he said.

"No! You keep bailing, Chip, and you, Billy, hold the lights! Off we go!" and Phil shoved away the moment all were fairly on board. From the black shore line to the east they could see the campfire shedding a bright light for a little distance over the waters; but except for this and the rays of the auto lamps Worth held the

darkness was like pitch.

"Paul's blaze will be our light-house. We want to hit toward the middle of the lake, just about opposite the camp, then straight over to the far side," spoke Way, breathing fast. "Keep me guided right, Bill." He was pulling hard.

The incoming water kept Slider more than busy. With a can in each hand he scooped to right and left. Worth found it necessary to give Phil very few directions for Way was a splendid oarsman and the light craft swept forward rapidly.

Every minute or two Billy sang out MacLester's name. Eagerly he scanned the water as far as the lamp rays fell, but heard nothing, saw nothing.

Not until the north shore was almost reached did Phil slow down. Then he let the boat drift forward easily while watching for a landing place. "Raise the lamp higher," he called over his shoulder.

Billy did so and as the skiff floated nearer the quite steep bank rising from the water at this point, there came suddenly into the lighted circle a flat bottomed fishing boat. It was the scow MacLester had used and it was empty.

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## CHAPTER VI

### IS NO NEWS GOOD NEWS?

The fishing boat lay drifting, but only three or four yards from shore. Had Dave effected a landing or, in the darkness, had he tried and failed? That which quite possibly, even probably, had happened was a thought that filled even Phil with apprehension and despair.

"Light the way! I'll pull close in shore," he said, trying hard to swallow the lump in his throat.

The bank where the skiff's nose soon touched was steep, yet easy to be climbed as its height was only a few feet. But there was no sign that anyone had been near it. Otherwise the dry earth would have shown the imprints of toes or heels. This was quickly proved when, Phil steadying the boat and with a root and a straggling shrub to help him, Billy crept quickly to the top.

"Still, we don't know just where Dave may have run in. It's queer that he let the scow drift, if—even if he expected to go right back," said Worth in a hushed tone, from the edge of the low bluff.

"Queer what became of the man who called him over here, if such a thing as Mac falling into the water may have happened," observed Phil. "And Dave could swim—why, almost across the lake, if he had to! He could save himself if there was nobody pulling him down."

Throwing Billy a line by which to hold the boat, Way and Slider followed him up the bank. They walked some distance in each direction along the shore but the feeble light of the oil lamps showed no trace of David MacLester nor yet of the mysterious person who had summoned him. The thought, "crooked work," was in the minds of all three.

"After all, it's the water I'm most afraid of. If Dave fell and hurt himself or was pushed into the lake—but never mind. One of us must go back to Paul and the others will have to—look further," said Phil at last.

Billy was chosen to return to camp. What Phil meant to do, with Slider's help, was drag the lake in this vicinity. If Dave had gone to the bottom, due to some accident or injury, it might not yet be too late to save his life. Such things had

been done, Way said, but he spoke without his usual confidence and very, very gloomily.

Returning to the skiff, the boys ran along side the fishing boat and drew the latter to shore. Phil and Chip tied her to a projecting root and Worth bade them good-bye.

With a long, steady stroke he pulled for the southern shore and the bright light blazing there. But it is one thing to row for the fun of it, when the sunlight dances on the ripples, and quite another to cross a strange body of water—and alone—when inky darkness spreads everywhere.

The swelling of the wood had now pretty well stopped the skiff's leaking, yet again and again Billy paused to bail out. The unpleasant thought that he would find the water pouring in too fast for his best efforts harassed him. He could not see, so he often put down his hand to feel and thus make sure the boat was not filling. So at last did he float into the rays of the campfire's light and a minute later stand telling Paul the unhappy discoveries made.

The thought that Dave and the strange man, having found their boat drifting beyond reach, may have started to walk around the head of the lake and so come on foot to the camp, had suggested itself to Billy as he rowed. Mentioning this to Paul he set out, with a small camp lamp in hand, to explore the shore in the direction indicated.

Thus left alone again Jones was the most dejected and sorrowful young fellow one could easily imagine. To keep the fire blazing high was all he could do to be of any possible assistance. Inactivity was hard for him to bear at any time. Especially was it hard when his thoughts were so disturbed and his anxiety so great.

It was coming daylight when at last Jones saw the fishing boat approaching. In it were Phil and Billy and Chip; for Worth, having traversed the whole upper border of the lake without result other than to tire himself exceedingly, had spent all the latter part of the night with Way and Slider.

To the great astonishment of these two he had suddenly appeared to them out of the darkness. He had broken his lamp to bits in a painful tumble into a dry water course the undergrowth concealed.

Several hours the three lads had then spent alternately dragging the lake's bottom with hooked poles, looking up and down the steep bank for footprints, and here and there going some distance back into the woods vainly searching. Even

before the dawn appeared their lamps went out. With difficulty they had then embarked for the opposite shore. Daylight came as wearily they worked their heavy craft forward.

The one hopeful fact the boys found in a sorrowful review of the situation, as they stretched their tired limbs upon the ground, was that the dragging of the lake in the vicinity where Dave's empty boat was found had been without result.

"We'll get some rest—a few minutes, anyway, and a cup of coffee, then we'll see what daylight will do to help us," suggested Phil.

Yet it was scarcely more than sunrise when the search was resumed. Crossing to the north shore in the skiff, Billy and Paul set about a minute inspection of the dry earth of the bank and of the woods for a long distance up and down the water's edge. Leaving Slider in camp, Phil made the detour of the east shore on foot.

As Way drew near the scene of the fruitless work of the night he discovered close in shore an old log lying just under the water's surface and partially imbedded in the earth of the bank. A short, stubby branch projected its wet and slimy tip an inch or two above the water. A splintered end that had risen considerably higher was freshly broken. Not completely detached, it lay almost level with the water's surface.

But a more interesting discovery still was unmistakable footprints in the dry earth. The footprints were made by MacLester. Of this Phil was certain. It was to the large projecting splinter, broken from the old log, that Dave had tied the boat, perhaps. Yet how had the slow and heavy craft broken from its mooring? And what was of vastly more consequence what had then happened to Mac?

The scene of Way's discoveries was some distance from the spot in which the fishing boat had been found. It was farther to the east, also, than search along the bank had been carried during the night; but the lake at this point had been dragged again.

Examining the ground carefully, Phil sought to find some further evidence concerning the missing boy's movements. He discovered nothing of importance. Going forward, then, to Billy and Paul, now working toward the westerly end of the lake, he told them of his discoveries. Quickly they returned with him.

To make their search thorough the three boys undertook to inspect the ground covering a wide area at this point where they believed their friend had landed. Several hundred feet from the water they made an interesting discovery. In a

little patch of earth, made bare by the burrowing of some small animal, there were three footprints. One showed the mark of a shoe such as Dave MacLester wore. Two other tracks were broad and heavy—the imprints of coarser footwear.

It was a marked relief to the three chums to find such good cause to believe MacLester was not drowned; but what in the world had become of him? Had he been enticed away? Had he been taken captive by some unknown enemy?

In vain the search for other footprints,—anything to cast additional light on the grievous problems,—was carried further. Every prospect ended in disappointment. It was long after noon. The boys had penetrated several miles into the woods and they at last acknowledged themselves completely baffled.

Murky was a name they often mentioned as they counseled together. They could think of no one else who might have a reason for doing them all an injury. But why should Murky wish to make Dave or any of them a prisoner? His only motive could be that he feared they were searching for the stolen money he considered as his own. He had warned Chip Slider to keep off that track, the boys knew.

"We'll hunt till dark, then if we have no success and get no word at all, we will get the sheriff and a lot of men from Staretta! We will find Dave and it won't be very pleasant for Murky or whoever is to blame for this," declared Way. "There's more back of the whole matter than we can make out—more than we can even guess right now, you'll see!"

The boys returned to camp. The thought had come to them many times that Chip Slider might know a great deal more than he had told. They remembered Link Fraley's words about the boy. But they could not accuse him without any ground for doing so. They could find no evidence that Mac's disappearance had not occurred just as Chip had told them. And he had twice repeated the whole story the same as in the beginning.

It was a heart-sick group that ate a hasty lunch of bread and coffee in the woodland camp. Now for the first time, however, Paul told of the lonely time he had had during the long night—told of the noises he had heard in the distance, along the beach. He was quite sure that bears and deer, as well, to say nothing of numerous smaller creatures, had come to the lake to drink and bathe. He believed they would have come quite close to the shack but, for the bright fire he kept blazing.

Ordinarily the boys would have found great interest in such a subject; but today their spirits were at too low an ebb, their minds too disturbed over the

unaccountable loss of their friend to permit their attention being otherwise occupied.

All except Billy set out after lunch to learn whether the suspected Murky had deserted his usual hiding place. Slider was the guide. He led the others quite directly to the logs where the tramp had made his bed and headquarters.

The fellow had apparently departed. He had left the pan and other utensils taken from the boys' camp but the blankets he had carried with him. They were nowhere to be seen, at any rate.

More certain than ever, then, that it was this unscrupulous villain who had decoyed Dave across the lake and in some manner forced their friend to accompany him, the lads hurried back to camp.

Again they rowed to the north shore and with utmost determination plunged into the hot, close woods.

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## CHAPTER VII

### THE LONG-HIDDEN TREASURE IS UNCOVERED

And now, while the weary young searchers were hastening resolutely into the woods to the north of the lake, they were leaving in the forest to the south one who would well bear watching. I do not mean Chip Slider sitting alone, tired and melancholy, beside the shelter of poles, wondering if there could possibly be any place where trouble did not come. No—not Chip, but a man who at this moment stood looking into the little valley where the last camp of the road builders had been.

A somewhat portly, somewhat pompous and self-important appearing individual was this man. His bristly hair, cut very short, was tinged with gray under the large, loose-fitting cap such as golfers and motorists wear. His face was smooth, puffy and red. His very eyes, more touched with red, also, than they should have been, as well as his pudgy hands indicated self-indulgence and love of ease.

Presently the cap and the person under it moved from the rise of ground, above the road builders' last camp, down into the valley. With a smile that had too much of a sneer about it to be pleasant, the man ground his heel into the gravel where the Longknives' road had come to its troubled ending. With the same disagreeable sneer in his manner that accompanied his unpleasant smile, he turned here and there, noting how the brush and stunted stalks of mullen were springing up all about the unfinished task the workmen had left.

Startled suddenly out of his reverie by a bluejay's scream, or some other noise—he may have fancied it, he thought—the man looked hastily, searchingly about him; but satisfied, apparently, that he was alone, he moved leisurely into a shaded place and sat himself down on a stump—another token of the great road that had been begun but never completed. Quite carefully he drew up his trousers at the knees, then picked from his hosiery, whose bright color showed in considerable expanse above his oxfords, some bits of dry grass and pine needles gathered in his walk. Mr. Lewis Grandall had come, apparently, to view the work his perfidy had caused to be abandoned.

For a long time the unfaithful treasurer of the ambitious Longknives sat in silent meditation. He had noted with some satisfaction that a growth of brush screened



his position from easy discovery should anyone chance to pass that way; and now his thoughts ran back over the circumstances leading up to his present personal situation. Quite steadily his eyes were fixed upon the unlevelled bank of gravel, the half-hewn logs and all the unfinished work in the general picture of desolation and abandonment before him.

It is doubtful, perhaps, if Grandall realized his own responsibility for the waste and ruin on which he looked. At least his face bore no trace of sorrow, no expression of sincere regret. The same dull sneer was in his eyes, the same defiant air was in even the poise of his body and the heel that, with a certain viciousness, he dug into the dry earth.

Lewis Grandall's start in life had been attended by bright prospects. If only he had been found out the first time he yielded to temptation in scheming to get money by dishonest means, he might still have made his life a success by turning at once to the right road; but not being detected, he became bolder. From mere trickery and deceit it is but a step to out-and-out thievery. Grandall took that step and more. Yet he managed for long to cover his tracks sufficiently that few suspected and no one publicly accused.

One would have supposed that, being accustomed to the handling of other people's money in his banking work, he would not easily have been tempted when he found himself with a large sum of the Longknives' funds in his possession. Neither had he any pressing need of this money at the time he laid his plan to appropriate to his own use the cash intended for Nels Anderson's army of road builders. He merely thought he might some day be glad to have at his command a secret reserve large enough to maintain him indefinitely.

So did he plan the pretended robbery by which a former woodsman he had long known made off with the suit-case wherein he carried the money for Anderson's long overdue payroll. His original purpose had been to make some sort of division of the cash with Murky; but there was not anywhere in the Grandall code either honor or honesty. It was a particularly bright idea, indeed, so Grandall himself considered when the thought came to him that he might have the unsuspecting Murky relieved of the suit-case before the fellow had so much as seen what was in it.

The plan was put into effect. Slider, weak of morals, but strong of arm, was chosen for the work. To him Grandall told as much of his whole scheme as he thought necessary, but told him nothing whatever that was wholly true, with the possible exception of the statement that Murky was not to be trusted because he talked too much.

Having been a beneficiary in a small but largely crooked lumber deal Grandall had once managed, Slider entered into the robbery scheme most willingly. With the general result the reader is familiar; but in detail it may be added that, in keeping with the promoter's plan, he who relieved Murky of the suit-case hid it later just where few would suspect it might be hidden.

That place was almost within gunshot of the very spot where the money would have been distributed had it reached those for whom it was intended. This not only suited Mr. Grandall's convenience, but kept Slider in a comparatively safe locality, as well. So many men had been engaged on the work near Opal Lake that the presence of any kind of person in working clothes, in that vicinity, would occasion no remark.

Thus had Slider secreted the suit-case in a decaying heap of drift along the identical little stream beside which the great gravel road had ended. There had Grandall found and quietly removed the riches the very next day. Then the dishonest treasurer limped back to his hotel, for he was supposed to be scarcely able to move, owing to his "injuries," as a result of the robbery.

Nearly three years passed. The suit-case lay undisturbed where Grandall hid it and its valuable contents were intact. If the Longknives' treasurer had had occasion to make use of this money, meanwhile, he had been either afraid or unwilling to do so. But he knew where it was. He knew that in an emergency he could lay hands on a moderate fortune whose existence he believed none suspected. The thought bolstered his courage in scheming the method of more than one piece of trickery and dishonesty.

Then came the end, as sooner or later in crooked plans it must come—Failure! They all fail,—it is inevitable,—at last. The wrong-doer faced the necessity of flight.

Grandall's defalcations in the bank did not appear at once. A small matter—the "padding" or falsely increasing of some petty bills for material furnished the city—had started an investigation. It was to the amazement of everyone who knew the man that a long, long chain of shady operations and even petty stealing, even the robbery of his own friends, was by slow degrees uncovered.

Toward the last, it was apparent, Grandall had been driven to the most painful desperation. Night and day he must be on guard to keep his deceptions covered up. Constantly he must devise new practices in deceit to conceal others that once had served, but now, daily and hourly, were opening at most unexpected points revealing the treachery, falsehood, hypocrisy and rottenness they erstwhile had

secreted.

Like a common thief, the guilty Grandall stole away in the night. Behind him he left all that might have made life useful and pleasant—home, friends, hope and ambition. Lying for some time hidden in a distant city, he at last felt it safe to travel by a circuitous route to Opal Lake.

At a country railroad station he stepped quietly off the train. With no luggage but a small handbag he slipped into the woods. A long tramp brought him the following day to the abandoned clubhouse. The very atmosphere of oppressive loneliness there pleased him because of its assurance of his safety from discovery.

How little Grandall guessed, or even suspected, that at just this time he could not have come to a place more fraught with danger to himself will never be known. No knowledge had he of the eyes that stealthily watched him. No thought had he that the moment he appeared with the stolen suit-case in hand, ready to slip away to hoped-for safety in a distant country, a lurking enemy would leap upon him.

The thief sat for a long time contemplating the ruins where so abruptly the road building had ended. It was not until near evening that he strolled slowly toward the clubhouse. The general course of the gravel drive he followed, but in the main kept a few feet to one side, that the trees and brush might screen him.

He had no fear here, yet he knew some boys were in camp not far away and not even by them did he wish to be observed. For he would spend one night of rest in the clubhouse room that once had been his own; and then he would be away—gone for all time from these and all the scenes of his younger life.

Yet a pair of heavy, scowling eyes watched Grandall's every footstep—saw him enter the clubhouse—saw him seat himself restfully in the empty living-room beside the great fireplace and proceed to make a supper of sandwiches and fruit from his small satchel.

Murky could not have been more vigilant had his own life been at stake. Not only his determination to gain again the stolen money that had been taken from him, but his hatred of that person the victim of whose double-dealing he had been, made him watchful, and a very dangerous man.

Quite suddenly in the afternoon had the vexed and oft-disappointed tramp discovered Grandall. It was while the latter stood beside the ruins where the gravel road had reached its ending. In delighted surprise Murky with difficulty suppressed a cry. Dropping instantly to the ground, he pressed over his mouth

both his dirty hands lest some exclamation he could scarcely resist should betray him. "Blame *me!*" Under his breath he muttered the words with almost fiendish pleasure.

His worst enemy then was the occasion of those sounds that had startled Grandall from his reverie. But he felt himself so entirely alone, so wholly free from any probability of being observed, that he had given the slight noise not a second thought. During all his afternoon of sinister gazing upon the ambitious enterprise his act had wrecked, he still believed himself as completely alone as a man well could be in any vast woods or wilderness.

And even when Grandall left the little valley and walked in silent meditation to spend one night more—but one—in the old house on the Point he heard no footsteps coming on behind. His thoughts were far from pleasant ones but they occupied him fully. The sullen hatred so clearly shown in the expression of his eyes and lips was but a reflection of all that passed within his mind. Friends or foes, men were all alike to him, and those who had never voiced a word against him he reviled equally with those who had been his dupes, and with the men whose accusations had caused his flight, as well.

Coming to the clubhouse, Grandall lingered for a time up and down the weed-grown walk leading to the garage. Then while it was yet light he went down to the rotting pier and looked long and earnestly across and up and down the lake. Slowly he returned and, entering the house, went at once down cellar.

In the pitch darkness he felt his way to the rear of the steps leading from above. Striking a match or two, he examined by such flickering flames the rough uneven wall. With bare hands, then, he seized a projecting corner of one of the large flat stones and pulled it easily from place.

If this part of the wall had been laid up with cement or mortar it had been broken down some time before, as would appear very probable, for the masonry that Grandall now brought tumbling to the floor concealed a deep aperture in the dry, sandy earth.

The thief's next lighted match revealed the hole and also revealed a damp and discolored leather case.

Still crouching in the dark cellar Grandall managed to work the rusty lock and lay the suit-case open. Then he struck another match and its dim glow disclosed the carefully packed bundles of bills, and among them a bag of coin. He nodded his head in a satisfied way. He had assured himself on first arriving at the old house that the treasure was safe; but he would not remove it from the hiding

place until he was prepared to leave, he had decided. Now he was ready.

And where was Murky?

As a matter of fact, from his concealment among the bushes near by, he was trying to decipher the room upstairs that this lone visitor to the old house would probably occupy. He had lost sight of Grandall when the latter had quickly entered and gone to the cellar. But it was only for a little while that the scowling eyes searched the open door and the windows in vain.

As Grandall came up to the living-room carrying the discolored suit-case, he glanced quickly all about him. Possibly some sense of his guilt came to his mind now that the evidence of his theft was squarely in his hands, and for the first time he appeared apprehensive. Yet he paused only for a few seconds. He saw to it that all the first floor doors were bolted from within, and slowly climbed the stairs to the sleeping rooms above.

As if quite at home the man entered that room whose long, low window opened upon the little balcony toward the lake. He smoothed down the mattress and brought a blanket from an adjoining chamber. Opening the window wide, for these upper rooms were very close and warm, he drew the suit-case to the better light he thus admitted and proceeded to count the money it contained.

The night was hot, the air seemed stifling, but when he had satisfied himself as to the amount of the treasure, Grandall returned the packages of bills and the bag of gold and silver pieces to their places, then closed and locked the window. He locked his chamber door also, before lying down to sleep. As if that could save him now!

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## CHAPTER VIII

### DAVE MACLESTER'S ADVENTURE

It required no little courage for Dave MacLester to row across the dark waters of the lake to the darker woods of the north shore. Had there been someone to go with him he would have answered the cries for aid much more willingly. But since either he or Chip must remain in camp, Davy set out alone, pretty gloomily, pulling the heavy scow with what speed he could.

MacLester was far from being a coward but by nature he was more timid than calm, self-possessed Phil Way, or bold and venturesome Paul Jones. With a keen sense of duty and resolute determination to overcome every thought of fear, however, he ran the scow against the steep bank of the lake's far shore.

The voice that had guided Dave across the water greeted him at once. "It's full glad I am to see ye, even if I can't see ye half in the darkness of it," came with a pronounced Irish accent.

"Guess that won't make much difference if you can see your way into the boat," Dave answered. "Did you get lost?"

"No, no! not lost at all, at all, but I couldn't find me way, quite," came the response. The speaker had now come down on the sloping bank close to the boat, as if about to step aboard.

"I only wondered," Dave answered. "Seems as if the woods were full of mysterious people—one lone man hiding in an old clubhouse, another—" The lad checked himself. A sudden thought came to him that perhaps he better not speak too freely without knowing with whom he was talking.

"What's he doin' there? A man all alone, and in an old clubhouse? What might be his name thin?"

"How should I know?" Dave answered to this question. He was becoming the least bit suspicious and again he checked himself when it was just at his tongue's tip to add, "We think the name may be Grandall." There would be no harm in awaiting developments before he told a stranger quite all he knew, he grimly reflected—a wise thought, it should be needless to say.

"No harm,—no harm intinded," spoke the Irishman good-naturedly. He had come close to the water's edge now and Dave's eyes being fairly accustomed to the darkness, made him out to be a little, elderly man with a short beard, but very little hair on his head. The old fellow's baldness was, indeed, the most noticeable thing about him as, with hat in hand, lest it fall off into the lake, perhaps, he stooped down the more closely to inspect MacLester and the boat.

"Why," said the boy, fearing his short "How should I know?" might have been unpleasantly curt, "You see there are four of us fellows in camp on t'other side and we've happened to see a man at the old house on the Point below us. We've wondered who he might be, staying alone as he does, and keeping so out of sight of everybody. It's miles to the nearest house and nobody but our crowd of four fellows and our one visitor is anywhere near. But climb down into the scow and I'll take you over. Steady now, while I hold the old shell up to the bank."

For a few seconds the stranger made no reply. Then—"It must be a lake here thin. Has it a name, at all, d'ye know?"

"Why, sure it's a lake!" replied Dave a little tartly, wondering if the old fellow supposed the sheet of water lying so quiet in the darkness there might be a river or an ocean. "Its name is Opal Lake. This old boat is good and strong though. It'll carry us across all right."

Once again there was a long pause before the stranger spoke. "Oh yis!" he suddenly exclaimed, "There's me baggage, and me almost forgettin' of it! Will ye help me a wee bit with it? Sure 'tis not far!"

The kindly and somewhat coaxing voice of the old fellow, whose brogue was just enough to give a pleasant quaintness to his speech, amused MacLester and he assented readily enough to the request made of him. He threw a loop of the scow's anchor rope over a stub projecting from the water and sprang ashore. He did not notice in the darkness that his leap broke the fragile branch securing the boat, allowing her to drift, but at once said:

"We'll have to wiggle some, for they'll be looking for me in camp pretty shortly."

"Sure, 'tis not far," the man again said pleasantly, and clapping his straw hat down over his head till it almost concealed his ears, he led the way into the woods.

"Me name is Smith—Jawn Smith. What's your'n thin?" spoke the genial Irishman, as the two walked quite rapidly, despite the darkness.

"MacLester—I'm Scotch," said Dave, smiling to himself over the thought that his

new friend plainly was not French.

Mr. Smith made no reply and a long distance had been covered when Dave spoke again.

"How far back are you—that is, your baggage? We'll never find the lake again, till morning, if we don't watch out."

"Sure, 'tis not far now any more," came the quite unsatisfactory answer. "Is it tired ye air?"

"No—but—great guns!"

With no other remark Dave continued close behind or alongside his guide for a long time—a very long time, it seemed to him,—possibly a quarter hour. Then—

"Where in the world are we bound for?" he asked pretty sharply.

"Sure, ye'll not lave me," was the answer, quite pleadingly.

With a decided mixture of feelings Dave said, "Couldn't you do without your baggage until morning?" But in his thoughts he added: "I've heard of wild Irishmen, and I guess I've met one, too." Still, he smiled in a grim way, reflecting further that he, also, would have a stirring personal adventure to report in camp, and he would see it through now at all hazards.

MacLester was certainly right. He would have a story of personal adventure to relate when he parted company with "Jawn Smith." But this was something he was not to succeed in doing so soon as he supposed.

Time passed and still the little, old fellow with now and again his oft-repeated, "'Tis not far," trudged onward. He *seemed* to know the way perfectly. Dave followed or kept near his side. However, when for possibly the tenth time the man said, "'Tis not far," the lad's impatience got the better of him.

"Your ideas of distance must have been picked up in an automobile," he said. "Twenty miles isn't far in a car, maybe. One or two—not to mention five or six—may be a lot better than a fair stretch for walking. And I've been gone a long time from camp."

The stranger made no reply.

"What are you doing in the woods—fishing, or just traveling for your health?" Dave was getting more than a little cross and his tone showed it.

"Sure, thin', I was goin' to tell ye," muttered Mr. Smith, still going forward but more slowly now,— "I was goin' to tell ye that me business is that of a sivy-ear—



you know?"

"A what? I'm afraid I don't know exactly."

"You don't know a sivy-ear? Sure! Peekin' through a little popgun on three poles? That's a sivy-ear."

"Oh, a surveyor!" exclaimed Dave. "What in the world have you been surveying here in the woods?"

"Down't be axin' questions. Sivy-ears go peekin' an' peekin' an' they don't tell whatever they may see. For why should there be sivy-ears at all, if they towld what they do be seein'?"

MacLester was both irritated and amused; but he was getting too uneasy now to let the all-too-apparent humbuggery of his companion go unchallenged.

"Well, I'll say this much, Mr. Smith, that if you know where your instruments are, and can go there right off, I'll stand by my bargain to help you; but if you don't, you better say so. We're five miles from the lake now, if we're a foot."

"Yes, it's right ye air," was the still unsatisfactory answer. And though Dave replied more sharply than he had yet spoken, his companion each time responded in soft tones and mild language, but always evasively.

"Well! if you know where we are, tell me that!" spoke MacLester very firmly at last. "I'm going not a step further until I know what sort of a wild goose business you are taking me on!"

"Oh,—oh! Sorra day—sorra day!" The man sat himself down heavily upon a fallen tree over whose prostrate trunk he had just escaped falling. "Ye must do as ye will, but it's lost I fear I am."

"Lost?" echoed Dave loudly. "You don't mean that we've been jamming ahead in the dark, and all this distance, without knowing where we were going!"

"It was *not far*!" Mr. Smith moaned wearily. "Oh! it is tired am I!"

"Well! I'll be cow-kicked!"

And possibly David MacLester may be excused for using so impolite an expression when his situation is considered. Here he was miles from Opal Lake—miles from camp, and lost in the woods in the dead of night with a strange man who might be either a dangerous crook or a harmless lunatic—circumstances pointed toward both.

"Ye'll not be blamin' *me*, sure!" spoke the old fellow. His very voice showed that

he was indeed tired to the verge of fainting; but his manner was as mild and child-like as his words.

Language could not express Dave's feelings. In mute contempt, anger, weariness and a certain deep curiosity mingled, he dropped to the ground.

"I wouldn't blame you, mister," said the boy at last, "but I set out to do you a friendly turn and you get me into this pickle as a result and still give me no satisfaction as to where you belong or where you want to get to."

"Jawn Smith"—and it plainly was not his name—made no answer for a long time. Meanwhile David expressed himself pretty freely to the effect that there was but one course to pursue and that was to stay right where they were until morning. "And when daylight comes we'll head straight for the lake," said he.

"It's no odds who I be," said the stranger finally. "If I be not a real sivy-ear, I'm the likes of one, a peekin' and peekin'. Which is for why I can't be gossipin' about matters that means a great deal to them that I would be befriendin'. Come mornin', we'll see."

"Humph! Hope we may see more than we do this minute," Dave answered. For although the two had been so long in the darkness that they could make out trees and other objects well enough to avoid them, it had been a very hard as well as a long tramp and the more so because of the gloom of night.

His head pillowed on his arm Dave fell asleep, at last, regardless of the many things that vexed and worried him. His queer companion slept also and so did the daylight find them sore and hungry. The sun's rays brightened their spirits, but "you can't eat sunbeams," as MacLester rather gloomily remarked. The first excitement of the adventure had subsided now and he was quite inclined to despondency.

On the strength of the stranger's statement that his camp and baggage and food he carried could be found in a short time Dave again let him lead the way. A long walk in one direction was followed by a tramp of a still greater distance in another with no apparent intention of arriving anywhere.

And both MacLester and the stranger were suffering for water. They had crossed a small stream where there were still pools of good water, notwithstanding the severe drouth, early in the morning. It was decided to revisit it before starting for the lake. But here, too, long-continued efforts were a flat failure.

It is a dreadful feeling to realize that you know not which way to turn to reach any given point. Lost! It is a word whose terrors must be experienced to be fully

understood.

"Come, now! I'll be the guide, and just you keep with me. We'll get out of here somehow," said MacLester resolutely. Thus far the stranger, for the most part, had been the pilot. It was past noon. Neither had tasted food since the preceding day and both were parched for water. The sun beat down till even through the thick screen of pine and deciduous branches the heat was trying. No bit of breeze relieved the sultriness.

But Dave's best efforts seemed fruitless. The only reward in a long, long tramp was to lead the weary pair to a small stream. But even this was a most fortunate discovery and both drank freely, then drank again.

As they rested the stranger was much depressed. After a long silence he said in hopeless tones: "What for a man ye may think me, I dunno; but the saints bear me witness, me bye, never did I sit out to drag ye where ye be. It's all past goin' further I am, and ye've got to lave me. An' if ever at last ye come to that lake, go right at wanst to that clubhouse and tell the gintleman who's stoppin' there, for the love of hivin' to come quickly where I be. It's Daddy O'Lear that wants him, say—poor—poor Daddy O'Lear."

"What's that?" exclaimed MacLester. "Now if this *ain't* a pretty mess! I was sure your name wasn't Smith, but—"

"An' I'll be staying thin, till ye come fer me; but ye'll be tellin' nobody but the wan man that I'm here, be sure."

"You are going along with me," was the decisive answer. "Then I'll tell no one anything. I don't want anything to do with your friend. There's a way out of this howling wilderness somehow! We've got to move! It will be dark again in two hours!"

But even a strong tugging at his arm would not persuade Mr. O'Lear, if such were his real name, to rise and start.

"You go with me or you'll go to jail where someone else ought to be too, if I'm not mistaken," said Dave with emphasis. "You can't stay here, man! And whoever you are, I'm not going to let you!"

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## CHAPTER IX

### "THE LAKE! IT'S THE ONLY CHANCE OF ESCAPE!"

The sun went down and the coming darkness warned the three boys, vainly searching for Dave MacLester, that they must hurry if they were to find their way to camp. If no success had attended them by daylight, they certainly could hope to do nothing after nightfall, and they turned back toward the lake.

All afternoon Phil, Billy and Paul had tramped the woods. Except for the three tracks in some soft earth, as earlier mentioned, not one certain clue to the direction taken by Dave and his unknown companion had the friends found.

Quite worn out in both body and mind, they took careful note of their bearings, then headed by what they thought a bee-line for Opal Lake. On and on they hurried. The twilight deepened and they kept to a direct course with difficulty. And still they reached neither the lake nor any familiar spot.

"Fine boat we're in if we've gone and got lost," gasped Paul, bringing up the rear. The boys were pushing forward at a slow run, Phil Way in the lead.

"We didn't pay close enough attention to the distance, when we were going the other way; but we'll be out of this in a little while now," came Way's hopeful answer.

"I smell smoke. It might be from our own camp. Chip would be firing up like mad to make a bright blaze," came Billy's voice above the steady patter of feet upon the needle-strewn ground.

"There's some breeze picking up, but not quite from that direction," said Phil, though he paused not a moment.

Paul was first to discover that the course Way was taking could not be right. "I can catch the smell of the swampy ground, at the west end of the lake, in the wind," he said. "We've got to head right against this breeze."

A brief pause, and the lads agreed that Paul was right. And soon the proof was positive. Ten minutes of rapid walking brought the chums to the water, but it was at the east end of the lake, not the north shore, at which they found themselves. Another half mile or less would have taken them entirely beyond the familiar

sheet of water, and have led them, hopelessly lost, undoubtedly into the woods to the south. Their course had been steered too far easterly in the beginning.

Glad, indeed, to be so near their camp once more, despite the weight upon their hearts concerning Dave, the boys agreed to continue on around the upper end of the lake on foot rather than return now for the skiff on the more distant shore. So did they come presently to their shack and the bright blaze Chip Slider had burning as a beacon light for them.

The ray of hope the young searchers held out to one another on their homeward way, that they might find MacLester safe and sound in camp upon their own arrival there, was quickly turned to disappointment. Chip had no news—not one word of information, good or bad, to report. He had remained faithfully in camp and had seen nothing, heard nothing unusual.

"Exceptin'," said he, "there's bad fires somewheres in the woods. I smelled smoke the minute the wind began blowin'. All day there wasn't hide nor hair of air a stirrin'. It was just after sundown that it started in, real gentle, an' it's gettin' higher. You take a fire in the woods, and a stiff gale, and you've got something to look out for, I tell you."

"We've got to rest and think a little, and have something to eat," said Phil, paying scant attention to Slider's words. "We've done what we can in one direction, now we must start out on some other plan."

"I knowed you'd be hungry and I've got the coffee hot. I boiled some eggs and cooled 'em this afternoon and them are ready, too. Just you all rest and I'll get some kind of supper," announced Slider, almost bashfully. But his friends were truly glad to do as he suggested. The simple, hasty meal of cold, hard-boiled eggs with plenty of bread and butter, crackers and cheese and coffee would have been most enjoyable too, had there been no absent one.

For an hour or two the three Auto Boys rested and sought to find the best plan to pursue toward finding Dave MacLester. They could not do better, they at last felt sure, than to report their mystery to the authorities at Staretta.

From the town, also, inquiries among the villages lying beyond the great woods could be made by telegraph or, even better, by telephone, perhaps. If Dave had been foully dealt with, as seemed only too probable, the law's officials could not be any too quickly informed.

It was drawing on toward midnight when the Thirty's lamps were lighted, the engine started and all made ready for a rapid run to the town. Phil took the

wheel. Telling Slider to keep a bright blaze shining and his ears wide open for any signal from over the lake, he threw in the gear, let the clutch take hold, and the three boys began this last bit of service they were ever to have from their much beloved car.

Way was usually a conservative driver but tonight his foot at no time ceased to press the pedal that increased the gas. Over the smooth spots and over the rough ones, ruts, ruts and hummocks of the hard-baked earth, the automobile whirred. Rarely did the speedometer show less than fifteen miles and often the indicator touched twenty-five, and this while the road was still but the woodland trail.

Luckily the lights were clear and bright, but more fortunate still, Phil was every moment alert and earnestly attentive to every inch of the road and every throb of the machine.

Like some swift phantom the blaze of the lamps sped on and on among the ever retreating shadows and utter blackness of the night. Like black-hooded spectres the trees at either side seemed to glide ever to the rear, silent and ghostly except as their branches were tossed by the rising wind.

It was not until they were far past the bleak, dark house of Nels Anderson, that Billy shouted his opinion that inquiry should have been made there. No, Phil called with emphasis, the time for giving heed to uncertain, unknown persons had passed. He was sorry the arrest of Murky and of Grandall had not been brought about when first it was suggested, he said. A lot of things might have turned out differently if it had been done, and he, at least, believed—

"Look! There's sure fire yonder!" It was Paul's voice interrupting.

The car was fairly clear of the woods and the road now led among the blackened stumps and rough undergrowth of the district where flames had raged in time long past.

Far to the west and north the sky was blazing red. The whole distant horizon of the direction named seemed as if the doors of some mighty, seething furnace, miles in width, stood open. A rank odor of burning wood came stronger and stronger on the gusts of wind.

"It's a good ways off and maybe isn't burning much this way," shouted Worth above the rush of air and whir of the auto's wheels.

"The wind, man! It's sweeping right into the heart of the woods," Phil answered loudly. But not for a moment did the car slacken speed. The road was getting better. Staretta was but five miles distant.

"Still, there's not much danger of the fire coming our way. It will go way north of the lake," Worth replied.

"And that's just the direction Mac's in," echoed Paul Jones in tones of alarm.

"Yes!"

Phil cut the word quick and short. His tone and the instantly still greater speed of the car told all too plainly where his fears were running.

There was no need to rouse Link Fraley or the officers of Staretta. They were astir watching the progress of the distant flames. Scores of men had already gone to join the fire fighters, who, it was reported, had reached the scene from Jacques' Mills, a settlement to the northwest that lay in great danger, should the wind change.

The fire had been noticed only as clouds of smoke during the day, Link Fraley said. In the afternoon messengers arrived saying that the blaze was gaining great headway. It might yet be confined to a certain swampy district, thick with dead trees and grass and a rank undergrowth of rushes, now dry as tinder from the long drouth. It was here the fire had started. Many men returned with the bearer of the news to aid in the battle.

With sundown came the wind. There could be no stopping of the terrible destruction so long as the gale increased, Link Fraley stated. The best that any could hope for was that the blaze could be kept within a narrow limit as it swept onward into the wholly unsettled country so saving the little towns and mills along the railroad line.

But about MacLester—the hearts of the three boys sank like lead. Even Sheriff Larsen said nothing could be done for him while so great a number of lives were in jeopardy and every hand was needed to preserve them. He was sorry—very sorry; but he believed and hoped Dave would escape in safety, somehow, though there was not a thing that anyone could do at once to help him or to aid his friends in finding him.

Perhaps he had been lured into the woods for purposes of robbery, or by Murky, in a spirit of revenge; but even the much-needed attention of the law to that dangerous character must wait, the sheriff said, until the great fire could in some degree be overcome.

Awed and alarmed, their every nerve tense with a depth of interest and anxiety such as few ever experience, the three friends listened to the conversation of those about them. The principal crowd had gathered before Fraley's store.

Suddenly, from the partially lighted interior, Link Fraley came. With a nod of his head he beckoned the Auto Boys aside.

"An Indian fellow—Doughnut Dan, they call him—has just come in from up the line," said he, "and brings word that the fire will get south of Opal Lake and no stoppin' it. Hadn't ye better go? Right now you'll be ahead of it to the lake and no danger. Later on—and ye've got that Slider chap on your hands back at your camp. Get him and get your stuff, and get 'em quick."

"But MacLester! We can't—" began Way hurriedly.

"You've *got* to! What can't be helped, can't be helped, but what *can* be—that's what you got to think about and *right off!*"

"He's dead right, Phil, bad as it is," murmured Billy sorrowfully.

"It may be, but we'll—"

Whatever Way had meant to say, he spoke no further but quickly started for the car. Paul and Billy followed and the latter took the wheel while Phil re-lighted the gas lamps and Jones gave the crank a quick, quarter turn.

When but little north of Staretta the three boys could see that all the Indian had reported was true, and more than true. If the high wind continued the whole district south of Opal Lake would be swept by the fire within the next few hours.

But even in this estimate they were falling far short of the truth. Every hour the wind blew harder. Great brands of fire were being carried forward, starting constantly, and in hundreds of places, fresh bursts of flame.

The car never traveled better than on this last night of its usefulness. In but little more than twenty minutes the boys were driving through dense volumes of almost stifling smoke. They were now well into the woods and within the path of the flames' fiercely rapid advance.

As they went forward they discovered that the fire's main path would probably be midway between the lake and the desolate country burned over years before. But it would be spreading constantly. Nothing could check it.

Suddenly a feeble glimmer of light loomed out of the smoke and the darkness forward. It was the glow of the lamps at Nels Anderson's.

"They'll never get out alive," called Phil. "Hold up, Billy!"

By the lights of the car, and from the windows and open door of the low, unpainted house, the figures of Anderson and another man, and of Mrs.



Anderson and their little girl could be seen moving hurriedly in and out. Phil sprang down to investigate.

The giant Swede, his family and their guest were carrying the household goods of every kind to the very center of the small clearing. What they feared was all too plain. But would their efforts count for anything? Would their very lives be safe in this small space?

"I tank she will go nort of us," spoke Anderson, excitedly, as Phil approached. "She must bane most at da lake now."

Obviously he referred to the fire. Before Phil could say more than that he hoped the little clearing would escape the fire's main fury, at least, the other man came up. He was the person in the golfing cap. Way was sure of his identity instantly and his face grew hard.

"Have you been in town? How bad is this situation?" he asked calmly but with a thoroughly business air.

"Ever so bad. You'll never be safe here," the boy answered with some excitement. "You better—"

"No! the worst of it will be north of us," said the other quickly. "It came up as if the whole woods had caught fire at once. We smelled and saw the smoke in the afternoon. Nels and I were 'way west of here to see what the danger was. We'd have been all right in this part but for the wind. But you boys—are any of your party at the lake now? Because—you'll have to move fast! Get back here to this clearing. If the fire keeps tending north you'll be far safer here than on the water. There's no telling how long it might keep you hemmed in there."

Much disturbed by the thought that even now Chip Slider might be in gravest danger, Phil said hastily, "Thank you for all you say, at least," and hurried to the car.

"The worst of this is ahead of us! Get to the lake, Billy, quick!"

Again the trusted Thirty shot forward. The fire was still too distant to be clearly seen among the trees, but the sky reflecting its red fury sent down a glow which, but for the dense smoke, would have been like early twilight. Still over ruts and roots, smooth spots and rough spots alike, Billy drove, not carelessly, but very fast. Still the smoke-filled air grew denser.

"The man is crazy! The fire may reach the lake, but Anderson's place will be squarely in the path of the worst of it," cried Phil Way excitedly. The boys were nearing their camp now, and the duller glow upon the sky gave proof that the

flames were more distant from here.

Poor Slider was found nearly beside himself with fear for the safety not of himself but his new-found friends. He was resolutely at his post, and the blazing campfire showed that he had not forgotten to keep going a signal to Dave MacLester that the camp was not deserted, should he chance to appear on the farther shore.

"We're the veriest blockheads!" said Phil Way, as he looked over the lake and noted that here was the only place of real safety. "We've left the Andersons to be suffocated if they aren't burned up. Who'll go with me to bring 'em?"

"I'll go! Come on!" cried Paul, and Billy was not a second behind him.

"Wait!" Phil ordered. Then, "One of you stay here with Chip. Add all the logs you can to the raft. Make it bigger, stronger! There'll be eight of us, likely, that it will have to carry."

"Gee whiz! The car! The car, Phil! It'll be burned."

"No, it won't! Into the lake it goes. Water won't put it out of business permanently. Billy, will you stay?"

"Go ahead!" cried Worth and in five seconds Phil was driving the automobile in a way he had never done before.

Even before Anderson's place was reached the raging flames to the west of the road lit up the narrow trail with a frightful glare. But on and on the car flew.

The little clearing was reached in the nick of time. Great sparks and even flaming branches were raining down upon it. The smoke was stifling.

Huddled under some kind of an old canvas,—a tent cloth from some workman's camp on the gravel road, perhaps, Mrs. Anderson and the little girl were trying to escape the smoke and terrific heat. The grass all about the clearing was on fire. The little house must go, when the main body of the flames came closer, and very doubtful did it look that life itself could be saved in so exposed a place.

With a cry, "You can never come through the fire if you stay here, people! We've come for you in the car! The lake! It's the only chance of escape!" Phil made his presence known.

The roar and crackle and all the dreadful noise of the ocean of flame that, as far as eye could see, flooded the woods to the west seemed quite to drown the boy's loud shout.

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## CHAPTER X

### THE LAST RUN OF THE BELOVED THIRTY

A second time Phil loudly called and now an answer showed Nels Anderson and the golfing man to be near the edge of the woods. They had completed the burning of a wide strip of the dry grass completely around the clearing, only to find their work useless. All hope of thus stopping the spread of the fire toward the buildings was destroyed by the falling embers. The wind carried them everywhere.

There was no time to lose. The danger of death from suffocation, even if the flames could be escaped, was very great. Now the roof of the house was on fire. There was not a barrel of water within miles. Further fighting, further loss of time, would be folly. Giants of the forest were flaming up from roots to topmost branch not twenty yards within the woods. The whole roadway would be ablaze, on both sides, in a few minutes.

A most pitiable object was Anderson's poor cow. Her head to the ground as if to escape the smoke, a low, frightened bellowing told of her realization of the danger. Forgetful of herself the child was saying, "Oh, poor, good bossy! Oh, poor bossy!"

The small haystack along side the crude, log barn suddenly blazed up. The dull red glow gave place to a white light all through the clearing. It was impossible now that any part of the property could be saved. Anderson and the other man came running to the car.

"It will be a close shave! Can you make it, boys?" cried the one in the golf cap, above the roar of the flames.

"You bet! Be at the lake in no time! We've often carried more'n six," yelled Paul excitedly. "Right in here!" and he held the tonneau door open wide. "You in front with Phil, Mr. Anderson!"

Even as Jones followed Mrs. Anderson, the little girl and the golfing man into the tonneau, and slammed the door behind him, the Thirty was under way. Its staunch gears were never before so quickly shifted from low to high. What mattered it if Paul did sit down hard in the strange man's lap? What mattered it if

poor Nels, unused to automobiles, was jerked nearly from his seat before he got his great, clumsy legs quite inside? The raging sea of fire was bordering the trail ahead, and hundreds of little tongues of flames leaped here and there in the parched, dry grass and weeds in the road itself.

With frightened, staring eyes Paul looked with wonder upon the dreadful flames leaping from one treetop to another. The man beside him was shielding his face from the terrible glare and heat and the woman and little girl clung tightly to each other, the former watching only the child and holding a hand to protect her face. As if dazed and unable to comprehend, Nels Anderson looked always back toward the doomed clearing.

Phil Way alone watched the road ahead. With firm set jaw and straining eyes he looked ever forward through the blinding glare and the billows of smoke that now and again concealed the trail completely. But his hands gripped the wheel with perfect confidence, his foot pressed the accelerator steadily. The gallant car responded. The ground seemed speeding from under its wheels. On and on it flew.

Thus far the fire had raged to the west of the road only. In but a few places had it reached the trees directly beside the trail, pausing there till some fresh gust of wind, or shower of sparks, carried it to the other side.

But now Phil saw before him a spot where on both sides of the road the forest was a flaming furnace. He did not falter. On flew the car. Another moment and it was in the midst of the fire. A hundred yards it ran through the deadly heat, the awful roar and sheets of flame leaping upward and outward till their fiery fingers were all but seizing the brave lad and his passengers.

Safely the Thirty ran the fearful gauntlet. There came a shout of praise and admiration from the golfing man, words of thanksgiving from the woman. The worst was over.

Rapidly, but not so fast as in the direct course of the wind, the fire was reaching out toward Opal Lake. Like a galloping army it came on behind the car, but, barring accident, could never, would never, overtake the swift machine.

Barring accident! Bravely the engine, clutch, gears, springs, axles and wheels had withstood the strain of the terrific speed, the heavy load and the wretched road. Bravely, with every charge of gas, each cylinder delivered generous power.

The car shot down the grade into the small valley where, some distance below, the gravel road came to its abrupt ending. There was a heavy jolt as the front

wheels struck the dry bed of the shallow stream.

Anderson, the giant, pitched forward. He might have caught and righted himself quite readily had he had complete use of his hands and arms, long since partially paralyzed; but in his disabled condition he missed the windshield frame he tried to catch, and went partly overboard.

With his left hand Phil Way reached for his falling passenger, still holding the wheel with his right. He seized poor Anderson just in time, but the great bulk of the fellow drew him partly from his own seat, and pulled the steering wheel sharply round.

Still going at speed, though now on the upward grade, the automobile answered instantly to the call of the steering knuckles—true to its mechanism, perfectly, to the last—answered to the driver's unintended command, and sharply swerved to the right. A large pine stood in its course.

So quickly did the collision occur, so unprepared were any of the automobile's occupants to meet the terrible shock that the escape of all from serious injury was truly miraculous. The outcome must surely have been far worse had the tree been struck squarely head-on. The fact of the fender and right front tire and wheel receiving the heaviest force of the impact lessened the jar, and the car swung around spending broken momentum in the dishing of both rear wheels.

Nels Anderson, pitched far out on the ground, was gathered up cut and bleeding. Mrs. Anderson and the child were bruised but not much hurt. Phil, Paul and the golfing man suffered no injuries beyond the nervous shock.

Strange as it may seem, Paul Jones spoke not a word. Questioningly he looked at Way.

Phil had been first to help Anderson to his feet. Now leaving him to the care of the others he quickly inspected the damage done to the machine. The roar of the flames was still just behind. Their blood-red glare cast a twilight glow far ahead through the darkness of the woods.

"She was a mighty good car," said Phil Way, softly, as if to himself, quite as one might speak of some friend who has gone. "A mighty good car!" but at the same moment his gaze took in the flames fast following along the ground and from tree to tree both west and south. Even here the heat and smoke were terrible. The dull red light was everywhere. The very sky seemed ablaze.

"This is most unfortunate. I'm truly sorry for this, boys," spoke the golfing man, very soberly. He too had been hastily investigating the damage.

Though his voice was kind, the speaker irritated Paul Jones exceedingly. "Wouldn't have happened but for you, and except to send you to prison you aren't worth it, I can tell you that, Mr. Grandall," were the words he thought, but did not utter.

"Might have been worse! We're still a mile from the lake and the fire's just behind us! That's the whole answer," said Phil rapidly. His words were in reply to the stranger's sympathetic expression, but were equally addressed to all. "Right ahead on this trail, then! We've a raft that will hold everyone!"

Rapid movement was necessary. The wind was blowing furiously now. No power on earth could stay the flames that swept ever forward. Their path grew constantly wider.

Both Phil and Paul looked with astonishment to see the stranger, whom they now detested more than ever, seize Anderson's little girl in his arms to carry her; but they were all hastening forward through the crimson light, and clouds of smoke. No more than a glance could the boys exchange.

Many times the two lads looked back. It was fortunate, perhaps, that the rise of the ground soon shut off their view of the prized Thirty. The hungry, sweeping flames came curling, playing, leaping, dancing, roaring on. They reached the car.

Phil remembered, long afterward, that as he stepped out of the automobile for the last time he noticed the speedometer, twisted about so that the light of a lamp shattered and broken, but still burning, fell upon it. The reading was 5,599 miles—the record of the season.

Safely ahead of the fire the fleeing refugees reached Opal Lake. With a glad shout, though their faces showed deepest anxiety and fear, Billy Worth and Chip Slider received them.

"The raft's all ready! I've made it big enough to float a house! All our provisions are on board, too!" said Billy to Phil, the moment he ran up. "Where's the car?"

A few words told the story. There was no comment beyond the quick, "Oh! what an escape!"

The snaky tongues of fire coming on swift, almost, as the wind itself, were but two hundred yards away when the rescuers and rescued embarked upon the raft. Boxes and camp equipage afforded seats. Billy had trimmed a couple of extra long poles with which to move the clumsy craft, and present safety for all was assured.

The dawn was just breaking. Once out on the water the coming daylight was

quite clear despite the smoke that in vast clouds rolled swiftly over, whipped and torn by the wind.

"Thank goodness there's no fire to the north—not yet anyway," said Phil rubbing his face, grimy with smoke and ashes. He was thinking of MacLester and for the information of the Andersons briefly told of Dave's unaccountable disappearance.

"There's a long stretch of pine on the other side," said the stranger, still wearing his golfing cap, by the way. "There are a couple of streams there, though, both of them flowing into the lower end of the lake. If your friend is lost and should remember that, he could follow either one of them and not come out wrong."

Dave was more than merely lost, Paul thought and said so. And, "You know this country pretty well," he added, addressing the former speaker. "You belonged to the Longknives," he went on rather tartly. "It will be the last of the old clubhouse."

"Yes, one blot will be wiped out. It is only too bad that so much that is good must go with it."

Paul glanced at Phil and his eyes also met Billy's. The man's words were puzzling.

"We saw—" Paul began, but a shout interrupted him—

"*There's Dave! There's Dave now and some man with him!*" yelled Chip Slider suddenly. His voice was like a burst of ecstasy. His eyes scanning the distant shore, he had instantly caught sight of the two hats waved as a signal.

The joy of the three chums, that the fourth member of their almost inseparable quartette was safe and sound, it would take pages to describe. With the most delighted waving of his own hat, Phil shouted to MacLester about the skiff still moored on the north shore. His voice was lost in the roar of the wind and the flames now sweeping very near the water's edge. By signals, however, he quickly made Dave understand and the latter and the man with him were seen to hurry forward to where the boat was tied.

All the time the golfing man watched MacLester and the person with him keenly. "Impossible!" he muttered at last. "I thought for a moment I knew the old chap your friend seems to have in tow."

But it was not impossible, apparently, for even before MacLester and his chums could exchange greetings, as the skiff drew near, the small, elderly man in the stern of the boat cried: "Oh! 'tis there ye air then, Mr. Beckley! Oh, ho! hurray! I dunno!" A laugh that was equally like a sob accompanied the words, and "Oh, ho! oh, ho! I dunno!" the old fellow cried again and again.

"It's 'Daddy' O'Lear, right from my own home," the golfing man explained briefly.

The three boys again exchanged quick glances. Instantly as he heard the name "Beckley" Phil had remembered the initial B on the shaving cup found in the clubhouse. Was the man trying to carry on a deception even as to his name, and at such a time, his thoughts inquired. No, he quickly decided, there was some mistake.

"I do hope it may be no bad news he may be sent with, Meester Beckley," said Mrs. Anderson. She had been sitting silent on one of the boxes Billy provided, the little girl leaning on her knees. All the Andersons had watched the fire constantly, their heavy hearts revealed in their sad faces.

"I—I think not," spoke the man in a puzzled way, glancing toward the fire now almost bursting through the shore line.

"It will be hot here, and dangerous," said Phil, looking in the same direction. "We must shove down the lake. Our poles won't reach to go out farther. The water's too deep. We'll lie off opposite the marsh near the Point."

Shouting to the approaching boat to follow, Way and Billy slowly pushed their heavy craft to the west. The skiff overtook them easily and quickly.

"Hello!" grinned Paul Jones as Dave faced quickly about when the boat came alongside. But his half-jocular tone fell on ears attuned to serious matters.

"Oh! this is a terrible thing," said MacLester, his eyes fixed on the flood of flames.

"I was never so glad as I am this minute! What in the world happened to you, Dave? But never mind; you're safe now," Way answered with emphasis.

Somehow all felt it was no time for conversation. Dave made no response to Phil's question. But Billy Worth—Chef Billy—remembered one thing.

"Have you had anything to eat?" he demanded. "I'll bet you haven't!"

"Mighty little—either of us," was the answer. "We were lost,—just about."



"Here's something!" and Worth drew a basket out from beneath a blanket. "Guess we'll all feel better for a bite of breakfast," he added.

Crackers, cheese, bread and butter and bananas were in the "ship's stores," as Billy expressed it, and there was enough for all.

The simple matter of eating served not only to relieve hunger but gave all present a sense of better acquaintance and far greater freedom in talking with one another.

"'Tis an awful waste of wood, sure!" said Mr. O'Lear.

Obviously he referred to the fire. The flames now swept the shore line from the Point to the lake's eastern boundary. For miles upon miles the forest was a whirlwind of furiously roaring flames, or a desolate waste of blazing wreckage, smoldering stumps and blackened, leafless tree trunks.

"The clubhouse! The roof has caught!" cried Billy Worth suddenly. "And look! It's a man!—two men, on the porch roof!" he yelled.

"Great heavens! it's Lew Grandall!" cried the stranger on the raft. "And the other man! They're fighting!"

"It's Murky! The other one is Murky!" Paul's sharp voice fairly shrieked. "It's the suit-case! They have the suit-case! Murky's trying to get it away from him!"

"Oo—ho there!" shouted the golfing man with all his force. "Get to the ground! The fire's all around you! Get into the lake quick or you're dead men!"

For an instant the two who fiercely struggled on the small balcony seemed to answer to the voice. Grandall would have leaped, it was apparent, but the other seized him furiously, and drew him forcibly back. Then a thick burst of smoke concealed them both.

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## CHAPTER XI

### SETTING WRONG THINGS RIGHT

Wearily had Lewis Grandall lain himself down to sleep in his hot, close room. It was his last night in the old clubhouse. He might have been quite comfortable, so far as his physical self was concerned, had he been willing to open the door-like window that led to the small balcony and admit the air; but this he feared to do.

Some sense of danger, a feeling of some dreadful peril impending, harassed him. He tried to reason it all out of his mind. He had not felt so before having actually in his possession the moldy, discolored leather suit-case, he reflected. Why should it make a difference?

There was no good cause for its doing so, he told himself, and resolved to think of other things. But always his thoughts came back to the one point—some great peril close before him. What was it? He could not fathom the distress of his own mind.

Often as Grandall tried wearily to forget, to turn and sleep, some lines of a tale he had somewhere heard or read,—a pirate's song you'll recognize as being in a book of Stevenson's—struck into his mind. It was as if someone sang or called aloud to him:—

"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest!  
Yo-ho-ho! And a bottle of rum!"

In vain he told himself that it was nothing—nothing! That he must not let himself fall a prey to such silly dread, an unidentified fear, like a child afraid in the dark. But ever the sense of peril oppressed him. Ever there came to his haunted thoughts—

"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest!  
Yo-ho-ho! And a bottle of rum!"

At last he rose and sat a long time on the edge of the bed. Then he dressed himself. For a great while, as the night crept slowly on, he sat thus fully clothed. He did not know why he did this. The fear of some unknown, threatening thing was not removed or altered. The ringing in his brain—

"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest!" was just as it had been before.

He lighted a match and looked at his watch. Four o'clock. Soon it would be daylight. Then he would go—leave this terrible place forever! Leave everything he hated—and that was all persons and all things. Leave the guilt he vowed he would never face—if he could. So thinking, he lay down once more and sheer exhaustion let the wretched man sink into heavy slumber.

Lynx-eyed, the scowling Murky waited. The black shadows of the thick shrubbery near the clubhouse door concealed him. A long, long time passed. It was quite evident, the tramp reflected, that the man with the suit-case had gone to bed.

Should he break in on him? Break in the house, slip up to his bed, strike one swift blow and end the whole search for that twenty thousand dollars quickly? End it all so quietly that the one who had played him false would never be conscious of the outcome?

No, that was not the plan Murky chose to follow. It might result in his obtaining the prize he sought, but he desired more. He wanted revenge. He wanted Grandall to know, too, that he *was* avenged,—would have him fully realize that it was Murky,—Murky whom he had tricked and deceived, that had found him out and vanquished him at last.

Daylight was necessary to the tramp's plan. He wanted Grandall to see and recognize him. He pictured in his mind how, when suddenly awakened, the trickster should find looking down into his face a pair of eyes that were sharper and just as unmerciful as his own. Then he would speak, make sure he was known—strike quickly and effectively, and be gone.

He would not commit murder—unless obliged to do so; it might make trouble. But he would leave Grandall so hopelessly senseless that there would be no possibility of early pursuit from that quarter, as there would probably be none from any other.

Oh, they were black, black thoughts that coursed in Murky's mind!—hardly the thoughts that should come to a man in his last night on earth. But they were very pleasing to the tramp. With a kind of wild, wolfish relish, he pondered over the details of his plan.

Satisfied that Grandall would not leave the clubhouse before morning, confident of his own ability to awaken at the slightest sound of footsteps near, and resolving to be astir before daybreak, anyway, if he were not disturbed earlier,

which he regarded as quite improbable, the scowling wretch allowed his eyes to close.

Even in sleep Murky's face bore an expression little short of fiendish. He was lying quite under the thick foliage of the bushes. They screened him from view and from the breeze that had sprung up out of the west. But also they screened from his eyes the glow that now lit up the heavens, in the distance, for miles around.

It was the smoke, strong in his nostrils, that at last startled the fellow into sudden wakefulness. He had been too long a woodsman, had had too thorough a knowledge of the great forests in his earlier, better days, not to know instantly what it meant. He sprang up and looked about. The course of the wind was such, he reasoned, that the fire would not reach this particular vicinity. But what if it should? Why, so much the better, he reflected. The clubhouse would burn. If Grandall, dead or unconscious, burned with it—Murky's smile was hideous.

For some time he watched the progress of the fire, yet in the distance. But presently he became aware that the daylight was near. It was time for him to act.

Stealthily Murky crept to the broken window at the west side of the clubhouse and entered. He knew the first floor doors were locked, but he did not know that Grandall had secured his bedroom door. This he discovered in due time. Just outside the room he listened. Sounds of heavy breathing assured him his victim slept.

It took a good while for Murky's heavy knife to cut in a panel of the pine door a hole large enough to permit him to reach in and turn the key; for he worked very slowly, very quietly. The daylight was coming in at the window of the narrow hallway when his task was done—the daylight, the dull glare of the advancing flames and the sound of their roar and fury.

The door creaked slightly as ever so slowly its hinges were moved, but in another second Murky stood inside.

The man on the bed awoke—leaped to his feet—saw—recognized—gave forth a yell the like of which even the wildest places have seldom heard.

Instantly Grandall knew his danger. Seizing the leather case, for whose stolen contents he had risked so much, he threw open the balcony window. In another moment he would have leaped to the ground below but Murky caught him and they grappled.

It was in the midst of this first fierce struggle that the two were seen by those on

the raft. Murky's greater strength was fast overpowering the other's soft muscles. Grandall breathed in choking gasps.

Then came the shouted warning from the lake. For an instant the surprise of it caused the tramp to relax his hold, but only for an instant.

"Blame *me!*" like some wild beast he growled, though there was savage delight in his tones as well, "Blame *me!* but I'd as soon leave my bones here as anywhere, to see you get what's comin' to ye, you lyin' skunk!" He fairly hissed the epithet in Grandall's ear.

It was at this juncture that Murky first drew his panting adversary back into the flaming clubhouse. Grandall knew he was no match for his enemy in strength.

"Wait, you fool!" he gasped. "There's a fortune for you—ease—luxury! Take it! I'll add as much more to it!"

As the lying wretch hoped, Murky's wild thoughts were for the moment attracted by the words. His grip upon Grandall's great, fat neck was weakened. Like lightning and with a vicious curse the latter threw him off, put forth all his strength and hurled the tramp to the floor.

For himself there was aid in sight, was Grandall's thought. If he could escape to the water below, he could make some explanation to those on the raft, whoever they might be. They would save him from the fire and from Murky, whom he feared still more.

Far more quickly than you read the words, the idea flashed in the mind of the frightened scoundrel. The instant he freed himself he leaped again through the window. With the yell of an enraged maniac Murky followed.

The Auto Boys and their companions on the great raft, floating but a few hundred feet from shore, saw Grandall reappear. With horrified faces they saw about him the smoke and flame that now raged in the roof above, and throughout the whole lower floor of the clubhouse, below the balcony,—saw him seize the leather case and pitch it far forward to the water's edge—saw him glance down as if, in desperation, to leap.

Again a blood-thirsty savage scream sounded above the fury of the fire and wind, and Murky also appeared on the flame-shrouded balcony.

Grandall was too late. No more than a child could he cope with the mad strength of his assailant. Like a great bag of meal, or other heavy, limp and lifeless thing he was dragged in through the open, blazing window. A fiendish but triumphant yell once more came out of the leaping smoke and flame. It was the voice of the

infuriated tramp, to be heard on earth again, no more forever.

Dazed, powerless, speechless, those on the lake helplessly witnessed the awful tragedy. With straining eyes and ears they watched and listened; but there came now no sound above the fitful roar and crackle of the fire and the surging wind.

Within a minute the roof of the clubhouse went down. The whole interior of the building followed, and where had stood the old house on the Point there remained only the walls of flaming logs, the mass of debris and the wreckage of wrecked lives that rapidly burned within them.

"You know what's in that bag he threw down to the water?" the golfing man asked. It was in the midst of the exclamation and words of awe of those who saw the terrible scene enacted, that the question was asked of Anderson. The Swede nodded.

"And you?" said the stranger, turning to Phil as spokesman for the boys.

"Yes, we know. We know the whole story. We—we thought *you* were—We saw you about the clubhouse and we got it into our heads that *you* were—Was it really Grandall that we saw on the balcony?"

"Thought *I* was Grandall?" muttered the man, mystified. "Why should you? Did you know he was in the woods? For I did not. But it was Lewis Grandall and no other that went to his death before our very eyes! The man with him—Murky was the name you used? Who was he?"

"Then you don't *know* the *whole story* of the robbery?" exclaimed Billy Worth. "Murky was the man Grandall got to go through the motions of robbing him of the twenty thousand dollars in the first place!"

It was with great interest, indeed, that Mr. Beckley heard the complete account of Grandall's double-dealing scheme as Chip Slider and the Auto Boys had gathered the information.

Meanwhile there had come with the wind fitful dashes of rain that soon settled itself to a steady downpour. The forest fire had nearly burned itself out on the lake's south shore. Thousands of acres of smoldering ruins lay in its wake. Yet for a long time the refugees huddled upon the raft, protecting themselves from the storm as best they could with blankets and bedding. Not yet was it safe to venture ashore.

It was during this period that the golfing man made known his own identity and told why he happened to be hiding in the old clubhouse, resulting quite naturally, he freely admitted, in his being taken for the fugitive treasurer of the

Longknives.

His name was Henry Beckley, he explained, and he had been one of the most active members of the Longknives Club. He had never been quite satisfied that the club's treasurer was really robbed of the money intended for the road builders, but had never found any genuine evidence to the contrary.

A long time had passed since the loss of the money. The investigation of Grandall's crookedness, at home, was taken up by the Grand Jury. Mr. Beckley had reason to suspect the man of a number of dishonest practices, but feared for the safety of the bank, in which he was heavily interested, if the public suddenly learned that Grandall was a thief.

To avoid being called as a witness in the matter he decided to go away until the investigation was over. He would keep his going and his destination a secret from all, his own family excepted, he planned, and with no one suspecting where he might be, visit Opal Lake. Living in concealment at the clubhouse he would have an opportunity of investigating his suspicion that Grandall had made up the robbery story. Also he would satisfy himself, at least, that Nels Anderson had had no part in the disappearance of the payroll money and settle, for all time, occasional rumors to the contrary.

Mr. Beckley had reached the lake only a day or two before the Auto Boys set up their camp there. He avoided them for he wished to work in secret. Also, for fear other strangers, or even some who might know him, should chance to visit the lake, he was careful not to disturb the deserted appearance of the clubhouse. He burned no light at night, and rarely sat anywhere but in his bedroom.

"You had a light there one night," spoke Paul. "We saw it flicker for just a second once, then after while saw the same thing again."

"It must have been matches to light my cigar that you saw," Mr. Beckley replied. "I knew you had discovered me and that in part was one reason that I went to Anderson's to stay. He brought me some provisions one evening and I agreed then to go to his house, and I did so within a day or two."

Paul could have said "Yes, *I* knew he came to see you," if he had wished. But he was silent.

But MacLester spoke up: "And you went down on the old pier and threw something into the water the last thing before leaving. We saw that, too!"

"Yes, you're right. All the scraps of my lunches and the like I tied up and, putting a stone in the package to sink it to the bottom of the lake, I threw it in. You must

have had pretty sharp eyes for the Point," the speaker added, pleasantly. "But it is no wonder. I would have been even more interested in my own investigations than I was had I known half as much of the true story of the Grandall robbery as you boys knew. And had I known of that awful Murky being around I'd most certainly have gone to stay with good old Nels Anderson much sooner than I did."

"Sure, I am worried sick to know what ever I would ha' done, a gettin' to the hoose an' not findin' of ye there," put in Daddy O'Lear with a sorrowful shake of his head.

Mr. Beckley's faithful follower had already given that gentleman and MacLester an account of his adventures ending in his sudden appearance on the north shore, as the three sat by themselves in the boat some time earlier. Now the story was repeated for the information of all.

Mrs. Beckley, it appeared, having learned of the flight of Grandall wished her husband to be informed of this development. He had cautioned her that he could receive no letters without revealing where he was, and she could not write or telegraph. So with many instructions as to secrecy she sent the old family gardener, Daddy O'Lear, to tell all that had occurred.

The well-meaning old fellow left the train at a town to the north of Opal Lake, as told to do. He became quite confused and lost in the woods as he sought the clubhouse, and when he chanced to learn from MacLester that he had actually reached Opal Lake, though quite without knowing it, he was greatly alarmed. He feared the nature of his errand would be discovered by the young campers.

On the pretext of going for his baggage he walked back into the forest, MacLester accompanying him, instead of crossing over to the boys' camp. He wanted to gain time to think and plan. He finally decided that, a long way into the woods, he would give MacLester the slip and later reach the clubhouse and Mr. Beckley secretly, by walking around the lake to the other side.

This plan might have been more successful had "Daddy" not lost himself more hopelessly than ever, before he was ready to put it into execution. And if it had not been for Dave serving as his guide, at last, the good-natured Irishman never would have found his way to the lake again at all. This he freely admitted.

"I was satisfied that the stream we found must lead to the lake, or to some larger stream that would do so," MacLester explained. "We were a long time getting here, but when I saw the fire burning so terribly I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry we had saved ourselves. Then I saw the raft, and—*believe me!*"



Very soon after reaching his friends MacLester had learned of the loss of the automobile. Naturally thoughts of the car were in the mind of every one of the boys, even in the midst of all they had lately passed through. But no word of complaint or grief was spoken. Possibly Mr. Beckley noticed this for his own thoughts were not idle.

The rain still fell in torrents, hissing and steaming in the smoldering ruins of the great fire. But the heat was almost gone now. The shore could be approached without inconvenience. Mentioning this, the golfing man suggested that it would now be possible to see if the general suspicion concerning the suit-case Grandall had thrown to the water's edge was correct.

The skiff was moored to the raft. Dave and Phil entered the boat and rowed up past the rotting and now half burned timbers of the old pier. The leather case had fallen partially into the water they saw, but quickly they recovered it.

"In spite of what has happened to this money, and we all know the terrible history now—I suppose we must agree that this bag and its contents are still the property of the Longknives Club," said Mr. Beckley solemnly. For, unopened, Phil had passed the discolored case at once to him. "At any rate," the speaker went on, very soberly, "we will see what is in it. I have a few things in mind regarding the club's disposition of this matter."

Without hesitation Mr. Beckley picked up the leather case and eyed it with a growing suspicion. It was now battered, almost shapeless. More than that it looked, somehow, almost too small. Finding that it was locked, he cut open one of the sides with his pocket knife.

But, instead of packages of bank notes and bags of gold and silver coin, there was disclosed brushes, comb, and a few other toilet accessories, together with a limited change of underwear and one bosom shirt. Of course these were soiled by mud and water, but not unduly discolored.

The varied expressions of dismay, vexation and amazement shown by those on the raft and in the skiff were almost comical.

Nels Anderson ventured an opinion that the bag was Grandall's, but wondered why the man had heaved it over first instead of jumping with it himself.

"He must have been crazed by terror," said Mr. Beckley. "But the question now is what did he do with the larger suit-case. He certainly had it somewhere, or that chap Murky wouldn't have been hanging round."

"Do you think both those men were burned to death?" This from Dave.

"I don't see how either could have escaped. The building was in flames when they disappeared. It is almost night and we're all tired. I think we perhaps had better to go back to camp, sleep quietly, and then in the morning we can search the ruins and see what we may find."

As everyone was weary, this received general assent. They were not only weary but discouraged. The unexpected and mysterious loss of the suit-case containing the money was, in itself, an unlooked-for defeat, and just as everyone felt sure that their difficulties were solved.

Scarcely had they reached the old camping ground than out of the still smoking wilderness came a loud shout. Link Fraley, his shapeless old hat pulled down almost over his eyes, his horses and wagon steaming wet and coated with ashes, drove up at a trot.

"Well, well!" he cried. "We've been worried about you all. Staretta's gone wild over this fire. Worried about the Andersons and the Auto Boys; and I'm more worried about what I saw on the way here."

"What do you mean by that last?" asked Mr. Beckley, who was quick to hear the unusual note in this final remark by Fraley. "What did you see?"

"I ain't certain; but I'm almost sure I saw that scowling fellow we called Murky. I didn't get but a glimpse. 'Twas a mile or so back, where the half burnt logs was piled up thicker than usual near the trail. Before I could stop my team he was gone. No use to foller; besides, I was in a hurry to get on to where the camp was, hoping I'd find you folks all right."

Link's news occasioned somewhat of a flutter among the weary party thus gathered at the ruins of what had once been the Auto Boys' camp. After some discussion, while Chip and Worth were roasting potatoes and preparing hot coffee, it was determined that, after eating, they would return with Fraley to Staretta and sleep in warm beds once more. After that plans might be made for investigating what Link had seen on the way over.

They hastened their meal and then, all climbing into the wagon, they started back. Probably a mile further on Fraley pointed at a confused tangle of fallen trees and logs which the fire had partially consumed, yet left in such profusion as to form a sooty labyrinth where a fugitive might easily escape unseen in that growing twilight. By now the moon was shining, for the rain had long passed. Link stopped the wagon and was pointing out where he had caught this flying glimpse. He was about to start on again when Phil Way, crouched at the wagon's tail-board, cried out as he jumped off:

"Hold on a minute, Link! I think I see something!"

Mr. Beckley, beside him, had seen it too, for the moonlight made things more distinct than when Fraley had passed an hour or so before. Beckley also descended.

When he reached Phil, the boy was raising up a sooty, battered leather suit-case with several holes burnt partially through its thick sides. A wide flap was cut through the leather. It hung down as Phil held it up. It was some larger than the other bag and Beckley instantly knew that he was looking at the receptacle that had held the money.

Had held it, but now no longer.

"It's empty, Mr. Beckley. How did he come to leave it here?"

"Why, don't you see? Look at those holes." Beckley pulled at the edge of one and the burnt leather parted easily. "Murky—of course it was he—must have seen that this bag would no longer safely hold his plunder."

"Then he's taken it out and put it into something else," said Way. "Perhaps his coat, if he had one left."

"No; here's what looks like it had once been a coat."

Further search under the moon revealed only that certain foot tracks, found by Paul Jones, led off to the left through the wet ashes, as if the party who made them was in a great hurry. But, search as they might, only one pair of foot tracks could be seen.

"Evidently Grandall did not survive," said Beckley. "No wonder! He must have been all in when that scoundrel dragged him back inside the burning building. But how could Murky have gotten out alive? Probably Grandall, in his frantic haste, must have caught up the wrong bag, for it was the money he was after. When Grandall was finished his companion would, of course, try to make sure of the loot which both had schemed so hard to get and keep."

Reasoning thus, they all went on to Staretta, for nothing could be done that night, or without bloodhounds, which the county sheriff was known to have at his home at the county seat.

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## CHAPTER XII

### WAS THIS THE END OF MURKY?

When the still struggling Grandall was dragged inside by Murky and hurled through the burning bedroom door into the flames beyond, the latter had one resource left, though it is doubtful if he would have thought of that but for one fact. In the brief struggle they had stumbled over another suit-case than the one Grandall had heaved to the water's edge.

Murky recalled that when he had at first entered he had seen two bags. One was the bag containing the money. Another, a trifle smaller, was the one brought by Grandall containing articles for his personal use while in the woods. In the fight Grandall had grabbed the smaller, whether by mistake or not will never be known. But in such a death-and-life struggle as went on, with Murky indisputably the best man, such a mistake was likely, more than likely, to have been made by the despairing, frightened thief then being overpowered by a more ferocious, desperate rogue.

In less than a second Murky knew that there lay the treasure for which he had run such a terrible risk, and also that his only competitor was gone. Little would the fire leave of Grandall for after-recognition, when the ruins were searched. The heat was unbearable; Murky's clothing was already ablaze in spots. On the stand was a can of water, left by the now dead man.

In a twinkling he poured it over himself, seized the suit-case already scorched, and dashed for an open closet door. In this closet was a displaced trap door. Murky knew that under this was the hallway leading to the cellar stairs. In the cellar might be present safety—if he could make it. The clubhouse had caught from the roof. Probably the cellar was not yet reached. All this in less than no time, as he darted to the closet, kicked aside the trap which Grandall had overlooked, and jumped boldly down to the floor he had glimpsed beneath.

Murky was strong, tough, and such a leap was easily made. Already the lower rear rooms were blazing, and he had barely time to rush through the advancing flames to reach the stair door. Jerking it open, he stumbled through, hurrying down into the obscurity below. It was not so dark as usual, for the wide flare of the burning house above lighted up the cellar dimly, also showing to Murky the

gleam of a cellar window off to one side, the last side to be encroached upon by the fire.

There were smoke and sparks outside, while sundry sparkles overhead told him that the floors might shrivel into flames at any minute. In fact crumbs of blazing embers already were filtering down. In the light thus afforded, he saw some tow-bagging piled on one of the boxes that littered the cellar floor. At the same time a jingling thud announced that some of the coin had fallen from the scorched suitcase.

At once he seized the bagging, picked up the chamois-bag of coin and wrapped it round the leather case, including the escaped coin. With a rock from the crumbling wall he broke what remained of the window and crawled through.

Fortunately for him he was on the opposite side from the balcony where the amazed group on the raft and skiff were still watching, although they, too, were on the point of quitting.

Which way should he go? The rain was beginning to fall though the woods were still burning. But, close by, a small lagoon began. It was a part of the water that separated the point on which the clubhouse was built, making it an eligible site for the purposes of the Longknives when they erected the house. It offered Murky a chance and he jumped at it as a drowning man will dash for a straw. The water was shallow, yet deep enough to keep off much of the heat as he waded along, crouching, half creeping, his treasure now over his shoulder as he hurried to where the lagoon widened towards the open lake.

Here he waited while the rain poured down drenchingly, gradually putting out the fires that here had not the fierceness that had driven them in from the westward. As soon as it was possible he stepped ashore, walking as he thought towards the east and south. He was still trying to make sure of his course and the rain was still coming down when he heard the rattling of wagon wheels off to his right.

"Blame *me!*" he ejaculated. "What the—the—what can that be?"

Twilight was near, the air dim with falling rain, when a rough wagon, drawn by two horses driven by one man whom he thought he knew, came in sight. Before Murky could get out of view behind the sooty, smoking logs, he himself was seen. Link Fraley had been urging his horses faster. Before he could slow down the scowling face he had seen was gone, as Link himself had told the others.

He felt sure that he knew that face, but being unacquainted with the events at the

clubhouse, already described, he was in too great haste to reach the lake to stop and further investigate. So Link passed on while Murky, now sure that he was headed wrongly, turned away.

In order to make greater haste he took the money, bills and all, from the dilapidated bag, thrust it all inside the tow sack, and turning at last to the course he had mistakenly thought he was following, he disappeared within those slimy, sooty depths of the fire-ruined forest.

He plodded on, wondering at times if he was going right. Later in the night it became cloudy and there were symptoms of more rain. Strange to say, he did not reach any farms or houses or other signs of the railroad which he felt sure must run in this direction. That is, if he had kept the course previously laid out by himself.

As may be imagined, the going was not easy. The earth, at times strangely swampy, grew more and more difficult to pursue. He wiped the sweat from his head and neck more than once.

"Blame me!" he ejaculated. "Why don't I git somewhere? Looks like I've travelled long enough and fur enough!"

When it began to rain again he was compelled to take off his one remaining coat to wrap round the tow sack of money to keep it, at least, partially dry.

"The bulk of this money is paper," he reflected. "Paper won't stand too much wetting; not even gov'ment paper such as money is made of. Blame me! Wish I had a rubber blanket!"

Crossing a log over a slough just before daylight, feeling his way slowly, yet not daring to stop until he reached some sign of railroad or clearing, or at least a house or barn, his foot slipped on a log and down he went into a black pool of mud-encrusted water.

"Ugh—ow-w-w-wh!"

Would his feet *never* strike bottom? Yes—at last. But the water was up to his shoulders: the bag, coat and all was partly in the slime that wrapped him coldly, icily about. Though the night was summery, the chill of that involuntary bath was unpleasant. More than unpleasant; it was exhausting, even terrifying. He tried to wade out, but the mire deepened. He turned and tried to find the log again, but in the darkness all sense of direction seemed to have left him.

At last, when even Murky's resolution was about to give way to despair, his outstretched hand touched a limb. Convulsively he grasped it, both arms going

out in eager hope to grasp something tangible amid that inky, nauseous blackness. As he did so a cry broke from him, for he felt the bag slipping from his shoulder. He clutched it desperately.

"Oh! Ugh-h! My Gawd!" The cry broke into stranglings as his head went under. A furious struggle then began, for Murky was not one to give up his hold on life, or plunder, or anything valuable to him, without fighting.

Somehow he grasped at the unseen limb. It broke just as his weight began to hang thereon. More splashings, strugglings. He found another limb, all dead, sooty, yet wet from the now pouring rain.

This one seemed to hold. Inch by inch Murky drew one leg, then the other from the sucking mud below, but as fast as one leg was released the other stuck fast again. It was like working in a treadmill, only far more perilous, fatiguing, and terrible. Would he ever get out—rescue himself?

After all, love of life was more powerful than money or aught else.

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## CHAPTER XIII

### SEARCHING FOR CLUES

The next morning, though it was still cloudy and rain was falling, Link was prevailed to return with his team to the place where he had seen the man with the scowling visage. Meantime Nels Anderson and family had been made comfortable in a disused cabin in the edge of the village.

Nels, being comparatively useless, also remained. To him later in the day came Chip Slider, saying:

"I went with them folks and they didn't do nothin' much, except that Paul picked up a gold piece right near where they found that old suit-case. All at once it come to me that something's got to be did."

"Vell, vot you bane goin' to do?" Nels spoke indifferently, for he had his own troubles heavily on his mind.

"I don't want you to say much to the others. But if you find they ain't goin' to foller up that trail we lost in them burnt woods, 'count of the rain, I'm goin' to foller it myself. Say, Nels, I want to get your wife to cook me up some grub—on the quiet, see?"

"On de qviet—heh? V'ot for you bane goin' to do?" Nels was vaguely suspicious but kindly.

"They've gone for the sheriff and the dawgs. But they won't get back afore ter-morrer. I want that grub right away—see?"

Nels grunted a surly assent, adding: "Don' you forget to bring dat grub."

This Chip proceeded to do, managing to secure through Billy Worth and Phil Way a limited amount of flour, bacon and one or more minor ingredients. But both were curious, naturally.

"Look here, Chip," remarked Phil casually. "You ain't going to leave us, are you? We—we rather like you, boy."

Chip took them both aside as he explained his purpose to some extent.

"You know Paul found a gold piece where that suit-case was picked up. That



shows as how Murky, or whoever it was, must 'a' been puttin' the money in something else. It's rained on that trail, and even if the sheriff comes with his dawgs, they can't foller it to do any good."

"Well then, how the mischief can you follow it?" demanded Worth. "You just can't! Believe me, Chip, you're going up against a hard thing."

But Chip persisted. The sooner he got off, the better. After all, seeing he was bound to go, they wished him luck. But meanwhile Paul had come up and was listening eagerly. When Phil and Billy turned away, he clapped Chip on the back, saying:

"Chip, you're the goods—sure! I'm going with you, see?"

Chip looked so astonished that Paul hastened to add: "Don't you worry! I'll have some grub of my own, too. More'n that, I'll get a couple of our camp blankets. Now that our Thirty is gone, we won't be using much of our camp supplies. Say, it's up to us to help get back that twenty thousand dollars or what's left of it—hey?"

So it was arranged. During the afternoon Mr. Beckley and a constable came back but without either the sheriff or the dogs. To the anxious queries put to them Beckley shook his head discouragingly.

"We talked to the sheriff. He seemed anxious to do all he could; but he was positive that the rains and the strong scent of burnt ashes over soil would baffle the hounds. Said he: 'I'm used to bloodhounds. I know what I am talking about. My dogs are useless here.' But he was insistent on our notifying the police of the nearer towns by wire. He also 'phoned to the nearest big cities, in case Murky turned up at any of them. We gave a description of the fellow as best we could, and also charged him with murder."

"I suppose you mean Grandall," remarked MacLester.

"Certainly! I think, considering what we saw on the balcony especially when Murky was dragging Grandall back into the burning building, there can be little doubt but that Murky made an end of him. It was undoubtedly to his interest to get Grandall out of the way; especially if Murky had a notion of making off with the plunder himself."

No one disputed this. And so the matter rested. During the day men were sent off to notify the nearest settlers. In case Murky appeared, they were to arrest the man or, if unable to do that, to let folks in Staretta know at once.

Meanwhile Link Fraley, having turned the store over temporarily to his father,

who was the real proprietor after all, and an assistant, spent most of his time going round with the Auto Boys and Mr. Beckley.

"It's this way," he remarked. "I've been so much with you lads in this business that I feel somehow as if we were all interested. By the way, kids, where is that chap Slider? And I don't see your chum Paul round here."

These remarks were made along in the afternoon, after a busy morning of investigation involving a good deal of running round generally. For the first time it suddenly occurred to three of the Auto Boys that one of their number had not showed up, even at the dinner taken at noon at the one tavern of the place. Also, where was Chip Slider?

"Gee whiz-z!" Phil wondered that he had not noticed their absence before. "I remember him and Chip whispering together after we got back. Don't you, Link?"

Link did and said so emphatically, adding:

"Now come to think, I seen them two moseyin' off down where the Andersons be."

"By ginger!" This from MacLester. "I bet they're off to help Nels fix up that old cabin a bit. It sure needs fixing if I'm any judge."

"Tell you what, boys," put in Worth, "suppose we all go down there and give poor Nels a lift. He's half helpless himself. These Staretta folks sent them in some things. We'll do our bit while we're waitin' for Mr. Beckley to get that automobile he thinks he needs."

Now that the Thirty belonging to the boys had been destroyed Beckley, on reaching Staretta, had sent a man to the nearest town to bring some kind of motor car, for it was plain to him that if he was to get anywhere with his faithful assistant Daddy O'Lear, some kind of assistance more to be depended on than Link's scraggy horse team should be secured.

So while Beckley waited the boys set out for Anderson's cabin. But upon reaching there no sign of either Paul or Chip was to be seen. Instead Nels himself sat despondent in the doorway, while inside Mrs. Anderson and the child were striving in a desultory, hopeless way to arrange the inside of the unkempt cabin.

"We came down to see if we could help about anything to make you all more comfortable," said Phil, still looking for Jones and Chip. "We kind a thought Paul and that Slider boy was down here."

"So they was," remarked Mrs. Anderson, apathetically wiping out a frying pan, "but they went off soon as they had their grub cooked. And a job it was, too."

"Just what do you mean, Mrs. Anderson?" put in Billy uneasily.

"They was goin' somewhere, I think. Then—"

"Yah—yah!" This from Nels in the doorway. "They bane had der dinners."

Meanwhile Phil was thinking what Chip had told them that morning. Paul's absence was now explained. Worth also felt that an astonishing light had dawned on him somehow. He turned to Way, saying:

"What doughheads we were when Chip was talking so glibly about what he was going to do! Why, the thing is sheer nonsense!"

"More than that, it is dangerous!" exclaimed Phil. "Suppose them two boys meet up with Murky way off in the burnt over woods. What'll Murky do to 'em?"

"Don't talk punk, Phil!" Billy was in cold earnest now. "You know what he'd do or try to do, if he thought they had come after that money. There's nothing he *wouldn't* do if he could, that would put them off his trail and land them—oh, goodness! It makes me cold when I think of Paul."

Here the Anderson girl timidly approached, holding out a scrap of paper.

"He give it me," said the child. "Pap was away and ma was busy."

"Who gave it you?" demanded Phil as Worth took the soiled, folded paper.

"One of you boys. They was leavin'. Ma didn't know," seeing Mrs. Anderson looking on with astonishment written all over her. "I fergot it 'til now."

"Boys," the pencilled scrawl began. "I'm off with Chip. We got some grub along, and a pair of blankets. Chip thinks we can follow Murky. I just got to go along, too. Paul. P.S. Don't worry."

Nels' wife was fishing out a blanket from a scant pile of bedding in one corner, and held it out, saying:

"He says wrong, sir. They ain't got but one blanket; for Mr. Paul he—offered us one of the two he had. I wouldn't take it but he piled it with the things folks brought in. Then they both hurried off."

"Ve nefer see dat blanket," began Nels. "No. He done left it. Mein frau, she find it v'en day bane gone."

The situation now looked more grave to the boys than ever. Little was said,

however. Even Dave would only commit himself so far as to ejaculate:

"Paul always was a fool!"

But this was said in no animadversive sense. It was wholly sympathetic, even while Dave might have disapproved. Finding there was nothing more to be done for Nels they were about to leave when Anderson, who had been whispering with his wife, suddenly announced:

"I bane go mit you. I know de woods. I lif in de woods. I go mit you!"

"It won't do, Nels," remonstrated Worth. "You ain't fit. You're needed more here."

"How did you know we were going after Paul and Chip?" asked Phil.

Nels smiled for the first time that day. His wife explained.

"He knew you boys were good and that you loved your chum. Perhaps he felt that you were sorry for Chip, too. He wants to do his part. But I think you are right. In his fix he'd better stay with us."

All three boys insisted that Nels' place was with his family. It looked that way, anyhow. But Nels shook his head rather grimly. Finally he retired to the doorsteps, neither taking part in further discussion nor saying much of anything more at all.

After the boys left, however, he bestirred himself. His wife, understanding him better than others, mutely began preparing more food. Meanwhile Nels, from some recess in his rough clothing, resurrected two one-dollar bills. These he forced upon his wife, who meantime had wrapped up certain provisions and made him take the blanket left by Paul.

On the way back to town the boys encountered Link Fraley; and he, being in their confidence, was briefly told all that had occurred. As they explained the grin on Link's face grew broader, his eyes twinkled and he seemed vastly tickled at something.

"Well, what you goin' to do?" He asked it as if he already knew.

They told him, and he slapped the boys on the shoulders congratulatingly as he rejoined:

"Bully for you, boys! Stick to your friends! That's the way to git along in this world. That little hungry looking cuss Chip—why, somehow I kinder liked him. Lemme tell you something. I'm goin' 'long, too."

Here Link's smile grew so broad that it nearly met his ears. "I been doin' some thinkin' of my own. I ain't after money in this. Yet, if we should happen to git that money back, or he'p 'em git it, I rather guess Mr. Beckley would do the right thing."

"He would; I feel sure of that." Phil was speaking. "But that isn't worrying us so much as that Chip and Paul should start out that way without even letting out a cheep what they was up to."

"We-ell!" Link looked uncommonly wise. "You see, they two had seen that ugly cuss first. Then ag'in, I think Chip felt sore 'cause Murky beat him up so. He'd sorter like to git even, I reckon."

"Another thing," put in Phil. "Chip knows that his dead father didn't act up square 'bout that money either. Grandall put him up to it. But Chip, I'm thinkin', wants to do the fair thing."

"You say you are going along, too?" asked MacLester. "That is good of you, Mr. Fraley. We've lost our car and the Longknives have lost their money. I guess it's right that we should all help to try to get the money back. As for the car—our bully old Thirty—well, we'll have to get home without it. But what made Paul and Chip in such a hurry?"

"Chip's knocked about a good deal. He knew that if Murky got out of the big woods our chance to get him would be small." This from Worth. "By the time it all got into the hands of the police there'd be more or less costs and—and expenses. As for Paul Jones, he just couldn't help it, I guess."

"When will you be ready, Link?" queried Phil. "That is, if you are really going along."

"Ready right now, boys. When will you start?"

"It's now mid-afternoon," remarked Phil. "I propose we get ready and start at daylight tomorrow. It has rained off and on all day—hullo! Here comes Mr. Beckley."

Beckley, still followed by his henchman Daddy O'Lear, came hurriedly out of the only telephone office in Staretta. When he learned what the boys together with Fraley were up to, he looked dubious. Finally he said:

"Perhaps it is the best way after all. Nothing more can be done here. Whether we recover the money or not, it is right that you should look after your chum and—and that Slider boy." Mr. Beckley spoke this last as if he rather had doubts if Chip were worth looking after. But, with the Auto Boys on the trail he felt safe

as far as the money went, provided they found Murky, and the spoil Murky would be apt to have with him.

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## CHAPTER XIV

### TRAILING THE STOLEN MONEY

Several miles away from the wagon trail that led from Staretta to the now destroyed Longknives' clubhouse, two boys were groping along in the falling twilight in a discouraged manner.

Around them stretched seemingly endless vistas of burned and blackened forest, stark, leafless, forbidding. Under foot was a sooty, miry quagmire of rain-soaked soil, naturally low, swampy in places, and now all but impassable. The rain had subsided into a misty drizzle, soft, fine, yet penetrating.

"Gee but I'm tired, Chip!" said the younger of the two, lifting with effort one foot after the other from the deep mud underneath.

"Well, she *is* gettin' rather bad," replied the other. "Won't be much moon tonight, I reckon."

"D'you suppose the other boys will start out such a day as this?"

"Dunno; hard to tell. But we've come a right smart ways, Paul, and so far as I kin see we're gettin' further and further into these big woods."

"But we've never lost old Murky's trail. Have we, now?"

"Nope! Dark as it is, I kin make it out. You know when we started out we noticed that one of his shoes or boots had a prong on one side of the heel. Well, here she is—see?"

And Chip Slider pointed to a deep impression made apparently by a big shoe-nail or some other peculiarity which the lads had noted earlier when the light was better. Paul grunted a tired assent.

"Where do you reckon we are, anyhow?"

Chip was staring at a high bulge ahead as if some huge rock or boulder protruded upward from the nearly level ground.

"I dunno. There's something ahead that looks like we might find a shelter. Come on, Paul."

The two plodded on, one carrying the lone blanket and the other the small store

of eatables that remained after their last inroad upon it. When they were nearly up to this unusual obstruction there came a sparkle of light that hit the damp air momentarily, then went out. It seemed to Chip, who had the keenest eyes of the two, as if it might have been the flare of a match.

The boys halted at once and stood staring, listening, perplexed and yet most curious. Finally they heard a snapping of twigs, and then came another flare and still another. Nothing else could they see for, as Chip suspected, it was only the reflection of a light that they had seen. Evidently there must be someone behind that bulge. While they waited breathless, there came a confirmation of their fears—or rather was it their hopes?

"Blame me!" growled a heavy voice. "Why in sin won't she get afire?"

With one accord the two boys stood and stared—at each other. Finally Paul leaned forward, whispering:

"Murky, Murky!"

Chip more composedly nodded; then he too whispered:

"We must slip up behind that thing. It's a rock, I reckon."

Paul said nothing but when Chip started, he did likewise.

"Step keerful," whispered Slider. "Don't let your feet make a noise when you pull 'em out of the mud."

A low rumble of thunder muttered its way out of the west indicating more rain. As if to emphasize the menace of this, they heard Murky cursing to himself. He, too, was aware that further rain and storm boded no good to himself.

More softly still the boys came gradually up under the shelving sides of a great rock, that proved to be the termination of a chain of similar rocks which abutted from a ridge of low hills off to the northeast.

Beyond, on the other side of this last big boulder, they could still hear Murky—if it was Murky—renewing his attempts to make a fire. Under the shelving sides the boys had some shelter. But from the brighter glare on the other side they knew that the tramp had succeeded in starting his fire. Was he any better protected from the increasing rain than they?

For quite a time the two crouched, blanket over their shoulders, while the rain pattered harder and harder. Finally a slight shift of wind to the westward caused the rain to beat in on them more. They were very uncomfortable, squatting in the wet mould with their backs against the damp rocks.



"See what I got?" Paul held up something that Chip cautiously felt.

"Where did you get that?" Chip was astonished.

"I knew we had one at the camp. But I thought it was lost. But today I found it in one of our bags. When we started I managed to slip it into my pocket. We're only two boys, and Murky is a grown man. Why, you've got bruises on you now that he gave you—" Paul was showing a pistol.

"Hs-sh!" whispered Chip. "Not so loud. Lemme see that gun!"

"All right," and Paul passed it over. Chip looked at it closely. "I can't tell yet if the chambers have any cartridges. We might need it."

By the mere feel of the thing they did not make sure, so Paul, before Chip had time to remonstrate, struck one of his own matches. By this light the two bent closely, the light flaring out into the night air. At last, as the match went out Chip declared:

"The chambers are all empty except one, and I can't see—hold on!"

Forgetting his previous caution, Chip himself struck another match. While they bent again to see if the cartridge was a full one they were appalled when a deep, rough voice from out the apparent wall of rock behind struck on their boyish ears like a knell of coming destruction.

They turned, Paul grasping the dubious pistol, while Murky, still wet, covered with mud and doubly forbidding by reason of this, seized Chip Slider in one hand and reached for Paul with the other.

Where had Murky come from? How did he suddenly appear apparently out of what the boys supposed to be a solid wall of rock? But at any rate there he was with Chip squirming in his grasp while Paul, darting to one side, barely eluded his left-handed clutch. Altogether it was a ticklish situation.

But Paul was plucky. In a trice, remembering the one cartridge, he levelled the pistol and began pulling the trigger.

"Let go that boy!" his almost childish treble rang out. "Leggo, I say!"

Click—click—click went the hammer as he pulled the trigger, at the same time jumping back further from Murky's gripping hand. Meantime Chip managed to loose himself. Murky, hearing the empty sound of the striking hammer, growled:

"Huh-h! She's empty, blame ye—"

Just then—crack! came the sound of the full cartridge; but Paul's aim being

unsteady, the ball just clipped Murky's left ear.

It maddened him more than anything else. With a yell of rage and pain he sprang at Paul, catching the lad as the latter tried to spring backward, but stumbling in the mud, while the pistol flew from his hand. By this time the light of Murky's fire was blotted out by some passing object that darted swiftly out of the obscurity whence Murky had sprung. At the same time Chip, now free, leaped pluckily to the assistance of his friend.

But on the instant the unknown object, emitting a Swedish howl of rage, burst through, striking Murky with an impact that sent him headlong out into the night. With this collision back came the light that had been momentarily blotted from view by the last welcome intruder.

When this last stood revealed, big, heavy, yet strangely hampered by his half useless arms, the two boys were in turn again astonished yet gratified to behold—Nels Anderson. Accompanying this appearance came the sounds of rapidly retreating steps as Murky, recognizing defeat, made himself scarce as fast as he could. The three looked at each other, grinning the while as they looked.

"Say, Mr. Anderson," began Paul, "it was bully of you to come, and you still crippled in your arms!"

At a glance both saw that Nels, while active as ever in body and legs, held his arms loosely, both hanging down at his sides.

"My arms no good," he began, "but I bane all right yet. Coom—ve look fer dot feller."

He turned, diving through a side passage hitherto hidden from Paul and Chip, while they, following, emerged into a recess where two gigantic boulders, leaning together, made the shelter under which Murky had started the fire that, flaring out into the darkness, had so puzzled the boys before. Here Murky, becoming aware that someone was beyond him, had crept up between rocks, listening when the boys arrived, and had sprung upon them as has been described.

For half a minute Nels stood, glaring at the embers of the fire and around to see what else might be there. But there was nothing, apparently, beyond a few scraps of eatables and a remnant of wet tow sacking.

"Coom on!" shouted the big Swede. "We bane get nothin' here!" And he darted off in the darkness towards where Murky's retreating steps had last been heard. But nothing resulted except a trio of tired searchers with deep mud on their legs

and a sense that Murky had eluded them again.

"I don't see any signs of money round here," gloomily owned Paul, looking about the rocky recess where Murky had been quartered but a short while before. "It is dark as pitch everywhere else. One thing, Chip. I fancy we got his grub, whatever he had left after eating."

"That's something," owned up Chip. "A feller can't git along much in these woods unless he has something to fill his belly with."

Anderson, paying little heed to this, was staring into the fire, doubtless thinking matters over. Chip picked up the tow-bagging, scanned it closely and turned to Paul standing near. He pointed at a shred of the bagging that, without being detached from the sack, had somehow caught a small patch of greenish paper inside its loose clutch. Carefully Chip picked out this, and handed it to Nels and Paul.

"That looks like a piece of money," quoth Chip. "Ain't it the corner of a bill of some kind?"

Closer inspection revealed, even to Anderson's thicker brain, that the paper shred had undoubtedly been part of a bank note of some kind. Being wet, it was easily torn from the parent bank note in the rough handling the money had undergone. At least such was the conclusion drawn by all three after a short inspection. Paul was greatly excited.

"What did I say when Phil found that old suit-case? Murky must 'a' put the money in something else. It must 'a' been all wet. He must 'a' had that money here. What did he do with it?"

"I'm goin' to hunt for it right now!" said Chip now all eagerness.

"First we find Murky," interposed Nels. "Vere he be, dere ve find money."

"But Murky didn't have no load on him when he tackled us!" was Chip's objection.

"I goin' make light," said Nels. "You look roun'. Mebbe fin' money. Mebbe fin' nothin'. I bane go fin' Murky. Make heem tell. Yah!"

And Anderson, who still had some use of his big hands, picked up a hatchet left by the fugitive in his haste and clumsily began to split some dry pine which had long lain under shelter, doubtless left there by former campers or hunters. For several minutes the boys ferreted their way into or through the neighboring crevices among the jumble of rocks, even using part of Anderson's splinters to

aid them; but nothing did they find.

"Now we go," said Nels at last. "You boys bane tired mooch?"

The truth was all were pretty tired, but not one would acknowledge the fact. Nels, used to long fatigues, and crippled besides, made both Paul and Chip reluctant to own up that they needed sleep more than further travel.

The upshot of all this was that, in a short time, all were following the mud trail left by Murky in his flight but a brief spell back. The fire had been replenished, so as to give them some clue as to where they were, should they wish to return. Chip bore the torch; Paul carried an armload of fat splinters; while Nels, plodding between, bent his woods-sharpened eyes on the tracks that were plain enough yet, for the rain had at last ceased.

After leading them a sinuous path through the blackened wilderness for perhaps a mile, the tracks turned sharply to the right and upward along a more gravelly slant until what seemed the backbone of a wooded ridge was attained. Here the fire in consuming leaves, fallen branches and most of the thinner undergrowth, had thus swept from the gravel beneath all the surface refuse. Probably this was accomplished before the rains began.

In consequence the tracks, growing more and more imperceptible, finally vanished entirely.

"I bane tired," and Nels sat down, shaking his great head discouragingly.

"Gee whiz!" gurgled Jones. "I almost wish I was back in Staretta in my little bed 'stead of way out here where I don't even know where I am or how I'll get out again."

But Chip was made of sterner stuff. Seeing his companions were in the dumps, he perked up and sniffed the night air expectantly.

"What's the use of gittin' discouraged? Mornin' 'll soon be here. We kin see that fire yet, can't we? Les' go back and git some sleep."

"No use of dat." This from Nels. "It bane very late now. We git fire here. Sleep a bit."

But it was concluded not to make a fire, as it might give the man they were hunting a clue as to where they were. So the three prepared to pass a comfortless night. Fortunately it did not rain any more and, after a fashion, they managed to endure the rest of the night. At last, cool and cheerless, the dawn came, and with the first glimmer the three set out along the ridge. Nels kept to the summit, while

the boys patrolled the sides, keeping an eye out amid the softer mud and ashes for any sign of foot tracks.

A mile or more might have been traversed thus when, at a shout from Chip, the others hastened to him and saw that the boy had detected distinct foot tracks leading away towards the east.

"Fresh ones too," said Paul, pointing. "And—look there. Criminy! I'm going to take a look inside that hollow log."

He darted towards a rusty looking tree trunk over which the fire had swept, leaving naught but the solid wood cylinder of dead beech. Most of the shrivelled bark, moss and dead leaves were reduced to ashes. These the rain had made into a moist, blackish gray mush. At the larger end were plain signs as if some heavy body had crawled inside and perhaps out again. Nels, more up to woods lore, looked, sniffed, fingered clumsily, then delivered himself.

"Murkee, he bane sleep here yoost li'l whiles. Git oop soon. He bane gone a'retty—yuss!"

"Gone—yes!" exclaimed Paul. "But where did he go? How did he get away so all-fired soon—hey?"

Here another call from Chip solved the question. Not far below the hollow log began a tiny slough which presently widened out until footprints were discernible in the mushy tussocks of what had before been a fringe of marsh-grass. It was Chip who led the way now, and eagerly pointed out further developments in the hunt.

"Do you reckon this really is Murky we are following?" asked Paul while Nels, tired, hungry and sleepy as well, dragged along dumbly.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Chip, who was bent on solving the apparently unsolvable. "Who else would it be way out here in this wilderness? We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Murky: Murky wouldn't be here if his own work hadn't driven him into it. Let's go on."

And on they went, the trail growing plainer as the slough widened and deepened. Finally they came to a fallen tree extending from one side of the slough to the other. The scorched, blackened, rain-soaked top reached to their side. Half way across the branches ceased and nothing but a slimy black trunk reached to the other side. Already they were about to pass this when Chip, who was in the lead, suddenly stopped.

"I don't see no more tracks," said he, seemingly nonplussed.

At once Nels came forward, took one look about, then pointed at a sooty limb projecting landward from the trunk.

"W'at de matter wid dat?" he exclaimed. "She bane go dat way."

"Sure—you're right!" cried Paul, instantly comprehending. "But how will you get across, Mr. Anderson?"

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## CHAPTER XV

### MURKY AT BAY

Chip Slider, always willing when there was something to do, caught hold of the limb that showed signs of recent use and swung himself up into the top. Paul Jones followed, but Anderson shook his head as he tried to raise his half useless arms. Without assistance he could not make it. Yet it was evident that the fugitive Murky must have taken that road.

Meanwhile Chip, landing on the other side after a slippery passage on the log, saw the tracks leading straight off through the woods as if Murky well knew what he wanted and where he was going. Paul, in crossing, noticed midway of the log certain muddy smears as if someone had either fallen off or had climbed up on the log about midway of the slough. This did not much impress him at the time. Hastening on to join Chip, the two then perceived that Nels was still on the other side.

"By cripes! Anderson can't make it, Chip! We ought to have waited and helped him over. That log's mighty slippery. Looks as if someone had fallen off already. What had we better do?"

"Say, Paul, this trail leads right back in the direction of them rocks where we spent last night. What do ye think of that?"

But Paul was now calling to Nels on the other side. He had heard what Chip said and shouted to the big Swede its import. At this Nels solved the difficulty in a few words, directing the boys—if they were sure of this—to follow the new trail while Nels would go back to the head of the slough and rejoin them somewhere near the foot of the rocky ridge they had previously traversed.

Still the trail was puzzling. Both lads found not only a fresh trail leading ridgeward, but signs of an earlier trail, now much rainwashed, that led towards the slough, not away from it as the fresh trail did.

"Tell you what I believe, Paul," remarked Chip after studying the situation over. "When Murky first struck out he was trying to get clear off, probably east somewhere. He must 'a' come this way, tried to cross the run here and couldn't. He might 'a' fell off that log where you saw them stains.

"What would he do then? Why, strike for higher ground; git to some place where he could make a fire. That took him back to where he run against us. And if it hadn't 'a' been for Nels, I ain't sure but what he'd a got the best in that mix-up. What do you think?"

What Chip thought was indicated by his pointing finger, for he was ahead, following the trail, now growing more and more indistinct. Paul came up and looked at the faint outline of tracks now turning abruptly up the rocky ridge.

"Murky—if 'twas Murky—is goin' right back where he and us spent last night. Now what would he be doin' that for? There hain't but one reason that counts," affirmed Chip. "He's hid out that money somewhere—don't you reckon?"

All at once the significance of this appealed to both the boys. As with one accord they eagerly resumed their trail hunt, but it was with such scant success that Paul finally shook his head in discouragement. Chip, now on hands and knees, stooping, at times almost crawling, was inclined to give up too.

"You remember how we lost that trail before on this ridge and only found it when we separated, taking in the lowland on either side?"

"Yep! That's what we'll have to do now. Wish Nels was here. Wonder where he is now?" And Paul peered in the direction of the slough.

With one accord both lads waited a few minutes, but seeing no sign of the vanished Swede, it was agreed that Chip should take one side of the ridge and Paul the other, and at each mile of progress or thereabouts, should let each other know. If, meanwhile, one should strike the trail again he should call or go in search of the other.

Possibly Paul had gone a mile, when a rumbling, heavy voice halted him. No trail had he found, but—there was Anderson coming, having at last rounded the head of the slough.

"You find him yet?" meaning the vanished trail. "He bane go dis way?"

"No, we lost it on the ridge like we did before. Chip is looking for it on the other side of this slope. I hope he has better luck than us."

"Let's res' a leetle, Paul," and Nels slumped heavily down.

At this juncture came a faint call from the other side of the ridge. Paul jumped up again, saying:

"Come on, Mr. Anderson! That must be Chip. He's found something, for we agreed to let each other know, whichever came on anything first."



And Paul gave an answering shout, starting up the gentle rise of the rocky elevation, on top of which both trails had vanished.

"Alright—I bane coomin'," responded Nels as he wearily got up and tried to keep up with Paul's hasty steps, but soon gave that up. "I bane tired—all een—das w'at."

Young Slider had felt all along the keenest interest in the recovery of that stolen money. His dead father's participation therein probably kept him stimulated by a desire to show his new-found friends, the Auto Boys that he was worthy to be trusted.

After some futile search he was at length gratified to discover signs of the vanished trail. It came down from the higher ground where the rocks and gravel made it indistinguishable. Filled with new courage he followed on, pleased that it became more plain as the lower ground grew softer and more mushy. At this juncture he began calling to Paul, and perhaps it was indiscreet in view of what presently happened.

But Chip was not thinking of himself. Instead, as he gave his last shout and heard the faint echo of Paul's reply, he only thought that he was again on the track of Murky. Where was Murky now?

"I hope we'll soon know," he said to himself as he plodded on, on—eyes on the ground and seeing little of things around him. "I hope Paul hurries. He'd help a lot—"

"Blame *me!*" A savage growl struck on Chip's ears. "It's that durned little Slider cuss."

With a curdling chill Chip raised his eyes and was astounded by what he saw. Having gone farther than he thought, amid his eagerness to get on and his constant scrutiny of the trail, he saw around him the same rocks rising to his right that they had approached the night before. And right under the heavy ledge where he and Paul had been sheltered, prior to Murky's attack, stood Murky himself, mud-slimed, gaunt, fierce, and scowlingly savage.

"Ain't I never goin' to git rid of you?" he snapped, drawing menacingly near. "You'll not dodge me this time!"

With this Murky lurched forward, his claw-like hand reaching forth. Chip let out a yell of terror. He could not help it. The yell would come, and it rang far-reaching, striking on Anderson's ear as the Swede, having recovered, was crossing the ridge's backbone not so very far away. That yell smote upon Paul not unlike the effect of an unexpected thunder clap. But Paul recognized the

voice. Chip was in trouble. He—Paul—was not with him. Gripping his courage, he rushed on, rounding a bulge of rock just in time to see Chip being dragged within that same recess whence both Murky and Nels had emerged the night before, one to attack, the other to rescue the two boys.

"Look here!" cried Paul, now more angry than ever, his fear of Murky quite gone for the time being. "You let that boy alone! Hear me?"

Apparently the tramp did not, for he disappeared through the elbowed recess still dragging the struggling Chip. Just then Paul stumbled and was nearly thrown down by hitting a smooth, round rock with his foot. Recovering, he picked up that rock and darted through the recess after Murky with his captive. His other hand also found that pistol with which he had clipped the robber's ear, and which Paul had hung onto, thinking he might have a use for it. No cartridges were in it of course, but still it was a weapon.

In one corner of that recess where the fire had been built Murky had young Slider down and apparently was choking the life out of the lad. Without a word Paul ran up, heaved the rock and, as luck would have it, struck the robber fairly right over the head.

A less hard-headed man would have toppled over. But Murky was hard-headed as well as hard-hearted. He reeled upon his knees and his clutch upon Chip relaxed sufficiently to enable that thoroughly frightened youngster to wriggle away on hands and knees while Murky was recovering.

The latter scrambled to his feet, his head smarting. Roaring, he lunged at Paul, who darted back, his only real weapon gone and wondering what to do next. More by instinct than anything he levelled the empty pistol at the robber, shouting at the same time:

"Keep off—keep off! I—I'll shoot—"

But by this time Murky had recovered his poise and his strength as well. For all he knew Paul might send bullets his way, but that did not now stop the ruffian. With a savage snort of anger he sprang upon the boy, wrenched from him the pistol and straightway began to beat Paul over the head. About this time Murky felt a clinging form jump upon his back, wind its thin arms and legs around his half reeling frame, as Paul struck at him with boyish impetuosity, though the blows were futile so far as doing the man any serious harm.

"Blame ye both!" he exploded. "I'll fix ye—blast ye!"

And fix them both he methodically proceeded to do. Seizing Paul by the scruff

of his neck and twisting Chip somehow under his other arm, he then tried to bang their heads together. Luckily he did not succeed before there was a sudden interruption.

For the second time there came in Murky's rear a rumbling roar of anger. Nels Anderson, just arrived, breathless, exhausted, was yet ready to do what might be done by a tired man almost without the use of his arms.

At the sound close behind him Murky turned, his savage claws fastened in the half helpless boys' clothing. Pushing them before him, he rushed upon the Swede. The impact was too much for Nels.

Back he staggered, his heels tripping, and fell with the two youngsters on top of his prostrate bulk.

By the time the three got to their feet again Murky had vanished. But they heard him farther on, and in an instant Chip was off, crying:

"We mustn't lose him! He's back after that money! I just know it!"

Was Chip right? Only quick work might solve that riddle. In a trice Paul was at Chip's heels while Nels, puffing more than ever, yet still game, came on after. Arrived at the next turning, they saw Murky dragging at something in a dark corner or crevice of rock. Seeing his pursuers coming, Murky rushed blindly at them. Chip managed to dodge but Paul was overborne and, stumbling back, brought up against Nels, and again a rough-and-tumble struggle began. Meantime Chip, having dodged, saw what Murky, down on his knees, had been dragging at when again surprised. Intuition told him what it might be. Instead of going to the aid of his companions Chip stooped over, dragged out a wet, soiled package from a deeper crevice, ran off through another passage that seemed to wind among a number of converging boulders, and—a moment later returned empty-handed to where the fight was still going on.

Murky now had the big Swede down and was pummeling him over head and face with his fists. Anderson was rolling, twisting about, striving ineffectually to wriggle loose. From behind Paul Jones was doing his best to drag the robber back. Paul had him by the hair and collar. When Chip came back, he had managed to hit Paul with one right-handed fist and the boy was gasping.

All this went through Chip like a flash of lightning out of a clear sky. Seizing a good sized fragment of rock, he began pounding Murky about the head.

"Blame ye!" roared the thief. "Will ye quit? I—I'll—"

Further utterance was checked by Murky's turning and flinging himself full

length upon young Slider. Bearing him to the ground, the lad was soon knocked into unconsciousness by Murky's powerful blows.

"Git outer my way!" he shouted, rising and making a break for the same place where Chip had seen him stooping not ten minutes before. "Blame me! I-I'll-where is it? What have ye done with it? Ye will, will ye?"

By this time, blinded by baffled rage, Murky proceeded—as Chip afterwards expressed it—"to wipe up the earth" with his opponents.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### CONCLUSION

Through the nearer passages under the leaning rocks, approaching footsteps were heard, hurried steps, that even Murky had to heed. Then came Link Fraley, followed by Phil, Dave, Billy—the Auto Boys. Behind those was Mr. Beckley, breathing heavily as if tired by undue haste.

No sooner had Murky seen who they were than he sprang up from the scramble wherein he, the Swede and Paul were engaged, and made a break for another passage. But Link, who happened to be nearest, thrust out one long leg. With another cry of rage Murky went prostrate.

For a few minutes—or was it seconds?—a struggle went on. But Murky's day of probation was at last over. Actually weeping with anger, Anderson strove to reach his late opponent. Paul, though somewhat bruised from his own struggles, also tried to do his bit in securing the scowling man. But it was not necessary. In another short space of time Murky lay there helpless. His arms were bound behind his back, his legs and feet also secured.

One of the first things Mr. Beckley did was to walk up to Anderson and shake his nerveless hand with great vigor. Then he did the same thing to Paul, who was also being congratulated by the other boys. Then Beckley turned to Anderson, saying:

"It was brave and faithful of you, Nels, to start out all by yourself. But it was you and this—this lad who really rounded up the rascal."

"You forget Chip Slider, Mr. Beckley, don't you?" Paul Jones liked to be fair, though at times he was too forward. "Chip was along—why, where is Chip? I'd forgot him for the moment."

Link Fraley and Phil Way were bending over Chip's still prostrate form where he lay after being so maltreated by the scowling villain who now lay bound not more than ten feet away.

Attention thus drawn, the entire party devoted themselves to the task of reviving young Slider, who it appeared was only stunned and bruised by his treatment at the hands of the robber.

Presently Mr. Beckley again took the lead in questioning. "Of course I—we feel deeply grateful. The Longknives will do almost anything for those who were most active in securing this fellow and his ill-gotten booty. He'll have to face a murder charge too, as there is little doubt but that he dragged Grandall to his death inside that burning building. And now that we have the thief and the money—"

"Are you sure we've got the money, sir?" It was MacLester who asked this for, Scotch-like, Dave was always ready to cast doubt upon most anything that was not proved before all men. "I don't see any money!"

"Of course we may not see it right now, yet I don't doubt but that you and Murky know where it is?" This to Nels and Paul, who both looked rather nonplussed. "Where is it, Nels?"

"I—I—" Anderson was stammering and confused in manner. "I bane not sure I can tell. That feller, he know." He pointed at Murky who glared evilly at the crowd in general.

"Ye needn't look for me to tell anything," he snarled. "I got no money!"

"If you had, you'd lie about it," was Beckley's comment that seemed to meet the general opinion among his captors.

Murky relapsing into sullen silence, Beckley resumed his queries.

"Do you mean that having gotten this scoundrel here," indicating Murky, "you don't know where his plunder is?"

"Wish I did, sir," said Paul Jones, turning from Chip who was just beginning to be conscious of outward things.

"And you, too, do not know where the money is?" Beckley turned again to Anderson, who squirmed rather uneasily.

"Wush I did," the latter muttered. "I bane coom after the boys. Ven I coom oop wid 'em, dey vass in mix-ooop wid heem," pointing at Murky.

"That fellow must 'a' had the money hid out somewhere," said Paul. "We followed him for miles. Finally we lost the trail, then we came on him by accident, as it were. He was about to get the best of Chip and me when in came Nels, here, and Murky disappeared. It was in the night. In the morning we struck his trail again. But he never seemed to have the money with him. It is all a mystery to me. Isn't that the way of it, Nels?"

Nels gave a sheepish nod of assent.

"Well, it's something big to have apprehended this fellow. Before we are through with him I dare say we will know where that stolen money is."

Mr. Beckley spoke with grim purpose which, however, did not belie his apparent disappointment that the stolen twenty thousand dollars was not forthcoming, or at least some knowledge gained as to its present whereabouts.

Here Chip Slider, reclining against Link Fraley, who was still solicitously supporting the boy's dizzy head, blinked and strove to raise himself. Clearing his throat, he asked in a shaky voice:

"Is it the money they want to know about?" This, apparently, to Link.

"Why, yes, boy! We've got hands on the thief," meaning Murky. "But what Mr. Beckley wants to know now, is what's become of the swag, the boodle, the stuff Murky stole. He won't tell, and you chaps don't seem to know."

"Yes, we do!" replied Chip unexpectedly. Then he sat up unaided.

"What do you mean, my lad?" queried Beckley, a quizzical smile on his face for he had not fully determined the reason of Chip's being here except in a casually superfluous way.

"I mean that—" glancing at Paul and Nels, "—that we know where the money is. At least it looks like the money and Murky seemed mighty anxious to get his paws on it."

Giving little heed to the wonder in the faces of the Swede and Jones, the boy tried to get to his feet. "Help me up, please. I'll be all right in a minute. There! Now if you will all go with me, I'll show you what I mean."

Still supported by Fraley, though Chip was almost himself again, he led the party to a deep crevice where some dirt had been hastily pawed out.

"Right here I saw Murky on his knees trying to pull out something from this hole. About that time he saw us again, and the way he went for us kep' him busy with Nels and Paul. It flashed through me what Murky was after. I left them fightin'. It was two to one, anyhow. When I got to this hole I pulled out a wet bundle that I took to be the money. Seemed like I could see the bills or the corners of them in bundles."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Beckley eagerly. "They would be apt to be in packages. You were right; I feel sure you were right!"

"But where are those bills now? Where is the bundle?" asked Link.

Without a word Chip, unaided, led the group to the nearby recess where he had hurriedly stowed them. Pointing, he continued:

"That there is what I drug out of yonder hole, sir. I guess it's the money, or Murky wouldn't 'a' been so anxious about gittin' it."

It was the missing money, of course. Practically intact, too, although it was wet and in places mud-soaked. The bags of coin were there. One had a small rip in the seam, doubtless where the coin had escaped that Paul found near the dilapidated suit-case.

Here Paul's enthusiasm at last broke loose.

"Oh, you Chip!" he cried. "You're the goods, ain't you? That then was the reason you didn't stop and help us fight Murky!"

"Yah—he had good reeasons—heh!" This from Nels, now rejoicing like the rest. "I bane like you, Cheep; zat I does!"

After that nothing apparently was too good for young Slider. Even Mr. Beckley, dropping his previous air of good-humored toleration, declared that Chip deserved real commendation.

"You have showed pluck and perseverance, for you were about to start after that skunk Murky alone when our young friend Paul Jones joined you. And Nels, our good old Nels, crippled though he was, came swiftly on the trail of you both, arriving just when help was needed."

"Yes, Paul," remarked Phil, "our crowd came just in time too; but if it had not been for you three, I guess we would not have both prisoner and money in our hands right now."

"That reminds me," interrupted Link, starting off on a run. "Who stayed behind to watch that devil Murky?"

As with one accord the others, except Mr. Beckley and Chip Slider, started after Fraley, leaving those two to bring along the money. A moment later they broke into the passage where Murky had been left, and found that the wily rascal had already loosed his hands by rubbing the cords that bound his wrists against a sharp edge of the rocks, and was at work upon the bindings that held his feet. These were only partially freed. Seeing his captors approach, he jumped up, made a reckless bolt for freedom, but fell sprawling on the earth. In a trice the others were upon him and after a brief struggle had him tied hard and fast again.

"You'll not get away again, old chap," was Billy's comment as he tied the last



knot. "There's a thing called law and justice you've got to face before you're done with this crowd!"

While Mr. Beckley, with Anderson's aid, and with sundry others looking on, carefully counted over the wet, draggled, yet still good contents of the package thus found, there came a rattle of wheels. Presently two teamsters from Staretta appeared, with word that they had managed to bring their teams thus far, but the mud and thickening tree trunks might prevent their going farther.

"Guess you won't have to go farther, my men," spoke up Mr. Beckley. "Can we get back to Staretta by night—with a prisoner, and also three more of our friends who came on before?"

"Sure we can! We've broke such road as there is in comin'." The speaker, a red-faced, burly looking man, was shaking hands with Nels, for he was one of the old gravel road workers whom the Longknives had never paid as yet.

"Well then," remarked Beckley to whom all deferred as the leader in their subsequent proceedings, "we will get a move on at once. I am anxious to reach town where I can telephone. It is lucky that I changed my mind and did not go on by rail, when I found that these boys were already after the prisoner yonder," indicating Murky, "and that the other Auto Boys, with Mr. Fraley, were going at once in pursuit. I may state here that, though the clubhouse is gone and Grandall along with it, we have recovered the twenty thousand dollars. If I know the Longknives Club, they will now be more than willing to pay all claims against them by those who trusted them. It was long delayed, yet it could not be helped. I trust to put all things straight before I leave your hospitable little town."

Needless to state good, clean Staretta beds were occupied by the Andersons, the Auto Boys, the golfing man, his servant Daddy O'Lear, and Chip Slider that night. Even Murky, though guarded in the village lock-up, had a more comfortable place to sleep than he had enjoyed for some time. Later, under a warrant duly drawn, charging him with murder and robbery, he was conveyed to the jail at the county seat to await the grand jury and the court.

Before Mr. Beckley left, and after he had wired particulars of these recent events to the Longknives Club, he received by wire the hearty acquiescence from them in the plan already formulated for the disposition of the stolen and rescued twenty thousand dollars.

First, there was to be medical aid for Nels Anderson, and a restoration of the money losses he had sustained in the building of that gravelled road. Also Chip Slider was to be helped and aided for the plucky way he had acted, especially in

removing the money from where Murky, had he come back in a hurry, would have found it. Next those workmen who had been employed three years before must receive the money due them.

Lastly a new automobile should be provided without undue delay for the Auto Boys. It certainly was due them. Had it not been for their bravery and devotion to duty the tragedy making up the last chapter of the gravel road's history would have been far, far more terrible.

It was not long until all Mr. Beckley's plans were carried out. Legally the Longknives Club had never been disbanded and the funds were unanimously voted as he proposed.

But how about poor Chip Slider?

There is today no more contented boy in Lannington, the home city of the Auto Boys, than he.

Without loss of time the chums returned home, taking Chip with them. He's working for Con Cecil in a newspaper office there and going to night school. All his questioning if peace and plenty might not be found somewhere, sometime, has been most pleasingly answered.

There was gladness and thanksgiving in the homes of all the boys' families when the telegrams telling of their escape from the great forest fire were received. A most happy homecoming it was for all, a day or so later.

Scarcely a week had passed when Henry Beckley and a committee of Longknives drove up to the green and yellow garage the Auto Boys called their own, and there delivered a truly splendid new car.

On part of the boys' families and their friends there was much ado about it all. A dinner by the Lannington Automobile Club, and a great many more fine speeches than the four chums relished hearing about themselves, was one such thing.

"And I will venture to say," spoke Mr. Beckley, in the course of his after dinner address, on this occasion, "that whatever the future has in store for our friends, they will be found active and alert in time of play, in time of work or in time of danger."

"The Auto Boys' Big Six," a book wherein the later experiences of the chums will be reported, should in due time enable you to judge whether Mr. Beckley was correct.

# THE END

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