

COPPER COLESON'S GHOST

By

EDWARD P. HENDRICK

Author of

"THE CRUISE OF THE SALLY"

Illustrated by

HAROLD CUE



L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
BOSTON PUBLISHERS

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“A FIGURE CATAPULTED FROM THE REAR OF THE VEHICLE”

(See [page 295](#))

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BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, U. S. A.

BECAUSE THEIR ENCOURAGEMENT AND CRITICISM HAVE
BEEN HELPFUL TO ME DURING THE WRITING OF
THIS STORY, I AM DEDICATING IT TO MY BOYS
BOB AND JACK

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CHAPTER I

FRIENDS—NEW AND OLD

In the rear of a white cottage, known to all residents of the town of Truesdell as “the Blake homestead,” stands a great apple tree, whose leafy boughs have afforded shade in summer and fruit in autumn to several generations of Blakes. At present, its hospitable branches have been converted into an out-of-door gymnasium by Ned Blake, great-grandson of old Josiah Blake, from whose half-eaten apple-core the tree sprang some seventy years ago. “Six feet, two inches in his socks and as wide as a door,” is how tradition describes old Josiah, and although Ned Blake at seventeen stands less than seventy inches in his sneakers and tips the scales at a trifle less than one hundred and fifty pounds, he has something of the supple strength and a goodly measure of the courage and grit that made old Josiah respected among the early settlers of Truesdell.

Clad in a sleeveless jersey, duck trousers and sneakers, Ned has just climbed a rope hand over hand to an upper limb from which he descends in a veritable cascade of cat-skinning, toe-holding, ape-like swings to drop on the turf beside his friend, Tommy Beals.

“Bully stuff!” applauded Tommy. “You sure can do the monkey tricks, Ned, but it makes me sweat just to watch ’em *this* weather,” and Tommy hitched his rotund form farther into the shade of the friendly tree.

“It would do you good to try some of them, Fatty,” laughed Ned. “Come on now. Here’s a simple one for a starter,” and catching a horizontal limb above his head, Ned proceeded to chin himself with first one hand, then with the other, and finished with a two-handed hoisting swing that left him seated upon the limb.

Tommy Beals wagged his head in a hopeless negative. “Nope, it can’t be done,” he sighed. “Whoever drew *my* plans must have been thinking about ballast instead of aviation, but if you ever want a good anchor for a tug-of-war team why just count on *me*.”

“All right, I’ll keep it in mind,” promised Ned, “but here’s something you can do for a little exercise,” he continued, dropping again to the ground. “I want to grind my camp axe a bit, if you’ll turn for me.”

“Sure, I’ll do it,” agreed Tommy good-naturedly and, fetching a soap box for a seat, he squatted beside a heavy grindstone that stood in the shade of the tree.

For perhaps ten minutes the sharp *skurr* of steel on stone sounded on the hot August air, then ceased abruptly as Ned lifted the axe from the whirling stone and tested its edge gingerly with his thumb. Tommy seized the opportunity to let go his hold of the crank-handle and wipe the beads of perspiration from his plump countenance.

“Gosh, it’s hot!” he panted. “Ain’t the old cleaver sharp yet, Ned?”

“It’s pretty good, except for a couple of nicks,” replied Ned, “but you needn’t turn any more, Fatty. Here comes Dave Wilbur and I’ll get him to spell you.”

“Yeah! I’ll sure admire to watch Weary Wilbur *work*,” grinned Beals, as a tall, lanky youth with hands deep in his pockets turned in at the gate and strolled leisurely across the lawn. “I’ll bet you the ice cream sodas, Ned, that Dave will find an alibi for *any* job—if he sees it coming,” continued Tommy, in a wheezy whisper.

“I’ll take that bet,” laughed Ned. “Hello, Dave,” he exclaimed, “you’re just in time to save Fatty’s life! Grab hold of that crank and turn a minute or so. I’ve got to grind a couple of nicks out of this axe.”

Dave Wilbur, affectionately known to his friends as “Weary,” glanced suspiciously at the axe in Ned Blake’s hands, then at the perspiring face of Tommy Beals whose grin was but partly concealed by his mopping handkerchief, and lastly at the heavy grindstone whose crank-handle projected so invitingly toward him. “Sure, I’ll turn for you,” he drawled. “Hop up, Fatty,” and as Beals surrendered the soap box, Dave seated himself with cool deliberation.

“Just a few turns will be enough, Dave,” were Ned’s reassuring words, as he pressed the axe upon the stone.

“Oh, that’ll be all right,” replied Wilbur. “One good turn deserves another, you

know, but say, before I forget it, who's your new neighbor?"

"Neighbor?" repeated Ned. "*What* neighbor?"

"Moving in next door," explained Wilbur as he leaned back comfortably against the tree trunk and inserted a clean straw in the corner of his mouth.

Ned laid down the axe and stepped quickly to the fence which divided his backyard from the property beyond. "I guess you're right, Dave," he remarked after a brief scrutiny. "There's a big furniture van unloading, and the stuff is piled all over the sidewalk. There's a young chap lugging it into the yard."

"Yeah, I noticed him as I came along," explained Wilbur. "I was just going to stop and give the young fellow a hand when I happened to think maybe you would want to be in on it—you and Fatty."

"It's mighty nice of you not to hog the job all by yourself, Dave," laughed Ned, "but let's see what's going on," and slipping his arms into the sleeves of a thin linen coat, he led the way toward the front of the house.

The furniture van had deposited its load and turned away toward the railroad station for a second installment. A slim, wiry lad about seventeen years of age was carrying the lighter articles into the house.

"Now's your chance, Weary," chuckled Tommy Beals. "Hop to it and rustle that piano up the front steps!"

"Here comes Dan Slade," announced Ned. "I wonder just how much help he'll offer."

"Dan Slade could just about tote that piano all by himself, if he took the notion," commented Beals, as he watched the youth who came swaggering toward them. "It seems to me he gets bigger and huskier every time I see him."

"Yes. Bigger and huskier and meaner," supplemented Wilbur. "It'll be just like him to start razzing that chap. Let's stroll over and listen in."

Slade had stopped at the heap of furniture, and the three friends approaching from the opposite direction were concealed from view as they halted to hear his opening salutation.

“Hey, kid,” he began. “What’s the big idea blockin’ the sidewalk with all this junk? This is a public street.”

The new boy straightened from the box he was preparing to lift and turned toward the speaker a freckled countenance. He had a wide mouth with slightly upturned corners that gave an expression of good humor to his face. “Sorry,” he apologized good-naturedly, “I’ll have this stuff cleared away soon, but if you’re in a hurry, I’ll”—here he paused and regarded Slade’s great hulking figure with a suspicion of amusement in his blue eyes—“if you’re in a hurry I’ll try to carry you around it.”

The words, together with the grin that accompanied them, brought an ugly scowl to Slade’s face. “Don’t wise-crack *me!*” he growled. “I don’t have to be carried around this junk. I’m goin’ *through* it!” and lunging ahead he put his weight against a tall bureau, causing it to topple toward the glass doors of a sideboard directly beyond. The new boy sprang forward in time to prevent the smash and succeeded in restoring the bureau to its place. The good-humored expression of his face had changed to one of surprise, not unmixed with indignation.

“I’ll ask you not to knock over our stuff,” he began in a voice that seemed to tremble slightly in spite of his effort to control it.

“Ho! Ho!” jeered Slade, pleased by what he interpreted as an indication of fear. “Now who do you think is goin’ to stop me?”

The freckled face paled slightly, but the wide humorous mouth compressed itself to a thin line and the blue eyes grew steely. Stepping forward, the new boy placed himself squarely in front of his tormentor. “*I’ll* try to stop you,” he said quietly.

It is doubtful if Slade had intended to do more than merely amuse himself by bullying the weaker boy into a condition of pleading, but this unexpected show of resistance nettled him. Evidently the youngster had not been sufficiently impressed. At Slade’s feet lay a box containing articles of fireplace furniture. Stooping, he picked up a poker made from a square rod of heavy iron. He seized the implement by its ends and fixed his bold black eyes upon the freckled face opposite him.

“*You’ll* try to stop me, eh,” he sneered, “Why, I’d bend *you* like I bend this here poker!” and with a wrench of his powerful arms Slade changed the straight bar

into a letter U. “It takes somebody who can do *that* to stop *me*,” he warned as he flung the distorted bar back into its box.

“That’s quite a stunt,” exclaimed a voice at his elbow. “Now can you straighten it again?”

Slade spun round to face Ned Blake, who had stepped into view closely followed by Tommy Beals and Dave Wilbur. A belligerent expression crossed Slade’s face as he eyed the group before him. “Who wants to know?” he sneered, doubling his big fists.

For a moment a fight seemed inevitable. Dave and Tommy felt the sudden tension and the new boy stiffened perceptibly; but to provoke a fight was not Ned Blake’s way of settling an argument and he answered without a trace of ill humor. “Why, I guess we’re *all* interested,” he said smilingly. “It takes some muscle to bend a bar like that, but they say it’s even harder to straighten it. Can you do it?”

Slade hesitated. Into his rather dull mind there crept a suspicion that perhaps he was being made the butt of some joke, and the thought brought an angry flush to his face. He would have welcomed an opportunity to try conclusions with this gray-eyed youth, who appeared so irritatingly cool and unafraid and yet offered no reasonable grounds for offense. Slade looked him up and down for a minute. “Sure I can straighten it—if I want to,” he growled.

“I’m wondering,” laughed Ned.

Stung to action as much by the tone as by the look of doubt in the smiling gray eyes, Slade snatched up the poker. “I’ll show you,” he gritted as he put forth his strength upon it.

To his surprise the U-shaped poker resisted stubbornly. It was an awkward shape to handle, and in addition the attempted straightening brought into play a very different set of muscles from those required to bend it. Pausing for a new hold, Slade strained upon the bar till the sweat streamed down his face and his breath came in wheezy gasps. Slowly the ends of the poker yielded to his power until the bar had assumed the general shape of a crude letter W, much elongated. With a grunt of disgust, Slade flung it upon the ground.

“It’s crookeder than ever,” grinned Tommy Beals with an audible chuckle.

Slade made no reply, but his hard breathing was as much the result of rage as of physical effort. Ned Blake picked up the bar and balanced it lightly in his hand.

“Bending a bar is much like mischief,” he remarked. “It’s easier to do than to undo.” As he spoke, Ned shifted his grip close to one end of the bar and that portion of the crooked iron straightened slowly in his grasp. It was done with seeming ease, but a close observer would have detected evidence of a tremendous effort in the whitening of the knuckles and the quiver of the muscles in chest and neck. The other crooked end yielded in much the same manner, and the poker had again assumed the shape of a letter U or horseshoe.

Ned paused and drew his knuckles across his eyes, into which the sweat of effort had rolled. Stooping, he dried his hands in the powdery dust of the gutter and grasped the bar, not as Slade had done, but close upon each side of the crook. With elbows pressed against his sides he inhaled to the full capacity of his lungs, bringing into play at the same moment every ounce of power in his wrists and forearms. Slowly the stubborn metal yielded until, after another quick shifting of grip, Ned’s extended thumbs came together in a straight line where the crook of the U had been.

“Here you are,” he said as he handed the bar to its owner, who had watched with no little surprise and uncertainty the little by-play enacted before his eyes. “And by the way,” continued the speaker, “my name is Blake—Ned Blake—next door, you know.”

The new boy’s freckles vanished in the flood of color that flushed his cheeks, as still keeping a wary eye upon Slade he reached forward to grip the friendly hand extended toward him. “Somers is my name—Dick Somers.” And as he spoke, the humorous expression again lighted his face.

“You seem to be obstructing traffic,” laughed Ned. “We’ll give you a hand with this stuff. Tommy Beals, here, is a great worker and as for Dave Wilbur—why, he’s absolutely *pinning* for a job.”

For a moment Slade listened with ill-concealed disgust to this conversation, then realizing how completely the mastery of the situation had been wrested from him, he swung round on his heel and slouched away.

“Is he a neighbor?” asked Somers with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the departing Slade.

“No, thank heaven, he’s not,” replied Beals. “His name is Dan Slade—Slugger Slade they call him where he lives up in the town of Bedford. He’s got a reputation as a great bully, but I don’t know just how far he’d really go.”

“A barking dog seldom bites,” drawled Wilbur, “but just the same, Somers, you showed a lot of spunk standing up to him the way you did. My guess is that you’re the right sort.”

“I don’t mind admitting I was plumb scared half to death when I saw him bend that poker,” grinned Somers, “but that wasn’t anything compared with straightening it,” he continued with a look of genuine admiration at Ned Blake.

“Both stunts are mostly trick stuff,” declared the latter, “but let’s get busy with this furniture, before somebody else gets sore about the sidewalk being blocked.”

Four pairs of hands made short work of the pile, and by the time the van had arrived from the freight house with its second load, the walk was cleared and the boys were helping Mrs. Somers arrange the articles indoors.

“This is awfully kind of you boys!” exclaimed Dick’s mother gratefully when the job was finished. “I wish I could offer you something cold to drink after your hard, hot work, but I haven’t a bit of ice in the house.”

“Don’t you worry about us, Mrs. Somers,” laughed Ned. “We’ve just invited Dick to go down to the corner and join us in an ice cream soda. It’s Fatty Beals’ treat.”

“Sure,” agreed Beals, “you win all right, Ned,” and then with a grinning glance at the perspiring countenance of Dave Wilbur he continued, “You win—but I’ll say it’s been worth the price.”

CHAPTER II

COPPER COLESON

If Tommy Beals found the open-air gymnasium impracticable, the same was not true of Dick Somers, whose slim, wiry body took most kindly to the various hanging rings and flying trapezes that adorned the limbs of the old apple tree. Only in such stunts as depended upon sheer muscular strength could Ned Blake greatly excel this new friend, who had accepted with enthusiasm the invitation to make himself at home in the Blake back-yard.

“Let’s go for a swim,” suggested Tommy from the soap box, where he sat fanning himself with his hat and watching the two young acrobats do their stuff.

“That’s a good idea, Fatty,” agreed Ned. “Where’ll we go?”

“Oh, most anywhere,” wheezed Tommy. “It’s ninety right here in the shade!” and he glared reproachfully at a rusty thermometer, which was nailed to the tree trunk.

“Let’s get Dave Wilbur to run us out to Coleson’s in his flivver,” suggested Ned. “I’ll go in and phone him.”

“Where’s Coleson’s—and what is it?” asked Dick, when Ned had returned with the information that Wilbur would be over in a few minutes.

“It’s an old copper mine on the shore of the lake about ten miles out from town,” explained Ned. “It used to be just a third-rate farm where Eli Coleson lived and grubbed a scanty living out of his few acres. The story is that one day he started to dig a well in his back-yard and down about ten feet he came upon a vein of almost pure copper ore. They say he quit farming that very minute and went to mining copper. For awhile he made money hand over fist, but, like lots of people who strike it rich, Eli Coleson couldn’t stand prosperity.”

“Here comes Dave,” interrupted Tommy Beals, as a battered car came into sight around the corner. “He’s brought Charlie Rogers with him. Hey there, Red!” he shouted to a boy on the front seat, who by reason of his fiery locks had been given that expressive nickname. “Who asked *you* to the party?”

“Nobody asked me, Fatty. I just horned in,” grinned Rogers. “I figured that if four of us sat on the front seat there’d be room for you in back.”

“Tell me some more about this Eli Coleson,” urged Dick, when the seating arrangements had been settled and the car was again in motion.

“Well,” resumed Ned, “the old man just naturally lost his head when he saw the dollars rolling in so fast. The first thing he did was to rip down his old farmhouse, which job he accomplished with a couple of sticks of dynamite, and right on the old foundation he began a great house of brick and stone.”

“Yes, and if he’d ever finished it, he’d have had one of the swell places of the state,” declared Rogers.

“There’s no doubt of that,” agreed Ned. “Every dollar old Eli got for his copper he spent on the house. The vein of ore was only about ten feet wide and extended toward the lake. They followed it out under the lake bottom as far as they dared; then they started digging in the other direction and tunneled back under the cellar of the house, but soon afterward the vein petered out and so did Eli’s fortune. The workmen had just got the roof on the new house when they had to stop. Eli was broke.”

“What became of him?” asked Dick.

“Oh, he’s still hanging around out there, living in one of the partly finished rooms and pecking away with pick and shovel trying to get a few more dollars out of the mine,” explained Ned. “Maybe we’ll see him. He’s got a long white beard streaked with green stains from copper ore he’s always handling. Copper Coleson, they call him.”

“I hear he’s got a fellow named Latrobe working for him,” remarked Beals. “I never saw him, but they say he’s an *ugly* guy.”

“Ugly is right,” declared Rogers. “Since Latrobe’s been out there, nobody’s allowed to go down into the mine, but I guess he won’t object if we take a swim

off the beach.”

Eight miles from town the car turned sharply from the main highway to follow a narrow road which wound through a desolate stretch of scrubby woodland for some three miles and emerged upon the shore of Lake Erie. Here on a slight elevation dotted with thickets of scrub oak and birch stood the unfinished mansion known locally as Copper Coleson’s Folly.

“It surely started out to be a grand place,” exclaimed Dick, as he gazed up at the tall brick front with its rows of windows, in none of which glass had ever been placed.

“We’ll leave the car out here in the road,” decided Wilbur. “We can walk around the house and get down to the beach without bothering anybody.”

Beyond the house the land sloped to the water’s edge, ending in a sandy shore which afforded fine bathing, and here the boys disported themselves for an hour, swimming and diving in the cool water.

“I’d like to get a look at this copper mine,” remarked Dick. “I never saw a mine or anything like one—except an old limestone quarry, and that was only a big hole in the ground.”

“There isn’t a whole lot to see in this mine,” replied Ned; “just a vertical shaft about fifteen feet deep, which is nothing more than the old well Coleson was digging when he struck the copper ore. It’s right behind the house. We can go up there and look down it, if you want to, but it’s hardly worth the trouble.”

Getting into their clothes the boys followed a footpath up the slope and crossed a sandy stretch to the rear of the house. Nobody appeared to oppose their progress, and in a moment they were grouped about the mouth of the shaft staring down into the blackness below.

“The tunnel runs both ways from the bottom of this shaft,” explained Ned. “One end is right under the house but the other is some distance out under the lake-bottom—I don’t know just how far it extends, although I’ve been down through it several times. Probably Coleson is down there now with his pick and shovel. He fills a dump car with ore, hauls it to the bottom of the shaft and hoists it with this rigging,” and Ned indicated a rusty windlass which stood at the edge of the pit.

“Some job turning that crank,” murmured Dave Wilbur, as he eyed the dilapidated mechanism.

“Yeah, it would be a lot wors’n turning a grindstone,” chuckled Tommy Beals. “By the way, Weary, when are you going to finish that job on Ned’s axe?”

“D’j’ever hear about the man who ‘always had an axe to grind’?” drawled Wilbur.

“What does Coleson do with the ore after he gets it to the surface?” asked Dick, who was still staring down into the mine.

“He loads it onto a truck and runs it up to the smelter at Cleveland,” explained Rogers. “There’s only about one load a week, because it’s mighty slow work knocking chunks off the walls of the tunnel, and they don’t dare fire a blast for fear of bringing down the roof of the mine and the lake with it. There’s no money in this kind of mining, and I don’t see how Coleson makes enough to keep him from starving.”

“You’re right!” exclaimed Tommy Beals, with an expression of genuine concern on his plump features. “And speaking of starvation reminds me that—”

“That you’ve been dieting for almost four hours and are about to pass out of the picture,” laughed Ned. “All right, boys,” he continued, “if Dick has seen enough, let’s save Fatty’s life right now by heading back for home and supper.”

CHAPTER III

THE HAUNTED MINE

Dave Wilbur was washing the flivver—or, to be entirely accurate, Dave was playing the hose on the car while Tommy Beals and Charlie Rogers wielded sponge and rag in an effort to remove mud and road oil. The job was nearly completed when Ned Blake and Dick Somers vaulted the back fence and joined the group.

“Heard the news?” cried Ned and Dick in a breath. “Coleson’s mine has caved in!”

“When? How?” came the excited chorus.

“It must have happened soon after we were out there,” replied Ned. “This fellow Latrobe, who worked for Coleson, had been away for a few days, so he says, and when he got back yesterday he couldn’t find the old man. According to the story Latrobe told, when he reached town about an hour ago, he lowered himself down the shaft and followed the tunnel till he came to the water. The roof had fallen in somewhere out beyond the shoreline and the lower end of the mine is full of water.”

“Did he find—” began Tommy Beals in an awestruck tone.

Ned shook his head. “No, they say he didn’t find any sign of Coleson. They’re out at the mine searching for him now. The theory is that he got discouraged with pick-and-shovel work and fired a blast to bring down a big bunch of copper ore. What he brought down was the roof of the tunnel and the lake with it. Some think he was blown to bits and buried in some crevice where he’ll never be found.”

For the next few days, gossip of Copper Coleson and his mine was the principal topic of conversation in the town of Truesdell. The wildest rumors were in

circulation. Somebody stated that Coleson had been seen across the lake in Canada. Others declared that he was hiding somewhere about the premises. Still another story was whispered to the effect that Latrobe knew more of the matter than he had told. He was said to have bought a quantity of blasting powder a short time before, and it was hinted that he might have fired the blast for reasons of his own.

A diver made a search of the flooded mine but found no trace of Coleson. The diver reported a considerable amount of loose copper ore at the lower end of the tunnel, and it was determined to bring this to the surface. A floating dredge was brought and anchored above the point where the bottom of the lake had caved in.

“Look at her scoop it up!” yelled Tommy Beals, who, with most of the younger population of Truesdell, was watching operations from the shore. “Why, every bucketful is more than poor, old Copper Coleson took out in a week!”

“Yes, and when they clean up in one place, they’ll pull the dredge in shore a few feet and start over again,” asserted Ned. “All they have to do is keep the dredge in line with that tall stake on the beach and that white mark on the chimney of Coleson’s house and they know they’re right plumb over the hole. I heard the foreman explain it. He says the hole is about fifty feet long.”

“Look! The diver’s going down again!” exclaimed Dick Somers.

“That’s not the regular diver,” declared Rogers, “that’s Latrobe. He says that he and Coleson were partners and he claims a share of this ore they’re taking out. I guess that’s why he’s keeping such a close watch on the job.”

“Well, I’ll say I admire Latrobe’s nerve,” remarked Beals. “I wouldn’t go down and explore that tunnel for a million times what he or anybody else will ever get out of it!”

A murmur of agreement followed this declaration as the boys watched while the diving helmet was fitted over the man’s head. In a moment he had been lowered from the forward end of the dredge and he sank from view amid a burst of silvery bubbles that shot upward from the air valve in the top of the helmet.

For several days the work of dredging went on, until the diver reported that there was no more copper ore remaining in the caved-in part of the tunnel. This was confirmed by Latrobe, who made a final examination for his own satisfaction.

There was some talk of firing another blast to bring down more of the tunnel's roof, but as fully half the stuff recovered by the dredge had proved upon examination to be worthless sand and rock, the project was abandoned.

"Who's going to own the Coleson place now?" asked Dick when it was reported that the dredge had been taken back to Cleveland.

"The town will take the house and sell it for taxes—if anybody is foolish enough to buy it," announced Dave Wilbur. "They've locked it up and put shutters over every window to keep folks out."

"Yes, and they took the windlass away and sealed up the mouth of the shaft with big stone slabs set in cement to keep people from falling down the hole and breaking their necks," added Ned. "I guess that's about the finish of both Copper Coleson and his mine."

This seemed to be the general verdict. During the following weeks a few people drove out to the deserted house, drawn to the spot by a morbid curiosity; but as there was really nothing to be seen, these visits soon ceased and the place was abandoned to desolation and decay. Summer passed and autumn's falling leaves collected upon the broad porch and banked themselves at the angles of the wide cornices. Later came the eddying snow, sifting through crevices in the rattling window-shutters to melt and trickle down the inner walls in little streams of staining moisture. Storm-driven owls sought temporary shelter in the gables and sent their ghostly screams echoing through the night. Dubious rumors began to circulate regarding the house. A negro, returning after dark from a duck-hunting foray along the lake-shore, made a frightened report of strange, dancing lights and uncanny sounds in and about the building. Most people scoffed at these stories, but such as were more credulous or more imaginative made them the basis for a revival of gossip to the effect that old Copper Coleson still lurked in the neighborhood. Others of superstitious mind derived a kind of blood-curdling satisfaction in the belief that the house and the sealed-up mine were haunted by the ghost of Copper Coleson.

CHAPTER IV

THE RACE

The winter, which dealt so severely with the great melancholy house standing lonely on the shore of Lake Erie, was proving a very cheerful season for the lads of Truesdell. Dick Somers, by reason of his natural aptitude for making friends, had quickly found a place in high school activities. A certain proficiency with the tenor-banjo had won him membership in a jazzy school orchestra, in which organization were some of his closest friends, including Ned Blake, Jim Tapley, Wat Sanford, Dave Wilbur and, jazziest of all, Charlie Rogers, who, in the words of Tommy Beals, “sure did wail a mean saxophone.”

Cold weather had set in much earlier than usual, and before school had closed for the Christmas holidays, the lake was frozen for a width of two miles along its southern shore. Skates were hastily resurrected from dusty attic nooks and exciting games of hockey were of daily occurrence. As the strip of ice increased in width, a few ice-boats made their appearance, skimming along shore like great white gulls.

“When are you going to get out the old *Frost King*, Ned?” asked Tommy Beals, as he leaned on his hockey stick to watch the speeding boats.

“We’ll have her out the minute the ice gets strong enough,” declared Ned, “but you know she weighs a lot more than any of those boats you’re looking at.”

“Have you got an ice-boat, Ned?” asked Dick, eagerly.

“I’ll say he has,” boasted Tommy, “about the fastest one on the lake, too. We keep it stored in my barn. Come on, Ned,” he continued coaxingly, “it’s getting colder every minute and by tomorrow the ice will be six inches thick, *easy*. Let’s get the boat out so’s to be ready.”

“All right, Fatty,” replied Ned, “get some of the crowd to help and we’ll start

now.”

As most of my readers know, an ice-yacht is built of two timbers or heavy planks arranged in the form of a big letter T. A steel-shod shoe, not unlike a big wooden skate or sled-runner, is bolted firmly to each end of the cross-plank; while a similar shoe, equipped with an iron post and tiller, supports the stern and acts as a rudder. The *Frost King* was a powerful boat, carrying a huge main-sail and also a big jib which was rigged on a long bowsprit that projected far forward.

All the remainder of the day and until noon of the next, the boys were hard at work hauling the boat from her storage in the Beals barn and getting her ready for the ice. Charlie Rogers, Jim Tapley and Wat Sanford had responded to Tommy’s call for assistance, and Dave Wilbur got around in time to help in hoisting the heavy mast and setting up the wire rigging that held it in place.

“Gee, fellows!” chattered Dick Somers, as he threshed his arms to restore the circulation in fingers benumbed by his rather clumsy attempts at handling the frozen rigging. “I guess a Hottentot knows more about an ice-boat than I do! I can’t make head nor tail of this tangle of rope!”

In spite of inexperience, however, Dick did his level best, disentangling the stiffened ropes and pulling and hauling on hoist or clew-line with unfailing good nature. Over all, Ned Blake kept a watchful eye, setting up and testing each bolt and stay, mindful of his responsibility for the safety of both boat and crew. At last all was ready and with a steady breeze filling her sails, the *Frost King* shot out from the shelter of the docks and went careening along shore at a speed that few of her competitors could equal.

“Zowie!” gasped Dick as the boat at length rounded into the wind and stopped. “This thing must have been going a mile a minute!”

“Easily that much,” laughed Ned. “She’ll do better than that in a stiff breeze.”

At almost any time during the week of Christmas vacation, the *Frost King* might have been seen skimming swiftly over the ice with as many boys on board as she could carry. To Dick Somers, this novel sport was a source of never-ending delight, and seldom did the ice-boat leave port without including him among her crew.

One afternoon as Ned, Tommy, and Dick stepped from the boat after an exciting

spin, they saw a man emerge from the shelter of a lumber pile on the dock and come toward them. He was muffled in a heavy fur coat, and a cap of the same material, pulled low upon his forehead, effectively concealed his features. In one gloved hand he carried a big valise, which, from the way he handled it, was evidently of considerable weight.

“I want to get to Cleveland as quick as I can,” announced the stranger in a voice which was muffled to a harsh growl by the thickness of his fur collar.

“There’s a train leaving in half an hour,” replied Ned, with a glance at his watch. “The station is only a few steps beyond the dock.”

The stranger shook his head. “That’s a slow local,” he said impatiently. “It’s the Detroit express I want, but it doesn’t stop here and they won’t flag it for me. I’ll give you ten dollars if you’ll run me up to Cleveland, so I can board it there.”

“It’s all of fifty miles to Cleveland and it’s four o’clock now,” objected Tommy Beals.

The man shot a quick glance back toward the station where the engine of the despised local was blowing off steam in a tempest of sound. “Yes, it’s fifty miles,” he growled. “I’ll pay you twenty-five dollars, if you get me there ahead of the express.”

“Can we do it?” asked Dick, a bit doubtfully. “How about it, Ned?”

“We might,” replied Ned, and then added with native caution, “but I’d want to see the money before we start.”

With an impatient grunt, the stranger plunged a hand beneath his coat and brought forth a roll of paper money, from which he selected two bills.

“Here’s fifteen dollars!” he exclaimed. “I’ll pay you the other ten if you land me at Cleveland station ahead of the express.”

With a nod of agreement Ned pocketed the money, and at his command the ice-boat was swung around till her long bowsprit pointed westward. The passenger took his place forward, where he lay flat, grasping the foot of the mast. The big valise he handled with care, holding it tightly in the crook of his free arm.

“There goes the express!” cried Dick as, with a shriek of its whistle, the big locomotive tore past Truesdell station with unabated speed and roared away down the line, dragging a long line of swaying coaches in its wake.

Rather slowly at first, the *Frost King* nosed its way out from the partial shelter of the docks and headed out upon the frozen lake. She was half a mile from shore before the full force of the wind struck her and then, with a sharp crunch of her keen runners, the big craft shot forward in pursuit of the already vanished express.

For the first few miles the ice was almost perfectly smooth, and to Dick’s excited senses it seemed as if the boat were actually flying through space, so steady was her bullet-like speed. Soon he caught sight of the train far ahead. It disappeared behind a wooded point, and when a few minutes later it had reappeared, they were running almost abreast of the rear coach. Car by car the flying ice-boat overhauled the fast express, till it ran neck and neck with the locomotive and a moment later had poked its long bowsprit into a clear lead. A flutter of white from the window of the cab told that the engine crew also watched the race with keen interest.

“We’ve got ’em licked!” screamed Dick as he waved back frantically; but at that instant Ned shoved the tiller hard down. The *Frost King* slewed into the wind with her canvas slatting furiously and came to a quick stop.

“What the blazes!” yelled Dick, bouncing up from his place and staring about him in astonishment. “What’s the idea?”

The passenger likewise straightened up and demanded the reason for the sudden stop.

“There’s a big crack ahead,” explained Ned briefly, and leaping from the boat, he ran forward to investigate.

Large bodies of water, such as Lake Erie, do not freeze with uniform smoothness as do small ponds. At intervals over their frozen surfaces great cracks form, which the varying winds cause to open and close with a force sufficient to tilt the ice along their borders at a sharp angle. It was one of these open cracks dead ahead that had caught Ned’s watchful eye.

“WE’VE GOT ‘EM LICKED!’ SCREAMED DICK”

“It’s ten feet wide if it’s an inch,” grumbled Tommy, as he stood at the edge of the lane of black water that stretched far to right and left of their course. “Can you jump it, Ned?”

“Not with the load we’re carrying,” was the decided answer. “We’ll have to look for a better place.”

Hurrying back to the boat, they skirted the crack for a mile, coming at last to a spot where a great cake of ice on the near side of the opening lay tilted at an angle that afforded a good take-off for the jump.

“Here’s the only possible chance I can see to make it,” observed Ned, after a quick survey of the situation. Then addressing the stranger he rapidly stated the case. “This crack right where we are is almost six feet wide,” he explained. “There’s a fair chance that we can jump it, but I’ll admit it’s none too easy a stunt. Do you want to risk it?”

“Sure,” growled the man in the fur coat. “Go ahead.”

Without another word, Ned tacked quickly to starboard, swung in a wide circle and headed directly for the crack, driving the *Frost King* to the very limit of her speed.

“Here we go!” yelled Tommy. “Hold *everything!*” And at that instant the big boat struck the tilted ice-cake, fairly leaped into the air, and a second later landed with a splintering crash on the farther side of the crack.

“Zowie!” yelled Dick. “That loosened every tooth in my head!”

“We’re lucky it didn’t take the mast out of her,” answered Ned. “Now keep a sharp lookout ahead. I’m going to *drive* her.”

For the next twenty miles the *Frost King* tore along at a speed that almost forced the breath from the bodies of her crew. The wind was increasing in strength, and in some of the sharper gusts it would lift the windward shoe clear off the ice, dropping it again with a jolt that caused the mast to sway and buckle

dangerously.

“It’s up to you to stop that, Fatty,” shouted Ned and, obedient to orders, Tommy Beals crept out along the cross-plank till his ample weight reposed at the extreme outer end, where he held tightly to the wire shrouds.

With this extra ballast to windward, the boat held to the ice much better and showed a considerable increase in speed, such that very soon Dick pointed to a white plume of steam which showed against the dark stretch of woodland far ahead.

“She’s blowing for some crossing,” shouted Ned, above the whistle of the wind. “We’re picking up on her but she’s got a big lead.”

The early winter twilight soon closed down, making it difficult to distinguish objects a hundred yards ahead. The green and red lights of a railroad switch-tower swept past, and a moment later Dick sighted the rear lights of the train. At the same moment a second plume of steam appeared and the faint scream of a distant whistle reached their ears. Foot by foot the lead was cut down till once again the *Frost King* ran neck and neck with the big locomotive. A bobbing red lantern saluted them from the window of the cab and then, as the express slackened in the outlying suburbs of the city, the ice-boat shot ahead and in a few minutes was rounding the breakwater that protects Cleveland’s waterfront.

“Here we are!” announced Ned, as he brought the boat into the wind. “We’ve beat the express by five minutes.”

The man in the fur coat rose stiffly from his place beside the mast. “All right,” he replied gruffly. “Here’s your money,” and peeling a ten-dollar bill from his roll, he handed it to Ned and hurried away across the ice, holding the heavy valise beneath his arm.

CHAPTER V

A STRANGE CONVERSATION

For a long minute after the stranger had departed, Ned Blake stood staring after him, a puzzled frown wrinkling his forehead.

“Humph!” grunted Dick, who also was gazing after the hurrying figure. “He must have been in an awful rush, if he’d pay twenty-five dollars just to get here ahead of the express. What do you make of it, Ned?”

Dick had to repeat his question before Ned roused himself to reply; but now the conversation was interrupted by the plaintive voice of Tommy Beals, who had dragged himself from the end of the cross-plank and was stamping the blood back into his aching feet.

“Gosh, I’m about froze to death!” he wailed. “Froze and starved! What’s the program, Ned?”

Ned cast a quick look at the fast-gathering shadows, which already lay in a black smudge along the shore of the lake. “We’d better not try to get home tonight,” he decided. “I’ve no mind to chance jumping that crack after dark. There’s a hotel close by the station where we can get a good dinner and a bed. We’ve got the cash to pay for both.”

“Yeah, that’s the idea!” exclaimed Tommy fervently. “A steak smothered in onions and French fried spuds! What?”

“How about the boat?” asked Dick.

“We’ll furl the sails and push her in against the dock,” replied Ned. “We can unship the tiller and hide it so that nobody will be tempted to run off with her.”

This was quickly done and the boys turned their steps toward the Union Station,

the lights of which gleamed a scant hundred yards ahead. The express had thundered into the station while they were taking care of the boat, and now, as they crossed the tracks, her rear lights were blinking in the distance as she picked her way through the switch-yards westward bound.

“There goes our twenty-five-dollar passenger,” remarked Dick, with a characteristic jerk of his thumb toward the departing train. “He had plenty of time to catch her, I guess.”

“I can’t get it out of my mind that I’ve seen that man somewhere before today,” began Ned. “I couldn’t see his face clearly, he was so muffled up, and yet there was something about him that seemed familiar—the way he stood—or walked—or something.”

The hotel was just across the street from the station, and here the boys registered after bargaining for a room containing three beds.

“And now for that steak and onions,” gloated Tommy Beals as he headed for the grill room closely followed by Dick.

“I’ll be with you in a jiffy,” Ned called after them as he paused at a telephone booth. “I’ll just shoot a word to the folks that we’re O.K. and will be home in the a.m.”

It took Ned several minutes to complete his call, and then, as he was about to step from the booth, he halted suddenly at the sound of a voice in the telephone compartment next to his own. There was a familiar note to the harsh growl. As Ned paused in surprise, the words came clearly to his ears.

“Sure, I made it on time and Miller was there, too. Where was *you*?” Silence a moment; then the voice continued. “Local *nothing*! I told you I’d be in on the express—stop or no stop. As a matter of fact I got there ahead of time—never mind how. Now listen.”

For a moment the heavy voice rumbled on but in a lower tone so that no word reached Ned’s ears; then the door of the booth was jerked open and its occupant crossed the hotel lobby with a rapid stride. He was joined by a tall, red-faced man and the two disappeared through the door leading to the street. For the second time within half an hour, Ned Blake found himself staring after a short, thick-set figure in a fur coat. There was no doubt of it. The growling voice in the

telephone booth had been that of his mysterious passenger on the *Frost King*. Hurrying to the grill room, Ned acquainted his companions with what he had learned.

“Then that yarn about wanting to catch the Detroit express was all bunk!” exclaimed Dick.

“Evidently,” agreed Ned. “But also it’s sure that he had some important date that coincided with the arrival of the train. That red-faced man ‘Miller’ showed up on time but somebody else missed out. I wonder what the game is.”

“We should worry about him or his business,” was Tommy’s cheerful comment as he eyed with huge satisfaction the nicely browned steak, which at the moment was being placed before him on the table. “Right now I’m for enjoying this feed that he’s paying for. Afterwards, I’ll *wonder*—if you insist,” and Tommy helped himself lavishly to the savory fried onions that accompanied the steak.

Long exposure to the biting wind had induced appetites which required a deal of satisfying, but at length even Tommy’s splendid yearnings had been appeased and he sank back in his chair, the picture of well-fed contentment. Hardly had the boys left the dining-room, when drowsiness came upon them as the natural reaction to long hours in the open air supplemented by a heavy meal.

“Can’t keep my eyes open,” mumbled Dick after a prodigious yawn. “Me for little old bed-o, even if it is only seven-thirty.”

The idea was accepted unanimously and the boys lost no time in seeking their room and making ready for bed. But now the puzzling question regarding their unknown passenger recurred to Ned with redoubled force. Before his mind’s eye there passed countless faces and figures of men he had known or seen. He was groping painfully in an effort to place one thick-set figure in a fur coat.

“What’s the matter, Ned? Do you see a ghost?” grinned Dick at his friend who sat on the edge of the bed, shoe in hand, staring blankly at the opposite wall.

“Not unless ghosts wear fur coats,” muttered Ned, flinging the shoe under the bed. “Hang it all! I’m sure I’ve seen that fellow—or at least somebody a whole lot like him. I wish I could remember when or where!”

“While you’re *wishing* you might as well wish for that *roll* he packed,” chuckled

Tommy. “Gosh! I’ll bet there was half a thousand dollars in it—and that fur coat!” Here Tommy rolled up his eyes enviously.

“One thing I *am* sure of,” continued Ned, “whoever he is, he probably does at least a part of his business in Canada. That last bill he gave me was Canadian money. I noticed it when I paid the dinner charge. Luckily, they accept Canadian money here.”

“What do you suppose he had in that suitcase he was so fussy about?” queried Dick. “It was darned heavy—from the way he handled it.”

“That’s another question I’d like answered,” admitted Ned, “also, what was he doing in Truesdell, when all the time he was so anxious to get to Cleveland that he was willing to risk his neck on the *Frost King*, just to save half an hour or so?”

“Heigh, ho! I’ll give it up,” yawned Tommy and, with a sigh of unalloyed satisfaction, the plump youth rolled over luxuriously and buried his face in the pillow.

Dick was only seconds behind Tommy in his plunge into the depths of sleep; but long after his companions were sunk in blissful oblivion, Ned lay racking his brain in what proved to be a futile effort to find some reasonable solution of the puzzle. Weariness at last closed his eyes, but through his troubled dreams there persisted these tantalizing, half-formed questions, always on the point of being answered but ever eluding his grasp.

The sharp rattle of icy particles on the window awakened Dick Somers next morning. Springing out of bed, he roused his companions and they stared out at a world rapidly whitening under a driving storm of snow.

“This will never do!” cried Ned. “We’ve got to get a move on or we’ll be snowed in down here!”

After a quick breakfast of bacon, eggs, rolls and coffee, the boys hastened down to the lake. The snow was, as yet, only about two inches deep, but it was whipping out of the north with a power that warned of much more to come. Sails were quickly hoisted and the *Frost King* shot away, homeward bound.

Holding close enough to the shore so that its dim outline served as a guide, Ned

kept his bearings; and although slowed somewhat by the fast gathering snow, the ice-boat made fair speed. Constant wind pressure had closed the shoreward end of the big crack and a cautious crossing was made without difficulty. Through a six-inch depth of snow, the *Frost King* plowed to a stop beside the dock at Truesdell, where the crews of other boats were busily engaged in removing the canvas from their craft.

“That’s what we’ve got to do right now,” declared Ned. “This storm feels like a genuine blizzard that will probably put an end to ice-boating for the rest of the winter.”

As rapidly as possible the sails were removed, the stiffened canvas folded up and stored in a safe place and the boat itself hauled as far up on shore as possible, pending the time when the boys would return her to her former place of storage.

“Well, we’ve had a bully time and a swell feed and have fifteen simoleons to divvy up among the crew of the *Frost King*,” chortled Tommy Beals as they trudged homeward. “I’ll say that’s good enough for anybody.”

“Yes, it’s O.K.,” agreed Ned, “but I’m going to keep my eye out for that fellow in the fur coat, and the next time I get a look at him, I’ll try to find out who he is or whom he reminds me of.”

As it transpired, however, many months were to pass and many strange happenings were to take place before Ned Blake again found himself face to face with the mysterious stranger.

CHAPTER VI IN TRAINING

It had been a great winter for the lads of Truesdell. Although the big blizzard put an end to ice-boating, it provided instead snow-shoeing, ski-running, and many other delightful winter sports. Plenty of hard study interspersed with recreation made the winter months pass rapidly, and when the last shrunken snow-drift had sunk to a muddy grave and the balmy south winds were drying soggy fields and muddy lanes as if by magic, the boys turned from winter sports to the enthusiastic consideration of baseball possibilities.

“We’ve got a swell chance to cop the championship pennant in the Lake Shore League,” declared Charlie Rogers to a group which had gathered in a sunny nook behind the school building. “Believe me! We’ll wipe the earth with Bedford this year!”

“Where do you get that stuff, Red?” demanded Abner Jones, a sallow youth whose prominent knee and elbow joints had won for him the nickname “Bony.” “I hear Slugger Slade is going to play third for Bedford. He’s an old-timer and knows every trick in the bag; and can he hit? Oh, boy!”

“Slade is tricky all right,” agreed Rogers. “He’s tricky and dirty, too, if he gets a chance, but when it comes to hitting, why we’ve got a couple of pitchers who may fool him.”

“Forget it!” scoffed Jones. “Slade will make a monkey of any pitcher we’ve got—even Ned Blake.”

“Here comes Ned right now,” interposed Wat Sanford. “Let’s hear what he has to say about it.”

“What’s all the row?” asked Ned, as he came down the steps swinging a strapful of books.

“Bony, the crape-hanger, says we can’t beat Bedford with Slade playing for ’em, and I say we’ll wipe ’em off’n the map,” explained Rogers. “How about it, Ned?”

“Both wrong—as usual,” laughed Ned, clapping a strong hand on the disputants and pushing his broad shoulders between them. “Now here’s how I see it,” he continued. “Slade is a wicked hitter and a tough man in the field. He’ll be a big help to Bedford, but he can’t play the whole game. Keep that in mind, Bony. On the other hand, Red, remember that plenty of teams are world-beaters before the season starts. We’ve got some good material, but it will take a lot of hard work to make a winning nine out of it. That’s what it’s up to us to do. I’ve just posted a notice for the squad to show up for practice this afternoon. The field is drying fast and I want every man on the job.”

“All except the pitchers, I suppose,” yawned Dave Wilbur. “I’ll be around the first of next week and work on the batting practice.”

“You’ll be right on the job at two p.m. this afternoon, Dave,” replied Ned, firmly. “I’m depending on you to set a good example to the new men.”

“Do you hear that, Weary?” giped Tommy Beals. “You’re expected to set the old alarm for one forty-five p.m. and be made an example of.”

“That’s the idea, Fatty,” laughed Ned. “Anybody going my way?”

“I am, if you don’t walk too darned fast,” replied Beals.

Dick Somers also rose to his feet and joined the two as they shouldered their way out of the group and strode down the street.

“Bony Jones is an awful knocker,” remarked Tommy, when they were out of hearing.

“He’s that all right,” agreed Ned, “and yet for the good of the team right now, I’d rather they’d hear Bony’s knocking than Red’s boasting. Over-confidence at the start of the season is a mighty bad thing, and as captain of the team, it’s up to me to kill it if I can.”

“What’s the real dope on this fellow Slade?” asked Dick. “I don’t have any very pleasant recollections of him myself, but how about his playing?”

“I’ve seen him in a couple of games,” replied Ned. “He’s a good third baseman and a small edition of Babe Ruth when it comes to hitting.”

“How about these stories of his spiking men on bases and other dirty work?” persisted Dick.

“I don’t know,” answered Ned with a shrug of his shoulders. “I won’t condemn a man till I actually see him do something of the kind myself. I’m more worried right now about how good our fellows are going to be than how bad somebody else is. By the way, Dick,” he continued, “how much ball have you played?”

“Oh, not a whole lot,” answered Dick, modestly. “We had a pretty fair team where I used to live. They let me chase around out in right field.”

“Well, I want you and Fatty to be on hand this afternoon,” declared Ned. “We’re going to need every man who shows any class.”

Promptly at two o’clock the Truesdell squad assembled on the muddy field and began the season with an easy workout. Dick Somers quickly demonstrated a remarkable throwing arm, both for distance and accuracy, while his quickness of foot promised to make him a valuable fielder and base-runner. The development of hitting ability was Captain Blake’s most difficult problem, and upon this first day and for many days thereafter he kept the weak hitters swinging at pitched balls till their shoulders ached.

“D’j’ever hear about ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back’?” grumbled Dave Wilbur as he left the pitcher’s box after a particularly long session of batting practice. “Ned’s an awful glutton for work. He’s making me wear out my wing throwing balls past these dubs, who couldn’t hit a balloon with a bass viol!”

“Don’t kid yourself, Weary,” giped Rogers. “Ned is figuring on giving you some much-needed practice in hurling. We’re just standing up there so’s you can learn to locate the plate.”

“Aw say, use your bean,” grinned Dave. “I can put ’em over the old pan with my eyes shut!”

The first regular game of the schedule was won by Truesdell but the victory proved costly. Charlie Rogers, sliding home with the winning run, sprained his ankle and was pronounced out of the game for the rest of the season.

“There goes the best fielder in the Lake Shore League,” wailed Tommy Beals, as he watched Rogers hobble from the field. “A few more unlucky breaks like that will make hard going for us!”

This pessimism seemed well founded, for a few days afterward, Ned Blake dropped into Somers’ home with another gloomy bit of news. “Tinker Owen flunked math. yesterday,” he announced, shortly. “That wipes him out of the picture, unless old Simmons will relent—and you know how much chance there is of that.”

“Not a look-in,” agreed Dick, picking up his banjo from the couch and plunking a few chords in a doleful minor key.

“It leaves us only nine real players anyhow you figure it,” continued Ned, who was checking off the names from a slip of paper. “You’ll have to play center field in Red’s place, Dick, and we’ll try out Fatty Beals in Tinker’s position behind the bat. Dave and I will have to alternate pitch and right field.”

“It’s pretty tough on Weary Wilbur, making him pitch every other game and play right field between times,” grinned Dick. “He’ll crab plenty when he hears the news!”

“I’m not worrying about Dave,” was Ned’s reply. “Of course he’ll crab a bit and probably he’ll spring one of his everlasting proverbs on us, but he’ll come through in his own lazy fashion. It’s a shame we haven’t got a few more good subs, but we’ll manage somehow.”

Truesdell High struggled through the next three games with its changed line-up, winning each by a narrow margin but improving steadily in the matter of speed and smoothness. Bedford Academy, although heavily scored against, likewise kept a clean slate showing six victories. It was freely predicted by the followers of baseball that this year’s annual game between the two great rivals would be “for blood.”

CHAPTER VII

THE BIG GAME

A special train brought a wild crowd of Bedford supporters down to Truesdell for the big game. Rooters for the local team jammed the bleachers and watched the preliminary practice with critical eyes.

“I can’t see Fatty Beals as catcher,” grumbled Bony Jones. “He might do all right for a backstop, but he can’t throw down to second to save his life! I could do better myself.”

“Why didn’t you think to mention that the first of the season?” demanded Charlie Rogers, whose hair was only a shade redder than his temper when one of his friends was assailed. “It’s a crime to keep your talents hidden that way, Bony!”

“Fatty’s all right,” declared Wat Sanford, “and anyhow, Ned Blake’s going to pitch, and there won’t be a Bedford man get to first—take it from me!”

The Truesdell players were soon called in and Bedford took the diamond for ten minutes fast work, handling infield hits and throwing around the bases.

“Look at Slugger Slade over on third!” exclaimed Jim Tapley. “This is his first year with Bedford, but I hear he’s a semi-pro. He looks more like a football fullback than a third sacker!”

“He’ll try football stuff, if he gets a chance,” asserted Rogers. “I’m hoping the umpire keeps his eye peeled for crooked work. Here’s our team,” he continued, hoisting himself up on his one sound foot with the help of a cane. “Come on, boys. Let’s give ’em a cheer!”

The long yell rolled forth from half a thousand throats. “Oh well! Oh *well!* Oh WELL! Truesdell! *Truesdell!* TRUESDELL.” To which the Bedford rooters

responded with their snappy “B-E-D-F-O-R-D!”

The visiting team was first at bat and three men went out in quick succession, not a man reaching first.

“What did I tell you!” chortled Wat Sanford. “You should worry about the heavy hitters, Bony!”

Truesdell’s efforts at bat were, however, little better than Bedford’s. The first man up drew a base on balls but perished on an attempt to steal second; the next fouled out and Ned’s long fly was captured by Bedford’s left-fielder.

Slugger Slade came to bat in the first half of the second inning and smashed to right field a wicked line-drive, which Dave Wilbur gathered in with his usual lazy grace.

“Atta boy, Weary!” screamed Jim Tapley. “*You* tell ’em!”

“What do you think now about Slade’s hitting?” demanded Jones. “That drive of his would have gone for a homer sure, if it had got past Dave!”

“*Horsefeathers!*” snorted Charlie Rogers.

What looked like a break for Truesdell came in their half of the fourth. Dick Somers bunted safely and went down to second on the first pitch, running like a scared rabbit and scoring the first stolen base of the game. Tommy Beals hit a grounder to right field, which was returned to first base before the plump, short-legged youth was half-way there. Dick raced round to third on the play and Truesdell’s chances for a run were excellent. Ned Blake ran out to the third-base coaching line.

“Great work, Dick,” he chattered. “Only one gone! Take a big lead. I’ll watch ’em for you!”

Slugger Slade, the third baseman, threw him a sour look. “Keep back of that coaching line, you!” he snarled.

Dave Wilbur was up, and as the bleachers yelled lustily for a hit, he lifted a high sky-scraper to center field. Dick clung to the bag till he saw the ball settle in the fielder’s glove; then dashed for home. Ordinarily it would have been an easy

steal for a runner of Dick's speed, but he had faltered noticeably in his start and the throw-in to the plate beat him by a narrow margin for the third out.

"I want to enter a protest on that decision!" cried Dick to the umpire, as the Bedford players trooped in from the field.

"What's the matter?" demanded the official. "The catcher had the ball on you half a yard from the plate!"

"I know that, but I'm claiming interference by the third baseman," yelled Dick, wrathfully. "He held me by the belt just long enough to spoil my start!"

"That's right, I saw him do it!" asserted Ned, who had run in to add his protest to that of Dick.

"What's all the crabbin' about?" growled Slade, swaggering up to the group. "You was out by a mile!"

"I'm not crabbing," declared Dick. "I'm just calling the umpire's attention to some of your dirty playing!"

"Who says I play dirty ball?" demanded Slade, doubling up his big fists menacingly.

"I do, for one!" Ned spoke quietly, but his gray eyes were blazing. "I saw you hook your fingers under Dick's belt when you stood behind him on the bag!"

"You mean you think that's what you saw," sneered Slade. "The umpire says he's out and that settles it!"

There seemed no chance for further argument, and Dick walked out to center field in a savage humor, which was somewhat appeased when Ned, a moment later, struck the slugger out with three fast ones. The next Bedford man was out at first, and a long fly to Dick ended the inning.

Ned Blake was up in Truesdell's half and brought the crowd to its feet with a screaming three-bagger.

"Wow! That's cracking 'em out!" yelled Wat Sanford. "It's a crime we didn't have a couple of men on bases when Ned got hold of that one!"

“There’s nobody gone, any kind of a hit will mean a run now!” cried Charlie Rogers.

The next Truesdell batter swung at two bad balls, but lifted the third for a high fly to right field. Slugger Slade’s heavy breathing sounded in Ned Blake’s ear as he crouched on third base, all set for the dash for home. With quick fingers he loosened his belt-buckle and as the fielder’s hands closed upon the fly ball, Ned sprang from the bag; stopped short in his tracks; and yelled lustily for the umpire. Every eye turned in his direction and saw Slade standing stupidly on third base with Ned Blake’s belt dangling from his hand. The Slugger had been caught in his own trap.

A chorus of boos and jeers changed to cheers as the umpire motioned Ned home; a penalty which Slade had earned for his team by interfering with a base-runner.

“Oh, boy! What a stunt!” shrieked Jim Tapley. “Slade met his match that time!”

The wild yells and jeers seemed to rattle the Bedford team for the moment. Slade, purple with rage, let an easy grounder roll between his legs, and before the inning was over, two more Truesdell runs came across, making the score three to nothing.

In their half of the next inning, two Bedford batters were easy outs, but the third drove a savage liner straight for the pitcher’s box. Ned knocked it down and managed to get the ball to first for the third out. The effort proved costly, however, for he came in with the blood streaming from his pitching hand, two fingers of which were badly torn.

“You’ll have to finish the game, Dave,” announced Ned, and the lanky southpaw at once began warming up.

Ned’s injured fingers were hastily taped and he took Wilbur’s place in right field.

“Oh, I’d give a million dollars to be out there now!” groaned Charlie Rogers, as he shifted his lame ankle to a more comfortable position.

Dave Wilbur had scant time to warm up before he faced the leaders of Bedford’s batting order. He was found for four hits and two runs scored. The score was now Truesdell three—Bedford two, and thus it stood when the latter came to bat in the first half of the ninth.

“Holy *cat!*” wailed Jim Tapley, as the first man up whaled out a two-bagger. “A couple more like that and we’re sunk!”

The second batter hit to shortstop and reached first on a fumble. Bedford now had men on first and second, with none out.

“For the luv o’ Mike, hold ’em, Dave!” screamed Wat Sanford.

Tommy Beals threw off his mask and ran half-way to the pitcher’s box to confer with Wilbur. Yells and jeers from the Bedford stand greeted this evidence of worry on the part of Truesdell’s battery, but it took more than mere noise to rattle Dave Wilbur. Strolling lazily back to the box, he fanned the next two men, and the Bedford yells subsided for the moment. The next batter, however, sent a pop-fly just out of the shortstop’s reach, and Bedford had the bases loaded with two out. Slugger Slade was up, and as he swaggered to the plate, the Bedford yells again rent the air.

“Come on now, Slugger! Knock the cover off’n it! Put it out of the lot!”

“One strike!”

The umpire’s shrill voice cut through the babel of yells from the Bedford stand. Slade glared round at the official and muttered something in protest. Dave Wilbur took his time in the wind-up and delivered the ball in his customary effortless style.

“Strrike two!”

A yell of delight from the Truesdell rooters greeted this decision. Slade rubbed his hands in the dirt and gripped his bat till his big knuckles were white. Dave Wilbur had fooled him with two slow out-drops and the crowd fell strangely silent as the lanky youth began his third wind-up. Dave put everything he had into the pitch—a high, lightning-fast ball over the inside corner of the plate.

The sharp crack of the Slugger’s bat brought the Bedford crowd to its feet with a roar, while the silent Truesdell bleachers watched with sinking hearts as the horse-hide sphere sailed high and far between right and center fields.

Ned Blake and Dick Somers were playing deep, and at the crack of the bat both started on the instant. The ball curved away from Ned and a bit toward Dick who

was running as he had never run before. For a moment it seemed to the watchers that the two racing fielders would crash together. Suddenly they saw Dick make a desperate leap into the air with upstretched arm. The ball struck the tip of his glove, and bouncing high to one side, fell into Ned's extended hands for the final out.

Truesdell had won, and with the sort of finish that comes once in a lifetime. With a roar, the Truesdell rooters swept across the diamond, and hoisting Ned Blake and Dick Somers high above the surging crowd, bore them in triumph from the field.

Slugger Slade stared after the retreating crowd and a savage scowl darkened his face. Into his mind there flamed a great hatred of these jubilant lads who had beaten him so unaccountably. Deep within him arose the sullen wish that he might somehow even matters with them. It was a wish that would later bear much fruit.

CHAPTER VIII

A SUMMER PROPOSITION

The school year had ended in a fashion to delight the heart of every loyal son of Truesdell, and the day following graduation found a group of the boys lounging in Dave Wilbur's yard, a convenient meeting-place by reason of its central location.

"Are you going to play ball this summer, Ned?" asked Jim Tapley. "I hear they're looking for a pitcher on the North Shore Stars. You could make the team easy, and there's seventy-five a month in it plus expenses."

Ned Blake shook his head. "Nothing doing, Jim," he said regretfully. "I'll admit the money would mean a lot to me, for, as you all know, I'm trying to scrape together enough to enter college in the fall. But if I get there, I want to play ball and this professional stuff would bar me."

"What I'd like to do is go to England on a cattle steamer," declared Charlie Rogers. "All you have to do is rustle hay and water for the steers."

"Yeah, that's all, Red," drawled Dave Wilbur, "and they only eat about four tons a day and drink—well, they'd drink a river dry, and you sleep down somewhere on top of the keel and eat whatever the cook happens to throw you—unless you're too blamed sea-sick to eat anything."

"Well, even that would be better than hanging round this dead dump all summer," retorted Rogers, with some spirit.

"Dan Slade has got a job over across the lake in Canada," announced Wat Sanford. "I saw him at the station yesterday when the train came through from Bedford. He was bragging that he was going to pull down a hundred a month, but he didn't say what the job was."

“Some crooked work probably,” remarked Tommy Beals. “Now what I’d like would be a good job bell-hopping at some swell summer hotel. A fellow can make all kinds of dough on tips.”

“Sure, you’d look cute in a coat with no tail to it and a million little brass buttons sewed all over the front!” laughed Dick Somers. “What you really need, Fatty, is a job as soda-fountain expert, where you can get enough sugar and cream to keep your weight up to the notch.”

There was a general laugh at this in which Tommy joined good-naturedly.

“I guess what we’re all looking for is a chance to make some money this summer,” suggested Ned. “What Red says about this being a dead dump is true of every town, until somebody starts something. It’s up to us to show signs of life. I don’t believe any of us would be content to loaf till next September.”

“Speak for yourself, Ned,” yawned Dave Wilbur, who, stretched at full length on his back, was lazily trying to balance a straw on the tip of his long nose. “I’m enjoying myself fine right here—and besides you want to remember that ‘a rolling stone gathers no moss.’”

“Bony Jones got a job down at the Pavilion dance hall,” remarked Tapley. “His old man has something to do with the place and they took Bony on as assistant. Pretty soft, I’ll say.”

“I was hoping to get a chance down there with the jazz orchestra,” lamented Rogers, “but I hear they’ve brought two saxophone players up from Cleveland, which lets me out.”

“Tough luck, Red,” sympathized Tommy. “You and Wat ought to find a chance somewhere to do a turn with sax and traps; the Pavilion isn’t the only place.”

“What’s the matter with our running some dances of our own?” asked Ned. “The Pavilion is usually over-crowded and we ought to get some of the business.”

“Who do you mean by we?” inquired Wat Sanford.

“Well, there’s you with the traps and Red with the sax—as Fatty has just suggested,” began Ned. “Dick is pretty fair on the banjo and Jim can play the piano with the best of ’em. Dave can do his stuff on the clarinet—if he’s not too

exhausted—and I would make a bluff with the trumpet. Fatty could take tickets and act as a general utility man. That makes seven, all we need for a start.”

“That’s about half of the high school orchestra,” remarked Dick. “I guess with a little practice we might get by as far as music is concerned, but where would we run the dances?”

Several possibilities were suggested, only to be turned down as impracticable for one reason or another.

“What we want is a place just out of town which auto parties can reach handily,” declared Jim Tapley, who was taking a lively interest in the scheme. “We could serve refreshments and make something that way.”

“There’s one place we might do something with,” began Ned, a bit doubtfully. “I’m thinking of the Coleson house,” he continued. “Of course it’s a good ten miles out and quite a distance off the main road.”

“Yes, and that’s not the whole story either,” objected Rogers. “The house was going to wrack and ruin even while Coleson lived in it, and lying shut up so long can’t have improved it a whole lot.”

“Guess it’s in bad shape all right,” agreed Tommy Beals. “Haunted, too—if you can believe all you hear about it. There’s talk of some mighty queer things going on out there.”

“What kind of things?” asked Wat Sanford, quickly.

“Can’t say exactly,” admitted Beals. “Some folks claim to have seen and heard things that couldn’t be explained. Last fall a darky went past the house after dark and was scared pretty near dippy.”

“That’s the bunk,” drawled Dave Wilbur. “D’j’ever see a darky that wasn’t nuts on ghosts?”

“What do you say we take a run out there anyhow?” suggested Rogers. “It’s a swell day for a ride and we can go swimming; the water’s elegant; I was in yesterday!”

“Bully idea, Red,” applauded Tapley. “Come on, Weary! Crank up the old

flivver!” he cried, as he stirred up the recumbent Wilbur with his toe.

Thus appealed to, Dave arose lazily to back the little car out of the garage, and piling in, the boys settled themselves as best they could upon its lumpy cushions.

“What do you reckon we’ll find out there, Ned?” asked Wat Sanford a bit anxiously, when the flivver after sundry protesting coughs and sputters, had finally gotten under way.

“Oh, dirt and lonesomeness, mostly,” laughed Ned. “They’re the usual furniture of a deserted house—especially if it’s supposed to be haunted.”

Lonesomeness seemed, in truth, to pervade the very air and to settle like a pall upon the spirits of the boys, as the flivver coughed its way up the weed-grown drive and came to a halt before the tall, gloomy, brick front.

Charlie Rogers sprang out, and mounting the weatherbeaten steps leading to the broad porch, rattled the great iron knob of the massive front door. “It’s locked, all right,” he reported, “and these window-shutters seem pretty solid.”

Further investigation proved this to be true of all the openings of the lower story, but at the rear of the house one window-shutter of the story above had broken from its fastenings and swung creakingly in the breeze.

“If we only had a ladder—” began Wat Sanford.

“That’s not necessary,” interrupted Ned. “The question is who’s got the nerve to go through that window and find his way down to open one of these lower shutters?”

“I’ll do it,” volunteered Dick. “That is, I will if I can reach that window-sill; it’s about fifteen feet up.”

“We’ll put you there,” promised Ned, and he locked arms with Dave Wilbur. The two braced themselves close to the wall of the house. Tapley and Rogers mounted to their shoulders and Dick, climbing nimbly to the top of this human pyramid, grasped the window ledge above and drew himself upon it. In a moment he was inside, and pausing only long enough to accustom his eyes to the gloom of the interior, he picked his way down the unfinished stairs and unhooked a shutter that opened upon the front porch. By this means the other

boys entered, but paused in awe of the deathly stillness of the place.

“Gee! It’s like a tomb!” shivered Sanford, and struggling with a window-fastening, he threw open another shutter at the westerly end, admitting a flood of sunlight which revealed an apartment nearly thirty feet square, partly paneled with oak and floored with the same material.

Opposite the entrance, a stairway had been completed up to its first broad landing, but the remainder of the flight was still in a rough, unfinished condition. Through a wide, arched doorway could be seen another large room, evidently designed for a dining-hall but entirely unfinished except for the floor, which, as in the case of the first apartment, was of quartered oak.

“What’s down below?” asked Wat, as he peered through a rectangular opening into the blackness beneath. “Ugh! It looks spooky!”

“There’s nothing down there except a big cellar,” replied Ned, reassuringly. “This hole was left for the cellar stairs to be built in, but they were never even begun.”

Further investigation of the interior showed the oaken paneling to be warped and cracked by dampness and long neglect, but the floors, beneath their thick covering of dust, were in fairly good condition.

“It’s the floor that we’re most interested in for our proposition,” declared Dick. “I believe that a few days of hard work with scrapers would make these two rooms fit for dancing. We could put the music on that stair-landing and leave this whole lower space free and clear.”

“Do you think we could get a crowd to come way out here?” asked Tommy Beals doubtfully. “It’s a lonesome dump even in the daytime, and at night it is mighty easy to believe these yarns about its being haunted.”

“Why not make *that* the big attraction!” exclaimed Ned with sudden inspiration. “Everybody is looking for thrills nowadays. We might be able to give ’em a brand new one.”

A chorus of approval greeted this suggestion.

“Bully stuff, Ned!” cried Charlie Rogers. “Great idea! And if there don’t happen

to be any honest-to-goodness ghosts on the job, we can manufacture a few just to keep up the interest.”

“What do you think it would cost to fix up the old shebang?” asked Wilbur, who, despite his rather affected laziness, was beginning to take an interest in the scheme.

“Oh, not a whole lot,” replied Ned, glancing about with an appraising eye. “As Dick says, the floor is our chief consideration, and if we do the work on it ourselves, the only expense will be for scrapers and sandpaper. We can string bunting and flags to cover the breaks in the walls and ceiling. We’ll have to lay a floor over that stair-opening, or somebody will manage to tumble through into the cellar, but I guess we can find enough lumber around here to do the job.”

“How about lights?” inquired Sanford. “There isn’t an electric line within five miles.”

“We’ll use candles,” decided Ned. “A dim light will be just what we want for ghost stunts anyhow, and candles won’t cost much if we buy ’em in wholesale lots.”

“Shall we figure on refreshments?” asked Rogers.

“Sure thing!” asserted Dick. “The Pavilion sells ice cream and soft drinks; we can do the same and serve the stuff from the butler’s pantry. That will be just the job for Fatty!”

“Nothing doing!” objected Beals in an injured tone. “I draw the line on handing out grub for other folks to eat, but I’ll *manage* the refreshment business and get our darky, Sam, to serve the stuff. Sam used to work in a restaurant and can do the trick in style.”

“All right, then,” announced Ned, who had, by common consent, assumed leadership, “let’s get organized into working shape. There are seven of us, and if we chip in two dollars each, it will put fourteen dollars into the treasury for immediate expenses.”

This was agreed to and Tommy Beals was elected treasurer.

“Now if there’s no objection I’ll assign the various jobs,” continued Ned. “Dick

and Red are to get brooms, scrapers, and whatever else they think we need for fixing the floors. Weary and Wat will attend to the bunting and such other decorations as may be required—also the candles. Fatty and Jim will look after the matter of refreshments. The first thing to do is to make sure that we can get the use of this house at a rental that we can afford. I'll talk to the town authorities right away and see if we can get a lease. Let's meet at Dave's house tomorrow afternoon and hear reports on costs of the different items, after that, we can make definite plans.”

CHAPTER IX

HOUSECLEANING

Dave Wilbur's back-yard was, as has been said, a favorite meeting-place for the Truesdell boys, and when for any reason secret sessions were desirable, the garage was especially convenient. Here, on the following afternoon, the seven prospective business men assembled to listen to reports of their various committees and to discuss ways and means. Ned Blake mounted a rickety step-ladder and called the meeting to order.

"I ran into a snag the moment I applied for a lease of the Coleson property," began Ned. "The town authorities are willing to get some income from it to cover taxes, but it seems that to be legal the lease must stand in the name of somebody over twenty-one years old. We can get it for three months at twenty-five dollars a month, but the papers must be made out to somebody of legal age."

"That ought to be easy," suggested Dick Somers. "I know Dad would let the lease stand in his name, if I asked him to."

Ned shook his head. "Of course we can get around it that way—and maybe we'll have to come to it; but this scheme is all our own and I'd like to see us put it through and make a big success of it by our own efforts, without calling on anybody's father for help in any way."

"That's the stuff!" exclaimed Wat Sanford. "We want to run this thing on our own. There ought to be some way to get around this silly legal difficulty."

"I've got an idea," volunteered Tommy Beals from the front seat of the flivver, where he had ensconced himself. "I talked with our man, Sam, last night and he agreed to handle the refreshments for us. Why not have the lease put in his name? That will cover the law and make Sam all the more anxious to attend to his part of the business."

“Bully idea, Patty!” chorused several voices.

“But will Sam agree to this?” asked Ned.

“Sure he will!” declared Beals. “He’ll be so swelled up when he sees his name on a legal document that we’ll be lucky if he doesn’t bust! Leave it to me.”

This the boys were willing to do, and the discussion proceeded to other matters. Dick Somers and Charlie Rogers reported an option on the purchase of two brooms and half a dozen steel floor-scrapers at four dollars. Sandpaper and wax would bring the total to eight-fifty. They had also arranged for the loan of two polishing brushes when needed. Dave Wilbur and Wat Sanford had proved themselves shrewd business men in the matter of interior decoration.

“Wat and I have contracted to tack up the usual flags and bunting around the municipal band-stand on July third and take ’em down again on the fifth,” explained Dave. “In return for this hard toil we are to have the use of the stuff till Labor Day, when the town will need it again.”

“That’s a clever scheme and it will save us real money,” approved Ned. “I’m a bit worried about all the hard work you’ve laid out for yourself, Weary, but at that, I guess you’ll find it easier than scraping and polishing floors.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured it would take the load off’n me for a couple of days,” admitted Dave, with a grin.

These details being settled to the satisfaction of all, it was decided to begin operations without further delay. Ned Blake, Tommy Beals and Dave Wilbur started off in the flivver in quest of Sam, who, when found, proved very willing to leave his labors in the Beals garden for the purpose of signing an important document at the town hall. There was no hitch this time, and very shortly a lease of the Coleson property to one Samuel G. Washington, for the period of ninety days from date, was signed, sealed and delivered, and with it the key to the house.

“Don’t say a word about this to anybody, Sam,” was Ned’s parting injunction. “We want to keep the thing a secret as long as we can.”

“No sah, no sah, I don’t say nuthin’,” chuckled the negro and he strutted back to his work in an ecstasy of self-importance.

After leaving Sam, the flivver was headed for the hardware store, where the other boys were waiting, and with brooms and scrapers stowed in the car they were soon on the way to the scene of their labors.

“Our first job is to sweep out this dust,” announced Ned, when the great oaken door of the Coleson house had swung open at the turn of his newly acquired key. “Open every shutter and let the wind blow through.”

Coats were discarded and brooms wielded with such good will that all the floored portion of the lower story was speedily cleared of its heavy deposit of dust and dirt. As fast as this was removed, the steel scrapers were put to work and, by the time the long shadows warned of supper time, a creditable showing had been made. A dip in the cold water of the lake removed the grime and refreshed the spirits of the workers, after which they climbed into the little car and rattled away for home, well satisfied with their first day’s progress.

“All members of the orchestra meet for practice at my house tonight at seven-thirty,” directed Jim Tapley, who, by reason of his superior ability, was the acknowledged leader in things musical. “Come on over and listen in, Fatty,” he continued hospitably.

“No, thanks,” declined the plump youth with some fervor. “My nerves are none too strong after such a strenuous day and besides I’ve got an idea that I want to work up.”

When Tommy Beals got an idea, he pursued it with vigor, and long after the last wailing pulsation of the practicing orchestra had melted into midnight silence, Tommy was still busily at work in his own room, upon the walls of which were tacked several cleverly executed copies of his “idea.”

CHAPTER X

A NOTE FROM A GHOST

The week that now followed was one of hard labor, and the long hours of work at the Coleson house were succeeded by earnest rehearsals of the orchestra. Such industry brought gratifying results and hardly had the young people of Truesdell settled to their accustomed routine after the usual Fourth of July celebration, when their interest was aroused by promise of a new attraction. This was heralded by flaming posters, adorned with grinning death heads and bearing the following announcement:

DEMON DANCES
at the
HAUNTED COLESON HOUSE

THRILLS!! MYSTERY!!

PHUN with the PHANTOMS

Grand Opening Sat. July 7

Music by the Syncopating Six

Admission \$1.00 a Couple

Refreshments.

Tommy Beals' "idea" went over big—as his companions assured him in so hearty a manner that he grew quite pink with pleasure.

"It really wasn't my idea at all," he protested modestly. "Ned said it first. I only worked it up a bit and made the posters."

“Yes, and in a way that none of the rest of us have got either the wit or the skill to do!” declared Ned, loyally. “Now the next thing will be to get up some stunts in the ghost line. Nothing horrible, but just enough to keep the crowd guessing.”

“That ought to be easy,” said Charlie Rogers. “All we need is a little phosphorescent paint—the kind that glows at night—kind of pale and ghastly, and maybe a couple of iron chains to clank at the right time.”

As July seventh drew near, the “haunted” house was the scene of feverish activity. The well scraped oak floor was given its final coating of wax and polished to a perilous smoothness. Flags and bunting, which had recently decked the town band-stand, now concealed the rough unfinished timbers and broken portions of walls and ceilings. A piano was installed on the stair-landing and one hundred chairs of the folding type used at public gatherings were arranged along the walls of the two dance rooms. A rectangle of solid flooring covered the opening to the cellar and removed any danger of injury to the dancers from a fall into the black pit below. With the heavy part of the work completed, the boys had declared a half-holiday and were gathered in the Wilbur garage for a final conference.

“We’re just fifty-six dollars in the hole,” announced Chairman Blake after a careful revision of the figures handed him by Treasurer Beals. “If this first dance is the success it ought to be, we can square up on everything and have something ahead for payment on the lease.”

“I guess we needn’t worry about that,” said Wat Sanford. “From the talk that’s going round we’ll have over a hundred paid admissions, easy.”

“The crowd down at the Pavilion is beginning to take notice,” chuckled Dick Somers. “Bony Jones held me up today and wanted to know who is backing us. I made him swear to keep the secret and then told him that Henry Ford is helping us. And that’s the truth,” continued Dick, indicating the flivver by a jerk of his thumb, “Henry is furnishing the transportation.”

“There’s something I ought to tell you fellows,” began Tommy Beals, when the laugh at Dick’s joke had subsided. “I don’t suppose it really amounts to anything, but all the same it’s a bit strange.” Here Tommy paused and drew from his pocket a paper which he unfolded and passed to Ned Blake. “It’s a letter that came to Sam,” continued Beals, “and I’ll say it just about scared the daylights

out of that coon. Read it, Ned.”

Ned glanced over the typewritten sheet and read aloud as follows:

“Sam G. Washington,

“I hear that you have hired my house and intend to run dances there. Now listen, you black son of Satan! If you do this, or if you *allow* it to be done, I’ll haunt you to your dying day.

“Eli Coleson.”

Ned paused and glanced round the circle of faces upon which was depicted surprise, doubt and uncertainty. For a moment nobody spoke. It was Tommy Beals who broke the silence.

“Sam got the letter this morning and was waiting to show it to me when I got home. I tried to laugh him out of his fright by telling him it was a joke that somebody is playing on him.”

“Of course it’s a joke!” exclaimed Charlie Rogers, impetuously. “Nobody but a superstitious darky would pay any attention to such stuff!”

“But suppose he should get scared and funk the whole thing and cancel his lease? What hold have we got on him to make him stick?” demanded Dave Wilbur.

“Not much, I’ll admit,” replied Ned, gloomily. “This letter was mailed on the train and shows only the railroad post-office mark. Evidently whoever wrote it intends to keep under cover. I wonder how many people know that the lease stands in Sam’s name?”

“Oh, probably a hundred, by this time!” declared Dick Somers, disgustedly. “I suppose Sam felt so important that he bragged of the thing all over town!”

But in this, Dick did the honest negro an injustice, for in spite of swelling pride which threatened him with suffocation, Sam had kept his secret faithfully. To his simple mind it thus appeared that the ghost of Eli Coleson must know his inmost thoughts and secret acts, and this idea had, as Tommy Beals expressed it, almost scared the daylights out of him.

“If we had the seventy-five dollars to plank down right now as advance payment in full for the lease, Sam might find it hard to cancel it,” suggested Jim Tapley.

“We’ll have the cash after the dance Saturday night,” declared Dick. “We’ll have to find some way to keep Sam away from the town hall till Monday—even if we have to kidnap him!”

“Suppose some of us have a talk with Sam and try to convince him that he is being made the butt of a joke,” suggested Ned.

“Well, it’s worth a try,” agreed Beals. “I’ll go with you right now,” and the two emissaries left the garage in a hurry.

CHAPTER XI

THE LIGHT ON THE WALL

Ned Blake and Tommy Beals found Sam slumped on a bench in the Beals garden, staring moodily at a long row of unweeded carrots.

“Nozzur, I ain’t gwine ter have no doin’s with dead folks—not any!” muttered the negro, when Ned and Tommy had broached the subject of their visit.

“But how do you know that Eli Coleson is dead?” argued Ned. “This letter was written on a typewriter and if it is really from Eli, why it proves that he isn’t dead, doesn’t it?”

Sam shook his woolly head obstinately. “Cain’t be sure of nuffin’,” he insisted.

“You’ve seen lots of ghosts, haven’t you, Sam?” asked Tommy Beals coaxingly.

“Suttinly I has! A plenty of ’em!” replied the negro, with deep conviction.

“Well, have you ever seen or heard of one that used a typewriter?” demanded Beals.

Sam was forced to admit that he never had, and Ned took advantage of this opening to discourse forcefully against such ghostly possibility. Like most of his race, Sam was readily susceptible to influence and after an hour of diplomatic argument, the boys succeeded in bolstering his resolution sufficiently to make it safe for them to leave him for the present.

“Do you think he’ll stick?” asked Ned anxiously, as he cast a backward glance at the negro, who had finally bent to his weeding of the carrot patch.

“I think he will—unless he gets another jolt of some kind,” replied Beals. “I’ll keep an eye on him till Saturday noon. The town clerk’s office closes at noon on

Saturday, and after then we'll be safe over the week-end anyhow."

"Yes, and I'll make it a point to be on hand with seventy-five dollars when the office opens Monday morning!" declared Ned. "I'll feel a lot easier in my mind after that lease has been paid for in full. In the meantime we may discover who wrote this letter to Sam. If it's only a joke, why let's take it that way; but if it's an attempt by somebody to interfere with our scheme, we'll have to be on our guard."

Two days passed with no clue to the writer of the warning letter. No further attempt had been made to frighten the negro and Sam had regained much of his usual self-confidence. Early on Saturday evening, the boys and Sam, whom they had hardly allowed out of their sight, wedged themselves into Dave's flivver and arrived at the Coleson house in time to complete a few finishing touches before the first of a long line of autos turned in at the gate and parked among the scrubby oaks in front of the house. Tommy Beals stood at the open door to collect the admission fees and soon the rooms were filled with a gaily chattering crowd of young people who giggled and squealed their appreciation of the weird atmosphere of the place.

A hundred flickering candles cast an uncertain, wavering light over the decorations of flags and bunting which had been supplemented with dozens of black paper cats, whose white and yellow eyes made of daisy heads glared forth in baleful fashion. Numerous toy balloons, each decorated with phosphorescent paint to represent a human skull, were tethered in the dark corners, where they swayed and bobbed in the varying drafts with ghostly effect.

In the butler's pantry stood Sam, attired in waiter's dress, with a gleaming expanse of shirt front, and barricaded behind containers of ice cream and bottles of soft drinks for sale at profitable prices.

Promptly at eight o'clock the orchestra took its place, and the couples stepped out across the polished floor in time with the blare of syncopated jazz. For several hours dance numbers followed in rapid succession, the orchestra responding valiantly to encore applause, while black Sam, under the direction of Tommy Beals, did a thriving business in ministering to the parched throats of the perspiring dancers.

"Whew! It's hot!" gasped Charlie Rogers, after a particularly long number in

which his saxophone had carried the major part. "Can't you open those north shutters, Ned, and let a little breeze blow through here?"

Laying down his trumpet, Ned crossed the room and threw open a shutter. Instantly a violent gust of wind swept in from the lake, extinguishing every candle and plunging the room into pitchy blackness.

A babel of voices burst forth at this unexpected occurrence, but was instantly hushed at sight of a strange spot of light, which made its sudden appearance upon the wall of the room. For a moment it remained stationary, then with a hesitating, uncertain movement, as though feeling its way, it advanced along the wall midway between floor and ceiling and vanished.

The breathless silence that followed was broken by a groan of abject terror from Sam. Somewhere a girl screamed hysterically. Closing the shutter with a bang, Ned fumbled for matches and relighted a candle. Several of the other boys followed suit and soon the room was again as bright as the rather dim flares could make it. The orchestra broke into a peppy foxtrot and the recently startled crowd, laughing gaily at what was seemingly one of the advertised "stunts," swung again into the dance.

"Nice stuff, Ned!" applauded Wat Sanford, as he finished the number with a long roll of the snare drum and the customary crash of the cymbal. "That gave 'em quite a kick! How did you manage it so cleverly?"

"I'll tell you about it later," replied Ned. "They're calling for an encore. Let's give 'em a hot one."

At midnight the dance ended and a line of automobiles streamed homeward through the darkness. Pausing only long enough to assure themselves that the house was securely locked, the boys and Sam followed after.

"How much did we take in, Fatty?" asked Dick Somers of the plump treasurer at his side.

"Eighty-six dollars for admissions and seventeen-fifty on the refreshments," replied Beals. "Not so bad for the first night and I guess everybody was pleased with the way things went. By the way, Ned, that was quite a stunt of yours. Tell us about it."

“Yes; let’s hear how you worked it,” urged several voices.

“Well, I’m glad you all approved of it, and I guess it satisfied such of the crowd as were expecting some haunted stuff,” replied Ned. “It’s too long a story to start on tonight. Sometime I’ll try to show you how it was done.”

At the outskirts of town, Sam was dropped at the gate of his humble dwelling, and hardly was the car again in motion when Ned startled his companions with this announcement.

“Boys, I didn’t want to mention it before Sam, for fear of scaring him worse than he’s scared already, but I’ll tell you now that the stunt you saw was no doing of mine. What that light was or where it came from I don’t know any more than any of you do—but I mean to find out!”

CHAPTER XII

WARNINGS

“Sam has quit on us!” announced Tommy Beals, as he joined Ned Blake and Dick Somers at the latter’s house on Monday morning.

“You mean he’d like to quit,” laughed Ned. “I got down to the town hall bright and early this morning and paid that lease in full, right up to the end of September. I met Sam as I was coming out and showed him the receipt. He gave me one scared look and shambled off toward home without a word. Has anything new happened, Fatty?”

“Well, it’s darned queer,” began Beals, taking off his cap and running his fingers through his stubby hair. “Sam came around to see me yesterday morning before I was out of bed. Usually he won’t move on Sunday, except to go to church, but yesterday was different. He hung around till I finished breakfast and then coaxed me out to the barn, where he told me about the wildest yarn I ever listened to.”

“Something he’d dreamed the night before, I suppose,” scoffed Dick.

“Maybe he dreamed some of it, and probably he drew pretty heavily on his imagination for the details,” agreed Tommy, “but *something* must have happened Saturday night, and whatever it was, it scared him foolish!”

“Do you mean after he got home Saturday night?” inquired Ned. “You remember we took him right to his gate that night.”

Beals nodded. “You know Sam lives alone in that shack of his and sleeps in a little room off the kitchen. He says that soon after he got into bed Saturday night he heard a queer noise. He sat up in bed to listen and there at the window he saw something that he insists was the face of Eli Coleson. Sam knew Eli well enough, and he swears he saw the old man with his white beard—copper stains and all.”

“What happened then?” asked Dick.

“According to Sam’s story, old Eli came right through the wall and struck at him with a pickax; but my own idea is, that if Sam thought he saw something white at the window, he was down deep under the bed covers about one second later. Anyhow, he’s so scared you couldn’t get him to go near the Coleson house again for a million dollars—and that’s *that!*”

“Let’s take a walk down to Sam’s shack. I’d like to see what the place looks like by daylight,” suggested Ned.

“Good idea. Maybe we can find the place where old Eli went through the side of the house,” laughed Dick.

A short walk brought the three boys to Sam’s house, about which they prowled, peering in at the closed windows and examining the little garden where the negro cultivated a few vegetables and flowers. There was no evidence of a forced entrance into the house, but in the soft earth of a flower bed, just below the bedroom window, was the distinct imprint of a rubber-soled shoe.

“Does Sam ever wear that kind of shoe?” asked Ned as he pulled aside the foliage for a better view of the footprint.

“I don’t believe he owns a pair of rubber-soled shoes, and anyhow, his foot is two or three sizes bigger than this print,” replied Beals.

“Somebody else has been here, that’s sure,” declared Dick. “They’re taking a lot of trouble to frighten a poor inoffensive darky half to death!” he continued angrily. “A pretty cheap joke, I call it!”

“Maybe it’s not altogether a joke,” suggested Ned. “I mean there may be something else than a joke behind all this. Nobody ever bothered Sam before, but about as soon as it becomes known that he has a lease on the Coleson house there comes that letter, then that light out at the house and now this funny business here. All these happenings look like the work of the same hand. What’s the answer?”

“Somebody is trying to scare Sam into quitting his lease,” growled Dick. “It’s lucky for us that we blocked that game!”

“But who can it be, and why this sudden interest in the place just as we get started there?” complained Tommy Beals.

“Perhaps the answer might be found out at the Coleson house,” suggested Ned. “Are you two fellows game to go out there with me and scout around a bit?”

“How can we get out there?” asked Dick. “Dave’s gone away somewhere with the flivver and won’t be back till tonight.”

“Let’s take the Cleveland bus and get ’em to drop us at Cedar Hollow. It’s only a couple of miles through the woods from there,” urged Ned.

This plan was agreed upon, and shortly afterwards the three scouts were threading the thick undergrowth between Cedar Hollow and the lake.

“Here’s luck!” cried Dick, as they emerged from a tangle of underbrush into what had evidently once been a wood-road. “This old track seems to be heading about in the right direction. Let’s follow it.”

“Somebody else has been doing the same thing,” observed Ned, pointing to several broken twigs and torn leaves on the thick bushes lining the road. “There’s been a car, or maybe a light truck through here quite recently,” he continued, after a closer examination of the ground.

“Probably somebody has got a camp over on the lake-shore,” guessed Beals.

For half an hour the boys followed the grass-grown track, noting frequent evidence of its use by some vehicle, but as the country grew more open, these marks became fewer and finally ceased altogether when they reached the hard stony ground bordering the lake. The old road ended in what had once been a pasture, barely a hundred yards from the Coleson house, and the boys halted at the edge of the clearing to reconnoitre.

“We can’t be sure whether the car that came through this old road kept straight ahead to the house or swung into the traveled road outside the gate,” commented Dick, who was searching the hard-baked ground for a possible wheel mark.

“Unless the ground happened to be wet, a car or even a loaded truck wouldn’t leave a mark on this hardpan,” agreed Ned. “Let’s see if we can find any tracks on that stretch of sand between the house and the lake.”

Approaching the rear of the building, the boys scanned every foot of the sandy area which ended at the water's edge. Not a single clue of any kind rewarded their search.

"There's the range pole that helped to locate the sunken end of the mine when they were dredging it," remarked Dick, and picking up a stone he threw it accurately at a long stake which stood at the water's edge. "You remember, Ned, how the big dredge used to get itself into line with that stake and a white mark on the chimney of the house and then dig up the copper ore in bucketfuls," and Dick hit the stake squarely with another stone.

"It's funny how solid that stake is in the ground," observed Ned as he noted the slight effect of Dick's bombardment. "You'd think after last winter's storms it would have loosened up or been knocked out entirely," and Ned walked down for a closer look at the old range mark.

Dick and Tommy followed at a leisurely pace, which quickened at Ned's exclamation of surprise. As they reached his side they saw the cause of his astonishment. The tall stake had been reset in the earth and its face, as seen from the lake side, bore a recently applied coat of white paint. For a moment they stared in wonder; then, as if in obedience to a common impulse, their eyes turned toward the house. Upon its broad chimney was a newly painted mark of gleaming white.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" cried Dick. "Now what does *this* mean? Are they going to start dredging again?"

"Suppose they do? It won't bother us, will it?" demanded Beals.

"Maybe not, and yet I can't help suspecting that whoever put up these new range marks may be back of the attempt to scare Sam away from this place," said Ned, thoughtfully. "I can't imagine what their reason can be, but that's up to us to discover—if we can. Come on; let's have a look around at the front of the house."

Everywhere between the gate and the building were tire tracks left from the autos that had parked there Saturday night, but it was quickly seen that nothing could be gained by examination of these confused impressions. As they reached the porch, Ned, who was in advance, stopped in his tracks and pointed to the front door. In the oak panel a nail had been driven and from it fluttered a scrap of

paper.

“FROM THE OAK PANEL FLUTTERED A SCRAP OF PAPER”

Mounting the steps, Ned tore the paper from its fastening and spread it wide. Upon it was scrawled these words:

“I don’t want company here.

“E. C.”

“Are you going inside, Ned?” asked Tommy in a tone that was not much above a whisper.

“Sure! Why not?” replied Ned, squaring his shoulders. “We’ve got a legal right to this place!” and drawing the key from his pocket, he unlocked the ponderous door and flung it open.

Not a sound disturbed the cool darkness of the interior, and waiting until their eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, the boys entered cautiously, peering about with uneasy glances. Everything appeared to be exactly as they had left it Saturday night. The black cats glared unwinkingly with their white and yellow eyes, and the painted balloon skulls grinned in their corners. In spite of the fact that this ghostly atmosphere was of their own making, the boys were glad to regain the outer sunlight and lock the door behind them.

“Whoever is up to these pranks has apparently confined himself to outside stuff—thus far,” was Ned’s comment as he stared again at the crumpled paper still in his hand.

“What do you make of it? Is it a warning or just an attempt to scare us?” asked Tommy Beals.

“Either—or both, I’d say,” interposed Dick. “Anyhow, it’s very evident that we’re being urged to vacate. The question is, are we going to quit?”

“Let’s get the boys together and talk it over,” replied Ned. “Right now we’d best be making tracks to catch the next bus at Cedar Hollow.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE NIGHT WATCH

A group of excited boys gathered in Dave Wilbur's garage that afternoon and listened to the astonishing story which Ned Blake and his fellow sleuths had to tell.

"So there is somebody else besides us who is interested in the Coleson house!" exclaimed Charlie Rogers.

"There seems to be no question about that," agreed Ned, "and what is more, they evidently want the whole place to themselves."

"But I can't see why anybody should want to drive *us* out," complained Tommy Beals in an injured tone. "We won't horn in on their business—whatever that may be—if they'll just lay off us!"

Ned shook his head. "I'm afraid we won't be able to get that idea across, Fatty. There's something going on out there that we don't understand; something that somebody is afraid we'll get wise to. That letter to Sam and the 'ghost' he saw at his window were attempts to scare him away from the place. This paper nailed to the door is the next step and is meant for *us*. They succeeded in frightening Sam away; now the question is, are we going to quit?"

"Not on your life!" yelled Dick Somers, whose wrath had been steadily rising during this discussion. "We've put a lot of money and hard work into this scheme of ours and I say stick it out!"

"If they'll be satisfied with trying to scare us with letters and ghost stuff, why we'll be able to stay with 'em until we've got our money back anyhow," said Beals, cautiously. "The dance crowd is looking for almost anything in the spook line and they will stand for quite a bit of it, but what worries me is the possibility that if ghosts don't drive us out, something else may be tried—some rough stuff,

you know.”

“You don’t suppose old Coleson may have a hand in it after all,” ventured Wat Sanford.

“Coleson? Not a chance!” declared Rogers, positively. “Coleson’s dead.”

“Well, er—even if he is dead,” persisted Sanford, uneasily, “what if—”

“Cut it out, Wat! Use your *bean*,” drawled Dave Wilbur. “As for me,” he continued, “I’m voting to keep the dances going till I get paid for all the hard work I did out there,” and Dave yawned wearily at the recollection of his labors.

“It would be a shame if we had to quit now. Everybody is talking about our ghost dances, and there will be a big crowd out there next time,” volunteered Jim Tapley.

“We may have a fight on our hands,” began Ned Blake, “but I’d rather fight than run, any time! As I see it, we’ve got to find out who it is that we are up against; what their game is; and why they think we are interfering with it.”

“Rather a large order, as a starter,” remarked Dick. “However, it sounds interesting. What’s your plan, Ned?”

“We ought to keep guard over that house night and day for a while,” was the quick reply. “Quite likely we are being closely watched, and it would be a good plan for us to do some watching. Two of us can take grub and blankets and camp there for twenty-four hours, or till relieved by the next two.”

“That sounds reasonable. Who’ll volunteer to be the first sentry?” asked Dick.

“We’ll draw lots,” decided Ned.

This was done and the short straws were found to be held by Charlie Rogers and Tommy Beals.

“All right, Fatty! We’re it!” exclaimed Rogers. “The sooner we start the better. Get plenty of grub and blankets and bring that big hammock of yours; it will come in handy!”

The two left for home at once to procure the necessary supplies, and that afternoon Dave Wilbur deposited them and their belongings on the porch of the Coleson house.

“Any last request you want to send back to the folks at home?” grinned Dave, as he backed the car around and headed for town.

“Yeah, tell ’em to have a steak and onions ready for me at six tomorrow night,” sighed Beals. “It’s going to be hungry work hanging around out here!”

“I wish we hadn’t floored over this opening into the cellar. I’d like to get a look down below,” said Rogers, thumping the solid oak with the heel of his shoe.

“Not for me!” decided Beals emphatically. “I’m for minding my own business and I recommend that policy to you, Red, but if you’re curious, you can hunt for an outside entrance to the cellar. I should think there must be one somewhere.”

Acting on this suggestion, Rogers searched diligently among the debris that lay along the foundation of the house, but without success. The heavy granite wall showed no opening and the masonry which sealed the mouth of the old mine-shaft was undisturbed.

“Come on in and eat!” summoned Beals.

Reluctantly, Rogers gave up his search and rejoined his companion, who was already making steady inroads upon the baked beans, bread and pickles that comprised the evening meal. Supper over, the two sat before an open window, watching the colors fade from the quiet surface of the lake.

“I suppose we’ll have to take turns with the sentry stuff,” remarked Rogers, as darkness at last settled down upon the landscape. “I’ll stand watch till midnight and then you can take your turn for a couple of hours.”

To this arrangement, Beals readily agreed, and climbing into the hammock, which had been strung across a corner of the room, he was soon asleep.

For a while, Charlie Rogers sat, chin in hand, staring out into the deepening dusk. Along the northern horizon distant lightning was flashing and from this quarter heavy clouds swept up the sky, blotting out the stars and reducing the moon to a dim disc, which paled and faded behind the thickening canopy.

Sounds of night life came to the ears of the watcher. Somewhere off to his left a giant bullfrog bellowed hollowly for a “jug-o-rum.” A night-hawk swooped past the window with a startling whirr of wings. From the woods on the far side of the house an owl hooted lonesomely.

Rogers got up, stretched, and glanced hopefully at the illuminated face of his watch. “Only ten-thirty!” he muttered. “Gee! This is a tedious job! I thought it must be nearly midnight!”

Returning to the window, he pillowed his head upon his folded arms and listened to the soothing splash of the little waves which a rising wind was sending upon the pebbly shore of the lake. His breathing became longer and more regular; his body sagged forward upon the sill. Once again came the hoot of an owl from the woods beyond the house and this time the cry was answered from a point closer at hand. It was the dull ache in his arms that finally brought Charlie Rogers to his senses. Again he consulted his watch.

“Quarter past one!” he gasped. “Great Scott! I must have—”

He paused in mid-thought and listened with every nerve a-tingle. Was he dreaming or had he really heard something? His pounding pulses were ticking off the seconds in his brain. Yes, there it was again! A metallic clink or rattle accompanied by a dull thud—faint but distinct.

Backing away from the window, Rogers crossed the room with noiseless steps.

“Wake up, Fatty! Wake up!” he gasped. “There’s something doing outside!”

Beals was up in an instant and together they crept back to the window. The waves were breaking upon the beach now with a steady surge, but above their murmur a strange fluttering sound, not unlike the flapping of huge wings, came to the four straining ears.

“It’s outside at the other end of the house!” breathed Rogers in a scared whisper.

“It’s up to us to find out what it is,” replied Beals, and crossing the room with Rogers at his heels, he noiselessly opened the front door.

A vivid flash of lightning, followed a moment later by the jarring rumble of thunder, greeted the boys as they traversed the porch and crept down the steps.

Keeping close to the wall of the building, they made their way cautiously toward the end of the house and peered past the corner.

The lightning flash had been succeeded by a pitchy blackness which their straining eyes could not penetrate, but the strange flapping sound had increased with their approach and the clinking rattle, as of metal upon metal, came at irregular intervals.

“Lie low and wait for the next flash of lightning!” whispered Beals close to his companion’s ear.

Crouched against the wall of the house they waited breathlessly. One—two—three minutes passed, and then once more the white glare of lightning blazed forth.

Brief as was the flash, it afforded the boys an instantaneous glimpse of something that struck them dumb with amazement. Extending from the end of the house to the edge of the woods, a distance of more than one hundred feet, stretched a grayish something. It was not unlike a layer of mist or smoke; and seemingly knee-deep in its billowing, heaving folds, a bent, misshapen figure, like a gigantic hunchback, stood outlined against the grayness beneath. It was but a fleeting glimpse, for instantly the scene was blotted out and with the splintering crash of quick thunder there came a pelting rush of rain.

“Beat it!” gasped Beals, and together the frightened boys raced for the door, and plunging into the shelter of the house, they shut and locked the heavy oak barrier behind them.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MYSTERY SHIP

When Ned Blake and Dick Somers arrived at the Coleson house the next afternoon, they listened to a tale beside which Sam's story was colorless by comparison. Dave Wilbur, who had brought the relief guard in his convenient flivver, was inclined to be skeptical.

"Use your bean!" he urged, as Beals and Rogers set forth the details of their terrifying experience. "You two are getting as loony as Sam! You probably heard something that scared you and then imagined you saw a whole lot in one flash of lightning!"

"I'll bet you five dollars that you don't dare stay here alone tonight!" rasped Charlie Rogers, wrathfully.

"Can't do it," drawled Dave. "I've got half a day's work to do yet before sundown. Hop in here now, you bewitched watchmen! Let's get going!"

Left to themselves, Ned and Dick carefully examined the ground where had occurred the alleged ghostly happenings so vividly described by Beals and Rogers.

"It's mighty funny that if there actually was somebody out here between the house and the woods, he or she or it didn't leave a single track of any kind," mused Ned as he surveyed the open space with puzzled eyes. "Here's over thirty yards of sand from the house to the hard ground near the woods and not a mark on it, except our own tracks!"

"Well, if the same thing happens again tonight, we'll try to have a better look at it than Red and Fatty could get in one flash of lightning," declared Dick. "I'm hoping it stays clear after the moon comes up."

Dick's wish was granted only in part, however, for after climbing above the line of trees, the moon was covered much of the time by drifting clouds, through which it peeped at infrequent intervals. The boys had decided to pass the night outside the house, as this would allow them to observe a much more extensive part of the premises than could be seen from inside. The spot selected for their sentry post was a thicket of oak, from which they had an unobstructed view of the stretch of sand between the end of the house and the woods. At intervals one or the other crept from this leafy covert and scouted entirely around the building, moving with caution and scanning every possible approach to the house. Returning from one of these rounds, Dick reported the lights of a vessel out upon the lake.

"Let's take a look at her," suggested Ned, and together they walked down to the beach.

The vessel seemed to be moving in a southwesterly direction, and they could see the ruddy gleam of her port light.

"She's some freight boat making for Cleveland," guessed Dick, but even as he spoke, the green starboard light flashed into view and it was evident that the boat had altered her course and headed in shore.

For a time the boys watched the strange craft as it drew steadily nearer, when suddenly her lights winked out, leaving her a black hulk which loomed dimly in the darkness.

"Well, what the deuce does *that* mean! What is she up to now?" exclaimed Dick.

As if in reply to his question, a long, thin finger of light reached out from the vessel's bow and played along the shore, not twenty yards from where the boys stood.

"Down! Quick! Don't let 'em see us!" cried Ned, flinging himself flat upon the sand.

Dick dropped beside him and together they watched with fascinated gaze the small circle of light as it crept toward them along the ground. Nearer and still nearer it came, but just as it seemed about to settle upon them the spot lifted suddenly and touched instead the wall of the house, which it slowly swept from end to end.

“That’s the light we saw Saturday night,” whispered Dick. “A searchlight that shot through the window when you opened the shutter!”

“Yes, and I think I know what they are searching for,” replied Ned in the same low tone. “Look!” and seizing Dick’s arm he pointed to the white mark now clearly illuminated as the circle of light came to rest upon the chimney of the house.

“The ranges!” Dick’s voice rasped in his throat. “She’s picking up the old range marks!”

In a moment the top of the tall whitened stake at the water’s edge was touched by the thin beam of light and it was evident that the mysterious craft was creeping shoreward in line with stake and chimney. And now there occurred something that brought a gasp of astonishment from the two watchers lying prone and motionless upon the sand. A hundred yards or more from shore and just ahead of the oncoming vessel, the quiet surface of the water was suddenly agitated into ripples which silvered as the moon poured its rays through a great ragged break in the clouds and disclosed a small dark shape that seemed to rise from the depths and float upon the surface. Instantly the searchlight was extinguished and the darkened vessel drifting slowly shoreward came to a stop beside the floating object.

“That thing is a marking buoy,” muttered Ned under his breath. “Now we’ll see what’s going on here!”

In this, however, the boys were doomed to disappointment. Heavy clouds again blotted out the moon, and although the watchers crept to the water’s edge, they could see nothing except the dark hull of the vessel as it lay motionless.

“They’re probably coming ashore in a small boat. Be ready to run if they land near us,” warned Ned.

But no boat was lowered from the mysterious stranger and, except for an occasional faint splash, no sound reached the eager ears on shore. An hour passed and then it was seen that the vessel was in motion. Gradually her dark form grew dimmer till it melted from sight amid the shadows that lay black upon the broad lake. Again for a brief moment the clouds parted and the brilliant moonlight whitened the sands and tipped the tiny ripples with its radiance. Every rock and bush along shore stood revealed with startling distinctness, but on the

silvered surface of the lake nothing was to be seen. The buoy—if such it was—had vanished.

“I suppose that boat took it away,” suggested Dick.

“Possibly, but I’m not sure,” replied Ned. “We saw it appear and maybe sometime we’ll find out where it came from and where it went. There doesn’t seem to be anything that we can do here. Let’s get back to the house; it’s almost two o’clock.”

Retracing their steps, the boys had reached the scrub oak when they halted with one accord and stared through the leafy screen.

“What did you think you saw?” demanded Ned, sharply.

“Why, why, it might have been a firefly,” stammered Dick, “but just for an instant I fancied it was a—”

“You thought maybe it was the tail light of an automobile going into that old wood-road,” interrupted Ned, grimly. “That’s what you thought—and I guess maybe you were right.”

“Can we follow it?” asked Dick.

Ned shook his head. “There’s no use chasing out there in the dark. Even if it was an auto, we’d have no chance of catching up with it. We’d best try to get a little sleep and wait for daylight.”

Rolling themselves in their blankets, the boys lay for a long time, talking over the exciting events that had transpired since they first began work on the Coleson house. Instead of clearing up, the situation was growing more and more complicated, and after racking their brains in fruitless efforts to solve the puzzle, they at last fell asleep.

The sun shining through the oak leaves above his head roused Ned Blake, and sitting up, he looked at his watch. It was nearly nine o’clock.

“Wake up, Dick!” he cried, pulling the blanket from his companion’s shoulders. “It’s late! We ought to have been on the job hours ago!”

Dick struggled to his feet, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and followed Ned, who was hurrying through the bushes in the direction of the old wood-road. Quickly but thoroughly the boys examined every foot of ground between the entrance to the road and the house. Broken weeds and crushed leaves showed where some vehicle had passed along the stony way, but not until the boys were close to the house did they come upon an unmistakable sign. On the hard earth amid the scrub oaks, a black splotch caught Ned's eye.

"Here's where an auto was standing only a few hours ago," he declared positively. "This is oil that dripped from the gears."

"It's oil sure enough," agreed Dick, poking at the black mass with a stick, "but isn't it possible that it came from one of the cars that were out here Saturday night?"

"If it had been here since Saturday night, that heavy thunder shower would have washed it into the ground," objected Ned. "No, this is fresh oil and we know there was no car here up to midnight."

"Which means it was run in here while we were watching that boat down on the shore," growled Dick, disgustedly. "What rotten luck!"

"Yes, one of us should have kept watch up here," admitted Ned. "We lost a good chance to get a look at our mysterious visitors, but we'll know better next time."

Dave Wilbur, chief of transportation, was not expected till afternoon, but he appeared soon after eleven o'clock. And he came alone.

"Wat Sanford and Jim Tapley are drafted for tonight's guard duty, but Wat funk'd the job and Jim won't come without him," explained Dave. "Wat's naturally superstitious anyhow and Red and Fatty have fed him up with that bedtime story of theirs, till he's so jumpy he'd see Coleson or Coleson's great-grandmother if you hollered boo at him!"

"Well, he'd have seen something queerer than any of the Coleson family, if he'd been here last night," declared Dick, proceeding to give an account of the night's happenings.

"So while you two were watching some tub out on the lake, a car ran in here and out again," remarked Wilbur dryly. "Well, 'when the cat's away, the mice'll

play,' but take my advice," he continued more seriously, "no matter what you saw—or what you *thought* you saw—don't say a word to the boys about it. If Wat gets another jolt, he may refuse to come out here Saturday night, and a jazz orchestra without a trap-drummer would be about as jazzy as a church picnic. Tip off Red and Fatty if you like, but make 'em lay off Wat Sanford with their ghost stuff."

As there was nothing to be accomplished by remaining longer at the house, it was decided to return to town without delay. Charlie Rogers and Tommy Beals were waiting in the Wilbur yard when the three drove in.

"Did you fellows see anything out there last night?" asked Rogers eagerly, as he and Tommy followed the car into the garage.

Ned paused to close the garage doors against possible intrusion and then proceeded with a more or less detailed account of what had occurred.

"Then you didn't get a sight of that—that creature; that big, shapeless, humpbacked-looking thing that Red and I saw standing between the end of the house and the woods?" asked Beals.

"Oh, you needn't look so darned wise, Dave!" snapped Charlie Rogers, his peppery temper flaring at sight of Wilbur's ill-concealed grin. "Fatty and I saw it—even if it was only for an instant. If Ned and Dick had stayed up at the house, they might have seen it also!"

"That is quite possible," interposed Ned, quickly, "and although we didn't actually catch sight of a person or anything that looked like one, we saw enough to make us sure that there's something mighty queer going on out there. We've got to find out what it is, but until we *do* solve the mystery, let's not say much about it—especially to Wat or Jim."

"You talk about solving the mystery," began Tommy, doubtfully. "Have you got any idea, Ned?"

"No, I haven't," admitted Ned, "but I'd like to investigate that old wood-road. We might stumble onto something."

"How about it, Dave? Will you run us out there?" asked Rogers, who was eager to begin the proposed search.

“Sure thing,” grinned Wilbur. “I’d like nothing better than to get a look at some of this ghost stuff with my own eyes.”

CHAPTER XV

WEARY CEASES TO SCOFF

Hardly an hour had elapsed since its previous trip when the patient flivver was again coughing its way up the drive to the Coleson house. Neither Wat Sanford nor Jim Tapley had been asked to join in the exploration of the old road, because, as Dave Wilbur expressed it, Wat and Jim were jumpy enough already.

“Let’s scout around a little before we tackle the road,” suggested Ned. “Red and Fatty can have another look out there between the end of the house and the woods while Dick and I go over the ground down toward the beach. Do you want to come with us, Weary?”

“Nope. ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth,’” drawled Dave. “I’ll stick around and make sure this humpbacked spook doesn’t carry off the flivver,” he added with a grin, as he lolled back comfortably and allowed his long legs to dangle over the side of the car.

Charlie Rogers glared angrily at the scoffer. “Here’s hoping he carries it off—and you with it!” he growled.

“Don’t let him get your goat, Red,” urged Tommy, as he seized Rogers’ arm and hurried him out of ear-shot of Wilbur’s irritating chuckle.

For half an hour the boys searched every foot of ground in the vicinity of the house without finding anything new.

“I guess this is about enough,” declared Ned. “There’s nothing to be learned here. Now let’s start at this end of the old road and trace it back as far as it goes. Four of us can walk ahead and Dave can follow with the car.”

For perhaps two miles the boys threaded the grass-grown track, which was so overgrown in places that the small trees and bushes swept both sides of the car,

as it crept along behind the party on foot. There was ample evidence of the recent passage of some vehicle in the broken twigs and stripped leaves along the way, and whenever the grassy surface gave place to sand, the marks of rubber tires were plainly visible.

“Here’s where Ned and Fatty and I struck into this road the other day,” exclaimed Dick, pointing to a clump of crooked birches which he recognized as marking the spot.

“You’re right,” agreed Ned. “From now on, we’ll be traveling over new ground and we must keep our eyes open. Let’s go slow and cut out the talking.”

Half a mile farther, Ned, who was in the lead, halted suddenly and dropped to his knees.

“What is it?” whispered Dick, who was close behind.

“Some kind of a clearing,” was the cautious reply. “There’s a pile of slabs and I can see a shanty. Lie low, fellows, while I sneak up for a closer look,” and creeping silently away to one side, Ned disappeared amid the thick undergrowth.

For ten minutes the boys lay motionless; then a low whistle brought them peering over the pile of slabs to see Ned standing before the shack.

“What do you make of it?” asked Rogers, as they hurried forward to join Ned, who was looking in at the partly open door of the hut.

“It’s nothing but a shanty the wood-cutters used when they cut the timber off this tract about ten years ago,” declared Wilbur, who had driven up and halted at the door.

“I guess you’re right, Dave,” replied Ned, “but let’s see what’s inside,” and pushing the door wide open, he stepped in, closely followed by the others.

The cabin was oblong in shape, being about fifteen feet long by eight or nine feet wide. At one end were two bunks built against the wall. In the middle of the room stood a rough table of slabs and in a corner was a rusty stove propped up with bricks in lieu of missing legs. Dick lifted a rust-eaten lid and peered into the fire-box.

“Ashes,” he remarked. “Cold ashes.”

“Which proves simply that there’s been no fire here for the last few hours,” asserted Rogers. “That bunk looks as if it may have been slept in recently but I’ll admit it’s only guess work.”

Ned had been glancing about the shanty, his keen eyes taking in every detail. All at once he bent low and peered closely at something on the floor beside the table.

“What have you found, Ned?” asked Tommy Beals, and at his words the other boys crowded around.

“Keep back!” warned Ned. “Don’t disturb them.”

“Don’t disturb *what?*” demanded Rogers. “I can’t see anything—unless you mean those black ants!”

“That’s just what I do mean,” answered Ned. “Ants don’t act that way without some reason,” and he pointed to a straggling column of the insects, which were emerging from a crack in the floor, advancing to a spot beneath the table, and hurrying back again to the crack as though time were a matter of supreme importance to them.

“They’ve got a nest somewhere under the floor,” remarked Tommy. “Look! They’re carrying their eggs in their mouths!”

Ned was on hands and knees poking with the blade of his jack-knife among the hurrying ants at the head of the column. “That was a good guess of yours, Fatty,” he laughed, “only it happens that in this particular case what they’re carrying isn’t eggs.”

“What is it then?” demanded Beals.

“Bread crumbs,” was the quick reply, “and there’s more of ’em on the table.”

It needed but a moment’s investigation to confirm Ned’s statement.

“Somebody ate a meal here awhile ago—that’s quite evident,” declared Dick, excitedly.

“Yes, and not so very long ago either,” supplemented Rogers. “This hustling bunch of ants would carry away half a loaf of bread in a few hours.”

“Well, supposing somebody did eat here—or supposing they slept in that bunk Red is so keen about. What business is it of ours? Where’s the proof of any connection between them and our affair at Coleson’s?” demanded Dave Wilbur. “I’m going to take a snooze in the car till you ghost-getters find something more exciting than a rusty stove, a tumbledown bunk and a flock of black ants!” and with these words, he lounged out of the door.

“I guess maybe Weary’s more than half right,” admitted Beals, ruefully. “Confound him though; I wish we’d had him out at Coleson’s that night!”

“I’ll say so!” growled Rogers.

Reluctantly the boys left the shack, but as they passed the corner of the building, Dick halted and began to read aloud: “All persons are hereby warned against starting fires in any and all forest lands under penalty of—” Dick paused in his reading. “That’s a fire-warden’s poster,” he remarked with a jerk of his ever ready thumb toward a placard tacked upon the side of the shanty. “The ranger has been here—maybe it was he who left the crumbs.”

“Nothing doing!” declared Rogers. “That paper has been there a month, easy. Don’t you think so, Ned?”

Ned Blake did not answer. He was looking fixedly at the poster from the lower corner of which a sizable scrap had been torn, thus interfering with Dick’s reading, as has been noted. A long moment Ned stared, then reaching into an inside pocket, he brought forth a fragment of paper which he carefully unfolded. Three strides brought him to the cabin where with a quick movement he placed his piece of paper against the torn corner of the fire warning. The ragged edges fitted together perfectly. “You wanted some proof awhile ago, Dave,” he said quietly. “Take a look at this, will you?”

Wilbur descended languidly from the car and joined the group at Ned’s elbow. “Sure it fits,” he drawled as he glanced at the fragment of paper under Ned’s thumb. “It fits perfectly—but what of it?”

Without a word Ned turned the scrap in his fingers and displayed the words scrawled upon its reverse side. Over his shoulder the boys read them eagerly.

“I don’t want company here.

“E. C.”

“Zowie!” yelled Dick Somers. “That’s the very paper we found tacked on the front door of the Coleson house!”

“Gosh a’mighty!” wheezed Tommy Beals. “Let’s dig out o’ here! I don’t like it!”

Charlie Rogers could not restrain a furtive glance over his shoulder at the half-open door of the shanty and even Dave Wilbur’s scoffing was silenced for the moment.

“I’ll have to admit that this doesn’t explain much,” began Ned, as he replaced the fragment of paper in his pocket. “In fact, it raises more questions than it answers, but at least we can be reasonably sure that one or more of our nightly visitors has been making some use of this old shack and also of this old road. Now let’s see if we can find *what* use.”

With interest roused to a high pitch, the boys resumed their exploration of the wood-road, scanning every tuft of grass and every broken bush as they passed. After leaving the shanty, the road surface had become more sandy and the marks of rubber tires more frequent as well as more distinct, until at length they formed a clearly defined track in which the ribbed pattern of the tires showed plainly.

“We’re coming to the end of the road!” exclaimed Rogers, pointing to a wall of solid green that blocked the way some thirty yards ahead.

The boys had halted to consider this surprising fact, when an exclamation from Dave Wilbur drew all eyes in his direction. The lanky youth had dismounted from his car and now stood staring wide-eyed at the roadway immediately before him.

“What’s the matter, Weary?” gibed Rogers, a bit maliciously. “Do *you* see a ghost?”

“The tracks!” blurted Wilbur. “Where are the tire tracks? They’ve disappeared!”

It was true. From the point where the boys stood, to the wall of foliage that apparently marked the end of the road not a tire mark showed upon the smooth,

firm surface of the ground. As if actuated by a common impulse, all eyes turned back along the road. Yes, the marks were there plainly enough, but at a point almost beneath their feet the tracks ceased as abruptly as if the mysterious car had suddenly left the earth like an airplane.

Dave Wilbur was the first to speak. “Fellows,” he began in a tone quite different from his customary lazy drawl, “I’ll *crawfish*. I said I wanted to see some of this ghost stuff that you’ve been telling about. I’ll admit I thought it was bunk, but now I’m satisfied that ghost, or no ghost, there’s some darned funny business going on here!”

“If this is the end of the road, I suppose we’ll have to turn round and go back the way we came,” observed Tommy Beals with a nervous glance along the back track.

“Maybe so, but first I’d like to have a closer look at what’s ahead,” suggested Ned, and moving forward, he approached the barricade of living green that merged with the foliage of a giant oak. In a moment he was shouting for the others to join him, and as they hurried to do so, Ned parted the curtain of thick growing creepers to disclose the smooth surface of the main highway not twenty feet beyond.

“Here’s the answer to at least a part of the riddle,” cried Dick. “Come ahead with the car, Dave,” and as the flivver shot forward the boys pulled the vines aside sufficiently to allow the car to force its way past and gain the road beyond.

“Whoever uses that old wood-road has certainly hit upon a clever scheme to hide the entrance!” exclaimed Rogers, as he looked back at the vines that twined upward about the big oak and hung like a great curtain from one of its horizontal limbs. “If I hadn’t seen it done, I’d never believe a car could enter or leave this place.”

“Yes, but the *tracks!*” insisted Dave. “The screen of vines is simple enough, but how can a car pass in or out and leave no tracks? *My* car left tracks,” and Dave pointed to the faint marks left by the wheels of the flivver upon the twenty-foot width of hard ground between the edge of the macadam road and the barrier of vines.

“That’s just one more question we can’t answer—yet,” replied Ned. “I move we go home now and get together tomorrow morning. Perhaps by then some of us

may have doped out an explanation.”

CHAPTER XVI

PUZZLED

The meeting held next morning in Dave Wilbur's garage was a strictly private affair. Neither Wat Sanford nor Jim Tapley was informed of it for the reason that neither of them could have offered anything as a result of personal observation or of actual experience.

"Well, Ned, did you dope out anything after sleeping on it?" asked Tommy Beals, after Ned Blake had called the meeting to order.

"Can't say I did," admitted the latter a bit ruefully. "The more I think of it the more puzzling it becomes. About the only thing I could do was to make a list of such facts as we are certain of so far. Maybe this won't do any good, but, on the other hand, it may give us something to start from. Shall I read it?"

"Shoot!" grinned Dick. "That's what Professor Simmons calls the 'scientific method of approach to a subject'—get your facts all lined up and then make 'em tell their own story."

"Sure, that's fine—if the facts will tell a story that we're not too dumb to understand," grumbled Rogers, "but go to it, Ned. Let's hear the worst."

"Here's how the thing lines up in my mind," began Ned, producing a slip of paper to which he referred from time to time. "First off, we get the idea of using the Coleson house and we go out there and break into it. We don't find any sign that anybody has been around the place recently. Next we get a lease of the property and start work on it. This was on June thirtieth. On July sixth somebody writes a letter to Sam, warning him to keep away from the Coleson house."

"Yes, and of course that meant for us to lay off as well as Sam," declared Beals.

"Well, we didn't heed that warning," resumed Ned, "and next came that light

that jiggered along the wall, and a few hours later Sam gets scared out of his wits and off the job by what he thinks was a ghost at his window.”

“Something was there—that’s a cinch,” interrupted Dick. “That foot track under the bushes was no dream!”

“No, it wasn’t,” replied Ned, “and neither was that painted stake, nor the repainted mark on the chimney of the house.”

“Nor that scrap of paper we found tacked to Coleson’s front door,” added Tommy.

“All of those things are down on the list of known facts,” answered Ned, “and it seems they must have some connection with each other, but from then on, the case isn’t so clear. Red and Fatty heard strange noises at the house and are certain that somebody or something was at work outside. As to what they actually saw in one flash of lightning, we’ll leave out of the question—for the present.”

“Yeah, leave it out,” muttered Tommy. “I’ll admit it ain’t scientific—but all the same I’ll never forget it!”

“Me neither!” growled Rogers. “A black, humpbacked thing half-way between the house and the woods. Something that didn’t leave any tracks!”

“Go on, Ned,” interrupted Dave Wilbur. “What comes next?”

“Well,” resumed Ned, “Dick and I saw a vessel pick up those ranges with a searchlight, and we think that accounts for the strange light that appeared on the wall Saturday night; also we know that the boat came fairly close to the beach and lay there almost an hour, although nobody came ashore from her. Even allowing for a lot of imagination, we are sure we saw a queer thing like a buoy that rose out of the lake and later disappeared—somewhere. Shortly afterward we fancied we saw a red light at the end of the old road, and from what we learned yesterday, I’m quite positive we were right in calling it the tail light of an automobile.”

“There’s not much doubt of that,” agreed Dave, “also you’ve proved that there’s some connection between the shack in the woods and some of the things that have been happening out at Coleson’s.”

“Somebody is using the old wood-road and has taken a lot of pains to conceal the fact,” continued Ned. “I guess this about concludes the list of things we actually know—up to date. I’ll have to admit that all of ’em taken together don’t help us a whole lot when it comes to solving the puzzle.”

“Do you think we ought to report the whole thing to the police?” asked Tommy, doubtfully.

“Police! Not on your life!” yelled Dick. “Once it got known that the cops were hunting for somebody out there, we’d never get anybody for the dances. Right now a lot of the crowd are getting a big kick out of the idea that the place is haunted and the rest believe that we are pulling off a few ghost stunts for their amusement—either way it’s going big. But a bunch of cops snooping around would kill it and leave us flat.”

“I think Dick is right,” agreed Ned. “We’ve got to work the thing out for ourselves—at least till we’ve made sure of our ground. We’re certain that something is going on out there and that it is being kept awfully close. Nobody is ever seen coming or going, yet we know such coming and going is actually taking place. Just what connection—if any—this has with the phony ghost stuff we can’t be sure of.”

“You can’t make Sam believe it’s phony,” murmured Tommy Beals.

“No, nor Wat Sanford either,” added Dave Wilbur. “He’s naturally more or less of an ‘Alice in Wonderland’ anyhow, and ever since Red and Fatty sprung that bedtime story about the hunchback, Wat has had the jim-jams regular.”

“Well, I guess we’re all pretty brave—in the daytime,” remarked Dick. “The question is what are we going to do about it all?”

“I have an idea we might learn something by watching that shack,” suggested Ned. “It might prove to be the key to the puzzle. I had planned to lie out there tonight and see if anything happens. Does anybody want to join me?”

“‘A watched pot never boils,’” drawled Dave, “all the same, I guess maybe it’s up to me to do some of the watching. What’s the plan, Ned?”

“My scheme is to walk out there before dark and find a good hiding-place where we can watch both the road and the old shanty,” explained Ned.

“O.K. with me,” agreed Dave. “All except the walking. What’s the matter with taking the car and hiding it in the brush this side of the old road?”

“That’s all right, Weary,” laughed Ned. “Get a good supper under your belt and call for me about seven o’clock. And now, if there’s nothing more to be said, let’s adjourn, and remember to keep mum for the present.”

CHAPTER XVII

A SINISTER DISCOVERY

Promptly at seven o'clock Dave Wilbur's car slowed down in front of the Blake house and Ned hopped nimbly into the seat beside the driver.

"It's going to be a black night," remarked Dave, as the car regained speed. "Look at those clouds piling up. Here's hoping it doesn't rain on us," and he pointed to a low-lying bank that had appeared in the western sky.

"There's a lot of wind in those clouds, judging by their ragged edges," replied Ned, "but as for being a black night, all we want is light enough to find the entrance to the old road and locate the shack and the pile of slabs. I think our best plan will be to hide among the slabs, where we can watch both ways."

Five miles out from town, Dave swung into an opening among the trees that lined the highway and forced the car far into the brush to screen it from the observation of any passer-by. "My guess is that we're less than a mile from the entrance," said Dave. "Can you find it?"

"Yes, I think so, although it's getting dark fast," was the reply. "We'd better stop short of the place and sneak into the brush. Somebody may be watching the entrance even at this early hour."

Ten minutes' brisk walk brought the boys to a point opposite a forked birch tree, that showed dimly white in the gathering gloom. Ned pressed his companion's arm for silence. "The entrance is less than fifty yards beyond that tree," he whispered. "Let's circle around and hit the old road farther in."

As noiselessly as two Indian scouts, the boys crept into the brush, and on hands and knees threaded the thickets until an opening in the foliage above their heads warned them that the wood-road lay close before them. In a moment Ned had dragged himself through the fringe of bushes and was peering to right and left

along the shadowy track. For several minutes he lay motionless; then rose slowly to his feet.

“There’s no sign of anybody,” he said in a low tone. “Let’s work along to the slab pile.”

Without a word, Dave followed, and in a few moments they had crept into the shadow of the big pile which reared its irregular shape against the faint light of the sky, now rapidly fading into the darkness of night. A few rods to their left the outline of the shanty loomed dim for a time, but soon it had been swallowed in the velvety blackness.

“It’s darker than the inside of a cow!” growled Dave. “I can’t see half-way to the end of my nose!”

“Never mind about your *nose*,” chuckled Ned. “We’ll have to depend entirely upon our *ears*—unless somebody shows a light.”

For almost two hours the boys maintained their vigil, speaking but rarely and then in very low tones. Above their heads a rising wind was moaning through the tree-tops in an ever-increasing blast, which at times rattled the upper portions of the loosely-piled slabs.

“It’s raining,” grumbled Dave as a drop of water splashed on his cheek. “Confound the luck! ‘It never rains but it pours!’”

Moving with extreme caution, and not daring to use the small flashlight which he carried in his pocket, Ned felt about in the darkness till he had located several loose slabs. These he stood up against the pile in the form of a rough lean-to, which kept off some of the rain that soon began falling in a steady drizzle. Beneath this partial shelter the boys crouched, each devoutly wishing the other would suggest a postponement of the job, but neither willing to be the first to cry quits. Another hour dragged by, and then Ned suddenly shifted his position and laid a warning hand on Dave’s arm.

“What is it?” whispered Wilbur. “Did you hear something?”

“Footsteps!” breathed Ned. “Put your ear to the ground and listen.”

Dave did so and in a moment there came to his straining senses the jar of a

cautious tread. A twig snapped in the darkness, followed almost immediately by a harsh scraping sound accompanied by a faint squeak. "Somebody has pushed open the door of that shanty," he chuckled softly, "I remember the sound of that scrape and the squeak of the rusty hinges. It's lucky we didn't pick that for a hiding-place!"

"Sh!" warned Ned. "Look!" and he pointed toward the shack from the single window of which a gleam of light had suddenly appeared. The light was quickly extinguished, however, only to be followed a moment later by a faint glow higher up.

"What do you make of that?" queried Dave, as he strove to pierce the thick murk.

"Somebody has lighted a fire in the stove. That's the reflection above the stove pipe," replied Ned. "He's covered the window with something to shut off the light."

For a time the boys watched the glow as it wavered above the pipe and then Dave sniffed the air eagerly. "Coffee!" he growled. "My nose is of some use after all. Mister Somebody is having supper. That means more crumbs for those black ants tomorrow."

"Yes, and I'm afraid it means a long wait for us," grumbled Ned. "If that fellow has time for a feed, he probably doesn't expect anything to happen right away."

"I can't say I care a whole lot for this," complained Dave after a long silence. "It's raining harder than ever and the wind is driving it through these slabs. There's a small cataract running down the back of my neck!"

"Same here," replied Ned. "That fellow in the shanty has got all the best of us right now; suppose we sneak over there and try to get a sight of him through a crack."

For once, action of almost any kind was welcomed by Weary Wilbur, and rising to their feet, the boys began to pick their way cautiously in the direction of the shack. Half the distance had been covered when high above the dull roar of the wind and the steady drumming of the rain there sounded the shrill wavering cry of a screech-owl. It came from a point near the entrance of the old wood-road and was followed at once by the scrape and squeak of the shanty door.

“Down!” gasped Ned, and both boys flung themselves flat upon the wet ground.

They were not an instant too soon, for a scant ten feet to their right a flashlight beam cut the blackness, blinked rapidly in a succession of flashes, and winked out. At once there followed the jar of a cautious tread as the holder of the electric torch moved slowly away along the grassy roadway.

“Now’s our chance!” breathed Ned, and the boys slid back to crouch among the weeds at the rear of the shanty. Through the brush they could peer down the road toward its entrance, from which direction faint sounds came to their straining ears; but except for an occasional brief flash of an electric bulb they could see nothing.

“This isn’t getting us anywhere,” grumbled Dave. “We can’t see a thing that’s going on!”

“Something is coming into the road. It’ll show up in a minute. Have patience,” urged Ned.

Five minutes passed and then came the soft crunch of wheels on wet grass and a black bulk barely discernible to the eyes of the watchers halted before the door of the cabin, less than ten feet from where they lay.

“What time is it?” growled a heavy voice.

The holder of the electric torch snapped it on and consulted a timepiece. “It’s ten minutes to midnight,” was his gruff reply.

“Cut out the glim!” came the quick growl of command and the light clicked out, but not before its thin beam had disclosed a small auto-truck with canvas top and curtained sides upon which the light glistened wetly.

“Is everything all jake ahead?” asked a third rasping voice from the front seat of the truck. “Curse this weather!” it continued, without waiting for a reply to the question.

For several minutes there followed a conversation carried on in a guttural undertone. The name “Irma” reached Ned Blake’s ears, also several disjointed phrases of which he could make nothing, except that they seemed to voice dissatisfaction with something or somebody. Once he caught the words “monkey

business” followed by an expression of disgust. At length the owner of the growling voice was heard to climb aboard the truck.

“Look for us in a couple of hours,” was his parting word to the man who was already returning to his former place in the shanty, and then the vehicle moved away in the direction of Coleson’s.

Waiting until the scrape of the shanty door and the squeak of its hinges had assured them that its occupant was inside, the boys circled the building, seeking a crack through which they might catch a glimpse of him. The effort proved fruitless, for obedient to orders, he had cut off the light, and save for the faint glimmer above the smoke-pipe not a ray could be seen. Convinced at last that nothing was to be gained in this manner, the boys crept back to the doubtful shelter of the slab pile.

“That truck has gone out to Coleson’s and won’t be back for two hours,” chattered Dave, whose lanky frame was beginning to feel the ill effects of his thorough wetting. “I’d like to know what’s up,” he continued, “but I’ll say it’s a mighty damp way of finding out!”

“I wish we could have heard what those fellows were talking about,” remarked Ned, regretfully.

“All I could get was the name ‘Irma,’” grumbled Dave. “I suppose that means there’s a woman mixed up in this business—whatever it is.”

“I wonder,” mused Ned. “Maybe now—” he broke off suddenly.

“You wonder what!” grunted Dave unsympathetically. “‘Irma’ is a woman’s name, isn’t it?”

“I’ve got it!” exclaimed Ned eagerly. “‘Irma’ isn’t the name of a woman—not in this case anyhow—it’s the name of a *boat*! I saw her up at Cleveland last month. She’s an old steam-tug, and I’ll bet she’s the craft Dick and I saw come in close to Coleson’s beach last night!”

For a while the two discussed this possibility, but without arriving at any definite conclusion. Meanwhile, the wind had increased in force and the chilling rain was driving almost unchecked through the flimsy slab shelter. Grimly the boys stuck to their watching, and at last the gleam of a headlight brought them to their feet

with a warming thrill of excitement.

“They’ve had to use their headlights to find the road!” croaked Dave in a voice gone suddenly hoarse.

“Only the dimmers,” replied Ned. “They won’t show any more light than necessary. Look!” he continued. “That fellow in the shack is on the job!” and Ned pointed to the flash of the torch which signaled the approaching truck.

“They’ll pass close to us! We’d better get farther back!” whispered Ned, and creeping from the lean-to, he slipped around behind the slab pile closely followed by Dave.

Pushing its bulk through the bush-lined roadway, the truck had arrived at a point opposite to where the boys crouched, when a sudden violent gust of wind lifted the slabs of which the lean-to had been constructed and flung them with a crash into the road directly in front of the oncoming vehicle. With a squeal of brakes the truck skidded to a stop and as its lights flashed into full power two men sprang to the ground and rushed forward, intent upon discovering what had happened. As the two came to a halt before the tumbled slabs, the glare of the headlights shone full upon them.

For an instant Ned Blake found himself staring at the two figures; one, muffled in a raincoat and with a cap pulled low above a swarthy face; the other, a tall man whose face glowed redly in the white gleam of the auto lamp. It was but a glimpse and then, on the moment, came the jar of running feet from the direction of the shanty, and a flashlight cut the blackness.

“Quick!” gasped Ned, backing into the bushes and dragging Dave after him. “Make for the flivver!” and stooping low, he started toward the highway.

“Whew! That was a close call!” wheezed Dave, when they pulled up at the edge of the state road. “Do you think they saw us?”

“I don’t believe so,” replied Ned. “The light was on them and the wind made a lot of noise to cover our movements. My guess is that after they have looked things over a bit without finding anything suspicious, they’ll come along with that truck.”

“And by that time we’ll be hitting the high spots for home!” ejaculated Dave.

“The inside of that tin lizzie is sure going to look good to me!”

“Not so fast,” urged Ned as his companion started for the thicket where the flivver was hidden. “I’m for lying close here for a while longer. I’d like to see how that truck gets into the highway.”

“It’s so black we can’t see *anything!*” grumbled Dave, who nevertheless made no further objection but followed Ned, as the latter, after hazarding a single brief gleam from his flashlight, succeeded in locating the entrance to the old road and crept silently beneath the tangle of vines close to the trunk of the great oak. Hardly were they settled in this new hiding-place when the pale gleam of dimmed lights came into view.

“Here she comes!” rasped Dave in his froggy whisper. “She’s feeling her way and taking no chances of hitting a tree. My guess is that she’s about where the tire-tracks leave off. Now we’ll soon see if she takes to the air—or *what* she does!”

Even as he spoke, the vehicle, which had been slowly but steadily approaching, came to a halt and her lights winked out. Sounds of cautious movement came through the darkness and at irregular intervals a flashlight spat fitfully, revealing shadowy forms which seemed bent to a crouching position as they crept forward. The faint throb of the motor told that the truck was again in motion but, to the deep chagrin of the watchers, no ray of light showed. The threshing of foliage indicated that the curtain of vines was being pulled aside. Then came another halt followed by a muttered order and the jolting of a heavy vehicle as it forced its way past the obstruction and gained the highway beyond. Quiet for several minutes, broken only by the same cautious movements as before and the sound of some heavy object apparently dragged along the ground. Soon the scrape of a boot told that somebody was boarding the truck; its lights flashed full, and with a quick-grinding of gears it was off, heading along the road toward Cleveland.

As the sound of the motor died in the distance, Ned burst from his covert beside the big oak, and jerking the flashlight from his pocket, played its white rays to-and-fro along the narrow way. Except for flattened blades of grass, which in a few hours would recover their former position, there was nothing to suggest that a vehicle had passed but a few moments before. On the hard soil between the curtain of vines and the edge of the macadam road no single mark of rubber tires was visible.

“Well, by jiminy! This beats me!” exclaimed Dave. “How? And also why? That’s what I’m asking the water-soaked world!”

“That’s what Dick and I wanted to know—also Red and Fatty,” answered Ned. “*How* and *why*. We didn’t get any satisfactory answer and neither will you and I by standing here. Let’s go home.”

Without a word, Dave led the way to his car and backing it out of the thicket headed back for town. “Not much to show for a night’s hard work—not to mention being half drowned in the bargain,” he croaked, as he let Ned out of the car at the Blake cottage.

“Not much, that’s a fact,” agreed Ned. “See you tomorrow.” But as he crept quietly up to his room and struggled out of his wet clothing, Ned Blake found himself faced with the problem of just how much he had best reveal to his companions regarding what he had discovered in that brief instant when the headlight of the truck had shone upon the faces of the two men.

Like a flashlight picture had come the remembrance of a short, thick-set figure muffled in a great fur coat, and of a tall, red-faced man called “Miller.” Yes, one of the men had been the mysterious passenger on the *Frost King*, but this time recollection had gone farther back to a day when, instead of a glistening wet raincoat, the man had been enveloped to the chin in the streaming rubber suit of a diver. There was no room for doubt. The man was Latrobe. And with this discovery there had come to Ned Blake the realization that behind the mysterious happenings out at the Coleson house there was something sinister; something fraught with real danger to whosoever might stand in its way. *Ghosts!* Latrobe was more to be feared than a whole houseful of ghosts! With the possible exception of Wat Sanford, none of the fellows took any stock in ghosts, but every one of them knew Latrobe by reputation. How would they react to the knowledge that they were dealing with this man? As for Ned himself, he was ready to pit his nerve and wit against anybody in defense of what he knew to be his right. Would the others support him against such an enemy as Latrobe? Should he risk the abandonment of their project out at Coleson’s by telling them what he had discovered? Morning dawned while Ned still wrestled with his problem.

“I’ll wait awhile anyhow,” he muttered, as he at last dropped into an unquiet sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE APPARITION AT THE DANCE

Ned Blake found himself still in a very uncertain state of mind, when he awoke at noon of the following day. After a meal which was a combination of breakfast and lunch, he set out for Dave Wilbur's, only to be met half-way by Tommy Beals and Dick Somers with the news that Dave was sick in bed with a hard cold.

"He can't speak above a whisper," declared Tommy, who had been admitted to the bedside of the patient. "His mother says he's got to stay in bed all day, and I guess that's the proper dope, if we want him to be with us for tomorrow night's dance."

"What did you fellows find out there last night?" asked Dick. "I thought of you when I heard the rain pelting down. Did the shanty leak?"

"I can't answer that," laughed Ned. "Dave and I didn't enjoy the comfort of the shanty—we let the other fellow have it."

"What fellow—for the love of Mike!" cried Charlie Rogers, who had joined the group in time to hear Ned's words.

"That's *another* one I can't answer," replied Ned quite truthfully, and he proceeded to recount in some detail the adventures of the previous night, omitting, however, all reference to his discovery of Latrobe.

"I'd give a million dollars to know what this is all about!" exclaimed Rogers. "Of course, we want to keep on with our stuff, but I'd hate to get into a jam with a bunch of *roughnecks*."

This was exactly what Ned had feared, and he determined then and there to keep to himself—for the present at least—his knowledge of the identity of *one* of the

“roughnecks.” Red Rogers was anything but a coward, and if he showed signs of wavering, there would be slight hope of keeping fellows like Jim Tapley and Wat Sanford in line. All the rest of that day, and much of the following, Ned devoted himself to making cautious inquiries concerning Latrobe, but beyond some evidence of the man’s unsavory reputation little or nothing could be learned.

“I’ll take a chance on tonight’s dance anyhow,” soliloquized Ned. “After it’s over, I’ll tell the boys what I know and let them decide what to do.”

Saturday night found the youthful population of Truesdell on tiptoe with expectation. Everyone who had attended the first “haunted” dance was eager to learn what new thrill lay in store for them, and those who had not been present on the opening night were doubly anxious to make up for their unfortunate omission by taking an especially active part in this second festivity. A considerable number of older people joined the crowd, ostensibly as chaperones for their daughters, but actually with a secret desire to learn what it was all about. The boys were early on the scene, including Dave Wilbur, who had recovered sufficiently to do his part although his voice sounded not much unlike the drawling croak of a bullfrog.

“Whew!” gasped Tommy Beals, as he stood just inside the front door of the Coleson house and ran his handkerchief around inside his wilted collar. “I’ve taken in ninety-five admissions and answered a couple of hundred questions about ghosts, and the crowd is still coming!”

“I’m hoping we have enough eats and drinks for this mob,” remarked Wat Sanford, who, in Sam’s absence, was preparing the refreshments. “If Fatty wilts just taking tickets and answering questions, I pity him when he starts passing out ice cream.”

“I wish we had fixed up a few good ghost stunts for tonight,” said Charlie Rogers, as he stood beside Ned watching the couples pour in at the front door. “This crowd is all keyed up for a wild time and I’d hate to see ’em disappointed—as they will be if nothing happens.”

“What’s worrying me is the fear that too *much* may happen,” replied Ned, anxiously.

“Meaning what?” queried Rogers.

“Well,” resumed Ned, “you and Fatty got a pretty good-sized scare the night you were out here, and Dick and I saw enough to keep us wondering ever since.”

“Yes, I was scared all right,” admitted Rogers, “—just the two of us here alone, you know—but with all this gang here you don’t think that—” and Rogers paused for want of just the right words to express his doubt.

“I don’t know what to think,” was the sober reply. “The whole thing seems impossible—and yet it has happened. One thing I’m sure of: there isn’t going to be room much longer on these premises for us and for whoever or whatever else is trying to occupy them. As you say, Red, this crowd has been led to expect some weird stuff and yet it might easily be thrown into a panic, which would mean the end of things for us. You and Fatty and Dick and I have seen enough to make us certain that something more than child’s play is going on around here. What it is or what it will lead to, I can’t even guess, but I’ll admit I’m worried.”

“Me, too,” grumbled Dick Somers, who had joined the other two in time to hear Ned’s words. “Why, hang it! somebody might take a crazy notion to blow up the whole shebang—same as Eli Coleson blew up his old farm house when he wanted to build this one.”

“Coleson!” muttered Rogers under his breath. “You don’t suppose—”

“Come on, you fellows!” interrupted Jim Tapley, striking a chord on the piano. “It’s eight o’clock. Let’s tune up and get going!”

The dance was quickly under way, and for several hours the whirl of gaiety continued with nothing more ghostly to offer than the painted balloons and black paper cats. As midnight drew near, the orchestra concluded a peppy fox-trot and made ready to close with the usual wailing syncopation of “Home, Sweet Home.”

“I guess you had your worry for nothing, Ned,” whispered Charlie Rogers. “In fact, the thing has been almost too tame. Don’t you think so?”

“Maybe it has,” began Ned, “but just the same I—”

His words were cut short by a shriek which arose from a group on the porch. Half a dozen frightened girls came plunging in through the doorway, which was instantly jammed with excited people, some making frantic efforts to get inside

and away from something, while others struggled in an attempt to get out and see what had happened. For several minutes confusion reigned, but the braver spirits who had been investigating outside soon returned with the report that they could find nothing to cause alarm. Of the group which had been upon the porch, only a few claimed actually to have seen anything, but these were unshaken in their statement that a shadowy figure had appeared at the corner of the house nearest to the woods.

Charlie Rogers and Tommy Beals exchanged a half-frightened glance, suggestive of their belief in this story; but of the dancers, nearly everybody considered it either an hallucination or at most a joke, and as the strains of the final number arose, the dance was resumed and carried to its completion without further interruption. The foremost of the departing crowd had reached the line of parked cars and the rest were streaming out across the porch when their gay chatter was silenced by a sudden cry.

“There it is again! Look! Look! There, by the corner of the house!”

All eyes turned in the direction indicated and saw outlined in the dimness a shadowy figure standing motionless. For perhaps five seconds nobody spoke or moved; then an occupant of one of the automobiles switched on a headlight and the vivid glare disclosed the form of a man with a long white beard who bore upon his shoulder what appeared to be a pickax.

As the blinding light flashed upon it, the apparition threw up an arm as if to shield its eyes, took a step forward, and dropping the pick from its shoulder, struck it into the ground.

At the first cry of alarm, Ned Blake had rushed out upon the porch closely followed by Dick Somers, and as the weird figure raised its pick for a second swing, both boys sprang from the porch and dashed directly toward the ghostly visitant. For an instant the figure seemed to hesitate; then it turned swiftly and vanished round the corner of the house.

Ned Blake and Dick Somers turned the corner in a breathless rush. Before them lay the open stretch of sand, extending from the end of the house to the fringe of bushes some thirty yards distant. Above the line of trees the late moon hung in the eastern sky, shedding a soft light by which the boys saw clearly the stretch of sand, the fringing bushes, the foundation wall of the house—and nothing else.

“It’s gone!” gasped Ned, staring with unbelieving eyes at the space before him.

“Yes, but where?” cried Dick. “We weren’t five seconds behind when it turned this corner, and there isn’t cover enough between here and the woods for a rabbit to hide in!”

Emboldened by the example of Ned and Dick, several of the men and boys came hurrying forward. Somebody produced a flashlight by means of which a careful search of the vicinity was made but without result. Borrowing the light, Ned made a minute examination of the ground along the foundation wall. The surface was littered with fragments of slate from the roof, but ten feet from the corner of the house a bare patch of sand showed amid the debris and upon this small yellow area a faint mark caught Ned’s eye. With a quick sweep of his hand he effaced the impression and after a few minutes of further search, returned the flashlight to its owner.

“Of course it’s all a hoax,” declared a gentleman, who had kept well in the background while the search was in progress.

“That’s right,” agreed a second, “I guess those two lads had some hand in it—else they wouldn’t have rushed forward the way they did.”

“Well, if it was a trick, I’ll call it a clever one and mighty well carried out,” remarked another, as he returned to his car when the hunt had finally been abandoned.

This seemed to be the general opinion among the guests as they slowly dispersed. Jim Tapley and Wat Sanford had accepted invitations to ride home with friends and made a hasty departure, leaving the other boys to lock up the house and return in Dave Wilbur’s flivver. As the last of the departing cars went honking down the drive, Ned Blake turned to his four companions.

“Fellows,” he began in a voice that betrayed his suppressed excitement, “I found something out there at the end of the house that I didn’t mention at the time!”

“What was it?” asked Beals.

“It was a footprint!” replied Ned.

“Yeah, I saw a hundred of ’em,” drawled Dave Wilbur. “Half the dance crowd

walked all over that stretch of sand.”

“The footprint I saw wasn’t made by a dancing shoe,” replied Ned. “It was made by a rubber sole.”

“That’s what we found outside Sam’s window!” cried Dick.

“And as nearly as I could see with the flashlight, it was a print of the same shoe,” was Ned’s calm response.

“Whew! If that’s a fact, why I feel like apologizing to Sam!” mumbled Tommy. “I don’t wonder he was scared!”

“What do you make of it, Ned?” asked Charlie Rogers.

Ned Blake turned and walked to the door to gaze with troubled eyes out upon the moonlit strip of sand, beyond which the line of scrubby oaks lay dim and shadowy. In a moment he again faced the group who were watching him curiously. “Fellows, there’s something I’ve got to tell you before we go any further with this business.” Ned paused as if to choose his words and continued. “We’ve been trying to find the answer to two questions, namely, *who* and *why*. The night Dave and I watched the old road I settled the first question, and the answer is—Latrobe!”

For a few minutes after this disclosure, the excited questioning kept Ned busy recounting such meager facts as were in his possession. “I don’t need to tell you fellows that any business we may try to carry on against Latrobe’s wishes is likely to be hard going—if not actually dangerous.” was Ned’s final comment.

“What do you propose?” asked Rogers.

Ned’s answer was prompt. “Somebody started something out here a few minutes ago. I’m wondering how many of us are game to finish out the night right here and see what else may happen.”

“Count on me for one,” was Dick’s quick reply.

Rogers and Beals, after an exchange of questioning glances, declared their willingness to remain.

“Oh, all right. I’ll stick around with you,” croaked Dave Wilbur, “that is, I will if I can stay inside, but when it comes to another night of camping on the cold, cold ground, there’s nothing doing.”

“That’s all right, Dave,” agreed Ned. “We’ll make you inside sentry,” and without further loss of time, Wilbur set about arranging a row of chairs upon which he stretched his lanky frame.

“Now, fellows,” continued Ned, “this is what I propose: Red and Fatty will hide in that clump of oaks beyond the driveway and watch the front and west end of the house. Dick and I will guard the rear side and the east end. If either party sees or hears anything suspicious, follow it up and yell a plenty if help is needed. We’ll try to capture this rubber-soled ghost, if he shows himself again.”

CHAPTER XIX

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE

Ned Blake and Dick Somers had secreted themselves among the bushes in such position that they could see any movement that might take place at the rear of the house or along its eastern end. The moon was now well above the woods and, although in its last quarter, it still gave sufficient light to make near-by objects dimly visible. From their place of concealment the boys could look out upon the shadowy surface of the lake, and many an anxious glance was turned that way, prompted by the remembrance of the craft whose mysterious movements had so puzzled them a few nights before. For the most part, however, their attention was fixed upon the great house, which loomed black and sinister, save where the feeble moonlight silvered the slate roof and touched the gleaming white range-mark on the chimney. Oppressed by the ominous silence, the boys exchanged but few whispered words and moved only when necessary to relieve cramped muscles. An hour passed, and then Ned grasped his companion's arm and pointed to a dark object that had made its sudden appearance at the end of the house.

"What is it! Where did it come from!" Dick's whisper was a gasp of excitement.

"I don't know," breathed Ned. "I didn't see it till it moved! Hist! Lie low! It's coming this way!"

The black shape, scarcely more than a blotch against the dark background of the house wall, seemed to creep along the ground till the corner was reached. Here it slowly straightened to the form of a man and, after a moment's hesitation, stepped out upon the moonlit strip of sand which it crossed with noiseless tread. Ten feet from the boys' hiding-place it stopped as if to listen.

"NED BROUGHT HIM DOWN WITH A HARD DIVING TACKLE"

“Now!” yelled Ned, and springing to his feet, he dashed straight at the figure which turned in its tracks and fled with desperate speed back across the open space toward the house.

“Help! Help! Head him off!” shouted Dick, and at the sound of his cry, Rogers and Beals leaped from their places.

But the flying figure never got past the end of the house. Ned Blake, running like an antelope, overtook and brought it down with a hard diving tackle. A furious struggle ensued, for the “ghost” proved to be a decidedly tough customer in a rough and tumble fight. Over and over rolled the combatants, Ned striving desperately to retain his leg hold, while Dick, who had been but a leap behind his leader’s dash, used every ounce of his own supple strength in a frantic effort to pinion the threshing arms. Charlie Rogers, flashing into view around the corner of the house, brought timely reinforcement, and Tommy Beals, puffing painfully from his own hard run, signaled his somewhat late arrival and at the same time ended the battle by catapulting his ample weight full upon the mid-section of the prostrate “ghost,” from whose body the breath was expelled in a loud “Hah!”

Aroused by the shouts of combat, Dave Wilbur rushed to the scene and assisted the victors to carry their semi-conscious prisoner to the house. A candle was quickly brought and as its light shone upon the distorted features the boys fell back with a cry of amazement. It was the face of Slugger Slade.

“Holy cat!” yelled Charlie Rogers. “What the blazes is *he* doing here?”

“Just this minute he’s trying to recover his breath that Fatty knocked out of him,” replied Ned. “We’d better make sure of him while we have the chance,” and slipping off his belt, Ned confined the slugger’s arms behind his back. Dick hastened to bind the ankles in like manner, and when this had been done, the prisoner was hoisted to a chair.

“Well—what are you—going to do—about it?” gasped Slade with his first returning breath.

“First of all we’re going to ask what *you* are doing on our property,” replied Ned, sternly. “If your answers aren’t satisfactory to us, we will take you back to Truesdell and turn you over to the police.”

“All right then, if you want the truth, I was just hiding out here to scare you fellows—just for the fun of it,” sneered Slade, at the same time flexing his great muscles in a testing strain on the strap which bound his arms.

“It’s no use pulling at that belt,” advised Dick. “That’s the same belt you fooled with once before. It beat you then and it’s going to be too much for you this time.”

Slade received the taunt with an ugly scowl and turned to Ned Blake. “Well, now that you’ve heard my explanation, what do you say?” he demanded.

“Why, I’d say that as an explanation it leaves too many things unaccounted for,” replied Ned, evenly.

“What things?” growled Slade.

“Oh, little matters—like phony letters, and warnings, and ghost tricks, all calculated to interfere with our business,” suggested Ned. “We want to know what your object was.”

“Just like I told you a minute ago,” persisted Slade. “I was trying to scare you fellows off the place. I worked it with the nigger, but—”

“Who sent you out here?” interrupted Beals.

“Nobody sent me,” growled Slade with an obstinate shake of his big head. “I just came of my own accord, and that’s all I’ll tell you—or the cops either!”

“Very well then, perhaps you’ll listen while I tell you something,” began Ned, quietly. “You are one of a gang that is making some use of this property of ours. The tug *Irma* comes close to shore here and picks up the old dredge ranges. A truck makes night trips back and forth through that old wood-road between here and the Cleveland highway. Now, who besides yourself is mixed up in this and what is it all about?”

Slade maintained a sullen silence, and after a moment Ned continued. “I’ll tell you who two of them are,” he said deliberately and without taking his eyes from Slade’s face. “One is a tall, red-faced man named Miller and the other is—Latrobe.”

“That’s what you’re *guessing*,” sneered Slade. “The chances are you’ve never set eyes on Latrobe.”

“Yes, I’ve seen him three times,” was the quiet reply. “Once when he wore a diving-suit, and again when he rode up to Cleveland on my ice-boat; but the last time I saw him was when he was talking to Miller out in the old wood-road last Thursday night.”

At these words, Slade straightened in his chair with an involuntary start of surprise and the furtive look that flashed into his black eyes proved a sudden inspiration to Ned, who was watching him keenly.

“You remember, Slade,” Ned continued in a tone of assurance. “You remember how the slabs fell down and Latrobe and Miller jumped out of the truck? *You* were in the shanty, signaling with a flashlight.”

“Where were *you*?” The question burst from Slade’s throat in a gasp of astonishment, which was ample confirmation of the correctness of Ned’s guess.

“Oh, we were behind the pile of slabs—Dave Wilbur and I,” laughed Ned.

“Yeah, I’ll say we were!” exclaimed Dave in his wheezy whisper. “We were there all right—but I’ve learned a lot more in the last minute than I suspected then!”

“Now, Slade,” resumed Ned, and the laugh was gone from his face and also from his voice, “you may as well tell us the whole truth. Let’s begin at the beginning. Who sent you out here?”

“Latrobe,” admitted Slade. “I’ve got a job with him over across the lake in Canada.”

“And your job was to scare us away from this house?”

“Yeah, that was it,” acknowledged Slade.

“Why did Latrobe want to get rid of us?” persisted Ned.

Slade shrugged his heavy shoulders and moistened his lips. “Latrobe doesn’t give his reasons for what he wants,” he muttered.

“How did you manage to appear and disappear so quickly?” demanded Rogers. “Where were you hiding?”

“Oh, I was laying out in the brush,” replied Slade, who seemed more ready to answer when the questions concerned himself instead of his employer.

“No, you were not!” exclaimed Dick, hotly. “You’ve got some hole close to the house! Now where is it?”

“If you knew that you’d soon learn a whole lot more,” was the sneering reply.

“And while we were learning it you might have a chance to make yourself scarce around here,” interrupted Ned. “We’d like to solve this mystery without outside help, but if you refuse to talk, we’ll turn you over to the police and see what luck they have with you. The game is up. Take your choice; talk to us or to the police.”

Slade hesitated and lowered the lids over eyes which had grown suddenly crafty. “You spoke of giving me a chance,” he began, speaking slowly and evidently choosing his words with care. “Do you mean I’ll be free to go if I show you what I know?”

“Absolutely,” declared Ned, after a glance at the other boys had assured him of their approval. “Play fair with us and we’ll let you go.”

“All right,” agreed Slade. “Take off these straps.”

“Not so fast,” interposed Ned. “We’ll give you the use of your feet and then if you prove yourself worthy, we’ll carry out the rest of the bargain.”

The belt was removed from Slade’s ankles and he arose from the chair. “Now lead on,” directed Ned, “and remember, no tricks—or into the flivver you go for a rough ride to town!”

The crafty expression in Slade’s eyes changed to a gleam of treachery, which might have aroused suspicion, had the boys noted it. Unfortunately for them, as events proved, they were too intent upon solving the mystery, as they eagerly followed their prisoner out of the door and down the steps. Rounding the corner of the house, Slade continued along its eastern wall and stopped before one of the foundation stones, a big slab some four feet long and three feet in height.

“Give me the use of my hands and I’ll show you,” he offered.

“Nothing doing!” replied Ned, decidedly. “You’ll tell us what to do and we’ll do it!”

“Suspicious, eh?” sneered Slade, and again he veiled the malicious light that flashed into his black eyes. “All right,” he continued, “step on that piece of white stone in the ground close to the wall.”

Ned did so and felt the stone settle an inch beneath his foot.

“Now push hard against the end of that slab,” continued Slade, indicating the big foundation stone.

Beals put his weight upon the point indicated and the slab swung inward pivoting upon a perpendicular axis near its center. The resulting opening was about three feet high and two feet wide, affording access to the cellar under the house.

“Well, are you satisfied?” demanded Slade, when the excited exclamations of astonishment had ceased.

By way of answer, Ned Blake unbuckled the belt from the slugger’s arms. “I don’t bear you any ill will, Slade, and I guess the rest of the boys feel the same. Evidently you’ve been mixed up in some sort of funny business and we’re going to know what it is mighty soon. Take my advice and keep straight hereafter.”

“Don’t you worry about *me*. I’ll take care of myself,” growled Slade, and turning on his heel, he strode away and passed from sight among the shadowy woods that bordered the lake.

CHAPTER XX

EXPLORING THE TUNNEL

Certain that Slugger Slade would lose no time in putting a safe distance between himself and the Coleson house, the boys turned their attention to the opening in the foundation wall, noting with great interest the ingenious way in which the heavy stone was made to turn on the iron pins at top and bottom, and examining the simple spring-catch, which held the slab in place until released by a pressure on the white stone.

“I wish I had hung onto that flashlight,” said Ned Blake regretfully, as he strove to pierce the inky blackness inside the wall. “We’ll have to depend on candles for our search, I guess. Wait a minute and I’ll bring some.”

Ned was back in a moment, and lighting the tapers, he crept cautiously through the opening followed by the rest of the boys. Within was the usual litter to be found in the cellar of an unfinished house. Broken tubs that had been used for the mixing of mortar; wrecked barrels and boxes of every description choked the space and made movement difficult. Just inside the wall the boys made their first discovery of interest. On a nail driven into a joint of the masonry hung a wig and false beard of coarse white hair and close at hand stood a wooden pickax painted white.

“I guess this puts the lid on one more ghost story,” remarked Ned, as the articles passed from hand to hand. “Somebody certainly went to a lot of trouble to work this ghost scare and we’ve yet to find the reason. There doesn’t seem to be anything of interest at this end of the cellar, but there’s an open way over to the left. Let’s follow it.”

The flickering light of the candles showed where rubbish had been thrown aside to provide a clear way, and following this, the boys at length came upon an angle in the foundation where the new masonry joined what had once been the wall of the old cellar. Turning this corner, they found themselves stopped by a low door

of solid oak plank and evidently of recent construction. Taking a cautious step forward, Ned seized the iron handle, and bracing his foot against the wall, threw his weight backward. The door yielded and swinging open on its heavy hinges revealed a steep flight of steps extending downward into the darkness.

“By jiminy! It’s a way into the old mine!” muttered Dick Somers, as he shaded the candle and peered into the black pit.

“Who’s afraid!” growled Dave Wilbur, as the group hesitated on the brink of the steep descent. “Go ahead, Ned! We’ll follow!”

Thus urged, Ned felt his way carefully down the slippery stairs followed closely by the other four. They reached the bottom of the short flight when suddenly a scurrying sound filled the air. Vague shapes rushed upon them. The candles were knocked from their hands, and as the lights flickered out, a pitchy blackness covered them like a blanket.

“Quick! Up the stairs!” shouted Ned.

In this his companions needed no urging, and he followed at their heels slamming the door behind him. Stumbling blindly against piles of rubbish in an effort to keep in the narrow lane, the boys reached the cleared area just inside the opening through which the reflected light of the moon shone dimly. Crouching there in the faint light, the five stared at each other for a moment, until Ned Blake broke into shamefaced laugh.

“We’re a brave bunch to be scared out of our wits by a few crazy bats!” he exclaimed.

“Bats!” echoed Dick Somers and Charlie Rogers together. “Well, can you beat it!”

“All the same it was a darn scary place!” grumbled Tommy Beals, as he wiped the sweat and grime from his face. “I was pretty well keyed up with all that I’d been through and then, when I got a wallop in the eye and had my candle knocked out of my hand, I wasn’t so sure but what Coleson’s ghost was on the job after all!”

“It’s a sure bet that whoever has been using this place didn’t try to light it with candles,” argued Ned. “There must be a lantern or something of the kind around

here.”

Taking a piece of candle from his pocket, Ned lighted it, and after a short search among the rubbish, discovered a small recess in the wall where lay a coil of rope, a roll of dirty canvas, and two lanterns.

“We’ll look this junk over later,” he remarked, “but first, let’s see what we can find down below.”

The lanterns were lighted and once more the boys descended the wooden stairs. The bats attacked again, but after battering uselessly against the lantern globes, they soon gave up the unequal contest. At the bottom of the stairway was a narrow tunnel sloping sharply downward. Along its center extended a pair of rusty iron rails on which stood a light dump-car.

“This is what Coleson used to haul up the copper ore in from the lower end of the mine,” remarked Ned as he squeezed past the car, which nearly filled the narrow space. “These rails run down to the lower end and this hand-winch was for hauling up the loaded car,” he continued, raising his lantern to examine a powerful-looking iron windlass bolted to heavy posts at the upper end of the tunnel.

“Here’s something funny!” cried Charlie Rogers, pointing to the wire cable which was wound upon the drum of the winch. “That wire rope looks to be brand new!”

“There’s no question of that,” declared Ned, after a close inspection, “and the gears of this winch are thick with fresh grease! This outfit has been used recently, or I miss *my* guess!”

“What’s that *little* windlass for?” asked Beals, pointing to a small device fastened to the wall. “Look! There’s a wire rope extending down along the roof of the tunnel!”

Dave Wilbur mounted upon the dump-car and reaching upward pulled hard on the rope.

“Gee whiz! It’s as tight as a bow string!” he exclaimed. “I wonder who or what is pulling on the other end!”

Picking up a stone, Ned knocked up the pawl which held the ratchet of the little winch. Instantly the drum began to revolve and the cable reeled off rapidly for perhaps a dozen yards when it came to a sudden stop. Seizing the crank handle, Ned attempted to reel it back but the pull upon it was too great, and only when Rogers and Beals had come to his assistance, did he succeed in rewinding the cable to its former position.

“By jiminy! This beats me!” ejaculated Dick. “Let’s follow that rope down and see who or what is pulling on it!”

“Not on your life!” chorused Beals and Rogers. “It’s too darned black and spooky-looking down there!”

Dave Wilbur also appeared reluctant to penetrate further into the mine.

“All right, you fellows keep one of the lanterns, and Dick and I will take the other and see what’s going on down below,” said Ned, “but instead of walking down the track we’ll ride down on the car. You can handle the winch and let us down slowly and be all ready to haul us up again when we yell.”

“That’s what I call pretty soft!” grumbled Dave. “I wish I had enlisted with Dick! All the hard work is going to be up at *this* end!”

Ned and Dick climbed upon the car; Beals released the brake of the winch and the car started of its own weight.

“Keep your foot on the brake, Fatty,” warned Ned. “Don’t let her get going too fast or she’ll jump the track!”

And then as the snaky cable reeled steadily from the winch-drum, the dump-car, carrying the two lads, swayed and jolted downward into the blackness of the tunnel.

CHAPTER XXI

TRAPPED IN THE MINE

As the dump-car moved steadily downward along the rails, Ned Blake held the lantern high and peered ahead. The feeble yellow gleam showed the rock roof and sides of the tunnel, which gradually narrowed till it became barely wide enough to allow the passage of the car. Beyond the small circle of light was a wall of pitchy blackness, ever receding as they moved toward it and closing again behind them as they rumbled onward.

“That small cable runs right along overhead,” declared Ned, holding up the lantern to better illuminate the roof. “I’m blessed if I can see what’s holding it up there!” he continued. “It must be—”

The words were cut short by a warning shout from Dick, and turning, Ned caught the reflected gleam from the surface of a black pool which filled the tunnel from wall to wall.

“Jump for it!” yelled Ned, and in an instant both boys had leaped from the rear of the car knee-deep into the icy water.

Floundering back up the passage, they gained dry ground, and straining their eyes through the gloom, watched the car as it continued on its way down the track and disappeared beneath the inky water.

“Wow! We came near getting an all-over ducking!” cried Dick, as he stooped to wring the water from the bottom of his trousers.

“It was mighty stupid of me not to have been looking out for this,” Ned blamed himself. “Of course everybody knows the tunnel runs out under the lake and that the lower end is full of water.”

“The car is still going ahead,” announced Dick. “Look! The cable is running out

yet.” But even as he spoke, the black wire rope dragging along between the rails suddenly stopped. “She’s got to the end of the tunnel,” he continued. “Now what!”

For a moment Ned Blake did not reply. He was staring up at the line of small cable stretched tightly along the roof of the mine and passing from sight where roof and water-surface met.

“I know what’s pulling so hard on that rope,” he said quietly. “It’s that buoy.”

“By jiminy! You’re right!” Dick’s voice rose excitedly. “And when that small winch is released, the buoy rises to the surface of the lake! But—but what’s the use of all this? That’s what I can’t make out!”

“Let’s try to make the boys hear and tell ’em to haul us back,” suggested Ned.

Raising their voices in a combined effort, they sent a shout reverberating up the tunnel, and an answering halloo came faintly to their ears.

“Here’s where Weary does his stuff!” grinned Dick, as he watched the cable drag slowly out of the water like a great black snake. “He’ll crab a plenty over *this* night’s hard labor!”

Soon the car came into view, looking not unlike some huge amphibian as it emerged from the pool streaming water at every angle. Climbing upon it as it passed, Ned and Dick were pulled up the steep incline, till at length they came in sight of their comrades grunting at the crank-handle of the winch.

“Well, what did you find?” puffed Beals, as the car came to rest in its original position.

“Nothing much,” replied Dick.

“Nothing *much!*” groaned Wilbur. “And that’s the fruit of the hardest labor a man was ever sentenced to! Say, you let *me* ride down and back a couple of times while you fellows grind that winch!”

“We didn’t find much because there’s nothing down there except water,” explained Ned, “but we’ve got an idea as to what’s pulling on that small cable,” and Ned proceeded to give his theory of the buoy which he and Dick had seen

appear and disappear at the surface of the lake.

“Sounds reasonable,” admitted Charlie Rogers. “If anybody outside wanted to get an absolutely exact location of the submerged end of this mine, why that buoy would do the trick for ’em; but what the blazes could anybody want of it, and why so fussy to be within *inches*?”

“That’s the puzzle,” agreed Ned. “That’s what we got to find out. Slade hinted that if we got inside the cellar we’d soon learn the whole game. So far we haven’t accomplished much. Let’s look around up at this end of the mine.”

There was nothing to be seen in the restricted area about the car and winches, but partly concealed by the stairway was a narrow passage hewn in the rock.

“This is where Coleson started to follow the vein of ore back under the house, I guess,” said Ned and moved forward with his lantern.

Half a dozen steps brought him to a door set in the rock wall. A quick jerk threw it back upon its hinges, revealing a small chamber between the walls of which tiers of wooden boxes reached from floor to roof. Crowding together before the open door, the boys stood silent for a long minute.

“What’s in ’em?” Dick Somers’ muttered question voiced the curiosity of all.

Setting his lantern upon a projecting point of rock, Ned Blake cautiously lifted one of the boxes from the front tier. A dull metallic rattle sounded from within.

“I heard that same noise once before!” exclaimed Rogers excitedly. “I’ll never forget it!”

The box was tightly closed, but by aid of the winch-handle the cover was pried off and the secret of the haunted mine stood revealed to five pairs of astonished eyes. Ned lifted a bottle from the opened case and read the label on its flat side.

“Canadian Club Whisky.”

“*Bootleggers!*” yelled Dick Somers.

“*Rum-runners* from across the lake!” wheezed Dave Wilbur.

“There’s no doubt of it,” said Ned, staring at the bottle in his hand. “They come across from Canada and locate the caved-in end of the mine by means of the ranges and that buoy. Once anchored there, they can lower these cases of whisky onto the dump-car that is waiting down below. They don’t have to land and leave tracks on the beach. It’s so simple we ought to have guessed it long ago!”

“And once they get the stuff safely stowed here, all they have to do is watch their chance to load a truck and run it up to Cleveland,” remarked Beals. “Like every other bunch of crooks and lawbreakers, they thought their scheme was one hundred per cent perfect.”

“Well, I guess it *was* working pretty fair till we butted in with our dance proposition,” grinned Dave Wilbur. “It’s no wonder they tried to drive us off the place.”

“Of course, we know they ran their truck up through the old wood-road and parked it among the scrub oaks opposite the end of the house,” began Dick. “Ned and I found where it stood but—but still there’s one thing that puzzles me.”

“You’re wondering why we never could find any tracks on the strip of sand between the house and the woods,” guessed Ned. “That question bothers me also. Let’s have another look inside the cellar.”

Leading the way with his lantern and closely followed by the other boys, Ned mounted the stairs. At the top he halted abruptly and held the lantern above his head. “Who was the last man in here?” he demanded.

“I was,” replied Charlie Rogers.

“Did you shut this door behind you?” Ned’s tone was sharp.

“I certainly did *not!*” protested Rogers. “It was wide open and I remember pushing it clear back against the wall in order to give us a chance to beat it out of here if anything happened!”

Handing his lantern to Dick Somers, Ned approached the door and tried it cautiously; then putting his shoulder against it he pushed with all his strength. “Come here, Fatty,” he grunted. “Put your beef on it!”

Tommy hastened to Ned's side and together they flung their united weight against the oak planks. It was useless. The door was securely fastened on the other side. They were trapped in the mine.

CHAPTER XXII

A DARING ATTEMPT

Grouped together upon the narrow steps of the mine, the five boys stared stupidly at the heavy, nail-studded barrier which stood between them and freedom.

“This is some of Slugger Slade’s work!” growled Ned Blake. “What a fool I was to have trusted him!”

“Shucks! We can break down this door!” cried Charlie Rogers. “Wait a minute till I get that winch-handle!” and running down the stairs, he quickly returned with the heavy iron crank.

Taking the implement and setting himself for a full swing, Ned attacked the door with a rain of blows which sent echoes reverberating down the tunnel like the roll of thunder. The solid oak resisted stubbornly, and as Ned redoubled his efforts, the iron handle snapped short in his hand.

“Here’s a sweet mess!” grunted Tommy Beals disgustedly.

“Let’s find something for a battering ram,” suggested Dick, starting down the stairs.

Diligent search through all parts of the mine failed to discover anything that could be used to force the door, and after a time the boys gave it up.

“What’s Slugger’s idea in locking us down here anyhow?” demanded Rogers, as he sat on the dump-car glaring helplessly at the closed door above him.

“No doubt he plans to keep us prisoners until he can get word to his rum-running gang,” replied Ned. “There’s several thousand dollars’ worth of liquor stored down here and they don’t want to lose it.”

“Then I suppose we’ve got to wait here till they come with a truck and cart the stuff away,” stormed Dick.

“Why, before they get around we’ll probably starve to death,” wailed Tommy Beals. “What time is it, anyhow, my watch has run down.”

“It’s three o’clock,” yawned Dave Wilbur, consulting his time-piece and stretching out beside Rogers on the dump-car. “This is a bum place to sleep, but at that, it’s better than standing up all night.”

“Weary is right,” muttered Charlie Rogers, “we may as well make the best of it. We’re caught like rats in a trap and there’s nothing to do but wait till we’re let out.”

Nobody attempted to dispute this dismal fact, and after a time the five “rats” sought the least uncomfortable spots in their decidedly uncomfortable trap and settled down with such patience as they could command. An hour dragged its tedious length away and then Ned Blake roused himself from his place on the stairs.

“Fellows,” he began, “we’re caught, as Red says, like rats in a trap. I’m bound to admit that it is the result of my stupidity in giving Slade his freedom and allowing him to turn the tables on us this way.”

“Forget it!” growled Charlie Rogers. “You’re no more to blame than the rest of us. We all agreed to let him go. Five dumb-bells—I’ll tell the world!”

“Mighty nice of you to talk that way about it, Red,” was the reply, “but it doesn’t change the fact that it was I who led you into this trap. I know this and I’ve been trying to figure some way to get out of it.”

“Not a chance,” drawled Dave Wilbur. “We’ll stay right here till somebody comes to *let* us out—which may be today or tomorrow or next week! ‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread’—that’s *us*!”

“Frankly, it’s this question of *time* that’s worrying me,” admitted Ned. “We could stand it several days without food, but there’s only a limited amount of air in this mine. Five of us use it up pretty fast. It’s getting stuffy up at this end of the tunnel even now and in another twenty-four hours it may become positively dangerous.”

“But what can we do?” demanded Beals. “The only way out is through that door!”

“Here’s what I was thinking,” replied Ned. “That whisky came down from the surface of the lake and up through the tunnel. I’m wondering if we can’t manage to reverse the process.”

“Are you talking about swimming under water to the end of the tunnel and then up to the surface?” cried Rogers. “Why, man, you’re *crazy!*”

“Don’t think of trying such a thing, Ned,” urged Dick, earnestly. “It’s a big hundred yards from where the water begins out to the end and it must be ten yards more to the surface!”

“Sure, it is,” asserted Wilbur. “Nobody but a South Sea Islander could stand a chance of getting through.”

“I’ll admit that under ordinary circumstances it would be a difficult and maybe an impossible stunt,” agreed Ned, “but I had no idea of attempting to *swim* any such distance. Let me ask you a question, Dick,” he continued. “After we jumped off the dump-car down there in the tunnel, how long did it take the car to get to the end of the mine?”

“Well, I would say about a minute and a half or maybe two minutes,” guessed Dick. “The cable kept running out about that long after the car disappeared below the water—if that’s what you mean.”

“Not over two minutes at the most,” was Ned’s comment. “Now that was when the car was empty; if it were loaded, it would run quite a lot faster.”

“And you’re talking about letting that dump-car carry us to the submerged end of the tunnel where we can then swim up to the surface?” demanded Rogers. “Not for *mine!* I haven’t the nerve!”

“Gosh! I couldn’t hold my breath two minutes—no, nor one minute to save my life!” gasped Tommy Beals breathless already at the bare suggestion.

“Of course, I don’t expect you fellows to try it,” Ned hastened to explain. “I’m certain I can do it. Holding my breath for a full minute or more is easy enough, if I’m not exerting myself during the time, and when I got to the end of the tunnel

I'd shoot up to the surface like a cork."

"It's too risky! Don't try it, Ned!" pleaded Dick.

"Well, I'm not anxious to do it," admitted Ned. "Here's what I had planned. It's now four o'clock; I'll wait one hour more, and if nobody comes to let us out by then, I'll get out without their help. By five o'clock the sun will be well up and I'll be able to see the light above me, which will be a big help in locating the opening and reaching the surface."

"Here's hoping and praying that Slugger Slade or some of his gang gets here before five o'clock!" muttered Dick Somers.

The other three echoed his sentiment, but the hour passed without a sound to break the deathlike silence and, at length, Ned Blake rose and began to remove his outer clothing.

"Bring out a dozen cases of bottles and load 'em onto the car," he directed, and the boys obeyed without a word.

After assuring himself that the car was loaded in such a manner as to distribute the weight equally on all four wheels and lessen the chance of it jumping the track, Ned gave his final directions to Tommy Beals, who was to handle the brake on the cable-drum.

"Let her run about as you did before, Fatty, until you feel her hit the water," Ned explained. "The instant you see by the lessening of the drag on the cable that she's gone under, why take your foot off the brake and let her run as fast as she will. Don't look so solemn, you fellows. In about fifteen minutes you'll hear me opening that door for you."

Mounting the car, Ned gave the signal, and as Beals released the brake, the heavily loaded car started and rumbled away down into the blackness with Ned Blake clinging tightly to its forward end.

With fascinated eyes the four boys watched the cable as it ran rapidly from the drum of the winch. The instant its slackened speed showed that the car had struck the water, Dave Wilbur jerked out his watch and told off the seconds.

"Ten—twenty—thirty—forty—fifty—sixty—seventy—"

“She’s down!” shouted Beals as the cable stopped unreeling.

“Seventy-six seconds!” announced Wilbur. “Seventy-six, from the time she hit the water.”

“A minute and sixteen seconds,” muttered Dick Somers. “It was as long as any hour I ever lived!” and Dick sat down suddenly and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XXIII

ESCAPE

Sitting there in the murky dimness of the old mine, Dick Somers struggled manfully against the anxiety which was making his heart throb painfully. Ned Blake was pal and leader of the other boys, but to Dick he was all this and much more. Not until this moment of terrible suspense did Dick fully realize the depth of his feeling for his friend and the shock of it brought a dry sob to his throat.

“Don’t take it so hard, Dick,” consoled Charlie Rogers in a voice that was husky in spite of his effort to control it. “Shucks! Ned’s all right. He’s a regular fish in the water! He can swim a couple of miles without half trying, and when it comes to doing *under-water* stunts—why he can beat a muskrat!”

“The only thing I was really worrying about was that the car might jump the track,” declared Tommy Beals in a cheerful tone, which was, however, belied by the solemn expression of his plump countenance. “I know by the way the cable acted that the old dump-wagon stayed on the rails and it’s dollars to doughnuts she made the end of the tunnel right side up!”

“Sure she did!” Rogers exclaimed confidently, “and the instant Ned saw light through the hole above him, why he started up. He thinks under water—take it from me!”

Thus the talk went on, hope contending with fear, and as the minutes ticked away, Dave Wilbur kept an anxious eye upon his watch. “The fifteen minutes are up,” he announced after what had seemed an endless wait. “Ned said it would take him that long, at least.”

Yet another full minute passed. Then there came a scraping sound on the farther side of the door, which quickly swung open, disclosing the dripping form of Ned Blake. The shout of relief and joy that burst from four throats was promptly checked by Ned’s warning gesture.

“Keep quiet!” he cried. “Tumble up here! Quick! Bring my clothes!”

The boys obeyed without question, and as they passed through the door, Ned closed it, replaced the heavy beam which had held it shut, and hurried his companions to a hiding-place behind a pile of barrels.

“There’s no chance to get out yet,” he chattered, as he struggled into his garments. “I had a narrow squeak of it. Latrobe and Slade were coming through the gate in Dave’s flivver, just as I turned the corner of the house. There was a truck right behind them. They’ll be here in a minute. Lie low and don’t breathe!”

Tommy Beals had brought one of the lanterns, which was quickly extinguished, and the boys had barely time to settle themselves in their places of concealment when the stone slab in the foundation wall swung back and the swarthy face of Latrobe appeared in the opening. A moment he paused to listen intently, then crept into the cellar, followed by Slugger Slade and the red-faced man whom Ned had recognized as Miller.

“They took both lanterns,” growled the leader, as he shot the rays of a flashlight into the niche where lay the canvas and the coil of rope.

“Yeah, they had both lights burning when I was watching ’em monkeying with the dump-car,” replied Slade. “They were too busy to notice me, so I just swung the door on ’em and propped that beam against it,” and Slade pointed to the heavy timber which still held the door shut.

“Well, maybe that was as good as you could have done,” was the grudging reply. “The game’s up, but we’ll load what we’ve got and make our get-away before anybody else comes snoopin’ around.”

“What’ll we do with these smart kids that butted in on our game and ruined it?” snarled Miller.

“Leave ’em shut in the mine till somebody who wants ’em starts looking for ’em,” was the cool answer. “They know too much about us and our business, and the longer they stay shut up, why the more time we’ll have to cover our tracks.”

“Their folks will probably start hunting for ’em today, but it may be a week or more before anybody suspects where they are and finds how to get ’em out,” ventured Slade, uneasily. “They’d pretty near starve by that time.”

“Let ’em starve,” snapped Latrobe. “It’ll learn ’em to mind their own business and not gum up somebody else’s game. All right, Miller,” he continued, “let’s get going.”

“Are you going to put out the bridge?” asked Slade.

“Sure,” answered Latrobe. “There’s no good leaving any more tracks than we can help. Let ’em guess how we did the trick. Come on, Miller; you and Slade get it out. We’ve no time to lose.”

From its place in the niche, the roll of dingy canvas was dragged to the opening in the foundation wall and pushed outside. Latrobe and Miller held one end of the cloth on the ground while Slade stepped onto it and walked slowly forward kicking the roll ahead of him. In a very short time he had laid a canvas walk, four feet wide, extending from the wall of the house to the fringe of bushes, among which the truck could be seen backing into position.

“That’s what Fatty and I heard flapping in the wind that night!” gasped Charlie Rogers, as he watched the canvas rise and fall in the breeze.

“Yes, and that big misshapen thing we saw must have been a man walking along that canvas with a case of bottles on his shoulder!” added Tommy. “No wonder we never could find any foot tracks!”

“Nor wheel tracks either!” wheezed Dave. “They worked the same kind of stunt for the truck at the entrance to the old road!”

“Sh! Keep still! They’re coming in again!” warned Ned.

The two men and Slade again crept through the opening into the cellar and approached the door leading down to the mine. “You say there’s five of ’em inside,” remarked Latrobe. “Are any of ’em scrappers?”

“Huh!” grunted Slade. “That fellow Blake is pretty strong and plenty handy with his football stuff, and there’s a fat guy that might knock you cold, if he jumped on you like he did me. The rest ain’t heavy-weights, but I guess maybe they’d fight if you got ’em cornered.”

“Well, you go out and tell Casey to come down as soon as he gets the truck in place,” decided Latrobe. “There’s no good taking chances of one of ’em getting

past us.”

Slade left the cellar and soon returned, accompanied by a burly individual who carried a short cudgel in his hand. “What’s the matter?” demanded the newcomer. “Can’t the three of you handle five boys? Open that door,” he continued savagely. “Let me at ’em!”

“Easy there, Casey,” warned Latrobe. “I’m running this show. We don’t want any broken heads unless it’s necessary, but if they try to rush us—well, don’t let any of ’em get past, that’s all.”

As Slade removed the timber and opened the door a cautious crack, Latrobe, with Miller and Casey at his elbow, peered through it into the mine below. For a moment the growl of low-voiced talk came to the ears of the boys where they crouched in their hiding-places; then Latrobe flung the door wide and stepped through it onto the stairs. “Come on out of there now!” he shouted. “Let’s have a look at you!” His shout went echoing down the tunnel, but no other sound broke the stillness.

“They’re here all right,” declared Miller. “Look at that lantern burning. They probably took the other light and went down into the tunnel.”

“The dump-car is gone,” announced Slade. “Look how they hammered this door trying to break it down!”

Latrobe directed his flashlight upon the battered door and examined it carefully; then turning, he played the rays along the pile of boxes and barrels that littered the cellar. Caution was one of Latrobe’s habits, and to the frightened watchers it seemed that their very breathing must be audible to his keen ears; but after a long moment of heart-breaking suspense, he again turned and went clumping down the stairs followed by the other three.

As the last form disappeared through the low doorway, Ned Blake crept silently from his place behind the barrels. Dick Somers was at his elbow and together they stole softly forward. A glance through the door showed Latrobe, Miller, and Slade grouped at the foot of the stairs watching Casey, who club in hand, strode down into the black mouth of the tunnel.

“That’s far enough, Casey,” commanded Latrobe. “Don’t let anybody get past you while we’re lugging out the stuff.”

“Swing the door easy. I’ll handle the timber,” whispered Ned. “Careful. Don’t make a sound!”

Inch by inch the door moved on its noiseless hinges, and when at last it came to a stop, Ned dropped the heavy beam into place without a sound.

“Whew!” gasped Dick, who, now that the crisis was passed, had turned suddenly weak and faint. “Let’s get out of here, Ned! I’m scared plumb to death!”

Dick was not the only victim of this nervous reaction, amounting almost to panic, that came with the sudden breaking of the strain to which the boys had been subjected; and it was a pale-faced group that was revealed, when Tommy Beals had, with trembling fingers, succeeded in relighting his lantern. Following its gleam, the boys made their way to the opening in the wall and emerged into the blinding sunlight of the quiet morning.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CHASE AND CAPTURE

For several moments the boys blinked owlishly in the strong light and filling their lungs with sweet, fresh air, that seemed indeed like a breath of new life after their long confinement in the close atmosphere of the mine.

“Hah! This is great!” exhaled Dick, who had regained his nerve and courage with his first breath of freedom. “I never would have believed that simple fresh air could smell so good, and besides,” he continued, “it’s a lot of satisfaction to know that we’re giving Slade a taste of what he made us stand.”

Without unnecessary loss of time, the boys scouted around the house, and among the scrub oaks they came upon the flivver.

“This is how Slade used my car last night,” growled Dave, as he pointed to a crumpled fender. “I guess we’re lucky he didn’t wreck it entirely.”

“Slugger probably had a wild ride getting to a telephone,” remarked Rogers. “He certainly got his gang together in quick time; I’ll say that much for him.”

“We’d better follow Slade’s plan of getting to the nearest telephone,” decided Ned. “We can call the authorities at Cleveland and let them come out here to take charge of things from now on.”

“Sure! That’s the idea! And while we’re waiting for ’em, we’ll have time to rustle some breakfast!” chirped Tommy Beals, his round face suddenly regaining its customary cheerfulness.

“Before we go, let’s roll up this canvas and stow it inside,” suggested Dick. “The secret is ours and maybe we can make some use of it later.”

It required but a few minutes to return the canvas to its niche in the cellar, and

after swinging the stone slab into place against the possibility of prying eyes, the boys climbed into the car and set out for Cedar Hollow, whose single gasoline station was adorned with the blue bell of telephone service. While Ned was closeted in the booth, the others, led by the resourceful Beals, foraged for food at a neighboring farmhouse with such success that a plentiful breakfast of homely fare was soon in readiness.

“There’s a squad of plain clothes men on the way,” reported Ned, as he took his place at the table. “The chief didn’t more than half-believe me when I told him we had trapped a gang of rum-runners. He’s from Missouri, but we’re going to *show* him!”

Had Ned realized the resourcefulness of Latrobe or taken into consideration the latter’s intimate knowledge of the old mine and its contents, he might have been a bit less confident regarding his ability to make good his boast; but for the time being, he continued to eat his breakfast in happy ignorance of what was, even then, taking place out at Coleson’s.

Hardly had the meal been disposed of when a big, blue automobile whirled into the little settlement and stopped with a squeal of brakes in front of the gasoline station. A tall, official-looking man sprang to the ground and advanced to meet the boys who came hurrying from the house.

“I’m Inspector Baker,” the newcomer introduced himself crisply. “Now then, what’s this story about a gang of boot-leggers that you’ve got locked in a cave somewhere out here?” and the officer ran his eye over the group in a manner that boded ill, should it appear that he had been trifled with.

“They’re not in a cave; they’re in the old copper mine out at Coleson’s,” explained Ned, who in a few words detailed the main facts of the situation.

“Latrobe and Miller, eh!” snapped the inspector. “That’s two of a gang we’ve been hunting for a year. Casey’s another. I never heard of this fellow Slade, but if he’s with ’em, that’s evidence enough. Let’s go!”

Only the roughness of the road, which slowed the speed of the blue car, enabled Dave’s flivver to keep up with the official machine, but by strenuous exertion the little car held its own against its big rival and was only seconds behind when the latter came to a stop before the wide porch of the Coleson house.

“There’s a secret entrance under the house and into the mine,” explained Rogers, as the boys hastened toward the end of the house closely followed by Inspector Baker and his men.

As they turned the corner of the building, Ned, who was in the lead, stopped in his tracks and stared in astonishment at a pair of deeply rutted marks which crossed the strip of sand between the house and the woods. Everywhere the surface had been deep-trampled by hurrying feet and the swinging stone slab that the boys had so carefully closed was now wide open.

“Zowie!” gasped Dick. “They’ve got away!”

“What’s *that*?” demanded Inspector Baker. “What kind of a yarn is this?”

By way of answer Ned could but point dumbly to the opening in the foundation wall. Advancing cautiously, the officers reconnoitered the aperture and crept into the cellar followed by the boys. A peculiar acrid odor assailed their nostrils and a thin veil of smoke hung like a bluish cloud above their heads. One of the men snatched a flashlight from his pocket and by its rays revealed the heavy plank door wrenched from its hinges and lying splintered and blackened on the ground.

“Blasting powder!” growled Inspector Baker, as he sniffed the tell-tale odor.

“Latrobe knew more about this mine than anybody else!” cried Ned. “He must have had a can of powder hidden somewhere down below!”

“They took most of the cases of whisky with ’em, too!” added Dick, who had run half-way down the stairs, from which point he could get a view of the small chamber beneath.

“I’m afraid it’s a clean get-away,” grumbled the inspector when, after a brief examination, he led the way out of the cellar. “Those wheel tracks show that the truck went around this end of the house, but that doesn’t help us much.”

“They haven’t been gone but a few minutes!” cried Ned, excitedly. “Look! The sand is still running into the deepest wheel ruts!”

“But in that case we would have met them,” began the officer.

“The old road!” cried several voices. “They’ve gone out by the old wood-road!”

Pausing an instant to swing shut the stone slab, the boys made a rush for the flivver and sent it bouncing across the rough stretch of pasture.

The big blue car was close behind, but when the wood-road was reached, Inspector Baker insisted upon taking the lead. "Latrobe isn't a fellow to take any chances with," he shouted. "If we overtake him there may be trouble. You boys keep well behind us and out of danger!" and as he flung this warning over his shoulder, the inspector forced the big car into the narrow bush-lined road at a reckless speed.

Close behind came the flivver, taking every turn and twist of the crooked track with all the skill that Dave Wilbur could muster and, in complete disregard of orders to the contrary, keeping a scant ten yards behind the big car.

Less than two miles of the difficult road had been traversed when the truck was sighted ahead. Evidently its occupants were not expecting pursuit, for they were traveling at a moderate pace suited to the roughness of the way. As the roar of pursuing motors reached his ears, Casey, who was at the wheel, sent his clumsy vehicle forward at the limit of its speed.

"There's Slade!" yelled Dick, as a turn of the road gave a glimpse of a white-shirted figure clinging to the rear of the bouncing truck. Even as Dick spoke, Slade was seen to heave one of the heavy cases of bottles into the road directly in the path of the big blue car as it rounded the curve.

With a ripping crash the automobile struck the obstruction knocking it into a mass of wood and glass splinters through which the car smashed its way, skidding wildly but regaining its equilibrium uninjured as the road straightened. Mindful of his tires, Dave swung the flivver around the wreckage and back into the road without much loss of distance.

"That was a clever trick!" cried Ned. "It may work next time!"

But before the attempt could be repeated, the fleeing vehicle had reached the sharp curve, beyond which stood the old shack. Here the road narrowed; and crowding the left side in an effort to make the turn, the truck struck the pile of slabs, lurched crazily across the road, and crashed head on against the old shanty, through which it plunged for half its length. The boys had a glimpse of a white-shirted figure that catapulted from the rear of the wrecked vehicle to fall face downward among the weeds. It was up in an instant, and darting forward,

disappeared in the thicket.

With a shriek of its brakes the blue car slid to a stop, and as the flivver drew up alongside, the boys saw Inspector Baker and his men rush toward the shanty. Before they had covered half the distance, however, a heavy explosion rent the air followed instantly by a sheet of flame. The gasoline tank of the truck had taken fire and exploded, and in a moment the shack was burning fiercely.

Dazed by the force of the collision and half-suffocated by smoke, Latrobe and his two companions staggered from the cabin to be promptly seized by the officers and hustled into the big car.

“We won’t be bothered again very soon by those three rascals,” remarked Ned when the blue car had passed the barrier of vines and disappeared on the highway beyond.

“No, and I guess Slade has had enough for the time being,” added Dick. “At the rate he was traveling when I last saw him, he must be pretty near the Rocky Mountains by now.”

“That’s the end of the old shack and the truck, too,” remarked Charlie Rogers, as he stood watching the blazing heap of ruins.

“Yeah, that’s the finish,” agreed Dave Wilbur. “Truck, shanty, and Ned’s black ants, all gone up in smoke,” he added with a prodigious yawn. “What d’y’say we beat it for home and get a real sleep?”

CHAPTER XXV

PROFITS

The interest that had been aroused by the cave-in of Copper Coleson's mine was as nothing compared with the excitement which prevailed when it became known that the property had been used as a base by smugglers from Canada. A large number of automobilists made the Coleson place the objective of their Sunday-afternoon drive, but except for wheel and foot tracks about the tightly shuttered building, there was nothing to be seen. The boys who had taken so active a part in the capture of the gang were overwhelmed with praise and bombarded with questions, but acting upon a preconcerted agreement, they gave out very little information.

"Keep 'em guessing," had been Ned Blake's brief advice. "We'll get the fellows together on Monday afternoon and decide what's to be done."

Owing to the fact that the Wilbur garage was newly painted, the meeting was held in the Blake yard beneath the friendly, though of late neglected, apple tree. Perched upon one of the lower limbs, Ned called the meeting to order, and Treasurer Beals from his soap-box submitted his report which showed after payment of all outstanding accounts a gratifying balance.

"We were going good, but I guess the game's up," concluded Tommy, gloomily.

"Yes, the Demon Dance bubble is busted," agreed Rogers. "The Ghost of Copper Coleson is laid, and the phantom stuff was really about all that we had to offer."

"But we've paid the rent on the old shebang right up to October," grumbled Dick Somers. "We've got to make *some* use of it, or else admit we're licked!"

"That's just what we're here to decide," declared Ned. "Instead of quitting, I believe we'll go bigger than ever!"

“Do you mean we’ll keep on with the dances?” asked Jim Tapley.

“I can’t see why not,” replied Ned. “All we need is some attraction to keep the crowd coming and this raid has given us a lot of advertising. Judging from the talk that’s going round I’d say that everybody wants to see where and how the thing happened. My idea would be to make ’em pay for what they learn. We can sell dance-tickets to include a walk across the canvas track and through the cellar into the mine.”

“Swell idea,” agreed Wilbur, “only we ought to run the dances twice a week while the interest lasts. D’j’ever hear about ‘making hay while the sun shines’?”

“Great!” applauded Rogers. “Fatty, it’s up to you to get out some new posters advertising semi-weekly dances at the Rum-Runners Retreat.”

“That’s the idea!” chuckled Dick. “We’ll get a new crank for the winch and charge half a dollar for a ride on the dump-car down the tunnel. That’ll be a swell job for Weary!”

“Aw say, Dick, use your bean,” urged Dave.

“There’s another plan that might help us,” suggested Ned, when the laugh at Dave’s expense had subsided. “Suppose we were to clear out the old wood-road, which has played such an important part in all that has happened, and make it usable for our dance crowd. It’s a good two miles shorter than the regular route to Coleson’s.”

This was unanimously approved.

“All we’ll have to do is pull those vines to one side and chop out the brush along the road,” said Rogers. “In a couple of days we’ll have everything ready for Wednesday night.”

“All right, fellows,” said Ned, as the meeting adjourned, “let’s meet at Dave’s tomorrow morning all set for a long day in the woods. Everybody will need a good sharp axe—and by the way,” he continued with a wink at Tommy Beals, “mine is pretty dull. How about giving me a few turns on the old grindstone, Weary?”

Dave Wilbur glanced at the crank-handle of the heavy stone and from it to the

circle of grinning faces. “Oh, all right,” he drawled. “I guess it’s on me this time,” and added with a grin, “they do say that ‘a chicken always comes home to roost.’”

THE END

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