

The Hilltop Boys on the River eBook

The Hilltop Boys on the River

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GETTING A MOTOR BOAT

"If you are going with the boys on the river, Jack, you will have to get a motor-boat. Won't you let me buy you one?"

"No, not a bit of it, Dick."

"But you want one?"

"Certainly, and I am going to have one."

"But motor-boats cost money, Jack. Why, mine cost me-----"

"Never mind what it cost, Dick. You spend a lot more money than I can afford to spend, and you have a gilt-edged affair, of course. I want a boat to use as well as to look at."

"But you want a serviceable boat, Jack?"

"I am going to have it, and it will not cost me anything like what your boat cost. Just let me look around a bit, Dick."

"All right, I'll let you do all the looking you want, but I'd like to buy you a boat just the same."

"No doubt you would, and so would Jesse W. and Harry and Arthur and a dozen other boys, but I am going to get one myself, and it will not cost me much either, and will give me all the service I want. We don't go into camp under a week, and that will give me all the time I want to build——"

"You are not going to build you a motor-boat, are you, Jack Sheldon?" asked Dick Percival in the greatest surprise.

"Well, not altogether build it, Dick. Put it together, I may say. I did not mean to let the cat out of the bag, but now that she is out you need not scare her all over the neighborhood so that everybody will know that she is out. Let Pussy stay hidden for a time yet."

"Yes, but Jack, how are you going to-----"



“No, no, Dick,” laughed Jack, “you have seen the cat’s whiskers, but you haven’t seen her tail yet, and you won’t until I get ready. I have told you more now than I meant to, and you must be satisfied with that. I’ll have the boat, don’t you be afraid.”

The two boys were two of what were called the Hilltop boys, being students at an Academy situated in the highlands of the Hudson on top of a hill about five miles back from the river, as the crow flies, but considerably more than that by the road.

Jack Sheldon was a universal favorite in the school, and although he had been obliged to work to pay for his schooling at the start he was not thought any the less of on that account.

Two or three strokes of fortune had given him sufficient money to more than pay for his education, and to provide his widowed mother with many extra comforts in addition, so that now he could give his time to study and not be distracted by work.

He had long known the value of money, having learned it by experience, and he was now averse to spending more than was necessary on things that gave pleasure rather more than profit.

He would not let Dick Percival, who was the son of rich parents, and had more money to spend than was really good for him, buy him a motor-boat, nor would he spend too much money on one himself when he would use it only for the smallest part of the year.



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The school term was over, but Dr. Theophilus Wise, the principal of the Academy, had arranged to continue it for a portion of the summer, not in the Academy, but in a camp on the river where the boys would have plenty of open air, exercise, relaxation, and all the fun they wanted, besides doing a certain amount of school work to keep them from getting rusty as they expressed it.

The summer school was to begin its session in a short time, and, meanwhile, Jack remained at the Academy instead of going home, some distance away in another county, giving his attention to certain matters in which he was interested.

He had done work for the editor of a weekly paper of a town on the river, the nearest large town to the Academy and was well known in the place besides, having many acquaintances there among business people.

Being fond of the water, and knowing that many of the boys would have boats of one kind or another, but mostly motors, Jack had already looked about him, and had already not only formed his plans, but had put some of them in operation.

Leaving Percival, who was his principal chum among the Hilltop boys, Jack went on his wheel to Riverton, the town nearest to the Academy, and called in at the office of the News where he found the editor, Mr. Brooke, pecking away at a typewriter in his sanctum, using two fat fingers only in doing his writing rather than all of them as an expert would do.

Brooke had learned to use the machine in that way, however, and would adopt no other, although he had been shown by Jack, who was a rapid writer on a machine, and could compose on it, that he could do much faster work by the other method.

"How do you do, Sheldon?" said Brooke, looking up. "Got any news?"

"What are you going to do with that little gasoline engine that you used to run your little presses with?" asked Jack.

"I don't know, sell it, I guess. It isn't good for much except junk."

"How much do you want for it?"

"Oh, you can have it if you think you can do anything with it," said the editor carelessly.

"No, I don't want it for nothing. I'll pay you for it."

"What are you going to do with it? It's too little to run any but the small presses. Ain't going to start a paper, are you?"

"No. I can fix it up so as to make it do good work. I want to put it in a motor-boat."



“It might do for that, and if you can fix it up you’re welcome to it. You have a mechanical bent, I know, and I guess if any one can fix it up, you can. Well, say ten dollars.”

“All right. It will cost me another ten to put it in shape, but after that it will do all right. Will you deliver it to a man that I send after it? I’ll take it down to the Riverton shops and work on it. They let me tinker things there whenever I want to.”

“Certainly. Send an order, and I’ll let the man have it.”



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“Very good. That’s all for the present,” and Jack went out.

His next call was at the machine shop he had spoken of, and going on their wharf he looked around, saw an old rowboat lying on the ground, took a good look at it, and then went to the foreman and said:

“What do you want for that rowboat lying on the wharf? I’d like to buy it. It will just suit me.”

“It is not worth much, Mr. Sheldon,” said the foreman. “You can have it if you want it.”

“No, I want to buy it.”

“Oh, well, say a dollar, but you’ll be a dollar out if you buy it.”

“I don’t think so,” said Jack, who knew what the boat was worth, and that a little money expended on it would not be wasted. “May I have a bench for a few days?”

“Yes, for as long as you like.”

Jack hired a man to take the boat to the shop, bought some paint and brushes and some narrow boards used for flooring, and then sent for the engine, which he placed near the boat.

He was of a mechanical turn of mind, as Brooke had said, and knew a good deal about engines, and by the purchase of a few necessary articles, and by working himself he managed in the course of a day or so to put his engine into a condition that thoroughly satisfied him.

Then he bought a propeller, lamps and other necessaries, had the engine fitted into his boat, and then proceeded to deck it over forward, having already remedied any defects that it had, and making it perfectly watertight, and like a new boat with a fresh coat of paint and varnish.

He was a week on the work, but at last his boat was ready and was put in the water with the aid of two or three men from the shop.

He took a run of a mile or so up the river, and then back to the shop, greatly satisfied with the result, having fitted up a boat for less than half what a craft of the cheapest kind would have cost him had he bought it at retail.

He tied his boat up, covered it over and told the foreman that he intended to leave it there for a day or so, and would then call for it.



“Looks to me as if you had a pretty good boat, Mr. Sheldon,” said the foreman. “I saw you going up the river. You made a good ten-mile gait, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“Yes, and I can do better yet,” said Jack, smiling. “I was just warming her up a bit. She’ll do better when she gets seasoned.”

All this time Jack had said nothing to Percival about his boat, which certainly did not look like a made-over affair now that she was painted and decked over, had her lights and all her appurtenances, an engine in her hold and a flagstaff at her bow, meaning to give his friend a surprise.

The day before they were to leave the Academy and go into camp on the river Percival asked Jack if he had secured his boat yet, and added:

“I have mine, and she is a beauty, cost me three hundred dollars, but it’s worth all that.”



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“Mine did not cost me a hundred,” said Jack, “and she is sixteen feet long, and makes good speed. I’ll have her down to-morrow when we go to camp. She is in a machine shop in Riverton, and it will be easy enough to take her down to our quarters.”

“So you have one, eh?” exclaimed Dick. “Where did you buy it? You’ve been very quiet about it. Did you send to the city for it?”

“No, I got everything around here, as I said I would, fixed it up myself from one thing or another, but I don’t think you’d know it, for she is like a new boat.”

“And you did all the work on her yourself?”

“Certainly,” laughed Jack. “It is nothing new for me to wear overalls and a jumper, and get my hands greasy. I can wash them.”

“The first time I saw you it was in overalls. Dress doesn’t make a boy. I believe you’d look all right in anything. But I’d like to see the boat now, Jack, and not wait till to-morrow.”

“Well, I don’t mind showing her to you, Dick, so if you will get out your runabout we’ll go down and I’ll give you a trip on the river.”

“To be sure I will,” replied Percival eagerly. “Come along.”

CHAPTER II

TRYING OUT THE NEW BOAT

In half an hour the two boys were at the wharf of the machine shop, and Jack was showing his new acquisition to Percival, whose delight could hardly be expressed in words.

“Why, I say, Jack, she looks as if she had just been turned out of the shops. Why, she’s a beauty and no mistake. And you did all the work on her yourself?”

“I did not build the boat, Dick, but I fixed her up, caulked, painted, and decked her over forward, put the rail around the standing room, and put in the seats, installed the engine, set the propeller, and got her in the shape you see her now. She’s all right?”

“All right? Well, I should say she was. I’d never believe that you hadn’t just got her brand new from the shop. No wonder you get along, Jack. A fellow who shows a knack for doing things that you do and goes ahead in spite of all obstacles is bound to get on. Come on, let me see how she can go. My boat is a lot fancier than yours, but I doubt if she can make the same speed or last as long. Come ahead, get aboard!”



The boys got on board, and Jack took his seat, started his engine, took the tiller and glided out upon the river, and then down toward the railroad station, Percival noting the speed, the smoothness with which everything worked, and the apparent ease with which Jack managed it all, as though he had always been used to such things.

“You’re doing fine, Jack,” he chuckled. “I suppose you can go faster if you like. Will you let her out a bit?”

“Wait till I get away from the railroad station and the docks, Dick. I’ll have a clear way before me in a little while, and then I can show off, but just now I’d rather take it easier.”



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"H'm! you take it easy enough as it is. Why, one would think that you had been used to motorboats all your life."

"Not quite as long as that, Dick," with a smile. As they were passing the railroad station they saw two big boys with not very prepossessing faces standing on the wharf near a motor-boat moored alongside, one of them, the biggest and most disagreeable looking, saying in a loud voice and with a sneer which seemed habitual with him, as in fact it was, his conversation being directed at the boys in the boat:

"Huh! Percival has hired Sheldon to run his boat for him. It's all he's good for, and Dick don't know any more about boats than a cat."

"Gets him to run his auto, too," said the other. "He'd drive Dick's carriage if he had one. Blacks his boots and brushes his clothes, too, I'll bet. He's nothing but a valet anyhow."

Percival flushed crimson at these insults to Jack, the boys being two of the most disliked in the Academy, and said hotly:

"I'll come and throw you two brutes in the river if you say any more. Because Jack Sheldon had to work you think he is no good, but he has you fellows skinned, in studies and in everything else. You never did any work in your lives, you're too-----"

"Don't answer them, Dick," said Jack quietly, heading for the middle of the river. "It won't do any good, and they'll talk all the more. I don't mind it, and neither should you."

"Come and chuck us in the river, why don't you?" jeered the first of the boys on shore, Peter Herring by name, and the chief bully of the school. "You daren't! You're afraid of wetting your pretty clothes. Yah! what an old tub! You'll never get back with that scow!"

"I'd like to thrash them!" sputtered Percival, who was of an impulsive disposition. "I'm sorry that they are going to be with us this summer, but I guess their fathers think they are better off with the doctor to keep them in check than they would be sporting away their money at fashionable summer resorts."

"We do not have to be with them any more than we can help, Dick," said Jack quietly, managing his boat in the deeper water and in a stronger current as well as he did nearer shore. "They like to stir you up, and you only please them the more when you answer them."

"If Pete Herring and Ernest Merritt think they can shut me up they are mistaken," growled Percival. "They are getting ready for a good thrashing and they'll get it. I am not the only Hilltop boy who is ready to give it to them. Here comes a steamer, Jack."

"Yes, I see her," said the other quietly. "I will look out for her."



One of the big river steamers was coming up, but Jack kept far enough away from her and managed his head so that her wash did not affect him, and the boat passed without causing him any trouble.

“That was well done, Jack,” said Percival when the boat was well up the river, and Jack went in nearer shore. “I would not be afraid to trust myself in any boat with you. Run ‘em before, have you?”



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“Not this sort, Dick, but a boat is a boat whether you run her by gas or pull the oars or have sails. You must look out for yourself.”

“And that’s just what you do. I suppose that was their boat that they were looking at? Must have cost something.”

“Yes, it looked like it,” carelessly. “You don’t have to spend a lot of money to get fun out of a boat, however. Some fellows’ boats cost them about fifty cents a mile, but this won’t.”

“H’m! I must look out that mine does not,” laughed Dick. “I am a great fellow for spending money. Guess if I had to earn it I’d be more careful of it. That’s what the governor is always saying, but I get it just the same.”

When the boys were on their way back to the wharf they met Herring and Merritt in the motorboat they had seen, Herring shouting out with his usual sneer and a contemptuous look:

“We’ll race you for ten dollars, Percival, if you think you can trust your helper. Two to one we’ll beat you hands down.”

“This happens not to be my boat,” said Percival, “and I would not race with you if it was.”

“Ah, go on! You can’t make us believe that Sheldon can earn money to buy a motorboat by picking fruit!”

Jack did not say anything, and the others turned and came after them so as to force them into a race.

“You could beat them, couldn’t you, Jack?” asked Percival in a low tone, so as not to be heard by the others.

“Yes, but I am not going to race with them.”

“They will try to beat you. Don’t let them do it.”

“I shall pay no attention to them, Dick,” quietly.

“Yes, but Jack, I should hate to have them pass us. They’d never grow tired of telling it all over the Academy.”

“Let them,” said Jack, keeping on at the same steady speed, and making for the wharf.

Herring, who evidently owned the boat, put her to her speed so as to pass Jack, and Merritt shouted derisively as they drew nearer:



“We’ll give you a tow, you fellows!”

The ferry boat running from Riverton to the town on the other side of the river had just put out, and was coming on at a good gait, blowing her whistle to warn the smaller boats to keep out of the way.

Jack went on across her bow with plenty of room to spare, but Herring slowed up and caught her wash, his boat dancing and rocking in the liveliest fashion, taking in water and causing both him and Merritt to shout and go into a panic.

They turned and took in more water, and Merritt, jumping up excitedly, waving his arms and scolding both Herring and the steamer captain, suddenly lost his balance and fell into the river.

“He can swim, can’t he?” asked Jack, seeing the accident.

“Yes, and there are other boats on the river. Let them pick the fellow up. Serves him right, anyhow. He ought to keep still in a boat.”

Merritt speedily came up, swam to the boat and tried to clamber aboard, Herring shouting at him and warning him off.

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“Get out, you’ll upset me!” he shouted. “Why didn’t you keep still? You’re as clumsy as a cow in a boat, you are. Get out of here, or I’ll hit you! Keep away, I tell you!”

“There is a rowboat coming,” said Percival, turning his head. “He will be all right, but he’ll have to go back to the Academy in wet clothes. No danger of catching cold now, but he’ll be a sight all the same, and serves him just right.”

Herring kept on, but made for the railroad wharf, while the rowboat that Dick had seen took in Merritt, and shortly landed him at one of the docks along the river.

By this time the boys had reached the dock of the machine shops and Jack tied up, covered his engine and walked up to the street with Percival, the latter saying:

“It will be like those fellows to say that we were the cause of Merritt’s going overboard. They did not pass us at any rate.”

“Let them talk,” laughed Jack. “Talk costs nothing, and won’t hurt us.”

The boys went to the office of the News where Jack gave the editor a few little items, writing them out on the typewriter, Percival looking on in great admiration, although he had seen Jack write before.

“One would think you had been born at a typewriter, Jack,” he said. “Now I could not do that. The very noise of the thing would bother me and then, having that bell ring every few seconds would get on my nerves.”

“Don’t listen to it, Dick. You don’t mind the chug of an auto or of a motor-boat, do you? This is not nearly as bad.”

“Well, no, I suppose not, but I don’t see how you can think with that thing making such a clatter. It would drive all the thoughts out of my head in a minute. None too many there, to start with!”

Leaving the office at length they came upon Herring on the main street, his late companion not being with him.

“You fouled us!” growled the bully. “I’d have passed you in another second. You’ll have to pay for Erne’s clothes and his doctor’s bills, too. He’s taken an awful cold. It’ll cost you something, let me tell you.”

Just then Merritt himself, in a ready made suit of clothes came out of a hotel on the corner, the boys seeing him before he saw them or Herring got sight of him.

“He does not seem to have suffered any,” said Percival in a whisper.



“No, he has bought another suit of clothes, and does not appear to suffer from colds or influenza or any of those things,” laughed Jack.

“Hello, Pete, why didn’t you wait?” Merritt called out, and then Herring saw him and he saw the boys.

“Huh! you made me fall into the river!” Merritt snorted, “and I had to buy a suit of clothes. You’ll have to pay for them.”

“And for the doctor’s prescription?” said Percival pointedly, for the bully’s breath smelled of something stronger than milk or lemonade. “Spirits may be good to prevent a chill, Merritt, but you want to be careful how you use them.”



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“Come on, Pete,” snarled Merritt, turning red. “They aren’t worth wasting time on,” and the bullies went one way while Jack and Dick went another.

“There won’t be any trouble, Dick,” said Jack.

“No, I don’t think there will”

CHAPTER III

EVIL INTENTIONS THWARTED

The Hilltop boys marched down to their camp the next day, and after they were settled Jack went with Percival to get his boat, Dick’s having been sent down to the camp in the morning.

The camp was on the river away from the railroad in a pleasant bit of woods a mile or so below the town so that they had all the charms of country life about them with the town near enough at hand in case they wanted to get anything.

There were tents to sleep in, a dining tent and one for the kitchen, and a big pavilion where the boys could do what little work they were expected to do during their stay on the river.

A very black, very jolly looking negro, who rejoiced in the name of Bucephalus, and who was the coachman and head waiter at the Academy, now had the position of head cook and general handy man, and the boys knew that they would be well looked after, Bucephalus being a general favorite.

Besides the professors there was the military instructor and drillmaster, Colonel Bull, a fat little man with a great deal of self-importance, who looked after the physical side of the boys’ instruction, while the professors attended to the mental side.

There were a number of motor-boats, several of the boys going partners in these, and there were also rowboats and canoes, a considerable number of the Hilltop boys being accustomed to the water, and spending a good deal of their time on it.

Harry Dickson and Arthur Warren, chums of Jack and Dick, had a boat together, as did Herring and Merritt, and there were several boys who had boats alone, like Percival and Jack, one of these being a little fellow, the smallest boy in the Academy, who had his full name, Jesse W. Smith, painted on the stern of his boat, which he managed alone with considerable dexterity.

Percival’s boat was a costly affair, and was fitted with cushions and an awning, had silver trimmings and was lined inside with mahogany and other costly woods, being a



very handsome affair, but no better as a boat, as its owner himself remarked, than Jack's made-over craft.

"That's the way I do things, Jack," he said when the boys were out on the river in his boat after bringing Jack's down to the camp. "I can't begin to make the speed with this boat that you can with yours, but I have a regular floating palace, as you might say. Why, the Hudson River boats are not any better fitted up than this, size considered, but I can't get any speed out of it. Maybe you can."

"I'll try, at any rate," returned Jack, as he did, making better time than Percival had done, and handling the boat with greater dexterity.



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“H’m! I believe you could get speed out of a canal-boat,” said Dick, as they sped along. “There’s a nasty looking cloud coming down from Thunder Mountain, Jack. Are you afraid of it?”

“No, not much, although I wouldn’t like to see some of those boys too far out if it cuts up rough on the river. There’s young Smith out in his boat, by the way. I think we had better warn him.”

At that moment Herring and Merritt came along in their boat, and Herring said in a tone of disdain:

“That boat of yours is pretty enough to look at, Percival, but she’s of no more use than a society girl in the kitchen. Want a tow?”

Jack passed the other boat with ease, although they were doing their best, and called out to young Smith:

“Come in, Jesse W., there will be trouble on the river in a few minutes, and you will be better off on shore.”

“Oh, he will depend on the name of his boat, which is bigger than the boat,” said Billy Manners, one of the chief funmakers of the Hilltop boys, who was coming along with another boy in a motor-boat. “Young J.W. is full of pluck.”

The smaller boy was taking Jack’s advice by this time, and there was need of it, for there was a squall coming and all the boys were making for the shore.

“Huh! you fellows are all afraid!” shouted Herring. “What’s a little blow to fellows like us? Go on shore, you weaklings.”

“There is danger, isn’t there, Jack?” asked Percival, as Jack was running for shore, having seen that young Smith was safe.

“Yes, there is,” shortly, “and those fellows will find it out before long. They should be told of it.”

“Yes, and get abuse for our trouble,” snapped Dick. “I won’t do it for one.”

“Better come in!” shouted Jack, all except the two bullies being now close to shore, and getting ready to make a landing.

“Mind your business!” shouted Herring. “We know how to look out for ourselves if you don’t!”



“I don’t like to say ‘I told you so,’ Jack, but I did,” said Percival. “If anything happens, the fault will be all theirs.”

At that moment Colonel Bull, on the bank, blew a tremendous blast on a bugle to call the boats in, and Herring obeyed, knowing that he would be cut short of many of his privileges if he did not.

As it was the two boys narrowly escaped an upset, and Merritt was deathly pale and shaking like a man with the ague when at last they got ashore, none too soon.

The river was white with foam, and it was no place for a small boat with the wind blowing sharply down from the mountains.

“You should have come in with the others,” said the colonel sharply when the two bullies landed. “If you take another such risk you will be prohibited from going on the river at all. As it is, you will not go out again to-day.”

Herring knew that there was no appeal from this decision, as the colonel was the physical instructor as well as drillmaster, and the doctor never disputed his word in cases which were so palpably just as in this instance.



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"Pete wanted to show off," chuckled Billy Manners, "and got come up with. He can't bully the colonel if he can bully the small boys."

"He can't bully all of them either," said Harry, "for some of them won't take it from him even if they can't fight him."

As it happened to be pleasant in the afternoon, and many of the boys were out on the river in boats, Herring felt the effect of his foolish boasting, and was greatly chagrined that he was cut off from a very enjoyable sport.

Jack took Percival's boat out and made very good speed with it so that Dick said with a grin:

"Well, the boat is all right, I see, and I am the fellow that needs to take a lesson, not the boat. As I said before I believe you could get speed out of a canal-boat."

"You can get speed out of this one if you will study it a bit, and not think only of using up gasolene. Besides, there is fun to be had out of the boat, even if you do not go like the wind all the time."

"Yes, I suppose there is, but I like to go fast, and I guess every boy does. If one does not there is generally something the matter with him."

Herring was not only smarting under not being allowed to go out with the rest, but also from the knowledge that Jack was a better boatman than he was, and that the boat which he had made himself, for this was known to all the boys now, could make better time than the expensive one his father had bought him and he said to Merritt, who had no one to go out with him, and was not allowed to run Herring's boat:

"I'd like to fix that boat of Sheldon's so that he couldn't run it. He'll be crowing over me all the time, and that is something I won't stand. It'll be an easy thing to get at it at night."

"Of course," agreed Merritt. "Make a hole in his tank, do something to the engine or cut a hole in the bottom. Anything will do. Then we can say that the boat was no good in the first place, and every one will believe you. That's easy."

"I won't say anything about it. Wouldn't he suspect something if I was to speak about it? You don't show any sense!"

"I show as much as you do, staying out there on the river when there was a squall coming down from the mountain," sulked Merritt. "Don't you talk. That was the biggest fool thing I ever saw any one do."



“Shut up!” snarled Herring. “What we want to do is to fix the boat so that it won’t run. Sheldon can’t afford to buy another, and we will have all the fun, while he has to stay on shore.”

All right. To-night will be a good time. How are you going to manage it? He may be watching.”

“Why should he? He won’t suspect anything. After all the boys have gone to sleep we can steal down to the shore and fix it all right. All we have to do is to see where he puts it.”

It was a lovely night with a moon and stars, and a number of the boys were out on the river with their boats, skimming over the water like fireflies, and sending paths of colored light in every direction from their side lamps or with their pocket flashlights.



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Herring was prohibited from going out as the day was not yet over, and he fretted at the prohibition, although it gave him a chance to watch Jack when he came in and see where he tied up.

“That’s all right,” he whispered to Merritt. “It’s in a line with the tent where he and Percival sleep and right on the beach. We’ll be able to find that all right.”

“Yes, and when Sheldon goes out in his boat to-morrow we’ll be able to walk right away from him. It’s a pity you can’t get him to bet on it, but he won’t bet on anything.”

“No, but Percival might. He likes to spend money. I’ll get him to bet and win a lot from him.”

The boys went to bed at the usual time, and before long all the tent lights were out, only a few of the camp lights being seen, as the moon was still up and there was light enough for all ordinary purposes.

There was a deep shadow on the bank of the river, however, on account of the trees and the mountains behind them, and when all was still Herring and Merritt stole from their tent and hurried toward the shore.

They wore soft shoes, so as not to betray themselves, and were dressed in dark clothes so as not to be seen readily, having prepared themselves for any possible emergency.

They had agreed between them that the safest thing to do was to bore a hole in the bottom of the boat so as to cause it to leak, and they had provided themselves with augers for the purpose.

Stealing down to the river noiselessly they easily found Jack’s boat, as they thought, and were preparing to bore the hole when suddenly a voice piped up out of the darkness and from the boat itself:

“Hi! what are you going to do with this boat?”

The voice was that of young Smith who at the next moment stood up and turned the light of a pocket flash upon them as they hastily beat a retreat to the tents.

CHAPTER IV

THE BOAT AFFAIR UNSETTLED

The conspirators had not mistaken the boat, and got hold of young J.W.’s by mischance, but had really begun operations on Jack’s boat when surprised by the boy who they supposed to be fast asleep.



It had happened that the little fellow had wanted to know some particular point about the engine, and had asked Jack's permission to look at his, which was simple and easily understood.

Jack had told him he could do what he liked, and the boy was under the cover with his electric light turned on the engine when the evildoers came up and got to work. The first turn of the auger startled him, and he called out sharply wanting to know what they were doing.

Then he suspected mischief, and immediately threw aside the cover, and turned his light upon the fleeing rascals.

He was unable to identify them, because there were several of the boys of the same build, but he was satisfied that they would not return.

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That was not enough, however, and he raised an alarm and brought out Bucephalus and a number of the servants, and said:

“Somebody’s been trying to monkey with Jack Sheldon’s boat. There ought to be a watch kept. Other camps have sentinels, and this should have one. Stay on watch to-night, boys, and I’ll give you a dollar apiece.”

“A’right, sah,” said Bucephalus with a broad grin. “So dey tried to hu’t Mistah Jack’s boat, did dey? Wha’ yo’ doin’ in it yo’se’f, sah? Was yo’ goin’ to sleep in it?”

“Me?” exclaimed the little fellow indignantly. “No indeed. I was looking over the engine to get the hang of it. Jack told me I might. Go to sleep nothing! If I had been asleep I would not have caught these rascals at their dirty work.”

“But yo’ didn’ cotch dem, sah, dey done runned away.”

By this time Jack, Percival, Harry and Arthur, and a number of the boys, aroused by the noise, had come down to see what was the matter.

Young Smith turned his light on the bottom of the boat, it having been drawn up on the beach, and saw the mark of the auger quite plainly.

It had not gone in deep enough to do any harm, and what, hole there was could be caulked with very little trouble.

The rascals had dropped their tools in their hurry, and Jack picked these up and examined them carefully.

“I can’t tell where these were bought,” he said to Dick, “and many of the boys have tools just like them. I will keep them for further use.”

“Wait till some one wants to borrow something like this,” said Percival, “and then we may find out something. It was a dirty trick, whoever did it, and I wish that Jesse W. had seen them plainer.”

“They were big fellows,” said young Smith quietly to Jack and Percival, “but there are a good many big fellows among the boys, and that does not tell us much. I only wish I could have seen their faces.”

“Well, I am glad you drove them away,” said Jack. “They might have done considerable damage. Still, it is likely that I would have seen the hole when I went to put the boat in the water unless they plugged it up with sand, which they might have done.”



“If any of our boys are doing things like this, which I would be very sorry to know,” added Percival, “we are in a pretty bad way. If it was done by strangers we shall have to set a guard at night.”

“H’m! standing guard duty is not very pleasant,” said Billy Manners dolefully. “I am too fond of sleeping to do that.”

“Nobody will like it,” rejoined Dick, “but we shall have to do it if this sort of thing continues. I hate to think that any of our fellows are mean enough to do it.”

There were many of the boys who thought that there were some of their number who were just mean enough, but no one was accused, the matter being too serious an affair for one to make charges unless they could be proved conclusively.

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“Did you see which way the rascals went, J.W.?” asked Percival when the three were quite alone. “That might tell us something.”

“Well, you know that it is dark along shore, Dick,” returned young Smith, “and they made very little noise. They started to run the minute I spoke, and when I turned the light on them they were going pretty fast. All I could tell was that they were big boys, but I could not say now just which way they went, it was so dark.”

“Well, they won’t try it again, that is certain, but it may come to having a regular guard at night, and none of the boys will like that.”

“I told Buck and the others that I would give them a dollar apiece to keep watch to-night, Dick.”

Both Jack and Dick laughed at the young fellow’s earnestness, and Jack said pleasantly:

“That was kind of you, J.W., but I don’t think it will be necessary to-night. Besides, if any one pays the men to keep watch it should be myself, and not you, old chap.”

“Imagine Pete Herring and fellows like that offering to pay men for watching another boy’s boat!” sputtered Percival “I see them doing it!”

“Well, no harm has been done, fortunately, Dick, and with you I do not think it will be repeated. Come, let’s go back to bed.”

There was no further disturbance during the night, and in the morning nothing was found to be the matter with Jack’s boat beyond what had been done before, and this could be easily remedied.

Percival watched Herring and others very closely to see if he could detect anything suspicious in their looks, speech or actions, but they were evidently prepared and on guard, for he could see nothing which would warrant his bringing an accusation against them.

He did not tell Jack that he suspected them, but, nevertheless, determined to watch them closely to see if there were any ground for his suspicions other than they had bad reputations and did not like Jack.

Matters went on as usual in the camp during the day, the boys dividing their time between study and recreation, with a little drill and some gymnasium practice, considerable apparatus having been erected at one side of the camp for that purpose.



Jack had a friendly race with Percival, first in his own boat and then in his friend's, and beat him in both, but nothing could induce him to race with Herring, and no one could say that he was afraid of his boat, for it was clear that he could do marvels with it.

He was willing to race with Harry and Arthur, with Billy Manners and Jasper Seymour, and even with young Smith, to whom he allowed odds, but he declined all offers to compete with Herring or any of his kind, much to their chagrin and anger.

"You're afraid!" growled Herring with his customary sneer, but Jack did not pay the slightest attention to the charge, and the other boys laughed, this making the bully more angry than ever.



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Nothing was said about patrolling the camp at night, and the boys had an idea that the doctor did not know what had happened the night before, and would, therefore, take no precautions.

They were considerably surprised, therefore, when they discovered that Buck, as the cook was often called, was corporal of the guard, and had the house servants for his assistants.

They kept watch at turns during the night, but nothing unusual occurred, and Percival said to Jack with a laugh:

“Our pickets did good service last night, but I wonder if they will be on to-night?”

“We can’t tell. The doctor has said nothing, and we don’t know if he has done this on his own initiative or because of what he may have heard.”

“Well, it is evident that we boys won’t be called on to act as guards, and I am glad of it, for if there is anything I do not like it is having to parade up and down in the cold and dark for nothing when I might better be in my bed.”

“I can sympathize with you,” said Jack.

During the morning Percival saw Bucephalus alone, and said to him, holding one hand behind his back:

“Was it your idea to keep guard last night, Buck?”

“No, sah, Ah was ready to do it, ’cause young Mistah Smith done offah me a dollah fo’ de service, but de doctah done intimate dat he t’ought it would be judicious.”

“How did the doctor know that we needed a picket?”

“Ah donno, sah, Ah reckon he thought it was acco’din to military etiquette, sah. It am de custom in military camps to set a picket an’ all presume he argued from dose premises, sah.”

“Then you did not tell him of what occurred the other night?”

“No, sah, Ah didn’t communicate nothing, sah. Mebbe it was one of de odah fellahs.”

“You are sure that you said nothing?”

“Yas’r, Ah is suttinly shuah dat Ah made no communication whatsoever regardin’ de events of de perceedin’ night, sah. Ah was suttin dat young Mistah Smith would keep



his wo'd abo 't de extra remuneration, sah, an' Ah didn't wanter prejudice de situation, sah."

"Oh, I see," laughed Dick. "Then Dr. Wise acted on his own initiative from information received elsewhere, is that it?"

Bucephalus scratched his woolly head, and answered:

"Ah donno abo't de inflammation an' de oder misery, sah. Am it so bad as all dat, sah?"

"I mean that he did it on his own account, and not because of anything that you may have told him."

"All reckon so, sah," said Bucephalus, greatly relieved. "Ah done told him nothin', an' Ah don' guess nobody else told him."

Percival went away laughing, but tossed the coin he held in his hand to Bucephalus, who caught it deftly and grinned.

"The doctor either found it out himself or some one has told him," he said to himself, "but it is clear that he knows about it. He would not set a guard on the camp unless he had a good reason, for strangers do not visit us, and the Riverton police probably have orders to keep their eyes on the place."



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Seeing Jack shortly afterward, Dick told his friend what he had learned and added:

“The Riverton police would simply keep a watch against strangers, but the doctor evidently thinks that some of our own Hilltoppers need watching, and he has, therefore, taken this means of doing it.

“I am sorry that he has had to,” said Jack, “but after all the doctor appears to be living up to his name. We must find out who the fellows were, Dick, for the sake of the decent boys of the Academy, not that I care so much about my boat.”

“We will do it, Jack,” said Percival shortly.

CHAPTER V

AN ALARM IN THE NIGHT

The day passed as usual, Percival saying no more about trying to discover the miscreants who had sought to injure Jack’s boat, and Jack being too busy to think of it.

That evening they had visitors from a fine house in the neighborhood, the owner of which, quite a wealthy man, complimented Dr. Wise on the good character of the boys, adding in rather a pompous manner:

“I must say, Doctor, that since you have been encamped on the river I have had nothing to complain of on account of your boys. Most boarding school boys are inclined to be mischievous, and to cause a good deal of annoyance to persons living in the neighborhood, but I must say-----”

“The Academy is not an ordinary boarding school, Mr. Vanderdonk, and the character of the young gentlemen in my charge-----”

“I beg your pardon, sir, but your pronunciation of my name shows that you do not quite understand the way it is divided. It is Van der Donk, with an equal emphasis upon each syllable, not Vanderdonk, with the accent on the first. I am most particular about the pronunciation of the name, which is that of one of the earliest settlers of the Hudson valley, and a very distinguished one, I may say. I am exceedingly proud of my origin, pardonably so, perhaps, but still most proud.”

“Dr. Wise does not care anything about genealogy, Father,” spoke up Miss Margaret, daughter of the proud descendant of the Van der Donks, “and you should not have spoken of the Academy boys as boarding school boys. They attend a military Academy, the fame of which is as great as that of your ancestors. Everybody along the Hudson



valley knows the Hilltop boys and any young gentleman might be proud to be one of them.”

Miss Margaret was a very pretty girl, a bit spoiled, perhaps, but the idol of her father and the puzzle of her mother, who wished her to be a young lady of society, and was greatly grieved because she preferred doing something by which she could earn her living if necessary.

“Far from saying anything against the character of the Hilltop boys, my dear,” said the father, “I must say that I find them a very fine set of young gentlemen. Why, we have not had our lawn tramped over by them, nor our fruit trees pilfered, nor have we suffered from any annoyances which boarding school boys are prone to commit upon neighbors. I am really-----”



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“Why, Father, you speak as if the boys were from a primary school, and had not learned the first rules of manners,” laughed Margaret gaily. What do you expect, Father dear? That the boys shall be young ruffians?”

“Well, perhaps not that, my dear,” replied Van der Donk loftily, “but the city boys who come out here-----”

“The poor fellows never saw a tree before in their lives, and they just wanted to make love to them,” interrupted Margaret, again laughing in the gayest fashion. “Could you blame the poor unfortunates for wanting to shin up them and pick peaches and apples and everything else? The only fruit they had ever seen was stale and on city stands, and when they saw the real article it was no wonder that they wanted it. You could not blame them.”

Then Miss Margaret admired the boats, and accepted Jack’s invitation to take her out on the river, her father and mother accompanying her, of course, and Percival going along to talk to the old folks and give Jack a chance to devote himself to the young lady.

Jack was quite taken with the girl whom he considered very natural and a good deal better company than her father who was forever trying to impress everybody with the renown of the Van der Donks, past and present, and after the company had gone Dick said to him:

“Very pretty girl, Miss Margaret, and has lots of sense, but what a tiresome old bore that father of hers is.”

“Yes, indeed,” laughed Jack, “but there and many persons who parade their blue blood and fine ancestry before the world just as much as he does. What is he, pork merchant or something like that?”

“Pretty good, Jack,” said Percival with a grin. “He was a butcher at one time, but don’t mention it if you don’t want to earn his everlasting scorn. It is never spoken of. He is one of the wealthiest men along the river, and employs a man to do nothing but cut off his stock coupons. They may invite us to the house, although they are a very exclusive sort and are supposed to associate only with millionaires, and the descendants of the oldest and best families.”

“The girl does not seem to have any of that nonsense,” said Jack, “and she is really very pleasant company. By the way,” with a smile, “she did invite me to the house, but I guess you did not hear it.”

“Well, well, you are coming on, Jack!” exclaimed Dick. “Of course she would invite you. Why not?”



“And she asked me to bring you, Dick,” with another chuckle. “That is all right, too, isn’t it?”

“Why, of course!” and Dick grinned again. “We will go as soon as we can, Jack.”

The visit to the fine house back of the river was made sooner than the boys anticipated, and in a most unexpected and unusual fashion.

It was about twelve o’clock at night, and everything was quiet in and about the camp when all at once there was a wild alarm, a sudden ringing of bells and shouting of voices, and Bucephalus tore through the camp shouting at each tent:



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“Wake up, sah, dere am a big fiah, wake up!”

Jack and Percival were the first to be aroused, and to run out of their tent at the sudden alarm.

“There is a fire somewhere!” exclaimed Jack, smelling smoke and seeing a light in the sky.

“It is up at Van der Donk’s,” cried Percival. “That is the direction, I am sure. Hurry and get dressed, Jack. We may be needed.”

Other boys were now coming out, asking questions, staring this way and that, rubbing their eyes or standing in a bewildered fashion, and wondering what all the commotion was about.

A messenger came running into the camp from the big house asking for help to put out the fire, which had just been discovered, and which had already gained considerable headway.

The fire was, indeed, at Mr. Van der Donk’s, and it was feared that the fine mansion with its costly furnishings would have to go, as there was no fire engine company within a mile or more, and it would be hard to get word to them at this time.

“Stir yourselves, boys!” cried the little colonel, bustling about half dressed. “We can at least form a bucket brigade. Form the lines quickly, Percival, and get the boys to moving.”

Jack, Dick and others quickly got the boys out, and, not more than half dressed, most of them, they quickly formed in good order, and went on the double quick out of the camp and toward the big house.

Every boy had a bucket to draw water from the river for washing purposes, and now they each seized one and went on the run toward the house.

It was a matter of a few minutes only to reach it, and once there Jack and Dick formed them into a double line reaching from the house to the well, and to an artificial pond on the grounds.

Once the line of buckets got started the boys went into the house, on the balconies and everywhere convenient, and the work went on rapidly.

Bucket after bucket was passed to the boys at the end of the lines, and passed back empty after their contents had been dashed upon the flames, the work going on rapidly.



The boys had been at work nearly ten minutes and had done much to stay the progress of the flames if not to subdue them when a fire company from Riverton arrived, and with a lot of noise and bustle, but with very little system, got to work to put out the fire.

Then their engine would not work, orders were misunderstood or not obeyed, and there was a great deal of confusion, during which the Hilltop boys worked steadily on and soon began to show the effects of their efforts, the flames being under control in many places and entirely out in a few.

Jack was hard at work taking bucket after bucket, and throwing water on the flames that poured from a corner of the piazza roof when Margaret ran up to him, almost fainted in his arms, and gasped:

“My baby brother! He is in the room up there in the extension. No one has thought of him. Save him, Jack!”



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“Yes, just as soon as—here, Billy, Arthur, take my place. I must go up to the extension.”

One of the boys quickly took his place at the head of the bucket line, and he ran inside and up the stairs to the room indicated by Margaret, covering his mouth with his hand to keep from breathing smoke.

He found the door, burst it open, and saw a bed in a corner with a small child asleep.

Seizing the infant he wrapped it in the blankets, pressed it close to him, and rushed out and down stairs to the open air.

“Here you are!” he cried, and a nurse ran up to him, and took the baby from his arms.

“Oh, thank you, thank you a thousand times!” she cried hysterically. “I do not know what I would do if the baby was lost. I shall lose my place.”

“H’m! thinking more of herself than of the baby!” sputtered Percival, who had run to support Jack. “Are you all right, old man?”

“Yes, but it was a close shave. Look! the place is all in flames now. It was lucky I went up there when I did.”

“You are very brave,” said Margaret, running up to him and seizing his hand. “I do not know how to thank you.”

“Never mind trying, Miss Margaret,” said Jack simply. “I am glad that I was able to do something. How was the child overlooked?”

“Every one supposed that the nurse had attended to him. She is always with him at night. I suppose she was frightened and left him, and then at the last moment thought of him.”

The girl nearly fainted again in her excitement, and fell against Jack’s shoulder, Percival raising her and saying:

“There, there, brace up. It is all right, and Jack Sheldon has shown himself a hero as he has done many times before.”

“I shall never forget him!” exclaimed Margaret, and then her father and mother took her away, and the boys continued their work.

The fire company was getting down to business by this time, but if the Hilltop boys had not made a good beginning for them they could have done nothing.



The fire was, before long, under control, and, although considerable damage had been done, the house was saved.

The boys were presently marched back to the camp, and Jack and Percival sought their tent, tired out and excited.

“Hello! what is this?” exclaimed Jack, as he was undressing, seeing something drop out of his trousers pocket.

It was a lady’s gold watch.

CHAPTER VI

THE MYSTERY OF A GOLD WATCH

“What have you got there, Jack?” asked Percival, seeing Jack stoop and pick up something.

“A gold watch, a lady’s watch, apparently. How did it get in my pocket? I don’t remember picking it up. It is a very handsome one, and quite expensive I should judge, although I never bought a gold watch.”

“And it dropped out of your pocket?”



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“Yes, that is the strangest thing about it. How did it get there? I did not put it there, I am certain.”

Percival examined the watch, which Jack handed to him, and said:

“Yes, it is a very expensive gold watch, aside from the case, which is set with diamonds. The watch itself is one of the best foreign makes, and probably cost anywhere from one to two hundred dollars for the works alone. Then add the price of the case, and you have a nice little sum to pay for a little watch such as a lady carries.”

“But how did I get hold of it, Dick? Could I have picked it up at the fire, and not known anything about it? We were all pretty well excited, and this might have happened.”

“I am sure I don’t know, Jack. I did not see you pick it up. You don’t remember anything about it?”

“No, not the first thing, Dick. Well, I shall give it to the doctor in the morning, and ask him to make enquiries about it. If I picked it up anywhere it must have been at the fire.”

“Yes, I don’t know where else you could have done it.”

The boys were not required to get up as early as usual the next morning on account of having been deprived of two or three hours’ sleep to go to the fire, but as soon as they were through breakfast and drill Jack took the watch he had so singularly found to the doctor, telling him how he had found it, and asking him to seek an owner for it.

“H’m, ha, well, I declare!” said the doctor, turning the watch over and over, and examining it closely. “Quite a valuable article, Sheldon. And you don’t know how it came in your pocket?”

“No, sir, I have not the slightest idea.”

“H’m, ha, very singular!” and the doctor looked the watch over again. “If you did not have a very good reputation, Sheldon, I should say that there was something very suspicious about this, but I am as much puzzled to get at the solution of this mystery as you are. Well, well, I will take charge of it, and if no one speaks of it will advertise it in the local paper.”

“That is a good idea, sir. I can get Mr. Brooke to advertise it. His paper is taken very extensively in this section.”

“Could the young lady have dropped it when you met her at the fire?” asked Dr. Wise. “She nearly fainted in your arms, I understand.”



“Possibly, sir,” said Jack. “Perhaps it will be well to ask Mr. Van der Donk if he has missed the watch. There are no initials on it to show the owner, but it is likely that it belongs to Miss Margaret, being a lady’s watch. Will you enquire?”

“Certainly. It is likely that some one from the house will be at the camp this morning in any event.”

An hour later Mr. Van der Donk called with his daughter to compliment the boys on their services of the night before, and to thank them personally for what they had done.

The doctor asked him if he had missed a valuable watch, and showed him the one which Jack had found.



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“It does not belong to any of us,” said the gentleman.

“I would very much like to have one like it,” said Margaret, “but it does not belong to me. You say it was found last night at our house?”

“The young gentleman found it in his pocket, but, of course, it got there by accident. It is very singular.”

“We have missed nothing, which is rather singular, seeing that there were so many strangers at the house. Of course, I do not include the boys. We would hardly call them strangers, being such near neighbors, and having the reputation they have, besides doing such a great service to.”

“And the watch does not belong to you?” asked Dr. Wise, who was growing rather tired of the fulsome praise of the descendant of one of the oldest and best families in the Hudson valley.

“No, it does not,” said Margaret.

“Then I shall have to advertise it. It is very singular. I thought it might be yours, but this makes it all the more mysterious.”

The boys were obliged to listen to a long speech of thanks from Mr. Van der Donk, at the end of which they were presented with an engrossed set of resolutions drawn up by the donor, which he had had copied that very morning, the language being as full of flourishes as the penmanship.

“Some one must respond to the speech, and thank the gentleman for his very complimentary gift,” suggested the doctor, and with almost one accord the Hilltop boys selected Jack Sheldon as their spokesman.

In a well chosen speech of five minutes, expressing more in that time than the descendant of an old family had expressed in his hour, Jack thanked him on behalf of the boys, stopping when he had finished and not repeating himself, as too many impromptu speakers do.

Then Mr. Van der Donk replied, and said all that he had said before, prating on till the boys began to yawn and to shift their feet from one side to the other, for they had been standing all this time, and were very tired.

When the gentleman had gone, the boys were dismissed, and some of them went to their tents, others going out on the river.



“Old Van is a tiresome old bore, Jack,” said Percival when the two boys were out on the river, gliding along side by side. “I would not like to have to listen to him all day as his family must.”

Jack smiled, but did not express any opinion regarding the gentleman in question, making it a rule never to give an adverse opinion of any one if he could not praise.

“I suppose if there is no owner found for the watch it will go to you, Jack?” Dick continued.

“I am sure I don’t want it, Dick. It is not a boy’s watch, and it is altogether too expensive a thing for me to carry. The rest of my things don’t match it at all.”

“You could sell it, I suppose? Or you might make a present of it to Miss Margaret. You said she was greatly taken with it.”



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“Yes, she was, but what business have I got making costly presents to a girl that I never saw before last night? Be sensible, Jack.”

“But I’m sure you are as good as she is, Jack.”

“Maybe, but look at the difference in fortune. And, as I said before, what business have I making presents, costly or otherwise, to people I have just met? It would be a piece of impertinence.”

“You must not take me too seriously, Jack,” laughed Dick.

That afternoon the boys went up the river in Jack’s boat, and Jack inserted an advertisement in the News, which appeared the next morning.

The advertisement was simply to the effect that a watch had been found, and could be had upon proving property, and paying for the advertisement, no description being given.

About the middle of the forenoon the next day a crafty-looking man came to the camp, and asked to see Jack.

“Did you find a watch?” he asked when the boy came up.

“Yes,” said Jack simply.

“What sort of watch was it? Maybe it was mine you found. I have lost one.”

“What sort did you lose?” asked Jack. “Describe your watch, and I will tell you if it is the one I found.”

“Well, what sort of watch did you find?” snapped the other. “If I say it was an open face watch you will say it wasn’t. Tell me the kind of watch you found, and I’ll tell you if it is mine or not.”

“You may say it was yours in any event,” said Jack quietly.

“Do you mean to say I would lie for the sake of a watch?” the man snapped, flushing deeply, and it was plain to see that this was just what he would do.

“Describe your watch to the doctor,” said Jack. “He knows what sort of a watch I found, and he will tell you if it is the one you lost.”

“You are a lot of swindlers and don’t mean to give it up,” the man stormed, getting redder in the face, and quite breathless from excitement. “I’ll see if I am going to be robbed like this. You will hear from me again, young fellow!”



“He won’t come back,” laughed Percival, who was with Jack at the time.

He was quite correct, for nothing more was seen of the indignant fellow, and the boys made up their minds that he was only a swindler who had imagined that as he had only boys to deal with he would obtain a watch at very little cost.

“I wonder if we will have any more claimants?” said Jack when an hour or more had passed, and no one else had called.

“If you had said more in your advertisement you might,” said Dick. “But you were very wise not to do so.”

“I always try not to say too much,” said Jack.

CHAPTER VII

MORE MYSTERY ABOUT THE WATCH

Shortly before noon a showily dressed woman came to the camp and asked to see the doctor, saying excitedly:

“I understand that one of your boys found a watch, Dr. Wise. May I see it? I lost mine the other day and——”



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“This one was found last night, Ma’am,” said the doctor shortly.

“Why, yes, I suppose so, but I could have lost it before then, of course. What sort of watch was it? May I see it?”

“Where did you lose it, Ma’am?”

“Why, I am not certain about that. You see I go about a good deal, and it may have been in one place or maybe in another. I could not tell just where I lost it or I would not have lost it.”

“It was lost somewhere in town, I suppose?”

“Why, yes, I suppose it was.”

“This watch was not found in town, Ma’am.”

“Oh, well, I do go out of town occasionally,” said the woman quickly. “Why, yes, now I remember, I was down this way yesterday afternoon, looking at the camp and enjoying the view. I would know the watch in a moment. May I see it, Doctor?”

“It was a gentleman’s watch, was it? Probably a keepsake? Your husband’s or son’s, perhaps, and you don’t like to-----”

“Yes, it was my father’s, and I value it very highly. Let me see it-----”

“This is not the watch you lost, Ma’am, this is a lady’s watch,” said Dr. Wise tersely, being convinced that the woman was an imposter, and that she had not lost a watch of any sort.

“You might at least let me see it,” said the woman persuasively. “Some of my friends may have lost a watch, and I could take it back to them. I know them all.”

“If your friends have lost their watches, Ma’am, let them come after them,” said the doctor shortly. “Good morning, Ma’am.”

“H’m! I don’t think you have any manners to boast of!” snapped the woman as she went away.

She had not been gone more than ten minutes before another woman came to the camp, and asked to see the boy who had found a watch the night before.



She was sent to the doctor and said to him, evidently disappointed at not seeing the boy himself:

“Ah, good morning, I understand that one of your young gentlemen found a lady’s watch last night. Ah, I have lost mine, and would like to look at it to see if-----”

“How did you know it was a lady’s watch?” asked the doctor. “The advertisement merely mentioned a watch. What sort of watch was yours, domestic or foreign, stemwinder or keyed, open face or hunting case, gold, silver, or nickel case? If the watch is as you describe it, it is yours. Otherwise I shall have to hold it.”

“Really now, I could not describe it so accurately as all that. Ah, do you mind showing it to me? I am very what you may call hazy on descriptions. I could not really say if it was large or small, those terms being relative, you know. Yes, it is in a gold case and is a stemwinder, that much I remember. It is an American, of course, but whether Elgin, Waltham, Howard, Thomas or—or any other make I really could not tell you.”

“You are sure it is American make?”

“Oh, yes, positively, and in a gold case, and about half this size,” closing her thumb and first finger to form a circle.



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“Well, I am very sorry, Ma’am, but this is not an American watch. I trust that you will find yours, but this is not it. I wish you good morning, Ma’am,” and Bucephalus showed the lady out evidently greatly disappointed.

Half an hour later a self-satisfied looking man came into the camp and asked to see the boy who had found a watch, and had advertised the same in the Riverton paper.

Billy Manners happened to see him first, and, seeing Jack at a little distance with Percival, called out:

“Hello, Jack, come here, somebody wants you!”

Jack came up with Percival in a few moments, and the self-satisfied man, eyeing him fiercely, said:

“You are the boy who found a watch, I believe. Describe it to me.”

“Excuse me,” laughed Jack, “I have not lost a watch. I have found one. If you have lost one describe it, and we will see if it is the same as the one I have found.”

“I have not lost a watch,” snapped the other. “I am in the detective service, and if I have the description of the article I can enquire who has lost one like it, don’t you understand?”

“And you wish to be a sort of middle man between me and the owner?” and Jack laughed again. “I advertised for the owner of the watch, not for an agent who would help me find the owner. I cannot see that we need spend any more time on the affair.”

“How do I know that you have not stolen the-----”

It was very fortunate for the man that Jack was nearer to him than Percival, who suddenly aimed a swinging blow at him.

Jack threw up Dick’s arm, and said quickly:

“Dick! What are you about?”

“It is lucky for you, sir,” said Dick hotly, “that my friend stopped me. Is it a part of your business to insult people without provocation?”

“Sir,” said the other, “I come in contact with very many persons



of a suspicious character and-----”

“Yes, I should suppose you might,” said Dick significantly. “We do not, and it is not at all necessary that you should consider this boy one of that sort. Let him talk to the doctor, Jack.”

The boys were walking away when the man interrupted them hastily with:

“I am in search of a watch which has been stolen. It is a lady’s watch, heavy gold case, about an inch and a quarter diameter, hunting case, set with five or six small diamonds, made in Switzerland, Jurgensen movement, worth from three hundred to five hundred dollars. There are no initials nor monograms, but the number is——”

“That describes the watch the doctor has,” said Jack. “We will see what the number is, and if it is the same as what you mention there is no doubt that this is the watch. We will go and see him.”

“Where did you find this watch?” asked the other, as he hurried after the two boys.

“Excuse me, but that has nothing to do with it,” said Jack. “I found a watch, and your description tallies with it all but the number, which I do not know. That we will ascertain.”



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The boys led the way to the cottage, which the doctor occupied, and went to his study where they found him.

“Write the number of the watch you are in search of on a piece of paper, and let the doctor see the number of the watch,” said Jack to the detective, after telling the doctor why they had come. Then we will see if this is the one or not.

The man wrote a number on a card, and handed it to the doctor, who took the watch from a pigeon hole in his desk and opened it.

“The number is identical,” he said, and handed the watch and the card with the number on it to Jack that he might compare them.

“Yes, so they are,” the boy said, showing them to Dick. “This is certainly the watch you are in search of.”

“May I ask you where and how you found it?” asked the detective, still with the accusing air that both Dick and Jack himself resented.

“I found it in my pocket after coming from the fire at Mr. Van der Donk’s house last night or this morning,” he replied.

“In your pocket? Was not that a singular place to find it? How did it get in your pocket?”

“You know as much about that as I do,” said the boy quietly.

“Are you sure you did not put it there yourself?” asked the man in an insinuating manner, which Jack resented.

“Dr. Wise,” he said, flushing, “will you tell this person what I told you when I gave you the watch this morning? I am afraid I cannot keep my temper if I talk with him any longer.”

“And I know I shall not!” sputtered Percival.

“The young gentleman did gallant work at the fire last night, and came home very much fatigued,” said the doctor. “While undressing with his companion who is here, this watch dropped from his trousers pocket. Percival will doubtless tell you the same. This is what he told me when he handed me the watch this morning. If you suspect him you do him an act of the rankest injustice.”

“This watch has been stolen,” said the other. “The thief was traced to Riverton. He went to the fire last night with a number of suspicious characters who generally congregate at such places in the hope of gain. The watch was doubtless passed from



one person to another, for it was not in the possession of the suspected man who denies all knowledge of it. Now I want to know how this boy got hold of it.”

“He does not know any more than you do, and I have told you just what he told me, and which I believe.”

“It sounds very queer,” said the detective. “I shall have to hold him for the Grand——”

“I beg your pardon, you will do nothing of the sort, in fact, you cannot,” said the doctor.

“Just let the Hilltoppers hear him, and see what they will have to say about it!” sputtered Percival under his breath.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT JACK AND DICK OVERHEARD



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"I beg your pardon, Mr.—, I did not catch your name," continued Dr. Wise, "but you have no authority in this case. You are not a civil magistrate, not even a police court judge, and you cannot hold this boy for any jury, grand or little. You can make a charge against him, it is true, and then if the local magistrate considers the evidence good he will be held for the Grand Jury. You are doubtless unaware, being a stranger to the section, that I am a magistrate myself, although seldom called upon to adjudicate cases."

"I was not aware of it, sir," said the other, a little shamefaced. "I may have been hasty, but my association with suspicious characters-----"

"Has made him one himself," muttered Percival, whereat Jack could not help smiling.

"Has made me suspect persons unjustly, perhaps," the detective went on. "Still you must admit yourself that the finding of the watch, as related by you, is, to say the least, singular."

"Singular, yes; suspicious, not necessarily. You say yourself that the watch was supposedly passed from one person to another. Why could not one of the suspected men have slipped it in Sheldon's pocket, either designedly or by mistake? It is certainly possible."

"I wish you'd let me go out and tell the Hilltop boys that this man has more than intimated that Jack Sheldon is a thief, Doctor," said Percival "I can imagine what they will have to say about it, and what they will do to him. The river is very convenient!"

"Restrain yourself, Percival," said the doctor.

"If I have given the young gentleman an unenviable reputation," the detective rejoined, his face red, "it is on account of the reports I have heard of him from-----" and he stopped short.

"Who told you this?" demanded the doctor. "There is not a more exemplary boy in the whole Academy than John Sheldon. Ask any one of the instructors, ask the boys themselves, ask the editors of the Riverton papers, ask the heads of the business houses, the superintendent of the Machine Works, the Chief of Police himself, and they will all tell you the same. Who was your informant to the contrary?"

"I am not at liberty to reveal the name of my informant," said the detective, a little abashed, "but I had it from more than one source."

"Then let me tell you that you were maliciously misinformed, for there is not a boy in the Academy who bears a better character than John Sheldon. I will retain this watch until I have a better authority to deliver it than yours. I wish you a very good morning."



Just then the bugle blew to call the boys to dinner, and as they always formed in regular order to march into the dining tent there was not the opportunity, which Percival so much desired, of pitching the detective into the river or at least giving him a sound hissing.

“As you please, sir,” the man said, as he bowed himself out. “You cannot expect me to believe all that this young gentleman says after what I have heard of him from-----”



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"You could have consulted me, at any rate," said the doctor. "I think I am best competent to judge of the characters of the boys put in my charge. Good morning, sir. Boys, the bugle has sounded."

The detective went away in a hurry, looking a good deal crestfallen, the boys getting into line with the rest, this operation preventing Percival from giving the man the send off that he had meant to give him.

"I'd like to know where that fellow got his information about you, Jack," he said to his friend when they were seated at table.

"I don't care to know, Dick, so long as the doctor speaks well of me," Jack returned.

"Well, I'd like to know just the same. There are some boys here who would say all they could against you, and the man may have seen them before he saw the doctor, and heard what they had to say. You could see that he was prejudiced from the start."

"Yes, he presupposed my guilt before giving me a chance to speak for myself, Dick. However, it is fortunate that I have a good reputation."

"Which is what some of the Hilltop boys have not. I am not mentioning any names," and Percival began eating his soup with a good appetite.

An hour or two after dinner Jack asked Percival to go up the river in his boat, having one or two errands in town to do, and wanting company.

Dick was glad to go in Jack's boat, as the boy managed it so well, and he would have very little to do himself.

Finishing his errands in town Jack was proceeding down the river when, with a sudden impulse, which he could not explain, he said to Dick:

"Suppose we go up the creek a bit. The tide is that way now, and we shall have water enough, and it will not be against us."

"You don't want to go to the Academy, do you, Jack?" asked Percival. "You can run in as far as the ravine. You came down that way once."

There was quite a deep ravine on the bill where the Academy was located, from which a turbulent creek or kill ran to the river, and Jack had once had a tumble into this, and had made his way to the little station at the foot of the hill along its banks, and, incidentally, had discovered a considerable sum of money stolen from a bank in Riverton and hidden there.



“No, I don’t want to go all the way, Dick,” answered Jack with a smile, “but we might go a short way up.”

They put into the little kill, and went beyond the business part of the town, finally getting into the woods and finding banks of some height on either side.

The kill was full, and the current set their way, so that they had no trouble and kept on for a mile beyond the town, finding themselves in a most wild and picturesque spot, most of the time in deep shadow, and hearing no sounds except those of the woods, now and then seeing a drowsy bird on a bough or hearing the low hum of insects as they flew past.

“You’ll get to the station before long, Jack,” said Percival at length. “I think the tide is beginning to turn. We get considerable of it even here. Do you think-----”



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Jack raised his hand as a sign for his friend to be quiet, and at that moment somewhere on the bank above them they heard a querulous voice:

“Why do you give me it if it is worth so moche, and there is alarm about it?” they heard in a high-keyed, querulous voice, evidently that of a woman, and Jack started involuntarily.

He had heard that voice before, but at the moment he could not tell where, or when it was.

“What have you done with it?” asked a man in a low tone, which Jack caught, nevertheless, all being silent in the place.

“How I know where I have lose it?” answered the woman. “I have be in a many exciting time. If there was suspicion you should not give it. I do not know, and maybe I show it to some friend to make her jealous.”

“Did you?” growled the man. “You should have more sense.”

“But you do not tell me. Now it is lose. I do not know where. I am glad. You should not have give me it.”

Jack now recognized the voice as that of the nurse who had taken the Van der Donk child from him the night before, but he was still at a loss to know what she was talking about.

“I gave it to you to keep safe for me until I could dispose of it,” the man answered. “The detectives were after me. Luckily I got rid of it in good time, but now that they have nothing against me I can dispose of it to advantage. And you have lost it?”

“I have tell you that I have,” the woman answered in her high voice, with a strong foreign accent, Jack now remembering that she had seemed to be French or Italian, although he had met her but a few moments. “I have lose it, and I am glad. Why shall I get into prison for you? You shall keep your gold and diamond watches for yourself, and not give them to me.”

“Sh! not so loud!” cautioned the man. “Somebody may hear you.”

It was the watch he had found in his pocket that the woman was talking about, and Jack had some trouble in restraining his surprise.

“But how did you lose it?” the man continued. “Did you carry it with you? You don’t go to throwing such things about, do you?”



“I don’t know. There is much excitement at the house, there is the big fire, there is the boy of the Academy coming to put it out, there is the man from Riverton, and there is the baby, which I forget, and the boy go up in all the smoke and bring him down. I shall lose my place if the baby is lose. How can I remember a watch, which I cannot carry, for fear some one say I steal? Ah! you should not give!”

“And now you have lost it!” growled the man. “Haven’t you any idea? Couldn’t you have mislaid it? You are not lying to me, you have really lost it, Gabrielle?”

“Yes, I tell you I have lose it, and I am glad!” cried the woman in a higher key than before, and with great excitement.

The tide now began to take the boys back down the hill, and Jack quickly steered so that he would go down with it, being speedily out of sound of voices.



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“What do you think of that, Jack?” whispered Percival.

“That the mystery of the watch seems to be as deep as ever.”

CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER CLAIMANT FOR THE WATCH

The boys made their way down to the mouth of the kill, and out upon the river, no more being said concerning what they had heard until they were on the river gliding down stream.

“That must have been the nurse you saw last night,” said Dick.

“Yes, but I don’t know the man. He must be a bad character.”

“Decidedly. There is one thing I cannot make out, though. How did that watch get in your pocket?”

“I don’t know myself unless the girl slipped it in during the short time I saw her. It was evidently not passed from hand to hand as we thought. The girl had it, but I cannot see that any one else did. I am as much in the dark as ever.”

“And we still have to learn who it was who gave you a bad reputation to the detective. He won’t tell.”

“He may not know,” rejoined Jack musingly. “I don’t care very much. My reputation does not depend upon what he says nor upon what some of the boys here may say. I have enough friends among the boys of Hilltop, and the faculty, not to mind the rest.”

“True enough, Jack. Hello! there are some of those fellows now looking for a race if not trouble.”

Herring and Merritt just now appeared in their boat off the railroad dock, and waited till Jack and Percival came up when Herring shouted:

“Come on if you want to race. We’ll meet you on the way back.”

“Race ’em, Jack, just to show them you can beat ’em!” whispered Dick hoarsely.

“No, Dick, I won’t,” said Jack with emphasis. “I’ll race any one else for the fun of it, but I will not race with those fellows.”



Herring started off at a good pace, expecting that Jack would follow, and when they had a good lead, Jack having turned and gone up the river, Billy Manners and young Smith in the latter's boat set off after them.

"We'll give you a race, Pete!" shouted Billy. "Whoop her up, J.W., and see how we'll leave 'em behind!"

Young Smith was managing the boat and doing it well, and now, anxious to show off, he shot ahead, and soon began to gain on the other boat.

"You can watch the fun even if you don't race, Jack," chuckled Percival. "Turn around, old man, and follow."

"I don't mind that," said Jack, "and if anything should happen to either Billy or to J.W., we will be on hand to help them."

Young Smith was putting his boat to its paces, and as Jack turned to follow had nearly reached the leading boat.

"Go ahead if you are going!" shouted Billy Manners with a laugh, greatly enjoying the excitement. "Chuck us a line and we'll tow you."

"Huh! you can't beat anything!" shouted Merritt.



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"Let's see you beat us!" snarled Herring, forging ahead.

Young Smith put on a spurt and came on behind at a swift pace, shortly being even with Herring.

"Watch 'em, Jack!" exclaimed Dick excitedly. "I'd give a dollar to see young Jesse W. beat those fellows, yes, five. I hope he'll keep it up."

The boy did keep it up, for in a few minutes he passed Herring and Merritt, and gained a good lead on them, much to Billy's delight.

The joker laughed and shouted, and seemed greatly to enjoy the fun, while the younger boy kept up his speed and increased the lead, Jack following till a bend in the river hid the two boys in the first boat from sight.

He would not pass Herring and Merritt, but went across the river where he could get sight of young Smith, who was going on at a good rate, Herring trying his best to reach him, but in vain.

"That's the best yet," laughed Percival uproariously. "Beaten by little Jesse W. Smith, and those fellows claim to have the fastest boat on the river. I think they will have less to say now."

"Probably Herring will say that there was something the matter with his boat, and yet he was ready to race with us just a moment before. He'll get out of it somehow, you'll see. It's just like him."

Herring did not overtake the other boys, and they were ashore some little time ahead of him, Jack coming along leisurely and letting Herring land first.

"Did you see that?" asked Billy in great glee when Jack came ashore. "We won't hear any more boasting from that quarter I guess."

"We didn't have enough gasolene to go fast," growled Herring, who came up at that moment. "We got out without knowing it. We'll race you for ten dollars to-morrow."

"Oh, we are satisfied," chuckled Billy, while Percival looked significantly at Jack, and said:

"What did I tell you, Jack? A poor excuse is better than none."

Jack said nothing, and he and Percival went off into the woods.



Within a short time of the supper hour when the boys returned they were told by Bucephalus that the doctor wished to see them, and they went at once to the cottage where they found a well-dressed stranger talking with the principal.

“This is the young gentleman who found the watch,” said Dr. Wise. “Will you describe it to him?”

“It is a lady’s watch,” said the other slowly, and in well modulated tones. “It was a present to my wife, and, of course, I am sorry to lose it, and will give a good reward for its return. It was stolen from the house where I live a few weeks ago, and I have been trying to find it ever since. I did succeed in tracing the man whom I suspected of stealing it, but when he was arrested the watch was not in his possession. I saw an advertisement in the paper only this afternoon, which made me think that perhaps this might be the watch I am in search of.”



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Jack looked closely at the man who did not have the marks of a bad character anywhere, being well dressed, well spoken, and evidently a man of easy means and considerable culture.

There was something about him, nevertheless, that made Jack think he was not what he seemed, and he tried to think what it was and to place him in his mind.

“Will you describe the watch, please?”

“Certainly, with the greatest of pleasure,” and the man proceeded to give an accurate description of the watch, not omitting the slightest detail, giving the name of the maker, the size, the number of diamonds on the case, and, in fact, everything about it.

“Number, please?” said Jack, still looking fixedly at the man. “You will know the number of the watch, of course? Persons who own valuable watches always make a record of the number.”

“The number?” said the other. “Oh, yes, to be sure. I have it in my pocket-book. The rest of the description is accurate, is it?”

“Let me hear the number,” said Jack quietly. “Two watches may be exactly alike, but have different numbers. I have not said that your description is correct. You have the number?”

“Why, of course!” said the other somewhat impatiently, and all at once a light broke in upon Jack.

The man was the one he had heard, but had not seen, talking with the foreign nurse maid on the bank of the kill earlier in the afternoon.

He had tried to place the man’s voice, but while he talked in low, pleasant tones, with a good inflection, he was puzzled, knowing and yet not knowing it.

The instant that the man spoke in impatient, angry tones, such as he had used on the bank of the kill, Jack recognized him, and he wondered that he had not done so before.

The man took a slip of paper from his pocketbook, and read out a number written in pencil, the exact number of the watch which Jack had found.

“Is that correct?” he asked Jack with a certain tone of triumph.

“Perfectly so,” the boy answered.

“And the description is correct also?”



“Absolutely.”

“Ah, I am glad of that. I mentioned a reward a few minutes ago, and I am perfectly willing to pay it. Will a hundred dollars be sufficient?”

“It would be more than ample in the event of my having the actual owner of the watch to deal with,” in a quiet tone.

The man flushed, glared angrily at the boy, and cried excitedly:

“What do you mean by that, you young scoundrel? Do you dare to say that I am not —” and then he stopped short, laughed, and said in his former pleasant tones: “but this is a joke, of course.”

“No, it is not, it is the truth,” said the boy. “Dr. Wise, don’t give it to him. He is not the real owner of the watch. Have you forgotten your conversation with Gabrielle this afternoon?” to the man himself. “Well, I have not, nor has my friend, and we both heard it. It was on the banks of a little kill that runs into the Hudson a few miles from here, and about a mile up from the river.”



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Before the boy had finished the man uttered an inarticulate mutter, and flushed deeply, dashing out of the room as the sentence was completed.

CHAPTER X

DISAPPOINTMENTS

“Come On, Dick, the man must not escape!” cried Jack excitedly. “Excuse us, Doctor, we’ve got to watch him. Come ahead, Dick!”

Both boys left the cottage in haste, seeing the man running toward the river when they reached the outside.

“Hello! stop that man!” shouted Dick.

“Catch him!” echoed Jack.

Jack’s boat was at the shore, not hauled up on the bank as usual, and now this man made directly for it, sprang in, started the engine in a few moments, and was out on the river as the two boys and some others came running down.

“I am going to take your boat, J.W., if it’s ready!” shouted Jack to young Smith whom he saw approaching. “I must catch that fellow!”

“All right, Jack!” cried the boy. “Do what you like with it.”

Jack sprang into the smaller boy’s boat, started the engine and set off after the runaway at a good speed.

The man was going up the river, and already had a good lead, but Jack did not hesitate, relying on getting help to stop him before he had gone much farther, or, at any rate, when he reached town, where he was evidently making his way.

The fugitive kept as close in to shore as possible, and made the highest speed he could; Jack realized that his boat was a good one, and would have some trouble to keep it in sight, although young Smith’s boat was capable of making good time.

“I am glad I know what young J.W.’s boat can do,” he said to himself, “and if that fellow had not had a lead on me I would have been up to him by this time. I think I can beat him in the long run, as he does not know my boat as well as I do, and I know this one now.”

Jack hoped that by the time he reached town he might get aid to stop the man even if he had not overhauled him, and he kept on at a good rate.



“That fellow must know something about motor-boats,” he thought, “for he is managing mine in good shape. I could do better with her, but he is doing very well. I only wish some one would come along so as to head him off. I don’t like to lose him.”

When they neared the mouth of the kill Jack shot a hasty glance ahead to see if there was any one coming to whom he could shout, and saw a little tug put out from the railroad dock.

He was about to shout to them when to his great annoyance he saw the man in his boat shoot into the kill and disappear.

“H’m! I don’t know where he will go now!” he muttered in disappointment, hurrying after the fugitive.

He was not far behind as it was, and as he entered the creek, having put on extra speed, he saw the man only a short distance ahead.

Not far away there was a turn in the creek, and the runaway presently disappeared around it, Jack following and gaining ground.



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In a short time he came in sight not of the man, but of his boat, tied up at the bank, the man having disappeared.

“Well, I have my boat at any rate,” laughed Jack rather ruefully, “and that is something I suppose. I wanted the man, but I shall have to be satisfied with what I can get.”

He got into his own boat, and towed the other out of the creek and down the river, disappointed, of course, but, on the whole, glad that it was no worse, and that he had not lost his boat.

He met Percival and some of the boys on his way back, the boys questioning him excitedly as they came up.

“Did you get him, Jack?”

“You have got your own boat back anyhow. Did you catch him?”

“How did he get away, Jack?” asked Percival. “Did he put up a fight?”

“No, he ran into the kill, and as soon as he got out of sight around a bend tied up my boat and skipped out,” said Jack in a tone of disgust.

“That’s too bad. I hoped that you would catch him”

“Young J.W. will think all the more of his boat after this,” said Billy Manners. “You made it go, Jack.”

“Haven’t I told him that he could get speed out of a canal-boat?” Percival retorted with a laugh.

“No one will want to race with Jesse W. after this,” remarked Arthur. “They won’t make fun of his boat now, nor of him either.”

“Well, he got away from me,” said Jack, as the boys turned and went back with him, “and now I suppose he will be harder than ever to find. He has not got the watch anyhow.”

When the boys reached camp supper had already started, but Bucephalus looked after them, and the doctor readily excused them on account of the importance of their errand.

“He got away from me, Doctor,” said Jack, “but I recovered my boat and that is something.”

“Percival told me of the conversation you heard this afternoon, and so I readily, understood why you were so anxious to apprehend the man. I was prepared to turn the



watch over to him, being convinced that he was the owner, and your accusation came as a great surprise, therefore.”

After supper Jack suggested to Percival that they go up to the Van der Donk house and see the nurse, as they might learn more about the man who had claimed the watch.

“It is a good idea, Jack,” said Dick, “but I guess you will need to be careful how you proceed with that excitable creature, who is ready to go up in the air at the slightest notice.”

“Yes, it will be necessary to observe caution if we wish to learn anything. These foreigners are very excitable, especially the women, and one has to be cautious in dealing with them.”

Early in the evening the two boys went up to the Van der Donk house, being met by Margaret, who seemed very glad to see them, and said:

“We have been busy putting things to rights, and if it does not look very tidy here you must excuse it. Gabrielle has gone away, no one knows why or where.”



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Jack glanced significantly at Percival, and said carelessly:

“Gabrielle? She was the nurse?”

“Yes, and I have been obliged to look after the baby, to help the maids with the cleaning and dusting, to assist the cook, to look after things generally and to keep father and mother from getting into the dumps.”

“Did Gabrielle do all these things?”

“Oh, no, but when one maid goes the others want to, and it has been a difficult matter to keep them all contented and busy. Gabrielle was a good nurse, but a bit flighty and quite excitable.”

“But you don’t know that she has gone for good?”

“She took her boxes, and went away very unexpectedly. It may have been on account of the fire, but we don’t know. She has never gone away like this before, but I suppose an excitable person, such as she was, is liable to do strange things at any time.”

“It must be very awkward to be without help at such a time, and if we are any trouble
—”

“Oh, no, don’t think of going,” said Margaret hurriedly. “By the way, did you find an owner for the watch?”

“We have had several claimants, but no real owner,” said Jack. “It is a very handsome one, and almost anybody might be excused for wanting it.”

“Yes, indeed. I would like very much to have it myself. How could it have been here when it does not belong to any one in our family?”

“There were strangers here last night, and we think that the man who stole it put it in Jack’s pocket by mistake when he saw that the police were watching him.”

“But we did not miss anything ourselves. One would think that if thieves were about they would try to pick up something when there was so much excitement. It seems very mysterious to me.”

“Yes, and to every one,” said Percival. Mr. and Mrs. Van der Donk came in shortly, and for a time there was a very pleasant conversation, but at last the old gentleman got upon the subject of his family, and before long the boys were yawning, and the old lady fast asleep.



“You will have to excuse us,” said Percival, getting up, “but we boys had very little sleep last night, and we have to be back at nine o’clock in any event.”

The boys took their leave, and when once clear of the house Percival said with a grin:

“I could not stand the old man and his genealogy, although we could have stayed an hour longer easily.”

“I saw that you were beginning to yawn, and I must confess that I felt a bit drowsy myself.”

“We won’t find out anything about the watch through that girl, Jack,” said Percival a little later. “Our plans of being cautious and all that did not amount to anything.”

“No, and we are as much in the dark as before regarding the real owner. We may never know who he is, Dick.”

“It looks like that,” said Dick.

CHAPTER XI



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THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

As the boys were nearing the camp on their way back they suddenly heard the sound of angry voices, and Percival whispered:

“Wait a minute, Jack. Some of the boys are having a quarrel, and I believe I know who they are.”

“I told you to let my boat alone, you idiot!” the boys heard Herring say just ahead of them.

They were in the woods adjoining the camp, and the two quarreling boys were very close to them.

“Well, I didn’t hurt it!” they heard Merritt say angrily. “You are making a lot of fuss over an old tub that isn’t any good anyhow. Look how little Smith beat us this afternoon, and he the smallest boy in the Academy. I didn’t hurt your boat.”

“I say you did, and I told you not to go out with it. You’ve busted the engine.”

“No, I didn’t. It wasn’t any good anyhow. You tried to put Sheldon’s boat out of business, but you couldn’t.”

“You had as much to do with that as I did!” sputtered Herring.

“Well, you started it, same as you started telling that detective that Sheldon had a bad name in the Academy, and——”

“Shut up! Somebody will hear you. You had as much to do with that as-----”

Percival suddenly let out a great bellow, such as a calf in search of its mother might make.

“Gracious! what’s that?” cried Herring in alarm, making a dash for the camp, the lights of which could be plainly seen.

Merritt followed in hot haste, frightened out of his wits, and Percival broke into a hearty laugh, not caring if the two conspirators heard him or not, and greatly enjoying their terror.

They may have done so, but they did not pause until they reached the camp, and were challenged by the sentry.



“That’s good!” laughed Dick. “And we have found out something as well. Now we know who it was who tried to put your boat out of commission. I have always suspected those rascals of having had something to do with it, and now I am certain.”

“Yes, but that was not as bad as----”

“As trying to make you out a bad character. No, it is not. I had my suspicions on that score, too. If you had asked me to name the fellows who were most likely to do a thing of that sort I would have named them in a moment. They are just mean enough.”

“Well, it does not matter,” said Jack. “No one would believe them who knows me. It is not worth thinking about.”

“But I think it is!” said Percival hotly. “You don’t know how far a thing of that sort might go. Suppose the detective had arrested you before he saw the doctor or you had a chance to explain? It would have taken a long time to explain things away.”

“I do not think so,” Jack replied. “I have friends enough in town to say nothing of the Academy. Besides, who is going to arrest me in any such peremptory fashion as all that? Do you suppose I would submit to it?”



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"No, I guess not!" and Percival laughed again. "You are a quiet sort of fellow, Jack, but when it comes to a thing of that sort you can be as lively as any one, myself for instance. I remember the time you knocked this same Herring bully down for insulting you. It was a surprise to him, and to all of us, for we all thought you were a quiet chap who would stand most anything for the sake of peace."

"Well, I don't seek quarrels," Jack replied, "but being in one-----"

"As Shakespeare says you stick it out," and Percival laughed again. "I think it ought to be known that Herring and Merritt tried to give you a black eye, Jack. It is no more than right."

"But they did not give it to me, Dick, and there is no use in stirring up trouble. Let it go. Both Herring and Merritt must know by this time that the Hilltop boys in general will not believe their lies."

"Well, if they do not they must be very stupid," grunted Percival, and by this time the boys were in the camp.

"Pete Herring and Erne Merritt saw a ghost!" laughed Billy Manners, as the boys came in. "They were frightened to bits. I believe myself that it was nothing but a white calf."

"You were frightened by a calf yourself once, Billy," chuckled Dick, "and declared that it was a roaring bull."

"Did I?" asked Billy innocently. "When was that?"

"You know well enough," said Percival, "so you need not be so innocent. However, I know what frightened Herring and Merritt."

"What was it?" asked Billy, and a number of others.

"Guilty consciences!" said Dick shortly, and with some emphasis, and then he and Jack went on to their tent.

"They will want to know more, Dick," said Jack. "You should not have given them a clue like that."

"I won't say any more, then. They are within hearing and they will understand, and you will see that they are careful how they talk about you to any one after this."

"Let them talk," laughed Jack.



For two or three days things went on as usual in the camp on the river, the boys doing a certain amount of study, drilling a little, exercising in the outdoor gymnasium, skimming along the river in their boats and otherwise occupying themselves, the time, on the whole, passing very pleasantly.

Then one day a messenger came from a boys' camp some miles down the river asking them to take part in a regatta, which was going to take place at the other camp in a day or so.

"We know you Hilltop boys," said the messenger, "and we would like to have some representatives of your Academy at our sports. Will you send a few of them?"

The messenger had met Percival and Jack, and Percival now answered:

"We shall be very glad to send any number. Do you intend to have any other besides aquatic sports? Any running, jumping, or anything of that sort? Our boys are good at all of them."



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“Mostly water sports, but I suppose we could have some of the rest. There will be races for motor-boats, shells, canoes, a tub race, and a swimming match. We have a good stretch of river at our camp, and there is plenty of room.”

“And the affair takes place the day after tomorrow?”

“Yes, beginning at two in the afternoon. That will give you time to get home after it is over, either by train or in your own boats.”

“Very well. We will be on hand. I cannot tell you whom we will send, for the doctor will have something to say about that, but there will be some of us there beyond a doubt.”

“You have a boy named Sheldon, who is a dandy at running a motor-boat, haven’t you?” the other boy asked.

“Yes, and he can get speed out of a canal-boat,” laughed Dick. “Do you want him?”

“We certainly do,” said the other emphatically. “We have heard of him, and we certainly want him.”

“Here he is now. You can ask him yourself.” The other boy was a bit surprised at seeing the very boy he had been talking about, and said:

“But I thought you were bigger. They said you were strong and wiry, and I expected to see a giant. Why, you are no bigger than I am. And you can run a motor-boat?”

“Certainly he can,” replied Dick. “Size does not count in a thing like that. Why, I am bigger than Jack, but he can beat me running a boat. Then there is little Jesse W. Smith, who is the smallest thing in the way of a boy in the Academy, and he has beaten boys twice his size.”

“And you will be down?” to Jack himself.

“If I am chosen to represent the Hilltop boys, I will certainly be on hand,” Jack replied. “I should like nothing better.”

Other boys now came up, and Percival told them about the regatta to be held at the other camp on the next day, but one, all of them being greatly excited over it.

“Even if we don’t take part I suppose we can go?” asked Billy Manners. “There ought to be a lot of fun in it.”

“There will be if you race, Billy,” said Percival. “There is going to be a tub race as one of the attractions.”



“Good enough! I can win a tub race as well as anything else if I put my mind on it,” laughed Billy. “I think I’ll enter for it.”

“Anything to make things lively,” said the messenger, and then he shortly took his leave, while the Hilltop boys were greatly excited over the coming contest wherein they hoped to take more than one prize.

CHAPTER XII

THE OWNER OF THE WATCH FOUND

On the second day following, a number of the Hilltop boys went down to the other camp to take part in the athletic games appointed for that day, and to witness the sports, the greater part of them being present.

The doctor had selected Jack Sheldon to take part in the motor-boat races, Percival as a runner and also a boatman, Harry, Arthur, and young Smith in the second-class motor-boats, Herring and one or two others as swimmers, and Billy Manners and Seymour to take part in the tub race, besides a few others in other contests.



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Dick Percival was not altogether pleased that Herring should have been chosen to represent the school in anything, but as the bully was really a fine swimmer, as well as runner and jumper, he swallowed his chagrin, and said nothing.

"They may like Pete's swimming," he said to himself, "but if they get an idea that the rest of the Hilltoppers are like him it will be pretty rough on the rest of us."

Jack, Dick, and a number of the boys went down in their boats, while Herring, Merritt, Holt, and quite a number more took the train.

The boys were well received and Jack, Dick, Herring and the rest who were to take part in the sports went to the dressing rooms back of the club house used by the other boys.

There were many residents of the neighborhood present, and a goodly showing from Riverton as well, the seats along the river and in the club house balconies being very well filled.

The sports opened with a footrace between three or four of the strangers, and the same number of the Hilltop boys, these being Percival, Harry and two others, being the first heat.

Percival and Harry and two of the others won the heat, and would run in the final later in the afternoon.

Then Jack Sheldon and another of the Hilltoppers represented the Academy against two of their opponents, Jack and the boy who had brought the message winning for the final.

"I don't think there is any doubt as to who will win it, Sheldon," said the Rocky Hill boy, "but I am going to try all the same. It is some fun to race with a boy like you. You are as straight as a house, and you make a fellow hustle, which is good for any one."

Then there was a tub race in which Billy Manners, young Smith, and two or three others, attired in bathing tights, as fitted the occasion, competed with as many of the Rocky Hill boys.

Each boy's craft was a big washtub, which he was required to propel a certain distance without sinking it, the one who went the farthest being adjudged the winner.

Billy had a bright red bathing suit and as he was rather fat and chubby, with a fair complexion and reddish hair, he was bound to attract a good deal of attention, which he increased by his remarks.

"Grand race of ocean liners for a purse of ten thousand dollars!" he shouted, as he entered his tub and started on the course.



Young Smith presently collided with him, and upset his own tub, and was obliged to swim for the bank, but Billy managed to avert disaster, and went on in great style.

“A life on the ocean wave is nothing to this!” he shouted, whereupon there was more laughter; still Billy went on, beginning to take in water, but keeping afloat, and avoiding collisions with the others.

Two or three had already been obliged to swim ashore besides Jesse W., some being Hilltop boys and some from the other camp.

Billy finally had to swim for it, his tub going under just as he got to the goal well ahead of every one else, and he was adjudged the winner amid considerable applause.



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“Honest merit will assert itself whether it is in a tub or an ocean liner,” he remarked, as he accepted the trophy, a miniature washtub decorated with ribbons, whereupon there was another laugh, and Billy retired to dress himself.

There were other contests between the Hilltop boys alone, and the Rocky Hills alone, as well as between teams made up of both camps, the winners being about evenly divided and the best of good feeling prevailing.

In the final motor-boat race Jack Sheldon won by several lengths, his opponent saying with a smile:

“Well, I did push you a bit, Sheldon, but you left me a long way behind for all that. I was scarcely second, you might say.”

Herring had won a swimming match, but was beaten in running, Percival coming a long way ahead in the footrace, to the great delight of the boys from the Hilltop camp.

Jack had noticed Margaret and Mr. and Mrs. Van der Donk on the club house balcony, and heard with considerable pleasure her cheers of delight, and saw her wave the Hilltop colors frantically when he won the race with his boat, and could not help feeling a certain amount of pride.

Later when he and Percival and a number of the boys went up on the balcony to receive their prizes and accept the congratulations of their friends, Margaret, who was seated with some distinguished-looking strangers, said to the boy after congratulating him on his victory:

“Have you learned any more about the watch, Mr. Sheldon?”

“I have not found an owner yet,” Jack replied, “and I don’t know what to do with it. It is altogether too costly an article for me to wear, besides being a lady’s watch, and my mother would feel that it was too much of a task to live up to it. However, I may find the owner yet.”

One of the ladies with Margaret seemed greatly interested, and she now turned to Jack, and asked:

“What is the watch that you speak of? One that you found?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Jack, “and in a very strange manner. It was the night of the fire at Miss Van der Donk’s. When I got back to the camp I found it in my pocket without knowing how it came there. It does not belong to Miss Margaret nor to any of the family, and they are as puzzled to know how I found it as I am myself. It was stolen I now know, but I do not know to whom it belongs.”



“You know it was stolen?”

“Yes, I overheard a man tell the nurse at Miss Van der Donk’s that he had stolen it. He gave it to her, in fact, and she lost it or threw it away, perhaps, fearing that it would make trouble.”

“Why, you never told me that!” exclaimed Margaret in great astonishment. “When did you learn all this?”

“The day after the fire. Dick and I went to your house the night after to see if we could get anything out of the nurse, Gabrielle, but she had gone during that day. I did not have a chance to tell you, and then your father came in and-----”



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“Talked genealogy till you fell asleep,” laughed Margaret. “But, Mrs. Hamilton, why are you so interested in this matter?”

“I’ll tell you in a moment. You say it was a lady’s watch?” to Jack.

“Yes, and a very handsome one. It is a Jurgensen with a gold case set with diamonds. I understand these watches are very valuable.”

“Do you know the number?”

“Yes, Madame, do you?” Jack returned. “Pardon me, but I have grown cautious. Several persons have claimed the watch who had no title to it whatever, and I have become cautious. Have you lost a watch of this sort?”

“Yes, and I know its number by heart. Is it this?” and the lady gave the exact number of the watch, which Jack himself remembered.

“Yes, that is right,” he said.

“I will tell you something else about it, which, perhaps, you do not know, my boy,” the lady continued. “The upper part of the case, the one with the diamonds on it, is double, and the top of it will unscrew, showing a small space beneath. In this is a photograph of a little girl, one I lost, and a small gold coin. When you return take off the top of the jeweled side of the case, and if you find it as I say then you will know that the watch is mine.”

“I did not deny this, Madame,” said Jack, coloring a little, “but you can readily understand that I would be cautious after so many persons have tried to get the watch away from me. By the way, did you employ a detective, a rather self-important person, to find it for you?”

“Higgins!” laughed the lady. “Yes, I did, and he told me that he had discovered the person who had it.”

“This was since the fire?”

“No, the day before.”

“And you have not seen him since?”

“No, nor heard from him.”

Jack laughed, and told how the detective had tried to get the watch from him, and how and why Dr. Wise had refused to give it up.



“Higgins always struck me as being a bit too zealous,” said the lady. “I do not wonder that the doctor refused to deliver it after the man’s poor account of you. You seem to be a great favorite both with the doctor and with the Hilltop boys.”

“And deservedly so,” echoed Percival. “We won’t hear a word against Jack, and it has not spoiled him either.”

“And you know about the watch, too?”

“Yes, being in the tent when it dropped out of Jack’s pocket. I hoped he might keep it, but now-----”

“But now you think that I have a right to it?”

“To be sure, and I only meant that Jack should keep it in case he could find no owner for it.”

It was now time for the boys to return to the camp, and they took their leave, Jack promising to examine the watch when he got back, and to report if it was as the lady had said.

After supper Jack and Percival went to the doctor’s, and Jack told what the lady had said, and asked to see the watch.



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The top of the upper part of the case could be removed, just as she had said, and Jack found the photograph and the little coin under it.

“Well, that is all right,” he said to Dick. “I am satisfied that the owner has now been found, for that thing has bothered me a good deal. I wonder what Higgins has been doing all this time, however, not to report his failure to get the watch?”

“A sudden rush of sense to the head may have affected him,” laughed Dick, “and he was ashamed to say anything about it. If he had told that he had discovered the watch, and that you had it he would have been obliged to tell why it had not been given to him, and that would have been altogether too much for his vanity.”

“I suppose so,” said Jack with a smile.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PRIZE POEM

Jack sent the watch to the lady he had seen with Margaret the next day, Dr. Wise being satisfied that it belonged to her, and suggesting that it be forwarded to her by express without delay.

The next day he received a very pleasant letter from the lady, together with a handsome locket to wear at the end of his watch chain.

“I suppose I can take this, Dick?” he said to his chum. “It is really a reward for having found the watch, and I did not expect any. However, it is not money, which I could not have taken, but it cost money just the same.”

“Keep it, Jack,” said Dick. “The lady feels that you ought to have something for your trouble, and you cannot very well refuse her gift.”

“No, I don’t suppose I can, but I did not want it, nevertheless. My mother is fond of things like that, and I can give it to her.”

“Well, the lady could hardly object to that, but I would wear it for a time. She might see you shortly, and she would miss it.”

“Very good,” said Jack carelessly. “I will do it.”

Just now the doctor was offering a prize for a poem to be written by one of the boys, not to exceed a certain length, and to be written upon some historical event, preferably one connected with the Hudson.



The poem must be entirely original, but must be unsigned and accompanied by a sealed envelope containing the writer's name, this not to be opened until the prize had been awarded to the best poem, at which time the name of the winner would be made known.

"That makes it fair for everybody," declared Percival. "I am not much of a poet, Jack, but you might try for this."

"You have had as much training in this line as I have, Dick," replied Jack. "There are plenty of subjects to choose from, Arnold's treason, the capture of Stony Point by Wayne, the firing upon the Highland Forts, Montgomery and Clinton, the burning of Kingston and the hanging of the man with the silver bullet and a lot more. Let your imagination loose, Dick, and I think you can win."

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"If it were a case of letting my temper loose," laughed Percival, "it would be a sure thing, but the imagination is different."

Jack knew that his mother would be pleased if he won the prize, and so he determined to try for it, and began setting himself to work on some verses having to do with the very location where the Academy was situated.

When Billy Manners heard of the contest he said to Arthur, Harry, young Smith, and a few others who were down on the shore fixing their boats:

"Oh, say, can you see by the dawn and so forth!" he exclaimed, "that is fine. Think of the inspiration we get from this historic river. Look at the mountains all around us, full of patriotic memories, and then say that you can't do anything. Why, the poetry fairly bubbles out of me."

"Give us a sample, William," chuckled Harry. "There was another poet named William once. Perhaps you inherit some of his genius. I never saw any suspicion of it on you, but it may be there all the same. Give us a sample, There's a good fellow."

"Why, certainly," Billy rejoined. "Historical subject, eh? And one that occurred on the Hudson? Why, that's easy. Listen to this:"

Then Billy threw up his arms, gazed straight up into the sky, and delivered himself of his poetic thoughts as follows:

"When Freedom from her mountain height Unfurled her banner to the skies, Not a creature was stirring, not-----"

"You've got things mixed, Billy," roared Harry. "Try again. Besides, that is not original. It must be original to pass."

"Oh, well, all poets are plagiarists more or less," said Billy, "but this time I will give you something of my own."

Then Billy struck a pensive attitude, and began again:

*"'Twas midnight; in his guarded tent,
Not a drum was heard, nor a funeral note,
By thy cold, gray stones, oh, sea!
Once upon a midnight dreary,
A gentle knight was pricking on-----"*

"Worse and worse!" yelled Arthur. "Halleck, Poe, Tennyson, Spenser, and I don't know who else in a regular literary hash! That will do for you, my boy.' A little of that goes a long way."



“Didn’t I tell you I was bubbling all over with poetry?”

“You’re a bubble yourself,” laughed Harry, “and you’ll burst if you get too full of that sort of stuff.”

“You wait till I really put my mind on it,” said Billy with a droll look. “You’ll be surprised, my boys.”

“We don’t doubt that in the least,” said Harry. “Why, I never heard such poetry,” chuckled young Smith.

“It actually makes me cry,” said Arthur.

“You will be surprised when I take the prize,” answered Billy, taking all this chaff good-naturedly.

“Yes, I think we will be,” replied Seymour. “Surprised is no name for it. We will be actually thunderstruck.”

“Oh, you boys are jealous,” grinned Billy. “Shall I give you another sample?”



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“Another piece of patchwork, you mean,” grinned Harry. “No, please don’t. I have not recovered from the other yet.”

“You fellows do not appreciate real genius, and here is the river right at your feet to inspire you to noble thoughts. Come on, let’s take a spin.”

“You have set our brains to spinning already,” said Arthur.

“No, one good turn deserves another,” quoted Jesse W., with a broad grin. “Come on, boys, before Billy breaks out again.”

“I may astonish you boys yet,” laughed Billy, as he got into his boat and set off down stream.

Jack worked industriously on his poem, and Percival became serious and did some really good work on one that he had begun when he knew that Jack was at work, a number of the boys getting to work at the same time.

“I don’t expect to do better than Jack,” Percival said to Arthur, “but if he knows I am going in for this he will do all the better, and I want him to come out on top.”

“He may anyhow, Dick,” returned Arthur. “He has been doing something of this sort for the News in Riverton. They have not been signed, but I know that they were his from a line or two that I heard him repeating to himself in the tent when he did not know that any one was around. I recognized them afterwards in one of the poems published in the paper. Jack is a modest fellow and does not blow his own trumpet.”

“Did any one else hear him, Art?”

“Yes, Harry. We did not say anything about it, but we know the pieces were his. Then you know that he has done something in that line for the Hilltop Gazette, of course?”

“To be sure I do. The Academy paper is doing fine since Jack took the editorship. It is some magazine now.”

“I should say it was. Jack will write something good I know, and I want to see him win the prize.”

“So do I, Art, as I told you before,” replied Percival heartily.

Percival let it be known to Jack that he was trying for the prize and this, instead of making the boy feel envious, as some would have done, encouraged him and caused him to put forth his best efforts.



“I hear that you are going to compete for the poetic prize, Dick,” he said to his friend. “That’s fine. I hope you will get it. You used to do a lot of good things, and I don’t see why you should not do them still. I’d like to see you get it, Dick.”

Dick chuckled over this to Harry and Arthur and Billy, and said:

“Jack is putting his best foot forward, as I hoped he would. He thinks that I will beat him, and so he is doing his best. That’s just what I wanted, and I hope he will win the pennant.”

“H’m! you talk as if this was a baseball series,” laughed Billy.

“Well, you know what I mean anyhow,” returned Dick.

The boys put in their poems and the blank sealed envelopes containing their names and the titles of their productions, the envelopes not to be opened till after the prizes were given.



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The doctor had all the manuscripts in his study, and was to go over them with the professors, the majority to decide which was the best.

On the night when the various manuscripts were in the doctor's study in the little cottage he occupied in the camp, Billy Manners was a bit restless, not from his literary efforts, but from having eaten something which greatly disagreed with him.

He occupied a tent with young Smith, and at a late hour awoke for the third or fourth time, and suddenly heard some one say in a whisper:

"It's all right, I've got it!"

Billy thought the voice was Herring's, but was not certain in his sleepy condition, and with pains gripping his bowels.

"Can you fix it?" somebody asked, and Billy thought this might be either Holt or Merritt, not being sure which it was, for the same reason that made him uncertain of the other.

"Fix it?" the first speaker retorted with a low chuckle, "of course I can fix it, and fix his winning the prize, too."

"There's some mischief going on," thought the young joker. "I wonder what it is?"

The voices he had heard had come from the next tent, but whether it was the next on the right or the left he could not tell, not knowing whether he may have turned in his sleep or not, having a habit of finding himself in all sorts of queer positions when he awoke.

While he was thinking the matter over, and trying to locate the tent from which the voices proceeded he fell asleep, his pain having left him for a time.

He did not know how long it was when he was awakened again, as well by the pain as by hearing voices.

"That will do first rate," he heard some one say, and then he thought he detected a light in the tent next to his.

Young Smith was fast asleep, and oblivious of everything, "and Billy did not think it worth while to arouse him.

"They won't notice the difference?" asked either Merritt or Holt, Billy was not certain which.

"No, and now to put it back."



“Put what back, I wonder?” said Billy to himself, as he sat up.

“And give the doctor a surprise.”

“Huh! he won’t be the only one surprised!” growled some one, and Billy thought it was Herring this time.

“That fellow is up to some mischief,” he muttered, “and I must find out what it is.”

Then he jumped out of bed, put on his trousers and shoes, and crept softly outside.

CHAPTER XIV

BILLY’S NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE

It was dark in the camp, but Billy, as he stole out of the tent, could distinguish a dark form moving swiftly down the camp street, and followed without making any noise, taking care to keep as much as possible in the shadow.

Unless the person he was following should happen to look around, there was very little danger of his being seen, but he took all the precautions he could to avoid being detected.



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"It is not a thief," he said to himself, "and it isn't any one who has designs on one of the boats. He left that tent, but who is he and what does he want?"

The silent figure, moving rapidly forward, presently left the line of tents, and made for the cottage occupied by the doctor.

"I wonder if it is the doctor walking in his sleep?" thought Billy. "That would be a great joke, wouldn't it?"

He thought he saw a flash of light for a moment, but was not sure of this, and hurried on after the midnight prowler, having just time to see him enter the window of the doctor's cottage.

"Can it be the doctor after all?" he muttered.

"That would be funny after all. I wish I had brought my light with me. That's just like me, though, thinking of things when it is too late." He stepped under the front window of the cottage, through which he had seen the figure disappear and listened:

"I don't hear anything," he muttered. "I wonder if it could have been the doctor? Burglars would have no good excuse for coming to the camp. Who is it anyhow?"

Listening intently, he fancied he could hear some one moving about in the cottage, and then the steps approached the window.

He was about to step back, but was a little too late in that, as he had been in thinking of his pocket light.

In another moment some one dropped out of the window, and he was upset most unceremoniously.

The person, whoever it was, had landed on his head and shoulders, and he was thrown down in an instant.

"Hello! who is that?" he exclaimed, as he felt himself lying on the bare and rather damp ground.

Some one was struggling to his feet with a startled exclamation, and Billy snatched quickly at him, and caught a leg or an arm, he could not be certain which.

"I've got you now!" he cried, "and you've got to give an account of yourself, my man!"

The stranger, whoever he was, certainly did give an account of himself, but not in the manner which Billy meant.



There was a sudden shooting out of a brawny fist, and Billy was taken between the eyes, and for a moment saw stars.

“Ouch!” he ejaculated, letting go of the person he had seized,

Then somebody rolled him over with a quick move of the foot, and by the time the unfortunate joker arose his nocturnal combatant was out of sight, as well as hearing.

“H’m! that’s too bad!” sputtered Billy. “I don’t know now whether it was a burglar, a nightmare, or what it was. I think I’d better go back to bed. Being out in the air may have done me a lot of good, but I guess I’ve had enough of it.”

With this conclusion he set out upon his return, but when he reached the line of tents was not certain whether he was in the right one or not, and began studying the appearance of things as much as he could by the very uncertain light.



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"I wonder if this is our street after all?" he asked himself. "Let me see, we are the sixth tent from the top. Or is it the seventh? Six one way and seven the other, I guess. Wait till I see."

Then he went on, counting the tents one by one till he came to the sixth from the start.

The flap was thrown back, and Billy made up his mind that he was at the right one and went in.

When he found his cot, however, he found some one on it.

"H'm! that's young J.W., and I must not awaken him," he muttered.

As a natural consequence his own cot must be just opposite Jesse W.'s, and he turned and went in that direction.

To his surprise he found the other cot occupied also.

"Hello, who is that?" asked Harry Dickson.

"It's me," said Billy. "I guess I must have got in the wrong tent. Have I been walking in my sleep?"

"How should I know?" laughed Harry. "You are in the wrong tent, that's all I do know. Arthur and I have this tent. Aren't you in with young Jesse W. Smith?"

"I thought I was," said Billy dolefully, "but I seem to have got twisted up a bit to-night. I've had the stomach ache."

"That will twist any one," chuckled Harry, "but really it is no laughing matter, my boy."

"No, I should say not. Well, I think I had better cut my call short. Would you kindly show me the way to my own tent?"

This was said in such a comical, and at the same time doleful tone, that Harry was forced to laugh.

"Why, certainly," he chuckled. "You've got on the wrong street, that is all. You can go through right here without having to go to the top or bottom and then down or up."

"Who is on the other side of the street?" asked Billy.

"Jones and Robinson."

"H'm! and they are right back of us. All right. I guess I can find the way now all right."



Then Billy started to go between two tents so as to reach his own on the next camp street.

“Look out for—”

“Ouch! what’s that?”

Harry was about to warn him to look out for the tent ropes, but Billy tumbled over them before he could be warned.

“I am having all sorts of fun to-night!” he said in a tone of disgust, as he picked himself up and made his way through to the other street.

Then he found his own tent and went in, but to make sure, even after he had found his bed unoccupied, got out his pocket light and turned it on.

“That’s all right,” he muttered, “but the next time I go wandering about the camp of a night without a light I’ll stay at home!”

Either the light flashing in young J.W. Smith’s face or Billy’s mutterings awoke that young gentleman, and he sat up in bed, asking in a very drowsy tone:

“Is it time to get up, Billy? What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing, I’ve been a bit restless, that’s all, but I feel better now, so go to sleep, J.W., and get a good night’s rest.”



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At that moment a distant church clock struck twelve, and then a rooster crowed.

"H'm! guess it is time I got to sleep!" grunted Billy, as he tumbled into bed, put out his light and was soon fast asleep.

In the morning when he and young Smith arose, the latter said to him in some surprise:

"Why, Billy, what is the matter, what have you been doing? You have got the blackest eye I ever saw on a boy."

"Me?" cried Billy. "Are you sure? Isn't it dirt? Where should I have been to get a black eye?"

"I am sure I don't know, but that's what it is all right. Look at it yourself, Billy, and see if it is not."

There was a little looking glass in the tent, and Billy now surveyed himself in this, finding that young Smith was right, and that he did have one beautiful black eye, the other being only slightly discolored.

He knew where he had obtained it, but did not think it necessary to explain the matter to young Smith.

"I'll wait and see who has the most to say about it," he thought, "and then I will know who it was that I followed last night, who it was that gave me this lovely decoration."

When he met the boys, however, all of them had something to say, and Harry said with a laugh:

"You must have got that when you stumbled over the tent rope last night, Billy."

"Yes, I guess I did," said Billy, but to himself he remarked that now there was very little chance of learning the truth.

CHAPTER XV

FUN ON THE RIVER

That day a number of the boys from the camp down the river came up on the invitation of the Hilltop boys to pay them a visit, and to compete for various prizes offered by the doctor, and some of the people of the neighborhood who had gone to the other camp on the occasion of the regatta.



“Some of our boys took away prizes from you the other day,” said Percival who received the visitors, “and it is only fair that we should give you a chance to capture something from us.”

“We won’t from you or Sheldon,” replied one of the visitors, “but we will try to compete with the rest of your boys. There is no use trying to beat you, however.”

“You won’t if you don’t try, at any rate,” said Dick. “We are glad to see you, at any rate, and we will endeavor to make you enjoy yourselves.”

Percival arranged a program, and at the suggestion of the leader of the visitors, although he would have liked not to do so, included Herring in an exhibition of swimming, and a match with four or five others, boys from both camps.

There was a three-legged race between Billy Manners and Seymour as one set of three legs, and two of the Rocky Hill boys as the other, which caused considerable amusement.

Billy’s left leg was strapped to his partner’s right so that they had really to run out of step in order to keep step, which seemed a paradox, but it was really the only way in which they could get along at all.



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“When I put out my right leg do you put out your left,” Billy cautioned his partner, “and put out the tied legs together. Keep out of step, in fact, and don’t try to go too fast. This is the sort of race where you cannot be too quick if you want to win.”

The efforts of the two teams, the funny mistakes they made, the many narrow escapes from tumbling, and the serious manner in which they took things, made a lot of laughter, and when finally Billy and his partner came in first there was a loud applause from every one.

“That makes a lot of fun for the rest of you,” said Billy, in a lugubrious tone, as he rubbed the leg that had been bound to that of his partner, “but it is not so funny for the legs.”

This remark made more laughter and then there was a flat race between teams from both camps, at least a dozen boys competing, which caused a good deal of excitement.

The race was won by Herring, Merritt, and two of the boys from the other camp, these four coming out in the lead and later the final was to be run, Herring expecting to win it.

In the meantime, he gave an exhibition of swimming, and a little later swam against two of the Rocky Hill boys.

As they were nearing the end of the course, Herring forging ahead and rapidly gaining on his opponents, intending to beat at the finish, one of the other boys was seen to throw up his hands and sink.

Herring would have kept on, claiming that this was only a trick of the boy to give his mate a chance to win the match, but a loud shout from the boys on the bank compelled him to stop.

Jack Sheldon happened to be at the shore in his boat, ready to start in the next event, when the shout arose.

In a moment he started his engine to going, and glided rapidly out upon the river toward where the boy had gone down.

He was confident that the boy would speedily rise, although not just where he went down, and he kept his eyes on the water so as to determine the spot at which he would come up.

He presently detected a certain motion of the water at a point a little to one side of his course, and in a moment steered his boat for that place, but not at too great speed.



He had calculated right, for when the boy came up Jack was within two feet of him and quickly made up the distance, reached out, caught him under the arms, and, by a dexterous move, lifted him into the boat.

The boy was nearly exhausted, but upon Jack's speaking cheerily to him, he revived sufficiently to assist his rescuer, and his getting into the boat was attended with no accident.

He collapsed when he was in, however, and Jack put for the shore at a rapid pace, a number of the boys being ready to take the fainting boy out as they came up the shelving beach.

"Why didn't you go to the boy's aid, Herring?" asked Percival, as the bully came in. "Couldn't you see that he had a cramp?"

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“I have had that trick played on me before,” retorted Herring in a surly tone. “How was I to know that it was real?”

“Our boys do not resort to such tricks?” declared the leader of the visiting team warmly, “and I do not think that the Hilltop boys in general can be accused of doing so.”

“I don’t know what you fellows do,” said the other in the same surly tone, “because I have seen very little of you, but I know that that trick has been worked on me before, and I was prepared for anything. That’s why I did not go to help him. Why didn’t his own chum do it?”

“You were nearer,” said Dick, and then he went away to see how the other boy was coming along.

Fortunately, he was out of danger, and was doing very well so that it was not necessary to stop the games, but Herring did not again have anything to do and shortly left the camp, and went off into the woods with Holt, leaving Merritt to finish the final of the flat race, losing to the boys from the other camp.

Jack won the race for motor-boats against a considerable fleet, and was the most popular boy in camp, not only on this account, but because of his timely action at the moment of danger whereby a catastrophe was averted.

“That’s only another time when Jack Sheldon has shown his nerve,” declared Harry warmly. “Why, the very first time I met him he saved a mighty bad situation by his coolness, and he has been doing those things ever since. Talk about nerve! Why, he is full of it!”

“Somehow he never seems to lose his head when it is most required,” added Percival, “although to look at him you would not suppose that he had such a command over himself. It’s when you get to know him that you find these things out.”

“Why, he would as soon jump into a flying machine as get in a motor-boat,” said Billy, “provided there was something to be done. He is a bird as well as a fish, and just as good at either.”

The sports were closed by a tub race, every one being desirous of seeing Billy Manners in another of these amusing contests.

There were a dozen or more boys in the race, all prepared for a spill in the water, which seemed to be the inevitable end of such affairs.

Billy had a bathing suit of the Hilltop colors, and said as he got into his tub:



“This is the great race of the submersibles. Mine is the I.O.U.—99, the fastest tub on the river. If she were fast I couldn’t go—fast to the bank, I mean.”

“She’ll be fast on the bottom, at any rate, Billy,” said Harry.

Jack, Percival, and a number of the boys who did not usually take part in such sports, went into this for the sake of making more fun, but the visitors were not asked to enter, as they had not brought their bathing suits, and could not very well get along without them.

The tubs started out, the boys propelling them rapidly with their hands, avoiding collisions when they could, and doing their best to keep afloat as long as possible.



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“You are not going to win this race, Billy,” laughed Percival, as he spun ahead. “You can’t take all the prizes, my boy, and I am going to beat you this time.”

“Maybe not!” chuckled Billy, using both hands and making the water fly. “This is a U.S., not a U-boat, and I’m bound to win.”

Jack was full of the spirit of the thing, and pushed the acknowledged rivals hard, presently passing Percival, and shouting to Billy:

“Look out, my boy, I am coming after you! Don’t take in too much water. It isn’t good.”

“Come on, Jack!” shouted Billy. “I am not going to the bottom yet, my-----”

Just then young Smith collided with him, and his tub filled in an instant, forcing him to swim for the shore in a hurry.

“You have a submarine now, at any rate!” laughed the younger boy, who went on a few feet farther, and then had to swim for it.

Jack and Percival were now in the lead, and the nearest to the goal, all the rest having had to swim for it by this time, and there was considerable excitement.

Both boys were great favorites and the fact of their entering such a novel contest just for the fun of it, and to please the boys and their visitors, was admired by everybody.

There was an even chance for each of the boys, but the odds were in favor of Jack, although Percival was no less liked by the Hilltop boys.

“Keep her up, Jack!” roared forty boys.

“Go ahead, Dick!” shouted as many more.

Percival had to take to the water a second or two ahead of Jack, who won the race, much to the delight of all the boys, Dick included.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PRIZES AWARDED



It was the day when the prizes were to be announced in the literary contest, and all the Hilltop boys were gathered in the pavilion eager to hear the result of the committee's consultation.

The doctor arose when all were present, and spoke of the contest, saying that it had brought out the best powers of a number of the boys and showed that they all had considerable ability when they put their minds on affair of this sort, and concluding by saying:

"I will now read the poem which I consider the best. In fact, it is the unanimous opinion of the committee that it is."

Thereupon the doctor began to read the opening lines of the poem, which were as follows:

*"From the hills of the beautiful Hudson,
Rendered sacred by patriot blood,
Come to us most inspiring traditions,
Swelling on in a glorious flood."*

"The mighty achievements of Clinton, Of brave Putnam and——"

Here Pete Herring suddenly jumped on his feet, and waving a paper in his hand, cried excitedly:

"That's plagiarism! That thing was not written by any of the Hilltop boys. It has been taken bodily from a paper published up the state, which I get every week, and was written by-----"



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“Why, those verses were written by Jack Sheldon himself!” cried Percival, getting up excitedly.

“They were published in the Riverton News, but were unsigned. I know that Jack wrote them.”

“Please be seated, Percival,” said the doctor. “Sit down, Herring. I will give you an opportunity to speak presently. This poem purports to have been written by Sheldon. Is that so?”

“Yes, sir,” said Jack, “or at least what you have read was written by me. I don’t know if the rest was. I cannot tell till I hear it.”

“And you say that the lines I have just read were not written by him?” Dr. Wise asked, turning to Herring.

“No, they were not, they were written by Miss Sadie May, and were published in a paper up the state. Here it is. I received it this morning, and was reading it as I came in.”

“Will you kindly read the entire poem?” Herring had a good voice when he wanted to display it, and he now read the lines that the doctor had read, the poem being about twice as long as the portion already given.

“The poem I have here contains these lines,” said the doctor, who had been following the manuscript in his hand, “but it is considerably longer.”

“I did not put those verses in the poem that I submitted, sir,” said Jack. “They had already been published in the News, and I would not think it right to submit any but entirely new matter. Will you read the rest of the poem? I can tell if it is mine, and I have a copy in my desk. If the rest is mine I do not see how these lines got in it, for I certainly did not put them in.”

“The other poem is certainly Jack’s,” said Percival. “He showed it to me at the time he wrote it, and I have a copy of the paper containing it. I would not wonder if other boys had it also.”

“I have!” spoke up five or six of the boys, Harry, Arthur and young Smith among the number.

“Will you kindly let me see the out-of-town paper you have, Herring?” asked the doctor.

“Certainly,” said Herring, taking the paper to the desk.

“When was your poem published, Sheldon?”



“Two weeks ago.”

“And this paper is a week old. You say you got it this morning?” to Herring, who was on his way to his seat.

“Yes, but they sometimes come late or two or three together. A friend sends them to me.”

“Have you the paper containing the poem handy, Percival?” asked the doctor. “Would you kindly fetch it?”

“Certainly, sir,” and Percival left the pavilion, returning in a few minutes with a copy of the Riverton paper in his hand.

The doctor compared the verses in both and found them to be identical, saying with a puzzled look:

“The one in the News is the same as this other, but it is not signed. The other is signed Sadie May. Do you use that as a nom de plume, Sheldon?”

“No, sir, I do not,” said Jack with a smile.



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“Then it strikes me that this other paper has been taking liberties with the News, not only taking things ‘written especially for the News,’ as printed over the poem, but declining to give any credit to the paper, and putting on the name of another besides the writer. Reputable newspapers are not supposed to do this.”

Many of the boys smiled, and the doctor continued:

“Didn’t you recognize this poem when you read it in the out-of-town paper, Herring?”

“I had never seen it before,” Herring answered, and it was noticed by some of the boys that he seemed a bit restless.

“Then you do not read the Riverton paper?”

“No, sir, I do not.”

“I seldom read it myself,” the doctor remarked, “or I would have remembered these verses. They are very clever and breathe the true spirit of patriotism. They really fit admirably into the rest of the poem, which I will read. Will you get your copy of the verses, Sheldon, and let some one compare them?”

“Certainly, sir,” and Jack arose and left the place, returning shortly and handing a copy of his poem to Percival.

Then the doctor read the poem, and Percival showed by his expression that it was identical with the one in his hand.

“It is the same, sir,” he said, “but it does not contain the opening lines which you read before.”

“I don’t see how they got in there, Dick,” said Jack. “I am sure that I did not put them in. How could I? It would have been a most astonishing piece of absent-mindedness. Besides, I have only the printed copy now.”

“However, it happened that the opening lines belong to another poem,” observed the doctor, “both by the same author, it does not alter the fact that both fit the subject admirably, and might easily be a part of one production. The metre is the same, and the subject as well. The first serves excellently as an introduction to the other.”

“I can see that they do, sir,” replied Jack, “but I am certain that I did not submit both. By the way,” with a sudden inspiration, “may I see the manuscript, sir?”

“If you will come to the desk I shall be pleased to show it to you.”

Jack went forward, took the copy of the poem, looked it over carefully a few moments, and suddenly said:

“The opening lines are not in my handwriting, Doctor. It is similar, but not the same. These lines have been inserted by some one else. I never put them in. You may see that they are at the top of the page, which had a wide margin. All the other pages had, but this one now has not. The title has been erased and written in at the top. Some one has tampered with the manuscript. You can see for yourself, Doctor.”

“Yes, but who would do this, Sheldon? You certainly do not accuse me of doing it? Or any of the professors?”

“Hardly, Doctor,” with a smile, “but some one has done it.”



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“But why should they, Sheldon, especially as both poems are your own? What reason would any one have to do this? If the inserted lines belonged to another poem so that you might be accused of plagiarism, then there would be some color to this argument, but the whole thing is yours.”

“It is strange,” said Jack, going back to his seat, all the boys seeming to be greatly puzzled, and talking to each other about the matter in low and earnest tones.

“I will now read the poem which took second prize,” said the doctor, and proceeded to read Percival’s poem, very much to the latter’s surprise and delight.

“Well, I came somewhere near you, at any rate, Jack,” he said, “but I never expected to come in second.”

There were other poems read, one receiving a prize and the best honorable mention, the boys being thoroughly satisfied with the awards, and cheering the winners loudly.

Jack was still puzzled about his poem, but he said nothing, having certain ideas about the matter, but not caring to make them known at the time, preferring to wait till he had more information.

After the exercises were over the boys went off in little groups of four or five in different directions.

Percival went with Jack on the river, taking young Smith along, and when they were out from shore Dick said:

“You have an idea who inserted the verses of your other poem in your new one, haven’t you, Jack?”

“How did Herring happen to hit upon some other verses of mine which a paper up the state had stolen?” asked Jack.

“He might do that, of course, but how did they get into the poem you had submitted two days before if he got the paper only this morning?”

“The paper was a week old, Dick.”

“Then you think that Herring may have been lying, Jack?” asked Dick pointedly.

“Other persons besides Herring may have seen the verses in the other paper, Dick. I cannot prove—now—that Herring wrote them in.”

“But you may do so at some other time?”



“That’s what he means,” said young Smith, “but Jack never says anything against a fellow unless he is sure of it.”

“That’s right enough, J.W., and we agree with you.”

“Do you remember a night or so ago when Billy Manners had the black eye?” asked the young fellow suddenly. “He said he must have got it tripping over a tent rope, and Harry said he got into their tent by mistake. I asked him what he was doing outside, and at first he would not tell me, but afterward he said there was some funny business going on the night before, and he thought that Herring and Merritt were in it, but he could not tell what it was.”

“Well?” asked Percival.

“Then he told me that he had gone to the doctor’s cottage, and that some one got out the window, fell over him and gave him a black eye. Herring, as he thinks, said that he would fix somebody and keep him from getting the prize. He told me not to say anything, but-----”



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"That's all right, J.W., it's as well you did, for now I think we will get at the bottom of this affair," said Percival in decided tones.

CHAPTER XVII

A PUZZLING MATTER SETTLED

At the same time that Jack Sheldon, Dick Percival and young Smith were on the river together, Billy Manners, Arthur Warren and Harry Dickson were going up the road leading to the Van der Donk house, although they had no idea of going there.

When they were well away from the camp and there were no other boys in sight, Billy stopped short suddenly, and said:

"Funny thing about Herring's recognizing that girl's poem in Jack's verses, wasn't it?"

"Why, I saw those verses two weeks ago, and knew they were Jack's," replied Harry.

"Funny about my getting that black eye the other night, too, wasn't it?" Billy went on.

"Yes, but what has that got to do with-----"

"I'll tell you. That night I woke up and heard some one say in the next tent to ours: 'it's all right, I've got it,' and somebody else asked, 'can you fix `t?' and the first fellow answered, 'fix it? Of course I can fix it, and fix his winning the prize, too.' That's all I heard then."

"In the next tent?" said Arthur. "Who is in the next tent?"

"Herring and Merritt on one side and Seymour and Blaisdell on the other. It was not them I heard. It was Herring and Merritt. I was not sure of it at the time, being half asleep, but from what has happened since-----"

"Hello!" exclaimed Arthur. "This is getting interesting. Go on to how you got the black eye, Billy."

"Well, I knew that there was mischief of some sort going on, but I did not bear any more and fell asleep. Later I woke up again and heard one of the fellows say, 'That will do first rate,' and the other one asked, 'They, won't notice the difference?' and the first one, Herring I am sure, said: 'No, and now to put it back.' Then they said something about the doctor being surprised, and I knew that there was some mischief on foot and I jumped out of bed and went out."



“Well, and what then?” asked Arthur.

“I saw somebody hurrying along, and followed till I came to the doctor’s cottage when I stood just under the open window. I could hear some one inside and finally came to the window. I was too late, and the first thing I knew somebody jumped out and upset me. I grabbed him by the leg, and he gave me a crack in the eye that made me see stars. Then he got away, and I found myself in your tent at last instead of my own, and later I fell over the tent rope and got another bump.”

“And what do you make out the fellow was doing in the doctor’s cottage?” asked Harry.

“Putting back the manuscript he had fixed up. He had written in the lines he thought were some one else’s, and then he put it back. He must have just come from taking it away when I first heard him.”



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"Things fit in pretty well, Art," said Harry. "Pete Herring has always had it in for Jack since he first came here. Do you remember what Jack said to him? 'What was your father?' asked Pete in that nasty way he has, when Jack told him his father was dead. 'A gentleman,' said Jack and the emphasis he put on the word just hammered home the idea that he didn't think Pete was one. It was the neatest thing I ever heard. Do you remember it?"

"Yes, and I guess Pete hasn't forgotten it either."

"Well, he was pretty sure that Jack would take the prize, as he generally does, and he fixed up this plot, never supposing that he had got hold of one of Jack's own poems."

"He always makes some stupid break like that," said Billy, "that upsets him. It takes a smart fellow to be a rogue, and Pete isn't quite smart enough. Another time when he tried to get back on Jack he made some such blunder as this, and gave himself away."

"You didn't say anything this morning?" said Arthur.

"No, for I was thinking things over. When I got to talking about it with you fellows it all came out straight."

"Well, Jack got the prize anyhow," remarked Harry, "and I don't suppose there is any use in saying anything about it. If you didn't actually catch Pete in the act and recognize him, he could easily say that he was not out of his tent that night, and Merritt would back him up."

"Yes, of course, but if he knows that I and young Smith and a lot more of the boys know it he won't put on so many frills after this;"

"No, he won't, but we don't go with him anyhow, and he bullies his own set into doing just what he wants, so that he never wants for company. You can't send him to Coventry very well, so I don't know that it will do much good to let him know that we know all about it."

"It will take down his conceit, Hal," said Arthur, "and that is one of his biggest assets. A bit of ridicule of his fine plot will take the starch out of him, and that's what he needs."

"Yes, to be sure."

The boys were in sight of the Van der Donk house by this time, but as they had no intention of calling they turned around and went back to the camp where they met Jack and his two friends just coming ashore.

"I have just heard how you got your black eye the other night, Billy," laughed Jack. "J.W., here, said he was not to tell, but we excused him under the circumstances. We



came to the conclusion that you got your black eye in trying to stop Herring when he was getting out of the window of the doctor's cottage after he had put back the manuscript he had been 'fixing,' as he called it."

"That's what we think," said Harry. "Billy has just been telling us about it. We laughed at him that night, but he was cute enough to keep the thing quiet until he found out more about it."

"Harry thinks it won't do any good to expose Herring," said Arthur, "but I think it will."



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“There is no especial need of it,” rejoined Jack quietly. “He has only made a stupid mistake, and done me no harm whatever, and it is really not worth while to pay any more attention to it. I shall not, at any rate.”

“I am sorry he is here, anyhow,” said Arthur. “He is always making a lot of trouble. The fellows don’t like him and after the other day when he claimed that he thought the Rocky Hill boys were playing a trick on him, and would not go to the aid of the one who had the cramp, not only our boys, but the other fellows are sore on him, and if there are any more meets they will look out that he is not asked.”

“They probably won’t have any,” added Percival. “They are really bound to ask the whole Academy, and so they won’t ask any one. That will put an end to these meets, for they won’t come up here as long as they know they will meet Herring. For my part I think he ought to be exposed, but, of course, it should be as Jack thinks. He is the one most concerned.”

“He may not stay here after this,” said Jack.

“He did not care to stay here in the beginning, I understand, preferring to go to some more lively place, and it is likely that he will leave after this.”

“We’ll wait a little and see,” answered Percival. “If he goes, that will settle the matter without any trouble. However, I want to see what Brooke will have to say about that paper using your poem without his consent, and putting it under another name.”

The boys went to town in Jack’s boat, and called at the office of the News, where they found the editor busy as usual.

Jack had the copy of the other paper with him, and showed it to the editor, asking him if he knew anything about it.

“I don’t exchange with it,” Brooke said, “but some one may have seen the poem in our paper and sent it to him. I’ll call him up.”

There was a long-distance telephone in the office, and the editor called up the other editor, and said:

“This is Brooke of the Riverton News. How about your printing a poem last week written especially for us, and putting another name to it? The poem was called ‘The Message of the Hudson.’ You remember it?”

“Yes. It was written by a young lady stopping at the hotel here, and given to me.”



“Oh, no, it was not. It was written by a young gentleman of the Hilltop Academy, and written especially for us, and not signed. I have his original manuscript in the office, and he is here now.”

“Well, I am very sorry, but the young lady told me she wrote it, and, as I thought it was very good, I published it.”

“You were right enough there, for it is good, but I have a copyright, which the young lady should have seen and respected. Will you make a correction in your next issue?”

“I certainly will, Mr. Brooke, and be glad to. You don’t think that I would have published the verses had I known the truth?”



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"No, I hope not. You might call the young lady's attention to the fact, while you are about it."

"I would do so gladly, but she has left town. She is making a tour of the towns in the neighborhood."

"And getting up a reputation on other persons' literary efforts," laughed Brooke. "Well, send me the paper. Sorry you were fooled that way. Take the News and you won't be again. Goodbye."

"That is the cheekiest thing I ever heard," laughed Percival, "taking a thing bodily and claiming it as your own. I should call that stealing, if I were asked about it."

"That's what it is," replied Brooke, "but it is a very common practice with some papers. Why, I had an editor show me an article of my own, and ask me if I did not think it quite clever. One of his compositors had written it, he said. I said a few things myself."

"I imagine you did!" chuckled Dick. "Well, I am glad we have settled this matter. We might not have known anything about it only for a blunder made by a fellow who has not the sense to read the News every week."

The editor looked puzzled and Percival explained briefly, Brooke laughing and adding:

"That was very funny, accusing Sheldon of plagiarizing his own stuff. I never heard anything quite so queer."

"And all on account of his not reading your paper," rejoined Percival with a wink at Jack. "You should make an editorial of this, Mr. Brooke."

"Thank you, I think maybe I will," replied the editor, beginning to peck savagely at his typewriter, and the boys left the office.

When they returned to camp after doing a few errands they were met at the landing by Billy Manners, who said with a grin:

"Well, it is settled. Pete Herring and Merritt have gone to Saratoga, so we will not be bothered with them any longer."

"Just as I thought," said Jack.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DEPARTURE OF THE BULLIES



Dr. Wise had had something to do with the going away of Herring and Merritt, although the two bullies had already decided that the camp on the river would not be a very pleasant place for them in view of what had occurred in the matter of the prize poem.

While the boys were out on the river and in the woods the doctor called Herring into his study, and looking at him fixedly through his big black-rimmed spectacles, said slowly:

“Don’t you think there are some very peculiar circumstances connected with your discovery of Sheldon’s supposed plagiarism, Herring? It strikes me that there are.”

Herring said nothing, but looked very surly, and the doctor went on.

“Does it not strike you as peculiar that you should have a week old paper in your pocket at the very time we were to pronounce upon the poems submitted by the students? And also that you had not noticed these verses before when they were published in a town paper? You can imitate different hand writings, can’t you?” the doctor suddenly broke off.



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Herring flushed, but said nothing.

"You have never liked Sheldon," said the doctor, going on to another side of the subject, "and have tried to injure him in many ways. This is known to all the Hilltop boys. Would it not be natural, therefore, that you would try to throw discredit on him at this time?"

"It would not do me any good," muttered the other. "I did not compete for the prize."

"I know you did not, but your dislike of Sheldon might induce you to endeavor to injure his reputation. Don't you think you went very clumsily to work about it?"

"You are assuming that I did this thing," growled Herring. "What proof have you that I did? Suppose I should deny it?"

"Do you?" asked the doctor pointedly.

"There haven't been any direct charges brought against me as yet, only hints and innuendoes," growled the other. "Sheldon has not accused me of anything, and he is the one most interested. What is it to me if a woman up the state stole his poem? I didn't."

"No, you did not, but who inserted the lines claimed by another person in the manuscript submitted? Were you in the cottage the other night? Some one was, for my servant heard some one prowling about, and a little later there was some sort of fracas outside. How did Manners receive his black eye? Can you tell me that?"

"He got to wandering in his sleep and fell over a tent rope, I understand. That might give him a black eye."

"Didn't he seize you by the leg and shout that he had got you, and that you must give an account of yourself?" the doctor asked. "My servant heard some one say this."

"I was in my tent all night when Manners got his black eye," said Herring, who did not fancy having this evidence brought suddenly before him.

"With a light burning?" asked the doctor. "One of the guards saw a light at occasions shining from your tent. What were you doing with it?"

"Could it not have been Merritt?" asked Herring. "I do not occupy the tent alone."

"You were writing in those lines, were you not? Did you observe that the first page had more on it than the others? I suppose it would have taken too long to copy the entire poem, insertion and all?"



“I don’t know anything about it,” snarled Herring. “What evidence have you that I did these things that you charge me with doing?”

“I have not charged you with them, Herring. I am merely asking you a few questions. I have circumstantial evidence, however, that you did these things.”

“Circumstantial evidence has hanged innocent men before now,” said the bully. “Haven’t you any corroborative evidence?”

He was beginning to grow defiant now, feeling that the doctor had no real evidence against him.

“Don’t you think that a trip to some more lively spot for the rest of the summer would be advisable, Herring?” the doctor suddenly asked, looking quizzically at him. “Better for all concerned, perhaps? You don’t altogether like this camp life, do you, Herring?”



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“Oh, I am satisfied with it,” said Herring, putting on an air of braggadocio, seeing that the doctor was giving him a loophole by which to get out. “I don’t see that I need——” but then he stopped, seeing a look in the doctor’s face like a danger signal.

“You think on the whole that it might be as well to go somewhere else for a few weeks?”

The doctor got up, and Herring took the hint and went out, saying nothing further upon the subject.

By the time Percival and the others had returned he was packing up, and when Jack and Dick came back from Riverton he had gone, and Merritt and one or two others had gone with him.

Shortly after this Jack and Percival, while in Riverton one day, came across Gabrielle, the former nurse maid for Mrs. Van der Donk, and Percival, recognizing her said shortly:

“How do you do? Will you tell me how you happened to put that watch in my friend’s pocket the night of the fire at your employer’s house?”

“What you say?” asked the girl in the high key customary with her. “I do not know you, I have not meet you before.”

“But you know me,” said Jack. “You remember the watch with the diamonds on the case that your friend gave you? You were talking about it on the banks of the kill one afternoon and said you had lost it. You did not lose it, did you? Didn’t you put it in my pocket?”

“Who are you?” asked the girl, making a move to pass the boys.

“I brought the baby down from the room in the extension, and you took him from me and thanked me very much. You remember this? You said you would lose your place if the baby had been burned.”

“Ah, then you are the young gentleman so brave who save the babee from being burn? Ah, yes, that was very brave. The ladee give you the reward, yes? That was very good.”

“Yes, but what about the watch? You need not be afraid. The owner has been found.”

“An, yes, and you find the watch in your pocket? That is very droll!” and the girl began to laugh.

“Yes, it was very funny,” said Jack, “but how did it get there?”



"I put it there, me, myself. I am afraid to carry so fine a watch and I wish to get rid of him. When you give me the baby and are tangle in the blanket I put him in your pocket."

"The baby?" laughed Percival.

"The babee?" said the girl with a look of scorn. "No, the watch. How I can put the babee in the boy pocket? That is stupid. It is easy to do when I am so close to the boy and he not know it. You have the watch then. You are be arrest, yes?"

"No, I was not arrested, and I found an owner for it. Your friend tried to get it, but I had heard him say that he had stolen it, and I would not give it up."

"An, and now he has go away and I do not see him. You want that you shall arrest him?"

"No, I don't care anything about him," said Jack, "but I did want to know how the watch got in my pocket without my knowing it."



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"An, that is one easy thing to do," laughed the girl. "Then you do not mean to make me arrest?"

"No, certainly not," said Jack.

"I am very glad. Good morning, sir," said Gabrielle, and in a moment she had whisked past the boys, and when they turned to see where she had gone she had disappeared.

"Well, that thing is explained at any rate," said Percival. "We thought she might have done it, but I don't see now how she managed it."

"She is evidently very quick in her motions," suggested Jack, "and from what we know of the man she was with, she may have been just such a character herself, and have learned deftness of fingers from him. He was evidently a pickpocket, and perhaps she had practiced the trade herself. That is the only explanation I can give."

"No doubt it is the correct one, but it does not matter. It is really the only feasible explanation there is. She had had the watch, and she was the only one who was close enough to you that night to have done it."

"Well, we shall probably not see her again to find out just how she did it, and very likely she would not tell us, as that would be revealing one of the secrets of the trade, and, of course, she could not do that."

CHAPTER XIX

THE TROUBLES OF THE SURVEYING PARTY

Shortly after the meeting with Gabrielle the boys were greatly surprised by the doctor's announcing that he had received a proposition from the company which operated the mountain railroads in that section for the Hilltop boys to survey a new line and afterward build it.

"This will give those of you who are studying engineering and surveying some practical experience," the Doctor added. "Just the surveying for the branch road will be done at this time, and later, some time in the fall, before the regular term begins, you will do the building. If you are agreeable we will move our camp in a day or so and begin the work at once. Not all of you will care to go, of course, as all are not far advanced enough for the work."

Percival, Jack and a number of others were fit to go into the work, however, and they were delighted at the prospect of a change of scene and of doing other work, and the party was quickly made up.



Being settled in their new camp, the young surveyors set out, carrying their instruments, a number of the boys who were not engaged in the work following them out of curiosity to see them at work.

Percival and his gang went ahead, and shortly after they had started, Jack and his boys followed, Jack with a level over his shoulder and boys with flags, axes, chains and other things necessary in the work, accompanying him, all in high spirits.

Billy Manners had a magazine camera slung over his shoulder and as the boys set out at a brisk walk he ran ahead of the party, turned his camera upon them, and took a snap shot, saying with a laugh:



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“There, that’s the first exhibit. That shows us on our way to build a railroad.”

“You did not get yourself in it, Billy,” said Jack as they went on.

“There isn’t room on the plate for him; he’s too fat,” remarked young Smith, who carried a pair of signal flags and a pole. “You would need a bigger lens to get Billy on the plate.”

The boys went on at a good gait and at length were surprised by hearing a considerable noise ahead of them, loud and angry voices of men being the principal part of the disturbance.

“Hello! there is trouble ahead,” cried Harry. “I wonder what it is all about?”

“We will find out in a few minutes,” said Jack, hurrying forward, the others quickly following.

In a short time they came to a little station in the woods, not much more than a shack, by the way, and here they saw Percival and his gang opposed by a number of men of rough appearance, who were talking in loud and angry tones and with threatening gestures.

“Hello! I’ve got to get this!” exclaimed Billy, pointing his camera at the group and giving the bulb a squeeze. “This’ll be the second exhibit, trouble on the line. I wonder what it is all about?”

The arrival of the other party was somewhat of a surprise to the men and they fell back a pace, Jack hurrying toward Percival and asking:

“What is the matter, Dick? What do these men want?”

“They say that we are going to ruin their farms by running a road through them,” replied Percival. “I’d like to know where they are. I never heard of any farms through here, nor any one else.”

“Well, they is!” snarled one of the men, a big, rough-looking fellow with a shaggy beard and long hair which seemed not to have been combed in a month. “They is farms here and they’s trout brooks an’ pasters an’ we ain’t goin’ to have ’em ruined by no railroad.”

“You will have to see the company,” answered Jack quietly. “We are not going to build immediately anyhow. We are only surveying now. The company has given us the right to do this, and if they were going to ruin any farms they would not do it. Where are the farms? I am pretty well acquainted with this section and I don’t know of any farms worth mentioning in all of it. We have authority from the railroad to make our surveys and you



had better see some of the officers before you make trouble. Dr. Wise also will give you all the information you require. He is with the rest of the boys, about half a mile back.”

“Well, we was told you was going to ruin our farms, and we won’t stand fer that. You talk all right, but the fust thing we know we’ll be druv out o’ house an’ home an’ all our crops sp’iled.”

“You should have them in by this time. Who told you that your farms would be ruined?”

“Well, we was told, anyhow, an’ we warn ye that if any damage is done to our farms or crops ye’ll have ter suffer fer it. We ain’t goin’ to be ground under by no graspin’ mono’ly, we ain’t, an’ yer’ goin’ to know it fust as last.”



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“There is no grasping monopoly in it,” said Percival impatiently. “We have a right from the railroad to make our surveys and we are going to make ’em. I don’t believe there is a farm within ten miles and you don’t look like farmers.”

“Send some one back for the doctor, Dick,” said Jack, who saw that his friend’s words had angered the men. “Who told you that we were going to ruin your farms?” he added, turning directly to the big man.

“I don’t have to tell ye!” blustered the other. “I know what railroads is an’ we ain’t goin’ to have none on ’em rootin’ up our land, an’ if ye sot up any o’ them machines here we’re goin’ ter—Hi! don’t shoot!”

Billy Manners had suddenly turned his camera upon the fellow, considering him a good subject for a picture, and was just about to squeeze the bulb when the man caught sight of him and sprang back.

“Ah! keep still,” cried Billy in disgust. “You’ve spoiled the picture. It would’ve been a fine one if you’d kept quiet.”

“I don’t want my picter took!” growled the big man, falling back among the others. “Ye want ter use it ag’in me, that’s what. I know you fellers. An’ ye ain’t goin’ to run no railroad, nuther!”

Jack looked around and quickly discovered that young Smith was missing, and at once came to the conclusion that he had gone off to get the doctor so as to settle the dispute about the surveying.

“If you will wait till we can send for Dr. Wise,” he said to the men, “he will assure you that we have every right to make the survey, as well as to build the road. Will you send some one, Dick?”

“I will go,” said Kenneth Blaisdell, who was one of Percival’s party.

“All right, Ken, go ahead,” and the boy set off through the woods, Jack noticing at the same time that two of the men slipped away with the evident intention of waylaying him and preventing him from delivering the message to the doctor.

“I suspected as much,” he thought. “Well, they don’t know that young J.W. has already started. He will get through all right, for although he’s little, he can be depended upon.”

Then Jack gave Percival a wink and stepped back a little.



CHAPTER XX

GETTING AT THE BOTTOM OF THINGS

“What is it, Jack?” asked Percival as he joined Jack a short distance from the group of men now standing idly about.

“They have sent some one to intercept Blaisdell. I have already sent young Smith, or at least he has taken the hint and gone off himself. He will get there, but I think we had better send some one to help Ken.”

“You are sure, Jack?”

“Yes, I saw the man slip away. Here are Art and Harry. They will go.”

Harry Dickson and Arthur Warren now came up, and Jack quickly told them what he expected and asked them to follow Blaisdell and assist him if necessary, both the boys slipping away without being noticed by the party of men collected at the little station house and now talking among themselves and paying no attention to the boys.

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Percival got all the boys together, including those who were not of the surveying party but had merely come along to see the work started, and said to them:

“It is my opinion that these men have been influenced by some one who has been telling them a lot of lies, and maybe for the purpose of getting money out of us. They don’t any of them look over intelligent, and I don’t believe there is a regular farmer among them. They are squatters, I believe, and don’t own half an acre of land among them. We don’t want to have a fight with them, and I believe the doctor will settle the whole affair without any trouble as soon as he comes back with Blaisdell.”

Meantime Harry and Arthur had hurried on along the path through the woods and it was not long before they heard the sound of voices ahead of them, and hastened on, expecting that Blaisdell was in trouble.

In a short time they came upon the boy, with his back against a tree and a defiant look in his face, saying at that moment:

“If you fellows attempt to touch me you will get hurt. You have no business to detain me and you will get the worst of it.”

“What are you doing to that boy?” cried Arthur, hurrying forward. “If you want this matter settled, why don’t you let him alone and allow him to go and get the doctor and have this matter arranged satisfactorily?”

The arrival of two extra boys where they had expected to deal with only one rather surprised the men, and one of them said with a growl:

“How do you know we was goin’ to do anything to him? We’ve got traps an’ snares here, an’ we thought he was goin’ to meddle with ’em. We gotter look arter our property.”

“It is not the time for setting snares,” said Arthur. “We know what you are up to. Get ahead, Ken. We’ll keep these fellows from following you. They are a bad lot, but we will take care of them.”

The two boys had picked up stout sticks, and they now advanced upon the men so as to give Blaisdell a chance to get away.

The men fell back, being natural cowards, and one of them now said to the boys in sullen tones:

“What you makin’ such a fuss about, anyhow? We was only foolin’ with the boy. We wasn’t goin’ to hurt him none.”



“Well, I don’t think you will,” replied Harry as Blaisdell set off toward the camp of the Hilltop boys, knowing that the two would be able to take care of the men.

“How did you men get the idea that your farms were going to be injured?” asked Arthur. “Who gave you that notion?”

“Bill said so,” replied one.

“Who is Bill? Is he the big man that did the most of the talking just now? He does not look as if he knew very much.”

“Yes, Bill’s a big feller.”

“Well, Bill had better study up a bit before he goes to making trouble for people. Where is his farm, anyhow? Has he got one?”

“Ah, you talk too much!” growled the man as he walked toward the station,



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Shortly after the return of Harry and Arthur Blaisdell, a dozen boys came running in, the former saying:

“Here we are, boys. The doctor is coming as fast as he can. You have not had any fight since I went away? Young Smith got there ahead of me and some of the boys had already started before I got there, so I did not go all the way, but came back with them to see the fun.”

Dr. Wise, all in black and wearing big spectacles came up soon and asked Percival and Jack who were the men who had made the trouble at the branch.

Jack pointed out the big man and the doctor said to him:

“What is the matter, my man? Why do you wish to oppose this work? We do not intend any harm to you or to any one. The railroad company has given me full authority to make a survey and to build a branch road. What is your objection?”

“It’ll hurt our farms,” growled Big Bill.

“Who told you that?”

“Phil Watts, that feller yonder.”

“How did you learn this, Watts?” asked the doctor.

“Jim Jenkins told me.”

“Well, well, this seems to be all hearsay information,” muttered the doctor. “Where is Jenkins? We must learn where he got his information. Who is Jenkins?”

“That’s me,” said one of the men who had hung back.

“And who told you that we were going to hurt your farms by building the branch road? I do not know of any farms in this section, and if there were any it would help rather than injure them by giving you a chance to get your produce to market sooner. Who told you that it would injure them, Jenkins? I want to get at the bottom of this affair.”

“Well, I wasn’t the only one what was told it,” growled Jenkins, glaring around at his companions, “though it’s been put up to me as if I started it. Bill Calthorpe heard it as well as me, an’ so did Phil Watts. We was all told it together.”

The big man did not seem to like this admission and moved uneasily, first on one foot and then on the other.



“Yes, yes, but who was the person who told you?” asked the doctor a little impatiently. “We want to get at the first person who gave this information. Was it one of yourselves or a stranger? Do you actually know the person who told you this?”

“No, I don’t,” growled Jenkins, “but I can tell you this, and that is that he was a big young feller and had a uniform under his coat which come open while he was talkin’, so’s I could see it plain; an’ if it wasn’t the same identical uniform them boys wear, I’ll eat my hat!”

“Do you see him now?” asked the doctor.

Jenkins looked around and Bill Calthorpe and the other squatters did the same, the first speaker’s admission not being denied by any of them.

“No, he ain’t here now,” said Jenkins.

“Was he here at all to-day?” suddenly asked Billy Manners in a tone that brought attention upon him in an instant.



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“Yes, he was!” said Jenkins doggedly, and all the boys gave a gasp.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT APPEARED ON BILLY’S PLATES

The statement of Jim Jenkins that a boy wearing the uniform of the Hilltop boys had told him and others that the building of the branch line would injure them had already caused considerable excitement among the young students, and Jim’s second statement to the effect that the boy had been there that very day only served to increase it.

The doctor did not seem to care about pressing this point, however, and said somewhat impatiently:

“Well, whoever it was who gave you this information, it was false, and I will prove to you that we have every authority for going on with this work and that it will not injure you in the least.”

Dr. Wise then produced maps, letters and other documents and proceeded to enforce his point.

The men seemed little interested, however, and several of them went away while the doctor was stating his case, the big man at length saying in a surly tone as he turned away:

“That’s all right, go on with yer old road, but I’d just like-----” and he went away muttering, followed by the greater part of the men still remaining, some having already left.

“Ha! very strange, quite incomprehensible, yes, yes,” said the doctor. “Well, well! I really can’t—well, never mind. Go on with your work, young gentlemen. I do not think it will again be interfered with.”

Percival had not waited for the word to go ahead, but had already set up his theodolite while the doctor was explaining matters to the men, and had taken a number of sights, set his first bench mark and was getting his boys to work, Jack being ready to follow behind with his levelers as soon as the work ahead was far enough advanced.

The greater part of the men went away with Calthorpe, but a few of them remained behind to watch the boys at work, showing considerable interest.



Percival took his sights, fixed his direction and went ahead rapidly, setting his stakes and running his line roughly, Jack coming on later and settling the level.

After supper, when it was quite dark and the boys were sitting around the camp fires, enjoying the warmth fully as much as the light, Billy Manners came quietly to Jack, who was sitting with Percival, the latter playing softly on a guitar, and whispered in his ear:

“Come with me, Jack. I’ve got something to show you that will give you a surprise and set you to thinking.”

“What is it, Billy?” asked Jack.

“Come and see!” was the mysterious answer, and Jack arose and followed Billy to a little tent in a bit of thick woods outside the camp.

“What is it, Billy?” asked Jack as Billy opened the flap of his little tent where the light of a small red lantern shone upon a bench where there were hard rubber trays, a few big bottles and a pail of water.



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"I have been developing," said Billy. "I can take out the plates I have already exposed and leave the others in the camera. It's a magazine, you understand."

"Yes, I know all about them. Well, what are you going to show me?"

"There are developments which we did not expect," laughed Billy.

"Never mind your puns, Billy, but get to business. I know you have developments, but what are they?"

"Here is one," said the other, holding up a developed plate between his friend and the light of the ruby lamp. "What do you see on it?"

Jack examined the plate a few moments, and said:

"It is the station in the woods. Some one has just jumped aside. You can see a bit of a blur on the edge like a man's arm and hand."

"Yes, and what do you see behind where the man was?"

"Two persons talking. Why, one of them is Herring."

"That's all right. Now look at this one," and Billy held up another plate which was still wet.

Jack took it in his fingers and held it to the light.

"This is in the woods," he said.

"Yes. It was the first one I took when we came up and found that the men were making trouble for Percival. What do you see on it, Jack?"

"I see some men making a disturbance, gesticulating and talking excitedly to Dick and his boys."

"Yes, that's all right. What else?"

"Ah, here are two persons, almost out of focus and talking very interestedly together at one side. They are down in front at one side and their figures are larger than—why, Billy, they are Jenkins and Herring."

"Exactly!" said Billy with a deal of satisfaction. "I thought you'd see them if I said nothing and I'm glad you found them yourself. I am going to have a print of that plate as soon as it gets dry enough. I can dry it by a little stove I have and then take a bromide print of it in soft grays. That will fetch it up all right."



“But, Billy, what are Herring and Jim Jenkins doing together and what are they so interested about?”

“Didn’t Jenkins say that a boy wearing the uniform of the Hilltops had told him and the rest that running the branch would hurt them?”

“This picture shows that Herring had something to do with Jenkins and yet everybody supposed he was in Saratoga.”

“That’s Herring all right and that’s Jenkins,” said Billy. “I’ll dry the plate and take a print of it. It won’t hurt anything to have a light now as I have no undeveloped plates about.”

Billy then raised the red glass of the lantern to the top and shoved a plain one under it, and then, lighting a little oil stove, proceeded to carefully dry his plates, presently standing them up not too near the stove and getting out his printing frames and a package of photographic paper done up in a thick sheet of heavy black paper which excluded the light.



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The little tent was lined with tar paper which had no glaze and was of an intense black, expelling all white rays which might be injurious to his exposed plates, the red rays not doing this.

When his plates were dry Billy put one of them in his frame, which contained a sheet of plain glass, and slipped one of his sensitized sheets under it, closing the frame with a cleat under the back.

Passing this in front of the lamp for a few moments, he removed the paper and placed it in a tray containing a developing fluid, when at once the print began to show very plain.

When it was dark enough he removed it from the tray and put it in another which contained a fixing fluid which prevented further development, and presently washed it thoroughly in clear water.

“What do you think of that?” he asked Jack, with a tone of triumph. “It is convincing, isn’t it?”

“It shows Herring talking to Jenkins, but you cannot tell what he says,” remarked Jack with a smile.

“No, I have not got to taking talking pictures yet,” laughed Billy, “but the very fact that he was with Jenkins at all means something.”

CHAPTER XXII

EVERYTHING IS SETTLED

The boys left the little developing room after putting out the lights and seeing that all was safe and that there was no chance of fire, and made their way to the middle of the camp, where there was an open space in which a number of the boys had gathered to amuse themselves.

There were several good singers among the boys and a number of them had musical instruments, banjos, guitars and mandolins, so that it was an easy matter to get up a concert at any time, the boys whiling away many an hour in this fashion.

Some of the musicians had already begun to play when the three boys arrived, their absence not having been noticed, and now Arthur, who played the banjo, called upon a number of the boys to join in a plantation melody and later a number of the old and new college songs.

Blaisdell had a good voice and he started the songs, the others quickly joining him, till there were a dozen or more and fifty for the chorus, the woods fairly ringing with the



melody, which could be heard a mile away by the men who had tried to stop the boys from surveying.

“Huh! they’re singin’ up there!” growled the big man. “We hain’t got nothin’ yet, an’ that young feller said he was goin’ to pay us.”

“We orter got pay afore we done anythin’, that’s the trouble,” growled Jenkins. “He was a sneak. Arter promisin’ to pay us for makin’ trouble, he run away an’ left us.” “Mebby if we tell the engineers who he is they’ll pay us,” suggested one of the men. “We gotter get something out o’ this.”

“That’s true enough,” echoed Calthorpe. “We can’t do things for nothing. We gotter make something.”

“I guess if we tell the young feller that we know who it was what sot us ag’in’ him he’ll pay us something,” added Jenkins. “It don’t make no difference to me where I get money, so long as I get it.”



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“O’ course not,” said a number of the men in a breath. “One feller’s money is as good as another feller’s.”

“Let’s go down there and see ’em,” suggested Calthorpe. “If the feller what hired us won’t pay up, we’ll get it from some other feller. That’s all right enough, I guess.”

Half an hour later Bucephalus called Percival to the edge of the camp, telling him that he was wanted, Jack and Billy going with Dick.

“Did you want to see me?” he asked, seeing Jenkins and Calthorpe.

“Yes, I guess so,” stammered Jenkins. “You’re at the head of the engineers, ain’t ye?”

“I am with them,” Percival replied. “You are one of the men who tried to stop us, aren’t you? You are Jenkins, I believe?”

“Yes, that’s me. What I wanted to say is this. I know who the feller was what told us we’d be hurt ef the road went through, and mebby you’d like to know who he is. I kin tell ye, for I know his name an’ he’s one of-----”

“We know who he is,” broke in Jack, “and you can tell us nothing.”

Jenkins seemed a good deal put back by this speech and stammered not a little as he replied:

“Huh! yer didn’t know who he was this afternoon, ’cause ye asked me if I had saw him. Guess ye’re only bluffin’ an’ don’t know-----”

“Look at this!” said Jack, suddenly shoving the print he had received from Billy that very evening under the man’s nose, there being light enough for him to see it. “Do you recognize any one there?”

“By Jinks!” exclaimed Jenkins, who recognized his own portrait first of all. “You’ve been takin’ our picters to use ag ‘in’ us. Gimme that!”

Jenkins tried to snatch the picture as Jack drew it back, but Percival, by a quick movement, threw his hand up and said sharply:

“No, you don’t, my man! We want to keep that picture for evidence. Besides, even if you got it, we can print a hundred more of them.”

“Ain’t you goin’ to give us anything for telling you who it was?” Jenkins asked in a tone of disappointment.



“No, for you have not told us.”

“But I told you it was one of your fellers this afternoon. You wouldn’t ha’ known anything about it if I hadn’t.”

“Oh, yes we would,” laughed Billy. “That picture was already taken when you mentioned the matter, and the minute we saw it we would have known that something was wrong, even if you hadn’t said a word.”

“And we ain’t goin’ to get nothing?”

“No!” said Jack in a tone of decision.

“You may get what you don’t want, though I won’t say but that you deserve it all right,” laughed Percival “I mean a term in jail.”

“And so this was what you sent to us for?” said Jack. “You might have known you would get nothing. Come, Dick. Come, Billy. There is no use wasting any more time on these fellows.”

“You look out that we don’t go on our own hook and stop your workin’ the branch,” snarled Calthorpe. “We can make trouble for you and we-----”



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"Herring cannot have paid them anything for what they did," remarked Percival as they walked back toward the middle of the camp. "That is like him, to promise them something for a service and then forget all about it. I don't believe he ever intended to pay them."

"That's nothing new for Pete," said Billy. "The man or boy who relies on that fellow keeping his word is going to get left."

The work was resumed the next morning and progressed rapidly, many of the boys from the camp who were not of the surveying party coming to see how things were getting on.

Then, greatly to the disgust of the Hilltoppers, Peter Herring and some of his cronies came along and stopped to watch the surveyors.

"I thought we would see him before long, Dick," said Jack in a low tone to Percival. "He could not stay away."

"Huh! surveying, are you?" sneered Herring. "Much you know about such things! Fine old railroad you fellows could build."

"I wouldn't want to ride on it, would you, Pete?" asked Merritt. "The only time it would go smooth would be when the cars was off the track."

"I thought you were at Saratoga," said Percival.

"So I was, but it was too slow there."

"So you thought you'd come here and make trouble for us?"

"Huh! I only got here just now. Me and a friend was motoring and heard that there were some surveyors around, and we came to watch them."

"Then you were not talking to Jenkins and Calthorpe and the other squatters and telling them that we wanted to ruin their farms?"

"Don't know what you're talking about!" blustered Herring, but Jack saw him turn color and knew that he had been taken by surprise. "Who are Jenkins and Calthorpe?"

"And you have not been anywhere near this place till just now?" asked Jack quietly.

"No, of course I haven't! I told you I just came."



“Then how about this?” and the boy suddenly thrust the print Billy had taken right under the bully’s nose. “What were you saying to Jenkins when Billy snapped this? Jenkins said a boy who answered to your description told them that we would ruin their farms.”

Herring flushed deeply and seemed utterly taken aback, it being clear that he had not suspected the existence of this picture, which was the clearest kind of evidence against him.

He tried to snatch it out of Jack’s hand, but the boy was too quick for him and drew it back, saying:

“What were you saying to Jenkins at the time that picture was snapped, Herring?”

“I was telling him that there was no use to bother you about the surveying,” growled Herring. “Why would I want to get ’em to trouble you for? It was nothing to me what you did.”

“But just now you said that you had not seen Jenkins and did not know him. This shows that you must have done so, and in fact Jenkins himself said that one of our boys, a big fellow-----”



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“Ah, what do I care what he said?” growled Herring, turning quickly and walking toward the road, followed by his companions.

They did not see him again and were not troubled by Jenkins or any of the pretended farmers, the work of surveying going on rapidly after that. At length it was completed to the satisfaction of everyone and the camp was broken up, the boys dispersing to their several homes.

Those who have been interested in the fortunes of Jack Sheldon and his friends will welcome the next volume of the series, which will show the young surveyors completing the work already begun and contain much to interest and instruct, as well as to amuse.

Jack spent a part of his vacation with Percival, and when the two parted Dick said earnestly:

“You’ll be on hand for the building of the railroad, Jack?”

“I certainly will, Dick.”

THE END