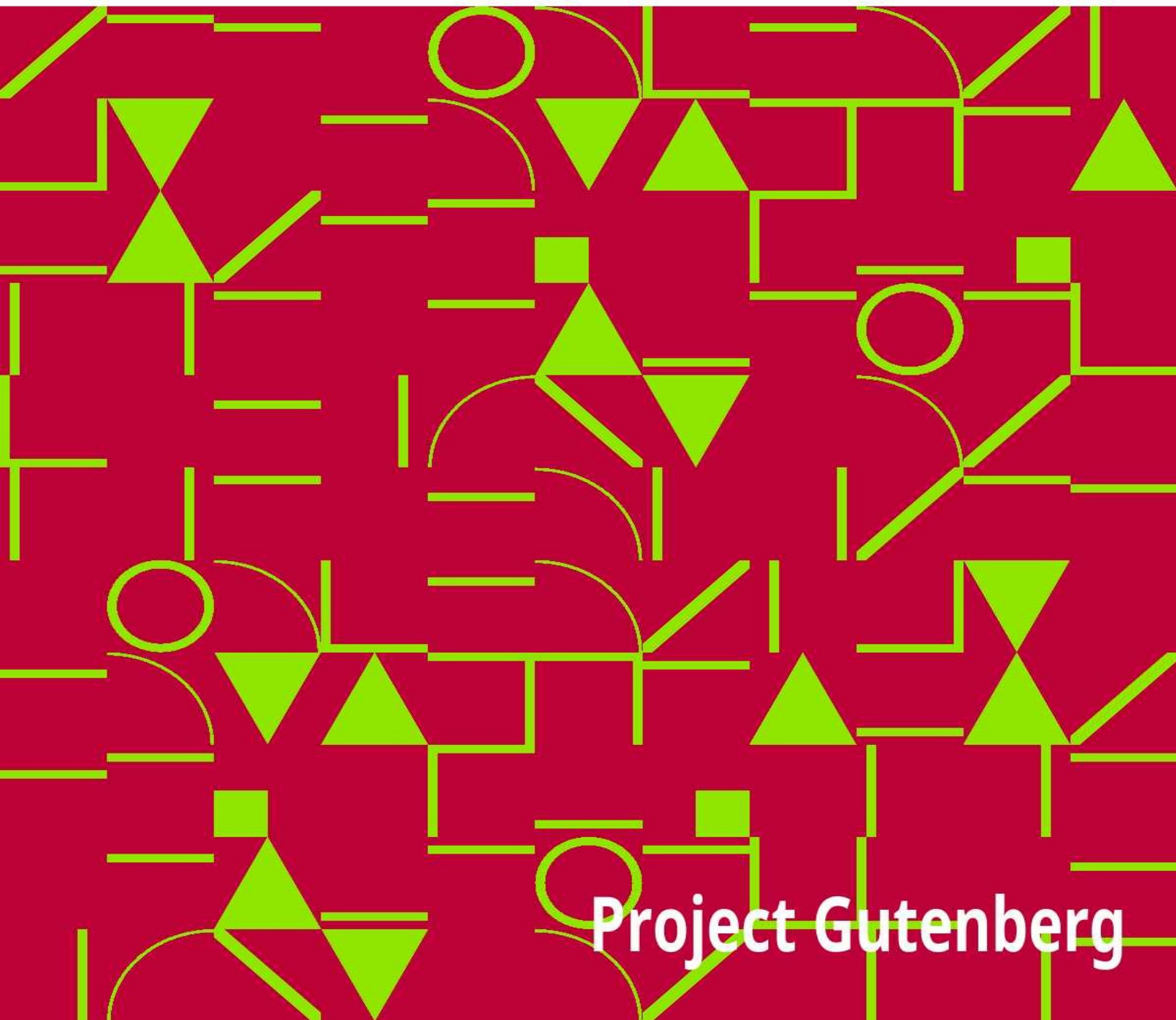


Ned Wilding's Disappearance; or, The Darewell Chums in the City

Allen Chapman



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NED WILDING'S DISAPPEARANCE

Or

The Darewell Chums
in the City

BY

ALLEN CHAPMAN

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

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NED WILDING'S DISAPPEARANCE

CHAPTER I

THE NEW GUN

The Keene household was suddenly aroused from peacefulness, one quiet afternoon, by a loud thud as if something had fallen. It was followed by a report like an explosion. Then, from Bart's room, sounded a series of yells.

"Wow! Ouch! Jimminities!"

"He's hurt!" exclaimed his sister Alice, as she ran toward her brother's room. As she entered she saw him running about the apartment, which was filled with smoke, holding one hand in the other. Drops of blood were coming from his fingers.

"What's the matter? Are you hurt?" asked Alice. "Oh, Bart, are you really hurt?"

"Am I hurt? Do you think I'm doing this for fun? Where's mother?"

"She's gone out. I'm the only one home."

"Get a rag or something, will you please Alice?" and Bart danced around on one leg, holding the other limb out so stiffly that he knocked over several chairs.

"Is your leg hurt too, Bart?"

"No, it's only my three fingers."

"But you stuck one leg out so I thought that was injured also."

"I'd stick 'em both out if it would only ease this pain any! Maybe my fingers will have to come off!"

"Oh, Bart! What did it?"

"My new gun. I went to lay it down on the table and it fell to the floor and went off. Did you hear it?"

"I couldn't very well help it. Did the bullet go through your hand?"

“It doesn’t shoot bullets. It shoots shot, and I guess it only grazed a few fingers. Most of the shot went into the wall,” and Bart gazed at a dark spot on the wall-paper, and then looked at his injured hand. “I didn’t think it would go off so easily,” he added.

“Oh, those horrid guns!” exclaimed the girl. “I just knew when papa let you send for it—”

“Say, Alice, if you ever intend to be a trained nurse you’d better get to work on me before I faint!” cried Bart. “Now don’t talk any more, that’s a good girl. Get a rag before I bleed to death.”

“Oh, Bart, I’m so sorry! Of course I’ll fix you up. Wait until I get my book,” and Alice, whose ambition was to be a nurse and wear a blue and white striped uniform, hurried to her room and came back with a little book. On the cover was a red cross, and the inscription, “First Aid to the Injured.”

“What kind of a wound is it, Bart?” Alice asked, rapidly turning the leaves of the volume.

“How should I know? It’s a painful wound, if that’s what you mean.”

“Oh, no! Is it incised or lacerated or a contused one? Because you see I have to give it different kind of treatment if it’s an incised wound than I would if it’s a lacerated one.”

“Oh, give me any kind of treatment!” and Bart began to dance around again. “The shot grazed my fingers, that’s all I know!”

“I guess that’s a lacerated wound,” Alice replied a little doubtfully, as she took a look at her brother’s bleeding hand. Then she turned to the page of the book that treated of lacerated hurts and read:

““These wounds have ragged edges and the skin is torn and bruised.””

“That’s me all right,” interrupted Bart.

““They result from force so applied as to tear rather than cut the tissues cleanly,”” the girl read on.

“Oh, I’m cut all right,” put in Bart. “Hurry up Alice, stick some court plaster on and let it go at that.”

“Why, Bart Keene! I’m ashamed of you! The idea of me putting such a common remedy as court plaster on a wound! Why, you’d get bloodpoison and other dreadful things! I must treat this just as I expect to treat other wounds when I get to be a trained nurse.”

“You’ll never get to be one at this rate,” Bart cut in.

““They are caused by railway and machinery accidents,”” Alice read on, ““by falling timbers, stones and brick. Such wounds are frequently followed by shock.””

“Well, this wasn’t a railroad accident, nor one caused by falling bricks or timber,” Bart retorted. “I guess it will come under the head of machinery. A gun’s machinery, I s’pose. But I can testify to the shock. Wow!” and, as a sudden spasm of pain seized him, he snatched his hand from the grasp of his sister and again began dancing around on one leg.

“Hold still! How can I treat the wound if you jerk around that way?” demanded Alice.

“Treat the wound! You aren’t treating any wound!” retorted Bart. “I could treat ten wounds in that time! All you’re doing is talk! If Fenn Masterson or Ned Wilding was here they’d have a rag around this long ago.”

“Yes, and it would probably be full of germs and other things and you’d be dead of lock-jaw,” said Alice calmly. “Now Bart, come here. I know what kind of a wound it is, and I must see how to fix it,” and once more securing her brother’s hand for examination, she began to leaf over the book.

““Treatment,”” she read. ““Cleanse the wound thoroughly with warm water, lay a wet cloth over it and bandage lightly. If symptoms of shock are present they must receive careful attention. See page twenty-two.””

“Never mind the shock, just get a rag on these fingers before I lose all the blood I’ve got and we’ll talk shock afterward,” interrupted Bart.

Then Alice, laying aside her book, brought some warm water in a basin, and some soft cloths, and soon had Bart’s hand tied up in a sling.

“You’ve got enough rags on here to make my hand look as big as my head,” objected the boy, as he gazed at the bandage his sister had adjusted.

“You don’t want to catch cold in it,” she replied. “It is very chilly to-day. I think we’re going to have more snow.”

“Ought to have some, with Thanksgiving here in about a week,” replied Bart.

“How did you get hurt?” asked his sister again.

“I was examining my new shotgun. It just came—Hark! Who’s that calling?”

“Oh, some of the boys I s’pose,” and Alice went to the window and looked down to the street, whence came a series of shrill whistles.

“Raise the window and I’ll yell to ’em to come up,” said Bart.

“Don’t you come near this window,” commanded Alice. “You forget you’re under treatment. If you should catch cold in that hand it might be terrible! I’ll call the boys. You go back in that corner.”

Then, as Bart meekly obeyed, Alice raised the sash and called:

“Come up, boys! Bart is hurt and can’t come down!”

“They’ll think I’m in bed,” her brother objected.

A few seconds later there sounded the noise of several feet on the stairs. A moment afterward three lads hurried into the room. They had just come from school, but Bart had not attended the afternoon session.

“Hello Frank!” cried Bart. “Howdy, Stumpy? How are you, Ned?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Ned, noticing the bandage on Bart’s hand.

“Oh, hurt myself with the gun. Went off before I was ready.”

“The gun!” exclaimed Frank.

“Got a new gun?” asked Fenn.

“Let’s see it,” demanded Ned.

“Here she is,” exclaimed Bart, and then, forgetting his sore hand, he took from the corner a fine shotgun. “It’s a beauty,” he went on. “It’s got patent—”

“Oh! Oh!” screamed Alice. “Your hand!”

CHAPTER II

PREPARING FOR A HUNT

“What’s the matter with my hand?” asked Bart holding the gun in the one that had been injured.

“Why you’ve taken it from the sling. The blood will rush to it and—and—”

“Oh, I guess it’s all right,” spoke Bart carelessly, as he held up the gun. “You see fellows, this is the patent ejector, and the barrels—”

“Well of all things!” exclaimed Alice. “I spend a lot of time fixing up your injury and you go and undo all my work in a minute. I never saw such a boy!”

“How did you hurt yourself?” asked Ned.

“I had just loaded both barrels and put the gun on the table. It fell off and something hit one of the triggers or the hammers and it banged out like a cannon. My hand was in the way, that’s all.”

“Hurt much?” inquired Fenn.

“Not much,” was Bart’s careless answer.

But an exclamation of pain escaped him as he hit his bruised fingers against the gun stock.

“There!” exclaimed Alice. “I knew you’d do something wrong. Now I suppose it will start bleeding again,” and she turned back as if to undo the bandage.

“Never mind!” spoke Bart quickly. “I’ll stick some court plaster on if it does. Say Alice get us some cake and lemonade, please.”

Alice agreed and while she prepared the beverage and got some cakes from the pantry, in which interval the four boys talked nothing but gun, there is an opportunity of making you better acquainted with them. It’s hard to be introduced to a person when he has sustained a smashed thumb, so it is, perhaps, just as well that the formal presentation was postponed until now.

Bart Keene, Ned Wilding, Frank Roscoe and Fenn Masterson, (who was called Stumpy, for short, because of his rather limited height and breadth of beam), were four boys who lived in the town of Darewell. This was located not far from Lake Erie, on the Still River, a stream in which the boys fished, swam and upon which they spent many hours in their big rowboat.

With the exception of Frank Roscoe, the boys lived in the heart of the town. Their parents were fairly well off, and the boys had been chums since they attended primary school together. In fact, when their companionship continued on through the grammar school and into the high school, they became such a town fixture, in a way, that they were known as "The Darewell Chums."

Those of you who have read the first volume of this series, entitled "The Heroes of the School," know what sort of lads the four were. Those of you who are meeting them for the first time may be glad of a little sketch of their characters.

Frank lived with his uncle, Abner Dent, about a mile out of town. Mr. Dent was a rich farmer, and Frank had resided with him as long as he could remember. He could not recall his father or mother, and his uncle seldom mentioned them. Frank was rather a strange sort of boy. His chums were very fond of him, but they could not quite make out the curious air of mystery about him. Frank seemed to have some secret, but his chums never asked him what it was, though of late years his odd ways, at times, had attracted their attention.

Ned Wilding was an impulsive, lively chap, full of fun, and given to playing tricks, which sometimes got him into mischief. He was rather thoughtless, but never mean, and when his actions did result in trouble for others Ned was always ready and anxious to make reparation. Ned's mother was dead and he lived with his father who was cashier of the Darewell bank.

As for Bart, he was so fond of sports, from baseball and swimming to snowballing and skating, that he was seldom still long enough to study his lessons.

Fenn, or Stumpy Masterson, had only one failing as far as his chums were concerned. He was "sweet" on the girls, as they called it. Fenn would go to considerable trouble to walk home with a girl. His chums made all sorts of fun of him, but he did not seem to mind much. His especial favorite was Jennie Smith, who was quite fond of poetry and who liked to recite and act.

As told in the first volume, the boys, during the summer preceding the winter in which this story opens, had taken part in some strange adventures. They discovered that some men in the neighborhood of the town were acting very queerly, and they resolved to find what it meant. One day they went up in a captive balloon at a fair, and the restraining cable broke. The four chums were carried off in the airship high above the clouds.

The boys were detained as prisoners aboard a barge on the river, because it was learned they knew something of the mystery the strangely acting men were trying to keep hidden. By dint of much pluck and hard work the boys managed to solve the affair, and, in order to avoid a law-suit, the men involved offered the boys one thousand dollars each, in valuable oil stock. This they accepted and their parents and relatives did not prosecute the men, as they originally intended, for detaining the boys on the barge.

“Here’s the lemonade!” cried Ned, as Alice came in with a big pitcherful while the chums were examining Bart’s gun. He took it from the girl, as it was quite heavy.

“Now I’ll get the cakes and glasses,” Alice said.

“Let me help you,” begged Fenn.

“Here, you quit that!” called Ned.

“Quit what?”

“Walking downstairs with Alice. I’ll tell Jennie on you, Stumpy!”

“Oh, you dry up!” cried Fenn, and, despite the boys’ laughter Fenn accompanied Bart’s sister to the next floor, where he got the cake and glasses.

“Stumpy’s as bad as ever,” commented Frank. “He reminds me of—” Frank did not finish his sentence.

“Reminds you of what?” asked Ned. “There you go again, beginning a thing and not finishing it.”

“I guess I’ll not say it. Doesn’t make any difference,” and Frank turned aside and gazed out of the window.

Bart and Ned looked at each other. It was a peculiarity of Frank’s to begin to say something, and then seem to recollect a matter that made him change his

mind. But his chums were now used to his strangeness.

“Where’d you get that gun, Bart?” asked Fenn as he came in with the cake.

“Saw it advertised in a catalog, and sent to New York for it.”

“How much?”

“Eighteen dollars. It was the first money I used of the thousand I got from the ‘King of Paprica’”—for such was the assumed name of the principal man in the mystery the boys had cleared up.

“From New York, eh?” spoke Ned. “That reminds me I have an invitation to visit my uncle and aunt there.”

“That’s so. You asked us to come and see you,” added Bart. “Wish we could go around Christmas time.”

“If the holiday vacation was longer maybe we could,” remarked Ned.

“Speaking of holidays, what’s the matter with going hunting the end of next week?” asked Bart. “I’ve got my gun, and you fellows have your small rifles.”

“I can borrow a shotgun,” put in Fenn.

“This is Thursday,” went on Bart. “School closes to-morrow for the Thanksgiving celebration. Let’s see, Thanksgiving is a week from to-day. That would give us three days counting Monday, when we can start off. Why not go on a shooting trip and stay a couple of nights in the woods? It’s not very cold, and we could take plenty of blankets.”

“The very thing!” cried Ned.



CHAPTER III

OFF IN THE WOODS

The town of Darewell, though situated near the center of a well-populated district, presented many advantages to the boys. There was the river to fish in, and it was a deep enough stream to accommodate steamers and barges up to a certain point. In addition there was, about five miles from the place, the beginning of a stretch of unbroken forest, seldom visited, and which in season contained much game. It was a favorite hunting spot, but had not been over-run with gunners.

The boys had, in past summers, camped along the river and in the woods, but they had not penetrated far into the forest, as there were few roads or trails through it.

“Have we got everything?” asked Fenn, as they stood in the front yard of Bart’s house, early the next Monday morning.

“I guess so,” Ned replied. “I looked after the blankets and such stuff, Bart saw to the tent and Frank to the portable stove and fixings. I suppose you’ve got the food all packed, Stumpy?”

“Everything.”

“Didn’t forget the salt, did you, the way you did when we went camping before and had to borrow of a tramp?”

“There’s lots of salt.”

“How about condensed milk?” asked Bart. “Remember how you dropped it in the river that day?”

“Do I? And how Ned howled because he had to drink black coffee.”

“Maybe we’d better take the sled along,” suggested Ned, as he noticed it was beginning to snow. “If it gets deep enough we can haul the things on it, instead of on the wagon.”

The camp supplies, including a shelter tent, had been placed on a wagon, on which they were to be taken to where the boys decided to make their first camp. On the large vehicle was a smaller one, which the chums could load with all their stuff and haul through the woods, in case they found it advantageous to move to a section where there was better hunting.

“Wait a minute, I’ve got an idea!” exclaimed Bart.

“Make a note of it before you forget it!” called Fenn. “Good ideas are scarce.”

“We can take runners along for the small wagon,” Bart went on, not noticing his chum’s sarcasm. “There are some adjustable ones I made a couple of years ago. Then we’ll be prepared for anything.”

The wagon was one the boys had built for themselves several seasons past. They used to cart their camp outfit on it when they did not transport the things by boat up or down the river. As Bart had said, there were adjustable runners, which could be fitted over the wheels, without taking them off, and thus on short notice the wagon could be transformed into a sled.

It was a crisp November day, with a suggestion of more cold to come, and the first few flakes had been followed by others while the boys waited until Bart, whose hand was almost well again, got the runners from the cellar.

“Looks as if we’d have quite a storm,” remarked Jim Dodd, the driver of the express wagon, whom the boys had hired to take their stuff to a point about two miles inside the woods. The road, which was made by lumbermen, came to an end there. “Yes sir,” Jim went on, “it’s goin’ t’ be a good storm. You boys better stay home.”

“Not much!” cried Ned. “A storm is what we want.”

“I’d rather eat my Thanksgivin’ turkey in a warm kitchen than in an old tent,” Jim added with a laugh.

“Oh, we’ll be home for Thanksgiving,” Fenn said, “and we’ll have plenty of game to eat too.”

“Wish ye luck,” was Jim’s rejoinder.

The adjustable runners were packed on the wagon, a last look given to see that everything was in place, and then, about nine o’clock the start was made.

“Keep your thumb wrapped up!” Alice called after her brother. “Don’t take cold. Drink some hot ginger tea every night before you boys go to bed. Keep your coats well buttoned up around your throats, don’t get your feet wet and—”

“Say, give us the books, sis,” called Bart good-naturedly, “we can’t remember all that. Good-bye!”

“Good-bye!” called Alice, waving her hands to the chums.

“Good-bye!” the four boys echoed.



CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST TURKEY

"I must say you boys has got grit," remarked Jim, as the wagon lurched along, pitching like a ship in a storm because of the rough road.

"Why?" asked Bart.

"Leavin' your comfortable homes an' comin' out to a wilderness in winter. Land! I'd no more think of doin' it than I would of flyin'."

"Didn't you do such things when you were young?" asked Fenn.

"Never had no time," the expressman said. "When I got a few days off I had t' go t' th' woods an' chop cord-wood or tap trees for maple syrup."

They jogged along for another mile or so, the road getting more and more rough as they progressed.

"Don't believe I can take you any farther," said Jim, as he brought his wagon to a stop before a big bog-hole. For the last mile the road was "corduroy," that is, made by laying small logs across it, close together, like the ribs in corduroy cloth; whence its name.

The boys helped the expressman to unload, and, with his aid they soon had cleared a place among the trees for the tent. It was put up, and then the camp stuff and provisions were taken inside.

Stumpy quickly had ready a meal, which, if it was not elaborate, was appetizing, and Jim who was invited to it had to acknowledge that the coffee was good enough for anyone.

"Now for a turkey hunt!" exclaimed Ned, when Jim had left and his wagon was out of sight on the wood road. "We've got all the afternoon. Let's get the guns and start out."

The snow was coming down faster now, and the wind had increased. It was not very cold, however, and they were warmly dressed so they did not mind it.

They had a compass with them, to avoid getting lost, and, confident they would return laden with turkeys or rabbits, they tramped on through the woods.

“Say, fellows! Here’s something!” cried Frank suddenly, pointing to some tracks in the snow. His companions ran to where he stood.

“Turkey tracks!” called Bart. “They’re leading off into the woods, too! Come on! We’ll get some birds now!”

The new-fallen snow deadened their footsteps or they would have frightened all the game within a mile, the way they rushed through the forest. They had never hunted wild turkeys, and did not know what shy birds they are.

So it was more by good luck than good management that they suddenly came upon a small flock, gathered about a big gobbler. The birds were in a little clearing, standing rather disconsolately about in the snow.

Bart, who was leading, came to an abrupt halt as he saw the flock through the bushes. He motioned for the others to remain quiet. Then he carefully brought his gun to bear on the big gobbler.

“Aren’t you going to give us a shot?” asked Ned in a whisper. He and the others were standing behind Bart, and could not get a fair aim at the turkeys, as the trail was a narrow one and Bart occupied the most of it.

The whisper, as it was, gave the alarm to the easily frightened birds. The gobbler raised its head and sounded one note of warning. But Bart shot at the instant. The flock scattered in all directions and the other boys fired wildly in the hope of getting a bird.

When the smoke had blown away the chums peered eagerly forward, expecting to see at least four turkeys lying on the snow-covered ground. Bart ran up, hoping the big gobbler had fallen to him.

“Didn’t we kill any?” asked Frank, as they saw nothing but turkey tracks.

“Looks as if we all missed,” remarked Fenn.

“No, here’s one, and it’s a fine one too!” exclaimed Frank, as he ran to one side and picked up a plump hen from under a bush.

“Who aimed at that one?” asked Bart, much disappointed at missing his gobbler.

“Hard to say,” said Ned. “I guess we can all claim a share in it. We each shot one-fourth of a turkey. Not so bad for a starter.”

“I’m out of it,” Bart rejoined. “I aimed straight at the gobbler, and he got away. It’s a third of a bird apiece for you fellows.”

“Anyhow it is the first turkey of the hunt,” observed Ned.

“Yes, and my gun is christened,” added Bart.



CHAPTER V

THE BLIZZARD

“Now for some more game!” cried Ned, as Frank tied the legs of the turkey and slung the bird across his back in true hunter fashion.

“Guess we’ll have to tramp a long distance before we get any more,” remarked Fenn. “All the turkeys for a mile around heard the guns and they’ll keep to deep cover.”

However the boys, ever hopeful, resumed their tramp. They found plenty of turkey tracks but no birds, and, after covering several miles, decided to make their way back to camp, as it was getting dark early on account of the storm.

They got the right direction, by means of the compass, and were within about a mile of where they had set up the tent when Bart, who was ahead, suddenly halted.

“What is it?” asked Fenn, as he saw his chum aiming his gun up through the low branches of a tree near which he had stopped.

For answer Bart fired. There was a flutter of big wings, a protesting gobble or two, and a big turkey cock fell to the ground.

“There, I knew I’d get him!” Bart cried as he ran forward and secured his prize. “I saw him roosting up in the branches, and I fired before he could get away. I knew I’d get him!”

“You don’t think this is the same one you fired at a while ago, do you?” asked Ned.

“Well, it’s one just as big and just as good,” retorted Bart. “I’m satisfied if he is.”

He slung the gobbler, which was a large fat one, over his shoulder and went on, much pleased with himself and his new gun.

“Guess we’ll have roast turkey to-night all right,” Frank remarked as they

trudged along.

“I guess not, if I have to cook it!” exclaimed Fenn. “It’s too late to dress any birds to-night. Canned stuff and coffee for yours.”

“Well, to-morrow then,” Frank insisted. “We’ve got to have a turkey dinner while we’re in the woods.”

It was almost dark when they reached camp. They lighted some lanterns, and built a big fire, while Fenn, who had been elected cook, got supper ready. The other boys cleared out the tent for sleeping purposes.

When the boys awoke in the morning it was to find the ground covered about a foot deep with snow. The flakes had ceased falling, but it was much colder, and there was a stiff wind. Gray clouds covered the sky, and altogether it was rather a cheerless prospect.

But the boys’ spirits were proof against almost anything. With some hot coffee to warm them up, and some hot canned meat, which Fenn prepared, they were ready for another day of tramping through the woods after game.

“What do you say to moving camp?” suggested Bart. “I’m afraid we’ve scared from around here whatever there was in the way of turkeys and rabbits. We can put our stuff on the sled and pull it through the snow.”

This was agreed to, and soon the runners were adjusted over the wheels, and the four boys were pulling the sleigh with the camp outfit.

They went slowly, picking their way as best they could among the trees. On a down grade, where two were enough at the rope, Bart and Frank went ahead to see if they could observe any signs of game. Frank killed a fat rabbit, but Bart fired at one and missed.

They went about four miles farther into the forest and, as they saw turkey tracks, they decided to camp there.

“We’ll have an early dinner, put the turkey hen on to roast, and go off hunting the rest of the day,” decided Fenn.

The turkey was prepared in a somewhat rough fashion and put to roast in the oven of the portable stove. When it was nearly done the fire was allowed to cool down.

“All we have to do when we get back is to start a small blaze and we’ll have hot turkey,” explained Fenn. Some dry wood was placed within the tent to keep it safe in case it began to snow again, and, fastening the flaps, the boys set off.

They had better luck this time, and managed to get a turkey apiece, though they were only hens, and not very large.

“We ought to each get a big gobbler before we go back home,” Bart said. “You fellows want to look alive. I’ve got mine.”

“You had all the luck,” retorted Ned.

But the gobblers seemed too wise to come within the reach of the boys’ guns, and when it came time to make back-tracks for camp there was none numbered among the slain. Several more rabbits had been secured, however, and the boys were well satisfied.

“My mouth waters for that roast turkey,” exclaimed Ned, as he tramped through the snow. “I want a piece of the breast and some of the brown skin. Just a bit of dressing, please, and a spoonful of gravy!”

“Let up!” cried Bart. “I’m half starved!”

Ned’s anticipations of the turkey were fully realized. It may not have been done just to the turn a French chef would call proper, but the boys thought they had never eaten anything half so good. There was little left when they had finished.

“We’d better circle around so’s to fetch up near where Jim’s to meet us to-night,” remarked Bart as they crawled out of the blankets Wednesday morning. The cold had increased and the wind was blowing half a gale.

The tent was struck, after a hasty breakfast, and, with the other things, not forgetting the game, was packed upon the sled. The boys started off, intending to make a large circle and bring up that evening where Jim had left them, in time to meet him. They would not erect the tent again.

They managed to kill several hen turkeys, another gobbler, which fell to Ned’s gun, and a couple of rabbits, but most of the game seemed to have disappeared, and there was no more in the vicinity of where the boys tramped, dragging the sled after them.

They halted for dinner in a dense part of the forest, and, after the meal, started for the place where the corduroy road ended. They judged it to be about six miles from where they were, and knew it would take them about until night-fall to reach it.

It was hard work, pulling the sled, but the exercise kept them warm, and they trudged on, plunging into drifts which the wind quickly raised. It started to snow again and the flakes began to blow across their path whipped into stinging particles by the force of the gale. They were enveloped in a white cloud through which they could see only dimly.

“Say, it’s getting worse and worse!” exclaimed Ned, as he paused for breath after a particularly stiff bit of pulling.

“Boys, it’s a regular blizzard, that’s what it is,” cried Bart. “We’re certainly in for it now. I don’t believe Jim will come for us in a storm like this.”

“If it isn’t a blizzard it’s the best imitation of one I ever saw,” remarked Frank. “What are we going to do?”

“Only thing is to keep on,” replied Bart.

“Are we going in the right direction?” asked Ned. “Fenn, suppose you take a look at the compass.”

Fenn, who carried the little instrument, reached in his overcoat pocket for it. He did not find it. Then he looked in several other pockets.

“What’s the matter? Haven’t lost it, have you?” asked Bart.

“I’m afraid so. Didn’t I give it to you, Ned, this morning?”

“Never saw it,” replied Ned.

Fenn made a more thorough search. The compass was not to be found. The boys stood there helplessly, in the midst of the howling storm, which was now at its height.

The snow was a blinding, scurrying, mass of flakes which stung their faces like needles. Overhead the trees were bending to the blast and the gale was roaring through the branches. There was no path. Ten feet ahead it looked like a blank white wall.

“Boys, we’re lost in the woods, and the blizzard is getting worse!” cried Bart, almost having to shout to make himself heard above the storm.



CHAPTER VI

A LONELY CABIN

“What’s to be done?” asked Fenn.

“Keep on! We may find the place where we were to meet Jim,” advised Frank.

“No,” Bart said. “That would be foolish. Jim would never come for us on such a night. Besides, we don’t know which way to go. We’d better camp here until the storm blows over. We’ve got everything we need, but it’s not going to be much fun under a tent in this weather.”

“Let’s get down more in a hollow,” suggested Fenn. “We’re on a hill here and get the full force of the wind. If we go on a bit we may find a better place.”

“Good idea!” exclaimed Bart. “Come on, fellows!”

He seized hold of the sled rope and began to pull, the others joining him. There was no choice of direction, so they turned to get the wind on their backs.

With grim perseverance they kept on. The wind seemed fairly to carry them forward, though it was hard to struggle through the drifts they encountered every once in a while. As they had no particular path to take, they avoided the big hummocks of snow as much as they could.

“I’ll have to stop!” declared Fenn, after a bit of hard pulling. “My wind’s giving out!”

“I wish the wind up above would,” murmured Bart as he tried to peer through the clouds of flakes to see where they were.

“Let’s stay here,” suggested Fenn. “If we’ve got to camp in the storm this place is as good as any.”

“That’s what I say,” remarked Frank. “This seems to be well sheltered.”

There came a momentary let-up to the gale. The snow did not seem to fall so thickly and the boys eagerly looked around them.

“There’s something over that way!” cried Ned, pointing to the left. “It looked like a barn or house. Let’s try for it!”

Then the wind swept down on them again, blotting out, in the swirl of flakes, whatever Ned had seen. But he had an idea of the direction it was in, and started off toward it.

“Here, come back and help pull the sled!” cried Bart, and the four boys, led by Ned, dragged the heavy load toward the spot where the building had been noticed.

They did not see it again until they were within ten feet of it, and then made out a lonely cabin in the midst of a clearing in the woods. The snow was half way up to the first floor window sills.

“There’s some one inside!” shouted Bart, as he saw smoke curling from the chimney. “Knock on the door! I’m half frozen!”

But there was no need to knock. The door was opened and a little girl peered out.

“Can we come in and get warm?” asked Ned. “We’re lost in the storm.”

“Who is it?” asked a woman’s voice, as she came to the door.

“We were camping out,” explained Bart, “and the storm caught us as we were about to go home. We live in Darewell.”

“Come in!” the woman exclaimed. “Our cabin is poor enough but it is better than the woods in such a storm. I’m sorry we can’t offer you anything to eat, but we have only a little for ourselves and there’s no telling when we’ll get more.”

“And to-morrow’s Thanksgiving,” murmured Ned in a low voice.

The boys stamped the snow from their feet and entered the cabin. There were two rooms downstairs and two up. In the apartment they entered was a stove in which a wood fire burned. In one corner stood a table with a few dishes on it, and there was a cupboard. Some chairs completed the furnishings. Close to the fire, clad in a ragged dress, sat a little girl. The boys needed but one glance to see that the family was in dire straits.

“My name is Perry,” the woman said. “I live here with my two daughters. The town of Kirkville supports us. The poormaster brought some food last week but

he hasn't been here this week, and we are afraid he can not come because of the storm. Otherwise I could offer you something to eat," and she turned aside her head to hide her tears.

"Don't cry, mother," exclaimed the child who had been sitting near the fire. "We're not very hungry, and maybe the snow will stop. We had a nice Thanksgiving last year—and—and—"

"I'm afraid we'll have a poor one to-morrow," Mrs. Perry replied. "But boys, come closer to the fire. You must be cold. At least we have plenty of wood. That is free, and my daughters gathered a lot the other day in the woods."

"Mrs. Perry—ahem, ma'am—that is—er—I mean—Oh, hang it! Ain't any of you going to help a fellow out!" exclaimed Ned, clearing his throat with unnecessary violence. "What I mean is we've got a lot of things to eat, on our sled. We'd be glad to have you—Oh, here! Boys come on out and bring in some of the things!" and before the astonished woman knew what was happening Ned and his chums were out in the snow fairly tearing the things off the sled. In they trooped again, bearing turkeys, rabbits, and a lot of the camp food they had not eaten.

"Oh, it's just like Santa Claus!" cried the little girl. "I knew we'd have Thanksgiving, mommey!"

But Mrs. Perry was crying, with her head down on the table.

Indeed the room did look as if it was ready for some sort of holiday feast. It was fairly crowded with the things the boys had brought in.

"I don't—don't know what to say," Mrs. Perry exclaimed, as she dried her eyes. "Are you sure you can spare so much?"

"Spare it? Say we've eaten so much lately we'll be sick!" broke in Bart, with a laugh. "Now we'll make a better fire, and if you'll get some of these turkeys and rabbits ready you can have a dinner. There's some other things,—canned stuff, you know."

By this time the older girl, whose name, the boys learned, was Jane, was placing some of the things aside. Her mother helped her, while Mary, the younger daughter, seemed, from mere astonishment, unable to stir. She sat gazing at the pile of good things as if they might suddenly vanish.

The boys brought in more wood and began to help with the meal. In a little while they had a good one ready, using some of the camp food, while the turkeys and rabbits were put away for the next day.

The boys told something of themselves, and, in turn, Mrs. Perry related how her husband had died a few years before, leaving her with a small farm, and three children, a boy and the two girls. The farm, she said, had been taken because they could not pay the interest on the mortgage, and there had been nothing left for them.

The town gave them the use of the little cabin, and they managed to make something of a living, for Mrs. Perry did sewing for women in the village, which was about three miles away. They had a little garden patch, and raised some fruit.

“You said you—you had a son?” asked Ned gently. “Is he—”

“No, he isn’t dead,” replied Mrs. Perry sadly. “Poor boy, I wish I knew where he was. He tried to help us, as much as he could,” she went on. “But there was no work for him around here, and so he decided to try and get work. He went to the city and wrote me that he was going to sea. He said he had a good position, and would send me some money.”

“Did he?” asked Bart.

“I have never heard from him since,” the widow replied. “I’m afraid he is dead,” and she began to cry again.

“Perhaps not,” suggested Ned, as cheerfully as he could. “Maybe he is on a long voyage and can’t write. Or perhaps he has written and the letters have gone astray. I would not worry. He may come back.”

“I think Willie is alive,” remarked Jane. “He was a very proud boy, and perhaps when he found he could not earn money enough to send home, he decided to stay away until he could. Maybe he is ashamed to come home.”

“Oh, he knows I would forgive him! I would be glad to see him if he never had a penny!” exclaimed Mrs. Perry.

“I’ll bet he’ll turn up all right,” put in Fenn. “He’s only waiting until he can come back rich.”

“It’s been about a year now,” the widow went on. “Willie was fifteen when he left, and he’d be sixteen now. It’s his first birthday away from home.”

The boys did their best to comfort her, and she seemed to feel a little better after telling her troubles. The girls were certainly more cheerful after the meal.

“You boys had better stay all night,” Mrs. Perry suggested. “The storm is getting worse. If you don’t mind being crowded we can accommodate you.”

“If we can sleep on the floor in the kitchen we’ll be glad to,” Ned answered.

“I have Willie’s bed, which no one uses, and there is another,” the widow replied. “I have always kept his room ready for him.”

“Then we’ll stay for the night, thank you,” Fenn said.

The storm did appear to be getting worse, or else the howling of the wind about the lonely cabin made it seem so.



CHAPTER VII

HOME FOR THANKSGIVING

“Hurrah! It’s stopped snowing!” exclaimed Ned as he looked out of the little window on the second floor of the cabin the next morning. “Maybe we can get home for Thanksgiving!”

“I hope so,” Bart answered. “The folks will be worried. Wonder if Jim is waiting for us?”

“Not much! Jim’s too fond of his comfort to come out in such weather,” said Frank.

The boys found the widow had breakfast ready for them. She told them their best plan would be to go to Kirkville, which could be reached by the road leading from the cabin. From that village it was seven miles to Darewell.

“It’s going to be a long pull,” remarked Ned. “But I guess we can make it.”

“Let’s go out and see how the snow is,” suggested Bart.

They found though it was quite deep it was dry and soft so that tramping through it, and pulling the sled, would not be so great an exertion as it otherwise would have been.

“We’ll have to take it easy, and we may get home in time for dinner,” said Frank. “Pity, though, we can’t have some of our own game cooked for the feast, but we’ll not arrive in time.”

“I think we’ll leave most of it with her. What do you say?” asked Bart, and he nodded toward the cabin, outside of which the boys stood.

“Sure thing!” exclaimed Fenn. “I wish we could find her son for her.”

“Maybe we can, some day,” remarked Ned. “But we’d better go in to breakfast and then get started.”

“I hardly feel like taking all this,” Mrs. Perry said as she looked at the rabbits and turkeys the boys left. They had reserved a turkey and some rabbits each but

left all the rest. "It hardly seems right," she added.

"Why it's no more than we owe you," said Bart quickly. "We never could have stayed all night out in that blizzard in our tent. I don't know what we would have done if it hadn't been that we saw your house."

"I only wish I had had better accommodations to offer you," the widow said. "But we have nothing except what charity gives us. In the spring Jane hopes to get a place to work."

"Perhaps we could help you," suggested Ned. "My father knows a number of business men and he might get Jane a place in a store."

"Oh, if he only would!" exclaimed the girl. "I do so want to help mother. I must take Willie's place—until he comes back," she added a little sadly.

"My poor boy," Mrs. Perry exclaimed with a sigh. "I wonder if he will have as nice a Thanksgiving dinner as we will, thanks to the generosity of you boys."

"We'll hope so," said Fenn. "So you haven't any idea where he is?"

"Not the least. He used to say he wanted to see New York, as I suppose all boys do. But I hardly believe he is there. I wish I knew where he was. He should come home, pride or not, no matter if he hasn't a cent."

"New York," murmured Ned. "I expect to go there soon. I might see Willie."

"Oh! If you only could!" exclaimed Jane. "Tell him to come home at once. You can easily recognize him. He has a little red scar on his right cheek. He fell and cut himself on a stone when he was a baby."

"New York is a big place," said Mrs. Perry. "You are not very likely to see my boy. But if you should—tell him his mother prays for him—every night!" and, unable to keep her feelings in control the widow burst into tears.

It was rather an awkward moment for the boys, but little Mary saved the day.

"I'm going to New York!" she exclaimed. "I'm goin' right now with these nice boys. They can pull me on their sled!" and she ran to get her bonnet and cloak.

This raised a laugh, and Mrs. Perry recovered her composure.

"Not now, dear," she said. "Sometime, maybe," and she smiled through her

tears.

“Well, we must be going,” remarked Fenn. “We’re ever so much obliged to you.”

“Indeed, I am in your debt,” the widow replied. “If you are ever out this way again come and see us.”

“We will!” the boys cried as they put on their things and started off with the sled. It was lighter now that the load of camp food and much of the game was off, though the boys found it heavy enough before they had gone a couple of miles. But they were determined to reach home as soon as possible and kept on.

“Pretty tough, eh?” remarked Ned, after a silence of several minutes, as he nodded back in the direction of the cabin.

“You’re right,” replied Bart. “Glad we could do something to help ’em.”

The boys found, on inquiring from a farmer they met, that, by taking a short cut through the woods, they could get on the road to Darewell without going to Kirkville. This would save them a mile, and, though they might be able to hire a horse and wagon in the village, they thought it better to take the short cut.

They were just turning from the woods into the highway that led to Darewell, which was about five miles away, when they heard the jingle of sleigh bells back of them. Turning they saw coming along a big sled drawn by two horses. A boy was on the seat.

“Here’s a chance for a ride!” exclaimed Ned. “We’re in luck. We can offer to pay him to take us home.”

They waited until the sled was close to them and hailed the driver. He turned and they saw it was their old enemy, Sandy Merton. Sandy had been employed by the men in the secret which the four boys were instrumental in bringing to disclosure, but had lost his position and gone to work for a farmer.

“Oh, it’s you, eh?” asked Sandy with a sneer, as he saw the four chums.

There was a moment’s hesitation among them. They did not relish the idea of asking him for a ride. But still less did they like the thought of pulling their heavy sled five miles.

“Look here, Sandy!” exclaimed Ned. “This is a strict business proposition.

Will you drive us to Darewell for four dollars, and take our sled? That's a dollar apiece, and it's more than livery prices. We're not asking you out of friendship."

"No, and I guess you'd better not!" exclaimed Sandy. "Not the way you acted toward me!"

"We never injured you in any way!" said Bart. "But we're not going to discuss that now. Will you give us a lift for money, or won't you?"

"Well I won't, and that's my answer!" cried Sandy, in sudden and unreasonable rage. "You fellows think you're mighty smart. But this time is where I've got the upper hand. I wouldn't take you to Darewell for ten dollars apiece. You can go off hunting and enjoy yourself while other folks work. Then because you get lost in the woods you think every one you meet has got to give you a ride. Not much! You can walk to Darewell!" And whipping up his horses Sandy drove on, laughing loudly at the predicament of the chums.

"Might have known better than to ask him," murmured Ned. "Well, fellows, I guess we'll have to walk."

It was easier traveling in the road than through the woods and across the fields, but still it was hard work. However, they managed to get a lift from a farmer when they were within a mile of town. They hitched their sled to the back of his sleigh and the man obligingly took them to Bart's house.

"Oh! There are the boys!" exclaimed Alice as she looked from the window. "Look, Jennie, they have some game. I can see the turkey feathers!" she added to her friend, who had called.

"Here we are!" cried Bart, as his sister and her chum came running down the front walk. "Just in time for dinner!"

Bart wanted his chums to come into his house, but they were in a hurry to tell their folks of their safe arrival, so, shouldering their guns, and dividing the game, the boys separated.

CHAPTER VIII

GETTING SQUARE WITH SANDY

"Come Alice, help me carry this game into the house," said Bart when the excitement over their arrival had quieted down a bit. His rabbits and the turkey were on the sled with the camp stuff.

"Is that all the luck you had?" asked Mr. Keene, as he came out on the porch to greet his son. "Why I thought you'd come loaded down. We didn't buy anything for dinner, thinking you'd have enough."

Bart knew by his father's tone that he was only joking.

"We did have fine luck," the boy replied, and then he told about the widow and how they had left her with plenty of food.

"Humph!" exclaimed Mr. Keene. "If you'd brought home any more game than you did, and hadn't left her some I'd make you go back to Mrs. Perry without your dinner. You did right, Bart. I'm glad to hear it."

Bart ate his Thanksgiving dinner with an appetite that astonished even himself. Jennie Smith remained, as the guest of Alice, and she kept those about the table in lively mood, reciting bits of verse.

During the course of the meal Bart told of their trip, and more about the widow.

"We didn't hardly know what to do when that blizzard came up," he said. "Wonder if Jim went to meet us."

"No, he came here and said he was expected to be at the end of the corduroy road for you," Mr. Keene explained. "I said I guessed you boys would know what to do. Besides, it is doubtful if he could have gotten his wagon through the drifts."

In the afternoon Bart's chums came over. Ned said he had spoken to his father about the Perry family, and Mr. Wilding was going to get Jane a place to work. Mr. Keene expressed a wish to help the widow, and arrangements were made to

see that she did not suffer any more for lack of food or clothing for herself and daughters. When the roads were better Mrs. Keene went to visit Mrs. Perry, and Jane secured a place in a store in Kirkville, so she could come home every night.

“Now if we could only find the widow’s son for her we’d have that family in pretty good shape,” remarked Bart to his chums one morning early in December as they were on their way to school after the Thanksgiving holidays. “Accidentally we were able to do quite a lot for them, but I’d like to do more.”

“I’m glad Jane has a place,” observed Fenn.

“Good thing it isn’t in Darewell,” said Frank.

“Why?” asked Fenn.

“Because you’d be hanging around the store where she was whenever you had the chance, Stumpy, to see her home.”

Frank did not dodge quickly enough to escape the snowball Fenn threw at him, and caught it on the head. But he laughed good-naturedly. It was the price for his joke and he was willing to pay it.

“Let’s go skating this afternoon,” suggested Bart. “The river edge is fine almost up to the Riffles.”

“Good!” exclaimed Ned. “We’ll have a race.”

School was dismissed for the day at three o’clock and as soon as they were out the boys hurried home for their skates. The weather was crisp and cold, just right for a fine spin up the frozen stream.

The four chums were soon gliding over the smooth surface on which were a number of other boys and girls enjoying the sport.

“We haven’t room to expand here,” said Bart, after they had skated around on the broad expanse of the river near the town. “Let’s go up a mile or two.”

His chums agreed, and they were soon racing up the stream toward the “Riffles” a shallower place where, in summer, there was good fishing.

“Let’s see who’ll be first to the dead pine!” cried Bart, pointing to a lightning-blasted tree on the river’s edge about a mile up. All four dashed off at top speed.

There was little difference in the ability of the boys when it came to skating.

They were as much at home on the steel runners as they were on the baseball diamond, and were speedy skaters. Forward they went, stooping over to avoid the wind resistance as much as possible, the metal of their skates singing merrily in the crisp winter air.

“Now for the last rush!” cried Bart, as he put on an extra burst of speed. His companions responded to the call, but Bart had a little the best of them, and was first at the goal.

“I’ll beat you going back!” cried Ned.

“Let’s rest a while,” suggested Frank. “What’s that?”

The boys turned suddenly at the sound of loud shouting on the road which, at this point, ran close to the river. It was someone trying to stop a team of horses, attached to a sleigh and, to judge by the noise, the animals were running away.

“Whoa! Whoa there!” cried the driver.

An instant later the team dashed from the road and came straight for the river, the driver trying in vain to stop them.

“It’s Sandy Merton!” exclaimed Bart.

Before the boys could say any more the horses had run out on the ice of the river, near the chums. Fortunately it was thick enough to bear the weight of the animals or it might have proved a disastrous runaway. As it was, Sandy, in trying to stop the horses, lost one rein. He pulled sharply on the other and the steeds, obeying it, turned quickly to the left. In an instant the sleigh, with its load of feed, in bags, was overturned on the ice and Sandy was spilled out.

“Quick! Grab the horses!” cried Bart, and the chums were soon at the bridles. But the animals appeared satisfied with the damage they had done, and stood still. Sandy picked himself up, for he was not hurt, and came to the heads of the horses. He looked at the overturned sleigh, with the bags of feed scattered on the ice, and murmured:

“I’ll catch it for this.”

“I rather guess he will,” said Bart in a low tone, as the temper of Silas Weatherby, for whom Sandy worked, was well known in that locality.

For a few moments Sandy stood surveying the scene. It looked as if it would

take several men to set matters right, even if the sleigh was not broken. Then Sandy, with a sigh, set to work unhitching the horses. He led them from the ice and tied them to a tree on shore. Then he began moving the bags of feed so as to get a clear place around the vehicle. The chums watched him for a few minutes. They were thinking, as no doubt Sandy was, of that day when he had refused them a lift.

“It’s a good chance to get square,” murmured Bart to his companions. “We could sit down and watch him sweat over this, and laugh—but we won’t!” he added quickly. “That isn’t our way. We’ll get square with Sandy by helping him out in his trouble. That’ll make him feel just as badly as if we sat and laughed at him.”

It was an application of the Biblical injunction of heaping coals of fire, but it is doubtful if the boys thought of it in that light.

“Come on!” cried Bart. He began to take off his skates, and his chums followed his example. Then, to the great surprise of Sandy, they began to help him move the bags away so they could get at the sled.

“Say—say—fellows—” began Sandy, as the thought of his own mean conduct, that day on the road, came to him. “Say—I don’t deserve this. I’m—”

“You dry up!” commanded Bart.



CHAPTER IX

SANTA CLAUS IN SCHOOL

The four chums pitched in with a will and helped Sandy. They did not talk much, for, take it all in all, it was rather an embarrassing situation. Sandy did not know what to say, and the boys did not feel like entering into friendly conversation.

They did not care to be sociable with Sandy after what he had done, not only in regard to refusing them a ride, but in the matter of the oil barge. But they could not see anyone in such a plight as Sandy was, through no fault of his own, and not render assistance.

"The horses took fright and ran away," Sandy explained, when most of the bags had been piled on shore. "I couldn't stop 'em. The load was too heavy, and it was down hill."

The chums did not answer. Sandy did not expect they would. The situation was too novel. But he was grateful for their help, and, doubtless resolved not to act meanly toward them in the future. The trouble with Sandy was he had no strength of character. He was mean in spite of himself, and couldn't help it.

When the bags were out of the way the five boys, by dint of hard work, managed to right the sleigh, which was a big double bob. It was not damaged to any extent and soon was ready to receive the bags of feed. They were piled in and the horses hitched up again.

"I'm—I'm much obliged to you fellows," said Sandy in a mumbling tone. "I'm sorry I didn't give you a ride that day."

Sandy meant that. He was much softened by what the chums had done.

"We'd made up our minds to get square with you," said Bart, as he fastened on his skates. "And I think we did, Sandy," and with that the four chums started off down the river, while Sandy drove the horses up into the road.

"Queer way to get square," murmured Ned. "I'd like to punch his face."

“This was the best way,” Bart replied, and, somehow, though perhaps they didn’t know just why, the chums agreed with him.

Christmas was approaching, and mingled with the joys of the holiday season, were thoughts in the minds of the four chums and all the other pupils, that school would close for two weeks.

“Next Wednesday is Christmas,” observed Bart one afternoon as the chums were on their way home. “School closes Tuesday for the two weeks, and we ought to mark the occasion in some way. Have you fellows heard of any celebration?”

“Nary a one,” replied Fenn.

“Well, there’s going to be something doing, all right.”

“Who’s going to do it?” asked Ned.

“Well, not the fellow who invited the cow to school,” replied Bart, referring to an incident for which Ned was responsible.

“You, maybe, eh?”

“Maybe,” and Bart winked his left eye.

There was little studying done on Monday of Christmas week, and less was in prospect for the following Tuesday. Some of the classes had arranged for informal exercises in their rooms and later there was to be a general gathering of all the pupils of the school in the large auditorium, at which Mr. McCloud the principal would make an address.

Monday night Bart was very busy in his room. There were odd noises proceeding from it, and when he came down a little later, and asked Alice to sew some strips of red cloth for him, she asked:

“What in the world are you up to, Bart?”

“I’m a knight, getting my armor ready for the conflict of battle,” he replied gravely. “Be ready for me when I return, for I may be covered with wounds and you can get lots of first-aid-to-the-injured practice.”

“Now, don’t do anything silly,” Alice advised.

“Far be it from me to do any such thing. You girls can attend to that part.”

“As if we girls were anywhere near as silly as boys are when they get started,” commented Alice, sewing away at the cloth. “Ouch! There, I’ve pricked my finger!” and she wiped away a few drops of blood.

“Here! Don’t get my uniform all spotted!” exclaimed Bart, as he saw Alice wipe her finger with the red cloth.

“Silly! How is blood going to show on this old red flannel?” asked Alice. “You’ll have to wait, Bart, until I wash my finger in an antiseptic solution,” and, laying aside the cloth, Alice hurried for her little box of remedies.

“I can sew it myself,” declared Bart, and he tried to, but he made awkward work of it, for he used a five cent piece in place of a thimble, at which Alice laughed when she returned. Under her skillful fingers, even though one was done up in a cloth, the work was soon completed.

It was about two o’clock when the pupils were assembled in the auditorium of the High School Tuesday afternoon. Professor McCloud delivered an address on the meaning of Christmas, telling of how ancient people celebrated it, and relating stories of the various nations that had beliefs in myths corresponding to Santa Claus, or St. Nicholas.

“Speaking of Santa Claus,” Mr. McCloud went on, as the closing remarks to his lecture, “I am reminded of—”

At that instant there was a jingle of bells out in the corridor, and before pupils or teachers, the latter all sitting on the raised platform in front, knew what it portended, a strange sight was presented.

Into the big room came a personage dressed in the usual Santa Claus costume, red flannel striped with white, a big white beard, his clothing sprinkled with something to represent snow, and, over his back a big bag.

But, oddest of all, was a little sleigh which St. Nicholas pulled in after him by a string. Hitched in front of it were eight tiny reindeer, made of plaster-of-paris, properly colored. Each animal was on a stand on wheels, and as St. Nicholas pulled them in with the sleigh, he shook the leading string, on which were bells, so that they jingled musically.

“Merry Christmas to all!” exclaimed St. Nicholas in a deep bass voice. “May I speak to them, sir?” and the figure turned to Professor McCloud, who, entering

into the spirit of the occasion, nodded an assent. Neither he nor any of the teachers were prepared for the advent of Santa Claus. Some of the boys had suspected, but they were not sure.

“My sled and reindeer shrunk as soon as I struck this climate,” Santa Claus went on in his deep tones, which Ned was puzzling his brain over. He was wondering where he had heard them before. “Still I managed to come,” the red-coated figure went on. “I have a few gifts for some of the more faithful of my subjects.”

He slung the bag from his shoulder and began groping in it.

“Is Lem Gordon here?” he asked.

“Step up, Lemuel,” said Professor McCloud, for, though he did not know what was coming, he was willing to let the pupils have fun on such an occasion as this.

Rather sheepishly Lem, the pitcher on the High School nine, left his seat.

“I have heard of your good work last season,” Santa Claus went on, “and, as a reward for it I have brought you this. May it help you to win many games.”

With that he handed Lem a red, white and blue striped rubber ball, the kind given to babies so they can not hurt themselves.

The other pupils burst into laughter, and Lem blushed. He acted as though he was going to throw it at the head of St. Nicholas, but thought better of it and went to his seat.

“Fenn Masterson,” Santa Claus called next, and Stumpy went forward. “Fenn, I have heard how devoted you are to the ladies,” the speaker went on. “So I bring you this that you may never forget them,” and Fenn was given a doll dressed in the height of fashion. On the neck was a card which read: “I love Fenn and Fenn loves me.”

“Kiss her, Fenn!” called out Ned in a loud whisper, and poor Fenn, blushing to his ears, carried the doll back to his seat.

“I have here something for Ned Wilding,” the figure went on, and, as Ned, in response to the remorseless urging of his fellow pupils, went forward he was given a tin rattle box.

“Now James Eaton,” called Santa Claus, and James, who was very fond of dogs was given a little woolly one that emitted a squeaky bark when gently punched in the stomach.

“William Sanderson!” called St. Nicholas, and a lad who did little else than fish in his spare time, was presented with a small pole and line, from which dangled a tin trout.

So it went on, until a score of the boys and several girls had been given toy presents bearing on their particular traits of character.

Meanwhile Ned and Fenn had been whispering to each other.

“Shall I do it now?” asked Ned, as St. Nicholas seemed to have reached the bottom of his bag.

“Yes,” whispered Fenn.

As Santa Claus prepared to leave, thinking perhaps his identity had not been penetrated, Ned walked forward.

“One moment,” he called, and St. Nicholas halted in the act of dragging out his tiny reindeer and sleigh.

“Though you have remembered us, you have forgotten yourself,” Ned went on. “Therefore, Mr. Bart Keene, *alias* St. Nicholas, on behalf of the pupils of the school I present you with this.”

Before Bart could get away Ned had torn the false beard from his chum’s face. Then, holding out what seemed to be a basket-ball, Ned suddenly raised it high in the air and brought it down on Bart’s head. It broke with a loud sound, for it was paper blown up, and out flew a shower of confetti, which covered Bart’s red flannel uniform with tiny scraps of colored paper. Ned had brought it to use in playing a joke on someone else, but, at the last minute, discovering the identity of St. Nicholas, he had resolved on a different plan.

CHAPTER X

WRECK OF THE TOWER

A loud shout of laughter went up at the surprised look on Bart's face. He did not know what to say, and he shook his head to get rid of the confetti that clung even to his eyebrows. He had hoped to get away undiscovered but his chums had been too smart for him. He opened his mouth to speak, and the hickory nut he had placed in it to make his voice sound deep, dropped out and rolled on the floor. At this there was more laughter.

"Very well done, Bart," observed Principal McCloud. "I think school is dismissed," he added, as he and the other teachers joined in the laughter.

"Come again, Bart," said Ned, as he and the other boys crowded about the impersonator of Santa Claus.

"Off with his uniform!" one of the boys called, and, before Bart could defend himself, he was being pulled this way and that, until the red suit he had gone to such trouble to make was a thing of shreds and tatters.

"It's just like poor King Lear, being all torn apart by the winds," exclaimed Jennie Smith, though some of her companions could not quite see the simile. "Oh, I would love to recite something," she went on.

"Go ahead," said Mary Tedwell. "I guess no one will hear you," and she laughed rather maliciously.

"Mean old thing!" exclaimed Jennie. "She's mad because she can't recite poetry."

Now Bart was entirely stripped of his Santa Claus suit, and the boys and girls, securing pieces of it, formed a ring about the lad and marched around singing any tune that came into their heads. The teachers had retired, leaving the pupils to finish in their own fashion the celebration attendant upon closing of school for the holidays as they knew there would be little trouble.

But all things must have an end and the merry frolic of the boys and girls was gradually brought to a close. Those who had received the odd presents from Bart

were made to exhibit them, and many were the jibes and quips that accompanied the display.

On all sides and from scores of girls and boys came the greeting, "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year," for school would not assemble again until the second week in January.

One by one the pupils left for home. The big auditorium became quieter and soon only the four chums, Alice and Jennie, and a few of their friends remained.

"Come on," said Bart. "I'll stand treat for hot chocolate at Fanton's Drug Emporium."

The boys and girls were a little later on their way to the "Emporium" as the sign in the window declared it to be.

"Coming to the entertainment Friday night?" asked Jennie of Fenn, when they were sipping the hot beverage.

"What entertainment?"

"The Y. M. C. A. is going to give one in the school auditorium. Moving pictures and some music. Alice and I are going."

"Sure I'm coming," Stumpy replied, though it was the first he had heard of it. But Stumpy wasn't going to be left out if there were girls in it.

"Where you going?" asked Bart, overhearing the talk.

"Entertainment—school hall—Y. M. C. A.—Mov—ing pict—ures."

The breaks Fenn made, in imparting the information, were caused by the sips of chocolate he took between his words.

"We'll all go," decided Bart. "We'll be over our Christmas dinners by then."

Finishing their chocolate the boys and girls walked together down the street on their way home. As they separated they wished each other the joys of the season.

Christmas, which came next day, was celebrated in Darewell much as it is celebrated every where in Christian lands. There was happiness in the homes of the four chums, not only at the gifts which they received, but also over those they gave. Each one remembered Mrs. Perry and her two girls, and, it is safe to

say, it was the best Christmas the widow's family had experienced since trouble came.

"If only Willie was home now," Mrs. Perry said to Jane as they looked at the gifts which had come so unexpectedly to them, "we would be very happy."

"Perhaps he will be with us next Christmas," Jane remarked, trying to comfort her mother. "Let us hope so anyhow. We are much more happy than we were the day before Thanksgiving when everything seemed so black."

"Yes, thanks to those good boys," the widow replied. "Well, we will trust in Providence. Perhaps Willie may come back to us."

The day of the Y. M. C. A. entertainment proved to be one of the coldest of the winter. It dawned with a dull leaden sky, filled with lowering clouds, and there was a nip to the air that made thick wraps a necessity. The wind, which had been blowing strongly in the morning, increased in violence as the day advanced until by evening it was blowing half a gale.

But the boys and girls who crowded into the school auditorium did not mind this. It only made their cheeks redder, and though the wind did toss and tumble the hair of the girls it only caused them to look all the prettier, at least so Fenn thought, and he ought to know.

"B-r-r-r! It's a regular hurricane!" exclaimed Bart as he and Alice entered the hall, where they found a number of their friends. The entertainment had not yet begun.

"It must be getting colder," observed Ned.

"What makes you think so?" asked Bart.

"Your nose is as red as a beet."

"It feels half frozen," Bart answered. "That comes of having such a big one. But it's a sign of greatness you know."

"If we let you tell it," interposed Frank.

The hall soon filled up and the entertainment was started. There was vocal and instrumental music and recitations. Jennie Smith rendered "Horatius at the Bridge" with all the energy she was capable of, and the four chums applauded vigorously.

The wind was increasing in violence, and it rattled the windows so that at times it interfered with the singing. The janitor went about tightening the fastenings.

“It’s going to be a bad storm,” Bart heard the man murmur as he adjusted the catches. “I hope it doesn’t blow some of the chimneys down. One or two of ’em need pointing up, for the mortar’s most out of ’em.”

“Is there any danger?” asked Bart in a whisper.

“No, I hope not. The old tower—” but what the janitor would have said about the tower Bart did not hear, for the man had passed on and there came the chorus of a song which drowned his words.

But the janitor’s prophecy seemed likely to be true. The noise of the wind could be heard more plainly now. The windows did not rattle so much after being attended to, but the gale fairly made the school building vibrate. The old tower the janitor spoke of was a tall, square affair, at one corner of the building. It was for ornamental purposes only, though it contained a large clock, and there was a winding stair in it that gave access to the mechanism.

A white screen was adjusted and moving pictures thrown upon it. The first series was that of battleships in practice evolutions and as the smoke rolled from the muzzles of the big guns a man behind the scenes beat a bass drum, to simulate the distant roar of the ordnance.

The audience watched one great ship as it came into view on the screen. A broadside was fired, and, as the white smoke rolled out there came a tremendous concussion that shook the entire school.

“He must have busted the drum that time,” thought Bart.

An instant later there came a terrifying crash so near at hand that everyone knew it was not the sound of the drum, nor their excited imagination. Nor was it the noise of the wind.

Then, down through one corner of the auditorium, fortunately in a place where no one was seated, crashing through the ceiling, came a mass of brick and mortar.

Before the echoes of that had died away there sounded another noise; a deep, dull sound, and the school again vibrated with the shock. Then the auditorium

was in darkness, and through it came the voice of the janitor shouting:

“The tower has been wrecked and has fallen!”



CHAPTER XI

NED GETS A LETTER

For an instant silence followed the startling announcement, silence in which the wind seemed to join, for there came a lull in the gale. Then, as the gale resumed its furious blowing, the audience became fear-crazed and a mad rush ensued.

Women and girls were screaming at the tops of their voices. Men were shouting to one another to know what had happened. Boys were darting here and there seeking a means of escape from what they believed would prove a death-trap. The noise of bricks clattering to the floor could be heard and the school-house seemed, at least to the excited imaginations of some, to be on the point of toppling down.

The four chums, who were seated near each other, had jumped up at the first crash. Bart reached over to grab Alice and prevent, if possible, her being trampled under foot. Fenn had Jennie by the arm. Then the light from the moving picture machine, which had served to dispel the gloom, went out. The maddened rush became worse.

“Quick!” cried Frank. “Let’s give the school yell! Maybe it will quiet the rush until we can turn on the lights! There’s a switch on the wall here! Now, fellows altogether!”

His three chums heard him as if in a dream, but they comprehended.

“One, two, three!” cried Frank.

Then, above the noise of the gale, above the shrieks of the women and girls, above the hoarse calls of frightened men, arose the yell, given with all the power of the lungs of the four boys:

“Ravabava—Havabava—Hick! Hick! He!
Dabavaba—Nabahaba—Snick! Snack! Snee!
Why do we thus loudly yell?
'Tis for our school: old Darewell!”

Never had the call been given under such circumstances. Never had it sounded more strangely. Never had it been more welcome.

For an instant there was a silence following the yell. It had momentarily drowned the cries from the panic-stricken ones. Before there was a chance for a continuance of the panic that had been halted, if only for an instant, Bart cried:

“There’s no danger. Wait until the lights are turned on!”

In another moment Frank had reached the switch and the place was brilliant with the gleam from scores of incandescent lamps. The rush had been stopped, for, as the crowd looked about, they saw there was no immediate danger.

In one corner of the auditorium there was a gaping hole in the roof, where the top part of the tower had crashed through. The floor in that section was covered with bricks and mortar, and several seats were crushed, but the audience had crowded up front and no one was hurt.

A moment later some of those in charge of the entertainment hurried to the platform and made an announcement.

A hasty investigation showed, it was said, that the tower had fallen mostly outward instead of toward the school, which accounted for only a small part of it hitting the roof. Had the entire pile of masonry toppled over on the auditorium there might have been a great loss of life. As it was the main school was in no danger, but, for fear the structure might have been weakened it was decided best to dismiss the audience at once.

“That wind must be pretty strong,” observed Bart as he and his chums, with Alice, Jennie, and some of the other girls, got outside.

“Oh! It certainly is!” cried Jennie as she stepped from the doorway. “I’m being blown away.”

The wind had caught her long cloak and whipped it up around her shoulders so that it acted like a sail. Jennie was being fairly carried along the street.

“There’s your chance, Fenn!” cried Frank. “Rescue a maiden in distress.”

Fenn did not stop to reply to his tormenter but caught Jennie by the arm and helped her to straighten her garment.

“Noble youth!” exclaimed Bart. “You shall be suitably rewarded.”

They all laughed, rather hysterically, it is true, at the nonsense talk, but it was a relief to their over-strained nerves for the shock of the accident had been a severe one.

They passed along and, as they got beyond the shelter of the school the full force of the wind was felt. It was almost a hurricane, and it was all they could do to walk along.

“No wonder it blew the tower down,” observed Ned. “Let’s take a look at the wreck.”

They walked around to the other side of the school. There, prone on the ground, though but a confused mass of bricks and mortar, was what had been the tower.

“There’s the clock!” exclaimed Frank, as he saw the dial of the timepiece some distance from the big mass of masonry. “See, it stopped just at ten.”

There were four dials to the clock, one for each side of the tower. The dials were of sheet iron with big gilt hands which were worked simultaneously by the one set of wheels and springs. This dial, to which Frank called attention, had fallen from its place, with the hands still attached to it, the rods to which they were fastened, and which served to turn them, having been cut off close to the back of the face.

“I’m going to take it home for a souvenir,” Frank said. “If they want it back they can have it.”

He picked up the dial, which was painted white with black numerals on it. As he did so he uttered an exclamation.

“What’s the matter?” asked Ned.

“It’s all mud, or something black,” Frank replied. “I’ve got it all over my hands.”

“Better let it alone,” advised Bart. “The wind will blow it away, and you with it, if you try to carry it.”

“I guess I can manage,” Frank responded, and though the gale did get a good purchase on the flat surface of the dial which was two feet in diameter, Frank clung to it and took it home with him.

“See you to-morrow!” called Fenn to Frank, as the latter turned off on a street that led to his uncle’s house. The others went in the opposite direction.

“We’ll come and take a look at the ruins by daylight,” suggested Frank. “Good-night.”

“Good-night,” called his chums, and the girls.

“Queer sort of a relic he’s got,” observed Bart.

“It’s just like him,” Ned rejoined. “Frank’s a queer chap anyhow.”

“I think he’s nice,” remarked Alice.

“So do I,” chimed in Jennie.

“Who said he wasn’t?” demanded Bart. “Can’t a fellow make a remark about his chum without being found fault with?”

“I don’t think it’s nice to say he’s queer,” Alice said.

“Why he admits it himself,” her brother put in. “He doesn’t care what we say about him. We call him queer about twice a week; don’t we fellows.”

“Sure,” replied Ned, coming to his chum’s support.

“Well, never mind,” Alice rejoined. “Let’s hurry home or we’ll be blown into the next county.”

It was such a cold blustery night, with the wind seeming to increase in violence rather than diminish, that all were glad when they reached their houses.

“It’s a pretty fierce gale,” remarked Mr. Keene, when his son and daughter had told him what had happened, “but I wouldn’t think it was strong enough to blow the tower down. Must have been weak somewhere.”

“The janitor said some of the chimneys needed new mortar in the cracks, and maybe the tower did also,” Bart said.

“I suppose the school authorities will investigate and see what caused it to fall,” his father went on. “It was a dangerous thing to let such a weak tower stay up.”

Bart stopped at Ned’s house the next morning to call for him, and then they

intended to get Frank and Fenn to go together and take a look at the tower.

“Come on in,” Ned invited his chum at the door. “I’ve got a letter.”

“Who from?”

“My aunt, Mrs. Paul Kenfield, of New York. She wants me to come down for a week or two. You know, she wrote me some time ago inviting me for next summer. Now she says she wants me to come right away, and to bring you three fellows. I wrote her, after I got the first invitation that I’d like to take my chums with me.”

“That’s very kind of you,” replied Bart. “I guess I can go. When are you going to start?”

“Monday.”

“That will give you a week there. I don’t believe I could get ready so soon. I’ve got to help dad Monday.”

“Then you and the other boys could come afterward. Say on Tuesday or Wednesday,” suggested Ned.

“I’ll think about it,” his chum replied. “But come on, let’s go take a look at the fallen tower.”

CHAPTER XII

NED STARTS OFF

Ned and Bart went to Fenn's house, where they found Frank. The two were just on the point of starting out.

"Did you get your relic home safe?" asked Bart of Frank.

"You mean the clock dial? I did, though I thought at one time the wind would blow it away. I got that black stuff whatever it was on it, all over my clothes."

"Was it paint?" asked Ned.

"No, seemed like some kind of smoke. I had hard work to get it off my hands."

"Come on!" called Fenn. "There are crowds going to see the tower."

"Well, what of it?" asked Ned. "They can't carry it away; can they?"

"No," replied Fenn, "but they'll all get around it and we can't see anything."

"Oh we'll get you a pair of opera glasses," rejoined Frank.

"I guess you're all just as anxious to see it as I am," said Stumpy. "Come on."

A fine, calm day, though cold, had succeeded the blustery one. As Fenn had said, the streets were filled with a large throng hastening to see the wreck of the tower. The falling of it had created more excitement than had been known in Darewell for some years.

"Say, you fellows are all right," called Jim Nelson, as the four chums passed him. "That was a fine yell you gave. I'd a joined in, only—"

"Too much work, eh?" asked Frank, for Jim had the reputation, not altogether undeserved, of being the laziest boy in town.

"No, it wasn't that exactly," Jim replied, "but I couldn't remember the words."

"Why didn't you come in on the tune?" asked Ned.

“Um,” was all Jim said. It was his usual reply when he did not want to take the trouble to answer in words. “Say,” he called a moment later, as the chums kept on, “are you going to the tower?”

“Yes; are you?” inquired Fenn.

“I was, but if you’re going that way would you do me a favor?”

“What is it?” asked Ned.

“Stop on your way back and tell me how it looks. No use of me going if you are. I’ll wait in the drug store here for you,” and Jim turned into the “Emporium.”

“We may not be back until late this afternoon,” Fenn said.

“That’s all right, I’m in no hurry. I can wait here as well as anywhere else,” and Jim went into the store and took a seat on one of the stools at the soda fountain, from whence he could look out of the window.

“Well, if that isn’t the limit!” exclaimed Ned.

“It’s a wonder he didn’t ask us to bring the tower around for him to look at,” said Bart.

“He would, only he was too lazy to think of it,” remarked Frank.

The boys found quite a crowd around the fallen mass of bricks, and many were the comments on the accident.

“Let’s go up and take a look at where the roof was broken through,” suggested Ned.

The chums started to enter the school intending to go to the auditorium, but, as they reached the stairs, for the building was open, they were met by Mr. Williamson, president of the Board of Education.

“You can’t go in, boys,” he said pleasantly enough.

“Is it dangerous?” asked Ned.

“Well, that’s what we’re trying to find out. We have some workmen looking over the ruins to see what repairs we will have to make. There’s quite a hole in the roof.”

“Will it interfere with the opening of school next week?” asked Bart.

“Do you wish it would?” asked Mr. Williamson.

The boys laughed, for the president had read their thoughts.

“We hope not,” Mr. Williamson went on. “By the way, you boys know almost everything that goes on in Darewell? Did you happen to hear of any one carrying off one of the clock dials? We can only find three in the ruins, and there were four.”

“I took one home with me last night,” said Frank promptly. “I wanted it for a relic. I hope there was no harm in that.”

“None in the world, if you still have it,” said Mr. Williamson. “You see we are trying to find out just what caused the tower to be blown down by the wind, and we want all the evidence we can get. Just keep the dial safely and, the next time you come up toward my store, leave it for me. You may have it back again after we are through with it, for we’ll have to have a whole new clock I expect.”

“Wonder what he expects to find from the clock face?” asked Ned, as the boys went back on the campus to get another look at the fallen tower.

“Probably wants to look into its open countenance and ask questions about how it feels to be blown down,” Bart replied.

“I hadn’t any idea they’d want that piece of the clock, or I’d never have taken it,” said Frank. “Lucky I saved it, or someone else might have carried it off and they’d never get it again.”

They took another look at the tower, though there was little they had not already seen, and then on Stumpy’s invitation to have some hot chocolate they strolled back to the “Emporium.” They found Jim still there, but he seemed to have fallen asleep.

“Put some chocolate near him, and see if he wakes up,” suggested Ned in a whisper.

The clerk, at the boys’ request, placed a glass of the steaming liquid close to Jim’s hand as it rested on the marble counter. Jim opened his eyes, looked at the beverage, glanced at the four chums waiting expectantly and then—closed his eyes again without reaching for the chocolate.

“He’s lost his chance,” Fenn said. “I’ll drink it myself.”

He did so, and, as the boys were leaving, Jim appeared to rouse from his slumber. He seemed to remember the chocolate, for he put out his hand as if to grasp it. His fingers closed on the empty air.

“Did I drink it?” he asked of the chums, who stood laughing at him.

“Must have,” replied Ned.

“I don’t remember,” Jim said, in puzzled tones. “But it’s all right. I’m sleepy to-day. Is the tower still—?” Then the exertion of talking seemed to be too much for him, and he closed his eyes again.

“Come on,” said Ned. “I’ve got to get home and make arrangements for my New York trip.”

“Oh, yes, and I must find out when I can go,” Bart added. “We can have jolly sport there, fellows.”

There were several family councils that night. Ned’s plans were all made, and he had but to pack his trunk, ready to leave on the following Monday morning. The other chums, though, had to consult their relatives. It was inconvenient for some to let the boys go Tuesday, and Thursday did not suit any better. Finally a compromise was made and Wednesday, following the Monday on which Ned was to start, was fixed on.

Then came an announcement which changed the plans of the boys to some extent. Late Saturday afternoon it was stated that the damage to the school had been greater than was at first supposed. It would be impossible to make repairs so that classes might assemble the second week in January, and the institution was to close for a month. Not until February first, President Williamson stated, would the school open again.

“Say, this will just suit us!” cried Ned as he and his chums discussed the news that night. “We can stay so much longer. I know my aunt will be glad to see us, and the longer vacation we have the better she will like it. She’s fond of boys. All hers are grown up. She said I was to come and stay a month if I wanted to.”

“Fine!” exclaimed Bart. “I’ll have to pack a few more clothes in my trunk if we are to be gone longer than we first calculated.”

“So will I,” cried Fenn.

“Then it’s all settled,” said Ned. “I’ll go Monday and you follow Wednesday. You can find your way to the house I guess. It’s on West Forty-fourth street. Here’s the number. I’ll be there to welcome you. Won’t we have fun though! I’ve never been in New York.”

The others had not either, and they spent some time discussing the pleasant prospects ahead of them.

Monday morning they all went down to the depot to see Ned off.

“Good-bye until Wednesday,” he called to his chums as they stood on the platform waving their hands to him. “I’ll meet you in New York sure.”

But it was a long time before Ned kept his promise.



CHAPTER XIII

STARTLING NEWS

The issue of the *Darewell Advertiser* that Monday afternoon contained some startling information. The three chums were standing in front of the drug store talking of their prospective trip when a newsboy ran past calling:

“Extra! Extra! Full account of the blowing up of the school tower with dynamite!”

“What’s that he’s yelling?” asked Bart.

“He said something about the school tower and dynamite,” replied Fenn. “Trying to sell his papers I guess.”

“Let’s get one and see if it’s a fake,” suggested Frank.

“Here boy! Give me one!” cried Bart, and the lad handed him a sheet, damp with paste from the press.

Staring at the three chums in big black letters was the heading:

SCHOOL TOWER DYNAMITED!
Not Blown Down by Gale of Wind as First
Supposed.
BELIEVED TO BE BOYS’ WORK!
Investigation Has Been Ordered by President
Williamson of the Board of Education.
FOUR LADS SUSPECTED!

“Well, what do you think of that!” exclaimed Bart when he had finished reading the head-lines. “Isn’t that the limit?”

“Limit! It’s the strangest thing I ever heard of,” cried Frank.

“Somebody has been stuffing the reporter,” suggested Fenn. “Let’s read the rest of it.”

Looking over Bart’s shoulders the two other lads read the account. It told in

vivid language how the fact was discovered that the tower had been blown down by an explosive. Those nearest the tower when the crash came told of hearing a dull boom, that was not caused by the wind. Then came the sound as the bricks fell through the corner of the roof of the auditorium.

“But if other evidence was wanting,” the article went on, “it is easily found in the dials of the clock that was in the tower. The white faces bear the black marks of powder and an analysis which has been made shows the stains to have been caused by some powerful explosive, the exact nature of which is being kept secret by the authorities.

“It is understood from a reliable source, however, that dynamite was used, a small quantity being placed in the top of the tower. It is said that part of a dynamite cartridge has been found but this is denied by the police.

“That the work was that of mischievous boys, who, possibly did not appreciate the seriousness of their deed, is the opinion of the school authorities. This is borne out by the fact that a boy confessed to having carried off one of the powder-marked dials of the clock. Why he did this has not been disclosed, but Mr. Williamson has secured an admission from him that he did take the dial from the debris of the wrecked tower. This dial the president of the board has secured, together with the other three.

“It is alleged that four boys, who are often seen in each others’ company, and who have, before this, taken part in more or less harmless tricks, are suspected of blowing down the tower. One of them, it can be asserted on the highest authority, had the clock dial. An investigation has been started by the school authorities, and the four boys in question, including the one who took the dial from the wreckage, will be called on to tell what they know. If the evidence, after a thorough sifting, points to them, it is understood that criminal action will be taken.”

“Did you ever hear the like?” cried Fenn.

“Wait, here’s something more,” said Bart. He pointed to a few lines of type at the bottom of the article. They read:

“Just as we are going to press we learn that one of the four suspected lads has hurriedly left town.”

“Come on!” cried Bart. “I’m going to make him take that back.”

“Make who take what back?” asked Frank.

“Why the editor of this paper. Can’t you see who he’s referring to in that last line? He means Ned! He means that Ned’s run away for fear he’ll be arrested! He means us when he says ‘four boys often seen in each others’ company!’ He’s accusing the Darewell Chums of blowing up the tower! Come on, we’ll make him deny this if he has to get out an extra!”

“Go slow,” advised Frank.

“Go slow! Yes, that’s always your way! Wait and let him say all he wants to about us! I guess not!”

“I say we’d better wait,” Frank went on quietly. “Of course you know, and I know, none of us had anything to do with the blowing up of the tower. I don’t believe it was blown up. I believe the wind did it, and some one has imagined all this and given the reporter a story of what he thinks is the truth. At the same time the school authorities may be going to have an investigation. It’s their privilege. Now if we go to the editor’s office and raise a row folks at once will jump to the conclusion that we had some hand in the explosion. Besides, it doesn’t say we are suspected.”

“It as good as says so,” Bart exclaimed. “Everyone will know they mean us.”

“At the same time the article doesn’t say so. That editor is cute enough for that. He doesn’t want a libel suit on his hands.”

“It might as well call us by the names,” Bart insisted. “Besides, that refers to Ned as plain as can be, and he isn’t here to defend himself. It’s our duty to go.”

“I tell you you’ll only make things worse if you go to the office of the paper,” Frank insisted. “The editor will ask you if you think the article refers to you. You’ll say it does, and he’ll say, in effect, ‘if the shoe fits put it on.’ These newspaper men are no fools. They have some basis for what they write. Besides, you know I did take the dial.”

“So you did,” said Fenn.

“Did you give it back to Mr. Williamson?” asked Bart.

“Yes, I took it to the store as he asked me to.”

“But you didn’t make any admissions, did you?”

“How could I? There were none to make. You were with me when he asked me about the clock face and you heard all I said. When I left the dial in the store he was not there. I haven’t seen him since. The reporter is drawing on his imagination I guess for considerable of this.”

“I wonder if they are going to have an investigation?” said Bart.

“Let’s go and see Mr. Williamson,” suggested Fenn. “We can show him the article and he can tell us what to do. I think that’s the best plan.”

The other two chums agreed to this, and, each one having purchased a paper containing the startling news, they went to the hardware store of the president of the Board of Education.

Mr. Williamson was talking to some other members of the board, in his private office, when the boys entered the store. They sent word they wanted to see him, and in a little while, his visitors having gone, the president invited the chums in.

“Well, boys,” he began, “what can I do for you?”

“This article,” began Bart. “It seems to—”

“I have read it,” Mr. Williamson interrupted.

“Do you suspect us?” demanded Bart.

“That is hardly a fair question,” Mr. Williamson replied. “I shall probably be called upon to preside at the investigation and I can not discuss the case in advance of the hearing. I will say this however: We believe some boy or boys blew up the tower, little thinking of the terrible danger to which he subjected the entire school and that audience. We have no direct evidence, as yet, but we expect to get some. I may add that a hearing will be held to-night, and I would like you boys to be there. I understand Ned Wilding has gone to New York.”

“He went this morning,” replied Bart, “but he had planned to go long before this thing happened. We are going to join him Wednesday.”

“Indeed?” and Mr. Williamson looked a little surprised.

“What time is the hearing?” asked Fenn.

“At eight o’clock, in my office here.”

“We’ll be on hand,” spoke Bart.

All the members of the Board of Education, the school janitor, the chief of police, a detective, the fathers of Bart and Fenn, and Frank’s uncle were at the hearing. There was much testimony in an informal way, to the effect that the tower was wrecked by an explosion and not by the wind. So much was easily proved.

The next thing was to discover who had done the deed. The janitor said he had seen a boy hanging around the tower just before the entertainment began, but he could not give a good description. It might fit half the boys in Darewell.

There was no direct evidence against the chums. Bart had bought some powder in Mr. Williamson’s store a few days before the explosion, but he testified it was for his gun, which evidence was corroborated by Mr. Keene. The taking away of the clock dial by Frank was dwelt upon, and there seemed a disposition to make much of it, but the boy’s uncle bore out Frank’s statement that the dial had been placed among a lot of other relics and ornaments in his nephew’s room, and was not hidden away as though Frank wished to conceal any evidence. Ned’s sudden trip was explained, though it was manifest that some of the school commissioners looked with disfavor on it.

The affair ended, as far as the four chums were concerned, in a sort of Scotch verdict of “not proven.”

“Does that end this inquiry?” asked Mr. Keene.

“For the time being,” replied Mr. Williamson.

“Then I demand that this committee issue a statement that there is not the slightest evidence against my son and his chums.”

“We will do nothing of the sort!” exclaimed Mr. Williamson.

“Then I shall take legal steps to compel you to.”

“And I will join you,” declared Mr. Masterson.

“This investigation will be continued later,” Mr. Williamson went on. “We have not finished. We are going to have some expert detectives here. Then perhaps we shall discover who perpetrated this outrage.”

“You may rest assured it was none of these boys,” said Mr. Dent. “I know my

nephew and I know his chums too well even to suspect them.”

“That is all at present,” the president of the board remarked. “The meeting is adjourned.”

“But it leaves these boys under a cloud,” objected Mr. Keene.

“I am sorry but that cannot be helped,” was Mr. Williamson’s reply.

CHAPTER XIV

NED'S BUSINESS VENTURE

Meanwhile Ned Wilding was speeding on the fast train toward New York. The first part of the journey was no novelty to him, as he had been over that part of the line before. Soon, however, he noticed a change in the scenery and was kept busy watching the landscape as it seemed to fly past the windows.

"I wonder if I'll have time to attend to that little matter of business before I go to Uncle Kenfield's house," said Ned to himself as he leaned back in his seat and pulled a bundle of papers from his pocket. "Let's see what the address is."

Ned began to turn over the pages of a booklet which he selected from among his bundle of documents.

"Skem & Skim, 111 Broadway," he read. "I'll just drop down there before I go to uncle's house and buy my stock. Just think of me being a stockholder in the Mt. Olive Oil Well Corporation, Limited. Capital ten million dollars, surplus and undivided profits five millions. It must be a great concern."

Ned gave himself up to pleasant thoughts and looked out of the window. Perhaps he saw himself a millionaire riding in his private car. For Ned was going to do some business on his own account—the first he had ever done.

When he learned that he was to visit his aunt and uncle in New York he decided to put into operation a plan he had long had in mind; ever since, in fact, he got the thousand dollars damages which were paid to him and his chums by Mr. Ricka, as told in the first volume of this "Darewell Chums Series."

Mr. Wilding, after much solicitation on Ned's part, had allowed his son to take one hundred dollars of the money to invest in any way he saw fit, subject to certain restrictions.

"I'll not let you buy gold bricks with it, of course," Mr. Wilding had said, "and I advise you not to invest it in alleged counterfeit money or 'green goods.' But anything else in reason you may do. It's your first real business venture, and it will be good for you to learn by experience. I had to when I was a boy."

“How about buying oil stock?” Ned had asked. “I have been reading that up lately.”

Mr. Wilding smiled behind the paper he was reading.

“I warned you against gold bricks,” he said.

“Oh, but this is a legitimate oil business,” Ned replied. “The company advertises in the best magazines, and is only selling stock low for a few days. By February first it is going to five dollars a share. It’s only fifty cents now. Why, they have testimonials from prominent men, and an expert writes that the oil wells of the Mt. Olive concern are the richest ever seen. They have one well that runs a hundred barrels a day and they haven’t it half bored yet.”

“Ned,” said Mr. Wilding, and he spoke a little gravely, “I’m not going to stand in your way. I’ve allowed you to take that hundred dollars to invest as you please. Now I’m not going to advise you. If I did I might as well invest the money myself. I want you to learn to be a business man and the best way to learn is by experience, though it isn’t always the easiest way. If you want to buy stock in that oil company do so. If you get ‘bitten’ you do so with your eyes open.”

“Don’t you think it’s a good investment, father?”

“I’m not going to say. Sometimes those concerns pay well, and again they do not. It’s an operation such as business men enter into every day, and in this case, as far as you are concerned, it is legitimate, since you are going to buy the stock outright, and not speculate in it by buying on a margin. As I said, I will not advise you. Buy that stock if you want to, and I’ll say nothing which ever way the cat jumps. It’s your money and you will have to foot the bill. I wouldn’t risk more than a hundred dollars though.”

“That will give me two hundred shares at fifty cents each,” Ned replied, figuring on the back of an envelope. “If it goes to five dollars a share I’ll make nine hundred dollars profit. That would be fine!”

“So you’ve decided to buy it, eh?”

“I think so. I’ll get it when I go to New York to Uncle Kenfield’s house.”

“Very well, Ned. You may do so. Only remember one thing, just repeat to yourself that old proverb about counting your chickens before they’re hatched.”

“Oh, well, I may not make nine hundred dollars, but I’m bound to clear some profit. The stock can’t go much below fifty cents a share,” Ned remarked hopefully.

“That’s your lookout,” his father replied. “Now that you’ve got it settled I’ll draw a hundred dollars of your thousand and give it to you before you start for New York.”

It was this transaction Ned had in mind as he was on his way to the great city. He read the account of the oil concern from circulars which had been mailed to him in Darewell a few weeks ago. There were big sheets of statistics, prospectuses glittering with gold printing, finely engraved sample stock certificates and a mass of figures that showed the impossibility of the Mt. Olive oil wells producing any less than the highest possible number of barrels per day.

“If this turns out all right I’ll get the other boys to invest some of their money,” Ned said to himself.

Ned reached New York safely about noon. He had his dinner in a restaurant near the station and then, leaving his trunk until he could have it sent to his uncle’s house, and carrying only a small valise, he went to the office of the oil concern.

He had little difficulty in finding it, once a policeman had directed him to Broadway. He was hardly prepared for the beautifully furnished office into which he stepped. There was heavy carpet on the floor, the chandeliers, glowing with electric lights, seemed of solid gold. There were brass and mahogany railings, big rosewood desks, telephones on the desks, stock tickers clicking in one corner, and three girls clicking on typewriters in another corner. On every side were evidence of a big and rushing business.

“Well, sir, what can we do for you? Who are you from?” asked a clerk, from behind a brass grating, as Ned entered.

“I came to buy some stock,” the boy replied.

“Who for? Speak quick! This is our busy day!”

“For myself,” Ned replied.

“Come, no joking. I haven’t any time to waste. Got an order from a broker? Hand it over with the check.”

“I haven’t any order and I haven’t any check,” Ned made reply, somewhat sharply, for the clerk’s manner nettled him. “I came in here to buy some stock on my own account. I’ve got the cash here, but if you don’t want—”

“What is it?” asked a large, pompous man, with a florid face and a white moustache, coming from an inner office.

“This boy says he wants to buy some stock,” the clerk replied.

The florid man looked at Ned sharply.

“You mean this gentleman comes in here to invest in the Mt. Olive Oil Well Corporation,” the florid man went on quickly. “Certainly, my dear sir,” and he shot a meaning look at the clerk. “Skem & Skim will be happy to transact any business you may entrust them with. Step in here, please,” and he held the door open for Ned to enter the inner office.

That was even more richly furnished than the outer one. Ned sat in an upholstered chair that seemed to smother him, so far down did it let him sink.

“Now, my dear sir, what can we do for you?” and the man looked at Ned.

“I have a hundred dollars to invest in your oil well.”

The man seemed a little disappointed.

“Hum, yes, of course. Well, at the present market rate that will give you two hundred shares. You are in luck, my dear sir. We are going to put the price at a dollar a share in the morning. In fact we were going to advance it this afternoon. I will have your certificate made out at once.” He took the money, which Ned held out, and touched a button on his desk. A young man entered. “Make out a certificate for two hundred shares for this gentleman, er—let’s see—I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name when you mentioned it.”

As Ned had not mentioned it the gentleman’s inability to catch it might easily be forgiven.

Ned supplied the necessary information, and the clerk withdrew. Another entered a moment later. He seemed much excited:

“Just had a wire from Colonel Janders,” he said. “The Black Cat well has increased fifty barrels a day, Mr. Skem!”

“Good!” exclaimed the florid gentleman. “Tell Mr. Skim at once, and put the stock up to a dollar a share. You got in just in time,” he added, turning to Ned, and our hero thought so himself.

As the last clerk withdrew another one came in.

“Got an order from Mr. Johnson for five thousand shares,” he announced. “Shall I let him have ’em at fifty?”

“Sorry to disoblige Mr. Johnson, who is a very good friend of mine,” said Mr. Skem, “but I shall have to charge him a dollar. I guess he’ll pay it. The stock will go to two dollars a share before the end of the week.”

The first clerk came back with a finely engraved certificate, on which the name “Edward Wilding” was written in a flourishing hand.

“There you are,” said Mr. Skem. “I hope you will take some more stock soon. If you invest before the end of the week I will, as a special favor to you, make the price seventy-five cents.”

Ned had half a mind to invest another hundred dollars, but he thought he had better write to his father first. Then, with the precious certificate in his pocket, he started for his uncle’s house, planning to stop on the way and order his trunk sent up.



CHAPTER XV

IN TROUBLE

By inquiring from a policeman Ned found which elevated road to take in order to get to his uncle's residence. As he found the station was close to the office of the oil company, he decided he would go direct to Mr. Kenfield's home and arrange later to have his trunk sent up. He knew his uncle had a telephone, and thought the baggage could be sent for by an order over the wire. This would save him a long trip back to the station.

When Ned reached the address on West Forty-fourth street he was admitted by a maid, who asked him whom he wished to see.

"Is my uncle in?" asked Ned.

"Oh, so you're the little lad from Darewell," the girl exclaimed, with a smile, though Ned did not think he quite came under the category of "little." The maid asked him to come in and, as soon as he entered the hall, he saw that the place was in confusion. Several trunks stood about, some half full, others empty, while on chairs and sofas in the reception hall and parlor were piles of clothing.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Ned.

"Mr. Kenfield has suddenly been called to Europe," the girl said. "He has to go aboard the steamer to-night, and he must pack up at once. He has gone down town on a matter of business but he'll soon be back. Your aunt is expecting you. She's upstairs. I'll show you."

The girl led Ned to Mrs. Kenfield's room.

"Oh, Ned, I had forgotten all about you!" his aunt exclaimed. "I'm so glad to see you, but I'm sorry we're so upset. However, it will be over in a few hours, and when your uncle is off on the steamer you and I can sit down and talk. I want you to tell me all about Darewell and how your father is. I haven't seen him in so long! My! but you're the perfect image of him. How are you?"

"Very well, aunt," Ned replied. "Can I do anything to help you?"

“No, we are almost packed, or, rather your uncle is. He has to take quite a lot of things, as he doesn’t know how long he may have to stay. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll see about another trunk.”

Mr. Kenfield returned to the house in about an hour and warmly welcomed his nephew. He expressed regret at the necessity which so unexpectedly called him abroad, and said his trip could not be postponed.

“But you will have a good time with your aunt,” he added with a smile. “She knows as much about New York as I do, and will have more opportunities to take you around.”

“Perhaps I had better telegraph the other boys not to come,” suggested Ned. “It may inconvenience you.”

“No, no; let them come and welcome!” exclaimed Mrs. Kenfield. “I love boys. We’ll have a fine time. I have lots of room, and I want you and your chums to enjoy this visit to New York.”

That night Mr. Kenfield, bidding his wife and nephew good-bye, went aboard the vessel which was to sail early in the morning to take advantage of the tide.

“Well, I suppose your uncle is well out on the ocean by this time,” remarked Mrs. Kenfield, after a somewhat late breakfast which she and Ned ate alone in the handsome dining room. “Now, Ned, will you excuse me for a few hours? I have some shopping to do, and I know you wouldn’t want to be going through the stores while I stop at the bargain counters,” and she laughed. “Try and make yourself at home here. Mary will get lunch for you, in case I am not back in time. To-morrow your chums will be here, and we must plan to entertain them.”

Ned said he would be glad to take a rest during the morning, and, after his aunt had left he went to the library to read. He could not get interested in books, however, with the big city of New York at hand.

“I think I’ll go out and get a paper, and see how my oil stock is getting along,” he said. “Maybe it’s advanced some more.”

Telling Mary, the maid, where he was going, and remarking that he would soon be back, Ned went out into the street. It was rather cold, but the sun was shining brightly and most of the snow had been cleared away. Ned got a paper and turned to the financial page. There, sure enough was the name, Mt. Olive Oil, and it was quoted at one dollar a share. Ned did not notice that it was in the

column of “unlisted securities,” together with other stock of corporations, some selling as low as ten cents a share.

“I’m getting rich,” Ned murmured to himself. “Guess I’ll take another look at that certificate.”

He pulled it from his pocket, and, as he stood in the street reading it over he suddenly exclaimed:

“They’ve made a mistake. It’s only for one hundred shares instead of two hundred. I must go right down to the office and have it straightened out. It’s probably a clerical error.”

Though he said this to himself, it was with a vague feeling of uneasiness that Ned boarded a car to go to the offices of Skem & Skim. It must be an error, he repeated to himself, over and over again. Still he remembered what his father had said about “fake” companies. But this one had seemed substantial, and their offices certainly indicated that they did a big business. Ned was deposited by the elevator in the corridor opposite the glittering offices of Skem & Skim. He observed a number of persons standing before the entrance door.

“I tell you I will go in!” Ned heard one excited man exclaim. “They’ve got a thousand dollars of my money and I want it back.”

“Yes, and they’ve got five hundred of mine,” another man chimed in.

“I am sorry, gentlemen,” replied a third voice. “But the offices are closed. No one can go in until after an investigation.”

“By whose orders are they closed?” asked the man who had mentioned the thousand dollars.

“By the orders of the United States postal authorities,” was the answer. “A fraud order has been issued against Skem & Skim, and there is a warrant for their arrest on a charge of using the mails to swindle. They skipped out just before we got here this morning.”

“Can’t we get our money?” inquired half a dozen anxious ones.

“I’m afraid not,” was the reply from a small but determined looking man who stood before the door. “My assistant and I have charge of the offices. As soon as we can learn anything definite we will let you know.”

“Did they both get away?” asked some one of the postoffice inspector, for such the man in charge was.

“Yes, both Skem and Skim.”

“Their names ought to be Scheme and Skin,” said a man in a corner. “They skinned me out of three hundred dollars.”

“Any chance of getting ’em?” was the next inquiry of the inspector.

“We hope so. We are also looking for a young fellow who is supposed to hold two hundred shares of this wild-cat oil stock in the Mt. Olive well. As far as we can learn he is the only stockholder outside of Skem & Skim, and of course he’s liable if there’s any money in the concern. He may have a lot of the cash, which the firm got on other deals, salted away somewhere. He’s the one we want as badly as we do the other two. A young chap too, but as slick as they make ’em I’m told, even if he is a stranger here.”

Ned listened in wonder. He thought of his two hundred shares, and of the certificate in his pocket. He wondered if, by any possibility, he could be the one wanted.

“Who is this young fellow?” some one in the crowd asked.

“That’s what we’d like to find out,” the inspector replied. “He only got into New York yesterday, so one of my detectives informs me. Came from up state, or out west I hear. He’s the one I want, for he can tell a lot about this business. If I can lay hands on him I’ll clap him into a cell quicker than he can say Jack Robinson.”

“I wonder if he can mean me?” Ned thought, and his heart beat rapidly. “I came from up state yesterday. I got into New York yesterday, and I have two hundred shares of the Mt. Olive stock—at least I paid for ’em. But I don’t know any more about this business than the man in the moon. Still they may not believe me. I wonder if they would arrest me? Maybe it was against the law to buy the stock of a fraudulent concern. I wonder what I’d better do?”

“Yes, sir,” the inspector went on, speaking to the angry and defrauded investors, “once let me get my hands on this young fellow who has those two hundred shares and I’ll clear up some of this mystery. He and Skem & Skim worked the trick among themselves and now you gentlemen can whistle for your money.”

“I’d like to get one chance at that young fellow!” exclaimed the man who had lost the thousand dollars.

“So would I!” chimed in the others.

“They wouldn’t even give me an opportunity to explain,” thought Ned. “They’d lock me up at once, though I’m entirely innocent. I’m going to get away from here!”

Then, while the angry men were still talking to the postal inspector, Ned turned and hurried off. He was afraid to go down in the elevator lest the attendant might recognize him as the youth who was at the offices the day before, so he walked down the ten flights of stairs.

“I must hurry and tell my aunt all about it,” Ned thought. “She will know what I ought to do.”



CHAPTER XVI

ADRIFT IN NEW YORK

Puzzled, worried and not a little frightened at what the outcome of his investment might be, Ned boarded an elevated train for his aunt's home. He was sure the inspector had referred to him, and, though he knew he had done nothing wrong, yet he admitted he was ignorant of the laws regarding stocks and bonds, and might have, unknowingly, acted illegally.

He had read of cases where the stockholders in a fraudulent concern were liable for the corporation's debts, and, in fancy, he saw a suit started against himself. As he was a minor he thought his father would have to stand the damage. Poor Ned was in a highly nervous state when he went up the steps of his aunt's home.

He began to imagine there might be a policeman waiting for him in the hall. He looked around as he reached the front door, expecting to see a blue-coated officer close at his heels. That there was a general alarm sent out for him he felt positive.

Something in Mary's manner, as she opened the door in response to his ring, told him there was trouble in the house. The girl's eyes showed she had been crying.

"Oh, Master Ned!" she exclaimed as he entered. "Isn't it awful! To think of the trouble!"

"Why, how did you hear?" asked the boy, wondering if in the parlor there was an officer to arrest him.

"Why, 'twas a message we got, to be sure."

"Then the postoffice authorities sent a letter here?" asked Ned, somewhat relieved to find he would not have to break to his aunt what he believed would be terrible news.

"No, dear," Mrs. Kenfield called down from the head of the stairs. "It wasn't a letter from the postoffice, it was a telegram. I have received bad news."

“Oh, aunt, it wasn’t my fault at all!” burst out Ned. “I didn’t know about it, or I’d never have come to New York.”

“Of course it isn’t your fault,” his aunt said. “How could you know about it when I only got the telegram myself a little while ago? As for your coming to New York, that couldn’t be helped. Of course it’s too bad. But you can pay me another visit.”

Ned thought she meant he must hurry away to escape arrest.

“Are you almost packed up, Mrs. Kenfield?” asked Mary.

“Yes, almost. I shall want a little help. I must go at once.”

“Why—what—are you—I don’t understand—” began Ned.

“Of course, just like women, to begin at the wrong end,” said Mrs. Kenfield, and Ned’s heart beat fast. He wondered if his aunt was going to reproach him for bringing disgrace on the family. He thought she would have to flee the city too, in order to avoid arrest. How he wished his uncle was at home to advise and help them.

“Do you have to go, aunt?” he asked. “Can’t I let ’em take me? I don’t mind.”

“No, it’s very good of you to offer, Ned. But I must go. They need me to help nurse her.”

“Help nurse,” repeated Ned, wondering if he had heard aright.

“Yes, didn’t Mary tell you? We have just received a telegram from my niece Jane Alden in Chicago. She has typhoid fever and I must go to her at once. She has no other relatives living and I must take care of her. I shall have to start at once and, as there is no telling when I will come back I must close up the house.”

“Close up the house,” Ned said.

“Yes, it will make lots of trouble, and I am so sorry that it will spoil the pleasure of yourself and your chums. But there is no help for it. I think you had better go back home, Ned. You and your friends can come and spend two months here next summer.”

“Is Mary going too?” asked Ned.

“Mary is going to stay with some relatives in Long Island until I come back. I have sent a cablegram explaining matters to your uncle and it will be waiting for him when his ship arrives on the other side. Oh, poor dear Jane! I hope her case is not a severe one. It is lucky I know how to nurse. She never could get along without me. I am sorry for you, Ned.”

Ned felt sorry for himself but he did not feel like inflicting his own troubles on his aunt. Still he did want some instructions about what he had better do. He was all upset and did not know whether to go home at once or wait until his aunt had started. He half resolved to tell her what had happened and ask her advice.

“Maybe she can send me to uncle’s lawyer and he can help me,” he said to himself. His aunt came downstairs at that moment and he decided to make an attempt to gain an idea of how to proceed.

“Do you know anything about stocks, aunt?” asked Ned.

“Stocks? Mercy, no! I leave all that to your uncle. I have trouble enough—”

The door bell rang and Mrs. Kenfield opened it. A boy handed her a telegram. Her hands shook as she opened it.

“Jane is worse,” she said as she read the second brief dispatch. “I must hurry off soon. Now Ned, I can’t tell you how sorry I am, but you had better arrange to go home at once. I will take the noon train for Chicago. What time can you get one back to Darewell?”

“At four this afternoon.”

“Then you had better take it. Mary, hurry packing those trunks. Then get your own things ready.”

“Mine are all packed, Mrs. Kenfield,” the girl replied.

“All right then. See that the house is well locked up. Don’t leave any victuals around where they will spoil. Shut all the blinds and fasten the windows well. You can go any time you are ready, Mary.”

“I was going to the station with you and help you carry your valise.”

“Ned can do that. His train doesn’t go until four o’clock; can’t you, Ned?”

“Certainly, aunt.”

Ned's chance to ask advice was gone for, following the receipt of the second telegram, his aunt was so excited about getting ready that he had no heart to bother her with his affair. He started every time the door bell rang, fearing the police might have traced him to his aunt's house and would arrest him at any moment.

An expressman, who had been telephoned for, took two trunks belonging to Mrs. Kenfield. They were to go to Chicago. Mary's was also shipped to her friends in Long Island. Ned was glad he had left his at the depot, as it could be checked back to his home from there.

Mary departed about ten o'clock. The house had been darkened by the closing of the shutters so that it was necessary to light the gas. Mrs. Kenfield went about making sure that all the doors were fastened.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," she said to Ned. "To think of your holiday being spoiled!"

"Don't worry about that, aunt," said the boy. "It couldn't be helped."

In fact he was thinking less about his broken holiday than he was about his own plight in the stock transaction. He felt the certificate rustle in his pocket when he moved, and he had half a mind to throw it away. But he feared lest doing that, even with the tearing of it into small bits, might lead to his discovery. He was too worried and excited to be able to think clearly.

"I guess we are all ready," his aunt remarked as she stood in the hall. She had a small valise to carry, and Ned had the one he had brought from home.

"Be sure and explain to your father how it happened," Mrs. Kenfield said. "Tell him about your uncle's unexpected trip to Europe and about Jane Alden. He knew her quite well when he was a young man. Now I guess we will start. I like to be in plenty of time for my train. I hate to hurry at the last minute."

Together they left the house, Ned carrying both valises. They boarded the elevated which ran near Mrs. Kenfield's house and were soon on their way to the station where Ned's aunt was to take her train.

The boy saw her safely aboard and bade her good-bye. She told him to write to her, and gave him her Chicago address.

"Tell your chums how sorry I was to disappoint them," she called to Ned as

her train rolled out of the depot.

“I will,” replied Ned.

Then, left alone as he was in the big city, he felt a sense of fear, and hardly knew what to do.

“Guess I’d better go straight back to Darewell and tell dad all about it,” he said to himself.

He was soon in the station at which he had arrived the day previous, and where he had left his trunk. As he was going to the baggage room, to have it rechecked to Darewell, he caught sight of a man who seemed strangely familiar to him. The man had his back toward Ned, but when he turned the boy saw it was the postal inspector who had been at the offices of Skem & Skim.

“He’s after me!” thought Ned. “He’s on my track! I must not let him see me.”

He turned suddenly away so the man could not observe his face. The inspector was talking to a policeman, and Ned overheard the bluecoat ask:

“Have you sent the telegram?”

“Yes, they’ll be on the watch for him if he goes back home,” was the reply. “They’ll nab him as soon as he gets off the train. If he calls for his baggage the agent here will hold him and notify me.”

Ned hurried from the depot and ran up the street as if the officer was after him. The last way of escape seemed closed.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CHUMS ARRIVE

Darewell never had known such excitement as followed the destruction of the school tower.

Of course all the doings in Mr. Williamson's store leaked out, and, though there were not lacking those who accused the four chums of, at least, knowing something about the matter, there were others who felt sure they had had nothing to do with it.

"I just wish I had a chance to nurse that mean Mr. Williamson!" exclaimed Alice, when her brother had told her of the hearing. "I'd fix him."

"What would you do?"

"I'd cover him with the hottest mustard plasters I could make, and I've got a good formulæ for some powerful ones. Then I'd fasten 'em on with bandages so they couldn't come off. The idea of accusing you boys!"

"He didn't exactly accuse us," said Bart. "That's the trouble. If he did we could demand a legal trial and be found not guilty in short order. As it is we're suspected and can't prove our innocence."

"What are they going to do about it?"

"Why nothing at present, and I'm glad of it. Frank, Fenn, and I are going to New York Wednesday and we don't care what they do until we come back."

"But, Bart, doesn't that look like running away?"

"I don't care what it looks like. It's the first chance we have ever had of going to a big city like that and we may never have another, so we're going. They can talk all they want to, and fix the tower up to suit themselves."

From the preparations Bart and his two chums made for their journey to New York, one would have thought they were going to Europe. They were at the station about an hour ahead of train time Wednesday morning, and a number of

their boy friends were present to see them off. Going to New York was somewhat of a novelty in Darewell, especially when three boys went at once to visit the rich aunt of another local lad.

Amid a chorus of good-byes the boys got aboard and soon they were speeding toward the big city. They arrived at the same depot where Ned had left the train two days before, and looked around for a possible sight of their chum.

“Was he going to meet us here?” asked Frank.

“No, he said we were to go right to his aunt’s house,” replied Fenn. “Bart has the address; haven’t you?”

“Yes, on Forty-fourth street.”

“East or west?” asked Frank.

“Neither one, just plain Forty-fourth street.”

“I’m sure he said east,” Fenn remarked.

“I think it was west,” Frank replied.

“Let’s flip a coin,” said Fenn. “Heads is east and tails is west.”

It came down heads, and, following a policeman’s directions they started for that section of the city. They reached it, after no little trouble for they took the wrong car once.

“Doesn’t look like a very nice neighborhood,” said Fenn as they started along East Forty-fourth street. “Still I guess New York is so crowded you can’t have much of a choice.”

They found the number on East Forty-fourth street, but at the first sight of the big apartment house they knew they had made a mistake, since Ned had told them his aunt lived in a house all to herself, which is quite a distinction in New York.

“Now for the other side of the city,” said Frank, as after diligent inquiry, they learned Mrs. Kenfield did not live in the neighborhood they first tried. They boarded a car and were soon at Ned’s uncle’s home.

“Looks as if it was shut up,” remarked Bart.

“I hope we haven’t made another mistake,” said Fenn.

“It’s the right number and it’s the right street,” replied Bart.

“Yes, and Mrs. Kenfield lives here,” put in Frank.

“How can you tell?” asked Bart.

“There’s the name on the door plate,” Frank answered pointing to the silver plate worked in black letters with the name: “Paul Kenfield.”

“Ring the bell harder,” suggested Fenn, when no one had answered in response to Bart’s first attempt.

“It’s an electric bell, and can ring only so hard,” Bart answered.

They rang several times and waited.

“The blinds are all closed,” spoke Frank, looking up at the windows.

“Folks in New York often do that,” replied Bart. “If his aunt wasn’t home Ned would have sent us word.”

Just then a woman in the next house came to her door.

“Are you looking for Mr. Kenfield?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Bart.

“He sailed for Europe Monday.”

“For Europe?” repeated Bart.

“Yes.”

“Is Mrs. Kenfield at home?”

“No, I saw her leave the house yesterday just before noon. She told me she had a telegram that some relative was quite ill and she had to go to Chicago. Her servant girl has gone also. The house is shut up.”

CHAPTER XVIII

HUNTING FOR NED

For a few seconds the boys did not know what to do. They stood on the steps looking blankly at one another. The woman observed them.

“Were you expecting to call on Mrs. Kenfield?” she asked sympathetically, as she observed they were strangers in New York.

“We came here to visit our chum, Ned Wilding,” said Fenn.

“That must have been the boy who went off with Mrs. Kenfield,” the woman went on. She described Ned so the chums had no difficulty in knowing it was he whom she had seen.

“You say he went off with Mrs. Kenfield?” asked Bart.

“Yes, just before noon yesterday. He was carrying two valises, one had a red mark on it.”

“That’s Ned’s satchel,” said Fenn. “That was some red paint he got on it the day we went over to Jones’s Corners to play ball. One of the fellows daubed it on for a joke.”

“And he didn’t come back?” asked Bart.

“No,” replied the woman. “There has been no one at home since Mrs. Kenfield went away. I understand she is going to stay in Chicago for some time. Her niece is quite ill.”

“Well, this is queer,” remarked Bart. “I wonder what we had better do.”

“If you want to leave a message with me I’ll give it to Mrs. Kenfield when she returns,” the neighbor went on.

“We’re much obliged to you,” said Bart, “but I’m afraid that would do little good. Mrs. Kenfield does not know us. Ned is her nephew and when she invited him to stay with her she said he could ask his chums to spend part of the time with him. Well, we’re his chums, but where is Ned?”

“I’m sure he didn’t come back here,” the woman continued. “I have been watching the house pretty constantly ever since Mrs. Kenfield went away, as she asked me to notify any tradesmen, who might call, that she was gone, but that they could send their bills to the house by mail and they would be forwarded to her. I can, however, give you her Chicago address.”

“I don’t know as that would be of any use, though we’re much obliged to you,” said Fenn.

“Yes, it would!” exclaimed Bart. “We can wire her and ask where Ned went. She’ll probably know.”

“Has she got to Chicago yet?” asked Frank.

“It’s about twenty-four hours since she started,” replied Bart. “Even a comparatively slow train would make it in that time. If you’ll give us Mrs. Kenfield’s address,” he went on, “we’ll wire her.”

The neighbor gave the boys the desired information and, since there was nothing more they could do at the closed house, save stare at the tight shutters, they started for the nearest telegraph office.

“If I can do anything for you boys, let me know,” the woman said to them as they were leaving. “I am Mrs. Rowland. I have two boys of my own, and, if you need any further help in locating your chum, they will be glad to aid you.”

They thanked Mrs. Rowland, but for whose information they would have been more in the dark than they were, regarding Ned’s strange disappearance.

“I had no idea people were so neighborly in New York,” said Frank. “I read somewhere that in this city no one ever knew who lived next door to him.”

“Lucky we got some sort of a starting point,” said Bart. “Now to send the telegram.”

A few minutes later they found a place where scores of instruments were clicking away and forwarded this message, addressed to Mrs. Kenfield:

“Ned’s chums arrived to find house closed. No trace of Ned. Understand he went away with you. Can you tell us where he is now?”

They told the clerk they would call for the answer in about two hours, as they

wanted to allow plenty of time for a reply.

“Meanwhile we’ll go and get dinner,” suggested Fenn.

“Let’s check our valises somewhere,” proposed Bart. “I’m tired lugging mine around.”

“Leave ’em at the station where our trunks are,” Frank put in. “We may have to start back home soon, and they’ll be handy for us there.”

“Too far away,” objected Fenn. “Here’s a good place.”

He pointed to a newsstand built under one of the elevated railroad stations, where a sign was displayed, announcing small parcels would be checked for ten cents. They left their grips, receiving little brass tags in return, and then went to a restaurant where they had dinner.

“Let’s go back and see if there’s an answer to our message,” suggested Fenn, after they had walked around a bit. Back they went to the telegraph office, and found there was a reply. Bart’s hands trembled slightly as he tore open the envelope. The message from Mrs. Kenfield was a short one. It read:

“Ned started for home after leaving me.”

“Might have known it,” remarked Frank.

“Of course,” put in Fenn. “What else could he do? He wouldn’t stay in New York, where he doesn’t know a soul, after his aunt and uncle left.”

“Then I s’pose the only thing for us to do is to follow Ned back to Darewell,” suggested Bart. “Here’s an end to our holiday. Too bad!”

“Why need we go back?” asked Frank. “We’re here in New York. It may be many years before we have another chance like this. We have enough money to last us a week or more, even if we have to stay at a hotel.”

“What do you mean?” asked Fenn.

“Why not spend a week in New York anyhow?” Frank went on. “It’s too bad Ned has gone home. He’d stay with us if he was here. We can go to a cheap hotel and have almost as much fun as if we were at Ned’s uncle’s house. What’s the use going right back home?”

“I believe you’re right,” came from Bart. “We’ll stay a while and see what

New York looks like. Might as well spend some of that money for hotel bills as anything else. I've heard they rob you in New York, but I guess we can look out for ourselves."

"Let's telegraph back to Darewell," suggested Fenn.

"What for?" asked Bart.

"To see if Ned got there safely. If he did maybe he'll come here and join us."

"Good idea," commented Frank. "Write out another message. Send it to Ned's father. He'll get it quicker at the bank than Ned would at the house."

A little later this message, signed by Bart, went clicking over the wires to Darewell.

"Is Ned home? His uncle and aunt called away unexpectedly and he started back for Darewell. Answer."

The boys said they would call in an hour for a reply. They spent the time wandering about the streets. Now, as it was approaching evening, the thoroughfares were filled with hurrying throngs. They found the telegram from Darewell waiting for them when they went back to the office. It was from Mr. Wilding and read:

"Ned not home. What is the trouble? Can't you locate him in New York? Try. Will come on in the morning."

"Ned has disappeared," said Bart in strange tones, as he let the telegram fall to the floor.

CHAPTER XIX

DOWN THE ROPE

When Ned started on a run up the street, after seeing in the station the man he believed was seeking to arrest him, he had no definite idea where he was going. All he cared about was to get out of the inspector's sight.

"I can't go back home," he reasoned as he hurried on, seeking to lose himself in the crowd. "If I do they'll arrest me as soon as I leave the train. I can't bring disgrace on my father that way, though I am innocent of any intentional wrongdoing. Besides if it was known that I bought this stock it might injure his reputation at the bank. They might think he advised me to do it, and the bank doesn't allow its officials to do that sort of business."

Ned slowed his pace down from a run to a rapid walk, as he noticed that several persons were looking curiously at him. He did not want to attract attention.

"What had I better do?" he asked himself. "If I stay here I'm liable to arrest any moment. If I go home I'm sure of it as soon as I get off the train, as every one at the depot knows me. But they don't here," he added, as a thought came to him. "That's one good thing. I'm an utter stranger in New York. The only persons who know me are my uncle and aunt. They are far enough off. Of course there's Mary the servant girl, but I guess she's not liable to meet me. Besides, she wouldn't know the police wanted me. Then there's Mr. Skem, but I guess he's too busy himself, dodging the officers, to be found in this vicinity."

"That's the best thing to do," Ned decided. "I'll stay in New York until—well until something happens. But the worst of it is I can't even write to the folks at home. I can't let them know what has occurred. I wonder what the boys will do when they come and find the house closed? If I send a letter to father the postal authorities can trace where it came from and get me. A telegram would be as bad. I'm just like a prisoner who can't communicate with his friends. The only thing to do is to stick it out until something happens. If they would only arrest Skem & Skim maybe their testimony would clear me. But I guess they're not likely to catch them. I've got to stick it out alone and it's going to be hard work."

By this time Ned felt he was far enough away from the depot to render capture in the immediate future out of the question. He felt he could risk walking a little slower, for it was no joke to hurry along a mile or more carrying his valise, even though it was not a large one.

“I believe I’m hungry,” he said, as he came in front of a small restaurant. He had taken no food since breakfast and it was now about four o’clock in the afternoon. “I’ll feel better after I’ve eaten. Besides I’ve got to stay somewhere to-night. I must look for a hotel.”

He did feel more encouraged after he had dined, and, on inquiring of the cashier in the restaurant, where he could find a cheap but decent hotel, was directed to the Imperial a few blocks distant, back toward the station. Ned thought this would be safe enough.

“I’d better take an account of stock,” he remarked to himself as he started for the hotel. “Most of my clothes are in the trunk, and so is the check dad gave me to have uncle cash. I can’t get at that, and I guess I wouldn’t if I could. I’d have to endorse it to cash it, and when I wrote my name whoever saw it might tell the police.”

Ned’s imagination probably made things seem worse than they really were, but he was unaccustomed to city ways, and the memory of the inspector’s words, and the angry men who had lost money through Skem & Skim acted as an incentive for him to do everything possible to avoid arrest, which he felt would follow any disclosure of his identity, such as would result from endorsing a check.

“The only clothes I’ve got are on me,” Ned went on, continuing the process of “stock taking.” He had a change of underwear and some clean collars, cuffs and handkerchiefs in his valise, and about ten dollars in bills. In his pocketbook he carried five dollars and there was a little change in his overcoat.

“I’ve got to sail pretty close to the wind,” he told himself. “Fifteen dollars isn’t going very far in New York. I must get work to do until this thing blows over, or something happens. That’s what I’ll do. I’ll look for a job to-morrow.”

The hotel at which Ned arrived a few minutes later did not look very inviting. Still, he reflected, he was not in a position to be particular. It was a five-storied building, and on both sides of it, were shops for the sale of various articles.

“Can you give me a cheap room?” asked Ned of the clerk behind the desk.

“Sell you one, you mean I guess,” was the man’s reply as he went on with the operation of cleaning his finger nails. “We don’t give ’em away.”

“I’d like to engage a room for the night,” Ned went on.

“Dollar’s the cheapest we’ve got.”

“That will do.”

“Register,” the clerk said, swinging the book around in front of Ned, and handing him a pen which he dipped into the dirty ink bottle. Then he went on with his manicuring.

“I must sign my name,” thought Ned. “No I can’t do that! They might trace me!” He felt the rustle of the stock certificate in his pocket as he took the pen. What was he to do?

“Is it necessary to register?” he asked.

“Course it is,” replied the clerk looking at him curiously. “That’s the law. Everybody who stops at a hotel has to put their name on the book. What’s the matter? You ain’t afraid to register, are you? Don’t look as though you’d committed a murder or had robbed some one,” and the clerk grinned at his joke.

“No, of course not,” Ned replied, his heart thumping away under his overcoat. Then he resolved to put on the book a fictitious name. He hesitated a moment and inscribed: “Thomas Seldon,” in a large hand as unlike as possible from his own usual small writing.

“Thomas Seldon, eh?” queried the clerk as he turned the book around once more. “Where you from? That has to go down.”

Once more Ned hesitated. What should he answer.

“What’s the matter? Forget where you live?” the clerk asked.

“No. It’s Perryville, New York,” replied Ned, taking a name at random, as he had the one he signed in the book.

The clerk told him to write it down, and after this was done the number 113 was placed after his name.

“Hope you’re not superstitious,” the clerk remarked.

“Why?” asked Ned.

“There’s a thirteen in your room number.”

“I don’t mind that.”

“Some folks do,” the clerk continued. “But that’s the only dollar room we’ve got left. Front!”

A boy answered the ring of the bell which the clerk touched, and, taking Ned’s grip led the way. A rattling, shaking elevator, of an antiquated type, carried Ned and his guide to the fifth floor. The young porter opened the door of a small room and set Ned’s grip down inside of it.

“Here’s where you bunk,” he remarked.

Ned had read of the necessity for tips in New York, and handed the boy a dime. The lad seemed to welcome it.

“T’anks,” he said.

“What’s that rope for?” asked Ned, as he noticed one in a corner of his room.

“Fire escape. New law. All rooms has to have ’em,” the boy replied. “If the shebang goes up you drop the rope out of the window and slide down. Your window’s right over the back yard and there’s a gate that leads out into a side street.”

“Do they have many fires?” asked Ned, feeling a bit nervous.

“Many? Every day ten or a dozen.”

“I mean around here?”

“Ain’t had none since I worked here, but when this place goes it’ll go quick. It’s about a thousand years old, I guess.”

When the boy had gone Ned looked out of the window. It overlooked the rear yard of the hotel, a place filled with boxes, barrels and all sorts of rubbish. The rope was fastened to an iron ring in the wall, and looked stout enough to hold several men. It was long enough to reach to the ground, as Ned could see.

“Hope I don’t have to use it,” he thought.

Leaving his valise in his room, Ned went downstairs, again, the old elevator taking considerable time on the trip.

“I’ll look around a bit, have some supper and then go to bed,” he decided. “Maybe my luck will change to-morrow.”

Ned after walking about the streets for awhile went back to the same restaurant where he had dined before, as he did not fancy the looks of his hotel well enough to eat there. He strolled about through the brilliantly lighted streets after supper pondering on his curious plight, and then went back to the Imperial.

As he approached the desk to get to the elevator he saw a stout man in close conversation with the clerk. He could hear the latter, in reply to some question, say:

“Guess we haven’t got anybody here you want, Jim. No new ones came except a kid. Queer thing about him, though, I believe he’s registered under the wrong name. Acts sort of funny.”

“What name did he give?” asked the stout man.

“‘Never’—‘ever’—no, that isn’t it but it’s something like that. ‘Seldom’—that’s it—no it isn’t either—‘Seldon,’ that’s it. ‘Thomas Seldon.’ I sized him up for a queer one.”

“I’ll have to get a look at him,” the stout man went on. “I don’t know as we have any call for him, but it’s best to be on the safe side.”

Ned felt his knees beginning to shake. He wondered who the big man might be. Just then the youthful porter sauntered toward him. Ned had come to a halt half way up the lobby of the hotel.

“Pipe off that guy?” asked the boy in a friendly whisper, with a nod at the stout man. Ned understood the question to mean “Do you know who that man is?” and he answered that he did not.

“One of the detectives from the Central Office. The sleuths come here same as at other hotels, every once in a while, to see if anybody they want might happen to be on hand. Guess he won’t land anybody this time, though, about a week ago —”

But Ned did not stop to listen. The stairway was in front of him, and he could get to his room without the clerk or the detective seeing him.

As he started up the stairs, intending to go to his apartment and hide, for he had left the key in the lock, the boy-porter called after him:

“Why don’t you take the cage?”

“The elevator’s too slow,” Ned answered, trying to keep his voice from trembling. He was afraid the men might hear him. But they did not, and, walking swiftly he was soon in his room.

“What shall I do?” poor Ned asked himself. He seemed hounded on every side. “I must get away from here,” he thought. “The clerk suspects me! Perhaps that detective has a description of me! I must sneak out, and yet—I can’t go. I haven’t paid for my room!”

Then he caught sight of the rope fire escape. An idea came to him.

“I’ll slide down the rope to the ground,” he murmured. “That’s the way. I can get off without any one seeing me, and I’ll go to another hotel.”

He loosened the rope, which was looped upon a hook, and looked down into the yard. All was dark and quiet there. He tied his valise to the end of the rope and lowered it. The little thud of the satchel as it landed and slipped from the noose of the rope told him it was in the yard. Then, having left a dollar bill pinned to one of the pillows of the bed, Ned put on his hat and overcoat, and, taking a firm hold of the rope stepped out of the window and went down, hand over hand. It was a trick he had often performed, though it was hard to descend the five stories. At last his feet touched the ground, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Now to take my valise and skip,” he said in a whisper. “That was pretty well done.”

He stooped over to loosen his satchel from the rope. His fingers encountered nothing but the hempen strands.

“My valise is gone!” he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XX

IN THE LODGING HOUSE

Ned felt around on the ground. He thought the valise might have slipped from the rope and rolled away into some corner of the yard. He got down on his knees and crawled about, looking among boxes and barrels, as well as he could in the darkness. But the valise was gone.

“Where in the world could it have disappeared to?” Ned asked himself. “I came down within three minutes after I lowered it to the ground.”

There was a gate, opening from the yard to the street, and Ned decided some one had either seen or heard the valise drop and had slipped in and stolen it.

“Now I am in a pickle,” the lad murmured. “No baggage, not even a clean collar, only a little over four dollars left” (for he had taken one from his pocketbook to leave for his room rent), “and I can’t even tell the police I’ve been robbed. If I do they’ll question me and find out I’m wanted for that stock matter. I certainly am up against it. But I guess I’d better get away from here. That detective may go to my room, discover that I’ve gone, and make a search.”

Ned peered out of the gate. The street was deserted at that moment. With a hasty look up at the window of his room he had just left, and from which the rope still dangled, Ned, in worse plight than he had been before, hurried away. Once more he felt himself an outcast, without a place to go.

“When they see that rope they’ll suspect I’m some sort of a criminal,” he reflected bitterly. “What a lot of trouble a fellow can get into without meaning it,” he reflected. “This is the last time I’ll ever buy stocks or bonds on my own responsibility. I guess dad can manage finances until I learn the ropes a little better.”

He walked on, not knowing whither he was bound. He emerged from the side street to one of the main thoroughfares. There he mingled with the crowds, believing, that for the present at least, he was safe from pursuit.

“But I’ve got to stay somewhere to-night,” he told himself. “I can’t walk the

streets forever. I wonder if there isn't some place where I can get a bed without having to answer a lot of questions about myself?"

As he walked along an illuminated sign, on a building across the street, attracted his attention. It informed those who cared to know that the place was the "Owl Lodging House," and that single beds could be had for fifteen cents a night, or a room including the privilege of a bath, for twenty-five cents.

"That about fits my pocketbook," Ned reasoned. "Twenty-five cents a night is cheaper than a dollar, and I've got to be saving. I wonder if it's clean? It seems like living in a tenement house, but I s'pose lots of men have to. I'll try it anyhow. If I don't like the looks of it I can leave."

He walked up the stairs. Certainly the place would not have taken a prize for cleanliness but then, Ned reflected, beggars must not be choosers. He emerged into a big room, lighted by several gas jets, and seemingly filled with men in chairs who were lolling about in all sorts of attitudes. Some were asleep and some were reading newspapers. As Ned stood irresolutely gazing on the scene his thoughts were interrupted by a sharp voice.

"Well, young man, do you want a room or a bed?"

"Have you any rooms left?" asked Ned, turning to see a man staring at him from a small window in an office built against one side of the apartment.

"Lots of 'em," replied the clerk of the lodging house. "Twenty-five cents. Pay in advance. This isn't the Waldorf-Astoria."

Ned handed a quarter through the half circular opening and received in return a key with a big brass tag.

"Do I register?" asked Ned, hoping that he would not have to put down another false name.

"Register nothin'," the clerk replied. "They go by numbers here. Yours is seventeen," and Ned, looking at the tag on his key, saw what the clerk meant.

"I'm glad there's no thirteen in this," the boy thought. "How do I get to my room?" he asked.

"Right along the corridor. You can't miss it. Go on until you strike the right number and go in. Do you snore?"

“No. Why?”

“Because there is a man in the next room to you who says he’ll punch my face in, if I put any one near him who snores. It’s all right. Go ahead. If you want a bath it’s the last room at the end of the hall, but you have to furnish your own soap and towels.”

“That settles the bath question,” thought Ned; “that is unless I dry myself on a pocket handkerchief, and I guess I’d better save that.”

“Lock your door,” the clerk called after him. “We’re not responsible for anything stolen from the rooms.”

Ned had not expected much for twenty-five cents, and the small room, the little narrow iron cot, and the scanty supply of coverings did not disappoint him. The room was merely separated from the others, in the row of which it was, by partitions that did not extend all the way to the ceiling. Ned sat down on the chair and gazed about him. He could hear men in the next rooms breathing heavily. It was rather chilly for there was no fire in the bedrooms.

“I can use my overcoat for a blanket,” Ned inadvertently spoke aloud. The next moment a voice, from the room on his left startled him.

“Hello, in seventeen!” called a man.

“Well?” asked Ned.

“Do you snore?”

“No.”

“All right. If you do there’ll be trouble. I’m a light sleeper.”

Ned wondered who his unseen questioner was, but he was too tired to care much.

He undressed, and crawled into bed. His overcoat answered well for a blanket, and soon he began to feel warm and drowsy, in spite of his strange surroundings.

He must have slept for several hours when he was suddenly awakened by a pounding on his door.

“What is it? Is the place afire?” he called, sitting up in bed.

“Fire nothing! I want my money you took!” It was the voice of the man who had asked him if he snored.

“I haven’t your money,” Ned answered, thinking the man might be a lunatic.

“Yes, you have! You sneaked into my room and took it! I woke up just in time! Open the door or I’ll break it down!”

Ned sprang from his bed and turned the key. The door flew open and a big man with a red moustache entered.

“Give me my money!” he demanded, striding up to Ned.

CHAPTER XXI

NED FLEES AGAIN

“I tell you I haven’t your money!” exclaimed Ned. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean well enough! I had a lot of dollar bills under my pillow! You sneaked in and took them! I want my money!”

“And I tell you I haven’t it and didn’t take it!” Ned repeated. “This is my room, and you’d better get out of it!”

“Not until I have my money! Where is it?”

He lifted a pillow from Ned’s bed. Under it were four one dollar bills which Ned had placed there before he went to sleep.

“Here’s part of it, anyhow!” the man exclaimed. “I want the rest now! Fork it over!”

“That’s my money!” cried Ned, as the red-moustached man took the bills and stuffed them into his pocket.

“Your money! A likely story! Anybody with as much money as that would never stop in a place like this.”

“How did you happen to stop here then?” asked Ned quickly.

“Me? Why young impudence, I’m the proprietor of this lodging house! I live here! That’s why. Hey, Bill!” he called in a loud voice, “come here. There’s trouble.”

In answer to the summons a big man, evidently the night porter or watchman, came shuffling down the corridor.

“What’s the trouble, boss?” he asked, and Ned began to believe the man had spoken the truth when he said he was the proprietor of the place.

“Why, here’s a kid comes into my room when I’m asleep and takes my cash right from under my pillow. I wake up just in time to see him sneak back into his

room and when I get him with the goods on him he has the impudence to deny it. There's part of the cash," and he showed Ned's money, "but I want the rest. Better call a policeman, Bill."

"All right, boss. Just as you say," and the porter shuffled off.

"Do you mean to say you're going to have me arrested on a charge of stealing your money?" asked Ned.

"That's what I am unless you give it up."

"But I didn't take it. It must have been some one else, if you really were robbed. Why don't you look in some of the other rooms along here?"

"Because I saw you come in here after you were in my room, and had your hand under my pillow."

"Couldn't you be mistaken?"

"Not much. I've been in this business too long. 'Tisn't the first time I've been robbed, but it's the first time I got the thief and I'm goin' to make an example of you."

"You're making a big mistake," Ned said, trying to speak bravely, but the accusation, unjust as it was, coupled with his other misfortunes was almost too much for him.

"I'll take the chances on that. Who are you, anyhow? What's your name, and where'd you come from?"

Ned hesitated. If he gave his real name it might lead to trouble over the stock, in case the proprietor carried out the threat to have him arrested. He was not used to telling untruths and he was afraid if he gave a false name he would soon betray himself. Still it seemed the best thing to do and would harm no one save himself.

"My name's George Anderson," he said boldly. "Where I came from is none of your affair."

"Afraid to tell, eh? Well, the judge will soon have it out of you."

It was quite cold now, and Ned, standing half dressed as he was in the room, began to shiver. He put on his clothes.

“Guess that’s a wise thing to do,” the proprietor of the lodging house remarked. “You’ll get a ride in the hurry-up wagon soon.”

The words struck a chill of terror to Ned’s heart. Must he spend the rest of the night in a cell? The man’s manner showed no relenting. He either believed Ned had robbed him or was insisting on the charge for some reason of his own.

“Are you in earnest about this?” asked Ned, as he put on his hat and overcoat.

“You can make up your mind to that,” was the man’s answer. “It’ll be the jail for yours, in a little while, if you don’t give me back my money. It isn’t too late. I can fix it with the cop if you’ll give up. Why look here, kid, they’ll search you and find it on you. You haven’t had time to hide it, and, besides, there’s no place in this room. You must have it on you. Give it up and save trouble.”

“I haven’t your money,” Ned said boldly. “Those bills you took from under the pillow were mine. You can search me now if you want to. That is all the money I have except a little change in my overcoat pocket,” and he showed the man.

“That don’t go with me. I’m sure you robbed me. I’ll not search you or you’d say I was up to some game, and nobody ever said but what Jim Cassidy was honest, though he does keep a cheap lodging house. No, sir, the cop’ll search you.”

Ned knew the officer would find nothing—except the stock certificate. There was the trouble. Ned thought every officer in New York had a description of it and was looking for the boy who carried it. No, he couldn’t allow himself to be searched.

“It’s cold!” exclaimed Cassidy suddenly, as he shivered in his long nightrobe. “I’m goin’ to get dressed. Better not try to run or I’ll nab you. I’ll be in the next room.”

He went into his own apartment and Ned could hear him putting on his clothes. By the grunts and puffs that ensued he judged Cassidy was having hard work, as he was a large man, and putting on a shirt was no easy matter.

Then a daring plan came into Ned’s mind. In spite of the excitement caused by the proprietor’s entrance into his room and the loud talking that followed the accusation, none of the other lodgers had gotten up. Even sending the porter for a policeman had not excited any curiosity.

Ned resolved to make his escape if possible. He thought he could slip past Cassidy's door and down the stairs before Bill would return with a policeman. He got upon the bed and looked over the partition into Cassidy's room. The proprietor was putting on his shoes and had his back to the door. There was a light at the far end of the corridor, illuminating it dimly.

Ned took off his own shoes, and, carrying them in his hand stepped to the door of his room. He stole softly into the corridor and was about to slip past Cassidy's room when the door of the apartment opposite his opened just a crack and a hoarse voice whispered:

"Hey, cully! If youse wants t' make a git-away, go de other way an' down de back stairs. Youse kin slip around through de alley an' inter de street 'fore de cop comes. I heard what youse said and ye sounds honest, an' dat's more'n ye kin say fer a lot in dis joint. Quick, some one's comin' up de front stairs!"

Then, before Ned could thank his unknown friend, the door was shut. Ned could hear Cassidy getting up from the chair on which he had seated himself to lace his shoes. There was not a moment to spare.

Making no sound in his stocking feet, Ned hurried down the dark corridor, away from the front of the building. He had to trust almost entirely to feeling, as the gleam from the single lamp farther toward the front stairs did not penetrate thus far. He did not even know where the rear flight was, but trusted to luck to find them. With his hand stretched out in front of him, to avoid running into any obstructions he went on as fast as he could. Suddenly he turned a corner in the passage and saw a dim light. Then he observed a flight of stairs leading downward. He listened a moment. Behind him he could hear the tramp of heavy feet, and guessed that Bill had returned with the policeman.

Ned hurried down the stairs. He stopped only long enough, when he reached the bottom, to put his shoes on, but did not lace them. He only tucked the ends of the strings into the tops so they would not dangle and trip him if he had to run. Then Ned stepped from the hallway into the dark and deserted street. Once more, though entirely innocent, he had been obliged to flee from officers of the law.

"It's getting to be a habit with me," he said grimly, as he hurried along.

What happened back in the lodging house he did not know and he cared less. That his flight would seem a confession of guilt he was sure; but what did it

matter?

It was cold and dark and cheerless in the streets. He was a night wanderer, with no place to go, and, as far as he knew, not a friend in the big city.

“I guess I’ll have to walk the streets all night,” poor Ned thought. “I haven’t much money left.” He felt in the pocket of his overcoat, and counted the change. There was less than a dollar.

“Have to take fifteen cent beds after this,” he remarked to himself. “As for eating I guess I’ll have to cut that out altogether.”

He walked through several thoroughfares. Not a soul did he meet save once as he passed a policeman the officer stared at him suspiciously. But Ned still had his good clothes with him, and his overcoat though crumpled from being used as a bed-spread, made him look decent enough to pass muster in the neighborhood where he was.

“I think I’ll find another lodging house and get a bed,” he said to himself. “I must get a little rest if I am to look for work to-morrow.”

He had no difficulty in finding a place, for there were many such nearby. He got a fifteen cent bed, in a room where scores of other men and youths were sleeping. His entrance excited no comment, and, in fact, few were awake to notice his arrival.

Ned was so tired he fell asleep with most of his clothes on. He had little fear of being robbed for he had little left to take. He got a frugal breakfast the next morning and started out to search for work.

But New York seemed to be overflowing with men and boys on the same errand. Every place where Ned applied, either from seeing a sign “Boy Wanted,” or by getting the address from a newspaper he bought, had been taken or else he would not fill the bill. All day long he tramped, spending a few cents for some buns and coffee at a lunch stand. At night, tired and discouraged, he went back to the lodging house where he had last stayed, and again got a fifteen cent bed.

“To-morrow’s Thursday,” thought Ned, as he crawled under his overcoat, which he once more used as a blanket. “I wonder if the boys arrived to-day? What could they have thought when they saw the house closed? Oh, I wish I could find them. If this keeps on I’ll have to pawn my overcoat for something to eat, and it looks as if it would snow to-morrow. What a pickle I’m in!”

Then, in spite of his troubles he fell asleep, for he was very tired.



CHAPTER XXII

OUT IN THE STORM

The telegram from Ned's father, which the three chums received that Wednesday evening, telling them their friend was not at his home in Darewell, was a great shock to them.

"Why," remarked Bart, as he picked up the message he had dropped, "it hardly seems possible. I wonder where in the world he can be. He starts for home but he never arrives."

"Are we sure he started for home?" asked Frank.

"Why of course," Fenn answered. "Didn't the telegram from Mrs. Kenfield say so?"

"She would hardly know," Frank went on. "Ned's train for Darewell wouldn't leave until four o'clock. The timetable shows that. According to what the woman who lives next door to Mrs. Kenfield told us, Ned's aunt started away before noon. Her train must have left about that time, so Ned couldn't have gotten away from New York, if he left at all, until after his aunt had started for Chicago. Consequently though she may have seen him leave the depot where she was, with the intention of going back to Darewell, that's no proof that he really went back home."

"That's so," admitted Bart, struck with the force of Frank's reasoning. "But where then can he be?"

"That's what we've got to find out," said Fenn.

"How are we going to do it?" Bart inquired.

"I think Ned's right here in New York," Frank went on. "Now look at it. His aunt goes away unexpectedly and closes the house up. It would seem natural for Ned to go back home, but we find out he has not. He doesn't know any one else in this part of the country, or he would have told us. Consequently he has not gone to any other city. Therefore he must be in New York."

“But why would he stay here?” insisted Bart.

“Probably for the same reason we’re going to, in order to see the sights.”

“Then why didn’t he send some word home to let his father know?” Bart asked. “Mr. Wilding wouldn’t be starting for New York if he knew Ned was safe here. Ned hasn’t communicated with his father, that’s sure.”

“I forgot about that,” Frank admitted. “That makes it look different.”

“Maybe something has happened to him,” suggested Fenn.

“Don’t look for trouble, Stumpy,” remarked Bart. “It’s bad enough as it is.”

“However I still think Ned is in New York,” Frank went on. “He may be sick or he may have been hurt, which would prevent him communicating with us, or with his father. But that he’s in this city I’m sure. Now the thing for us to do is to find him.”

“But how?” asked Fenn.

“There are dozens of ways. We must communicate with the police and ask their help.”

“Ned wouldn’t like that,” interposed Bart. “He’s not a criminal.”

“Of course not,” Frank answered. “But the police have to help find lots of persons who are not criminals. If Ned’s in trouble we want to know it as soon as possible so we can help him.”

“Then the sooner we start the better,” suggested Bart. “Where ought we to begin?”

“Let’s ask the agent here at the station where Ned’s train came in,” Frank said. “Perhaps he may have noticed him.”

“Not likely,” replied Bart. “Too many passengers coming and going.”

They made some inquiries, but, as Bart had said, there were too many arrivals and departures for the agent to have taken particular note of a boy among a thousand others.

“That settles one end of it,” remarked Fenn, as they were about to leave the depot. “Let’s arrange to stop at some hotel. We’re going to be here several days,

very likely.”

“So we are,” Frank replied. “Hold on! Wait a minute! I’ve just thought of something.”

“What?” asked Bart.

“The baggage room. We can find out if there are any trunks from Darewell, besides our own, that have not been called for. Besides I know Ned’s when I see it.”

They hurried to the baggage agent and told him what they wanted. He soon ascertained from his records that four trunks had come in from Darewell in the last few days. Three were those of the three chums, which had arrived that noon.

“I’ve got one other,” the agent said. “It came in Monday, and there are storage charges on it now.”

“Can we look at it?” asked Frank.

The agent showed it to them.

“That’s Ned’s trunk!” cried Frank. “We’re on the track. He hasn’t left New York, that’s sure. Has any one called for that trunk?” he asked the agent.

“No, but I wish they would. It’s in the way here.”

“Could you let us know in case any one does call?” Frank went on, giving his reasons for the request. “We’ll pay you for your trouble.”

“I s’pose I could. Where’ll you be?”

“We ought to stop at some hotel near here,” Frank suggested. “Then we can come here quickly if we get a message.”

“Do you know of a good hotel near here?” asked Bart of the agent.

“There’s the Imperial a few blocks up the street. It’s not especially good, but it’s respectable. I guess you could stop there.”

“That will do,” Frank said. “We’ll get rooms there. We will send for our trunks, and you can telephone us in case that other one is called for.”

He gave the man a couple of dollars to pay for his trouble, and for any

telephone messages he might have to send, and then the three chums went to the same hotel where Ned had stopped.

The same clerk was on duty who had been there when Ned registered, and he seemed rather surprised at the three well dressed youths who entered. Usually the Imperial, in spite of its name, did not attract such a class of patrons. The boys bargained for three connecting rooms, and, as they had plenty of money were given good apartments on the second floor.

“Register,” the clerk said, swinging the book around to them.

As Bart took the pen to write his name, he looked at the book and gave a start.

“I thought first that was Ned’s writing,” he said as he looked where his chum, but a few hours before had written “Thomas Seldon.”

“Friend of yours?” asked the clerk quickly.

“I thought first it looked like the writing of a chum of mine,” Bart replied. “But it’s different I see.”

“Guess that chap doesn’t travel in your company,” the clerk went on, as the other boys put down their names.

“Why?”

“Oh, he’s a crook I guess,” and he told of the discovery of Ned’s escape down the rope. “He hasn’t done anything as far as we can learn,” the clerk went on, “but his getting out that way showed there was something wrong, though he was honest enough to leave a dollar for his room, which he didn’t occupy. However, the police would like to get him just to see why he was in such a hurry to get away.

“Funny thing, too,” the clerk continued. “He left his valise behind him. He must have lowered it out of the window by the rope, or else he threw it out. Anyway, just before we found out that he had gone, our chef went out in the back yard for a breath of air. He saw the valise lying on the ground, but didn’t take notice of the rope. He brought the satchel in and gave it to me. I was talking to a detective at the desk, one who comes in here every once in a while to see if there are any suspicious characters. I was telling him about this Seldon lad, just as the cook handed me the grip. I recognized it as the one the boy had when he came in, and got suspicious. We went to his room, but he had skipped. We’ve got

the valise yet, but haven't opened it. The police may in a few days."

The boys slept soundly that night. They awoke in the morning to find a heavy snow storm in progress. They spent the day going from one place to another, following the advice they got at the office of the chief of police. But all to no purpose. There was no trace of Ned. They were out almost all day in the storm, which continued to get worse as night approached.

"There's one thing we forgot," said Frank, as they prepared to go back to the hotel for the night.

"What?" asked Fenn.

"We should have let Mr. Wilding know where we are stopping. You know he said he was coming to New York. We must send him a wire. If he has left Darewell, the bank will know his address here, and forward it to us."

This plan, Frank's chums decided, was a wise one. They turned toward a telegraph office which they had noticed near their hotel. As they were going down a dark side street Bart, who was in advance, stumbled over something and fell into a snow drift.

"Hurt yourself?" asked Frank.

"No. It was like falling into a feather bed, only it's cold."

Just then something like a groan sounded from the object Bart had stumbled over.

"What's that?" asked Fenn.

The three boys bent over the object.

"It's a boy!" cried Frank. "He's almost frozen to death. Come on, fellows! We must carry him to some shelter."

"Better take him to our hotel," suggested Bart.

They picked up the boy, who was lying in a drift of snow on the sidewalk, and hurried on with him. Feeble moans came from between the unknown's white lips.



CHAPTER XXIII

NED'S PREDICAMENT

When Ned awakened Thursday morning in the lodging house and, on looking from the window saw that it was snowing, his unpleasant position came forcibly to him.

"This is nice," he reflected as he put on his shoes. "It's as cold as Greenland out of doors, and I'm down to—let's see what my cash capital is, anyhow."

He fumbled in the change pocket of his overcoat, and found a few coins.

"Thirty cents," he murmured as he looked at them. "There's enough for three five-cent meals, and enough to pay for a bed to-night. I'll need the bed too, if this storm keeps up."

He finished dressing and went to the window to look out. It was anything but a pleasant day on which to look for work. The wind had blown the snow into big drifts, and the white flakes were still falling. It was cold too, as he could tell by the draught that came in around the window.

"Come now, everybody clear out!" called a voice, and one of the porters of the lodging house appeared with a pail and broom. "Got to clean up the place. Fifteen cents doesn't mean you fellers can make a hotel of this place and hang around all day. Clear out!"

"Can't we stay until it stops snowin'?" asked one of the men, who were crowded around the big stove in the sleeping room.

"You kin if you pay for another night's lodging," was the answer. "What do you think this is, the Salvation Army or the Y. M. C. A.? If you want free graft go there. You has to pay for what you gits here. Clear out!"

There was no help for it. Those who hoped to remain in away from the storm, where it was at least warm, though not very inviting, were doomed to disappointment. A few, who had the money, paid for another night's lodging, which gave them the privilege of remaining in during the day.

Ned had half a notion to do this, but he reflected he might find a place to work which would be so far from the lodging house that he could not conveniently return. So he decided to save his money until he could find out what the day might hold for him.

With scores of other unfortunates he left the warm room and went out into the cold. He was glad he was well clothed and that he still had his overcoat. How long he could keep it, before he would have to pawn it for food, he did not know. He almost decided to go back to the hotel where he had first stayed and see if they knew anything about his valise. That had ten dollars in it. Then the thought of the detective deterred him.

“If I had the four dollars the lodging house proprietor stole from me I’d think I was rich,” he murmured. “But I wouldn’t dare go back after it. He’d have me arrested sure! Though I may have to submit to that to get a warm place to sleep and something to eat, if I don’t get work soon,” he added.

It was very cold. As soon as Ned got out into the street, where he could feel the full sweep of the wind he shivered though his overcoat was a thick one. The snow was blown into his face with stinging force.

“As long as it doesn’t make any difference which way I go I may as well have the wind at my back,” he reasoned as he turned and walked in the opposite direction. “That’s more comfortable, at any rate,” he continued. “Now I must get something to eat, if it’s only a cup of coffee.”

He walked on until he saw a restaurant. In the window was a big gas stove on which a man, in a white uniform and cap, was browning some buckwheat cakes. They looked so good they made Ned’s mouth fairly water.

“I’m going to have some,” he decided. “It will take fifteen cents, if I get coffee with them, but it’s worth it. I’ll make this meal do for dinner too. But supper—”

Ned did not dare carry his thoughts further. All he knew was that he was very hungry, and at least he had money enough to pay for a simple meal. Supper must take care of itself.

“Maybe I can get a night’s lodging at some free place, and save the rest of my money for supper and breakfast to-morrow,” Ned thought to himself as he entered the restaurant.

He ordered a plate of the cakes and some coffee, and could hardly wait until the girl had placed them on the table in front of him. He got a small pitcher of what passed for maple syrup, and there was a plate of butter from which all at the table helped themselves.

Ned finished the cakes in short order. The coffee was hot if nothing else, but Ned was surprised at the small place in his big appetite which the cakes filled. He almost felt like ordering more but decided it would be rash to reduce his capital to five cents. As it was now, when he had paid for his breakfast, he would have fifteen cents left out of the thirty.

With the pasteboard check which the girl had left at his plate, in his hand, Ned approached the cashier's desk in the front part of the restaurant. His fingers went into the change pocket of his overcoat, searching for the money. He could feel nothing but the lining. A blank look came over his face. He was sure he had put the money back into that pocket as he finished counting it when he sat on the edge of his bed. Yet it was not there. Hurriedly he felt in all his other pockets.

Meanwhile several customers behind him were impatiently waiting to pay their checks.

"One side," said the cashier in a gruff tone, as he saw Ned fumbling through his pockets. "What's the matter with you? Left your memory home?"

"I think I've lost my money," Ned answered, his voice trembling a little.

"Then you've got another think coming," the clerk said in an ugly tone. "I've heard that story before."

"What story?" asked Ned.

"About forgetting your money. Left it in the bank I s'pose, or home on the pianer, or you've got to have a check cashed. What is it, speak quick, I've got no time to fool."

While he was talking, the man was busy making change for other customers who walked past Ned.

"Do you mean that you think I'm trying to cheat you?" asked the boy.

"I don't mean anything if you pay for what you've eaten. If you don't pay—well—there's a cop just around the corner, and we've had your same kind in here

before.”

By this time Ned stood alone in front of the desk, as the line of waiting men had passed out.

“I had my money when I came in here,” said the boy. “Or at least I think I did. I had it a little while before, I’m sure, for I counted it. There was thirty cents—”

“That’s what you look like now,” the cashier interrupted, with a coarse laugh at his joke. “It’ll be thirty days for yours if you don’t settle up.”

“But I haven’t got the money,” replied poor Ned.

“Then you shouldn’t have eaten anything. Do you think we’re feedin’ beggars here?”

“I thought I had the money when I ordered the cakes,” Ned replied, staring helplessly at the fifteen cent check in his hand.

“Say, young feller, that’s too thin. It don’t go here any more. I’ve been stung too often with that yarn. You’ll pay for your grub or you’ll be arrested, see? Have you got the money; yes or no?”

“I haven’t—but if—”

“Yes, if we let you go you’ll stop in on your way from the bank and give us a check! No you don’t! A fellow gave me that song and dance last week. Jim, call the cop,” and the cashier nodded to one of the men waiters.

“Are you going to have me arrested?” exclaimed Ned.

“That’s what I am. It’s a criminal offense to order a meal, eat it, and not pay for it.”

Ned did not know what to do.

CHAPTER XXIV

A QUEER IDENTIFICATION

Stumbling through the snow drifts the three chums bore the half-unconscious boy they had picked up in the snow bank. They went as quickly as they could, for they knew the need of haste in the case of a person who had been exposed to the cold and storm.

"I wonder who he is?" said Fenn.

"Whoever he is he's pretty nearly dead," replied Frank. "I hope we're not too late."

As they struggled into the lobby of the hotel with their burden, the night clerk gazed curiously at them.

"What the matter?" he asked.

"Boy almost frozen," replied Bart. "Send for a doctor!"

"Who's going to pay him?" the clerk inquired.

"We will!" Bart replied, somewhat indignantly.

"That's all right, needn't get mad about it," the clerk exclaimed. "You'll find there's a lot of grafting in New York, and we have to be careful. Here, I'll help you with him."

"Take him up to my room," Frank suggested, as the clerk came from behind the desk and assisted in supporting the boy, who was now unconscious. "Mine is the largest apartment," Frank went on, "I can bunk in with one of you fellows."

"Telephone for Dr. Smithers," the clerk called to a helper as they placed the boy in the elevator. "He's just around the corner."

The lad was put to bed in Frank's room, and the clerk, who seemed a little sorry, for his question about payment, brought in some rubber hot-water bags which were placed about the silent form under the coverlet.

“We must thaw him out,” he said. “That’s the best treatment I know of.”

In a little while the doctor arrived. He said the clerk had done the right thing and he ordered some hot broth prepared.

“Alice ought to be here,” remarked Bart. “This would be just in her line.”

“Wonder who he is?” asked Frank, as the three boys were in Bart’s room, for the doctor, and one of the women servants of the hotel, who had volunteered for a nurse, were busy trying to restore the boy to consciousness.

“Probably some poor homeless wanderer,” replied Fenn. “Tough luck, to be without a home on a night like this.”

“I only hope Ned isn’t in any such plight,” spoke Bart.

“Why should he be?” asked Fenn. “He had plenty of money when he left home.”

“You can never tell what will happen in New York,” replied Fenn with a wise look, which, though he did not appreciate it, was quite a truthful remark.

In about an hour Dr. Smithers came out. He seemed well pleased with what he had accomplished.

“I think we’ll pull him through,” he said, rubbing his hands. “It was a close call. If you had been five minutes later he would probably have been past human aid.”

“Could he tell you anything of himself, doctor?” asked Frank.

“Oh, no. He has not yet fully recovered consciousness. But he will be pretty well in the morning, unless something unforeseen sets in. In the meanwhile he must be kept perfectly quiet. On no account must he be disturbed. One of the chambermaids will watch him during the night. I ventured to engage her as a sort of emergency nurse.”

“That’s right,” spoke Bart. “You can send the bill to me, doctor, and we’ll pay for the nurse.”

“I’m sure that’s very good of you,” Dr. Smithers went on, “to take so much interest in a boy you never saw before, as I understand it.”

“Can’t tell but we might want the same kind of help ourselves, some day,”

Frank remarked.

“That’s so,” the physician agreed. “Well, now I believe I’ll go. He’ll get along all right I think, and I’ll look in on him in the morning.”

Frank and Bart arranged to occupy the latter’s bed that night, as it was a large one. As Frank went into his room, where the rescued boy was, to get some clean clothing for the morning, he saw the lad lying asleep, with the woman watching at the head of the bed. The gas was turned low, but a gleam from it struck on the cheek of the sleeper. As Frank passed close by the bed he looked down on the patient, and, as he did so, he started. For there, on the right cheek of the boy, was a small, but vivid red scar. Frank pointed to it, before he knew what he was doing. The nurse, seeing his gesture, looked up in alarm.

“That mark!” whispered Frank. “Is it a cut? Did he fall and hurt himself?”

“It’s an old scar,” the woman replied in a whisper. “I noticed it when I was giving him some medicine a while ago. Why?”

“Nothing much; I thought it might be a cut,” Frank replied as he hurried quietly from the room. He found Bart and Fenn discussing the finding of the boy. “Fellows,” began Frank suddenly as he entered, “do you remember Mrs. Perry?”

“You mean the woman whose place we stayed at over night out of the blizzard?” asked Bart.

“That’s it. Do you remember what she told us about her son William who was lost?”

“Sure,” answered Bart.

“Didn’t she say he had a scar or something on his face?”

“A red scar on his right cheek,” replied Bart. “Why?”

“He’s in there!” declared Frank.

“Are you dreaming?” asked Bart incredulously.

Then Frank told his chums what he had seen.

“Of course there may be other boys besides William Perry with red scars on their right cheeks,” he added, “but I’m sure this is the son of the widow, in the cabin in the woods. We can find out in the morning.”

“Why not now?” asked Fenn.

“Doctor said he mustn’t be disturbed,” Frank replied. “We’ll have to wait.”

In the morning the boy was much better. The doctor paid an early visit and pronounced him out of danger, but advised that he be kept in bed a day or so.

“Now you chaps who rescued him had better go in and tell him all about it,” the physician said as he came from the room. “He’s all excited with curiosity as to how he got here.”

The boys paid the doctor, who said he would not have to call again unless the patient had a relapse, and then they went into the room where the lad was. He was sitting up in bed alone, for the chambermaid had gone.

“Are you the boys who saved me?” was the first question he asked.

“We pulled you out of the snow, but I guess the doctor did the real work of saving you, William Perry!” exclaimed Frank.

“What’s that?” almost shouted the boy in bed.

“Aren’t you William Perry? Doesn’t your mother live near Kirkville, and haven’t you two sisters, Mary and Jane?” Frank went on earnestly, for he had determined on a bold plan. “Your mother wants you to come home,” he added. “Your room is all ready for you. She told us to tell you to come back, no matter what had happened.”

“Have you seen my mother?” asked the boy, his eyes filling with tears. “Did she send you to find me?”

“Then you are William Perry!” exclaimed Bart. “You guessed it, Frank!”

“We saw your mother Thanksgiving day,” went on Frank. “We were able to help her. We found her cabin just in the nick of time, for we were caught in a blizzard. So we have only paid back, in a measure, what she did for us.”

“Yes, I am William Perry,” the boy admitted, and now he made no effort to conceal his tears. “It’s the first time I’ve used my name, though, in many months. My poor mother! Yes, I will go back to her. I’d go now, only—”

“Don’t let the money part worry you,” said Fenn eagerly. “We’ll lend you some.”

“I’ve made a big failure of it all,” William went on. “I ought not to go home.”

“The more reason why you should,” interrupted Frank.

Then the waif told them his story. He had started off to go to sea, in order to earn money for his mother. But he only got as far as Boston. Then, unable to stand the hard work he deserted the ship. Fearing to go home, because he thought he might be arrested for leaving the vessel, he tried to find work. He did manage to get odd jobs here and there, and finally drifted to New York.

He found it was just as hard to earn a dollar there as it had been in Boston. He could barely get enough to buy himself food and he often went hungry. Finally he managed to get a permanent position, but he earned so little that he could only just live on it. He had slept in lodging houses, he said, and wore the poorest clothing he could buy.

“I was ashamed to go home without money,” he went on, “or I would have gone back long ago. I wanted to return with good clothes and gold jingling in my pocket, as I had read, in books, of boys doing. So I didn’t even write to let them know where I was. Poor mother!” and William sighed.

“I lost my position a month ago. Since then I have only managed to earn enough to live, and it was hard work at times. I hadn’t had anything to eat all day yesterday,” he went on, “and I was cold and weak. I was on my way to the river, thinking I could find a place on the wharves to sleep, when I stumbled and fell into the snowbank. When I was down it felt so warm there I decided to stay. I didn’t care what became of me.”

“But you do now, don’t you?” asked Frank.

“Do I?” asked the boy eagerly. “Say, will you lend me a stamp so I can write home to mother?”

“We’ll do better than that,” said Bart. “We’ll send her a telegram.”

When the message had been forwarded to Mrs. Perry, telling her of the unexpected finding of her wandering boy, the three chums told the waif their reason for being in New York.

“And you haven’t been able to find a trace of Ned, eh?” asked William, musingly.

“Not a trace,” replied Frank. “But don’t let our troubles worry you. You must get strong and hurry home to your mother.”

“Say, let me help you!” exclaimed William eagerly. “Maybe I can pay you back for your kindness. I know New York like a book. I’ve knocked all around it for the last six months. Maybe I can locate Ned for you. I know lots of places where fellows go when they’re down on their luck, as I was. Let me help. Mother won’t mind when I write and tell her I’m going to stay here a few days longer, when she knows what it’s for. I believe I can help you.”

“Perhaps you can,” said Fenn.

So it was arranged that William was to stay with the three chums at the hotel for a few days. He was not to venture out until the next day, however, as he was still weak.

“Will you be all right if we leave you alone here?” asked Frank a little later. “We want to go out and make some inquiries.”

“Sure. Go ahead,” replied William. “I’m so happy now I’ll not be lonesome.”

The three chums went to police headquarters to ask if any news concerning Ned had been received, but there was none for them. The sergeant behind the desk tried to cheer them up by remarking that “no news was good news.”

“We must find him pretty soon,” Bart declared. “If we don’t I’ll begin to believe something bad has happened.”

As they were walking along the Bowery, in the neighborhood of the cheap variety theaters, they were attracted by a flaming poster which announced the various performers who could be seen or heard. They paused and read it through. There were men who imitated monkeys, trained birds, strong men, women who sang, bands of musicians, and at the bottom of the poster was the announcement.

HEAR JOHN NEWTON, THE GREAT BIRD WHISTLER.

“John Newton,” murmured Fenn. “That name sounds familiar.”

“Of course it does,” replied Frank. “That’s the name of the chap who was expelled from our high school last term.”

“So it was. But this can’t be the same one.”

“I think it is,” suggested Fenn. “Don’t you remember, he said he was going to New York to be an actor? I heard he had some sort of a job in a theater. Maybe this is he. Let’s go in and see.”

They bought tickets and entered. The whistling was the last thing on the program, the theater being one where a “continuous performance” was given. A boy came out on the stage and began to whistle, giving imitations of various birds. He did very well, but the three chums were more interested in the identity of the lad than in his performance.

“It is John Newton, from Darewell,” whispered Bart. “I never knew he could whistle like that.”

“He was always practicing at it,” declared Fenn, “but he’s improved a lot since I last heard him in Darewell.”

“Let’s find out if we can’t see him,” suggested Frank, as they went from the theater and inquired their way back of the scenes.

CHAPTER XXV

NED SHOVELS SNOW

A multitude of thoughts rushed through Ned's mind as he stood in the restaurant awaiting the arrival of the policeman for whom the cashier had sent. He could not imagine what had become of his money. He knew his pockets had no holes in them and he came to the conclusion he must have dropped it on the bed in the lodging house instead of putting it in his overcoat. But he knew he must think of something besides the lost money, as any moment the officer might appear and take him to the police station.

He looked across the street to where a man was shoveling snow from the sidewalk. Then a bright idea came to Ned. He turned to the cashier who was looking at him vindictively and asked:

"Can't I shovel your walk off and pay for my breakfast that way?"

"Humph! That's a different proposition," the cashier replied. "If you're willing to do the square thing, I guess we are, too. Only don't try any trick like that again. I s'pose if I let you take a shovel you'll not skip out with it?"

"I'm not in the habit of stealing," Ned answered indignantly.

"I don't know anything about your habits," the man answered. "I only know a fellow worked that game on me once and I don't intend to be caught again. I'll give you thirty cents for cleaning the walk. That'll pay for your meal and be fifteen cents over. You can take it or go to jail."

"I'll take it," Ned exclaimed. "Where's the shovel?"

"I'll be watching you," the clerk went on. "If you try the sneaking act I'll have the cop after you."

"You needn't be afraid," rejoined Ned.

The waiter came back to report that the policeman would be there in a few minutes.

“Go and tell him it’s all right,” the clerk said. “The kid’s going to shovel the walk to pay for his grub.”

The waiter, not much relishing his second trip through the storm, scowled at Ned as he passed our hero, but the boy was so pleased at the escape from his predicament that he did not mind the waiter’s black looks.

Ned made a good job of cleaning the walk. The snow was not falling so heavily now, though the storm was far from being over.

“I think I could get work at this if I only had a shovel,” Ned thought as he put the finishing touches on his task. “Maybe the clerk would lend me this one.”

He made the request when he went in to get his pay.

“I’ll leave the fifteen cents with you as security for the shovel,” he said, when he had made his request.

“That’s a hot one; fifteen cents security on a dollar and a half shovel,” the clerk replied with a laugh. “Still, you look honest, though I had my doubts at first,” he added. “Go ahead, take the shovel. Never mind about leaving the money. You’ll need it to get dinner with. Bring the shovel back to-night.”

Thus was Ned started in business. He got several jobs at cleaning sidewalks, and at noon had earned two dollars. He went back to the restaurant, returned the shovel and got dinner. The cashier he had dealt with had gone, but the one who had relieved him knew about the transaction. When Ned had finished his fifteen cent dinner, for that was all he allowed himself, the waitress brought him a big piece of pie.

“I didn’t order that,” he said, though he looked at it longingly.

“The cashier says it’s his treat,” the girl replied with a smile, and Ned had no further compunctions about eating it.

“I told the other fellow you wouldn’t bring the shovel back,” the cashier remarked as Ned paid his check.

“How do you mean?” asked Ned.

“Why the clerk, who was on duty here when you ate breakfast, said he thought you would, and I said I didn’t believe you would show up again. I said if you did I’d give you some pie. See?”

“Oh,” Ned answered with a laugh, “much obliged.”

That afternoon he bought a second-hand shovel and went about looking for more walks to clean. By night he had earned a dollar additional, which gave him considerable more capital than he had possessed since the episode at the hotel.

“I’ll get a room at the lodging house to-night,” he said as he finished a simple supper. “I don’t like those beds all in a heap.”

It was still snowing the next day, and though Ned found the field pretty well covered by scores of other men and boys, he managed to earn two dollars, which made him feel quite like a capitalist, as he shut the door of his lodging-house room that night.



The three chums, who wanted to find John Newton had no trouble. They met him coming from the rear of the theater, as he had done his “turn,” and was not to go on again for three hours.

The “Bird Warbler” was as much surprised to see his former acquaintances from Darewell as they were to find him engaged at a theater.

“I’m studying to be an actor,” John said, “but it’s dull times now and I took this job. It pays pretty well.”

“I never knew you could whistle good enough for this work,” said Fenn.

“It comes natural I guess,” replied John. “But what are you chaps doing in New York?”

They told him, and Bart suggested that perhaps John might happen to see Ned.

“If I do I’ll let you know,” the “warbler” replied. “Where are you stopping?”

“At the Imperial,” replied Bart. “You might telephone us if you hear anything of Ned.”

“I will. Come and have a glass of soda with me,” John added, but the chums were too anxious to keep on with their search to accept, and, bidding the “warbler” good-bye they kept on.

They got back to their rooms at noon, to find that William Perry was up and dressed, and impatient to go out.

“I want to begin to help you,” he said. “Did you see the clerk when you came in?”

“No. Why?” asked Fenn.

“He’s anxious to tell you something. Says they opened a valise a fellow left here and he thinks it might contain a clew that would help you.”

“Maybe it’s about Ned,” suggested Bart. “Come on fellows.”

“What did you say the name of your missing friend was?” the clerk asked them, as the three chums hurried down to his desk.

“Ned Wilding,” answered Frank. “Why?”

“You remember me telling you about that fellow who slipped down the fire escape rope and lost his valise?” the clerk asked. The boys said they did. “Well, we opened it to-day, and the collars are marked ‘N. W.’ I thought it might be a tip for you.”

“Let’s see the things in the satchel,” suggested Fenn.

The clerk showed them to the chums. They had no difficulty in identifying as Ned’s several articles in the valise.

“Then that writing was his, after all!” exclaimed Frank. “Boys, we are on his track.”

“But where can he be?” asked Bart. “We only know he ran away from here. Why did he leave in that fashion? Had he done something he was afraid of?”

“Perhaps he suddenly went—” began Frank, and then he stopped in seeming confusion.

“What were you going to say?” asked Bart.

“Nothing,” Frank replied. “I made a mistake. I think we’d better tell the police about this.”

“That’s so. I nearly forgot,” the clerk added. “You are to go to police headquarters. A message came over the telephone a little while ago.”

“Perhaps they’ve found Ned!” exclaimed Bart for they had left the telephone number of their hotel with the sergeant at headquarters and the official had promised he would telephone if he had any news.

“Hurry up!” cried Fenn. “Perhaps Ned is there waiting for us.”

“I only hope he is,” Frank remarked, and the boys noticed he appeared gloomy and sad.

“Wonder what ails Frank?” asked Bart of Fenn, as they went to their rooms to get their coats and hats.

“A fit of the same old mysteriousness,” replied Stumpy. “Don’t notice him and it will pass over.”

“Let me go to headquarters with you,” begged William. “I want to help.”

“Are you strong enough to go out?” asked Bart. “It’s quite cold.”

“Oh I’m used to that,” and the boy laughed.

“But you—er—you have no overcoat,” said Fenn, wishing when it was too late he had not mentioned it.

“I’m used to that too,” William replied.

“Would you mind if we loaned you money enough to get a coat?” asked Bart.

William thought for a moment.

“I’m ever so much obliged to you,” he said. “You’ve done more for me now than I can ever repay.”

“Then a little more won’t hurt,” said Fenn with a laugh.

The overcoat was purchased, and the four boys went to police headquarters.

“Gentleman waiting to see you,” the sergeant said. “Seems terribly upset about something.”

They went into an anteroom and found Mr. Wilding. He had been in New York since early Thursday morning, but had been unable to locate the boys, since the finding of William in the snow had taken from the minds of the three chums all thoughts of sending the telegram to Darewell, telling Ned’s father of

their address.

“I knew there was something we should have attended to, but I couldn’t think what it was,” Bart exclaimed.

“Have you any news?” asked Mr. Wilding eagerly after explaining he had obtained the address of the chums from the police sergeant who offered to telephone to them.

“Just a little,” replied Fenn and he told of the finding of Ned’s valise. Then all went over the situation, but the prospect seemed no brighter than ever.

“I’ll tell you what we ought to do,” declared William.

“What?” asked Mr. Wilding anxiously.

“We ought to make a regular search of all the lodging houses and other places. I’ve slept in lots of ’em. That’s where men and boys go when they have only a little money, and I guess your son hadn’t much when he lost his valise.”

“I believe you’re right!” exclaimed Ned’s father. “It is a good suggestion. I will hire some private detectives to help in the search.”

“And I’ll do all I can,” said William, whose story had been told to Mr. Wilding.

“My poor boy,” Ned’s father murmured. “I wonder where he can be.”

“Don’t you fret!” exclaimed William. “We’ll find him for you,” and he spoke so hopefully that Mr. Wilding smiled for the first time since he had left home.

It was arranged that he would stay at a hotel near police headquarters while the four boys would remain at the Imperial as there was a bare chance Ned would return.

“Now here’s where I get busy,” declared William, as they left the police station.



CHAPTER XXVI

CASSIDY CATCHES NED

A systematic search of the lodging houses was begun that afternoon. But it was harder and more baffling work than any one had imagined.

John Newton gave them unexpected aid. As he had much time to himself he offered to go with them to the different lodging houses in the evenings, and give his whistling imitations of birds.

“What good will that do?” asked Bart. “Does he think Ned will hear him and come from hiding?”

“Not that,” explained Fenn, to whom John had told his scheme. “But when he’s whistling there’s sure to be a crowd around him, and, if Ned is in the place, he’ll join the others and we may see him. I think it’s a good plan.”

The others did also, and, for several evenings John amused the inmates of the lodging houses with his whistling. As Fenn had said, crowds gathered about him, and the three chums looked eagerly through them for a sight of Ned.

It was perhaps one of the best plans the boys could have adopted, for in their eagerness to hear the “Bird Warbler” the unfortunate lads and men who were forced to the shelter of the places crowded close up around John Newton. In this way Bart and his companions could scrutinize at short range nearly every person in the throng.

“Aren’t you getting tired of it?” asked Bart one evening when they were starting out for a large lodging house on the Bowery.

“I don’t mind it a bit,” replied John. “I’d do more than this to help find Ned. Besides, it’s a good advertisement for me. You see the fellows in these places hear me, and when they see my name on the theatrical bill boards they’ll come in. You can’t get too much advertising when you’re an actor,” and John looked quite important.

There was a larger crowd than usual in the lodging house that night. John made his way to the front of the room. At first no one paid any attention to the

entrance of himself and his friends. But, as soon as John began an imitation of a mocking bird, there was a stir.

“That sounds just like it used to when I was a boy!” exclaimed an old man. “Many and many’s the mornin’ I’ve heard them birds. Can you do a song-sparrow imitation, sonny?”

“Sure,” replied John, and he trilled some sweet high notes.

“My but that’s fine!”

From that John proceeded to imitate a robin and a bob-o-link. He had scarcely finished with the last before there was a stir in one corner of the room. It seemed as if some one was trying to get out.

“Maybe Ned’s there!” exclaimed Bart to Fenn. “Go over and take a look.”

Fenn edged his way through the crowd, but found, instead of some one trying to get out, it was a man trying to make his way closer to where the whistler was. From his appearance the man seemed to have just awakened from a sound sleep on a couple of chairs.

“Where are they?” he exclaimed. “Let me get at ’em!”

“What’s the matter?” asked several.

“I want to catch those birds!” the recently awakened sleeper said, rubbing his eyes. “I can put ’em in cages and sell ’em. I haven’t made any money lately, now’s my chance. Get out of my way, can’t you? I used to trap birds when I was a boy. These are fine singers.”

John had not yet caught sight of the man making his way toward him. The “Warbler” was giving an imitation of a blackbird, and he managed to send out his notes with such skill that it really sounded as if the bird was in a different part of the room from where the whistler stood. The notes appeared to come from a window in the corner.

“I can get him! Look out!” cried the man.

He made a dash for the window, and at that, John, who was now aware of what was going on, changed the whistling to the notes of a bluebird.

This time the tones were so directed as to seem to come from a window on the

other side of the room, and the man turned to make a dash in that direction.

“Why, there’s two birds!” he exclaimed. “I’ll catch ’em all!”

No sooner had he reached the second window than John changed the tune to that made by a bullfinch, and the man, listening, thought the bird was in the back of the apartment. He made his way there, the crowd parting to let him through, and laughing, the meanwhile, at the deluded man’s actions.

John was concealed from view by the throng packed close about him, or the man would have discovered the trick at once. As it was he thought sure there were several birds in the room. When he got to the rear the notes of the feathered songster seemed more distinct than ever. The man climbed up on a chair to peer behind the window curtain, and, as he did so, John, whose vocal abilities were not alone limited to birds, let out a croak like a big frog.

“That’s no bird!” exclaimed the man in disgust, as the crowd broke into a laugh at him. “Am I dreaming or what’s the matter? Is this place haunted?”

Then he caught sight of John, who was just puckering up his lips to again imitate a bird.

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” the man exclaimed. “Well you’re a good one, all right, to fool me. I used to live in the woods and I know birds pretty well.”

“That’s where I learned to imitate ’em; in the woods,” said John, glad of a chance to rest, for his lips and mouth were aching from the strain.

“Can you whistle tunes?” the man asked him.

“A little.”

“Give us some music then. I like a good jolly song; and we’ll join in the chorus.”

Then John poured forth his melody in a series of popular songs, for he was a good whistler, aside from his power to mimic, and, for half an hour the lodging house rang with the voices of the men, led by John’s shrill notes.

All this while Bart and the others kept a close lookout for Ned. They did not see him, and, when it was evident that all the inmates of the place had come under their scrutiny, the boys left, their mission unsuccessful. And so it was for several evenings.

Meanwhile Ned, all unconscious of the search being made for him, was puzzling his brains as to what he had better do. He was in no immediate danger of starving, as there were several snowstorms, and he earned enough to pay for his room and live frugally. Still he knew his father and chums would worry but he did not feel he dare communicate with them. He bought the papers each day, and saw several references to the swindling operations of Skem & Skim. They had not been arrested yet, it stated, and search was being made for them and for a young fellow who was believed to have helped them in their operations by dealing in a number of shares of oil stock.

“That means me,” thought Ned, as he read it. “I’ve got to lay low yet.”

So he went his weary way, fearing arrest every moment, yet feeling rather secure now that a week had passed and he had not been apprehended. He found several odd jobs to do when there was no snow to shovel and so managed to make enough to live on.

The four boys and Mr. Wilding kept up their search. The police and private detectives did what they could but to no purpose. Personals were inserted in the papers, begging Ned to communicate with his father, but Ned never thought of looking for them.

One afternoon, William, who had adopted the plan of walking about the streets in the hope of seeing Ned, whom he knew by description and a photograph, paused in front of a commission store, where a youth about his own age was helping to move boxes of oranges from a truck. Something about the lad attracted William’s attention.

“I wonder if that’s Ned?” he said to himself. “He looks just like the boys told me he would and like that photograph Mr. Wilding had. Still I wouldn’t like to make a mistake. I must get closer.”

He pretended to be searching for a number on the building, and so approached near to the boy helping unload the crates.

“I’ll bet it is Ned,” William said to himself with conviction. “I’m going to ask him. He can’t any more than say no.”

He sauntered up to the young fellow, and, with an air of unconcern asked:

“Do you know anyone around here named Ned Wilding? I’m looking for him.”

The boy, carrying a crate of oranges, jumped so he almost dropped the fruit. Then he looked sharply at William. His face grew pale, and William was sure he had found Ned.

“I haven’t got time to talk,” was the rather gruff answer made by the boy with the crate. “I’m busy,” and then he hurried into the store with the box.

“Fooled again,” thought William. He waited until the boy came out again, and this time he was sure it was the missing youth. But now he decided on a different plan.

“Evidently, if it is Ned, he doesn’t want to be known,” thought William. “Something’s gone wrong with him. My only chance is in getting some of his chums here to identify him. I must telephone to one of them. They may be at the hotel. If not I’ll leave word for them to come here as soon as they get back. Mr. Wilding too! I must ’phone him! Then I’ll remain on the watch until some one arrives.”

There was a telephone pay-station across the street, and William sent his two messages from there. Neither of the three chums was in, nor was Mr. Wilding, but at both hotels the clerks said they would deliver the messages promptly.

“Now to wait until they come,” said William as he left the booth.

Just then, as he was looking at the boy, who was still carrying in the crates, he saw a big man with a red moustache approach him. William was not near enough to hear what the man said, but he noted that the boy seemed frightened.

“Ah I’ve caught you, haven’t I?” exclaimed the man, and Ned (for as William suspected the boy carrying in the oranges was the missing youth) looked up with a start. “I’ll teach you to steal my money and run away.”

He grabbed Ned by the arm and shook him roughly.

“I didn’t take your money, Mr. Cassidy!” exclaimed the boy, as he recognized the lodging house keeper.

“What did you run away for? I’m on to your game. Now you can come along with me and work out what you stole from me, or I’ll hand you over to the first officer I meet. What are you going to do?”

What was poor Ned to do? He was in dire straits. Still it seemed better to go

with Cassidy than to make a scene on the street and be arrested. He wanted that least of all things.

“I’ll go with you,” he said, “though you have no right to make me, and I didn’t take your money.”

“What’s the matter?” asked the fruit man, who had hired Ned to assist in unloading the truck.

“Nothing much,” replied Cassidy. “This lad owes me some money and I’ll make him work it out.”

“That’s your affair,” the fruit man replied. “He’s earned half a dollar working for me. Here it is.”

He was about to hand it to Ned, but Cassidy took it.

“I’ll apply that on account,” he said grimly, as he marched Ned away.

The whole affair had occurred so suddenly that Ned did not know what to do. He was in a sort of dream. The appearance of Cassidy, the confiscation of the half dollar and the lodging house keeper’s evident intention of holding the boy to account for a theft he had never committed, made Ned think he was doomed to misfortune, no matter what he did to avoid it.

Then followed a natural desire to escape. He knew Cassidy had no right to take him into custody, and he felt the injustice of it keenly. The man held him loosely by the coat sleeve, and marched him along through the streets. Several persons turned to look at the spectacle, but no one ventured to interfere. New Yorkers have formed the habit of not taking much interest in affairs that do not concern them directly.

As they were crossing a narrow street in one of the thickly settled tenement districts a horse, attached to a wagon, and rapidly driven, bore down on them. Ned, with the instinct of a quick runner, started to dash ahead. Cassidy, who moved slower, pulled back toward the curb, to let the steed pass. The movement separated Ned from his captor, for Cassidy’s hold on the boy’s sleeve was broken. Ned was free!

The horse and wagon was now between him and the man. The boy gave a hasty glance back, and saw Cassidy standing on the crossing, ready to dash forward as soon as the wagon should pass. He could not go around it because of

vehicles on either side.

“Here’s my chance!” exclaimed Ned as he dashed forward and ran down the other side of the street.

An instant later the wagon had passed and Cassidy was after him. But the start Ned had he used to good advantage. He was fleet of foot and he had an object in making speed, such as he had never had before. Somewhat to his surprise Cassidy did not shout to him to stop, and made no outcry.

“I wonder if he’s afraid to let people know he’s after me?” thought Ned.

The truth of it was, Cassidy wanted to save his breath for running. Also, he did not want to raise too much disturbance in his pursuit of Ned. He knew he had no right to take the boy into custody, and, though he knew he could cause his arrest on the false charge, that would not bring back the money Cassidy thought Ned had stolen. It was the money, or its equivalent, the lodging house keeper was after.

So he decided to try to catch Ned without aid from outside sources if possible. With this in view he started after the fugitive without raising an alarm, though the streets were well filled.

Ned made good time. He speeded down the thoroughfare until he came to where another intersected it, and turned the corner. This put him out of Cassidy’s view.

The second street was not so thronged as the one he had just left, and Ned had a chance to run better. But there was this disadvantage, that he was more closely observed. On the crowded avenue a running lad attracts little attention, but when more plainly in sight, as Ned now was, he becomes an object of interest.

As he ran he looked back over his shoulder to see if Cassidy was in sight. Past several houses Ned kept on, and his pursuer did not appear around the corner. Then, just as he came in front of a big tenement house Ned saw Cassidy some distance in the rear.

“I guess I’ll go in here!” thought the boy. “Maybe I can slip out of the back before he gets here and that will fool him. I’m going to try!”

He darted into the hallway, but, before he had gone three steps he collided with an old man who, at that instant, was coming from his room into the

corridor. The shock threw the old man down, and Ned could scarcely retain his balance.

“Excuse me!” he exclaimed, pausing, when he had recovered his equilibrium, to help the aged man to his feet. “I’m sorry,” and then he started to run through the hallway.

“Here! Vait a minute!” the man exclaimed. “Are you tryin’ to rob me? I dinks you are a t’eef! Hold on! Vait until I see if you haf taken my vatch!”

“I haven’t taken anything of yours!” cried Ned. “I’m in a hurry!”

He was almost at the end of the hall, and saw that it opened into a sort of court. Abutting on that was another tenement.

“Vait! You vas a t’eef!” cried the old man, and he set up such a yelling that doors on either side of the corridor opened, and men and women stuck their heads forth, all demanding to know what the matter was.

“I’m done for now!” thought Ned. “If Cassidy comes past here he’ll be sure to hear the excitement, and they’ll tell him I ran through!”

Still he determined not to give up. He dashed on into the court, leaving behind the aged man who was now the centre of an excited throng.

“He vos a t’eef! He knocked me down! He wouldn’t vait until I looked to see if I am robbed!” was the burden of the aged one’s cry. “Call de police! He vos a t’eef!”

Ned ran across the open space and into the other tenement house. The hallway there seemed deserted, but he knew it would not be so long, when the cries from the other house had aroused the inmates.

“If I can only get through the corridor, and into the other street I can fool Cassidy,” Ned reasoned. “I seem to be having all my bad luck at once.”

He had almost reached the front door, for it was the back entrance of the structure that he had gone in, and he thought he saw freedom before him, when there sounded behind him a cry of:

“Stop thief! Stop thief!”

This is enough to arouse excitement anywhere, but in a New York tenement

nothing can sooner be calculated to draw the inmates from their rooms, than such an alarm, unless, indeed, it be one of fire.

No sooner had the first cry resounded through the corridor than the hall was swarming with people. Ned found his way blocked, the more effectually when one woman ran to the front door and closed it.

“I’ve caught you!” she exclaimed. “I’ll teach you to rob honest people, even if they are poor!”

“I haven’t robbed anybody!” cried Ned, as he saw the throng in front of him, and heard the tramp of many feet in his rear.

“Stop him! Hold him!” cried half a score.

Ned looked about him. There seemed to be no way of escape. He was standing near the flight of stairs leading to the upper stories of the second tenement. There was a little clear space in front of him, as the crowd before him was composed mostly of women, who were a little timid about approaching too closely to a “thief” even if he was only a lad.

“I’m going to chance it,” thought Ned. “If I can get to the roof I can cross to some other house, and go down a scuttle hole, perhaps, and so reach the street. Or I can hide until the excitement blows over.”

With this in mind he suddenly grasped the balustrade near which he was. With a jump and a swing he was over it and part way up the stairs. Then he began to run, while the crowd below him, surprised at his sudden escape, set up a chorus of yells.

But Ned had a good start. He took the steps three at a time, and was soon at the top. Then he essayed the next flight, and so on until he found himself on the roof, which was a big, wide stretch of tin. It was used as a place for hanging out clothes, and was easy of access from the top hallway.

Below him Ned could hear the shouts and cries, and the tramp of many feet.

“Which way shall I go?” he asked himself, as he paused for an instant. “Guess it can’t make much difference.”

He turned to the left and ran along until he came to a stairway several houses further along. The door of this was open, and he went down. He had fairly

distanced his pursuers, for none of them were yet on the roof.

“I’ll get to the street and leave ’em behind,” the boy reasoned. “Everyone will be in the house looking for me, and the street will be deserted.”

In this Ned was almost right, for when, after hurrying down several flights of stairs, he reached the thoroughfare, the only person in sight in the immediate neighborhood was a colored man putting in coal. He seemed to be so busily engaged that he had no time to waste in pursuit, so, after a hasty glance from the front door of the tenement, Ned went out.

But in this he reckoned without his host. The colored man, looking up from his shoveling, saw Ned. The lad’s wild and disheveled appearance raised the man’s suspicions. Besides he had heard of the chase after the thief.

“I’ll cotch you!” he cried, leaping from his wagon. “I’ll get you!”

Ned, who was, by this time, running past where the coal wagon was backed up to the curb, turned out to avoid the negro, who, with outstretched arms was advancing toward him. In his anxiety to avoid the coal man, Ned did not notice an open hole down which the black diamonds were being shoveled. Before he could save himself he had plunged into it.

Lucky for the boy the cellar underneath was almost full, the coal coming to within a few feet of the sidewalk, so when Ned toppled in he only went down a little ways. There he was, his head and shoulders sticking up above the pavement, while his feet and legs were buried in the pile of coal underneath.

“Now I’ve got you!” yelled the colored man, as he ran up to Ned, and hauled him from the hole. “I’ve got you! What’d you steal?”

“I didn’t steal anything,” Ned answered. “It’s all a mistake. Please let me go!”

“Hold him!” cried Cassidy, appearing at that moment from the front entrance of the house, up the stairs of which Ned had dashed a few minutes before. “Don’t let him get away!”

“He’ll not get away,” replied the negro.

Cassidy came up and took charge of Ned. Quite a crowd gathered, but the lodging house keeper answered none of the many questions asked him.

“Guess he’s a detective,” was the general whisper that went around, and Cassidy did not correct it.

“You come with me!” he said to Ned. “Don’t try any of your tricks again, or it’ll be the worse for you.”

And he marched Ned off.



CHAPTER XXVII

BAFFLED AGAIN

William, coming across the street to take up a position, where he could watch the lad he suspected was Ned, puzzled his head over the scene he had just witnessed.

“I wonder what he went off with that man for?” he said to himself. “Didn’t act as though he wanted to, either. I’ll ask the fruit man.”

He approached, and then the thought struck it would be a good idea to apply for the job the other boy had just left. He got it, for there was need of hurry in unloading the fruit, as the day was cold.

“What was the matter with the other fellow?” asked William carelessly as though it was of little moment to him.

“I don’t know,” the fruit man replied. “The boy came along just like you and asked for a job. I hired him and then along comes this fellow and says the lad owes him money. It wasn’t any of my affair. Hustle those boxes in now, I don’t want the oranges to freeze.”

“Who was the man who took him away?” asked William, as indifferently as he could, though he was nervous with eagerness to hear the answer.

“I never saw him before. It was none of my affair, though I liked the looks of that boy, and I didn’t care much for the man. But I’ve gotten over the habit of interfering in other people’s business. Come now, boy, hustle!”

William went to work with an energy that pleased his employer. The boy was beginning to think he had made a mistake. He felt that he should have followed the man, to see where he took the lad he believed was Ned. But then, too, he had telephoned Mr. Wilding and the chums to meet him at the fruit store, and if he was not there when they arrived, they would not know what to make of it.

“I can’t be in two places at once,” William thought to himself. “I guess I’d better stay here until some one comes. Then maybe I can trace which way the man took the boy. Anyhow I’m not sure it was Ned. I’ve never seen him, and it

wouldn't do to make a mistake. He wouldn't admit he was Ned Wilding, but he acted to me as though he was afraid of something."

Thus musing, and puzzling over whether he had done the right thing, William continued to help unload the truck, keeping a sharp lookout for Mr. Wilding or the three chums.

The three boys arrived first. They came down the street in a hurry looking for the place William had described to the hotel clerk over the telephone.

"There he is!" cried Bart, as he caught sight of the boy they had pulled from the snow drift. "Where's Ned?" he added.

"I'm not sure it was him," William replied, "but a man came and took him away half an hour ago."

Then he rapidly explained what had taken place, describing the boy he had seen.

"That's Ned sure enough," Fenn exclaimed. "Where in the world could he have gone to?"

"And who was the man who said Ned owed him money?" asked Frank. "I guess we're on the trail of the mystery."

"Hurry up, let's see if we can't find them," suggested Bart. "They can't have gone very far."

"One of us ought to stay here to meet Mr. Wilding if he comes," said Fenn. "The other two can go with William to look for Ned and the man."

"Say, did I hire you to chin or to carry in oranges?" asked the fruit man, suddenly appearing in the doorway, and noting William talking to the three boys.

"Guess I'll have to give up the job," replied William. "I've got to go with these boys."

"Say, there must be a hoodoo about this job," the fruit man exclaimed. "You're the second boy to give it up in less than an hour. What's the matter?"

The boys did not think it necessary to explain. It was arranged that Frank would stay in the vicinity of the store to meet Mr. Wilding, if that gentleman should arrive, and tell what had happened, while William, with Bart and Fenn,

tried to trace Ned and the red-moustached man.

“When Mr. Wilding comes I’ll take him to our hotel,” said Frank. “There will be no use in remaining here and we can wait for you there, as it’s nearer than his.”

“All right,” replied Bart. “We may have some good news for you.”

“I hope you do,” Frank said. “This thing is getting on my nerves. I’m afraid we’ll never see Ned again.”

“Oh, yes we will,” put in Fenn cheerfully.

William did not stop to ask any pay from the fruit man for what work he had done, but hurried off with the two chums in the direction taken by Ned and the man who had led him away.

“We’ll ask any policeman we meet,” suggested Bart.

“I’m afraid we’re on a sort of wild-goose chase,” remarked William, “but it’s the best we can do. If I had only been sure it was Ned I would have followed him, without waiting for you, but I wasn’t.”

“If it was Ned,” said Bart, “I can’t understand why he didn’t admit his identity.”

“He must have had a good reason for it,” retorted Fenn.

Through the street they hurried, making inquiries from policemen, and others whom they met, as to whether Ned and the man had gone that way. They got some traces, but in New York few persons, even policemen, have time to take note of those whom they have no special reason for keeping in mind. As William had said, it was a sort of wild-goose chase, and, when they had gone a mile or more, they became convinced that it was useless to continue any farther.

“Baffled again,” remarked Bart. “This beats me. I wonder what we are to do.”

“Have to begin all over again,” declared William. “It was my fault. I should have followed Ned.”

“No, you did what you thought was best,” Fenn replied.

They returned to the hotel, to find Mr. Wilding and Frank awaiting them. Mr. Wilding, who had expected some news of his son, was deeply disappointed

when the three boys returned with none.

“What in the world are we to do?” asked Mr. Wilding. “We seem completely at a loss.”

“There are a few more lodging houses to try,” suggested William. “I’ll start out again this evening. That’s when the places are full, and I may get some trace of him.”

No one could offer a better suggestion, and it was arranged that Mr. Wilding should continue the search with a private detective he had hired, while William and Bart would make a tour of the lodging houses. Fenn and Frank were to remain at the Imperial Hotel.

“There’s no telling when a message may come from the baggage agent telling us that Ned has called for his trunk,” Bart said, “and some one ought to be ready to hurry to the depot. We’ll have to divide our forces.”

With little hope in their hearts, but with dogged patience, and a determination to keep up the search, William and Bart started out.



CHAPTER XXVIII

NED A PRISONER

Ned followed Cassidy through the streets, the lodging-house keeper leading the way, and seemingly in no fear that the boy would give him the slip. As a matter of fact, Ned did not intend to try to escape. He was, in a sense, a voluntary prisoner now, as he knew, if he tried to run away again, Cassidy would probably take after him and raise such a disturbance that the police would interfere. And Ned had his own reasons for not wanting anything to do with the bluecoats.

Afterwards he thought how senseless, in a measure, his fears were, but at the time they loomed up large before him, and caused him to do things of which, otherwise, he would not have dreamed.

“Hurry up!” exclaimed Cassidy when he and Ned had been walking about half an hour. “I haven’t got all day.”

“What do you intend to do?” asked Ned.

“I intend to make you work out the value of the money you stole from me. One of my porters has left and I have to have another. Instead of hiring one I’ll make you do the work until you square things.”

“I never took your money!” declared Ned.

“You’ve said that several times,” Cassidy exclaimed. “I don’t want to hear it again. I saw you, but I’m willing to give you a chance to reform. No use calling in the police unless I have to, but I will, if you don’t do as I tell you.”

The man spoke earnestly, and not unkindly, and Ned began to believe that Cassidy really believed he stole the money, a thing the boy had not admitted at first.

“Some day you’ll find you’re wrong,” Ned said.

“I guess not! Jim Cassidy doesn’t make mistakes,” was the answer. “If I do I’ll pay you back with interest.”

They reached the lodging house where Ned had stopped before, and whence he had escaped in the night.

“Go ahead up,” commanded Cassidy. “Get a broom and a pail of water and scrub out the rooms. I’ll allow you at the rate of a dollar and a half a day. I had fifteen dollars under my pillow that you took. I got four and a half of it back, counting the fifty cents from the fruit man, and that leaves ten dollars and a half you owe me. You work seven days and I’ll call it square, and give you your bed free at night. That’s more than you deserve, but you’re young and I’ll give you a chance.”

Ned thought it was a pretty poor chance, considering his innocence of the theft, but he decided it was best not to answer. He got a pail and broom, and, taking off his coat set to work cleaning the dirty floor. Cassidy watched him a while in silence and remarked:

“I’ll be on the lookout, so don’t try to sneak away.”

“I’ll work my seven days,” Ned replied, trying to hide the tears that would persist in coming into his eyes. As he labored away the stock certificate, in his inside pocket, rustled. All his trouble dated from the acquisition of that, he reflected bitterly, and it was a dearly bought bit of experience.

All that afternoon Ned worked away, his heart like lead. He longed for a sight of the faces of his chums, and he wanted to hear from his father. It seemed a very long time since he had left Darewell so happy and filled with expectations of the pleasures he and his friends would enjoy in New York.

“I wonder if the boys came?” Ned thought. “I wonder what my father must think? Oh, I’ve a good notion to write to him and ask him what to do! I can’t stand it any longer!”

Ned was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He had stood about all he could, and with the poor food and the bad sleeping places, which were all he could afford, his health was in danger.

“Come now, no loafing!” exclaimed Cassidy’s coarse voice, as Ned paused a moment in his scrubbing. “When I pay a dollar and a half a day I expect good, quick work. We don’t want any idlers around here.”

Wearily Ned began to move the wet broom over the dirty boards. There were a number of unkempt men engaged in the same occupation.

“If my chums should see me now,” thought Ned.

He expected to be allowed to go to bed early as he was tired, but when Cassidy had sent him to a near-by, cheap restaurant, in company with one of the other porters, for supper, Ned found, on his return, that he was expected to clean out the office.

“Ten o’clock’s time enough to go to bed,” Cassidy told him. “The work got behind when my other man left and it’s got to be made up. I don’t want the Board of Health here, condemning the place.”

Even with all the cleaning that was done, it looked as if the Board should take some action, Ned thought.

Meanwhile William and Bart had, that same evening, visited several lodging houses. They met with no success, though the proprietors described boys who bore a resemblance to Ned, but who had only stopped one night and had then disappeared.

“We’ll find him,” said William, more cheerfully than he felt.

The two boys were walking down a side street, approaching a lodging-house they intended to visit. It was one they had not yet inspected. It was about eight o’clock and was blowing up cold. There was a feeling of snow in the air, and the boys buttoned their coats closely around them.

“Hope Ned doesn’t have to stay out in the storm like I did,” said William.

“So do I,” chimed in Bart. “I hate to think about it.”

“We’ll try this place,” William went on, as they reached the entrance to the lodging house. In the hallway a gas jet burned, and, as the lads started up the stairs, they met a red moustached man coming down. At the sight of him William cried out:

“There he is!”

“Who?” asked Bart.

“The man who took Ned away!”

The next instant the two boys were besieging Cassidy with questions. The lodging-house proprietor looked bewildered a moment, and then, gathering the

import of what they wanted, he exclaimed:

“Oh, you’re chums of his, eh? Belong to the same gang I s’pose? Well, you can’t come any tricks on me! If that lad is your chum he stays here until he’s worked out what he owes me!”

“What does he owe you?” demanded Bart. “Ned Wilding doesn’t need to owe anyone anything.”

“He owes me the money he stole!” Cassidy cried, “and I’m going to get it! Now, you fellows skip out of here or I’ll call the police!”

“Can’t we see Ned?” demanded William.

“No, you can’t! He’s got to stay here a week. Think I’m going to let you in and have you help him git away the way he did after he took my money?”

“He never took your money!” cried Bart.

“Clear out!” exclaimed Cassidy.

“Bart, you go get a policeman!” called William suddenly. “We’ll see about this thing. Telephone for Mr. Wilding and the boys!”

“What will you do?” asked Bart.

“I’ll stay on guard!” William replied, looking Cassidy straight in the face. “He’s not going to get Ned away from me again!”



CHAPTER XXIX

NED IS FOUND—CONCLUSION

Bart hurried down the stairs. Cassidy looked after him, a little in doubt what to make of the proceeding. Then he glanced at William.

“Here, you get out of this!” he called roughly.

“All right,” agreed William cheerfully. “It’s your place, I admit, but you’ll sing a different tune pretty soon. I’ll get out of the hallway but the street is free, and I’ll be on guard there until this thing is settled.”

“You’re too fresh!” spluttered Cassidy, as he turned and went back upstairs.

“That’s all right! You’ll get what’s coming to you pretty soon,” retorted William confidently, as he went down to the street to await the return of Bart with reinforcements.

Bart soon got into communication with Mr. Wilding, and with the two chums, at their hotel. They said they would hurry to the lodging house, and Mr. Wilding announced that he would bring a detective from headquarters, rather than have the boys ask a policeman to investigate the matter. Meanwhile, Mr. Wilding advised Bart to keep close watch on the lodging house.

William and Bart now took up their positions where they could observe the entrance to the place. They did not know there was a rear stairway, but, as Cassidy had no idea of spiriting Ned away, desiring, in fact, to only keep him secure, there was no need of guarding the back.

It seemed a long time before Mr. Wilding arrived with the detective. About the same time Frank and Fenn got to the place.

“I have told the detective all about it, as far as we know the circumstances,” Mr. Wilding said. “Are you sure Ned is in there, William?”

“Almost positive,” was the answer. “The man admitted as much. He says Ned stole money from him and has to work to pay it back.”

“We’ll soon see about it,” the detective put in. “I know Cassidy. He’s a rough sort, but he’s square I guess. Come on.”

Up the stairs they went, the hearts of the boys beating with anxiety. Mr. Wilding’s face showed the strain he was under but, as for the detective, he seemed to take it all as a matter of course. He had seen too many similar scenes to be affected.

The little party entered the main room of the lodging house. Mr. Wilding pressed forward, close behind the detective. Through the office window he caught sight of a boy scrubbing the floor. There was something dejected in the lad’s appearance. Mr. Wilding looked a second time. Then he called out:

“Ned! My boy!”

“Father!” cried Ned, and an instant later he was locked in Mr. Wilding’s embrace, while the tears, which he did not try to conceal, streamed down his face.

“Hurrah!” fairly yelled William. “We’ve found him!” and he began dancing around the room.

At the sound of William’s cry Ned looked up and saw his chums.

“Why—why—where did you all come from?” he asked.

“We came after you,” replied Bart, “and a fine chase you led us. Where in the world have you been, Ned?”

“Here! What’s all this row about in my place?” asked Cassidy, hurrying up from the rear of the resort. “You people have no right in here.”

“Easy, Cassidy,” advised the detective. “What about that boy?” and he pointed to Ned.

“Oh, it’s you, Reilly,” said Cassidy, as he recognized the officer. “Well, he robbed me!”

“No, I didn’t!” retorted Ned, hotly.

“That’s right, you didn’t kid!” exclaimed a husky voice, and a man, in ragged clothing, shuffled into the light. “He didn’t take your money, Cassidy.”

“Who did then?” asked the lodging-house keeper.

“It was Mike Jimson. I met him down the street a while ago, and he told me. Thought it was a good joke. He had a room next to you that night and he slipped in while you were asleep. He heard you accuse the kid here, but when the lad got away he thought it was all right, and the next day Mike lit out.”

“Are you sure?” asked the detective.

“Sure! Didn’t Mike tell me? He showed me some of the money. He’s spent the rest.”

“Then I’ll have him locked up!” Cassidy exclaimed. “I wonder how I could have made that mistake? I thought sure it was you who took my money,” and he looked at Ned. “I’m sorry for what I did.”

Ned was too happy over the outcome to reply. He held his father’s hand and his chums crowded around him.

“Here,” said Cassidy suddenly, holding out five one dollar bills to Ned.

“What are they for?” asked Mr. Wilding.

“Guess they’re his. Anyhow four and a half belongs to him. The rest is interest. I took ’em from under his pillow thinking they were mine. I hope you’ll let this thing drop.”

“You’ve made a serious mistake, Cassidy,” Detective Reilly said. “You are liable to be sued for damages.”

“I hope you’ll not prosecute me,” whined the lodging house keeper.

“That’s a question we can settle later,” said Mr. Wilding sternly. “Come, boys, let’s get away from here. We will go to my hotel, and then I’ll send a telegram to our friends in Darewell. They are very anxious to hear from me.”

“Will you arrest Mike and get my money back, Reilly?” asked Cassidy.

“Maybe, later,” the detective replied. “You don’t deserve it, for the trouble you caused,” and he followed Mr. Wilding and the boys to the street.

“But, Ned, it wasn’t that accusation that kept you in hiding, was it?” asked his father as they walked along.

“No—no—” Ned answered with a look at the detective. “I guess I’m wanted

on another charge?”

“Wanted on another charge? What in the world do you mean?”

“Why I bought some stock in the Mt. Olive Oil Well Company,” Ned explained, still eyeing the detective. “I got it from the brokers, Skem & Skim. I went back to have a mistake in the figures corrected and I found the firm had fled and the postal authorities were in charge of the offices. I overheard the inspector say they wanted a young fellow who had bought two hundred shares of the stock and I knew it was me, so I ran away. I didn’t want to be arrested.

“But I don’t mind, now!” he went on, as he drew the stock certificate from his pocket and handed it to his father. “You can lock me up, if you want to,” turning to the detective. “I’m tired of dodging around.”

“Let’s see that paper?” asked the officer, and he took it to a light where he could read it. As he looked it over a smile came to his face. “Well, well, you certainly had a big scare for nothing,” he remarked to Ned.

“How?”

“I know all about the case. I helped work on it. We located Skem & Skim in Boston and they’re under arrest.”

“But about me? About the two hundred shares of stock that the inspector was talking about?” asked Ned anxiously.

“Two thousand shares was what he said I guess, but you probably misunderstood him,” Mr. Reilly went on. “Yes, there was a young fellow who was mixed up in the transactions. He was a holder of two thousand shares of the stock. All there was in fact, and he was one of the main ones in working the swindle. We’re looking for him still. Why, my boy, this paper isn’t worth anything. They cheated you. There isn’t any stock in the Mt. Olive Oil Well Company except the fake two thousand shares issued to John Denton, which is the name of the other swindler we want. And so you thought the inspector meant you?”

“I did, and that’s why I ran away. I didn’t want to be arrested and bring disgrace on my father.”

“You poor boy!” exclaimed Mr. Wilding. “But it’s all over now, Ned. How in the world did you manage to live in the meanwhile?”

Ned told them part of the story as they walked to his father's hotel, and the remainder of it he related inside, from the time of his aunt's departure until they found him scrubbing the lodging-house floor, including his escape down the rope.

"And we have your valise!" exclaimed Fenn. "It's at our hotel."

"I thought some one came along and stole it," Ned replied. "I was afraid to ask about it for fear I'd be arrested. I didn't even dare go for my trunk."

"That's safe at the depot," said Bart, "but you'll have to pay storage charges on it. Well, well, how this thing has worked out!"

"We've solved two mysteries instead of one," Frank remarked. "Here's William ready to go back to his mother," and he told Ned who William was.

"So you're the boy who was watching me this afternoon when Cassidy came for me?" Ned asked. "I was afraid you might be a detective, and so I wouldn't admit who I was."

"We'll start for home in the morning," declared Mr. Wilding.

"And maybe get into more trouble there," put in Fenn.

"How?" asked Ned. "If there's any more trouble I want to get it all over with at once."

"They suspect us of blowing up the school tower!" exclaimed Frank.

"Oh, that!" cried Mr. Wilding. "I guess I forgot to tell you about that, I was so busy thinking of Ned. That's all cleared up!"

"How?" asked Bart.

"They found out it was done by a wicked boy named Peter Sanderson. He thought it was a joke to set off a dynamite cartridge, but he found out it wasn't. He's been sent to the reform school and his father has to pay a big bill for damages. I got a letter from Fenn's father this morning, telling me all about it. So you boys can go home with everything cleared up."

"And we'll take William with us," said Bart.

"Yes, of course. I guess William's troubles are over too. We need a boy in the bank, and I think he will fill the bill," and Mr. Wilding laughed.

They were all so excited that none of them slept well that night, but they were up early and started back for Darewell.

Ned rather expected his father would express regret at the loss of the hundred dollars, for Detective Reilly said there was little chance of the money ever being recovered. Mr. Wilding, however, did not refer to it, until Ned, anxious to know how his parent felt, remarked:

“I guess I’m not much of a business man, dad.”

“Why so?” inquired Mr. Wilding with a smile.

“Why, I lost my hundred dollars the first thing.”

“Not exactly lost it, Ned, though you haven’t got it. You can consider that you bought a hundred dollars worth of experience, and I think you got quite a lot for your money.”

“I certainly did,” replied Ned with conviction.

“By the way,” his father went on. “I got a telegram from your aunt. Her niece in Chicago is not as ill as was at first believed, and Mrs. Kenfield is coming home soon. She wants you boys to stay and visit her. Your uncle will be home from Europe in another week.”

“I think I’d rather go home for a while,” answered Ned.

“Well, everything came out all right,” remarked Bart as he and Fenn sat together looking from the car windows as they approached their destination.

“Yes, everything is right but Frank,” replied Fenn. “He’s been acting strangely lately,” and he nodded toward his chum who sat alone in a seat on the other side of the car.

“I wonder what ails him?” Bart remarked.

“I’d like to find out. It certainly is something strange,” went on Fenn. What the mystery was will be told in the third volume of this series, to be called, “Frank Roscoe’s Secret.”

A little later the train drew into the Darewell depot. There was quite a crowd to welcome the boys, for their story was partly known. Mr. Wilding had telegraphed to the families of Ned’s chums, that the mystery was solved and the

trouble at last ended.

“Did you see any great actors, Fenn?” asked Jennie as she greeted the boys. “Tell me all about them.”

“The only actor we saw was John Newton, the ‘Marvelous Bird Warbler,’” replied Fenn, “and we left him there. He certainly can whistle.”

“Oh, tell us all about it!” begged Alice. “Did you see any accidents?”

“Didn’t have time,” her brother replied. “But come on home. I want to see the folks.”

There we will take leave of the boys and girls, as they trooped up the platform, talking, laughing, and asking and answering scores of questions. Only two in the crowd were rather silent. Frank, who seemed gloomy and depressed, and William. But William was only quiet because of the great happiness he felt in knowing he would soon see his mother and sisters, from whom he had been so long separated. Two hours later he was with them, telling all about the way the chums found him, and of Ned’s disappearance so strangely solved with his aid.

THE END

Transcriber’s Notes:

Punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

Changed Table of Contents page numbers to the actual page numbers in the text, for Chapters XXVII (was 203, now 216), XXVIII (was 209, now 222), and XXIX (was 216, now 229).

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