

**MORGAN
SCOTT**

THE GREAT
OAKDALE
MYSTERY

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The Great Oakdale Mystery:

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	4
CHAPTER II.	12
CHAPTER III.	20
CHAPTER IV.	28
CHAPTER V.	37
CHAPTER VI.	47
CHAPTER VII.	55
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	58

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CHAPTER I. THE HUNTERS

Two boys, each carrying a gun, came out of a strip of woods and paused. They were followed by a short-haired pointer dog. One of the boys, whose gun was a single-barreled repeater, bore a game-bag suspended from his shoulder by a strap, and he spoke to the dog with an air of authority that proclaimed him the animal's master. He was a pleasant-faced, blue-eyed chap, and his name was Fred Sage.

The gun of the other boy was a double-barreled hammerless. The boy had a slightly undershot jaw, and his eyes were a trifle too small. This was Roy Hooker. During the months of the past summer these two fellows had become exceedingly friendly.

"There are the Hopkins woodcock covers down yonder, Fred," said Roy, pointing across the open strip of pasture land. "Old Hopkins doesn't like to have anyone gun there, but I'm for giving those covers a try, as long as he will probably never know it."

"Has he posted 'No Trespass' signs?" asked Sage.

"Guess not; I haven't seen any. He doesn't do any shooting

himself, but being a cranky old bear, he doesn't like to have anyone else gun on his property."

"Well, as long as there are no warnings posted and he hasn't personally notified us to keep off, we'll see if we can find any birds there. The covers look attractive to me. Here, Spot; heel, sir."

With the first indication that the boys intended to proceed, the eager dog had started forward, but he turned at the command of his master and once more fell in behind.

The forenoon of this clear, sunny autumn day was not far advanced, the young hunters having set forth shortly after breakfast. Although the air was clear and almost warm, there was a certain suggestion of crispness in it, which, together with the flaming leaves of the deciduous trees, plainly betokened that the early autumn frosts had been at work. The stubble of the open pasture land was brown and dry. Behind the boys, in the woods they had just left, squirrels were chattering and bluejays screaming, but Fred and Roy were after bigger and more legitimate game. Thus far their hunt had proved disappointing.

"If we don't find anything down yonder," said Hooker, "I'll get mad and shoot the next squirrel that barks at me. I was tempted to pop over one big gray fellow that leered at me from a limb."

"You don't eat squirrels, do you?"

"Oh, no."

"What would you do with them if you should shoot 'em?"

"Nothing; just throw them away."

"Then don't shoot them, Roy. It's not good sport to kill practically harmless creatures simply for the sake of killing something. I'd rather never shoot anything at all than do that."

"Oh, you're deucedly finicky about some things, old fellow. You won't have many chances to gun this fall, for football is going to keep you busy. When I proposed it last night I hardly thought I'd get you out to-day."

"And I came out with the understanding that we are to get back in time for practice this afternoon. Next Saturday, a week from to-day, the team plays its first game."

"And will be beautifully beaten," prophesied Hooker.

"What makes you think so?"

"Why shouldn't I think so? The eleven is going to be weak this year. With Roger Eliot for captain, it made an unexpected success last fall; but Eliot is gone, and Stone, who was chosen to follow him as captain, never can be such a crafty, far-sighted general. The team was weakened fifty per cent by the loss of Eliot."

"Perhaps you're right," admitted Sage; "but you seem to forget that we ought to receive some strength from the development of new players. For instance, there's that fellow from Texas, Rodney Grant –"

"Oh, yes," nodded Roy quickly, "I suppose he'll help some, but it takes time to make a football player, and Grant has had little experience at the game. Stone realizes he's going to be shy of material, and he's coaxing everybody to come out for practice."

He's been at me."

"You're going to come out, aren't you?"

"I don't know. Never did care a great deal about football. You know it's my ambition to be a baseball pitcher, and a fellow can't do everything."

"Baseball is over now, and there'll be no more until next spring. For the good of the team you ought to take hold and do your best to become a player and fill one of the weak spots."

"And maybe get a broken leg or arm or collar-bone to set me back. A baseball player is taking chances when he goes in for football."

"But if none of our ball players went in for football," reminded Sage, "we'd have no eleven. Our school isn't big enough for the two teams to be made up of distinct and independent bodies of players. You're quick, active and strong, Roy, and, if you choose to take hold and work hard, it seems to me you might become one of the valuable members of the eleven."

"Oh, possibly," admitted Hooker, attempting to conceal the fact that he was somewhat flattered. "I fancy I could do as well as some other fellows, Piper, Cooper or Tuttle, for instance. In a way they are mere makeshifts; none of them is a bang-up good football man."

By this time they had crossed the pasture land and reached the edge of the covers, the dog betraying a restless desire to get to work. Sage permitted the animal to go forward, directing his movements now and then by a word of command, and, with

the guns held ready for quick use, the young hunters advanced slowly, keeping their eyes on the pointer the most of the time. They separated somewhat and went forward with the dog at the apex of an imaginary triangle. Nearly all the time the boys could see each other through the scrub growth, which made it unlikely that either would place his friend in danger by careless shooting.

Moving hither and thither, sniffing, pausing, advancing, every hunting instinct alert, the dog did his work beautifully. Suddenly, with one foot uplifted, tail horizontal and rigid and muzzle thrust forward, the pointer became a statue of stone. Directly ahead of him, a few feet away, was a thick cluster of low bushes.

“Point, Roy – point!” called Sage softly, his repeater held in both hands and half lifted, ready for a quick shot.

Immediately Hooker swerved toward the dog and advanced as swiftly and noiselessly as possible, in order to obtain a position for a shot when the bird should flush. Reaching a favorable spot, he placed himself in position to shoot and waited for the rise.

The seconds passed slowly – so slowly that to the anxious boys they seemed more like minutes. A chickadee flitted through the bushes, lighted on a branch within five feet of Roy, performed some surprising horizontal bar evolutions and applauded himself in a ludicrously hoarse voice. Something rustled at a distance, like a creature running swiftly along the ground. Far away, so far that it was but faintly heard, the gun of some other hunter spoke.

With a sudden whirr of wings a woodcock rose straight up from the further side of the cluster of bushes. The butt of Sage’s

gun came to his shoulder, his eye caught the sights, and he fired.

Hooker was a trifle slower, but ere Sage, realizing that he had shot too quickly and therefore made a miss, could fire again, Roy's weapon spoke.

Down came the bird into the midst of the thicket.

"Good work, old man," cried Fred approvingly. "You got him. I shot under; didn't wait for him to make his full rise. Go fetch, Spot."

The dog, released from the spell that had chained him motionless, plunged forward, sniffing around in search of the bird. In a few moments he brought the dead woodcock and placed it at his master's feet.

"A plump fellow," laughed Sage, holding the kill up for the other lad to see. "That's the first blood for you, Roy. Shall I put it in my bag?"

"Sure; I haven't any. There's likely more of them near by."

There were more, and Sage evened things up by bringing down the next one. After this both boys missed a shot, and, though they had tried to "mark" their birds when they lighted, they beat back and forth for more than half an hour without getting another flush.

"Come on," said Roy at last; "I'm tired of this. There's some good partridge timber near by, and I'd rather shoot one partridge than half a dozen woodcock."

"Every fellow to his taste," laughed Sage. "I prefer the sport of woodcock shooting, and I certainly hate to leave without getting

either of those two birds up again.”

He yielded, however, to Hooker’s urging, and they left the low covers for the adjacent timber, in which partridges might be found.

The partridges were there, too. Roy put one up almost beneath his feet, but the timber was so thick at that point that he could not get even a chance shot with the slightest hope of success. While he was grumbling over this, Spot made a point and the partridge rose with a booming of wings before Sage could give his companion warning.

Fred fired.

“Did you get her?” called Hooker.

“I think I hit her,” was the answer. “I saw her go down. Come, Spot, we must dig that bird out.”

Hooker started to follow, but had not advanced thirty feet before still another partridge rose and went sailing away in another direction. This time Roy fired, but he did so under such a disadvantage and with so much haste that he had little hope of bringing down the game.

“Confound it!” he muttered. “Are all these birds going to get away?”

For a full minute he stood still in his tracks, peering into the woods on all sides and listening keenly. Then he removed the empty shell from his gun and slipped a loaded one into place.

“I’m going to follow that old bird I banged at,” he decided. “I don’t believe she went beyond the road that runs through these

woods. If I can get her without the assistance of the dog, it will be a trick worth turning.”

Having hurried after the partridge until he fancied he had reached a point where the bird might have alighted, he began creeping forward with the utmost caution, pausing every few yards to listen and use his eyes. Once an acorn, clipping down through the leaves and striking the ground, gave him a start, but it seemed that the partridge had flown farther than he thought, for presently, without again sighting the game, he approached the road. A short distance from the highway he stopped in his tracks and flung the gun to his shoulder, the barrel levelled toward some roadside bushes, near which he had heard a slight noise.

Beyond the bushes a man rose into view from a stone on which he had been seated, and found himself looking straight into the muzzle of Hooker's gun.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

Roy was tremendously startled. The gun had an easy pull, and his bent finger was gently touching the trigger, yet so astonished was he by the unexpected appearance of the man that for some moments he stood rigid with the weapon leveled at the stranger's head.

On the other hand, the man was no less dismayed. Not more than twenty-six or seven years of age, he was somewhat roughly dressed and decidedly in need of a shave. His eyes opened wide at sight of the threatening weapon, and a wave of pallor swept over his bronzed face. Not a word escaped his parted lips.

Presently, with a catch of his breath, Hooker lowered the gun. "By Jove!" he cried, with a touch of resentment. "You came near getting shot, bobbing up that fashion from behind those bushes."

No longer menaced by the gun, the stranger seemed greatly relieved. Gradually the color returned to his face, and, his eyes searching the young hunter keenly, he gave a short, nervous laugh.

"It's pretty serious," he said, "when a chap can't sit down by the roadside to rest without being in danger of getting himself peppered from a shotgun. You should make sure of the kind of

game you're banging at, before you fire."

"If I hadn't done so," returned Hooker, still feeling slightly resentful, "I'd probably blown your head off. I was following a partridge. Did you see one fly across the road a short time ago?"

"No, I didn't; but I haven't been here more than four or five minutes – perhaps not that long."

The man had a pleasant, agreeable face, and Hooker thought that, were he shaved and better dressed, he would be a rather good-looking chap. Apparently he had not wholly recovered from the start which the sight of the armed boy had given him, for he was still a bit nervous and uneasy.

"Maybe," said Roy, "it took me longer than I thought to follow that old bird to this point. Perhaps she flew across the road before you came along."

"Are you alone?" asked the man.

"I'm with a friend. He's back in the woods somewhere with his dog."

"Of course you live near here?"

"Yes, in Oakdale."

The man seemed interested. "Oakdale; that's a small town near by, isn't it?"

"You must be a total stranger in these parts," said Roy, as he stepped out into the road. "Oakdale is not more than three or four miles from here. It's a country village." He was wondering if the man could be a tramp, but closer inspection made this seem quite improbable, despite the stranger's rough clothes and somewhat

shabby appearance.

“No, I don’t belong around here,” said the man. “I’m looking for work. Anything a fellow can do in Oakdale?”

“I don’t know about that, but I presume one could find some sort of work if he wasn’t too particular. There are two mills and some lime quarries, but the men who work in the quarries are mostly foreigners. What are your special qualifications?”

“I haven’t any,” was the frank confession. “I’m ready to do any sort of work to earn an honest living.”

“In that case, it shouldn’t be hard for you to find something.”

“It’s not as easy as you might think. You see, employers usually like to know something about the workmen they engage, and they are apt to be suspicious of a total stranger who looks a bit rough and down in his luck.”

“Of course you’re ready to tell anyone about yourself and give references?”

The young man shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t happen to have any references,” he answered. “Of course I can answer questions about myself, but who would know I wasn’t lying?”

“If you stated your last place of employment, it would be a simple matter to investigate your story.”

Again that quick shrugging of the shoulders. “Yes, but supposing that, for reasons of my own, I didn’t care to tell where I’ve been employed?”

“Reasons? What sort of reasons could you have, unless – ”

“It might be the case, you know, that I had had trouble with

my former employer. Perhaps," he went on hastily, "we quarreled over something for which I was not at all to blame, and that quarrel led to my leaving without giving due notice. You see, that would deprive me of references and would make it impossible for me to hope for any benefit by stating where and for whom I had worked."

"Yes, I see," nodded Hooker slowly. "That would put you in bad. In such a case, unless someone was in great need of a man, I doubt if you could find employment."

The stranger made a quick gesture with one hand.

"There you are," he said; "or rather, there I am. Until you get up against it yourself, you'll not be able to understand such a predicament, and I hope you'll never have the misfortune to face such a situation."

Now Hooker had been led to believe that the misfortunes which usually befall a person, barring ill health, were almost always the result of incompetence, carelessness or dishonesty, and the fact that this stranger was wholly indisposed to make known his past history led the boy to regard him with doubt and suspicion. Perhaps the man understood something of what was passing in Roy's mind, for suddenly he said:

"You can see how it is; even you would hesitate about giving me work. That's the way with everybody. They demand to know a person's past; they want to pry into his private affairs. But I tell you," he added, a trifle bitterly, "I feel that it's none of their business, and I resent their impertinence. The man who gives me

a job at which I can earn an honest living will find me ready to do my work, and do it well. Why should he insist on probing private matters concerning me, any more than I should demand to know about his personal history? In fact, in many cases it would be to the advantage of the laborer if his employer were compelled to lay bare such secrets. A great many would be shown up as grinders of the poor, bloodsuckers living and growing fat upon the life-toll of others, unfeeling despots paying their workmen a mere pittance while they piled up riches by what those workmen produced. And some would be branded as dishonest rascals from whom their neighbors would shrink in abhorrence.”

“Jingoes!” exclaimed Hooker, fancying himself enlightened by the vehement words of the stranger. “I guess I know what’s the matter with you. You must be a Socialist.”

The man laughed. “That’s the usual term applied in these days to those who have courage enough to question the honesty and fair dealing of a certain greedy, selfish brand of employers. But I’m not claiming that all employers are of that sort. If they were, conditions in this country would be desperate indeed. But what’s the use in talking to you of such things; you’re simply a boy, and at your age problems of that nature had never troubled me for a moment. At your age,” he continued, something like a dreamy look of sadness creeping into his blue eyes, “I was as carefree and thoughtless as you are to-day. I’d give a great deal if it were possible for me to go back to that time.”

This statement served to convince Hooker that the stranger

was carrying a secret locked in his heart, and that the secret was one which gave him no small amount of regret and remorse. Otherwise, why should a man in the very prime of his youth and vigor, a time to which Roy looked forward with eager anticipation, desire to blot out a portion of his life that he might return to the days of his boyhood?

The sad and dreamy look was gone in a moment, and the stranger asked:

“Have you lived long in Oakdale?”

“Brought up there,” answered Hooker.

“Then I presume you know nearly everyone in town?”

“Sure. In a little place like that everybody knows everybody else.”

The man’s next question gave the lad a start: “Do you know any people by the name of Sage?”

“What? Sage? I should say so!”

“Ah!” breathed the man. “There is a family by that name in Oakdale?”

“Yes.”

“How long have they been there?”

“Let me see. About three years, I think.”

“Where did they come from? Do you know?”

“Not exactly, though I believe they came from somewhere in New York State. Why, Fred Sage is my chum.”

“Oh, is he?” The stranger’s eyes were now bright with interest and his manner eager.

“You bet he is,” nodded Roy. “He’s a fine chap, too. We’re gunning together to-day. He’s the fellow I spoke of. I left him back yonder with his dog. Do you know the Sages? If you do, perhaps they might give you a recommendation that would help you get work.”

At this moment the report of a gun, only a short distance away, rang through the woods.

“That’s Fred – that’s him now,” cried Hooker. “I’ll bet he bagged that old biddy.” Then he lifted his voice and shouted: “Hey, Fred! Here I am, out in the road. Did you get anything?”

“I didn’t miss that time,” came back the triumphant answer. “It’s a partridge.”

“The one I was after, I reckon,” said Roy, with a touch of chagrin. “She must have run on the ground so that I lost track of her. Here comes Fred now.”

There was a sound of someone pushing through the underbrush, and Roy, facing the woods, waited for his chum to appear. In a few moments, followed by the dog, Sage came out of the woods, triumphantly holding aloft a dead partridge.

“The other one fooled me and I lost her,” he said; “but I got a good open chance at this old biddy. She didn’t get away.”

“She got away from me,” said Roy. “I’m sure that’s the one I chased, but she gave me the slip all right. I was so hot after her that I came near shooting – ”

He stopped abruptly, his mouth open as he looked around for the mysterious stranger. To his astonishment, the man had

disappeared.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOME OF THE SAGES

“Well, what do you know about that?” muttered Hooker wonderingly. “He’s gone.”

“Who?” questioned Fred, reaching the road.

“The man – the man I was talking with. He was sitting right here on this stone when I came sneaking down through the woods, and I almost shot his head off. He rose up into view just in time. Where the dickens has he gone?”

In both directions a strip of road lay in plain view, but, save themselves, there was no human being to be seen upon it.

“When did he go?” questioned Sage.

“After you fired; while I was watching for you to come out of the woods. He was right here within five feet of me. I can’t understand how he got away so quickly without my knowing it. He must have put off into the woods on the other side.”

“What made him do that?”

“You’ve got me. He was a stranger around these parts, and said he was looking for work. There was something queer about him, too. He was a good, healthy looking specimen, and he didn’t seem like a hobo, though his clothes were rather rough. He talked like an educated man. Say, Fred, he asked about you.”

“About *me*?” exclaimed Sage in surprise. “Why, how was

that?”

“Don’t know. He asked if there was a family by the name of Sage in Oakdale and how long they had been there. He must be someone who knows you, Fred.”

“Describe him.”

Roy did so as well as he was able, but his friend did not seem at all enlightened.

“I can’t imagine who he was,” said Fred. “The description doesn’t seem to fit anyone I know. Did he give his name?”

“No; I forgot to ask it. He talked like a Socialist or an Anarchist, although he didn’t look to be a very desperate character. And he seemed nervous and troubled about something or other, but perhaps that was because he fancied he had come so near getting himself shot. When he saw me, with the gun leveled straight at him, he turned pale.”

“I don’t wonder,” said Fred, with a laugh. “It was enough to give anyone a start. I don’t see what made him run away, and I wish he’d waited until I could have taken a look at him.”

“Perhaps he was somebody who knew you before you came to Oakdale.”

Sage frowned a bit. “It doesn’t seem likely, and yet, of course, it may be so. Well, we can’t fret ourselves about him. Let’s go on with the hunt. Spot is getting restless.”

For some time the pointer had been running back and forth in the road, turning at intervals to gaze inquiringly at his master and whine beseechingly. Apparently the dog was wondering why the

boys should linger there, with the woods all about them and their success thus far giving ample evidence that there was plenty of game to be had for the hunting.

Absorbed once more in the search for birds, both lads seemingly dismissed all thoughts of the stranger and his puzzling behavior; but, had he possessed the faculty of reading his companion's mind, Hooker would have been surprised to discover that, far from dismissing such thoughts, Sage was not a little troubled by them. Indeed, so deeply plunged was he in mental speculations that he failed to note when the dog next made a point, and he flushed the bird unexpectedly by the careless manner in which he stumbled forward through the underbrush. Taken thus unawares, he could not recover his self-possession in time to shoot, and, Hooker being in no position to fire, the game got away untouched, not a little to the disgust of Spot.

"What's the matter with you, Fred?" called Roy sharply. "You almost stepped on that one. Didn't you see Spot point?"

"No," was the regretful confession, "I didn't notice it."

"I started to call to you, but I thought you knew your business and were ready to pepper away when the bird flushed."

Later, when they ran into a covey of woodcock, Fred was astonishingly slow about shooting, and Hooker brought down two birds to his one, which seemed rather remarkable, as Sage was much the better wing shot. It was Fred, too, who, seeming the first to tire of the sport, finally proposed that they should go home.

"There's time enough," objected Roy. "Practice doesn't begin until three o'clock, and it's not yet noon."

"But I'll need to rest up a bit after this tramp. I've got enough, anyhow."

On the way back to the village Sage suddenly asked Hooker once more to describe the stranger, and when Roy had complied he again asserted that he had not the least idea as to the man's identity.

It was nearly one o'clock when Sage reached his home, a comfortable, well-kept story-and-a-half house on the outskirts of the village, but he found that his mother had kept dinner waiting for him, for which he scolded her in a laughing fashion.

"No need to put yourself to so much trouble, mother," he said. "I could have done just as well with a cold lunch from the pantry."

"It was no trouble, my boy," she replied, affection in her tone and in the glance she gave him. "We knew you would be home, for you said there was to be football practice this afternoon, and it was your father who suggested that we should wait for you."

She was not an old woman, but her hair was snowy white, and there was something in her face and the depths of her gentle eyes which indicated that her life had not been wholly free from care and sorrow.

Fred's father, who had been reading in the sitting-room, put aside his newspaper and came into the dining-room, rubbing his hands together as he peered at the boy over the gold-bowed spectacles that clung to his nose.

"Well, what luck, young man?" he asked. "Did you find any shooting worth while?"

"We got seven woodcock and three partridges," answered Fred; "but Roy shot the most of them, though he insisted on dividing them. I made him take the odd partridge, though, keeping only one for mother, as she doesn't care for woodcock."

"H'm!" nodded Andrew Sage slowly. "How did you happen to let him outshoot you, Fred? With that new gun of yours, I thought you'd make a record. Doesn't it shoot as well as you expected?"

"Oh, the gun is all right. I suppose I was a bit off form."

He was on the point of telling them of the unknown man who had questioned Hooker about the Sages living in Oakdale and then run away in such a perplexing manner on Fred's approach, but something seemed to caution him to remain silent, and he did so.

Like Roy Hooker, the people of Oakdale knew little about the Sages, save that they had lived in the place for three years having moved there from some distant state. Andrew Sage was a man nearly sixty years of age, with the speech and bearing of a person of education and refinement. He had purchased a tiny farm of some twenty acres, the buildings of which were promptly repaired, remodelled within and thoroughly painted. The grounds in the vicinity of the buildings were cleared and graded, with the exception of a picket-fenced front yard, where an old-fashioned flower garden had been choked out by weeds. Of course the fence was straightened up, repaired and given

several coats of paint, and the flower garden was restored to its former state of blooming fragrance and beauty; but this work was done at the direction of Mrs. Sage, who seemed to find in that garden something to occupy her mind and give her many hours of pleasure. Her knowledge of flowers and their proper care was much superior to the knowledge displayed by her husband in the vegetable garden, which he planted and attended. The neighbors often remarked that it was plain enough that Andrew Sage had never turned his hand to such labor before coming to Oakdale.

That the Sages possessed an income sufficient to support them modestly was likewise evident, for they lived comfortably and paid their bills promptly, although Mr. Sage worked upon his own property only, and, as conducted, that brought in practically no revenue whatever.

The little household was held together by strong bands of understanding and affection which would have been apparent enough to anyone who could have watched them this day at their belated dinner. Into their pleasant conversation there entered no jarring note, and their thoughtfulness and consideration for one another was of the finest sort. The atmosphere of that home was truly such as it should be, comfortable, homelike, fraught with an indescribable something that always makes such a place the best-loved spot on earth.

It was natural that Fred's mother should speak of football and its dangers and express her regret that he should care to take part in such sport. And in supporting Fred's arguments in favor of

the game, it was diplomatic of his father to seem, in a way, to favor both sides of the question, while all the time he was cleverly reassuring the apprehensive woman. Andrew Sage's skill in this form of controversy not only made it much easier for Fred, but checked, in a great measure, the worry of the boy's mother.

When he reached the football field that afternoon Fred found Roy Hooker telling a group of boys about the encounter with the mysterious stranger. Of those boys Billy Piper, familiarly known as "Sleuth" on account of his yearning desire to emulate the feats of detective heroes of fiction, appeared to be the most deeply interested. The others showed a disposition to treat the affair as something of minor importance or no importance whatever.

"Through what I can gather from your statements, Hooker," said Sleuth, "I am led to infer that this unknown party may have been a red-handed criminal fleeing from justice. Or, perchance, to look at the matter in another light, he was a person deeply wronged, seeking to visit retribution on the head of one who had injured him. I say, Sage," he called, catching sight of Fred, "have you any reason to suppose that you or any of your immediate relatives may have a bitter and remorseless enemy who seeks reprisal for some fancied injury in the dark and buried years of the past?"

"As far as I know," answered Fred, "we have not an enemy in the world."

"And you haven't a notion as to the identity of the mysterious stranger who made inquiries about you and then ran away before

you could get a look at him?”

“Not the remotest idea.”

“Hah!” breathed Piper in deep satisfaction. “The plot thickens. I scent a mystery of deep and terrible significance. The clues are faint indeed, but they shall not baffle me. If this unknown stranger lingers in the vicinity of Oakdale, I’ll yet lay bare his foul designs and foil him in his fell purpose.”

“Oh, slush!” cried Phil Springer. “You’ve got another bad attack, Pipe. You bub-better forget it. Here comes Stoney. Let’s start practice, fellows.”

The group dissolved, leaving Piper, his arms folded, his eyes fixed upon the ground, in profound meditation.

CHAPTER IV.

A MAN "WANTED."

Captain Stone, who seemed to be amazingly conversant with the new football rules, which of late he had studied faithfully during all his spare moments, tried hard to impart an understanding of them to the other boys, the most of whom were eager to learn, their willingness keeping them at practice until the gathering darkness finally forced them to stop.

Upon the occasion of his son leaving Oakdale Academy for the purpose of taking a final college preparatory year in one of the leading prep schools of the country, Urian Eliot had contributed five hundred dollars for the purpose of carrying out a plan for certain improvements of the Oakdale gymnasium. These improvements had been made, and now in one end of the former bowling alley there were heated dressing rooms and a number of shower baths. This made it possible for the boys to take their showers after practice or games, and then rub down and dress in comfort.

Hurrying to the gym, Fred Sage lost no time in stripping off his soiled and sweaty football clothes and making a dive for one of the shower compartments. The rooms resounded with the voices of the boys, and from some of the showers rose whoops and boos and strange gasps mingling with the hissing rush and

drip of water.

“Hey, there, Cooper!” called a voice. “What are you doing? Turn on the cold. You’ll parboil yourself in a minute. Look, fellers – look a’ the steam coming out of Chipper’s cell!”

“Aw, go on and mind your business,” came from the steaming compartment. “I always start with it warm and turn off the hot gradually till it’s cold enough to suit me.”

“And that’s abaout cold enough to bile aigs,” chuckled Sile Crane, a lanky country boy who talked through his nose. “Hurry up there, Chipper, and give a feller a chance. Tuttle’s treatin’ on peanuts, and you won’t git none if you don’t git a move on.”

“Somebody can have my place,” said Sage, as he shot out of the compartment, dripping icy water from every part of his shining body. “Where’s my towel? I left it right here. Somebody has swiped my towel.”

In a moment he had found the towel and was using it vigorously. A thorough scrubbing set his firm flesh aglow, and he jumped into his clothes feeling as fresh and vigorous as if he had not tramped the forenoon through, carrying a gun, and followed that up by an afternoon of strenuous football practice. He was almost fully dressed when he observed Sleuth Piper, still adorned in football togs, standing a short distance away and regarding him through half closed lids. In some story Sleuth had read that whenever he wished to concentrate his mind on any perplexing problem the hero of the yarn always gazed fixedly at some object through partly closed eyelids.

"Hi, there, Pipe!" called Fred sharply. "Going to sleep? Wake up. Going to wear those rags the rest of the evening?"

"Hush!" said Piper, frowning and lifting a reproving hand. "Don't interrupt me that way when my mind is at work upon a problem."

"Forget it," advised Fred. "You'll be late for supper. Cæsar's ghost! but *I'm* as hungry as a bear."

He was the first one to leave the gymnasium, and he strode away whistling. In a few moments, however, he ceased to whistle and proceeded with his head slightly bent and his hands sunk deep in his pockets. Finally, with a shake of his shoulders, he tossed back his head, muttering:

"Confound Sleuth, anyhow! He's always trying to make a deep, dark mystery out of any unusual occurrence. It was *queer* that the man should ask about the Sages and then run away when he knew I was coming, but it isn't likely he'll ever be seen again by anyone around here, so what's the use for me to addle my brains over it?"

Truly, Fred seemed "hungry as a bear," and the manner in which he swept the food from the supper table made his mother gasp and caused his father to chuckle.

"One thing about football," said Mr. Sage, "boys who play the game aren't apt to be finicky about their food. How did you get along at the field this afternoon, son?"

"First-rate, everything considered. Of course the new rules are going to bother us a little, but Stone seems wise to them, and

I fancy he'll be able to do pretty well with the team, though of course we're going to miss Eliot."

"A fine boy, Roger Eliot," nodded Andrew Sage.

"Sure thing," agreed Fred instantly; "and his father comes pretty near being the real thing, too. When we first came to Oakdale people were saying that Urian Eliot was cold and close-fisted, but look what he did for the school. We've got a new gym now, heated and lighted and fitted out with shower baths, like a first-class place. I tell you, the fellows take off their hats to Mr. Eliot these days."

"Oakdale people are just beginning to realize that Eliot has done a great deal for the town," said Mr. Sage. "He's one of our solid, reliable citizens. Only for him, we'd still be without a bank."

After supper Andrew Sage lighted his pipe, and Fred, feeling no desire to go out, settled down to a book before the comfortable open fire in the sitting-room.

An hour had not passed when there came a ring at the door-bell, and Fred himself rose at once to answer. On the steps stood a dark figure with coat collar upturned and cap pulled well down. Blinded a little by the sudden change from light to darkness, the boy failed to recognize the caller.

"Good evening," he said.

"St!" came back a sibilant hiss. "It's me, Piper. Why don't you ask a feller in? Almost cold enough to freeze to-night."

"Oh, come in, Sleuth," was the invitation, and the visitor lost

no time in stepping out of the chilly wind that swept round the corner of the house.

“What brings you up here at this hour?” questioned Fred.

“Hush! I’m doing my duty. I’m gathering up the scattered threads one by one. The skein shall be untangled.”

Piper was known to Mr. and Mrs. Sage, who spoke to him pleasantly, although both were somewhat surprised by this, his first, visit to their home. Having removed his cap and jammed it into the side pocket of his coat, Sleuth deported himself in his usual mysterious manner when “investigating,” and suddenly the other boy began to fear that he would speak of the stranger in the presence of the older people.

“I’m glad you dropped around, Pipe,” said Fred. “I suppose you want to talk football? Come on up to my room; we can chin there as much as we like.”

The caller was more than willing, and they mounted the stairs to Fred’s room, which was large, comfortable and exceedingly well furnished. But Piper, still bearing himself “professionally,” gave little heed to the aspect of the room.

“I’ve come,” he announced, declining to sit down, “to propound a few vital questions, which I trust you may see fit to answer without evasion or subterfuge.”

“What’s this?” laughed Sage. “Is it a court of inquiry?”

“Not exactly. Of course there is no compulsion in the matter, but, assuming that you have nothing to conceal, there should be no reason for refusing the information I require.”

“Oh, say, Sleuth, don’t you ever get tired of it? It must be wearisome, searching for these deep, dark mysteries in a quiet, uneventful country town like Oakdale. Of course I know what you’re driving at, and in this case I think you’re trying to make something out of nothing – and that’s impossible.”

Piper shook his head. With his hands locked behind his back, he slowly paced the floor.

“You are like the usual order of persons who lack the analytical mind,” he retorted. “You fail to see the true significance of apparently commonplace events. I am different. At this moment I feel assured that we are face to face with one of the most perplexing mysteries on record. I’ve interviewed Hooker this evening, and from him I obtained a certain amount of information concerning the mysterious man he encountered in the woods beyond Culver’s Bridge. According to his statement, that man was about twenty-six years of age, and apparently something like five feet and ten inches in height. Hooker judged that this person should weigh in the neighborhood of one hundred and sixty pounds. His complexion was medium, and he had hair slightly curly. His eyes were blue, his teeth white and even, and his smile pleasant. His voice was agreeable, but he showed traces of nervousness and anxiety. He spoke with some bitterness of people who had wealth and employed laborers. Roy states that, as far as he could see, the man bore no peculiarly distinguishing mark, like a scar or deformity.”

“Well,” said Fred, lounging on the Morris chair, “why should

the appearance of such a stranger interest you so deeply?"

"Wait," said Piper, halting in front of Sage's chair. "This man made inquiries concerning your family. He must have known you."

"We've lived in Oakdale only three years. There are people outside of this place who know us."

"Quite true; but when he learned that you were near at hand, and when he heard you approaching, the man disappeared in a most astounding, inexplicable and unaccountable manner. He didn't wait until you should come forth to meet him face to face."

"That was rather odd," admitted Sage.

"And, furthermore, you have stated that you have no idea who the person can be."

"Not the slightest."

"Is there anything connected with your past or that of your parents which, for good and sufficient reasons, you wish to conceal?"

Fred sat up suddenly. "Why should you imagine anything of that sort?" he retorted sharply. "Of course it's nonsense."

"H'm!" said Sleuth. "It's a rare family closet that doesn't contain a skeleton."

"Well, Piper, if you've come here to pry into private family affairs, you may as well chase yourself at once."

"Restrain your annoyance, Sage; check your angry resentment. If you choose to unbosom yourself to me in my professional capacity, you may do so with the assurance of my

honorable intention to hold inviolate any secret with which I may be entrusted.”

Fred’s face was flushed and he betrayed annoyance, which, however, he endeavored to restrain.

“Cut out that fol-de-rol, Piper. There’s no reason why I should tell you any family secrets, if we happen to have them. As you’ve just said, doubtless there are few families who do not have some minor secrets they choose to keep hidden; but, as a rule, such things concern no others than those personally interested. Again, let me repeat that you are trying to make something out of nothing, and it’s extremely ridiculous.”

“Perhaps so,” retorted Sleuth. “But tell me, did you ever hear of a man by the name of James Wilson?”

“Never. What has he to do with the matter?”

The visitor drew a folded newspaper from an inner pocket of his coat. “It’s my custom,” he said, “to take special note of the records of crime and criminals as contained in the press of the day. I never overlook anything of the sort. Here in this paper is the description of one James Wilson, *alias* ‘William Hunt,’ *alias* ‘Philip Hastings,’ but known among his pals as ‘Gentleman Jim.’ This man is described as twenty-six years of age, five feet, ten inches in height, and weighing one hundred and sixty pounds. While there are no distinguishing marks upon his person, he has blue eyes; a medium complexion; hair slightly curly; white, even teeth; a pleasant smile; an agreeable voice; and white, shapely hands, which show evidence of recent arduous labor. This labor

was performed in prison, from which Jim Wilson has but lately been released. He is a confidence man and safe-breaker, and it seems that his prison experience has done little to cure him of his criminal proclivities, for it is suspected that since his release he has been concerned in certain unlawful operations. One week ago he was arrested in Harpersville, which is just over the state line, and placed in jail to await the arrival of officers who wanted him. But Mr. Wilson, *alias* 'William Hunt,' *alias* 'Philip Hastings,' *alias* 'Gentleman Jim,' is a slippery customer, and he didn't remain in that insecure jail. Instead of doing so, he broke out of his cell, cracked the guard's skull, and made good his escape. The guard is not expected to live, and the authorities have offered a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of the murderous scoundrel."

"Well!" breathed Sage, who had listened with swiftly increasing interest. "Do you think this James Wilson and the stranger Hooker talked with this forenoon are one and the same?"

"I haven't a doubt of it," declared Sleuth.

CHAPTER V.

BY THE LIGHT FROM THE WINDOW

“But that,” said Fred, “is practically a matter of supposition with you; you have no real proof.”

“Proof?” returned Piper reprovingly. “Why not? The circumstances are significant, and it’s only the bigoted person who denies the value of circumstantial evidence in criminal cases. The description of James Wilson applies perfectly to the mysterious stranger with whom Hooker conversed.”

“If you’ll think it over a bit, that description might apply to a great many persons. Wilson seems fortunate in having practically no personal characteristics by which he might readily be identified. It seems to me, Piper, that, casting aside your professed caution and acuteness, you have jumped at a conclusion. Simply because you happen to read about an ex-convict who has recently broken jail in a neighboring state, and the description of this convict, although in a way indefinite and unsatisfactory, apparently applies to a stranger in these parts, you immediately decide that the convict and the stranger are one and the same. I’m surprised at you, Sleuth.”

“Wait a moment,” said Piper, holding up his finger. “Let me ask you a question. Since you came to Oakdale, how often have

you seen strangers in these parts who looked like tramps, talked like educated men, and deported themselves in a manner which, without the least stretch of fancy, could be called mysterious?"

"Seldom," admitted Sage.

"Never before," asserted Piper.

"And, because this happens to be the first instance of the sort, you feel confident in your hasty conclusion. I'm afraid you'll never make a great detective, Sleuth, for in stories, at least, they never jump at conclusions, and they always make sure they're right before forming a definite opinion."

Piper was not pleased by these words. He frowned heavily and shook his head.

"You can't deny," he retorted, "that it was most strange that the man should inquire for your family and then take flight when he learned that you were about to appear before him."

"That, I admit, was odd indeed. Nevertheless, I do not think it justifies you in seeking to connect us with the ex-convict, James Wilson. It's scarcely necessary for me to tell you that we have never known such a man."

"It gives me no small amount of satisfaction," said Sleuth, "to hear that statement from your lips, even though it may, in a measure, make my work more difficult."

"Your work? What do you propose to do?"

"I hope to lay this safe-cracker by the heels. I hope to enmesh him in the toils and turn him over to the stern hand of justice."

"In which case it seems to me that your proper course would

be to notify the officers. Why don't you go to Deputy Sheriff Pickle?"

"Haw!" cried Sleuth, contemptuously snapping his fingers. "That would be the height of folly. These rural officers are blockheads in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, and William Pickle is no exception. For instance, recall the bungling mess he made of it when he arrested your friend, Benjamin Stone. Only for me, Stone might have been convicted of a crime he never committed."

"You helped get Ben out of an unpleasant predicament," admitted Sage; "but in that case Pickle did his duty, according to instructions. If you are so positive that you're not bungling in this case, you'll require the assistance of Mr. Pickle, for you can't expect to capture James Wilson unaided."

"And so you would advise me to apply to Pickle? You would advise me to tell him my deductions, through which he would be enabled, perhaps, to capture this jail-breaker and get the reward of five hundred dollars? That's what would happen if he made the capture; he'd claim the reward, and get it. Oh, I know Bill Pickle!"

"If you gave the information on which the man was arrested, doubtless you could claim and obtain a portion of the reward money."

"Perhaps so, and perhaps not. I tell you I know Bill Pickle. He'd get it all if he could."

"But, having talked with Roy Hooker of this matter, how

do you expect to keep it secret long enough to do anything yourself?"

"I didn't tell Hooker about James Wilson. I simply questioned him regarding the stranger, and learned enough to satisfy me that he and Wilson must be the same man."

"Well, how did you happen to tell *me* so much?"

Sleuth hesitated. "You see, I – I thought it might be – well, different in your case," he stumbled. "I fancied there might be reasons why you wouldn't care to say anything about it."

Sage rose to his feet. "You make me tired, Piper," he said, with a touch of angry reproof. "It's evident that you *did* think my family was somehow connected with this criminal, whom we might be inclined to shield. Just to show you what a bungler you really are, I think I'll tell Pickle myself."

In a moment the visitor was thrown into the utmost consternation. Seizing Fred by the arm, he cried:

"Don't do that – don't! Why, if you did, and Pickle should happen to catch the man and he turned out to be the right one, you'd get part of the reward! That wouldn't be fair to me, Fred, and you know it. Give a chap a square deal, old man."

"If you're right in your suspicions, Piper, it's a bad thing to have this jail-breaker prowling around Oakdale, and it's your duty to notify the local officers."

"But supposing," protested Sleuth, "that, by some unusual chance, I should be mistaken? You can see what that would mean. I might get the wrong man arrested and make an awful mess of it.

I might become the laughing stock of the village. My professional reputation might be blasted.”

“Oh, then you’re not nearly as confident as you pretended to be? It seems to me like a huge joke, Piper, and if you’ll take my advice, you’ll stop cramming your head with foolish detective yarns and abandon the idea that you possess any special talents in the way of detecting criminals or fathoming mysteries. The last I heard about you, you were trying to write stories, and, by the way of amusement, I advise you to rely upon that occupation. Not that I imagine you’ll ever write anything printable, but it might serve to keep you from the rather obnoxious habit of poking your nose into affairs which don’t concern you.”

Thus reproved, Sleuth found it difficult to restrain his indignation and resentment.

“You’re like everybody else around here,” he cried. “But you should remember the old saying that a prophet is never without honor save in his own country. Some day I’ll show these people a thing or two, see if I don’t. I’ll make them sit up and take notice. They may think Billy Piper’s a fool, but I’ll show them. Say, Sage, give me a little time on this case; don’t run straight to Pickle with what I’ve told you. Promise me you won’t do that.”

In spite of himself, Fred laughed. “If I really thought there was one chance in a hundred that you had guessed right, I might insist on telling Pickle, providing you refused to do so. Not having the slightest confidence in your so-called ‘deductions,’ I’m willing to keep still.”

"Thanks," said Piper. "Some fellows I wouldn't trust, even on their promise; but I know you, and I'm sure you'll do nothing without first consulting me. I think I'll be going."

Sage descended and bade Piper good-night at the door, watching Sleuth slouch away toward the distant lights of the village, a few of which gleamed through the darkness. Andrew Sage glanced up as the boy returned to the sitting-room.

"Well," he said, "been discussing football, son?"

"Not exactly," answered Fred. "Piper had something else on his mind."

"Isn't he a bit queer?" asked Mrs. Sage, who was employing herself with some needlework in front of the open fire.

"Most persons think he is."

"He behaves so oddly. Does he always act like that?"

"Oh, it's Piper's way. The fellows don't pay much attention to it, though they josh him sometimes."

Fred attempted again to interest himself in his book, but in spite of his efforts, his mind wandered from the story, and he repeatedly found himself thinking of Sleuth and the matter they had discussed. There was, of course, a remote possibility that Piper had not made a mistake in fancying the stranger in Oakdale was James Wilson, for whose capture a large reward had been offered; and only for his promise to remain silent Fred might have told his parents. He was inclined to regret that unconsidered pledge. Presently, his eyes drooping, he decided to go to bed, and bade his father and mother good-night.

In his room he paced the floor, thinking it all over, his perplexity increasing.

"I can't understand why that man ran away after asking about us," he muttered. "That's what gets me. If I hadn't been afraid of giving mother uneasiness, I'd have told about it when I first came home. Piper can't be right, for certainly we don't know any convicts and jail-breakers."

As if his final words had given him a shock, he stopped in his tracks, his lips parted, his face paling somewhat, and for some moments he stood thus, without moving. Presently he resumed his walk up and down the room, his brows knitted, his manner absorbed. At last he stopped and laughed shortly as he thought of Piper pacing the floor in almost precisely that same way.

"Oh, he's a joke. I'm going to bed."

The strenuous diversions of the day had given him a healthy weariness which he was now feeling, and it did not take him long to undress. He had put out the light when he remembered that his window was still closed, and he turned to open it.

With his hand on the sash he paused, an electric thrill shooting through his body. Directly beneath his room the light from a lower window shone forth into the darkness, falling upon the dimly seen figure of a man, who, with his hat pulled down over his eyes, was standing where he could look into the sitting-room.

For some seconds Fred remained rigid, watching the motionless man. In an instant he had become convinced that it was the stranger with whom Hooker had talked, but the baffling

hat-brim prevented Fred from seeing the fellow's face.

Suddenly, as if becoming aware that someone was near who had no right to be there, the dog barked in the room below. Immediately the man drew hastily back from the border of light and retreated into the darkness.

In a twinkling Fred Sage was leaping into his clothes. The dog, quieted by a word from Mr. Sage, did not bark again. The deep darkness beneath a tree near the house had enfolded the man.

Fred did not strike a light. With his hastily donned clothes barely clinging to him, he caught up a pair of rubber-soled "sneakers," thrust his feet into them, opened the door of his room quickly but quietly, and crept down the stairs. He could hear his father and mother talking, but they did not hear him as he turned the key in the lock of the door and let himself out.

Quivering with excitement, the boy reached the corner of the house and peered round it. He could see no one, although the tree beneath which the man had vanished was only a short distance away.

"If I can find him, I'll demand to know what business he has around here," thought Fred. "If mother knew, she'd be badly frightened."

Summoning all his courage, he stepped out boldly and advanced toward the tree, but when he reached it there was still no living creature to be seen.

Twice Sage circled the buildings without result, and he became satisfied that the unknown had lost no time in departing.

“But it’s mighty queer,” he muttered – “mighty queer. I don’t understand it. Perhaps I ought to tell father, but if I do I know mother won’t sleep to-night.”

Silently though he reentered the house, Spot barked again, and Fred’s father opened the door into the hall.

“Just stepped outdoors for a minute,” said the boy. “It’s going to be a good day to-morrow, I think.”

“Oh, is it you?” said Mr. Sage. “Spot barked, and your mother thought he heard something. We had an idea you were abed.”

“I’m going now. Good-night. Good-night, mother.”

“Good-night, Fred,” called his mother in response, and Mr. Sage closed the door.

For more than half an hour Fred watched from his unlighted window. He heard his parents retire, and the light no longer shone forth from the sitting-room. His eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and he could see certain objects in the vicinity of the house, but they were all familiar objects, and amid them no strange shadow moved.

“I’ll have to tell father and mother to-morrow,” decided the boy, as he finally got into bed.

Again and again during the night he dreamed of the mysterious stranger, and once he awoke panting from a terrific hand-to-hand struggle with the man. It brought him up to gaze once more from the window, through which came the chill air of the autumn night.

“I’m a fool,” he whispered, his teeth chattering with the cold.

“I’m going to sleep now, and see if I can’t dodge those silly dreams. Confound Sleuth Piper, anyhow! Still, I’d like to know what that man was doing here.”

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTAIN QUINN'S MONKEY

Fred's parents were regular church attendants, and Fred himself rarely failed to appear with them at morning service on the Sabbath day. It must be regretfully confessed that church had little attraction for many of the youths of Oakdale, and among those who seldom sat through a sermon was Roy Hooker.

Roy, however, was waiting on the sidewalk in front of the church when Fred came out. It was a mild, sunny day, and the outside world looked most attractive. In response to a covert signal from Hooker, Sage joined him.

"Come for a walk, old man," invited Roy. "Gee! you must be dopey, sitting in that dark old church and listening to a dry sermon."

"I did get a bit sleepy," Fred confessed. "You're not going to walk far, are you?"

"Oh, you can suit yourself about that. What time do you have dinner?"

"Around two o'clock."

"That will give us a couple of hours. It's mighty pokey loafing around all day Sunday, with nothing for amusement. If you'd only go gunning – "

"Not on the Sabbath. Too many fellows do that around here."

Fred's parents had lingered to exchange a few words with some friends, and as they finally came down the walk he told them he was going for a short stroll with Roy.

"Be home to dinner, surely," urged his mother.

He promised, and set off with Hooker, turning down the street. At the square, in the center of the village, they turned on to Lake Street and proceeded eastward, passing the new bank, a small, square building of brick and stone.

"That makes a great improvement on this street," commented Fred.

"Oh, yes," nodded Hooker; "but it would have looked better had they been able to purchase that little old hut and the land belonging to Aaron Quinn. That shanty, squatting right there almost under the rear eaves of the bank, is a regular eyesore, but I understand old Quinn refused to sell at any price."

The building in question was a tiny old house that stood some distance from the street, partly hidden by two large oak trees and a straggling growth of lilac bushes. It was sorely in need of repairs and paint, and some of the broken windows had been patched or stuffed with rags.

Aaron Quinn, the owner of this disreputable little shanty, was a surly, blustering old sea captain, who had given up his calling on account of age and rheumatism and returned to spend the latter days of his life at his birthplace in Oakdale. His irascible temper and general crabbedness made him more or less unpopular among the villagers, and especially so with the boys of

the town, who seldom lost an opportunity to jibe or annoy him.

As the two friends were passing beneath the spreading limbs of one of the oaks, something struck Roy on the shoulder and bounded to the sidewalk. It was an acorn, and Hooker might have thought that it had fallen in a natural manner from the tree had it not been followed almost immediately by another, which clipped the edge of his cap-visor.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, looking up. "Who's throwing them? Oh, I see; it's that confounded monkey."

Grinning down at the boys from one of the branches, a large monkey let fly another acorn with surprising accuracy. The creature belonged to the old sea captain, being, apparently, Quinn's only congenial companion; and, like his master, the monkey had learned to detest the village lads.

"Ah! ha! Mr. Jocko," cried Hooker, as he quickly stepped off the sidewalk and found a stone. "Two can play at that game."

"Don't," said Fred.

But before he could interfere Roy had sent the stone whistling and clipping through the branches of the tree, causing Jocko to utter a chattering scream of mingled dismay and defiance as he quickly mounted higher.

In a moment there came a roar from the hut beyond the lilac bushes, and forth from the door, which had been standing ajar, issued Aaron Quinn with his stout cane. At one time, although rather short of stature, he had been a sturdy, husky man, who commanded the respect, if not the liking, of his sailors. Now the

bushy fringe of whiskers beneath his chin seemed to bristle, his lips were drawn back from his teeth, and his eyes glared with rage.

“You young lubber!” he shouted, as he came hobbling down the path, flourishing the cane. “I’ll teach ye! I’ll larn ye to stone my monkey! If I ketch ye, I’ll break your back!”

With a mocking shout of laughter and a taunt, Hooker took to his heels.

“Run, Fred!” he cried. “The old gink will swat you if you don’t!”

But Sage did not run. Instead, he remained calmly facing the wrathful old sailor, who seemed bent on using the stout cane over the boy’s head.

“Why don’t you skedaddle?” snarled Captain Quinn. “Ain’t you got sense enough to run?”

“I didn’t do anything, and I sha’n’t run,” was the quiet retort. “I don’t believe you’ll hit me.”

The man paused with the cane uplifted, surprise written on his face.

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” he said in a milder tone. “You’re about the only brat around here who hasn’t tried his tricks on me. You seem to be different from the rest of these unmanly cubs. No, I won’t crack ye, but if ever I get my hands on that other rascal, he’ll have to take to his bed.”

“Aw, you couldn’t catch a snail,” taunted Hooker. “Somebody will shoot that monkey of yours some day.”

“If anybody hurts him, they’ll sartain wish they hadn’t,” retorted Quinn. “He knows more than half the people in this town, and that ain’t giving him a great deal of credit. Here, Jocko – here, come down.”

Chattering a little, the monkey slowly swung himself down to the lower limbs and dropped to his master’s shoulder, where he perched in evident assurance of security, making faces at the boys.

Fred laughed and rejoined Hooker, while, assisted by his cane, Aaron Quinn hobbled back toward the hut, carrying the monkey.

“It would be a good thing if that old pirate would get out of town,” said Roy. “He’s no benefit to the place.”

“He’s harmless enough if people will let him alone,” retorted Fred; “but he’s been pestered so much that he seems to have it in for everybody. At the most, it’s doubtful if he lives many years, and when he dies the bank people will doubtless get his little place for what it’s really worth.”

They proceeded on their way, the conversation soon drifting into other channels, football for a time being the main topic, as, to Sage’s surprise, Hooker betrayed considerable interest in the game.

“You’re right about old Stoney,” he said. “He knows the new rules. Why, he must have studied them until he has every word by heart. Perhaps he’ll make a fairly good captain, after all, though he never can come up to Roger Eliot.”

“Perhaps not,” admitted Sage. “Eliot certainly was a natural

leader at anything he undertook. I'm glad you came out yesterday."

"Oh, it isn't likely I'll get a chance to play."

"I'll guarantee you will if you pitch in. Why, there's Piper, the last fellow one would ever suppose could make good at the game."

"That's right," agreed Roy. "Say, he came round and interviewed me last night. He's got another bug in his bonnet. Asked me all sorts of questions about the strange man I saw in the woods. What do you suppose he thinks he's up to?"

"He's struck a trail," laughed Fred. "He was up at my house to see me, too."

"Well, it would give me some satisfaction if he could find out who the man was. Don't suppose you were able to enlighten him any?"

"Not a bit. I told you yesterday that I hadn't the remotest idea who the stranger could be."

"I know you did, but I thought you might have placed him since."

Down the river on the road to Clearport they entered a grove and sat chatting for some time on a fallen tree. Roy was anxious for another gunning expedition, but Fred feared that school work and football practice would give him little time for it. Finally they returned to the village, and Roy walked up Main Street to accompany his friend part of the way toward home.

On the sidewalk in front of Urian Eliot's house they saw Mr.

Eliot talking with Lucius Timmick, the cashier of the bank. Timmick was a man under thirty years of age, thin, smooth-faced, save for some high cut "siders," and a trifle sanctimonious in his manner. He was dressed wholly in black and carried a Bible in his hand.

Mr. Eliot spoke pleasantly to the boys as they passed, and Timmick gave them a grudging nod.

"That dried-up shrimp makes me tired," muttered Hooker. "Just because Urian Eliot took him into the bank and made him cashier, he thinks he's something. I know him; he always was a sneak. Why, he used to watch the boys nights and blow on them every time they had a little fun. He caught us hooking apples once, and made an awful fuss about it. Talked of having some of us sent to the reform school. Now he teaches a class in Sabbath School, and butter wouldn't melt in his mouth."

"It is evident," smiled Fred, "that you don't love Mr. Timmick much."

"You wouldn't think much of him either, if you'd lived long in Oakdale. He has too much dignity now to sneak round nights trying to find out what the fellows are doing, but he's just as much a fox as he ever was. If I was president of a bank, I'd never trust him to handle the cash."

"Evidently Mr. Eliot trusts him thoroughly."

"Oh, yes, he's got Urian Eliot fooled. Well, guess I'll hike for home, as Rod Grant would say. Bye, bye, old man."

Thus far Fred had found no good opportunity to tell his father

privately about the mysterious stranger and about what he had seen from his window the night before, nor did he find such a chance that day. The following morning he dismissed the matter from his mind, fancying it improbable that the man would again be seen around Oakdale.

CHAPTER VII.

ANNOYING ATTENTIONS

Sleuth Piper seemed to develop a sudden remarkable fondness for Fred Sage, upon whom he persisted in thrusting himself whenever possible, although he endeavored to make his actions seem natural and unpremeditated. At the academy he hung around a great deal in Fred's vicinity, usually near enough to hear and understand anything Sage might say. Time after time he engaged Fred in conversation, which he usually brought about by speaking of school matters or sports in which the most of the boys were interested.

Monday morning, as he was making his way to the academy, Fred had been a bit surprised to encounter Sleuth in the vicinity of the Methodist church, for Piper, if also bound for school, had come a considerable distance out of his way. This action seemed to be explained, however, when the queer fellow betrayed a certain amount of anxiety lest Sage had broken his promise to maintain secrecy regarding the Saturday night interview at Fred's house.

"What do you take me for, Piper?" exclaimed Fred, annoyed. "When I get ready to tell about that, I'll let you know in advance."

"No offence, old fellow," said Sleuth hastily. "You understand anyone can let such things leak unintentionally."

That night, after the shower in the gym following practice on the field, Sleuth was waiting to join Fred and persisted in walking all the way home with him, maintaining a confidential atmosphere, which seemed to invite confidence and trust on the part of the other. This effort was so palpably apparent that, although inwardly annoyed, Sage could not help laughing over it when Sleuth finally set off for his own home.

"The chump!" he muttered. "He thinks he's clever, but it's easy enough to see through him."

But when, on the following morning, Sleuth again joined Fred on the way to school, Sage could scarcely restrain his annoyance. Succeeding, however, he tried the effect of joshing and banter.

"Say, Sleuth," he laughed, "you've certainly taken a sudden pronounced liking for my society. I never dreamed you entertained such deep affection for me."

"Oh," returned Piper, with pretended carelessness, "I've always liked you, Fred, ever since you came here from – from – . Let me see, where did you come from? I've forgotten."

"Perhaps you never knew."

"That's right, perhaps I didn't. Seems to me, though, I've heard it was somewhere in New York State. Is that right?"

"Let it go at that; it's near enough."

"Oh, if there's any reason why you don't care to tell, of course you've a right to decline to answer."

"Do you know, Sleuth, I always feel a natural disinclination to gratify the unwarranted curiosity of people who try to pry into

affairs that are of no concern to them.”

“Oh, piffle, Fred! I’m not prying. What’s the matter with you? I was just thinking that probably before coming here you attended a school of more importance than Oakdale Academy. You knew as much about football as any fellow in this town when you appeared here, and that’s how you happened to get on the team as quarterback last year. Eliot said you were the fellow best adapted for the position, and you proved that he was right by the way you filled it.”

“Thanks for the taffy. Your generosity in handing it out has got me going. What do you want to know next? Ask and ye shall *not*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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