

Warner Frank A.

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Nine: or, The Champions of  
the Monatook Lake League**



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# **Frank A. Warner**

## **Bobby Blake on the School Nine; Or, The Champions of the Monatook Lake League**

### **CHAPTER I**

### **FLYING SNOWBALLS**

“Ouch!”

“That was a dandy!”

“How’s that for a straight shot?”

“Thought you could dodge it, did you?”

“Have a heart, fellows! I’ve got a ton of snow down my back already.”

A tumult of shouts and laughter rose into the frosty air from a group of boys, ranging in age from ten to twelve years, who were throwing and dodging snowballs near the railroad station in the little town of Clinton.

Even the fact that four of the group were on their way back to school after the Christmas holidays was not sufficient to dampen their youthful spirits, and the piles of snow heaped up back of the platform had been too tempting to resist.

As though moved by a single spring they had dropped the bags they were carrying, and the next instant the air was full of flying snowballs. Most of them found their mark, though a few in the excitement of the fray passed dangerously near the station windows.

Flushed and eager, the panting warriors advanced or retreated, until a stray missile just grazed the ear of the baggage man, who was wheeling a load of trunks along the platform. He gave a roar of protest, and the boys thought it was time to stop. But they did it reluctantly.

“Too bad to stop right in the middle of the fun,” said Bobby Blake, a bright wholesome boy of about eleven years, with a frank face and merry brown eyes.

“Bailey’s got a grouch on this morning,” remarked Fred Martin, better known among the boys as “Ginger,” because of his red hair and equally fiery temper.

“I never saw him any other way,” put in “Scat” Monroe, one of the village boys, who had come down to the station to bid his friends good-bye. “I don’t believe Bailey ever was a boy.”

“Oh, I guess he was – once,” said Bobby, with the air of one making a generous concession, “but it was so long ago that he’s forgotten all about it.”

“Perhaps you’d be grouchy too if you came near being hit,” ventured Betty Martin, Fred’s sister, “especially if you weren’t getting any fun out of it.”

Betty formed one of a party of girls who had accompanied the boys to the station to see them off. With flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, these girls had stood huddled together like a flock of snowbirds, watching the friendly scuffle and giving a little squeal occasionally when a snowball came too close to them.

Fred looked at his sister coldly. He was very fond of Betty, but as the only boy in a large family of girls, he felt it was incumbent on him to maintain the dignity of the male sex. He had pronounced ideas on the necessity of keeping girls in their place, and Betty was something of a trial to him because she refused to be squelched.

“Of course, girls feel that way,” he said loftily. “They’re afraid of the least little thing. But men aren’t such scare-cats.”

“Men!” sniffed Betty scornfully. “You don’t call yourself a man, do you?”

“Well, I’m going to be some day,” her brother retorted, “and that’s more than you can say.”

This was undeniable, and Fred felt that he had scored a point.

Betty was reduced to the defensive.

"I wouldn't want to be," she rejoined rather feebly.

Fred cast a proud look around.

"Sour grapes!" he ejaculated.

Then, elated by his success, he sought rather imprudently to follow it up.

"As for me," he declared, "I wouldn't care how hard I was hit. I'd only laugh."

Betty saw an opening.

"You wouldn't dare let me throw one at you," she challenged, her eyes dancing.

Fred went into pretended convulsions.

"You throw!" he jeered. "A girl throw! Why! you couldn't hit the – the side of a house," he ended lamely, his invention failing.

"I couldn't, eh?" cried Betty, a little nettled. "Well, you just stand up against that post and see if I can't."

Fred was somewhat startled by her prompt answer to his taunt, but it would never do to show the white feather.

"All right," he responded, and took up his position, while Betty stood some twenty feet away.

The laughing group of boys and girls gathered around her, and Bobby and Scat began to make snowballs for Betty.

"No, you don't!" cried Fred. "I know you fellows. You'll make soakers. Let Betty make her own snowballs."

"What do you care, if you're so sure she can't hit you?" said Bobby slyly.

"Never you mind," replied Fred, ignoring the thrust. "You leave all that to Betty."

The boys desisted and Betty made her own missiles.

"How many chances do I have?" she asked. "Will you give me three shots?"

"Three hundred if you like," replied her brother grandly. "It's all the same to me."

He stiffened up sternly against the post. Somewhere he had seen a picture of Ajax defying the lightning, and he hoped that he looked like that.

Betty poised herself to throw, but at the last moment her tender heart misgave her.

"I – I'm afraid I'll hurt you," she faltered.

"Aw, go ahead," urged "Mouser" Pryde, one of the four lads who were leaving for school.

"Aim right at his head," added "Pee Wee" Wise, another schoolmate who was to accompany Bobby and Fred to Rockledge.

"You can't miss that red mop of his," put in Scat heartlessly.

"N-no," said Betty, dropping her hand to her side. "I guess I don't want to."

Fred scented an easy victory, but made a mistake by not being satisfied to let well enough alone.

"She knows she can't hit me and she's afraid to try," he gibed.

The light of battle began to glow in Betty's eyes, but still she stood irresolute.

"I'll give you a cent if you hit me," pursued Fred.

"My! isn't he reckless with his money?" mocked Pee Wee.

"He talks like a millionaire," added Mouser.

"A whole cent," mused Bobby.

Fred flushed.

"Make it a nickel, then," he said. "And if that isn't enough, I'll give you a dime," he added, in a final burst of generosity.

"Have you got it?" Betty asked suspiciously. She knew that Fred was usually in a state of bankruptcy.

"I've got it all right," retorted her brother, "and what's more I'm going to keep it, because you couldn't hit anything in a thousand years."

Whether it was the taunt or the dime or both, Betty was spurred to action. She hesitated no longer, but picked up a snowball and threw it at the fair mark that Fred presented.

It went wide and Fred laughed gleefully.

“Guess that dime stays right in my pocket,” he chuckled.

“Never mind, Betty,” encouraged Bobby. “You were just getting the range then. Better luck next time.”

But the next shot also failed, and Fred’s mirth became uproarious.

“I might just as well have made it a dollar,” he mocked.

But his smile suddenly faded when Betty’s third throw caught him right on the point of the nose.

Fortunately the ball was not very hard. It spread all over his face, getting into his eyes and filling his mouth, and leaving him for the moment blinded and sputtering.

The girls gave little shrieks and the boys doubled up with laughter, which increased as the victim brushed away the snow and they caught sight of his startled and sheepish face. Betty, in swift penitence, flew to his side.

“Oh, Fred!” she wailed, “I hope I didn’t hurt you!”

To do Fred justice, he was game, and after the first moment of discomfiture he tried to smile, though the attempt was not much of a success.

“That’s all right, Betty,” he said. “You’re a better shot than I thought you were. Here’s your dime,” he added, taking the coin from his pocket.

“I don’t want it,” replied Betty. “I’m sorry I won it.”

But Fred insisted and she took it, although reluctantly.

“Too bad you didn’t make it a dollar, Fred,” joked Pee Wee.

“Couldn’t hit you in a thousand years, eh?” chuckled Scat.

“Oh, cut it out, you fellows,” protested Fred. “I didn’t dodge anyway, did I? You’ve got to give me credit for that.”

“That was pretty good work for short distance shooting,” remarked Bobby Blake, molding a snowball. “But now watch me hit that rock on the other side of the road.”

“Look out that you don’t hit that horse,” cautioned Betty.

But the snowball had already left Bobby’s hand. He had thought that it would easily clear the scraggy old horse that was jogging along drawing a sleigh. But the aim was too low, and the snowball hit the horse plump in the neck.

The startled brute reared and plunged, and the driver, a big hulky boy with pale eyes and a pasty complexion, had all he could do to quiet him.

He succeeded at last, and then, grasping his whip, jumped over the side of the sleigh and came running up to the boys, his face convulsed with rage.

## CHAPTER II

### A FRIEND INTERFERES

“Oh,” gasped Betty, “it’s Ap Plunkit!”

“Yes,” added Fred, “and he’s as mad as a hornet.”

Applethwaite Plunkit was the son of a farmer who lived a short distance out of town. He was older and larger than the rest of the boys gathered on the station platform, and they all disliked him thoroughly because of his mean and ugly disposition.

Bobby and Fred had had several squabbles with him when he had attempted to bully them, but their quarrels had never yet got to the point of an actual fight. But just now, as he strode up to them, it looked as though a fight were coming.

Bobby was a plucky boy, and though he never went around looking for trouble, he was always willing and able to take his own part when it became necessary. But Ap was a great deal bigger and heavier than he, and just now had the advantage of the whip. So that Bobby’s breath came a little faster as Ap came nearer. But he never thought of retreating, and faced the bully with an outward calm that he was very far from feeling.

“Which one of you fellows hit my horse?” demanded Ap, in a voice that trembled with rage.

“I did,” replied Bobby, stepping forward a little in advance of the group.

“What did you do it for?” cried Ap, at the same time raising his whip.

“I didn’t aim at the horse,” replied Bobby. “I was trying to hit a rock on the other side of the road.”

“I don’t believe it,” snarled the bully.

“I can’t help whether you believe it or not,” answered Bobby. “It’s the truth.”

“You needn’t think you’re going to crawl out of it that way,” Ap snapped back. “You hit my horse on purpose and now I’m going to hit you.”

He lifted his whip higher to make good his threat. Bobby’s fists clenched and his eyes glowed.

“Don’t you touch me with that whip, Ap Plunkit,” he warned, “or it will be the worse for you.”

“You bet it will!” cried Fred, rushing forward. “You touch Bobby and we’ll all pitch into you.”

“That’s what!” ejaculated Mouser.

“Sure thing,” added Pee Wee, who, though lazy and hard to rouse, was always loyal to his friends.

For a moment it seemed as though a general scrimmage could not be avoided, and the girls gave little frightened shrieks.

Ap hesitated.

“Four against one,” he muttered sarcastically. “You’re a plucky lot, you are.”

“Throw down that whip and any one of us will tackle you,” cried Fred hotly, his fiery temper getting the better of him.

But just then a diversion came from a new quarter.

A boy who was just about equal to Ap in age and weight, who had a lot of freckles, a snub nose, a jolly Irish face and a crop of red hair that rivaled Fred’s own, pushed his way through the crowd that had gathered.

“It’s Pat Moriarty,” cried Betty in relief.

“Hello, Bobby! Hello, Fred!” called out the newcomer cheerily. “What’s the rumpus here?”

“It’s this Ap Plunkit,” explained Bobby. “I hit his horse with a snowball by accident.”

“And the big coward’s brought his whip over to get even,” volunteered Fred.

“To git even is it,” said Pat, as his eyes fell on the bully, who was beginning to move backward. “Well, I’ll give him the chanst.”

He went over rapidly to Ap.

“Why don’t you tackle a feller of your size?” he asked scornfully. “Like me, fur instance?”

“You keep out of this,” muttered Ap uneasily.

“Keep out of it!” jeered Pat pugnaciously. “A Moriarty never keeps out of a scrap when he sees a big feller pickin’ on a little one.”

With a sudden movement he snatched Ap’s whip and threw it on the ground.

Resentment flared up in Ap’s eyes.

While the two antagonists stand glaring at each other, it may be well, for the benefit of those who have not followed the fortunes and adventures of Bobby Blake from the beginning, to give a brief outline of the preceding volumes in this series.

Bobby was the only child of his parents, who resided in the little inland town of Clinton. Although their hearts were bound up in their son, they had been sensible enough not to spoil him, and he had grown into a bright, manly boy, full of fun and frolic, and a general favorite among the boys of the town.

Fred Martin, whose family lived only a few doors away from the Blakes, was Bobby’s closest friend and companion. The boys were very different in temperament, and it was this very unlikeness, perhaps, which had made them chums. Fred had a hot temper which was constantly getting him into scrapes, and Bobby, who was much cooler and more self-controlled, was kept busy a good deal of the time in getting his friend out of trouble. They seldom had any differences between themselves and were almost constantly together.

Mr. Blake was once suddenly called to South America on business, and it was arranged that Mrs. Blake should go with him. What to do with Bobby during their absence gave them a good many anxious moments. They finally decided to send him to Rockledge School, of which they had heard excellent reports, and to Bobby’s great delight, Mr. Martin consented to let Fred go with him.

The school opened a new world for the boys. They had to study hard, but a lot of fun was mixed in with the work and they had many exciting adventures. They formed warm friendships, but there were two or three bullies in the school who tried to make their lives burdensome. How they finally defeated these petty tyrants and came out on top is told in the first volume of the series, entitled: “Bobby Blake at Rockledge School; or, Winning the Medal of Honor.”

The steamer on which Mr. Blake and his wife had sailed was lost at sea, and for a time it was feared that all on board had gone down with her. Bobby was heart-broken; so when news came later that his parents had been rescued his joy can be imagined. The end of the spring term was near, and Bobby and Fred accepted the invitation of one of their schoolmates, Perry (nicknamed “Pee Wee”) Wise, to spend part of the summer vacation on the coast, where Perry’s father had a summer home. There they had a splendid time. Their most stirring adventure involved the search for a missing boat. This is described in the second volume of the series, entitled: “Bobby Blake at Bass Cove; or, The Hunt for the Motor Boat *Gem*.”

They would have stayed longer at this delightful place, had it not been for a message brought to Bobby by an old sea captain who was a friend of Mr. Blake. He told Bobby that his parents were on their way home but would stop for a while at Porto Rico, where they wanted Bobby to join them. Bobby was wild to see his parents again, and his joy was increased when Mr. Martin said that he would go too and take Fred along. They expected adventure, but got more than they bargained for, and the story of how they were cast away and finally picked up by the very ship on which Bobby’s father and mother were sailing is told in the third volume of the series, entitled: “Bobby Blake on a Cruise; or, The Castaways of Volcano Island.”

Once more at home, the two boys were preparing to go back to Rockledge for the fall term, when they suddenly came into possession of a pocketbook containing a large sum of money. A strange series of happenings led them at last to the owner. In the meantime, their school life was full of action, culminating in a lively football game where Bobby and Fred helped to defeat Belden School,

their chief rival. How well they played their part is shown in the fourth volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake and His School Chums; or, The Rivals of Rockledge."

The uncle of "Mouser" Pryde, one of Bobby's particular friends at school, owned a shooting lodge up in the Big Woods, and he invited Mouser to ask some of his friends up there to spend part of the Christmas holidays. Bobby and Fred were members of the party, and they had a glorious time, skating, snowshoeing, fishing through the ice and hunting. In turn, they were themselves hunted by a big bear and had a narrow escape. Incidentally they were fortunate enough to rescue and bring back to his right mind a demented hunter who proved to be Pat Moriarty's father. How they did this and won the everlasting gratitude of the red-headed Irish boy is described in the fifth volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake at Snowtop Camp; or, Winter Holidays in the Big Woods."

Pat and Ap seemed to be trying to outstare each other, and the rest waited in breathless silence during this silent duel of eyes.

But Ap's eyes were the first to fall before the blaze in Pat's.

"I'll get even with that Bobby Blake yet," he mumbled, stooping to pick up his whip.

"Well, the next time don't bring along your whip to help you out," replied Bobby.

"An' when you feel like lookin' for trouble, I can find it for you," added Pat. "You'll be rememberin', Ap Plunkit, that I licked you once when you gave a hot penny to a monkey, an' I can do it again."

It was evident that Ap did remember perfectly well the fact which Pat referred to, for he did not seem to want to stay any longer in the Irish lad's vicinity. He picked up his whip, went over to the wagon and climbed in. Then he took out his spite by giving his nag a vicious slash and drove away. But first he doubled up his fist and shook it at the boys, a gesture which they answered with a derisive shout of laughter.

"I think that Ap Plunkit is just horrid," declared Betty, with a stamp of her little foot.

"I don't blame him for feeling a little sore," said Bobby, "especially before he knew I didn't do it on purpose. But I guess he has a grudge against me anyway."

"He was just looking for an excuse to make trouble," put in Fred, "and it was just like him to bring his whip along. He never has played fair yet."

"He's got a yaller streak in him, I'm thinkin'," chuckled Pat, a broad smile covering his jolly face. "I just couldn't help buttin' in when I seen him a swingin' of that whip."

"You always stand up for your friends, don't you, Pat?" said Mouser admiringly.

"Sure thing," grinned Pat. "Especially when they're the best friends a feller ever had. I'll never forget what Bobby and Fred have done for me an' my folks."

"Oh, that was nothing," put in Bobby hastily.

"Nothin'!" exclaimed Pat. "It was just everything, an' there isn't a day goes by in our house but what we're talkin' about it."

"How did you happen to be Johnny-on-the-spot this morning?" asked Bobby, anxious to change the conversation.

"I just was doin' an errand at the grocery store when I heard some one say that you boys were goin' off to school this mornin'," answered Pat, "an' I dropped everything an' came down here on a dead run to say good-bye and wish you slathers of luck. I guess me mother will be after wonderin' what's keepin' me, an' she a waitin' fur the butter an' sugar," he added, with a grin, "but she won't care when I tell her what the reason was."

"I wish you were going along with us, Pat," said Bobby, who was genuinely fond of the good-hearted Irish boy.

"Yes," drawled Pee Wee. "We've got a couple of fellows up at Rockledge that I'd like to see you handle just as you faced down Ap this morning."

"If there's any kind of a shindig, I'd sure like to be in the thick of it," laughed Pat. "But I'll trust you boys not to let them fellers do any crowin' over you."

“Right you are,” put in Mouser. “There aren’t any of ’em that can make Bobby and Fred lie down when they get their dander up.”

“Oh, dear,” sighed Betty, as the toot of the train’s whistle was heard up the track. “Here it comes. I just hate to have to say good-bye to you boys.”

“Never mind, Betty,” cried Bobby cheerily. “It won’t be so very long and you’ll hear from us every once in a while. And maybe we’ll be able to come home for a few days at Easter.”

There was a scurrying about as the boys got their hand-baggage together and brushed the snow from their clothes. The train had now come in sight, and a minute later with a great rattle and clamor and hissing of steam it drew up to the platform.

“All aboard!” shouted Mouser, and the four boys scrambled up the steps, Pee Wee as usual bringing up the rear.

They rushed up the aisle and were lucky enough to find two vacant seats next to each other. They turned over the back of one of them, so that two of them could sit facing the others, and tucked away their belongings in the racks and under the seats. Then they threw up the windows so as to have a last word with those they were leaving behind.

The girls had their handkerchiefs out ready to wave a good-bye, and Betty was applying hers furtively to one of her eyes.

“I hope your nose isn’t hurting you, Fred,” she questioned, the mischief glinting out in spite of the tears.

“Not a bit of it,” answered Fred hastily, as though the subject was not to his liking.

“And you’re sure you don’t need the ten cents?”

“Need nothing,” declared Fred, with the magnificent gesture of one to whom money was a trifle. “I’ve got plenty with me.”

Betty drew back a little, and Scat and Pat came along and grasped the four hands that were thrust out to meet theirs.

“Good luck, fellows,” said Scat. “I hope you’ll get on the baseball nine this spring and lay it all over the teams you play against.”

“We’re going to do our best,” Bobby replied.

“Good-bye, boys!” called out Pat. “I sure am sorry to have you goin’. It won’t seem like the same old place when you ain’t here no more.”

“Good-bye, Pat!” the four shouted in chorus.

“If you have any mix-up with Ap while we’re gone, be sure to let us know,” laughed Bobby.

“There won’t be any mix-up,” put in Fred. “Not if Ap sees Pat first, there won’t.”

“Ap will crawfish all right,” confirmed Mouser.

“He’s a wonder at backing out,” added Pee Wee.

The bell of the engine began to clang and the train started slowly out of the station. The little party left behind ran alongside until they reached the end of the platform, shouting and waving.

The travelers, with their heads far out of the windows, waved and called in return until they were out of sight and hearing.

“Betty’s a bully girl, isn’t she, Fred?” remarked Bobby, as they settled back in their seats. “You’re a lucky fellow. I wish I had a sister like her.”

“Ye-e-s,” assented Fred, rather hesitatingly. “Betty’s a brick. That is,” he added hastily, “as far as any girl can be. But don’t be wishing too hard for sisters, Bobby,” he went on darkly. “Girls aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.”

“Especially when they know how to throw,” put in Bobby, with a roguish glint in his eyes.

Fred pretended to think this remark unworthy of an answer, but he rubbed his nose reflectively.

## CHAPTER III

### THE COMING STORM

For several minutes the boys were the least bit quiet and subdued. There is always something sobering in going away from home and leaving relatives and friends behind, especially when the parting is going to last for many months, and the warm-hearted farewells of the group at the station were still ringing in the boy's ears.

But it is not in boy nature to remain quiet long, and their irrepressible spirits soon asserted themselves and caused the young travelers to bubble over with fun and merriment.

Besides, Pee Wee and Mouser had said good-bye to their parents the day before in their own homes, and had been stopping over night with their school chums in Clinton. Their depression was but for the moment and was over the thought of leaving behind so much fun and good will as they had found at their chums' home town, and they helped Bobby and Fred to forget their feeling of homesickness.

There were not many other passengers on the train that morning, so that the boys had plenty of room and could give vent to their feelings without causing annoyance to others. They snatched each other's caps and threw them in the aisles or under the seats, indulged in good-natured scuffling, sang bits of the Rockledge songs and cut up "high jinks" generally.

Fred and Mouser were seized by a longing for a drink of water at the same moment, and they had a race to see who would get to the cooler first. Fred won and got first drink while Mouser waited for his turn. But Mouser got even by knocking Fred's elbow so that half the water was spilled over the front of his coat.

"Quit, I tell you, Mouser," remonstrated Fred, half choking from the effort to drink and talk at the same time.

But Mouser kept on, until suddenly Fred saw a chance to get back at him.

"What does it say there?" he asked, pointing to some words engraved on the lower part of the cooler. "I can't quite make the letters out from here."

Mouser innocently bent over, and Fred, taking advantage of his stooping position, tipped his glass and sent a stream of water down his victim's neck.

There was a startled howl from Mouser as the cold water trickled down his spine. He straightened up with a jerk and chased Fred down the aisle, while Bobby and Pee Wee went into whoops of laughter at his discomfiture.

"That's no way to drink water, Mouser," chaffed Bobby as soon as he could speak. "You want to use your mouth instead of taking in through the pores."

"Oh, dry up," ejaculated Mouser, making frantic efforts to stuff his handkerchief down his back.

"We're dry enough already," chuckled Pee Wee. "Seems to me it's you that needs drying up."

"You will jog my elbow, eh?" jeered Fred, who was delighted at the success of his stratagem.

"My turn will come," grunted Mouser. "It's a long worm that has no turning," he added, getting mixed up in his proverbs.

Again the boys shouted and Mouser himself, although he tried to keep up his dignity, ended by joining in the merriment.

In the scramble for seats when they had first boarded the train, Bobby and Fred had had the luck to get the seat that faced forward. Mouser and Pee Wee had to ride backward and naturally after a while they objected.

"You fellows have all the best of it," grumbled Pee Wee.

“That’s all right,” retorted Fred. “That’s as it should be. Nothing’s too good for Bobby and me. The best people ought to have the best of everything.”

“Sure thing,” Bobby backed him up. “The common people ought to be satisfied with what they can get. You fellows ought to be glad that we let you travel with us at all.”

“Those fellows just hate themselves, don’t they?” Mouser appealed to his seat mate.

“Aren’t they the modest little flowers?” agreed Pee Wee.

“What do you say to rushing them and firing them out?” suggested Mouser.

“Oh, don’t do that,” cried Fred in mock alarm. “Pee Wee might fall on one of us, and then there’d be nothing left but a grease spot.”

“Might as well have a ton of brick on top of you,” confirmed Bobby.

“I’ll tell you what,” grinned Pee Wee. “We’ll draw straws for it and the fellows that get the two longest straws get the best seats.”

“That would be all right and I’d be glad to do it,” said Fred with an air of candor. “Only there aren’t any straws handy. So we’ll have to let things stay as they are.”

“You don’t get out of it that way, you old fox,” cried Mouser. “Here’s an old letter and we’ll make strips of paper take the place of the straws.”

“All right,” agreed Fred, driven into the open. “Give me the letter and I’ll make the strips and you fellows can draw.”

“Will you play fair?” asked Mouser suspiciously.

Fred put on an air of offended virtue.

“Do you think I’m a crook?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” retorted Mouser in a most unflattering way. “A fellow that will pour water down my back when I’m trying to do him a favor will do anything.”

Fred looked at him sadly as though lamenting his lack of faith, but proceeded briskly to tear the strips. The boys drew and Bobby had the luck to retain his seat, but Fred had to exchange with Mouser.

“It’s a shame to have to sit with Pee Wee,” said Fred as he squeezed in beside the fat boy. “He takes up two-thirds of the seat.”

“The conductor ought to charge him double fare,” grinned Mouser.

Pee Wee only smiled lazily.

“Look at him,” jeered Bobby. “He looks just like the cat that’s swallowed the canary.”

“It would take more than that to make Pee Wee happy,” put in Fred. “A canary would be a mighty slim meal for him.”

“You’d think so if you’d seen how he piled into the buckwheat cakes this morning,” chuckled Bobby. “Honestly, fellows, I thought that Meena would have heart failure trying to cook them fast enough.”

“I noticed that you did your part all right,” laughed Pee Wee. “I had all I could do to get my share of the maple syrup.”

“Buckwheats and maple syrup!” groaned Mouser. “Say, fellows! stop talking about them or you’ll make me so hungry I’ll have to bite the woodwork.”

“We can do better than that,” said Fred. “Here comes the train boy. Let’s get some candy and peanuts.”

The boys bought lavishly and munched away contentedly.

“Look at the way the snow’s coming down!” exclaimed Fred, gazing out of the window.

“It is for a fact,” agreed Bobby.

“Looks as though it had settled in for a regular storm,” commented Mouser.

“Maybe it will be a blizzard,” suggested Pee Wee.

As a matter of fact, it appeared to be that already. The snow was falling heavily and shutting out the view so that the boys could scarcely see the telegraph poles at the side of the track. A fierce wind was blowing, and in many places the fence rails were almost covered where the snow had drifted.

“Hope we won’t have any trouble in getting to Rockledge,” remarked Fred rather apprehensively.

“Not so bad as that I guess,” said Bobby. “There’s one place though, a little further on, where the track runs through a gulch and that may be pretty well filled up if the storm keeps on.”

“I wonder if there’s anything to eat on the train if we should get snowbound,” ventured Pee Wee.

“Trust Pee Wee to think of his stomach the first thing,” giped Fred.

“There isn’t any dining car on the train,” said Mouser. “And we’re still a good way from the station where it usually stops for lunch.”

“We’re all right anyway as long as the candy and peanuts hold out,” laughed Bobby.

“Yes,” mourned Pee Wee, “but there isn’t much nourishment in them when a fellow’s really hungry.”

The storm continued without abatement, and the few passengers that got on at the way stations looked like so many polar bears as they shook the clinging flakes from their clothes and shoes.

“Oh well, what do we care,” concluded Pee Wee, settling back in his seat. “There’s no use borrowing trouble. It always comes soon enough if it comes at all.”

“We ought to be used to snow by this time,” remarked Mouser. “After what we went through up in the Big Woods this doesn’t seem anything at all.”

“Listen to the north pole explorer,” mocked Fred. “You’d think, to hear him talk, that he’d been up with Cook or Peary.”

“Well, I’ve got it all over those fellows in one way,” maintained Mouser. “I’ll bet they never had a snowslide come down and cover the shack they were living in.”

“That was a close shave all right,” said Bobby a little soberly, as he thought of what had been almost a tragedy during their recent holiday at Snowtop Camp. “I thought once we were never going to get out of that scrape alive.”

“It was almost as bad when we were chased by the bear,” put in Fred. “We did some good little running that day all right. I thought my breath would never come back.”

“And the running wouldn’t have done us any good if it hadn’t been for good old Don,” added Mouser. “How that old dog did stand up to the bear.”

“He got some fierce old digs from the bear’s claws while he was doing it,” said Bobby.

“He got over them all right,” affirmed Mouser. “I got a letter from my uncle a couple of days ago, and he says that Don is as good as he ever was.”

The train for some time past had been going more and more slowly. Suddenly it came to a halt, although there was no station in sight. It backed up for perhaps three hundred feet, put on all steam and again rushed forward only to come to an abrupt stop with a jerk that almost threw the boys out of their seats.

They looked at each other in consternation.

## CHAPTER IV

### HELD UP

Once more, as though unwilling to admit that it was conquered, the train backed up and then made a forward dash. But the result was the same. The snorting monster seemed to give up the struggle, and stood puffing and wheezing, with the steam hissing and great volumes of smoke rising from the stack.

"We're blocked," cried Bobby.

"It must be that we've got to the gulch," observed Fred.

"A pretty kettle of fish," grumbled Pee Wee.

"We're up against it for fair, I guess," admitted Mouser. "But let's get out and see how bad the trouble is."

The boys joined the procession of passengers going down the aisle and jumped off the steps of the car into a pile of snow beside the track that came up to their knees. Pee Wee, who as usual was last, lost his balance as he sprang, and went head over heels into a drift. His laughing comrades helped him to his feet.

"Wallowing like a porpoise," grinned Fred.

"You went into that snow as if you liked it," chuckled Bobby.

"Lots of sympathy from you boobs," grumbled Pee Wee, as he brushed the snow from his face and hair.

"Lots of that in the dictionary," sang out Mouser. "But come ahead, fellows, and see what's doing."

The others waded after Mouser until they stood abreast of the locomotive.

It was a scene of wintry desolation that lay stretched before their eyes. As far as they could see, they could make out little but the white blanket of snow, above which the trees tossed their black and leafless branches. Paths and fences were blotted out, and except for the thin column of smoke that rose from a farmhouse half a mile away, they might have been in an uninhabited world of white.

"Looks like Snowtop, sure enough," muttered Mouser, as he looked around.

The conductor and the engineer, together with the trainmen, had gathered in a little group near the engine, and the boys edged closer in order to hear what they were saying.

"It's no use," the grizzled old engineer was remarking. "The jig's up as far as Seventy-three is concerned. I tried to get the old girl to buck the drifts, but she couldn't do it."

The boys thought it was no wonder that Seventy-three had gone on strike, as they noted that her cowcatcher was buried while the drift rose higher than her stack.

"It's too bad," rejoined the conductor, shaking his head in a perplexed fashion. "I've been worrying about the gulch ever since it came on to snow so hard. It wouldn't have mattered so much if it hadn't been for the wind. That's slacked up some now, but the damage is done already."

"What are you going to do, boss?" asked one of the trainmen.

"You'll have to go back to the last station and wire up to the Junction for them to send the snow-plough down and clear the track," responded the conductor. "Get a hustle on now and ask them to send it along in a hurry."

The trainman started back at as fast a pace as the snow permitted, and the engineer climbed back into his cab to get out of the wind while waiting for help. The conductor started back for the smoking car, and as he went past, Bobby ventured to speak to him.

"How long do you think we'll have to wait here?" he inquired.

"No telling, sonny," the conductor answered. "Perhaps a couple of hours, maybe longer. It all depends on how soon they can get that snow-plough down to us."

He passed on and Mouser gave a low whistle.

“Scubbity-yow!” cried Fred, giving vent to his favorite exclamation. “Two long hours in this neck of the woods!”

“And nothing to eat in sight,” groaned Pee Wee.

“I wish I’d let Meena put up that lunch for us this morning,” said Bobby regretfully. “My mother wanted me to bring one along, but I was in a hurry and counted on getting something to eat at the railroad lunch station.”

“What are we going to do?” moaned Pee Wee.

“Fill up on snowballs,” suggested Mouser heartlessly.

Pee Wee glared at him.

“I’m almost as bad as Pee Wee,” said Fred. “I feel as empty as though I hadn’t had anything to eat for a week. I could eat the bark off a tree.”

“I tell you what, fellows,” suggested Bobby, who was usually the leader when it came to action; “what do you say to going over to that farmhouse and trying to buy something to eat? I don’t think they’d let us go away hungry.”

They followed the direction of his pointing finger, and new hope sprang up in them.

“But it’s an awful long way off,” objected Pee Wee, whose fear of exertion was only second to his love of eating.

“Have you got another stone bruise on your foot?” asked Mouser sarcastically.

This was a standing joke among the boys. Whenever Pee Wee hung back from a walk or a run, he usually put forth the excuse of a stone bruise that made him lame for the time.

“No, I haven’t any stone bruise,” Pee Wee rapped back at him, “but how do you know I didn’t bark my shins when I had that tumble a few minutes ago?”

He put on a pained look which might have deceived those who did not know him so well. But the steady stare of his comrades was too much for him to stand without wilting, and he had to join rather sheepishly in the laugh that followed.

“You stay here then, Pee Wee, while we go over and get something to eat,” suggested Fred. “We’ll ask the farmer to bring you over something on a gold tray. He’ll be glad to do it.”

“Oh, cut it out,” grinned Pee Wee. “Go ahead and I’ll follow.”

“Foxy boy, isn’t he?” chuckled Fred. “He wants us to break out the path so that it will be easier for him.”

“I’d rather have Pee Wee go ahead,” remarked Mouser. “He’d be better than any snow plough.”

With chaff and laughter they started out, Bobby leading the way and the rest following in single file. They had pulled their caps down over their ears and buttoned their coats tightly about their necks. Luckily for them the wind had moderated, although the snow still kept falling, but more lightly than before.

They did not do much talking, for they needed all their breath to make their way through the drifts. As they had no path to guide them, they made straight across the fields, bumping every now and then into a fence that they had to climb. They were pretty well winded and panting hard when at last they reached the fence that bounded the spacious dooryard in front of the farmhouse.

A big black dog came bounding down to the gate barking ferociously. The boys took comfort from the fact that the fence was high and that the dog was too big and heavy to leap over it.

“He’s glad to see us – I don’t think,” said Fred.

“Seems to have a sweet disposition,” muttered Pee Wee.

“Let Mouser get to talking to him,” suggested Bobby. “He’ll tame him down in no time.”

Mouser, somewhat flattered, stepped forward. He had gained his nickname because he had a number of mice which he had taught to do all sorts of clever tricks. His fondness extended to all animals, and he had the remarkable power over them with which some people are gifted. No matter how savage or frightened they might be, they seemed to yield to his charm.

It did not fail him now. He muttered some words soothingly to the dog, whose barking grew feebler. Soon it stopped altogether, and in another minute or two the brute was wagging his tail and poking his muzzle through the rails of the fence for Mouser to pat him.

It was almost uncanny, and the boys held their breath as they watched the transformation.

"It's all right now," said Mouser, lifting the latch of the gate. "Come along, fellows."

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Bobby. "How do you do it?"

"You ought to be with a circus," said Fred in undisguised admiration. "You'd make a dandy lion tamer."

Mouser was elated at the tribute, but accepted it modestly enough, and led the way up to the house, the dog prancing along with them in the most friendly manner.

As they reached the door and were about to knock, it was opened, and a motherly looking woman appeared on the threshold. There was an expression of anxiety on her face.

"Down, Tiger, down," she cried. Then as she saw the evident pleasure of the brute in the boys' company, her worried expression changed to one of surprise.

"Mercy on us!" she exclaimed. "I was afraid the dog would eat you up. He's awfully savage, but we keep him on account of there being so many tramps around. I was upstairs when I heard him barking, and I hurried down as fast as I could, for I was sure he'd bite you if you came inside the gate."

"Oh, Tiger's a good friend of mine, aren't you, Tiger?" laughed Mouser, as he stooped to caress the dog.

Tiger licked his hand.

"Well, I never saw anything like it," said their hostess. "I just can't understand it. But here I am keeping you standing outside when you must be half perished with the cold," she went on with quick sympathy. "Come right inside and get warm before you say another word."

She led the way into a bright, cheerful sitting room, where there was a big wood fire blazing on the hearth. She bustled around and saw that they were comfortably seated before the fire. Then Bobby explained their errand.

"I suppose we're sort of tramps ourselves," he said with the winning smile that always gained for him instant liking. "But we were on the train and it got stalled over there in the gulch on account of the snow. We hadn't brought any lunch with us and we thought we'd come over here and see if we could buy something to eat."

"You poor starved boys!" she exclaimed with as ready a sympathy as though she had been the mother of them all. "Of course you can have all you want to eat. It's too early for dinner yet, as Mr. Wilson – that's my husband – went to town this morning and will be a little late in getting back. But I'll get up something for you right away. You just sit here and get warmed through and I'll have it on the table in a jiffy."

"Don't go to too much trouble," put in Bobby. "Anything will do."

She was off at once, and they heard the cheerful clatter of pans and dishes in the adjoining kitchen.

The boys stretched out luxuriously before the fire and looked at each other in silent ecstasy.

"Talk about luck," murmured Mouser.

"All we want to eat," repeated Pee Wee.

"She didn't know you when she said that," chaffed Fred. "I don't believe there's enough in the house to fill that contract."

"Pee Wee will have to go some to get ahead of me," chimed in Bobby.

A savory odor was soon wafted in from the kitchen. Pee Wee sat bolt upright and sniffed.

"Say, fellows! do you smell that?" he asked. "If I'm dreaming, don't wake me up."

"It's no dream," Mouser assured him. "It's something a good sight more real than that."

Before long the door opened to reveal the smiling face of Mrs. Wilson.

"All ready, boys," she announced cheerily. "Come right along."

## CHAPTER V

### THE TRAMPS' RETREAT

The boys needed no second invitation. Even Pee Wee shook off his usual laziness. With a single impulse they sprang from their chairs and trooped out into the dining room.

It seemed to the hungry boys as though nothing had ever looked so good as the meal that their hostess had provided for them. There was a huge dish of bacon and eggs, plates piled high with snowy, puffy biscuit, which, as Mrs. Wilson told them, she had "knocked together" in a hurry, smoking hot from the oven, a great platter of fried potatoes, and, to crown the feast, mince and apple and pumpkin pies whose flaky crusts seemed to fairly beg to be eaten.

A simultaneous "ah-h" came from the boys, as they looked at the store of good things set before them, and the way they plunged into the meal was the sincerest tribute that could be paid to the cookery of their hostess. It brought a glow of pleasure into her kindly eyes and a happy flush to her cheeks. She fluttered about them like a hen over her chicks, renewing the dishes, pressing them to take more – a thing which was wholly unnecessary – and joining in their jokes and laughter. It is safe to say that a merrier meal had not been enjoyed in that old farmhouse for many a day.

But even a meal like that had to come to an end at last, and it was with a sigh of perfect satisfaction that the boys finally sat back in their chairs and looked about at the complete wreck they had made of the viands.

"Looks as if a whirlwind had passed this way," remarked Mouser.

"I never enjoyed a meal so much," said Pee Wee.

"Well, you're certainly a judge," laughed Fred. "When you say a meal's the limit you know what you're talking about. And this time I agree with you."

"I'm glad you liked things," put in Mrs. Wilson. "It does me good to see the way you boys eat."

"I'm afraid you wouldn't make much money if you had us as steady boarders," smiled Bobby.

"Come right back to the living room and get yourselves warm as toast before you start out again in this wind," urged their hostess.

"We'd like to ever so much," replied Bobby. "But I guess we'd better be getting along. Perhaps that snow plough will get down sooner than we thought, and everything's been so good here that I'm afraid perhaps we've stayed too long already."

They wrapped themselves up warmly, and then Bobby as spokesman turned to their hostess.

"How much do we owe you?" he asked, taking out his pocketbook, while the others prepared to do the same.

"You don't owe me a cent!" declared Mrs. Wilson with emphasis.

"Oh, but yes," rejoined Bobby, somewhat startled. "We couldn't think of letting you go to all that trouble and expense without paying for it."

"I won't take a penny, bless your hearts," Mrs. Wilson repeated. "It's been a real joy to have you here. I haven't any children of my own, and the old place gets a bit lonesome at times. I haven't had such a good time for years as I've had this morning, seeing you eat so hearty and listening to your fun. I feel that I owe you a good deal more than you do me."

She was firm in her determination, although the boys pressed the matter as far as they could without offending her. So they were forced at last to yield to her wishes and return the money to their pockets.

It was with the warmest thanks that they left their kind-hearted hostess and went down the steps, Tiger accompanying them to the gate. He seemed to want to go further and whined softly when Mouser patted him good-bye.

"Isn't she a prince?" said Pee Wee admiringly, as they waved their hands in farewell.

“A princess you mean,” corrected Mouser.

“Have it your own way,” retorted Pee Wee. “Whichever name’s the best, she’s that.”

They were in a high state of elation as they ploughed their way across the snowy fields. They were blissfully conscious of being, as Mouser put it, “full to the chin,” and little else was needed at their age to make their happiness complete.

But they were sharply awakened by the sound of a whistle.

“That must be our train,” cried Fred in alarm.

“That’s what it is,” assented Bobby, quickening his pace. “We stayed a long time at the table, and the snow-plough must have come along sooner than they thought it would. Hurry, fellows, hurry!” and he tried to break into a run.

The others followed his example, but the snow was too deep for that. It clung about their feet and legs until they felt that they were moving in a nightmare.

“She’s going, fellows!” shouted Mouser in despair, as a stream of smoke began to stretch out behind the moving train.

“And all our bags and things are on board!” wailed Fred.

“Now we’re in a pretty mess,” gasped Pee Wee, slumping down in the snow.

There was no use in hurrying now, and they looked blankly at each other as they came to a full stop.

“Scubbity-yow!” howled Fred as the only way to relieve his feelings.

“Well, I’ll be jiggered!” exclaimed Mouser.

Pee Wee was too tired out from his exertion to say anything, and Bobby, too, kept silent, though for a different reason. He was busy thinking of the best way to get out of the tangle.

“There’s no use in worrying about our baggage, fellows,” he said at last. “Probably the conductor will take good care of that. And we may be able to send a telegram from some place telling the conductor to put our things off at Rockledge and leave them in care of the station agent there. What we’ve got to worry about is ourselves. We can’t stay here, and we’ve got to find some way to get another train as soon as we can. Have any of you fellows got a time table?”

“I had one,” replied Mouser, “but it’s in my bag on the train.”

None of the others had one and Bobby came to a quick decision.

“There’s no other way,” he announced. “We’ll have to go back and ask Mrs. Wilson. She’ll know all about the trains and what’s the best station for us to go to.”

They trudged back rather forlornly and explained their plight to Mrs. Wilson, who was full of sympathy.

“I’d like to have you stay here all night,” she volunteered, “and Mr. Wilson will take you over to the station in a rig to-morrow morning.”

They thanked her heartily, but explained that this was out of the question. They would be missed from the train, telegrams would be flying back and forth and their parents would be anxious and excited. They must get to some place where they could either telegraph or, better yet, get a train that would land them in Rockledge that afternoon or evening.

“I’ll tell you what to do,” she suggested, as a thought struck her. “You can’t get a train on this line you’ve been traveling on until very late to-night. But there’s another road that crosses this at a junction about two miles from here and connects with the main line that goes on to Rockledge. There’s an afternoon train on that line that you’ll have plenty of time to make, and it will land you in Rockledge before night. There’s a telegraph office there too, and you can send any messages you like before you board the train.”

“That’s just the very thing,” cried Bobby with enthusiasm.

“Just what the doctor ordered,” chuckled Mouser.

She gave them very careful directions for finding the station, and as there was none too much time and the walking was bound to be slow they set out at once, after thanking their friend for having come a second time to their relief.

Their path led for the most part through a wood and they passed no other houses on their way. Even in summer it was evident that the locality was wild and deserted. Now with the snow over everything it was especially desolate.

“You might almost think you were up in the Big Woods,” commented Mouser.

“That’s what,” agreed Fred. “It would be a dandy place for train robbers and that kind of fellows.”

“I’d hate to be wandering around here at night,” remarked Pee Wee, who was panting with the exertion of keeping up with the others.

“It would give one a sort of creepy feeling, like being in a cemetery,” assented Bobby.

Suddenly Fred uttered an exclamation.

“There’s a little house right over in that hollow,” he cried, pointing to the right.

“More like a hut or a shack than a regular house, seems to me,” grunted Mouser.

“I don’t believe there’s any one living there,” commented Pee Wee.

“Yes, there must be,” declared Bobby. “I can see the light of a fire shining through the window.”

The hut in question was a dilapidated structure of only one story that stood in a little hollow just off the road. It was in the last stages of decay and looked as though a strong wind would blow it to pieces. There were no fences nor barn nor any wagon or farm implement in sight.

Yet that some one lived in the crazy shack was evident, as Bobby had said, by the red light that came flickeringly through the only window that the cabin possessed.

“Let’s stop there for a minute and get warm,” suggested Fred. “Then, too, we can make sure that we’re still on the right road to the station.”

“What’s the use?” cautioned Bobby. “We got left once to-day by stopping too long.”

“It will only take a minute,” urged Fred.

As the others also wanted to stop, and Bobby did not wish to insist too much, they all went down into the hollow together.

The snow of course deadened their footsteps, so that whoever was in the cabin had no notice of their approach.

Fred, who was in advance, rapped on the door.

There was silence for a moment and then the door swung open and a rough looking man appeared on the sill.

“What do you want?” he asked gruffly.

“We wanted to ask directions about the road,” said Fred, a little dismayed by the fellow’s surly manner.

The man looked them over for a moment, noticed that they were well dressed and hesitated no longer.

“Come in,” he said briefly, and stood aside for them to pass.

## CHAPTER VI

### HEAVY ODDS

Although feeling rather uneasy because of the man's rough manner, the boys hardly saw what they could do but accept the invitation, and they went inside. The next moment they wished they had not.

There were two other men within the hut besides the one who had opened the door. They were seated at a bare pine table, and on the table there was a bottle of liquor. There seemed to be no other furniture in the miserable room, except a rusty wood stove, which was at white heat, two or three stools and a pile of hay in the corner, which evidently served as a bed.

The heat inside was stifling, and the room was rank with the fumes of liquor. The unshaven faces of the men were flushed, their eyes red and bleared, and a greasy pack of cards told of their occupation when they had been interrupted.

"Tramps," whispered Bobby to Fred, who was nearest. "Let's get out of this."

"You bet," returned Fred, as he made a motion toward the door.

But the man who had let them in now stood with his back against the closed door, looking at them with an ugly grin on his face, a face which was made still more repellant by a livid scar up near the temple.

"What do these young buckos want here?" asked one of the men at the table, rising and coming toward them. As he did so, Bobby noticed that he limped a trifle.

"We stopped in for a minute to ask if we were on the right road to the station," said Bobby in a tone which he tried to render as careless as possible.

"You did, eh?" said the man. "Well, just wait a minute and I'll tell you."

He and his companion approached their comrade at the door, and for a few moments there was a whispered conversation. Then the man with the scar, who seemed to be the leader of the gang, turned to Bobby.

"You're on the right road all right," he said.

"Thank you," returned Bobby. "Then I guess we'll be getting on."

The man laughed at this.

"Guess again, young feller," said one of them.

"What's your hurry?" asked the lame man.

"We don't often have such nice young kids drop in to keep us company," sneered the man with the scar. "Take off your hats and stay awhile."

The boys' hearts sank. They no longer had any doubts of the evil intentions of the men who held them virtually prisoners. They had fallen into a den of thieves.

"We're going now," declared Bobby, in a last desperate attempt to bluff the matter through, "and if you try to stop us it will be the worse for you."

The men laughed uproariously.

"A fine young turkey cock he is!" croaked one of them. "We'll have to cut his comb for him."

"You'll get your own cut first," shouted Fred, who was blazing with anger. "Don't forget that there are policemen and jails for just such fellows as you are."

"Shut up, Redhead," commanded the scar-faced man, adding insult to injury.

Then his jocular manner passed and was replaced by a wicked snarl.

"Hand over what money you've got in your pockets," he commanded, "and turn your pockets inside out. Do it quick too, or we'll skin you alive."

There was no mistaking the menace in his tone. He was in deadly earnest and his eyes shone like those of a beast of prey.

There was nothing to do but to obey. His victims were trapped and helpless. They were only eleven year old boys, and were no match physically even for one such burly ruffian. Against three, resistance would have been ridiculous.

Boiling with inward rage, they slowly and sullenly handed over the contents of their pockets. None of them had any great amount of money – only a few dollars for spending allowance. But taken altogether it made quite a respectable sum, over which the robbers gloated with evident satisfaction. Probably their chief calculation was the amount of liquor it would buy for their spree.

But even with this the thieves were not content. Bobby's silver watch, a scarf pin of Mouser's, Fred's seal ring and Pee Wee's gold sleeve buttons went to swell the pile. They even carried their meanness so far as to rob the lads of their railroad tickets. Then when they found that there was nothing else worth the plucking, the leader opened the door.

"Now beat it," he growled, "and thank your lucky stars that we didn't swipe your clothes."

Half blinded with wrath, the crestfallen boys climbed out of the hollow and into the road which they had left in such high spirits a few minutes before. They had been stripped clean. If their outer clothing had fitted any of the rascals they would have probably lost that too. They were utterly forlorn and downhearted.

If they had lost their possessions after a hot resistance against those who were anyway near their age and size, there would at least have been the exhilaration of the fight. But even that poor compensation was denied them. The odds had been too overwhelming even to think of a struggle.

At first they could not even speak to each other. When they attempted to find words they were so mad that they could only splutter.

"The skunks!" Fred managed to get out at last.

"The low down brutes," growled Mouser.

"Every cent gone," groaned Pee Wee. "And those sleeve buttons were a Christmas gift from my mother."

"And that silver watch was one my father gave me on my last birthday," muttered Bobby thickly.

"If they'd only left us our railroad tickets!" mourned Fred.

"That was the dirtiest trick of all," put in Mouser. "You can understand why they took the money and jewelry. But they probably don't have any idea in the world of using the tickets."

"Likely enough by this time they've torn them up and thrown them into the fire," Pee Wee conjectured.

"Don't speak the word, 'fire,'" said Bobby. "If we hadn't seen the light of it through the window, we wouldn't have gone in there at all."

"It was all my fault," moaned Fred. "What a fool stunt it was of me to want to stop there anyway."

Bobby could easily have said, "I told you so," but that was not Bobby's way.

"It wasn't anybody's fault," he said. "It was just our hard luck. We might have done it a thousand times and found only decent people there each time."

"Lucky I gave that dime to Betty this morning anyway," grunted Fred. "That's one thing the thieves didn't get."

The remark struck the boys as so comical that they broke into laughter. It was the one thing needed to relieve the tension. It cleared the air and all felt better.

"Talk about looking on the bright side of things," chuckled Pee Wee.

"You're a wonder as a little cheerer-up," commented Mouser.

"That's looking at the doughnut instead of seeing only the hole in the doughnut," laughed Bobby.

After all they were alive and unharmed. The thieves might have beaten them up or tied them in the cabin while they made their escape.

"Things might have been a great deal worse," said Bobby cheerfully, putting their thoughts into words. "The money didn't amount to so much after all, and our folks will send us more. And we

may be able to have the tramps arrested and get back our other things. We'll telegraph just as soon as we get to – ”

But here he stopped short in dismay.

“We haven't even money enough to pay for the message!” he exclaimed.

“Perhaps the station man will trust us,” suggested Fred.

“I think there's a way of sending messages so that the folks who get them pay on the other end,” said Pee Wee hopefully.

None of the boys were very clear on this point, but it offered a ray of cheer.

“We won't need to send more than one message anyway,” said practical Bobby as they trudged along. “Some of our folks might be away and there might be some delay in getting to them. But I know that my father is at home and I'll just ask him to send on enough money for the bunch of us. Then you fellows can square it up with me afterwards.”

They had reached the outskirts of a village now and the walking had become easier. They quickened their pace and soon came in sight of the station.

“There it is!” cried Fred, and the boys broke into a run.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **PAYING AN OLD DEBT**

As Bobby's watch had been the only one in the party, the boys had not been able to keep track of the time during the latter part of their journey, and they were a little fearful that they might be late for their train.

They were relieved therefore to learn they were in plenty of time. The train was not regularly due for half an hour, and owing to the snowstorm it would probably be an hour or more behind time.

The station agent at Roseville, as the town was named, had charge of the telegraph office as well. He was a kindly man and listened with the greatest sympathy to the boys' story. His indignation at the robbers was hot, and he promised to put the constable on their trail at once.

"It's a beastly outrage," he stormed. "That old deserted shack has been too handy for fellows of that kind. They make it a regular hang-out. We'll clean out the gang and burn the place to the ground. I've got to stay here now until after the train leaves, but as soon as it's gone, I'll get busy."

He assured them that he would send on the telegram to be paid for at the other end, and the boys, possessing themselves of some blanks, withdrew to a quiet corner to prepare the message.

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