

Stratemeyer Edward

**Dave Porter and His Rivals: or,
The Chums and Foes of Oak
Hall**



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PREFACE

"Dave Porter and His Rivals" is a complete story in itself, but forms the seventh volume in a line issued under the general title of "Dave Porter Series."

When I brought out the first volume of this series, entitled "Dave Porter at Oak Hall," I trusted that the story would please the young people for whom it was written, but I did not imagine that so many thousands of boys and girls all over our broad land would take to Dave as they have, and would insist upon knowing more about him.

My opening tale was one of boarding school life, and this was followed by "Dave Porter in the South Seas," whither our hero had gone in search of his father, and then by "Dave Porter's Return to School," in which book Dave met all of his friends again and likewise a few of his enemies.

So far our hero had heard about his father, but had not yet seen his parent, and the next volume, "Dave Porter in the Far North," related the particulars of a trip to Norway, where the youth had some stirring adventures amid snow and ice in the Land of the Midnight Sun.

Coming back to America, the lad was sent again to Oak Hall, as set down in the next volume, called "Dave Porter and His Classmates." During that term at school many complications arose, and our hero did something for the honor of Oak Hall that was a great credit to him.

Dave's father was now with him, but his sister Laura was in the Far West, and upon her return he received an invitation to visit a large ranch, and how he went, and what strenuous times he had, were related in "Dave Porter at Star Ranch."

As soon as his Western outing was at an end, Dave returned home, and then betook himself once more to Oak Hall. Here, to his surprise, he found an unusual state of affairs, the particulars of which are given in the pages that follow.

Once again I thank those who have praised my books in the past. I hope the present volume will also please them and do them good.

Edward Stratemeyer.

CHAPTER I

AN AUTOMOBILE RIDE

"Everybody ready?"

"Yes, Dave; let her go!" cried Phil Lawrence.

"How about you folks in the other auto?" queried Dave Porter, as he let off the hand brake and advanced the spark and lever of the machine he was about to run.

"We are all ready," responded Roger Morr.

"Been ready for an hour," added Ben Basswood, who sat beside Roger.

"Oh, Ben, not quite as long as that!" burst out Laura Porter, who was one of three girls in the tonneau of the second car.

"Well, make it fifty-eight minutes then; I'm not particular," responded Ben, calmly.

"Are the lunch hampers in?" asked Jessie Wadsworth, anxiously. "Mamma said we musn't forget anything."

"Trust Dave and Roger to look after the food," burst out Phil Lawrence.

"Likewise Mr. Phil Lawrence," added Dave. "Just wait till it comes lunch time, and you'll see Phil stow away about fifteen chicken sandwiches, ten slices of cake, three pickles, five olives – "

"Stop! I draw the line on olives, Dave!" cried Phil, making a wry face.

"Oh, olives are fine; I love them!" cried Belle Endicott.

"Then all that are coming to me are yours," returned Phil, quickly. "But start her up, fellows, if we are going!" he added, and then, putting a big horn to his lips, he blew a loud blast.

"Take good care of yourselves!" cried a voice from the veranda of the mansion in front of which the two automobiles were standing, and Mrs. Wadsworth waved a hand to the young people.

"We'll try to," answered Dave, and then he threw in the clutch on low gear, and the big touring car moved gently away, out of the grounds of the Wadsworth mansion and into the main highway leading from Crumville to Shady Glen Falls. The second car speedily followed.

It was a late summer day, with a clear blue sky overhead and just enough breeze blowing to freshen the air. A shower of rain the day previous had laid the dust of the road and added to the freshness of fields and woods.

The boys and girls had planned this outing for several days. All of the youths were to return to Oak Hall school the following week, and they wished to do something for the girls to remember them by, as Dave expressed it.

"Might have a party," Roger had suggested.

"No good, unless it was a lawn party," Phil had answered. "It's too stuffy in the house, these warm days."

"We might take a couple of autos and go for a day's outing up the river road," Dave had suggested, and this proposition had been accepted immediately. It was decided that Dave should run the Wadsworth machine, he having learned to do so some time before, and Roger was to run a car hired at the new Crumville garage. Each car had a capacity of five passengers, including the driver, and the party consisted of ten young people, five boys and five girls.

"Now, Dave, don't let her out for more than fifty miles an hour," remarked Sam Day, who sat in the back of the leading auto, between two of the young ladies.

"Fifty miles an hour!" shrieked Jessie Wadsworth. "What an idea! Dave, don't you dare!"

"Oh, Lazy is only fooling, Jessie," answered Dave. "He wouldn't want to ride at that rate of speed himself."

"Twenty miles an hour is fast enough," said Belle Endicott. "I want to view the scenery. It is lovely around Crumville – so different from around the ranch."

"Yes, the scenery is fine, even though we haven't such big mountains as you have out West," answered Dave.

"And Shady Glen Falls is an ideal spot for a picnic," said Jessie. "Papa took us there last summer."

"You've got to make the most of the Falls this summer," went on Dave. "I heard in town last week that next year a paper company is going to put a mill there."

"Oh, Dave, is that the Eureka Paper Company?" questioned Jessie.

"Yes. What do you know about them?"

"Why, I heard papa and your uncle talking about it. It is a company in which Mr. Aaron Poole holds a big interest."

"Aaron Poole!" murmured the youthful driver of the automobile, and his face grew serious, as he remembered the trouble he had had with that mean individual.

"Yes. Papa heard Nat bragging down at the post-office, about what great things his father was going to do, when the paper company got started."

"That's just like Nat Poole," was Phil Lawrence's comment. "If Nat couldn't brag about something he'd die."

"By the way, where does Nat keep himself?" questioned Sam Day. "I haven't met him since I came to Crumville."

"He has been keeping shady – since our little affair at Niagara Falls," explained Dave.

"Is he going to return to Oak Hall?"

"I presume so. He left his motor-boat and some other things up there, so I heard."

"We can get along without Nat Poole, Dave."

"Right you are, Lazy," put in Phil Lawrence. "But maybe, with Link Merwell gone, he won't be quite so bad as he was."

"Oh, that horrid Link Merwell!" cried Jessie. "I trust we never see or hear of him again!"

"Well, one thing is certain, Merwell will never get back to Oak Hall," said Dave. "He got his walking papers and that settled it. He is out for good, the same as Nick Jasniff."

"Dave, have you heard anything about Jasniff lately?" questioned Phil.

"One of the boys wrote that he had heard Nick had returned to the United States. Personally, I haven't seen or heard from him since we met in Europe – and I don't want to see him," added Dave, earnestly.

Toot! toot! came from behind the leading automobile, and a moment later the second car ranged up alongside.

"Guess you folks are doing more talking than running!" cried Roger, with a grin. "Here is where we show you the road!" And in a twinkling the second car shot ahead, and was "hitting her up," as Ben expressed it, at thirty miles an hour. Dave immediately turned on more speed likewise, and over the smooth, straight road both machines spun.

"Oh, Dave, is it safe?" asked Jessie, with a little gasp, as the speed increased.

"Yes, – as long as we are on the straight road," he answered. "We'll have to slow down at the turn."

"I like to ride fast – but not too fast," said Lucy Basswood, Ben's cousin, the other girl in the car.

The turn in the road was almost gained, and both machines had slowed down once more, when there came a shrill, screeching whistle from behind, and a racing car shot into sight, moving along with a great noise, for the muffler had been cut out. All of the girls screamed in fright, and instinctively Dave and Roger ran their cars as close to the right side of the road as possible. Then, with a roar, the racing car shot past, sending up a cloud of dust, and a shower of small stones, one of which hit Laura Porter in the cheek, and another striking Phil in the ear.

"Fellows that run that way ought to be arrested," was Roger's comment.

"Oh, I was so afraid we should be struck!" gasped Jessie, sinking back into her seat with a white face.

"Did you recognize them?" asked Belle Endicott.

"I didn't have time to look," answered Roger. "I was busy getting out of the way."

"Just what I was doing," added Dave. "I didn't want them to take off the mudguard, or a wheel."

"I caught sight of one of the fellows," said Ben Basswood. "He looked right at me as he passed."

"Who was it?" questioned several eagerly.

"Nat Poole."

"Nat Poole!" cried Dave. "Surely, he wasn't driving that racing car."

"No, he was in the rear, with another chap, – and two were on the front seat. But I didn't recognize any of the others."

"I saw that machine in Crumville last week," said Laura. "I believe it belongs in Lumberdale."

"I hope those fellows are not bound for Shady Glen Falls," said Laura. "It would quite spoil our outing, to have such persons around."

"A picnic like ours would be dead slow for that crowd," remarked Phil. "If they stop anywhere, it will be most likely at some roadhouse, where they can drink and smoke, and play pool and cards."

The racing car had long since disappeared in the distance, and now the other automobiles proceeded on their way. The girls were very nervous, and the boys did all in their power to remove the strain. But the girls declared that they had had a narrow escape from a serious accident, and it put much of a damper on the trip.

"If ever I meet the driver of that car I'll give him a piece of my mind," said Dave. "It's against the law to run at such high speed."

The distance to Shady Glen Falls from Crumville was thirty-five miles. The last half of the journey was over a winding dirt road, and the boys had calculated that it would take them two hours to reach the picnic grounds.

"We'll go by way of Darnell's Corners, and come back by way of Haslow," said Dave. "That will give us a sort of round trip." And so it was decided.

Darnell's Corners was but five miles from the Falls. It was only a small settlement, boasting of a tavern, a blacksmith shop, a church, and two stores. As they came in sight of the place Phil uttered a cry:

"There is that racing car now!"

Phil was right, the car stood in front of the tavern, the engine still running and letting out short puffs of smoke.

"Where are the fellows who were in it?" questioned Sam.

"Must have gone inside for a drink," answered Ben.

"Here come two of them now," said Roger, in a low voice, as the tavern door swung open and two young men appeared, each wearing a linen duster and a touring cap.

"It's Nat Poole!" cried Jessie.

"I know that driver," said Dave. "He is Pete Barnaby, a sport from Lumberdale. He used to follow the horse races before autoing became popular. He once tried to sell Caspar Potts a horse, but we found out the animal was doctored up and worthless, and we didn't take him. Barnaby was furious when the deal fell through."

"I've heard of him," said Ben. "He wanted to sell my father a horse, but father wouldn't have anything to do with him."

While the boys were talking the tavern door had swung open again, and now two other persons stepped forth. They, too, wore linen dusters and touring caps, and one carried a basket containing something to eat and to drink.

"Dave!" cried Phil, in astonishment. "Look who they are!"

"Link Merwell and Nick Jasniff!" murmured Dave. "How in the world did they get here, and what underhanded work are they up to now?"

CHAPTER II

DAVE AND HIS PAST

Dave Porter had good reasons for looking upon Link Merwell and Nick Jasniff with suspicion. In the past these two unworthies had caused Dave a good deal of trouble, and when exposed each had vowed that sooner or later he would "square accounts" with the youth who had gotten the better of him. Dave had hoped he had seen the last of them, but here they were, eyeing him closely, each with a face that plainly showed his envy and his hatred.

To those of you who have read the preceding volumes of this series Dave Porter and his friends and enemies will need no special introduction. For the benefit of others let me explain that Dave had once upon a time been a homeless child, having been found wandering along the railroad tracks near Crumville. He was placed in the local poorhouse, and later on bound out to a broken-down college professor named Caspar Potts, who had taken to farming for his health.

Professor Potts could not make farming pay, and was in danger of being sold out by Aaron Poole, the father of Nat Poole, already introduced, when a most unexpected happening changed the whole current of events. In the town lived Mr. Oliver Wadsworth, a rich manufacturer. He had a young daughter named Jessie, and one day, when this miss was waiting for an automobile ride, the gasoline tank of the machine took fire, and Jessie was in danger of being burned to death when Dave rushed in and rescued her.

"A boy who will do such a brave deed deserves to be assisted," said Mr. Wadsworth, and he talked to the boy, and learned that Caspar Potts had once been one of his own college professors. Arrangements were at once made for the professor and Dave to move to the Wadsworth mansion, and then Dave was sent to boarding school, as related in detail in my first volume, entitled "Dave Porter at Oak Hall." With Dave went Ben Basswood, his one chum in Crumville.

At the school Dave made a number of friends, including Roger Morr, who was the son of a United States senator; Phil Lawrence, the offspring of a wealthy shipowner; Sam Day, usually called Lazy, because of a habit he had of taking his time, and others whom we shall meet in the near future.

In those days, Dave's greatest trouble was the cloud over his parentage, and when he got what he thought was a clew to his identity he promptly followed it up by taking a trip far across the ocean, as related in "Dave Porter in the South Seas." After some stirring happenings, on ship-board and among the natives, he located his uncle, Dunston Porter, and learned much concerning his father, David Breslow Porter, and his sister Laura, then traveling in Europe.

After his trip to the South Sea islands, the lad returned to Oak Hall, as related in the third volume, called "Dave Porter's Return to School." Here he was warmly received by his many friends, and became more popular than ever, much to the disgust of Link Merwell, Nick Jasniff, and also Nat Poole, who had followed him to Oak Hall from Crumville.

"Dave Porter puts up a big front, but I'll take him down a peg or two," said Nick Jasniff, and he forced a fight with the Crumville lad. Much to his surprise he was knocked down and badly whipped, and then, in a sudden brutal rage, he snatched up an Indian club and might have inflicted serious injury to Dave had not the latter seized him, while others forced the weapon from his grasp. Then, in alarm, Jasniff ran away from Oak Hall, and having gotten himself mixed up with some men who were wanted for a robbery, he left the country.

During this term at the school Dave was anxiously awaiting to hear from his father and his sister. Then came word, through Jasniff, who tried to belittle Dave, that Mr. Porter and Laura were in Europe, and the youth determined to go in search of them. Roger accompanied him, and what befell the pair was related in detail in "Dave Porter in the Far North." In England Dave ran across Nick Jasniff, and compelled the fellow to tell what he knew of Mr. Porter, and then Dave followed

his parent to the upper part of Norway, where father and son at last met, under conditions far out of the ordinary.

Laura Porter, not knowing anything of Dave's existence, had gone from Europe to the ranch home of her friends, the Endicotts. She returned to Crumville, to meet her long-lost brother, and then Dave again returned to Oak Hall, as told of in "Dave Porter and His Classmates." Jasniff was gone, but Link Merwell and Nat Poole remained, and both did what they could to dim Dave's popularity. Link Merwell was particularly obnoxious, and in the end Dave took matters in his own hands and gave the bully the thrashing he richly deserved. Then some of the fellow's wrongdoings reached the ears of the master of the school, and he was ordered to pack his trunk and leave, which he did in a great rage.

"It is all Dave Porter's doings!" said Link Merwell, bitterly. "But wait – I'll square up with him, see if I don't!"

Laura Porter and Belle Endicott were great friends, and through the latter Laura and her brother received an invitation to visit the Endicott ranch in the Far West, and this they did, as related in the volume entitled "Dave Porter at Star Ranch." They took with them Jessie Wadsworth and also Roger and Phil. On the way they met Nat Poole at Niagara Falls, and Poole attempted to play a mean trick on Dave. But the latter turned the tables on the money-lender's son, and the latter went back home a wiser if not a better boy.

The Endicott ranch was located next to one owned by Link Merwell's father, and, as was to be expected, it was not long before there was a clash between Dave and his party on one side and Merwell and his followers on the other. Link Merwell, as usual, did all in his power to injure Dave, and make the outing for the others a failure, but he was caught in his own trap, and it was proved that he had, to a certain extent, aided some horse-thieves in their nefarious work. Mr. Merwell had to pay Mr. Endicott for the animals that were missing, and, in order to hush the matter up, he agreed to sell his ranch and move to some other part of the country.

"Well, I hope that is the last of Link Merwell, so far as we are concerned," said Roger at the time.

"We can do very well without such chaps as Merwell and Nick Jasniff," Dave had added, with a grim smile.

"Yes, and without such fellows as Nat Poole, too," Phil had put in. "Although I must say I don't think Nat is as bad as Link and Nick."

"Nat is too much of a dude to be real bad," said Laura.

"Nat lacks backbone," explained Dave. "He usually does what the others tell him to. But Jasniff and Merwell are both wicked fellows, and Jasniff is brutal."

The home-coming from the ranch had been a gala occasion at the Wadsworth mansion, and the young people had been warmly welcomed by Jessie's parents and by Mr. Porter and Caspar Potts. Ben Basswood had come over from his home to greet them, and he brought with him Sam Day, who was paying him a visit.

"I suppose you are all going back to Oak Hall," remarked Sam to the boys.

"Of course," answered Dave. "You are going back, aren't you?"

"Sure thing – and so are all of the others of our old crowd."

"We must make the best of what vacation is left before we get down to the grind again," remarked the senator's son, and the next day the matter was talked over, with the result that the automobile trip to Shady Glen Falls was proposed and decided upon. All had started out in the best of spirits, never dreaming of the trouble that was in store for them.

"Dave, what are you going to do?" whispered Ben, as he, too, recognized the crowd coming toward the racing car.

Before Dave could answer, Nat Poole strode forward with a sickly smile on his face.

"Hello, there!" he cried, and nodded curtly to the girls. "Out for a ride, I see."

"Nat, who was driving your car?" asked Dave, sharply.

"What business is that of yours, Dave Porter?" questioned the dudish youth, quickly.

"You came pretty close to running us down. You were speeding altogether too fast."

"Ho! ho! We scared you, did we?" returned Nat. "Sorry for the girls, I'm sure," and his face took on a mean little grin.

"What are you finding fault about, Dave Porter?" demanded Pete Barnaby, the owner of the racing car, coming closer. His nose was very red, and his breath smelt strongly of liquor.

"I am finding fault with the way your car was run, if you want to know it," answered Dave, stoutly.

"We are not asking you for advice."

"Perhaps not, but if you try any such trick again, Pete Barnaby, you may get yourself into trouble."

"You were exceeding the speed limit," put in Roger.

"And you came close to running us down," added Ben.

"Oh, you boys are a timid bunch," grumbled the owner of the racing car. "I didn't come within ten feet of touching you."

"Of course they are a timid crowd," said Nick Jasniff, loudly. "If they had any sand they wouldn't say anything about it."

"You're a nice one to talk about 'sand,' after what Dave did to you at the school gym.," was Phil's sarcastic comment.

"Look here, Phil Lawrence, I don't want any of your hot air!" cried Nick Jasniff, in a sudden rage. "You keep your mouth shut."

"It's a wonder you didn't stay in Europe, Jasniff," said Dave. "I didn't think you'd dare to come back to the United States."

"Say, you needn't – " began Jasniff, and then drew back, looking much disturbed. "You – er – you needn't rake up old times. Those things are all settled, and I've got as much right to be here as you have."

"Well, you won't come back to Oak Hall," said Sam.

"Don't want to come back. I'm going to a better school."

"And so am I," said Link Merwell, as if he was anxious to make the fact known to his former schoolmates.

"I don't care where you go, so long as you don't bother us any more," rejoined Dave.

"Oh, you haven't seen the end of us yet, has he, Nick?" said Link Merwell, appealing to his crony.

"Not much he hasn't," retorted Nick Jasniff.

"We are going to Rockville Military Academy," continued Link Merwell, mentioning a school which, as my old readers know, was located not a great distance from Oak Hall. In the past there had been many contests between the students of the two seats of learning, and the rivalry was very bitter.

"Rockville!" cried the senator's son. "I shouldn't think they'd want you there."

"Say, you take that back, or I'll – I'll – " blustered Merwell, and then stopped, not knowing how to proceed.

"Oh, say, come on, you fellows," broke in Nat Poole, who was growing scared, thinking there might be a fight. "You can talk this over some other time. Just remember what we started out to do. Hurry up, let's do it," and he motioned his companions towards the racing car.

"I'm ready to go ahead," answered Pete Barnaby, climbing into the driver's seat. "Come on, pile in, if you're going."

"I don't want Dave Porter and his crowd to think I am afraid of them," growled Link Merwell.

"We'll meet you after you get back to Oak Hall," sang out Nick Jasniff. "And we'll settle old scores."

"Well, you look out that you don't get your fingers burnt trying to do it!" retorted Dave. And then the racing car started off and was speedily lost to view around a turn of the road.

CHAPTER III

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE FALLS

"What horrid young fellows!" was Jessie's comment. She was trembling from head to foot and her face was pale.

"Don't mind what they say," answered Dave, kindly. He thought a great deal of the girl, and it distressed him greatly to see her so worried.

"I shouldn't think they'd want Jasniff and Merwell at Rockville," was the comment of the senator's son. "Everybody in that town knows how Jasniff was mixed up in that railroad station affair." He referred to a robbery committed by some men, the particulars of which were recorded in "Dave Porter's Return to School." Nick Jasniff had been in company with the evil-doers, but his share in the transaction had been smoothed over and hushed up by his family.

"Well, I heard that the military academy was rather hard up for pupils this term," answered Sam. "About a dozen of the sophs and juniors left, and the enrollment of freshmen was rather slim. I suppose on that account the authorities can't be overly particular as to who they take in."

"And of course Merwell and Jasniff had their sides of their stories to tell," said Dave. "You can be sure they didn't tell matters as Doctor Clay would have done."

"Or as we might have done – had we been asked," broke in Sam.

"Well, I hope you boys keep away from them when you get to school," said Laura.

"What do you suppose they are up to now, Dave?" asked the shipowner's son.

"I don't know, Phil; but from the look on Nat Poole's face I should think – " And then Dave stopped short.

"What?"

"Well, never mind now. I may be wrong, and there is no use of worrying. Come on, let us get to the Falls, – and try to forget that crowd." And so speaking, Dave started up the touring car he was running, and followed in the direction Pete Barnaby had taken, and Roger came after him.

The meeting at the tavern had disturbed all of the girls, and the boys had hard work trying to cheer them up and make them forget the unpleasant encounter. Everybody felt that there was "something in the air," but each person hated to mention it to the others.

Presently Dave reached the point where they would have to take to a side road that was deep with dust and hemmed in on both sides by rocks and bushes. Here, in the dust, could plainly be seen the marks of another automobile.

"Think they came this way, Dave?" questioned Sam.

"Yes, – although some other folks may be at the Falls on an outing."

"Oh, I hope we don't meet them again!" said Belle Endicott. The two machines were running slowly and close together.

They passed on around a long curve, and over a small hill, and then came in sight of the river, glistening in the sunshine between the trees. From a distance came the roar of the Falls, where a fairly large body of water rushed steadily over the rocks.

"Isn't it a shame that they are going to use the Falls for a mill!" said one of the girls.

"Well, this is a commercial age, and so one must expect those things," answered Dave. "But I shall hate to see the Falls used for business. They are so pretty."

There was another turn just ahead, and it was lucky for Dave that he was running slowly, for there, across the road, were placed several logs and dead limbs of trees. As it was, he ran directly on top of some of the tree limbs before he could come to a stop, and Roger, so close behind, had to turn into some bushes to avoid ramming the car in front.

"Well, of all things!" burst out Phil, while several of the girls screamed in fright.

"Who did this?" demanded the senator's son.

"It is easy to see who did it," answered Dave. "See the sign?" And he pointed to a big white card, tacked to a post propped up among the logs and tree limbs. On the card was painted, in red, the following:

THIS ROAD CLOSED
By Order of Aaron Poole
Pres. Eureka Paper Co.

"This is some of Nat's work!" burst out Phil. "That is why he was in such a hurry to get ahead of us."

"I believe you," answered Dave. "I was afraid he was up to some trick, but I didn't want to say anything about it until I was sure."

"But if Nat is guilty, how did he know we were coming here?" asked Roger.

"I guess I can explain that," said Ben. "I was talking to my cousin about it, down at the drug store. Just as we were coming out, after having some soda, I saw Nat behind one of the partitions. He must have heard all we said, and I suppose it made him mad to think we were going to have a good time, and that he wouldn't be in it."

"Exactly," returned Dave. "Just as he was mad when he wasn't invited to the party, and tried to spoil the ice-cream."

"Do you suppose they have a right to close the road?" questioned Roger.

"I don't know. I always thought this was a public highway."

"So it is," added Ben. "The paper company bought the ground on one side of the road but not on the other. I don't think they can stop us from going through, even though they may stop us from going down to the Falls."

"But if we can't go to the Falls, what is the use of keeping on this road?" asked Laura.

"We can go above the Falls, Laura," answered her brother. "There is a beautiful spot there called Lookout Point, where you can look out all over the valley."

The matter was talked over for a few minutes, and the boys decided to go ahead, to show that they considered that they had a right to use the road, even if they did not go down to the Falls. The roadway was cleared sufficiently to let the cars pass, and the power was turned on once again.

"Be careful, Dave, that you don't run into more trouble!" sang out Roger.

"I'll be on the lookout!" was the answer. "And you be prepared to stop quick, too, so as not to run into me."

"I'll drop back to a place of safety," returned the senator's son. "There is no use of keeping so close together, anyway."

The road wound in and out among the trees, and in some spots was so narrow that the boys had to run with great care, for fear of bumping into the stump of a tree or on the rocks, or switching into some low-hanging branch. Dave had his foot on the brake, ready to stop quickly, should it become necessary to do so.

"Hi, there! Stop! Don't you dare to come any further!"

The call was an unexpected one, coming just as the leading automobile hove in sight of the Falls. Dave saw Nat Poole hurrying towards him, followed by Merwell and Jasniff. Pete Barnaby was nowhere in sight, and the marks on the narrow road told that his racing car had gone on ahead.

"What do you want, Nat?" asked Dave, as coolly as he could, having brought his machine to a standstill.

"Can't you read, Dave Porter?" fumed the son of the Crumville money-lender.

"Certainly I can read."

"Well, then, what are you doing on this road? You know it is closed. You haven't any right on it at all – you or anybody else. You turn around and go back, just as quick as you can."

"This is a public road, Nat Poole!" cried Ben. "You hadn't any right to put up that sign."

"Humph! A lot you know about it, Ben Basswood! This is my father's land, and I reckon he knows his rights. You are not going down to the Falls to-day to have your picnic." And Nat's small eyes gleamed maliciously.

"We don't intend to go down to the Falls, – now that we know how matters stand," said Dave. "But we are going through on this road."

"Not much you ain't – not another step!" roared Nat.

"That's right, Nat, make 'em keep off your property," put in Link Merwell.

"Show 'em that you won't allow a poorhouse nobody to dictate to you," added Nick Jasniff, but in such a low voice that Dave did not catch all he said.

"I said we were going through on this road – and we are," answered Dave, calmly, and he started to turn on the power again. As he did this Nat Poole leaped to the road directly in front of the touring car, and Jasniff and Merwell followed suit.

"Stop! Don't you dare to touch me, or I'll have the law on you!" screamed the money-lender's son.

"We'll fix 'em for you, Nat!" cried Nick Jasniff. "Come on, Link, get to work!" And leaping to one side of the roadway he dragged forth the dead limb of a tree and dropped it in front of the first car. Quick to understand, Merwell followed with another dead limb, and then with some stones.

"That's the stuff!" cried Nat Poole, his face brightening. "Pile it up, fellows!" And he, too, ran for some sticks and stones, with which to make the barrier in the narrow roadway more complete.

Had Dave elected so to do he might have gone ahead when first this work was done by the enemy. But there was danger of injury both to the big touring car and to those in the roadway, and he did not wish to take the risk. Besides, there was no telling if Roger could get through, and he would not leave the crowd in the second automobile in the lurch.

"Now, I reckon you'll have to turn back!" cried Nat Poole, in triumph, after so much had been piled in the roadway that passing was totally out of the question.

"Nat Poole, I believe you are the meanest boy in the whole world!" cried Jessie, and there was a suspicion of tears in her eyes as she spoke.

"Humph! You people needn't think that you are going to have the best of me all the time," growled Nat.

"We are not doing this against any of the young ladies," said Link Merwell, with a smirk at Laura that made Dave's sister turn away in disdain. "We are only doing it to square accounts with Dave Porter and his cronies. We owe them a good deal, – and this is the first installment."

"With a good deal more to follow!" added Nick Jasniff, with a wicked chuckle.

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, this is a public highway," said Dave, as calmly as he could. "You have no right to block the road, and I want you to clear that stuff away just as fast as you put it there."

"Hear him talk!" cried Link Merwell. "You'd think he was Governor of the State, wouldn't you?"

"Don't you mind what he says, Nat," said Jasniff. "If they start to take the stuff away we'll put it back." And then, looking around, he picked up a heavy stick which might be used for a club. He was spoiling for a fight, and only the presence of the girls, and the fact that he and his cohorts were but three against five, kept him from attacking Dave.

"Oh, Dave, what shall we do?" whispered Jessie. She was becoming more frightened every minute.

"I don't see how we are going to turn around," said one of the other girls. "The trees are too close to the sides of the road."

"We are not going to turn around," answered Dave, and his face took on a stern look. He turned to his chums. "How about it?"

"I'll fight them before I turn back!" answered Roger.

"So will I," added Phil. "I don't believe they have any more right to this road than we have."

"Oh, you mustn't fight," cried Laura.

"Do you want to let that crowd crow over us, Laura?" asked Dave, flatly.

"No, no, Dave! But – but – " And then Laura stopped short, not knowing what to say. She did not wish to see an encounter, nor did she wish her brother and his chums to give in to those who were so unjustly opposing them.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

"This is the time we get the best of Dave Porter!" whispered Link Merwell to his cronies. "I guess we have spoiled their picnic."

"I – I – don't think th – they'll fight," faltered Nat, as Dave leaped to the ground, followed by his chums.

"Better arm yourselves with clubs," suggested Nick Jasniff. "Remember, we are only three to five."

"Maybe we had better – er – go away," returned the money-lender's son, hesitatingly.

"No, I am going to see the thing out," answered Jasniff.

"So am I," added Merwell. "Don't go, Nat – they won't dare to fight – with the girls looking on."

"Whoa, there! Whoa!" came a cry from behind the two touring cars, and looking back the boys and girls saw a man drive up on a buckboard drawn by a spirited horse.

"Why, if it isn't Jed Sully!" cried Ben.

"Who is he?" questioned Sam.

"Sort of a roadmaster in these parts. I suppose he is going around, inspecting the roads and bridges."

"Then he ought to be able to tell us about this road!" put in Phil, quickly.

"Hello! What's the meaning of this?" demanded Jed Sully, after alighting. And he strode forward and confronted the boys.

"How are you, Mr. Sully?" said Dave, for he had met the roadmaster before.

"Oh, so it's you, Dave! Blocked up, eh?" And the roadmaster looked first at Dave and his chums and then at those standing on the other side of the barrier. "Who did this?"

"They did," answered Roger, and pointed to the other crowd.

"What for?" And the roadmaster's voice grew a bit hard.

"Nat Poole, there, claims that his father has a right to close this road," explained Dave. "He put up a barrier some distance back, but we passed it. Now he and his friends have put up this."

"And we want to know if they have a right to do it," added Ben. "I had an idea the new paper company bought only one side of the road."

"So it did," answered Jed Sully. "And even if it bought both sides it couldn't close off this road, which is a public highway." He turned to Nat. "Are you Aaron Poole's son?"

"Ye-as," faltered the youth addressed, and he commenced to look worried.

"Did your father give you orders to close off this road?"

"Why – er – he – that is," stammered Nat. "What business is it of yours, anyway?" he cried.

"It is a good deal of my business," responded Jed Sully, warmly. "I am the roadmaster for this district, and I won't allow you or anybody else to close off this road, or any other, without special permission. You had no right to put those logs across the road away back, and put up that sign, and I want you to take 'em away as soon as you can."

"Well, my father bought this land, and – "

"No, he didn't buy it; the paper company bought it," corrected Jed Sully. "But that gave 'em no right to close the road. You take that stuff out of the way, and at once, or I'll have you locked up." And walking around the barrier he caught Nat by the arm.

"Let go – don't you touch me!" screamed the money-lender's son, trying to jerk away.

"You let my friend alone," broke in Nick Jasniff, and made a motion as if to use his club.

"Here, none of that – or I'll have you all in the lock-up in jig time," said the roadmaster, so sternly that Jasniff allowed the club to drop to his side. He turned again to Dave and his friends. "Did you see these chaps put this stuff here?"

"Yes," replied the others.

"Then get to work and clear it away instantly, or I'll lock you all up, and these fellows can testify against you," continued the roadmaster, to Nat and his cronies.

"Good! that's the way to talk to 'em!" cried Roger, in a low voice.

"I guess Nat didn't expect to meet the roadmaster," returned Sam.

The money-lender's son and his cronies tried to argue the matter, but Jed Sully would not listen to them. He knew Aaron Poole, and had no love for the man who had on more than one occasion foreclosed a mortgage, and driven people out of house and home.

"I'll give you ten minutes to clear the road," he said, taking out a big silver watch. "If it ain't cleared by that time I'll take you over to Lumberdale and lock you up."

"I won't touch a stick!" cried Jasniff, defiantly.

"Nor I," added Merwell.

"Oh, but – er – I don't want to be locked up!" whined Nat.

"You said your dad had a right to the road," said Jasniff, in disgust.

"I thought he did have, but – er – I guess I was mistaken. Oh, come on and help me!" pleaded Nat, and set to work without further delay, to clear the road.

Jasniff and Merwell were very angry, but they did not care to let their crony do all the work, and they were a bit afraid of Jed Sully, so presently they took hold and aided the money-lender's son in clearing the highway.

"As soon as you've finished here you'll come back with me and clear the other spot," said the roadmaster. "And you can tear up that sign, for it is no good."

"I'm going to put it up near the Falls," answered Nat. "Nobody can come down there any more."

"Then you'd better put up a fence to keep 'em out," was the roadmaster's comment.

"You don't want us to come back with you, do you?" asked Dave, in a whisper. "We are off for a picnic and it is getting late."

"No, you can go on if you want to," answered Jed Sully. "I can manage them, I reckon. If they give me any trouble I'll put 'em in the lock-up and get you to testify to what they did on the road."

"Oh, Dave, let us go on!" cried Jessie. "I don't want to stay here another minute."

The others were all anxious to depart, and as soon as the road was entirely clear the two touring cars were started up.

"Hope you have a nice time clearing away that other stuff," remarked Phil to Nat Poole and his cronies, as the machine passed on.

"Don't you crow, – we are not done with you yet!" shouted Merwell, and Jasniff shook his fist at the departing cars. Nat Poole felt so humiliated he turned his gaze in another direction.

"It was a lucky thing that that roadmaster came along when he did," remarked Sam, when the scene of the encounter had been left behind. "If he hadn't showed up I don't know what we should have done."

"Maybe we would have had a fight," returned Ben.

"Oh, I am glad it didn't come to that!" cried Jessie, and her face showed her relief.

"Wonder what became of the racing car and Pete Barnaby?" questioned the shipowner's son.

"Perhaps Barnaby went ahead to make more trouble for us!" said Dave. "We had better be on our guard," he called to Roger.

"I'll follow you at a safe distance, as I did before," answered the senator's son.

The Falls were passed, and then they commenced to ascend a long hill, leading to Lookout Point. Just before the spot was reached they took to another side road, and were glad to see that no other automobile had passed that way.

"We'll have the Lookout all to ourselves," said Dave. "And that is just what we want."

"Maybe I'm not getting hungry!" cried Phil. "I really believe I could choke down a chicken sandwich, if I was forced to do it!"

"'Forced' is good!" answered Dave. "Girls, be sure to keep the hamper away from Phil, or he won't leave enough behind to feed a canary," and this remark brought forth the first laugh since the trouble on the road.

They drove as close to Lookout Point as the road allowed, and then placed the two cars in a safe place under the trees.

"We must keep our eyes open," whispered Dave to the other boys. "That other crowd may sneak up and try to damage the machines, so as to make us walk from here."

"We'll watch out," answered Roger; and the others said the same.

While the boys started a campfire over which to boil some coffee, and obtained a bucket of fresh drinking water from a nearby spring, the girls spread a tablecloth over some flat rocks and set around the dishes and the things to eat. There was more than enough of everything to go around, and it was particularly appetizing after that long ride in the fresh air.

"I tell you, this is something like," cried Dave, munching on a sandwich and a stalk of celery. "I shouldn't mind having a picnic like this once a week regularly."

"Make it twice a week," returned Roger, who was eating a sandwich from one hand and a hard-boiled egg from the other.

"Who'll have some coffee?" cried Phil, coming up with a pot of the steaming beverage. "I've got to strain it through the corner of a napkin, but I guess that won't hurt it."

"Napkin, indeed!" cried Jessie. "There is a strainer in the spout."

"Oh, is there? I didn't look in to see. Well, here goes! Coffee! Ten cents a cup, or two cups for a nickel! Good for the complexion and warranted to cure the blues!" cried the shipowner's son gayly, and swung the pot around over his head.

"Hi! Look out there!" roared Sam, clapping his hand to his ear. "I like coffee, but I don't drink it that way!" And he wiped off a few drops that had reached him.

"Phil is fined one horseshoe nail for spilling the coffee," cried Dave.

"Don't nail me so soon!" answered the shipowner's son gayly.

"Shoo! Just to hear that!" murmured Roger.

"I'm too hoarse to answer to that!" said Ben.

"Say, do you know why a lawyer likes to drink coffee?" asked Sam.

"Why?" asked the girls, in a chorus.

"Because there is always a fee in it for him," was the answer. And then the joker had to dodge an olive and a pickle that Dave and Phil hurled at him, while all the girls giggled.

An hour was spent over the lunch, the boys doing their best to entertain the girls and succeeding admirably. Of course a good many of the things that were said were silly, but everybody was in good humor and out for a good time, so what did it matter? In their high spirits they forgot all about the unfortunate occurrence of the morning.

After the lunch the boys helped the girls clean up and put away what was left, and then all strolled about, first to the edge of the Lookout, to view the scenery, and then to the woods and the brook beyond. Dave naturally paired off with Jessie, while Roger went with Laura, and Phil with Belle.

"Well, it won't be long now before I'll be off again for Oak Hall," said Dave, as he and Jessie stood where the brook tumbled over a series of rocks, making a murmur pleasant to hear.

"Yes, Dave, and I – I shall be sorry to have you go," said Jessie, looking him full in the eyes.

"You'll write to me often, won't you, Jessie?" he asked, in a lower voice.

"I'll answer every letter you send, Dave," and now she cast down her eyes for a moment. "I always do."

"I know it – and you can't imagine how much I treasure those letters," he went on.

"Well, I – I think a lot of your letters, too," she whispered.

"Then you want me to write very often?"

"Yes."

"All right, I will. And, Jessie – " continued Dave, but just then a shout from Sam interrupted him.

CHAPTER V

THE BOYS AND A BULL

"Wonder what Sam wants?" said Dave, as the shouting continued. "I guess I'll have to go and see."

He ran over the rocks in the direction of the cries, and soon came in sight of his chum.

"Hurry up!" cried Sam. "I want you!"

"What is it, Sam?" questioned Dave.

"We are going to have trouble."

"What, have Jasniff and those others come here?"

"No, but maybe it's just as bad, Dave. Just look toward the autos."

Dave did as requested, and his face became a study. He was half inclined to laugh, yet, having been brought up in the country, he well knew the seriousness of the situation.

The two automobiles stood side by side, about three yards apart. Between them was a big and angry-looking bull, tramping the ground and snorting viciously. The bull had a chain around his neck, and to the end of this was a small-sized tree stump, which the animal had evidently pulled from the ground in his endeavor to get away from his pasture. The tree stump had become entangled in the wheel of one of the automobiles, and the bull was giving vicious jerks, first one way and then another, causing the machine to "slew around" in an alarming fashion.

"Sam, we'll have to get him out of there!" cried Dave. "If we don't he may break that wheel – or do worse."

"I'm afraid he'll run off with the car!" gasped Sam. He was almost out of breath from running and calling.

By this time the others were coming up. At the sight of the savage bull several of the girls commenced to scream.

"Oh, we'll be killed!"

"Can't somebody drive him away!"

"Look! look! He is dragging one machine into the other!"

"You girls had better keep back," warned Dave. "If he breaks loose he may come for you."

"Oh, Dave, do be careful!" cried Jessie.

"Yes, yes, don't go too close," added his sister.

"What do you suppose we can do?" questioned the senator's son, as the boys gathered in a group at a little distance, and the girls got behind them.

"If I had a hooked pole I'd soon fix him," answered Dave.

"How?" asked Phil, who knew little or nothing about bulls.

"See that ring in his nose? I'd hook him in that and then keep him at the end of the pole. That always brings 'em to terms."

"But we haven't got any hook," said Ben. "We might make one, though," he added.

A small hatchet had been brought along – with which to chop firewood – and securing this the boys quickly cut two slender but strong saplings, and trimmed them of their branches.

"There is a hook in our car," said Jessie. "If you could only get that!"

"Don't you try it," said Ben. "I've known a bull to leap into a wagon, and this one might leap right into the auto and wreck everything – and hurt you in the bargain."

"I'll use a tree root for a hook," said Dave, and quickly found what he wanted, and bound it fast to one of the poles by means of a fishing line he happened to be carrying.

"Now, Ben, you stand by to prod him, if he gets too rambunctious," went on Dave, as he handed the second pole to his chum.

"All right," answered Ben. He, too, had been brought up on a farm, and knew a little about bulls. The animal had quieted down for a moment, and was grazing on some grass between the automobiles. But, as the lads approached, he raised his head, pawed with his hoof, and gave a vicious snort.

"He means to fight, Dave!" cried Ben. "We've got to be on our guard."

"Oh, do be careful!" cried Belle. To her this beast of the farm looked more terrifying than those she had seen on the ranch.

With great caution Dave approached the bull from one side while Ben approached from the other. The animal snorted again, and lowered his horns. All the girls began to scream.

"Better be quiet," called out Dave. "You'll only excite him more."

"Oh, be careful!" answered Jessie, in a horrified whisper.

At that moment the bull backed up against one of the automobiles, and then moved forward again. This action released the tree stump, so that the beast was now free to go where he pleased. He started straight for Ben.

"Prod him!" yelled Dave, and Ben promptly did as requested, catching the bull in the mouth with his stick. Then, as the animal turned aside, Dave jumped closer, put out his stick, and caught the improvised hook in the nose ring.

"Good! you've got him!" shouted Phil. "Can we help you any?"

"I don't think so – keep quiet," was the reply.

The bull snorted wildly for a moment, and Dave had all he could do to keep the animal at the pole's length. But he knew how to twist the ring, and this speedily brought the beast to terms. The snorting ceased, and the bull stood still, glaring viciously at his captor, but not daring to attempt an attack.

"Come, gee haw!" cried Dave, presently; and with caution commenced to pull on the pole. Slowly the bull stepped after him, dragging the chain and stump behind him.

"What are you going to do with him?" called out Roger.

"Tangle him up in the bushes – if I can," was the answer, and Dave turned in the direction of the brushwood lining the watercourse.

At this point there were a good many sharp rocks and twisted roots of bushes and trees, and it was not long before the loose stump caught on them.

"Come on, we'll fasten him good and hard!" cried Phil, dashing up behind the bull, and as quickly as it could be done he and the others piled some loose rocks against the tree stump, so that it would be next to impossible for the bull to work it free.

"Now you can let him go, Dave," said Ben, who had stood guard with his pole. "We've got him as fast as he ever was." And then Dave let loose from the ring, much to the animal's relief, for he chanced to have a tender nose, and the twisting of the ring hurt him a good deal.

"Are you sure he won't get away and come for us?" questioned Laura, as all drew to a safe distance.

"He won't get away very soon," answered Ben. "But we ought to notify his owner of what we have done."

"Whose bull is it?" asked one of the girls.

"I give up – I never saw him before."

"I think the bull belongs to the Hook Stock Farm," said Dave, mentioning a farm located about a mile away. "I don't know of anybody else around here who would own a bull. When we go home we can stop at the farm and tell them of what has happened."

Leaving the animal quietly grazing among the bushes, the boys and girls walked over to the automobiles, to learn if any damage had been done. In his movements the bull had scratched some paint from the wheels and the mudguards, but that was all, for which they were thankful.

"Well, it's about time to start for home," said Dave, consulting his watch. "Remember, we are to go the long way around, – and stop at the Hook place in the bargain."

"I'm ready to go," answered Jessie. The presence of the bull still disturbed her.

Yet it was some little time before they started, for the things had to be packed, and several of the boys and girls wanted to get photographs of the picnic party. Then Dave cranked up, and Roger did the same. All piled in, and the start for home was begun.

"I'll wager that Nat Poole, Link Merwell, and Nick Jasniff are the maddest boys in this State," was Phil's comment, as the first car rolled on, with he and Dave on the front seat.

"I believe you, Phil," answered the driver of the machine. "And if Jasniff and Merwell really do go to Rockville Academy you can make up your mind that they will cause us all the trouble possible."

"I don't believe the better class of fellows at the military academy will take to those chaps."

"Neither do I. But there are some mean boys at that school – you remember them – and Merwell and Jasniff will flock with that bunch. Oh, they'll try their best to down us, you see if they don't!" declared Dave.

On the road beyond the picnic ground they came to a spot where some rocks and logs had been piled up and then taken away again. All gazed at the spot with interest.

"I guess Pete Barnaby did this – under directions from Nat Poole," said Ben.

"Yes, and Jed Sully made him, or the Poole crowd, clear it away again," answered Dave. "They'll not close this road as long as Sully is roadmaster."

"Be on your guard, Dave!" sang out Roger. "Those rascals will play some trick on us, if they can."

"I'm on the watch!" answered Dave.

As they bowled along all kept their eyes on the alert, and it was well that they did so, for at a turn they suddenly came upon some broken bottles thrown down just where the machines had to pass. Dave gave a yell of warning, and turned off the power and applied the brakes just in time, and, as before, Roger had to turn into the bushes, to avoid striking the turnout ahead.

"They thought they'd make us cut our tires," said Dave.

"Right you are," answered Phil. "Phew! If we had gone over that glass we might have had some nasty punctures or blow-outs."

"They ought to be arrested for this!" said Sam, wrathfully. "It's against the law to put glass on a public highway."

"We can't prove they did it," answered Ben. "If we accused them, of course they would deny it. But it shows their meanness."

The boys got out and picked up some of the glass, and swept the rest aside as well as they could. Then the machines were started up once more, and soon they came in sight of the Hook Stock Farm, and Dave beckoned to a man who stood near the gateway.

"Have you lost one of your bulls?" he asked.

"We sure have!" answered the man, quickly. "What do you know about him?"

"We know he tried to run off with our autos," returned Dave, with a grin, and then told the man the story, and described where the animal could be found. While he was speaking two other stock farm hands came up. They had been looking for the bull since early morning.

"He's a valuable beast," said one of the men. "I hope he ain't hurt none."

"He isn't hurt – and we are mighty glad he didn't hurt us," said Phil.

"Oh, he won't hurt nobody – if he's left alone," said the man.

"How can he hurt anybody, if he is left alone?" was Roger's dry query. But the man was too dull to see the joke.

From the stock farm hands, the boys found out which were the best roads to take, and then passed on again, up hill and down dale for a distance of six miles, when they came out on a broad and well-kept highway.

"Good! This is what I like!" cried Dave, and turned on the power until the touring car was moving along at a lively rate. Roger "hit her up," as he called it, also, and before long they had covered an additional ten miles. Then they had to go over a hill, beyond which lay the village of Lester.

"Let us stop at Lester for some ice-cream soda," whispered Phil to Dave, and the latter agreed.

At the foot of the hill there was a turn, and Dave slowed up to make this, and Roger did likewise. Then, as they passed a deep and muddy ditch, Dave gave a cry and came to a stop.

"Look there!" he called out, pointing down into the ditch.

All gazed to where he pointed. There, in the water and mud, rested the racing car belonging to Pete Barnaby. And standing in the mud up to his knees was the sporty man himself, looking the picture of woeful despair.

CHAPTER VI

A TALK WITH AARON POOLE

As the boys halted their touring cars and gazed at the racing car and its owner, they could not help but smile, and Phil laughed outright.

"How did it happen?" asked Dave, in as kindly a tone as he could assume, for he saw that Pete Barnaby was in serious trouble. The turnout had landed in a particularly soft spot, and was settling deeper and deeper every minute.

"None of your business!" growled the sporty man, wrathfully.

"Oh, all right!" returned Dave, coldly. "I thought maybe you would want us to help you."

"Precious little help I'd get from you chaps!" grumbled Pete Barnaby.

"You might get some if you would act half civil," answered Dave.

"Humph! I suppose you want me to ask you to help me, so that you can have the pleasure of refusing me, eh?"

"No, if I can aid you I will," answered Dave, promptly.

"He doesn't deserve any help," whispered Phil.

"I know that, Phil," answered Dave. "But I'd hate to leave him in the lurch. Why, that machine may sink so deep nobody could get it out."

"If you'll haul me out I'll pay you for your trouble," said Pete Barnaby, gruffly. "It's an easy way to earn ten dollars."

"I don't want your money," replied Dave. "I'll do what I can."

"So will I," added Roger. "The two machines together ought to be able to do the trick."

"Do you really mean it?" asked the sporty man, and now his voice had a ring of hope in it.

"Yes," said the senator's son, and Dave nodded.

The boys got out, and from the three cars ropes were produced and tied together, and the two touring cars were hooked one in front of the other, and then made fast to the racing car.

"Don't haul too hard at the start," begged Pete Barnaby. "If you do you may pull my car apart."

"We'll be careful," answered Dave. He turned to his chum. "Remember, Roger, we've got eighty horse-power hooked up here."

"I'll be on my guard," answered the senator's son. "But remember," he added to Pete Barnaby, "we are not to be responsible if the hauling breaks your car."

"I'll run that risk – only go slow," answered the man in trouble.

The rope had been made as long as possible, so that the stalled car could be drawn out of the ditch lengthwise instead of sidewise. The two cars in the road started up on low speed, and gradually the rope grew taut.

"Look out, everybody, in case that rope snaps!" cried Ben. "I once heard of a rope like that snapping and killing a house-mover."

"You are cheerful, I must say," was Sam's dry comment. Nevertheless, all were on their guard as the rope grew as tight as a string on a bow.

"She ain't moving yet!" cried Pete Barnaby. He stood by the side of his machine watching the rope closely.

Hardly had he spoken when there came a slow, sucking sound, as the wheels left their bed of soft mud. Then the racing machine moved forward slowly.

"Hurrah! she's coming!" cried Sam. "Put on a little more steam and you'll have her!"

Dave and Roger turned on more power, and the racing machine continued to move. Soon it was at the edge of the ditch, and then, with something of a jerk, it came up on the roadway, leaving a trail of dirty water and slimy mud behind it.

"Say, you did it all right enough!" cried Pete Barnaby, in delight. "I was afraid she was too deep down to budge."

"She would have been too deep if you had left her there very much longer," answered Dave. "Now, if you'll untie those ropes and clean them off for us, we'll be on our way again."

"Sure, I'll clean them off." And the sporty man set to work with alacrity. "Say, don't you really want me to pay you for this?" And he made a move as if to draw a roll of bills from his pocket.

"I don't want a cent," answered Dave.

"It's all right," added Roger; "only, Mr. Barnaby, I'd advise you after this not to stand in with Nat Poole and his crowd."

"I'm sorry I did, now; honest I am," was the sporty man's answer. "I – er – I only did it as a favor for Nat, because his father is holding one of my notes. How did you make out after I went away? I see you must have got through."

"We did," replied Dave, and then mentioned how Jed Sully had come to their aid. At this news Pete Barnaby began to grin.

"It was sure a neat way of turning the trick," he said, "and seeing how you young gentlemen have helped me, I'm glad you did it. You can be sure I'll never lay a straw in your way again, never!" And then, the ropes having been put away, the two touring cars proceeded on their way once more, leaving Pete Barnaby to clean up his machine and put it in running order again.

"Dave, that was a real nice thing to do!" declared Jessie, and gave him a bright look.

"He must have felt awfully small, for you to be so generous after the way he acted," was Laura's comment.

"Maybe it will be a lesson to him, to do what is square in the future," said Belle.

They were soon in the town of Lester, and there stopped at the main drug store, where the boys treated the girls to ice-cream "sundaes," as they are sometimes called. Then they took a round-about way back to Crumville, arriving there at sundown.

"Oh, what a nice day we have had, in spite of the drawbacks!" cried Jessie, dancing into the mansion.

"Drawbacks?" queried her mother. "Did you get a puncture, or a breakdown?"

"Oh, no; nothing happened to the cars," answered the curly-haired miss. And then she turned to the boys, to let them tell the story. While they were doing this, Mr. Wadsworth came in, followed by Dave's father and his uncle, and Caspar Potts.

"That is just on a par with Aaron Poole's actions in general," said Mr. Wadsworth. "He would claim the earth, if he dared. I think the other property owners along that road will have something to say if he tries to close it up."

"I heard about the new paper company this morning," said Dave's father. "Some of the stockholders are not in sympathy with the way Mr. Poole is managing affairs, and they talk of putting him out."

"I hope they do put him out!" cried Dave. "He tries to carry things with too high a hand altogether."

"I am glad people are finding out what sort of folks the Pooles are," said Caspar Potts. He had not forgotten how in the past Aaron Poole had driven him to the wall, and tried to get his little farm away from him.

After the automobile outing, Phil, Roger, and Sam left Crumville to pay their folks a brief visit before departing for Oak Hall. This left Dave and Ben to get ready by themselves, and to take out the girls, which they did on several occasions. They thought they might meet Nick Jasniff and Link Merwell, but did not do so, and later on heard that the pair had departed for Rockville Military Academy. They saw Nat Poole, but he kept out of speaking distance.

"I wish Nat was going to Rockville, too," said Ben. "He'd never be missed at Oak Hall."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Ben," returned Dave. "Nat spends considerable money – although how he gets it from that miserly father of his I don't know – and that makes him some friends. But I, too, wish he wasn't going back to our school."

"Do you suppose he'll take the same train we take?"

"Perhaps, although I hope not."

On the day before departing for Oak Hall, Dave and Ben went down to the railroad station to purchase their tickets. There they saw Nat, with a new dress-suit case and a new fall overcoat, talking to his father.

"He must be going to take the train this afternoon," said Dave, and he was right. When the train came in Nat got aboard, along with a number of other passengers. As he did this, he espied the others, and spoke a few words to his father in a whisper. Then the train rolled away, and Aaron Poole strode over to where Dave and Ben were standing.

"See here, young man, I want to talk to you!" cried the money-lender, gazing sourly at Dave.

"What do you want, Mr. Poole?" asked Dave, as calmly as he could.

"You tried your best to get my son into trouble the other day."

"No, I didn't – Nat got himself into trouble."

"Bah! You needn't try to tell me! I know all about it."

"I don't care to discuss the question," went on Dave, a trifle sharply.

"Nat was to blame – if you don't believe it, ask Mr. Sully, the roadmaster," put in Ben.

"Don't you try to tell me!" fumed Aaron Poole. "I know both of you boys only too well! You did your best to get my son and his friends into trouble. Now, I want to warn you about something. I understand both of you are going back to Oak Hall. Nat is going there, too, and I give you fair warning that you must treat him fairly. If you don't I'll come to the school and have it out with Doctor Clay, understand that?" And the money-lender shook his long finger into the faces of the boys.

"Mr. Poole, just let me tell you something," answered Dave. "It is something you ought to know, and I feel it is my duty to tell you, even though you are not treating us as you should. Come out of the crowd, please."

"I don't want to listen to your talk."

"Well, you had better, – unless you want a lot of trouble later on."

"What do you want?" And rather unwillingly the money-lender followed Dave and Ben to a secluded corner of the railroad station.

"I want to warn you about the company Nat is keeping. The two boys he is going with, Nick Jasniff and Link Merwell, are bad characters. You don't have to take my word for it – write to Doctor Clay and see what he says. Nick Jasniff ran away from school and he got hold of some money that didn't belong to him and used it. Link Merwell got mixed up with some horse-thieves, on his father's ranch out West, and his father had to foot the bill to hush the matter up. I feel it my duty to tell you this, so that you can warn Nat. That's all." And Dave caught Ben by the arm and started to walk away.

"Humph! So that is your game, eh? Trying to blacken other boys' characters!" sneered Aaron Poole. "Well, it won't work with me, for I know you too well, Dave Porter. Don't I know where you came from – the Crumville poorhouse? I guess I can trust my son to pick out the right kind of friends. You are jealous of him, because those other boys won't go with the like of you! Don't talk to me! Only –" And Aaron Poole raised his forefinger again. "Remember my warning, when you get to Oak Hall!" And then he strode away, his thin lips tightly drawn, and his sharp chin held high in the air.

"Well, wouldn't that make you groan!" was Ben's comment, after the man had disappeared. "Dave, you had your trouble for your pains."

"I don't care, Ben – I just felt I had to tell him. It's a shame to let Nat cotton to fellows like Jasniff and Merwell. They will drag him down as sure as fate."

"I believe you there. But if Nat's father won't listen – why, I'd drop the matter. Besides, you must remember that those fellows are going to another school, situated quite some distance from Oak Hall. Nat won't see them, excepting on special occasions."

"He can meet them whenever he goes to Rockville – the town I mean – and Jasniff and Merwell will get him to drink and smoke, and maybe gamble, and worse. Nat is easily led at times."

"Yes, I know that." Ben drew a long breath. "Well, let's drop the subject, Dave. We have our own battles to fight." And then the boys separated, each to finish the preparations for his departure.

CHAPTER VII

ON THE WAY TO OAK HALL

Swiftly the hours rolled away until it was time for Dave to bid his family and his friends good-by and leave for Oak Hall. The evening before his departure he took a walk with Jessie, to the end of the Wadsworth garden, but what was said between the pair was never known to anybody but themselves. When they came back he was holding her hand, and both of them looked as if they understood each other perfectly and were correspondingly happy.

All of the girls, as well as Dave's father, went to the depot to see him off, and there they met Ben and some of his folks. Then the train came in, and the youths climbed on board, dress-suit cases in hand. The girls waved their handkerchiefs.

"Have a good time!" cried Belle, gayly.

"Take good care of yourself, Dave!" added Jessie.

"Don't forget to write," supplemented Laura.

"We'll do everything you want us to do!" shouted Dave, with a smile, and then he and Ben waved their caps from the car window as the train rolled forward, and Crumville was left behind.

"Well, we are off at last," observed Ben, as he and Dave settled back in the seat for the run to the Junction, where they would have to change cars for Oakdale, the town nearest to the school. "And I am not sorry, are you?"

"Not at all, Ben. When it comes time to go to Oak Hall I am always glad to go and meet the other fellows; when the term is over I am equally glad to get home and see the folks. It is like the seasons – at the end of the summer I am glad winter is coming, and at the end of winter I am just as pleased that summer is at hand."

"It's the change, I suppose." Ben stretched out and drew his knees high up in front of him. "My, but when you come to look at it, what changes have taken place at Oak Hall since we first went there! Don't you remember what a bully Gus Plum used to be, and how Chip Macklin used to toady to him! Now Plum has reformed completely, and Chip is as manly a little chap as any of 'em."

"It's a pity that Nat Poole can't take a leaf from Gus's notebook and reform, too," answered Dave.

"Maybe he will – after he sees the error of his ways. But, Dave, what of athletics this season? Are you going in for them?"

"I am – but not too strongly, Ben. I want to get all the education I can."

"Want to get through and leave Oak Hall?"

"I don't want to be a schoolboy all my life. I want to get out in the world and make something of myself."

"What are you going to become after you leave school?"

"I don't know yet. I was talking it over with father and my uncle, but I haven't reached any decision."

At the Junction the boys had to wait about half an hour for the train to Oakdale. Dave suggested that they walk over to a candy store and have some soda water.

"May meet some of the other fellows there," he added. "The train from the other way came in quarter of an hour ago, and I saw a lot of dress-suit cases in the baggage room."

As the two youths entered the candy store a shout went up from three boys who were drinking soda.

"There are Dave Porter and Ben Basswood!"

"Hello, Dave, old man; how are you?"

"My, look at Ben's new suit! It's almost loud enough to talk!"

"Hello, fellows!" answered Dave, and striding forward he shook hands with the crowd, one after the other.

"Got any of those mountain lions with you?" queried Joseph Beggs, a round-faced, fat lad. "Heard you brought down about a dozen while you were on the ranch."

"Yes, Buster, I've got three in my trunk," answered Dave, gayly. "Want me to let 'em loose!"

"Heard you did up Link Merwell," said Luke Watson, another lad, who was well liked because of his singing and playing abilities. "I was glad to hear it."

"So were all of us," broke in the third boy, a tall, slim youth, Maurice Hamilton by name. "But speaking of mountain lions puts me in mind of a story. Once three men –"

"The same old Shadow!" interrupted Dave, grabbing his hand and giving it a squeeze that made the story-teller of the school wince. "Shadow, I believe you'd try to spin a yarn when you were proposing to your best girl."

"That sure would be a yarn," cried Ben, as he, too, shook hands.

"I haven't any best girl and you know it," retorted Shadow. "But I say," he continued, closing one eye tightly. "How is Miss Jessie Wadsworth, Dave?"

"Very well," was the answer, and Dave turned a bit red. "Let us have something," he added, hastily, to the clerk behind the soda fountain counter. "What shall it be, Ben?"

"Make it a true love frappé," sang out Buster Beggs, with a broad grin.

"But don't forget to put some ginger in it," added Shadow Hamilton.

"My love, how can I leave thee!
One parting hug I give thee!
And now when Oak Hall calls me,
I go, whate'er befalls me!"

sang Luke Watson, and put up his hands as if playing an imaginary guitar.

"Say, doesn't anybody want to hear that story about the mountain lions?" queried Shadow, reproachfully. Story-telling was his hobby, and it had often been said by his friends that he would rather spin a yarn than eat.

"Some other time, Shadow," answered Buster. "We want to hear about Dave's trip West, and about what he did to Link Merwell."

"Before I tell you about that, let me give you a piece of news," said Dave. And then he related how he and the others had met Merwell and Jasniff with Nat Poole, and how the two former youths were going to Rockville Military Academy. As he had anticipated, this created quite a sensation, and a lively discussion followed, which was kept up even after the crowd got aboard the train which would carry them to Oakdale.

"Well, if Rockville wants such fellows it can have 'em," was Buster Beggs's comment. "I, for one, am glad they are out of Oak Hall."

"I know one fellow who will be glad they are gone," said Shadow. "That is Gus Plum."

"Yes, indeed," answered Dave, for he well remembered what influence Merwell and even Jasniff had exercised over Plum when the youth had found his appetite for liquor almost too strong for him.

Of course Dave had to go over many of his Western adventures, and the others listened with keen interest to all he had to tell. When he mentioned the theft of the horses at the ranch, and how Link Merwell had been mixed up with the thieves, more than one shook his head.

"According to that, Link and Nick are a team," said Luke Watson. "Dave, you had better be on your guard. They won't hesitate to play you some foul trick."

Oakdale, a small but prosperous town, was reached at last, and the schoolboys piled out of the train, along with a few other passengers.

"Hello, there is Polly Vane!" cried Dave, catching sight of a slender lad with a girlish face. "How are you, Polly?"

"Oh, it's Dave Porter!" answered Bertram Vane, in a low but pleased voice. He held out his slender hand. "I am delighted to see you back! How tanned you are, and how strong-looking!"

"It was the mountain air did it, Polly. By the way, is Horsehair around?" he continued, with a glance beyond the depot platform.

"Oh, yes! Here he comes now!" And as Polly spoke the big carryall of the school swung into view, with Jackson Lemond, commonly called "Horsehair," on the driver's seat. The boys made a rush for the carryall, throwing their suit-cases in the rack on top, and piling inside one over the other.

"Horsehair, you're looking fine!"

"How's the widow, Horsehair? Heard you were going to marry a widow with eight children."

"Nine children, Buster, – don't drop any of the family like that."

"Nothing like getting a ready-made family while you are at it, Horsehair."

"I heard the widow was a suffragette, Horsehair. Is that right?"

"If she's that, Horsehair, she'll make you mind the children and wash dishes – better beware!"

"Oh, don't worry about that. Horsehair is an expert at washing dishes, and at minding babies he once took first prize at a county fair; didn't you, Horsehair?"

"Say, you!" roared the carryall driver, his face as red as a beet. "You quit your knockin'! I ain't gittin' married to no widder, nor nobody else! An' I ain't washin' dishes an' mindin' babies nuther! Such boys!" And with a crack of his whip he started up the turnout so suddenly that half the lads were pitched into the laps of the other half.

It was certainly a jolly crowd that rolled over the well-kept highway toward Oak Hall. They knew that many hard lessons awaited them, and that, once school opened, discipline would be strict, but just now all were in high spirits. To the tune of "Auld Lang Syne" Luke Watson started up the school song, and the others joined in lustily:

"Oak Hall we never shall forget,
No matter where we roam,
It is the very best of schools,
To us it's just like home!
Then give three cheers, and let them ring
Throughout this world so wide,
To let the people know that we
Elect to here abide!"

"That's the stuff!" cried Ben, slangily. "Now, then, for the field cry," and then came the Oak Hall cheer:

"Baseball!
Football!
Oak Hall
Has the call!
Biff! Boom! Bang! Whoop!"

"I think we ought to display the school colors!" cried Dave. "Anybody got a flag?"

"Here is one," answered Polly Vane, from his seat in front, beside the driver. "But I haven't got a stick for it."

"Never mind, Shadow's fishing rod will do," answered Dave. "Shadow, hand it over."

"All right, but don't break the rod," said Shadow. "It cost me four bones."

The rod was put together, and the school colors fastened to the top. Then the rod was thrust out of a side window of the carryall and waved in the air, first by one student and then another.

"Look out, that you don't hit nobody with that fishin' pole!" warned the carryall driver, as the turnout swung around a bend of the road.

He had scarcely spoken when a buggy came into view, driven by a tall, serious-looking individual, wearing a high silk hat. The buggy swung forward quickly, directly in line with the fishing rod, and before the boys could haul the colors in the rod hit the silk hat, sending it whirling into the bushes beside the roadway.

CHAPTER VIII

ABOUT SOME NEW STUDENTS

"Hi! hi! what's the meaning of this outrage!" roared the individual in the buggy, as he brought his horse to a standstill. "Do you want to kill me?"

"Who is it? Is he hurt?" questioned Dave, quickly.

"I don't know," answered Ben. "The rod took off his hat, but whether it struck his head or not remains to be seen."

"Wot's the trouble back there?" demanded Jackson Lemond, as he succeeded in bringing his team to a halt.

"Trouble is, we hit that man with the rod," answered Buster.

"Humph! I told you to be careful," grumbled the carryall driver. "It don't pay to act like a passel o' wildcats, nohow!"

"It's too bad it happened," said Dave, and leaped to the ground and ran back to where the buggy stood, with the driver glaring at them savagely. The other students followed.

"Are you hurt?" asked Dave, anxiously. The man in the buggy was a total stranger to him.

"Hurt? I don't know whether I am or not. What do you mean by knocking off my hat with that stick?"

"It was an accident, sir. We had our school colors on the fishing rod and were waving them in the air. We didn't expect to hit anybody."

"Bah! you are a lot of rowdies!" growled the man. "Give me my hat!" And he pointed to where the head covering rested on some bushes.

"There you are," said Ben, restoring the hat to its owner. "But we are not rowdies – it was purely an accident," he added, with a little flash out of his clear eyes.

"Bah, I know schoolboys! They think it smart to be tough!" The man looked his silk hat over. "I ought to make you buy me a new hat."

"That doesn't seem to be damaged any," said Buster, as he looked the tile over. "If it is, of course we'll make it right," he added, hastily. He and Luke were holding the fishing rod at the time of the accident.

"Do you boys belong at Oak Hall?" demanded the man, smoothing down the roughed-up silk hat with his forearm.

"Yes," answered Dave.

"I thought so. Well, if this hat is cracked or anything like that I'll notify the master of the school, and make you get me a new hat. Maybe it will be a lesson to you, to be more careful."

"Let me see the hat, please," said Luke.

"What for?"

"I wish to see if it is really damaged."

"If it is, I'll let you know quick enough, don't fear."

"I want to see it now. I am not going to pay for a new hat if this one is all right."

"Ha! so you don't want to take my word for it, eh?" roared the man.

"I want to look the hat over," answered Luke, stubbornly.

"So do I," added Buster.

"I'll not give you the hat – to play more tricks with. I shall take it to a hat dealer, and if he says it is injured, I'll call at the school about it." And having thus delivered himself the man in the buggy put the silk hat on his head, spoke to his horse, and whirled on down the road in the direction of Rockville.

"Talk about a peppery individual!" cried Ben. "He certainly is one."

"I don't think the hat was damaged at all," said Dave. "It will simply be a hold-up – if he tries to get a new one out of us. That hat is quite old and rusty-looking."

"He was a rusty-looking fellow all the way through," commented Buster. "Wonder who he is?"

"He's some kind of a doctor," answered the carryall driver, who had left his turnout to join the boys. "He came to Oakdale and Rockville this summer, and he gives lectures on how to git well and strong, an' then he sells medicine. I know a feller got a bottle from him, but it didn't do him no good. He calls himself Doctor Montgomery, – but I reckon he ain't no real doctor at all."

"Must be one of these quacks who go around the country trying to rope people in," said Dave. "If he is, he ought to be run out of the neighborhood."

"Maybe we'll never hear from him again," said Luke. But the boys were destined to hear from Hooker Montgomery again, and in a manner to surprise them.

Returning to the carryall, the boys took in the colors, so that they might do no further damage, and then the journey to Oak Hall was resumed. The encounter on the road had sobered them a little, and this did not wear away until they came in sight of the school buildings.

"Hurrah! I see Phil and Roger!" cried Dave, as the carryall swung in between the large oak trees that gave the place its name. "Hello!" he shouted. "Here we are again!"

"Dave!" returned the senator's son, running forward, while Phil did the same. "How are you all?" he added, waving his hand to the crowd in general.

A number of other boys were present, and soon Dave was surrounded by his old friends, all eager to shake hands. They wanted to know all about his trip, and he in return wanted to know what they had been doing. So there was a perfect babble of voices as the crowd walked into the main school building, where good old Doctor Hasmer Clay, the head of the institution, stood to welcome each new arrival.

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