

Smith Ruel Perley

# **The Rival Campers Ashore: or, The Mystery of the Mill**



Ruel Smith

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**Smith R.**

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# **Smith Ruel Perley**

## **The Rival Campers Ashore or The Mystery of the Mill**

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **AN INLAND VOYAGE**

The morning train from Benton, rumbling and puffing along its way through outlying farmland, and sending its billows of smoke like sea rollers across the pastures, drew up, ten miles from the city, at a little station that overlooked a pond, lying clear and sparkling at the base of some low, wooded hills. An old-fashioned, weather-beaten house, adjacent the station, and displaying a sign-board bearing the one word, "Spencer's," indicated that Spencer, whoever he might prove to be, would probably extend the hospitality of his place to travellers. Here and there, widely scattered across the fields, were a few farmhouses.

The locomotive, having announced its approach by a mingled clanging and whistling that sent startled cattle galloping for the shelter of the thickets, came to a dead stop at the station; but, as though to show its realization of the insignificance of Spencer's, continued to snort and throb impatiently. Certain important-appearing trainmen, with sleeves rolled to the elbows, hastily throwing open the door of the baggage-car, seemed to take the hint.

Presently a trunk, turning a summersault through the air, landed, somewhat damaged, on the platform. A few boxes and packages followed likewise, similarly ejected. Then, through the open doorway, there appeared the shapely, graceful bow of a canoe. Whatever treatment this might have received, left to the tender mercies of the trainmen, can only be imagined; for at this moment two youths, who had descended from one of the passenger coaches, came running along the platform.

"Hold on, there," said the larger of the two, addressing a man who stood with arms upreached to catch the end of the canoe, "let me get hold with you. We don't want to be wrecked before we start, – eh, Henry?"

"Hope not," responded his companion, quietly taking the bow of the canoe, which the larger youth relinquished to him, while the latter stepped to the car door and put a stalwart shoulder and arm under the stern, passed to him by a man inside.

Together, the two boys deposited their craft gently on a patch of grass near-by; the locomotive puffed away from Spencer's, dragging its train; the station agent resumed his interrupted pipe. Soon the only sounds that broke the stillness of the place were the clickings of a single telegraph instrument in the station and the scoffing voices of a few crows, circling about the tops of some pine trees that overlooked the farmhouse.

The prospect that met the eyes of the boys was most enticing. On one hand lay the little pond, reflecting some great patches of cloud that flecked the sky. All about them, as far as eye could discern, stretched the country, rolling and irregular, meadow and pasture, corn and wheat land, and groves of maple, pine and birch.

Flowing into the pond, a thin, shadowy stream wound its way through alders and rushes, coming down along past Spencer's, invitingly from the fields and hills. It was the principal inlet of the pond, flowing hence from another and larger pond some miles to the westward.

"Well, Henry, what do you say?" said the larger boy. "Looks great, doesn't it?"

"Ripping, Jack!" exclaimed the other. "I feel like paddling a mile a minute. Let's pick her up and get afloat."

They reached for the "her" referred to – the light canoe – when the station agent, welcoming even this trifling relief from the monotony of Spencer's, approached them.

"That's a right nice craft of yours," he remarked, eying it curiously. "Going on the pond?"

"No, we're going around through the streams to Benton," replied the elder boy. "Think there's water enough to float us?"

"Why, p'raps," said the station agent. "It's a long jaunt, though – twenty-five or thirty miles, I reckon. Calc'late to do it in one day?"

"Why, yes, and home in time for a late supper. We didn't think it was quite so far as that, though. How far do you call it to the brook that leads over into Dark Stream?"

"Oh, two or three miles – ask Spencer. He knows more'n I do 'bout it."

Spencer, a deliberate, sleepily-inclined individual, much preoccupied with a jack-knife and a shingle, "allowed" the distance to be a matter of from a mile and a half, to two miles, or "mebbe" two and a half.

"Henry Burns, old chap, get hold of that canoe and let's scoot," exclaimed his companion, laughing. "Tom and Bob said 'twas a mile. Probably everyone we'd ask would say something different. If we keep on asking questions, we'll go wrong, sure."

Henry Burns's response was to pick up his end of the canoe, and they went cautiously down through the tangle of grasses to the stream. The buoyant craft rested lightly on its surface; they stepped aboard, Henry Burns in the bow, his companion, Jack Harvey, in the stern, dipped their paddles joyously together, and went swiftly on their way.

It was about half-past seven o'clock of a June morning. The sun was lightening the landscape, yet it was by no means clear. The day had, in fact, come in foggy, and the mist was slow in burning off from the hills. Often, at intervals, it hung over the water like a thin curtain. But the mystery of an unknown stream, hidden by the banks along which it wound deviously, with many a sharp twist and turn, tempted them ever to vigorous exertion.

Just a little way ahead, and it seemed as though the narrow stream were ending against a bank of green. Then, as they approached, an abrupt swerving of the stream one way or the other, opened up the course anew for them. This was a matter of constant repetition. Theirs were the delights, without danger, of exploration.

"Warming up a bit, isn't it, Jack?" said Henry Burns, laying aside his paddle for a moment and peeling off a somewhat dingy sweater. "I'm not so sure about getting the sun for long, though."

"Nor I," replied his companion, driving the canoe swiftly with his single paddle till the other had freed himself of his garment and was braced, steadily, once more; when he, too, laid his paddle across the gunwales and stripped for the work. "I don't just like the looks of those clouds. If we were in the old Viking now, I'd say put on all sail and make for harbour; for it looks like rain by and by, but no wind."

"Well, this is all one big harbour from here to Benton," laughed Henry Burns. "Avast, I sight a cow off the port bow. Never mind the cow? All right, on we go. If it rains hard, we'll run ashore and hunt for a barn. Wouldn't Tom Harris and Bob White laugh to see us poking back by train, instead of making the trip?"

"Oh, we won't turn back," said Harvey. "Besides, there's no train in to Benton till night. Fancy spending the day at Spencer's station! It's through the streams for us now, rain or shine."

As though to demonstrate more fully his determination, Harvey dipped with a sharper, quicker stroke, put the strength of two muscular arms into his work, and they sped quickly past the turns of their winding course. Perhaps either Tom Harris or Bob White, of whom Henry Burns had spoken, might have wielded the paddles with a bit more of skill, have kept the course a little straighter, or skimmed the turns a trifle more close; but neither could have put more of life and vim into the strokes. A large, thick-set youth was Harvey, strongly built, with arms bronzed and sinewy – clearly a youth who had lived much out of doors, and had developed in sun and air.

Harvey's companion was considerably slighter of build, but of a well-knit figure, whose muscles, while not so pronounced, played quickly and easily; and whose whole manner suggested somehow a reserve strength, and a physique capable of much endurance.

Had they possessed, however, more of that same skill and familiarity with canoeing which comes only with practice, they would have perceived more clearly the speed with which they were travelling, and how great a distance already lay between them and the point where they had embarked.

"Queer we don't come to that inlet," remarked Harvey, at length. "I haven't seen anything that looked like the land-arks: the two houses, the road and a bridge, that Tom spoke of."

"No," replied Henry Burns, but added, reflectively, "unless we passed them at least three-quarters of a mile back. But there wasn't any inlet there. Hang it! Do you suppose Spencer was right after all?"

"May be," said Harvey. "Let's hit it up a little harder; but watch sharp for the brook."

"Aye, aye, skipper," said Henry Burns.

But at this moment the glassy surface of the stream dimpled all over with the sudden fall of raindrops; a compact, heavy cloud wheeled directly overhead and poured its contents upon them, while, afar off, the fields were still lit with patches of sunlight. They scrambled as hastily as they could into their sweaters again.

"Let it come," said Henry Burns, resuming his wet paddle; "it's only a cloud-bank that's caught us. We'll work out of it if we keep on. Then the sun will dry us."

They pushed on in the rain, peering eagerly ahead for some signs of the landmarks that would show them the brook. Then, all at once, to their amazement, the stream they were following divided into two forks; the one at the right coming down from higher land, broken in its course, as far as they could see, by stones and boulders that made it impassable even for the light canoe; the other branch emerging from a thick tangle of overhanging alders and willows.

"Well now, what do you make of that?" cried Harvey, in disgust. "That can't be the brook, to the right, and the other doesn't look as though it led anywhere in particular." He stopped paddling, and squeezed the water out of his cap.

"We've come past the brook," replied Henry Burns. "It's rainy-day luck. We've got to go up to that farmhouse on the hill and find out where we are."

"I haven't seen a farmhouse for more than half an hour," exclaimed Harvey.

"No, but there are cattle in that pasture, and a track going up through the grove," said Henry Burns. "We'll follow that. It won't be any blinder than this stream."

They brought the canoe in upon the muddy bank, slumped into the ooze, pulled the canoe half out of water and started off.

"Nice trip!" said Henry Burns. "And the worst of it is, I have a suspicion I know just where that brook is. I can see it now. There was a tiny bit of a cove, a lot of rushes growing there, and two houses back about a quarter of a mile. But it was dry – no water running – and it was so near the station I didn't suppose that could be the place."

"It isn't so dry by this time," remarked Harvey.

"No, and neither are we," said Henry Burns. "Look out!"

He dragged one leg out from a mud-hole into which he had sunk to the knee. The path they were following led through clumps of fern and brake, almost waist high. These, dripping with rain, drenched them as they pushed their way through. Some fifteen minutes of hard travelling brought them to a little rise of land, from the top of which they could see, down in a valley beyond, a farmhouse.

"More wet day luck," muttered Harvey. "We're in for it, though. It's a good half mile more."

They tramped on, in silence. The particular cloud that had first wet them had blended much with others by this time, and it was still raining. But they came up to the house soon, and, the big

barn door standing open invitingly, they entered there. A man and two boys, busily engaged mending a harness, looked up in surprise.

"Sort er wet," the man commented. "Come from the city, eh? Well, I guess it's only a shower. What's that? The brook that runs into Dark Stream! Huh! You're two miles past it."

Henry Burns and Harvey looked at each other helplessly. Then Harvey grinned.

"It's so tough, it's almost a joke, Henry," he said.

"Great – if it had only happened to somebody else, say your friend Harry Brackett," replied Henry Burns. "Guess we won't tell much about this part of the trip to Tom and Bob, though. What do you want to do, go back to the station, or keep on?"

"Back!" exclaimed Harvey. "Say, I'm so mad, I'd keep on now if every drop of rain was as big as a base-ball. I'll never go back, if it takes a week – that is, if you're game?"

"Come on," said Henry Burns quietly.



## CHAPTER II

### TURNUED ADRIFT

Soon they were on their way again, with the sky lightening a little and the rain almost ceased. They plunged through the tangle of dripping brakes, down to the shore; pushed off once more in midstream, and started back the way they had come.

There was not quite so much spirit to their paddling as there had been on the way up. Every stroke had meant to their minds, then, just so much of their journey accomplished. Now they knew they were striving only to put themselves on the right track again, and that there would be four wet miles of wasted effort. However, they were still strong, and the canoe went rapidly down stream.

The two miles seemed nearer four when Henry Burns suddenly pointed with his paddle ahead and said, soberly, "There's the place, Jack. I saw it, coming up, but I thought it was only a patch of bull-rushes. We can't get a canoe through, anyway. Let's go ashore and have a look at the country."

They paddled in and scrambled up the bank. Sure enough, there was what would be a small brook, at some stages of water, coming in from across country; doubtless with water enough, in the spring of the year, to float a canoe; but now impassable. They followed it up through a wheat field to a road, from which, to their relief, a stream of about the dimensions of the one they had been following – not quite so large – was to be seen. A horse drawing a wagon at a jog trot came down the road, and they accosted the occupant of the seat.

"How many miles to Mill Stream by the way of Dark Stream?" he said, repeating their question. "Well, I reckon it's fifteen or sixteen. Water enough? Oh, yes, mebbe, except p'raps in spots. Goin' round to Benton, you say? Sho! Don't esactly envy yer the jaunt. Guess there'll be more rain bime-by. Good day. Giddap."

"Wall, I reckon," said Henry Burns, dryly, imitating the man's manner of speech, "that I don't ask any more of these farmers how many miles we've got to travel. According to his reckoning, we'd get to Benton sometime to-morrow night. The next man might say 'twas fifty miles to Benton, and then you'd want to turn back."

"Never!" exclaimed Jack Harvey, grimly. "Let's go for the canoe."

They got the canoe on their shoulders, and made short work of the carry. But it was after ten o'clock when they set their craft afloat in Dark Stream; and the real work of the day had just begun.

Knowing they were really on the right course, however, cheered them.

"Say," cried Harvey, in a sudden burst of enthusiasm, "we'll not stop at Benton, at all, perhaps; just keep on paddling down Mill Stream past the city, down into Samoset river, into the bay, and out to Grand Island. Make a week of it."

But even as he spoke, a big rain drop splashed on his cheek, and another storm burst over them. Down it came in torrents; a summer rainfall to delight the heart of a farmer with growing crops; a shower that fairly bent the grass in the fields with its weight; that made a tiny lake in the bottom of the canoe, flooded back around Harvey's knees in the stern, and which trickled copiously down the backs of the two boys underneath their sweaters.

"What was you saying about Grand Island, Jack?" inquired Henry Burns, slyly.

"Grand Island be hanged!" said Harvey. "When I start for there, I'll go in a boat that's got a cabin. I guess Benton will do for us."

They looked about for shelter, but there were woods now on both sides of the stream, and through them they could get no glimpse of any farmhouse.

"Well, I wouldn't go into one if I saw it, now!" exclaimed Harvey. "I can't get any wetter. Pretty soon we'll begin to like it. I'll catch a fish, anyway. This rain will make 'em bite."

He unwound a line from a reel, attached a spoon-hook, cast it over and began to troll astern, far in the wake of the canoe. It was, in truth, an ideal day for fishing, and the first clump of lily pads they passed yielded them a big pickerel. He came in fighting and tumbling, making the worst of his struggle – after the manner of pickerel – when he was fairly aboard. Once free of the hook, he dropped down into the puddle in the canoe and lashed the water with his tail so that it splattered in Jack Harvey's face worse than the rain. Harvey despatched the fish with a few blows of his paddle.

"Guess I won't catch another," he said shortly. "I can't stand a shower coming both ways at once."

Henry Burns chuckled quietly to himself. "Let's empty her out," he suggested.

They ran the canoe ashore, took hold at either end, inverted the craft and let the water drain out. Then they went on again. It was a fair and pretty country through which the stream threaded its way, with countless windings and twistings; but the rain dimmed and faded its beauties now. They thought only of making progress. Yet the rain was warm, they could not be chilled while paddling vigorously, and Henry Burns said he was beginning to like it.

Presently, in the far distance, a village clock sounded the hour. It struck twelve o'clock.

"My, I didn't know it was getting so late," said Henry Burns. "What do you say to a bite to eat?"

"I could eat that fish raw," said Harvey.

"No need. We'll cook him," responded Henry Burns. "There's the place," and he pointed in toward a grove of evergreens and birches. "That village is a mile off. We don't want another walk through this drenching country."

They were only too glad to jump out ashore.

"You get the wood, Jack, and I'll rig up the shelter and clean the fish," said Henry Burns. Drawing out a small bag made of light duck from one end of the canoe, they untied it and took therefrom two small hatchets, a coil of stout cord, a fry-pan, a knife and fork apiece and a strip of bacon; likewise a large and a small bottle. The larger contained coffee; the smaller, matches. They examined the latter anxiously.

"They're all right," said Harvey, shaking the bottle. "Carry your matches in a bottle, on a leaky boat and in the woods. I've been in both."

Taking the cord and one of the hatchets, Henry Burns proceeded to stretch a line between two trees; then interlacing the line, on a slant between other trees, he constructed a slight network; upon which, after an excursion amid the surrounding woods, he laid a sort of thatch of boughs.

"That's not the best shelter I ever saw," he said at length, surveying his work, "but it will keep off the worst of the rain."

It did, in fact, answer fairly well, with the added protection of the heavy branches overhead.

In the mean time, Harvey, having hunted for some distance, had found what he wanted – a dead tree, not so old as to be rotten, but easy to cut and split. Into the heart of this he went with his hatchet, and quickly got an armful of dry fire-wood. He came running back with the wood, and a few sheets of birch-bark – the inner part of the bark – with the wet, outer layer carefully stripped off. They had a blaze going quickly, with this, beneath the shelter of boughs.

They put the bacon on to fry, and pieces of the fish, cut thin with a keen hunting-knife. The coffee, poured from the bottle into a tin dipper, they set near the blaze, on some brands. They they gazed out upon the drizzle, as the dinner cooked.

Harvey shook his head, gloomily.

"We're in for it," he said. "It's settled down for an all day's rain."

"I hope so," responded Henry Burns, with a twinkle in his eye, "I like it – but I wish I could feel just one dry spot on my back."

They ate their dinner of fried bacon and pickerel and coffee beside a fire that blazed cheerily, despite an occasional sputtering caused by the rain dripping through; and when they had got half dry

and had started forth once more into the rain, they were in good spirits. But the first ten minutes of paddling found them drenched to the skin again.

They ran some small rapids after a time, and later carried around a little dam. The afternoon waned, and the windings of the stream seemed endless. It was three o'clock when, at a sudden turn to the right, which was to the eastward, they came upon another stream flowing in and mingling with the one they were following. Thenceforth the two ran as one stream, the banks widening perceptibly, the stream flowing far more broadly, and with increased depth and strength. The way from now on was to the eastward some three or four miles, and then almost due south to Benton, a distance of ten or eleven miles more.

They were soon running swiftly with the current, shooting rapids, at times, of an eighth of a mile in length, going very carefully not to scrape on submerged rocks. And still the rain fell. There were two dams to carry around, and they did this somewhat drearily, trudging along the muddy shores, climbing the slippery banks with difficulty, and with some danger of falling and smashing their canoe.

Five, six and seven o'clock came; darkness was shutting in, and they were three miles from Benton. To make matters worse, with the falling of night the rain increased, pouring in such torrents that they had frequently to pause and empty out their canoe.

A few minutes after seven, and a light gleamed from a window a little distance back from the stream, less than a quarter of a mile.

"There's our lodgings for the night, Jack," said Henry Burns, pointing up through the rain. "I don't mind saying I've had enough. It's three miles yet to Benton, or nearly that, there are three more dams, and as for walking, the road must be a bog-hole."

"I'm with you," responded Harvey. "If it's a lodging house, I've the money to pay – three dollars in the oiled silk wallet. If it's a farmhouse, we'll stay, if we have to sleep in the barn."

Presently they perceived a landing, with several rowboats tied up. They ran in alongside this, drew their canoe clear up on to the float, turned it over, and walked rapidly up toward the house from which the light shone.

"We're in luck for once," said Harvey. "There's a sign over the door."

The sign, indeed, seemed to offer them some sort of welcome. It bore an enormous hand pointing inward, and the inscription, "Half Way House."

"I wonder what it's half way between," said Henry Burns, as they paused a moment on the threshold of the door. "Half way between the sky and China, I guess. But I don't care, if the roof doesn't leak."

The picture, as they entered, was, in truth, one to cheer the most wretched. Directly in front of them, in line with the door, a fire of hickory logs roared in an old-fashioned brick fireplace, lighting up the hotel office almost as much as did the two kerosene lamps, disposed at either end. An old woman, dozing comfortably in a big rocking chair before the blaze, jumped up at their appearance.

"Land sakes!" she ejaculated, querulously. "What a night to be comin' in upon us! Dear! Dear! Want to stay over night, you say? Well, if that ain't like boys – canooering, you call it, in this mess of a rain. Gracious me, but you're wet to the skin, both er yer. Well, take them wooden chairs, as won't be spoiled with water, and sit up by the fire till I make a new pot of coffee and warm up a bit of stew and fry a bit of bacon. Canooering in this weather! Well, that beats me."

"The proprietor, you say? Well, he's up the road, but he'll be in, soon. You can pay me for the supper, and fix 'bout the stay in' over night with him. I jes' tend to the cookin'. That's all I do."

She called them to supper in the course of a quarter of an hour, and had clearly done her best for them. There was coffee, steaming hot, and biscuit, warmed up to a crisp; bacon, freshly fried, with eggs; a dish of home-made preserves, and a sheet of gingerbread.

"Eat all yer can hold," she chuckled, as they fell to, hungry as panthers. "Canooering's good fer the appertite, ain't it? It's plain vittles, but I reckon the cookin's good as the most of 'em, if I say it, who shouldn't."

She rambled on, somewhat garrulously, as the boys ate. They did full justice to the cooking, stuffed themselves till Henry Burns said he could feel his skin stretch; paid the old woman her price for the meal – "twenty-five cents apiece, an' it couldn't be done for less" – and went and seated themselves comfortably once more by the fire in the office. They settled themselves back comfortably.

"Arms ache?" inquired Harvey of his comrade.

"No," replied Henry Burns, "but I don't mind saying I'm tired. I wouldn't stir out of this place again to-night for sixteen billion dol – "

The door opened, and a bulky, red-faced man entered, stamping, shaking the rain from his clothing like a big Newfoundland dog, and railing ill-naturedly at the weather.

"It's a vile night, gran'," he exclaimed; then espying his two newly-arrived guests, he assumed a more cordial tone.

"Good evening. Good evening, young gentlemen," he said. "Glad you got in out of the storm – hello! what's this? Well, if it don't beat me!"

At the sound of the man's voice, Henry Burns and Jack Harvey had sprung up in amazement. They stood beside their chairs, eying the proprietor of the Half Way House, curiously. He, in turn, glared at them in astonishment, fully equal to theirs, while his red face went from its normal fiery hue to deep purple, and his hands clenched.

"Colonel Witham!" they exclaimed, in the same breath.

"What are you two doing here?" he cried.

"What new monkey-shine of yours is this? Don't you know I won't have any Henry Burnses and Jack Harveys, nor any of the rest of you, around my hotel? Didn't yer get satisfaction enough out of bringing bad luck to me in one place, and now you come bringing it here? Get out, is what I say to you, and get out quick!"

"You keep away, gran'," he cried to the woman, who had stepped forward. "Don't you go interfering. It's my hotel; and I wouldn't care if 'twas raining a bucket a drop and coming forty times as hard. I'd put 'em out er doors, neck and crop. Get out, I say, and don't ever step a foot around here again."

Henry Burns and Jack Harvey stood for a moment, gazing in perplexity at each other.

"Shall we go, or stick it out?" asked Harvey, in a low voice.

"Why, it's a public house, and I don't believe he has a right to throw us out this way," said Henry Burns. "But it means a fight, sure, if we try to stay. I guess we better quit. It's his own place, and he's a rough man when he's angered."

Ruefully pulling on their sweaters – at least dry once more – and taking their paddles, which they had brought with them, from behind the door, they went out into the night, into the driving rain.

## CHAPTER III

### THE OLD MILL

The two boys, thus most unexpectedly evicted, stood disconsolately on the porch of the Half Way House, peering out into the storm. The character of it had changed somewhat, the rain driving fiercely now and then, with an occasional quick flaw of wind, instead of falling monotonously. And now there came a few rumblings of thunder, with faint flashes of lightning low in the sky.

"Well, Jack," said Henry Burns, at length, speaking with more than his customary deliberation, "wet night luck seems to be worse even than wet day luck. But who'd ever thought we'd have such tough luck as to run across Col. Witham up here, and a night like this? The boys never said anything about his being here."

"No – and he's got no right to put us out!" cried Harvey. "If you'll stand by, I'll go back into that office and tell him what I think of him."

"He knows that already," replied Henry Burns, coolly. "Wouldn't be any news to him. Say, I see a light way up on the hill to the left. Suppose we try them there. I wish we could see the road and the paths better, so as to know where we are."

As though almost in answer to this wish, a brilliant flash of lightning illumined the whole sky; and, for a brief moment, there stood clearly outlined before them, like a huge magic-lantern picture, the prominent features of the landscape.

Past the hotel where they stood, the highway ran, gleaming now with pools of water. Some way down the road, the land descended to a narrow interval through which a brook flowed, with a rude wooden bridge thrown across in line with the road. Farther still down the road, and a little off from it, beside the larger stream which they had travelled all day, an old mill squatted close to the water, hard by the brink of a dam. Away up on the hillside, some three quarters of a mile off, a farmhouse gave them a fleeting glimpse of its gables and chimneys. Then the picture vanished and the black curtain of the night fell again.

"All right," assented Harvey, to the reply of his comrade, "I suppose we better go without a fuss. It isn't getting out in the rain here that makes me maddest. It's to think of Col. Witham chuckling over it in there, snug and dry."

"He isn't," said Henry Burns. "He never chuckles over anything. He's madder than we are, because we got our suppers and a drying out. Come on, dive in. It's always the first plunge that's worst."

They stepped forth into the rain and began walking briskly down the road. They had gone scarcely more than a rod, however, when something brushed against Jack Harvey, and a hand was laid lightly on his arm. He jumped back in some alarm, for they had heard no footsteps, nor dreamed of anybody being near.

To their relief, a girl's merry peal of laughter – coming oddly enough from out the storm – sounded in their ears; and a slight, quaint little figure stood in the road before them.

"Oh, how you did jump!" she exclaimed, and laughed again, like some weird mite of a water-sprite, pleased to have frightened so sturdy a chap as Jack Harvey. "I won't hurt you," she continued, half-mockingly. "I'm Bess Thornton. Gran' got the supper for you. Oh, but I'm just furious at Witham for being so mean."

Henry Burns and Harvey, taken all by surprise, stood staring in amazement. A faint glimmering in the sky came to their aid and they discerned, indistinctly, a girl, barefoot and hatless, of age perhaps twelve, poorly dressed in a gingham frock, apparently as unmindful of the rain as though she were, indeed, a water-sprite.

"Well, what is it?" asked Henry Burns. "Witham doesn't say come back, does he?"

"Not he!" cried the little creature, impetuously, "Oh, the old bogey-man! He's worse than the wicked giant in the book. I wish I was a Jack-the-giant-killer. I'd – "

Words apparently failing her to express a punishment fitting for Col. Witham, the child shook a not very formidable fist in the direction of the tavern, then added, sharply, "Where are you going?"

"Up to that house on the hill," said Harvey. "They'll take us in there, won't they?"

The answer was not encouraging.

"No-o-o, not much he won't," cried the girl. "Oh, don't you know old Farmer Ellison? He's worse than Witham. He hates you."

"Guess not," said Henry Burns. "We never saw him."

"No, but you're from the city," said the child. "He hates all of you. Haven't I heard him say so, and shake his old cane at Benton? He'll cane you. He'll set the collies on you – "

"I'd like to meet anything that I could kick!" cried Harvey, clenching his fist. "What kind of a place is this we've got into? That's what I'd like to know. Henry, where in this old mud-hole shall we go? Think of it! Three miles to Benton on this road."

"That's what I've come to tell you," said the child, "though I'd catch it from Witham if he knew – and old Ellison, wouldn't he be mad?"

The very idea seemed to afford her merriment, and she laughed again. "Come, hurry along with me," she continued. "It's the old mill. I know the way in, and there's a warm fire there. You'll have to run, though, for I'm getting soaked through." And she started off ahead of them, like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"Here, hold on a minute," called Henry Burns, who had gallantly divested himself of his sweater, while the rain drops splashed coldly on his bare arms. "Put this on. I don't need it."

But she tripped on, unheeding; and twice, in their strange flight toward the mill, the lightning revealed her to them – a flitting, odd little thing, like a figure in a dream. Indeed, when they saw her, darting across the bridge over the brook, just ahead of them, they would scarcely have been surprised had she vanished, as witches do that dare not cross running water.

But she kept on, and they came presently, all out of breath, in the shadow of the old mill. The three gained the shelter of a roof overhanging a narrow platform that ran along one side, and paused for a moment to rest.

It was a dismal place, by night, but the child seemed at ease and without fear.

"I know every inch of the old mill," she said, as though by way of reassurance. "You've just got to look out where you step, and you're all right."

Had it not offered some sort of shelter from the storm, however, the place would hardly have appealed to Harvey and Henry Burns. The aged building seemed to creak and sway in the wind, as though it might fall apart from weakness and topple into the water. The stream plunged over the dam with a sullen roar, much as if it chafed at the barrier and longed to sweep it altogether from its course and carry its timbers with it. Once the lightning flashed into and through all the cobwebbed window-panes, and the mill gave out a ghastly glare.

"Nice, cheerful place for a night's lodging," remarked Henry Burns. "Perhaps we'd better roost right here. I don't exactly take a fancy to the rickety old shell."

"Oh, but it's lovely when you're inside," exclaimed the child, almost reprovingly. "There's the meal-bags to sleep on. And look, you can see the stove, in through the window, red with the fire. It keeps things dry in the mill. I've slept there twice, when gran' was after me with a stick."

"All alone?" asked Henry Burns, looking at the child wonderingly, and feeling a sudden pity for her.

"Why yes," said she. "There's nothing to be afraid of – only rats. Ugh! I hate rats. Don't you?"

"Go ahead," said Henry Burns, stoutly. "We'll follow you. It looks like a real nice place, don't it, Jack?"

"Perhaps," muttered Harvey.

The girl crept along the platform and descended a short flight of steps that led to the mill flume – a long box-like sluice-way that carried the water in to turn the mill wheels. These wheels were silent now, for two great gates at the end of the flume barred out the waters. The girl tripped lightly along a single plank that extended over the flume. The boys followed cautiously.

"Can you swim?" asked Harvey.

"Why, of course," said she.

Presently she paused, took a few steps across a plank that led to a window, raised that, climbed in and disappeared.

"Come on," she called softly. "I'll show you where to step."

"Whew!" exclaimed Harvey. "This is worse than a gale in Samoset Bay."

"Oh, it's lovely when you get inside," said Henry Burns – "all except the rats. Come along."

They climbed in through the window, dropping on to a single plank on the other side, by the child's direction.

"Now stay here," she said, "till I come back."

It was pitch dark and they could not see where they were; but they could hear her light steps as she made her way in through the mill and disappeared.

"She'll never come back," exclaimed Harvey. "Say, wake me up with a good, hard punch, will you, Henry? I know I'm dreaming."

But now they perceived the dull glimmer of a lantern, turned low, being borne toward them by an unseen hand. Then the figure of the girl appeared, and soon the lantern's rays lighted up vaguely the interior of the mill.

They were, it proved, still outside the grinding-rooms, in that part of the mill where the water would pour in to turn the wheels. It was gaunt and unfinished, filled with the sound of dripping waters; with no flooring, but only a scanty network of beams and planking for them to thread their way across.

They followed the child now over these, and came quickly to a small sliding door, past which they entered the main room on the first floor. There, in truth, it would seem they might not be uncomfortably housed for the night. A small box-stove, reddened in patches by the burning coals within, shed warmth throughout the room. There were heaps of empty meal-bags lying here and there. And, for certain, there was no rain coming in.

And now, having been guided by their new acquaintance to their lodgings, so strangely, they found themselves, almost on the moment, deserted.

"Here you are," said the child, with somewhat of a touch of pride in her voice. "Didn't I say I'd get you in all right? Don't turn that light up too bright. Someone might see it from the road. And get out early in the morning, before old Ellison comes. Good night and sleep tight. And don't you ever, ever tell, or I'll catch it. I don't need the lantern. I can feel my way."

The next moment she was gone. They would have detained her, to ask more about herself; about the mill wherein they were; to ask about Ellison, the owner. But it was too late. They heard her steps, faintly, as she traversed the dangerous network of planking, and then only the steady, dripping sound came in through the little doorway.

"Well," exclaimed Harvey, throwing himself down on a pile of meal-bags, close by the fire, "this isn't the worst place I ever got into, if it is old and rickety. Don't that fire feel good?"

He drew off his dripping sweater and hung it on a box, which he set near, and rubbed his arms vigorously.

"This is such a funny old room I can't keep still in it," he continued. "The fire feels great, but I want to explore and see what kind of a place I'm in."

"Oh, sit down and be comfortable," replied Henry Burns. "Just make believe you're in the cabin of the *Viking*."

"Say, Henry," exclaimed Harvey warmly to his friend's reply, "do you know I'm half sorry we let the *Viking* go for the summer. Of course 'twas mighty nice of Tom and Bob to ask us to spend the

summer in Benton with them; but I don't know as canoeing and fishing and that sort of thing will do for us. I'd like to have a hand on the old *Viking's* wheel right now."

"Oh, we'll get sailing, too," answered Henry Burns. "We're going to try the pond, you know. Hello, there's a wheel, now. Looks like a ship's wheel, at that – only rougher. You can stand your trick at that, if you want to, while I sit by the fire."

He was sorry he spoke, the next moment, for Harvey – never too cautious – gave a roar of delight, and darted over to where his friend had pointed.

There, attached to a small shaft that protruded from the wooden partition which divided the two lower rooms of the mill, was a large, wooden wheel, with a series of wooden spokes attached to its rim, after the manner of a ship's wheel.

"Hooray!" bawled Harvey, seizing the wheel and giving it several vigorous turns, "keep her off, did you say, skipper? Ay, ay, we'll clear the breakers now, with water to spare.

"Here you," addressing an imaginary sailor, "get forward lively and clear that jib-sheet; and look out for the block. Hanged if we want a man overboard a night like this, eh, Mister Burns?"

"Say, Jack, I wouldn't do that," replied Henry Burns, laughing at his comrade's antics. "You don't know what that may turn."

"Don't I, though!" roared Harvey, jamming the wheel around with a few more turns. "Why, you land-lubber, it turns the ship, same as any wheel. This is the good ship, *Rattle-Bones*, bound from Benton to Boston, with a cargo of meal – and rats. We've lost our pilot, Bess – what's her name – and we've got to put her through ourselves.

"Hello!" he cried suddenly, checking himself in the midst of his nonsense and listening intently. "What's that noise? Henry, no joking, I hear breakers off the port bow. We're going aground, or the ship's leaking."

Henry Burns sprang up, and both boys stood, wondering.

Out of the darkness of the other part of the mill there came in a sound of rushing water, plainly distinguishable above the roar of the water flowing over the dam, and the dashing rain and the gusts of wind. Then, as they stood, listening curiously, there came a deep, rumbling sound out of the very vitals of the old mill; there was a gentle quivering throughout all its timbers; a groaning in all its aged structure; a whirring, droning sound – the wheels of the mill were turning, and there was needed only the pushing of one of the levers to set the great mill-stones, themselves, to grinding.

"Jack," cried Henry Burns, "you've opened the gates. The wheels are turning. We've got to stop that, quick. Someone might hear it."

He sprang to the wheel, gave it a few sharp whirls, turned it again and again with all his strength, and the rushing noise ceased. The mill, as though satisfied that its protests against being driven to work at such an hour had been availing, quieted once more, and the place was still.

Still, save that the wind outside swept sharply around the corners of the old structure, moaning about the eaves and whistling dismally in at knot-holes. Still, save that now and again it seemed to quiver on its foundations when some especially heavy thunder-clap roared overhead, while the momentary flash revealed the dusty, cobwebbed interior.

One standing, by chance, at the door of the mill that opened on to the road, might have espied, in one of these sudden illuminings of the night, a farm wagon, drawn by a tired horse, splashing along the road past the mill, and turning off, just below it, on the road leading to the house on the hill.

The driver, a tall, spare man, thin-faced and stoop-shouldered, sat with head bent forward, to keep the rain from beating in his face. He was letting the horse, familiar with the way, pick the road for itself.

All at once, however, he sat upright, drew the reins in sharply, and peered back in the direction of the mill.



"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "If that isn't the mill. I must be crazy. It can't run itself. Yes, but it is, though. What on earth's got loose? It's twenty years and it's never done a thing like that. Back, there. Back, confound you! I'll have a look."

The horse most unwillingly backing and turning, headed once more toward the main road, and then was drawn up short again.

"Well, I must have been dreaming, sure enough," muttered the driver. "I don't hear anything now. Well, we'll keep on, anyway. I'll have a turn around the old place. There's more there than some folks know of. I'll see that all's safe, if it rains pitchforks and barn-shovels. Giddap Billy."

A few moments later, Henry Burns and Harvey, having tucked themselves snugly in among the meal-sacks close by the fire, with the lantern extinguished, roused up, astounded and dismayed, at the sound of carriage wheels just outside, and the click of a key in the lock of the door. They had barely time to spring from their places, and dart up the stairs that led from the middle of the main floor to the one next above, before the door was thrown open and a man stepped within.

They were dressed, most fortunately, for canoeing; and they had gained the security of the upper floor, thanks to feet clad in tennis shoes, without noise. Now they crouched at the head of the stairs, in utter darkness, not knowing whither to move, or whether or not a step might plunge them into some shaft.

"It must be Ellison," whispered Harvey. "What'll we do?"

"Nothing," answered Henry Burns, "and not make any noise about it either. He heard your ship, Jack. Sh-h-h. We don't want to be put out into the rain again."

Farmer Ellison shut the door behind him, and they heard him take a few steps across the floor; then he was apparently fumbling about in the dark for something, for they heard him say, "It isn't there. Confound that boy! He never puts that lantern back on the hook. If he don't catch it, to-morrow. Hello! Well, if I've smashed that glass, there'll be trouble."

Farmer Ellison, stumbling across the floor, had, indeed, kicked the lantern which had been left there by the fleeing canoeists. That it was not broken, however, was evidenced the next moment by the gleam of its light.

By this gleam, the boys, peering down the stairway, could make out the form of a tall, stoop-shouldered man, holding the lantern in one hand and gazing about him. Now he advanced toward the little door that opened into the outer mill, and stood, looking through, while he held the lantern far out ahead of him.

"Queer," he muttered. "I closed that door before I went up, or I'm getting forgetful. But everything's all right. I don't see anything the matter. Ho! ho! I'm getting nervous about things – and who wouldn't? When a man has –"

The rest of his sentence was lost, for he had stepped out on to one of the planks. They heard him, only indistinctly, stepping from one plank to another; but what he sought and what he did they could not imagine.

"He must think a lot of this old rattle-trap, to mouse around here this time of night," muttered Harvey. "What'll we do, Henry?"

"Hide, just as soon as we get a chance," whispered Henry Burns. "He may take a notion to come up. There! Look sharp, Jack. Get your bearings."

Again a sharp flash of lightning gleamed through the upper windows, lighting up the room where they were, for a moment, then leaving it seemingly blacker than before.

"I've got it," whispered Henry Burns. "Follow me, Jack."

The two stole softly across to an end of the room, to where a series of boxes were built in, under some shafting and chutes, evidently constructed to receive the meal when ground. Henry Burns lifted the cover of one of these. It was nearly empty, and they both squeezed in, drawing the cover down over their heads, and leaving an opening barely sufficient to admit air.

They had not been a minute too soon; for presently they heard the sound of footsteps. Farmer Ellison was coming up the stairs. Then the lantern appeared at the top of the stairway, and the bearer came into view.

They saw him go from one corner to another, throwing the lantern rays now overhead among the tangle of belting, now behind some beam. Then he paused for a moment beside one of the huge grinding stones. He put his foot upon it and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"All right – all right," they heard him say. "Ah, the old mill looks poor, but there's some men dress just like it, and have money in their pockets."

Then he passed on and up a flight of stairs leading to the third and highest floor of the mill. He did not remain long, however, but came down, still talking to himself. And when he kept on and descended to the main floor, he was repeating that it was "all right," and "all safe;" and so, finally, they heard him blow out the light, hang the lantern on a hook and pass out through the door. The sound of the wagon wheels told them that he was driving away.

Quickly they scrambled out from their hiding place, descended the stairs and crouched by the fire.

"Well, what now?" asked Harvey. "Guess we'll turn in, eh?"

But Henry Burns was already snuggling in among the meal-bags.

"I'm going to sleep, Jack," he said. "Didn't you hear old Ellison say everything was 'all right'?"

"Yes. I wonder what he meant," said Harvey.

"Oh, he said that just to please us," chuckled Henry Burns. "Good night."

The bright sun of a clearing day awoke them early the next morning, and they lost no time in quitting the mill.

"Jack," said Henry Burns, as he followed his companion across the planking of the flume, "you look like an underdone buckwheat cake. There's enough flour on your back for breakfast."

"I'd like to eat it," exclaimed Harvey. "I'm hungry enough. Let's get the canoe and streak it for Benton."

They were drawing their canoe up the bank, a few moments later, to carry it around the dam, when something away up along shore attracted their notice. There, perched in a birch tree, in the topmost branches, with her weight bending it over till it nearly touched the water, they espied a girl, swinging. Then, as they looked, she waved a hand to them.

"Hello," exclaimed Henry Burns. "It's Bess What's-her-name. She's not afraid of getting drowned. That's sure."

The boys swung their caps to her, and she stood upright amid the branches and waved farewell to them, as they started for Benton.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE TROUT POOL

The brook that flowed into Mill Stream, just above the old mill, itself, came down from some heavily wooded hills a few miles to the northeast, and its waters were ever cold, even in hottest summer, save in one or two open places in the intervening meadows. It was called "Cold Brook" by some of the farmers. Henry Burns and Harvey and Bess Thornton had crossed this brook, by way of the bridge on their flight to the mill.

A wayfarer, standing on the little bridge, of an afternoon, keeping motionless and in the shadow, might sometimes see, far down in the clear water, vague objects that looked like shadows cast by sticks. He might gaze for many minutes and see no sign of life or motion to them. Then, perchance, one of these same grey shadows might disappear in the twinkling of an eye; the observer would see the surface of the water break in a tiny whirl; the momentary flash of a silvery side, spotted with red, appear – and the trout would vanish back into the deep water once more.

Let the traveller try as he might, he seldom got one of these fish. They were too wary; "educated," the farmers called them. They certainly knew enough not to bite.

Tim Reardon occasionally came back to Benton with two or three of the trout tucked inside his blouse; but he wouldn't tell how he got 'em – not even to Jack Harvey, to whom he was loyal in all else. Most folks came back empty-handed.

To be sure, there was one part of the brook where the least experienced fisherman might cast a line and draw out a fish. But that was just the very part of all the brook where nobody was allowed. It was the pool belonging to Farmer Ellison.

A little more than a mile up the brook from the bridge the water came tumbling down a series of short, abrupt cascades, into a pool, formed by a small dam thrown across the brook between banks that were quite steep. This pool broadened out in its widest part to a width of several rods, bordered by thick alders, swampy land in places, and in part by a grove of beech trees.

Come upon this pool at twilight and you would see the trout playing there as though they had just been let out of school. Try to catch one – and if Farmer Ellison wasn't down upon you in a hurry, it was because he was napping.

You might have bought Farmer Ellison's pet cow, but not a chance to fish in this pool. Indeed, he seldom fished it himself, but he prized the trout like precious jewels. John and James Ellison, Farmer Ellison's sons, and Benjamin, their cousin, fished the pool once in a great while – and got soundly trounced if caught. It was Farmer Ellison's hobby, this pool and its fish. He gloated over them like a miser. He watched them leap, and counted them when they did, as a miser would money.

The dam held the trout in the pool downstream, and the cascades – or the upper cascade – held them from escaping upstream. There were three smaller cascades which a lusty trout could ascend by a fine series of rushes and leapings. The upper water-fall was too steep to be scaled. When the water in the brook was high there was an outlet in the dam for it to pass through, to which a gate opened, and protected at all times by heavy wire netting.

Farmer Ellison's house was situated on a hill overlooking this part of the brook, less than a half mile away.

Some way up the brook, if one followed a path through mowing-fields from Farmer Ellison's, and crossed a little foot-bridge over the brook, he would come eventually upon a house, weather-beaten and unpainted, small and showing every sign of neglect. The grass grew long in the dooryard. A few hens scratched the weeds in what once might have been flower-beds. The roof was sagging, and the chimney threatened to topple in the first high wind.

The sun was shining in at the windows of this house, at the close of an afternoon, a few days following the adventure of Henry Burns and Harvey in the mill. It revealed a girl, little, sturdy and of well-knit figure, though in whose childish face there was an underlying trace of shrewdness unusual in one so young; like a little wild creature, or a kitten that has found itself more often chased than petted.

The girl was busily engaged, over a kitchen fire, stirring some sort of porridge in a dish. Clearly, hers were spirits not easily depressed by her surroundings, for she whistled at her task, – as good as any boy could have whistled, – and now and again, from sheer excess of animation, she whisked away from the stove and danced about the old kitchen, all alone by herself.

"Isn't that oatmeal most ready, Bess?" came a querulous voice presently, from an adjoining room. "What makes you so long?"

"Coming, gran', right away now," replied the child. "The coffee's hot, too. Don't it smell go-o-od? But there's only one – "

"What?" queried the voice.

"Nothing," said the child.

She took a single piece of bread from a box, toasted it for a moment, put it on a plate, poured a cup of coffee, dished out a mess of the porridge, and carried it all into the next room. There, an elderly woman, muttering and scolding to herself as she lay on a couch, received it.

"Too bad the rheumatics bother so, gran'," said the child, consolingly. "If they last to-morrow, I'm going to tell old Witham and make him send you something good to eat."

"No, you won't," exclaimed the woman sharply. "Much he cares! Says he pays me too much now for cooking; and he says I've got money tucked away here. Wish I had."

"So do I," said the child. "I'd buy the biggest doll you ever saw."

"Fudge!" cried the old woman. "Why, you've outgrown 'em long ago."

"I know it," said the child, solemnly. "But I'd just like to have a big one, once."

"And so you should, if we had our rights," cried Grannie Thornton, lifting herself up on an elbow, with a jerk that brought forth an exclamation of pain. "If he didn't own everything. If he didn't get it all – what we used to own."

"Old Ellison?" suggested the child.

"Yes, Jim Ellison." Grannie Thornton sat up and shook a lean fist toward the window that opened off toward the hill. "Oh, he bought it all right. He paid for it, I suppose. But it's ours, by rights. We owned it all once, from Ten Mile Wood to the bridge. But it's gone now."

"I don't see why we don't own it now, if that's so," said the child.

"Well, it's law doin's," muttered the woman. "Get your own supper, and don't bother me."

"I don't understand," said the child, as she went back to the kitchen.

She might have understood better if Grannie Thornton had explained the real reason: that the Thorntons had gone wild and run through their farm property; mortgaged it and sold it out; and that Ellison, a shrewd buyer, had got it when it was to be had cheapest. But she asked one more question.

"Gran'" she said, peeping in at the door, "will we ever get it again, s'pose?"

"Mercy sakes, how do I know!" came the answer. "It's ours now, by rights. Will you ever stop talking?"

The child looked wonderingly out across the fields; seated herself by the window, and still gazed as she drank her coffee and ate her scanty supper. She was sitting there when night shut down and hid the hill and the brook from sight.

The sun, himself an early riser, was up not anywhere near so early next morning as was Bess Thornton. There was light in the east, but the sun had not begun to roll above the hill-tops when the child stole quietly out of bed, slipped into her few garments, and hurried barefoot, from the room where she and Grannie Thornton slept. The old woman was still slumbering heavily.

"I'll not ask that old Witham for anything for gran," she said. "I'll get her something, – and something she'll like, too. It all belongs to us, anyway, gran' said."

The girl gently slid the bolt of the kitchen door, stepped outside and closed the door after her. Then she made her way out through the neglected garden to an old apple-tree, against which there leaned a long slender alder pole, with a line and hook attached. Throwing this over her shoulder, she started down through the fields in the direction of the brook.

On the way, a few grasshoppers, roused from their early naps in the grass by the girl's bare feet, jumped this side and that. But, with the coolness of the hour, they seemed to have some of old Grannie Thornton's rheumatism in their joints, for they tumbled and sprawled clumsily. The girl quickly captured several of them, tying them up in a fold of her handkerchief.

Presently she came near the borders of the pool, dear to the heart of Farmer Ellison. But the edge of the pool on the side where she walked was boggy. Gazing sharply for some moments up at the big house on the hill, the girl darted down to the edge of the brook close by the dam, then suddenly skimmed across it to the other side.

A little way above the dam, on that side, there were clumps of bushes, among which one might steal softly to the water's edge, on good, firm footing. The girl did this, seated herself on a little knoll behind a screen of shrubs, baited the hook with a fat grasshopper and cast it into the pool.

"Grasshopper Green, go catch me a trout," she whispered; "and don't you dare come back without a big – "

Splash! There was a quick, sharp whirl in the still water; a tautening of the line, a hard jerk of the rod, and the girl was drawing in a plump fellow that was fighting gamely and wrathfully for his freedom. The fish darted to and fro for a moment, lashed the water into a miniature upheaval, and then swung in to where a small but strong little hand clutched him.

"Oh, you beauty!" she exclaimed, gazing triumphantly and admiringly at his brilliant spots. "Didn't you know better than to try to eat poor old Grasshopper Green? See what you get for it. Gran'll eat you now."

She took the trout from the hook, dropped it among the shrubs, took another "grasshopper green" from her handkerchief, and cast again. A second and a third trout rewarded her efforts.

But Bess Thornton, the grasshoppers and the trout were not the only ones stirring abroad early this pleasant morning. A person not all intent upon fishing, nor absorbed in the excitement of it, might have seen, had he looked in the direction of the house on the hill, Farmer Ellison, himself, appear in the doorway and gaze out over his fields and stream.

Had one been nearer, he might have seen a look of grim satisfaction, that was almost a smile, steal over the man's face as he saw the grass, grown thick and heavy; grains coming in well filled; garden patches showing thrift; cattle feeding in pasture lands, and the brook winding prettily down through green fields and woodland.

But the expression upon Farmer Ellison's face changed, as he gazed; his brow wrinkled into a frown. His eyes flashed angrily.

What was that, moving to and fro amid the alder clumps by the border of the trout pool? There was no breeze stirring the alders; but one single alder stick – was not it waving back and forth most mysteriously?

Farmer Ellison gave an exclamation of anger. He knew these early morning poachers. This would not be the first he had chased before sunrise, taking a fish from the forbidden waters. He stepped back into the entry, seized a stout cane, and started forth down through the fields, bending low and screening himself as he progressed by whatsoever trees and bushes were along the way.

That someone was there, whipping the stream, there could be no doubt. Yet, someone – whoever it was – must be short, or else, perchance, crouched low in the undergrowth; for Farmer Ellison could get no glimpse of the fisherman.

Crack! A dead branch snapped under Farmer Ellison's heavy boot.

Bess Thornton, gleeful, – joyous over the conquest of her third trout, looked quickly behind her, startled by the snapping of the branch only a few rods away. What she saw made her gasp. She almost cried out with the sudden fright. But she acted promptly.

Giving the pole a sharp thrust, she shoved it in under the bank, beneath the water. The trout! The precious trout! Ah, she could not leave them. Hastily she snatched them up, and thrust all three inside her gingham waist, dropping them in with a wrench at the neck-band.

"Ugh! how they squirm," she cried, softly.

Then, creeping to the water's edge, she dived in – neatly as any trout could have done it – and disappeared. One who did not know Bess Thornton might well have been alarmed now, for the child seemed to be lost. The surface of the brook where she had gone down remained unruffled. Then, clear across on the other side, one watching sharply might have seen a child's head appear out of the pool, at the edge of a clump of bull-rushes; might have seen her emerge half out of water, and hide herself from view of anyone on the opposite shore.

She had swum the entire width of the pool under water.

From her hiding-place she saw Farmer Ellison rush suddenly from cover upon the very place where she had sat, fishing. She saw him run, furiously, hither and thither, beating the underbrush with his cane, shaking the stick wrathfully. His face showed the keenest disappointment and chagrin.

Up and down the shore of the pool he travelled, searching every clump that might afford shelter.

"Well," he exclaimed finally, "I must be going wrong, somehow. First it's the mill I hear, when it isn't grinding, and now I see somebody fishing when there isn't anybody. I'll go and take some of them burdock bitters. Guess my liver must be out of order."

Farmer Ellison, shaking his head dubiously, and casting a backward glance now and then, strode up the hill, looking puzzled and wrathful.

When he was a safe distance out of the way, a little figure, dripping wet, scrambled in across the bog on the other side, and stole up through the fields to the old tumble-down house.

"What's that you're cooking, child?" called out a voice, some time later, as the girl stood by the kitchen stove.

"M-m-m-m gran', it's something awful good. Do you smell 'em?" replied the child, gazing proudly into the fry-pan, wherein the three fat trout sizzled. "Well, I caught 'em, myself."

"I do declare!" exclaimed Grannie Thornton. "I didn't know the trout would bite now anywhere but in Jim Ellison's pool."

The girl made no reply.

"You like 'em, don't you, gran'?" she said, gleefully, some moments later, as she stood watching the old woman eat her breakfast with a relish. Grannie Thornton had eaten one trout, and was beginning on the half of another.

"They're tasty, Bess," she replied. "Where did you catch 'em? I thought the fishing in the brook wasn't any use nowadays."

The girl stood for a moment, hesitating. Then she thought of the old woman's words of the night before.

"I caught 'em in the pool, gran'," she said.

The iron fork with which Grannie Thornton was conveying a piece of the trout to her mouth dropped from her hand. The last piece she had eaten seemed to choke her. Then she tottered to her feet with a wrench that made her groan.

"You got 'em from the pool!" she screamed. "From the pool, do you say? Don't yer know that's stealing? Didn't I bring you up better'n that? What do you mean by going and being so bad, just 'cause I'm crippled and can't look after yer? Would you grow up to be a thief, child?"

The old woman's strength failed her, and she fell back on the couch. The girl stood for a moment, silent, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"But you said 'twas all ours, anyway, gran'," she sobbed. "Will I have to go to prison, do you think?"

"Nonsense!" cried Grannie Thornton. "But if Ellison found it out – "

Bess Thornton was darting out of the doorway.

"He'll find it out now," she said, bitterly. "I'll tell him. I don't care what happens to me."

Benjamin Ellison, James Ellison's nephew, a heavy-set, large-boned, clumsily-built youth, lounged lazily in the dooryard of the Ellison homestead as the girl neared the gate, a quarter of an hour later.

"Hello, Tomboy," he said, barring her entrance, with arms outstretched. "Don't know as I'll let you in this way. Let's see you jump the fence. Say, what's the matter with you? Ho! ho! Why, you look like that cat I dropped in the brook yesterday. You've got a ducking, somehow. Your clothes aren't all dry yet. Who – ?"

The youth's bantering was most unexpectedly interrupted. He himself didn't know exactly how it happened. He only knew that the girl had darted suddenly forward, that he had been neatly tripped, and that he found himself lying on his back in a clump of burdocks.

"Here, you beggar!" he cried, spitefully, scrambling to his feet and making after her. "You'll get another ducking for that."

But the girl, as though knowing human nature, instinctively ran close beside another youth, of about the same size as Benjamin, who had just appeared from the house, caught him by an arm and said, "Don't let him hurt me, will you, John? I tripped him up. Oh, but you ought to have seen him!"

Her errand was forgotten for an instant and she laughed a merry laugh.

The boy thus appealed to, a youth of about his cousin's size, but of a less heavy mould, stood between her and the other.

"You go on, Bennie," he said, laughing. "Let her alone. Oh ho, that's rich! Put poor old Bennie on his back, did you, Bess? What do you want?"

The girl's mirth vanished, and her face flushed.

"I want to see your father," she said, slowly.

"All right, go in the door there," responded John Ellison. "He's all alone in the dining-room."

Farmer Ellison, finishing his third cup of coffee, and leaning back in his chair, looked up in surprise, as the girl stepped noiselessly across the threshold and confronted him.

"Well! Well!" he exclaimed, eying her somewhat sharply. "Why didn't you knock at the door? Forgotten how? What do you want?"

The girl waited for a moment before replying, shuffling her bare feet and tugging at her damp dress. Then she seemed to gather her courage. She looked resolutely at Farmer Ellison.

"I want a licking, I guess," she said.

Farmer Ellison's face relaxed into a grim smile.

"A licking," he repeated. "Well, I reckon you deserve it, all right, if not for one thing, then for something else."

"I guess I do," said Bess Thornton.

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" queried Farmer Ellison, looking puzzled. "Can't old Mother Thornton give it to you?"

"No," replied the girl. "She's sick. And besides, she didn't know what I was going to do. I did it all myself, early this morning."

Farmer Ellison looked up quickly. An expression of suspicion stole over his face. He looked at the girl's bedraggled dress.

"What have you been up to?" he asked, sternly.

"I've been stealing," replied the girl. "'Twas – 'twas – "

Farmer Ellison sprang up from his seat.

"'Twas you, then, down by the shore?" he cried. "Confound it! I knew I didn't need them burdock bitters all the time I was takin' 'em. Stealing my trout, eh? Don't tell me you caught any?"

"Only three."

The girl half whispered the reply.

Farmer Ellison seized the girl by an arm and shook her roughly.

"Bring them back!" he cried. "Where are they?"

"I can't," stammered the girl; "they're cooked."

He shook her again.

"You ate my trout!" he cried. "Pity they didn't choke you. Didn't you feel like choking – eating stolen trout, eh?"

"Gran' did," said the girl, ruefully. "But 'twas a bone, sir. She didn't know they were stolen till I told her."

The sound of Farmer Ellison's wrathful voice had rung through the house, and at this moment a woman entered the room. At the sight of her, Bess Thornton suddenly darted away from the man's grasp, ran to Mrs. Ellison, hid her face in her dress and sobbed.

"I didn't think 'twas so bad," she said. "I – I won't do it again – ever."

Mrs. Ellison, whose face expressed a tenderness in contrast to the hardness of her husband's, stroked the girl's hair softly, seated herself in a rocking chair, and drew the girl close to her.

"What made you take the fish?" she inquired softly.

"Well, gran' said we ought to have the whole place by rights – "

Mrs. Ellison directed an inquiring glance at her husband.

"She's been complaining that way ever since I bought it," he said.

"And gran' was sick and I thought she'd like some of the trout," continued the girl. "She's got rheumatics and can't work this week, you know."

"But wouldn't it have been better to ask?" queried Mrs. Ellison, kindly. "Didn't you feel kind of as though it was wrong, eating something you had no right to take?"

"I didn't," answered the girl, promptly. "I didn't eat any. I was going to, though, till gran' said what she did – "

"Then you haven't had anything to eat to-day?" asked Mrs. Ellison, feeling a sudden moisture in her own eyes.

"No," said the girl.

"And what makes your dress so wet? Did you fall in?"

"No-o-o," exclaimed the girl. "I swam the pool. And I did it all the way under water. I didn't think I could, and I almost died holding my breath so long. But I did it."

There was a touch of pride in her tone.

"James," said Mrs. Ellison. "Leave her to me. I'll say all that's needed, I don't think she'll do it again."

"Indeed I won't – truly," said Bess Thornton.

Farmer Ellison walked to the door, with half a twinkle in his eye. "Clear across the pool under water," he muttered to himself. "Sure enough, I didn't need them burdock bitters."

A few minutes later, Bess Thornton, seated at the breakfast table in the Ellison home, was eating the best meal she had had in many a day. A motherly-looking woman, setting out a few extra dainties for her, wiped her eyes now and again with a corner of her apron.

"She'd have been about her age," she whispered to herself once softly, and bent and gave the girl a kiss.

When Bess Thornton left the house, she carried a basket on one arm that made Grannie Thornton stare in amazement when she looked within.



"No, no," she said, all of a tremble, as the girl drew forth some of the delicacies, and offered them to her. "Not a bit of it for me. I'll not touch it. You can. And see here, don't go up on the hill again, do you hear? Keep away from the Ellisons'."

She had such a strange, excited, almost frightened way with her that the child urged her no further, but put the basket away, put of her sight.

"Mrs. Ellison asked me to come again," she said to herself, sighing. "I don't see why gran' should care."

## CHAPTER V

### SOME CAUSES OF TROUBLE

It was early of a Saturday afternoon, warm and sultry. Everything in the neighbourhood of the Half Way House seemed inclined to drowsiness. Even the stream flowing by at a little distance moved as though its waters were lazy. The birds and the cattle kept their respective places silently, in the treetops and beneath the shade. Only the flies, buzzing about the ears of Colonel Witham's dog that lay stretched in the dooryard, were active.

They buzzed about the fat, florid face of the colonel, presently, as he emerged upon the porch, lighted his after-dinner pipe and seated himself in a big wooden arm-chair. But the annoyance did not prevent him from dozing as he smoked, and, finally, from dropping off soundly to sleep.

He enjoyed these after-dinner naps, and the place was conducive to them. The long stretch of highway leading up from Benton had scarcely a country wagon-wheel turning on it, to stir the dust to motion. In the distance, the mill droned like a big beehive. Near at hand only the fish moved in the stream – the fish and a few rowboats that swung gently at their ropes at the end of a board-walk that led from the hotel to the water's edge.

The colonel slumbered on. But, far down the road, there arose, presently, a cloud of dust, amid which there shone and glittered flashes of steel. Then a line of bicyclists came into view, five youths, with backs bent and heads down, making fast time.

On they came with a rush and whirr, the boy in front pointing in toward the Half Way House. The line of glistening, flying wheels aimed itself fair at Colonel Witham's dog, who roused himself and stood, growling hoarsely, with ears set back and tail between his legs.

Then the screeching of five shrill whistles smote upon the summer stillness, the wheels came to an abrupt stop, and the five riders dismounted at a flying leap at the very edge of Colonel Witham's porch. The colonel, startled from sweet repose by the combined noise of whistles, buzzing of machines, shouts of the five riders and the yelping of his frightened dog, awoke with a gasp and a momentary shudder of alarm. He was enlightened, if not pacified, by a row of grinning faces.

"Why, hello, Colonel Witham," came a chorus of voices. "Looks like old times to see you again. Thought we'd stop off and rest a minute."

Colonel Witham, sitting bolt upright in his chair, and mopping the perspiration from his brow with an enormous red handkerchief, glared at them with no friendly eyes.

"Oh, you did, hey!" he roared. "Well, why didn't you bring a dynamite bomb and touch that off when you arrived? Lucky for you that dog didn't go for you. He'll take a piece out of some of you one of these days." (Colonel Witham did not observe that the dog, at this moment, tail between legs, was flattening himself out like a flounder, trying to squeeze himself underneath the board walk.) "What do you want here, anyway?"

"Some bottled soda, Colonel," said the youngest boy, in a tone that would seem to indicate that the colonel was their best friend. "Bottled soda for the crowd. My treat."

"Bottled monkey-shines and tomfoolery!" muttered Colonel Witham, arising slowly from his chair. "I wish it would choke that young Joe Warren. Never saw him when he wasn't up to something."

But he went inside with them and served their order; scowling upon them as they drank.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Making a fifty mile run, Colonel," replied one of the boys, whose features indicated that he was an elder brother of the boy who had previously spoken. "Tom and Bob – you remember them – are setting the pace on their tandem for Arthur and Joe and me. Whew, but we came up a-flying. Well, good day, we're off. You may see Tim Reardon by and by. We left him down the road with a busted tire."

They were away, with a shout and a whirl of dust.

"Hm!" growled the colonel. "I'll set the dog on Tim Reardon if he comes up the way they did. Here, Cæsar, come here!"

The colonel gave a sharp whistle.

But Cæsar, a yellow mongrel of questionable breeds, did not appear. A keen vision might have seen this canine terror to evildoers poke a shrinking muzzle a little way from beneath the board walk, emit a frightened whine and disappear.

Colonel Witham dozed again, and again slumber overtook him. He did not stir when Grannie Thornton, recovered from her attack of rheumatism, appeared at a window and shook a table-cloth therefrom; nor when Bess Thornton, dancing out of the doorway, whisked past his chair and seated herself at the edge of the piazza.

The girl's keen blue eyes perceiving, presently, an object in the distance looking like a queer combination of boy and bicycle, she ran out from the dooryard as it approached. Tim Reardon, an undersized, sharp-eyed youngster, rather poorly dressed and barefoot, wheeling his machine laboriously along, was somewhat of a mournful-looking figure. The girl held up a warning hand as he approached.

"Hello," said the boy. "What's the matter?"

The girl pointed at the sleeping colonel.

"Said he'd set the dog on you if you came around the way the others did," replied Bess Thornton. "They woke him up. My! wasn't he mad? Here," she added, handing a small box to the boy, "George Warren left this for you. Said they wanted to make time. That's why they didn't stop for you."

"Thanks," said the boy. "Thought I'd got to walk clear back to Benton. But I was going to have a swim first. Guess I'll have it, anyway. It's hot, walking through this dust."

"I'll tell you where to go," said the girl. "Do you know what's fun? See that tree way up along shore there, the one that hangs out over the water? Well, I climb that till it bends down, and then I get to swinging and jump."

Tim Reardon gave her an incredulous glance, with one eye half closed.

"Oh, I don't care whether you believe it or not," said the girl. "But I'll show you some time. Can't now. Got to wash dishes. Don't wake him up, or you'll catch it."

She disappeared through the doorway, and Tim Reardon, leaving his wheel leaning against a corner of the house, went up along shore. In another half hour he returned, took from his pocket the box the girl had given to him, got therefrom an awl, a bottle of cement and some thin strips of rubber, and began mending the punctured tire of the bicycle. The tire was already somewhat of a patched affair, bearing evidences of former punctures and mendings.

"It's Jack's old wheel," he remarked by way of explanation to Bess Thornton, who had reappeared and was interestedly watching the operation. "He's going to give me one of his new tires," he added, "the first puncture he gets."

"Why don't you put a tack in the road?" asked the girl promptly.

Tim Reardon grinned. "Not for Jack," he said.

"Say," asked the girl, "what's Witham mad with those boys about? Why did he send 'em out of the hotel the other night?"

"Oh, that's a long story," replied Tim Reardon; "I can't tell you all about it. Witham used to keep the hotel down to Southport, and he was always against the boys, and now and then somebody played a joke on him. Then, when his hotel burned, he thought the boys were to blame; but Jack Harvey found the man that set the fire, and so made the colonel look foolish in court."

But at this moment a yawn that sounded like a subdued roar indicated that Colonel Witham was rousing from his nap. He stretched himself, opened his eyes blankly, and perceived the boy and girl.

"Well," he exclaimed, "you're here, eh? Wonder you didn't come in like a wild Indian, too. What's the matter?"

"Got a puncture," said Little Tim.

The colonel, having had the refreshment of his sleep, was in a better humour. He was a little interested in the bicycle.

"Queer what new-fangled ideas they get," he said. "That's not much like what I used to ride."

Little Tim looked up, surprised.

"Why, did you use to ride a wheel?" he asked.

"Did I!" exclaimed Colonel Witham, reviving old recollections, with a touch of pride in his voice. "Well, now I reckon you wouldn't believe I used to be the crack velocipede rider in the town I came from, eh?"

Little Tim, regarding the colonel's swelling waist-band and fat, puffy cheeks, betrayed his skepticism in looks rather than in speech. Colonel Witham continued.

"Yes, sir," said he, "there weren't any of them could beat me in those days. Why, I've got four medals now somewhere around, that I won at county fairs in races. 'Twasn't any of these wire whirligigs, either, that we used to ride. Old bone-shakers, they were; wooden wheels and a solid wrought iron backbone. You had to have the strength to make that run. Guess some of these spindle-legged city chaps wouldn't make much of a go at that. I've got the old machine out in the shed there, somewhere. Like to see it?"

"I know where it is," said Bess Thornton. "I can ride it."

"You ride it!" exclaimed Colonel Witham, staring at her in amazement. "What?"

"Yes," replied the girl; "but only down hill, though. It's too hard to push on the level. I'll go and get it."

"Well, I vum!" exclaimed Colonel Witham, as the girl started for the shed. "That girl beats me."

"Look out, I'm coming," called a childish voice, presently.

The door of the shed was pushed open, and Bess Thornton, standing on a stool, could be seen climbing into the saddle of what resembled closely a pair of wagon wheels connected by a curving bar of iron. She steadied herself for a moment, holding to the side of the doorway; then pushed herself away from it, came down the plank incline, and thence on to the path leading from the elevation on which the shed stood, at full speed. Her legs, too short for her feet to touch the pedals as they made a complete revolution, stuck out at an angle; but she guided the wheel and rode past Tim Reardon and the colonel, triumphantly. When the wheel stopped, she let it fall and landed on her feet, laughing.

"Here it is, Colonel Witham," said she, rolling it back to where he stood. "Let's see you ride it."

Colonel Witham, grasping one of the handle-bars, eyed the velocipede almost longingly.

"No," he said. "I'm too old and stout now. Guess my riding days are over. But I used to make it go once, I tell you."

"Go ahead, get on. You can ride it," urged Tim Reardon. "It won't break."

"Oh no, it will hold me, all right," said Colonel Witham. "We didn't have any busted tires in our day. Good iron rim there that'll last for ever."

"Just try it a little way," said Bess Thornton.

"I never saw anybody ride that had won medals," said Tim Reardon.

Colonel Witham's pride was rapidly getting the better of his discretion.

"Oh, I can ride it," he said, "only it's – it's kind of hot to try it. Makes me feel sort of like a boy, though, to get hold of the thing."

The colonel lifted a fat leg over the backbone and put a ponderous foot on one pedal, while the drops of perspiration began to stand out on his forehead.

"Get out of the way," he shouted. "I'll just show you how it goes – hanged if I don't."

The colonel had actually gotten under way.

Little Tim Reardon doubled up with mirth, and rolled over on the grass.

"Looks just like the elephant at the circus," he cried.

"Sh-h-h, he'll hear you," whispered Bess Thornton.

Colonel Witham was certainly doing himself proud. A new thrill of life went through him. He thought of those races and the medals. It was an unfortunate recollection, for it instilled new ambitions within him. He had ridden up the road a few rods, had made a wide turn and started back; and now, as he neared the hotel once more, his evil genius inspired him to show the two how nicely he could make a shorter turn.

He did it a little too quickly; the wheel lurched, and Colonel Witham felt he was falling. He twisted in the saddle, gave another sharp yank upon the handle-bars – and lost control of the wheel. A most unfortunate moment for such a mishap; for now, as the wheel righted, it swerved to one side and, with increased speed, ran upon the board walk that led down to the boat-landing.

The walk descended at quite a decided incline to the water's edge. It was raised on posts above the level of the ground, so that a fall from it would mean serious injury. There was naught for the luckless colonel to do but sit, helpless, in the saddle and let the wheel take its course.

Helpless, but not silent. Beholding the fate that was inevitable, the colonel gave utterance to a wild roar of despair, which, together with the rumbling of the wheels above his head, drove forth his dog from his hiding-place. Cæsar, espying this new and extraordinary object rattling down the board walk, and mindful of the agonizing shrieks of his master, himself pursued the flying wheel, yelping and barking and adding his voice to that of Colonel Witham.

There was no escape. The heavy wheel, bearing its ponderous weight of misery, and pursued to the very edge of the float by the dog, plunged off into the water with a mighty splash. Colonel Witham, clinging in desperation to the handle bars, sank with the wheel in some seven feet of water. Then, amid a whirl and bubbling of the water like a boiling spring, the colonel's head appeared once more above the surface. Choking and sputtering, he cried for help.

"Help! help!" he roared. "I'm drowning. I can't swim."

"No, but you'll float," bawled Little Tim, who was darting into the shed for a rope.

Indeed, as the colonel soon discovered, now that he was once more at the surface, it seemed really impossible for him to sink. He turned on his back and floated like a whale.

And at this moment, most opportunely, there appeared up the road the line of bicyclists returning.

They were down at the shore shortly – Tom Harris, Bob White, George, Arthur and Joe Warren – just as Little Tim emerged from the shed, with an armful of rope.

"Here, you catch hold," he said, "while I make fast to the colonel." The next moment, he was overboard, swimming alongside Colonel Witham.

"Look out he don't grab you and drown you both," called George Warren.

Little Tim was too much of a fish in the water to be caught that way. The most available part of Colonel Witham to make fast to, as he floated at length, was his nearest foot. Tim Reardon threw a loop about that foot, then the other; and the boys ashore hauled lustily.

The colonel, more than ever resembling a whale – but a live one, inasmuch as he continued to bellow helplessly – came slowly in, and stranded on the shore. They drew him well in with a final tug.

"Here, quit that," he gurgled. "Want to drag me down the road?" The colonel struggled to his feet, his face purple with anger.

"Now get out of here, all of you!" he roared. "There's always trouble when you're around. Tim Reardon, you keep away from here, do you understand?"

"Yes sir," replied Tim Reardon, wringing his own wet clothes; and then added, with a twinkle in his eyes, "but ain't you going to show us those medals, Colonel Witham?"

It was lucky for Tim Reardon that he was fleet of foot. The colonel made a rush at him, but Tim was off down the road, leaping into the saddle of his mended wheel, followed by the others.

"Don't you want us to raise the velocipede, so you can ride some more?" called young Joe Warren, as he mounted his own wheel.

The colonel's only answer was a wrathful shake of his fist.

"Colonel Witham," said Grannie Thornton, as her employer entered the hotel, a few minutes later, "here's a note for you, from Mr. Ellison. Guess he wants to see you about something."

"Hm!" exclaimed the colonel, opening the note, and dampening it much in doing so, "Jim Ellison, eh? More of his queer business doings, I reckon. He's a smart one, he is," he added musingly, as he waddled away to his bed-room to change his dripping garments; then, spying his own face in the mirror: 'What's the matter with you, Daniel Witham? Aren't you smart, too? In all these dealings, isn't there something to be made?'

Colonel Witham, rearranging his figure in a dry suit of clothing, was to be seen, a little later, on the road to the mill, walking slowly, and thinking deeply as he went along. He was so engrossed in his reflections that he failed to notice the approach of a carriage until it was close upon him. He looked up in surprise as a pleasant, gentle voice accosted him.

"Good afternoon, Colonel Witham," it said.

The speaker was a middle-aged, sweet faced woman – the same that had appeased the wrath of her husband against Bess Thornton. She leaned out of the carriage now and greeted Colonel Witham with cordiality.

"Oh, how-dye-do," replied Colonel Witham abruptly, and returning her smile with a frown. He passed along without further notice of her greeting, and she started up the horse she had reined in, and drove away.

Only once did Colonel Witham turn his head and gaze back at the disappearing carriage. Then he glowered angrily.

"I don't want your smiles and fine words," he muttered. "You were too good for me once. Just keep your fine words to yourself. I don't want 'em now."

Colonel Witham, in no agreeable mood, went on and entered at the office door of the mill. A tall, sharp-faced man, seated on a stool at a high desk, looked up at his entrance. One might see at a glance that here was a man who looked upon the world with a calculating eye. No fat and genial miller was James Ellison. No grist that came from his mill was likely to be ground finer than a business scheme put before him. He eyed Colonel Witham sharply.

"Aha, Colonel," he exclaimed, in a slightly sneering tone, "bright and cheery as ever, I see. I thought I'd like to have you drop in and scatter a little sunshine. Sit down. Have a pipe?"

Colonel Witham, accepting the proffered clay and the essentials for loading it, sat back in a chair, and puffed away solemnly, without deigning to answer the other's bantering.

James Ellison continued figuring at his desk.

"Well," said Colonel Witham after some ten minutes had passed, "Suppose you didn't get me down here just to smoke. What d'ye want?"

"Oh, I'm coming to that right away," replied Ellison, still writing. "You know what I want, I guess." He turned abruptly in his seat, and his keen face shaded with anger. He pointed a long lean finger in the direction of the town of Benton. "You know 'em, Dan Witham," he said, "as well as I do. Though you didn't get skinned as I did. You didn't go down to town, as I did twenty odd years ago, with eight thousand dollars, and come back cleaned out. You didn't invest in mines and things they said were good as gold, and have 'em turn out rubbish. You didn't lose a fortune and have to start all over again. But you know em, eh?"

Colonel Witham nodded assent, and added mentally, "Yes, and I know you, too. Benton don't have the only sharp folks."

"And now," added James Ellison, "when I've got some of it back by hard work, you know how I keep it from them, and from others, too. Well, here's some more of the papers. The mill and a good part of the farm and some more land 'round here go to you this time. All right, eh? You get your pay on commission. Here's the deeds conveying it all to you – for valuable consideration – valuable consideration, see?"

The miller gave a prodigious wink at his visitor, and laughed.

"You don't mind being thought pretty comfortably fixed, eh – all these properties put in your name? Don't do you any harm, and people around here think you're mighty smart. Your deeds from me are all recorded, eh? People look at the record, and what do they see? All this stuff in your name. Well, what do I get out of that? You know. There are some claims they don't bother me with, because they think I'm not so rich as I am. There's property out of their reach, if anything goes wrong with some business I'm in.

"Why? Well, we know why, all right, you and I. Here's the deeds of the same property which you give back to me. Only I don't have them put on record. I keep them hidden – up my sleeve – clear up my sleeve, don't I?"

"You keep 'em hidden all right, I guess," responded Colonel Witham; and made a mental observation that he'd like to know where the miller really did hide them.

"So here they are," continued the miller. "It's a little more of the same game. The property's all yours – and it isn't. You'll oblige, of course, for the same consideration?"

Colonel Witham nodded assent, and the business was closed.

And, some time later, as Colonel Witham plodded up the road again, he uttered audibly the wish he had formed when he had sat in the miller's office.

"I'd like to know where he keeps those deeds hidden," he said, apparently addressing his remark to a clump of weeds that grew by the roadside. The weeds withholding whatever information they may have had on the question, Colonel Witham snipped their heads off with a vicious sweep of his stick, and went on. "I don't know as it would do me any good to know," he continued, "but I'd just like to know, all the same."

And James Ellison, his visitor departed, wandered about for some time through the rooms of his mill. One might have thought, from the sly and confidential way in which he drew an eye-lid down now and again, as he passed here and there, that the wink was directed at the mill itself, and that the crazy old structure was really in its owner's confidence; that perhaps the mill knew where the miller hid his papers.

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