

Stratemeyer Edward

**Dave Porter and His Double:
or, The Disapperarance of the
Basswood Fortune**



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Disapperarance of the Basswood Fortune

PREFACE

“Dave Porter and His Double” is a complete story in itself, but forms the twelfth volume in a line issued under the general title of “Dave Porter Series.”

This series was begun some years ago by the publication of “Dave Porter at Oak Hall,” in which my young readers were introduced to a wide-awake American lad at a typical American boarding-school.

The publication of this volume was followed by “Dave Porter in the South Seas,” to which portion of our globe the lad journeyed to clear up a question concerning his parentage. Next came “Dave Porter’s Return to School,” telling of additional happenings at Oak Hall; “Dave Porter in the Far North,” where he went on a second journey looking for his father; “Dave Porter and His Classmates,” in which our young hero showed what he could do under most trying circumstances; “Dave Porter at Star Ranch,” in which he took part in many strenuous adventures in the Wild West; “Dave Porter and His Rivals,” in which the youth outwitted some of his old-time enemies; “Dave Porter on Cave Island,” giving the details of a remarkable sea voyage and strange doings ashore; “Dave Porter and the Runaways,” in which the boy taught some of his school chums a much-needed lesson; “Dave Porter in the Gold Fields,” whither he went in search of a lost mine; and finally “Dave Porter at Bear Camp,” which was located in the Adirondack Mountains, and where we last left him.

In the present volume we find our hero in a new field of activity. Having graduated from school, he has taken up the study of civil engineering, and while engaged in that calling in Texas he becomes mixed up in most unusual happenings, the particulars of which are given in the pages that follow.

Once more I wish to thank my young readers, and many of their parents, for all the kind things they have said regarding my stories. I trust that the reading of the present book will not only please but also profit the young folks.

Edward Stratemeyer.

March 1, 1916.

CHAPTER I

OFF FOR A SLEIGH-RIDE

“What is the matter, Dave? You look rather mystified.”

“I am mystified, Laura,” replied Dave Porter. “I have a letter here that I can’t understand at all.”

“Whom is it from?” questioned Laura Porter, as she came closer to her brother, who was ensconced in the largest easy-chair the Wadsworth library contained.

“It’s from a shopkeeper in Coburntown, Mr. Wecks, the shoe-dealer. He wants to know which pair of shoes I have decided to keep, and asks me kindly to return the pair I don’t want.”

“Well, what of that, Dave?” continued his sister, as the youth paused with a wrinkle on his forehead. “Can’t you make up your mind which pair of shoes you want to keep?”

“I certainly can not, seeing that I haven’t had any shoes from Wecks’s store,” returned Dave, with a faint smile. “I haven’t been in his place for nearly a year, and the last time I was there I bought a pair of rubbers and paid for them.”

“Oh, then the letter must be meant for somebody else, Dave. Mr. Wecks has got his customers mixed.”

“Perhaps so. But in the letter he speaks of the two pairs of shoes I took away with me. That looks as if somebody had gotten two pairs of shoes in my name.”

“Well, as we are going out sleighing this afternoon, why don’t you drive to Coburntown and drop into his shop and explain matters?” suggested the sister.

“I guess that would be best, Laura.” Dave folded up the letter and placed it in his pocket. “How soon will you be ready?”

“Inside of quarter of an hour.”

“And how about Jessie?”

“She was almost ready when I came downstairs.”

“Good! Then we can get an early start and have a good long ride besides stopping at Coburntown, where I suppose you and Jessie can do a little shopping while I am at Wecks’s store.”

“That will be fine, Dave! I would like to match some ribbon, and the only place I can do it is in the French Shop in Coburntown;” and thus speaking Laura Porter hurried out of the room to get ready for the sleigh-ride.

Dave had proposed the ride just before lunch, and the young people living at the Wadsworth mansion had telephoned over to the Basswood home, asking if Ben Basswood would accompany them.

“Sure I’ll go—be glad to!” Dave’s former school chum had answered over the wire. “I haven’t a thing to do this afternoon, and a first sleigh-ride of the season will tickle me to death.”

“Oh, I don’t want it to kill you, Ben,” Dave had answered gaily. “Just the same, you be ready for us when we come over;” and to this Ben had agreed.

Although it was still early in the winter, there had been a heavy fall of snow two days before and now the roads in and around Crumville were in excellent condition for sleighing. The musical sound of sleigh-bells could be heard in all directions, and this had made Dave anxious to get out on the road, even though he had to spend most of his time indoors studying, as we shall learn later.

Dave had already given orders to the hostler connected with the Wadsworth estate, and now this man brought to the front of the mansion a fine, big sleigh drawn by a pair of sleek-looking, high-stepping steeds. The sleigh was well provided with heavy robes to protect its occupants from the cold.

“Oh, Dave, I’m so glad to go sleighing!” burst out Jessie Wadsworth, as she came bounding down the broad stairway of the mansion to meet him. “Isn’t it just glorious weather?”

“It sure is,” he answered, as he gave her a warm glance. To Dave, Jessie was the most beautiful girl in the world, and just now, clad as she was in her dainty sealskin coat and her jaunty sealskin hat, she looked more bewitching to him than ever.

“Going for a ride, eh?” came from Dave’s uncle, Dunston Porter, who had just finished a belated lunch. “Well, have a good time, and don’t let that pair of grays run away with you. John was telling me they are feeling quite mettlesome lately. I guess they don’t get exercise enough.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Uncle Dunston. I’m sure I can manage them,” answered Dave.

“Sure you can!” returned his uncle, heartily. “Too bad you couldn’t have asked an old fellow like me to go along,” he continued, making a wry face.

“Why, you can come along if you want to. Can’t he, Dave?” burst out Jessie. “We’d be very glad to have you.”

“He’s only fooling, Jessie,” answered Dave. “You couldn’t hire Uncle Dunston to go sleighing to-day. I saw him cleaning up his shotgun right after breakfast. And I’ll wager he has just come in from hunting and expects to go out again this afternoon. How about it, Uncle—am I right?”

“You’ve got me, Davy,” answered the man, with a grin. “You see, I can’t get over my old habit of going hunting when I get the chance. And now that this snow is on the ground, it’s just fine for tracking rabbits.”

“Did you get any this morning?”

“A few. I didn’t go very far. This afternoon I am going deeper into the woods, and I guarantee to bring back enough to make the biggest rabbit pot-pie to-morrow you ever saw;” and, thus speaking, the uncle hastened away.

He had spent many years of his life roaming the world in quest of game both big and little, and now, though of late years he had done his best to settle down, it was still impossible for him to give up his hunting habit entirely.

Laura soon appeared ready for the ride. Dave had already donned his heavy overcoat, fur cap, and his driving-gloves. He assisted the girls into the sleigh and saw to it that they were well tucked in with robes.

“Have a good time and don’t stay out too late,” were the farewell words of Mrs. Wadsworth, who had come to the door to see them off.

“Well, you know we don’t expect to be back to dinner this evening,” answered Dave. “We can get something to eat at Coburntown, or some other place, and then drive back in the moonlight.”

“Very well, but don’t make it too late,” answered the lady of the mansion. And then Dave took up the reins, chirped to the team, and away the sleigh started out of the Wadsworth grounds and down the highway leading to the Basswood home.

Ben was on the lookout for them, and by the time Dave had drawn up beside the horse-block he was outside to meet them.

“Good afternoon, everybody,” he said gaily, lifting his cap. “This is just fine of you to take me along.”

“Let Ben come in back here with me,” said Laura, “and that will give Jessie a chance to sit in front. I know she always likes to be up ahead,” and Laura smiled knowingly.

“Suits me,” answered Ben, quickly; and then assisted Jessie to make the change, which, however, the miss did not undertake without blushing, for it may as well be admitted here Jessie thought as much of Dave as he did of her.

“Oh, Dave, do you think the grays will behave themselves to-day?” asked the girl, partly to conceal her embarrassment.

“I’m going to make them behave,” he answered, sturdily.

“I don’t believe they have been out of the stable for several days. You know we don’t use the horses nearly as much as we used to, before we got the automobile.”

“I’ll watch them.” Dave looked behind him. “All right back there?”

“Yes,” answered his sister. “But please don’t drive too fast.”

“I don’t believe sleighing will seem too fast after the riding we have been doing in the auto,” answered the brother. He took up the reins again, and once more the turnout sped along the highway.

They made a turn, passed along the main street of Crumville, and also passed the large Wadsworth jewelry works, and then took to a road leading to Coburntown, some miles distant. The air was cold but clear, with the bright sunshine sparkling on the snow, and all of the young people were in the best of humor.

“Say, Dave, how would you like to be back at Oak Hall?” cried Ben, while the sleigh sped along. “Wouldn’t we have the dandy time snowballing each other, and snowballing old Horsehair?”

“So we would, Ben,” answered Dave, his eyes gleaming. “We sure did have some good times at that school.”

“How are you and Roger getting along with your civil engineering course?”

“All right, I think. Mr. Ramsdell says he is greatly pleased with our work.”

“That’s fine. I almost wish I had taken up civil engineering myself. But dad wants me to go into real estate with him. He thinks there is a big chance in that line these days, when Crumville is just beginning to wake up.”

“Hasn’t your dad got a big rival in Aaron Poole?”

“Oh, no! Poole isn’t in it any more when it comes to big deals. You see, he was so close and miserly in all his business affairs that a great many people became afraid of him.”

“What has become of Nat Poole?” questioned Laura. “Did he go back to Oak Hall?”

“For a short while only. When his folks found out that he had failed to graduate they were awfully angry. Mr. Poole claimed that it was the fault of the school and so he took Nat away and told him he would have to go to work. I think Nat is working in some store, although where, I don’t know.”

“I don’t think it’s in Crumville or we should have seen him,” said Dave.

“I never want to meet that boy again,” pouted Jessie. “I’ll never get over how meanly he acted toward us.”

“It’s not so much Nat’s fault as it is his bringing up,” remarked Ben. “His father never treated him half decently. But I hope Nat makes a man of himself in spite of the way he used to treat us,” went on the youth generously.

“By the way, Ben, didn’t you say your father had gone away?” queried Dave, a few minutes later.

“Yes, he has gone to Chicago on very important business. It seems an old friend of his—a Mr. Enos, who was once his partner in an art store—died, and now the lawyers want to see my father about settling up the Enos estate.”

“An art store?” queried Dave. “I never knew that your father had been in any such business.”

“It was years ago—before my folks came to Crumville. You see, my father and this Mr. Enos had been chums from early boyhood. My father says that Mr. Enos was a very peculiar sort of man, who was all wrapped up in pictures and painting. He got my father to advance a thousand dollars he had saved up, and on that money the two opened an art store. But they couldn’t make a go of it, and so they gave it up, and while Mr. Enos went West my father came here.”

“Maybe the dead man left your father some money,” suggested Laura.

“That is what my mother said to dad. But he thinks not. He thinks it is more than likely Mr. Enos died in debt and left his affairs all tangled up, and that the lawyers want my father to help straighten them out.”

“I’d like to be able to paint,” said Jessie, with a sigh. “I think some of those little water-colors are just too lovely for anything.”

“Why don’t you take it up? There must be some teacher in Crumville,” returned Dave.

“Let’s both do it!” cried Laura. “I used to paint a little before father and I did so much traveling. I would like to take it up again. It would be very interesting.”

While the young folks were talking, the pair of mettlesome grays had been speeding over the snow of the road at a good rate of speed. Dave, however, had them well in hand, so that there was little danger of their running away.

“We’ll be to Benson Crossroads soon, Dave,” remarked Ben a while later, after they had passed over a long hill lined on either side with tidy farms. “Which road are you going to take—through Hacklebury or around Conover’s Hill?”

“I haven’t made up my mind,” answered Dave. He looked at Jessie. “Have you any preference?”

“Oh, let us go up around Conover’s Hill!” cried Jessie. “That is always such a splendid ride. There is so much of an outlook.”

“Yes, let us go by way of the hill by all means,” added Laura. “It isn’t very nice through Hacklebury, past all those woolen mills.”

“All right, the Conover road it is,” answered Dave; and forward they went once more as fast as ever.

They soon passed the Crossroads, and then took the long, winding road that led around one side of the hill just mentioned. Here travel since the snow had fallen had evidently been heavy, for the roadway was packed down until it was almost as smooth as glass. Over this surface the spirited grays dashed at an increased rate of speed.

“Some team, believe me!” was Ben’s comment. “Mr. Wadsworth ought to put them on a race-course.”

“Papa does not believe in racing,” answered Jessie. “But he always did like to have a horse that had some go in him.”

“Hark!” cried Laura, a moment later. “What is that sound?”

“It’s an auto coming,” announced Ben, looking behind them. “A big touring-car, and whoever is in it seems to be in a tremendous hurry.”

“I wish they wouldn’t cut out their muffler,” was Dave’s comment, as he saw the grays pick up their ears. “They have no right to run with the muffler open.”

As the touring-car came closer those in the sleigh who were able to look back saw that it was running at a great rate of speed and swaying from side to side of the roadway. It contained four young men, out, evidently, for a gloriously good time. Dave did not dare look back to see what was coming. The grays had their ears laid well back and their whole manner showed that they were growing more nervous every instant.

“Hi! Stop that noise!” yelled Ben, jumping up and shaking his hand at the oncoming automobile. But those in the car paid no attention to him. The fellow at the wheel put on a fresh burst of speed, and with a wild rush and a roar the touring-car shot past the sleigh and the frightened horses, and in a few seconds more disappeared around a turn of the road.

As might have been expected, the coming and going of the big machine, with its unearthly roar, was too much for the mettlesome grays. Both reared up wildly on their hind legs, backing the sleigh off to one side of the roadway.

“Whoa there! Whoa!” cried Dave, and did his best to keep the team in hand. But they proved too much for him, and in an instant more they came down on all fours and started to run away.

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING OF THE PAST

“The horses are running away!”

“Oh, we’ll be killed!”

Such were the cries from the two girls as the mettlesome grays tore along the country highway at a speed that seemed marvelous.

“Dave, can I help you?” asked Ben, anxiously.

“I don’t think so,” answered the young driver between his set teeth. “I guess I can bring them down. Anyway, I can try.”

“What shall we do?” wailed Jessie.

“Don’t do anything—sit still,” ordered Dave. He was afraid that Jessie in her excitement might fling herself from the flying sleigh.

On and on bounded the frightened team. Each of the grays now had his bit in his teeth, and it looked as if it would be impossible for Dave to obtain control of the pair. And, worst of all, they were now approaching a turn, with the hill on one side of the roadway and a gully on the other.

“Better keep them as far as possible away from the gully,” suggested Ben.

“That is what I’m trying to do,” returned Dave, setting his teeth grimly.

Dave Porter was a resolute youth, always doing his best to accomplish whatever he set out to do. Had it been otherwise, it is not likely that he would have occupied the position in which we found him at the opening of our story.

When a very small youth Dave had been found wandering along the railroad tracks near Crumville. He could tell little about himself or how he had come in that position; and kind people had taken him in and later on had placed him in the local poorhouse. From that institution he had been taken by an old college professor, named Caspar Potts, who at that time had been farming for his health.

In Crumville, the main industry was the Wadsworth jewelry works, owned by Mr. Oliver Wadsworth, who resided, with his wife and his daughter Jessie, in the finest mansion of that district. One day the Wadsworth automobile caught fire, and Jessie was in danger of being burned to death, when Dave came to her rescue. This led Mr. Wadsworth to ask about the boy and about Mr. Potts. And when it was learned that the latter was one of the jewelry manufacturer’s former college professors, Mr. Wadsworth insisted upon it that Caspar Potts come and live with him, and bring Dave along.

“That boy deserves a good education,” had been Oliver Wadsworth’s comment, after several interviews with Dave, and as a consequence the youth had been sent off to a first-class boarding-school, as related in the first volume of this series, entitled “Dave Porter at Oak Hall.”

At the school Dave had made a host of friends, including Roger Morr, the son of a United States senator, and Phil Lawrence, the son of a rich shipowner.

Ben Basswood, the son of a Crumville real estate dealer and a lad who had been friendly with Dave for several years, also went to Oak Hall, and thus he and Dave became closer chums than ever.

The great thing that troubled Dave in those days was the question of his parentage. Some of the mean boys in the school occasionally referred to him as “that poorhouse nobody,” and this brought on several severe quarrels and even a fist fight or two.

“I’m not going to be a nobody,” said the youth to himself; and when he received certain information from an old sailor he eagerly went on a quest after his father, as told of in “Dave Porter in the South Seas.” There he managed to locate his uncle, Dunston Porter, and learned much concerning his father, David Breslow Porter, and also his sister Laura.

Coming back from the South Seas, Dave returned to school, and then took a trip to the Far North, whither his father had gone before him. There he had many adventures, as already related in another volume.

Glad to know that he had found, not only so many kind friends, but also several rich relatives, Dave went back again to Oak Hall. His classmates were more than glad to see him, but others were jealous of his success in life, and several of his enemies, including a certain Link Merwell, did all they could to annoy him. The annoyances went from bad to worse, and in the end one boy named Jasniff ran away from school, and the other, Merwell, was expelled.

Dave's sister Laura had a friend, Belle Endicott, who lived in the Far West, and through this young lady Dave and his chums and also Laura and Jessie received an invitation to spend some time at the Endicott place, known as Star Ranch. While in the West Dave once more fell in with Link Merwell, and this young man, as before, tried to make trouble, but was exposed.

"I hope I have seen the last of Merwell," said Dave to himself, on returning once again to Oak Hall. But this was not to be, for Merwell became a student at a rival academy, and once more he and some others did all they could to make life miserable for our hero.

When the Christmas holidays came around Dave went back to Crumville, where he and his folks resided with the Wadsworths, who had taken such a liking to the youth that they did not wish to have him live elsewhere. Directly after Christmas came a thrilling robbery of the jewelry works, and Dave and his chums discovered that the crime had been committed by Merwell and his crony, Jasniff. After a long sea voyage to Cave Island, one of the evil-doers was captured, but the other, Link Merwell, managed to make his escape.

During Dave's next term at school there was much trouble with one of the teachers, who was harsh and unsympathetic, and as a result some of the boys ran away. It was Dave who went after them and who, in spite of a fearful flood, managed to bring them back and make them face the music. Then came the graduation exercises at Oak Hall, Dave receiving high honors.

Our hero had promised Roger Morr that he would pay the senator's son a visit. During this time Dave heard of a gold mine belonging to Mrs. Morr which had been lost because of a landslide. All the boys went out West in an endeavor to relocate this claim. Their adventures were both numerous and hazardous, and once more Dave fell in with Link Merwell. But all went well with our young friends, and they had a glorious time visiting Yellowstone Park and other points of interest.

"Now you fellows have got to come on a little trip with me," Phil Lawrence had said after he, Dave and Roger, with the others, had returned again to the East. There was a small steamer belonging to Mr. Lawrence that was tied up at Philadelphia getting ready for a trip to Portland, Maine. The voyage up the Atlantic coast had been productive of several unlooked-for results. On the way those on the boat had discovered another vessel in flames. This was a craft being used by a company of moving-picture actors, and some of the latter in their panic had leaped overboard. Our young friends, as well as some of the sailors on their ship, had gone to the rescue; and among others had picked up a young man, Ward Porton by name. Much to the surprise of Roger Morr and Phil Lawrence, Ward Porton had looked a good deal like Dave. Not only that, but many of his manners, outwardly, were similar to those of our hero.

Following the trip up the coast, it had been decided by the Wadsworths and the Basswoods to spend part of the summer in the Adirondacks, at a spot known as Mirror Lake. Thither all of the young people and some of the older ones went to enjoy themselves greatly and to meet with a number of strange happenings, all of which have been related in detail in the volume preceding this, entitled "Dave Porter at Bear Camp."

The boys fell in with a wild sort of creature whom they at first supposed to be a crazy uncle of Nat Poole, the son of a miserly money lender of Crumville. Later, however, the man was found to be a missing uncle of Phil Lawrence, for whom the Lawrence family had been seeking for a long time.

Although Dave Porter did not know it at the time, the moving-picture company to which Ward Porton belonged had also numbered among its members Dave's former school enemy, Link Merwell. From Link, Ward Porton, who was the good-for-nothing nephew of a Burlington lumber dealer, had learned the particulars concerning Dave's childhood and how he had been placed in the Crumville poorhouse and listed as of unknown parentage.

This had caused Porton to concoct a clever scheme, and to Mr. Porter he announced himself as the real Dave Porter, stating that our hero was really and truly the nobody that years before everybody had thought him.

This announcement had come like a thunderbolt to poor Dave, and for the time being he knew not what to do or say. The others, too, especially his sister Laura and his dear friend, Jessie, were almost equally affected. But they clung to him, refusing to believe the story that Ward Porton was circulating.

"You take it from me—this is some scheme gotten up by Link Merwell and this other fellow," declared one of Dave's chums. And on the strength of this declaration the youth took it upon himself to do some clever investigating. From one of the moving-picture actresses Dave learned much concerning Ward Porton's past, and then, in company with some of his chums, he journeyed to Burlington, where he met Mr. Obadiah Jones, the uncle of Porton, and asked the lumber dealer if Ward were his real nephew or not.

"Yes, he is my real nephew—the son of my youngest sister, who married a good-for-nothing army man," replied Obadiah Jones; and then gave many particulars. He stated that his sister's name had been Clarice Jones Porton, and that years before she had married a certain Lieutenant Porton of the United States Army, an officer who had been discharged because of irregularities in his accounts. He further stated that the mother of the young man was dead, and what had become of the worthless father he did not know further than that it had been stated he had joined some revolutionists in Mexico.

Dave had gotten Mr. Jones to sign a paper stating the exact truth concerning Ward Porton, and with this duly witnessed had returned to Bear Camp. All present were glad to know that the cloud hanging over his name had been cleared away. His sister Laura and her friend Jessie hugged him over and over again in their delight.

Then came news that Link Merwell had been captured, and later on this misguided young man was sent to prison for his share in the crime at the jewelry works. A hunt was instituted for Ward Porton, but he had taken time by the forelock and disappeared.

"I don't believe Ward Porton will ever bother you again, Dave," said Roger one day. But the surmise of the senator's son proved incorrect, as we shall see. Ward Porton was to show himself and make more trouble than he had ever made before.

CHAPTER III

THE TEAM THAT RAN AWAY

“Oh, Dave, the gully!” cried his sister Laura. “If we go into that we’ll all be killed!”

“Please keep quiet, Laura,” flung back her brother in a low, tense voice. “These horses are scared enough as it is.”

Dave was doing his best to bring the spirited grays out of their mad gallop. But they had not been out of the stable for the best part of a week, and this, combined with the scare from the roar of the automobile, had so gotten on their nerves that to calm them seemed next to impossible. On and on they flew over the packed snow of the hard road, the sleigh bouncing from side to side as it passed over the bumps in the highway.

Jessie was deadly pale and had all she could do to keep from shrieking with fright. But when she heard Dave address his sister in the above words, she shut her teeth hard, resolved to remain silent, no matter what the cost. Ben was worried as well as scared—the more so because he realized there was practically nothing he could do to aid Dave in subduing the runaways. The youth on the front seat had braced both feet on the dashboard of the sleigh, and was pulling back on the reins with all the strength of his vigorous muscles.

Thus fully a quarter of a mile was covered—a stretch of the hill road which fortunately was comparatively straight. But then there loomed up ahead a sharp turn, leading down to the straight road through the valley below.

“Dave—the turn!” gasped Ben, unable to keep himself from speaking.

“I see it. I’ll do what I can,” cried the young driver; and then pulled on the reins more strongly, if possible, than before.

Closer and closer to the dreaded turn in the road the sleigh approached, and as it drew nearer the girls huddled in their seats almost too terror-stricken to move. Ben sprang up, totally unconscious of doing so.

“Can you make it, Dave, do you think?” gasped the real estate man’s son, when the turn was less than a hundred feet away.

“I don’t think I’ll try,” was the unexpected answer. “Hold fast, everybody! We’re going through the fence!”

The turn in the road led to the left, and as they approached it Dave relaxed his hold on the left rein and pulled with might and main on the right. This brought the team around just a trifle, but it was enough to keep them from attempting to follow the road—something which would undoubtedly have caused the slewing around of the sleigh and probably its overturning. As it was, the team left the roadway, and the next instant had crashed through a frail rail-fence and was floundering along in the deep snow of a ploughed-up and sloping field beyond.

“Whoa there!” cried Dave, soothingly. “Whoa, Jerry! Whoa, Bill!” And thus he continued to talk to the team while the sleigh bumped along through the deep snow and over the uneven ground.

Running away on the smooth surface of the highway had been one thing; keeping up such a gait over a ploughed field and in snow almost a foot deep was quite another. Soon the fiery grays broke from their mad gallop into a trot, and a minute later Dave had no trouble in bringing them to a halt. There they stood in the snow and the furrows of the field, snorting, and emitting clouds of steam from their nostrils.

“Hold ’em, Dave, while I get out and go to their heads!” cried Ben, and an instant later was out in the snow and had hold of the steeds. Each of the horses was trembling a little, but the run seemed to have done neither of them any harm.

“Oh, Dave! Dave!” gasped Jessie. She tried to go on, but could not.

“Oh, how thankful I am that you did not attempt to go around that corner!” came from Laura. “If you had tried that we would have been upset and maybe all killed!” and she shuddered.

“It was just the right thing to do, Dave,” was Ben’s comment. “But I don’t know that I would have thought of it. You are a quick thinker, and I guess we have you to thank for saving our lives.”

“Well, we’ve broken down somebody’s fence,” returned Dave, not knowing what else to say. “We’ll have to fix that, I suppose.”

“Huh! What’s a broken fence to saving one’s neck!” snorted Ben. “Besides, we only busted a couple of rails, and they are not worth a great deal.”

“Dave, do you think it will be safe to ride behind that team any more?” questioned Laura.

“I’m going to do it,” he answered promptly. “No team of horses is going to get the better of me!”

“I think, now that they have had this run, they’ll tame down a little,” said Ben. “Besides that, the rest of the road to Coburntown is almost straight and flat.”

“Yes, and as soon as we get on a straight road I’ll give them all the running they want,” answered Dave. “I’ll guarantee that by the time we reach town they’ll be just as meek as any one would want them.”

With Ben still at their heads the team was turned around and led to the roadway once more. There the horses were tied to a tree near by, and then Dave and Ben spent a little time in repairing the damage done to the fence.

“I wish we could find out who those fellows in the auto were,” said Ben, when they were once again on the way. “They ought to be fined for speeding.”

“I doubt if we’ll be able to locate them,” answered Dave. And he was right—they never saw or heard of the reckless automobilists again.

As has been mentioned, beyond the hill the road to Coburntown was almost straight and level. And here for over two miles Dave allowed the grays to go along at a good gait, although keeping his eyes on them continually, so that they might not get beyond control. As a consequence of this additional burst of speed, when they came in sight of the town for which they were bound, the grays were quite docile and willing to behave themselves properly.

“Now if you say so, I’ll take you girls around to the French Shop,” suggested Dave, “and then Ben and I can drive around to Mr. Wecks’s shoe-store.”

This was agreeable to Laura and Jessie, and in a few minutes the girls were left at the door of the establishment where Laura had said she wished to match some ribbon. Then the two boys started for the shoe-dealer’s shop. Dave had already acquainted Ben with the particulars of his errand to the place.

“What are you going to do if Wecks says you really had the shoes?” questioned the son of the real estate dealer, when they were on the way to the shoe store.

“But how can he say that when I haven’t been near the place, Ben?” returned Dave.

“I don’t know. But I do know that people have sometimes had things charged to them at the stores which other people got.”

“Humph! Well, I sha’n’t pay for any shoes that I did not get,” answered our hero, simply.

Mr. Wecks’s establishment was at the far end of the main street of Coburntown; so the lads had half a dozen blocks to cover before they reached the place.

“Hello, it’s closed!” exclaimed Ben, as they came in sight of the store; and he nodded in the direction of the show window, the curtain of which was drawn down. The curtain on the door was also down, and on the glass was pasted a sheet of note paper.

“Some sort of notice. I’ll see what it is,” answered Dave, and, throwing the reins to Ben, he left the sleigh. Soon he was reading what was written on the sheet of paper:

Closed on account of death in the family.

William Wecks.

“Somebody dead. That’s too bad!” mused Dave. “I wonder who it can be?” and then he passed into a barber shop next door to find out.

“It’s Mr. Wecks’s father—a very old man who lived back in the country from here,” explained the barber. “Mr. Wecks went up there last night, and he doesn’t expect to come back until after the funeral, which will probably be day after to-morrow.”

“I don’t suppose his clerk is around?” questioned Dave.

“No. The funeral gave him a holiday, and he was glad of it. He’s out of town, too;” and having thus expressed himself, the barber turned to wait upon a customer who had just come in, and Dave returned to the sleigh.

“If that’s the case, you’ll have to let the matter rest until the next time you come to Coburntown, or else you’ll have to write to Mr. Wecks,” said Ben.

“I’ll be coming over again before very long,” answered Dave. “But, just the same, I’d like to have this matter settled.”

While Dave was speaking to his chum a man passed him on the sidewalk, looking at him rather fixedly. This man was Mr. Asa Dickley, the proprietor of the largest gentlemen’s furnishing establishment of which Coburntown boasted. Our hero knew the man fairly well, having purchased a number of things at his place from time to time, and so he nodded pleasantly. Mr. Asa Dickley nodded in return, but with a rather sour expression on his face. Then he glanced at Ben, and at the handsome sleigh and still more stylish team of horses, and passed on muttering something to himself.

“Mr. Dickley didn’t look very happy,” was Dave’s comment, as he and Ben entered the sleigh.

“I don’t think he likes my father very much,” answered the son of the real estate dealer. “He wanted to get a piece of property here very cheap, and my father found another customer for the place at five hundred dollars more.”

“I see, Ben. Just the same, why should he give me such a hard look? Of course, I haven’t been in his place of business for a good while. But he can’t expect me to buy all my furnishing goods from him.”

“Well, you know how it is, Dave—when you buy some things from some storekeepers they think they are entitled to your whole trade. However, I shouldn’t let the matter worry me.”

“Not much! I’ve got other things to think about. Don’t forget that I expect next month to take that examination in civil engineering. That’s what is on my mind just now.”

“Oh, you’ll pass, don’t worry, Dave. Just think of what a brilliant showing you made at Oak Hall.”

“True. But my studies in civil engineering have been a good deal harder than anything I tackled at school. If it wasn’t for Mr. Ramsdell, the old civil engineer who is coaching Roger and me, I don’t know how I would possibly have gotten along.”

“If you pass the examination, what will you do next?”

“Roger and I will go out on some constructive work and thus get a taste of real engineering. Mr. Ramsdell thinks he can get us positions with the Mentor Construction Company of Philadelphia, who are now doing a good deal of work in Texas—laying out railroads and building bridges.”

“In Texas? Say! that’s quite a distance from here.”

“So it is, Ben. But it is not as far as I expect to get some day. If I ever make anything of civil engineering I hope some day to be able to do some great work in other parts of the world—maybe in Mexico or South America.”

“Say, that will be great!” cried Ben, enthusiastically. “You’ll have a fine chance to see the world. You must take after your uncle, Dave. He was always a great fellow to travel. Think of how you located him years ago away down on that island in the South Seas!”

“It sure was a great trip! And some day I’d like to take it over again. But just now I’ve got to put in all my time on this civil engineering proposition. I think I’ll be lucky if I pass and get that chance to go to Texas.”

CHAPTER IV

WARD PORTON AGAIN

A quarter of an hour later the girls had finished their shopping and rejoined the boys. Then it was decided that the party should go on to Clayton, six miles farther. They were told that the road was in excellent condition, and this proved to be a fact, so that the sleighing was thoroughly enjoyed.

It was growing dark when they drove down the main street of Clayton, and, although a bit early, all agreed to Dave's suggestion that they get dinner at the leading restaurant—a place at which they had stopped a number of times and which they knew to be first-class.

“What a pity Roger couldn't come along,” said Jessie to Dave just before sitting down to the sumptuous meal which the boys had ordered. “I know he would have enjoyed this very much.”

“No doubt of it, Jessie,” answered Dave, who well knew what a fondness for his sister the senator's son possessed. “But, as you know, Roger had to go home on a business matter for his father. Senator Morr is very busy in Washington these days, so Roger has to take care of quite a few matters at home.”

“Isn't it queer that he doesn't want to follow in the footsteps of his father and take up politics?” went on the girl.

“Senator Morr didn't want him to do it. And, besides, Roger has no taste that way. He loves civil engineering just as much as I do.”

“It's a wonder you and he didn't persuade Phil Lawrence to take it up, too, Dave.”

“Oh, Phil couldn't do that. You know his father's shipping interests are very large, and Mr. Lawrence wants Phil to take hold with him—and Phil likes that sort of thing. He is planning right now to take several trips on his father's ships this summer.”

“When does that examination of yours come off, Dave?”

“About the middle of next month.”

“And if you really pass, are you going to work away down in Texas?” continued the girl, anxiously.

“If I can get the position,—and if Roger is willing to go along.”

“I don't like to have you go so far away;” and Jessie pouted a little.

“Well, it can't be helped. If I want to be a civil engineer I've got to take an opening where I can get it. Besides, Mr. Ramsdell thinks it will be the best kind of training for Roger and me. He knows the men at the head of the Mentor Company, and will get them to give us every opportunity to advance ourselves. That, you know, will mean a great deal.”

“Oh, but Texas, Dave! Why, that is thousands of miles away!”

“Not so very many thousands, Jessie,” he answered with a little smile. “The mails run regularly, and I trust you will not forget how to write letters. Besides that, I don't expect to stay in Texas forever.”

“Yes, but when you come back from Texas, you'll be going off to some other far-away place—South America, or Africa, or the North Pole, or somewhere,” and Jessie pouted again.

“Oh, say, let up! I'm not going to South Africa, or to the North Pole either. Of course, I may go to Mexico or South America, or to the Far West. But that won't be so very soon. It will be after I have had considerable experience in civil engineering, and when I am older than I am now. And you know what sometimes happens to a fellow when he gets older?”

“What?”

“He gets married.”

“Oh, indeed!” Jessie blushed a little. “And then I suppose he goes off and leaves his wife behind and forgets all about her.”

“Does he? Not so as you can notice it! He takes his wife with him—that is, provided she will go.”

“Oh, the idea!” and now, as Dave looked her steadily in the eyes, Jessie blushed more than ever. Where this conversation would have ended it is impossible to say, but at that moment Laura interrupted the pair, followed by Ben; and then the talk became general as the four sat down to dinner.

The horses had been put up in a stable connected with the restaurant, and after the meal it was Dave who went out to get them and bring them around to the front of the place. He was just driving to the street when his glance fell upon a person standing in the glare of an electric light. The person had his face turned full toward our hero, so that Dave got a good look at him.

“Ward Porton!” cried the youth in astonishment. “How in the world did that fellow get here, and what is he doing?”

Like a flash the memory of the past came over Dave—how Ward Porton had tried to pass himself off as the real Dave Porter and thus relegate Dave himself back to the ranks of the “nobodies.”

Dave was crossing the sidewalk at the time, but as soon as he had the team and the sleigh in the street he jumped out and made his way towards the other youth.

“I think I’ll interview him and see what he has to say for himself,” murmured Dave to himself. “Maybe I’ll have him arrested.”

Ward Porton had been staring at our hero all the while he was turning into the street and getting out of the sleigh. But now, as he saw Dave approaching, he started to walk away.

“Stop, Porton! I want to talk to you,” called out our hero. “Stop!”

“I don’t want to see you,” returned the other youth, hastily. “You let me alone;” and then, as Dave came closer, he suddenly broke into a run down the street. Dave was taken by surprise, but only for a moment. Then he, too, commenced to run, doing his best to catch the fellow ahead.

But Ward Porton was evidently scared. He looked back, and, seeing Dave running, increased his speed, and then shot around a corner and into an alleyway. When Dave reached the corner he was nowhere in sight.

“He certainly was scared,” was Dave’s mental comment, as he looked up and down the side street and even glanced into the alleyway. “I wonder where he went and if it would do any good to look any further for him?”

Dave spent fully five minutes in that vicinity, but without being able to discover Ward Porton’s hiding-place. Then, knowing that the others would be wondering what had become of him, and being also afraid that the grays might run away again, he returned to where he had left the sleigh standing.

“Hello! Where did you go?” called out Ben, who had just emerged from the restaurant.

“What do you think? I just saw that rascal, Ward Porton!” burst out Dave.

“Porton! You don’t mean it? Where is he?”

“He was standing under that light when I drove out from the stable. I ran to speak to him, and then he took to his legs and scooted around yonder corner. I went after him, but by the time I got on the side street he was out of sight.”

“Is that so! It’s too bad you couldn’t catch him, Dave. I suppose you would have liked to talk to him.”

“That’s right, Ben. And maybe I might have had him arrested, although now that he has been exposed, and now that Link Merwell is in jail, I don’t suppose it would have done much good.”

“It’s queer he should show himself so close to Crumville. One would think that he would want to put all the distance possible between himself and your folks.”

“That’s true, Ben. Maybe he is up to some more of his tricks.”

The girls were on the lookout for the boys, and now, having bundled up well, they came from the restaurant, and all got into the sleigh once more. Then they turned back in the direction of Crumville, this time, however, taking a route which did not go near Conover’s Hill.

“Oh, Dave! were you sure it was that Ward Porton?” questioned his sister, when he had told her and Jessie about the appearance of the former moving-picture actor.

“I was positive. Besides, if it wasn’t Porton, why would he run away?”

“I sincerely hope he doesn’t try to do you any harm, Dave,” said Jessie, and gave a little shiver. “I was hoping we had seen the last of that horrid young man.”

“Why, Jessie! You wouldn’t call him horrid, would you, when he looks so very much like Dave?” asked Ben, mischievously.

“He doesn’t look very much like Dave,” returned the girl, quickly. “And he doesn’t act in the least like him,” she added loyally.

“It’s mighty queer to have a double that way,” was the comment of the real estate man’s son. “I don’t know that I should like to have somebody else looking like me.”

“If you couldn’t help it, you’d have to put up with it,” returned Dave, briefly. And then he changed the subject, which, as the others could plainly see, was distasteful to him.

As they left Clayton the moon came up over a patch of woods, flooding the snowy roadway with subdued light. In spite of what had happened, all of the young folks were in good spirits, and they were soon laughing and chatting gaily. Ben started to sing one of the old Oak Hall favorites, and Dave and the girls joined in. The grays were now behaving themselves, and trotted along as steadily as could be desired.

When the sleighing-party reached Crumville they left Ben Basswood at his door, and then went on to the Wadsworth mansion.

“Did you have a fine ride?” inquired Mrs. Wadsworth, when the young folks bustled into the house.

“Oh, it was splendid, Mamma!” cried her daughter. “Coming back in the moonlight was just the nicest ever!”

“Did those grays behave themselves?” questioned Mr. Wadsworth, who was present. “John said they acted rather frisky when he brought them out.”

“Oh, they were pretty frisky at first,” returned Dave. “But I finally managed to get them to calm down,” he added. The matter had been discussed by the young folks, and it had been decided not to say anything about the runaway unless it was necessary.

On the following morning Dave had to apply himself diligently to his studies. Since leaving Oak Hall he had been attending a civil engineering class in the city with Roger, and had, in addition, been taking private tutoring from a Mr. Ramsdell, a retired civil engineer of considerable reputation, who, in years gone by, had been a college friend of Dave’s father. Dave was exceedingly anxious to make as good a showing as possible at the coming examinations.

“Here are several letters for you, David,” said old Mr. Potts to him late that afternoon, as he entered the boy’s study with the mail. “You seem to be the lucky one,” the retired professor continued, with a smile. “All I’ve got is a bill.”

“Maybe there is a bill here for me, Professor,” returned Dave gaily, as he took the missives handed out.

Dave glanced at the envelopes. By the handwritings he knew that one letter was from Phil Lawrence and another from Shadow Hamilton, one of his old Oak Hall chums, and a fellow who loved to tell stories. The third communication was postmarked Coburntown, and in a corner of the envelope had the imprint of Asa Dickley.

“Hello! I wonder what Mr. Dickley wants of me,” Dave mused, as he turned the letter over. Then he remembered how sour the store-keeper had appeared when they had met the day before. “Maybe he wants to know why I haven’t bought anything from him lately.”

Dave tore open the communication which was written on one of Asa Dickley’s letterheads. The letter ran as follows:

“Mr. David Porter.

“Dear Sir:

“I thought when I saw you in Coburntown to-day that you would come in and see me; but you did not. Will you kindly let me know why you do not settle up as

promised? When I let you have the goods, you said you would settle up by the end of the week without fail. Unless you come in and settle up inside of the next week I shall have to call the attention of your father to what you owe me.

“Yours truly,

“Asa Dickley.”

CHAPTER V

WHAT ASA DICKLEY HAD TO SAY

Dave read the letter received from Mr. Asa Dickley with much interest. He went over it twice, and as he did so the second time his mind reverted to the communication received the morning before from Mr. Wecks.

“What in the world does Mr. Dickley mean by writing to me in this fashion?” he mused. “I haven’t had anything from him in a long while, and I don’t owe him a cent. It certainly is a mighty strange proceeding, to say the least.”

Then like a flash another thought came into his mind—was Ward Porton connected in any way with this affair?

“Somebody must have gotten some things in my name from Mr. Dickley, and he must have gotten those shoes from Mr. Wecks, too. If the party went there in person and said he was Dave Porter, I don’t think it could have been any one but Ward Porton, because, so far as I know, he’s the only fellow that resembles me.”

Our hero was so much worried that he gave scant attention to the letters received from Phil Lawrence and Shadow Hamilton, even though those communications contained many matters of interest. He was looking at the Dickley communication for a third time when his sister entered.

“Well, Dave, no more bad news I hope?” said Laura, with a smile.

“It is bad news,” he returned. “Just read that;” and he turned the letter over to her.

“If you owe Mr. Dickley any money you ought to pay him,” said the sister, after perusing the epistle. “I don’t think father would like it if he knew you were running into debt,” and she gazed anxiously at Dave.

“Laura! You ought to know me better than that,” he answered somewhat shortly. “I never run any bills unless I am able to pay them. But this is something different. It is in the same line with the one I got from Mr. Wecks. I didn’t get his shoes, and I haven’t gotten anything from Mr. Dickley for a long time, and nothing at all that I haven’t paid for.”

“Oh, Dave! do you mean it?” and now Laura’s face took on a look of worry. “Why, somebody must be playing a trick on you!”

“If he is, it’s a mighty mean trick, Laura. But I think it is more than a trick. I think it is a swindle.”

“Swindle?”

“Exactly. And what is more, do you know who I think is guilty?”

“Why, who could be guilty?” The sister paused for a moment to look at her brother. “Oh, Dave! could it be that awful Ward Porton?”

“That’s the fellow I fasten on. Didn’t we meet him in Clayton? And that’s only six miles from Coburntown. More than likely that rascal has been hanging around here, and maybe getting a whole lot of things in my name.” Dave began to pace the floor. “It’s a shame! If I could get hold of him I think I would have him locked up.”

“What are you going to do about this letter?”

“I’m going to go to Coburntown the first chance I get and tell Mr. Dickley, and also Mr. Wecks, the truth. I want to find out whether the party who got those things procured them in person or on some written order. If he got them on a written order, somebody must have forged my name.”

“Hadn’t you better tell father or Uncle Dunston about this?”

“Not just yet, Laura. It will be time enough to worry them after I have seen Mr. Wecks and Mr. Dickley. Perhaps I can settle the matter myself.”

Dave was so upset that it was hard for him to buckle down to his studies; and he was glad that evening when an interruption came in the shape of the arrival of his old school chum and fellow engineering student, Roger Morr.

“Back again! And right side up with care!” announced the senator’s son, as he came in and shook hands. “My! but I’ve had a busy time since I’ve been away!” he replied in answer to a question of Dave’s. “I had to settle up one or two things for father, and then I had to go on half a dozen different errands for mother, and then see to it that I got those new text books that Mr. Ramsdell spoke about. I got two copies of each, Dave, and here are those that are coming to you,” and he passed over three small volumes. “And that isn’t all. I just met Ben Basswood at the depot where he was sending a telegram to his father, who is in Chicago. Ben had some wonderful news to tell.”

“What was that?” asked Laura and Jessie simultaneously.

“He didn’t give me any of the particulars, but it seems an old friend of theirs died out in Chicago recently, and Mr. Basswood was sent for by some lawyers to help settle the estate.”

“Yes, we know that much,” broke in Dave. “But what’s the new news?”

“Why, it seems this man, Enos, died quite wealthy, and he left almost his entire estate to Mr. Basswood.”

“Is that so!” cried Dave. “That sure is fine! I don’t know of anybody who deserves money more than do the Basswoods,” and his face lit up with genuine pleasure.

“It will be nice for Ben,” said Jessie, “and even nicer for Mrs. Basswood. Mamma says there was a time when they were quite poor, and Mrs. Basswood had to do all her own work. Now they’ll be able to take it easy.”

“Oh, they are far from poor,” returned Dave. “They’ve been living on ‘Easy Street,’ as the saying goes, for a number of years. Just the same, it will be a fine thing for them to get this fortune.”

“There was one thing about the news that Ben didn’t understand,” continued Roger. “His father telegraphed that the estate was a decidedly curious one, and that was why the lawyers wanted him to come to Chicago immediately. He added that Mr. Enos had proved to be a very eccentric individual.”

“Maybe he was as eccentric as that man in Rhode Island I once read about,” said Dave, with a grin. “When he died he left an estate consisting of about twelve thousand ducks. This estate went to two worthless nephews, who knew nothing at all about their uncle’s business. And, as somebody said, the two nephews very soon made ‘ducks and drakes’ of the whole fortune.”

“Oh, what a story!” cried Jessie, laughing. “Twelve thousand ducks! What ever would a person do with them?”

“Why, some duck farms are very profitable,” returned Roger.

“You don’t suppose this Mr. Enos left such a fortune as that to Mr. Basswood?” queried Laura.

“I’m sure I don’t know what the fortune consists of. And neither did Ben. He was tremendously curious to know. And he said his mother could hardly wait until Mr. Basswood sent additional information,” replied Roger.

“Ben told me that this Mr. Enos was once a partner of his father in business, the two running an art store together. Enos was very much interested in art; so it’s possible the fortune he left may have something to do with that,” added Dave.

As my old readers know, Roger Morr had always thought a great deal of Laura; and of late his liking for her had greatly increased. On her part, Dave’s sister had always considered the senator’s son a very promising young man. Consequently, it can well be imagined that the four young people spent a most enjoyable time that evening in the mansion. The girls played on the piano and all sang, and then some rugs were pushed aside, a phonograph was brought into action, and they danced a number of the latest steps, with the older folks looking on.

Roger was to remain over for several days at Crumville, and early the next morning Dave asked his chum if he would accompany him on a hasty trip to Coburntown. He had already acquainted Roger with the trouble he was having with the shoe-dealer and the man who sold men’s furnishings.

“We can take a horse and cutter and be back before lunch,” said Dave.

“I’ll be glad to go,” answered the senator’s son. “I haven’t had a ride in a cutter this winter.”

They were soon on the way, Dave this time driving a black horse that could not only cover the ground well, but was thoroughly reliable. By ten o’clock they found themselves in Coburntown, and made their way to the establishment run by Asa Dickley. The proprietor of the store was busy with a customer at the time, and a clerk came forward to wait on the new arrivals.

“I wish to speak to Mr. Dickley,” said Dave; and he and Roger waited until the man was at leisure. Mr. Dickley looked anything but pleasant as he walked up to our hero.

“I got a very strange letter from you, Mr. Dickley. I can’t understand it at all,” began Dave.

“And I can’t understand why you treat me the way you do,” blurted out the shopkeeper. “You promised to come in here and settle up over a week ago.”

“Mr. Dickley, I think there is a big mistake somewhere,” said Dave, as calmly as he could. “I don’t owe you any money, and I can’t understand why you should write me such a letter as this,” and he brought forth the communication he had received.

“You don’t owe me any money!” ejaculated Asa Dickley. “I just guess you do! You owe me twenty-six dollars.”

“Twenty-six dollars!” repeated Dave. “What is that for?”

“For? You know as well as I do! Didn’t you come in here and get a fedora hat, some shirts and collars and neckties, and a pair of fur-lined gloves, and a lot of underwear? The whole bill came to just twenty-six dollars.”

“And when was this stuff purchased?” went on Dave.

“When was it purchased? See here, Porter, what sort of tom-foolery is this?” cried Asa Dickley. “You know as well as I do when you got the things. I wouldn’t be so harsh with you, only you promised me faithfully that you would come in and settle up long before this.”

“Mr. Dickley, I haven’t had any goods from you for a long, long time—and what I have had I have paid for,” answered Dave, doing his best to keep his temper, because he knew the storekeeper must be laboring under a mistake. “As a matter of fact, I haven’t been in your store for several months.”

“What!” ejaculated the storekeeper. “Do you mean to deny that you bought those goods from me, young man?”

“I certainly do deny it. As I said before, I haven’t been in this store for several months.”

At this plain declaration made by Dave, Mr. Asa Dickley grew fairly purple. He leaned over his counter and shook his clenched fist in Dave’s face.

“So that is the way you are going to try to swindle me out of my money, is it, Dave Porter?” he cried. “Well, let me tell you, it won’t work. You came here and got those goods from me, and either you’ll pay for them or I’ll sue your father for the amount. Why, it’s preposterous!” The storekeeper turned to his clerk, who was gazing on the scene in open-mouthed wonder. “Here a customer comes in and buys a lot of goods and I am good-hearted enough to trust him to the amount, twenty-six dollars, and then he comes here and declares to my face that he never had the things and he won’t pay for them. Now what do you think of that, Hibbins?”

“I think it’s pretty raw,” responded the clerk.

“Weren’t you in the shop when I let Porter have some of those goods?”

“I certainly was,” answered Hibbins. “Of course, I was in the rear, sorting out those new goods that had come in, so I didn’t see just what you let him have; but I certainly know he got some things.”

“Mr. Dickley, now listen to me for a minute,” said Dave in a tone of voice that arrested the man’s attention in spite of his irascibility. “Look at me closely. Didn’t the fellow who got those things from you look somewhat different from me?”

Dave faced the storekeeper with unflinching eyes, and Asa Dickley was compelled to look the youth over carefully. As he did this the positive expression on his face gradually changed to one of doubt.

“Why, I—er—Of course, he looked like you,” he stammered. “Of course you can change your looks a little; but that don’t count with me. Besides, didn’t you give me your name as Dave Porter, and ask me if I didn’t remember you?”

“The fellow who got those goods may have done all that, Mr. Dickley. But that fellow was not I. I may be mistaken, but I think it was a young man who resembles me, and who some time ago made a great deal of trouble for me.”

“Humph! That’s a fishy kind of story, Porter. If there is such a person he must look very much like you.”

“He does. In fact, some people declare they can hardly tell us apart.”

“What’s the name of that fellow?”

“Ward Porton.”

“Does he live around here?”

“I don’t know where he is living just at present. But I saw him day before yesterday in Clayton. I tried to stop him, but he ran away from me.”

The storekeeper gazed at Dave for a moment in silence, and then pursed up his lips and shook his head decidedly.

“That is too much of a fish story for me to swallow,” he said harshly. “You’ll either have to bring that young man here and prove that he got the goods, or else you’ll have to pay for them yourself.”

CHAPTER VI

MORE TROUBLE

Dave and Roger spent the best part of half an hour in Asa Dickley's store, and during that time our hero and his chum gave the particulars of how they had become acquainted with Ward Porton, and how the young moving-picture actor had tried to pass himself off as the real Dave Porter, and how he had been exposed and had disappeared.

"Well, if what you say is true I've been swindled," declared the storekeeper finally. "I'd like to get my hands on that young man."

"You wouldn't like it any better than I would," returned Dave, grimly. "You see, I don't know how far this thing extends. Mr. Wecks has been after me to pay for some shoes that I never got."

"Say, that moving-picture actor must be a lulu!" declared the storekeeper's clerk, slangily. "If you don't watch out, Porter, he'll get you into all kinds of hot water."

"I think the best you can do, Dave, is to notify the storekeepers you do business with to be on the lookout for Porton," suggested Roger. "Then, if he shows up again, they can have him held until you arrive."

"I'll certainly have to do something," answered Dave.

"Then I suppose you don't want to settle that bill?" came from Asa Dickley, wistfully.

"No, sir. And I don't think you ought to expect it."

"Well, I don't know. The fellow who got those goods said he was Dave Porter," vouchsafed the storekeeper doggedly.

From Asa Dickley's establishment Dave, accompanied by his chum, drove around to the store kept by Mr. Wecks. He found the curtains still down, but the shoe-dealer had just come in, and was at his desk writing letters.

"And you mean to say you didn't get those shoes?" questioned Mr. Wecks with interest, after Dave had explained the situation. "That's mighty curious. I never had a thing like that happen before." He knew our hero well, and trusted Dave implicitly. "I shouldn't have sent that letter only I had a chance to sell a pair of shoes that size, and I thought if you had made your selection I could sell the pair you didn't want to the other fellow."

Once again the two boys had to tell all about Ward Porton and what that young rascal was supposed to be doing. As they proceeded Mr. Wecks's face took on a look of added intelligence.

"Exactly! Exactly! That fits in with what I thought when that fellow went off with the shoes," he declared finally. "I said to myself, 'Somehow Dave Porter looks different to-day. He must have had a spell of sickness or something.' That other chap was a bit thinner and paler than you are."

"He's a regular cigarette fiend, and that is, I think, what makes him look pale," put in Roger. And then he added quickly: "Do you remember—was he smoking?"

"Yes, he was. He threw a cigarette stub away while he was trying on the shoes, and then lit another cigarette when he was going out. I thought at the time that he was probably smoking more than was good for him."

"I don't smoke at all, and never have done so," said Dave. He turned to his chum. "I think the fact that the fellow who got the shoes was smoking is additional proof that it was Porton."

"I haven't the slightest idea that it was anybody else," answered the senator's son.

Mr. Wecks promised to keep on the lookout for Ward Porton, in case that individual showed himself again, and then Dave and Roger left.

"I'm going into all the stores where I do business and tell the folks to be on the watch for Ward Porton," said our hero.

“A good idea, Dave. But see here! How are they going to tell him from you?” and the senator’s son chuckled. “You may come along some day and they may hold you, thinking you are Porton.”

“I thought of that, Roger, and I’ll leave each of them my signature on a card. I know that Ward Porton doesn’t write as I do.”

This idea was followed out, the boys spending the best part of an hour in going around Coburntown. Then they drove back to Crumville, and there Dave visited some other establishments with which he was in the habit of doing business.

All the storekeepers were much interested in what he had to tell, and all readily agreed to have Ward Porton detained if he should show himself. At each place Dave left his signature, so that there might be no further mistake regarding his identity.

After that several days passed quietly. Both Dave and Roger were applying themselves to their studies, and as a consequence saw little of Ben except in the evenings, when all the young folks would get together for more or less of a good time.

“Any more news about that fortune in Chicago?” asked Dave, one evening of the Basswood lad.

“Not very much,” answered Ben. “Father telegraphed that he was hunting for some things that belonged to Mr. Enos. He said that as soon as he found them he would tell us all about it.”

“That certainly is a strange state of affairs.”

“Strange? I should say it was!” cried the other. “Mother and I are just dying to know what it all means. One thing is certain—Mr. Enos did not leave his fortune in stocks or bonds or real estate, or anything like that.”

On the following day came additional trouble for Dave in the shape of a communication from a hotel-keeper in Coburntown. He stated that he had heard through Asa Dickey that Dave was having trouble with a party who was impersonating him, and added that a person calling himself Dave Porter was owing him a bill of fifteen dollars for five days’ board.

“Isn’t this the limit?” cried Dave, as he showed the letter to his father and his Uncle Dunston.

“No use in talking, Dave, we’ll have to get after that rascal,” announced the father. “If we don’t, there is no telling how far he’ll carry this thing. I think I’ll put the authorities on his track.”

Two days after that, and while Dave was continuing his studies as diligently as ever, came word over the telephone from Clayton.

“Is this you, Dave Porter?” came over the wire.

“Yes,” answered our hero. “Who are you?”

“This is Nat Poole talking. I am up here in Clayton—in the First National Bank. You know my father got me a job here last week.”

“No, I didn’t know it, Nat. But I’m glad to hear you have something to do, and I hope you’ll make a success of it,” returned Dave promptly.

“I called you up to find out if you were in Clayton,” continued the son of the money lender. “I wanted to make sure of it.”

“Well, I’m not. I’m right here at home, Nat.”

“Then, in that case, I want to tell you that the fellow who looks like you is here.”

“Where do you mean—in the bank?”

“Well, he came in here to get a five-dollar bill changed. I happened to see him as he was going out and I called to him, thinking it was you. When I called he seemed to get scared, and he got out in a hurry. Then I happened to think about that fellow who looked like you, and I made up my mind I’d call you up.”

“How long ago since he was in the bank?” questioned Dave, eagerly.

“Not more than ten minutes ago. I tried to get you sooner but the wire was busy.”

“You haven’t any idea where he went?”

“No, except that he started down the side street next to the bank, which, as maybe you know, runs towards the river.”

“All right, Nat. Thank you very much for what you’ve told me. I want to locate that fellow if I possibly can. He is a swindler, and if you clap eyes on him again have him arrested,” added Dave; and this Nat Poole promised to do.

The news over the wire excited Dave not a little. Of the men of the household, only old Professor Potts was in, and he, of course, could not assist in the matter. Dave at once sought out Mrs. Wadsworth and told her of what he had heard.

“I think I’ll drive to Clayton and see if I can locate Porton,” he added. “Roger says he will go with me.”

“Do as you think best, Dave,” answered the lady of the house. “But do keep out of trouble! This Ward Porton may prove to be a dangerous character if you attempt to corner him.”

“I think Roger and I can manage him, if only we can find him,” returned the youth.

Once more the black horse and the cutter were brought into service, and the two youths made the best possible time on the snowy highway that led through Coburntown to Clayton. Arriving there, they called at the bank and interviewed Nat Poole.

“If what you say about Porton is true he certainly must be a bad one—almost as bad as Merwell and Jasniff,” was the comment of the money lender’s son. “I certainly hope you spot him and bring him to book. That’s the way he went the last I saw of him,” he added, pointing down the side street.

Dave and Roger drove down the street looking to the right and the left for a possible sight of Ward Porton. But their search was doomed to disappointment for the moving-picture actor was nowhere to be seen.

“It’s a good deal like looking for a needle in a haystack,” was the comment of the senator’s son, after a full hour had been spent in the hunt.

They had left the sleigh and had walked around a number of mills and tenement houses which were situated in that locality.

“I’ve got an idea,” said Dave, as several children approached them. “I’m going to ask the youngsters if they’ve seen a young man who looks like me.”

The first boys and girls to whom the subject was broached shook their heads and declared they had seen nobody that resembled Dave. Then our hero and his chum passed on to other children, and finally to some men working around a newly-constructed tenement.

“Why sure! I saw a young feller wot looked like you,” said a youth who was piling up some lumber. “He ast me fer a match. Say! he looked like he could have been your twin,” he added in wonder; and then continued suddenly: “Maybe youse is playin’ a trick on me, and it was youse got the match?”

“No, I never met you before,” answered Dave, quickly. “When did you meet the other fellow, and where? I am very anxious to locate him.”

“It was down on de bridge, about an hour ago. I was comin’ dis way, and he was goin’ de udder way.”

“Was he smoking a cigarette?” asked Roger.

“He had one o’ de coffin-nails in his hand and he lit up after I given him de match.”

“Did he say anything?” questioned our hero.

The carpenter’s helper scratched his head for a moment. “Sure he did! He ast me if it was putty good walkin’ to Bixter. I told him ‘putty fair,’ and den he went on and I came here.”

“Then he must have gone on to Bixter!” cried Roger. “How far is that from here?”

“About two miles and a half,” answered Dave. He turned to the carpenter’s helper. “Much obliged to you.”

“Dat’s all right. Say! but dat guy certainly looks like you,” the carpenter’s helper added, with a grin.

“Come, we’ll follow him,” said Dave to his chum, and led the way on the run to where the horse was tied.

Soon they were in the cutter once more. Dave urged the black along at his best speed, and over the bridge they flew, and then along the road leading to the village of Bixter.

CHAPTER VII

FACE TO FACE

“If you catch Porton, Dave, what will you do—turn him over to the authorities?”

“Yes, Roger.”

“Is Bixter much of a place?”

“Oh, no. There are but two stores and two churches and not over thirty or forty houses.”

“Then you may have some trouble in finding an officer. Probably the village doesn’t boast of anything more than a constable and a Justice of the Peace.”

“I am not worrying about that yet, Roger,” returned our hero, grimly. “We have got to catch Porton first.”

“Oh, I know that. But if he started for Bixter on foot we ought to be able to locate him. A stranger can’t go through such a small place without somebody’s noticing it.”

On and on trotted the horse, past many well-kept farms, and then through a small patch of timber land. Beyond the woods they crossed a frozen creek, and then made a turn to the northward. A short distance beyond they came in sight of the first houses that went to make up the village of Bixter.

“Well, we’ve not seen anything of him yet,” remarked the senator’s son, as they slowed up and looked ahead and to both sides of the village street.

“No, and I don’t understand it,” returned Dave. “From what that carpenter’s helper said, I thought we should overtake him before we got to Bixter. Either he must have left this road, or else he must be some walker.”

“I don’t see where he could have gone if he left the road, Dave. All we passed were lanes leading to the farms, and a path through that wood. It isn’t likely he would take to the woods in this cold weather—not unless he was going hunting, and that chap back in Clayton didn’t say anything about his carrying a gun.”

With the horse in a walk, they passed down the village street and back again. As they did this they kept their eyes wide open, peering into the various yards and lanes that presented themselves.

“I’m afraid it’s no use unless he is in one of these houses or in one of the stores,” was Roger’s comment.

“I’ll ask at the stores,” returned Dave.

The inquiries he and his chum made were productive of no results so far as locating Ward Porton was concerned. No one had seen or heard of the former moving picture actor.

“All the strangers we’ve seen to-day was a cigar drummer,” said one of the shopkeepers. “And he was a fat man and about forty years old.” The other storekeeper had had no strangers in his place.

Hardly knowing what to do next, Dave and Roger returned to the cutter.

“Maybe he went farther than this,” suggested Roger. “We might go on a mile or two and take a look.”

Now that they had come so far, Dave thought this a good idea, and so they passed on for a distance of nearly two miles beyond Bixter. Here the sleighing became poor, there being but few farmhouses in that vicinity.

“It’s no use,” said Dave, finally. “We’ll go back to Bixter, take another look around, and then return to Clayton and home.”

When they arrived once more at the village Dave suggested that he and his chum separate.

“There are a number of these lanes that lead to some back roads,” said Dave. “Perhaps if we tramp around on foot and ask some of the country folks living around here we may get on the track of the fellow we are after.”

The senator's son was willing, and he was soon walking down a lane leading to the right while Dave went off to the left. Presently Dave came to a barn where a farmer was mending some broken harness.

"Hello! Back again, are you?" cried the farmer, as he looked at Dave curiously. "What brought you? Why didn't you stop when I called to you before?"

"I guess you're just the man I want to see," cried Dave, quickly. And then, as the farmer looked at him in increasing wonder, he added: "Did a young man who looks very much like me go past here to-day?"

"Look like you?" queried the farmer. "Why, it was you, wasn't it?"

"No. It must have been a fellow who resembles me very closely. I am trying to catch him."

"Well, I swan!" murmured the farmer, looking at Dave critically. "That other feller looked as much like you as could be. Wot is he—your twin brother?"

"I am thankful to say he is no relative of mine. He is a swindler, and that is why I would like to catch him. He has been getting goods in my name. If he went past here perhaps you can tell me where he has gone?"

"He walked past here less than fifteen minutes ago. He went down that lane, which is a short cut to the road to Barnett."

"Barnett!" cried our hero. "That's the railroad station up this way, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then he must be heading for a railroad train!" exclaimed Dave, quickly. "How far is it from here?"

"Barnett is three miles by the road, but it's less than a mile and a quarter by that short cut through Gerry's Woods."

"Then I'll go after him by that short cut," answered Dave. He thought for a moment. To hunt up Roger and get him to go along might take too long. He looked at the farmer. "Would you like to go with me? I'll make it worth your while," he continued.

"Sorry, but I can't do it," was the reply. "I've got to meet the man who buys my milk down town in about fifteen minutes. He's a very particular customer, and if I should fail him he might get mad. So I can't go."

"All right, I'll go after him alone," answered our hero; and then continued: "If you are going down town, and you chance to see a friend of mine with my black horse and cutter, will you kindly tell him where I have gone?"

"Sure, I will;" and with this promise from the farmer Dave started on a swift walk along the short cut to Barnett which the other had pointed out.

Fortunately for the youth, to keep his feet warm while riding he had donned a heavy pair of rubbers, so that walking through the rather deep snow of the path leading through the back farms and through Gerry's Woods was not as uncomfortable as it might otherwise have been. To be sure, he occasionally found himself floundering in snow that was over his shoetops, but when this happened he simply smiled grimly and made the best of it. When at Oak Hall he had often taken part in track athletics, cross-country running, and occasionally in a game of hare and hounds, and consequently his wind was good and he made rapid progress without becoming too much exhausted.

He was in the depth of the woods when, at a turn in the path, he saw a figure ahead of him. The individual wore a heavy overcoat and had a cap pulled well down over his ears and the back of his head.

"I may be mistaken, but that looks as if it might be Porton," said Dave to himself. "However, I'll soon know;" and he increased his speed so that he might catch up to the other walker.

As the ground was covered with snow our hero made but slight noise while he advanced, and as a consequence he drew quite close to the other individual before the latter was aware of his presence.

“Hi there!” called out Dave, when he was but a few feet behind. The fellow had stopped and turned around, and a single glance showed our hero that it was the youth he was seeking.

“Dave Porter!” muttered Ward Porton, as he recognized our hero. His manner showed that he was much astonished, as well as chagrined, at this unexpected meeting.

“You didn’t expect to meet me out here, did you?” remarked Dave, sharply, as he came up alongside the former moving-picture actor.

“Why—I—er—I—can’t—can’t say that I did,” returned Porton, lamely.

“You’ve been acting in a fine way, haven’t you, Porton?” went on Dave, angrily.

“Huh! What have I done?” Porton’s gaze was shifty. He did not dare to look our hero in the eyes.

“You know well enough what you’ve done, Porton—buying a whole lot of goods in my name.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t do any such thing!” was the blustering reply. The former moving-picture actor was recovering from his surprise.

“I can prove that you did; and I’m going to hold you responsible for it,” answered Dave, calmly.

“Look here, Porter, I don’t want any such talk from you!” and now Ward Porton doubled up his fists and stuck out his chin. “I’ve stood all I am going to stand from you. I want you to leave me alone.”

“Porton, you can bluster all you please, but it won’t do you any good,” answered Dave, and his voice had a more positive ring to it than before. “You thought you could play this trick on me and get away with it, but I am going to show you it can’t be done. I am going to hand you over to the authorities and see that you go to jail.”

“If you think you can do that, Porter, you’ve got another guess coming. You clear out and let me alone or I’ll make it hot for you;” and Ward Porton shook his fist in Dave’s face.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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