

Braden James Andrew

The Auto Boys' Mystery



James Braden

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

The Auto Boys had been camped on the unfrequented shore of Opal Lake for several days. At first hunting and fishing were the only enlivening features of this, their unusual summer outing.

Opal Lake, far up in the big northern woods, had at this time no other campers. True, there was an abandoned clubhouse on a nearby point not far from where Phil Way, Billy Worth, Dave MacLester and Paul Jones selected the spot for their Outing Camp. But, until within a day or two, even the clubhouse had seemed to be as it looked, deserted.

But a smoke being seen one day, the boys had become curious. Without actually entering the house itself, they had made individual or collective trips that way. Also strange sounds had been heard, and even human presence had been detected. Finally Paul, the youngest of the boys, made a cautious trip thither and even entered the house where he had heard voices, and otherwise had detected that real folks were undoubtedly there; though why they were there Paul could only guess. Perhaps they were in search of a bag of money, said to be twenty thousand dollars, stolen three years before and supposed still to be hidden somewhere in that region.

Strange men had been seen near the end of a gravel road which the Longknives Club (owners of the now abandoned clubhouse) were then constructing for their own use and convenience. The unexpected loss of this money caused the work to stop, while the workmen, including a Swedish foreman, Nels Anderson by name, remained unpaid to this day.

Aside from the clubhouse, the nearest inhabitants to the boys' camp were this same Anderson and his family, who lived in a small clearing five or six miles away on the trail leading to Staretta, a small town perhaps a dozen miles further on. This was the nearest town to Opal Lake which was, indeed, a veritable "Lake of the Woods."

When Paul Jones, finally escaping through the cellar window, left the clubhouse without being discovered, he ran across in the dark another somebody who vanished, uttering strange and savage oaths. Paul also made himself scarce in another direction and happened upon Chip Slider, whose merry response to Paul's greeting caused both soon to become so friendly that Paul took Chip to their camp, where a warm meal soon loosened the boys' tongues and there was a general interchange of opinions about game, fish, the big woods, and at last the abandoned house on the point.

Here the boys learned from Chip that a man named Murky was also in the woods and supposedly after that lost or stolen satchel, thought by many to be hidden somewhere near. They learned from Chip more of the robbery of Grandall, the treasurer of the Longknives, by this same Murky; also that Murky himself, through the connivance of Grandall, was held up by Chip's father by the order of Grandall. The scheme seemed to have been for Grandall to get the money thus entrusted to his care in a way that would divert suspicion against himself and direct it elsewhere. After sufficient time had elapsed, then Grandall would manage to use that money, meanwhile placating Chip's father, supposedly by bribes.

So open, frank and friendless was young Chip that he won the Auto Boys' confidence, and stayed on at the camp, proving himself a valuable aid and an added link in their narrow social life.

Shortly before this Chip, encountering Murky in the woods, had been badly beaten by the other, and had been seen with a bandaged head by some of the boys. This induced much pity for the homeless lad, while Chip's knowledge of Murky and matters connected with the robbery just alluded

to, made him serviceable in the matter of knowing more about what was going on in and about the house on the point. It appeared, too, that others of the boys during previous scoutings about the point had seen Murky, though they did not know who or what he was until Slider enlightened them.

The general conclusion was that the voices heard inside the house were more than apt to have indicated the presence of Murky and Grandall, still on trail of stolen money that must have, in some way, slipped into unknown hands. Still nothing was sure or settled in their minds except that Chip was a good fellow and Murky a bad one from almost any point of view one might take.

Another point occurred to Phil Way, the oldest and the leader of the Auto Boys; not one of suspicion against Chip, but for general enlightenment.

A recent visit to their camp when all the boys were away had occurred. Things had been taken, including provisions, bedding and dishes. Perhaps young Slider, more familiar with the woods life nearby, might have some knowledge that would lead to the perpetrator.

Taken all round, the camp thought itself rather in luck that Paul had met this strange homeless lad in the way and under the circumstances he did.

Nels Anderson, the giant Swede, had also been seen under suspicious circumstances by some of the boys. Taken altogether, the whole matter was attractive enough to foster certain ambitions inside the lads, who were too apt to fancy themselves amateur detectives, a vocation they knew little or nothing about, rather than young woodsmen, hunters, or anglers, pursuits they really did have some knowledge of and also some skill.

CHAPTER II

A QUIET, TRANQUIL SUNDAY

A great bull-frog whose hoarse croaking could always be heard above other sounds about the lake, "beginning at exactly eleven o'clock each night"—at least so Paul Jones positively stated—had started his unmelodious serenade a long time before the Auto Boys and their visitor prepared for bed. Paul's adventure, Chip Slider's whole story and the combined information thus afforded had proved a most fruitful field for speculation and conversation.

A bed for Slider was contrived by spreading over some hemlock boughs a tarpaulin used on the car for covering baggage. A bucket-seat cushion from the car served quite nicely as a pillow. Indeed Chip had not for a long while had so comfortable a resting place, crude as it was.

The plans for the night's sleeping arrangements were seized upon by Phil as an opportunity of finding out whether the strange boy had any knowledge of the recent robbery of the camp. With this in view his remarks about a scarcity of blankets and his inquiries as to where Chip had been managing to find accommodations were adroitly framed. Quite perfectly he succeeded in gaining the knowledge desired, nor did Slider ever suspect that the Auto Boys' suspicions might very easily have been directed toward him.

It was truly pitiable to hear Chip tell how in the night he had stood off a distance in the woods, taking note of the bright campfire of the four friends; how he had smelled their frying bacon when all he had to eat was a little dry bread; how he had been tempted to apply at the camp for food and shelter, but was afraid; how he had spent one whole evening within sight of the cheerful light about the shack, because it was a kind of company for him, and he slipped away and made his bed in the dead leaves beside a log when at last the campfire had quite died down.

Yet very interesting, too, was all that Chip told. One certain fact made clear was that he had nothing to do with the theft of provisions and other items from the camp. When this was fairly plain Phil Way ventured the remark that Murky had possibly fared better in the woods than Slider had done.

"No denyin' it," Chip assented. "I found his hang-out only yesterday. It would put you in mind of a bear's den, most, to see it."

"Tell all about it," urged Phil. "I'd like to smoke him out, like we would a woodchuck," he added with bitter earnestness.

"Nothin' much to it," answered Slider, but he went on promptly to report what he had seen and the manner of his discovery. He had been in search of berries, or whatever he could find for food, he said, for his slender store of provisions was nearly gone.

As he approached a marshy place where he thought he might find huckleberries, or blueberries, he discovered Murky there ahead of him. He had known the evil fellow was in the woods. He had watched him frequently, believing he might learn something of the stolen payroll money or at least what was going on so secretly about the old clubhouse.

Carefully keeping himself out of sight, Chip had followed when Murky left the marsh. The latter walked directly to a thicket on a knoll, went in among the bushes and disappeared. Then for a long time Slider patiently waited. He wondered if the treasure he was seeking might not be hidden in the copse.

Toward evening Murky left the thicket and slipped away in the direction of the point of land occupied by the clubhouse. Improving this opportunity Slider cautiously visited the brush-covered knoll. There he found the tramp's den—a nest of leaves and pine needles and branches between two logs. Poles laid across the logs and covered over with branches made a roof for the den. Merely as a place to sleep the nest looked snug enough, Chip said.

"Didn't see any blankets or dishes, did you?" Dave asked.

Indeed he had seen these very things, Slider answered, and had wondered how Murky came by them. He thought they probably had been taken from the clubhouse.

A complete quartette of voices answered this remark, setting Chip right as to the real ownership of the items mentioned. For not one of the four friends doubted now that it was Murky and no one else who had stolen their equipment and provisions. Considering the unscrupulous character of the fellow, they only wondered that he had not plundered the camp completely, leaving them nothing of value. It did not occur to them that probably the thief really wished to take more than he did, but could not conveniently carry a greater load.

It was a matter of congratulation among the boys that they had not, by leaving the camp again unguarded, given Murky a chance to return. They were more certain than ever now that some one of them must be always in attendance about the shack, and it would have needed very little to persuade them, also, that despite Opal Lake's many attractive features their best course would be to pull up stakes and bid its shores good-bye.

Even after all were in bed this feature of their situation was discussed to some extent. Two main reasons for wishing to occupy the present camp, for yet a few days, were suggested. One was that in another week they must head the Thirty homeward and it was therefore hardly worth while to search out a more secure and less frequented locality for a camp site.

For reason number two there was the lively interest in the outcome of the search for the Grandall payroll money, and an earnest wish to help Chip Slider find the treasure, if possible, and return it to the rightful owners,—the members of the club which had been practically broken up by its twenty thousand dollar loss, as many a larger organization might be.

Quite as usual Paul's voice was the last one heard when the discussion closed and the quiet of midnight settled over the forest. All had been silent for some time. Slider had expressed in his grateful, however awkward, way his appreciation of the offer his new friends made to help him. And Phil Way, answering for all the boys, said there was no obligation at all and no thanks necessary,—that nothing had been done, as yet, at least.

"Anyhow, it seems to me," said Paul, after a long silence, "It seems to me as if we were all going to have our hands full. There will be Murky and Grandall and Nels Anderson digging into this mystery just as hard as we can, and maybe harder. And they are all bad ones, all of 'em, unless maybe Anderson might not be so really bad excepting for being hooked up with a bad outfit, and all that."

No comment being made by the others with regard to these remarks, Jones went on to say that if there was any advantage to be had by having right and justice on their side, fortune ought to favor Slider and his friends in the search to be carried forward. He reasoned it all out, too, to his own satisfaction, that in the end justice must prevail in all things or the whole world would ultimately go to smash. "And that's a fact, now, ain't it?" he asked.

There came no answer.

"Well, is it, or don't it, wasn't it!" inquired Paul, rather facetiously.

Still no answer. Jones raised himself up on his elbow. He listened. It was perfectly evident from the heavy breathing all about him that every one of the other lads was sound asleep and had been for some time.

"Why! The bing-dinged mummies!" he exclaimed, "and me talking till I'm all but tongue-tied—and to no one!" he added indignantly.

Having heard how Slider slept in the open woods with not even a cover over him more than leaves, the Auto Boys would have been ashamed now to feel afraid in their snug shack, no matter what strange noises might come from the lake's dark shore lines. And though the sounds of various wild creatures coming to bathe or drink did reach the lads, as occasionally one or more of them awakened during the night, no heed was given the disturbers. It was enough to know that the exceeding drouth brought animals from long distances to the water's edge and that they were much more intent on drinking than having trouble with anyone or even among themselves.

Not because it was Sunday morning but due quite entirely to their having retired so late, the Auto Boys slept longer than was their custom. Poor Chip Slider awakened with the first peep of daylight, really tremendously surprised to find himself in such comfortable quarters. With a sigh of exquisite content and satisfaction he at once dropped off to sleep again. With the exception of the night at the bachelor's shanty he had not known such sweet and unbroken rest for—it seemed to him almost his whole lifetime.

And then again, if Chip had wondered whether there might be kindness, cheerfulness and plenty to eat somewhere in the world, as he most certainly often had done, he must surely have found the answer now. For when he awoke again the rich aroma of boiling coffee and cheering scent of frying bacon greeted him. From the beach down by the lake, too, there came lively laughter and a great splashing of water.

"Skip down and dive in! Paddle around some, then rub down lively!" urged Billy Worth, who, having had his plunge, was now nimbly getting breakfast. "Makes a man feel dandy!" he urged, really thinking that a bath would do Chip good, anyway. "And hold on!" he added. "Here's soap and a towel if you care for 'em."

Slider was by no means afraid of the water. He was glad of the chance to take a swim and had the sound sense to realize, as well, that he stood much in need of a vigorous scrubbing. He hurried down to the water zestfully, albeit rather lamely for his body was stiff and sore. Paul made him feel at home at once by turning a back flip-flop off the now completed raft for his especial benefit. He asked Chip to follow suit, but the latter only smiled and dove off forward, instead.

"Being around the woods as much as you have been, you'll hardly have a change of clothes with you, but here's a shirt I'll never need, and you can keep it if you'll accept it from me," said Phil Way in a pleasant, off-hand manner, when he and Chip were dressing. It was a friendly yet delicate way of getting the young stranger into one garment, at least, that was clean and whole.

The boy could not refuse nor did he wish to do so. Though he was sensitive, his feelings were not injured. Nor were his pride and manliness hurt at all. It was just because he was not permitted to feel that he was in any degree an object of charity.

True, Chip had begged for food along the road. One would think that did not indicate much pride on his part; but it should be remembered that asking for aid among strangers is very different from receiving anything as charity from those one considers his friends.

With such a beginning the Auto Boys and their new acquaintance found Sunday passing very pleasantly. They wrote letters, took long walks about the lake and Phil and Paul took Chip for a ride in the car, going almost to Anderson's cabin before turning back.

This put the boys in mind of the tree that had been shivered by the mighty blow of the great Swede. After dinner all but Dave walked out to the end of the gravel road improvement to inspect the spot again and particularly to see the slivered stump on which Anderson's sledge had fallen with such mighty force.

Here, it developed, Slider had made his headquarters, so far as he may be said to have had anything of the kind in the woods. He had kept his stock of food here, hidden in a weather-beaten cracker box, that some teamster had used in feeding his horses. But there was no food left now, Chip explained. Then he added that but for falling in with his new friends he would have been obliged to abandon, for the time, at least, his search for the stolen fortune. The few berries he could find would not have been enough to sustain him. He had eaten even the stray stalks of stunted corn that grew up where horses, used in the road building, had been fed.

MacLester had remained on guard in camp while the others were out upon the old roadway. The latter returned to find him perched on the log projecting over the water, scrutinizing the Point and the old house there closely.

"Hang it!" declared David forcefully, "I wish we hadn't agreed that we wouldn't go near the clubhouse today. I've seen a man moving about over there. He came out on the porch toward the lake,

once, and after looking all around he stepped down to that rotten old wharf and threw something into the water."

"Gee whiz!" Paul Jones burst forth, "was it the same man we saw before?"

"Yes, the one with the golf cap," MacLester said. "When he went inside he went upstairs and closed that window that has been open. He acted as if he was getting ready to go away."

CHAPTER III

THE SEARCH IN THE OLD HOUSE

Paul's adventure in the old house somehow seemed to give importance to his opinions on all matters pertaining to that subject. So when he suggested that the act of throwing something into the water by the tenant of the abandoned building was for the purpose of destroying evidence, all the boys agreed that quite likely such was the truth.

What evidence this person, be he Grandall or not, wished to destroy and why, was the subject of vast discussion. Since the coming of Slider among them, particularly, the Auto Boys found the mystery of the stolen twenty thousand dollars to possess for them a strong personal interest. They talked over and over again, and with the greatest relish, everything that had come within their notice in and around the bleak old structure down there on the Point.

Finally—it was during the Sunday evening supper of cold hard-boiled eggs, bread and butter, bananas, graham crackers and coffee—that finally, and at last, Phil Way proposed that a really serious visit be made to the clubhouse the following morning. Of any person encountered—Mr. Murky excepted, of course—permission to use the vise and other equipment in the automobile shed would be asked. This would be a reasonable pretext for going to the clubhouse grounds. And being on those premises, everyone should look carefully about for some clue to the stolen money's hiding place.

It was not easy for Captain Phil to suggest this plan. He was not sure it was quite square and honorable—"on the level"—as some would say,—but he called it a stratagem in a worthy cause and so felt better over it. But really, since the cause was that of helping Chip Slider, as against such villains as Murky and Grandall, no one could blame Phil, or blame any of the lads that they welcomed his proposal heartily.

The day had been hot and close. Contrary to the usual condition, also, the air grew little if any cooler as night came on. A dive from the projecting log into the lake to cool off was in order then, as the boys prepared for bed.

"Just goes to show what a nuisance clothes are, anyway," observed Paul Jones, as he dried himself. He was rejoicing exceedingly that he had only to jump into his nightshirt to be clothed to all necessary extent, following his swim. "Heap fine idea if we had clothes for day time as simple as for night time!" he added.

"Yes sir, it's just such fellows as you, Jones, that would sooner or later drift right back to the stone age if there weren't more energetic ones to drag you along forward, making you wear clothes and things—keeping you civilized," was MacLester's answer. A good-natured grin accompanied his remarks.

"Well, I s'pose it takes clothes to give some folks an appearance of being civilized," was Paul's warm rejoinder, yet with utmost good-nature. "But for my part—well, I'll go on wearing 'em, David, for your sake."

"And it would make your appearance more civilized still if you made more civil use of your tongue," MacLester retorted.

Then Jones had recourse to his usual, "Tush, tush, Davy! You've tired yourself all out. You'll feel better tomorrow."

This sort of language, in a fatherly tone that from Paul's slender size, in contrast with Dave's large frame, was really grotesque, always provoked a mild laugh. Usually, too, it closed the wordy clashes in which the two boys frequently engaged.

MacLester made no further response. He was ready for bed now, Billy had already crept in and Phil and Chip Slider were following him.

"Last is best of all the game," chirped Jones in his own blithe, self-complacent way as he saw that he was bringing up the rear, as often he had done before. But in another moment he likewise was in bed. The boys were feeling now the late hours of the night before. Undoubtedly they all would "feel better tomorrow."

The probability that the amiable Mr. Murky would discover Chip Slider's presence in the woods had been discussed before, but the talk was renewed at breakfast Monday morning. Chip was quite sure the old fellow did not suspect that he was near. He had been very careful to keep out of Murky's sight and was more anxious than ever to do so now, being quite sure there would be serious trouble for himself and his new friends as well, were he discovered.

It was so apparent that Slider stood in great dread of the tramp that Phil had no hesitancy in suggesting that he might better remain at the camp while the others visited the old house. Chip agreed readily. He said he could be of no use elsewhere, and his presence with the Auto Boys would but inflame Murky as much against them as himself if they chanced to meet him.

With the exception of the upstairs window being closed, the clubhouse and its surroundings looked exactly the same as on their former visits to the Point, the Auto Boys found. The air of loneliness, melancholy and excessive quiet impressed them all just as it had done before. The sound of their own footsteps appeared to ring in a hollow and unnatural way. Their voices, though low and subdued, seemed loud and harsh in their ears in the foreboding calm of this haunted atmosphere.

"I don't see *why* it should always feel so here—as if a fellow was just going to be scared to death," remarked Billy in an undertone.

"If you figure it out, though, it's all in your mind," replied Phil thoughtfully. "Trouble is, to make yourself believe it."

But notwithstanding his reasoning, sound enough, undoubtedly, despite the awful tragedy the Point was so soon to witness—Captain Phil carried his philosophy rather gingerly, as it were, when he stepped up on the porch to knock. In other words, he stepped very lightly. Still his rapping was right sharp and it should have brought a response had there been anyone within hearing, willing to make answer.

Peering in at the windows, the boys could see nothing in any way different than when they had been at the house the first time.

"I tell you whoever *was* here has gone," said MacLester for the fourth or fifth time, and he tried the door. It was locked. The door at the rear,—that is, the one opening upon the high porch facing the lake, was likewise tightly secured.

"Now then," said Phil, resolutely, "we're face to face with the question that has been in my mind all night. What are we going to do next? And I'll tell you what we *are* going to do. We have no right to go into the house—no right at all, one way you look at it. But that isn't the answer. We are helping Chip Slider with his search for money that was stolen and hidden, and that ought to be found and returned to its owners. Then it's *necessary* that we go in this clubhouse and *we're going in*."

"Paul knows the way up through the cellar! Let him get in at the window he got out of and so go up the cellar stairs and open the door for us. There's a key inside, likely," proposed Billy.

"Say! how'd you like to take a run and jump off the dock?" answered young Mr. Jones with more fervor than elegance. "No, sir! We can find some other window open!"

And Paul was right. A surprise awaited the boys when they reached the west side of the house. (The path from front to rear passed on the east of the building.) The brush and a couple of tall trees grew very close to the walls at the westerly side. Phil was foremost as the friends ventured in that direction.

"Look!" he cried suddenly. "A window open, and more than that, it's smashed to smithereens!"

Quite true it was. The fragments of glass littered the parched and stunted grass. The sash of the window was raised to its fullest height. A freshly broken branch of a low bush, close by, was evidence that the mischief had been done but recently.

The boys could only guess by whom and for what purpose the window had been shattered. The thought came to them that Murky might have been doing some investigating inside. Possibly he was in the house at this very minute. The idea was not a pleasant one to contemplate.

"Gee whiz! I'd fade *away*— I'd shrink up to a pale shadow and perish—actually perish, if ever that fellow got hold of *me!*" said young Mr. Jones. His voice indicated that perhaps his exaggerated statement might not be so overdrawn as it appeared.

"Come on! Give me a lift, somebody," exclaimed Way impatiently. Then, ignoring Billy's prompt offer of a hand to boost him, up he clambered and the next moment stood within. Billy, Paul and Dave followed.

The air in the house was close and oppressive. Outside the sun shone hot. Not even a zephyr stirred the leaves. A bluejay shrieked noisily, as if in protest at the visitors' conduct. With something of that "fading away" feeling Paul Jones had mentioned, the boys proceeded, however, from room to room.

Downstairs they found everything to be quite as has been described heretofore. The bucket on the kitchen table beside which, on a former occasion, the boys had seen a tiny pool of water, was now empty and turned upside down. Other little things, such as the tin dipper being inside a cupboard and every drawer and every door closed, suggested that whoever had occupied the house had indeed gone away.

A door opened upon the stairs that led to the second floor. It was closed but not locked. Up the dusty steps the boys went. They found themselves in a hall off of which opened six small bed-rooms. In each was a bedstead of one kind or another, some of iron, some built of pine lumber. There were mattresses on all the beds but on only one was there other bedding. This was in the room the window of which the boys had more than once seen to be open.

A couple of blankets and a pillow were thrown loosely over this mattress. The latter was quite out of its proper position as if it had been placed on the bedstead hurriedly. Looking more closely the lads discovered that the other mattresses were awry. Dave suggested that someone had pulled them this way and that to see if anything was hidden in or under them. There was no telling whether he was right.

Between two of the tiny bed-rooms was a bath-room. It contained a tub and washstand only, but was quite nicely finished in painted pine as, indeed, was all the second floor. There were no towels, soap, brushes or any of the usual paraphernalia of a bath-room in sight but on a little shelf beneath the mirror were a shaving-mug and brush.

"See! this has been used just lately! The soap is still wet on the brush," Phil Way observed, picking up that article. "Mr. Grandall forgot it, I reckon."

"Grandall—your grandmother!" exclaimed Worth quickly. "Look at the initial B, big as life, on the cup!"

"Just the same, it was Grandall who was here and the only questions are, what did he come for and where has he went?" said Paul Jones more positively than grammatically.

"Anyhow the shaving cup or the initial, either one, is no sure sign of anything except that someone was here, and we knew that before," said Way reflectively. "Quite likely the reason the mug was left here was that it had been here all along and did not belong to Grandall," he reasoned.

"Now you're shouting," spoke Jones with emphasis.

At the end of the narrow hall was a small room with a door opening upon a balcony. Here the boys stepped out. The view of the lake from this point was extremely pretty. Under the glow of the sun the water shone like silver. The green shores looked cool and delightful—far cooler than they really were.

But they were lovely to the eye. Only one tall, dead pine whose naked top and branches rose gaunt and ghostly above the foliage of its neighbors offered the slightest omen of the impending danger in a scene so tranquil.

A high trellis on which the roses or some vines had at some time clambered to this balcony or porch roof where the boys now stood, offered them an opportunity to climb down to the ground. Only Billy chose this route. He quickly reached the earth and went out to the decaying remnants of the wharf while the others resumed their search through the house. But if he thought to discover any sign of whatever the strange man threw into the water the day before, he was disappointed.

Worth rejoined his friends in the clubhouse living-room. Striking many matches to find the way, they all descended the steep steps into the cellar. Very little light entered this dark place. One small window only was there beside the one whose presence Paul Jones had found so convenient.

"Here's the place to look carefully," observed Billy. "But I say, we are a pack of mutton-heads! What if someone should come into the house this minute? Tell you what! You fellows dig around here and I'll stand guard upstairs."

"I did think of such a plan but after seeing that broken window, I concluded it wasn't necessary," said Phil. "Whoever there might be to disturb us now, has been through the house ahead of us, I'm thinking. And it's my opinion that we are too late coming here, anyhow. The man who most likely found the twenty thousand dollars is the one who cleared out last night."

Still Billy Worth insisted on going upstairs to stand guard while the search of the dark cellar went forward and the bluejay outside harshly screamed its protests while the gaunt, bare top of the old dead pine frowned ominously across the lake.

CHAPTER IV

A GUEST AT NELS ANDERSON'S

In vain did the youthful searchers examine every foot of the cellar's earthen floor. The thought that there, if anywhere, the treasure might be buried, impressed them strongly and right diligently did they apply themselves to their task.

A few old boxes, a heavy pine table and a combination cupboard and ice chest were substantially all the cellar contained. All these were explored and the ground beneath them thoroughly inspected. "Nothing doing," was the way Jones summed up the result, and if he meant by this that every effort was fruitless, as would appear likely, he was quite correct.

All through the automobile shed and all about the club grounds the boys carried their exploring and their minute inspection of whatever had the appearance of being a likely hiding place for a suitcase containing twenty thousand dollars of currency. Despite the temptation to experiment with the engine that had been used for pumping, to try the tools of the workbench, or to put afloat the fishing skiff they discovered, partly covered with lumber at the far end of the shed, they molested nothing. They only looked, but this they did thoroughly.

It was noon and Chip Slider, keeping camp alone, had become anxious and worried for the safety of his new friends before the latter made their appearance at the lean-to. He looked wistfully from one to another and read in their faces the answer to the question in his mind.

All hands fell to with preparations for dinner. Chip had busied himself with the gathering of an immense quantity of dry wood, but fresh water must be brought from the well in the sandy beach, potatoes must be washed, peeled and sliced for frying; bacon must be sliced; eggs and butter brought from the "refrigerator," also,—something for everyone to do, in short, under Chef Billy's competent direction.

Whether Murky, as well as the wearer of the golfing cap, that is, the recent tenant of the clubhouse, had departed from the woods, was a question all tried in vain to answer satisfactorily as the boys sat at dinner. And if one, or both, had or had not really gone for good, was also an inquiry, the answer to which could not be discovered.

Paul Jones proposed that a visit be made to the den Murky had made for himself. Slider could show the way. Approaching carefully, it might be quite easy to discover the tramp's presence or absence without danger of being seen by him. Billy Worth interposed with the suggestion that a trip to Staretta was more important. Provisions were needed, there would surely be some mail at the office and the letters written yesterday should be posted.

"Yes, and stop at Anderson's, too!" put in MacLester. "I'm mighty suspicious of that individual, *myself*,—specially after Jonesy's experience!"

With these good reasons for going to town confronting them, together with the fact that the use of their car was always a source of keen enjoyment to the Auto Boys, it seems quite needless to state what they decided to do.

Paul inspected the gasoline supply and added the contents of a ten gallon can kept as a reserve, not forgetting to put the now empty can in the tonneau to be refilled at Staretta. Dave looked to the quantity of oil in the reservoir and decided none was needed. Phil in the meantime was examining nuts and bolts with a practiced eye—a hardly necessary proceeding for every part of the beloved machine had been put in the pink of order on Saturday afternoon.

"Worth's turn to drive," said Jones. "So go on, Bill. I'll wash dishes. Gee whiz! If there's anything I'd rather do than wash dishes—"

"Yes, the list would fill a book!" Worth broke in. "You go ahead, Paul, I'm going to stay in camp. Going to cook up a little stuff and all I ask of you fellows is to bring these things from Fraley's."

Worth passed over a list he had been writing and, with a show of an extreme reluctance he did not feel, Paul climbed up to the driver's seat. Phil Way meantime was protesting that he would remain to guard camp. Billy would not listen, but said in an undertone that Way must go along to make Chip feel comfortable and contented.

For Slider had shown for Way a fondness that was both beautiful and pathetic. It was as if he realized that he had truly found the answer to the musing questions of his lifetime at last. This was true with regard to all four of the chums but most especially was Chip already devoted to Phil.

With MacLester up beside Paul, and Way and the now clean and well-fed boy of the woods in the tonneau, the graceful automobile threaded its route among the trees. With roads averaging from fair to good, an hour would have taken the travelers to Staretta easily. With six or seven miles of woodland trail, then an equal distance of but moderately good going before getting fairly out of the forest, Paul took an hour and a half for the trip. There was no need to hurry, he said, but just the same as soon as the wheels struck the good, level earth not far from town the speedometer shot up to "30."

Link Fraley was found, busy as usual, this time packing eggs into a shipping case; but for once he stopped working the moment he caught sight of his callers. Sometimes he had allowed his father to wait on the boys as they did their buying, but today he told the senior member of the house he would attend to them himself.

"Been wantin' to see ye," said Link cordially. "Anything new back in the timber?"

The young storekeeper's voice had a peculiar inflection and his face bore an expression that answered "yes" to his own question.

"A little; that is, we have something to tell and something to ask about, as usual," Phil replied. "Here's the list of things Billy wanted. If you'll get them ready while we go over to the post-office—we want to have a good, old talk with you."

"Been annexing part of our lumber country population, I see," remarked Fraley in an undertone, glancing toward Slider who had waited at the door.

Phil nodded.

"Want to look a little out," Fraley continued, with a shake of his head and a tone of doubt; but he turned away at once to find the baking soda, item number one in Billy Worth's list, and his young friends betook themselves to the post-office.

At the rear door of Fraley & Son's establishment was a platform to facilitate the loading and unloading of freight. It was roofed over with pine boards that gave protection from sun or rain and, as whatever slight breeze there might be blowing was to be found here, there was no better place in Staretta for a chat on a hot day. Seated on kegs of nails on this platform, upon their return to the store, the Auto Boys told Mr. Fraley, Jr., the main facts of their discoveries since last seeing him.

Link listened with the most sober attention.

"I honestly don't know," said he at last, "whether to take much stock in the story of the suit-case full of swag or not. But it does look as if things in general pointed in that direction. I didn't believe, at first, that your neighbor up there by the lake was anything more than one of these vacation tourists that often go tramping 'round, even if he wasn't just a chap doing some shooting out of season. But I'm pretty well satisfied now that a lot more than ever *I* suspected has been going on. Listen here!"

With this Link took from between the leaves of a notebook a neatly folded clipping from a newspaper. Clearing his throat, while he opened the clipping and smoothed it over his knee, he proceeded to read aloud.

The newspaper item was an Associated Press dispatch dated from —, the home city of the Longknives Club. Its substance was that Lewis Grandall, teller of the Commercial Trust & Banking Company of that city, was missing from his home. His absence was supposed to be on account of an investigation the Grand Jury had been making in connection with certain city contracts in which he had been interested, not as an officer of the bank, but personally. The disappearance of Grandall, the dispatch stated, had caused a small run on the bank and general uneasiness among the depositors and

stockholders. This had later been quieted by a signed statement from the directors stating positively that the company's interests were not involved in any of the missing teller's personal business affairs.

"From which it would seem to a man up a tree that one certain Grandall was finding Opal Lake atmosphere good for his constitution," remarked Link Fraley as he finished reading. "But," he went on, "it looks to me a lot more as if he had come up here for his health, so to speak, than to hunt for a bag of the coin of the realm that somebody stole three years ago. The point is, that if the twenty thousand dollars that the road builders should have got, but didn't, was put through a nice, neat and orderly system of being stolen here and there till it all got back to Grandall again, he ain't been letting it lie around the woods and drawin' no interest nearly three years now."

"By ginger! I knew that fellow at the clubhouse was Grandall, all right," spoke up Paul Jones. "And you must have hit the nail on the head when you told us in the first place that Nels Anderson was mixed up with him in cheating that whole army of men out of their pay," the boy added briskly.

"That doesn't dovetail with what we already know about Murky getting the money first and then Slider taking it from him and its getting back to Grandall again," said Paul thoughtfully.

"Oh, no! that wouldn't make much difference," said Fraley. "Grandall was playing everybody against everybody else for the benefit of Grandall. That was his general reputation, too—downright deceitful! Never knew just where he'd hook up or how long he'd be either one thing or the other—your best friend, or your worst enemy."

Whether Grandall had been frightened away from the clubhouse by finding Murky to be in the vicinity, or for other reasons had deemed the lake an unsafe hiding place, the boys and Fraley debated for some time. As they at last prepared to go, Link called Phil to one side. He did not like the notion of Chip Slider being taken up by the Auto Boys in any very intimate way, he declared. He had known the elder Slider, he said, and there were a lot of better men in Michigan than he and a lot of better boys than his son was likely to be.

Phil told Fraley he was surely mistaken with regard to Chip, at least, but promised he would be on his guard in case he found any deceptive tendencies developing in the young gentleman in question.

Meanwhile Paul and Dave had driven to the general repair shop at which their gasoline was purchased and all were soon ready for the road. With a steady purr their quiet, powerful car left the town behind. What a perfect machine it was! And what its owners would do were anything to happen to deprive them of its ever-ready services—the very thought would have been quite unbearable. It is a wise plan, indeed, that none of us can see even a few short hours forward, or know certainly the changes a single day may bring.

An adequate excuse for stopping at the lowly home of the Andersons had not been forgotten by the chums while in town. Choosing to call there on their homeward way rather than when on the road in from the woods, they now had with them an extra half dozen of bananas.

Mrs. Anderson sat on a rickety chair at the shady side of the little house vainly trying to get a breath of fresh air while doing some mending, as the Thirty came to a stop near her. Hastily she arose and went around to a back door.

Phil was already out of the car and was walking up to the low front step—the dwelling was without a porch—when through the open doors he saw Mrs. Anderson enter at the rear. She spoke some words in her native tongue the boy did not understand; but directly Nels Anderson stepped forward from the kitchen to meet him while at the same time another man glided silently out of the door at which the woman had just come in. The man wore a golfing cap. If he was not the identical person who had lately occupied the clubhouse then Phil Way was vastly mistaken.

"Wouldn't you like some bananas?" asked Way pleasantly. "We thought likely you did not get to town often and maybe would relish a taste of these," and with a friendly smile he tendered his offering.

With only a word of thanks and that spoken rather indifferently, Phil thought, the great Swede accepted the fruit. Still holding the paper sack under his arm he said he wished the camp at the lake only good luck but he thought it dangerous for the boys to stay there. It would be more so as time

went on, unless a pouring rain came very soon to wet the ground and foliage. The probability of forest fires near by was becoming serious. Two severe blazes had already occurred. He pointed away to the west and south, calling attention to smoke that he said he could see over the distant tree tops.

Oddly enough Phil could see no smoke, at least nothing more than usual. The horizon in this region had always a hazy, smoky tinge, he had observed. Nevertheless he said he appreciated the suggestion and added that a few days more would see the breaking of camp at the lake, anyway. It was in his thoughts to ask what Anderson himself would do in the event of a forest fire. The tiny clearing, he thought, would be very little protection if the flames came near it.

But Way refrained from speaking of this. There was a matter of more importance about which he wished to inquire. "Do you know if there is anyone staying at the clubhouse at the lake, Mr. Anderson?" Thus did the boy frame his question. Receiving no answer but a shake of the head, Phil then continued. "Because," said he, "it would be right convenient if we could get permission to use the workbench in the automobile house. We'd do no harm to anything."

"I tank yo better let him bay," Nels answered, the least bit sharply. But more kindly he went on to say that he knew of no one being at the clubhouse now and that while the property was not his, the best advice he could offer was not to meddle with anything in the buildings or on the grounds.

Quite baffled by the Swede's apparent friendliness, yet certain that he was practicing deception, Phil returned to the machine. He told fully of the conversation with Anderson while the car purred forward.

Without exception the boys agreed with him that the talk of forest fires was like the denial of all knowledge of the clubhouse being occupied—simple deception, and nothing else. Clinching the soundness of this reasoning also, was the certain fact that the recent clubhouse tenant was now Anderson's guest.

"Grandall! He saw Murky or Murky saw him! He must have guessed that Murky has found out how he had been given the double cross, and was after him in dead earnest. Result: Grandall, in cahoots with Anderson for some bad business or other, packs his little satchel and goes to the Swede's to stay."

So did Dave MacLester reason the whole matter out. Chip Slider nodded his endorsement of these conclusions.

"They've got that stolen money, so they have!" he said. "We could have them arrested," he added, only the word he used was "pinched."

"And we will! *Mark that!*" said Phil Way.

Yet it often does happen that young gentlemen, and older ones, too, make assertions which, in the end, lead not where it was thought they would do at all.

CHAPTER V

"WHO SAID I WAS AFRAID?"

For Billy's information the developments of the afternoon were told and retold when all were again together in the camp. There was much discussion, too, concerning the advisability of causing the arrest of the man in the golfing cap and, possibly, Nels Anderson as well.

Meantime Billy had announced supper. It was a most tempting little meal with warm soda biscuits and honey as the chief items. The former Chef Worth had prepared during the afternoon and the latter he had caused to be brought from Fraley's in anticipation of his having the biscuits ready.

No doubt it was at the comfortable old farm home of Tyler Gleason that the four chums had developed a marked fondness for the delicacies mentioned, as readers of "The Auto Boys" will remember; but be that as it may, they enjoyed the change from the usual camp fare hugely.

As has been stated, there was no little discussion as to whether the Staretta officers should be asked to arrest and hold the stranger at Nels Anderson's until he could be positively identified as Grandall, the dishonest Longknives' treasurer. Phil Way declared firmly that this must be done.

"Personally, I don't see any sense in mixing up in an affair that doesn't really matter much to us!" exclaimed MacLester. He had been quiet for a long time. When he did speak it was with hard emphasis in his voice. "Murky and Grandall and the whole outfit that got away with the cash the road builders should have had—well! we don't usually have much to do with such people and no good will come of our beginning now," the boy added.

For a moment Chip Slider's face wore a look of anger. Perhaps he thought Dave's latter remark was aimed at him. But he said nothing.

Phil looked at MacLester in a significant manner, as if he would caution him against speaking so. Yet, "No use growling, Davy," were the words he said. Then he added that such a thing as duty must be taken into consideration; that one who has knowledge of a crime and conceals it is regarded by the law the same as if he actually shielded the wrong-doer.

"Gee whiz! I should say so," piped Paul Jones with shrill emphasis. "We'd be a pack of softies if we let Grandall and Murky, and the rest, get away, after all we know now!"

When Billy also joined heartily with Phil and Paul in urging that the Staretta officers be notified of the presence of both Grandall and Murky, MacLester no longer held back. How best to go about the matter, however, became immediately a problem.

Dave wanted to telegraph the police in Grandall's home town and learn if the man was really wanted by them. The hearsay evidence possessed by Slider, with regard to the stolen twenty thousand dollars, he declared, wasn't worth much until it could be backed up by more hard, cold facts than were thus far in hand.

"Suppose we were to go back to Staretta and have a talk with the sheriff or chief-of-police or constable—whatever they have there in the brass buttons line—tonight," proposed Billy. He was resting comfortably, his back against a tree, while Phil and Dave, with Slider's help, were washing the dishes.

Having had a quiet but busy afternoon young Mr. Worth was quite ready for an evening out.

"Sure pop!" Paul Jones exclaimed. "How do we know but that Grandall fellow is right on his way now to fly the coop?—and that's just what he is, most likely."

"Go ahead! I'll keep camp—Slider and I," put in MacLester quickly. Perhaps Dave was anxious to show Chip some friendly attention to make amends for the unpleasant words spoken a little while before. Perhaps Chip, as well, wished to show that he harbored no ill feeling. At any rate, "Yes, let him an' me do up the rest of them dishes an' the rest of you get started sooner," the lad proposed.

The thought that Slider's presence, to tell the officers in person what he knew of the stolen payroll money, would be highly desirable, did not occur even to Phil, usually quick to see such things.

The plan was put into effect at once. With headlights throwing a long, white glow before them Billy, Phil and Paul said good-bye. Worth was at the wheel, one finger on the throttle, and at truly hazardous speed he sent the steady Thirty in and out among the trees that bordered the narrow trail.

"Goodness, Bill! What's the hurry?" ejaculated Phil, alone in the tonneau and getting more of a shaking up than he relished.

"Oh, he thinks there's so many trees around it won't hurt if he does tear out a few of the big, old ones *that are all done growing anyway*," Paul added grimly.

For it most generally is true that the driver is much less nervous than his passengers. A chuckle was Worth's only answer, but he did retard the throttle some and with less gas the machine at once slowed down.

The evening was close and warm as the previous night had been. The moon had not yet risen but, knowing every part of the road, Billy let the car pick up speed again directly he reached the broader, straighter path.

"We'll get this robbery business into the hands of the bluecoats; then home for us," called Phil from his seat behind. He would not willingly have admitted it, but he believed he smelled smoke. Also he was thinking of a clipping enclosed from home that morning telling of very destructive forest fires in other sections of this northern part of Michigan.

"I guess so," Worth answered. "It's a shame to punish a car on such roads as these. The lake is all right and being by ourselves is just what we wanted, but—"

The sentence was not finished. It was a way Billy had of leaving some things unsaid. In this case the road told all the driver had left unspoken. It was certainly "no boulevard," as young Mr. Jones had expressively remarked the first time the chums traversed it.

The dim glow of a kitchen lamp was the only sign of life the boys noticed at Nels Anderson's little house as they passed. They did not pause. There would be no occasion for them to visit the place again, they had decided, but whether correctly or not will in due time be apparent. Just now the main thing was to reach Staretta before everyone, Link Fraley in particular, would most likely be found in bed.

True it was that the little town fell asleep early. "And what's to stop it?" Paul Jones had once asked. Yet the lights were still burning in Fraley's store and at the post-office, which was in the little shoe store opposite, when the Thirty rumbled down the main street.

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