

Chapman Allen

**Bart Keene's Hunting Days: or,
The Darewell Chums in a
Winter Camp**



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CHAPTER I

A MIDNIGHT EXPEDITION

“Hold on there! Go easy, now, fellows,” cautioned Bart Keene to his two chums, as they stole softly along in the darkness. “What are you making all that racket for, Ned?”

“It wasn’t me; it was Frank.”

“I couldn’t help it,” came from Frank Roscoe in a whisper. “I stumbled on a stone.”

“Well, don’t do it again,” retorted Bart. “First thing you know some one will hear us, and the jig will be up.”

“And then we can’t play the joke on Stumpy,” added Ned Wilding.

“Of course not,” went on Bart. “Easy now. Come on. Keep behind me in a line, and walk in the shadows as much as possible. We’re almost there.”

The three lads bent upon playing a peculiar trick on their chum, Fenn, or “Stumpy” Masterson, kept on toward the Darewell High School, at which they were students. The building set well back from the street, and the campus in front was now flooded with brilliant moonlight. It was close to midnight, and to approach the institution unobserved, to take from it certain objects, and to steal away without having been noticed, was the object of the three conspirators.

“Are you coming?” asked Bart, as he turned around to observe what progress his companions were making. He saw Ned and Frank standing still, crouched in the shadow of a leafless tree. “What’s the matter?” he continued, somewhat anxiously.

“Thought I heard a noise in the building,” whispered Frank, hoarsely.

“You’re dreaming,” retorted Bart. “Come on. It’s getting late, and we want to finish.”

“Yes, and it’s as cold as Greenland,” added Ned. The boys had on light overcoats, for winter was near at hand.

Once more the two advanced, and joined Bart. The three were now in the shadow of one of the wings of the school, and, as far as they knew, had not been seen.

“Which way are you going in?” asked Ned, of Bart, who was leading this midnight expedition.

“Through the side court, and in at the girls’ door. That’s most always open, as Riggs, the janitor, lives on that side of the school, and he doesn’t take the trouble to lock the door, as his house is so near.”

“Good idea,” commented Frank. “Lead on, Falstaff, an’ may he who – ”

“Cut it out,” advised Bart sharply. “This is no time to spout Shakespeare stuff.”

Once more the three advanced. Suddenly Bart stopped, and Ned, who was close behind, collided with him.

“What’s wrong now?” whispered Ned, as soon as he caught his breath.

“Hush!” cautioned Bart. “I saw a man just then! He was right by the front door of the school.” Bart had come to a halt in the shadow of a buttress, just before stepping across an open space that led to the court.

“A man,” murmured Ned. “Probably it was Riggs, the janitor.”

“No, he was too tall for Riggs,” answered Bart. “Besides, he didn’t limp, as Riggs does, from a leg that was once broken. No, this man wasn’t Riggs.”

“What was he doing?” asked Frank.

“Standing near the front door, as if he was going in. Then he seemed to change his mind. I think – There he is again!” exclaimed Bart, suddenly, and he shrank farther back into the dense shadows, his chums following his example.

At the same instant Ned and Frank caught sight of the man. The stranger approached the front door as if afraid of being seen, and, every now and then, he turned about, as the boys could notice to take an observation. As they looked on they saw him suddenly open the front door, after fumbling about the lock, and enter the school, closing the portal behind him.

“Well, what do you think of that?” gasped Bart, after a moment’s pause.

“He’s a burglar!” declared Frank.

“Let’s go tell the police,” suggested Ned.

“No, wait a minute,” advised Bart, putting restraining hands on his two chums. “Don’t tell the police.”

“Why not?” Ned wanted to know.

“Because they might ask what we were doing around the school at night, and we don’t want to tell – do we?”

“That’s so,” agreed Frank. “Maybe that chap isn’t a burglar, after all.”

“You’re right,” came from Ned. “What could a burglar steal in the school?”

“Books, and instruments from the laboratory,” was Bart’s contribution to the opinions. “But I, myself, don’t believe he is a burglar. Possibly he is some one whom Riggs hired to help out with the sweeping and dusting.”

“Let’s wait and see,” suggested Frank, and this was agreed to. Silently the chums, from their place of hiding, kept their eyes on the school. Presently there was a flicker of light in the windows of one of the upper rooms.

“There!” exclaimed Ned, “what did I tell you! He’s a new janitor, sweeping out,” for the light moved to and fro.

“What room is that?” asked Bart.

“Professor Long’s – the place where we’re bound for,” answered Frank.

“Hush! Not so loud,” pleaded Bart. “Some one may hear you, and get on to our trick. I guess you’re right. We’ll wait until he gets out of the way.”

“It may be a long time, and Fenn may come looking for us,” ventured Ned.

“Can’t help it,” decided Bart. “We can’t go in while the man is there.”

There seemed no way out of it, and the three chums crouched in the shadows, waiting. It was cold, and more than once they wished they had not started to play the joke on Fenn, but they were not going to give up now. They saw the light, moving to and fro, but it did not leave the room where they had first observed it – the classroom of Professor Long, the science teacher.

“He must be giving that a good cleaning,” remarked Bart. Hardly had he spoken than the light disappeared. A few minutes later it was visible on the floor below, and then it could be traced, as the person carrying it, descended.

“He’s coming out,” declared Ned.

“So much the better,” commented Frank.

An instant later the front door opened and the man who had gone in, hurried out. He seemed in great haste for, giving a quick look around, he darted away from the school, down the front walk, and up the street.

“Fellows, that was no janitor!” declared Bart. “I believe he was a burglar!”

“But he didn’t have any bundles,” declared Frank. “If he had stolen anything, he’d have to pack it up, as anything of value in the school is quite bulky. I don’t believe he took anything.”

“Then why did he run?” demanded Bart.

This was a poser for his chums, until Frank said:

“It may have been one of the teachers who went back after some papers he forgot.”

“Didn’t look like any of the teachers,” said Bart. “Besides the teachers wouldn’t run, as if the police were after them, and they wouldn’t act as frightened as that man did.”

“Well, what are we going to do about it?” asked Ned. “If we’re going to play that joke, let’s get busy. We won’t say anything about seeing the man unless something develops, and I don’t believe it will. Come on in. The front door seems to be open. We can go in that way, instead of around through the court; less chance of Riggs seeing us.”

“All right,” agreed Bart, “only I wish I knew who that man was.” The time was to come when the boys would have given a great deal to have been able to penetrate the identity of the mysterious stranger. But the three chums gave little heed to that now, for they were intent on playing a joke that Bart had evolved. A little later, finding the front door unlocked, they were inside the school, just as the distant town clock boomed out the hour of midnight.

CHAPTER II

THE MISSING DIAMOND BRACELET

There were three lads who had entered the Darewell High School so mysteriously at midnight, and, had any one seen them, who was acquainted with them, he would have at once asked:

“Where is the fourth member of the quartette? Where is Stumpy Masterson?” For there were four lads in the town of Darewell who were so inseparable that they had come to be known as “The Darewell Chums.” Their names you are already familiar with, and some of my readers have met them before in the previous books of this series.

In the first volume, entitled, “The Heroes of the School,” there was related how the four friends took part in a strange mystery, and how they got at the bottom of it. At one time they went up in a balloon, and were captured by some men who were their enemies, so that, for a time, it looked dubious for the lads. But our heroes were wide-awake, and resourceful, and managed to take care of themselves.

Their home, as I have said, was in the town of Darewell, which was located on the Still River, a stream that flowed into Lake Erie. Living not far from that great body of water, the four chums often made trips to it, though more frequently they went swimming in or sailing on the river, in summer, and skated on it in winter.

In the second volume of the series, called “Ned Wilding’s Disappearance,” a story was told of how Ned tried to become a millionaire on his own account. He speculated in stocks, and to do this he had to go to New York. There he became mixed up in some peculiar transactions, and he thought it was necessary for him to disappear to avoid arrest. His chums, who followed him to the city, tried for some time in vain to find him, and poor Ned suffered many hardships before the affair was finally straightened out.

“Frank Roscoe’s Secret” was the title of the third volume. There always seemed to be a mystery about Frank Roscoe, and his chums could never penetrate it. At times he was moody and distraught, and he seemed to have some secret that worried him. He made no confidant of any one and succeeded in avoiding all inquiries.

The four lads went camping, and it was hoped that Frank would forget his troubles, but, instead, he seemed to get right into the thick of them. Frank, for some years, had believed his father dead, but it transpired that he was not. Mr. Roscoe was kept in a private insane asylum, though he had full possession of his reason, only he was made ill by drugs constantly administered to him by men who had an interest in keeping him out of the way. How he was rescued, and the perils the boys ran in saving him after they had released him from the institution, you will find set down in the third book.

In the fourth book, called “Fenn Masterson’s Discovery,” there was related the details of a long trip the chums took on the Great Lakes. They were aboard a vessel commanded by Captain Wiggs, and almost from the start the boys were involved in a mystery. They were pursued by strange men, when they landed to witness a large grain elevator on fire, and eventually they succeeded in causing the breaking up of a gang of Chinese smugglers, and a band of scoundrels who were secretly taking valuable minerals from a cave, under land owned by a man whom the boys had once befriended. It was not until after some strenuous happenings that these events had come to pass, and, more than once, our friends were in danger. But Fenn Masterson succeeded in getting on the trail of the mystery, through an odd discovery he had made, and, though he was captured by the enemy, he used his eyes and ears to good advantage, so that when his friends came he could lead them to the secret cave.

Following the exciting events of their cruise on the Great Lakes, the boys had returned to Darewell, and had resumed their studies at the High School, where they were great favorites with the

other pupils. At the time this story opens the fall term was well under way, and football was the chief sport, our heroes playing on the first team of the school.

The reason for the midnight visit of Bart, Frank and Ned to the school was this: Stumpy, the missing member of the quartette, was an odd sort of lad, always making collections of one thing or another. Sometimes it was postage stamps, or postmarks, and again minerals, or jackknives, or butterflies.

The day of the midnight visit, when the Darewell Chums, together with Bart's sister Alice (who wanted to be a trained nurse) and her chum, Jennie Smith, were in a drug store getting soda and cream, Fenn had pulled from his pocket, together with his handkerchief, a small mud turtle. There had been a wild scramble on the part of the girls, and some ladies in the store, before Fenn recaptured the reptile.

"What's that for?" Bart had asked.

"Oh, nothing," Fenn had answered, as casually as possible.

"It certainly *is* something," Ned had insisted, and they had badgered Fenn until he finally admitted that he was now collecting mud turtles, and had a number of them in a pen at home.

This had at once given Bart his cue for playing a joke, and it might be mentioned that the fun-loving youth never let go by a chance to play a trick. A little later, that same afternoon, after Fenn had been sufficiently "rigged" over his new fad, Bart Keene might have been seen whispering cautiously to Ned and Frank.

His proposal was that the three of them should pay a surreptitious visit to the school that Friday night, and, from the room of Professor Long, the science teacher, take a number of turtles, snakes and small alligators which the instructor kept for the use of his class in biology. The three conspirators planned to remove the reptiles, take them to Fenn's house, slyly put them in with his collection of turtles, and then see what their chum would say when he found his number of reptiles so unexpectedly increased.

The plan found favor on the part of Ned and Frank. They had met at Bart's home after supper, and started off, leaving word with Alice, that if Fenn accidentally came, he was to be detained, entertained, or something done to him, to prevent him from becoming suspicious over the absence of the three lads.

But Fenn, or Stumpy, which he was more frequently called, had no suspicions, and did not leave his house that night. Meanwhile, as told in the first chapter, Bart and the others had gone to the school, had suffered a momentary alarm at the sight of the mysterious man, and had finally gained an entrance through the front door, unexpectedly found open.

"Well, we're in here, what's next on the program?" asked Ned, of Bart.

"Go ahead up stairs, and don't make any more noise than you have to."

Long familiarity with the interior arrangements of the High School enabled the three lads to ascend the stairs without the aid of a light. Bart, as a precaution, however, had brought along a pocket electric flash lamp, to use when they reached the case of live reptiles.

They got to the room where Professor Long gave instruction, and when Bart sent out little flashes of light, all gazed quickly around.

"No traces of any burglar here," observed Frank.

"Guess you're right," admitted Bart. "But we surely saw some one up here with a light."

"Might have been one of Riggs' friends," commented Ned. "Anyhow he isn't here now. Come on, and let's finish. It's getting late. The cabinet of turtles, alligators and snakes is over here," and he led the way across the almost dark room, for the electric lamp only gave light in a small circle.

Professor Long was more enthusiastic over science than are most teachers, and he used live animals to illustrate points in biology, evolution and kindred studies. Hence he had quite a collection of reptiles, which were kept in a case especially constructed for them, where they could be fed and watched, and live under conditions as nearly approaching those of nature as possible.

The three conspirators proposed “borrowing” a few specimens, smuggling them into Stumpy’s collection, which was kept in a shack in his back yard, and, after witnessing his surprise, they would take Professor Long’s reptiles back to the school. The interval between the closing of the school Friday night and the Monday morning opening gave them time for this.

“Get some of the toads, lizards, alligators and snakes, besides the mud turtles,” advised Bart, “and take care that the beggars don’t bite you. I don’t want to get blood poison, even if my sister is studying to be a trained nurse. Here, I’ll hold the light, and you fellows can put the creatures in the bags.”

“Yes, you will!” exclaimed Frank, somewhat indignantly. “You want us to run all the risks! No, sir, you put the lamp down and pitch in yourself. If we get bit, so do you.”

“But the lamp won’t give any light unless I press the spring,” explained Bart, for the electric switch was thus operated.

“I’ll show you how to make it,” volunteered Ned. “I can fasten the spring with a match,” which he proceeded to do, the light glowing without any one touching the spring. Bart had no further excuse, and assisted his chums in transferring to the bags he had brought a large part of Professor Long’s collection. The reptiles made little resistance, though one of the large turtles did nip Frank slightly.

“Never mind, Alice will put on some carbolic salve or peroxide,” said Bart, cheerfully. “I guess we’ve got enough now. Look out, there’s a snake going to get away!” He grabbed the lively reptile just in time, and stuffed it into his bag.

The three conspirators hurried away from the school, and made their way to the back yard of Fenn’s house. The shack was fastened with a simple catch, which Bart had no difficulty in loosening. Then, working quickly and silently, the three chums made a large addition to Fenn’s collection. The snakes, turtles, lizards and frogs from the school cabinet were put in the boxes with Fenn’s pets, and the small doors fastened. Then the hut was closed.

“Now we must be on hand here early to-morrow morning,” said Bart, as they sneaked away.

“Sure. We’ll pretend to Fenn that we are anxious to see his collection,” said Ned. “He’ll be only too glad to take us out here, and then we can see his expression, when he catches sight of the visitors. Oh, we’ll be on hand all right!” and then the trio went to their homes.

Early the next morning, Bart, Ned and Frank called on Fenn. He had not been in evidence the night before, so they felt sure their trick had not been discovered. He came to the door in response to their whistles.

“Say, you fellows are on the job early, aren’t you?” inquired Stumpy, with just a shade of suspicion in his tones.

“We want to have a little football practice,” answered Bart. “And we came to see if you’d show us your collection of turtles.”

“Hey? What’s that?” asked Fenn, quickly.

“That’s straight, Stumpy,” added Ned. “We won’t hurt ’em, will we, fellows?”

“Sure not,” agreed Frank.

His suspicions lulled to rest, Fenn led the way to the shack in the back yard.

“I haven’t fed ’em yet,” he remarked. “I was just going to when you chaps came along. I haven’t had my breakfast yet.”

“Oh, it’s awful to have to pay these social calls on young ladies!” mocked Bart, pretending to yawn. “It keeps you up so late, and morning comes too soon.”

“Aw, cut it out,” advised Fenn, with an injured air, but he blushed. “Now, no poking the turtles,” he stipulated, as he opened the shack door.

“Visitors are politely requested not to feed or annoy the animals,” quoted Bart, from some menagerie sign. “Do they eat much?” he asked of Fenn.

“Oh, not much, especially in cool weather. They’re sort of sluggish then. I haven’t got many yet, but I expect to – ”

By this time Fenn had the door open, and the sight that met his eyes almost bereft him of speech. For, to his small collection had been added nearly all the reptiles from the High School. Snakes reared up their heads and hissed at him. From the corner of one cage a large mud turtle stuck out its leathery neck. A fat toad, one of many, squatted on the box of worms Fenn kept for his “pets,” and two alligators, like twins, waved their long tails to and fro.

“For the love of Mike, what have you here?” cried Bart, pretending to be frightened.

“Good land! You never said you had so many!” added Ned.

“Is it safe to go in? Let me hide behind you, Stumpy. You’re so fat and juicy that they’d grab you first,” said Frank.

For a moment Fenn did not speak. Then he understood the joke that had been played.

“You fellows think you’re awful smart; don’t you?” he demanded. “Well, all I’ve got to say is – ”

“That you’re stung! Eh, Stumpy, my lad?” cried Bart good naturedly, clapping his chum on the back. “Take your medicine like a man. You’re stung good and proper. We thought your animals would be lonesome, so we added a few for luck. Pretty, aren’t they?” and, at the sight of Fenn’s bewildered face, Bart went off in a paroxysm of mirth, finally lying down on the ground outside the shack, and rolling over and over.

Frank and Ned joined him, and their howls brought Mrs. Masterson to the back door to see what was the matter. As soon as she saw the four chums she knew, without being told, that it was some joke.

“It wouldn’t be them, if they weren’t up to something,” she observed, as she went on getting breakfast.

Fenn was not long proof against the infectious laughter of his chums. The frown faded from his face, and a smile replaced it. Soon, he too, was laughing heartily at the joke played on him.

“All I’ve got to say,” he remarked, “is that you fellows went to a lot of work to get a laugh. You must have brought nearly all the school collection,” for he recognized the professor’s specimens.

“We did,” admitted Bart, “but it was worth it all; eh, fellows?”

The boys paused to admire Fenn’s “pets” as well as to take a more careful view of the reptiles they had “borrowed” from the school. Then Bart and his two chums put back into the bags the snakes, lizards, turtles, toads and alligators belonging to the professor, and hurried back with them to the school. They were lucky in escaping observation by the janitor, and soon the science-cabinet cages held their former tenants.

There was a football game that afternoon, in which the four chums took part, playing hard and well, their team winning the contest by a narrow margin. They took a short walk, Sunday, discussing the game, and talking rather vaguely of the possibility of going to a winter camp that year.

“I think it would be just the cheese, fellows,” observed Bart.

“It would, and the crackers, too,” conceded Ned. “But I don’t see how we can manage it.”

“Maybe we can,” declared Frank indefinitely.

When the four chums went to school the following Monday morning they were made aware that something unusual had taken place. It was not so much in what was said, as in an indefinable air of expectancy on the part of several members of the faculty. After the usual opening morning services, Principal McCloud advanced to the edge of the platform in the assembly hall, and remarked:

“Young gentlemen, I have something to say to you. After I have finished, Mr. Long, the science teacher, has a few words to add.”

At once Bart cast apprehensive looks at his chums. Had the “borrowing” of the specimens been discovered? It looked so.

“Some time between Friday night and this morning,” went on the principal, “this school was entered, and some objects were taken from the science cabinets.”

There was no doubt about it. The blow had fallen. Bart, Ned and Frank prepared to “take their medicine.”

“It has been discovered,” continued Mr. McCloud, “that several specimens of snakes, lizards, toads and alligators were surreptitiously removed from Professor Long’s cabinet. This would not have been so serious, for, whoever took them, brought them all back again – that is all save one. I regret to report that one of the finest and largest specimens of mud turtles is missing. Now Professor Long has a word to say.”

Mr. Long, who was a small man, with a bustling, nervous manner, came briskly to the edge of the platform.

“I can only confirm what Professor McCloud has said,” he began. “While I regret exceedingly that any persons, least of all pupils of this school, whom I may say we suspect, could so far forget themselves as to run the risk of damaging my collection of reptiles, that is not the worst I have to speak about. The loss of the mud turtle is serious, for it was a rare kind, but there is something else missing. It is a valuable diamond bracelet, belonging to my wife. She gave it to me, as she was going away on a little trip, to take to the jewelers to have the setting of some of the stones tightened, and I placed it in the cabinet with the reptiles for safe keeping, until school should be closed, Friday. I forgot all about it until this morning, and when I went to look for it, I discovered that my collection had been disturbed.

“It was easy to see,” went on Mr. Long, “that some one had taken the reptiles out, and placed them back, for they were not in their proper cages. It was also easy to see that my wife’s diamond bracelet was missing. It is valued at over a thousand dollars, and I presume was taken by accident, or, perhaps, for a joke. In either case I shall be glad to have it back.

“I might add that I have certain clues as to who were the midnight visitors to the school, for one of them dropped his knife, and it has his name on it.”

Bart frantically felt in his pocket, and then, conscious that many eyes were on him, sat still, but a guilty flush suffused his face.

“If the bracelet is returned to me,” went on Mr. Long, “all will be well. If not, I must take – ” he hesitated a moment – “strenuous measures,” he added. “I will await in the principal’s office, any one who may wish to see me,” he concluded significantly, after a pause.

“You are dismissed to your classes,” said Principal McCloud. “Any one who wishes to see Professor Long has permission to do so.”

The boys arose, and filed from the assembly hall; the girls were on the floor below. Bart looked at Frank and Ned. Then Fenn whispered:

“Maybe the missing turtle is in with mine.”

“Maybe,” Bart whispered back. “But what of the diamond bracelet? We never took it!”

“The man – the stranger – who was in the school just before us?” replied Ned. “Fellows, I guess we’d better make a clean breast of it to Mr. Long!”

CHAPTER III

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

There was much buzzing and whispering among the pupils as they marched to their classrooms – whispering which the teachers and principal thought best to ignore under the circumstances, for the morning announcement had been an unusual one.

Bart, Fenn, Ned and Frank were in the same grade, and their first morning period was taken up with a Latin recitation. All four were doing some hard thinking as they got out their books in Mr. Kenton's room. Bart Keene was the first of the four chums to make up his mind. He felt a certain responsibility, since he had proposed the joke.

“Mr. Kenton,” he asked, “may I be excused for a moment?”

“What for, Keene?” inquired the Latin instructor.

“I wish to – to speak to Professor Long.”

There was an audible gasp of astonishment from Bart's classmates at this. Ned and Frank started to their feet, to utter a protest. They saw Bart's motive, but they were not going to let him bear the brunt of the punishment alone. There was a curious look on the face of Fenn.

“You may go, Keene,” went on the instructor.

“May I also?” exclaimed Frank, and again there was a buzz of excited whispers. The other lads knew what Bart's request meant.

“Silence!” called Mr. Kenton, sharply. “One at a time is enough,” he added grimly. “We will proceed with the lesson. Ned Wilding, you may begin to translate.”

Discipline held sway once more, and the boys settled back into their seats. Bart, conscious that the eyes of every lad in the room were on him, walked out. He found Professor Long in the chemical laboratory, preparing for some class work.

“Ah, Keene,” remarked the science instructor, as he mixed some unpleasant-smelling liquids in a test tube. “Did you wish to see me?”

“Yes – yes, sir,” stammered Bart. “You said – that is – I – er – I was the one who took the collection of reptiles,” blurted out the uneasy lad. “But I didn't take the diamond bracelet! We didn't see anything of it! I hope you'll believe me! You don't know how unpleasant it is to be accused. At one time I – that is my chums and I – were accused of blowing up the school tower with dynamite, and – ”

“Yes, I remember that happening,” went on Mr. Long, gravely. “You were innocent on that occasion.”

“And we are innocent now!” burst out Bart. “We – that is I – took the turtles and the alligators, but we – that is I – never saw the bracelet. Are you sure it was in the cabinet, Mr. Long?”

“Very sure, Bart. But you might save yourself some embarrassment by telling me all the details. I'm glad to see you willing to bear all the blame, but, if you were alone in the escapade, how is it that I found Ned Wilding's knife, and this handkerchief with Frank Roscoe's name on it,” and the instructor, with a smile, held up the articles he mentioned.

“I – I dropped Ned's knife,” replied Bart. “I had borrowed it.”

“And Frank's handkerchief?”

“I – I didn't have that,” and Bart looked confused.

“I think I can guess how it was,” said Mr. Long at length. “You were all four after my collection, and – ”

“Not all four!” interrupted Bart. “Fenn wasn't there. You see we were playing a joke on him,” the lad went on, in a burst of confidence, realizing that it was useless to try to shoulder all the blame. “Ned, Frank and I came in here Friday night and got the things. I knew I had lost Ned's knife, but

I didn't think I'd dropped it here. But Fenn wasn't along. We took the things to his house, and put them in the pen with his reptiles. He is making a collection."

"So I understand," remarked Mr. Long. "Therefor I have a proposal to make. It is barely possible that in gathering up the toads, alligators and turtles from my cabinet that you boys picked up the bracelet with them. You may have dropped it in the place where Fenn keeps his collection. Perhaps if you go there and look you will find it, and also the missing turtle, which I value highly. But, of course, the bracelet is more valuable, and as it was a birthday present to Mrs. Long she will feel the loss very much. Will you kindly go and look? I am sure Mr. McCloud will excuse you."

"I'll be glad to make a search!" exclaimed Bart, eagerly. "Perhaps if Ned and Frank –"

"Just what I was about to propose," interrupted the instructor. "I'll request the principal to let you four boys leave your classes this morning, to make a hunt for the missing bracelet – and the turtle. Don't forget that."

"I'm – I'm very sorry – sorry we disturbed your collection, Professor Long," stammered Bart, "but I know we never touched, or saw, the diamond bracelet."

"I know you didn't mean to take the bracelet," went on Mr. Long, a bit stiffly. "Of course it was a foolish, and, at the same time, a risky trick to play, and, while I believe you had no intention of keeping the bracelet, I cannot but believe that in some way you removed it from the cabinet, either in catching up one of the reptiles hurriedly, or otherwise. I shall be glad to talk with Ned and Frank. But now I suggest that you go to Fenn's house and make a search."

"We never took or saw the bracelet, Professor!" declared Bart, with great earnestness. He felt, somehow, just as he did the time the unjust accusation of blowing up the school tower was made against him and his chums, as related in a former volume of this series.

"Well," remarked the teacher, "I can only say that you boys were the only ones in the school after the closing hours Friday. Some time between then and this morning, the reptiles were taken and returned – that is all but one large turtle – and the diamond bracelet belonging to my wife. There can be but one conclusion, and I –"

"We were not the only ones in the school between Friday night and this morning!" exclaimed Bart, and instantly his thoughts reverted to the stranger who had acted so mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" asked the instructor, quickly.

"I mean – the janitor," replied Bart, with a sudden change in his tone. He had started to mention the man, but concluded not to. He had several reasons for this, as will develop presently.

"There is where you are mistaken," declared Professor Long. "The janitor, and two assistants whom he hired, cleaned out the school late Friday afternoon. I know, for I remained here to go over some of my class records. It was late when I left, and the janitor had finished before I was ready to go. I know this because Riggs asked me to be sure and close the front door and put the spring lock on when I came out. I was the last person to leave the school Friday night, and I locked the door. Riggs had gone. The reason why he did his cleaning work Friday night, and not Saturday, as is usual, was because he wanted to go away over Sunday. He did go, I understand, so you see you boys were the only ones in the school."

"And did you lock the front door after you?" asked Bart with a sudden suspicion in his mind, as he thought of the mysterious man.

"I did, certainly. Why do you ask?"

"Oh – nothing – only I thought – I –" Again Bart was about to speak of the midnight visitor to the school, and again he refrained.

"By the way, how did you boys get in the school?" asked Professor Long, suddenly.

"I – er – we – that is –"

"Never mind," hastily interrupted the instructor, "I should not have asked that. I have no wish to pry further into this matter than is necessary. Believe me, I appreciate your motive in making a clean breast of it. I do not care to know all the details. Boys will be boys, I suppose. Only get me

back the diamond bracelet and the turtle. I will see Mr. McCloud at once, and I'm sure he will let you make a search at Fenn's house."

Bart's opportunity had passed. If he only had mentioned the fact that he and his chums found the front door open, and had seen a mysterious man enter the school, things might have turned out differently, and much trouble have been averted. But now it was too late. Mr. Long hurried to the office of the principal, and returned shortly with permission for the four chums to go and make a search.

"But why didn't you tell him about the man we saw?" asked Ned, as they were on their way to Fenn's house.

"Because," answered Bart.

"That's a regular girl's reason," objected Frank.

"Well," answered Bart desperately, somewhat weary and nervous over the ordeal through which he had gone, "the chief reason was that if I told that, I'd have to tell why we didn't notify the police. That's where we made a mistake. If that fellow was a thief, and took the bracelet, we should have called the police."

"We didn't know he was a thief – we don't know it yet," declared Frank.

"No, but when we saw a stranger sneaking into the school, we should have had gumption enough to notify the authorities," insisted Bart. "That's where we were slow. I didn't want to make it any worse. If we find the bracelet, all right; we won't have to tell how silly we were."

"And if we don't find it – which is very likely to be the case – what then?" asked Fenn.

"Well, we didn't take it, that's certain," decided Frank. "Neither by accident nor intentionally – did we take that bracelet."

"Then the man we saw, did," said Ned.

"Yes, and he's far enough off by now," observed Frank. "Fellows, I'll bet he was the thief!"

"How could he be?" asked Bart. "He didn't know the bracelet was in the cabinet. Besides, no ordinary person would think of looking among a lot of reptiles for anything valuable."

"Well, if we don't find it I think we'd better tell about the man," was Fenn's opinion.

"It will be too late then," insisted Bart.

"Too late? Why?" Frank wanted to know.

"Because if we come back without the missing turtle and bracelet, and tell about having seen a mysterious man enter the school just before we did, on Friday night, every one will say we made up the story to shield ourselves. No, the best way, if we can't find that diamond ornament, is to keep mum about the man."

"And let them accuse us?" cried Frank, indignantly.

"For a while – yes," replied Bart. "It won't be the first time, and probably not the last. But I don't mean by that for us to sit still under the accusation."

"What *do* you mean?" asked Fenn.

"I mean to find the missing bracelet, Stumpy!" was the emphatic answer. "That's what we've got to do! It's up to us! We didn't take it, but perhaps that man did. If so we've got to find him as well as the bracelet. Come on, now, not so much talking. Let's get busy, but, remember, if we don't find the bracelet now, we must keep mum about the man, if we don't want to be laughed at, as well as accused."

There was a momentary discussion, but Bart's chums agreed with him, as they usually did. They hastened on to Fenn's house, and at once began a frantic search about the yard and in the shack where the lad kept his reptiles.

But there was no sign of the bracelet. Fenn lifted out every one of his turtles, toads and kindred specimens, and the place was gone over carefully. So was the route the boys had taken to and from the school. But it was a fruitless search.

“Fellows, let’s look for the mud turtle, anyhow,” suggested Ned. “Maybe we can find that for Professor Long, if we can’t get the bracelet.”

They looked in every likely and unlikely place for the missing turtle, but it had vanished as completely as had the bracelet. They were loath to give up the hunt, but concluded that there was nothing else to do. As they were about to return to the school much cast down and dispirited, to report no progress, Fenn exclaimed:

“Fellows, I have just thought of something.”

“Out with it,” ordered Bart.

“I believe the mud turtle has the bracelet!” exclaimed the stout youth.

“The mud turtle? Are you crazy?” demanded Ned.

“No, I’m not,” answered Fenn, with a show of indignation. “Listen! The missing mud turtle was a large one, and a species that has a very long neck. Now it would be the easiest thing in the world for the turtle to get the diamond bracelet over his neck, and walk off with it. One of mine once got his neck in an iron ring, and I didn’t know it for quite a while, as the folds of skin on the reptile’s neck hid the iron. I’ll wager that’s what’s happened in this case. We’ll find that the turtle is wearing Mrs. Long’s diamond bracelet on its neck!”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Bart.

“Well, there might be something in it,” admitted Ned. “Let’s have another look for that turtle, fellows.”

“We’ll look for the turtle all right,” agreed Bart, “but as for expecting to find Mrs. Long’s diamond bracelet on its neck – why you fellows are crazy to think of such a thing. You might as well expect to find hickory nuts growing on a peach tree. You’re loony! Off your trolley! You’ve got bats in your belfry, as the poet says,” and, when Frank and Ned thought it over, they were inclined to agree with their chum.

CHAPTER IV IN THE SHOOTING GALLERY

Fenn's suggestion gave a new impetus to the hunt, which was renewed with energy. Mrs. Masterson, who heard from the boys what had taken place, joined them in searching through the long grass of the back yard for the turtle. But it was not to be found.

"It's very likely a good distance from here," said Fenn, who was well versed in the habits of the reptiles. "They go slow, but they keep it up, and this one has had two days' start. We'll have to hunt farther off than this for him."

"Then that's what we'll do!" declared Frank. "We'll organize ourselves into a hunting party for a diamond-studded turtle," and he laughed.

"It's no laughing matter, though," declared Bart. "If we go back and tell that kind of a yarn we'll look ridiculous."

"Then why tell it?" inquired Ned. "Let's keep mum about that part of it, too. We'll simply report to Professor Long that we can't find his wife's bracelet, or the turtle, either, but every spare minute we get we'll be on the lookout for the reptile."

"And the man, too," added Fenn. "We want to find out who he was."

"Of course," agreed Bart. "We should have given the alarm when we saw him going in the school, but it's too late now. Come on back, and take our medicine."

It was not a very happy quartette of lads who made their way back to the Darewell High School. They went directly to Professor Long, who turned his physics class over to another instructor, and conducted the chums to his private room.

"Well?" he asked suggestively.

"We couldn't find the bracelet or the turtle," said Bart.

"I was afraid not," was Mr. Long's quiet comment. "I have notified the detectives."

"You – you're not going to have us arrested – are you?" blurted out Frank. "My father –"

"Have no fears on that score," answered the professor. "I have not the slightest grounds for thinking you boys *stole* the bracelet," and, perhaps unconsciously, he emphasized the word.

"We never took the bracelet!" declared Ned stoutly.

"Of that I am not so sure," was the retort. "I do not accuse you – that would not be right. You have accused yourselves, after a fashion. What I think is this: I believe the bracelet was accidentally taken out of the cabinet in the confusion, and, perhaps, dropped on the way to Fenn's house. That is why I am sending for the police. Some person may have picked it up, and may be keeping it. I believe that is all now. You may return to your classes," and though he tried to speak calmly, there was a note of disappointment, not to say displeasure, in Mr. Long's voice.

Naturally the story was all over the school by the noon recess, and Bart and his chums were besieged with questions. They had held a brief consultation, and resolved to make only certain statements. These were to the effect that though they had played the trick with the reptiles, they knew nothing of the bracelet, and their search for that and the turtle, had been without avail.

Needless to say, that few, if any, of the students had the least suspicion against the chums. Nor, for that matter, did any of the faculty entertain any unjust thoughts. It was regarded more as an accident. Mr. Long being the party who suffered, could, perhaps, be excused for thinking that perhaps the boys had taken the bracelet in a joke, and were now afraid to return it. In fact he hardly knew what to believe. In due time the police came to the school, made an investigation and questioned our heroes. They went away as wise as they came. But, as several days passed, and there was no trace of the bracelet, there was an undefined air of suspicion directed against the chums. It was not in so many words, but nevertheless they felt it.

Two weeks passed, during which, in all of their spare time, Bart and his chums made a search for the turtle in such places as the reptiles were wont to be found. But, of course, they discovered none wearing a diamond bracelet on its neck, though they did find a few specimens which Fenn added to his collection. It was not the time of year when turtles abounded.

Several football games were played, and there seemed to be no ill spirit manifested against the four lads, until one Saturday about three weeks after the disappearance of the diamond ornament. Then, during a hotly-contested game with the Fernwood High School, one of the opposing players remarked to Bart, after a hard scrimmage:

“We’re not used to playing against diamond robbers, and maybe that’s why we can’t break through your line.”

Bart’s answer was a blow that knocked the sneering lad down, and resulted in Bart being ruled out of the game. From then on the Darewell eleven seemed to go to pieces, and they lost the game.

There were many sore hearts among the students that night, and accusing glances were cast at Bart. His chums felt his position deeply.

“I know it was a hasty thing to do,” said Bart, contritely, “but I couldn’t help it.”

From then on there seemed to be a spirit manifested against the four chums, and, naturally, they resented it. The others would not desert Bart, and when he refused to apologize to the lad he had struck, and was permanently ruled off the eleven, Ned, Frank and Fenn resigned. They resisted the pleading of the manager to remain, so that the school eleven would not be crippled.

“It’s the school’s place to stick by us, as much as it is ours to stick by the eleven,” declared Frank. “The fellows are beginning to think we took that bracelet. We’ll show them that we didn’t, and, in the meanwhile, it’s better that we don’t take part in any games.”

His chums agreed with him, and for a time it seemed as if they would be sent to Coventry. But a calmer spirit prevailed, and when some of the school societies took up the matter it was agreed that the four had a right to do as they pleased, and that the lad who had made the offensive remark was in the wrong; and so matters quieted down.

But the football season ended anything but brilliantly for Darewell, and the four chums felt this bitterly in their hearts, though they could do no differently than they had done.

“I should think you boys would hire a detective on your own account,” said Alice Keene to her brother, one November evening, when the four chums were at Bart’s house. “You could get one easily, and perhaps he could locate the bracelet for you.”

“We’ll do it ourselves,” remarked Bart firmly.

“If we could only find the turtle we’d have it, I’m sure,” declared Fenn, who had not lost faith in his odd theory.

“We’ve looked in every likely place where turtles are around here,” said Frank.

“Yes; and now we ought to go farther off,” came from Ned. “I say fellows, what’s the matter with going on a little hunting expedition soon? The weather is just right, we all have guns, and I think the trip would do us good.”

“Why not make it a big hunting expedition while we’re at it?” suggested Frank.

“A big one? What do you mean?” asked Bart.

“Why, I mean go camping, as we did not long ago. We don’t mind the cold, or ice and snow. We could make a winter camp, around the Christmas holidays, and have lots of sport.”

“And a Christmas tree in the woods!” cried Alice. “That would be lovely! Jennie Smith and I would come out and see you – if it wasn’t too far.”

“Yes, Jennie’d recite poetry, and you’d insist on making us drink hot ginger tea, so as not to catch cold,” observed Bart.

Alice looked a little hurt, until Ned added:

“Well, I’m sure ginger tea would be all right in a snow storm, such as we had the last time we camped in the winter.”

“Of course,” agreed Alice, gratefully.

“It would be a good thing to get away from school and the town of Darewell for a while, at least,” was Bart’s opinion. “People are beginning to think we really stole that bracelet.”

“Oh, Bart!” remonstrated Alice, reproachfully.

“Well, it’s the truth,” he went on doggedly. “I’d as soon have ’em say it as look it. I’d like to get away for that reason, and, of course, it would be sport to have a winter camp again.”

“Then let’s do it,” proposed Ned. “At the same time we can look for mud turtles.”

“You won’t see many, unless there’s a thaw,” was Fenn’s opinion. “But you can count on me going.”

“And me,” added Frank and Ned.

“Hasn’t anything been learned of the missing bracelet yet?” asked Mrs. Keene, coming into the room, in time to hear some of the conversation.

“No,” answered her son, “and it’s my opinion that it never will be found, until – ” He paused in some confusion.

“Until when?” asked his mother.

“Until we locate it,” finished Bart. “Well, fellows, let’s talk of a winter camp. Maybe we can manage it around the holidays. We don’t get much of a vacation, but I guess we could afford to take an extra week.”

“Is your gun in shape again, since you broke it?” asked Ned.

“Sure. I fixed that spring,” replied Bart. “I’ll show you. Come on up to my den. I’m not allowed to have firearms in the dining-room,” and he led the way, his chums following. From then on, until the three left, the talk was a conglomeration of powder, shot, shells, guns, game and camp-life.

The weeks passed. Little mention was made of the bracelet now, but Mr. Long showed by his manner that he had not forgotten the loss of it. He was not exactly distrustful of the boys, but his bearing was, to say the least, a bit suspicious.

One evening, following an examination in school, Bart remarked to his chums, as they gathered at his house:

“Come on down to the shooting gallery. They’ve got some new guns there, and I want to try them. It’s good practice if we’re going camping. Besides, I’m full of Latin verbs and Greek roots, and I want to clear my mind.”

“You don’t need any practice,” remarked Ned. “You can beat us all to pieces shooting.”

“I have to keep in practice, though,” asserted Bart, who, to give him credit, was quite expert with the rifle.

A little later the four were in the gallery, trying their skill with the new rifles which the proprietor had purchased.

“Here’s one that ought to suit you, Bart,” remarked the man in charge, who was well known to the boys. “It’s well balanced. Try that small target.”

“No, I want something moving, Clayton,” replied Bart. “Start off the birds and beasts.”

These were small images of birds and squirrels that moved around on a sort of endless chain arrangement. Clayton, the man in charge of the gallery, set the machinery in motion, and the painted effigies began to go around. Bart raised the rifle – a repeater – to his shoulder, took quick aim, and fired. A bird was knocked over, then a squirrel went down, and, in rapid succession he repeated this until he had fifteen hits to his credit, out of a possible sixteen.

“Fine!” cried Ned, enviously.

“I should have had ’em all,” announced Bart with a shake of his head. “Here, some of you fellows try.”

They did, but could not do nearly as good as had Bart. Then Bart contented himself with making bullseyes at a stationary target, though Frank and Ned made another effort to equal Bart’s record with the moving objects. Frank came the nearest with ten.

“Now I’ll try for sixteen out of sixteen,” announced Bart, as Clayton reloaded the weapon for him.

By this time a crowd had gathered in the gallery, which, being a new amusement resort in town, was quite an attraction. Bart paid no attention to the spectators grouped back of him, but, with the coolness a veteran shot might envy, he began.

Report after report rang out, and at each burst of flame and puff of smoke a bird or a squirrel toppled over, until fifteen straight had gone down.

“That’s the stuff!” cried one man, enthusiastically, as Bart was about to make his last shot.

“Hush!” cautioned Clayton, but Bart did not mind. He fired his last bullet, and knocked over his sixteenth target, only he did not hit it as squarely as he had the others.

“That’s very good shooting, my lad,” remarked a man who had stood near Bart’s elbow. “Very good indeed. Would you like to try your skill with me; on a little wager?”

“I never bet,” answered Bart, coolly, as he tried to get a glimpse of the man’s face. But the latter wore a slouch hat, which was pulled well down over his eyes, shading his features.

“Oh, I don’t mean a bet,” was the quick answer. “I only meant that the loser would pay the bill for cartridges,” and he laughed, not unpleasantly. As Bart had often done this with his chums, and other lads in town, he had no objection to it, and the arrangement was made.

“What shall it be, sixteen straight?” asked the stranger, as he carefully selected a gun.

“Double it if you like,” replied Bart, who was just warming up to his work.

“Ah, you’re game, I see,” was the laughing comment. “Well, I’m willing. Will you go first?”

“I’ll shoot sixteen shots, then you can do the same, then I’ll take sixteen more, and you can finish,” answered Bart, and this arrangement was made.

By this time word had gotten around that some remarkable shooting was going on in the gallery, and it was packed almost to the doors. Bart and the stranger had difficulty in getting room to aim properly.

Bart started off, and in rapid succession made sixteen straight targets of the moving objects. There was a cheer, and it was repeated when his rival duplicated the lad’s performance. Bart was not exactly annoyed, but he felt that his reputation was at stake. He was easily accounted the best shot in Darewell, but now it seemed likely that he would have to share the honors with this stranger. Bart felt himself wishing that the man would show his face, but the soft hat remained pulled down well over the fellow’s eyes.

Bart began on his second round, and all went well until the last shot. Then, in some unaccountable manner, he missed it clean. Still, his performance was a fine one.

The stranger said nothing as he took his place. Slowly and confidently he pulled the trigger, and worked the lever that ejected the discharged shell, and pumped a new bullet into place. For fourteen shots he never made a miss. Then, on the fifteenth of the second round he made a blank by a narrow margin. A start of annoyance betrayed itself. At best he could but tie Bart. Once more the gun sent out flame and smoke.

“Missed!” called out Clayton, quickly, as he looked at the target.

Bart had won. The stranger paused a moment, as if to make sure that he had lost, and then, throwing down on the counter the price for his shots and Bart’s, he turned to leave the place. Several stared at him, for it seemed as if he should have said something, or congratulated his rival, but he did not. He pushed his way through the press of men and boys, and reached the outer door.

Then, by some accident, a man brushed against him, and the stranger’s hat came off. Bart, who was looking at him, could not repress an exclamation of astonishment.

“What’s the matter?” asked Clayton.

“Nothing – nothing,” murmured Bart, quickly.

“Come on, show us some fancy shooting,” urged Sandy Merton, who at one time had been an enemy of the chums, but who was now on friendly terms with them.

“No – I can’t – now,” answered Bart, a bit shortly. “Come on, fellows,” he called to Ned, Frank and Fenn. They followed him, wondering at his haste. Bart was making his way rapidly to the door. Once outside he gazed up and down the street. It was deserted, and lay cold and silent under the moon.

“He’s gone!” exclaimed Bart, in disappointed tones.

“Who?” inquired Ned.

“That man – the man I shot against.”

“Well, what difference does that make? Did you want another contest? You beat him.”

“I know it,” spoke Bart quietly. “But do you know who he was?”

“No,” answered Frank and Fenn together.

“He was the man we saw getting into the school the night Mrs. Long’s diamond bracelet was taken!” answered Bart. “That’s the man who can prove that we are innocent – that’s the thief! Come on, let’s see if we can catch him!” and Bart started off on a run.

CHAPTER V AN INITIATION

Hardly appreciating Bart's explanation, his chums set off after him. Down the moonlit street they sped, their footsteps ringing out on the frosty night. But though they could not have been far behind the man who had engaged in the shooting contest with Bart, they caught no glimpse of him.

"I guess it's no use," remarked the leader, pulling up as he peered down a deserted alley. "He's given us the slip."

"Do you really think it was the same man?" asked Fenn.

"Sure. Didn't I have a good look at his face?"

"Yes, I know you did this time, but we didn't have at the school the night we were hiding in the shadow. Are you sure it's the same man?"

"Of course. I had a good look at him just as he was entering the front door of the school. The moon was as bright as it is to-night, and he had his hat pushed back. Oh, it's the same fellow all right. Besides, didn't he run when he found out his face had been seen? I thought there was something suspicious about him when I was shooting against him, but I couldn't tell what it was. However, he realized that we were after him."

"I don't see how that can be," spoke Frank. "He doesn't know we're the fellows who are accused of taking the bracelet, for he is a stranger in town. And, anyway, he doesn't know that we saw him entering the school – that is providing it's the same man, Bart."

"Oh, it's the same man all right, and I wouldn't be surprised but that he was suspicious of us. Else why did he hurry away so quickly? I wish we could have caught him."

"Maybe we'd better notify the police," suggested Ned.

"No," declared Bart. "We've gotten along so far without their help, and we'll work this out alone. Besides, the minute we notify the police we'll have to explain why we didn't tell about the man before, and that won't do. No, we'll keep mum. Let's look a little farther."

They continued on down the main street, with short excursions into alleys and side thoroughfares, but all to no purpose. No trace of the man was to be seen, and they returned home tired from their run, and somewhat discouraged.

The chums said nothing to their folks of their experience at the gallery, though Bart's fame as a shot spread among his school companions, and there was some speculation as to who the stranger might have been.

"Whoever he was, he's almost as good a shot as you are, Bart," remarked Sandy Merton. "You ought to arrange for a return match with him."

"Perhaps I would – if I could find him," agreed Bart.

"That's so he did go out rather suddenly," went on Sandy. "Do you know who he was?"

"No, I wish I did," murmured Bart, and then he changed the subject, fearing Sandy might ask leading questions.

The police had practically given up looking for the diamond bracelet, and Professor Long made no further references to it, though it was easy to see by his manner that he had not forgotten it. An undefinable air of suspicion hung over the four chums, though Fenn, from the fact that he had not entered the school, was, more or less, exempt. But he would not have it so.

"No," Stumpy said, "if one of us is guilty we all are – only, as a matter of fact, none of us is. We'll find that bracelet yet, and the missing turtle, too. If not this fall or winter, we will this spring. I know a new swamp where lots of turtles are, and we'll have a try at that some day," he told his chums.

Meanwhile matters at school continued to fill most of the time of the chums. The Darewell institution was a large one, and, of late, a number of secret societies had been formed among the

junior and senior students. Sandy Merton was president of one of the junior organizations, known as the "Shamma Shig," in comic reference to some of the college Greek letter fraternities.

"Why don't you fellows join our society?" Sandy asked Bart and his chums, one day.

"I'm afraid we'd be balloted against, and it would spoil our good records," answered Fenn.

"Get out!" exclaimed Sandy, good-naturedly. "Come on, let me propose your names. We want a bigger membership, and I can guarantee that you'll get through all right."

"What about the initiation?" asked Frank. "Some we've been through have been pretty stiff."

"Well, we don't claim to have the easiest rites in the school, but they're not so fierce," replied the president proudly. "I can tip the fellows off, and we can make an exception in your cases, if you like, only –"

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Bart, quickly. "We'll take all that's coming to us – that is if we join. We'll think about it."

The chums talked matters over among themselves that night, and came to the conclusion that it would be a good plan to join the "Shamma Shigs."

"All right, then, we'll do it," concluded Bart. "I'll let Sandy know, and he can get the goat ready for us to ride."

The initiation took place three days later, in the afternoon, and was held before a "crowded house" in the barn owned by Sandy's uncle.

"Here are four worthy and gentle knights, who seek admission to our ranks," announced Sandy, who was disguised with a sheet, all splashed over with red paint, to represent blood. He had a hickory nut in his mouth, to make his voice sound deep and hoarse, and was supported on either side by one lad in a purple sheet, and another one in yellow, the trio forming the "Mystic Three."

Bart, Fenn and the others were put through some strenuous exercises, including the riding of a "goat" which was a saw-horse, with knots and bumps of wood nailed here and there on it, to represent bones. They were dipped into the rain-water barrel by means of a rope and pulley, and they were cast from "the terrible height into the awful chasm," which ordeal consisted merely in being pushed down a space of about three feet, upon some hay, but being blindfolded was supposed to make up for the difference.

Then they had to climb a steep "mountain" which was an old horse tread-mill, geared up unusually high, and finally had to "drink the terrible cup," which was supposed to be some horrible mixture, but which was really only molasses, ginger and water.

"Now for the final test," proposed Sandy, to the four. "Are ye ready for the last act, or are ye timid and do ye shrink back from the terrible danger that confronts ye? If so, speak, an' ye shall be allowed to depart in peace. But, if ye would brave the awful dangers and gloom of the bottomless pit, say the word, an' then shall ye be true knights of the Shamma Shigs."

"Go ahead, we're ready," replied Bart, irreverently.

"Let her flicker," added Ned.

"Tis well – blindfold them," ordered Sandy, giving his red-spotted robe a shake.

"What, again?" asked Frank.

Sandy did not answer, but thick bandages were put over the eyes of the candidates. Then from sounds that took place in the barn they knew that a horse was being hitched up.

"We're going to have a ride," observed Fenn.

"Quiet, Stumpy," cautioned Bart, in a whisper. "Keep still, and let's see if we can catch on to what they're doing."

A little later their hands and feet were bound, and the candidates were put into a large wagon, and the drive began. It lasted for some time, and, try as they did, Bart and his chums could not imagine in which direction they were being taken. But, as they were familiar with the country for several miles in any point of the compass from Darewell, they were not worried.

"Halt!" Sandy finally ordered, and the creaking, jolting wagon came to a stop.

“Ye have one more chance, candidates,” went on the president, as he touched the foreheads of the four with something cold and clammy – a hand, from the feel of it, but it was only a rubber glove, filled with cracked ice. “One more chance ere ye dare the dangers of the bottomless pit,” went on Sandy. “Wilt withdraw?”

“Naw, let her go,” replied Fenn nonchalantly.

“Tis well. The bottomless pit awaits ye,” threatened Sandy, and then, one at a time, the four were carefully lowered over the side of the wagon, down into some depths, as they supposed, but in reality only a short distance, so strangely are distances rendered when one is blindfolded.

“Ye are now in the pit, whence there is no escape,” went on Sandy, “but, if ye are true knights, and no craven cowards ye will come to no harm. In one hour’s time we shall release ye. Bide here until we return.”

His voice sounded faint and far away, but it was only because he was speaking into a pasteboard box he had brought along for that purpose. Then the sound of the wagon departing was heard, and the four chums were left, sitting they knew not where, with their hands and feet tied, and their eyes bandaged.

CHAPTER VI

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

“Well,” remarked Fenn, after a somewhat long pause, “I don’t know how you fellows feel about it, but I think they’ve rather put it all over us; eh Bart?”

“Somewhat,” admitted the leader of the Darewell Chums. “But it isn’t so bad as I expected. I wonder where we are, anyhow?”

“Might be ten miles away,” observed Frank.

“I’ll wager we’re not more than half a mile from home,” came from Ned. “They drove roundabout to fool us.”

“That’s what I think,” remarked Bart. “Anyhow we’ve got to stay here an hour, and I don’t much fancy it, either. But since we’ve gone this far we might as well go the whole distance, I suppose. It’s a good thing it’s comparatively warm, or it wouldn’t be any fun staying here. Where are we, anyhow.”

“I’m going to find out!” declared Fenn suddenly.

“How, Stumpy?” asked Frank.

“I’ve almost got one hand loose. I’ll soon have it out, and then I’m going to take off this bandage. There’s no use of us staying here like a lot of chickens tied up, when we can just as well get away.”

“That’s the trouble – we can’t get away,” came from Frank. “I’ve been trying for the last ten minutes to loosen these cords, but I can’t slip a single knot. They knew how to tie ’em all right.”

“You just watch me,” called Fenn, who was squirming about on a bed of leaves.

“Watch you – yes, with our eyes bandaged,” said Ned, sarcastically. “That’s a hot one.”

“Patience, noble knight,” mocked the stout lad, “and I’ll soon release ye.”

“Stumpy is so fat that they didn’t have rope enough to tie him,” remarked Bart. “That’s the reason he thinks he can get loose.”

“I don’t think it, I know it!” cried Fenn in triumph a few seconds afterward. “I’ve got both hands out, and now here comes off my bandage.”

A moment later Fenn uttered a cry.

“What’s the matter?” asked Bart, making an unsuccessful attempt to get rid of the ropes binding his arms and legs.

“Why we’re in Oak Swamp, or, right on the edge of it,” replied Fenn. “They brought us farther than I thought they did. But we’ll fool ’em all right. We’ll get loose, skip out, and when they come back they won’t find us. Wait until I get these ropes off my legs, and I’ll help you fellows.”

Fenn was as good as his word. A few seconds later he was free from his bonds, and, in turn, he released Bart, Frank and Ned. They all looked around in some surprise, for they had no idea that they had been brought so far from home. The wagon had traveled faster than they had suspected.

“Oak Swamp,” mused Bart. “It’s a good thing it’s coming on winter instead of summer, or we’d be eaten up with mosquitoes. Well, let’s get out of here. I don’t like the place.”

Indeed it was gloomy and dismal enough at any time, but now, on a late fall evening, with darkness fast approaching, it was anything but an inviting place. The swamp derived its name from a number of scrub oak trees that grew in it. During the summer it was a treacherous place to visit, for there were deep muck holes scattered through it, and more than one cow, and several horses, had broken out of the pastures, and wandered into the wet place, only to sink down to their deaths. It was said that several years before a man had endeavored to cross the swamp, had been caught in a bog hole, and sucked down into its depths, his body never having been recovered.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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