

Stratemeyer Edward

**Dave Porter on Cave
Island: or, A Schoolboy's
Mysterious Mission**



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PREFACE

“Dave Porter on Cave Island” is a complete story in itself but forms the eighth volume in a line issued under the general title of “Dave Porter Series.”

The opening tale of this series, called “Dave Porter at Oak Hall,” related the adventures of a wide-awake lad at a typical boarding school of to-day. This was followed by “Dave Porter in the South Seas,” whither our hero had gone to find his father, and then by “Dave Porter’s Return to School.”

From Oak Hall, Dave journeyed to Norway, as related in “Dave Porter in the Far North.” On his return to this country he once more attended school, as told of in “Dave Porter and His Classmates.” Dave made a host of friends and likewise a few enemies, and some of the latter plotted to do him much harm.

When vacation came once more, Dave received an invitation to visit a home in the far west, and what he did on that trip

has been set forth in "Dave Porter at Star Ranch." Then, when vacation days were at an end, he came back to Oak Hall, as related in the seventh volume of this series, entitled, "Dave Porter and His Rivals."

In the present book we find Dave again at school. But the Christmas holidays are at hand and the lad returns home. Here a most mysterious and unlooked-for happening occurs, and Dave's great benefactor, Mr. Wadsworth, is on the verge of ruin because of it. Dave gets a clew to the mystery, and, with his chums, resolves to investigate. He takes a long journey and has a number of stirring adventures, the particulars of which are given in the pages that follow.

When I started this line of books I trusted that Dave might please the boys, but I did not imagine that so many thousands of boys and girls all over the land would clamor as they have for more concerning the doings of my hero. I thank all for their appreciation of my efforts to please them, and I sincerely trust that the reading of this new volume will be a benefit to them.

Edward Stratemeyer.

February 1, 1912.

CHAPTER I – THE SCHOOLBOY CHUMS

“Come on, fellows, if you are going! It’s a good six-mile skate to Squirrel Island, and we’ve got to hustle if we want to get there in time for lunch.”

“Wait till I fix my right skate, Dave,” returned Phil Lawrence. “I don’t want to lose it on the way.”

“Say, that puts me in mind of a story,” came from another of the group of schoolboys who were adjusting their skates. “Once a man asked for a pair of skates for – ”

“Stow it, Shadow!” interrupted Dave Porter. “We haven’t any time now to listen to stories. You can tell them while we are resting up at the island.”

“Shadow can tell stories while we put away the lunch,” observed Roger Morr, with a grin.

“Not much!” cried the lad mentioned. “I guess that skate will make me as hungry as anybody – and the stories will keep.”

“I thought Ben Basswood was going, too?” came from another of the schoolboys.

“Here he comes, Lazy,” answered Dave, and as he spoke he pointed to a path across the snow-covered campus, along which another boy was hurrying, skates in hand.

“Co-couldn’t get here an-any so-sooner!” panted Ben, as he

dropped on a bench to adjust his skates. “Old Haskers made me do some extra work in Latin! Wow, but don’t I love that man!”

“We all do,” answered Phil. “We are going to get up a testimonial to him. A silver-mounted – ”

“Slice of punk, with an ancient lemon on top,” finished Dave. “It’s just what he’s been waiting for.” And at this sally there was a general laugh.

“Well, I’m ready,” went on Phil, as he arose from the bench. “Say, but isn’t it just a glorious day for the outing?” he added, casting his eyes around and drawing in a deep breath of the pure, cold air.

“It couldn’t be better, Phil,” answered Dave. “And we ought to have a fine time at the island, bringing down rabbits and squirrels. Old Jerry Lusk told me that hunting was never better.”

“What’s the matter with having some of the rabbits and squirrels for lunch?” asked Sam Day.

“Perhaps we can cook them, Sam,” returned Dave. “But we had better depend on the lunch hamper for something to eat. By the way, we’ll have to take turns carrying the hamper. It is rather heavy.”

“Chip Macklin and I are going to carry it first,” said a tall, strong youth named Gus Plum. “It’s not so very heavy, although it is filled with good things.”

“Don’t lose it, on your life!” cried Phil.

“Lose it!” echoed Roger Morr. “Banish the thought! We’ll form a guard around Gus and Chip, so they can’t get away with

it on the sly.”

“Not so much as a doughnut must be eaten until we reach the island and start a campfire,” said Dave. “Those are orders from headquarters,” he added, with a grand flourish.

“Orders accepted, admiral!” cried Gus, and made a bow so profound that his skates went from under him, sending him to his knees. This caused a wild laugh, and the powerfully-built youth got up in a hurry, looking rather sheepish.

“I’m ready now,” said Ben, as he left the bench and settled his skating cap on his head. “Come on, let’s get away before old Haskers calls us back for something or other. He just loves to spoil a fellow’s outing.”

“There he is at one of the windows!” cried Roger, pointing back to the school building. “I really believe he is beckoning to us!”

“Don’t look,” cautioned Dave. “He’ll want us to go back, to put away some books, or clean our desks, or something. Doctor Clay said we could take this outing, and I’m not going to let any teacher spoil it. Forward!” and away from the shore he skated, with his chums around him. They had scarcely covered a distance of a dozen yards when a window was thrown up hastily, and Job Haskers thrust his head through the opening.

“Boys! boys!” called out the Oak Hall teacher. “Wait a minute! I want to know where you are going, and if all of you have finished studying.”

“Don’t look back, and don’t answer!” said Roger, in a hoarse

whisper.

“Give the school yell!” suggested Phil.

“Just the thing!” returned Sam Day. “Now then, all together!” And an instant later through the clear, wintry air, rang the well-known Oak Hall slogan:

“Baseball!

Football!

Oak Hall

Has the call!

Biff! Boom! Bang! Whoop!”

Three times the boys gave the cry, and by that time they had skated far up the river and out of sight of the window at which the teacher was standing. Job Haskers looked after them glumly, and then closed the window with a bang.

“They must have heard me – I don’t see how they could help it,” he muttered to himself. “Such disrespect! I’ll make them toe the mark for it when they get back! Bah! Doctor Clay is altogether too easy with the boys. If I were running this school I’d make them mind!” And the teacher shut his teeth grimly. He was a man who thought that the boys ought to spend all their time in studying. The hours devoted to outdoor exercise he considered practically wasted. He was too short-sighted to realize that, in order to have a perfectly sound mind, one must likewise have a sound body.

“He’ll have it in for us when we get back,” murmured Chip

Macklin. "My! how he does love to stop a fellow's fun!"

"Don't worry," chimed in Roger. "Sufficient unto the hour is the lecture thereof. Let us enjoy this outing while it lasts, and let come what will when we get back."

"Which puts me in mind of another story," broke in Shadow Hamilton. "A fellow used to eat too much, and he had to take his medicine regularly, to keep from getting indigestion. So once – wow!" And Shadow broke off short, for Phil had suddenly put out his foot, sending the story-teller of Oak Hall sprawling.

"So he had to take his medicine," repeated Dave, gravely.

"Did the medicine agree with him?" asked Roger, innocently.

"He took it lying down, didn't he?" questioned Gus.

"I'll 'medicine' you!" roared Shadow, as he scrambled to his feet. Then he made a wild dash after the youth who had tripped him up, but Phil had skated on ahead and he took good care that Shadow did not catch him. "I won't tell you another story for a year!" the story-teller growled, after the chase was at an end.

"Phew! Shadow says he is going to reform!" murmured Ben.

"Let it pass, Shadow!" cried Dave, not wishing the story-teller to take the matter too seriously. "You can tell all the stories you please around the campfire. But just now let us push on as fast as we can. I want a chance to do some rabbit and squirrel hunting, and you know we've got to be back on time, or we'll have trouble with Doctor Clay as well as with old Haskers."

"Yes, and I want to take some pictures before it gets too dark," said Sam, who had his camera along.

“Do you know what Horsehair told me?” came from Roger. “He said we were fixing for another snowstorm.”

“It doesn’t look so now,” returned Dave. “But Horsehair generally hits it on the weather, so maybe we’ll catch it before we get back.”

“Wonder if we’ll meet any of the Rockville cadets?” remarked Phil, as he and Dave forged to the front, they knowing the way up the river better than did some of the others.

“It is possible, Phil. All of them have guns, and I should think they would like to go hunting.”

“I guess most of their firearms are rifles, not fowling-pieces.”

“Not more than half – I learned that from Mallory, when we played hockey. He said they had some shotguns just for hunting and camping out purposes.”

“Well, those chaps have a holiday to-day, the same as we have, so some of them may be up around Squirrel Island. But I’d rather not meet them,” and Dave’s face became serious.

“Humph! If those military academy fellows try to play any tricks on us I reckon we can give ’em as good as they send,” growled Phil.

“To be sure we can, Phil. But I’d rather keep out of trouble to-day and have some good, clean sport. I haven’t been hunting this season and I’m just itching to draw a bead on a fat bunny, or squirrel, or some partridges. You know, I used to go hunting in the woods around Crumville, when I was home.”

“Why, of course! Didn’t Roger and I go along once? But we

didn't get much that trip, although we did get into a lively row with Nat Poole."

"Oh, yes, I remember now. I wish – " And then Dave Porter came to a sudden silence.

"What is it, Dave?" and Phil looked closely at his chum.

"Oh, not much," was the evasive answer.

"But I know something is worrying you," insisted the shipowner's son. "I've noticed it for several days, and Roger noticed it, too."

"Roger?"

"Yes. He came to me yesterday and said that he was sure you had something on your mind. Now, maybe it is none of our business, Dave. But if I and Roger can help you in any way, you know we'll be only too glad to do it." Phil spoke in a low but earnest voice.

"Hi, what's doing in the front rank?" cried a cheery voice at this juncture, and Roger Morr skated swiftly up beside Dave and Phil.

"I'm glad you came," said Phil, and he looked at the senator's son in a peculiar fashion. "I was just speaking to Dave about how we had noticed something was wrong, and how we were willing to help him, if he needed us."

"Sure, we'll help you every time, Dave; you know that," returned Roger, quickly.

"I don't know that I need any help," answered Dave, slowly. "The fact of the matter is, I don't know what can be done."

“Then something is wrong?” cried both of his chums.

“Yes, if you must know. I was going to keep it to myself, for I didn’t think it would do any good to tell about it. I’ll tell you, but I don’t want it to go any further, unless it becomes necessary to speak.”

“Before you tell us, let me make a guess about this,” said Phil. “Some of your old enemies are trying to make trouble for you, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“And those enemies are Link Merwell and Nick Jasniff,” cried Roger.

“Yes, again,” answered Dave.

“What are they up to now, Dave?” The eager question came from Phil.

“They are up to a number of things,” was the grave response of Dave Porter. “They are evidently going to do their best to disgrace my family and myself, and ruin us.”

CHAPTER II – A GLIMPSE AT THE PAST

“Disgrace you and ruin you!” cried Roger, in amazement.

“That is what it looks like,” answered Dave. “I can account for their actions in no other way.”

“Tell us just what is going on,” urged Phil. “You know you can trust us to keep it a secret.”

“I will tell you everything,” answered Dave. “But first let us skate up a little faster, so that the others won’t catch a word of what is said.” And with that he struck out more rapidly than ever, and his two chums did likewise.

To those who have read the former volumes of this series, Dave Porter will need no introduction. For the benefit of others let me state that my hero had had a varied career, starting when he was but a child of a few years. At that time he had been found wandering along the railroad tracks near the town of Crumville. As nobody claimed him, he was placed in a local poorhouse and later bound out to a broken-down college professor, Caspar Potts, who had taken up farming for his health.

Professor Potts was in the grasp of a miserly money-lender of Crumville named Aaron Poole, who had a son Nat, who could not get along at all with Dave. Mr. Poole was about to foreclose a mortgage on the professor’s place and sell him out

when something occurred that was the means of changing the whole course of the professor's own life and that of the youth who lived with him.

On the outskirts of Crumville lived Mr. Oliver Wadsworth, a wealthy manufacturer, with his wife and daughter Jessie. One day the gasoline tank of an automobile took fire and little Jessie was in danger of being burned to death. Dave rushed to her assistance and beat out the flames, and thus saved her. For this Mr. Wadsworth was very grateful. He made some inquiries concerning Caspar Potts and Dave, and learning that Professor Potts had been one of his former college instructors, he made the old gentleman come and live with him.

"Dave shall go to boarding school and get a good education," said Mr. Wadsworth. And how Dave went has been told in detail in the first volume of this series, entitled "Dave Porter at Oak Hall." With Dave went Ben Basswood, his one boy friend in Crumville.

At Oak Hall, a fine seat of learning, located on the Leming River, in one of our eastern states, Dave made a number of warm friends, including Phil Lawrence, the son of a rich shipowner; Roger Morr, whose father was a United States senator; Maurice Hamilton, usually called Shadow, who was noted for his sleep-walking and the stories he loved to tell; Sam Day, known throughout the school as Lazy, why nobody could tell, since Sam at times was unusually active, and a score of others, some of whom have already been introduced. He also made, in those

days, one enemy, Gus Plum. But Gus had since reformed, and was now as good a friend as any of the rest.

What troubled Dave most of all in those days was the question of his identity. How he started to find out who he was has been related in my second volume, called "Dave Porter in the South Seas." There he did not meet his father, as he had hoped, but he did meet his uncle, Dunston Porter, and learned much concerning his father, David Breslow Porter, and also his sister Laura, then traveling in Europe.

When Dave came back to Oak Hall, as related in "Dave Porter's Return to School," he met many of his friends and succeeded in making himself more popular than ever. But some lads were jealous of our hero's success, and two of them, Nick Jasniff and Link Merwell, did what they could to get Dave into trouble, being aided in part by Nat Poole, the son of the miserly money-lender, who had followed Dave to the school. The plots against Dave were exposed, and in sheer fright Nick Jasniff ran away and went to Europe.

Dave had been expecting right along to meet his father and his sister, and when they did not return to this country, and did not send word, he grew anxious, and started out to find them, as related in detail in "Dave Porter in the Far North." It was in Norway that Dave first saw his parent, a meeting as strange as it was affecting.

After his trip to the Land of the Midnight Sun, our hero returned once again to school, as related in "Dave Porter and His

Classmates.” Jasniff had not returned, but Link Merwell was still at hand, and likewise the lordly Nat Poole, and they did what they could to make our hero’s life miserable. In the end Merwell did something that was particularly despicable and this caused Dave to take the law into his own hands and he gave the bully the thrashing that he well deserved. Merwell wanted to retaliate in some manner, but in the midst of his plotting, word of his wrongdoings reached the head of the school and he was ordered to pack up and leave, which he did in great rage.

While Dave was off hunting for his father and his sister, Laura Porter had been visiting her friend, Belle Endicott, at Mr. Endicott’s ranch in the far west. Belle was anxious to meet her girl chum’s newly-found brother, and this led to a visit to the ranch, as told of in “Dave Porter at Star Ranch.” Here Dave again met Link Merwell, and proved that the latter had been aiding some horse-thieves in their wicked work. Mr. Merwell had to settle a heavy bill because of his son’s actions, and then, for a short space of time, Link disappeared.

With the coming of fall, Dave and his chums returned to Oak Hall, as related in the volume preceding this, called “Dave Porter and His Rivals.” As his chief enemies had left the school, he did not anticipate much trouble, yet trouble came in a manner somewhat out of the ordinary. Nat Poole joined a group of students who had come to Oak Hall from another school, and the crowd did what it could to get Dave and his friends off the football eleven. Then, when Dave had once more fought his way

to the front, came word that Nick Jasniff and Link Merwell were again “after his scalp,” as Roger expressed it. Jasniff and Merwell were then attending a rival institution of learning known as Rockville Military Academy.

“Be careful, or they’ll play you some dirty trick, Dave,” said Phil, warningly.

“I’ve got my eyes open,” replied Dave.

In a rather unusual manner Dave had become acquainted with a man named Hooker Montgomery, a fake doctor, who traveled around the country selling medicines that he made himself. This man asked Dave to call on him, and when the youth did so he was suddenly seized from behind, made a prisoner, and carried off in a sleigh and then in an automobile. At first he did not know what to make of it, but at last learned that he was being held, for some purpose, by Merwell, Jasniff, Montgomery, and the fourth man, a mere tool. He watched his chance, and, at length, escaped, much to his enemies’ chagrin.

“Have them all arrested,” was the advice of Dave’s chums, but this was not easy, since all of the evil-doers had disappeared. Then, one day, while on a sleigh-ride to a distant town, the boys fell in with Hooker Montgomery. The fake doctor was practically “down and out,” as he himself expressed it, and said he would do anything for Dave, provided he was not prosecuted.

“It was all a plot gotten up by those two, Jasniff and Merwell,” said Hooker Montgomery. “They promised me some money if I would help them, but I never got a cent.” Then he said that Jasniff

and Merwell were in town.

“We’ll locate them,” said Dave, but this was not accomplished until later, when the pair of rascals were encountered at a railroad office. Our hero and his chums tried to stop Jasniff and Merwell, but the rascals rushed through a crowd and got aboard a train, and that was the last seen of them for the time being. The boys might have gone after the pair, but they had an important hockey game to play, and when they administered a stinging defeat to Oak Hall’s ancient rival, Rockville Academy, Dave, for the time being, forgot that he had an enemy in the world.

“Two weeks more of the grind, boys!” cried Dave, on the following Monday. “And then home for the holidays.”

“Right you are,” answered Phil. “But, oh, those two weeks!”

On Wednesday one of Dave’s chums celebrated his birthday, and among the presents received was a very fine double-barreled shotgun. This lad immediately wanted to go hunting; and the result was that the boys applied to Doctor Clay for permission to go to Squirrel Island, up the river, on a hunting expedition, the following Saturday. There was just sufficient snow on the ground to make rabbit and squirrel tracking good, and the boys were told that they might remain away all day. Six of them had guns and two had revolvers, and they carried in addition a good-sized hamper of provisions for lunch.

“Now, boys, be careful and don’t shoot yourselves or anybody else,” said Doctor Clay, with a smile, when Dave, Roger, and Phil left the school building. “Don’t fire at anything until you are

certain of what it is. Every hunting season somebody is killed through the sheer carelessness of somebody else.”

“We’ll be careful,” answered Dave.

“Do you think you’ll get any game?” And the doctor continued to smile.

“I hope to bring you at least a brace of rabbits or squirrels, Doctor.”

“Well, I wish you luck. And don’t stay too late,” returned the head of the school, and then with a pleasant nod he dismissed them.

Dave, Roger, and Phil were the first at the place of meeting, but they were quickly joined by all the others except Ben.

“I’ll tell you what, Phil,” said the senator’s son, when he had a chance to talk to Phil alone. “Something is wrong with Dave. He isn’t himself at all. Can’t you see it?”

“Of course I can, Roger,” was the reply of the shipowner’s son. “If I get a chance to speak to him about it, I am going to do so. But I’ve got to be careful – I don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

“When you do speak, give me the sign, so I can hear what he has to say, too,” went on Roger, and to this Phil agreed. Then came the start up the river, and a little later Phil broached the subject, and Dave made the dismaying announcement that Jasniff and Merwell were doing their best to bring disgrace to himself and his family and ruin them.

CHAPTER III – WHAT DAVE HAD TO TELL

“It’s rather a long story, and I scarcely know how to begin,” said Dave, after he, Phil, and Roger had skated ahead and to the right, where the others were not likely to overhear the conversation. “But, to begin with, Jasniff and Merwell have been to Crumville since they left here in such a hurry, and – I have some reason to believe – they have been here in town, too.”

“Here!” cried the shipowner’s son.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell us of this before?” asked Roger.

“I didn’t know of it until lately, and I didn’t want to worry you over my private affairs.”

“But what have they done?” demanded Phil, impatiently.

“As I said before, Phil, I hardly know how to begin to tell you. But to plunge right in. In the first place, when they were in Crumville they followed my sister Laura and Jessie Wadsworth to a concert by a college glee club. They forced their attentions on the two girls, and gave outsiders an impression that they had come as escorts. The girls were so upset over it that Laura wrote me that Jessie was actually sick. Two days after that, when the girls were out walking one evening, Jasniff and Merwell followed them, and right on the main street, near the post-office, they

came up and commenced to talk and Merwell said to Laura, loud enough for half a dozen folks to hear: 'You've got to keep your word – you can't go back on us like that.' And Jasniff added: 'Yes, you girls were glad enough to let us give you a good time before, down at the Rainbow.' The Rainbow is a ten-cent moving-picture place, and a low one at that. Of course there wasn't a word of truth in it, but Merwell and Jasniff gave folks the impression that Laura and Jessie had been going out with them, and you know how such reports spread in a small town like Crumville."

"The hounds!" exclaimed the senator's son, wrathfully. "They should have been run out of town!"

"Why didn't the girls tell your folks?" asked Phil.

"They did, as soon as they got home, and my father, Uncle Dunston, and Mr. Wadsworth went out to look for Merwell and Jasniff, but they were not to be found. But that was only the beginning. The next day an old lady came to the house with a letter she had picked up in the post-office. It was addressed to Link Merwell and had my sister's name signed to it, and stated that she was sorry they had quarreled and wouldn't he please forgive her and take her to the dance as promised? Of course the whole thing was a forgery, and it was dropped in the post-office just to make talk. I suppose Merwell thought some chatterbox would pick it up and spread the news."

"But what is his game?" queried the shipowner's son. "I don't see how he is going to gain anything by such actions."

"He wants to ruin our reputations, just as he and Jasniff have

ruined their own. But I haven't told you all yet. A day later my father heard of another letter being found, in which Laura and Jessie promised to go off on a joy-ride in an auto with Merwell and Jasniff. Then Merwell and Jasniff appeared in Crumville with a stunning touring car, and they had two girls with them, loudly dressed and heavily veiled, and the whole four tooted horns, and sang, and behaved in anything but a becoming fashion. A good many folks thought the veiled girls must be Laura and Jessie, and you can imagine how my sister and her friend felt when they heard of it."

"Those chaps ought to be arrested," murmured Phil.

"And tarred and feathered," added the senator's son.

"After that, my father and Mr. Wadsworth got after them so sharply that they left Crumville. That was only a few days ago. The very next day came a lot of goods to the house, delivered by a large city department store. The folks hadn't ordered the goods and didn't know what to make of it. They investigated, and learned that a young woman calling herself Laura Porter had selected the things and had them sent out. Then came other goods for Mr. Wadsworth, said to have been bought by Jessie. It was an awful mix-up, and it hasn't been straightened out yet."

"It's the limit!" muttered the senator's son. "I'll wager your dad and Mr. Wadsworth would like to wring those chaps' necks!"

"Wait, you haven't heard it all yet," went on Dave, with a sickly smile. "Yesterday I received a notice from the express company here to call for a package on which eighteen dollars was due.

I was expecting some things that I am going to take home for Christmas presents, although they were to come to fifteen dollars and a half. I paid for the package, thinking I had made a mistake in footing up my purchases, and when I got it home I found out it wasn't what I had bought at all, but a lot of junk nobody can use. Then my own package came in by the next express, and, of course, I had to pay again. I sent a telegram to the city about the first package and they answered that David Porter had purchased the same and had it sent C. O. D. Then two other packages came, one calling for six dollars and the other for twenty-four dollars. But I refused to have anything to do with them, and said I could easily prove that I hadn't been to the city to order them. But it is going to cause a lot of trouble."

"I believe you," returned the senator's son.

"Anything more, Dave?" queried Phil.

"Yes. Last night, if you will remember, an old man came to see me. He said that two young men had sent him to me, saying that we wanted a man in Crumville to take care of a certain young lady who was slightly out of her mind. He said he had once worked in an asylum and knew he could give satisfaction, even if he was getting old. It was another of Merwell and Jasniff's mean tricks, and I had quite a time explaining to the old man and getting him to go away. He said he had spent two dollars and a quarter in car-fare to come to see me, and I felt so sorry for him that I gave him five dollars to help him along."

"Dave, where is this going to end?" cried Roger.

“That is just what I want to know,” returned Dave. “Perhaps by the time we get back to Oak Hall there will be more packages waiting for me – or potatoes, or a horse, or something like that.”

“You could have Merwell and Jasniff arrested for this,” was Phil’s comment.

“Yes, if I could catch them. But they know enough to keep shady. But that isn’t all. Yesterday I got a letter, or rather a note. It was postmarked from Rocky Run, about fifteen miles from here. Inside of the envelope was a card on which was written: ‘We’ll never let up until we have ruined you.’”

“Was it signed?” asked the senator’s son.

“Oh, no. But I am sure it came from Merwell and Jasniff.”

“They are certainly sore,” was Phil’s comment.

“Traveling around must cost them money. Where do they get the cash?” asked Roger.

“From Mr. Merwell most likely,” answered Dave. “He got a good price when he sold his ranch, and he seldom denies Link anything.”

“Have you any idea who the girls were who were in the auto in Crumville?”

“Not exactly, but I think they must have been some of the girls Nat Poole goes with. When Jasniff and Merwell were there with Nat, I saw the whole crowd out with some girls from the cotton mills. They were nice enough girls in their way, but they were very boisterous and not the kind Laura and Jessie care to pick for company. I suppose those girls played their part thinking it

was nothing but a good joke. One had a hat on with feathers such as Jessie wears and the other wore a coat and veil like Laura's. I guess a good many who saw them riding in the auto and cutting up like wild Indians thought they were Laura and Jessie." And Dave heaved a deep sigh.

"And what are you going to do, Dave?" asked Phil, after a short silence, during which the three chums continued to skate in advance of their friends.

"What can I do? We are trying to locate the rascals, and when we do we'll make them stop. But in the meantime – "

"They may cause you no end of trouble," finished the senator's son.

"I don't care so much for myself as I do for Laura and Jessie, and for Mr. and Mrs. Wadsworth. I hate to see them suffer because of my trouble with those rascals. I don't see why Merwell and Jasniff can't fight it out with me alone."

"You forget one thing, Dave," returned Phil. "Merwell was once sweet on your sister. I suppose it made him furious to be turned down by her."

"Well, then, why does he annoy Jessie? She never harmed him, or Jasniff either."

"Huh! As if you didn't know why!" replied Roger, with something like a chuckle. "Don't they both know that Jessie is the very apple of your eye, and that anything that brings trouble to her will cut you to the heart? Of course they know that, Dave, and you can rest assured that they will try to hurt you quite as

much through Jessie as they'll try to hurt you direct."

"Perhaps, Roger. If I was sure –"

"Low bridge!" shouted Phil at that instant, as a bend of the river was gained, and then the whole crowd of students swept under the lowhanging branches of a number of trees. Those ahead had to go slowly and pick the way with care.

"How much farther have we to go?" called out Sam Day.

"Only a couple of miles," replied Dave. He turned to Phil and Roger. "That's about all," he whispered. "Keep it to yourselves."

"We will," they replied.

"Somebody else going to carry this hamper?" cried Chip Macklin. "It's getting rather heavy."

"I'll carry one end," said Ben Basswood.

"And I'll take the other," added Phil. "Dave, you and Roger go ahead and bring down a couple of deer, and a bear, and one or two tigers, or something like that," he continued, with a grin, for he wanted to get Dave's mind off of his troubles.

"Nothing but an elephant for mine," answered Dave, with a forced laugh. "I don't want to waste my powder."

"As the society belle said when she left the mark of her cheek on the gent's shoulder," remarked Buster Beggs, the fat lad of the group.

"Say, that puts me in mind of another story," came from Shadow. "Once on a time a Dutchman heard that a certain lady was a society belle. He wanted to tell his friend about it, but he couldn't think of the right word. 'Ach, she is von great lady,' he

said. "She is a society ding-dong!"

"Wow!"

"There's a ringer for Shadow!"

"Shadow, you want to frame that joke and hang it in the woodshed."

"Put it down in moth-balls until next summer, Shadow."

"Oh, say, speaking about moth-balls puts me in mind of another story. A man –"

"Was it a young man, Shadow?" asked Dave, calmly.

"Maybe it was a very old man," suggested Phil.

"Was he clean-shaven or did he have a beard?" queried Roger.

"Never mind if he was young or old, or clean-shaven or not," cried the story-teller. "This man –"

"Was he an American or a foreigner?" demanded Gus Plum.

"That is something we have simply got to know."

"And if he was knock-kneed," put in Sam. "I hate love stories about knock-kneed men. They aren't a bit romantic."

"Who said anything about a love story about a knock-kneed man?" burst out Shadow. "I said –"

But what Shadow was going to say was drowned out in the sudden report of a shotgun, – a report so close at hand that it made nearly every student present stop in alarm.

CHAPTER IV – THE SCHOOLBOY HUNTERS

“Dave, what did you shoot at?”

It was Phil who asked the question, for he had been the only one to see Dave raise his shotgun, take quick aim, and fire into the brushwood lining the river at that point.

“I shot at a rabbit, and I think I hit him,” was the reply. “I’ll soon know.” And Dave skated toward the shore, less than twenty yards away. He poked into the bushes with the barrel of his gun and soon brought forth a fat, white rabbit which he held up with satisfaction.

“Hurrah!” cried the senator’s son. “First prize goes to Dave! He’s a fine one, too,” he added, as the students gathered around to inspect the game.

“Thought you said you wouldn’t shoot anything less than an elephant,” grunted Buster.

“The elephant will come later,” answered Dave, with a smile.

“I’d like to get a couple like that,” said Gus Plum, wistfully.

“Maybe that will be the total for the day,” was Sam’s comment. He had gone wild-turkey shooting once and gotten a shot at the start and then nothing more, so he was inclined to be skeptical.

“Oh, we’ll get more, if we are careful and keep our eyes open,”

declared Dave. "I saw the track of the rabbit in the snow yonder and that made me look for him."

Dave's success put all the students on the alert, and they spread out on either side of the stream, eager to sight more game.

Less than two minutes later came the crack of Gus Plum's shotgun, followed almost immediately by a shot from Buster Beggs' pistol. Then a gray rabbit went scampering across the river in front of the boys and several fired simultaneously.

"I got him! I got him!" shouted Gus, and ran to the shore, to bring out a medium-sized rabbit.

"And we've got another!" cried Sam. "But I don't know whether Shadow, Ben, or I killed him."

"I guess we all had a hand in it," said Ben. "We all fired at about the same time."

"What did you get, Buster?" questioned Chip Macklin.

"I - I guess I didn't get anything," faltered the fat youth. "I thought I saw a squirrel, but I see now that it is only a tree root sticking out of the snow."

"Great Scott, Buster! Don't shoot down the trees!" cried Phil, in mock dismay. "They might fall on us, you know!" And a laugh arose at the would-be hunter's expense.

On the students skated, and before long reached a point where the river was parted by a long, narrow strip of land known as Squirrel Island, because squirrels were supposed to abound there.

As they reached the lower end of the island Dave held up his hand as a warning.

“I think I saw some partridges ahead,” he said, in a low voice. “If they are there we don’t want to disturb them. Put down the hamper and take off your skates, and we’ll try to bag them.”

His chums were not slow in complying with his commands, and soon the crowd was making its way toward the center of the island, where grew a dense clump of cedars. They had to work their way through the brushwood.

“Ouch!” exclaimed Shadow, presently.

“What’s the trouble?” whispered Roger.

“Scratched my hand on a bramble bush,” was the reply. “But it isn’t much.”

“Be careful of your guns,” cautioned Dave. “Don’t let a trigger get caught in a bush or you may have an accident.”

“There they are!” cried Ben, in a strained voice. “My, what a lot of ’em!”

He pointed ahead, and to one side of the tall cedars they saw a covey of partridges, at least twenty in number, resting on the ground.

“All together!” said Dave, in a low, steady voice. “Fire as you stand, those on the right to the right, those on the left to the left, and those in the center for the middle of the flock. I’ll count. Ready? One, two, three!”

Crack! bang! crack! bang! went the shotguns and pistols. Then came a rushing, rattling, roaring sound, and up into the air went what was left of the covey, one partridge, being badly wounded, flying in a circle and then directly for Roger’s head. He struck it

with his gun barrel and then caught it in his hands, quickly putting it out of its misery. The other boys continued to bang away, but soon the escaping game was beyond their reach.

“A pretty good haul!” cried Dave, as he and his chums moved forward. “Three here and the one Roger has makes four. Boys, we won’t go back empty-handed.”

“Who hit and who missed?” questioned Sam.

“That would be a hard question to answer,” returned Phil. “Better let the credit go to the whole crowd,” and so it was decided.

“Well, there isn’t much use in looking for any more game around here,” said Dave. “Those volleys of shots will make them lay low for some time.”

“Let’s go into camp and get lunch,” suggested Buster. “I’m as hungry as a bear.”

“Were you ever anything else?” questioned Ben, with a grin, for the stout youth’s constant desire to eat was well known.

They tramped to the south shore of the island, and there, in a nook that was sheltered from the north wind, they went into temporary camp, cutting down some brushwood and heavier fuel and building a fire. Over the flames they arranged a stick, from which they hung a kettle filled with water obtained by chopping a hole through the ice of the river.

“Now, when the water boils, we can have some coffee,” said Roger, who was getting out the tin cups. “And we can roast those potatoes while the water boils,” he added.

“What about some rabbit pot-pie, or roast partridge?” asked Buster.

“Oh, let us take all the game back to the school!” exclaimed Ben. “Just to show the fellows what we got, you know.”

“That’s the talk!” cried Gus. “If we don’t, maybe they won’t believe we were so lucky.”

“Yes, let us take it all back,” chimed in Chip Macklin.

All but Buster were willing to keep the game. He heaved a deep sigh.

“All right, if we must,” he said mournfully. “But it makes my mouth water, just the same!” And he eyed the plump rabbits and fat partridges wistfully.

Inside of half an hour the lunch was under way. Around the roaring campfire sat the students, some on convenient rocks and others on a fallen tree that chanced to be handy. They had brought with them several kinds of sandwiches, besides hard-boiled eggs, crackers, cheese, some cake, and the coffee, with a small bottle of cream and some sugar. They also had some potatoes for roasting, and though these got partly burned, all declared them “fine” or “elegant,” – which shows what outdoor air will do for one’s appetite.

They took their time, and during the meal Shadow was allowed to tell as many stories as he pleased, much to his satisfaction. It was Dave who was the first to get up.

“Might as well be moving,” he said, after consulting his watch. “We’ll have to start on the return inside of two hours, and that

won't give us much time for hunting.”

“Wait, I want just one more picture!” cried Sam, who had been busy before with his camera. “Now all look as happy as if to-morrow were Christmas!” And as the others grinned over the joke, click! went the shutter of the box, and the picture was snapped.

“Now, Sam, let me take you, with a gun in one hand and the partridges in the other!” cried Dave. “If it turns out well, we can have it enlarged for our dormitory.” And a minute later another picture was added to the roll of films.

“Why not leave the things here and come back for them?” suggested Roger. “No use in toting the hamper and game everywhere.”

“We can hang the game in a tree,” added Ben.

All agreed to this, and so the hamper and the game were hung up on the limbs of a near-by walnut tree along with their skates and some other things. Then the fire was kicked out, so that it might not start a conflagration in the woods, and the students prepared to continue their hunt.

“I guess we may as well tramp to the upper end of the island first,” said Dave, in answer to a question from his companions. “Then, if we have time, we can beat up one shore and then the other. By that time it will be getting dark and time to turn back to the Hall.”

“Say, wait a minute!” cried Ben, suddenly.

“What's wrong, Ben?” asked several.

“Why, I – er – I thought I saw somebody over in the woods yonder, looking at us,” and the Crumville lad pointed to the trees in question. All gazed steadily in the direction but saw nothing unusual.

“Maybe it was a rabbit, or a bear, or something like that,” suggested Buster. “If it’s a bear we had better look out,” he added, nervously.

“We’ll soon find out,” said Dave. “Come on,” and he walked forward toward the woods. But he found nothing and soon rejoined his companions.

“I must have been mistaken,” said Ben. “Come on, if we are to do any hunting.” And off he stalked, and one by one the others followed.

Evidently the shots at the partridges had scared much of the game away, for at the upper end of the island they started up nothing but two squirrels and a few wild pigeons. Then they came down the north shore and there bagged two rabbits. They also saw a wild turkey, but it got away before anybody could take aim at it.

“See, it has started to snow!” cried the senator’s son, presently, and he was right. At first the flakes were few, but inside of five minutes it was snowing steadily.

“We may as well start for the Hall,” said Dave. “This storm looks as if it might last for some time.”

They left the shore and soon reached the edge of the island. By this time the snowflakes were coming down so thickly that the boys could see but little around them. The sky was now growing

quite dark.

“I don’t like this,” was Phil’s comment. “We’ll have no fun of it getting back to school, especially if the snow gets so deep that we can’t skate on the ice.”

“Say, this puts me in mind of a story,” commenced Shadow. “Once two boys were caught in a storm and – ”

“We haven’t any time for yarns now, Shadow!” cried Dave. “It’s back to the camping place as fast as we can get there, and then off for school, unless we want to be snowed in along the route!”

All started across the island, which, at that point, was not over seventy-five yards wide. They came out at a spot just above where they had stopped for lunch. Soon all of them stood close to where lay the remains of the campfire, now covered with the fast-falling snow.

“Hello! What does this mean?”

“Where is the hamper?”

“Where is the game?”

“What has become of the skates?”

“Where is that overcoat I left on the tree?”

These and several other questions were asked in rapid succession. Then the Oak Hall students looked at each other in blank dismay.

And not without good reason. For everything left at the camping spot when they had continued the hunt – game, hamper, skates, an overcoat, a sweater, and some other things of lesser

importance – all had disappeared!

CHAPTER V – A TRAMP THROUGH THE SNOW

“What do you make of this, Dave?”

“I don’t know what to make of it, Roger – excepting that somebody has taken our things.”

“Do you think it’s a joke, or just plain stealing?” demanded Ben.

“That remains to be found out,” replied Ben. “One thing is certain, the things didn’t walk off by themselves.”

“Footprints of two persons!” exclaimed Gus, who had been scanning the snow-covered ground in the vicinity of the trees and bushes.

“Where do they lead to?” asked Dave, eagerly.

“Here they are – you can follow them as easily as I can,” was the reply, and the heavy-set youth pointed out the tracks in the snow. They led all around the trees and bushes and then in the direction of the river. Here there were a jumble of tracks and further on the marks of skate runners.

“Stopped to put on their skates,” remarked the senator’s son.

“And they have skated off with all our things!” grumbled Buster Beggs. “What are we going to do?”

“Say, that puts me in mind of a story,” came quickly from Shadow. “Once two boys were out skating and – ”

“For the sake of the mummies of Egypt, let up on the storytelling, Shadow!” burst out Phil. “Don’t you realize what this loss means to us? It’s bad enough to lose the hamper and clothing, but what are we to do in this snowstorm, with night coming on, and so far from Oak Hall without skates?”

“Humph! I guess we’ll have to walk,” grumbled the story-teller of the school. “But that will take time, and if this storm keeps up – ”

“We’ll be snowed under!” finished Chip Macklin.

“Well, no use in staying here,” came from two of the students.

“That is just what I say,” said Dave. “Those skate marks lead down the river and that is the way we want to go. By following them we’ll be getting nearer to the Hall and at the same time closer to the fellows who took our things.”

“We’ll never catch those fellows,” grumbled Ben. “They can skate five times as fast as we can walk.”

“Never mind, we’ll go after ’em anyway,” replied Gus. “And if we catch ’em – ” He did not finish in words but brought his right fist down hard into his left palm, which left no doubt as to how he intended to treat the thieves.

“Maybe it’s a trick, of some of the Rockville cadets,” suggested Buster, when the crowd were on their way down the river.

“Say, don’t you remember my saying I thought I saw somebody near the camp, just before we went away?” burst out Ben. “You all thought I was mistaken.”

“Well, I reckon you were not mistaken,” answered Dave. “It’s a great pity we didn’t investigate more before leaving.”

“No use in crying over spilt milk,” said Sam.

“Which puts me in mind of a sto – ” commenced Shadow, and then suddenly stopped talking and commenced to whistle to himself.

“Say, boys, if anybody should ask you, you can tell him it is snowing some,” puffed Buster, who was struggling to keep up with those in front. “If it wasn’t that we were on the river, it would be easy to lose our way.”

“That’s true,” replied Dave. “The snow seems to be coming down heavier every minute.”

“Yes, and the wind is coming up,” added Roger. “We’ll have a hard time of it reaching the Hall. We’ll never do it by supper-time.”

“Then where are we going to get something to eat?” demanded Buster. “I’m not going without my supper just because I can’t get back.”

“Perhaps we can get something at some farmhouse,” suggested Phil.

“I’ve got an idea!” cried Dave. “Why can’t we get some farmer to hook up a carriage or a sleigh and take us to the Hall that way?”

“Hurrah, just the cheese!” cried Ben, who did not relish walking such a distance. “The thing is, though, to find the farmer,” he continued soberly.

“Keep your eyes open for lights,” suggested Dave, and this

was done.

A quarter of a mile more was covered, the students hugging the north shore of the stream, as that afforded the most shelter from the rising wind. Then Roger gave a cry.

“I think I saw a light through the snow! Just look that way, fellows, and see if I am right.”

All gazed in the direction indicated, and presently three of the boys made out a glimmer, as if it came from a lantern being swung to and fro. Then the light disappeared.

“Perhaps it’s some farmer going out to care for his cattle,” said Dave. “Let us walk over and see,” and this was done.

Dave was correct in his surmise, and soon the boys approached a big cow-shed, through a window of which they saw the faint rays of a lantern. Just as they did this they heard a voice cry out in wonder.

“What be you fellers a-doin’ in my cow-shed?”

“Oh, we just came in to rest out of the storm,” was the answer, in a voice that sounded strangely familiar to Dave. “We are not going to hurt your shed any, or the cattle either.”

“It’s Mallory, of Rockville!” whispered Dave to his fellow students, naming the cadet who was the star hockey player of the military academy team.

“And Bazen and Holt are with him,” added Phil, gazing through a partly-open doorway, and naming two other Rockville cadets.

“Hello, who’s out there?” cried the owner of the cow-shed,

and, lantern in hand, he turned to survey the newcomers.

“Why, it’s Mr. Opper!” cried Sam. “Don’t you remember me? I called last summer, to see some of your young lady boarders.”

“Oh, yes, I remember you,” replied Homer Opper. “You hired my dappled mare for a ride.”

“That’s it, Mr. Opper. Say, that mare could go.”

“Go? Ain’t no hossflesh in these parts kin beat her,” cried the farmer proudly. “She won the prize at the last county fair, she did! But wot brung ye here, sech a night as this?” added Homer Opper curiously.

“Hello, Porter, old man!” cried Mallory, rising from a box on which he had been seated and shaking hands. “Caught in the storm, too, eh?”

“Yes,” answered Dave. He gazed curiously at the Rockville cadet and his companions. “Been up the river?”

“Not any further than this.”

“Hunting?”

“No, skating. We would be going back, only Holt broke one of his skates and that delayed us. Been out hunting, eh? Any luck?”

“Some – good and bad. We shot some rabbits, squirrels, and partridges, and we likewise had our hamper, our skates, an overcoat, and some other things stolen.”

“Stolen!” cried Homer Opper. “By gum, that’s tough luck! Who tuk the things?”

“That is what we want to find out,” and as Dave spoke he looked sharply at Mallory and the other Rockville cadets.

“Not guilty,” came promptly from Bazen. “Honest Injun, Porter, if you think we touched your things, you are on the wrong track; isn’t that so, fellows?”

“It is,” came promptly from Mallory and Holt. Then suddenly the star hockey player of Rockville Academy let out a long, low whistle of surprise.

“You know something?” demanded Dave.

“Maybe I do,” was Mallory’s slow answer. “Yes, I am sure I do,” he added. “You can put the puzzle together yourself if you wish, Porter – because, you see, I hate to accuse anybody.”

“What do you know?”

“I know this: Less than an hour ago we met two fellows on the river, one with a hamper and the other with a bundle that looked as if it was done up in an overcoat turned inside out. We came on the fellows rather suddenly, at a turn where there were some bushes.”

“Our stuff, as sure as you’re a foot high!” cried Phil.

“Who were the fellows, do you know?” demanded the senator’s son.

At this question Mallory looked at Holt and Bazen.

“I wasn’t exactly sure, but – ” He hesitated to go on.

“I was sure enough,” chimed in Holt. “They were those chaps who came to our school from Oak Hall and then ran away – Jasniff and Merwell. How about it, Tom?”

“I think they were Jasniff and Merwell,” answered Tom Bazen. “To be sure, as soon as they saw us, they skated away as

fast as they could, and kept their faces hidden. But if they weren't Jasniff and Merwell they were pretty good doubles."

"Jasniff and Merwell," murmured Dave, and his heart sank a little. Here was more underhanded work of his old enemies.

The farmer and the Rockville cadets were anxious to hear the particulars of the happening, and the Oak Hall lads told of what had occurred.

"I know those chaps," said Homer Opper. "They stayed here one night last summer. But they cut up so the boarders didn't like it, so my wife told 'em she didn't have no room for 'em, an' they left. They ought to be locked up."

"They will be locked up, if we can lay hands on them," replied Phil.

"They must have followed us to Squirrel Island, and spied on us," said Shadow. "Ben, you were right about seeing somebody. It must have been either Merwell or Jasniff."

"Have you any idea where they went?" asked the shipowner's son.

"No, they skated away behind an island and that's the last we saw of them," answered Mallory.

"Yes, and I reckon it's the last we'll hear of our things," returned Buster, mournfully. "But come on, let us see about getting back," he continued. "It's 'most time for supper now."

"Mr. Opper, can you take us back to Oak Hall?" asked Dave. "We'll pay you for your trouble."

The farmer looked at the students and rubbed his chin

reflectively. Then he gazed out at the storm and the snow-covered ground.

“Might hook up my big sleigh and do it,” he said. “But it would be quite a job.”

“What would it be worth?” asked Ben.

“Oh, I dunno – three or four dollars, at least. It’s a tough night to be out in – an’ I’d have to drive back, or put up at the town all night.”

“Supposing we gave you fifty cents apiece,” suggested Roger.

“And we’ll go along – as far as Rockville, at the same price – if you’ll have us,” added Mallory, quickly.

“Why, yes, Mallory, and welcome,” answered Dave cordially. “That is, if the turnout will hold us all.”

“Sure it will,” answered Homer Opper. “An’ if ye all go an’ pay fifty cents each,” – he counted them mentally as he spoke – “I’ll hook up my four hosses an’ git ye there in jig time.”

“Then it’s a go,” answered Dave, after his chums and the Rockville cadets had nodded their approval.

“And do hurry,” called out Buster, as the farmer moved away to prepare for the journey. “We don’t want to miss our suppers.”

“Ye ain’t goin’ to miss nuthin’,” called the farmer.

Inside of fifteen minutes he came around to the cow-shed with a big, low sleigh, to which were attached four fine-looking horses. The sleigh contained two lanterns and a quantity of wraps and robes.

“Don’t want ye to catch cold, when we’re a-drivin’ fast,”

chuckled Homer Opper. “Now pile right in, an’ we’ll be movin’.”

The boys needed no second invitation, and soon all were aboard – Dave and Roger on the front seat with the driver and the others behind, including the Rockville cadets. Then came a crack of the whip, and away through the swirling snow moved the big sleigh, bound for the two schools.

CHAPTER VI – GOOD- BY TO OAK HALL

“Where in the world have you boys been? Why didn’t you come back in time for supper? Don’t you know it is against the rules to stay away like this?”

Thus it was that Job Haskers, the second assistant teacher of Oak Hall, greeted Dave and his chums as they came in, after leaving the big sleigh and settling with Homer Oppen.

“We are sorry that we couldn’t get here before, Mr. Haskers,” answered Dave. “But something unusual happened and we were delayed.”

“I’ll not accept any excuses!” snapped the teacher, who had not forgotten how the boys had hurried away without listening to his call from the window. “I think I’ll send you to bed supperless. It is no more than you deserve.”

“Supperless!” gasped Buster, in dismay. “Oh, Mr. Haskers, we don’t deserve such treatment, really we don’t!”

“We have been robbed – that is what delayed us,” declared Phil. “I guess we had better report to Doctor Clay, or Mr. Dale,” he went on, significantly.

“You can report to me,” answered Job Haskers, with increased severity. “There is no need to bother the doctor, and Mr. Dale has gone away for over Sunday.”

“Well, boys, back again!” cried a cheery voice from an upper landing, and then Doctor Clay came down, wearing his gown and slippers. “A wild storm to be out in. I am glad you got back safely.”

“They are late – and you said you gave them no permission to be out after hours,” said Job Haskers, tartly.

“Hum! Did I?” mused the kindly head of the school. “Well, when it storms like this it, of course, makes some difference.”

“We would have been back in time only we were robbed of our skates and some other things,” answered Dave. “We had to walk a long distance through the storm, and we’d not be here yet if we hadn’t managed to hire a farmer to bring us in his sleigh.”

“Robbed!” echoed Doctor Clay, catching at the word. “How was that?” And he listened with keen interest to what the boys had to tell. Even Job Haskers became curious, and said no more about penalizing them for being late.

“And you are sure the fellows were Merwell and Jasniff?” asked the assistant teacher.

“All I know on that point is what Mallory and his chums had to say,” answered Dave.

“I think it would be like that pair to follow you up,” said Doctor Clay, with a grave shake of his head. “They are two very bad boys, – worse, Porter, than you can imagine,” and he looked knowingly at Job Haskers as he spoke. “Now go in to supper, and after that, you, Porter, Morr, and Lawrence, may come to my study and talk the matter over further.”

Wondering what else had happened to upset the head of the school, Dave followed his chums to the dining-hall. Here a late supper awaited the crowd, to which, it is perhaps needless to state, all did full justice.

“Do you think we can track Jasniff and Merwell?” asked the senator’s son, during the course of the repast.

“I don’t,” answered Dave frankly. “For they will do their best to keep out of our way.”

A little later found Dave, Phil, and Roger in the doctor’s private study, a sort of library connected with his regular office. The head of Oak Hall was reading a German historical work, but laid the volume down as they filed in.

“Sit down, boys,” said Doctor Clay, pleasantly, and when they were seated, he added: “Now kindly tell me all you know about Merwell and Jasniff.”

“Do you want to know everything, Doctor?” asked Dave, in some surprise.

“Yes, – and later on, I’ll tell you why.”

“All right,” answered the youth from Crumville, and he told of the many things that had happened, both at the school and at home – not forgetting about the auto ride in which Laura and Jessie were supposed to have participated.

“It all fits in!” cried Doctor Clay, drawing a deep sigh. He tapped the table with the tips of his fingers. “I wonder where it will end?” he mused, half to himself.

“You said that Merwell and Jasniff were worse than we

imagined,” suggested Dave, to draw the doctor out.

“So I did, Porter. I will tell you boys something, but please do not let it go any further. Since Jasniff and Merwell became pupils at Rockville Military Academy and since they ran away from that institution they have been doing everything they could think of to annoy me. They have sent farmers here with produce that I never ordered, and have had publishers send me schoolbooks that I did not want. Worse than that, they have circulated reports to my scholars’ parents that this school was running down, that it was in debt, and that some pupils were getting sick because the sewerage system was out of order. Some of the parents have written to me, and two were on the point of taking their boys away, thinking the reports were true. Fortunately I was able to prove the reports false, and the boys remained here. But I do not know how far these slanders are being circulated and what the effect will be in the future.”

“And you are sure they come from Merwell and Jasniff?” questioned Phil.

“I am sure at least one letter was written by Merwell, and one farmer who brought a load of cabbages here said they were ordered by two young men who looked like Merwell and Jasniff.”

“Oh, nobody else would do it!” cried Roger. “Merwell and Jasniff are guilty, not the least doubt of it! The question is: How can we catch them?”

“Yes, that is the question,” said Doctor Clay. “I have notified the local authorities to be on the watch for them, and now I think

I shall hire a private detective.”

“Do it, Doctor,” said Dave eagerly. “I will pay half the expense. I know that my father will approve of such a course.” And so the matter rested. The private detective came to Oak Hall two days later, and after interviewing the doctor and the boys, said he would do his best to run down Link Merwell and Nick Jasniff.

It snowed hard for a day and a night and when it cleared off the boys had considerable fun snowballing each other and in coasting down a long hill leading to the river. Pop Swingly, the janitor, came in for his full share of the snow-balling and so did Jackson Lemond, usually called Horsehair, the Hall carryall driver. Horsehair was caught coming from the barn, and half a dozen snowballs hit him at the same time.

“Hi, you, stop!” he spluttered, as one snowball took him in the chin and another in the ear. “Want to smother me? Let up, I say!” And he tried to run away.

“These are early Christmas presents, Horsehair!” sang out Ben, merrily, and let the driver have another, this time in the cap.

“And something to remember us by, when we are gone,” added Gus, hitting him in the arm. Then the driver escaped. He felt sore, and vowed he would square up.

“Maybe he’ll report us,” said Ben, after the excitement was over.

“Not he,” declared Gus. “He’s not that kind. But he’ll lay for us, – just you wait and see.” And Gus was right. About half an

hour later he and Ben were told that somebody wanted to see them at the boathouse. They started for the building, walking past the gymnasium, and as they did so, down on their heads came a perfect avalanche of snow, sent from the sloping roof above. When they clawed their way out of the mass and looked up they saw Horsehair standing on the roof, snow-shovel in hand, grinning at them.

“Thought I’d give ye some more snow fer snowballs,” he chuckled. “Here ye are!” And down came another avalanche, sending the boys flat a second time. When they scrambled up they ran off with all speed, the merry laughter of the carryall driver ringing in their ears.

At last came the final session of the school, with the usual exercises, in which Dave and his chums participated. Nearly all of the boys were going home for the holidays, including Dave, Phil, Roger, and Ben. Dave and Ben were, of course, going direct to Crumville, and it was arranged that Phil and the senator’s son should come there later, to visit our hero and his family and the Wadsworths. Nat Poole was also going home, and would be on the same train with Dave and Ben.

“I wish he wasn’t going with us,” said Ben. “I’m getting so I can’t bear Nat at all.”

“Well, he isn’t quite as bad as he was when he chummed with Merwell and Jasniff,” answered our hero. “I think their badness rather scared Nat. He is mean and all that, but he isn’t a criminal.”

“Well, I think some meanness is a crime,” retorted Ben.

The boys had purchased gifts for Doctor Clay, Mr. Dale, and some of the others, and even Job Haskers had been remembered. Some of the students had wanted to ignore the tyrannical teacher, but Dave and his chums had voted down this proposition.

“Let us treat them all alike,” said Dave. “Perhaps Mr. Haskers thinks he is doing right.”

“Yes, and if we leave him out in the cold he may be more hard-hearted than ever,” added Gus, with a certain amount of worldly wisdom.

Dave carried a suit-case and also a big bundle, the latter filled with Christmas presents for the folks at home. Ben was similarly loaded down, and so were the others.

“Good-by, everybody!” cried our hero, as he entered the carryall sleigh. “Take good care of the school until we come back!”

“Good-by!” was the answer. “Don’t eat too much turkey while you are gone!” And then, as the sleigh rolled away from the school grounds, the lads to leave commenced to sing the favorite school song, sung to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne”:

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

Elect to here abide!”

“That’s the stuff!” cried Roger, and then commenced to toot loudly on a tin horn he carried, and many others made a din.

At the depot the boys had to wait a little while. But presently the train came along and they got aboard. Dave and Ben found a seat near the middle of the car and Nat Poole sat close by them. He acted as if he wanted to talk, but the others gave him little encouragement.

“Nat has something on his mind, I’ll wager a cookie,” whispered Ben to Dave.

“Well, if he has, he need not bother us with it,” was Dave’s reply. “I am done with him – I told him that some time ago.”

The train rolled on and when near the Junction, where the boys had to change to the main line, a couple in front of Ben and Dave got up, leaving the seat vacant. At once Nat Poole took the seat, at first, however, turning it over, so that he might face the other Oak Hall students.

“I want to talk to you, Dave Porter,” he said, in a low and somewhat ugly voice. “I want you to give an account of yourself.”

“Give an account of myself?” queried Dave, in some astonishment, for he had not expected such an opening from Nat. “What do you mean?”

“You know well enough what I mean,” cried the other boy, and now it was plainly to be seen that his anger was rising. “You can blacken your own character all you please but I won’t have

you blackening mine! If you don't confess to what you've done, and straighten matters out, as soon as we get to Crumville, I am going to ask my father to have you arrested!"

CHAPTER VII – NAT POOLE’S REVELATION

Both Dave and Ben stared in astonishment at the son of the money-lender of Crumville. Nat was highly indignant, but the reason for this was a complete mystery to the other lads.

“Blacken your character?” repeated Dave. “Nat, what are you talking about?”

“You know well enough.”

“I do not.”

“And I say you do!” blustered the bully. “You can’t crawl out of it. I’ve followed the thing up and I’ve got the evidence against you, and against Roger Morr, too. I was going to speak to Doctor Clay about it, but I know he’d side with you and smooth it over – he always does. But if I tell my father, you’ll find you have a different man to deal with!”

Nat spoke in a high-pitched voice that drew the attention of half a dozen men and women in the car. Ben was greatly annoyed.

“Say, Nat, don’t make a public exhibition of yourself,” he said, in a low tone. “If you’ve got anything against Dave, why don’t you wait until we are alone?”

“I don’t have to wait,” answered Nat, as loudly as ever. “I am going to settle this thing right now.”

Fortunately the train rolled up to the Junction depot at this

moment and everybody, including the boys, left the car. Several gazed curiously at Dave and Nat, and, seeing this, Ben led the others to the end of the platform. Here there was a freight room, just then deserted.

“Come on in here, and then, Nat, you can spout all you please,” said Ben.

“You ain’t going to catch me in a corner!” cried the bully, in some alarm.

“It isn’t that, Nat. I don’t want you to make a fool of yourself in front of the whole crowd. See how everybody is staring at you.”

“Humph! Let them stare,” muttered the bully; yet he followed Ben and Dave into the freight room, and Ben stood at the doorway, so that no outsiders might come in. One boy tried to get in, thinking possibly to see a fight, but Ben told him to “fly on, son,” and the lad promptly disappeared.

“Now then, Nat, tell me what you are driving at,” said Dave, as calmly as he could, for he saw that the money-lender’s son was growing more enraged every minute.

“I don’t have to tell you, Dave Porter; you know all about it.”

“I tell you I don’t – I haven’t the least idea what you are driving at.”

“Maybe you’ll deny that you were at Leesburgh last week.”

“Leesburgh?”

“Yes, Leesburgh, at Sampson’s Hotel, and at the Arcade moving-picture and vaudeville show,” and as he uttered the words Nat fairly glared into the face of our hero.

“I haven’t been near Leesburgh for several months – not since a crowd of us went there to a football game.”

“Humph! You expect me to believe that?”

“Believe it or not, it is true.”

“You can’t pull the wool over my eyes, Dave Porter! I know you were at Leesburgh last week Wednesday, you and Roger Morr. And I know you went to Sampson’s Hotel and registered in my name and then cut up like a rowdy there, in the pool-room, and got thrown out, and I know you and Roger Morr went to the Arcade and made a fuss there, and got thrown out again, but not until you had given my name and the name of Gus Plum. Gus may forgive you for it, and think it only a joke. But I’ll not do it, I can tell you that! You have got to write a letter to the owner of that hotel and to the theater manager and explain things, and you and Roger Morr have got to beg my pardon. And if you don’t, as I said before, I’ll tell my father and get him to have you arrested.” And now Nat was so excited he moved from one foot to the other and shook his fist in the air.

To the bully’s surprise Dave did not get excited. On the contrary, our hero’s face showed something that was akin to a faint smile. Ben saw it and wondered at it.

“Say, you needn’t laugh at me!” howled Nat, noting the look. “Before I get through with you, you’ll find it no laughing matter.”

“I am not laughing at you, Nat.”

“Well, do you admit that what I’ve said is true?”

“No; on the contrary, I say it is false, every word of it. Did you

say this happened last Wednesday?”

“I did.”

“Both Roger Morr and I were at the school all day Wednesday. During the day I attended all my classes, and after school I went to my room, along with Polly Vane, Luke Watson, and Sam Day, and the three of us wrote on the essays we had to hand in Thursday. After supper we went down to the gym for about half an hour, and then went back to our dormitory. And, come to think of it, you saw us there,” added Dave suddenly.

“I saw you?”

“You certainly did. You came to the door and asked Luke Watson for a Latin book; don’t you remember? Luke got it out of his bureau. We were all at the big table. Sam Day flipped a button at you and it hit you in the chin.”

At these unexpected words the face of the money-lender’s son fell.

“Was that – er – was that Wednesday?” he faltered.

“It certainly was, for we had to hand the essays in Thursday and we were all working like beavers on them.”

“Nat, what Dave says is absolutely true – I know he wasn’t near Leesburgh last week, for I was with him every day and every evening,” said Ben.

“But I got the word from some fellows in Leesburgh. They followed you from the hotel to the show and talked to you afterwards, and they said you told them your name was Porter, and the other chap said his name was Morr. They said you gave

the names of Poole and Plum just to keep your real identity hidden.”

“Well, I am not guilty, Nat; I give you my word of honor on it.”

“But – but – if you aren’t guilty how is it those fellows got your name and that of Morr?” asked the money-lender’s son, not knowing what else to say.

“I think I can explain it, Nat. The same fellows who did that are annoying me in other ways. But I’ll not explain unless you will give me your word of honor to keep it a secret, at least for the present.”

“A secret, why?”

“Because I don’t want the thing talked about in public. The more you talk about such things the worse off you are. Let me tell you that I have suffered more than you have, and other folks have suffered too.”

“Do you mean to say that some other fellows did this and gave my name and Plum’s first and yours and Morr’s afterwards?” asked Nat, curiously.

“Exactly.”

“Why?”

“For a twofold reason; first to blacken your character and that of Plum, and, secondly, to cause trouble between all of us.”

“What fellows would be mean enough to do that?”

“Two fellows who used to be your friends, but who have had to run away, to keep from being arrested.”

“Say, you don’t mean Link Merwell and Nick Jasniff!” burst

out the money-lender's son.

“Those are the chaps I do mean, Nat.”

“But I thought they had left these parts. They were in Crumville, I know,” and now the bully looked knowingly at our hero.

“You have heard the reports from home then?” asked Dave, and he felt his face burn.

“Sure.”

“Nat, those reports are all false – as false as this report of your doings at Leesburgh. They are gotten up by Jasniff and Merwell solely to injure my friends and my family and me. My sister and Jessie Wadsworth would refuse to even recognize those fellows, much less go auto-riding with them. Let me tell you something.” And in as few words as possible our hero related how things had been sent to him and his friends without being ordered by them, and of the other trouble Jasniff and Merwell were causing. The money-lender's son was incredulous at first, but gradually his face relaxed.

“And is all that really so?” he asked, at last.

“Every word is absolutely true,” answered Dave.

“Then Nick and Link ought to be in jail!” burst out Nat. “It's an outrage to let them do such things. Why don't you have 'em locked up – that is what I'd do!”

“We've got to catch them first.”

“Do you mean to say you are trying to do that?”

“We are.”

“Well, you catch ’em, and if you want me to appear against ’em, I’ll do it – and I’ll catch ’em myself if I can.”

There was a pause, and Nat started for the doorway of the freight room. But Ben still barred the way.

“Nat, don’t you think you were rather hasty in accusing Dave?” he asked, bluntly.

“Well – er – maybe I was,” answered the money-lender’s son, growing a bit red.

“Oh, let it pass,” said Dave. “I might have been worked up myself, if I had been in Nat’s place.”

“Here comes the train – we don’t want to miss it,” cried the money-lender’s son, and he showed that he was glad to close the interview. “Remember, if you catch those fellows, I’ll testify against ’em!” he called over his shoulder as he pushed through the doorway.

“The same old Nat, never willing to acknowledge himself in the wrong,” was Ben’s comment, as he and Dave ran for the car steps. The other boy had lost himself in the waiting crowd and got into another car, and they did not see him again until Crumville was reached, and even then he did not speak to them.

The snow was coming down lightly when Dave and Ben alighted, baggage and bundles in hand, for they had not risked checking anything in such a crowd. Ben’s father was on hand to greet him, and close at hand stood the Wadsworth family sleigh, with Laura and Jessie on the rear seat. The driver came to take the suit-case and Dave’s bundle, grinning a welcome as he did so.

“There’s Dave!” cried Jessie, as soon as he appeared. “Isn’t he growing tall!” she added.

“Yes,” answered the sister. “Dave!” she called.

“Here we are again!” he cried with a bright smile, and shook hands. “I brought you a snowstorm for a change.”

“I like snow for Christmas,” answered Jessie. She was blushing, for Dave had given her hand an extra tight squeeze.

“How are the folks?”

“All very well,” answered Laura. “What have you in that big bundle?”

“Oh, that’s a secret, sis,” he returned.

“Christmas presents!” cried the sister. “Jessie, let us open the bundle right away.” And she made a playful reach for it.

“Not to-day – that belongs to Santa Claus!” cried the brother, holding the bundle out of reach. “My, but this town looks good to me!” he added, as he looked around and waved his hand to Mr. Basswood. Then Ben took a moment to run up and greet the girls.

“You must come over, Ben,” said Laura.

“Why, yes, by all means,” added Jessie, and Ben said he would. Then he rejoined his father, and Dave got into the sleigh, being careful to keep his big bundle on his lap, where the girls could not “poke a hole into it to peek,” as he put it. There was a flourish of the whip, and the elegant turnout, with its well-matched black horses, started in the direction of the Wadsworth mansion.

CHAPTER VIII – A MERRY CHRISTMAS

As my old readers know, the Wadsworth family and the Porters all lived together, for when Dave found his folks and brought them to Crumville, the rich jewelry manufacturer and his wife could not bear to think of separating from the boy who had saved their daughter from being burned to death. They loved Dave almost as a son, and it was their proposal that the Porters make the big mansion their home. As Dave's father was a widower and his brother Dunston was a bachelor, they readily agreed to this, provided they were allowed to share the expenses. With the two families was old Caspar Potts, who spent most of his time in the library, cataloguing the books, keeping track of the magazines, and writing a volume on South American history.

With a merry jingling of the bells, the family sleigh drove into the spacious grounds. As it rounded the driveway and came to a halt at the front piazza the door opened and Dave's father came out, followed by Dunston Porter.

“Hello, Dad!” cried the son, joyously, and made a flying leap from the sleigh. “How are you?” And then he shook hands with his parent and with his uncle – that same uncle whom he so strongly resembled, – a resemblance that had been the means of bringing the pair together.

“Dave, my son!” said Mr. Porter, as he smiled a welcome.

“Getting bigger every day, Davy!” was Uncle Dunston’s comment. “Before you know it, you’ll be taller than I am!” And he gave his nephew a hand-clasp that made Dave wince.

“Oh, he’s getting awfully tall, I said so as soon as I saw him,” remarked Jessie, as she, too, alighted, followed by Laura. By this time Dave was in the hallway, giving Mrs. Wadsworth a big hug and a kiss. When he had first known her, Dave had been a little afraid of Mrs. Wadsworth, she was such a lady, but now this was past and he treated her as she loved to be treated, just as if he were her son.

“Aren’t you glad I’ve returned to torment you?” he said, as he gave her another squeeze.

“Very glad, Dave, very glad indeed!” she answered, beaming on him. “I don’t mind the way you torment me in the least,” and then she hurried off, to make sure that the dinner ordered in honor of Dave’s home-coming should be properly served.

In the library doorway stood Caspar Potts, his hair now as white as snow. He came forward and laid two trembling white hands in those of Dave.

“Dave, my boy Dave!” he murmured, and his watery eyes fairly glistened.

“Yes, Professor, your boy, always your boy!” answered Dave, readily, for he loved the old instructor from the bottom of his heart. “And how is the history getting on?”

“Fairly well, Dave. I have nine chapters finished.”

“Good! Some day, when it is finished, I’ll find a publisher for you; and then you’ll be famous.”

“I don’t know about that, Dave. But I like to write on the book – and the research work is very pleasant, especially in such pleasant surroundings,” murmured the old gentleman.

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