

Warner Frank A.

Bobby Blake on a Plantation: or, Lost in the Great Swamp



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CHAPTER I

THE SINKING BOAT

"I tell you what, fellows, that was some game yesterday," said Fred Martin, as he sat with his comrades on the steps of Rockledge Hall, the day after that memorable Thanksgiving Day when Rockledge had beaten its great rival, Belden, in the annual football game.

"It was a close shave though," remarked his chum, Bobby Blake, who had been the chief factor in the victory. "There were only two minutes left of playing time when, we got the touchdown. It came just in the nick of time."

"I thought you were a goner when that fellow Hoskins dove at you," put in Jimmy Ailshine, better known as "Shiner." "That fellow sure is a terror when it comes to tackling. He grabs you as if you were a long-lost brother."

"He came mighty near stopping me," admitted Bobby. "I just felt his fingers touch me as I dodged. But a miss is as good as a mile, in football as in everything else."

"It was a tough game for Belden to lose," commented Perry Wise, a big, fat boy, who went by the ironical nickname of "Pee Wee." "But both teams couldn't win, and we were just a little bit too good for them," he added complacently.

"Listen to that 'we'," jibed "Sparrow" Bangs. "Lot you had to do with it, you old elephant."

"Wasn't I sitting there rooting to beat the band?" demanded Pee Wee in an aggrieved tone. "And let me tell you I'm some little rooter."

"Well, we've won the banner of blue and gold anyway," declared Howell Purdy. "Maybe it won't look good floating from the top of that flagstaff."

"I wonder when we're going to get it," pondered "Skeets" Brody. "Have you seen it yet, Bobby?"

"Not yet," replied Bobby. "But Frank Durrock told me all about it. It's mighty nifty. It's made in blue and gold, with a football in the center. Then at each of the four corners there'll be the emblem of one of the schools that played for it, and it will have embroidered on it: 'Champions of the Monatook Lake Football League.'"

"I'd like to have the letters big enough so that the Belden fellows could read it from across the lake," chuckled Sparrow.

"Come off, Sparrow," said Bobby with a laugh. "You're like the Indians who scalp the dead. It ought to be enough for you that we beat them, without wanting to rub it in. Besides, we didn't beat them by such a margin that we can afford to brag much about it. They sure let us know that we'd been in a fight."

"Talking of fighting," chimed in Billy Bassett, "did any of you fellows hear of the hold up that took place in town this morning?"

"Hold up!" came in a chorus from the lips of all the boys, as they crowded around him.

"Yes," replied Billy, "up at Mr. Henderson's house, about nine o'clock."

"In broad daylight!" ejaculated Fred. "Gee, but those robbers are getting bold. Are you sure about it, Billy?"

"Dead sure," replied Billy. "In fact, I just happened to be passing by, and I saw the whole thing."

"You saw it!" cried Sparrow, fairly bubbling over with excitement. "It's a wonder you didn't say something before. How many were there in it?"

“There were two against one,” answered Billy.

“Weren’t you awfully scared?” asked Skeets.

“Not a bit,” declared Billy. “Why should I be scared at seeing two clothes pins holding up a shirt?”

There was a moment of awful silence.

Then with a howl the crowd rose and threw themselves on Billy, and mauled and pounded him until he begged for mercy.

“To think that I fell for it!” snorted Fred disgustedly. “I sure am easy.”

“I’m just as bad,” mourned Sparrow. “I swallowed the whole thing, hook, line and sinker. I’m not fit to go around alone. They ought to put me in an asylum for the feeble-minded.”

“Serves you both right,” laughed Bobby. “You ought to know Billy by this time. Whenever he starts to talk you can be sure that he’s trying to put something over on us.”

“I’d hate to have your suspicious disposition,” grinned Billy, highly delighted with the success he had scored.

“Say, fellows, isn’t it getting near time for lunch?” spoke up Pee Wee from his recumbent position on one of the steps.

“Can’t that tank ever get filled up?” asked Skeets. “Look at the way he polished off that grand old Thanksgiving dinner, and he’s starving yet.”

“That was yesterday,” explained Pee Wee. “How long do you think one dinner’s going to last? Don’t you suppose I’ve got to keep up my strength?”

“What for?” scoffed Skeets. “You’re too lazy to use it anyway.”

“Don’t forget that he’s got a lot of weight to carry around,” admonished Fred.

“What seems to be the matter down there,” put in Sparrow, pointing to a tree on the campus about a hundred feet from where the boys were lounging.

The others followed the direction of Sparrow’s finger and saw two boys engaged in what seemed to be an angry dispute. Even as they looked, the larger of the two snatched off the cap of his companion and threw it on the ground.

“Bill Snath is at it again!” exclaimed Fred, jumping to his feet. “He’s ragging that new pupil that came in a few days ago, Cartier I think his name is.”

“Might know that Snath couldn’t stay decent for long,” remarked Skeets. “He toned down a little after Sandy Jackson skipped out, but now he’s up to his old tricks. Cartier’s a good deal smaller than he is.”

“That’s the reason Snath’s picking on him,” said Bobby. “Trust that bully not to tackle anyone of his own size. Come along, fellows, and let’s see what the trouble’s about.”

They hurried in the direction of the two disputants, even Pee Wee showing more speed than usual, although even at that he brought up in the rear.

In the meantime, Snath had added insult to injury by planting his feet firmly on Cartier’s cap and looking on with a malicious grin on his face, while his victim tugged at it in vain attempts to regain it.

As the running boys neared the two, Snath caught sight of them, and a look of disappointment, not unmixed with fear, came into his small, pale eyes. For a moment he appeared as though about to slink away, but he thought better of it and stood his ground.

“What’s going on?” asked Bobby, as his eyes went from one to the other.

“Don’t know that that’s any of your business,” growled Snath, a pasty-faced, loose-jawed youth, with mean eyes set too close together.

“We’ll make it our business, you big bully,” Fred was beginning, when Bobby placed a restraining hand on his chum’s arm.

“Just a minute, Fred,” he said. “Let’s hear what Cartier has to say about it,” he went on, turning to the other boy. “How about it, Lee?”

"I was passing by him when he told me to take off my cap to him," replied Lee Cartier, a slender, dark-eyed boy with a clean-cut, intelligent face. "I told him I wouldn't and then he grabbed it and threw it on the ground. He's standing on it now," and he pointed to the crumpled cap under the bully's feet.

"Suppose you let Lee have his cap, Snath," said Bobby.

"Suppose I don't," snarled the bully doggedly.

"Then we'll make you," Fred burst out hotly, his face almost as red as the fiery hair combined with a fiery temper that had gained for him the nickname of "Ginger."

But again Bobby intervened.

"Easy, Fred," he counseled. "Now look here, Snath," he continued, fixing his eyes steadily on the bully, who tried to meet his gaze, though his shifty eyes wavered, "we've had enough of this sort of thing in this school, and we're not going to stand for any more of it. Sandy Jackson tried it and couldn't get away with it, and you're not going to, either. Take your foot off that cap."

"I won't!" snapped Snath furiously, though there was a perceptible wobbly movement of his knees. "Who do you think you are anyway, Bobby Blake? You just quit butting in and let me tend to my own affairs. You needn't think you're running this school."

"Take your foot off that cap," repeated Bobby, not raising his voice a particle, but moving a step forward so that he was within easy reach.

The rest of the boys crowded about the two, all agog with expectation of a "scrap." There was not one of them but cordially detested the bully, and many of them had been the victims of his petty torments. They were eager to see him get the thrashing he richly deserved, and that they felt Bobby was fully able to give him.

But Snath was one of those who believed that discretion was the better part of valor. He hated to give in, with all the boys looking at him, but he hated still worse the idea of coming to blows with Bobby, although he was much the larger of the two. His eyes fell on Bobby's fists which were slowly clenching, and then with a growl he stepped back off the cap. He could not resist, however, the temptation to give the head covering a vicious kick.

"Take your old cap," he snarled. "As for you, Bobby Blake, I'll get even with you for this when you haven't got your crowd with you."

"Make him pick it up, Bobby!" shouted Fred, who was disappointed at not seeing the bully get his just deserts.

But Lee had already picked up the cap and put it on his head, while he flashed a look of gratitude at his champion.

Snath shambled away with a last malignant look at Bobby that was full of threats of vengeance in the future.

"It's too bad you didn't have an excuse for trimming him, Bobby," sighed Sparrow, as the bully's form vanished round a corner of the building. "He's had a licking coming to him for a long time, and you're the one who could have done him up to the queen's taste."

"I don't want to fight," replied Bobby. "I never want to if I can help it. You know the trouble that came from that mixup with Sandy Jackson. But there's been too much of this bullying going on in the school and it's just as well to let fellows like Snath know where they get off."

"He's got it in for you," declared Skeets. "Did you see that look he gave you when he went away? I'll bet he's figuring out right now some dirty trick to play on you."

"Let him figure," laughed Bobby. "I should worry a lot and build a house on it. But what do you say, fellows, to kicking the football around a little? I'm a little sore from yesterday, and it will help get some of the kinks out of my bones. Besides it will help us get up an appetite for lunch."

All assented readily, except Pee Wee.

"I've got all the appetite I want already," he said. "If I had any more I'd be starving to death. But you dubs go ahead and play, and I'll lie down here and rest."

“That’s the best thing you do,” chaffed Fred.

“Rest is Pee Wee’s middle name,” jibed Sparrow.

But the good-natured fat boy only smiled in a superior sort of way and made himself comfortable, while his comrades got the ball and put it in action. There were not enough of them to form two elevens and play a regular game, but they got up a couple of skeleton teams and were soon in the thick of some lively scrimmages.

The new boy, Lee Cartier, had been chosen by Bobby as one of his side, and although he was not familiar with the fine points of the game, he played with zest and spirit and showed that he had it in him to become a good player. What he lacked in weight and strength he made up in quickness, and he followed the ball in a way that called forth praise from Bobby.

“That was good work, Lee,” the latter said, after Lee had fallen like a flash on the ball that one of the opposing players had fumbled.

Lee’s face flushed with pleasure at the commendation.

“I’m afraid I’m a good deal of a dub at the game,” he answered. “If I could ever learn to play the way you did yesterday it would be something to talk about. I wish you would teach me the way the game ought to be played. Will you?”

“I’ve got lots to learn about it myself,” replied Bobby, “but what little I know you’re welcome to. There’ll probably be lots of days when we can practice before real cold weather comes.”

Just then a cry of alarm arose from Fred, as he happened to glance toward the lake.

“Look at that boat!” he shouted. “It looks as if it were sinking!”

All eyes were turned on a boat containing four boys, about a quarter of a mile from the shore. Two of the occupants were pulling desperately at the oars, but making scarcely any progress. The other inmates of the boat were waving their hands wildly and shouting at the tops of their voices, although what they were saying could not be distinguished at that distance.

Bobby gave one look and threw down the football.

“Come along, fellows!” he shouted, as he made for the boathouse at the top of his speed.

“They’re sinking and we’ve got to save them!”

CHAPTER II

JUST IN TIME

There was a wild shout as the other boys followed, and they were close on Bobby's heels when he reached the boathouse.

There were several boats in the house, most of them laid up in canvas coverings, as the weather was becoming so cold that the lake offered no special attraction. One boat, however, and luckily the one nearest the doors, was available, and to this Bobby rushed.

"Lend a hand, some of you fellows!" he called. "Some one get two pairs of oars from the rack. Hurry now! We can't waste a second."

In a moment the oars were handed down and put in the boat and Bobby had thrown open the sliding doors.

Willing hands helped him to push the boat down the slanting way that led to the float.

"Four of us can go in this," cried Bobby. "You, Fred, and you, Sparrow, and – "

"Let me go," begged Lee, whose eyes were burning with excitement. "I've had a good deal of practice in rowing and I can handle an oar as well as any one."

"All right," agreed Bobby. "Into the water now with the boat."

The rowboat was shoved into the water and held to the float by Skeets and Shiner, while Bobby and his three mates tumbled in, grasped the oars and pulled off.

By this time it was plainly to be seen that the endangered boat was much lower in the water than it was when it had first been seen. The gunwales were almost flush with the level of the lake, and the two who had been rowing had abandoned the oars, as it was impossible to drag the heavily laden water-logged boat through the water. The occupants had thrown off their coats, and two of them were tugging away at their shoes, preparatory to the swim for life that seemed inevitable.

The boys who were left on the shore waved their hands frantically, shouting to the boys in the sinking boat not to jump, and pointing to the other boat that was coming to their assistance.

In the meantime, Bobby and his companions were bending to the oars lustily and putting all their strength into every stroke.

"Keep at it, fellows!" panted Bobby, while the perspiration rolled down his face. "Don't stop to look behind. I'll take a look once in a while just so as to keep the boat steering right. Pull with all your might!"

His comrades needed no urging, and the boat leaped through the water with a speed that rapidly cut down the space that still intervened between it and the sinking craft.

For sinking it was now beyond a doubt. The occupants had for the moment abandoned the design of springing overboard, and were baling frantically, using their caps and sweaters and hands in the effort to keep the doomed boat afloat until their rescuers could reach them.

"If they can only keep afloat two minutes more!" gasped Bobby, as a glance behind showed him the awful danger. "Don't spare yourself, fellows. It may mean life or death. Just two minutes more and we'll get them."

But the two minutes grace could not be granted. They had got within perhaps a hundred feet, when there was a desperate cry from the inmates of the sinking boat, which was echoed from the watching crowd on the shore. The next instant the boat went down by the bow, and its four occupants were struggling in the lake.

"Pull, fellows, pull!" Bobby fairly screamed, bending almost double with his own exertions.

And while the other rescuers were following his example, it may be well for the benefit of those who have not read the earlier volumes of this series, to trace briefly his adventures and those of his friends up to the time this story opens.

Bobby Blake was a bright, wide-awake American boy, who had been brought up in the small but prosperous inland village of Clinton. He was the only son of parents who were in comfortable circumstances. Bobby was frank, merry and straightforward, and a great favorite with the boys of his own age, of whom he was the natural leader.

Bobby's special chum was Fred Martin, son of a Clinton business man, who lived only a few doors away from the Blakes. Fred was freckled, redhaired, and had the hot impulsive temper that often goes with that color of hair. But he was good and generous of heart, and he and Bobby got on famously together. Fred was constantly getting into trouble of one kind or another, and Bobby was kept busy trying to prevent his friend from reaping the consequences of his quick temper. Bobby never looked for trouble, though he was always ready to defend his rights and would not let himself be imposed on. The boys were inseparable, and wherever one was found the other was pretty sure not to be far away.

When Bobby was ten years old, Mr. Blake was suddenly called away on business to South America, and as Mrs. Blake was going with him, it became necessary to send the lad away to boarding school. Bobby and Fred were feeling very badly over the prospect of their being separated, when, to the delight of both, their parents decided to send them to Rockledge School together. The school was a fine one, located on a beautiful sheet of water called Monatook Lake. Here the chums found that they had to study hard, but they also had lots of fun and adventure. Some bullies tried to tyrannize over them, but failed in the attempt, and how Bobby came out ahead of them is told in the first volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake at Rockledge School."

Vacation time found Bobby spending a few weeks at the summer home of Perry Wise, or "Pee Wee," the big, fat boy whose laziness and enormous appetite were a source of good-natured fun for all the Rockledge boys. Here they had a great variety of sports, for the home was on the sea coast and there were abundant opportunities for swimming, boating and fishing. The hunt for a missing motor boat added greatly to the excitement of their visit.

Their stay was cut short by a message from Bobby's parents to meet them at Porto Rico, where they expected to stop on their homeward journey. Bobby was wild to meet them, the more so because at one time their ship had been reported as shipwrecked and lost. It was arranged that Fred should go with him, and the boys embarked in high spirits. Their ship caught fire, however, and they with others found themselves adrift, landing at last on a volcanic island, narrowly escaping with their lives.

"The fellows at Rockledge will hardly believe us when we tell them all we've gone through," declared Bobby, as they were on their way home.

"It will sound as if we were stretching things," admitted Fred, "but I guess they'll believe us when we cross our hearts. Anyway, we know it's true."

They found the Fall term at Rockledge full of sport and interest and they had some surprising experiences. Many of these were due to the warm rivalry that existed between Rockledge and Belden School, a rival institution on the further side of Monatook Lake.

When the Christmas holidays came, Bobby and a number of his special chums were invited to visit Snowtop Camp belonging to an uncle of "Mouser" Pryde. This was up in the Big Woods. There were wildcats near there, to say nothing of a big bear that made lots of trouble for them before the boys got the best of him. There was a snowslide too that buried their house and gave them some lively work to dig themselves out.

With the coming of Spring, the boys of Rockledge were alive with enthusiasm over baseball. Bobby and Fred became members of the Rockledge nine, and it was Bobby's fine work as a pitcher in the most important games that enabled the Rockledge boys to beat Belden out and win the baseball championship of the school league.

"I tell you what, he just had the Belden fellows eating out of his hand," was the way Jimmy Ailshine, or "Shiner," as he was called, expressed his opinion of Bobby's work in the box.

An entirely new experience came to Bobby when he and Fred and several of their schoolboy friends went out West to a ranch owned by a relative of Sparrow Bangs. Here they made friends with the cowboys and learned to ride, and they also fell in with a moving picture company and took part in the making of a film. The way they discovered the plot of some Mexicans and lawless characters and were able to thwart it forms the subject of a very exciting story.

There was still a part of their vacation left, when they returned from the ranch, and Skeets Brody urged them to spend this in making a trip in his father's automobile. A copperhead snake that took possession of their cave furnished an exciting feature of the trip, which was further enlivened by an encounter with gypsies. They rescued two little children from these vagabonds of the road, though at considerable risk to themselves, and had the good fortune to restore them to their father.

The boys returned to school in high spirits, and in the intervals of their studies practiced strenuously in order to "make" the football team. This time there were two other schools besides Belden that they had to battle with, and they found their work cut out for them. In fact they came within an ace of losing the deciding game, but how Bobby rose to the occasion and carried the ball over the goal line for a touchdown and a glorious victory is told in the volume preceding this, entitled: "Bobby Blake On the School Eleven; or, Winning the Banner of Blue and Gold."

And now on the very day following that victory, we see Bobby working as he had never worked before, to save the inmates of the sinking boat from death in the icy waters of the lake.

The boys who had been thrown into the water when the boat went down rose to the surface, dashed the water from their eyes and looked wildly about them.

They spied the advancing boat, which was now close at hand, and two of them struck out for it. A third tried to swim, but seemed to be so chilled and bewildered that he could make no progress. He did manage, however, to keep his head above water. The fourth, it was evident could not swim at all. He splashed about feebly for a moment and then sank.

By this time Bobby's boat was right among them. The two foremost swimmers grabbed the stern, as the boys suspended rowing. Bobby reached over and grabbed a third one, who almost pulled him out of the boat.

Just then the water broke alongside and the head of the boy who had gone down appeared. His eyes were glassy, and he was almost unconscious. Lee was the nearest one to him and reached over to grab him. He caught his hair, but the drowning boy's weight was too great, and the boat tipped so sharply that Lee was dragged over the gunwale.

He came up spluttering and gasping, but still holding on to the other. Bobby surrendered the boy he was holding to Fred, and grasping an oar held it out to Lee. The latter caught it and Bobby pulled him up to the side of the boat.

"Take him in first!" gasped Lee, indicating his helpless burden. "I can hold on to the boat."

By using all their strength and being especially careful not to upset the boat, the rescuers lifted the half drowned boy on board. Then came Lee's turn and that of the other three, two of whom managed to clamber over without help.

"Now," said Bobby with a sigh of relief, when all were safely in the boat. "We've got to work like beavers to get back to shore. It's no joke to be soaked to the skin on so cold a day as this. Here, Lee," he went on, turning to the shivering lad, "take this coat of mine."

"I won't do it," said Lee, "You need it yourself."

"Not a bit of it," replied Bobby. "I've been rowing so hard I'm all in a sweat, and the work getting home will keep me warmer than I'll want to be. You've just got to take it."

Despite Lee's protest, Bobby put the coat around him. Fred and Sparrow followed suit with regard to the other boys, whom they made lie down in the boat so as to escape the wind. Then they took the oars and pulled vigorously for the shore.

Cheers greeted them as they approached. The news of what was going on had spread like wildfire, and all of Rockledge School was down at the shore, including Doctor Raymond, the head

of the institution, and Mr. Leith and Mr. Carrier, two teachers. A doctor also had been summoned and many of the townspeople had hurried on foot and in autos to the spot.

There was a hubbub of excited exclamations, as the boat reached the little landing stage. The spectators had seen the figures dragged aboard, but from that distance could not tell whether some of them were alive or dead.

The moment the boat slid alongside the float, eager hands were outstretched to help, and great was the relief when it was found that no life had been lost.

The rescued ones were hurried up to the school, where their wet clothes were stripped from them and they were given hot drinks and placed between warm blankets.

Doctor Raymond was so busy in supervising this work that he had no time more than to tell the rescuers that he was proud of them and would see them later in his study. But others crowded around them and made much of them, while showering them with questions.

“It was nothing at all,” said Bobby with characteristic modesty. “We simply happened to be nearest and the boat was handy and we piled in and rowed out to them. Any one else would have done the same if the chance had come to them, and you fellows are making too much out of it.”

“That’s all very well,” said Skeets Brody with a grin, “but I notice just the same that when anything has to be done and done in a hurry it’s Bobby Blake that’s ‘Johnny on the spot’.”

CHAPTER III

A CLOSE CALL

Now that the danger was over, the crowd began to melt away, and the boys, who in the excitement had forgotten all about lunch, suddenly remembered that they had been overlooking what was to all of them a duty and to most of them a pleasure and made a break for the dining hall.

Pee Wee was especially remorseful that he had so far forgotten himself.

“Gee!” he observed, as he took out his watch. “Lunch time has been over for more than half an hour. I hope they haven’t cleared the table.”

“If they haven’t, you will when you get to it,” jibed Skeets. “That’s one place where you can be depended on to work.”

“That isn’t work – it’s fun,” admitted Pee Wee, as he started to put his watch back in his pocket. But in his haste it dropped from his fingers and fell with a bang to the ground.

There was an exclamation from the boys, who crowded around Pee Wee as he looked ruefully at the watch, whose crystal had been broken.

“Did it stop?” asked Fred.

“Of course it stopped when it hit the ground,” put in Billy. “What did you expect it to do – go right through to China?”

Pee Wee favored Billy with a glare that expressed his opinion of that lad’s frivolity.

“Of all the idiots – ” he began, and then words failed him and he tapped his forehead significantly.

Nothing abashed, the graceless Billy grinned.

“It wasn’t so bad,” he said complacently. “I don’t know how those things come to me but they do – just like that,” he added snapping his fingers airily.

“He hates himself – I don’t think,” remarked Fred, making a playful pass at Billy, who dodged so adroitly that the blow passed over his head and caught the luckless Pee Wee in the stomach almost making him drop his watch again.

“Say, what are you up to?” he demanded indignantly, rubbing the injured spot with his hand. “Haven’t I had hard luck enough for one day without you fellows rubbing it in?”

“You seem to be doing all the rubbing,” laughed Fred. “Sorry, old boy, but that stomach of yours is so big that nothing can miss it.”

“Stop picking on poor little Pee Wee,” chuckled Sparrow. “Cheer up, Pee Wee. What if another Ingersoll did bite the dust? You’ll have a good excuse now for being late at recitations.”

This silver lining to the cloud was not without its effect on Pee Wee, and putting the battered watch into his pocket, successfully this time, he hurried to the dining hall, where the savory odors of the meal that the housekeeper had prepared soon made him forget all his troubles.

The boys at the tables were bubbling over with interest at the stirring events they had witnessed, and Bobby and the rest of his crew had all they could do in answering the questions that were showered upon them.

“Don’t you feel awfully sore and used up, Bobby?” queried Howell Purdy, his voice a little muffled because his mouth was so full.

“Not so very,” responded Bobby. “I suppose I will to-morrow though. The second day is always worse than the first.”

“If our boys ever pulled that way in a race, we’d have no trouble in beating out Belden,” remarked Shiner. “You fellows were simply lifting that boat out of the water. As it was, you didn’t get there a minute too soon either.”

“Not a second too soon,” corrected Sparrow. “That fellow who couldn’t swim will never come nearer to death than he was to-day. My heart was just about in my mouth when I saw him go down.”

“Lee had a close call too when he was pulled overboard,” put in Skeets.

“Oh, as for that, Lee can swim like a fish,” remarked Fred. “But he got a wetting just the same and had to sit in his wet clothes until we got back to the float. I hope it hasn’t hurt him.”

“He isn’t very strong, but he’s as plucky as they make them,” commented Skeets, “and he certainly knows how to swing an oar.”

“We had one bit of luck to help us out,” said Bobby, “and that was that one of the boats hadn’t been put away in canvas. If it had been, we could never have got it out in time. As it was, it was close to the door, so we could slide it out in a jiffy.”

When at last the meal was finished and even Pee Wee had had enough to eat, Bobby’s first thought was of Lee. He saw Mr. Carrier hurrying through the hall and asked him about the Southern boy whom he had already learned to like very much.

“Lee Cartier was very badly chilled,” was Mr. Carrier’s response, “and that, combined with over exertion, has made the doctor a little anxious about him. I guess it would be better for you boys not to see him for a while. But the other boys are getting along all right, and they just told me that they would like to see you and the other members of the boat crew that rescued them. By the way, Blake, you and the other boys who went with you did nobly to-day and I’m proud of you. It was a splendid piece of work.”

Bobby flushed at the praise and would have disclaimed any special credit, but Mr. Carrier smiled and went on. Bobby hunted up Sparrow and Fred, and the three went to the room which had been placed at the disposal of the boys they had rescued.

They found the four seated before a glowing fire, wrapped in hot blankets and eating with evident relish an abundant meal that had been brought up to them. Apart from their rumpled hair, they bore no sign of the ordeal through which they had passed, and which had so nearly cost the lives of all of them.

They jumped to their feet as their three rescuers came in and surrounded them, shaking hands and offering fervent thanks for the help they had brought them at the moment of their deepest need.

“Why, you are Belden boys!” exclaimed Bobby, as he took a good look at them. “I suppose I ought to have known that before, but I was so busy that I didn’t have a chance to see much of your faces.”

“Then, too, we looked so much like drowned rats that you probably wouldn’t have recognized us anyway,” laughed the eldest one of the quartette. “Yes, we’re Belden boys, all right, and live ones too, thanks to you. If it hadn’t been for you fellows, all four of us would have been at the bottom of the lake by this time. My name is Wilson and this is Thompson and this is Livingston and this is Miner,” he added, introducing himself and his companions.

“I know Livingston and Miner already,” responded Bobby, after having introduced Sparrow and Fred in turn. “They played against our team in the football game yesterday.”

“Sure thing,” agreed Livingston, while Miner smiled assent, “and we didn’t think when we were trying to keep you away from our goal line then that you’d be saving our lives to-day.”

“Tell us how it all happened,” said Bobby, as the party seated themselves comfortably before the open fire.

“I suppose it was a bit of foolishness on our part,” replied Wilson, who seemed by common consent to be the spokesman of the Belden group, “and I’m the most foolish of the lot, because I was the one who proposed the trip. We were all feeling a little sore and blue over the defeat our team suffered yesterday, and to get our minds off it I proposed to the rest of the fellows here that we should take a row on the lake. We noticed a little water in the bottom of the boat when we started, but thought that might be due to the rain we had a few days ago. It was only when we had got out beyond the middle of the lake that we noticed that the boat was leaking badly. We tried to stuff the

leak with, our handkerchiefs, but in jabbing them in with an oar, we pushed too hard and widened the crack so that we could do nothing with it, and the water began to come in faster than we could bail it out. This side of the lake was the nearer, and we began to pull toward it as hard as we could. It was just about that time I guess that you saw us. I tell you we felt good when we saw you rush to the landing and get out the boat. It braced us up and made us keep up the fight till the last minute. But toward the end I thought it was all up with us. Thompson here was the worst off of any of us, for he can't swim a stroke."

"I sure thought that I was a goner," broke in Thompson. "I think I must have gone all through the pain of drowning, for the last thing I remember was that my lungs seemed bursting. I don't even recall being pulled into the boat. It sure was a close call."

"Yes," agreed Bobby soberly as he gazed into the fire, "it was a close call."

CHAPTER IV

FACING THE BULLY

There was silence in the room for a minute or two. The boys all sensed the nearness of the tragedy that had been so narrowly averted, and each had an inward shudder as he thought of what might have been.

But though the death angel had passed so close that they had almost heard the rustling of his wings, here they were after all alive and safe, and their spirits rose while their hearts swelled with thankfulness.

“Well,” remarked Wilson, breaking the silence, “this will be a lesson to me, as the darky said when he was about to be hanged. I don’t get in any more boats unless they’re as dry as a bone.”

“And even then I’ll keep out of them,” said Thompson with emphasis. “Dry land is good enough for me, at least, until I learn how to swim.”

“Wouldn’t care to have us row you back to Belden, eh?” queried Bobby with a grin.

“Not on your life,” laughed Miner. “They’ve ’phoned over that they’ll send an auto for us and we’ll go back in style. But we’ll never forget till the last day of our lives what you fellows have done for us. And if I ever hear any fellow knock Rockledge, he’ll have a fight on his hands right away.”

Bobby laughed, as he and his two companions rose to go.

“Oh, Belden and Rockledge will have many a fight yet,” he said, “but they’ll be good-natured fights on the baseball or football fields, and may the best school win.”

They exchanged hearty farewells with the Belden boys, and went out of the room and down the corridor. On the way they passed Bill Snath, who favored them with a malicious stare in passing and uttered the word “heroes,” in a sneering tone, as he went by. It was spoken in a low tone, but loud enough for Fred, who was nearest him, to hear it, and his temper took fire at once.

“What was that you said, Bill Snath?” he demanded, as he turned on his heel.

“Nobody spoke to you, redhead,” returned Snath, snapping out the epithet with a good deal of relish.

This was like a spark to powder, and Fred’s face became as red as his hair.

“You take that back!” he cried, rushing up to Snath, who had stopped and was regarding him with a tantalizing grin.

“Suppose I don’t, what are you going to do about it?” demanded the bully, his tone the more confident because he could see behind Fred’s back the tall figure of Mr. Leith, the head teacher, coming up from the other end of the hall.

“I’ll show you what I’m going to do about it,” Fred replied, and was starting to unbutton his coat, when Bobby, who had come up, restrained him.

“Mr. Leith’s coming, Fred,” he warned him. “Cool off now and come along. He’s close behind you now.”

There was no need of saying anything else, and Fred by a great effort restrained himself. Mr. Leith came by and looked curiously at the flushed face of the boy. He said nothing however, but when he had reached the other end of the hall stood there as if in meditation.

“It’s lucky for you that he came along just then,” Fred said in a low tone to the bully. “If you have nerve enough to come somewhere out of sight of the school, we’ll settle this thing right now.”

“You’re three to one,” Snath replied. “If you were alone I’d make you sing small.”

“They’ll only go along to see fair play,” answered Fred. “But if you like, I’ll go with you alone. I’ve taken about all I’m going to take from you. Bill Snath.”

“You’ll have to take all I care to give you,” drawled Snath, feeling perfectly safe as long as Mr. Leith was in sight.

As at that moment Mr. Leith began to come back along the hall, there was nothing more to be done or said and the boys separated, Snath sauntering toward the teacher with affected nonchalance, while Fred with Bobby and Sparrow went in the opposite direction.

"That fellow gets my goat," growled Fred. "He never goes past without a nasty look or word. He's getting just as bad as Sandy Jackson, and he needs to be taken down."

"He's aching for a thrashing," agreed Bobby, "and that's twice to-day he's come near getting it. But if I were you, Fred, I'd take as little notice of him as I could. If you hadn't paid any attention to what he said about heroes, he'd have thought we didn't hear him, and that would have made him sore. As it is, he's tickled to death because he thinks he put one over on us."

"But he called me redhead!" exclaimed Fred, "and no one can do that in earnest without a fight."

"That of course is different," admitted Bobby. "I wouldn't let any one call me names and get away with it. But as far as we can, the best thing is to let him alone. Some time or other he'll get to the end of his rope, just as his pal did and get out of Rockledge School."

"I guess Bobby's about right," remarked Sparrow. "I suppose it's always better to go round a skunk than take a kick at him. But I don't blame Fred for feeling sore. I feel the same way."

The chums went out on the steps of the school, where they found a group of their friends waiting for them.

"How are the fellows getting along who were nearly drowned?" asked Skeets.

"Fine and dandy," replied Fred, who by this time had regained his usual good nature. "Not one of them is going to kick the bucket. And what do you think, fellows? They're all Belden boys."

"Belden boys!" echoed Shiner. "Our chief rivals! That's what you call heaping coals of fire on their head."

"I guess coals of fire would have felt comfortable when they were out in the lake," laughed Mouser. "But I'm mighty glad they're getting along all right. If any of them had died, I'd expect to hear their ghosts walking about the halls of the building to-night."

"Listen, to him talk," said Howell Purdy scornfully. "You can't hear ghosts walk. They just float around as soft as anything."

"That's right," came in a chorus from the boys, who had involuntarily gathered a little closer together at the talk of ghosts.

"No, he isn't right," chirped up Billy. "Mouser had it straight when he talked about hearing ghosts walking."

"There you are," said Mouser, glad of the reinforcement.

"It's easy enough to say that," put in Howell, "but how are you going to prove it? All the books I ever read say that they don't make any noise. You can't bear them coming. So what do you make of that?" he added turning triumphantly toward Billy.

The latter however seemed not to be a bit disturbed.

"All the same I'm right," he asserted with quiet confidence.

"How can you prove it?" demanded Howell defiantly.

"That's the talk" came from the others. "Prove it, Billy. Put up or shut up."

"All right," replied Billy, accepting the challenge. "I know that ghosts walk because I've heard them do it!"

CHAPTER V

PUTTING ONE OVER

There was a shout of amazement from the boys in which could be detected an element of unbelief and derision. But there was also a note of awe that was balm to Billy's soul. Any one who was so familiar with the supernatural was not to be regarded lightly. Billy felt that he had scored a decided hit and swelled out his chest importantly.

"When did you hear them walk?" asked Skeets, looking about him a little apprehensively.

"You're just kidding," declared Shiner, stoutly. "I don't believe a word of it."

"I think that Billy's getting us on a string," affirmed Fred, although his eager eyes showed that he was none too sure of it.

Billy waited for the storm of protest and comment to subside.

"I mean just what I said," he affirmed. "Cross my heart and hope to die if I don't."

This solemn affirmation helped to quell the doubters, especially as there was nothing to arouse suspicion in Billy's sober face.

"Well then, tell us all about it," urged Mouser, who was anxious to obtain confirmation of his own belief.

"It was in our town when old General Bixby was buried," explained Billy, amid a silence in which one could have heard a pin drop. "There was a big turnout and the band played awful solemn music."

He paused for a moment.

"Yes, go on, go on," urged Skeets excitedly. "Was it then that you heard the ghosts walk?"

"Yes," replied Billy. "It was then that I heard the Dead March."

There was a moment of stupefaction, as the idea filtered into the minds of Billy's dupes. Bobby grasped it first.

"Run, Billy run!" he counseled. "They'll kill you for that!"

But Billy had already edged his way to the rim of the group and by the time they lunged for him was safely out of reach. Then he danced a jig and went through various gestures expressive of his pity and contempt for the victims who had let themselves so readily be taken in.

"It's too easy," he shouted. "It really isn't sportsmanlike to take advantage of such innocent boobs. It's like taking candy from a baby."

"It's no use," declared Bobby. "Billy is a hopeless case."

"He sure is," agreed Mouser, whose faith in ghosts had received a severe bump. "I was watching his face too, but he was so sober that I fell for it and fell good and hard. The only satisfaction is that the rest of you fell for it too."

Just then Dr. Raymond, the head of the school approached, and the boys subsided. The doctor smiled pleasantly at the group and singled out Bobby.

"I'd like to have you come to my office in a few minutes, Blake," he said, "and you also Martin and Bangs. I have something to say to you."

"Very well, sir," the boys assented.

The doctor passed on, and the boys looked at each other. Usually an invitation to the doctor's office portended something unpleasant, and was not looked forward to with any degree of enthusiasm.

"Now you're going to catch it," chaffed Skeets.

"What have you roughnecks been up to now?" demanded Shiner with mock severity.

"Perhaps he's going to scold you for falling for my jokes," Billy rubbed it in.

But the three who had been summoned only smiled. There had been times after midnight spreads and other escapades, when such an invitation would have made them decidedly uneasy. But

just at the moment their consciences were clear, and it was without misgiving that a few minutes later they knocked at the doctor's door and were told to come in.

The doctor was seated at his desk, but rose as they entered and motioned them to seats. He was a tall, rather spare man of middle age, with keen eyes and the face of a scholar, in which could be seen also the experience of a man of affairs. There was an air of natural dignity about him that warned any one that he would be an unsafe man to trifle with. But although he was a strict disciplinarian and the boys stood in wholesome awe of him, he was yet tolerant and broadminded and absolutely just. Any boy that was summoned before him for an alleged offense could be certain of being heard in his own defense, and of getting a "square deal;" and wherever possible, justice would be tempered with mercy.

He had built up a reputation for Rockledge School that was spread far and wide. His instructors were well chosen, the manners and morals of the boys were carefully looked after, and parents had no hesitation in confiding their boys to his keeping. The institution was fortunate in its location, standing on the shores of Monatook Lake, a beautiful body of water, which afforded facilities for bathing, boating and fishing in Summer and for skating and other ice sports in Winter. In addition to these natural advantages, the school had a well-equipped gymnasium and excellently laid out fields for football, baseball and other sports. For training both the mind and the body, Rockledge School left little to be desired; and this was so well understood in that part of the country that there was usually a waiting list of applicants for admission to the strictly limited number of pupils.

"I have sent for you boys," the doctor said, after they had seated themselves, "to thank you on behalf of myself and the school for the gallant thing you did to-day in saving those boys from drowning in the lake. It took a lot of pluck and hard work, and I'm proud of you."

The boys looked embarrassed.

"How is Lee Cartier getting along, Dr. Raymond?" asked Bobby eagerly, glad to change the subject. "Mr. Carrier told me that he wasn't well enough for us to see him."

The doctor's face took on a worried look.

"It's a little early to tell yet," he replied. "Dr. Evans, who has just gone, told me that the drenching he had received and the exposure afterward while you were getting back to shore had been a severe shock to his system. He comes from the South, you know, and hasn't been up here long enough to get hardened to our climate. There is a possibility that he may be in for a serious illness. Still, we'll hope for the best. I won't keep you any longer," he said, rising as a signal of dismissal, "but I want once more to say to you that you have done honor to yourselves and the school."

The boys bowed themselves out and closed the door behind them.

"The doctor's a brick, isn't he?" remarked Fred, as they went down the hall.

"You bet he is," agreed Sparrow. "He's the real goods."

"He's all wool and a yard wide," was Bobby's tribute to the head of Rockledge School.

A week passed swiftly by and then another, and by that time Winter had come in earnest. There had as yet been no snow, but the weather had become intensely cold and the lake was beginning to freeze over. At first, the ice looked like a gigantic spider's web shooting out in shimmering threads until the entire surface was covered with a crystal coating. Then the ice began to thicken at the shores, and it was evident that with the continuance of the cold weather it would soon be possible to skate from one end of the lake to the other.

Skates were gotten out and polished and sharpened. Some of the boys busied themselves with making ice sails, which they could hold in their hands and which would carry them like the wind along the glassy surface without the expenditure of any effort of their own, save what was required to hold the sails. This contrivance had a special appeal to Pee Wee, who was a profound believer in any device that would save labor. He was far too lazy however to make one for himself and had written home asking his folks to buy and send him one. To the other boys' suggestion that it be especially reinforced or made of sheet iron, he turned a deaf and scornful ear.

But before the ice was quite hard enough to be trusted, the snow took a hand. Up to then there had been nothing but a few flurries that did scarcely more than whiten the ground. But one afternoon, as the boys came out of their last recitations, they saw that the skies were lowering and that a steady snowstorm was in progress.

Ordinarily this would have been welcomed, but just now the boys had their minds set on skating, so that the sight of the whirling flakes was something of a disappointment.

“There goes our skating up the flue,” commented Shiner, as he looked on the ground on which there was already an inch of snow. “The lake will be no good, if it’s all covered with snow.”

“And by the time the snow’s ready to melt, the ice will melt too,” mourned Sparrow.

“And I just got a notice from the express company this morning that my ice sail was there,” complained Pee Wee.

“Oh, stop your grouching, you poor fish,” said Bobby. “In the first place the snow may not amount to anything. In the second place, if it does, we can get busy and sweep off enough of the ice on the lake to skate on. And in the third place, what we may miss in skating we can make up in coasting.”

chanted Skeets. “I guess that means Bobby,” he added, giving the latter a nudge in the ribs.

“Well, what have we got to growl about anyway?” said Fred, falling into his chum’s mood. “Here we are well and strong and able to put away three square meals a day” – here Pee Wee pricked up his ears. “Now if we were shut up in a room like Lee Cartier, we might have something to kick about.”

“Poor Lee!” remarked Bobby regretfully. “He’s certainly had a rough deal. He’s lucky of course that he didn’t get pneumonia. But it’s no joke to be kept in his room so long. I’m going over to see him for a while as soon as supper is over.”

Which he did, accompanied by Fred and Sparrow, who had expressed a desire to go along.

CHAPTER VI

FIRE!

The other schoolboys found Lee in the private room that had been set apart for him, propped up with pillows in a big easy chair and wrapped snugly in a bathrobe. His face was pale from his illness, but it lighted up when he saw his visitors.

"I was just wishing you fellows would drop in," he said, as they shook hands with him and pulled their chairs up close.

"It must get awful poky cooped up in the room so long," said Bobby sympathetically.

"It sure does," rejoined the boy from the South. "Of course I have books to read that help to pass away the time, but that isn't like being with the fellows. Not that I've read very much this afternoon," he went on, "because I've been too busy looking at the snow. Do you know that this is the first real snow storm I have ever seen?"

"Is that so?" queried Fred in astonishment. "We see so much of it every year that it gets to be an old story with us."

"You've got an awful lot of fun coming to you," put in Sparrow. "There's skating and ice sailing and coasting and snowballing and lots of things."

"Not forgetting muskrattin and fishing through the ice," added Fred. "Maybe we didn't have a lot of fun the winter we spent up in Snowtop Camp, eh, fellows?"

"You bet we did," agreed Sparrow, and launched into a long description of that memorable winter holiday in the Big Woods, not forgetting the bear and the wildcat and the snowslide that buried the house, and other adventures, to all of which Lee Cartier listened with the most rapt attention and interest.

"It must have been great," he murmured with a sigh of envy. "I can see that I've got a lot of fun waiting for me as soon as I can get outdoors again. And I hope it won't be long till then. The doctor said to-day that I could probably be outdoors in a week."

"That's bully," said Bobby. "But do you really mean, Lee, that you've never seen snow before?"

"Oh, I've seen little flurries of it once or twice," replied Lee, "but it's never amounted to anything, and it's melted just as soon as it struck the ground. Down in Louisiana, where I come from, it's practically summer all the year round. While it's been snowing here to-day, people have been going in swimming down there. The darkeys are going round barefooted, women are fanning themselves, and men are going round on the shady side of the street."

"Nobody getting sunstruck, is there?" queried Fred with a grin.

"Well, perhaps not as bad as that," smiled Lee, "but take it altogether it's almost as different there from what it is here as day is from night."

"I saw a picture the other day of some boys shinning up cocoanut trees somewhere in the middle of January," remarked Sparrow. "It seems funny to think there should be such differences in the same country."

"I'd like to spend some time down South," said Bobby. "I've been out West and almost everywhere else in the country except the South. Of course we had a taste of what it was like when we went to Porto Rico. But I'd like to be somewhere in the South for weeks at a time, and learn just how different things are from what they are here up North."

"You'd enjoy it all right," affirmed Lee. "You can fairly live outdoors all the year round, and you'd find lots of things that would be strange and interesting. I'd like to have you on my place where I could go round with you and show you the sights."

"That would be fine," agreed Bobby. "What town in Louisiana do you live in, Lee?"

"I don't live in any town," replied Lee. "The nearest town is Raneleigh, and that isn't much more than a store and a railroad station. Mother and I live on a plantation. My folks have lived there for generations. My great-grandfather had the property in the old days when Louisiana belonged to France."

"I guessed you were French or of French descent because of the name," said Bobby. "Let's see, wasn't there a Cartier who had something to do with the discovery of America?"

"There was a Cartier who discovered parts of America in 1534," replied Lee, "and he, I believe, was an ancestor of mine. That's one bit of history that's been pretty well dinned into me," he added with a smile. "Our people, you know, put a lot of value on their ancestry, though I never cared much for it. My mother too was of French descent, as one can tell from her first name, Celeste."

"Is the plantation a big one?" asked Bobby.

"Pretty big," replied Lee, "though not as big as it was before the Civil War. That was in the days when people kept slaves, and our folk had a lot of them and thousands of acres of land. But after the war was over, a lot of the land was sold, and now we have only a few hundred acres. And I don't know how long we'll have that," he added, a shadow coming over his brow.

"What do you mean?" asked Fred with ready sympathy.

"Oh, we're having trouble about the boundary lines of the property," explained Lee. "Some of the stones that mark the lines are missing, and there's a neighbor of ours named Boolus who's claiming part of the property. We're sure he is wrong, but we're not able to prove it, and he's making us lots of trouble. He's one of the meanest men in the parish and everybody hates and despises him. But he's got lots of money and tricky lawyers, and it looks as though he were going to get the best of us. But I don't want to bother you about my troubles," Lee added, brightening up. "I only wish I had you fellows down with me on the plantation while we still own it. I think I might be able to show you lots of things that would make you open your eyes, such as alligators and –"

"Alligators!" exclaimed Fred. "Do you have them down there?"

"You see you've made Fred open his eyes already," said Bobby with a laugh.

"There are lots of them," said Lee, "and big ones too. There's a big swamp on the edge of our property that they say is full of them. It's lots of fun hunting them."

"Have you ever hunted them?" asked Sparrow with intense interest.

"I've never gone after them alone," replied Lee, "but I've gone along with hunting parties and seen them caught."

"How do they do it?" asked Fred.

"They dig them out of their holes," explained Lee, pleased that he could tell the boys something outside the range of their experience. "You see the alligators have holes or burrows in the neighborhood of the water, where they crawl in at times. The hunters go along until they spy one of these burrows, which are not very deep below the surface of the ground. Then one of them takes a stout rope, makes a noose in it and hangs this over the entrance to the hole. Others take a sharp spear or stake, and prod into the ground above where they know the alligator is lying. That stirs him up and he crawls out of his hole to see what's the matter. As he comes out he sticks his head into the noose, and the man above tightens it before he can back out. The brute tries to pull back into his burrow, but all hands get hold of the rope and yank him out. As his body appears, other ropes are passed around him, and by the time he's all out he's pretty well trussed up. Sometimes though, he puts up an awful fight and breaks the ropes, and then you have to look out. If you ever come within reach of his jaws or the swish of his tail, it's all up with you."

"It must be awfully exciting," exclaimed Fred.

"It is that all right," agreed Lee. "Then we have lots of other sports in which there's plenty of fun. There's badger hunting, and coon hunting with the dogs at night, and once in a while a panther comes round, and take it altogether there isn't much dullness on the plantation. I only wish you fellows could share the fun with me."

“There’s nothing I’d like better,” said Bobby, and his companions nodded assent. “But Louisiana’s a long way off, and I guess we’ll have to take it out in wishing. I suppose we’ll have to go now,” he added, reaching for his cap, “though I’d like to stay for hours and hear you tell us things about the South.”

“It’s done me a lot of good to have you fellows drop in,” said Lee. “The days seem mighty long here with no one but the doctor and the nurse to see and talk to. Come in again just as often as you can.”

“We sure will,” replied Bobby, “and you must hurry and get well so as to be around with us again.”

That night Bobby found it hard to get to sleep. The talk with Lee had brought novel ideas into his mind, and he lay awake for a long time, conjuring up visions of what life must be on a plantation.

When at last he did fall asleep, he dreamed that he was pushing a flatboat along a Louisiana lagoon. On the shores about him were a number of what seemed to be logs of wood. Suddenly one of them moved and slipped into the water, and he saw that it was an alligator. One after the other, things that looked like logs did the same. The presence of so many of the ugly brutes made him uneasy, and he made his craft move faster to get out of the vicinity as soon as possible. Just as he was congratulating himself that he had gotten out of the danger zone, the water broke at the side of the boat, and a pair of great jaws appeared, above which were the menacing eyes of a big alligator. The brute made a lunge at the boat and nearly overturned it. Bobby tried to beat him off with the pole, and while he was doing so, another alligator appeared on the other side of the boat. A moment more and the water was fairly alive with the fearsome creatures, and Bobby was surrounded by a circle of open jaws and frightful teeth and flaming eyes. He struck out desperately, but to no avail. The circle closed around him, and one of the brutes with a blow of his tail stove in the side of the boat. He felt himself sinking, saw a terrible pair of jaws reach out to seize him and – woke up to find himself sitting bolt upright in bed while a cold sweat bedewed his forehead.

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