

Warner Frank A.

**Bobby Blake at Rockledge
School: or, Winning the
Medal of Honor**



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CHAPTER I

"THE OVERLAND LIMITED"

A boy of about ten, with a freckled face and fiery red hair cropped close to his head, came doubtfully up the side porch steps of the Blake house in Clinton and peered through the screen door at Meena, the Swedish girl.

Meena was tall and rawboned, with very red elbows usually well displayed, and her straw-colored hair was bound in a tight "pug" on top of her long, narrow head. Meena had sharp blue eyes and she could see boys a great way off.

"Mis' Blake – she ban gone out," said Meena, before the red-haired boy could speak. "You vant somet'ing? No?"

"I – I was looking for Bobby," said the visitor, stammeringly. He and Mrs. Blake's Swedish girl were not on good terms.

"I guess he ban gone out, too," said Meena, who did not want to be "bothered mit boys."

The boy looked as though he thought she was a bad guesser! Somewhere inside the house he heard a muffled voice. It shouted:

"Whoo! whoo! whoo-who-who-o-o-o!"

The imitation of a steam whistle grew rapidly nearer. It seemed to be descending from the roof of the house – and descending very swiftly. Finally there came a decided bang – the landing of a pair of well-shod feet on the rug – and the voice rang out:

"All out! All out for last stop! All out!"

"*That's* Bobby," suggested the boy with the red hair, looking wistfully into Meena's kitchen.

"Vell!" ejaculated the girl. "You go in by the dining-room door, I guess. You not go to trapse through my clean kitchen. Vipe your feet, boy!"

The boy did as he was bade, and opened the dining-room door. A steady footstep was thumping overhead, rising into the upper regions of the three-story house.

The red-haired youngster knew his way about this house just as well as he knew his own. Only he tripped over a corner of the dining-room rug and bumped into two chairs in the darkened living-room before he reached the front hall.

This was wide and was lighted above by ground-glass oval windows on all three flights of stairs. The mahogany balustrade was in a single smooth spiral, broken by no ornament. It offered a tempting course from garret to ground floor to any venturesome small boy.

"All aboard!" shouted the voice overhead.

"The Overland Limited," said the red-haired boy, grinning, and squinting up the well.

"Ding-dong! ding-dong! All aboard for the Overland Limited! This way! No stop between Denver and Chicago! All aboard!"

There was a scramble above and then the exhaust of the locomotive was imitated in a thin, boyish treble:

"Sh-h! sh-h! sh-h! Choo! choo! choo! Ding-dong-ding! We're off – "

A figure a-straddle the broad banister-rail shot into view on the upper flight. The momentum carried the boy around the first curve and to the brink of the second pitch. Down that he sped like an arrow, and so around to the last slant of the balustrade.

"Next stop, Chi-ca-go!" yelled the boy on the rail. "All o-o-out! all out for Chicago!"
And then, bang! he landed upon the hall rug.

"How'd you know the board wasn't set against you, Bobby?" demanded the red-haired one.
"You might have had a wreck."

"Hello, Fred Martin. If I'd looked around and seen your red head, I'd sure thought they'd flashed a danger signal on me – though the Overland Limited is supposed to have a clear track, you know."

Fred jumped on him for that and the two chums had a wrestling match on the hall rug. It was, however, a good-natured bout, and soon they sat side by side on the lower step of the first flight, panting, and grinned at each other.

Bobby's hair was black, and he wore it much longer than Fred. To tell the truth, Fred had the "Riley cut," as the boys called it, so that his hair would not attract so much attention.

Fred had all the temper that is supposed to go with red hair. Perhaps red-haired people only seem more quick tempered because everybody "picks on them" so! Bobby was quite as boisterous as his chum, but he was more cautious and had some control over his emotions. Nobody ever called Bobby Blake a coward, however.

He was a plump-cheeked, snub-nosed boy, with a wide, smiling mouth, dancing brown eyes, and an active, sturdy body. Like his chum, he was ten years old.

"Thought you had to work all this forenoon, cleaning the back yard?" said Bobby. "That's why I stayed home. 'Fraid some of the other fellows would want me to go off with them, and we agreed to go to Plunkit's Creek this afternoon, you know."

"You bet you!" agreed Fred. "I got a dandy can of worms. Found 'em under that pile of rubbish in the yard when I hauled it out."

"But you haven't cleared up all that old yard so soon?" determined Bobby, shaking his head.

Fred grinned again. "No," he said. "I caught Buster Shea. He's a good fellow, Buster is. I got him to do it for me, and paid him a cent, and my ten glass agates, and two big alleys, and a whole cage-trap full o' rats – five of them – we caught in our barn last night. He's goin' to take 'em home and see if he can tame 'em, like Poley Smith did."

"Huh!" snorted Bobby, "Poley's are *whiterats*. You can't tame reg'lar rats."

"That wasn't for me to tell him," returned Fred, briskly. "Buster thinks he can. And, anyway, it was a good bargain without the rats. He'll clean the yard fine."

"Then let's get a lunch from Meena and I'll find my fish-tackle, and we'll start at once," exclaimed Bobby, jumping up.

"Ain't you got to see your mother first?"

"She knows I'm going. She won't mind when I go, as long as I get back in time for supper. And then – she ain't so particular 'bout what I do just now," added Bobby, more slowly.

"Jolly! I wish my mother was like that," breathed Fred, with a sigh of longing.

"Huh! I ain't so sure I like it," confessed Bobby. "There's somethin' goin' on in this house, Fred."

"What do you mean?" demanded his chum, staring at him.

"Pa and mother are always talkin' together, and shutting the door so I can't come in. And they look troubled all the time – I see 'em, when they stare at me so. Something's up, and I don't know what it is."

"Mebbe your father's lost all his money and you'll have to go down and live in one of those shacks by the canal – like Buster Shea's folks," exclaimed the consoling Fred Martin.

"No. 'Tain't as bad as that, I guess. Mother's gone shopping for a lot of new clothes to-day – I heard her tell Pa so at breakfast. So it ain't money. It – it's just like it is before Christmas, don't you know, Fred? When folks are hiding things around so's you won't find 'em before Christmas morning, and joking about Santa Claus, and all that."

"Crickey! Presents?" exclaimed Fred. "'Tain't your birthday coming, Bob?"

"No. I had my birthday, you know, two months ago."

"What do you s'pose it can be, then?"

"I haven't a notion," declared Bobby, shaking his head. "But it's something about me. Something's going to happen me – I don't know what."

"Bully!" shouted Fred, suddenly smiting him on the shoulder. "Do you suppose they're going to let you go to Rockledge with me this fall?"

"Rockledge School? No such luck," groaned Bobby. "You see, mother won't hear of that. Your mother has a big family, Fred, and she can spare you –"

"Glad to get rid of me for a while, I guess," chuckled the red-haired boy.

"Well, my mother isn't. So I can't go to boarding school with you," sighed Bobby.

"Well," said the restless Fred, "let's get a move on us if we're going to Plunkit's."

"We must get some lunch," said Bobby, starting up once more. "Say! has Meena got the toothache again?"

"She didn't have her head tied up. But she's real cross," admitted Fred.

"She'll have the toothache if I ask for lunch, I know," grumbled Bobby. "She always does. She says boys give her the toothache."

Nevertheless, he led the way to the kitchen. There the tall, angular Swede cast an unfavorable light blue eye upon them.

"I ban jes' clean up mine kitchen," she complained.

"We just want a lunch to take fishing, Meena," said Master Bobby, hopefully.

"You don't vant loonch to fish mit," declared Meena. "You use vor-rms."

Fred giggled. He was always giggling at inopportune times. Meena glared at him with both light blue eyes and reached for the red flannel bandage she always kept warm back of the kitchen range.

"I ban got toothache," she said. "I can't vool mit boys," and she proceeded to tie the long bandage around her jaws and tied it so that the ends – like long ears – stood right up on top of her head.

"But you can give us just a little," begged Bobby. "We won't be back till supper time."

This seemed to offer some comfort to the hard-working girl, and she mumbled an agreement, while she shuffled into the pantry to get the lunch ready. She did not speak English very well at any time, and when her face was tied up, it was almost impossible to understand her.

Sometimes, if Meena became offended, she would insist upon waiting on table with this same red bandage about her jaws – even if the family had company to dinner! But in many ways she was invaluable to Mrs. Blake, so the good lady bore Meena's eccentricities.

By and by the Swedish girl appeared with a box of luncheon. The boys dared not peek into it while they were under her eye, but they thanked her and ran out of the house. Fred was giggling again.

"She looks just like a rabbit – all ears – with that thing tied around her head," he said.

"Whoever heard of a rabbit with red ears?" scoffed Bobby.

He was investigating the contents of the lunch box. There were nice ham sandwiches, minced eggs with mayonnaise, cookies, jumbles, a big piece of cheese, and two berry tarts.

"Oh, Meena's bark is always worse than her bite," sighed Bobby, with thanksgiving.

"And *this* bite is particularly nice, eh?" said Fred, grinning at his own pun.

"Guess we won't starve," said Bobby.

"Besides, there is a summer apple tree right down there by the creek – don't you know? If the apples are all yellow, you can't eat enough to hurt you. If they are half yellow it'll take a lot to hurt you. If they're right green and gnarly, about two means a hurry-up call for Dr. Truman," and Fred Martin spoke with strong conviction, having had experience in the matter.

CHAPTER II

APPLES AND APPLETHWAITE PLUNKIT

Bobby found the little grape basket in which he kept his fishing-tackle on a beam in the woodshed. Clinton was an old fashioned town, and few people as yet owned automobiles. There were, therefore, not many garages, but plenty of rambling woodsheds and barns. When all the barns are done away with and there are nothing but garages left, boys will lose half their chance for fun!

The Blakes' shed, and the stable and barn adjoining, offered a splendid play-place in all sorts of weather for Bobby and his friends. There were a pair of horses and a cow in the stable, too. Michael Mulcahey was the coachman, and he liked boys just as much as Meena, the Swedish girl, disliked them. This fact was ever a bone of contention between the old coachman and Meena. Otherwise Michael and Meena might have gotten married and gone to housekeeping in the little cottage at the back of the Blake property, facing on the rear street.

"He ban *in*-courage them boys in their voolishness," accused Meena. "Me, I don't vant no boys aroundt. Michael, he vould haf the house overrun mit boys. So ve don't get married."

Just now Michael was not at the barn. He had driven Mrs. Blake to the neighboring city in the light carriage, on her shopping trip. Bobby and Fred trailed through the back gate and down the lane, leaving the gate open. Later Meena had to run out and chase the chickens out of the tomato patch. Then she tied the red bandage in a harder knot and prepared to show herself a martyr to her mistress when it came supper time.

Back of the Blake house the narrow street cut into a road that led right out into the country. There were plenty of houses lining this road at first, but gradually the distance between them became greater.

Likewise the dust in the road grew deeper. It was not a way attractive to automobiles, and it had not been oiled as were many of the Clinton streets.

"Let's take off our shoes and stockings and save our shoes," suggested Fred. "We'll go in swimmin' before we come back, so we'll be all clean."

"Let's," agreed Bobby, and they sat down at once and accomplished the act in a few moments. They stuffed their stockings into their shoes, tied the laces together and slung them about their necks. The shoes knocked against their shoulder-blades as they trotted on, their bare feet scuffing up little clouds of dust.

"We raise a lot of dust – just like the Overland Limited," said Bobby, looking back. Bobby had once travelled west with his parents, and they had come back by way of Denver. He had never forgotten his long ride in that fast train.

"Go ahead!" declared Fred. "*I'm* the Empire State. You got to get up some speed to beat *me*."

A minute later two balloons of dust could have been seen hovering over the road to the creek – the boys were shrouded in them. They ran, scuffing, as hard as they could run, and kicked up an enormous cloud of dust.

They stopped at the stile leading into Plunkits' lower pasture. The boys from town never went near the farmhouse. Plunkits' was a big farm, and this end of it was not cultivated. If they went near the truck patches, somebody would be sure to chase them. There always had been a feud between the Clinton boys and the Plunkit family.

But there wasn't a swimming hole anywhere around the town – or a fishing stream – like the creek. The Plunkits really had no right to drive anybody away from the stream, for the farm bordered only one side of it. The city boys could go across and fish from the other side all they wanted to. That had been long since decided.

The best swimming hole was below the boundary of the Plunkit land, anyway, but this path across the pasture was a short-cut.

"If we see that Applethwaite Plunkit and his dog, what are we going to do?" asked Fred, as they trotted along the sidehill path, white with road dust from head to foot.

"Nothing. But if he sees us, that's another matter," chuckled Bobby.

"All right. You're the smart one. But what will we do?"

"Run, if he isn't too near," said Bobby, practically.

"And suppose he *is* too near?"

"Guess we'll have to run just the same," returned Bobby, thoughtfully. "He can lick either of us, Fred. And with the dog he can lick us both at once. That dog is real savage. He's made him so, Ap Plunkit has."

"I bet we could pitch on Ap and fix him," said the combative Fred.

"Now, you just keep out of trouble if you can, Fred Martin," advised Bobby, cautiously. "You know – if you get into a fight, you'll catch it when you get home. Your father will be sure to hear of it."

"Well! what am I going to do if they pitch on me?" demanded Fred.

"Turn the other cheek," chuckled Bobby, "like Miss Rainey, our Sunday-school teacher, says."

"Huh! that's all right. A fellow's got two cheeks; but if you get a punch in the nose, you can't turn your other nose – you haven't one! So now!" declared the very literal and pugnacious Fred.

Just then they came close enough to the creek to see the willows along the bank. At the corner of the Plunkit fence there stood a big apple tree – a "summer sweetnin'" as the country folk called it.

"Scubbity-yow!" ejaculated Fred Martin. "See those apples? And they're *yellow*!"

"Some of them are," admitted his chum.

"More'n half of them, I declare. Say! we're going to have a feast, Bob. Come on!"

Bobby grabbed him by the sleeve. "Hold on! don't go so fast, Fred," exclaimed the brown-eyed boy. "Those apples aren't ours."

"But they're going to be," returned Fred, grinning.

"Now, you don't mean that," said Bobby, seriously. "You know you mustn't climb that tree, or pick apples on *this* side of the fence. Here's where we crawl through. Now! lots of the limbs overhang this other side of the fence – and there's a lot of ripe apples on the ground."

"Pshaw! the Plunkits would never know," complained Fred. But he followed Bobby through the break in the pasture fence, just the same.

Bobby was just as much fun as any boy in Clinton; Fred knew *that*. Yet Bobby was forever "seeing consequences." He kept them both out of trouble very often by seeing ahead. Whereas Fred, left to himself, never would stop to think at all!

They had come two miles and a half. Where were there ever two boys who could walk as far as that without "walking up an appetite"?

"My goodness me, Fred!" exclaimed Bobby, as they came to the clear-water creek in which the pebbles and sand were plainly visible on the bottom. "My goodness me, Fred! aren't you dreadfully hungry?"

"I could eat the label off this tomato can – just like a goat!" declared Fred, shaking the can which held the fishworms before his chum's face and eyes.

"Then let's eat before we bait a hook," suggested Bobby. "I don't care if Meena *does* have the toothache. She makes de-lic-ious sandwiches."

"Scubbity-yow! I should say she did," agreed Fred, sitting down cross-legged on the grass under a spreading oak that here broke the hedge of willows bordering the stream.

The boys soon had their mouths full. It was not yet noon, but the sun was high in the heavens, and it twinkled down at them between the interlacing leaves and twigs of the oak. A little breeze played with the blades of grass. A thrush sang his heart out, swinging on a cane across the stream. A

locust whirred like a policeman's rattle in a tall poplar a little way down the creek. In the distance a crow cawed lazily as he winged his way across a field, early plowed for grain.

"This is a fine place," said Bobby. "I just love the country."

"This is the way it is at Rockledge," declared Fred, proudly.

"How do you know? You've never been there."

"But Sam Tillinghast, who comes to see us once in a while, went to Rockledge before he went to college. He says Rockledge is right up on a bluff overlooking Monatook Lake, and that a fellow can have more fun there than a box of monkeys!"

"I never had a box of monkeys," said Bobby, grinning, and with his mouth full.

"That's all right. I wish you were going," said Fred, wagging his head. "Don't you suppose that's what's the matter at your house – what your pa and your mother are thinking about?"

"No," said Bobby, wagging his head, sadly. "I guess it ain't nothing as good as going to boarding school. You see, they look so solemn when I catch them staring at me."

"Maybe you've done something and they are thinking of punishing you?" suggested Fred.

"No. I haven't done a thing. I really haven't! I'd thought of that, and I just went back over everything I've done this vacation, and I can't think of a thing," decided Bobby, reflectively.

"Well, if it's something bad, you'll find out soon enough what it is," said Fred, playing a regular Job's comforter.

"And if it is something *good*, I suppose they'll worry me to death – or pretty near – too, eh!"

"Mebbe if we could find a Gypsy woman she'd tell your fortune and you'd know," said Fred.

"Yah! I don't believe in such stuff," declared Bobby. "You remember that old woman that came around selling baskets last spring and wheedled that ten cents out of you? She only told you that you were going to cross water and have a great change on the other side."

"Well, she knew!" exclaimed Fred, earnestly. "Didn't I fall into the canal the very next day and have to swim across it; and you brought me a change of clothing from home? Huh! I guess that old woman hit it about right," declared the red-haired boy, with conviction.

Bobby chuckled a long time over this. It amused him a great deal. He and his chum had eaten up nearly the whole of Meena's luncheon – and she had not been niggardly with it, either.

"I'm going to have some of those apples," declared Fred. "Come on."

"All right," agreed Bobby, who had no compunctions about taking the apples on this side of the fence. He believed that the Plunkits had no claim upon the fruit that overhung somebody else's land! That is the usual belief of small boys in the country, whether it is legally correct, or not.

When the chums bit into the yellow apples on the ground they found that almost every one had been seized by a prior claimant. Fred bit right through a soft, white worm!

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed the red-haired boy, and ran down to the creek's edge to rinse his mouth. "Isn't that awful?"

"Don't bite blindly," advised Bobby, chuckling. "You were too eager."

"I'm going to have a decent apple," declared Fred, coming back.

He jumped up, seized one of the lower branches of the apple tree, and scrambled up to a seat on a strong limb. Several tempting looking "summer sweetnin's" were within his reach. He seized one, looked it all over for blemishes and, finding none, set his teeth in it.

"How is it?" asked Bobby, biting carefully around a wormy apple.

"Fine," returned his chum, and tossed Bobby an apple he plucked.

At that very moment a voice hailed them from a distance, and a dog barked. "There's that Applethwaite Plunkit and his dog," gasped Bobby.

"Sure it is," said Fred, turning his gaze upon the lanky boy of twelve, or so, and the big black and brown dog that were running together across the pasture.

"Now we're in for it!" exclaimed Bobby, somewhat worried.

CHAPTER III

FRED IN TROUBLE

Fred sat kicking his bare heels together and grinning over the fence at the Plunkit boy and his dog.

"Get down out of that tree – you!" exclaimed the Plunkit boy.

"Who says so?" demanded Fred.

"I do."

"Well, say it again," responded Master Fred, in a most tantalizing way. "I like to hear you."

Applethwaite Plunkit was not a nice looking boy at all. He had perfectly white hair, but he wasn't an albino, for albinos have pink-rimmed eyes. His eyes were very strange looking, however, for they were not mates. One was one color, and one was another.

There are many such afflicted people in the world; usually they have one gray eye and one brown one. But Ap Plunkit had one eye that was of a sickly brown color, while the other was of a sickly green. That means that the "whites" of his mismated eyes were yellowish in hue.

Perhaps, because of this misfortune, the other boys plagued him, and that had soured his temper. He was very angry with Fred.

"Get out of that tree, you red-headed monkey!" he shouted, "or I'll set my dog on you!"

"I won't do it, you white-headed donkey – and your dog can't get me; not unless he can climb a tree," added Fred, grinning again.

"I'll come over there and knock you out of it," threatened Ap.

"I'd like to see you do it," responded Fred, swinging his feet again.

"I'll show you!" cried Ap, and he started for the hole in the fence. "Come on, Rove!" he called to the dog.

The big dog followed his master. He was part Newfoundland and would have made a fine playmate for any boy, if he had not been trained to be ugly with all strangers. When he got through the fence and saw Bobby standing idly by, he growled at him.

"Look out, Bob!" shouted Fred. "He'll bite you."

"I'm not doing anything," said Bobby Blake. "And you had better not set your dog on me, Plunkit."

"You fellers are too fresh," said the farm boy. "My father says you're not to come around here –"

"Your father doesn't own this land, and your father doesn't own this creek," whipped in Fred, from the branch.

"You fellers came across our land to get here," declared Ap.

"How do you know *that*, Mr. Smartie?" asked Fred. He had just finished eating an apple. He threw the core at the dog and hit him on the nose. Rover growled and then jumped up and snapped at Master Fred's bare heels.

"Scubbity-yow!" shrieked the daring Fred, kicking up his heels excitedly. "Didn't get me that time, did you? I'm not *your* meat."

"You stop that, Ap," ordered Bobby. "Call off your dog."

He had not been altogether idle. There was a heavy club of hard wood lying nearby, and he seized it.

"He'd better get down out of that tree or Rove will eat him up," said Ap, boastfully.

"Those branches overhang this land. The apples don't belong to you any more than they do to us," said Bobby, and he thought he was quite right in saying so.

"Yah!" scoffed Ap. "He had to climb the tree-trunk to get there, and the tree's on *our* side of the fence."

"Didn't neither, Mr. Smartie!" cried Fred, in delight. "I jumped up and grabbed a limb, and pulled myself up. Have an apple?" and he aimed one of the hard, green ones at Ap.

"Don't you do that, Fred!" called up Bobby, in haste.

"Well, then, I'll give it to the dog," said Fred, throwing the apple to Rover.

"You come down out of that tree, and you stop pelting my dog!" commanded Applethwaite Plunkit.

"Yes – I – will!" responded Fred, biting into another apple.

"Well! I'll lick one of you, anyway!" exclaimed Ap, who had been slyly stepping nearer.

And immediately he threw himself on Bobby. He caught the latter so unexpectedly that he couldn't have used the club had he wished to.

"Come on, Rove!" shrieked Ap. "Bite him, boy – bite him!"

"You stop that!" shouted the red-haired boy in the tree. "Bobby hasn't done a thing – "

The dog growled and ran around the two struggling boys. Perhaps he was looking for a chance to bite his master's antagonist. At least, it looked so.

Bobby Blake, although never a quarrelsome lad, was no mollycoddle. Attacked as he had been, he struggled manfully to escape the bigger boy. He dropped the club, but he tore off Ap's hat and flung it into the creek.

"Go for it, sir! After it!" he screamed, and Rover heard him and saw the hat. That was one of the dog's accomplishments. He was a Newfoundland, and retrieving articles from the water was right in his line.

He barked and bounded to the edge of the steep bank. He evidently considered that, after all, his master and Bobby were only playing, and this part of the play he approved of.

The instant Bobby heard the splash of the big dog into the water, he twisted in Ap's grasp, tripped him, and fell on top of the larger boy.

"Oh! oh! oh!" gasped Ap. "You're hurtin' me – you're killin' me! I can't breathe – "

"Scubbity-yow!" yelled Fred, giving voice to his favorite battle-cry, and he dropped from the apple tree, running to Bobby's help.

But Bobby got up and released the bawling farm-boy at once. "Come on, Fred," he said. "Let's get out o' here."

"Why, you got the best of him!" cried Fred, in disgust. "Let's duck him! Let's throw him in after his old dog."

"No you don't," declared Bobby, seizing Fred's hand. "We're going to get out while we have the chance. I only tripped him and got the dog out of the way so you could escape."

"Huh!" exclaimed Fred. "I didn't get as many apples as I wanted."

"I don't care. You come on," said his chum.

"Whoever heard of the winning side giving way like this?" grumbled the red-haired boy. "Anyway," he added, picking up the club Bobby had lost, "if that dog comes after us, I'll hit him."

Bobby picked up the box containing the remainder of their luncheon, and led the way through the bushes. The dog had come ashore, and it and Ap Plunkit were quickly out of sight. Fred was still grumbling about leaving the foe to claim "the best of it."

"He'll pitch on us next time, just the same," he declared. "Why didn't you punch him when you had him down, Bob?"

"Aw, come on!" said his chum. "Always wanting to get into a fight. You keep that up when you get to Rockledge School, and you'll be in hot water all the time."

"Shucks!" grinned Fred. "I'd like to be in *cold* water right now. The swimming hole isn't far away. Let's."

"We can't go in but once – you know we can't," said Bobby.

"Why not?" demanded Fred, quickly.

"Because we promised our mothers we wouldn't go in but once a day this vacation."

"Huh! That ain't saying but what we can take off our clothes and put on our swimming trunks, and stay in all day long."

"That would be just as dishonest as going in two or three times, Fred," exclaimed Bobby. "And you wouldn't do it. Besides," he added, grinning; "you know you tried that *last* summer, and 'member what you got for it?"

"You bet you!" exclaimed the red-haired one. "I got sunburned something fierce! No. I won't do *that* again. That's the day we built the raft on Sanders' Pond, and oh, how I hurt! I guess I do remember, all right."

"No," said Bobby, after a minute. "We'll go fishing first, and then take a swim before we go home. That'll clean us up, and make us feel fresh. There's that old stump again, Fred. I believe there's a big trout lives under that stump. Don't you 'member! We've seen him jump."

"Ya-as," scoffed Fred. "But that old fellow won't jump for a worm. He's had too many square meals this summer, don't you know? It'll take a fancy fly, like those my Uncle Jim uses when he goes fishing, to coax Mr. Trout out of the creek."

"I'm going to try," said Bobby, who could be obstinate in his opinion.

"I'll be satisfied if I catch a shiner," declared Fred. "I'll try off that rock yonder. Come on! There's a couple of dandy fishpoles."

Like real country boys, Bobby and Fred cut poles each time they went fishing. No need to carry them back and forth to their homes in Clinton and it did not take five minutes to cut and rig these poles.

"What nice, fat worms," said Bobby, when Fred shook up the tomato can.

"That's what the robin said," chuckled Fred. "Know what my sister, Betty, said yesterday morning? You know it rained the night before and the robins were picking up worms on the lawn right early – before breakfast.

"Bet was at the window and one fat robin picked up a worm, swallowed it, and flew right up into a tree where he began to sing like sixty! Bet says:

"'Oh! that robin gives me the *squirms*; how can he sing that way when he's all full of those crawly things?'"

"Now hush!" ordered Bobby, the next moment. "I'm going to drop this nice fellow right down beside that stump and see if I can coax Mr. Trout up."

But Mr. Trout did not appear. Bobby, with exemplary patience, tried it again and again. He changed his bait and dropped a fresh worm into the brown, cloudy water where he believed the trout lay.

"You're not fishing," chuckled Fred, from his station on the rock, a few yards away. "You're just drowning worms."

"Huh!" returned Bobby. "I don't see any medals on *you*. You haven't caught anything."

"But I'm going to!" whispered Fred, swiftly, and holding his pole with sudden attention.

Then, with a nervous jerk, he flung up the pole. Hook and sinker came with it, and a tiny, wriggling, silver fish, about a finger long, shot into the air. But Fred had not been careful to select his stand, and he drove his line and fish up among the branches of a tree.

"Now you've done it – and likely scared my trout," exclaimed Bobby.

Fred, in his usual impulsive fashion, tried to jerk back his line. The hook and sinker were caught around a branch. The shiner dropped off the hook and rested in a crotch of the branch. No fish ever was transformed into a bird so quickly since fishing was begun!

And while Bobby laughed, and held his sides, Fred jerked at the entangled line again and again until, stepping too far back, and pulling too hard, the line chanced to give a foot or two, Master Fred fell backwards and —*flop!* into the deep pool below the rock he went!

CHAPTER IV

AN EVENTFUL AFTERNOON

"On! oh! oh! – gurgle! gurgle! *blob!* Help! Give us a hand – "

Down Master Fred went again, and, his mouth being open, he swallowed more of the murky water of the creek than was good for him. He came up, coughing and blowing.

Bobby, although forced to laugh, extended the butt of his own fish pole and Fred seized it. In half a minute he was on the bank, panting and "blowing bubbles," as Bobby said.

"You can laugh – "

"I hope so," returned Bobby, turning to give his attention to his own hook and line. "Oh!"

Something was the matter down under that stump; the water was agitated. The taut line pulled in Bobby's hands.

"Oh! A bite!" cried he, picking up his pole. "Oh, Fred! I've hooked that old trout!"

Master Martin was too much taken up with his own affairs just then to pay much attention. Bobby, all of a tremble (for he had never caught a trout over a finger long), began to "play" the fish cautiously. It seemed to be sulking down in its hole under the old stump. Bobby pulled on the line gently.

Meanwhile Fred, getting his breath, began to remove his saturated garments.

"I guess," he grunted, "we might as well go in swimming right now. Gee! I'm wet. And these things will have to dry before I start home. Oh!"

Bobby's line "gave" suddenly. Bobby uttered a yell, for he thought the trout had jumped.

Whatever was on his hook shot to the surface of the brown pool. Bobby went over backward on the grass. The point of his pole stood straight up, and the hook was snapped out of the water.

There was a long, black, *squirmy* thing on the hook. As Bobby squealed, the eel flopped right down into his face!

"Aw! ouch! take him off!" shouted Bobby, and flung away his pole.

In a second the eel was so tangled in the fishline that one might have thought it and the line had been tied into a hard knot! Fred was rolling with laughter on the bank, his wet shirt half over his head.

"Scubbity-yow!" he shrieked. "Now you got it. You laughed at *me*, Bobby Blake. See how you get it yourself."

Bobby began to laugh, too. He could see that the joke was, after all, on him.

"And that's your big trout – ho, ho!" shouted Fred. "An old eel. Kill him with a club, Bobby. You'll never get him untangled if you don't."

"And he'll wiggle *then* till the sun goes down. Just like a snake," declared Bobby, repeating a boyish superstition held infallible by the boys of Clinton.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Fred, at last pulling the wet shirt off. "I'm aching for laughing. What a mess that line's in."

"And how about your own!" demanded Bobby, on a broad grin again, and pointing into the branches of the tree where Fred had flung his shiner.

"We're a pair of fine fishermen – I don't think!" admitted Fred, in some disgust.

He got off the remainder of his wet clothing, and slipped on his trunks.

"You might as well do the same, Bobby," he advised, while he laid his clothing over the low bushes back from the bank of the creek, where the sun could get at them nicely. "Look at your shirt. All slime from that old eel."

"I wish he'd keep still a minute," said Bobby, with some impatience. "*What* were eels ever made for?"

"They're good eating, some folks think. But I'd just as lief eat snakes."

"Some savages eat snakes," said Bobby, trying to keep one foot on the tail-end of the eel, and unwinding the fishline.

But the next moment the squirming creature wound itself up in the line again into a harder knot than before.

"Looks just like the worm he swallowed," chuckled Fred. "There! he's got the hook out of his mouth. Fling him back, Bobby!"

Bobby did so, pitching eel and line into the water. There was a flop or two and the wriggling fish got free. Then Bobby hauled in his line and began to rebait the hook.

"I guess I'll try fishing somewhere else," he said. "I won't try here. If there ever *was* a trout under that stump, he's scared away."

"There never was a trout where an old eel made his nest," scoffed Fred, struggling with his own line.

"That eel didn't belong here," announced Bobby, with confidence. "What do you bet I don't catch a trout to-day?"

"Never mind. I've landed *one* fish," chuckled Fred.

"Fish! what's it doing roosting in that tree, then!" demanded Bobby, giggling. "It's a bird."

Fred managed to untangle his own line, and in doing so he shook the shiner out of the branches.

"Catch it!" he shouted. "There it goes!"

"Plop!" the fish went right into the pool, and with a wiggle of its tail disappeared.

"We're a couple of healthy fishermen," scoffed Bobby. "We land them, and then lose them."

"Let's go farther down stream. We've made so much noise here that we couldn't catch anything but deaf fish – that's sure."

Bobby was quite agreed to this, and Fred in his bathing trunks, leaving his wet clothing to dry on the bushes, led the way along the creek bank. Bobby followed with the can of worms.

They found another quiet place and this time both took pains to cast their lines where no overhanging branches would interfere with the tips of their poles. The creek was well stocked with sunfish, yellow perch, shiners, and small brook trout. Once – "in a dog's age," Fred's Uncle Jim said – somebody landed a big trout out of one of the deeper holes in the stream.

The boys fished for an hour, and both landed perch and shiners.

"If we get enough of them we can have a fish supper," declared Fred.

"At home?"

"Sure. We can clean them – "

"Who'll cook them? Our Meena won't," declared Bobby, with confidence.

"And I don't suppose our girl will, either. Besides, we'd have to catch a bushel to give the crowd at our house a taste, even," for there were five young Martins at Fred's house, besides himself, ranging from the baby who could just toddle around, to Fred's fourteen year old sister, Mary. There was another girl older than Fred, who was the oldest boy.

"Just wish Michael Mulcahey would light a fire in his stove and pan them for us," said Bobby, wistfully. "Member, he did once!"

"Yes. But we haven't caught enough yet."

"Hush!" murmured Bobby. "I got another bite."

In a minute he had landed a nice, big sunfish. He cut a birch twig then, with a hook on the end of it, and strung his three fish. Fred did the same for his two, and the fish were let down into the cool water, and were thus kept alive.

They moved farther down the creek after a bit, and tried another pool. The strings of fish grew steadily. It looked, really, as though they would have enough for supper – and it takes a right good number of such little fish to make a meal for two hungry boys.

Not that they wanted food again so soon. During the afternoon they ate the rest of the lunch and some apples to stave off actual hunger!

"I bet you get sunburned again," said Bobby.

"No, I won't. I'm in the shade all the time."

"The wind will burn as well as the sun."

"But I'm not in and out of the water all the time, like I was that day at Sanders' Pond. Just the same," added Fred, "I'm going into the creek now. There's a dandy place for fish just across there."

"There's some stepping stones below. I'll go over with you," declared Bobby, winding up his line.

Fred was not afraid of splashing himself. He ran across the stones laid in the bed of the creek. Bobby came more cautiously, but he did not see the wide grin on Fred's face as he stood on the far side and watched his chum.

Bobby stepped on the rock in the middle of the stream. Just as it bore his full weight, and he had his right foot in the air, stepping to the next dry-topped rock, the one under him rolled!

The red-haired boy had felt that stone "joggle" when he came across but he had leaped lightly from it. Bobby was caught unaware.

He yelled, and tried to jump, but the stepping stone, under which the action of the water had excavated the sand, turned clear over. "Splash!" went Bobby into the water.

He stood upright, but he was in a pool over his knees, and the agitated water splashed higher. His knickerbockers were as wet as Fred's clothes had been when he waded out.

"Oh, oh, oh!" shouted Fred, writhing on the grass. "Aren't you clumsy? Now you'll have to take off *your* clothes to dry, Bobby."

"You might have told a fellow that rock was loose," grumbled Bobby.

"And you might have told *me* that I was stepping off into the old creek when I was jerking at my line," retorted Fred. "I got it worse than you did."

Bobby removed his trousers and wrung them out. Then he put them on again. "They'll dry as good on me, as off," he said. "Now, come on. Let's go up along and see if we can't get some more fish."

They whipped the creek for half a mile up stream, and were successful beyond their hopes. Both boys had a nice string of pan-fish when they came to the deep swimming hole, which was only a few yards below the corner of Plunkit's farm Sphere the apple tree stood.

The sun was then sliding down toward the western horizon. Bobby's trousers were pretty well dried. He put on his bathing trunks, and followed Fred into the pool.

Both boys were good swimmers. There was a fine rock to dive from and a soft, sandy bottom. No danger here, and for an hour the chums had a most delightful time.

Then Bobby brought his own clothes across to the side of the creek where they had begun to fish. Fred brought the fishing-tackle and the two strings of fish. Then he trotted down the bank to get his own clothes and their shoes and stockings.

Bobby was half dressed when he heard his chum shouting. "Bobby! Bobby!" shrieked the red-haired boy.

Fearing that his chum was in trouble, Bobby started for the sound of Fred's voice, on a hard run.

"I'm coming, Fred! Hold on!" he shouted, as loudly as he could.

In a few moments he came out into the open place where Fred had carefully arranged his clothing on the low bushes. There wasn't a garment there, and Fred came out of the brush, his face very red and angry.

"What's the matter?" asked Bobby.

"Matter enough!" returned his chum. "Don't you *see*?"

"Not – not your clothes gone?" gasped Bobby.

"Yes they are. Every stitch. And your shoes, too. What do you think of *that*?"

"Why – why – Somebody's taken them?"

"Of course somebody has. And it's your fault," said Fred, very much provoked. "If you had helped me pitch in and lick that Ap Plunkit, he wouldn't have dared do this."

"Maybe – maybe he'd have licked us," stammered Bobby.

"He'll – he'll just have to lick me when I meet up with him next time, or else he'll take the biggest licking *he* ever took," threatened the wrathful Master Martin, wiping a couple of angry tears out of his eyes with a scratched knuckle.

CHAPTER V

THE TALE OF A SCARECROW

"My goodness! you can't go home that way," said Bobby Blake, faintly.

He did not laugh at all. The situation had suddenly become tragic instead of comic. Fred could not walk back to Clinton in his bathing-trunks – that is, not until after dark.

"I wish I had hold of that Ap Plunkit," repeated Fred Martin. "*He* did it," he added.

"Oh, we don't know – "

"Of course we do. He sneaked along there after us and found my clothes, and ran away with them – every one. And your shoes and stockings, too!"

"No he didn't, either!" cried Bobby, suddenly, staring up into the tall tree over their heads.

"Eh?"

"There are the shoes and stockings – shoes, anyway," declared Bobby, pointing.

It was a chestnut tree above their heads. It promised a full crop of nuts in the fall, for the green burrs starred thickly the leafy branches.

Whoever had disturbed the chums' possessions had climbed to the very tip-top of the chestnut and hung the two pair of shoes far out on a small branch.

"That's Ap Plunkit's work – I know," declared Fred, with conviction. "He climbs trees like a monkey. You see how long his arms are. I've seen him go up a taller tree than this."

"Maybe he's taken your clothes up there, too," said Bobby, going to the trunk of the tree.

"The mean scamp!" exclaimed Fred. "How'll we get them, Bob? I – I can't climb that tree this way."

"Neither can I," admitted his friend. "But wait till I run and get my clothes on – "

"And you'd *better* run, too!" exclaimed Fred, suddenly, "or you won't find the rest of *your* clothes."

Thus advised, Bobby Blake set out at once for the spot where he had been dressing. There was no sign of Applethwaite Plunkit about – or of any other marauder. Just the same, when Bobby was dressed and went down the creek side again to Fred, he carried all their possessions with him.

That chestnut was a hard tree for Bobby to climb – especially barefooted. There were so many prickly burrs that had dropped into the crotches of the limbs, and, drying, had become quite stiff and sharp. He had to stop several times as he mounted upward to pick the thorns from his feet.

But he got the shoes and stockings, and, hanging them around his neck, came down as swiftly as he could. Both boys at once sat down and put on this part of their apparel. Fred was almost tempted to cry; but then, he was too angry to "boo-hoo" much.

"I'll catch that Ap Plunkit, and I'll do something to him yet," he declared. "I'll have him arrested for stealing my clothes, anyway."

"How can we prove he took them? We didn't see him," said Bobby, thoughtfully.

"Well!"

"I tell you what," Bobby said. "Let's go up to his house and tell his mother. We *know* he did this, even if we didn't see him. Of course, we got him mad first – "

"We didn't have to get him mad," declared Fred. "He's mad all the time."

"Well, we plagued him. He just was getting square."

"But such a mean trick to steal a fellow's clothes!"

"Maybe his folks will see it that way and make Applethwaite give them back."

"But I can't go up there to the house with only these old tights on!" said Fred.

"No," and Bobby couldn't help grinning a little. "You wear my jacket."

"And if I have lost my clothes," wailed Fred, "and have to go home this way, my father will give it to me good! Come on!"

"Let's each find a good club. That dog, you know," said Bobby.

"Sure. And if we meet up with Ap, I'll be likely to use it on him, too!" growled Fred, angrily.

Bobby decided that it was useless to try to pacify his chum at the moment. It seemed to relieve Fred to threaten the absent Ap Plunkit, and it did that individual no bodily harm!

So the boys found stout clubs and started up the bank of the creek. Fred was feeling so badly that he did not pick more of the "summer sweetnin's" when they came to the apple tree.

They crawled through the hole in the boundary fence of the Plunkit Farm and kept on up the creek-side. First they crossed the pasture, then they climbed a tight fence and entered a big cornfield. The corn was taller than their heads and there were acres and acres of it. It was planted right along the edge of the creek bank, and they had to walk between the rows.

"If old Plunkit sees us in his corn, he'll be mad," said Fred, at last.

"This is the nearest way to the house, and we've got to try and get your clothes," said Bobby, firmly.

After that, he took the lead. The nearer they approached the farmhouse, the more Fred lagged. But suddenly, in the midst of the long cornfield, Master Martin uttered a cry.

"Look there, Bob!"

"What's the matter with you? I thought it was the dog."

"No, sir! See yonder, will you?"

"Nothing but a scarecrow," said Bobby.

"Yes. But it has clothes on it. I'm going to take them. I'm not going up to that house without anything more on me than what I've got."

Bobby began to chuckle at that. It seemed too funny for anything to rob a scarecrow. But Fred was pushing his way through the corn toward the absurd figure.

Suddenly Fred uttered another yell – this time his famous warwhoop:

"Scubbity-yow! I got him!"

"You got who?" demanded Bobby, hurrying after his chum.

"This is some o' that Ap Plunkit's doings – the mean thing! Look here!" and he snatched the cap off the scarecrow's head of straw.

"Why – that looks like *your* cap, Fred," gasped Bobby.

"And it *is*, too."

"That – that's just the stripe of your shirt!"

"And it is my shirt. And it's my pants, and all!" cried Fred. "I'll get square with Ap Plunkit yet – you see if I don't. There's the old ragged things this scarecrow wore, on the ground. And he's dressed it in *my* things. Oh, you wait till I catch him!"

Meanwhile Fred was hastily tearing off the garments that certainly were his own. They were all here. Bobby kept away from him, and laughed silently to himself. It was really too, too funny; but he did not want to make Fred angry with *him*.

"Now I guess we'd better not go to the farmhouse – had we?" demanded Bobby.

"Let's go home," grunted Fred, very sour. "It's almost sundown."

"All right," agreed his chum.

"He tore my shirt, too. And we might never have found these clothes. I'm going to get square," Fred kept muttering, as they struck right down between the corn rows toward the distant roadside fence.

Just as they climbed over the rails to leap into the road they were hailed by a voice that said:

"Hey there! what you doin' in that cornfield?"

There was the Plunkit hopeful – otherwise Applethwaite, the white-headed boy. He sat on the top rail near by and grinned at the two boys from town.

"There you are – you mean thing!" cried Fred Martin, and before Bobby could stop him, he rushed at the bigger fellow.

He was so quick – or Ap was so slow – that Fred seized the latter by the ankles before he could get down from his perch.

"Git away! I'll fix you!" shouted the farm boy.

He kicked out, lost his balance, and Fred let him go. Ap fell backward off the fence into the cornfield, and landed on his head and shoulders.

He set up a terrific howl, even before he scrambled to his feet. By his actions he did not seem to be so badly hurt. He searched around for a stone, found it, and threw it with all his force at Fred Martin. Fortunately he missed the town boy.

Immediately Fred grabbed up a stone himself and poised it to fling at his enemy. Bobby threw himself upon his chum and seized his raised arm.

"Now you stop that, Fred!" he commanded.

"Why shouldn't I hit him? He flung one at me," declared the angry boy.

"I know. But he didn't hit you. And you might hit him and do him harm. Suppose you put his eye out – or something? Come on home, Fred – don't be a chump."

"Aw – well," growled Fred, and threw the stone away.

"You know you are always getting into a muss," urged Bobby, hurrying his chum along the road toward town. "What'll you do when you go to Rockledge – "

"You got to go with me, Bob," declared Fred, grinning.

"Oh! I wish they'd let me," murmured his friend.

But as far as he could see then, no circumstances could arise that would make such a wished for event possible.

CHAPTER VI

A FISH FRY AND A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT

They got home at early supper time, fish and all. But one look into the kitchen assured Bobby that it was useless to expect Meena to pan their catch for them.

The "rabbit ears" stuck up on top of her head at a more uncompromising angle than ever. Mr. and Mrs. Blake had not returned from town. At a late hour Michael Mulcahey had come back with the carriage and announced that his mistress would stay in town for dinner with Mr. Blake and they were to be met at the 10:10 train.

Michael had just finished cleaning the carriage and now sat with his pipe beside the stable door. He was a long-lipped Irishman, with kindly, twinkling eyes, and "ould country" whiskers that met under his chin, giving his cleanly shaven, wind-bitten face the look of peering out through a frame of hair.

"'Tis a nice string of fish ye have, byes," he said.

"And I s'pose we got to give them to the cats," complained Fred. "They won't cook 'em at my house, and Meena's got the toothache."

Michael grinned broadly, puffing slowly at his pipe. "Clane the fish, byes. There's a pan jest inside the dure. Get water from the hydrant. Have ye shar-r-rp knives?"

"Oh, yes, Michael!" cried Bobby.

"Scale thim fish, then. I'll start a fire in my stove. An' I've a pan. Belike Meena, the girl, will give ye a bit of fat salt por-r-rk and some bread. Tell her she naden't bother with supper. We'll make it ourselves – in what th' fancy folks calls 'ally-frisco' – though *why* so, I *dun*-no," added Michael.

He knocked the dottle out of his pipe and washed his hands. The boys, meanwhile, were cleaning the little fish rapidly, and whispering together. They were delighted with the coachman's suggestion. It was just what they had been hoping for. Fred even forgot his "grouch" against Applethwaite Plunkit.

Bobby ventured to the kitchen door. Meena was just untying the red bandage, but the moment she caught sight of him she hesitated. She may have felt another slight twinge of "face ache."

"Vat you vant?" she demanded.

Bobby told her what they were going to do. Michael had his own plates, and knives and forks. He had "bached it" a good many years before he came to work for Bobby's father. Meena saw a long, quiet evening ahead of her.

"Vell," she said, ungraciously enough, for it was not her way to acknowledge her blessings – not in public, at least. "Vell, I give you the pork and bread. But that Michael ban spoil you boys. I wouldn't efer marry him."

"What did she say?" asked the coachman when Bobby returned to the room over the harness closets in which Michael slept – and sometimes cooked.

"She says she won't marry you because you spoil us," declared Bobby, winking at Fred.

"Did she now?" quoth Michael. "So she has rayfused me again – though it wasn't just like a proposal *this* time. Still – we'll count it so's to make sure."

He gravely walked to a smooth plank in the partition behind the door, and picked up the stub of a pencil from a ledge. On this board was a long array of pencil marks – four straight, up and down marks, and a fifth "slantingdicular" across them. There were a great many of these marks.

Each of these straight, up and down, marks meant "No," and the slanting mark meant another "No"; so that Meena's refusals of the coachman's proposal for her hand were grouped in fives.

"The Good Book says Jacob sarved siven years for Rachael, and then another siven. He didn't have nawthin' on me – sorra a bit! When Meena's said 'No' a thousan' times, she'll forgit some day an' say 'Yis.'"

He went back to shaking the pan on the stove, in which the cubes of salt pork were sputtering. He mixed some flour and cornmeal in a plate, with salt and pepper. Wiping each of the little fish partly dry, he rolled them in the mixture, and then laid them methodically in rows upon a board. When the fat in the skillet was piping hot, he dropped in the fish easily so as not to splash the hot fat about. Then with a fork he turned them as they browned.

As he forked them out of the hot fat, all brown and crispy, he laid them on a sheet of brown paper for a bit to drain off the fat. Then the boys' plates and his own were filled with the well fried fish.

"There's just a mess for us," said Michael, as they sat down. "For what we are about to rayceive make us tr-r-ruly grateful! Pass the bread, Master Bobby. 'Tis the appetite lends sauce to the male, so they say. Eat hearty!"

Bobby and Fred had plenty of the "sauce" the coachman spoke of. After the excitement and adventures of the afternoon they had much to tell Michael, too, and the supper was a merry one.

Fred had to go home at eight o'clock and an hour and a half later it was Bobby's bedtime. But the house seemed very still and lonely when he had gone to bed, and he lay a long time listening to the crickets and the katydids, and the other night-flying insects outside the screens.

He heard Michael drive out of the lane to go to the station and he was still awake when the carriage returned and his father and mother came into the house. They came quietly up stairs, whispering softly, but the door between Bobby's room and his mother's dressing-room was ajar and he could hear his parents talking in there. They thought him asleep, of course.

"But Bobby's got to be told, my dear. I have bought our tickets – as I told you," Mr. Blake said. "We can't wait any longer."

"Oh, dear me, John!" Bobby heard his mother say. "*Must* we leave him behind?"

"My dear! we have talked it all over so many times," Mr. Blake said, patiently. "It is a long voyage. Not so long to Para; but the transportation up the river, to Samratam, is uncertain. Brother Bill left the business in some confusion, I understand, and we may be obliged to remain some months. It would not be well to take Bobby. He must go to school. I am doubtful of the advisability of taking *you*, my dear – "

"You shall not go without me, John," interrupted Mrs. Blake, and Bobby knew she was crying softly. "I would rather that we lost all the money your brother left – "

"There, there!" said Bobby's father, comfortingly. "You're going, my dear. And we will leave Bobby in good hands."

"But *whose* hands?" cried his wife. "Meena can look after the house, and Michael we can trust with everything else. But neither of them are proper guardians for my boy, John."

"I know," agreed Mr. Blake, and Bobby, lying wide awake in his bed, knew just how troubled his father looked. He hopped out of bed and crept softly to the door. He did not mean to be an eavesdropper, but he could not have helped hearing what his father and mother said.

"We have no relatives with whom to leave him," Mrs. Blake said. "And all our friends in Clinton have plenty of children of their own and wouldn't want to be bothered. Or else they are people who have *no* children and wouldn't know how to get along with Bobby."

"It's a puzzle," began her husband, and just then Bobby pushed open the door and appeared in the dressing-room.

"I heard you, Pa!" he cried. "I couldn't help it. I was awake and the door was open. I know just what you can do with me if I can't go with you to where Uncle Bill died."

"Bobby!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake, putting out her arms to him. "My boy! I didn't want you to know – yet."

"He had to hear of the trip sometime," said Bobby's father.

"And I'm not going to make any trouble," said Bobby, swallowing rather hard, for there seemed to be a lump rising in his throat. He never liked to see his mother cry. "Why, I'm a big boy, you know, Mother. And I know just what you can do with me while you're gone."

"What's that, Bobs?" asked his father, cheerfully.

"Let me go to Rockledge School with Fred Martin – do, *do!* That'll be fun, and they'll look out for me there – you know they are *awfully* strict at schools like that. I can't get into any trouble."

"Not with Fred?" chuckled Mr. Blake.

"Well," said Bobby, seriously, "you know if I have to look out for Fred same as I always do, I won't have time to get into mischief. You told Mr. Martin so yourself, you know, Pa."

Mr. Blake laughed again and glanced at his wife. She had an arm around Bobby, but she had stopped crying and she looked over at her husband proudly. Bobby was such a sensible, thoughtful chap!

"I guess we'll have to take the school question into serious consideration, Bobs," he said. "Now kiss your mother and me goodnight, and go to sleep. These are late hours for small boys."

Bobby ran to bed as he was told, and this time he went to sleep almost as soon as he placed his head upon the pillow. But how he *did* dream! He and Fred Martin were walking all the way to Rockledge School, and they went barefooted with their shoes slung over their shoulders, Applethwaite Plunkit and his big dog popped out of almost every corner to obstruct their way. Bobby had just as exciting a time during his dreams that night as he and his chum had experienced during the afternoon previous!

Nothing was said at the late Sunday morning breakfast about his parents' journey to South America. Bobby knew all about poor Uncle Bill. He could just remember him – a small, very brown, good-tempered man who had come north from his tropical station in the rubber country four years, or so, before.

Uncle Bill was Mr. Blake's only brother, and most of Bobby's father's income came from the rubber exporting business, too. Uncle Bill had lived for years in Brazil, but finally the climate had been too much for him and only a few months ago word had come of his death. He had been a bachelor. Mr. Blake had positively to go to Samratam to settle the company's affairs and Bobby's mother would not be separated from her husband for the long months which must necessarily be engaged in the journey.

Bobby felt that he *must* talk about the wonderful possibility that had risen on the horizon of his future, so, long before time for Sunday School, he ran over to the Martin house and yodled softly in the side lane for Fred.

Fred put his head out of a second-story window. "Hello!" he said, in a whisper. "That you, Bobby?"

"Yep. Come on down. I got the greatest thing to tell you."

"Wait till I get into this stiff shirt," growled Fred. "It's just like iron! I just *hate* Sunday clothes – don't you, Bobby?"

Bobby was too eager to tell his news to discuss the much mooted point. "Hurry up!" he threw back at Fred, and then sat down on the grassy bank to wait.

He knew that Fred would have to pass inspection before either his mother or his sister Mary, before he could start for Sunday School. He heard some little scolding behind the closed blinds of the Martin house, and grinned. Fred had evidently tried to get out before being fully presentable.

He finally came out, grumbling something about "all the girls being nuisances," but Bobby merely chuckled. He thought Mary Martin was pretty nice, himself – only, perhaps inclined to be a little "bossy," as is usually the case with elder sisters.

"Never mind, Fred," Bobby said, soothingly. "Let it go. I got something just wonderful to tell you."

"What is it?" demanded Fred, not much interested.

"I believe something's going to happen that you've just been *hoping* for," said Bobby, smiling.

"That Ap Plunkit's got the measles – or something?" exclaimed Fred, with a show of eagerness.

"Aw, no! It isn't anything to do with Ap Plunkit," returned Bobby, in disgust.

"What is it, then?"

So Bobby told him.

CHAPTER VII

FINANCIAL AFFAIRS

Two boys in Clinton did not go to Sunday School that day with minds much attuned to the occasion. Fred could scarcely restrain himself within the bounds of decent behavior as they walked from Merriweather Street, where both the Blakes and the Martins lived, to Trinity Square, where the spire of the church towered above the elms.

The thought that Bobby was going with him to Rockledge (Fred had jumped to that conclusion at once) put young Martin on the very pinnacle of delight.

"Of course, it would be great if your folks would take you to South America," admitted Fred, after some reflection. "For you could bring home a whole raft of marmosets, and green-and-gray parrots, and iguanas, and the like, for pets. And you'd see manatees, and tapirs, and jaguars and howling monkeys, and all the rest. But crickey! you wouldn't have the fun we'll have when we get to Rockledge School."

Fun seemed to be all that Fred Martin looked forward to when he got to boarding school. Lessons, discipline, and work of any kind, never entered his mind.

That evening Mr. and Mrs. Blake, with Bobby, went up the street to the Martin house, and the parents of the two chums talked together a long time on the front porch, while the children were sent into the back yard – that yard that Buster Shea had cleaned so nicely the day before, being partly paid in rats!

When the Blakes started home, it had been concluded that Bobby was to attend school with Fred, and that if Mr. and Mrs. Blake did not return from their long journey in season, Bobby was to be under the care of the Martins during vacation.

"Another young one won't make any difference here, Mrs. Blake," said easy-going Mrs. Martin. "Really, half the time I forget how many we have, and have to go around after they are all abed, and count noses. Bobby will make us no trouble, I am sure. And he always has a good influence over Fred – we've remarked that many times."

This naturally made Mrs. Blake very proud. Yet she took time to talk very seriously to Bobby on several occasions during the next few days. She spoke so tenderly to him, and with such feeling, that the boy's heart swelled, and he could scarcely keep back the tears.

"We want to hear the best kind of reports from you, Bobby – not only school reports, but in the letters we may get from our friends here in Clinton. Your father and I have tried to teach you to be a manly, honorable boy. You are going where such virtues count for more than anything else.

"Be honest in everything; be kindly in your relations to the other boys; always remember that those weaker than yourself, either in body or in character, have a peculiar claim upon your forbearance. Father would not want you to be a mollycoddle but mother doesn't want you to be a bully.

"You will go to church and Sunday School up there at Rockledge just as you have here. Don't be afraid to show the other boys that you have been taught to pray. I shall have your father find out the hour when you all go to bed, and at that hour, while you are saying your prayers and thinking of your father and me so far away from you, I shall be praying for my boy, too!"

"Don't you cry, Mother," urged Bobby, squeezing back the tears himself. "I will do just as you tell me."

It was arranged that Mr. Blake should take the boys to school when the time came, but there was still a fortnight before the term opened at Rockledge. Bobby and Fred had more preparations to make than you would believe, and early on Monday morning Fred came over to the Blake house and the chums went down behind the garden to have a serious talk.

"Say! there's fifty boys in that school," Fred said. "There's another school right across Monatook Lake. They call it Belden School. There's all sorts of games between the two schools, you know, and we want to be in them, Bobby."

"What do you mean – games?" asked Bobby.

"Why, baseball, and football, and hockey on the ice in winter, and skating matches, and boating in the fall and spring – rowing, you know. Lots of games. And we want to be in them, don't we?"

"Sure," admitted his chum.

"It's going to cost money," said Fred, decidedly. "We'll have to get bats, and good horse-hide balls, and a catcher's mask and glove, and a pad, and all that. We want to get on one of the ball teams. You know I can catch, and you've got a dandy curve, Bobby, and a fade-away that beats anything I've ever seen."

"Yes. I'd like to play ball," admitted Bobby, rather timidly. "But will they let us – we being new boys?"

"We'll make them," said the scheming Fred. "If we show them we have the things I said – mitt, and bats, and all – they'll be glad to have us play, don't you see?"

"But we haven't them," suddenly said Bobby.

"No. But we must have them."

"Say! they'll cost a lot of money. You know I don't have but a dollar a month," said Bobby, "and I know Mother won't let me open my bank."

"Of course not. That's the way with mothers and fathers," said Fred, rather discontentedly. "They get us to start saving against the time we'll want money awfully bad for something. And then we have to buy shoes with it, or Christmas presents, or use it to pay for a busted window. *That's* what cleaned out my bank the last time – when I threw a ball through Miklejohn's plate-glass window on the Square."

"Well," said Bobby, getting away from *that* unpleasant subject, "I have most of my dollar left for this month, and Pa will give me another on the first day of September."

"I haven't but ten cents to my name," confessed Fred.

"Then how'll we get new bats, and the mask, and pad, and all?"

"That's what we want to find out," Fred said, grimly. "We'll have to think up some scheme for making money. I wish I'd cleaned our yard Saturday instead of hiring Buster Shea."

"*That* didn't cost you much," chuckled Bobby. "Only a cent – and you couldn't have sold the five rats for anything."

"Aw – well – "

"Let's start a lemonade stand," suggested Bobby.

"No. It's been done to death in Clinton this vacation," Fred declared, emphatically. "Besides, the sugar and lemons and ice cost so much. And you're always bound to drink so much yourself that there's no profit when the lemonade's gone."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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