

FICTION

Edward Sylvester Ellis

**The Launch
Boys
Adventures in
Northern
Waters**

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IN NORTHERN WATERS

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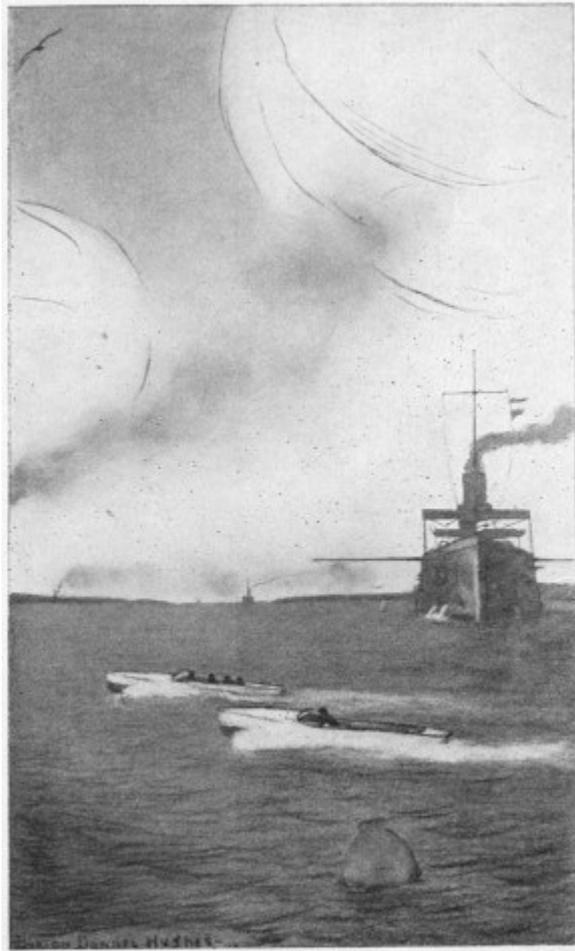
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NONE SUSPECTED THE MEANING OF WHAT THEY SAW

THE LAUNCH BOYS SERIES

The
Launch Boys' Adventures
In Northern Waters

BY

EDWARD S. ELLIS

Author of "The Flying Boys Series,"
"Deerfoot Series," etc., etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
BURTON DONNEL HUGHES

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The Launch Boys' Adventures in Northern Waters

CHAPTER I

A PROPOSAL AND AN ACCEPTANCE

Alvin Landon and Chester Haynes were having a merry time in the home of Mike Murphy, when a servant knocked and made known that a caller was awaiting Alvin in the handsome bungalow belonging to his father. I have told you how the boys hurried thither, wondering who he could be, and how they were astonished to find him the "man in gray," who had become strangely mixed up in their affairs during the preceding few days.

But Alvin was a young gentleman, and asked the stranger to resume his seat, as he and Chester set the example. They noticed that the visitor was without the handbag which had hitherto seemed a part of his personality. Self-possessed and vaguely smiling, he spoke in an easy, pleasant voice:

"Of course you are surprised to receive a call from me." He addressed Alvin, who replied:

"I don't deny it. Heretofore you have seemed more anxious to keep out of our way than to meet us."

"I admit that it did have that look, but the cause exists no longer."

This remark did not enlighten the youths. Chester for a time took no part in the conversation. He listened and studied the man while awaiting an explanation of what certainly had the appearance of a curious proceeding.

"I don't understand what could have been the cause in the first place," said Alvin, "nor why my friend and myself should have been of any interest at all to you."

The other laughed lightly, as if the curt remark pleased him.

"I have no wish to play the mysterious; my name is Stockham Calvert."

It was Alvin's turn to smile, while Chester said meaningly:

"That tells us mighty little."

"I am one of Pinkerton's detectives."

The listeners started. They had never dreamed of anything of this nature, and remained silent until he should say more.

"You are aware," continued the mild spoken caller, "that there have been a number of post office robberies in the southern part of Maine during the last six months and even longer ago than that."

The boys nodded.

"A professional detective doesn't know his business when he proclaims his purpose to the world. He does so in the story books, but would be a fool to be so imprudent in actual life. Consequently you will think it strange for me to take you into my confidence."

"I don't doubt you have an explanation to give," suggested Alvin.

"I have and it is this. Without any purpose or thought on your part you have become mixed up in the business. The other night you gave me great help, though the fact never entered your minds at the time. You located their boat in a small inlet at the southern extremity of Barter Island."

At this point Chester Haynes asked his first question:

"How do you know we did?"

Mr. Stockham Calvert indulged in a low laugh.

"Surely I did not follow you thither without learning all you did. Your conversation on the steamer gave me the information I wished. I did not expect you to succeed as well as you did."

"Why did you avoid us? Why didn't you take us into your confidence from the first?" asked Chester.

"I had several reasons, but I see now it would have been as well had I done so. However, let that go. My errand here to-night is to ask you whether you will not assist me in running down these criminals."

The abrupt proposition caused a start on the part of the youths, who looked wonderingly into each other's face. It was Alvin who replied:

"Assist you! What help can *we* give?"

"You have the fleetest motor boat on the Maine coast. It must be capable of twenty miles an hour."

"It is guaranteed to make twenty-four."

"Better yet. These men have a boat which closely resembles yours."

"And its name is the *Water Witch*," said Chester. "I wish Captain Landon could run a race with it."

"He can have the chance if he will agree."

"I fail to see how. Those men after committing their crimes are not going to spend their time in running up and down the Sheepscot or Kennebec."

"Not wholly, but I don't see any particular risk they incur in doing so. If they are pressed hard they can put into some bay or branch or inlet and take to the woods."

"Still I do not understand how we can help you, Mr. Calvert," said Alvin.

"It is possible you cannot, but more probably you can. While cruising in these waters, we may catch sight of their boat, and you can see the advantage of being able to outspeed it. But do not think I am looking for a battle between you and me on the one hand, and the criminals on the other. I wish to employ the *Deerfoot* as a scout. I can't express myself better than by that word."

Whatever the right name of the caller might be, he was a good judge of human nature. He saw the sparkle in the eyes before him. While the lads would not have been averse to a scrimmage, neither dared incur such risk without the consent of his father, and you do not need to be told that such consent was out of the question.

"As I understand it, then, our boat promises to be useful to you solely on account of its speed?" said Alvin inquiringly asked the detective.

"Precisely. What is your answer?"

The young Captain looked at his second mate.

"How does it strike you, Chester?"

"I'm with you if you wish to make the experiment. If things don't turn out as we wish we can withdraw at any time."

"Of course I shall expect to pay you for your services----"

"Then you will be disappointed," interrupted Alvin crisply. "The *Deerfoot* isn't for hire, and if we go into this it will be for the fun we hope to get out of it."

"I think I can guarantee you some entertainment. I presume you two will be the only ones on the boat beside myself."

"You mustn't overlook my first mate, Mike Murphy. It would break his heart if we should go on a cruise and leave him behind."

"I am afraid he is too impetuous and too fond of a fight."

"He may have a weakness in those directions, but his good nature, pluck and devotion to my friend and me more than make up."

"It strikes me----"

"I can't help how it strikes you," broke in Alvin, who did not intend to accept any commands at this stage of the game. "Mike goes with us wherever we go."

"I feel the same way," added Chester. "The *Deerfoot* can never brave the perils of the deep short-handed. The first mate is indispensable."

"As you please then. When will you be ready to start?"

"When do you wish us to start?"

"Say to-morrow morning?"

"This is so sudden," said Alvin, whose spirits rose at the prospect of the lively times ahead. "We ought to have a little while to think it over. However, if my second mate, who generally has views of his own, will agree, we'll get under way to-morrow after breakfast."

"I'm wid ye, as Mike would say."

"Suppose, Mr. Calvert, we leave it this way: if we decide to go into this business, we'll make the venture to-morrow morning."

"I shall stay at the Squirrel Inn to-night and be on the wharf a little before nine, on the lookout for you. If you do not show up then or soon after I shall not expect you. Your boat will be in plain view all the time, so I shall see you when you start."

"Why not stay with us over night? We shall be glad to have you do so," was the hospitable invitation of Alvin Landon.

"Thank you very much," replied Stockham Calvert, rising to his feet; "but I came over in a rowboat which is waiting to take me back. I engaged my room at the inn this afternoon."

He bade them good night and walked briskly down the slope. The boys stood in front of the bungalow until they heard the sound of the oars and saw the dim outlines of the boat and its occupants heading eastward toward the twinkling lights from the inn and cottages on Squirrel Island.

"What do you make of it all?" asked Alvin of his chum, when after some minutes they returned to the big sitting room.

"I don't know how to answer you," replied Chester. "It looks to me as if we are bound to have lively times before we get through with the business. But, Alvin, all the time that man was talking I felt a curious distrust of him. He said he is a detective, but I'm not sure of it."

"Suppose he belongs to the gang that is playing the mischief with Uncle Sam's post offices in this part of the Union?"

"If that were so, what in the world can he want of you and your boat?"

"Because of its fleetness it may serve him when he needs it. However, I don't see that any harm can come to it or to us. He can't pick up the launch and run away with it and he would find it hard to do so with us."

"Not forgetting Mike Murphy."

"Then you accept his proposal?"

"Not I, but we together."

"All right; it's a go."

CHAPTER II

THE SCOUT OF THE KENNEBEC

AT nine o'clock on a bright sunshiny morning in August the usual group were gathered on the dock at Squirrel Island. Some were watching the arrival and departure of the different steamers, not forgetting the little *Nellie G.*, plying between that summer resort and Boothbay Harbor, some three miles distant, with calls at other islands as the passengers wished. Sailboats were getting ready to take parties out, some to fish, while others sought only the pleasure of the cruise itself. Small launches came up to the low-lying float for men and women to get on board, while others were rowed out in small boats to the anchored craft.

By and by the attention of most of the spectators was fixed upon the beautiful *Deerfoot*, which, putting out from the lower end of Southport Island opposite, was heading toward Squirrel. The picture had become familiar to all and they admired the grace and symmetry of the launch which had won the reputation of being the swiftest of its kind in those waters. It was known that she was owned by Alvin Landon, the son of a millionaire who had built a handsome bungalow on Southport, where he was expected to spend his vacation days, though, as we know, he passed precious few of them there. Alvin was holding the wheel of his boat, while directly behind him sat his chum, Chester Haynes, calmly watching their approach to the floating dock.

The third member of the crew was our old friend Mike Murphy, whose official rank was first mate. Instead of sitting among his companions, the Irish lad had gone to the stern, where he sat with his legs curled up under him tailor fashion. He could not get much farther in that direction without slipping overboard. The figure of Mike was so striking that he drew more attention than did his comrades or the boat itself. His yachting cap was cocked at a saucy angle, revealing his fiery red hair, while underneath it was his broad, crimson face, sprinkled with freckles, and his vast grin revealed his big white teeth. It will be remembered that the remainder of his costume was his ordinary civilian attire, though Captain Alvin Landon had promised him a fine suit for the following season. The time was too short to secure one for the present occasion.

Mike's good-natured grin awoke more than one responsive smile among the crowd on the dock. The universal opinion was that the youth from the Emerald Isle was so homely of countenance that he couldn't be any homelier, but at the same time none could be more popular. He knew that the eyes of nearly every one were fixed upon him and he in turn scanned the different faces, all of which were strange to him.

Alvin Landon slowed down as he approached and guided his boat among the others with the skill of a professional chauffeur weaving in and out of a procession of carriages. He gave his whole attention to this task, Chester watching the performance with the admiration he had felt many times before. But it was the people who interested Mike. Before the boat rounded to, Stockham Calvert, the detective, accompanied by Lawyer Westerfield, of New York, walked down the inclined steps to the float. Westerfield was a gentleman of culture, an authority on many questions and one of the greatest baseball fans in the country. Having secured a liberal money contribution from Calvert the night before at the Inn, he invited him to stay and witness the great struggle between the Boothbay nine and the Squirrel Islanders. Westerfield was to act as umpire, his impartiality and quickness of perception having won the confidence of all parties; but of course Calvert had to decline under the pressure of a previous engagement.

"It does a fellow good to look at that broth of a boy squatting on the stern," remarked Westerfield, while the *Deerfoot* was still a short distance away.

"His name is Mike and he is a great favorite with every one. As yet I have not met him, but he has all the wit and humor of his people. Suppose you test him."

Nothing loath, Westerfield, who was a bit of a wag himself, called so that all heard him:

"You don't need to show a red signal light, my friend; you ought to wait until night."

Cocking his head a little more to one side, and with a slight extent of increase in the width of his grin--admitting that to be possible--Mike called back:

"Thin why have ye the *graan* light standing there on the wharf?"

Westerfield joined in the general laugh, but came back:

"That face of yours will keep off all danger by daylight."

"And it's yer own phiz that will sarve the same purpose at night."

The laughter was louder than ever, and the pleased Calvert said to the lawyer:

"Better let him alone; he will down you every time."

But Westerfield could not refuse to make another venture. Stepping back as if in alarm from the launch, which was now within arm's reach, he feigned to be scared.

"Please don't bite me with those dreadful teeth."

Mike, who was now close to the wharf, leaped lightly upon it.

"Have no fear; the sight of yersilf has made a Joo of me."

Then as if afraid that the listeners would not catch the force of his words, he added:

"A Joo, as ye may know, doesn't ate pork."

Detective Calvert slapped the lawyer on the shoulder.

"Try him again."

"No; I have had enough." Then raising his hat and bowing in salutation, Westerfield offered his hand to the lad, who shook it warmly.

"You're too much for me, Mike. I'm proud to take off my hat to you."

"And it's me dooty to be equally respectful, as me dad said whin the bull pitched him over the fence and stood scraping one hoof and bowing from t'other side."

While still in the boat, Alvin and Chester had returned the salutation of Calvert. The Captain remained seated at the wheel, but the second mate stepped out on the float and a general introduction followed. The detective and he went aboard and sat down on one of the seats. Mike kept them company, and throwing in the clutch, Alvin guided the launch into the spacious waters outside, all three waving a salute to Westerfield, who stood on the float and watched them for some minutes.

Detective Calvert had the good sense fully to admit Mike Murphy to his confidence, though he had hoped at first he would not be a member of the party. Alvin Landon gave the man to understand that he was not hiring out his boat, but was conferring a favor upon the officer, who had the choice of rejecting or accepting it on the terms offered. While Calvert could not doubt the loyalty of the young Hibernian, he distrusted his impulsiveness. But as I have said, having decided upon his line of conduct, he did not allow himself to show the slightest degree of distrust.

Mike on his part was tactful enough to act as listener while the man made clear his plans. He did not ask a question or speak until addressed. The launch moved so quietly that Alvin, with his hands upon the wheel and scanning the water in front, heard all that was said by the others, and when he thought it fitting took part in the conversation.

Instead of returning to Southport, the *Deerfoot* circled Cape Newagen, which you know is the southern extremity of that island, and entering the broad bay, headed up the Sheepscoot River, over the same course it had followed before.

"Mike was not with you," said Detective Calvert, "when you traced the other launch into that little inlet at the lower end of Barter Island. That boat stayed there overnight and may still be there, but probably is not."

"Suppose it isn't there?" said Chester.

"We must find out where she is. That is the chief reason for my presuming upon the kindness of the Captain to lend me the help of his launch. In other words, it is my wish that the *Deerfoot* shall serve as the Scout of the Kennebec."

"A romantic title," remarked Alvin, over his shoulder, "though we are not cruising on the Kennebec, but up the Sheepscoot."

"No doubt we shall have to visit the larger river. And then, you know," added Calvert, with a smile, "the name I suggest sounds better than the other."

The launch required no special attention just then, and, with one hand on the steering wheel, Captain Alvin looked around:

"Mike, what do you think of it?"

"Arrah, now, what's the difference what ye call the boat? At home, I was sometimes referred to as the Queen of the May, and again as the big toad that St. Patrick forgot to drive out of Ireland, but all agraad that I was as swate under one title as the ither."

"Suppose the *Water Witch* happens to be where Chester and I saw her at night?" asked Alvin of their director.

"We shall have to decide our course of action by what develops."

Neither of the youths was fully satisfied with this reply. They could not believe that a professional detective would

come this far upon so peculiar an enterprise without having a pretty clear line laid out to follow. It may have been as he said, however, and he was not questioned further.

The day could not have been finer. The threatening skies of a short time before had cleared and the sun was not obscured by a single cloud. Though warm, the motion of the launch made the situation of all pleasant. Since there was no call for haste, Calvert suggested to the Captain that he should not strain the engine, and Alvin was quite willing to spare it. The time might soon come when it would be necessary to call upon the boat to do her best, and he meant she should be ready to respond.

Past the Cat Ledges, Jo and Cedarbrush Islands moved the *Deerfoot* like a swan skimming over the placid waters. Then came Hendrick Light, Dog Fish Head, Green Islands and Boston Island. Powderhorn was passed, and then they glided by Isle of Springs, which brought them in sight of Sawyer. A little beyond was the inlet where they had seen the *Water Witch* reposing in the darkness of night.

CHAPTER III

AT THE INLET

"SLOW down," said Detective Calvert as the launch drew near the southern end of Barter Island. Captain Alvin did as requested and all eyes were fixed upon the inlet.

"If that boat should happen to come out while we are in sight," added Calvert, "pass up the river, as if you had no interest in it."

"But if it should happen to be there?" said Alvin, repeating the question he had asked before.

"We can't know until we have turned in, and then it would not do to withdraw, for that would be the most suspicious course of all. You have as much right to go thither as anyone. Act as if you were merely looking in out of curiosity; make a circuit of the islet and then come back and go on up the Sheepscoot toward Wiscasset."

It was at this moment that Mike Murphy asked a question whose point the others were quick to perceive.

"If the spalpeens are there, will ye let 'em have a sight of yersilf?"

"No; I shall drop down and hide, for if they noted that you had me for a passenger they might smell a rat, but would think nothing of seeing you three, for they know you travel together."

As the launch drew near the opening, Alvin slackened her speed still more until she was not going faster than five or six miles an hour. There was an abundance of sea room and he curved into the passage with his usual skill. The four peered intently forward and had to wait only a minute or two when the boat had progressed far enough to give them a full view of the crescent-like cove, which extended backward for several hundred yards and had an expansion of perhaps four hundred feet. In the very middle was the islet, in the form of an irregular oval, containing altogether barely an acre. As has been said, it was made up of clay and sand with not a tree or shrub growing, and only a few scattered leaves of grass, but there was no sign of life on or about it.

Alvin sheered the boat close to the shore, and continued slowly moving. A glance downward into the crystal current showed that the depth was fully twenty feet, so that it was safe for the largest craft to moor against the bank.

"Here's where the *Water Witch* lay," said Alvin. "Do you wish to land, Mr. Calvert?"

He was standing up and scrutinizing the little plot as they glided along the shore, but discovered nothing of interest.

"No; there's no call to stop; we may as well go back."

"Do ye obsarve that six-masted schooner wid its nose poked under the bushes in the hope of escaping notice?"

As Mike Murphy asked the question he pointed to the southern shore of the inlet, where all saw the little rowboat in which Detective Calvert had visited the spot and which had been used later for a similar purpose by Alvin and Chester. It was drawn up so far under the overhanging limbs that only the stern was in sight. It seemed to be exactly where it had been placed by the boys after they were through with it.

It was on the tip of Alvin's tongue to refer to the incident and to ask something in the way of explanation from their companion. Instead of doing so, the latter surprised both by saying:

"That must belong to somebody who lives in the neighborhood."

The remark sounded strange to our young friends and both remained silent waiting for him to say more, but he did not. He sat down again, facing the Sheepscoot, and lighted one of his big black cigars. He crossed his legs like a man of leisure who was not concerned by what had occurred or was likely to occur.

The incident impressed Alvin and Chester unfavorably. Mike, not having been with them at the time, knew nothing of it. To each of the former youths came the disquieting questions:

"Does he believe we did not know him that night? Does he think neither of us suspected what he did? *Is he what he pretends to be?*"

These queries opened a field of speculation that was endless, and the farther they plunged into it the more mystified they became. Alvin would never stoop to ask favors of this man. He was trying to aid him in carrying out a good purpose, and he must "be on the level," or the Captain would have nothing to do with him or his plans.

"The first proof I get that he is playing double," muttered Alvin, "I'll order him off the boat and never let him set foot on it again, and, if he belongs to that gang of post office robbers, I'll do everything I can to have him punished."

One of the most discomfoting frames of mind into which any person can fall is to see things which make him distrust the loyalty of one upon whom he has depended. It might be Alvin Landon was mistaken and Stockham Calvert was in reality a Pinkerton detective whose sole aim was to bring these criminals to justice; but, as I have shown, the full truth was still to be learned.

And Chester Haynes' feelings were the same as those of his chum. He glanced at the man who was puffing his perfecto, and wondered who he really was and what was to be the end of this curious adventure upon which he and Alvin had entered.

It was a brief run out to the Sheepscot, and the *Deerfoot* headed up the river again toward Wiscasset. A steam launch was seen off to the left and a catboat skimmed in the same direction with our friends. Both were well over toward Westport, the left-hand bank, and slight attention was given them.

The *Deerfoot* had not reached the upper end of Barter Island when Alvin from his place as steerer called out:

"That looks like the boat we are hunting for."

Running closer in to the right shore than the *Deerfoot*, a second boat was visible whose similarity of appearance caused astonishment. The bows of the two being pointed toward each other, the view was incomplete at first, but since the speed of each was all of ten miles an hour, they rapidly came opposite. Alvin sheered to the left, so as to make an interval of a hundred yards between them. Chester had caught up the binoculars and kept watch upon the launch, his companions doing what they could without the aid of any instrument.

"It's the *Water Witch*!" said Chester excitedly.

A minute before he did so, Detective Calvert quietly slipped from his seat to the floor, removed his hat and cautiously peered over the taffrail. But he did not cease smoking his huge cigar, and it struck Alvin when he looked around that his head was high enough to be in plain sight of anyone watching from the other craft.

Mike Murphy caught the stir of the moment.

"How many passengers do ye observe on the same frigate? It seems to me there be only two."

"That is all that are visible," replied Chester, holding the glass still leveled.

"Thin they must be them two that we had the shindy wid the ither night!"

"Undoubtedly; in fact I recognize the one you pointed out at Boothbay."

"And the ither must be the ither one."

"There is every reason to believe so."

"Thin----I say, Captain," said the agitated Mike, turning to Alvin, "would ye be kind enough to run up alongside that ship?"

"Why do you wish me to do that?"

"I wish--that is--I wud like to shake hands wid that gintleman and ask him how his folks was whin he last heerd from them. Just a wee bit of friendly converse betwaan two gintlemen--that's all. Come now, Cap, be obliging," continued Mike, in a wheedling tone which did not deceive his superior officer.

"I faal a sort of liking for the young gintleman and should be much pleased if ye would give me a chance to have a few frindly words wid him--I say, Cap, ye're losing vallyble time, fur we're passing each ither fast."

"No, Mike--not to-day; I have no objection to your having a little 'conversation' with Mr. Noxon or his companion, but this isn't the right way to go about it."

"I hope ye didn't suspect that I had any intintion of saying harsh wurruds to them, Cap!" protested the Irish youth, in grieved tones.

"Not words particularly, but there would be enough rough acts to make things lively. Chester, let me have the glasses, while you take the wheel for a few minutes."

They hastily exchanged places, and steadying his position, Alvin pointed the instrument at the receding launch. Detective Calvert still knelt on the floor and peeped over the side of the boat. He did not ask for the binoculars nor did the owner offer them to him.

Suddenly Alvin slipped down beside his friend in front and passed him the instrument, as he resumed the wheel. While doing so, he whispered in a voice so low that no one else could hear what he said:

"Look just behind the fellow who is steering. He's Noxon, I'm sure! Study closely and let me know whether you see anything suspicious."

Wondering to what he referred, Chester complied. While doing his best to learn what his friend meant the latter whispered again:

"If you see anything, be careful to let no one besides me know what it is."

Chester nodded, with the glasses to his eyes. The opportunity for scrutiny was rapidly diminishing. Chester held the binoculars level but a minute when he lowered them again. The commonest courtesy compelled him to offer them to the detective.

"Maybe you can discover something," remarked the youth as he passed them over. The posture of the man gave him the best chance he could ask, and he carefully studied the receding boat until it was so far off that it was useless to continue.

"Did you notice anything special?" asked Chester.

"I saw nothing but those two young men, with whom as I learn from the Captain he had an affray some nights ago."

Chester leaned over and whispered to Alvin:

"I saw it plainly."

"What?"

"A man crouching down among the seats as Calvert did and peering over like him."

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE RACE

Suddenly the *Water Witch's* whistle sent out a series of piping toots.

"What's the meaning of that?" asked Chester of Detective Calvert, who had quietly resumed his seat in one of the wicker chairs in front of the youth.

"It's a challenge to a race."

"I accept it," said Alvin, with a flash of his eyes. At the same moment he swung the wheel over and began circling out to the left, so as to turn in the shortest possible space. "If that boat can outrun me I want to know it."

"Be keerful ye don't run over him," cautioned Mike, catching the excitement, "as Tam McMurray said whin he started to overtake a locomotive."

Alvin quickly hit up the pace of the launch, which sped down the Sheepscot with so sudden a burst of speed that all felt the impulse. The sharp bow cut the current like a knife, the water curving over in a beautiful arch on each side and foaming away from the churning screw. Even with the wind-shield they caught the impact of the breeze, caused by their swiftness, and each was thrilled by the battle for mastery.

"Are you doing your best?" asked Calvert, watching the actions of the youthful Captain.

"No; I am making about two-thirds of the other's speed."

"Then don't do any better, is my advice," said the detective.

Alvin glanced over his shoulder.

"Why not?"

"It may be wise at this stage of the game not to let them know that you can surpass them. Wait till the necessity arises."

"I agree with Mr. Calvert," added Chester, and the Captain was impressed by the logic of the counsel. He was on the point of increasing the pace, but refrained. In truth he was already wondering what they would do if they overtook the other and what could be gained by passing the boat.

Again the whistle piped several times and it was evident that the fugitive, as it may be called, had "put on more steam."

"Do you wish me to let her get away from us?" asked Alvin.

"Not for the present, but that may be the best course. Hold your own for awhile and then gradually fall back."

When the race opened, less than an eighth of a mile separated the contestants. The abrupt burst lessened this slightly and then it appeared to be stationary as the two glided down the river.

Such were the relative positions when the *Water Witch* shot past Ram Island, holding the middle of the stream, and a few minutes later came abreast of Isle of Springs.

"Those two young fellows have a man with them," remarked Calvert. "He tried to keep out of sight when we first met, but now he doesn't seem to care. You can see him plainly without the help of the glasses."

Such was the fact, and Chester said:

"They must know that we also have a friend with us."

"I don't see that it matters either way. I think you are gaining."

"But not half fast enough," added Mike, who was standing and impatient to beat their opponent. "We must come up wid the spalpeens before they git to Boothbay."

"They are not heading for Boothbay," observed Calvert, whose keen eyes had detected the change in the line of flight. His companions saw he was right. The front boat had made so abrupt a change of course that it was almost at right angles to that of the pursuer. The side of the launch was exposed, showing the two youths, one of whom held the wheel, while the man with a mustache sat directly beside the other. It might be said of the two craft and their crews that they were twins, so marked was their resemblance.

Naturally Alvin shifted his line of pursuit. You may recall that, opposite the Isle of Springs, Goose Rock Passage connects Sheepscot River with Knubble Bay, which leads into Montsweag Bay, reaching northward on the western

side of the long island of Westport. In their first trip northward our young friends had gone to the eastward of Westport, as they had been doing during this race. Montsweag Bay takes the name of Back River at the northern end of the island and that and the Sheepscot unite above before reaching Wiscasset.

The *Water Witch* dived into Goose Neck Passage past Newdick Point, where it turned northward into Knubble Bay. This is the path taken by the steamers from Bath and other places on the Kennebec when going to Boothbay Harbor, Squirrel Island and other points. To the westward of these bodies of water sweeps the noble Kennebec to the sea.

Just ahead was discerned a swiftly approaching mass of tumbling water, above which the deck, pilot house and puffing smokestack of a little steamer showed. This was the "pony of the Kennebec"--the *Gardiner*, plowing ahead in such desperate haste that one might well believe the fate of a score of persons depended upon its not losing a half minute. Alvin took good care to give her plenty of room and saluted with several whistle toots. There was no reply. The captain merely glanced at the two craft and sped onward like an arrow from the bow of the hunter.

The *Deerfoot* rocked and plunged in the swell made by the steamer, which, spreading out like a fan from its bow, ran tumbling and foaming along the rocky shores, keeping pace with the headlong charge of the boat, and trying to engulf everything in its path. One small catboat that was tied to a rickety, home-made landing, after a couple of dives capsized, as if it were a giant flapjack under which a housewife had slid her turning iron.

"They're gaining!" exclaimed Chester, who was closely watching the progress of the racers. "Do you mean to let them get away, Alvin?"

"Mr. Calvert will answer that question."

"I do so by advising that you neither gain nor lose for the present."

The Captain gave the launch a little more power, and it became clear to all that the pursuer was picking up the ground, or rather water, that she had lost. Then for several minutes no difference in speed was perceptible. A space of a furlong separated the two when they shot past the point of land bearing the odd name of Thomas Great Toe, which is on the western side of the lower part of Westport, some two miles above Goose Neck Passage. Here the water is a mile in width, and is filled with islands of varying sizes, until the large bay to the northward is reached.

The *Water Witch* persisted in hugging the eastern shore, while her pursuer kept well out, as if to make sure of having plenty of room in which to pass her, when the chance came. But all the same the chance did not come. It was soon seen that the fugitive was drawing away from her pursuer. Mike Murphy fumed, but held his peace.

"It's mesilf that hasn't any infloouence here," he reflected, "as I obsarved to mysilf whin dad and mither agreed that a thundering big licking was due me."

"Can you overhaul her?" asked Detective Calvert.

"Easiest thing in the world; I can shoot past her as if she were lying still."

"Well, don't do it."

Mike could remain silent no longer.

"That's a dooce of a way to run a race! Whin ye find ye can bate the ither out of sight ye fall back and let her doot. That's the style I used to run races wid the ither boys at school, but the raison was I couldn't help it. If ye'll allow me to utter a few words of wisdom I'll do the same."

Alvin nodded his head.

"It is that ye signal to that pirut ahead to wait and give us a tow, being that's the only way we can howld our own wid 'em."

Now while it was trying to Alvin and Chester to engage in a race of the nature described and voluntarily allow the contestant to beat them, when they knew they had the power of winning, yet they believed it was the true policy, since Detective Calvert had said so. They understood the disgust of Mike and could not forbear having a little fun at his expense.

"You see," said Chester gravely, "those two young men who gave you and Alvin such a warm time the other night are on the other boat, and if we should come to close quarters with them they would be pretty sure to even up matters with you."

Mike glared at the speaker, as if doubting the evidence of his ears.

"Phwat is that ye're saying?" he demanded. "Isn't that the dearest object of yer heart? I shall niver die contint till I squar' matters wid 'em, and ye knows the same."

"You forget," added Calvert, with the same seriousness, "that they have a full-grown man to help them out."

"And haven't we a full-grown man wid us, as me dad said whin he inthrodooed me to his friends at Donnybrook, I being 'liven years old? Begorra, I'm thinking we haven't any such person on board."

It was a pretty sharp retort, but the officer could not repress his amusement at the angry words. Alvin looked over his shoulder and winked at Calvert and Chester, making sure that Mike did not observe the signal. In his impatience, he had turned his back upon them and was looking gloomily over the stern at the foaming wake.

"I wonder if there isn't some tub along the shore that'll put out and run us down. I hope, Captain, that whin we git back home ye'll kaap this a secret from dad."

"And why?"

"He'll sure give me the greatest walloping of me life."

"For what reason?"

"For consoorting wid a party that run away from the finest chance in the wurld for a shindy. It's a sin that can be wiped out in no ither way."

"I'll explain to him," said Calvert, "that you couldn't help yourself."

"And it's mighty little difference that will make, as Terry McCarthy said when he had the ch'ice of foighting two Tipperary byes or three Corkonians."

"Wouldn't your father prefer to have us bring you home safe and unhurt rather than to have your beauty battered out of you?" inquired the detective, with a solemn visage.

Mike, who had risen to his feet and was still staring over the stern, slowly turned and faced the questioner. Then, with an expression of contempt, he said:

"Ye haven't the honor of an acquaintance wid me dad."

CHAPTER V

THE LOSER OF THE RACE

A long, low bridge connects the western projection of Westport with Woolwich on the opposite bank, beyond which spreads Montsweag Bay, narrowing to Back River, which, as has been explained, joins the Sheepscoot.

The draw had just been swung open when our friends came in sight of the bridge, and saw the *Water Witch* passing through. The bridge tender immediately began turning his lever with which he closed the draw. Alvin whistled to signify that he wished to follow the other, but seemingly the man did not hear him. His back steadily rose and fell, as he worked the handle of his contrivance, and the movable section of the structure slowly swung back in response.

"Isn't that lucky now!" was the sarcastic exclamation of Mike.

"Why?" asked Chester.

"He wants to hilp ye fall back further behind the ither boat."

"There may be something in that," the Captain replied.

None the less, Alvin continued his tooting, without abating his speed. The tender, however, did not mean to tantalize them, and all quickly saw the cause of his action. A heavily loaded wagon had come upon the bridge from the Woolwich side, and waited while the draw was held open. The driver must have had a "pull" with the attendant, who immediately closed the draw so he could cross before the second boat passed through.

At this juncture fate showed how perverse she can be when in the mood. Directly over the draw, something connected with the wagon or the harness of the team got askew and the driver paused to set it right. Possibly it was pretence on his part, for many men will do such things, but, all the same, he took ten minutes before he climbed back on his seat and started his horses forward again. Alvin reversed the screw, so that the launch became motionless when a few yards from the bridge.

I am afraid the driver purposely delayed the *Deerfoot*, for when Mike shouted an angry reproach, he looked around, put his thumb to his nose, twiddled his fingers, and then moved slowly over the rattling planks toward Westport.

"I suggist that ye turn about, Captain, and scoot for home," was the ironical advice of the Irish youth.

"For what reason?"

"I'm afeard that man is real mad and he might take it into his head to git down off his wagon and saize aich of us by the nape of the neck as the boat goes through, and slam us down so hard he'd jar us."

"Better wait, Captain, till he's a little farther off," advised Calvert; "there may be something in what Michael says."

As for Mike, feeling he could not do justice to the subject, he held his peace for the moment.

Gliding through the draw and entering Montsweag Bay, the occupants of the *Deerfoot* were surprised to see nothing of the other launch. She was as invisible as if she had been scuttled and sunk in fifty feet of water.

The right shore above the structure, belonging to Westport, slopes to the right, and something like a half mile above, this course is at right angles to the stream. It is really a peninsula, there being an inlet more than a mile long which divides it from the rest of Westport. This little bay is spanned by a bridge which forms a part of the highway that passes over the longer structure already referred to.

When Mike found the *Water Witch* had vanished, he pretended to be vastly relieved. He had dropped into his chair and now straightened up.

"But ain't we lucky?"

"Why so?" asked Calvert.

"If we hadn't been stopped at the bridge the ither boat might have broke down and we'd come up wid the same, and those chaps would have give us all a good spanking."

"I am glad you are becoming so prudent," said Calvert, with an approving nod. "We must take Michael with us whenever we are likely to run into danger. Captain, if you don't mind, you might tune up your boat a bit."

"Better wait," suggested Mike, "fur ye might gain on t'other one."

Alvin now put on the highest speed of which the *Deerfoot* was capable. The bow rose, the stern settled down in the water, and the spray was flung high and splashed against the wind-shield. The exhaust deepened to a steady roar, and

the broadening wake was churned into a mass of tumbling soapy foam. The whole boat shivered with the vibration of the powerful engine. She was going more than twenty miles an hour--in fact, must have approached her limit, which was four miles faster. Alvin had attained such a tremendous pace only a few times in his practice and did not like it. Though his instructor had assured him that the launch was capable of holding it indefinitely without injury, he feared a breakdown or the unnecessary wear upon many parts of the engine.

He kept up the furious speed until they curved around the upper part of the peninsula and saw the expansion above, all the way to Long Ledge, where Back River begins. He had been confident of catching sight of the *Water Witch*, but she was nowhere in sight.

The natural conclusion was that the launch had taken on a higher burst of speed--probably the limit--and gone so far that by still keeping near the shore she had placed several miles behind her--enough to carry her out of the field of vision.

"Keep it up till we catch sight of her again," suggested Calvert. "I believe there are no more bridges between us and Wiscasset."

Some three or four miles were passed at high speed, when they reached a portion of the river which opened a view of still greater extent. They saw two small sailboats at a distance, and a little steamer puffing northward, but nothing of the *Water Witch*.

"You may as well slow down," remarked the detective, who, guarding a match with his hands behind the wind-shield, proceeded to light another cigar.

"What do you make of it?" asked Alvin, turning his head, as the pace became slower than before.

"We have passed the other boat; she is behind us instead of in front."

"What shall we do?"

"For hiven's sake don't go back," protested Mike. "Ye might find her--and then what would become of ye?"

The detective now gave his view of the situation.

"If we should turn round and find that boat, those on board would know we were looking for them. We don't wish to give that impression, at least for some time to come. While we were going in one direction and they in another, they challenged us to a race. Any two boats might have done the same in the circumstances. We have to accept defeat and that's all there is to it."

Calvert looked at his watch.

"It is near noon; if you all feel as I do you would welcome a good dinner."

"That's the most sensible sense that I've heerd since we started," remarked Mike, who was as hungry as his companions.

"It is not a long run to Wiscasset," said Alvin; "and there's more than one good hotel there."

"I'm thinking that at the speed ye're going, we'll hardly arrive in time for supper. There must be some place betwixt here and the town where we can git enough to stay the pangs of starvation till we raich Wiscasset."

"We shall pass several landings, and there are farmhouses along shore where I'm sure the folks will be glad to accommodate us."

The others were not much impressed with Mike's plan, but since there was plenty of time at their command, they fell in with it. Alvin suggested that all should keep a lookout for an inviting dwelling, when, if a good landing could be made, they would stop and investigate.

Chester offered to relieve his chum at the wheel, and Alvin was quite willing to exchange places with him. The occurrences of the last hour or more, together with what was said by Detective Calvert, had increased the confidence of the youths in him. True, they could not understand the full object of this cruise up the river, after gaining sight of the launch and the occupants for whom he had been searching. They were content to await explanation on that point, but Alvin determined that one or two things which puzzled him and Chester should be cleared up.

"Accepting what you said last night at my home, Mr. Calvert, I must say for myself and friend that we do not understand some of your actions. Perhaps you won't mind explaining them."

"I shall be glad to do so, if it is prudent at this time."

"You will pardon me for saying that in our opinion you acted foolishly when you followed us off the steamer the other day at Sawyer Island, pretended you had made a mistake in landing there, and then dogged us to that little inlet. We saw you several times, but you either wished or pretended you wished to keep out of our sight, as, for instance, after

crossing that long bridge from Hodgdon to Barter Island. You followed us, but when we stopped at the side of the road to wait for you, you slipped among the trees and made a circuit round the spot. Why did you do that?"

The detective smiled, and smoked a minute or two before replying.

"Perhaps it was undignified, though a man in my profession has to do a good many things in which he casts dignity to the winds. The truth is, I formed the intention of getting off at Sawyer as soon as I heard your friend Mr. Richards say he thought he had caught sight of your launch in that cove. I was trying to get track of the same parties, but prudence whispered to me that the time had not yet come in which you and I should hitch up together. I suspected it might soon be advisable, but not just then. My pretence of having left at the wrong landing was a piece of foolishness meant only to afford you and the agent a little amusement, but I feared you would run into trouble with those criminals and I decided to keep you under my eye. Until I concluded to trust you, it was just as well that you should distrust me. For several reasons, which I won't explain at this point, I came to the belief last night that it was time we made common cause."

CHAPTER VI

A WARM RECEPTION

"I have me eye on the right place, as Father Mickle said whin he wint into the saloon to pull out Jim Gerrigan by the nape of his neck."

Mike Murphy pointed to a small, faded yellow house which stood at the top of a gentle slope on their right. It was a hundred yards from the river and a faintly marked, winding path led from it down to the bank. The surrounding land showed meagre cultivation, and the looks were anything but inviting.

On the little porch sat a big man with grizzled whiskers, smoking a brier-wood pipe, his beamlike legs crossed and his arms folded as he moodily watched the launch.

"It strikes me as a poor promise," remarked Alvin, who, nevertheless, asked Chester to steer to the shore to see whether a landing could be readily made. The prospect was good, as a shaky framework had evidently been placed there for use, though no small boat was near.

Chester brought the *Deerfoot* alongside with the skill that the owner of the launch would have shown. Alvin sprang lightly upon the structure, which sagged under his weight, caught the rope tossed to him by Chester, and fastened it around one of the rickety supports. The boat was made fast.

"I'll walk up to the house and have a talk with the gintleman," said Mike, stepping carefully out upon the boards. "Do I look hungry?" he asked of Alvin, who replied:

"You always have that expression."

"I'm glad to hear it, fur I wish to impriss the gintleman that that's my condition. I'll assoom a weak, hisitating walk. Do ye abide here aginst me return and repoort."

Detective Calvert retained his seat and lighted another cigar. Chester sat with his hand idly resting on the wheel. Alvin kept his place on the tiny dock, and all three watched Mike Murphy. They smiled, for the stooping shoulders of the Irish youth and his feeble gait were those of a man of four-score. The huge stranger sat like a statue, slowly puffing his pipe, his glowering eyes fixed on the approaching lad.

With each advancing step, Mike's doubts increased. The nearer he came to the stranger, the more forbidding he appeared. Had the lad followed his inclination he would have turned back, but he knew his friends were watching him. Besides which, he was really hungry.

He had passed half the distance between the boat and the house, scrutinizing the scowling fellow all the time, when the latter made his first movement. He uncrossed his huge legs, took the pipe from between his lips and emitted a low whistle.

"He must be so cheered at sight of me that he is obleeged to give exprission to his feelings--Begorra!"

Around the end of the house dashed a mongrel dog, and halting abruptly with pricked ears, glanced at his master to hear his command. The canine was of moderate size, black and white in color, one eye wrapped about by an inky splash of hair that made him look as if the organ was in mourning.

Holding the pipe away from his lips, the man pointed the stem toward Mike, who had paused, and said to his dog:

"Sick him, Nick! Sick him!"

And the dog proceeded to "go for" the caller. Had the latter run away, the brute would have been at his heels, nipping and biting at each step. But Mike had no thought of retreating. He was filled with anger at his inhospitable reception and gave his whole attention to the animal, which with a muttered growl charged full speed at him.

Mike noticed that a collar with projecting spikes encircled the stumpy neck, and never was one of his breed more eager to bury his teeth in a victim's anatomy.

"This is going to be a shindy sure, as Micky Rooney said when he tackled five p'licemen--and I haven't even a shillaleh in hand."

Mike coolly braced himself for the shock, not yielding an inch nor turning his gaze from his foe. It was no longer a doddering old man who faced the stranger, but a sturdy youth, muscular, brave and always eager for the fray.

Nothing could surpass the skill with which the first assault was repelled. At the exact moment Mike launched his shoe, the toe of which caught Nick under the jaw and caused him to turn a backward somersault. He uttered several yelps,

but the blow added if possible to his rage.

The dog was so bewildered for the moment that he lost his sense of direction, and made a dash toward the porch where his master was watching proceedings.

"Sick him, Nick! Sick him!" he called, pointing his finger at the lad.

Nick impetuously obeyed orders, and at the critical moment Mike launched a second kick, which, however, was not delivered with the mathematical exactness of the first. It landed in the canine's neck and drove him back several paces, but he kept his balance, and came on again with the same headlong fierceness as before.

It was at this juncture that Stockham Calvert flung away his cigar, sprang from his chair and with one bound landed beside Alvin Landon.

"I don't intend that Mike shall get into trouble."

As he spoke, he laid his hand on his hip pocket where reposed his revolver.

"It looks as if it's the dog that is in trouble," replied Alvin, his cheek tingling with pride at sight of the bravery of his comrade.

"If he had to fight only one brute I shouldn't fear, but there are two against him. When Mike is through with the dog he will have to face his master. I shall be ready to give him help."

"You don't mean to shoot the fellow?" said the alarmed Captain.

"It won't be necessary," was the quiet response.

The next exploit of Mike was brilliant. He did not kick at the dog, for that only deferred the decisive assault, but as the mongrel rose in air, he side-stepped with admirable quickness, gripped him by the baggy skin at the back of his neck, and, slipping his hand under the spiky collar, held him fast. The brute snarled, writhed, snapped his jaws and strove desperately to insert his teeth into some part of his captor, who held him off so firmly that he could do no harm.

Mike now turned and began walking hurriedly toward the launch, with the squirming captive still in his iron grip.

The infuriated owner sprang from his seat and leaped down the steps.

"Drop that dog!" he shouted, striding after Mike, who called back:

"I'll drop him as soon as I reach the river."

Afraid of being checked, the youth broke into a trot, and an instant later was at the landing, the yelping mongrel still firmly gripped. Back and forth Mike swung him as if he were the huge bob of a pendulum, and then let go. He curved over the launch, like an elongated doughnut, and dropped into the current with a splash. But all quadrupeds swim the first time they enter the water. In an instant, the brute came to the surface, and working all his legs vigorously, came smoothly around the stern of the launch, and headed for Mike with the purpose of renewing the attack.

The man, who had dropped his pipe and strode down the walk, was over six feet in height, of large frame, and manifestly the possessor of great muscular strength. Although he knew his dog had suffered no harm and was safe, he was enraged over his maltreatment and resolute to wreak vengeance upon the author of the insult.

Mike read his purpose, poised himself and put up his fists.

"Now for the next dog and it's mesilf that is ready fur him."

It would give me pleasure to tell how Mike Murphy vanquished the giant who attacked him, but such a statement would be as untrue as absurd. You have read of the dude who daintily slipped off his kid gloves, adjusted his eyeglasses, and proceeded to chastise an obstreperous cowboy; but take it from me that no such thing ever occurred, except in stories. Nature governs through rigid laws, and two and two will always make four. It might have been creditable to the courage of the Irish youth thus to engage in a bout with a man who would have quickly beaten him to the earth, but it would have shown very poor judgment. Had they clashed there could have been only one end to the encounter.

But they did not clash. Several paces separated the two, when Stockham Calvert, his thin gray coat buttoned around his trim form, stepped quickly between them, and, looking sharply into the face of the savage stranger, said in a voice that showed not the least agitation:

"Stop! he's my friend!"

He raised one hand, palm outward by way of emphasis of his warning words.

"Who are you?" demanded the other, stopping short, his eyes flaming above his shaggy beard and under his straw hat, like an animal glaring through a thicket.

"Come on and you'll learn!" was the reply in the same even tones, as Calvert assumed the posture of a trained pugilist.

Now it is proper to say of this man that he had been the champion boxer in college, and in his New York club he was easily the master of every one with whom he had donned the gloves. Though of only average size and stature and inclined to thinness, his muscles were of steel, he had the quickness of a cat, and had been told more than once, that if he would enter the "magic circle" he would hold his own with the best in the profession. But, like all gentlemen who are masters of the manly art, he disliked personal encounters, and many a time had submitted to insulting words and even the accusation of timidity, rather than to call his iron fists and superb skill into play. You might have been in his company for months without suspecting his attainments in that respect. His business required that he should always carry a revolver, and when he placed his hand on his hip at sight of Mike Murphy's personal danger, the action was instinctive, but he instantly gave up all thought of using so deadly a weapon. He was certain there was no necessity for it; he had no more doubt of his mastery of the bulky brute, who was equally confident, than he had of his ability to handle any one of the three lads who were his companions.

CHAPTER VII

SCIENCE VERSUS STRENGTH

Had the large man undergone the scientific training of the smaller one, he might have overcome him, for, as has been said, he was immensely powerful and must have been a third heavier than Stockham Calvert. But he was out of condition, and, worse than all for him, had not the slightest knowledge of the "manly art." When he doubled his huge hairy fists, he charged upon the detective like a roaring bull, expecting to beat down his smaller antagonist as if he were pulp.

The pose of the defendant was perfect. Resting easily on his right foot, the left advanced and gently touching the ground, he could leap forward, backward or to one side with the agility of a panther. The left fist was held something more than a foot beyond the chest, the elbow slightly crooked, while the right forearm crossed the breast diagonally at a distance of a few inches. This is the true position, and the combatant who knows his business always looks straight into the eyes of his opponent. The arms and body are thus in his field of vision, whereas if he once glances elsewhere he lays himself open to a sudden blow.

With that alertness which becomes second nature to a pugilist, Calvert saw before the first demonstration that his foe had no knowledge whatever of defending himself. He allowed him to make a single rush, his big fists and arms sawing space like a windmill. He struck twice, swishing the air in front of Calvert's face, and gathered himself to strike again, when---

Not one of the three spectators could ever describe how it was done, for the action was too quick for the eye to follow. But, all the same, that metal-like left fist shot forward with the speed of lightning, and landing on the point of the chin, the recipient went down like an ox stricken by the axe of a butcher. Rather curiously, he did not fall backward, but lurched forward and lay senseless, knocked out in the first round.

"You have killed him!" whispered the scared Captain.

"Not a bit of it, but he will be dead to the world for ten or fifteen minutes. We may as well let him rest in peace. What's become of that dog?" asked the officer, glancing inquiringly around.

Chester pointed toward the house. The brute, with his two inches of tail aimed skyward, was scooting around the corner of the building as fast as his bowed legs could carry him. He would not have done so had he been of true bulldog breed, but being a mongrel, there was a big streak of yellow in his make-up.

"He's come to the belief that it's a good time to adjourn, as me cousin said whin someone blowed up the stump on which he was resting his weary body."

"I think we have had enough foraging along the river," remarked Captain Alvin, who re-entered the boat and resumed his place at the wheel. "We dine at Wiscasset."

"I'm not partic'lar as to the place," said Mike, "if only we dine."

Chester flung the loop of rope off the support, and he and the others stepped aboard the launch, which moved up the river. Standing in front of the detective, Mike, with his genial grin, offered his hand:

"I asks the privilege of a shake of yours. I apologize for thinking ye didn't like a shindy as well as the rest of us. I'm sorry for me mistake, as me uncle said, whin he inthrootoced dad to a party of leddies as a gintleman. I couldn't have done better mesilf."

The smiling officer cordially accepted the proffer.

"No one can doubt your pluck, Mike, but, to quote your favorite method of expressing yourself, you showed mighty poor judgment, as the owner of the bull said when the animal tried to butt a locomotive off the track. That man would have eaten you up."

"P-raps, but he would have found me hard to digist. Do ye obsarve?"

He pointed to the little landing which they were leaving behind them. All looked and saw the burly brute of a man slowly rise to a sitting posture, with his hat off and his frowsy hair in his eyes, as he stared confusedly after the launch speeding up the river.

"He is recovering quicker than I expected," was the only remark Calvert made, as he turned his back upon the fellow and gave his attention to lighting another cigar.

"He has the look of a fellow mixed and confused like, similar to Pat McGuigan, whin he dived off the dock and his head

and shoulders went through a lobster pot that he didn't observe in time to avoid the same."

"He's coming round all right," said Calvert, referring to the man they had left behind, though he did not glance at him. "He may not be very pretty, but he knows more than he did a little while ago. Which reminds me to say something that ought to have been said at our first interview."

The three listened to the words of Calvert, who clearly was in earnest.

"Each of you knows that I am a professional detective who has been sent into Maine to do all I can to capture the gang that is robbing the post offices in this section. I told you that much, but I wish to ask you to be very, very careful not to say this to any person whom you may meet, until you have my permission to do so. Some would insist that it was unprofessional on my part to say what I did, but I had good reason for it, as will appear before I am through with the business."

"It was not necessary to tell Chester and me that, but I suppose you wish to run no risk that can be avoided."

"That's it; I did not doubt your loyalty, but you know we can't be too careful."

Mike was leaning back in his chair deeply thinking.

"There's one waak p'int in the plan suggested."

Inasmuch as no one had submitted a plan the three wondered.

"Me friend doesn't wish us to tell anyone that he's the best detective and scrapper outside of our family in Ireland, but when folks priss their questions, some answer must be given or 'spicions will be stirred."

"The point is well taken. I don't wish you to tell an untruth----"

"I'm sure the task is not difficult fur the Captain and second mate," interrupted Mike, "though it's beyond me."

"But you can evade a direct reply."

"May I venture upon another suggestion?" asked Mike.

"We shall all be glad to hear it, I'm sure."

"Without waiting for questions to be asked, I'll step up to ivery one that I observe casting an inquiring eye over ye and say ye're my older brither, that took a hand in the Phoenix Park murders, but broke out of Dublin jail and thus escaped hanging, and yer kaaping dark in Ameriky till the little matter blows over."

"A brilliant idea!" laughed the officer. "All I ask is that you give no truthful information about me."

"Ye doesn't object to my telling folks how ye laid out that Goliah a bit ago?"

"I prefer you should not mention it."

Mike sighed.

"Ah, have ye no pride of family, as Tam O'Toole used to say whin mintioning the fact that all his five brithers were in jail, where Tam himsilf ought to have been?"

"I may add," continued the man, "that it is quite likely we shall soon part company."

Mike affected to be surprised.

"Doesn't the Captain pay ye 'nough wages?"

"I have no fault to find on that score."

"I'm glad to larn that. If he requires ye to do too much dooty, I'll hilp ye out, the bist I can."

"I promise to call upon you if necessary, Mike, but I hope I shall not be obliged to do so."

"I have been wondering since we started," said Alvin over his shoulder, "whether by any possibility the *Water Witch* kept on up the river ahead of us instead of running into some bay or inlet to the south."

"It is possible, but not probable. You know we had an extended view of this stream, or rather of Montsweag Bay, and she could not have gone far enough in the short time to pass out of sight."

"Ye forgits how anxious the Captain was not to overtake her," reminded Mike. "I once read of a farmer who chased a big black bear that had been staaing his sheep fur two days and nights and then quit. Can ye guess why?"

"I should say that after so long a chase he would have given up disgusted," replied the detective.

"It was not that; it was 'cause he found the tracks were becooming too fresh."

"I don't think, Mike, that you are in danger of being accused of that," ventured Chester, "because you are always fresh-

-you are never *becoming* so."

"But the same is becoming to me, as Jim Flannery said when he walked into church with two black eyes and his head bent out of shape from the shindy he had with his twin brother over the question of aiting maat on Friday."

"You seem quite sure that these three whom we saw in the launch are mixed up in these post office robberies?" asked Alvin.

"It has that look. No matter how certain I may feel, nothing can be accomplished until legal proof is obtained. You know the rule that every man must be presumed to be innocent until proved guilty."

"It strikes me that the most important question of all has been settled."

"What's that?"

"These two young gentlemen are the spalpeens that tried to hold ye up, Captain, the other night on yer way home. That fur outweighs the taking of a few postage stamps from some country offices."

"The puzzling feature of that business," said Alvin, "is that when you meet those two fellows again, you will not have Mr. Calvert along to protect you."

Mike stared as if he failed to catch the meaning of this astounding remark.

"Please say that again, Captain, and say it slow like."

Alvin's face being turned away, he was not forced to maintain his gravity while he repeated in his most serious tones the remark quoted.

"All I have to say to that is not to say anything, as Teddy Geoghan observed when they found a stolen pig in the bag he was carrying over his shoulder which the same he insisted was filled with clothes for Widow Mulligan."

CHAPTER VIII

THE LONE GUEST

The *Deerfoot* glided through the smooth waters, and while the afternoon was still young rounded to at the wharf, below the long wooden bridge which spans the stream at Wiscasset, and made fast where a score of other boats of all sizes and models were moored. Several large vessels were anchored farther out and Captain Alvin Landon had to slow down to thread his way among them. There was plenty of room, and the launch was tied up opposite a small excursion steamer which was to start southward an hour later. A tip to the old man who was looking after a number of yachts assured the safety of the last arrival from molestation.

The possibility that the *Water Witch* had preceded them to Wiscasset caused a scrutiny of the various craft in sight by the Captain and his crew, including Detective Calvert, but nothing was seen of the boat.

"She is miles off down stream," was the remark of the officer, "and for the present is out of the running."

The four walked up the easy slope to the main street, along which they passed to the leading hotel for dinner. They were a little late and when they went into the spacious dining room found a table by themselves. The only other occupant was a tall, angular man of about the same age as Calvert, similarly attired and apparently giving his sole attention to the meal before him. He nodded to the group in a neighborly way, but did not speak.

When the four took their places at the small table, Calvert faced this person a short distance away; Chester Haynes sat with his back to him, thus confronting the detective, while Mike and Alvin occupied the respective ends of the board. These details sound trifling, but they had a meaning. Calvert thus distributed his companions apparently off-hand, but the seating of himself as mentioned was done with a purpose. Chester then, from the position he occupied, was the only one of the other three who observed anything significant in that action and in what followed.

In the first place, the officer raised his glass of water, and while slowly drinking looked over the top at the lone guest. Chester noticed that he sipped the fluid longer than common, gazed at the stranger and deliberately winked one eye. What response the other made of course could not be seen by Chester.

"The two are acquaintances," was the conclusion of the lad, "and they don't wish anyone else to know it."

He was curious to know whether Alvin and Mike had noticed anything of the by-play. The Irish lad for the time devoted himself to satisfying his vigorous hunger and cared for naught else. The same was to be said of the Captain. Chester remained on the alert.

Several trifling incidents that occurred during the meal, which was enlivened by the wit of the Irish lad, confirmed Chester in his first suspicion. Calvert tried to divert possible suspicion by cheery remarks and pleasant conversation as the meal proceeded.

"I am sure, Mike, you never had any such feasts in the old country."

Having said this, the detective coughed several times and held his napkin to his mouth, but Chester knew the outburst was forced, and was meant to carry to the other man, who rather curiously coughed the same number of times immediately afterward.

"A message and its reply," was the thought of Chester, "but I have no idea of what they mean. Mr. Calvert doesn't wish me to see anything and I won't let him know I do."

Meanwhile, Mike made his response to the inquiring remark of Calvert:

"Ye're right, me frind, as Hank McCarthy said whin dining on one pratie and a bit of black bread, calling to mind his former feasting in his own home. Which reminds me, Mr. Calvert, to ask, did ye iver see the heart of an Irishman?"

"I'm not quite sure I grasp your meaning, Mike," was the reply, while Alvin and Chester looked up.

"I can bist explain by a dimonstration, as the tacher said whin I asked him what was meant by the chastisement of a school lad. Now, give heed, all of ye, and I'll show ye what I meant by the sinsible inquiry."

Among the different articles of food on the table was a dish of "murphy" potatoes with their "jackets" on. That is, they had not been mashed or peeled, though a strip was shaved off of each end. They were mealy and white, and Mike had already placed several where they were sure to do the most good. The tubers in boiling had swollen so much that most of the skins had popped open in spots from the richness within.

Mike reached over and carefully selected a big murphy, which he held with the thumb of his left hand and fingers circling about it. The upper end projected slightly above the thumb and forefinger, as if peeping out to watch

proceedings. The three stopped eating for the moment and watched the youth. While doing this, Chester glanced for an instant at the face of the officer, and saw him look quickly across the room and telegraph another wink.

Like a professional magician, Mike was very deliberate in order to be more impressive. The true artist does not overlook the minutest point, and he daintily adjusted the potato, shifting it about until it was poised exactly right. Then he slowly raised his open right hand, with the palm downward, until it was above his head. Like a flash he brought it down upon the upper end of the tuber, which shot through the loose encircling grasp as if fired from an air gun. The skin remained, but the potato itself whisked down upon the table with such force that it popped open, and lo!

"There's the heart of an Irishman--Begoora! but I'm mistook!" exclaimed Mike in dismay, for when the tuber burst open the interior was black with decay!

Calvert threw back his head and roared, and Alvin and Chester came near falling from their chairs. Even the man at the other table joined in the boisterous merriment, which was increased by the comical expression of Mike. With open mouth and staring eyes he sat dumfounded. For once in his life he was caught so fairly that he was speechless.

The deft little trick he had performed many times, but never before had he been victimized by what seemed to be a rich, mealy potato. He couldn't understand it.

Oddly enough the stranger was the first to recover his speech. He must have had little liking for Hibernians, since he called:

"You're right, young man! You showed us the heart of a real Irishman!"

With lower jaw still drooping, Mike turned his head and stared at the speaker. He yearned to crush him with a suitable reply, but all his wit had been knocked out of him by the cruel blow of fate. However, it could not long remain so. He picked up the fragments of the potato, fumbled them reprovingly and gravely laid them on the tablecloth beside his plate. Then the old grin bisected his homely face, and addressing the three, he said:

"I made a slight mistake, as Jerry Sullivan said whin he stepped out of the third story windy thinking it was the top of the stairs. If it's all the same to yees, we'll now give our attintion to disposing of the remaining stuff on the board."

Out of curiosity, the four cut in two each of the potatoes left in the dish. Every one was as sound as a dollar, whereat all laughed again, Mike as heartily as any.

"It'll be a sorry day whin I can't take a joke, as Jim Doolin said smiling whin his frinds pushed his cabin over on top of him as he lay sleeping behind it, but I was niver sarved such a trick before."

Chester thought the unanimous merriment caused by Mike's mishap would open an acquaintance between the lone guest and the others, but nothing more was said by the respective parties, nor did the watchfulness of the youth detect any further signals while at the table. Evidently an understanding had been brought about, and nothing else was required.

The meal finished, the four rose to leave the dining room. While there may have been nothing meant by Calvert's action in dropping to the rear, Chester was alert and glanced back as they walked into the hall outside. He was rewarded by seeing the officer turn his head for an instant and give a slight nod. No doubt it was meant for the guest left behind, whose response was invisible to all except him for whom it was intended. The individual must have been blessed with a good appetite, or he followed the sensible policy of lingering long over his meals, since he began eating before the little party and continued after their departure.

Reaching the pleasant, shady avenue, the four strolled through the town and when tired came back to the hotel and sat down. Chester was on the lookout for the stranger, but nothing was seen of him. What did it all mean and what was the cause of the secrecy between him and Stockham Calvert?

"If he chooses to explain I must wait until he is ready," was the decision of Chester.

The afternoon was well forward, when they walked down the slope to the wharf, where the *Deerfoot* awaited them. Alvin made a hasty inspection of it and found everything seemingly all right. As they were about to step aboard, the officer said:

"I shall have to bid you good-by for awhile."

"Why is that?" asked the Captain, in surprise.

"You remember I told you it was likely, but I hope soon to meet you all again."

Nothing could be said by way of objection, and he stood on the wharf as Alvin seated himself after adjusting the plug and swinging over the fly-wheel. The boat circled out into the broad stream, and all waved their hands to the officer, who responded similarly. Then he turned about and went slowly up the slope, probably to the hotel where they had dined.

When everything was moving easily, and the boat was gliding down stream, Chester sitting directly beside his chum told him all that he had observed in the dining room. Mike had gone to the stern of the launch and sat down in his favorite position, with his feet curled up under him.

CHAPTER IX

A BREAK DOWN

Captain Alvin was keenly interested in the story of Chester Haynes. He admitted that he had noticed nothing peculiar, and it was evident that Mike had been equally blind to the events passing under their eyes.

"It is plain," said Alvin, "that although Calvert told us a good many things about himself, there is a good deal more he didn't tell."

"What do you make of it all?"

"That man who was in the dining room with us may have been another detective or----"

"Or what?" asked Chester, observing the hesitation.

"I hate to say what comes into my mind, but every now and then a queer suspicion steals over me that Calvert is deceiving us and is not what he claims to be."

"In other words, he is a member of the gang whom he pretends to be hunting down."

"I am ashamed to confess it, but such has been my fear at times. And yet," the Captain hastened to add, as if regretting his unworthy thoughts, "it seems impossible, when we call to mind all he did and how he has acted from the first of our acquaintance with him."

Chester was thoughtful for a moment or two.

"I made up my mind after that rumpus down stream when he saved Mike from a bad beating, that he was just what he said, though I won't deny that more than one thing he has done--such as following us from Sawyer Island to the inlet where the *Water Witch* lay, and his behavior on the road--had a queer look. But what's the use of speculating about it? Sooner or later we shall know the truth, and, if we don't, I can't say I much care. Which course will you take in going home?"

"I haven't any choice; have you?"

"Suppose then you follow Back River, and around Cape Newagen home. That's a pretty good run, and at the rate we are going we sha'n't get there before dark."

"Have you any reason for the choice?"

"Only that we may catch sight of the *Water Witch*, from which we parted in those waters. If we do, we shall have to hold Mike in leash."

So it came about that the *Deerfoot* turned into the headwaters of Back River, passing Cushman Point through the Cowseagan Narrows, and into the more open waters below. Three or four miles farther would take them to Montsweag Bay, of which mention has been made, that body of water being twice or thrice as wide as the river.

Suddenly Chester asked an odd question:

"Do you think the launch was injured by that spurt this forenoon?"

"She ought not to have been, for she has gone through the strain more than once and for a longer time. Why do you ask?"

"Somehow or other, it seems to me she isn't running exactly right."

"What is wrong?"

"I can't put my finger on it; I may say I *feel* it--that's all."

"Well, you are right, for I have had the same misgiving ever since we left Wiscasset. I have tried to figure it out, but can't and am waiting for it to develop, hoping all the time it won't--hello! there it comes!"

While the speed of the boat was not affected, the engine began hissing with vicious persistency.

"Take the wheel, Chester, while I look around."

He first examined the spark plugs, knowing that if one was broken the result would be what had just taken place, but all were intact. He had turned the switch, stopping the motor, and next inspected the valve caps where a fracture or loosening would have caused the hissing. They were sound and tight and the gaskets where the exhaust and intake pipes connected with the cylinders were tight.

"I've found it!" he called to Chester. "It's an open compression cup, which is easily fixed; I am glad it is nothing worse."

Remembering the lessons he had been taught, the young Captain soon corrected the fault and resumed progress. The launch, however, was held down to a comparatively slow pace, for the slight slip naturally caused misgiving. Several minutes passed with all going well.

"It seems to me safe to give her more speed," said Chester. "At this rate we sha'n't reach home until late at night."

"All right; turn on more power--no, don't! *Ouch!*"

Alvin snapped his fingers, as one does when they are burned. He had placed them upon the exhaust pipe, which was growing red hot.

"Shut her off! The mischief is to pay."

Knowing from the gesture of the Captain what was the matter, Chester asked, as he obeyed the request:

"What causes that?"

"There is either something wrong with the water pump, the spark is retarded, or a lack of sufficient lubrication, causing the motor to heat. It will take some time to find out and we shall have to drift for awhile."

"Why not run to land and tie up? We may get in the way of some of the boats steaming up or down the river if we stay out here."

Alvin scrutinized the eastern bank, which is the upper portion of Westport, and much nearer than Wiscasset township opposite.

"The water is so deep that I suppose we can touch the bank anywhere without risk to the hull. All right; feel your way in."

The turning of the boat naturally stirred Mike's curiosity and he came back to learn the cause, which was soon explained to him.

"Ye have me consint, since I obsarve there's a bit of a town not far off where we can git enough food to keep off starvation."

Fir, spruce and pines line the shore of this part of Westport, the ground rising moderately inland. A half mile, more or less, from the river, runs the public highway from Clough Point, the northern extremity of Westport, almost to Brooks Point at the extreme southern end, the distance being something like fifteen miles, the entire length of the island.

The village to which Mike Murphy alluded stands alongside this road, a half mile from the shore of Back River. There was enough rise to the ground to show the church steeple and the roofs of the higher buildings. Perhaps it will be well to give it the name of Beartown, and to say that it numbered some five hundred inhabitants. Although its main interest was with the highway alluded to, yet it had considerable trade with the river, up and down which boats of different tonnage steamed, sailed or rowed during the day, and occasionally at night. A well-marked road led from a wharf to the village. Over this freight was drawn to and fro in wagons, and some of the less important steamers halted for passengers who liked that way of going up or down stream.

Alvin and Chester thought it better not to stop at the public wharf, where they were likely to be in the way of larger craft and might draw unpleasant attention to themselves, while engaged in repairing the launch. Accordingly, the latter timidly approached the land, several hundred yards below the wharf. The water possessed that wonderful clearness which is one of its beautiful peculiarities in Maine. The boat was far out when the change was made in her course, but she had not gone far when, looking over the side, the dark, rocky bottom was plainly seen fully thirty feet below. There was slight decrease in this depth until the boat was within a few yards of land. Even then, it must have been twenty feet at least, the bottom sloping as abruptly from the shore as the roof of a house. Consequently the approach was safe and easy.

In such favorable conditions there was no difficulty in laying the launch near the bank, where, as in former instances, she was made fast by the bow line looped around a sturdy spruce more than six inches in diameter, and the anchor out over the stern. Chester tied the knot securely, and stepped back to give what help he could to Alvin, who was busy with the engine. Mike looked on and remarked that, although he knew nothing at all about the various contraptions, he held himself ready to give valuable advice whenever it was needed.

"Being as mesilf ain't indispinsable just now, 'spose I strolls up to the city nixt door and make a few more new acquaintances."

"There is no objection to that," replied the Captain, "but be sure to come back before dark."

Mike sprang lightly to land and set off on his journey of discovery. It will be recalled that our friends were some distance from the highway connecting the wharf and town and therefore he had to thread his way among the trees to

reach the direct route to the village. There was no trouble in doing this: the trouble came afterward.

Alvin and Chester gave the lad no thought, for he surely was old enough to take care of himself, and there was nothing in the situation to cause any misgiving. Their ambition was to get the engine of the launch in shape. With painstaking care and the expenditure of more time than was expected, Alvin finally discovered that the heat of the exhaust pipe was due to the clogging of the pump with weeds, and not to the lack of lubrication or the retarding of the spark.

To the disgust of both, when a test was made with the launch still held immovable, and the heating was overcome, explosions in the muffler developed.

"Now we must find whether that is caused by a cylinder missing fire and pumping the gas into the muffler."

"How will that do it?" asked Chester, who, while a good motor boat pilot, possessed less practical knowledge than his chum.

"The charges which I spoke of are ignited from the heat of the next exhausted charge. It may be the exhaust valve is stuck or does not seat properly, or the gas mixture is too weak to fire in the cylinder, or the spark may be insufficient or over-retarded. It is a job to get that straightened out, and when that is done, perhaps something else will turn up, but we may as well tackle it at once."

It was fully dark before the difficulty was remedied by a careful readjustment of the carburettor. Repeated tests were made, and everything found to be right.

"At last!" said Alvin, with a sigh of relief. "And now we are ready to go home. But where is Mike?"

CHAPTER X

AT BEARTOWN

Alvin Landon had been toiling so long, often in a stooping posture, that he was tired. He sat down on one of the seats and his chum placed himself opposite.

"I'm mighty glad," said the Captain, "for a fellow can't do much of this in the dark, and I was bothered a good deal as it was."

"It strikes me that you will be running into danger by going down the river to-night."

"How?"

"There is no moon until late. Suppose the launch should break down when we were well out in Sheepscot Bay, wouldn't we be in a fix?"

"Yes, but I hope she is through breaking down for some time to come."

"So do I, but why take the risk, when there's no necessity for it?"

"We aren't fixed to sleep on board, though we could do it in a pinch, for the weather is mild."

"Let's go up to this village or town near by. I am sure we shall get accommodations for the night. Truth to tell, Alvin, I'm as hungry as I was at dinner to-day in Wiscasset."

"The plan is a good one, though I don't like to leave the boat by itself till morning. You know what happened the other night."

"That won't occur again in a thousand years. Put the flags and other stuff in the cockpit, lock the engine cover, take the switch plug with you, and the boat will be as safe as if she had a regiment of men on guard."

"Mike ought to have been back before this," said the Captain, with a touch of impatience. "Unless he has a good excuse I shall demote him, by making you first mate."

"It is a dazzling promise you hold before me, but it won't be fair to condemn Mike unheard. Give him a chance."

After some hesitation, Alvin acted upon the advice of his comrade. The launch was made as secure as possible, and they sprang ashore, where the gloom among the trees reminded them of that other tramp after taking supper with Uncle Ben Trotwood. There was no reason for going astray and they followed a direct course until they reached the roadway between the wharf and the village of Beartown, alongside the main road running the length of the island of Westport.

The moon had not yet risen; in fact it would not be up for several hours, but the sky was clear and studded with stars which shone with dazzling brilliancy. They could plainly see the broad trail into which they turned and walked toward the village.

Less than a score of paces were passed when the two caught sight of a figure approaching through the obscurity. The person kept in the middle of the road, and an instant later both recognized him as their comrade.

"Hands up!" called the Captain, in his most startling voice.

Mike stopped short, but made no motion to obey.

"Didn't you hear me?" demanded Alvin fiercely, as he strode forward with the grinning Chester at his elbow.

"If ye'll be kind enough to spell out the words I'll think 'em over and let ye know me decision to-morrer," replied the Irish youth, who knew the voice, though the speaker screened himself as much as he could in the shadow at the side of the highway. The parties met and shook hands.

"What kept you so long?" asked Chester.

"I spint the time in making acquaintances, and before I knowed it, night had descinded. I 'spose there's about two thousand folks in Beartown as they call it, and I know 'em all except two or three, the same being out of town."

"It is so late," said the Captain, "that we have decided to stay here overnight--that is, if we can get lodgings."

"Arrah, now, that's a sinsible remark which I xpected ye to make, as Arty Devitt said whin he admitted he was the biggest fool in Cork. But there ain't a hotel in Beartown."

"Then we shall have to go back to the boat and either start down the river or bunk in as best we can."

"Nothing of the kind; supper is waiting and ye're expected. The house has only one bed, which av coorse is fur me, while ye two will have to make shift in the adj'ining woodshed. Come on and I'll show ye."

"Be sensible for once in your life," said Alvin, "and explain matters."

"Isn't that what I'm doing?" asked Mike, as he turned about and the three walked toward the sleepy little town.

"I've made frinds wid the postmaster, which is a fine old lady with a swaat darter. She has spread supper for us three, and whin I told her we'd honor her by staying overnight, she was that pleased she danced the Highland Fling and kicked over a barrel of apples. And what do ye think, byes, after we'd talked awhile, we found we was relatives. What have ye to say to that?"

"It is impossible. What's her name?"

"Mrs. Friestone and her daughter is Nora. It was that name that set me wits to work. Ye see the leddy thinks--that is, after I suggisted the same--that one of her ancistors about the time St. Patrick was driving the snakes out of Ireland was living there, and immigrated to this country and he come over wid the ither sarpints."

"St. Patrick died fifteen hundred years ago," said Chester.

"Thin I 'spose he must be purty dead by this time, but that isn't aginst the fact of the father of Mrs. Friestone, two or three thousand ginerations back, paddling across the Atlantic and sittling in this part of Maine. I have raison to belave that one of me own ancistors was a second cousin to the owld gintleman and came wid him on the v'yage. The owld lady doesn't dispoote me, but is inclined to belave the same."

"But where do we come in?" asked Alvin.

"That was me chaif trouble in gitting ye folks straightened out. Av coorse, I made it clear to them that I owned a launch, which the same is called the *Deerfut*, and I had took ye out fur a sail--that I had left ye to thry to run the boat, in order to taich ye the same, and ye had broke down. I said ye were half dacent chaps, and if she would bear in mind that ye hadn't been under me training long, she would be able to git along wid ye. Nora said I must bring ye to the house, and ye should have slaaping accommodations and as much as folks of yer kind oughter ate. I reminded them that I had provided ye with plinty of pocket money and instrhucted ye niver to accept favors widout paying for 'em. Thus the way has been opened for ye."

"So it would seem, if a tenth part of what you say is true," was the comment of Alvin.

The village, which I have thought best to call Beartown, straggles along both sides of the highway which runs the length of Westport island. It has a neat wooden church, a faded school house, which had been closed several weeks, it being vacation time, two stores, a blacksmith and a carpenter shop, but lacks a hotel, no one being enterprising enough to build such a structure with the meagre prospects he would have to face. If now and then some visitor wished to stay overnight in the place it depended upon his success in finding lodgings with one of the citizens. This could not always be done, but it is safe to say that Mike Murphy won the favor of so many with whom he came in contact that a half dozen homes would have been glad to take him in indefinitely. Strolling along the highway, his attention was caught by sight of a modest frame building, standing near the middle of the village with the sign in small letters "Post Office" over the front porch, which was crowded with samples of what were for sale at the store.

Entering the open door, he asked in his most suave manner if there was a letter for "Michael Murphy, lately from Tipperary." The thin old lady in spectacles behind the counter, at the front, pulled the half dozen missives from the pigeon hole over which the letter "M" showed and slowly inspected each. She gently shook her head:

"It doesn't seem to have arrived; probably it will come in the next mail."

Mike's genial face became the picture of disappointment.

"That's mighty qu'ar. The Duke promised he would write me two waaks ago from his castle and return the five pounds I loaned him. Ye can't thrust the nobility."

"I am sorry," said the sympathetic postmistress, "but I don't see how I can help you. Have patience and all will come right."

"Don't think it's yersilf I'm blaming, though onraisioning folks are inclined that way. The matter of a little money doesn't consarn me, but it's the aboose of me confidence."

Just then a man came in to inquire for a letter, and the sweet looking old lady was obliged to withdraw her attention from the freckled face before her.

During this brief interview a girl not yet out of short dresses stood behind the counter, measuring out some calico for a woman in a scoop shovel-bonnet. The girl's face was as mirthful as Mike's, and her black eyes twinkled with mischief. She heard all that was said, and read the youth like a book. He looked more at her than at her mother, and could not

help being pleased with the lively young lady. Never at loss for an excuse in such circumstances, he waited at the front of the store, sighing as if greatly depressed, until the woman customer paid her bill, accepted the roll and walked out. Then Mike, blushing so far as it was possible to do so, moved respectfully toward the smiling attraction.

"I lost me wheelbarrer in coming up from me launch; have ye anything of the kind ye would be willing to sell to a poor orphan?"

"Will one be all you want?" asked the miss. "We can furnish you with a dozen as well as a single barrow. How much would you like to pay?"

Mike was caught. He had taken a comprehensive survey of the display outside the store before entering, and was sure that only the simplest agricultural implements were on sale. Furthermore, he had less than a silver dollar in his pockets.

"I'll have to wait to consolt me partners," he replied, while nature did her best to deepen the blush on his broad countenance. "Ye see it's them that has to do the work fur me, and it's only fair on me side to let them have something to say about the ch'ice of tools. What do ye think yersilf?"

"I think you haven't any wish to buy a wheelbarrow, that you haven't the money to pay for it, and I know we haven't one in the store--so I think further that there won't be any sale so far as wheelbarrows are concerned."

CHAPTER XI

AT THE POST OFFICE IN BEARTOWN

Although Mike Murphy rarely got the worst of it in a bout at repartee, he had the true sporting instinct and liked the winner because of his victory. It took a bright person to beat him, but it did happen now and then, and he enjoyed a clash of wits with one who proved his master, though in the long run the youth generally came out ahead.

When, therefore, the girl in the post office at Beartown snapped out the remark just printed, he was roused to admiration. He threw back his head and the store rang with his infectious laughter.

"Begorra! ye were too much for me that time. If ye'll not think me impudent, I beg the privilege of shaking hands wid ye."

The merry sprite, laughing almost as heartily as he, though with less noise, reached a dainty hand across the counter and he grasped it. From behind the rack at the front of the store, the gentle mother beamed with a smile. She had heard and understood it all.

"I am afraid, Nora, you were rude to the gentleman," she said in her silvery voice.

"Not a bit!" was the hearty response of Mike. "I got it that time where the chicken got the axe--which the same is in the neck. It was a fair hit and I desarved more, though no one could give it to me."

It may be said that this little incident fixed Mike in the favor of mother and daughter. It was hard to resist the rollicking good nature of the Irish youth, who was equally impressed by the gentle goodness of the mother and the sprightly wit of the daughter. He now called a halt with his nonsense and gave a true account of the situation. His two companions were the sons of wealthy parents and one of them owned a beautiful motor launch which broke down while descending the river from Wiscasset. He had left the two trying to tinker it in shape, but had doubts of their success. In case they failed, it would be very pleasing to them if they could get supper and lodging in Beartown. Would the good woman advise them where to apply?

She replied that she would be glad to meet their wants, though they would be disappointed with the poor meals and lodging, for she knew they must be accustomed to much better. This was the invitation for which Mike was angling and he promptly accepted, assuring the woman that it was a fine piece of good fortune which more than repaid them for the disabling of their engine.

"They may repair it and go home," suggested Nora.

"That will make no difference, for I sha'n't return to them till night comes and then they'll have no ch'ice."

"They may not wait for you," said Nora.

"Little fear of their laving widout me, so nothing will be done till I arrive, as Brian O'Lynn said when he was walking forth to be hanged."

With no other purpose in mind than to force his friends to stay over night in the village, Mike Murphy loitered. When the mother and daughter were not engaged with customers he entertained them by his quaint remarks, which kept the smile on their faces. He had seated himself, on the invitation of Nora, in a chair at the rear of the store, where he was in no one's way and where he could make use of his eyes. Thus it came about that he observed several interesting facts.

Mrs. Friestone and Nora made up the whole force of the store, which did a considerable trade in groceries and articles such as a village community needs. Furthermore, the abundant and excellent stock showed that the owner was not only enterprising but understood her business. The other store in Beartown hardly rose to the dignity of a rival.

It may as well be said at this point that her husband, who had been dead six years, went through the whole war for the Union and was badly wounded several times. President Grant personally complimented Captain Friestone for his bravery in battle, and when he became President appointed him as postmaster at Beartown. He suffered so grievously from his old wounds that the small post office and his pension were all that saved him and his young wife from actual want. He took up storekeeping in a small way, gradually branching out until he had established a flourishing business, whereupon he did an almost unheard of thing. As soon as he knew his future was secure, he notified the government that he would no longer accept a pension and he stuck to the resolution.

The veteran was retained in office by the successors of President Grant until his death, when the appointment was given to his widow, not a member of the community asking for a change. The income was meagre, but the widow had become accustomed to the duties, having performed them during the last years of her husband's life, and she liked the

work. The store paid so well that it more than met the wants of the two.

When the cheering thousands welcomed the soldiers returning from the war, a proud father held his little girl on his shoulder and she waved her hand joyously to the bronzed heroes some of whom were still little more than boys. One laughing soldier snatched away the child and kissed her. He was Captain Friestone and the girl was Bessie Elton. The acquaintance thus begun ripened until the time arrived for her to put on long dresses, and by and by she became the happy bride of the officer, and never a shadow darkened their hearthstone until Death called and took away the brave husband and father.

Mike noticed that a massive safe stood behind the counter in a corner at the rear of the store. The ponderous door was open, for mother and daughter had frequent cause to use the repository. Within the steel structure all the stamps, government funds and daily cash receipts were deposited at the close of the day's business. The value of these was slight, but the safe contained a great deal more. While Nora was lighting the five kerosene lamps, suspended on brackets at favorable points in the store, a middle aged and somewhat corpulent man bustled in, nodded to the widow and handed her a large sealed envelope. Mike heard him say, "Twenty-five hundred," and she replied "Very well." It was evident that he had brought in that amount of money and left it for security with her. On the back of the envelope--though of course the youth did not see this--was written in a large, round hand, "C. Jasper, \$2500."

The widow walked to the rear of the store, drew out one of the small central drawers of the safe and placed the big envelope in it, still leaving the heavy door open, though the little drawer was locked with a tiny key.

Five minutes later, a second man, thin, nervous and alert, stepped through the door, glanced sharply around and passed a similar envelope to the woman. On the back of it was written, "G. H. Kupfer--\$1250."

"You will please give me a receipt," he said in his brisk fashion. The reply was gentle:

"I cannot do that."

"Why not? It's simple business."

"Mr. Kupfer, because you have more faith in my safe than in your small one, you bring your money to me. I have not asked it; I should rather not have it, and I do it only to accommodate you, besides which I charge you nothing. If burglars should break in and steal your money, I cannot be responsible. Do I make that clear to you?"

"Why, Mrs. Friestone, I have no fear of that sort; I only ask that you give me a receipt merely as a matter of record and to save you possible annoyance. Suppose anything should happen to me--such as my death--my folks would be put to great trouble to get this money."

"That cannot possibly occur, for your name and the amount are written on the sealed envelope; I know every member of your family, and in the event you speak of I should hand it personally to some one of them. On no other condition will I take your money for safe keeping. Follow your own pleasure."

"Oh, well," replied the caller, with a nervous laugh, "have it as you please. I have left money with you before and haven't suffered. But say----"

As the keen eyes flitted around the store, he saw Mike Murphy sitting under one of the lamps and looking as if he was not listening to their conversation. Mr. Kupfer leaned over the counter and lowered his voice:

"Who is he?"

"A young gentleman."

"I don't like his looks."

"Then I advise you not to look at him," was the reply.

"How long is he going to hang round the store?"

"Just so long as it suits his pleasure to do so. He and two of his friends are going to take supper and stay overnight with us."

"Do you know anything about the two?"

"I have never seen them, and I never saw this young gentleman till this afternoon."

The caller turned his face and scanned Mike more closely. The youth, who was boiling with anger, tried to look as if unaware of the insulting action.

"Please hand that package back," said Mr. Kupfer, with a compression of his thin lips.

Without a word, the widow passed the envelope to the man, who whisked through the open door, fairly leaping off the porch to the dusty path.

Who shall describe the emotions of Mike Murphy during these exasperating moments? He recalled the experience of Alvin and Chester, as they related it to him, when they were arrested as post office robbers some days before, and now something similar in essence had come to him. But what could he do? He would have liked to pummel the one who had insulted him, but that was impracticable, inasmuch as he had not addressed any words to the youth.

While he was fuming and glaring at the door through which the man had disappeared, Mike heard a soft chuckle behind him. He whisked his head around and saw Nora standing beside the safe just back of him, stuffing her handkerchief in her mouth and with her face almost as crimson as his own.

"If I may be so bowld I should like to know what ye are laughing at," said Mike, who could feel no resentment toward the merry young miss.

"We both heard what he said," she replied as soon as she could command her voice.

"Being I faal like a firecracker that has jest been teched off, I suspick I caught his loving remarks consarning mesilf."

"Will you tell me something truly--upon your word of honor--take your dying oath?"

"That I will, ye may depind upon the same."

"Are you a real post office robber?"

CHAPTER XII

HOSTESSES AND GUESTS

Mike affected to be greatly embarrassed by the question of Nora Friestone. He swallowed what seemed to be a lump rising in his throat, grinned in a sickly way and then asked as if much distressed:

"Do ye insist on me answering yer quistion?"

"I do," she replied, with an expression of tremendous solemnity.

"Then I'll hev to own that I'm the champion post office robber in Maine. It was mesilf that plundered three offices, each a hundred miles from the ither, on the same night and burned up an old man, his wife and siven children that vintured to dispoote me will. I've been in the bus'nness iver since the year one and me home is Murthersville at the head of Murthersville Creek in Murthersville County."

Rising from his chair, Mike bowed low.

"I thrust I have answered yer quistions satisfactorily, Miss."

"You couldn't have done better--hello, Jim!"

This salutation was to a big gawky boy, who slouched through the door, with the announcement:

"Wal, I'm ready: what shall I do?"

"Who's yer frind?" asked Mike of Nora.

"He comes round each morning to take out and place the things on the porch in front and brings them in again each evening"

"Jim," said Mike, addressing the gaping youngster, "ye're discharged fur to-night. I'm doing yer job for the avening, but you git your wages just the same."

With which Mike thrust his hand into his trousers pocket and drew out one of the three silver quarters there, handing it to the boy, who was too mystified to understand what it meant.

"Yaws," he said, with a silly grin, looking at the coin and then clasping it tight; "what do yuh warnt me to dew?"

"Go right home to yer mommy and give her that quarter to save up fur ye. Don't git gay on the road and buy a horse and wagon."

"Yaws, but--uh--I don't understand what yuh am drivin' at."

"Ye don't understand anything in this wurruld and by yer looks niver will."

"He means, Jim," interposed Nora, "that he will bring in the things to-night for us, but you must come round in the morning and set them out again. That's plain enough, isn't it?"

"Yaws--but what did he give me so much money fur? I hain't done nothin' to earn it; I don't understand it."

"We all know that. Come wid me, James."

As Mike spoke, he slipped his arm under that of Jim and walked to the door, not pausing until they stood on the porch.

"Now, James, tell me where ye live."

"Yaws, what fur?"

"Cause I asked ye; out wid it!"

The lad pointed a crooked finger down the street to the left.

"Now, see how quick ye can git thar. Don't look back, and whin ye tumbles over the doorsill, tell yer mither ye won't have any wurruk to do here until to-morrer mornin'."

"Oh, yaws, I understand--why didn't ye say so afore?"

"Cause ye wouldn't have understood if I did. Off wid ye!"

And to make sure of being obeyed, Mike gave him a push which caused his dilapidated straw hat to fall off. He snatched it up and broke into a lope, as if afraid of harm if he lingered longer in the neighborhood of such strange doings.

"Now, Miss Nora, if ye'll tell me where ye want these things placed, I shall be honored by carrying 'em in fur ye."

Mike stood in the front door and looked down the big store to Nora, at the rear, who called:

"Set them in the back part of the room right here where I'm standing."

"How can I put 'em there, if ye stand there?" asked Mike.

"I expect to get out of your way."

"Oh, yaws," remarked the youth, mimicking Jim, who had shown so much mental bewilderment.

The task was easy. There were picks, shovels, rakes, hoes, spades, pails, ice cream freezers, toy wagons with gilt letters, coils of rope and the various articles displayed by most village or country stores to attract custom. These were carried in by the lusty Mike, a half dozen at a time, and set down somewhat loosely at the rear, Nora making a few suggestions that were hardly needed.

While this was going on, the mother employed herself in locking the safe for the night. It will be remembered that in addition to the stamps and money belonging to the government and to herself, a liberal amount was already there, the property of one of the leading citizens of Beartown, who was glad to entrust it to the keeping of the honest widow.

"I think," said the daughter when Mike had completed his work, which took only a few minutes, "you have earned your supper."

"Ah, now what reward can equal the light of yer blue eyes and the swate smile that shows the purtiest teeth in the State of Maine?" was the instant inquiry in return.

The mother had just finished locking the safe, and, standing up, she laughed in her gentle way and said:

"Surely you have kissed the blamey stone, Mike."

"I would have done the same had the chance been mine, which it wasn't. Is there any more play that ye call wurruk which I can do fur the likes of ye?"

"Nothing more, thank you. Nora and I will now close the store and attend to preparing supper."

"And I'll bring me frinds to enjy the same."

So Mike bade them good night for a brief while, and strode down the road to find Alvin and Chester, whom, as you know, he met on their way to look for him. The three lingered and chatted, with the view of giving mother and daughter time in which to make ready the evening meal.

Following a common fashion of the times, the veteran Carter Friestone, in building his store and home, made the second story the living room of the family. It could be reached by the stairs at the back of the regular entrance, being through a narrow hall where visitors rang a bell when they called.

The upper front apartment served for parlor and sitting room, and was neatly furnished, one of the principal articles being a piano. This was a birthday present to Nora, who was gifted with a naturally sweet voice and received instruction from the schoolmistress of Beartown. At the rear was the kitchen and dining room, with two bedrooms between that and the parlor, facing each other across the hall.

Nora answered the tinkle of the bell, and Alvin and Chester were introduced to her under the light of the hanging lamp overhead. The little party found the mother awaiting them at the head of the stairs.

"Supper will be ready in a few minutes," she said. "Nora will entertain you in the parlor until I call you."

The girl escorted them to the front room, where all sat down and chatted with the cheery good nature proper in such a party of young folks. Mike was at his best, and kept all laughing by his drollery. Nora's merriment filled the room with music. Michael had given his name soon after his entrance into the store, but insisted that the way to pronounce it was "Mike," not "Michael."

"I never knew such a funny person," said Nora, after one of his quaint remarks. "Mother and I took to him from the first."

"I find it's a common wakeness whereiver I go," said Mike gravely.

"We find him fairly good company," said Alvin. "He seems to have been born that way and we can hardly blame him."

"He tries our patience very much," added Chester, "but we have learned to bear the affliction."

"I wish you all lived in Beartown," said Nora impulsively, "and that Mike would call to see us every day."

"Whisht, now," said he, lowering his voice. "Whin I strolled through the town on me arrival, I was so chaarmed I began hunting fur a house and property to buy fur me home. I sthruke the right spot and made an offer to the owner of the

same. I think we'll come to tarms, being there's only a difference of a thrifle of five or six thousand dollars in the price."

Mrs. Friestone now appeared with word that supper was waiting, and all passed into the kitchen and dining room. Of course she presided, Nora acting as waitress whenever necessary. Alvin and Chester complimented their hostess on the excellence of the meal, while Mike was so extravagant in his praise that they protested. Alvin told the particulars of their trip in the launch from home to Wiscasset and return, omitting of course all reference to Stockham Calvert that would give a hint of his profession and his purpose in making what looked like an aimless ramble through this portion of Maine. The Captain was assured that his boat would not be disturbed where it lay moored under the bank, and he and Chester gave no further thought to it.

The group lingered long at the table, and at the close of the meal Nora preceded them to the parlor, were she excused herself in order to help her mother in washing the dishes and clearing away things. The work was finished sooner than the friends expected, and the happy party gathered in the parlor.

The presence of the musical instrument made its own suggestion, and the lads insisted that Nora should favor them with a song or two. She had the good taste to comply after a modest protest, and gave them a treat. Her voice, as I have said, was of fine quality though rather weak, and she sang several of the popular songs of the day with exquisite expression. She was so warmly applauded that she blushed and sang again until it was evident to all she was tired.

"Now," said she as she rose from the stool and looked at Mike, "you must sing for us, for I know you can."

"Certainly, Mike, show them what you can do in that line," joined Alvin, and Chester was equally urgent.

He objected and held back, but when Mrs. Friestone joined in the request he rose reluctantly and went to the instrument.

And straightway came the surprise of the evening.

CHAPTER XIII

AN INCIDENT ON SHIPBOARD

Among the passengers on one of the most magnificent of ocean steamers that crossed the Atlantic during the summer of which I have made mention, was a famous prima donna coming to the United States to fulfil a contract which would net her many thousand dollars. This notable artist who possessed a most winning personality as well as great beauty was easily the most popular passenger aboard the steamer on that memorable trip across the ocean.

One evening this lady was strolling over the promenade deck under the escort of her brother. The night was unusually calm, with a bright moon in the sky. The mighty throbbing structure glided over the sleeping billows as across a millpond, and all were in fine spirits, for they were nearing home, and that dreadful affliction *mal de mer* had troubled only the abnormally sensitive. Neither the brother nor the prima donna had felt the slightest effects.

The two were chatting of many things, but nothing of any importance, when she suddenly stopped with an exclamation of surprise.

"Listen!" she added when they had stood motionless for a few seconds; "do you hear that?"

"I do; it is wonderful."

It was the voice of some one singing "Mavourneen," that sweet Irish melody which has charmed and will always charm thousands. It came from the second class section, which was separated from the first by two gates. These marked the "impassable chasm," so far as the less favored were concerned, though of course the first class passengers were free to wander whither they chose.

The lady and gentleman walked to the barrier and looked across.

"There he is!" said the man, in a low tone.

"Where?" asked his companion, with eager curiosity.

"To the right, in front of that group which has gathered round him."

"I see him now. Why, he is only a boy."

"A pretty big one. But hark!"

They ceased talking that they might not lose any of the marvellous music. Others gathered near until more than a score were listening near the bridge. Many more paused in different parts of the deck, and even the grim captain high up on the bridge expressed the opinion that the singer's voice was "infernally good."

The singer was modest, for when he discovered the number of listeners he abruptly ceased nor could any coaxing induce him to resume the treat.

"Louis," said the prima donna, after the silence had lasted some minutes and the various groups began dissolving, "I want you to bring that boy to me."

"Why, my dear, he is a second class passenger."

"What of that? He has a divine gift in his voice. I must meet him."

Louis shrugged his shoulders, but he was used to the whims of his brilliant sister. He strolled through one of the gates while she awaited his return. He soon appeared, walking slowly, in order to keep pace with a big boy behind him, who, it was evident, moved with deep reluctance. Louis led him straight to the lady, who advanced a step to meet him.

"I wish to shake hands with you," she said in her frank, winning manner, "and to tell you how much we all enjoyed your singing of 'Mavourneen.'"

The confused lad doffed his cap and bowed with awkward grace.

"It was mesilf that feared I was disturbing yer slumbers, which if it be the fact I beg yer pardon fur the same."

"Disturbing our slumbers! Did you hear that, Louis?"

And the artist's musical laughter rang out. More soberly she asked:

"Will you tell me your name?"

"Mike Murphy--not Michael as some ignorant persons call it--and I'm from Tipperary, in the County of Tipperary, and the town is a hundred miles from Dublin--thank ye kindly, leddy."

"Are you alone?"

Mike was standing with his cap in hand where the moonlight revealed his homely face and his shock of red hair. His self-possession had quickly come back to him and his waggishness could not be repressed. He glanced into the beautiful face before him and made answer:

"How can I be alone, whin I'm standing in the prisence of the swatest lady on boord the steamer, wid her father at her elbow?"

How the prima donna laughed!

"Louis, he thinks you are my father, when you are my twin brother! It's delicious."

"It may be for you, but not for me," he grimly answered, though scarcely less pleased than she over the pointed compliment to her.

Addressing Mike, the lady said:

"You have a wonderfully fine tenor voice: do you know that, Mike?"

"I do *now*, since yersilf has told me, though ye make me blush."

"Are you travelling alone?"

"Yes, Miss; I'm on me way to jine me dad and mither, which the same live in the State of Maine, of which I suppose yersilf has heard."

"Have you had any instruction in music or the cultivation of your voice?"

"The only insthrumint on which I can play is the jewsharp, and folks that hear me always kindly requists me to have done as soon as I begin. As to me v'ice, the cultivation I've resaved has been in shouting at the cows when they wint astray or at the pigs whin they broke out of the sty."

"How would you like to become an opera singer, Mike?"

He recoiled, and, though he knew the meaning of the question, he asked:

"And phwat does ye mane by 'opera'?"

"Ah, you know, you sly boy. I am sure that after a few years of training you can make your fortune on the operatic stage."

The assurance did not appeal to Mike. He must find some excuse for declining an offer which would have turned the heads of most persons.

"It is very kind of you, leddy, and I'm sorry I can't accipt, as Terence Gallagher said whin the mob invited him out to be hanged."

"And why not?"

"Ye see, me dad, if he lives long enough will be eighty-odd years owld, and me mither is alridy that feeble she can hardly walk across the floor of our cabin, and I am naaded at home to take care of the two."

"Well, let that go for the present. I wish you to come and see me to-morrow at ten o'clock. Will you do so?"

"How can I refoos?" asked Mike, who would have been glad to back out. "Who is it that I shall ask fur whin I vinture on this part of the boat?"

She gave him her name, thanked him for the meeting and bade him good night. Mike donned his cap and returned to his acquaintances, to whom he told a portion of what had taken place.

Dressed in his best, his obdurate hair smoothed down by dousing it in water and threading a brush many times through it, and spotlessly clean, Mike with many misgivings crossed the bridge the next morning into the more favored section of the steamer. He did not have to make inquiries for the lady, for she stood smilingly at the end of the first class promenade awaiting him. She extended her dainty gloved hand, and the lad, who had braced himself for the ordeal, had shed most of his awkwardness. The brother kept in the background, having been ordered to do so, but he amusedly watched the two from a distance, as did a good many others.

The prima donna conducted Mike straight to the grand saloon and sat down before the superb piano. Others sauntered into the room to listen and look and enjoy.

The frightened Mike hung back.

"Stand right here beside me," she said with pleasant imperiousness. "I will play the accompaniment while you sing 'Mavourneen.'"

"I'm that scared, me leddy, that I couldn't sing a word."

"Tut, tut--none of that. Come, try!" and she struck several notes on the instrument.

Mike's voice was a trifle uncertain at first, but she knew how to encourage him, and soon the tones rang out with the exquisite sweetness that had charmed the listeners the evening before. When with many doubts he finished, he was startled by a vigorous handclapping that caused him to look round. Fully fifty men and women had gathered without his suspecting it. He bowed and was turning to walk to a chair, when the lady stopped him.

"You are not through yet; I must test your voice further. Can you sing any other songs?"

"I have thried a few."

"Name them."

"I can't ricollect them at this moment, but there's 'Oft in the Stilly Night' and----"

"That will do; it is one of Tom Moore's prettiest. Are you ready?"

And the fast increasing audience applauded to the echo. Other pieces followed until the prima donna allowed him to rest. Then sitting down beside him, she said:

"As I told you last night, you have a fortune in your voice. If you can arrange to leave your feeble parents to the care of others, you can soon earn enough to keep them in comfort all their lives. If you can come to Boston or New York when I sing there, you must not fail to call on me and to attend the concert. Here is my card."

She had already written a few lines upon the pasteboard which made it an open sesame to the possessor to any and all of her concerts. Mike thanked her gratefully, and had to promise to come to see her again before the steamer reached New York, and to think over her proposal. He kept his promise so far as calling on her again, not once but several times before she bade him good-by on the pier.

But, as I have said, there was nothing in her plan that appealed to the Irish youth. The modest fellow never told of the occurrence to anyone, nor did he give it more than a passing thought in the weeks and months that followed. The brother of the prima donna imparted the particulars to his intimate friend Gideon Landon, the wealthy banker, and in this way I am able to relate the incident on shipboard.

CHAPTER XIV

"THE NIGHT SHALL BE FILLED WITH MUSIC"

The prima donna who grew so fond of Mike discovered several interesting facts about him, aside from his marvellous tenor voice. He had the talent of improvisation. When they became well enough acquainted for him to feel at ease in her presence, he sang bits of melody that were his own composition. She was delighted and encouraged him to cultivate the gift. Of course he knew nothing about playing any instrument, but under her instruction he quickly picked up the art of accompanying himself on the piano. The music which he sang was of the simplest nature and the chords suggested themselves to his ear.

Another peculiarity of the lad was that, despite his exuberant, rollicking nature, he had no taste for humorous music. When she asked him to sing a lively song, he shook his head. He not only knew none, but had no wish to learn any. His liking was for sentiment and tenderness of feeling. Moore's melodies were his favorites and he knew few others. At the last meeting of Mike and the lady she gave him a fragment of verse which she had cut from a paper and asked him to compose a melody for it. He promised to try.

With this rather lengthy explanation, and the fact that neither Alvin Landon nor Chester Haynes had ever heard him sing, though both had noticed that his voice was peculiarly clear, you will understand the surprise that awaited them when he walked to the piano and reluctantly sat down. The hoarseness which followed his shouting when marooned on White Islands was gone and his notes were as clear as a bell.

Every one expected a mirth-provoking song when he placed his foot on the pedal and his fingers touched the keys. Even Widow Friestone smiled in anticipation, while Alvin and Chester feared that in his ignorance of true singing his attempts would become comical to the last degree. The listeners glanced significantly to one another, while he was bringing out a few preliminary notes.

Suddenly into the room burst the most ravishing music from the sweetest voice they had ever heard.

"The harp that once through Tara's halls
The soul of music shed,
Now hangs as mute on Tara's walls
As if that soul were fled.
So sleeps the pride of former days,
So glory's thrill is o'er,
And hearts that once beat high for praise,
Now feel that pulse no more."

With the same bewitching sweetness he sang the remaining stanza, and then paused with his fingers idly rambling over the keys, as if in doubt what next to do.

There was no applause. Not a person moved or seemed to breathe. Then Alvin and Chester looked wonderingly at each other, as if doubting their own senses. Whoever imagined that Mike Murphy was gifted with so wonderful a voice? It seemed as if they were dreaming and were waiting for the spell to lift.

It would have been affectation on the part of Mike to pretend he was ignorant of the effect he had produced. He had seen it too often in the past, and he knew the great songstress on the steamer would not have said what she did had there not been good basis therefor. So, without seeming to notice the hush--the most sincere tribute possible--he sang the old favorite "Mavourneen," and at its conclusion "Annie Laurie," with a liquidity of tone that was never surpassed by throat of nightingale.

At its conclusion he swung round on the stool, sprang up and dropped into the nearest chair, looking about as if doubtful of the reception that was to attend his efforts.

Nora was the first to rally. She uttered one ecstatic "Oh!" bounded across the floor, threw her dimpled arms about his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"You darling! You sing like an angel!"

"Nothing could be sweeter," added the smiling mother. Mike gently kissed the girl on her forehead, and did not release her until she drew away.

"Ye're very kind. It's mesilf is glad me efforts seemed to please ye, though I'm in doubt as to the Captain and second mate."

Alvin walked silently across the floor and reached out his hand.

"Glad to know ye," replied Mike, with a grin, looking up in the face that had actually turned slightly pale. "What is yer name, please?"

Chester joined his chum.

"Mike, Alvin and I were silent, for we didn't know what to say. You have given us the surprise of our lives. I am no singer and never can be, but I would give a hundred thousand dollars, if I had it, for your voice. Alvin makes some pretensions. He is the leader of his school quartette, but he can't equal you."

"Equal him!" sniffed the Captain. "If Mike ever shows himself where our quartette is trying to sing, I shall make every one shut up to save ourselves from disgrace. As for Mike, we'll give him the choice to sing for us or to be killed."

Chester asked reprovingly:

"Why didn't you let us know about this before?"

"Ye didn't ask me, and what could be the difference if ye didn't find it out? Ye wouldn't have larned the same if Nora and her mither hadn't insisted that I should entertain them, as I tried to do."

"You are a queer make-up," replied Alvin, with a laugh.

"Since ye are the leader, Captain, of yer quartette at school, it's up to ye to obleege the company wid something in their line."

Nora added her entreaties.

"We know you can do very well, Alvin, though of course not half so well as Mike, for *nobody* can do that," was the naive argument of the miss.

"No, sir," said Alvin emphatically, and, assuming deep solemnity, he raised his hand. "I vow that I will never, never sing in Mike's presence. I can stand a joke as well as most persons, but that is the limit. Here's Chester, however. He will be glad to give Mike a few lessons."

The fun of it was that Chester could not sing the chromatic scale correctly if his life were at stake. He was not rattled by the request.

"Mike, can you play the accompaniment to 'Greenville'?" he asked.

"How does it go? Hum the same fur me so I can catch it."

Chester stood up and "hummed," but without the slightest resemblance to any tune that the others had ever heard.

"That gits me," commented Mike, "as Teddy O'Rourke said whin the p'liceman grabbed him. If ye'll sthrike in I'll do my best to keep wid ye."

"No, sir; I decline to play second fiddle to anyone," and Chester resumed his seat as if in high dudgeon.

At this moment Nora asked of Mike:

"Did you ever make up music for yourself?"

"I have tried once or twice, but didn't do much."

"Oh, please sing us something of your own."

"A leddy on the steamer that brought me over give me some printed words one day wid the requist that I should try to put some music to 'em. I furgot the same till after she had gone, but I'll make the effort if ye all won't be too hard on me."

(This was the only reference that Mike was ever heard to make to the incidents recorded in the previous chapter.)

And then the Irish lad sang "The Sweet Long Ago."

CHAPTER XV

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

Alvin easily caught the swing of the bass and sang when the chorus was reached. Mike barely touched the keys, bringing out a few faint chords that could not add to the sweetness of his voice. Mrs. Friestone sat motionless, looking intently at him until he came to the last words. Then she abruptly took off her glasses and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

The sweet long ago! Again she saw the handsome, sturdy youth when he returned from the war for the defence of his country, as brave, as resolute, as aflame with patriotism as in his earlier years, but with frame wrenched by painful wounds. Their lives were inexpressibly happy from the time she became a bride, and their maturer age was blessed by the gift of darling Nora. Existence became one grand sweet dream—more happy, more radiant and more a foretaste of what awaited them all in the great beyond. That loved form had vanished in the sweet long ago, but the memory could never fade or grow dim.

It was the song that brought back the picture with a vividness it had not worn for many a year. The tears would come, and Nora, glancing at her mother, buried her face in her own handkerchief and sobbed. Alvin and Chester sat silent, and Mike, turning gently on the stool, looked sympathetically at mother and daughter.

"Thank you, Mike," came a soft, choking voice from behind the snowy bit of linen, and the brave lad winked rapidly and fought back the tears that crowded into his honest eyes.

It was not strange that the effect of Mike Murphy's beautiful singing of the touching songs brooded like a benison throughout the evening. Even Nora, when asked to favor them again, shook her head.

"Not after Mike," she replied, her eyes gleaming more brightly through the moisture not yet dried.

It was impossible for the Irish lad to restrain his humor, and soon he had them all smiling, but there was no loud laughter such as greeted his first sallies, and the conversation as a whole was soberer and more thoughtful. Alvin and Chester told of their school experiences, and finally Mike related his adventure when marooned on the lonely island well out toward the Atlantic and his friends found him after they had given him up as drowned.

So the evening wore away until, at a seasonable hour, the head of the household said that when they wished to retire she would show them to their room. Just then Mike had his hand over his mouth in the effort to repress a yawn. Nora laughingly pointed at him.

"In a few minutes he'll be asleep and will tumble off his chair."

"I'm afeard ye're right, as I replied to me tacher whin he obsarved that I was the biggest numskull in Tipperary County. Come, Captain and sicond mate--ye won't forgit, Miss Nora, that I'm *first* mate of the battleship *Deerfut*."

The girl went to the kitchen from which she speedily returned, carrying a hand lamp, which she gave to her mother. She nodded to the lads, who followed her to the door of the apartment assigned them for the night. They entered behind her as she set the light on the stand and turned about.

"I think you will find everything as you wish."

"It couldn't be itherwise, whin it's yersilf that has provided the same. Be that token, we're getting more than we desarve."

"Nothing could be finer," added Alvin, glancing round the lighted room. "It's as neat as a pin and we shall sleep the sleep of the just."

The three had noticed when in the parlor the portrait suspended in the place of honor. The blue uniform, the military cap resting on one knee, and the strong, expressive face told their own story. It was the picture of Captain Carter Friestone, taken many a year before, when in the flush of his patriotic young manhood. A smaller picture was on the wall of the bedroom of mother and daughter.

The chamber which the lads entered was graced with two small, inexpensive pictures of a religious character, a pretty rug covered most of the floor, the walls were tastefully papered and there were several chairs, to say nothing of the mirror, stand and other conveniences.

Not only was the broad bed with its snowy counterpane and downy pillows roomy enough for two, but a wide cot had been placed on the other side of the neat little room for whoever chose to sleep upon it.

That which caught the eye of the three was a musket leaning in the far corner. Chester stepped across, and asking

permission of Mrs. Friestone, picked it up and brought it over to where the light was stronger. He saw it was a Springfield rifle, but the lock and base of the barrel were torn into gaping rents.

"I suppose this belonged to the captain," said Chester inquiringly. The widow nodded her head.

"And it did good service--that is certain," added Chester, with his companions beside him scrutinizing the weapon. "But it seems to have been injured."

She smiled faintly.

"Carter brought it home from the war, declaring it was better than when new. He put a double charge in one Fourth of July morning, forgetting that the weapon was much worn from many previous firings. It exploded at the lock and came very near killing him. But," she added, with a sigh, "it is very precious to me."

"I am sure of that," said Chester as he reverently carried the gun back to the corner.

The good woman kissed each lad on the forehead. When she thus saluted Mike, who was the last, she placed her thin hand on his head, and said with infinite tenderness:

"I thank you for what you did to-night."

"I beg ye don't mention it----"

Mike stopped abruptly, and pretending to see something interesting in the old rifle, hurried across the room to examine it more closely.

"Good night and pleasant dreams," called the lady as she passed out, noiselessly closing the door behind her.

It having been agreed that Mike should use the cot, the three prepared for retiring, the mind of each full of the experience of the evening. Both Alvin and Chester wished to speak of the extraordinary voice of Mike, but neither did, for they knew he would prefer they should not. He could not help knowing how greatly he had been favored by nature, and disliked any reminder.

The wick of the lamp was turned down and blown out by Alvin, after glancing around and noting that his companions were ready. Through the raised window, opening over a broad alley, the cool wind stole. It so came about that for several days and nights, including the one of which I am now speaking, the leading cities of the country, embracing even Boston, were suffering from one of the most intense heat waves that ever swept like a furnace blast over most of the States in the Union. But in favored southern Maine it was ideally cool. You could stand a thin covering at night, or you could cast it aside. You were equally comfortable in either situation.

Our young friends ought to have sunk into a sound sleep within a few minutes after lying down, but they did not. Something was on their minds, and the singular fact of it was that the thoughts of each were identically the same, though as yet not a hint had been dropped by anyone.

It was Mike who abruptly spoke:

"I say, Captain, are ye asleep?"

"I ought to be, but I was never wider awake."

"How about the second mate?"

"The same here," was the reply from that individual.

"I wish to observe that I'm engaged just now in thinking, byes."

"Thinking of what?" asked Alvin.

"Spose them post office robbers should pay this place a visit."

"What in the world put that in your head?"

"Didn't the same thought come to ye, Captain?"

"I must admit it did."

"And how is it with the second mate?"

"It has troubled me, too, Mike."

"But I can see no real cause for misgiving," added Alvin.

"We know the *Water Witch* is somewhere in the neighborhood," remarked Chester, to which his chum replied:

"What could attract them to a small office like this? They hunt for bigger game."

"There's a good lot of money in the safe downstairs," said Mike. "'Twas meself that observed one of the leddy's callers

gave her twenty-five hundred dollars, which she put away. Where could the spalpeens make a bigger haul?"

"But how should they know about it? They didn't see it done," said Alvin.

"Hist, now! From what me eyes told me, the same being anither chap called and would have lift more, had he not been afeard of me eagle eye that was on him."

"What of that?"

"Doesn't it show that it's the practice in Beartown wid some of them as has lots of money to lave the same wid the leddy? Thim chaps are prying round and it would be aisy fur 'em to larn the fact."

"We should have seen something of them if they were in this village."

Alvin felt the weakness of this statement, for such unwelcome visitors would be too shrewd to expose themselves to discovery when it was possible to avoid it. All three might have been in Beartown for hours without drawing attention to themselves and without giving Mike, during his earlier visit, a glimpse of them.

Speculating in this manner, Alvin and Mike came to the belief, or rather hope, that their good friend was in no danger of a burglarious visit. Chester would not be convinced, but expressed the hope that they were right.

"I shall make bold to remind Mrs. Friestone in the morning of the risk she runs and advise her to cease accepting any outside deposits."

Chester was the last to fall asleep. It was a long time before he sank into slumber, but by and by he glided into the realm of dreams. He had no means of knowing how long he lay unconscious, when he gradually became aware of a peculiar tapping somewhere near. A moment's listening told him that someone was knocking on the door.

CHAPTER XVI

VISITORS OF THE NIGHT

Chester bounded out of bed and hunted to the door, which he unlocked and opened for a few inches. He could see nothing in the gloom, and asked in a whisper:

"Who is it?"

"It is I--Nora. Mamma and I are awfully scared."

"What's the matter?"

"Somebody is in the store downstairs."

"How do you know that?"

"Mamma heard the window raised and woke me. She asked me to call you boys."

"Wait a moment and we'll be with you."

It showed how lightly Alvin and Mike were sleeping when they were instantly roused by the slight noise made in opening the door. Each sat on the side of his couch and listened. In the deep silence they heard the snatch of conversation and hurriedly began putting on their clothes. They wrought silently and without lighting the lamp.

"I expected it," remarked Chester, imitating them.

Mrs. Friestone joined her daughter in the dark hall, she being too wise to use a light. A moment later the whole party stood together in the gloom, where neither could see the face of the others.

"Hark!" whispered the mother.

The five stood for a minute without stirring or speaking and hardly breathing. Not the slightest sound reached their ears. Then Chester asked in a guarded undertone:

"Are you sure you were not mistaken, Mrs. Friestone?"

"I could not have been; the sound of the raising of the window was too distinct for me to be deceived--hark!" she warned again.

This time all heard something. It was a faint, rasping noise such as might have been caused by the cautious pushing of a box or large smooth object over the floor. If this were so, the article could not have been moved more than a few inches, for the sound ceased immediately.

"You are right," said Alvin; "you have visitors. About what time do you suppose it is?"

"The clock struck twelve quite awhile ago. There! it is now one," she added as a silvery tinkle came from the parlor.

"What shall we do?" asked Nora, echoing the question that was in the mind of every one.

And then a strange council was held in a place so dark that all who took part were mutually invisible.

It would seem that the common sense course was to make a noise that would be heard by the burglars and would scare them off. That is to say that theoretically this would occur, but it might not. Knowing how much loot was within their reach, if not already in hand, one or two of them were likely to hurry upstairs and compel those that were there to hold their peace, hesitating at no violence to enforce their orders.

While the boys were eager to take the risk, the mother would not agree and the plan had to be abandoned.

The next proposal was for each to thrust his or her head out of a window and call for help. The cry would rouse the village and it would not take long for many citizens to rush thither. Beartown had no police force, the only officer of the peace being a constable who was lame and cross-eyed and lived at the farthest end of the village. No dependence could be placed on him, but there were plenty of others who would gladly hasten to the help of mother and daughter.

This was the only thing to do, and it would have been done but for the hysterical opposition of Nora Friestone. She declared that the dreadful robbers--she was sure of it--would hurry upstairs the instant the first scream was made and kill every one before any help could arrive! It might not take more than five or ten minutes for friends to run to the spot, but that would be enough for the burglars to complete their awful work.

Possibly the girl might have been argued out of her absurd fear had she not won her mother to her side. She took the same view.

"What then is to be done?" asked Chester a trifle impatiently.

"Nothing; they can't get the safe open, if they work till daylight."

"They can do it in a few minutes if they use dynamite, and at the same time blow out the whole end of your house."

To this terrifying declaration the lady could make no reply except to say:

"We may as well go back to our rooms."

It was on the point of Chester's tongue to ask in view of this conclusion why Nora had knocked on their door, but he thought best to refrain.

"Whisht!" whispered Mike; "let's go to the parlor, where we have the moonlight to help us."

Walking on tiptoe and as silent as so many cats, the party moved through the hall to the front room. The straining ears heard nothing more from below stairs, though there could be no doubt that their visitors were still there.

As Mike had intimated, the round, clear moon was in the sky, and looking from the windows it seemed almost as bright as day. The party stood just far enough back to be invisible to anyone in the street below. A row of elms lined each side of the highway, being mutually separated by a dozen yards or so. They were small, having been set out only a few years before, but were in full foliage and the most remote ones cast a shadow into the highway. On the same side of what was the main street, each frame house that served for a dwelling had a yard, shrubbery and flowers in front. Farther to the left was the small grocery store, while to the right on the same side as the post office was the pert little village church to which reference has already been made.

At this hour all Beartown seemed to be sunk in slumber, as was quite proper should be the case. From not a single window twinkled a light nor was man, woman or boy seen on the street. A solitary dog, with nose down and travelling diagonally as canines sometimes do, trotted to the front gate of the house opposite the post office, jumped over and passed from view to the rear.

"I wonder what that man is waiting there for."

It was Nora who whispered this question, which instantly put the others on the *qui vive*.

"I don't see any man; where is he?" asked Chester.

"Under that tree opposite; he's in plain sight."

Such was the fact now that she had directed attention to him. The elm was directly across the street, and had a trunk not more than six or eight inches in diameter. A man was standing motionless under the dense foliage several feet above his head, doing nothing except simply to stand there.

"He is the lookout," said Chester.

"What's a lookout?" asked the nervous Nora.

"He is there to watch for danger that may threaten the others who are inside and working at your mother's safe. If he sees anything wrong he will give a signal, probably by means of a whistle, and the fellows below will run."

"Why couldn't you give the signal?"

"I could if I knew what it is, but I don't."

"Look! he is coming over here!" exclaimed the affrighted Nora, as the man stepped from the shadow, walked half way across the street, and then halted as if in doubt whether to advance farther.

"No fear of his visiting us," Alvin assured her; "but it is best to keep out of sight."

All shrank still farther back, when there was no possibility of being seen in the first place. The man did not look up, but kept his slouch hat pulled so far down that nothing of his face was visible. He held his position for perhaps five minutes, when he turned about and went back to his post. There could be no doubt that he was the lookout of the gang, as Chester had said when he was first noticed. Not once did he look up before reaching his place, so that none of our friends caught a glimpse of his features.

What a unique situation! One or more burglars were at work on the safe below stairs, and there were five persons on the floor above who knew it, but did not raise voice or a hand to interfere with them. It has been explained why, though it should be added that in the way of firearms there was only the single worthless Springfield rifle in the house. It was mother and daughter who held the three lads supine. Had they been left free they would have acted immediately on first learning of the presence of the criminals.

Chester had spoken the word "dynamite," and it was that terrific explosive which he and his companions dreaded unspeakably. If the charge were fired, it would not only blow the massive safe apart, but was likely to wreck the

building itself and probably inflict death to more than one in the dwelling.

Mike Murphy chafed more than his comrades. Reflecting on the exasperating state of affairs, he determined to do something despite the opposition of the mother and daughter. A few minutes' thought suggested a plan. He would have revealed it to Alvin and Chester, but feared they would prevent action or that his whispering in the darkness of the room would awaken the suspicion of the other two.

Only when near the front windows could the members of the party dimly see one another. They had withdrawn so far at sight of the approach of the man on guard that the light ill served them. Mike stealthily retreated to the open door leading into the hall. Neither of his comrades heard him, and he groped along the passage, with hands outstretched on each side to guide him. The feet were lifted and set down without noise, and by and by he came to the opening leading to the bedroom. Across this he made his way with the same noiseless stealth, until the groping hand touched the battered rifle, which he lifted from its resting place. Back into the hall again, and then through the dining room, inch by inch, to where he remembered seeing the head of the stairs, though he knew nothing beyond that. He would have struck a match but for fear of attracting the notice of those below.

"I've only to feel each step," he reflected, "and I'll soon arrive, and then won't fur of the spalpeens fly?"

His unfamiliarity with the stairs made him think they were not so nearly perpendicular as was the fact. While the thought was in his mind, he made a misstep and, unable to check himself, went bumping all the way to the bottom.

CHAPTER XVII

"TALL OAKS FROM LITTLE ACORNS GROW"

If you wish an illustration of how great events often flow from trifling causes read what follows. It is one of the many events which prove that "tall oaks from little acorns grow."

You have not forgotten Jim, the gawky, overgrown boy who had a verbal contract with Mrs. Friestone which bound him to go to the store each weekday morning and set out on the front porch the score or more samples of the goods that were on sale within. The same agreement required him to come around at dusk each evening and carry them inside, his weekly wage for such duty being twenty-five cents. When, therefore, Mike Murphy handed him a silver quarter and assumed the job for that single night, Jim received a whole week's pay for turning it over to the Irish lad. It is not so strange that the youngster was confused at first over his bit of luck, which he did not fully understand until he reached home and had eaten his supper.

Now by one of those curious coincidences which occur oftener in this life than most people think, that day was the anniversary of Jim's birth. Being a good boy, as such things go, his father presented him with a fine pocketknife, than which nothing could have pleased his son better. It was really an excellent article, having four blades, one of which was a file, two of small size, and one quite large, the three being almost as keen-edged as a razor. Straightway the happy lad selected his right hand trousers pocket as the home of the knife when not in use. The miscellaneous articles, such as a jewsharp, a piece of twine, a key, three coppers, a piece of resin, several marbles, two ten-penny nails, a stub of a lead pencil and a few other things were shifted to the left side repository, where also he deposited the shining silver coin, after showing it to his parents and telling them how he fell heir to it.

The chat of the family shut out reference to the knife for most of the evening. Both parents were inclined to be gossipy, and they indulged in many guesses as to the identity of the donor and what caused him to be so liberal. The mother's first thought was that the red-haired, freckle-faced youth was a newcomer to Beartown, and had secured Jim's job, but that fear was removed by Jim's declaration that the stranger distinctly said he intended to do the work only for that evening.

It was not very late when Jim went to his bedroom on the second floor to retire for the night. When ready to disrobe, he took out the wealth of treasures in his left pocket, including the bright quarter, and shoved his hand into the other for the prize that outweighed them all. Then he emitted a gasp of dismay: the pocket was empty!

For a few moments he could not believe the truth. He frantically searched his clothing over and over again, but in vain. The explanation was as clear as noonday. In the bottom of his right-hand pocket was a gaping rent, through which he pushed two fingers and disgustedly spread them apart like a fan. He turned the cloth wrong side out and the dreadful yawn seemed to grin at him.

Weak and faint he sat down on the edge of his trundle bed.

"What made that blamed hole? It wasn't there a little while ago. It must have wore the hole while I was walking. I wouldn't lose that knife for ten million dollars. It *can't* be lost!"

And then he repeated the search, as almost anyone will do in similar circumstances. He even looked under the jewsharp and among the marbles on the stand, where a mosquito could not have hidden itself.

"Oh, what's the use!" he exclaimed, dropping down again despairingly on the bed. "It's lost! Where did I lose it?"

Pulling himself together, he recalled the experiences of the day, from the time he received the present directly after breakfast. He had tested the implement many times in the course of the forenoon and afternoon, and by and by remembered snapping the big blade shut and slipping it into his pocket as he was going out of the house to the post office to perform his daily task. He reasoned well.

"I lost it somewhere atween here and the store. I can't see how it slipped down my trousers leg without me feeling it, but that's what it done. It's a-laying on the ground atween here and there, onless," he added, with a catch of his breath, "that ugly looking willain seen me drop it inside the store. I wonder if he give me that quarter so as to hurry me out that he might git my knife!"

He shivered at the probability, but rather singularly the dread was dissipated by a few minutes more of thought.

"If he'd seen it, so would Nora and she'd told me. It's somewhere along the street."

Such being his conclusion, the all-important question was what should he do to retrieve his crushing loss. His first inclination was to tell his parents and then hurry back over the route to look for the treasure. But it was night. There

was no such thing as a lantern in the house, he could not carry an ordinary light in the breeze, and the search would be hopeless.

"I'll get up as soon as it is light," he said, "and hunt till I find it."

Trying to gain hope from this decision, he knelt at the side of his bed to say his prayers, which he never omitted. His petition was longer than usual and I need not tell you what its chief if not its whole burden was.

Despite the depressing weight upon his spirits, Jim fell asleep and remained so for several hours, though his slumber was tortured by dreams of his knife. Sometimes it was tiny as a pin and then bigger than himself, but it always slipped from his grasp when he reached out to seize it.

Suddenly he awoke. It took a minute or two to recall his situation, but soon the startling truth came back to him. He had lost his knife, and, remembering his resolve before going to sleep, he bounded out of bed, certain that day not only had dawned but that it had been light for some time. He soon discovered, however, that what he took for the glow of the rising sun came from the moon, whose vivid illumination made the mistake natural.

"I never seen it so bright," he said, stepping to the window and peering out.

And then as if by inspiration he whispered:

"It's the right time to hunt for my knife."

He did not know what time it was nor did he care to know. There was so much moonlight in his room that he easily dressed without any artificial light. Then, too, the night was mild and his covering scanty. Shirt and trousers were his only garments. He left his straw hat where he had "hung" it on the floor in one corner beside his shoes and stockings. The chief cause for now going barefoot was that his steps would be lighter, though as a rule he saved his shoes for Sunday and his trips to and from the store.

He knew his father was a light sleeper, and if awakened would probably forbid him to go out before morning. So Jim opened his bedroom door so softly that not the slightest noise was caused. He went down the stairs as if he were a real burglar in rubber shoes. He stopped several times with a faster beating heart, for although he had never known the steps to squeak before they now did so with such loudness that he was sure his father heard him. But the snoring continued unbroken and Jim reached the door, where he stealthily slid back the bolt and reversed the key, without causing any betraying sound.

This side of the house was in shadow, and he stood for a minute or two on the small, covered porch looking out upon the highway or main street. Not a soul was in sight, nor did he see a twinkle of light from any of the windows. It cannot be said that Jim felt any fear, nor did he reflect upon the risk caused by leaving the door unlocked behind him. He was thinking only of that loved knife.

He had walked to and from the store so many times that he knew every step taken earlier in the evening. It was impossible to go wrong, and he was quite confident of finding the knife unless the brilliant moonlight had disclosed it to some late passerby.

Jim always crossed the street at a certain point, the post office being on the other side, so he trod in his own footsteps, which would have worn a path long before but for those of others, including horses and wagons. He walked slowly, scanning every inch of the ground and clay pavement in front of him, but when he drew near the well-remembered building he had not caught sight of the prize. He was within a few paces of the steps of the porch of the store, when he was suddenly startled by a gruff voice:

"Hello, there! Where you going?"

He turned his head as a man stepped from under the small elm behind him. Both being on the same level the slouch hat only partially hid the grim face and big mustache. Jim would have been more scared had he not caught sight an instant before of his knife lying at the foot of the steps of the porch. He sprang forward, caught it up and then faced the stranger, who had stepped into the street.

"I'm looking fur my knife that I dropped and I've found it too!" he replied gleefully, holding up the cool, shiny implement. "Gee! aint I lucky?"

"Well, you get out of here as quick as you can. Go back home and stay there till morning. Do ye hear me?"

"Yaws; I'm going."

A strange discovery had come to Jim the instant before. As he stooped to seize his property, his eyes were at the same height as the bottom of the door leading into the store. It was only for a second or two, but in that brief space he saw a faint glimmer through the crevice, which he knew was caused by a light within. With a shrewdness that no one would have expected from him he said nothing of his discovery to the man who had accosted him.

"Mind what I told you!" added the stranger, "and don't show your nose outside your house before morning. Understand?"

"Yaws; I don't want to, 'cause I've got my knife. Hooray!"

"Shut up! Off with you!"

"Yaws;" and Jim broke into a trot which he kept up until he reached his own porch. In his exuberance of spirits, he was careless and awoke his father. He came into the hall and roared out a demand for an explanation, which his son gave in a few hurried words.

"Hooh!" exclaimed his parent; "there's robbers in the post office and I think I'll take a hand as soon as I can get hold of my shotgun."

Which may serve to explain how it was that Gerald Buxton became involved in the incidents that speedily followed.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CLEVER TRICK

At the foot of the rear stairs in the home of Widow Friestone was an ordinary door latched at night, but without any lock. When Mike Murphy was groping about in the blank darkness, where nothing was familiar, he did not know, as has been said, of the steepness of the steps. Thus he placed his shoe upon vacancy, and, unable to check himself, bumped to the bottom, striking every step on the route, and banging against the door with such force that the latch gave away, it flew open, and he sprawled on his hands and knees, still grasping the rifle with which he had set out to hunt for burglars. He was not hurt, and bounded like a rubber ball to his feet.

An amazing scene confronted him. A young man, his face covered with a mask, had just drawn back the ponderous door of the safe, and by the light of a small dark lantern in his left hand was trying to unlock one of the inner compartments, with a bunch of small keys held in his right. It was at this instant that the racket followed by the crash which burst open the door paralyzed him for the moment. He straightened up and stared through the holes of his mask at the apparition that had descended upon him like a thunderbolt, in helpless amazement.

If he was terrified, Mike Murphy was not. Forgetful of his shillaleh in the shape of the Springfield, he made a leap at the fellow.

"S'trender, ye spalpeen!" he shouted. The criminal answered by viciously hurling the lantern into the face of his assailant, and in the act, the mask somehow or other was disarranged and slipped from its place. It was only a passing glimpse that Mike caught of him, but it identified him as one of the young men who had attacked Alvin Landon some nights before while passing through the stretch of woods near his home.

The throwing of the lamp was the best thing the burglar could have done, for it caught the Irish youth fairly between the eyes and dazed him for an invaluable second or two. Instant to seize his advantage, the criminal made a leap through the rear window, which he had left open for that purpose, and sped like a deer across the back yard of the premises. Mike was at his heels and shouted:

"Stop! stop! or I'll blow ye into smithereens! I've got a double barreled cannon wid me, and if ye want to save yer life, s'render before I touch her off!"

Perhaps if the fugitive had not been in so wild a panic he would have given himself up, for no man willingly invites the discharge of a deadly weapon a few paces behind him. But the youth was bent on escape if the feat were possible and ran with the vigor of desperation.

Less than a hundred yards over the garden beds and grass took the fellow to the paling boundary over which he leaped like a greyhound. Mike would have done the same, but feared it was too much for him. Moreover, his short legs could not carry him as fast as those of the fleeing one. The pursuer rested a hand on the palings and went over without trouble. By that time the fugitive was a goodly distance off in the act of clearing a second fence. In dread lest he should get away, Mike called:

"Have sinse, ye lunkhead! I don't want to kill ye, but hanged if I don't, if ye fail to lay down yer arms."

The appeal like all that had preceded it was unheeded. The burglar must have taken heart from the fact that his pursuer had already held his fire so long. Running with unusual speed, he took advantage of the shadow offered by several back buildings and continued steadily to gain. When he made a quick turn and whisked out of sight, the exasperated Mike dropped to a rapid walk.

"Arrah, now, if this owld gun was only in shape! there wouldn't be any sich race as this, as Brian O'Donovan said-- phwat's that?"

When within twenty feet of a small barn, a burly man stepped out of the gloom and with a large gun levelled gruffly commanded:

"Throw up your arms or I'll let moonlight through you!"

"I don't see any room for argyment, as Jed Mitchell said whin----"

"Up with your hands! and drop that gun!" thundered the other, and Mike let the old rifle fall to his feet and reached up as if trying to hold the moon in place. Which incident requires an explanation.

Gerald Buxton, the father of Jim, had no sooner heard the story of his boy than he decided, as had been related, that something was wrong at the post office. He had read of the many robberies in southern Maine during the preceding

summer, else he might not have been so quick to reach a conclusion. He woke his wife, told her his belief and then took down his shotgun from over the deer's antlers in the kitchen. Both barrels were always loaded, but to make sure of no lack of ammunition, he put a number of extra shells loaded with heavy shot into his pockets.

"Remember," he said impressively to his son, "to stay home and not show your nose outside the door while I'm gone."

"Yaws, sir," meekly replied Jim, who three minutes later, unseen by his mother, sneaked out of the back door and reached the battlefield directly behind his parent.

Mr. Buxton had never had any experience with house breakers, and did some quick thinking from the moment he left his front gate until he arrived on the scene. Nothing seemed more natural than that the ruffians would not approach the house from the front, but by the rear. The light which Jim saw must have come from the back part of the store. For the gang to make their entrance from the main street would have been far more dangerous.

Because of this theory, Mr. Buxton crossed the road directly before his own house, passed through the alley of a neighbor, and followed a circuitous course which compelled him to climb several back fences. But he knew all the people, and in case he was questioned could readily explain matters.

So in due time he came to the barn of one of his friends, and had turned to pass around it when to his astonishment a man dashed toward him on a dead run. Buxton was alert, and pointing his weapon, crisply commanded:

"Stop or I'll fire!"

The panting fellow obeyed with the exclamation:

"I'm so glad!"

"Glad of what?"

"That you came as you did. There are burglars in the post office!"

"That's what I thought, but wasn't sure. Who are you and why are you in such an all-fired hurry?"

"One of them is chasing me. I tried to wake the postmistress, when he heard me and I had to run for my life. How thankful I am that you appeared just in time!"

"Where is the scandalous villain?" demanded Mr. Buxton, glancing on all sides.

"He will be here in a minute."

"I shan't wait for him; tell me where he is."

The fugitive, who was momentarily expecting the appearance of his pursuer, pointed to the barn around which he had just dashed.

"He is coming from there. Look out, or he'll shoot you!"

"I'm ready for him," exclaimed the angered citizen as he hurriedly trotted off and confronted Mike Murphy a few seconds later.

We have learned of the pointed conversation which passed between them. Mike's first thought was that it was one of the robbers who had held him up, but there was no gainsaying the argument brought to bear against him. He remained with hands uplifted, awaiting the will of his captor.

"So you're one of those post office robbers," said Mr. Buxton, partly lowering his weapon.

"Not that I know of," replied Mike, beginning to scent the truth.

"Have you a pistol?"

"The only deadly wippon I have is me pocketknife, with its two blades broke and the handle being lost some time since."

"Where is the rest of your gang?" demanded the man, stepping closer to the youth.

"The two frinds that I have are wid the widder Mrs. Friestone, doing their best to entertain the leddy and her daughter, while I started out to chase one of the spalpeens that run too fast for me to catch."

Mr. Buxton stepped still nearer. He was becoming doubtful.

"Who the mischief are you, anyway?"

"Mike Murphy, born in Tipperary, in the County of Tipperary, Ireland, and lately, arrove in Ameriky."

"What are you doing here?"

"Standing still for the time, as Pat Mulrooney said whin the byes tied him to the gate post and wint off and left him."

"Ain't you one of those post office robbers?"

The question told Mike the whole truth. It was a clever trick that had been played upon him, and his musical laugh rang out on the still night.

"What made ye have that opinion?"

"I just met a young chap the other side of this barn, and when I stopped him he said he was running away from an enemy."

"Which the same was the thruth."

"And that one of the gang was chasing him, meaning to shoot him."

"It's mesilf that would have shot if I'd had a gun wid a conscience, fur I caught the spalpeen when he was opening the safe of Widder Friestone, and I made after him; but most persons can run faster than mesilf, owing to me short legs, and he was laving me behind, whin ye interfared."

"Do you mean to tell me that first fellow was one of the burglars?" asked the astounded Mr. Buxton.

"As sure as ye are standing there admiring me looks."

"Confound the rapscallion! I'll get him yet!" and the irate citizen dashed off with the resolution, to put it mildly, of correcting the error he had made.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Standing in the darkness of the upper front room, stealthily watching the mysterious stranger on the other side of the street in the shadow of the elm, and knowing that burglars were at work below stairs--the nerves of mother and daughter and of Alvin Landon and Chester Haynes were on edge. Had they peered out of the window less than half an hour earlier they would have seen the meeting between the lookout and young Jim Buxton.

Mike Murphy had slipped so silently from among them that no one was aware of his absence when the bumping and crash at the rear were followed by exclamations and words that were not intelligible. Mrs. Friestone uttered a faint cry and sank back on her chair. Nora screamed and threw her arms about her mother's neck.

"They will kill us! What shall we do?" she wailed.

For the moment Alvin and Chester, startled almost as much as their friends, were mystified. When Chester said:

"That sounds like Mike's voice. Hello, Mike, are you here with us?"

The failure to receive a reply proved that Chester was right. Their comrade had stolen off and was already in a "shindy" at the rear of the store.

"He may need our help!" called Alvin, starting for the stairs, with his chum at his heels. But Nora, who had heard the unguarded words, called in wild distress:

"Don't leave us! Don't leave us!"

They stopped irresolute. They could not abandon the two, and yet Mike's life might be in peril.

"Go back to them," whispered Chester. "There's no call for both of us to stay."

"Better not go down yourself; you know you have no weapon. Let's take a look."

First of all it was necessary to quiet the daughter and mother, for one was as much terrified as the other. Alvin hastened into the room.

"We will not leave you," he said, "but we wish to see what we can from the kitchen window."

"Oh, you may fall out," moaned Nora, scarcely responsible for what she said. Even in the crisis of a tragedy a vein of comedy will sometimes intrude itself.

"Have no fear of that," replied Alvin. "I will hold Chester from tumbling out and he will do the same for me. Pray, compose yourselves."

During this brief absence Chester had threaded his way past the furniture in the darkness to the window, out of which he was gazing on a most interesting moving picture which had vanished when Alvin appeared at his elbow.

"It made my blood tingle," said Chester. "I was just in time to see a man, who must have leaped out, running for life with Mike in pursuit. He had that old gun in one hand--as if it could prove of any earthly use to him."

"Where are they now?"

"The fellow, after leaping the fence, turned to the right and disappeared among the shadows."

"With Mike still chasing him?"

"As hard as he could run, but you know he hasn't much speed."

"I wonder," whispered Alvin, "whether there are any more of them downstairs."

They stepped noiselessly to the head of the steps and listened. Everything was so quiet that they heard the ticking of the clock on the wall of the store.

"I don't believe anyone is there. Let's take a closer look."

Alvin struck a match from his safe and led the way, thus saving the two from the mishap that had overtaken their friend. They were a trifle nervous when they stepped upon the lower floor, Alvin maintaining the illumination by burning more matches. He climbed upon the counter, and lighted the large oil lamp suspended there for such purpose. Adjusting the wick to the highest point it would stand without smoking, the two looked around.

What they saw completed the story that had already taken shape in their own minds. The unbroken dark lantern lay on

the floor where it had fallen, the light having been extinguished. The raised window showed by what avenue the burglar and Mike had left the building, but what amazed the youths more than anything else was the wide open door of the safe. Not a burglar's tool or device was in sight, and the appearance of the lock and door without a scratch showing proved that no part of the structure had been tampered with. It was just as if Mrs. Friestone had manipulated it--as she had done times without number.

"Whoever opened it must have known the combination. And how did he learn it?"

Chester shook his head.

"Perhaps Mrs. Friestone can guess. I'll ask her."

Going to the foot of the stairs, the young man called to the woman just loudly enough for her to hear. He said the visitors had left, but the door of the safe was open and it was advisable for her to come down and take a look at things.

She timidly came down the steps, with Nora tremblingly clinging to her skirts, ready to scream and dash back to the front of the house on the first appearance of danger. But nothing occurred to cause new alarm, and mother and daughter stared wondering at the safe with its wide open door.

"Who did that?" asked the woman, in a faint voice.

"One of the burglars," replied Chester.

"How did he learn the combination?"

"That's the mystery; Alvin and I cannot guess. Was it known to anyone besides yourself?"

"No; I changed it two days ago and did not even tell Nora. Not another soul knew it--and look!"

She pointed to a bunch of keys, one of which was inserted in the lock of the middle small drawer, with a half dozen others dangling from the metal ring. It will be understood that while the door of the safe was opened by means of a usual combination of numbers, the interior was guarded by only a tiny lock and key. This was more convenient, for, when the massive door was drawn back, the little wooden drawers, even with a combination, would not avail long against a burglar.

"They have taken the money!" gasped the widow.

"Let us see."

As Alvin spoke, he turned the key. The lock clicked and he drew out the drawer. There lay the big sealed envelope with the two thousand five hundred dollars intact within, while the stamps and cash receipts of the day were neatly piled on the shelf beneath.

The astonishing truth was that the criminal had been interrupted at the critical moment when he had succeeded in fitting a key to the lock. Had Mike Murphy been the fraction of a minute later in bursting upon the scene, he would have been too late. The robber would have carried off nearly three thousand dollars.

"That's what I call the greatest luck that ever happened," said Chester.

The discovery was as cheering as amazing. The large amount of money had been saved by a hair's breadth. The woman clasped her hands in thankfulness. Chester slowly shoved the steel door shut.

"Now try the combination," he said to Mrs. Friestone. "Chester and I will turn our backs while you do so."

"And why will you do that?"

"So that we shall not learn the secret. If anything like this happens again, you cannot say we did it."

She saw the smile on his face and knew he spoke in jest.

"It may be the lock was broken in some way," suggested Chester.

But it worked perfectly. The knob was turned forward till the finger pointed to a number, then back and then forward again to another numeral. It moved as smoothly as if the delicate mechanism was oiled.

"Now open it," she said to the lads, her spirits rallying over her good fortune. They shook their heads and Chester said:

"We might succeed, and that would be suspicious."

"Whether you noticed the combination or not, you surely did not know what it was a little while ago. I acquit you of having any understanding with the burglars."

"What's become of Mike?" asked Nora plaintively, speaking for the first time. "I'm afraid something dreadful has happened to him."

"He is probably still chasing the bad man," said Chester.

As if in answer to her wail a hasty tread was heard at that moment and a bushy red head without a cap appeared at the window, as if flung thither by the hand of a giant. The bright light within the door told him the story.

"The top of the morning to ye all, for I judge it's near morning, as Tim Mulligan said after he had been slaaping fur two days and nights. I hope ye are all well."

He began climbing through and was half inside when Nora dashed forward and caught hold of his arm. It so disarranged his balance that he tumbled on the floor, the rifle falling from his grasp.

"I'm so glad to see you, Mike! I was afraid those awful people had killed you," said the happy girl. "Are you hurt?"

"Not worth speaking of; I think my neck is broke and me lift leg fractured in two places, but niver mind."

Then the exuberant youth told his story, to which his friends listened with breathless interest.

"Then you didn't catch the villain?" said Chester inquiringly.

"No, but I made it hot fur him, as me cousin said after chasing the expriss train a couple of miles. He has longer legs than mesilf. The next time I engage in a chase wid him I'll make sure his legs is sawed off at the knees, so as to give me a chance. If I had thought to have that done I'd brought the spalpeen back to ye."

"Well, you drove him off in the nick of time. He didn't get away with a penny," said Alvin.

"But what was the maans he used to open that door? That's what gits me--whisht!"

The report of a gun rang out on the stillness, and the friends stared at one another. Before anyone could venture an explanation, the sound of hurried footsteps told that someone was approaching.

CHAPTER XX

"I PIPED AND YE DANCED"

Gerald Buxton was boiling over with indignation when he parted company with Mike Murphy and realized how he had been tricked. He had allowed the real burglar to get away while he held up his innocent pursuer.

"All I ask is one sight of that villain!" he muttered, striking into a lope which carried him rapidly over the ground. Since the fugitive had disappeared several minutes before and there was no telling what course he had taken, it would seem there was not one chance in a hundred of Buxton ever seeing him again.

But, although the citizen had been cleverly hoodwinked, he used shrewdness in wrestling with the problem. As he viewed it, the fellow was likely to make for the stretch of woods between Beartown and the river, that he might screen himself as quickly as possible. He would lose no time in getting away from the village as soon as he could. It was quite probable that he and his gang had come up or down the river and had a launch awaiting them. To avoid going astray, he would use the highway which joined Beartown and the landing.

Mr. Buxton had to climb three fences before he reached an open field of slight extent, beyond which lay the woods. He knew the chances of overtaking the criminal were meagre, but with a thrill of delight he caught sight of his man only a little way in front and walking in the same direction with himself. He seemed to have sprung from the ground, and it was clear that he had no thought of further pursuit. His follower tried to get nearer to him before he reached the woods, but the fellow heard him and glancing over his shoulder broke into a run.

"Stop or I'll fire!" shouted Buxton.

After the young man's experience with his first pursuer and his Springfield, he could not be blamed for refusing to heed the command. He ran the faster and the next minute would have whisked beyond reach, had not Buxton come to an abrupt halt, and taking a quick aim, fired.

He got his man too. With a cry of pain he leaped several feet in the air and fell. Terrified by what he had done, Buxton ran forward, gun in hand, and called out while several paces distant:

"Are you hurt bad?"

"I'm done for," was the reply as the wounded fellow laboriously climbed to his feet.

With anger turned into sympathy, the captor asked:

"Where did I hit you?"

"You shattered my right leg," was the reply, accompanied by groans as the fellow with excruciating effort tried to support himself on the other limb.

Buxton laid down his weapon and knelt to examine the wound. He saw now that the lower part of the trousers leg was shredded by the charge of shot and that, doubtless, the hurt was a very grievous one.

"I'm sorry I gave it to you so bad, but you can't deny you deserved it. If you're able to walk back to my house, with my help, I'll get a doctor and we'll soon----"

At that instant the young man sprang back a couple of paces, and the startled Buxton looking up saw that he stood firmly on both feet, with the shotgun pointed at him. He had snatched up the weapon while the owner was stooping over to inspect the wound.

"Now it's *my* turn!" he said, with a chuckle. "It isn't your fault that you didn't kill me, and it will be my fault if I don't even matters up with you!"

Poor Buxton slowly came to the upright position, with jaws dropping and eyes staring. He could only mumble:

"W-w-what's the matter?"

"Nothing with me; it's *you* that's in a hole."

Believing it was all up with him, the terrified victim stood mute.

"I ought to shoot you down and I'll do so if you don't obey me."

"W-w-what do you want?" Buxton managed to stammer out.

"Dance!" was the crisp command.

The citizen stared, not comprehending the order.

"We cowboys in the West when we want a little fun make a tenderfoot dance while we fire our revolvers at his feet. BEGIN!"

The victim lowered the point of the gun so as to point it at the shoes of Mr. Buxton.

"I--I--can't dance; never done it in my life," he stuttered.

"Can't begin earlier. Start up!"

Knowing what was ordered, the victim obeyed. He leaped up and down, shuffled his feet and made such comical antics that the gun wobbled in the hands of the laughing master of the situation.

"I have one loaded barrel left and I'm aching to let you have it! Keep it up!"

Now that he had started, Mr. Buxton threw more vigor into his steps. He bounded in the air, side-stepped, kicked out his feet, tried a number of fancy movements of which he knew nothing, and acted like an energetic youth taking his first lessons in that branch of the terpsichorean art called buck dancing.

"Turn your back toward me and dance all the way home! If you let up for one minute or look around I'll blaze away, and you won't get the charge in your *feet*! Remember that!"

Mr. Buxton reflected that having left home so jauntily with loaded weapon over his shoulder, it would be anything but a dignified return to dance back again without it. If he jig-stepped down the main street some neighbor was likely to see him and make remarks. A waltz through the gate, up the steps of the porch and into the hall, by which time it would probably be safe for him to cease his exhausting performance, would undoubtedly cause annoying inquiries on the part of his wife and family.

But there was hope. He might gain a start that would make it safe to resume his natural gait. He did his best. Facing the boundary fence less than two hundred yards away he kicked up his heels, swung his arms in unison, and steadily drew away from that fearful form standing with gun levelled at him. He yearned to break into a run, but dared not. He believed his tormentor was following so as to keep him in range.

It was hardly to be expected that he should go over the fence with a dance step, but he reflected that he could resume his labors immediately he dropped to the ground on the other side and faithfully maintain it to the next boundary. But there was risk and he was afraid to incur it. While still shifting his feet with an energy that caused him to breathe fast, he approached the obstruction. Partly turning his head while toiling as hard as ever, he called:

"I'll have to stop a minute till I climb over, but I'll resume dancing as soon as I hit the ground on the other side again. Is that all right?"

There was no reply and he repeated the question in a louder voice. Still hearing nothing, he ventured to look back. The young man was nowhere in sight. Truth to tell, no sooner had Mr. Buxton begun his humorous exhibition than the youth, vainly trying to suppress his mirth, flung down the gun, turned about and entered the wood toward which he was running when so abruptly checked by his pursuer.

"Wal, I'll be hanged!" was the disgusted exclamation of the panting Buxton. "That's the meanest trick I ever had played on me. The scand'lous villain oughter be hung. What a sight I made! I'm mighty glad no one seen me."

In his relief, he did not notice a vague form which flitted along the edge of the wood, so close to the trees that the shadow screened it from clear view. Had Mr. Buxton noted it he might not have felt certain that no one witnessed his unrivalled performance.

He was so tired out from his tremendous efforts that he stood awhile mopping his moist forehead with his handkerchief while he regained his wind.

"It's lucky he didn't foller and make me dance all the way home. Never could have done it. Would have dropped dead, I am that blamed tired."

He leaned against the fence while recovering from his unwonted exercise. Naturally he believed the young man who had used him so ill had carried away his weapon beyond possibility of recovery.

"And I paid twenty-five dollars for it in Portland," he bitterly mused. "It looks to me that as a hunter of post office robbers I ain't of much account."

He resumed his walk homeward, going slowly, carefully climbing the obstructions in his path and studying what explanation to make to his friends for the loss of his valuable piece. He might manage it with all except his wife and son. It would not do to tell them he had dropped it somewhere along the road without noticing the accident. A boy might lose his pocketknife (I know of a youngster who lost a wheelbarrow and never found it again), but a double barreled shotgun manifestly could not disappear in that fashion so much out of the ordinary way of things.

"I think I'll have a look at the post office and learn what mischief the villain done there."

He veered in his course and came to the back window, where a light showed that some persons were gathered. He found mother, daughter and the three boys, who gave him warm greeting.

"Was that your gun we heard a little while ago?" asked the woman.

"I reckon it must have been," replied Mr. Buxton, who declined the invitation to enter and remained standing outside the window.

"Did you hit the burglar?" asked Alvin.

"Young man," said Mr. Buxton loftily, "when I fire at anything I *always* hit it."

"You didn't kill him, Gerald!" exclaimed the horrified mother.

"No; I just winged him so he won't forget it if he lives a thousand years; don't like to kill a scamp even if he is a burglar."

"Where's your gun?" continued Alvin.

The man glanced around as if it were hidden somewhere about his garments.

"Now isn't that a fine go?" he exclaimed disgustedly. "I set it down while I went forward to see how bad that feller was hit, and plumb forgot."

"O dad, here's your gun!"

It was the son Jim who called this greeting as he straddled forward with the heavy piece resting on his shoulder. All stared in amazement, and the father in his confusion was imprudent enough to ask:

"Where did you get it?"

"I seen that feller that took it away from you and made you dance all the way across the field. He throwed it down and went into the woods. When I seen you hopping and dancing and kicking up your heels I nearly died a-larfing. But I didn't forgit the gun, and run along the edge of the woods and picked it up. Gee! it's heavy! But, dad, I didn't know you could dance like that. Say----"

"You young rascal, didn't I tell you to stay home? I'll learn you!"

The parent made a dive at his son, who, with the gun still over his shoulder, scooted across the yard and over the fence, with his irate father in fierce pursuit.

CHAPTER XXI

HOW IT WAS DONE

The attempt to rob the safe in the Beartown post office was accompanied by more than one unique incident. Chief among these was the cowardice exhibited by two of the three members who composed the little band of lawbreakers.

It has been shown that the full-grown man with a big mustache acted as a lookout at the front, which is perhaps the safest post for a criminal in such circumstances, since he has a good chance to get away on the first approach of danger. A second lookout was placed at the rear. After-developments showed that the trio was headed by Kit Woodford, the adult member, who had led a life of crime since boyhood and had served a term in prison. He would have been more successful as a criminal except for his rank cowardice which caused him to be despised and cast out by several gangs with which he sought to connect himself.

The other two burglars were Orestes Noxon and Graff Miller, neither of whom had reached his majority by more than two years. It was Miller who took his station at the rear, where on the first sign of something amiss he sneaked off without giving the signal which would have warned Noxon in time to flee unharmed. In his way, he was as lacking in personal courage as Kit Woodford. The latter held his place until the racket caused by Mike Murphy's tumble downstairs apprised him that things were not going right. He ventured upon a single timid whistle, which no one else heard, and then slunk down the road, hugging the shadows and intent only on saving his own bacon.

How was it that young Noxon was assigned the most perilous task of all, when in reality he was the youngest of the three? It was due to a peculiar skill which neither of the others possessed. He proved more than once that he could take position in front of an ordinary safe--not the most modern kind--and by a wonderfully deft manipulation of the knob which governed the combination tell by the fall of the tumblers just when the index struck the right numerals. He demonstrated this power many times when all others who made the trial failed. He asked simply to be left undisturbed with his ear against the steel door as he turned the knob with infinite delicacy. He was proud of his ability in this respect, and when Kit Woodford gave him the post of peril he accepted it as a compliment and eagerly essayed the task.

Although there is no evidence on the point, it is quite sure that Kit Woodford, whose chief business was to spy out the land, knew that several wealthy citizens of Beartown made a practice of leaving large deposits with Mrs. Friestone overnight or for several nights and days. It is not to be supposed that Woodford would rob so insignificant a post office for the small booty that belonged to the government. Quite likely he was aware of the large sum left with her on the afternoon before.

But Mike Murphy's original style of descending the back stairs brought the schemes of the criminals to naught, and saved the safe from spoliation. I have told how the three criminals scattered to as many different points of the compass. They could not have come together again had not previous provision been made for such emergencies. The leader, having shaken himself clear of the village, turned into the wood and picked his way toward the river. He was to the north, however, while the other lookout, Miller, was to the south, and neither knew how far apart they were.

There seemed little risk in signalling, and after Woodford had gone half way to the river he paused among the shadows and listened. He had been startled by the report of the gun, but everything was now still. Placing his thumb and forefinger between his lips, he emitted a sharp, tremulous whistle, which was instantly answered by a similar call from some point not far off. A few minutes later he and Miller, after a few precautions, came together among the shadows.

"I knew you would be somewhere in the neighborhood," was the young man's explanation, "and I was listening for your signal."

"Well," growled the elder, "Noxon made a mess of it to-night."

"It looks that way."

"Do you know what happened? Did you see anything?"

"I saw him dash out from the rear of that store with someone chasing him with a loaded gun."

"That must have been what we heard a little while ago. Looks as if they got Nox."

"Shouldn't be surprised," remarked the other indifferently.

"He oughter managed things better. How was it you didn't warn him?"

"I did; I whistled twice the instant I saw his danger, and ran the risk of getting it in the neck myself," was the

unblushing response of the youth.

"I don't see that there's anything we can do for him. He got himself in a hole through his own foolishness and must pull himself out. My motto when a gang gets into trouble is that every one must look out for himself and the devil take the hindmost."

"I say, Kit," said Miller, lowering his voice as if fearful of being overheard, "do you think they'll get Nox?"

"Haven't a doubt of it."

"I say, do you think there's any danger of his squealing, that is, if he hasn't been killed?"

"Naw," was the disgusted reply. "Nox is game--true blue; you can bet on him till the cows come home."

Which was more than Nox could say about his two pals.

Kit Woodford may have spoken with confidence, but he was not as free from misgivings as he would have it appear. He could not feel sure of their missing companion. If the report which they had heard did not mean that he had been slain, his capture looked certain, and there was no saying what he might do to secure leniency. Kit knew what *he* would do in a similar situation.

"Well, come on," he growled. "We're in tough luck to-night."

And the two pushed their way among the trees in the direction of the river.

Meantime, matters remained interesting at the home of Widow Friestone. The words of young Jim Buxton told a graphic story which made even Nora laugh and forget for the time the frightful excitement they had passed through. When the merriment had partly subsided, Mike drew one of his remaining two quarters from his pocket and handed it to Nora.

"Will ye do me the kindness to presint that to Jim when he comes to the store in the morning to set the table on the front porch?"

"What's that for?" asked the puzzled girl.

"For the gayety he imparted to this gloomy avening. I don't know as ye need say that to him, for he wouldn't understand what ye meant until after three or four years of hard thought. But he's aimed it, and ye'll not forgit."

She laid the coin aside and assured the donor that his wishes should be carried out.

Chester spoke:

"It seems to me we are throwing away time. It is past midnight and here we sit talking, and doing nothing because there seems nothing to do. What do you think, Alvin?"

"You are right. This business doesn't seem to have stirred up the town. I don't suppose anyone knows what has happened except Mr. Buxton and his family, and I don't think he will tell the particulars himself."

"That can be lift to Jim," said Mike, "unless his dad imprisses upon him that it won't be healthy for him to talk too freely wid his mouth regarding the sarcus he obsarved this avening."

"The lookout in front ran off at the first sign of danger, and if there was a second one he ran too. It will be a long time before any member of that party pays Beartown a second visit."

Alvin now made known the fear in his mind--a fear that was shared by Chester. The *Deerfoot* was lying against the bank in Back River exposed to any injury which these criminals might choose to inflict by way of revenge. He proposed that the mother and daughter, after refastening the window and locking up, should retire to their beds, while the boys returned to the launch to make sure no harm befell it.

This course was only the commonest prudence, but the hostess and her daughter were clearly so nervous over being left alone for the remainder of the night that Alvin regretted his proposal. Nora especially did not try to hide her distress.

"Never mind," Alvin made haste to say, "we will wait till morning. You have been so kind that we cannot willingly cause you a moment's pain."

"May I make a suggistion?" asked Mike, speaking so seriously that all knew he was about to say something worth while.

"I know he's going to tell us the right thing," said Nora.

"How could I do itherwise wid yer bright eyes cheering me?" he asked, with his expansive grin. "The same is this: Do ye two spalpeens go down to the launch and stay there till morning while I remain behind wid the misthress and sweet Nora, and keep off the burglars wid that same gun that sarved me so well."

Only Alvin and Chester knew the chivalry of this proposal. Mike regretted keenly the separation from them, even though it promised to be for only a few hours.

"That is asking too much," said the widow, though her countenance brightened with pleasure.

"How can the same be asking too much whin ye haven't asked it?"

Nora clapped her hands.

"I can't hilp it if she looks upon mesilf as worth the two of ye," said Mike, with an assumption of dignity that deceived no one.

"It is good on your part, Mike," said Alvin. "I feel as if we ought to give attention to the boat, and you may as well stay here. We'll wait for you in the morning."

"Don't feel obleeged to do the same. Something may turn up that may cause ye to hurry off. If it be so, don't tarry a minute for me."

"Possibly you may prove right, but we shall hate to leave you behind."

"Ye may do so foriver, so long as I have such quarters as these."

With this understanding, the friends parted, no one dreaming of what was to befall them before all met again.

CHAPTER XXII

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

Nothing was more natural than that Alvin Landon and Chester Haynes should be concerned for the safety of the motor launch *Deerfoot*. It had been stolen from them once in simple wantonness by two young men who had nothing to do with the post office robberies. The motive for a similar theft was now much stronger. It was evident that the criminals had come to Beartown, or as near to it as they could come, by water, and their boat was somewhere in the neighborhood. They were likely to discover the *Deerfoot*, if they had not already done so, and knowing its superior speed, would either make use of or disable it so it could not be employed for pursuit.

Alvin and Chester kept to the road which connected the landing with the village, for it was much easier thus to advance than to pick their way through the pines and firs. They did not meet a solitary person, for the night was well along and daybreak near. When the rickety frame work loomed up in the moonlight, they turned off into the shadow of the wood and moved with the utmost care. All the time they kept within sight of the gleam of water. Alvin was in advance, with his comrade close upon his heels.

"Hello! here she is!" was the pleased exclamation of the Captain a few minutes later.

"Has she had any visitors while we were away?" asked Chester, as the two stepped down to the margin of the river.

"I see no signs of it, but we shall have to examine further."

The launch lay as close to shore as it had been possible to bring her--so close indeed that the two stepped aboard without use of a plank. The position of the moon in the sky was such that the shadow of the trees was cast several feet beyond the boat, which, as a consequence, was wrapped in obscurity. Peering here and there, the youths began a visual search for the evidence they did not wish to find. Alvin tried the covering, which had been drawn over the cockpit, preliminary to taking the bunch of keys from his pocket. It slid back easily.

"I thought I locked that," he said in surprise.

"I remember you went through the motions, but you must have missed it."

"So it seems."

He stepped over, seated himself and grasped the steering wheel.

"Nothing is wrong here----"

"Hark!" whispered Chester.

The two listened and heard the muffled exhaust of a launch not far off.

"It comes from down stream," said Chester.

"It's their boat!" exclaimed the excited Alvin. "They are hurrying off."

"Let's chase them!" added Chester, catching the glow of his chum.

"All right! Light up and cast off."



LIKE A SWALLOW SKIMMING CLOSE TO THE SURFACE.

Chester quickly fixed the lights, sprang from the taffrail to shore, untied the loop of rope, flung it on deck and leaped after it. Alvin had opened the forward deck, which covered the engine, climbed down and around to the front and started it. Then throwing in the clutch the boat quickly caught the impulse, and the Captain steered away from shore. While lying against the bank the nose of the launch was pointed up the river, and since the noise showed that the other boat was speeding down stream, it was necessary to head in that direction. The sweeping circle carried the craft far out into the moon glow and the Captain turned on full power, sending the boat southward like a swallow skimming close to the surface.

"They got the idea yesterday that the *Water Witch* is faster than the *Deerfoot*. That was a cute idea of Calvert, but they will soon learn their mistake. Do you see anything of her lights?"

Chester stood beside him in the cockpit, with one hand grasping the top of the wind-shield, while he peered into the sea of illumination through which they were plunging.

"Not yet," he answered "but we must be gaining fast."

The water curled over in a graceful half circle as it was split apart by the sharp prow. Some of the spray was scattered over him, though otherwise the river was as calm as a millpond. The tide was at its turn, so there was no current. Alvin held to the middle of the river, where he knew it was very deep, and he would have timely notice of every obstruction that could appear.

Now that the two were fairly started upon the singular chase, they had time to speculate as to its probable result. They had not a firearm on the boat nor had they ever had one aboard. They were chasing a party of criminals who were sure to be well armed. Suppose our young friends overtook them, what could they do?

Alvin had a dim idea that having drawn near enough to discover the *Water Witch*, he would keep in sight until others could intervene. His boat would follow wherever the fugitive dare lead, and would never give up. If our young friends could not attack, they could point out the way for others. Should the criminals run into shore, where there was a chance of landing without being observed, the pursuers could be at their heels, and through the nearest telegraph station raise the hue and cry that would quickly end in their overthrow.

"It is strange," reflected Alvin, "that while we have not meant to have anything to do with those scamps we are continually running into them, while Detective Calvert, who is in this part of the world for that purpose, can't put his hand on them. If he and his friend, whom we saw at Wiscasset, and who is an officer of the law also, were here, we should be sure of doing the right thing. As it is, it's all guesswork."

"Light ahead!" suddenly called Chester beside him.

"Where away?"

"Right ahead, but closer in shore on the left."

Alvin leaned forward and gazed intently.

"You are right," he added as he saw a white light low down on the water. "Now we'll show those fellows what the *Deerfoot* can do when she tries."

He flung over the little lever controlling the power, and instantly the engine responded so fiercely that the launch shivered from stem to stern. It bounded forward like a hound freed from the leash, the bow rising from the impulse, as if it would leap clear of the water, and seemingly shooting over it, like an iceboat driven in a hurricane.

But the launch in front was no laggard. Whether she increased her speed at sight of the light which was seemingly hustling down the river after her, or whether she simply held her former rate, she was going at a tremendous pace. Soon leaving Long Ledge on their right, the pursuer shot into the broader waters of Montsweag Bay, only to find the white light seemingly as far off as ever. Possibly the pursuers had gained something, but not enough to be perceptible.

"They have seen us," said Chester, from his station at the front, "and are putting in their best licks. We must be going the limit."

"That is twenty-four miles, but we're not making it, Chester."

The second mate pulled down his cap more snugly, for the motionless air was turned into a gale, and looked back.

"What do you mean? The *Deerfoot* is eating up water."

"That may be, but she isn't getting there as she ought to," insisted Alvin, who, of course, was more familiar with his boat. "Something is the matter with her. She seems to be doing her best, and yet she lags."

"Do you think it because of her trouble yesterday?"

"It must be, but I was sure she was shipshape when we left her last night. See whether we are gaining."

Chester spent several minutes in studying the position and progress of that white light, which was gliding with swift smoothness over the water, and hugging the bank all the while. When he spoke it was doubtfully.

"Perhaps we have gained a little, say about six inches."

Alvin groped about him for the binoculars, which he had left on the seat at his side. By turning the glass over when in use, one could avail himself of the night lens, which was helpful in the gloom. But he did not find it.

"That's queer," he muttered; "I am sure I laid it there. I wonder if anyone visited the boat while we were away."

"By gracious!" called Chester from his station; "I believe she has stopped!"

"Make sure of it. I should think they would put out their stern light if they wanted to elude us."

"Likely they don't care. Yes; she has run into shore, where there seems to be some sort of landing."

Alvin swung over the wheel so as to approach directly from the rear. Since the other boat had become motionless, he slackened speed to save the strain upon his own.

Everything was now in the vivid moonlight. The launch drew steadily up to the landing where the other boat had halted. Two men were observed moving about as if making ready to tie up for the remainder of the night. They showed no interest in their pursuers, and Alvin sheered off slightly so as to pass at a distance of several rods, and while doing so he made an exasperating discovery.

The craft which he had been pursuing with so much zest was not the *Water Witch*, but a small runabout capable of high speed. The couple on board gave no attention to the larger craft, and the chagrined Alvin turned farther out into the bay and gradually headed up stream again. Chester came back from the front and chuckled:

"What a wild goose chase! The next thing to do is to make after the *Nahanada* or the *Gardiner*. There will be as much sense in the one as the other."

Observing the change of course, Chester inquired:

"Where to now?"

"We may as well go back and pick up Mike. It seems to be growing light in the east."

"So it is; a memorable night in our experience is drawing to a close."

"I say, Chester," called the Captain, "I am sure someone was on this boat while we were away at Beartown."

A sudden suspicion took form in his mind.

"Is there enough light for you to see the name on the bow?"

"Of course."

"Take a look and tell me what it is."

Chester carefully leaned over and studied the gilt letters painted on the right of the prow corresponding to those on the left. Then he straightened up with a gasp:

"As sure as I'm a living sinner it's the *Water Witch!*"

CHAPTER XXIII

THROUGH THE FOG

It was an astounding discovery.

With never a thought of the grotesque mistake, both youths had boarded the launch believing it to be the *Deerfoot*; they had pursued the imaginary fugitive only to awaken to the fact that she was not a fugitive, and that they had unconsciously stolen the property of the burglars, which must have been lying so near their own craft that the slight difference of location was not noticed.

Chester stepped down and seated himself at the elbow of his chum.

"Here are only four seats instead of six. Why didn't we notice it before?"

"Because we were too much occupied with other things, or rather were both struck with blindness just then. As Mike would say, I'm completely flabbergasted."

"And I'm with you. What's to be done now?"

"Tell me where the *Deerfoot* is."

"Ask me something easier. She may be lying where we left her, or twenty miles away."

"We should have heard her if she came down stream."

"She may have gone up the river and around into the Sheepscot."

"And back to the former hiding place of this boat or to a different one--the 'Beautiful Isle of Somewhere,'" said Alvin grimly.

"One place will serve as well as another. I wonder whether there was ever so wonderful a mix-up of launches since such craft were known."

Alvin shut off power and the two listened. From some point miles away came the hoarse growl of a steam whistle, but all else was still. He had hoped that they would hear the *Deerfoot's* exhaust, but nothing of the kind came to their ears. He flirited the switch around and resumed the speed which was not above half a dozen miles an hour.

One of the plagues of the Maine coast is the dense fogs which sometimes creep far up the rivers. Such an obscurity now began settling over Montsweag Bay and Back River, shutting out the moonlight as well as the rays of the rising sun. Before Alvin was aware, he could not see either shore until he had run far over to the right and caught a shadowy sight of the pines, spruce and firs which lined the bank. The air dripped moisture and, though it was summer, it grew chilly.

While gliding slowly forward they heard a steamer's bell, accompanied by occasional blasts from her whistle. She was feeling her way down stream and sounding warnings to other craft. By and by the beat of her screw and the ripple of the water from her bow sounded so near that Alvin edged closer to land. In the heavy mist loomed a minute later a bulky steamer, surging southward at sluggish speed, the crew, as seen for an instant, looking like saturated ghosts.

The boat was quickly swallowed up, her bell still tolling, with blasts from her whistle at short intervals.

Seated as described, the two youths discussed what was the best thing to do. It seemed advisable to return to the point from which they started, that is, near Beartown landing. There was not one chance in a hundred that they would find the *Deerfoot* there, but such a thing was not impossible. That which made this policy seem wise was the likelihood of again meeting Detective Calvert. The news of the attempted robbery of the Beartown post office would be telegraphed far and wide, and he would be sure to hear of it at Wiscasset. It would not take him and his brother officer long to reach the village, where the lads could hope to see him.

It was certainly a singular coincidence that the launch should be twice stolen in so brief a time, and the owner grimly asked himself whether fate had not ordained that he was to lose it after all.

There was no light in the maze of conjecture that opened before them. Chester suggested an alarming complication.

"The *Deerfoot* can outspeed any craft in the Maine waters. These burglars must have a hiding place, and we know there is no end to them among the bays, inlets, coves and islands that stud the rivers. Suppose they board the launch and speed away till all pursuit is thrown off the scent--something they can easily do--and then abandon the boat."

"We shall find her sooner or later, and Calvert will perhaps in this way get on their track."

"They can avert such danger by sinking her in deep water, where she may not be found for years."

"I have not thought of that. It looks as if they had the whip-hand. These fellows may have blundered last night, but it was solely through the sudden appearance of Mike on the spot, for they are no fools. If we try to get the best of them we shall get the worst, unless we have the help of Mr. Calvert."

"And the only way to gain that is to go back to Beartown."

"So it seems to me. What do you think?" asked the Captain.

"I know of nothing better. Wouldn't it be well to hit up the pace a little?"

"If this fog would only lift! But it seems to be growing thicker. We must feel our way."

While the Captain was doing this, his second mate looked over the *Water Witch*. Its resemblance to the *Deerfoot* was remarkable. It was probably two or three feet shorter, but that was the only noticeable difference. The model was the same, even to the color of the paint used. As has already been said, however, there were only four seats while the *Deerfoot* had six. The similarity of the craft was proved by the fact that Alvin Landon boarded and ran it for quite a number of miles before even the slightest suspicion entered his mind.

All landmarks were shut from view until, as may be said, the launch ran against them. The boys had little or no acquaintance with the river they were ascending, and only here and there were they able to identify certain landings or towns from their previous study of the map. Alvin knew he was creeping northward, and sooner or later must reach the point which he left during the latter part of the night. Even the landing would not be recognized without close study, and possibly not even then.

Had not the noise made by the progress of the launch shut out a certain sound and had not the dense fog hidden something from sight, the two would have made a startling discovery within the hour which followed their turning back. But no knowledge of that nature came to them.

The boys agreed that they would not reach their destination until long after their change of course. Neither noted when this was done, but Chester now looked at his watch and found it showed a few minutes to seven.

"A good hour for breakfast," he remarked, "and my appetite is with me, as I am sure yours is with you."

Alvin nodded and kept his eye on the receding shore and the water ahead.

"Mike is to be envied, for the good woman and especially the daughter will give him the best their house can afford. These boats don't carry a large stock of provisions--who knows but there's something of the kind on board?"

He asked the Captain to rise while he lifted the cushioned lid of the locker upon which he had been sitting. The next moment Chester uttered a joyous cry.

"Hurrah! we're in luck!"

He held up a large paper bag into which he had peeped. It contained half a dozen plump ham sandwiches.

"While we are about it suppose we see what other treasures are in the ship's chest."

They found a most interesting stock indeed. Five black pieces of muslin, each with two peep-holes, several sets of false whiskers, two pairs of brass knuckles, three metal rings from each of which dangled more than a dozen keys of varying sizes, a box of revolver cartridges, a formidable knife, some twine and a number of articles of no importance.

"They tell their story," said Chester, holding them up one after another for his chum's inspection. "If the officers of the law arrest us, we shall have to depend upon our friends to prove an alibi."

"Meanwhile there is no need to keep those sandwiches waiting."

"Wonder if they are poisoned," laughed Chester, as he passed one to his chum, and sank his teeth in another. "Anyhow, I'm going to take chances."

"So am I. They don't seem to have any cooking utensils on board, so coffee and warm food are to be denied us."

The Captain ate with one hand on the steering wheel, and frequent glances ahead. Now and then they would find themselves approaching a sharp projection of land, around which the launch was steered, and then perhaps would glide past a cunning looking cove, too narrow to admit a boat of large size. Once, while doubling a cape, they came within a hair of running down a small rowboat propelled by a single occupant. He shouted angrily for the steersman to keep a better lookout.

"I'm sorry!" called back Alvin; "but the fog bothers us. Will you please tell me how far it is to Beartown landing?"

"'Bout half a mile, mebber a little more. Who are you?"

Alvin gave his right name and thanked the man for his information.

"I thought that was about the distance," said Chester, as he resumed the duty of sentinel. "I can't recognize any landmark, and couldn't if there was no fog to play the mischief with our sight."

Alvin stopped the engine two or three times while approaching the spot, in order to listen for sounds of the other boat. They heard nothing, but had they not waited too long to make the experiment, they would have picked up some exceedingly interesting information.

"Here's the spot!" called Chester a few minutes later, as he identified the spiderlike landing from which a road led to Beartown.

"Then we have passed the place where the launch lay up last night. We may as well go beyond and be out of the way of folks."

A hundred yards north of the wharf, too far to see it when they looked back, the *Water Witch* came gently to rest, the waiting Chester sprang ashore with a line in hand and made fast.

CHAPTER XXIV

BAD FOR MIKE MURPHY

When Gerald Buxton's shotgun was fired by him, and the report rang out in the still night, it awoke several persons, who wondered what it meant. No one gave the matter further thought, however, until an old lady, facing the main street, looked through her bedroom window and saw the citizen chasing his boy, who toted a gun over his shoulder. At the first streakings of daylight she hurried to the Buxton home for the explanation. Within the following half hour the majority of the population of Beartown knew that an attempt had been made to rob the post office during the night. Then followed a hurrying thither, for no one could be satisfied until he had viewed the scene and talked with the postmistress herself.

It was the confusion and hurly-burly below stairs that awoke Mike Murphy early. He would have left at once to join Alvin and Chester if Nora had not forced him to eat breakfast before bidding them good-by. It must be said that the Irish youth did not require much urging to detain him that long.

He found he was attracting unpleasant attention. It was Nora who took pains to let it be known that but for him all the money in the safe would have been stolen. Mr. Jasper, the owner of the large sum, scrambled through the crowd, snatched up his big envelope and hurried off without so much as thanking Mike, who cared naught.

"You needn't tell me," said the keeper of the other grocery store to the husband of the town milliner. "That redheaded Irish chap is one of the gang."

"How do you account for his preventing the other robber from carrying away the money in the safe?" asked his neighbor.

"Plain enough; they'd had a quarrel. He wanted it all for himself."

"Why didn't he take it then?"

"The widder and others bounced down on him afore he had the chance."

"I don't see why if the other villain run away this one didn't do likewise."

"He'll do it quick enough, never you fear."

"Why is he hanging round after they've gone?"

"To git the money. Seems to me, Rufe, you're blamed stupid this morning. Why, you've only to take one look at that young ruffian's face to see the wickedness wrote there. He oughter be in prison this very minute, and he'll soon be there--take my word for it!"

"Where is he?"

"Sneaked off while he had the chance--wal, I'll be gul darned!"

The grinning Mike Murphy was standing at his elbow, where he had heard every word of the pointed conversation. The gossip was so taken aback that he began stammering:

"I had--that is, I was thinking of the other robber."

"I was told," said Mike, "that there was a man hereabouts that looked so much like me he must be my lost brither that was let out of jail in Boston a fortnight since. I've found him and begs the privilege of shaking his hand."

And he caught the limp fingers of the gaping fellow and squeezed them hard, while he continued to gape and say nothing.

Since this unpleasant person bore not the slightest resemblance to the youth, being pale and effeminate looking, those who stood near broke into laughter. Mike turned about, and having bidden good-by to mother and daughter, passed into the street and turned down the road leading to the landing.

The hour was early and the fog of which I have spoken was beginning to creep over the village and through the woods. He kept his bearings, and when near the river plunged in among the trees to find the *Deerfoot*, remembering where she was moored the night before.

Some hours earlier Alvin Landon and Chester Haynes had boarded the *Water Witch*, never doubting that it was the *Deerfoot*, and started down the river. Consequently Mike could not make the same mistake, and came straight to the launch with which he was familiar. Standing for a brief period on the bank he looked admiringly at it.

"Where are the byes?" was the first question he asked himself, as a glance told him he had arrived ahead of them. "I wonder now if they have strayed off in the woods, where they may wander about like the two lost babes and be niver heerd of agin."

Not doubting that they would soon show up, he sat down on the velvety ground to await them. By and by he became drowsy. The previous night had been so broken that he had not gained half the sleep he needed. It was natural, therefore, after his generous breakfast, that he should be inclined to slumber. Rousing up, he reflected:

"If I fall asleep here, the byes may not obsarve me and sail away and leave me behind. I shouldn't mind that so much wid only a quarter of a dollar in me pocket, fur I could go back to Nora and her mother and spind the rest of me days. But the Captain and second mate would graive themselves to death, and that would make me feel bad."

Throwing off his drowsiness, he rose to his feet, reached out one hand and sprang lightly aboard the boat. Seats, cushions, flags, everything was as they had left it the night before. He sat down on one seat, rested his feet upon another and settled himself for a good nap, indifferent as to how long it should last.

"When they come they will obsarve that I'm sweetly draaming, and will respect me enough to refrain from disturbing me, as Bobbie Burns used to say whin he lay down beside the road late at night on his way home."

His posture was so comfortable that his head soon bowed and he drifted into the land of dreams. His first essay was not so successful as he hoped it would be, for by and by the nodding head tipped too far forward, and he sprawled on his face. His first confused fancy was that he had been lying in his trundle bed at Tipperary with his cousin Garry Murphy.

"Arrah, now, what do ye maan by kicking me out on the floor, ye spalpeen? Whin I git me eyes open I'll taich ye better manners," he called, climbing carefully to his feet. After a brief spell he recalled the situation. His first fear was that the Captain and second mate had returned and witnessed his tumble, but looking around, he saw nothing of them. The mooring line lay looped around the base of the spruce and the launch was motionless.

Soon after, two persons came stealing their way among the trees, feeling each step like a couple of Indian scouts entering a hostile camp. They were Kit Woodford, leader of the post office burglars, and his young companion Graff Miller. You remember they acted as lookouts, while the third was busy inside. They had fled like the cowards they were on the first sign of danger, had managed to find each other and then set out to flee in their launch. What had become of "Nox" they did not know or care. He must do as they had done--save himself or go unsaved.

A shock of astonishment came to the miscreants when they reached the place where the *Water Witch* was moored the night before, only to discover that it had vanished. To the alarmed ruffians there was but the one explanation: the men who had interfered with the work at the post office had learned of the launch and run off with it.

"This is a rum go!" was the disgusted exclamation of Woodford. "I thought we should have an easy thing of it, but we've got to turn back inland. We shouldn't have any trouble, though it looks to me as if we shall have to part company."

The younger man was not favorably impressed at first, but a moment's reflection convinced him that this was one of the situations in which the proverb, "In union there is strength," did not hold good. Two persons trying together to make their way out of the neighborhood without drawing suspicion would be in more danger than one. So he said:

"All right; I will go down stream."

He moved away from his companion, who held his place for a brief while, still reflecting whether his plan was the better one after all. He was turning over the problem in his mind, when he caught the sound of a guarded whistle. It was a familiar call from his companion and he did not hesitate to follow it. Only a little way off he paused with an exclamation of astonishment.

There was the swift launch *Deerfoot* moored against the bank so near the place where the *Water Witch* had been left that it is no wonder that Alvin Landon and Chester Haynes failed to notice the difference of location. Not only that, but one of the youths belonging to the boat was seated near the stern with head bowed as if asleep.

What could the amazing fact mean? Woodford's first thought was that a trap had been set for them. More than likely the seeming slumber on the part of the motionless figure was a pretence, and meant to tempt them to come out into the open.

"What do you make of it?" whispered Graff Miller.

"Some deviltry you may be sure; the others are near by."

They stealthily withdrew deeper into the wood and watched and listened, but nothing occurred to cause alarm. Then a sudden resolution came to the elder.

"So long as there's only one, let's make him prisoner."

"I'm willing," assented the other.

As silently as two shadows, they stole to the edge of the water. Woodford deftly cast off the bow line and, leaning over, gently laid it on the deck. Then they stepped aboard and Miller took up the boathook, pressed it against the bank and the launch began moving away. When the boathook could be used no longer, it was softly laid down and the younger man took his place at the wheel. He understood the running of the launch better than his companions and generally acted as pilot.

"Shall I start?" he asked, in a guarded voice.

The other nodded. Miller slipped the switch plug in place, started the motor and put on the power, with just enough force to set the screw slowly revolving. He headed out in the river, where, because of the fog, he could barely see the flagstaff at the bow, and began a wide sweeping circle with the intention of descending the stream.

And still Mike Murphy dreamed on.

Now that the boat was under way with the screw revolving faster, Kit Woodford stepped closer to the sleeping youth and looked at his face. When he recognized him as the belligerent Irish lad, his feelings underwent a sudden change. He knew something of the sleeper and decided on the instant that he was *persona non grata*. While one of the other boys might have been held with some vague idea of being used as a hostage, this one would make more trouble aboard than on land.

Without a word as to his purpose to his companion, Kit Woodford stooped over, and with the great strength he possessed, easily lifted the sleeping boy clear of the deck. Then he cautiously moved to the taffrail, and with a single toss flung Mike Murphy clear of the launch. And the water was fifty feet deep, and Mike had never swum a stroke, and there was no one to go to his help.

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT SAVED MIKE

Let us be just to all. I therefore make haste to say that when Kit Woodford thus threw Mike Murphy into the Back River he did not doubt for an instant that he was a swimmer, for whoever heard of a lusty youth seventeen years old who could not take care of himself in water? Of course there are such, but they are so few that they are a negligible number.

Graff Miller was startled when he heard the splash, and turning his head saw the lad disappear, but his belief was the same as his companion's, and turning on more power, he shot beyond sight before the lad could come to the surface.

Now I wish to say further that it is a fact within the knowledge of more than one that a person who did not know how to swim has, upon being precipitated into deep water, struck out like a master of the natatorial art. A father standing on the shore of a lake in northern England saw a boat upset when a hundred yards off and his little boy flung clear of the support. The lad had never even tried to swim, but as he was going down the parent shouted to him:

"If you don't come right to land, I'll whip you within an inch of your life!"

And the little fellow swam to where the frantic parent awaited him.

Moreover, I once witnessed the same strange occurrence. I was not six years old when I was waiting at the side of a deep pond, and watching my brother, four years older, construct a raft, with which he had promised to come over and take me a-sailing. He put a number of boards loosely together, and using a shingle for a paddle, worked out from shore and began making his way toward me, who was in high spirits over the promised treat.

In the very middle of the pond, where the water was fully twenty feet deep, the primitive raft began disintegrating. The boards slipped apart, so that those upon which my brother stood sank under his weight. Had he been older and more sensible, he would have known that this need not mean danger to him, for the smallest board was buoyant enough to hold his head above water, and he could have worked his way to land with such support. But the sight of the structure breaking apart threw him into a panic. He made a frenzied leap as far out as he could, came up instantly, blew the water from his mouth and swam so easily to where I was standing that I never dreamed he was in peril. I should have said that never before had he tried to swim.

The explanation of what seems unaccountable is simple. Now and then it happens that when a sudden demand is made upon a person to save his life by swimming he instinctively does the right thing. He adjusts his body correctly, and uses his legs and arms properly--his action being exactly like those of a bullfrog when he starts on a voyage to the other side of the spring where he makes his home.

This thing does not often occur, but, as I have said, it does now and then. Let me beg you never to make the experiment unless it is forced upon you, for I dread what the result would be.

You have already guessed that this is what took place with Mike Murphy. I cannot think of a more startling awaking than that of a sleeping person who is flung into a deep stream of very cold water. Mike's momentum took him several feet below the surface, but he quickly rose again, shook the water from his eyes, blew it out of his mouth, and then swam straight for land with the skill that you would show in a similar situation. Even in taking the right direction he was providentially guided, for at first the dense fog shut everything from sight, but after a few strokes, he saw the dim outlines of the trees, and never stopped the vigorous swimming until he reached up, grasped an overhanging limb of a near-by tree and felt his feet touch bottom.

And then he was so overcome by what had taken place and it was so beyond his comprehension that he believed it was a miracle. Standing on the bank in his dripping clothing, he was mute for a full minute. Then he sank on his knees and looking reverently upward said:

"I thank Thee, my Heavenly Father, for saving me life when I didn't deserve it. Why Ye took the trouble is beyond me, but I niver can thank Thee enough. I'm going to try me bish to be more deserving of Yer kindness, and now if it's all the same to Yer blisssed self, please give me a chance at that spalpeen that treated me as he did."

From down the river came the sound of the *Deerfoot's* exhaust, growing fainter as the boat sped on its way. The hoarse blast of a steamer's whistle shuddered through the mist, but the lad saw nothing of either craft. It was fog, fog on every hand.

He could not straighten out in his mind all that had taken place. More than one phase of the occurrences was beyond explanation. Overcoming in a degree the awe he felt for what had occurred in his own person, he thought:

"If the Captain and second mate didn't know I couldn't swim, I'd believe it was them that dropped me overboard by way

of a joke, as the Barry brithers explained to the Judge was their raison for hanging Black Mike. It was thim spalpeens that wint fur the Captain whin he was journeying through the woods. Begorra! but they are piling up a big debt fur me to pay! But I'll sittle the same wid int'rist at siven thousand per cent.

"Where's Alvin and Chester all this time? Why didn't they git to the *Deerfut* before me instead of laving it fur them chaps? What does it all maan, anyway?"

One of the singular coincidences of this series of adventures was that the *Deerfoot* in going down the Back River passed within a few rods of the *Water Witch* coming up. The noise of the respective engines prevented either party hearing the other, and the fog would have veiled them had the space between been considerably less.

Not knowing that the launch of their enemies had been moored anywhere near, Mike did not look for it. Ignorant also of how far he had been carried while asleep, he could not guess the distance to Beartown landing. It might be half a mile or ten times as much. In truth, the former distance was about right.

The pressing question was as to what he should do. His clothing even to his cap was saturated. The morning was chilly, and he shivered. He must find a place where he could obtain warmth until his garments dried. When that was done he would decide upon the next step to take.

Had he suspected that he was so close to the landing, he would have picked his way thither and then followed the road to the home of Mrs. Friestone. It seemed to him that there must be a good many scattered houses, any one of which would give him welcome. He remembered that a broad highway runs the whole length of big Westport Island. Necessarily this was parallel with the course of Back River. If he therefore turned away from the latter and held a direct course, he must sooner or later reach the road named, where he would be sure soon to receive hospitality.

No doubt you know from experience how hard it is to hold a straight course when going through a wilderness, without landmarks to guide you and ignorant also of the "signs" which are as plain as print to the veteran hunter. The fog inclosed Mike on every hand, but his activity imparted a pleasant warmth to his frame, which otherwise would not have been felt, even though it was summer time.

He zigzagged sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left, but, on the whole, held substantially to the right direction and gradually drew near the dusty avenue which, once reached, would bring the end of his discomforts. Good fortune stayed with him, for when he was beginning to feel somewhat discouraged with his failure to free himself from the dripping woods, he abruptly came upon a clearing, in the midst of which stood a small house, surrounded by a well-tilled garden and several smaller buildings. Chickens were scratching and picking at the earth, and a big dog, fortunately restrained by a chain, scrambled out of his kennel at sight of the stranger and barked and tugged to get at him.

Between him and Mike stretched a clothesline supported at intervals by leaning props, and despite the fact that the humidity in the air must have been close to ninety-nine degrees, a corpulent woman was hanging out clothes. Two or three wooden pins were in her mouth, and every now and then she reached up with one hand and squeezed the little conveniences over the cord which supported the flapping clothes. She wore no bonnet or hat, and the untied shoes evidently were an old pair belonging to her husband.

Hearing the dog bark, she looked around to learn the cause. She saw a freckle-faced youth in the act of doffing his cap and bowing.

"The top of the morning to yer ladyship, and would ye be willing to hang me across yer line till me clothes be dried?"

The woman snatched the pins from between her teeth and stared at him. Her face was broad, homely and good-natured.

"Gway now," she answered; "I don't hang up any clothes till the same is *claan*. It will take a waak's washing to rinder ye fit. If I straddle ye over the line wid yer faat and rid head hanging down and bumping together, ye'll cut a purty figger a-flapping in the wind."

Mike's laughter rang out. She was Irish like him and his heart warmed to her.

"Begorra! I've met a leddy after me own heart. She's from the 'owld sod' and it's not mesilf that is going to have me own way in gay conversation wid the charming beauty."

True enough, the woman was his match and Mike was glad to learn it.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE GOOD SAMARITANS

She looked sharply at him through her bright blue eyes.

"Are ye saaking to make me belave ye are from Ireland?"

"Sartinly--Mike Murphy, from the town of Tipperary, County of Tipperary, at your sarvice," and he bowed again.

"Arrah, poor Ireland, how many wrongs are heaped upon ye! I was sure from yer accint that ye were a Dutchman or Frinch."

"May I ask yer name, me leddy?"

"Mrs. Maggie McCaffry, and me husband is Tam that is working for Mr. Burns at Beartown."

Mike clasped his hands and with a glowing expression stepped forward.

"I knowed it! I knowed it!" he exclaimed, as if overrunning with joy.

"Knowed phwat?"

"That ye were my mither's fourth cousin that lift Tipperary fur Noo York six years ago, but by some mistake landed in Dublin jail--bad cess to them as made the same mistake!"

"It's bad enough fur ye to be born in the same counthry wid mesilf, but I war-r-n ye to make no claim to relationship. There's some things a respecttable leddy can't stand."

"Did ye not almost break me heart by thinking I was a Dutchman?" asked Mike reprovingly.

"I'll make the same roight by axing the pardon of ivery Dutchman I maats for the rist of me born days. 'Twas har-r-d on the poor haythen."

"Aunt Maggie, I'll give ye all me wealth if ye'll consint to let me dry mesilf in front of yer fire."

"Arrah, now, what are ye saying? Five cints is no object to me---"

Just then, in spite of an effort to prevent it, Mike's teeth chattered. Now that he had ceased walking he quickly became chilled. The woman noticed it and her warm sympathy instantly welled up.

"'Tis a shame that I kipt ye talking nonsense wid me while ye was shivering. Do ye walk straight into the house and war-r-m yersilf till I come, which will be in a jiffy whin I have the rest of me clothes hung out. And if ye're hungry ye shall have food."

"I thank ye, aunty, but I am not in need of that."

Two small wooden steps were in front of the only door on that side of the neat little cottage. He pressed his thumb on the latch, pushed open the door and the next instant faced one of the greatest surprises of his life.

The lower floor consisted of two rooms, a kitchen and a general living room. The fire in the former would have been enough for the interior, but for the fact that a visitor had preceded Mike, and because of his presence a roaring fire was burning on the hearth. In front of this sat a young man leaning back in a rocking chair, with a bandaged leg resting on a pillow laid upon a second chair in front of him. He was smoking a cigarette, and despite the fact that something ailed him, looked quite comfortable.

As the door opened, his eyes met those of Mike Murphy, who halted with one foot over the threshold, started and exclaimed:

"Can I belave what me eyes tell me! Is it *yersilf*?"

The young man sitting before him, smoking and nursing his injured limb, was Orestes Noxon, whom Mike chased away from the Beartown post office the night before, and who received a part of the charge from the shotgun of Gerald Buxton.

The face of the injured youth flushed and he laughed nervously, but with amazing coolness answered:

"I guess you don't need spectacles. You've got the best of me; I'm down and you're up."

"There's an old account to be squared atween us, but that can rist till ye become yersilf. Be the same token, are ye much hurt?"

Mike's Irish sympathy immediately went out to the fellow, who certainly was at his mercy.

"I can't say I am. But your clothing is wet. I heard a part of your talk with Mrs. McCaffry--God bless her splendid soul!--so suppose you come closer where you will be in front of the fire and can dry yourself, and we'll get on better."

It was good advice and Mike acted upon it. Standing with his back to the blaze, he looked down in the face of the criminal whose self-possession he could not help admiring.

"You remember our little foot race from the back of the Beartown post office?" said Noxon, as if referring to an incident in which he felt no particular interest.

"I do, but I niver won a prize at running and ye give me the slip."

"Only to get in front of that beefeater with a shotgun. Why didn't you fire when you were chasing and threatening me?"

"I couldn't have touched off that busted gun any more than I could have fired a broom handle."

"I made the mistake of thinking the other fellow would be equally forbearing and kept on running, till all at once, bang! he let drive. I caught a good part of the charge in that leg below the knee. It didn't hurt much at first, and after managing to get hold of his gun I made him dance for me. It would have killed you to see him," and at the recollection the young man laughed hard.

"His boy Jim observed it all and told us and we laughed," said Mike, with a grin. "The sight must have been very instructive."

"It was, to that old codger, who won't get over his lesson for a month. Well, as the gun wasn't of any use to me I threw it away and started to find my friends and the boat we came on. By and by my leg began to hurt, I suppose from walking so much and a tumble I got by catching my foot in the root of a tree. I sat down to rest awhile and when I got up it hurt so badly that I thought it was all up with me. You know it was night, and somehow I had gone astray in the infernal pine woods. The wound was bleeding, and I sat down again intending to wait till morning. By and by I heard a dog bark so near that I climbed to my feet again and made my way to this house. McCaffry and his wife were asleep and it took a good deal of banging and shouting for me to wake them. But when they found out what was the matter they took me in, and my own father and mother could not have been kinder."

"What did they do fur yer fut?"

"The good woman not only washed the wound, but, by the light of the lamp which her husband held, picked out every one of the shot that had been buried there and were making the trouble. Then she bathed the hurt again and wrapped it about with the clean linen, as you see for yourself. All that remains is for me to keep quiet for a few days and nature will do the rest."

"Wouldn't it be well if I got a dochter fur ye?"

Noxon looked up in the face of the Irish youth, who tried to keep a grave countenance.

"I think not," replied the sufferer.

There was a world of significance in the words, and both understood.

Strange that these two who had never met before except as the bitterest of enemies should talk now as comrades. Mike kept pinching his clothing and turning every side to the blaze, thus drying the garments quite rapidly. He was so interested in the story of Noxon that he grew careless.

"I think I see smoke coming from behind you," finally said the sitter.

Mike reached back to investigate and with a gasp snatched back his fingers.

"I'm afire! Is there a well outside that I can dive into the same?"

"Turn around; I can help you," said Noxon, laughing, dropping his foot and sitting forward.

Together they quenched the twist of blaze which if left alone would have played the mischief with Mike's garments.

"I'm thinking this is a little different, Mr. Noxon, from last night."

"It is, and I hope it will always stay that way."

Mike was astonished and looked questioningly at the fellow.

"Phwat might ye be maaning?" he asked, lowering his voice.

Noxon tried to speak, but his voice broke. He snatched out his handkerchief from the side pocket of his coat and pressed it to his eyes. Then his breast heaved and he broke into sobbing.

The heart of Mike melted at the sight. He had never dreamed of anything like this. Enmity and resentment gave way to an anguish of sympathy for the fellow. He longed to say something comforting, but could not think of a word, and remained mute. Very soon the youth regained his self-control. Dropping his handkerchief in his lap, and with eyes streaming, he exclaimed from the very depths of his despair:

"Oh, why didn't that man aim better and kill me! I'm not fit to live! I'm the worst villain unchanged! I am lost--damned, and a curse to those who love me!"

Mike pulled himself together sufficiently to reply:

"I don't think ye're quite all them things. Cheer up! cheer up, old fellow!"

Noxon did not speak, but slowly swayed his head from side to side, like one from whom all hope had departed. Mike drew a chair beside him, and as tenderly as a mother lifted the white hand from where it lay on the handkerchief, and held it in his own warm grasp.

"Noxy, me bye, Mike Murphy is yer frind through thick and thin--don't ye forget *that*--and I'm going to see ye through this if I have to break a thrace in trying."

"*You!*" repeated the despairing one, looking up in Mike's honest blue eyes. "No one can save a wretch like me. I'm not worth saving!"

"Ye forget there's One to whom the same is aisy, me bye. Ye feel down in the mouth jest now, as Jonah did respicting the whale, but bimeby this fog will clear away and the sun will shine forth again. I've been in some purty bad scrapes mesilf and He niver desarted me. Why, it ain't two hours, since He raiched out His hand, grabbed me by the neck and saved me from drowning. I tell ye, Noxy, that He won't fail ye."

"But you never did what I have done."

The Irish youth bent his head as if recalling his past life.

"I can't say that I did, but I'm the meanest scamp that iver lived--barring yersilf," he added, with the old twinkle in his eyes. "Come, now, be a man and we'll have ye out of this scrape as quick as I jumped awhile ago whin I awoke to the fact that me trousers was afire."

Noxon actually smiled at the recollection.

"You call yourself a scamp. Why, you are an angel compared with me--so is everybody! Kit Woodford and Graff Miller are a thousand times better than I."

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNWELCOME CALLER

With rare wisdom Mike now gave an abrupt turn to the conversation. Lowering his voice to a confidential tone, he asked:

"Does Mrs. McCaffry know anything of this?"

"If so, she hasn't given me any reason to suspect it," replied Noxon, brightening up and seizing the straw held out to him. "I told her I had met with an accident, and neither she nor her husband asked a question. Their big hearts had no room for any feeling other than of pity for the one who is not deserving of a particle of it."

"She told me her husband works in Beartown. He wint there airly this morning; he'll hear of the throuble at the post office and the beefeater, as ye call him, will let everybody know he winged the robber as he was running off. Did ye spake any caution to the man before he lift this morning?"

"By good luck I thought of that. I asked him to make no mention of my being at his house and he promised me he would not."

"Arrah, now, but that's good, as me dad says whin he tips up the jug. All that ye have to do is to sit here and let Mrs. McCaffry nurse that game leg till ye're able to thraavel."

"Ah, if that was *all!* But I have a father and mother whose hearts I am breaking. I have two younger brothers and a sweet sister. What of *them!*" demanded Noxon almost fiercely.

"Ye have read the blissed story of the Prodigal Son, haven't ye?"

"I am a thousandfold worse than that poor devil, who was simply foolish."

"Do yer dad and mither know where ye are?"

"No; the one decent thing I did when I turned rascal was to change my name. Orestes Noxon is a *nom de plume*."

"I don't know the fellow, but that shows, me bye, ye ain't such a big fool as ye look. I'm beginning to have hope for ye."

A strange impulse came to Mike. It was to sing in a low, inexpressibly sweet voice a single stanza of a familiar hymn, just loud enough for the one auditor to hear. But he restrained himself, fearing the effect upon him. The "fountains of the deep" were already broken up, and the result might be regrettable. At that moment a heavy tread sounded on the little steps outside, the door was pushed inward, and the bulky form of the red-faced Mrs. McCaffry filled the whole space. She now stepped awkwardly and ponderously within.

"I begs that ye'll oxcoose me for not coming in wid this blamey and inthrodooing ye to aich ither. Have ye becom acquainted?"

"It was an oversight which no Irish leddy should be guilty of," gravely replied Mike, "espically whin the same is the fourth cousin of me own mither. But ye have been away from the owld counthry so long that ye have forgot a good deal, Aunt Maggie."

"I haven't furgot to resint the insult of being accused of relationship wid the family of a spalpeen that is proud of the belaiif. Whin Tam coomes home to-night I'll explain the insult to him and lave ye two to sittle the same."

"I'm thankful ye give me due notice, Aunt Maggie, so that I'll have time to slip outside and climb a tree. Which reminds me to ask how fur it is to Beartown."

"It's a good half mile from our home, and nigh about the same distance back. Ye can figger out the rist for yersilf. Now, me darlint," said she, coming to Noxon's chair and bending over with her broad face radiating sympathy, "it's toime I had a look at that leg, which would be a big ornamin't if bestowed on the spalpeen wid the freckles and rid hair."

"I don't think it can need any attention," said Noxon, pleased to listen to the sparring of the two; "but you are the doctor."

Her hands were big and red, but no professional nurse could have handled a patient with more gentle deftness. The linen was unwound, and Mike for the first time inspected the wound inflicted by Gerald Buxton with his shotgun. Little as the lad knew of such things, he saw the hurt was not serious. With the removal of the leaden pellets went the cause of irritation. The stumble in the woods had aggravated the wound temporarily, but a rest for even a day would render it safe for the young man to use the leg.

When the bandage had been repinned in place, Noxon felt that he was being coddled more than was necessary. Dropping his foot to the floor, he asked impatiently:

"What's the sense of my playing baby? I can walk as well as ever. All I need is an ordinary cane. I think I'll stay with you till after dinner, Aunt Maggie--I suppose I may call you that--and then I'll vamose the ranch."

The woman stared wonderingly at Mike.

"Do ye know what he maanes by thim words? His mind I fear is afther wandering."

"He wishes to say that ye and Tam have used him so well that he will take delight in spinding several days wid ye."

"Ah, now his mind isn't afther wandering when he do spake that way. All roight, me cherub, ye'll stay where you be till I give you liberty to lave. Do ye mind that?"

And she shook her stubby finger in his face.

"Ah, what a tyrant you are, Aunt Maggie!"

"Phwat's that?" she demanded, straightening up. "Are ye calling me out of me name?"

"You are the sweetest, kindest, most motherly woman and best wife in the State of Maine."

She sprang to her feet and lumbered to the door.

"I haven't finished hanging me duds; whin I have I'll come back and wipe out the insoolt ye have put upon me."

Noxon looked at Mike, who for the first time heard him laugh with real jollity in his voice.

"What a big heart! How unutterably ashamed she makes me feel! What can I weigh in the balance against her? She is pure gold and I am base dross."

"Don't forgit to include mesilf wid the dross, me bye. Ye won't be able to get away from this here place for a few days, I guess."

"Glad should I be if I could believe it safe to stay here."

"And why not?"

"Her husband has already heard all about last night's business."

"He promised ye to say nothing."

"When he did that, he had no suspicion of who I am. He will know that I was one of the gang and his disposition will be far different when he comes home to-night. In fact, he is likely to feel freed of any promise he made me."

"Ye don't know a real Irishman. I can't say how he will be disposed, but I know he'll kaap that pledge. Have no fear of that."

Noxon sitting back in his chair and apparently without any thought of his injured leg, pondered earnestly over the situation.

"I am disposed to believe as you do, but that isn't my only danger."

"Phwat have ye in mind now?"

"There will be lots of people scouring the country for the three persons who were in this business. We are so near Beartown that some of them are likely to call here before the day is over."

"This house stands well back from the road wid only a path betwaan the two. Why should anyone sarch here fur ye?"

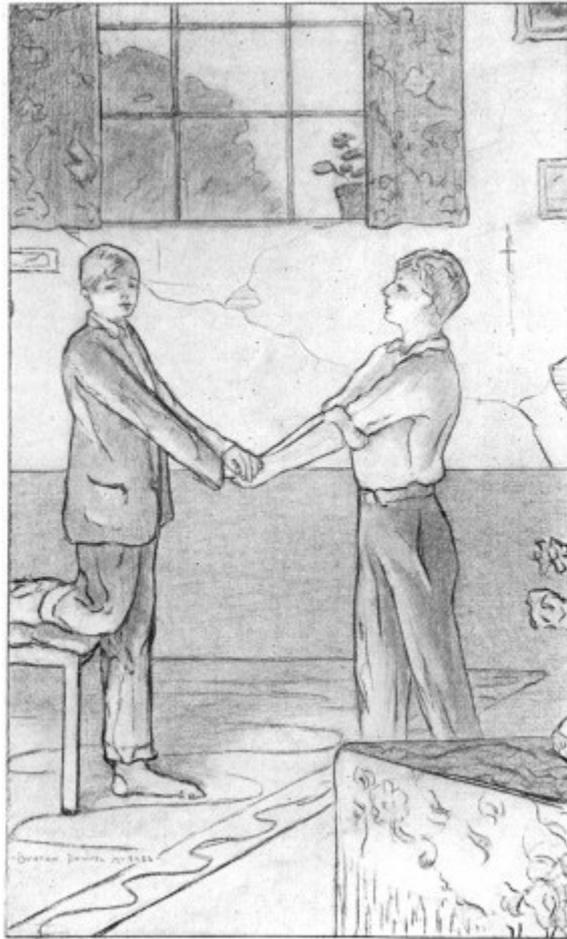
"And why should they not? I shouldn't dare to stay here while this is going on. However, you have shown such goodwill toward me, I am willing to compromise. I'll stay till to-night and then must make a change of base."

"Whither will ye go?"

"I haven't thought of that. My aim will be simply to get out of the zone of danger, and what follows must depend upon circumstances."

"Noxy, will ye answer me one question?"

"I will."



"GIVE ME YOUR HAND ON THAT."

"When ye lave here will ye be going back to Kit Woodford and Graff Miller?"

The eyes of the young man flashed and, with an earnestness that seemed deadly in its intensity, he said hoarsely:

"No! never! I'll die first!"

"Give me yer hand on that!"

It seemed as if the grip would crush the clasping fingers. The pressure continued for nearly a minute, while the two looked fixedly into each other's eyes. The pledge had been made and into each heart stole the warm, irradiating glow that God gives to all the children of men when they break loose from evil and cling to that which is good.

And then the young man gave Mike his confidence. Aunt Maggie, with a tact that was creditable to her, left them together most of the forenoon and their talk was comparatively free from interruption.

As Noxon had hinted, he was the eldest son of parents who were in prosperous circumstances. He did not give their name nor place of residence, for it was unnecessary, but he admitted he had been wayward from early boyhood. He longed for wild adventure, and caused his family grief and anguish by his persistent wrongdoing. Finally, when he had matriculated at Yale, he ran away from home, taking what funds he could steal and fully resolved upon a life of sin.

"If there were pirates to-day, as there used to be, I should have striven to become the chief of a crew that flew the black flag, but I had to give that up. Some humorist has said that when a man starts to go to the devil he finds everything greased. So it proved with me. I fell in with Graff Miller, who, though he is about my age, has been a burglar for several years. I never suspected it until he found I was hunting for such a companion, when he told me of his partnership with Kit Woodford. In my vanity, I had shown how easy it was for me to open one of the old-fashioned combination safes, by detecting the working of the mechanism inside. This made me invaluable to them, and they proposed that I should become the third member of the gang. I jumped at the chance. Since Miller told me they used aliases instead of their right names, I took the one by which you know me.

"Their plan was to visit different points in the south of Maine, where there had been a number of post office robberies, and use me to open the safes. I was delighted with the scheme, and we started in a few weeks ago. The Beartown post

office was the third visited----"

Just then a knock sounded on the door. Both were startled and Mike called:

"Come in!"

The door was pushed inward and Stockham Calvert entered the room.

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed Mike, "as Father Malone said when he saw his church burning."

CHAPTER XXVIII

PLUCKING A BRAND FROM THE BURNING

"Good day, my friends!" was the greeting of the detective as he closed the door behind him, strode forward and saluted Mike, who, after his exclamation, rose from his chair and, open mouth and staring eyes, limply clasped the hand that was offered him.

"I wasn't looking for you, Mike, but I was searching for Hor--I beg pardon, Orestes Noxon. I hope I see you well, barring the slight injury to the leg inflicted by Mr. Gerald Buxton last night."

And what did the officer do but shake hands with Noxon, who kept his seat as if in a daze? Mike, who was watching the couple, instantly noted a significant fact. Beyond question the two were acquaintances. The face of the young man flushed scarlet and he said faintly:

"Well, Mr. Calvert, you have got me at last."

"Yes; and a right merry chase you have led me. You won't get away this time."

"I suppose not."

"Sit down, Mike," said the caller, drawing up a chair for himself. "I have something I would like very much to say to thee, Orestes."

At this moment Aunt Maggie swung through the door again. She had seen the man enter and wished to know what it meant. Calvert sprang to his feet and bowed.

"I have found a couple of good friends of mine, who I am sure are greatly indebted to you for your hospitality. One cannot fail to tell by your looks that you have a wonderfully kind heart----"

"Arrah, now," replied Mrs. McCaffry, pushing away the hair in front of her face with her fat hand, "but ye are the worst blarney of thim all. I'll have nothing to do wid ye till dinner time, whin I'll stuff ye all so full of roast pig and praties that ye'll be obleeged to kaap quiet regarding dacent folks."

She knew the three wished to talk over private matters, and made sure they were left alone for the next hour or two.

"Mr. Calvert," said Noxon, "Mike here has proved himself a true friend to me--so you may talk freely before him. He doesn't know my right name and says he doesn't care to know. So we will let that pass. What caused you to look here for me?"

"Warner Hagan met me in Wiscasset yesterday to give what help he could in running Kit Woodford and his gang to earth. Early this morning we heard of the attempted robbery of the Beartown post office. We hired a launch and got there as soon as we could. Nobody in Beartown suspects our business. It did not take us long to pick up all that was known. We learned that one of the three got peppered with bird shot, and managed to limp off in the woods. Of course I recognized the three young gentlemen who were accepting the hospitality of Mrs. Friestone, the postmistress. They required no immediate attention and were sure to turn up all right in the end.

"I left Hagan in Beartown to look into matters further while I set out to hunt for the fellow who had limped off in the woods, after turning the tables so cleverly on Mr. Buxton. Without any reason that I could explain I formed the suspicion that this member of the gang was you, Noxon (I believe that is your travelling name). It was represented that he was hurt much worse than I am glad to say was the fact. I inquired at each house along the road between here and Beartown and hit it at last.

"Now," added the visitor as if seated with his intimate friends, "since you tell me to talk freely in Mike's presence, I shall do so. Are you ready, Noxon, to go to your home with me?"

"Begging yer pardin, Mr. Calvert, I beg to say that has been sittled. The dearest hope of Noxy's heart is to return to his parents."

"Is that so?" asked the detective of the young man.

"I would give my right hand," he solemnly replied, holding it up, "if I could go back three months in my life and have things as they were."

"You can't do that as regards time, but it will bring sunshine and happiness to your loved ones when the wandering boy comes to their waiting arms. All being true, we have got to travel the 'rocky road to Dublin.' You have committed a serious crime against the United States laws, and if convicted nothing can save you from a long term in prison."

"Then what hope is there for me?"

"You haven't been convicted yet, but I won't deny that you are in serious danger of it."

"How shall I escape?"

"I thought that over while on the road from Beartown. This, I believe, is your third essay as a burglar. Am I right?"

Noxon nodded.

"Once would be enough to send you to Atlanta, but let that go for the present. Are you willing to turn state's evidence?"

Noxon moved uneasily in his seat. The proposition was distasteful.

"You needn't feel any compunctions. Kit Woodford and that cub who calls himself Graff Miller have handed out the double cross many a time, and stand ready to do it again if it promises the slightest advantage to them. They have run off in the hope of taking care of their own hides, without caring the snap of a finger what became of you."

"There is no mistake about *that*, Mr. Calvert?"

"I wouldn't deceive you for an instant. Their own actions prove it. They have done the same thing before, and to-day they did not give you a thought, when danger threatened them."

"I shall do whatever you wish."

"Good! You may not know that, although I am a Pinkerton detective, I am under promise to my lifelong friend to do all I can to save you from yourself."

"Does father know I am in this business, Mr. Calvert?"

"He doesn't dream of such a thing. The shock would kill him. Therefore, I shall strain every nerve to keep him from ever learning the truth. I have a plan in mind, but before trying it you must answer a few questions."

"I am ready."

"In the first place, where do this gang with whom you have been associated have their headquarters?"

"I can guide you to the exact spot."

"It is not that little patch of ground in the cove at the southern end of Barter Island?"

"No; the character of the islet forbids. Miller ran the launch in there one night when he thought some one was watching, to throw him off the scent. Have you a pencil and bit of paper anywhere about you?"

Calvert produced the articles from an inner coat pocket and handed them to Noxon. Placing the paper on the table in the middle of the room, he spent several minutes in drawing a diagram. He was apt at the work and did it with no little skill. By and by he handed paper and pencil to the owner with the remark:

"That will answer your question."

"It is a production of art," said the detective admiringly. "No professional artist could beat it."

Noxon had not only drawn a perfect representation of the neighborhood which he had in mind, but lettered it so that no mistake was possible. It pictured a part of the eastern shore of Westport Island, opposite Barter, and only a short distance north of the inlet where the *Water Witch* had been visited some nights before. Noxon leaned forward and placed the tip of his finger on the different points.

"Right there is one of a hundred similar coves among the waters of southern Maine. It is smaller than the others, and a little way back is an island, which resembles except in size those that you see in every part of these waters. You know they rise above the surface like vast bouquets, with trees growing down to the edge of the river or sea. It is not so with that bit of earth you first asked about, but it is so with the islet in that cove which I show on that piece of paper."

"What about this one?"

"It is what you may call the headquarters of the Woodford gang of post office robbers. And, yet, it seems hardly right to call it that, for it is sort of hiding place to which they flee when things begin to grow warm."

"You have been there?"

"Several times. I will go again with you."

"No need; I can't go wrong with such directions. Why, Mike himself can understand it."

He gravely held up the drawing before the Irish youth, who squinted one eye and carefully scrutinized it.

"I must say I don't make sure whither it's a picture of yourself, Mr. Calvert, or a view of an automobile trying to climb a

tree."

"What did I tell you, Orestes? Isn't he bright?"

"An unnecessary question," said Mike loftily; "as Auntie McCaffry would answer if ye asked her which was the handsomest and cutest and smartest one among her three guests."

"Noxon," said Calvert, with a smile over the repartee of the Irish lad, "do either Kit Woodford or Graff Miller know your right name?"

"They never asked me and it was never given in their presence."

"You said as much before. Do they know where you came from?"

"They haven't the slightest knowledge. I am as unknown to them as regards my real identity as if I never existed."

"That will help my plan, which, I may say to you and Mike, is simply this: get you out of this neighborhood to your home. There, of course, you will assume your true identity and no one need ever be the wiser."

"What of the testimony of Woodford and Miller when they are released from jail?"

"You and they will be so much older that neither will recognize the other. Have no fear on that score. The thing is to run you out of the State of Maine. The hunt for these post office robbers has become so hot that it isn't going to be an easy job, but I believe I can work it. There's some sort of a mix-up of motor boats, which as yet I can't get the hang of, but when I do I shall try my plan. Mike, how was it you were here with Noxon when I called? Can you tell me anything about your launch or the *Water Witch*?"

Thereupon the Irish youth related his story, and when it was finished the detective smiled.

"If I'm not mistaken that is going to help us a big lot."

CHAPTER XXIX

"THE BEAUTIFUL ISLE OF SOMEWHERE"

Detective Stockham Calvert was quick to make deductions and as quick in adapting himself to circumstances. He had said he did not expect to have the help of Orestes Noxon--as we must continue to call him--in capturing the two criminals, but ten minutes later he made a radical change of plans. He meant to make use of the young man, in his pursuit of the post office robbers.

"We must leave here at once," he announced in his crisp manner. "Searching parties are out and some of them are likely to call here at any time. Since Noxon worked with his face masked, except when the slip occurred last night, it is not likely, he would be recognized by any of those who are looking for him. But there is a risk which we must avoid."

Mrs. McCaffry made strong objection to their leaving before the dinner hour, but the officer assured her it could not be helped. He and Noxon compelled her to accept liberal tips, but she refused to take the last remaining quarter of Mike.

"The same would bring me bad luck," she said, with a shake of her head.

"How could it do that whin it brought me the bist of luck, being I came to your door?" asked the youth, trying to press it upon her; but she would not consent.

"Ah," he said, "it's mesilf that's of no more account than a naught wid no circle round it."

Instead of following the path that led to the highway and so on to Beartown, Calvert turned into the woods through which his companions had made their way to the humble but hospitable home.

"We'll keep clear of the village," he explained, "for every one there is in a fever of excitement, and although I can do my part in the way of prevarication, I don't wish to be driven to the limit, when it might not, after all, avert trouble."

The fogs which often plague the coast of Maine and vicinity have a habit of sometimes leaving as suddenly as they come. It was a great relief to the party when they dived in among the pines and firs to find that the gloomy dampness had lifted and the sun was again shining from a clear sky. It impressed all as a good omen.

Noxon's rest and care for his injured leg had been of great benefit. The rising inflammation had gone and the pain was trifling. If they did not walk fast, he was sure it would give him no anxiety.

Calvert took the lead, with Noxon next and Mike Murphy at the rear. The last was highly pleased to see his young friend walk without a perceptible limp.

The leader kept his bearings so well that when within an hour he reached the shore of the Back River, it was at the spot he had in mind. There was the runabout in which he and Warner Hagan had come from Wiscasset, and the owner was calmly smoking his brier wood pipe, content to wait indefinitely when he was well paid for so doing. He lay a few rods south of the landing, and just below him was the *Water Witch*, with Alvin Landon and Chester Haynes on board, wondering what in the world had become of Mike Murphy. The youths had tried to open communication with the master of the runabout, but he had been warned by his two passengers to tell nothing to anyone, and he glumly refused to talk. Chester had set out in quest of the missing Mike, going as far as the village. All he could learn there was that his friend had left a good while before and no one knew anything of him. The second mate went back to his Captain, and the two were so impatient that they were half inclined to leave without him, when lo! he appeared with Calvert and Noxon, coming from among the trees as if he had been absent only a few minutes.

Then followed full explanations, and you can imagine the astonishment of Alvin and Chester. They were sure of the identity of Noxon when he first appeared, but were considerate and said never a word that could hurt his feelings.

"You ran away with their launch," added Calvert. "They ran away with yours, and you and they met as you were coming back. But for the fog you would have seen each other, for you must have passed quite close. The beauty of it is," said the officer, with a flash of his keen eyes, "that while they have gone far away we know exactly where. My friend Hagan and I, with Noxon as our guide, are going to scoop them in."

He thought it best not to affect too much mystery.

"They passed down Montsweag Bay clear to Knubble, through Goose Rock Passage into the Sheepscot, and up that to the Beautiful Isle of Somewhere. Most folks don't know the exact location of that sweet spot, but we know--thanks to Noxon--the latitude and longitude of ours, which the same is the port we are heading for."

The plan was simple. Noxon, who was familiar with the running of the *Water Witch*, was to act as engineer and steersman. Calvert and Hagan would be the only passengers, and the prize would be Kit Woodford and Graff Miller.

"And phwat's to become of us?" asked Mike.

"That depends upon how you behave yourself. If you grow tired of waiting, take a walk up to Beartown, have dinner with Mrs. Friestone and then come back and wait for a few days and nights till you see us again."

"That's aisy, as I told me taicher whin she asked me how much two and two made and I informed her the same was five."

"But Mr. Hagan isn't here," reminded Chester.

"He will be very soon. Meanwhile, I'll say a word to my man."

He walked to the runabout, where he told its owner he might return to Wiscasset as he was not needed further. He added a dollar to the price agreed upon and the man bade him good-by. Hagan, who had gone off on what might be called a reconnaissance, justified the faith of his partner, for he came forward, and thus the party was complete.

The distance was shorter by way of the Narrows and down the Sheepscot than by the route just named. Accordingly, the *Water Witch* headed north, while the *Deerfoot* it will be remembered went south. The difference was not much, the real reason why the course was taken being of another nature. If the *Water Witch* had set out to search for the other boat, with no knowledge of its destination, it would have prowled to the southward, inspecting all likely hiding places on the way, with a strong chance that she herself would be detected and her purpose read before she discovered the fugitive. By taking the northern route this handicap would be avoided. They could make much better progress and not be seen until it was too late for the criminals to escape.

Thus Alvin Landon, Chester Haynes and Mike Murphy were left on the shore of the Back River, near Beartown landing, without any launch and compelled to pass the time as best they could. They decided to spend a few hours in the village.

They appreciated the reason why Calvert would not have their company. He was plunging into a venture where deadly weapons were likely to be used, and their lives would be endangered. The affair was really none of theirs. Besides, their presence would be a serious handicap and might prove fatal to success.

The *Water Witch* soon shot past Cushman Point, passing the runabout so close that the officers exchanged salutations with the man who had brought them from Wiscasset. Calvert and Hagan sat side by side, both puffing heavy black cigars, the smoke of which as it streamed astern might have suggested that the launch was impelled by steam instead of gasoline. She ran smoothly, and Noxon, with a pale face, his hands grasping the wheel, steered as skilfully as Alvin Landon had directed the swifter *Deerfoot*. He had done it many times and had no fear. The young man had come to the parting of the ways, and nothing could turn him back. His resolution was due to the wound, which had distressed him so much when he hobbled to the home of Mrs. McCaffry that he believed for a time he was near the end of life, and when one reaches *that* point he is sure to do some serious thinking.

Just above Clough Point, marking the northern extremity of the large island of Westport, the *Water Witch* turned eastward through the Narrows and headed straight south down the Sheepscot River to its destination some ten miles away. Noxon seated with his hands upon the wheel remained silent. The officers spoke to each other now and then in low tones, but most of the time left him to his meditations. He held the boat to moderate speed, for there was no call for haste. She was running easily, but a glance by the young man into the gasoline tank showed the supply was low, and he wished to avoid stopping at any of the landings to renew it. Besides, high speed is always a strain upon an engine, and he was nervously anxious to prevent a breakdown at a critical point in the enterprise. His familiarity with the launch made him cautious.

While Calvert and Hagan were following a clearly defined plan, they knew "there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip." They had high hopes of finding the other boat at the spot which Calvert had facetiously named the Beautiful Isle of Somewhere, but it might well happen that they would be disappointed. At the first sign of danger the *Deerfoot* would run away and her superior fleetness would leave her pursuers hopelessly behind. Above all, it was important that the criminals should not discover their peril in time to get away.

"Noxon," said Calvert, leaning forward, "let us know when we are near the cove."

"We are within less than a mile of it now. It is just ahead on the right."

Each officer flung his stump of a cigar overboard and slipped from his chair to the bottom of the boat. Inasmuch as their interest was centred on one side of the boat, they crowded each other a little. They removed their headgear and permitted only their crowns to show a few inches above the rail as they peered over. They held themselves ready at the same time to duck into complete invisibility.

"The cove is in sight," announced Noxon, slightly turning his head. "Better keep down."

A few minutes later they felt the change in the course of the launch. They were entering the inlet and the officers raised

their heads barely enough to peer alongside of the steersman, over the front and beyond the flagstaff with its fluttering bunting.

"There it is!" whispered Calvert to his friend.

"I see it," said the other, "the Beautiful Isle of Somewhere; we are closer to it than I supposed."

CHAPTER XXX

A THROUGH TICKET TO HOME

There it was in plain sight, rising like a giant nosegay of emerald from the crystalline water. It was barely two acres in extent, and, like nearly all islands great and small in southern Maine, the firs, pines and spruce grew to the very edge of the water. It reminded one of the patches of green earth in Europe where the frugal owners do not allow a square inch to go to waste.

"I don't see anything of the *Deerfoot*," said Calvert in a guarded voice to Noxon.

"We always lay to on the other side. Keep down!"

It was wise advice, though not needed. The two crouched so low in their crowded quarters that a person a hundred feet away would not have seen them. Each instinctively felt of his hip pocket. The little weapon was there.

The officers had now to depend upon Noxon, who for the time was director of the enterprise. He could make himself heard over his shoulder without drawing attention to himself, provided he was under the eye of his old associates. He was never more alert.

Veering to the right, where there was a hundred yards of clear water between the islet and the mainland, he slowed down and began gradually circling the exuberant patch of earth. It will be remembered that he had been there before and knew the habits of Woodford and Miller. By and by, he had glided far enough to bring the western shore into his field of vision. Before that moment he had discerned the stern and flagstaff of a launch. A second glance told him the truth, which he cautiously made known to the crouching forms behind him:

"The *Deerfoot* is there! Don't stir till I give the word!"

Neither of the criminals was in sight, but it was evident they were near, else the launch would not be lying where it was. Noxon gave a series of toots with his whistle, though the noise of the exhaust must have been noted before. In response, Kit Woodford and Graff Miller came out from among the trees, halted at the side of the launch and stared at the *Water Witch* and its single occupant.

Could they believe their eyes? They saw before them their own boat and the young man whom they had cowardly deserted in his extremity. What was the explanation to be?

By this time the parties were so near that they could talk with only a slight raise in their voices. Kit Woodford was the first to open his mouth. With a profane expletive expressing his surprise, he demanded:

"Where did you come from?"

It was on the tongue of Noxon to make a biting reply, but he did not forget the part he had to play.

"I found this boat at the wharf at Beartown and thought I'd hunt you up. How came you to have *that* launch?"

"Some one had run off with ours and left that. So we made a trade and I rather think we got the best of the bargain. I don't understand how ours was found by you."

"Maybe the owners of that wanted to trade back. I say, Kit, I would like to know something--why did you and Graff run off and leave me behind?"

"We didn't!" replied Woodford, with virtuous indignation. "Me and Graff hunted high and low for you and made up our minds you had run off yourself with the swag."

"A fine lot of swag I had, when I had to scoot just after I got the safe open."

While this snatch of conversation was going on, Noxon, who had cut off the power, was edging nearer. Calvert and Hagan squeezed each other so hard that it looked as if they would push themselves through the hull of the launch.

Graff Miller now put in his oar:

"If we didn't get a haul out of the measly post office we've scooped a mighty fine motor boat. We can sell it and gather in enough to last us till we crack another place."

"That won't be as easy as it looks to you. The whole neighborhood is up in arms and we shall have to lie low for awhile."

"Well, we've got enough to keep us a week or so---Nox, *there's somebody in the boat with you!*" exclaimed Miller, who that instant caught sight of the head of one of the crouching men. The craft was now so close that concealment was

impossible. In fact, in the same moment that the *Water Witch* gently bumped against the other boat, Stockham Calvert and Warner Hagan straightened up and bounded across upon the *Deerfoot*. Each grasped a revolver, and Calvert shouted:

"Hands up, or I'll let daylight through you."

The terrified Woodford turned to run, but a bullet whistled past his ear. Perhaps too he realized in that frightful instant that no place of refuge awaited him. The island was too small to allow him to hide himself. He abruptly halted on the edge of the wood, and facing about sullenly raised his hands.

As for Graff Miller he did not attempt to get away. Accepting the order addressed to his leader as applying to himself, he stood stock still and seemed to be doing the best he could to keep the sky from falling on him.

Knowing that Hagan would look after him, Calvert gave his whole attention to Woodford. Keeping his revolver presented, he crossed the narrow deck of the *Deerfoot* and dropped lightly to the ground. A few steps took him to the cowardly ruffian. Never lowering his weapon, he ran the other hand over the outside of the man's clothing and twitched a revolver from his hip pocket.

"That will do, Christopher; if you now feel an inclination to lower your dirty hands, you have my permission to do so. Perhaps it will not tire you quite so much."

Hardly had he complied when a sharp click sounded. So quickly that it looked like a piece of magic a pair of handcuffs were snapped upon the miscreant, and Hagan was only a few seconds later in doing the same with his prisoner.

The capture of the two was so easy that it suggested a farce.

"If you had only put up a fight, Kit, it would have been a good deal more interesting," said Calvert, "but you always were one of the biggest cowards that ever made a bluff at being a bad man. Get a move on you!"

As meekly as a lamb the prisoner stepped upon the nearest launch, and, as ordered, seated himself on one of the seats at the stern.

"Do you want me to go there too?" humbly asked Graff Miller.

"Of course; step lively."

Calvert explained what was to be done. The handcuffed prisoners were to be taken to Wiscasset on the *Deerfoot*, their captors bearing them company. In that city they would be locked up, and every step that followed would be strictly in accordance with law.

Noxon was to trail after the launch in the *Water Witch*. There was more than one reason for this arrangement. Since both boats were capable of making good speed, it was better than to have one tow the other. If the *Water Witch's* gasoline gave out, the *Deerfoot* could take it in tow, but this would not be done unless the necessity arose.

The separation of Noxon from his former associates would prevent an unpleasant scene. Kit Woodford and Graff Miller could not fail to see that Noxon had given them into the hands of the officers. While they were powerless to harm the young man, they could make it uncomfortable for him despite the restraining presence of Calvert and Hagan.

It is safe to say that none of the steamers and other boats encountered on that memorable voyage up stream suspected the meaning of what they saw. One launch was gliding evenly up the river with a second closely resembling it a hundred yards or more to the rear. In the latter sat a young man. In the former were four persons, two of whom had been engaged for weeks in robbing post offices in the State of Maine. No one observed that they wore handcuffs, or dreamed that the man handling the wheel was a famous detective. In this case he was Calvert, who had a fair knowledge of running a motor boat.

The prisoners were sullen and silent for most of the way. Hagan, seated behind Calvert, could protect him from any treacherous attack with the handcuffs. The detective was too wise to invite an assault of that nature.

When a turn in the course brought the long Wiscasset bridge in sight with the pretty town on the left, Kit Woodford turned his head and looked back at the young man who was guiding the other launch.

"What are you going to do with *him*?" he asked, with a black scowl.

"Nothing," replied Hagan.

"Why haven't you got the bracelets on him?"

"He has done us too valuable service. That isn't the way we reward our friends."

Calvert, who had overheard the words, looked round.

"We may need his evidence to land you and Graff in Atlanta."

The remark was so illuminating that the prisoner said never a word. The occasion was one of those in which language falls short of doing justice to the emotions of the persons chiefly involved. It was Graff Miller who snarled with a smothered rage which it is hard to picture:

"I'll get even with him if I have to wait ten years."

"You'll have to wait all of that and probably longer," said Calvert, "and by that time I don't think Orestes Noxon will care much what you try to do."

The detective pronounced the name with emphasis, to learn whether it attracted any notice. It did not so far as he could judge, whereat he was glad.

The criminals were put behind bars, and the young man strolled through the street to the railway station. On the way, the elder said:

"It looks to me as if you have a clear title to the *Water Witch*. What do you wish to do with it?"

"Sell it to someone so I shall never see it again."

"If you will turn the boat over to me I think I can dispose of it for you. Have you any price in mind?"

"Sell the launch for whatever you can get, if it isn't more than twenty-three cents."

"All right; I'll fix it. Here is the railway office. You have enough funds?"

"Plenty. I shall buy a through ticket to--*home*."

"Of course. I shall call upon you this autumn. Good-by, Horace."

"Good-by to one of the best friends I ever had. God bless you!"

CHAPTER XXXI

GATHERING UP THE RAVELLED THREADS

The records show that not long ago there were a number of post office robberies among the towns and villages in that section of Maine to which some attention has been given in the preceding pages. Not all the guilty parties were captured, but we know of two, or rather three, who were caught in the toils. Two of them, Kit Woodford and Graff Miller, were convicted in the United States Court at Portland, for, to use a common expression, they were caught with the goods on them, and sentenced to long terms in the Atlanta penitentiary. There they are sure to stay for an indefinite time to come, provided they are not soon released on parole, or pardoned on the ground of poor health. Let us hope for better things.

During the trial of the criminals inquiries were heard for the third member of the gang, but he seemed to have vanished as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him. Possibly the Judge learned all the facts from Detective Calvert and saw that justice would be best served by winking at the youth's offence. Moreover, an officer of the law cannot be punished for the escape of a prisoner unless gross carelessness or collusion is proved, which was not easy in the case named. Be that as it may, Orestes Noxon no longer exists. In his place rises another young man, "redeemed and disenthralled"—a brand plucked from the burning. The grandest work of our penal institution is that of reforming instead of wreaking revenge upon the erring ones. It certainly proved so in the instance named. The parents of the youth knew he had strayed from the narrow path, but it will be a long time before they learn how far his wayward footsteps led him. There is no need of their ever knowing the painful truth. Detective Calvert simply told the grateful father that his boy had gotten into bad company, but the error could never be repeated, nor can I believe it ever will be.

One day Gideon Landon, the wealthy banker and capitalist of New York, received a characteristic letter from his son Alvin. He said his motor boat *Deerfoot* had been housed for the winter, there to remain until next summer, and he and Chester Haynes had had the time of their lives, for which they could never thank the kind parent enough. The son meant to prove his gratitude by acts instead of words, for he intended to buckle down to hard work and not rest until he was through West Point and had become General of the United States Army. He added:

"And now, my dear father, I want you to do a favor or two for me, Chester and Mike Murphy, who is one of the best fellows that ever lived. Some time I shall tell you all our experience after you left the bungalow on Southport Island. I know you will agree with what I say.

"Please send to 'Uncle Ben Trotwood,' Trevett, on Hodgdon Island, Boothbay Township, Maine, a big lot of fine smoking tobacco. While you are about it you may as well make it half a ton, more or less. In his old age, he doesn't do much else but smoke, eat, sleep, and talk bass, but he was very kind to Chester and me. He kept us overnight and fed us, and was insulted when we wished to pay him." (No reference was made to Uncle Ben's frugal wife.)

The genial old man would never have solved the mystery of the arrival of the big consignment of the weed had it not been accompanied by a letter from the two boys in which all was made clear.

(Another paragraph from Alvin's communication to his father.)

"In the little town or village of Beartown live the sweetest mother and daughter in the State of Maine. Anyhow, there is none kinder and more loving. The name of the daughter, who isn't out of short dresses yet, is Nora Friestone. Send her a fine first class piano--no second-hand one--with about a bushel of music. Select any stuff you choose, not forgetting a copy of 'The Sweet Long Ago,' published by C. W. Thompson, Boston. I wish you could have heard Mike Murphy sing that for them. He has one of the finest voices in the world. If he would only study and cultivate it, he would be a second Caruso. I will send an explanatory letter to Mrs. Friestone, so you needn't bother to write her."

And the Steinway duly reached its destination. Mother and daughter were overwhelmed. They would have insisted that a tremendous mistake had been made had not a letter reached them at the same time from the bungalow. This was signed by Chester Haynes, Mike Murphy and Alvin Landon. It begged Miss Nora to accept the present as a token of their appreciation of the hospitality received by them, and in memory of an interesting night they had spent in the Friestone home not long before. Nora wrote one of the most delightful replies that goodness and innocence could pen, and assured the donors that the prayers of her mother and herself would follow the three as long as mother and daughter lived.

(Another paragraph from Alvin's communication to his father.)

"You must understand that the expense of these presents, including that which follows, is borne by you

and Mr. Haynes. He knew all about them and is as ardent as we. He says he is sure you will be as glad as he to help in so good a cause.

"One more trifling gift and I shall be through. About a half mile from Beartown lives a poor Irish day laborer known to every one as Tam McCaffry. Chester and I did not have the pleasure of meeting him, but Mike spent some time at his home, where his big, jolly wife proved herself the soul of hospitality. She is Irish through and through. Mr. Calvert saw her and says the great attraction of the woman, aside from her natural goodness, is that she is the only person he has yet met who in the way of repartee and wit could give Mike as good as he sent. It was a treat to hear the two spar, and Mike admitted that he had met his match.

"Send her a pianola. Her hands are too big and untrained to master the keys of a piano, but there is nothing the matter with her feet, which is all she needs to work one of those contrivances. Don't forget to include a whole lot of music, which should be of the Irish vintage, such as Moore's melodies, 'Sweet Mavoureen,' 'The Rocky Road to Dublin,' 'St. Patrick's Day in the Morning,' 'Rory O'Moore,' and so on. Be sure that the expense is prepaid all the way to the McCaffry door. Mike is specially interested in this present and contributes more than both of us, for he gives his all, the same being twenty-five cents, and to him we have assigned the duty of explaining things to the good woman."

Alvin had his father well trained, and he cheerfully granted every request of his son. He smiled and remarked to his wife after reading the letter to her:

"Alvin has never caused us an hour of anxiety. He would not ask these things without good reason. I shall give orders when I go to the office that everything he wishes shall be done."

"That was rather nice on the part of Mr. Haynes to say what he did of you, Gideon."

"Yes, Franklin hasn't anything mean in his nature."

"Don't you think it a pity that while his boy and ours are so fond of each other their fathers are not on speaking terms?"

"Perhaps so, but there must always be two persons to a quarrel."

"And you are one of them in this case. I mean to call on Sophia this very day."

"Haynes flew up before he had time to understand all the facts in that little affair of ours. If he had waited he would have found that he had no cause for grievance."

"Suppose you call on him."

The banker shook his head.

"That is asking too much; it would be humiliating."

Now when a sensible wife makes up her mind that her husband shall do a certain thing, and when that husband wishes to do it, but allows a false pride to hold him back, you may make up your mind that the aforesaid thing will be done with no unnecessary delay.

So it was that Gideon Landon went to Franklin Haynes and they had not talked ten minutes when the cloud between them vanished. Friendship and full trust were restored and can never be broken again. It was another illustration of the good that often flows from small deeds and even smaller words.

(Mike Murphy's letter to Mrs. McCaffry.)

"MY DEAR AUNT MAGGIE:

"I'm thinking that about the time this luv letter raiches ye, an insthrumint will do the same, which the name is peeanoler, or something like that. I beg ye to accept the thrifle as a prisent from Captain Landon, Second Mate Haynes and First Mate mesilf. I know Mither Noxon would crack his heels together fur the chance of j'ning wid us, but he forgot to lave his card and I suspect he's sailed for Europe not to be back fur fifteen or twinty years, as was the case wid me great uncle whin he sailed for Botny Bay.

"The peagnoluh--I'm thrying all ways of spelling the name of the blamed thing so as to get the same right wunst any way--is played wid the feet. You slide the sheet wid the holes punched into 'em into the wrack over the keeze and then wurk the feet up and down like yer husband Tana used to do at home in the treadmill.

"Don't try to sing along wid the music for somebody might hear ye. Me worry is that yer teeny Sinderilla feet won't be able to wurruk the peddles, and if ye put on the shoes ye wore whin hanging out the clothes, there wont be room in the house for the peanholler, so ye might try the same widout yer shoes and

stockings.

"Wid regards to Tam and much love to yersilf I am ever

"Yer devoted,
"Mike Murphy."

(Mrs. McCaffry's reply to the foregoing.)

"My darlint broth of a boy:

"It tuk me and Tam 2 nights and 3 days to understand the maaning of the action of Jim Doogan the carter in drawing up his taam to our risidence and tumbling out a big shiny box wid the remark that there wasn't a cint to pay. Tam hadn't got home and Jim carried the purty thing into the parler and leaned it against the flure. He had obsarved something of the kind in his travels and he showed me how to wurruk it wid me faat. Whin he slipped in one of the shaats of paper, wid hundreds of little kriss-kross holes through it, sot down on the stule and wobbled his butes, and 'Killarney' filled the room, I let out a hoop, kicked off me satan slippers, danced a jig and shouted, 'For the love of Mike!' which the same is thrue, that being yer name.

"My number 10 shoes fit the peddlers as yer snub nose fits yer freckled face. Tam and me spind the time whin we aint slaaping or eating or working in playing the thing and thinking of yersilf and the byes you spake of.

"Me darling Mike, may the birds wake ye aich morning wid their swaat songs of praise and soothe ye to slaap in the avening; may the sun shine fur ye ivery day through; may yer draams be of angels and no man or woman spake anything but wurruuds of love to ye; and whin old age bows yer head and the time comes to lave us all, may ye be welcomed to heaven wid the blessed graating: 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'

"Do you and the other byes come soon and see what a happy home ye have made for Tam and me.

"Lovingly,
"AUNT MAGGIE."

THE END