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Moon tenders

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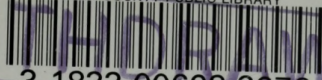
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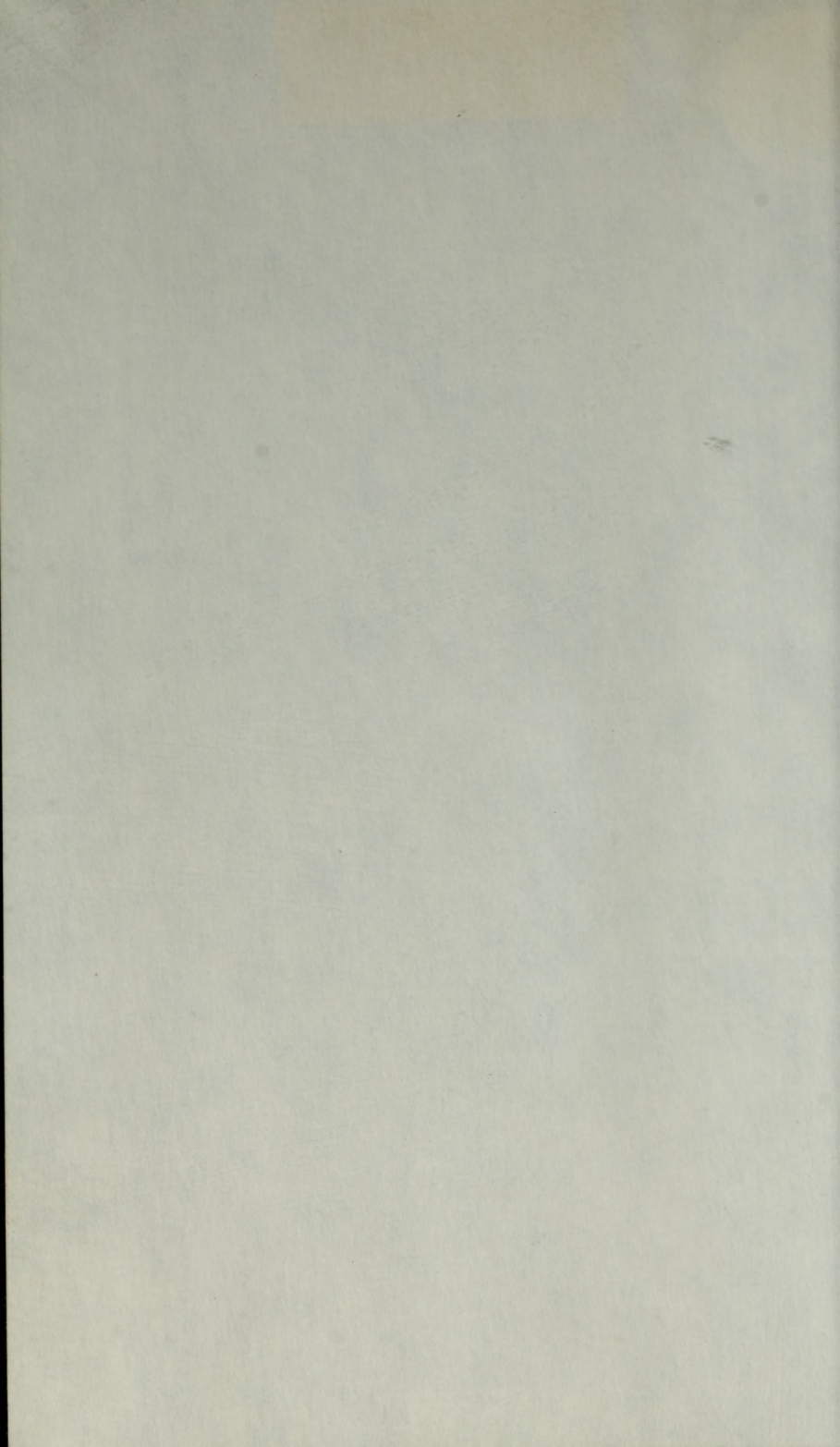
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The Moon Tenders

The Moon Tenders

AUGUST DERLETH

1954  
DUNN, ELIAN AND FRASER, NEW YORK





# The Moon Tenders

BY

AUGUST DERLETH

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



for

*April Rose and Walden William  
in the hope that they will enjoy  
life as much as their father . . .*

1059336

FORMER

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# The Moon Tenders

The Moon

The window I loved the best, I knew

It didn't come from an oak. It sprang like a fern from  
labyrinth. Ever since the June had been a candle and  
the bird sang back, he thought he could sustain just about any-  
thing.

I waved a hand out of the window to let him know  
I was coming and to keep him quiet. If they heard a couple of  
calls like the first one December, Father would be outside with  
his gun before I could get down.

I listened. Nothing moved in the kitchen below my room.

I slipped out of bed and dressed. Then I got the rope ladder  
from the chest, swung it out of the window, and climbed down.  
Step was there, leaning up against the oak tree.

"Tapped the 'A' back you," he whispered.

"It says did," I said. "I almost broke my neck getting up to  
keep you from doing it again. Last year and Pa's been here  
out shouting you. He looks like a Sign-Book, and he always  
takes after me."

I returned to the bed to keep still and looked over the window  
through the window. Father was still reading the evening  
paper. Mother and Grandmother Adams were talking. I slipped  
away, looked out the window and up at the moon toward the  
peak of the other end of the railroad tracks.

"What year you is in?" asked Step, once we were well away  
from the house.

"I'm in the first."

The Moon Temple



# 1.

## Tending the Moon

THE MINUTE I heard the owl-call, I knew it didn't come from an owl. It sounded like a tired bird with laryngitis. Ever since Sim Jones imitated a cardinal once and the bird sang back, he figured he could mimic just about anything.

I waved a hand out of the upstairs window to let him know I was coming and to keep him quiet. If they heard a couple of calls like that first one downstairs, Father would be outside with his gun before I could get down.

I listened. Nothing stirred in the kitchen below my room.

I slipped out of bed and dressed. Then I got the rope ladder from the closet, swung it out of the window, and climbed down. Sim was there, leaning up against the ash tree.

"Figured that'd fetch you," he whispered.

"It sure did," I said. "I almost broke my neck getting out to keep you from doing it again. Once more and Pa'd have been out shooting—you sounded like a high-hoker, and he always takes after them."

I motioned to him to keep still and looked into the kitchen through the window. Father was still reading the evening paper; Mother and Grandmother Adams were talking. I sidled away, beckoned Sim, and set off across the lawn toward the park on the other side of the railroad tracks.

"What were you in for?" asked Sim, once we were well away from the house.

"I answered back."



"If you got stuck in your room every time you talked back," he said, "you'd be there all the time."

"Well, it wasn't just that I answered back. I hollered too much."

A grin broke his lean, saturnine face. "I sort of figured something happened when you didn't come down to the shop. You'll have to learn to hold your tongue—we haven't got all summer to build that raft."

"You sound like Ma."

We crossed the railroad tracks and the road beyond, and plunged into the Freethinkers' park, which occupied a whole block of Sac Prairie on the far side. Even with the moon shining, it was dark along the path that wound to the southeast corner of the park.

Someone else was on the path, coming up from downtown. We almost ran into him. He put out a hand and grabbed me by the arm.

It was Grandfather Adams.

"Not so fast, Old Timer," he said. "I thought you got sent to bed."

I looked up into his broad face to see whether there was a smile beneath his mustache. There was. His hat was pushed back on his head. He was stroking his mustache with one finger.

"Sure," I said. "But I got out."

"I see." He did not ask how. If I knew him, he would go around and find out for himself.

"Grandpa, don't tell on me."

He chuckled. "You'll let the cat out of the bag yourself—you always do. Where are you off to now?"

"We're going down to the harness shop."

"And then where?"

"Oh, around. Down to the river, maybe."

"We're building a raft," said Sim.

"A raft!" echoed Grandfather Adams with a deep laugh. "I can hear your mother now, Old Timer. Next thing it'll be a trip down the river."

"Sure," said Sim.

I kicked his ankle to shut him up. I figured there was no

sense letting that out before we had the raft ready, or we'd never get to go.

"And what's 'around'?" Grandfather asked then, as if he hadn't heard Sim.

"Oh, we'll walk down and see how the new bridge is coming, and we'll maybe go up on the island, and if we got time we'll trade stamps—you know," I said, "you know how it is."

"Moon tenders," said Grandfather, shaking his head. "Nothing better to do but tend the moon and the stars. I guess that's what it is to be a boy. Get on with you."

He let go of me and went on his way to pick up Grandmother at our house and go to his own home next door.

"Sometimes I wish I had a grandpa," said Sim.

Both Sim's grandfathers had died before he was born. His parents were almost as old as Grandfather Adams and Grandfather Grendon. I didn't figure that Sim, being an only child, needed grandparents the way I did, but I didn't say so.

We went single file along the path through the park. The June night was warm. Near the round old bandstand not far from the path, a screech owl keened; its sad little song trembled into the darkness. Crickets churred all over the park, but there wasn't another sound.

Past the park, we cut across lots at Sim's house and down the alley to the back of Main Street to duck in past the old sheds and barns to the back door of the harness shop.

Old Fred Jones never even turned around when Sim opened the door and walked in. He was sitting on the stitching horse at the north-wall bench, his spectacles slid down his nose, his eyes fixed on the calendar that said *June 1922* beyond the pale green smoke which wreathed up from the asthmador burning in a little tin on the bench to give him relief from the asthma which had troubled him ever since he got back from the Spanish-American War.

"Where you been?" he asked Sim.

"Up to Steve's."

"Where you goin'?"

"Business," said Sim in a flat voice.

Old Fred grinned. "You don't know what business is," he

said more to himself than to Sim. "'Bout time you began to think of it. By the time you get to work here, there won't be any horses left any more."

"The livery stable's full of 'em," said Sim.

"They're going to tear it down in a year or so. Build a garage—for cars."

Sim turned on the green-shaded light over the south-wall bench. He climbed up on the stepladder used for hanging harnesses and took a roll of paper off the top of the old-fashioned secretary pushed up against the south wall next to the bench. He brought it down and unrolled it, moving some tools around to hold it down.

It was a drawing of a raft. Sim did everything scientifically. He was always the one to measure everything and get it just right. He never got anything less than an *A* in mathematics or physics—even in manual training. I could hardly ever draw a straight line, but Sim could do it with his eyes shut.

"There she is," he said.

I looked at it. I could see he had spent a lot of time on it. I wished it was the real thing, not just a drawing.

"We'll make it out of lumber—not timbers," he said. "Too hard to handle if we use timbers. We'll get some good floats, and I figure we can even build a shelter on her—in case it rains."

Old Fred turned around to dump out the ashes in the tray. "You goin' to discover America?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "We can start right here."

He laughed, but in a minute he sobered up and said, "I guess you can, at that. You could find out a lot about it right here in Sac Prairie. People are pretty much the same all over. You learn to take the bad with the good and find out there's a little of both in all of 'em."

He got off the stitching horse and walked across to the back door, where he dumped the ashes off the stoop. He stood there looking out into the fragrant June night.

"I went over to the lumberyard and looked at some timbers already," said Sim. "We got some here I could use—piled out

back of my office." Sim had an "office" in a shed out at the end of the lot on which the harness shop stood.

"Grandpa Grendon might have some, too," I said, remembering lumber piled next to the shed in which he kept his buggy and the new car.

Sim went on to talk about just how to make the raft. He had everything planned, right down to the last spike. At first he had counted on lashing the timbers together, but common sense had won out. His eyes shone, and when he talked he made quick, jerky movements, to illustrate what he said.

Old Fred came back into the shop and sat down at the north-wall bench once more. He got to work on a hame strap he had laid out for repair. From time to time he cleared his throat. He didn't seem to be listening to Sim, but sometimes you couldn't tell whether he was listening or not. He could be sly, and we had a nickname for him; we called him Eli, Alias the Night-Wind.

"And when," said Fred suddenly, "you figure on gettin' all this done?"

"We start tomorrow," announced Sim.

"And be at it all summer," said Fred dryly.

"We ought to finish in about a week."

"With the garden to take care of and the lawn to mow." Fred chuckled.

"I never slipped up yet, and I won't start now," said Sim. He moved the tools off the drawing, folded it up, and started for the door. "C'mon, Steve."

We went out to his office. He unlocked the door, walked into the darkness, and turned on the shadeless single light bulb that hung in the center of the room. The pale yellow glow sprang to life above stacks of *Field and Stream* and *Sports Afield*—above Sim's postcard collection and the glassed-in case where he kept his collection of butterflies—above a table all covered with funny papers, tear sheets from *The American Weekly*, all about ghosts in British castles, and all kinds of odds and ends which represented some of Sim's forgotten enthusiasms. Some day, I was pretty sure, that drawing of the raft would lie there, too.



Sim sat down in the rocking chair beside the table. I sat on an old kitchen chair leaning against just about the only open space there was on any of the four walls, except where the door opened. The wall could be seen at one other place—that was where Sim's fishing rods stood.

Sim unrolled the map once more.

"I saw it," I said. "I want to know how we're going to get the lumber."

"We might have to buy some of it, but I figure the most of it we can get somebody to give us. Your grandpa Grendon'll give you what you want as long as you don't want too much at a time. You get one plank now and another plank a day or so later. If you came right out and asked for all of 'em at once, you'd never get one. Old people are funny . . ."

Suddenly, with a wildness that filled the little building with alarm, the sound of the fire bell rang out. The fire station was only a block due west of the office, and the bell sounded as if it were right on top of us, peal after peal of it. It was always a scarey sound; sometimes at night it woke me with my heart pounding up in my throat.

Sim stopped talking; he stopped moving—his hand hung where it was above the drawing. But only for a few seconds—then he was on his feet, and I after him. He stopped only to put out the light and lock up the office; then both of us ran like rabbits, ducking through the yards of the block between, to the fire station.

Firemen came running from all directions. Some came driving up like crazy in their cars. The Sac Prairie Fire Department was a volunteer group; anybody who wanted to fight fires could get into it, so there were a lot of them, some not much more than boys like us, only they never grew up and still had a lot of fun squirting a hose and hollering at each other and pretending they were saving the whole town from something like the Chicago fire. Despite it all, most of the time they did a pretty good job.

Everybody was shouting, "Where's the fire?"

"Down at Whittiers'. Stove blew up."

"Come on," said Sim. "We can beat the fire truck."

We did, too. We made a beeline through the alleys and down to the river road where the Whittier house stood. Whittiers weren't home now; the old lady was visiting somewhere, and they had a caretaker, Louie Dock, a fussy little man not much bigger than a midget, who wasn't used to a gas stove and had managed to explode it. He had got a little singed, and was dancing around outside while clouds of black smoke were pouring out of the kitchen at the rear of the house.

Some of the neighbors were standing around hollering at him. "Hey, Louie! You tryin' to burn yourself out of a job?— You got a lot of wind, Louie—just go in and blow it out!" But Louie didn't hear anything except the wail of the siren on the fire engine coming down the street.

The engine careened to a stop in front of the nearest fire hydrant and the firemen, all dressed in black hats, slickers, and boots, jumped and ran. Some unrolled the hose; others attached it. The chief himself strode up to the house, waving people back with the fire ax he carried.

"Now watch the chief," said Sim. "You never see anything like old Hole-in-the-Roof!"

The chief mounted the steps of the front porch.

Louie Dock came dancing around to the front of the house. "Hey—it's out in back—it's in the kitchen!" he shouted.

The chief never heard him. Though the front door stood wide open, he marched up to the big living-room window and shattered it with a blow of the ax. Then he stepped carefully into the living room through the broken window.

In the meantime, the water was turned on. It arced up to the roof, dousing half-a-dozen people who were standing too close.

"The fire's in the kitchen!" screamed Louie. He was frantically beckoning and pointing, but it didn't look as if any of the firemen saw him at all. "In the kitchen—the kitchen—it's out in back!" Poor Louie was almost hoarse.

The chief came proudly out of the front door carrying a potted fern. He walked out to the curb and set it carefully down. Once again he motioned the people back. Then he half-ran back to the house. He went in again through the window he had broken. This time he came out with the pedestal on which

the fern had stood; he carried it to the curb, put it down, then got the fern and stood it on the pedestal.

Louie clapped his hands to his head and ran toward the rear of the house.

A stream of water from the hose poured into the living room through the shattered window, while the chief stood watching with obvious satisfaction. "Stand back!" he shouted. "Give 'em room!" At the same time he began to eye the roof.

"Now you watch him," said Sim. "He'll holler for a ladder and climb up to chop a hole in the roof. He'll want to give the fire air."

The chief whirled and shouted, "Bring up a ladder!"

Sim was doubled up with laughter. He was laughing so hard he was almost crying. "If this don't beat anything you ever saw at the Electric Theater!" he cried. "By the time the firemen are through, Whittiers won't have anything left worth saving. Maybe it's just a coincidence the chief's a carpenter."

The ladder was just being brought up when somebody called out, "Hey—the smoke's stopped!"

Just then Louie came around the house, all black and wet. "It's out," he shouted hoarsely. "I got it out."

The chief looked at him like a kid whose old man has just spoiled his fun. "Out!" he said in disgust, and motioned to his men to go around and check.

"Just when he had a spot all picked for the hole he was going to chop, too," said Sim. "Did you ever see anything like it? Just like that time at Miller & Hantsch's old shop—the fire was out in back under the forge and good old Hole-in-the-Roof got up in front and chopped a big hole in the roof while the fire smothered and went out by itself!"

The show was over, and Louie was the hero. All the neighbors stood around shaking his hand and clapping him on the shoulder and telling him he ought to be a fireman. Louie only looked at them and grinned a little foolishly. He was probably thinking about that shattered front window and all the unnecessary water damage. It would be a long, cold day before he ever called the fire department again.

Sim began to walk away. His shoulders still shook. I went

after him. At the corner under the street light he turned and looked back to where the firemen were getting ready to leave.

"All you have to do," he said, "is just keep your ears and your eyes open in this town. It's the best show there is. You could put 'em all under a big tent and it'd beat Ringling's all hollow."

"I wonder what time it's getting to be," I said. I was beginning to feel a little uneasy about being out so late. "I'd better get home."

"I'll walk up to the park with you," said Sim.

"A whole half a block out of your way," I said. "Thanks."

"Don't forget—tomorrow morning we'll begin building the raft."

"We haven't got the lumber yet," I protested.

"We'll have enough."

I knew we would, too. Sim would have some down by the river up along the island, or he'd have a good reason why not.

I ran through the park. I was still thinking about the fire. I could see Louie dancing around trying to tell the firemen where the fire was. I could see the chief carrying out the fern.

I ran across the railroad tracks, gleaming in the moonlight, through the yard, and clattered up the back steps to the porch. I burst into the kitchen where Father and Mother and Grandfather and Grandmother Adams were sitting around the table playing euchre.

"You should've seen the fire," I said. "It was down at Whit-tiers'. Louie Dock put it out himself. The firemen . . ."

Then I remembered. I shot a glance at Mother.

Mother was a handsome woman; she looked a lot like her father, Grandfather Adams. She was twice as handsome when she was angry because the color rose so in her face. Right now she was red clear up under her eyes.

"Stephen Grendon! I thought you were supposed to be in bed," she said.

"I was," I said.

Mother threw her cards down and pushed back her chair. "It's high time we come to an understanding."

"Great God in heaven, woman, let the boy alone and get on



with the game!" boomed Grandfather, pushing his hat still farther back on his head. "You'll have him so upset he won't be able to sleep. A growing boy needs his sleep."

Father glowered over his shoulder. "You get to bed!"

I was glad to get out of there. I said, "Good night," and pulled open the stair door before Mother could get her second wind. I listened from my room for a little while. At first they had an argument—and I could just about imagine how it went—but then I heard Grandfather say, "Clubs is trump!" and I knew the game was going on.

They would never wake me up to scold me. I'd hear about it in the morning, but by that time they'd have simmered down, and if I could only hold my tongue, everything would be all right.

I pulled up the rope ladder and hid it under the mattress.



## 2.

### We Plan for Treasure

SIM DROPPED the hammer and stepped back. "Well, there she is," he said. "I straightened out those spikes you pounded in."

Sim could drive a spike as straight as Father could, but 50 per cent of the time I hit everything but the spike. Anyway, the raft was done. Sim missed it by one day: it took eight days, but one day it rained, so that accounted for it.

The raft was ten feet by eight, riding on three rows of floats, and solider than any of the boardwalks you could still find on the western edge of town where the cement sidewalks hadn't been put in yet. We had built a small lean-to in the middle. The whole thing was made out of used timbers; they were nice and smooth and there wasn't a sliver to be found where we were likely to sit.

I had wanted to build it up on the island along the east edge of town north of Main Street, but Sim argued that straight across from the harness shop, which faced the river across the street, was the best place. There was plenty of willow cover there, and most of the kids never got down there; they came to the river a block or so above, where the Electric Theater stood, to fish for rock bass, and went swimming off Karberg's sand bar north of that. So the raft was screened from the sight of all but Mr. Elpy, who had a haberdashery on the street above and who used to come to the river wall and call down a lot of well-meaning but useless advice.

"Well, she's done. Now where do we go with her?" asked Sim. "We could go down to Henn's Point and camp."

"We didn't need a raft for that," I pointed out. "We can walk down there any day we want. No, now we can take a real trip. We can make it worth while."

"Well, you figure it out."

I knew just where we were going. I had been thinking about it for a long time, but I had held back from telling Sim because Sim was always the one to raise practical objections and cool down all the enthusiasm I could work up.

"We're going on a treasure hunt," I said quietly.

Sim gave me a startled what-next? look, and his face put on the same expression he wore when he was at work in the harness shop and couldn't convince the farmer who had come to buy that he was turning down a first-class bargain.

"You've been reading too many books again," he said. "Treasure hunt! That's kid stuff."

"Not this treasure," I said. "I read about this in a history book. It goes back about a hundred years. When Portage was just Fort Winnebago, and they had to bring the soldiers' pay up the river by flatboat or keelboat—all in gold coin."

Sim's eyes narrowed. He was still suspicious and hostile, but he was getting interested.

"Back in 1832—that summer, July or August—they were fighting the Black Hawk War along the Wisconsin and the Mississippi. There were Indians all along the Wisconsin—the Sacs under Black Hawk and some Fox and Winnebago who were neutral—and Sioux siding with the militia. Well, one day during a storm one of the pay boats was sunk down below Lone Rock—of course Lone Rock wasn't there then. The guards got the gold off the boat all right, and hid it somewhere near Bogus Bluff. Then they set out on foot for Fort Winnebago—and the Indians got 'em. So nobody's found the gold from that day to this."

"You read that in a history?" asked Sim dubiously.

"I did."

"It don't sound logical. Anyway, that's ninety years ago. I don't see much sense to hunting for that treasure now."

"The trouble with you is you're too practical. You haven't got any imagination. If Columbus hadn't had an imagination, he wouldn't have discovered America. If Peary hadn't had it, we might not know about the North Pole even yet. If . . ."

"Hold on, hold on. We just got out of school for the summer. You show me the book."

That was Sim all over. Practical. He had to see it for himself. See it, feel it, taste it, smell it—it didn't make any difference what it was, he had to experience it himself before he believed it.

"Come on," I said. "It's out in the summer kitchen somewhere. We'll find it."

We climbed the riverbank and headed for the street. Mr. Elpy stuck his sad-eyed face out the front door of his store and hollered, "All done, boys?"

"Done," said Sim.

"Remember, I get the first ride on 'er."

"You sure do," I said, knowing we couldn't have paid Mr. Elpy to get out on the river on our raft.

We crossed to the harness shop and went in by the front, as usual, to go out the back. Old Fred was standing at the secretary writing a letter laboriously with a scratchy pen. Without looking around, he asked dryly, "Found any new lands yet?"

"Give us time," I said.

"Pa likes to pour oil," said Sim.

"Oil" was Sim's word for useless conversation—just small talk which didn't mean anything. Fred Jones only laughed. At the back door Sim turned.

"Any work I have to do?" he asked.

"No, no. Go ahead. Only don't forget—I get all the harness-making rights in any new country you discover."

"That's Pa's number-one grade oil," said Sim. "Almost as good as neats-foot."

We went out the back of the harness shop and headed for home.

The summer kitchen was as hot as an oven. It had been standing under the hot sun most of the day, with nothing open and hardly any shade on it. I left the door stand open and



raised two of the windows. Then I got to work looking for the book I wanted.

The summer kitchen was once part of our old house, until just a year ago, when the new one was built. I remembered how my sister and I used to get our baths in it, sitting in a little tin tub, and how we used to take all our meals in it in the summertime, and how Mother did all her canning in it. It used to smell of apples cooking and plums and tomatoes, of pickles and elderberry syrup, one after the other. Now it was just a storehouse for all kinds of stuff.

Sim opened a trunk and looked in. "Funny papers!" he exclaimed.

"Sure," I said. "You know I collect 'em."

He shut the trunk and looked around at all the books. "You read all these, Steve?"

"Sure," I said. "I read just about anything I can lay my hands on. I guess I got the record at the library, Miss Mergan says—I took out thirteen books one Saturday and read 'em all by Monday."

Sim began reading off the titles. "*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*," he said. "I read that. *Tom Swift and His Flying Machine*. *The Boy Scouts on Old Superior*. *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*. *The Count of Monte Cristo*. *Ivanhoe*. *Walden*. *Thelma*. *Poems and Prose by Poe*. *Emerson's Essays*. No wonder you can't drive a spike straight! You never had time to learn."

The summer-kitchen doorway darkened suddenly as Grandfather Adams looked in. "What's going on here?" he asked.

"I'm looking up some history," I said.

He came in and sat down on a trunk. His eyes twinkled. He pushed his hat back on his head. "Why don't you look in the history books then?" he asked. He pointed to a set of the *Wisconsin Historical Collections*.

"I did," I answered. "They don't even mention Bogus Bluff. They only mention Lone Rock twice—and then offhand, because somebody lived there once."

"Well, what're you looking for?"

I told him.

"Oh, that." He shot an amused glance at Sim. He had put two and two together. "So Sim doesn't believe it."

"I'm halfway willing," said Sim.

"You have to take a good many things on faith," said Grandfather soberly. "Like God and the government and whether or not you'll get the grade you deserve in school." He favored me with a slightly apprehensive glance. "What're you digging around in that old story for?"

"We're going to hunt up that treasure," I said.

Grandfather Adams sighed. Then he grinned. "What for? It'll still belong to the government if you find it. Or are you planning on giving up being honest?"

I hadn't thought of that. I sat back on my heels and contemplated the problem.

"I knew there was a catch in it," said Sim.

"There'll likely be a reward," I said. "Anyway, if we find it and give it up—why, maybe somebody'll come along and decide we deserve to be rewarded for being honest and give us money."

"You see," said Grandfather to Sim, "how much he takes on trust! That's going a little far," he went on. "People like that exist mostly in books."

"I said to him he reads too much," said Sim.

"The boy's got his dreams embalmed out here," said Grandfather.

"Embalmed nothing!" I protested. "You only embalm something dead. My dreams aren't dead—not by a long shot."

"And how're you planning to get to Bogus Bluff?"

"We finished our raft, Mr. Adams," said Sim.

"I thought so! I can just hear your mother, boy! When do you plan to tell her?"

"Tonight at supper," I said. "I figure if we aim to get going by next week or so, it'll take that long to convince her."

"All of that. I'll try to be on hand."

"Thanks, Grandpa," I said. I knew I would need him.

"Make sure the lawn's mowed and everything else is done before you spring it on her," Grandfather Adams went on. "She'll raise every objection she can. Mothers always do. I had

one once, too. It's not that they want to be hard on you—they just can't help it. They feel their responsibility—and you boys haven't got the feeling of responsibility yet, nor won't have for a good many years to come."

"I'm responsible for the lawn and feeding the chickens and keeping the weeds out of the garden and the wood box filled," I said. "I don't hanker for any more responsibilities yet."

Grandfather gave me a sympathetic smile. "You don't know what responsibility is," he said. "Just wait. Don't rush it. It'll come all in good time. And there's plenty of time yet. Now tell me just what you're planning for your river trip. After all, Bogus Bluff's over thirty miles from here by river—closer to forty."

"You tell him, Sim," I said.

Sim had it all figured out to the last bread crumb just what we'd need for each day we might be on the Wisconsin. Even though he hadn't had any idea of where we were headed for, he figured up our rations at once for two weeks. Grandfather Adams sat nodding and listening carefully.

"Of course," Sim finished, "somebody'll have to come and get us when we're ready. We can't pole that raft all the way back up the river—it'd take us the rest of the summer."

"See," I said to Grandfather, "Sim's the practical one, and I've got the imagination. That just balances."

"Or cancels out," said Grandfather dryly. "Well, it sounds good. Let's just see how it works out. You found that treasure story yet, Steve?"

I had to admit I hadn't.

"You ever heard that story, Mr. Adams?" asked Sim.

Grandfather nodded. "Anyway, truth or not, there's a cave that could do with some exploring on Bogus Bluff—and it's a sort of nice size for a trip. You could camp out on the islands a night or two—just take your time getting down there—no hurry about it—so long's you stop now and then and telephone home to let us know you're all right—or there'd be no living with Steve's folks."

"All that's easy enough," conceded Sim.

"Are you game then?" I demanded.

"I'm game," said Sim. "You tackle your folks and I'll tackle mine. See you late tonight to find out how things worked out."

I ate supper as slowly as I could that night. I didn't want to say anything until Grandfather Adams got there. He didn't come and didn't come. You'd have thought he lived at the other end of town instead of just next door.

My sister guessed I was holding something back; I could see it by the way she looked at me. If she could think of some way to do it, she'd try to pry it out.

"Ma, I bet Steve doesn't feel well," she said suddenly. "Look how slow he's eating."

Mother glanced anxiously at me, her warm eyes filled with concern.

"I'm all right," I said hastily. I shot a venomous glance at my sister.

"Food not good enough for you?" asked Father.

"I'm eating it," I said.

"Well, if you don't feel good," said Mother, "say so and we'll call the doctor. Or maybe a dose of Alpenkräuter . . ."

"I feel all right," I said. "I was just thinking."

At that moment Grandfather came up the back porch steps. He was just in time, because I was getting desperate enough to open up.

"I was thinking about what to do this summer," I went on. "Now that Sim and I have finished our raft."

Mother's eyes flashed right away. "Didn't I tell you to stay away from the river?" she cried. "You know how dangerous the river is."

"We weren't in the river," I said. "Just beside it—on the bank. We've got the raft all built now, and we're figuring on making a trip on it."

"I should say not," said Mother decisively.

"Why not?" I hollered.

"It's too dangerous. And don't raise your voice. We're not deaf!"

"Dangerous!" I was disgusted because I couldn't tell them how much I went swimming. "You'd think I was still in diapers,



the way you talk. All you have to do is use some common sense about the river."

"That's something we all need to use a good deal of," put in Grandfather. "What kind of trip did you have in mind?" he asked, as if he didn't know.

I looked him straight in the eye and I said, "We figured on going down to the Mississippi, and then making the route Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn made—at least to Hannibal, Missouri—maybe down to New Orleans."

Mother just sat there with her mouth open and an expression of absolute horror in her eyes. When she regained her voice, she said, "You—must—be—out—of—your—mind!" Saying every word with a pause after it. It was one of her favorite lines, and she always said it when she wanted to express the positive peak of disapproval.

"Can't I go?" I asked, looking astonished at the injustice of it.

"Certainly not!"

Grandfather Adams' eyes twinkled. I could tell he was enjoying himself.

"Why can't I go?" I hollered.

"You're just crazy," said my sister.

"You be careful," I said, "it might be catching."

"That is absolutely out of the question," said Mother. "Why, a grown man wouldn't think of such a trip. It would take all summer. And on a raft, too!" She shook her head vehemently. "I'm beginning to think we should have put you out to the farm to work this summer. You could be out there helping Uncle Joe and Aunt Lou and you wouldn't have time to dream up ridiculous trips like that."

I got a little alarmed. "But now we built that raft—Grandpa Grendon gave us some of the lumber, even. He thinks it's all right to have a raft."

"I have no quarrel with your having a raft," said Mother.

"Well, then," I said, "what's the good of having a raft if you can't take it out on the river?"

Still beset by horrifying visions of me tossing around on the

Mississippi on a little raft, Mother said cautiously, "I suppose it's reasonable to take it out on the river."

Grandfather flashed me a warning glance, as if to caution me not to go too far.

"But such a trip?" She shook her head and tut-tutted a little. "I can't imagine how you got it into your head. I do believe you read too much. You pick those things up out of books. Mark Twain was writing fiction, not history."

I was perfectly satisfied that Mark Twain was writing autobiography, but this wasn't the moment to say so. I glanced over at Grandfather; it was about time for him to take the ball.

He cleared his throat. "A little common sense would have told you such a trip is just too much of an undertaking, boy," he said. His voice sounded pompous, but his eyes were laughing. "Why don't you be sensible and settle for something a little shorter? Say to Prairie du Chien?"

Mother's brows lowered. "Prairie du Chien? Isn't that on the Mississippi, not the Wisconsin?"

"Just off the Wisconsin," said Grandfather.

"No, Pa," said Mother firmly. "I won't have him go on the Mississippi. Pa, you know these boys couldn't handle a raft on a river like that."

"Well, the thought had occurred to me." He turned back to me. "How about a little trip down the Wisconsin?"

"Could we go as far as Boscobel?" I asked hopefully.

"Wouldn't that take quite a while?" asked Mother in a more temperate voice. "How fast can that raft travel?"

"Just about as fast as the current," I said. "Maybe four, five miles an hour."

"And Boscobel is more than fifty miles from here." She began to shake her head.

"Well, then, maybe Muscoda—or Lone Rock," I said.

"Lone Rock's not so far away," put in Father.

"Thirty-five miles or so," said Grandfather.

"That would take ten hours," estimated Mother.

"Oh, Ma!" I protested. "We want to camp out nights. We don't just want to float down there and come right back."

"How long?" asked Mother flatly.

"A week or so. We'd telephone home every night, I promise," I said, talking fast, now that Mother was weakening. "We could always make shore and find a farmhouse with a telephone. Then, when we're ready to come home, we'll telephone for Pa. He can come down with a wagon or a truck, and we can load up the raft and take her home."

Father looked profoundly doubtful.

Grandfather cleared his throat once more and observed that that point about the raft could be settled later.

"Well, you can't go before Homecoming," said Mother finally. "Sac Prairie hasn't had a Homecoming for eight years—since 1915—and we'll have relatives coming who'll want to see you. And if you're gone a week, you'll have to make up one piano lesson—*before* you go."

"Homecoming!" I hollered. "Who wants to wait for that?"

"You do," said Grandfather warningly. "It might be fun. Fun's what you make it, boy."

"All right," I said.

"We can talk about it later," said Mother with more assurance, as the dread vision of her only son being rent and torn by the turbulent Mississippi receded.

"O.K.," I said. "And thanks."

As soon as I could get away, I ran down to the harness shop. I peered through the window; Sim was there alone. So I opened the door and went in.

"Well," I said, "how'd it go?"

"Oh, after Ma carried on for a while and Pa took my side, they gave in," said Sim. "Only—we can't go right away."

"Don't tell me you have to wait for Homecoming, too?"

He grinned. "I see they stuck that at you, too." Then he shrugged. "Well, it don't matter. We get to go, and I guess it don't make any difference when we do it. Give you more time to hunt around for that story about the treasure on Bogus Bluff."

"Then I have to make up the piano lesson I'm missing," I said, "before I go, to boot."

Sim began to laugh. "Me, I can play the piano," he said.

I laughed, too. He played it like a mechanical man.

"But you'll never be able to—you'll never be patient enough," he finished.

We had a good laugh at each other's expense.





### 3.

## Slings

## and Arrows

I GOT that extra piano lesson out of the way first. Three days after Mother had laid down the conditions I went to Miss Amy Stoddard's for an hour. Miss Amy lived in a sprawling house in the middle of a large expanse of lawn, almost a quarter of a block of it, with a lot of trees around, and great masses of purple lilacs and a grape arbor out in back.

Miss Amy lived with her younger sister and her brother. The Stoddard family had inherited money, but they had put their trust in the bankers. Only Miss Malvina had got her money out of the bank in time; the rest of the family money just dwindled away, and now Miss Amy gave piano lessons at fifty cents an hour so that she could make a living. She was a thin woman with straggly hair and warm, merry eyes, always ready to laugh. She loved to talk, but she could listen, too, and she was wonderfully patient; she had to be to stand for all the young "geniuses" their mothers sent to her to learn how to make a thousand dollars every time they gave a concert later on in life.

I had no intention of being a genius, and Miss Amy knew it. I had no illusion about myself as a piano player or a student, either. Mother had insisted that I learn to play the piano so I could play *Red Wing* and *Moonlight Bay* as well as she could. The first time I showed up at Miss Amy's, I told her right out I didn't want to be bothered with scales and octaves and all that stuff; I wanted to start with the *Barcarolle* from *Tales of Hoffman*, and Mendelssohn's *Spring Song* and Ru-

binstein's *Melody in F*, all of which I knew and liked. Miss Amy had just laughed and set me down at the piano and opened up the *Barcarolle* and said, "Play!" and of course I botched it. "Tsk, tsk!" she had said. "You sank the gondola in your very first lesson." After that it was exercises. Czerny—not Offenbach or Mendelssohn.

"Well," said Miss Amy when I showed up for my extra piano lesson, "what is it to be today? Liszt's *Second Piano Concerto*? Or will you settle for Brahms' *Cradle Song*?"

I had been secretly practicing Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* and I announced that today we would play that.

Miss Amy serenely found the music, opened it, and sat down beside the piano stool. She tucked away a few wisps of chestnut-brown hair, adjusted her spectacles, pulled herself together a little, and said, "Begin!"

I suppose the reason I liked Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody* so much was because it was so noisy. I attacked it with vigor. If there had been any dust on Miss Amy's piano when I started, there wasn't any settled there when I finished.

"My, my," said Miss Amy. "Thank goodness Franz Liszt wasn't alive to hear that! It would have killed him." She put the piece away and opened up the exercise book. "Now, then," she said.

I began the exercises. Miss Amy didn't own a metronome. She sat there counting: "One and two and one and two," and so forth. Oh, it was wearying! I was always sure that after ten minutes or so of it Miss Amy was just as tired of it as I was. But she had to do it all day long, with one student after another, and most of the students were just little kids. I never so much as hinted it, but I always felt that Miss Amy came as close to being a saint as anybody I knew to stand for all that day after day, and have to listen to parents, too, especially those who didn't know a thing about music, prattle on about how their youngsters were coming along and convinced they were raising budding pianists and composers.

After half an hour Miss Amy called a halt. "Now you rest a little, Steve," she said.

"I guess you need the rest, too," I said.

She laughed. "I guess I do."

"How'm I coming?" I asked.

"Well, I'll tell you, Steve, you'll never be much of a piano player."

I felt enormously encouraged—and also flattered because Miss Amy was so honest with me. She knew she could count on me not running home to repeat what she said and cut down her income by stopping my lessons.

"But you'll be able to play if you insist on it—never very well, though." She patted me on the shoulder. "But you *do* love music, Steve. I can tell that. You know good music, and you always will. You don't have to know how to play it yourself."

"I can't sing, either," I said. "Think what a blessing it is I didn't take that up!"

"I should say!"

"Think what a blessing that I know what I sound like when I try to sing," I went on. "All those people who don't know how they sound and they sing at the drop of a hat. Is my piano playing as bad as that, Miss Amy?"

When she finished laughing, she assured me it was not. "It will always do in a pinch," she said honestly, "because most people don't have much taste, anyway, and wouldn't know the difference between good piano playing and bad."

She got up to go out into the kitchen and came back with some cake and lemonade. That was good for at least five minutes, I figured, if I stretched it out. Like the apple I brought Miss Amy once.

"Are you going visiting that you have to take this extra piano lesson?" asked Miss Amy. "I remember you used to go out into the country to visit your Great-uncle and Great-aunt Stoll quite often. Perhaps you're going again?"

"Maybe later, Miss Amy," I said, "but not now. Sim Jones and I are going down the river on a raft in search of a lost treasure."

She blinked her eyes rapidly, watching for evidence of a smile on my lips. She decided I was serious. "My! You *do*

have an imagination, Steve. What a pity you couldn't translate it into something useful!"

"Useful!" I protested. "What's more useful than treasure? You can buy just about anything with money."

"Oh, I don't know," said Miss Amy, thinking back. "I used to have money once. Sometimes I'm almost glad I lost it. Sometimes money's more trouble if you have it than if you haven't."

She really meant it. I could hardly believe it. She sat silent after that, slowly drinking her lemonade, until it was time for me to get back to the piano.

Then it was the same as before, with both of us going through that drudgery until the hour was up.

The Homecoming didn't go nearly that fast. Homecoming in Sac Prairie officially took three days and unofficially lasted a week. It was always a big event in town. A lot of people who had come into Sac Prairie way back when still lived there, but their children had gone off to the cities, and they came back—as well as the slightly older children of people who had moved permanently out to the cemetery. They came to Sac Prairie from St. Louis and Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, and Cincinnati—even from out West. They were sentimental about Sac Prairie, the same way some of the old people in town were sentimental about the *Vaterland*, by which they meant Germany, where so many of them had come from.

This time the Homecoming was planned to fit in with the dedication of the new bridge. The old toll bridge would soon be abandoned and torn down; the pleasant little tollhouse, so overgrown with grapevines you could hardly see it, would be moved away; and, since the approach to the bridge had been donated by Governor Emmanuel Philipp, who had grown up just west of Sac Prairie, the Governor himself was coming out to make the dedication speech.

The only thing about the Homecoming that looked lively was the parade. I went down to the harness shop that day to watch the parade from there.

"Here comes the lost Charley Ross," said old Fred when I walked in. "Ain't seen you for a whole day. Where you been?"

I said I had been home and around. This was some more of



Fred Jones' "oil." You came to expect it when you went to the harness shop. He was always saying something like that. Sometimes he said, "Here he is now—now tell him to his face." Sometimes it was, "Look what the wind blew in!" He almost never said just plain, "Hello."

Sim was already over at the front windows, the show windows. "Come on, come on," he said impatiently. "They're comin' up the street already."

I could hear the band playing, and just as I got to the window, the band came into sight. I knew them all—Cap Schlungbaum, and Max Ninman, and Frank Littel—the whole lot of them. They were all togged out in new uniforms, and all their faces were red with the effort of playing so hard. Besides, it was a hot day.

The Governor came right after, riding in an open car. He was red-faced, too. He wore a thick mustache, but his hair was thinning on his head. He was a fat man, but very friendly. He waved to everybody, and a lot of old-timers who had grown up with him called him by his first name when he went past.

Old Fred came up behind us.

"He worked mighty hard," he said, watching the Governor ride past. "He was always a hard-working boy. But his pa—why, he was the laziest man ever lived on the prairie. That feller was so lazy he used to fire his stove by putting in the whole trunk of a small tree, and letting the one end stick out the door. Then all he had to do was get up now and then and push it a little farther into the stove."

Next came the floats. All the business places had floats, and some of the churches, even the Freethinkers. The floats were trucks and wagons all decked out in colored crepe paper and real flowers. In between the floats went people masquerading as clowns, and some of the town characters, like Mr. Elky, the watchmaker, as Abe Lincoln, and Hester Duff and her black goat.

"What I'd like to see is her riding it," said Sim.

"You got no respect for man or beast," said Fred.

"Are you going down to hear the Governor's speech?" I asked Sim.

"Me?" He looked shocked. "I get all the speeches I need to hear at home."

"Well, if you're going," said Fred, "you'd better get started. The parade goes around town and comes back there, and by this time people'll be collecting around the bridge approach."

"I'm goin' fishin'," said Sim.

"So'm I," I said.

"You can borrow one of my poles," said Sim, which showed he was anxious to have my company today, because ordinarily you'd have thought anything he owned was encrusted with jewels, he was that reluctant to lend it. "We'll go down behind Cunradi's and fish for carp. They're runnin'—I was down before, I saw 'em."

The parade was just about over, anyway.

We got the poles and crossed the street to go down along the river.

"It won't be long now," I said. "We'll be out on the old Wisconsin."

We went and looked at the raft. We admired it for five minutes or so. Then we walked down along the shore to the place behind the drugstore where the sewer from the butcher shop emptied. There we fished around with our hands till we found some pieces of lung, and with that bait we settled down to fish for carp.

At the end of the block to the south stood the two bridges. The old toll bridge was still being used. The new one was not quite ready for use yet. There were a lot of people on both bridges, in addition to wagons and cars and buggies. There was a lot of noise drifting down from Main Street. I figured it was enough to scare the carp out and said so.

"Well, they were here two hours ago," said Sim.

"Yes, but the noise wasn't."

The river's edge was deserted. We were the only fishermen on it. Most of the time half-a-dozen people were there fishing—some kids and some old-timers, who had nothing to do but fish the whole day long if they felt like it. They were all watching the parade or following it up Main Street and down one of the back streets and around to the bridge approach.

"Let's try it down farther," suggested Sim.

We moved down to the halfway mark in the block, behind the post office.

"If they won't bite right there at the sewer, where all that clotted blood comes out, they won't bite here either," I reasoned.

"Noise won't scare fish," said Sim bluntly.

"We'll see," I said.

Nothing hit our bait.

Pretty soon we could hear the sound of the band once more, this time coming toward the bridge. They were playing *On Wisconsin*. It sounded good down along the river, and the closer they came, the better they sounded. The hills across the river threw the music back. They finished *On Wisconsin* and began the *Washington Post March*.

"We might as well go on up and take a look," I said. "All the fish are out in the middle of the river making time north or south by now."

Sim grumbled, but came along just the same. We climbed up the steps behind the jewelry store, and walked around to come up beside the toll tender's house. From there we climbed up one end of the brick abutment of the approach. There we sat, with just as good a view of the proceedings as if we'd come in two hours ago.

Governor Philipp was just beginning his speech. The village president was trying to hold an umbrella over him to shield him from the hot sun, but he kept moving out from under it all the time so that the president had to follow him around the platform. Almost all the women in the crowd had their umbrellas up, and all the men had their coats off; they stood there in shirt sleeves and straw hats. The members of the band had taken off their coats, too. I could see Max Ninman standing back with his band hat still on, but his coat put by, his horn under one arm, and his other hand resting on his hip. His shirt was just about glued to his back, he was so hot. A photographer from the *Wisconsin State Journal* was trying to take a good picture from a platform put up south of the new bridge, but he never seemed to get his focus right or something, for

he kept on fiddling around without ever getting to take the picture.

The Governor was talking about how he remembered Sac Prairie and his childhood and about how it was when he was a boy, how he had worked hard, and so on, and how he wanted to do something for his home town, and when Orville Malakay had talked to him about the bridge, he knew his chance had come so he had donated the bridge approach. Some band members were giving up in the heat and crossing the intersection to take refuge in the roofed-over two-story bandstand, all painted white, which had been built for this occasion and occupied the corner facing the bridge approach.

"And I want all you people to see that those stone urns or bowls or whatever they are here at the approach are always filled with flowers—that's what I had the architect put them in for," said the Governor. And with that he pointed to the nearest one, which was at the north approach, high on the wall. Sim was leaning against it, and, as everyone turned to look, he just slipped down over the wall to the grass below.

I jumped after him.

"I was wondering how long you could stand that," he growled.

"I had enough."

"Let's go back to the carp," said Sim.

We ran along the old limestone retaining wall. Sim went down the steps to the river's edge, but I was too impatient—I jumped.

I should never have done it. I was wearing tennis shoes, and I never thought about the way the businessmen whose stores backed on to the riverbank threw out trash. I landed square on a piece of broken bottle that curved up from both sides and cut through my shoe into my right foot just below my ankle bone.

Sim saw right away what happened. "Now you did it!" he cried. "Look at that bleed!"

Blood welled out of my foot on both sides. Even as I watched it, my shoe changed color.

"I don't feel it much," I said. "Come on—let's finish fishing."



Sim shook his head. "You better have that tended to. Look, each time you take a step you can see the whole outline of your foot in blood." He took my pole. "You go ahead—I'll take the poles back."

I didn't want to go, but it was plain that Sim didn't want to fish as long as I stood around with a bleeding foot.

I went straight up to Grandfather Grendon's. He was the oldest and best doctor in town, and he had his office at home, just three blocks west of Main Street. Every other step I took was printed in blood. I left a long line of bloody foot-prints all the way from downtown. I could imagine what people would think when they saw them.

Grandfather Grendon was home. He was a heavy-set man, stockily built, with firm, clear eyes and a thick mustache. He noticed right away that I was limping a little. Then he saw my bloody shoe.

He had the shoe and stocking off in a minute. Then he washed the two cuts—with soap, put something on that hurt worse than the glass had done, and bandaged it.

"How did it happen?" he asked finally.

I told him.

He shook his head. "I've told the Village Board a dozen times to clean up the riverbank. Some day somebody'll be seriously hurt there. Does it pain you when you step on it?"

"I walked all the way up from town," I said.

"More nerve than sense," he said. "Well, it'll hurt some by tonight, and probably be stiff in the morning, but I guess you'll survive." He eyed the discarded shoe. "Better not put that back on. I'll find something here you can wear over the bandage."

He left the office for a few minutes. When he came back he was carrying a bedroom slipper.

"Put that on and run along. I'll telephone your mother and tell her what to do with that foot," he said. "And next time, take a little more care."

I walked the rest of the way home—four blocks, up the street, through the lumberyard, and over the railroad tracks. It

was a funny thing, but that foot hurt worse with a bandage on than when it was just bleeding.

Mother was waiting for me on the back porch. I could tell the way she stood with her arms akimbo that Grandfather Grendon had called her and she was all set to make a speech. It was too late to exaggerate my limp, too, because she had seen me first.

"So this is the young man who wants to take a raft down the river," she said when I came up the steps. "When he hasn't learned how to walk along the riverbank yet!"

"Some people don't look where they dump glass," I said, aggrieved.

"Some people don't look where they walk," she answered, with spirit.

"I jumped."

"All the worse. Sometimes I'm convinced you don't stop to think."

"If I stopped to think every time I wanted to do something, I'd never get anything done," I said. "One thought leads to another and first thing you know I'd be way off somewhere. I don't have to stop and think when I mow the lawn or fetch in wood or weed the garden. What's so different about jumping off the wall beside the river?"

"Don't be sassy," warned Mother. "Well, it's plain to see that you'll have to put off your trip."

She meant it, too. I started arguing and kept it up till Father came home for supper and slapped the table with his hand and said, "I don't want any of this infernal argument during supper."

It was no use. Mother had made up her mind. Besides, Grandfather Grendon had ordered that I keep off my foot for at least twenty-four hours.

So it was more than a day before I could get down to the harness shop and let Sim know that we'd have to alter our plans a little. I had to stay pretty quiet at home, too, because more than once I could tell by the gleam in Mother's eye that she was within an inch of calling the whole trip off altogether.



## 4.

### We Begin

### Our Odyssey

HOMECOMING had been over a week before we were ready to set out. I wanted to stock the raft with everything the night before, but Sim pointed out very practically that anybody could raid it before morning.

We were supposed to start out early in the morning, but we were still in Sac Prairie at noon. Mother and Sim's mother—a birdlike little woman, very quick in all her movements—wanted to be sure we had enough to eat and had to check over everything we planned to take along. Sim's mother made us a big batch of "kisses"—cocoanut macaroons. Sim could hardly abide them, because he had eaten them all his life, so I knew I would have a feast.

At the same time, Father decided that he ought to inspect the raft to make sure it would hold up.

All the delays took time. It was the middle of the afternoon before we were ready to start.

Both our mothers came down to see us off; so did Fred Jones, since, after all, he only had to walk across the street and down to the river from the harness shop. Fred seemed to take it all like a joke, but our mothers were anxious.

"If you're out over Sunday, you see that you go to church," said Mother.

That was just the kind of unreasonable request mothers always make. I wouldn't even know where the nearest church

was, chances were. Just the same, I promised I'd go to church if there was one handy.

"And keep out of the sun," said Sim's mother.

Old Fred just cackled. "I don't know how the boys could travel on the river except by night if they had to keep out of the sun," he said.

That was just what I was thinking.

"And be careful of rattlesnakes. You know they're thick in the hills along the river," warned Mother.

"And poison ivy, boys," said Sim's mother.

Sim was anxious to start. "Come on, get on," he said impatiently. He got out on to the raft and picked up one of the poles.

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I was glad to follow.

Mother was shouting advice and admonitions, and all I could say was, "Yes—sure—all right."

"Remember, boys," said Fred—"any new countries—I get the harness rights."

Sim thrust his pole into the stony shallows of the river's edge. I followed suit. The raft edged out a little way, scraping bottom.

"You telephone home now," called Mother.

"Sure, Ma," I hollered back.

We were actually on our way. Up until the last minute I was willing to bet that Mother would find some excuse for stopping us. Sim waved and I waved, and both mothers waved. Old Fred was already up at the street level; he, at least, was no longer visibly worrying.

Sim was almost bursting with complaint. "Do you know what time it is!" he said in disgust. "Four o'clock!" He shook his head. "It's a wonder we got away now."

"We might as well have put it off till tomorrow," I said.

"It'd been the same thing. They just didn't want us to go. They want to keep us tied to their apron strings. That's how women are."

We were well out on the Wisconsin by this time. I glanced back toward shore. Mother and Mrs. Jones were still standing there. Right about now they were beginning to realize we had



to get around the icebreakers which were stuck up before the old bridge—which was still in use, after all. Despite all the dedication at the Homecoming, the new bridge wasn't ready for use yet, and probably wouldn't be for two more months. After the icebreakers, we had to negotiate the bridges, both old and new, and then do it all over again a few blocks farther on for the railroad bridge.

Sim was concentrating on the problem. He had already forgotten our mothers and everyone else.

"Watch out for that icebreaker, Steve," he kept saying. "We'd be laughed out of town if we rode up on 'er."

The current was taking us sluggishly. Still, we were moving. We had passed the drugstore and were level with the post office. We sailed past between two icebreakers and headed for the old bridge.

"Have fun!"

I looked up. There was Grandfather Adams, hanging over the railing of the old bridge. He waved his smoking cigar at us.

"But remember," he called, "all the joys of life are spoiled by the overdoing."

"The pier! The pier!" hollered Sim. "Look out for the pier!"

I hit the pier with my pole and pushed hard. The raft swung gently around and slipped between the piers just as smooth as could be. But neither of us could relax for a moment. There were pilings coming up, and another pier loomed ahead where the new bridge stood.

I flashed a glance back. Grandfather Adams had moved to the south side of the bridge, the downstream side. I saw there were quite a lot of other people there, too, shouting and waving encouragement. Sim never looked around. He stood braced on the raft, holding his pole like a veteran of the river. He looked like those old river raftsmen in the photographs made when the last of the great log and lumber rafts came down to tie up at Sac Prairie almost forty years ago.

The pilings were more dangerous than the piers. The piers were sitting in the middle of stone piles, and the worst that could happen if we hit one of them was a little trouble shoving off the stones—unless the water was high. But the pilings could

push in our floats and make the whole raft lopsided. So we watched anxiously for any telltale signs of mounded or swirling water passing over undersurface pilings.

But the water was carrying us well. We were riding one of the main currents. We slipped past the pilings and out under the new bridge without coming within a pole's length of the pier on either side of us. The people on the bridge cheered, and Renna Gluyk, the belle of Sac Prairie, who was standing at the bridge approach, waved her plaid sunshade like a flag.

"We did it," I said.

"Keep your guard up," said Sim peevishly. "This is nothing. The current takes you over to Bergen's Island now, and then throws you at the railroad bridge."

I stood watching, unconsciously imitating Sim's stance on my side of the raft. On the west shore Sac Prairie slid past, like some place in a dream gone by—all the houses looked smaller than they were, and the people seen across the water looked like dolls. Sure enough, the current was pulling us straight toward the island which lay dead ahead. The river divided there, but the water in the east channel was often just dead water, hardly flowing at all. We had to go with the current.

We began to pick up a little speed when the water hit the north end of the island and began to run swiftly along the west shore of Bergen's toward the west spans of the Milwaukee Road bridge. I could see Sim was growing a little nervous and tense. He was on the island side of the raft and had to keep a sharp eye for sunken trees pulled off the bank by high water every spring.

The river pulled us toward the island, but not into it. The bank was rounded out there; sand and grass and everything that grew there had been sucked little by little into the Wisconsin. The curve came up against the riprapping of the embankment that supported the east end of the main spans of the bridge, and from there the water poured angrily out directly toward the second pier. The icebreakers here were no menace; the current took us wide around the nearest one.

But in a moment I knew what Sim had meant. Suddenly the raft lurched forward. Sim jabbed at the embankment. Luckily,

he missed; if he had hit it, the force might have broken his pole. We were heading straight for the pier.

I stood petrified, unable to move.

"Pole! Pole!" hollered Sim.

I never moved. I was too fascinated by what was happening. The raft was being whipped around like a piece of driftwood. Sim was being turned from the embankment side, and I was being turned away from the pier. I didn't think we dared make a move for fear of upsetting the raft in such treacherous water.

Sim fell silent. He, too, just waited for what was bound to happen. The raft shot ahead, surging toward the pier. Then the water's swirling turned us sharply, the raft tipped a little toward shore, and we were past the end of the pier.

South of the bridge, still bobbing in the swift, swirling current, the raft began to right itself. I looked back with relief at the white water through which we had come.

"Pole! Pole!" hollered Sim with sudden urgency.

I stabbed at the water and almost fell off the raft.

"Pole?" I hollered back. "It's too deep—I can't touch bottom."

Abruptly, almost as I finished speaking, the raft came to a thudding stop. I went over the side, pole and all. Sim, who had seen the gravel bar showing just under the surface, was braced for the shock of hitting it. We were stuck fast on the bar. I swam over to it and climbed out.

"You all right?" asked Sim.

"Sure. Just wet." I was standing in about four inches of water. Farther below me the bar showed above the water.

"Well, this is better'n hitting the pier," said Sim. "We'd have been done for back there."

He stood surveying the raft. A few things had been upset under our lean-to. The water between us and the gravel below had protected our floats. We were firmly on the bar, but the raft hadn't been damaged.

"This is going to take a while," estimated Sim. He glanced at the sun, which was lowering westward now. "Water's apt to fall, too. We can't wait till they open the gates at the dam

and let the water through, unless we want to spend the night here. We'll have to get her off."

I got out of most of my wet clothes and hung them on the lean-to. I would have stripped, only somebody would be bound to come walking over the railroad bridge, and all in good time Mother would have heard about it and then I'd never hear the last of it. Half a mile down the river would have made all the difference. I worked in my underwear.

It was work, too. We tried to scrape away the gravel. We used our hands. We used the poles. We tried to maneuver the raft over into position where the water would help pull it off, for the back end was still afloat—but only just afloat, for the bar was cut off sharp at its upcurrent end.

We worked and worked. Sim took off most of his clothes, too, for he was getting almost as wet as I was. The sun went lower and lower, and the shadows of the trees on the west shore began to reach farther and farther across the water toward us. But little by little the raft was moving back into the river.

It took us over an hour to push off the gravel bar. By that time it was going on sundown. We poled away from the bar and out around it into the current once more with profound relief.

Now the river took us to the west bank again. We floated parallel to the old river road where it turned west and became the Lower Mill Road because it ran straight out four miles to Grell's Mill and the Mill Bluff that broke into the western horizon across the millpond from Grell's house and the falls. We went slowly down to Dickerson's Point, which was just opposite Dickerson's Slough, where Carlie Ganzlin and I used to catch sunfish far into the summer nights, while our mothers had visions of us fallen into that brackish water and caught under the roots of the great old maples half in and half out of the water there.

Then we were around the point, swinging out into the stream again, past the long, curving shore of Bergen's Island. The long shadows were bringing out the river birds. Solitary sandpipers ran crying along the strand. Great blue herons called



*krark, krark*, and rose with flapping wings from their fishing places. Killdeers flew low along the shore, crying their wild *kildee, kildee*. And the nighthawks and swallows were beginning to swoop low over the water, catching insects, mingling with the black terns and the gulls that were rarer visitors to the river.

At last we were out of sight of Sac Prairie. The wilderness of the island lay to the east, and on the west shore woods and pastures and the gable of a distant barn, red in the declining sunlight. And soon there was no sign at all of any human hand or foot, only, when we got close to the sandy shore, the tracks of deer and otter. We floated past the southernmost tip of Bergen's Island, which lay almost in a straight line down from the heart of town, so much did it curve with the great bend of the Wisconsin, past the rocky foot of the tall hill on which the old Pierneau house stood, its many windows gleaming redly in the light of the setting sun.

Then the woods closed in on both sides, the woods and the yellow sandbanks and the islands.

It was just beginning to grow hard to see breaks in the water when Sim pointed through the dusk and asked, "What's that?"

I looked. High up on the south face of the Mill Bluff shone the orange flame and glow of a fire.

"Why, it's a fire," I said.

"I can see that much," Sim answered impatiently. "But what's it for? I been watching it for a while, and it's no woods fire—it don't spread out. It's too far down from the top to belong to Ortell's house up there."

From the glimpses I had of it through the trees along shore I was quickly convinced that it had a sinister reason for being there. "Sim," I said excitedly, "that fire's about three quarters of the way up the Mill Bluff. Grell's Creek runs right by it. The mouth of the creek is just up ahead. We have to tie up pretty soon for the night, anyway. What do you say we pole up the creek to the foot of the falls and sneak up the hill to find out what's going on?"

I could see right away that all Sim's practical sense was against it, but there was a reckless streak of daring in him,

too—and that was for it. His eyes were glued to that fire. It seemed to stand for all the mystery of the river and the night settling in with the dusk all around us.

“Maybe it’s the Ku Klux Klan,” I said.

“Those birds would never climb that high a hill,” said Sim scornfully. “That’s what you get from reading all those Fu Manchu stories.”

Just the same, Sim began to pole the raft over toward shore. We were over a sandy stretch. The Ferry Bluff and Cactus Bluff loomed ahead. At the foot of Ferry Bluff, where a ferry had once run to connect with Laws’ Landing on the other side, Grell’s Creek flowed into the Wisconsin.

We turned into the creek.

We had to work hard to push the raft up as far as the falls at the millpond. It seemed to me a good mile. The creek wound all around through the marshes and pastures. Luckily, bushes grew close to the water’s edge and hung over so we could use them to help pull us along until we came to the pasture south of the falls and east of the Mill Bluff. There it was all poling against the sluggish current. Sometimes the water was so shallow it was touch and go.

It was pitch dark, except for a first-quarter moon, when we came up to the highway bridge that crossed Grell’s Creek just below the falls. Whippoorwills and frogs were calling; you could hear them even above the steady talking of the falls. The water was quiet here, and under the bridge was a fine place to tie up the raft.

Sim climbed out to the steep shore and stood looking up the almost vertical face of the Mill Bluff.

“We’ll need wings to get up there,” he said.

“No. You just follow me,” I said.

I was in familiar country here. Only a few years ago I used to ride out with Grandfather Grendon when he made his calls. We went to Grells’ on the east side of the pond, and we came around to go up to the hilltop to visit Ortells’. I knew there was a road up along the north side to the saddle of the hill well west of the crown. And from the saddle we could swing around through the woods to the place on the south face where we

might see what the fire was for. The road led on up to the top along the north side, but the woods on the south had never seemed to me too dense. I was sure we could find our way.

We went up around the hill along the road that followed in beside the pond. The stars gleamed in that quiet water. How often I had fished there! I had come out with Grandfather Adams and Grandfather Grendon to catch sunfish. Once, when I didn't know any better, Grandfather Grendon had me convinced I had to take old Ben back to town and get salt to put on the sunfishes' tails, so that we could catch them. Grandfather stopped me just as I was getting into the buggy.

The voice of the falls grew more muted as we rounded the hill and took Ortell's road. And the whippoorwills began to call more insistently. We could hear them all around us, clucking and calling. Sometimes they flew up from the road, their noiseless wings almost brushing our faces. The woods on both sides of the road seemed alive with sounds from rabbits and skunks and raccoons and other nocturnal animals.

"I hope you know where you're going," said Sim.

"I know," I said.

We reached the saddle. Off to the northeast lay a cluster of lights that was Sac Prairie. At the foot of the hill stretched the great black body of the millpond, studded with stars. The whole land that lay between the village and the hill was iridescent with moonlight. Here and there the yellow window eyes of farms and barns broke the half-dark. It looked as peaceful as a picture.

"Don't just stand there," said Sim. "Maybe you don't mind the mosquitoes, but I do. One just took a chunk out of me."

"We cut off the road here," I said.

"Which road?"

There were two roads where there had been but one before—or so it had seemed to me. The truth was that I had never looked off the side of the saddle; I had always just gazed back at this point over the lovely country we had just passed through on our way out from town those times I came with Grandfather Grendon. But there was another road that led off around the south face of the Mill Bluff.

"No, I guess we can take this road," I said, pointing to it. "It's new to me."

Sim, as I might have expected, got down on his knees like Sherlock Holmes, and looked it over.

"It's an old road," he announced, getting up. "Been here a long, long time. It's my guess it'll lead us right around to that fire."

"We'll see," I said.

We set out, walking not in shadow now, as up along the north face, but in the full light of the moon, flecking shadows across the road. It was a wagon road, judging by the feel of it. It led through the woods, around to open glades, from which we could look out and see the Wisconsin and Grell's Creek gleaming in the moonlight. And it led straight to the fire, and a man standing beside it.

I stopped. Sim drew up behind me and peered over my shoulder. The man at the fire was plainly tending it. He had just finished feeding it when we first saw him. Now he stood up and stretched. He was a man of a little more than medium height, I figured. He wore a bushy mustache and he had an old felt hat on his head. He looked to be about middle-aged. He had overalls on and wore a blue shirt underneath.

"Heck! I know him," whispered Sim. "That's Hank von Behren. He comes to the harness shop."

We went on down the road until the noise we made drew Von Behren's notice. He stood trying to look past the fire into the night.

Sim greeted Von Behren by name as we came up.

He was surprised to see us. "What in heaven's name you two boys doing out here this time of night?" he wanted to know. "Why, sure, you're Sim Jones," he said, looking at Sim, and then, peering at me, he added, "And you're Doc Grendon's grandson."

Sim told him how we came to be here.

Von Behren laughed heartily when Sim came to the part about my thinking it might be the Ku Klux Klan on the Mill Bluff. "Why, we've had this lime kiln here for a good many years now," he said. "Your pa's been out here for limestone,"



he said to me. "Your grandpa Grendon uses it. Seems to me once, quite a spell ago, you were along with him. But you were a little shaver then. You could hardly remember it."

I assured him I was trying to recall it, trying to remember coming up the Mill Bluff once, long ago, behind old Ben, when Father had come for a wagonload of stone and lime for the kiln.

"How'd you boys get up here anyhow?" he asked.

I explained. I told him how often I had ridden out with Grandfather Grendon to the top of the Mill Bluff. "We just took Ortell's road and crossed over the saddle," I said.

Sim was studying the lime kiln. It was a little mound of limestone, like a rounded haystack—only a lot smaller—on a framework of iron bars. Under it and around it the fire burned. The fire had to go through the stone before it could be sold for lime.

I remembered now coming up here once with Father, when I was small. Seeing the place now brought it up out of my memories, only I had just never connected it with the Mill Bluff. Grandfather Grendon used to buy lime from both kilns—this one run by Hank von Behren and the other one run by old man Pings on the other side of the Wisconsin, back of the Wisconsin Heights battleground.

"You stay here all night?" asked Sim.

"Tonight's my night. We take turns, my partner and I. Have to keep the fire going," he explained.

"It must be lonely," I said.

"Oh, I don't know. There's owls—whippoorwills—sometimes a coon or a fox. Plenty of bats. Sometimes a car or a buggy goes past on the road, and I hear the falls all night long. No, I don't reckon a man'd get lonesome up here. I don't."

"Listen to the dogs," said Sim.

"Dogs all night long some nights," said Von Behren. "When the moon shines, like tonight, a man can count on it."

"Sounds like somebody hunting," said Sim.

The barking of the dogs somewhere off to the west rose and fell. I could feel my pulse quickening.

"I bet I know who that is," I said. "It's my great-uncle, Joe Stoll, and I'll bet Gus Elker's with him."

Hank von Behren began to laugh heartily. "Ain't nobody

else in these parts fool enough to go chasing around after a pack of dogs on a night like this," he said. "If it was fall, now, there'd be some sense to it."

"Come on," I said to Sim.

"Don't get lost, boys," warned Von Behren. "Those woods can be mighty tricky by night."

"Once I get past Ed Burke's farm, I'll be all right," I said. "And Ed Burke's is just up ahead."

We turned our backs on the pleasant orange glow of the lime kiln and set out to go back along the road toward the sound of the dogs.



## 5.

### We Go Hunting

THE NIGHT was deepening. Neither of us had any idea what time it was, but, since our day had begun for us only about the time we had actually started down the river, we weren't tired. All along the south now, between us and the river, where the marshes were and the lowland meadows, a thin bank of fog was rising. With the moonlight on it, it looked like a distant lake. And with the fireflies flickering in it by the thousands, it looked as if a sunken city lay far underneath the surface of that mysterious lake out of which came the far sound of cowbells from cattle in night pasture.

The hill was growing a little damp, too. Now the air was overpoweringly sweet with the fragrance of wild grapes in blossom, mingling with the musk rising from the bottoms—a thick, cloying miasma which was the exhalation of the swamps and sloughs, of blade and leaf that grew there, of old, rotting wood. It was wonderful to smell. It was like taking in the very breath of the earth every time you drew some of it into your nostrils.

We came to the saddle. I struck out off the road into the woods, following the ridge a little way, then crossing the slope high up, blundering into blackberry vines until the strong pungence of their blossoms forewarned me each time I got close to them. We pushed on straight west and then up the slope a little. Pretty soon we were walking in an oak woods that was fairly open, being used for pasture. I could tell by the smell of the oak leaves where we were. Nothing smells so good as oak leaves in the woods, unless maybe in spring the sweeter smell of soft maple leaves. Now and then I caught the sharp, minty pungence of bergamot trodden underfoot.

"I hope you know where you're going," said Sim nervously.

"I know," I said. "This is Ed Burke's pasture. Many a time I've been in it. We come to the ridge again up ahead. Then we follow along it for a way, go past some fields, through an open pasture, and down the lane right square into Great-uncle's farmyard. Stone's Pocket and Gus Elker's are off that way, and the Fair Valley store's down along the hill beside the road."

"You're not bearing toward the ridge," said Sim.

"No," I said, "I'm following the sound of those dogs."

We were moving steadily toward the dogs. Their baying rose up from much nearer now. Besides, we soon had evidence of how they were stirring up the woods. First a deer went flying past us. He never saw us. Then it was a pair of foxes; they came close, pulled up sharp—maybe they smelled us—and veered off down the hill.

I began to walk faster. I knew where I was now—coming into my great-uncle's woods. The fence was just up ahead.

"Be careful," I warned Sim. "Fence coming up."

I crawled under it.

"What about poison ivy?" asked Sim.

"Not here. Only up at the corner where the fence turns," I said. "It hangs over from Ed Burke's land."

The dogs seemed just up ahead. I stood listening. After a while I fixed the pattern of the dogs' course. They had come in from the north, crossed in front of us, and were now veering off into the southwest. If Great-uncle Joe were following them, he'd be bound to pass in just a few minutes.

"Faster," I said, and started to run.

We ran ahead for a little way. Then I stopped to listen once more. The first thing I heard was running footsteps coming in from the north, straight toward where we stood.

"That's my great-uncle," I said. "He's the only thing that heavy around here."

"Two men running," said Sim flatly. "The other's light."

"O.K., Sherlock Holmes," I said. "Gus Elker's with him. Get over behind that tree trunk."

We waited. There was a little moonlit space up ahead. The men would be bound to cross it.



We didn't have to wait long. Gus Elker came through first. He was hatless, and his coat was torn. He was sweating; the moonlight gleamed from his forehead, and his half-moon of yellow mustache looked to be plastered down around his mouth. He stopped and peered back into the woods.

"C'mon, you, Joel!" he hollered. "Them dogs'll ketch up with it yet, I be dog if they don't."

"My dogs'll have sense enough not to meddle with it," my great-uncle called back. "But not yours. They never had no example set to 'em."

He came into sight—a great, broad-shouldered man, heavy to fatness, his balding head gleaming in the moonlight, his jowled face as wet as if it had been rained upon. His torn shirt clung to his great body. He came up beside Gus.

"Which way'd they go?" he asked.

"They're cutting in behind the Fair Valley store," I said, stepping out from behind the tree.

Great-uncle Joe jumped as if he had been stabbed. "Jukas! who's that?" he hollered. Then he made me out. "Why, Old Timer, what're you doin' out here?"

"Sim and me came to stay overnight," I said. "We're tied up down at the falls."

"Tied up?" asked Great-uncle, mystified.

"We're going down the river on a raft, Mr. Stoll," said Sim.

"That's good," said Gus Elker. "Shows we ain't the only crazy ones in these woods."

"What're you hunting?" I asked, remembering fox hunts and coon hunts and deer hunts that were even funnier than the Sac Prairie Fire Department at its best.

Great-uncle began to laugh. His great body shook. "Oh, if it don't beat all!" he cried. "Ever' time I set out to hunt with Gus, it's the craziest thing! I like to die if it ever works out right! That Gus is fox-crazy—says a fox was stealin' his chickens—claimed he even seen him . . ."

"I did, too, you old potbelly," shouted Gus in an aggrieved voice. "I seen him with my own eyes, be dog if I didn't!"

"So we took his dogs and my dogs and we got his trail. But that fox is too smart for us, yes, sir, Old Timer—first thing we

know, them dogs was behind a wildcat. That fox jus' put us on that cat's trail, and like as not he's settin' on his haunches somewheres enjoyin' the fun."

"Well, come on, come on," said Gus impatiently. "You want them dogs to git all tore up by that wildcat?"

"Let's go," I said.

Gus was off already. Great-uncle went after him, lumbering along like a baby elephant.

Sim held back. "This is senseless," he said.

"Sure," I agreed. "That's what makes it so much fun. Come on."

I took off after the two men, and Sim decided to follow.

Every once in a while Gus or Great-uncle raised his voice, calling the dogs— "Here, Rover!—Here, Hank!—Here, Sue!"—as if the dogs, with all that frenzy of barking, could hear anything but their own voices.

Sim began to giggle. I had to stop and lean up against a tree to laugh.

"See what I meant?" I asked.

"How long will this go on?"

"I've known it to go on all night," I said. "But don't be discouraged. A wildcat won't run too far before it takes to a tree, as much as I know."

We started off once more. Neither Great-uncle nor Gus Elker had noticed our absence. We had no trouble catching up to them. Great-uncle was complaining loudly about the prickly ash, the blackberry briars, and the grapevines that tripped him up. All we had to do was listen to him holler to find out which way not to go. Up ahead, the dogs were barking and baying like crazy.

Gus tripped over branches and vines time after time, but he never said a word. Maybe he figured Great-uncle Joe was making enough noise for both of them.

Suddenly, without warning, Gus went off a little ledge and came down into the middle of the dogs. Great-uncle flung himself down and peered over the ledge. Sim and I followed his example. The dogs were collected around a tall tree that loomed

up over the ledge. We could hear an ominous scratching of bark and a low growling.

"You hurt, Gus?" asked Great-uncle Joe anxiously.

"No, no," answered Gus breathlessly, "but I can't hang on to these dogs much longer." He had caught hold of two of the dogs, and they were straining toward the tree.

Behind us there was a soft thud, a rush in the leaves.

"There goes the cat," whispered Sim.

Great-uncle hadn't heard. He shouted, "Be careful, Gus. That cat's apt to come rushing down the tree and rip up the dogs. Hold on—I'm comin'."

He edged gingerly around and lowered himself over the ledge. He dropped. His feet were scarcely a foot above ground. The dogs were still carrying on deafeningly, and now Great-uncle Joe added his voice to the general mêlée, commanding the dogs to heel, and mauling them at the same time, grabbing them by the loose skin of their necks and hauling them away from the tree, at the same time warning Gus about the menace of the wildcat, which was probably already halfway across to the Ferry Bluff by this time, though Great-uncle evidently thought he saw her gleaming eyes fixed calculatingly on his inviting back and just waiting on the moment to drop on him and tear out a couple pounds of choice meat.

Sim was almost hysterical with laughter by this time.

I shook him. "Laugh some other time," I said. "We'll have to go down there and lend a hand with the dogs or they're likely to take off after something else and we'll never get to bed."

He sobered up a little and followed me over the ledge.

Among us we finally shook and hollered some sense into the dogs. Great-uncle would have climbed back up over the ledge, but both Sim and I objected loudly, though we didn't tell him it was because we knew the dogs would hit the cat trail up there again. So we went around to the road that led back into the hills from the vicinity of the Fair Valley store.

Once on the road, we could relax. We let go of the dogs. They were content to drag along beside us, tongues hanging out. They were just about beat. Great-uncle Joe had got his second wind, and even Gus was perking up a little.

"It was that dog Sue of your'n," he complained to Great-uncle. "She never did have much sense. She ain't no foxhound, that's why she took off after that cat."

"Hohl!" snorted Great-uncle. "You ever so much as lay a eye on a foxhound?"

"I seen more foxhounds in my day than you could add up," said Gus, shifting his gun angrily from one hand to the other.

I nudged Sim, and we just listened. It went on that way all along the road and down the lane to the house. You'd have thought they were mad at each other, but the fact was they were as close as two friends could get, and this was the way they liked to show it best.

Great-uncle's white house lay pooled in moonlight, with the shadow of a great elm lying across one wall and part of the roof. As we came down into the yard, Gus Elker called his dogs to him, bade my great-uncle a boisterous good night, and went off to the north across the pasture toward his own adjoining farm.

We went around to the back of the house. Light still burned in the kitchen and streamed yellowly out across the back porch. Great-uncle clumped up the porch steps, opened the screen door, and walked into the kitchen.

Great-aunt Lou, a thin, angular woman, sitting at the kitchen table reading the *Pioneer Press*, looked up, peering over her spectacles slid half down her thin nose. Her eyebrows went up at sight of us.

"Heavens t' Betsy!" she cried out. "Where'd you find the boys?"

"We didn't get that fox, woman—but we got Old Timer and Sim Jones, here," said Great-uncle, his eyes twinkling. "We come on 'em in the woods."

"At this hour! My land—eleven o'clock! Whatever in the world . . . ?" She gave me a look that commanded immediate explanation.

I made it.

"My soul and body!" she exclaimed. "It's a good thing you had the sense to come over here for the night. Your poor mother's probably worried sick."



I remembered abruptly I had promised to telephone her. "I better call her up," I said.

"You better," agreed Great-aunt Lou.

I went to the old-fashioned wall telephone and called our number. I could hear the telephone ringing it seemed a long time. I knew Father and Mother had gone to bed. I wanted to hang up, but, after all, I had promised. Now Mother would think something had happened.

"Hello?" It was Mother's voice.

"Ma, it's me," I said.

"Where are you? Are you in trouble of any kind? What happened? Why didn't you telephone me earlier in the evening? Pa and I were in bed."

"Ma, I'm out at Great-aunt Lou's. Sim's with me. We just got here."

"Where?" asked Mother incredulously.

"Great-uncle Joe's place," I said. "You know."

"Is *that* all the far you are?" she hollered. "Why, at this rate you'll be away from home two weeks!"

"Don't get excited," I said.

But she was off. "I think we'd better come to an understanding before you go any farther. When I think this thing over . . ."

"Ma!" I yelled. "You just forgot we have to go with the current—from one side of the river to the other—and we have to duck all the sand bars—it's not like driving down the road in a car. Besides, we didn't get started till late today."

"Well, that's true," said Mother, reasonably enough. "But you should have called earlier."

"It took a while to walk over here from the Mill Bluff," I said.

"How was it on the raft?"

"Fine," I said. "We got stuck once. Took us an hour to get off that bar below the railroad bridge. But we made it. We don't figure on getting stuck any more than we can help it, though."

"I should hope not." I could hear Father talking. "Just a moment—Dad wants to talk to you."

Father came on. "Son?"

"Yes, Pa."

"Do you need anything?"

"No, Pa."

"Let me talk to Rosie," said Great-aunt Lou.

"Pa," I said, "don't let Ma worry too much. And call her back to the phone—Aunt Lou wants to talk to her."

Great-aunt took the telephone and said, "Rosie, don't you worry none. We'll keep the boys tonight, and first thing in the morning Joe'll take 'em back to the creek. . . . Pshaw! It's no bother a-tall."

She hung up and turned back to us, one arm on her hip. "'Pears to me, you're a mite peaked. Did you have supper?"

I was going to say we had eaten, but Sim beat me to it.

"I wouldn't rightly call it supper," he said with a straight face.

"I thought so," said Great-aunt Lou.

"Wait," I said. "Sim here hasn't got any bottom. Don't you go to any bother."

Great-uncle Joe chuckled. "Save your breath, Old Timer," he said. "You know my old woman."

I knew Great-aunt Lou, all right. Mother once said she was "all heart" and I guess she was. She got right to work and in no time at all she put fried eggs, bacon, and ham in front of us, with fresh milk—as much as we could drink.

She enjoyed watching us eat as much as we enjoyed eating. "It just does my heart good to see a body eat," she said honestly. "The way Joe picks at his food—not that he ain't et plenty of it in his time—it's no fun cookin' for him. It takes a boy to eat good, I always say."

She certainly enjoyed herself. I was a hearty eater, but Sim could eat twice as much as I could and still stay as slender as a beanpole while I got muscular all over.

When we had finished, Great-aunt Lou rushed us right off to bed. "We'll put you in the attic room," she said. "You'll need sleep. You get up when you feel like it."

"We'll get up early," said Sim. "We have to make an early start to get down to the river for the high water from the dam."

The attic room was just under the roof, with windows open-

ing out of the gable. I had slept there often—almost every summer for years, and many a weekend. I would probably be out in it again before this summer was over. It was a cozy room, and we were no sooner settled down in bed than we were asleep.

I was still dead to the world when Sim shook me awake next morning. The sun was just coming up.

“Come on, wake up,” he said. “We got to get going.”

I crawled out of bed feeling that I had just begun to sleep. Sim was already dressed. By the time I was dressed, I was more awake and beginning to feel the pull of the river once more.

“I hope the raft’s all right,” I said.

“Sure, she’s all right. Nobody’d ever see her under the bridge.”

Great-aunt Lou heard us and had breakfast ready for us when we got downstairs. And Great-uncle Joe came in from the barn as soon as she called, and announced that he was ready to take us down to our “ship.”

“I don’t know, Old Timer, what a country boy like you is doin’ on a raft,” he said. “Seems to me you ought to be out here again this summer lendin’ me a hand.”

“Helpin’ me to put a rein on you and Gus Elker, ’s more to the point,” put in my great-aunt, though she knew half a dozen of her and half a dozen of me put together wouldn’t change any of Great-uncle’s impulsive plans by a hair’s breadth.

“Well, summer isn’t over,” I said. “I’ll be out later on.”

After breakfast Great-uncle Joe drove us down past the Fair Valley store and around the Mill Bluff to the bridge. He got out of the car and stood watching us untie our raft and pole it out into the creek.

He watched us out of sight, shouting encouragement—anything, as Great-aunt Lou would say to him when he got home, “to keep away from the cornfield a minute longer!”

6.

Down-River

IT WAS a wonderful morning. The sun was just up a little way—we hadn't lost any time at breakfast—and the creek was just about all in deep shadow yet. Birds were still singing. Pewees mourned in the woods, and meadow-larks sang in the pastures. Ovenbirds shouted *teacher, teacher* at us when we went by, and the blue jays stilled everything momentarily by telling all the woods a couple of strangers were in sight.

The smell in the air was something I couldn't put into words. It was one thing along the creek—mostly the woods smell, a rich musk that seemed to come out of the bottoms and cling to you, something made up of last year's leaves and the new foliage, of mud and wild roses and clover and honeysuckle, of grasses and the apple-tangy pungence of sweetbriar roses growing wild on the slopes of the Ferry Bluff. It was another thing at the river, where the wet, exposed sand and the stony shore alike sent up the miasma of the river itself. A lot of people in Sac Prairie said they disliked the smell of the Wisconsin; they called it a fishy smell, but it wasn't, it was just the smell of stones and sand and river bottom covered by the water most of the time—it was the essence of the river itself, and nothing in the world smelled just like it.

We came out of the creek right into the Wisconsin's current. The water took us close in along the Ferry Bluff, then under the overhanging rock of the Cactus Bluff, and past Andy's Bluff just beyond it. The sunlight was warm there, and the hot smell of the rock drifted down. Past the bluffs, the islands began again.



Once we had gone by Laws' on the east bank, and Andy Huerth's farm in the pocket below the last of the three big bluffs, we were practically in the wilderness. Woods crowded down to the shore on both banks of the river. The islands were thickly wooded, with festoons of wild grape and ivy vines hanging from the trees, sometimes trailing in the water.

"I know a good fishing place down here a way," said Sim suddenly. "I come here with Pete to fish once in a while. Too bad we can't stop."

"Why can't we?" I wanted to know. "We can take all the time we want. That treasure's been waiting ninety years now—it can stand to wait another hour or two."

Sim was willing. For once he forgot about being practical. He pointed out the place—a shady eddy where big old trees leaned over the river—and we poled the raft over toward shore. The river bottom here was all sand. It was sand for most of the way now, with occasional stretches of stones and rocks and gravel.

We fished for more than an hour. We caught two largemouth bass and a walleye. Then we went for a good long swim. After that, we unpacked some of our stuff, got out the frying pan, built a fire on the shore of the island, and fried the fish. No fish ever tasted that good!

It was about noon when we pushed off once more. The Wisconsin was up now. We didn't have to worry much about sand bars, and as long as the raft was in the middle of the current fallen trees didn't bother us much either. We just stretched out on the raft and let the country drift past. Once in a while a fisherman—like old man Genz, who had his favorite spot along shore down from his farm—hollered at us, but most of the time we heard bird talk and the multiple voices of the water moving our raft, rushing among the limbs of fallen trees, pushing past rocks in its path.

Late in the day we came to the bridges at Spring Green. First the railroad bridge, then the highway bridge. They were about half a mile apart, and between them stood all that was left of the old shot tower, almost hidden by trees. The shot tower was about a hundred years old, and that was old for this part of Wisconsin.

It had been put up here along a slough in from the river a little way, so that the lead miners to the west could haul lead over and sell it to be made into shot—melted and dropped down the deep tower into water below. A town had once stood nearby, too, but it had been torn down to make a bridge for the soldiers who were chasing Black Hawk during the Sauk War, and never really built up again. All that was left of it was the cemetery, somewhere on a hill beyond the shot tower.

The bridges were easy, compared to the Milwaukee Road bridge at Sac Prairie. We just floated between two spans. On the other side of the Spring Green bridge we could look up through the trees and see the sunlit windows and chimneys of Taliesen, the home Frank Lloyd Wright had built into the hills there. After that, it was woods again, and islands, and the widening river, with Lone Rock and then Bogus Bluff somewhere ahead, not more than a day—if that much.

At sundown we came in toward a gravel bar, and Sim said, "That's the place where we'll camp."

"Why there?" I protested. "We could go on another hour or so and get closer to Bogus Bluff."

Sim shook his head. "You said yourself we got plenty time. I figure that stone bar's a good place. There won't be many mosquitoes on it, for one thing. We can set up a camp on it. We can stake our raft down just far enough off it so we'll still have water tomorrow morning—you know how the river goes down at night. Then I saw a farm with wires leading to it back up on the hill inshore, and I figured you could go up there and telephone."

As usual, practical Sim had it all worked out. There was no use arguing. I didn't have any arguments to counter his. "O.K.," I said. "Pole for shore and I'll get the telephoning over with right away."

We reached the shore and I got off.

"It's long distance from here," said Sim. "Be sure you got money enough to pay for it."

"I got it."

I went through the fringe of woods along the sandy shore, up through a pasture, and pushed up the slope to the farm-

house. I went around to the kitchen door and knocked. When a woman came to answer, I asked her if I could use the telephone. She said, "Sure," so I gave her a quarter right away and said I had to call Sac Prairie.

It took a while, because the call had to be routed through Madison, but finally Mother was on the line.

"Ma," I said, "we're below Spring Green—just getting ready to set up camp."

"That's good," she said. "By tomorrow you'll reach Lone Rock. Tomorrow night Dad can be down to pick you up."

"Aw, no!" I hollered. "That's too soon. We won't have time to explore any at all."

"You'll be glad to come home," said Mother calmly.

"I won't either," I answered indignantly. "We want to explore Bogus Bluff and the cave—"

"Cave!" interrupted Mother. "You could drop down a crevice and be lost forever."

"Heck, no!" I said. "It wouldn't be that big a cave, anyway. Ask Grandpa—he knows it."

"Anyway, you'll be there tomorrow—and that's where you wanted to go—so . . ."

"Ma," I said, talking fast, "next time I call it'll be for Pa to come after us. I won't call tomorrow night, then. I'll call when we're ready to come."

"And when will that be?"

"Maybe day after tomorrow—maybe day after that."

"And maybe a week?" She sounded very cold.

"Oh, it won't be a week," I said. "Once we're there, though, we don't want to come back right away."

"Promise me you won't go on down the river from there."

"Just till where we can telephone," I said.

"All right, then. I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing—but all right. If anything goes wrong, you'll never set foot on that river again!"

I held back a giggle at the thought of me walking on the water.

"All right, Ma," I said.

I went back to the raft, and we poled her out to the stone

bar. It was well off shore, but it was the shore side of the bar that was the shallow side; the other side came in sharp off the current. We took the raft up to the edge of the bar, unloaded our stuff, and then took her back out to where Sim judged would be far enough, and anchored her, not only with the heavy anchor we carried, but also by ropes tied to a stake on the bar. It would have taken a flood to move her.

We went in swimming. We swam for a long time. The water was cool and good to feel after the long, hot day. We didn't stop swimming until after the sun had gone down and the moon had come out, almost full now, high in the east, and only a couple of crows and one soaring hawk remained in the blue over us.

Then we ate supper and lay down to watch the night come in. Sim was right about the mosquitoes—there were hardly any. He said they liked foliage to hang on to, and there was none on the bar. The night came in slow—first the dusk, with the solitary sandpipers and killdeers running up and down along the shore, the songs of pewees and hermit thrushes and wood thrushes rising in the darkening woods, and the coming in of the great blue herons to fish in the shallow water. Then the deep twilight, with the whippoorwills beginning to sing, and the crickets, and nighthawks spiraling up, crying, and coasting down the buttes of heaven.

I found the first star, which was Venus. It shone bright and clear in the west, while light still lay there. Sim found the second—Mars, which followed the sun down under the western rim. Then lots of stars began to show, and the sky grew rapidly darker.

The heat of the day faded, and the fresh coolness of the river rose. Midges and gnats danced in the darkness, with a high, thin humming in the air. The evensong of birds died away; only whippoorwills and owls were left calling, and dogs barking up and down the river. Later, a fox yawped out of the woods near the fields on the ridge at the farm to which I had gone to telephone.

Then all was still except for the lulling sound of the water lapping at the raft and the bar. The moonlight danced on the



water, and lent its silver mystery to the darkness, and a little wind came up out of the south.

"Don't you ever wonder, Steve," said Sim sort of offhand, "when you look at all those stars, where heaven is?"

"No," I said, "I never wonder about heaven. There's so much here to wonder about."

"If our universe is a hundred million light-years across, and we're separated by millions of light-years from other universes—lots of 'em—as big as ours and bigger—where do you suppose they'd find room for heaven?"

"I have a hard time finding my jackknife from day to day," I said. "I wouldn't know. You take it on faith, that's all."

"If a man could travel every second as far as light goes in a year," said Sim gravely, "it'd take him sixteen years to travel to the outermost edge of the mapped universe."

"That'd be some ride," I said. "Count me out—I don't want to take it. If it's all the same to you, I'm going to sleep."

He laughed and turned over.

Sim's practicality was all right as far as it went, but that night it didn't go far enough. Sim had counted on the water going down, but he hadn't figured it would go down as far as it did. In the morning we found our raft high and dry, and a good five feet from the nearest water.

Sim just sat and looked, the picture of disgust.

"Well," I said, "do we try to get her to water or do we just sit and wait till the water comes down?"

"They're not apt to send us enough water till late afternoon," said Sim. "I wish I had one of those magic books you used to read, Steve. I'd draw a pox down on the power company."

"That wouldn't raise the water an inch. I'm for not waiting."

We got to work, took up the anchor, untied the ropes. I started to lug our stuff off the bar back to the raft, but Sim stopped me.

"If you think that raft's not heavy enough without all that stuff, try pushing her in that wet sand and see," he said sarcastically.

I took the stuff back to the bar and went out to the raft. I pushed her with all my strength. The most I could do was tremble her a little; I couldn't budge her.

Sim joined me.

Both of us pushing hardly budged the raft. She was down solid in wet sand, and I figured, at a conservative guess, it would take us until noon to get her anywhere near the water. That five feet might as well have been a mile, as far as we were concerned.

We were standing there, wondering what to do, when Sim's eyes almost popped out. He was staring down-river. I turned. There, coming around the bend, was a trim little steamboat, a side-wheeler, the like of which hadn't been on the Wisconsin for a long time.

"Do you see what I see?" he asked.

I nodded. Sight of the steamboat was bringing back the memory of where I had last seen her—from Bergen's Island, when I was fishing there one day more than a year ago.

"You know who that is?" I asked, pleased because I remembered. "That's Dr. Fahrney—he's been coming up to Sac Prairie for six, seven summers now."

"Who's Dr. Fahrney?"

"Well, you wouldn't know—lucky you! He's the fellow makes that medicine I have to take every time I get anything from a headache to a bellyache—*Alpenkraüter*."

"It sounds pretty bad."

"Ma gives it to me every time I have an ache. It tastes bitter—like prune juice without sugar."

"Does it work?"

"Seems to."

We watched the boat come on. She was moving slowly, feeling her way for deep water and not finding any too much of it. She came on up, more and more slowly, smoke pouring out of her stacks. Pretty soon she was so close I could see a very pretty girl at the rail pointing to us while she talked to a tall, graying man who was wearing a captain's cap.

The steamboat came to a stop just about opposite us. She was now within easy hailing distance, and the old fellow at

the rail cupped his mouth in his hands and hollered, "Ship ahoy!"

"That's us," said Sim, startled.

"Are you grounded?" asked the old fellow.

"Sure are," I called back.

"Don't you know the power companies are legally obliged to provide passage water for vessels on all navigable streams?" he shouted.

"No, sir," said Sim.

"Fact."

"Well, you'll need some yourself soon," Sim yelled. "The shallows begin just a little way up."

"I know it. Is there a telephone handy?"

"Farm up on the hill," I shouted. I turned and pointed.

He turned and bawled an order. There was a great deal of running around on the steamboat. Then a small rowboat was lowered with the old man in it.

He rowed over toward the bar, but didn't beach his boat. He viewed our predicament from his boat, shaking his head and grinning.

"I'm Fahrney," he announced then. "It's only because the general public—I mean you boys—is so ignorant of the law that the power companies get away with this sort of thing," he went on. "I'll telephone for water without delay."

"It's probably on the way already," said Sim mildly. "They usually open the gates about eight every morning at the Sac Prairie dam."

"They'll open 'em wider when I finish with 'em," said Fahrney vigorously, and rowed for shore.

By the way everybody on the steamboat watched him, I figured he wasn't doing anything new. He talked like a man accustomed to getting what he wanted, but he was after a pretty unlikely thing, I thought.

Sim looked at me quizzically. "Talks big, don't he?"

"Maybe he delivers big, too."

"I hope he does. Just the same, we won't ease off to wait and find out."

We tackled the raft once more.

We were still at it when Dr. Fahrney returned. He looked mad. He had a cigar clamped in his mouth and he was puffing furiously at it. He cut over to avoid the bar.

"Don't see water yet," said Sim, as he went by.

"You will, boy, you will," said Fahrney gruffly. "I talked to that head man at the Sac Prairie dam, and he as much as told me to jump into the river. I fixed him. I called Washington, and just about now somebody'll be burning his ears."

He applied himself to the oars and shot around the bar. He never let up rowing hard until he reached his steamboat. He climbed aboard. The rowboat was hauled up after him.

Then the whistle blew three sharp blasts, smoke came pouring out of the boat's funnels, and she began to move slowly off up the river once more.

"She'll be grounded before she gets up two miles," estimated Sim. "Even if they open the gates at the dam, it'll take hours for the water to reach us."

I had been studying the water level. "Well, it's up about three inches since we began working at the raft," I said.

"None of his doing," said Sim.

"Just the same, we might as well wait."

"All right," agreed Sim.

We stripped and went into the water to swim off the deep end of the bar. The steamboat was upriver from us now, pulling steadily ahead, this way and that, dodging the sand bars. She looked pretty—all white against that blue water and the trees that lined both shores. She just matched the color of a cloud towering in the north above the water. The smoke from her stacks was spreading in the thin wind.

By noon the high water was on us. It came in a rush. From the first rise I had noticed in the morning, the water had gone up slowly but steadily; then, all of a sudden, it began to come up fast, as if a great deal of water had been let out at once.

Sim and I got out of the water and loaded up the raft. We didn't have any too much time before the water was high enough to float the raft. We climbed on and began to pole around the bar into the current.

"Looks like your friend Fahrney was telling the truth," said



Sim. "The way that water came shows they opened a lot of gates up there. Remind me to look up that law he talked to us about. It might come in handy some day."

"So I suppose we owe him something," I said. "I'll have to show my gratitude by drinking his *Alpenkräuter* all the rest of my life."

"If you wouldn't overeat you wouldn't get a bellyache," said Sim, laughing.

The current took us suddenly, swung us clear of the bar, and carried us down.

"Won't be long now," I said. "We'll be able to spot Bogus Bluff. Watch for it."

7.

## Bogus Bluff

THAT EVENING we reached Bogus Bluff.

We saw it first when we came around a curve in the Wisconsin and passed between two large sand bars still gleaming in the light of the westering sun. There it was, straight ahead of us, on the west bank of the Wisconsin where the river turned south once more. It was a tree-girt hill, with some rock showing near the crown. The mouth of the cave was plain to see among the trees from this distance, but as we drew closer, it fell behind the treetops and was hidden.

Filled with visions of that Fort Winnebago gold lying somewhere there just waiting for us to find it, we did everything we could to hurry the raft along. Even so, it was the edge of dusk when we tied up along the shore just below the bluff. It loomed over us, almost straight up, separated from us by a road that went past, and the wooded stretch between the road and the water's edge.

Sim leaned his head back and looked straight up the bluff. "Maybe we better wait till morning to go up to the cave," he said. "We're in strange country. Looks like rattlesnake country, too."

"Why wait?" I wanted to know. "We got flashlights. And there seems to be a path of some kind."

We took a couple of sandwiches—the last of those Great-aunt Lou had made for us to take along—and set out. The sun had just gone down, and there was still plenty of light. Besides, as long as the sky was clear, the moon would soon be giving its light, and it wouldn't be as if we had to proceed in pitch blackness.

There were three trails up the bluff. At first, what we thought was the trail that led straight up turned out to be a cow path that angled over to the side. We found a better trail coming up on the northeast side, and it was that one we followed. It looked as if people came in from the yard of an abandoned pasture shed and went up the bluff. Sim looked at it close once or twice as we went along, beginning the steep climb. Then he stopped.

"I thought your grandpa Adams said people didn't come here much any more," he said.

"He did. Used to be a place to go to when people didn't have anything but horses and buggies."

"Well, look at this. Leaves turned. Twigs broken." He pointed them out. "Somebody's been using this path lately. Looks to be quite a lot, too."

I examined the evidence. Someone had been passing up and down the old trail. Yet there was every sign to show that the trail had been unused for a long time—little runnels of erosion right in the middle of it, for instance—until recently.

I dropped to my knees and turned on my flashlight. I crawled forward a little way. I studied the footprints, wherever I could find them. Here and there I found fairly clear prints in the sandy loam. There were also cow tracks.

"Well, it's not kids," I said. "The footprints are too big. I'd say two men—one heavy, one light."

Sim peered over my shoulder. "That's elementary," he said.

"Anyway, the last footprints lead down—so we don't have to worry about them."

"You don't suppose the heavy one was carrying the Winnebago gold, do you?" asked Sim, grinning.

"You'll laugh out of the other side of your mouth if we do find it," I said. "Come on."

We pushed on up the steep hill that seemed almost as broad as it was high.

Bushes and treetops pretty well screened the mouth of the cave when you looked up toward it. It opened right out of the rock, and the last ten feet or so was the hardest part of the climb. From the mouth, I looked back and saw the broad Wisconsin,

with the two sand bars still showing sunlight and the bottomland trees a green sea on both sides of the river.

It was dusk at the cave. I turned on my flashlight. You could walk into the cave, the mouth was that wide. A lot of earlier visitors had cut marks into the rock on both sides. "Sue and Elmer," I read, "July, 1871." And, "Jo, Mattie, and Chris, May 11, 1901."—"I met Molly here Aug. 7, 1899. Came back on honeymoon, June 10, 1900. Elgin Platt." And hundreds of other names and dates carved into the soft stone.

"Lookin' for somebody you know?" asked Sim. "Or can we go in?"

"Grandpa Adams always says it takes a special kind of fool to carve his name in a place like this."

"Or somebody showing off for his girl," said Sim. "Go on in. You can take all day tomorrow to read what's on the walls. I don't know, Steve, but you got too much curiosity."

"I like to know about everything," I admitted.

We walked into the cave. About thirty feet back it began to narrow. We dropped to our knees and began to crawl. It was damp and cool-smelling, as if springs or some other running water weren't very far away.

After a little way on our knees the cave got higher again. At the same time, we came up against three openings.

"Now what?" asked Sim.

"You take the right one, I'll take the left," I said. "Crawl as far as you can go, then come back here, and we'll both take the middle. If you find anything, holler."

Sim turned off into the one passage, and I took the other away from the main cave.

I crawled until I came to another opening out of the hill. I could look down the river from it, and figured I was on the south side. I turned around and went back.

Sim was just coming out of his passage when I came back into the main cave.

"Just a lateral," he said. "I came out on the north side."

"I came out, too," I said. "It's only a narrow passageway."

"Same here."

We turned into the main cave once more and went on, still on



our knees. We came to another room, not quite high enough to stand up in, and crouched through it, to the opening at the far end. Then we had to crawl again. We crawled until we came to a place where the passage began to widen once more. Just when we thought we would be able to stand up again, we came up against a wall of rock.

I examined the side walls carefully. The more I looked, the more disappointed I felt.

"I don't know where the soldiers'd find a place to hide the gold here," I said.

"Was it soldiers?" insisted Sim.

"Well, it was soldiers' pay—must have been a detachment bringing it up from Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien. What difference does it make, anyway? This wall's solid. Whenever I find a chink in it, it's hardly big enough for my hand."

"How much gold you figure it was?"

I shrugged. "Oh, I don't know."

"How many soldiers were at Fort Winnebago at that time?"

"Two or three companies," I said. "Everything I read about the Black Hawk War tells about two companies coming from Winnebago. They'd hardly have left less than one company to hold the fort, would they? Then there'd be officers and the regular help at the fort and the Indian Agency."

Sim did some silent computing. "Well, that might come to quite a lot of money," he admitted.

"That's what I said," I answered.

Sim began to flash his light around. "But there wasn't anything in that book that said they hid the gold here, was there?" he demanded.

"Not exactly, no. It just said it was around here that the boat was sunk. So they went ashore with the gold and hid it. The book says, 'on or in the vicinity of Bogus Bluff.' That's the story."

"But was it true?"

Sometimes Sim could be the most trying person on earth. He always had to know every last detail. He called it "the scientific method," and he thought as much of his science books as of the Bible.

"It didn't have any footnotes on it, if that's what you mean,"

I said. "If all the soldiers got killed and the gold was never found, who do you suppose could prove it?"

"Oh, that's simple. They'd have some record of it at Fort Crawford, and that would be passed down. All you'd have to do would be check back."

"You mean, write the War Department down in Washington and have them look it up? Fort Crawford's been abandoned sixty, seventy years—it'd take years for the government even to find out there was such a fort in Wisconsin Territory."

Sim didn't answer. His light wasn't moving, either. I looked over at him. The light was directed down at a sizable cedar branch lying over against the wall at the end of the cave, and he was peering at it with frowning attention. His lean, hawklike face was all scrounged up to show that he was thinking.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Now here's a funny thing," he said. When Sim said "funny" he meant "strange," unlike the rest of us to whom "funny" meant something to laugh at most of the time. "What's that cedar limb doing here?"

"Somebody dropped it," I said. "You know how people are always breaking off branches. They carry them around till they get tired of 'em, then they just drop them wherever they are."

Sim shook his head. "No. This limb's too big for that. Besides, you know how hard it is to break cedar. This one's been cut. It's all dirty on the branches, too. It's been used for something."

"Maybe somebody brushed the cobwebs off the wall," I said. Sim just shrugged.

I shot my light down, too. "Look at the marks on the floor," I said. "Somebody's been brushing the floor with that cedar limb, that's what."

"What for?"

"Why, to hide something," I said, excited now. "Maybe that's where the gold's buried!"

Sim laughed.

"Laugh!" I said. "I'll be the one who laughs last."

"You and your imagination!" said Sim.

"You and being practical!" I retorted.

Just the same, when I simmered down and looked at it, of course the cedar branch would never hide anything except maybe marks of some kind in the sandy floor—the sandstone worn away from the rock in all these years to lie as a thin covering on the floor of the cave. Something like an outline marking the place where something had been buried—that cheered me a little. But most likely it was just to erase what somebody had scrawled into the sand. Or maybe just footprints.

“Footprints,” I said. “See.”

I took the branch, turned around, and swished it over the sand, obliterating my footprints.

“But why?” asked Sim.

I put the branch back. Sim turned his light on the back wall and began to scrutinize it.

“If you can wait, Sherlock,” I said, “I’ll run back to the raft and try to find our magnifying glass.”

He paid no attention. He turned around, picked up a fair-sized stone, and began to pound on the back wall. The wall was a kind of limestone—not so soft as that used at the lime kiln at the Mill Bluff—maybe part sandstone.

“It sounds hollow,” said Sim finally. “Could be there’s another room in back—another cave.”

“Then that’s where the gold must be,” I said.

Sim had been crawling along the wall. Now he stopped at one corner where the rocky side wall was especially craggy. “Hey!” he cried out. “These stones are fitted. Hold your light up here.”

I turned my light on the wall, while he put his out and slipped it into his pants pocket. While I held the light, he worked away at the back wall. He had hold of a good-sized slab of rock. It was plain, after only a few moments, that he was moving it.

I looked around for something to prop my light on. There was a little projecting ledge up the wall just about level with the place where Sim worked, so I put the flashlight on that. It threw a steady glow on the back wall. Then I gave Sim a hand.

The slab of rock came out.

We put it down on the floor at the side of the cave. Sim took out his flashlight once more and shot it through the hole we had made. He let out a whistle of astonishment. I crowded close and peered over his shoulder.

The light fell upon a lot of things no one would ever expect to find in a cave—a table, rickety chairs, pots, what looked like machinery of some kind—just the kind of stuff you'd think kids would get together and put into a hut in the woods somewhere. I'd found it half-a-dozen times on Third Island or on Bergen's or in the bottoms woods near the brook coming down from behind Roxbury—lugged in by kids and abandoned.

"Kid stuff," I said disgustedly.

Sim put out his flashlight and put it back into his pocket. "Let's move a few more of these stones," he said. He couldn't help jeering, "You and your men, one heavy, one light! A fat boy and a thin one, most likely."

I didn't say anything. By the glow from the flashlight on the ledge we cleared a door-sized opening right down to the cave floor. Then I picked up the flashlight and we went into the real rear of the Bogus Bluff cave.

Sim's light flickered over everything. It fell on an old cane rocking chair. He promptly sat down in it.

"Here's solid comfort," he said. "Or would be, if I had more bottom to fit to the chair. This is the fat boy's chair," he decided.

I kept on looking around. My light fell upon a pile of blankets all laid out on the floor. Pillows, too. "Look at that," I said. "Sometimes they even sleep here."

But of course boys slept in the log huts they made in the woods around Sac Prairie, too. That was part of the fun of it—no mother, no father, nobody around to say "Do this," "Do that," or "Don't, don't, don't!" Almost every kid I ever knew who had any ambition or any self-reliance went into the woods at some time or other to camp out at least, if he didn't build himself a hut with the help of a few other kids.

Sim got out of the chair and gazed at the blankets. "It's pretty damp to be sleeping in here," he said.



"Not for just once in a while," I said. "You have to get used to things like that when you're not home."

"I can see your ma or mine letting us do that," said Sim.

"I, too."

"There's a funny smell in here," Sim went on.

"The whole place smells," I said. "It's not just one smell—it's a whole lot of 'em. Something real sharp—metallic like."

"And something that smells like an old battery," added Sim.

"You know how kids lug those things around. Smells like they've been smoking, too. Cigars, at that." I had to laugh. "Every little kid thinks he's a man just as soon as he can put a cigarette in his mouth—the poor dumb shoat!"

"They've got more junk here than I ever saw in a hut," said Sim. "But no sign of your treasure. Maybe they found it."

"If they did, they wouldn't be here."

"They aren't."

"Don't be so encouraging," I said. "Nobody knows how long this place has been empty."

"Would it still smell like this if it had been empty a long time?" wondered Sim.

"How would the smell get out, with the wall shut off like that? Leave those stones down for a while, and all you'll get in here is that wet ground smell you always find in caves."

"There's a draft," said Sim. "That means openings somewhere."

"There wouldn't be a draft with the wall up."

Sim had turned his flashlight from the blankets. The light now lay on the table. There were two kitchen chairs drawn up to it. Like the table, they looked like junk-heap discards.

"Where do you suppose they got all this stuff?" asked Sim. "Looks like chunks of metal."

It did, too. What was on the table was the strangest mixture of stuff I ever saw. I couldn't imagine what kids might be doing with it. Chunks of metal. An iron pan that looked as if it had had fire in it many times. Other iron pans, smaller in size, which had been used to boil something in; they were all discolored inside. But what had been boiled hadn't been something to eat, because there were pieces of kitchenware stacked

to one side. There were tools there, too. Some were like needles with handles on. Some were more blunt. Some seemed to be carving tools. Two or three had the look of being used to stamp designs.

"Dies," said Sim.

"Kids'll pick up anything," I said. "It takes a while to grow before they become selective—like you and me."

"I think these kids are up to something," said Sim.

"Most kids are up to something. We weren't any different when we were younger—except that you were always going on about being caught and never got to do much."

"Ha! Have your little joke," said Sim.

He examined the tools with puzzled interest.

I flashed my light all around. The rear part of the cave was the best part of the Bogus Bluff cavern. I wondered how it could have been sealed off like this without somebody noticing, but then I reasoned that if few people came up here any more, there wouldn't be anyone to know the difference. Besides, most of the visitors probably wouldn't go much beyond the laterals.

My light fell upon a folded newspaper stuck behind a box against the wall. I went over and pulled it out.

"Here's a copy of the *Chicago American*," I said.

"What's the date on it?"

"Wait till I read *Krazy Kat*," I said. I read the comic strip and had a good laugh. Then I looked at the date. "May seventeenth, this year."

Sim thought about this for a while. "Well, I suppose Gotham or Muscoda boys get to see a Chicago paper just the way we do in Sac Prairie," he said. "Anything else back there?"

I looked. There were a few more newspapers pushed back there. There was also a copy of *The Atlantic Monthly*. And a badly worn book, *Essays of Emerson*, which I knew practically by heart. Next to *Walden*, it was one of my favorite books.

Sim stared, jaw agape. "*The Atlantic Monthly!*" he exclaimed. "That don't add up."

"What's the matter with it?" I asked. "I look at Grandpa's copies once in a while."

"I can't figure what kind of kid would come up here to live in a cave and read such a magazine," he said.

That made sense.

"And Emerson, to boot! Say, there's something mighty fishy about all this."

"Who's got the imagination now?" I wanted to know. "The kids might have picked up the magazine and the book the same way they got everything else they lugged up here."

"Funny papers, maybe—but not *The Atlantic Monthly*."

"Maybe they couldn't find any funny papers," I said. "They aren't all as lucky as we were. Shumow's had their junk yard only a block from our house, and I could go down there any time with Sollie and they'd give me funny papers. My aunt Bertha keeps sending them down from Minneapolis to this day—about every two weeks I get a pack. So maybe they couldn't find funny papers."

"What issue of the magazine is it?"

"June," I said. "This month."

"They never found that on a junk pile."

"Well, could be somebody gets it."

"There'd be a label on it—you know, an address label."

I examined the magazine carefully by flashlight. There was no mailing label on it.

Sim came over and looked through the newspapers.

"No label here, either. They didn't get these at home, then," he said. "They weren't discarded by a drugstore or anybody else that sells papers, either," he went on, "because they always have to cut off the top of the front page and send it in for credit. These are whole."

"Couldn't they buy 'em?"

"Kids buy papers?" he said scornfully. "Not when they can buy ice-cream cones."

"Their folks might have bought 'em," I said.

"Speaking of ice-cream cones," Sim said, "I'm getting hungry." He took his sandwich out of his pocket, unwrapped it, and began to eat.

I followed his example.

"We'd better get back to the raft and make camp," I said

between mouthfuls. "We can camp right on shore. Then tomorrow we can really begin to hunt the whole bluff, top to bottom."

Sim might just as well have been in another world. "I can't figure this out," he said. "It wouldn't be like kids. Maybe you were right, Steve, about those footprints."

"Sure I was right," I answered confidently. "But anybody could've made them any part of the day."

He finished his sandwich and was just about to throw the wrapping away when he thought better of it. He began to fold it up. "Better not leave anything here," he said. "You never can tell."

I bent and retrieved the wrapping I had dropped.

"Do we put back the stones?" I asked. "I suppose we'd better."

"Sure," said Sim.

"It's a lot of work," I said. "We could come back in the morning and do it."

Just then my flashlight went out.

"There goes your battery," said Sim. "Lucky we got more on the raft."

"Your own's getting a little weak, too," I said. "We'd better get out while we still have a little light left."

"Well, well," said a rich, oily voice out of the darkness behind us, "it seems we have visitors, Mr. Tom."

Sim turned and shot his light at the opening we had made in the wall.

It was filled. Two men stood there, looking in.



8.

Trapped!

FOR A MOMENT nobody moved, nobody spoke.

Sim just held his light on the two men who blocked the opening. One was a fat man, whose roly-poly body was crowned by a jowled face out of which looked eyes that gleamed in the flashlight's glow. His face was framed in hair—unkempt locks, beginning to gray, swept back from his forehead, and a Quaker beard of a reddish-brown hue carried around from ear to ear. Under his fat roman nose a little smile parted his lips; a gold-crowned tooth shone through, glinting in the light.

The other was as short as the fat man was tall—yet neither of them was over medium height. He was skinny—there was no other word for it. He had a long, thin, lean face, with a grizzly beard on it, as if he had forgotten to shave for a week. His eyes were close set, and he had scarcely any eyebrows at all. And his mouth was a straight, unsmiling line.

One look at them told a lot. They were carrying groceries. So they were the two men who lived here—the heavy one and the light one. *Lived* in the cave—not camped in it. They had been out to shop—probably in Gotham or Muscoda—and they had come back just a few minutes too soon for us.

“We were just going,” said Sim.

“We couldn’t dream of being so inhospitable as to let you go,” said the fat man. “Could we, Mr. Tom?”

The skinny one growled something. He looked mean. He called the fat man “Ellis.”

The fat man pushed his way in, saying to the other one, “Close the door a little way, Mr. Tom.”

He dropped his packages into the cane rocking chair. It was plain that he stood where he was only to keep us from making a rush for the opening. Sim glanced at me and I glanced at Sim in the dim light. I could see he was thinking the same thing I was—they didn't mean us to get out.

The skinny one worked fast. In half the time it had taken us to open it, he had the opening more than half closed up. He left enough for air, and now I could feel the draft up higher. There was another opening of some kind inside that part of the cave where we were.

Then the skinny one came up and muttered something into the fat man's ear.

Ellis made a clucking sound of disapproval. "Now, now, Mr. Tom," he said unctuously. "We couldn't do a thing like that. We must size up the situation—study it—and determine what is the best thing to do in the circumstances."

Mr. Tom made a disturbing gesture—like wringing the neck of a chicken. He stood glaring at us until Ellis spoke once more.

"A little light, Mr. Tom."

The skinny man went over to a box, lifted it, and brought out a battery light with about twenty times as much power as our flashlights. It was a kind of hurricane lamp. As soon as it went on, Sim prudently put out his flashlight.

"Now we can pay some proper attention to our guests," said the fat man, and moved forward a little. "Sit down, boys."

"If it's all the same to you," began Sim, "we'll go to our raft."

The fat man turned and glowered at his companion. "Raft, Mr. Tom?" he asked coldly.

"I didn't see no raft," said Mr. Tom.

"I thought you were always to look carefully. If we hadn't come up so quietly and heard our young guests talking, we might have missed seeing them entirely." He clucked again, and shook his head in disapproval.

"I'll go down and cut it loose," offered Mr. Tom.

"Not so hasty, Mr. Tom. It ill behooves us to take any precipitate action. We have time. We have all night. We may have longer. Perhaps we can persuade our guests to tell us a little of their plans."

He gave us a broad, friendly smile, disclosing two more gold-crowned teeth. In the light from the hurricane lamp he looked almost benevolent, like a preacher just getting ready to read the text for the day.

"We're exploring," I said. "We'll be missed."

"Tch! Just what I feared," said Ellis.

"Well, *we* ain't gonna be missed," said Mr. Tom with sudden violence. "I say take care of 'em right away before they get away from us, that's what I say."

"Haste maketh waste, Mr. Tom," said Ellis. "Haste engendereth regret. Think carefully before you act. And plan, Mr. Tom—plan with an eye for tomorrow."

"But what'll we do with 'em?" asked Mr. Tom, raising his voice.

The fat man made an almost imperceptible motion, brushing Mr. Tom away. Mr. Tom understood the motion. He fell back and took up his stand beside what was left of the opening.

Ellis removed the groceries from the rocker and lowered himself into it. He sat forward, as if he were on a throne. "Sit down, boys," he said again.

I reached out a foot, pulled over one of the chairs at the table, and sat down on it, with my arms folded across the back of it. I could see they were aiming to keep us right where we were. It was a cinch we didn't have anything they wanted, so they must have something they were afraid we'd got. They weren't poorly dressed. I'd have thought anybody who lived in a cave like this, even for a little while, would've looked tackier than that. And Ellis had a gold watch chain on his vest.

After a long minute of hesitation Sim sat down, too.

"You've had time to look around?" asked the fat man.

"We've been here a while," I said.

Sim was petrified. He scared easy. He was always one to think twice about doing anything the law said he couldn't do, and now he didn't know whether we had been trespassing or not.

"I see, I see," said Ellis. "And looked around, too."

"We were looking for the gold," said Sim abruptly.

I kicked him in the ankle.

"What gold?" asked Mr. Tom.

The fat man turned and glared at him. Then he swiveled around once more and smiled at us.

"You boys needn't be so tense," he said. "It may be a little inconvenient, but I'm afraid you'll have to stay with us a while."

I began to wish I hadn't told Mother to wait until I called again before sending Father down after us. It was a little late for that now. I wondered how long it would be before Mother would begin to provoke Father with her worrying. At least another day. Perhaps two, I figured. A lot could happen in two days.

"Mr. Tom," said Ellis, "these boys must have some camping gear on their raft. We can hardly ask them to sleep on the ground, can we? Go down and fetch up any blankets you find."

There was no use saying anything. I could see that the fat man had made up his mind and that was that. But why? I kept asking myself. I glanced at Sim, as Mr. Tom crawled back through the opening and the fat man got up and stood before it to make sure we didn't make a rush to get out.

Sim wasn't looking at any of us. His eyes were fixed on the tools on the table. I followed his eyes. He picked out the dies, one after the other. Then he looked over to the biggest of the metal blocks and looked hard at it. It was divided in the middle and had handles, like a mould. His eyes wavered to a couple of files, and then slid around to the chunk metal off to one side.

These things weren't something kids were playing with. I began to grow uneasy. I glanced at Ellis again.

The fat man was following our looks with philosophic interest. Meeting my glance, he raised one eyebrow and grinned. "Sometimes a good thing, sometimes bad—curiosity," he said.

"What are you making here?" I asked.

Ellis wagged a pudgy finger at me. "Now, now, don't pretend ignorance. I can see you boys are sharp and observing. It only remains to discover whether you've drawn the correct conclusions."

Sim's face gave him away. He began to blush.

The fat man did not miss it. He sighed. "I see you have," he said quietly. "Tch, tch!" he went on, shaking his head, "that *does* complicate matters. I'm afraid we'll have to keep you with us. The question is: does anyone know you've come here?"



"Sure," I said.

"I see." I didn't like the tone of his voice at all.

"We came down the river from Sac Prairie," I said.

Ellis smiled once more. Whenever he smiled, his face lit up; but when his smile was gone, he looked sort of sinister. "That makes a slight difference," he said. "So nobody will worry about you for a while, eh? Sac Prairie? Now, let's see, that's forty miles from here, as I figure it. They'll expect you to be gone for a few days."

"We've already been gone a few days," I said.

"So, all right—a day or two more. Above all, we must not trouble Mr. Tom. He has an unhappy tendency toward violence. We wouldn't want anything unpleasant to happen."

I glanced at Sim. He was pale as a piece of paper. I was a little nervous myself, but since this was beginning to sound like some of the stories I had read, I couldn't take it so seriously as Sim. He had figured out something. What? I looked back at the table. The metal—the dies—the files—the mould—the two men were making something. Whatever it was, it must be illegal, and the whole point of keeping us here was to prevent us from telling anyone what we had seen in the cave.

"Would we, boys?" insisted Ellis.

"No, we wouldn't," I said.

Mr. Tom came back, preceded by our few blankets, which he tumbled into the cave through the opening.

"Ah, now the boys can at least be comfortable," said Ellis.

Mr. Tom glared at us. "I still say—" he began.

The fat man cut him off. "Tut, tut, Mr. Tom. Let us keep our thoughts free of all unpleasantness. Now, just move our bedding over here in front of the wall, and put theirs where ours was. They could hardly crawl over us." He tittered.

"Look, at least we oughta tie 'em," said Mr. Tom. "Boys can be mighty fast."

"You sleep like a cat, Mr. Tom, with one eye open. You'll hear the least move they make—but I'm sure the boys are happy with us. There are so many mosquitoes outside."

Neither of us said anything. I didn't mind spending a night in the cave. But what about tomorrow? And the next night? I

watched Mr. Tom exchange bedding. He just threw ours down the way he had brought it.

"I'll sleep immediately next to the wall," said the fat man.

"They could step on you and bounce right out," said Mr. Tom.

"But they couldn't get past you, could they, Mr. Tom?" Ellis said it as if he knew that we could not and we had better not try. "But I'm forgetting our guests," he went on, unctuous once more. "Dear me, how uncivil! Have you boys had supper?"

"Had a sandwich," said Sim.

"Well, now, there's a little fruit here. I'm sure we could spare a banana for each of you. Fresh fruit is so good for you."

"You gonna feed 'em, too?" asked Mr. Tom, as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"We're not savages, Mr. Tom."

He opened one sack after another among the groceries they had brought until he found the bananas. He handed one to Sim and one to me. He looked roguishly at the skinny one and asked, "And will you have one, Mr. Tom?"

Mr. Tom just shook his head angrily.

Ellis peeled a banana for himself and sat eating it contemplatively. I could see he enjoyed food. There was the evidence of his waistline to prove it. He did enjoy that banana. He sat there with his eyes sleepily half-closed, taking small bites and mashing the banana all up, sort of straining it through his teeth and rolling it around on his tongue. Of the two of them, I figured him for the one who read *The Atlantic Monthly* and Emerson's *Essays*.

"I found your book and magazine," I said. "And the papers."

His eyes opened wide. "Mr. Tom does enjoy the Chicago paper," he said. "After all, we're native Chicagoans—though Chicago just now isn't a happy place for us to be—and Mr. Tom gets homesick. But the other things are mine, yes."

I remembered some lines and said, "I suppose you're keeping us here because you believe the only right is what's after your constitution, and the only wrong's what's against it."

"Aha! We have here a young student of Emerson," he said, with a broad grin. "Some day you and I will have a little talk

about Emerson." His eyes actually twinkled; he seemed pleased. "You must have had him assigned in English class."

"My grandpa Adams reads Emerson, too," I said.

Mr. Tom interrupted. "What's goin' on?" he demanded fiercely.

"We're having a literary discussion, Mr. Tom," said Ellis affably. "Something not in your line."

Seeing that nothing was going to happen to us right away, Sim began to stir around. He shifted on his chair, and then suddenly got up and walked back to our blankets.

"What're you up to?" asked Mr. Tom.

"I'm going to arrange our blankets," said Sim. "If we have to sleep here tonight, I might as well get them ready." He stood for a moment beside the blankets. "Say, the draft's strong back here," he said.

"There are crevices that lead outside," explained Ellis. "But only crevices—hardly big enough for one's hand. They allow for a certain movement of air."

"Ma said not to sleep in a draft."

Mr. Tom swore. "I tell you, Ellis," he said, "the best thing . . ."

"Be still, Mr. Tom," retorted the fat man. "Crudity always pains me." Seeing that we had finished our bananas, he went on, "Would you like something more to eat, boys?"

I shook my head. Suddenly I was reminded of our position. From far away I could hear a whippoorwill calling. It made me think of the hills and marshes around Sac Prairie, of Aunt Annie's old place on the hills between Logtown and Spring Green, of Great-uncle Joe's farm west of Grell's millpond. When the fat man asked whether we wanted more to eat, I couldn't help thinking about the way they fed people before hanging or electrocuting them.

"We better have an understanding," said Mr. Tom.

I began to feel bad. For a moment he sounded just like Mother. I could just hear her. I felt sorry for myself. If she could look in on us now, the first thing she'd say would be, "I told you so!" and I'd never hear the last of it.

"Yes," said Ellis, "I trust you boys realize you're not to try to

escape. Mr. Tom and I would regard it as a breach of that relationship which ought always to exist between host and guest, indeed we would. We wouldn't be inclined to look lightly on it."

Mr. Tom made it clear. "I'd just as soon cut your throats as not," he growled.

The fat man closed his eyes, as if he hurt somewhere. "Mr. Tom is such an impulsive man," he said. "Just the same—be warned."

"Right now," I said, "I'm too tired to even try it. I don't know about tomorrow. We worked half this morning to get our raft into the water and I'm still tired from that. I expect to sleep."

Ellis looked at me as if he found it hard to believe. He glanced at Sim. "What have you got to say?"

"Ask him," answered Sim, pointing to me. "He likes to hear himself talk. He can talk big or small, any way you like it."

Sim's sudden outburst surprised Ellis. He looked at his companion. "This is some pair we have here, Mr. Tom," he said.

Mr. Tom only grunted.

"What's the hour, Mr. Tom?"

"It's goin' on ten. You aimin' to work yet tonight?"

"I think not. Rather tomorrow morning."

"I still think it'd be better if we took care of that raft. Somebody might see it. Somebody comin' along . . ."

"Where does it lie, Mr. Tom?"

"Straight out from the bluff."

"Readily seen?"

"Well, no."

"Let it be, then. It wouldn't arouse curiosity unless it were seen repeatedly by the same passers-by. Let's get some sleep now. We'll sleep on this little problem."

"I still think . . ."

"Tut, tut, Mr. Tom. There's no artistry in low crime, none, sir. I frown upon it." He turned to us. "Now, boys, do rest well. A good night's sleep is so important for growing boys. Mr. Tom, I regret to inform you, snores. I trust he won't disturb you too much." He motioned to the lamp. "The light, Mr. Tom."

The skinny man got the light and held it while Ellis took off



his shoes. Then he took off his own shoes. Ellis removed no other clothing. He went over and lay down on the bedding next to the opening which had been all but closed again by Mr. Tom. I tried to estimate the chances of a stone falling on his head and knocking him silly long enough for us to get away; they were mighty slim. The way he was lying there, it would be next to impossible getting past him.

“Good night, boys,” said Ellis.

Sim and I got up and went over to our blankets.

The light went out.

I could hear Mr. Tom take his place beside the fat man. Next to me, Sim was methodically taking off his shoes. I guess he figured trying to escape was useless. I took off my own shoes. Sim stretched out and I lay down beside him.

There was hardly a sound from the two men. Sim didn't make any sound, either. I knew he wasn't asleep any more than I was. I listened. I could hear one sound after another in the darkness. A bat chittering. Some of those creatures probably lived in the crannies of the cave. Whippoorwills and owls outside. There was a steady soft sound, too, I couldn't figure out for a while; then I guessed it was raining; I was hearing the rain on the leaves outside the cave. I could hear something crawling, too. It was probably mice, but it could just as well have been moles.

The fat man turned, grunting.

Mr. Tom said, “Lie still.”

So they weren't asleep yet, either.

The smell of the cave came in over everything else. I could still get the smoke and the metal smell, but the earth smell was more powerful. Next to it came the smell of rain in the woods; it came in from outside, probably both from the crevices and the mouths of the cave.

A fox yawped outside, and I got to thinking of home and began to feel bad again. Guilty, too. This whole trip had been my idea. And here we were, trapped! Mother and Father were probably getting ready for bed just about this time. Maybe talking about us, worrying a little, and if Grandfather Adams was

there, he'd be saying, "Great God in heaven, woman! The boy's old enough to take care of himself!"

Sim was probably thinking about home and wishing he were back in the harness shop. I could just feel him thinking that, feel him regretting his rashness. He would be reviewing the entire course of events trying to figure out how he got mixed up in this crazy trip.

Mr. Tom began to snore, gently at first, then with a steady loudness that drowned out fox and owls and whippoorwills. I expected any moment to hear the fat man tell him to be quiet, but he never said a word. They must both be sleeping, I figured.

I edged over close to Sim. "You awake?" I whispered.

"Heck, no," said Sim sarcastically. "I'm right here in the middle of a dream."

"I feel just as bad as you do," I whispered back. "But I'm not bellyaching."

Sim just grunted.

"We try anything?"

"Not a chance."

"Sim," I whispered then, "I saw you looking over their stuff. What're they up to?"

Sim kind of shook himself. He turned and put his mouth next to my ear. "Counterfeiting," he said.

9.

Prisoners

I HARDLY SLEPT a wink all night.

I lay awake thinking about what might happen to us. When it gets dark, everything looks bad. With my imagination, I could see every possibility as clear as day. I could see us with our heads broken, buried in the cave. I could see us tied up, weighted with stones, and dropped into a deep place in the river. I could see us all cut up into little pieces and scattered all over the countryside. The things I could see in my imagination all looked real, too, and it didn't make any difference how unreasonable they might be.

Sim—practical Sim—he slept. He might be afraid of something, but he wasn't going to let it spoil his sleep. He lay there as quiet and peaceful as if he were in his own bed. You'd never have been able to tell how hard and uncomfortable the cave floor was the way Sim slept.

Every time I did drowse off, Mr. Tom's snoring woke me again. In that cave it was absolutely the loudest snoring I ever heard. How Sim could sleep, I couldn't figure out. The fat man was probably used to it. He never so much as let out a sound, once he had settled down.

Counterfeiting! It was plain as could be the minute Sim had mentioned it, and it wasn't any credit to me that I hadn't thought of it before. I lay wondering what they were counterfeiting. Not dollar bills of any kind. There wasn't a scrap of paper fit for their use to be seen, and they couldn't counterfeit paper money without paper. Something metal, that was sure, for that would explain the chunks of metal. But I hadn't seen very much metal, either. If we had had time to really snoop around—look

under and into things, perhaps—we might have seen what it was they were counterfeiting. I never doubted Sim's judgment for a moment; he didn't have the imagination; so he had to rely on the facts.

I thought some, too, about how we might get away. Sooner or later one of the men would have to go outside. That would leave us two to one. The groceries they had brought didn't seem enough for more than three or four days; with all of us eating them—if Sim and I were around—they wouldn't last that long. Both of the men couldn't go after more groceries; one would be left behind. It would probably be Ellis, and I figured we could rush him easier than Mr. Tom, who, being skinny, could get around easier. There didn't seem to be much chance of trying to get out while they slept; one of us might have been able to do it, but not two.

Along toward morning I was pulled out of a drowse by the sound of somebody getting up. It was still pitch-black in the cave. The only light of any kind was a faint, reflected glow which somehow got into the back of the cave through the opening in the wall from the moonlight outside; it lay over against the corner of the roof and didn't shed any light on the rest of the cave where we were.

In a moment the battery light went on, and I could see it was the fat man. I lay still. A wild hope surged up in me. Perhaps he was going outside. If he were gone, we could drop a stone on Mr. Tom's head long enough to lay him out until we could get out, and then we could outrun Ellis easy.

But the fat man wasn't going outside. He came over to the table and sat down with his back to us. His bulk shut off most of my view. I couldn't see what he was doing, but it was plain after a while that he was at work. He lit a fire in the brazier and melted some of the metal. After a while he used the mould, too, with the dies fixed into it.

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to know what he was doing. I got up and walked to where he sat. I looked over his shoulder.

"Good morning," said the fat man, without turning.

"Good morning," I said.



He didn't push me away. So I stood there. The dies in the mould were of two halves of a Liberty nickel. I could hardly believe it.

"Why, that's not even a dollar!" I said.

"No, it isn't," Ellis said agreeably.

"I don't know much about counterfeiting," I said, "except what I read in Pinkerton's books, but if I were a counterfeiter, I'd do five- or ten-dollar bills. Maybe even twenties."

"My boy, any amateur can counterfeit five- or ten-dollar bills," said Ellis, unmoved. "You wrong me. You think of me first as a counterfeiter, but the truth is I'm only secondarily that. First and foremost, I'm an artist." He looked toward the place where his companion still slept. "Mr. Tom!" he said sharply. "Get up. Time to go to work."

Mr. Tom stirred and groaned. The fat man went on talking.

"Consider, for instance, the great Becker, a German counterfeiter who engraved dies for hundreds of coins so skillfully that his gold pieces were bought by museums all over the world as original Roman or Greek coins. His counterfeits were so perfect that it was very difficult—if not impossible—to tell them from the originals. That man was an artist, boy. He went to such lengths as to put his coins into a box of iron shavings. He attached it to the springs of his carriage, and after they'd been jolted about among the shavings for a while, they looked old and worn."

"But this isn't a gold piece," I said. "It's only a nickel."

"A nickel, indeed, boy. A rare nickel, a very rare nickel." He gave me a sharp look. "Which are you—a coin collector or a stamp collector? Most boys are one or the other."

"Sim and I collect stamps, mostly American."

"Ah, true patriots!" he said in a dry voice.

"Oh, we keep some coins, too. But we're not collectors," I said. "Sim has some coins from the time his pa was in Japan or the Philippines or some place like that—Japanese coins—and we both have some early American and some English and French coins."

The fat man brushed them aside as if they had been pennies.

"Oh, they're worth *something*," I protested.

"Undoubtedly. But this little nickel is worth a lot more."

"I've seen a lot of nickels like that, and the most it's worth is a nickel. Five cents," I said.

Ellis smiled. "Not this one," he said. "I doubt very much that you've seen 'a lot,' as you put it—or even one—like this. This is a 1913 Liberty-head nickel."

"Sure," I said, "1910, 1911, 1912—lots of Liberty-head nickels. You still come across one every little while."

"But not 1913," said Ellis. "If you did, we wouldn't be making them so carefully." He shot an annoyed glance toward his still-sleeping companion. "Mr. Tom!" he called again. "Get up this instant. We have work to do."

Mr. Tom sat up and stretched. He yawned.

"The design was changed to the buffalo head in 1913," the fat man went on. "But the mint had started running off Liberty-head 1913 nickels before the changing order came through. As a result, there were very few Liberty-head 1913's minted. And, being a stamp collector, you know the value of scarcity. This nickel now catalogs at something like a thousand dollars. So far, we've made a few over a hundred fifty of them."

I let out a low whistle. A hundred fifty at that price would bring Ellis and Mr. Tom a hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

"Of course they must be sold slowly and carefully, and in many places, to collectors and dealers. You see, boy—any fool can separate some poor working-man from his money, but it takes an artist to detach money from a rich man. Mr. Tom and I have principles. We believe only in mulcting the rich for the benefit of the poor—Mr. Tom and I being poor."

"Like Robin Hood," I said.

"Exactly."

Mr. Tom came up muttering. "What're you tellin' all that for?"

"Nobody in his right mind would believe such a tale told by an imaginative boy," said the fat man calmly.

"You talk too much," said Mr. Tom.

"If I hadn't talked so well in Chicago, you'd be sitting in quod right now, Mr. Tom. Ungrateful man! But of course it's hardly adult to expect gratitude in this material world."

Mr. Tom looked squarely at me with a grin on his ratty face. "Mr. Ellis," he said, "is a man who never says something in five words when fifty will do."

Ellis laughed heartily. "Well said, Mr. Tom! And I must admit to a modicum of truth in it." He turned to me and said, "Mr. Tom, you see, does have his human side."

"I'm glad to know it," I said.

"Counterfeiting," resumed Ellis, "is customarily the occupation of low, depraved characters, like Owen Sullivan of colonial Connecticut, who combined counterfeiting with all manner of crimes and was finally hanged on May 10, 1756. Fellows like Sullivan exist by the score, while artists like Becker in coins, and Rouchomowsky in jewelry, and Weininger in the craft of manufacturing reliquaries come along once in a century. Weininger's reliquary of the Holy Thorn is as perfect a work of art as the originals of the period it imitated. And Rouchomowsky's gold tiara of Saitapharnes—supposed to have a Scythian origin—was bought by the Louvre. The experts were sure it dated to the third century B. C. They were so sure, in fact, they didn't even want to take Rouchomowsky's own word that he had manufactured it."

"All that," put in Mr. Tom, "don't get us any more nickels."

"Patience, Mr. Tom, patience," said Ellis. "Who knows—perhaps some day the boy may elect to become an artist of similar dimensions." He reached into his pocket and took out one of his spurious nickels. He handed it to me. "Examine it, boy."

I took it.

"I know you don't qualify as an expert, but it feels like a nickel, doesn't it?"

I admitted it.

"And it looks like one—not new any more, but worn."

I agreed to that.

The fat man made a little bow in Mr. Tom's direction. "The wearing is done by Mr. Tom. He also wields the file. He puts on the finishing touches, as it were—he lends the product the appearance of authenticity—in short, he makes it look like the real thing, the genuine article."

Mr. Tom said nothing. He only shrugged his shoulders, as if

he knew there was no stopping Ellis. He wasn't a talkative man. He kept his thoughts mostly to himself. They were two men as unlike as you could get men to be. But somehow they seemed to fit together. Ellis did all the bossing and some of the work, and Mr. Tom just did about what he was told. As long as they split fifty-fifty, it probably made no difference to Mr. Tom. I noticed in Sac Prairie—and all over, I guess—there were lots of people like Mr. Tom, and most of them seemed to come out all right in the end.

I looked around, hearing Sim. He was sitting up. His slender face wore a puzzled look, as if he couldn't remember where he was. He probably didn't, the way he slept.

"Mr. Tom," said Ellis, "we ought to eat breakfast."

"You oughtn't to," said Mr. Tom. "If you ever had to run for it, they'd have you right off."

The fat man ignored him. He looked at us and said, "Owing to the little difficulty about smoke attracting unwelcome attention, we can't offer you a warm breakfast, boys. But we have ham sandwiches, cheese sandwiches, fresh fruit, and a bakery cake. Mr. Tom loves to eat well."

"Who loves to eat well?" asked Mr. Tom, looking pointedly at Ellis' waistline.

Sim got up and came over to the table. He had recalled where we were.

Mr. Tom got out the food. Both Sim and I were hungry. We hadn't eaten much the night before, but we made up for it now. I watched the men eat. The fat man ate everything his hands fell on, but Mr. Tom was picky. The fat man ate like he was in love—with his eyes half-closed, and a smile on his lips when he chewed. The skinny one sat with his eyes fixed blankly on the wall. He was thinking about something else.

Nobody said anything. When it came to something to drink, they had only cold coffee. I couldn't stand coffee. Sim liked it, but hot.

"We got some root beer on the raft," I offered.

"Mr. Tom," said Ellis.

The skinny one got up, crawled over the rocks, and went out of the cave.



"You really got him trained," I said.

"I don't think Mr. Tom would like you to say that," said Ellis. "Mr. Tom's sensitive."

Sim deliberately stepped on my foot.

Mr. Tom came back with the root beer. He put it down in front of us. I thanked him. Sim thanked him. He turned to Ellis and said, "You and me ought to have a little talk, private."

"Very well," said the fat man amiably. To us he added, "We'll be just outside, boys. No tricks, now."

Mr. Tom removed a few stones so that the fat man could get out more easily. They crawled through into the next standing-up place in the cave.

I looked at Sim as soon as they were far enough away. "What do we do now?" I asked.

"I was thinking," said Sim. "If we could set those two against each other—you know—make Mr. Tom think he's just Ellis' slave—make 'em have a falling out, maybe a fight. If we had only one to deal with, we could handle him, I think."

"That might be nasty," I said.

"What might happen to us could be nastier," he said with his brows brought down in a dark frown. "Say, you were watching him—what's he making?"

I told him.

"Nickels!" he exclaimed. "Counterfeiting nickels!" He couldn't believe it. "I thought for sure it'd be twenty-dollar gold pieces or something like that."

I explained about the 1913 Liberty-head nickel.

"That's different," he said. The way he said it sounded as if he admired the counterfeiters. "That's pretty smart. Chances are, nobody'll ever suspect they're counterfeit for years to come. It's not like money in everyday use—the banks watch that and they find it pretty soon after it's passed."

"Sure, sure," I said, "I heard Ellis brag about how smart it is. The question now is, how smart can we be so we can get out of here whole?"

"No use rushing them," said Sim. "It'd be too dangerous."

"Mr. Tom," I said, "would just as soon put a knife into us as not."

"The fat one's more dangerous," said Sim. "He thinks. Mr. Tom just acts. He follows impulses. But I can see the fat one's taken with you, Steve. Maybe because you said that line from Emerson to him."

"I wanted him to know I believed in self-reliance," I said.

"So he'll watch us all the closer," said Sim.

"Look," I said, "if we're in danger of being put out of business, why didn't they do it right away? They've got the stake—maybe about two hundred thousand, when they pass all those nickels."

"Well, lots of reasons," said Sim. "For one thing, they want to finish up here. For another, they have to find out how long it'll be before somebody starts looking for us. How long is that going to be, Steve?"

"I figure by tonight—maybe tomorrow night at the latest."

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"That's right. I promised Ma I'd go to church. Now how can I do it?"

"Oh, talk to Ellis. Maybe he'll take you."

Sim was making fun of me, but I thought the idea was worth considering. "Any chance of one of those crevices being larger than they think?" I asked.

Sim shook his head scornfully. "Sooner or later one of 'em'll leave the other one alone with us. We can rush that one, whichever he is. It'll probably be Ellis—he don't seem to want to move any more than he has to."

"What do you suppose they're talking about now?"

"Probably what to do with us. Mr. Tom wants to get rid of us. Ellis wants to wait and see. The longer they wait, the better for us. It's easy for somebody like Mr. Tom to kill a man he doesn't know, but the longer we're here, the better he gets to know us."

"Well, I don't know about Mr. Tom, but I could think of lots of good reasons to get rid of some people I know in Sac Prairie. I'd think it'd work the other way round."

"Will your folks come looking for us?" Sim asked.

"I think so."

"Mine won't. They figure I can take care of myself."

"Ma'll never believe I can," I said. "I can see myself twenty years from now—she'll still worry about everything I do."

"Maybe it wasn't so smart to tell 'em to wait till you telephoned for them to come get us."

"Maybe it wasn't. But it's done now. We're on our own. We can't depend on them. The question is, how do we do it?"

"I'd be willing to take a chance on fighting our way out when the fat one's alone—if Mr. Tom goes out—but I'm afraid he'd do something mean—something vicious. Mr. Tom you could maybe lay out, but if you hit Ellis with a stone, chances are he wouldn't even feel it till a day later."

"If Pa came to look for us, the first place he'd come to is here," I said. "He'd expect to work up the river from here. He'll see the raft."

"If it's still there. We don't know that it is."

"Don't be so encouraging."

Sim raised a warning hand. "They're coming back."

"Let 'em," I said. "I'll say what I feel like saying."

"The only thing you could do," said Sim, "is talk your way out. Maybe if you talk enough, they'll be glad to boot us out."

The fat man and Mr. Tom came back. Ellis came in first, Mr. Tom after him.

I looked from one face to the other. Mr. Tom was sort of glum. Ellis was beaming. Whatever it was Mr. Tom had wanted to talk about, the fat man had had his way about it. And Mr. Tom had agreed again, as before. All the better, I thought, for Sim's plan to divide them, if we had the chance to do it.

"And now, boys," said Ellis, "if you've finished with breakfast, we'll all get to work."

10.

We Try  
to Escape

MOST OF THAT morning Ellis and Mr. Tom worked at their counterfeiting. There wasn't much we could help them with, but the fat man took to ordering us around as if we were being paid a salary. It wouldn't even have taken two men to do the work they did. Mr. Tom prepared the metal. Ellis moulded in two halves of the coin. Then Mr. Tom did the milling with a very fine-set file. And at last Ellis touched it up.

Ellis was very critical of his work.

"That one," he would say, "is a masterpiece." Or, "That one's a work of art." Or, "This one will do, but it's inferior."

I couldn't see any difference among them.

It was slow work. Once in a while Mr. Tom and Ellis made remarks to each other. I listened. From what they had said before, and what they said now, I could piece things together. They had had a run-in with the police in Chicago and had left the city. They had come here to lie low for a while and build up some capital. One of them had first seen the cave on Bogus Bluff when he had taken a tour of southern Wisconsin years ago.

When Ellis wasn't talking to Mr. Tom, he was talking to us. He took such pride in his work! He couldn't help comparing it with the work of other famous counterfeiters—not just those who made coins, but all kinds. He went on about James Macpherson. Macpherson was a man in England who said he had translated the poems of somebody named Ossian, who was supposed to have been an Irish poet dating back to about the third century. He made quite a thing of it. The poems were published



in 1760, and nobody questioned them. Then he raised money so that he could travel to collect more manuscripts by Ossian. He came back with another long epic he said Ossian had written about his father. Sam Johnson doubted the whole thing, though, and the last epic Macpherson said he had found was a little too much. Johnson challenged Macpherson to produce the original manuscripts, but Macpherson couldn't, since he had invented them all.

"But did they hang Macpherson?" trumpeted Ellis. "No, sir, they did not. They elected him a Member of Parliament, which only goes to show that the great mass of people tend to reward a clever rogue as much as a man of genuine genius. And who is to say which has the greater merit?"

"Well, they found Macpherson out in the end, didn't they?" I said. "So it's the man who deserves it who's better."

"Ah, but not until after he was dead—so that couldn't hurt Macpherson."

"His reputation's shot," I said.

"Faugh! A paltry thing! It's just what the people make it." I wouldn't agree.

He talked about Bastianini. He was a good sculptor who worked on orders for an art dealer who wanted to pass off his work as genuine Renaissance art. He did well, too. He was a real artist, though, even if he was imitating. He did a cupid "by Michelangelo" everybody but his dealer thought was the real thing.

Along about noon it was plain that Mr. Tom was growing increasingly nervous. "Too much talk," he said. "It's time to close up, too. If anybody comes in, it'll be this afternoon. Saturdays might bring out kids. I told you we should've got rid of these two."

"Let's have something to eat," said the fat man. "I'll think about your problem, Mr. Tom."

Mr. Tom got out the food again and we ate.

After that lunch the fat man sat eying us speculatively for quite a while. Then he sighed, shrugged his heavy shoulders, and nodded to Mr. Tom.

"I'm sorry, boys," he said, "but we must leave the cave on a

little errand. Unhappily, since one of you sets great store by Mr. Emerson's essay on self-reliance, I don't think it would be wise of us to trust you not to try to escape. We'll have to tie you up until we return."

I didn't say anything. I wasn't going to lie and say I didn't intend to try to escape. Sim didn't talk, either.

"Mr. Tom, the ropes."

Mr. Tom dug around in their stuff and came up with some old, worn ropes. He came over. He took me first. He knew what he was doing. First he tied my hands behind my back. Then he tied Sim's hands the same way. Then he sat us down and tied our feet. Then he tied us together, back to back. There we were, tied up like a couple of chickens.

"Since we'll be within sight of the cave most of the time, we won't have to gag you," continued Ellis. "We'll be able to see anyone approaching, and we can get back here before them. Behave now, boys. I'm a tender soul; it would pain me to have to administer punishment."

Behave! I don't know how we could have done anything else, trussed up like that. I only hoped they wouldn't be gone too long. We could get mighty stiff tied up.

They went out of the place like men with a mission. First, though, they carefully closed the opening. Before they put the last stone in place, Ellis peered through, his eyes twinkling.

"Don't worry about air, boys. There's plenty of circulation through those crevices. It's a lot cooler than outside, too," he said.

Then the rock closed off the rest of the cave from the end we were in. I could hear them crawling toward the mouth of the cave.

"I just figured out," said Sim, "if it hadn't been for that treasure of yours, we'd have done like everybody else—just come in here, looked around a little, and beat it."

"I'm willing to take the blame," I said, "but don't forget it was you who got suspicious about this wall."

"You talked me into that treasure," said Sim, "or I'd no more'n looked at it."

"Anyway, that's water over the dam. Can we work off these ropes?" I wondered. "They look pretty old."

"They are old. But I don't know how we can manage it tied up this way. Can you move your fingers?"

"Oh, I can move my fingers," I said. "But I can't move 'em to any place. How about you?"

"Same," said Sim laconically.

"Anyway, the knots aren't where we can reach 'em, are they?"

We began to push toward each other, but that didn't work. We tried pulling apart. That didn't work, either. I groped for the knots around Sim's wrists, and he groped for mine. But Mr. Tom had been too smart for us. He had tied Sim high and me low. We didn't meet.

"There's one other thing," said Sim. "If we could get over next to the wall, one of those stones might be sharp enough."

"If we could get into position."

"Let's try it."

We tried to slide over toward the wall. Trouble was, Sim started for the wall nearest him, and I started for the one nearest me. We didn't budge.

"Let's get together," said Sim, irritated. "We'll aim for this wall. If you'd look before you move, you'd see there aren't any rocks worth trying on over there."

I looked. He was right.

We tried it again. This time we moved a little. It was awkward to move at all, and I had no idea of how rough that cave floor was until we began to slide our bottoms along on it.

Sim aimed for a little open space along the bottom of the blankets where we had slept the night before. At first it seemed only a short distance away. But after a few jerks and slides it seemed about a mile off.

We went over slow. Sometimes Sim pulled and I pushed. Sim dug his heels into the floor and inched his body over, while I pushed with my back and heels. Sometimes we edged along sideways. I thought for a while we wouldn't make it, it took so long. And for a few moments I wondered what I was going to tell Mother about how I had worn the seat of my pants—if I ever saw her again.

But we made it. We were both wet with the effort it took. We had to rest before we could begin to hunt up a stone that was in the right place for us to come up against the ropes.

But Sim had his eye on a projecting stone.

"Over this way," he said. "It'll just come up to that rope that ties us together. Once we're apart, we can move around till we can get at each other's knots."

We got over next to the stone. We worked ourselves into position so that the stone lay up against that part of the rope that was not against us, but taut between us when we pulled apart a little.

"That's it," said Sim judiciously. "That's just fine." He moved in closer. "Now then, we'll do it together, up and down. It won't be easy."

It took a little time before we got co-ordinated, but pretty soon we were sawing away against the jagged stone. It was slow going. Up and down. We had to sort of lift ourselves up, then let ourselves come down. After only a little of that, those ropes began to bite into us, too. Sitting quiet, they wouldn't have bothered us so much. But moving around, and then making the ropes taut—that did it. We were soon sore all over.

That wasn't the worst of it. The rope didn't seem to give any. But the rock did. Little pieces of stone and sand came drifting down. They fell between us, sometimes into our hands.

Suddenly Sim said, "We might as well stop."

"Stop!" I protested. "After all that work?"

"Yes, because twice as much work won't cut that rope."

"Why not?" I said. "I've seen it done a dozen times in the movies at the Electric. Tense strands of rope against the cutting edge of a rock—that always works."

"Sure, sure," said Sim patiently, "only this isn't really rock. It's a mixture of sandstone and limestone. It's too soft to cut, that's all."

"Even an old rope like this one?"

"Even an old rope like this."

It was discouraging. I thought of Emerson. What would he have to say in a situation like this? "Trust thyself . . . Insist on yourself." Now it was up to me. Sim's plan hadn't worked.



"Listen," I said, "tomorrow's Sunday."

"Sure," said Sim. "It might as well be any other day."

"Tomorrow I'll pester Ellis to take me to church. I'll tell him I promised Ma . . ."

"A lot he'd care."

"Oh, I don't know. He's a funny guy. He might do it."

"Suppose he does?"

"Well, then you'll be alone with Mr. Tom. That gives you an even chance. Just in case that don't work, I'll try to write a note tonight."

"In the dark?"

"I'm used to writing in the dark. I take my notebook along in my pocket all the time, and my pencil, when I go into the marshes, and I put down all kinds of notes in the dark. You do it by feel," I said. "I can write just about anything in the dark."

"O.K. So what then?"

"Well, I'll write a note and leave it in one of the prayer books in church. The next person who opens it will find it."

"When'll that be? Next Sunday?"

"Next service, I hope."

"Heck! next service might be a week away. Besides, most of the people who go to church, I notice, never so much as look into the prayer book. Maybe they know all the prayers by heart."

"Maybe it wouldn't do you any harm to pray a little yourself," I said. "None of your ideas has helped yet, and maybe a little prayer is just what you need."

"You lead and I'll follow," said Sim sarcastically.

I ignored him. "Then when Ellis isn't looking," I went on, "I'll slip the note into a prayer book. If he does take me, he'll stick to me like a leech to be sure I don't talk to anybody."

"What if you do?"

I considered that. "Ja, that's right," I said, "what if I do? He can't do anything in the middle of a lot of people, can he?"

"He will, though, just the same," said Sim. "You'd trust your luck—or your gall—too far."

"Well, I could find out what he'd do."

"Don't try it."

"In the movies, they always tell everybody he's crazy—it's usually a girl, though. It's easier to say girls are crazy, because everybody usually believes it."

"O.K. Suppose, though, Ellis won't take you to church."

"I haven't got that far yet."

"Well, I have. The groceries," said Sim. "The way we've been digging into 'em, they won't last long. They'll have to go in and buy. Maybe only one'll go."

"Or maybe both, and leave us tied up like this," I said.

I gave a quick, angry jerk. It seemed to me that one of the ropes was loose. I tried it again.

"Say, something's loosening up," said Sim.

One of the ropes that was wound around both of us was loose. All that wriggling across the floor and the rubbing it up and down against the rock in the wall must have loosened it. Both of us began to pull and twist. The rope grew steadily more loose.

"We can do it yet," I said. "Once we get untied . . ."

But I spoke too soon. Time had been passing. In the middle of what I was going to say I heard voices outside. It couldn't be anyone other than the two men, because, if they had been watching for anyone else to come, one of them would have been up in a hurry to gag us.

Sim heard them, too. He just sort of sagged together, disappointed. I was disappointed, too, but there was no use feeling bad about it. I figured I needed all my energy trying to match wits with them.

They were at the opening, removing the rocks. When they were two thirds of the way down, the fat man stepped through. He was smoking a cigar and carrying a lot of stuff. It took a minute or so to recognize the stuff. It was ours. Everything from under the lean-to on the raft! He threw it down beside the cane chair against the wall, and turned to us.

"Moved around some, eh?" he said jovially. "I'm happy to see that Mr. Tom didn't tie you too tightly. Ropes can be so uncomfortable and so inconvenient."

He came over to us and saw the loosened rope.

"Tch! How careless of Mr. Tom!" he said, and turned to the

skinny one, who had come in and was busy closing up the opening again. "Mr. Tom, untie the boys."

I saw that both Mr. Tom's pants legs and Ellis' were wet. Their shoes and stockings were dry, though. They had been in the water, with their pants rolled up. They had done something to our raft. Right away I figured they couldn't have set it afloat with the intention of making people think we were drowned, or else they'd have left our stuff to float away with it. So they must have done something else with it. But what? Take it apart? They hardly had time enough for that. Or had they? I didn't know how long they had been gone.

"What'd you do with our raft?" I asked.

"Mr. Tom wanted to cut it loose or take it apart," said Ellis. "I didn't. It struck me it might come in useful some time—who knows? Mr. Tom isn't much of a seaman, but I'm for a life on open water," he went on garrulously, "and I might start with a raft on the Wisconsin. A journey to the Mississippi, perhaps."

"What did you do with it?" I asked again, scarcely feeling Mr. Tom's roughness as he untied us.

"We compromised by unloading your things," said the fat man, "and concealing the raft. No harm's come to it."

I sat rubbing my arms where the rope had gone around me.

"It pleased us," Ellis went on, "to see how many edibles were left on your raft. We were afraid we'd have to go into town tonight after groceries, but your admirable foresight has now made that unnecessary. It's a long walk to Gotham, and we have an understandable reluctance to make too many public appearances."

I looked at Sim. He was the picture of disgust. I could see he was blaming me, because it was I who had insisted on taking along plenty of food.

Mr. Tom now went over to our things and began to take out our groceries and put them with theirs. There was a whole ring of Kirschner's bologna and some of their garlic sausage, too. We had had four rings and two whole garlic sausages to start with, so we hadn't done too badly with it. There were two full boxes of raisins. There was still a whole loaf of Mother's bread.

"Homemade bread," said Ellis, contemplating it and wetting his lips in anticipation.

"Ma's one of the best cooks in town," I said. "There ought to be a piece of her devil's food in there somewhere, too."

Mr. Tom found it and held it out to Ellis.

"You try that," I said to the fat man. "You'll never taste a better piece of devil's food cake. Her sunshine cake's good, too, but we ate that all up. And her white delicate with chocolate frosting—it makes my mouth water to think of it." It did, too.

The fat man took the cake and ate it with slow relish. "Mighty good," he said. "Superlative, in fact. I can see why you're putting on fat."

"I'm muscular," I said, "not fat."

Ellis just grinned. "Man," he said, "has an ironic capacity for self-deception. Don't lie to yourself, boy. You should remember Emerson a little better. Keep the integrity of your own mind. There's no room in it for self-deception."

"Ralph Waldo Emerson," I said, "was never tied up like a chicken in a cave."

"Life is full of a variety of experiences," said the fat man calmly. "How you adjust to them makes your measure as a man, boy. Whether experiences are good or bad depends on you. Nothing is bad unless you believe it to be so. Nothing is good unless you believe it to be good."

"You sound like my grandpa Adams," I said.

"You evidently have an admirable grandfather," he said.

"I sure have," I said, "and I wish he were right here with us now."

"Could he help you?" asked Ellis quietly. "I doubt it." He reached over and picked up his copy of Emerson's *Essays*. He tossed it over to me. "Here. Read *Self-Reliance* once more. 'Nothing,' says Emerson, 'can bring you peace but yourself.'" He grinned.

I picked up the book and opened it as if I were seeing again a long-lost friend.





## 11.

### Free

### Once More

THE NEXT MORNING was just the same as the morning before.

The fat man got up early, before anyone else, and went to work at his counterfeiting. He was running low on raw metal, I noticed, and it wouldn't be long before he had to dig up some more, wherever he got it. He couldn't just walk out of the cave and pick it up. Chances were, it would mean a trip to Chicago. But perhaps he didn't intend to make any more nickels.

I got up early, too, and went over to him.

"Mr. Ellis," I said, "I've got a serious problem."

He turned a sympathetic face to me. "Can I help?"

"I think so. You see, Mr. Ellis," I said earnestly, "today's Sunday."

"So it is."

"Being Sunday, I promised Ma I'd go to church," I said.

"Go to church!" he exclaimed with the look of a man who had just been hit by a thunderbolt.

"Church," I said. "I always go to church. Every Sunday. I'd hate to miss it. I never yet broke a promise to Ma," I added, feeling virtuous.

Ellis still looked at me as if he couldn't believe what his ears told him he had heard.

I never blinked. I looked him right in the eye. His eyes were wide. They were a soft gray-blue with a touch of green. They were a little bloodshot, too.

He began to laugh. At first it was only a chuckle deep inside

him, then he burst into such loud laughter that it woke both Sim and Mr. Tom. I waited until it had subsided.

Then I said, "It's a funny thing about having a mother. If I didn't go to church, I'd never hear the last of it. I'm bound to go. I suffer twice as much if I don't go as if I do."

"You don't strike me exactly as the kind of boy who likes to go to church," said the fat man thoughtfully.

"Who's talkin' about church?" demanded Mr. Tom, getting out of his blankets and reaching for his shoes.

"The boy would like to go to church," said Ellis dryly.

"Well, get that out of his head," said Mr. Tom.

"Gently, gently, Mr. Tom," said Ellis softly, still looking attentively at me. "Doesn't it occur to you," he said to me, "that it might be impossible to find your kind of church at a moment's notice?"

"I said 'church,' Mr. Ellis."

"I see. Any church will do?"

"I promised Ma I'd go to church," I said.

"Interesting," said the fat man.

"Ellis," said Mr. Tom, raising his voice, "you ain't listenin' to that kid?" He sounded scared.

Ellis didn't answer. He just sat looking at me. I couldn't tell what he was thinking about.

Mr. Tom pushed over to the fat man's side and took him fiercely by the elbow. "Ellis!" he hollered. "You hear me?"

Ellis shook Mr. Tom's hand loose. "Life is filled with challenges," he said. "This boy challenges me."

"You must be crazy to even think of it," said Mr. Tom, talking fast. "You can't go into town with him. Nobody ain't seen a kid with us before. They'll think . . ."

"Be still, Mr. Tom."

"I got a right to say what I think."

"You said it. I abominate repetition." He was still looking at me. Now he said, "You can hardly go to church dressed like that, boy."

"You brought up our stuff," I said. "I got a clean pair of pants and a pullover shirt."

"Get dressed," said the fat man.

I thought at first he was joking. I never really believed he intended to take me. I didn't think it would be so easy.

"Go on," he said. "Change your clothes."

I took off my overalls quick and got into my pants and shirt before he could change his mind. He sat there watching me, with a little smile on his lips and his chin resting on his cupped hand. One of his fingers was moving up and down in his beard, and his eyes looked as if he were laughing behind them.

"I'm ready," I said.

"There's plenty of time. We'll eat breakfast first."

It *was* early. I couldn't help feeling he was playing with me. After breakfast the game might be over and I might be sorry I said anything.

The fat man sat there eating and chuckling to himself. His eyes twinkled and whenever he chuckled, his fat cheeks crinkled up and almost hid his eyes. Mr. Tom ate in silence, glowering at me. It was plain to see he didn't have any love for me. The way Sim looked was enough to say he was just waiting on the next move, and, judging by the expression on his face, he was sure it would be bad. Sim and optimism always were strangers; he always could see the dark side before the light.

After breakfast the fat man said, "Of course, my boy, being a rational lad, you realize there are conditions to your going to church?"

"Sure," I said brashly. "I don't talk to anybody, and so on."

"So on?"

"Well, try to run for it."

Ellis smiled. "That's not quite all," he said gently. He turned and looked toward Sim. "Mr. Tom, tie that boy up. And gag him, if necessary."

Mr. Tom jumped up and got the rope.

If looks were acts, the look Sim gave me would have skinned me alive and tossed the carcass out for the wolves.

"If you give me the slightest trouble," said the fat man to me, "if you raise a ruckus and bring somebody down on us, your friend here . . ." He made a significant gesture across his throat.

Sim looked goggle-eyed.

"Sim'll pray," I said, "so I can control my impulses."

"I'd just as soon take care of 'em both now," said Mr. Tom.

"You're too eager, Mr. Tom," said Ellis. "A charge of counterfeiting is one thing to face. Murder is quite another." He turned to me. "If you're ready, come."

While Mr. Tom was tying Sim, the fat man removed the stones from the opening. He left them for Mr. Tom to replace and crawled through. I followed him all the way out of the cave.

I never thought it was so good to breathe fresh air again. It was wonderful. The sun was shining, and a little wind was blowing out of the west, and the morning was hot. The day was going to be a scorcher. I said so to the fat man as we scrambled down Bogus Bluff.

He nodded. "All the better," he said. "It's not likely we'll have visitors climbing the hill in hot weather."

Up ahead lay the bend of the Wisconsin and the two sand bars we had passed, it seemed, a long time ago. Soon the trees shut the river from sight, and below us the road curved along the bluff.

Ellis seemed to know just where he was going. On his way to town for groceries he had passed a country road on which stood a church; it was about halfway to Gotham, along a little stream that flowed into the Wisconsin. He led the way through the warbler-sweet morning straight toward it.

It was a little clapboard building, painted white not long before. It fairly shone in the sun. Catbirds sang in a bush near the door, and scolded when we walked up. They probably had a nest in the bush. And a brown thrasher running around the bush probably nested there, too.

There was nothing to say what kind of church it was. A slate hung next to the door. The text for the day had been scrawled on it in chalk. It was Proverbs, 16, 8: *Better is a little with righteousness, than great revenues without right.*

We went inside. Nobody was there yet. It was cool inside, and musty, with that kind of smell always to be found in a building that isn't used very much. I looked around for prayer books, so I could slip the note I had written last night into one of them. There weren't any. There were only songbooks. And they weren't



In racks on the backs of the seats, as in St. Jude's back in Sac Prairie. They were right on the seat with us.

I picked one up, but Ellis' eyes were right on me. So I just flipped a few pages and put it down again. The note was down in my right shoe. I was afraid I might be searched or something, so I had hidden it just under my ankle. I could get it out easy enough when I wanted it.

After a while a few people came in. First one and two, then families. In all there must have been a hundred people there before the preacher came. He was a small man with a white beard and deep-set eyes. He wore his hair long. He was dressed in a plain black suit. He didn't have on a cassock or a robe of any kind, nothing to make him look like a preacher, not even a turn-about collar.

He opened the service with a prayer of welcome. Then two old ladies got up and sang. It was terrible. It reminded me of the singing of Ella and Thekla Kraft in the Park Hall at home. Maybe once they had been good singers, but they hadn't known when to stop. Then the audience joined in, and we had to take up the songbooks. I saw it coming and had the note all ready to slip between the pages. I did it without Ellis seeing a thing, and put the book down as soon as the song was ended. Ellis didn't sing, but I did, as loud as I could.

Then the preacher took up the text, after making an announcement or two. For such a small man he had a big voice. And he knew how to use it. He rolled it and thundered it through the little church. He took up the text, examined it, turned it inside out, and then gave it straight from the shoulder to his flock. He as much as told them they were all sinners, they were all worshipping the dollar, they had forgotten the great moral laws, they didn't know what justice was any more, they would lie and cheat for a few pennies, and so on. In no time at all I was feeling guilty.

I glanced at Ellis. He sat there with his eyes half-closed and a little smile on his face. If he felt guilty about anything, he certainly didn't show it. But somehow he looked just about as holy and un sinful as a deacon of the church. His whole attitude—the way he sat with his shoulders hunched and his head bowed, the

way his face looked, so peaceful—seemed to say: Rest thy weary burden on my broad shoulders for a while, Preacher.

Just then the preacher shouted, "And how often does the face of iniquity bear the countenance of a saint?"

I couldn't resist poking the fat man and grinning.

He grinned right back. I could tell then that Sim had been right. Ellis was really the wicked one of the two. I could figure out that the way he took Emerson's *Self-Reliance* was to mean: Be wicked, but don't get caught! And that was all the sermon meant to him, too.

A little before the service ended, Ellis touched my arm and gestured toward the door. When the congregation stood to sing the final hymn, the fat man slipped out of the pew, shepherding me before him. We went up the aisle and out of the door into the hot June day.

Ellis made his way across the road into a little woods there. I knew he meant to get out of sight, so that nobody could stop to ask any questions, the way church people often do to make a stranger feel welcome in their midst. From the woods he made his way across the fields and up into the hills. He followed the hills back to Bogus Bluff.

My steps dragged going up the Bluff. Hot as it was, I hated to go back to that dank prison. The Wisconsin never looked so good. And the two big sand bars, gleaming in the sun, looked like gold to me. The fat man, who was behind me, wasn't at all impatient; when I went slow, he did; he didn't urge me on. But all the time he kept smiling, as if secretly pleased with himself. He had known I wouldn't make a move to get away or draw attention to us as long as Sim was in any danger.

I took a last deep breath of fresh air at the mouth of the cave before I went in.

Sim's eyes lit up to see us coming back.

The fat man motioned to Mr. Tom to close up the opening once more. He sat down in the rocking chair.

"Elevating," he murmured. "An elevating sermon, indeed. I've seldom heard one more to the point."

"Arrgh!" muttered Mr. Tom.

"The lad made but one attempt," the fat man went on.

I stared at him.

He pulled my note out of his pocket and read it. "‘Help! We’re trapped in Bogus Bluff cave by a gang of counterfeiters. Sim Jones, Steve Grendon.’ Somewhat imaginative, but it has a flair." He chuckled. "Written in the dark, I would judge." He took a match from a folder, lit it, and touched the flame to my note.

Sim gave me a look as much as to say he knew I’d botch it. "And now," said the fat man, "to work."

"It’s Sunday," said Mr. Tom. "The kids."

Ellis looked thoughtful. "It’s so hot out, I doubt that anyone would be inclined to climb the bluff. Still . . ." He shrugged. "I suppose it would be best."

Mr. Tom went for the ropes.

That Sunday afternoon was the most miserable afternoon I ever spent. I guess Sim would say the same. There we were, tied hand and foot, back to back—and gagged! Oh, but it was uncomfortable! The gag wasn’t too tight, but it cut in after a while, and my throat got so dry. I was cramped, too, but after a little I just got numb. The fat man was wrong, too, about not having visitors. A gang of kids did come into the cave. We could hear them talking. They crawled right up to the wall. From what they said, I could tell they were from Richland Center. Boy Scouts on a field trip. But they didn’t stay long, and, anyway, even if we’d wanted to, we were too numb to stir.

All afternoon, except for the time that visitors were in the cave, the fat man and Mr. Tom worked. They used up the last of the metal, they made all the nickels they could out of it, and then they began to clean up. They took apart the big table. Every leg came off, and the flat top was broken down into two pieces, which explained how something so big had been got into the cave in the first place. They carefully piled everything that belonged to Sim and me on one side.

Along toward evening the fat man said, "Mr. Tom!" and pointed to us.

"Now?" Mr. Tom seemed reluctant.

Ellis nodded.

Mr. Tom came over and took the gags out of our mouths. Then he untied us.

"I regret that such treatment was necessary, boys," said Ellis. "It goes quite beyond the duties of a host toward his guests. But, I fear"—and here he clucked in disapproval—"the crude attempt to communicate with the outside world by means of—of all things—a hymnal, could hardly be overlooked."

Stiff and numb as Sim was, he managed to kick me. I was past feeling anything.

"Further," continued the fat man, "I'm afraid we can't offer you any food. I rather think we'll need it ourselves. Besides, whether or not you have supper won't matter very much to you in a little while."

Sim swallowed hard, and I began to get a little uneasy again.

"If—that is—you're sensible boys," continued Ellis. "It may not, after all, be necessary to take drastic measures." He smiled friendly like, but his eyes were as cold as steel.

"Hey!" said Mr. Tom. "What's comin' off now?"

Ellis only waved a fleshy hand at him. "Now, boys, if—I say *if*—we decide to set you free, will you promise on your honor to say nothing of what happened here? Neither of us nor our occupation? And will you promise to follow my directions in regard to your next few hours?"

Sim was ready to promise anything, to take an oath, to seal it with blood. "Sure," he said, "I only want to get outa here."

I wasn't so sure. For one thing, I never broke a promise in my life. If I made a promise, I kept it. Sim made promises, too, but he could somehow wangle his way out of them, unless they were made in such language that he couldn't; then he kept them, complaining mightily. Ellis waited on me.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "Maybe we ought to tell. After all," I said, "you're breaking the law."

"How disappointingly ethical this lad is," said the fat man. Just the same, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

Mr. Tom pushed forward. "Ellis," he said, "I got the best way there is. They can't talk."



"Mr. Tom is a sadist," said Ellis. "No, Mr. Tom. Permit him to think it out."

Sim kicked me again, hard. He wasn't so stiff any more.

"You have just twenty seconds," said the fat man to me. He took out his watch and consulted it.

"All right," I said, "I promise—on my honor."

"Very well. I accept that promise. I expect it to be kept. If it isn't—well, Mr. Tom has ways of finding out, and he gets around. Now, then—you'll take your things back to the raft. Mr. Tom will go down with you and show you where the raft is hidden. He'll help you get it back into the water. Once it's launched, I suggest you continue well downstream before you try to land."

"How far?" I wanted to know. "We're strange on this part of the river, and it's going to be dark pretty soon."

"An hour's journey," said the fat man.

"All right," I said. "We'll go as far as we can. But I have to telephone home to let them know."

"Good-by, boys," said the fat man softly. His eyes twinkled and danced. His lips trembled. I was sure that deep inside he was rolling with laughter.

That was the last I saw of him. Carrying our things, we followed Mr. Tom out of the cave, down the winding path on the slope of Bogus Bluff, and along the river to a bushy little rise where the raft was concealed. We put our things on board, and with Mr. Tom's help, we pushed her down the slope right into the water. Everything was intact. Our poles were still there. Our floats were sound. Sim and I got on to the raft and turned around to say good-by to Mr. Tom. He was already gone.

"Let's get out of here—fast," said Sim. "You and your Winnebago treasure!" he added in a voice that was syrupy with scorn.

We poled out into the current. It was already sundown. We wouldn't have an hour of light. Even if we had wanted to, we couldn't stay on the water for an hour and still hope to land somewhere to find a telephone and lodge the raft where she might be loaded on to a truck to be taken back to Sac Prairie. Or maybe the fat man had planned it that way.

Somehow, it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that we were on the Wisconsin again. Nighthawks and bank swallows and chimney swifts were flying low over the water, catching insects. Bats chattered high in the air, and the great blue herons were coming into the shadowed bars to fish. The smell in the air was wonderful. It was the smell of water and leaves, of grasses and flowers and wet sand. The hotness of the day was gone. The river breathed into the evening and cooled the air. In the woods along shore the wood thrushes were beginning to sing their liquid songs, and among the willows the song sparrows spilled their threnodies into the dusk.

We went downstream, watching for a place where we could land. For quite a while the river followed the road; then the two separated a little and the woods closed us in again. Sim talked a good deal. After being silent for so long in that cave, he more than made up for it. Most of it was nothing but laying the blame for everything onto me. I was used to it. I didn't care. As long as I could hear the solitary sandpipers crying along the water and the first whippoorwills begin to sing in the dark places, as long as I could see a hawk soaring as free as I felt, Sim could talk all he wanted to.

"There!" I said at last. "There's a place. A road comes right down to the water's edge—there's a little pier or something—and a farmhouse up the road. Telephone lines, too."

"It's not an hour yet," said Sim, looking nervously back up-river.

"That worries me," I said, "a lot. I didn't exactly promise an hour, anyway. I said we'd try."

"There's smoke back there," said Sim. "Off the Bluff, too."

"Let it burn," I said, "whatever it is. Pole for shore."

## 12.

### Home

THE NAME on the mailbox at the farm up the road from the river was Omar Falkner. He was a short, stub-nosed man, brown as a berry, with a couple of gold teeth right in the front of his mouth. He was just coming out of the barn on his way to the milkhouse when we turned in.

"Mr. Falkner," I hollered, "may we use your telephone?"

He just waved us to the house, pointing toward the back door.

We went around and knocked. The door stood open beyond the screen. A fat, little, freckle-faced woman came toward the screen saying, "Come in."

"Mr. Falkner said we could use the telephone," I said.

"Sure, boys," she said. "Right over there on the wall. Just ring for Central."

"It's long distance—to Sac Prairie," I said. "We'll find out what it costs and pay you."

"That's all right."

I rang through, gave our number, and waited. It took quite a while. The country line buzzed and hummed, and sometimes fragments of talk came through, as if the centrals crossed lines or something. But at last Mother came on.

"Ma?" I said. "This is me."

"Where in the world are you?" she hollered. "It's about time you called. We were just worried sick." She went right on talking without giving me a chance to say another word.

I covered the mouthpiece with one hand and turned around. "Whereabouts are we, Mrs. Falkner?" I asked. "I have to tell my folks where to come for us. Our raft's down at the river."

"Tell him to drive right straight to Orion," she said. She gave me all the directions.

As soon as Mother paused for breath, I told her that we were ready to come home and to put Father on the telephone.

"I should think you're ready!" hollered Mother. "The very idea of keeping us without a word like this! You could have been drowned. We'd never have known it . . ."

"Ma," I hollered, "tell Pa I want to talk to him."

Mother finally let go the telephone so that Father could talk.

"Pa," I said, "you can come and get us now. We're down near Orion." I gave him all the directions as to how to reach us once he left Highway 60. "We're at the river road just below Omar Falkner's farm. Can you find us?"

"I guess so."

"Can you bring a truck or something so we can take the raft back with us?"

"I'll see what I can do. You're sure you want the raft?"

"Sure, I'm sure," I said. "We might want to make another trip sometime."

"I certainly hope not!" said Father fervently, which gave me some idea of how Mother had been carrying on.

Mother got hold of the telephone again. "Where have you been?" she cried.

"In the cave," I said. "We started to look for that treasure."

"You must be out of your mind," she said.

When I heard that, the fat man and Mr. Tom already seemed to be part of a dream I had had last year. "Ma," I interrupted, "this is long distance. It's costing me money."

"Oh, that's right," she said. "Well, Dad'll be right down."

"Tell Sim's folks," I said. "Good-by, now."

"What'd they say?" asked Sim, when I turned from the telephone for a moment before calling to find out how much the fee was.

"Pa's coming," I said. "The rest you can guess."

I found how much the call cost and paid Mrs. Falkner. That left me with four pennies and a nickel. I almost paid Mrs. Falkner the nickel but discovered in time it was the counterfeit Liberty-head 1913 nickel the fat man had handed me to look



at. I must have unconsciously slipped it into my pocket and nobody had noticed. I couldn't honestly have given her that worthless nickel.

She put the money into her apron pocket and stood for a moment sort of measuring us. Then she said, "You boys must've been on the river suppertime. Have you et?"

"No, ma'am," said Sim.

"But we're not hungry," I said. "At least, not much. And Pa's coming after us."

"Sac Prairie's a good time away from here," she answered. "If you're not hungry now, you will be by the time your pa gets here. There's plenty to eat."

She brought out some cold pork, bread, butter, plenty of milk, and a big bowl of fresh strawberries, with cream and cake. We didn't waste any time; we dug into it. While we were eating, Mr. Falkner came in with fresh milk for the icebox. He looked at us and shook his head.

"You boys haven't had a meal for quite a spell," he said, "the way you eat."

"We always eat this way," said Sim.

"Where've you been on your raft?"

I told him we had been hunting the lost Winnebago treasure on Bogus Bluff.

He began to laugh. "Oh, that treasure again," he said. "Why, boys, I kinda think that's just a tall story. There's one tale about a rock slide sinking a boat put in by a storm alongside the Bluff, but the closest they ever got to verifying that was some timbers sunk deep down in the river bed near Lone Rock—they found them when they were fixing to build the bridge. Then there's another story about a gang of robbers holding up a pay boat, and caching the gold and then getting shot. There's a third story about the storm and the sinking boat and the Indians . . ."

"That's the one," I said.

He sort of snickered. "Well, the boat may've gone down, all right, but I don't think any gold got lost or planted hereabouts. It makes good stuff for Steve Fogo's paper over in Richland

Center, though—and they say if you say a thing often enough, you'll find quite a lot of people willing to believe it."

There went another illusion. Life, I was rapidly coming to see, was just making progress from one disillusionment to another.

Sim said crushingly, "That's about what I thought all the time."

I gave him a reproachful look. But there was nothing I could say.

It took Father about two hours to get to where we were. We had gone to the raft, and Sim kept showing his flashlight in the darkness, though it could hardly be seen against the light from the late-rising moon. Father had Grandfather Adams with him, knowing he would have to have help getting the raft on to the pick-up he had brought.

"What took you so long, Pa?" I asked.

"What took me so long?" he shouted. "That's a fine question from a boy who took several days to get around to telephoning us. I had to borrow a truck and talk your grandpa into coming along."

"A hasty tongue," observed Grandfather, "possesses a genius for speaking the wrong words." He laughed. "Did you boys find treasure?"

"No, sir," said Sim.

"But we got lots of experience," I said fervently.

"No time for talk," said Father. "Let's get that raft on the truck and head for home."

It took some doing, but we managed it. First we got the raft in out of the water, right up on the road. The road looked like one used to back boats down into the water, so it was just right. Father backed the pickup around, and the four of us managed to lift the raft by one end and edge it into the box of the pickup. The rest was easy.

"There's enough room left for you boys," said Father. "You won't mind riding the box if you could stand the raft for a week."

I didn't feel like arguing. I wouldn't, anyway, if it meant displacing Grandfather Adams from the front seat. I climbed

up into the box. Sim came after. We sat back against the cab, a little cramped by the raft, but not much. I would probably have complained about it, only the memory of being tied in the cave was still too vivid at this moment.

"Well, we still got the raft," I said. "Maybe later on we can make a trip to Prairie du Chien."

"Ha!" snorted Sim. "I can just see that! Your ma'll fix that good!"

I knew he was right, so I didn't say anything more.

We jolted up the country road, waving and hollering at Omar Falkner and his wife, who were outside, standing under their Delco light, to watch us go past. Once on the highway, the going was smoother. The way he pushed the car, Father was in a hurry to get home.

We rode in silence. We were very tired now. Sim's head kept nodding, and finally he went to sleep. Tired as I was, I couldn't sleep. The sounds and smells of the night kept me awake. And the moon shining. It was a bright night, now that the moon was up above the trees. For a long way we went alongside the river, right past Bogus Bluff, and the smell of the water lay on the road. In some places fog was forming, and in low, marshy places the fireflies winked and shone like a faraway city. Whippoorwills sang from the woods, sometimes so close to the road as to be almost deafening, sometimes in the distance, so they sounded like an echo.

We wound around among the hills to Gotham, and then through a flat stretch of prairie country to Spring Green, passing Lone Rock west of town. Then we were back along the river again, in familiar country, between Sac Prairie and Spring Green, all hills on the left and lowland and river on the right. Here fireflies were thick, and the fog was thick, too, and rich with swamp musk, with once in a while the fragrance of blue flags in it. It was the old, long-known country of whippoorwills and owls, of foxes yawping and dogs barking across the valley of the Wisconsin, of rare wildcats and once-in-a-while wolves, of raccoons and deer and thousands of birds, of frogs and toads singing, the country of Cassell Prairie, the Fair Valley store, Great-uncle Joe's farm, and Grell's Creek. . . .

We rattled over the bridge above the creek before I knew it. I leaned over and woke Sim. "We're coming to home," I said. "Wake up."

He struggled to wake, and demanded to know where we were. I told him.

Father drove in up along the Lower Mill Road. He went straight to Sim's house to let him off.

"I'll bring your things down to the shop," I said.

"So long," he said. "Thanks, Mr. Grendon."

We went on home.

I hopped out of the box before Father could get out of the car. "What about the raft?" I asked. "Maybe we ought to put her into the river down across from the harness shop?"

"We can do that in the morning. Get into the house."

I went in. I knew when I saw the light in the kitchen that Mother was still up. She was standing there with one arm akimbo when I came in, and her bright blue eyes were on fire.

"Look at that!" she said, pointing to the clock. "What an hour to come home! Couldn't you telephone us early enough to at least get you home by dark?"

I shot a glance at the clock. It was past midnight.

"No, Ma," I said, "I couldn't. We just couldn't make shore before the time we called. Honest! We had to look for some place where we could load up that raft."

"That raft, indeed! We'll at least get enough out of it to fill the woodbox."

"Oh, Ma, no!" I hollered.

Father came in. "Oh, for God's sake, stop all this arguing."

Grandfather Adams came in, too. He sat down and tipped his hat back on his head. His eyes danced.

"This boy's got to come to an understanding with us, Will," said Mother. "We've been putting it off too long. It might as well be now as ever."

Father raised his eyes heavenward as much as to call on God to witness the cross he bore.

"Ma wants to saw up my raft," I cried.

"Well, nobody's going to saw it up. It's half Sim's, your mother forgets," said Father.



“Now, Stephen,” began Mother.

Once more Father interrupted. “Before another word,” he said, looking at me, “you go out and clear your stuff and Sim’s off the raft. If we’re to put it into the water in the morning, I’ll be out of here with it before you’re out of bed, if I know you.”

“All right, Pa,” I said, and ran out of the house before Mother could protest.

I took all the time I could about cleaning off the raft. I separated Sim’s things from mine on the back porch and left them there. It didn’t make any difference—Mother was still waiting. She hadn’t yet had her say. She meant to have it.

“Just where were you all that time?” she asked.

I didn’t want to lie. I hated lying. I could stand just about anything else, but not lying. “Ma, we were in the cave,” I said.

“In the cave?” she went on, raising her voice. “What on earth were you doing in the cave? And just look at your pants!”

“We were just in the cave,” I said helplessly. “We went in to look for that treasure.”

Grandfather Adams stirred himself. He had leaned his chair back against the kitchen wall; now he brought it forward a little way. “You seem to have left the gold behind,” he said.

“Sure,” I said. “We figured it belonged to the government anyway.”

“Stephen, you didn’t find any real money?” demanded Mother.

“No,” I said truthfully, “we never caught sight of any real money. We sure looked, though.”

The thought of how they had waited while we hunted the cave made her indignant all over again. “The very idea,” she said, “not to at least telephone us and let us know! You might know we’d worry. You’ll just have to learn not to be so careless. I don’t know what’s to become of today’s young people, I really don’t. They’re so thoughtless, so irresponsible . . .”

“I’m not irresponsible,” I said. “I take responsibilities.”

“But you don’t live up to them,” Mother came back. “If you did, you’d have thought about how we’d worry and kept in touch with us.”

“There wasn’t any telephone there,” I said. “All the farms

down there just don't have telephones. We couldn't leave where we were because if we moved the raft down the river, we'd lose a heck of a lot of time trying to get back. Once we left the cave, we put in the first place we saw with telephone wires and called up."

"It just proves how thoughtless you are," Mother continued. "You might have left the cave earlier in the day and called Dad in time. Just look at the hour!"

"One o'clock," I said.

"Yes, and first thing in the morning you'll have to get up and mow the lawn."

"And weed the garden," I said. "I know."

"Now, then," she went on, "just throw your clothes down the clothes chute."

"All of 'em? I haven't used some of 'em."

"All," said Mother inexorably. "You can't tell what they might have been exposed to. There are germs everywhere."

Mother always talked about germs as if they were invisible little animals just waiting to jump on human beings and begin eating. I took the pile of clothing, fresh as well as used, crossed to the clothes chute in the pantry, and threw everything down.

"Now take your things out of your pockets," commanded Mother.

I took everything out—the jackknife, the four pennies, and the nickel, some fish line, half a package of spearmint gum, three pieces of anise candy in waxed paper, a red handkerchief, my notebook and attached pencil. They made a small pile on the oilcloth-covered kitchen table.

"Just leave them there," said Mother. "You can get them in the morning. Now I want you to promise such a thing won't ever happen again."

"Oh, Ma," I protested, "how can I make a promise like that? You'd think I did something on purpose."

"I suppose you didn't! You just didn't think. That's the trouble with young people today—they don't think, they don't care enough to think. Now promise!"

"Ma, I can promise it won't happen like that again on purpose—if I can help it."

Grandfather Adams burst into laughter. "Rose," he said, "the Inquisition had nothing on you. You're forgetting he's a boy, not a paragon. And you wouldn't really want a paragon."

"Pa, you're always sticking up for him," said Mother, exasperated.

"I just want to put things in balance," said Grandfather, pushing his hat still farther back on his head. "It's past one o'clock in the morning, and if you had your way you'd still be nagging the boy at three. What's the sense of demanding foolish promises?"

"We've got to come to an understanding, Pa," said Mother.

"Ma, I understand you," I said, "and you understand me."

"Don't get sassy," said Mother.

"Great God in heaven; woman, let the boy alone!" roared Grandfather, coming down to the floor on the forelegs of the chair and getting to his feet, all in one movement. "He's just suffered one of life's little tragedies. After going out for a box of gold, he's come back with this!"

He bent over the table and spread apart the little pile of things I had taken from my pockets.

"Pa, you try my patience," said Mother. "You make it hard for me to raise the boy the way he has to be raised."

"Be sensible, and try to close the book tonight—don't start on the second chapter as soon as he's up in the morning," said Grandfather. "Look at the time!"

Father spoke at last. "That's right," he said. "It's high time we were all in bed." He looked at me. "Get upstairs, Steve."

I flashed a look of gratitude at Grandfather Adams and made for the stair door. I was so tired after that ordeal I could have dropped off to sleep standing beside the kitchen table.

"And don't forget to throw every stitch you have on down the chute," Mother hollered after me.



## 13.

### Grandfather

### Tests My Honor

I FINISHED mowing the lawn all the way down to the grain elevator by the middle of the morning. I should have taken Sim's stuff down to him, but I knew he wouldn't be in a hurry, anyway. So I went into the house for Sunday's funny papers to add to my collection in the summer kitchen.

"You all finished?" asked Mother.

"Ja," I said.

"That's good. There are some doughnuts in the drawer if you want some."

I went to the bread drawer for raised doughnuts. I was positive that not another woman in town could make raised doughnuts like Mother's. Sim and Carlie, Robin, and my sister's friends all came around to eat them. They seldom lasted long.

My sister came up from the basement and went past me. "You caught it last night," she said.

"Oh, it wasn't so bad," I said nonchalantly.

"I'll bet!" she said, with a grin.

"Is that all you want me to do, Ma?" I asked.

"All for now," said Mother.

I took the funny papers and went out to the summer kitchen. It stood just east of the house, across a little garden from the back porch. Once, when I was small, it had stood north of the old house, Great-grandfather Van Damm's house, where we had lived for a while after he died, until Father and Uncle Joe had built this one and moved the summer kitchen to where it now stood.



I kept my funny papers in good order. I figured to have them all bound some day, and I kept them neat and properly folded, so they would bind easily. Mother always used to say that no matter what else she had to complain about, I did keep my things in order, not strewn all over the house.

Every time I came into the summer kitchen, I ended up looking at old comic pages. *Happy Hooligan* and *Little Nemo in Slumberland* and *Mama's Angel Child*. *Krazy Kat* and *The Katzenjammer Kids* and *Old Doc Yak* and *School Days*. I was reading *Just Boy* and *Everett True* and *Hawkshaw the Detective* in some papers Aunt Bertha had sent down when the doorway darkened.

Grandfather Adams stood there, looking in and shaking his head.

"A grown boy reading funny papers," he said. "It hardly seems like blood of mine."

"I read everything," I said flatly.

He came in and sat down on a trunk. He crossed one leg over his knee and rested both hands on it.

"There's a lot of common sense in some of these comics," I went on. "Look at *Everett True* or *Indoor Sports!* Or *Out Our Way* and *Our Boarding House*." I cut all these out of *The Capital Times* every day, and sometimes before Grandfather Adams saw the paper, which annoyed him.

He grinned. For a while then he just sat and watched. I looked at him from time to time. It made me feel guilty to be watched like that when I knew he didn't think much of my collecting funny papers. Besides, I began to get the uneasy feeling that he had something on his mind and was just being patient.

I put away the funny papers.

"Tell me," he said, when I had finished, "did you have a good time on your trip?"

"Oh, sure," I said.

"See anything different?"

"Oh, you know, Grandpa—everything's different when you're not home."

"Heard you were out at Stoll's."

"First night," I said.

"For a boy who's just made a long trip on a raft, you haven't got much to say," he said.

"What's there to say?" I asked.

"Well, your trip. Tell me about it."

I told him all I could, right from the beginning. But I noticed when I finished that there was a sort of hole in the story toward the end. Grandfather Adams didn't seem to notice. He listened closely, a little frown over his graying eyebrows, his blue eyes fixed on me, and now and then a smile on his lips.

When I was done, he reached into his pocket. "That's quite interesting, boy, but where did you get this?" He held out his hand to show me.

It was the Liberty-head 1913 nickel!

I reached into my pocket for my change. A nickel and four pennies, just as I had scooped them up from the kitchen table this morning early. The nickel was a buffalo head.

"I exchanged them last night," said Grandfather Adams. "That look of consternation on your face tells me a lot," he went on. "So you know the value of it. Where did you find out?"

"A thousand dollars," I said.

"Thereabouts. Maybe a trifle more. I thought you were a stamp collector. All your other coins are strays. Where'd you get it?"

He put the nickel down on the trunk beside him. I could hardly take my eyes off it. I didn't know what to say. I wouldn't lie to Grandfather Adams for anything. How could I keep from telling him? I kept still.

"Your face is just like a page in a book, boy," said Grandfather. "It tells more than you want it to." He shook his head sympathetically.

"I promised not to tell," I said.

"So you knew when you got it that it had a value in excess of its face," Grandfather Adams went on inexorably.

I felt as if I were being boxed in. I swallowed hard. I had promised not to tell about the fat man and Mr. Tom and everything that went on in the cave. But not . . .

"That nickel," I blurted out, "isn't even worth five cents."

Grandfather Adams' eyes narrowed swiftly. He looked at it again. "What makes you think so?" he asked.

"It's counterfeit," I said.

Grandfather took out his spectacles, put them on, and held the nickel close to his eyes.

"You can see," I said, "it's new. Where'd I find a new 1913 Liberty-head almost ten years after they were made?" I asked. "You can see it's been moulded together in two halves. And the filing's all done by hand. Just look close."

"An excellent counterfeit," said Grandfather Adams admiringly. "I must say it would take a more skilled eye than mine to discover it." He put the coin down again. He looked at me and waited.

I dropped my eyes. I knew I should have known better than to empty my pockets like that in front of him. He was too sharp. But I had been too tired to think.

"I think you ought to tell me, boy," said Grandfather Adams.

"Grandpa, I promised not to," I said. "On my honor."

Grandfather took off his spectacles and put them away. He sat back and waited. He didn't say a word. He just sat looking at me.

I felt as if he could see a hole right through me. I could bluff Mother and Father, but not Grandfather Adams. Or Grandfather Grendon, either, for that matter. I would hate to have both at once at me.

"Can you have honor without honesty, boy?" asked Grandfather gently.

"What do you mean, Grandpa?"

"I mean that a counterfeit of any kind suggests something dishonest because a counterfeit is on its face dishonest. And any promise you make concerning it is hardly binding because it knowingly involves dishonesty on your part."

"I'm not dishonest," I said hotly. What he said stung me, and it bit in deep because I knew he had thought it out and I hadn't.

"But if you keep your promise to conceal whatever you know about something dishonest, that makes you dishonest, too." The way Grandfather said it, I knew there was no way I could get around it.

I could feel the perspiration break out on my forehead. I was proud of being honest. I hated lying. I hated dishonesty. More than anything in the world, I hated to think my grandfather Adams thought I might be dishonest.

"Grandpa, if I tell you," I said, "you won't tell, will you?"

"If it's something that ought to be known, I'd expect you to tell it—not I," he said.

I sat there looking at him. There was no smile on his lips now. His eyes had a question in them, an important question. He was counting on me to answer it. I knew he wouldn't be angry with me if I didn't tell him, but he would be disappointed in me. I couldn't stand that. I would sooner have him mad enough to cuff me than that.

"Is it that bad?" he asked gently.

"No," I said, confused. "I don't think it's that bad. It's just that I promised on my honor, and you tell me now I can't have any honor anyway if this is about something dishonest."

"That's right, boy," he said. "You have to learn that life is full of hard decisions for you to make. I know how you pride yourself on keeping your promises. But this is a promise you shouldn't have made. And if the circumstances of its making weren't entirely of your own choosing, then you aren't bound to it, in any case. It's plain as the nose on your face that a counterfeit of a rare coin is being made to cheat someone."

"But if it's just rich people?" I asked.

"I don't think the Lord or the law intended any distinction to be made—it's cheating, whether a rich man or a poor man is cheated. It's thievery whether you steal from a poor man or a rich man. The act is the same, the wrong is the same—" He shook his head. "No, boy, you don't have a rule for different economic levels, but one which applies to everyone, regardless of whether he's white or yellow or black, Catholic or Protestant, rich or poor."

I took a deep breath and told him. I told him everything—all about the fat man and Mr. Tom, about how hardly anybody ever came to the Bogus Bluff cave any more, about the room the fat man and Mr. Tom had made at the end of the main cave, about the way they made the nickels—everything. I told him



about the way we had been tied up and how Mr. Tom wanted to kill us, and how I talked Ellis into taking me to church.

Grandfather Adams burst into laughter at that. He laughed so hard the tears came to his eyes. "Oh, great God in heaven!" he exclaimed. "Great God in heaven!"

I said, "I didn't think it was that funny."

"Well, you can't see yourself in perspective," he said. "Never mind. The whole thing strikes me as a delightful slab of human comedy. Your fat man must have had a sense of humor."

"Oh, he did," I said.

"Didn't he have a name?"

"Sure, Mr. Tom called him 'Ellis.' "

Grandfather sobered up and sat thinking for a while. "Ingenious," he said. "Ingenious! Those spurious nickels could keep them in funds for a long time, if they're smart. They could sell one in Chicago and another in Detroit and another in St. Louis, and so on. It's not a counterfeit a fence would be so much interested in handling."

"Fences," I said, "are people who handle stolen goods."

"Have it your way," said Grandfather. "I want to point out only that your friends will probably have to pass the nickels themselves—and they'll have to travel to succeed. They'll probably separate to do it."

"Grandpa," I said, "do I have to tell?"

"I'm afraid you do."

"Even if they might come back here and find us?"

"Are you afraid they might?"

"Not much."

"Well, then. If you don't tell, you'll be an accessory after the fact, won't you?" He cocked his head at me. "You're the great reader of crime stories, you know all about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Thorndyke and Arsène Lupin and Dr. Fu Manchu—I don't."

"I guess I would be, at that," I said. It excited me a little to think of myself as an accessory after the fact.

"But quite apart from that," Grandfather went on, "you owe it to yourself to tell. A good man can't live a lie, and you'd be trying to do that knowing those two rascals are out to rob some-

one under the pretext of selling him something valuable. When you grow older, you'll learn that what happens to any man happens to yourself."

That was hard for me to figure out. I didn't try much. I turned over the problem in my mind. If I had to tell, who would I tell? I asked Grandfather.

"Why, I suppose you'd tell the village marshal," he said.

"But coining is a federal offense. I ought to tell the Secret Service," I said.

"You're romancing again. Any information lodged with any officer of the law is bound to reach its proper destination."

"Why don't *you* tell the marshal?" I asked.

"Because it's your job, your obligation. Besides, all I know is hearsay."

"That's right," I agreed.

He held out his hand. "I'll exchange again. Give me my nickel."

I gave it to him and took the counterfeit Liberty-head 1913 back. It felt hot in my hand now. It felt hot in my pants pocket. All I wanted now was to get rid of it as soon as I could. But I still didn't know about telling anyone, least of all the village marshal.

"Will you tell it now?" asked Grandfather.

"I don't know," I said. "I have to think it over."

"Take your time. I don't imagine those rascals are sitting down there waiting to find out whether you tell or not."

"Come to think of it," I said, "Sim *did* see smoke on the Bogus Bluff after we left it."

Grandfather didn't say anything. He only kept on sitting there, tossing his nickel up and down, and looking at me as if he were trying to figure out just what I was going to do.

"I'd have to talk it over with Sim, anyway," I said. "I'd look mighty foolish if I said it and he didn't back me up. They'd think I dreamed it."

"It wouldn't be the first time, would it?" said Grandfather, chuckling.

"No," I agreed, "it wouldn't."

Grandfather sighed. He put the nickel into his pocket and stood up.

"Well, boy, you'll have to make up your own mind," he said.

"Grandpa," I said, "don't tell Ma."

"It's *your* story. She's bound to find out anyway, as soon as you tell the marshal," he said. "But let me give you a little tip—the longer she waits to find out, the more upset she's likely to be."

He went out of the summer kitchen.

I turned back to the funny papers, but I couldn't concentrate on *Little Jimmy* and *Polly* or even *Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn* for thinking about what I ought to do. That nickel lay in my pocket like a red-hot coal. I should never have put it there so absentmindedly when the fat man gave it to me to look at. But even without the nickel, it would have been the same thing. Sooner or later, I knew, it would have come up between Sim and me without Grandfather Adams' talk.

I put the funny papers away again. I spent a little time rearranging my books. But I knew I was just marking time, trying to put off doing what I had to do.

At last I crossed to the house.

Mother was in the kitchen up past her wrists in dough. She was kneading it, making bread. My sister was sewing. She had learned how to sew not too long ago, and now she was sewing everything she could get her hands on. She sat across the kitchen table and looked over at me; she had a pretty face, with freckles across her nose.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "D'you eat something?"

Mother immediately looked up. "Are you sick, Stephen?"

"No, Ma," I said. "It's just about my not telephoning home."

"Yes, we'll have an understanding about that," she said. "I haven't forgotten."

"Well, you see, we were in the cave. We couldn't get out."

"Yes, so you said," answered Mother.

"What I mean is, we were prisoners in the cave," I said. I could feel the wetness in my palms.

Mother looked darkly over at me. "Stephen, you read too

many mystery stories. I've always felt you ought to balance your reading a little more."

"No, really," I said earnestly. "It was a couple of counterfeiters. They kept Sim and me locked up there."

My sister started to giggle. "Oh, that's the silliest thing I ever heard," she said between giggles.

"Listen," I said, "there was one fellow who was big and fat, and the other one was short and thin. The fat man's name was Ellis and the little one's was Mr. Tom."

"Were Dick and Harry there, too?" asked my sister sarcastically.

"You shut up," I said.

Mother walked away from the table to wash and wipe her hands. She never said a word, just came over from the sink and put her hand on my forehead to see whether I had a fever or not.

"What were they counterfeiting?" asked my sister.

"Nickels," I said.

She started to giggle again. "Imagine—counterfeiting nickels instead of ten-dollar bills or something worth while! All that work for just nickels!" She burst right out laughing. "Oh, that's the craziest thing!"

I appealed to Mother. "Ma, it's really true," I said earnestly. "That's just the way it was. Really. You don't think I'd let you sit here and worry when I know how you get bothered if I could help it, do you?"

"Well, Stephen, you usually *are* a responsible boy, I do admit," said Mother.

"Grandpa said I had tell you," I said.

"You mean Grandpa believes you?" demanded my sister.

"Of course he does."

"Well, you always were his favorite," she said.

Mother looked worried and puzzled. She was worried because she probably thought I was losing my mind, the way she always said I was; she was puzzled because I was so earnest, and maybe it was true after all.

"You poor boy," she said. Then she got suspicious again. "But how could they keep you in a cave?"

"They tied us up and sealed off the end of the cave," I said.



My sister laughed again. She was absolutely heartless.

But Mother decided finally to believe me. I thought she would be mad enough to lecture me for half an hour, but no, she just put her arms around me and patted me and said how sorry she was she spoke so angrily and all that, just as if I had risen up from a sickbed and was at last on the road to recovery once more after lying for weeks at death's door! I'd have thought she'd be mad, really mad.

"Isn't that sickening!" said my sister.

I thought it was disturbing myself.

Mother said, "Such a thing mustn't ever happen again."

I knew she meant we'd never go out on the raft again if she could help it. I guess I wasn't meant to understand women.

14.

Sim Balks

THAT EVENING at street-light time I set out for the harness shop with Sim's things. Street-light time was the hour the arc lights came on. It was the edge of night, and the street lights came on like pale lemon flowers against the smouldering afterglow that shone saffron and crimson down along the black rim of the earth. I always paused outside the house and looked west up the lane where there was a long row of street lights—seven or eight of them—that stretched past all the street crossings all the way out to old Mrs. Block's house on the edge of the prairie, which was the western edge of town.

They made a long row of flowers, and the last one looked like a star in the afterglow. Somehow they made the evening seem so beautiful that it hurt. Those street lights seemed to point out to the sky, to another day. They seemed to promise something, as if something very lucky were going to happen tomorrow or next day or the day after that, some day soon, very soon. They seemed to say all I had to do was wait and enjoy life and it would come to me—all the promise of the evening for the future. I expected something wonderful to happen every tomorrow, day after day, to make up for the sweet, intimate loneliness of evening.

I crossed the tracks and headed into the darkening dusk of the Freethinkers' park. At the corners of the park the arc lights danced in the wind blowing out of the west, and the shadows of the trees leaped and bowed against the wall of the Park Hall. I hurried through the park without meeting anyone. At Sim's home I peered into the window, but his mother sat there alone, reading the newspaper. So I went on down through the alley

to the harness shop, where Sim was at work helping old Fred.

"Well, look what the river washed up," said Fred slyly, as I came in.

"Here's your stuff," I said to Sim. "Hello, Mr. Jones."

"I been waitin' to cash in on my harness-making rights," said Fred. "But Sim says you didn't find any new country."

"No," I said, "the country was all taken up. The harness rights were gone."

Old Fred chuckled. "That's how it goes. One disappointment after another."

Sim was painting hames. He stood over at the far end of the north-wall bench, carefully brushing red paint over the hames and hanging them in pairs from the hooks in the ceiling.

"One more is all," said Sim.

"Oh, go, go, if you want to," said Fred. "That can wait."

Sim went right on painting. "I want to get it done now," he said.

Fred got off the stitching horse. "Well, then, if you're not going, I am. I'm going to walk down to the corner for a cigar."

He took off his apron, hung it over the clamp of the stitching horse, put on his hat, and walked out the front door of the harness shop.

"You look as if you caught it," said Sim.

"Oh, it wasn't too bad. How about you?"

"They didn't say much. Ma cried a little and Pa—he just laughed." He finished the last hame and put it up. "I got some new approvals today," he said, putting the stepladder away.

"Let's see 'em," I said.

Sim got the envelope of stamps from the back room and brought it to the north-wall bench so that we could examine the stamps under the green-shaded light.

"I got six of those thirty-cent buffalo, this year's issue, off one of Pa's packages," said Sim. "Light cancellations, too. You can have one, if you want it."

"Thanks," I said. "Mine's almost black with ink."

He opened the envelope and shook out the stamps. They were all attached to sheets, and priced. There was a black Jackson, 1862 issue, two-cent value. There were the first six stamps from

the one-cent through the twelve-cent of the 1869 issue, but most of them were off center.

"Ever notice," I asked, "how many of these stamps you see are off center?"

Sim nodded.

There was a complete set of the 1890 issue, but the price was too high. The price on the commemoratives was high, too. The company wanted twice as much as they were worth for the set of Columbian Exposition and the Louisiana Purchase stamps.

"High-priced," I said.

"That's what I thought." He opened the latest copy of *Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News* and showed me an advertisement offering those commemoratives for less money.

"You're dealing with the wrong company," I said.

"You're not enthusiastic tonight," said Sim. "Not like usually. What's the matter?"

"Sim, I was talking with Grandpa Adams. We've got to tell about those counterfeiters."

"*You* might have to tell, but I don't," Sim said quickly.

"I can't say it without you backing me up," I protested.

Sim gathered up the stamps and put them back in the envelope. He didn't say anything. I didn't say anything, either. The harness shop was dark now; only the light from the globe over the north-wall bench glowed. It gleamed in a kind of dull reflection on the freshly-painted hames hanging from the ceiling. It shone from the oil dip, from the cold stove, and lay in a pool on the bench itself, which was in turn mirrored by the single north-wall window, the blackness of which gave back every board, every tool, even the lamp itself, and the faces of Sim and me pale in the diffused light above the shade. I felt pleasantly closed in by the four dark walls, beyond which were only street lights outside and a distant arc light out in back of the shop, beyond the walk there to the back street.

"Have to tell," said Sim again, crossing over to sit down on a chair in the corner near the stove. "There's no such thing."

"Yes, there is," I said. "It's as plain as can be. If we don't, we're accessories after the fact."

"We're only accessories if and after they get caught," Sim



pointed out. "You have to take a practical view, Steve," he went on. "And if they get caught on our say-so, they might get away again."

"Oh, you don't really think we'll ever see them again, do you?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Oh, I guess not," he said. "But I'm not anxious." He sort of shook himself, as if he were shaking off something unpleasant.

I could see Sim wasn't any more ready to talk than I was. I didn't think Sim was afraid something would happen to us if we did tell; he was just unwilling to draw attention to himself. That was his nature. But I hoped he would come around.

"How's the raft?" I asked, to change the subject.

"One of the floats is loose," he said. "You want to see it?"

"Sure," I said. "If you can leave the shop."

"Oh, it's just across the street. Come on."

He grabbed his flashlight and we went out the front door of the shop, across the street, and down the riverbank. Mr. Elpy was in his store and we paused to look in. He never saw us. He was busy making large signs reading, "Cost-Price Sale!" Sim beckoned me on.

"Louie's always having 'cost-price sales,'" said Sim, chuckling. "All he tries to sell cost though is the stuff he wears when he has to leave the store to go down to the post office or some place like that. He always grabs a coat or a jacket from the stock. Wonder what the customers would think if Pa did that."

"Your pa would look a little funny in a harness," I said.

Sim laughed.

Once we were down along the river we might have been in a different world. Sac Prairie rose up behind us, behind the retaining wall; all its noises—the cars on Main Street, the voices of people, the barking of dogs—seemed very far away. Here were only the sounds of water lapping gently against the shore and the churring of crickets. Here were the water smell and willows' herblike pungence. This was a world that stretched all the way up the river, past the Electric Theater and our old fishing place, past Elzy's house and Mr. Elky's beach, where we swam, all the

way to Third Island, where we went swimming naked, all the way back to childhood.

Sim turned on his flashlight. "I put a new battery in her," he said.

The light was strong. It fell on the raft, half out of the water. Sim took hold of one of the gasoline barrel floats and moved it.

"See," he said. "She's loose."

"It must have happened in the truck," I said. "She was all right when we took her out of the water."

"One of these days we'll have to fix her," said Sim.

"I don't know what good it'll do," I said, remembering how Mother had talked. "If I so much as mention making another trip on this raft, Ma'll probably lock me up in my room."

"I notice," said Sim with a sarcastic kind of laugh, "nothing much ever seems to happen to you as long as your grandpa Adams is around."

"Oh, we'll fix her," I went on. "You can take her out. Maybe Fritz or Bobbie'll go along. But it'll take quite a while before Ma comes around."

"She'll get over it. Seems like a lot of fuss to make just because you didn't telephone home."

"Oh, it wasn't that," I said. "It was when she found out about the counterfeiters."

Sim turned on me, instantly apprehensive. "How'd she find out?"

"I told her. I figured she'd be madder'n a wet hen if she found it out later on."

"You didn't have to tell her."

"I did. Grandpa said I had to."

"How'd *he* find out, anyway?"

I explained about the Liberty-head 1913 nickel.

Sim just groaned. "Sometimes I think you musta been standing behind the door when the brains were passed around," he said. "Now the fat's in the fire."

I let him stew. It would be something for him to think about. I could see he was mad about it. He shut off the flashlight and started back up the riverbank. I walked after.

Mr. Elpy was standing in the doorway of his shop, mopping

his forehead with a bright red handkerchief. His sad eyes lit up a little at sight of us.

"Well, boys, when am I going to get that ride you promised me?" he asked.

"We'll take you right now, Mr. Elpy," I said.

"If you got your will made," added Sim.

Mr. Elpy laughed slyly. "Well, I can't go right now, boys. Got a little work to do."

I knew Mr. Elpy would never go. He wouldn't trust us or the raft, even if he wouldn't ever admit it.

"How'd you like my new sign, boys?" asked Mr. Elpy, pointing at it.

Mr. Elpy had hung out in front of his door a large gray paper wasp nest. Attached to it was a sign he had lettered himself—"You don't get stung here!"

"Say, that's pretty good," said Sim.

"I thought so," said Mr. Elpy, very pleased.

"It's the smartest sign in town," I said.

I felt sorry for Mr. Elpy. All the signs in the world wouldn't have brought him more business than he had already. He was off the best block in the business section, which was half the block south, and from there to the bridge. But he tried so hard and he took in cleaning besides. Sometimes he talked big to us boys, but somehow we knew it was good for him to talk that way and we encouraged it because we thought Mr. Elpy, for all his bluff and bluster, was a good fellow.

We crossed to the harness shop.

Old Fred had come back. He sat again at the north-wall bench, his head wreathed in the greenish smoke rising from the little tin in which he burned the asthmador powder. He looked over his spectacles the length of the harness shop when we came in.

"Well, where you been?" he asked. "Off on another trip?"

"We were looking at the raft," I said.

He chuckled. "Should have thought you'd have seen enough of it for a while."

"We have to fix it," I said. "Get ready for another trip."

"Ain't got enough gold yet, eh?" said Fred, grinning.

"Pa can have a good time all by himself," said Sim, stung a little.

"I feel sorry for the man who couldn't," said Fred, still smiling. He lowered his head into the smoke once more.

"Pa, we're going out to the office," said Sim.

"Go 'head," said Fred.

We went out to Sim's office and sat down. Even though the night was warm, Sim carefully closed the door as if he feared that somebody might hear us. Then he sat down uneasily.

"We'll have to figure this out," said Sim.

I didn't say anything. I just sat watching him. He sat there looking grim. He was still a little mad. I thought there was no use saying anything; he would have an answer of some kind before long.

"How much did you tell?" he asked.

"Everything," I said.

He made a face. "You're the one," he said. "Bucked about making a promise not to tell, and the first one to spill over. You got running of the mouth, that's all there is to it."

"Grandpa put it to me and the way he said it he was right," I said. "That's it."

"You fixing to tell the police?"

"Who else?" I asked. "But my mind isn't made up yet. I don't know. I want to think about it a little more, too."

"And if you tell—who'll it be to?"

"I suppose Mike Kurth," I said. Mike Kurth was the village marshal, the only policeman Sac Prairie had. "I don't know anybody in the Secret Service. And you'll have to go along."

Sim shook his head stubbornly. I could see this would take time, all the more since I wasn't sure of myself, either.

"You didn't tell anybody else?" asked Sim, as if he thought I had broadcast it to the whole town.

I said I hadn't.

"Well, it's a wonder!" He sort of snorted. "What'd you do with the counterfeit nickel?"

I reached into my pocket and got it out. "It's right here," I said. "Want it?"

He pulled back as if I were offering him a white-hot iron.



"It won't poison you," I said. "You can keep it just as well as I can. You could lock it up right here in the office."

"It's yours," he said. "You took it."

"I didn't rightly take it," I said. "I just sort of put it into my pocket; I didn't think about it. The fat man didn't notice it. You didn't, either, and you're always boasting about how much you see."

"You just keep it," said Sim again.

I could see we weren't going to get anywhere that night. I said to Sim he should think it over and I'd think it over, too—there wasn't a great hurry about it—and we'd decide what to do later on.

"How about going to the show tomorrow night?" asked Sim then.

"What is it?"

"Oh, it's some picture with Wild Bill Hart in it."

"A Western?"

"It's more a mystery."

"We'll go, then."

He got up and opened the office door. He looked out. He appeared more at ease when he saw there wasn't a Secret Service man or Mr. Tom, either, kneeling there with his ear glued to the keyhole.

"You goin' home?" asked Sim.

I nodded. "You?"

"Guess I'll stay and see if Pa wants me to do any more to-night yet," he said. "See you tomorrow."

I walked home the way I had come down. Past Ab Estabrook's place—where she was bawling him out on the back porch for coming late to supper. Past the Jones house—where Mrs. Jones was busy sewing by the light over the kitchen table. Past the old house of yellow stone at the end of the park where nobody lived now because so many people had died or killed themselves there. I went into the park and walked over to the Park Hall. I sat there on the shadowed steps.

The Park Hall was in the middle of that block, about equal distance from the corner arc lights. It was a dark place, because there were so many trees around it. Couples who came

out walking were in the habit of coming there to sit on the steps and neck, but there was nobody there tonight. Just me. The wind was still blowing out of the west, and the shadows of the tree limbs hanging down toward the arc lights danced in the road in front of the Park Hall. It was a good place to sit and think.

I had a lot to think about, too. If I told Mike Kurth about the counterfeiter and Sim didn't back me up, I'd look like a fool. It'd be just my word against theirs. Still, I had the nickel—that was real evidence. But without Sim I didn't have any way to prove I hadn't made it myself, I thought. And how could I convince Sim to stick by me when I didn't know myself for sure I would tell?

A little owl began to call out of the pine trees west of the Park Hall. It made a thin, sad sound. Sometimes its call was a keening wail; sometimes it was a series of little notes that fell gently into the darkness like the echo of faraway bells drifting into the village on the wind from out on the prairie. From downtown came the hum of cars moving. Everything else was still.

I sat thinking. What mattered most was what Grandfather Adams thought of me. I couldn't let him down. He had never let me down. He had always stood by me. What he said bothered me. What he didn't say bothered me a lot more.

I felt caught between two impulses—to tell—to be silent and let Ellis trap himself. If there were so few 1913 Liberty-head nickels made, then sooner or later Ellis and Mr. Tom would be found out. Why would I have to say anything at all?

But the answer to that lay in what Grandfather had said. No matter what happened to Ellis and Mr. Tom, nothing would change that. And there was nothing to be gained by waiting to see what took place. No, it was a decision I couldn't get out of making. I had to make it. I had to make it the way Grandfather would want me to make it. I wanted him to feel proud of me, not disappointed in me. Because if Grandfather Adams was disappointed in me even for a little while, I'd end up being disappointed in myself.

I got up and walked west. I went under the pine trees and the screech owl paused and fluttered low and said, "Hoo? Hoo?"

Who, I said, but Steve Grendon, who can't make up his mind.

15.

William S. Hart

Sets an Example

IN A WAY, I suppose, the show at the Electric Theater the next night helped make up my mind. Sim's, too. The Electric was Sac Prairie's only theater. It was on the upper floor of a store a little more than half a block up the street from the harness shop. The theater took up the entire top floor. You went up to it by means of a covered stairs put in on the south wall of the building. The ticket office was at the head of the stairs, back from the doorway into the theater.

All the kids in town who went to the movies usually came early. They could sit and talk before the ticket seller, Bill Henning, came out of his booth and hoisted the black shades over the windows all around the walls. The kids sat down in front. Sim and I sat well back in the section along the north wall; we weren't kids any longer. Up in front all the little kids were clustered around Si Wardler, a tousled, black-haired boy who always got very excited and entered violently into the spirit of every picture on the screen.

Bill Henning was a talkative man. He was a house painter by day and sold tickets at the theater at night. He was another good fellow. He found out I had developed a hankering for Harry Stephen Keeler's webwork mysteries which were running in the *Chicago Ledger*, to which he subscribed; so as soon as he was finished with each issue, he gave it to me. Bill loved to talk about his children. He was proud of all of them, but especially of his oldest boy, who was in the United States



Navy. Bill's face just glowed whenever he talked about his boys, and his blue eyes crinkled up at the corners.

Bill also had the job of punching a button in his office to make the electric player piano play. The piano was supplied with a large roll of music. All kinds of pieces were on the roll, and sometimes what came out of the piano was just the opposite in mood of what was going on on the screen. It didn't make any difference to the little kids, but Sim and I were old enough to think it very funny, and we always took note of what the piano played and compared it to what was showing on the screen. Sometimes it was as good as the comedy, even when the comedy was by Fatty Arbuckle or Larry Semon.

That night we got to the theater just as Bill finished putting up the black screens. We waited for tickets until he got back to his office.

"I had a letter today from Charlie," he said.

"How is he?" I asked.

"He's coming home on leave."

"That's good," said Sim.

Bill was looking forward to his son's coming home just about as much as a kid looked forward to Christmas.

We went in and sat down in our usual place. We were hardly seated when Margery Estabrook and Norma Lahn came in. Sure enough, they came and sat down right in front of us. Margery with her long braids was a temptation I never could resist. In school I pulled them and stuck them into the inkwell. Here she was right in front of me with her braids tempting me. She was a pretty girl, with flinty blue eyes, and easy to tease.

The show that night was all about William S. Hart down among the Incas in Peru. Before it could begin, though, we had to sit through the advertisements. As soon as the lights went out, the white slides came on to the screen. "Kirschner's Bologna! None Better in All Wisconsin!" "Malakay's Fashion Center—Your Store Since 1891!" "Meyer's Department Store—We Offer the Best Values for the Least Money." "Ice and Eggs at Kuoni's." I could recite most of them by heart, I had seen them so often.

I leaned forward in the dark and pulled Margery Estabrook's braids.

"You, Steve!" she whispered angrily, turning around.

Norma turned around, too, looking at us reproachfully.

Sim nudged me. "Be quiet," he said.

"She's kinda pretty when she flares up like that," I said.

Margery turned again and gave me an indignant glance, just as if she didn't know I'd pull her braids if she sat there in front of me—I'd done it before. Girls, I figured out long ago, are highly peculiar.

The serial came on. This part was in the middle of a real thriller featuring Pearl White. In each part she got herself involved in a hair-raising position, so that the episode could end with her just about to be stabbed, or sawn in two, or being run over by a train. This episode ended with her being thrown off a cliff. Just as they had her poised over the edge, Bill punched the button and the piano played *Won't You Wait Till the Cows Come Home?*

It was all exciting, but we knew that somehow she had to be saved so she could be plunged into the vat of burning oil or carried off by kidnapers for ransom or buried alive at the end of next week's episode.

After the serial came the comedy. The comedy that night was by Larry Semon. He got a job some place and botched it. He got fired and went to work in a bakery. In practically no time at all blueberry pies and lemon pies and custard pies were flying all over the screen, most of them connecting with Larry Semon's face.

"They sure waste a lot of pies," said Sim.

"It makes my mouth water," I whispered back.

Margery Estabrook turned around. "Don't you boys ever think of anything but food?" she asked sarcastically.

I mimicked her.

She just swung her shoulders and tossed her head.

Then at last the comedy ended. It was a good thing, because Si Wardler was almost hoarse. He had yelled every time a pie was headed for Larry Semon, but Larry never ducked a one.

Si was frothing. I guess somehow he thought Larry ought to hear him.

The screen showed another white slide. "Ladies, Please Remove Your Hats." Then another one: "Dr. Tabor Is Wanted. Please Return to the Office."

After all that came the feature. It started out with William S. Hart riding hard on his horse. You saw him far away. Then close up. He had a face like a crag. He had eyes like steel. You knew right away he was on a mission. Not wind, not storm, not fire, nor flood would keep him from his goal. You knew that. But somehow William S. Hart had not counted on the Incas.

We never stopped to wonder what a cowboy like William S. Hart was doing in Peru. We figured we would find out soon enough. It came out—of all things—that he was in search of some of the lost Inca treasure, going all the way back to the Conquistadors, when the Spanish soldiers locked up Atahualpa and killed him. One of Hart's friends had had a rough map of the lost treasure's location, and somebody else had killed him to get the map. But they hadn't got the map, and now they were following William S. Hart.

"Look," I whispered to Sim, "here come Steve Grendon and Sim Jones looking for the lost Fort Winnebago treasure."

Sim just grunted.

It was certainly a coincidence.

Bill pushed the button again and the piano gave out *My Home Town Is a One-Horse Town, but It's Big Enough for Me*.

We left William S. Hart and got a look at some of the troubles he was going to have. First, there were the villains. All three of them needed shaves. They looked mean. One was a little ratty fellow. The next one looked like a walking corpse—real tall and thin with sunken cheeks. I had seen him once before in a Western where he was called Rattlesnake Joe. The third one was really too fat to be in an adventure picture. They were all not far behind Hart; if he had turned around, he would have seen them. But then, if he had turned around, it might have ended the picture right there.

But not quite. Up ahead the Inca scouts had also seen him. They were sending word back to the chief by runner. "Turn around, Bill," hollered Si. "Just look back once. And look ahead, too." William S. Hart just went right on as if Si Wardler weren't sitting there watching him.

The piano played *El Choclo* just as the fat villain showed up on the screen again.

"There's Ellis," I said to Sim.

Sim only shook his head. He coughed, uneasily, I thought.

The villains went into conference. You could see by the way they were gesticulating and pointing that they were planning to surround William S. Hart, kill him, and take the map. They said so as fast as the words could be flashed on the screen beneath the picture. It wasn't clear why they had to surround him, why they just didn't ride right up behind him and fire. The way William S. Hart was riding with his steely eyes fixed on the Inca country ahead of him, he wouldn't have heard a tornado creep up behind him. Si was trying to tell him, too.

Just about that time the girl came into the picture. She came in with *My Isle of Golden Dreams* from the piano; Bill timed that one just right, I thought. She had just escaped from the Incas. They were going to use her for a sacrifice to one of their gods. She turned out to be the sister of William S. Hart's friend, who was murdered for the map.

"Wouldn't you know it?" whispered Sim. "Just about when everything's going all right, they have to let a girl into the picture!"

You could tell by the look in Hart's craggy face that now he had a new interest in life—the girl. The question now was, could he have both the girl and the treasure? If he saved the girl, would he be too late for the treasure?

The villains were bearing down on William S. Hart and the girl, and at the same time the Incas had begun to ride. I would have thought Incas would have been riding something other than the same old horses the Sioux rode in *In the Days of Buffalo Bill*, but no, they were the same ones.

At last came the fight. The villains had crept up one canyon while William S. Hart, burdened with the girl, went more



slowly up the other. She had got away on foot, and had staggered into his arms. Now he was wasting precious time making moon eyes at her every now and then. He looked like a sick calf such times, which was quite a contrast to the crag. Si did his best to get William S. Hart's attention from the girl, who wasn't much to look at what with her hair down to her waist as if she had just been washing it when the Incas had left the door of her prison open. But it did no good. William S. Hart rode straight into the ambush, and Bill Henning got so excited he jabbed the button and the electric piano played *That Naughty Waltz*.

The fight didn't last long. William S. Hart just flung the girl around behind him, sort of pinning her to the wall of the rocky canyon. Hé fought valiantly. He was handy with his fists. He knocked the ratty one down. Then he knocked the tall one down. Then the fat one fell on him. He was down. He was up. They were all three against him. They were all three on top of him at once. The girl just stood there with her hands up to her face and her mouth open as if she had adenoids. Si croaked hoarsely. William S. Hart could have licked all three at once, only it was just the third or fourth reel.

In the end they took William S. Hart. But not before he had a chance to eat half the map. They got the other half. They tied him and the girl. Then, though there was nothing to show the villains had ever been in the Inca country before, they locked the two of them in a secret cave they knew about. Just at that moment the piano started up again, this time with *Taking Nellie Home*.

The Incas, who had been riding all this time, suddenly got there. William S. Hart and the girl were in the cave. The three desperadoes weren't; so the Incas saw the villains. They shot arrows and guns. They killed the ratty one right away. They wounded the tall, thin one, and took the fat one prisoner. They cavorted all around their prisoners, looking fierce, with the paint beginning to run down their faces, showing a lot of white skin underneath. It was perfectly plain that they meant to sacrifice the two villains.

William S. Hart saw all this from the cave. There he was,

bound and helpless to interfere. I couldn't see any reason why he would want to interfere, except perhaps to get the rest of the map back. Even that wouldn't be necessary, because he had memorized it, or else how could he find the treasure? Bill Henning punched the piano button once more and the strains of *A Kiss in the Dark* rang out. Si couldn't make a sound any more; he had hollered himself absolutely silent.

As soon as the Incas rode away with their prisoners, William S. Hart worked his gag loose and then chewed at the knot in the rope that tied the girl. Then he made a profound deduction. "We've got to get out of here," he said.

And then what did he do but roll over to the wall where there was a jagged rock jutting out and saw his ropes through! In no time at all he was free, untying his legs, untying the girl. He had the kind of rock we should have had in Bogus Bluff. Well, he made his way back into the cave, because, he said, he had a hunch it led somewhere. Then he started pressing walls, until a secret entrance slab slid back and there before William S. Hart and the girl was the sacrificial meeting of the Incas.

Margery turned around. "Is that electricity they had?" she asked. "To work those secret doors?"

"They didn't have electricity in those days," I said.

"Probably goes by balance," said Sim.

There was all this show—the Incas gathered around, the victim spread out on a stone, the Inca priest ready to tear his heart out while he was still living—and Bill Henning played *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. I thought I'd choke.

Well, of course, William S. Hart barged right down there singlehanded to save the fat villain who tried to do him in, and then in turn the fat fellow tried to kill William S. Hart, but got killed himself by one of the Incas. So that took care of him. There was still the treasure to be accounted for. And the girl. Somehow the girl got herself captured again. Then William S. Hart found the lost Inca treasure. He wrestled with his conscience for a while—this was a great soul struggle; his face got craggier than ever, and his eyes rolled wildly around—but in the end he decided the treasure belonged to the Incas.

So he gave it up, and the Incas were so grateful they gave him the girl and provided him with an escort so he could get out of the country before anybody changed his mind—though why he needed an escort to get out when he had got in by himself wasn't made clear. Anyway, the player piano had the last word. As the lights came on it was playing *You're a Million Miles from Nowhere*.

I felt sort of like that, too. Everybody was saying what a wonderful picture it had been, wondering whether Pearl White was going to be saved in time, and so on. Margery and Norma walked right past us with their noses stuck up in the air, and Si Wardler pushed by, his face wreathed in smiles because William S. Hart had triumphed again.

Outside, we went through the cooling night toward the harness shop. Main Street was all lit up. The electric department had just put in a great new white way—that was what they called it—and the old arc lights were gone from Main Street. The streets leading west were almost dark by comparison, with only the corner arc lights to contrast the sidewalk lights all the way up one side and down the other of Water Street—which was the real name of what everybody called Main Street. Moths and other insects clouded around every light of the great white way.

At the harness shop old Fred was just preparing to go home. He was standing near the back door, smoking a cigar. When we came in, he took the cigar out of his mouth.

"Well, well," he said. "Give account of yourself. Where you been?"—as if he didn't know we had been to the show. "How many Indians did Bill Hart kill tonight?"

"I lost count," said Sim.

Fred chuckled. "I'm goin' home. You lock up the shop."

"Ja, I will," said Sim.

He went over and sat down on the stitching horse, with his arm folded across the clamp. I could see he had something on his mind.

"I been thinking," he said. "I observe it's this way in life: in the end you pay for your mistakes."

"That's right," I said. "I knew that a long time ago. Grandpa Adams always says so."

"I think maybe you're right about those counterfeiters," he said.

"You mean you'll tell?"

"Hold on, now," he said cautiously. "You said you'd tell, and I was to back you up."

"Well, it's the same thing."

"No, not quite," said Sim.

Sometimes it was hard to figure out just what Sim meant. But at least he was coming around. I concluded that it was due to the good example set by William S. Hart.

"When do you figure on talking to Mike Kurth?" asked Sim then.

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow or next day."

"He won't be downtown in the morning. He comes on duty about four o'clock. He's more a night cop than a day," said Sim.

"Well, when I'm ready to tell him," I said, "I'll come around and get you. We'll talk to him together."

Sim didn't say anything.

"What do you say?" I asked.

"Depends on where I'm at when you come," he said. "If I'm over behind the Electric catching bass, it can wait."

"O.K.," I said.

He got off the stitching horse. "I'll walk part way home with you," he said.

I went out the back door and stood there drinking in the night smells that rose from the old sheds and the grapevines next door, while Sim locked up the harness shop. We went down the narrow sidewalk to the back end of the lot, crossed the street, and walked toward the Freethinkers' park.

It was a warm night and a dark one. Since the hour was late, Sac Prairie was quieting down, except for the noise of travel on the federal highway that ran up along the river through the town. Killdeers cried along the river, still, and over the upland fields near town. Nothing else stirred except a pair of cats slink-



ing down the alley past Sim's home, which we passed when we took the usual cross-lots short cut to the park.

At the corner of the park Sim stopped.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

"Well, it won't be anything much," I said. "I'll just tell Mike about the counterfeiters and show him my nickel. And you just tell him it's all so the way I tell it."

Sim looked very doubtful, but he didn't say anything. I could see he was halfway between going ahead and backing out. He just turned and headed for his house, and I went on up through the park, across the tracks, past our house, and over to Grandfather Adams', because I saw that his kitchen light was still on.

I looked in the window. Grandfather was sitting at the table eating a dish of strawberries, and Grandmother Adams was saying, "Mr. Adams, you ought to get into the habit of removing your hat in the house," and he was saying, between spoonfuls of strawberries, "Yes, woman. Yes, woman," in the kind of voice he would have used for his favorite horse.

I opened the door and stuck my head in. Grandmother Adams smiled at me. I winked at her. She never let anybody guess about it—I was her favorite grandchild. Grandfather Adams kept right on eating.

"Grandpa," I said, "we're going to talk to Mike Kurth tomorrow."

"That's good, boy," he said. "I figured you'd come to the right answer."

When he looked up, his eyes were twinkling. He was pleased.

## 16.

### We Tell All

MIKE KURTH was a tall, raw shank of a man. He was just about the best marshal Sac Prairie ever had. He had a hawk nose and a high, broad red face, with bushy eyebrows and unkempt hair. He was absolutely fearless. Once he had stopped a pair of Chicago gangsters by waiting for them when they came across the bridge in their car. He didn't have a car, but he just stepped out in front of their car and they were so startled by the suddenness of it that they stopped and he just reached in and collared the two of them. When one made a grab for his gun, Mike just knocked their heads together and they weren't much good for quite a while after.

Mike was a stickler for the law. When he was appointed marshal, he was told to enforce the laws. So he studied all the laws and ordinances, and he set out to enforce as many as he could. Right off he tagged a couple of Illinois tourists who had parked on a crosswalk to shop, and then the businessmen of Sac Prairie complained to the Village Board that Mike ought to pay more attention to local lawbreakers. The businessmen of Sac Prairie always operated on the principle that whatever was good for their business was good for the town, no matter how many laws got broken if they took in a few pennies extra. So the Village Board gave Mike strict orders to enforce the traffic laws broken by villagers. Mike did. Within a week he had given tickets to the village president, the village clerk, and five members of the Village Board for running the stop light at the corner by the bridge entrance. After that, they let him alone.

That day Mike Kurth was at his favorite spot when Sim and

I found him—that was just across from the bridge, under a big old elm tree at the corner. The white bandstand that had stood so grandly, all festooned with flags and banners, during the bridge dedication, was now abandoned and was already showing signs of wear. And across the street the old bridge was still being used. It didn't look as if the new bridge would come into use until some time in August or September.

Mike looked almost as big and formidable as the trunk of the old elm, and when he saw us heading for him he bunched his brows together and gave us a dark and suspicious look. Kids had played so many tricks on the village marshals that a marshal could hardly think of kids any other way but as a short cut to trouble. Though we weren't kids any more, Mike probably thought we were.

We marched straight up to Mike. That is to say, I marched up to him. Sim held back, as if he were having some second thoughts about his decision now.

"Mike," I said, "we have to tell you something."

"About what?" he asked. He turned his head and spat tobacco juice from a wad in his mouth.

"It's about a crime," I said.

He eyed me with profound suspicion.

"I mean it," I said. "I'm not kidding, Mike."

His expression showed that he had reached the absolute peak of suspicion.

"Can we talk here?" I asked.

"Why not?" said Mike. "But I'll tell you now, if you boys are fixing up some kinda fool trap for me, I'll lay for you and sooner or later . . ."

"No, Mike," I protested earnestly. "You know I wouldn't do such a thing."

"Hoh! Ain't a kid in town wouldn't do it," he scoffed. "Look what they done to Skinny that time!"

Sim giggled at the memory of how the boys one Hallowe'en had succeeded in plastering the central block of Water Street with all kinds of junk despite the marshal's boast that nothing of the sort would happen, and right at the same time he'd been on duty on that block. They had just divided into two gangs,

and one gang had lured him up to one end of the block while the other gang threw their junk all along the other end. Then, when he chased after them, the first gang poured back out of the alleys with their junk. They just about drove him frantic, and it took a whole day to haul away all the junk they had thrown at the business-house doorways virtually before his eyes.

"It's nothing like that," I said.

"Go ahead," invited Mike.

I told Mike as clearly as I could everything I thought he needed to know about the fat man and Mr. Tom. Not for one second during my whole recital did Mike grow any less suspicious. He kept looking over to Sim for the slightest sign of a grin.

"I don't know what you're tellin' all this to me for," he said when I finished. "I ain't got no jurisdiction anywheres outside of Sac Prairie."

I explained that it was his duty to make contact with the United States Secret Service and put them on the trail of Ellis and Mr. Tom.

"I ain't got no jurisdiction," he kept saying.

"What about that time you got the Chicago gangsters?" I asked.

"Why, they come here," he said, astonished that I could question any of his actions. "They come into my jurisdiction."

"And that time you took off after that fellow who held up the filling station," I said.

"Why, he was tryin' to escape my jurisdiction," he said indignantly. "I didn't aim to let him. I got him, too. Now, you just let them counterfeiters come into my jurisdiction . . ."

I explained patiently that since counterfeiting of United States coins was a federal offense, it was his duty to report what I had told him to the nearest office of the Secret Service.

It only made him more suspicious. He looked darkly from Sim to me and back to Sim.

"You seen this?" asked Mike finally of Sim.

"It's all true," said Sim.



"That ain't what I asked," said Mike. "You seen it with your own eyes?"

"What do you mean?" hedged Sim.

"I mean did you actually see them two making those nickels?"

Sim grew cautious. I could tell he was having second thoughts by the way his mouth straightened out and his eyes grew wary. "Well, the fat one's back was toward me most of the time," he said. "I could see he was busy at what he was doing at the table. Then there were all the tools. I knew what they were for."

"Did you *see* him making any nickels?" pressed Mike.

"Well, no, I can't say I actually *saw* the counterfeiting," said Sim. "I saw the nickels."

Mike gave a short, bark-like laugh. He was just about to say something nasty when he was interrupted. An old fellow in a car bearing an Illinois license, seeing nothing coming from the crossroads, had edged across Water Street against the red light. Mike blew his whistle an angry blast, followed it with a roar like that of a furious bull, and strode out into the street waving his arms. The old fellow, looking mildly astonished, pulled up beside Mike.

"Where you think *you're* goin'?" asked Mike.

The old fellow put a hand up behind his ear and leaned forward politely.

"You fellers from Illinois just about think Wisconsin's all yours to play in—just because some of them Chicago papers call Wisconsin 'Chicagoland,' hah?" Mike held a grudge against Illinois motorists, all of whom he suspected came out of Chicago with the sole purpose of irritating him. Now he went on bawling out the old fellow for fair, though it seemed plain to anybody who ever read a detective story that he came from some town no bigger than Sac Prairie.

The old fellow just sat there listening, with a little smile on his face.

"He don't hear half what Mike's saying," said Sim.

Suddenly the old fellow put one hand on Mike's wildly

swinging arm, bringing it to a halt, and asked, "Say, son, what town is this here?"

"Sac Prairie," said Mike.

"Where?" asked the old fellow.

"Sac Prairie, Wisconsin," roared Mike.

"Oh, say," said the old fellow, "this ain't where I wanta go at all. Thank you, son." He reached into his pocket and put a nickel tip into Mike's outstretched hand.

Then he drove calmly off, leaving Mike just about speechless with astonishment.

I couldn't resist putting in what Sim called my "two-cents' worth." "Mike," I hollered, "look that nickel over good. It might be one of those 1913 Liberty heads."

Mike came bristling back. "I heard just about enough about 1913 nickels," he said. "You boys are just fixin' to get me into some kinda trouble."

I thought frantically of the nickel. I dug into my pocket for it, searching until I found it. I drew it out.

"Here's that counterfeit, Mike," I said earnestly.

He refused to touch it at first, just as if he were afraid we had something under it—a snapper for his thumb or finger, or something like that. He leaned over and peered at it.

"Looks like a good nickel to me," he said.

"Oh, sure, it looks good," I said. "But it's not worth a penny, honest!"

He picked it up, turned it over, examined it, and dropped it back into my hand.

"It looks like a good nickel to me," he said again with dogged insistence.

"Well, it's not," I said. "Is it, Sim?"

Sim shook his head.

Mike said, "For all I know, you boys are just puttin' me up to something. Make a fool a me."

"If you look close, Mike," I said, "you can see where the two halves are moulded together."

He picked up the nickel again. He carried it close to his eyes and examined it with care.

"Right there's where it's milled," I said. "It's hand milled. The two halves are put together."

He compared the Liberty-head counterfeit with the nickel the Illinois traveler had given him.

"Well, it sure does look a little different," he conceded at last. He handed the counterfeit back to me.

"You keep it, Mike," I said. "You have to have it for the Secret Service. They'll want proof, too."

He kept it reluctantly. "If this nickel's counterfeit," he said, "it's just about your only proof."

"I saw it made," I hollered.

Mike jerked his thumb at Sim. "He didn't," he said. "And you said he was right there in the cave with you."

"I was," said Sim.

"The whole thing," said Mike, "sounds crazy."

"I know it," I said.

"It's just that crazy I couldn't hardly think you made it up," Mike went on. "You ain't that smart."

"I know it," I said again.

He put the nickel into his pants pocket.

"Be careful with that nickel, Mike," I said. "If you let it get mixed up with your own money, you might spend it. Then you'd lose the evidence."

"Besides," Sim pointed out, "you'd be guilty of passing counterfeit money."

Mike hastily transferred the nickel from his money pocket to another. "I'll guard it," he assured us.

"But we have to be sure you'll get in touch with the Secret Service," I said. "Will you do it?"

"Well, boys, I'll tell them—that's all I can do. After that, it's their job. I said it before—that place down the river is outa my jurisdiction."

We had to be satisfied with that.

"Of course," continued Mike, as we turned away, "you boys know you'll be called in to give evidence if they catch them fellers."

"In court?" cried Sim, in alarm.

"Sure. Where else?"

Sim just pressed his lips together and walked off. I hurried and caught up with him.

"Might 'a' known it'd turn out this way," he said bitterly. "I don't want to go to court."

"Nobody's been caught yet," I said.

"Looks to me like an honest man suffers more than the crook," said Sim.

Sim was mad and I was glum. Mike Kurth didn't half believe us. If we hadn't had the 1913 nickel, he wouldn't have believed a word I told him. It troubled me. If I had been one of the kids who played tricks on him, I could have understood it. This way, I didn't.

"Anyway, it won't be so bad to go to court," I said. "Better a witness than the man in the dock."

"You're a great comfort," said Sim.

We got back to the harness shop.

"Look what the cat dragged in," said old Fred. He gave us a sharp glance. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I'm goin' fishing," said Sim shortly.

"Well, catch some for a change," said Fred. "I could eat a mess of sunfish or blue gills."

His eyes followed Sim around. He knew his son well enough to know Sim was griped about something. He also knew it wouldn't do any good to try finding out.

"You comin'?" asked Sim.

"No," I said. "I got something else to do."

"All right," he said. "See you tonight. I'll be at the shop."

I went around back of the shop and back downtown. I walked down to where Mike Kurth still stood.

"Mike," I said, "I could see you didn't much believe us. Grandpa Adams told us to tell you."

"He did, hey? Well, you know, Steve, a man in my job has got to be mighty careful. Can't go runnin' for ever' little thing."

"Would you believe Grandpa Adams if he told you?" I asked.

"I didn't say I didn't believe you," he said. "A man can't just believe everything he hears."

"Well, I'll talk to Grandpa," I said.

Mike didn't say anything. He still looked puzzled. He looked



as if I would tell him the joke any minute, and we would both burst out laughing.

I went home. It was already late afternoon, almost supper-time. After supper I would have to go downtown, as I did every evening, to get Grandfather Grendon's *Capital Times* for him. It came up from Mazomanie on the evening train. Now I wanted to see Grandfather Adams, but he wasn't home.

I went to the summer kitchen and started rearranging my books. I put all the detective stories in one section and all the good books in another one. I read a few paragraphs of *Walden* and a few paragraphs of Emerson's essays. I read the ending of *Self-Reliance* twice. "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles." It still sounded right to me. Nobody could quarrel with that. But I wasn't so sure some people wouldn't try, just the same.

I was sitting there with the book in my hand when Grandfather Adams came up and sat down on the stoop.

"Grandpa," I said, "I told Mike Kurth. He didn't believe me."

"Show him the nickel?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Did he keep it?"

"Sure," I said. "He had to."

"What makes you think he didn't believe you?"

"The way he acted."

He could see I felt bad about having my story doubted. "Well, you've done your duty, boy," he said. "You can't be expected to do more."

"But why didn't he believe me?" I cried.

"You'll soon be old enough to know that a great many people hate to be forced to take any kind of action that may be unpleasant. It takes strength to stand up for principles. It always did, and it always will. The mass of people turn down the easy path—they don't stand on principle. They follow the way of least resistance, and they find it pretty easy to drop principles on the way."

"That sounds like something Emerson wrote," I said. I read it to him.

He nodded. "Don't you ever forget that, boy. In the long run, the world will always think more of a man of principle than of one of expedience. It takes no backbone to be expedient. It takes courage to be a man of principle. I see you're a man of principle. Many a time you'll come face to face with other events like this. But hang on, even if your friends desert you because you won't let go the principle. Never let go."

"I won't," I said. "That's a promise."

Grandfather Adams shook his head gently. "It's so easy to say, boy, so easy now. But wait—wait till the envious slander you to hide their own weaknesses. Wait till the little men stone you because you're big and strong enough to hang on to principles and stand by them. Many a man goes down."

"I won't," I said scornfully. "I won't go down. I'm different."

Grandfather Adams laughed. "You're about as different as different could be," he agreed. "I believe you won't. Time will tell. I hope I'm around to see. Always remember this when you grow up and look around you—the fellow who conforms to everything he's 'supposed to' is apt to be anything but a man of principle."

"I don't conform to just about anything," I said proudly.

He laughed again. "Your mother'll tell me I'm a bad influence," he said.

"Grandpa," I said, "will you talk to Mike Kurth?"

"Sure, I'll talk to him." He got up. "You see how hard it is to be honest?" He reached down and tousled my hair. "But don't back away from it. Don't give an inch. I wouldn't want my grandson to."

"I won't," I said. "There's nothing I have to do except be honest with me."

Grandfather Adams nodded with plain satisfaction. "You learn a little at a time," he said. "And that's what life is—learning day after day, and getting hurt and getting over it, and understanding that nothing on this earth is yours—only lent to you to enjoy for a little while."

17.

A Visit

from the Secret Service

THE SECRET SERVICE man came on the Fourth of July. That was a day of celebration all around Sac Prairie. Early in the morning of that day Father brought the car around, and we all got in—Grandfather and Grandmother Adams, Mother, Father, my sister, and I—and headed out to Witwen. Witwen was a little town, smaller even than Sac Prairie. They always had the biggest Fourth-of-July picnic of any place around. Great-uncle Joe and Great-aunt Lou and Gus Elker were bound to be there, too. Sim, though, never went.

The day usually started with a monster parade. People from Sac Prairie and other towns entered floats in it. There were ponies, big farming machines, dogs, trick cars, and lots of fancy floats put in by every church and community organization on all sides of Witwen. There were always two things sure about the Witwen parade—it would be big and it would start about an hour late.

We always went to the steps in front of Meyer's store to watch the parade. We could go into the store to buy ice-cream cones or pop while we waited for the parade to come down from the schoolhouse corner more than half a mile away. Then, as soon as the parade was over, we went through the store, crossed the brook to the picnic grounds, and got ready to eat dinner served from one of the stands.

It was a day of fireworks and little visits among old friends who hadn't seen one another for a while. Right after dinner an

orator stood up near the bandstand and delivered a full-throated piece about God and our country against a background of popping firecrackers the little kids had snuck off to the bank of the creek to fire in defiance of orders. I was standing there behind the rows of benches listening when somebody poked me.

I looked around and there was Great-uncle Joe. "You gettin' educated, Old Timer?" he asked.

I backed away from the crowd with Great-uncle Joe, who led the way toward the millrace where Gus Elker stood, switching with a stick at some spiderwort blooming there.

"Here's Gus," said Great-uncle. "He's enjoyin' hisself."

"I like to die if ever' year your uncle talks me inta comin' here to listen to the same ol' stuff," complained Gus.

"You got something better to do?" asked Great-uncle.

I could see Great-aunt Lou, standing over near the ice-cream stand, talking with Mother and Grandmother Adams, sort of watching the two men with a sideways look.

"I know a place the biggest bullheads in the county is," said Gus. "But here we are at the Witwen picnic."

"Where'bouts is that, Gus?" asked Great-uncle Joe, interested.

Gus's face lit up. His eyes lost their sadness. He began to talk with animation. "There's a slough not far from Cassel Prairie church—almost straight south," he said. "I be dog if I ever see such bullheads before! They like to come right up outa the water."

Great-uncle looked at me. "You game, Old Timer?"

"Sure," I said.

"All we gotta do is get away from my old lady," said Great-uncle.

Great-aunt Lou was already on the way over. "You, Joe," she said crisply, "don't you go puttin' ideas into the boy's head. I can just see the two of you hatchin' something up. Don't you listen to 'em, Old Timer," she said to me as she came up. "Whatever 'tis they're up to, it'll lead to no good."

"Now, Lou. Now, Lou," said Great-uncle.

"Me?" cried Gus Elker innocently. "I wouldn' even be here, if Joe hadn' sweet-talked me inta comin'."



"See that you stay here," said Great-aunt Lou, looking severely at both of them over her spectacles.

Then she turned and went back to Mother and Grandmother.

"I reckon," said Great-uncle Joe, "we'll have to separate."

"Uh-huh," muttered Gus.

They were bound to go fishing, picnic or no picnic.

"You'll miss the ball game and the pulls," I said.

"Sooner miss them than the bullheads," said Great-uncle. "All right, now. Gus, you cross the millrace and go to Meyer's store. I'll go out around the bandstand. Old Timer, we'll meet in front of Meyer's. We'll figure to be back in time for supper."

Gus Elker walked away, down along the millrace to the little bridge thrown across it. Great-uncle stood talking with me for a few minutes. Then he left and angled off toward the bandstand. I shot a glance at Great-aunt Lou. She had her eye on him, all right. I started down the lane past the ice-cream stand, heading for outside the grounds.

I was looking forward to fishing with Gus Elker and Great-uncle Joe. It was bound to be entertaining. Every time I went fishing with them something happened that wasn't ordinarily a part of fishing, like the time Great-aunt Lou caught the biggest fish, and the time Gus hooked on to a motorboat and got pulled into the river. I wondered what would happen today.

But I wasn't going to be there to find out. I got past the ice-cream stand, all right, and safely out of sight of Mother and Great-aunt Lou. Then somebody caught me by the shoulder.

I turned around. A thin young fellow stood there. He had on a straw hat and a sport coat. He wore yellow shoes. He was chewing a stalk of grass. His freckled face and wide brown eyes looked friendly.

"Your name Steve Grendon?" he asked.

"Yes, it is," I said.

"I want to see you," he said.

"Who're you?" I asked.

He pulled his hand out of his pants pocket, sort of casual-like, and stuck it under my face. He had a little card in it. It had

a lot of printing on it, and some signatures, but what I saw and read was: "United States Secret Service."

I looked at him again. He didn't look any more like a man in the Secret Service than I'd have thought he looked like a man from Mars. I guess maybe I was looking for a dark, stone-faced type, quick on the draw, one of those fellows who wouldn't have to ask what my name was but would just come up and say, "Steve Grendon—I want you."

"They told me I'd find you here," he said. "Now, where can we go to talk in private?"

"We have to have Sim," I said. "He'll back me up."

"All right," he said agreeably. "Where's he?"

"He's in Sac Prairie somewhere. We'll have to go back to town."

"All right. My car's out near the gate. We'll go back to Sac Prairie."

"I'll have to tell Ma," I said.

"I'll wait."

I was thinking about Gus Elker and Great-uncle Joe, too. Just then I saw Cliff Meyer heading back for his dad's store to fetch something for the ice-cream stand, so I hollered to him to tell Gus and Great-uncle I couldn't make it.

I ran back around the stand to where Mother was still talking with Grandmother Adams and Great-aunt Lou.

"Ma," I said, "I have to go back into town."

"Don't talk foolish," said Mother brusquely.

"I mean it," I said. "That Secret Service man is here."

"Where?"

"On the other side the stand," I said.

"You sure, boy, this isn't just something your uncle thought up?" asked Great-aunt Lou, her eyes narrowed and fixed on me.

"No, Auntie," I said. "It's the truth."

"He *is* expecting a visit," said Mother. "He's been expecting it for some time. It's odd that the man should come on the Fourth."

"That's the government for you," said Great-aunt tartly. "Every time!"

"Ma, I'll stay with Sim or I'll go home when I'm through," I said.

"You have that man bring you back here or you'll miss the fireworks," said Mother.

I went back to where the Secret Service man waited. He was certainly a disappointment. He looked just like anybody else. He looked like one of the Witwen or Black Hawk boys who'd been away all year to college and had decided to come to the picnic to give the home folks a treat.

"I'm ready," I said.

"O.K.," he said. As he walked along at my side, he said, "You probably didn't see my name on my card—you looked sort of pop-eyed." He grinned. "I'm Mark Brennan."

"O.K., Mr. Brennan," I said.

We walked along the lane out of the picnic grounds. The Secret Service man's car was at the end of a long row at the gate. We got in. He started the motor, threw her in gear, and away we went. As we drove past Meyer's store, I could see Cliff explaining earnestly to Gus Elker and Great-uncle Joe. I regretted not being able to go bullheading, but it wasn't every day I got to be in on a case with a United States Secret Service man.

"Any idea where we'll find your pal, Steve?" asked Brennan.

"Oh, he'll be fishing somewhere, I guess," I said.

Brennan didn't look especially enthusiastic about the prospect of hunting Sim up. "You got any idea just where he'd be fishing?" he asked.

"Oh, sure," I said. "He could be over at the wing dam. He could be down at the railroad bridge. He could be up at Third Island. Any one of those places. He could even be out at the millpond. Maybe we ought to stop there first."

Brennan shrugged and said, "Well, I'm being paid."

We went around to the millpond. There were a lot of fishermen there, but Sim wasn't one of them. I could tell that right away, because Sim's bicycle would've been there, and it wasn't. Just the same, I got out of the car and went around both sides of the falls across the narrow little cable walk just above the foaming water to find out how the fish were biting. Those same

sunfish I could hardly ever get to bite when I came out here with Grandfather Grendon were biting like crazy today on just anything. It was disgusting.

We drove in to Sac Prairie. We stopped at the railroad bridge on the way up into town. Sim wasn't there, either.

"Now where are those other places?" asked Brennan.

I pointed up the river to the wing dam.

"That's on the other side," cried Brennan.

"Sure," I said. "We could get a boat. Or we could ride over the bridge and walk it. Third Island's just a little above it, only on this side of the river."

Brennan grinned and shook his head.

Just to be on the safe side, I told him to drive around to the harness shop. It was a good thing I did, because Sim was there. He had just come back from Third Island. He was alone in the shop, because old Fred had gone to the Old Settlers' Picnic.

"Sim," I said, "this is the man from the Secret Service."

"Mark Brennan," said Brennan.

Sim looked apprehensive right away. He stood there and sort of stretched and put his hands flat down on his belly and drew them up, as if to make himself look taller and thinner, but his eyes never left Brennan.

"Nice day," said Sim.

"Hot," said Brennan.

Then Brennan took that 1913 Liberty-head nickel from his pants pocket and laid it on the north-wall bench.

"Now, then," he said, "tell me about this. Your local marshal doesn't seem to believe in it very much, but he told us and sent in the nickel."

"It *is* counterfeit, isn't it?" I said.

"Yes, it's counterfeit. Almost bound to be," said Brennan.

"Any idea how few there were made?"

"Oh, maybe a couple thousand," I guessed.

He shook his head. "Not nearly that many."

"A few hundred?"

Brennan shook his head again.

"Less than a hundred?"

"Quite a few less," he said.



"No wonder Ellis was making them," I said.

"Well, tell me about Ellis," said Brennan. He hitched himself partly up on the north-wall bench and waited.

I told him. I wouldn't have blamed him if he were skeptical. The story was beginning to sound like something I made up. But Mr. Brennan wasn't a bit skeptical.

"This fat man, now—did he talk a good deal?"

"Yes," I said, "and he read Emerson."

The Secret Service man grinned. "That would be Darwin Ellis," he said. "He's a very clever man. And dangerous."

"That's what I said right from the start," put in Sim.

"You know him?" I asked.

"Well, I don't know him personally. But I've seen his record. It's quite a record. Counterfeiting 1913 Liberty-head nickels is just the kind of thing he'd do. He'll make some money at it, too, and we'll have a hard time catching him and making a charge stick. We've sent out notices, though, on the strength of this nickel. It's a good job—within its limits, and it'll take in most people."

He looked at the old wall clock that stood on a shelf above the north-wall bench. "I'll tell you what," he said, "if you boys have the time, we'll just drive down to Bogus Bluff and take a look around." He glanced from Sim to me and asked, "What about it?"

"Great!" I said.

Sim hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "If they saw us coming back with you . . ." He left his sentence unfinished, but I understood him.

Brennan just laughed. "I'd be more surprised than you if they were sitting around waiting for us," he said.

"When'll we be back?" asked Sim. "I have to be here supper-time."

"And I have to be back at the Witwen picnic for the fireworks," I said.

"Oh, I guess we'll be back," said the Secret Service man.

Sim insisted on writing a note for Fred. He left it on the north-wall bench.

Then we got into Brennan's car and set out for Bogus Bluff.

Sim was nervous all the way down, but I didn't begin to think about what might happen if the fat man and Mr. Tom caught sight of us until we were climbing up the path toward the cave. But the Secret Service man was in the lead, and I was pretty sure he was armed, even if he didn't draw and flourish his gun around. Brennan didn't make any attempt to conceal his approach or to keep from making noise—nothing at all. He just pushed on up the hill to the mouth of the cave.

"Chicago must have been pretty hot for Ellis for him to hole up here," said Brennan. "Some climb." He pointed off to one side of the cave. "Somebody had a bonfire up here."

"Picnickers," I said. "They likely come up here and have a wiener or marshmallow roast."

He went over to the ashes and poked around.

Sim looked at me and raised his eyebrows. His expression said he was trying to figure out for himself why he had ever agreed to come along back to this place.

I just shook my head. I didn't know what Brennan was doing, but I was sure anybody in the Secret Service would have a good reason for doing it.

He came back with a half-smile on his lips and led the way into the cave.

"Now whereabouts was that 'room'?" he asked over his shoulder.

"It's up ahead. We'll have to crawl," I said. "You skip those side openings—they just lead out to the side of the hill. It's the middle one you take."

He came to where the cave narrowed, dropped to his knees, and began to crawl. We crawled after him. We came to the end at last.

"It's right ahead," I said. "The end of the cave."

I looked past Brennan's shoulder to where his flashlight shone. There was nothing there at all but the end of the cave. Only the little shelf from which the partition had been built. Nothing at all—not even a loose rock—no table, no blankets, no cane chair—nothing. The cave was just as slick and clean as if it had been swept out.

I expected the Secret Service man to turn on me and ask just

how long that particular dream of mine had lasted. But he only walked on the length of the cave, and when he got back to the end he looked around by the light of his flashlight, which had a beam not much bigger than a lead pencil but threw out a powerful glow. He examined the walls, the stone ledge, and the floor. He got down on his knees and ran his fingers through the loose earth.

"Just where about was that table?" he asked.

I showed him, as nearly as I could remember.

"And Ellis sat—where?"

I showed him that place, too.

He looked around there with special attention.

Sim put his mouth to my ear and asked, "What's he think he can find here?"

"Clues," I said. Sim seldom read a detective story.

Finally Mr. Brennan got up and dusted off his knees. "I guess we can go now," he said.

Outside the cave, I said to him, "I'm sorry we couldn't find any evidence. I'll bet you think I dreamed most of this up."

"Not at all," he said cheerfully. "And there's plenty of evidence—but not the kind we could use in court to our advantage in a case of counterfeiting."

"How so?" asked Sim.

"Well, the mere presence of droplets of what had been melted metal on the floor of the cave won't prove counterfeiting. The fact that somebody's scraped considerably off that rock ledge inside won't prove it, either—it only shows there was stone up against that rock. And this pile of ashes—" he pointed to it—"this shows somebody burned quite a bit of wood and some cloth—the table, chairs, and blankets."

"I saw a fire that night—I saw the smoke, I mean," said Sim, "just when we were poling to shore."

Brennan nodded. "They had it all figured out. They kept you boys here just long enough—till they could finish counterfeiting, and before your folks would start searching for you, because they knew the first place they'd look would be Bogus Bluff. You were headed for there. As soon as they let you go, they burned everything they didn't need, and cleaned up the cave. They were

probably on their way out of the country before you boys got home that night.”

I nodded. “When I think it over, that’s just what I’d have done, if I were a counterfeiter like that,” I said.

“I hope we don’t have the beginnings of a criminal mind here,” said the Secret Service man with a laugh.

“No,” I said, “before you can be a detective you have to learn how to think like a criminal. I’ve read a lot of mystery stories.”

Brennan laughed again. “Well, Steve,” he said, “I hate to disillusion you, but real detectives aren’t much like those you find in books.”

“I can see that,” I said. “Nobody would ever take you for a Secret Service man.”

He seemed just as pleased as if I’d paid him a compliment.

I couldn’t say from what little I saw of him how good a detective he was. At least he believed me. But he certainly was a good driver. He got us back to Sac Prairie by suppertime and ran me right straight out to Witwen.

I wasn’t more than ten steps from the car when I ran right into Mother and Grandmother and Great-aunt Lou. Great-aunt’s face was as dark as a thundercloud.

“It’s the Lord’s mercy you didn’t run off with my old man and Gus, Old Timer,” she said. “The both of ’em fell into the slough!”

A bedraggled Great-uncle Joe loomed up behind her, grinning a little sheepishly. “You’d ought to a seen them bullheads,” he said. “This long!”

Great-aunt Lou took a firm hold of him. “I got the biggest fish that ever was in that slough right here,” she said.

I had to laugh. “Oh, I wish I’d been there,” I said. “That must have been a sight to see.”

Grandmother Adams smiled and shook her head. “That boy’s going to take right after Mr. Adams.”

“Well,” said Mother, “I’d sooner have him laugh at everything than mope and cry around about it. Now come on—we’ll watch the fireworks.”



## 18.

### The Way

### Things Happen

LATE THAT MONTH I went down to the harness shop right after dinner one noon. I saw that Sim was no longer at the dinner table with his folks when I went past his house. He wasn't at the harness shop, either. I tried the office door. It was locked, as usual. I pounded on it and hollered, "It's me. Steve."

There wasn't a sound from inside.

I started around the north wall of the shop, where Sim and I had planted a wild-flower garden years before, filling a triangle there up against the brick house next door with trilliums, dutchman's breeches, hepaticas, and wild ginger. I was just beside the garden when Sim came in from the street.

"Wouldn't you know it!" he cried. "I just get our raft fixed and you show up."

"If it's fixed," I said, "it's the best time in the world for me to show up. We can go fishing. Pa said old Mr. Roelke said they were biting over at the wing dam."

"Gus Naffz stopped by and said the same thing," said Sim. "They're biting all over."

"I'll go home and get my pole."

"You can use one of mine. I'm gonna take my casting rod."

Old Fred came down to work as we were getting ready. He stood on the cool, shaded back step, unlocking the door, and watched our preparations with languid interest.

"You ain't makin' another trip?" he asked.

"No, we're going fishing," I said.

"I thought maybe you figured on going out again. Down the Mississippi this time, maybe," said Fred.

"Pa's got to pour his oil," said Sim.

Fred laughed heartily and went into the shop. He pulled the screen shut and left the door stand open.

We went through the shop and out the front door. Old Fred paid no attention to us. We crossed the street. Mr. Elpy was just returning to his store from lunch. He stood under his paper-wasp sign and patted it affectionately.

"Well, boys, going fishing?" he said, seeing us.

"We're ready to take you on that raft trip," I said. "Right now."

Mr. Elpy made a big show of pulling out his watch and gazing at it. He shook his head. "Boys, I can't go now. Time to open up. I have an appointment. Some other time."

"That time'll never come," muttered Sim, as we rounded Mr. Elpy's building and went down the slope of the bank to the water's edge.

Mr. Elpy came through his store to the open back window. "Thanks, anyway, boys," he called down.

"Some other time then," I said.

"Sure. Sure. Some other time," called Mr. Elpy.

"Some Sunday," said Sim, "when you don't have to work."

Mr. Elpy waved. He looked as if he would really have liked to go with us, but something more than what he liked to do charted his course. He stood gazing after us, trying to seem very professional. But his baggy eyes were soft and sad.

The bushes shut him from sight as we came to the edge of the Wisconsin. The raft lay there. It had been out of the water for so long that it was dry on top.

Sim put his casting rod and his creel and his bait box under the lean-to. I gave him my things. Then he came back off, got the poles out of the bushes where he had hidden them so that kids going past wouldn't throw them into the water, and put them on board. We were just getting to work to get the raft all the way back into the water when somebody hollered at us.

"Hey, boys!"

I looked up. Mike Kurth was standing on the stone retaining wall behind us.

"Fred said I'd find you here. Got a letter from that Mr. Brennan," he bawled in a voice loud enough to startle the cows in Gus Pillep's pasture across the river.

"I can hear you, Mike," I said. "Don't holler so."

"I ain't hollering," he hollered. "Says I should tell you they caught that feller, Ellis."

"That so?" I said. I got interested right away.

Sim just grunted.

"But they couldn't do much to him," the marshal went on. "He didn't have any of them nickels with him. They turned up two that got sold—two false ones, he said—but Ellis was too cute for 'em. He got somebody else to sell 'em, and the dealers had to swear it wasn't Ellis they bought 'em from. So they let him go."

"What about us?" I asked. "We could tell 'em—"

"They said that was only hearsay—your word against his. Sim didn't see 'em counterfeiting; so it's just one against the other, and Brennan says a good lawyer would make hay out of that. No use spendin' good money till they get a tighter case against Ellis. They will, sooner or later."

"What about Mr. Tom?" Sim put in.

"Ain't been heard of."

"Thanks, Mike," I said.

"Oh, you're welcome," said Mike. "Any time you boys get mixed up in anything else illegal, you come see me."

"We sure will," I said.

Mike turned and vanished among the bushes on the slope.

"We might as well have kept still," said Sim, "for all the good it's done."

"No," I pointed out, "it did some good, even if they couldn't put Ellis and Mr. Tom in jail. Now everybody's been warned to watch out for those counterfeit 1913 Liberty-head nickels. It sort of spoils Ellis' game."

"Ha!" snorted Sim. "If I know him, he's already unloaded all those nickels—maybe not to dealers and collectors, but to somebody he could count on to pass 'em. He made enough already,

ten to one. He's just settin' back laughing at the Secret Service—and at us, too, most likely."

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it," I said. "Let's get the raft in."

The shore there was pebbly, not sandy, and the floats rolled. All we had to do was push and hold the raft steady. She slid in easy, but grounded because the water was shallow along shore. Sim jumped on board. I took off my shoes and stockings and waded into the water to push a little more until Sim could begin to pole the raft away from the river's edge. Then I got on, too.

The wing dam was across the Wisconsin and a little way up from the place where we put in, about a block or so. We couldn't hope to go right across the current. First we had to take the raft down around a point of sand bar, over which the water was too shallow for her; then we had to go up along the bar against the current, heading for quiet water up where the bar cut in. And from there we had to pole the raft all the way up to Third Island, which was about as far above the wing dam on this side as we were below it.

Part of that way we could walk in the water, just pulling the raft. It was hard pulling when we sank into the watery sand, but it was easier than trying to pole upstream. It was a cloudless day, and the sun beat down upon the river. Once we were out of sight of town, we took off our clothes and cooled off in the water.

It took us about an hour to get to Third Island. From there it was easy. We just poled the raft off into the current from the point and let the river carry us in an angle toward the wing dam. The hills on the east shore loomed up closer and closer; the turtles on the rocks along shore slipped off into the water as we drew near; Pillep's cows stood in the shallows and stared at us; and in only a few minutes we were poling in around the end of the old dam.

"Tie up," said Sim, jumping off with his casting rod in his hand.

I was just as eager to get to the pilings of the dam as he was. It was a place where blue gills and crappies, bass and pike lay on one side or another. I tied the raft up hurriedly, grabbed my fishing pole and the bait, and got off after him. Sim was already



casting into the quiet water along the north wall of the dam, in from the current, where the bass and pike liked to lie. I baited my hook, dropped it in, and sat down to watch the cork. It seemed as if I had been watching a cork for the best part of every summer all my life. It made me feel good to do it—sort of peaceful, sort of in tune with the water lapping and the cowbell ringing and the west wind in the birch trees.

There were a few aspen and birch and cottonwood trees growing up from among the stones of the old wing dam, and they gave us shade and coolness. It was wonderful to sit there and to look up the river, along the curving line of the hills, up to where Black Hawk Lookout rose bluntly into the sky. The Lookout dominated the valley—all the long curve of the river, the great bend of the Wisconsin, all that paw of land stretched out from the western hills for Sac Prairie to grow upon, all the near hills and the marshes, the islands and the bridges. High overhead nighthawks spiraled up and dropped, booming.

“Rain tonight,” said Sim, looking up at them. “They always say nighthawks in the afternoon mean rain at night.”

“I don’t believe it,” I said. “There’re a lot of old superstitions like that. Why don’t sandpipers in the evening mean rain? Or marsh hawks at night mean a shortage of mice next day, or something like that?”

“You talk too much,” said Sim.

Just then he had a strike and hooked a fish. He played it smoothly, and brought in a bass I figured weighed at least three pounds. He was more patient with a pole than I was; I always wanted to pull the fish right up—not play him and tucker him out, the way Sim did it.

Soon after that I caught my first blue gill—a fish bigger than my hand spread out.

In the quiet spell that followed Sim pondered, “You don’t suppose we might be seeing Mr. Tom one of these days?”

“Heck, no!” I said. “The Secret Service doesn’t give away its sources of information. When they pinched Ellis, they didn’t mention us. Besides, Mr. Tom’s probably taking it easy somewhere on all the money they made.”

“I don’t know,” said Sim.

"Oh, the way I figure it out now," I said, "they knew all along they were going to let us go, and they guessed we'd say something. That's why they cleared out the way they did the same time we did. Burned everything, so there wouldn't be any evidence. And that's why Ellis got rid of the counterfeit nickels so fast."

Sim had another strike and forgot about the counterfeiters. I kept on thinking of them. Here at the wing dam it did begin to seem like something in one of my books out in the summer kitchen. Here the wing dam hill rose up into the blue sky east of us, and the Wisconsin stretched out west for a good distance to Karberg's bar, and on to the village on the bank above. Bogus Bluff seemed very far away. I could still see the fat man and Mr. Tom and the cave and the things in it. But they didn't seem so real as Sim's bass or my blue gills.

In a way I was glad Ellis and Mr. Tom hadn't been sent to jail. The fat man wouldn't have liked it in jail. And it bothered me a little that I was glad.

"What're you so still about?" asked Sim.

"I was just thinking," I said, "the way things happen."

"It's none of your doing or mine," said Sim. Another strike bent his casting rod. "Gosh! The fish are like crazy in here today."

They kept on biting, until each of us had a string of them. The afternoon grew older. The cows came out of the hills again to drink at the river below the wing dam, and then began to meander slowly homeward along the path that would take them to Pillep's barn for the evening milking. We fished like fishing fools, and we didn't pay attention to the time or the river rising or anything—just fish.

Until the angelus rang out from St. Jude's in Sac Prairie.

"It's six o'clock!" cried Sim. "You'll catch it."

"I always catch it when I'm late," I said.

Sim reeled in his line and pulled up his fish. He started for the head of the dam, while I was cleaning my hook. I heard him holler.

"Where'd you tie up, Steve?"

"Right there," I said. "Right where we got off."

I walked after him.

The raft was gone.

I had tied her too hastily, not carefully enough. The high water had helped loosen the raft, and now she was way out in the river, moving fast, already too far away from the wing dam to swim out to.

Sim turned with a reproachful glance and began to run. "Come on! Maybe we can catch her at the bridge."

I ran back to my pole, snatched it up, grabbed my string of fish, and ran after Sim. In along the wing dam, dodging among the trees, over the rocks, and around the sandy shore. We ran like crazy. We ran to the embankment of the highway and out on the old bridge, for the new one still wasn't ready for use. We ran from one span to another, but we were too late.

The rising water took the raft and flung her against an ice-breaker. From that she sailed across the water, her poles sliding off into the river, and thudded up against one of the piers of the old bridge. The boiling water caught her, churned her around, and washed her up against the nearest pilings, scraping off one of her floats. And then she hit the sharp, jutting point of the new bridge pier and broke into three pieces.

Sim never said a word. Neither did I. We just stood and watched all our work go down the river, watched until the pieces were almost out of sight at the tip of Bergen's Island, knowing that the railroad bridge would do even more damage, knowing that though we might be able to find the timbers and floats along Henn's Point or the inlets of the islands, we probably would never hunt for them.

"There goes our summer," said Sim.

"We can build another one," I said.

Sim just shook his head. He started on across the bridge toward Sac Prairie. I trailed after, wishing we had never thought of going fishing.

I was an hour late for supper. Everybody had eaten and my supper was cold. Mother was just sitting there waiting for me to come in and sit down.

"I suppose you didn't hear the six-o'clock bells?" she said.

"Sure," I said. "Only I was across the river. Just look outside and see the nice blue gills I caught."

"One hour late!" hollered Mother. "It's high time we came to an understanding."

"Oh, let him eat," cried Father, lowering a Western novel he was reading.

"I'm not stopping him," said Mother.

Nothing was stopping her, either. She went on for five minutes before I could get a word in edgewise.

"Well, anyway," I said, "we got rid of our raft."

That sort of stopped her. If she meant to say anything more, the words never came. "Thank goodness!" she said, when she had got over her surprise. "Did you sell it?"

I told her what had happened.

Father gave me a sympathetic look.

"Maybe that'll teach you a lesson," said Mother. "Maybe you'll grow up into some sense yet."

"There's hope," I said.

"Don't be sassy," said Mother.

"I'm not. I was just agreeing with you."

"You listen to me, Stephen. We've got to come to an understanding. It's high time . . ."

"Sure, Ma," I said. "I just couldn't help it this time. The fish were biting so good."

Father hit the table with the flat of his hand. "Enough of this argument! It's a wonder a man can digest his food!" He glared at Mother. He glared at me. He raised his book once more, but in a few seconds he lowered it and asked quietly, "Where were they biting?"

I told him.

He grinned. "I used to catch it when I was a boy, too, for the same reason. Only you just have to listen to your mother—and every time I did it I took a strapping."

I smiled and Mother smiled, and the storm was over.

I felt bad about the raft, just the same. I felt bad that Ellis and Mr. Tom had escaped, too, at the same time that I felt glad about it. It was a mixed-up feeling. I didn't eat much; I didn't have much appetite. After supper I went out to the summer



kitchen just as Grandfather Adams came up the boardwalk between his house and ours. He followed me out to the summer kitchen and sat down on the doorsill.

"What is it this time?" he asked. "You look and act like the last rose of summer."

I told him about the raft.

"If only we hadn't gone over to fish the wing dam today," I said.

"It might have happened tomorrow, then, or next day," said Grandfather. "My boy, a great many things happen every day which are outside your control. Don't blame yourself."

"But it was my fault. I must have tied her too loose," I said. "Then the river came up and worked her loose . . ."

"Was that your fault, too?" asked Grandfather gently.

"Well, no."

"Who was it wanted to go to the wing dam?"

"I guess we both had the idea."

"So both of you knew that the current is tricky at the wing dam and comes down heading straight for it. That's why the wing dam was put in—to keep the river from washing out the hills and the road embankment at the east end of the bridge. If the raft means so much to you, you can build a new one."

I knew we wouldn't. I said so. "Seems like a lot of things went wrong this summer," I said. "They caught Ellis, too—and they had to let him go."

"That doesn't surprise me," said Grandfather.

"And now the raft . . ."

Grandfather Adams sat looking at me for a while with a soft light in his eyes and a little smile on his mouth. "You'll have to learn to accept life the way it is," he said softly. "Don't sulk. Don't waste yourself regretting things. It doesn't help. And remember, boy, you have to put something into living in order to get something out of it."

"Grandpa," I said earnestly, "I put a lot into life."

"Yes, you do—but you try to hang on to all of it. And you can't do it. Because little by little everything changes in this life, everything passes away, until, in the end, life does, too. The sooner you begin to understand that, the happier you'll be. You

won't fight against what you can't help. You'll learn to enjoy what life brings to you." He pointed to the trunks filled with funny papers. "Look at these things now—you're hanging on to your childhood here." He chuckled. "And you'll probably be stubborn enough to hang on most of your life."

"Sure," I said. "Sure I will." I had to smile.

"Life isn't meant to be all laughter or all tears," said Grandfather then. "We get a little of both. It makes for balance. It tempers a man. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Grandpa," I said. "I understand."

He tousled my hair and laughed. "You don't understand a bit of it—but you will." He put his arm around me and drew me close to him. "You will, boy," he said again. "It just takes time, that's all."

Outside, in the evening, the new moon shone fresh and clear in the washed blue of the western sky. In the dark park a little screech owl began to tumble its bell-like notes into the dusk. And, like pale yellow moths, the street lights came on, stretching out along the lane among the dark trees to westward, toward the prairie and the smoky orange afterglow, out to the last house on the edge of town, the lemon street lights with their haunting promise of tomorrow. . . .

...the first of these was the ...  
...the second was the ...  
...the third was the ...

...the fourth was the ...  
...the fifth was the ...  
...the sixth was the ...

...the seventh was the ...  
...the eighth was the ...  
...the ninth was the ...

...the tenth was the ...  
...the eleventh was the ...  
...the twelfth was the ...

...the thirteenth was the ...  
...the fourteenth was the ...  
...the fifteenth was the ...

...the sixteenth was the ...  
...the seventeenth was the ...  
...the eighteenth was the ...

...the nineteenth was the ...  
...the twentieth was the ...  
...the twenty-first was the ...

...the twenty-second was the ...  
...the twenty-third was the ...  
...the twenty-fourth was the ...

...the twenty-fifth was the ...  
...the twenty-sixth was the ...  
...the twenty-seventh was the ...

...the twenty-eighth was the ...  
...the twenty-ninth was the ...  
...the thirtieth was the ...

