

the evening, forgetful of all the manifold unpleasant incidents of the day.

It was a rare occasion always for Professor Ballentine's grammar-school, the evening of the day preceding the long vacation. In the present instance, absolute riot reigned for several hours in the old academy and its vicinity.

There was unrestrained license for that evening at least. Professor Ballentine was busy in his study, working on some maps of the proposed expedition, one of the more inquisitive of the boys said, and the students knew they were the masters of their own time until ten o'clock.

They played a dozen pranks on the janitor and the servants, had a grand march on the campus, sang a dozen songs, and then, when the retiring bell rang, they gave a score of cheers for the school, the teachers and the community in general, subsiding from boyish vivacity finally after a battle with pillows in the dormitories.

Silence at last fell over the building, and only an occasional voice sleepily discussing the morrow broke the stillness of the hour.

"I can't rest until I see if Mr. James is all right," murmured Ned finally. "I'll just steal quietly to his room and back again."

He reached the hall, and listened intently. In some distant part of the silent structure he could hear the echoing footsteps of the patrolling janitor.

"I'll venture it," decided Ned.

He stole cautiously down the corridor, and reached the door of Mr. James' room.

A light burned dimly in the apartment. It showed the disordered bed, and the clothing of the occupant over a chair, but no sign of the under-master.

"Where can he have gone?" Ned murmured, gliding to the corridor again. "What is that?"

A white-robed form was visible as he leaned over the balusters and looked down the stairs leading to the main floor of the academy. It was the under-master.

"Mr. James," whispered Ned softly down the stair case.

There was no reply, and Mr. James disappeared in the direction of the Professor's study.

"Maybe he's sick, and has gone for some medicine from his brother," soliloquized Ned. "I'll wait for him here till he returns."

He heard a sound below like a door forcibly opened, then a distant crash echoed through the building.

A moment later the door of the Professor's sleeping-room opened. The Professor himself glanced forth.

Ned Darrow followed the boyish instinct of flight. Had the Professor seen and recognized him? He hoped not, and lay in his bed, as he regained the dormitories, listening intently.

There was the sound of a bell, and a few minutes later the janitor came tramping down the corridor.

"Did you ring for me, Professor Ballentine?" Ned heard his gruff voice ask.

"Yes. I want you to keep a watch on the dormitories to-night."

"Mischief brewing, sir?"

"On this, of all nights, of the year, of course," was the Professor's cheery reply. "I just saw one of the boys scamper down the corridor."

"All right, sir. I'll keep my eye on the young rascals!" chuckled the janitor, complacently.

Ned had no further opportunity of visiting Mr. James that night, for the janitor was on guard.

For half an hour he tossed restlessly on his bed, thinking of the long vacation, the story of his brother, Ralph

Warden's enmity, the mysterious man in the thicket, and Mr. James.

He fell asleep finally, dreaming of the man with the bushy whiskers, and deciding that the events of that day had certainly been the most exciting of his life.

Yet, startling as they were, they were trifling as compared with the episodes destined to be ushered in with the dawning of another day.

CHAPTER IV.

LEFT BEHIND.

A brighter day never dawned for Ridgeland than that which inaugurated the long vacation for Professor Ballentine's grammar school.

Before daylight the voices of the excited students mingled with the happy chirping of the birds, and twenty industrious lads devoted an hour or more to packing as many satchels, in pursuance with the orders of the previous day.

Before nine o'clock, when the bell rang for the boys to congregate in the chapel, in some mysterious way a hint as to the point of destination of the expedition had leaked out.

Ernest Blake, meeting Ned Darrow, amazed the latter with the announcement—

"Well, Ned, it's a long journey, for sure. Just think of it—the ocean, the salt breeze, the bounding billows! Hurrah!"

"What!" ejaculated Ned. "Who says so?"

"All of the boys. It started with Dick Wilson as authority."

Ned Darrow looked perplexed.

"I don't see how he found out——," he began, and then checked himself with a flushing face and embarrassed manner.

"Aha! You knew it then beforehand!" cried Ernest, triumphantly. "Dick! Harry! Sam! Quick! Mr. Ned Darrow verifies your surmises. It's the ocean, sure!"

"No, no, I have verified nothing," dissented Ned, as he found himself the centre of a chattering group.

"It's no use, Ned," cried Dick Wilson. "You did know it. It was from your lips I got the hint."

"Mine?" cried the astonished Ned.

"Exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. I woke before you did this morning, and I heard you dreaming. Talking in your sleep, you see."

"What did I say?" Ned asked, in a subdued tone, crestfallen and mortified that even in his sleeping moments he should have betrayed Professor Ballentine's cherished secret.

"Oh, lots of nonsense, but in the jumble of words I traced the truth. You had overheard somebody telling about the expedition. There's the mail, boys," and as the postman drove up to the gate of the academy, the throng scampered off, leaving Ned a victim to a variety of emotions.

"It's too bad," he murmured, "that the truth should have leaked out. I must see if Mr. James has awaked yet."

A visit to the under-master's room, however, revealed to Ned the fact that Mr. James was not there, and inquiry failed to elicit any reliable information as to his whereabouts.

Just as the chapel bell rang, Dick Wilson handed Ned a letter.