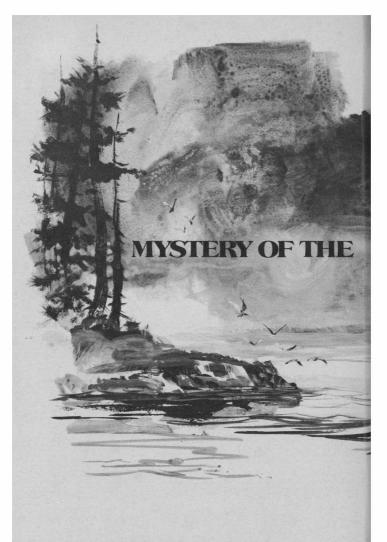


by Elaine Macmann Willoughby illustrated by Raymond Keane







LOBSTER THIEVES by Elaine Macmann Willoughby illustrated by Raymond Keane Xerox Education Publications

To Janet and Bob and John

Text copyright © 1978 by Elaine Macmann Willoughby

Illustrations copyright © 1978 by Xerox Corporation

Publishing, Executive and Editorial Offices: Xerox Education Publications Middletown, Connecticut 06457

Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or format without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 0-88375-217-4

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 78-52140

Xerox® is a trademark of Xerox Corporation.

Weekly Reader Children's Book Club edition

A Good Place for a Mystery

I had never thought much about girls and boys getting kidnaped before we moved to Blue Shutters. Blue Shutters is a little white cottage with blue shutters that we rented on an island—just off the coast of New Hampshire.

The cottage is on a little cove, and you can fish and swim and everything. There are apple trees to climb and late in the summer we use the apples for pies. Sometimes we use the apples for ammunition in an apple war. Getting hit with a rotten apple doesn't hurt as much as the good ones, but it is very messy.

Besides all the apple trees there is a big oak tree. Wallace, my ten-year-old brother, hung a swing from it. Then there is a rowboat anchored about ten feet from the

house. Good and bad things happened with that rowboat. In the end I guess you'd say that the rowboat was the reason the mystery was solved. But after what we went through because of it sometimes makes me not so sure.

Well, the day we moved into Blue Shutters was one of "those days." My little sister, Josie (who isn't quite three years old), woke up with a high fever. "Annie," said my mother, "I'd like you to read to Josie while the movers pack the furniture."

I was stuck! And Josie was a "mess"! She kept looking at the movers and asking if they were going to pack her in the van, too. How silly!

Then Wallace and I had a fight in the car. Neither one of us wanted to hold the goldfish bowl. My father put the bowl on Wallace's lap. But Wallace didn't want it, so he slid it onto my lap. Some of the water slurped out. The goldfish probably thought it was a tidal wave! Then I tried to put it back on Wallace's lap. But Wallace turned away and you guessed it. Goldfish on the seat of the car! Without water it is a bad time for goldfish.

My father quickly grabbed the goldfish and put them back into the bowl. Wallace poured in some water from his canteen. So the goldfish were O.K. Then nothing much more interesting happened until we crossed the bridge to the island and saw a lobster boat anchored close to shore. Fishermen catch lobsters in traps, then

they take the lobsters to market to sell. Lobsters are something like crabs—you have to get the shell off before you can eat them.

Soon we turned down a little dirt lane, and just before we got to the water there was the white house with blue shutters. The moving van was in front getting itself unloaded. And in back of Blue Shutters was the sparkling blue salt water. Wallace and I ran down to the tiny beach. We took off our shoes and socks and waded into the water.

"The cold water makes my skin tingle," said Wallace.

"Mine, too," I answered. It was a nice tingle, though.

Two sea gulls glided up and down in the air currents. They were beautiful big birds. Mostly white with pearly grey mantels and black wing tips. It looked as though they were having fun gliding up and down and around the tiny cove. I know I was having fun. Wallace had found some sea shells here and there on the beach. Some pretty pebbles, too. I was stuffing the best ones into my pockets when Mom called us to come help unpack. Well, I figured we'd be there all summer to explore. So I went up to amuse Josie again.

By dinner time we were all moved into our little house.

From the side porch I could see the sea gulls and water and little beach. So I asked if we could eat our dinner

4 Mystery of the Lobster Thieves out there. Mom said we could.

"I wish Mr. and Mrs. Moore were going to be in their cottage next door this summer," said my father, as he set the table. "Then you wouldn't be so all alone down here."

My father was going away to Japan on business. We couldn't go with him.

"That's one of the things I like about this place," said Mother. "It's so lovely and secluded."

"Very private," said Wallace. "Good place for a mystery," he added playfully.

"Now, Wallace," said my father, "don't try and scare anyone."

By "anyone" I knew he meant me. I didn't say anything except, "Please pass the butter." Wallace is always imagining things, so his mystery didn't scare me one bit. Maybe it should have scared me. Then we might have been more careful.

•2• A Light in the Darkness

After supper Mom left the two of us to clean up the kitchen and take care of Josie while she took Dad to the bus. She told us to keep the latch on the door. I don't know who she thought would find us living in the

midst of all those bushes and trees. Anyhow, she was only driving into town. Dad had a late night plane to catch, but with the good bus service Mom didn't have to drive him all the way to Boston.

It took us some time to get the dishes washed and put away, because we kept going out on the porch to see how fast the tide was coming in. We measured the way it came in by a big rock on the beach. Little by little the water came closer to the big rock and soon it began to cover it.

While we were working and watching and measuring, the wind came up and it started to rain. By the time Mother got back it was really coming down hard! Mom looked tired. She got us going on a game of Monopoly and made a real effort to be cheerful, but it was not enough to hide her real feelings. Suddenly it was catching. We were all tired from the moving and we missed Dad

With our tiredness and the noise of the wind and rain beating down on the house, I guess we didn't hear the first knock on the door.

Mother looked over at us and said uncertainly, "I wonder who could be calling at this hour?"

"And in this storm," I added. I won't say I was scared, but it did seem a little unusual.

Greed kept Wallace from paying much attention to the

knock. He was busy buying houses and hotels to put on his Monopoly property.

Mother got up and looked out of the window. "It's a man," she said. "And he looks friendly." But I noticed that she opened the door only the length of the latch chain.

The man raised his cap and said, "Mrs. Crocker, my name's Stone, Captain Stone of the tugboat *Jupiter*. We live up on Beech Street. I guess the Moores told you about my taking care of things down here."

Mother's shoulders relaxed and she unlatched the door. She said, "Oh, yes, do come in, Captain Stone. Mr. Moore told us that we're to contact you if we need anything."

I didn't know then how much we'd need Captain Stone later on, but I won't get into all that now.

Captain Stone seemed to fill the entire kitchen, he was that big. His eyes were kind and soft and watery. His face was weatherbeaten from years on the water. And he had a set to his jaw that made me think that he could handle his crew in good shape.

"You folks getting settled all right?" he asked.

"Yes," said my mother, "except I'm not certain how to turn down this hot water heater."

After Captain Stone showed us how to adjust the wa-

ter heater, my mother asked him if he'd have a cup of coffee.

"Don't mind if I do," he said as he lowered himself into one of the easy chairs. "Been as busy as a one-arm paper hanger all day!" He looked at us and said, "This is a great place for young people like you to explore. There are tiny islands all over the place. One of the islands used to have slave quarters on it."

Wallace stopped playing Monopoly and listened to Captain Stone. His beady little eyes were very thoughtful. Wallace has one of those faces, like a book. Big and round and freckled with no place he can hide any secrets. Like just then, when my mother brought in cookies and hot chocolate, he looked greedy again. Anyone else might feel greedy, but wouldn't show it. But if Wallace feels something you can always read it on his face. Besides greedy he also looked interested. "What about camping on those little islands?" he asked.

"Dandy," said Captain Stone. "My boy goes out camping every once in awhile. He'll probably be down here one of these days. About your age, I guess."

Since he looked at both of us, I figured his boy might be about nine, which is a year older than me, but younger than Wallace.

I'd been thinking about those little islands all this



time. I love to explore, but didn't want to get caught tramping all over someone's yard and have their dog after us. So I asked Captain Stone if anyone lived on the little islands.

"Nope, not now," he said. "They're all uninhabited. Folks who own them want them that way, too. Keeps their view unspoiled, you know."

"What great places for smuggling or something," said Wallace. He looked excited.

This was too much. I said in my most grown-up, bored voice, "My brother has pirates and robbers on the brain!"

Captain Stone smiled a little and said, "Not much going on out there these days." He paused as he remembered. "But we have been having trouble the past two seasons with someone stealing lobsters from our men's lobster traps."

Mother looked up from her knitting and said, "Can't the authorities do anything about it?"

"Well," said Captain Stone, "the authorities on the island are the Chief of Police. A reward has been posted in the post office, but so far we can't find out who's doing it."

Wallace perked up.

I thought of the lobster traps we'd seen earlier in the day. I said, "You'd think they could be easily noticed getting into something like a lobster trap."

"Well, you'd think so," answered Captain Stone, "but of course they might be working at night." Suddenly he looked at his watch and said, "Well, I best be going. If you need anything, just let me or my boy know." As the door opened, a gust of rainy wind swept in and blew some of the Monopoly around.

It had been a long and exciting day and we were all very tired. So, very soon after Captain Stone left, we all went to bed. The Monopoly board was left in the middle of the floor with Wallace's hotels and houses all over the place.

I had a tiny bedroom under the eaves. It was very cozy and smelled of pine wood. There wasn't any plaster ceiling, so I could hear the rain on the roof. It was like some kind of lullaby and I was almost asleep when I heard a loud crack outside. I sat bolt upright in bed and looked out into the darkness.

During the day the view from my window was nothing but water and islands and the Moores' empty cottage. So at night it was all dark, or it should have been. That's why, when I saw a faint light come and go near the Moores' cottage, a strange prickly feeling came over me. I strained forward in the darkness to see better. There it was again! But after a few seconds the light disappeared.

I waited for ages for it to come on again. But it didn't, and neither did the crack. Finally I decided that I must

have been seeing things, so I lay back down under the blankets and tried to go to sleep. I kept thinking about my new home and my father leaving and Captain Stone and the lobster thieves. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed that lobsters were hanging from the branches of the apple trees and that we picked them and hid them under the house.

·3· The Unfriendly Fisherman

The next morning, before I opened my eyes, I heard two squirrels scampering around on the roof. Nothing else. So I knew that the rain had stopped.

Suddenly I remembered the light I had seen and I sat up in bed and looked out the window toward the Moores' empty cottage. The trees and bushes near our cottage sparkled as the sun hit the moisture that was left from last night's rain. You couldn't see the Moores' house because of the bushes, but I knew it was there. In the daylight it didn't seem scary at all.

I started to wonder if I really had seen anything when the smell of bacon came floating up the stairs. So I hurriedly put on my jeans and rushed downstairs.

Wallace was already eating, and grumpy Josie was sitting in her high chair, kicking the leg of the table.

Mother looked at Josie and said, "She's feeling better, thank goodness."

"I'm starved," I said, and I helped myself to several pieces of bacon and a large portion of eggs.

While I was stuffing my mouth, I started to think about the light again, but I was interrupted by my mother. "I'd like you two to bike over to the little store for me as soon as you finish eating."

We were so glad not to have to "Josie-sit" that we didn't protest. I jammed the money and list into my pocket and hurried out the door, just in case Mother changed her mind. Wallace and I had gotten half way down Beech Street when we nearly bumped into a boy who seemed a little older than me, but younger than Wallace. He was much fatter than Wallace and he had on a wrinkled tee shirt that said, "I'm the MOST!"

"You the new kids down the lane?" he asked.

We both nodded.

"I'm Dave Stone-my dad told me about you." When he grinned at us his eyes almost disappeared in his face.

"Hi ya," mumbled Wallace.

Then there was the kind of silence that sometimes happens when you first meet someone new. I put my hands in my pockets and looked down at a white pebble in the dirt. Then my fingers touched the grocery list and I found my voice. "Can you tell us how to get to the

Mystery of the Lobster Thieves 13 little store?" Lasked.

"I'll ride with you," said Dave. But he peddled on ahead so fast down the hill and around the curve that we barely could keep up with him. We whizzed past the school into the tiny center of the island. On one side of the street were a town hall, church and miniature post office. On the other side were the little store and fish market.

We parked our bikes in front of the post office right by a sign that said REWARD. Wallace and I love rewards, so we started to read it.

Dave said, "It's about the lobster thieves. Can't seem to find out who's behind the whole thing."

"Boy, I'd like to catch them and get that reward," said Wallace.

Dave laughed. "Who wouldn't?" he said. "Besides, there are some men who make their whole living by lobstering, so when their traps are empty they don't eat."

After we told the postmistress who we were, we went across the street to the little store. The woman behind the counter was very friendly and in no time we had everything on the list except the fish. The groceries just fitted into my bike carrier, and I left them there while we went to get the last item on our list.

For the fish we had to go next door to the Wells Brothers Fish Market. Dave pushed open the door and

we stepped onto the wet concrete floor. On the right were double decker lobster pounds. A lobster pound is a big box where they keep lobsters alive until someone buys them. There is fresh sea water running into the tanks all the time.

Wallace and I started to look into the pounds when a rather sharp nasal voice called to us from the other end of the market. "You kids want something?"

We all turned toward the voice. Dave looked surprised.

The tall, stringy man behind the counter looked dirty and not very pleasant.

"Hi ya, Charlie," mumbled Dave. "My friend here wants some salmon."

Charlie said, "Any friend of Dave Stone's is a friend of mine!" But he looked so unfriendly that none of us believed a word of what he said!

"Well, c'mon," said Charlie. "I haven't got all day!"

Wallace ordered a pound of salmon, and while Charlie was wrapping the fish he looked sideways at us and said, "You the new family down at Blue Shutters?"

"Yes," we both answered.

"Kind of lonesome down there, isn't it?" he asked.

Wallace and I didn't say anything since we'd heard this kind of talk from Dad the night before.

I paid for the fish and we went outside.

WELLS BROS. FISH

"Whew," said Wallace as we started towards our bikes. "What an unfriendly place to get fish!"

"It isn't the market," said Dave. "It's Charlie. He's a bad apple. Used to work for my father on the tug, but he got fired for goofing off and a few other things."

I laughed. "I thought he didn't act like your best friend."

"What's he doing running the fish market?" asked Wallace, as he slipped the fish behind him into the ruck-sack he was carrying on his back.

"Oh, he doesn't really," said Dave. "His half brothers own it. I guess he was just helping out since he doesn't have a job."

"You mean since your father fired him?" I asked.

We got on our bikes and were starting back to Blue Shutters. Dave slowed down next to us so that we could talk together. "No," he said in answer to my question. "After he left the tug, he started lobstering. But there is a law which says you can't take lobsters out of the water until they have grown to a certain size."

"And he did?" I asked.

"Yes," said Dave, "and he had his license suspended for a year. That's another reason he doesn't like me. My father helped convict him!"

By now we had rounded the curve and were going up the little hill to Beech Street. "What a family," said Wallace.

"Oh, his brothers are really nice," said Dave. "Not like him at all. One is a notary and the other sells insurance. They have to have something to do in the winter when the fish business slows down. My father says that Charlie is the black sheep in the family."

"Well, I wouldn't trust him very far," I said. "He gives me a pain," and then as my bicycle tires slipped in the big ruts in the dirt lane I added, "and so does this dumb old dirt road give me a pain!" The groceries were jiggling around in my bike carrier. It seemed for a moment, until I got control of my bike, that the eggs would all be broken and squishy over everything else.

Mother and Josie were in the kitchen when we came in with the groceries. I introduced Dave and started to put away the food. For some reason, when I opened up the refrigerator door and saw the light, it reminded me of the light I had seen last night over at the Moores. I wanted to go over next door and take a look.

Wallace must have been a mind reader because he said, "Hey, can we go out around and explore for a while?"

Mother stopped washing off a shelf and said, "Yes, but do be careful. I guess you're O.K. with Dave. And be back by lunch!"

In no time we were through the bushes and onto the

Moores' property. The cottage was more overgrown than Blue Shutters, but it was pretty and white. Over the door was a sign which read *The Sea Gull*.

On the water side of the house was a big garage door. And it looked as though the water went right in under the house.

Dave saw Wallace and me looking at the water and said, "That's a boathouse, except it's not used anymore. The Moore's moor their boat out in front now."

The next discovery may have been the real start of things, but it's always hard to tell where something actually begins.

Wallace was looking intently at the door. Finally he said, "So if the Moores don't use this door anymore, then why are the hinges newly oiled?"

It's funny. Fifty people could have looked at that door and not seen the oiled hinges. And fifty other people could have seen the oiled hinges but wouldn't have thought a thing about them. And then there is Wallace, who did see the oiled hinges and did think something about them.

It was then that I remembered last night's light. I said, "The light—I saw a light last night. It came from somewhere over here!" Both boys stopped and looked at me—with great interest!

.4. The Warning

Liwas a very interesting person. It's a nice feeling, being interesting, I mean. As usual Wallace's face was like an open book, and I also saw something else there—envy! Well, I told them all I knew about the light, but it wasn't much, really.

Dave had taken off his shoes and socks and had begun to roll up his jeans. He was thoughtful. Finally he said, "Well, the light could have been anyone. For instance, I cut across here with a light when I'm camping out." That seemed to satisfy him, so he changed the subject. "Tide's out—let's wade across to Pine Island."

The outgoing tide had uncovered an old dam that went from where we were out to Pine Island. The dam kept most of the water from being drained out of our little cove at low tide.

Wallace was still thinking, although he had started to roll up his jeans, too. "Well, but what about those hinges?" he persisted. "Explain that!"

I stuffed my socks into my sneakers and waited for Dave to answer.

"Oh, there's probably a simple answer to that, too," he said. "Maybe even my dad thought they needed some oil

and did it himself. I'll ask him." With that he seemed to really end the matter. He quickly climbed down the Moores' retaining wall and began to pick his way nimbly over the small rocky beach to the barnacle-covered wet rocks of the dam.

We could see that Dave didn't find the oiled hinges or light in the darkness at all unusual. But for some reason we did. And we were interested to hear what Dave's father would say about the hinges. Maybe we were seeing more clearly than Dave because we were new on the island. Dave had lived there all his life and took things pretty much as they came along, with no big questions.

Dave was across the old dam in no time. But it took Wallace and me a lot longer because our feet weren't used to the sharp rocks, barnacles and mussel shells. Also, in some places it was very, very slippery from the wet seaweed.

Finally we reached the end of the dam. Here the going was easier. We hurriedly crossed the soft grey mud and the sandy beach and followed Dave over the big boulders up to the grass and bushes.

I turned and looked back over our route. Everything looked different from out here on this tiny island. You could see a little of Blue Shutters, but The Sea Gull was completely lost in the trees on the opposite bank. "Very secluded," I thought.

Dave and Wallace interrupted my thought with their yelling at me to hurry up. So I turned around and followed them up through the long prickly grass, past a few scrub pine trees. Just after we'd gone over the crest of the hill, we came to a big cut in the bank of the island. It was hollowed out several feet, making a natural shelter. To give it even more privacy I could see that someone had built a kind of lean-to in which a person could stay without being seen.

"How do you like it?" asked Dave as he climbed down and disappeared from view.

"Great!" I called, and Wallace and I scrambled down in after Dave.

"You could even spend the night here," said Wallace, with great enthusiasm.

"That's just what I do," said Dave.

Wallace and I were excited. We'd never done anything like this before. Mom and Dad had talked about camping, but they never got around to doing it.

Wallace was peering out between the logs of the shelter when something caught his eye. "Hey," he said. "Isn't that Charlie Wells out there rowing that boat?"

Dave walked over and looked out. "Yes," he said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. Then he turned back to where he was digging deeper into the bank.

But Wallace kept staring. I could see that he was try-

ing to figure something out. "I wish I had my binoculars," he said. "Didn't you tell us he couldn't lobster anymore?"

"That's right," said Dave.

"Well, those look a little like lobsters in those baskets," he said. I could tell that he was just aching to find a mystery somewhere. I only wish that he'd left well enough alone. He didn't have to say anything because I saw it all on his face. He was hatching all kinds of ideas about Charlie's sinister character.

Dave didn't seem very interested because he hardly stopped digging when he answered Wallace. "Well, I doubt that they're lobsters, but if they are he's probably fetching them for his brothers." He carried a bucket of dirt out of the lean-to and threw it topside. He said, "He wouldn't take any lobsters that didn't belong to him. He's had too much trouble with the authorities."

I thought so, too. I crawled outside to get a better view of Charlie. I noticed that Dave was watching him, too.

Charlie looked over our way and saw Dave and me. He quickly started his motor and was soon off around the island.

"I don't think he wanted us to see him," I said.

Dave agreed. He seemed a little surprised, but only

for a moment. Then he picked up his pail and went back into the lean-to.

Wallace had heard what happened and he was all excited. "Why didn't he want us to see him?" he asked.

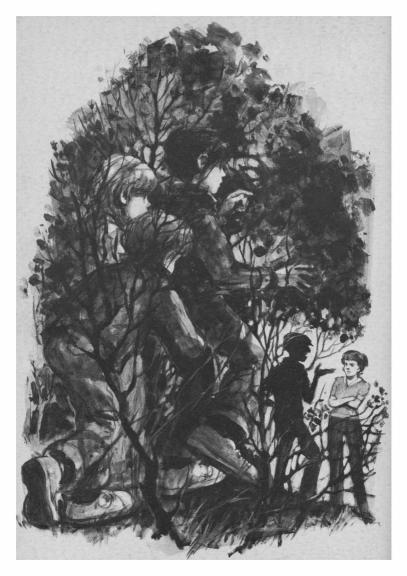
Dave, being very practical, said, "What you gettin' so excited about? If people really don't want to pass the time of day with you, they soon get out of your way—and that's what Charlie was doing!"

Wallace didn't look convinced. I could tell.

I'm not certain that I was all that convinced, either. I was still thinking about Charlie when Dave looked at his watch and said, "Oh, gosh! We'd best be getting back—it's almost noon!"

We ran back over the dam, passed by the Moores' boathouse door and had just gone through the bushes to Blue Shutters when we stopped dead in our tracks. There in the driveway, talking with my mother, was Charlie Wells! Mother looked worried, but when she saw us her face relaxed a little. She smiled at Charlie. "Here they are. See, there's nothing to worry about. They're with Dave and they're just fine!"

Charlie scowled. He looked more stringy and rumpled than when we first saw him. "Yes, they're all right—this time. But it doesn't hurt to be careful around here. The tide is fast and strong and they could get themselves into



Mystery of the Lobster Thieves 25 all kinds of trouble fooling around."

I thought it sounded almost like a threat. I looked at Wallace's face and decided he was thinking the same thing.

Dave was greatly annoyed. After all, he'd grown up on the island and probably knew as much about it as Charlie did—or almost as much. There was an edge to his voice when he said, "Oh, they're O.K. as long as they're with me, Charlie."

"Yeah, well," drawled Charlie, "just make certain that they are O.K. with you, and don't go exploring around too much or you might find things that don't agree with you."

As Charlie turned around to leave, he said to my mother, "It's mighty lonesome down here—especially at night. Yes, sir, especially at night. I hope it don't make you too n'ervous, ma'am." And before any of us could say anything he was gone up the lane.

Mom looked worried for a few seconds, then shrugged her shoulders and walked towards the cottage.

I was really angry. "Did you hear him, Mom?" I asked. "He was threatening us."

"Some nerve," said Wallace.

Dave was more calm. "Don't bother about Charlie," he said. "He's always trying to stir people up. It's a kind of hobby with him."

Mother had stopped with her hand on the doorknob. She thought for a minute, then said slowly, "Yes, I do think it was a kind of threat, wasn't it? What a strange man."

"I tell ya, Ma," said Wallace, "I don't think he wants us down here."

Sometimes I think that Wallace gets carried away with himself. But this time I rather agreed with him.

"Well, I'd best be going," said Dave. He had gotten halfway up the lane when I yelled, "Don't forget to ask your dad about the hinges!"

"O.K.," called Dave. "See ya later."

Ever since Charlie left, Mother had looked very thoughtful, but when she heard me yell about hinges she became interested. "What do you want hinges for?" she asked.

Grown-ups are funny that way. Sometimes they don't pay attention when you're telling them about your Christmas list, but things you hope will get by them often make them very curious. Wallace and I exchanged looks which meant "grown-ups not allowed." So he just mumbled something about some interesting hinges we had seen at the store. I guess you could say that Wallace was stretching the truth, but there are some things you just have to keep to yourself.

I helped Mother forget the hinges by telling her about

Dave's lean-to out on Pine Island and about how going across the dam was very painful for our feet.

That changed her thinking all right because she said that we really ought to protect our feet. She said that since it was time to buy new sneakers we could wear the old ones out on the dam. "As a matter of fact," she continued, "there are a number of things we need to get in Harborside, so let's take a trip in there this afternoon."

Wallace and I groaned. And the whole trip would have been a drag if Mother hadn't come out of the post office with a birthday card in her hand. "This card is from your father," she said. "Tomorrow is my birthday!" Since Wallace and I had forgotten to buy her a gift, we ended up being glad to go into town. Neither one of us had much money. But we were in luck because we found a candle in a pretty red glass holder for a reasonable price. And we had just enough money left for a box of cake mix.

We were so busy with the birthday and buying sneakers and helping Mother when Josie had a temper tantrum in the hardware store that we practically forgot about the hinges, the light, and the unfriendly fisherman.

When we got home, Wallace and I decided that the next day I would take Mother out fishing while Wallace stayed home and baked her a cake. Actually, it wasn't Wallace's idea. It's just that he lost when we drew straws.

It wasn't until I started to crawl into bed that I remembered the light from the night before. I sat on my bed and peered out into the darkness. No light—nothing but black. I waited a few more minutes, nothing. I had just about decided that Dave was right, that it probably had been someone cutting across the property, when a light appeared. It was very faint and didn't stay on long, but it was a light.

I went in to get Wallace, but by the time the two of us got back, the light was gone. We must have waited twenty minutes, but no more light. Finally I curled up on my bed and fell asleep. I guess Wallace left soon after.

·5· Intruders

Two blasts, then two minutes' wait, then two more blasts, and so on. The fog horn tells ships where rocks are that they might otherwise crash into when the fog is thick. I knew that the fog horn would keep up this pattern as long as there was any danger to the ships.

Then I heard the herring gulls at their before-sunup meeting, squawking and calling to each other on the mud flats and rocky shore. It seemed as though the world was taking care of itself, so I snuggled down under the covers and felt very cozy. As I drifted off to sleep again, I thought about Dad and wondered if I should mention the mysterious light to him in my next letter.

Later on I was awakened again, this time by two squirrels chasing each other across the roof, and by Wallace, who was making breakfast noises downstairs. Suddenly I remembered Mother's birthday, and I got dressed and hurried down the narrow little stairway into the kitchen.

"Happy birthday," I said to Mother and I gave her a big hug. She and Josie were sipping their orange juice and they looked very happy and relaxed.

But Wallace's face spelled out w-o-r-r-i-e-d and d-i-s-t-r-a-c-t-e-d, and it was obvious from the incredible mess that he was trying to get a fancy breakfast. He turned down the coffee just before it boiled over. On the counter was a used box of blueberry muffin mix and something was baking in the oven. On the stove was some very crinkled blackbrown bacon, which Wallace was trying to get onto a paper towel to drain, while with the other hand he was trying to stir some scrambled eggs.

I helped him with the eggs, and we were going to cook some more bacon, but Mother said she liked black-brown bacon. I'm not so sure about this, but it was a relief to us. Then the timer rang and Wallace got the muffins out of the oven.

It turned out to be a nice breakfast with the blueberry muffins and all of us in good spirits.

I was just pouring Wallace and me a cup of coffee, which we don't generally drink, when there was a knock at the door.

Josie went over and let Dave Stone in. She said, "To-day is my mother's birthday. But soon it will be my birthday!"

Dave smiled and said, "Hi ya," then added, "Happy birthday, Mrs. Crocker."

"Thank you," said Mother.

"Have a cup of coffee?" asked Wallace.

Dave looked doubtful for a minute. Then he brightened and said, "Why not!"

Mother said, "Annie was going to take me fishing for my birthday, but I'm not certain about being in a boat in this weather. What do you think, Dave? Could we get lost in the fog?"

"If you don't know your way around pretty well, it could be a problem," said Dave. He thought a minute. "Tell you what," he said. "If it doesn't burn off by this afternoon, I'll be glad to take you out fishing."

That settled it. Mother and I both felt better about having Dave go with us, especially since afternoon came and it was still foggy as ever. Like I said, Wallace was going to stay behind and bake the cake. I could tell that he'd much rather be going fishing with us, but he stuck to our bargain and was a fairly good sport.

When Josie found out that she wasn't going fishing with us, she started to throw a temper tantrum. Mother looked annoyed, and I was angry. But Wallace solved the problem by whispering something in Josie's ear about the importance of helping him bake the birthday cake. I guess he made it sound so special that Josie was delighted. She loved secrets, but she just couldn't keep them. So she turned to Mother and said, "Me and Wallace are going to bake you a cake, 'cept it's a secret!"

Everyone laughed.

"I'm really looking forward to this fishing," said Mother. "First I've done in ages!"

Right away I was glad that Dave was with us because once we got a few feet off shore I couldn't tell where we were. Dave had brought a can of sea worms for bait. He seemed impressed that Mother wasn't at all squeamish about handling, cutting and baiting worms. "My mother wouldn't touch a worm," he said.

Soon he threw out an anchor and we started to fish.

Once in a while we'd hear a motor, without being able to see the boat that went with it. "Wouldn't recognize



Mystery of the Lobster Thieves 33 your own grandmother today from more than two feet away," said Dave.

"Or anyone else," I laughed. I didn't realize then that later on that evening I would be able all too easily to recognize someone two feet away.

"I wonder that anyone can find her way around," said Mother.

"Oh, after a while," said Dave, "you get to know a place so well you could find it in the dark."

Mother was thoughtful for a minute, then she said, "That's how those lobster thieves must operate."

Dave grunted some response, but he was too busy hauling in a flounder.

After a couple of hours we'd gotten a good haul—ten crabs (which we threw back), one eel and six good sized flounders. We were getting chilly and wet from the mist, so we headed back to shore.

We decided to clean the fish right there on the beach, because it's pretty messy. Dave had his knife with him. I had borrowed Wallace's knife, since I'd lost my own knife the day we moved. I lent the knife to Mother so she could help Dave clean the fish.

When they finished, Mother invited Dave to come have dinner with us, but he said he had to go someplace with his dad. So we gave him a couple of fish to take home and thanked him for going out with us. I could tell

that Mother had had a really good time. I know I did—and I almost felt sorry for Wallace. And speaking of Wallace, when we got back to Blue Shutters he was in a very gloomy mood. His cake had fallen, and I made matters worse by saying it looked like a pizza.

Mother saved his feelings by convincing him that the cake tasted just fine—and after a little more praise, Wallace pulled himself together and we started to get dinner ready.

The birthday party was great fun. Mother was so pleased with our glass candle holder that she lit it right away. Wallace told her that the birthday cake was from Josie and Dad, too. It didn't seem fair to leave them out just because they couldn't help bake it. Mother started to open Grandma's package, but the mailing string was so strong that she couldn't get it undone.

Wallace said, "Here, use my knife," but when he reached into his pocket he found that the knife was missing.

"Remember? I borrowed it to clean the fish," I said. "I guess it's still there on the beach. Sorry."

"Sorry isn't enough," said Wallace, "I'd like my knife!"

I said I'd go get it, so I put on my sandals and left. The fog and the coming darkness made it difficult to see anything once I'd gotten two feet away from the door. It was a ghostly world—mostly dull-white, with things like

trees showing through soft-black and hazy. I decided to go to the beach by way of the public foot path, rather than cut through the Moores' property, because it was so dark under all their trees.

As I walked along, everything in the fog-dusk seemed strange. For some reason I shivered and felt uneasy. I recalled what Dad and Charlie had said about its being lonesome down here. Suddenly I understood what they meant. The lonesome feeling made me hurry along onto the beach. I remembered the big rock where we'd cleaned the fish, so I found the knife right away and put it in my pocket.

Then because I wanted to get back to the cake and ice cream as quickly as I could, I decided to take the dark shortcut across the Moores' property.

I scrambled over the boulders and had just gotten to the edge of the Moores' house when I heard a familiar voice say, "Come on, Gus, let's get out of here before this fog lifts. We ought to have quite a haul tonight!"

It was Charlie Wells! His voice was easy to recognize because it was the kind you don't forget in a hurry.

At first my heart stopped from the tightness of my throat. Then it settled back down and started to pound like mad. I quickly backed around the corner of the house and crouched down behind a lilac bush. Through the branches of the lilac bush I could just make out the

hazy figure of Charlie Wells and another man. They were in a boat that was sliding out of the Moores' boathouse. There were several baskets in the boat, and I thought they were empty, but the light was so dim that I couldn't be certain. The garage door came down quietly, and suddenly I knew why the hinges had been oiled! It's one of the things that come to you, even if you're afraid.

As soon as the boat disappeared in the fog, I came out from behind the bush. When my legs stopped shaking, I ran behind the Moores' house and onto the safety of my own lawn at Blue Shutters.

·6· A Dangerous Plan

Here I was safe within view of my own doorstep. So I stopped for a few minutes to gather my wits and try to figure out what I should do next. For a second or two, it seemed that the right thing to do would be to tell Mother what I had just seen next door. But I realized that if I did tell her, she would call the police and it wouldn't be our secret anymore. I knew how thrilled Wallace would be that I had come across a real mystery. So for the present, I decided to tell just him.

When I went back into the house with Wallace's knife, I found that Mother had gotten her birthday package



open with a kitchen knife. Grandma's package, which contained some bright colored aprons, was sitting on the dining room table. Mother was upstairs putting Josie to bed. And Wallace was trying to watch T.V. as he slowly cleaned up the dinner things.

"So where have you been?" he asked sourly. "We were beginning to think you were lost in the fog, and then I decided that you were just trying to fink out on the dishes!"

Well, you should have seen Wallace when I told him what had happened. I'm just glad that Mother didn't come down until he had calmed down enough to get the secret off his face. "Wow," he said, "a mystery, a real mystery!" He kept saying it over and over until he realized we should be thinking about what to do, if anything.

"If they're on their way out someplace in that boat, it means that they might be coming back again," he said. "And we should be there when they return, so we can see what's going on."

I didn't answer Wallace right away because I guess I didn't want to get mixed up in anything. I was still frightened from my scary moments behind the lilac bush at The Sea Gull. But I was very interested in the whole adventure. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and it was exciting!

I was afraid of Charlie Wells, though, and I hated to think of what he might do to us if he caught us spying on him. So I said, "Mom isn't going to let us go wandering around in this fog at night."

That stopped Wallace, but only for a few moments. It also gave me time to think a little more. I did really want to find out what was in those baskets. And I guess I was caught up in Wallace's excitement over finding a mystery to sink his teeth into.

Finally I decided that it wouldn't hurt to spy a little, as long as we were careful. So I said, "Mom would let us go up to see Dave, and maybe he could think of something."

Right away I knew what Wallace was thinking, because it was on his face. He didn't want Dave in on what he called "our" discovery. But I guess he realized that because of the fog and dark and us being new and everything, we really did need Dave's help. So he reluctantly agreed.

We called upstairs and asked Mom if we could go to Dave's house for a while. We had to do some fancy talking because at first she wasn't going to let us go. Finally, however, she said we could go for a short visit. So we left the birthday mess in the kitchen and ran out of the house before she had time to change her mind.

After going through the usual greetings with Dave's father and mother, we got Dave alone long enough to tell him what happened at The Sea Gull. He was very surprised. And I think in his own matter-of-fact way he was interested. Though he did say, "Around here a body's smart if he leaves well enough alone. Saves problems later on." If we'd only listened to him then, it would have saved us from a really dangerous and frightening time.

Dave thought some more. "I'll admit, it does sound like monkey business, but it pays to be careful." He turned back to working on his ship model. We could see that he was still thinking about the whole thing.

Finally he said, "Tell you what—we'll meet tomorrow and figure something out."

"Tomorrow may be too late," I grumbled.

"No, I don't think so," said Dave slowly. "Whatever they're doing, they've been doing for some time, by the looks of things—so one more night won't make much difference."

We could see that the matter was closed for the time being. So we said good night and made our way home through the fog and dark to wait for the next day.

We were surprised to see Dave appear at our house bright and early the next morning. He said he'd just been to the post office and he looked excited, at least ex-

cited for him. He said that a couple of angry lobstermen were talking about how their traps had gotten robbed of all of their lobsters in the night. "The thieves always seem to take the lobsters from the traps on the river side. So the police chief is going to double the watch out there tonight."

"You know," continued Dave, "I can't help but feel that there is some connection between what you saw last night and these lobster thieves. It is hard, though, to believe that Charlie Wells would want to get into trouble again."

"I'm pretty certain that there weren't any lobsters in those baskets I saw the other night," I said.

"Maybe so," said Wallace. "But I bet that's what they're using them for. The question is, just where do they leave them?"

Suddenly I had an idea. It was an idea that I'd live to regret. "Let's tell everyone we're going camping tonight, and then we can hide in our boat and see if we can find out what's going on."

Wallace agreed right away. And after a little more thinking, Dave said it was probably a good plan, too. "We'll stay on this side of the island where the boat is kept," said Dave. "Everyone else on the island will be watching on the river side, anyhow. We might not see anything, but still, you never know."

We had no trouble getting Mom to let us camp out with Dave. But once we got out in our boat, we did have trouble getting comfortable. Although the boat was dry and we had pillows, it was still difficult getting into a good position. Trying to sleep in a rowboat is no easy matter. Also, the night mist was chilly and the mosquitoes bothered a good deal.

We anchored our boat just around the corner of the Moores' retaining wall, so we couldn't be seen. But we were near enough the boathouse to hear or see anything going on there. Then we divided the night up into watches, the way they always do at sea.

At first the night noises were a little scary, and I was glad that the three of us were together. I didn't mind the rushing sound of the water going over the dam, but I wasn't used to the snapping of twigs and rustling leaves.

·7· Caught

We got through the first night without anything unusual happening. As a matter of fact, it got a little boring. You can't stay excited forever, especially if nothing happens.

By the next afternoon Wallace and I were a bit sleepy,

Mystery of the Lobster Thieves 43 and much to Mom's surprise, we both took an afternoon nap.

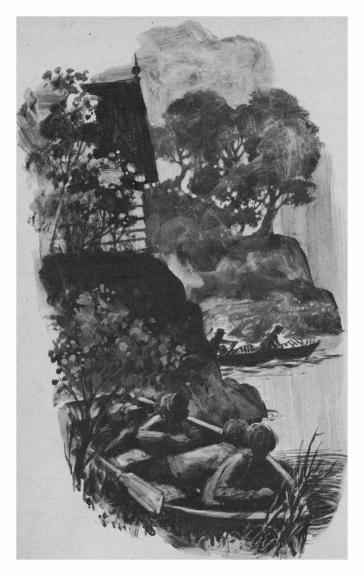
By the middle of the second night I was on watch and getting drowsy, when all of a sudden I heard something—more than the usual night noises. It was the crunching-scraping noises that shoes make when someone is walking across a pebbly beach.

I quickly woke Dave and Wallace. All three of us froze, and listened. We could see quite well because the night was fairly light, although there wasn't a moon. We could also hear the voices of Charlie Wells and the man called Gus. I wondered if they could hear my heart beating.

One of them pulled up the boathouse door and they both went in. We could hear something which sounded like baskets being thrown into their boat. Then we heard them get into the boat, and it came gliding out. One of the men pulled the garage door down.

They passed near where we were hiding—no motor, just rowing. Although their boat kept in the dark shadows by the shoreline, we could follow them by the sound of their oars dipping into the water and an occasional word or two between them.

My mouth was dry from nervousness and a lump of something heavy sat in my stomach. I wondered how Wallace and Dave felt, but it was not light enough to see, and I didn't dare say anything.



After going along a few hundred yards, the other boat came out from the shoreline darkness, crossed over the channel and disappeared into the shadow of nearby Clam Island.

Instead of following Charlie and Gus, Dave stopped rowing and waited.

"Go on," whispered Wallace.

Dave shook his head. "Too risky," he whispered. "If they're into any of the traps over there, we'll soon see them," and he picked up his binoculars and watched.

We waited for what seemed like ages. Every once in a while we'd see the other boat come out of the shadows. Dave whispered that they were probably emptying the traps that were close to shore.

When it was my time at the binoculars, I saw the boat again. It stopped in the lighter area. As I watched, I could just make out that they were lifting something over the edge of the boat. I knew it had to be a lobster trap, but just to make certain I quickly handed the binoculars to Dave.

Dave grunted with satisfaction. "That's it, all right! I guess that's what they're up to. But I still can't understand Charlie Wells getting into trouble again."

"Well, they can't possibly eat them all before they get back," said Wallace. He was trying hard not to be scared. I could tell. I suppressed a nervous giggle. Although Dave was still puzzled over the whole operation, he had at least finally seen the thieves with his own eyes, and there was no more room for doubt.

"So let's go tell someone," I said quietly. In spite of being scared, I hadn't forgotten about the reward, but I didn't think that this was the time to mention it.

"No," said Dave slowly. "We're going to stick this thing out and see where they're taking the lobsters."

I didn't want to push our luck too far. We'd seen them take the lobsters and I figured that was good enough for me. But Dave was determined, so we all went along, danger and all!

After another long wait, Dave turned around and said, "They're starting back across the channel again. Keep your eyes on them."

The other boat glided across and went into the shadows a couple hundred feet from us. Instead of returning towards the Moores' garage (which would have been mighty sticky for us) they headed toward Sheep Island. Dave let them get a safe distance ahead, then started to follow. I really didn't like this part one little bit, and I wondered just how and why I'd gotten mixed up in the whole thing in the first place.

For a moment Charlie's boat came out into the light again. Then it passed in under the Sheep Island bridge. Dave waited a few minutes before following along under the bridge. The current here was very strong, making it hard for Dave to stay close to shore. It was also pitch black

I was glad that Dave was rowing because I was too miserable to think about anything except how I'd like to be back in bed under the eaves at Blue Shutters. I didn't care about lobsters or thieves or rewards or anything, except that I was very scared. The next day Wallace said he had felt the same way.

I didn't have any more time to think about these things, however, because we had come out from under the bridge and right into an awful fix. We had glided to within touching distance of Charlie Wells' boat!

Charlie and Gus were tying their boat up alongside an unused wharf. For some reason I noticed the baskets full of lobsters. I could also see that Charlie and Gus were mighty surprised to see us.

We were surprised, too – but more than that, we were scared! Too scared to do anything but just plain freeze.

Charlie recovered his wits before anyone else. "Quick," he muttered to Gus. "Reach over and grab their boat!"

·8· Prisoners

After that, everything happened fast. In the time it took for my terror to settle into fright, Gus had tied our boat and had grabbed Dave just as he was trying to jump overboard.

Another man whom I hadn't seen before had hold of Wallace. And Charlie was talking to me: "C'mon, you nosey little brat, get out of that boat! And don't try to jump overboard, because you won't be able to swim against that current!"

It hadn't occurred to me to try to swim away. I looked up at Charlie, and what I saw on his face was mean—meaner than I'd ever seen on anyone, even in the movies. I managed to stand up, and as I crawled over the thwarts of the boat toward the dock, I thought of my mother.

"Where'd you pick them up?" asked the man I didn't know.

"Must have been following us," answered Charlie. He grabbed my arm as I stepped out onto the dock. His grip meant business and it hurt plenty. But it did help to hold me up, since my rubbery knees weren't doing a very good job.

"We'll put them in the shed up above, where they

Mystery of the Lobster Thieves 49 can't talk to anyone until we get out of here!" He shoved me up the ramp behind Wallace and Dave.

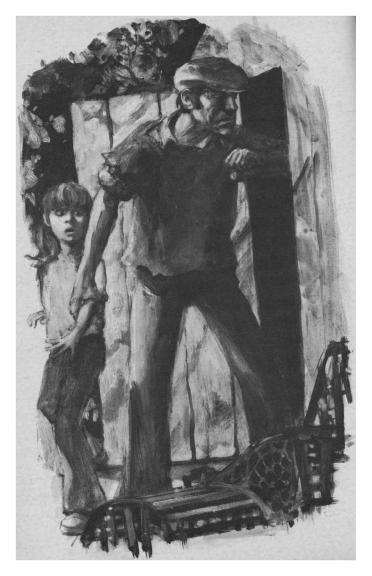
"Perhaps they won't talk at all-ever," said Gus. "No one uses this place anymore, you know."

By "this place" I figured he meant the storage shack at the head of the ramp toward which we were being pushed. It was an old weatherbeaten building with no window. But since it was built to outlast many winter storms, it was as sturdy as a jail.

There was a black pickup truck beside the wharf. It had Wells Brothers Fish Market painted on the side. For a fleeting moment I had a wild vision of being bound and gagged and thrown out of the truck on some lonely country road.

Later on, Wallace said he thought maybe they would tie weights on our feet and drown us. I'm sure glad that I don't have Wallace's imagination, because mine is bad enough!

Dave was pushed into the shed first. Charlie was still holding my arm like a vise, but he looked in at Dave and said, "You and your old man, always messing around where you're not wanted. Well, now I've got something to make him think about!" and he almost threw me in after Dave. Wallace was shoved in after us and the door slammed shut. We heard a padlock snap and we knew for sure that we were prisoners. My knees felt weak and



Mystery of the Lobster Thieves 51 I thought I was going to be sick.

We heard the other man say, "Maybe we ought to take those kids with us. If they talk, they'll ruin our operation!"

There was a moment's silence, then Charlie said, "I don't want to get into anything more than is necessary. Anyhow, we've just about milked this thing dry. You get out of here with those lobsters, sell them at our usual place, and get the truck back here before my brothers discover it's gone. In the meantime, Gus and I will get this boat back to the Moores'."

"But Charlie," persisted the other man, "if those kids are discovered, we're in trouble. I say we ought to take them along."

"No," said Charlie, "I planned to get out of here any-how-might as well be now-and by the time those kids are found, if they ever are, we will be far, far away!"

The three men's voices got fainter as they walked over to the truck. We could hear them loading the baskets into the truck. Finally, as the truck motor started, Charlie called, "Come to my house when you get back on the island and we'll get ready to leave these parts for a good long while!" Then the motor got fainter as the truck drove off. We heard Charlie and Gus get things ready to shove off in the rowboat, and soon we knew they were on their way back to the Moores'.

We were alone. All we could hear was the lapping of the water against the piling below—and with no windows, we couldn't see a thing.

I felt less sick, but I did begin to get panicky. Ever since I got stuck in an elevator between floors with my mother in New York City, I have had this fear of being shut up where I couldn't get out. I don't think Dave has this fear, because he sounded very calm when he said, "Well, now we know who's stealing the lobsters and how they've been doing it."

"Great," groaned Wallace. "Just great!"

I knew what he meant. I said, "So what good is that if we've been kidnaped and are prisoners?" I still felt awful—so many unpleasant feelings all at once! "What are we going to do, Dave?"

"Don't know," said Dave. "Let's see if we can find anything to break this door open."

So we all groped around on our hands and knees, trying to find something strong enough to pry the door open. But all we found was some rope, two small baskets and some lobster pots.

"I want to get out," said Wallace. He sounded desperate.

"Well," said Dave, "it may be a good long time before anyone discovers us." He tried to sound brave, but I'm not sure he felt that way. "Do you think that it might be three days or more?" I asked.

There was a silence. Then Dave said in a gloomy sort of voice, "I sure hope not, Annie."

"I wish we'd never gotten into this mess," said Wallace. "All I want to do is to go home. I'll never ever stick my nose into another mystery as long as I live!"

"Well," I said, "we gotta do something to get out of here, so let's bust this door in with our shoulders!" I'd seen it done often enough in the movies.

So all together the three of us crashed against the door time after time until our shoulders were bruised and we were exhausted. But the door was so strong it didn't show any signs of strain at all.

Then Dave suggested that we yell. We knew from the light under the door that it must be near morning and that people would be up and stirring. We didn't have much hope of being found, since it was a rather out of the way and unused place. Still, we figured it was worth a try. So we started shouting.

Every little while we rested our voices so we wouldn't get hoarse. And it was during a rest period that we heard a motor boat. It was coming closer.

"Hey, I bet someone heard us," said Wallace hopefully.

"Couldn't possibly, above the sound of that motor,"

54 Mystery of the Lobster Thieves said Dave. "But let's just hope that whoever it is will come close enough to hear us."

I hoped in a way that I'd never hoped before.

We continued yelling.

The motor stopped against the wharf just below us. Then we heard footsteps coming up the ramp and we yelled our very loudest!

"Hey, in there!" called a familiar voice.

Were we surprised! "It's my dad!" yelled Dave. "It's my dad-I know it is!" For him this was excited.

"Let us out!" we yelled.

"What are you all doing in there at this time of day?" asked Captain Stone as he started to work with the padlock. "Someone play a joke on you?"

"Joke, my eye," muttered Wallace.

In no time Captain Stone had hammered the padlock off the door and we were free. I was never so glad to see anyone in my life!

"You're mighty lucky," said Dave's father. "I just happened to be coming down here to this old shed to pick up a couple of lobster pots that the Wells brothers said I could have."

We quickly told our whole story to the Captain, and he said that there wasn't a moment to lose. So it wasn't long after this that the four of us were in the police station. The chief had called the state police and several other stations nearby to see if they could locate the truck. One of the officers had picked up Charlie and Gus and was holding them. Things were really happening, with calls coming and going every few minutes.

One of the calls was to my mother, who wasn't even worried because she thought we were out camping. When she heard what had happened, she was thankful that we were all safe.

By this time our news had spread around the island. People began dropping into the tiny police station to thank us. When the Wells brothers came in, we were a little nervous about meeting them. But after two minutes we could see how different they were from their brother Charlie. They thanked us for solving the mystery.

A police officer from a nearby town caught the truck, but only after it was on its way back from selling the lob-sters. Because of this, no one could prove for certain that the men were peddling lobsters, but the baskets were in the back of the truck—and they had our word. The man was also held for taking a truck that didn't belong to him.

Families on the island who made their living from lobstering were now certain of being able to sell their lobsters once more.

We were famous, but frankly, we were all so worn out from no sleep and being scared that we were in a daze. Wallace even fell asleep in the police station!

Finally we were taken to our homes—with the reward money! It seemed like an awful lot of money, but Wallace and I had to combine our money in order to have enough to cover the cost of a motor for our rowboat.

Wallace said, "Oh, boy, with a motor we can go exploring all over the place, and who knows? We might even find another mystery!"

I groaned.



