

*The “Once Upon a Time Club”
Rough’s Story of the Old Man and the Ape*

by Vieux Moustache

It was Rough’s turn for the next story, but more than a month passed before the “Once Upon a Time Club” met again, and then, not upon the roof, of a hot moonlight night, but in the ruin of an old sawmill in Sleepy Hollow, and on a gray, blustering autumn Saturday.

The open end of the sawmill, into which there blew, with every backhander of the northeaster, little flocks of fluttering, crackling leaves—yellow, scarlet, purple, oaks, maple, chestnuts, and all the rich variegations and variations of leaf color and kind—looked down a brook that hurried, with a steady run here and a sudden jump there, to the Hudson, six miles away. It was a cool gray day, but there were pleasant summery vistas through the partly stripped trees over the brook-course to the southwest—glimpses of view that seemed in contrast to the sound of the harsh wind that scolded and threatened against the wall-side of our retreat. Although this siting of the “Once Upon a Time Club” was at a point seven miles distant from our boarding school, yet we had brought Rough, as he always travelled with us, on our backs. However, we got a lift over part of the road in a farm-wagon that was going in our direction.

And now as Rough was about to tell his story, he sat facing the out-of-door scene, with his back against one of the sides of the chimney-place, bending a stick against his knees, and now and then turning his head to spit accurately and thoughtfully into the blaze.

His voice was clear, strong, and deep.

“Mind you, fellows, I want it understood that I am not to be asked whether my story is true or not. It is no matter whether I heard it from someone else or made it up myself. Perhaps I was one of the actors in it, only under another name and on better legs. Perhaps—a good manythings. At any rate, here is the story:—

“Alden Holly—none of you fellows ever knew him—was a good one, I tell you. He is a detective officer in New York now. When he was a boy they called him Lucky Holly, but I don’t believe much in luck. *Luck*—pshaw!—call it, I say, good sense, steady nerves, pluck. From the time he fell out of a second-story window on to a big Newfoundland dog until he was a man, he kept constantly falling into all kinds of dangers, but always lighting feet first on something soft. Alden was an only son, and his father was a rich man for those times and that part of the country. He can’t be a detective officer now for want of money, I guess, but just because that sort of business—where a long-auger brain, quick wit, ready hands, steel nerves, and unflinching pluck are wanted—is what he loves and shines in. Once when Alden Holly was about fourteen years old, he was at home from boarding school in vacation, when something occurred which occasioned more than nine days’ talk in the rustic community around his father’s home. Mr. Holly, being a rich and generous man, lived in some style, having a large house and ample grounds, and entertaining his friends with the best of everything he could command.

“In the same county were three or four other rich families at distances of ten and twelve miles from one another, and in the course of the three years preceding this vacation time of young Holly at home, each one of these few great houses had been robbed. At one time two of them were broken into during one week. Then eight months passed, and another was robbed. After that there was a period of two years, and the fourth was entered and emptied. In every case the burglar or burglars took everything of value—silver from the closets, money from desks, and watches even from beneath the pillows of the sleepers. Yet not the slightest trace was ever found of the offenders. Whether one or a dozen men executed these skillful robberies, whether they commenced the forays from within or without, whether the robber or robbers were black or white, male or female, could not be discovered. Not a clew of any kind was there by which to track them. The best police officers from large cities came to the county, lived there for weeks at different times, left detectives who prowled about for months, and yet, though, too, the whole county was in a fever of excitement and indignation after each new robbery, nothing was discovered. In those three years, not a single article of the large amount of stolen property was ever recognized among all the other discoveries of turned-up plunder in the large cities where such goods find circulation and market. The county magistrates were utterly perplexed and humbled, and the crafty city police, with all their smartness, were brought to a stand without a sight or scent.

“I like to hear of a big burglary—don’t you? How it was planned, executed, and finally its authors tracked out. I’ll bet you all do. To Alden Holly, those daring and successful robberies in his own county were subjects of the greatest interest, and he used to study them out as faithfully as the officers whose business it was to do that. The puzzle of how it was all done worried him as much as them. But somehow neither he nor his father ever imagined they should suffer from the rascals. Their house, they thought, was too well fastened and guarded to tempt robbery.

“The county in which Alden Holly lived was an agricultural county, not very thickly settled, which bordered on the sea. There were only a few rich families in it, as I have said. The county town, so called, was a small village with a courthouse in it. Lying in the sea, from half a mile to a mile off the coast of this county, were a number of small low islands, some barren and unsightly, others wild and well timbered, and yet one or two that were salt swamps, swept by every tide. These islands were all lonely places, seldom visited. To two or three, where wild fowl abounded, some of the gentlemen of leisure in the county used to go for shooting in the fall; and one of the islands, the wildest and most inaccessible—because of a wide border of salt-marsh, too nasty to wade through and too hard to push a boat through—but the best timbered and most picturesque, had two inhabitants—an old man and an ape. The county people said that these two had been cast ashore there many years ago at the time of a shipwreck, when a small Cuban brig had sunk just off that island, the man (one of the sailors) escaping with his ape on a raft which the sea tossed up there.

“Alden Holly had twice seen the old man on the rather rare occasions of his visits to the mainland, where he came to peddle moss and shells. He was a large, gray, and rough-bearded old man, much bent, and leaning on a long staff. He spoke very little, and then only in broken English, hardly intelligible; and he seemed a very honest and devout old man, selling his goods cheaply; and always, when one purchased from him, casting up his eyes to heaven, and ejaculating ‘Tank God.’ He had once or twice brought the ape with him, fastened by a stout

chain, but Alden had never seen the two together, and had an intense curiosity to see the beast, that he had heard was about five feet in height, and very savage. So, a year before the occasion of this story, Alden had, in his usual spirit of adventure, embarked one day in a small flat-bottomed boat, to visit Sir Orang-outang's island abode. He got out there safely enough, it being a quiet morning, but he found the usual difficulty in landing. 'So,' thought he, 'that old man is not such a fool as always to travel through a mud-marsh every time he goes to and from his island; I must go about a bit, and find where he does land.' With this intention, he pulled slowly along the shore, until, away on the further side, he discovered a stream like a ditch-course, leading through the marsh. Up that he paddled, and found a good landing. After a few minutes walking on a foot-path, through thick brush and over-reaching vines, he came upon the abode of Sir Orang-outang and master—a house half cave and half cabin—but everything fastened so that Alden could not effect an entrance. However, it was evident that the two friends were absent, and Alden, after waiting for hours, had to take his journey homeward, unsuccessful in his search. A heavy wind was blowing off the sea now, which soon increased to such a gale that, in spite of all the boy's efforts, the flat-bottomed boat suddenly turned over on its stomach and left Alden fighting in the rough waves. But he managed in a few minutes to climb on the upturned craft, and came ashore, near night, on the top of the breaker, that stove his boat in pieces, and tossed him breathless, wet, and cold, on the stony shore.

“Well, boys, I have had to ramble off some distance since I said that something occurred in Alden's fourteenth year, when he was home in vacation, that made a great excitement in the county. However—to take it up now—Alden Holly was at home, and upon waking one morning an impression, like the remembrance of a dream, came over him, that he had seen during his sleep, or partial sleep, a very small man glide across his room and get out of the window. 'What a strange idea,' he thought, 'to wake up with. It's funny I should only remember that part of my dream just like one single scene out of a play—funny, that it is, but I must look at my watch and see if it is time yet to turn out.' So he put his hand under the pillow—fumbled about—then turned the pillow over—pulled off the bolster; *no watch was there*. The house had been robbed: every ounce of silver taken; four hundred and fifty dollars in gold gone from his father's secretary, and three watches taken out of the rooms. As Alden, at the breakfast-table, was telling how he had seen, though he had thought it only a dream at the time, a dwarf of a man cross his room and get out of the window, he said, in answer to the eager, inquiries that hailed this statement—'I don't remember the face at all, and don't know whether I saw it, but the figure was a small one, I tell you.'

“‘About what size?’ someone asked.

“‘Well—let me see.’ Just at that moment, a little woman not more than five feet high, who had been working in the Holly kitchen for about six weeks, and who had come to Mr. Holly's housekeeper in seeming distress, begging for employment, appeared at the door of the large butler's pantry adjoining the dining room, to hand a plate of cakes to the waiter. Alden's eyes happened to fall on her just as he was trying to tell the robber's size, and he continued—'Why, just about the size, both in height and slimness, of Jane there.' As he spoke the words, she started suddenly, and dropped her plate of cakes.

“With no better success than in the investigation of the other burglaries, the neighbors and the city police searched for a clew to the robbers. Every corner of the county was pried into; every suspicious person examined; but all in vain.

“Alden Holly was with the officers in all their searchings, and he was present, too, at all their deliberations in his father’s house. The police were much pleased by the keen interest the boy took in the hunt, and they were astonished and astonished and assisted often by the wisdom of his suggestions. Never in his life had Alden been so wrapped up in anyone subject as he was in that of the burglaries. He thought of it by day, and dreamed of it by night. And he had certain undefined suspicions or guesses of how the affair had been effected, which seemed so vague and without reason, that he would not mention them to anyone, but kept puzzling them over in his own head, hoping all the while that some discovery or theory of the detectives might coincide with and strengthen his singular ideas.

“All this time his vacation was drawing nearer and nearer to a close. Before that day came, however, there were two little occurrences that were of much consequence, though they appear very slight. He was at breakfast with his father one morning, and Jane, the little woman I have told you of, was waiting on them in the absence of the regular servant. Purposely Alden asked of his father, whilst he all the time kept his eyes on Jane—‘Father, have you any objection to my going over to the old man’s island this morning? I have never seen that Orang-outang yet, and am very curious on the subject.’ Jane heard the request with evident nervousness. Alden went immediately from the breakfast to the coast, where he got a boat and crossed to the island. The old man met him as sullenly as he did all visitors to his peculiar domain, affecting to misunderstand his questions, and making short and indefinite answers; but when Alden said—‘But I came especially to see your ape: where is he?’ the old hermit was very careful and obliging in his account of how the ape had escaped, as he would sometimes, and that though he could not find him on the island, yet he *was there*, hidden somewhere, and would soon return.

“Alden was to go back to boarding school in a week after this incident, and the second occurrence that influenced the after-course of events, probably, was the rather boastful statement that Alden made to his father, a few mornings after his visit to the island, and which he did most carelessly, ignorant of the fact that the same little Jane was close on the other side of the closet door, which stood ajar. They were talking, as so often they did, of the burglary, and finally Alden said, ‘Father, I know, I am sure, something sharp about the affair, and I can’t tell you a word now of my reasons or suspicions. I shall study them up, and let you know when I get back to school, with time to weigh coolly all I have picked up; but I’ll bet little John Knob, with all his smartness, that I will unravel the mystery before he does.’

“The day before Alden’s departure for school, it happened that little Jane came, with tears in her eyes and a black-sealed letter in her hand, to beg Mr. Holly to let her go home to Overstone, one hundred miles away, where the only relative she had on earth was dying. She had just got a letter from the lady at whose house her relative worked, telling her to come quickly, she said. Of course Mr. Holly said ‘Yes,’ and I shall add here to his ‘yes,’ that little Jane never reappeared at the Holly place.

“It was on a Wednesday morning that Alden Holly drove over to the county town and took the cars for his boarding school, which was in Napville, sixty miles off. Soon after the cars started, a man entered the carriage in which Alden was seated, and took the place beside him. He was a good-looking man—that is, he was well and cleanly dressed, strongly built, and had dark curly hair and beard; but the expression of his face was reckless and cruel. He appeared to be a seafaring man, or, at least, to have been such at some time of his life. In a sociable, jovial manner, he soon entered into conversation with the boy beside him, and made himself so interesting that Alden was delighted with his companion. As they drew near one of the railroad stations, he said, ‘Young gentleman, I wish you were a poor boy with a taste for the sea, for I should like mightily to ship you for a voyage that a trim little brig of mine will soon make from Grayhead, two miles from the station we are coming to. In all my sea-going—and it had been considerable—I never saw such a swan of a craft. Come now, my young Captain, and jump out with me here to see my *Sweetheart*—that is what I call her. We can ride over to the Head, and you can take the three o’clock train to finish your journey by. Say you will, now’—and with that he gave Alden a warm, hearty slap on the knee.

“Alden was much pleased by the manner of this frank, brave-seeming tar, and he was somewhat flattered by the notice the man took of him. Moreover, he did above all things like tarpaulins, canvas, salt-water, and all that brotherhood. And add to all, there was no need for him to be at his boarding school before night, and his ticket would carry him as well by the next train; so, after a moment’s thought, he answered—

“‘Thank you, I will go with you. I should like it first rate.’

“In a moment the whistle blew and they were at the station. The boy and his nautical friend started on foot for the Grayhead wharves. It was a cool, blustering day something like this, and the autumn wind came scudding over Grayhead harbor to nip the cheeks of the two companions, blow open their jackets, and remind them of luncheon; so Blackbeard proposed to Alden that they should step into a tavern before going down to the brig, and get a bite of something. To which Alden assented, and they entered an inn where the few sailors around the Head loved to congregate. The public room was full of oaths, bluejackets, and smoke. Blackbeard, greeting many of the men by name, seated himself with Alden by a small table in a corner, and called for beer and sausages. You must know that thus far Alden had enjoyed his adventure greatly. He had borne a brisk part in the conversation, and now that he entered so intimately with Blackbeard, who was evidently a big gun among the company there, he felt the full charm of a scene and act like those we read of in sea novels—you know the kind, fellows: little chapters in port, where crews of Captain Marryatt, or men from that “Cruise of the Midge,” or companions of “The Green Hand,” or “White Jacket,” meet in low sanded barrooms; where small, wind-shaken windows look out on a harbor, and a neat, saucy little bar-maid brings them beer and cigars, and smiles coquettishly at their jokes. Yes, he felt precisely as if he had been suddenly clapped down into the reality of one of those fascinating pages; so he nibbled away at his prog—so Blackbeard called the sausage and biscuits—and drank his beer thirstingly. But whilst Blackbeard told him of some wild sea adventure, he felt himself growing very sleepy, and unaccountably confused in his thoughts and hearing. In five minutes more, his head had fallen on the table, and he was snoring heavily.

“Alden Holly had been drugged.

“When the poor boy recovered consciousness, he found himself lying on his back, his hands tied, in a dark, cellar-smelling place. His head was hot and throbbing, and of course the strange and terrible circumstances of his situation made him feel very miserable. Determined, with his usual fire, to ascertain at any rate the worst, he called out as loud as his lungs would allow him, until a gleam of light came from an opening above, and he saw descending on a ladder, lantern in hand, an Orang-outang. This brute, having reached the floor, approached him in a nearly erect attitude, sometimes changing a shambling gait for a jump or two. Having come close to Alden, he leaned over him as if for a careful inspection, and Alden, looking with fear into the eyes peering over him as if for a careful inspection, and Alden, looking with fear into the eyes peering over him, was astonished at the expression of those large intelligent eyes, that seemed to be laughing sneeringly at his misfortune. The ape was gone in a minute, and returned as quickly again, bringing some food in one hand and an axe in the other. The food he put down beside Alden, and, keeping the axe in hand, he untied the boy’s hands. Before Alden had fully recovered from the numbness of his limbs, the strange jailer had left him again alone in his dungeon. Whilst Alden sat up and munched the loaf bread left him, his mind was very busy, trying to rehearse not only his adventures since taking the cars for boarding school, and the few but remarkable facts of his present imprisonment, but also all he knew of the burglary at his father’s house, and trying, too, to compare and reconcile them with the suspicions that he had once hinted of to his father—he had only hinted at them, they had appeared too improbable and foundationless at the time, to permit him to disclose them. He had feared he would be laughed at, and yet, notwithstanding his reason had opposed him, he had held those convictions with great faith; ‘and now,’ he thought, ‘I begin to see the proof of them. If it were not for the evidences I thought the burglary furnished, the fright I gave the little Jane, and the visit I paid to the old man when *his ape was absent*, I should never doubt, notwithstanding the human look of those eyes, that the Orang-outang was an Orang-outang, but now I feel sure of something else. Oh, if I can only get out of this place, won’t I fix some scoundrels?’

“Alden’s place of confinement, as I have said, was perfectly dark. Where he lay there seemed to be a bed of rushes or shavings. He felt in his pockets and found *seven* matches. He determined to light one now and see his prison. He struck the match carefully and looked about: yes, he was in a cellar without a window; the room was only about twelve square feet, but it was very deep—he supposed twenty feet—and the only apparent mode of entrance and exit was the ladder descending from a trapdoor.

“Alden fell asleep again. When he awoke—probably the next day—he called out for food. The trapdoor was lifted carefully; a loaf of bread was thrown to the prisoner, and then a can of water was lowered by a string. The young prisoner was not to see his jailer or jailers, not even the hideous Orang-outang, again, whilst he remained in the cellar. Having eaten all the food allowed him, the gritty boy set to work for another reconnaissance of his cell—allowing himself three matches this time. Before they and the few shavings he lighted were exhausted, he made a discovery that cheered him greatly. High up in one corner he found what he believed to be an old board, about a foot square, closing up what had once been a small window-place, or opening of some kind. Noiselessly now, and in the dark, he moved the ladder to that corner, and proved his conjecture correct. By the exertion of some strength, he could move the board a little. There were

probably earth and stones piled against it from the outside. ‘All right,’ he said to himself; ‘perhaps I shall leave this place tonight. I must be cool and patient, though.’ He replaced the ladder, and waited for night, or rather, for the time he supposed to be night. It was a long, long worrying waiting, but when he supposed it must be evening, he heard the sound of feet above, and believed, as was correct, that his captors had come home for supper. Again he anxiously hoped for some other move. After what seemed half a night of suspense, he distinguished footsteps overhead, and this time they grew more distinct all at once, and he could catch the mumble of conversation. It came from the corner over the dead window. There Alden quickly put his ladder, thinking that when those noises ceased, his jailers would probably be asleep, and then for his chance of escape. Standing near the top of the ladder, he found he could just make out a word of their talk now and then, but nothing that taught him anything comprehensible, until, when they once raised their voices as if disputing, he heard this partly broken sentence—‘I tell you we are in danger—we must be off quickly, you fool’;—there was much apparent quarreling here that he could not understand, they talked so fast and thick, and then he heard—‘Shut up, Gus; I am sleepy! Don’t let’s come to a fight, for I can’t fight three—an ape, a woman, and a man, dwarfs though you all be.’ After time enough had passed, and all the mumbling had ceased, Alden went to work. Half an hour of digging and pushing removed the obstruction, and Alden, by tight squeezing, made his way to the outside. By the light of the stars, he saw, as he expected, that he had been confined in a cellar beneath the old man’s cave-house on the island. Quickly as possible he made his way by the path he had before trodden in daylight, to the creek. Striking the three matches remaining to him, he found the old man’s boat and oars. When he had pulled around the island, the moon came out, and by that light he made his way quickly and safely to the shore, four miles from his father’s house. There he arrived at daylight.

“It was late in the afternoon before a party, hastily organized, and augmented by police, got over to the island. It was deserted; everything left, evidently, in the greatest haste, and about two miles off seaward was a sloop under all the canvas she could carry, standing for the east. But here were the proofs of a regular retreat for the robbers, although nothing of any value was discovered. The booty had probably been taken off from time to time by accomplices afloat. Coming, perhaps, for another cargo, they had arrived in time to carry off the old man and his ape. Nothing more was ever discovered of the scoundrels. But the suppositions, to explain the strange career of the two villains, were, that old age for one, and a perfect Orang-outang disguise and adroitness for the other, were the devices to avoid suspicion, whilst the neighborhood of the rich houses was visited. The man’s feebleness, devoutness, and broken English, taken with the facts of his apparent poor and hermit-like existence, and that he had no comrade, only an immense ape, shielded him from all suspicion as most skillful burglar. Added to this, the rarely seen ape was a man—a little, muscular fellow, delicate in form and face, but active as a cat, and not troubled with a beard. In the dress of a woman, he had got entrance into Mr. Holly’s house as a domestic, and thus prepared the way for his accomplice. And that accomplice, the apparent old man, was, Alden always thought, the very man who, otherwise disguised, met him in the cars and captured him so adroitly, to prevent the disclosure of the rascalities which Alden had got the scent of. Jane—the ape—saw that Alden vaguely suspected her or him and the ape as identical, and by leaving Mr. Holly’s house, managed to get information to his partner.

“Hi! [T]here, my coves,” said Rough, as with a sigh of relief he finished his story, “my yarn is done and I am glad of it. If you don’t like it, you can do the other thing.” We gave Rough, every

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one, a commendatory slap on his broad back, and then pitched into our lunch before starting homeward in the autumn storm.

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