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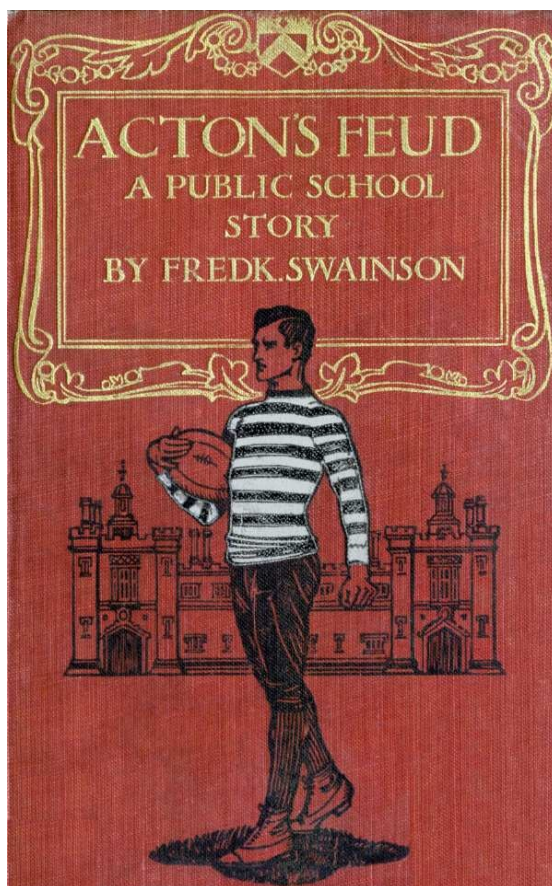
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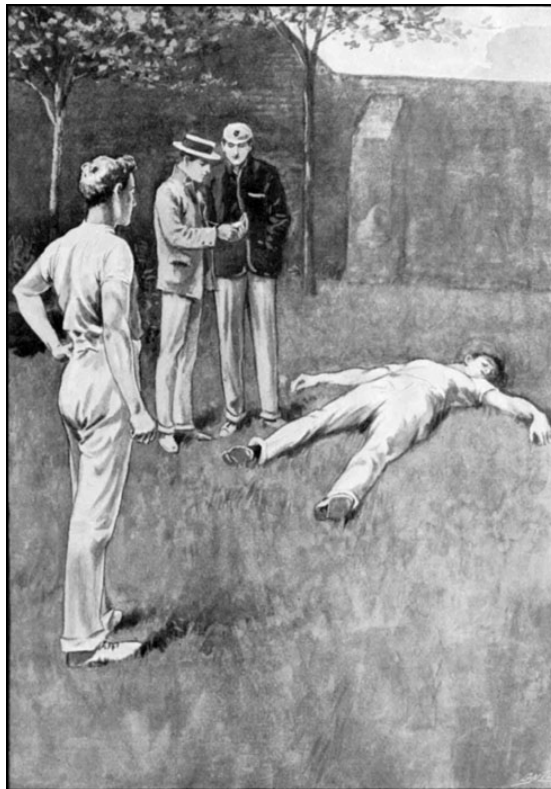
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ACTON DROPPED TO THE GROUND LIKE A BLUDGEONED DOG.

ACTON'S FEUD

A PUBLIC SCHOOL STORY

BY
FREDERICK SWAINSON

WITH TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON
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AD MATREM

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CHAPTER I

THE FOUL

Shannon, the old Blue, had brought down a rattling eleven—two Internationals among them—to give the school the first of its annual "Socker" matches. We have a particular code of football of our own, which the school has played time out of mind; but, ten years ago, the Association game was introduced, despite the murmuring of some of the masters, many of the parents—all old Amorians—and of Moore, the Head, who had yielded to varied pressures, but in his heart thought "Socker" vastly inferior to the old game. Association had flourished exceedingly; so much so that the Head made it a law that, on each Thursday in the Michaelmas term, the old game, and nothing but the old game, should be played, and woe betide any unauthorized "cutters" thereof. This was almost the only rule that Corker never swerved a hair's breadth from, and bitter were the regrets when Shannon had sent word to Bourne, our captain, that he could bring down a really clinking team to put our eleven through their paces, if the match were played on Thursday. Saturday, on account of big club fixtures, was almost impossible. Corker consented to the eleven playing the upstart code for this occasion only, but for the school generally the old game was to be *de rigueur*.

So on this Thursday pretty well the whole school was out in the Acres, where the old game was in full swing; and, though I fancy the players to a man would have liked to have lined up on the touch-line in the next field and given Shannon the "whisper" he deserves, O.G. claimed them that afternoon for its own, and they were unwilling martyrs to old Corker's cast-iron conservatism. Consequently, when Bourne spun the coin and Shannon decided to play with the wind, there would not be more than seventy or eighty on the touch-line. Shannon asked me to referee, so I found a whistle, and the game started.

It was a game in which there seemed to be two or three players who served as motive forces, and the rest were worked through. On one side Shannon at back, Amber the International at half, and Aspinall, the International left-winger, were head and shoulders above the others; on our side, Bourne and Acton dwarfed the rest.

Bourne played back, and Acton was his partner. Bourne I knew well, since he was in the Sixth, and I liked him immensely; but of Acton I knew only a little by repute and nothing personally. He was in the Fifth, but, except in the ordinary way of school life, he did not come much into the circle wherein the Sixth moves. He was brilliantly clever, with that sort of showy brilliance which some fellows possess: in the exams, he would walk clean through a paper, or leave it untouched—no half measures. He was in Biffen's house and quite the most important fellow in it, and no end popular with his own crowd, for they looked to him to give their house a leg up, both in the schools and in the fields, for Biffen's were the slackest house in St. Amory's. He played football with a dash and vim good to see, and I know a good few of the eleven envied him his long, lungeing rush, which parted man and ball so cleanly, and his quick, sure kick that dropped the ball unerringly to his forwards. He was not in the eleven; but that he would be in before the term was over was a "moral." He was good-looking and rather tall, and had a certain foreign air, I thought; his dark face seemed to be hard and proud, and I had heard that his temper was fiery.

Bourne had chosen him to play against Shannon's team, and as Acton bottled up the forwards on his wing Bourne felt that the school's future right back would not be far to seek.

I soon saw that the school was not quite good enough for the others: Shannon was almost impassable, and Amber, the half, generally waltzed round our forwards, and when he secured he passed the ball on to Aspinall, who doubled like a hare along the touch-line. The question then was "Could Acton stop the flying International, who spun along like Bassett himself?" And he did, generally; or, if he could not, he forced him to part with the ball, and either Baines, our half, lying back, nipped in and secured, or Bourne cleared in the nick of time. Nine times out of ten, when Acton challenged Aspinall, the International would part with the ball to his inside partner; but twice he fainted, and before either of the school backs could recover, the ball was shot into the net with a high and catapultic cross shot. Again and again the game resolved itself into a duello between Acton and Aspinall, and Bourne, when he saw the dealings with the International and his wiles, smiled easily. He saw the school was stronger than he thought.

The interval came with the score standing at two against us. When I started the game again I found that our fellows were pulling along much better with the wind, and that some of Shannon's men were not quite so dangerous as before, for condition told. We quickly had one through, and when I found myself blowing the whistle for a second goal I began to think that the school might pull through after all. Meanwhile Acton and Aspinall were having their occasional tussles, though somewhat less often than before, and three or four times the school back was overturned pretty heartily in the encounters.

Though there was not a suspicion of unfairness or temper on Aspinall's part, I fancied that Acton was getting rather nettled at his frequent upsets. He was, I considered, heavier than Aspinall, and much taller, so I was both rather waxy and astonished to find that he was infusing a little too much vigour into his tackling, and, not to put too fine a point on it, was playing a trifle roughly. Aspinall was bundled over the touch-line a good half-dozen times, with no little animus behind the charge, and ultimately Bourne noticed it. Now, Bourne loathed anything approaching bad

form, so he said sharply to Acton, though quietly, "Play the game, sir! Play the ball!" Acton flushed angrily, and I did not like the savage way he faced round to Bourne, who was particularly busy at that moment and did not notice it. The game went on until within about five minutes from time. Amber had been feeding Aspinall assiduously for the last ten minutes, and Acton had, despite his cleverness, more than he could really hold in the flying International. He stalled off the attack somehow, and Bourne always covered his exertions, so that it seemed as if there would be a draw after all. At last the ball was swung across, and Aspinall was off on a final venture. Acton stuck to him like a leech, but the winger tipped the ball to his partner, and as Acton moved to intercept the inside, the latter quickly and wisely poked the ball back again to Aspinall. He was off again in his own inimitable style, and I saw him smile as he re-started his run. I rather fancy Acton saw it too, and accepted the smile as a sneering challenge; anyhow, he set his lips and I believe made up his mind that in any case Aspinall should not get the winning goal. How it exactly happened I cannot say, but as Aspinall was steadying himself, when at top speed, for an almost point-blank delivery, I saw Acton break his own stride, shoot out his leg, and the next moment the International was stumbling forward, whilst the ball rolled harmlessly onward into our goal-keeper's hands. I could hardly believe my own eyes, but it was a deliberate trip, if ever there was one! Aspinall tried to recover himself, failed, and came with a sickening crash against the goal-post. I blew the whistle and rushed to Aspinall; his cheek was bleeding villainously and he was deadly pale. I helped him up, and he said with his usual smile—who could mistake it for a sneer?—"Thanks, old man. Yes, I do feel a bit seedy. That back of yours is an animal, though." He tried hard to keep his senses; I saw him battling against his faintness, but the pain and shock were too much for him; he fell down again in a dead faint.

We improvised a hurdle and carried him up to the school. Acton, pale to the lips, prepared to bear a hand, but Bourne unceremoniously took him by the arm and said with concentration, "No thanks, Acton. We'll excuse you—you beastly cad!" I heard Bourne's remark, though no one else saw or heard. Acton's hand closed involuntarily, and he gave Bourne a vitriolic look, but did nothing nor said anything. We took Aspinall up to Merishall's—his old house—where he was staying, and left him there still unconscious.

What astonished me was that no one save Bourne had noticed the trip, but when I came to think it over the explanation was easy. Acton had, whether from accident or of purpose, "covered" his man and blocked the view from behind. I myself had not really *seen* the trip, but it would have been plainly visible for any one opposite on the touch-line, and luckily there was no one opposite. The goal-keeper might have seen it, but Roberts never attends to anything but the ball—the reason he's the fine keeper that he is. Bourne had actually seen it, being practically with Acton, and I knew by his pale face and scornful eyes that he would dearly have liked to kick Acton on the spot.

I was, as you may guess, intensely pleased that no one had an idea of the foul except Bourne and myself, for I could imagine vividly where the rumour of this sort of "form" would spread to. We'd hear of it for years after.

I mentally promised that Acton should have a little of my opinion on the matter on the first opportunity.

CHAPTER II

THE PENALTY

I arranged to see Bourne that evening, when we should have heard the doctor's report on Aspinall. In the evening Bourne strolled into my room, looking a little less gloomy than I expected. "Briggs says that there is nothing broken, and that as soon as Aspinall gets over the shock he will be all right. The cut may leave a scar, but that will be about all. All the same, Carr, I think that's too heavy a price to pay for the bad temper of one of our fellows who can't stand a tumble into the mud at 'footer.' You saw the villainy, didn't you?"

"I can't say I actually saw him trip, but there's no doubt whatever that it was an abominable foul."

"None at all. I saw him, worse luck, tolerably plainly."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Practically nothing."

"I think Biffen's rather fancy he's going to lift them out of the mire."

"Can't say I envy them their champion."

"What strikes me as odd is that such a magnificent player should do such a vile trick."

"Rum, certainly. The affair will give quite a professional touch to our 'Socket' fixtures, and the Carthusians will ask us to bar our bullies when they come down again. Oh, this *is* sweet!"

"I say, Bourne, this business must not move one inch further. You've spoken to no one?"

"Is it likely?"

"We'll not have any of our dirty linen washed *coram populo*, old chap. Frightful bad form. No one knows but you, Aspinall, and self."

"Surely Aspinall will——"

"You don't know Aspinall, old man. He'd shrivel up sooner than say a word more. Bet you he'll speak of it as an accident. Remember, he was captain of the school here once."

"Which makes it a blacker shame than ever," said Bourne, wrathfully.

"I've inquired casually of the Fifth, and it seems our friend once distinguished himself in the gym. Lost his temper—as *per recipe*—and Hodgson had to knock him down before he could see that we put on the gloves here for a little healthy exercise, and the pleasure of lifting some of the public schools championships. He, however, apologized to Hodgson, but I don't think he'll do the honourable here."

"Then, the chief attraction of the beauty is its temper?"

"Or want of it."

"Who is he, anyhow?"

"Yorkshire people, I believe. Own half a town and no end of coin. Been to school in France and Germany, and consequently came here rather late. I know his head-piece is all right, and I imagine his amiability is only a little foreign blood working its way out. He will be with us in the Sixth at Christmas."

"Delightful prospect. What I want to know is—how are we to settle this business as far as he is concerned? Ought Moore to know?"

"I don't think so. Never trouble Corker more than you can help, old man. That's a tip for you when I'm gone. Besides, masters generally mishandle affairs of this sort. I rather fancy I'll put it to Aspinall when he pulls through."

"Do. One thing, though, is pretty certain. He'll never get his cap as long as I'm captain of the footer eleven. I'd rather come out of it myself."

"Of course. I see there's no help for that, but, all the same, it will make complications. What a pity he *can* play!"

"It is, for he is a back out of a thousand."

Bourne's voice had in it a ring of genuine regret, and whilst I could almost have smiled at his unaffectedly tragic tone, I could see the vista which his resolution opened up. I heard the school shouting at Bourne to let the finest player out of the eleven in, and all the shouting would be across "seas of misunderstanding." I know Bourne saw the difficulties himself, and he left my study soon after with a rather anxious look on his face. Personally I determined not to think about the matter until I had seen Aspinall. From the very first I had never expected any help from Acton. There was something about the whole of his bearing in the caddish business that told me plainly that we would have to treat him, not as a fellow who had been betrayed to a vile action by a beastly temper and was bitterly sorry for it, but as a fellow who hated us for finding it out.

I saw Aspinall two days later, and as we walked towards the station I broached the matter.

"Certainly; I thought he tripped me, but he has written me and said how sorry he was for my accident, so, of course, it rests there."

"Candidly, Aspinall, have you any doubt yourself?"

"No, old fellow. I'm sorry, but I really think he tripped me. He was riled at a little hustling from Shannon's lot, and I may have upset him myself occasionally. But it is a small matter."

I looked at the bandages across his cheek, and I didn't think it small.

"But, Aspinall, even if we leave you out of the business, it isn't a small matter for us, especially for Bourne."

"Well, no; hardly for you," he admitted. "'Twas a piece of sheer bad form. It shouldn't be done at our place at all."

"If you were in Bourne's place would you bar him his place in the eleven?"

Aspinall considered a full minute.

"On the whole, I think I should—at least, for one term; but I'd most certainly let him know why he was not to have his cap—privately, of course. I should not like it to get about, and I do not fancy Acton will say much about it."

That night Bourne and I crossed over to Biffen's, and waylaid Acton in his den. I'm pretty sure there wasn't another room like his in the whole school. No end of swell pictures—foreign mostly; lovely little books, which, I believe, were foreign also; an etching of his own place up in Yorkshire; carpets, and rugs, and little statuettes—swagger through and through; a little too much so, I believe, for the rules, but Biffen evidently had not put his foot down. Acton was standing on the hearthrug with his back to the fire, and on seeing us he politely offered us chairs with the air of a gentleman and a something of grace, which was a trifle foreign.

I saw that Acton's polite cordiality nettled Bourne more than a little, but he solemnly took a chair, and in his blunt, downright fashion, plunged headlong into the business.

"Only came to say a word or two, Acton, about Thursday's match."

"A very good one," he remarked, with what Corker calls "detached interest." "Aspinall's accident was more than unfortunate."

"The fact is," said Bourne, bluntly, "neither Carr nor I believe it was an accident."

"No? What was it, then? Every one else thought it was, though."

"We know better. We know that you deliberately fouled him, and——"

Acton paled, and his eyes glittered viciously, though he said calmly, "That is a lie."

"And," continued Bourne, "though there is not a fellow even a respectable second to you at 'footer,' I shall not give you your cap as long as I am captain of the eleven. That is all I came to say."

Acton said quite calmly (why was he so uncommonly cool, I asked myself)—though his face was red and white alternately: "Then listen carefully to what I say. I particularly wanted to have my footer cap—why, does not concern any one but myself—and I don't fancy losing it because a couple of fellows see something that a hundred others couldn't see, for the sufficient reason that there wasn't anything to see. I shall make no row about it; and, since you can dole out the caps to your own pet chums, and no one can stop you—do it! but I think you'll regret it all the same. I'm not going to moan about it—that isn't my way; but I really think you'll regret it. That is all; though"—this with a mocking sneer—"why it requires two of you to come and insult a man in his own room I don't understand."

"I came to say that if you'd apologize to Aspinall things might straighten."

"Might straighten! Oh, thanks!" he said, his face looking beastly venomous. "I think you'd better go, really."

So we went, and I could not but feel that Bourne was right when he said on parting, "Our friend will make himself superbly disagreeable over this, take my word for it! But he won't get into the eleven, and I won't have a soul know that old Aspinall's scar is the work of a fellow in St. Amory's, either. If they have to know, he must tell them himself."

CHAPTER III

THE REGENERATION OF BIFFEN'S HOUSE

To say that Acton was upset by our visit and our conversation and Bourne's ultimatum would be beside the mark; he was furious, and when he had cooled down somewhat, his anger settled into a long, steady stretch of hate towards us both, but especially towards Bourne. He simmered over many plans for getting "even" with him, and when he had finally mapped out a course he proceeded, as some one says, "diligently to ensue it;" for Acton was not of that kind to be "awkward" as occasion arose, but there was method in all his schemes.

It so happened that Worcester was captain of Biffen's house, and also of Biffen's "footer" team. My own opinion was that poor old Worcester would have given a lot to be out of such a house as Biffen's, and I know he utterly despised himself for having in a moment of inexplicable weakness consented to be permanent lead to Biffen's awful crowd on the Acres. He died a thousand deaths after each (usual) annihilation. Worcester and Acton had nothing in common, and, except that

they were in the same house and form, they would not probably have come to nodding terms. Worcester, of course, looked up to the magnificent "footer" player as the average player looks up to the superlative. After the first game of the season, when Acton had turned out in all his glory, Dick had thereupon offered to resign his captaincy, even pressing, with perhaps suspicious eagerness, Acton's acceptance of that barren honour. But Acton did not bite. Captains were supposed to turn out pretty well every day with their strings, and Acton was not the sort of fellow to have his hands tied in any way. So he had gently declined.

"No, old man. Wouldn't dream of ousting you. You'll get a good team out of Biffen's yet. Plenty of raw material."

"That's just it," said Worcester, naively; "it is so jolly raw."

"Well, cook it, old man."

"It only makes hash," said Worcester, with a forlorn smile at his own joke.

But now Acton thought that the captaincy of Biffen's might dovetail into his schemes for the upsetting of Bourne, and therefore Dick's proposal was to be reconsidered. Thus it was that Worcester got a note from Acton asking him to breakfast.

Worcester came, and his eyes visibly brightened when he spotted Acton's table, for there was more than a little style about Acton's catering, and Worcester had a weakness for the square meal. Acton's fag, Grim, was busy with the kettle, and there was as reinforcement in Dick's special honour, young Poulett, St. Amory's champion egg-poacher, sustaining his big reputation in a large saucepan. Worcester sank into his chair with a sigh of satisfaction at sight of little Poulett; he was to be in clover, evidently.

"That's right, Worcester. That *is* the easiest chair. Got that last egg on the toast, Poulett? You're a treasure, and so I'll write your mamma. Tea or coffee, Dick? Coffee for Worcester, Grim, tea for me. Pass that cream to Worcester, and you've forgotten the knife for the pie. You're a credit to Sharpe's, Poulett; but remember that you've been poaching for Biffen's footer captain. That's something, anyhow. Don't grin, Poulett; it's bad form. Going? To Bourne's, eh? I can recommend you, though it would be no recommendation to him. You can cut, too, Grim, and clear at 9.30. See the door catches."

Grim scuttled after the renowned egg-poacher, and Worcester and Acton were left alone. When Worcester was fed, and had pushed back his chair, Acton broached the business to which the breakfast was the preliminary.

"Fact is, Worcester, I've been thinking how it is that Biffen's is the slackest house in the place."

"Oh! it's got such a plucky reputation, you know. The kids weep when they're put down for Biffen's. Give a dog a bad name—"

"But why the bad name?"

"Dunno! Perhaps it's Biffen. I think so, anyhow. At any rate, there's not been a fellow from the house in the Lord's eleven or in the footer eleven, and in the schools Biffen's crowd always close the rear. By the way, how did you come among our rout?"

"I think mater knew Biffen; that's the explanation."

"Rather rough on you."

"Don't feel anything, really, Worcester."

"Well, Biffen has got a diabolical knack of picking up all the loose ends of the school; all the impossible fellows gravitate here: why, look at our Dervishes!" (Dervish was the slang for foreigners at St. Amory's.)

"We've certainly got more than our share of colour."

"That's Biffen's all the world over," said Dick, with intense heat; "you could match any colour between an interesting orange and a real jet black among our collection. Biffen simply can't resist a nigger. He must have him. What they come to the place at all for licks me. Can't the missionaries teach 'em to spell?"

"*La haute politique*," suggested Acton.

"Of Sarawack or Timbuctoo?" said Worcester, with scorn. "Bet my boots that Borneo one's governor went head-hunting in his time, and the darkest African one's knows what roasted man is."

Acton laughed, for a nigger was to Worcester as a red rag to a bull. "St. Amory's for niggers!" Dick would say with intense scorn.

"Anyhow," said Acton, "I think there's no need for us to be quite so slack."

"You'll pull us up a bit?" said Dick, with genuine admiration.

"Thanks. But I meant the whole house generally."

"Not much good. We're Biffen's, that never did nor never shall, etc."

"I don't know. There's sixty of us, barring your niggers; we ought to get eleven to look at a football with a business eye out of that lot, you know."

"We ought to, but don't."

"We ought to do something in the schools too."

"We ought to, but don't, though Raven is in for the Perry Exhibition. Guess he won't pull it off, though."

"We'll see about that, too," said Acton. "As for the niggers—"

"Oh, never mind them!" burst in Worcester. "Without humbug, Acton, do you really want our house to move a bit?"

"Rather!"

"Well, then, consent to captain our footer eleven and we give ourselves a chance, for I can't make the fellows raise a gallop at any price, and I somehow think you can. Have a try. If you are sick of it at Christmas, I'll come in again; honour bright. It isn't too good-natured of me to ask you to pull Biffen's out of the mud, but you're the only fellow to do it if it can be done. Will you?"

"You wouldn't mind resigning?"

"By Jove, no!" said Worcester, precipitately.

"Don't mention it. Not at all, old man, not at all."

"Well, I've been thinking that, if you didn't mind, I'd like to try my hand on our crowd; though, since you don't move 'em, there can't be much chance for me to do anything smart."

"That doesn't follow, for you aren't me, old man."

"Then I'll have a shot at it."

Worcester grasped Acton's hand, as the French say, "with emotion."

"But the house will have to elect me, you know; perhaps they'd fancy Raven as captain. He can play decently, and they know him."

"Well, Biffen's are a dense lot, but I'm hanged if even their stupidity would do a thing like that. They've seen you play, haven't they?"

"Thanks. Fact is, Dick, I feel a bit bored by the patronage of Taylor's and Merishall's, and Sharpe's and Corker's, and all the rest of the houses."

"Oh! Biffen's laid himself out for that, you must see."

"I don't fancy Bourne's sneers and Hodgson's high stilts."

"Haven't noticed either," said Dick.

"H'm!" said Acton, rather nettled by Dick's dry tone. "I have. As for the niggers—"

"The other houses despise us on their account. We're the Dervish Camp to the rest."

"As for the niggers, they shall do something for Biffen's too," said Acton, rather thoughtfully.

"You mean in the sing-songs? Well, they'll spare the burnt cork certainly."

"Well, that's an idea too," said Acton, laughing, "but not the one I had. That will keep."

Worcester might have some curiosity to know what Acton's idea was, but he wasn't going to inquire anything about the niggers.

"It's awfully brickish of you, Worcester," said Acton, as Grim was heard trotting up the corridor "to stand down."

"Not at all; the sacrifice is on your altar."

"Then *allons*. Here's Grim knocking, and I've to see Corker at 9.40. You'll excuse me."

Grim came in and commenced to clear away, and the two sallied out.

CHAPTER IV

BIFFEN'S PROGRESS

That day, after morning school, Biffen's held a meeting, and thereat Acton was proposed captain by Worcester and seconded by Raven; and Biffen's confirmed Worcester's qualified opinion of their sense by electing him *nem. con.*

From that day Acton threw his heart and soul into the regeneration of Biffen's. There did not pass an afternoon but that he turned out for footer, and coached, encouraged, bullied, stormed, praised each individual member of the team with the strictest impartiality and Spartan justice.

The smallest fault was dragged out into the light of day, and commented on with choice fulness, and any clever concerted piece of work got its due reward. Acton would stand no half-hearted play; he wanted the last ounce out of his men. The fellows stared a bit at first at his deadly earnestness, so unlike Dick's disgusted resignation at their shortcomings; but they found the change refreshing on the whole, for they could stand a lot of bullying from a fellow like Acton, who never seemed to make a mistake, or to have an off-day, and who could give stones and a beating to the best man among them. They respected his skill, and buckled to the work in hand. In about a fortnight there was a suggestion of style about the moving of some of the fellows up the field. Worcester backed up Acton with whole-hearted enthusiasm, and Raven was lost in wonder at the forward movement. This backing Acton found rather useful, for Dick and Raven were as popular as any in St. Amory's.

Some of the fellows were inclined to turn restive after about a fortnight, when the novelty of earnestness in football had worn off, but Acton's demands were as inexorable as ever. Matters came to a head (probably, as I expect, to the new captain's inward satisfaction) when his girding upset Chalmers—about the best forward of Biffen's regenerated lot. There was to be a match with some of the Fifth for the Saturday, and Acton had arranged a preliminary canter the day before to test his attack. Chalmers was the winger, but on the day he was tremendously selfish, and stuck to the ball until he was robbed or knocked off it. Now, Acton loathed the "alone I did it" type of forward, and asked Chalmers pretty acidly what his inside man was for. This riled Chalmers considerably, for he had a large private opinion about his own play, and he said pretty hotly, "Mind your own business, Acton."

Acton said very coolly, "I am going to do so. Please remember, Chalmers, this is not a one-horse show."

"Seems distinctly like it, judging by the fellow who's been doing all the talking for the last age."

"Play the game, and don't be an ass."

"I object to being called an ass," said Chalmers, in a white rage.

"Well, mule, then," said Acton, cheerfully. "Anything to oblige you, Chalmers, bar your waltzing down the touch-line to perdition. You're not a Bassett nor a Bell yet, you know."

Chalmers would dearly have liked to have struck Acton, but Worcester looked so utterly disgusted at the whole business, that I fancy it was Dick's eye that suggested to Chalmers his getting into his coat and sweater. He did so, and stalked angrily off the field.

Now, Chalmers really liked the game, and did not fancy being crossed out of the eleven, which Acton would almost certainly proceed to do; so that night after tea, he went to Worcester's study, and boarded Dick.

"Apologize to Acton," said Dick.

"But he called me an ass!"

"You were one," said Dick, dryly. "Acton's putting in a lot of work over the slackest house that ever disgraced the old school, and this is how he's treated. Ass is a mild term."

Chalmers went to Raven.

"Apologize," said Raven.

"He called me a mule," urged Chalmers, despairingly.

"So you were. I quite expected to see the kicking begin, really. Acton's sweating no end to screw us up to concert-pitch, and flat mutiny is his reward. Apologize, and help us win the Fifth tomorrow."

So Chalmers moved reluctantly across to Acton's and made his apology.

"Don't mention it," said Acton, cheerfully. "Sorry I upset you, Chalmers, but you elected me captain, and I do want a little success in the houses, and how can we get it if the fellows don't combine? Say no more about it; I was rather afraid you weren't going to come, which is the unadorned truth."

This last delicate touch, which showed Chalmers that, without the apology, his captain had meant to cut him adrift, *sans* hesitation, and yet contained a pretty little compliment to his footer, embarrassed Chalmers more than a little; but Acton offered his forward tea and muffins, and five

minutes afterwards Chalmers was finding out what a nice fellow Acton really could be. The next day Chalmers smoothed his ruffled feelings by piling on three goals against the Fifth, who sneaked off the Acres five goals to the bad. This was the first time for ages that Biffen's had tasted blood, and the news of the victory staggered others besides the victims. There was quite a flutter among the house captains, and Acton, by the way, had no more mutinies.

"Without haste, without rest," Biffen's captain started his second project for the elevation of his house. He had noticed what none of the other fellows would condescend to see, that two of the despised niggers of Biffen's were rather neat on the bars. He spent a quarter of an hour one evening quietly watching the two in the gym, and he went away thoughtful. Singh Ram and Mehtah thereupon each received a polite note, and "could they call about seven in Acton's study?" They came, and Acton talked to them briefly but to the point. When they sought their quarters again they were beaming, and "Singed" Ram carried a fat book of German physical exercises under his arm.

"Am I not coming out strong?" said Acton, laughing to himself, "when I set the very niggers a-struggling for the greater glory of Biffen's—or is it Acton's? Then, there's that exhibition, which we must try to get for this double-superlative house. Raven must beat that Sixth prig Hodgson, the very bright particular star of Corker's. Would two hours' classics, on alternate nights, meet his case? He shall have 'em, bless him! He shall know what crops Horace grew on his little farm, and all the other rot which gains Perry Exhibitions. Hodgson may strong coffee and wet towel *per noctem*; but, with John Acton as coach, Raven shall upset the apple-cart of Theodore Hodgson. There's Todd in for the Perry, too, I hear. Hodgson may be worth powder and shot, but I'm hanged if Raven need fear Cotton's jackal! If only half of my plans come off, still that will put Philip Bourne in a tighter corner than he's ever been in before. Therefore—*en avant!*"

CHAPTER V

COTTON AND HIS JACKAL

As I said before, the victory of the despised Biffenites over the Fifth Form eleven—a moderate one, it is true—caused quite a little breeze of surprise to circulate around the other houses, which had by process of time come to regard that slack house as hopeless in the fields or in the schools. Over all the tea-tables that afternoon the news was commented on with full details; how Chalmers had gained in deadliness just as much as he had lost in selfishness, and how Raven and Worcester had worked like horses, and mown down the opposition—"Fifth Form opposition!" said the fags, with a lift of the eyebrows—like grass, and as for Biffen's new captain, well, if there was one player who could hold a candle to him it must be Phil Bourne, and he only.

In the Rev. E. Taylor's house, Cotton senior, who answered to the name of "Jim" among his familiars, and was "Bully Cotton" to his enemies—every Amorion below the Fifth, and a good sprinkling elsewhere—and Augustus Vernon Robert Todd, who was "Gus" to every one, sat at tea together in Todd's room. Cotton had been one of the slain that afternoon on the Acres, and was still in his footer clothes, plus a sweater, which almost came up to his ears. There was a bright fire in the grate, and though Todd's room was not decorative compared with most of the other fellows' dens, yet it was cheerful enough. Cotton had come back from the match hungry and a trifle bruised from a smart upset, only to find his own fire out, and preparations for tea invisible. Having uttered dire threats against his absent, erring fag, he moved into his friend's room, and the two clubbed together their resources, and the result was a square meal, towards which Cotton contributed something like 19/20, A.V.R. Todd's share being limited to the kettle, the water, and the fire. When Cotton had satisfied his footer appetite, he turned down his stocking and proceeded vigorously to anoint with embrocation his damaged leg, the pungent scent of the liniment being almost ornamental in its strength.

"How did you get that, Jim?" said Gus, surveying the brawny limb with interest.

"Acton brought me down like a house, my boy."

"Fair?"

"Oh yes; but you've got to go down if he catches you in his swing."

"You fellows must have played beautifully to let Biffen's mob maul you to that extent."

"Gus, my boy, instead of frowning up here all the afternoon with your books, you should have been on the touch-line watching those Biffenites at their new tricks. Your opinion then would

have a little avoirdupois. As it is, you Perry Exhibit, it is worth exactly nothing."

"You're deucedly classical to-night, Jim."

"Oh, I'm sick of this forsaken match and all the compliments we've had over it. I'm going now to have a tub, and then we'll get that Latin paper through, and, thirdly, I'll have the chessmen out."

"Sorry, I can't, Jim," said Todd, discontentedly. "There is that beastly Perry Scholarship—I must really do something for that!"

"Thomas Rot, Esq.!" said Cotton. "Haven't you been a-cramming and a-guzzling for that all this afternoon? You've a duty towards your chums, Toddy, so I tell you."

"That's all very well, Jim, for you, who are going to break some crammer's heart, and then crawl into the Army through the Militia, but my pater wants me to do something in the Perry, I tell you."

"Chess!" said Cotton, disregarding Todd's bleat, and then, with a sly smile, he added, "Shilling a game, Gus, and you know you always pull off the odd one."

"All right," said Todd, swallowing the bait with forlorn eagerness; "I'll have the board set out if you must come in."

"Oh, I must!" said Cotton, with a half-sneer at Todd's anxiety to pick up a small sum. "Clear the table, and we'll make a snug evening of it."

Todd's method of clearing a table was novel, if not original. He carried it bodily into Cotton's room, and then returned with his friend's mahogany, which was undoubtedly more ornamental than his own.

Acton was absolutely right when he sneeringly called Gus "Cotton's jackal." Todd was exactly of the material which makes a good jackal, though he never became quite Jim Cotton's toady. He was a sharp, selfish individual, good-looking in an aimless kind of way, with a slack, feeble mouth, and a wandering, indecisive glance. He had a quick, shallow cleverness, which could get up pretty easily enough of inexact knowledge to pass muster in the schools. Old Corker knew his capabilities to a hair, and would now and then, when Gus offered up some hazy, specious guess-work, blister him with a little biting sarcasm. Todd feared the Doctor as he feared no one else. Todd's chief private moan was that he never had any money. His father was a rich man, but had some ideas which were rather rough on his weak-kneed son. He tipped poor Gus as though he were some thrifty hairdresser's son, and Todd had to try to ruffle it with young Amorians on as many shillings as they had crowns. Not a lad who ever had naturally any large amount of self-respect, the little he had soon went, and he became, while still a fag, a hewer of wood and drawer of water to his better-tipped cronies. His destiny finished when, on his entry into the Fifth, Jim Cotton claimed him, and subsidized him as his man.

At the beginning of the term his father had told him that if he could make a good show in the Perry Exhibition there need not be any more grumbling about his tip. Gus came back to St. Amory's hysterically anxious to cut out all competitors for the Perry, but the shackles of his old serfdom were still about him. When he showed signs of being restive to the old claims, and recommended Cotton to do his own classics and mathematics, Cotton coolly and calmly demanded repayment of sundry loans contracted of old. Todd had not the pluck to face a term of plain living and high thinking by paying his former patron all he owed him and exhausting all his present tip by so doing, but flabbily, though discontentedly, caved in, and became Cotton's jackal as before.

Cotton was by no means as bad as his endearing name might make you think. He was a tall, heavy fellow, with a large, determined-looking face. He was wonderfully stupid in the schools, but was quite clever enough to know it. He had some good qualities. He was straight enough in all extra-school affairs, did not lie, nor fear any one; kept his word, and expected you to keep yours.

"You can't beat Hodgson of the Sixth, Gus, so what is the good of sweating all the term? Hodgson's got the deuce of a pull over you to start with."

"I'm not frightened of Hodgson if you wouldn't bother, Jim."

"Can't do without you, old cock. You're just the fellow to lift my Latin and those filthy mathematics high enough out of the mud to keep the beaks from worrying me to death. I tried Philips for a week, but he did such weird screeds in the 'unseens' that Merishall smelt a rat, and was most particular attentive to me, but your leverage is just about my fighting weight."

Gus had sniffed discontentedly at this dubious compliment; but Cotton had smiled stolidly, and continued to use Gus as his classical and mathematical hack. Besides, there was something about Gus's easy-going lackadaisical temperament which exactly suited Cotton, and he felt for his grumbling jackal a friendliness apart from Gus's usefulness to him.

This afternoon had been a fair sample of Todd's usual half-holiday. Feeling no heart for any serious work for the Perry, he had spent it in reading half a worthless novel, and skimming through a magazine, and feeling muddled and discontented in consequence. He had the uneasy feeling that he was an arrant ass in thus fooling time away, but had not sufficient self-denial to seize upon a quiet afternoon for a little genuine work.

Cotton soon returned from his bath, and the two cronies spent about an hour in getting up the least modicum of their classics which would satisfy Merishall; and then they played chess, by which Gus was one florin richer. A third game was in progress, but Todd managed to tip over the board when he was "going to mate in five moves." Cotton thereupon said he had had enough, but Gus avariciously tried to reconstruct the positions. He failed dismally, and Cotton laughed sweetly. Now Cotton's laugh would almost make his chum's hair curl, so he retorted pretty sweetly himself, "I say, Jim. I can't get out of my head that awful hammering you fellows got this afternoon. Think Biffen's lot likely to shape well in the House matches?" "There's no telling, old man. But if they get moderate luck they'll be waltzing about in the final."

"That's absolute blazing idiocy!" said Todd, knocking over more chessmen in his astonishment.

"All right, Gus. To talk absolute blazing idiocy is my usual habit, of course. They may carry off the final even, but that, perhaps, is a tall order."

Todd nursed his astonishment for a full five minutes, whistling occasionally, as at some very fantastic idea. At last he said more seriously: "Aren't you now, Jim, really pulling my leg?"

"No, honour bright! Biffen's are really eye-openers."

Gus said with infinite slyness: "Look here, I'll bet you evens Biffen's *don't* pull off the final."

"Oh, that is rot, Gus, to talk about betting, for you can't pay if you lose."

Gus had not too much sensitiveness in his character, but this unmeant insult stung him.

"You've no right to say that. I've paid all I've ever betted with you."

Cotton considered heavily in his own mind for a moment. "That is almost true, but—"

"Well, what do you mean—" began Todd, in a paddy.

"All right," said Cotton; "shut up, confound you! I'll take you."

"Three quid Biffen's are not cock-house at 'footer.'"

"Done," said Cotton, unwillingly pulling out his note-book; "and straight, Todd, I shall expect you to pay if you lose."

"Oh, shut up, Cotton, you cad! I shall pay if I lose, man. What do you want to keep on insulting me like that for?"

"Steady, Gus. You'll have Taylor up if you howl like that. I meant nothing."

"Nothing!" said Gus in a fury, seeking for something particularly sweet to say to his patron. "I jolly well hope, then, that if our house should meet 'em in the rounds you will do your little best to put a stopper on their career. Don't, for the sake of pulling off your bet, present 'em with a few goals. You 'keep' for our house, you know."

"Oh, dash it all, Todd," said Cotton, in a white rage, "you are a bounder! Think I'd sell my side?" he demanded furiously.

"Ah!" said Gus, delighted at having got through Cotton's skin. "You don't stomach insults any more than I do. Then why do you ladle them out so jolly freely to me?"

"That was a particularly low one," said Cotton angrily; "and anyway, you avaricious beggar, you've got thundering good terms, for it is hardly likely that Biffen's can really be cock-house. There's Corker's house, with Bourne and Hodgson and a few more good men. You're a sight more likely to see my three sovs, that I am yours."

"I hope so," said Gus, with some relief at the anticipation of this pleasant prospect.

Then the anger of the two simmered down, each having given and received some very choice compliments, and as these little breezes were usual between the two, ten minutes afterwards they were amiably entertaining each other. Cotton was putting up a pair of dumb-bells three hundred times, and his crony was counting and criticising his form. The Perry Exhibition did not enter Todd's head, but his bet—"such a gilt-edged one," he chuckled—was never once out of it. And Todd's bet had some momentous consequences for him, too.

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST CAP

While Acton was thus making such strenuous exertions to lift Biffen's out of the mire, Bourne was finding out the whole unpainted beauty of the situation—as far as it concerned himself.

The experimental footer elevens were chosen in what, I believe, is the usual manner. The old members of the school eleven formed a committee, and chose fellows to play in the weekly matches, and if any one of them showed special talent he was, of course, retained, and by-and-by the captain gave him his school cap, and he was henceforth a full-blown member of the eleven, with a seat on the committee like any of the old gang.

There were left of the last year's team five players—Bourne, Mivart, Vercoe, Baines, and Roberts. The final promotion of fellows into the eleven, however, rested with the captain alone, and when he considered any fellow good enough he signified the same by presenting him with the blue and silver cap of St. Amory.

The giving away of a cap had become quite a function. Whenever there was the rumour that some one was to have a cap after a match, pretty well the whole school swarmed round the pavilion, and when the new member came out in all the glory of his new blue and silver he got the cheers which his play or popularity deserved, and especially did the new member's house distinguish themselves in the shouting.

Thus Bourne had six caps at his disposal, and since "Socket" had been introduced, the last cap was always given so that when the school played the last match—the Carthusians—the eleven would be complete.

Bourne saw at once the cloud which was rising on the horizon when, at the first committee meeting to choose the eleven against "The Cognoscenti" Mivart said, "Well, Bourne, we've got your partner for to-morrow ready made. I think we may put that new chap Acton down right off."

"Rather," said Vercoe. "He can't be left out."

"Best back we've seen for an age-barring Phil, of course," said Baines.

"And the others we'll have to fight over, as usual. My choice is Hodgson for centre."

"Too lazy, Roberts. Mine is Chalmers."

"Rot! He's a winger."

And so the selection of an eleven against the Cognoscenti went on in the usual old-fashioned style.

Bourne dropped into my study afterwards and said, gloomily; "On the whole, Carr, had I not better tell the fellows that they may elect Acton for our school fixtures, but he cannot have his cap? That will take the bull by the horns from the beginning."

"By no means. The other fellows have nothing whatever to do with giving caps away; that is your business entirely. Besides, who knows? Acton may not care to play when he knows he cannot get his cap."

"I'd be agreeably surprised if he didn't. But that won't be his little game. Take my word for it, he'll turn out on every blessed occasion, play like a master of the game, and give us no end of trouble."

"Perhaps he may. Anyhow, something may turn up between now and the last match—we'll hope so, anyhow; and until the last cap is given away the fellows generally won't spot your little game."

"'Tis only putting off the evil day, Carr," said Phil, discontentedly.

"A good day to put off."

Thus, when Hodgson was given the first cap, there was the general comment that he was pretty sure to annex a cap sooner or later, and might as well have it soon. Acton's turn—so said the school would come later, though Biffen's house sneered. "Of course, Hodgson is in the Sixth. What else but a Sixth Form fellow is wanted in a footer eleven?"

Sharpe's house secured the next two caps, and Biffen's groaned aloud. "Whatever is old Phil about? One might think he was blind in his right eye and straddled in his left. We'll send him a pair of gig lamps, and then perhaps he may discover Acton—Acton, of Biffen's."

The weeks went by, and after a spirited display by Chalmers against the Emeriti, he was given his cap, and for the first time since Biffen's was a house they had a man in the eleven. But they gasped as Chalmers came out of the pavilion with his blue and silver cap on his curls. "That ass Bourne found the house at last, and then he goes and carefully spots the wrong man. Whatever *is* the matter with him? To pick Chalmers before Acton! Rot!"

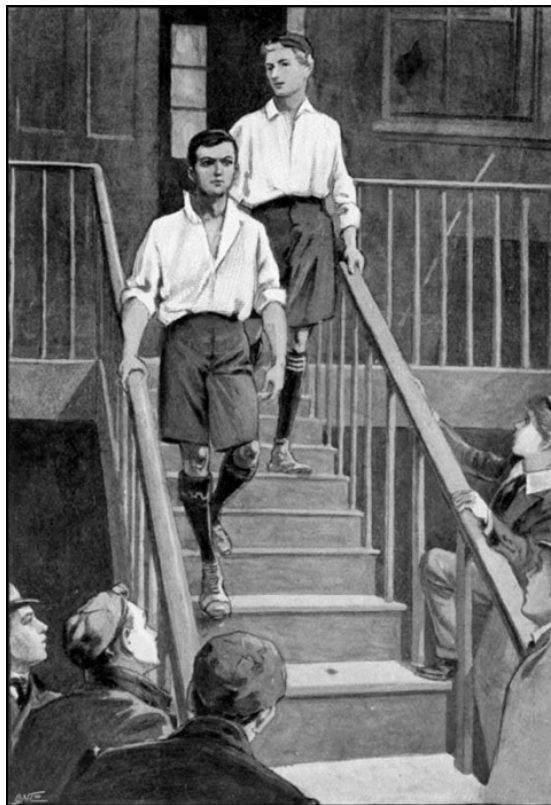
Over tea that night Biffen's bubbled and choked, and the other houses began to take a lively interest in the next distribution, for this constant passing of Acton was becoming exciting. But still—and I was glad to see it—the school had faith in Phil; they counted on justice being done, as it were, in the last laps. No one mentioned a word to him about the intense curiosity and even anxiety that his odd bestowal of caps had excited amongst them, for Phil has that way with him that can shut up a fellow quicker than you can snap a knife if that fellow is travelling out of

bounds.

However, when Place, of Merishall's, came out of the pavilion a full-blown member of the school eleven there was a scene. The whole body of fellows now thought that the comedy was pretty nearly becoming a tragedy, and they showed their feelings unmistakably. Place was cheered by Merishall's, but not overwhelmingly, and from the other houses there was an ominous silence. Place, as he trotted out, looked rather puzzled, and a bit undecided how to take his odd reception, and glanced rather helplessly round at the sea of faces all turned anxiously towards him. There would be pretty nearly seven hundred fellows round the pavilion, for there was no end of excitement.

"Keep up your pecker, Place! You're all right, anyhow!" shouted some one.

The other members came out one by one, and were cheered to the echo, and at last Phil came out with Hodgson. He was rather pale, but had his back very straight. There was a dead silence, and, for the first time since he had been captain, Phil walked down the steps without a friendly cheer. I think even now the old school behaved itself very well—the fellows were not behind the scenes, and didn't see more than was before their eyes, but there was not a single word thrown out at Phil. Acton came out with Worcester, and the pity was that he didn't deserve the cheers he got.



PHIL WALKED DOWN THE STEPS WITHOUT A FRIENDLY CHEER.

The week before the Carthusian match there was but one solitary player to be promoted. The position was back, and every fellow in the place knew that, bar Bourne himself, there wasn't another man that could hold a candle to Acton there. The committee doggedly, and with meaning, elected the only player there was to elect, and Acton signified that he was willing to play. Bourne, as usual, was there, and no one felt more than he the air of distrust and constraint which hung over the meeting. When Acton was unanimously elected for back Phil stolidly wrote out the list of the team and had it pinned up on the notice-board. He had carefully drawn the line in red ink above the last name—Acton's—which showed that the pride of Biffen's was not in the eleven yet.

Probably Acton on the next day played as well as even he had ever played in his life, for he was almost impassable, and the crowd of fellows cheered him till they were hoarse. The minute the whistle blew, like one man the whole school swarmed round the pavilion. The question each asked himself and his chum was, "Would Acton get the last cap?" And the answer was, "Why, of course! Who else should have it?"

That afternoon to most of the fellows the eleven seemed an age getting into their sweaters and coats. When Acton appeared first, and it was seen that he was wearing the pink cap of Biffen's on his head there was more than astonishment, there was consternation. Whatever did it mean? Acton smiled good-naturedly at the school as they cheered him to the echo, and hurried unconcernedly along. The others of the eleven came out dejectedly, and filed up the hill in gloomy little groups. The whole school waited for Phil, and when he came out, pale and worried,

they received him in icy silence. As he was coming down the steps one of Biffen's fags shouted shrilly, "Three cheers for Acton!"

Phil stalked through the shouting school, and as I joined him and we walked up together, he said, through his clenched teeth—

"I wish, old man, I had never seen that brute."

That evening Bourne wrote to Worcester offering him the remaining cap.

Worcester flew across to Acton's room, and said, "Bourne has offered me the place—the last cap. He must be stark, staring mad!"

"Take it," said Acton, coolly.

"No fear," said Worcester. "We have a stupid kind of prejudice here for having the best eleven we can get, and it isn't the best if you're out of it. Bourne has always been a most impartial fellow up to this date, so this little occurrence has thrown us off the rails. Before I go to protest, though, have you any idea what is the matter?"

"He does not consider me fit for the eleven," said Acton with a light laugh, but also with perfect truth.

"Rot!" said Dick, hurrying away.

He hunted up the other nine fellows, and said bluntly his business.

"I vote we all protest to Bourne. A round robin should meet the case."

"Good," said Mivart. "Draw one up, Dicky dear."

Dick in time produced the following:—

"We, the undersigned, think that the St. Amory eleven is incomplete without John Acton, of Biffen's house, and, consequently, that he ought to have the last cap; and we would beg the captain to offer it him unless there be very good reasons for not doing so. We would suggest that if John Acton isn't to have the cap he be told the reason. The undersigned do not wish in the smallest degree to prejudice the right of the captain to select members for the eleven, but think that in the present case the withholding of a cap from John Acton inexplicable."

"You're a ready scribe, Dick," said Chalmers. "We may all sign that, eh?"

"Yes," said Worcester. "I first, because I am undeservedly offered the cap, and the rest of you in order of membership."

No one saw any objection to signing Dick's memorandum, and forthwith, with all legal formality, the round robin was signed by the ten, and sent to Phil by Dick's fag with orders to wait for an answer.

It came within five minutes.

"DEAR WORCESTER,

I have no intention of offering John Acton a place in the St. Amory's football eleven. There are good reasons for not doing so, and I have already told Acton the reasons. Please let me know whether you accept the vacant place I had the pleasure of offering you.

Yours sincerely,
PHILIP BOURNE."

This was a thunderbolt among the fellows. Then Acton knew!

Worcester posted back to Acton, lost in amazement.

"Look at this, Acton!"

Acton carefully read Bourne's letter, and Dick, who was watching him anxiously, saw him bite his lips with rage; for Phil's icy contempt stood out in every word of the letter.

"He says you know why you are not in the eleven."

Acton knew that he would have to explain something, or else Bourne would win the day yet. So he said—

"That is true. He told me so at the beginning of the season, but, of course, I never bargained for his keeping his word; and when you hear the reason he gave me—if this is his reason—you'll gasp."

"Well," said Dick, "although I've no right to ask you, I'd like to hear the plain, unvarnished tale, for, speaking out, Phil Bourne has always passed for a decent, level fellow. This business, somehow, doesn't seem his form at all, and it is only fair to him to say it."

"Did you see the match we had with Shannon's scratch team when the term began?"

"I did."

"Did you notice anything about my play?"

"You opened our eyes a bit, I remember."

"Did I play roughly?"

"No. Not quite that! You were not gentle; but you aren't that as a rule, though your game is fair enough."

"Not for Bourne. He doesn't like my game. I'm too rough. It's bad form, *pace* Bourne, therefore I'm barred my place in the eleven."

"Is that the explanation?"

"Yes. Honour bright! Except"—Acton paused diplomatically for a moment—"except, I don't think he likes me."

"Then Phil is a fool, and he'll find out pretty speedily that we can't stand rot of this quality. I, of course, can't take the cap."

"My dear fellow, why in the world not? If you don't, some other house will get it. Biffen's deserves two fellows in the eleven this year."

"They do, by Jove!"

"Then let us have the satisfaction of keeping out another Corker fellow."

Dick told the other fellows plainly and without any gilding, his conversation with Acton, and they pressed him to go and see Phil personally; so Dick marched heavily to Bourne's quarters.

"Sorry, Worcester, but I cannot explain anything. Not even to you. But I do hope you'll come into the eleven."

Dick said shortly, "I think I shall, for Biffen's deserves the other cap, though the right fellow isn't getting it. By the way, Bourne, you'll not be very sweet to the school generally after this. They—the fellows—to a man, are no end cut up over Acton's treatment."

"I supposed they would be. I knew it would be so."

"Look here, Phil. You always did the square thing. Let us have the reason for this," said Dick, earnestly.

"Sorry, Worcester, I can't."

"Good night, then."

"Good night."

The rage and consternation of the Biffenites when they found that Bourne was immovable in his decision can be imagined. Some were inclined to take the matter up to Corker's throne, but they were a miserable minority.

"Let Corker have a finger in our own private affairs!" said Dick, with intense disgust. "What next, gentlemen? We won't be able to blow our own noses without his permission. Keep the masters out of this, whatever we do. Can't we see the thing through ourselves? I vote we try, anyhow."

Some were inclined to blame Dick for accepting the cap; but pretty generally it was agreed that, if Acton was not to have it, Dick was the next best man, but at what a distance! The honour of having two men in the eleven was no *solatium* for the wounded pride of Biffen's, when they considered their great injury. The reason, though, was, naturally, what puzzled them—and, for the matter of that, the whole school. Did Bourne expect his team to play footer as though it were a game of croquet? Were drawing-room manners to be introduced on to the Acres' clay? Were the famous eleven of St. Amory's to amble about, like a swarm of bread-and-butter misses? One wit suggested wadded coats and respirators. Acton rough, indeed! Phil Bourne must be an embodiment of his grandmother, then! Most of the fags in Biffen's house sent Phil elaborate instructions for "a nice drawing-room game to take the place of 'Socket' football—nasty, rough 'Socket' footer—for one-and-six, and guaranteed to do no injury to the most delicate constitution. A child can play it!" These letters were anonymous, of course; but Biffen's house-paper was freely used. "Anyhow," said Phil, with a gentle smile to me, "the spelling is obviously Biffen's."

Acton went on his own way, serenely indifferent to his house, which would have made a god of him on the smallest provocation. He cheerfully ignored Bourne, and he had the art of never seeing Phil when they met, in school or out, though, of course, Phil minded this not at all. When the Carthusians were played, Acton spent the afternoon reading with Raven, whose exam, was now very near; and, whilst the two were grinding out all the absurd details of Horace and his patron, "and the poet's little farm, and the other rot which gains Perry Exhibitions," the shouts and cheers of the school down at the Acres came floating up the hill to their room.

The school lost their match with the Carthusians—the match which a good St. Amorion would rather win than any two others—and it was plain that Dick, though a useful fellow, could not

bottle up the forwards in the Actonian style. This defeat was the last straw to break the back of the school's patience.

It was customary, after the Carthusian match, for the footer captain to give his eleven a formal tea, Phil arranged the usual preliminaries, sick at heart, and wearily certain as to the result. Three put in an appearance—Vercoe, Baines, and Roberts—and in place of the burly forms of the rest of the St. Amory's eleven, the sylph-like figures of their fags flitted to Phil's hall of entertainment with curt little notes. Worcester and the rest "regretted they were unable to avail themselves of the captain's invitation."

The tea was not a success.

The school followed the plain lead of the eleven, and as Phil hurried along to chapel the next day no one hooked in with him, as had been done "the day before yesterday!" He was left severely alone.

In plain words, St Amory's School consigned Phil Bourne to Coventry.

CHAPTER VII

THANKS TO ACTON

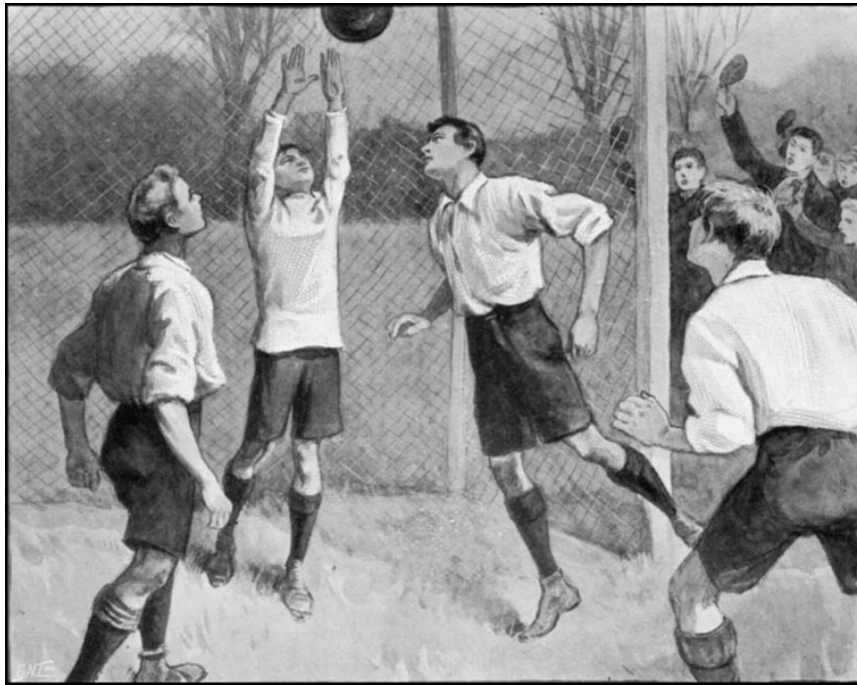
After the Carthusian match there was but one topic, or to be strictly accurate, perhaps, two topics of interest in the school—who would be cock-house at footer and who would get the Perry Exhibition.

The rest of the houses knew that Biffen's house was not now the unconsidered article it was once; that it wasn't the door-mat upon which any one might wipe his feet before proceeding into the inner circles of the housers' competition, and there was more than a little curiosity to see how far the "resurrected" house would mount.

But not a single soul dreamt that it would reach the final. The whole school gasped for a fortnight on end as Biffen's annihilated Dover's, Hargen's, Sharpe's, and Merishall's *seriatim*, and at last faced Corker's house in the final. This was a resurrected house with a vengeance! Corker's had had a bye in the first round and had been drawn against rather rickety houses since, but they were generally fancied to pull off the final as usual, for Bourne was captain, and they had Hodgson and Roberts of the eleven as well. The wonderful progress of Biffen's had thrown an awful lot of excitement into the game.

The match was fixed for the last Saturday in the term, and the result of the Perry Exhibition was to be announced on the evening of the same day, so the last Saturday was going to be the memorable day of the Michaelmas stretch.

If you want a full account of the match you had better write to the editor of *The Amorian*. He will send you the magazine with a page or so of description and account, but all I'm going to say is that Bourne and Acton played as they had never played before—I think I've said that before about Acton, but he really was superlative in the housers' final—and that five minutes from time the score was "one all." Then Acton showed the school a stroke of genius. He brought Raven out from centre-forward, where he was quite unable to cope with Bourne, whispered him to go "back" with Worcester, and before any one could realize what was happening he was playing forward himself. He' was a "lambent flame along the ground" if you like. In a second Biffen's were swarming round Roberts in goal, Acton passed out to Chalmers, who was ready for the pass, and in a twinkling the ball was in the net. From the row you might have imagined the school had gone mad.



ACTON JUST REACHED IT WITH HIS HEAD.

The ball was kicked off again. Almost immediately Acton secured near the centre. He dribbled through the ruck of his opponents until he saw Bourne upon him. With a smile of triumph upon his lips he gently rolled the leather to Chalmers, who was hungrily waiting for the pass out on the touch-line. Chalmers waltzed beautifully for the short run almost to the corner flag. He steadied himself for one instant after his run, and then lifted the ball magnificently into the goal mouth. As the leather was skimming past, Acton just reached it with his head and deflected it high and dry out of Roberts' reach into the net. It was the supreme effort of his splendid game.

Biffen's had won by three goals to one!

They carried Acton off the field in ecstasy, and nearly scared Dame Biffen out of her wits by the "whisper" of "cock-house." Well, it certainly was unusual.

After tea the whole of St. Amory's crowded into the Speech Room to hear the result of the Perry Exhibition. There would not be a fellow away, I should fancy, bar the cripples in the hospital, for there was no end of excitement. Was this to be another Biffen's triumph? Was Raven of the Fifth to beat Hodgson, the chosen of the Sixth, for the Perry? It was not to be expected that he would, but when the whisper circled round that Acton had "coached" him in classics it was agreed that perhaps there would be another feather in Acton's cap.

The masters were there on the platform in serried ranks, the whole fifty of them, from Corker to Pfenning who "does" the music.

Corker, as usual, went straight to the mark, whilst the entire mass of fellows kept a death-like silence. "The result of the examination for the Perry Exhibition is as follows:—

- 1st. Arthur Raven, 672 marks.
- 2nd. Theodore Hodgson, 591 marks.
- 3rd. Augustus Vernon Robert Todd, 114 marks."

Then out broke the usual uproar, "shivering the silence," as some one says, "into clamour." We all cheered for Raven, who scored a popular and unexpected victory, for why should a Fifth Form fellow beat one of the Sixth? Biffen's crowd kept up the cheering until Corker rose again.

"I can heartily congratulate Raven on his success, for his classical knowledge was distinctly good. Hodgson I can also congratulate, for his papers too were good. As for Augustus Vernon Robert Todd"—we all yelled with laughter as Dr. Moore scrambled in hot haste through Todd's awful list of names, but were again quiet when he dropped his eye-glasses from his eagle's beak, a sure sign he was going to "savage" somebody—"as for *his* performance in this *examination*, I can only regard it as a very bad practical joke, or as his *ballon d'essai* for some kindergarten scholarship."

Raven got up from his seat near the door. He was pale to the lips, but his voice was clear and unhesitating. "If you please, sir, may I say a word?"

"Eh, what?" said Corker. "Say a word? Oh, certainly."

"I am very glad indeed to hear that I have won the Perry Exhibition. I know in my own mind that I could never have beaten my friend Hodgson if I had not had Acton's help. I owe the winning of the Exhibition entirely to him, for he has read the whole of the classics with me and helped me in

every way in his power. I cannot thank him enough for all he has done, but at least I owe him this open acknowledgment."

Corker looked no end pleased, and turned round and beamed on Biffen, whose good-natured easy face shone with pleasure and delight.

"Biffen," said good old Corker, audibly, "your house is fortunate in having Acton, and St. Amory such a good amateur coach in classics. Cock-house, too, bless me!"

And can you wonder that Biffen's, frenzied with delight, carried Raven and Acton shoulder high through the gas-lit streets?

Whilst the Biffenites were thus shouting their way home, one unhappy youth hurried to his room feeling as though the moon had fallen out of heaven and crushed him—Todd. After that night when he had made the bet with Cotton, he had neither worked for the Perry nor yet left it alone, but loafed about with Cotton as usual, and piffled with the work for the Exhibition. As a last-lap spurt, he had, in the last week or so, desperately stuffed himself with cunning tips leading twistingly to nowhere. Never had any one faced a serious examination with such a rag-bag of tips as Todd, and the examination had found him out with a vengeance. As he slunk along to his quarters, Corker's words were buzzing in his ears unendingly. "As for Augustus Vernon Robert Todd"—"*ballon d'essai*"—"Kindergarten!" Oh! it was a sickener, and how the fellows had laughed!

As for his bet with Cotton about cock-house, why, he had, when he saw those goals put on at the last moment, felt a cold shiver run down his back. He had crawled off the Acres a sick and sorry and miserable wretch. Cotton had, being rather riled at his chum's temper for the last month, hinted, in unmistakable terms, that the debt was to be paid on return after holidays. Todd contemplated the ravishing prospect of the future with unmixed feelings. Between the upper and nether millstones of the lost Exhibition and the lost bet he had been crashed, annihilated!

When he had shut the study door, in sheer despair of spirit, he laid his head on the table and—Well, did he blub? All I know is, the Rev. E. Taylor knocked at the door once, twice, thrice, and Todd heard him not. The house master came in and surveyed the bowed form of poor Gus with a good-natured smile, tempered with some scorn. He took the liberty of loudly poking Gus's decaying fire, whereat the young gentleman sprang up instanter.

"I knocked, Todd, but I suppose you were thinking too deeply to hear me."

"Sorry, sir," said Gus, hurriedly getting the master a chair, "and, as a matter of fact, I was thinking."

"Yes!"

"What an awful ass I've been, sir!"

"I don't know quite about the ass, but you've certainly not been an epitome of all that's wise this term. It was on that very subject that I came here to have a word with you before we go for the holidays."

Gus looked blankly into the grate.

"This exhibition of yours, Todd, in the examination is just the answer you might expect to the problem you've set yourself. 'How can I get something of value by doing nothing for it?' I must say... etc." Taylor spoke very much to the point to Todd for about half an hour, taking the ribs out of Gus's conceit one by one, until he felt very much like a damp, damaged gamp, and about as helpless. One by one he took him through the catalogue of the aimless, stupid, footling performances in the term, and Gus blankly wondered how the dickens Taylor knew quite so much of his doings. He felt that the house master was not a bad imitation of Corker on a flaying expedition. I must say that Taylor's performance was a considerable trifle above the average "beak's wiggling," but the sting of his discourse was in the tail. "Now, Todd, would you like me to ask Dr. Moore to transfer you to some other house, where your very intimate friends will not absorb so much of your time?"

Todd blushed purple at this very broad hint.

"I'd rather stay where I am; I am not quite an incapable, sir."

"No; I don't think you are—not quite. Dr. Moore, however, is somewhat out of patience with you, and proposes drastic measures."

"Home?" inquired Todd, with gloomy conviction.

"Yes," said the house master. "Dr. Moore has written your father. But you are coming back next term, when you will have the chance of showing that that awful performance in the Exhibition is not your true form. I hope you'll take it."

Todd said bitterly, "I will, sir."

"I am glad of that," said Taylor, "and I believe you will. Good night, Todd."

"Good night, sir."

Todd packed up his portmanteaux that night as gloomily and as savagely as though his shirts were his deadly enemies. But there was a square, determined thrust-out of his weak chin which

boded ill for Jim Cotton's classics and mathematics in the future.

CHAPTER VIII

BIFFEN'S CONCERT

It was the inalienable right of the juniors of the cock-house to give a concert the last night of the term, and to have free and undisputed possession of the concert-room. Corker made it a rule that the captain of the school should be there to see there were no riots, which, as the fags were off home on the morrow, was more than possible. So when I got a polite note from Grim about half an hour after the results of the Perry Exhibition had been announced, telling me that Corker had given the customary consent, I strolled about looking up a cohort of monitors to help me in maintaining the "sacred cause of order and decency." I knew of old those junior concerts. "Pandemonium" was nearer the word.

Biffen's juniors, red-hot from their exertions and hoarse from their shouting in the speech-room, held a meeting in their own private quarters to deliberate as to their concert.

"I vote Father Grim to the chair," said Wilson.

"Thanks, my son," said Grim, with alacrity "Somebody second that, and let's get to business."

Somebody obligingly seconded, and Grim enthroned himself with dignity in the chair, and said cheerfully, "Carried *nem. con.* That's the way to commence biz. Now, you fellows, I thank you for this unexpected honour, which has quite taken me by surprise. I shall always—"

"Shut up, Grim," said Brown. "You know jolly well you asked Wilson to propose you."

"All right, Brown; I'll talk with you afterwards. Sorry your Roman nose is out of joint; but nobody proposed you, you know, so shut up. Gentlemen—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Biffen's are cock-house at last" (deafening cheers) "and we must make our concert a stunner. It must go with a bang from start to finish. It must lick every other fag's concert that ever was, and 'be the bright harbinger of—'What is the rest of the quote, Wilson?"

"'Of future joys,' you ass."

"'Of future joys,' you asses."

"I'll punch your head, Grim; you said you remembered it."

"All serene, old man, never mind the cackle."

"What about our concert?" asked Brown.

"It's going to be great. Does any one happen to have a programme of that awful performance of Corker's house last year?"

"Rather!" said half a dozen of Biffen's ornaments. "Did you think we'd burn a curiosity like that?"

"Cut out and get yours, Rogers, my pet."

"My pet" bolted and came back with the year-old programme of the Corker's fags.

"Pass the abomination this way, Rogers. Gentlemen," said Grim, with intense scorn, "those unspeakable Corker asses started off with a prologue."

"We must go one better—eh, you fellows?" said Rogers.

"Rather!" they all shrieked.

"I vote," said young Cherry, "that we lead off with an epilogue. That will leave 'em standing."

"Hear, hear!" said Fruity.

"Who'll second that?" said Grim.

"I will," said Rogers, cheerfully.

"Then do it, you ass," said the chairman.

"I second," said Rogers, hurriedly, "and you needn't be so beastly strict, Grim."

"Gentlemen, the proposal before the meeting is that we lead off with an epilogue. Item number one on the programme to be 'An Epilogue.' Those in favour signify. Carried unanimously."

"I say, Grim, what is an epilogue, anyhow?" said a voice.

"Oh, I say," said the chairman, "pass that young ignoramus this way. Lamb, do you mean to say you don't know what an epilogue is?"

"No, I don't."

"This is sickening," said Grim, with disgust. "A fellow in Biffen's not know what an epilogue is! Tell him, Fruity," he added, with pathetic vexation.

"He asked you," said Cherry, hurriedly.

"I'm the chairman," said Grim, in a wax, but with great relief. "Explain away, Fruity!"

"Oh, every first-class concert starts with one," he said vaguely.

"See now, Lamb?"

Lamb professed himself satisfied, but he did not appear absolutely blinded by the light either.

"Anyhow," said Wilson, "Fruity will see to that. I propose he does."

"I second it," said Lamb, viciously, whereupon Cherry kicked the seconder on the shins, for he did not exactly thirst for that honour. "I'm an ass," he said to himself; "but, anyhow, I'll look up what the blessed word does mean, and try to do it."

"I see," said Grim, "they've got a poem on 'Cock House' for number two. That seems all right, eh?"

"Oh yes; it's always done."

"Well, we'll have one too, eh? Who's got to do the poetry, though? Somebody propose somebody"—thereupon every fag proposed his chiefest enemy, and the battles raged along the line. "And you call yourselves gentlemen!" said Grim in disgust—he had been overlooked for the time being.

"I propose Sharpe," said Wilson, dusting himself. "He does no end swell construes from 'Ovid.'"

"I second that," said Rogers. "He has long hair. Poets always have. Milton had."

"That bit is *side*," said the chairman, judicially. "Those who are in favour of Sharpe doing the poetry hold—Carried, *nem. con.*"

"*Nem. con.* is side too, Grim," said Rogers.

"Shut up, you mule! Sharpe, you'll have to do the poem."

"I say, you fellows, it will be horse work," said Sharpe, disconsolately. "There isn't a rhyme to Biffen's."

"Oh! isn't there? What about 'spiffing'?"

Sharpe choked.

"Griffin."

"Tiffin."

Lamb squeaked out "stiff 'un," and some one gently led him out—even Biffen's fags caved in at that.

"Sharpe, you're booked for number two, old man. Gentlemen, I direct your attention to number three—Corker's did Indian clubs and the gold-fish dodge."

"Oh, well," said Wilson, "we're not going to copy Corker's, anyhow. Let's do dumb-bells and something else."

"I propose that Wilson does the something else," said Cherry, good-naturedly.

Wilson said he was ready to do something to Cherry any time that was convenient. Rogers suggested that they ask the niggers to do something on the bars, and Sharpe seconded it, so the dervishes were written to and promised a scragging if they didn't turn themselves inside out for the glory of Biffen's concert.

"I say, you fellows," said Grim, "it's to be a concert, you know, and except for Fruity's epilogue there isn't any music down yet." Cherry groaned to think he'd been let in for a song.

"What about Thurston?" asked half a dozen of the fags.

"Right, oh! Now, 'Dicky Bird,' hop up to the front, and trot out your list."

Thurston wasn't shy, and rather fancied his bleat, so he said, "Oh! I don't mind at all."

"We thought you wouldn't," said the chairman, winking.

"What do you say to 'Alice, where art thou'?"

"We don't fancy your shouting five minutes for her at all. Next, please."

"Only to see her face again, ' then?"

"Whose?" said Sharpe, irreverently.

"Why, the girl's the fellow is singing about," said Thurston, hotly.

"Oh! you'll see her the day after to-morrow, Dicky Bird, so don't you fret about that now. Do you know 'My first cigar'?"

"Do you mean the one that sent you to hospital, Grimmy?"

"No I don't. None of your cheek. I'm chairman. I mean the one Corney Grain used to sing."

"Yes."

"Well, you sing that and you'll make the fellows die with laughing. And mind you illustrate it with plenty of life-like pantomime, do you hear?"

"Carried, *nem. con.*," shouted all the fags with enthusiasm.

"Hear, hear, Grimmy!"

"So that's settled for you, and if you get an encore, Dicky Bird, you can trot 'Alice' out if you like."

"Which of the fellows have we to invite out of the eleven to help us?"

"Acton," was the universal yell.

"We'll see him, then, to-night."

"Three cheers for Acton," said someone, and the roof echoed.

"Well, we're getting on, and I say, you chaps, I have an idea."

"Hear, hear!" said Cherry, acidly; "Grimmy *has* an idea."

"A grand idea, Fruity. Your epilogue isn't in it."

"What is it, Grim?"

"We'll have a boxing competition open to St. Amory's juniors only. Rogers should pull that off, eh?"

"Rather," said they all. "One more feather in Biffen's cap."

"But, Grimmy," said Rogers, "I don't last, you know."

"Ah!" said the chairman, brilliantly, "we'll only have one two-minutes' round each draw. It will go by points. You're safe as a house, my pet, really."

"Who'll be judge about points? I propose you, Grim," said Rogers, with intent.

"Thanks, old cock, but I really couldn't do the honourable if you were 'rocky' in the last rounds. We'll ask Carr to see us through that part. You'll be all right, I tell you."

"Who's to accompany on the P and O?"

"Oh, Brown must see to that!"

"I propose Brown key-thumper."

"I second that."

"Carried," said the chair, smartly.

"I say," said Grim, "I propose myself stage manager. I'm the only fellow who knows a ha'porth about it."

"A ha'porth is an awful lot; besides, a chairman can't propose himself," said Cherry, revengefully.

"I second the chairman's proposal," said Wilson, backing up his chum.

"Carried, *nem. con.*"

"No, I'm hanged if it was!" said Cherry. "You're a fraud, Grimmy."

"All right now, you chaps, the meeting is over. Wilson and I will go up to Acton, and see what he'll do for us, and then we'll rough out a swagger programme."

CHAPTER IX

THE END OF TERM

The two worthies, Grim and Wilson, after seeing Acton, began to get out their programme. Here it is:—

- BIFFEN'S JUNIOR'S CONCERT.
Cock House, December, 1898.
- (1) Epilogue.
B.A.M. CHERRY.
 - (2) Poem on the subject of Cock House.
B. SHARPE.
 - (3) Bar Act.
 - (4) First Round Junior Boxing Competition.
PRINCE RUNJIT MEHTAH AND RAM SINGH.
 - (5) SONG. "My First Cigar."
R.E. THURSTON.
 - (6) PIANOFORTE SOLO.. "Oh! listen to the band."
O. BROWN.
 - (7) Second Round Boxing.
 - (8) SONG.. "Jim."
J. ACTON, ESQ.
 - (9) Third and Concluding Rounds Boxing.
 - (10) SONG.. "Well, suppose you did?"
R.E. THURSTON.
- GOD SAVE THE QUEEN.
ACCOMPANIST. O.E. BROWN.
STAGE MANAGER. W.E. GRIM.

N.B.—The Manager begs to state that there will be no Latin or classical allusions throughout the evening. No waits. No charge for programmes. No antediluvian jokes.

This was printed on paper blushing pink—Biffen's colours—and Grim and Wilson, when they got the advance proof last thing on Saturday night, almost embraced in their jubilation. There was such a swagger look about the "N.B."

Meanwhile B.A.M. Cherry had consulted his dictionary, and therein found that an "epilogue" was defined as "a concluding speech in an oration or play." He broke into a cold sweat of horror. That was an epilogue, then! Where could he find one? What would be the good of one if he did find it? And supposing he had one and could recite it, it was at the wrong end of the programme—the programme which had already been printed in such hot haste? It was too late to tell Grim, who would have instantly summoned all the strength of Biffen's to scrag him. The wretched Cherry shuddered at his awful plight.

Nothing could he do or dare he do. In desperation he determined to fall ill on the concert night. B.A.M. Cherry hadn't the heroic soul, and when Grim asked him cheerfully how the epilogue was going on, he said "spiffing," in the tone of a martyr at the stake.

On the Monday Grim scuttled about all day—now on the stage, listening to Thurston going over his songs with Brown, now getting entries for his boxing competition, now encouraging Sharpe, who was in the throes of composition, and now criticizing the Dervishes with much force. Acton put in an appearance in the concert-room, and gave Brown the accompaniment to "Jim;" and, after hearing him play it through, went and read his novel the rest of his spare time.

At 7.30 the juniors of St. Amory's began to stroll in, Biffen's lot collaring the front seats as per custom. The programmes were distributed to each one as he came in, and created no end of sensation, and W.E. Grim was allowed to have come out very strong in the programme line. St. Amory's fags did not spot anything wrong about item one, but the older fellows chuckled a little and said "the manager was a funny ass." This opinion was instantly conveyed to Grim by one of

his cronies, and made that young gentleman think himself no end of a sly dog.

Punctually to the minute Grim rang his bell, and, darting into the dressing-room, said, "Now, Cherry, come along with your epilogue, They're all waiting. Where is that ass?"

"Cherry has not turned up yet, Grim."

"What?" he said in horror.

"Not turned up yet!"

"I'll go and fetch the beggar at once."

Grim darted out of the room, tore along the street, and was hammering at Cherry's door within the minute.

"Fruity, hurry up, they're all waiting."

"I'm not well, Grim."

"What?"

"I'm not well—I'm in bed."

"You miserable beast!" shouted Grim. "I'll massacre you. You'll make us the laughing stock of the whole school. Get up, man, Be a man."

"I'm ill," moaned Cherry from within.

"You miserable beast! You'll be dead to-morrow." He shook the door violently, but Cherry was not quite the utter fool Grim took him for, for he had locked the door. Grim stood outside on the corridor for some seconds, petrified with rage and disgust, and then flew like a madman back to the concert-room. He cannoned up against some one leisurely strolling up to the dressing-room, and was darting on again *sans* apology. A hand gently closed upon his collar and pulled him back.

"Hallo, young shaver! Little boys used to apologize when they—Why, it's Grim! What in the name —"

Grim, almost blubbing with anger and shame, poured out his tale, and Acton listened with an amused smile. "Sheer funk, Grim. Well, go on, and tell 'em their Cherry has rotted, but that I'll come and tell 'em a little tale instead."

Grim would have embraced Acton if he'd been a little taller, but he gurgled, "Acton, you *are* a brick," and darted on to the stage.

He was received with deafening cheers, and shrieks of "No waits!" "Manager!" "Don't hurry, Grim!" "We'll send out for supper!" "We want Cherry!" "Go off," etc.

When Grim could get a word in he panted, "Gentlemen, I am sorry to say B.A.M. Cherry is indisposed and cannot favour you with the epilogue."

"Funked it!" roared all the delighted juniors.

"He says he is unwell," said Grim, anger getting the better of him, "but he'll be a jolly sight worse in the morning."

There was a hurricane of thunderous cheers at this sally, but Grim managed to shout above the laughing, "I have great pleasure in announcing that John Acton, Esq., will take Fruity's—I mean Cherry's—place and tell you a little tale; even Corker fags will understand it," added Grim, viciously.

Acton came on and received his hearty welcome with easy good nature. He plunged right into his contribution: "A London cabby's account of his different fares"—from the double-superfine gilt-edged individual to the fat old dowager who *will* have the parrot inside with her. Acton gave it perfectly. Grim, who had his ears glued to the exit door, vowed he could almost hear the swell drop his eyeglass.

Sharpe stepped on to the stage amid the polite attentions of his natural enemies. "Be a man, Sharpe." "Don't cry." "You'll see mamma soon." "Speak up." "He did it all alone, remember." "No help." "Oh, dear no!"

"When on the bosom of the sleeping pool,
That's shaded o'er by trees in greenest dress,
Upon its breast of snow its gem of gold
The water lily swims——"

The juniors howled with dismay at this commencement, and Corker juniors instantly began to keep time to Sharpe's delivery in the organ-grinder's fashion. But Sharpe toiled remorselessly on. He compared Biffen's house to a water lily growing in a muddy pond, and again as a Phoenix risen from the ashes; and he gave us, with circumstantial details, every round of the footer housers, their two eleven caps, and the Perry Exhibition, and darkly hinted at Acton's exclusion from the eleven.

He wound up his awful farrago in one glorious burst of solemn fury—

"And even Fate girds on her sword, and her right arm she stiffens,
As thunders to the icy pole the glorious name of Biffen's."

When Sharpe finally made his bow, according to the invariable custom, every junior except a Biffenite imitated with rare fidelity the mixed sensations of channel passengers after a stormy passage.

Sharpe, cheered to the echo by the Biffenites on the front row, went proudly off.

The Dervishes were received with enthusiasm, and went through their performance to the shouts of "Well wriggled, Java!" "Why don't you oil!" "Do it again—orang-outang!" They amiably smiled acknowledgments as they backed away.

Then I myself stepped on to the stage, prepared to judge the two-minutes' rounds. Grim had whipped up sixteen fags, each willing to do battle for the honour of his house. The rounds proceeded to the accompaniment of ear-splitting encouragement, and I had the satisfaction of knowing that not a solitary one of the defeated heroes thought he had really been beaten on points.

No mistake about it, Biffen's had a fag who could sing. Thurston's "My First Cigar" only lacked one thing—it should have lasted a little longer to suit the audience.

"She called it an Intimidad,
It had spots of a yellowish hue,
She said the best brands always had,
And I firmly believed it was true."

A good number of the fellows knew "The Soldiers in the Park," and Brown hammered it out in a good old breezy style.

As he was racing home, and the jolly chorus was crashing out from the piano, one fag started "Oh, listen to the band!"

Instantly the whole school, juniors and seniors as well, joined in the chorus, keeping time with their feet.

"Oh, listen to the band!
Who doesn't love to hark
To the shout of 'Here they come'
And the banging of the drum—
Oh, listen to the soldiers in the park."

When the dust had settled, every one acknowledged that Biffen's concert was going with a bang. I am not going to bore you with a longer account of Biffen's concert. Thurston sang "Alice, where art thou?" the fellows telling him between the verses that "She wasn't going to come," "Spoony songs barred," etc., and Rogers carried off the fags' boxing competition with a big rush in the final round, and Biffen's crew howled with delight.

Finally the bell rang for Acton's song. Brown rattled through the preliminary bars, and the song commenced. The singer held himself slightly forward, in a rather stiff and awkward fashion, and his eyes were staring intently into vacancy. There was not the shadow of a shade of any expression in his face. A feeling of pity for Acton was the universal sensation when the first words fell from his lips. Acton had not the ghost of a singing voice, and the school shuddered at the awful exhibition. There was an icy silence, but Acton croaked remorselessly on. This is the song:
—

"Jim and I as children played together,
Best of chums for many years were we;
I had no luck—was, alas! a Jonah;
Jim, my chum, was lucky as could be.
Oh, lucky Jim! How I envied him!

"Years rolled by, and death took Jim away, boys,
Left his widow, and she married me;
Now we're married off I think of Jim, boys,
Sleeping in that churchyard by the sea.
Oh, lucky Jim! How I envy him!"

As the words followed on there was a suggestion of oddity in that awful voice singing a comic song, and there were a few suppressed laughs at the idea. As the song progressed, the utter dreary weariness of the voice, and the rather funny words, compelled the fellows to laugh in uncontrollable bursts; but still Acton never turned a hair. When he arrived at the churchyard lines there was one universal howl of delight. Brown stopped dead at the end of the second last line, and Acton stopped dead too. Instantly all the fellows became as mute as fish. The singer straightened himself up, looked round the room with a mocking smile while one might count a dozen, and then winked to Brown, who recommenced softly on the piano. Then Acton *sang* slowly and deliberately—sang with a voice as clear and as tunable as a silver bell—

"Oh, lucky Jim! How I envy him!"

His croak was a pretence—he had hoaxed us all! Before we recovered from our stupefaction he had vanished. The school clamoured for his return, but though they cheered for three minutes on end Acton did not reappear, and Brown struck up "God save the Queen!" Biffen's concert was at an end!

Grim held a five minutes' meeting among the Biffenites before bed.

"There's never been a fellow like Acton in St. Amory's. He goes away at nine to-morrow. The Great Midland are going to stop their express to pick up St. Amory fellows, and Acton goes up to his place by that. I vote we all go in a body to the station and cheer him off. We keep it dark, of course." This *staccato* oration was agreed to with acclamation, and Biffenites went to bed happy.

On the morrow Acton strolled into the station and espied the Biffenites, who were scattered up and down the platform with careful carelessness. The train came in, and at once the juniors crowded *en masse* round the carriage in which Acton had secured a corner seat, and stood talking to Grim, who was in fine feather.

At that very moment Phil Bourne and young Jack Bourne bustled into the station. An idea struck Rogers, and he said to all his chums, "Here's Bourne, you fellows; let him know we see him."

The fags were delighted, and when Bourne entered the carriage next Acton's there was a long-drawn-out hoot for his especial benefit.

"Another," said Rogers, whereat more soulful groans.

"The last," said Rogers, and Bourne took his seat to a chorus of hisses and tortured howls. He smiled a little and opened his paper, while the people in the carriage looked curiously at him.

The guard's whistle went and Acton sprang in. "Good-bye."

As the train moved, Grim said, "Three cheers for Acton!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

"A groan for Bourne!" Acton smiled good naturedly to his henchmen. As he glided past he said to himself softly, "And yet I have not quite hoed all my row out either, Bourne. Wait, my friend, wait!"



AS THE TRAIN MOVED, GRIM SAID, "THREE CHEERS!"

CHAPTER X

THE YOUNG BROTHER

When St. Amory's reassembled after the holidays Acton found himself firmly established in the good graces of the fellows, and, indeed, he was not far from being the most popular fellow in the place, but poor Phil was looked coldly upon by those who had been his chiefest friends, and, by those who knew little of him, he passed for a jealous bounder. Acton played up to his cards in beautiful style, and acted the forgiving innocent splendidly; but Phil, who was only a very honest fellow, did not play anything to speak of. Those who gave him the cold shoulder once never had a second chance of showing it him, for Phil was no end proud; but he had still one or two friends, who condoned his passing of Acton for the "footer" cap on the ground of "insufficient information" thereon. Roberts and Baines and Vercoe were not a bad trio to have for friends either. Acton was now in the Sixth, and a monitor.

His main idea was to keep Bourne in the bad books of the school until such time as he could direct their ill-favour into channels favourable to himself and unfavourable for Phil. A lucky chance seemed to open to him an easy method of striking at Bourne, and Acton almost hugged himself with joy at his windfall.

About a week after the holidays Acton had been skating on the Marsh, and as he was returning he came across Jack Bourne engaged in a desperate fight with a young yokel. There was a small crowd of loafers, who were delighted at this little turn up, and were loud in their advice to the fellow to give "the young swell a good hiding."

This little crowd, as I said, caught Acton's eye, and when he perceived that one of the fighters was a St. Amory fellow, he hurried up to see what was the little game.

Young Bourne was getting the worst of it. The yokel was a year or two older, was taller, and stones heavier. It was an unequal fight. Bourne was standing up to his man pluckily, and, thanks to the "agricultural" style of the clodhopper, was not taking nearly so much harm as he should have done. He was, however, pretty low down in the mouth, for there was not a friendly eye to encourage him, nor a friendly shout to back him up. On the contrary, the mob howled with delight as their man got "home," and encouraged him: "Gow it, Dick! Knock the stuffin' out of 'im!"

Acton had not been noticed, but he thrust himself into the mob, and said, "Stand back, you little beggars, or I'll massacre the lot of you. Give the boy room, you filthy pigs!" The "pigs" scuttled back, and for the first time Bourne really had fair play.

Acton took out his watch and assumed the direction of the fight.

"Time!" he shouted out. "You fellow, that's your corner, and if you stir out of it before I give the word I'll thrash you within an inch of your life. This will be ours, Bourne." He strode in between the two, and pushed the yokel among his friends, whilst he dragged Bourne a little apart.

"Thanks awfully, Acton. That beast knocked me off the path into the snow-heap when he saw I was one of the school. I struck him, but he's a big handful."

"Don't talk, Bourne," said Acton, grimly. "It's only wasting breath. Keep cool, man, and you will pull it off yet."

Thanks to Acton's encouragement, young Bourne worked along ever so much better, so that when time was called he had taken no damage practically, but had scored a little on his own account.

"Sit down on my coat. You're doing famously. Whatever you do, don't let him swing you one in the face. You'll be snuffed out if you do. Keep him out at any cost, and try an upper cut after he swings. Waste no time after he's missed."

But although young Bourne scored no end in the next few rounds by following Acton's advice, his good efforts seemed wasted. The lout's face was as hard as a butcher's block. Acton saw that Bourne was visibly tiring, and that it was an almost foregone conclusion that in the end he would be beaten. He could hardly stall off the fellow's attack.

After the seventh round Acton saw that he must put all to the touch, or Bourne would lose. "Listen carefully, young 'un. You're jolly game, and that's a fact, but there's no good hammering on the fool's face—he can't feel. You must try another trick. It's the last in your box, too, Bourne, so make no mistake. St. Amory's for ever! When he swings, duck. Don't try to ward him off—he'll beat you down. Then, for all you're worth, drive home with your left on the jaw. On the jaw for all you're worth. You've seen the sergeant do it dozens of times in the gym. Keep cool, and look when you hit—on the very peak. Understand?"

"Rather!" said Jack, coolly but wearily.

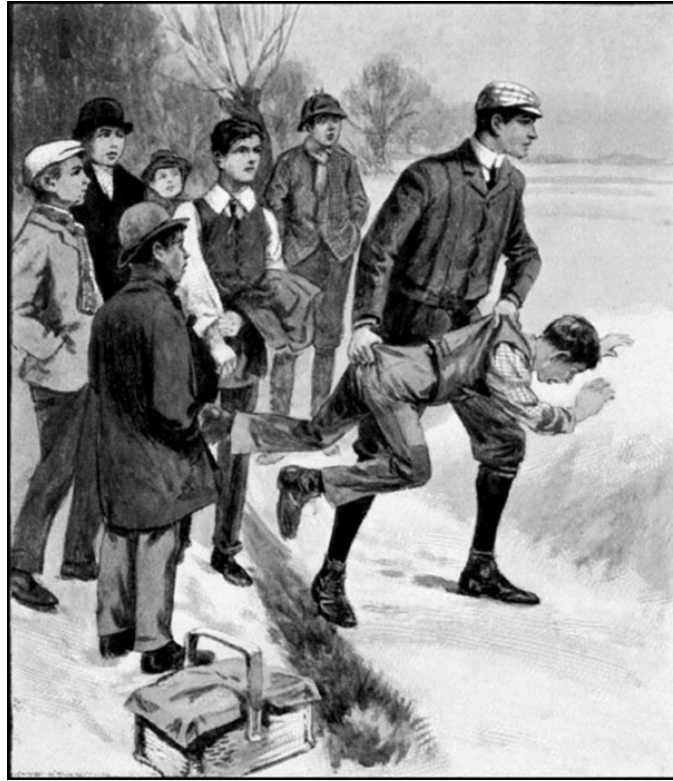
"Time!"

The yokel came on in all the pride of his beefy strength, for he knew that he was going to finish the "swell" this round. He swung. Bourne ducked, and then, quick as lightning, the lad closed in, and, with the last ounce he had in him, drove his left on the jaw. He was true to a hair.

"*Habet!*" shouted Acton. "Don't give him time, Jack. Send him down if you can."

Bourne's "point" had the usual effect; the lout's head swam, he felt sick and sorry, and could not

even ward off Jack's blows. He backed, Jack scoring like mad all the time, and when Acton finally called "time!" he dropped on to the ground blubbing. The fellow's eye was visibly swelling, his lips were cut, and his nose bled villainously.



ACTON THREW HIM INTO THE SNOW-HEAP.

"The pig bleeds," said Acton, cheerfully. "You have him now, Bourne; he's too sick to have an ounce of fight left in him. Time!"

The next round wasn't a round really; it was a procession, with Bourne, as fresh as paint from his success, following up the other blubbing with rage, pain, and sickness. Before Acton called, the fellow dropped to the ground and howled dismally.

"Get your coat, Jack, and then come here. He's done. Stand back, you others."

Jack came back.

"Now, you pig, get up and apologize to this gentleman for having knocked him into the snow-heap. I suppose your pig's eyes couldn't see he was only half your size." Acton got hold of the fellow by the collar and jerked him to his feet. "Apologize."

The fellow would not understand; he snivelled obstinately, and struggled aimlessly in Acton's grasp.

"Apologize."

"I wown't."

"Good," said Acton, grimly. With his flat hand he gave the fellow a thundering cuff which sent him sprawling. Acton then caught him by the scruff of his neck and threw him headlong into the snow-heap.

"Come along, Bourne," he said, with a smile. "You have fought a good fight this day, and no mistake. That fellow will have a fit the next and every time he sees the smallest St. Amory's fag's cap."

"I say, Acton, you're an awful brick to back me up like that."

"Don't mention it, Bourne. Come and have some tea with me, and I'll pour oil into your wounds, or at any rate, I'll paint 'em."

So young Bourne had tea with Acton, and his host went out afterwards to Dann's the chemist's and brought back a camel's-hair brush and some lotion. Thanks to this, Jack's scars appeared as very honourable wounds indeed.

From that day Jack thought Acton the finest fellow in St. Amory's.

"He did not spread-eagle that fool," he said to himself, "but let me have the glory of pounding the

ugly brute into jelly, and made me go in and win when I was ready to give in to the cad. Why did not Phil give him his cap? There's something rotten somewhere."

As for Acton, as I said before, he regarded this little incident as a treasure trove upon which he could draw almost unlimitedly in his campaign against Bourne. "I'll strike at Bourne, senr., through his young brother. I'll train him up in the way he should go, and when our unspeakable prig of a Philip sees what a beautiful article young Jack finally emerges, he'll wish he'd left me alone. Jack, my boy, I'm sorry, but I'm going to make you a bad boy, just to give your elder brother something to think about. You're going to become a terrible monster of iniquity, just to shock your reverend brother."

Acton took not the smallest interest in the usual Easter Term games. Footer was only played occasionally, but there was one blessing, the fellows need not play the usual Thursday Old Game. As for cross-country running, paper chases, *et hoc genus omne*, Acton refused to have anything to do with them. "That sort," he said to Dick Worcester, "isn't in the same street with footer."

"Why not try and lift the Public School Heavy at Aldershot?" suggested Worcester.

"There's Hodgson in for it, Dick."

"A good man; but if you would only apply yourself seriously to the business I'd back you. You're a good weight, and got a longer reach than Hodgson."

"There's Bourne, too."

"Personally, I believe Phil is only pacing Hodgson to take him along quicker."

"It's an awful fag, and I believe Eton have got the Heavy safe and sure this year. A cousin of mine there says that their pet, Jarvis, would walk right through the best man we've ever turned out."

"Oh, that's their usual brag!"

"Personally, I don't think so. They have got a young Bermondsey professor—who is up to all the latest dodges—to coach. Our sergeant is a bit old-fashioned—good, but old-fashioned. Does not do enough with his right."

"I'm quite an amateur," said Dick. "Don't understand the finer shades of the arts. Should have thought the sergeant good enough."

"*Dubito!* Anyhow, Dick, I'll think it over; and if I think I can make a decent show I'll have a shot. When does it come off?" "At Aldershot? Oh!—last week in March."

"That gives me nearly two months. One can turn round in two months; and if I'm satisfied as to my coaching I'll certainly try at Aldershot. But what has a fellow to do on the half-holidays now? No footer, and one might do enough practice after tea for the Heavy. I wish Kipling would write a book every week. He is the only fellow in England who can write."

So Acton, on the half-holidays, prepared to read his novels by his fireside. Not that he was particularly fond of toasting himself, but because, for him, it was all he could do.

But Corker came to his rescue. The old man, after having had his back to the wall for an age, consented to monitors being allowed to cycle by themselves, and even to be *chaperon* to any fags who cared to run with them, and—important *proviso*—whom the monitors did not object to. Otherwise the old rule of no cycling *sans* house-master was in force.

Acton thereupon invested in a swell machine, and he and young Bourne, or Grim, or Wilson on the hired article, would cover no end of country between dinner and roll call.

By-and-by Phil noticed that his brother was getting pretty thick with Acton.

"Rather thick with Acton, Jack? I don't think he'll do you any good."

"He has, anyhow, Phil."

"How?"

Jack explained.

"I'm glad you licked the animal, young 'un; but, all the same, I wish some other fellow had seen you through."

"I don't!" said Jack, hotly.

"I wonder," said Phil, dryly, "what is the great attraction which a Sixth Form fellow sees in a fag? Above all, a fag of the name of Bourne?"

"Fact is, I don't see it myself," said Jack, shortly. "Better ask him."

"No, I don't think I shall. All the same, I would not dog Acton's footsteps quite so much."

"He's a monitor."

"Who'll make you useful. Take my word for it."

"We'll see."

"Oh! Certainly we shall."

Jack was thoroughly unhinged by his brother's dry bantering tone, and said hotly—

"I cannot understand, Phil, why he didn't get his cap. He deserved it."

"There's no need for you to understand it, young 'un."

"My opinion is——"

"Not worth the breath you're going to waste."

"It's considered a shame pretty generally."

"I've heard so; but, still, that does not alter matters. However, I did not want to talk politics with you, Jack. Don't put your innocent little toes into any scrape—that is all I wanted to tell you. Here is half a crown for you to buy butterscotch, and while you're sucking it think over what I've said. What! Little boys given up toffee? Then I'd better say good night, Jack." Jack went out pretty sore.

About a week or so after this, Acton and young Bourne sped down to the old Lodestone Farm, and as they pedalled in at the gate young Hill, the farmer's son, said to Acton—

"The man's been here since twelve, sir."

"That's all right," said Acton. "Has he got the stable ready?"

"He's been putting it to rights the last hour."

"I say, Bourne," said Acton, turning to Jack, "ever heard of the Alabama Coon?"

"The fellow who won that fight in Holland? The prize-fighter?"

"The very same."

"Rather!"

"Well, I've engaged him to give me a few lessons here. I'm going to try for the Heavy at Aldershot. Like to see the fun?"

"Rather!"

"Then come along."

Together they went into the stable, and therein found "The Coon," a coal-black negro, busily shovelling sand upon the floor, smoking an enormous cigar the while.

"Making ready the cockpit," said Acton to Jack, who was staring open-eyed at the worker. "Lusty looking animal, eh?"

"My aunt!" said Jack.

"Hallo, Coon, you're about ready!"

"Yaas, sir," said the negro. "I'm almost through."

"Brought the mittens with you, too?"

"Yaas, sir, I have the feather beds."

"Then when you've peeled we'll start."

The Coon put down his spade and slipped behind a stall.

"You see, young 'un, the sergeant at the gym is a good old hand, but he is an old hand, so to speak—hasn't got the polish. Seeing that at Aldershot they tie us down to a very few rounds, if St. Amory's have to make any show at all they must get all the points they can first round or so. That's why I've got the Coon down here. He is the most scientific boxer we have."

"The figure will be pretty stiff, Acton, eh?"

"No matter about that if I can beat Jarvis. By the way, Bourne, you need not say anything about this to any one. I have particular reasons for keeping this quiet."

"All serene. I'm mum, of course."

"Thanks. You watch the Coon, and you'll pick up no end of wrinkles."

The Coon came out from behind the stall dressed in a vest, trousers, and thin boots; his black arms were bare, and he had exchanged his cigar for a straw, which he chewed vigorously. Acton changed his shoes and took off his coat, and the lesson began.

Acton's opinion of the Coon's knowledge was, in Jack's mind, absolutely corroborated by the display. His marvellous parrying of Acton's attentions; his short step inwards, which invariably followed a mis-hit by Acton; his baits to lure his opponent to deliver himself a gift into his hands; his incredible ducking and lightning returns, held Bourne fascinated. Everything was done so easily, so lithely, so lightly, and so surely, that Jack gasped in admiration. Acton in the hands of

the nigger was a lamb indeed.

"This is an eye-opener," said Jack. "I'll try that left feint on Rogers, the cocky ass!"

The negro stopped now and then to show Acton where and how to avail himself of opportunities; and Acton, who was in grim earnest, applied himself whole-heartedly to the business in hand, and, in consequence, as Jack afterwards told us, "you could almost hear old Acton travelling on the right road."

After about half an hour of instruction, Acton said—

"That is enough of jawing for the afternoon, Coon. Let us have three rounds to finish up with. Take the time, young 'un."

Jack, with immense pride, took out his watch and prepared to act as timekeeper.

"Better take it easily first two, sir, and put in all you know for the last. A little hurricane in the third round is my advice."

Jack had an ecstatic ten minutes, the final round putting him in the seventh heaven of enjoyment.

"All I could make out was Acton's white arms mixed with Alabama's black ones, and the sand flying in all directions. Stunning isn't the word for it!"

As Acton and young Bourne pedalled leisurely home for roll call, Jack said—

"I think Jarvis' chance of collaring the Heavy for his place is a trifle 'rocky.'"

"I hope so."

"Crumbs! How Alabama does get home!"

CHAPTER XI

TODD PAYS THE BILL

Another youth had come back to St. Amory's with resolutions as fixed and steady, though more legitimate than Acton's. Augustus Vernon Robert Todd returned to school with pockets more scantily lined than ever from the parental source, with his mind constantly fixed on the conversation which he had had with his house-master on that awful concluding day last term, and his chin still thrust out valiantly. Gus's square chin meant an undeviating attention to serious study, and Gus, armed *cap-à-pie*, against all his old friends.

For Todd had taken his precautions. His watch—a gold one, "jewelled in numberless holes," as its owner pathetically remarked—had been left with the family jeweller for three bright golden sovereigns, an eight-and-six brass turnip, which went jolly well, although its tick was a trifle vigorous under Gus's pillow, and an agreement. This document, drawn up by himself, Gus regarded as a very masterpiece of business-like acumen. Gus could have his gold watch back again within the year by paying three sovereigns, and buying the brass turnip for half a sovereign, the profit accruing on this latter transaction being, as Gus explained proudly, the jeweller's percentage on the loan. The family jeweller had informed Gus casually that he couldn't keep a wife and growing family on such percentages, but to oblige, etc.

Todd received Mr. James Cotton blandly and politely, and Jim, in his heavy way, mistook this airiness for non-paying symptoms on Gus's part.

"Had a good time, old cock, during the holidays?"

"Beastly," said Gus.

"Governor rusty?"

"No end. Been making the will again, and leaving me out."

"Perry *fiasco*, eh?"

"Yes, and other things."

"Well, I hope you can pay up all you owe me, old chap."

"Oh yes!" said Gus. "I said I would keep my word, although you were so good as to have your

doubts."

"All right, glad you can manage it."

"Here you are," said Gus, thrusting his hand into his pocket and bringing up his coins. "Three three for that rotten bet, and the other fifteen bob I owed you. It's all there."

Cotton opened his eyes.

"You said the governor was rusty, Gus?"

"So he was, beastly; but I can pay you all the same."

"Well," said Cotton, after a little awkward pause, "I don't want to clean you out quite, so pay half now and the rest next term. Would that suit you better, Gus?"

"Thanks, I don't mind," said Gus, airily. "Here's half, then."

Cotton left his friend's room considerably puzzled, but when he came next night with his books for his old jackal's attentions as before, he was more than puzzled, for Gus said—

"Can give you half an hour, Jim."

"We won't be able to screw up enough for Merishall in that time, old man."

"Then you'll have to do the rest yourself, Jim. I'm not going to piffle about any more."

"Oh, don't be an ass, Gus! I've heard that footle before," said Cotton, with his heavy selfishness.

"Not quite, for this time I mean what I say."

"Oh no, you don't!"

"Oh yes, I do!"

"You wouldn't leave a fellow in the lurch like this, after all I—"

"I was left in the lurch last term, Jim, dear, and I'd rather you had a taste of it this go. Do you remember when old Corker was savaging me before all the school!"

The ghost of a smile flitted over Cotton's lips as he said—

"Rather!"

"The entire school, from the meanest fag up to Carr, was laughing at me, and, by Jove! Jim, your laugh was the loudest and longest."

"It was your tips I was thinking of, and Corker's frothing through your list of names," said Cotton, apologetically.

"All right," said Todd, acidly. "If you had left me alone I wouldn't have wanted those tips, and as for my names, I did not christen myself. If you want half an hour to shake out your work roughly I'll do it, but I can't do more, Jim, honour bright."

"I don't want *that!*" said Cotton, angrily, gathering up his books."

"Am deucedly glad you don't. And here, Jim, is the other half of the money. Since I'm not obliging you in any way, why should you me?"

"You're logical, Todd, at any rate," said Jim, with half a sneer.

"Didn't know you could spot logic when you heard it, Cotton," said Gus, with an equal amount of acid, and yet good-naturedly too.

"I suppose I clean you out?"

"You do. I've got a shilling to look at when you've taken up that heap."

"Is that your last word?"

"It is, but there's no need to quarrel—we're as we were before I began to take your hire, Jim."

"Not quite," said Cotton, who was hit by Gus's decision. "I'll leave you to your odd shilling and your forsaken tips."

He stumped off to his own room, and called Todd pet names till bedtime. What made Cotton so angry was that, deep down in his own mind, he knew that Gus was about to do a sensible and a manly thing, and just because he himself was going to suffer by it he had not moral courage enough to speak out openly his better mind.

But Gus, smiling at Cotton's bad temper, took out his books, drew up a scheme for study, bolted his door, and commenced to work. He slacked off when the bell went half an hour before lights out, and spent the time left him in boring a hole in his solitary shilling. He then slipped it on his watch-guard, prepared boldly to face a term of ten weeks without a stiver.

CHAPTER XII

RAFFLES OF ROTHERHITHE

Twice a week, on half-holidays, Acton and Bourne ran over to the farm, to find the Coon waiting for them in the stable, smoking an enormous cigar as usual, and reading sporting papers on the corn-chest. Young Hill, the farmer's son, generally put in an appearance when the boxing was about over, and to Jack's utter disgust, plainly showed that he would rather that Jack was anywhere else than with Acton when the gloves had been laid aside. He seemed to have some business with Acton concerning which he evidently did not want Jack to hear a single syllable.

Jack did not quite see at first that he was one too many after the boxing was over, and that Hill, at any rate, did not mean there should be a fourth to the deliberations of himself, Acton, and the Coon. Jack, however, soon tumbled that he was *de trop*, and the minute young Hill came in Jack would stalk solemnly and formally out of the stable and kick up his heels in the farmyard until such time as Acton should be ready for the run to school.

Jack certainly did not like this cavalier treatment, but found it rather a bore pottering about the yard, "looking at the beastly ducks;" but Acton was so profusely apologetic when he did come out that Jack generally smoothed his ruffled plumes and pedalled home at peace with himself and all the world.

"The fact is, Jack," said Acton, "young Hill has arranged for me to have the stable for our practice, for old Hill himself was rather against it, and as he has a prejudice against St. Amory fellows generally, but especially when they're of the Junior School—some of your tribe scuttled his punt for him on the moat, didn't you?—I thought you would not mind humouring the man's amiabilities. The Coon and he talk rot—sporting rot—and it would only bore you to listen to it."

Jack said, "It does not matter in the least. I'd as soon look at the ducks as listen to Hill. It's a bit *infra dig.*, though, that *he* should object."

As a matter of fact, young Hill received letters for Acton which dealt with many things, the burden of most of them being "betting," and the other sweet things of the sporting shop. Acton was, as you will have seen, not the very green innocent who would come to much harm in this lovely form of diversion.



A LITTLE YELLOW, EAR-TORN DOG BUSTLED OUT OF SOME SHED.

About a fortnight after the visits to the Lodestone had commenced, the Coon brought down with him a long-legged, thin-faced, horsey-looking individual, who introduced himself to Bourne as Raffles of Rotherhithe, and who laid himself out to be excessively friendly to Jack. He took, evidently, quite a professional interest in the sparring, and told Acton that "his left was quite a colourable imitation of the Coon's."

"Not colourable, anyhow," said Acton, with a wink at Jack.

"What do you think, sir, of Alabama's 'blind hook'?"

Jack, who had not the remotest idea what a "blind hook" was, said it "was simply stunning."

"Exactly my idea, sir. I see you know above a bit about the noble art."

Raffles, as he would have said in his own special slang, worked the "friendly lay" so well upon Jack, that that young gentleman was captured to the last gun; you can do an awful lot of execution by deferring to the opinion of a young man of sixteen, or thereabouts, as to the merit of relying exclusively on the left.

When the sparring was over, Raffles shuffled out with Jack into the yard and whistled. A little yellow, ear-torn dog hustled out of some shed and trotted demurely by Mr. Raffles' right boot.

"See that dog, Mr. Bourne?"

"By the way, Raffles, how did you know my name was Bourne?" asked Jack.

"Mr. Acting mentioned that it was so. No offence, I hope, sir?"

"Oh no!" said Jack.

"Mr. Acting mentioned to me as how Warmint might amuse you."

"Warmint! What the deuce is that?"

"Why, the dawg."

"Well, it's a pretty ugly brute anyhow, Raffles."

"It is so; it's the colour—yellow is a mean colour. But he's a terror to go."

"Where?" said Jack, uncivilly; for the man's manner, a mixture of familiarity and servility, had begun to pall on Jack's taste.

"Why, there ain't a better, quicker, neater dawg in all London after the rats than Warmint. He holds the record south the Thames."

"Is there a record then for rat killing? How is it done?"

"Turn a sack o' long tails on to the floor and let the dawg among them. He works against time, of course."

"Have the rats any chance of getting away?"

"No fear."

"Ugh!" said Jack, looking at the mongrel with intense disgust.

"Is time for twenty—but I say, Mr. Bourne, if you like I'll bring a bag o' rats down, and you can see for yourself. While the other gentleman, Mr. Acting, is with the Coon, we can bring it off in the barn."

"Man alive, no!" said Jack, with another spasm of disgust; "but if you've any other plans, Raffles, of killing an hour or so whilst Hill makes speeches, trot 'em out. I'm sick of pottering round his yard like an idiot. Are you coming with the Coon again?"

"Pretty well every time. What do you say to a little game of billiards?"

"Where?" said Jack.

"Nice little 'ouse near 'ere, I know."

"No fear! That's clean against the rules. Besides, who wants to knock balls about with a sticky cue on a torn billiard cloth, where the whole place reeks of beer and stale tobacco? No, thanks!"

"Young gents used not to set so much store by rules when I was a lad."

"We've changed since then, Raffles," said Jack, drily.

"A little shooting?"

"What?"

"Sparrers?" suggested Raffles, off-hand.

"Rot!"

"Bunnies?"

"That's better, Raffles. If you can get me half an hour with Hill's rabbits, I'd risk that. Of course, there'd be a row if it was known. Acton won't inquire, I fancy, who's shooting?"

"Mr. Acton won't, Mr. Bourne; he's a gentleman."

"He's a monitor, though, Raffles, which is a different sort of animal."

Raffles of Rotherhithe did not appear to think that Acton's being a monitor was a clinching argument barring young Bourne's sport. Perhaps he had private reasons for his opinions. Anyhow, he glibly promised to have a breech-loader and a ferret for young Bourne on the morrow.

"And old Hill? They're his rabbits, you know."

"That will be all right. Take Dan Raffles' word for it."

"Now look here, Raffles; I'll give you sixpence for every rabbit I shoot, and I'll pay you for the cartridges. You'll keep all the rabbits, but you will lend me the gun."

"Very good, sir," said Raffles, smartly.

"And, Raffles," said Jack, eyeing over that individual with a curious mixture of amusement and dislike, "you needn't be too beastly friendly and chummy. I'm going to pay you for what you do, and don't fancy I'm going an inch further than I feel inclined. I'm paying the piper, and I'm going to choose all the tunes."

"Orl right," said Raffles, considerably taken aback by the ultimatum. "I'll not be friendlier than I can 'elp."

"Don't," said Jack.

CHAPTER XIII

"EASY IS THE DOWNWARD ROAD"

Aided by Raffles of Rotherhithe, young Bourne went royally through half the rules of the school. He called the tune to that extent. In the first place, one may believe that when he called in the aid of that horsey gentleman he had no further idea in his head than that of passing away those dull half-hours which Hill inflicted upon him.

But, like many a wiser man, young Bourne found it was easier to conjure up a spirit than to lay one, and, having once accepted the aid of Raffles, he found it beyond his power to dispense with it, despite his brave word. So, unheeding of his brother's advice, he not merely put his innocent feet into the stream of forbidden pleasures, but waded in whole-heartedly up to the chin.

Raffles, as promised, turned up on the next occasion provided with a ferret and a gun, and all difficulties were smoothed over with the farmer. Thus Jack Bourne took his post as the noble British sportsman just behind the Lodestone Moat, whilst Raffles, with his ferret, worked the bank, which was honey-combed with rabbit-holes. As the rabbits scurried out before the ferret, Jack blazed away noisily, and occasionally he had the pleasure of seeing a rabbit turning a somersault as it made its last bound. Certainly, Jack was not a dead shot, but when he contemplated the slain lying stark on the flanks of the bank, he felt the throaty joy of the slaughtering British schoolboy. He counted out to his worthy henchman four sixpences for the four slain with all the pride of the elephant-hunter paying his beaters yards of brass wire and calico. Raffles was properly grateful, of course.

Then, as their acquaintance progressed, there were little competitions between Jack and Raffles at artificial pigeon-shooting, Raffles having fixed up the apparatus, and Jack, from the twenty-five yards' mark, occasionally winged his clay pigeon. It was very good sport in Jack's opinion. Further, that little "ouse" which Raffles knew of also soon made the acquaintance of Jack, and he and Raffles on rainy afternoons snatched the fearful joys of hasty "hundreds up" or "fifties up," just as time allowed, Jack did not find the cue quite so sticky nor the charms of stale tobacco quite so unlovely as he had expected. The landlord, who marked for the two worthies, told our young gentleman that he had "a pretty 'and for the long jenny," and Jack felt he could not do less than order a little of his favourite beverage in return for his good opinion. And thus as ever. Under the expert tuition of Raffles, Jack became a little more of a "man" every day, and a little less of a decent fellow. He smoked, he could call for a "small port" in quite an off-hand fashion, he had played "shell out" with loafers at the little "ouse," and he began to know a little more of

betting, "gee-gees," and other kindred matters, than an average young fellow should know.

"*Facilis descensus Averni*"—you know the old tag.

By insensible gradations Jack Bourne found himself with a ruin of broken rules behind him, and still tied to the chariot-wheels of Raffles, who dragged him wherever he would. Jack's pockets, too, began to feel the drain, but luckily—or unluckily, if you look at it properly—he was rather flush this term, and as he had more than the usual allowance, he was not so short as he might have been.

One thing bothered Jack, though he did not exactly put the idea that worried him into words. There was not much fun *really* in this shooting, billiards, etc., since Jack broke all the rules alone. Now, if Poulett, or Wilson, or Rogers, or Grim had been with him, that would have been jolly. Besides that, since he could give his old chums so precious little of his time, and had perforce to head them off when they offered to bear him company on half-holidays, they called him many choice names.

"I hear they sample all the public-houses between here and Westcote," said Rogers. "Look what a dissipated eye Mr. Bourne's got."

"Yours will soon be groggy, Rogers, my pet, though you are cock of your beastly water-lilies." After Sharpe's memorable poem, Biffen's house were always "water-lilies" to the rest of St. Amory's.

"Ah?" said Poulett, "Jack carries Acton's notes to some yellow-haired dolly down at Westcote. She gives him milk whilst he's waiting for the answer."

"Go and poach eggs, Poulett."

"Don't do anything too mean, dear Jack, so that you'll make us blush for you."

"Keep Acton out of mischief, Jack, remember he's only a poor forsaken monitor. Show him the ropes."

"Good-bye, you chaps," said Jack, hopping on his bike, "here's Acton coming." The two would then pedal the well-known road to the Lodestone, and the elevating company of the Coon and Raffles.

"Don't let Raffles bore you, young 'un," said Acton to Bourne one day as the owner of Warmint hove in sight. "Make him useful, but keep out of mischief."

Jack, had he thought about the matter, might have reasonably asked Acton how he could make Raffles useful and yet keep out of mischief, but the Coon appearing at the stable-door in all the glory of a fur-lined coat, with a foot of fur round the collar and half a foot round the sleeves, and a bigger cigar than ever in his mouth, drove Jack's thoughts in another direction.

Acton had really made marvellous progress under the Coon's coaching, and as Jack watched the usual concluding three rounds, he was puzzled in his own mind as to who could hold a candle up to his friend. This particular afternoon was to be the final appearance of the Coon, who was going to figure shortly as principal in some contest at Covent Garden, and Jack determined to miss no opportunity of catching the last wrinkles of the great professor's skill. Therefore, instead of sallying out as usual halfway through the performance in the stable, he sat on the corn-chest until Hill came in.

"Good-bye, Coon! Hope you come off all right in your turn-up."

"Good-bye, sir! Hope I'll train you when you start for the Heavy."

"I'll give you the chance if I do. Come along, Raffles."

When they were outside, Jack said, "By the way, Raffles, this will be your last appearance down here too, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Raffles, "unless you make it worth my while to come down entirely on your account."

"H'm, no," said Jack. "I'm deucedly short now, and when I've paid for the last fifty cartridges, and the last rabbits, I'll be still shorter."

"Let it stand over, sir."

"No," said Jack. "I've had the fun, and I'll pay, of course. Let's have a last dozen pigeons at the twenty-five yards' rise."

Secretly, Jack was rather glad that Raffles' *rôle* of entertainer was finished; for his stolen pleasures had lost a considerable part of their original sweetness, and their cost *was* heavy. It would be quite a change, too, to get back to Grim and the others, and be the ordinary common sort of fellow again.

Raffles went and wound up the throwing apparatus, and set the clay pigeon on the rest. Jack took his breech-loader, raised it to the shoulder, and said, "Ready!" Raffles pulled the string, the dummy bird rocketed up, and Jack pressed the trigger.

For one second afterwards Jack did not rightly know what had happened. There was a blinding

flash before his eyes, a something tore off his cap, and something stung his cheeks like spirits of scalding water. His left hand felt numb and dead. This all happened in the fraction of a moment.

Jack looked at the gun in stupid wonder. The breech was clean blown out! With a groan of horror, he dropped the gun. He realized that he had escaped death by a miracle. He put up his right hand to his face, which felt on fire, and stared blankly at Raffles.

That worthy was scared out of his wits; but when he saw Jack was more or less alive, he managed to jerk out—

"That was a squeak, young shaver! Hurt any?"

"Don't know," said Jack, blankly.

Raffles anxiously examined him, and it was with no end of relief he said—

"Clean bill, sir—bar those flecks of powder on your cheek. Considering—well you're—we're—lucky."

"Rather," said Jack, dizzily. "That's my cap isn't it?"

Yards away was Jack's cap, and Raffles brought it. His face was white—white above a bit. There was a clean cut through the brim, and a neat, straightforward tear-out of an inch or so of the front just above the crest.

"Well," said Raffles, looking narrowly at that business-like damage. "All I can say is you're lucky."

"Lucky! Yes," said Jack. "I suppose I'd better go. Let's have the thing. An inch lower down, and I'd have had that piece of barrel in my head—or through it. It wants thinking over."

"I suppose, sir, you're going to——"

"Oh, the cash you mean! Eh?"

"Yes, that was my meaning."

"Your cash will be all right, man. Come down for it on Friday—can't you?"

"How if I can't, young shaver?" said Raffles of Rotherhithe.

"Then do without it! Anyhow, I'm going now—I'm too sick."

"All right," said Raffles, sulkily. "On Thursday."

Jack, without another word, stumbled across the fields into the farmyard, and luckily found Acton ready for home. He shakily dropped into his saddle; and, with a mind pretty busy, he tailed wearily after Acton to St. Amory's.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE STABLE

After tea that day Acton went down to the farm *solus*, not having, as you will presently see, any need of Jack's company, even if Bourne had felt any desire to accompany him, which he didn't.

The monitor tinkled his bell, and in answer to the ringing, Raffles lounged out of a barn, the inseparable Warmint trotting at his master's heels.

"Suppose we'd better go into the stable, Raffles."

The odour of the Coon's afternoon cigar still hung about the place, and the stable was half dark, but as Acton had an idea that his conversation with Raffles would not be a short one, and the night was rather cold, they went in.

"Fire away, Raffles. Start at the beginning."

"Very good, sir," said Raffles, seating himself on the corn-chest. "Agreeable to instructions received from Mr. Acting——"

"Acton," suggested that gentleman.

"Acting—I said so, didn't I? Very well! Agreeable to instructions received from you, sir, I prepared

—"

"Don't be so beastly legal, you ass!"

"Let a cove tell 'is tale 'is own way, sir. We'll get on better like that. As I was going to say, following your tip, I prepared to show that young shaver, Bourne, a few things which as you told me he ought not to know of, and to do a few things which you told me he ought not to do—in fact, to put him on the way of breakin' every blessed rule that that beak of your school 'as drawn up for the guidance of the youth and the beauties under 'is 'and. What's the name of the beak, sir?"

"Oh, Moore!" said Acton, impatiently.

"The young shaver spoke of 'im different."

"Corker, perhaps," said Acton.

"That's it," continued Raffles. "Well, Corker 'asn't got a thoroughbred greenhorn in Bourne, Mr. Acting."

"No. Young Bourne's head is on his shoulders, more or less. Get on."

"Well, we opened the ball with a little bunny-shootin', for he couldn't stand Warmint's workin' among the rats. He shoots moderate straight, so I doctored his cartridges, or he'd have cleared out the bank. Not more than two in the half-dozen, sir. And then he couldn't understand it. What might Corker say to the bunnies, sir?"

"Oh, a thrashing, perhaps, and a stringing up for the rest of the term."

"We went to the Blue Cow on wet days. Billiards, beer, and 'baccy, Mr. Acting, was the true bill there. What's the law on those fancy articles?"

"A thrashing for first course, and *et ceteras* which you wouldn't understand."

"Well, he's earned 'em. We couldn't do any betting on the horses, since the Lincolnshire Handicap is not in sight yet, but he fluttered a little on the Sporting Club matches; and he was lucky—more than ordinary."

"You didn't wing him there, then?"

"Nothing to speak of. He may have dropped half a sov. altogether, but I doubt it."

"Then, Raffles, you're a fool. Do you think I brought you down here to be moral instructor to young Bourne, you grey old badger? Couldn't you bag an innocent of sixteen or so? Besides, what the deuce do you mean by tipping me the wink as Bourne and I used to get on our 'bikes'? You always did it, and I thought you were winding up the youngster hand over hand."

"Them winks," said Raffles, diplomatically, "was meant to show that I was moving—moving slow, but sure. You've observed, Mr. Acting, yourself, as 'ow the young shaver had a head on 'is shoulders."

"Yes, but I didn't bargain for yours being off your shoulders."

"Well, what with bunnies, cartridges, and the Blue Cow, and the other extras, he is about cleaned out now."

"Cleaned out!" said Acton, with intense irritation. "That's not what I wanted. I told you distinctly that I must have him five pounds deep at the least. How can I engineer my schemes if my sharpers can't cut? You'll look blue, Raffles, when I settle your account, take my word for it."

"Not quite so quick off the mark, Mr. Acting. What do you value this piece of ironmongery at?"

Raffles fished up the gun which had burst in Jack's hands that afternoon from behind the corn-chest, and held it up to the light.

"A burst gun!" said Acton. "It's worth throwing away; no more."

"It was worth this morning, say fifteen bob, before Bourne blew its ribs out."

"Jove!" said Acton, "let me handle the thing." He looked at the torn breech, and whistled with involuntary horror. "Much of a squeak, Raffles?"

"Touch and go, sir. He'll never be nearer pegging out than he was this afternoon; for he scraped the gates of his family buryin'-place, in a manner of speakin.' It went clean through his hat—rim and crown."

"Did he know his luck?"

"Nobody better."

"He looked more than average queer as we trotted home. I thought he was digesting your little bill, Raffles."

"No; he only owes me a matter of shillin's. But I could say that I ticketed the gun at £5 or £6, when the old shooter wasn't worth—"

"Fifteen bob," said Acton, looking at the worn barrel.

"See where I have—where you have—the youngster tied neatly up? He owes me—or you—seven, eight, nine pounds, or any fancy figure I—or you— like to mention for that old piece of iron there."

"Raffles, we're in luck! Luck has served me better than all your downy work."

"It has," said that bright specimen of humanity, regretfully. "I can't pretend that I'd any hand in the blowing out of them blessed barrels."

"All right, Raffles; don't weep. You'd have done it, of course, if you'd thought about it," said Acton, with a curious sneer; "but this is my plan—as far as you're concerned. When young Bourne comes, you're to ask for £7 10s. And you're to be an adamantine Jew; you're to have the money instant, or there'll be a rumpus."

"I twig. Make it seven guineas, though," said Raffles, generously.

"Seven guineas! So be it. You can suggest that, unless you get the cash, you would see Moore."

"Corker, D.D.? I'm on."

"Or Bourne, senior."

"The shaver's brother. I'm tumbling to the dodge."

"Bourne will curl up at this."

"Naturally."

"But you're still the blood-thirsty Jew."

"Moses, and Aaron, and the rest."

"You'll suggest at last that I be tackled for a loan."

"And you'll lend it him!" said Raffles, with an unspeakable leer.

"The business wants careful handling, remember. Young Bourne will think twice about borrowing, and, perhaps, if he could keep me out of it, would stand your racket, or Corker's either. So drive him lightly."

"You'll see him on the borrowing tack to-morrow, Mr. Acting."

"And the rest is my business."

"Where do I come in?"

"You can cleave to the seven guineas—if you earn 'em."

"Seven pounds ten, Mr. Acting."

"Seven pound seven, Mr. Raffles. Your own proposal."

"Orl right," said Raffles, resignedly. "I think I know them ropes."

"Good!" said Acton. "Then you can scuttle now to Rotherhithe, or where the deuce else you like. I'm off."

Acton wheeled out his bicycle and melted into the gathering dark, and his jackal lurched off to the station and reached Rotherhithe to dream of his seven guineas which he was going to get. Raffles felt sure of those seven guineas.

CHAPTER XV

GRIM'S SUSPICIONS

As I said before, Jack Bourne, after the first bloom of his forbidden pleasures had worn off, rather repented of the Raffles' connection, and would gladly have exchanged it for the old, easy, open, and above-board society of his chums. Grim, Rogers, Wilson, Poulett, etc., were, on their side, rather sore at Jack's continual desertion of them and their causes. They had just seen him pedalling easily after Acton, throwing them a rather mirthless joke as he ran past, and they had, naturally, held a council to consider matters.

"Wherever can the beggar get to is what I want to know," said Wilson.

"Can any one tell me what he wants with Acton?" said Grim.

"I think that it's Acton that wants him," said Rogers. "Come to think of it, Grimmy, you're Acton's man. Why doesn't he lag you?"

"Grimmy's not to be trusted. He'd read the *billet-doux*"

"I don't believe that there's any notes, Wilson," said Grim, impressively, "in this business. It's something deeper than that."

"What's the mystery, Mr. Grimmy Sherlock Combs?"

"Poachin'," said Grim, solemnly.

"What!" exclaimed the other, with breathless interest.

"Dunno, quite," said Grim; "but that young ass dropped a cartridge from his pocket the other day."

"There's nothing to poach here, Grimmy."

"There's Pettigrew's pheasants," said Grim, mysteriously.

"But you don't shoot them in March."

"We don't, Poulett, but poachers do."

"Tisn't likely that Acton——"

"Well, don't know," said Rogers, reflectively. "He's lived so long in France, where they shoot robins and nightingales, that he'll not know."

"But Bourne would."

"That's why he looks so blue. He does know, and it preys on his mind."

W.E. Grim's pathetic picture of young Bourne turned out-of-season poacher against his will by an inexorable Acton didn't seem quite to fill the bill.

"Grimmy, you're an absolute idiot. That poachin' dodge won't do. Perhaps, after all, they only bike round generally."

"What about that cartridge?" said Grim.

The little knot of cronies discussed the matter for a good half-hour, Grim holding tenaciously to a poaching theory—pheasants or rabbits—the others scouting the idea as next door to the absurd.

"Look here," said Wilson, brilliantly, "we'll track the pair to their earth to-morrow. If they're after birds or bunnies I'll stand tea all round at Hooper's."

"All right," said Grim. "I'd like to know about that cartridge."

On the morrow the suspicious band quietly trotted out after dinner from St. Amory's, dressed ostensibly for a run down Westcote way. Once down the hill they lay well out in the fields, keeping a sharp watch through the hedges for their quarry. When they saw two well-known figures, feet on the rest, coasting merrily down and head for Westcote, they all drew a long breath and girded up their loins for the race.

"With luck and the short cuts," said Grim, stepping out, "we may just see 'em sneak into Pettigrew's woods."

"And we've got a mile in hand too," said Wilson.

The cronies ran tightly together, nursing their wind and keeping well screened from eyeshot from the road, not that either Acton, or Bourne dreamed that their afternoon's run was being dogged by anyone. From their numerous short cuts the scouts were necessarily out of view from the road, but they marked the two cyclists from point to point and themselves headed up hill and down dale straight for Westcote. They felt pretty well winded by now, as they stood panting in a breezy spinney, watching for the appearance of their quarry on the brown road beneath them.

"There they are," gasped Wilson, pretty blown.

"There's only one," said Rogers, "and it is that young owl Bourne, too. He's shed Acton."

"Perhaps he's punctured," suggested Grim; "anyhow, we hang on to Jack."

Rather puzzled at the non-appearance of Acton, they kept the first-comer well in view as he pedalled hard for Westcote.

"That's Jack right enough," said Rogers; "and we'll have to leg it or he'll slip us. Jove! he's captured a wheel with a vengeance. Hear it hum."

The quartette strung down the hill full pelt, but when they got to the bottom the cyclist was a good hundred yards ahead. His pursuers came to a dead stop.

"May as well go home now," said Grim, in great disgust. "We can't dog him now, and anyhow it isn't Pettigrew's pheasants that Jack's after: he's gone past the woods. What a bone-shaker he's captured. Hear the spokes rattlin'."

"Not so quick, Grimmy. He's wheeling into that little Westcote inn. We'll run him down now."

The rider had indeed dismounted nearly a quarter mile ahead, and instantly the Amorians were stringing down the road again. Before the door of the little inn they found a bicycle propped up drunkenly against the wall, and the Amorians, pumped though they were, had breath enough left to explode over Bourne's machine. It was a "solid" of pre-diamond-frame days, guiltless of enamel or plating, and handle-bars of width generous enough for a Dutch herring-boat's bow.

"There's no false pride about Jack," said Grim, gloating over the weird mount. "Whatever is he doing in here?"

"Liquid refreshment," said Rogers between a gulp and a gasp. "Oh, Jack, was it for this and this that you gave us the go-by?"

"This place doesn't seem Jack's form somehow," said Wilson, looking doubtfully up and down the little inn.

"Ring him out, Wilson," said Grim. "His little game's up now, and we can rag him for an age over this."

"Let's try his mount first, Grimmy." Rogers wheeled out the machine and, after hopping twenty yards, "found" the saddle. To mount it was one thing, to ride it was evidently a matter of liberal education beyond the attainments of a junior Amorian, for, as Rogers attempted a modest sweep round, the machine collapsed, and he was sprawling on his back, the bicycle rattling about his ears. Then—it seemed automatically to the gasping Amorians—a sturdy youth rushed out of the inn flourishing a half-emptied glass of beer in one hand, and he seized the struggling Rogers by the scruff of the neck with the other. Rogers was unceremoniously jerked to his feet before he quite realized what it was all about. One or two men lounged out of the inn, and surveyed the scene dispassionately, and the landlord pushed his way forward.

"Wot's the matter?"

"Matter!" gasped the youth, tightening his hold on Rogers' collar and waving his glass dramatically.

"This young shaver was going to nick my bike. I seen him."

"I wasn't, you fool——" began Rogers, who did not like the man's knuckles in his neck.

"Fool am I, you little ugly thief? Worn't you a-scorchin' down the road w'it? I see you."

The other Amorians curled up with laughter at the way things were mixing up, and at the last exquisite joke.

"Jove, Rogers, to think you meant to steal it!" bumbled Poulett.

"Leave loose of my collar, you idiot," said Rogers, squirming in the man's grasp; "I tell you it's all a mistake."

"That's all my h'eye. I see you sneak it, and it'll be a month for you. Sneaking bikes is awful! Mistake be blowed."

"Oh! explain, some of you," said Rogers, frantically, "before I—Grim, tell the lunatic."

The Amorians were beyond mere laughter now, but the landlord had wit enough to see that there was some mistake somewhere, and he finally persuaded the owner of the bicycle to moderate his attentions to the exasperated Rogers. Grim recovered sufficiently to lift some of the suspicions from that ill-used youth.

"We thought you were a friend of ours—back view only and at a distance, you know—but you're not very like him, really, in the face. His name's Bourne."

"Mine's 'Arris," said the bicycle owner, angrily.

"A very nice name, too;" said Grim, soothingly. "You'd better see what's the damage to the machine for we must be trotting back to St. Amory's."

Mr. Harris spun the pedals and tried the wheels.

"It's shook up considerable, that's wot it is."

"All right," said Grim, hastily. "Here's a shilling. Give it a drink of beer."

This was a wretched joke really, but it brightened the face of Mr. Harris considerably when he heard it, and the loafers departed from their dispassionate attitude, and became quite friendly. The landlord went in to draw beer.

A minute afterwards the quartette was heading back for St. Amory's as hard as it could go, and whenever a halt was called for breath, three of the cronies collapsed on the earth, and howled at Rogers, who could not see the joke.

Over a quiet little tea, after call-over, at Hooper's Rogers explained fully his views.

"No, I'm not going to do any more detective work. We missed Acton and Bourne beautifully; they don't go to Westcote, and Grimmy's idea about poachin' 's rotten. He may be Acton's messenger-boy or the rider of a decent pneumatic, but I'm going to let him go his own way."

When, afterwards, they rubbed embrocation into their wearied limbs, the rest agreed with Rogers.

"But, yet," said Grim, "I'd like to know about that cartridge too."

CHAPTER XVI

TODD "FINDS HIMSELF"

Todd had found out all the unpainted beauty of public-school life without pocket money, and discovered that existence was just possible. A shilling on your watchchain and a shilling's worth of stamps admit of no luxuries, and Todd, through his impecuniosity, even if he had wished, could not have done anything else but work. Taylor's house was supposed to provide a fairly liberal table, but Gus really did miss his after-dinner cup of coffee at Hooper's, and not many fellows would regard long letters to and from home as being the *summum bonum* of the week. Yet Todd had come to regard his mamma's letters—four-paged gossip about his sisters, his brothers, the horses, and the dogs—in the light of luxuries.

Consequently, with nothing to distract him, Gus really did work. His standing in the Fifth sensibly increased. Merishall did not make elaborate jokes on his Latin, and Corker not once let fall the warning eye-glass preparatory to savaging him for his Greek, formerly called so by a courtesy title. There was a world of difference between his old haphazard slip-slop and his present honest attempts in the ways of scholarship.

The half-holidays, though, dragged dreadfully, for Gus was one of those fellows who have no natural aptitude for games, and he had a theory that he did not care a straw about them either. Being in the Fifth he could, of course, suit himself what he did with his halfers. Sometimes, in very desperation, he would lounge down to the Acres, and wander forlornly from goal post to goal post, and sometimes he spent the afternoon amusing himself—with Lancaster's express approval—in the laboratory, and so effaced previous bad impressions from the science master's mind. Gus, however, was honest enough with himself to own that he would rather have had an aimless stroll with Cotton than any amount of footer-gazing or "bottle-washing." But Cotton had definitely thrown him over; they did not nod when they met, and Jim was very careful not to see Gus walking in solitary state in the roadway.

Todd was moodily looking out of his window one halfer, and discontentedly wondering how he could exist till he should switch on the electric for the evening grind, when a not unfamiliar knock sounded on the door. Gus faced round wonderingly, and opened the door. The house-master dropped into the chair which Todd hastily drew out for him.

"I thought I should catch you in, Todd. Nothing on, have you?"

"No, sir," said Todd.

"No particular engagement for this afternoon."

"No, sir," said Gus, with a half sigh merging into a half smile, "though I did think of going down to the Acres, and looking at the footer."

"I'm glad of that," said Taylor, as though he really were. "I promised to referee this afternoon—Hargon's *v.* Sharpe's—but I want to cry off now. Neuralgia, Todd, is simply torturing me this moment, and refereeing wouldn't improve it. Do you mind taking my place? Do please say 'No' if you'd rather not."

"Very sorry, sir," said Gus, referring to the neuralgia. "Referee!"

"Yes," said Taylor, with a ghost of a smile at Todd's astonishment.

"Certainly, I will, sir—I mean I'll take your place. But the fellows will gasp when I step into the arena."

"Thank you, Todd. Why will they gasp?"

"Footer isn't my line, sir."

"Hasn't been, Todd. Anyhow, they'll be delighted when you whistle them up."

"I hope they'll be delighted when I've finished, sir," said Gus, doubtfully.

"One side won't, of course," said Taylor, cheerfully. "That is natural, and the usual thing. Do you know, I never played football, but I like refereeing immensely. Positive it's the best thing after playing, and I know that a really first-class referee is a very rare fowl. Of course it's the off-side rule and, etc."

Taylor delivered himself of a little homily on the subject of refereeing. He was enthusiastic almost to the point of forgetting his neuralgia, and Todd got quite interested in the theme so earnestly handled. He had not thought there was much fun in it until the house-master unfolded its possibilities, but he took over the whistle fairly sanguine.

"I'll do my best, sir," said Gus, in conclusion; "and if they stone me off the Acres——"

"I'll bury my reputation as a prophet under the missiles."

In one thing Todd was certainly right. When he found Hargon's *v.* Sharpe's pitch and told the assembled twenty-two—rather diffidently, I must own—that he was the deputy referee, they did gasp.

"Show us your whistle, Gus," said Higgins, Hargon's captain, doubtfully.

Gus held it up, with a genial and childlike smile.

"Got the rules in your pocket, too, I suppose."

"I have," said Todd—"for reference. But I know *now*, Higgins, that goal-keepers cannot take more than two steps with the ball, and——"

Sharpe's lot guffawed at Todd's neat little thrust at Higgins's little failing as a goal-keeper.

"But don't you worry, Hig; I'll see you through all right. Three-quarter each way, I suppose?"

Todd gave his whole mind to the refereeing, and soon warmed to business. He found that there was heaps more fun in it than he had bargained for, and as he was a sharp, quick, and clever youth he came out of the ordeal with flying colours. He made mistakes, naturally, but momentous issues depended on none of them, and he felt he had not done so badly when Higgins, at half-time, spoke to him as one in authority to another. But Palmer, the captain of Sharpe's lot—the beaten side—put the coping stone to a pleasant afternoon by asking Gus to referee for them against Merishall's. Gus walked off the field a happy man.

From that afternoon Todd had no excuse for loafing away any halfer. His services as referee were in demand, not merely as a matter of utility, but of preference. Taylor, who had watched rather anxiously Todd's progress, smiled easily at the success of his understudy.

"I say," said Bourne to me, "what's come over Todd? Blessed if that usual ass didn't handle the Fifth *v.* Sixth to-day simply beautifully. When you're lynched, Gus will fill your shoes completely. Talks so-so, too. Who's improving him?"

I acted on Phil's advice, and Todd and I parcelled out the outstanding fixtures between us. Then Todd became one of the best-known fellows in the school, and strolled up the hill with Worcester, Acton, Vercoe, and other heroes as to the manner born. The old, lazy, shallow, shifty, shiftless Gus was drifting into the background every day.

Then Todd gave us a final shock. I was hurrying down the High when a constable asked me if I could tell him "where a young gentleman named Todd lived."

"I'm passing by his house," said I, more than a trifle puzzled as to what the police might want with Gus. "Hope it isn't house-breaking, constable?"

"No, sir," said he, laughing. "It is a matter of ice-breakin'!"

I expect I looked mystified.

"Mr. Todd, sir, fished out of the water just below the Low Locks a common ordinary drunk, Robins—a bargee. That was yesterday afternoon, and this morning the superintendent sends me to see how he is."

I looked more blankly ignorant than before.

"He's kept it dark, I see, sir. There isn't a bigger fool alive than Robins when he's drunk—which he mostly—what is—and he acted yesterday up to the usual form of drunks. He *would* go on the ice just below the locks, when it would hardly bear a sparrer, let alone a drunk Robin, and he naturally goes under before he'd gone a dozen yards. Mr. Todd went for him without, I fancy, considering the risks. He broke the ice up to that forsaken Robins, and waded in after him. When we got there he was up to his neck in water, and he'd got the fool by the collar; then we pulled 'em both out. Mind, up to his chin in that frozen water! We thought Robins was a goner from cold when we landed 'im, and asked Mr. Todd's name as bein' likely to be required at the inquest. But, bless you, sir, Robins pulled through all right; that sort generally does."

"Was there any one to help Todd, when he went for the fellow?"

"No, sir; he just waded in and took his chance. I wouldn't—at least not for an ord'nary drunk. Mr. Todd just ran home as he was: said the sprint would warm him to rights. How is he?"

"Got a vile cold; he was barking pretty well all chapel."

"And Robins," said the policeman, in disgust, "doesn't own up to a snuffle. This Mr. Todd's house, sir?"

"Yes. I'd just ask to see Mr. Taylor, the housemaster, first. I fancy he'll be pleased to see you."

The constable's plain, unvarnished tale gave the Rev. E. Taylor as pleasant a ten minutes as he had enjoyed for some time, and he passed on the worthy man to the butler with instructions as to "something hot." Then he rapped on Todd's door.

Decidedly the ship *Agustus Vernon Robert Todd* "had found herself."

CHAPTER XVII

RAFFLES' BILL

It was with hearty thankfulness at the idea of being finally rid of Raffles that Jack walked over to the "Lodestone" by himself on the Thursday, jingling his last few shillings in his pockets. Raffles was waiting for him in the stables, and he was very friendly and familiar, which always annoyed Jack immensely.

"Glad you're in time, sir, and to 'ear the dibs a-rattlin' in your pockets."

"Because they'll rattle in yours, soon, I suppose. I make out I owe you about ten shillings, Raffles."

"Ow do you make that out, Mr. Bourne?"

"Rabbits, cartridges, and dummy pigeons. I'm about right, I fancy?"

"Right as far as they go."

"As far as they go, of course—not farther. Then here you are."

"And the gun," said Raffles, calmly, looking into vacancy, and not seeing Jack's coins—"leastwise, wot was a gun."

"Am I to pay for that filthy article?" said Jack, angrily. "Why, it nearly blew my brains out!"

"As'e to pay for that breech-loader gun?" said Raffles, laughing softly as at some good joke. "Why, of course you have."

"My opinion is, Raffles, that that gun was rotten. It wasn't worth a sovereign. I don't believe it was ever fit to shoot with, now."

"Of course, *now*," said Raffles, with a sneer. "*Now*, when you've got to pay for it."

"I don't know so much about 'have got to pay for it' at all. That grin of yours doesn't improve your looks, Raffles," said Jack, who was rather nettled by Raffles' sneer.

"Well, my bantam cock," said Raffles, savagely, "I only 'opes as this 'ere bill won't spoil yours. And let me tell you, young shaver, I want the money."

Jack calmly took the piece of note-paper which Raffles hurriedly fished out of his pocket, and flourished dramatically before Bourne. There was a touching simplicity about Raffles' bill-making that would in ordinary times have made Jack split with laughter, but, naturally, at the present time he did not feel in a very jovial frame of mind. Hence he read through the farrago with only one very strong desire—to kick Raffles neck and crop out of the stable. This was the bill:—

Mr. burn owes me daniel
raffles this money.

To bunneys at sixpence
each

To 50 cartriges	6 6
To pidgins	1 6
1 gunn breech loder	<u>£7 0</u>
	<u>0</u>
total	£7 10
	0

"Now, Raffles," said Jack, in a white heat, "what do you mean by this rotten foolery?"

"There's no foolery about it," said Raffles, sulkily. "That's my bill."

"Why, you unspeakable rascal, did you fancy I'd pay it?"

"I did, and I do."

Something in the fellow's tone made Jack a trifle uneasy, and he considered within himself for a moment what he had better do. That the rascal had made up his mind to be nasty was evident, and when Jack thought that the gun, poor as it was, was destroyed, though through no fault of his own, he thought perhaps he might give his old jackal something as a solatium.

"All right, Raffles! I'll pay you for what I owe you now, and I'll give you a sovereign for the gun. I'll send you that in a day or two. I've no more money with me now."

"That ain't the bill. I want this 'ere bill paid."

"This 'ere bill' is sheer rot!" retorted Jack.

"Rot or not, it's what I want from you. You pay up that seven odd, or it will be the worse for you. What is seven odd to a young gent like you? Aren't you all millionaires at St. Amory's?"

"Not by a long chalk."

"Well, I don't want to be unpleasant, my buck, but if you won't pay over I'll show you up."

"Show me up, you beast—what do you mean?"

"I'll write to Corker and blow the gaff."

"If you did that," said Bourne, grimly, "I'd kill you first day I could do it."



"I'M GOING TO HAVE THE SEVEN TEN, OR SHOW YOU UP."

"Or I'd write to your brother."

"And he'd do it now, you skunk!"

"No names, young gent. That won't pay my bill. You don't seem to imagine I mean what I say."

"No, I don't, for you wouldn't be any *nearer* getting the money."

"But then you say you aren't going to pay anyhow, so I may as well touch you up a bit. You've

most every time told me not to be so beastly friendly, and I ain't going to be. I'm going to have the seven ten or show you up. That's straight."

"Show me up," repeated Jack, blankly. "You miserable blackmailer!" Bourne felt then the beautiful feelings of being in the grasp of a low-bred cad who could play with him as a cat with a mouse. He sat staring in front of him livid with rage, and Raffles, who was watching him covertly, and with no small anxiety, could see he was digesting the whole situation. Jack would indeed then and there have let Raffles do his worst, and would have stood the racket from Corker—and his brother—rather than be blackmailed by the villain by his side, but he said hopelessly to himself, "How can I do it without bringing Acton into it? When this comes out all his training with the Coon must come out too; perhaps he'll lose his monitorship for not keeping his hand on me, and Phil's done him a bad enough turn already. I can't round on him. Heavens! I can't do that."

This reads rather pitiful, doesn't it, under the circumstances?

Jack at the end of his resources tried a desperate bluff.

"I'll put Acton on your track, my beauty, and perhaps he'll make you see—or feel—reason."

"That game's no good, young shaver. I don't want to see Mr. Acting no more than you want to tell him of your little blow-outs. Look here, are you going to pay? Yes or no?"

"I haven't got the money," said Jack, at his wits' end.

"Ho! that's very likely," said Raffles, with a sneer; "anyhow, you could mighty soon get it if you wanted to."

"How?"

"Why, borrow it, of course. Ask your chum, Mr. Acting. *He* 'as money. No end of brass, the Coon says."

"I can't do that," said Jack, in utter despair.

"Orl right," said Raffles, seeing his shot had told. "I see you ain't got the money on you now, and I don't want to be too 'ard on you. I'll give you a chance. I'll give you till Saturday to turn it over. My advice is to borrow from Mr. Acting. He'll lend it you, I should think; anyhow, I can't stand shilly-shallying here all night, no more than I can stand the loss of that grand gun, so I'm off. Have the money by Saturday at three, or I blow the gaff and you can be hung up or cut up for all I care. I'm not going to be more beastly friendly nor more chummy than that."

Raffles lurched off with a savage leer, and Jack staggered back to St. Amory's.

Jack's life was a burden to him for the next few hours, his head nearly split with the hatching of impossible plans with loopholes to escape the weasel on his track, but the end was as Acton had foreseen. Acton got a note through Grim.

"DEAR ACTON,

"Could you give me ten minutes in your study to-night?—Yours,

"J. BOURNE."

"DEAR BOURNE,

"Twenty, if you like.—Yours,

"J. ACTON."

Jack went, and when Acton put him into the easy-chair and noticed his white, fagged face, he felt genuinely sorry for him.

"You look seedy, young 'un."

"I hope I don't look as seedy as I feel, that's all."

"What's the matter?"

Jack boggled over what he'd come to say, but finally blurted out: "Acton, would you lend me seven pounds? I'm in a hole, the deuce of a hole; in fact, I'm pretty well hopelessly stumped. I'll tell you why if you ask me, but I hope you won't. I've been an ass, but I've collared some awful luck, and I'm not quite the black sheep I seem. I don't want to ask Phil—in fact, I couldn't, simply couldn't ask him for this. I'll pay you back beginning of next term if I can raise as much, and if not, as much as I can then, and the rest later."

"Oh, you're straight enough, young 'un, and I'll lend you the money," said Acton.

Jack blubbed in his thanks, for he was really run down.

"Keep up your pecker, Bourne. Borrowing isn't a crime, quite. When do you want the cash?"

"By to-morrow, please," said Jack.

"Call in for it, then, before afternoon school, and you can pay me back as you say. I suppose the sharks have got hold of you."

"Yes," said Jack, with perfect truth, though he only knew of one, and he went to bed that night blessing Acton. His gorge rose when he thought of his fleecing, and at this he almost blubbed

with rage as he blubbed with gratitude to Acton.

That interesting Shylock, Raffles, was at the farm confidently waiting young Bourne and his coins, and when he saw the young innocent bowling furiously down the road, he sighed with satisfaction. His dream was true.

"Write out the receipt."

"I've already done it, Mr. Bourne."

"Then here's your blackmail."

"Correct to the figure, sir, and I think it's a settle, nice and comfortable for all parties."

"If it's any comfort for you to know you're an utter blackguard you can hear it. A fellow like you isn't on the same level as your filthy mongrel."

"I never said we was," murmured Raffles, as he shuffled away.

CHAPTER XVIII

HODGSON'S QUIETUS

Acton now felt pretty safe as regards young Bourne. He held him fast in the double bonds of indebtedness and of gratitude, and with Jack the gratitude was by far the greater. Acton had saved him from disgrace, from a lengthened stringing up, from the scorn of his brother, from the jeers and laughter of the rest of the fellows. Like others, he could have stood Corker's rage better than the jokes of his cronies. He was received back into the fold of his own particular set with more *éclat* than he felt he deserved.

"Here's old Bourne gone and sacked Acton," said Grim.

"Sure Acton hasn't sacked him?" suggested Rogers.

"Best fellow breathing," said Bourne, fervently.

"Still, he's Biffen's."

"I don't care whether he's a water-lily or not—he can't help that, you know, poor fellow."

"Why should he? Aren't we cock house?"

"Where would you have been if Acton hadn't lifted you out of your muddy pond, and let you see a little sunlight?"

"You should be his fag," said Grim.

"I'd jolly well like to," said Jack. "I'd black his boots almost."

"He's a dozen pairs," said Grim.

"Write a poem on his virtues," suggested Rogers.

"Shut up this rot," said Wilson. "Let's try a run round the Bender—last fellow stands tea at Hoopers."

"Carried, *nem. con.*," said Grim, who was pretty speedy.

And the reunited half-dozen cronies ran the three miles out and ditto home, Wilson subsequently standing tea, for, as he pathetically explained, "I was overhauling Rogers hand over hand when I slipped my shoe, else he'd have had to fork out." Thus Jack became again for a while the common or garden variety of school-boy, and he enjoyed the change.

Phil Bourne came into my room the same evening that saw Jack Bourne released from the toils of Raffles.

"Busy, old man?"

"Not at all," said I, pushing away my books. "Jolly glad you've come in."

"There's a bit of news for you. I've just been in the gym. I fancy the old school will pull off the 'Heavy' at Aldershot."

"Has Hodgson turned out so jolly well, then?"

"Hodgson! Oh no! Hodgson isn't going to be the school's representative this year, I fancy."

"Why, have you been in form to-night?"

"Look here, old man, you are quite out of it. You sit here reading up all that ancient lore about the cestus, and you could tell me the names of all Nero's gladiators, and yet here at this establishment we've got a gladiator who is going to make history, and you don't know it."

"I thought you were the only fellow who could show Hodgson anything."

"No," said Phil. "I never was as good as Hodgson. I always made a point of making him go all the way to win on principle, but he always had a pull more or less over me. You see, Hodgson is lazy, and he wanted some one to challenge the right to represent the school, or I don't fancy he'd have put in enough good work to stand much chance against the Eton man. Therefore I stepped into the breach, and, by sweating him, have made Hodgson from a very fair boxer into a good one—good, but nothing super-excellent."

"Then who's been lying low all this time?"

"Acton."

"*Acton?*" said I, in utter astonishment. "Why, didn't our dear Theodore dress him down once for losing his temper in the gym?"

"He did, my boy, and Acton repaid the compliment to-night—with interest. He opened our eyes for us. I'm telling the bare truth when I say that he simply played with Theodore, and at the third round he as good as knocked him out."

I stared into the fire for a minute or two, thinking out this news.

"Eureka!" said I. "I've found it!"

"What?"

"The reason Acton crops up here. He cannot forget an injury. Hodgson humbled him once, and so Acton must needs take away from Theodore his own peculiar pet ambition, which is to represent St. Amory's at Aldershot in the Heavy."

"I wish," said Phil, gloomily, "Biffen's Beauty's schemes always worked out so well for the school's honour. He'll represent St. Amory's without a doubt."

"Is he so very good, then?"

"Super-excellent, old fellow! Prodigious!" said Phil, with genuine admiration. "We'll all sleep with both ears on the pillow when the telegram comes from Aldershot. Such a left! He has a swinging, curly stroke which he uses after an artful little feint which would win the final by itself. Hodgson really seemed trying to catch quick-silver when he tried to get home on Acton. Where did Acton learn all this? The sergeant hasn't got that artful mis-hit in his bag of tricks."

"Don't speculate on Acton's doings or where he picks up what he knows. It's too intricate."

"What a pity one can't go and shake his hand as one would like to do. He is a marvel—this dark horse," said Phil, with genuine regret, as always when speaking of Acton.

"Our *bête noir*," said I, without winking.

"You heathen," said Phil, laughing. "That was almost a pun. But I'm afraid I'm a bit selfish in my joy about Acton. Since he's a certainty, I can devote all my mighty mind to rackets. I don't think there is a better pair in the place than Vercoe and self at present."

"Oh, thou modest one!"

"'Toby' always finishes up 'When you and Mr. Vercoe goes to Queen's Club, Mr. Bourne, I advise you, etc.' So, 'Toby' evidently has no doubt who's to go there."

"Toby" Tucker was our racket professional, and when he spotted a pair for the public-school rackets, Fenton, the master who finally chose the pair, never said "Nay." "Toby" was incorruptible. With both his little eyes fixed inexorably on merit, the greatest joys of his life were consummated when the St. Amory's pair brought the championship home.

"Congratulate you, old man. If Acton pulls off the Aldershot and you and Vercoe the rackets—"

"If I only felt as confident on our lifting that as I do of Acton bringing off his, I'd go straightway and smother 'Toby.' He almost works one to death."

CHAPTER XIX

HOW THEY "ELPED THE PORE FELLER"

As a rule, the laboratory was empty on half-holidays, and Gus used to work through his tables in solitude, when he tried a little "bottle-washing" as a change from the refereeing, but one afternoon he found no less a person than W.E. Grim, the prize fag of Biffen's, doing something very seriously with a green powder.

"Hullo, young 'un! What are you footling round here for?"

"Lancaster has given me this salt to analyze, Todd. I think there's copper in it."

"What have you been up to, that Lancaster has run you in? Half-holiday, too!"

"He hasn't run me in," said Grim, sulkily. "As a special favour he's let me come in here to work a little myself. I did a ripping chemistry paper last week, and—"

"Oh, I see. Are *you* going to give Biffen's another leg up, too?"

"Just as soon as you give Taylor's one," said Grim, who, in common with all the juniors, did not fear the easy-going Todd.

"No cheek!" said Gus. "If I mixed up coal-dust and brick-dust, how'd you separate 'em?"

"Ask my grandmother for a telescope, and look out the mix through the butt end."

"Quite so," said Todd, chuckling. "I suppose you've given me a specimen of Biffen's latest brand of wit. Well, don't make too big a row in hunting for your copper, and then I'll not chuck you out."

Grim murmured something disparaging Todd's authority for chucking out, but Gus languidly sidled off to his own particular bench, where, out of sight of Grim, he prepared to do an afternoon's quiet work.

Meanwhile Grim's particular cronies, Wilson, Rogers, Sharpe, Poulett, and young Bourne, arrayed in all the glory of mud-stained footer-togs, after vainly waiting outside Biffen's, were seeking high and low for the copper-hunting chemist, who, for many reasons, had kept his afternoon's plan very dark. He knew only too well that his beloved chums would not hear of an afternoon's work, and would head him off either to footer or a run round the Bender. Therefore, immediately after dinner, he had made an unostentatious exit, and reached the laboratory in safety.

"Where *is* Grimmy?" said Sharpe.

"Dunno," said Wilson.

"Did he know of our six-a-side against Merishall's lot?"

"Rather! Said he hoped we'd win."

"*We!* Why, is he backing out, then?"

"Well, we've waited for him half an hour, and there's no sign of him yet—look's like it."

"What is up with him, I wonder?" said Poulett.

"Seemed rather mysterious this morning—rather stand-offish to my idea. Perhaps, though, he's only guzzling buns or swilling coffee somewhere. Let's see."

The quintette thereupon spread themselves out, but every shop was drawn blank.

"Rum!" said Rogers. "Where can the ass be?"

"If we knew, Solomon, would we try to find out?" said Sharpe.

"I say, you fellows—I've got an idea about Grimmy. Didn't Lancaster give him a leg-up for his chemistry the other day? Permission to foogle in the lab. on half-holidays, and all the rest of it? Grim was no end cocky over that."

"Grimmy waste a 'halfer' bottle-washing! Rot! That isn't his form, Wilson."

"If," said Poulett, impressively, "he *has* sunk so low, we must give him an 'elpin' 'and, pore feller!"

"Rather. If Lancaster has put the cover over old Grimmy we must get him out somehow. Let's adjourn to see."

The honourable five forthwith moved over to the laboratory, and Grim received his beloved cronies with hot blushes and a rather nervous manner.

"I say, you chaps, what do you want?"

"What did we want?" said Bourne, as though he'd forgotten it. "What was it, Rogers?"

"A fellow, formerly Grimmy, not a nasty bottle-washer," said Rogers, more in sorrow than in anger.

"But yesterday and Grimmy was an average back, and now he's holding up some filthy brew to the sunlight to see how muddy it is. Oh, my great aunt!" chimed in Wilson.

"How are the mighty fallen!" gasped Sharpe.

"Look here, you fellows—" began Grim, with still more vivid blushes mantling his noble face.

"Ear, 'ear! speech! speech! withdraw! apologize!"

"I'm not ashamed of being here and doing a little chemistry for my own amusement, so there; and you fellows had better cut before Lancaster comes and runs you all in."

"That is all right, Grimmy. Lancaster's sporting a silk tile, so he's off to town. To think of your cutting our six-a-side to puff down a dirty blow-pipe! Come out, you idiot, and get into your footer togs!" said Sharpe.

"I'm not coming, I tell you."

"Insanity in the family, evidently," observed Poulett, judicially.

"Aren't you coming, really?"

"No, I'm not; do get out and leave me alone!"

"Never!" said Poulett. "We'll stay with him and see him through the fit, eh?"

"Rather! We'll never desert you, Grimmy!"

"We'll let the six-a-side slide for this afternoon, and we'll help Grimmy with his salt," suggested the egg-poacher, brilliantly; and any amount of hidden meaning was in the word "help."

"We will! we will!" cried the rest, spotting Poulett's idea instanter, with enthusiastic joy; and despite Grim's frenzied declamation and eloquence they all "helped."

For two hours—as lively a couple of hours as ever were passed within the laboratory—Gus lay low behind the far bench and enjoyed the afternoon's performance far more than Grim. The green powder underwent some weird experiments, each of the quintette availing himself of Grim's knowledge and test-tubes and acid-bottles with the utmost freedom. The analysis of Lancaster's mixture gave various results, but when Rogers "found" rhubarb and black-lead this was held the correct find, and after this verdict the generous five put up the test-tubes in the rack. They all said Rogers had settled the matter, and anyway they had had a jolly time.

"Understand," observed Poulett, as he washed away some acid stains from his bare knees, "that Grimmy is not ashamed of his black-lead and rhubarb hunt."

"Why those vivid blushes, then?"

"We never bargained that old Grim would copy that Fifth Form ass, Todd, and chum up with Lancaster, did we?"

"What did you say about Todd?" inquired Grim, suavely.

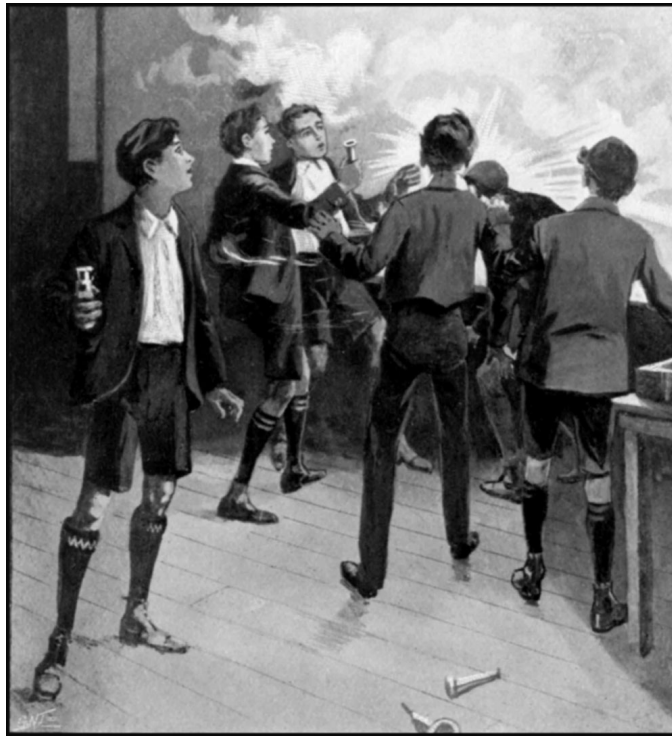
"Said he was an ass."

"A what?"

"An ass, a jackass, a howling jackass!" cried Poulett, *crescendo*.

"How?"

"Remember Corker pitching into him? Said he wasn't fit for a decent nursery, and Toddy had his mouth open all the time."



THE GREEN POWDER UNDERWENT SOME WEIRD EXPERIMENTS.

"Bully Cotton has given Toddy up. Toddy was too big an ass even for Cotton," remarked Wilson.

"He looks fairly intelligent," observed Grim, in a gentle whisper.

"So did you, almost, till you started fooling like this."

Grim artistically kept the conversation on Todd, and Gus learned how like an ass each individual of the quintette thought him. He smiled gently at Grim's astuteness in paying him out so neatly for his previous friendly remarks about chucking out. When the first stroke of the roll-call bell reached the laboratory he emerged solemnly and with state from his retreat, and stalked quietly through the knot of his outspoken critics, who were instantly besieged by a variety of emotions. He closed the laboratory door after him, and, when he saw the key outside, the temptation to repay the left-handed compliments of Poulett and Co. in their own coin was too strong. Gus gently turned the key, and was halfway down the corridor before the band arrived at the locked door.

"Let us out!" shrieked Rogers. "We'll apologize all of us—won't we, Poulett?"

"Yes!" yelled Poulett. "Anything! Oh, Todd, do let us out!"

But Todd went on his way, serenely ignoring the frantic appeals behind him, and turned out into the street with a sweet smile on his face.

"That beast, Todd, has gone, and Merishall will ladle us out three hundred of Virgil for missing call-over," moaned Bourne.

"It's four hundred, if Merishall takes it," said Rogers, with dire conviction.

"Not for me," said Grim, beaming cheerfully around; "I'm all right. I'll tell Merishall that the door was locked; but as for you five idiots, who oughtn't to be here at all—well! What the dickens did you want to call old Toddy all those fancy names for, you silly cuckoos?"

"Oh, look here, Grim, you artful bounder," shouted Poulett, bitterly, "you've got us into this mess. Why didn't you say Todd was behind those back benches?"

"Yes, why?" shouted the rest of the raging fags. "We'll scrag you for this, darling. Cuckoos are we? Scrag him—put him in the scrum."

W.E. Grim had a very bad five minutes, but when he crawled out of the scrum, hot, damaged, and dusty, he said viciously—

"I hope Merishall gives you a thou., you beastly cads. You've mucked up my afternoon, and I'm hanged if I don't tell Lancaster."

Ten minutes after roll-call the janitor let them out, and shortly afterwards a wretched procession of five emerged from Merishall's room with two hundred lines from Virgil hanging over each head for a missed call-over without excuse. Grim worked an artistic revenge on his scrummagers by calling personally the next half-holiday to inquire if they would prefer to analyze a green salt or

to play a six-a-side against Merishall's lot. In every instance a Virgil hurtled towards his head. Having done his duty to his friends, he left them to pious Æneas and the slope of Avernus, whilst he got another salt from the science-master, and, with Gus, possessed the laboratory in peace.

CHAPTER XX

ACTON'S TRUMP CARD

On the Saturday before we should go home Acton was due at Aldershot, and would return the same night, as the fellows hoped, with his laurels thick upon him. Bourne and Vercoe were staying at school a week later than we, for the rackets did not come off until our holidays had commenced. Toby had begged for this almost with tears in his eyes, for he had a mortal dread of the relaxing process of a week at home.

"You'd have no 'ands, Mr. Bourne, no spring, no eyes, when you toed the mark at Kensington. I'll send you fit if I have you here."

So Vercoe and Phil agreed to stay.

And now Acton determined to put into operation his long-thought-of scheme for the paying off of the score against Phil. It was subtle, and founded on a perfect knowledge of Bourne's character, and a perfect disregard of the consequences to any one—even including himself. Acton would have willingly martyred himself, if he could have inflicted a little of the torments on Bourne too.

There was one rule from which Dr. Moore never swerved a hair's breadth. Compared to this particular law the stringency of the Old Game regulation for Thursday was lax indeed. He never had departed from it, and he never would depart from it. If any fellow took it into his head to slip out of his house after lights out at ten on any pretence whatever he was expelled. There was some legend in connection with this severity, what exactly none of us rightly knew, but according to the tale the escapade of two fellows years ago, when Corker was new to the place, had resulted in one of the fellows being shot. Twice had he expelled fellows while I was at school—Remington and Cunningham—and I cannot ever forget the old man's deathlike face as he told them to go. Some fellows broke out and were not found out, for Corker wasn't going to have any barred windows as in some places. Any one *could* break out any night he liked, but he knew what he might expect if he were caught. There was no help. Remington had been found out, and though there had been Remingtons in the school since Anne's reign, Corker was inexorable. He was expelled.

In a word, Acton determined to go to London and to take young Bourne with him, and so risk certain expulsion for both, supposing they were discovered. He had no intention of being expelled, though; for he liked the life at St. Amory's, where incense floated round him all day long, but he meant, when he had accomplished the ruin of Jack, to let Bourne senior know it. Acton gloated in advance over Phil's anger, shame, and consternation, and—this was the cream of the joke—his utter inability to do anything except keep silence and chew the bitter cud of hopeless rage against him—the man to whom he would not give the footer cap. Acton never thought of Jack's share in the matter at all, and yet he was genuinely fond of him; all he thought of was what would be Philip's hopeless rage.

Phil, of course, could say nothing to Corker, for he knew it would be hopeless. And Acton knew that Phil's pride could never bear the idea of Jack—a Bourne—being expelled from the old place. Therefore he would keep silence. I don't think I used the wrong adjective when I said it was subtle. The only question was—could he so manage that Jack would go? And Acton for good reasons was pretty certain that he could.

Jack was staidly taking a turn up and down the pavement with Grim when, on passing by Biffen's house, he heard a whistle from one of the windows, and, on looking up, he saw Acton.

"I want you, Bourne, for five minutes—if you can spare them."

"Of course he can," said Grim, *sotto voce*. "Aren't you a monitor? Jack, my boy, Acton wants to knight you—or something. You'll find his boots in the bottom cupboard, if you want to black 'em very much. I suppose, being only a common or garden fag, my feelings aren't to be considered for a moment. When you were—for once—talking sensibly for a Corker fag, you are called away to ___"

"Cork all that frivol, old man, till you see me at tea," said Jack, moving into Biffen's yard.

When Jack was comfortably installed in a chair, Acton bolted his door, and, somewhat to young Bourne's surprise, seemed rather in a fix how to start what he had to say. The locking of the door was unusual, and this, combined with Acton's grave face and hesitating manner, made Jack a trifle uneasy. Whatever was coming?

"I say, Bourne," at last said his friend, "do you know anything about betting?"

"Betting!" said Jack, with a vivid blush. "About as much as most of the fellows know of it. Not more."

"Well, do you mind reading this?" He handed Jack a slip of paper which contained such cryptic sentences as: "Grape Shot gone wrong, though he will run. Pocket Book is the tip. If you're on Grape Shot, hedge on best terms you can get," etc.

"I understand that," said Jack, "you've—if this means you—you've backed the wrong horse."

"Exactly," said Acton. "I backed Grape Shot for the Lincolnshire Handicap, and he hasn't a ghost of a chance now. Gone wrong."

"I see," said Jack, absolutely staggered that Acton, a monitor, should tell him, a fag, that he was betting on horse-racing.

"I see, young 'un, that you seem surprised at my little flutter, but, by Jove! this will have to be my last. Do you know, Bourne, I'm in an awful hole."

"I'm very sorry to hear it," said Jack, with no end of concern.

"You see, if Pocket Book pulls the handicap off before I've time to trim my sails, I lose a lot."

"Much," said Jack, "*for you?*"

"Thirty pounds."

"Whew!" whistled Bourne.

"I get a good allowance from home, Bourne, but I'm bound to say thirty pounds would cripple me."

"Rather," said Jack, with a gasp.

"Of course, if the worst did come to the worst, I'd have to apply to home; but there would be, as you might guess, no end of a row about it."

"Then you must hedge," said Jack.

"That is it, exactly. I must back Pocket Book for first place. This is a sure tip—I can depend upon it."

"Then send to the fellow you bet with, and let him put you on Pocket Book."

"That is just it, Jack—the bookmaker wouldn't take a bet from me."

"Why ever not?" said Jack, mystified.

"Because I'm a minor—I'm under age."

"Then how do you manage?" said Jack.

"Why, I bet through another man."

"I see," said Jack, for this was but another edition of his own little adventures. "And that man——"

"Is Raffles," said Acton, quietly.

Jack bounced out of his chair as if he had been stung. "That beast!" he gasped.

"Raffles?" said Acton, with a slow smile. "I didn't know he was a beast."

"He is the meanest skunk alive," said Jack. He added fervently, "Acton, have no dealings with that fellow. He is an abominable sharper."

"Thanks," said Acton, with a slight grimace at Jack's advice. "But, all the same, I have to deal through Raffles."

"Then write to the fellow."

"I don't know—I've forgotten his address."

"Well, I'm hanged if I understand it!" said Jack, lost in astonishment. "If you don't know it, and your bookmaker will only bet through Raffles, you are in a hole—a marvellously deep one."

"There's only one way out—find Raffles."

"And that you can't do."

"And that I think I can do by going to London."

"Well, we're off for the holidays on Tuesday, and you can find Raffles then."

"I should be hopelessly too late if I waited till then. It would be almost ruinous to be put on to Pocket Book in a day's time. I must hedge to-night."

"To-night?" said Jack, in a complete fog. "And you haven't found Raffles!"

"No, but I think I know where to find him to-night. You know the Coon is having a match with the Battersea Beauty at the Universal Sporting Club, and Raffles is pretty sure to be there, and I must see him then."

"But that means going to London, Acton."

"Certainly."

"And Corker would expel you—even you."

"Without a doubt—if he finds out."

"There's a chance that he may."

"Certainly, but it's a mighty slender one, and in any case I mean to—I *must*—risk it."

"I'm awfully sorry for you."

"Now, Jack, I want you to listen to me," said Acton, very gravely, and his voice showed his genuine anxiety. "The Coon's match does not commence until eleven o'clock at night, because an awful lot of the Universal Sporters are actors and they cannot get away before that time at earliest. Now, there are two entrances for the members into the club, one in Pelican Street and the other in Ridge Street. Raffles must enter by one or the other, and there must be some one at each doorway to give him my note. I can take the one, and the question is—who will take the second doorway?"

"Not I, Acton," said Jack, in a blue funk. "Please, Acton, don't ask me."

"Jack, believe me, you were the last person I wanted to ask. I would have asked Worcester or Chalmers if it had been any good, but they would not know Raffles from Adam. It is ten thousand pities, but you are the only fellow who knows Raffles here. No one else has ever set eyes on him."

"Acton, it means expulsion," said Jack, hoarsely.

"Certainly for me if I'm caught, but, of course, I've no idea of being caught. Jack, I'm not going to ask you to come with me. I shall think no worse of you if you say you won't come, and I cannot take advantage over you to force you against your own wish, because I lent you money. Don't think so meanly of me."

"Acton," said Jack, sweating drops of terror, "it *is* expulsion if we're caught."

"Jack," said Acton, "have you ever known me to fail yet in anything I undertake?"

"No."

"Well, I *will* not fail here. If you like I'll give you my word of honour we shall not be caught, and, if by a miracle of ill-luck we should be, I shall see you through. I'll take every iota of blame on my own shoulders. You'll find yourself captain of the school one day yet."

"If I were expelled, Acton," said Jack, with intense conviction, "the pater would kill me first, and die himself afterwards; and as for Phil——"

"Jack," said Acton, "I must see the business through myself. You can't do it, I see. I must lose the £30."

Jack got up and walked up and down the room in agony.

For five minutes Acton watched his wretched prey torn to pieces by his conflicting fears—his shame of leaving Acton in the lurch, and his dread of discovery.

"Acton," said Jack at length, "I can't leave you in the lurch. I'll go with you to London."

Acton clasped Jack's hand, and said, "Jack, you are a brick. I can only say I thank you." He had landed his fish, as he knew he would.

Half an hour afterwards Jack said, almost cheerfully, for Acton had been doing his best to smooth poor Bourne's ruffled feathers—

"But how are we to go to town?"

"I've got a plan," said Acton; "but I must turn it over in my mind first. If you'll look in, young 'un, after tea, I'll tell you how we do it. I'm going to see about it now. Once again, Jack, I thank you. You do stand by a fellow when he's down on his luck."

Acton and Jack went out—the monitor to make arrangements for the escapade, and Jack to Grim's quarters, where he was due for tea, which he demolished with comparative cheerfulness, for Jack's confidence in Acton was illimitable. After he had taken the jump he was not—is not now—the kind of boy to look back.

At six young Bourne left his friend Grim among a waste of empty teacups, plates, and jam-pots,

and went to Acton's room.

"I've arranged all," said that worthy. "I've seen the proprietor of the hotel down at Dring, and he's going to have a smart dog-cart and a smarter horse to do the dozen miles between here and Charing Cross ready for us at nine. He says we shall be rattled into town within the hour. So if we aren't in time to spot Raffles we are down on our luck with a vengeance. Your room is on the ground floor, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Jack, "overlooking Corker's flowerbeds."

"Well, pull up the window after supper as quietly as you can, and slip into the garden. Then scoot through the field, and you'll find me waiting for you in the hotel stables. You can pass the word to your chums in Corker's that you aren't going to be on show after supper, and then they won't be routing you out."

"My chums are mostly in Biffen's," said Jack. "Grim and Rogers, etc."

"Good omen," said Acton. "Leave your window so that you can easily shove it up when you come back, and leave your school cap behind, and bring a tweed instead. Got such an article?"

"Yes."

"How's your room lighted?"

"Oh, we have the electric. It is switched off at ten, so that the light will not give any trouble, Acton."

"Well, bolt your door, too. It seems as though the fates were fighting for us, eh, young 'un?"

CHAPTER XXI

LONDON AND BACK

At nine that night the two, as agreed upon, met at Dring in the hotel stables. There had been no mishaps.

The groom was busy putting the horse into the trap, and, when Jack saw what a really smart turnout Acton had engaged, his fears began to occupy less of his thoughts and the pleasures of a rattling hour's spin a jolly lot more. Punctually to the minute Jack climbed up beside the driver, the place of honour, and Acton swung himself up behind; the yard doors were flung open, and the gig rattled smartly out. The hotel proprietor had not chanted the praises of his horse in vain. On the level road it laid itself out to go for all it was worth.

The pleasant music of the jingling harness and the scurrying of the wheels made as jolly a tune as Jack could wish to hear. There was a touch of frost in the air, which made the quick motion of the gig bite shrewdly on his cheeks, and made him button up his overcoat to the chin and settle his cap well over his ears. Acton threw out jokes, too, from behind, which made Jack feel no end clever to listen to them, and the driver now and then restrained his horse's "freshness" with the soothing mellow whistle which only drivers possess. The farmhouses, hayricks, and an occasional village, drifted past now to the right, now to the left, and occasionally they overhauled a leisurely belated cyclist, who at once began to take an unimportant position in the rear, his lamp growing less and less down the stretch of long white road.

Soon the houses began to come more frequently, then came the streets with their long avenues of yellow lights, and within the hour they were rolling smoothly over the wooden pavements.

"Piccadilly," said Acton. "Drop us at the top of Whitehall, will you? Then you can take the horse to the mews. Be ready for us outside Frascati's by twelve. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, at Frascati's by twelve! I know the place." A minute or two later the two swung off in Trafalgar Square, and the driver rattled away into the crowd.

Jack was delighted. "Spiffing run, Acton, eh?"

"Glad you liked it, young 'un. Now let us localize the Universal Sporting Club. I know it's about Covent Garden somewhere." Together they went up the crowded Strand, Jack enjoying every minute of the bustling walk to the Garden and imagining that he was a very much daring young desperado to be so far from his little white bunk at St. Amory's. He would have been usually fast asleep by this time.

The Universal Sporting Club was not a difficult place to find, and though all its windows were lighted up, upon its fast shut doors were two little notices: "This door will be open at 11 p.m. None but members and friends admitted."

"Well," said Acton, "we've got about twenty minutes before there's any particular need to begin our watch for Raffles, but some of the members are hanging round now. The early birds get the best perch for the show. On the whole, perhaps you'd better prowl about this door now, whilst I go round the corner and see if I can run our fox to his earth."

"All serene," said Jack. "I'll mark time out here till I see you."

Acton walked round the corner, and Jack perambulated about, peering into the faces of the idlers to see if he could spot the well-known and much-detested face of Raffles. He had (of course) no luck.

Five minutes afterwards Acton came back smiling. "Almost first fellow I ran against was Raffles, and I've given him his instructions. He'll hedge for me with the bookie within five minutes."

"So you're quite safe now, Acton?" said Jack, beaming.

"Oh, quite," said Acton, laughing. "Now, Jack, you've been no end brickish, and I'm going to treat you. Ever seen a ballet?"

"No."

"Well, you shall."

A hansom flitted slowly up to them, and Acton hailed it. "In you get, Jack. Kingdom!" said Acton to the cabby. They glided noiselessly through the lighted streets, and in a minute or so were before the "Kingdom Theatre." The two hurried up the steps, and Acton asked an attendant if the ballet were rung up yet.

"No, sir. Two stalls, sir? Certainly. Twelve and thirteen are vacant."

Jack had never seen a ballet before, and when the gorgeous ballet "Katrina" slowly passed before his eyes, and he followed the simple story which was almost interpreted by the lovely music, when every fresh scene seemed lovelier than all the rest, and fairyland was realized before his eyes, his face beamed with pleasure.

"This *is* ripping, Acton. Isn't Katrina lovely? Jove! I'd hunt for Raffles every blessed night if there was a 'Kingdom' to finish up with!"

His enthusiasm amused Acton.

"It is very pretty, Jack, certainly."

For nearly an hour did Jack sit entranced, and when the orchestra crashed out the last floods of melody in the *finale*, and when most of the audience rose to go, he trotted out with Acton in a dream.

"We'll have a little supper at Frascati's, young 'un, and then home."

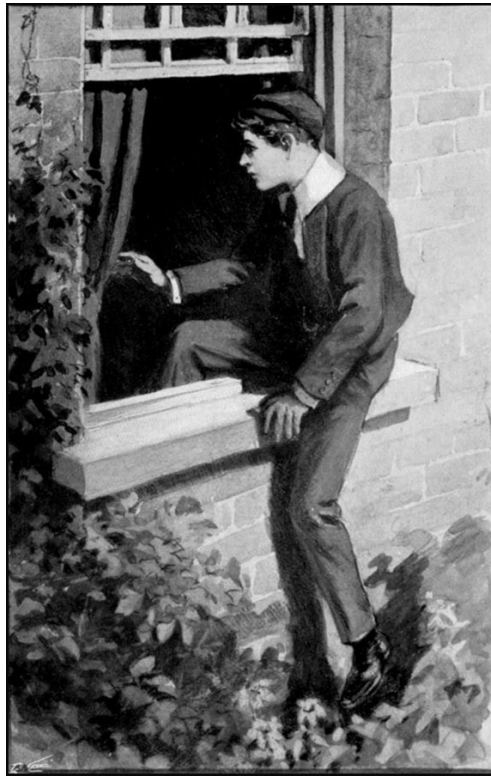
Frascati's completed the enchantment of Bourne. The beauty of the supper-room, the glitter of snowy linen, of mirrors, and the inviting crash of knives, and the clink of glasses, the busy orderliness of the waiters, the laughter, chatter of the visitors, the scents, the sights and sounds, fascinated him. Acton ordered a modest little supper, and when Jack had finally pushed away his plate Acton paid the bill, and went out to find the driver. He was there, the horse almost waltzing with impatience to be off. The two swung themselves up, and in another minute they were whirling along back to St. Amory's.

The St. Amory's clock could be heard striking the half hour after one when Jack and Acton parted at the corner of Corker's garden.

"Jack," said Acton, "good night! and you need not trouble about the £7. You've done more for me than that, and I shall not forget it."

Jack, almost weeping with gratitude, said, "Good night, Acton!" in a fervent whisper, and scuttled over Corker's flower-beds. He pushed up his window and crawled through, and, seeing that all was as he had left it after supper, he undressed and jumped into bed, and in a few minutes slept the sleep of the just.

Acton had managed his re-entrance just as successfully—did he ever fail?—and the thought of Bourne's hopeless rage, when he should find out about Jack's escapade, made him sleep the sleep of the happy man. He was made that way.



HE PUSHED UP HIS WINDOW AND CRAWLED THROUGH.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PENFOLD TABLET FUND

The Easter term had been one of unadulterated discomfort for Jim Cotton. He had felt the loss of Gus's helping hand terribly, and he had not yet found another ass to "devil" for him in the way of classics or mathematics. Philips, a former understudy to Gus, was called upon, but with unsatisfactory results, and Cotton, *mirabile dictu*, was compelled in sheer desperation to try to do his own work. Frankly, the Fifth of St. Amory's was beyond Jim's very small attainments, classical or otherwise. He had been hoisted up to that serene height by no means *honoris causa*, but *aetatis causa*. Jim was verging on six feet, and he filled his clothes very well into the bargain, and though his scholarship was strictly junior school, the spectacle of Jim in Fourth Form Etons would have been too entrancing a sight for daily contemplation. Hence he had got his remove. Thrown over by Gus, unable to discover a second jackal for the term so far, he had been left to the tender mercy of Corker, Merishall and Co., and Jim was inclined to think that they showed no quarter to a fallen foe. Corker had been distilled venom on the particular morning with which this chapter deals on the subject of Jim's Greek. Herodotus, as translated by Jim with the help of a well-thumbed Bohn's crib, had emerged as a most unalluring mess of pottage, and Dr. Moore had picked out Bohn's plums from Jim's paste with unerring accuracy. Whilst Cotton was wishing the roof would fall down on Corker's head and kill him, the other fellows in the Fifth were enjoying the fun. Gus Todd, though, felt for his old friend more than a touch of pity, and when old Corker left Jim alone finally, Gus very cleverly kept his attention away from Jim's quarter. When Corker finally drew his toga around him and hurried out, Jim Cotton gathered together his own books and lounged heavily into the street, sick of school, books, Corker, and hating Gus with a mighty sullen hate. For Jim had remarked Gus's sprightliness in the Greek ordeal, but was not clever enough to see that Gus's performance had been only for old friendship's sake. Jim, however, put down Todd's device as mere "side," "show-off," "toadyism," and other choice things, all trotted out specially for his eyes. When he reached his room he flung his Herodotus into the nearest chair, and himself into the most comfortable one, and then beat a vicious serenade on his firegrate with the poker until dinner time.

In the evening, while Jim was moodily planted before a small pile of books, he received a visitor, no less a personage than Philips, Jim's occasional hack.

"Well," said Jim, surlily, "what do you want?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, old boy. Can I have a chair?"

"Can't you see I'm busy?" said Cotton, unamiably.

"You look like it, more or less, certainly."

"Well, I've no time for any oratory to-night, Philips, and that is all about it."

"I'll give you a leg-up for Merishall in the morning if you're decently civil."

"All right, then," said Jim, thawing instantly. "What's the matter?"

"Ever heard of Penfold?"

"No; what was the animal?"

"Well, he was the brightest and most particular star that Taylor ever had in his house; that is, until you pitched your tent among us."

"Don't rot, Philips. What has the Penfold done?"

"Made a chemical discovery which stamps him as one of the first half-dozen chemists in the world."

"Oh," said Jim, wearily; "most interestin', very."

"Here only ten years ago, and, 'pon honour, this was his very den."

"Have noticed the place to be stuffy," said Jim, with no enthusiasm, "and now that is explained. Suppose he lived with his nose in books and test-tubes?"

"And," said Philips, ignoring Jim's heavy wit, "the Fifth and Sixth Form fellows in Taylor's think we ought to take notice of it somehow."

"Now, I wouldn't," said Cotton, critically; "I'd keep a thing like that dark."

"You heathen!"

"If he'd pulled stroke at Cambridge, or anything like that——"

"We thought a tablet on the wall, or something of that sort, would meet the case. Corker's dining-hall is lined with 'em."

"Get to the point," said Jim, grimly.

"A sub. of five shillings among seniors, and half a crown among the kids, would meet the case, I think."

"And did you think I'd spring a crown for a marble tablet to a mug like Penfold?"

"Rather," said Philips.

"Well," said Jim, "life would be worth living here if it weren't for the unearthly smuggling, but as it is St. Amory's is about as lively as a workhouse. I'm not forking out on this occasion. Taylor's smugs must do all that is necessary to be done."

"Well," said Philips, "all the other fellows have given in their names, bar you and Todd."

"Oh!" said Jim, with sudden interest, "you've asked Todd, have you?"

"Of course. Gus seemed rather waxy that he should be called upon. One might almost fancy he hadn't got the five shillings."

"Todd evidently is a miserable miser," said Jim, with a bitter smile at the thought of Gus's insolvent condition. "He isn't the same fellow he used to be."

"Jove, no!" said Philips; "he's come on no end this term. He's an improvement on the old Gus."

"Yes," said Jim, angrily; "the beaks have got him into their nets. But he ought to subscribe to the Penfold, when he's the biggest smug in Taylor's."

"And you ought too, Jim, since you've the biggest money-bags."

"All right," said Jim, "I'll subscribe. 'Twill look better if we all subscribe."

"You're a funny ass, Cotton. I thought I was going to draw you blank. What's the reason for your sudden change of mind?"

"I don't want to be bracketed equal with Toddy."

"That's settled, then," said Philips, who was puzzled at Jim's sudden change of front. "And now let's see to Merishall's work for the morning."

The subscriptions for a tablet in the great Penfold's honour were not hard to obtain, the upper form fellows in Taylor's dunning the rest of the house without mercy, and, to the great wonder of all, the foremost of the duns was James Cotton, Esq. The way he squeezed half-crowns out of the fags was reckoned little short of marvellous, and before the week was out every Taylor fellow had subscribed bar Gus. Jim's exertions were rewarded by the office of secretary to the Penfold Fund.

"We'll get a house list, Philips, and pin up a proper subscription list on the notice-board. The thing will look more ship-shape then. By the way, what was it the Penfold did? Is he dead?"

"You are a funny fellow, Cotton. Here you are sweating the half-crowns out of the fags and you don't know why you're doing it."

"That is just what I do know," said Jim, smiling serenely.

When the list was pinned up on the board, and opposite each fellow's name appeared the half-crown or crown he had contributed, it made a brave show. Towards the end of the list opposite the name of Todd, A.V.R., there had occurred a dismal blank thoughtfully filled by secretary Cotton with a couple of beautifully even lines ruled in staring red ink. This vivid dash of colour on the white paper gave poor Gus quite an unsolicited advertisement, and since none of the other fellows knew of Gus's circumstances, it practically put him in the pillory as a tight-fisted old screw. This result was exactly what Jim Cotton had in his mind when he fell in with the tablet scheme so enthusiastically. Pretty mean, wasn't it?

When Gus saw the staring red abomination for the first time it made him feel that he would like to pour a little boiling oil over the secretary of the fund, for to a fellow of Gus's temperament the chaffing remarks of his acquaintances and the knowing looks of the juniors made him shiver with righteous anger. He did not like being pilloried. He had desperate thoughts of going and publicly kicking Cotton, but he remembered, fortunately, that Jim would probably only make one mouthful of him. But he paced his room angrily, and except that he really meant to keep himself to his resolution of honourable poverty to the term's end he would have written home. Not to do so cost him a struggle.

There was some one else who eyed this plain manifesto of Gus's position with anger, and that was the Rev. E. Taylor himself. The house-master had not been a house-master for years for nothing, and he guessed pretty shrewdly that some one was writing off a debt with interest against Gus. The house-master made a still shrewder guess as to who this might be, for he had watched the dissolution of the partnership of Cotton and Todd with great interest.

Thus it was that Philips was called into Taylor's room for a quiet little chat on house matters. "Your idea of a memento to Penfold was an excellent one, Philips, and the house seems to have taken it up very heartily."

"Oh yes!" said Philips, naïvely. "The fellows have taken any amount of interest, especially Cotton."

"Cotton's is rather a case of Saul among the prophets, isn't it, Philips?"

"This sort of thing didn't quite seem his line before, sir."

"No; I never thought so myself; but it is very pleasant to make a mistake, too. I see Todd, who is the best chemist in the house, does not subscribe at all."

"Most of the fellows thought it rather strange."

"And said so, no doubt?" said the master, looking abstractedly at his finger-nails.

"H'm!" said Philips, feeling uncomfortable at this thrust. "They may have."

"You see, Philips," said Taylor, gently, "there ought to have been no quizzing of Todd, for a contribution to a matter like this ought to be entirely voluntary—most emphatically so, I think. And if Todd does not see his way to subscribe—and he is the sole judge—there ought to be no remarks whatever."

"I see, sir," said Philips, dubiously.

"I was much annoyed to see that Todd's name has been prominently before the house for the last day or so."

"You mean on the notice-board, sir?"

"Yes; I can quite see why it is. The honorary secretary has not had much experience in this clerical work before, so he has fallen into a great mistake. In fact," said the house-master, bluntly, "the secretary's taste is not to be depended on."

"I don't think Cotton meant anything——" began Philips.

"Well, perhaps not," said the Rev. E. Taylor, doubtfully; "but, in any case, will you take down the present list, and draw up a fresh one—if you think one at all necessary—with only the names of subscribers upon it? A house list should not have been used at all. Please tell Cotton I said so, and I hope he will see the fairness of it."

Philips took down the offending list, and told Cotton the house-master's opinions. Jim Cotton had not very quick feelings, but contempt can pierce the shell of a tortoise, and as Philips innocently

retailed the message, the secretary of the Penfold Tablet Fund knew there was one man who held him a cad.

CHAPTER XXIII

BOURNE v. ACTON

Jack had gone to London with his patron on Thursday. On Saturday morning Acton went to Aldershot, carrying with him the hopes and good wishes of the whole of St. Amory's, and at night the school band had met him at the station. They (the band) struggled bravely—it was very windy—with "See, the Conquering Hero comes!" in front of the returned hero, who was "chaired" by frenzied Biffenites. The expected had happened. Acton had annihilated Rossal, Shrewsbury, and Harrow, and in the final had met the redoubtable Jarvis, from "Henry's holy shade." The delightful news circulated round St. Amory's that Acton had "made mincemeat" of Jarvis. He had not, but after a close battle had scrambled home first; he had won, and that was the main thing.

As Acton walked into chapel on Sunday morning with Worcester, Corker got scant attention to his sermon; the fags to a man were thinking of Acton's terrible left. The gladiator lived in an atmosphere of incense for a whole day.

As Phil Bourne was finishing breakfast on Monday morning his fag brought him his letters, and, after reading his usual one from home, he turned his attention to another one, whose envelope was dirty, and whose writing was laboriously and painfully bad amateur work.

"Rotherhithe," said Phil, looking at the post-mark. "Who are my friends from that beauty spot?"

I give the letter in all its fascinating simplicity.

"Rotherhithe, Sunday.

"Dear Sir,

"I was sorry as how I did not see you on thursday night when you came with Acting to Covent garden to do a small hedging in the linkinsheer handicap. I think since you did a fare settle about the gunn and pade up my little bill like a mann you would deserve the show at the "Kindumm" and the blow out at that swell tuck shop as Mister Acting said he was going to treat you to for coming with him to london. I hopes you enjoyed em and As how that stiff necked old corker your beak—won't never find out.

"As you gave him the Propper slip and no Errer your beastly Chummy

"Daniel Raffles."

The letter had evidently been meant for Jack, but had naturally reached Phil, since the envelope was directed to "Mr. Bourne."

Bourne, when he had struggled to the end of this literary gem, dropped the letter like a red-hot coal. Was it a hoax, or had Jack really gone up to town, as the letter said?

The "Mister Acting" made Phil's heart sink with dire forebodings.

"Go and find young Bourne, Hinton, and tell him to come here to my study at once, or as soon as he's finished breakfast."

Jack came in whistling a jolly tune; he was in full bloom, for had he not now left all his cares behind him?

"You can cut, Hinton; and, Jack, take a chair and give me an explanation of this letter."

Jack read Raffles' letter through to the bitter end, and wished he had never been born. Phil eyed his young brother, who had turned deathly white, with the horrible certainty that Jack had gone up to London.

"Then it's true?" he said.

No answer.

"Jack, I know you could speak the truth once. Look at me. Did you go to London on Thursday night?"

"Yes," said Jack, faintly.

"Did Acton take you?"

"Yes."

"You know that if Dr. Moore hears of it he will expel you."

"Yes."

"You went to oblige Acton?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever think what pater would think if he heard about this?"



"Cut, YOU MISERABLE PUPPY!"

Jack, as a matter of course, had thought many a time of what his father would think about the business, and when Phil in that level voice of his recalled him to this terrible point he broke down.

"Phil, do not tell pater; he'd never forgive me! Nor Corker. Cut me into ribbons if you like, only don't let me be expelled."

"Here," said Phil, "I don't want any snivelling in my room. Cut, you miserable puppy, to your own quarters, and when school is over keep to them till I come. You're a contemptible little puppy."

Jack hurried out, crunching Raffles' letter in his fist. He went straight to Acton's room, and, bursting in whilst Acton was drinking his last cup of coffee, blurted out the dismal news. Jack was almost hysterical in his rage against Raffles.

"Acton, I believe that filthy blackmailer meant Phil to get that letter: he wanted to round on me and get me into trouble. Oh!" said Jack, in a very explosion of futile rage, "if I could only pound his ugly face into a jelly."

"Well, perhaps you'll have that pleasure one day, Jack. I hope so, anyhow. Now, straight, Jack, you need not be frightened of your brother saying a word. He could never risk Corker hearing of it, for he could not bear the chance of expulsion, so he'll lie low as far as Corker is concerned, take my word for it. He may hand you over to your father, but that, too, I doubt. He may give you a thrashing himself, which I fancy he will."

"I don't mind that," said Jack. "I deserve something."

"No, you don't, old man; and I'm fearfully sorry that I've got you into this hole. But your brother will certainly interview me."

"I suppose so," said Jack, thoughtfully, even in his rage and shame. "I hope there is no row between you;" for the idea of an open quarrel between Phil and Acton made Jack rather qualmish.

"You'd better cut now, Jack, and lie low till you find out when the hurricane is going to commence."

Jack went away, and as the door closed softly behind him Acton smiled sweetly.

"Well, Raffles has managed it nicely, and carried out my orders to the strokings of the t's. He is quite a genius in a low kind of way. And now I'm ready for Philip Bourne, Esq. I bet I'm a sight more comfortable than he is." Which was very true.

I, of course, knew nothing of all these occurrences at the time, and the first intimation I had that anything was wrong was when Phil Bourne came into my room and gave me a plain unvarnished account, *sans* comment, of Acton's and young Bourne's foolery in London.

"I'm awfully glad, old man, that I am able to tell you this, because, although you're Captain of the school, you can't do anything, since Acton is a monitor."

(It is an unwritten law at St. Amory's that one monitor can never, under any circumstances, "peach" upon another.)

"Well, I'm jolly glad too, Bourne, since your brother's in it."

"What has to be done to Acton? Jack, of course, was only a tool in his hands."

"Oh, of course. It is perfectly certain that our friend engineered the whole business up to and including the letter, which *was* meant for you."

"Do you really think that?" said Phil.

"I'm as certain of it as I can be of anything that I don't actually know to be true."

"Why did he do it?"

"Do you feel anything about this, old man?"

"I feel in the bluest funk that I can remember."

"Then, that's why."

"You see, I cannot put my ringer on the brute."

"He has you in a cleft stick. Who knows that better than Acton?"

"I'm going to thrash Jack, the little idiot. I distinctly told him to give Acton a wide berth."

"Jack, of course, is an idiot; but Acton is the fellow that wants the thrashing."

Phil pondered over this for fully five minutes.

"You're right, old man, and I'll give—I'll try to give—him the thrashing he deserves."

"Big biz," said I. "You say you aren't as good as Hodgson; Hodgson isn't in the same street as Acton; *ergo*, you aren't in the same parish."

"That's your beastly logic, Carr. Does a good cause count for nothing?"

"Not for much, when you're dealing with sharps."

"I see *you've* inherited your pater's law books. The school goes home to-morrow, doesn't it? Well, my Lord Chief Justice, in what relation do you stand towards the school to-morrow? Are you Captain?"

"No," said I, in my best legal manner. "There is no school to-morrow—*ergo*, there cannot be a captain of a non-existent thing. To-morrow is a *dies non* as far as I'm concerned. Why this thirst for knowledge, Phil?"

"Because I want you to be my second against Acton, and I didn't want your captaincy to aid or abet me in a thing which is against rules."

"I see," said I, warmly, "and I will sink the rules and all the rest, and trust to a little rough justice being done on an arrant scamp."

"Thanks," said Phil. "With you as second and a good cause, I ought to teach Acton a little genuine lesson."

"I'd rather trust in a good straight left."

"All right, then. I'll see Acton now, and bring him to the point."

"Do, and let me have the result."

Phil swung off in that cool, level-headed fashion which is peculiarly his own. He had thought the matter out thoroughly in that five minutes' brown study, and now that he had put his hand to the plough he would not look back. I liked the set shoulders and his even step down the corridor. Surely something must reach Acton now! He walked down the street, turned in at Biffen's yard, and mounted up to Acton's room. He knocked firmly on the partly open door, and when he heard Acton's "Come in," walked solidly in.

Acton smiled amiably when he saw his visitor, and, with his half-foreign politeness, drew out a chair.

"No, thanks," said Phil, icily; "but, if you've no objection, I'd like to close your door. May I?"

"By all means."

"My opinion of you, Acton——"

"Why trouble about that, Bourne; I know it."

——"is that you're an unmitigated cad."

"Gently, friend, gently," said Acton, half getting up.

"You, by your foul play, have disfigured poor Aspinall for life——"

"Bourne, you're a monomaniac on that subject. I've had the pleasure of telling you once before that you were a liar."

"And you did not get your 'footer' cap for it, which seems such a paltry punishment for so villainous a crime."

"That is stale, stale," said Acton, coolly.

"You entice my brother to London, which means expulsion for him if it is found out by Dr. Moore."

"I believe that's the rule."

"The expulsion of Jack would bring disgrace on an honest name in the school and give pain to an honest gentleman——"

"The pity o' 't," said Acton, with a sneer.

"And so, since you, by a kind of malicious fate, seem to escape all proper punishment——"

"You should be a parson, Bourne."

"I'm going to try to give you your deserts myself."

"An avenging angel. Oh, ye gods!"

"Do you mind turning out at the old milling ground at seven sharp to-morrow morning?"

"The mornings are chilly," said Acton, with a snigger. "Besides, I don't really see what pressing obligation I'm under to turn out at that time for the poor pleasure of knocking you down."

"I never thought you were a coward."

"How charitable!"

"But we must bring you to book somehow. Will you fight—now?"

Before he had time to avoid the blow Phil had struck him lightly on the face. For one half second a veritable devil peeped out of Acton's eyes as he sprung at Phil. But Phil quickly backed, and said coolly, "No—no, sir! Let us do the thing decently and in order. You can try to do all you wish to-morrow morning very much at your ease. I apologize for striking you in your own room, but necessity, you know——"

"Bourne, you'll regret that blow!"

"Never," said Phil, emphatically, and with cutting contempt. "I have asked Carr to second me. I dare say Vercoe would do the same for you. He has the merit of being a perfectly straightforward fellow, and since he does not go home like the rest to-morrow——"

"Thanks. Vercoe will do excellently. He is a friend of yours, too!"

"I'm glad to say he is."

"Well, you may now be pretty certain there will be no foul play, whatever else may follow. I'll teach you wisdom on your front teeth."

"I dare say," said Phil, as he coolly stalked out, and left Acton curled up on his chair, like a cobra balancing for its stroke.

CHAPTER XXIV

A RENEWED FRIENDSHIP

One morning Gus was much astonished to receive a letter containing a blank sheet of notepaper enfolding a postal order for £1. This was properly filled in, payable to A.V.R. Todd at St. Amory's Post-office, but there was not the slightest clue as to the sender. Gus looked at the blue and white slip in an ecstasy of astonishment. Now, Gus knew that no one was aware of his bankrupt exchequer save Cotton, and he knew that Jim was not likely to have said anything about it for one or two very good reasons, and would now keep it darker than ever. If it were known that Gus had been practically pilloried for being penniless by the fellow who had lifted his cash, Cotton would have heard a few fancy remarks on his own conduct which would have made his ears tingle. Gus pondered over this problem of the sender until he felt giddy, but he finally came to the conclusion that Cotton had regretted his polite attentions to an old friend, and had sent the order as a kind of *amende honorable*. Gus instantly regretted the fervent wishes about the boiling oil and the public kicking for Jim Cotton, and he also determined to go and thank his old patron for what he was sure was his anonymous gift.

So, after breakfast, he cashed the order and, with pockets heavier with coin than they had been for some time, he went to Jim Cotton's room. Jim received him with an odd mixture of anger and shame, and when Gus handed over to him two half-crowns, Cotton in some confusion, told him to hand them over to Philips, who had initiated the subscription for the Penfold tablet.

"Thought you were the secretary?" said Gus.

"No! I'm out of the boat now. Philips is the man," said Cotton, sulkily.

"And, by the way, Jim, it wasn't half bad of you to send me that order. It was no end brickish, especially after I had left you more or less in the lurch."

"What order?" said Jim, looking curiously at Gus.

"What's the good of trying to pass it off like that, old man? It could only be you."

"I don't know what you're driving at. You seem to be talking rot," said Cotton, angrily, for he fancied that Gus was fooling him in some way.

"Well, I've got an order for £1 this morning, envelope stamped St. Amory, and it could only come from some one who knew I was stumped, and you're the only fellow who knew that, unless, indeed, you've been kind enough to tell some of the fellows."

"I've told no one; and anyway, I didn't send the order."

"Oh, rot!"

"Thanks! I don't tell lies as a rule, and I say I know nothing whatever about your order. I think you'd better cut now, instead of wasting my time with this rotten foolery."

"You didn't send it?" said Gus, finally, with more than a dash of irritation in his voice at the continued boorishness of Cotton.

"No, I tell you! Shall I get a foghorn and let you have it that way?"

"Then, look here, Cotton. If you didn't send it, your underscoring of my name on the house list because I couldn't subscribe was the act of an arrant cad."

Cotton winced at Gus's concise definition, but he said, "Oh, get out, you fool!"

"Fool, or not," said Gus, becoming more angry every moment as he thought of his wrongs, "I'm not an underbred loafer who cleans a fellow out of his cash and then rounds on him because he can't pay his way. Why, a Whitechapel guttersnipe——"

"Can't appreciate the allusion," said Jim; "I've never been to Whitechapel. But anyhow, Todd, there's the door. I think you had really better go."

"Not till I've said you're the biggest bounder in St. Amory's."

"Now you've said it you really must go, or I'll throw you out!"

Gus was too taken up with his own passion to notice that Cotton was also at about the limit of his patience, and that Jim's lips had set into a grim and ugly sneer. Todd was furiously trying to find some clinching expression which would quite define Jim's conduct, when that gentleman took one stride forward and caught him by the collar. The grip, the very touch of Cotton's fingers maddened Gus beyond all bearing. His anger broke loose from all control; he wrenched himself out of Cotton's grasp and passionately struck him on the mouth.

Cotton turned grey with passion as bitter as Todd's and repaid Gus's blow with interest. Gus dropped to the floor, bleeding villainously. Cotton thereupon jerked him to his feet, and threw him out of the room.

Gus picked himself up from the corridor floor and went to his own room, his face as white as a sheet and his heart as black as ink. What Gus suffered from his passion, his shame, his hatred, and the pain of his old friend's blow, for the next few hours words will not tell. He attended morning school, his head in a whirl of thought. Cotton was there too, and, could looks have killed, Jim Cotton would not have been in the land of the living for very long. When Merishall went, Gus

waited until all the form had filed out, and, still dizzy and sick, he wearily followed suit and turned in at his own door. As Gus came into the room some one rose up and faced round to meet him, and Todd found himself once more face to face with Cotton.

Now, the blow which had tumbled down Gus so heartily had, so to speak, tumbled down the striker in his own mind just as thoroughly. Jim Cotton's mind was not a subtle one, but the minute after he had floored Gus and shut the door on him, his better mind told him distinctly that he was a cad. Why? Because when he struck Gus the feeling was as though he had struck a cripple. Gus had doubled up under the weight of his hand as though he had been a leaf. Cotton dimly felt that for a fellow of his build and weight to let Gus have the full benefit of both was not fair. "That is how it must feel, I suppose, to strike a girl. My fist seems unclean," he said, in huge disgust. "I'd give Todd his three sovs. back if I could recall that blow. I wish I'd left the fool alone, and anyhow, it's my opinion I don't shine much in our little squabble. Todd has been playing the man since his Perry cropper, and I've been playing the cad just because he was once useful to me and I did not want to let him go." Cotton devoted the next few hours to a little honest unselfish thinking, and the result was that he came pretty near to despising himself. "I'll go and apologize to Gus, and if he shies the poker at my head I'm hanged if I dodge it."

That is why Gus was received in his own room by the fellow who had so lately knocked him down. Gus stared at Jim, his swollen lip trembling with anger and his eyes blazing with indignation.

"I say, Gus, old man, I am an utter out-and-out cad, and I've come to apologize."

Gus murmured something indistinctly.

"When I knocked you down I did the most blackguardly thing that even I have ever done, and, you may believe me or not, I am now about disgusted with myself. I felt that there was only one thing that I could do, and that was to apologize."

Jim was so obviously cut up by remorse that Gus thereupon buried the hatchet. He did not throw the poker at Jim's head, and you may be surprised to hear—or you may not—that Gus and Jim Cotton took their after-dinner coffee at Hooper's, as in the old time. The conversation was *staccato* at first, but interesting.

"But who sent the order?" said Gus.

"Dunno, really; but I could almost bet my boots that Taylor is the criminal."

"Taylor! What does he know of my affairs?"

"Well, that beastly house list with your red raw agony column made him most suspicious, and I believe he knows to a hair exactly how big a cad I've been."

"Go on, old man; leave that."

"He sucked Philips dry about the Penfold tombstone, and although he said nothing to me personally, Philips gave me to understand that I'm not in favour with the parson. Taylor is the man who's provided your sub. for the Penfold, take my word for it."

"He's not half such a bad fellow, Jim."

"No," said Jim, with an uneasy laugh; "Taylor's all right, but he'll make me squirm when he has the chance."

The friendship of Cotton and Todd was thus renewed and cemented—with Gus's bluest blood. Gus gave Jim some good advice about the schools, which made Jim feel a bit dubious.

"Chuck your Bohn's cribs and your keys under the grate, and show up your own work."

"Footle, you mean, Gus."

"All right, footle, then. I know all our own private personal beaks would rather have a fellow's own work, if of fair quality, than all the weirdest screeds from any crib whatsoever."

Jim made the experiment, very gingerly, be it said, but did show up his own work, and from Corker to Merishall all the beaks were civil to him. Gus's reputation as a prophet was established, for Corker himself seemed pleased with the Cottonian version of Herodotus.

"Rather rough in parts, Cotton," said the old man, beaming on the shrinking Jim; "but at least you've not been ploughing Herodotus with the help of your old ass, Bohn."

Jim's effort, however, came too late to affect in any degree his position in the Fifth. When the lists of the Easter term were published, Cotton was the last, deservedly, of the form, but A.V.R. Todd was the seventh. This was an eye-opener to many in the form, but the result sent Gus into the seventh heaven of delight. Taylor came specially into Todd's modest sanctum to congratulate him, and Corker sent an extra special letter to Todd senior, saying all manner of sweet things about Gus. He put the highest mark of his favour upon the delighted Gus by asking him to dinner—a very great honour, but a dreadful ordeal. Gus was wonderfully nervous as he commenced his soup. How do I know? Well, I had been asked, I believe, to give the bewildered Gus a little countenance. Gus went home, a day or two later, to the bosom of his family, where he was treated with the utmost honour. He redeemed the watch from the jeweller, and fulfilled his own promise to that worthy man. All through the holidays he basked in the smiles of his proud father,

and rode that gentleman's pedigree hack. Corker's highest mark of appreciation was to give you a dinner; with Gus's father it was to let you ride his own horse.

CHAPTER XXV

A LITTLE ROUGH JUSTICE

Quietly and without any fuss the few details were arranged, and next morning four of us filtered down to the old milling ground, on whose green sod so many wrongs had been righted in the old times, and where I sincerely hoped Phil would yet redress, however imperfectly, another.

Of course, we all know fisticuffs are not what they were; for every strenuous mill of to-day there used to be fifty in the old days, and the green turf which formerly was the scene of terrific combats between fellows of the Upper School now only quaked under the martial hoof of, say, Rogers, the prize fag of Biffen's, and Poulett, the champion egg poacher of Corker's, and other humble followers of the "fancy." Milling as an institution in the schools may write up "Ichabod" above its gates.

I tossed with Vercoe for corners, and when I won, I chose the favourite corner, the one King had when he fought Sellers with a broken wrist, and beat him, too; which Cooper had when he stood up to Miller for one whole half-holiday, and though beaten three or four times over, never knew it, and won in the end, which mills and the causes thereof, if some one would write about them, would make capital reading. Anyhow, it is a lucky corner, from the legends connected with it, and I thought we should need any luck that might be knocking about so early in the morning.

Phil was as cool and calm as though he were going to gently tunc a small fag for shirking. Acton was outwardly calm, but inwardly seething with hate, rage, and blood-thirstiness. His proud soul lusted for the opportunity to repay the flick on the face he had received from Phil, with interest. I watched the sparkling fire in his eye, the unaffected eagerness for the fray in his pose, and thought that even Acton had not quite the skill to cater for such a large and lusty appetite. Vercoe and I set our watches, and agreed to call time together, and then we moved each to our corner. Phil peeled as quietly as though he were going to bed, Acton with feverish haste, which perhaps was his foreign blood working out; beside Acton's swift, impulsive movements Phil's leisurely arrangements seemed sluggish indeed.

"Time!" said Vercoe and I in chorus, and I added in an undertone to my man, "Go in and win."

It was obvious from the start that Phil was not as good a man as Acton as far as skill was concerned, but when it came to well-knit strength there was no doubt that Phil had the pull. Acton's eagerness was a disadvantage against one so cool as Bourne. In the very first round, Acton, in his overwhelming desire to knock Phil out in as short a space as possible, neglected every ordinary precaution, and, after a spirited rally, Phil broke through Acton's slovenly guard, and sent him spinning into Vercoe's arms. We called time together, and to my intense satisfaction the first round resulted in our favour.

After that, thoroughly steadied by Phil's gentle reminder, Acton dropped all looseness, and began to treat Phil with the greatest respect, never taking any risks, but working in a scientific fashion, which poor Phil found hard enough to parry, and when he could not do that, hard enough to bear. But he never faltered; he took all that Acton could give him in imperturbable good temper, working in his dogged fashion as though he were absolutely confident of winning in the long run, and as disregarding present inconveniences because they were expected, and because the ultimate reward would repay all a hundred-fold.

There was also something else I noticed. Acton did not do so much damage as he ought to have done, and I found him constantly "short," but when Phil did score there was the unmistakable ring of a telling blow. I was puzzled in my mind why Acton was so "short," but I think now it was because he had never done anything but with gloves on, and fisticuffs, which were more or less familiar with Phil, were unknown to him. They don't fight, I believe, in France or Germany with Nature's weapons, but occasional turn-ups with the farmers' sons and the canal men had, of course, fallen to Phil's share.

On each occasion that Phil got home, Acton answered with a vicious spurt which did not do much good, but only tired him, and at the end of the seventh round I was astonished to think that Phil had stood the racket so well. Phil's lips were puffy, and one eye was visibly swelling, and he had other minor marks of Acton's attention, but he was in excellent condition still. Acton was damaged above a bit, and Phil's first-round reminder showed plainly on his cheek.

Acton began to think that unless he could make Phil dance to a quicker tune pretty soon, he himself would be limping round the corner of defeat, for he was very tired. When we called them up for the eighth round, he had evidently determined to force the fighting. Much as I disliked Acton, I could not but admire his splendid skill; he bottled up Phil time and again, feinted, ducked, rallied, swung out in the nick of time, planted hard telling blows, and was withal as hard to corner as a sunbeam. As I sponged Phil at the end of the eighth I felt that three more rounds as per last sample would shake even him, so I said, "Try, old man, for one straight drive if he gives you a ghost of a chance. Don't try tapping."

Acton came up smiling; in a twinkling he had Phil at sea by his trickiness, and was scoring furiously. Then, for the first time, Phil backed, shortly and sharply. Acton sprang forward for victory, and a huge lunge should have given Phil his quietus, but it was dreadfully short, and stung rather than hurt. Phil recovered the next moment, and was on the watch again cool and cautious as ever. Then Acton, following an artless feint which drew Phil as easily as a child, ducked the blow and darted beneath his guard. I gave Phil up for lost. How it happened, though I was watching carefully, I cannot say, but Acton seemed to slither or stumble on the turf as he rushed in, and for one second he was at Phil's mercy.

At that very instant Phil's arm flashed out, and with a blow which would have felled an ox, he caught Acton between the eyes. Acton dropped to the ground like a bludgeoned dog.

Phil, like a gentleman, backed a yard or so away, waiting for Acton to get up again, but he made no sign. Vercoe and I then counted him out with all due formality, and Phil had won at the very moment he was about to be beaten. We did our best for Acton, who was unconscious, and, just when we began to despair of bringing him round, he opened his eyes with the usual vacant stare. In a minute he recovered his thoughts, and said eagerly, "Then I've won."

"Not quite," said Vercoe, grimly. "You've jolly well lost."

Acton tottered to his feet blind with rage—diabolic rage—but hate and fury couldn't give him strength to stand. Vercoe gently caught him, and laid him quietly on his back, and sponged his face where the awful force of Phil's blow was becoming plainer every moment.

He compressed his lips with rage and pain, and looked at Phil with such a look of deadly hatred that Vercoe was disgusted.

"Now come, Acton. You've fought well, and, by Jove! you ought to lose well. Bourne fought like a gentleman, and you've been beaten fairly. What is the good of bearing any malice?"

"Look here, Acton," said Phil, "I'm jolly glad I've thrashed you, but all is over now. Here's my hand, and we'll let bygones be bygones."

"Never!" said Acton. "I'll get even with you yet."

"So be it," said Bourne; and he turned away, and got into his coat, leaving Vercoe and Acton on the field of battle. "Don't care to mention it, old man," he said to me as we got to his room, "all the same, I thought I was a gone coon just when I knocked the fellow out."

I went for my holidays that morning, and Acton, escorted by Vercoe, got into the same train. He was white and almost scared looking at his defeat, but there was on his face still that unfading expression of unsatisfied hate and lust for revenge. I buried my face in my paper in utter disgust.

So you see Acton departed from St. Amory's at the beginning of the Easter holidays in a slightly different mood from that which he enjoyed at Christmas, when the young Biffenites had cheered him till they were hoarse and he was out of hearing.

Toby was almost beside himself with consternation when Bourne and Vercoe turned up at the Courts in the afternoon.

"Your 'ands, Mr. Bourne, and your eye! What have you been a-doing of?"

"I have had the painful necessity to thrash a cad, Toby."

"But you did thrash him, sir?"

"I fancy so," said Bourne, grimly.

Jack went home in the evening a sadder and wiser boy. When he saw his brother's closed eye and swollen lip, and the angry patches on his cheeks, he was cut to the heart; he took his thrashing like a man, and, when all was over, felt he loved and respected his brother more than ever. "What a beastly little pig I've been," he said to himself.

Vercoe and Bourne were the victorious finalists at Kensington in the rackets. It was, as the papers aptly remarked, "Quite a coincidence that Bourne's right eye was beautifully and variously decorated in honour of the occasion."

I don't expect many finalists, at rackets anyhow, turn up with black eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MADNESS OF W.E. GRIM

Grim and Wilson had come back to St. Amory's firmly convinced that Biffen's was the most glorious house that had ever existed, and that it would do—thanks to Acton, Worcester, and the dervishes—great things when the cricket housers came round.

"Grimmy," said Wilson, "you'll have to try to get into the team this year. You would last, if your batting hadn't been so rotten."

"All right, old man; don't rub that in too often."

"You put in a lot of extra practice at one of those bottom nets, Grimmy, and you'll find Worcester'll shove you in first choice, almost, this go."

"Serene. Shall we try to raise a bottle of cherries now," said Grim, lazily, lounging from net to net. "It's heaps too soon to think of housers yet."

"You conceited ass, Grimmy! Not for you. Your batting is too awful."

"Don't worry now. Oceans of time, I tell you. We'll try some cherries, eh?"

The pair strolled lazily off the field, and made several purchases in the preserved fruit line, and then adjourned to their common room for refreshment.

But, as time went on, Grim did not fall in with Wilson's arrangements quite as enthusiastically as that single-hearted Biffenite would have liked him to. A fortnight passed, and Grim had only put in the regulation practice at the nets to Wilson's intense disgust, and the time that should have been devoted to extra cricket was "wasted," according to that ardent Biffenite, in doing, of all things, needlessly elaborate translations for Merishall.

"Whatever is the good of getting the very word the beak wants, Grimmy. I always translate *Carmen*—a song. Does it matter a cherry-stone that it sometimes means a charm? What good does it do you, you idiot? It only means that Merishall is harder on us. Think of your friends, Grimmy, do. If I didn't know you were a bit cracked, I'd say your performance was undiluted 'smuggling.'"

"Cork that frivol, do," said Grim, who was stretched full length on the grass and gazing skywards with a rapt expression in his eyes, "and look over there. How beautiful it is!"

"How beautiful what is?" asked Wilson, astonished.

"The sunset, you ass!"

"I don't see anything special about it," said Wilson. "An ordinary affair!"

"Ordinary affair! Ugh, you idiot. Look at those lovely colours mingling one with another, those light fleecy clouds floating in a purple sea, that beautiful tint in the woods yonder, that—that—"

"Steady, Grim. Take time," said Wilson, squirming away from his chum.

"Wilson, you haven't any soul for beauty. A sunset is the loveliest sight on earth, you duffer."

"Didn't know a sunset ever was on earth," said Wilson, sarcastically.

"Is that funny?"

"All serene, Grimmy," said Wilson, elaborately agreeing with his friend as a mother might with a sick child. "Matter of fact, it is rather fine. Not unlike a Zingari blazer, eh?"

"Zingari blazer!"

"Exactly like. And that pink on the trees would do for the Westminster shirts."

"Blazers and shirts," cried Grim, in disgust. "Oh! get out."

"Let's get in, Grimmy, instead. You'd better see the doctor. 'Pon honour, you aren't well."

"I can't help it," said W.E. Grim, resignedly, "if you haven't any soul. Yes, I'll come. I've got Merishall's work."

There was a coolness that night between the two friends as they sat at the opposite sides of their common table doing their work for Merishall, and Wilson was determined to find out what was disturbing their accustomed peace. He had soon done his modicum of prose and forthwith broached matters.

"Let's have this business out, Grim. It will do you a lot of harm if you keep it in."

"The fact is——" began Grim, hesitating.

"Allez! houp-la!" said Wilson, encouragingly.

"I'm going in strong for poetry."

For reply Wilson laughed as though his life depended on the effort, and Grim turned a rich rosy hue. Wilson finally blurted out—

"Grim, you're an utter idiot."

"What do you think about it?"

"Nothing."

"I thought it would surprise you."

"It has, but nothing you do ever will again. Lord, Grimmy, was it for this you chucked cricket and your chance of the house eleven?" Wilson exploded again, uproariously. "I'll tell Rogers and Jack Bourne. You a poet!"

"Why shouldn't I be, you silly cuckoo?"

"Why, you haven't got the cut of a poet, for one thing, and for another, I believe, next to your mother, the thing you like best in the world is a good dinner." Wilson waxed eloquent on Grim's defects from a poet's standpoint. "Your hair is as stiff as any hair-brush; you can't deny you're short and a trifle beefy; and was ever a poet made out of your material and fighting weight?"

"That isn't criticism," said Grim, angrily.

"No," said Wilson, bitterly. "I don't pretend to that. They are a few surface observations only. Just tell this to Rogers or even Cherry, and watch 'em curl."

Wilson and Grim went to bed that night pretty cool towards each other, but in the morning Grim was obstinately bent on being the poet as he was the next week and the week after that. He wrestled with poetry morning, noon, and night, and he made himself a horrible nuisance to his old cronies. Wilson complained bitterly about their study being "simply fizzing with poetry." Grim sprang a poem or a sonnet, or a tribute or some other forsaken variety of poetry, on pretty well everything about the place. He "*dia*" the dawn and worked round to the sunset. He had a little shy at the church and the tombstones, and wrote about the horse pond's "placid wave." He did four sonnets on the school, looking from north, south, east and west, and let himself go in fine style about the school captain's batting. He sent this to Phil, and Phil passed the disquisition on to me; it was very funny indeed. Not a single thing was safe from his poetry, and he cut what he could of cricket to write "tributes."

He had a lively time from his own particular knot of friends and enemies, and they jollied him to an extent that, perhaps, reached high-water mark, when Grim found one morning on his table a dozen thoughtful addresses of lunatic asylums, and specimens of the writing of mad people, culled from a popular magazine. But Grim recked not, and persevered. He turned out, as became a budding poet, weird screeds from Ovid, Virgil, and Horace—Bohn's cribs were simple to his tangled stuff—and Merishall beamed wreathed smiles upon him, and told him he was "catching the spirit of the original." After this patent, distinct leg-up from Merishall, Grim took the bit between his teeth and went careering up and down the plains of poesy until the lights were cut off.

Wilson bore with his chum for a month, and then finally delivered his ultimatum.

"If you're still a poet at midsummer, I'm going to cut, and dig with Rogers or Cherry. This den isn't big enough for you, me, and the 'original spirits' you wing every night. I'm off to the nets. Coming? No? Jove! Grimmy, what nightmares you must take to bed with you every night."

But the kindly Fates had the keeping of the chums' friendship in their safe keeping, and I haven't observed yet, that Grim and Wilson are less friendly than they used to be. This consummation is owing to Miss Varley. This young lady, *ætat* XIV, or thereabouts, was responsible for the reclamation of Grim. What the whole posse of his acquaintances with their blandishments and threats could not effect in the space of a month, she did within four and twenty hours. I cannot account for this, except on the supposition that little girls with long yellow hair and pretty brown eyes, and a perambulating blush, create mighty earthquakes in the breasts of rowdy fags. Miss Hilda Elsie Varley, being Biffen's niece, had taken the house under her protection, was more rabidly Biffenite than even Rogers, adored Acton, revered Worcester, and appreciated Chalmers, but despised fags who weren't "training-on" for one of her houses' various elevens. Her sentiments on these matters were mysteriously but accurately known amongst Biffenite juniors.

Grim finally turned his poetical talents upon this young lady. I am not quite certain why he delayed so long. Perhaps he had waited until his gift of song had matured so that the offering might be worthy of the shrine, or perhaps because he had exhausted all other exalted subjects for his muse, but anyhow, he sent Miss Varley an ode on her birthday. This day was pretty generally known amongst Biffen's fags.

When he had finished he read it to Wilson, who unbent from his antagonistic attitude towards poetry when he heard the subject of the verse.

"After all, Grimmy, it doesn't sound more rotten than Virgil, and it *is* rather swagger to say that Biffen's is to Hilda what Samnos was to Juno. It's a jolly lot more, though."

Grim had cheerfully compared Miss Hilda to the queenly Juno, and said that if she would give Biffen's her protection, the house would give the other houses "fits" when the housers came round again; then he put in something about her hair, unconsciously cribbed from Ovid; and something about her walk—this I tracked to Horace; and wound up the whole farrago by saying he was ready to be her door-mat and to shield her from the furies, *etc.*, which, I think, Grim genuinely evolved out of his own effervescing breast. The ode was properly posted by the poet himself, and even Wilson felt genuinely interested in the result. As for Grim, he was so jolly anxious that he could not tackle any more poems, but divided his time between ices at Hooper's and loafing round the letter-rack for Hilda's answer.

A day or so later Wilson was busy translating for Merishall—carefully putting "songs" whenever he spotted "*carmina*"—when he heard Grim flying upstairs, and when the poet had smashed into the room, he held up a letter.

"It's come," he gasped.

Wilson laid down his pen and said, "Wait till you're cool, and then read it out."

This is the letter *in extenso*:—

"Biffen's, Wednesday.

"DEAR GRIM,

"I don't think you'll ever be a poet, at least not a great one. I believe I could give you the Latin for most of the lines you have written: they are so dreadfully like the translations of my school-books, and it isn't very flattering when one has to put up with second-hand compliments several thousand years old, is it? But I am very glad that you think my good opinion of any value to Biffen's, for I should dearly like to see our house top of the school this year, and how can it be when one, who ought to be in the House Eleven, gives up all his time to writing 'poetry' instead of playing cricket? I hope you will not be very vexed with me for writing this, but I know you would prefer me to be

"Yours very sincerely,

"HILDA E. VARLEY.

"P.S.—If I see you admiring the sunsets or the rose-bushes when you ought to be at the nets, I know I shall titter ... even if Miss Langton be with me.

"H.E.V."

Grim struggled through this to the bitter end. Wilson made the very roof echo with his howls of unqualified delight, but Grim's face was uncommonly like that sunset he admired so much.

"This is a sickener," he gasped.

"Jove! Grim, you've wanted one long enough," said Wilson, holding his aching sides.

"Crumbs! One would think she was old enough to be my mother."

"That's a way they have, when they're not feeling quite the thing. No wonder, poor girl."

"Look here, Wilson, keep this dark. I'm not going to write any more poetry. I've been thinking that, ever since I sent Hilda the ode. I don't think it's quite the real article."

"No," said Wilson, consolingly; "only original-spirit catching."

"A lot you know about it, old man," said Grim, hotly.

"Granted, Grimmy; but Hilda twigg'd the fraud, quick enough."

"Well, I'm going to burn it all, right off."

They did. I believe I am doing Grim no injustice when I say he looks less a poet, and acts up to his looks, than any junior in St. Amory's.

Two nights after the receipt of this fateful letter Grim was industriously practising Ranjitsinghi's famous glance at a snug, quiet net, when Miss Varley, accompanied by Miss Cornelia Langton, her governess, went past the nets. Miss Langton told Hilda afterwards that she ought not to speak to hard-working cricketers and distract them in their game. Hilda, I don't think, minded this little wigg'ing, and Grim never went without a friendly nod as he turned from cutting Wilson into the nets, if Miss Hilda Elsie Varley went by.

CHAPTER XXVII

CONCERNING TODD AND COTTON

Knowing Acton's pride—his overwhelming pride—I never expected to see him back at St. Amory's. I expected that he would almost have moved heaven and earth and got himself taken off the school books and gone to complete his education somewhere else rather than come back to the old place where he had had such a signal thrashing. But, of course, he knew jolly well that we four had our tongues tied, and that the knowledge of his defeat was, so to speak, strictly private property; and that is why, I am pretty sure, he turned up again.

He strolled up and down the High, arm-in-arm with Worcester, in high good humour, on the day we returned; but when I turned the corner and came upon him *vis-à-vis* he gave me a long, level, steady look of hatred, which told me that he had nursed his wrath to keep it warm. His look made me thoughtful. Young Jack Bourne, too, came sailing along—a breezy miniature copy of Phil, his brother—but when he caught sight of his former patron he blushed like a girl and scuttled into the first available yard.



HE GAVE ME A LONG, STEADY LOOK OF HATRED.

He was not particularly anxious to meet Acton, for Phil, in the holidays, had given Jack a pretty correct inkling of Acton's character, and he began to see—in fact, he did see—that Raffles and the shooting and the billiards, and the hocus pocus of "hedging on Grape Shot," and the trip to London, etc., was only one involved, elaborate plot to strike at Phil. Jack now fully realized that he had played a very innocent fly to Acton's consummate spider, and he now, when there wasn't any very pressing necessity, determined to give the spider's parlour a very wide berth indeed. Acton saw Jack's little manoeuvre, and smiled gently. He was genuinely fond of Jack, but young Bourne had served his purpose; and now, thought Acton, philosophically, "Jack looks upon me as a monster of iniquity, and he won't cultivate my acquaintance." And Phil? Well, Phil regarded the incident as "closed," and paid no heed to his enemy's bitter looks, but divided his attention

between his books and cricket, keeping, perhaps unnecessarily, a bright outlook upon Master Jack.

Todd had come back to St. Amory's in a very different frame of mind from that in which he had returned after the Perry fiasco. His three weeks' holiday had been no end enjoyable; and now, besides a coin or two in his pocket, he had a clean, crisp note in his purse. As he stepped out of the train at the station, the burly figure of Jim Cotton hove in sight, and an eleven-inch palm clapped Gus on the back.

"Hallo! old man. How goes it?"

"Oh!" said Gus, coughing; "I'm all right, Jim, and your biceps seem in their usual working order."

"They are, Gus. I've got a cab out here; we'll go on together."

"Rather! I must find some one to see to the traps, though."

"I've commandeered young Grim," said Jim, "and he'll see to them."

"Provident beggar! Here you are, Grim. Put mine into Taylor's cart, and here's a shilling for you."

Grim, who felt rather injured at being lagged by Cotton so early in the term, just at the moment, too, when he had caught sight of Wilson staggering along with a heavy hat-box, etc., seized Jim's and Gus's effects. Todd's modest *douceur*, however, took off the rough edge of his displeasure.

After tea, Cotton and Todd strolled about, and finally came to anchor behind the nets, where some of the Sixth were already at practice.

"Phil Bourne's good for a hundred at Lord's," said Jim, critically, watching Phil's clean, crisp cutting with interest.

"There's Acton out, too."

"Raw," said Jim. "Biffen's beauty has never been taught to hold his bat, that is evident. Footer is more his line, I take it."

"Are you going to have a try for the eleven, Jim, this year?"

"I'll see how things shape. If Phil Bourne gives me the hint that I have a chance, I'll take it, of course."

"Will he give Acton the hint, think you?"

"I shouldn't say so," said Jim, as Acton's stumps waltzed out of the ground for the fourth time. "He can't play slows for toffee."

"Rum affair about the footer cap," said Gus.

"Rather so. But I believe Phil Bourne is as straight as a die. I'm not so sure of Acton, though. I fancy there's something to be explained about the cap. By the way, Gus, are you going to loaf about this term as usual? Taylor's house side really does want bigger fellows than it's got."

"No!" said Gus. "I'm no good at cricket, nor croquet, nor any other game; nor do I really care a song about them. All the same, I'm not going to loaf."

"What is the idea?" said Jim, curiously.

"I'm going to have a shot for the history medal, and I mean to crawl up into the first three in the Fifth."

"And you'll do 'em, Toddy," said Jim, admiringly. "You're not quite such an ass as you once were."

"Well, I'll work evenly and regularly, and, perhaps, pull off one or other of them."

"I go, you know, at midsummer. Then I'm to cram somewhere for the Army. Taylor's been advising a treble dose of mathematics, and I think I'll oblige him this time."

"Taylor's not half a bad fellow," said Gus.

"Oh, you're a monomaniac on that subject, Gus! Once you felt ill if you met Taylor or Corker on your pavement."

Jim Cotton was right. Gus was now a vastly different fellow from the shiftless, lazy, elusive Gus of old; he worked evenly and steadily onward, and, in consequence, his name danced delightfully near the top of the weekly form-lists of the Fifth Form. He, however, did not sap everlastingly, but on half holidays lounged luxuriantly on the school benches, watching the cricket going on in the bright sunshine, or he would take his rod and have an afternoon among the perch in the Lodestone, that apology for a stream. Fishing was Gus's ideal of athleticism; the exercise was gentle, and you sometimes had half a dozen perch for your trouble. Gus argued there was nothing to show for an eight hours' fag at cricket in a broiling sun.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ACTON'S LAST MOVE

Phil's unpopularity had somewhat abated, for his victory in the rackets had given him a good leg up in the estimation of his fellows; but still there was the uneasy feeling that in the matter of the "footer" cap his conduct was shady, or at least dubious.

I was awfully sorry to see this, for I myself was leaving at midsummer, and in my own mind I had always looked upon Phil to take up the captaincy. He would have made, in my opinion, the *beau ideal* of a captain, for he was a gentleman, a scholar, and an athlete. But the other monitors, or at least many of them, did not look upon Phil with enthusiasm, and his election for the captaincy did not now seem the sure thing it had done a few months before.

At St. Amory's the monitors elect a captain, and Corker confirms the appointment if he thinks their choice suitable, but he insists that he must be well up in the Sixth, and not a mere athlete.

Now, Phil's ambition was to be Captain of St. Amory's, as his father had been before him, and when the home authorities finally decided that I was to go to Cambridge in the Michaelmas term; Phil hoped and desired to step into my shoes. He had one great lever to move the fellows in his favour, he was much the best cricketer in the school and deservedly Captain of the Eleven, and, besides that, was one of the best all-round fellows in Sixth Form work. But Phil did not in the least hint that the captaincy was his soul's desire; he determined to merit it, and then leave the matter in the hands of the school. So, from the very beginning of the term, he read hard and played hard, and he left his mark on the class lists and the scoring-board in very unmistakable fashion.

And now Acton came like an evil genius on the scene. In a word, he had determined that if he could in any way baulk poor Phil's ambition, he would. If by his means he could put Phil out of the running for the captaincy it should be done. If he could succeed, this success would make up and to spare for his two former defeats. Therefore, warily and cautiously, he set to work.

Acton himself was not much of a cricketer; the game was not, as it were, second nature to him, as it was to Phil, but he was a very smart field—cover was his position—and he could slog heavily, and often with success. He threw himself heartily into the game, and crept rapidly up the ladder of improvement, until Biffen's whispered that their shining light stood a good chance of getting into the Eleven. "That is," said Biffen's crowd, "if Bourne will run straight and give a good man his flannels. But after the 'footer' fraud, what can one expect?" I heard of this, and straightway told Phil.

"Oh, they need not fear. If Acton deserves his flannels, he will get them. I've nothing whatever against his cricket."

Acton learned this, and instantly his new-found zeal for cricket slackened considerably.

"Oh!" said he to himself, "I can't blister you there, Bourne, eh? I can't pose as the deserving cricketer kept out of the Eleven by a jealous cad of a captain, eh? So I'll try another tack to keep you in evil odour, Mr. Bourne."

Acton did not turn up at the nets that night, and when Worcester noticed this, Acton calmly sailed on his new tack.

"What's the good of sweating away at the nets, Dick? I'll not get my flannels in any case."

"Oh yes, you will. Bourne has said he's got nothing against your cricket."

"And you believe that, Dick?" said Acton, with a whistle of contemptuous incredulity.

"I do," said Dick. "But you are not exactly quite the flier at cricket that you are at 'footer,' so you can't afford to slack up now."

"I've got private knowledge," said Acton, with a filthy lie, "that I won't get 'em in any case, so I shall not try."

Dick was considerably upset by this, and Acton's sudden stoppage of practice after an intense beginning made his lie seem a good imitation of truth, and gave Worcester food for bitter thoughts against Phil. Acton worked "the-no-good-to-try" dodge carefully and artistically; he never actually said his lie openly, or Phil would have nailed it to the counter, but, like a second Iago, he dropped little barbed insinuations here, little double-edged sayings there, until Biffenites to a man believed there would be a repetition of the "footer" cap over again, and the school generally drifted back to aloofness as far as Phil was concerned.

Acton laid himself out to be excessively friendly with the monitors, and just as he entered into

their good graces, Phil drifted out of them—in fact, to be friendly with Acton was the same thing as being cool towards Bourne. Phil made splendid scores Saturday after Saturday, but the enthusiasm which his fine play should have called out was wanting.

"Why don't you cheer your captain, Tom?" I overheard a father say to his young hopeful.

"No fear!" said the frenzied Biffenite. "Bourne is a beast!"

In fact, the only one who seemed to derive any pleasure from Bourne's prowess in the field was Acton himself. He used to sit near the flag-staff, and when Phil made his splendid late cut, whose applause was so generous as his? whose joy so great? Acton's manoeuvres were on the highest artistic levels, I can assure you, and in the eyes of the fellows generally, his was a case of persecuted forgiving virtue. Acton, too, kept in old Corker's good books, and his achievements in the way of classics made the old master beam upon him with his keen blue eye.

I saw with dismay how persistently unpopular Phil remained, and I heard the charms of Acton sung daily by monitor after monitor, until I saw that Acton had captured the whole body bar Phil's own staunch friends, Baines, Roberts, and Vercoe. And then it dawned upon me that Acton was making a bid for the captaincy himself, and when I had convinced myself that this was his object, I felt angrier than I can remember. I thereupon wrote to Aspinall, gave him a full, true, and particular account of Acton's campaign against Phil, and asked him to release me—and Phil—from our promise of secrecy regarding the football-match accident. His reply comforted me, and I knew that, come what might, I had a thunderbolt in my pocket in Aspinall's letter, which could knock Acton off the Captain's chair if he tried for that blissful seat.

I told him so, to save trouble later on, and he heard me out with a far from pretty sneer, which, however, did not quite conceal his chagrin. But though I made sure of his being out of the hunt, I could not make sure of Phil being elected, and in a short time Mivart was mentioned casually as the likeliest fellow to take my place. I have nothing whatever to say against Mivart; he was a good fellow, but he was not quite up to Phil's level.

Phil knew of these subterranean workings of his enemy, but he was too proud a fellow to try and make any headway against the mining.

"If they elect Mivart they will elect a good man, that is all, though I'd give a lot, old man, to take your place."

Thus things went on until Lord's came and ended in the usual draw. Phil's selection of the Eleven was in every way satisfactory, and his score for first wicket had made St. Amory's safe from defeat, but, despite all, his unpopularity was pronounced.

The election was going to take place in a week, and Mivart, thanks to Acton's careful "nursing," was evidently going to romp home in the election with something like a sixteen to four majority. Vercoe determined to propose Phil, and Baines was only too delighted to second it; but Phil's cronies had no more hope of his success than Phil had himself.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHY BIFFEN'S LOST

After the Lord's match there were two burning subjects of conversation: Who should be captain in my place? and which house should be the cock house at cricket? Every house captain looked with dread upon the house of Corker, great alike at cricket and footer, and it was agreed that very probably Phil Bourne would once more lead his men on to victory. Biffen's house did not stand much chance, for there was no superlative Acton at cricket; but it was, indeed, mainly through his efforts that Biffen's was as good as it was. You may remember that Acton had taken under his patronage those dark-skinned dervishes, Singh Ram and Runjit Mehtah. They were unquestionably the best pair of fellows in the school in strictly gymnastic work; and when summer came they showed that they would, sooner or later, do something startling with the bat. The Biffenite captain, Dick Worcester, did not altogether relish their proficiency. "It's just my luck to have my eleven filled up with niggers," he observed to Acton in half-humorous disgust; but Biffenites pinned their faith on Worcester, the dervishes, and Acton, and, to the huge delight of Grim, Rogers, Wilson, Thurston, and other enthusiastic junior Biffenites, the resurrected house survived the first two rounds.

The third round they were to meet Taylor's lot, a good house, and the hopes of Grim and Co. were

tinged with considerable doubt.

On the particular afternoon when this important match was to be played, Todd had strolled off to the Lodestone stream, laden with all the necessary tackle for the slaying of a few innocent perch. The year's final lists of the forms were due also in the evening on the various notice-boards.

Gus had redeemed his promise made at the beginning of the term, and had worked hard for a prominent position on the list, and his attempt to capture the history medal had been, he thought, fairly satisfactory. He would soon know his fate, however, in both directions. Meanwhile, to allay his anxiety as to the results, he had unpatriotically given the cricket-fields a wide berth, and thus deprived Taylor's of the privilege of his cheer in the house match. He and Cotton had an invitation to dine with Taylor that evening, so, after telling Jim his programme for the afternoon, he had trudged down the lane which Jack Bourne knew so well.

The afternoon was hot: the one-o'clock sun made Gus think that perhaps there was more cruelty than usual in luring the fishes out of the cool waters of the Lodestone; but, nevertheless, he philosophically baited his hook, and cast forth. The sport was not exciting, and by-and-by Gus found himself wondering, not why the fish were so shy, but whence came the faint, delicate perfume of cigars, which undoubtedly reached his nostrils? The Lodestone Farm was a quarter of a mile away, and obviously the scent could not travel thus far, and since Gus was alone on the banks of the stream, running sluggishly towards the moat, the constant whiffs of cigars reaching him seemed somewhat mysterious. Gus looked again carefully, but could see no one, and yet there was undoubtedly some one smoking very near him.

"Well, it *is* odd," said Gus, for the nth time sniffing the "tainted breeze." Curiosity piqued the fisher to trace the mystery. He reconnoitred carefully, and presently fancied he could hear the faint murmur of voices. This proceeded from the boat-house, wherein Hill moored the moat punt. "I'll just make a reconnaissance in force," said Gus, putting down his rod. Arrived at the punt-house, Gus peeped in through the slightly open door, and discovered no less important personages than Runjit Mehtah and "Burnt Lamb." The two dervishes were lolling luxuriantly on the punt cushions, each smoking a fine fat cigar, and the combined efforts of the two gave quite an Oriental air of magnificence to the ramshackle boat-house.

"Hallo!" said Gus. "What the deuce are you doing?"

The cigars nearly fell from the mouth of each of the smokers as Gus appeared on the scene, but when the smokers made out Todd's face through the haze, Mehtah said, with much relief—

"Oh, talking."

"That isn't quite a true bill," said Gus. "Your Flora Fina de Cabbagios keep the fish from biting."

"Have one," said Burnt Lamb, hospitably offering Todd a cigar.

"No thanks. Is this punt-house your usual lounge?"

"Sometimes," said Mehtah. "We can't do without our smoke, and we can't do it, you know, at the school."

"No, that you jolly well can't, my dusky Othello. But aren't you two booked for the Houser's this afternoon? I thought you were the backbone of Biffen's."

"The match is not for an hour yet," said Lamb.

"Oh yes," said Mehtah, "we're going to sit on your house this afternoon, Todd."

At this most interesting point of the conversation the door of the punt-house was violently slammed to, and Gus was propelled forward clean into the punt and received hurriedly into the unexpectant arms of Burnt Lamb. Before any of the three could understand what had happened there was a hurried fumbling with the staple and pin of the punt-house door from the outside, and then an equally hurried retreat of footsteps.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Gus, after he had picked himself up and tried the door. "We're locked in."

Young Rogers and Wilson, who had done this fell deed, hoped there was no doubt about the locking. This couple of ornaments had immediately after dinner snatched their caps and ran on past the Lodestone Farm for a particular purpose. They had found a yellowhammer's nest a day or so before, containing one solitary egg, and their hurried run was for the purpose of seeing if there was any increase, and if so—well, the usual result. They were anxious to get back to the cricket-field in time to shout and generally give their house a leg-up when the Houser with Taylor's commenced, and their friend Grim had strict orders to bag them each seats, front row, in the pavilion. They had been busy blowing eggs for pretty well twenty minutes, and, as they were lazily returning schoolwards, they caught sight of Gus watching his float.

"There's Gus Todd trying to hook tiddlers," said Rogers.

"Shy a stone," suggested Wilson, "and wake 'em up."

"Rot! There's no cover."

"It's only Todd," said Wilson. "What's the odds?"

"Yes, but not quite the old ass. Better get home."

Keeping well out of sight, the two cronies had watched with curiosity Todd's manoeuvres as he tried to run the cigar-smokers to earth. When Gus entered the punt-house, a bright idea struck Wilson.

"Say, Rogers, remember Toddy locking us in the laboratory last term? Two hundred Virgil."

"Ah!" said Rogers, catching the meaning of Wilson's remark instanter; "if we only could cork him up there for the afternoon! That would pay him out for Merishall's call-over lines."

"We'll chance it," said Wilson. "If we can't do it, well, we didn't know Gussy was in—eh?"

"Rather! That is the exact fable we'll serve out to Todd, if necessary."

Breaking cover, the young Biffenites had secured the door of the punt-house without any difficulty, and then had run for dear life.

"Golly!" said Rogers, pulling up when well out of sight of the boat-house; "we did that rather neat, eh? Hanged if Toddy wasn't smoking like a chimney. Did you twig his weed?"

"Regular stench," said Wilson. "Toddy will have to swim out through the front way, or howl for help. The punt is sure to be locked."

"He'll have to take a header off the punt into the moat, and that isn't crystal, exactly."

"Six yards of mud is about the figure," said Wilson, almost hysterically.

"I say, old man, if we'd only been able to bottle up Jim Cotton along with his chum! What price Biffen's for the Houser, then?"

"If" said Wilson, wistfully. "Wouldn't the dervishes walk into Taylor's bowling, if Bully wasn't there to sling them in?"

"Never mind," said Rogers, hardly daring to contemplate the ravishing prospect of Taylor's house without Cotton, "the dervishes are sure to come out strong this afternoon. Let 'em once get their eye in, and either of 'em is good enough for a hundred."

The two young Biffenites found the faithful Grim holding the fort in the front bench of the pavilion against the ardent assaults of some Taylorian juniors, who could not see what Grim wanted with three seats. The fellows of the two houses were rapidly lining up for the match, and Dick Worcester had sent to Biffen's making affectionate inquiries for the dervishes. By-and-by, word was brought to Worcester that the two were not to be found in the neighbourhood; and a further hurried search by anxious Biffenites, headed by Rogers and Wilson, had a like result.

"Isn't it awful, Grimmy?" said Rogers. "Where can the idiots be?"

Worcester and Acton had a consultation. "If they don't turn up in time we'll have to make a start without 'em."

"If we have to go in we may give 'em up. We can't bat substitutes."

"No fear!" said Dick. "Cotton isn't likely to hear of that, and, besides, it's just like the rotten thing you might expect from those niggers."

Acton smiled. "All right, old chap. Put in Grim and Rogers in their place. The little beggars will be as keen as mustard."

So Grim and Rogers had the honour of representing their house, since the dervishes did not turn up. Rogers, when he shut the door on Todd, did not guess that he had shut up Biffen's crack bats too. That Biffen's lost the match, and made no sort of show against Cotton's bowling, may also, perhaps, be attributed to the inadvertent imprisonment of Mehtah and "Lamb."

The imprisoned trio had not had a very lively time that afternoon in the punt-house. The door remained obstinately shut, and neither Todd nor his two companions relished a swim in the moat as the price of freedom. The dervishes took matters very calmly; the desire to play for Biffen's was not strong enough to counterbalance the natural shrinking from a header into the duckweed and a run home in wet clothes. Singh Ram had a final try at the door, and then murmured—so Gus said—"Kismet," and relit his half-smoked cigar. Todd, indeed, shouted lustily; but when he realized that by contributing to the escape of the dervishes he might contribute to the downfall of his own house, he stopped himself in the middle of an unearthly howl. For three hours Gus remained a half-voluntary prisoner; but, when he judged it safe, he created such a pandemonium that young Hill hurried out of the farm stable, thinking there must be some weird tragedy taking place at the punt-house. He had hurried across and let the trio out.

The dervishes got a mixed reception from Biffen's crowd. Worcester was almost eloquent in his language, and Acton was calmly indifferent.

"But I tell you, Worcester, some beast locked us in the punt-house."

"I wish they'd kept you there," said Dick, unmollified.

Whilst Worcester was swallowing his tea, Rogers and Wilson craved audience. Their faces were as long as fiddles.

"Oh, Worcester!" began Rogers, tremulously, "we've come to tell you that it was we who lost Biffen's the houser."

"Why, Wilson didn't play, and you caught Cotton," said Dick, astonished.

"But we locked the dervishes in the punt-house—we thought there was only Todd inside."

"Oh, you did, you little beggars, did you?" said Worcester, considering the doleful and grief-stricken Biffenites. "Well, here's a shilling for each of you if you keep it dark. I'm deucedly glad the dervishes didn't play. I'd rather lose a dozen housers than feel the niggers were indispensable. Now, cut; and next time you bottle 'em up, see they don't get out."

"Golly!" said Rogers, as the two left Worcester to his tea. "I suppose the sun's affected Worcester's brain."

Whilst the dervishes were explaining matters to Worcester the other prisoner was elbowing his way into the crowd around the Fifth Form notice-board, whereon were pinned the final lists. Jim Cotton was planted squarely before the board, eyeing the contents with huge delight, and when he caught sight of the struggling Gus he haled him vigorously forward.

"Here you are, Gus! By Jove, Toddy, you've done it this time, you old Perry fizzler!"

Gus eyed the list with delighted eyes.

This is what he saw: "First—Todd, A.V.R.—history medal, and chemistry prize."

Need I say anything more of either Todd or Cotton? Todd entered the Sixth when the summer holidays were over, and Phil Bourne writes me often and tells me what a big gun Todd is in the schools. Jim Cotton was entered upon the roll-call of some celebrated "crammer" near the Crystal Palace. If crammers' hearts *could* be broken, Jim, I should say, will accomplish the feat. But if ever James Cotton *does* get into the Army he will never disgrace his regiment.

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF THE FEUD

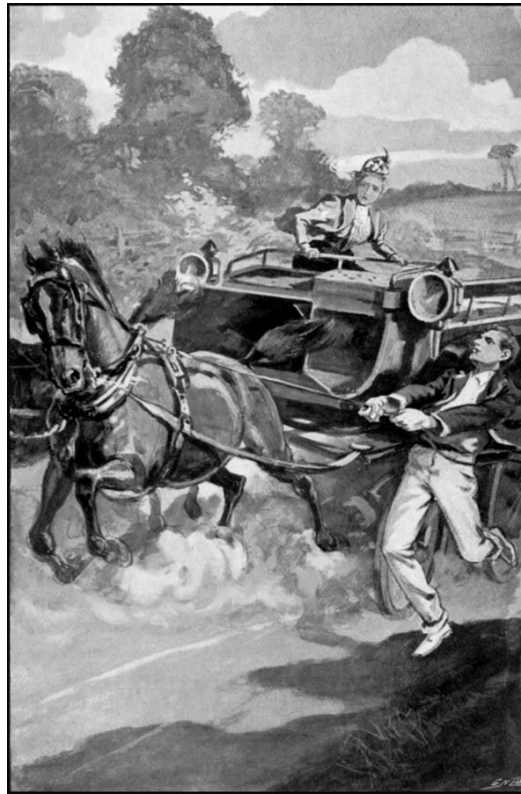
Thoroughly satisfied with himself and all the world, Acton had on the last Saturday of the term—the election for the captaincy was to be held that night—left the cricket field to the enthusiasts, and turned his feet towards the old Lodestone Farm, the road he knew so well. He wanted to be alone with his happy thoughts. He was more than satisfied with himself, and, as he walked along, he mowed down with his ash-plant thistles and nettles in sheer joyfulness of heart. His long feud with Bourne would come to a joyful end that night. Mivart's election was certain, and Mivart's election would pay for all—for the loss of the "footer" cap, and for that terrible half-hour after Bourne had knocked him out, when he felt himself almost going mad from hatred, rage, disgust, and defeat. He had engineered his schemes beautifully; his revenge would be as perfect. The loss of the captaincy would be a bitter, bitter pill for Bourne to swallow.

Whilst he strode on, engrossed with these pleasant thoughts, he fancied he heard shouts and cries somewhere in the distance behind him. He turned round, and down the long stretch of white road he saw a cloud of dust rolling with terrific speed towards him. For one moment he wondered whatever was the matter, but out of the dust he could see the flashing of carriage-wheels, the glitter of harness, and the shining coats of a couple of horses. The carriage came rocking towards him at a terrible rate, sometimes the wheels on one side off the road altogether; the horses had their heads up, and Acton could hear their terrified snorting as they thundered towards him.

"A runaway!" said Acton, backing into the hedge. "They'll come a cropper at the little bridge. What a smash there'll be!" As the runaway horses, galloping like the furies, came nearer, Acton saw something which made his blood run cold. "Jove!" he cried, darting out from the hedge, "there's a lady in the carriage!" Acton was almost frozen with the horror of the thing. "She'll be smashed to pieces at the bridge."

Acton glanced to the little bridge half a mile down the long white road, where the road narrowed to meet the low stone walls, and he knew as well as though he saw it that the carriage would catch the bridge and be shivered to match-wood. The horses must be stopped before they

reached it, or the lady would be killed. Now Acton, with all his faults, was no coward. Without thinking of the terrible risk he ran, he sprang out into the middle of the road and waved his arms frantically at the horses moving like a thunderbolt towards him. But they were too maddened with terror to heed this waving apparition in their path, and Acton, in the very nick of time, just jumped aside and avoided the carriage-pole, pointed like a living lance at his breast.



AS THE HORSES WHIRLED PAST, HE CLUTCHED MADLY AT THE LOOSE REINS.

As the horses whirled past, he clutched madly at the loose reins, see-sawing in the air. He held them, and the leather slid through his frenzied grasp, cutting his palms to the bone. When he reached the loop he was jerked off his feet with a terrible shock, and was whirled along the dusty road, the carriage-wheels grinding, crunching, and skidding within a foot of his head. Luckily the reins held, and when, after being dragged a hundred yards or so, and half choked by the thick dust, he managed to scramble to his feet, he pulled with frenzied, convulsive strength on the off-side rein. The horses swerved to the fearful saw on their jaws, and pulled nearly into the left-hand hedge. Acton's desperate idea was to overturn the carriage into the hedge before the horses could reach the bridge, for he felt he could no more pull them up than he dare let them go. There was just a chance for the lady if she were overturned into the bank or hedge, but none whatever if she were thrown at the bridge. In a minute or so the carriage lurched horribly sideways: there was a grinding crash, and the carriage overturned bodily into the bank. The lady was shot out, and the next minute the horses' hoofs were making tooth-picks of the wrecked carriage.

Acton darted up the bank and found the lady dazed and bruised, but was overjoyed to see she wasn't dead. "Are you much hurt?"

"No, I don't think so," she said, with a brave smile; "but I expected to be killed any moment. You are a brave man, sir, to risk your life for a stranger."

Acton said quietly, "Not at all; but I think I was very lucky to turn them in time."

In a minute or two there was a small crowd. Half a dozen stray cyclists had wheeled up, and with their help Acton got out the horses, dreadfully cut about the legs and shivering with terror, from the wreckage. Down the dusty road were men running for dear life, and ahead of all Acton caught sight of a well-known athletic figure running like a deer, and in another moment Phil Bourne was asking the lady in panting bursts if she were not really hurt.

"No, Phil; not in the least. I owe my life to this gentleman, who pulled the horses into the bank before they could reach the bridge."

Phil wheeled round, his face beaming with gratitude, but when he saw Acton, pale to the lips, the words of thankfulness froze on his lips. For one instant he stared at his old enemy with wonder and amazement, then, with a gesture of utter gratitude, he said—

"Acton, I can never tell you how much I owe you for saving my mother's life, but will you shake

hands?"

Acton looked at Bourne, whose face beamed with admiration and gratitude, and then he put out his hand. In that moment, so honourable to them both, the feud was stamped out for ever. Fresh as he was from as glorious a deed as any Amorion had ever done, he realized that he had been a blackguard towards Bourne the moment Phil begged him to shake hands.

Phil murmured almost inarticulate words of gratitude; but Acton, more than a trifle disturbed at his own thoughts, interrupted hastily—

"Say no more about it, please, Bourne. You'd have done as much for any one."

"Your hands are bleeding," said Phil, with immense concern.

"Nothing at all. I think the reins cut them."

Mrs. Bourne *would* bind them. "Of course!" said she. "How blind of me not to see that this gentleman is one of your schoolfellows, Phil."

"Mother," said Phil, "this is John Acton."

"I've heard Phil talk about your wonderful win at Aldershot. I suppose you're great friends?"

The "great friends" looked on the ground rather guiltily, but Phil cut in with—

"I say, Acton, you must come and have tea with mother and me in my den. Can you?"

Acton said quietly, "All right, Bourne. Thanks, awfully." Then he added under his breath to Phil, "If I can come as a friend?"

"On that condition," said Phil, "I'd like you to come."

The trio walked back along the road—a happy trio they were, too—and a melancholy procession of injured horses and an angry coachman closed their rear. The tea in Bourne's room was very successful, and I should fancy that Hinton did more hard thinking and hard staring when he saw Acton amicably seated with his feet under Bourne's table than he ever did before. The minute he had permission, he flew down the corridor, and exploded bombshell after bombshell among wondering Amorians.

"Acton and Bourne teeing together like two birds on a bough!" he gasped.

"That would be a funny sight," said Cherry. "Birds don't take tea."

"Write an epilogue, Fruity. Teeing together as friendly as Grim and I might."

"Only that," said W.E. Grim, with a genial wink, "my opinion is, that Hinton's been on the drink, and seen double."

Incredulity and wonder were the dominant notes among Amorians for the next two hours.

Acton and Phil walked to the station with Mrs. Bourne, and when she had gone to town, and the pair were returning schoolwards, Acton said thoughtfully—

"Look here, Bourne. Don't know quite what it was that made me feel so cheap when you rushed to thank me for helping your mater. I felt very small."

"If that's so, you'll feel cheaper and smaller when pater sees you. I'd have those hands cured first."

"Bourne," said Acton, very seriously, "I've been an arrant cad since I've come to St. Amory's, and if those horses hadn't bolted with your mater I should never have seen in you anything but a strait-laced prig, as I've all along thought you. I have, really. But that's all changed now, and I'm going to dry up. I suppose you know you aren't popular among the fellows generally?"

"Rather!" said Phil, gloomily.

"And you know that you owe all this to me?"

"Only too well, Acton."

"Well, I'm going to make what amends I can. Have you any objection to my proposing you as captain to-night?"

"Acton, you are a brick," said Phil, "but you're too late now. I don't stand a ghost of a chance against Mivart."

"And I'll get Mivart to second you. I can put all the fellows straight concerning you, and, by Jove, it's the least I can do! I'll make a clean breast of it to them all to-night before the election comes on."

"Oh no, you won't! I'd rather lose the captaincy than that. Besides, Aspinall asked me not to do anything but refuse you your cap."

"I've been an insufferable cad," said Acton, with a hot blush, "but you shall be captain in any

case."

Acton saw Mivart, and whether he told him the whole history of his quarrel with Bourne or not, I cannot say; anyhow, Acton prevailed on him to second Phil. Mivart was a very good fellow, as I said before, and he thoroughly believed that Bourne would make a better captain than he himself would, so he said he would be delighted to back Phil up to any extent, since Phil was not now the jealous bounder he had so long been considered.

I myself, as the retiring captain, took the chair in the Sixth Form room to see the election of my successor through with all due solemnity. Acton got up, and though he was very nervous, he said out straight what he had resolved to say.

"I propose Phil Bourne for captain in place of Carr, and I'll tell you why. I consider him the most suitable fellow to take our old captain's place. Many of you may be—will be—surprised to hear me propose Bourne, for between us two, as you all know, there has been no love lost. But in all the dreary business I have been the utter cad and Bourne the other thing. He brought upon himself any amount of bad feeling because he would not give me my 'footer' cap. I did not deserve it"—some one here said "rot!" emphatically—"not because I wasn't good enough a player, but for another reason, which, much as I should shy at telling you, I would tell, only Bourne begged me not to. It is his and Carr's and another fellow's secret as much as mine, so I feel I had better not say it. But, believe me, in the business I was an utter cad, and instead of bringing all that row about my cap upon Bourne's head, I ought to have burned my boots, and never kicked a football again. There's another matter, this time strictly between Bourne and self, in which I did him as big an injury as one fellow can do another. He gave me a sound thrashing for it on the morning that you fellows went away last term, and Carr and Vercoe here assisted us in our little mill. No one ever deserved a thrashing as I deserved that one, and now I'm glad I got it. It was Bourne's only score against me. Fact is," said Acton, with a grim smile, "I'd rather meet another Jarvis than Bourne."

The fellows opened their eyes, and wondered what next.

"This term I've worked the whole school, and especially you monitors, against Bourne, to make his chance of getting the captaincy a very rocky one. And I think I pretty well succeeded. You all liked Bourne before I appeared on the scene, with good reason, and I do hope you will all give him your votes, for, and I say it absolutely sure of its truth, the best fellow in St. Amory's is Bourne. That is all I can say."

Mivart got up before the fellows had time to recover from their astonishment, and said—

"I have great pleasure in seconding Acton's proposal. I, too, consider Bourne out and out the best fellow to take Carr's place. Whilst Phil was under a cloud I was willing to stand for captain, but since we all know now that he stands where he did, the only proper thing to do is to give him the unanimous vote, for I do not mean to stand at all."

The fellows blankly voted for Bourne, and, as Grim would be sure to say, "the proposition was carried *nem. con.*"

That evening Corker confirmed Phil's appointment, and I spent as happy an evening as I can remember. Acton said he should not come back to St. Amory's again, as his record was too black to be used as a convenient reference, but Phil and I and all the fellows told him we should be only too glad to let bygones be bygones, and that he had really done the square thing at the last.

He did come back, and Phil's letters to me tell me that his old enemy is one of the most popular—deservedly—in the school, and his best friend. They are inseparable, play back together at "footer," and are variously called Gemini, Damon and Pythias, David and Jonathan, as the case may be.

Biffen's are still cock-house at "footer;" Acton is going in again for the "heavy"—this time without the Coon's help—and those "niggers," Singh Ram and Runjit Mehtah, to Worcester's intense disgust, are the representatives of St. Amory's in gymnastics; and, altogether, Biffen's House is, thanks to Acton's help, perhaps the most distinguished in the school.

ACTON'S CHRISTMAS

I

SNOWED UP

A jollier going away for the Christmas holidays had not taken place for an age.

An old Amorian had done "something good" in India, which had obtained an extra week's holiday for his old school, and the Amorians, a day or so before, had beaten the Carthusians, whose forwards had been led to the slaughter by an International whose very initials spell unapproachable football.

The station of St. Amory's was crowded with the fellows, all sporting rugs of vivid patterns on their arms, and new and of-the-latest-shape "bowlers" on their heads, and new and fancy trouserings on their emancipated legs. No more Amorian cap—peak pointing well down the neck—no more trouserings of sober grey-and-black, no more beakish restraint for five weeks! Couples strolled up and down arm-in-arm; knots of the Sixth and Fifth discussed matters of high state interest, and the worthies of the lower forms made the lives of the perspiring porters a misery and a burden to them. Prominent Amorians were cheered, and when those old enemies, John Acton and Phil Bourne, tumbled out of their cab as the greatest of chums, the fags quavered out their shrill rejoicings, honouring the famous school backs who had stemmed the sweeping rush of the Carthusians a day or so before.

There was a rumour that Acton had been asked to play for the Corinthians, and the other athletes on the platform pressed round the pair for information.

Our old friends, Wilson and Jack Bourne, had shut up by stratagem B.A.M. Cherry in the lamp-room, and the piteous pleadings of that young Biffenite were listened to with ecstasy by a crowd of a dozen, who hailed the promises and threats of the prisoner with shouts of mocking laughter.

W.E. Grim, Esq., explained to a few of his particular chums, Rogers among them, the wonderful shooting he was going to have "up at Acton's place" in Yorkshire, and they listened with visible envy.

"Look here, Grimmy, if you tell us next term that you bagged two woodcock with one barrel, we'll boot you all round Biffen's yard—so there."

Acton had, as a matter of fact, invited Dick Worcester, Gus Todd, Jack Senior, of Merishall's house, and Grim, to spend Christmas with him at his mother's place, and they had all accepted with alacrity.

The northern express rolled into the station, and Grim was hurriedly informed by Rogers that he was to bag the end carriage for Acton under pain of death. Grim tore down the platform, and, encouraged by the cheerful Rogers, performed prodigies of valour, told crams to groups of disgusted Amorians, who went sighing to search elsewhere for room, engaged in single combat with one of Sharpe's juniors, and generally held the fort. And then, when Acton came running down, and wanted to know what the deuce he was keeping him waiting for, Grim realized that Rogers had "done" him to a turn. He shouted weird threats as he was hurried away, to the bubbling Rogers, and that young gentleman lifted his hat in ironical acknowledgment. There was the warning shriek from the engine, and then the train crawled out, taking toll of all the Amorians going north, and leaving the others to shout after them endearing epithets and clinching witticisms.

For two days before the Amorians were on the wing home there had been heavy falls of snow, culminating, on the going-away day, in a heavy snow-storm. All the way from St. Amory's the express had been held up by doubtful signals, and in the deeper cuttings the snow had piled up in huge drifts. The express had toiled on its northern journey, steadily losing time at every point. At Preston Acton had telegraphed home that probably they would arrive quite three hours late. Thus it was that, tired but jolly, the party of five Amorians got out of the main line express at Lowbay, and, each laden with rugs and magazines, stumbled light-heartedly across the snow-sodden platform into the local train, which had waited for the express nearly three hours. They found themselves sixteen miles from home, and with no prospect of reaching it before midnight.

"Raven Crag," the name of Acton's home, was situated just within the borders of Yorkshire. A single line of rails takes you from Lowbay Junction up the Westmoreland hills to the top of the heaviest gradient in the kingdom, and then hurtles you down into the little wayside station of Lansdale, the station for "Raven Crag."

The sturdy tank engine coupled to the short local train was steaming steadily and noisily, and when the express had rolled heavily out for Carlisle, the station-master hastily beat up intending passengers for the branch line. Besides Acton's party, there were only two passengers, a lady and a little girl.

"I'll give the old tank a good half-hour to crawl the eight miles to the top of the fells," said Acton, "and then we'll rattle into Lansdale in ten minutes. But she *will* cough as she crawls up. Look here, Dick, I'll have a whole rug, please. This carriage is as cold as a refrigerator."

The fellows made themselves as comfortable as an unlimited supply of rugs and a couple of foot-warmers would admit of. Dick Worcester, without a blush, propped his head against a window and said: "Grim, there's a lingering death for you if you fail to wake me five minutes from Lansdale." The others exchanged magazines and yawned hopefully, whilst Acton took out his Kipling, and straightway forgot snow, home, and friends.

The station master, and the driver, and the guard held an animated conversation round the engine. "Strikes me, Bill, the old engine'll never get t' top of t' bank to-night!" said the guard. "The snow must be terrible thick in Hudson's cutting."

"She'll do it," said the driver,— "wi' luck."

"Got another engine with steam up," inquired the guard, "to give us a lift behind?"

"No, they're all shut down, and we couldn't wait now. You'll have to run her through yourselves," said the station-master. "Nearly four hours late already! Off with you!"

"I'm doubting we can't do it," said the guard, thoughtfully. "To-night is the worst night I can remember for years. The expresses could just manage it."

"Oh, well," said the driver, "we're down to run it, and we're going to try."

"There'll be drifts twenty feet deep in the cutting, and it'll be like running into a house," said the guard, slowly, "but I suppose we've got to try, anyhow."

He walked away thoughtfully to his van, and a moment later there was a shrill whistle, and the Lansdale local ran out into the night.

And it *was* a night! There was no moon, and not the least glimmer of a star overhead; an utter darkness shrouded the world. The wind was high and steady, and its mournful howling through the rocky cuttings of the railway sounded unspeakably melancholy. Driven by the gale, the snowflakes had in five minutes covered the windward side of the train with a winding-sheet, inches deep, and when Gus Todd, from curiosity, opened the window to peer out into the night, the flakes, heavy, large, and soft, whirled into the carriage a very cataract of snow.

"Don't, Gus, please," pleaded Acton, looking up from his book in astonishment at the snow glittering in the lamp-light; "I prefer that outside, thanks."

"It's an awful storm, Acton," said Gus, hastily drawing up the window. "Allah! how it snows!"

"Is this up to the usual sample here?" asked Senior, nestling nearer the dozing Dick.

"Well," said Acton, listening a moment to the stroke of the engine, and the roar of the wind, "I think we may say it is."

"Blizzard seems nearer the word, old man. The flakes come at you like snowballs."

"Shan't be sorry when we tread your ancestral halls. This weather is too-too for comfort. And don't we crawl!"

"We're rising," said Acton, "and it is uphill work. Hear the old tank groaning?"

In fact, the train, labouring up the heavy gradient, did barely more than crawl through the snow and wind, and the slow beat of the engine told how hard it was even to do that. Acton added thoughtfully, "We've quite four miles yet to the summit, and there's a chance we mayn't——"

"Mayn't what, Acton, please?" said Grim, putting down his magazine.

"Get there, Grimmy."

"To the top? Oh, rot!" said Senior.

"I can't quite remember such a crawl as this, Jack; listen how the engine coughs."

"If we can't get to the top of the incline—what then?" asked Grim.

"Go back, I should say."

"To Lowbay?"

"Yes. But while we *do* crawl there's no need to fret."

"That would mean goodbye for the present to your place, old man?"

"Yes. 'Twould be a horrid nuisance, wouldn't it?"

The Amorians listened anxiously to the engine toiling up the incline; but the howling of the wind almost drowned every other sound. The pace was still a crawl, but it was a steady one.

"Oh! she'll worry through after all," said Acton.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the train pulled up with a jerk that sent Senior and Grim flying forward into the unexpectant arms of the dozing Dick and Gus Todd. The luggage rattled out of the rack in instantaneous response, and whilst all the fellows were staring blankly at each other they heard the crunching of the brake, and felt that the train had come to a dead stop.

"What ever is the matter?" gasped Worcester, quite wide awake by now.

"We've landed into a drift, I fancy," said Acton, "and there's no home for us to-night. What beastly luck!"

There was now no sound but the roaring of the storm; the engine gave no sign that they could hear, and Acton impatiently let down the window, but was instantly almost blinded by the snow, which whirled through the open window. Crossing over, he tried the other with better success, and the first thing he saw was the guard, waist deep in snow, trying to make his way forward, and holding his lamp well before him. "What's happened, guard?" he asked.

"Matter!—why, we're off the line for one thing, and——"

Forward, they could hear the shouts of the driver above the hiss of escaping steam.

"Let me have your cap, Grim," said Acton, all energy in a moment. "I'm going forward to see what is up. Back in a minute."

He slipped out carefully, but seeing the predicament of the guard, he did not jump out into the snow, but advanced carefully along the footboards, feeling his way forward by the brass-work of the carriages. To the leeward the bulk of the train gave comparative shelter from the fury of the storm, and Acton was in a minute abreast of the guard, floundering heavily in the drifts.

"This is a better way, guard. Take my hand, and I'll pull you up."

"All right, sir. Here's the lamp."

Acton's hand closed on the guard's wrist, and in a moment the young athlete had the man beside him. Together they made their way forward, and by the light of the lamp they saw what had happened. The engine had taken a drift edge-way, had canted up, and then rolled over against the walls of the cutting. Luckily, the carriages had kept the rails. The driver was up to his neck in the snow, but the fireman was not visible.

Acton availed himself of the overturned engine, which was making unearthly noises, and reached out a hand for the driver. The latter clutched it, and scrambled out.

"Where's your mate?"

"Tom jumped the other way, sir."

Acton swung the lamp round, sending its broad sheet of light into the driving snow. For a moment he could see nothing but the dazzling white floor, but next instant perceived the fireman, whose head rested against the horizontal wheel of the overturned engine.

"This man is hurt," he said, when he saw a crimson stain on the snow. "Take the lamp, guard."

Acton clambered over the short tender, seized the man by the shoulder, and, with an immense effort of strength, pulled him partly up. The man gave no signs of life.

"Bear a hand, driver, will you? He's too much for me alone."

The driver hastily scrambled beside Acton, and in a minute or so they had the insensible man between them.

"He hurt himself as he jumped," said Acton, looking with concern at a gaping cut over the man's eye. "Anyhow, our first business is to bring him round."

It was a weary business lifting the unconscious fireman into an empty compartment, and still more weary work to bring him round, but at last this was done. Acton tore up his handkerchief, and with melted snow washed clean the ugly cut on his forehead, and then left the fireman in charge of his mate.

"We'll have to roost here, sir, all night. There's no getting out of this cutting, nohow. Thank you, sir; I'll see to Tom."

Acton and the guard made their way back to the rear of the train, where the Amorians were awaiting their schoolfellow with impatience and anxiety.

"The engine is off the rails and the stoker is damaged above a bit," said Acton, seriously, "and we're fixtures here until the company comes and digs us out. There's only one thing to do: we must make ourselves as comfy as possible for the night. I must see that lady, though, before we do anything for ourselves. Back in a moment."

Acton sallied out once more and devoted a good ten minutes to explaining matters to the very horrified and nervous lady and her tearful little twelve-year-old girl.

"I'll bring you some cushions, and I'll steal Dick Worcester's pillow for the little girl," he explained cheerfully. "You have one rug, I see. We can spare you a couple more. No danger at all, really. But isn't it really horrid? We have not a morsel of food to offer you, but I dare say you can, if you don't worry over it, put up with a makeshift bed—only for one night, I'm sure."

Acton relieved Dick Worcester—who plumed himself on his pillow—of that article, and one of Senior's rugs.

On his return he confronted the dubious looks of his chums with his invincible cheerfulness.

"Now, you fellows! we're to sleep here. Two on a seat is the order, and one on the floor, that's me. Dicky, darling, please don't roll off your perch. We've plenty of rugs and overcoats: enough to stock Nansen, Grim, so we shan't all wake up frozen to death."

Gus Todd smiled dutifully at this bull.

The guard came with a modest request.

"Can you roost with us? Oh! certainly. Bag another cushion for the floor, and then you're all right. More, the merrier; and let the ventilation go hang. If Mr. Worcester doesn't fall on you, guard, I dare say you'll live to tell the tale."

The Amorians, who trusted to Acton as they would have trusted to no one else on earth, entered into the fun of the thing, and the last joke of the night was a solemn warning to Grim from Dick Worcester to avoid snoring, as he valued his life.

"We can manage like this for one night, anyhow," whispered Acton to the guard, "for we really keep each other warm. We'll get out of this to-morrow."

The guard did not reply to this for fully a minute. He whispered back, "Listen to the wind, sir. The storm isn't half over yet. I've got my doubts about to-morrow. We're snowed up for more'n a day."

II

OVER THE FELLS

When day dawned, and the snowed-up travellers began to look around them, they found that, though the snow was not descending nearly as heavily as on the night before, the wind was still strong and the weather bitterly cold.

On the windward side of the train the snow had drifted almost up to the window panes, but on the leeward there was considerably less. Looking up and down the line, they could see their train surrounded by its dazzling environment, and the drifts were so high that they had filled the low cutting stretching towards Lowbay level to its top.

The train was an island in a sea of snow.

The Amorians, stiff and cramped with their narrow quarters of the night, dropped off into the snow on the sheltered side and explored as far as the overturned engine, now stark and cold, with wonder and awe.

"Why, we're like rats in a trap!" exclaimed Gus Todd.

"We'll have a council of war now," said Acton, as he saw the driver and his mate floundering towards them, "and then we can see what's to be done—if anything can be done."

It seemed the result of the council was to be the decision that there was nothing to be done. To go back to Lowbay, or forward to Lansdale, was plainly impossible, and neither guard nor driver thought they could be ploughed out under two days at the earliest. "And yet," concluded Acton, "we can't starve and freeze for two days. Look here, guard, isn't there a fell farm somewhere hereabouts? I begin to fancy——"

"There's one over the hills yonder, three or four miles away. Might as well be three hundred, for they'll never dream of our being snowed up here."

"Well, but can't we go to them, if you know the way?"

"That's just what I don't know, with all this snow about. The farm is behind that hill somewhere; but I could no more take you there than fly. Besides, who could wade up to their necks in snow for half a mile, let alone three?"

"But the snow won't be so deep on the fells as in these cuttings."

"That's true, I suppose. But get into a drift on the fell—and, Lord, that would be easy enough—you're done. And there's beck deep enough to drown a man, and you'll never see them till you're up to your chin in their icy waters. I wouldn't chance it for anything. We mun wait here till we're dug out, sir, and that's all about it."

"Where is that farm, guard? Behind which shoulder of the fell?"

"Look here, Acton," began Dick Worcester, apprehensively, "I'm hanged if we're going to let you go groping about for any blessed farm in this storm. We'll eat the coals in the tender first!"

"Thanks, Dick. Which shoulder, guard?"

The man explained as fully and elaborately as if he might as well talk as think. The shoulder of the fell was noted by Acton exactly and carefully, even to borrowing a compass pendant off Todd's historic watch—chain.

"It lies exactly N.N.E., and one could find one's way in the dark if that were all."

"But it isn't, Acton," said Grim, anxiously, "not by a long chalk. Oh, Acton, don't go!"

"I'm going to turn over the idea, Grim. But, anyhow, I don't stir out of this cutting until the snow's out of the sky."

Acton and the guard talked long and seriously, whilst the Amorians put into practical working Senior's idea of a fire beside the van. There were coals galore.

Half an hour afterwards the snow ceased. "Now," said Acton, quietly, "I know exactly where that farm is. I'm going to go now and have a try for it. I'll move the farm people, if I reach 'em, double quick back again with food, for they're used to these fells, and then we can all go back to the farm together. The fact is," said Acton, hurriedly, as he saw a chorus of dissent about to break out, "we *must* get out of this very soon. There's the lady and the child—and even more than that, there is the fireman, who is downright ill. We cannot wait till we're dug out; that is absolutely certain. I'm not going to run any danger, and if I find I'm likely to, I'm coming back. I fancy, really," he added, laughing, "that the most difficult part of the business will be to get out of this cutting."

The fellows all knew Acton; they knew that when he said things in a certain tone there was no good arguing. That was why Grim, with a white face, hurriedly left stoking the blazing fire and retired in dismay to the guard's van, and why Gus Todd, in an access of angry impatience, shied the magazine he had been turning over into the middle of the flames.

Jack Senior said, "This is just like you, Acton. You *will* fight more than your share of bargees, but this time I'm going to go one and one with you. If you like to risk being drowned in those beastly moorland streams, or to fall into some thirty-feet drift, I'm going to go too. That is final. *Kismet*, etc.!"

Acton looked narrowly at Senior. "All right, Jack. Get your coat on; but, honour bright, I'd rather go alone."

"Couldn't do it, old man," said Senior, whilst Worcester nodded approvingly. "What would Phil Bourne say, if he heard we'd let you melt away into—— I'm going too."

The passage out of the cutting was not so difficult as Acton had bargained for; but Worcester and Todd did wonders with the fireman's shovels and made a lane through the drifts. On the firm ground of the fell the two found that, though the snow was deep enough in all conscience, it was not to be compared with the drifts on the line. The wind now, as they started off, was whipping away the loose top layers of snow in cold white clouds, which stung the face and ears with their icy sharpness; but, with caps well down and coats buttoned up to the ears, the two trudged on. The snow had ceased, but it was plain, by the dark and lowering sky, that this might only be temporary, and Acton kept up as smart a pace as he could, heading right for the shoulder of the fell, a couple of miles away, behind which he might, if he were lucky, see that moorland farm. The hill ran down into a valley, towards which the two Amorians hurried, Acton keeping his ears well open for the faintest murmur of water.

"There's a beck somewhere down here, Jack, but we'll not see it until we're almost into it. So look out!"

"All serene! I'm on the *qui vive*!" Hardly were the words out of Senior's mouth than he stumbled headlong forward, the ground opening at his feet, and a narrow ribbon of cold grey water, silently sliding under its shrunken banks, caught Acton's eye. Senior had plumped cleanly into this. Luckily, it was not very deep, and he scrambled out to the other side drenched to the skin, and showing clearly enough, where he had broken through the snow on both sides, that all the care in the world would not prevent them repeating the experience. The snow overhung a yard. Acton had stopped dead when he saw Senior disappear, but in a moment he had sprung clear, and was helping his friend up the bank. The snow slipped silently into the stream as he jumped.

"That's number one," said Senior, "and only half an hour from the train! Any more hereabouts?"

"I fancy so, but we may have better luck next time."

"Hope so. Set the pace, old man, please. It's b-b-beastly c-c-cold."

Acton was thoroughly upset by this mishap, and he headed up the opposite slope of the hill with a face that showed how the incident had shaken him. Senior's teeth chattered, and he looked blue with cold. The two plodded on, Acton insisting on Senior keeping behind. Acton again had the unenviable pleasure of seeing some more of those icy waters, and their slow and deadly stealing under the snow seemed to him sinister and fatal as he pulled himself up on the brink. The care necessary, the cold, cutting wind, and the knee-deep snow, made their progress terribly slow, and Acton began to notice that Senior, despite his anxiety for a sharp pace, was already terribly fagged.

The distance widened between the two, and once, when Acton turned round and found his friend nearly thirty yards behind, his heart almost stopped beating.

"This will never do! Heaven help us if he cracks up!" He waited for the weary Senior, and then said gently, "Pace too hot, old fellow?"

"Rather. So sorry, but you seem to run almost."

"Run!" smiled Acton, bitterly. "Why, we're not doing a mile an hour. Put your heart into it, Jack, and for Heaven's sake don't let me get too much in front!"

"All serene!" said Senior, gamely.

To Acton's intense alarm, the snow had recommenced, and the wind swept it down the fells full into their faces. Acton was afraid that he might make a mistake if the snow became so heavy as to blot out the landscape, and, knowing that to do so might have terrible consequences, he nervously forced the pace.

Senior responded gamely.

"Keep well behind, old man. You'll dodge the snow better. Can you do a wee sprint? We're not far from the top of the ridge, and then we've only to work down the hill and bear to the left, and there we are."

"Only!" said Senior, wearily. "How far?"

"A bare mile. Step it out for all you're worth."

By this time it was obvious that the storm had recommenced in all its fury, and Acton, in an ecstasy of horror and anxiety lest he should turn the shoulder of the hill too late to see anything of the farm, almost ran forward. He had thrust out his head, and his eyes anxiously peered forward. They were now almost on the top of the shoulder of the fell. Acton turned round with eagerness.

"Five minutes more and we're—— He's gone!"

Senior, indeed, was not in sight. With a groan of despair, Acton ran back down the slope.

"Jack! Jack! Jack!" he howled above the wind, "Where are you?"

There was no reply

"He's lost!"

Further down the slope ran Acton, shouting into the storm. He heard nothing; not a sound. Then, and his heart almost burst with joy, his eye caught sight of a moving, staggering figure, drifting aimlessly across his path. Senior, half his senses beaten out of him by cold, wet, the wind, and lack of food, looked at the screaming Acton with uncomprehending eyes, and was aimlessly shaking off his grasp to lounge easily to death.

"He *has* cracked up," said Acton, in despair, and he gripped the half-senseless youth with frenzied strength.

"This is the way you're to go—with me!" he yelled.

Half-dragging, half-coaxing, uttering strange promises, to which Senior smiled stupidly, Acton regained those few but terrible yards to the top of the ridge. Then his heart almost died within him: there was nothing to be seen, as, half-blinded by the snow, he tried to peer down the valley.

"Nothing!"

Senior, bereft of his companion's arm, had sunk down happily upon the snow and looked at Acton, stupidly trying to make head or tail out of the situation. His face was darkly flushed; his lips were swollen; and his eyes were heavy with sleep.

Roused from his momentary despair by these terrible signs, Acton seized his friend by the throat of his overcoat, and jerked him to his feet. He shook him savagely until some sign of intelligence glimmered in the sleepy eyes.

"Jack! Jack! Keep awake! We'll win out yet if you do."

"All right, old man: my head buzzes awf'ly, Where are we? What are you doing?"

"We're going down the hill. Don't leave go of me whatever you do, and oh, keep awake."

"Serene," said Senior, closing his eyes again peacefully.

With a sob of horror and despair, Acton lurched down the hill, dragging his companion with him. He kept repeating, as though it were a formula: "Down the slope and bear to the left" again and again.

What the next half-hour held of misery, horror, and utter despair, Acton cannot, even now, recall without a shudder. They stumbled and staggered downwards like drunken men. The snow blinded him, and the dragging weight of Senior on his arm was an aching agony, from which, above all things, he must not free himself.

Then, as the very climax to hopeless despair, Senior rolled heavily forward and lay prone, as helpless as a log, his face buried in the snow! His cap had fallen off, and Acton watched the black

curls whitening in the storm.

How long he remained there, crouched before the motionless body, he does not know; only that he tried many times to shake the dying youth from the terrible torpor in vain. Senior breathed heavily, and that was all.

All hope had died in Acton's breast. He threw himself forward beside his friend, and sobbed, with his face in the snow.

A sound reached Acton's ears which brought him to his feet with a bound. He placed his hand to his ear, and sent his very soul to the effort to fix the sound again, above the roar of the wind. It was the deep, but not distant, low of cattle.

A third time did the low boom through the storm.

Almost frantic with a living hope, Acton turned to Senior. He raised the unconscious youth, and, by a mighty effort, got him upon his shoulders, and then staggered off in the direction of the sound. He has a faint recollection that he rolled over into the snow twice, that he waded across a river, with the water up to his arm-pits, and always that there was a weight on his neck that almost throttled him.... He felt that he was going mad. Then at last—it seemed many hours—a building, wreathed in white, seemed to spring up out of the storm. Delirious with joy, Acton staggered towards it with his burden. Some figures moved towards him, and Acton shouted for help as he pitched forward for the last time into the snow. He dimly remembers strong hands raising him up and helping him through a farmyard, which seemed somehow to tremble with the low of cattle, and then he was in a chair, and a fire in front of him.

An hour or two afterwards, Acton was seated before a table, and, in the intervals of gulping down hot coffee and swallowing food, told his tale. The peasant farmer and his wife listened open-eyed with astonishment. The farmer, from sheer amazement, dropped into the broadest Westmoreland dialect.

"How far did thoo carry t'other yan?"

"Don't know, really. Seemed an awful way. I went through a river, I know. The water guggled under my arms."

"River!" said the farmer, rising up and running his hand over Acton's clothes. "He *has*, wife; he's waded through t' beck! Man, give us thee hand! Thoo's a—thoo's a good 'un. Noa! thoo shan't stir. I'll bring t'folk over t'fell mysel'!"

And he did—the farmhouse, a few hours afterwards, giving the snowed-up passengers a hospitality which none of them ever forgot.

There was the jolliest Christmas at "Raven Crag" that had ever been known. Mrs. Acton had whipped up a cohort of *cousins et cousines*—as they say in the French books—and even Grim found a partner, who didn't dance half bad—for a girl. Did I say a jolly Christmas? Well, even jolly doesn't quite do it justice.

Letters dropped in upon Acton in the course of the week. There was one from Senior's father, which made Acton blush like a school-girl. There was another, a very stately one, from the board-room of St. Eustis, wherein the secretary of the Great North and West Railway, on behalf of the directors, tendered him hearty thanks for his great services to themselves and their employees. There was another from a lady, which *simply gushed*. There also arrived a small lock of child's hair, which Mr. Acton was begged to accept from a little girl, who slept "on Mr. Acton's pillow." Dick Worcester claimed this, but Acton was adamant.

"I say, Todd," said Grim, earnestly, "don't you think we fellows might give Acton some memorial or other, just to show what we think of him?"

"Good, Grimmy! Trot out suggestions."

"Well, I had thought of a stained-glass window in——"

Todd couldn't look at W.E.G.'s face for days after without a quiver.

THE END

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