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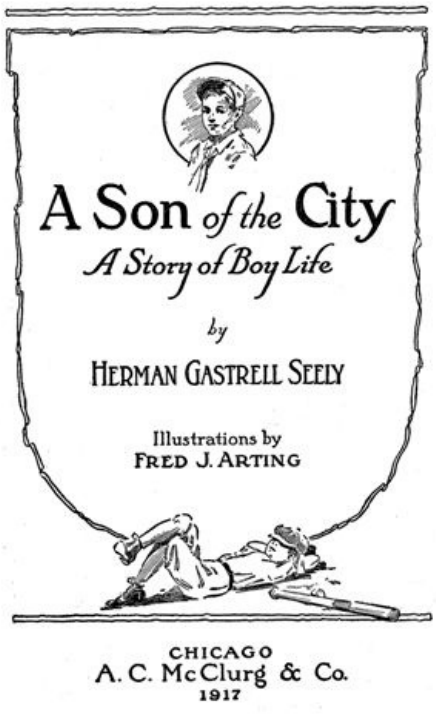

A SON OF THE CITY

A Story of Boy Life

by HERMAN GASTRELL SEELY

Illustrations by FRED J. ARTING

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To My Father
THE COMPANION OF MANY A YOUTHFUL STROLL THROUGH CITY PARK AND SUBURBAN FIELD

"H'ist away," he ordered finally. "I'll shove under when he gets high enough." [Page 19]

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A SON OF THE CITY

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH OUR HERO GOES FISHING

Startled from a sound sleep, he fumbled blindly beneath the bed that he might throttle the insistent alarm clock before the clamor awakened the other members of the household. Then he lay back and listened breathlessly for parental voices of inquiry as to what he might be doing at the unearthly hour of half-past three on a late September morning.

Far down the railroad embankment which passed the rear of the house, an engine puffed lazily cityward with a load of empty freight cars. Over the elevated tracks a mile to the south, a train rumbled somnolently towards the park terminal, and under the eaves of the house, just above his room, two sparrows squabbled sleepily. Inside, the only audible sounds were the chirpings of a cricket somewhere down the hall, and the furious, muffled pounding of his own little heart.

He glanced from the window near the head of his bed. The air was oppressive with a strange, almost rural quietude. In the east, a faint streak of light brought the tree tops of the park into indistinct relief, and to the north a thin line of smoke floated apathetically from a hotel chimney to show that a light breeze from the west augured favorably for the morning's sport.

Stockings, knickerbockers, and blouse were drawn on with unwonted rapidity. His coat and necktie he left hanging over the back of the chair, disdained as unnecessary impediments on a fishing trip. Then with a final glance from the window at the fast-graying sky, he reached behind the bookcase for his carefully concealed pole and tackle, gathered his shoes in one hand, and tiptoed down the pitchy hall with the stealth of a cat.

Down the stairway he went, step at a time, scarcely daring to breathe as he shifted his weight again and again from one foot to the other. On the first landing, a board creaked with alarming distinctness. Came a maternal voice:

"John."

Her son hugged the stairway in a very agony of fear lest his carefully made plans had been spoiled. Why hadn't he walked along the end of the steps as bitter experience had taught? He knew that board was loose. Again the well-known tones:

"John, what *are* you doing?"

A subdued babel of conversation in the big south room followed, in which his father's deep bass took a prominent part.

"Nonsense, Jane, you're imagining things!"

"But you know I forbade fishing during school mornings. And he was looking at the DuPree's weather vane when he watered the lawn last night. Get up and see what he's doing."

John drew a sigh of relief as the deep voice sounded a sleepy protest. Minutes passed. His legs became cramped from inaction, yet he dared not stir. Were his parents asleep? Or was Mrs. Fletcher waiting merely until some tell-tale noise enabled her to order John senior forth on an expedition which would result in certain detection? If he had only avoided that misstep!

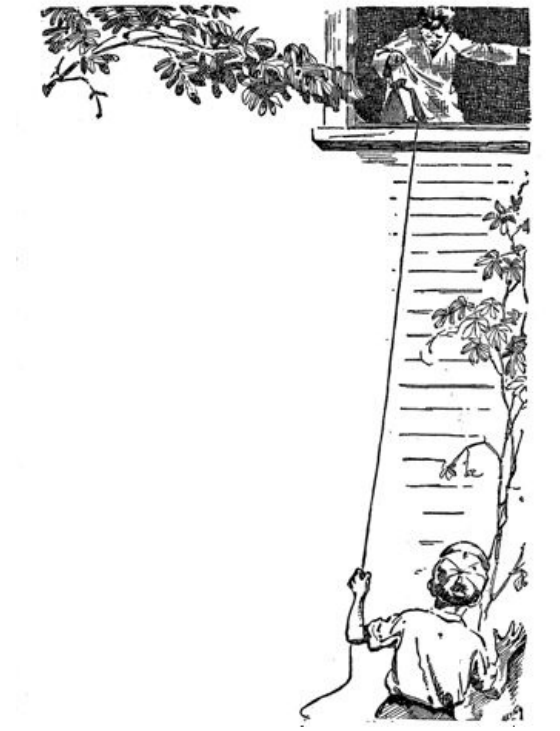
Then the kindly fast-mail thundered over the railroad tracks and enabled the seeker after forbidden pleasures to scurry to the first floor under cover of the disturbance.

In the hallway, the boy deposited his shoes and tackle very cautiously on the carpet, and tiptoed over to the unused grate. There he extracted from behind the gas log a package of sandwiches, surreptitiously assembled after supper the night before. Then with both hands grasping the doorknob firmly, he strained upwards, that weight be thrown off the squeaking hinges as much as possible, and swung the door back, inch by inch, until the opening permitted a successful exit.

The old cat bounded from her bed on the window ledge with a thud and mewed plaintively for admittance as he stood with one hand on the screen door, and fumbled in his pockets. Sinkers, spare hooks, a line with a nail at one end on which to string possible victims of his skill, "eats," his dollar watch that he might know when breakfast time came around—all present and accounted for.

The family pet protested volubly as he blocked her ingress with one foot and closed the door as slowly and noiselessly as it had swung open. A moment spent in lacing his shoes, a consoling pat for puss, and he was off on the dogtrot for Silvey's house, with tackle swinging easily to and fro in one hand and a noiseless whistle of exultation coming from half-parted lips which became more and more audible as his rapidly echoing footsteps increased the distance from home. For he had made good his escape, the strange fragrance of the cool, early air with its absence of city smoke went to his head like wine and set his pulses a-throb with a very joy of living, and five hours, three hundred glorious minutes, if the excursion were stretched a bit past breakfast time, of enchanting, tantalizing sport lay before him.

A short distance from the corner, he turned in abruptly at a frame house which was distinguished from its neighbors by unusually ornate fretwork about the porch and gables, and tiptoed gently over the struggling grass on the narrow sidelawn. For it was here that the Silvey family lived, and if Bill were his boon companion with tastes akin to his, strange to relate, the Silvey elders were light sleepers with the same propensities as his own parents for curbing unlawful fishing expeditions, and there was need of caution.



He fumbled momentarily along the dark sidewall, yanked at a cord which swayed idly to and fro with each light air current, and gazed expectantly upward. Nothing happened. Again a jerk, given this time with a certain vindictive delight. A muffled "Ouch!" came from the open window as a splotch of animated white appeared indistinctly behind the dark screen.

"Trying to pull my big toe off?" angrily.

John snickered. "Got the worms?" he asked.

Silvey swallowed his wrath and nodded. "Sh-sh, not so loud. You'll wake the folks. The can's on the back steps. Ain't many worms though. I hunted under the porch and down the tracks and all over. But the ground's too dry."

John shook the nearly empty can disparagingly as Silvey joined him on the back lawn a moment later.

"Jiminy," he whispered, "that all you could find?"

His chum nodded. "Maybe there's old worms or minnies from yesterday left on the pier. Or we can cut up the first fish for perch bait. Come on! Beat you over the tracks."

They scaled the wire fence which barricaded the embankment, and cut across the long parallel lines of rails like frisky colts. Past the few unkempt buildings of the neighborhood dairy, over the small bit of pasturage where the master thereof kept a dozen cows that his customers might think their milk was fresh, daily, and across the cement road, they scampered at top speed, to pull up panting just inside the park.

"Bet you I get to the lagoon bridge first," said Silvey when their breathing grew less labored.

Off they raced again, now on the trim gravel walks, now on the springy dew-laden turf, frightening a myriad of insects from their shelters as the pair brushed aside protruding shrubbery and brought a chorus of reproof from rusty-plumed grackles who were gathering in the open spaces for the long migration south.

As their footsteps echoed and re-echoed between the stone buttresses of the wooden planked bridge, John halted to dig frantically at his shoe top.

"Wait a minute, Sil. My heel's full of cinders."

He shook the offending boot free of the irritants, relaced it and leaned over the bridge rail for a moment. From beneath, northward, stretched the park lagoon calm and dark in the uncertain

morning light. Fronting him rose the stately columns and porticoes of the park museum, once a member of an exposition whose glories are almost forgotten, which now veiled its need of repair in the kindly dawn and formed a symphony in gray with the willow-studded, low-lying lagoon banks. The air throbbed with the subdued noises of awakening animal life. In a shrub near them, a catbird cleared his throat in a few harsh notes as a prelude to a morning of tuneful parody, and on the slope below, a fat autumn-plumaged robin dug frantically in the sod for fugitive worms.

"My! Isn't it just peachy?" breathed John ecstatically.

"Yes," assented his companion, intent upon the lesser spectacle of the robin. "Don't you wish you could find worms like he does, Fletch?"

Once more they resumed their journey lakewards, breaking into the inevitable dogtrot as the long, dark pier came in sight. At the land end, John stooped to pick up a few sun-dried minnows which lay on a plank, and a little farther on Silvey grabbed eagerly at an earth-filled tomato can.

"Nary a worm," he exclaimed in disgust, as he threw the tin into the lake.

But shortly, their diligent search was rewarded by finding a tobacco-tin which contained at least a dozen samples of the squirming bait, and the anxiety regarding that problem was permanently allayed.

But one disciple of Izaak Walton had arrived before the boys, and he sat crouched in a huddled, lonely heap at the end of the pier, in a manner which seemed scarcely human. As they drew nearer, John broke into a sudden exclamation:

"Old hunchback! Been out here all night again. Wonder if he's caught anything!"

As they passed the first of his multitude of throwlines and poles, John leaned forward and peered down on the water.

"Look, Sil," he pointed at the long string of perch which floated to and fro with the sluggish water. "Aren't they peaches?"

He made a motion as if to joint his rod. The cripple drew a sharp, hissing breath from between thick, distorted lips and waved him away. Silvey caught his chum's arm warningly.

"No use of fishing beside *him*," he asserted. "Don't you know that, John? Brings bad luck to everyone 'cept himself, he does. I tried it one morning. He kept hauling them in, all the time, and I couldn't catch a thing."

John shook his head skeptically as they moved over to the other side of the pier.

"He does!" reiterated Silvey. "Never's the day I've been out here that he hasn't a lot. And look at that," as a shining, squirming object rose unwillingly from the water. "I'll bet I couldn't catch one if I was there. It's because he's hunchbacked, I'm telling you."

As John jointed his bamboo pole, he cast a furtive glance at the poor, misshapen being, and caught a touch of Silvey's superstitious fear.

"Maybe," he admitted, as he reached for the worm can.

Hooks baited, the boys dropped their lines in the water and sat down to dangle their legs to and fro over the pier's edge as they waited for the first hint as to the morning's luck. Possibly a quarter of an hour elapsed before Silvey's light steel rod gave a twitch, to be followed by another and still another. Its owner jerked a denuded hook high in the air.

"First bite, first bite!" he shouted, for that honor was ever a point of spirited contest on the pair's many expeditions.

"Hard?" asked John breathlessly.

"Hard!" repeated Silvey, boastfully exultant. "Hard? Goll-e-e-e, yes. Didn't you see him? Bent the tip most a foot. Took the worm, too."

Then the jointed bamboo began to shake ever so slightly and John leaned intently forward.

"Bite?" queried Silvey in turn.

"He's nibbling," said John cautiously without taking his glance from the flexible tip.

"Wait until he takes the hook," advised Bill. John braced himself and yanked a luckless perch high in the air. As it came down on the pier with a thud, his friend sprang to his feet.

"That-a-boy!" he yelled exultantly as his fingers extracted the hook. John brought out the fish stringer, and the unfortunate minnow, firmly tied by the gills, was lowered slowly into the water. The pair watched its spasmodic efforts at escape with a great deal of gusto.

"Ain't so small, is he, John?" asked Silvey optimistically, as he leaned over and looked down from an angle which only a small boy could maintain without losing his balance. "Bet you it's going to be a peach of a day."

The pier was now rapidly filling. A plethoric, sandy-haired German squatted beside the hunchback, watching an unproductive pole with a patience worthy of a better cause. At John's

corner, a party of voluble loafers joked noisily as they unwound long, many-hooked throwlines and jointed nondescript rods. Beside Bill, a phlegmatic Scandinavian puffed morosely at an empty pipe. Just beyond, a fat negress shifted her bulk from time to time as she baited the hooks on one of her husband's numerous fishing outfits. Farther landward, a mixed throng—nattily clad business men who were snatching a few minutes of sport before business called, down at the heel out-of-works with nothing to do and all day to do it in, here a woman with a colorful shirtwaist, there a couple of noisy school-boys—made the sides of the pier bristle like the branches of a thicket hedge.

The faint tinge of orange in the eastern sky deepened to a radiant crimson glow. A glistening, fast-widening, crescent sliver of the sun appeared on the horizon and painted a long golden path on the rippled lake, and still the lonely perch waited in vain for a companion in misery.

Silvey jerked his line from the water and examined the untouched bait in disgust.

"Just like it was last time," he ejaculated. "I'm going down the pier and see what the other fellows are catching."

He jammed his pole between two bent nails in a plank and was off, stopping now and then to peer downward at some trophy as he sauntered along. John did likewise with his rod and stretched out on the rough boards to look lazily up at the clear sky. It wasn't half bad after all, even if the fish weren't biting. There was something in this getting up and over to the park before the smoke got into the air, to listen to the songs of the birds and watch the throng of people, that more than atoned for the lack of luck.

He pulled out his watch dreamily—a quarter of six and still but one captive—and let his glance follow the wake of a graceful, white-hulled gasoline cruiser which chugged its way up from the south. Presently Silvey returned to break in upon his revery with the exciting news that a man near the life-preserver post had caught five fish. John sat up.

"What did he catch 'em on?" he asked as he stretched his arms.

"Minnows."

"Let's try a couple of ours."

They scraped the hooks free of the whitened worms with their finger nails and rebaited, only to find that the sun-parched flesh softened and floated away soon after it was lowered into the water.

"Have to buy some fresh ones! Got any money?"

A thorough search resurrected a worn copper that had lain in Silvey's back pocket until he had forgotten it—else the coin had gone the way of many another that had purchased peppermints at the school store. John surrendered a penny that had been given him the night before for a perfect spelling paper. They viewed the scanty hoard on the sun-bleached plank reflectively.

"Ask him." John indicated the Scandinavian, who was well supplied with the desired bait. Silvey stood up and jingled the two pennies in his grimy hand with the air of a young millionaire.

Yes, the fisherman would sell some. How many were desired?

"Aw, give me," the boy paused, as if considering the amount sufficient for their needs, "give me two cents' worth."

The merchant shook his head. "Two cents?" he sneered. "Naw! Won't sell any for less 'n a nickel."

A gaunt, anaemic southerner, who was with the party of idlers, spoke up.

"Yeah, boy. What's the matter?"

Silvey turned ruefully. "Ain't got money enough to buy some minnies," he explained.

The tall figure stooped abruptly, fumbled in a battered basket which held a miscellaneous assemblage of bait, throwlines, newspapers, and food, and drew forth a handful of the diminutive fish.

"Yeah, boy," he smiled.

Silvey offered the two coppers in payment.

"Keep 'em, boy, keep 'em," with an indignant glance at the imperturbable fish monopolist. "I ain't like some folks."

The boys rebaited their hooks joyfully. The cruiser which John had sighted earlier in the morning drew up within easy distance of the pier and dropped anchor. Two of her crew appeared presently in swimming suits and dove overboard for a morning plunge. From her diminutive, weathered cabin came the rattle of cooking utensils and the hiss of frying bacon as the cook of the day prepared breakfast. Bill stirred restlessly.

"Let's have a look at the sandwiches," he suggested.

They stretched themselves full length on the pier end and, with an occasional eye to the fishing poles, munched the uncouth slabs of bread and jam contentedly. Silvey read the name on the

boat's stern with interest.

"Detroit," he gasped. "Gee, Fletch, don't you wish you had a boat like that with all the gasoline to run her?"

John's brown eyes grew dreamy. "Just don't you, though! We could ride down the canal out in the Illinois River and down the Mississippi to St. Louis. No staying after school, no 'rithmetic lessons, no lawns to cut or front porches to wash on Saturdays. We'd get up when we liked and fish when we liked, and loaf around all day. If money ran out, we'd find a place where there wasn't any bridge, and ferry people across the river for a nickel or a dime, or whatever they charge down there. Maybe, too, we could get a lot of red neckties and shirts with brown and yellow stripes and sell 'em to the darkies for a dollar apiece. Sid DuPree says they buy those things and he ought to know. He spent summer before last down South with his ma!"

"Where'd we get the money to buy 'em in the first place?" asked the practical Silvey.

His chum's face clouded. "Shucks, Sil, you're always spoiling things. But," more hopefully, "we needn't really worry about money anyway. All the books I've read about the South tell how kind folks are down there, and how they won't allow a stranger to go hungry, not even if they have to give him their last hunk of cornbread. So if ferrying didn't pay, all we'd have to do would be to land, walk up to the nearest house, and knock at the door. When the big mammy cook—they always have 'em in the books—came to the door, we'd just look at her and say, 'We're hungry.'"

Silvey nodded, content to revel in the glories of the daydream which John's more vivid imagination was spinning.

"We'd go all the way down the Mississippi to New Orleans. Maybe we'd catch some alligators to make things exciting, and maybe some big yellow river catfish. I read about one once that was six feet long. And when we arrived, they'd put our pictures in the newspapers, with a big lot of print after them, just the way they do when someone comes to town here who's done something. We'd win a lot of race cups, and folks would say to their friends, 'See those two kids there? They took a launch all the way down the river from Lake Michigan by themselves.' We'd be *it* all the time we were there."

Silvey, under the spell of the alluring picture, let his gaze roam dreamily around until it lighted upon an excited group down the pier. He sprang to his feet energetically.

"Fletch! Look! A man drowned, maybe. Come on quick!" Such alluring possibilities may come true in a city.

They sprinted up to the rapidly increasing crowd, and wriggled, boylike, past obstructing arms and between tense bodies until they found themselves in the inner line of the circle. A carp of a size sufficient to excite the envy of the neighboring fishermen lay with laboring gills upon the water-spattered planking. The lads gazed in open-mouthed admiration at the large, glistening scales, the staring eyes, and the twitching, murky red fins.

"Weighs five pounds if he's an ounce," orated the proud captor. "Says I to myself when he bit, 'I've got a bird there,' and I was right."

John turned to his chum with the inevitable question:

"Gee, don't you wish we could catch a fish like that?"

And Silvey made the inevitable reply:

"Just don't you, though!"

They watched breathlessly as the fisherman forced his stringer between the large gills and out through the gaping mouth, and tied it in a secure double knot that there might be no danger of an escape. As the rebellious captive was lowered into the water, and the throng about the spot began to thin, the successful angler seated himself again.

"What'd you catch him on?" John broke out.

"Taters."

"Do big fellows like that bite on potatoes?"

They were assured that such was the case.

"Say," John scratched nervously at a knot in a pier plank as he summoned courage for his request. "Give me a hunk, will you? I never caught a fish that big in my life and I sure want to!"

"Catch." The man's eyes flashed in amusement as he opened a deep cigar box and tossed out a half-boiled tuber.

For a second time that morning, the boys tested a new type of bait. Hoping to change his luck, John cast far out to the very limit of the ten cents' worth of fishing line on his reel and sat, tensely hopeful, for five dragging minutes. Then he jammed the pole into its old resting place between the bent nails.

"No use," he exclaimed in disgust to Silvey.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth before the reel gave a sharp click of alarm. The sagging line grew taut and rose more and more from the water as an unseen something made a frightened break for liberty. John seized the handle as the rod threatened to drop into the water and jumped to his feet.

"Gee!" he cried, half frightened by the weight and resistance of the fish, "Gee!"

Silvey strained his eyes far out in an effort to descry the captive. The southerner who had given the minnows sprang forward with a shout of "Play him, boy, play him. Give him line until he turns or he'll break away."

"Can't," John gasped, his heart in his mouth. "It's all out, now."

As the cheap line stretched almost to the breaking point, the fish circled rapidly landward, then, alarmed by the shoaling water, sped back, close by the pier, for the open lake. The minnow monopolist jerked his lines clear of impending entanglement and scowled.

"Take in slack, boy, take in slack," shouted the southerner.

John's fingers spun around like a paper pinwheel. Again the line tightened and again the carp turned to the shore. The news that a big one was hooked spread far down the pier, and the boys, for the first time in their lives, tasted the delight of being the cynosure of the eyes of a rapidly increasing crowd. The man with the potatoes had forced his way to the pier's edge and gave advice with an almost proprietary manner. The fat negress' husband, roused from his inaction, gibbered delightedly as the line circled more and more slowly through the water, while John panted and reeled, slacked and rereeled line until the exhausted fish rose to the surface directly beneath him.

"Gee," gasped Silvey, awe-struck.

"No wonder he fought like an alligator fish," vouchsafed the southerner.

"Who says 'taters don't catch anything?" asked the man of that bait proudly. "Twenty pounds or I'll eat my shirt."

Cautiously, very cautiously, lest the fish make a sudden frightened dash for liberty, John drew in line to raise the captive from the water.

"Y'all wait a minute," said the southerner. "Land him in my minny net. That's safer."

But the minnow net, thanks to its abbreviated handle, lacked an easy two feet of the water, reach as the gaunt, outstretched figure might.

"H'ist away," he ordered finally. "I'll shove under when he gets high enough."

Inch by inch, the quivering body rose from the water. Appeared above the wire rim of the net, first the staring, goggle eyes, then the slowly laboring gills, the twitching side fins, and six inches of glistening scales.

"Now!" shouted the southerner.

Then, as if sensing the imminent danger, the great body gave a convulsive wrench, the light hook tore through the soft-fleshed mouth, and the carp, rebounding from the bark-covered piling, dove into the lake with a splash and disappeared from sight.

"Shucks!" ejaculated Silvey.

John sat down on the pier suddenly and very quietly. His tackle had snarled, and as the throng returned to their own poles, he picked at the tangle of line in the reel while his lower lip trembled piteously.

To have landed that Goliath among fishes! What a triumphal procession it would have been—a march down the home street with such a captive. How Sid DuPree and the Harrison boys would have stared! He rebaited and dropped his line forlornly into the water.

"Maybe he'll bite again," he suggested, hoping against fate.

The minutes dragged. The gaunt, gray-faced southerner stretched out on the pier for a nap. The sandy-haired German rose from his seat beside the hunchback, stretched the stiffness from his arms, and unjointed his pole. The last neatly dressed business man was walking briskly from the pier. Silvey yawned listlessly.

"Breakfast time, ain't it?" he asked.

John's watch showed a quarter after eight. Slowly they reeled in the dripping lines, freed the hooks from all traces of water-soaked bait, and dismounted their rods. As they left the lake shore, the sun's rays became oppressive with heat. The air had lost the cool, fresh fragrance of early morning, and hinted of soot-producing factories and unsavory slaughter houses. Suburban trains thundered incessantly cityward, blending the snorts of their locomotives with the rumble of innumerable elevated trains and the clamoring bells of the surface cars.

When they came to the tall poplars which marked the entrance to the park, Silvey looked down and viewed the fruit of their morning's labors with disgust.

"He's awful small," he said shamefacedly. "Throw him into the bushes."

John raised the diminutive perch into the air and regarded it glumly. "Cat'll eat him, I guess."

"Have to sneak home the back way, then," said Silvey.

The return home by way of the railroad tracks was ever their route when a fishing trip had been unsuccessful, for it avoided conveniently all notice by jeering playmates.

"Don't you wish we'd landed that big fellow?" breathed John, half to himself, as he reviewed mentally that thrilling struggle on the pier.

"Just don't you, though!" echoed Bill, regretfully.

They walked on for some minutes in silence. As they left the cement walk for the little footpath which led across the corner vacant lot to a break in the railroad fence, Silvey roused himself.

"What you going to say to your mother?"

John shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know. What you going to say to yours?"

So they fell to planning their excuses.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH HE GOES TO SCHOOL

But an hour had passed since his protesting assertion that "Once doesn't matter, Mother, and anyway, it's school time," had been followed by flight to the many-windowed, red-brick building, and already the surroundings of dreary blackboard, dingy-green calsomine, and oft-revarnished yellow pine woodwork were becoming irksome. The spelling lesson had not been so unpleasant, for he could sense the tricky "ei-s" and "ie-s" with uncanny cleverness, but 'rithmetic—the very name oppressed him. What use could be found in such prosy problems as "A and B together own three-hundred acres of land. A's share is twice as much as B's. How much does each own?" Or "A field contains four hundred square yards. One side is four times as long as the other. What are its dimensions?"

Miss Brown closed the hated, brown-covered book and turned to write the arithmetic homework on the blackboard. Instantly John's attention wandered to objects and sounds far more interesting than the barren, sultry school room.

A couple of sparrows flew from the roof of the school to the window ledge nearest him, intent on their noisy quarrel, and he gave a scarcely perceptible sigh. Birds could enjoy the sunshine unmolested—why not he? A horse sounded a rapid tattoo of hoof beats over the heated street macadam below and he longed—as he had longed for the launch that morning—for a vehicle which would take him along untraveled roads to a country where schools were not, and small boys fished and played games the long days through. Next, a three-year-old stubbed her toe against the street curbing opposite the school and voiced her grief with unrestrained and therefore enviable freedom. John stirred uneasily and meditated upon the interminable stretch of four days which must elapse before Saturday. Then a majestic thunderhead in the blazing September sky caught his attention and the miracle happened.

He was on his back in the big field of his uncle's Michigan farm, gazing upward at the white, rapidly shifting clouds. The unimpeded western breeze made little harmonies of sound as it swept through the tall, waving grass; strange birds carolled joyously from the orchard by the road, and near at hand the old, brown Jersey lowed lovingly to her ungainly calf. From the more distant chicken coop came the cackle of hens and the boastful crowing of a rooster.

A shift of the thought current, and the fat, easy-going team dragged the lumbering, slowly moving wagon over the four-mile stretch of sand road to town, while he sat on the driver's seat to listen to the hired man's tales of army service in the Philippines, or to watch the ever-shifting panorama of flower and bird and animal life which he loved so well. Past the ramshackle farm of the first neighbor to the north, past the little deserted country school house, past the pressed-steel home of a would-be agriculturist, which had rusted to an artistic red, and down to the winding river which flanked the hamlet through banks lined with white birches and graceful poplars—"popples" the hired man called them. There was good fishing in the river, too. Once a twenty pound muskellunge had been caught, and bass were plentiful.

But better still than that was his uncle's well-stocked trout stream. Again he stumbled over the root-obstructed footpath which ran along the east bank, stopping now and then to untangle his hook and line as he forced his way past thick, second-growth underbrush, or to let his hook float with the current past some particularly promising bit of watercress. There was the fallen, half-rotted log under which the swift current had dug a deep hole in the sandbed for the big fellows to haunt and pounce out upon bits of food which floated by. How his heart had gone pitapat when he had discovered it and had quietly, oh, so quietly, dropped his baited hook into the clear, spring water. Then had come a swift-darting something up stream, a jerk at his line to set his pulses

throbbing, a wild scurry for freedom and—

"John!" Miss Brown's voice brought him rudely back to present day surroundings. He rose uncertainly, dimly conscious that his name had been called.

"Yes, 'm," he stammered.

"What was I telling the class just now?"

He strove to collect his scattered faculties. Then his glance, roaming the room, caught at the newly written problems on the blackboard. He ventured an uncertain smile.

"You—w-was telling—" he began.

"'Were,' John."

"Yes, 'm," nervously. "Were telling the class to be sure and write plain, and not to use pen and ink if we couldn't get along without blots and—and—" What else did Miss Brown usually say to the class on such an occasion?

Over in the far corner of the room, Sid DuPree snickered maliciously. The boy two seats ahead of him turned with an exultant grin on his freckled face. Several little girls seemed on the verge of foolish, discipline-dispelling giggles, and he felt that something had gone wrong. Teacher, herself, ended the suspense.

"Very good, John. Your inventive faculties do you credit. But it happens that as yet, I haven't said anything."

The class broke into uproarious laughter while he stood in the aisle, to all appearances, a submissive, conscience-stricken little mortal. Inwardly he seethed with anger. What right had Miss Brown to trick a fellow that way? It was mean, it was cowardly, worse than stealing.

"Now, John," she continued, looking sternly down from the raised platform, "I spoke just six times to you last week. Finally you promised me that you would pay strict attention. What have you to say for yourself?"

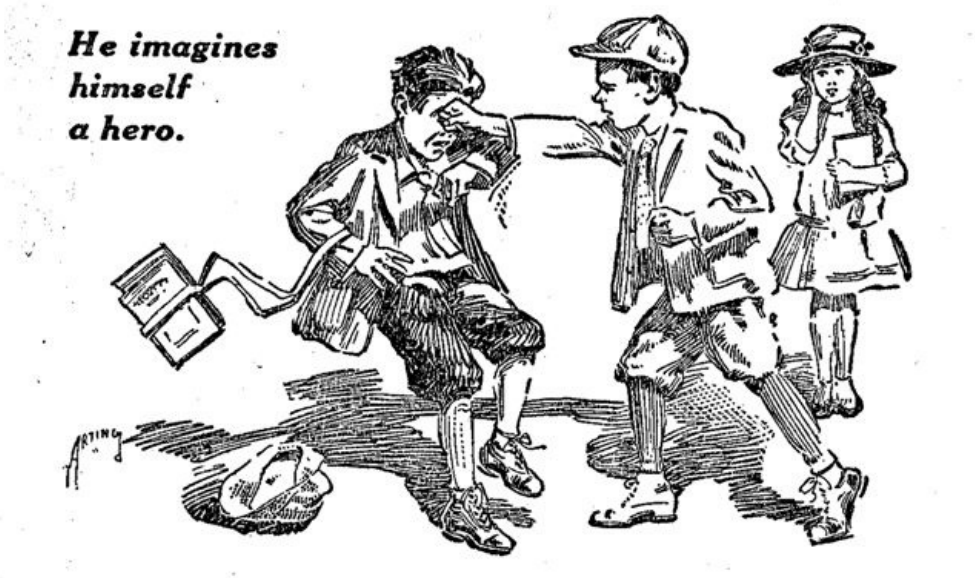
He shot her a half-frightened glance and found her face seemingly stern and remorseless. He had been tempted to explain how the great out-of-doors called to him with an insistence which was irresistible, but shucks, she wouldn't understand. How was he to know that under the surface of it all, she sympathized with the culprit daydreamer exceedingly? So he hung his head in silence.

There was a knock at the door. Miss Brown dismissed him with a curt nod. He sank thankfully into his desk as Sid DuPree sprang forward to admit the newcomer—a new girl and her mother. From the shelter of his big geography, John surveyed the couple with that calmly critical stare which only a ten-year-old is master of.

The mother was nice, he decided. Fat ones always were. It was your long, thin woman who made trouble. Look at old lady Meeker, who lived next the vacant lot on Southern Avenue, where the boys gathered occasionally on their way from school for a game of marbles or to play split-top on one of the loose, decayed fence planks. Never did a glassy go spinning from the big dirt ring through a dexterous shot, or a soft, evenly grained top split cleanly to the spear head amid the proper shouts of approval than her fretful, piercing voice put an end to further fun. Such goings-on made her head ache, she averred time and again. If they didn't leave immediately, she'd telephone the police station. Once she had said it was a "wonder some parents wouldn't keep their children in their own back yards." She forgot that half the gang lived in apartment buildings with back yards only designed for clothes-drying apparatus, and that the other half lived in houses built upon so cramped an acreage that the yards were no fun to play in. But grown-ups were in the habit of committing such oversights—especially the skinny, cranky ones.

As for the little girl—ah! she was good to look upon.

Her chestnut hair hung in curly ringlets below her shoulders, almost to the waist of her little white frock. Her face held a slight pallor which was strangely fascinating to the sun-tanned urchin, and her eyes were a deep, rich brown. As the conversation ended between teacher and parent, she left the platform and walked to the front seat assigned her in a timid, shrinking way which stamped her as just the sort of a girl the fellows would make miserable on the slightest provocation. John's face set in an expression of heroic determination until he looked as if he'd swallowed a dose of castor oil!



He imagines himself a hero.

He'd like to catch Sid DuPree dancing around her in maddening circles, some afternoon, while she shrank piteously from each cry of "'Fraid cat! 'Fraid cat!" Or that bully might throw pieces of chalk at her or pelt her with snowballs in the winter time until she broke into incoherent sobs. Then he, John Fletcher, would show that Sid where he got off at. He'd punch his face in, he would!

The school room door closed upon the mother's broad back, and the hum of excitement at the departure subsided into the normal undercurrent of whispering between the pupils. Pencils scratched laboriously over rough manila pads as their owners copied the questions from the board. The boy two seats ahead of John took a wad of chewing gum from his mouth and stuck it on the underside of his desk. Someone over on Sid DuPree's side of the room dropped a book to the floor with a bang.

Then Miss Brown shoved back the test papers she had been correcting and glanced at the clock.

"Clear the desks," she ordered sharply. "Class prepare for physical culture."

They obeyed with alacrity, for the drills were ever a relief from the enforced inactivity of restless little bodies. Moreover, they were vastly more enjoyable than mathematical perplexities or troublesome state and river boundaries.

"Rise on toes, inhale deeply, and exhale ver-y slowly!" came the crisp command after the children had stumbled to their feet in the aisle. "One, two, three, four; one, two, three, four."

Heated little faces grew even more flushed as the minute hand of the big wall clock showed the passing of five flying minutes. Next came, "Thrust forward, upwards, and from your sides," "bend trunks," to all points of the compass, "lunge to the right and left, and thrust forward," and a baker's dozen of other exercises designed to offset the weakening influences of cramped city environments and impure air.

In conclusion, the class made a quarter-turn to the right and as they thus stood in parallel rows, took hold of each other's hands. At teacher's command, they swung their arms back and forth vigorously to an accompaniment of the inevitable "one-two, one-two."

John's was a back seat, thanks to skillful maneuvering on the opening day of school, and flaxen-haired Olga occupied the desk ahead. A day earlier he had counted himself fortunate in having her for a neighbor, for she was clever at studies which required plodding perseverance, and not at all bashful about helping a fellow when teacher pounced on him with a catch question.

Now he loathed her slow, insipid smile as his left hand released her plump right fingers at the end of the exercise. If she were only the new little girl!

Then he noticed, as a prosaic business man will notice suddenly, that a skyscraper which he has passed daily for months is out of line with its neighbor, that the seat behind the new little girl was unoccupied and that she stood alone in the aisle during exercises. Would that he had possession of it!

To sit next her, to be able to exchange the trivial, yet important, little confidences in which fourth-graders indulge when teacher's back is turned, or to win her quick, flashing smile as a reward for sharpening her pencil or for judicious prompting during a spelling lesson!

To achieve these things, he would be willing even to relinquish the powers which he held by virtue of his aisle end seat. And to allow voluntarily some other pupil to fill the inkwells,

distribute pencils, scratch pads, and drawing paper at their appointed intervals, and to indulge in a hundred and one other little acts of monitorship is no slight sacrifice for a boy to make.

The geography lesson began. With the disregarded map of Africa in front of him as a blind, he fell to comparing the new girl with the other maidens of his acquaintance.

Take poor, inoffensive Olga for example. Her placid being seemed clumsy and her movements bovine as he pictured again the dainty grace of that new arrival as she stepped down from the teacher's platform; or Irish-eyed, boisterous, fun-loving Margaret! John had regarded her with a great deal of favor during the past two weeks, for she was a jolly little sprite with a mother who, thanks to the neighborhood's laundry patronage, contrived to clothe her daughter in a constantly varying and seldom-fitting assortment of dresses. Now echoes of her noisy laughter returned to grate upon his memory. The new little girl wouldn't laugh like that. Not she! No one with so sweet a smile had need of impudent grins. And what a contrast between Margaret's untidy mop and those long, silken curls which so fascinated him.

Yes, the boy decided that here was the being who was to be his girl for the ensuing year—to be worshipped from afar in all probability, but to be, nevertheless, his girl. So he drove ruthlessly from his heart all memories of a certain gray-eyed Harriette, his third-grade charmer, and erected a purely tentative shrine to the new divinity. As yet he was not quite certain of his feelings—and there might be a later addition to the room!

In the meantime, there was the vacant seat. Temporary idol or not, he longed for possession of it, but he knew that although he moved heaven and earth to support a direct request for transfer, Miss Brown would never assign it to him. Many a past bitter experience had shown the most harmless desires to mask deep-laid juvenile plots, and she was singularly wary and distrustful. A way must be found to trick her into giving him the occupancy.

He ate his meat and potatoes very quietly and thoughtfully that noon, a procedure so contrary to his usual actions that his mother asked him if he felt well. He nodded abstractedly, went upstairs to the big, sunny sewing room, searched the family needlecase for a long stiff darning needle and extracted several rubber bands from the red cardboard box on the library table. Then he sauntered off to wait in the school yard for assembly bell, with the air of a military strategist who has planned a well-laid campaign and is sanguine of success.

The tramp of juvenile feet up the broad, school stairways grew steadily less until silence reigned in the big, empty corridors. Miss Brown sat down at her desk, drew out the black-covered record book from the right-hand drawer, and gave a few reassuring pats to her dark, orderly hair. Scurrying footsteps pounded up to the cloak room entrance. A moment later, Thomas Jackson, still panting and breathless, stumbled into his seat and mopped the beads of perspiration from his dark-skinned forehead with his coatsleeve. Then the tardy bell rang and Miss Brown began roll call.

"Anna Boguslawsky," came her clear, even tones as the "B" names were reached. Hardly had Anna's timid "Here" reached her ears than a series of subdued cluckings came from some small boy's throat. She rapped for order and went on.

"Edna Bowman."

"Clu-wawk, clu-wawk," repeated the offender. Miss Brown laid her book down with a snap and glared at the class, which hesitated between ill-suppressed amusement and fear of teacher's wrath. She waited for one long, dragging moment and spoke crisply:

"Children, you are no longer third-graders. Try to act as really grown-up boys and girls ought to."

"Clu-wawk, clu-wawk," came the maddening repetition. She sprang to her feet.

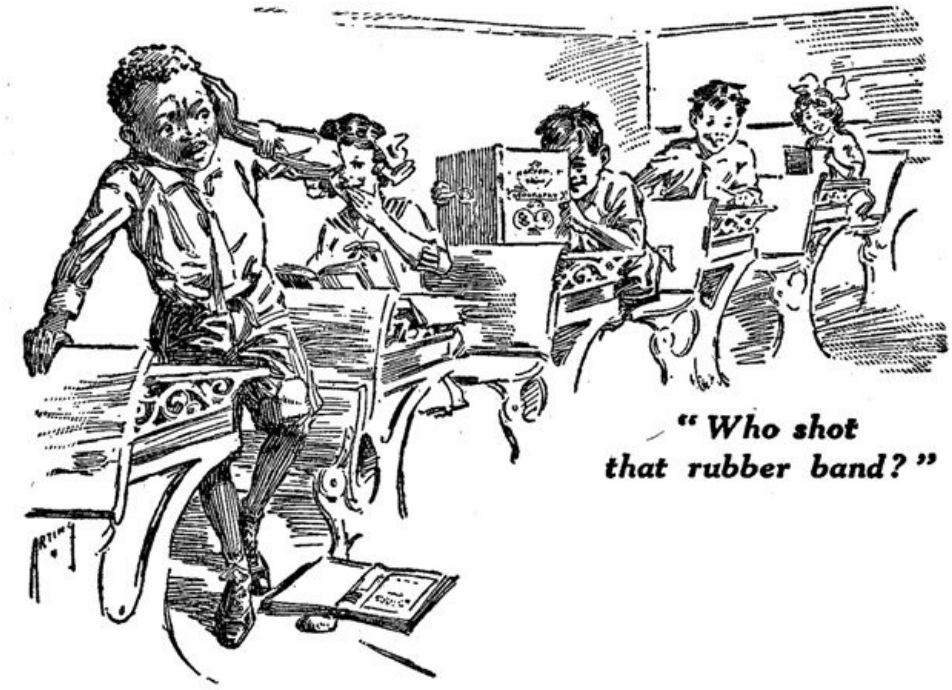
"That will be quite enough," she snapped. "If that boy makes that noise again he will be sent to the office and suspended for two weeks." During the awed silence which followed, she seated herself and took up the black-covered book with impressive deliberation. All went well until the "H's" were reached.

"Albert Harrison," she called, "Albert!"

"School doctor sent him home this morning," volunteered the boy nearest Albert's empty desk.

As Miss Brown's eyes sought the record book again, an unseen something whizzed through the air. Thomas Jackson jumped to his feet and rubbed a chocolate ear belligerently.

"Who shot that rubber band? I'll fix him. Who done it? He's afraid to let me know."



"Who shot that rubber band?"

Miss Brown stepped down from the teacher's platform with an angry swish of her skirts, and took up a position half-way down the aisle where she had a better view of the class. John studied her carefully. The usually smiling lips were set in a thin, nervous line, and the hand which held the record book trembled ever so slightly. In an opposite corner of the room, two little girls giggled hysterically. The ring of pupils around him, true to the child's creed of no talebearing, glanced at school books or lesson papers with preternaturally grave faces. Discipline had been so badly broken that the class was at the stage where a dropped piece of chalk or a sneeze will provoke an outburst of laughter.

John drew the needle from his coat lapel and wedged it carefully in the joint between his desk and the back of Olga's seat. A glance at Miss Brown found her watching Billy Silvey closely in the belief that he was the miscreant. The time for his crowning bit of persecution had arrived.

Suddenly a nerve-wracking, ear-piercing vibration filled the room. Miss Brown's face went white with rage. John caught the tip of the needle with his fingernail and bent it back again.

"T-a-a-ang." The class gasped at the sheer audacity of the deed. A ray of reflected light caught the teacher's eye, and she pounced upon the boy before he could remove the incriminating bit of steel.

"John Fletcher," she screamed, as she stood beside him. "So it's you who have been causing all this trouble!"

He admitted as much. Sober second thought would have counseled Miss Brown to make good her threat of a visit to the principal's office and consequent suspension, but an outraged sense of personal grievance clamored for redress. She gained control of herself with perceptible effort.

"Take out your books," she ordered.

He assembled his belongings on the top of his desk—geography, reader, arithmetic, composition book and speller—all too new to be as yet ink-scarred—a manila scratch pad, a ruled block of ink paper with a cover crudely illustrated during his many bored moments, and a sundry assortment of teeth-marked pencils and pens, and stood, a smiling, incorrigible offender, in the aisle, awaiting further orders.

Miss Brown found that smile peculiarly irritating. "The first thing to happen to you," she told him sternly, "is that you'll have to stay after school an hour for the rest of the week. As for your back seat, I let you keep it only on promise of good behavior, and this is the way you've acted."

The maddening grin reappeared. That seat behind the new little girl was the only vacant one in the room located at all near Miss Brown's desk. The prize was all but in his possession. She was going to—she had to—

"And," went on the cold, inexorable voice, "as Louise is such a well-behaved little girl, I'm going to let her exchange with you. Louise, will you take out your books?"

He drew one piteous, gasping breath. Every vestige of sunlight seemed to leave the room. Slowly he fumbled among his belongings as he gathered them into his arms and, half-way up the aisle,

stood aside to let his divinity pass. Longingly his glance took in every detail of the silken curls, the curving lashes which half hid the brown eyes the rosy, petulant lips, and the unmistakably snub hose. Then he walked uncertainly to the seat which she had just vacated.

A little later, Miss Brown looked up from a stack of composition papers which had been collected by the monitors, and found John's lower lip a-quiver. She was greatly puzzled, for boys did not usually take detentions after school so much to heart. But fifteen minutes before school ended for the day, she knew that his troubles had vanished, for he was gazing out of the window with such vacant earnestness that she felt called upon to reprove him again for daydreaming.

He eluded the watchful eye of authority as the exit bell rang, and filed down stairs with the long line of pupils. Sid DuPree dashed past him as he stood in the school yard, with a cry of "Just wait until teacher fixes you for ducking." A friend called an enthusiastic invitation to play tops on the smooth street macadam. Silvey stopped to convey the important information that the "Tigers" were to hold their first fall football practice in the big lot that afternoon. John promised his appearance—later. Other and more important matters would claim his attention for the next half-hour.

At last the new little girl came down the long walk leading from the school yard to the street and hippity-hopped over the cement sidewalk towards home, with school books swinging carelessly to and fro in her strap.

He started after her with the unnecessary and therefore fascinating stealth of an Indian, for he meant to find out where she lived. As she left the cross street where the telephone exchange stood, her gait slackened to a walk—still eastward. Past the little block of stores which housed a struggling delicatessen, an ambitious, gilt-signed "elite" tailoring establishment, and a dingy, dirty-windowed little jewelry shop, across Southern Avenue where gray-eyed Harriette, that divinity of the preceding year, lived, and still no sign of a change in direction.

Once she turned and looked backward. John fled, panic-stricken, to the shelter of the nearest store entrance; for you might be in love with a girl, you might be obsessed with a desire to find her residence that you might pass it occasionally and wonder in a dreamy sort of a way what she might be doing, but the girl herself must never know it. That would be contrary to every precept of the schoolboy code of ethics.

At last she turned a corner—his home corner—where the drug store stood, and broke again into a hippity-hop down the shady, linden-lined street. With heart gloriously a-thump, he watched the door of the big apartment building at the end of the street close upon the little white-clad form, and he knew that the van load of furniture which had been carried in on the Friday preceding belonged to her parents. So he retraced his steps across the street with a dolorously cheerful whistle on his lips.

Over the railroad tracks he went as usual to the big, weed-grown, rubbish-littered field north of the dairy farm, which served as baseball grounds, athletic field, and football gridiron, according to the season. There he found a baker's dozen of boys of his own age, who greeted him joyously.

"Sid DuPree's gone to get his football," Silvey explained. "We'll be practicing in a minute."

They were a ragged lot. Silvey boasted of a grimy, oft-patched pair of football pants, which were a relic of his brother's high-school career; Albert, the older Harrison boy, who did not seem very ill in spite of the physician's dismissal, owned half of an old football casing, which had been padded to make a head guard, and there was a scattering of sweaters among them. Sid DuPree, thanks to parental affluence, was the only boy who laid claim to a complete uniform, and presently he sauntered over the tracks in shining headgear, heavy jersey, padded knee trousers, and legs encased in shin-guards far too large for him. A new collegiate ball was tucked securely under one arm.

"Here she is, fellows," he called, as he clambered into the field and sent the pigskin spinning erratically through the air. "Isn't she a peach?"

Last year, their combats had been fought with a light, cheap, dollar toy, but here was one in their midst of the same weight, brand, and size as that which the big university team used, and which cost as much as, or more, than a new suit of clothes, according to the individual. They gathered around it, poking at the staunchly sewn seams and thumping the stony sides with a feeling akin to reverence.

Presently Silvey produced a frayed, dog-eared treatise *How to Play Football*, which had survived two years of thumbing and tugging and lying on the attic floor between seasons, and proceeded to lay down the fundamental laws to the neophytes in the great American sport. Positions were tentatively assigned, and the squad raced over weeds and stones in an effort to master the rudimentary plays, while Silvey strutted and blustered and administered corrective lectures in a manner that was a ludicrous imitation of a certain high-school coach. Let John excel at baseball if he would; he was the master of the hour now, and he marched the boys back and forth until they panted and sweated and finally broke into vociferous protest. Thus the "Tigers," whose name that season was to spell certain defeat to similar ten-year-old teams, concluded their first football practice.

The "Tigers."

John dropped behind to talk to the elder Harrison boy as the team sauntered noisily homeward. He wanted to learn the details of the accommodating illness. Albert chuckled.

"Nothing the matter. Only the school doctor thought there was."

That official was a recent acquisition to the school personnel whose duties, according to the school board's orders, were to "Make daily visits, morning and afternoon, to examine all cases of suspected illness, and prescribe, if poverty makes it necessary, that epidemics be safeguarded against."

"What do you mean?" asked John.

"Well, my throat felt funny and I told Miss Brown. She sent me up to the office to see him. 'Stay home a day, my boy, until we see if it gets worse,'" Albert quoted. "Was I glad?"

So that was what the new school doctor did. Thumped you around and looked down your throat and prescribed a day's holiday as a cure. He wished he'd been Albert. He'd a' stayed on the pier all morning and hooked the big carp again. Some folks seemed to be born lucky, anyway. Couldn't he fall sick too, not badly enough to go to bed, but just nicely sick as Al was?

He startled his parents at supper that evening by a sudden and seemingly morbid thirst for information about diseases.

"Mother," he queried, between mouthfuls of bread and homemade marmalade, "what's measles and scarlet fever and diphtheria start out like?"

His father chortled with amusement. Mother, after the manner of women, remembered his actions that noon and grew anxious.

"You're not feeling sick, are you, dear?"

He didn't feel exactly well. Could she tell him about any of the foregoing? Perhaps he had one of them.

"Put that marmalade right down, then. It'll upset your stomach. Here, let me look at your tongue!"

He demurred. Jam wouldn't hurt him. There was nothing really wrong, anyway. Only one of the boys at school had gone home with the measles and he was wondering what it was like. Then he subsided into silence.

Late that evening, Mr. Fletcher found the library gas burning and discovered his son sitting beside the desk, his eyes glued to the portly, green-bound *Family Doctor*. Beside him on a pad were scribbled copious notes. Nor would he even hint, as his father ordered him to bed, what he wanted them for.

CHAPTER III

HE PLAYS A TRICK ON THE DOCTOR

In the morning, John sneaked from the table as soon as the last forkfull of fried potatoes had been

devoured. When Mrs. Fletcher brought the breakfast plates out to the kitchen sink, she found him on tiptoe, with one hand fumbling among the spice tins and bottles in the top bureau drawer. He turned guiltily, and yawned to hide his embarrassment.

"I was looking for a piece of cinnamon to chew," he explained. "Guess I'll be going to school now."

His mother glanced at the alarm clock which ticked noisily in its place on the wall over the sink.

"Only twenty-five minutes to nine, son. Isn't it a bit early?"

He explained that he had to be up at school at first bell. A geography notebook had been left in his desk, and entries must be made in it before the class began. He was gathering his scattered belongings together in the hall when the maternal voice called him back to the kitchen.

"Yes, Mother?" with his head in the doorway.

"Will you ever learn to shut a drawer when you're through with it?"

He shoved it back with a sulky bang. "Where's my hat?"

"Did you look in the front hall?"

"'Tain't on the floor by the big chair. That's where I most always leave it."

"How about the closet hat rack?"

A moment later, a surprised shout told that the lost had been found. The front door slammed noisily and he was off to school.

The dishes were washed and dried, the plates and saucers stacked on the pantry shelves, the cups hung neatly on the appointed hooks in the cupboard, and the silver put away in the sideboard drawer. Then Mrs. Fletcher turned her attention to the tidying of the house. She made innumerable circles and criss-crosses with the carpet sweeper over the parlor rug, and was dusting the big rocker by the bay window when a chance glance up the street revealed two small figures playing far at one end of the strip of macadam. Her son, without doubt, was one of them. No one else wore a cap tilted back at quite so ridiculous an angle. The other stocky figure looked and acted like Bill Silvey.

Why weren't they at school? Hookey? No, for truants never allowed themselves within sight of home and easy detection. And there was a certain brazen righteousness about their actions. At the big, green house, Silvey challenged John to a game of tag. A lamppost nearer, they ceased the mad, dodging chase and engaged in earnest conversation. A hundred yards from the Fletcher house, footsteps lagged to an astonishing degree and an air of lassitude overcame them that was inexplicable in view of recent activities. The boys mounted the front steps wearily. John pressed the bell as if the act consumed the last atom of strength in his arm.

His mother swung back the door anxiously. "What on earth's the matter?"

"School doctor sent me home," her son explained. "Think's I've got the measles."

"Nonsense! Let me take a look at you." His eyes were reddened to an alarming degree, but there seemed little else the matter.

"He did," John insisted. "Told me to stay home today to see if they got worse. Silvey and I are going fishing."

"Fishing! And coming down with the measles?"

He protested volubly. His head felt heavy and kind of funny, but he didn't think that lazying around on the pier would be harmful. The sunshine might do him good.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Fletcher a second time and with increased emphasis. She turned to Silvey. "You can go home, Bill. John can't come out. He's going to stay in bed until he gets better."

John trudged wearily up the interminable stairs to his little tan-walled room.

Shucks, it was just his luck! Look at Al Harrison. He came home with a sore throat and was allowed to play football and fool around as he pleased, while he, John Fletcher, was ordered to bed because the school doctor feared measles.

A fellow had returned from the pier with a string of perch a yard long dangling from his pole. "Fishing good? Say, kid, this ain't nothing to what some of 'em have caught!" And he was condemned to a day's imprisonment while they were biting that way. It was a shame, tyranny, oppression worse than the old slaves labored under in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He'd run away from home, he would. Perhaps his uncle would give him a job on the Michigan farm if he worked his way up there. Or else he could commit suicide. There was the long, shiny, carving knife in the kitchen table drawer. He'd just bet his mother would be sorry if he used it.

Instead, he threw his clothes sulkily over the back of the wicker chair and, after some deliberation, drew a well-thumbed, red-covered book from his library shelves. Sherlock Holmes was a far better panacea for his troubles than the big carving knife.

He had read and reread the tale until the episodes were known almost by heart, but still *The Sign*

of the Four held powerful sway over his imagination. Thaddeus Sholto lived again to tell his nervous, halting tale to the astute Baker Street detective. Tobey took the two eager sleuths through the episode of the trail which led to the creosote barrels. Holmes appeared and reappeared on his fruitless expeditions as the boy's eyes narrowed with excitement, and his figure straightened and his breathing quickened as he followed the police boat in the thrilling pursuit of Tonga and Jonathan Small on the tortuous, traffic-blocked Thames.

He found himself reading the love passages with a sudden and sympathetic insight. No longer did he feel tempted to skim those pages hastily that he might resume the thread of the main and more engrossing plot. Didn't Louise live almost across the street from him? Wasn't his interest in her explained by that paragraph, "A wondrous and subtle thing is love, for here were we two who had never seen each other before that day—"

"John!" His mother stood in the doorway, stern disapproval in her gaze. He looked at her blankly.

"Put up that book this minute. Don't you know that reading is the worst thing possible for inflamed eyes?"

The treasure was surrendered regretfully. His mother replaced it on the shelf.

"Where's the key to your bookcase?" He shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't matter. Mine fits your door, anyway."

The squeak of the lock sounded the death knell to the one course of amusement that had lain open to him. His mother pulled down the window shades and stooped over in the darkened room to kiss him.

"Sleep a little, son," she counseled. "Mother wants you to feel better in the morning."

He undressed and threw himself into bed angrily. Even books were denied him. What was the fun in being sick, anyway, if a fellow's mother insisted on taking that sickness seriously. Why wasn't she as easy going as Mrs. DuPree who allowed that privileged youngster to stay up as late as he wanted and to indulge in other liberties not usually granted to a boy of ten?

Sid and the class must be finishing arithmetic now. He wished he were there. Anything—even school—was better than staying in bed in a darkened room. Did Louise enjoy his back seat? Had she found the big wad of chewing gum he'd left on the bottom of the desk? Was Silvey having the same unfortunate time as he?

The room was warm and close in spite of the open east exposure. He yawned dismally. A fly lighted on his nose. He brushed it away in drowsy irritation. In a moment his eyes closed.

He was awakened by the buzz of the egg beater in a china bowl in the kitchen below him. Must be 'most dinner time. He felt hungry enough. What was his mother cooking? A fragrant hissing from the hot pan hinted of an omelet. Just let him sink his teeth into one. Wouldn't be long before he was ready for another.

He roused himself and went into the hall.

"Moth-a-ar," he called down the stairway.

"Yes, John?"

"I'm hu-u-ngry."

"Lie still. I'll be up with your dinner in a few moments."

He hoped it would be something good. Beefsteak and mashed potatoes and peas would be about right. Omelet would do, if there were enough. He could devour the house, he felt so ravenous.

Shortly his mother appeared with the big brown tray, drew up a straight-backed chair to the bed, and lowered the feast to it before his expectant eyes.

"Milk toast!" disgustedly.

"Why not?"

"Milk toast!"

"That isn't enough for a fellow. Aren't there any potatoes or meat?"

"They'd make your temperature rise," Mrs. Fletcher explained gently. "Perhaps, though, you can have some tomorrow, if you're better."

He waited until she left the room and attacked the mushy stuff hungrily. Everything is grist which comes to a small boy's digestive mill, anyway, and the food wasn't really distasteful. Then he lay back and, for the first time in his active life, realized what a refined torture complete and enforced idleness can be.

The shadows played incessantly on the brown wallpaper as the window curtains swung back and forth with the air currents and lightened and plunged his prison into oppressive twilight alternately. A fly made a complete toilette on the bed cover before his interested eyes, now brushing the gauzy wings, now twisting its head this way and that way, as if indulging in a form of calisthenics. He stretched forth a cautious hand to capture the insect, only to watch it buzz merrily away before his arm was in striking distance.

A suburban train puffed noisily past and slowed down at the adjacent station. Only twenty minutes elapsed! And an afternoon of this awful monotony faced him.

He blinked idly at the ceiling. This was Thursday. Played properly, his malady should be sufficient to keep him out of school on the morrow; but was the game worth the candle?

John dressed himself hurriedly and bounced down the stairs. Mrs. Fletcher was in the parlor, glancing for a brief moment at a newly arrived magazine. He presented himself sheepishly.

No, he didn't want to stay in bed. He felt all right—honest!

She examined the invalid carefully. The inflammation had left his eyes and they were now as clear as her own. His skin felt cool to the touch, without a trace of fever, and his tongue was an even, healthy pink.

"There doesn't seem much the matter with you now," she admitted. "It won't hurt you to stay up if you don't play too hard. There are lots and lots of things to do to help me."

First, the potatoes were to be washed for tomorrow's dinner. He filled the dishpan full of water, dumped the sand-laden tubers in, and attacked them with a brush in vigorous relief at the change from deadening inactivity. Next, there were a hundred and one little errands to do about the house, for his mother began sewing on his negligee blouses, and the button-hole scissors, the missing "60" thread, and other mislaid implements must be found for her. Lastly, he announced that it might be well to go up to school and get the lessons for tomorrow.

"Then I won't miss anything," he explained.

Mrs. Fletcher nodded assent. "But come right back. I don't want you to be sick again."

The afternoon passed without sign of John. At supper time, he approached the house warily. His face was flushed, his school clothes begrimed and rumpled, and a bruise on his right shin forced

a perceptible limp as he walked. He had been practicing with the "Tigers," and the scrimmage had been most exciting. Silvey—who had not been put to bed—had bumped into Red Brown in a manner which the latter regarded as unnecessarily rough. There had been a fight between the two, while the other aspirants for positions on the team stood around and yelled "Fi-i-i-ight" at the top of their lungs.

Yes, everyone seemed to be inside the Fletcher house. The outlook was reasonably safe. He tiptoed up on the porch and stretched out on the swinging lounge. There his mother found him feigning a deep and overwhelming sleep.

"John!"

Sleeping boys never wakened at the first summons. That wasn't natural. So he waited until a maternal hand shook him vigorously.

"Yes, Mother?" With a doleful yawn.

"Is this the way you come straight home from school?"

He protested. There were some lessons to get from Miss Brown after, dismissal and that had delayed him. "And I've been here ever so long."

"Nonsense!" she ejaculated. "Just look at the state of your clothing. You've been playing football. Come into the house this instant!"

He obeyed meekly. The period of invalidism was over.

But to the harassed school doctor, it seemed on the following morning that John Fletcher's case was but the beginning of a long and startling outbreak of illness in the school.

Hardly had Miss Brown finished roll call before dark-haired Perry Alford, her brightest and most guileless scholar, waved his hand excitedly to attract attention. His eyes hurt terribly as teacher could see. Wouldn't it be well for him to go to the school physician? Miss Brown thought that it would.

Room Ten's door closed upon the prospective invalid. But a few moments passed before towheaded, lethargic Olaf Johnson voiced his complaint.

"Please, ma'm, my throat, it feels funny here." He placed a pudgy hand on each side of his jaw. "And this morning when I get up, my head feels hot."

He, too, was sent to see the school physician.

"Does your nose run?" asked the man of medicines when Perry finished the catalog of his ailments.

Perry sneezed and admitted that it did.

"Anything else wrong with you?"

"Not exactly, sir;" then with a sudden glibness, "but I don't feel like doing much. Only loafing around—and my head feels queer."

"Home," ordered the doctor, emphatically. "At least four days. Tell your mother you've a first-class case of measles developing."

As Perry made his exit, Olaf appeared.

"Another?" exclaimed the physician, as he exchanged a glance with the gray-haired principal. "Well, what's the matter with you?"

Olaf elaborated upon the symptoms which he had described to Miss Brown. The young medic was puzzled.

"There are aspects which are not quite consistent," he said to the principal, "but the soreness suggests mumps. Shall we send him home?"

"As you think best," nodded Mr. Downer. Olaf went the way of the measles-smitten Perry.

The doctor was picking up his hat and medicine case to leave when the office door opened again. Two more boys appeared.

"Good heavens!" said he, as he sat down heavily. "Is it an epidemic?"

The principal shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment.

"More mumps." He beckoned to the larger of the two boys. "Now it's your turn."

The older urchin was sturdily built, with a deep coat of tan on his face that no city sun had ever bred.

"What's wrong with you?"

The situation was beginning to pall. The position of school doctor, newly created by the Board of Education at the close of the spring term, carried no munificent salary. The young practitioner had grasped at the opening because the routine work offered golden opportunities for acquiring

a clientele among the parents of the various pupils. Now, almost at the outset, a whole morning had been consumed, and there was promise of a great deal more work in the future.

There didn't seem to be anything seriously the matter with the boy. He felt bruised all over, that was all.

"Where does it hurt the most?"

"Around my back."

"Here?" The doctor placed his hands firmly on either side of the patient's spine.

"O-o-oh, don't!" he waited.

The physician straightened up and regarded the pupil gravely.

"Anything else?"

"My stomach feels queer and it hurts like the dickens every once in a while. I lost my breakfast, this morning, too!"

A tense note crept into the inquisitor's voice. "Have you ever been vaccinated?"

"No sir. We just moved to the city this summer."

"Smallpox!" The principal turned a little pale.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"The pain in the back and the vomiting are almost certain indications." He turned to the boy. "Tell your mother to notify the health department the very minute you get home. Your house must be quarantined immediately."

Much more was said regarding precautions, and measures, and medicines, to which the patient listened stolidly. A disinterested observer might have said that he was waiting solely for the order to leave school.

As the door closed, the authorities exchanged worried glances.

"The health record of the school has always been remarkably good," began the principal.

"But it's an epidemic," cut in the worried physician. "And what an epidemic. Four cases this morning, and two yesterday, ranging all the way from mumps to smallpox. Downer, the school ought to be closed and thoroughly disinfected."

"Doesn't it strike you as peculiar that the cases are confined to one room, Ten, and that boys are the only victims?"

"Did you ever hear of a germ carrier. A person who, through some source of exposure, carries germs here and there on his or her clothes, and is perfectly immune to them. That's what you must have in that room. As for your last question, merely a coincidence. The boys happened to be the most susceptible to exposure, that's all."

A bell clanged noisily. Mr. Downer stood up and looked thoughtfully from his window upon the orderly lines of pupils that no sooner passed from the school threshold than they became a howling, shouting mass of seeming infant maniacs.

"Seems to me," he said, "Miss Brown was telling about a girl named Margaret, Margaret Moran, whose mother took in washing for a living. Spoke of it as a great joke. Said the girl wore a new dress every day, sometimes too long, sometimes too short, but never a fit. An ingenious way to reduce one item of the present high cost of living. She might be the one," he admitted.

"Always the way," his companion said sharply. "There are more epidemics and near epidemics started by these itinerant washerwomen than the medical journals can keep track of. They ought to be regulated."

"At any rate," said the principal, "I think it would be wise to question her a little before steps are taken to close the school. She may be able to shed some light on matters."

"As you wish." The physician shrugged his shoulders. "I'll be back, this afternoon, to help with the inquisition."

Next to children, the gray-haired man loved flowers, and he had planted the barren strip of land adjoining the fence separating the school yard from the alley with cannas and elephant's ears. He was puttering among them, now seeking voracious parasites, now examining a leaf which hinted in its faded coloring of fast approaching frosts, when boys' voices coming from the alley, held his attention.

"So you want a holiday?" John Fletcher was the speaker beyond doubt; and his case had been the forerunner of the epidemic.

"Uhu."

"Got your nickel?"

"Show me how, first."

A moment's silence. John was examining the seeker after advice.

"Just want this afternoon?"

The boy assented.

"Better have the measles, then. That's only good for one day, 'cause you can't fake it much longer. The disease comes on too fast. Doctor's book says so. Now pay attention."

"Yes."

"Just before you go to school, shake some red pepper into your hand and go into a small closet. Shut the door so's none of the stuff can get out, and blow on it. Stay there until your eyes begin to smart. You'll find they're all red. That's the first symptom. Now repeat what I told you."

His pupil obeyed.

"Let Miss Brown take a good look and she'll send you to the doctor right away. When you come into the office, give a little cough as if your throat hurt. Let's hear you."

The urchin hacked vigorously.

"No, no, not so loud! You couldn't do that if your throat hurt as much as you must pretend it does. Try again."

This time, the effort satisfied even the teacher's critical ear.

"Then, when the doctor asks what's the matter, tell him you don't exactly know; that your head feels sort of queer, and you were all hot when you woke up this morning. He'll say 'Measles' and order you 'home until the case develops,'" quoting the physician's words at his own dismissal. "Now give me the nickel."

"Shucks, is that all?"

"Yes."

"That ain't worth no nickel."

"Aren't you going to give me that nickel?" threateningly.

"That ain't worth more'n a penny. How do I know whether it'll work?"

"Perry Alford's worked, and so did mine, and Bill Silvey's, Olaf's, Carl's, and the country kid's."

"The other kids aren't paying you no nickel."

"They are, too. Ask Mickey and his brother, and the Shepherd kids. They're going to be sick this afternoon, and they've paid me."

"I can go to Olaf," asserted the would-be dead-beat. "He'll tell me what you told him, and it'll only cost a penny."

"He'd better not! I'll smash his face in if he does. *Are you going to give me that nickel?*"

"Naw, I ain't."

John clenched his fists belligerently. His debtor raised both arms in a posture of defense. The principal tiptoed noiselessly around the end of the fence. John sparred for an opening and his opponent spied the approaching figure.

"Jiggers! Old man Downer!" he yelled. "Beat it quick!"

John turned, only to meet the principal's firm grasp on his shoulder.

"Come up to the office," said the quiet voice. "I want to have a talk with you."

He led the way to the center doors, an entrance reserved for the use of such awe-inspiring mortals as the faculty, visiting school superintendents, and parents. Up the dingy wooden stairs, worn at either end by the innumerable shuffling feet which had passed over them, they went, and into the bleak little office.

"Sit down," said Mr. Downer.

John collapsed into an uncomfortable wooden chair and gazed about him. There were the same desk, the same window box, filled with geraniums and pansies, and the same dun wall that he had seen on previous visits, prompted by his various sins. There was only one change. Opposite him, a newly framed head of Washington looked down from the wall in cold disapproval of the culprit who, for once in his brief life, felt strangely small and subdued.

There were no questions; the principal had heard too much from his vantage point beside the fence. So he talked on and on and on in even, severe tones, of notes mailed to parents, of suspension notices, of school board action, and of interviews with Mr. Fletcher, until John, staring, motionless, at a panel in the big oak desk, felt his lower lip quiver. Then the gray-haired man desisted.

"But I hope none of these measures will be necessary, John," he concluded.

"N-no, sir," came the scarcely audible response.

Had the boy looked at the kindly face, he would have seen that the deep set eyes were a-twinkle with suppressed merriment, but he was too conscience-stricken to do anything but slink from the office to the school yard.

There he found that the news of his downfall had been spread among the fast increasing throng of boys who scampered over the pavement in breakneck games of tag or made tops perform miraculous tricks as they waited for the school bell to ring. Not a few jeered at him. One or two little girls who were passing stuck out their tongues. Even Sid DuPree and Silvey and the rest of the "Tigers" had only derisive laughter.

It was the first time in his life that he had been made to feel ridiculous and he liked it not at all. He felt strangely out of place and stood to one side of the yard, a scowl on his face, glaring at the throng of merrymakers. Anyway, the proceeds of his escapade were in his pockets; that was more money than any of the scoffers owned. He shook the coins consolingly.

A boy darted past. "Y-a-a, Johnny will try to fool the doctor!"

The scowl deepened, then vanished suddenly. "Hey!" he bellowed to an astonished group near him. "Come on, all of you, over to the school store."

They filed, a perplexed, noisy throng, into the cramped room. The proprietress gasped. John swaggered forward.

"Here," said he, with the air of a young millionaire throwing away twenty-dollar tips, "I want forty-five cents' worth of six-for-a-cent lemon drops. Give each of these kids two and save the rest for me, if there is any rest!"

Then he strutted out, a veritable lord of creation. His pockets were empty, but little he cared. The clamor in the school store was as sweet music to his ears, for it meant that his status among his play-fellows was restored. His bump of conceit no longer ached. So he knew that the victory was worth the price and again he felt at peace with the world.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH A TERRIFIC BATTLE IS WAGED

The following morning was clear and sun-shiny. Silvey, his trousers' pockets strangely distorted, sprinted down the street and halted on the cement walk in front of the Fletcher house.

"Oh, John-e-e-e! Oh, John-e-e-e!"

John appeared at an upper window in answer to the ear-piercing call. He carried a dustrag in one hand, and an expression of extreme discontent was on his freckled face.

"What you want?"

"Come on out."

"Can't." Disgruntled pessimism rang in his tones.

"Why?"

"Got to tidy my room and dust the bookcase and hang up my clothes in the closet and cut the front grass. Mother says so."

"Aw-w-w, shucks! Can't you get out of it?" His friend fumbled in one of his bulging pockets. "Look!"

The laborer at household tasks stared with sudden interest. "Ji-miny, cukes! Where'd you get 'em?"

"'Long the railroad tracks. Vines are loaded. Nice and ripe, too. Watch."

He hurled the greeny, spiny oval against the window ledge where it burst with the peculiar "plop," which only a wild cucumber of a certain stage of juicy plumpness can make.

"The fellows are going to have a big fight," Silvey continued—"Perry Alford and Sid and the Harrison kids and all the rest of the gang. Ask your mother can you leave the work until afternoon. Tease her *hard*."

Cucumbers ripe so early? That was fine! But could he evade the Saturday tasks. He would try.

As he descended the stairs, the elation left his face and his step grew heavy and lifeless. He was framing a plea for freedom and his manner must fit the occasion. Had you seen him, you might have thought that his best bamboo fishing pole had been broken, or that the key to his bookcase was in maternal possession as punishment for some misdeed. All boys are splendid professional mourners anyway, and John was by no means an exception to the rule.

He halted in the dingy coat closet to listen. Through the closed kitchen door came his mother's voice uplifted in song.

> Nita, Oh, Ju-a-a-nita,
> Ala-a-s that we must part!

He sighed deeply. Bitter experience had taught that never was moment so unpropitious for errands like the present as when that cheerful dirge filled the air. But the thought of the waiting Silvey nerved him. He turned the doorknob and coughed hesitantly. His mother looked up from the pan of apples on her lap and smiled. She knew that lagging step and drooping mouth of old.

"Well, John?"

Her son fidgeted from one foot to the other. Beginnings were always so difficult. At last he blurted out:

"Mother! Bill's outside with a lot of cucumbers. Says the fellows are going to have a sham battle and wants me to come along."

"Did you put your shoes away in the bag on the door and hang up your good knickerbockers and coat?"

His eyes began to fill. "N-no," he admitted.

"Well, you've been upstairs nearly an hour," Mrs. Fletcher went on inexorably. "I suppose your room is tidied and dusted anyway."

"Not quite," reluctantly. If the truth were told, a new book from the public library had caught his eye as he was about to start, and time had flown as a consequence.

His mother shook her head. "That's your regular Saturday work, John. It has to be finished before you can go out. You know that. And there's the lawn to be cut, and the porch to be hosed. You skipped them last week."

"I'll do them this afternoon. Honest, I will." His lower lip began to tremble. Mrs. Fletcher struggled to hide a smile.

"Tell Bill you'll be out later." She disregarded his offer of compromise. "Now run along, son. Teasing only wastes time. You could be half finished if you'd only worked."

There was no mistaking the tone. It meant business in spite of the aggressive cheerfulness. He turned moodily and stamped out of the room. As the door closed, he found an outlet for the disappointment in half mumbled ejaculations.

"Mean old thing. Never lets a fellow do what he wants. Just as well have let 'em go until afternoon. What's the use of tidying a room, anyway? Always gets dirty again."

Half-way up the carpeted stairs, he tripped in his blind anger and bruised his knee. The pain was sufficient to make the tears—the easy flowing tears which had longed for an outlet from the start of the interview—stream from his eyes.

In a trice, he turned, threw back the door, and fled to the haven of his mother's lap. His arms sought clumsily to encircle her neck. She dropped the pan of apples on the floor, and gathered him, a sobbing little bundle, into her comforting arms.

"What is it, son?"

"My knee." One uncertain hand indicated the injured spot.

"Ah, son, son," she laughed softly with just a hint of a catch in her voice as she rubbed the injury gently, "is it only when you want something that you love me like this?"

He shook his head and snuggled closer in vehement protest. They rocked to and fro for some moments. Gradually the sobbing ceased and he lay blissfully motionless until she looked down at him. Then he said sheepishly,

"If I do the lawn now, can I leave the porch and my room until afternoon?"

Mrs. Fletcher gave her son an amused shake. He sensed hope for his cause and began to weep anew.

"Please!"

His mother's smile broadened. "You little humbug," she said softly.

John wanted to smile, too. She always said that when she was relenting.

"Can I?" eagerly.

"Well, make a good job of the front lawn and I'll see."

He struggled to his feet and was on the front porch before the kitchen door had slammed behind him. Half-dried tears still streaked his face, but a smile shone through them like the sun after a summer shower.

"Got to cut the front lawn," he said exuberantly, "but that won't take long. She says I can leave the rest of it."

Silvey's face clouded. "They're waiting for us in the big lot."

"Won't take long if you help me," John hinted gently. "You run the mower and I'll follow with the rake."

He darted back into the house and down into the dark, badly ventilated basement. Silvey sauntered around to the side, just in time to hear him struggling with the rusty door bolt.

They dragged the implements up the area steps and set to work grimly. No time to be spent in making erratic circles or decorative designs in the long grass now. Up and down, up and down, the mower whirred with methodical thoroughness until the little plot had been cut after a fashion.

"Guess that'll do," said John as they bumped the tools down the rickety wooden steps and left them lying in the doorway.

"Going to tell her you're finished?"

Mrs. Fletcher's son shook his head vigorously. "S'pose I want to trim the edges with the shears?

Come on. Beat you over the tracks!"

The lot where the boys had held their first football practice was large and occupied more than half of the double city block on which the dairy farm was located. The far end was flanked by a row of red, ramshackle frame stores, occupied by photographers, art dealers, and a Greek ice cream soda shop. A little further in and along the railroad fence, dense weeds flourished, topping at times even the tallest of the boys. Nearer to the dairy, short, sparse grass struggled for existence under a profusion of tin cans, charred wood, and broken milk bottles. A considerable area had been cleared of these impediments, and formed the boys' athletic grounds. Near one corner stood a monster pile of barrels and boxes, collected some months past, for a bonfire; but the policeman on the beat had interfered with a threat of arrest for the whole tribe, and the giant conflagration had not taken place.

The pair were greeted with shouts as they jumped down from the railroad fence.

"What took you so long?" Sid DuPree asked.

John explained. The members of the gang offered congratulations at the escape, or sympathized with him over the work yet to be done, according to their several viewpoints. The elder Harrison boy led the two to one side and pointed out a scant bushel basket of the green ammunition. Others explained the plans for the morning's fun.

"Silvey 'n I'll be generals of the armies," said John, when the babel had diminished. Sid raised his voice in protest.

"Give somebody else a chance. Let Red and me be it this time."

Silvey shouted derisively. "'Member the time you got hit in the eye with a snowball? Went home, bawling 'Ma-m-a-a, Ma-m-a-a.' Fine general you'll make!"

Sid brandished his fists with a show of braggadocio. "Want to fight about it?"

"Na-a-w," came the sneering reply. "Don't fight with cowards."

John turned upon the pair imperiously. "Silvey'n I'll be generals, just as I said. Cut out the quarreling. If you don't like it, you don't have to. Want to quit?"

Sid mumbled a sulky denial and retreated to the outer edge of the little group. There he poured out his troubles to the elder Harrison boy. John and Bill were always bossing things; ought to let him lead once in a while; thought they were the earth, anyway.

John shot him a keen glance and whirled upon Silvey.

"First choose!" he shouted.

"'Tain't fair," objected his rival. "I wasn't ready. Draw lots."

Perry Alford plucked a half-dozen blades of grass of varying lengths and folded them carefully. Then he held one, tightly closed, chubby hand first to Bill and then to John. The leaders compared their prizes. Silvey gave an exultant yell and beckoned to a gawky, loosely jointed lad who stood a little apart from the rest of the gang.

"Come on, Skinny! You're on my side."

Skinny's long arms made him a welcome addition to any force and a warrior to be feared at all times. Occasionally he performed feats of marksmanship which not even the two redoubtable leaders could equal.

The group of boys drew closer. Perry Alford lagged with seeming nonchalance, a step in the rear of his more eager play-fellows. Sid DuPree picked up a pebble and threw it unerringly toward a railroad fence post as John eyed him regretfully.

If only that youngster had not such a reputation for quitting under fire, time and again during their many mimic battles! Then his glance fell upon Red Brown's impudent, freckled face and he smiled. Here was a warrior with a temperament to delight the leader of a forlorn hope.

"Come on, Red!"

Sid was promptly seized upon by the rival commander.

"Perry Alford," said John.

The remaining half-dozen mediocrities were divided without further ado. Then the two leaders stepped gravely to one side and discussed the rules for the approaching conflict, while the rank and file of the two armies, twelve strong, amused themselves by wrestling, throwing bits of stone and glass up on the railroad tracks, and engaging in impromptu games of tag.

"Each fellow gets twenty cucumbers," concluded John. "That'll leave some for fun, later. If a man gets hit three times, he's a deader and has to quit. Side wins when the other fellows are killed, same as it was last year."

Silvey nodded and beckoned to his clan. The Fletcherites were about to withdraw to the opposite side of the field when an unforeseen interruption occurred.

"Wanta fight!" announced a tousled-headed, wash-suited five-year-old with determination.

"Go on!" retorted Silvey incautiously as he looked down upon the petitioner from the lofty height of ten long years of life. "This game ain't for babies. It's for *men*. You'd get hit in the eye and go home to ma-ma in a minute. You can't play."

The infant eyed him for a moment and threw himself on the ground in a fit of rage. "Wanta fight! Wanta fight! Wanta fight!" he wailed again and again.

Bill turned to Skinny Mosher angrily. "What do you always bring that kid brother along for? He spoils all our fun. Ain't you got any sense?"

"Sense?" replied that star marksman in injured tones. "You bet I've got sense. But what's a fellow to do when his ma says, 'Now, Leonard, take little brother along and see that those big, rough boys don't hurt him.'" Tone and mannerisms were in perfect imitation of Mrs. Mosher.

"Give him some cucumbers and let him fool around. That'll keep him quiet," Red suggested.

"Yes," retorted Silvey scornfully. "Then he'll mix in the fight and get hit and go home bawling, same as he did when we had the snow fort. Then his ma'll go around to our mas and tell 'em what rough games we play and how it's a wonder somebody hasn't lost an eye. We'll all get penny lectures and the fun'll be spoiled for a week. Oh, yes, let him fight!"

John broke the gloomy silence which followed. "Here, kid, you can join both armies at once."

The incubus ceased wailing and looked up eagerly. Silvey's and Skinny's faces bespoke perturbed amazement.

"How——," interrupted Red Brown.

"You can be a Red Crosser and look after the ones who get killed," John continued serenely. "Only you mustn't fight. Red Crossers never do. They just stay around the hospitals." He fumbled in a hip pocket for the bit of red school chalk which he used for marking hop-scotch squares on the sidewalks. "Come here and I'll put the cross on your arm. And," he offered as alluring alternative, "if you don't like that, I'll punch your face and send you home!"

Like the one non-office holder of a certain short-lived boys' club who was given the specially created position of "Honorable Vice-President," the Mosher infant was more than placated. As he galloped off astride an imaginary horse for a circuit of the field, the factions breathed a unanimous sigh of relief.

"No fair firing until we say 'Ready,'" shouted the exultant diplomat, as he gathered his forces and led them toward their own territory.

"Now," said he, when they reached the tall, straggling weeds, "how're we going to beat 'em?"

Immediately a babel of suggestions ensued. Bill waited a few impatient minutes and executed a taunting, barbaric war dance to the center of the field. Carefully planned campaigns were not for him; his force boasted too many good marksmen.

"'Fraid cats! 'Fraid cats!" he shrieked at the top of his lungs. "C'ardy, c'ardy custard, eatin' bread an' must-a-ard. Come on an' get beat. Come on an' get beat."

John nodded at a suggestion of Red's and turned to the dancing figure.

"Ready, ch-a-arge!" he shouted. Silvey retreated promptly to the shelter of his own army. Presently his four weakest marksmen advanced.

"Wants to get us fighting," explained General Fletcher, as he restrained his impatient subordinates. "Then he and Skinny and Sid will pick us off. Come on—and remember."

They advanced silently without wasting a cucumber. The elder Harrison boy who led the four skirmishers, ventured a shot to open the engagement. Silvey, Skinny, and Sid DuPree sauntered carelessly up.

"Now!" shouted John.

His little force split into two groups. Red, with Perry and two others, charged to the right of the advancing quartette, while the general's detachment dodged quickly past their left. Then at a signal, seven arms loosed a shower of missiles at the startled trio of leaders.

A cucumber caught Skinny Mosher squarely below his ear. Another left a moist spot on one of Silvey's oft darned stockings. A third missile found another mark on the now bewildered Mosher. Red Brown advanced upon him.

"Surrender!" he yelled.

Mosher fished another cucumber from his trousers and fired squarely at his advancing enemy. That gentleman dodged, tripped upon a bit of debris, and fell over backwards with a "plop." As Skinny advanced incautiously to make sure of his victim, Red retired him with a glancing shot on his upraised hand.

"You're a deader, you're a deader," he yelled as Mosher lifted his arm a second time. "John hit you and the little Harrison kid hit you, and now I did. That makes three times, and you're killed entirely."

"Shucks," grunted the disgusted corpse. "Just as I was beginning to have some fun, too."

The victor busied himself in removing bits of flattened cucumbers from his juice-soaked hip pockets. "Just wait until ma sees these pants," he said ruefully. "Hey, John, I'm going after more ammunition."

The main conflict slackened. To lose a first lieutenant at the outset, and to have two more members of your army near death, is no slight matter. Silvey grew more and more disconcerted as the failure of his offensive became apparent.

"Beat it," he yelled at last as a stray shot missed his shoulder by a scant inch. The survivors retreated to the shelter of the boxes and barrels, where they maintained a desultory fire.

The advantage of the impromptu fort began to make itself felt. Missile after missile shot accurately out at the attackers and retaliation was well nigh impossible. John withdrew his forces just out of range.

"We've got to do something," he said desperately. "Who's hit on our side?"

Red pointed to a discolored nose and admitted "Twice." Perry Alford indicated a moist, dark circle on his wash blouse and a sticky lock of hair. Their leader looked grave.

"Silvey's hit twice, and Skinny's dead, so that leaves them only five. But, Jiminy, Red, if you and Perry get hit, it's all up. And look where they are. Maybe I can get 'em to come out."

He advanced a few paces toward the weathered heap of debris and broke into a time-honored taunt:

> Silvey, th' bilvey,
> Th' rik-stick-stilvey!

To which the intrenched commander of the enemy replied,

> Fletcher, oh, Fletcher,
> Th' old fly catcher,

and exposed just enough of his person to wriggle ten brazen fingers from the tip of his nose. John made a last, despairing attempt.

"'Fraid-cat! 'Fraid-cat! 'Fraid of getting hi-i-t! Ya-a-h!"

"Come on and hit me, then," came back the answer, which admitted of no retort save action.

"We've got to chase 'em out someway." He turned desperately to Red. "You and Perry Alford sneak up behind that thick lot of weeds when we start yelling and dancing like everything. Then we'll charge and drive 'em around to your end. But don't let 'em hit you."

In the meantime, the youngest member of the Mosher family had discovered that his position as "Red-Crosser" carried only a decoration on his sleeve, which admitted of no honor or excitement whatever. He crept up, unobserved by the excited Fletcherites, raided the cucumber basket of as many of the missiles as his little pockets would hold, and halted within easy distance to watch the attack on the fortress.

Red and Perry sneaked stealthily to the weed-clump ambush while their comrades showered cucumbers on the sheltered foe recklessly. Occasionally the defenders replied with a shot whenever a good mark was presented, but for the most part, they seemed content to keep the box heap between them and their enemies and bide their time. Farther and farther away they edged in response to the flanking movement of the main division of John's army, until Red, deeming the moment opportune, fired. Perry Alford followed. Silvey, surprised by the sudden attack from the rear, turned and received a cucumber full upon his half-open lips.

"Who did that?" he sputtered, as he dislodged the acrid fragments from his mouth.

Red threw caution to the winds and danced exultantly out in the open.

"You're a deader. You're a deader. I killed the general. I killed the general."

Silvey advanced on him furiously. "I'll punch your face in, hitting me in the mouth that way."

Brown was ever in ecstasy at the prospect of a fight. "Come on and do it," he retorted. "Didn't last football practice, did you?"

Silvey doubled his fists. His opponent held his ground. The rank and file of the two armies dropped their cucumbers and gathered in a little semi-circle to watch the fight. The youngest Mosher boy crept up and balanced himself unsteadily on one foot. In his right hand he held a cucumber, and on his face shone set determination.

"Wanta fight," he cried, as the combatants began the inevitable preliminary sparring. "*Goin'ta* fight!"

The next moment, a cucumber caught Silvey squarely in the eye. The latter turned, dug viciously in his pocket for ammunition, and fired a handful of cucumbers at his assailant without perceiving, in his blind rage, who it was. Yell after yell filled the air.

"Now look what you've done," exclaimed Mosher miserably. "Just watch me catch it when he gets home."

"Well," Silvey snapped, still angry as the others gathered around the infant, "I told him to keep out of the cucumber basket. What did he throw at me for?"

The wails continued. Skinny bent anxiously over his brother. "Come, buddy," he coaxed. "You're not hurt badly."

"W-a-a-a-h!" The boys began to feel alarmed.

"Where did he hit you?"

"W-a-a-a-h!"

Silvey looked down remorsefully. "Here, kid, here's some cucumbers. You can hit me as hard as you want and get even."

"W-a-a-a-h!"

Once more, Mosher tried to assuage his brother's grief. "Look at the funny man who's coming over to see you. Don't let him find you crying."

The "funny man" proved to be the school physician who was returning from a professional call. He dropped his medical case on the turf and stooped over the prostrate urchin, who promptly kicked him in the shins.

The doctor drew back hastily. "What's the matter?" he queried.

"Th-th bad boy hit me."

"Which one?"

A grimy, tear streaked hand pointed to Silvey. The medic turned to him.

"Come here, boy," he said majestically.

Instead, Silvey beat a hasty retreat to the railroad tracks. There, from the summit of the embankment, he heaped abuse on the inoffensive figure with the little black case.

"Smarty, smarty, smart-e-e-e!" he shrilled. "Johnny made a monkey of you. Johnny made a monkey of you!"

The ex-members of the armies snickered. Still the shouts continued. The doctor flushed a deep scarlet. To retreat in the face of the taunts seemed cowardly—to remain was rapidly becoming insufferable.

"Tell your friend he'd better keep quiet," he said in futile anger. Silvey interpreted the gesture which accompanied the ultimatum.

"Come on and make me quit," he chanted. "Johnny made a monkey of you and I can, to-o-o!"

The physician grinned sheepishly and took a few swift strides after the dancing figure. Silvey waited until he was almost at the wire railroad fence, and retreated to one of the back yards on the opposite side of the embankment. As the doctor retraced his steps to the sidewalk, the boys gazed thoughtfully at the depleted supply of ammunition. John turned to Skinny Mosher.

"Take that kid away before he gets us into more trouble. He's always spoiling our fun, anyway. What'll we do now."

"Let's go over to the street and get chased," Perry Alford suggested, as Skinny started towards home with his sniffling, reluctant brother.

They apportioned the last of the cucumbers and crossed the tracks in single file, pausing now to balance fantastically on the shining steel rails, and now to skip flat, smooth pebbles against the black, weathered girders which supported the block signals. As they reached the home precincts, a still-panting figure joined them.

"Has he gone?"

John nodded. "He was only bluffing. Might have known that. We're going over to the flats."

"The flats" was the largest building on their home street. Built on the corner, in the shape of a huge, four-storied, red brick "C," it was really composed of a number of apartments with separate entrances with a common, cement-paved inside court on which the back porches fronted. The basements were given over to boiler rooms, laundry tubs, and storerooms, linked by long, twisting, badly lighted corridors which formed excellent hiding places for the boys in time of pursuit.

The gang gathered noisily just off the corner and waited for victims. A gray-haired, poorly clad woman shuffled past. Sid raised his arm. Silvey whispered a protest. "That's old lady Allen. Has the rheumatism. Leave her alone."

John broke into a gleeful chortle. "Look what's coming, fellows."

The cause of his exultation was a callow youth of sixteen, whose father had met with a sudden wave of prosperity and was now trying to sell his rather modest home that he might move to a more exclusive neighborhood. The son was inclined to patronize old acquaintances and affected a multitude of expensive tailored clothes and a light cane. John eyed the gray, immaculately pressed suit appreciatively and let fly.

The boy wheeled in surprise, then stooped to pick up his hat.

"You fellows had better cut that out," he blustered, as he straightened the soft, felt brim.

"Who's going to make us?" Silvey jeered, as his cucumber hit the neat lapel.

"Just do that again. I'll show you."

A volley of the juicy missiles greeted his words. He charged upon the boys, who fled to the haven of the darkest of the corridors and took refuge in an empty outer storeroom. There they barricaded themselves and awaited his coming.

"Ya-a-ah," John taunted, as he heard heavy breathing through the door. "What'll you do now?"

"Just wait until dinner time."

"Not going to make us stay that long, are you? Please don't be mean."

The elder boy deigned no reply. John raised the little window which fronted the street and grinned. One by one the gang climbed through the narrow opening to the sidewalk and left their vindictive enemy guarding the empty storeroom.

Across the street from the flats stood the building which housed the corner drug store and "Neighborhood Hall," used according to season for high-school dances, minstrel shows, and fraternal meetings. They assembled at the entrance, which commanded an excellent view of all approaches leading from the flats, and awaited developments.

A little girl rounded the corner with sundry grocer's packages in her arms. She noticed that the boys were gathered in the excited group, which always spelled danger to unescorted maidens, but held bravely on. As she passed, Silvey yelled exultantly. Perry Alford threw wildly and hit the ground by her feet. Red's missile caught one nervous, white little hand and made her drop a bag of eggs to the sidewalk. John raised his arm, then lowered it as if paralyzed.

It was Louise!

"Quit that fellows," he cried, seizing on the first excuse which came into his mind. "She's a little girl."

Silvey looked at him in blank amazement. "What of it?" he ejaculated. "Ain't the first time you've made one cry."

John's lips tightened. "Don't care if it isn't," he snapped. "Stop that, Sid, or I'll punch your face in."

He threw his own cucumber into the gutter to show that his was a peaceful errand and walked hastily over to the sobbing figure.

"They'll leave you alone," he assured her. "Let me pick up your eggs."

They were smashed beyond all hope of salvage, but he gathered the fragments of shell, with as much of the dust-laden yolks as he could scrape up, and placed them gravely in the torn, soggy bag. Then he took the bread and the butter from her very gently and turned his back on the gang.

"I'll carry them all for you," he said, almost in a whisper. "Let's go home now."

She acquiesced silently. They strolled down the leafy walk. John's back tingled unpleasantly, for he expected a shower of missiles. Louise's weeping ceased, save for an occasional sniffle. At last Silvey roused himself from the amazed silence into which his chum's actions had thrown him, and seized upon the solution of the mystery.

"Johnny an' Lou-i-ise! Johnny an' Lou-i-ise!"

Louise flushed scarlet and bit her lip. John turned and stuck out his tongue defiantly. An awkward silence followed.

"I'll punch that kid's head off when I catch him," he growled as the shouts continued. Louise looked up at him shyly.

"I don't mind," she said.

They halted in front of the three-story apartment where her parents lived. John shifted clumsily from one foot to the other, not knowing how to make a graceful adieu. The maiden came to his rescue with a parrot-like imitation of Mrs. Martin's formula for such occasions.

"Thank you very much—and—I'm so glad to make your acquaintance."

Though the words were ridiculously stilted, John turned with a song on his lips and skipped across to the home porch swing, where his mother found him a moment later, and made him come in and get washed for dinner.

That afternoon he walked north to the branch library to turn in his book on which a six-cent fine impended. With the yellow card in his hand, he went over to the fiction section of the open

shelves. No more Hentys, no more Optics. He was in love, and love stories he must have.

Silvey, Perry Alford, and Red sauntered up just before supper to find out how the land lay. They found him stretched out on the porch swing with the latest acquisition from the library beside him.

"Say, John," Silvey began nervously. He was afraid he had gone a little too far that morning.

John raised dreamy eyes. What did he care about commonplace declarations of friendship such as Silvey was making? His head was a-riot with the thrilling words of the latest love passage between the hero and a heroine so perfect that her like never existed beyond the covers of a novel, and the interruption bored him.

"So you see," Perry chimed in as Bill finished, "we didn't want you to be mad about it."

John waved a magnanimous dismissal. "But don't do it again," he cautioned apathetically, "'cause—well—she's my girl. That's all."

And again his eyes sought the alluring pages of the book.

CHAPTER V

HE COMPOSES A LOVE MISSIVE

Sunday afternoon, Mr. Fletcher took his son for a long stroll in the park. They joined the throng of people who promenaded up and down the broad cement walk along the beach, and watched the antics of the children with their transitory castles until this pleasure began to pall. Then they retraced their steps westward to the big island and explored the fascinating, winding paths along the shrubbery-covered shores. Everywhere were signs of autumn. A light carpet of half-dried leaves had already covered the ground. The song birds in the fast yellowing, graceful willows were supplanted by silent, migratory groups of somber juncos, who fled at their approach. Here and there, they surprised a squirrel adding another peanut to his well-buried winter cache. But a little later, a pair of lovers on a narrow peninsula bank separated awkwardly as the two sauntered up, and John laughed joyously. The spirit of summer was as yet far from dead.

Still they wandered on as their fancy pleased them. Far to the south of the park, John collected an armful of cat-tails from a bit of marshland, and Mr. Fletcher pointed out to him a strange, spotted lizard, which scurried for shelter from the intruders. As they returned, they loitered by the green, verandaed club house to count the fast diminishing fleet of yachts, and joined an ironic audience who watched the struggles of two motorboat owners with their craft, and a pair of rickety wagon trucks. Sunset found them climbing the home steps to sink into the easy porch chairs and wait blissfully until Mrs. Fletcher announced that supper was ready.

Now by all the laws of small boy nature, John's eyes should have closed that night five minutes after his head had touched the pillow. But then it was that the inexplicable happened. Louise forced a disturbing entrance into his thoughts with a strange insistency. Was she sleeping peacefully or was she thinking of her rescue from the mercies of the gang? Perhaps she had already forgotten him. Still, the boys hadn't. They would probably spread the details of the love affair all over the juvenile neighborhood. Would she walk with him if they did?

The big clock in the hall of the house next door struck ten. He discovered that a wrinkle in the sheet chafed his back and smoothed it out half angrily.

Why couldn't he go to sleep? Had Louise's mother been vexed at the broken eggs? How pretty the girl's long ringlets had looked as she stood on the sunlit corner that morning. Did she like to fish? An expedition for two could be arranged in spite of the late season. He'd bait her hook and take the fish off if she wished. Lunch could be prepared beforehand and they wouldn't have to worry about meal time.

Again the timepiece next door chimed its message. He counted the strokes—seven—eight—nine—ten—*eleven*! Only twice before had he remained awake so late—once on a railroad trip, and once when Uncle Frank had come to visit them. He rubbed his clenched fists in his eyes and wondered if he dared light the gas to read. He could keep his geography near as an excuse if anyone discovered him. Then, hastened possibly by the soporific influence of that school book, sleep came at last.

In the morning, John tried to analyze the causes for his mental rampage as he drew on one toe-frayed stocking. Now that his mother had roused him for the third and final time, he felt tired enough to sleep another three hours. What had been the matter?

A love scene from that latest public library book flashed into his perplexed brain and he sighed contentedly. Had not Leander sacrificed long hours of precious slumber at the shrine of his beloved Philura? The inference in his own case was both obvious and satisfactory.

To tell Louise of his infatuation seemed the next and most logical step. He lacked the courage for a verbal declaration; therefore the message must be in writing. But in what form? Letter writing

to a girl was a novel experience, and he had a horror of parental laughter if he asked for advice.

"John!" his mother called from the stairway. "Aren't you ever going to get dressed?"

He pulled on his second stocking hastily, with a call of "Down in a minute, Mother."

His grandmother's old *Complete Letter Writer* was in the library bookcase. That ought to help him out of his predicament. Wasn't it the *Complete*——"

"John!" came a second and more peremptory interruption of his thoughts. "Get down here this minute."

He started, drew on his shoes, half-buttoned them, slipped into his blouse, with boyish disregard for such matters as bathing, and scampered down the stairs to the dining-room. After a hasty meal of oatmeal and potatoes, he fled to the seclusion of the library. A moment of nervous fumbling with the lock, a rapid turning of pages, and—

"From a son at an educational institution, to his father, engaged in business at Boston, requesting —"

But he didn't want to borrow money from Louise. "Honored Parent!" Why, "Honored Louise" would sound too ridiculous for anything.

"From a merchant engaged in the hay and grain business in Baltimore, to a wholesale dealer in New York, complaining that—"

Such prosaic details as hay and grain shortages were not for him. He wanted a love letter, an epistle that would breathe the fire of adoration in every line. Didn't the old book have any? The title said *Complete*—What was this?

"From a young man—" He skipped the rest of the heading—such things didn't have much to do with the real contents anyway.

"Beloved—"

That sounded better.

"When first I—"

The door opened suddenly. Mrs. Fletcher gazed down at him in astonishment.

"Haven't you gone to school yet? It's five minutes of nine, now. What on earth have you been doing?"

The book dropped to the floor. A scant five minutes later, he stumbled breathlessly into the school room, only to find that roll call had been finished and that "B" class was holding its English recitation. Miss Brown frowned and made a mark in the record book on her desk, and went on with the class work. Out came his theme pad and pencil. The fifteen minute study period was his for the composition of that letter and he set to work.

What did a fellow usually say to a girl, anyway? He'd never written one before. He twisted in his seat and caught a glimpse of the adored one's graceful curls, but even with this inspiration, ideas refused to come.

"B" division closed its composition books and began to recite under Miss Brown's guidance,

> And she, kissing back, could not know
> That *my* kiss was given to her sister,
> Folded close under deepening snow.

For two long weeks they had been memorizing "The First Snow-Fall," but were not as yet, letter-perfect in the verses. The teacher encouraged them. Twenty odd juvenile voices resumed the choppy, monotonous chant. John gripped his pencil with new life.

Poetry! That was the only way to express your sentiments! Why hadn't he thought of it before? Once, in third grade, he had composed a masterpiece:

> Think, think, what do you think?
> A mouse ran under the kitchen sink.
> The old maid chased it
> With dustpan and broom
> And kicked it and knocked it
> Right out of the room.

The slip of paper had been passed to a chum for appreciation, only to have Miss O'Rourke pounce upon the effort and read it to an uproarious class. His ears burned, even now, at that memory.

But there would be no second disaster. He began on the ruled sheet boldly,

"Beloved Louise!"

Then came a pause. Oh for a first line! You couldn't start out with "I love you." That would make further words unnecessary. What did people usually put in poems? All about stars, and the warm

south wind and roses. A fugitive bit of verse echoed in his brain. "The rose—" He had it now!

The rose is red,
The violet's blue,
This will tell you
I love you.

To be sure, the bit of doggerel had been inscribed on a card sent him by Harriette in the third-grade valentine box, but Louise need never know the secret of its authorship. And it expressed his feelings with such a degree of nicety!

He scrawled a huge, concluding "John," folded the paper complacently, and waved one hand to attract Miss Brown's attention.

"Please, may I go over to the school store and buy a copy book?"

"Are your lessons prepared for this afternoon?"

"Yes'm."

Consent was given. John rose, with the compact paper hidden in his right hand, and sauntered carelessly down the aisle. At his old desk, he paused with a fleeting glace at Louise as he dropped the note, and walked on into the hall. There he stopped to peer into the room through the half-closed door.

Louise covered the note with one hand and drew it toward her slowly and with infinite caution. He watched her face breathlessly. Curiosity was succeeded by surprise and then by anger. A little toss of her curls, a glance at teacher, and she half turned toward the door. He could see that her face was scarlet. What was she going to do?

Horror of horrors, she stuck out her tongue at him!

The ways of girls were beyond his comprehension. There was no cause for offense in that note. He loved her. Why should she object to being told about it?

He made his way moodily down the broad flight of stairs leading to the basement. There, in the big, dimly lighted, cement-floored playroom, where the children held forth on rainy days, he met a boy from another room, who was likewise in no hurry to return. They hailed each other in subdued tones.

"Been down long?"

"Oh, our teacher doesn't get mad unless you're gone half an hour. Want to play marbles?"

John assented joyously. His friend chalked an irregular circle on the floor, and presently the room resounded with shouts of "H'ist," and "No fair dribblin'" until the grizzled school janitor sent them flying to their rooms under threat of a visit to the principal's office.

At the doorway, he paused to summon his courage, for time had flown all too rapidly in the basement. Louise showed not a sign of recognition as he passed. Miss Brown broke the oppressive silence.

"Where's the copy book, John?"

His lower lip dropped in consternation. His excuse for leaving had been completely forgotten. "A quarter of an hour after school" was the sentence for the offense, and he opened his geography with a feeling of thankfulness that it had not been more.

All about the brick-paved school yard, on the walk, and in the street gutters, were scattered oblongs of blue paper as he scampered from the deserted building at noon. The boy picked one of the handbills up and read with an odd thrill:

Professor T. J. O'Reilley's

PUNCH AND JUDY SHOW

in

Three Stupendous, Sidesplitting Parts

at

NEIGHBORHOOD HALL,

Monday, October 4, at 4:15 p.m.

I

Punch and Judy. The old favorite as played before the Crowned Heads of Europe.

All the well-known characters, with added mirth provoking innovations. Alone worth the price of admission.

II

Peck's Bad Boy and His Pal. Startling, amusing, and instructive exhibition of ventriloquism by that amazing expert, Professor T. J. O'Reilley. Hear the Bad Boy and his friend talk and joke as if they were really alive. During this act Professor O'Reilley uses one of his marvelous ventriloquial whistles and will explain its operation to the audience.

III

Motion Pictures. Actual figures thrown on the screen that do everything but talk. Thrilling display of the heroism of American Soldiers during the Spanish-American War! See the landing of the Regulars under fire! See men fall in actual battle before your very eyes! Watch the charge up San Juan Hill—the thrilling infantry skirmish!

Followed by

A Grand Distribution of Valuable Prizes! Glistening Ice Skates. Rings, Dolls, Doll Carriages, and other Toys. In addition, every man, woman, and child in the audience who does not win a gift, will receive *absolutely free*, one of Professor O'Reilley's marvelous ventriloquial whistles.

TWO HOURS OF AMUSING AND INSTRUCTIVE ENTERTAINMENT!

Admission only ten cents!

Could he go? Of course, for the necessary dime was always forthcoming from his mother when an itinerant showman rented the corner dance hall for a one day performance.

On the corner of Southern Avenue, he overtook Bill, who had stopped to play tops with an acquaintance.

"Going?" he asked, as his chum glanced at the blue slip in his hand.

"Bet your life," said Silvey decidedly. "Did you see the rings the man showed in the school yard?"

John reminded him of the fifteen minute detention. "Were they pretty?"

"Pretty? They were just peaches—all gold and stones, and sparkled like everything."

They parted at his front steps. John plodded thoughtfully homeward, for his brain buzzed with a new and daring possibility. Would Louise overlook the morning's fiasco and allow him to take her? He broached the matter of finances to Mrs. Fletcher.

"But what do you want two dimes for? Tell Mother."

No, he wouldn't. But he had to have the two coins. Mrs. Fletcher studied him curiously.

"Is there some little girl you want to take?"

An evasive silence followed her question. Nevertheless his brown eyes pleaded his cause so eloquently that one o'clock found him sitting on the front porch, jingling the money merrily in one hand.

The day was crisp and sunny, with an invigorating breeze from the lake, which set the blood pulsing in his veins. Ordinarily, he would have scampered off to play with Bill and Perry Alford or Sid on the way to school, but not this time. He was waiting for some one.

Shortly a dainty, pink pinafored figure with the familiar curly ringlets skipped past on the opposite side of the street. When she had gone perhaps fifty yards, John walked down the steps and followed not too rapidly. He must catch up quite as if by accident, for it would never do to have the meeting occur seemingly of his own volition.

She saw him coming and halted at the corner drug store to gaze demurely at a window display of gaily tinned talcum powder. As the boy came up to her, a queer, choking sensation filled his throat.

"'Lo," he gulped nervously. Not a sign of recognition. Evidently "Rose is red" still rankled.

"'Lo," he persevered. She raised her chin ever so slightly. "Those kids won't throw any more cucumbers. I fixed 'em." Perhaps the memory of his protection that Saturday would pave the way to peace.

"'Lo," she responded at last. They forsook the enticements of the drug window and walked on in embarrassed silence.

"Had to stay after school this morning," he volunteered desperately.

"Why?"

Back to his folly again. What a dunce he was!

"Why?" she asked again.

"Oh, 'cause." Conversation dragged once more.

What could he talk to her about? He knew nothing of dolls and keeping house and making clothes. And he didn't suppose she could tell "Run, sheep, run" from "Follow the leader," either. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out the folded blue circular with a show of nonchalance. She eyed it curiously.

"Going?" he asked.

She didn't know.

"I've got two tickets," eagerly. "Want to come with me?" The school yard lay but a half-block ahead, so he went on hurriedly, "There's Silvey and the bunch. I've got to see 'em. Meet you on this corner after school."

The truth of the matter was that not even his infatuation was equal to passing that mob of shouting, yelling urchins with a girl by his side.

You might have guessed that something unusual was to occur, had you passed Neighborhood Hall that afternoon. By the green mail box on the corner, an envied seventh-grade boy, subsidized by an offer of free admission, passed out more blue cards like the one John had found, and advised that they be retained, for "Them's got programs on, and you'll need 'em." On the broad pavement, excited little groups of boys read and reread the announcements amid running choruses of approving comment. Now and then, a fussy, important matron bustled past with a four-or five-year-old following in her wake. Around the door, a baker's dozen of boys with shaggy hair and sadly worn clothes besought the more prosperous of the grown-ups, "Take us in, Mister [or "Missis" as the case might be], we ain't got no dime."

Inside the great, raftered, brilliantly lighted hall were rows upon rows of collapsible chairs, which slid and scraped on the slippery dance floor as their owners took possession of them. John and Louise secured seats in the third row, center, where they commanded an excellent view of the tall, black cabinet where Punch and his family were soon to appear. Around them, a babel of noise and confusion held sway. The place was filling rapidly. Boys called to each other from opposite corners of the room. A not infrequent shout of surprised anger arose as a seated juvenile clattered to the floor through the agency of some mischief-maker in his rear. Eighth-grade patriarchs, retained by the same pay as the corner advance agent, darted here and there in the aisles, striving to preserve order amid a great show of authority. Up on the little balconies at each side groups of trouble-makers performed gymnastics on the railings and banisters at seeming peril of their lives until the colored janitor ordered them down. Every now and then, the wailing of a heated, irritable infant rose above the din, to be quieted more or less angrily by its mother.

John looked at his watch. "Most time to start," he whispered.

Indeed, the audience was beginning to grow restless. In the rear rows, a claque started a steady handclapping, and cat-calls and hisses from unmannerly boys became more and more frequent.

Then entered upon the stage Professor T. J. O'Reilley amid a storm of relieved applause. The bosom of his stiff white shirt might have been a trifle soiled, the diamond glistening therein, palpably false, and the lapels of his full-dress coat, distressingly shiny, but to John and Louise, he seemed a very prince of successful entertainers. He bowed perfunctorily, issued a few words of admonition to the boisterous element in the audience, and disappeared in the long, black cabinet.

Ensued a series of raps from somewhere in the folds of the cloth, and subdued cries of "Oh, dear, dear, dear! Judy, Judy, Judy! Where is she?" The familiar, hooked-nosed figure appeared on the little stage and John sighed in ecstasy. What mattered if Punch's complexion were sadly in need of renewal through his many quarrels—he was the same old Punch, and his audience greeted him as such. Judy followed.

"He'll send her after the baby, now. You just see!" John whispered as the marionettes danced excitedly back and forth.

"How do you know?" Louise's eyes were a-glisten.

"Haven't you ever ever been to a Punch and Judy show before?" asked John in surprise.

In one corner of the hall, a row of badly nourished colored children from the district just north of the "Jefferson Toughs," forgot the family struggle for three meals a day and rent money in their present bliss, grins appeared on the faces of the adults in the hall, and the rest of the audience swayed and shouted and giggled as Punch made away with first the baby, then friend wife, the policeman, the clown, and the judge, and hung their bodies over the edge of the stage in time-honored fashion.

A prolonged groan came from the depths of the cabinet.

"It's the devil," said John, squirming ecstatically on his hard chair. "There he is, in one corner where Punch can't see him."

Punch lifted a victim from one side of the stage to the other.

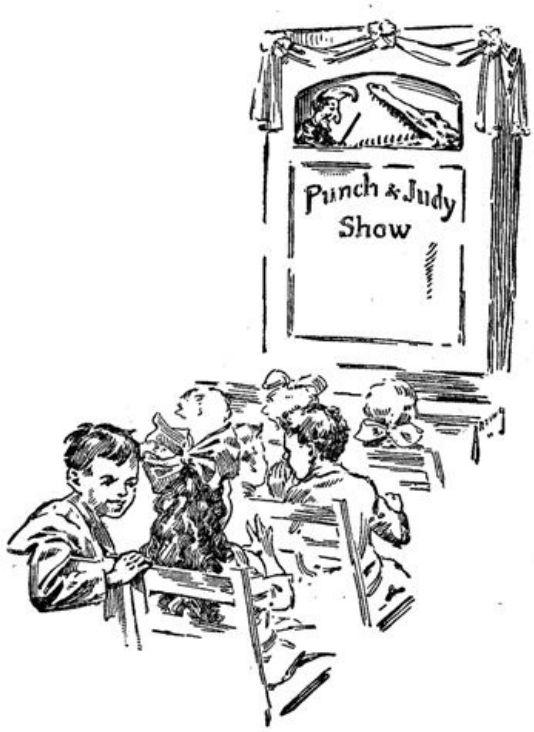
"That's one," he counted.

The red-faced, lively little imp returned the corpse to its original resting place. Some minutes of this comedy followed.

"Twenty-six," squawked the unsuspecting Punch in surprise, while the audience roared appreciatively. "Did I kill so many? Hello, who are you?"

"I," came the preternaturally deep voice as Louise quaked at the make-belief reality of the scene, "am the devil!"

"Now they'll fight," breathed John, watching intently. "It'll be the bulliest fight of all, and they'll throw each other down and hit each other over the head forty-'leven times. Then the devil'll win."



But a puritanical mother had, on the tour preceding, written Professor O'Reilley, objecting to the devil's conquest of the unrepentant old reprobate, so that master of ventriloquism introduced a new character into the ancient tale, and the devil went the way of Punch's other victims.

"H-m-m," puzzled John with wrinkled brow. "This isn't the same—What's that?"

"Open," ordered Punch of the long, flat object which appeared beside the body of the devil.

"It's an aggilator," shrilled Louise as the mystery disclosed two terrific rows of teeth and a long, red throat.

"Shut," ordered Punch. The jaws closed with a snap.

"Isn't it peachy?" whispered John.

"Open," ordered Punch once more. Again the jaws swung slowly and impressively apart.

"Close," repeated Punch, as he stooped dangerously near the yawning cavern.

The jaws snapped within a thirty-second of an inch of the arch-villain's nose. Angered, Punch hit the beast with his little club, while the audience screamed in delight. Ensued a fight which changed rapidly to a pursuit back and forth over the bodies of Judy, the policeman, and the rest of the company. At last Punch tripped and the animal seized upon him and bore him, shrieking, below.

"Is that all?" asked Louise, as the little curtain descended.

"All?" John answered, as he glanced over the other delights promised by the blue advertisement. "All? Why it isn't but a third over!"

Two assistants turned impromptu stage hands and shifted the Punch and Judy cabinet to the rear of the stage. The professor stooped over a battered trunk at the side, and brought out two life-sized dolls with huge, staring eyes, and swinging arms and legs. He sat down on a chair at the center of the platform.

"These," he said as he balanced the manikins on his knees, "are my two little boys. They're usually very nice little fellows, but I'm afraid they've been shut up so long in that dark trunk that they're feeling a little angry. I'll have to see. Now [to the sandy-haired caricature on his right], tell the people what your name is. No? Then we'll have to ask your friend here. What's your name?"

"Sambo," mouthed the black-faced marionette.

"Gee!" whispered John, as he watched the professor's lips closely. "How's he do it?"

"Now, tell all these nice little girls and boys how old you are."

"T-ten."

"Did you ever go to school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now tell that little girl with the pink hair ribbon who's sitting in the third row, what you learned yesterday."

"Ya-ya-ya," interrupted the younger member of the Peck family. "Ya-ya-ya!"

"Why, George," admonished the ventriloquist. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, behaving in this way?"

"No, I ain't," protested George incorrigibly. "Ya-ya-ya, blackface!"

So it went for the space of a good half-hour. Pretty poor stuff, it may seem now, oh, you grown-ups who have lost the magic eyes of childhood, but snickers and shouts and giggles filled the hall while the dialogue lasted. Finally the lay figures waxed so disputatious that Professor O'Reilley consigned them to the darkness of the trunk from which they came.

"Stay there until you behave yourselves," he scolded, as the groans grew more and more subdued in protest against the captivity.

"Wish I could do that," said John. "Couldn't I get teacher mad, talking at her from the blackboard?"

"Sh-sh," whispered Louise. "He's going to speak."

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. We have with us today for the first exhibition in this part of the city, the most wonderful invention of the glorious age in which you are living. After the hall is darkened, I shall go down to the table where that lantern stands and throw upon the screen actual moving pictures taken from real life. You will see the landing of our brave troops upon the rock-bound shores of Cuba. You will witness a thrilling battle with Spanish insurrectos [the professor was getting his history a little mixed, but that mattered not a whit to his audience], and brave men will fall before your eyes in the charge up San Joon hill. I need not state that these pictures have been secured at an almost fabulous cost, for Professor T. J. O'Reilley always makes it a point to give his patrons the best of everything, regardless of expense. The best of order must be kept while the hall is in darkness. Anyone creating a disturbance at that time will be instantly expelled."

Thus did the professor conclude his introduction of the feature which, later, was to drive him and his kind out of business.

A click, a sudden buzzing as if a giant swarm of bees were flying about in the center of the hall where the long, cylindrical gas tanks stood, and a six foot square of light flashed on the white curtain which had been lowered to the stage.

The pictures flickered and jumped a great deal, and at times streaks on the old film gave the idea that the boat loads of infantry were approaching the shore in a torrent of rain, but the figures moved, nevertheless, and unslung rifles, and formed into companies.

"The charge up the hill under fire," supplemented the operator. They had no titles for the motion pictures in those days.

Amid a steady whirring, flashes of smoke appeared from the thickets overhanging the shore. A soldier threw up his arms, another pitched headlong into the sand, and the Americans swept up the slope in a charge which brooked no obstacles. Little girls handclapped vigorously, while the boys pounded on the floor with their feet and gave vent to weird whistles of enthusiasm.

"And so San Joon was taken!"

"The hill wasn't on the water that way," John interrupted excitedly. "I've got a book at home with maps and everything. Wasn't that way at all."

"Let's pretend it was," Louise replied philosophically.

The lights flashed on in the hall to dazzle the eyes of the audience. A chair squeaked. There was a sound of footsteps near the doorway.

"Keep your seats," cautioned Professor O'Reilley as he jumped up on the stage. "The drawing for prizes will now take place. Ryan," to his assistant, "bring them out on the stage as I call for them."

A babel arose. "Don't you wish you could win the skates, Jim?" "What'll you do if you get a ring?" "And there's dolls and doll carriages, too."

The showman raised an arm as a signal for silence. "Will some boy step up to draw the tickets from the hat?"

Four or five eager volunteers scrambled over the footlights. The professor selected the largest of them.

"Number six-seventy-six!" John looked eagerly at the coupon which had been handed him at the door. "Number six-seventy-six! Who has it?"

Harriette, the cast-off Harriette of last year, bobbed forward.

"Ah," boomed the deep voice. "A little girl, and a nice one, too." Harriette stuck one finger in her mouth as she shifted sheepishly from foot to foot. "But the skates are boy's. Isn't that too bad? Now, little girl, do you think you will be satisfied with a nice, new dollar bill instead? Will that buy a good enough pair of skates?"

"Jimmy!" John ejaculated enviously.

"Number three-forty-four!" he continued, as his volunteer assistant drew out another slip. "And another little girl. Well, she gets this beautiful Brazilian pearl ring, set with wonderful, glistening rhinestones!"

The fortunate maiden scurried back to her mother as fast as her stocky little legs could carry her.

"Number seven-hundred-fifteen! Number seven-hundred-fifteen!"

"Here!" shrieked John, as he nearly knocked the boy ahead of him over in an excited effort to get to the front. "That's me!" Was it another pair of skates, or a baseball bat, or the big, shining jack-knife which the boys had told about?

"Number seven-fifteen is a boy, is it?" The professor's eyes twinkled.

"Ye—s—sir," stammered John, nervously.

"William," ordered the distributor of prizes as he half turned to the exit in the wings. "Bring out that doll carriage!"

The house broke into vociferous mirth. Silvey, hailing him at the top of his lungs, counseled him to "Give it to her! Give it to her!" Sid DuPree's face grinned maliciously at him from the first row. Slowly he stumbled down the aisle with the despised toy bumping after him, and rejoined Louise.

He scarcely heard the numbers of the other prize winners as they were called out. Nor did he pay attention to the professor's lecture on the operation of the famous whistle which had so amused the audience that afternoon.

Someway or other, he found himself out on the street with Louise. About him, boys scampered home in the fast gathering dusk. One or two yelled taunts about the doll carriage, and John was tempted to throw the wicker-bodied pest into the street.

Louise was silent. She wanted to offer consolation, for she felt that her escort was dangerously near tears over his humiliation, but she knew not how to begin. They sauntered along. John eyed the little piece of tape bound tin in the girl's hand with reawakening interest.

"Would you like it?" she asked graciously.

He murmured a husky "yes," and put the whistle in his mouth. After a few uncertain "J-u-u-dys," he trudged on again in silence.

As they stopped in front of her apartment, John had an inspiration.

"Say, Louise," he began awkwardly, "I don't want this doll carriage. Want it?"

And though his words were ungracious, she caught the spirit which lay back of them and thanked him sweetly.

Thereupon, John skipped happily homeward to make his parents miserable with divers attempts to imitate the noted T. J.'s Punch and Judy show. Two days later, he left the noise-maker lying on the floor by his bed, where Mrs. Fletcher confiscated it, and quiet reigned in the family again.

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH WE LEARN THE SECRET CODE OF THE "TIGERS"

For over two weeks after Professor O'Reilley had gathered up his properties and gone in quest of juvenile dimes in other neighborhoods, John waited at the corner of the school yard for Louise, gravely added her books to his own under his arm, and walked slowly home with her. His roommates were at first loud in their jeers, but gradually the primitive jests grew less and less frequent until the daily meeting became a part of the unnoticed routine of the school.

As for his friends, Silvey, after a few caustic remarks, forbore comment. Sid DuPree made the condescending admission that she wasn't half-bad after all. And the "Tigers" found it a distinct addition to their prestige to have a feminine rooter who danced around on the sidelines and exhorted them to even greater deeds of valor as they ground chance opponents into the cinders of the big lot.

Then it was, one Friday afternoon, that Miss Brown stacked her record books neatly in a little pile at one corner of the desk, placed the unmarked homework papers in one of the drawers, and made an innocent announcement which roused thoughts lying dormant in each boy's brain to instant life.

"Halloween is only a week from Saturday. I want each member of the class taking part in the

exercises to have the lines learned perfectly. We'll rehearse Monday afternoon."

The rest of the speech fell on deaf ears with John. Halloween but a short seven days away? Why, it seemed scarcely three mornings ago that he had started on the fishing trip which nearly landed the big carp. The gang should be a big one, this time. Silvey and Sid, the Harrison kids, Mosher, Perry, and Red Brown were certainties, to say nothing of smaller groups which might join on that final night. He drew three solitary pennies from his pocket, arranged them, heads up, in a row on the top of his desk, and stared at them until the bell rang for dismissal.

With the coins in his hand, he swung back the door of the little school store, and hastened eagerly up to the proprietress. She greeted him with a smile, for the episode of the lemon drops was still fresh in her memory.

"Pea shooters in yet?" he queried anxiously.

They had arrived that very noon.

"Is there wood on the ends to keep the tin from cutting your mouth?"

She nodded. The door swung back again as Sid DuPree and Silvey stamped noisily in. It developed that they were on a similar errand, and presently Miss Thomas cut the cord around the big, blue bundle and gave them their weapons. The trio left in high spirits, puffing through the empty tubes, making imaginary shots at open windows, and blustering loudly about past performances, as they sauntered along. Silvey halted when the first of the grocery shops near the home corner was reached.

"Got any peas at your house, Sid?"

Sid shook his head. His family dined at a near-by hotel most of the time, and a reserve stock of any kind of food was a rarity. John mentioned a big jar of beans on his mother's pantry shelf.

"They're no good," said Silvey scornfully. "Get stuck in the pea shooter and jam it all up. Got any money, Sid?"

Sid had a penny. It was the day before the generous allowance from Mr. DuPree was due, and his finances verged upon bankruptcy. Silvey had another, and John contributed the remainder of his little hoard. That brought the total to four cents.

"S'pose he'll sell us that little?" asked John, as they gazed at the tempting array of vegetables in the store window. They opened the door timidly. The rotund proprietor stepped forward as he stammered his request.

"Of course!" He beamed on the trio good-naturedly. "What kind do you want, boys?"

"Split's the cheapest," said Silvey thoughtfully.

"But they don't go as far, and it's harder to hit anything with them."

They ordered the more expensive projectiles and divided them equally before they left the store. At the corner, the pharmacy was bombarded persistently until the drug apprentice sprang through the doorway and sent the boys flying down the street.

The pursuit slackened at last and the white coated youth turned to go back. Silvey halted to pant a defiant "Ya-a-a, ya-a-a. Can't catch us. Can't catch us."

John pulled his chum's arm impatiently and pointed to the vacant house just three lots south of Silvey's home.

"Look," he whispered, suddenly cautious. "Some one's forgotten to close the front door tight. We can lock it from the inside and go up to the attic. Nobody can get in to chase us, and we won't do a thing with our pea shooters, oh, no!"

"Maybe the folks haven't left. You can't tell."

"We can run, then. 'Sides, they won't do anything."

They crossed the street and tiptoed up the dusty, rain-spotted veranda steps. John peered into the bleak, dirty parlor and reported the coast clear. Nevertheless, they hesitated on the very threshold.

"You go first," said Sid to Silvey.

"All right," Silvey nodded apathetically. He peered in at the window. "You don't think there's anyone inside, do you, fellows?"

The trio listened intently. "Might be someone upstairs," suggested Sid. "Tramps or something."

"Shucks," broke in John impatiently. "You're all 'fraid cats, that's what you are."

"Go on in, yourself," Bill retorted quickly.

He drew a nervous breath, and swung the door swiftly back, as if afraid that his courage would ooze away before he reached the stairway. Sid and Silvey followed very cautiously over the scratched hardwood floor.

"Shall I shut the door?" asked Bill as he took hold of the knob.

"N-no, we may have to run, yet."

They explored the main floor. No one was in the library, no one in the narrow, badly lighted dining-room, and no one in the dingy kitchen. All seemed quiet upstairs. Silvey bolted the basement door that they might not be pursued from that quarter, and Sid, as they returned to the hallway, cut off the avenue of escape to the street. John led the way up the winding, uncarpeted stairs. Silvey followed close at his heels and DuPree lagged in the rear.

"Boo-oo!" Sid shouted when they had ascended half the distance.

John's pea shooter clattered to the landing. Silvey turned angrily on the miscreant, his face still pale from the fright.

"I've a' mind to punch your nose for that! 'S'pose there was really somebody!"

At last they reached their goal. Tales of wandering vagrants with lairs in the attics of vacant houses proved untrue in this instance, and John swung back the hinged window in the gable with a sigh of relief.

"Jiminy!" he exclaimed as he looked down upon the bright, reassuring play of light and shadow on the lawn and macadam below. "Isn't this great?"

The boys stuffed their mouths so full of peas that conversation was impossible and waited for the first victim. A low, heavily laden lumber wagon, drawn by straining horses, creaked down the street. They concentrated their fire upon the driver by tacit consent, for each of the marksmen had had an aversion to causing runaways drilled into him by the hair brush or corset steel method.

The teamster, bewildered by the steady rain of missiles, could see no one and departed in an atmosphere of heated profanity. Came delivery boys, wagons, an occasional carriage, and now and then an unprotected pedestrian. Only Louise, as she passed on the way to the grocery, was exempt from assault.

The shadows of the house tops and the lindens spread across the street and shut off gradually the flood of sunlight through the attic window. The Mosher four-year-old trotted past, just out of range, on his way towards home and an early supper. John wasted a few ineffectual peas on a pair of sparrows who began a pitched battle on one of the roof gutters. Sport lagged for a few minutes. Then came a great, heavy hulk of a man in overalls, with a battered tin pail swinging from his side, whose lurching step bespoke a violent temper. Silvey raised his pea shooter.

"Better leave him alone," Sid cautioned.

"Can't do anything to us," John scoffed. "Doors are all locked. And how's he going to tell our mothers when he doesn't know who we are?"

He filled his mouth anew, took aim with the long tin tube, and let fly. Bill seconded him nobly.

The quarry halted, looked upwards, and received Sid's volley full in his face.

"He's coming up the steps," yelled John, who was watching the effect of the attack. "Jiggers, fellows, he's coming up the steps."

They turned to fly to safety. But where was a haven of refuge to be found? They could hear his angry footsteps tramping up and down on the porch.

"Were those front windows locked?" Sid asked.

John shrugged his shoulders miserably. An angry pounding echoed through the deserted hall and bare, cheerless rooms. They stole silently down to the second floor.

"There's more closets to hide in, here," said John hopefully. He glanced from a rear window to the little pantry gable which stood but a story's height from the back yard. "If he gets in, we can climb out and drop. It won't hurt much."

Their enemy tried the door again. Once a window rattled ominously. Sid's face regained a little of its color. "They were locked after all. Jiggers, there he is around the back!"

They drew hastily away from the opening as a purple, distorted face glared up into theirs. A moment later, he was kicking at the back door.

"That's bolted, too," said Silvey thankfully. "I guess we're safe."

At last he left and went around to the front. They listened for a second attack from that quarter. Not a sound in the house, save the dripping of a leaky faucet in the bathroom.

"Come on, fellows." John led the way to the stairs. "We'll open the back door and run like everything!"

The rapidly deepening dusk cast weird shadows through the empty rooms as they tiptoed tensely to the first floor. Once Sid imagined that he saw the fat man hiding in a nook in the hall where the evening gloom lay deepest, and they raised eery echoes through the house in their panic-stricken flight back to the top of the stairway. Past the fearsome corner again, through the stuffy kitchen where a ray of gas-light from the next house fell upon the tall, cylindrical water boiler and gave them a second fright, and out into the blessed freedom of the back yard. There they broke for the railroad tracks and home.

Mr. Fletcher had already arrived from the office, and was in the kitchen, talking, as Mrs. Fletcher prepared supper. That meant that it was long after six, and John was under strict orders to report upon his immediate arrival from school! But as he came in, still panting, the shining rod caught her eye, and his sin of omission was forgotten.

"Pea shooter! Give it here, John. One night of Halloween pranks is enough, let alone a whole week of it."

He surrendered the weapon reluctantly. "Now mind," she added as the bit of tin was dropped into the top drawer of the kitchen bureau, "you're not to buy another one, either."

Mothers were peculiarly unsympathetic about premature pranks; take Fourth of July, no matter how many firecrackers a fellow owned, he had to sneak off to the big lot to light them if he wanted to celebrate on even the day before.

So there was little left to do but look longingly forward to the great night. On Monday, as he dressed, John found himself repeating, "Only four more days." His last thought on Tuesday was, "That makes just three." Thursday afternoon at school, as he chanted a silent refrain, "Day after tomorrow's Halloween, day after tomorrow's Halloween," the boy in the seat just behind tapped him stealthily on the shoulder and passed over a bit of folded paper.

He glanced up at Miss Brown. She was filling out the monthly report cards and was not likely to detect him, but he held the note underneath his desk as he opened it, nevertheless. It was from Silvey and ran in nearly illegible figures:

17-12-19-13. 14-22-22-7 26-7 7-19-22 8-19-26-24-16
26-21-7-22-9 8-24-19-12-12-15 7-12-23-26-2 26-15-15
7-19-22 7-18-20-22-9-8 7-19-22-9-22. 25-18-15-15.

He ran his hand back of the untidy jumble of school books and pads and drew out an oft creased, finger marked sheet, the secret code of the "Tigers":

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14
N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

He began deciphering the message with a concentration never meted out to his school work. Five minutes of effort resulted in:

John. Meet at the shack after school today all the Tigers there. Bill.

He caught Silvey's gaze upon him and nodded to show that he had received the note. The pair

would have met on the way home from school, anyway, but what was the use of a secret code unless it was used at every possible opportunity?

The shack was a rickety, frame affair, built during the long summer vacation when time hung heavy on the boys' hands, and the tribal desire for a stronghold waxed too strong to be denied. Three of the walls were formed of odd planks scavenged from neighboring woodpiles and fences, eked out, here and there, with a few pantry shelves taken from vacant houses. The fourth was nothing but the picket fence, but as Silvey expressed it when viewing their handiwork, "It doesn't rain much from the north, anyway." Door for the low entrance there was not, and the roof, whose shingles were purchased by an arduously earned half-dollar, became a veritable sieve when the raindrops were pounded through by a driving gale from the lake.

The furnishings consisted of a chair, which had long since parted with its back, and a small, shaky desk which had in some way survived the interval between its Christmas presentation and the fall school term. In the one drawer were kept the original of the "Tigers'" secret code, a twenty-five cent rubber stamp outfit which had been used to print the set of membership rules, beginning, "I. No swearing," and two sadly battered, springless, and rusty revolvers. Where they had originated, no one could remember, but there they lay, unsuspected by parental authorities, to be used as a possible defense against the incursions of the "Jefferson Toughs," who ruled the district to the immediate north, or to be dragged forth, as in the present case, to lend an air of solemnity to the many plots hatched between the four cramped walls.

Red Brown descended the side steps into the yard, in answer to the summons of the clan, and found John in his rôle of master-at-arms, strutting back and forth before the doorway. Silvey, as befitted the holder of the exalted office of president, was sitting inside on the crippled chair. John whipped the more formidable of the two weapons from his back pocket and pointed it at the breast of the intruder.

"Halt!" Brown obeyed.

"Who goes there?" The formula had been borrowed from a thrilling Civil War story.

"Friend," came the prompt reply.

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign."

Red opened his mouth doubtfully, then hesitated.

"Hurry up."

"I've forgotten it."

"Aw, think—*hard*."

John jabbed the muzzle of the revolver into his ribs with a steadily increasing pressure. Brown thought—hard. Finally he broke out,

"It's easy enough for you to remember. You made it up."

Which was true, for the master-at-arms, who was also the secretary, had drafted the rules and was responsible for the initiation ceremonies and passwords of the organization.

"Go on. I'll help you."

"Can't," hopelessly. "It's clean out of my head."

"Have to stay away from the meeting, then."

"Aw, John, quit your fooling. It doesn't matter."

"Here's the start. 'Oppy.'"

"Oppy—"

"What's the rest of it?"

"'Nother 'Oppy,' wasn't there?"

"No, it was 'Oppy-poppy—'"

"'Oppy-poppy—'"

"'Oppy-poppy-oppy-nox.' Let's hear you say it all."

Red repeated it triumphantly.

"Right. Pass friend to the meeting of the 'Tigers.'"

All the other members had trouble with the tongue twister. Either they left out the distinguishing "p" in the third syllable, or forgot the final "oppy" and had to have their memories refreshed in much the same manner as that of the first arrival. This was precisely what John had intended. What was the use of being both secretary and master-at-arms of a club if you couldn't have some fun at the expense of your fellow members?

Inside, Silvey's glance took in the prostrate figures of Sid, Red Brown, and Perry Alford, who

were packed so closely together in the enclosure that they could scarcely move, then roamed listlessly past John with his insignia of office, out to the sunlit fence and railroad tracks. Red yawned wearily.

"Hurry up and do something, Sil."

"Where's Skinny?" asked the president.

"Down town with Mrs. Mosher," Sid volunteered. "She wanted him to help her carry packages home."

"Gee," commented Perry, sympathetically. "If I had her for a mother, I'd run away. Honest, I would!"

"And the Harrison kids?"

"Both sick in bed. Too many pork chops again."

"Master-at-arms and secretary," Silvey raised his voice. "Come on in."

John squatted in the doorway and gazed meaningly at his superior. They had walked home from school together that afternoon, and instructions upon the proper way of opening a meeting had been profuse. Silvey grew palpably nervous.

"This here meeting," he blurted at last.

"That isn't the way I told you." John shook the revolver in disapproval. "Meeting will now come to order."

"Meeting will now come to order," Silvey repeated mechanically. "Secretary call the roll."

John snapped his fingers in disgust. He had been so busy looking after Silvey's duties that he'd forgotten his own. There was an interchange of glances between the two before the president spoke up scornfully,

"We'll have to let that go. Who'll be in the gang this year?"

Each member present raised a hand. The two leaders in the affair beamed. Everything augured for a successful night of sport.

"What'll we do?"

"Let's go outside where there's room," Sid suggested. "My leg's gone to sleep."

"Now," said John a few minutes later, as the five boys stretched themselves out on the soft grass beside the shack, "there's the garbage cans on the flats' back porches. They're never, taken in on Halloween."

Silvey nodded. "'Member the chase the janitor gave us last year before we had half of 'em spilled?"

"That was because we started at the bottom and worked up," explained the master strategist. "This time we'll begin at the top and spill 'em out as we go down. We'll be off before the janitor learns about it."

Red chewed on a blade of grass thoughtfully. "Leave milk bottles alone this time. 'Specially old lady Boyer's."

The members nodded approval. On the Halloween preceding, Sid had discovered a solitary container on a window near the flat entrance and dashed it to the cement walk amid exultant yells. Hardly had the noise subsided when a wrinkled, gray-haired head made a distracted appearance at the opening, with a cry of, "I want my milk! I want my milk!" Returning a moment later from panic-stricken flight, the full meaning of the act dawned upon the boys and remorse overcame them. A hasty search for coin of the realm, a moment of consultation, and Silvey, boosted high on his comrades' shoulders, had rapped on the window ledge. "It ain't much, ma'am, but it's all we got, and we didn't know the bottle was yours," he had murmured; and, all unwitting of the sardonic humor of the act, had passed in a check good for a drink at a near-by saloon.

There were moments of reflective silence. "Isn't there something new we can do this year?" Silvey appealed to his fellow members. "Garbage cans and doormats and ringing electric bells are fun, but isn't there a trick we've never worked before?"

"Get some grease and spread it over a porch before you ring the bell," suggested Sid. "My big brother, who's away at college, used to do it. Told me so, himself."

"I tried that once," Red broke in scornfully. "Nearly broke my back getting away. Besides the fellow never steps where he ought to."

John spat with sudden deliberation at a chip of wood on the turf. "Who can get a lot of tomato cans without any holes in them?"

Silvey mentioned a city dump just north of the park, where cans of all sizes and conditions were to be found. His chum nodded approvingly.

"Sid, you and Perry go over there Saturday morning and bring back as many middling-sized ones as you can carry. You other fellows cut up pieces of string about as long as you are."

"S'posing the trick don't work after all that trouble?" asked Sid irritably. John was always giving him jobs to do.

"I'll bring a hose key Halloween night," went on John, ignoring the interruption. "We'll tie a string to a tin, fill it up with water from the hose pipe on the front lawn, and tie it to the doorknob. Door jerks open when the bell rings—you know how mad a fellow is then—and the water goes flying into the hall, ker-splash! Bet you that'll make some fun!"

The others regarded the inventor in silent admiration. "How about the cop?" asked one of them finally.

"Never got mad last year, did he? He's all right. Besides, he's too fat to run very fast."

The back door in the Silvey home squeaked disturbingly as Mrs. Silvey appeared. A dusting cap was jammed determinedly over one eye, and in one hand was a broom.

"Bill, you come in here right away. I want you to help me move the hall rug."

Silvey drawled a response. "Jes' wait until we get through talking. It won't be a minute." He turned to the rest of the "Tigers." "Everybody got pea shooters?" They had, or would have before the eventful day arrived.

"I bought a peachy false-face," Perry boasted in the lull of the conversation which followed. "You ought to see it; looks just like a circus clown."

"Leave it at home," said John brusquely. "You can't see out of 'em when you're running away, and they get all sticky, anyway. They're for kids, not for fellows like us."

"Bill!" scolded the maternal voice again. "Come in the house this minute, before I tell your pa on you when he gets home."

There was that final note of exhausted patience in Mrs. Silvey's voice which commanded instant obedience. He rose with alacrity. As he mounted the steps, the boys still at liberty scampered away in the fast gathering dusk for a game of "Run, sheep, run," down the tracks and over the grass plots and back yards on the street.

It was nearly six when John came panting into the kitchen.

"What have you been doing, son?" asked his mother as she half turned from the gas stove to smile down at him.

"Oh, talking about Halloween, and what we're going to do, and lots of things. It's going to be peachy."

"Mind, you're not to destroy property or anything like that. Otherwise, you'll have to stay in the house Saturday night."

He yawned with elaborate carelessness. "Just going to blow beans and ring doorbells, same as we did last year. Isn't it supper time? I'm hungry."

"We'll eat as soon as your father gets home, son." She turned to give the creamed potatoes a stir lest they stick to the pan. "Oh, I nearly forgot! There's a letter at your place on the dining-room table. It came in the afternoon mail."

"For me?" Surprise made his voice rise to a funny squeak. "Who from?"

"A young lady, I think."

He dashed into the dining-room and opened the envelope with clumsy fingers. On a diminutive sheet of note paper, decorated at the top with two laughing gnomes, ran an invitation copied from some older person's formula:

"Miss Louise Martin requests the pleasure of Mr. John Fletcher's company at a Halloween party to be given at her home on Saturday, October 31st, from eight to ten o'clock."

CHAPTER VII

HE GOES TO A HALLOWEEN PARTY

Of course, he accepted. The temptation of a whole evening in the lady's company was too great. But no sooner had he dropped his reply in the corner mail box than he began to consider the cost.

The doormats and porch furniture of the neighborhood would go unharmed for aught that he might do. No raids on the flats' garbage cans, no ringing of doorbells, or raining peas through open windows. And only through the vainglorious boasting of the gang on Sunday morning would he know of the success of his string-and-can trick. Shucks! He was out of it all.

After breakfast, Mrs. Fletcher glanced at the clear sunlight on the house across the road and announced that John's Saturday tasks would be suspended in honor of the day. He raced up to the Silveys, and found the expedition for cans starting out under the leadership of his chum. Once in the park, the quartette broke into impromptu games of tag, dashing over the moist grass, or halting to puff lustily that they might watch their breaths in the clear, frosty air. Tiring of this as they came to the site of an old exposition bicycle race-track, they ran up and down the grass-covered sides until Perry reminded them that the morning would be over before they knew it, and started on a dogtrot for the goal.

Cans there were in profusion, also a fascinating array of wreckage of other nature in this dump, which lay just north of the park. John picked up a suitable container.

"Get 'em like this," he ordered Perry and Sid. "And be sure they don't leak."

As the two walked obediently off, he prowled among the debris of his own accord. Silvey raised a shout from the water's edge.

"Look-e-e." He held up a chair minus one leg and a back for John's admiring approval. "Won't this be great for the shack?"

Sid and Perry turned and took a few steps toward Bill.

"Say," ordered the president and his secretary in unison, "get busy with those cans. What do you suppose you came over here for?"

A little later, John discovered a pair of warped, rusty bicycle wheels, and hastened over to Silvey with them.

"Can't we make a peachy wagon with these if we find two more?" he said excitedly. "Bet you anything she'll go faster'n the fastest one on the street."

Sid came up, his arms filled with tins. "That's enough," he blurted. "If you want any more, you can get 'em yourselves." He looked down sullenly at his rust-spotted waist. "Always the way. We do the work and you come along and boss."

"Well," retorted John magnificently as Perry dropped his collection beside Sid's, "we didn't *have* to come at all, did we?"

They apportioned the rusty objects and the broken chair and wheels between them and sauntered slowly homewards. It was easily dinner time before the street was reached, and the

party broke up as soon as the booty was deposited in the Silvey back yard. John lingered a moment to help Silvey carry the junk into the "Tigers'" club house.

"Gee," Bill exclaimed as he gazed at the nondescript jumble, "I'll bet you it'll be a peachy time tonight."

John nodded ecstatically. Then a lump caught in his throat and held him speechless for a moment. After all, he was out of the fun, and he hadn't the heart to tell his chum, either. He turned to leave.

That afternoon the clan gathered again on the turf beside the shack and went over the evening's campaign. The new family in the large green house across the road still had a big swing suspended from the veranda ceiling. If they didn't remove it, the boys intended to. Sid DuPree reported that the gate on Otton's back fence could be lifted from its hinges very easily. It would be great fun to replace the bit of porch furniture with it. As for doormats, the preoccupied neighborhood doctor had left his out last Halloween, and could be depended on to do it again; also, there were the apartment entrances, each with a heavy rubber mat in front of the stone steps. As for the can-and-string trick, the frame dwelling where the fat little tailor lived was marked for the experiment, as were a half dozen others.

"Gee," chuckled Silvey, "don't you wish it was dark now?"

John fingered his pea shooter wistfully.

At last the welcome dusk blotted out the long shadows on the railroad tracks and the "Tigers" filed stealthily out of the yard to commence the skirmishing before supper, which always came as a prelude to the more important evening campaign. They darted up and down steps, rang doorbells, and raised eery cat-calls which echoed between the houses, and pelted pedestrians to their hearts' content.

Presently the door of the big green house swung open and threw a shaft of golden light across the leaf-strewn macadam, over against the Alford dwelling, which stood opposite. Four white-sheeted figures danced down the steps and paraded on the walk in front of the home lot, tooting horns and performing antics in a manner which no set of self-respecting ghosts ever dreamed of.

"Her kids," John snapped scornfully. "'Member how she chased us out of the street last Saturday because we were making too much noise with our tops? Come on!"

They divided silently into two parties. The one slipped across the road on tiptoe and hugged the shadows of the houses as they advanced, halting finally under the shelter of an adjacent porch. The other walked boldly some distance down the walk on the far side of the street, crossed over, also, and executed a similar maneuver.

Suddenly a pea caught the biggest of the four apparitions on the nose and caused him to drop his horn to the sidewalk. As he stooped to pick it up, a volley sent his younger brothers and sister scurrying porchward, amid cries of "Mamma! Mamma! Mamma!" The "Tigers" yelled gleefully. John forgot himself so far as to dance incautiously into the path of light. Then from the shadows of the porch swing—that same swing which was to transport itself mysteriously far down the street in the evening—emerged the tall, angular figure which had driven them away that other Saturday.

"Jiggers!" came the shout of warning.

"John Fletcher!" That doughty leader retreated to the shelter of the shadows. "I'll telephone your mother this minute. Such a lot of bullies I've never seen before in my life!"

The boys were in for it. Nevertheless, they listened to the prolonged tirade with suppressed amusement. Its conclusion was an order to the quartette to go down on the walk again.

"They won't touch a hair of your heads now," she boasted unwisely.

Again came the stinging volleys on the sheeted figures. A few of the peas flew by chance, or otherwise, in the direction of the protectress, herself.

"Come into the house this minute," she called to her brood. "I'll fix 'em."

The door slammed angrily. Through a front window, the boys could see her at the telephone in the lighted hallway. They redoubled the bombardment of the house in defiance.

Across the street a door creaked. Mrs. Alford's voice carried to where the excited little group stood.

"Per-e-e-e, it's nearly seven. Supper is ready. Come in and get washed right away!"

The "Tigers" gasped and dispersed quickly. Half-past six was the deadline for the evening meal with most of them, and parental scoldings were in order.

"See you at eight," Silvey called as he turned north.

John stopped short. Hang that party!

"I w-won't be with the gang," he quavered.

"What?" Bill could scarcely believe his ears. John explained haltingly.

"That kid! I knew she'd make trouble."

The murder was out; the worst was over with. But it would never do to let his chum think that he regretted the choice.

"Oh, I don't know." John gathered courage and glibness as he went on. "Saw two ice cream freezers going in the back way this afternoon, and Jiminy, Silvey, her mother's some cook. Louise says [he hadn't laid eyes on that lady since Friday] she's just baked four chocolate layer cakes with nuts and candies in the frosting. And there's lots of other things. Now, don't you wish you were me?"

Silvey shrugged his shoulders and admitted that the entertainment had its alluring side.

"Chocolate cake," he repeated. "Just think, all you can eat."

There was an envious silence.

"Strawberry ice cream. Three helpings to a fellow; and I'll have more, 'cause I wouldn't let you throw cucumbers at Louise."

His chum's face grew wistful.

"S'long," said John exuberantly. He had not only converted the scoffer, but he now found that the gang's plans for the evening no longer held a charm for him. What a peach of a time he would have at the Martins'!

Mrs. Fletcher greeted him with a suppressed smile as he came in.

"Mrs. Riley telephoned," she began reprovingly.

"Old sorehead!" he exclaimed. "Didn't hurt 'em any."

The maternal smile broadened. There was little sympathy between that quarrelsome lady and the other mothers of the street, anyway. "But you shouldn't torment little children like that, son. It isn't manly."

John murmured a few sheepish words under his breath, and asked tactfully if supper were ready.

"Not quite. Why?"

"Have you forgotten the party?"

She shook her head. "You'll find your blue serge suit all cleaned and waiting for you on your bed. But John, dear, do be a little more careful next time you eat candy. I had a terrible time with those spots."

After supper, he ran up to his room. There lay the suit, true evidence of his mother's thoughtful kindness. As he drew off his school knickerbockers, he noticed that his stockings had sagged, small-boy fashion, and formed a little roll of cloth just above his shoe tops. He pulled them up. How on earth had all that mud gotten there? In a moment he was at the head of the stairs, shouting, "Mother, Mother, Moth-a-a-a-r! Where are some clean stockings?" and went off to her room in search of them. His boots, too, were dusty and scratched; how long was it since he had blackened them?

A five-minute session with the shoe-shining outfit, heretofore despised as a useless nuisance, made them glisten as did the kitchen stove after that Saturday polishing task had been completed. Before him stood the washstand with its cold marble basin, the soap trays, washrags, toothbrushes, and other instruments of torture. He turned on the water and considered a moment as to just how far he should extend the waterline. Still, he was going to a party, her party, and his appearance must be beyond reproach. So he soaped his face vigorously and ran his wet hands around to the back of his neck. Then he surveyed as much of the result of his labors as he could see with a new satisfaction.

He slipped into his little wash blouse hastily. The alarm clock indicated fifteen minutes of the hour and no time was to be lost. But which of his four ties should he wear? His blue one was wrinkled because it had lain beneath the bed for over a week before he had resurrected it. The tan-and-black striped one given him by his uncle was in equally bad condition. And Louise had said she hated green. After all, his brilliant crimson four-in-hand was the nicest. It contrasted with his dark suit the best, anyway.

He presented himself a sheepishly smiling little figure with neatly parted hair, for his mother's inspection. She looked up with a smile.

"If it isn't our little John! And so clean that I scarcely know him. Come here and let me look at your ears."

They were immaculate! Mrs. Fletcher exchanged a glance of mock surprise with her husband. "It's the first time that's happened since he was old enough to wash himself."

John, junior, seized his hat and slammed the door as he sprang down the front steps. Why did grown-ups always carry on so? There was nothing unusual in washing one's ears, was there?

He stopped across the street from the building to watch for a moment. The Martin parlor on the second floor was ablaze with light. Occasionally an adult moved now and then within range of the windows as she shifted chairs to and fro. A boy from Southern Avenue, with whom he had a speaking acquaintance, walked up and into the entrance with an air of unnatural gravity. John could see him give his tie a twitch as he rang the front bell. A brougham drove up and a little girl encased in innumerable fluffy wraps was escorted up the steps by her mother. More girls followed from time to time. Some skipped merrily up to the door; others sauntered more slowly, tittering excitedly as they went along. John decided that it was time to go in.

Up the heavily carpeted stairway, with its ornately panelled wainscoting and brown wallpaper, a half turn to the right, and the goal of the evening lay before him. The stout woman whom he had seen silhouetted in the window greeted him with a gracious smile.

"So this is the John Fletcher of whom Louise is always talking!"

A maid, subsidized for the evening, took his hat and coat away to some mysterious recess. Mrs. Martin led him into the parlor, lighted to a soft glow by deftly shaded electric bulbs.

"Now let me introduce you," she said. "This is Martha Gill." He bowed awkwardly to the lady of the carriage. "And this, Ella Black." So it went, all down the smiling, giggling circle, as he promptly forgot each name in the presence of a new beauty.

He joined the boys with a sigh of relief. They stood in an awkward group near the piano, and grinned and poked each other furtively in the ribs, and made mocking allusions to half-known juvenile love affairs until Mrs. Martin reentered with Louise.

The little girl had never appeared so daintily bewitching to John; no, not even on that memorable first day at school. Her long, graceful curls were caught in a big, blue silk bow which matched her dress, and her eyes were a-dance with the excitement of her first party. She greeted the company with a shy, quick smile and sat down in the chair nearest her exultant worshiper. A constrained silence took possession of the little gathering again.

If the children were to enjoy themselves at all, something must be done to put them at their ease. Mrs. Martin clapped her hands loudly.

"Who likes 'Musical chairs'?" she asked.

The little girls applauded vociferously. The boys, as became members of the more reserved sex, nodded condescendingly. While not as exciting as wrestling, or "Run, sheep, run," the game would pass the time away. In a moment they were sent flying to the different rooms in the flat after straight chairs of all sizes and descriptions, while Mrs. Martin supervised the formation of the long line which extended into the hall.

"Now," said she, as she stepped over to the piano, "is there anyone who doesn't know how to play this game?"

No fear of kill-joy amateurs with "Musical chairs." The children had become experts at the pastime through other parties innumerable. She seated herself at the instrument and ran her fingers over the keys.

Slowly the procession started. Little girls lingered as long as possible by each inviting seat. Boys scurried past the chairs facing in the opposite direction, or slid around the treacherous ends lest they be caught. Still the waltz strains swung onward until they seemed eternal to the anxious players. Then a false note, another, a pause, and a wild scramble for safety. Bashful maidens sat on trousered knees and scrambled up after still vacant places. Other players squabbled for the possession of contested chairs. At last the babel died away, and another cry arose:

"Johnny, Johnny, Johnny Fletcher's out of it."

It was always the way; he was ever too reluctant to dispossess a girl of a nearly won prize to be a success at the game. But he took up a position beside the pianist and watched with amused interest. It was really just as good fun as being a participant.

Gradually all were eliminated save the Southern Avenue boy and Louise. The music began again under Mrs. Martin's nimble fingers, and swelled in volume like the notes of a church organ. Then it dragged and paused just long enough to send Louise flying to the seat before it picked up the fateful melody. Suddenly, without hint of a finish in the throbbing, rapidly beating march, there came the end. Louise found herself standing with the high-wooden back toward her, while the Southern Avenue contestant yelled triumphantly from his throne.

"Shucks!" said John in disgust. "Why didn't he let her have it? I would."

Next came "A tisket, a tasket, a green and yellow basket." The fun grew fast and furious. No standing aloof in a corner of the room for the boys now. They enjoyed themselves too well, as each, in turn, chased, or was chased by some nimble-footed maiden around the circle. There followed "Thimble, thimble, who's got the thimble," and then Mrs. Martin's even voice:

"Perhaps some boy will suggest a game."

The winner of "Musical chairs," emboldened by his triumph, called out, "Kiss the pillow!"

Little shrieks and cries of "Won't play!" arose from some of the girls. Others maintained a coy

silence. Eventually the whole company joined; that is, all save John. He saw no fun in such pastime. What was the use of kneeling on a pillow and kissing, for example, homely Ella Black? Other boys might, if they wished. There was but one divinity worthy of his homage, and he would pay none of it to other maidens.

So he followed Mrs. Martin into the dining-room, to that lady's great, though secret, merriment, and helped her arrange the plates and the spoons and napkins for the refreshments which were to follow later. The shouts from the parlor rose louder and louder.

Then came a sudden silence. Mrs. Martin turned towards the hall. Surely they didn't need her assistance again! As she passed the doorway, cries of "Post-office," "let's play 'Post-office,'" broke forth, and she returned to the table with a satisfied smile. Evidently the members of the party were furnishing their own amusement with great success.

Louise, her curls bobbing excitedly, darted into the room and seized John by the arm.

"Come on," she begged, for she was afraid he wasn't enjoying himself in the lonely dining-room. "Come on, Johnny. Please!"

It was his lady who commanded, so he obeyed. They had drawn a green portière across the curtain pole in the doorway until the little alcove with the bookcase was shut off from the larger room for all practical intents and purposes. Jimmy, the Southern Avenue boy, waxing more and more masterful, had appointed himself postmaster, and strutted beside the narrow opening which remained. And to hold that position in a game of "Post-office" is no slight thing. Not only is the postmaster the sole witness of all that transpires behind the secretive curtain, but he is privileged to turn over the exalted office to a temporary substitute and hale the lady of his heart forward, if he so desires.

There was no lack of mail. Hardly had the window been declared open than the postmaster's chum stepped up and, after a moment of whispered conversation, disappeared behind the portière. Called the master of ceremonies in stentorian tones:

"Two packages and three letters for Martha Gill!"

Martha Gill shook her head. Cries of "Go ahead" arose from the boys, while the girls tittered at her embarrassment. At last she gathered up courage and darted past the sentinel. John stared in amazement. Two packages and three letters—two hugs and three kisses—what was there in that overdressed little doll to merit such favor?

Correspondence became fast and furious. Eventually the postmaster called John forward and whispered a name in his ear before he went into the alcove. His appointee, concealing his astonishment as best he could, called out, "Ella Black, Ella Black; four letters for Ella Black!" at the top of his lungs. But for that much-despised young lady to be so honored by the social lion of the evening was more than he could comprehend.

As the postmaster resumed his duties, a voice cried, "Johnny, it's your turn. You haven't sent any mail yet."

John flushed and shook his head. Tormenting whispers of "'Fraid cat! 'Fraid cat!" carried to where he stood, and some imp of mischief began that scornful chant:

> C'ardy, c'ardy, custard,
> Eatin' bread an' mustard!

He clenched his fists. If it must be, he'd show them he was no coward! A moment later, as he stood tensely in the alcove, came the postmaster's cry of "One letter for Louise Martin," and the green curtain swung aside to admit her.

She returned from the sanctum composedly. He waited a moment that they might not reappear together, and came out with eyes shining and heart a-beat.

> He had kissed her!
> He had kissed her!

The entrance of Mrs. Martin and the maid, the one bearing heaping dishes of ice cream, and the other, as he had unwittingly prophesied, a luscious, heavily-frosted chocolate cake, brought him down to more mundane thoughts with alacrity. Indeed, he devoted himself to his portion with such earnestness that he was able to finish and place his empty plate innocently under his chair, and wait until his plight caught the servant's eye.

"Why, haven't you had any, little boy?"

He shook his head mournfully.

"How did Mrs. Martin ever come to skip you? I'll bring you some right away!"

A second helping of ice cream.

When she reappeared, he winked heartily at his amazed companions and settled to the second helping of ice cream.

At last the party came to an end, as all such joyous occasions must, and he found himself on the sidewalk, looking up once more at the now darkened parlor. Far up the street came the hooting and jeering of a gang—possibly his own—although the voices seemed older and strange, and the gate of the house next the apartment building had disappeared, leaving empty hinges as mute testimony that some band of witches had done their work thoroughly and well.

In response to his prolonged ring and joyous kicks on the home door, Mrs. Fletcher let him in. "Don't pound so hard, son," she cautioned. "We're not deaf."

"Might a' thought it was some Halloween gang if I didn't," he defended himself as he threw his hat on the nearest chair.

"Have a good time?" she queried.

"Did I?" The earnestness of his voice left little doubt as to his sentiments. "Did I? You just bet I did!"

The family always slept late on Sunday morning, but at that, John, worn out by the excitement of the preceding evening, stirred drowsily when his father appeared in the doorway.

"Come on, John; time to get up."

"Yes, dad," gazing at him with lackluster eyes. As Mr. Fletcher left, he turned his face promptly toward the wall and dropped off to sleep again.

"John!" It was his mother's voice this time.

"Uhu."

"Why didn't you get up when your father called you?"

"Aw, let me alone. I don't want any breakfast. Honest, I don't."

"Nonsense! You can take a nap in the afternoon if you want. Come on. I won't go down stairs until I see you up."

He might as well, then. Mrs. Fletcher was pretty well versed in his tricks, thanks to long years of experience, and there was little chance of further delay. So John sat up and dangled his legs over the side of the bed, while he rubbed his sleep-laden eyes with his fists.

"Need a wet washrag?"

No. He was wide awake now. He listened to her steps on the stairs, and to the opening of the front door as his father brought in the morning paper. Then he fingered one stocking abstractedly.

Half an hour later, prompted by Mrs. Fletcher's remonstrances, her husband came up and found

the boy staring with unseeing eyes far over the railroad tracks into the park. In his hand was the same stocking which he had picked up so many minutes before.

At last he appeared in the dining-room, to find that his father and mother had eaten their meal. His hair was half brushed, and his face and neck untouched by cleansing water (hadn't they been soaped the night before?), but he set to work on the nearly cold breakfast with a will. He removed his empty grain saucer from the bread and butter plate and looked up suddenly.

"Mother," he said irresolutely.

"Yes, son?"

"Say, Mother—how old does a fellow have to be to get married, anyway?"

His father chortled with merriment. John flushed an embarrassed red. His mother restrained a smile as she answered:

"About twenty-one, dear, and lots of people wait until they're older. Why?"

"Nothing. Does it cost very much?"

"Cost much?" Mr. Fletcher dropped the Sunday paper to the floor and looked at his son and heir attentively. "Why, I should say it does. You ought to have at least a thousand dollars saved before you even *think* of marrying."

"John," cautioned Mrs. Fletcher reprovingly. "Don't torment the child."

"Let's see," went on her husband, unheeding. "You're ten now. If you want to marry by the time you're twenty-one, that means you'll have to earn about a hundred dollars a year from now on. Better begin right away."

"Raise my allowance, will you, dad?" came the unexpected retort. "I'm only getting a quarter a week now, and Sid DuPree's father gives him a whole dollar."

"Young man," was the grave reply. "If you want to support a family, you'll have to do it of your own accord. You and your mother keep me busy as it is."

"Give me a quarter, then," the boy persisted. "That's all I want. Please!"

His father dug into his pockets and brought out the desired coin. "The nest-egg for the second generation of Fletchers," he grinned. "Catch, son."

A few minutes later John disappeared in the direction of a little stationery and toy shop which lay some blocks to the north. But not a word could Mr. Fletcher draw from him as to the aim of the expedition. He returned with a mysterious package which he took up to his room and then sauntered out to Silvey's house.

A little later his mother, who had gone upstairs to dress herself for dinner, came down to the dining-room where John, senior, still sat reading.

"John," she said.

"Yes, dear?" with a hasty glance away from the news sheet.

"Do you know," her smile was tender, "there's a big, china pig bank up on that boy's bureau? I believe he's taken your words in earnest!"

CHAPTER VIII

WHEREIN HE RESOLVES TO GET MARRIED

The Thursday date for the game with the "Jeffersons" had been selected in early September, and there had been a tacit truce between the two factions as a result. For three afternoons of that first week in November, the "Tigers" sacrificed their games of tops and "Run, sheep, run" on the altar of the football god, and trooped over to the big lot as soon as school was dismissed. There, Silvey, self-appointed coach of the team, expounded the rudiments and the higher attributes of the sport as culled from a series of ten-cent hand books, and ran the team through signals and trick formations in a way that would have amused a university football coach.

Louise went down town with her mother, so the team was deprived of the support of its feminine rooter on the eventful afternoon. They met in front of Silvey's. John boasted the one addition made to the equipment of that first practice when he appeared with a second-hand pair of shin-guards which he had acquired from a boy at school in exchange for a dime and an agate shooter. Presently Sid appeared with the football, and they trooped towards the lot in a compact, determined little group.

As they climbed over the railroad fence on the opposite side of the tracks, the "Jeffersons," who were as badly equipped as their rivals, greeted them defiantly. There was a moment or so of conference between Silvey and the Shultz boy before they tossed for sides on the field. Then the

teams lined up, kicked off, and sweated and toiled and wrangled through one half of the game without result. Towards the end of the second period, the heavier invaders began a slow march over the cinder-strewn ground toward their opponents' goal and victory.

Onward, onward, inch by inch, first down, five (this was the day of unreformed football), second, three, third, one yard to gain, while the "Tigers" shouted "Ho-o-old 'em! Ho-o-old 'em!" in desperation. On the ten-yard line, indicated by stakes driven in the ground at each side of the field, the lighter eleven braced for a last stand. As the "Jeffersons'" youthful quarter attempted to pass the ball, Silvey broke through and knocked the pigskin from his hands towards John, who grabbed it and ran to the other end of the field for the one and decisive touchdown of the game.

"Time," called Silvey, striving vainly to make himself heard above the exultant shouts. "Time, I tell you!" Captain Shultz of the "Jeffersons" drew out a watch, borrowed from a friend for the occasion, and compared it with the one in Bill's possession.

The game was over and the "Jeffersons" had lost.

The victors swaggered woodenly around by the ice cream soda shop and art stores to the home street. No cutting across the tracks for them now; this was a march of triumph! The vanquished trailed sulkily along, some twenty feet behind, giving vent now and then to cat-calls of defiance and disgruntled suggestions that the game would have ended differently if this or that member had played better. At the corner, Silvey turned.

"We licked you!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "We licked you! We licked you!"

Shultz raised his voice above the clamor of his team. "Just wait until we catch you alone. You'll be sorry!"

John shrugged his shoulders. "We'll all stick together coming home from school. And if they catch just one of us, why, we can maul them, too." For Shultz's declaration meant that the guerrilla warfare was in full swing again.

Sid's muscles stiffened and his back began to ache. Silvey owned a discolored spot over one eye where an opponent had tried to disable him during a tense moment of the game. John's shin was badly bruised, and Perry Alford had wrenched his ankle. The other members had minor hurts. Only Red Brown had, by some miracle, come through the battle unscathed.

"We won," said Silvey happily, as they stopped in front of his house. "Come on, now, all together!"

They broke into the "Tigers'" exultant war cry, which is very much the same as that of the football team to which you belonged as a boy:

> Sis-boom-bah!
> Sis-boom-bah!
> "Tigers," "Tigers,"
> Rah, rah, rah!

Then they left for their several homes, too worn out to do anything but rest.

Up in his room John threw himself on the bed with a sigh. His injured leg hurt terribly—but they'd won. Pity Louise had missed the defeat of the "Jeffersons." Why did women folks always have to go shopping, anyway? Only spent a lot of money on hats and other foolishness.

He turned over wearily and found the yellow pig bank leering at him from the bureau with hungry, malignant eyes. Where was that apportioned two dollars which he was to earn by the end of the week? Four days had already elapsed, and the beast's interior was as empty as it had been on the toy-shop shelf. Why had he bought those lemon drops on Monday? And the marbles and his rubber spear top? Was there anything left after the shin-guard purchase? He sat up on the edge of the bed and rummaged in his pockets. One lonely penny remained from his weekly allowance of a quarter.

He dropped the coin into the long slot and shook the pig disgustedly. Two dollars could never be earned by Saturday night. Not even if three lawns were to be cut, and a half-dozen errands run for the neighbors. He slammed the big china animal back on the bureau and went down to supper. The lonely copper had seemed to make the beast sound more hollow than ever as it rattled against the unglazed interior.

That night the wind veered to the south, and Friday proved to be mild and sunny, save for a touch of autumnal haze in the air. But not even this freakish return of summer could rouse him from the grumpy mood which held over from the night before.

He scanned the front yards on the street as he sulked along to school. How slowly grass grew in the fall! Not a lawn needed trimming, and as for freeing them from leaves, the nearly denuded boughs made such operations unnecessary. Coin of the realm seemed further away than ever.

In the afternoon, the haze thickened and hinted of rain. As he and Louise sauntered homeward, a drop of water spattered on her cheek. Another hit him on the nose, and it was but a short time before the cement sidewalks were covered with rapidly merging mosaics of a darker hue.

What luck! Dimes and even quarters, quickly and easily earned, were within his grasp. He left Louise at the apartment entrance and dashed into his own front hall in great excitement.

"I've got the umbrellas," he shouted, as he struggled into his raincoat. "I'm going out with them."

"Don't take my good one," Mrs. Fletcher cautioned. But he was beyond earshot, best umbrella and all, before the words were out of her mouth.

Down the water-glazed street he ran, its dust now laid by the refreshing, pounding torrent, past the barrier of the railroad ticket office, thanks to the friendly agent, and up the worn steps to the station platform. Other boys were there, each with two or three umbrellas, who viewed the newcomer with disfavor. Ere long, each suburban train from town would discharge its quota of daintily dressed shoppers, pallid office clerks and stenographers and prosperous business men. Not one of them would carry protection from the soaking rain, and competition between the juvenile vendors threatened to become acute.

A lean, light suburban engine pulled in amid a cloud of escaping steam and a hissing of airbrakes. John spied a tall slender woman in a car doorway arranging a paper over her hat, and raced along beside the platform until it came to a halt.

"Umbrella home, lady?"

She nodded. "To the hotel."

Behind her loomed a tall, slightly bowed, black-haired lawyer whom John had seen on the long, wooden veranda of that substitute for home more times than he could count on his ten fingers. He, too, took advantage of a rented shelter. Together the couple made their way down the dripping steps while John followed exultantly. Two at once—and the hotel but a scant block and a half away! At the broad entrance, they paused.

"How much do I owe you, little boy?" asked the lady, with a smile.

"Dime," was the laconic answer. Another train was due in ten minutes and there was no time to waste. She opened a dainty leather purse, while the lawyer paid his debt from a pocketful of small change. Twenty cents at once. That *was* luck. A moment later John was sprinting back at top speed.

No double fare the next time, but the helpless stenographer lived a street farther west, and each additional block meant another nickel according to the unwritten umbrella tariff.

"Fifteen cents, madam," he demanded.

She retreated discreetly to the shadow of the apartment hallway to dive into her stocking bank, while he watched two bedraggled sparrows on the sidewalk until she reappeared.

On his return, he found the trains running on the five-minute, rush-hour schedule. Each carried its revenue of small change for the eager, clamoring boys. Once, a gray-haired, kindly-eyed man gave John a quarter and would receive no change, and another time a friend of his mother's did likewise. But for the most part, ten- and fifteen-cent fees were his lot.

Rifts in the misty clouds to the west appeared, which hinted of an end to the rain. Nevertheless, he jingled the change in his pocket light-heartedly. He had made more in the brief eighty minutes than he could cutting the Langley's lawn, or by other juvenile chores which would consume a like time. And, if he were fortunate, there was still time for another customer before the storm ceased.

He found her. She was dressed in some rustling brown taffeta stuff and carried her hat in a carefully pinned page of newspaper. Her face was sunken and lined and rouged to lessen the ravages of age, and her hair was palpably mismatched. Moreover, instinct warned that his offer would be refused, for she was one of the tall, skinny folks. Nevertheless, he approached her.

"Umbrella home, lady? Can I take you home under an umbrella?"

He could. Instantly all criticism of her personal appearance vanished. True, she might be trying to keep up appearances like the old-maid teacher who scolded knowledge into the eighth-grade class, but she was willing to spend money for his benefit, and that made all the difference in the world.

Past the hotel they went, and down the five long, successive blocks of gray stone university buildings which flanked that side of the boulevard. John's spirits rose. His last was to be a quarter customer, at the least. Then they turned southward and dodged pools of water in the muddy street crossings and on the walks for another two squares. She halted at a grimy, run-down apartment building and closed the umbrella. Thirty-five cents! He opened his mouth to name the fee, but she interrupted him.

"Here's the umbrella, little boy." She stepped into the stuffy, badly-lighted hallway. "Thank you very much for taking me home."

Before he could say a word of protest, the weather-beaten oak door swung to in his face and the lady fled up the stairs.

When he had recovered from his surprise, he stamped angrily in after her. What should he do? He wanted that money. He didn't care if she had disappeared. He'd ring the bell and keep on ringing it until she answered or the batteries gave out. But which bell? The building was four-storied, with flats front and rear, and which of the cramped apartments did she occupy? And there were dozens of roomers' cards over the dusty speaking tubes. To find her was impossible. He had been tricked, and tricked nicely, and he might as well go back.

When he was a block from the station the rain changed to a sudden fine drizzle and halted. The umbrella business was ended for the afternoon. Nevertheless, he had been fairly successful. If that old maid had paid what was due him, the small change in his pocket would have totaled a dollar and thirty cents. But ninety-five cents wasn't bad, as it was.

He sauntered in from the dark street a few minutes later and stacked the dripping umbrellas in the rack in the hallway. Then he burst into the kitchen to tell his mother the news.

"What will you do with all that money, son?"

He blinked a moment at the brilliancy of the gas-light, and guessed he'd save most of it. At that Mrs. Fletcher smiled, and he grinned sheepishly back. She had probably guessed the secret. Mothers had uncanny ways of seeing right into fellows, and he might as well tell her now.

"Louise and I are going to be married when I'm twenty-one," he blurted. "I'm starting to save now, and she's going to get her mother to teach her how to cook beefsteaks and keep house."

Then he ducked from her amused kisses and ran up to his room. Down came the pig bank from the resting place on the bureau, and out on the white coverlet came the result of his work. Piece by piece the money disappeared in the narrow slot, until not even a nickel was left for lemon drops at the school store. Then he shook the porker with satisfaction. It didn't sound so empty now, and the hungry look seemed to have disappeared from the yellow china face. The eyes held an expression of sleepy content, if an insensate bit of china could do such a thing.

Ninety-six cents was a good start. But he'd have to hustle every minute of Saturday morning. The advent of autumn had so discouraged the growth of grass on the home street that he would have to invade Southern Avenue. Surely he could find some sort of a job on that long, well-groomed street.

After breakfast he sneaked off to drag the lawn-mower from its storage place in the basement. The rattle and bang of the iron frame against the area steps caught Mrs. Fletcher's alert ear. She raised the little side-pantry window and looked out as he lifted the implement up on the walk.

"John!"

"Yes, Mother?" A sheepish note crept into his voice. "Taking the mower out of the basement; that's all."

"Where are you going with it?"

Oh, nowhere in particular. He hoped to earn a little money; that was all.

"Is your room picked up?"

"No."

"And the front porch has to be hosed off for Sunday; never mind the neighbors until my work's finished, son."

Mothers must have forty-'leven pairs of ears to catch fellows the way they did. He stopped to argue with her, but she shook her head impatiently.

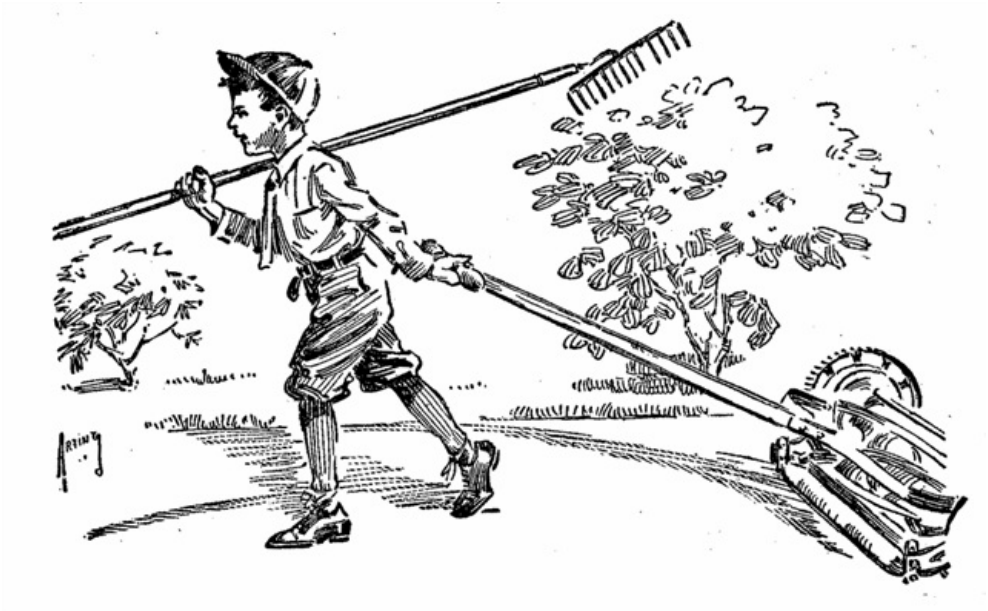
"That won't do a bit of good, John. You're just wasting time when you're talking this way."

She was right. And wasting time meant just so many minutes less in which to earn a dollar and four cents. He scampered upstairs and pitched the book which had lain under the bed since a certain clandestine night-reading session into the case. Next, his odds and ends of clothing and ties were thrown on the closet floor with a prayer that they might not be discovered before he made his escape. With his bureau top set hastily in order, he reported for duty below. Out with the hose-reel and up with the nozzle on the porch. A twist of the key, and the water spurted forth while his mother watched the procedure in amazement. He was taking five minutes for work which consumed twenty-five, ordinarily!

But when the water splashed against the sun-blistered clapboards of the veranda wall, his spurt of energy diminished. He adjusted the nozzle until the fine spray came from the hose and watched the miniature rainbow in the bright sunlight. An earnest spider was repairing a web up under the eaves in anticipation of coming storms, and John shifted back to the hard stream to dislodge the industrious spinner. The old cat trotted around from the back porch and made faces at a squirrel which had strayed from the park to enjoy the more munificent bounty which the kind-hearted housewives and children on the street offered. He shot the quarrel-quelling stream in their direction, and the pair scampered away to safety. As yet a good half of the porch was untouched by water, and he dropped the hose to the floor with the nozzle pointed toward the baseboard, while little rivulets trickled over the dust-strewn boards until they joined larger streams, just as the little black river lines in his school maps did.

There was a sudden, sharp tapping at the window which fronted the porch. Mrs. Fletcher's voice jerked him from the clouds of miniature geographical research to the realities of his task.

"John! Half an hour's gone already. Do get the hose reeled up!"



A few hasty strokes of the broom—his mother's best, taken unknown to her—obliterated all traces of the water systems, and the hard spray was splashed against the windows just long enough to splatter the sashes well. The dirtiest places on the steps met with a half-hearted scrub or two before he reeled up the hose. A moment later, with the rake over one shoulder, and the lawn mower trailing noisily behind him, he set off to find Silvey.

A noisy whistle in front of his chum's house brought no answer. An ear-splitting clamor of "Oh, Silvey-e-e-e; Oh, Silvey-e-e-e, come on out. Come on out!" brought his mother to the door.

"Bill's gone down town with his father," she said crossly. "Won't be back until dinner time."

Shucks; everything was going wrong. If Silvey wasn't on hand, he'd have to pitch in alone.

Around the corner he went, the mower still beating a noisy tattoo over the pavement, past the big new apartment building with flats which actually rented for a hundred dollars a month, and down to the long row of older houses, erected when land was cheap, and set far back from the walk; still on past foot after foot of trim grass plots, through a mud-puddle in the street which held more water than was good for the already rusty blades, and across to the opposite sidewalk before he found a prospect of employment.

He swung back the gate and tiptoed up the weathered steps. The window shades were down and the cobwebs hung thick on the porch railings and under the eaves. Yet the place was occupied, for he had noticed a homeless cat dragging an unsavory meal from a well-filled garbage pail at the side. He rang the bell once, twice, thrice, before the door opened.

"Want the lawn cut?" he asked of the wrinkled, tremulous dame who faced him.

She shook her head, angry at being disturbed. He walked down the walk mournfully.

It was clear that there was no revenue to be gained this day. So he turned toward the home street and dropped the mower into the area way just loudly enough to bring Mrs. Fletcher to the side window.

"That you, son? Run up to the corner and get some lamb chops, that's a good boy." She tossed him a half-dollar. "And get ready for dinner when you come back."

He set off thoughtfully, for the problem of earning still annoyed him. He hated to fall down on the newly made resolution the very first week. If it were only winter and a heavy snow falling! Then he'd make money quickly enough, but in late autumn—why folks wanted to walk to the corner for groceries themselves because the tang in the clear, snappy weather made the errand enjoyable!

As the door of the butcher shop closed behind him, he saw Shultz, leader of the "Jeffersons" and sworn enemy, tugging at a heavy suitcase as he struggled to keep pace with the athletic young lady to whom it belonged.

Why couldn't he do likewise? Three ten-cent suitcase jobs would bring his capital to a dollar and twenty-four cents, and that was better than nothing.

As soon as he had eaten, he left the house on the trot for the suburban station, where he had seen his football rival. He waited in front of the three iron turnstiles, now dancing up and down, now watching the ants in a hill which was forming between two paving blocks, and now scanning the thrice reread headlines of the papers on the unpainted news stand by the station entrance. A gentleman came with golf sticks bound for the park links; there came ladies innumerable who had been delayed on their shopping expedition—and still no sign of employment. Locals came and went, and expresses followed on twenty-minute runs until his memory failed in counting them, before a puffy, white-moustached gentleman in tweeds grunted a noisy passage down the platform steps.

"Satchel carried, sir?"

"How far is it to the hotel."

John explained. The traveler should have left the train at the station three blocks to the south. But it wasn't so very far, even at that. "Shall I carry it for you?" he concluded.

The man nodded jerkily and paused to light a cigarette. As they left, Shultz sauntered up and stood aghast at this invasion of his territory.

"Hey!" he ejaculated finally.

John held his course, grip in either hand. He was a little nervous, but his business rival dared not take revenge while his patron was with him. After that—well, he guessed he could take care of himself if that "tough"—a term of endearment used by the "Tigers"—bothered him.

A lapse of ten minutes found him fingering a quarter as he stood on the broad hotel steps. Would he go back, when such fees were in prospect? You bet. That dirty-faced kid had no mortgage on the place. He'd like to see any trouble between them. He would call out the "Tigers," he would!

Shultz was pacing up and down in front of the station when John came up. The expression on his face was far from pleasant, and the boy began to regret his fit of bravado. But shucks, that tough wouldn't dare do anything. He stopped at the turnstiles once more, and Shultz glared at him angrily.

"What you trying to do?"

John explained. He wanted to make a little pocket money.

"Well you can't here. G'wan home before I smash your face!"

"Won't," stubbornly. "Got just as much right as you here."

There was a pause. "Well are you going?" asked the "Jefferson's" captain.

"No!"

"I'll make you." He advanced, fists doubled. They circled around and around on the pavement,

each looking for an opening through the other's guard. Suddenly the bigger boy lunged forward and his fist went true to the mark—John's nose. They sparred again, now feinting forward, now stepping backward, like two young turkey cocks. A tall, blue-clad, brass-buttoned figure rounded the corner, and Shultz raised the alarm.

"Cheese it, the cop!"

They broke for cover, each in the direction of home and parental protection, while the guardian of the peace stood and laughed at the fleeing figures.

Once well down the street, John pulled up, panting, and rubbed his nose. That kid had certainly hit it. The organ hurt like the mischief, and felt as if it were three sizes too big. He hoped it wouldn't be like that at school, Monday.

He heard a familiar voice, "Hello!"

He turned quickly. Louise, and at this, of all times!

"What you been doing?" She looked at his face curiously.

He forced a smile. "Fight, that's all."

"Did he hurt you much?"

"Only here." John pointed to the injured appendage and added, "Gee, you ought to see him. Black eye, and his lip's bleeding something fierce!" His lady must never know that he came out second best in the battle.

Suddenly he turned a-tremble from the reaction of his feelings. He wished his feminine playmate down town, over in the park, any place where she couldn't talk to him. He wanted to get home, to have mother's gentle hands lay cooling bandages on his nose, and his eyes began to fill with tears. For in spite of his air of defiance, he had been beaten and the knowledge stung him into a poignant longing for sympathy.

Louise, with the intuition of her sex, changed the subject.

"Look what I've got," she held a brown package at arm's length. "Sugar from the grocer's. Mother's going to teach me how to bake, this afternoon. Want to watch?"

He nodded gratefully and went with her to the flat where that memorable party had been held. In the airy kitchen, Mrs. Martin instructed Louise in the mysteries of mixing flour, spices, and molasses into that sticky mass which composes the dough for delicious, old-fashioned gingerbread. John stood at the young lady's side and watched dreamily. Just wait until he had that thousand dollars saved and could rent a kitchen of his own!

After the mixture was poured into the pan, the two children, spoons in hand, scraped the mixing dish of its residue of uncooked delicacy, and decided that the effort would prove a huge success.

"Wait until it's baked," said Louise, "and you can have a piece."

John was transported into a seventh heaven of ecstasy, and followed her into the parlor. They sat on the floor and played dominoes while the minutes flew past.

"That's five games for me," Louise broke out exultantly. John nodded and gazed listlessly around the room. On the bottom shelf of the magazine table was a red and black checkerboard.

"Let's play that," he pointed with one grimy finger.

Louise demurred. "I don't know how."

"I'll teach you," her victim said eagerly. So she did penance for her victories until Mrs. Martin appeared in the doorway and smiled down at them.

"Come, kiddies. It's ready now."

They broke for the kitchen in a wild dash, leaving boards and men on the carpet as they had finished with them.

Half an hour later, John sauntered into the house, his hat cocked exultantly over one ear, and his mouth redolent of savory spices. He heard voices in the dining-room and stuck his head in between the portières.

"That you, John?" asked his mother. "Where on earth have you been?"

"Up at Louise's." His spirits were too high to notice the admonitory note in her voice. "She baked a cake all by herself, and when it was done, I had a great big piece. And Mother," his voice rose proudly at the memory of that effort, "it was better'n any ginger cake you ever made in all your life!"

When he had placed his napkin in his ring and gone out on the front porch, Mrs. Fletcher looked at her husband and her husband smiled back at her.

"The little imp," she murmured finally.

But it was the first foretaste of the time when another woman should dispossess her of her son's

love, and she liked this touch in the childish comedy not at all.

CHAPTER IX

HE SAVES FOR "FOUR ROOMS FURNISHED COMPLETE"

The early Sunday church bells roused him to consciousness that the clear autumn sunlight was streaming in through the east window. The other members of the family were as yet not awake, so he stretched lazily and recalled, incident by incident, that blissful afternoon with Louise. How pretty she had looked when she had opened the oven door, and how delighted she had been when he had sampled and approved her first gingerbread! It almost atoned for the defeats at dominoes.

He rolled over. There stood the pig bank on the bureau, staring down at him with an air which said, plainly as if spoken, "John Fletcher, you're a failure. Two dollars was your goal for the week. There's but a dollar and twenty-nine cents in me. What are you going to do about it?"

Nor would it allow his conscience to rest during the hours which followed. Louise had accepted an invitation to feed the squirrels in the park that afternoon, so he begged a nickel from his father for peanuts and rushed in to his mirror to see if his face needed washing. There was the four-footed caricature to insinuate that he might better be thinking of means to increase his weekly income, instead of squandering money on fat, saucy park squirrels.

He was beginning to hate the bit of china. Why hadn't he purchased instead a mail-box bank that owned no such accusing eyes?

Not until after supper, when he threw himself on the bed to face, for the first time, the problem of earning a steady weekly income, did the yellow, glazed features cease to trouble him.

He stared thoughtfully at the flicker of the gas rays against the wavy markings in the ceiling paper for some minutes. How was a boy to earn money? What were the channels of revenue by which the "Jefferson Toughs," Shultz and his ilk, made pitiful contributions to the family war fund against the enemies of fuel, food, and clothing bills?

Shultz sold papers. Very well, John Fletcher would do likewise. If twenty papers were sold daily, a weekly revenue of forty-eight cents would come from that source. The allowance from his father would bring the amount up to, say, seventy-five cents. Could he hope for five errands a week from the neighbors? That would make a dollar and a quarter. But where, oh, where, was the other money to come from?

In any case, hard, persistent work, man's work, lay before him and it must be done in a man's way. No more tops, marbles, "Run, sheep, run," or even snow fights! The thousand dollars which meant a home was to be earned by his twenty-first birthday, and such trivialities might delay the achievement of that heart's desire.

The first test of the resolution came within the next twenty-four hours. As the pupils formed in line for the afternoon, he fingered a dime in his pocket repeatedly, for the coin represented the investment for his first newspaper venture. In the school yard Silvey darted up to him.

"Oh, John-e-e-e!"

"Yes," said John, not greatly enthusiastic over the hail.

"It's open practice at the university today. Red and me are going. It'll be the biggest game, next Saturday, and, Jiminy, you ought to watch the quarter-back kick! Come along?"

John shook his head regretfully. Too well he knew the joys which awaited them within the big enclosure with its towering bleachers. Hadn't he haunted the gate for just such opportunities, last year? Hadn't Bill and he discovered a hole in the fence and laid plans to see one of the early games by its aid? And hadn't an unfeeling freshman emptied a bucket of water as he had crawled half through the opening? But the dime in his pocket was a reminder of last week's procrastinating failure.

"Can't," said he finally.

"Why?"

"Got to work—sell papers."

Silvey stared, scarcely believing his ears. John scuffed the school walk with one sadly abused shoe.

"You see," he went on reflectively, "I've got to have a thousand dollars by the time I'm twenty-one."

"What for?"

"Get married."

"That girl again!" Bill ejaculated scornfully. "Aw, come on, Johnny. Just once won't hurt."

"No," retorted John firmly. "I've got to act like a man now. I haven't any more time for kid foolishness!"

"Kid foolishness!" repeated Silvey in awe-struck tones, as his chum turned and walked rapidly away, "kid foolishness! Gee!"

As for John, he was finding hidden sweets in the new vocation. Never had Silvey's eyes held such astounded respect as they had at that moment.

Shultz lived in a brown brick, ramshackle tenement diagonally opposite the apartments in which the gang had found shelter that day of the cucumber fight. Once, the flats had been advertised as being the utmost in modern conveniences, but that had been in the days when the park museum was glorified as an exposition building. Since then, a long succession of tenants had scented the dark, badly lighted corridors with a variety of garlicky odors, and the rentals had been lowered until only the most necessary repairs could be afforded to keep the building in order. So there the block stood, making a tawdry front with small, and often-remodeled stores, as it waited for one of the numerous small fires which were always starting to consume it.

Shultz was playing on the walk in front of the grimy main entrance. It was John's purpose to learn the hour of arrival for the newspaper wagon, and whatever other information on news vending the boy might be willing to give. His erstwhile enemy doubled both fists as he crossed the road.

"Want another bloody nose?"

John raised an open palm as a token of peace. "When's the wagon drive up?"

The ex-captain of the "Jefferson's" looked at him suspiciously. "What do you want to know for?"

"Sell papers. What do you s'pose?"

"Old man lost his job?" There could be but one motive for engaging in the paper business according to his simple mind.

John thought a moment. It was all very well to tell his chum of the cause for the sudden desire for money, but not this boy. The love affair would be all over school by morning recess. He nodded, taking the easiest way out of the dilemma.

"Had a fight with his boss," the would-be merchant invented boldly, throwing plausibility to the winds. "Came home last night, crying like everything. There isn't enough to eat, and we have to pay the gas bill, so I'm going to work."

All enmity vanished instantly. The pair were comrades in misfortune, and as such John was to be aided in every possible way.

"Joe'll be around in half an hour," Shultz explained generously. "Stay here with me and I'll tell him you're a new kid, and fix things up. How many are you going to buy?"

"Dime's worth."

"Think you can sell 'em all?"

"Easy."

Shultz studied him for a moment and decided that the novice had better learn the vicissitudes of the business through bitter experience. John wasn't the kind to take advice, anyway.

At last the green, one-horse cart pulled up by the delicatessen at the side of the old apartments. The boys crowded up to the wagon step. Shultz surrendered a nickel for his nightly quota of eight papers and pointed to his pupil.

"New kid, Joe."

"What's his name?"

"John."

"All right, John, how many?"

He reached up the dime and received a neat bundle of papers in return. The other boy left to make deliveries to established customers, while John dashed exultantly over to the railroad station. He was a real paper boy now. The news sheets under his arm proved that.

An incoming suburban train pulled in at the platform overhead. Steam hissed from the pistons, and the first few puffs of locomotive smoke arose as the engine got under way again. Then came the pound, pound, pound of a multitude of feet as the weary, scurrying passengers made the turnstiles click continuously. John opened his mouth to call his wares.

"Pa—a—"

A man with a red necktie glanced down at him. The rest of the word became inaudible. What was the matter with his voice, anyway? There was nothing to be ashamed of in selling papers. The policeman wouldn't arrest him. Again he forced a shout, and practiced until he could yell at the top of his lungs like an old hand at the game.

The last saffron tint of the autumn sun faded from the western sky. Lights appeared one by one in

the windows of the flat buildings and glistened like jewels in the fast gathering dusk. The store windows on either side of the street cast brilliant reflections far across the macadam. The lamplighter, speeding from post to post on a bicycle, paused long enough to leave a flickering beacon on the corner, then sped away with his long torch over one shoulder. Trains came and went. Business men in well-tailored, immaculate suits walked briskly past. Weak arched clerks with home pressed trousers slouched wearily along. Chattering women innumerable scurried by on the walk. His dollar watch showed a quarter past six in the light from the ticket office window and John counted his papers.

Eleven on hand and five paltry coppers in his right trousers' pocket. Caught with an overstock! Not only had the prospective profits vanished, but a deficiency impended as well. He began to understand the cause of Shultz's question—and supper impended.

He snatched a moment under the light from the street lamp to glance at the funny sheet, for the excitement of the new occupation had prevented such amusement earlier in the afternoon. As he unfolded a copy, a glaring headline on the first page held his attention.

Again the turnstiles clicked, and again came the shifting crowd. But John Fletcher was not on the station corner to vend his wares. Instead, that small boy was legging it westward as fast as he could go. Past the school, past the row of dilapidated houses which lay beyond, past the plank-walled football grounds and the last of the gray stone, many-windowed university buildings, into the residence district which he had marked as his goal.

This section of the city was so far removed from the railroad station that the inhabitants made use of the slower street car lines to take them to and fro from work. Frank Smith, bookkeeper in a wholesale house, would be still on his way home, and this difference between the expensive fifteen-minute train service, and the fifty-five minutes of the more plebeian surface system was all that made his plan feasible. What would Mrs. Smith know of the day's news occurrences?

He waited until his panting grew less violent before he sauntered down the gas lit, unpretentious street, with a cry of,

"Extry paper! All about the big South Side murder! Extry pa-a-a-per here. Extre-e-e-e, extre-e-e-e, extre-e-e-e!"

Heads became silhouetted in numerous windows as their owners tried to catch his words.

"A-a-all about the big South Side murder! Extry pa-a-a-a-per!"

A door swung back, releasing a flood of light against the unkempt front lawn of a two-story cottage. John dashed up the shaky steps.

"Extry, lady? All about the big murder?"

She nodded and handed him a penny. The boy looked at it scornfully.

"Extras are a nickel!"

"But the paper's marked 'one cent.'"

"S'pose it would pay," his voice was as grave as a financier's, discussing a huge stock transfer, "to chase all over and miss supper, just to make three cents on eight papers? No, lady, price is a nickel. Always is."

He held out his hand. The woman capitulated and went back into the house for the stipulated coin.

The sale wiped out the deficit and made an even break on the venture, the worst to be feared. Selling extras which were not extras to people who thought they were was proving a most profitable undertaking. He resumed his stroll down the street.

"Extra-e-e-e paper here! South Side family murdered! Extry paper! Extry, extry, extre-e-e-e!"

Every fourth or fifth residence yielded its toll to the grewsome lure. At last but one newspaper remained. He redoubled his vocal efforts.

A woman, her arms full of grocery packages, stopped him and fumbled in her purse. Across the street, a whistle sounded. He dropped the nickel into his pocket, gave over the last of the troublesome sheets, and started for home. Again came the whistle. He made a trumpet of his hands and bellowed "Sold out" as he turned the corner. If he had only more copies! At least sixty could have been sold.

Nevertheless, fifty cents for the pig bank—a dime was to be reserved for the morrow's capital—wasn't bad. Surely the other dollar and a half could be saved by the end of the week. Earning a thousand dollars was as easy as rolling off a log.

John kissed his mother good-bye in high good humor, as he left for school in the morning. She watched him for a moment as he danced along the gusty, wind-swept street, and went in to sit by the parlor grate for a few moments. Hardly had she opened her magazine when the front door-bell rang, and the neighbor from across the way stood on the threshold, panting and very much excited.

"My dear Mrs. Fletcher," she shrilled in her acrid tones. "Do tell me all about it!"

Her hostess led her into the parlor and drew up a companion chair before the fire. "About what?" she asked.

"About Mr. Fletcher." The neighbor warmed her hands a moment before the dancing flames, while Mrs. Fletcher looked a mute inquiry.

"Mrs. Shultz, she's my washerwoman," went on the thin, nasal voice, "said this morning that John had told her little boy he had to sell papers because your husband had had trouble with his employer and had lost his position." She would have added further details as to the straits the Fletchers were supposed to be in, if something in that lady's manner had not prevented her.

"So I said to Mrs. Leland, next door," concluded the neighbor from across the way, "that I hoped things were not as bad as they seemed, and that I'd run right over to ask you."

"John told *what*?" asked that youngster's mother, now that the verbal torrent had halted.

The story was repeated. Mrs. Fletcher broke into relieved laughter. "I'll have to interview that son of mine when he gets home," she said as she leaned forward to explain matters.

But when John did appear, his mother was far more lenient with him than he had any right to expect. She was still too amused at the turn of affairs to be anything else.

Two weeks sped past. In spite of the success of that first paper venture, the lesson was not lost upon John, who recruited a dozen or so regular customers from among his mother's friends the next afternoon. Since then, thanks to persistent effort, the list had steadily grown until he was able to double his first day's order without danger of financial loss. The errands for the neighbors had not materialized to swell his income, nor had other umbrella days followed the first one. But indeed, the paper route occupied too much of his time to permit such side issues.

His minimum income was now at the respectable mark of a dollar and seventeen cents a week and still growing. At first, the thought that he was falling below the two dollar limit troubled him sorely until he remembered that everything must have a beginning. Just wait until a year from now; he'd make five dollars a week, he would!

"I'll bet you five thousand dollars that I do," he had told Silvey when that youngster scoffed at his plans as they walked to school, one bleak, overcast noon. Needless to say, Bill did not meet the wager. He wasn't accustomed to thinking in such large sums and, besides, John's manner was singularly convincing.

Louise, the business man scarcely saw at all, save to walk home with her from school now and then, or to take her on Sunday expeditions to the park. On one of the strolls, she told of further experiments in the science of cookery. "And mother says you can come up and watch, tomorrow."

He declined as diplomatically as possible. Nondelivery of the papers spelled failure for the new business. Would she mind?

Louise shook her head. Nevertheless, John felt that she was hurt. Hang it all, couldn't a girl understand? How was the thousand dollars which was to start them housekeeping to be earned if he loafed away his afternoons?

Mrs. Fletcher took him down town the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Already the holiday throngs were beginning to fill the noisy, grimy streets and passage, in them was both tedious and difficult for a small boy. Weary after the morning of tramping from store to store, they were returning to the railroad station when a display in a furniture store window caught his eye.

Rich plush hangings and an occasional picture gave the impression of the walls of a room. In the center, a shiny mahogany bed stood, with a dresser of like material and fragile, spindle-legged chairs grouped around it.

He tugged at his mother's hand to stop a moment. She obeyed indulgently, as his eyes became glued to the little sign in the foreground.

"Bedroom set. Adam style. Reduced to *three hundred and sixty-five dollars*."

He gasped. Three hundred and sixty-five dollars for a bed and a dresser and chairs which would break the first time a small boy plumped down on them! Then came the appalling thought: *"How far would a thousand dollars last with such prices?"*

All the speeding ride homeward, and after supper as he stretched out on the bed before undressing, he worried over this new and unexpected problem. If bedroom furniture *alone* cost that much and the pictures and carpet were still to be paid for, the total would at least be four hundred and fifty dollars. The parlor should cost even more, for chairs, a sofa, and a reading table were to be placed in it. As for the dining-room, he shrank from a consideration of that expense! And there were dishes and books and silverware! Two thousand dollars was the least he could expect his five furnished rooms to cost, and he had considered half that amount sufficient for all expenses. Newly married folks usually took honeymoon trips, too. He groaned. Would he ever earn enough to marry Louise?

Thanksgiving drew nearer. At school, on the Wednesday immediately preceding, the chosen few who were Miss Brown's personal aides, stayed after school at noon to decorate the room for the entertainment to be given at a quarter of two. Her desk was backed against the wall, and the cornstalks used by the drawing class as models for their efforts, were grouped against it to form

a background for the impassioned actors. A supply of pumpkins, gourds, and other autumnal fruits of the earth, borrowed by the teacher from the grocer with whom her mother traded, gave still greater festivity to the room.

There was no need of roll call. Every child was there, for they were too much interested to absent themselves.

Miss Brown gave a brief history of the origin of the day. A little girl whose pink dress clashed violently with her red hair and freckled complexion, followed with a rendition of a doleful poem beginning:

> Only a grain of corn, Moth*ur*,
> Only a grain of corn.

Then the class sang one of the songs in the fourth-grade music book and settled back expectantly, for the feature piece of the afternoon.

Silvey and Red Brown dragged a long, green curtain along a wire which ran from one side of the room to the other, until the platform was hidden from the room's eager gaze. A scurry of gray calico came from the coat closet which served as the green room for the amateur actors. A boy, muffled mysteriously in a long cloak, followed. Miss Brown gave a last look to see that the stage was properly arranged, and the curtain was pulled back against the wall again.

It was Sid and Louise!

It was Sid and Louise! He'd thrown aside the long cloak (insisted upon because he'd feel like a fool if the class saw him in costume while waiting for the play to begin), and stood forth in high, paper cuffs hiding his coat sleeves well up to his elbows, and a queerly shaped, high-buckled hat which threatened to slide down over his ears at any moment. Louise, in a Priscilla gray gown, waited for the pilgrim father to begin his lines. The class applauded wildly, for the spirit of make believe threw them back into those tempestuous early days along the Atlantic Coast.

John heard not a word of the scenes which followed. He was sorely disturbed. There was Sid on the platform with his beloved, waving his arms back and forth in fervid, pump-handle motions which Louise seemed to mind not a bit. Hang it all, that kid must be trying to cut him out! But he'd show him. Just wait until his thousand dollars was earned.

Then his calculations of that Saturday evening came back to throw an icy feeling into the pit of his stomach. What right had he to hope when housefurnishings were at such a figure?

Mrs. Fletcher set him to picking the pinfeathers from the turkey when he came in from his paper route that night. He turned to with a gusto, mindful of the culinary treats which were to come, and blissfully conscious of four long holidays, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, in which he could sleep as late as he wanted—besides, he could see a little more of Louise. He didn't like the way she had acted on the platform. Perhaps he had been a little neglectful, but just wait a few

years. Then he'd—but the thought of that costly furniture put an end to his dreams.

Thanksgiving morning he haunted the kitchen incessantly, dancing now to the little pantry to swing back the doors and feast his eyes on the huge mince pie which waited on the bottom shelf, and then back to the kitchen where he pestered his mother with innumerable questions until she drove him out into the snappy, late November air. He scampered up to Bill's house, where the two boys retired to the chilly seclusion of the shack and compared notes.

"We've got a fifteen-pound turkey," said John boastfully.

"That's nothing," Silvey dug scornfully into the hard dirt floor with his heel. "You ought to see ours. Twenty pounds, and my, such a big fellow! Cranberry sauce an' roast potatoes, an' squash to go with him. Umm-m-m."

"So've we," retorted John, undaunted by this itemized account. "Your turkey may be bigger'n ours, but it won't taste as good, for my ma (he'd forgotten his assertion regarding Louise) is the best cook in the whole world and there isn't anyone can beat her."

Certain empty pangs in nature's alarm clock brought him home half an hour early to inquire about dinner. He was most starved to death. Wouldn't mother hurry it up? Mother couldn't—expert cookery was not to be hurried. He'd better go out again for a while.

Instead, he carried the morning paper into the parlor and lounged in the big easy chair. The minutes slipped past as he devoured news items, the fiction supplement, and miraculous patent medicine announcements with amusing impartiality. He turned to an inner page and found a huge advertisement staring him in the face. At the top, floated a streamer with the legend, "You furnish the girl, we furnish the house!" Further down the page were furniture bargains innumerable, for sale on a plan of "One dollar down, seventy-five cents per week," and in the center, between heavy rules, was the announcement, "Four rooms, furnished complete, only ninety-five dollars!"

"John," called his father from the dining-room. "Come to dinner!"

He threw the paper from him in sudden exultation, and danced in to the dining-table. His eye took in each detail of the evenly browned national bird, the long, slender stalks of celery in the dainty china dish, the deep-red cranberry jelly, the appetizing roasted potatoes, and the golden squash, and he smiled happily.

"Jiminy, that looks good, Mother!" He plumped into his seat. "Hurry up, dad, I'm most ready to eat the house!"

But through his brain, as he attacked a third helping of turkey and its accessories, there still ran the exultant echo of "Four rooms, furnished complete, only ninety-five dollars!"

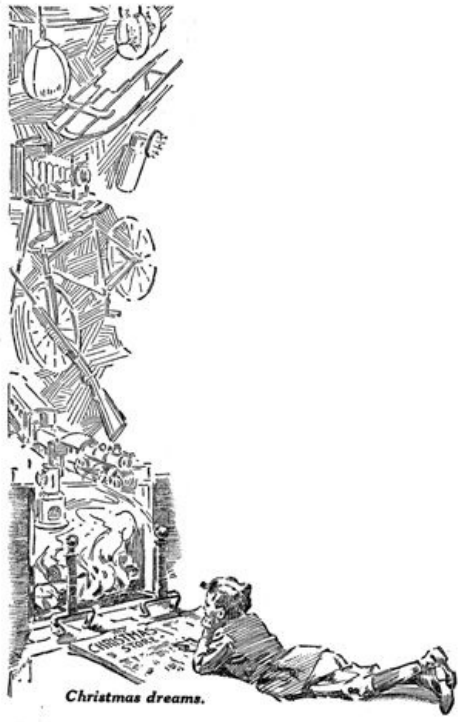
Thus did the day become a real Thanksgiving to him.

CHAPTER X

CONCERNS SANTA CLAUS MOSTLY

At early dusk of the Friday holiday, he scampered to a hiding place underneath a house porch while Sid DuPree, his face buried in his arms, stood against a tree trunk and counted "Five hundred by five" as rapidly as he could. But as the cry of "Coming" echoed between the closely built houses, John's conscience suddenly robbed him of all the pleasure in the game of "Hide and seek." An afternoon of suitcase jobs had been frittered away, and the paper wagon was due in another fifteen minutes. So he withdrew reluctantly to haunt the walk in front of the delicatessen store and wonder that the work upon which he had entered with such gusto was becoming so irksome.

A sharp, long-delayed touch of winter had crept into the air the night before, and set his toes to tingling as he drew his blue, knitted stocking cap further over his ears. He scampered along the petrified lawns on the paper route until the last news sheet was delivered, then blew lustily on his black mittens to warm his numbed fingers as he started for home. There, under the cheerful influence of the glowing parlor grate, he waited lazily until the last trace of tingling had left his hands, and spread a copy of the evening paper out on the carpet before him.



Christmas dreams.

First he looked at the cartoon on the front page, and then at the grotesque drawings on the back sheet comic section. Those finished, he returned to the first page, where an account of a ghastly train wreck held him spellbound. Searching on an inner page for the rest of the narrative, he came across a department store's advertisement which banished all thoughts of mangled victims and splintered cars from his mind.

"Beginning tomorrow, Santa Claus will be in his little house in our greatly enlarged fifth-floor Toyland to greet each and all of his friends. See the animated bunnies and the blacksmith shop in the Brownie Village, and the wonderful display of toys of every description which Santa has gathered for the delight of the children." There followed enticing cuts of toys with even more alluring descriptions and, alas! oftentimes prohibitive prices.

Thanks to the paper business, the holiday season had crept up almost unnoticed. Santa was an exploded myth, these years, but the stereotyped cut of the jovial, fat-cheeked saint at the top of the page brought John a thrill of anticipation, nevertheless. Christmas was coming. What did he want?

After supper, he rummaged in the library until he found his mother's box of best stationery. He drew a few sheets and several envelopes from the neat container, and sat down at his father's big writing desk to begin his series of Christmas letters to certain responsive relatives. These favored ones heard from him regularly four times a year—before his birthday, before Christmas, and as soon after each of these feast days as his mother could force letters of acknowledgment from him. John dipped the pen too deeply into the inkwell, and wiped his finger tips dry on his trousers. Then he began,

"Dear Aunt Clara: I hope you are well. The weather is fine but getting cold. Christmas is coming so I thought I would write you. I want—"

He paused for reflection. Bill Silvey had been given a toy electric motor, last year. It was now in the juvenile scrap heap, thanks to an attempt to harness the bit of machinery to the powerful lighting current in Sid's house, but it had been delight indescribable to swing the little switch and watch the armature gain momentum until it hummed like a bee. So the first of his desires ran, "Motor, electric. Batteries, too."

Last year, Bill and he had built a shaky bob for use on the park toboggan, only to have a collision with a park water hydrant, used for flooding the field, and the remains of the sleds had gone to their respective family woodpiles. So down went, "Sled, coaster, with round runners."

The descriptive bit was to eliminate any possibility of getting a high, useless girl's sled, which would go to pieces in less than no time.

As he thought of each article he wrote, "Hockey skates. My old ones are rusted. A knife. Mine's lost." And last, but not least, "Books, lots of them."

That exhausted his list of needs. There were a thousand other things which he knew he wanted if he could only think of them, but the innumerable boyish desires which had arisen since his birthday in June had fled, and, try as he would, he could recall none of them. As a last desperate

resort, he scrawled a concluding "Anything else useful," and signed it, "Your loving nephew, John."

Saturday, an errant breeze from the east veiled the clear starlight of the early evening as if by magic, and by morning had marshaled long, heavy rows of slate-hued clouds which drove over the city from the lake. The temperature, too, rose above the freezing point and gave the only boy in the Fletcher household a chance to bank the ever-hungry furnace, and shut off all draughts. He employed his respite in a blissful perusal of the double-page advertisements in the Sunday paper.

Toys, hundreds of them! The department stores vied with each other in the profusion of their offerings. Illustrations of "William Tell Banks—drop penny in bank and Tell shoots apple from son's head"—mechanical engines which sped around three-foot circles of track until any human engineer would become dizzy; sleds of every description from humble ones at fifty cents to long, elaborately enameled speed kings with spring-steel runners, and games in innumerable variety, made him read and reread the alluring pages until his eyes ached.

He sighed and looked up dreamily. The moisture-laden clouds from the east had borne out the newspaper forecast of "probably snow flurries," and he jumped to the window.

Heavy, feathery flakes were swirling earthward with the vagaries of the air currents. Here they eddied out from between the houses to disappear on the shining black macadam of the street and sidewalks, there they gave a momentary touch of white to the brown, frost-bitten lawns as a prophecy of that which was yet to come. In front of the Alfords', Silvey, Perry, and Sid, danced back and forth with shouts of laughter as they tried to catch the elusive bits of white. He would have joined them, but an ache in his stomach told that dinner was near, so he returned from his vantage point with a cry of "Mother! Mother! Mother! It's getting Christmasier every minute!"

Nor did the Spirit of the Holidays allow his interest to lessen during the days when the advertisements lost their fascination through monotonous repetition. As he and Bill ran home at noon one day, a quartette of men with bulging, gray denim bags on their shoulders, left big yellow envelopes on each and every house porch of the street. They were rigidly impartial in their work, and John dashed up the steps of that same vacant house which the boys had held that day with the pea shooters.

"Look!" he cried, drawing the gaudy pamphlet from the manila casing. "It's the *Toy Book*, Silvey!"

The *Toy Book* had been issued since time immemorial by one of the down town stores, and its yearly visit made it something of an institution among the juveniles of the street. On the cover, a red-coated, rosy-cheeked Saint Nick, with a toy-filled pack, was descending a snow-capped chimney while his reindeer cavorted in the background. On the back were rows of dainty pink, blue, and green clad dolls with flaxen ringlets and staring, china eyes—trash which interested John not at all. Why didn't they put engines and sleds and worth-while things there?

"Come on, Bill," he said suddenly. "Let's collect 'em."

They waited until the distributors were too far down the street to interfere, and sneaked up and down the house steps with careful thoroughness. As the bundles under the two boyish arms were becoming heavy, Mrs. Fletcher darted out by the lamppost in front of the house and beckoned to John vigorously. He left Bill with a show of regret, for the dozen odd copies under his arm were far less than he would have liked.

Louise sauntered home with him after school that day. As they passed Southern Avenue, the lady's gaze rested on a muddy object in the street gutter, and John stooped to pick it up. Torn, disfigured with innumerable heel marks and wagon wheels, the battered bundle of paper was all that remained of a Christmas booklet.

"Oh!" said Louise in surprise.

"Didn't you get one?"

She shook her head. Evidently other boys at her end of the street had emulated John and Bill.

"Tells all about toys," he volunteered. "I'll bring you one with the paper, if you want."

She thanked him and dropped the ruin regretfully. Those dolls on the back cover were so enticing.

"Aren't you glad Christmas is coming?" John asked. "Gee, I wish it was day after tomorrow."

Louise nodded.

"What do you want for Christmas?" he pursued.

She didn't know. "A doll—"

"A doll!" he interrupted in disgust. What did she want with dolls? They would be of no use when she had grown up.

"Yes, a doll," said Louise decidedly. John feigned placating approval. "And doll clothes," she went on, "and new hair ribbons and things for my dresses, and lots and lots of other presents. What do you want?"

He told her briefly. "But that isn't half," he concluded, as they loitered on the apartment steps.

"I'm trying to think of the others all the time. Jiminy!" with a glance at his watch, "I'd better be going. I've got work to do."

But there were no interviews with prospective newspaper customers that afternoon. After John had started the parlor grate for his mother, he fell under the spell of one of the wonder-books and scanned page after page of the illustrations until Mrs. Fletcher interrupted him.

"Aren't you going to deliver your papers, son? It's a quarter of five now."

What a pest the paper route was getting to be, always demanding his attention just as he wanted to do something else. He rose to his feet and stretched both arms to take the cramps out of them, pitched the booklet into a corner of the hall, and dashed to the closet for his coat and mittens.

After the evening meal, John brought out another of his store of gaudy toy books and went into the parlor. His father, following a few moments later, looked down at the little figure on the carpet before the fire, and smiled.

"What is it, son?"

The boy raised his head, brown eyes a-dream with visions of automobiles, steam engines, and hook and ladder outfits.

"Looking at this," he explained.

Mr. Fletcher drew up the big, easy armchair which he liked so well, and lifted him into his lap. A moment later, the two heads, the old and the young, bent over the picture-laden pages.

"Look, daddy." John pointed to a locomotive with pedals and a seated cab for a youthful engineer. "I saw one, once. All red and shiny, with a black smokestack. And the bell really rings."

"But don't you think that's too much money for a toy?"

The boy nodded reluctantly. "Still, it's such lots of fun to just *wish* for things, even though you know you can't have them."

The strong arms tightened about him tenderly for a moment. As they relaxed, John turned the leaves back rapidly.

"Let's begin at the very beginning," he explained, then rapped the first page petulantly. "Nothing but dolls and dolls and more dolls," as a procession of things dear to the feminine heart passed by; "and doll bathtubs and dishes and other sissy things." He bent forward suddenly.

"That's better. A 'lectric railroad. Let's take your pencil." He marked an irregular cross beside the illustration. "And here come the sleds. Lots of them aren't so very 'spensive. And banks," he smiled. "I guess mine's big enough, isn't it, daddy?"

Mr. Fletcher joined in the smile. Indeed until he had seen that porker safe on his son's bureau, he had no idea that so large a china animal existed. The boy broke in on his thoughts excitedly.

"Punch and Judys!" His memory swept back to the raftered hall and Professor O'Reilley's performance. "They're such fun, and they don't cost very much. If I had one, I wouldn't spend any money on those shows, either."

His father chuckled at the bit of juvenile diplomacy. "You'd better make out your Christmas list for us before that pencil gets worn out making crosses, son."

He slid from the paternal knee and was off to the library in a trice. Mrs. Fletcher had overheard the finish of the conversation and smiled in on him before she joined her husband in reading the evening paper. Minutes passed.

"Most finished, son?" called Mr. Fletcher. "It's nearly bedtime, you know."

A grunt was the only response.

"Better add a few things you'll need around the flat when you and Louise are married!"

"John!" Mrs. Fletcher rattled her newspaper disapprovingly. "Do stop teasing that boy."

A few moments later, her son appeared in the doorway, yawning sleepily.

"It isn't ready yet," he said. "I'm going to bed now."

Late the following evening, Mrs. Fletcher opened her son's door to see if he slept soundly, and a scrap of paper fluttered from an anchoring pin to the floor. She picked it up. True to his peculiar custom, John had presented his Christmas needs in a manner which seemed more delicate than to ask in person for them. With a whimsical, sympathetic smile, she rejoined her husband in the big bedroom.

"Look what your joking did last night!" She handed him the slip of paper. He, too, chuckled tenderly, for the scrawl ran: "What I want for Chrismas: Pictures, pretty ones, Picture frames, Chairs, Plates for dinner, Knives, Spoons, Anything for a flat." A little space followed as if the author had hesitated before he had added in heavier writing that which told of a longing not to be denied, "Books, lots of them."

Christmas drew nearer. The delivery wagons from the down-town stores made more and more

frequent stops at the Fletchers, to leave odd-shaped bundles in the hallway, bundles at which John would gaze longingly as if to pierce the outer wrappings and excelsior. Watching the packages arrive was half the fun of Christmas, anyway.

His own shopping list was small. He broached the subject of a gift for his father to Mrs. Fletcher. Would she buy it, the next time she went to town? "Then it'll be a surprise for dad." Likewise he approached Mr. Fletcher. "Then mother won't know I'm buying her a book," he explained. But he was uncertain what to order for Louise. He'd never made a present to a girl before.

The Friday before the great holiday, the papers upset his plans. The store of the *Toy Book* announced that "Santa Claus leaves tomorrow for his home at the North Pole. As a farewell inducement to the children of this city to visit him, he will give a splendid present to each and every girl or boy accompanied by an adult."

The North Pole part was all bosh. John knew that well, thanks to his present sophistication. But the lure of the present set him to thinking. Couldn't he—providing of course that maternal permission was given—go down town and do his shopping Saturday afternoon and wander around the different toy displays to his heart's content? But there was the paper route. Blame the nuisance, anyway!

He sprinted up to see Bill after supper. Would his chum make the deliveries if he gave him a list of the customers? John would be willing to pay a dime for the service.

Silvey assented gladly, for ten-cent pieces were scarcities among the small boy population just before Christmas, when the display of penny and five-cent novelties in the school store window proved so tempting. Thus the difficulty was solved.

Two o'clock the following day found John following the varied shopping crowd through the revolving doors of the biggest department store. Inside, the aisles were packed with a jostling, slowly moving throng. Fat, breathless hausfraus rubbed elbows with high-cheeked, almond-eyed Slav maidens, and tired office clerks took advantage of the half holiday to fill their shopping lists. Here, a well-dressed, clear-complexioned lady of leisure examined an expensive knickknack, there an Irish mother led her brood to the throng around the elevators that they might see Santa Claus. But they were all filled with a desire to buy, buy, buy, in the name of the Christmas Spirit, and buyers and department heads rubbed their hands gleefully as they watched the overworked clerks. John fought his way to the nearest floorman, a white-haired veteran of many such rush seasons.

"Where's the neckties?" he asked. That employee looked down at him wearily. "Next to the last aisle—to your right."

Past the silverware counter, past the women's gloves, past innumerable little booths with high-priced holiday trinkets, and past the fountain-pen display—at last the long, oval counter came in sight. Eager purchasers stood two and three deep around the spaces where goods were on display. Clerks hurried back and forth in response to the calls of the wrapping girls, and change carriers popped unceasingly from the pneumatic tubes. John plied his elbows vigorously and worked his way through the thickest of the crowd. Above him, hands grabbed feverishly at the tangled heap of ties on the counter top, while querulous voices requested instant attention from the sales force.

One of the four-in-hands dropped over the edge. The boy seized upon it, fingered it, and threw the bit of goods back in the heap. Poor stuff that, even at a quarter. His mother's frequent dissertations upon silk samples which she had brought home had taught him that much. He waved a frantic hand to attract attention until a tall, spectacled clerk took pity on him.

"Let's see a tie, a real one! Don't care if I have to pay a whole half-dollar for it!"

"What color?"

John's lower lip drooped. He hadn't noticed his father's taste in neckwear. "Red," he hazarded at last.

A crimson horror was thrust in front of him. Yellow cross-stripes clamored against the fiery background. The clerk twisted it deftly around his forefinger and, behold, it was made up as if in the paternal collar.

"Like it?"

John nodded and brought out a fifty-cent piece which he had forced from the pig bank that morning. A moment later, the wrapped holly box was given him, and he was off in the direction of the book department.

Still the crowds! They choked the aisles and carried him here and there at the mercy of their eddies. Now he was forced up against a wooden counter edge, now jammed against two fat women in rusty black who were buying devotional books for the edification of less pious friends. At last a sign, "Popular copyrights, fifty cents a volume," gave impetus to his hitherto haphazard course.

The poorly dressed salesgirl behind the counter smiled down at him in a manner which successive ten o'clock sessions had failed to eradicate. "What kind?" she asked.

His gaze wandered helplessly over the bewildering array of volumes.

"Here's something everyone's reading," she suggested, holding up an inane, pretty-girl covered book. He eyed it dubiously and pointed to a title which hinted of the West and of Indian fights.

"Give me that one," he said decisively. His own love affair had proven that heroes and heroines in every day life never have the easy sailing which a limited reading of popular novels had implied. Anyway, cowboy stories were the most exciting.

With the two packages wedged securely under his arm, he battled a way to the elevators. The family shopping was over and the real business of the day, a tour of the toy section and a present for Louise, called him.

"Fifth floor," droned the elevator man. "Toys, dolls, games, Christmas-tree ornaments."

His words became drowned in a sudden babel which made ordinary conversation impossible. A murmur of a thousand voices blended with the rattle of mechanical trains and the tooting of toy horns. Impatient salesmen called "Cash, cash, cash!" at the top of their lungs. Wails arose from hot, disgruntled infants. Now and then a large steam engine in operation at one counter corner, whistled shrilly when mischievous juvenile hands swung back the throttle.

At the far end of the floor, where the carpet and rug department had been shifted for the holiday season, a long line of people were waiting. Heavily clad, perspiring women shifted infants from one arm to the other as they walked patiently along. Poorly clad street loafers sought to idle away their time with a visit to Santa Claus. Tall, slim young women yanked their little brothers into place or besought small sisters to "Hush up, we're nearly there!" And up and down the whole line, a baker's dozen of streets gamins skirmished on the lookout for some adult to whom they might attach themselves for the time being.

Clearly that pointed the way to the little house and the fulfillment of the gift promise.

John worked himself cautiously along the line in spite of cries of, "Cheater, look at him!" from boys with maternal impediments to prevent like maneuvers. When the white, asbestos snow-covered house came in view, John halted discreetly, for, with the goal so near, he could not risk being thrown out of the line for cutting ahead of others.

Slowly the people moved forward until the interior of the room was visible through the little side window. At the far end of a wooden counter, a fat, red-coated Santa Claus passed trinket after trinket into eager juvenile hands, pausing now and then, as childish lips lisped requests for dolls, sleds, or other toys.

On the very threshold, a stocky store employee interposed a hand in front of John.

"Where's your folks?" he demanded.

The boy gasped. That condition of the distribution had been completely forgotten.

"Well?" pressed the inquisitor, a smile about his lips.

He gazed about desperately. Just leaving the room was a buxom German woman in black, with a hat covered with bobbing, blue-green plumes.

"There she is," he pointed. "That's my mother. I got separated from her."

The man removed his arm and chuckled. At least three other urchins had claimed relationship with that self-same lady.

Up to the old saint at last. His ruddy-cheeked mask was softened by perspiration, and there was a droop about his red-clad shoulders which expressed a wish that this, the last day of his sojourn in the city, were already over. John grabbed the cheap pencil box which was handed him. The guardian at the exit was crying, "Keep moving, keep moving," and the lethargic line in obedience carried John beyond the confines of the house to new wonders.

If the Brownie Village forced staid adults to pause and smile appreciatively at the whimsicalities of gnome life, the juveniles halted and dragged and impeded the progress of the procession as each new wonder confronted them.

White-furred little bunnies moved solemnly along at intervals over concealed runways, stopping now and then to bow to the amused audience. Winking, gray-bearded elves bobbed up from behind canvas rocks to wave diminutive hands before popping back to their shelters. One sun-bonneted fellow in patched overalls bent spasmodically over a little wooden wash tub on a hill. Further on, a perpetual clatter drew attention to the rustic forge where a brown-clad smith hammered lustily at a miniature horse shoe. At the end, stood a second brazen-lunged sentry, who like the other, implored the crowd to "Keep moving. Please keep moving."

Out by the toy counters, John found a dirty-faced street gamin in patched knee trousers confronting him. They eyed each other for a moment.

"Going 'round again?" asked John.

The boy nodded. "What'd he give you?"

John displayed his pencil box; the boy, a discordant reed whistle.

"Want to trade?" No sooner offered than accepted. What was the use of a school pencil box anyway?

Again they fell in with the Santa Claus line, hoping devoutly that the sentry would not recognize them. But on the third trip as they nodded toward an unkempt, brown-shawled Italian woman, the clerk bent over.

"Three times and *out*," he whispered as the boys' hearts went pitapat. "See?"

They saw, and went off in search of new pleasures. First they stopped at the mechanical train booth. When the operator of the miniature railroad was engaged, John's new found friend threw over a tiny switch and caused an unlooked for wreck on the line. A floorwalker pounced on them and ordered them away, so they sauntered down the aisle to a crowd which courted investigation.

"Kid lost," explained the street gamin, who possessed an uncanny trick of working his way through a throng. "They're taking him away now."

Along counter after counter, the boys wandered, past the dollar typewriter booth, through the doll carriage aisle, where a little girl tried to carry a vehicle away with her and made things momentarily exciting, and over by the electrical toys, the building blocks, and the sleds.

"Gee," said the dirty-faced boy as they stooped to examine a price tag, "My legs are 'most off me."

John examined his watch. Half past six! And he should have started for home an hour ago. Already his stomach clamored for something to eat. He invested a nickel in peanuts, and the pair devoured them ravenously. Then John wiped the last traces of salt from the corners of his mouth, said good-bye, and fled for the elevator. It would be nearly eight when he arrived and mother might be anxious over this trip—his first alone—to town.

He passed through the revolving doors for the second time that day and stopped short in the brilliantly lighted street. He'd forgotten about Louise! But perhaps some one would make a purchase for him later.

He passed a store with a red auction flag waving in the doorway. In the window was a tempting array of cheap jewelry, watches, and holiday goods. Surely there must be something that would be suitable for his lady.

The room was filled with tobacco smoke and the odor of unwashed humanity, for chilled vagrants helped to swell the throng which gathered around the raucous-voiced auctioneer. As John entered, that worthy lifted a glistening object in a green plush case high in the air that all might see it.

"This lady's watch has been asked for, gentlemen. Sixteen jewels in its movement and a solid gold-filled twenty-year case—and fit for any lady in the land to wear. Will somebody start bidding?"

John fumbled in his pocket and took inventory of the remains of the two dollars which had been filched from the pig bank. Presents for his mother and father had depleted the sum by half, peanuts had cost a nickel, and carfare, including the return trip, would account for another dime.

"How much am I offered, gentlemen," persisted the man behind the glass counter. "How much am I offered?"

There was no response. He passed the timepiece to a man in the front row and requested that he examine it carefully.

"Isn't it a beauty?" He raised the watch in the air again. "Now, will some one please bid?"

"Eighty-five cents," called John. Subdued laughter arose as the auctioneer bowed elaborately. "I thank you. This gentleman knows a good thing when he sees it. Eighty-five, eighty-five, a dollar and a half, a dollar and a half, two dollars, two dollars, two dollars—"

The boy lost interest in the proceedings. What was the use of wishing that you might give such a trinket to your lady love if you hadn't the money to pay for it?

There were books, but Louise was not over fond of reading; ash trays, atrocious Japanese vases with wart-like protuberances on their sides, and cut-glass dishes—each in its turn went to some fortunate, or unfortunate, who outbid John's modest offer.

At last the auctioneer rummaged among the conglomeration of articles on the counter below him and brought forth a little china dish.

"I have here," he began, "a hand-painted china vanity box. Think of it, gentlemen, these dainty violets are hand painted, and the top is solid gold-filled. Inside is a soft, dainty, powder puff. How much am I offered for this beautiful trinket. An ideal gift for wife, sister, or sweetheart. How much am I offered?"

A man in a far corner of the room bid a quarter. The auctioneer looked pained. "Only a quarter bid? Gentlemen, it's a shame. The time taken to decorate it was worth more than that. Only a quarter bid? That gentleman must be married. Is that all he thinks of his wife?"

The gathering tittered derisively. Came a bid of forty cents as a reward for his efforts.

"Forty cents," the droning voice went on. "Forty cents—forty—forty, fifty cents, I thank you—fifty cents, fifty cents, fifty-five, fifty-five, going at fifty-five, fifty-five, better than nothing, fifty-five—"

"EIGHTY-FIVE!" shouted John.

"Sold," concluded the auctioneer. "Sold to our friend here at eighty-five cents. Will the lucky purchaser step up to the cashier?"

With the precious package safely in his pocket, the boy darted for the car line. Another hour had elapsed, and he dreaded the "penny lecture" which must be awaiting him on his arrival.

But inside the street car, though the air was stifling, and large, heedless grown-ups crushed him with each jolt of the uneven roadbed, his spirits rose buoyantly.

His holiday shopping was concluded. Christmas was less than a week away, and he had a vision of a beautifully hand-painted vanity box with a glistening solid gold-filled top greeting him from Louise's chiffonier when his thousand dollars had been achieved and the age of twenty-one reached which allowed him the independence of marriage.

CHAPTER XI

HE HAS A VERY HAPPY CHRISTMAS

Christmas Eve! Home to a six-o'clock supper after the daily paper distribution was finished, and then to bed, "'Cause going to bed early makes Christmas come sooner, Mother!"

On the back porch, the tree, a big, bushy-branched fir, lay waiting to be carried into the front hall. The lower floor was filled with mysterious packages, so disguised by bulky wrappings that their contents could not even be surmised, and all over the house, from the attic where the tree decorations were stored, to the holly-trimmed parlor hovered an air of holiday expectancy.

He loved that thrill, did John. Earlier, the possibilities which Santa's visit held furnished it to him, for who was to know which of the many needs that personage would see fit to satisfy? And the very Christmas after he had exposed the old fellow as a delightful, kindly fraud, he had sheepishly asked his parents to decorate the tree and arrange the gifts as before, "'Cause being surprised is the best part of Christmas."

That night when he had caught Santa! The memory of it brought a retrospective smile to his lips, in spite of the shivers which the chilled bed sheets sent through his warm little body. Awakened by a noise below, he had drawn the old bathrobe about him as protection from the frosty air, and tiptoed into the dark hallway. Well around the stair landing, a scene met his eyes!

There stood the tree, wedged firmly into the soapbox support with flat irons around the base for ballast. In one corner of the room, a Noah's ark, which later came to an untimely end on a mud-puddle cruise, had spilled its assortment of cardboard animals out on the carpet. Near the doorway lay a red fireman's suit, and in the dining-room, bending over the candy-filled cornucopias on the table were his father and mother.

"W-where's Santa Claus?" he had stammered, not grasping the situation at first. A sharp, gasping breath of surprise came from his mother as his father broke into chagrined laughter.

"I guess you've found him, son," had been the reply. And that was the end of Santa Claus.

A few moments later, a long, empty freight train rattled cityward unnoticed, as John's regular breathing told off, faithfully as any timepiece, the fast lessening minutes which stood between him and Christmas Day.

He wakened with a start. The late, gray dawn of winter was peering in between the window shades and the sashes, casting hesitant shadows about the room. He rubbed his eyes sleepily for a moment, then, remembering, sprang to his feet and opened the blinds.

A dun railroad embankment lay before him, with lighter streaks which told where the shining rails lay. Over on the boulevards, the arc lights twinkled sleepily, their long night vigil nearly finished. The barren tree tops which skirted the park, made a lace work against the frosty, winter's sky, and here and there, chance rays of light threw piles of rubbish in the big lot into unlovely relief. The same kindly, grimy, disorderly neighborhood of the day before and the year before, and yet the spirit of Christmas cast a halo over the whole and beautified it in the boy's eyes.

"It's Christmas, it's Christmas," he repeated over and over again as he drew on his clothes.

Then for a tiptoed scamper down the stairs for a view of the surprises which were awaiting him in the hall below.

A scent of pine, reminiscent of the sweet-scented Michigan forests, made him sniff eagerly. There towered the tree on the spot where its predecessors had stood in front of the fireplace, so tall that the tip barely missed the ceiling. Gleaming spheres caught the light from the stair window in brilliant contrast with the dark, needled depths. Cornucopias, candy laden, weighted the boughs.

Sugar chains made symmetrical festoons of beads as they looped down from the upper branches, and innumerable candles stood stiffly in their holders, waiting for the taper in his father's hand to bring them to life.

Underneath the tree lay his presents. Not so many, perhaps, oh, sons of richer parents, as you may have had, but John's eyes grew wider and wider with delight as each object greeted him.

There lay the sled, long, low and scarlet, not as ornate as the expensive "Black Beauty," for which he had longed, but quite as serviceable. At the terminal of a railway system which encircled the tree base, stood a queer, foreign mechanical engine, with an abbreviated passenger car, and on a corner of the sheet which was to protect the carpet from candle drip, was a dry battery and diminutive electric motor. Then there were books—Optics, The Rover Boys, and others of their ilk—which would furnish recreation for months to come, regardless of his rapid reading.

Of course he turned the switch and listened to the hum of the little motor until the battery threatened to be exhausted; of course the railway was put into immediate and repeated operation, regardless of the noise which might awaken his parents. And he stood up, at least three times, sled pressed tightly against his chest, and made imaginary dashes down the park toboggan, outspeeding even the long bobsleds as the ice flew beneath him. Then he glanced at the title pages of the books again and even read a page or two from each opening chapter that he might know which would have the honor of being chosen for first consumption by his hungry mind. Finally, he stretched out on his back beneath the tree and gazed upward, watching each glistening detail in utter content.

Voices upstairs told John that his parents had wakened at last. Up the winding flight as fast as his little legs could carry him, and into the big south room with a cry of, "Oh, Mother! Mother! Daddy! it's just fine!"

"Happy, son?" asked his mother as he snuggled down beside her on the bed.

He nodded. Happy? Who wouldn't be with all those treasures in his possession? Mr. Fletcher chuckled.

"There's a box on your mother's bureau which we forgot to put under the tree," he said. "You can open it here if you wish."

The boy was up and back in a trice, this time to his father's bed, where he sat and tugged at the pink string fastenings until a set of doll's dishes came in sight.

"That's in answer to that list of yours," he was told. "Think those will do for your flat, son?"

"Louise'll like 'em," he smiled unabashed. "I'll give 'em to her with my other present."

More chuckles, more smiles, and more laughter. What matter if all else in the world went wrong, if the Spirit of Christmas reigned supreme in that family for the day?

"What did you see in the parlor, John?" asked his father.

"Something in the parlor?" The boy was on his feet again. "Where?"

"Wait a minute until I get my bathrobe and I'll go with you."

A little later, the two descended the stairway, hand in hand. John's gaze followed his father's pointing finger as they stood on the parlor threshold. In front of the dead grate, was a three foot, denim-covered, cabinet. From the square opening at the top hung half a dozen or so of limp, dangling figures.

"Punch and Judy!" John could scarcely believe his eyes. "Oh, Daddy! Daddy!"

In a moment, Punch was on his right hand and Judy on his left as he wiggled his fingers back and forth to see if they worked as did the showman's at Neighborhood Hall. Judy bobbed up on the stage as his father beamed down at him.

"Mr. Punch, Mr. Punch," she called. But her voice had neither the range nor the strength which Judy demanded to be successful, and he drew the marionettes off his fingers.

"Here," he said to his father, "you work 'em. Mine don't act right."

Nothing loath, Mr. Fletcher stretched himself out on the floor behind the little cabinet. John shifted to the front and watched eagerly with his head resting on his hands.

What a Punch and Judy show it was that ensued! Mr. Fletcher, drawing on his fertile imagination, invented a new set of domestic quarrels for the unhappy couple, brought in a doctor and a clown, (two lifelike dolls which supplemented the original, limited performers), and kept John shrieking with laughter until the ruddy-faced little devil brought the performance to a close in the time-honored way. Subdued laughter in the doorway made them both look up with a start. There stood Mrs. Fletcher, fully dressed, with a smile on her face.

"John senior," she ordered with mock severity, "go upstairs and dress yourself for breakfast immediately. I do believe you're the biggest boy of the two in spite of your age."

After the morning meal had been eaten, John devoured the contents of a candy-filled cornucopia from the tree, and drew on his stocking cap, coat, and mittens. Louise's presents were to be

delivered, and that was a matter which brooked no unseemly delay.

Mrs. Martin's sister answered his ring at the apartment.

"Louise home?" he inquired eagerly.

Her aunt explained that Louise had gone out of town with her mother for a three-day Christmas visit.

"She'll be back, the day after tomorrow," she consoled him.

So he left the presents in her charge with instructions to give them to his lady on the very moment of her arrival, and scampered down the carpeted stairway again.

Sid DuPree met him in front of his house. John surveyed him warily.

"'Lo!"

"'Lo!"

"What'd your folks give you?"

"Oh, lots of things. What'd you get?"

Sid stopped a moment to recount his various gifts, lest one of them be omitted in the effort to impress his neighbor.

"'Nother football," he boasted. "Cost five dollars, it did."

"I got a railway with forty-'leven pieces of track."

"My uncle sent me a peachy pair of boxing gloves," Sid continued.

"Just wait till you see what my uncle sends me. Always comes in the mail, it does, but it hasn't come yet. Besides, I got a new sled."

"And I've got a punching bag."

"But you ought to see my 'lectric motor," retorted John, still undaunted. "You just wait till you see the toys I make for it to run."

Sid had saved his last and most cherished possession until the last. "My mother, she gave me a real gun, a Winchester. It'll shoot across the lake, it shoots so far. I'm going hunting with it on the ranch, next summer."

"That's all right." John was not in the least nonplussed. "But the cops won't let you shoot it in the city, and you've got to wait until spring comes before you can use it. I can go home and have all sorts of fun with *all* my things, *now*."

Silvey and Perry sauntered up.

"'Lo!" came the inevitable greeting.

"'Lo!" came the inevitable reply.

"What did you get for Christmas?" asked Perry.

John allied himself instantly with Sid in the effort to outboast the new arrivals.

"Sid's got a sure enough gun," he said impressively. "Bigger'n I am."

"And John's got an electric motor," chimed in Sid as John finished. "He's going to hitch it on his his new sled with a pair of oars, and go rowing over the snow when snow comes. My, but it's strong!"

"We've got a Christmas tree," spoke up Silvey.

"So've we," said John.

"So've we," Perry added.

"But mine's bigger'n any of yours," Bill insisted. "It's so big, we most had to cut a hole in the ceiling to set it up. And wide? It's so wide I can hardly get in the room with it."

"'Tain't," exclaimed John incredulously. "Nothing can be bigger'n ours."

"Come and see," was Silvey's unanswerable retort. So the quartette trooped up the street to "come and see."

On their way, they passed the postman, struggling under his load of Christmas packages. Not only was his leather sack packed to overflowing with mail, but a little cart which he dragged behind him on the walk also held its quota of letters and gifts.

"Merry Christmas!" the boys called to him. He was a genial soul, not in the least like the evil-tempered crank who had held the route the year before.

He smiled back at them, for he had just been given a seventh necktie which a family had decided

was too hideous to be worn by the original recipient, and was in high spirits.

"Any mail for us?" came the chorus of inquiry.

He fingered the mail in his sack. "Here you are, young Fletcher! Catch!"

"From my aunt," announced John proudly as he looked at the postmark. "She always sends me jim-dandy things for Christmas." He ripped the protecting envelope away and stared in amazement at the two white-crocheted squares in his hand.

"Washrags, washrags!" jeered the boys. For once, Aunt Clara had followed the haphazard suggestion at the end of his letter and had sent something useful.

"Washrags, washrags."

He jammed the offending gifts into his pocket, and sought to change the subject.

"Come on, Silvey, let's see that big tree of yours." So they stamped up the Silvey front steps and into the house.

"There," said Bill, pointing proudly at the family fir.

John gave one disgusted glance. "That? Why that's set on a little table! Wouldn't come near the ceiling if it was on the floor. Come down to my house and I'll show you a *real* tree."

They left the Silvey house noisily.

"Beat you down to John's," Perry shouted as they stood on the front walk. Away they went, puffing like little steam engines, in the cold air. A moment later, they stood admiringly in the Fletcher hall.

"Now, isn't our tree bigger'n yours?"

Silvey admitted that it was, thus adding the final restoring touches to John's complacency. Then they staged an impromptu Punch and Judy show and played with the other toys until Mrs. Fletcher, beaming in spite of perspiration, came into the room.

"The turkey's most done, John, so the boys had better go home now. They can come back at five to see the tree lighted, if they wish."

Would they care to? You just bet they would!

The front door slammed behind them, and John went out to the kitchen to nibble at bits of celery, sample the cranberry sauce, and in other ways annoy his busy mother until she turned on him despairingly.

"For heaven's sake, John, go into the parlor and read one of your new books until dinner's ready if you can't be quiet."

By five in the afternoon, he was so thoroughly surfeited with the season's delights, that he had barely enough energy to stand in the window and peer into the lighted area around the street

lamp as he watched for his guests; for to bountiful helpings of turkey, potatoes, cranberry sauce, dressing, and a quarter of one of his mother's delicious plum puddings had been added cornucopia after cornucopia of candy, until his stomach, for once in his life, caused misgivings as to its food capacity.

Perry Alford came punctual to the minute, and shortly thereafter Red Brown, Sid DuPree, Silvey, and Skinny Mosher. Mrs. Fletcher had made use of her telephone to make the gathering a little more of a party for John than he had anticipated.

Another display of the presents followed, while his father and mother stood in the parlor doorway and beamed down upon the youngsters. When the excitement had died away somewhat, Silvey spoke up.

"Let's have a Punch and Judy show now, fellows."

"Come on, dad," added John. "You can do it best."

So for the second time that day, the room formed the theater for that ancient, comic tragedy. But as the devil popped up on the shaky little stage to make an end to Punch, there came a cry of protest from the audience who were squatting breathlessly on the floor.

"Oh, not yet, not yet. Please, not yet."

So Punch triumphed in his fight with the little red-faced imp, and the play went forward through a new and altogether delightful chapter of the Punch family's existence. Amid the laughter which followed its conclusion, John disappeared silently and came back into the room with a box of tapers.

"Now, daddy, light the tree."

Nothing loath, Mr. Fletcher obeyed. Candle after candle on the tinselled branches sprang into life until the fir stood in a flickering blaze of glory while the boys stood back and watched with a feeling akin to awe at the beauty of it. At a propitious moment, he reached carefully between the waving lights and brought out snap crackers and little tin horns from the branches. There was one of a kind for each excited guest.

"Wish there were girls," said Perry to Red, as they tugged at their respective ends of a snapper. "Then it's more fun. They always act 'fraid cat, and scream when it goes off." He unrolled the little cylinder of paper which had been concealed in the foil wrapping. "My hat's pink. What's yours?"

Cornucopias came next, four to a boy. They donned their hats, and munched candy after candy silently while the candles burned low. At last Mr. Fletcher clapped his hands.

"Form in line and march into the dining-room and back by the tree, five times, and blow hard as you can on your horns!"

The procession started. Passers-by on the sidewalk stopped and looked in through the lighted window to see the cause of the disturbance. A flame sputtered as it burned perilously near a resinous twig.

"Halt!" called Mr. Fletcher. "Everybody blow!"

The lower flames vanished two and three at a time. Those higher up followed more slowly. At last but one flickering beacon at the top of the tree remained to defy all the boys' efforts. John's father watched in amusement, then gathered him up in his arms.

"Now, hard!" And the last candle went out.

Mrs. Fletcher suggested "Hot potatoes," and the minutes sped joyously past until the telephone rang.

"Tell Perry to come home for supper," was the message. That youngster slipped on his overcoat sulkily.

"Wish'd there wasn't any old telephones," he snapped as he opened the door.

His departure was a signal for a lull in the festivities. Mrs. DuPree sent a servant over for Sid, and the other boys followed shortly, leaving the family to watch in the darkness beside the parlor grate. Mrs. Fletcher broke the silence.

"It's been a beautiful Christmas," she said softly. "A beautiful Christmas."

John nodded contentedly from his father's knee. Again, the only sound to be heard in the room was the soft whick-whicker of the burning coal as the flames licked the chimney breast, or the occasional rustle of falling ash. Suddenly footsteps pounded up on the porch and the bell rang loudly. John opened the door, and Silvey came panting into the hallway with skates in one eager hand.

"Come on over to the lagoon with me," he shouted breathlessly. John looked at his mother.

"How about your supper?"

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. Hadn't he eaten enough candy for a dozen suppers?

"Please let me go, Mother," he concluded. "Please. It's Christmas!"

There was no resisting such a plea. He flew upstairs to resurrect his last year's skates from the attic, and was back in a moment for his mittens and stocking cap. The door slammed as the two dogtrotted it down the street. At the corner, John slackened speed.

"Are you sure there's skating, Bill?" he asked. Never, so far back as he could remember, had the ice been in condition for the sport by December.

Silvey nodded emphatically. "Saw six fellows go by the house with skates on their shoulders. So I asked 'em."

They left the park gravel path, now flanked on either side by leafless shrubbery, and struck out over the hard macadam of the road. As they reached the board walk leading to the warming house on the boat landing, John strained his eyes eagerly ahead.

"There is, oh, there is," he cried as the long tile roof by the boat house came in sight. "I can see 'em."

They spurted and pulled up at the skating house doors. A moment later they were in the crowded, brightly lighted interior. Directly beneath the apex of the roof, ran a lunch counter which divided the place into a section for men, and another for women, escorted or not, as the case might be. Long, wooden benches ran along each wall, all filled with a constantly shifting occupancy. John seized the first available seat and drew on his skates. A stamping on the hacked, wooden floor to make sure that the steel runners were locked firmly, a wobbly interval as he stepped out and sought control of his ankles, a momentary pause on the steps, and he was out on the ice, with Silvey following. They executed a few maneuvers and sat down on the boat landing.

"Ice is great," said Bill, as he tightened a skate strap. "Doesn't it feel funny, though?"

John nodded and stood up again. "Beat you around the island," he challenged.

No sooner said than they were off. Silvey's new skates cut the ice cleanly at every stroke, while his chum's duller pair skidded and slid now and then as he gained headway. Along the narrowing, west pond, past helpless beginners whose efforts not to appear ridiculous made them doubly so, past staid business men, past arm-linked couples from the university dormitories, and out on the thirty-foot path of scraped ice which encircled the island. There Silvey slowed up.

"Getting bumpy," he cautioned. "Watch out!"

The warning came too late. John's skate sank to his shoe sole in a crack and sent him sprawling. He stood up shakily and rubbed a bruised knee.

"First fall, first fall," yelled Bill as he turned back. "Hurt much?"

John shook his head and started off again bravely. They got into the swing of it as they swept under the second island bridge and out on the last lap of the course. Faster and faster their legs flew over the ice as they dodged cracks with more certainty. Skater after skater was left behind, often by a hair's-breadth margin of safety which evoked half-heard protests as they skimmed on.

"Almost there," shouted Bill as he increased his efforts to the utmost.

"Tie," yelled John as he shot over and grabbed an arch of the northern bridge to stop his momentum. "Look at the crowd. What's happened?"

They skated slowly over and around until they found a thin space in the human circle which allowed them a view of proceedings.

"Fancy skaters," whispered Bill. "Look at him write his name on the ice."

"And the medals on his sweater. Gee, don't you wish you were him?"

A voice broke in on them.

"Scatter there, scatter." The policeman forced his way to the center. "You're blocking the way to the skating house. Keep moving!"

In obedience to the majesty of the law, the boys skated off and found a secluded, smooth bit of ice nearer shore. There, John tried to cut a shaky "J" on the ice and fell over backwards. Shortly afterward, Silvey met with a similar fate, and the boys looked at each other despondently. Both pairs of ankles were aching badly from the unaccustomed exercise, but neither wanted to admit it. Silvey loosened one of his skate straps.

"Got your watch, John?"

It showed a quarter past nine. "Our mothers'll be waiting for us," he said. Thus a way to honorable retreat was found.

They stamped stiffly back to the warming house and took off their skates. John held his numbed fingers as near to the glowing coal stove in the center of the room as he dared, while Bill studied the age-stained menu over the lunch counter.

"My treat," he said, as he drew a bright half-dollar from his pocket. "What'll you have?"

John ordered his favorite, mince pie; his host, a cut of half-baked apple. They washed the food down with a glass of cider apiece, and stumbled out on the board walk toward home.

"Feel's funny, walking after you've had skates on," John commented as they trudged along the dark path. Silvey spoke up, "Say, John."

"Yes?"

"You know Sid DuPree?"

He nodded.

"Well, he's trying to cut you out with Louise. Saw her in the corner drug store with him, drinking ice cream sodas."

John's foot caught in a piece of loosened turf at the edge of the gravel walk. Otherwise, he gave no sign that he had heard.

"Aren't mad because I told you, are you?"

"No."

His paper route had kept him too busy to give the attention due her, but if Louise were inclined to succumb to the blandishments of ten-cent sodas at a drug store, he was glad to know it. Such incidents might result in disaster for the great plan if allowed to run unhindered.

"Feel's like a thaw," said Bill, trying to rouse his chum from the revery into which his announcement had plunged him.

Again John nodded. Indeed there was a curious softness in the air. Perhaps the promise of a long skating season was to prove false after all. But he must see Louise, the very moment of her return. Then Sid had better watch out.

He was at his front steps before he realized it.

"Good night," called Silvey, as he turned for home.

"Good night," replied John a trifle wearily. And with the same feeling of morose taciturnity, a strange mood on this of all nights, he undressed and crept into bed.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH THE PATH OF TRUE LOVE DOES NOT RUN SMOOTHLY

But the softness in the Christmas air did not presage a thaw. When Mrs. Fletcher closed the windows in her son's room the following morning, and laid her hand on his motionless shoulder, she awakened him with a greeting of, "Come, son, look out and see what's happened."

Snow! A veil of fine, driving flakes scurried groundward with each gust of wind from the lake and half hid the passenger-laden suburban trains, and the ramshackle dairy buildings across the tracks. Already the cinder-laden railroad embankment was covered with a white mantle, too new as yet to be anything but spotless, which in places had drifted across the rows of rails. Along the street, each smoke-tinged roof and window ledge had a share of the rapidly deepening coverlet which sped from the leaden clouds to mask the gray, unlovely earth.

John drew on his knickerbockers hurriedly. No time for a peep at one of his new books now. Not only was the snow a thing of beauty, but it offered certain revenue if he and Bill appeared with their shovels before competition became too keen. So he appeared in the dining-room with surprising promptness.

"Sick, John?" asked his mother with gentle sarcasm, as he sat down to breakfast.

He shook his head as he gulped down spoonful after spoonful of the steaming oatmeal. Now and then he glanced out of the window at the walks and porches of the street. They were still untouched, but there was need of haste.

"Never mind the potatoes, Mother," he said, as he hurried to the coat closet for his wraps. "I'm going shovelling."

He ran down into the basement and was out and down the street with the wooden shovel over his shoulder before Mrs. Fletcher realized that he had escaped. She hailed him back.

"How about our walk, son?" she asked, as she stood in the doorway.

He shook his head in protest. "I don't get paid for that. Bill and I'll do it when we get through."

"Not much!" There was decision in his mother's tones. "That means it won't be cleaned before noon."

"Aw-w-w, Mother!"

The door closed and put a stop to further parleying. He stood by the lamppost, undecided as to which course to pursue. Should he walk boldly off and take the consequences, or was discretion the better part of valor after all? Still, when a fellow's mother wanted something done, it was useless to try to evade the task, and he was just beginning to realize it.

He set to work. Before long the cheerful scraping of the wooden shovel against the pavement restored his good humor. His face became flushed, and he stopped a moment to pull his stocking cap back from his hot forehead, for the exercise was making his blood circulate rapidly. The long walk which led to the back door could be skipped, and the porch railings left snow-capped as they were, for his aim was to fulfill the barest letter of his orders before Mrs. Fletcher looked out of the window.

Five minutes later, he knocked the snow from his shovel, and sneaked up the street, slipping now and then as his feet struck concealed ice on the walk, and once he fell sideways into a soft drift. As he walked up the Silvey steps, a snowball hit him on the leg, and another sped past his nose. He turned to find Bill on the lawn with a snowball in one hand.

"Surrender," came the call.

John dropped his shovel to the floor and seized a handful of snow.

"Going to fight or get snow jobs with me?" he asked, as he pounded the mass into an uneven sphere.

For an answer, his chum dropped his missile and ran around to the back yard, to reappear with his own shovel. He pointed down the street. Two members of the unemployed were making the snow fly at the DuPree's with an earnestness which boded ill for their youthful competitors.

"Let's try Southern Avenue," said John. "Perhaps there won't be anyone there."

No sooner said than done. But as they rounded the corner, they found that three of the "Jeffersons" had organized an expedition of their own and were cleaning the walk and porch of the house nearest the corner. Their leader motioned to Bill.

"Go on back home, or we'll smash your faces in."

John promptly stuck out his tongue. "They can't fight," he said scornfully, "and two of 'em are 'fraid cats. Let's try the big yellow house, Bill."

With a glance back at the foe, they ran up the steps and rang the bell persistently until a becapped, flustered servant opened the door.

"Ask the missis if she wants the walk cleaned?" said Silvey, who usually handled the negotiations for work.

Scraps of conversation floated down to the boys from the upper regions whence the girl had disappeared with the message. Presently she came to the head of the stairs and called down to them, "How much you want?"

Bill made a mental inventory of the appearance of the grounds as the boys had approached the house. "Quarter," he said promptly.

"Missis, she say 'all right,'" said the maid.

The boys stamped out of the hallway and set to work with a will. Silvey began at one end of the broad veranda floor, while John made the snow fly from the railings and porch posts. Next came the steps, and the walk leading down the lawn.

"This won't take long," said John optimistically.

He stooped to fix a shoelace which had become untied. Silvey yielded to temptation and gave him a shove into the heaped snow, to have him rise angrily and dig the half-thawed slush from between his neck and collar. Then he sprang at his partner and they went sprawling again, but this time, Bill was the underdog. The two boys struggled for a while until John sat heavily on his foe's stomach, and pinioned the resistant arms with his knees. Then the fun began. "Going to be good?"

Silvey looked desperately up at the handful of snow held high above his head.

"Going to be good?"

"Look, here, Fletch—don't you wash my face, don't you—"

"Going to be good?" asked John again.

His answer was a wrench for freedom. Thud, came a soft mass down on Bill's nose and open mouth. He spluttered and rolled over desperately, trying to throw John from his vantage point. The front door creaked, and an alien voice called,

"What's the matter, you boys? Ain't you ever going to get finished?"

They rose sheepishly to find the servant smiling down at them from the doorway.

"Missis says, 'hurry up,'" she cautioned them.

Silvey picked up his shovel and began to make the snow fly industriously. Presently the fit of ardor wore off, and he stared thoughtfully at the long stretch of walk which still remained between the front porch and the back yard.

"How much did I say we'd do this for?" he asked.

"Quarter," said John, as he leaned on his shovel handle.

"Wished I'd made it thirty-five cents!"

Foot by foot, they cleared a path well around by the side of the house. The milkman, the butcher, and the gas inspector had each left heavy footmarks which were difficult to remove and made progress slow. At the rear steps, a huge drift met their gaze, and Silvey stretched his aching arms.

"What'd we say we'd do this for?" he asked again.

"Quarter."

"Wished I'd said *half a dollar*. There's a walk on the other side, too."

No skylarking now. Their muscles ached too much from the exercise to waste their energy in other channels. When the cut through the drift had been made, and the back porch and basement walk freed of the covering, Bill leaned his shovel against a clothes-line post, and surveyed the result of their labors malevolently.

"Next time we do this, John," he snapped emphatically, "we'll charge a whole dollar!"

But the mischief had been done. By the time they had been paid the well-earned quarter, not a house near them offered prospect of employment. And at the far end of the street, the "Jeffersons" were making a last reconnoissance before deserting the neighborhood for more fruitful fields of labor.

"Now see what you did when you shoved me into the snow," said John ruefully.

"Well, you didn't have to wash my face," retorted Bill. Secretly he was not sorry that the work was at an end. "Get your new sled and we'll go hitching. Beat you over to our street."

They dashed up the nearest private walk into a residential back yard, and dropped their shovels over the back fence. John wedged one foot between a telegraph pole and a picket, and drew himself up.

"Come on, Sil."

Silvey braced himself for the spring. A rear window in the house creaked open and a woman's head appeared.

"What are you boys doing?" called the shrill voice. They dropped over into the other yard, and John started to run.

"She's in curl papers," said Bill. "She won't chase us. Let's fix her."

"I'll call the police if you go through again," she persisted as the boys filled their hands with snow. John gave a few finishing pats to his missile.

"How'd you like to have her for a mother?" he asked his chum, as he drew his arm back for the assault.

A projectile broke against the window sash and showered snow fragments upon the untidy hair. A second went a serene way through the opening and dissolved in a blot of hissing water on the kitchen stove. The frame slammed to with a violence which threatened destruction to the window glass, and John grabbed his shovel with an exultant yell.

"Now run like the dickens!"

They parted at the Silveys'. John continued on a dogtrot towards home, and a moment later was pestering Mrs. Fletcher at her work in the kitchen.

"Where's some rope, Mother?"

She looked from the pile of napkins on the ironing board. "What do you want it for, son?"

"My sled."

She walked over to a box behind the kitchen gas range and drew out a three-foot length. "Will this do?"

"No. Got to be lots longer than that."

"You're not going hitching, are you?"

He shook his head dubiously.

"Now, John! There have been little boys killed because wagons ran over them when their ropes broke and they couldn't get out of the way!"

He evaded his mother's eye and sneaked from the house. Silvey was waiting for him impatiently on the front walk.

"Where's the line?" he asked.

"Can't go," complained John. "She won't let me."

"Aw, come on. We'll go over to Southern Avenue and she won't know a thing about it. I'll get you a rope from our house."

His feeble scruples vanished. A five-minute stop at the Silveys sufficed to make the necessary alterations in John's equipment. Bill brought out his own sled, and they started for the corner. In front of the grocery store, they found Pete, the wagon boy, placing the last of the noon orders in his cart.

"Give us a hitch," they begged.

He nodded a cheery consent. "But hurry. These have got to be delivered in time for dinner."

The boys ran the ropes rapidly around the rear axle and jumped on the sleds. A shout, a sudden jerk, and they were off, swinging around the corner on Southern Avenue with a momentum which shot them far to one side. John drew a breath of relief, for it was his first experience at the sport. Bill looked up from between the sled runners and grinned.

Along they sped. The smooth steel slid easily now over the closely packed snow in the wagon ruts, now over bumps which forced involuntary grunts from between their lips. As the horse increased his pace they tightened their grasp on the sled hand-holes.

"Whoa," shouted Pete. The wagon stopped abruptly as he reached back into the body for a package, and the sleds shot under the wagon almost up to the horse's hoofs, before the boys could find a holding place in the hard snow for their toes.

John dragged his sled out, and lay back on it while he waited for Pete to reappear. The sun had pierced the heavy clouds, and dazzled the eyes of the neighborhood with glistening reflections on the white, unsullied lawns and doorsteps. On the more exposed portions of the closely packed house roofs, the melting snow formed long, dagger-like icicles which hung from the eaves, or clustered thickly around drain pipes and gutters. The heel-packed lumps which had defied the

efforts of the wooden shovels to remove them from the cement walks showed dark, water-marked edges under the influence of the warming rays. Near him in the street, a flock of hungry sparrows fought boldly over a bit of vegetable which had fallen from a passing fruit vender's cart, and in the clear, dancing air was a touch of elixir which set his pulses to throbbing.

"Yes," he said, although Silvey had asked no question, "it's just peachy."

"Isn't it?" acquiesced Bill. "And your mother's afraid you'll get hurt, doing it."

The smile vanished. What if Mrs. Fletcher should find out! The joys of the sport, sweeter through their illegality, were not sufficient to prevent a sinking sensation in his stomach at the thought of such a catastrophe.

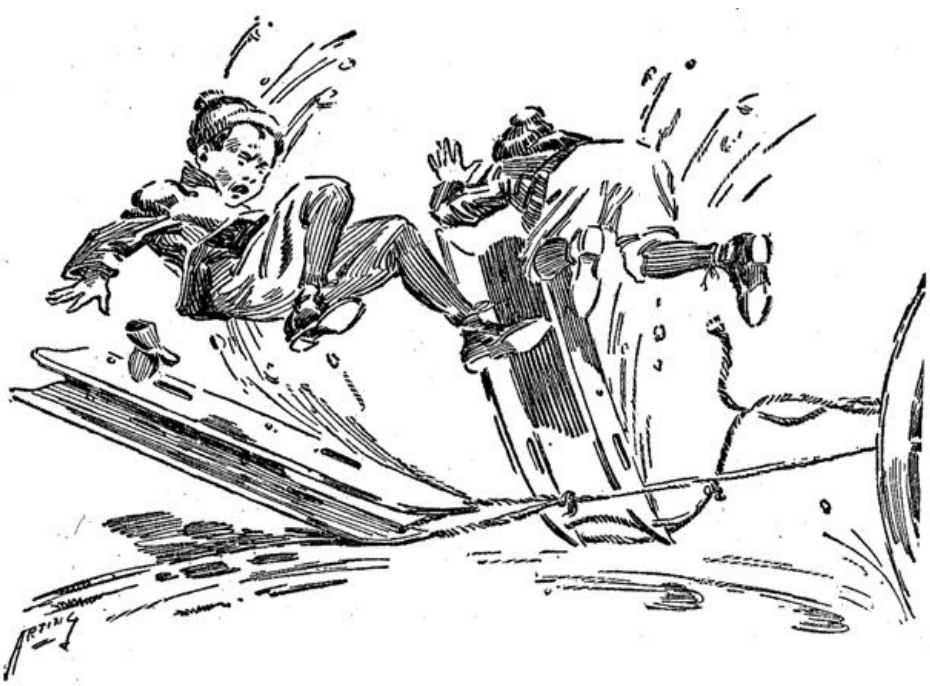
There came a scurry of footsteps on the walk close by him, another caution from Pete and his sled rope tightened again. They drove from one street to another, working ever westward until the gray-stone, red-roofed buildings of the university were behind them. When but a package of steak, bread, or a similar trifle was to be delivered, John or Bill dashed around to the back porch or through a basement flat areaway, while the driver sat and smoked in state on his seat. Thus the arrangement was of mutual benefit to the parties concerned.

At last they halted before a dingy, eight-flat apartment building. Pete carried the last, and heaviest, consignment of edibles in to its owner and returned, a moment later, to stand on the curbing with a kindly smile on his heavy-featured face.

"Now, boys," he said, as he drew his cap down over his ears and forehead until the peak nearly met his black, bushy brows, "hang on tight, and I'll give you a real ride back."

A flick at the ribs of the fat, easy-going horse, and the two sleds were flying homeward. The depressions and hoof marks in the snow flew between the runners at a speed which dizzied their owners. Bits of ice, dislodged by the horse's hoofs, flew up and struck the boys' faces stinging blows. Past the university buildings, past the school which now stood empty and deserted because of the Christmas holidays, past impatient pedestrians on the street corners, and over to Southern Avenue where Pete turned in abruptly to the alley entrance of the grocery store. Silvey screamed a warning as his sled, running straight ahead, felt the tug of the tow rope, and skidded in a wide circle over the rough, uneven snow. John tried to save himself from a similar fate, but he had delayed too long. Straight for a huge snow bank, the two sleds headed, struck the curbing, and capsized with their owners underneath.

John rose shakily with an uncertain smile on his lips. His chum dug some snow from his ears and ran forward to unhitch the sleds. The grocer's clock showed a quarter after twelve, so they started for the home street. As they parted, John held up a detaining hand.



"That quarter," he explained. "Come on back to the drug store and get it changed. I want to put my share in the pig bank."

Silvey drew off one moist mitten, and fumbled in his trouser's pockets with a perplexed frown. Neither was it in his coat, nor in his blouse. Where had it been left?

"S'pose we lost it when we took that spill?"

There was another fruitless search before the boys went back to the grocery corner. There, they raked the snow bank over and over, levelled and reheaped it, and levelled it again before their ardor cooled. At last they were convinced that the coin was hopelessly lost. John turned away moodily.

"Come on," he said. "I'll be getting scolded if I don't get home for dinner." It was hard to lose the proceeds of a morning's work in such a manner.

Mrs. Fletcher was waiting for him when he came into the hallway, stamping his feet lustily to free them from the last lingering traces of snow.

"Where's the brush, Mother?" he asked, as he shook his coat. She brought him the implement and watched him keenly.

"Didn't I forbid you to go hitching, this morning?"

"Who told you?" he asked naïvely, taken aback at the sudden accusation. Mothers had the most mysterious ways of discovering things.

She smiled in spite of herself. "I asked the little Mosher boy where you were and he said he'd seen you riding off behind Anderson's grocery wagon. What do you think I ought to do to such a disobedient little boy?"

He didn't know. But he wished that he might lay hands on that kid brother of Skinny's. He'd teach him a thing or two about holding his tongue.

"You're getting too big to spank," she commented as he stood silently before her. He nodded a cheerful assent to this.

"So I think you'd better stay in the house this afternoon."

"A-w-w-w, Mother!"

She went into the dining-room where the table had been set for the noonday meal for two, and heaped his plate with potatoes and gravy, while he stood looking miserably out of the window.

The sun's rays were melting the surface of the snow and turning it a dirty gray. Up the street, Perry Alford was winging snowballs at a black, leafless trunk opposite his house. That meant good packing, and snow fights, snow men, and a baker's dozen of other exciting amusements.

To be gated on such an afternoon!

"Come, son!" said Mrs. Fletcher, as he turned away with quivering lip, and drew his chair to the table. "Be a man. Mother's right about it, isn't she?"

He admitted that her sentence was but justice, and attacked the dinner with an appetite which no sorrow could diminish. Then he tramped slowly up to his room and threw himself down on his bed with a book to while away the weary stretch of afternoon confronting him.

Straightway the centuries rolled back, and the present day sorrows were forgotten. The times of the good king Alfred held sway as he followed the exploits of the hero against his Danish enemies with breathless interest. Again and again did the young earldorman's well-drilled band sally forth from its stronghold to attack larger bodies of the foe, and again and again did the boy on the bed wish that he was living in those soul-stirring times. Then came the building of the *Dragon*, for war must be waged on the sea as well as by land, and a call of, "Oh, John-e-e-e-e! Oh, John-e-e-e-e!"

He stood up regretfully. One of his legs was cramped from lying motionless so long, and he limped into the front room. Silvey was below on the water-streaked walk.

"Come on out!"

"Can't. She found out about my hitching this morning."

"Aw-w-w, come on. The fellows are building a snow fort in the big lot, and pretty soon, we're going to have a big fight." He reached down, scooped up a handful of the moist snow, and patted it easily into a small, hard ball. "Look, packing's fine. Go down and tease her!"

John shook his head. Mother was inexorable on such occasions, and never had there been a time on record, no matter what the weeping or wailing, when a gating had been lifted. So he would meet his punishment without further ado.

Silvey went disconsolately back towards home, and the prisoner returned to his room and stared from the window which overlooked the railroad tracks. Presently he turned away and rummaged in the bureau in the big south room until he found his mother's opera glasses. A moment or so of adjustment, and he smiled contentedly. If he could not be a participant, he would at least witness the battle.

The construction of the fort was well under way. Long, erratic paths in the snow showed where the three big balls had been rolled which formed the most exposed wall. They were almost as tall as the boys, themselves, and even now Sid and Red Brown and Perry Alford were digging their

heels into the slippery footing as they moved a fourth to its proper place. Mosher, bent almost double, was rolling a new and rapidly increasing sphere over the soft snow. The walls completed, the gang devoted themselves to filling in the crevices, smoothing the surface, and to testing the weak places in the fortress. A few busy minutes were spent in making ammunition, then Sid, his longing for leadership gratified at last, led his army behind the "U" shaped protection. Bill beckoned his followers out of range, and missiles began to fly. John laid the glasses down wistfully.

Shucks! watching only made him want to join worse than ever. The book was better than that!

Dusk came at last, and liberation. As he was returning from the newspaper route, the sight of a familiar figure, in the lighted circle of a street lamp, made him cross over. It was Louise.

"'Lo."

"'Lo."

John paused. It was a difficult thing to lead up to her faithlessness tactfully. She broke the silence.

"Those dishes were dear. But, oh, John, I liked the powder puff jar the best of all!" Which was the truth, for the fact that he thought her old enough for such feminine weapons was a soul-satisfying compliment.

He murmured a perfunctory acknowledgment. "Louise, what's this I've been hearing about you and Sid drinking sodas together at the drug store?"

She stood speechless, thinking of a defense.

"It's got to quit. Do you hear?"

"Why shouldn't I have sodas with him?" his lady broke out vindictively. "You never take me anywhere."

Didn't she understand that all of his playtime was taken up with earning money for her? "But we can go skating tonight," he concluded pacifically.

"That isn't spending money on me. And Sid does, lots and lots of times."

The words hurt. He'd show her that two could play at that game, even if the funds were to be drawn from the pig bank.

"I'll tell you," he shot back recklessly. "We'll go to the theater a week from Saturday. Isn't that better than sodas?" He watched her anxiously for she was most dear to his suddenly constant heart.

She assented eagerly. Nevertheless, it was plain that she still thirsted after the drug store flesh pots. He must interview Sid in the morning, for that catch in her voice was far from reassuring.

CHAPTER XIII

HE CRUSHES AND HUMILIATES A RIVAL

Sid, with new skates glistening at his side, was bound for the park lagoon when John ran across the street and stopped him.

"Come along?" asked Sid amicably. John shook his head.

"I want to talk to you," said he. "Bill says you're trying to cut me out with Louise. It's got to stop."

"What's he know about it?" asked the culprit defiantly.

"And Louise told me you'd taken her up to the drug store."

Sid shrugged his shoulders. "Guess I've a right to. What have you got to say about it?"

"Well," said John slowly, "She's my girl—"

Sid sneered.

"And we're going to get married on the money from the paper route when I grow up and—"

"Pooh!" Sid laughed unpleasantly. "Go ahead and save your money. I don't care. I'm spending mine—on her—and you can't stop me either."

Money, money, money! All he was hearing these days was about spending, not saving it, and Sid's words, as had his lady's, riled him not a little.

"I'm going to take her out, too," he shot back. "Won't be a cheap thing like sodas, either. We're going to the theater, we are, and then she'll promise not to speak to you any more. If she won't, I'll punch your face in, first time I catch you."

"Theater!" said Sid, so impressed that the concluding threat passed unheeded.

"Going to buy the tickets, this afternoon," John boasted. "Main floor seats at the 'Home'—*seventy-five cents each!* Don't you wish you were going?"

Sid's skates slipped from his shoulder into the snow. He picked them up and looked at John uncertainly.

"That'll cost a lot of money, won't it?" he asked.

"Most two dollars," magnificently.

"Let's take her together, then. I'll pay half the carfare and the seats."

John thought a moment. The plan possessed certain advantages. He would be able to observe how Louise acted with Sid, for one; and if he didn't consent, that persistent rival would take her later, anyway, which would be a thousand times worse. Besides, the prospect of two hard-earned dollars being frittered away for an evening's entertainment had been far from pleasing.

"The tickets are for a week from Saturday," he said slowly. "Want me to get you one?"

Sid nodded and dug into his pocket for a handful of Christmas change. He passed over a dollar and twelve cents to John, and left for the lagoon.

Half a dozen times as the street car bounced westward over the uneven track, John decided to tell Sid that, after all, the entertainment was for but two. He would probably spoil all the fun, anyway, and then the evening would be a total failure. He was still undecided when he stepped up to the tawdry box office with its photographs of local theatrical stars.

"How many?" asked the man at the little window.

John drew out a coin from his pocket. Heads, Sid joined them; tails, he should be Louise's sole escort. Heads it was. The fates had willed it; let the outcome be for good or ill.

When he told of the arrangement at the family supper table, that evening, his parents choked.

"I suppose," said Mr. Fletcher, his voice still shaking with laughter, "that you'll sit, one on each side of the lady, and glare because she took the last piece of candy from the other fellow's box."

Candy? Why, of course. The heroine of each of the novels he had read, was always receiving toothsome dainties and showers of roses from her many admirers. But he couldn't afford both methods of expressing his devotion, and candy alone would have to do. This taking your best girl to a show promised to be far more expensive than he had thought.

Need it be said that his shoes were veritable ebony mirrors, that eventful evening? Or that his ears were clean, even to the very recesses under the lobes? And when such a thing occurs, you may be sure that Solomon in all his glory was arrayed no more immaculately than that small boy.

He presented himself promptly at the door of the Martin flat at half-past seven. Louise was in her room while Mrs. Martin added the finishing touches to the party dress which she was wearing in honor of the occasion, so he shoved the two-pound box of dipped caramels, ordered in spite of paternal objections, into his overcoat pocket and sat down in the big parlor rocker to wait.

Shortly thereafter, Sid appeared with a tissue-wrapped bouquet of roses in his hand. "For Louise," he told Mrs. Martin.

John glared at him stolidly, and regretted his choice of candy. It would have taken a little of that confident smile away, if his rival had found himself antedated by a gift of a similar nature.

A quarter of an hour later found them bouncing along over the same car line which John had used on the ticket quest. The conveyance was poorly heated, but the children were too excited to notice the cold. Louise was wearing two of the roses on her frock, and Sid was in high spirits accordingly.

"Ever been out West, Louise?" he asked with a side glance at John. The lady shook her head.

"I was, all last vacation—real ranch, real cowboys. Used to take pony rides every day."

John sketched a caricature on the frosty window pane and sulked in silence. Why didn't his folks make enough money to take him on such summer jaunts? Then he wouldn't have to sit like a dummy and listen to his rival out-talk him with the one girl he cared anything about.

"And walk?" continued Sid, secure in his romancing, now that he knew that neither of his auditors had been beyond the Mississippi. "Why, the air's so fine that you can walk ever so far without feeling tired. Breakfast at the ranch was at seven, and once, I walked twenty miles just to get up an appetite for it."

"That's nothing," John snapped moodily. "I walked thirty miles before breakfast, once, too. It was right here in the city."

"What?" gasped Sid, scarcely believing his ears.

"Yes," assented John cheerfully. "It was in the afternoon before, but that didn't make any difference. It was before breakfast, wastn't it?"

Louise giggled. Sid kicked against the wicker seat cushion in front of him and was silent. John rubbed a clear spot on the frost-etched car window and peered into the outer darkness.

"Next block's ours," he grinned, still elated at the success of his thrust. "Come on, Louise."

They scrambled wildly for the door. Sid was the first in the street and helped the lady down from the high car-step, while John drew the tickets from his coat pocket and led the way to the brilliantly lighted theater lobby. Louise's eyes glistened with excitement as the trio stopped to look at the posters beside the doorway.

"Martha, the Milliner's Girl," Sid read slowly from the huge letters at the top of the bulletin board.

"Peach of a show," John commented, as they walked past the line of people waiting their turn at the box office. "Six folks killed, and shooting and everything. I asked the man when I bought the seats."

A uniformed usher led them impressively to their places and presented them with programs. John stooped over his fiancée and helped her off with her coat as he leered at Sid. That gentleman leaned easily back in the upholstered theater chair.

"Nice seats," he remarked with a touch of condescension. "A little near the stage [the words had been Mrs. DuPree's, once upon a time], but they'll do."

"I like 'em," John snapped angrily. Louise acquiesced. Sid scowled and fell back upon the wild and woolly West as a means of maintaining the conversational upper hand.

"Once I went hunting, last summer"—he began. John glanced at his watch. Ten minutes before the performance would begin; ten long, dragging minutes of Sid's talk about a place of which he knew nothing. Why had he brought his voluble rival along?—"hunting for bear," continued the narrator. "Lots of fun, Louise. One of the cowboys took me with him 'way up a mountain. We went into a big, dark forest with palms—"

"Palms don't grow out West," John interrupted savagely.

"Yes, they do."

"Geogerfy says they don't."

"This was a part the geogerfies don't know anything about," serenely. "Ever been out there?"

"No," reluctantly.

"Then keep quiet. *I have.* Well, there were the palms and—"

Was there to be no respite from the steady flow? John suddenly remembered the candy, and reached for his overcoat.

"Oh," exclaimed Louise, as the white, pink-stringed box was brought forth. Sid stopped, obviously disconcerted. John unwrapped the dainties and threw the paper on the floor.

"Have some?" he asked as he lifted the cover.

The lady's lips closed over a chocolate-covered caramel. Sid's did likewise. John helped himself to a third and leaned back happily. At last a way of silencing his adversary had been found.

Silencing his adversary.

Conversation was temporarily impossible, so the trio gazed eagerly around them. Just ahead, sat a shop girl in a shabby best dress, with a head of blonde, mismatched hair, and beside her, her escort, an Irish mechanic, who shifted his head from time to time as the unaccustomed collar scraped his neck. Across the aisle was a family of towheaded Swedes, the father self-conscious in his carefully pressed black suit; the mother, watchful of her two mischievous, blue-eyed urchins. Young gallants of the neighborhood filled the boxes at either side of the auditorium, taking this, the most expensive, means of proving their devotion to their lady loves. In the rear of the theater were the first and second balconies, occupied by voluble men and women of all ages and nationalities. Ahead, hung the stage curtain, decorated with staring advertisements, "Lamson, the neighborhood undertaker," "Trade at the corner grocery. Vegetables always at the lowest market prices," "Snider's drug store, prescriptions, choice candies, and camera supplies," and the like. From somewhere in the heights came a sharp "rap-rap-rap," which echoed even to the more forward rows on the main floor.

"Gallery," explained John. "Fellow knocks on the back of one of the benches to make the boys behave." His jaws resumed the burden of reducing that persistent caramel to a swallowable state.

The orchestra of five filed solemnly in through the little door beneath the stage and took their accustomed places. A dart, propelled by an urchin of the upper regions who evidently had no fear of the monitor's stick, sailed serenely downward and found a resting place in a blonde lock of the salesgirl's hair. The footlights flashed on, and the musicians struck up a lilting, popular air, as Sid cleared his throat.

"Then the cowboy—" he began.

"Have another?" interrupted John, extending the box of tenacious goodies.

"Sh-h," whispered Louise. "There goes the curtain."

Why Martha had selected the hapless vocation of milliner's apprentice, John could not understand. For it was in Madame's little millinery shop in New York that Mordaunt Merrilac, gentleman by appearance, and leader of a desperate band of counterfeiters, met and became infatuated with the heroine. This he revealed in a soliloquy punctuated by frequent tugging at his black mustache, and strode majestically to the rear of the long, gloomy basement in which the first act was laid. There he joined three overalled mechanics in shirtsleeves, who puttered gingerly about a table on which were mysterious vats and a brightly glowing electric crucible.

"Is all in readiness?" growled Mordaunt.

"Aye, master."

"Into the acid vat with the plate, then." He drew out a jewelled watch and studied the dial with knitted brows. "Ten long minutes before we know of our success."

A muffled scream, long-drawn and filled with terror, broke in upon the silence which followed. Louise, Sid, and John leaned anxiously forward on the very edges of their seats.

"What's that?" gasped the tallest of the workmen.

"'Tis nothing," sneered the villain. "Come, Ralph, draw out the die."

The group gathered anxiously around the bit of metal. Mordaunt scrutinized it carefully, and strode swiftly over to an opposite corner of the stage where an ancient letterpress stood. Running an inked roller over the surface of the etching, he placed it on the bed of the press, revolved the wheel rapidly in one direction, reversed, and drew forth a slip of white paper.

"The face of a twenty-dollar bill to perfection," he exclaimed as he examined the dark oblong at one end. "Men, you may go."

Thus was the intricate process of counterfeiting depicted, and the audience, as audiences did in Shakespeare's time when a sign represented a forest or a tree or a mountain, allowed its imagination to make the thing seem plausible.

Mordaunt raised his voice. "Dolores!" he called, once, twice, thrice.

A tall, lithe creature in dark, clinging robes, with the black hair of all villains and villainesses, responded.

"Yes, brother?" she whined from the head of the basement stairway.

"Bring me Martha."

The ogre had commanded, therefore the maiden was flung down the steps before him—slight, dainty, with a wealth of blonde hair, and a pitiful sob in her voice which drew a lump into John's throat, willy-nilly.

"Let me go, oh, please let me go!" she wailed. Louise's lower lip trembled sympathetically. Such a tender slip of a heroine to be at the mercy of such an unscrupulous monster!

"Still stubborn, Martha?" Mordaunt snarled.

The girl drew herself up proudly. Only her heaving bosom told of the physical struggle which had forced her into the basement den. John could not help marvelling at her recuperative powers.

"Still," she murmured with flashing eye.

"Think it over well," the black mustachioed one persisted. "Am I so odious? Marriage with me means riches, girl, riches. And I would be kind to you."

She shook her head vehemently. "Never, never, never would I marry a man who lives as you. Though you beat me, though you torture me [Louise's eyes welled in spite of herself], never can you force me into such wedlock."

Hasty footsteps sounded at the head of the stairway. Ralph, the etcher, dashed down into the room.

"The police!" he shrieked. "They are about to raid us!"

Merrilac muttered a curse. "Take her away," he growled to his sister of the clinging robes. "Take her to your home by the secret passage." He pressed a button and a panel in the wall swung back. "Ralph and I must remain to destroy the die! Quick, on your life, be quick!"

Would the police come in time? Nay, John and Sid and Louise, not yet. That would have ended the play in the first act. Dolores dragged the heroine away with her. Mordaunt swung the panel back into place and ran over to the table where the counterfeiting apparatus lay.

"Look you to your automatics!" he shouted. "And up with the trapdoor, Ralph. The acid vats must be hidden."

But the police were upon them as he spoke. Revolvers cracked. Jack Harkness, blonde, curly haired, and of magnificent physique, let his firearm drop as he clapped his hand to a suddenly nerveless right arm.

"I'm wounded," he bellowed, "but after them! Let not that arch villain escape!"

A bluecoat sprang forward, halted, and fell flat on his face. Ralph, a heroic sacrifice in spite of his guilt, intercepted a bullet meant for Mordaunt. Then the master counterfeiter, realizing that his cause was hopeless, raised a hand as a token of surrender, and advanced slowly to receive the waiting handcuffs. As the policeman raised his hands to slip them on, he dashed suddenly past to the stairway, and slammed the door behind him. A key squeaked in its little-used lock, and the representatives of the law stared at each other for one dazed, dragging moment.

Suddenly Harkness flung his muscular form against the door again and again until it broke from its hinges. As his subordinates dashed up the stairway in futile pursuit, he dallied in the bullet-marked room that he might walk to the center of the stage and wave his unwounded arm melodramatically.

"I will rescue her," he vowed solemnly. "I will rescue my little Martha though the chase leads to the burning, sand-strewn deserts of Africa!"

There was tumultuous applause and the curtain. Louise leaned back in her seat with shining eyes. John drew a deep breath.

"Isn't it just peachy?"

Sid DuPree nodded. "Makes me think of the way the cowboys used to shoot off their revolvers on the ranch."

"Have another candy," suggested John promptly. Again was the flow of reminiscences successfully checked.

But the author of "Martha, the Milliner's Girl," was too considerate of the welfare of his hero to lead him on an expensive trip to Africa; for that worthy, as are all such stage beings, was poor and otherwise honest. So the second act revealed a richly furnished room in Dolores' apartment, not many miles away from the scene of act one. Martha threw herself on the luxuriously upholstered lounge in a paroxysm of sobs. Dolores entered, still clothed in dark, clinging robes. Entered also Mordaunt Merrilac, as beetling of brow as ever. Perfervid conversation ensued between the trio in which little Martha tearfully ordered the villain to release her.

"My detention here will avail you naught, Mordaunt Merrilac," she quavered. "In spite of all you can do, some day, my hero, Jack Harkness, will find this den and rescue me!" Prolonged handclapping came from the more genteel portion of the audience, mingled with cheers and cat-calls from the gallery.

The villain laughed sardonically. "Still you hope for rescue by him?"

"I do."

"Then wait." He pressed a convenient button. Through the heavily curtained doorway, closely guarded by the two remaining members of the gang, walked Jack Harkness.

"Gee!" gasped John, consternation-struck by this new development. It was evident that the same stupidity which had allowed Merrilac to make his escape in the first act, had led this singularly wooden-headed hero into that villain's trap.

"So, my proud beauty," hissed Mordaunt, "you expect this man to save you? 'Tis futile. At twelve, tonight, we shall plunge him into the Hudson River, and you, Martha, shall see him die!"

Whereupon Martha gave a piercing shriek, swooned, and the curtain fell.

"Crickets!" sighed John, as a prodigious bumping behind the lowered curtain told of scenery that was being shifted, "I wish they'd hurry up." Louise nodded silently, while the box of carmels lay neglected on her lap; and for once during the evening, Sid could find no parallel for such thrilling events in the scenes of his last vacation trip.

Almost before they realized it, the curtain rose again and revealed the hut on the Hudson. In one corner of the dismal interior stood Jack Harkness, bound, but appropriately defiant. In the other, on the floor lay the weak, sobbing little heap that was Martha. In the center stalked a triumphant Mordaunt with his two confederates.

"Jack Harkness," he hissed, "your time has come. Men, throw back the trapdoor." Ah, those ever-present trapdoors!

He walked over to the opening. "The Hudson runs muddy tonight," he murmured, as a shudder ran through the audience, "and very cold. 'Tis well. Drag forth the prisoner and loose his bonds."

He stooped to jerk Martha to her feet. The rude door at the rear sprang open, and the police burst in upon the scene. The two counterfeiters sought for an escape, and Jack, sudden strength returning to his immobile limbs, sprang upon the startled Mordaunt. A terrific struggle ensued, and a tender scene between the two lovers as the police dragged their three captives from the stage.

"At last, little Martha," Harkness murmured as he looked down at her.

"At last," she murmured, gazing shyly into his face. Then came a long, passionate kiss—and the curtain.

Sid sprang to his feet and helped Louise on with her coat, but John, stumbling after them up the aisle and out on the crowded street, neither noticed nor cared. The play triangle of two men and a maid seemed strangely analogous to his own love affairs. Sid was Mordaunt Merrilac, Louise was little Martha, and he was the heroic Jack Harkness. Neither counterfeiters nor police would participate, but that did not diminish the tenseness of the situation, nevertheless. He was roused from his revery by Sid's voice as they came to the street car corner.

"Here's a drug store, Louise. Let's go in and have a soda."

Dreaming again, and Sid had stolen another march on him! He trailed sulkily in and the trio sat down in the little wire-backed chairs before a round, shiny table. The drug clerk came forward ceremoniously and stood beside them.

"My treat," said Sid grandly. "What'll you have, Louise?"

She wasn't certain. A feeling of dull resentment took possession of John. If Sid was going to act this way, he'd make it as costly an affair as possible.

"Chop-suey sundae," he announced, after a hasty glance at the printed menu.

"What?" stammered Sid. Such a delicacy cost a whole quarter, the most expensive treat that the soda fountain purveyed.

"Yes," said John calmly. "Better take one, too, Louise," he added maliciously. "They taste just peachy."

She accepted his suggestion gratefully.

"Give me a glass of water," ordered Sid weakly. It is an awful thing to possess soda liabilities of fifty cents when you have but three dimes and two nickels in your pocket.

John sensed his rival's predicament and smiled. Slowly, with manifest enjoyment in every mouthful, he devoured the tempting, frozen treat. Then he leaned back in his chair contentedly and waited for Louise to finish. The white-coated soda clerk approached the table for payment, and the terror which crept into Sid's face was strangely like that on Mordaunt's when the police had broken into the river hut. He drew out his inadequate supply of small change and looked at it blankly.

"Come, boys," prompted the man of syrups and sodawater, "I can't wait all day."

"I haven't enough money," whispered Sid at last.

John turned, a hint of the stage hero's mannerisms in his dramatic gesture. "What? Invite us for a treat and then can't pay for it? You're a fine one, Sid." He drew a half-dollar from his own pocket and flung it down on the table. "Never mind him," he turned to Louise. "I'll pay your car fare home!"

And with the crushed and humiliated Sid following them miserably, he led the way from the drug store to the waiting car.

CHAPTER XIV

HE BUYS VALENTINES

Sid made one more effort to cope with Miss Martin's suddenly aggressive fiancé. John came upon the couple one late, crisp January afternoon, as he was leaving for the paper route. Louise did her best to appear nonchalant as he picked his way carefully across the slippery, wagon-rutted road, and Sid, after a longing glance toward the iron fence which surrounded the home lot, decided to brazen matters out.

"'Nother chop-suey sundae?" John sneered as he eyed his rival scornfully.

"'Tain't fair, always talking about that," blurted Sid. "How'd I know the money I'd need when I left home?"

John deemed the excuse unworthy of notice, and turned to Louise.

"What's he want this time?"

"Go skating with him," she replied after a moment's hesitation.

"Then ask you to have a treat in the warming house, and let you pay for it 'cause he didn't bring enough money. I'll teach you to skate—tonight if your mother'll let you. Silvey said the ice was fine yesterday, and everything'll be peachy. Want to come?"

What maiden wouldn't? John glanced at his watch. The paper wagon was due in five minutes.

"I've got to run," he said hastily. "See you tonight!" He left on the dogtrot for the corner.

His school books eyed him reproachfully as he hunted for his skate straps after supper. An arithmetic test impended, and he had a composition to write. Nevertheless, he disregarded both tasks serenely and called for his lady. With her skates swinging with his over one shoulder, they started for the park.

"Ever been skating before?" he asked casually as he took hold of her arm that she might pass a slippery bit of walk in safety.

Louise shook her head. "Once a mud puddle froze in front of the house where I used to live, and I got a broom and tried. That's all."

Then, for an instant, John regretted the invitation. To teach an absolute novice, no matter what the age, to skate with a passable degree of security is no light task. But his hesitation vanished, ten minutes later, when he fastened her skates on and helped her through the doorway of the warming house. It is no unpleasant thing for a small boy's best girl to cling to his arm as did his when they walked, oh so cautiously, down the skate-chopped steps from the boat landing.

As they stepped out on the slippery ice, Louise made a last, despairing grab for the step rail.

"You go on and skate, Johnny," she pleaded. "I'll just stay here for a while."

"Shooting the duck."

Nothing loath, he sped off in and out among the swiftly moving, ever changing throng of people. In a moment he shot back to a less crowded space near her, where he "shot the duck," balanced himself first on one foot and then on the other, and finally came to an abrupt halt, leaving a trail of ice shavings in his wake.

"My!" said Louise as he stood beside her, panting a little. "I wish I could do those things."

He beamed. "They're easy. Hang on to my arm and I'll show you. Now, step out with me. One-two, one-two, one-two."

Her ankles bent over until they touched the ice, and her breath came in quick, nervous gasps. Nevertheless, she followed bravely over a scant ten feet of the rink.

"Isn't that easy?"

She nodded with an assurance which she was far from feeling. "My skate strap hurts. The right one. Loosen it, John."

He knelt to make the necessary alteration. As he stood up, one of his lady's feet started off on an unauthorized expedition, and she grabbed him by the arm with a fervency which nearly proved disastrous.

"Don't start again just yet," she begged. "I'm tired."

As they stood there, a pounding, scurrying figure in black, Red Brown, sped past at top speed. Silvey followed closely, noted the situation, and slowed up.

"Leave her in the skating house and come on," he called. "Red's got it and we're having heaps of fun."

Skinny Mosher and Perry Alford came, both in pursuit of the fleet-footed Brown. Sid DuPree, puffing audibly, stopped just out of reach, glad of any pretext to halt long enough to catch his breath.

"Let's see her skate," he sneered, knowing that Louise dared not release her escort for pursuit. "You're a fine teacher, you are. Don't you wish you were with us?"

John's eyes followed him longingly as he skated off. The temptation of Silvey's invitation was great, and with any other maiden, would have proved fatal. But the lure of the rosy dream for the future was still strong. He freed himself gently from her grasp, and was two yards away before she realized what he had done.

"There," he said with satisfaction. "I knew you could stand up. Now, skate to me."

"Aw-w-w, Johnny, come on back. I'm going to fall!"

"No you're not," said John decisively. "Try and you'll see."

Louise essayed one ineffectual stroke and stood helpless. "I t-think you're just horrid," she whimpered.

He grew a trifle impatient. "You'll never learn that way." Why were girls always so afraid to try things, anyway?

She made another halting attempt, reached forward to catch him, and felt herself slipping, then straightened up, leaned too far backwards, and her feet shot suddenly out from under her. Pupil and teacher crashed to the ice. John was the first to recover himself, although the unexpected fall had been a severe one. He stooped over his lady in spite of strangely shaky knees, and found her sobbing, partly from nervous shock and partly from mortification.

"Hurt, Louise?" She sat up angrily and dug her mittened hands into her eyes. He caught a murmur of "Horrid old thing!" and she began to sob. The boy knelt and removed her skates gently.

"Come," he suggested wisely. "We'll go into the warming house and have something to eat. Then you'll feel better. Catch hold of my hand. One, two, three! Up you come."

They sat down on one of the gray, wooden benches which lined the big room. Louise studied the dingy sign on the post by the counter.

"Aren't mad, are you?" he asked anxiously. "I didn't do it on purpose."

The easy tears had dried and she shook her head cheerfully.

"Give me some apple pie," she began. Thus peace was concluded.

When she had drained the last drop of cider from the glass and dropped the pasteboard pie plate on the floor, John kicked it under the seat with his heel and leaned over to her.

"Take some more," he urged. "I'm not Sid DuPree."

Since the disastrous one in late December, there had been two exceedingly prosperous snowfalls to supplement the newspaper revenue, and he had plundered the pig bank for funds for the evening with a clear conscience.

Again Louise eyed the placard. Coffee was for grown-ups, and strictly forbidden at home; therefore she would sample a cup of it. "And a red-hot sandwich and some more apple pie, Johnny."

When she had finished, they started for home. Their feet were still unaccustomed to the difference between walking and skating and they stumbled now and then along the path. As they came to the road, John looked down at her anxiously.

"Have a good time?"

"It was peachy."

"Aren't you glad you didn't go with Sid?"

She nodded.

"Have enough to eat?"

She assented heavily. Strange how the taste of that forbidden coffee lingered in her mouth.

In the morning as Miss Brown called the roll, John gave a quick glance backward along the aisle. His lady was absent. The strangely assorted meal had been too much for her.

But attacks of indigestion rarely last more than a day, and this one proved no hindrance to the series of tri-weekly skating parties, minus refreshments, in which the pair participated. After two weeks of laborious lessons, Louise found that she was able to take a few sure strokes without gulping and calling for masculine aid. The first trip around the rough ice about the island followed, sure test of a beginner's prowess, and, behold! the youthful mentor found the lessons no longer irksome.

As they sauntered home, skates clashing merrily at every step over the arc-lit snow of the park driveway, one starlit February night, Louise broke into a sudden delighted giggle.

"Day after tomorrow's Lincoln's birthday. Aren't you glad?"

Glad? Was ever a schoolboy sorry for an added day of freedom?

"Two days after that's St. Valentine's day. We'll have a box up at school then. What kind of valentines do you like best?" he quizzed in return. "Paper hearts and things with lots of lace on them, or celluloid ones in boxes?"

Louise hesitated for a moment.

"I like," she said finally, "any kind of valentines, but best I like lots and lots of them—more'n anyone else in the room gets. Last year I was third, and in second grade a girl got one more valentine than I did. It was only a comic, but that gave her nine, and I had eight. This year I want to be first!"

It was no small honor which the girl craved. To lead in the valentine distribution is to be acknowledged the belle of the room until the June examinations break up the little, pupil cliques and send their members to the different higher-grade rooms. John resolved that her wish should be fulfilled, but that achievement lay at the end of a path beset with pitfalls. Let rumor make the rounds that he purposed stuffing the box, and others would play at the same game. Witness a girl in an early grade, the homeliest of the room, who begged a dollar from her father and filled the box to overflowing with a hundred penny valentines addressed to herself.

He left for his paper route half an hour earlier, that Lincoln's birthday afternoon, and turned abruptly westward as he reached the corner where the wagon drove up with his nightly bundle. He halted a moment in front of the school store. In the window was the usual display of rubber balls, penny trinkets, and magazines, and beyond them, he could see the deserted interior. As he had foreseen, the holiday had brought the usual lack of juvenile trade, and investment in the valentine market could be made without fear.

He swung the door back. The trip bell rang noisily, and tall, angular Miss Thomas came out from the suite of little rooms in the rear.

"Valentines," said he briefly. She reached a shallow box containing a dozen or so of the little printed love missives to the glassy-topped counter, where he pawed them over with one half-washed hand.

"I want more than these!"

The look of boredom, bred by long months of finicky penny purchasers, vanished. She stooped for one of the packets of fresh stock on the lower shelf. As he broke it open, she readjusted her heavy-rimmed spectacles, and watched his actions with amusement.

Hearts of cardboard with crudely pierced edges of blue forget-me-nots, little square folders bearing pictures of doves, a cottage, an old mill, or a bit of idealistic scenery—he sorted them all. Each appropriate sentiment on the inner leaf, "To one I love," "To my true love," and the like, was read and approved before he shoved the packet away from him.

"Let's see your two-penny ones."

Gorgeously laced, these, with cut-outs in the center to reveal butterflies, arrow-pierced hearts, or Dresden Shepherdesses. He selected three of the gaudy creations.

"The nickel ones—in boxes."

Thus did he aspire to brilliantly-colored celluloid for the crowning jewel of the St. Valentine's sacrifice. He handed the assortment to Miss Thomas with a sheepish grin.

"Envelopes for them, too. How much?"

She counted them with gaunt, practiced fingers.

"Sixteen penny ones, three two-centers, and one at five. Do you want one or two-cent envelopes?"

He gazed at the assortment of paper containers. Monstrosities of hearts, cupids, and entwining fretwork were embossed on each, but save for the intricacy of design, there was little difference between them. He indicated his choice.

"Forty-three cents," said Miss Thomas.

John paid the sum without a tremor and dashed for the door. The selection had taken longer than he had planned and he was afraid he would miss the paper wagon.

That evening was passed in addressing the envelopes at his father's library desk. Five of them were scrawled in a heavy backhand, with the aid of his mother's broad, stub pen, and five more in his normal handwriting. He finished the others in a variety of huge pothooks with blackly crossed "T's" and dotted "I's," and viewed the result of his labors with great satisfaction. Louise would never guess that they had come from the same donor.

Their despatch to the valentine box was the next thing to trouble him. If he deposited so large a number of love tokens in one, or even two installments, it would certainly attract attention. He took Silvey into his confidence.

"Why don't you want Louise to know where they came from?" asked his chum thoughtfully.

"'Cause getting the most valentines in the room won't be half the fun if she knows I sent 'em all."

"Give 'em to me," said Silvey. "I'll put half in, myself, and Red can take the rest."

Promptly at two-thirty, that Fourteenth of February, Miss Brown brought the recitations to a close and laid her little, black record book in the desk drawer, then drew the big, slotted cardboard box toward her and smiled down at the expectant pupils.

"I'll ask you to keep as quiet as possible," she requested. "Otherwise, we may disturb some of the grown-up, eighth-grade classes who are too old for these things."

No need of any such caution. The children were quiet as the proverbial mice as they waited for the first name to be called.

"John Fletcher."

He stumbled to his feet in amazement. Had Louise sent him a valentine? As he opened the envelope, a gaudy caricature of a gentleman with reddened nose, paste-diamond pin, and flowered vest met his eyes. Underneath was a bit of doggerel elaborating certain traits ascribed to "The Rounder." He twisted suddenly in his seat and surprised a smile of exultation on Sid's face.

Just wait until school was over. He'd fix him for that.

"Olga," called Miss Brown with a smile, some moments later.

Flaxen-haired Olga simpered up to receive her missive. The excited buzz of conversation which arose claimed John's attention.

"That makes eight for her."

"But Louise has nine!"

Names of several girls who were popular only in the eyes of their youthful swains followed. The teacher shuffled the remaining valentines hastily.

"Four more for Olga, and three for Louise."

John turned anxiously and encountered a look of placid satisfaction on Olaf's stolid face; that same Olaf who had offered to sell his symptom list for a fifth of the market price.

"Louise Martin, two more."

"*Six* for Olga!"

John leaned tensely forward. He had sent but an even twenty of the gaudy trinkets, and this sudden influx of rival valentines threatened dangerously to pass that number. More envelopes were passed out. From behind him, he caught the excited whisperings of two girls.

"Louise has twenty!"

"And Olga, twenty-one!"

Miss Brown stooped to turn a broad box right side up on her desk.

"The last valentine," she concluded. "Here you are, Louise."

Had Sid sent that? He'd smash his face in if he had. The unexpected addition had saved the day for his sweetheart, but that kid had no business butting in, anyway! Miss Brown watched the buzzing groups of pupils.

"There's just fifteen minutes left before dismissal," she said considerately. "You may spend it in looking at each other's valentines if you wish."

The pupils crowded back to his lady's seat, while he stood on a chair near the wall and craned his neck to see the vision of celluloid and pink and blue ribbon which had come in that last box. She examined the wrappings again, but no identifying mark could be found. As John stepped down, Sid DuPree tried to edge past him, and found his way blocked immediately. Louise looked up at her youthful fiancé.

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny," she smiled delightedly.

"I sent—" began Sid from behind his shoulder. Then was John filled with sudden wrath. He would squelch this persistent rival once and for all.

"You sent it?" he sneered.

"I did," DuPree replied. Louise watched the two eagerly.

"Why that cost all of a quarter. And kids who asks folks to have sundaes and then can't pay for them, don't spend that much for valentines. Cheapskates never do!"

Sid scowled. Before he could make suitable reply, Miss Brown rapped for order and he had to go back to his seat. There, as he squirmed in his seat while waiting for the dismissal bell, he caught John looking at him and stuck out his tongue as a manifestation of his scorn. But that gentleman only grinned. Wrongfully or no, he knew that the credit for the twenty-five cent valentine had been given to him, and he was content to let matters rest as they were.

Valentine's day past, Washington's birthday was the one festive oasis left for the children in the desert of school days. Though the cold weather held marvelously well, little by little the thermometer beside the drug store's door showed rising-temperature levels as John stopped to look at it on the way to school. The long, northern shadows which the houses and apartments cast against the soot-grayed snow were shortening rapidly, and his paper route, so long patrolled in entire or semi-darkness, was now completed just as dusk set in.

Then Miss Brown reached back in her desk drawer for a certain packet of narrow manila envelopes, that last February afternoon, and brought to a certain small boy who occupied the seat just in front of her desk, sudden realization that March was upon the class.

"Please have them signed and returned by Monday," she told the pupils as she distributed them.

John drew the white, finger-marked card from the ragged envelope, and his face went first white and then scarlet as his eye followed the long column of marks. Accusing memories of lessons half done or postponed with a hope that teacher wouldn't call on him, of a skating party with Louise when a geography map should have been outlined, and of arithmetic papers hurriedly done in the half-hour "B" class recitation period, to be returned with a heavily penciled "20" or "30" across their surfaces, arose to annoy him. His teacher spoke again.

"There are one or two boys and girls in the 'A' class who will have to do better next month," John fancied that she was looking squarely at him, "or they'll be sent down into the 'B' division."

That wasn't the worst of the matter. He had to take that testimonial of disgrace *home* to be signed, and duly commented upon, by his mother.

The card reposed safely in his pocket over Saturday, while he pondered now and then upon the least painful method of breaking the news to her. Sunday passed. On Monday morning, as he stood up from the breakfast table, he broke out,

"Mother!"

"Yes, son?"

His courage vanished, and he was unable to go any further.

"What is it?" she asked.

"N-nothing. It was a peachy breakfast." He kissed her nervously and went into the hall for his coat.

"I forgot to bring it," he told Miss Brown that morning school session. At noon, he had the same excuse.

"Well, if it isn't here tomorrow morning, I'll send you home after it," that sophisticated supervisor of juveniles replied. And with this uncomfortable fact ever in his mind, he set out on the afternoon journey with the newspapers.

The weather seemed to have shaped itself for his mood. A curious, raw dampness had crept into the still air, and overhead was a level, sullen expanse of gray vapor. Locomotive smoke showed that the light breeze had shifted suddenly to the south, and there was an indefinable attitude of expectancy about, as if the big city with its varied expanse of buildings and vacant lots and snow-filled parks was waiting for something. As he stamped up the front porch steps and kicked the snow from his shoe soles, a fine, almost invisible drizzle began.

Blame that report card, anyway. Perhaps if he presented it with the "hundred" spelling paper that very day, his mother wouldn't be too severe with him. He'd try that experiment in the morning, anyway.

But upon waking, he stared from his window in delight at the spectacle which the capricious weather had formed for him. The rain had increased as the night passed, and had frozen upon the chilled trees and house roofs. The linden on the Fletcher lawn was coated with fairy lace work, and the denuded lilac bush across the way shone black through its glassy covering. The long expanse of dark, cement walk which flanked each side of the snowy road was coated with ice and made walking for pedestrians a matter of some danger. As he jerked his tie into position, Perry Alford shot past on his skates, and he hurried down to breakfast. He'd have a little of that sport before school, himself.

But as he rose joyously from the table, he stopped short. There was that report card; and he knew that his plans were shattered. Mrs. Fletcher's remarks upon his many deficiencies would consume every minute of the time before school.

"My report," he said briefly. She looked at it.

"John!"

He gazed out of the window in a forlorn effort to appear unconcerned.

"Reading, 'F'," quoted Mrs. Fletcher, "and last month it was 'G'."

He drew out his watch and set the big hand forward ten minutes. If he used a little strategy, he could at least shorten the lecture by that amount of time.

"Arithmetic, 'P'," she went on. "And geography, 'P'. And you told me you had all your lessons done when I gave you permission to go skating those evenings. I'm very much displeased with you."

He grew desperate. When Mrs. Fletcher began to talk about being displeased and grieved, there was trouble ahead. He drew a much-chewed pencil from his coat pocket and handed it to her.

"Hurry and sign, Mother," he begged. "It's school time."

She scribbled a reluctant signature at the bottom and looked at it thoughtfully. "I'll keep this to show to your father this evening."

"I've had it three days already," he blurted. "It's got to go back today."

He snatched the card from her hand, showed his watch as she protested, and fled for his coat. Once at the corner, he stopped running and smiled. The escape had been fairly easy and with a minimum of fuss, and he was immeasurably light-hearted, now that the report card bugaboo was off his mind.

At Southern Avenue, he caught up with Sid, Silvey, and Perry Alford. Bits of ice dropped from the trees to the walk as they sauntered along, and water dripped from the icicles on the eaves of the apartments and stores as the morning rise in temperature began to take effect.

"Feel's as if it's going to thaw," said Silvey as they came to a very slippery stretch of walk. So the quartette slid up and down on the ice as long after the second assembly bell as they dared, and with the fear of tardiness upon them, dashed for the school yard.

His pocket was empty, and his conscience clear, and the morning session passed swiftly for John. At noon, as the long lines filed into the school yard to freedom, he looked about him with delight.

The winter's deposit of snow was melting into little rivulets which trickled merrily along wagon ruts until they came to the street drains. First-graders stopped to splash soggy snowballs into a huge puddle which had collected in the street just beyond the alley, and the drip-drip-drip of the water, from the trees and buildings to the wet, glistening sidewalks was as music to his ears. He broke into a run toward home from pure exuberance of feelings, and halted now and then to fill his lungs with the sunlit, pregnant air which the south wind had brought.

The thought of the continuation of the "penny lecture" which was waiting failed to dampen his spirits, even though it threatened curtailment of his evenings with Louise. For if the skating parties were over, spring with its marbles, tops, and kindred delights had arrived and all sorrow fled before it.

CHAPTER XV

THE SPRING BRINGS BASEBALL

Little by little the snow disappeared. During the first days of the thaw, lethargic city employees chopped paths through the melting ice to the street drains. Bare edges of the cement walks appeared in places, and at night the puddles and pools in the street hollows bore a thin, frozen covering. As the month passed, the crystals became more and more rare, and green areas of grass appeared on the more exposed portions of the neighborhood lawns. The children turned from their sport of sailing sticks and improvised boats down the trickling, artificial brooklets to take part in games of "Run, sheep, run" and "Hide-and-seek" over the rapidly softening turf. A pelting, refreshing rain from the south drove away the last soot-stained vestiges of the snow lying in the protecting shadows between the houses, and presto, Miss Thomas' little store displayed a window stock of agates, catseyes, and common clay marbles to tempt pennies from boyish pockets.

Then, after school, during recess, and for long minutes before the afternoon session, the alley which flanked the school yard was marked with rings of varying dimensions. The air resounded with cries of, "No hudgins," "H'ist," "Your shot," or "You dribbled," as the players contested for prizes of five- and six-for-a-cent clay marbles. Occasionally two of the big eighth-grade boys would draw a six-foot circle in the earth and play for "K'nicks, dime ones," and the game would bring a crowd, three deep, from the neighboring players to applaud or gasp at each shot.

Even John, man of business that he was, could not resist the temptation. The last traces of that autumnal scorn toward "such foolishness" vanished as he became the owner of two shooters and a pocketful of the more common marbles.

The clan spirit among the different boyish cliques at school revived again. Skinny Mosher, who had hugged the warm house during the coldest days of the winter, caught suddenly up with John and Silvey as they frolicked home for dinner, and brought the news that a "Jefferson Tough" had threatened to punch his face in, with no provocation whatsoever. The long-discussed secret code took a new lease on life, and cipher messages passed to the various corners of room ten with a frequency which drove Miss Brown nearly to distraction.

That early April afternoon saw the reunion of the "Tigers" in the Silvey back yard. They viewed the dilapidated, weather-beaten club house with reawakened interest. Quoth John,

"It's awful dirty where the snow worked in through the fence. Let's fix her up." Down into the basement went Bill at the words, and reappeared with an old broom, a hammer, and some nails.

"A lot of the boards are loose," he said, as the boys grabbed the implements.

Sid stood around and offered voluble suggestions, but the others fell to work with a will. At the end of a half-hour the dirt floor was brushed free of debris with a thoroughness never attained on maternal cleaning assignments, and the little desk was dragged from its winter shelter of the house to occupy the customary position of state.

Red Brown stretched out on the springy, alluring sod near the building. John and Sid, Skinny and Silvey, followed his example.

"Isn't this great?" the red-haired one asked blissfully. Sid reverted to the cause for the summons of the clan.

"How about the 'Jeffersons'?" he asked.

Babel reigned instantly. Silvey was for picking them off, one by one. Red counseled a sudden descent in force upon the home haunts of the enemy. A rear window in the Silvey house creaked upward, and a feminine voice pierced the sun-filled air.

"Land's sakes, Bill Silvey, get off that wet ground this minute. You'll catch your death of cold lying there this early in April."

The boy sprang to his feet, while his friends grinned sympathetically.

"And you, John Fletcher," Mrs. Silvey went on, "you needn't laugh. Your mother won't like it a bit better, if I telephone her. She'll call you home in a minute!"

They all rose at this. Truly, modern electrical inventions widen the maternal scope of authority.

"Shucks!" said Skinny, as he brushed some dead grass from his coat. "Now she's spoiled it all. What'll we do?"

John tossed his battered cap high in the air in a sudden access of spirits. "One for scrub," he shouted. "First raps for the first game of scrub. Go home and get your league ball and bat, Sid. I'll bring my first baseman's glove. Silvey'll find his catcher's mitt. Beat you home! Beat you home!"

They were off. Down the cement sidewalk they darted, their quick breaths showing ever so slightly in the crisp air. John stamped up the steps and into the front hall.

"Mother!" he called. "Mother!"

"Yes, son?" came the voice from the big second floor sewing room.

"Where's my baseball glove?" He kicked against the bottom step of the stairway impatiently.

"Did you wipe your feet when you came in?" came the disconcerting inquiry. "I don't want the carpets all over mud."

"Y-yes."

"Go back and wipe them right away. Then come up and tell me what you want."

He gave his offending shoes a half-rub against the fiber mat on the porch, and was up by her side in another moment. She looked up from the basket of ragged stockings she was sorting.

"Now, what is it?"

"My first baseman's glove. The one dad gave me for my birthday. Know where it is?"

"Where did you leave it?"

"Why, don't you know?" His surprise was genuine. Usually his mother picked up his boyish belongings and stored them in a place of safety.

"Is that the glove which laid in the coat closet all last November? the one that I kept telling you to put away before it became lost?"

He nodded. "Please tell me, Mother. The boys are all down at Silvey's, and I've got to get it *quick*!"

Mrs. Fletcher yielded with a smile. "Seems to me I saw it on your closet shelf, the other day."

A moment later, a shout told that her memory had served her rightly. The door slammed, eager feet sprang down the wooden porch steps, and her son dogtrotted north toward his chum's, as fast as his legs could carry him.

When he arrived, Silvey scaled the stout wire fence on the railroad property, and hunted three white stones of fair and flat proportions.

"Here's your bases," he called as he heaved the objects into the yard with a recklessness which threatened destruction to the turf. "Johnny was first at bat, wasn't he?"

They took their positions in the order of the numbers which they had called earlier. Silvey stood behind the home plate, Sid DuPree was in the pitcher's box, Red played first base, and Skinny Mosher stood near the fence to cover the outfield, second, and third as best he could. Sid ground the ball into the heel of his heavily padded mitt, as he had seen professional pitchers do, bent forward, and threw the ball over Silvey's head against the back wall of the house. "Ya-ah," taunted John as the catcher scrambled for the ball. "'Fraid to put 'em near me. 'Fraid to put 'em near me."

Again a window creaked, and again a maternal voice showed that attention had been drawn to the "Tigers" latest recreation.

"What *are* you boys trying to do?" fretfully. "Don't you know this house has windows in it?"

"Go easy," cautioned Bill in an undertone. "Remember, Sid, you haven't thrown a ball since last summer. I don't want any 'penny lectures' 'cause you smashed some glass."

Sid drew his arm back for the second time. John leaned forward, caught the slowly moving ball with the full force of the bat, and tore for first base.

"Over the fence is out, over the fence is out," came the chorus. "Silvey's turn next."

The ex-batsman took up the position near the fence in disgust. Skinny moved forward to the pitcher's box, and Sid replaced Bill as catcher. The muscles of Skinny's long, thin arms tightened as he grasped the ball for his first pitch of the season.

Suddenly the subdued afternoon babel of the city was dwarfed by a humming of factory whistles, some long drawn and of deep bass, others quicker and higher pitched, rising and dying away in succession as they were supplanted by the distance-mellowed notes of other establishments with lagging time clocks. Dismay robbed John's face of the grin of a moment before.

"Five o'clock," he cried as he threw the baseball glove into the quickening grass. "Jiminy, kids, and the paper wagon comes at ten of!"

Inquiry at the little dingy-windowed delicatessen and milk depot confirmed his fears. The cart had arrived on time, and his customers would expect their news sheets that evening.

What a pest the business was growing to be. It wasn't half-bad in winter when the afternoons were short, but now that spring had arrived, there were so many delightful demands on a boy's time. He counted the coins in his pocket, and made a mental calculation of the number of papers actually needed.

"Give me all you've got," he demanded of the astonished delicatessen proprietor. That thin-haired, shaky-fingered gentleman counted the papers on the black news stand.

"There's one for ol' Miss Anderson, an' one for—"

"Never mind them," John broke in excitedly. "Give me all your papers! You've got to!"

At that, the number was pitifully inadequate for his demands. He retraced his steps to the corner and hurried over to the suburban railroad station. There, the leader of the "Jefferson Toughs" was trying to dispose of the last of his wares.

"Let's have 'em all," said John. His rival gazed at him in amazement.

"Quit your kiddin'," he ejaculated finally.

"Honest 'n truth," John assured him. "Missed the paper wagon, and I've got to fix my customers, somehow."

Next, he ran westward to the little school store to beg Miss Thomas to disappoint her steady

patrons for just this once. The search led him far beyond the university buildings and the gray-stone flat which had marked the limits of their hitching trip in February, down to the business street with its rattling surface cars which lay a full mile west of John's home. He returned by a side street, four blocks to the north, stopping at the numerous little stationery and notion shops on the way. Even with that, certain staid and substantial customers were horrified to find that the yellowest of yellow newspapers had supplanted their conservative favorite, that evening.

He came home tired and footsore, and went wearily to bed after a half-eaten supper. The business which he had built up so zestfully in the autumn had enfettered him, and was shaping his leisure moments like an inexorable machine, and the realization of it gave him moodily thoughtful moments during the remainder of the week.

Sunday, blessedly work free, was warm and sun-shiny. As soon as he had eaten dinner, he grabbed his battered cap from the hall chair and started for the door.

"Going for a walk," he explained to Mrs. Fletcher as she looked up from the Sunday paper.

"Louise going with you?"

"Not much! Silvey'n me are going on a real walk. We don't want to feed squirrels on an afternoon like this."

It was as if the entire city's population had turned out to welcome the arrival of spring. The street leading from the car terminal was thronged with a constantly moving procession bound for the park. White-faced stenographers and anaemic clerks came from the dingy boarding-house districts to the north. Stockily built mechanics swaggered along with their simpering, gaudily dressed lady loves. Here and there were entire families of substantial Germans and Swedes, and occasionally, swarthy Italians and beady-eyed, voluble Jews. Sooner or later, they all lost themselves in the winding gravel paths of the park, or made their way to the broad walk along the lake front, where the air was filled with their polyglot babel.

"Isn't it peachy?" asked John as the boys passed the long, parallel rows of poplars which marked the edge of the park. "Come on, Bill. Let's go to the island."

The path led them by the boat landing. All traces of the warming house which had sheltered so many numbed skaters during the winter had been removed. In its stead, were piled rows upon rows of yellow, flat-bottomed boats, one on top of another, with boards separating them.

"Look!" John pointed them out. "That means summer's coming soon, and fishing, and school vacation." On the island, they found two severely dressed, angular students from the university who stood beneath a small brown bird in the branch of a budding maple. As he sunned himself happily, the taller of the two consulted a book which she held in one hand in a manner vaguely suggestive of Miss Brown and school recitations.

"It is a little smaller than Wilson's thrush, Maria," she admitted. "Still——"

John chuckled; "Nothing but a sparrow." He brushed past a bench on which was squatted a be-shawled, unwashed, immigrant grandmother. "Come on down this little path, Bill. Perhaps we can find some birds if we look."

But the season was still a little too early for the arrival of the robins, the yellowhammers, and the elusive kinglets and thrushes from the southland. Though the boys stalked in and out the winding, bush-beset trail, their search startled only nervous-tailed squirrels and dozens of the feathered gamins which had so sorely puzzled the two schoolmams. But the dandelions were poking their green shoots through the deposit of snow-packed autumn leaves, and the moss on the tree trunks lightened the somber gray of the bark. In one inlet of the lagoon, John caught a gleam in the water which was not a ripple reflection of the sun's rays.

"Sunfish," he whispered to Bill.

A bungling pair of grown-ups crashed down the path and drove the wary feeders to cover in deeper water. The boys waited a few futile minutes for their return, then dashed noisily over the wooden south bridge, past the golf links with its dense mass of patiently waiting enthusiasts, and down the gently sloping road to the stone bridge which marked the entrance to the yacht harbor.

There, where the black, bobbing buoys marked the moorings of the summer fleet of skiffs and schooners, of noisy little open motorboats, and long, heavily powered gasoline cruisers, Silvey found an empty bottle on the graveled shore. John looked at it reflectively.

"Got some paper?"

Bill found an old spelling sheet in his pocket. John tore off the cleanest end and, with the curving side of the bottle for a writing board, scribbled a laborious note.

"Lat 57, Long 64," he began, remembering the inevitable heading of the missives in sea-faring novels. "Nancy Lee sank this date, August 3, 1872. All hands lost but me. Frank Smith."

"What's that for?"

He worked the note down the narrow glass neck and plugged it with a bit of driftwood. "Maybe somebody, 'way across the lake, will find this," he explained, as he threw the receptacle far out on the water. "Then they'll think a ship's sunk."

"What's 'lat' and 'long'?" asked Silvey, as they watched it bobbing up and down with the ripples.

"The checkerboard lines on the geography maps," his chum answered evasively, as they retraced their steps northward.

At the macadam road they hesitated. On the other side lay the smaller golf course, which offered excellent amusement because of its many enthusiastic novices at the sport, and the lure of an occasional shrubbery-hidden ball which might be found by keen eyes. Ahead, stretched the lake and the broad walk, thronged with laughing, friendly humanity.

"Let's go the beach way," said John suddenly. Indeed, no spring jaunt could be complete without a stroll over the clinging, weather-beaten sand.

They halted first at the long pier, and walked out to the end to catch the invigorating freshness of the water-kissed south wind. There, a persistent fisherman, the first of that season's nimrod tribe, leaned against the life-preserver post.

John leaned cautiously over to see if captive perch were floating back and forth. Only ruffled water met his gaze.

"Biting any?" he asked.

The fisherman shook his head. "A mite early, I guess."

"Oh, I don't know," John encouraged. "Come on, Sil, let's sit down and watch. Maybe he'll catch something soon."

So the boys dangled their feet over the edge of the pier until the lengthening shadows told that it was time to leave for home. They rose regretfully and resumed the saunter along the broad walk with its many, occupied benches. Down on the sand, children hazarded spring colds as they fashioned hills and castles by the lake. Further along, an ardent youth serenely disregarded photographic rules and pointed his kodak at a group of laughing girls who stood between him and the setting sun. As the boys left the park, they passed a group of gray-suited ball players, which had been using one of the park diamonds near the golf links. John watched them a minute.

"Most time for our team to get together again," he said.

Silvey nodded. "Sid was talking about it after the game of scrub the other day. Wants to be captain this year."

John laughed scornfully. As Silvey well knew, he, himself, intended to be re-elected to that important office. "Let's go home by the big lot and see what it's like," he suggested.

A few minutes later they clambered over the shaky fence which separated the field from the sidewalk and neighboring dairy pasturage. Silvey dug his foot into the yielding turf, which had formed the scene of that football scrimmage between the "Jeffersons" and the "Tigers."

"'Most dry enough to play on," he observed.

John nodded. The flat, white stone which had been used for a home plate during the summer had been removed as a hindrance to the gridiron sport, and the base lines which had been worn into the turf by frequent boyish footsteps, were almost obliterated by the winter's debris and the rank, quickening grass. Not an inspiring view by any means, yet John gazed upon it in dreamy satisfaction.

"Let's make 'er a *real* home grounds," he said suddenly. "Soon as it gets drier, we'll bring our rakes over and get this stuff out of the way;" he kicked a rusty tin can to one side. "Then we'll cut the grass and make cinder base lines, and everything'll be just peachy."

Silvey beamed, enthralled as usual by John's fertile imagination.

"Then," went on John, as he retraced his steps to the walk, "we'll get some lumber from new flat buildings and put up a grand stand and call it 'The Tigers' Baseball Park.'"

They halted some minutes later in front of the Silvey house. John's watch told of at least a quarter of an hour before supper time, and they perched themselves on the top step to talk of fishing, of the May vacation of a week which would soon be upon them, of the leaky roof in the shack, and lastly of the baseball team.

"Joe Menard's folks had to move," said Silvey, as he thought over the roster of last year's organization.

"We'll get a pitcher somewhere," said John, a trifle impatiently, as he changed the subject. "So Sid wants to be captain, does he?"

Silvey smiled, as does an adult listening to the vagaries of a child. "You know him as well as I do."

"But who'll vote for him? There's Red and Skinny and you and me and Perry and the Harrison kids, all don't like him. If it wasn't for that baseball and bat, and those gloves of his, he couldn't a' played with us last year."

Silvey shrugged his shoulders. "He's going around school, saying that he's going to be captain of the 'Tigers' this year."

"You're president of the club, aren't you?" said John, thoughtfully.

His chum nodded.

"I'll go around and see all the fellows. Any of 'em who won't vote for me, you tell 'em they'll be dropped from the club. We'll have a meeting when everything's fixed, and Mr. Sid DuPree won't think himself so smart."

Never was precinct canvassed more thoroughly by a municipal candidate than was the membership of the "Tigers" by the two boys during the week which followed. John dropped the usual walk home with Louise, one day, that he might talk to Skinny Mosher, and hung around the school yard another noon, that he might reassure himself of Brown's loyalty. With a clear majority of six assured over Sid's lone vote, code notices were sent back and forth between the different members until Miss Brown threatened to send the responsible parties to the principal's office.

With victory certain, John raced across the school yard and caught up with a certain maiden whom he had neglected sorely of late.

"We're going to have a ball team election tomorrow," he explained, as he took possession of her school books. "I've been awfully busy."

"I know," she replied absently. "Sid told me. Says he's going to be captain."

"Guess not!" John was too pleased with the surprise prepared for his rival to realize the revelation in her words. "Smarty DuPree hasn't much show when six of the fellows are going to vote for me."

Conversation lagged. Miss Martin was nervously alert lest she encounter a friendly greeting from Sid while her escort was with her, and John became absorbed in the affairs of the morrow. Strangely enough, he experienced a feeling of relief when he left her at the apartment building and was able to race back to the shack where Silvey was waiting.

There the two planned and boasted of combats to take place under his leadership on the renovated baseball field, until a warning conscience reminded John that it was nearing paper time.

CHAPTER XVI

MORE ABOUT "THE GREATEST GAME IN THE WORLD"

One by one, the boys filed in through the Silvey gateway, to squat outside the club-house entrance until their roster was complete. Bill glanced nervously at Sid and cleared his throat.

"It's baseball time," he began abruptly. "And we've got to elect our captain and manager. Any—" he paused and looked at John.

"Nom'nations?" said the latter promptly.

There was an awkward silence. Sid tightened his grasp on a handful of the fresh, green turf. John looked meaningly at Red Brown, who spoke up as he had been instructed.

"I nom'nate John Fletcher. He was captain last year 'n he ought to be this."

"Any one else?" asked Silvey.

"I want to be captain," said Sid, curtly.

"Can't nom'nate yourself," ruled the president. "Somebody's got to do it for you."

"Somebody's got to second it, too," supplemented John.

Sid gazed helplessly about. Truly this newly made maze of parliamentary law was bewildering. "Nobody's seconded John's," he said at last.

"Second John's nom'nation," said Skinny Mosher promptly.

"All those in favor of John as captain—"

Sid sprang to his feet. "Wait a minute," he snapped. "You fellows think you're smart, but let me tell you something. I said I was going to be captain, and I am."

"You!" sneered John. "Why, you lost the game with Room Six's team 'cause you couldn't stop an easy grounder. Let it roll between your legs, you did."

"Don't care," was the stubborn reply. "I'm going to be captain. Whose league ball did the team use last year?"

"Yours," admitted Silvey, reluctantly.

"And the two bats, the second baseman's glove, and two fielders' mitts were mine, too, weren't

they? Didn't my dad buy 'em for me? Well, go ahead and have Johnny for your old captain if you want. But if I can't run the team, the team can't use my things!"

There was an astounded silence. Those astute politicians, John and Bill, had never dreamed of such a barefaced threat. They sat looking blankly at him, while Red Brown laughed disagreeably.

"And you're the kid who went home crying 'cause you were hit on the shin with a baseball. Fine captain, you'll make."

"Captain and the gloves, or you play without 'em," came the arrogant ultimatum. "Which do you want?"

He could see by the thoughtful faces around him that his words were not without effect. Last year, the team had owned a reputation for being blessed with proper equipment, and to go back to the cheap, undersized balls, and scantily padded private mitts would be no small privation. John sighed wearily.

"Guess you can be captain if you want to," he said, finally.

A reluctantly assenting chorus sanctioned his consent. Bill broached the subject of the baseball park improvements, and Sid shook his head emphatically. The idea was his rival's and therefore to be fought.

"The park diamonds are lots better," he argued. "Take us all year to fix the lot up."

"But it'd be our own," Red broke in enthusiastically. "Think of playing the 'Jeffersons' on the 'Tigers' Home Grounds.' 'Tain't every team could say that, could it?" Which was the truth, for the vacant lots of the neighborhood were being rapidly supplanted by flat buildings and room for boyish playgrounds was becoming more and more scarce.

Sid considered the matter a moment. Certainly it would add to the team's, and his, prestige.

"Well, maybe," he said, with seeming reluctance that his change of front might not seem too obvious. "Let's go over and see what the place is like."

"First across the tracks," shouted Red, as he sprang to his feet. In a moment, the whole tribe was up and after him, climbing the wire railroad fence with a vigor which threatened destruction to the meshes. They scampered across the expanse of cinders and rails, broken here and there by a struggling bit of plant life, and scrambled out on the untidy field.

The broken glass and old milk-bottle tops from the dairy had crept further out from the low, tar-paper building during the winter. Boards from the boxes and barrels which had formed the fortress for the cucumber fight were scattered to the four corners of the field, and the sparse, fresh grass blades sprang up to sunlight and life through the dead, gray-brown vegetation of the preceding autumn. Neither trace of baseball diamond nor football gridiron could be found. Yet the "Tigers" purposed to make the place the talk of the juvenile population and they turned to their captain for advice.

"Oh, fix 'er up someway," said that gentleman vaguely. John glared at him in futile anger.

"Get the rubbish out of the way, first," he broke out.

Sid shrugged his shoulders. "John'll tell you what to do. I'm captain, but so long as the park's fixed up, I don't care who does it."

"Get your rake, Bill, and you, too, Skinny. I'll go after ours. Rest of you kids pick up the tin cans and wood and things while we're gone. Come on, fellows. Beat you over the tracks."

John dropped his rake over the fence on his return, and glanced at his watch as a precaution. It was nearly five! Blame the paper business anyway! Never did he start some important project but what time flew so swiftly that he had to leave just when things were getting interesting. He called an explanatory "paper time!" to his team mates, turned his implement over to Red, and left for the little delicatessen store.

All the next Monday afternoon the boys labored while their captain stood around with his hands in his pockets and watched condescendingly. John picked up Bill on his return from the paper route, and went over to the lot to inspect the carefully combed playing area. The broken glass, rain-soaked paper caps, sticks, boards, and dead grass had been carefully assembled in conical heaps near the railroad fence, and he beamed his approval.

"It's going to be peachy, Silvey," he broke out.

"Yes, and Sid'll say he did it," his chum commented bitterly.

"What do we care? We'll put the home plate here," he indicated a spot some fifty feet north of the dairy buildings. "Then the sun won't get in our eyes. I'll borrow dad's big tapeline to measure off the other bases, and the grand stand can go here. It'll be big enough to hold 'most fifty people!"

Silvey listened in amazement. He could run a football team as quarter-back to perfection, or break through the opposing line time and again, as he had done last autumn, but this fertile foresight was something beyond his comprehension.

"You talk as if you see it," he said finally.

"Why, I do." John dismissed the matter as worthy of no further comment. "But before we do any of these things, we've got to cut the grass and see where the bumps in the ground are."

For two afternoons the whirr of lawnmowers was heard over the "Tigers' Home Grounds." When the many hollows and hummocks in the uneven turf came to light, the youthful construction boss ordered that shovels be brought, and another day passed in transporting dirt and leveling the obstructions off. Pail after pail of water was carried from the dairy buildings to wet down and harden the new, loose earth, and it was Saturday morning before the distances between the various bases and the pitcher's box could be measured off.

"We'll start filling in the paths with cinders now," said John, as Silvey drove a peg into the ground to mark the location of the home plate.

"Won't they hurt when you slide on them?" drawled Perry Alford.

"But there's nothing else to use, is there?"

"They're starting a flat building next old lady Meeker's on Southern Avenue," the boy suggested. "Why not get sand from there?"

John shot him a glance of approval and called to the team members. "Everybody get a pail and meet at Silvey's," he concluded, as they started for the railroad tracks.

"I'll sit here and watch the tools," said Sid, brazenly.

"Aren't you going to work at all?" broke out Silvey impatiently.

"Don't have to," was the unperturbed reply. "I'm the captain."

They left their nominal leader to do as he desired and scattered to commandeer the various family buckets and fiber pails. Skinny, who lived farthest from the Silvey's, came up at last with his utensil, and they set off, single file, past Neighborhood Hall and the corner grocery stores, and around to quiet, sedate Southern Avenue, beating a crude marching rhythm on the tins as they went. At the sight of the ten-foot sandhill which the excavations for the apartments had formed, John broke into a run.

"Beat you there!" he shouted.

Away they went after him, pell-mell, and dashed up the yielding sides to bury their pails deep in the golden particles. Silvey braced himself, tugged his load free, and staggered along the walk for perhaps thirty feet. John caught up with him and also halted for a rest.

At last they started again, but it was no light-hearted, carefree, return trip for the "Tigers." The sand-filled buckets weighed too much to be used as drums, and they retraced their steps slowly, dropping them every few minutes to ease their aching wrists. In front of Neighborhood Hall, Skinny found a blister on one of his hands.

"Think we'll ever get back?" he asked, despairingly.

"It isn't so far now," John encouraged him. "We've only got to go another block before we turn. Then it's a half-block down to the hole in the fence. Come on. I'll stump you to carry yours as far as the railroad tracks."

Thus by making it a matter of athletic prowess the boys carried their loads to the destination. But the little heaps on the dusty earth looked pitifully insignificant. Skinny borrowed a pin and lanced the white protuberance at the base of his second finger.

"Jiminy," he mourned, as he squeezed the water out. "It's going to be an awful lot of work, fellows."

They raked the sand level along the path from the plate to first base. Not by the wildest stretch of imagination could they seem to reach even a quarter of the distance, and protruding grass blades showed that the covering was far too scanty.

"Where's your wagon, John?" asked Red Brown suddenly.

"Busted," said John, reproachfully. "Have you forgotten?"

During the summer preceding, a fever of wagon building had seized the boys. Every spare wheel and tricycle frame in the block had been requisitioned for the construction of a half-dozen little vehicles which suddenly appeared to scud down the sidewalks and over the smooth macadam street. There had been discussions and disputes as to speed, and John's wagon, a long, well-oiled affair with a coat of red, discarded house paint on its framework, had come to grief in a collision with Brown's, one sunny afternoon. Even Silvey, the optimist, who had furnished the motive power, had looked at the wreckage in well-founded despair.

"Where's yours?" Red turned abruptly to the Harrison boys.

"In the basement."

Skinny Mosher's, too, was still in existence. All the rest of the morning and afternoon, the two wagons ran merrily toward the Southern Avenue sand hill, or creaked slowly and laboriously back to the "Tigers' Home Grounds," with such good effect that but a scant ten feet of path

remained to be filled in when John's paper route called him.

Silvey and he sauntered over that evening after supper to make the final inspection of the work.

"Just like the park diamonds, isn't it?" he asked, as Silvey stretched a pair of weary arms.

"And Sid said he was glad he thought of it. And we worked like everything while he stood around!"

John scarcely heard him as he stood, eyes a-dream, looking over the even, carefully raked turf. "The grand stand comes next, Bill. Do you think we ought to tear down the shack for lumber?"

Bill demurred. That shaky building occupied too great a place of importance in the boys' lives to justify such a sacrifice. Surely there were enough new buildings being erected in the neighborhood without that.

Sid made an announcement on the following Monday which made the postponement of that last bit of construction work imperative.

"Saw the captain of the 'Jeffersons,'" he beamed as the little group gathered about him on the baseball diamond. "We're going to play 'em this Saturday."

"What?" John exploded. Sid nodded his head.

"They've got the best team around," Silvey broke out. "And they've been practicing in the park ever since the snow melted. How can we lick 'em now?"

Sid shrugged his shoulders aggravatingly.

"Haven't you any brains at all?" John stormed.

"I'm captain," Sid snapped back at the insurgents. "I'm running this team. If you don't like it, you can quit!"

The voice of Skinny Mosher, the peacemaker, broke in: "Aw, kids, never mind. 'Tain't so bad as it looks. Let's start practicing now, and maybe we can beat 'em anyway."

It was excellent advice, and the boys scampered over the tracks for home, to return singly and in pairs with their baseball paraphernalia. John took up his old position at first, and Silvey donned his catcher's mitt to receive and return imaginary balls thrown by the other players. Red Brown and Perry Alford stationed themselves at second and shortstop respectively, while the Harrison boys stood around and waited until duty should call them to the outfield.

"Where's Skinny and Sid?" asked John as he glanced around.

"There's Mosher, now," exclaimed Silvey, as a tall and diminutive figure made their way down the railroad embankment. "Kid brother with him as usual."

"Had to bring him," the unfortunate elder boy exclaimed when he reached the diamond. "Ma wouldn't let me come unless I did."

They accepted the affliction resignedly. "He can watch," said Silvey. "Come on, John. Toss up your little ball while we're waiting."

Accordingly, the first baseman brought out a lopsided ten-cent ball and threw it toward third. Skinny Mosher dropped the sphere as if it were a hot coal.

"Go easy," he cautioned. "Sid hasn't brought my glove yet."

The elder Harrison boy who aspired to fill Joe Menard's place, ran over to the pitcher's box, and the tossing was resumed. From third to first, second to pitcher, and then to Silvey, and back again. Muscles became limbered and arms more certain of their mark. Skinny misgauged a swift throw from John and caught the ball on the tip of his fingers.

"Jiminy!" he yelled. "What you think you're doing?"

"Butter fingers, butter fingers!" came the taunting reply.

"Don't care. I'm going to wait for my glove. Here's Sid now."

The team turned as one man and stared in astonishment. Their captain had delayed his return to don his new baseball suit, and from the spikes on his shoes to the visor of his red-trimmed cap, he was a perfect miniature of a professional player. Even John was unable to restrain an envious stare at the natty flannel shirt and knickerbockers, and the maroon and white stockings.

"Cost eight dollars, it did," Sid announced, as he acknowledged the unconscious homage with a satisfied smile. "Dad gave it to me 'cause I was captain. Here's the gloves and the ball and the bat. Let's start practice."

They ran back to their positions. Sid, bat in hand, stood by the plate, tossed the league ball high in the air, and knocked the sphere easily toward third base. Skinny, with the confidence engendered by a well-padded hand, scooped the ball with surprising accuracy and returned it. Again Sid repeated the process.

Red pranced impatiently up and down on the sand path. "Give me one this time," he begged.

"Don't send 'em all to Skinny."

The captain of the "Tigers" nodded and hit the descending ball with all his force a little too far for Red to reach. A quick glance showed the impending catastrophe.

"Hey, kid, get out of the way," he yelled. The warning came too late. The ball skimmed over the grass, struck a hummock which had been overlooked by the builders of the diamond, and ricochetted upward into the hapless Mosher youngster's stomach.

Yells filled the air. Skinny, unwilling slave, stooped over his prostrate brother. "Hurt much?" he queried anxiously. John glanced at his watch in boredom, for such occurrences had lost their novelty long months ago.

"Paper time," he called, as he made for the tracks. A last glance back before the dairy buildings cut off the view, showed the wailing infant trudging sturdily toward the walk. Every line of his figure indicated maddened determination to tell his mother on the whole team.

Tuesday and Wednesday sped past. It became more and more apparent that a substitute for Joe Menard must be found if the "Tigers" were to have even a fighting chance of holding their own with the ancient enemy. Time and again Haldane Harrison took his place to whip a few slightly curving balls down to the critical Silvey, only to realize that his knowledge of the art was sadly deficient. They all had a try at it, eventually, while Sid stood by with a sarcastic grin on his face and watched their futile efforts.

The next noon, John walked home with Louise, a custom sadly broken since the baseball season had begun, and passed a stockily built lad who was bouncing a baseball against the side of a house but a few doors from the Martin's apartment. On the way back, he stopped to watch. The newcomer returned his stare with equal interest.

"'Lo," said John, as he walked nearer.

"'Lo," said the boy with an ingratiating smile.

"My name's John Fletcher."

"Mine's Francis Yager," spoken with equal curtness.

"Live here?" asked the first baseman of the "Tigers." The boy admitted that such was the case. "There's my house," explained John, pointing with an inkstained finger.

There was an awkward silence. Francis bounced his ball against the side of the house a few times.

"Ever play baseball?" asked John, as the boy made a difficult catch of an erratic return from a drain pipe. The newcomer turned, his face lighted with interest.

"Just bet you!" he beamed. "Back home we had a team and I played—"

"Pitcher?" asked John, breathlessly. The new boy nodded. Truly the fates were proving kind to the "Tigers" that day.

"What can you throw?"

"An 'in,' and an 'out,' and a 'slow ball.'" The expert paused in the summary of his attainments. "Last year, I was just getting so's I could pitch a drop. But it didn't work very well."

Dinner, maternal lectures, all were forgotten as John poured out the tale of the "Tigers'" woes to his new friend. Arm in arm, they made their way up to Silvey's house. That catcher tried out the new recruit, while John watched eagerly, and pronounced him all and more than he had claimed for himself.

"We'll fix the 'Jeffersons' now," John shouted confidently. "You can hold 'em, Francis, old boy."

He marched the new member over the tracks to the ball grounds, that afternoon, and introduced him to the delighted team. Sid heard Silvey's tale of the pitcher's prowess with ill-disguised resentment.

"He can play in the outfield," he said shortly. "I'm going to do it myself."

"You!" shrieked John.

"Yes, me!"

"You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with a baseball. Pitch! Only reason we let you play at all last year was because—" He checked himself suddenly. Sid only smiled.

"I'm captain," he replied, as John finished. "I'm running this team. I'm going to pitch, and if you don't like it, you can quit." He walked over to the position, leaving a dazed and resentful first baseman behind him.

That evening, John returned from the paper route to eat supper listlessly and skip up to Silvey's as soon as he had finished. The team, his team which he had built up with such care last year, was going to the dogs, and he craved sympathy from Bill about it.

"He's crazy," his chum sighed when John's outburst had slackened. "You should a' seen him when

you'd gone for the papers, today. First he threw over my head, and then to one side, 'most out of my reach. He hit the ground twice before he could throw a fast one over the plate, and Francis laughed at him. 'Well,' says Sid, 'I guess I can learn before Saturday. I've got a book at home that tells all about it.'"

"Maybe—" said John, thoughtfully.

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe the 'Jeffersons' 'll make so many runs in the first inning that he'll have to quit. Then Francis can play, and perhaps we can catch up with them."

"But he won't let Francis learn my signals," Silvey complained. "Says he's captain and we've got to do just what he says."

"Get Francis to come down to your yard tomorrow noon," John counseled, as he stood up and stretched himself. "Teach him then."

Thus it came about that, unknown to Sid, two small figures rehearsed for a good hour, such intricacies as "Two fingers against the glove means a swift one," "when I pound like this, it means an 'out,'" and "this means an 'in'" until Francis became letter-perfect in them.

That Friday afternoon, the "Tigers" gathered for the final practice before the first and most important game of the season. Silvey knocked grounders innumerable to the different members of the infield who handled them with uncanny dexterity, or sent long flies out to the waiting players until he grew tired and Sid supplanted him. Red Brown and one or two of the fleeter spirits of the team raced from base to base, practicing a little trick of sliding which Red had noticed at a park baseball game, and Sid took his position as pitcher for a few minutes' erratic practice with Silvey. John left them for the night, wavering between confidence and despair as to the result of the morrow. Everything had gone marvelously well with the exception of Sid.

"If he quits early," Silvey consoled him as they sat on the Fletcher front steps just before bed time, "we'll win after all."

"We'll have to," said John, stubbornly, as he rose in answer to his mother's call. "So-long, Bill."

CHAPTER XVII

HE'S "THROUGH WITH GIRLS"

Nine o'clock in the morning saw the "Tigers" assembled in front of the Silvey home. Sid wore his elaborate outfit; Bill, the ragged football trousers which had done duty in the autumn, and John sported a battered cap. Other uniforms among them there were not, but the team made a brave showing, nevertheless, as it trooped lustily toward the corner. No scampering across the railroad embankment this time for the members. A baseball game demanded a more ceremonious arrival on the grounds. They neared the viaduct and Red and Perry Alford began a tattoo on the cement walk with the baseball bats. The other players broke into that time-honored refrain,

> Hip! Hip!
> I had a good job
> And I quit.
> My name is Sam
> And I don't give a—[pause]
> Hippetty hippetty, hip!

With the corner and adult ears left behind them, Sid, in a spirit of bravado, filled in the tabooed expletive and aroused the awed admiration of his subordinates.

Past the long, low, red art shops they swaggered, keeping perfect time to the chant as they rounded the corner. John who was a little ahead of the others, broke into a sharp cry of dismay.

"Look! *Our grounds!*"

The consternation which was on his face spread to theirs. The shaky, weather-beaten fence by the sidewalk had been torn down before their arrival. At intervals, load after load of building stone rumbled over hastily formed paths of heavy planks. Further in, on the field, from the home-plate northward over the painstakingly levelled earth, harnessed horses sweated and tugged at the traces as scoop after scoop bit into the turf and came up filled with dirt to be emptied against the railroad tracks.

"Flats," gasped Silvey, as they drew nearer. John said nothing, but his lower lip trembled as the last trace of the beautifully sanded base lines disappeared under the excavators' devastating hands.

"'Tis a pity," said the kindly Irishman, who noted their approach, "but it has to be, I guess, kids. Yis, the other team went home, fifteen minutes ago. Said they didn't guess there'd be a game today."

They stopped in dazed bewilderment to watch the progress of the foundation work. At last, John, sick at heart, slunk away. He wanted to be home, away from everyone until he could get control of his feelings. As he came down the street with his baseball glove dangling aimlessly in one hand, he stumbled over the Mosher youngster who was intent upon some childish pursuit in the dust of the gutter.

"Get out of the way," he stormed angrily. To vent his disappointment upon even so small an offender was a relief. The infant smiled maliciously.

"Johnny an' Louise, Johnny an' Louise," he chanted, reviving the cry of the autumn before.

"Well, what about it," demanded John belligerently.

"Louise had a soda with Sid. Saw her, saw her!"

"When?" Had Louise, too, forsaken him in this hour of grief?

"Yesterday. Sidney an' Louise, Sidney an' Louise," came the taunting revision.

John's face set. All the wrongs which Sid had perpetrated since the Halloween party—the earlier sodas, the persistence which had culminated in the theater affair, the baseball election, and his arrogance since that time—clamored for revenge. He'd get even, he would. He'd go back and punch Sid's face in, and muss that new suit, and throw his baseball gloves up on a house roof. Then Mr. Sid would quit monkeying with his girl.

The appearance of that gentleman around the corner put a stop to his meditations. John waited until he sauntered unsuspectingly up to him.

"Say, Sid!"

"Yes?" A note in the voice put the captain of the "Tigers" on his guard.

"What's this I hear about Louise?"

"N-nothing."

"Been drinking sodas with her again, have you?"

"Who told you?" Sid made a futile effort to edge past the inquisitor.

"Never mind who. Promise not to do it any more or I'll—" He clenched one fist and drew it back threateningly.

"Guess I won't," retorted Sid with sudden spirit. "Guess I've got as much right to drink sodas with her as anybody. Who's going to stop me?"

"I am!"

"You," scornfully.

At this moment, the very cause of the dissension came skipping along with the inevitable package from the grocery under one arm. Feminine intuition told her that trouble was lurking in the air, and she would have passed but John held up a detaining hand.

"Louise, you've been drinking sodas with Sid again."

"Haven't either," in the same breath came the admission, "who told you?"

John gave her a searching glance. "Tell this *guy*," he said with infinite scorn, "that you won't have anything more to do with him. Tell him you're my girl, Louise," he added incautiously.

The lady's head went back to a warning angle.

"Go on!" John ordered.

"Guess I won't!" she snapped, angered by his persistence. "Guess I won't!" she repeated angrily. "'Cause I'm not anybody's girl. So there!" With nose held regally in the air and knees strangely jointless, she walked away from the pair.

"Ya-a-a-h," jeered Sid incautiously.

John drove out, full strength, with his right fist upon his adversary's nose. Sid stepped back in dismay. It wasn't fair, punching without the preliminary tilt of words and wary skirmishing. Again John set upon him and he turned, dodged behind a tree, and fled for home. Down the street they tore at top speed. Inch by inch, the space between the two diminished as they passed the Alfords, the Harrisons, and finally arrived at the DuPree iron gate.

"Ma-a-a-a!" yelled Sid, as he struggled with the handle. "Come quick, come quick."

The gate suddenly yielded. Sid sprang inside, up the front steps, and into the hallway. There he turned, locked the screen door, and stuck out his tongue at his adversary.

"Ya-a-a-a!" he taunted.

John contemplated an attack upon the flimsy screening, but a remnant of wisdom withheld him.

Fletcher,
The Fletcher,
The old fly-catcher!

came the cry from the porch.

"Think you're smart," John glared. "Just dare you to come down here! Just dare you to!"

"The old fly-catcher" continued. John opened his lips for a reply in kind.

Sid DuPree
Went out on a spree
And never got back
'Til half-past three.

The hero of the verse was struck suddenly dumb by this display of poetical ability. Again John repeated his latest composition. He was beginning to enjoy himself immensely. At the third repetition of the adventures of Sid, a window creaked noisily up.

"John Fletcher," came the harsh voice from the upper window. "You're a nasty little boy, and if you don't leave Sidney alone, I'll telephone your mother."

"Ya-a-a-ah," jeered Sid in an undertone. John looked and longed.

"Go on," urged Mrs. DuPree. "The telephone's right here in the hallway."

He decided that discretion was the better part of valor and crossed over to his own porch. Once up in his room, he threw himself on the bed, and as the excitement of the chase wore off began to realize the extent of the morning's losses.

The athletic field upon which they had labored so long and carefully, was torn to pieces—gone forever. Worse than that, Louise wasn't his girl any more. She'd said so herself. No more samples of cookery, no more confidential little walks to and from school, no more squirrel-feeding excursions. And the glorious dream of the future was as completely demolished as the "Tigers' Home Grounds." There could be no thousand dollars and a home when he reached his majority now.

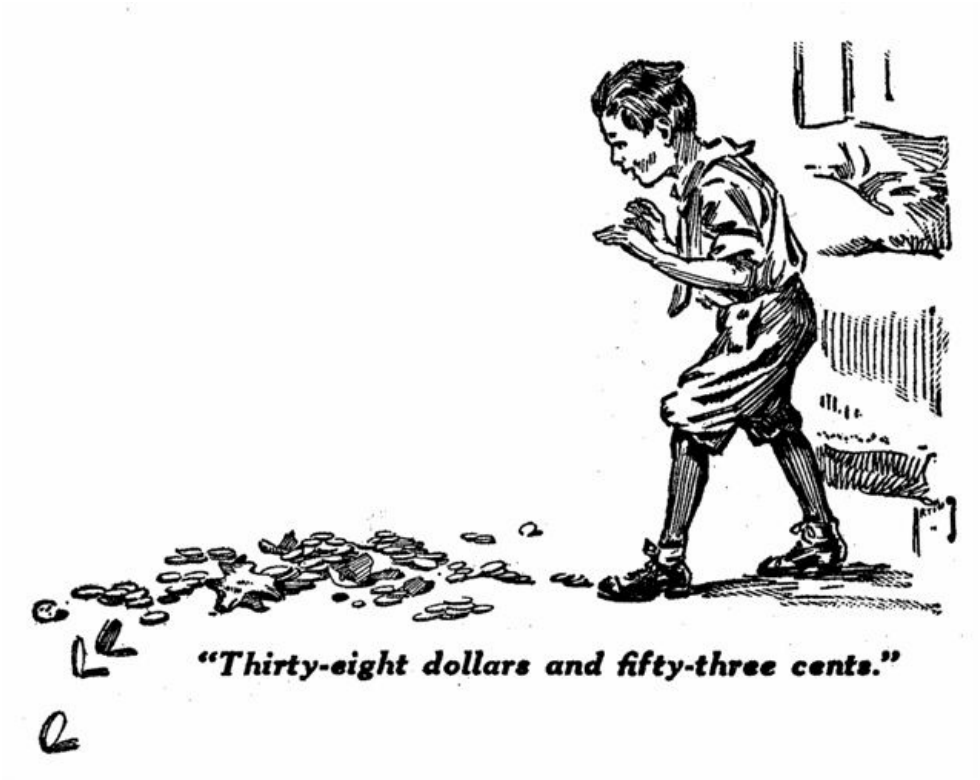
He lay staring at the pattern in the ceiling paper, sobbing ever so little now and then, for some minutes, then wrenched himself miserably over on his side.

There he found that horrid old bank staring him in the face, that same pig bank which stood a grinning monument to his industry of the past months. But what good was the paper route now? or where the pleasure in dropping his weekly income into that long, narrow slot? Louise wasn't his girl any more. She'd said so, herself.

In a sudden fit of spite, he sprang up and seized the heavy, sneering bit of pottery in both hands. The next moment, it crashed to the floor and pennies, nickels, dimes, and even half-dollars rolled out on the carpet or mingled with the shattered bits of china. He stood astounded at the number for a moment, then gathered them up on his bed, and took careful count.

Thirty-eight dollars and fifty-three cents? He could scarcely believe his eyes.

Then he lay back, not quite so grief-stricken, and stared thoughtfully into space until Mrs. Fletcher called him for dinner.



"Thirty-eight dollars and fifty-three cents."

At the table, that evening, he was unusually quiet. As he finished his last slice of bread and butter, he looked up at his father.

"Dad, if a fellow earns a lot of money, all by himself, he can spend it any way he wants, can't he?"

Mr. Fletcher nodded. "Why, son?"

"I was just wondering. That's all."

A week later, Louise was sitting on the street curbing in front of her apartment building, when a crimson-clad baseball warrior on a new bicycle sped over the macadam and came to a sudden halt beside her. She raised her eyes in astonished recognition. It was her late fiancé.

"'Lo."

"'Lo."

"Like my new wheel?"

"Uhu."

"Bought it out of the money I was saving so's we could get married. Cost me twenty-one dollars, and it's got puncture-proof tires and a real coaster brake. Just watch me ride it!"

He sped off, rode free for a moment, threw the brake on and came to a sudden stop, then cut a figure eight over the paving. The clear spring sun made miniature rainbows in the shining, rapidly revolving spokes, and an early robin warbled his approval of the performance from his seat in a linden's top.

"I can ride without touching the handles, too," he boasted, as he guided the wheel back to her. "Isn't it peachy?"

She nodded. The long, curving bars bore a suggestion of possible rides on this beautiful steel-and-rubber creation, if their quarrel could be healed, and she held out a tentative olive branch.

"Want to play jacks?"

John shook his head. "Going over to the park baseball diamond with the 'Tigers.' We're going to play the 'Jeffersons,' this afternoon."

"But your paper route?"

He laughed joyously. "Sold it to the newspaper man. He gave me three dollars and twenty-five cents for the customers."

"Oh!" There was a pause.

"Like my baseball suit?" he asked.

She gazed at the flaming horror and nodded enthusiastically.

"You ought to see me run that team!"

"You?" she exclaimed. "Why, I thought Sid was captain."

"He *was*," with zestful emphasis on the verb. "But I bought nine baseball dollar uniforms and a lot of gloves and two bats, and a real league ball out of my money, so the kids fired Sid and elected me. He isn't even on the team any more."

"O-o-oh!" Truly John was becoming an important figure in the juvenile world.

"And I've got a dollar and thirteen cents left for candy and peanuts," he concluded.

Louise studied the confident, freckled face before her, the sparkling bicycle with its glossy saddle and acetylene lamp, the heavily padded baseball glove on the nickeled handle bars, and then their owner again. She took the last remnant of her pride and stamped it under foot in a wave of regret.

"John," she said, shyly.

"Yes?"

"I won't have anything more to do with Sid."

The captain of the "Tigers" only laughed. "You can go with Sid all you want, and drink all the sodas he'll pay for. I don't care, because—" he leaned his weight forward on the pedals and started for the park so suddenly that she barely caught his parting words, "I'm through with girls. I'm going to be a bachelor!"

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