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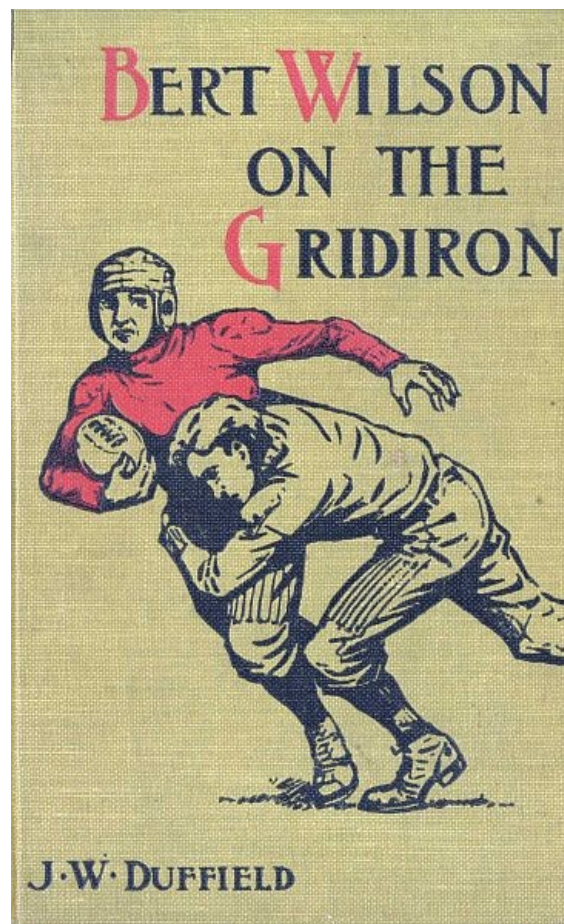
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BERT WILSON ON THE GRIDIRON

BY

J. W. DUFFIELD

AUTHOR OF "BERT WILSON AT THE WHEEL,"
"WIRELESS OPERATOR," "FADEAWAY BALL,"
"MARATHON WINNER," "AT PANAMA."

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BERT WILSON ON THE GRIDIRON

[1]

CHAPTER I

NEVER SAY DIE

"**H**OLD 'em! Hold 'em! Buck up, fellows. Don't give an inch!"

A storm of cheers swept over the field, as it was seen that the scrubs were holding the

'Varsity on their ten-yard line.

Three times in succession the 'Varsity players plunged like enraged bulls against the defenders of the goal, only to be thrown back without a gain. One more fierce attempt, and the ball went to the scrubs on downs.

It was unprecedented. It was revolutionary. It shrieked unto heaven. The poor, despised scrubs were actually holding the haughty 'Varsity men on even terms. More than that; they even threatened to win. They seemed to forget that they were doormats for the "regulars," mere "sparring partners," to be straightened up with one punch and knocked down by the next. The "forlorn hope" had suddenly become a triumphant hope. The worm had turned, and turned with a vengeance. Pale and panting, plastered with mud and drenched with sweat, with "blood in their eyes" and here and there a little on their features, they faced the "big fellows" and gave as good as they took. [2]

Reddy, the college trainer, danced up and down on the side lines and sputtered incoherently. "Bull" Hendricks, the head coach, stamped and stormed and yelled to his charges to "put it over." The things he said may not be set down here, but he gave the recording angel a busy afternoon. His words stung like whips, and under the lash of them the 'Varsity men braced themselves desperately. They burned with shame and rage. Were they to have a defeat "slapped" upon them by the scrubs? The college would ring with it, and it would be the sensation of the season.

But the scrubs were not to be denied. They had caught the 'Varsity "off its stride," and they fought like tigers to clinch their advantage. Every ounce of strength and determination that they possessed was called to the front by the prospect of impending victory. A daring run around the left end netted them twenty yards, and they gained fifteen more on downs. An easy forward pass was fumbled by the regulars, who were becoming so demoralized that the men fell all over themselves. The panic was growing into a rout that promised to end in a Waterloo. [3]

The referee was poising his whistle and looking at his watch, ready to blow the signal that marked the end of play. There was but one chance left—a goal from the field. On the 'Varsity team only two men had seemed to keep their heads. The quarterback and fullback had sought to stem the tide, but in the general melting away of the defence had been able to do but little. The ball was now on the scrubs' forty-yard line. The player who had it fumbled in his eagerness to advance it, and the 'Varsity quarterback pounced on it like a hawk. With almost the same motion he passed it to the fullback. The opposing line bore down upon him frantically, but too late. One mighty kick and the pigskin rose in the air like a bird, soared over the bar between the goal posts, and the 'Varsity was three points to the good. An instant later and the whistle blew. The game was over.

The hearts of the scrubs went down into their boots. Another minute and the game would have ended with the ball in the middle of the field, and the score a tie; and a tie on the part of the scrubs was equivalent to a victory. But that last kick had dashed their hopes into ruin. [4]

Still, they were not wholly cast down. They had deserved success, if they had not actually won it. They had really played the better game and beaten their foes to a standstill. The nominal victory of the 'Varsity was a virtual defeat.

And the 'Varsity knew it. For an instant they felt an immense relief, as they crowded around Wilson, the fullback, and clapped him on the shoulder. But their momentary exultation was replaced by chagrin, as they filed past the coach on the way to the shower baths, and their eyes fell before the steely gleam in his.

"I won't say anything to you dubs, just now," he announced with ominous calmness, as they shambled along wearily and shamefacedly. "I don't dare to. What I'd have to say wouldn't be fit for the ears of young ladies like you. Besides, I don't want to commit murder. But I may have a few quiet remarks to make before practice to-morrow."

"A few quiet remarks," muttered Ellis, when they got beyond earshot. "Gee. I'll bet life in a boiler factory would be peaceful compared with the training quarters when he once gets going."

"I've always thought deafness an affliction," said Drake, "but I think I'd welcome it for the next twenty-four hours."

"Ten to one that's why they call a football field a gridiron," grumbled Axtell. "The fellows that play on it get such a fearful roasting." [5]

Just then, Morley, the captain of the scrubs, came along with a broad grin on his face.

"Buck up, you fellows," he joshed, "the worst is yet to come. I can see just where you 'false alarms' get off. Your epitaph will be that of the office boy."

"What was that?" queried Martin, biting at the bait.

"Monday, hired-Tuesday, tired-Wednesday, fired," retorted Morley.

"Don't you worry about epitaphs," snapped Tom Henderson. "We're not dead ones yet, as you'll find out the next time we take your measure."

"What was that Satan said," asked Dick Trent, "about rather reigning in hell than serving in heaven? I'd rather be a boob on the 'Varsity than king of the scrubs."

"O, well," laughed Morley, "if you want to put yourself on a level with Satan, there's no one to prevent you. As for me, I'm a little particular about *my* company;" and with this Parthian shot he rejoined his exulting mates.

It was a disgruntled group of athletes that plunged into the tank and stood beneath the shower. And when it came to the rubdown, Reddy and his helpers seemed to take a fiendish delight in picking out the sore spots and getting even for the day's poor showing. But such vigorous health and splendid condition as theirs could not be long a prey to gloom, and when, refreshed and glowing, they wended their way to the training table, they were inclined to take a more cheerful view of life. They ate like famished wolves, and when they had made away with everything in sight, even the promised raking from "Bull" Hendricks had lost some of its terrors. [6]

"O, well," remarked Tom, "while there's life there's hope. We won't be shot at sunrise, anyway, even if we deserve to be."

"No," assented Dick, yielding to his irrepressible habit of quotation:

"Somewhere 'tis always morning, and above
The wakening continents from shore to shore,
Somewhere the birds are singing evermore."

"The only bird you'll hear to-morrow," said practical Bert Wilson, "will be a crow. Poe's raven won't have a thing on Hendricks when he starts croaking."

One would have had to go far to find a finer group of young fellows than this trio, as they sauntered over the campus to the college buildings. They were tall, well-knit and muscular, and no one, looking at them, would "despair of the Republic," as long as she produced such sons. Outdoor life, clean living and vigorous exercise had left their stamp on face and frame. They were immensely popular in the college, leaders in fun and frolic, and in the very front rank as athletes. Each had won the right to wear the college jersey with the coveted "initial," proving that on hard fought fields they had brought glory to their Alma Mater. [7]

This was preëminently the case in college baseball. Tom at third and Dick at first had starred in their positions, while Bert in the pitcher's box with his masterly "fadeaway" had cinched the pennant, after a heartbreaking struggle with the "Greys" and "Maroons," their leading rivals. The story of how he had plucked victory from defeat in that memorable fight was already a classic and had made his name famous in the college world. And now, in the early fall, the three comrades were seeking to win further laurels on the gridiron as they had previously won them on the diamond.

Provisionally, they had been placed by the keen-eyed coach on the 'Varsity team. Tom's quickness and adroitness had singled him out as especially fitted for quarterback. Dick, who had been the leading slugger on the nine, was peculiarly qualified by his "beef" and strength for the position of center. Bert's lightning speed—he had made the hundred yards in ten seconds, flat, and won a Marathon at the Olympic Games—together with his phenomenal kicking ability, made him the leading candidate for fullback. [8]

So far, the results had seemed to indicate that no mistake had been made. But no one knew better than they how insecure their positions were, and how desperate a fight they would have to wage in order to hold their places. The competition was fierce, and the least sign of wavering on their part might send them back to the scrubs. Bull Hendricks played no favorites. He was "from Missouri" and "had to be shown." His eagle eye was always looking for the weak places in the armor of his players, and no one was quicker to detect the least touch of "yellow." He had no use for any one but a winner. He watched unceasingly for any failure of body or spirit and pounced upon it as a cat upon a mouse. Nor could any past success atone for present "flunking."

Not that he acted hastily or upon impulse. Had he done so, he would have been unfitted for his position. He knew that everybody had his "off days." The speediest thoroughbred will sometimes run like a cart horse. No one can be always at the "top of his form." But after making all allowances for human weakness and occasional lapses, when he once reached a definite conclusion he was as abrupt and remorseless as a guillotine. Many a hopeful athlete had been decapitated so swiftly and neatly, that, like the man in the fable, he did not know his head was off until he tried to sneeze. [9]

It was a sharp but wholesome discipline, and kept his men "on their toes" all the time. It gave hope and energy also to the scrubs. They knew that they had a chance to "make" the 'Varsity team, if they could prove themselves better than the men opposed to them. The scrub of to-day might be the regular of to-morrow. They felt like the soldiers in Napoleon's army where it was said that "every private carried a marshal's baton in his knapsack." So they fought like tigers, and many a battle between them and the 'Varsity was worthy of a vaster audience than the yelling crowds of students that watched it rage up and down the field.

But the rivalry, though bitter, was also generous. There was nothing mean or petty about it. After all, it was "all in the family." Everybody, scrub or 'Varsity, was crazy to win from the other colleges. If it could be shown that the team could be strengthened thereby, any 'Varsity man would go back to the scrubs without grumbling and "root" just as hard as ever for the team to make good. It was a pure democracy where only merit counted and where the individual effaced himself for the common good of all. So that while the 'Varsity and scrubs were bitter enemies on the gridiron, they were chums as soon as they had shed their football "togs." [10]

"We certainly did put up a rotten game to-day," ruminated Tom. "I don't wonder that the coach was sore. We ought to have eaten those fellows up, but they walked all over us. What was the matter with us, anyway?"

"Aw," snorted Dick, disgustedly, "why is it that an elephant runs away from a mouse? They simply threw a scare into us and we lost our nerve. We can thank our stars it was only a practice game."

"It goes that way sometimes," said Bert philosophically. "It's just the same in other games. I've seen the Giants and Athletics play like a lot of schoolboys. One fellow will muff an easy fly and then the whole infield will go to pieces. They'll fumble and boot anything that comes along."

"Yes," assented Tom, "and the pitchers get theirs too. There's Matty, the king of them all. There are days, when even Ty Cobb, if he were batting against him, couldn't do anything but fan. Then again, there are other days when he hasn't anything on the ball but his glove. I saw him in an opening game in New York before thirty-five thousand people, when he was batted out of the box like any bush leaguer."

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"Even Homer sometimes nods and Milton droops his wing," quoted Dick. "If our playing is rank sometimes, it's a comfort to feel that we have lots of company. But speaking of baseball, fellows, how do you think it compares with chasing the pigskin?"

"Well," said Bert slowly, "it's hard to tell. They're both glorious games, and personally I'm like the donkey between the two bundles of hay. I wouldn't know which to nibble at first."

"Of course," he went on, "they're so different that it's hard to compare them. Both of them demand every bit of speed and nerve a fellow has, if he plays them right. And a bonehead can't make good in either. There are lots of times in each game when a man has to think like lightning. As for courage, it's about a stand off. With three men on bases in the ninth, nobody out, and only one run needed to win, it's a sure enough test of pluck for either nine. But it needs just as much for a losing eleven to buck its way up the field and carry the ball over the goal line, when there's only three minutes left of playing time. Both games take out of a fellow all there is in him. As for brute strength, there's no doubt that football makes the greater demand. But when it comes to saying which I prefer, I'm up a tree. I'd rather play either one than eat."

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"How happy could I be with either, were 'tother dear charmer away," laughed Dick.

"Well," remarked Tom, "it's lucky that they come at different seasons so that we can play both. But when you speak of 'brute' strength, Bert, you're giving 'aid and comfort' to the enemies of football. That's just the point they make. It's so 'awfully brutal'," he mimicked, in a high falsetto voice.

"Nonsense," retorted Bert. "Of course, no fellow can be a 'perfect lady' and play the game. Even a militant suffragette might find it too rough. There are plenty of hard knocks to be taken and given. It's no game for prigs or dudes. But for healthy, strong young fellows with good red blood in their veins, there's no finer game in the world to develop pluck and determination and self-control and all the other qualities that make a man successful in life. He has to keep himself in first-class physical condition, and cut out all booze and dissipation. He must learn to keep his temper, under great provocation. He must forget his selfish interests for the good of the team. And above all he has to fight, fight, fight,—fight to the last minute, fight to the last ditch, fight to the last ounce. It's a case of 'the Old Guard dies, but never surrenders.' He's like old General Couch at the battle of Kenesaw Mountain, who, when Sherman asked him if he could hold out a little longer, sent back word that 'he'd lost one eye and a piece of his ear, but he could lick all Hades yet.'"

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"Hear, hear," cried Tom. "Listen, ladies and gentlemen, to our eloquent young Demosthenes, the only one in captivity."

He skilfully dodged the pass made at him and Bert went on:

"I don't deny that there was a time when the game was a little too rough, but most of that has been done away with. There has been progress in football as in everything else. There's no wholesale slugging as in the early days, when the football field was more like a prize ring than a gridiron. Of course, once in a while, even now, you'll be handed a nifty little uppercut, if the referee isn't looking. But if they catch on to it, the fellow is yanked out of the game and his team loses half the distance to its goal line as a penalty. So that it doesn't pay to take chances. Then, too, a fellow used to strain himself by trying to creep along even when the whole eleven was piled on him. They've cut that out. Making it four downs instead of three has led to a more open game, and the flying wedge has been done away with altogether. The game is just as fierce, but the open play has put a premium on speed instead of mass plays, and made it more interesting for the spectators and less dangerous for the players. And the most timid of mothers and anxious of aunts needn't go into hysterics for fear that their Algernon or Percival may try to 'make' the team."

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"This seems to be quite an animated discussion," said a pleasant voice behind them; and wheeling about they saw Professor Benton, who held the chair of History in the college.

They greeted him cordially. Although a scholar of international reputation, he was genial and approachable, and a great favorite with the students. In connection with his other duties, he was also a member of the Athletic Association and took a keen interest in college sports. He himself

had been a famous left end in his undergraduate days, and his enthusiasm for the game had not lessened with the passing of the years and the piling up of scholastic honors.

"We were talking about football, Professor," explained Bert, "and agreeing that many of the rough edges had been planed off in the last few years."

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"I could have guessed that you weren't talking about your studies," said the Professor quizzically. "You fellows seldom betray undue enthusiasm about those. But you are right about the changes brought in by the new rules. It surely was a bone-breaking, back-breaking game during my own student days.

"And yet," he went on with a reminiscent smile, "even that was child's play compared with what it was a thousand years ago."

"What!" cried Dick. "Is the game as old as that?"

"Much older," was the reply. "The Greeks and Romans played it two or three thousand years ago. But I was referring especially to the beginning of the game in England. In the tenth century, they commenced by using human skulls as footballs."

"What!" exclaimed the boys in chorus.

"It's a fact beyond all question," reaffirmed the Professor. "In the year 962, when the Danes were invading England, a resident of Chester captured a Dane, cut off his head and kicked it around the streets. The gentle populace of that time took a huge liking to the game and the idea spread like wildfire. You see, it didn't cost much to run a football team in those days. Whenever they ran short of material, they could go out and kill a Dane, and there were always plenty swarming about."

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"Those good old days of yore," quoted Dick.

"Plenty of bonehead plays in those days as well as now," murmured Tom.

"Of course," resumed the Professor, "that sort of thing couldn't go on forever. The Danes withdrew, and naturally no Englishman was sport enough to offer his own head for the good of the game. So they substituted a leather ball. But the game itself was about as rough as ever. It was usually played in the streets, and very often, when some dispute arose about the rules, it developed into a battle royal, and the players chased each other all over the town with ready fists and readier clubs. Heads were broken and lives lost, and the King issued an edict forbidding the game. But under other rulers it was resumed, though in a somewhat milder form, and has continued up to the present.

"No longer ago than yesterday," he added, taking out his memorandum book, "I ran across a criticism of the game, by an Englishman named Stubbs, way back in 1583. He goes for it right and left, so bitterly and yet so quaintly, that I thought it worth while preserving, old-fashioned spelling and all. Here's the way it goes:

"'As concerning footballe, I protest unto you it may rather be called a friendlie kind of a fight than a play or recreation, a bloody and murthering practice than a felowly sort of pastime. For doth not every one lie in wait for his adversary, seeking to overthrow him and kicke him on the nose, though it be on hard stones or ditch or dale, or valley or hill, so he has him down, and he that can serve the most of this fashion is counted the only fellow, and who but he, so that by this means their necks are broken, sometimes their backs, sometimes their arms, sometimes their noses gush forth with blood, sometimes their eyes start out; for they have the sleights to mix one between two, to dash him against the heart with their elbows, to butt him under the short ribs with their gripped fists, and with their knees to catch him on the hip and kicke him on his neck with a hundred murthering devices.'"

[17]

"Phew," said Tom, "that's a hot one right off the bat."

"He hits straight from the shoulder," agreed Dick. "I'll bet the old boy himself would have been a dandy football rusher, if he'd ever got into the game."

"He certainly leaves no doubt as to where he stands on the question," assented the Professor, "and I think we'll admit, after that, that the game has improved. The most rabid critic of to-day wouldn't go so far as this old Briton. The game as played to-day offers very little danger to life and not much more to limb. Of course, accidents happen now and then, but that's true of every game. The old French proverb says that 'he who risks nothing, has nothing.' The element of risk in football is more than counterbalanced by the character it develops. The whole secret of success in life is to 'never say die.' And I don't know of any game that teaches this as well as football. But I must be going," he concluded, with a glance at his watch; and, turning off to the right with a farewell wave of the hand, he left the boys to finish their interrupted stroll.

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"The Prof's all right," said Tom emphatically.

"They say that he was the bright particular star on his football team," contributed Dick.

"And he's starred just as brightly in his profession since then," chimed in Bert.

"I guess that 'never say die' motto has stuck by him all the time," mused Tom. "It's a bully motto, too. By the way, have you fellows ever heard the story of the mouse that fell in the milk pail?"

They stared at him suspiciously. Long experience with that facetious youth had taught them the folly of biting too quickly, when he put a question.

[19]

"No catch," protested Tom. "This is on the level."

"Well," said Dick, "if a crook like you *can* be on the level, shoot."

"It was this way," continued Tom, cheerfully accepting the reflection on his character. "Two mice fell into a bucket of milk. They swam about for a while and then one of them gave it up and sank. The other one, though, was made of different stuff and wouldn't give up. He kept on kicking until he had churned the milk into butter. Then he climbed on top of it, made a flying leap for the edge of the bucket and got away. You see, he was a kicker from Kickersville and his motto was 'Never say die'."

They looked at him reproachfully, but Tom never "batted an eye."

"That mouse was a smooth proposition," murmured Dick softly.

"A slippery customer," echoed Bert. "But, Tom," he asked, in mock innocence, "is that story true?"

"True?" snorted Tom, "you'd better believe that it's true. Why——"

But this crowning outrage on the English language was too much, and he took to his heels, barely escaping a flying tackle as they launched themselves toward him.

CHAPTER II

[20]

RAKED, FORE AND AFT

IN the training quarters, "Bull" Hendricks paced to and fro, his forehead creased by deep lines as he wrestled with the problems that beset him.

Six feet two inches in height and built in proportion, he was a fine figure of a man. Despite his weight and bulk, there was nothing ungainly or awkward about him. If he had not the grace of an Apollo, he had what was better—the mighty thews and sinews of a twentieth century Hercules. His massive chest and broad shoulders were capped by a leonine head, from which looked the imperious eyes of a born leader of men. Few men cared to encounter those eyes when their owner was angered. He was a good man to have as an ally, but a bad one to have as an antagonist.

How he had obtained his nickname was a disputed question in college tradition. Some maintained that it was due to a habit of plunging through the opposing lines with the power and momentum of an enraged buffalo. Others with equal likelihood held that it was an abbreviation of "bulldog," and had been won by the grit and grip that never let go when he had closed with an enemy. But whatever the origin of the term, all agreed that either definition was good enough to express the courage and power and tenacity of the man. Force—physical force, mental force, moral force—was the supreme characteristic that summed him up.

[21]

In his college days, ten years earlier, he had been a tower of strength on the greatest football team that had ever worn the Blue, and the part he played in its triumphs was still a matter of college song and story. It was the day when mass play counted heavily, when the "guards back" and the "flying wedge" were the favorite formations; and the Blue would never forget how, after a series of line plunging, bone-breaking rushes, he had dragged himself over the enemy's goal line with the whole frantic eleven piled on him, while the Blue stands went stark raving mad over the prowess of their champion. That famous goal had won him an undisputed place on the All-American team for that year and the captaincy of his own team the following season.

His reputation clung to him after he had graduated, and even among his business associates he was commonly and affectionately referred to as "Bull." The same qualities of courage and tenacity that had marked his student days had followed him into the broader arena of business life, and he had speedily become prosperous. But the tug of the old college had drawn him back for more or less time every year to help "lick the cubs into shape" and renew the memories of the past. This year the call had been particularly insistent, owing to two bad seasons in succession, when the Blues had been forced to lower their colors to their exulting rivals who had so many defeats to avenge. A hurry call had gone out for the very best man available to stop the "tobogganing" of the team; and as this by universal consent was "Bull" Hendricks, he had, at a great sacrifice, laid aside his personal interests and come to the rescue.

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A few days on the ground had been sufficient to show him that he was "up against it." A herculean task awaited him. The material he had to work with was none too good. The line was lacking in "beef" and the backs in speed. There were exceptions, notably at center and full and quarter; and here his falcon eye detected the stuff of which stars are made. But it takes eleven men to make a team and no individual brilliancy can atone for a lack of combination work. "A chain is no stronger than its weakest link," and, in a modified sense, a team is no stronger than its weakest player. That one weaker player would be unerringly "sized up" by the sharp-eyed

scouts of the opposition and they would plunge against him like a battering ram.

[23]

Usually, at the beginning of the fall season, there would be an influx of promising candidates from the leading academies and preparatory schools. Fellows who had starred at Andover and Exeter and Lawrenceville, some of them giants in bulk or racehorses in speed, would come in as Freshmen and give the Sophs or Juniors a tussle for the team. But "nothing succeeds like success," and the failure of the Blues for two seasons in succession had tarnished their prestige and turned toward other colleges the players emulous of football glory. The "Greys" and "Maroons" had "gobbled" the most likely "future greats" and the Blues had been replenished by a number limited in quantity and mediocre in quality. Of his veterans, the right guard and left tackle had graduated that summer, and their places in the line would be hard to fill.

Not that the coach felt discouraged. He didn't know the meaning of the word. It simply meant that he would have to work the harder. Like Napoleon, the word "impossible" was not in his dictionary. It was said once of a famous educator that "Mark Hopkins at one end of a log and a student at the other would make a university." With equal truth it could be declared that "Bull" Hendricks on the coaching line and eleven men on the field would turn out a 'Varsity team.

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His task was the more difficult just now because he was practically alone. It was too early in the season for the "old grads" to put in an appearance. By and by they would come flocking in droves from all quarters of the compass, eager to renew their youth, and to infuse into the raw recruits some of the undying enthusiasm that they felt for their old Alma Mater. Then every separate player on the team could have the benefit of the advice of some famous former player in his own position, who would teach him every trick and turn by which he had won his own reputation. But at present most of the work devolved on him. He had to teach the backs how to kick, the ends how to run down under a punt, the guards and tackles how to interfere; and into all he had to infuse the deathless determination to win that is the very heart and core of the game. Like a new Atlas, he was carrying the football world on his shoulders, alone.

No, not quite alone. There was "Reddy." And that sorrel-topped individual was a host in himself.

Not one fellow out of ten could have told his real name. He was simply "Reddy" and they let it go at that. His flaming mop of hair to which he owed his nickname covered a shrewd if uneducated mind. For many years he had been connected with the college as head trainer, and in this capacity he had turned out so many winners that he had become famous in the athletic world. He had supreme control of the physical training of all the teams turned out by the college—track, baseball and football—and none excelled him in sending their men to the post in superb condition. He had an unerring eye for an athlete and knew how to bring each individual to the very top of his form. Whatever was in him he brought out to the full. He was a universal favorite in the college. All the boys swore by him, although at times perhaps—for his temper was as red as his hair—they were tempted to swear *at* him. But if they ever did, it was under their breath, for Reddy was an autocrat, and in his own domain ruled with an iron hand.

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Just now, he was, as he himself put it, "as busy as a one-armed paperhanger with the hives." Dinner was over and the football candidates, scrub and 'Varsity alike, were getting into their togs and undergoing the searching scrutiny of Reddy. There were bad knees and ankles and shoulders galore. He began at the soles of the feet and went up to the crown of the head.

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"Take off those shoes, Kincaid," he commanded. "The soles are worn so thin that you can't help feeling the cleats through them. Before you know it, your feet'll be so bruised that you'll be wanting a crutch."

"Those phony ankles again, eh," he remarked, as he noticed a slight wobbling on the part of Anderson. "Here," to an assistant, "give me that tape." And with the skill of a surgeon he applied strips of adhesive tape along each ligament, leaving a narrow space down the instep free from bandaging to allow free circulation of the blood. And when he got through, the "phony" ankle was so protected that it was practically impossible for it to turn under its owner.

So, step by step, he went up the human frame that he knew so well. Shin guards were handed out to the forwards to help them against the fierce hammering that they would have to meet. Pads were strapped below the knee and left loose above to give free play to the joints. The thighs were protected by fiber, and large felt pads covered the hips and kidneys. Then with shoulder and collarbone pads, topped by a head guard, the costume was complete. Then Reddy stood in the door that led to the presence of the coach and not a man went through until the trainer's critical eye pronounced him ready for the fray.

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"Don't hurry," he said goodnaturedly, as some crowded past him. "'Tis quick enough ye'll be getting in there, I'm thinking," and his eyes twinkled, as he thought of the castigation that awaited them.

To tell the truth, they did not hurry. There were no bouquets awaiting them. They knew that they were due for a raking fore and aft and that they deserved it. No one could tell which one or how many would be "fired" back into the scrubs. More than one of them, on waking in the morning, wondered what made his heart so heavy, until with a qualm the thought of "Bull" Hendricks came to enlighten him. That thought had persisted all through the morning hours, and, if they were distraught in the recitation rooms, the reason was not far to seek. Even Tom's irrepressible spirits were somewhat tamed, although he had less to fear than some of the others.

"Gee," he whispered, "it's like a funeral."

"Don't cheer, boys, the poor devils are dying," murmured Bert.

"They piled the stiffs outside the door,
There must have been a cord or more,"

quoted Dick.

The subdued way in which the boys filed in gave the coach his cue. [28]

"Nice little flock of sheep," he purred. "Little Bo-Peep will miss you pretty soon and come down here looking for you."

"There was a time," he flashed, "when a Blue football team was a pack of wolves. But you're just sheep and the 'Greys' and 'Maroons' will make mutton of you, all right."

"A football team!" he went on scornfully. "Why, you don't know the rudiments of the game. You're a bunch of counterfeits. You can't tackle, you can't interfere, you can't kick, you can't buck the line. Outside of that, you're all right."

"Now this kind of work has got to stop. As a comic opera football team, you're a scream. If the 'Greys' or 'Maroons' had seen you yesterday, they'd have laughed themselves to death. But no Blue team has ever been a joke in my time, and you're not going to get away with it, if I can pound any brains into your heads or any strength in your muscles. If Nature hasn't done it already, I don't know that I can, but I'm going to try. The team I'm going to send into the field may be licked but it shan't be disgraced. It's going to be an eleven made up of men—not female impersonators. And I'll get them if I have to rake the college with a comb."

From generals he came down to particulars, and his rasping tongue spared no one, as he went over the plays of the day before and described their sins of omission and commission. The men writhed beneath the lash and their faces tingled with shame. But they were game and stood the "lacing" with what grace they might, the more so as they realized that the criticism, though bitter, was just. His whip tore the flesh and he rubbed vitriol into the wounds, but behind it all was his immense passion for victory and his pride in the old college that they loved and wanted to serve as ardently as he did. It was a wry dose and they swallowed it with a gulp, but it braced them to new endeavor, and deep down in their hearts was forming a resolution that boded ill for the scrubs, who had been gloating while the 'Varsity "got theirs." [29]

"Now," the coach concluded, "I'd about made up my mind to fire half this gang of quitters back into the scrubs, but I'm going to give you one more chance. Do you get me? Just one more. For the next hour, you'll practice tackling and passing and interference. Then when you've limbered up your poor old joints, I'm going to line you up against the scrubs. I want you to rip them up, eat them alive, tear them to pieces. And heaven help the 'Varsity man that falls down on the job."

The boys saw some real practice that day. The coach was merciless. They flung themselves against the dummy tackle until they were bruised and sore. They ran down the field under punts until their breath came in gasps. They practiced the forward pass until they were dizzy and seemed to see ten balls flying over the field instead of one. But no one complained or shirked, although every separate bone and muscle seemed to have its own particular ache. A short respite, the 'Varsity and scrub faced each other as they had the day before. [30]

But the hour had struck for the scrubs. They faced their doom. To be sure, they faced it gallantly, but it was doom none the less. From the beginning they never had a chance. All the pent up rage of the 'Varsity that had accumulated while they were being flayed by the coach was poured out on the devoted heads of their opponents. They wiped out the stigma of the day before and paid their debt with interest. It was a "slaughter grim and great," and before their furious attack the scrub line crumpled up like paper.

In vain Morley yelled to his little band to stand fast. They might as well have tried to stem Niagara. Warren and Hodge tackled like fiends. Dick at center and Tom at quarter worked together with the precision of a machine. Bert's mighty kicks were sure to find Caldwell or Drake under them when they came down, and three times he lifted the pigskin over the bars. Then as the play was most of the time in the scrubs' territory, the kicking game gave place to line bucking. Bert was given the ball, and through the holes that Boyd and Ellis made for him in the enemy's line he plunged like a locomotive. There was no stopping them, and the game became a massacre. They simply stood the scrubs "on their heads." Their own goal line was not even threatened, let alone crossed. Touchdown followed touchdown, until when the whistle blew, the 'Varsity had rolled up a score of 54 to 0 and their humiliation had been gloriously avenged. [31]

"Well, Morley," taunted Drake, as the panting warriors left the field, "how about that 'false alarm' stuff?"

"Who's loony now?" crowed Tom.

"Only a spasm," countered Morley, with a sickly grin. "We'll get you yet."

"Bull" Hendricks said never a word as the fellows filed past, but, as he turned to leave the field, his eyes encountered Reddy's, and he favored that grinning individual with a drawing down of the right eyelid that closely resembled a wink. And when he was alone in his own quarters, he indulged in a low chuckle.

"Pretty strong medicine," he said to himself as he lighted his pipe, "but it worked. I guess I'm some doctor."

CHAPTER III

[32]

A THRILLING EXPLOIT

A PLEASANT surprise awaited the boys that evening as they went from the training table to their rooms. Under the elms in front of their dormitory, two men were pacing up and down. The close resemblance between them indicated that they were father and son. As they turned toward the boys there was an instant recognition, and they hurried forward in eager greeting.

"Mr. Quinby—Ralph," they cried in chorus.

"We can't tell you how glad we are to see you," said Bert. "What lucky wind blew you so far from California?"

"Business, as usual," responded Mr. Quinby, evidently pleased by the warmth of his welcome. "I had to attend a meeting of directors in New York, and while I was so near, I thought I'd take a day off and run down here for a look around."

"That's what he says," laughed Ralph, "but, as a matter of fact, Dad gets hungry to see the old college every once in so often, and I think he fakes up the 'business' talk just as an excuse."

"Impudent young cub, isn't he?" said Mr. Quinby with mock severity. "But I refuse to say anything in defense, on the ground that I might incriminate myself. Anyway, I'm here, and that's the main point. How are things going with you fellows?"

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"Fine," was the response. "But come right on up to our rooms. We're not going to let you get away from us in a hurry, now that we've laid hands on you."

"We'll surrender," smiled Mr. Quinby. "Lead on MacDuff." And they mounted to the rooms that Bert and Dick occupied together, a floor higher up than Tom.

A flood of memories had swept over Bert at the unexpected meeting. Two years had passed since they had been closely associated and many things had happened since that time. Yet all the experiences of that memorable summer stood out in his mind as clearly as the events of yesterday.

Mr. Quinby had been the owner of a fleet of vessels plying between San Francisco and China. Needing a wireless operator on one of his ships, he had applied to the Dean of the college and he had recommended Bert, who was pursuing a course in electricity and making a specialty of wireless telegraphy. Tom and Dick had made that trip with him, and it had been replete with adventure from start to finish. At the very outset, they had been attacked by a Malay running amuck, and only their quickness and presence of mind had saved them from sudden death. Soon after clearing the harbor, they had received the S.O.S. signal, and had been able thereby to save the passengers of a burning ship. A typhoon had caught them in its grip and threatened to send them all to Davy Jones. His flesh crept yet as he recalled the tiger creeping along the deck of the animal ship after breaking loose from his cage. And, traced on his memory more deeply perhaps than anything else, was that summer evening off the Chinese coast when they had been attacked by pirates. Sometimes even yet in his dreams he saw the yellow faces of that fiendish band and heard the blows of the iron bars on their shaven skulls, when old Mac and his husky stokers had jumped into the fray.

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How large a part he had played in that repulse he seldom allowed himself to dwell upon in thought and never referred to it in speech. But the country had rung with it, and his friends never tired of talking about it. And none knew better than Mr. Quinby himself that he owed the safety of his vessel and the lives of all on board to the quick wit of Bert in sending the electric current from the dynamo into the wires and hurling the screaming rascals back into their junks. His first words, after they were settled comfortably in their chairs, showed of what he had been thinking.

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"Have you run up against any more pirates lately, Bert?" he asked.

"Not of the yellow kind," was the laughing response, "but it looks as though we might meet some white ones before long. They say that the 'Greys' and 'Maroons' are flying the skull and crossbones and threatening to give no quarter, when they stack up against us on the gridiron."

"Threatened men live long," said Mr. Quinby drily. "I've heard that talk before, but I notice that the Blues usually give a good account of themselves when it comes to an actual fight. It was so in my own college days. There'd be all sorts of discouraging rumors afloat and the general public would get the idea that the team was going around on crutches. But when the day of the game came, they'd go out and wipe up the field with their opponents. So I'm not worrying much for fear you'll have to walk the plank."

"You'd have thought so if you had heard the way the coach waded into us to-day," broke in Tom. "Since I heard him, I've had a new respect for the English language. I never knew it had

such resources."

"There was a certain honeyed sweetness about it that was almost cloying," grinned Bert.

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"'Twas all very well to dissemble his love,
But why did he kick us downstairs?"

added Dick.

Mr. Quinby laughed reminiscently.

"I've heard coaches talk," he said, "and I know that some of them are artists when it comes to skinning a man alive. They'd cut through the hide of a rhinoceros. But that is part of the game, and if a man is over-sensitive, he doesn't want to try to make a football team. I'll wager just the same that it did you fellows good."

"We licked the scrubs by 54 to 0," answered Tom. "We felt so sore that we had to take it out on somebody."

"Sure thing," commented Mr. Quinby. "Just what the coach wanted. He gets you fighting mad, until when you go out you are 'seeing red' and looking for a victim. I've been there myself and I know."

"Did you ever play on the football team while you were an undergrad?" asked Tom.

"No, I wasn't heavy enough. They needed beef in those days more than they do now. You wouldn't think it, perhaps," with a glance at his present generous girth, "but I was a slender young sprout at that time, and I had to content my athletic ambitions with track work and baseball. But I was crazy over football, and I was always there to root and yell for the team when the big games were pulled off. And many a time since I've traveled from San Francisco all the way to New York to see a Thanksgiving Day game. Sometimes, the result has made me want to go away somewhere and hide, but more often the good old Blue has come out on top, and then I've been so hoarse from yelling that I haven't been able to talk above a whisper for a week. Of course it wouldn't be a good thing for the game if one team won all the time, and as long as we cop about two out of three, I'm not doing any kicking. It isn't often that we lose two years in succession, and I'm looking for you fellows now to come across with a victory."

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"We'll do our best not to disappoint you," said Bert. "It's a sure thing that we haven't as heavy a line as we've had in other years, and for that reason we'll have to play more of an open game. But we've got a dandy new shift that will give the other fellows something to think about when we spring it on them, and probably Hendricks has one or two aces up his sleeve. I heard him tell Reddy the other day that he was planning a variation of the forward pass that he thought would be a corker."

"Well," said Mr. Quinby, "we'll hope so. It's almost as hard to forecast results in football as it is in baseball. The game's never over until the referee blows his whistle. I've seen teams touted as certain winners go all to pieces on the day of the game. Then, again, there have been times when the team didn't seem to have as much of a chance as a blind man in a dark room hunting for a black cat that wasn't there. But they'd go out just the same and stand the other fellows on their heads."

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"You must have seen a lot of sparkling plays in your time," remarked Tom enviously.

"I surely have," assented Mr. Quinby. "Perhaps the best of all was one that thrills me now when I think of it, although I didn't enjoy it so much at the time, because it did the Blues out of a victory just when they thought they had it tucked away safely."

"Tell us about it," came in a chorus from the boys.

"Well, it was this way," and he lighted a fresh cigar as he settled back for a "fanning bee." "The 'Greys' came up to meet us that year with one of the best teams they ever turned out. They seemed to have everything, weight and strength and speed, and, on the 'dope,' we didn't have a chance in the world. They had gone through their schedule with the smaller colleges like a prairie fire, and the scores they piled up had been amazing. Their goal line hadn't been crossed all season, and all the newspaper writers tipped them to slaughter us."

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"We had a dandy captain that year, though, and he, together with the coaches, had done wonders with the material on hand. The old Blue spirit that never knows when it is licked was there too. The game was on our grounds and although the 'Greys' had an immense delegation in their stands, we outnumbered and outyelled them. Say, maybe we didn't give the boys a send-off when they trotted through the gates and began passing and falling on the ball in practice. If we felt any doubts, that yell didn't show it."

"From the time the ball was kicked off it was a fight for blood. And you can imagine whether we fellows went crazy when we saw that our team was winning. We got off to a flying start, and, instead of having to defend our own goal, we took the offensive and kept the ball in the enemy's territory most of the time. We scored a goal from the field, and although the 'Greys' fought desperately, we seemed to have their number."

"It was the same in the second half. We downed them when they tried to rush us, blocked when they kicked, and stopped them in their attempt to skirt the ends. It was near the end of the last

half, and there was only five minutes left to play. It looked as though it were 'all over but the shouting,' and you can bet that we were doing enough of that. The Blue stands were a good imitation of a lunatic asylum.

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"But here Fate took a hand, and two minutes later we wanted to die. The ball was in our hands, halfway down the field. As we had already made one score, while the 'Greys' had nothing, all we had to do was to play safe and the game was ours.

"Peters, our captain, was a splendid fellow and a 'dead game sport.' It seemed to him a little like 'babying' to fritter away the few minutes remaining in safety play. The more generous instinct prevailed, and he 'took a chance.' He shot the ball back to the quarter. He in turn passed it to the back, who got in a perfect kick that sent it far down the field and close to the enemy's goal. One of the 'Greys' made a grab at it, but it was one of those twisting deceptive punts and bounded out of his hands down toward the southern line. One of his mates was just behind him and, quick as lightning, he caught the ball on the bound, tucked it under his arm and scooted down the field toward our goal line.

"Our forwards of course had run down under the kick and had got past the ball, expecting to pick it up when they saw that it had been muffed. So the 'Grey' runner was well past them before they could stop their momentum and turn in their tracks. The back who had kicked the ball was near the northern side, too far away to interfere, and Lamar, the runner, covering the ground like a deer, hugged the southern line.

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"There were only two men in his way, and they made the mistake of keeping too close together, so that, as Lamar neared them, he made a superb dodge and slipped by both of them at once. Now he had a clear field before him, but with forty yards yet to go.

"How he ran! He had lost some time in the dodging and twisting, and now the whole Blue eleven were thundering at his heels. He could hear their panting as they sought to close in on him. The nearest one was not more than five feet away. He let out a link and fairly flew. The white lines of the field fell away behind him. One more tremendous effort by pursuer and pursued, and just as eager hands reached out to grasp him, he flashed over the goal line for a touchdown. Suddenly, brilliantly, inconceivably, the 'Greys' had won the game.

"Were we sore? We felt like draping the college buildings with crepe. To have had victory right within our reach and then to have had it snatched away in that fashion! Poor old Peters was fairly sick over it. I suppose to this day he has never forgiven himself for that sportsmanlike instinct.

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"But nobody blamed him. The crowd took their medicine. Strictly speaking, I suppose it was foolish. As was said of the charge of the Light Brigade that 'it was magnificent but it was not war,' so, no doubt, many thought of Peters' move that although generous it was not football. Still the finest things in human life are often the 'foolish' things. At any rate, it enriched the history of the game with one of the most dashing and spectacular plays ever made.

"Those pesky 'Greys'," he mused. "They were always doing things like that. They had a fellow once that was always starting the fireworks. Poe was his name—a relative, by the way, of Edgar Allan Poe. I remember once, when with just one minute left to play and the ball thirty yards from our goal line, he dropped back for a kick and sent the ball sailing over the line for the goal that won the game. You've heard no doubt the song that the gloating 'Greys' made to immortalize a run down the field that he made on another famous occasion:

& never mortale Manne shall knowe
How ye Thynges came about—
But from yt close-pressed Masse of Menne
Ye Feet Balle poppeth oute.

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& Poe hath rushed within ye Breache—
Towards Erthe one Second kneeled—
He tuckes ye Balle benethe hys Arme,
& Saunteres down ye Fielde.

Ye Elis tear in fierce pursuite;
But Poe eludes yem alle;
He rushes 'twixt ye quyvverynge Postes
& sytteth on ye Balle.

But Arthur Poe hathe kyckt ye balle
(Oh woefulle, woefulle Daye.)
As straighte as myghte Dewey's Gunnes
upon ye fyrste of Maye."

"They're foemen worthy of our steel, all right," laughed Dick.

"All the more credit in licking them," chimed in Tom.

"The percentage is on our side, after all," added Bert. "We've won about two-thirds of all the games we have played together."

"Some funny things happen in the course of a game," went on Mr. Quinby, who in this

congenial company was feeling the years drop away from him and was enjoying himself immensely. "I remember once when our boys played Trinity in Hartford. At that time, the woolen jersey was part of the regulation football suit. This made tackling too easy, as one could get a good grip on the jersey, especially after it had been stretched in the course of the game. There had been some talk of substituting other material for it, but nothing had been done. You can imagine our surprise then when, on the day of the game, the Trinity men came out on the field in a full uniform of canvas. It was stiff and shiny and you couldn't get a good grip on it to save your life. That was bad enough, but, in addition, the Trinity boys had covered their uniforms with grease. Our fellows didn't tumble to it until after the game was under way and the enemy were wriggling away from us like so many eels. It was a time for quick thinking, but the Blues rose to the occasion. They sent out a hurry call for a bag of sand, and when it came, they grabbed handfuls of it and so were able to get more or less of a grip on their slippery opponents. A rule was made later on forbidding the use of grease. The canvas uniforms, however, proved so much superior to the older style that it was officially adopted and has been in use ever since."

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"How did the trick work?" asked Ralph. "Did they get away with the game?"

"No, we beat them all right, but by a close score and it certainly played hob with our tackling and interfering."

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"Speaking of tricks, I remember one played by the Carlisle Indians. In addition to being crack football players, those 'noble red men' are about as smooth propositions as you'll find anywhere. The bland Ah Sin was a piker compared with them. You have to keep your eye peeled all the time. They were playing Harvard and the Indians got the ball on a kick off. There was a scrimmage, and when the crowd was untangled, the ball had disappeared. Suddenly, Dillon, of the Indians, darted out and made for the Harvard goal. But he didn't have the ball under his arm, and, after starting in pursuit, the Harvard boys thought it was a mere feint to draw them after him and turned back to see who really had it. Dillon went 105 yards down the field, running like the wind, and crossed the Harvard goal for a touchdown, and then they saw that he had the ball. And where do you think it had been all the time? Tucked up the back of his jersey. It had been enlarged especially for that purpose before the game began, and the first chance they had they worked the trick. The Harvard fellows raged, but there was nothing in the rules to forbid it and the touchdown counted. Since then the rules have been amended, and now the ball has to be in sight outside the clothing."

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"He must have had a hunch that he would win," murmured Tom.

"Yes," assented Mr. Quinby. "A hunch on his back and a hunch in his heart. The Harvard boys had to stand for an awful joshing on the way they had been outwitted by 'Lo! the poor Indian with untutored mind.'"

"But brain work and quick thinking aren't confined to the redskins. I recall a game played between the Army and Navy. You know there's always a fierce rivalry between those branches of Uncle Sam's service, and this game was being played for all it was worth. The Army had the ball and the fullback punted it to the center of the field. The Navy quarter tried to make a fair catch, but it slipped from his fingers. The Army center had run down under the kick and was close to the ball when it fell to the ground. The Navy men were so close behind that they would have piled on top of him if he had stooped to pick up the ball. So he kicked the ball ahead of him, following it up and ready to reach down and pick it up the minute he had the chance. But the Navy was so close that he had to keep dribbling it along and he kept this up until with one last kick he sent it over the goal and fell upon it for a touchdown. It was a new wrinkle in the game, and one of the hardest things in the world to get away with. They've tried it repeatedly since, but that feat of the Army man still stands as the star play of the 'dribbling' game."

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"A good deal of the rough stuff has been cut out of the game and I'm glad of it, but in my college days almost everything 'went,' provided the referee wasn't looking. There was a lot of slugging and jiu-jitsu work, and more fellows had to be taken out of the game because of injuries than at present. Often a concerted effort was made to 'get' some especially efficient man on the other side, and they weren't always scrupulous about the way they did it. I remember one time we were playing a big game, and 'Butch' Allaire, the best player on the Blue team, had his knee badly hurt. We were short of good substitutes, and he felt that he had to continue playing, if it were at all possible. So, after a short wait, he came limping out again to his position, with a white bandage tied round his knee outside his uniform. To the other side, that bandage was like a red rag to a bull. They lunged against him, piled on top of him, and in every scrimmage they pressed heavily on that wounded knee. But, despite all their efforts, he played out the game, and we came out winners. After the excitement was over, the captain said to him:

"Great work, Butch, but why in thunder did you wear that bandage on your knee? They knew just what to go for."

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Butch grinned. "I tied it round the well knee," he said.

The boys laughed.

"Well," remarked Dick, "some of the prize-fighting tactics may have been rooted out of the game, but I'll bet the coaching is just as rough as it used to be."

"I'm not at all sure about that," said Mr. Quinby dubiously. "I'll admit that 'Bull' Hendricks is a finished workman when it comes to the use of pet names, after he's been stirred up by some

bonehead play. But, after all, he doesn't use the paddle."

"Paddle!" came the exclamation in chorus.

"That's what I said. Paddle. In my day it was used by almost all the coaches, as an aid to quick thinking. Some advocate it even yet. The coach would take up his position right behind some line man when the ball was about to be put into play in practice.

"Now, my son,' he would say, 'the minute the ball is snapped back I'm going to give you a fearful whack with this paddle. It's up to you to jump so fast that the paddle won't find anything to hit.'

"Did it work? I should say it did. Sometimes the paddle would catch him and sometimes it wouldn't, but after a few days of that the slowest of them would be off like a flash the instant the ball was snapped back. After that it wouldn't be necessary. They'd got the habit of a quick start. And you fellows know that that is the secret of good football, as it is of almost everything else—to get the jump on the other fellows.

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"Nowadays, the methods are more often mental than physical. One coach I know works it something like this:

"I want you to imagine that I have a loaded shotgun in my hand and that I am going to pull the trigger when the ball is snapped, and that you must get out of range before I fill you full of shot.'

"No doubt both methods help in the development of speed, but as between the two, my money goes on the paddle.

"But now," he said, as he made a motion to rise, "I'll have to go. I've had a bully good time with you fellows, but I'm keeping you from your studies and then, too, there are one or two of the old Profs I want to see before I turn in. I'll see you again before I go and I'll be there with bells on where the big games are pulled off. Good luck," and although they urged him to stay longer, he and Ralph took their leave.

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"Great old sport, isn't he?" said Tom, when they were left alone.

"All to the good," replied Bert heartily.

"Let's hope that last 'good luck' of his was prophetic," remarked Dick.

"It's up to us to make it so," said Bert thoughtfully. "Of course there is such a thing as luck, but I've usually noticed that luck and pluck go together."

"O, I don't know," said skeptical Tom. "Sometimes a 'jinx' follows a man or a team, and everything goes against them. You've heard of the man

Whose horse went dead and his mule went lame,
And he lost his cow in a poker game,
And a cyclone came on a summer day
And blew the house where he lived away.
Then an earthquake came when that was done,
And swallowed the ground that the house stood on.
Then a tax collector, he came round
And charged him up with the hole in the ground."

"Some hard luck story, sure enough," grinned Bert. "Heaven forbid that any such hoodoo get after us. But, somehow, the result of the game to-day and Mr. Quinby's talk have braced me up, and I feel a mighty sight more hopeful than I did yesterday."

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"Same here," acquiesced Dick. "I've a hunch that we're due to give the 'Greys' and 'Maroons' a great big licking. At any rate, if we lose, they'll know they've been in a fight, and we'll try to take our medicine gracefully."

"Spoken like a sport, old man," cried Bert, clapping him on the shoulder. "God loves a cheerful giver, but the whole world loves a cheerful loser."

CHAPTER IV

[52]

BREAKING THE RULES

"YES," remarked Tom, following up a conversation he and his two comrades had been engaged in for some time, "there's certainly something radically wrong with Martin, and personally I believe he's hitting the booze, or something just as bad. There's always some explanation when a fellow goes all to pieces the way he has, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred the answer is 'red-eye.'"

"I wouldn't be surprised if you were right, Tom," agreed Bert soberly, "and it's too bad, too. Martin has always been such a good scout that I hate to see him going back. What he needs is to have somebody give him a heart-to-heart talk and point out the error of his ways to him. But

likely even that would do little good, anyway. When drink once gets a hold on a man it usually takes more than talk to break him of the habit."

"You can bet your hat it does," put in Dick. "I guess nobody who hasn't actually fallen a victim of the liquor habit and then broken himself of it can have any idea of the struggle necessary to do it. The only safe way is to let the 'stuff' strictly alone." [53]

"Right you are," said Bert earnestly. "Everybody thinks that liquor will never get a grip on him. Oh, no! But what most people never take into account is the fact that every drink of whiskey taken weakens the will just a little, and makes it just so much harder to refuse the next drink. So it goes on, in increasing ratio, until it becomes next to impossible for the victim to break himself of the habit. My idea is, don't monkey with a red-hot poker and you won't get hurt. If you do, no matter how careful you may be, you're apt to get hold of the hot end, and then it's too late to wish you hadn't."

"My, Bert, you could get a job as lecturer for the W. C. T. U.," laughed Dick. "But just the same," he continued more seriously, "there's not a doubt in the world but what you're dead right. But the question is, if Martin, as we have reason to believe, has started drinking, what can we do to help him? Not only for his sake, but for the sake of the college. Without him on the team, we'd be so badly crippled that we wouldn't have a chance in the world to win the championship."

"I don't know what we can do, I'm sure," said Bert with a perplexed frown; "about all we can do is sit tight, and hope he'll see the error of his ways before he gets so bad that Reddy will have to fire him from the squad." [54]

The others had no suggestions to offer, and after a little further discussion of the problem they gathered up their paraphernalia and went to their respective rooms.

The foregoing conversation took place on a Monday evening, and all the next day the three comrades saw comparatively little of each other, all being "up to their eyes in work," as Tom expressed it. But on Wednesday morning they happened to meet on the campus after the first lecture period, and Tom proposed that that evening, after supper, they take a ramble through the town after they had prepared their work for the following day.

"I'm beginning to feel stale," he complained; "Reddy won't let us go to a theater, of course, because that would keep us up too late. But I guess he'd have no objection to our taking a walk like that, provided we got back early."

"All right," said Bert. "I was just going to propose something of the kind myself. You'll come, won't you, Dick?"

"Surest thing you know," agreed that personage promptly. "What time do you want to go? About seven o'clock?"

The others were agreeable to this, and so the matter was settled. They talked a few minutes more, and then hurried away to the classrooms. [55]

In accordance with this plan, they met at the appointed time in Bert's room, and sallied merrily forth. And indeed, it seemed as though these three needed no other entertainment than they could give each other. What with jokes, laughter, and "monkey-shines" the time passed very quickly, and they soon found themselves on one of the main thoroughfares of the town. They sauntered along, extracting amusement from everything they saw, and were about to return to the college, when Bert's laughing face suddenly grew grave.

They were approaching a brilliantly lighted saloon at the time, and Bert halted his companions with a gesture.

"What's up, Bert?" inquired Tom and Dick in surprise.

"I may be mistaken," replied Bert, "but I'm sure I saw Martin go into that place. And I should think, by the way he was walking, that he'd absorbed a few drinks already. What do you think we ought to do about it?"

"We might wait around until he comes out, and then give him a talking to," suggested Dick.

"No, I think that the best thing we can do is to go in and catch him red handed," said Bert. "It may make him so ashamed of himself that he'll cut out such things in the future." [56]

"Well, perhaps that would be best," said Dick, and as Tom seemed to think so too, they decided to follow this course of action.

Accordingly, they made their way through the swinging doors, and found themselves in the brilliantly lighted interior of the saloon. Rows of glasses behind the polished mahogany bar sparkled in the light, and many mirrors reflected it, so that at first their eyes were almost dazzled. Nevertheless, they had little difficulty in locating Martin. He was leaning up against the far end of the bar, a whiskey decanter in front of him, and a glass a third full of the liquor in his hand.

Even as the boys watched him he raised the glass to his lips, and emptied the contents at two gulps. He was starting to pour out another portion when Bert walked swiftly up to him and laid his hand on his arm.

"Come on along out of this, Martin," he said: "we're all going back to the college now, and you'd better come back with us."

Martin turned toward him, but hardly seemed to recognize him. He was about to speak when the bartender, who saw a good customer being taken away from him, interfered.

"Aw, let de gent alone, can't youse," he said, in a belligerent tone; "he's got a right to take a drink or two if he wants to, ain't he? He don't look like no kid to need a guardian." [57]

"You keep out of this," said Bert, with a steely glint in his eyes, "this is our business, not yours, and if you want to steer clear of trouble don't try to mix in."

The bartender seemed inclined at first to try the efficacy of force, but as Dick and Tom ranged up alongside Bert, he thought better of it.

"Awright," he grumbled, "awright. Take the guy along wid youse, an' I wish you joy of him."

Martin at first refused to move, but at last, by dint of much persuasion, the three comrades prevailed on him to go with them. Bert and Tom supported him on either side, guiding his uncertain footsteps to the best of their ability.

"I only hope we don't meet any one we know," said Dick fervently. "We'd better take a roundabout course going back, so as to take as little chance as possible of that happening."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," said Tom, "and I think it would be a good stunt for me to go on ahead and do a little scouting. I could meet you at the east gate and let you know if the coast is clear. If possible, we want to get Mart to his room without anybody getting on to the state of affairs." [58]

"All right, go ahead," acquiesced Bert, "we'll get there as soon as we can."

Accordingly Tom set off at a round pace, and soon came within sight of the college towers. Fortunately, there was a swimming contest going on in the natatorium, and many students who ordinarily would have been apt to be wandering about on the campus were indoors watching the swimmers. There was hardly a soul to be seen, and Tom prayed that the favorable conditions might last until Bert and Dick arrived with their unfortunate charge.

He hurried to the appointed meeting place, and strained his eyes through the darkness in search of the trio that he knew must be pretty near by this time. Sure enough, in less than five minutes they emerged from a neighboring street, and Tom walked swiftly up to them.

"We're in luck," he said, in a low tone. "Everybody's in the natatorium watching the swimming meet, and we've got the campus practically to ourselves. I'll walk in front of Martin, and the chances are we'll get him to his room without anybody getting wise."

Bert and Dick accordingly hurried Martin forward as fast as possible, and, as Tom had predicted, found everything favorable to them. They hurried across the deserted campus, and entered the dormitory in which Martin's room was located by a side door. [59]

By the greatest good fortune they met no one in the corridors, and in a very few moments had the "high life" exponent safely in his room.

"Well, that's about all we can do to-night," said Bert, as they were leaving the room. "I think the best thing will be to let him sleep off the effects of his carouse, and then give him a talking to to-morrow."

"I think we'd better leave that to you," said Dick, after exchanging glances with Tom. "Probably if we all got at him at once, it would only make him obstinate. You do the talking for all of us, Bert. Show Mart what bad medicine he's been mixing, and maybe he'll come around to your point of view."

"Well," agreed Bert, but with evident reluctance, "I suppose that would be the best way to do it. I'll get hold of him some time to-morrow, and talk to him like a Dutch uncle."

Accordingly, the next day he was on the lookout for the backslider. Several times in the course of the day he saw him, but Martin always managed to avoid him, more by design than accident, as Bert thought. At last, however, after the last recitation period, he cornered him in a secluded corner of the campus. [60]

"I guess you know what I want to say to you, don't you, Mart?" he inquired gravely.

"Oh, yes, I guess I know, all right," the other replied sullenly, "but there's no use your preaching to me about the evils of drink, or anything like that. I've tried to cut out the stuff, and I can't, that's all. I'm going to Reddy to-night and resign from the team."

"You're not going to do anything of the kind," said Bert gravely, "you're going to keep right on being the best halfback the college ever had, but I'm going to ask a personal favor of you on behalf of myself, and also Trent and Henderson."

"I think I know what you mean," said Martin suspiciously, "but fire away and ask it."

"We want you to go to Reddy and make a clean breast of it, ending up by promising to do your best to cut out the 'stuff,'" said Bert. "Will you do it? Don't say no now," as the other started to

shake his head, "don't give me an answer now, if you don't want to. Think it over. I'm mighty sure if you think hard enough you'll do what we want you to."

"I'll do it!" exclaimed Martin, suddenly thrusting out his hand, "and I'll let the booze alone in the future if it takes a leg. You and the others have done me a bigger service than you'll ever realize, probably."

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"Well, you know the way you can best repay it," said Bert, with a hearty smile, and after another strong handclasp they parted.

Bert went straight to Dick and Tom, and told them what he had accomplished. "I think he'll keep his word, too," he finished. And as it proved, he, was right. From that day forward Martin reported regularly for practice, and kept strictly to training table regulations. In less than a week he was back to his old time form, and became as he had been before, one of the mainstays of the team.

CHAPTER V

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TACKLING THE ARMY

"THIS looks like a case of bearding the lion in his den," remarked Dick, as the stately steamer on which they had embarked at New York that morning swept up to the landing at West Point, and the boys were gathering up their traps to go ashore.

"It's certainly a stiff contract to tackle the future leaders of the United States Army," replied Tom. "But we're the boys to do it, and to lick them, too. If that be treason, make the most of it."

"Don't you be too sure of that," admonished Bert. "From all I hear, they're a husky set of brutes, and we're likely to have our hands full. They've never been easy picking and we'd better postpone our jubilee till after the game."

"Punk philosophy," countered Tom. "Let's have it now and make sure of it."

He was clearly a hopeless case, and they gave up the task of subduing his levity, and started for the gang plank.

It was a large party that had come up the river on that glorious day in early October, to test the prowess and mettle of the cadets. The team itself with the substitutes numbered over thirty, and there was a small army of rubbers and other attendants. To these were added several hundred of the college boys, and these were further reinforced by a host of "old grads" who sniffed the battle from afar and couldn't resist the temptation to "come on along," and root for the youngsters on their scalp-hunting expedition.

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The game with the Army was always one of the events of the football season. Although not ranked with the "big three," they followed close behind, and once in a while gave the "top-liners" a hard struggle to avoid defeat. Only the year before, they had held the Blues to a 6 to 0 score, and on a muddy field had played a tie with the "Maroons" after a Homeric contest. They were not "easy meat" for any one, and the coaches of every team had learned not to hold them lightly.

This year, disquieting rumors had leaked out from West Point as to the strength of the team. They were said to have the heaviest aggregation behind the line that they had had in twenty years, and it was freely predicted that here, if anywhere, the Blues might find themselves overmatched. The fullback was a new recruit who weighed close to two hundred pounds, and despite his weight was said to be as fast as greased lightning. The two halves were both veterans, and one of them the previous season had been picked for the All-American team in his position. In addition they had a powerful set of guards and tackles, and it was universally acknowledged that their quarterback was one that it would be hard to match on any of the big teams.

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Still the Blues were not greatly stirred up by this advance information. If they were to be "licked," it would have to be by actual speed and muscle on the field, and not by "dope" that might prove fallacious.

"They can't come too big or heavy to suit," philosophized Drake. "The bigger they are the harder they fall."

There was a stiff wind blowing when the rival teams came on the field, and in the toss for position the Army won. As the teams lined up for the kick-off, there was a tremendous outburst of cheers from the Army supporters who, of course, vastly outnumbered the loyal Blues who had accompanied their team. What the latter lacked in numbers, however, was made up by the enthusiasm with which they cheered the wearers of the Blue colors, that had waved triumphantly over so many hard-fought fields, and which, they hoped, was now to add another trophy to their list.

Since the Blues had lost the toss for position, they were entitled to the kick-off. Bert took careful aim and lifted the ball far and high. Ordinarily it would have been good for at least fifty yards, but the wind limited it to thirty-five. Caldwell was down under it like a flash, but Birch, of

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the Army, made a fair catch and kicked back for twenty yards. Drake got possession of the ball, and the Blues had it on the Army's forty yard line.

A forward pass, superbly engineered by Tom, gave them twelve yards. They gained eight more on two successive downs, but were penalized five yards for off-side play. On the next play they gained their distance, but on the next, in attempting to skirt the end, Axtell dropped the ball, and the Army left pounced upon it instantly.

It was now the Army's ball, and they immediately started to try a plunging game. The Blue line held like a rock, however, and then the Army tried one of their favorite formations. They lined up as though for a kick, but the back who had dropped behind as if for that purpose, either tried a forward pass or made a quick dash around the ends. To complicate the play still further, it was sometimes passed to still another back before the attempt was made. It was a clever "fake," and against a weaker or slower team might have worked. But the Blues had practiced many a weary hour in breaking up just such a combination, and they met it and smothered it so effectually, that before long the Army recognized its futility and fell back on straight football. [66]

And here for the first quarter they fairly held their own. McAlpin, their giant fullback, proved a tower of strength, and when he was given the ball plunged through the line like a thunderbolt. There seemed to be no holding him, and his team backed him up so powerfully that he made his distance easily on the four downs. The ball was still in the Army's possession when the referee's whistle announced the end of the first quarter, and the field was swept by the cheers of the cadets at the gallant way in which their favorites had made a stand against the most famous team in the country.

In the short rest between quarters, there was a hurried council of the Blues.

"Buck up, fellows, for heaven's sake," urged Bert. "We mustn't let these Army men outplay us. What'll the boys at home think of us? They've already got the bulletin of this quarter, and they're wondering what on earth is the matter with us. Get a move on now and show them some real football. Just go in and eat them up."

This was an eminently desirable thing from the Blue standpoint, but the cadets refused to subscribe to such a cannibal programme. They were not ready to glut anybody's appetite. On the contrary, their own was whetted by their sturdy resistance so far, and their ambition was rapidly growing. They had really not had much idea of winning at the outset. It would have been almost more than they dared to hope to hold these doughty warriors to a tie. Failing that, they hoped possibly to cross the enemy's goal line for at least one score or perhaps more. But their wildest hopes had hardly soared so high as to count on actual victory. Now, however, that they had locked horns with their adversaries and found to their delight and surprise that they were holding them on even terms, they were fired with a mighty determination to win. [67]

Nor did the second quarter dim their hopes. The Blues had not yet found themselves. There was a cog missing somewhere in the machinery. Technically, their playing was not open to much adverse criticism. Their passing was accurate and their tackling fair, but they were too mechanical and automatic. They needed something to wake them up.

That something came more quickly than any one expected. Out of a scrimmage on the forty yard line of the Army, a flying figure emerged, with the ball tucked under his arm. Twisting, dodging, ducking, he threaded his way through the field, bowling over Caldwell, eluding Axtell's outstretched arms and bearing down upon the Blue goal. As he neared Bert, who was running in a diagonal line to head him off, he swerved sharply to the right in an attempt to pass this last obstacle between him and a touchdown. But in a twinkling Bert had launched himself against him, gauging the distance unerringly, and they both came heavily to the ground on the Blue's ten yard line. [68]

It was the Army's ball with only ten yards to go! The stands went frantic as the teams lined up for a last desperate trial of strength. The Blues were thoroughly awake now. All their apathy was gone at this moment of deadly peril, and they swore to themselves to hold that precious ten yards if they died in doing it.

The jubilant Army men called on McAlpin, their giant fullback, to buck the line. He went into it like a maddened bull, but Dick at center refused to give an inch. He tried again at left and made two yards through Ellis. A hole made by his guards between Axtell and Martin yielded three more. Five yards yet to go and only one chance left! Once more he braced and hurled himself savagely against the right side of the line. But Bert was crouching there in readiness, his six feet of bone and muscle instinct with power and resolution. He went into McAlpin like a human pile driver, and threw him back for a loss of four yards. The goal was safe and the ball belonged to the Blues on their ten yard line. It had been a close call, and a murmur of disappointment went up from the Army partisans, while the Blue stands rocked with applause. [69]

The elevens lined up and Tom snapped the ball to Dick, who passed it to Bert, five feet behind the line. The ball rose from his toe like a bird and soared down to the forty yard line. From there the Blues rushed it down to within thirty yards of the Army goal before the whistle announced the end of the second quarter.

It was a different crowd that gathered in the Blues' dressing rooms in the interval that followed. That threat against their goal line was the electric spark that was necessary in order to shock them into action. They were worked up to fighting pitch. Their eyes were blazing, their

features grim, and "Bull" Hendricks, who was primed to lash them to the bone with his bitter tongue, wisely forebore. He saw that they were fairly fuming with eagerness for the fray, and after making some minor changes in the line-up—Ellis having sprained his ankle and Caldwell broken a finger—he sent them out with the single exhortation to "hammer the heart out of them."

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It wasn't as classic as Wellington's "Up, Guards, and at them," but quite as effective. Against that electrified and rejuvenated team, the Army didn't have a chance. Their highly raised hopes went glimmering before the raging onslaught of the Blues. Every man worked as though the outcome of the game depended upon him alone. They plunged into the crumbling lines of the Army like so many wild men. Their opponents fought back nobly, furiously, desperately, but to no avail. The "class" was with the Blues, and as this fact was driven home to the spectators, deep gloom settled over the Army stands, while from the opposite side the old college song went booming down the field.

The Blues were bent on massacre. They charged hard and played fast. Dick plunged through the line again and again like a battering ram for tremendous gains. Tom did some dazzling running back of punts. Drake hit the forwards hard and often, and Axtell tackled with deadly accuracy, laying out his victims all over the field.

As for Bert at fullback, no such demon playing had been seen at West Point for a generation. His handling of the forward pass was a delight to the eye, and even the hostile stands were stirred at times to involuntary applause. Twice he carried the ball over for a touchdown—once by straight bucking and again by a spectacular run of fifty-five yards through a broken field. The quarter ended with a result of 15 to 0 in favor of the visitors.

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From that time on, it was only a question of the size of the score. The battle had become a rout. In the last quarter the ball was in the Army territory all the time. There was no necessity now for tricks to further befuddle the demoralized cadets. By "straight football" the Blues pursued their victorious course down the field and added two more goals before the game was called, with the ball on the fifteen yard line, and destined, had the play continued two minutes longer, to make a final touchdown. It was a dashing victory, gallantly won after an inauspicious start. The weary players drew the first long breath they had permitted themselves since the start of the game. The cadets, game as pebbles, gave their conquerors the rousing Army cheer and the Blues responded vigourously. The rival teams fraternized for a while and then the Blues retired to their quarters to dress and make their "get-away."

Naturally, despite the immense fatigue that weighed them down, they were tingling with exultation. It was the first time they had been pitted against a really big team, and they had clearly outclassed them. The contests with the smaller colleges had been little more than practice, and in most cases the scrub could have won as certainly if not as overwhelmingly as the 'Varsity. And the victory to-day had been won not by a "fluke," but by clearcut playing. To be sure, the memory of the first part of the game kept rising up like Banquo's ghost to make them uncomfortable. But they had redeemed that so royally in the final half as to silence the most captious critic.

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Moreover, they had come through that crucial contest in good shape. There had been no serious accident to weaken the team. The injuries to Ellis and Caldwell were only trivial and in a week they would be as well as ever. Of course there were minor wounds and bruises galore, but they were incident to the hardening process and were of no consequence.

The mere fact that they had won, satisfying as it was, counted for little compared with the enormous benefit of the game in welding the team together. It had taken eleven stars and molded them into a team. No individual brilliancy, however great, can atone for the lack of team work. To-day they had tested each other, supported each other, played into each other's hands, forgotten that they were anything but parts of one great, smoothly moving, swiftly running machine. And, having so tested his fellows, each one would play with the confidence and self-forgetfulness that alone can win a championship.

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For all these reasons, it was a very hilarious bunch that foregathered in the dressing rooms and tumbled into their clothes, after the soothing ministrations of shower and rubdown.

"I guess we're poor, eh, old top," chuckled Tom, as he poked Bert in the ribs.

"Ouch," responded that worthy, "haven't I been punched enough to-day without you soaking me? I'm black and blue all over."

"I don't wonder," put in Dick. "The way that big McAlpin lammed into you was a crime. He piled on me in one of the scrimmages, and I thought the Flatiron building had fallen."

"He's a tough bird, all right," said Drake, "but he ran up against a tougher one when he tried to go through Bert for that last down in the second quarter. I never saw anything prettier than the way Bert flung him back as though he had been a lightweight. I caught the bewildered look on his face as he went over. He didn't know for a minute what had hit him."

"It was the only thing that saved us from being scored on," said Martin. "It's the tightest place we've been in so far this season."

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"Well, a miss is as good as a mile," said Bert, slipping on his coat. "But hurry up, you fellows, and let us tackle some eats. I'm so hungry that it hurts."

He had struck a responsive chord and in a few minutes they were on their way to the mess hall of the cadets, who had insisted that they should be their guests at supper.

To reach the dining hall they had to cross the baseball field, abandoned now in the early fall, but the scene of fierce diamond battles earlier in the season. To Bert and Tom and Dick it brought back the memory of the great game they had played there two years before—a game that had gone into extra innings, and had been won by a wonderful bit of playing on the part of Tom who was holding down third.

"Remember that game, Tom?" asked Bert.

"O, no," mocked Dick. "He doesn't remember. A man who has made a triple play unassisted never thinks of it again."

"He's blushing," exclaimed Drake. "Look at him, fellows. What a shrinking violet."

Tom made a pass at him.

"A mere bit of luck," he countered. "You fellows give me a pain."

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But there had been no luck about it. The game had been bitterly fought, and at the end of the ninth the score was a tie. The Blues had got a man round in the tenth, and the cadets went in to do or die. Before long the crowds were on their feet and screaming like maniacs. There was a man on third, another on second, nobody out, and the heaviest slugger in the nine was at the bat. Amid exhortations to "kill it," he caught the ball squarely on the end of his bat and sent it whistling toward third about two feet over Tom's head. He made a tremendous leap, reaching up his gloved hand, and the ball stuck there. The batter was out, but the man on third, thinking it was a sure hit, was racing like mad to the plate. As Tom came down he landed squarely on the bag, thus putting out the runner, who had by this time realized his mistake and was trying desperately to get back. In the meantime, the man on second, who had taken a big lead, was close to third. As he turned to go back to second, Tom chased him and touched him out just before he reached the bag. The game was won, three men were out, and the bewildered spectators were rubbing their eyes and trying to make out just what had happened. They had seen a "triple play unassisted," the thing that every player dreams of making, and one of the rarest feats ever pulled off on the baseball diamond.

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"We've certainly got the edge on Uncle Sam's boys in both baseball and football," commented Dick, in discussing the incident, "but it's only an edge. They always make us extend ourselves to win."

They had a royal time at the mess hall and afterward at the barracks, where both the vanquished and victors mingled on terms of the most cordial good fellowship. But the demands of training were not to be set aside, and all too soon they were forced to tear themselves away and repair to their hotel. By ten o'clock they were in their beds, lights were out, and they were sleeping as only a college team can sleep after a day of such storm and stress.

After Reddy had made his rounds and assured himself that all his charges had retired, he joined "Bull" Hendricks for a chat and smoke over the day's happenings. Few things had escaped their keen eyes during that crowded hour, when conditions and formations changed with the swiftness of a kaleidoscope. And now that it was all over, they could recall every play, every gain, every fumble, every pass, with a precision that would have been astounding to any one less versed than they in every turn and angle of the game.

Their mood was one of deep, if quiet, satisfaction. A long and bitter experience had made them cautious in prediction. They were by no means ready to admit yet, even to themselves, that they had a team of "world beaters." There were still a host of faults to be corrected, of raw edges to be polished off, of plays to be developed. But, on the whole, the boys had done surprisingly well. The dogged way in which they had held the enemy when their goal was threatened was worthy of the best "bulldog" tradition. And the slashing, ding dong way in which they had worked the ball down the field in the last half had been gratifying beyond words. It showed that the "never say die" spirit, that they had tried so hard to instill, was there in abundance.

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There was still another cause for congratulation. They had not been forced to uncover any of the new tricks that they were holding in reserve for the championship games. At one point, in the early part of the game, they had feared this might be necessary, but the quick recovery later on had enabled them to depend upon straight football. The scouts for the "Greys" and "Maroons," several of whom had been "spotted" in the stands, had had "their trouble for their pains," and the coach was greatly elated in consequence.

"They'll go home with an empty bag from this day's hunting," he chuckled.

"They sure will," assented Reddy, as he filled and lighted his faithful cob. "And I'm thinking 'tis a little bit shaky they are, after seeing the way we ripped up the Army line."

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"That boy Wilson is certainly a hummer," commented Hendricks, flicking the ash from his cigar. "I haven't seen such plunging and line bucking since the days of Heffelfinger. You could no more stop him than you could a runaway horse."

"He's all there, full sixteen ounces to the pound," was Reddy's emphatic endorsement. "I've seen some crack fullbacks in my time, but none to top him. He's got the weight, he's got the

speed, and as for nerve, begorra! Did ye note the way he toyed with that big rhinoceros, McAlpin?"

"What he did to him was plenty," laughed Hendricks. "I guess that's one position we don't need to worry about any longer. And I'm feeling pretty good, too, about Trent and Henderson. They worked together at quarter and center like a pair of shears. Axtell tackled like a tiger, and if he keeps it up, we can count on him as a fixture. And Drake, too, did some dandy work at end. Did you see the way he got down under Wilson's punts? Johnny-on-the-spot, every time the ball came down."

"For them five positions there's nothing better in sight," said Reddy. [79]

"I rather think so," acquiesced the coach. "There's only one weak spot in the back field, and that's at left half. Martin, for some reason, isn't playing his game. He's too slow in starting, and he doesn't tackle as hard and fast as he ought to. Then, too, he's a little bit thick when it comes to the signals. He got mixed up twice to-day, and he was all at sea on that 'fake' pass in the second quarter. He needs more blackboard work, and I'm going to see that he gets it."

"But it's in the line that we've got to make some changes. Most of the forwards to-day would have been 'pie' for the 'Greys' or 'Maroons.' I can excuse Caldwell for not playing his best, since he broke his finger in the beginning of the game and nobody knew it until twenty minutes later. Plucky of the youngster, but he ought to have told us. Ellis is all right, but that's the second time his bum ankle has given way, and I don't know whether he can stand the strain of a big game. Hodge has got the weight and the strength, but he leaves too much of the work to Trent. As for Boyd, I'm afraid he lacks sand."

"I saw him flinch to-day, when McAlpin piled into him," mused Reddy.

"I'm going to try out Warren a little longer," went on Hendricks. "There's good stuff in that boy, but I'm afraid there's hardly enough beef. But he's trying all the time, and never lets up till the whistle blows. Perhaps I'll let him change places with Martin and see how it works. He's quick as a flash and an expert at dodging, and he may make a better back than he is a tackle. We'll shift him there for a tryout. [80]

"I'll have to keep quite a bunch of them 'under suspicion' for some time yet, and we may have quite a different line up by November. But, take it all in all, I'm not kicking at the way we're going along, so early in the season. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't let them know for a farm how good I really feel over their showing. I'd like to get a line, though, on the other teams. By the way, I saw you talking with Bushnell, the old 'Grey' quarter. Did that Irish blarney of yours get anything out of him?"

"Niver a bit," mourned Reddy. "I did me best, but he was as close-mouthed as a clam. I ran across a reporter though, who's been down that way lately, and he says they're going great guns in practice."

"They're the fellows we've got to beat. That agrees with everything I've heard from that quarter. We're heavier and I think we're faster than the 'Maroons' this year. But from all accounts the 'Greys' have got everything, and then some. They'll take a lot of beating." [81]

"Hivin send that they take it instead of giving it," ejaculated Reddy; and with Hendricks' grunted indorsement of this pious wish, the captain and first mate of the football craft parted for the night.

CHAPTER VI [82]

REDDY'S RECOLLECTIONS

IN spite of the trainer's autocratic rule, the life of the team while in training was not just one long grind, without any recreation to break the monotony. Reddy, it is true, prohibited theaters and kindred amusements, because they necessarily meant late hours, and late hours, as the trainer well knew, meant decreased efficiency, both physical and mental.

Nevertheless, he had no objection to the athletes playing quiet games of an evening, provided they were well up in their studies, and sometimes even contributed to the general enjoyment by spinning some yarn culled from his own vast store of "past performances."

Whenever the members of the squad found him in a reminiscent mood, all other amusements were suspended, and they would listen attentively to the little trainer's reminiscences of victories won on field and track.

In his day Reddy had taken part in almost every branch of sport, and could tell stories about them all. For some time this particular evening he had not uttered a word, however, and had sat listening to the conversation of his charges with a faraway look in his twinkling blue eyes. The boys had been talking of motorcycling, and had been discussing Bert's record-breaking run across the continent. [83]

In a lull of the conversation he spoke up.

"Motorcycle racing is all right in its way," he said, "but for real sport on two wheels give me the old bicycling days. Why, we had more fun then at one meet than you guys have now in a whole season. I call to mind one time——"

Reddy stopped to light the pipe that he had been carefully packing with rather rank tobacco, and there was a general movement toward him while he was taking the first few puffs. Feet and chairs scraped, and by the time he had his pipe pulling satisfactorily there was a ring of interested faces gathered about him.

"I suppose you think I'm going to spin ye a yarn now, ye good-for-naughts, don't ye?" he inquired, with a ferocious glance around the circle.

"If you back out now, Reddy," laughed Bert, "after getting us worked up this way, we'll all swear to throw the next game we play, just to get even with you."

"Well, I suppose I'll have to satisfy you, that bein' the case," said Reddy, his assumed ferocity of demeanor melting down into a broad grin, "although 'tis not much of a tale at that."

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"'Twas in the palmy days of the bike, when everybody that could possibly scrape the price together owned one. A bicycle race in them days meant somethin', let me tell you, and people for fifty miles around would organize parties to go see it.

"Well, I had the fever just like everybody else, and after a while, when I'd saved up enough, me and a friend bought a tandem machine. It cost a pretty penny all right, but it was a well-built machine, and had better stuff in it than most bikes you see nowadays.

"My partner, whose name was Barney Keogh, and myself took many a long spin on it, and many a time had sprints with other 'speed boys' out on the road. We got so we could hit it up at a pretty hot clip, but neither of us ever thought of going into the racing game.

"But one fine Sunday there was a big meet to be held at the old Newark track, in New Jersey, and we made up our minds to go see it. We started out bright an' early and took it easy along the road enjoyin' the scenery and the fresh, mornin' air. 'Twas in the early spring, I remember, and we both felt like two colts that had just been turned loose in a big pasture.

"We just took it easy though, for we had quite a long pull ahead of us, and we was enjoyin' ourselves too much to want to hurry anyway. We got to the track a good hour before the first race was slated to start, and after puttin' our bike in a safe place we meandered around, seein' if we could locate anybody we knew. We hadn't gone far when I heard someone callin' my name, and when I turned I saw a feller named Robertson, a man I'd worked for once. I introduced Barney, and we hadn't talked very long before Robertson informed me that he was one of the committee in charge of affairs. 'Come on around with me to the judges box,' he invited, 'an I'll get you a couple of good seats.'

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"O' course that was pretty soft for us, so we trailed along with him and he located us in fine seats not far from the judges box. Of course we thanked him and then he shook hands and hurried off.

"Well, the first events passed off all right, although they were rather tame, and then came the big race, which for that day happened to be a tandem race. There was a big purse offered for the winner, and there were several entrants. But for some reason there was a long wait, and first thing we knew there was Robertson coming toward us, his face red and perspirin' and his collar wilted.

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"He rushes up to us, and leans over and whispers:

"'Say, Reddy,' he says, 'you can help us out if you want to. We're shy an entrant. One of the teams hasn't shown up, and according to the conditions of the race no less than six entrants can start. We've only got five, and if the race isn't ridden the crowd will go wild. Here's a chance for you and your friend to help us out of a bad fix and at the same time maybe win a nice piece of money for yourselves.'

"Well, at first Barney and me was knocked flat, an' then we turned down the proposition cold. But Robertson wouldn't take no for an answer.

"'It can't hurt you any, can it?' he said. 'An' if you should win, think of the coin you'd pull down. Why, you've got everything to win and nothing to lose.'

"Well, to make a long story short, he finally talked us into it, and we beat it around and got our machine. By the time we got on the track the crowd was getting pretty impatient, and Robertson hustled us around to the starting line.

"'Do your best, boys,' he says, 'it's a ten mile race, so don't put all your steam into it at once. Let one of the others set the pace and then you come up at the end.'

"It sounded easy all right, but I guess both Barney and I were more than a little doubtful about that 'coming up at the end' business. But it was too late to back out then, so we lined up in front of the starter's stand, and when the pistol cracked made a pretty fast getaway.

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"We weren't in it with some of those professionals though, and before we'd hit our speed at all

they had several yards lead over us. But we were feeling pretty strong at that. I was steering the bike, and I could feel Barney pushing along like a steam engine. But at first it was all we could do to hold our own, no matter how hard we pedaled. Pretty soon I began to feel mighty tired I can tell you, and I guess Barney must have, too, because we began dropping behind. But we kept on pushing like mad, and pretty soon we began to get our second wind. And then we certainly made that old tandem hum! We burned up that track for fair, and before very long were on equal terms with the last team. We crept steadily past them, and before the end of the sixth mile our front wheel was even with the back wheel of the leaders.

"Well, by that time the crowd had begun to sit up and take notice, and before we had covered another mile everybody was on their feet, cheering like mad and waving flags. But no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't seem to draw up even with the leading machine. By that time the blood was beating through my head fit to burst it, and I suppose Barney must have felt the same way. But neither of us was exactly what you might call a quitter, so we kept on. And by the end of the ninth mile they hadn't more than the length of one wheel's lead over us! As we started the last lap I could feel the old bike shove forward, and I knew that Barney had some reserve strength left. That kind o' put heart into me, too, and I put everything I had into that last mile, believe me. Between us we pretty nearly lifted that tandem off the ground at every stroke, I guess. Anyway, we crawled up on the leaders inch by inch, and managed to cross the finishing line a scant foot ahead of them.

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"Well, I don't think I ever saw a much more excited crowd than that one. They swarmed down onto the track, and it was only by makin' a mighty quick sneak that we managed to get away from them. We weren't feeling like being made heroes of just then, let me tell you. We were just about all in."

"Believe me, I'd like to have been there," exclaimed Bert, as Reddy finished; "it must have been a real race for fair. I should think that after that you and your friend would have gone into professional bicycle racing."

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"We did try to," confessed the trainer with a grin, "but we could never seem to do as well again, and after a few attempts we gave it up in disgust. But we found the prize money very welcome, for we were both hard up at the time.

"But now," he continued, "I've kept you up too late as it is, so off with you. Vamoose!"

CHAPTER VII

[90]

THE LION'S ESCAPE

"FELLOWS, I've got an inspiration," said Dick one evening when several of his companions, including Tom and Bert, had gathered in the latter's room.

"Well, well," said Bert, "old Dick's got an inspiration, boys. I wonder what it is? The last time Dick had an inspiration, that one about taking a cow up onto the roof of the recitation hall, we all pretty nearly got into trouble, including the cow. I think any other inspiration from the same source will have to come with first-class references and a letter of introduction. Otherwise I, for one, refuse to recognize it at all."

"If you're quite through," said Dick, with elaborate politeness, "perhaps you'd be so kind as to let me get in a word edgewise, and enlighten an expectant world regarding this inspiration. Just because the cow fell down a flight of steps that time and made everybody think there was an earthquake in progress doesn't prove that it wasn't a good idea. Accidents will often spoil the best laid plans."

"I notice something almost always does happen to plans of that kind," laughed Bert. "But go ahead and tell us your scheme. What is it? Kidnapping the dean, or just burning down one or two of the buildings."

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"Well, that wasn't what was in my mind," confessed Dick. "But now that you speak of it, either one might be worth trying. But the particular idea simmering in my massive intellect at the time I was so rudely interrupted by a certain low character, was this: There's going to be a circus in town to-morrow, and I for one feel a whole lot like going to see it. I haven't been to a circus for the last five years and I'm just honing to see this one."

"That's an inspiration as how *is* an inspiration," said Tom; "it's funny how really first-class ideas originate in unbalanced minds at times. Dick comes out real strong once in a while."

"Thanks for your valued approval," said Dick sarcastically; "how do the rest of you fellows feel about it? Want to go?"

There was a general chorus of assent, and Dick gravely declared the proposition carried by a unanimous vote. "I think it starts around half past two," he said, "and I guess we can all be there by that time, can't we?"

It appeared that everybody could, and after discussing incidents of circuses they had seen in

the past the group dispersed to their respective rooms.

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The next day was clear and bright, and at the appointed time the merry group met on the campus and took their way in high spirits toward the center of the town, where the circus had pitched its tents. Many others were going the same way, and numerous were the jokes and furious the repartee exchanged between the different groups. In a short time they reached the "big top," and after inspecting the grounds and gazing in mock wonder at the portraits of bearded ladies and wondrously thin "living skeletons," made for the gorgeously decorated ticket wagons and secured their tickets.

"It's more fun, of course," said Tom, "to crawl in under the canvas, but I'm afraid that wouldn't be quite dignified enough for me. The rest of you can go in that way if you like, however. Don't let me interfere with your pleasure."

"If you get off much more of that stuff we'll show the crowd a 'Christian martyr' stunt by feeding you to the lions," threatened Bert. "Maybe the animals could appreciate you better than we can."

"Yes, I've heard that in many respects animals are wiser than men," retorted Tom, "and I wouldn't be surprised at that. I don't see how they could have much less sense than some people I know."

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"I wonder if he means us?" inquired Bert seriously. "It hardly seems possible, does it?"

"Oh, no, I wasn't thinking of you at all," said Tom. "I was thinking of the faculty when I said that."

"Well," said Bert amid a general laugh, "in that case we'll forgive all your past offenses and start you off with a clean slate. Your sentiments regarding the faculty do you credit."

By this time the group found themselves opposite the beginning of the row of cages containing the menagerie, and started out on a tour of inspection. There was a big crowd and progress could only be made at a snail's pace. By the time they had reached the elephants it was close on to the time set for the show to begin, and after feeding the big brutes a few peanuts they hurried into the main tent. They secured seats near the top of the high tier of loose planks placed on trestles, and settled themselves to enjoy the performance. Before ascending to their places they had amply provided themselves with popcorn and peanuts, without which, as one of the fellows remarked, a "circus wasn't a circus."

The circus was one of the smaller variety, but had a reputation of giving a first-class exhibition, and in the opinion of some of the spectators was more satisfactory to watch than one of the big shows, where the very multiplicity of attractions made it difficult for the spectator to really enjoy anything. The onlooker's attention is drawn by a burst of applause in some distant line of seats, and while he is trying to make out what is going on there he misses, most likely, the act that is being performed near him.

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This circus had only two rings, but the acts presented were of a high character and our friends enjoyed everything from the opening parade to the final act, in which a man "looped the loop" on a bicycle. At the conclusion of this feat, Dick leaned over toward Bert. "Why don't you try that stunt on a bicycle some time, Bert?" he inquired, "it ought to be a cinch for you."

"Too easy, too easy," laughed Bert, "give me something hard while you're about it. Just the same," he added more seriously, "it is a mighty hard stunt, and requires nerve and skill of the highest sort. Personally, I'd rather make a living some other way."

By this time they were able to make their way through the throng to the main entrance, and were just passing through into the outer tent when they were startled by hearing shouts and screams from the direction of the animal cages. There was a wild flurry and commotion in the crowd in front of them, and suddenly they saw a great tawny form flying through the air. The people in the path of the beast scattered wildly to left and right, and the brute landed on the sawdust floor without doing any damage. He stood there a moment glaring about him, swishing his tail angrily back and forth. Meanwhile there was a mad scramble for the exits, and many persons were thrown down and trampled in the crush.

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The group of collegians had stood stupefied for a few minutes watching the escaped lion, for such the animal proved to be. The big brute seemed bewildered by the crowds and the shouting, and knew not what use to make of his new-found freedom. But suddenly he emitted a deep roar, and bounded toward the main exit, in which a struggling, shouting crowd was now solidly packed. Suddenly Bert sprang into action. "Head him off! head him off!" he shouted and, suiting the action to the word, started diagonally toward the entrance. Tom and Dick were close after him, followed by the more courageous of their companions. By this time several of the animal keepers and trainers had also struggled through the press, and were hot in pursuit of the fleeing lion. But they were too far behind to be of any good, and the lion would surely have dashed headlong into the packed mass of humanity had not Bert and the others with him intervened. They waved their hats and shouted, and the lion, somewhat taken aback, halted for a second. Then he gathered himself together and, with a mighty bound, leaped clear over their heads. With another spring he cleared the crowd at the entrance, and was free. He hesitated a moment, looking this way and that, and then, just as one of the keepers, a rifle in his hand, reached the tent entrance, bounded swiftly forward and disappeared around a corner.

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The trainers started out in hot pursuit, accompanied by Bert and his friends. "I don't want to shoot him," panted the man with the rifle as he ran, "he's worth five thousand dollars. He's one of the finest lions in captivity, and his loss would mean a bad blow to the outfit. But if I get a crack at him I'll shoot, just the same. We can't run the risk of trying to capture him alive."

It was not difficult to trace the lion's path, although not once did they actually catch sight of him. Distant shouts and cries told of the beast's progress, and their path was lined by closely shut doors and pale faces peering from upper windows. Soon they reached the outskirts of the town and then, in the more open country, were able to catch a glimpse of their quarry. He was about half a mile distant, and evidently making directly for a dense piece of woodland just ahead of him. Soon he disappeared among the trees, and the man carrying the rifle, who was evidently the head trainer, called a halt. [97]

"How far do those woods extend?" he asked Bert.

"Not very far," replied Bert. "I should say there's not more than a square mile of woodland, at most."

"Well, then," said the other, "the chances are ten to one that Leo will stick to the trees, and not come out unless he has to. In that case, all we have to do is surround the place to see that he doesn't get away. Then I don't think we'll have much trouble recapturing him."

As this seemed to be the opinion of his assistants, too, their leader sent one of them back to the circus to make a report and bring out reinforcements, and then made plans to surround the strip of woods. By this time quite a crowd had collected, and the animal trainer selected volunteers to set up a guard about the trees and give warning if the lion attempted to break cover.

"All you have to do," he explained, "is to climb a tree near where I post you, and if you see anything of the lion, sing out. He can't climb a tree, of course, so you'll be perfectly safe."

There was no lack of volunteers, and our three comrades were among the first to proffer their services. "This is a little more than we had counted on," laughed Tom; "we expected *some* excitement for our money, of course, but nothing like this." [98]

"Well, we won't kick now that it is handed to us," remarked Bert; "it begins to seem like old times again. Only that time we were up against a tiger instead of a lion."

"Yes, that's so," agreed Dick, "but I hope we don't have as close a shave this time as we had then. That was getting a little too close to the undertaker to suit me."

"No, we won't go looking for trouble the way we did that time," said Bert. "If that lion wants us, he'll have to climb a tree to get us. I'm not anxious for a fracas with a big healthy lion. I'll leave that pleasure to some one else."

By this time twilight had begun to set in, and it was with the greatest caution that the volunteers and circus men began to skirt the edge of the patch of trees. The head trainer went with them, and at intervals stationed one of the band in a convenient tree. "Just keep your eyes peeled until it's too dark to see," he instructed them, "and by that time we'll have torches from the circus. Then we'll form a ring of fire around the woods, and keep the brute inside it until daybreak. Then we'll get him, dead or alive."

In this way he made the circuit of the woods, until his last helper had been stationed to his satisfaction. Tom, Bert and Dick were stationed in succession at a distance from each other of two or three hundred yards, and accommodated themselves as best they could among the branches. They kept a sharp lookout below them, but all remained quiet and undisturbed, and it seemed hard to believe that there was lurking death in the midst of the quiet woodland. No sound reached their ears save an occasional distant shout, probably of command or direction from the head trainer. [99]

Time wore on slowly, after the first excitement had passed, and the watchers began to get thoroughly chilled in the crisp autumn air before they saw a host of twinkling lights approaching from the direction of the town. The lights grew rapidly nearer, and the watchers knew that this was the squad of men of which the trainer had spoken. Soon they reached the fire where the head trainer had made his headquarters, and after a brief halt started to surround the woods. Each man of the party held a flaring, smoking gasoline torch, and their combined strength gave a brilliant illumination. In their progress they stopped at the trees where the watchers were stationed, and one after the other relieved them. Bert, Dick and Tom were soon on the ground once more, and were glad to get an opportunity to stretch their cramped muscles. [100]

"Well, what's the plan now?" Bert asked one of the men.

"Oh, there's nothing we can do till daylight," he answered, "we'll just hang around and make sure that the lion doesn't get out of these woods. Then we'll capture him some way, and hustle to catch up with the rest of the outfit."

"Why, have they gone on without you fellows?" asked Tom in surprise.

"Sure," replied the other; "we're due in the next town to-morrow, and a little thing like a lion getting away can't stop us. Nothing much less than an earthquake could, anyway."

And indeed, it was very much as the fellow said. A circus simply must meet its engagements on

time, or else go out of business. Its agents go on days in advance of it, advertising and pasting bill posters over the surrounding landscape, and if the show isn't on time all the cost of this is wasted, besides the loss of prestige to the circus, not to say anything of the loss of the day's gate receipts.

Therefore, the circus from which the lion had escaped struck its tents and traveled on exactly as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. To be sure, it was hindered by the fact that so many of its men had to be assigned to capturing the lion, but in spite of this it was hardly an hour late in starting. [101]

After the volunteer watchers had been relieved, Burton, the trainer in charge of the proceedings, thanked them for their services, but told them that there was nothing more they could do, so that they could feel at liberty to go home if they were so inclined. A few did, but the majority elected to stay and "see the show through," as Tom expressed it. "It isn't often you get a chance to see a lion hunt in a quiet college town," he said, "and I, for one, am not going to miss it merely to get a little sleep. I can sleep 'most any old time."

"Yes, but there probably won't be anything doing until morning, anyway," said Burton with a smile; "you could get your sleep, and come back again."

But the three comrades were of one mind, and resolved to spend the night around the camp fire, so as to miss nothing of the novel experience. Fortunately, the next day was Saturday, and, as it happened, none of them had any recitations on for that day. This left them free to do about as they liked, and it did not take them long to make up their minds.

They settled themselves around the fire, and soon had good reason to feel glad that they had decided to stay. The last arrivals had brought food and coffee in plenty, and this was soon passed around, everybody making a hearty meal. Then pipes were lit, and those of the circus men who were not on duty began swapping tales of adventures and experiences while following the "game," that were teeming with interest to the boys. Many of the men were fairly well educated, and told what they had to tell in a very interesting way. Every once in a while those about the fire would leave to replace some of their companions who had been watching some time, and the men thus relieved would have a new batch of stories to relate. Around the crackling, roaring fire it was very warm and comfortable, and time flew by faster than the boys realized. They had never felt more wide awake in their lives, and they were much surprised when the first faint streaks of dawn in the eastern sky told of approaching day. [102]

As soon as it became light enough to see, two carpenters started constructing a wooden cage out of lumber they had brought with them, and had soon built a cage large enough and strong enough, it seemed to the boys, to hold an elephant. When the work was completed, several men lifted the cage and carried it to the very edge of the woods. Then, having located the place where the lion had entered, they placed the cage directly across the trail. It had been provided with a door that slid up and down, and this was fastened open with a stout cord. [103]

By the time these preparations were finished Mr. Burton hurried up, and carefully inspected the work. He had just returned from a trip around the trees, and reported everything quiet so far. "Now, boys," he said, "get a move on, and we'll carry this trap a little farther in. Old Leo might not want to come out this far for his breakfast, even though he's probably pretty hungry by this time. Lively's the word, now!"

The cage was lifted by willing arms, and carried well into the shadow of the trees. "All right, here's the place," said Mr. Burton, when he judged they had penetrated far enough, "set it down here. Have you got the meat with you, Bill?" The man addressed produced a large bundle, which on being unwrapped proved to be a large piece of juicy raw meat.

"That will do fine," said Burton, approvingly and, taking the meat from the other, placed it well inside the cage. "All right," he said, when everything was arranged to his entire satisfaction. "All hands get into the trees now, and we'll wait for Leo to come for his breakfast. I'll take the rope into my tree, and spring the trap. Hustle. The brute's apt to come around most any time now." [104]

Even as he spoke a loud roar echoed through the woods, so close at hand that for a moment every heart stood still. Then there was a wild dash for the nearest trees. Dick and Bert and Tom made for a large oak near at hand, and went up it faster than they would have imagined possible. They had barely reached a place of safety in the lower branches, than with another roar the lion leaped into the clearing. For a few minutes he stood motionless, with the exception of his tail, which swished angrily back and forth. Soon he located the boys in their tree, and made an angry dash toward it. By this time, however, they were high up in the branches, and the lion seemed to realize that they were beyond his reach, and after giving vent to another roar, walked away. Then he saw others in the surrounding trees, and made a circuit of inspection, gazing eagerly upward at the tempting human beings so close to him and yet hopelessly beyond his reach. Finally, he seemed to dismiss them from his mind and, going over to the cage, sniffed eagerly at the meat inside it. He had had nothing to eat since the preceding noonday, and was ravenously hungry. But he seemed to suspect some trap to curtail his new-found liberty and, hungry as he was, for more than half an hour he refused to enter the cage. He made numerous attempts to hook the meat with his claws, but found it always a little beyond his reach. At last, with an angry growl, he made up his mind and stepped inside the cage. [105]

He had hardly commenced to gnaw the meat, however, when Burton released the cord that held the sliding door open. With a crash it slid closed, and the great beast was a prisoner once

more!

The lion whirled like lightning and dashed himself madly against the restraining bars, but the cage had been built with an eye to emergencies, and stood the strain without any sign of weakening. Finally the lion's ragings subsided, and the head trainer concluded it was safe to descend and complete the work. He expressed himself accordingly, and everybody swarmed down to the ground, and surrounded the cage, taking care, however, to keep at a respectful distance.

"All right, boys, get busy," sang out Mr. Burton. "Let's get this cage up against the wagon as soon as we can. We're behind our schedule as it is."

Long poles were thrust under the cage, and with a good deal of heaving and tugging the lion was lifted through the air and his temporary cage placed alongside the animal wagon. When it had been securely fastened, the door was opened, and Leo was at liberty to enter his old abode. At first he seemed disinclined to do so, but after much coaxing and prodding he was persuaded. The door of his old cage was slammed shut, and the capture had been effected.

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"Well!" exclaimed the trainer, drawing a long sigh of relief, "that's a good job well done. And I want to thank you lads," he continued, turning to where our three friends were standing; "the circus owes you a big debt of gratitude, and that's a fact. If ever any of you should be out of a job, there'll always be one waiting for you with our outfit."

"Thanks," smiled Bert, speaking for his comrades and himself, "if we ever do, we'll let you know. We've had quite an adventure out of this, anyway."

"I should say you had!" said Mr. Burton; "the chances are you'll never be in another lion hunt as long as you live."

After a few more words the trainer turned away, and the party proceeded in the direction of the town. At its outskirts our three comrades said farewell and made off toward college.

On the way they discussed the exciting happenings of the previous day and night, but as they reached the campus Bert said: "Well, fellows, I hadn't noticed it much before, but now I come to think of it, I'm mighty tired. I think I'll turn in and sleep until about supper time."

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The others also expressed themselves as "all in," and sought their beds, where slumber was not long in coming.

CHAPTER VIII

[108]

ON THE TOBOGGAN

"**M**ISFORTUNES never come singly," groaned Tom.

"It never rains but it pours," added Dick gloomily.

"O, cut out the croaking, you fellows," admonished Bert. "Or, if you're dead set on proverbs, remember that 'it's no use crying over spilt milk.' We're up against it good and plenty, but that's all the more reason to get together and try to kill the 'jinx.'"

There certainly was room for disquietude, if not despair, in the present condition of the football team. The "Blues" were in the throes of a "slump." And that misfortune, dreaded like the plague by all coaches and trainers, had come on them suddenly, like "a bolt from the blue." From the heights of confidence they had fallen to the depths of hopelessness. The superb machine, evolved and developed with infinite pains, now seemed headed straight for the scrap-heap.

Only the Saturday preceding they had been lined up against Dartmouth—always a fierce proposition—and to the delight of Hendricks had "run rings around them." They had played with a dash and fire that made them seem simply unbeatable. The ball had been in the enemy's territory three-fourths of the time and, after the first quarter, it was simply a question as to the size of the score. When at last the game was over, they had run up thirty-two points, and the ball had never once been within twenty yards of their own goal. The criticisms on the game in the Sunday papers had dwelt upon the impregnable defense and slashing attack of the "Blues." On the same Saturday the "Greys" and "Maroons" had also met redoubtable antagonists, and although they won, the scores were small and the playing by no means impressive. The general consensus was that on the form already shown, the "dope" favored the Blues in the great games yet to come. While admitting the wonderful work of some of the men who had starred in their positions, special stress was laid upon the smoothness and accuracy of the team work as a whole.

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This of course was balm to the coach, all whose efforts had been directed toward making individual work subordinate to the development of a coherent system of team play, and he began to see the reward of the untiring labors that he had given without stint for the six weeks preceding. Reddy went about his work with a complacent smile, and the boys themselves were jubilant at the way they were rounding into form.

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Then suddenly the blow fell, to be succeeded by others no less paralyzing.

"Have you heard the news?" exclaimed Drake, as he burst in upon Bert and Dick on Monday evening, as they were preparing their lessons for the following day.

"What is it?" they cried in chorus.

"Axtell and Hodge have been conditioned and forbidden to play until they get up with the rest of the class," was the answer.

"No," said Bert incredulously.

"Sure thing," affirmed Drake. "I had it straight from the boys themselves not five minutes ago. They sure are in the doleful dumps."

The three friends looked at each other in a perplexity and anxiety that they made no effort to conceal.

"But it will break up the team," cried Dick. "They're two of our very best men."

"You're right there," gloomed Drake. "There isn't a fiercer tackler than Axtell on the eleven, and Hodge is the heaviest man in the line. We haven't any too much beef at best, and man for man, the 'Greys' average five pounds heavier."

"Just when we were getting into such dandy shape, too," groaned Dick.

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"Why in thunder didn't they keep up in their work," demanded Drake fiercely. "They must have known they were falling behind, and there's too much at stake for them to take any risk."

"There, there," soothed Bert. "Don't you suppose they're feeling worse about it than any one else?"

Just then there was a knock at the door and Axtell and Hodge themselves stalked in.

"I see you've heard about it," said Hodge, falling heavily into a chair. "I wish you fellows would take me out and kick me around the campus."

"Same here," echoed Axtell despondently. "I'll pay for all the shoe leather you wear out doing it."

"O, brace up, fellows," said Bert cheerily. "Things will come out all right yet. How bad is it anyway?"

"It isn't so bad with Axtell," replied Hodge. "He's only got a condition in Latin, and he can probably work that off in a week. But I'm stuck on mathematics and Greek both, and I've got about as much chance as a snowfall in June of making them up before the big games."

"I wonder if there's no chance of getting the faculty to let you put off making them up until after the games," pondered Bert thoughtfully.

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"Such a chance," said Drake sardonically. "That stony-hearted crew hasn't any sporting blood. They'll insist that every t must be crossed and every i dotted before they'll take off the conditions."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Bert. "There's Benton. He used to be a star at left end, and I don't think he's forgotten how he used to feel about such things. I can't any more than fail anyway, and I'm going to take a hack at it. You fellows stay right here and I'll run over and see him."

He found the professor at home, and received a cordial greeting.

"I see you boys trounced Dartmouth last week," he said genially. "I've seldom seen a better game."

This gave Bert his opening.

"We hope that isn't a circumstance to what we'll do to the 'Greys' and 'Maroons,'" he replied. "That is, we did hope so up to this afternoon."

The professor looked at him sharply.

"Why not now?" he asked.

And then Bert told him of the conditions of Hodge and Axtell, and the hope he entertained that some way might be found to make them up after the big games instead of before. He spoke with all the earnestness he felt, and the professor listened sympathetically.

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"It's too bad," he assented. "I'm afraid, though, there's no remedy. The rules of the college are like those of the Medes and Persians, not to be broken, even"—and his eyes twinkled—"for so important a thing as a football game. Those matters anyway are in the province of the Dean. You might see him if you like, but I fear that it is a forlorn hope."

And so it proved. The Dean had a warm corner in his heart for Bert, but in this matter was not to be shaken. The college, he reminded his caller, was primarily an institution of learning and not a gymnasium. The conditions would have to be made up before the men could play, although he hinted slyly that the examinations would not be over severe.

And with this one crumb of comfort, Bert was forced to be content. He bowed himself out and returned to report the non-success of his mission.

"What did I tell you?" said Drake.

"You're a brick anyway, Bert, for trying," acknowledged Axtell, "and perhaps it will make them go a little easier with us when we try again to show them how little we know. And now, old man," addressing Hodge, "it's up to us to make a quick sneak and get busy with those confounded conditions. Plenty of hard work and a towel dipped in ice water round our heads, with a pot of hot coffee to keep us awake, will help make up for our lack of brains. Come along, fellow-boob," and with a grin that they tried to make cheerful, the two culprits took their departure. [114]

The next morning the campus was buzzing with the news. It jarred the college out of the self-complacency they had begun to feel over the prospects of the team. Many were the imprecations heaped upon the heads of the hard-hearted faculty, and one of the malcontents slipped up to the cupola without detection and put the college flag at half-mast. The smile on Reddy's face was conspicuous by its absence and Hendricks chewed furiously at his cigar instead of smoking it. But when it came to the daily talk in the training quarters, he was careful not to betray any despondency. There was enough of that abroad anyway without his adding to it. Like the thoroughbred he was, he faced the situation calmly, and sought to repair the breaches made in his ranks.

"Winston will play at right guard until further notice," he announced, "and Morley will take the place of Axtell."

The two members of the scrubs thus named trotted delightedly to their places. For them it was a promotion that they hoped to make permanent. They knew they would have to fight hard to hold the positions if Hodge and Axtell came back, but they were bent on showing that they could fill their shoes. [115]

But although they worked like Trojans, the machine that afternoon creaked badly. The new men were unfamiliar with many of the signals and made a mess of some of the plays that the old ones whom they supplanted would have carried out with ease. This, however, was to be expected, and time would go a long way toward curing the defects.

The real trouble, however, lay with the other nine. They seemed to be working as though in a nightmare. An incubus weighed them down. Their thoughts were with their absent comrades and with the altered prospects of the team. They played without snap or dash, and the coach ground his teeth as he noted the lifeless playing so strongly in contrast with that of three days earlier.

Just before the first quarter ended, Ellis, in running down under a punt, came heavily in collision with Farrar, of the scrubs, and they went to the ground together. Farrar was up in a moment, but Ellis, after one or two trials, desisted. His comrades ran to him and lifted him to his feet. But his foot gave way under him, and his lips whitened as he sought to stifle a groan. [116]

"It's that bum ankle of mine," he said, trying to smile. "I'm afraid I've sprained it again."

They carried him into the dressing room and delivered him to Reddy. He made a careful examination and, when at last he looked up, there was a look in his eyes that betokened calamity.

"Sprained, is it," he said with a voice that he tried to render calm. "It's broken."

"What!" cried Ellis as he realized all this meant to him.

"Are you sure, Reddy?" asked Hendricks, aghast.

"I wish I wasn't," was the answer, "but I've seen too many of them not to know."

To poor Ellis the words sounded like the knell of doom. The pain was excruciating, but in the rush of sensations it seemed nothing. The real disaster lay in the fact that it put him definitely off the football team. All his work, all his sacrifice of time and ease, all his hopes of winning honor and glory under the colors of the old college had vanished utterly. Henceforth, he could be only a looker on where he had so fondly figured himself as a contender. His face was white as ashes, and the coach shrank from the look of abject misery in his eyes.

"Come now, old man, buck up," he tried to comfort him. "We'll send for the best surgeon in New York, and he'll have you on your feet again before you know it. You may make the big games yet." But in his heart he knew that it was impossible, and so did all the pale-faced crowd of players who gathered round their injured comrade and carried him with infinite care and gentleness to his rooms. [117]

The rest of the practice was foregone that afternoon as, under the conditions, it would have been simply a farce, and the players made their way moodily off the field, chewing the bitter cud of their reflections. Sympathy with Ellis and consternation over this new blow to their prospects filled their minds to the exclusion of everything else.

Bert and Tom and Dick—the "Three Guardsmen," as they had been jokingly called, as they were always together—walked slowly toward their rooms. The jaunty swing and elastic step characteristic of them were utterly gone. Their hearts had been bound up in the hope of victory, and now that hope was rapidly receding and bade fair to vanish altogether.

Apart from the general loss to the team, each had his own particular grievance. Tom, as

quarterback, saw with dismay the prospect of drilling the new men in the complicated system of signals, of which there were more than sixty, each of which had to be grasped with lightning rapidity. The slightest failure might throw the whole team in hopeless confusion. Dick was ruminating on the loss of Ellis, whose position in the line had been right at his elbow, and with whom he had learned to work with flawless precision on the defense. And Bert would miss sorely the swift and powerful coöperation of Axtell at right half. Those two in the back field had been an army in themselves.

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"The whole team is shot to pieces," groaned Tom.

"The hoodoo is certainly working overtime," muttered Dick.

"It's a raw deal for fair," acquiesced Bert, "but we're far from being dead ones yet. We haven't got a monopoly of the jinx. Don't think that the other fellows won't get theirs before the season's over. Then, too, the new men may show up better than we think. Morley's no slouch, and there may be championship timber in Winston. Besides, Axtell and Hodge may be back again in a week or two. It's simply up to every one of us to work like mad and remember that

The fellow worth while is the one who can smile
When everything's going dead wrong.

"You're a heavenly optimist, all right," grumbled Tom. "You'd see a silver lining to any little old cloud. You remind me of the fellow that fell from the top of a skyscraper, shouting as he passed the second-story window: 'I'm all right, so far.' We may be 'all right so far,' but the dull thud's coming and don't you forget it."

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And during the days that followed it seemed as though Tom were a truer prophet than Bert. Storm clouds hovered in the sky, and the barometer fell steadily. On Wednesday they were scheduled to play a small college—one of the "tidewater" teams that ordinarily they would have swallowed at a mouthful. No serious resistance was looked for, and it was regarded simply as a "practice" game. But the game hadn't been played five minutes before the visitors realized that something was wrong with the "big fellows," and taking heart of hope, the plucky little team put up a game that gave the Blues all they wanted to do to win. Win they did, at the very end, but by a margin that set the coach to frothing at the mouth with rage and indignation. After the game they had a dressing down that was a gem in its way, and which for lurid rhetoric and fierce denunciation left nothing to be desired.

But despite all his efforts, the lethargy persisted. It was not that the boys did not try. They had never tried harder. But a spell seemed to have fallen upon them. They were like a lion whose spine has been grazed by a hunter's bullet so that it can barely drag its deadened body along. In vain the coach fumed and stormed, and figuratively beat his breast and tore his hair. They winced under the whip, they strained in the harness, but they couldn't pull the load. And at length "Bull" Hendricks realized that what he had been dreading all season had come.

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The team had "slumped."

There are over three hundred thousand words in the English language, and many of them are full of malignant meaning. Fever, pestilence, battle, blood, murder, death have an awful significance, but in the lexicon of the coach and trainer of a college team the most baleful word is "slump."

This plague had struck the Blues and struck them hard. It was a silent panic, a brooding fear, an inability of mind and muscle to work together. There was but one remedy, and "Bull" Hendricks knew it.

The next day a dozen telegrams whizzed over the wires. They went to every quarter of the continent, from Maine to Texas, from the Lakes to the Gulf. And the burden of all was the same:

"Team gone to pieces. Drop everything. Come."

If one had looked over the shoulder of the telegraph operator, he would have seen that every address was that of some man who in his time had been famous the country over for his prowess on the gridiron, and who on many a glorious field had worn the colors of the Blues.

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One of them was delivered in the private office of a great business concern in Chicago. Mr. Thomas Ames, the president—better known in earlier and less dignified days as "Butch"—turned from the mass of papers on his desk and opened it. His eyes lighted up as he read it and saw the signature. Then the light faded.

"Swell chance," he muttered, "with this big deal on."

He turned reluctantly to his desk. Then he read the telegram again. Then he sighed and bit viciously at the end of his cigar.

"Nonsense," he growled. "There's no use being a fool. I simply can't, and that's all there is to it."

He crushed the telegram in his hand and threw it into the waste basket.

Ten minutes later he fished it out. He smoothed out the wrinkles and smiled as he noted the imperious form of the message. He was more accustomed to giving orders than obeying them, and the change had in it something piquant.

"Just like 'Bull,'" he grinned. "Arrogant old rascal. Doesn't even ask me. Just says 'come.'" [122]

"Off his trolley this time though," he frowned. "Nothing doing."

The pile of letters on his desk remained unanswered. His stenographer waited silently. He waved her away, and she went out, closing the door behind her. He lay back in his chair, toying idly with the telegram.

The memory of the old days at college was strong upon him. A few minutes ago, engrossed in the details of a large and exacting business, nothing had been farther from his thoughts. Now it all came back to him with a rush, evoked by that crumpled bit of paper.

Days when the wine of life had filled his cup to the brim, when "the world lay all before him where to choose," when the blood ran riot in his veins, when all the future was full of promise and enchantment. Days when laughter lay so near his lips that the merest trifle called it forth, when fun and frolic held high carnival, when his unjaded senses tasted to the full the mere joy of living. Days, too, of earnest effort, of eager ambition, of brilliant achievement, of glowing hope, as he prepared himself to play his part in the great drama of the world's life. Glorious old days they had been, and although he had had more than his share of prosperity and success in the years since then, he knew that they were the happiest days of his life. [123]

In his reverie his cigar had gone out, and he lighted it again mechanically.

The old place hadn't changed much, he supposed. That was one of its charms. World-weary men could go back to it and renew the dreams of their youth in the same old surroundings. A new dormitory, perhaps, added to the others, a larger building for the library, but, apart from these, substantially unchanged. The old gray towers covered with ivy, the green velvet of the campus, the long avenue of stately elms—these were the same as ever. He thought of the initials he had carved on the tree nearest the gate, and wondered if the bark had grown over them. And the old fence where the boys had gathered in the soft twilight of spring evenings and sung the songs that had been handed down through college generations. How the melody from hundreds of voices had swelled out into the night!

There was the old "owl wagon," where the fellows late at night, coming back from a lark in town, had stopped for a bite before going to bed. There never were such delicious waffles as that fellow turned out. And there was Pietro at the chestnut stand, always good natured under the teasing of the boys, and old John, the doughnut man— [124]

O, what was the use? He must get back to those letters.

There was the "sugar eat" in the spring. That usually came in the latter part of March. The soft wind would come up out of the south, the snow would begin to vanish and the sap stir in the trees. That was the signal for the "Hike." A scouting party would be sent out to make arrangements at some sugar camp five or six miles away. Then the next morning the fellows would "cut" recitations, and the startled professors would find their rooms deserted, while the hilarious culprits were footing it out to the camp. The farmer's wife, forewarned in advance, would have the long rough tables under the trees prepared for the hungry crew. Out from her capacious ovens would come great pans of hot puffy biscuits, while from the boiling caldrons the boys drew huge cans of bubbling maple syrup. And that sugar on those biscuits! Ambrosia, nectar, food for the gods! He had dined since then in the finest restaurants in the world, and never tasted anything to be compared to it.

What mattered the sarcastic and cutting remarks of the Profs. on the following day? They had had their fling and were willing to pay the price.

He came back to reality and the telegram that he was automatically folding and unfolding. [125]

"Team gone to pieces." He stirred uneasily.

That was certainly tough luck. It must be serious when "Bull" talked like that. It had usually been the good fortune of Blue teams to make the other fellows go "to pieces." Now it really seemed as though the good old colors were in danger of being dimmed, if not disgraced.

They hadn't been disgraced when he wore them, he remembered. How they had wound up the season in a blaze of glory the last year he had played on the team! He saw even now, the crowded stands, the riot of colors, the frenzied roars of the Blues, when he had squirmed out of the mass piled on him, and grabbing the ball, had rushed down the field for a touchdown, with the enemy thundering at his heels. He felt still the thrill of that supreme moment when the fellows had hoisted him on their shoulders and carried him in triumph off the field.

He half rose from his chair, but sank back.

"If it wasn't for that confounded deal," he groaned.

He had been so used to Blue victories that their failure for the last two years had made him "sore." In his business associations and at his club he came in contact with many graduates from different colleges. He had usually been able to "josh" them good naturedly over the way the Blues had "done them up." But lately the shoe had been on the other foot and they had delighted in getting even. [126]

He was not too thin skinned, and took their jibes smilingly, even though the smile was a trifle

forced. They were entitled to their revenge. Sometimes, however, he winced when they flicked him "on the raw." There was Evans, for instance, an old Princeton tackle. Good fellow, Evans—corking good fellow—but after the Blues lost last fall, he had gloated a little too much. He had met him on the street and clapped him hilariously on the shoulder.

"Ha, ha, Ames," he shouted, "how about it? We tied the can on the bulldog's tail, and we'll do the same next year."

That had stung. His face flushed now as he recalled it:

"We tied the can on the bulldog's tail, and we'll do the same next year."

"They will, will they?" he roared, jumping to his feet.

He pressed a button on his desk, and his confidential man came in.

"Thompson," said Ames hurriedly, "I've been called East on important business. Keep in touch with me by wire. I've just got time to catch the Twentieth Century Express."

CHAPTER IX

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HAMMERED INTO SHAPE

LIKE a sheaf of arrows, the other telegrams sped over the country, and most of them went straight to the mark. A mining engineer in Montana got one, and pulled up stakes at once. A rising young lawyer in Minneapolis found it necessary to look up some data in the old college library. A guest on a houseboat down near Jacksonville made hurried excuses and came North by the first train. Others felt urgently the need of a brief vacation from their accustomed duties and acted promptly on the impulse. Not a week had elapsed before ten of the dozen were on the scene of action. Of the remaining two, one was up in the North Woods and could not be reached, and the other was on his honeymoon.

They had a royal welcome from the coach, who had not doubted for a moment that they would heed the call. He knew that the old war horses would "sniff the battle from afar" and come galloping to the fray. Now that they were there, he felt the lightening of the tremendous load of responsibility he had been carrying since the beginning of the season. These men were not theorists, but from actual experience knew every point of the game from start to finish. Now he could divide his men up into squads, each one presided over by an expert who could coach each individual player in the duties of his position, while Hendricks himself could exercise a general supervision of the whole.

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"It was bully of you fellows to come," he said, as they gathered in his rooms, as full of life and ginger as so many two-year-old colts. "And, now that you are here, I'm going to give you plenty of work to do. Heaven knows there's enough to keep you busy if we're to have a ghost of a show to win this fall."

"What's the seat of the trouble?" asked Ames. "Are they shirking? Are they too light? Many accidents? Come, get it off your chest. Tell us the sad story of your life."

"It wasn't so sad until lately," grinned "Bull," "and up to a week ago I didn't feel the necessity of weeping on any one's shoulder. In fact, I was beginning to think that the team was the real goods. They walked all over the Army, and what they did to Dartmouth was a sin and a shame. Then somebody must have wished a hoodoo on us and things began to happen."

And he narrated in detail the unexpected way in which three of his best men had been whisked off the team, and the results that followed.

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"The fellows simply got in the doldrums," he went on, "and, with a few exceptions, have played like a lot of schoolboys. They seem to have forgotten all that they ever knew. Now you fellows know as well as I do that when a team slumps in that fashion there's only one thing to do. We've got to have new blood, new faces, new tactics. That's the reason I sent for you fellows. The boys know you by reputation. They've heard of the big things you did when in college, they look up to you as heroes——"

"Spare our blushes!" exclaimed Hadley.

"And it will give them a new inspiration," went on the coach, not heeding the interruption. "They'll forget their troubles and play like fiends to justify your good opinion, and to show you that the honor of the old college is safe in their hands. I want you to teach them all you ever knew, and then some.

"I'm not asking you to make bricks without straw," he continued. "The stuff is there for a crackerjack team. We're a bit short on beef, and I'd like to have an average of five pounds more in the line. But I've got the finest back field in the country, bar none. Wilson at full is simply chain lightning, and the whole country will be talking of him by November. Axtell is one of the most savage tacklers I've ever seen, and if he can only get his conditions worked off soon, we won't have to worry about right half. Morley, the man I put in his place, is a dandy, but doesn't come up

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to Axtell. Henderson at quarter is as quick as a cat and as cunning as a fox. Trent at center and Drake at right end are as good as they make 'em. Those fellows I've named are stars. The rest are good, but I've seen as good and better on many a Blue team.

"Now that's the way I size them up, and I want you fellows to go to it. There are just about enough of us to take a man apiece. Do what you like with them. I'll stand for anything short of murder. Work them till their tongues hang out. Knock it into them if you have to use an axe. Every day counts now. Do you realize that the game with the 'Maroons' is only three weeks off? If it were to-morrow they wouldn't leave anything of us but a grease-spot. And the 'Greys' wouldn't leave even that."

"Leave it to us," answered Ames, grimly voicing the general sentiment. "We'll give 'em medicine in allopathic doses, and it will be a case of 'kill or cure.'"

And promptly the next afternoon they proceeded to make good their threat. They went at their men hammer and tongs from the start. And the boys responded at once to this drastic treatment. There was a general brace all along the line. A new factor had been injected into the situation. The listlessness of a few days back gave place to animation, and before half an hour had passed the coach was delighted at the way his plan was working. [131]

In order that the newcomers might get a line on their style of play, the whole team was put through the fundamentals. The tackling dummy was brought out, and the players in turn launched themselves against it to the accompaniment of stimulating cries:

"Harder."

"You're too low."

"That was a love tap."

"Batter it."

"Above the knees."

"Slam the life out of it."

"Too ladylike."

"Once more."

"Murder it."

And there was no let up until the tackling was as savage as even the most exacting of the visitors demanded.

Then followed practice in falling on the ball in such a way as to shelter it with hands and knees, while avoiding having one's breath knocked out by the fall; running with it tucked under the arm so securely that no grab of the enemy can dislodge it; getting down under kicks fast enough to take advantage of any fumble by the enemy in trying for a "fair catch;" getting a quick start the moment the ball was snapped back, and a dozen other elemental features that constitute the alphabet of the game. The boys had practiced these things a hundred times before, but they can never be done too often or too well; and to-day under the new stimulus they outdid themselves. Each tried to surpass his fellows and worked as he had never worked before. [132]

After an hour of this, they were lined up for two ten-minute sessions with the scrubs. The play was sharp and snappy and every move was followed by keen and critical eyes that nothing, however trivial, escaped. By the time the team had rolled up twenty points and held their opponents scoreless, the volunteer coaches knew pretty well the defects that would have to be corrected, and just what work was cut out for them.

The coach was immensely pleased. Once more he saw daylight ahead.

"What do you think of them, Butch, now that you've clapped your eyes on them?" he asked, as they strolled off the field.

"All to the good," said Ames, sententiously. "Of course it's far from being a finished team as yet, but you've got some first-class material to work on. You're a little weak at the end of the line, and right tackle can stand a lot of improvement. But all the fellows seem willing, and that goes a long way. I didn't see one that appeared to be holding back." [133]

"That fullback of yours is a peach," broke in Hadley. "He comes pretty near to being a team in himself. If he once gets a start, there's nothing that can ever catch him."

"He's the fastest man in college," replied Hendricks. "He's the fellow that carried off the Marathon at the Olympic Games in Berlin. And he's as game as he is speedy. You ought to have seen the way he stood McAlpin on his head when we played the Army. That fellow was as big as a house and as full of grit as a gravel path, but he wasn't one-two-three with Wilson. If all the boys were like him I'd have the championship won right now."

"What made a hit with me," commented Lawrence, "was that classy bit of dodging when he went down the field for sixty yards toward the end of the game. At least six of them tried to stop him, but he slipped by them like a ghost. And yet he ran almost in a straight line. All the dodging was done by the swaying of his hips and shoulders. A man that can do that comes pretty near to [134]

being the king of them all."

"You haven't any kick coming on your center and quarterback either," broke in Allen. "Jove, they're a pair of dandies. They work together like a well-oiled machine. They're playing with their heads as well their feet all the time. They've got the snap-back and the forward pass down to perfection. And they're a stone wall when it comes to the defense."

"Two of my very best," assented Hendricks, "and as sandy as the Sahara desert. It's around those three that I've had to build up my team."

"Those three," all unknowing of the comments that were being made on their work, were at the moment engaged in getting their bath and rubdown, never more grateful than just now after their strenuous labors of the afternoon.

"That was a course of sprouts for fair," remarked Tom when they were putting on their clothes.

"They certainly put us through our paces," assented Dick. "I haven't been so tired since the Army game."

"Just what we dubs needed," affirmed Bert. "Did you notice the snap and pepper in the team? It's the first time for a week that we've known we were alive. We're going to be a real football team after all. 'The cat came back,' and why shouldn't we?"

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"I suppose it was due to that lot of 'old grads' looking on," surmised Tom. "Gee, when I thought of all those fellows leaving their work and traveling hundreds of miles for the sake of the old college, it made me ashamed of myself. I felt like going through a knot hole and drawing the hole in after me."

"Same here," said Dick. "And they can bully-rag me all they like. There'll be never a squeal from me. I'll work my head off to show them that we're fit to wear the Blue."

"Hear! hear!" exclaimed Bert. "That's the real tobasco. And I'll bet there isn't a fellow on the team that doesn't feel the same way."

They were still stirred by this feeling of elation when, after a hearty supper, they reached their rooms. What was their surprise on opening the door to find Axtell sprawled out in a chair, his feet upon the window sill. He grinned affably.

"Come right in and make yourself at home," he greeted.

"What are you doing here, you old flunker?" laughed Bert.

"Take back them cruel woids," demanded Axtell. "Flunker," he went on meditatively, "it hath a right knavish sound. Beshrew me, if I fling it not back in the teeth of any caitiff knight that dare put such shame upon me."

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A great light dawned upon them.

"What!" cried Dick. "You old rascal. You don't mean to say that you've worked off your conditions?"

"You speak sooth," was the reply, "albeit your wonder at the same pleasureth my pride but little. For less than that my sword hath oftentimes drunk the blood of churls."

They fell upon him and pounded him till he was out of breath.

"Glory hallelujah!" shouted Tom.

"The best news I've heard since Hector was a pup," declared Dick.

"Now we've got a fighting chance," exulted Bert. "By Jove, old scout, you don't know how the team has missed you."

Axtell flushed with pleasure.

"Maybe I won't be glad to get back with the gang again," he ejaculated. "Gee, for the last two weeks I've felt like a sneak. I can't forgive myself for getting in such a fix, just when we were in such good shape and going like a house afire. You bet that from now on my record will be as clean as a hound's tooth."

"Bully!" said Bert. "I think you've done wonders though, to get rid of the conditions so soon. You must have worked like a horse."

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"I've worked all right," said Axtell grimly. "It was the least I could do, heaven knows. Some nights I haven't gone to bed at all. Even at that, I felt a little skittish when I went up for my exam. But I was desperate and went in largely on my nerve. When the Prof. looked over my papers I thought I heard him mutter to himself something that sounded like: 'All Gaul is divided into three parts and you've got two of them.' But that may simply have been my guilty conscience. At any rate I got away with it, and the old sport gave me a clean bill of health."

"It's like getting money from home," affirmed Dick. "Maybe 'Bull' Hendricks won't be tickled to death. He'll kill the fatted calf if he can find one straying loose around the training quarters."

"O, he'll fall on my neck all right—with a club," remarked Axtell drily. "When it comes to

disguising his joy, 'Bull' is a dandy actor."

"Don't you believe it," said Bert. "But how about your accomplice in crime?"

"O, Hodge will be coming along soon," was the reassuring reply. "He's been working just as hard as I have or harder. But he's had two to make up, where I had only one. He's hired a tutor to coach him and is cramming away like mad. He told me this morning he thought he'd be ready to go into the torture chamber by the end of this week."

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"That'll be all to the merry," jubilated Tom. "Honest, Axtell, we've been all at sea since you fellows have been away. Winston has done fairly well at tackle, but he can't seem to start quickly enough when it comes to blocking. 'Bull' has been trying out Chamberlain in place of Ellis, but he gets mixed on the signals. He plugs away like a beaver, but finds it hard to get them straight. Morley is doing fine work at half, but he can't fill your shoes when it comes to tackling. Of course I don't know what 'Bull' will do, but I have a hunch that he'll take Chamberlain out and put Morley there permanently, as there isn't a chance in the world for Ellis to come back in time."

"Poor old Ellis," mourned Bert. "Game to the core, that boy. It nearly broke his heart when his ankle went back on him, but he never whimpers. He hopes to be out on crutches in time to see the big games. Told me yesterday, when I dropped in to see him, that when it came to yelling for the boys we'd find his voice was all right even if his leg was on the blink."

"Plucky old scout," agreed Axtell, "and one of the best men we had. But now I must be going. I'll toddle over and give 'Bull' a chance to welcome back the prodigal son. It'll be an affecting greeting," he grinned.

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But if he had expected to be "skinned alive" for his shortcomings, he was agreeably disappointed. The coach was too delighted at the strengthening of the team to dwell too much or too sternly on the defection that had thrown it out of gear. He gave him a fatherly talk, pointed out the necessity of keeping his studies up to the mark from that time on, and put it up to him to "play the game" both in the classroom and on the field for all it was worth. Then he dismissed him with an injunction to turn up early for practice the following day.

The reinstated halfback went away with his eyes shining and his heart elate. Once more "his foot was on his native heath." And the dignified "Bull," after a cautious glance around to make sure that no one was looking, indulged himself in the luxury of an impromptu Highland fling.

CHAPTER X

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IN THE ENEMY'S COUNTRY

ONE afternoon, after practice, "Bull" Hendricks called Bert aside and said: "I want you to stay a few minutes after the others have gone, Wilson. Reddy and I have something we want you to do."

"All right," was the reply, and accordingly, after the other members of the squad had finished dressing and had left the dressing room Bert lingered behind. In a few minutes the coach walked into the apartment, followed by Reddy.

"Reddy and I," began Hendricks, "have decided that we want something a little more definite than rumor concerning one or two of the rival teams. We have talked the matter over, and what we want you to do is this. Next Saturday afternoon, as of course you know, the 'Maroons' and 'Greys' are scheduled to play off the game that was postponed on account of bad weather. We want to get a line on the two teams, but both Reddy and myself are too busy just at present to take the time off. But we thought you could go over and size things up about as well as we could. You understand the game thoroughly, and in addition I believe know how to use your head for something besides eating."

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"You compliment me more highly than I deserve," laughed Bert. "But," more seriously, "I'll be glad to do anything you want me to that will be of any service in helping the team to win."

"Well, it will be a help," said the coach. "We hear one thing to-day, and the exact opposite to-morrow, so we never know what to believe. But if you go and see this game, you ought to be able to get a pretty fair line on the real state of affairs."

"The only trouble is," worried Reddy, "that the team will practically miss a whole afternoon's practice, because it's not much we can do without Wilson."

The little trainer would never have made this admission had he not been very sure of his man. But he knew Bert's sterling character well enough to be sure that the remark would cause no case of "swelled head."

"We'll get along some way," said Hendricks, "and the team is in good enough shape now to afford taking it easy one afternoon. We'll just practice on signals, and they'll be all the better for a little let up."

"In that case," suggested Bert, "why couldn't I take Dick and Tom along with me? You know the

old saying that 'two heads are better than one,' and on the same plan, three heads ought to be better than two."

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"At that rate you'd have the entire college going over there and giving the whole thing away," grunted Hendricks, "but I suppose you might as well take them along. The chances are you won't be noticed in the crowd, and if you are there's no special harm done. There's no law against players from one team going to see another team play."

"An' what's more," put in Reddy, "I don't believe one o' them can think real well unless the other two is hangin' around somewheres close by. It sure beats the Dutch, the way them three lads holds together."

"Well," said Bert, "that 'holding together,' as you call it, has been a mighty good thing for each of us at one time or another. Looked at in one light, it's a sort of mutual benefit affair."

"Whatever it is, it seems to work pretty well," remarked Hendricks, "and it's results that always make a big hit with me."

They then proceeded to arrange the details, and it was decided that the three boys should leave immediately after breakfast on Saturday. When everything had been settled Bert took leave of the coach and trainer and sought out his friends.

After he had explained the plan to them, Tom threw a book he had been studying into a far corner, and gave a shout of delight which was echoed by Dick.

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"Some class to us, all right," exulted Tom; "it shows old Hendricks must have some confidence in us, even though he'd probably be pulled to pieces before he'd admit it."

"I suppose he must have," grinned Dick, "although up to this time I will confess that I never suspected it."

"Well, we'd better not look a gift horse in the mouth," said Bert. "The fact remains that we're in for an afternoon of good sport. It will certainly be a pleasure to me to watch somebody else play football for a change. And before the afternoon is over, you can take it from me I'm going to know all about the comparative strength of their teams and ours that there is to know."

"Well, you *may* be able to learn something, seeing that I'll be along to explain the fine points of the game to you and see that you understand what is going on," said Tom. "I suppose the coach realized that there wouldn't be much use in sending you over alone, and that's why he told you to ask us to go too."

"You certainly hate yourself, don't you?" grinned Bert. "However, I won't lower myself to answer you, merely remarking in passing that your words are only worthy of the deepest contempt."

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"Is that so?" replied Tom. "I'm afraid if you pull much more of that stuff I'll have to find a quiet nook for you in my private graveyard. I'd have done it before only that I find myself somewhat overcrowded even now."

"Say, cut out that nonsense, you two, and get down to business, will you?" interrupted Dick. "What time are we supposed to leave here, Bert?" he asked.

"Right after lunch," responded that individual. "I'll get a time table, and we'll see what will be the best train to take."

"I know a better way to go than by train," said Dick.

"What's that—walk?" inquired Tom sarcastically.

"Please don't be any more foolish than you can help," said Dick with elaborate politeness; "what I was about to say was, that I think I know where I can borrow an automobile for the afternoon. How does that idea strike you?"

"Greatest ever," ejaculated Bert, "but where in the world are you going to get the car?"

"Leave that to your Uncle Dudley," replied Dick. "I met an old friend the other day. He's visiting relatives in the town for several weeks. He has all sorts of money, and sports two 'devil wagons.' He told me I could have the use of one any time I had a mind to ask for it, so I don't think I'll have any trouble on that score."

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"That seems too good to be true," said Bert. "Suppose you look up your friend this evening after supper and make sure of getting the car. It's better to know in advance what we can count on."

"I'll do that," promised Dick, "and if I get back in time I'll let you know if everything is all right. If I get back late I'll tell you about it in the morning."

Matters were left in this state, and it was not until the next morning that the boys learned of the success of Dick's visit to the town.

When they caught sight of him in the morning, Bert and Tom did not have to question him.

"It's all right fellows," he said. "I fixed it all up, and we can have the car any time we want it."

And the one we're going to use is a peach, too."

"That's certainly fine," said Tom. "We'll make the trip in tip-top style all right."

"People will think we're regular swells, for fair," agreed Bert.

"I think we'd better pose as a rich man traveling with his chauffeur and valet," said Tom. "I'll be the rich man, Dick can be the chauffeur, and Bert can be the valet."

"All right," said Bert, "but under those conditions, I insist on being paid in advance." [146]

"So do I," grinned Dick. "I refuse to run that car a foot until I'm paid in full, a year in advance, cash down."

"If you feel that way about it," grumbled Tom, "I'll be forced to fire you both and run the car myself. All you fellows think of is money anyway, it seems to me."

"Well, if you can't pay us I suppose we'll have to pose as just three friends traveling together," laughed Bert. "That's the only way out of it that I can see."

"I'll have to let it go at that I suppose," said Tom; and after a hearty laugh the boys dispersed to their recitation rooms.

Practice that afternoon was fast and hard, and it was a tired trio that met that evening in Bert's room to make final plans for their trip the next day. They decided to walk to the garage where the automobile was kept, and Dick showed them a written order his friend had given him authorizing him to take the car out.

"Your friend has certainly done everything up in fine style," commented Bert; "he must be a good man to know."

"He's a brick," said Dick enthusiastically; "we used to be in the same class in school, and we were always good friends. I'd like to have you fellows meet him." [147]

"Yes, I'd like to get acquainted," said Tom. "It seems funny we haven't met him before."

"Well, you see, his folks moved West when we were both youngsters, and that's the reason," explained Dick, "otherwise I suppose you would have."

"Well, probably we will before he leaves town," said Bert. "But now, how about to-morrow?"

"Why, right after breakfast to-morrow," said Dick, "we'll go straight from the training table to the garage. We won't have any more than enough time as it is. It must be a matter of a hundred miles or more, and we want to travel easy and allow for possible breakdown and delay."

As there seemed to be no objection to Dick's plan, the boys adopted it. Immediately after the morning meal they set out for the town, and after a brisk walk reached the garage.

Here they sought the proprietor, and Dick showed him the written order from Moore, his friend.

"Oh, yes, that will be all right," said the garage man. "Mr. Moore told me that you would call for the car at about this time, so I've been expecting you. There she is, over in the corner, the big gray one there."

He indicated a big gray touring car, and the three comrades walked over to it. It was, as Dick had told them, a beautiful machine, and they piled in with many expressions of admiration. As Dick had procured the car the honor of driving it naturally fell to him. He manoeuvred the big automobile skilfully out of the garage, and they were soon spinning smoothly over an ideal country road. The car behaved perfectly and Dick was enthusiastic over it. [148]

"We could get twice the speed out of it that we are now," he exulted, "but I'm not taking any chances to-day. We owe it to the team to be careful."

"Right you are," agreed Bert. "There's no use taking risks when we don't have to. At this rate we'll eat up the distance in mighty short order anyway."

And indeed, it was no great time before they reached their destination and were bowling through the streets.

They left the car at the local garage, and made their way to the field, guided thereto by a constant stream of chattering and laughing people evidently bound for the same place. They obtained good seats and sat down to await the beginning of the game.

Before long the "Grey" players trotted out onto the field, and were shortly followed by the "Maroons." Both teams went through their preliminary practice with snap and "pep," and received enthusiastic applause from their admirers in the stands. Then the actual play began, and the three comrades noted every play and formation with the greatest attention. They were resolved to justify the coach's confidence in them, and to be able to give him an accurate line of "dope" when they returned to their Alma Mater. [149]

The game was fast and furious, but at the end of the first half the "Maroons" were leading by one touchdown. Excitement ran high at the opening of the second half, and a battle royal began. But the "Greys" fought fiercely, and by a splendid run down the field made a touchdown and tied

the score. Then, in the last three minutes of play, they forced the ball over for another touchdown, and the day was theirs.

"Well!" exclaimed Bert as they filed out with the crowd, "both those teams have the 'goods,' but I think the 'Greys' are just a shade better than the 'Maroons.'"

"I do, too," said Tom, and this seemed also to be Dick's opinion. They made their way to the garage, and as it was now almost dark, Dick lit the lamps on the car. Then they purred smoothly along the macadam road and after a delightful ride through the crisp autumn air delivered the car safely into its garage before midnight.

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The next morning they were received with an uproarious welcome when they made their appearance at the training table. The other members of the team had a pretty good idea of where they had been, and assailed them from every side with questions. But they kept their own counsel, reserving their information for the ears of the coach, and knowing that he would tell the team all that he thought fit.

After the meal was over they repaired to the training quarters, where they found the coach awaiting them.

"Well," he said, "what luck?"

Speaking for his comrades, Bert related the story of the game, and the coach listened attentively. When Bert had finished, he asked a number of crisp questions of each of the three boys, and their answers seemed to satisfy him.

"Well," he growled, when at last he rose to go, "I can go ahead now with more certainty. You fellows have done better than I expected." Which from Hendricks was high praise.

"We've certainly got our work cut out for us," said Bert after the coach had departed. "I haven't a doubt in the world but what we can beat them, but just the same we'll have to do our prettiest to get the long end of the decision."

"Bet your tintype we will," said Tom; "both those teams are a tough proposition for anybody to handle. But there will be all the more glory for us when we win."

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"That's the talk!" exclaimed Dick, "there's no fun in winning a game where you don't get hard opposition, anyway."

Meanwhile Hendricks had wended his way back to the training quarters, where he sought out Reddy.

He gave the red-headed trainer a brief outline of what the boys had told him, and Reddy listened attentively, once or twice breaking in with a question or two.

"So it seems," said Hendricks at last, winding up his discourse, "that the team we've really got to look out for is the 'Greys.' According to the report of our three boys, they are mighty strong on the attack, and nothing behindhand on their defense."

"It looks that way," acquiesced Reddy, nodding his head, "the lads did pretty well, don't you think?"

"They did," agreed Hendricks; "they got just the information that I was after. And what do you think," he added with a laugh, "they weren't content to go by the train or trolley, but borrowed an automobile and went in style."

"Sure, and it's like themselves," grinned Reddy, "if I was runnin' a business I'd be afraid to give those byes a job. They'd be ownin' the plant in less than a year."

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"I believe they would," said Hendricks. "They're natural born winners."

CHAPTER XI

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A DESPERATE FIGHT

THE day for the game with the "Maroons" broke dark and lowering. Clouds chased each other across the sky, the air was saturated with moisture and, although rain had not yet fallen, there was every prospect that it would before the day was over.

The team had been "tuned to the hour." There was not a man on it that was not fit to put up the game of his life. Each one had brought himself down to the weight at which he was most effective, their flesh was "hard as nails," and their lean bronzed faces betokened the pink of condition. If they were doomed to be beaten there could be no excuse put forth that they were not at the top of their form.

Not that they anticipated any necessity of making excuses. An air of quiet confidence was everywhere apparent. The old indomitable Blue spirit was as much in evidence as their splendid physical condition. Not that they underestimated their opponents. The "Maroons," despite their

defeat of the week before by the "Greys," were formidable opponents and still full of fight. In fact, their loss of that game might be counted on to put them in a savage mood of retaliation, and nothing was more certain than that they would fight like demons to down the Blues. But the latter welcomed the prospect of a bitter fight, and were fully convinced of their ability to give harder blows than they would have to take.

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"We've simply got to win to-day, fellows," said Tom as they strolled back to their rooms after breakfast.

"It's the only way we can have a clear title to the championship," remarked Bert. "It won't do us much good to lick the 'Greys' next week if we fall down to-day. In that case it will be 'even Steven.' Each team will have won and lost one and we'll be as much at sea as ever as to which has the best team."

"Then, too," added Dick, "we're fighting to-day on our own grounds and next week we'll have to play the 'Greys' on a neutral field. If we can't win now with that advantage it will be doubly hard to win then."

"We'll cop them both," said Bert with an air of finality. And this solution received the hearty approval and implicit faith of his companions. In one form or another every man on the team was swearing to himself that the prediction should come true, if it lay in human power to compass it.

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As the day wore on the town took on a festal air. Flags and bunting fluttered everywhere. Special trains drew in from every point of the compass and disgorged their thousands to swell the crowds. The streets resounded with the raucous cries of the fakirs, and their wares of canes and flags were soon sold out. Groups of college boys accompanied by pretty girls wandered over the campus, and the walks under the elms resounded with song and laughter. From every city in the country "old grads" came down to renew their youth and shout themselves hoarse for their favorites. The clouded sky and threatening rain daunted them not at all. They were there to make holiday, and serenely ignored everything else. Only an earthquake or a cyclone could have kept them from coming. It might rain "cats and dogs," rheumatism and pneumonia might hang out danger signals, but they cared not a whit. They were out for the time of their lives and bound to get it.

The game was to begin at two o'clock, and after cleaning out all the restaurants in town, put to their utmost to feed the ravening horde of locusts that had swarmed down upon them, the throngs set out for the stadium. That gigantic structure could hold forty thousand people and, long before the time for the game to begin, it was crowded to repletion. On one side were the stands for the Blues and directly facing them were those reserved for the "Maroons." The occupants yelled and shouted and waved their flags at each other in good-natured defiance. At the upper end a band played popular airs that nobody cared for, and half the time in the din and tumult did not even hear. In front of the stands the cheerleaders jumped up and down and went through their weird contortions, as they led the cheers and gave the signal for the songs.

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The Blues were gathered in their training quarters, ready and anxious for the fight. They were like a pack of hounds straining at the leash. Reddy and his assistants had gone over every detail of their equipment, and the coach had spoken his last word of appeal and encouragement. This he had purposely made short. There was little dwelling on the game to be played, nor any attempt to rehearse signals. The time for that was past. If they were not ready now, they never would be. He had done his utmost and now the result must be left to the team and to fate.

At half past one a slight drizzle set in. Old Jupiter Pluvius had lost patience and refused to hold off until the game was over. But the general hilarity abated not a particle. It would take more than rain to drive that crowd to cover. The field had been strewn with straw to keep the ground beneath as dry as possible. Now, however, it was time for practice, and a crowd of assistants appeared and raked the straw away, showing the glistening newly-marked yard lines underneath.

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Then a gate at the end of the one of the stands opened and the "Maroons," in their gaily colored jerseys, trotted on the field. The "Maroon" stands rose en masse and a torrent of cheers swept over the field as they gave the team a greeting that must have "warmed the cockles of their heart."

The boys peeled off their jerseys and commenced punting and falling on the ball. They kept this up for ten minutes and then gave way to their rivals.

Out from the other side of the field scampered the Blues. Then Pandemonium broke loose. The yells were simply deafening, and, as the home crowd let itself go, the fellows grinned happily at each other and their muscles stiffened with ardor for the fight.

"Seems as though they were glad to see us," laughed Tom, as he sent the ball whirling in a spiral pass to Bert.

"You bet," answered Bert, "and we must make them yell louder yet at the finish."

The practice was short and snappy. There was ginger in every movement and Bert's tries for goal elicited the unwilling admiration at the same time that it awakened the fear of the "Maroon" supporters.

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Then the signal was given and the captains of the two teams clasped hands cordially in the middle of the field and tossed a coin for position. The "Maroons" won and, as there was not

enough wind stirring to favor either goal, elected to take the kick off. The teams lined up on the "Maroon's" forty yard line. Miller kicked the ball thirty yards down the field and the game was on.

Martin made a fair catch, but before he could run back was downed in his tracks. The teams lined up for the scrimmage. Dick plunged through left guard and tackle for a gain of five yards. Axtell went through right for two more. Then the ball was given to Bert, and he went through the hole opened up by Drake and Boyd for eight more. They had gained their distance and the ball was still in their possession on the fifty yard line.

Their bucking had been so successful that they were still inclined to try the plunging game. But the "Maroons" had braced. Three successive downs failed to yield the coveted ten yards and Bert dropped back for a kick. The ball was handled with superb precision by Tom and Dick, who made a perfect pass to Bert. It was off from his toe like a flash, just escaping the "Maroon" forwards as they broke through to block. Miller made a great jumping catch, but Axtell's savage tackle downed him where he stood. The ball was now in "Maroon" territory on their twenty yard line. [159]

It was altogether too close for comfort, and the "Maroons" made a gallant and desperate effort to get it further down the field. The Blues, however, were no less determined. Against the bull-like plunges of the enemy they held like a stone wall. Three times in succession they refused to let their foes gain an inch. It was clear that other tactics would have to be resorted to. Halliday, the "Maroon" quarter, tried a forward pass. Richmond at right end caught it and started down the field. Warren tackled him, but slipped in the mud and Richmond shook him off. His interference was good and he was off like a frightened rabbit. He had made twenty yards before Bert caught and threw him heavily. But he held on to the ball and the "Maroons" breathed more freely. The ball was still theirs, forty yards from their goal line.

"Never mind, old man," called Bert cheerfully to Warren. "A bit of hard luck, but don't let it get your goat. Any one might have slipped in such muddy going."

The narrow escape heartened the "Maroons" and they fought like wildcats. They were on the defensive and the ball stayed in their territory. But the utmost efforts of the Blues failed to make substantial gains, and when the whistle blew at the end of the quarter neither side had scored. [160]

By this time the rain was coming down in torrents. The stands were a mass of glistening umbrellas and shining raincoats. The flags and decorations no longer waved defiantly, but hung dank and dripping. The field beneath the rushing feet of the players had been churned into a sea of mud, and this was plastered liberally on the uniforms of the teams. In the minute's interval between quarters a host of trainers' assistants rushed from the side lines with sponges and towels and tried to get their charges in some kind of shape.

When the next quarter started the play was fast and furious. The teams had sized each other up and got a line on their respective line of play. Each side realized that the battle was for blood, and that it had in the other a worthy foeman. There would be no walkover for anybody that day.

Floundering and slipping in the mud, the Blues steadily pounded their way down to the "Maroon's" goal. Morley made a successful dash around left end, netting twenty yards. On a forward pass Caldwell fumbled, but Tom made a dazzling recovery before the enemy could pounce upon the ball. Bert found a gap between left and tackle and went through with lowered head for twelve yards before the "Maroons" fell on him in a mass. Then the Blues uncovered the "Minnesota shift"—one of "Bull" Hendrick's pet tricks—and they went through the bewildered "Maroons" for twenty yards. Another trial of the same shift was smothered and a daring end run by Hudson of the "Maroons" brought the ball to the middle of the field. Four unsuccessful attempts failed to advance it and it went to the Blues on downs. [161]

The ball was now on the "Maroons'" forty yard line and there were only two minutes left of playing time. The "Maroon" defence had stiffened and it was a practical certainty that line bucking could not avail in that limited time, so Bert dropped back for a kick. Tom snapped it back to Dick, who with the same motion made a beautiful pass to Bert. With all the power of his mighty leg he swung on it and lifted it far and high. Straight as an arrow it winged its way toward the "Maroons'" goal.

A tremendous shout had gone up as the ball left his toe, but then followed a deadly silence as they watched its towering flight. Would it go over the posts and score three points for the Blues or would it go to one side just enough to give the "Maroons" a new lease of life?

Now the ball had reached its highest point and was falling in a swift curve toward the goal. As it neared the posts it seemed for a moment to hesitate. Then, as though it had made up its mind, it swooped suddenly downward and crossed the goal bar, just grazing it. The goal had counted and a groan went up from the "Maroon" stands, while those in the Blues leaped to their feet waving their flags and cheering like madmen. [162]

Tom danced a jig on the field and threw his arms about Bert, and the other fellows coming up swarmed around him with frantic congratulations. And just then the second half ended and both teams went to their quarters for the fifteen minutes' rest that marks the half of the game. Here they changed quickly into fresh uniforms and braced themselves for the second and decisive half. Naturally the confidence was on the side of the Blues, but the lead was not large, and as yet it was anybody's game.

"You've got them started," exhorted Hendricks. "Now keep them on the run. Don't let up for a minute. Hit them, hammer them, tear their line in pieces. I want you to roll up a score that will scare the 'Greys' before we tackle them."

The advice was good in theory and the will was not lacking to carry it out in practice. But the "Maroons" had other views and from the moment they came on the field it was evident that they had taken a brace. They were yet a long way from giving up the ghost. After all, the field goal had only counted three points, and a touchdown would not only even this up but put the Maroons in the lead. [163]

To get that touchdown they worked like fiends. Berriman kicked the ball out of bounds and Flynn fell upon it, sliding along in the mud and water as he did so. The ball was brought in at the Blues' forty yard line and the teams lined up for the scrimmage. Adams slammed through left tackle for five yards. Gibbons with lowered head butted into center, but Dick threw him back for a loss of two. Hudson skirted left end, cleverly dodging Caldwell and making twelve yards, before Tom leaped upon him and downed him heavily. But the ball was under him and the "Maroons" had more than made their distance on the four downs.

Once more they lined up, and now the Blues were on the defensive. Boyd had hurt his knee and Chamberlain came running out to take his place. Instead of reporting to the referee, he spoke first to one of his comrades, and for this violation of the rules the Blues were penalized five yards. A moment later they lost five more through off-side play by Warren. Ten precious yards thrown away when every one was beyond price! And now the jubilant "Maroons" were within fifteen yards of the goal, and their partisans were on their feet yelling like wild men. [164]

Panting, crouching, glaring, the two teams faced each other. The "Maroons" consulted for a moment. Should they try a kick for goal, yielding three points if successful and tying the score, or buck the line for a touchdown which would put them in the lead? The first was easier, but the latter more profitable if they could "put it over." They might never be so near the line again, and they thought that they saw signs of wavering among the Blues. They decided then to try for the greater prize and buck the line.

Berriman, their halfback, bowled over Chamberlain for a gain of four yards. Richmond tried to make a hole between Dick and Tom, but was nailed without a gain. Once more Berriman ploughed in between Warren and Chamberlain, which seemed to be the weakest part of the defense, but, anticipating the move, Bert had posted himself there and, meeting the rush halfway, dumped Berriman on his head. As he fell, the ball slipped from his hands and Tom, quick as a cat, picked it up and twisting, dodging, squirming, scuttled down along the southern line. Burke flung himself at him in a flying tackle and grabbed one leg, but the runner shook him off and, with his momentum scarcely checked flew down the field, aided by superb interference on the part of Drake and Axtell, who bowled over the "Maroon" tacklers like so many ninepins. He had made thirty-five yards and was going like the wind when, in eluding the outstretched arms of Miller, he slipped in a pool of mud and water and went down, skating along on his nose for several yards, while the whole "Maroon" team piled over him. But his nose guard had saved him from injury and, when the wriggling mass was disentangled, it was found that he still had the ball. He wiped the mud from his face and grinned happily while his mates gathered round him and billows of cheers swept down from the Blue stands, frantic with delight at the brilliant run. [165]

"Splendid, old boy!" cried Bert, slapping Tom on the back. "That was classy stuff. You went down the line like a shot from a gun."

"It saved the goal line all right," panted Dick. "Jove! They were close. It looked for a minute as though they had us going."

The ball was put into play again but just as the teams lined up time was called. The game was three-quarters over and the remaining fifteen minutes would tell the tale of victory or defeat. The boys stood around in groups scraping the mud from their uniforms and rubbing rosin on their hands to get a better grip in tackling. [166]

Just as the breathing spell was over the sun suddenly burst forth in a blaze of glory. Umbrellas went down like magic and even the "Maroon" supporters, chagrined as they were, joined in the cheer that rose from the drenched spectators. It put new life into the players also.

"Look!" cried Bert as the teams took their places. "The rainbow!"

All eyes were turned in the direction he pointed, where in a magnificent arch of shifting colors the bow of promise curved over the field.

"It's our rainbow," shouted Tom. "We saw it first."

"Come off, you dubs," sang out Halliday. "Don't you see that it's over our goal?"

"Sure," retorted Tom. "That's to show us where we've got to go."

"It is, eh?" said Halliday grimly. "You'll only get there over our dead bodies."

"You're dead ones already," taunted Drake good-naturedly. "You're only walking round to save funeral expenses."

But in the furious battle that developed from the kick-off, it was evident that the "Maroons" were very lively corpses. It was no use to play on the defensive. If they did that, they were beaten

already by the three points that now loomed up in such tremendous proportions. Nor was there any reason to keep any of their plays up their sleeves. For them it was the last game of the season and now was the time to uncover their whole "bag of tricks."

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So they threw caution to the winds and played with utter recklessness and abandon. Their "Wheel shift" was a new one on the Blues, and the "Maroons" had used it twice for a gain of thirty yards before the Blues solved and checkmated it. Then the forward pass was tried, usually without advancing the ball, though one clever skirting of the end gained fifteen yards. The ball was getting pretty well down into Blue territory when a magnificent drop kick by Bert sent it sailing to the middle of the field. In the momentary silence that succeeded the cheering, some wag from the Blue stands piped out:

"It's too bad that fellow Wilson is lame." And everybody laughed.

But the laugh of the "Maroons" had a pang behind it. Only five minutes of playing time were left, and the ball was in the hands of their enemies. They ranged up for the scrimmage with the desperation of men faced by advancing doom but bound to go down fighting.

And go down they did before the savage and exulting onslaught of the Blues. Fighting, raging, blocking, charging, they were forced back toward their goal. Drake and Dick and Axtell went ploughing through big holes opened up by their comrades in both sides of the line until, with two downs yet to go, the ball was in the hands of the Blues twelve yards from the enemy's goal.

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Everybody was standing now. Flags were waving, voices yelling and the tumult was indescribable.

It was the supreme moment, and Bert was called on for the final plunge.

"Go to it, old man, the instant I snap it back," whispered Tom.

"For the sake of the old college," urged Dick.

Bert stiffened.

"Watch me," he said.

It was a perfect snap from Tom to Dick, who passed it to Bert so swiftly that the eye could scarcely follow it. At the same instant Drake and Axtell opened up a hole between left guard and tackle and Bert ploughed through it like an unchained cyclone. The whole "Maroon" team was on him in an instant, but the fearful headway of his charge had carried him through nine of the coveted twelve yards and the goal post loomed almost directly overhead.

"Buck up, fellows, buck up," screamed Halliday wildly. "For heaven's sake, brace!"

Bert's head was buzzing with the impact of that mighty plunge, but his eyes blazed with the light of coming triumph.

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"Not an inch, boys, not an inch," yelled Halliday. "Throw them back. It's their last down."

But their hour had struck. Once more the ball was passed and, charging hard and low, Bert went into the line. The "Maroons" hurled themselves savagely against him, but a regiment could not have stopped him. He crumpled them up and carried the fragments of the broken line on his head and shoulders, coming at last to the ground five yards over the goal for the touchdown. And the Blue stands promptly went stark raving mad.

Bruised and dizzy but smiling, Bert rose to his feet. At that moment he would not have changed places with an emperor.

The ball was carried out to the twenty-five yard line and Dick, lying flat on the ground, steadied it for the kick. Bert took careful aim and lifted it unerringly over the goal. It had scarcely touched the ground when the whistle blew and the game was over. The Blues had triumphed, ten to nothing, but only after a desperate battle that left the "Maroons" vanquished, but not disgraced. Their gallant foes gave them a rousing cheer that was returned by the victors with interest.

Then the crowds swept down like a tidal wave from the stands and submerged the doughty fighters. The Blues, all muddy and disheveled as they were, were hoisted on the shoulders of their exulting comrades and carried from the field. And it was all they could do to get away from them and repair to their shower and rubdown, never before so needed or so welcome.

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The campus blazed that night with bonfires and resounded with noises that "murdered sleep." But all the pleading that the team might take part in the festivities fell unheeded on the ears of the two inexorable tyrants, Hendricks and Reddy. Happy and exulting tyrants just then, but tyrants none the less.

"Not until they lick the 'Greys,'" was "Bull's" decree. "If they do that they can split the town wide open. Until then the lid is on."

There was no appeal from his decision, and by nine o'clock the weary warriors were tucked away in bed to dream of past and hope for coming victory.

Dick was just dropping off when a voice came from Bert's bed:

"Say, Dick, what's the greatest game in the world?"

"Football," was the prompt reply.

"And, Dick, what's the greatest team in the world?"

"The Blues," averred Dick stoutly.

"Right," assented Bert. "Now go to sleep."

CHAPTER XII

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THE COACH ROBBERY

ONE morning Bert received a letter that caused him to emit a wild whoop of joy, and then set off post haste to find Tom and Dick. He discovered them at last on the campus, kicking a ball around, and rushed toward them waving the open letter over his head.

"Say, fellows," he shouted when he got within speaking distance of them, "whom do you suppose this letter is from? Bet you a million you can't guess right in three guesses."

"From the way you seem to feel about it," grinned Dick, "it must contain money from home. I don't know what else could make you feel as happy as you appear to be."

"No, it isn't money," replied Bert, "but it's something better."

"Come off," chaffed Tom, "there 'ain't no such thing.' But tell us what it is and get it out of your system."

"It's a letter from Mr. Melton," explained Bert, "saying he's on his way East, and is going to visit us here. What do you know about that, eh?"

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"Great!" exclaimed Dick and Tom in chorus, and Dick asked, "When does he say he'll get here?"

"Monday or Tuesday of next week," replied Bert, consulting the letter. "Either Monday afternoon or Tuesday morning. He's going to stop at the 'Royal,' and wants us to be on hand to meet him. He says in all probability he'll arrive on the 7:45 Monday evening. And just make out we won't be on hand to give him a rousing welcome, what?"

"I rather guess we will," said Tom, "and then some. I move that we hire a brass band and do the thing up right."

"That's a good idea all right," laughed Bert, "but I rather think Mr. Melton would prefer to dispense with the brass band. But we'll manage to make him know he's welcome, I have no doubt of that."

"I'd deserve to be hung, drawn, and quartered if I didn't," said Dick with feeling. "He was certainly a friend in need if there ever was one."

Dick alluded to a never-to-be-forgotten time when Mr. Melton had, at the risk of his own life, rendered timely aid to Bert and Tom in rescuing Dick from a band of Mexican outlaws. The three comrades were not ones to forget such a service, and from that time on Mr. Melton had always occupied a warm place in their regard. In addition to his personal bravery he was genial and good natured, with a heart as big as himself. He had taken part in many enterprises, but was now a prosperous rancher in the Northwest, calling many a fertile acre his own.

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He had traveled extensively and knew much of the world. His stock of experiences and anecdote seemed inexhaustible, and he was never at a loss for some tale of adventure when called upon to tell one. His bluff, hearty manner gained him friends wherever he went, and it was with feelings of the keenest anticipation that the three comrades looked forward to his coming. It was only Wednesday when Bert received the letter announcing his coming, so they had several days of inevitable waiting.

However, "all things come to him who waits," and the day to which the boys looked forward with so much anticipation was no exception to the rule. They were at the station long before the train was due, and it seemed hours to them before they heard its whistle in the distance.

"The chances are though," said Tom pessimistically, "that something has happened to delay him and he won't be on this train at all, but on the one that comes in to-morrow morning."

"That's the way it usually works out," agreed Bert with a grin, "but somehow I have a hunch that Mr. Melton is going to be on this train. He said in the letter you know, that in all probability he would be on the earlier train."

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"Yes, I know," said Tom, "and I only hope that my fears are groundless. But we won't have to wait long now to find out at any rate."

He had hardly ceased speaking when the train puffed into the station. They scanned the long

line of cars carefully, and it was Dick who first discerned the burly form descending the narrow steps of one of the rear Pullmans.

"There he is, fellows," he shouted and made a dash in the direction of the approaching figure, followed closely by Bert and Tom. Mr. Melton saw them coming and stretched out his hand. "Well, well!" he exclaimed, after shaking hands all around. "I'm certainly glad to see you once more, my boys. You don't look as though the grind of college work has interfered much with your health," with a twinkle in his eyes.

"No," laughed Bert, "we're not actually wasting away under the strain. But as far as that goes," he continued, "you look pretty fit yourself."

"Yes, and I feel it, too," replied Mr. Melton. "I'm not quite as spry as I used to be, but I never felt better in my life. There's nothing like an open air life to keep a man young." [175]

While this talk was going on, the little party was making its way toward the hotel at which Mr. Melton had said he was going to put up, and were not long in reaching it.

"Well, boys," said Mr. Melton as they ascended the handsome flight of steps leading up to the entrance, "I don't suppose you've had supper yet, have you? If not I want you all to keep me company. It's on me, and the best in the house is none too good for us."

"Well," replied Bert, "speaking for myself, nothing would give me greater pleasure. But we're all three slaves of the training table, you know, so I'm afraid you'll have to excuse us this time."

"That's right!" exclaimed Mr. Melton in a disappointed tone, "for the moment I had forgotten all about that. But duty is duty, and far be it from me to put temptation in your path."

"What I think we had better do," said Bert, "is to see you safely installed here, and then hustle back to college and eat. Then we can come back here and spend the evening with you."

"I guess that will be the best plan," agreed Mr. Melton, "but you must promise me to get back soon."

Of course they all promised, and after leaving their friend to the tender mercies of the hotel clerk, hastened back to their Alma Mater. [176]

They were just in time for dinner, but in their excitement and hurry to get back to the hotel ate less than usual. In reply to Reddy's query as to "what was up," they told him of Mr. Melton's arrival. Reddy had heard of the Mexican adventure and spoke accordingly. "He must be a good man to know," he opined, "and I'd like to meet him. Go ahead and make your call now, but don't get back late. I guess, from what I hear of this Melton that he'll see that you leave in time anyway."

"No, he's not the kind to persuade people to forget their obligations," said Dick. "In fact, he's just the opposite. But of course our own well-known principles would make it impossible for us to be late," with a grin.

"Yes, I know all about that sort of stuff," said Reddy. "See if for once you can live up to your own 'rep.'"

"All you got to do is keep your eyes peeled, and you'll see us piking in here right on the dot," laughed Tom. "Come on, fellows. The sooner we get started the sooner we'll get back."

"Right you are," agreed Bert, and the three comrades swung into a brisk stride. A twenty-minute walk brought them to the "Royal," and they were immediately ushered up to Mr. Melton's room. In answer to their knock a hearty voice bade them "come in," and as they opened the door Mr. Melton met them with outstretched hand. [177]

"Come in and make yourselves at home," he said genially. "If you want anything and don't see it, ask for it."

"You seem to be pretty well fixed with about everything that anybody could want, now," commented Bert, glancing about the luxuriously appointed room. "This place certainly looks as though it had had some thought and money expended on it."

"Yes," admitted the Westerner, "it reminds me of the so-called 'hotels' we used to have out West in the early days—it's so different. The height of luxury there was in having a room all to yourself. As a rule you had to bunk in with at least two or three others. O yes, this is quite an improvement on one of those old shacks. I remember one of the pioneer towns where there was a fierce rivalry between the proprietors of the only two hotels in town. They were each trying to get the better of the other by adding some improvement, real or fancied. First the owner of the 'Palace' had his shack painted a vivid white and green. Then the owner of the 'Lone Star' hostelry, not to be outdone, had his place painted also, and had a couple of extra windows cut in the wall. So it went, and if they had kept it up long enough, probably in the end people stopping at one of the places would have been fairly comfortable. But before matters reached that unbelievable pitch, O'Day, owner of the 'Palace,' was killed in a shooting fracas. The man who plugged him claimed he was playing 'crooked' poker, and I think that in all probability he was. If he wasn't, it was about the only time in his life that he ever played straight." [178]

"What happened to the man who did the shooting?" asked Bert.

"Well, O'Day wasn't what you'd call a very popular character," replied Mr. Melton, "and nobody felt very much cut up over his sudden exit from this vale of tears. They got up an impromptu jury, but the twelve 'good men and true' failed to find the defendant guilty."

"But how did they get around it?" asked Tom. "There was no doubt about who did the killing, was there?"

"Not the least in the world," replied Mr. Melton with a laugh; "but as I say, popular sentiment was with the man who did the shooting, so the jury turned in a verdict that ran something in this fashion, if I remember rightly: 'We find that the deceased met death while inadvisably attempting to stop a revolver bullet in motion' or words to that effect. I thought at the time it was a masterpiece of legal fiction."

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"I should say it was," commented Dick. "The quibbles and technicalities that make our laws a good deal of a joke to-day have nothing much on that."

"That's a fact," agreed Mr. Melton; "some of the results of our modern 'justice,' so called, are certainly laughable. It's all very well to give a man every chance and the benefit of every doubt, but when a conviction is set aside because the court clerk was an hour behind time getting to court on the day of the trial, it begins to look as though things were being carried too far. Mere technicalities and lawyers' quibbles should not have the weight with judges that for some reason they seem to possess."

"I've no doubt," remarked Bert, "that some of the rough and ready courts such as you were just telling us about meted out a pretty fair brand of justice at that."

"Yes, they did," replied Mr. Melton. "They got right down to the core of the argument, and cut out all confusing side issues. If, for instance, three witnesses all swore they saw a man steal a horse, and yet were unable to agree on the exact time of the stealing, the chances were ten to one that the horse thief would be strung up without further loss of time. And there was no appeal from the findings of a frontier jury."

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"It must have been an exciting life, that of the old frontier days," commented Bert. "I guess nobody had to complain much of the monotony of it."

"Not so you could notice," replied Mr. Melton with a smile, "but there wasn't half as much shooting going on all the time as you might believe from reading the current stories in the magazines dealing with the 'wild and woolly West.' Most everybody carried a gun, of course, but they weren't used so very often. Every man knew that his neighbor was probably an expert in the use of his 'shooting irons,' too, so there wasn't much percentage in starting an argument. Most of the scraps that did occur would never have been started, if it hadn't been for the influence of 'red-eye,' as the boys used to call the vile brands of whiskey served out in the frontier saloons. That whiskey bit like vitriol, and a few glasses of it were enough to make any man take to the war path."

"I suppose you carried a gun in those days, too, didn't you, Mr. Melton?" questioned Dick.

"Yes, I carried a pair of Colt's .45s with me for years," replied the Westerner, with a reminiscent look in his eyes. "Why, a couple of guns were as much a part of a man's dress in those days as a pair of shoes. Every one carried them as a matter of course."

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"Did you ever have to use them?" asked Bert.

"Only once," replied Mr. Melton. "I never went looking for trouble, and it has been my experience, when you don't look for trouble, trouble seldom looks for you. But the one time I did have use for my arsenal made up for lost time."

"Tell us about it, please," chorused the boys, and Mr. Melton smiled at their eagerness as he lit another perfecto.

"Well," he began, "it was back in the old days before the time of the railroads, when stage coaches were the only carriers known. I was traveling to Fort Worth on business, and was finding the journey anything but a pleasant one. The coach was old and rickety, and the way it lurched and rolled reminded me of a small boat in a rough sea. It was a terrifically hot day, too, and the stinging alkali dust got down your throat and in your eyes until life seemed an unbearable burden. We had traveled steadily all the morning, and along toward afternoon most of the passengers began to feel pretty sleepy, and dozed off. I was among the number. Suddenly I was awakened by a shout of 'hands up!' and found myself looking full into the muzzle of a blue barreled Colt, held in the hand of a masked man."

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"There was nothing for it but to obey, seeing he had the drop on us, so up went our hands over our heads. There were six other passengers in the coach, but if we had been sixteen we would have been no better off."

"As we gazed in a sort of fascination at the ugly-looking revolver, another masked man entered the coach and commenced systematically to relieve the passengers of their valuables. I happened to be nearest the front of the coach, and so did not receive the benefit of his attentions at first. He had almost reached me when there was a commotion outside, and he straightened up to listen, all his senses on the alert."

"He was between me and the door in which his companion was standing. For the moment the

man in the door could not get at me except through his comrade, and I resolved to grasp the opportunity. In a flash I had reached down into the breast of my coat and grasped the butt of my revolver. Before the desperado in front of me could get his gun in action, I had fired. At the first shot he dropped to the ground and, as he fell, a bullet from the man in the doorway took my hat off. I pulled the trigger as fast as my fingers could work, and he did the same. I have only a confused recollection of smoke, flashes of flame, shouts and a dull shock in my left arm. In what must have been but a few seconds it was all over. With my own gun empty, I waited to see what would happen. I knew that if by that time I hadn't killed the bandit, he had me at his mercy. And even with him disposed of, I fully expected to be plugged by the man outside who was holding the driver under guard.

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"But he must have had a streak of yellow in him, for when he failed to see either of his comrades come out of the coach he concluded that they were either dead or prisoners, and made off as fast as his pony could carry him. By that time we passengers had rushed out of the coach, and some of us began firing at the fugitive. But a revolver is not very accurate over two or three hundred feet, and I doubt if the desperado was even grazed. I was unable to shoot for, as I had realized by this time, my left arm was broken just above the elbow, and I was unable to load my gun.

"Well, finding that we could not hope to harm the fugitive, we returned to the coach. An examination of the two hold-ups showed that one, the man I had shot first, was dead. The other, who had guarded the door, was badly wounded and unconscious. One of the passengers had been bored through the shoulder by a stray bullet, but was not hurt seriously.

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"The driver bound up my arm after a fashion, and whipped up his horses. It was after dark before we reached Fort Worth though, and by that time my arm was giving me a foretaste of what Hades must be. But there was a good doctor in the town, fortunately for me, and he fixed the arm up in fine fashion. And, believe me, I felt lucky to get off as easy as that."

"I should think you would," said Bert admiringly. "It must have taken nerve to pull a gun under those conditions."

"Well," replied Mr. Melton, "it was all on account of a watch I carried at that time. It was one I had had for years, and thought a lot of. The idea of losing that watch just made me desperate. I think if it hadn't been for that I would never have taken the chance."

"And what happened to the man you wounded?" asked Dick.

"He gradually recovered," replied Mr. Melton. "The boys were going to hang him when he got well enough, but one night he broke jail and got away. They made up a posse and chased him through three counties, but never caught him. I imagine, though, that his liking for hold-ups suffered a severe check."

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"Very likely," agreed Bert, "but I'm glad you saved the watch, anyway."

"So am I," said Mr. Melton with a smile. "Here it is now, if you'd care to see it."

He passed a handsome gold timepiece over to the boys, who admired it greatly. Then the talk turned to other subjects, and before they realized it, it was time for them to go.

Before leaving, however, they made Mr. Melton promise to visit the college the following afternoon. This he readily did, and the boys took their departure after saying a hearty good night to their Western friend.

CHAPTER XIII

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AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

TRUE to his promise, Mr. Melton made his appearance at the south end of the campus a little after three o'clock of the following day. The three friends were there to meet him, and they exchanged hearty greetings.

"There's so much we want to show you that we hardly know where to begin," said Bert. "What shall we show him first, fellows?"

"Let's start with the library," suggested Dick, "that's one of the handsomest buildings. When he sees all the books he'll get the idea that we're very literary, and first impressions are lasting, you know."

"I'm afraid it wouldn't do any good," said Bert. "He'd just be getting that impression, and then Tom would pull some of his low comedy stuff and queer the whole thing. We can never palm ourselves off as highbrows while he's around."

"Just because you're unable to appreciate the little gems of wit I offer you from time to time, you have to go and run them down," protested Tom. "It isn't my fault that you haven't sense enough to laugh at them. It's your misfortune, that's all."

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"Well, I'll do my best to bear up under the deprivation," laughed Bert. "But here we are, Mr. Melton. What do you think of the outside?"

While he and Tom had been exchanging thrusts the little group had been strolling toward the library building, and by this time had reached the broad flight of steps that led up to it. There they halted while Mr. Melton examined the front of the building.

"It is very handsome," he commented; "if its interior answers to its outer appearance it must be a beautiful place."

"I think you'll find that it does," said Bert; "but the best way to tell is to go inside."

Accordingly, they ascended the stone steps and, entering the massive doors, found themselves in a lofty hall, from which branched the various reading rooms. Everything was in perfect harmony and taste, and Mr. Melton was outspoken in his expressions of admiration.

Leaving the library, the boys showed their friend all the college buildings—the recitation hall, the dormitories, the chapel and the gymnasium. Mr. Melton seemed attracted most of all by the latter, and examined the different athletic apparatus with the greatest interest. [188]

"You certainly have everything that modern science can furnish," commented Mr. Melton enthusiastically. He lingered long by the swimming tank, in which a number of athletic young fellows were disporting themselves.

"How would you like to visit the engine room?" asked Dick. "To my mind that's the most interesting place in the college."

"I'd like it first rate," said Mr. Melton; "anything in the way of machinery can always be sure of getting a respectful hearing from me."

The three friends accordingly guided him down into the engine and boiler rooms, sacred ground to which few visitors ever penetrated. Here was machinery of the latest and most up-to-date patterns, and Mr. Melton listened attentively while the boys explained to him the uses of the various mechanisms. They were familiar with everything in the place, and their listener knew enough about machinery to readily understand everything that they told him. They spent over an hour altogether in the engine room, and when at last they emerged into the upper regions again Mr. Melton drew a long breath.

"It's certainly a wonderful place," he said with enthusiasm; "and I envy you boys the chance you have of getting an education in a such a college. It's a privilege that you'll probably appreciate ten years from now even more than you do at the present time." [189]

"Possibly," said Bert with a note of doubt in his voice. "But I don't think we'll ever take any more pride in the old college than we do right now."

"Nope, can't be done," said Tom flippantly; "any place that can give Bert three such meals a day as he gets at the training table is sure to make a hit with him."

"I'll make a hit with a brick if you make any more comments of that kind," threatened Bert; "and what's more, you'll be *it*."

"I call you to witness, Mr. Melton," said Tom, turning to that gentleman, who by now was laughing heartily, "this low person has threatened to land me with a brick if I make any further criticism of his bad habits. Now, what I want to know is, is this, or is it not, a land of free speech? Is a freeborn American citizen to be threatened and bullied by a——" but here his protest ended in a muffled roar, as Dick and Bert pounced on him and wrapped their coats tightly about his head.

"It's the only way to make him quit," apologized Bert to Mr. Melton. Then, addressing the muffled Tom, "Will you promise to be good if we let you out?"

The only answer was a series of wild plungings, that ended by landing the three in a tangled heap on the grass. At last Tom managed to get his head free, and struggled to his feet. [190]

His laughing comrades also scrambled to theirs, and they stood facing each other.

"Well," said Tom, smoothing down his rumpled mop of hair, "you knew you were tackling something, anyway."

"It was quite exciting," laughed Mr. Melton. "If you boys play football in the same fashion you employed then, I don't see how your opponents ever have a chance."

"They don't when they have me to deal with," said Tom unblushingly; "it's only when the rival teams come up against Dick or Bert that they have an easy time of it."

Bert and Dick passed this remark over with the silent contempt they felt it warranted, and asked Mr. Melton what he would like to do next.

"Anything you suggest will suit me," replied that individual. "I place myself entirely in the hands of my friends."

"Well, then," suggested Dick, "why not go over and watch the boys practising football? There's always a few kicking the ball around, even when there's no regular practice on the programme,

and sometimes they play sides. It won't hurt to go over and see what's doing, anyway."

As Mr. Melton expressed himself as agreeable to this plan, they strolled over toward the campus, and were soon standing on the sidelines watching the practice. There was a goodly number out, and the air resounded with the smack of leather against leather as the pigskin was sent soaring high into the air, to be caught expertly as it descended swiftly toward the earth. A few of the regulars were out, and it was easy even for a stranger to distinguish them by the deftness and quick sureness of their actions. The others sometimes missed hard catches, but these veterans, with clocklike precision, were always in position to make the most difficult catches without even the appearance of effort.

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"Looks easy, doesn't it?" said Bert to Mr. Melton.

"Well, I wouldn't say that exactly," said Mr. Melton, "but I've no doubt it looks a good deal easier than it really is. I have had enough experience of life to realize that nothing is as easy as it looks. Many people never realize that though, and the result is they never try hard enough, or at least, when they do realize it, find it too late to do anything."

They watched the practice a short time longer, and then as the afternoon was getting well along, Mr. Melton looked at his watch and said he would have to get back to his hotel. They were just turning away when they came face to face with Hendricks, who was hurrying toward the scene of activities. He and Mr. Melton had hardly glanced at each other when they each gave a shout and rushed forward with outstretched hands.

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"'Bull,' you old reprobate, is it really you!" exclaimed Mr. Melton, pumping the coach's hand up and down like a pumphandle.

"It certainly is, old timer," replied Hendricks, "and you sure are a welcome sight to me. But how in the name of all that's good did you happen to get here?"

"I came as a guest of our young friends here," replied Mr. Melton; "they mentioned your name, but I didn't think that it might be you. It's some years now since we were together last."

While all this had been going on, the three boys had looked on wonderingly, but it did not take long to explain matters. It seemed that Hendricks and Mr. Melton had once been members of a hunting party, and had scoured the Rockies together in search of game. They had formed a friendship then that had never grown cold. Through the years that had elapsed since their last meeting it had lain dormant, but now, at sight of each other, blazed up again brightly.

After a little further talk, Mr. Melton insisted that the coach and the three boys come to his hotel for dinner and spend the evening there. "You can tell me what to order now," he said, cutting short Hendrick's objections, which, to tell the truth, were not very strong. "I'll order exactly what you say, and it will be just the same as though you were eating dinner at the training table. That's satisfactory, isn't it?"

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"Why, I suppose it will have to be," laughed the coach; "if you'll follow out that programme I'll consent. But you can bet your boots I wouldn't do it for everybody."

"All right then that's settled," said Mr. Melton; "so make out your menu, and I'll hustle back to my hotel and make arrangements."

Hendricks fished out an old envelope and jotted down a list of edibles, starting with "beefsteak." This he gave to Mr. Melton, and then they shook hands and after saying good-by to the boys, Mr. Melton hurried away in the direction of his hotel.

Not long afterward the three comrades, accompanied by the coach, set out for the same destination. When they arrived they were greeted by a cordial welcome, and shortly afterwards dinner was served.

It consisted of nothing but the plainest and most nourishing foods, and Hendricks expressed himself as feeling perfectly satisfied. After the meal they repaired to Mr. Melton's rooms, and for a couple of hours the two old friends swapped yarns, while Tom and Bert and Dick listened with the greatest interest. They told tales of adventure by field and forest, and the time passed like magic. But "Bull" Hendricks was not to be beguiled into forgetting the time, and shortly after ten o'clock he glanced at his watch and rose.

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"Time to be going, boys," he announced crisply. "I'm sure it would be a pleasure to stay all night, but rules are rules, you know."

"Well, I'd like to have you stay," said Mr. Melton, "but far be it from me to try to urge you against your judgment. I hope, though, that there won't be as much time between our next meeting as there was between the last, old fellow."

"So do I," responded Hendricks heartily as they shook hands, "but so long till then, anyway."

"Good-by," said Mr. Melton, and then shook hands with the boys. "I'm afraid I won't see you fellows again this trip, although I'm going to make a desperate effort to stay East until the big game comes off," he said. "I've got to get a very early train for New York to-morrow, so I guess we'd better say good-by now until the next time."

The boys shook hands with him warmly, and then started downstairs. Mr. Melton followed them to the door, and the last thing they saw as they looked back was his sturdy bulk outlined in

CHAPTER XIV

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A PLOT THAT FAILED

ALTHOUGH Reddy, in common with everyone else in the college, felt jubilant over the gallant victory of the Blues, he relaxed not one jot of his vigilance. Two days' rest was all that he allowed. By that time Boyd had recovered from the injury to his knee, the strain of the contest had largely abated, and the team was once more in a condition to face the final test—the battle with the redoubtable "Greys" in New York on Thanksgiving Day.

But other and more baleful eyes were fixed on the condition of the team.

Football is one of the cleanest games in existence, and few sports are more free of gambling of every kind. Nevertheless, it is impossible to control the actions of a few professional gamblers who grasp eagerly at every chance to ply their trade. Naturally, the conditions of the different teams are of vital importance to them, and they make it their business, through spies and in every possible way, to be well informed on the subject. And the big football games of this season were no exception to the rule. The condition of every player was carefully noted and kept track of, and it is safe to say that the gambling clique had almost as accurate a line on these points as the different trainers themselves.

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During the practice games in the earlier part of the season the "Greys" had seemed to have the "edge" on the other members of the "Big Three." Consequently, they were picked by the poolmakers as the eventual winners, and large bets, amounting in some cases to practically the entire "bank roll" of the plungers, were placed on them to win.

But the "Blues" had of late been going at such a terrific pace that they had a most excellent chance of winning the pennant. And when this was accentuated by the splendid victory of the "Blues" over the "Maroons" it threw the "sports" into a condition closely bordering on panic.

A week before the final game on Thanksgiving Day one of the most unscrupulous of the gamblers decided that if he could not win as matters then stood, he would have to resort to underhand methods to change them. Accordingly, one evening he called a number of his henchmen about him, and when they and other plungers of his own stamp had assembled at a designated rendezvous, he broached his plan.

"Boys," he said, glancing from one to the other of the hard faces turned toward him, "there's no use telling you of the hole we're in. You know just as well as I do, I guess, that we stand in a fair way to lose about all we've got on account of the 'Blue' team coming up the way it has lately. And according to Donovan here, it's not just a flash in the pan, either. It looks as though they had hit their stride and meant to keep it up until the end of the season."

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"You can lay a stack of blues on dat," here spoke up the individual referred to as "Donovan." "Dose guys has got more pepper in dem dan a Mexican stew. De way dey practice an' de way dey play sure has got me scared stiff. I knows a snappy football team when I sees one, an' you can take it from me dem guys has de goods, and plenty of dem."

"Well, you see how things stand," said their leader, when Donovan had finished. "If we don't do something, and do it pretty quick, we'll be cooked—hashed—done brown on both sides."

There were significant looks exchanged among his auditors, and at last one of them said:

"Well, what's your plan? Do you think we could buy one of the 'Blue' players? It would be worth our while to ante up something handsome, if you think it could be done."

"No chanct in de world," spoke up Donovan disgustedly, "dey're all straighter'n a string, an' I tink any guy what made a proposition like dat to one o' them would need a ambulance mighty quick."

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"That leaves us only one thing to do, then," spoke the leader; "if we can't buy one of them, we'll have to steal one, that's all. We'll have to pinch one of the players some way, and keep him until the big game is over. Then we can let him go, and if we play our cards right nobody will ever get on to who turned the trick."

If, as is altogether unlikely, there existed any lingering scruple among those present at taking part in any such project, the thought of the ruin impending over their heads quickly banished such thoughts. All that remained to be discussed was which player should be kidnapped, and there were various opinions on this point. But the voice of Donovan decided the question.

"De best man we can crimp," he said, "is Henderson, de quarterback. He's de guy what gives de signals, an' it will stand de whole bunch on deir heads. Besides," with a crafty grin, "he ain't quite as big as some of de other huskies, an' dere's no use makin' ourselves any more trouble dan we got to."

"I'll provide a good safe place to keep him in," said Bloom, the leader. "There's a place over

Mike's saloon, on the outskirts of the town, that will be just the thing, and there won't be any questions asked, either."

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So the plans for kidnapping the unconscious Tom were finally settled and disposed of.

Bloom immediately set about perfecting his plans. He realized that he was confronted with a difficult problem. He knew that it would be necessary for him to capture Tom at some time when he was not in the company of his two comrades, and from what his spy, Donovan, had told him, he knew that the three were seldom separated for any length of time. But he finally evolved a plan, and without loss of time set about putting it in action.

He secured the use of a powerful automobile, and put it in charge of one of his trusted lieutenants. The man was carefully instructed in the part he was to play, and was intrusted with a note that he was to deliver to Tom at a certain time. Thus the trap was laid, and Bloom settled back to wait for the proper time to spring it.

And fate seemed to play into his hands. Toward dusk of the Tuesday immediately preceding Thanksgiving Day Bert and Dick had occasion to go to town, and as Tom had some studying to do, they left him in his room and set out on their errand.

This was the time for which the gambler had been waiting. His spies immediately sent him word of the favorable condition of affairs. Excitedly he slammed the receiver of the telephone on its hook and sent word to the man in charge of the automobile. The latter immediately cranked up his car, and a few minutes later the big limousine rolled quietly up to Tom's dormitory. The driver, who was dressed in ordinary chauffeur's garb, mounted the stairs to the entrance, and when his ring was answered by the appearance of an attendant, requested him to deliver a letter that he handed him to "Mr. Tom Henderson."

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A few moments later Tom was interrupted in his studies by a knock on the door of his room, and on opening it was handed an unstamped envelope. Somewhat surprised, he drew forth a yellow slip of paper that proved to be a telegraph blank. Tom read the words scrawled across it, in careless, hasty writing.

"Dear Tom," the message read, "am in town just for one evening, and want you to drop in and see me. I would visit you if possible, but have some friends with me, and so cannot. Just to make sure of your coming I'm sending my car for you. Please don't disappoint me." The letter was signed "Dave."

"Why," thought Tom, "that must be Dave Rutgers. I should say I would go to see him. I haven't laid eyes on the old sinner since I came to college."

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Crumpling the yellow slip into a ball, he flung it into a corner of the room and hastily donned his coat and hat. As he was about to leave the room he hesitated a moment, and started back. But after a second he started out again, and slammed the door after him. "I'll be back in a couple of hours," he thought. "Bert and Dick probably won't return much before that, so there's no use writing a note telling them where I've gone." With this thought he dismissed the matter from his mind, and hurried down to the waiting auto. He stepped in, the chauffeur slammed the door, and the big machine glided noiselessly away, at a rapid gait.

About ten o'clock that evening Bert and Dick returned, and on their way to their room pounded on Tom's door. They received no reply, so concluded that he must be asleep, and passed on.

But when they stopped at his room the next morning, as was their invariable custom, and received no answer to repeated summons, they began to feel uneasy.

"Perhaps he's stolen a march on us and gone down early," suggested Dick.

"Possible," answered Bert, "but more likely he's just 'playing possum.'" As he spoke he seized the knob to rattle the door, and the door swung open!

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"Why, he's not in here," exclaimed Bert, as he gazed about the room; "and what's more," he continued excitedly, "he hasn't been here all night, either. It's easy to see that the bed hasn't been slept in."

"That mighty queer," said Dick uneasily. "Where do you suppose he can have gone?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, I'm sure," said Bert. "He didn't say anything to you about going anywhere, did he?"

"Not a word," said Dick, "and I think if he had expected to be away any length of time he would have told one of us about it."

"Something might have come up unexpectedly," said Bert; "but then he'd have left a note for us. I—but what's that over in the corner!" he suddenly exclaimed, "looks as though it might be a telegram."

As he spoke he pounced on the crumpled ball that Tom had tossed there the evening before, and hastily smoothed it out. Then he and Dick read the words written on it.

"That explains why he went," said Bert when they had mastered its contents. "But it doesn't explain where he went or why he didn't get back before this." They gazed at each other a few seconds, and each saw his own fears mirrored in the eyes of his friend.

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"There's something wrong somewhere," declared Dick at length, "and it's up to us to find out what."

"It looks that way," said Bert. Then he continued, "this isn't a regular telegram, you see. It looks as though the person writing it had just scribbled the message on the handiest scrap of paper he could find, which happened to be this."

"It may give us a clue to the writer," said Dick, as a sudden thought flashed across his mind; "there are several telegraph offices in the town, and probably if we showed that slip in any of them we could learn what office it came from. There must be some identifying mark on it. Then the people in that office might be able to give us some clue as to who wrote it."

"It's worth trying, anyway," said Bert after a brief consideration. "And the sooner we start the better. I'm getting more worried every minute."

With all thoughts of breakfast forgotten, they hurried from the college, and were not long in reaching the railroad depot where the main telegraph office was located. They showed the slip to the operator, asking him if he could tell them from what station it had been taken.

"Sure," he said, looking at a figure in the upper left-hand corner, "that came from station 'D,' on the corner of Spruce and Elm Streets." [204]

The boys thanked him and hurried out. The address the operator had given them was nearly a mile away, and they broke into a run. As they went along they noticed that the houses lining the streets began to wear a very tumble-down aspect, and to thin out more and more.

"This is a rotten neighborhood," panted Bert; "we must be getting pretty near the edge of the town."

They had almost reached their destination when, as they passed a particularly ramshackle building with a saloon on the ground floor, they became conscious of a terrific hubbub going on within. There was a sound of shouting and blows, and every once in a while the whole crazy building would fairly rock as some heavy body crashed against the walls from within.

Even as Bert and Dick stood watching in amazement, a muffled shout arose above the general uproar that they both recognized. "That was Tom's voice for a million!" yelled Bert, and without another word the two friends made a dash for the door that evidently led to the floor above. Without hesitating to find out whether or not it was locked they crashed against it. Their combined weight acted like a battering ram and the door, torn from its hinges, fell inward. They rushed up the rickety stairs in great bounds and, crashing through another door that barred their way, found themselves precipitated into the midst of a fierce struggle. [205]

On the floor four men were locked in a deadly grapple. The meager furniture of the room was splintered and broken, and the whole place looked as though a cyclone had struck it. With a yell Bert and Dick plunged into the struggle.

And now the odds were more even. Instead of three to one they were now three to three, and the tide of battle began to turn. Bert and Dick tore Tom's assailants away from him and he staggered to his feet. He was battered and bruised, but still full of fight. "Come on, fellows, wade into them," he shouted hoarsely. His tried and true comrades needed no second bidding, and now began a battle compared to which the other seemed mild. The three thugs who had been trying to overpower Tom were brutal fighters, and withal were men of muscle. But it did not take long to decide which side would win. The three friends, every fighting instinct in them aroused, and the lust of battle hot within them, fought with a fury and concentrated power that nothing could withstand.

Slowly they forced the thugs across the room, planting blow after blow with deadly effect. Their opponents gave ground steadily, unable to withstand the terrific punishment meted out to them. Suddenly the one nearest the door made a dash for it, and the others followed suit. The three comrades started in hot pursuit, but reached the street only to see the last of their erstwhile antagonists disappearing around the nearest corner, and Bert called a halt. [206]

"No use chasing them," he said, when they had gotten their breath a little. "They know the neighborhood and we don't, and the chances are we'd never catch them. We licked 'em good and proper though, didn't we?"

"That was *some* scrap, all right," said Dick with a long whistle, "and we didn't get off scot free, either. My left eye feels as though a coal wagon had fallen on it."

"It looks it, too," said Bert with a wry grin; "we're all marked up a little, but I'll bet that bunch of roughnecks will remember us for a little while to come. But how did they come to get you, Tom? Tell us all about it."

Tom then told them about receiving the note, and getting into the automobile. "After that," he said, "there's not much to tell. It was dark, and I didn't notice what kind of a neighborhood that rascally chauffeur was taking me into. After a while he stopped and opened the door, telling me we had arrived at Dave's house. As I stepped out those three 'bad men' jumped on me. One of them pressed a rag soaked in chloroform over my face, and I went to sleep almost before I had a chance to fight. When I came to I found myself in that room, with one lowbrow on guard. I waited until my head cleared a little, and then I sailed into him. The noise of the shindy brought up the [207]

other two, and then the argument got pretty hot. There's no doubt but what they'd have won the decision soon, too, if you fellows hadn't happened to butt in just as you did. I couldn't have held out much longer against odds like that."

"Yes, it is rather lucky," agreed Bert; "we weren't a minute too soon."

"How did you learn where I was?" inquired Tom.

Bert then told him how they had discovered the slip of paper containing the note to him, and gave a brief outline of his and Dick's actions after discovering it.

"Pretty good detective work," said Tom admiringly. "Sherlock Holmes would better look out for his laurels."

Meanwhile they had been walking back toward the college, and with the aid of a street car were not long in reaching it.

As they were crossing the campus, they met Reddy.

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"For the love of Hivin," exclaimed the trainer, as he caught sight of their swollen faces, "what in the world have you been doin' anyway? You haven't been lambastin' each other, have ye?"

"Not exactly," said Bert, and then proceeded to give the trainer a detailed account of the recent happenings. Reddy listened attentively, and when Bert finished made no reply at once. After a thoughtful silence, he said: "Well, it's something of a mystery, Wilson, but one thing is certain—without Henderson the team would have been so crippled that we wouldn't have had a chance in the world of winning, and I have an idea that the bunch connected with Mike's place, where he was held prisoner, have a pretty big interest in our winning or losing, in a money way. And the two facts put together may come pretty near giving the correct answer."

"I imagined it might be something of the kind," said Bert; "I wonder what chance there is of bringing the scoundrels to justice."

"You'll bet we'll do everything possible," said Reddy grimly, "but now, you'd better pack Henderson off to bed, and Trent had better put a bit o' beefsteak on that damaged 'lamp' of his! This afternoon we start for New York, and we want everybody fit."

CHAPTER XV

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THE DASH FOR THE GOAL

"The day, the important day,
Big with the fate of Cato and of Rome,"

quoted Dick.

"It is the sun of Austerlitz," chimed in Tom, not to be outdone in quotation, as he drew aside the curtains of the hotel window and saw the bright rays streaming over the city roofs.

"As long as it isn't Waterloo, we'll have no kick coming," added Bert. "I'm tickled to death to see that it's this kind of weather. I'd hate to play on as muddy a field as we had with the 'Maroons.'"

"The paper predicted rain yesterday," said Tom, throwing up the window, "but from the bite in the air, it seems cold enough for snow. How would you like to play on a snowy field, fellows?"

"Not for mine," replied Dick emphatically, "although the Western teams do it often. Only a few years ago Chicago and Michigan played in what was almost a blizzard."

"I'll bet the teams kept warm enough," commented Bert; "but it must have been tough on the spectators."

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"O, those dyed-in-the-wool football fiends don't care for a little thing like that," said Dick. "We'll never play to empty benches, no matter what the weather. But hurry up now and come down to breakfast. We won't dare to eat very much at lunch and we'd better fill up now."

It was Thanksgiving Day, and the Blues had come up to New York the night before, so that they might have a good night's rest before the most important game of the season. The game was to be played at the Polo Grounds and public interest was so great that all the seats had been sold out long in advance. It was a foregone conclusion that the vast amphitheater would be crowded to capacity when the teams should come trotting out on the gridiron.

The excitement was the greater because of the superb form shown by both teams all through the season. Seldom had competitors been more equally matched. Both had come through their schedules unbeaten, and the shrewdest followers of the game were hard put to it to pick a winner. Even the games played by each with the "Maroons" did not give much of a line. The "Greys," to be sure, had made two touchdowns, while the Blues had only tallied one. But, on the other hand, the "Maroons" had scored on the "Greys," while the Blues had been able to keep their

goal intact. The "dope" was perplexing and the wisest tipsters were all at sea. Man for man, the "Greys" had a slight advantage in weight. But the Blues were admitted to have the finest backfield in the country, and Wilson was "touted" as the greatest player seen at full for the last twenty years. All in all, it was a "toss up," and many predicted that neither side would score.

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But no such neutral tint shadowed the rosy dreams of the Blues. They were full of fight, and brimming over with confidence. All their cripples had come back except Ellis, who was just able to limp around without a crutch. But Morley in his place had rounded to in great shape and there was scarcely a shade to choose between the two. Boyd's knee, hurt in the game with the "Maroons," was all right again and, best of all, good old Hodge was back again at right tackle, having at last made up his conditions. He plugged up the only really weak place on the team, and made the line twenty per cent. stronger than it had been without him. For all these reasons the team felt itself unbeatable, and were eager for the hour to come when they might prove it. Even Dan, the old bulldog that served the team as a mascot, moved about with unusual alacrity and seemed to have caught the contagion.

"He's actually smiling," declared Tom, as he patted him affectionately. "It's up to you to bring us luck to-day, old fellow."

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Hendricks and Reddy, although delighted to see the way the boys were feeling, felt it incumbent to add a word of caution.

"You're going to win, boys," said the former; "but you'll have your work cut out for you. Those fellows are never easy, and there'll be something doing every minute. Get the jump at the very start, and keep forcing the fight. Go in for straight football until you feel them out, and don't resort to the 'fireworks' until you have to. And keep your eyes on that quarterback of theirs. He's one of the trickiest in the game and always liable to start something."

"Not forgetting the full," added Reddy, "they say he's as big and strong as a bull elephant, and it's aching he'll be to stack up against you, Wilson."

"Let him come," grinned Bert. "I'll try to make it interesting."

Even New York, big and indifferent as it is to most things taking place within it, was agog with interest over the contest. The front pages of the papers were devoted to a review and comparison of the teams, and bulletin boards were prepared for the great crowds expected to gather about the offices during the progress of the game. Broadway and Fifth Avenue were alive with flags and the college colors, and the lobbies of the hotels were packed with a swarming mob of undergraduates. Tally-hos with merry parties and tooting horns rolled up the Avenue, and hundreds of automobiles joined in the procession. The subways and elevated roads were crowded to the doors, and at one o'clock, although the game did not begin till two, there was not a vacant seat in the vast stadium, while thousands of deadheads seized every point of vantage on the bluffs that surrounded the grounds. The stands were a perfect riot of beauty and color, and the stentorian voices of the rival rooters, to which was joined the treble of the girls made the air echo with songs and shouts of defiance.

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After a light lunch the teams had been bundled into swift autos and hurried to the field, where they made their final preparations and underwent the last scrutiny of coach and trainers. Both were in superb fettle and ready to present their strongest line-up, and when they tumbled out on the field, amid frantic roars of greeting, there seemed nothing to choose between them.

The preliminary practice was sharp and snappy. The crisp tang of the air was a tonic to which all responded, and the inspiration of the huge crowds spurred them on to do their prettiest. Bert attracted especial attention as he kicked goals in practice. His fame had preceded him, and the college men in the stands were kept busy at the behest of a sister—or somebody else's sister—in "pointing out Wilson." Other heroes of the gridiron also came in for their meed of admiration, and by the time the game was started expectation was wound up to the highest pitch. Everyone felt, as the young gladiators faced each other, that the game would be "for blood."

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Nor were they disappointed. From the moment the referee's whistle blew, the playing was of the most desperate kind. The "Greys" had won the choice of goal and the Blues had the kick-off. Bert poised himself carefully and shot the ball down the field far and high. Hamilton made a fair catch at the thirty yard line, but Caldwell had gone down like a flash, and nailed him before he could run back.

The ball belonged to the "Greys." Dudley went through left and tackle for a gain of five. Hamilton gained two more on the other side of the line. Again Dudley tried between center and guard, but caught a Tartar in Dick, and was thrown back for a loss of three. The bucking game was not panning out and the ball was passed back to the giant fullback, Livingston, for a kick. The snapping was good and the kick speedy, but Bert burst through the line like a whirlwind and by a superb leap blocked it in mid-air. It was a rattling play and the Blue stand shook with cheers.

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The teams lined up for the scrimmage on the "Grey's" thirty-five yard line. Hodge plunged through for seven with the whole "Grey" team sprawling over him. A forward pass, beautifully engineered by Tom, garnered eight more. Martin skirted left end for a pretty run of fifteen yards, but was tackled so heavily by Livingston that he dropped the ball, and Felton pounced upon it. It was a close call for the "Greys" and a sigh of relief went up from their partisans when on the next play a great punt by Minden sent it whirling down the field and out of danger. A furious battle ensued, but Fortune seemed angry at the Blues for their disregard of her gifts, and the quarter

ended with the ball in the middle of the field.

Nor, try as they would, could they gain in the next period against the stonewall defense put up by the "Greys." Perhaps the Blue attack was somewhat more savage than their own, but they made up for that by superior weight in the line. Their signals were working perfectly and they moved with the precision of a machine.

Twelve minutes of playing time had elapsed when, with the ball on the "Greys'" forty yard line, Bert suddenly dropped back for a kick. The "Greys" burst through, but it got off perfectly. High in the air it soared like a hawk, headed straight for the goal. A groan rose from the "Grey" stands, while those in the Blue sprang to their feet, in a burst of frantic cheering. But, just as it neared the bar, a stiff gust of wind from the north caught it and deflected it from its course. It curved down and out, striking the post and bounded back into the field, where Ensley fell upon it. [216]

The hearts of the Blues went down into their boots, while their opponents capered about and hugged each other.

"What's the use playing against such luck as that?" growled Drake disgustedly.

"It's tough, all right," agreed Bert, "but they can't get all the breaks. It'll be our turn next."

Before the ball could be put in play the period ended, and the teams went to their quarters for the fifteen minute rest before the final struggle.

"Hard luck, boys," consoled the coach, "but things are due to change. Wilson deserved that goal if he didn't get it, but that's part of the game. You've got their number. Keep on hammering the line, and if you find that won't work, uncork that variation of the forward pass. Go in now and eat them up."

As the fellows filed out, they passed Dan, the bulldog, dressed in a brand-new suit of blue in honor of the occasion. Tom stooped and patted his head. [217]

"Get on the job, old boy," he urged. "Show those fellows that you are the real thing in mascots."

Dan barked reassuringly. But he took his time in thinking it over. And the hard luck of the Blues still persisted.

A fruitless attempt to buck the line by either team failing to yield the desired gain, there followed a kicking duel between the two fullbacks in which Bert easily carried off the honors. But slips and off-side playing neutralized the advantage.

On the "Greys" forty yard line they tried out "Bull" Hendricks' new variation. The ball was passed to Bert, apparently for a drop kick, but immediately on receiving the ball, he started on an end run as though the move had been a "plant" to draw in the end rush. Thinking the whole thing a fake, the halfback at first hesitated to come in, but Bert kept on parallel to the line of scrimmage until the half dared hesitate no longer, as it looked certain that Bert was bent on a run around the ends. In the meantime the long run had given Drake time to get down the field, and Bert, turning swiftly, sent the ball to him in a beautiful spiral swing. It would have worked to a charm had not Drake tripped as he started on his run and been savagely tackled by Livingston before he could regain his feet. [218]

"Another good thing gone wrong," groaned Dick. And it certainly seemed as though "the stars in their courses" were fighting for the "Greys."

A moment's breathing space, and the fourth quarter opened up. With a strength born of desperation the teams went at each other hammer and tongs. The "Greys" were heartened by the good fortune that had declared so steadily for them and they played like wild men. A brilliant run around left end netted them twenty yards, and a forward pass gained ten more. Inspired by their success they "forced" their luck until they were on the Blues fifteen yard line with the ball in their possession. But here the Blues braced savagely.

The crowds were standing now and crazy with excitement. The "Grey" followers shrieked to their favorites to "put it over," while from the Blue stands their football song came booming from twenty thousand throats:

"Steady, boys, steady.
You're fighting for your father,
You're fighting for your mother,
You're fighting for your sister,
You're fighting for your brother,
You're fighting for the Blue.
Hit them up, rip them up, tear their line in two.
Steady, boys, steady."

Panting, pale, determined, the team heard, and their muscles stiffened. Livingston plunged in but was thrown back on his head. Dudley tried and failed to gain an inch. The line was impregnable, and Ensley dropped back for a kick. But like lightning, Bert was on him so suddenly that the ball shot up and back over Ensley's head. Without checking his speed, Bert scooped it up on the bound and was off down the field. [219]

Such running! It was flying. Its like had never been seen on a football field. On he went, like a bullet. Down that living lane of forty thousand people, he tore along, his eyes blazing, his head held high, a roar like thunder in his ears, while beneath him the white lines slipped away like a swiftly flowing river. On and on he went, nearer and nearer to the goal.

Behind him came the "Greys" like a pack of maddened wolves. But the Blues were coming too. Savagely they hurled themselves on the enemy, grasping, holding, tackling and brought them to the ground. Then from the tangle of legs and arms emerged Tom and Dick, and running like the wind put down the field to the help of their flying comrade.

[220]

Victory! Before him was the goal, but twenty yards away. Behind him pounded his pursuers, who had made up ground while he was dodging. He could hear their panting and almost feel their breath upon his neck. One more tremendous leap, and like an arrow from a bow, he flashed over the line for a touchdown. He had made a run of ninety yards through a broken field in the last minute of play.

Some days later when the "tumult and the shouting" had died away—when the "sound of revelry by night" had ceased—when the "lid" for a moment open was again "on"—when the snake dances and the bonfires and the toasts were over—Bert, more than ever the idol of his college, together with Tom and Dick, were bidding good-by to Mr. Melton at the railroad station.

"And remember," he called through the window as his train pulled out, "I'm going to hold you boys to that promise to come out to my Montana ranch. I'll give you a corking good time."

How "corking" a time they had, how full of dash and danger, adventure and excitement, will be told in

"BERT WILSON IN THE ROCKIES."

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

"Good-natured", and its forms, is printed with the hyphen, without the hyphen and as one word (goodnatureedly) in this text. This was retained.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BERT WILSON ON THE GRIDIRON ***

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