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THE RUSHTON BOYS AT RALLY HALL

OR

GREAT DAYS IN SCHOOL AND OUT

BY
SPENCER DAVENPORT

Author of "The Rushton Boys in the Saddle," "The Rushton
Boys at Treasure Cove," etc.

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BOOKS FOR BOYS
BY
SPENCER DAVENPORT
THE RUSHTON BOYS SERIES

THE RUSHTON BOYS AT RALLY HALL
Or, Great Days in School and Out
THE RUSHTON BOYS IN THE SADDLE

Or, The Ghost of the Plains
THE RUSHTON BOYS AT TREASURE COVE
Or, The Missing Chest of Gold

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THE RUSHTON BOYS AT RALLY HALL

CHAPTER I A RASH IMPULSE

"Get back, Jim. It's over your head."

The ball had left the bat with a ringing crack that made it soar high into the air toward left field.

Jim Dabney, who was playing left, made a hard run for it, but stumbled over a clump of grass, and the ball just touched the end of his fingers.

"Wow!" he yelled, wringing his hand, "there's another nail gone."

"Never mind your hand, Jim!" yelled the second baseman. "Put it in here. Quick!"

Fred Rushton, who had hit the ball, was streaking it for second, and Jim, forgetting his injured hand, picked up the ball and threw it in. Fred saw that it was going to be a tight squeeze and made a slide for the base. The ball got there at almost the same time, and for a moment there was a flying tangle of arms and legs. Then Fred rose to his feet and brushed the dust from his clothes.

"Never touched me," he remarked, with a slight grin.

"No," agreed Tom Benton, the second baseman. "It was a pretty close call though."

He threw the ball to the pitcher and Fred danced about between second and third.

"Bring me in now, Jack!" he shouted to Jack Youmans, the batter. "Hit it right on the trademark."

Jack made a savage swing but met only the empty air.

"Never mind, Jack," called Fred cheerfully. "Better luck next time. What did I tell you?" he added, as the ball, meeting the bat squarely, went whizzing past just inside third.

Jim Dabney, who was playing close up, made a clever pick-up and threw it straight as a die for home. Fred had passed third and was legging it for the plate with all his might. But this time the ball had a shade the better of it, and Fred was nabbed just as he slid over the rubber.

"Good try, old boy, but you just didn't make it," cried Bob Ellis, the catcher, as he clapped the ball on him.

"Sure thing," admitted Fred, "but it was worth taking a chance."

There were three out, and the other side came in for its inning. Jim Dabney was all smiles, as he came over to Fred.

"How was that for a throw, Fred?" he asked. "Pretty nifty, I call it."

"It was a peach," assented Fred. "You got me good and proper and I'm not saying a word. That wing of yours is certainly all right. How's the hand? Did you hurt it badly?"

"Only started another nail," answered Jim. "I suppose that will turn black now and begin to come off. That'll make the third I've lost this year. Lucky it was on the left hand, though."

"Cheer up, Jim," laughed Bob, "you've got seven nails left."

But, obviously, Jim did not need cheering up. His good-natured face was aglow with satisfaction. He had made a good stop and had thrown his man out at the plate. Then, too, he rather gloated over his scars in secret, and would exhibit them on occasion with all the pride of a soldier showing his wounds received in battle. They were so many proofs of his prowess on the diamond.

It would be straining a point, perhaps, to call the field on which the boys were playing a "diamond." At the best it was a "diamond in the rough." Half a mile away, on the other side of the village of Oldtown, there was a real baseball field, well laid out and kept in good condition. There was a fine turf infield, a spacious and closely cut outfield and the base lines were clearly marked. The townspeople took considerable pride in the grounds, that were much above the average for villages of that size, and, on Saturday afternoons, almost the whole male population of the town was to be found watching the game and "rooting" for the home team.

But on this day the boys were practicing on a lot directly behind the home of Fred Rushton, who was the captain of their school nine. Big stones marked the position of the bases, and the "rubber" at the home plate was a sheet of tin. Although the infield was fairly smooth, the lot further out was rough and clumpy, and it was risky work running for high flies, as Jim had proved to his cost. But it was good practice, and the enthusiasm and high spirits of the boys made up for all defects in the playing field. It is safe to say that no highly paid athlete, prancing over the velvet sward of major league grounds, got so much real fun out of the game as these lads with their makeshift diamond.

Most of the boys playing were members of the Oldtown school team, but enough others had been picked up to make a scrub game of seven on a side. Two players had to cover the whole outfield, and each side was minus a shortstop. Even with this handicap, the game had been a good one, and, after one more inning had been played, Fred's side had come out two runs ahead. It was getting late in the afternoon, and the boys, flushed and dusty, had begun to draw on their coats.

"Oh, don't go yet, fellows," urged Teddy Rushton, Fred's younger brother. "I haven't had half enough baseball yet. I'm as full of pep as when I began."

"Oh, come off," retorted Bob Ellis. "Don't you see where the sun is? It's getting near supper time. It's too late to start another game."

"Who said anything about another game?" replied Teddy. "I'm going to do some fungo hitting. Get out there, you fellows, and I'll knock you some flies. Go along, Jim, and I'll take off another nail."

"You'd better not," grinned Jim, but scampered out just the same, followed by three or four others, whose appetite for the game, like Teddy's own, had not been fully satisfied.

Teddy had a keen eye and a good arm, and there were few boys of his age who could hit the ball harder or send it further. Usually, too, he could gauge the distance and knock a fly so that it would fall almost in the fielder's hands. But to-day the ball seemed to take a perverse delight in falling either too short or too far out, and the boys were kept on the run, with only an occasional catch to reward their efforts.

"Have a heart, Teddy!" shouted Jim, red and perspiring. "Put 'em where a fellow can get 'em."

"Get a move on, why don't you?" called Teddy in return. "I can't help it if you run like ice wagons. I hit them all right."

"Hit!" snorted Jim wrathfully. "You couldn't hit the water, if you fell overboard."

A little nettled by the taunt, Teddy looked about him. He caught sight of a stage, drawn by two horses, jogging along the road that ran beside the field. A glint of mischief came into his eyes and he gripped his bat tightly. Here was a chance to prove that Jim was wrong.

The stage coach was coming from the railroad station at Carlette, a mile away, where it had

been to meet the five-thirty P. M. train. Business had not been very brisk, judging from the fact that the ramshackle old vehicle carried only one passenger, a rather elderly man dressed in black, who sat on one of the side seats with his back toward the boys. A bag of mail was on the front seat alongside the driver, a lank, slab-sided individual, in a linen duster that had evidently seen better days. He held the reins listlessly over the horses, who moved slowly along, as though they were half asleep. Coach and horses and driver were so dead and alive, so Rip Van Winkle-like, that the temptation was almost irresistible to stir them up, to wake them out of their dream. To Teddy, with his native love of mischief, it proved wholly irresistible.

"Can't hit anything, eh?" he yelled to Jim. "Just watch me."

He took careful aim, caught the ball full on the end of the bat and sent it straight as a bullet toward the coach. Even as he swung, he heard the startled cry of his brother:

"Don't, Teddy, don't!"

But it was too late.

The ball struck the gray horse a glancing blow on the flank and caromed off into the coach, catching the solitary passenger full in the back of the neck. He fell over toward the opposite side, grasping at the seat to steady himself.

The effect was electric. If Teddy had wanted action, he got it—got it beyond his wildest dream.

The gray horse, stung and frightened by the sudden blow, reared high in the air and threw himself against his companion. The sorrel, catching the contagion, plunged forward. The startled driver tried to hold them in, but they had gotten beyond him. The frenzied brutes rushed on down the hill, the old coach bumping and swaying wildly behind them.

Dazed and scared, the author of the mischief dropped his bat. Horror stole into his eyes and his face showed white beneath its coat of tan.

The horses were running away!

CHAPTER II

THE RUNAWAY

At the point where the coach was moving when Teddy's hit caused all the trouble the road wound down hill at a gentle incline. A few rods further on, however, it became steep, and here it was the custom of every careful driver to gather up the reins and press his foot on the brake, to keep his wagon from crowding too closely on the heels of his horses.

If old Jed Muggs, the driver of the coach, had been able to get his charges under control before they reached the steeper portion of the hill, he might have saved the day. But he had had very little experience with runaways, and it had never entered his mind that the sober old team he drove would ever have spirit enough to take the bit in their teeth and bolt. That they might some day drop in their shafts and die of old age would have struck him as likely enough. But here they were, running like colts, and the shock of it was too much for him.

He grabbed wildly at the reins that had been hanging loosely over the horses' backs.

"Stop! Whoa, consarn yer!" he yelled, half standing up as he sawed wildly with the reins. "Burn yer old hides! what in Sam Hill's got inter yer? Whoa, whoa!"

He was agitated through and through, and his wild yells and feeble handling of the reins only made the frightened brutes go faster and faster.

Inside the coach, the passenger was holding on for dear life, as the coach bumped and swayed from side to side of the road.

"Stop them, pull them in!" he shouted, and put out his hand to grasp Jed's arm.

The driver shook him off with a savage snarl.

"Leave me alone," he snapped. "What d'yer suppose I'm doin', encouragin' 'em?"

Streaming out behind the runaways came the boys, blazing with excitement. Most of them at first had seen only the funny side of the incident. They had howled with delight at the sight of the "old plugs," as they irreverently spoke of Jed's horses, rearing up into the air like frisky two-year-olds, and the frightened antics of Jed himself had added to their amusement. It was all a huge joke, and they chuckled at the thought of the story they would have to tell to those who had not been there to see the fun.

Jim Dabney was fairly doubled up with laughter.

"Take it all back, Teddy," he shouted. "You're some hitter, after all."

"Jiminy, look at those scarecrows dance!" exclaimed Jack Youmans.

"Who'd ever think those old has-beens had so much ginger in 'em," commented Tom Davis.

But boys as a rule, though thoughtless, are not malicious, and the laughter stopped suddenly when they saw that the joke might end in a tragedy.

Fred, alone of all the boys, had seen from the first this danger. Quicker witted than the others, he had thought of the hill that lay before the runaways. But his shout of warning to Teddy had come too late to stop that impulsive youth, and now the damage was done.

"This way, fellows!" he shouted, as he took a short cut across the field in an effort to get to the horses' heads. If he had been able to do this, the other boys, coming up, could have helped to hold them. But the distance was too great, and when he reached the road the team was twenty feet ahead and going too fast to be overtaken by any one on foot.

Behind the others pounded Teddy, the cause of it all. How he hated himself for yielding to that impish impulse that had so often gotten him into trouble! Now, all he could think of was that somebody would be killed, and it would be his fault and his alone. His heart was full of terror and

remorse.

"I've killed them!" he kept repeating over and over. "Why did I do it? Oh, why did I do it?"

There was not a spark of real malice in Teddy's composition. He was a wholesome, good-natured, fun-loving boy, and a general favorite with those who knew him. His chief fault was the impulsiveness that made him do things on the spur of the moment that he often regretted later on. Anything in the form of a practical joke appealed to him immensely, and he was never happier than when he was planning something that would produce a laugh. When Teddy's brown eyes began to twinkle, it was time to look for something to happen.

He was a born mimic, and his imitation of the peculiar traits of his teachers, while it sent his comrades into convulsions of laughter, often got him into trouble at school. Notes to his parents were of frequent occurrence, and he was no sooner out of one scrape than he was into another. When anything happened whose author was unknown, they looked for Teddy "on general principles."

Sometimes this proved unjust, and he had the name without having had the game. More often, however, the search found him only too certainly to be the moving cause of the prank in question. His fourteen years of life had been full of stir and action, both for him and all connected with him, and nobody could complain of dullness when Teddy was around. Still, he was so frank and sunny-natured that everybody was fond of him, even those who had the most occasion to frown. He was a rogue, but a very likable one.

Fred Rushton, his brother, a year older than Teddy, was of a different type. While quite as fond of fun and full of spirits, he acted more on reason and good judgment than on impulse. As in the instance of the batted ball, where Teddy had seen only the fun of making the horses jump, Fred had thought of the runaway that might follow.

Teddy was the kind who would make a leap and take a chance of getting away without a broken neck. Fred, while quite as ready to take the leap if it were necessary, would first figure out where he was going to land. A deep affection bound the two boys together, and Fred was kept busy trying to get Teddy out of old scrapes and keeping him from getting into new ones.

At school, Fred was a leader both in study and sports. He was one of the best scholars in his class and it was his ambition to graduate at its head—an ambition that was in a fair way to be realized.

In the field of athletics, his unusual strength, both of body and will, made him easily the first among his companions. Tall, strong, self-reliant, with clear gray eyes that never flinched at any task set before him, the other boys admitted his leadership, though he never made any conscious claim to it.

He shone in football as the fastest and cleverest fullback that the school had known for years, and he had well earned his position as captain and pitcher of the baseball team.

With the boys trailing on in the rear, the coach had now nearly reached the bottom of the hill, and was gathering speed with every jump of the frightened horses. A man rushed out from a house beside the road and grabbed at the bridle of the gray, but was thrown to the ground and narrowly escaped being trodden under foot.

On and on they went, until they were close to the little river that ran along at the foot of the hill. A bridge, about twelve feet in width, crossed the river at this point, and along this Jed tried to guide the horses. But just before they reached it, the passenger, who evidently feared that the team would crash into the railing, took a flying leap over the side of the coach and plunged head first into the river below.

The stage took the bridge, escaping the rails by a miracle. On the other side, the path curved sharply, and the team, keeping on blindly, brought up in a mass of bushes on the side of the road. The shaft snapped, and the driver was thrown over the horses' heads and landed in a thicket, badly scratched but otherwise unhurt. Two of the boys, who had now come up, rushed to the heads of the trembling horses, and, with the aid of the driver, got them under control.

The others, including Fred and Teddy, ran to the assistance of the man in the water. He had come up, spluttering and snorting, but unharmed, except for the fright and the wetting. His hair was plastered over his face and his black clothes clung tightly to his angular frame.

The river was not deep at this point, and he waded to the bank, where many eager hands were outstretched to aid him. He felt that he presented a most undignified appearance, and, although, of course, thankful for his escape, he was angry clear through. He looked up, and for the first time they clearly saw his face.

A new horror came into Teddy's eyes. He stepped back, startled, and his legs grew weak under him.

"It's—it's Uncle Aaron!" he stammered.

CHAPTER III

A NARROW ESCAPE

Modesty was not one of Teddy's strong points, but just then he had a most violent desire to fade gently out of sight. He had not the slightest wish to be "in the limelight." Never had he been more eager to play the part of the shrinking violet.

He tried to slip behind the other boys who came crowding around. But, even though partly blinded by the water that streamed over his face, the sharp eyes of his uncle had recognized him.

"So it's you, is it?" he asked ungraciously. "I might have known that if there was trouble

anywhere you'd be mixed up in it."

Fred, ever eager to shield Teddy, came forward.

"Why, Uncle Aaron!" he exclaimed. "I'm awfully sorry this happened. Just wait a minute and I'll hustle round to get a rig to take you—"

"Happened!" broke in the shrill voice of his uncle. "Happened!" he snorted again, his wrath rising. "This thing didn't just happen. Something made those horses run away, and I want to know just what it was. And I'm not going to be satisfied till I find out," the man went on, glaring suspiciously from one to the other of the boys until he finally settled on Teddy.

But Teddy just then was intently studying the beautiful sunset.

Good-natured Jim Dabney tried, right here, to make a diversion.

"The horses must have got frightened at something," he ventured hopefully.

"Yes," said Jack Youmans, following his lead, "I could see that they were awfully scared."

"You don't say so!" retorted Uncle Aaron, with withering sarcasm. "I could guess as much as that myself." And the two boys, having met with the usual fate of peacemakers, fell back, red and wilted.

"Gee, isn't he an old crank?" muttered Jim.

"That's what," assented Jack. "I'd hate to be in Teddy's shoes just now."

To tell the truth, Teddy would gladly have loaned his shoes to any one on earth at that moment.

"Come here, Teddy," called his uncle sharply, "and look me straight in the eye."

Now, looking Uncle Aaron straight in the eye was far from being Teddy's idea of pleasure. There were many things he would rather do than that. There had been many occasions before this when he had received the same invitation, and he had never accepted it without reluctance. It was a steely eye that seemed to look one through and through and turn one inside out.

Still, there was no help for it, and Teddy, with the air of an early Christian martyr, was slowly coming to the front, when suddenly they heard a shout of triumph, and, turning, saw Jed Muggs hold up something he had just found on the floor of the coach.

"Here it is!" he cried; "here's the identical thing what done it!" And as he came shambling forward he held up, so that all could see it, the ball that had been only too well aimed when it had hit the gray horse.

Jed was a town character and the butt of the village jokes. He had been born and brought up there, and only on one occasion had strayed far beyond its limits. That was when he had gone on an excursion to the nearest large city. His return ticket had only been good for three days, but after his return, bewildered but elated, he had never tired of telling his experiences. Every time he told his story, he added some new variation, chiefly imaginary, until he at last came to believe it himself, and posed as a most extensive traveler.

"Yes, sir-ree," he would wind up to his cronies in the general store, as he reached out to the barrel for another cracker, "they ain't many things in this old world that I ain't seen. They ain't nobody kin take me fur a greenhorn, not much they ain't!"

For more years past than most people could remember, he had driven the village stage back and forth between Oldtown and Carlette, the nearest railway station. He and his venerable team were one of the features of the place, and the farmers set their clocks by him as he went plodding past. Everybody knew him, and he knew the past history of every man, woman and child in the place. He was an encyclopedia of the village gossip and tradition for fifty years past. This he kept always on tap, and only a hint was needed to set him droning on endlessly.

Jed's one aversion was the boys of Oldtown. He got on well enough with their elders, who humored and tolerated the old fellow. But he had never married, and, with no boys of his own to keep him young in heart, he had grown crankier and crustier as he grew older. They kept him on edge with their frequent pranks, and it was his firm conviction that they had no equals anywhere as general nuisances.

"I've traveled a lot in my time," he would say, and pause to let this statement sink in; "yes, sir, I've traveled a lot, and I swan to man I never seen nowhere such a bunch of rascallions as they is in this here town."

Then he would bite off a fresh quid of tobacco and shake his head mournfully, and dwell on the sins of the younger generation.

Now, as he hobbled eagerly up to the waiting group, forgetting for the moment his "roomatics," he was all aglow with animation. His loose jaw was wagging and his small eyes shone like a ferret's.

"Here's what done it," he repeated, in his high, cracked voice, as he handed the ball to his partner in the accident. "I knew them horses of mine wouldn't run away for nuthin'."

"Nobody ever saw them run before," Jack Youmans could not help saying.

"You shet up!" cried Jed angrily. "They was too well trained."

Aaron Rushton took the ball and examined it carefully.

"I found it in the corner of the coach under the seat," volunteered Jed. "It wasn't in there when we started. I kin stake my life on that."

"This explains the blow I got on the back of the neck," commented Teddy's uncle. "The ball must have hit one of the horses first, and then glanced off into the coach. Were you boys playing ball, when we went past?" he asked, turning to Fred.

"Yes, we were," answered Fred. "That is, we weren't playing a regular game. We'd got through with that and were having a little practice, batting flies."

"Why weren't you more careful then?" asked his uncle sharply. "Don't you see that you came within an ace of killing one or both of us? Who was doing the batting?"

Jim and Jack loyally looked as though they were trying their hardest to remember, but could not feel quite sure.

"Yes," broke in old Jed, "who was doin' it? That's what I want to know. 'Cos all I got to say is that it'll cost somebody's father a consid'able to make good the damages to the coach and the

hosses. The pole is snapped and the sorrel is actin' kind o' droopy."

A smothered laugh ran around the group of boys, whose number had by this time been considerably increased. No one in Oldtown had ever known either sorrel or gray to be anything else than "droopy."

Jed transfixed the boys with a stony stare. He had, at least, the courage of his convictions.

"Yes, sir-ree," he went on, "them hosses is vallyble, and I don't kalkilate to be done out of my rights by nobody, just becos some fool boy didn't have sense enough to keep from scarin' 'em. Somebody's father has got to pay, and pay good, or I'll have the law on 'em, by ginger! Come along now. Who done it?"

"Jed is right, as far as that goes," said Mr. Aaron Rushton. "Of course, it was an accident, but it was a mighty careless one and somebody will have to make good the damage. Now, I'm going to ask you boys, one by one—"

Teddy stepped forward. His heart was in his boots. The game was up and he would have to face the consequences. He knew that none of the other boys would tell on him, and he would be safe enough in denying it, when the question came to him. But the thought of doing this never even occurred to him. The Rushton boys had been brought up to tell the truth.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Aaron," he said, "but I'm the one that hit the ball."

CHAPTER IV FACING THE MUSIC

There was a stir of anticipation among the boys, and they crowded closer, as Teddy faced his angry relative.

"Jiminy, but he's going to catch it!" whispered Jim.

"You bet he will. I wouldn't like to be him," agreed Jack, more fervently than grammatically.

His uncle looked at Teddy sourly.

"I'm not a bit surprised," he growled. "From the minute I saw you on the bank I felt sure you were mixed up in this some way or other. You'd feel nice now, if you'd killed your uncle, wouldn't you?"

Poor Teddy, who did not look the least like a murderer and had never longed to taste the delights of killing, stammered a feeble negative.

"Why did you do it?" went on his merciless cross-examiner. "Didn't you see the stage coming? Why didn't you bat the other way?"

The culprit was silent.

"Come," said his uncle sharply, "speak up now! What's the matter with you? Are you tonguetied?"

"You see, it was this way," Teddy began, and stopped.

"No," said his uncle, "I don't see at all."

"Well," Teddy broke out, desperately, goaded by the sarcasm to full confession, "I was batting flies to the fellows, and one of them said I couldn't hit anything, and I wanted to show him that he was wrong, and just then I saw the coach coming, and I took aim at the gray horse. I didn't think anything about his running away—I'd never seen him run hard, anyway—and—I guess that's all," he ended, miserably.

"No, it ain't all, not by a long sight!" ejaculated Jed, who had been especially stung by the slur on his faithful gray. "Not much, it ain't all! So, yer did it on puppose, did yer? I might have s'picioned from the fust that you was at the bottom of this rascality. They ain't anything happened in this town fur a long time past that you ain't been mixed up in.

"I'm mortal sure," he went on, haranguing his audience and warming up at the story of his wrongs, "thet it was this young varmint thet painted my hosses with red, white and blue stripes, last Fourth of July. I jess had time to harness up to get to the train in time, when I found it out, and I didn't have time to get the paint off before I started. And there was the people in Main Street laffin' fit ter kill themselves, and the loafers at the deepo askin' me why I didn't paint myself so as to match the hosses. It took me nigh on two days before I could get it off, and the hosses smelt of benzine fur more than a week. Ef I could a ketched the feller what done it, I'd 'a' taken it out of his hide, but I never had no sartin proof. Howsumever, I knowed pooty well in my own mind who done it," and he glared vindictively at Teddy.

But Teddy had already done all the confessing he cared to do for one day, and the author of Jed's unwilling Fourth of July display was still to remain a mystery.

Far more important to Teddy than Jed's threats was the wrath of his uncle, who stood looking at him with a severity before which Teddy's eyes fell.

"And you mean to tell me," said Mr. Aaron Rushton slowly, "you have the nerve to stand there and tell me that you actually aimed at that horse—that you deliberately—"

"No, not deliberately, Uncle Aaron," interrupted Fred, who had been trying to get in a word for his brother, and now seized this opening. "He didn't think of what he was doing. If he had, he wouldn't have done it. He didn't have any idea the horses would run away. Teddy wouldn't hurt—"

"You keep still, Fred," and his uncle turned on him savagely. "When I want your opinion, I'll ask you for it. If you weren't always making excuses for him and trying to get him out of scrapes, he wouldn't get into so many.

"Not another word," he went on, as Fred still tried to make things easier for Teddy. "We'll

finish this talk up at the house. I want your father and mother to hear for themselves just how near this son of theirs came to killing his uncle."

"I'll see if I can get a rig of some kind to carry you up," volunteered Fred.

"Never mind that," answered his uncle shortly. "It isn't far, and I don't want to wait. Bring that valise that you'll find in the coach along with you. I want to get into some dry things as soon as possible. Lucky it isn't a shroud, instead of regular clothes," and he shot a glance at Teddy that made that youth shudder.

"As to the damage done to the coach and horses," Mr. Rushton said, turning to Jed, who had been watching Teddy's ordeal with great satisfaction and gloating over what was still coming to him when he should reach home, "you need not worry about that. Either my brother or I will see you to-morrow and fix things up all right."

"Thank yer, Mr. Rushton," mumbled Jed, as he mentally tried to reach the very highest figure he would dare to charge, with any hope of getting it. "I knowed you would do the right thing. I'm only sorry that you should have so much trouble with that there young imp," and he shook his head sorrowfully and heaved a sigh, as though he already saw ahead of Teddy nothing but the gallows or the electric chair.

Nor could he forbear one parting shot at that dejected youth.

"Don't forget, young man, that you may have to reckon with Uncle Sam yet," he hinted, with evident relish, as the party prepared to move away. "It ain't no joke to interfere with the United States mail and them thet's carryin' it. The padlock on that mailbag was all bent and bunged up when the stage smashed up against that tree. Course, I ain't sayin' what may come of it, but them gover'ment folks is mighty tetchy on them p'int. They've got a big prison at Leavenworth and another at Atlanta where they puts fellers that interferes with the mails in any way, shape or manner. Oh, I know all about them places. I've traveled a good deal in my time, and—"

But by this time, the uncle and nephews were well on their way up the hill, and Jed had to save the rest of his discourse for his cronies that evening at the general store.

The Rushton home stood on a beautiful elm-shaded street just beyond the field where the boys had been playing ball. It was a charming, up-to-date house, capacious and well arranged, and furnished with every comfort. A broad, velvety lawn stretched out in front, and towering elms threw their cool shadows over the roadway.

Around three sides of the house ran a hospitable veranda, with rugs and rattan furniture that made of it one large outside room. Tables, on which rested books and magazines, with here and there a vase of flowers fresh cut from the garden, showed that the inmates of the house were people of intelligence and refinement.

Mansfield Rushton, the boys' father, was one of the most prominent citizens of Oldtown. He was a broker, with offices in a neighboring city, to which he commuted. His absorption in his business and his interest in large affairs left him less time and leisure than he would have liked to devote to his family. He was jovial and easy-going, and very proud of his two boys, to whom he was, in fact, perhaps too indulgent. "Boys will be boys," was his motto, and many an interview, especially with Teddy, that ought, perhaps, to have ended in punishment, was closed only with the more or less stern injunction "not to do it again."

His wife, Agnes, was a sweet, gracious woman, who, while she added greatly to the charm and happiness of the household, did not contribute very much to its discipline. She could be firm on occasion, and was not as blind as the father to what faults the boys possessed. Although each one of them was as dear to her as the apple of her eye, she by no means adopted the theory that they could do no wrong. Like most mothers, however, she was inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt, and it was not hard to persuade her that they were "more sinned against than sinning."

The Rushton system of household management, with love, rather than fear, the ruling factor, was not without its critics. The boys' uncle, Aaron, some years older than his brother Mansfield, and wholly different in disposition, had been especially exasperated at it. On his occasional visits to Oldtown he never tired of harping on his favorite proverb of "spare the rod and spoil the child," and his predictions of Teddy's future were colored with dark forebodings.

To be sure, he had never gone so far as to prophesy that Teddy's mischief would ever come near killing any one. And yet, that was precisely what had happened.

And as Aaron Rushton toiled up the hill the discomfort he felt from his wet clothes was almost forgotten in the glow of satisfaction that at last he had proved his theory. He would show Mansfield and Agnes that even if he was a bachelor—as they had at times slyly reminded him—he knew more about bringing up boys than they did.

The unsuspecting parents were sitting on the veranda, waiting for the boys to come in to supper. The table was spread and waiting, and Mr. Rushton had once or twice glanced impatiently at his watch.

"What on earth is keeping those boys?" he exclaimed. "Oh, here they are now. But who's that with them? Why, it's Aaron! Great Scott! What's the matter?" he cried, as he sprang up excitedly.

Mrs. Rushton uttered a little shriek as her eyes fell on the three figures entering the gateway.

CHAPTER V

UNCLE AARON RAGES

It was no wonder that both were startled, for the little group coming up the walk showed that something far out of the ordinary had happened.

It was a surprise in the first place to see Aaron Rushton at all, as, contrary to his usual custom when he paid a visit to Oldtown, he had not notified them that they might expect him.

But to see him in such a plight as this was altogether beyond their experience. He was prim and precise in every detail of his clothes, and his sense of personal dignity was very strong. Neatness was a passion with him, and, in his regulated bachelor existence, this had grown upon him with the years.

But now, as he walked between the two boys, he presented an appearance that was almost grotesque. He was without his hat, which had floated down the stream and had not been recovered. His hair was plastered down on both cadaverous cheeks, his shirtfront was a mass of pulp, and his wet clothes clinging closely to him brought into full relief every bony angle of his figure. One leg of his trousers was torn from the knee to the ankle. His feet sloshed in his shoes with every step, and a wet trail marked his progress from the gate to the porch.

On each side of him walked one of the boys, Fred staggering under the weight of a big suit case, while Teddy carried nothing but a guilty conscience. But probably his burden was the heavier of the two, and he would gladly have changed loads with his brother.

Under other circumstances, the pair on the veranda would have been unable to restrain their laughter. But Aaron was not a man to take a joke, and, besides, they did not know as yet but that he had received some hurt more serious than a wetting.

They hurried down the steps to meet him.

"Why, Aaron, what on earth has happened?" asked Mr. Rushton, as he grasped the clammy hand of his brother.

"Can't you see?" snarled Aaron ungraciously. "I've been in the river. It's a wonder I'm here to tell you that much."

"In the river!" gasped Mrs. Rushton. "How did you get there?"

"How do you suppose?" growled Aaron. "Think I went in swimming with my clothes on? I fell in, or rather, I jumped in to save my life, when Jed Muggs' horses ran away."

"Ran away!" exclaimed Mr. Rushton. "I never heard of their doing anything like that before. What made them run away? Did you get hurt?"

"Nothing but my feelings and my clothes," said Aaron. "But if you want to know what made them run away, ask that precious son of yours there." And he shot a vicious glance at Teddy, who colored as the eyes of his father and mother turned toward him.

"Teddy!" exclaimed Mrs. Rushton. "What did he have to do with it?"

"What didn't he have to do with it, you mean. He had everything to do with it. He hit one of the horses with a baseball—aimed deliberately at him, mind you—and the horses took fright and ran away. They came within an ace of killing the driver, and, as it is, you'll have a pretty penny to pay for the damage to the coach and horses. As for me, I might have been killed in the smash-up, if I hadn't had the gumption to jump before we came to the bridge."

"Oh, Teddy," moaned Mrs. Rushton, "how could you do a thing like that?"

"Go into the house, sir," commanded his father sternly. "I'll attend to your case later."

Teddy obeyed with alacrity, glad to escape for the moment from the sharpness in his father's voice and the sadness in his mother's eyes.

His despondency was lightened somewhat by the savory smells from the kitchen. He made his way there, to see what they were going to have for supper. It was behind the regular time, and he was ravenously hungry.

Appetizing odors came from the dishes, already taken up and ready to be conveyed to the dining-room.

"Um-yum," he gloated. "Chicken—and green peas—and strawberries—and peach pie. Bully!"

The colored cook, Martha, who was whipping up some cream for the strawberries, turned and saw him.

"Laws sakes, honey, wut's keepin' the folks? I'se just tuckered out tryin' to keep things hot."

"It's Uncle Aaron," explained Teddy. "He's just come."

"Umph," sniffed Martha, none too well pleased. She had no liking for unexpected company, and least of all for Uncle Aaron, whom she disliked heartily.

Martha was an old family servant, who had been with Mrs. Rushton from the time of her marriage. She was big and black and good-natured, although she did not hesitate to speak her mind at times when she was ruffled. She was devoted to her master and mistress, and they, in turn, appreciated her good qualities and allowed her many privileges, letting her run her end of the house largely to suit herself. Long before this she had come to regard herself as one of the family.

She had dandled and crooned over the boys as babies, and, as they had grown up, she had become almost as fond of them as the parents themselves. They always knew where to get a doughnut or a ginger cake when they came in famished, and, though at times they sorely tried her patience, she was always ready to defend them against any one else.

And the one reason more than any other why she detested their Uncle Aaron was because he was "allus pickin' on dem po' chillen." That the "pickin'" was only too often justified did not weigh at all in Aunt Martha's partial judgment.

"Here dey cum, now," she said, as she heard footsteps in the hall. "Get out of my way now, honey, and let me serve de supper. Goodness knows, it's time."

"I tell you what it is, Mansfield," Aaron Rushton was saying, "you've simply spoiled those boys of yours. You've let the reins lie loose on their backs, and they're going straight to perdition. And Agnes is just as bad as you are, if not worse. What they need is a good hickory switch and plenty of muscle behind it. If they were my boys, I'd let them know what's what. I'd put things in order in jig time. I'd show them whether they could run things as they liked. They'd learn mighty quick who was boss. I'd—"

"Yes, yes, Aaron, I know," said his brother soothingly. "I feel just as bad about this as you do,

and I'll see that Teddy pays well for this mischief."

"Mischief!" mimicked Aaron angrily. "That's just the trouble with you folks. You excuse everything because it's simply 'mischief.' Why don't you call it crime?"

"Now, Aaron, that's too much," cried Mrs. Rushton, bristling in defence of her offspring. "It was an awful thing to do, of course, but Teddy didn't realize—" then, seeing the retort trembling on Aaron's lips, she went on hastily: "But go right up to your room now, and get a bath and change your clothes. Mansfield will get you some things of his to put on, and I'll have supper waiting for you when you come down."

And Aaron, still rumbling like a volcano, was led to the upper regions, where the splashing of water shortly after told of a bath more grateful than the involuntary one he had taken an hour before.

Mrs. Rushton, with tears in her eyes, turned to Fred, in the lower hall.

"It's just awful," she said. "Tell me, Fred, dear, how it all happened."

"Uncle Aaron makes too much of it, Mother!" exclaimed Fred, who had had all he could do to keep still during his uncle's tirade. "Of course, it might have been a bad accident. But you know just as well as I do that Teddy wouldn't have done it for all the world, if he had thought anybody would get hurt. The boys were teasing him about hitting the ball straight, and, as luck would have it, Jed's team came along just that minute. It just struck Teddy that here was something to aim at, and he let fly. Of course, there was only one chance out of ten of hitting the horse at all, and, even if it had hit him, it might have only made him jump, and that would have been the end of it. But everything went wrong, and the team ran away. Nobody felt worse about it than Teddy. If you'd seen how white he looked—"

"Poor boy!" murmured Mrs. Rushton softly. Then, recollecting herself, she said a little confusedly: "Poor Uncle Aaron, I mean. It must have been a terrible shock to him. Think what a blow it would have been to all of us, if he had been killed!"

"Sure, it would!" assented Fred, though his voice lacked conviction. "But he wasn't, and there's no use of his being so grouchy over it. He ought to be so glad to be alive that he'd be willing to let up on Teddy. I suppose that all the time he's here now he'll keep going on like a human phonograph."

"You mustn't speak about your uncle that way, Fred," said his mother reprovingly. "He's had a great deal to try his temper, and Teddy is very much to blame. He must be punished. Yes, he certainly must be punished."

"There's one thing, too, Mother," went on Fred, determined to put his brother in the best light possible, "Ted might have lied out of it, but he didn't. Uncle Aaron put the question to the boys straight, or rather he was just going to do it, when Teddy spoke up and owned that he was the one who hit the ball."

"Bless his heart," cried Mrs. Rushton delightedly, pouncing on this bit of ammunition to use in Teddy's behalf when the time came.

Fred went to his room to wash and brush up, and a few minutes later the family, with the unexpected guest, were gathered about the table, spread with the good things that Martha had heaped upon it.

Last of all, came Teddy. Usually, he was among the first. But a certain delicacy, new to him, seemed to whisper to him to-night that he would do well not to thrust himself obtrusively into the family circle. Perhaps, also, a vague desire to placate the "powers that be" had made him pay unusual attention to his face and nails and hair. He was very well groomed—for Teddy—and he tried to assume a perfectly casual air, as he came down the stairs.

Martha caught sight of him from the kitchen, and shook her head ominously. She had heard enough to know that storm signals were out.

"Dat po' chile!" she mourned, "he sho am goin' like a lam' to de slo'ter!"

CHAPTER VI

TEDDY'S BANISHMENT

Teddy slipped in like a ghost. That is, as far as noise was concerned. If he could also have had the other ghostly quality of being invisible, it would have suited him to a dot.

He drew out his chair and was about to sit down, when his father lifted his hand.

"Stop!" he said, and there was a tone in his voice that was not often heard. "You don't sit down at this table to-night."

Teddy stared at him, mortified and abashed. With all eyes turned toward him, he felt as though he would like to sink through the floor.

"I mean it," said his father. "Go straight to your room and stay there. I'll have something to say to you later on. But before you go, I want you to apologize to your Uncle Aaron for the danger you put him in this afternoon."

Teddy turned toward his uncle, and the sour smile he saw on the latter's thin lips made him almost hate his relative.

"Of course, I'm sorry," he blurted out sullenly. "I told him so, down at the bridge. He knows well enough, that I didn't mean—"

"That will do now," interrupted his father. "There's no need of adding impudence to your other faults."

Teddy took his hand from the back of the chair and started for the hall, after one despairing

glance at the table.

"But, Father—" ventured Fred.

"Wouldn't it be enough to make him go without dessert?" interposed Mrs. Rushton. "Can't you let him have at least a piece of bread and butter? The child's health, you know—"

"Well," hesitated Mr. Rushton. But he caught sight of the sarcastic grin on Aaron's face.

"No," he went on more firmly, "he can't have a thing. It won't hurt his health to go without his supper for once. No, nothing at all!"

"Except what Agnes or Fred may slip to him later on," put in Aaron, with a disagreeable smile.

"Mansfield's wish is law in this house, and Fred would not go against his father's will," answered Mrs. Rushton, with a coldness that for a moment silenced her brother-in-law and wiped the smile from his face.

Old Martha, over in one corner, glowered with indignation.

"Cantankerous ole skinflint," she muttered under her breath. "Dey ain't never nuffin' but trouble when dat man comes inter dis house. Sittin' dere, stuffin' hisself, while dat po' lam' upstairs is starvin' ter def. I on'y hopes one of dem chicken bones sticks in his froat. It'd be do Lo'd's own judgment on 'im."

But Martha's wishes were not realized, and Aaron finished his supper without suffering from any visitation of Providence. In fact, he had seldom enjoyed a meal more. It was one of Martha's best, and, to any one that knew that good woman's ability in the culinary line, that meant a great deal. Then, too, Teddy, was in disgrace, and the discomfort he had suffered that afternoon was in a fair way to be atoned for. He was not by any means willing to let it rest at that, and he figured on putting another spoke in the wheel of that young man's fortunes.

But, if Aaron had enjoyed his meal, nobody else had.

Mr. Rushton was wondering whether he had not been too severe. Mrs. Rushton, on the verge of tears, was sure he had. And Fred, who had been thinking all the time of poor Teddy, agreed with her.

That morning, their home had been one of the happiest in Oldtown. To-night, every inmate was thoroughly miserable, except their guest.

Why was it, Mrs. Rushton wondered, that trouble always came with Aaron? Never had he come except to her regret, and never had he left without a sigh of heartfelt relief on the part of every member of the family. He was a shadow on the hearth, a spectre at the feast.

He was not without good qualities, and plenty of them. In the community where he lived, he was highly respected. He was upright and square-dealing, and nobody could say that Aaron Rushton had ever wilfully done him a wrong.

But, though everybody esteemed him, there were few who really liked him. His was not a nature to inspire affection. He was too rigid and severe. The "milk of human kindness" had either been left out of his composition, or, at best, it had changed to buttermilk. Whenever one brushed against him, he was conscious of sharp edges. He was as full of quills as the "fretful porcupine," and always ready to let them fly.

With young people especially, he had little sympathy. Although as far apart as the poles in many things, he and Jed Muggs were absolutely at one in this—their utter disapproval of boys.

Fred and Teddy had always felt in his presence that they ought to apologize for being alive.

But, if Aaron did not go so far as that, he at least resented the fact that they were so very much alive. Their noise offended him, and their pranks irritated him. Their boisterousness got on his nerves.

The bringing up of the boys had always been a bone of contention between Aaron and their parents. If their birth, in Aaron's view, had been a misfortune, the way they were reared was nothing less than an outrage.

He never tired of storming at what he regarded as the lax and careless way in which the boys were allowed to do largely as they pleased. He magnified and distorted their boyish scrapes, until he had really convinced himself that they were headed straight for destruction, unless brought up with a round turn.

As a matter of fact, with all their faults, there were no finer boys in Oldtown.

Mr. and Mrs. Rushton, although conscious that they were perhaps a little too easy going, had always defended their methods good-naturedly. What especially irritated Aaron was their calm assumption that he did not know what he was talking about, because he had no children of his own, and their sly thrusts at the perfection of "bachelors' children" made him "froth at the mouth."

To-night, though, he had rather the advantage.

So he had been an old crank, had he? He hadn't known what he was talking about! He had made too much of the boys' little foibles! Well, what did they have to say now, now that through their younger son's tomfoolishness, his pigheadedness, his criminal carelessness, his—there were so many good words that Aaron hardly knew which to choose, but lingered lovingly over them all—he had come within a hair's breadth of causing his uncle's death. Perhaps now they'd listen to his opinions with the respect they deserved.

The argument was with him for once, beyond a doubt. He had the whip hand, and he fairly reveled in his opportunity. In his heart, he was almost thankful to Teddy for having given him this advantage over the parents.

They, on their part, were sad and mostly silent. They had really been greatly shocked by the serious results that might have followed this latest prank of Teddy's. They realized, however, the lack of malicious motive behind the act, and they knew that Aaron was failing to take this into account as much as he ought to have done.

They were at a disadvantage, too, from the fact that Aaron was their guest, and Mr. Rushton's brother. If they defended Teddy too strongly, it would seem to be making light of Aaron's danger and possible death.

So, with almost a clear field before him, their guest used his advantage to the full, and rumbled on to his heart's content.

Mrs. Rushton, however, did what she could.

"You must admit, Aaron," she ventured, "that Teddy might have lied about it, but didn't. He didn't let you think that somebody else had done it, but owned up, even before you asked him. Give him that much credit, anyway."

"Ye-e-s," admitted Aaron slowly. He was a truthful man himself, and respected the quality in others.

"Yes," he repeated, "that was all right, as far as it went. But," he went on, as though regretting his momentary weakness in making any concession to a criminal of the deepest dye, "what good would his telling the truth have done, if I'd been lying at the foot of the hill with a broken neck? Answer me that."

As poor Mrs. Rushton could not think of any real benefit that could have come to Aaron under such unfortunate conditions, she was forced to abandon the attack, leaving the enemy in possession of the field.

CHAPTER VII

THE MISSING PAPERS

Cheered by his victory in this skirmish, Aaron Rushton went on:

"I tell you what it is, Mansfield, what the boys need is to go to some good boarding school, where they'll be under strict discipline and have to toe the mark. They've a soft snap here, and they know it. You let them run the whole shooting match."

"Nothing of the kind, Aaron," protested Mansfield. "I don't believe in the knock-down and drag-out system of bringing up children, but, all the same, the boys always mind when I put my foot down."

"When you put your foot down!" sneered Aaron. "How often do you put it down? Not very often, as far as I've been able to see. They twist you and their mother around their little fingers."

"A boy's a good deal like a horse," he continued. "Any horse can tell just from the feel of the reins how far he dares to go with his driver. Now, what your boys need to feel is a tight rein over their backs that'll make 'em feel that their driver isn't going to stand any nonsense. They don't have that feeling at home, and it's up to you to put them where they will feel it."

"It might be out of the frying pan into the fire," objected Mr. Rushton. "There are many boarding schools where the boys do just about as they like."

"Not at the one I'm thinking about," rejoined Aaron. "Not much, they don't! When Hardach Rally tells a boy to do anything, that boy does it on the jump."

"Hardach Rally," inquired his brother, "who is he?"

"He's a man after my own heart," answered Aaron. "He's one of the best disciplinarians I've ever met. He has a large boarding school on Lake Morora, about a mile from the town of Green Haven, the nearest railway station. I reckon it's about a hundred miles or so from here. It's a good school, one of the best I know of. Rally Hall, he calls it, and under his management, it's made a big reputation. If I had boys of my own—thank Heaven, I haven't—there's no place I'd sooner send them."

Mr. Rushton and his wife exchanged glances.

"Well, Aaron, we'll think it over," his brother said, "But there's no special hurry about it, as they couldn't start in till next fall, anyway. In the meantime, I'll write to Dr. Rally and get his catalogue and terms."

"It'll be the best thing you ever did," remarked Aaron.

He yawned and looked at his watch.

A surprised look came into his eyes.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "it must be later than that."

He looked again, then put it up to his ear.

"Stopped," he said disgustedly. "I haven't let that watch run down for five years past. And it hasn't run down now. That's some more of Teddy's work. I must have jarred it or bent a wheel or something when I went over into the river."

"Let me have it," said Mr. Rushton, holding out his hand. "I'm pretty handy with watches and perhaps I can get it started."

Aaron handed the timepiece over. It was a heavy, double-cased gold watch, of considerable value, and he set a great deal of store by it. It was of English make, and on the inner case was an engraving of the Lion and the Unicorn. Under this were Aaron's initials.

His brother shook the watch, opened it, and made several attempts to set it going, but all to no purpose.

"I guess it's a job for a jeweler," he said at last regretfully. "Of course, I'll pay whatever it costs to have it fixed."

"By the time you get through settling with Jed Muggs, you won't feel much like paying anything else," retorted Aaron, "Give me the watch and I'll take it down town in the morning and leave it to be mended. Chances are it'll never be as good again."

"I'm dead tired now," and again he yawned. "If you folks don't mind, I guess I'll be getting to bed."

They were only too glad to speed him on his way. Nobody ever attempted to stop him, when he

was ready to retire. It was the one thing he did that met with everybody's approval.

His brother went up with him to see that everything had been made ready for his comfort, and then, bidding him good-night, came back to his wife.

He smiled at her whimsically, and she smiled back at him tearfully.

"Been a good deal of a siege," he commented.

"Hasn't it?" she agreed. "But, oh, Mansfield, whatever in the world are we going to do about Teddy?"

He frowned and studied the points of his shoes.

"Blest if I know," he pondered. "The young rascal has been in a lot of scrapes, but this is the limit. I don't wonder that Aaron feels irritable. Of course, he rubs it in a little too much, but you'll have to admit, my dear, that he has a good deal of justice on his side. It was a mighty reckless thing for Teddy to do.

"I wonder," he went on thoughtfully, "if perhaps we haven't been a bit too lax in our discipline, Agnes. Too much of the 'velvet glove' and too little of the 'iron hand,' eh? What do you think?"

"Perhaps—a little," she assented dubiously. Then, defensively, she added: "But, after all, where do you find better boys anywhere than ours? Fred scarcely gives us a particle of trouble, and as for Teddy"—here she floundered a little—"of course, he gets into mischief at times, but he has a good heart and he's just the dearest boy," she ended, in a burst of maternal affection.

"How about that boarding school idea?" suggested Mr. Rushton.

"I don't like it at all," said Mrs. Rushton. "I simply can't bear to think of our boys a hundred miles away from home. I'd be worrying all the time for fear that something had happened to them or was going to happen. And think how quiet the house would be with them out of it."

"I know," agreed her husband, "I'd feel a good deal that way myself. Still, if it's for the boys' good—"

But here they were interrupted by a commotion on the stairs, and as they rose to their feet, Aaron came bouncing into the room. His coat and vest and collar and tie were off, but he was too stirred up to bother about his appearance. He was in a state of great agitation.

"What's the matter?" they asked in chorus.

"Matter enough," snarled Aaron. "I was just getting ready for bed, when I thought of some papers in the breast pocket of my coat. I just thought I'd take a last look to make sure they were all right, but when I put my hand in the pocket, the papers weren't there. What do you make of that now?" and he glared at them as though they had a guilty knowledge of the papers and had better hand them over forthwith.

"Papers!" exclaimed Mrs. Rushton, her heart sinking at this new complaint. "What papers were they?"

"I hope they weren't very valuable?" said Mr. Rushton.

"Valuable!" almost shrieked Aaron Rushton. "I should say they were valuable. There was a mortgage and there were three notes of hand and the transcript of a judgment that I got in a court action a little while ago. I can't collect on any of them, unless I have the papers to show. I'm in a pretty mess!" he groaned, as he went around the room like a wild man.

"We'll make a careful search for them everywhere," said Mrs. Rushton. "They must be somewhere around the house."

"House, nothing!" ejaculated Aaron. "I know well enough where they are. They're down in the river somewhere, and I'll never clap eyes on them again. They must have fallen out of my pocket when I jumped. Oh, if I just had the handling of that imp"—and his fingers writhed in a way that boded no good to Teddy, if that lively youth were luckless enough to be turned over to his uncle for punishment.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, Aaron," his brother assured him. "We'll have a most careful search made at the place where the accident happened, the first thing to-morrow morning. I'll also put up the offer of a reward in the post office. The papers are not of much value to any one except you, and if somebody has found them, they'll be glad enough to bring them to you. In the meantime, we'll take one more look about the house."

But the search was fruitless, and, at last, Aaron, still growling like a grizzly bear, went reluctantly to his room to await developments on the morrow.

In the meantime, Teddy, the cause of it all, although cut off from the rest of the household, had shared in the general gloom. He was devotedly attached to his father and mother, and was sincerely sorry that he had so distressed them. He would have given a good deal if he had never yielded to his sudden impulse of the afternoon.

Fred had spent most of the evening with him, and had done his level best to cheer him up. He had succeeded to some extent, but, after he had left him and gone to his own room, Teddy again felt the weight of a heavy depression.

It must be admitted that not all of this came from conscience. Some of it was due to hunger.

He had never felt so hungry in his life. And it seemed an endless time from then till breakfast the next morning.

He had just turned out his light, and was about to slip into bed when he heard a soft knock on his door. He opened it and peered out into the dark hall.

"It's me, honey," came a low voice. "Take dis an' don't say nuffin'."

The "dis" was a leg of chicken and a big cut of peach pie!

The door closed, and old Martha went puffing slowly to her room in the attic.

"Ah doan't care," she said to herself defiantly. "Ef it wus right fer de ravuns ter take food ter de prophet 'Lijuh in der wil'erness, et's right fer me ter keep mah po' lam' frum starvin'. So, dere, now!"

CHAPTER VIII

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

There were no traces left the next morning of Martha's stealthy visit. The chicken bone had gone out of the window, but all the rest had gone where it would do the most good. And Teddy had slept the sleep of the satisfied, if not exactly the sleep of the just.

Breakfast was served at an unusually early hour, as there was a great deal to be done to right the wrong of the day before, and it was very important that the boys get an early start in the search for Uncle Aaron's missing papers.

He himself had little hope of finding them. If they were in the river, which seemed to him most likely, they might have been carried down the stream. And, even if they were found, they might be so spoiled by the soaking that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make them out.

In any event, it meant for him a lot of trouble, and he was in a fiendish temper, when, after a sleepless night, he came downstairs. He responded gruffly to the greetings of the others, and favored Teddy with a black stare that showed that he had not forgiven him.

"What have you got up your sleeve for to-day?" he growled. "Some more mischief, I'll be bound."

"I'm going to look for your papers," answered Teddy promptly, "and I won't stop until I find them."

His mother shot him a bright glance at the respectful reply, which rather took the wind out of Aaron's sails.

"Humph," he muttered. "Talk is cheap." But he became silent and devoted himself to the breakfast, which Mrs. Rushton, with Martha's help, had made unusually tempting in order to coax him into good humor.

"Now," said Mr. Mansfield Rushton when they had finished, "your Uncle Aaron and I are going down to the village. He's going to leave his watch to be repaired, and I've got to see Jed Muggs and settle with him for the damage to his coach and horses"—here he looked sternly at Teddy, who kept his eyes studiously on the tablecloth—"from the runaway. I'm going, too, to put up a notice in the post-office, offering a reward to any one who may find and return Uncle Aaron's papers.

"As for you boys, I want you to get some of the other boys together and go over every foot of ground down near the river, where the accident—"

"*Accident!*" sneered Aaron contemptuously.

"Where the accident happened," went on Mr. Rushton, taking no notice of the interruption. "Look in every bush on both sides of the road. Slip on your bathing suits under your other clothes, and if you can't find the papers on land try to find them in the water.

"In most places it isn't so deep but what you can wade around. Get sticks and poke under the stones and in every hole under the bank. In places where it's over your heads, dive down and feel along the bottom with your hands."

"But do be careful, boys," put in Mrs. Rushton. "I'm always nervous when you get where the water is deep."

"Don't worry, Agnes," were her husband's soothing words. "Both of them can swim like fish, and now they've got a chance to do it for something else than fun.

"And mind, Teddy," he added, "it's up to you to get busy and make good for your own sake, as well as Uncle Aaron's. I haven't yet decided"—here Aaron grinned, unpleasantly—"just what I shall do to you for what happened yesterday, but I don't mind telling you that if you come home with those papers it's going to be a mighty sight easier for you than if you don't. Now get along with you," addressing both boys, "and make every minute tell."

The Rushton boys hurried about, put on their bathing suits under their other clothes, and hastened from the house, eager for action. They were glad to get out of the shadow of Uncle Aaron, and, besides, the task they had before them promised to be as much of a lark as a duty.

"I'll pick up Jack and Jim as I go along, and you skip around and get Bob," suggested Fred. "Probably we'll find some other fellows down by the bridge, and they'll be glad enough to help us do the hunting."

Teddy assented, and soon had whistled Bob out of the house.

"Hello, Teddy," was Bob's greeting. "You're still alive, I see. What did that old crab do to you last night?"

"Nothing much," said Teddy cheerfully. "So far, I've only had to go without my supper. Didn't go altogether without it, though," and he poured into Bob's sympathetic ears the story of the pie and the chicken.

"Bully for Martha," chuckled Bob. "She's the stuff!"

"You bet she is!" echoed Teddy heartily. "But let's hurry now, Bob," he went on. "Fred and the other fellows are down at the bridge by this time, and we've got a job before us."

The two boys broke into a run and soon overtook the three other boys, who were looking carefully among the bushes on each side of the road as they went along. This they did more as a matter of form than anything else, for it was hardly likely that the papers had been dropped this side of the bridge.

It was almost certain that they had left Aaron's pocket at the moment he had made his flying leap into the stream. In that case, they would be either in the bushes on the bank or in the water itself. It was barely possible, too, that they had fallen in the coach, when the blow of the ball had brought Aaron to his knees. If that were so, they might have been jarred out of the coach on the further side of the road, when it had smashed into the trees.

So when the boys reached the neighborhood of the bridge, the search began in earnest. The

boys scattered about under the direction of Fred, who gave each one a certain section to search over.

"Now, fellows," he urged, himself setting the example, "go over every foot with a fine-tooth comb. We've simply got to get those papers, or home won't be a very healthy place for Teddy."

Apart from their liking for Teddy, the boys were excited by the idea of competition. To be looking for papers that meant real money, as Fred had carefully explained to them, seemed almost like a story or a play. Each was eager to be the first to find them and stand out as the hero of the occasion.

But, try as they might, nobody had any luck. They reached and burrowed and bent, until their faces were red and their backs were lame. And at last they felt absolutely sure that the papers were not on either side of the stream.

There remained then only the river itself.

"Well, fellows," summed up Fred, finally, "it's no go on land. We've got to try the water. Here goes."

And, stripping off his outer clothes, he dived in, to be followed a moment later by Teddy.

"Gee, that water looks good," said Jim enviously. "I wish I'd thought to bring my bathing suit along."

"So do I," agreed Jack, as he looked at the cool water dripping from the bodies of the brothers.

"Well, what if we haven't!" exclaimed Bob. "Don't let's stand here like a lot of boobs. We can take off our shoes and roll our pants almost up to our waists. Then we can wade along near the edge, while Fred and Teddy do their looking further out in the river."

It was no sooner said than done, and they were soon wading along in the shallower parts, each armed with a long stick, with which they poked into every place that they thought might give results.

Fred and Teddy dived and dived again, keeping under water as long as they could, and feeling along the river bed. They kept this up until they were nearly exhausted, and had to go to the bank to rest.

"It isn't our lucky day," said Fred, puffing and blowing. "I'm afraid the river doesn't know anything about those papers."

"I hate to go home without them," said Teddy, as visions of Uncle Aaron flitted across his mind.

"Oh, well, you fellows have certainly worked like truck horses," remarked Bob, "but if they're not there you can't get them, and you might as well make up your minds to it."

"Phew, but I'm hot!" complained Jim. "Say, fellows, how would some of those peaches taste?" and he cast a longing look toward a peach orchard, across the way from where they were resting.

"How would they taste?" repeated Jack, as he followed the direction of Jim's glance. "Yum-yum."

"There's a lot of big mellow ones lying on the ground," went on Jim, whose mouth was watering more and more. "They'll only rot, anyway, so what's the matter with our getting a few? They're no good to Sam Perkins, and they'd certainly do us a whole lot of good."

Fred and Teddy were hurrying into their clothes.

"We want to keep a sharp lookout for Sam," cautioned Fred. "He's got a new dog whip, and he said that if he caught any boy in his orchard, he was going to skin him alive."

"He's got to catch us first," said Teddy. "Let's take a chance."

They took it. Another moment, and they were over the fence.

CHAPTER IX

CHASING THE TRAMPS

The Rushton boys and their chums crouched low in the shadow of the fence, and took a careful look around. All of them knew the violent temper of Mr. Sam Perkins, and none of them wanted to make the acquaintance of that famous dog whip he had recently bought at the village store, loudly declaring at the same time the use he expected to make of it.

But five sharp pairs of eyes could see nothing to cause alarm. A sleepy silence brooded over the orchard, and it looked as though Sam must be busy at some other part of his extensive farm.

"I guess it's all right," said Fred, in a cautious whisper.

"Cricky, look at those beauties!" exclaimed Jack Youmans, as he pounced upon a luscious peach that lay within a foot of him.

The others quickly followed his example, and there was soon no sound except the munching of jaws, as they satisfied their first hunger for the delicious fruit.

There was no need to pluck them from the trees, as there were plenty lying on the ground. And since these were doomed to rot in time, the consciences of the boys did not disturb them much. Still, they knew they were trespassing, and at first they kept a keen lookout. Nothing happened, however, and gradually their caution relaxed, and they strayed farther and farther from the road into the heart of the orchard.

Suddenly, a fierce barking made them jump and sent their hearts into their throats. They looked behind them, and saw a big dog rushing toward them. He was between them and the fence, and shut off escape in that direction.

"It's Sam's dog, Tiger!" ejaculated Bob, his face growing pale.

"Quick, this way!" cried Fred, grasping the situation at a glance. "Let's make for the barn. It's our only chance."

They were not more than two hundred feet from a big red barn, which had two entrances, one of which faced them. The one at the further end was closed, but the one to which the boys were nearer was open.

They ran with all their might, a wholesome fear lending wings to their feet. There were many stories abroad about the ferocity of Tiger, whose name seemed to fit his nature. Only a week before, he had taken a piece out of a man's leg, and Sam Perkins had more than once been in danger of lawsuits on account of the dog's savage disposition. But the farmer was ugly himself, and, instead of trying to curb the brute, seemed to glory in its reputation.

"I ain't a-goin' to muzzle him," he would say, when people complained that the dog was dangerous. "All any one has to do is to keep off my grounds, and he won't get hurt."

The dog was gaining at every jump, but the boys had a good start, and the distance to the barn was short. They covered it in fast time, and almost fell inside the door. Fred and Bob had just time to swing it shut and slip the bar in place, when Tiger hurled himself against it.

It was a close call, and for a minute or two they lay there, panting and unable to speak.

The hay scattered on the floor had deadened the sound of their footsteps, as they piled in, and, in the silence of the big barn, the only sound came from their own gaspings for breath.

"Oh!" Jim was beginning, when Fred lifted his hand and put his finger on his lips as a signal to keep still.

"S-sh," he whispered. "I thought I heard some one speaking over there," and he pointed to a distant corner of the barn where fodder for the cattle was stored.

"Who can it be?" whispered Teddy in return. "Do you think it can be Sam? If it is, we're done for."

"No, it isn't Sam," was Fred's guarded reply. "If it were, he'd come to see what Tiger's barking about. Let's creep over there and take a look."

As silently as Indians, the boys wormed their way across the floor. The only light came from the cracks in the side of the barn, and they had to use great care not to bump into anything that might betray their presence.

Suddenly, Fred, who was leading, stopped.

"Wait," he breathed. "I just got a look at them. There are two of them there, and they look to me like tramps. Stay here a minute."

They halted, while he crept on a little farther, until, through a small opening in a stall, he could get a better view.

He glued his eye to the opening and studied more closely the two strangers.

His first guess, that they were tramps, proved to be correct. Both had all the marks of vagrants. Their clothes were ragged and dirty, their hair long and uncombed, and their faces were covered with scraggy beards.

One was tall and lank, and seemed to be the leader of the two. His eyes were little and close together. He had no socks, and his toes showed through his ragged shoes. His only other clothing was a torn shirt, opened at the throat, and a pair of old trousers held up by one suspender. Up near his temple was an ugly scar, that looked as though it had been made by a knife.

His companion was shorter and stockier. His clothes were on a par with those of his "pal," and he looked equally "down and out."

A partly emptied bottle stood on the floor beside them, and their flushed faces and the glassy look of their eyes told what had become of most of its contents.

"I tell you, I heard something," the shorter of the two was saying.

"You're woozy," answered the other. "It's only the dog a-barkin'. He's treed a squirrel, or he's diggin' out a woodchuck, or somethin'."

But, true to the laziness that had made them what they were, neither took the trouble to go to see what the disturbance was about.

"So you think we can get away with that job all right?" asked one, evidently resuming a talk that had been interrupted.

"Sure thing," said the other. "Why, it's a cinch. A blind man can do it. I took a squint at the place this mornin', an' it's like taking candy from a baby."

Fred strained his ears to listen.

But the men had dropped to a lower tone, and, try as he might, he could only catch a word here and there. Once when the tall man raised his voice a trifle, he heard the phrases "apple tree" and "side window." But this did not give him any clear idea of what was meant, nor did the shorter man's grunt of "dead easy" help him out.

He beckoned to his companions, and, one by one, they crept up to take a look at the tramps. Teddy had just taken his turn, when they were startled at hearing a gruff voice, which they knew only too well, speaking to the dog.

"What in thunder's the matter with yer, Tige?"

A frantic outburst of barking was the response.

"It's Sam!" murmured Teddy.

"Now we're in for it!" exclaimed Bob, and his voice was shaky.

"Keep perfectly still," whispered Fred. "He can't get in through that door, anyway. He'll have to come round to the other door, and the minute he does, we'll take down the bar from this one and bolt for the fence."

"Sumthin' doin', eh!" exclaimed the farmer, as he tried the door. "I might have known that dog wouldn't have brought me over here fur nuthin'. Come along, Tige," and the boys heard him running along the side of the barn to the other door.

The tramps too had heard the farmer, and sprang to their feet, confused and panic-stricken. Another instant, and the door flew open, and Sam Perkins rushed in, with Tiger at his heels.

Coming from the bright sunlight into the twilight of the barn, the farmer peered around, not seeing clearly for a moment. But the tramps saw him plainly enough, as they saw also the

pitchfork in his hand, and they made a rush past him for the open air. Taken by surprise, Sam was almost upset, and they took full advantage of the chance. A howl of pain showed that Tige had nipped the taller one, but he shook the dog off and ran after his companion, who was making a desperate effort to break the record for speed.

Pulling himself together with a shout of rage, Sam joined in the chase.

Fred slipped the bar from the door, and pushed it open.

"Now's our chance, fellows!" he shouted. "Sam'll never catch them, and he'll be back here in a minute. Let's beat it while the going's good."

He set the pace, and they needed no urging to follow close on his heels. All reached the fence and leaped over it. And not till they found themselves on the other side, did they dare to breathe.

"Jiminy!" gasped Bob, "that was a narrow squeak!"

"A miss is as good as a mile," panted Jim.

"We didn't get here a minute too soon, either," said Teddy. "See, there's Sam coming back, now."

"He's not much of a sprinter," commented Jack, as the heavily built farmer came lumbering back, muttering angrily to himself.

"No," assented Jim, "and it's lucky for those tramps that he isn't. But Tige had a little better luck," he added, as the dog came trotting beside his master, holding in his mouth a patch of cloth that he had torn from one of his enemies.

"Chewing the rag, as usual," chuckled Bob. "They make a sweet pair, don't they?"

Sam caught sight of them and came over, scowling.

"What are you boys hanging round here for?" he asked suspiciously.

"We were watching you chase the tramps," answered Fred. "Did you catch them?"

"None o' yer business," snarled Sam.

"You certainly ran fine," said Bob admiringly. "I love to see you run, Mr. Perkins."

"I'm goin' to see *you* run in a minute," growled the farmer. "Here, Tige."

But as the boys were not anxious to pursue the conversation, they made a more or less dignified retreat, and Sam, with a parting malediction on all tramps and all boys, went off towards his house.

CHAPTER X

BUNK GOES CRAZY

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Teddy, as the Rushton boys and their chums came near their homes. "I hate to own up that we didn't find those papers."

"It is too bad," admitted Bob. "But you did the best you could, and if they're not there, you can't help it."

"I can see the look on Uncle Aaron's face," said Teddy. "That sort of I-told-you-so look that makes you wish you were big enough to lick him."

"You sure do stand well with that uncle of yours," laughed Jim.

"Yes," assented Teddy gloomily, "I stand like a man with a broken leg."

"Oh, brace up," chirped Jack. "We had the peaches anyway."

"Bother the peaches!" exclaimed Fred. "I'd give all the peaches in the world just to lay my eyes on those papers."

"Sam Perkins at one end of the road and Uncle Aaron at the other," brooded Teddy. "I sure am up against it!"

But the confession of failure had to be made. The boys had cherished a faint hope that somebody in town might have found the papers, and that when they got back at noon, Uncle Aaron might have recovered them. But although he had been downtown most of the morning and had inquired everywhere, there had been not the slightest trace of them, and he had returned tired and angry.

"Rampagin' roun' like de bery Ole Nick," was the way Martha described him, when she had a moment alone with Teddy. "It sho duz beat all, how de good Lo'd lets people like him cumber de earf."

His greeting was about as genial as Teddy had expected. But he had steeled himself for that and could stand it. What disturbed him much more was the distress his mother felt and the chilly disapproval of his father.

The latter had settled with Jed Muggs that morning for the damage caused by Teddy. Jed had named an excessive price, but Mr. Rushton had been in no mood to haggle and had paid him what he asked. But it was not this that kept him silent and preoccupied.

He was seriously debating with himself whether he would do well to take Aaron's advice. The boarding school idea had set him thinking. He wanted to do the very best thing for the boys, and he was worried by the thought that perhaps he had been too easy and indulgent.

Several days passed, while he was pondering the matter. Gradually the atmosphere cleared, and the household began to go on as usual. Even Uncle Aaron lost some of his crankiness and seemed at times to be "almost human."

And then, just as things were going along nicely, Teddy, once more, as Fred sorrowfully put it, had to "spill the beans."

It was a very warm morning, and most of the family were out on the porch trying to get what air there was. Teddy had occasion to go upstairs, and had to pass the door of his uncle's room.

The latter had an appointment to meet a little later on, and, as it was an important one, he had arranged to dress with more care than usual. His clothes, including a new white vest, were laid out neatly on the bed, near his writing desk.

But what especially caught Teddy's eye, was a sheet of fly-paper, laid on a small table close beside the desk.

Such things were a novelty in the Rushton home. There was no need for them, because every window and door was carefully screened during the hot weather, and Martha was death to any unlucky fly that happened to wing its way inside.

But Uncle Aaron was so fidgety and nervous that even a solitary insect buzzing around kept him awake at night, and, at his request, Mrs. Rushton had secured the sticky sheet that now lay glistening on the table.

It must have been Teddy's evil genius that caused Bunk, the house cat, to come strolling past the door at just that moment. He was so sleek and lazy and self-satisfied that Teddy was strongly tempted to shake him out of his calm.

He hurried down to the kitchen, found a piece of meat on one of the breakfast dishes that Martha was clearing up, and ran upstairs again.

Bunk was still there, putting the last touches on his toilet. His smooth fur, washed and re-washed, shone like silk.

"Here, Bunk," called Teddy coaxingly, holding the bit of meat just above the little table.

The confiding Bunk looked up lazily. Then his eyes brightened. He measured the distance, jumped and came down with all four paws on the sticky fly paper.

With a yowl of surprise and fright, he tried to free himself from the mess. He used his head to get it away from his feet, and only succeeded in smearing his face and shoulders. At times he would get one foot loose, only to get it stuck again when he tried to free another. In less time than it takes to tell, he was a yellow, sticky mass.

Thoroughly panic stricken, he took a flying leap to the desk, upsetting a bottle of ink in his course and landed on the bed, where he rolled over and over on the white vest and other clothes so carefully laid out by Uncle Aaron.

Teddy was almost as scared as the cat. He dashed after him, grabbing at the paper, getting some severe scratches in the process, and finally yanked it away. As for Bunk, he dashed out of the room like a yellow whirlwind.

Fred, who had heard the racket, came running upstairs and found Teddy standing aghast at the mischief he had caused. The older brother took in the situation at a glance.

"Quick," he urged, "get out of the window. They'll be up in a minute."

The kitchen extension was just under the window of the room. Teddy lifted the screen and dropped to the roof. From there it was only twelve feet to the ground and he made the drop in safety. No one saw him but Martha, and that faithful soul could be depended on to keep silent.

Mr. Mansfield Rushton had already left for the city, but Mrs. Rushton and Uncle Aaron came hurrying up the stairs. The former was in a flurry of excitement, which increased materially when she looked into Uncle Aaron's room and saw the awful wreck that had been made of it.

"Oh, whatever in the world has happened now?" she gasped.

As for Aaron, he could hardly speak at all. He was speechless with rage, as he picked up his clothes and handled them gingerly.

"Spoiled, utterly spoiled," he spluttered. Then, he caught sight of Bunk in one corner of the hall.

"It's that confounded cat," he shouted, as he made a kick at him that missed him by a hair. "He got tangled up in the fly paper and carried it all over the room."

But just then he saw the bit of meat that had tempted the unwary Bunk. He picked it up and looked hard at it.

"Um-hum," he muttered, and the steely look came into his eyes.

He turned sharply on Fred.

"Where's Teddy?" he asked.

"He doesn't seem to be around here anywhere," replied Fred. "I'll see if I can find him downstairs."

And he went down with alacrity, but carefully refrained from coming up again. He remembered that he must see Bob Ellis at once. He opened the front door and passed swiftly round the corner.

"He'll find him," growled Aaron bitterly. "Oh, yes, he'll find him! You won't see either of those boys till lunch time."

"I tell you, Agnes," he went on fiercely, "one of those young scamps is just as bad as the other. Teddy starts the mischief and Fred does all he can to shield him."

"You don't know yet that Teddy had anything to do with it," protested Mrs. Rushton, in a tone which she tried to make confident, but with only partial success.

"No, of course not," he answered sarcastically, "he's never to blame for anything. All the same I'll bet my life that he and nobody else is at the bottom of this. How did this meat get up here, if somebody didn't bring it?"

"Perhaps the cat brought it up," suggested Mrs. Rushton desperately. Then, feeling the weakness of her position, she went on hurriedly:

"But now, I must get busy and clear up this awful mess. Give me those clothes, and Martha and I will fix them up right away."

But though the damage to the clothes was soon repaired, storm clouds were still hovering over the household when Teddy came in to lunch.

He loafed in with an elaborate pretense of unconcern. Nothing was said at first, and he was beginning to hope when Uncle Aaron suddenly blurted out:

"What's the matter with your hand?"

Though startled, Teddy lifted up his left hand.

"Why, I don't see that anything's the matter with it," he replied, holding it out for examination.

"I mean the one you're hiding under the table," went on Aaron stonily.

"Oh, that one?" stammered Teddy. "Why, it's scratched," he added brightly, as he studied it with an expression of innocent surprise.

There was a dead silence. Teddy, not caring to look anywhere else, kept gazing at his hand, as though it were the most fascinating object in the world.

"Oh, Teddy!" moaned his mother.

And then Teddy knew that the game was up.

"Honestly, Mother," he stammered, "I didn't mean to—that is I meant to make the cat jump on the fly-paper, but I didn't think he'd—"

Here was Uncle Aaron's cue.

"Didn't think!" he stormed. "Didn't think! If you were my boy—" And here he launched into a tongue lashing that outdid all his previous efforts. It seemed to Teddy an age before he could escape from the table, carrying away with him the echo of Uncle Aaron's final threat to have it out with his father when he came home that night.

It was the last straw. Mr. Rushton's indecision vanished at the recital of Teddy's latest prank. Before he slept that night he had written to Dr. Hardach Rally, asking for his catalogue and terms, intimating that if these proved satisfactory, he would send his two boys to Rally Hall.

CHAPTER XI

THE ROBBERY

The answer came back promptly.

In addition to the catalogue and pictures of the Hall and grounds, Dr. Rally wrote a personal letter. It was in a stiff, precise handwriting that seemed to indicate the character of the man.

He would be very glad to take the Rushton boys under his care. He thought he was not exaggerating when he said that the standard of scholarship at Rally Hall was not exceeded by any institution of a similar kind in the entire state. Their staff of instructors was adequate, and their appliances were strictly up to date. There was a good gymnasium, and the physical needs of the boys were looked after with the same care as their mental and moral requirements.

But what he laid especial stress upon was the discipline. This came under his own personal supervision, and he thought he could promise Mr. Rushton that there would be no weakness or compromise in this important particular.

"That's the stuff!" broke in Uncle Aaron, gleefully rubbing his hands. "What did I tell you? Hardach Rally is the one to make boys mind."

Fred and Teddy failed to share his enthusiasm, and Mrs. Rushton shivered slightly.

But, taken as a whole, the letter met the views of Mr. Mansfield Rushton, and when the family council broke up, it was definitely settled that the boys should go to Rally Hall.

Old Martha was "dead sot," as she put it, against the whole plan.

"Ain' no good goin' to kum uv it," she grumbled to herself, as she jammed her hands viciously into the dough. "House'll seem like a graveyard wen dose po' boys get shunted off ter dat ole bo'din' school. Like enuf dey won't giv' um half enuf ter eat. An' all on 'count uv dat ole w'ited sepulker," she wound up disgustedly.

But Uncle Aaron, wholly indifferent to Martha's views even if he had known them, was in high feather. He had carried his point, and, in the satisfaction this gave him, he became almost good-natured. He could even allow himself a wintry smile at times, as he reflected that the boys—the "pests," as he called them to himself—were to get a taste of the discipline that their souls needed.

"He'll show them what's what," he chuckled. "He'll either bend 'em or break 'em. I know Hardach Rally."

As for Fred and Teddy themselves, they hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry.

They loved their home and their parents, and then, too, they hated to leave their boy friends with whom they had grown up in the home town.

But, on the other hand, there was the attraction of new sights and places and all the adventures that might come to them. It was another world into which they were going, and it was not in boy nature that they should not be thrilled by the prospect of "fresh fields and pastures new."

But before the time came for their departure, Oldtown had a sensation that turned it topsy-turvy.

The village store was robbed!

The first thing the boys knew about it was when they heard a whistle under their windows that they recognized as that of Jack Youmans. They stuck sleepy heads out to see what had brought him there at that early hour.

"Hurry up, fellows!" he cried excitedly. "Get your clothes on and come down. There's something doing."

"What is it?" they asked in chorus.

"Never you mind," answered Jack, swelling with a sense of his importance. "You get a move on and come down."

They slipped into their clothes and in less than three minutes were down beside him. He made them beg a little before he finally gave up his secret.

"The store was robbed last night," he said importantly.

"The store!" exclaimed the boys. There was no need of specifying, as there was only one store

in Oldtown of any importance.

"How did it happen?" asked Fred.

"Did they get much?" questioned Teddy.

"They don't know yet," replied Jack to both questions. "A fellow came past our house a little while ago, and he called to my dad, who was working in the garden, that when Cy Briggs went to open up, he found that the front door was already open and everything inside was all scattered about. He can't tell yet just how much was stolen, but the safe was broken into and everything in it was cleaned out. Cy is awful excited about it, and they say he's running around like a hen with her head cut off. Get a wiggle on now, and let's get down there."

The boys could not remember when anything like a robbery had happened before in the sleepy little town, and they were all afire with excitement.

The family was not up yet, but the boys did not wait for breakfast in their eagerness to be on the scene of the robbery.

A hasty raid on Martha's pantry gave each of them enough for a cold bite, and, eating as they went along, and running most of the way, they were soon in front of the village store.

The news had traveled fast, and there was an eager crowd already gathered. All sorts of rumors were about, and in the absence of any real news as to the robbers, one guess was as good as another.

The only thing about which there was no doubt at all was that the robbery had occurred. The open safe and tumbled goods were sufficient proofs of that. Cy Briggs, who had run the store for forty years, and had never had a robbery or fire or anything to disturb the regular order of things, was so flustered that he had not yet been able to find out the extent of his loss.

One or two of the cooler heads were going over the stock with him, while the others clustered on the broad porch in front and waited for developments, keeping up a constant buzz of questions and conjectures.

No one had heard any unusual noise the night before. The village constable, who constituted the entire police force of Oldtown, had made his usual round about ten o'clock, and, as a matter of form, had tried the door. But it had been securely fastened as usual, and there had been nothing to rouse his suspicion. Apart from two or three traveling men who had come in with Jed Muggs, and were now staying at the one hotel, nobody had seen any outsiders.

The whole thing was a mystery, and this was increased by the discovery that while the door had been found open, showing that the thieves had come out that way, they must have found some other means of entrance. The door had been fastened by a bolt, which Cy had pushed into the socket the last thing before leaving. This had not been broken, as it would have been, if the robbers had forced their way in from the front. Cy himself had gone out of a back door, which he had locked, carrying the key away with him, and this door was found still locked when he came that morning to open up.

"Well, Cy, how about it?" was the question from a dozen voices, as the old storekeeper, grizzled and flushed, came out on the porch. "How much did you lose?"

"Don't know yet," Cy answered, wiping his forehead with a huge bandana handkerchief, "but I reckon it'll figger up to close on three or four hundred dollars' wuth."

A hum of excitement rose from the crowd. To the boys especially, this seemed an enormous amount of money.

"That's a right smart sum, Cy," remarked a sympathetic listener. "What was it they got away with?"

"Money, mostly," mourned Cy. "The goods in the store wasn't bothered much. Reckon they was lookin' only for cash. Then, too, they've cleaned out a co'sid'able of jewelry and watches. Some of 'em I was gettin' ready to send away to the city to be repaired, and others had come back mended, but the customers hadn't called for 'em yet."

Catching sight at that moment of Fred in the crowd, he added: "One of them watches was your Uncle Aaron's. It was a vallyble one and I feel wuss over that than almost anything else. I know he set a heap of store by it."

"Uncle Aaron's watch!" gasped the boys.

It was a knock-down blow for them, especially for Teddy. Was he never to get away from that miserable runaway? If it had not been for that, the watch would not have been injured, and at this very moment it might have been reposing in his uncle's capacious pocket. Now the "fat was in the fire" again. The chances were that the watch would never be seen again by the rightful owner.

"I'm the hoodoo kid, all right!" he groaned.

"It sure is hard luck," sympathized Jack.

"Brace up, Teddy," urged Jim. "They may catch the fellows yet."

"Swell chance!" retorted Teddy to their well-meant sympathy. "Even if they do, they won't get the watch back. Those fellows will make a beeline to the nearest pawnshop, and that'll be the end of it."

"I wish we could have caught them at it," said Fred savagely. "If they'd only been working when we came past last night."

"What time last night?" asked Cy, pricking up his ears.

"About eleven o'clock, I guess," answered Fred. "Teddy and I had been over to Tom Barrett's house. He's just got a new phonograph, and we went over to hear him try it out. He had a lot of records, and it was pretty late when we came away."

"And yer didn't see anything out of the way when you come past?" went on Cy.

"Not a thing. We didn't meet a soul on the way home."

Just then there was a stir inside the store, and the constable, Hi Vickers, came to the door.

"Come here a minute, Cy," he said. "I bet I've found out how those fellers got into the store."

As many as could crowded in after him as he led the way to a little side window.

"They got in here," he said triumphantly.

"But that's locked," said Cy.

"Sure it is," explained Hi, "but they could have locked it again after they got in, couldn't they? One thing certain, they've unlocked it first from the outside. See here," and the constable showed where the blade of a heavy knife had left marks on the frame. It had evidently been thrust between the two halves of the window to push back the fastening.

"There you are," he said. "You see, they clum that apple tree right alongside the winder and—"

"Say!" broke in Fred, as a thought came to him like a flash of lightning, "I bet I know who the robbers were."

All eyes were turned on him in surprise.

"It was two tramps that I saw round here a few days ago," continued Fred. "A lot of us fellows were in Sam Perkins' barn, and we heard the tramps talking. They didn't see us, but we saw them. We couldn't hear all they said, but I did hear them say something about an 'apple tree' and 'side window' and something being 'dead easy.' I'd forgotten all about it till just now. But there's the apple tree and the side window, and that must have been what they were talking about."

"By gum, it wuz!" assented Hi. "Tell us what the fellers looked like."

"One of them was a good deal taller than the other," said Fred, trying to recall their appearance. "They were both ragged and dirty. And, oh, yes! the tall one had a scar up near his temple, as if he had been stabbed there some time."

"Well," commented Hi, "that may help a lot. We know now what we've got to look for. I'll telephone all along the line to the other towns to be on the lookout for them, and some of us will hitch up and drive along the different roads. They can't have got very far, and we may get 'em yet."

Later on, as the boys were on their way home, Jim chuckled.

"What are you laughing about, Jim?" asked Bob.

"I was just thinking," Jim replied, "that it was mighty lucky they didn't ask Fred how he happened to be in Sam Perkins' barn."

CHAPTER XII

OFF FOR RALLY HALL

As Teddy had clearly foreseen, all that had happened before was as nothing, when Uncle Aaron learned that his cherished watch was gone, probably forever.

He stormed and raged and wondered aloud what he had done that he should be saddled with such a graceless nephew. It was in vain that Mr. Rushton offered to make good the money loss.

"It isn't a matter of money," he shouted. "I've had that watch so long that it had come to be to me like a living thing. I wouldn't have taken a dozen watches in exchange for it. Big fool that I was ever to come to Oldtown."

All the amateur detective methods of the village constable ended in nothing. And as day after day passed without news, it began to be accepted as a settled fact that the culprits would never be found.

One happy day, however, came to lighten the gloom of Uncle Aaron. And that was the day that the Rushton boys said good-by to Oldtown and started for Rally Hall.

"Thank fortune," he said to himself, "they're going at last! A little longer and I'd be bankrupt or crazy, or both."

But if Uncle Aaron was delighted to have them go, nobody else shared that feeling, except Jed Muggs.

That worthy was in high glee, as he drove up to the Rushton home on that eventful morning, to take them and their trunks to the railroad station at Carlette.

Although he had made a pretty good thing, in a money way, out of the accident, charging Mr. Rushton a great deal more than would have made up the damage, he had by no means forgiven Teddy for the fright and the shock he had suffered on that occasion. The Fourth of July incident of the painted horses, of which he firmly—and rightly—believed Teddy to have been the author, also still "stuck in his crop."

The old coach and horses swung up to the gate, and Fred and Teddy came out. They had had a private parting with their parents, and now the whole family, including Bunk, had come out on the veranda to see them off.

Mr. Rushton was grave and thoughtful. Mrs. Rushton was smiling bravely and trying to hide her tears. Uncle Aaron looked perfectly resigned. Old Martha was blubbering openly.

The trunks were strapped on and the boys jumped inside the coach. Jed climbed to the driver's seat, chirruped to his horses and they were off amid a chorus of farewells.

Those left behind waved to them until they were out of sight. But in the last glimpse that the boys had of the old home, they saw that their mother was sobbing on her husband's shoulder, while Martha's apron was over her face.

They themselves were more deeply stirred than they cared to show, and for some time they were very quiet and thoughtful.

They chanced to be the only passengers that morning, and Jed, having no one else to talk to, turned his batteries on them.

"So you're goin' to leave us, be you?" he remarked, chewing meditatively on a straw.

"Yes," answered Teddy, the light of battle coming into his eyes, "and we hate to tear ourselves

away from you, Jed. You've always been such a good pal of ours."

"It breaks us all up to leave you," chimed in Fred, "and we wouldn't do it if it weren't absolutely necessary. I don't know how you are going to get along without us."

"A heap sight better than I ever got along with yer!" snapped out Jed. "I won't be lyin' awake nights now, wonderin' what rascality you kids will be cookin' up next."

"And this is all the thanks we get for trying to make things pleasant for you all these years!" exclaimed Teddy, in mock despair.

"The more you do for some people, the less they think of you," and Fred shook his head mournfully.

"I tell you young scalawags one thing, and that ain't two," Jed came back at them. "Ef it hadn't be'n fer me, you two might be behind the bars this blessed minit."

"I ain't never writ ter the gover'ment yit, about you interferin' with the United States mail," he went on magnanimously. "Yer pa and ma is nice folks an' I don't want ter make no trouble fer them. Perhaps I oughtn't ter hush the matter up, me bein', as yer might say, a officer of the gover'ment when I'm carryin' the mails"—here his chest expanded—"an' maybe the hull matter will come out yet and make a big scandal at Washington. Yer actually busted up gover'ment prope'ty. That padlock on the mail bag wuz bent so that I had ter git a new one—"

"Yes," interrupted Fred, "father said that he paid you a dollar for that."

"I've seen those same padlocks on sale in the store for twenty-five cents," added Teddy.

"That's neither here nor there," said Jed hastily. "The nub of the hull thing is that if it hadn't been fer me, yer might be doin' the lock step in Atlanta or Leavenworth, or some other of them gover'ment jails. How would yer like that, eh? And wearin' stripes, an' nuthin' but mush and merlasses fer breakfast, an' guards standin' around with guns, an'—"

But what other dismal horrors might have been conjured up by Jed will never be known, as at that moment they came up alongside the railroad station at Carlette, and more pressing things demanded his attention.

"Great Scott, Teddy!" exclaimed Fred, as they jumped down, "the whole gang is here!"

Sure enough, it seemed as though all the juvenile population of Oldtown had turned out to give them a royal send-off.

They ran up to the boys with a shout.

"It's bully of you fellows to walk all this distance to say good-by," said Fred, and Teddy echoed him.

"We'd have come up to the house," explained Bob Ellis, "but we knew you'd have a whole lot to say to your own folks, and we didn't want to butt in."

"We're all dead sore at your leaving the town," said Jim. "It won't seem like the same old place with you fellows out of it."

There was a general chorus of assent to this from the other boys.

"We hate to leave the old crowd, too," said Fred. "But, of course, we'll be back at holidays and vacation times. I only wish you fellows were going along with us."

"That would be great," agreed Jack. "But no such luck for us."

"I don't know how we're going to fill your place on the football and baseball teams," mourned Tom Barrett. "We'll be dead easy for the other teams now."

"Don't you believe it!" said Fred heartily. "You'll find fellows to take our places that will be better players than we ever dared to be."

"Nix on that stuff!" said Jim. "You know well enough that you put it all over every other fellow in town."

The locomotive whistled at the nearest crossing, and a moment later the train came into sight.

There was a perfect hubbub of farewells, and amid a chorus of good wishes that fairly warmed their hearts, the boys swung aboard. Even Jed thawed out enough to wave his hand at them in semi-friendly fashion.

"I'll keep it dark," he called after them, "that is unless the gover'ment gits after me, on account of—"

But the rest was lost in the rattle of the train.

The Rushton boys were off at last.

CHAPTER XIII

ANDY SHANKS, BULLY

The train was a long one, consisting of seven cars, beside the smoker, but, as the homeward rush after summer vacations was in full swing, it was pretty well filled, and the boys found it hard to get two seats together.

It was only after they had gone through the first three coaches, that they saw their opportunity.

About the middle of the fourth car, a back had been turned so that two seats faced each other.

Only one passenger was occupying this space, a large overgrown boy, about sixteen years old. His face was heavy, and his loose mouth and protruding eyes gave him a most unpleasant expression. A traveling cap was pulled down part way over his eyes, and he looked up from under the peak of this with a cold, piggy stare, as the boys paused beside the seats.

Filling up the rest of the seat beside him was a raincoat and a tennis racket. On the seat facing him he had deposited a heavy suit case, that filled it from end to end.

Fred and Teddy stood beside him for a moment without speaking, taking it for granted that he

would take his suit case from the seat and put it on the floor. He did nothing of the kind, however, and continued to gaze at them insolently.

The surprise that Fred felt at first was rapidly giving place to a different feeling, but he restrained himself, and asked, pleasantly enough:

"Beg pardon, but would you mind putting your suit case on the floor, so that we may have the seat?"

"Of course, I'd mind," came the ungracious answer. "There are plenty of other seats in the train, if you'll only look for them."

A red flush began to creep up Fred's neck, which to any one who knew him would have been a danger signal. But he put out a hand to restrain Teddy, and answered patiently:

"Perhaps there may be, though I haven't been able to find them, but I just happen to want this one," and he pointed to where the suit case was resting.

"Nothing doing!" sneered the other. "Guess again!"

Fred came of fighting stock. One of his ancestors had fought in the battle of Kings Mountain, and another had scoured the seas under Decatur in the War of 1812.

He had been taught to keep his temper under restraint and never to provoke a quarrel. But he had been trained also never to dodge trouble if it came his way in any case where his rights or his self-respect were involved.

Like a flash, he grasped the heavy suit case and put it on the floor, its owner giving a howl as it came down on his toes. At the same instant, Teddy swung the back of the seat so that it faced the other way, and the boys dropped into it.

The rage of the flabby-faced youth was fearful. He started to his feet, his eyes popping from his head in his excitement.

"You-you—" he spluttered. "I'll—"

"Well," replied Fred, turning and looking him straight in the face, "what'll you do?"

Before the resolute glow in Fred's eyes, the bully weakened.

"You'll find out what I'll do," he mumbled. "I'll-I'll get you yet."

"All right," remarked Fred calmly. "You can start something whenever you like. I'll be ready for you. No car seat hog can try any such game with me and get away with it."

The fellow slumped back in his seat, mouthing and muttering. Nor was his defeat made less bitter by noting the smiles of approval with which the other passengers greeted the incident.

"Good work, son," laughed a grizzled old farmer, sitting across the aisle. "That's the way to take the wind out of his sails."

"What you got to say about it?" growled Andy, glaring at him.

"Whatever I choose to," was the answer, "and there'll be plenty more to say if you give me any of your impudence."

Andy subsided, but for the rest of the journey his little eyes glowered with rage as he kept them fixed on the boys in front.

"He's a sweet specimen, isn't he?" chuckled Teddy.

"I'd hate to have to live under the same roof with him," answered Fred, little thinking that for the next nine months they would have to do just that thing.

"Starting off with a scrap the first thing!" laughed Ted. "Wonder what mother would say to that?"

"I think she'd say we did just right," answered Fred, "and I'm dead sure that father would."

Nothing further happened to mar the pleasure of their journey. The country through which the train was passing was entirely new to the boys, and, in the ever changing panorama that flew past the windows, they soon became so absorbed, that they almost forgot the existence of their unpleasant fellow-traveler.

"Green Haven the next stop!" sang out the brakeman.

"Here we are," said Fred, as the boys began to gather up their traps. A little quiver of excitement ran through their veins. They were on the threshold of a new life. It was the most momentous step they had ever taken.

With a clangor of the bell and hissing of steam, the train slowed up at the station.

Green Haven was a smart, hustling little town, much larger than Oldtown. There was a row of stores stretching away from the station, quite a pretentious hotel, and the spires of three churches rose above the maples that bordered the village streets. There was the hotel bus drawn up beside the depot, and alongside this a much larger one, used by the students in going to and from Rally Hall, which was a little more than a mile from the town.

"Quite a crowd of people getting off here," commented Fred, as he stepped into the aisle of the car.

"Yes," answered Teddy. "Hello, the bully is gone!" he exclaimed, as he glanced at the seat back of him.

"Sure enough," rejoined Fred. "There he goes, now," and he indicated the rear door of the car, through which their ugly neighbor was just disappearing.

"I wonder if he lives in Green Haven," said Teddy. "If he does, we may run across him once in a while."

"Something pleasant to look forward to," laughed Fred, as they stepped down to the station platform.

There was a large crowd of young fellows at the station, and there was a noisy interchange of greetings, as others stepped from the train. Everybody seemed to know everybody else, and the boys felt a little forlorn, as they looked over the gay throng and saw no face that they knew.

They were making their way toward the bus, when a tall, manly young fellow, who had been watching them, came to meet them. His keen grey eyes were kindly and humorous, and he wore a friendly smile that made the boys warm to him at once.

"I don't know how good a guesser I am," he laughed, as he held out a hand to each, "but I'll bet

you fellows are going to Rally Hall."

"Guessed it right, the first time," smiled Fred, as he and Teddy grasped the extended hands.

"Good," was the answer. "Then we're fellow sufferers, and we'd better get acquainted right away. Melvin Granger is my handle. What are the names you fellows go by?"

"Brothers, eh?" he went on, when the boys had introduced themselves. "That's dandy. It won't be half as lonesome for you at the start as it would be if either of you came alone. Still, there's a bunch of good fellows here, and it won't be long before you'll feel at home. I think you'll like them, most of them, that is. Of course, there is, here and there, an exception—"

He paused just here to nod carelessly to a passer-by.

"How are you, Shanks?" he said indifferently.

The boys followed the direction of his glance, and Teddy clutched Fred's arm.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "that's the fellow we had the scrap with on the train."

"Scrap," repeated Granger, laughing. "Well, I don't wonder. Scrap is Andy's middle name. He," and his eyes twinkled, "he's one of the 'exceptions' I just mentioned."

CHAPTER XIV "HARDTACK" RALLY

"Well," commented Fred, as they made their way toward the bus which was filling up rapidly, "I'm glad that he's the exception and not the rule. A very little of him will go a good way with me."

"Yes, that's a case where 'enough is plenty,'" assented Granger.

The Rushton boys' bags were slung into a wagon standing alongside the bus and their trunks followed. Then the lads took the only seats remaining in the bus, the door slammed to and they were on their way to Rally Hall. The students inside were in high spirits, and as the Rushton boys looked around at their companions they were ready to believe Melvin Granger's statement that they were all around good fellows. Brown as berries from their summer outings, full of the zest of living, their bright eyes and boisterous laughter showed that they were kindred spirits to the newcomers.

"I don't see our grouchy friend here with the rest," Fred remarked, as he looked around.

"Not with the common herd," grinned Melvin. "There he goes now," as they heard the honk of a horn, and an automobile swept by, leaving a cloud of dust behind it.

In the driver's seat, holding the wheel, was their acquaintance of the train, while slumped down beside him was a smaller youth, with little, shifting eyes and a retreating chin.

The fellows in the bus looked at each other understandingly.

"Andy and his valet," one of them remarked.

"Yes," replied Granger, to the unspoken question in the eyes of the brothers, "he's got an auto of his own. Keeps it in a garage down in the village."

"To tell the truth," he went on, "that's half the trouble with Shanks. He has more money than is good for him. His father's a millionaire they say—got a big woolen mill somewhere down in Massachusetts. But if he knows how to make money, he doesn't know how to bring up a boy. Andy's the only son, and his father lets him have all the money he wants, and doesn't ask him what he does with it. He's always been allowed to have his own way, and it's only natural that he should think he owns the earth. And that's one of the reasons he wanted to have four seats to himself in the train this morning, even if some one else had to stand."

"One of the reasons, you say. What are the others?" asked Fred.

"Well, I guess the others must be set down to Andy's unfortunate disposition," laughed Granger. "There are other fellows here who have rich fathers, but they're good fellows just the same."

"Was that really his valet who was in the auto with him?" asked Teddy.

"No," replied Melvin, with a smile, "that's only the name the fellows gave to Sid Wilton. He plays second fiddle to Shanks. He's always at his beck and call, and ready to fetch and carry for him. He jumps through the hoop and rolls over and plays dead whenever Andy gives the word.

"But here we are now," the other youth went on, as the bus turned from the road into a broad avenue, shaded by elms and maples. "Behold, gentlemen and fellow citizens," he jested, "the far-famed institution of learning known as Rally Hall!"

The boys leaned out eagerly to see what would be their home for many months to come.

Before them rose a massive building, three stories in height, made of pressed brick and with white granite facings. A wing at right angles to the main building on each side, gave it the form of three sides of a square.

A wide flight of stone steps led to the main floor, which was devoted to class rooms and the offices of the institution. On the second floor were the dormitories, varying in size, and containing from eight to twelve beds each. The rooms of the principal and teachers occupied the greater part of the third floor, while a section in the left wing was set apart for the janitor and the other employees of the school.

Before the building stretched a large campus, covering several acres. Most of it was lawn, although it was interspersed with bits of woodland. On one side of it was a large frame building, used as a gymnasium, and immediately adjoining was the athletic field. This was very large and was kept in superb condition. There were a number of tennis courts, but the major part was reserved for baseball and football. A full-sized diamond was surrounded with smooth turf that

shone like green velvet, though browning a little in places under the September sun. A half mile running track encircled the whole field.

Directly in front of the Hall, at the foot of the gently sloping campus, lay Lake Morora. It was about two miles in length by three-quarters of a mile wide and was dotted by several tiny islands. It was the most beautiful body of water the boys had ever beheld, and they fell in love with it at once.

"My! isn't it a peach?" murmured Teddy.

"It sure does make a hit with me!" agreed Fred emphatically.

"It's a dandy, all right," was Granger's comment, "and the fellows have no end of fun on it. But come along now," he added. "You'll have plenty of time later on to ask 'what are the wild waves saying?' But just at present, we'd better hunt up old Hardtack."

"Hardtack?" asked Fred wonderingly.

"Sure!" grinned Granger, "the boss of this shebang."

"Oh!" exclaimed Fred, a light breaking in upon him, "you mean Dr. Hardach Rally?"

"Dr. Hardach Rally," said Melvin, with mock solemnity, "is the very man I mean."

"Naturally," he went on, "I don't call him 'Hardtack' to his face. It wouldn't be exactly healthy to do it."

"Hardtack," chuckled Teddy. "Wouldn't Uncle Aaron have a fit if he knew the fellows called him that?"

"The name fits pretty well, too, I guess," laughed Fred. "From what we've heard, he must be a terror."

"Oh, I don't know," rejoined Granger. "He isn't exactly a cooing dove in disposition, and if a fellow tries any monkey business, he comes down on him like a thousand of brick. Still, he's not such a bad kind after all. He's pretty severe, and he won't stand for a shirk or a crook. But if a fellow's white and tries to do the square thing, he'll get along and not find Hardtack too hard to digest."

By this time they had mounted the steps, and Granger, who had taken an instant liking to the boys and had made himself their "guide, philosopher and friend," led the way to the private office of the head of Rally Hall.

A gruff "come in" was the answer to his knock, and they entered the study.

It was a large square room with a polished hardwood floor. Behind the flat mahogany desk sat Dr. Hardach Rally.

He was lean and spare and above middle height. He wore a pair of horn spectacles through which peered a keen, uncompromising pair of eyes. He gave the impression of a stern man, but nevertheless a just one.

"Good afternoon, Granger," he said stiffly, and his eyes rested inquiringly on the two boys.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Rally," replied Granger. "These friends of mine are Fred and Teddy Rushton. I met them at the railroad station."

Dr. Rally shook hands with the newcomers and asked them to be seated. Then Granger excused himself and with a whispered "see you later" hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XV

LEARNING THE ROPES

The boys sat there, silently studying the new "master of their fate," and wondering how they would get along with him. He, in turn, looked them over carefully. Then he leaned forward and took some papers from his desk.

"I was expecting you," he said, glancing at two letters he held in his hand. "Your father wrote me that you would reach here to-day."

"I have also here a letter from your uncle, Mr. Aaron Rushton," he went on. "He is a very close friend of mine, and I gather that it was through his suggestion that your father decided to send you here."

Fred murmured an assent, while Teddy's heart sank, as he tried to imagine what Uncle Aaron had said about him in the letter.

Dr. Rally sat up straight in his chair. It was significant that it was not an easy revolving chair, but as stiff and perpendicular as the doctor himself.

"The matter of your studies and assignment to classes," Dr. Rally continued, "will be looked after by Professor Raymond, my chief assistant. I will send you to him in a moment. But first, I want to say one word."

"The discipline of the school is strict, and it must be obeyed. Sometimes"—here he glanced at Uncle Aaron's letter and then let his gaze fall on Teddy, who squirmed inwardly—"a boy comes here who thinks that he is going to run the school. He never makes the same mistake a second time. That is all."

He gave the boys directions how to find Professor Raymond, and they found themselves out in the hall, surprised at the briefness of the interview, but relieved that it was over.

"Say!" exclaimed Fred, "he didn't have so much to say, after all."

"He didn't talk very much, if that is what you mean," corrected Teddy, who was unusually thoughtful, for him, "but he said a good deal."

"I wonder what Uncle Aaron told him in his letter," mused Teddy. "I'll bet he just skinned me alive."

"Oh, well, don't you care," Fred consoled him. "Your cake is dough with Uncle Aaron, and I suppose it will always, unless he finds his watch and papers."

"Do you suppose he ever will?" asked Teddy, for at least the hundredth time, and rather wistfully.

"We'll keep on hoping so, anyway," replied Fred. "But here's the room the doctor told us to go to."

They found Professor Raymond to be a young man, alert and vigorous and full of snap. He was very friendly and cordial, and the boys liked him from the start.

He examined the boys as to the point that they had reached in their studies, and carefully looked over the reports they had brought from their teachers in the Oldtown school. These proved exceedingly satisfactory. Fred's work had been really brilliant, while Teddy, despite his love of mischief, had held a very creditable rank in his studies.

The professor assigned them to their classes and gave them all necessary directions as to the hours of study and times for recitations. Then he consulted a slip he took from his desk.

"I'm going to put you boys in Dormitory Number Three," he said finally. "There are ten beds in there, and just two have been left vacant. I'll give directions for your trunks and bags to be sent up there, and you can unpack and get your things arranged in the wardrobe and locker that stand at the heads of your beds. By the time you get rested and freshened up, it will be nearly time for supper."

Dormitory Number Three, they found to be a very large and airy room in the front of the building on the second floor, and commanding a splendid view of the lake. There were ten single beds, with ample space between them, and at the head of each was a wardrobe and locker. At the foot was a washstand with all the necessary appliances.

The dormitory was intended for sleeping purposes only. On the floor below, there were special study rooms, where the boys were supposed to prepare their lessons for the next day's recitations.

Fred and Teddy had just begun to wash, when Granger came through the door like a whirlwind.

"Well, by all that's lucky!" he exclaimed. "So Raymond's put you in here, has he? I was hoping he would. Now that's what I call bully!"

"That's what we call it, too, if this is your dormitory," said Fred, who had seldom formed so strong a liking for any one on such short acquaintance.

"I've slept here for the last two years," replied Melvin, "and I think it's the best dormitory in the whole school. Look at the view from here." His sweeping gesture took in the lake, rippling in the glow of the western sun.

"It's a pippin, all right!" assented Fred.

"It sure is!" echoed Teddy.

"And we've got a ripping lot of fellows in here, too," went on Melvin. "All of them are the real goods. There isn't a snoop or a sneak in the bunch. All of them are old timers, except two fellows that came in two days ago. One of them is named Garwood, who comes from out West somewhere. The other is Lester Lee from somewhere down on the coast of Maine. I don't know much about them yet, but I like them first-rate from what I've seen of them so far. I think we're going to be a regular happy family, as soon as we get going, and I'm mighty glad you fellows are going to be in the crowd."

Nobody was gladder than Fred and Teddy themselves. Although they had not confessed it, even to each other, they had felt a sort of dread of the first few days at school. They had not known but what it might take weeks before they could establish their footing and begin to feel at home. Yet here it was only a few hours, and this friendly, big-hearted boy had taken them right in, as cordially as though he had known them for years. If they were to suffer from loneliness or homesickness, it would not be Melvin Granger's fault.

"Here come some of the fellows now," he said, as a noisy group burst into the room and began to make use of wash basins and towels. "I won't stop to introduce you now. The supper gong will ring in about five minutes, and they'll be breaking their necks to get ready in time. When we get up here again after supper and study hours, I'll trot them all out, and they can tell you the sad stories of their lives."

As he had predicted, the splashing of water and brushing of hair were interrupted a few moments later by the clanging of the gong that told a hundred or more hungry boys that supper was ready. There was no need of a second summons, and with a last hasty touch to their incomplete toilets, they came trooping into the immense dining-room that covered an entire floor in one of the wings.

There were eight long tables, at the head of each of which was one of the teachers. Dr. Rally sat apart, in state, with his family, at a private table in one corner of the room. For this, all the boys inwardly thanked their stars. Not one of them would have cared to eat under the direct glare of the head of the school.

Fred and Teddy were glad to find that they had been assigned to the table over which Professor Raymond presided. Melvin, too, was at the same table, a little higher up.

The food was plentiful and well cooked, and although Fred and Teddy would not have minded having one or two of the dainties that old Martha was so adept in preparing, it was plain that her prophecy of their early death from starvation was not going to be fulfilled. They made a most satisfactory meal, marred only by the fact that Teddy's piece of pie was devoured by some unknown neighbor while he was talking to Fred.

He was game, however, and not being able to swallow the pie, swallowed his resentment, making a mental vow to get even, if he should ever discover the culprit.

A half an hour for rest and recreation followed the supper. Then the bell rang for a study period of two hours. At the end of this time work was over for the day, and the boys sought their dormitories to do as they chose till bedtime. All lights were to be out by ten o'clock.

The boys came into Number Three with a clatter and a bang. When they were all there, Melvin lifted his hand to hush the racket.

"Hi, there, you fellows," he shouted. "Keep still for a minute. I want to say something."

The tumult subsided, as the boys came crowding around him.

"Gentlemen," he said, with mock dignity—"I know I flatter you, but no matter—I want to introduce you to two new roommates, Fred and Teddy Rushton."

CHAPTER XVI

A JOLLY CROWD

There was a general bow and smile on the part of all, as the boys acknowledged the introduction, and then Melvin became more personal:

"You have here before you," he said to the Rushton boys, assuming the air and tone of a "barker" at a seaside show, "the most gorgeous collection of freaks ever gathered under one tent. Positively, gentlemen, an unparalleled aggregation of the most astonishing wonders of nature now in captivity, assembled by the management without regard to expense from all quarters of the civilized and uncivilized world. So remarkable, gentlemen, are these specimens of the animal world that they have even been taught to walk, talk and eat like human beings. Some have even gone so far as to say that they *are* human, although this opinion is not maintained by those who know them best.

"And what do I charge you, gentlemen, for gazing at this mammoth collection of monsters and missing links? Do I charge you a half a dollar? I do not. Do I even ask you for a quarter? I do not. Do I even set you back to the extent of a dime? I do not. Do I even extract from your vest pocket the humble jitney? No, gentlemen, a thousand times, no!

"This amazing show is free, gentlemen, absolutely free, free as the air, free as the sunshine, free as good advice, free as—"

He ducked, just as a pillow flew past his head.

"Jo-Jo, the dog-faced boy, did that," he explained; "whenever he hears me say 'free' he thinks it means that he's to be free with me. But I don't mind, because he never hits anything."

There was a general laugh, and Granger abandoned his showman's attitude.

"This is Billy Burton, the sweet singer of the Wabash," he said, indicating a stocky youth with a shock of red hair. "We call him the Indiana Nightingale, because he's so different. You ought to hear him sing 'We Give the Baby Garlic, So that We Can Find Him in the Dark!' The sentiment's so strong, it brings tears to your eyes."

"You're pretty good at music yourself, Mel," retorted Billy.

"I?" said Melvin in surprise. "Why I don't know one note from another. I don't think I could play a jewsharp or a hand-organ. What kind of music am I good at?"

"Chin music," replied Billy.

Melvin was fairly caught, and the boys howled.

"You got me that time, Billy," Melvin cried. "But, talking of music, here's the real goods in that line," and he laid his hand on the shoulder of an olive-skinned Italian boy, with delicate features and large dark eyes.

"This is Tony Dirocco," he went on; "Tony's a count or some other high muckamuck in his own country, and he's studying here while his father is at Washington on some diplomatic business or other. But Tony doesn't care half as much about books as he does about music. Say, when he gets hold of a violin he fairly makes it talk. Real high brow stuff, you know, operas and things like that, the kind that goes right up and down your spine and takes your heart out by the roots. Just wait until he gives us one of his concerts all by himself."

Tony shook hands with a shy smile, and the boys made up their minds that they were going to like him immensely.

"Now for our Spanish athlete," said Granger, "the man who 'throws the bull.' This is Slim Haley," and he nodded toward a fat chubby fellow who must have weighed close to two hundred pounds. His broad face was wreathed with smiles, and his eyes twinkled with fun, as he came forward.

"This puny infant," went on Melvin, "can tell the most wonderful stories you ever heard, and tell them with such an innocent air that sometimes you almost believe him. He's got Baron Munchausen skinned a mile. He was telling me one to-day about a rabbit, and I sat watching him, expecting every minute to see him choke."

"Oh, come off, Mel," laughed "Slim." "You see," he said, turning to the boys, "the trouble with Mel is that he hasn't imagination enough to understand anything he hasn't seen himself. Now that story of the rabbit—"

"Let's hear it, and judge for ourselves," suggested Fred.

"Why, it was like this," said Slim. "It was out in the Western League, and they were having a close game of ball. It was in the ninth inning, with two men out and one run needed to win.

"The man at the bat, one of the best sluggers on the team, soaked the ball good and plenty on a line to centre field. It hit a rabbit, who was browsing near the centre field fence. Of course it scared him, and he came streaking in and reached second base just before the batter.

"Down the line went the rabbit toward third, with the batter legging it right after him. The rabbit touched third and then, frightened at the crowd in the bleachers just behind third, it turned around and scooted for the home plate. It crossed the plate with the batter right at its

heels, just as the ball was thrown in. But although the batter touched the plate just before the ball got there, the umpire called him out."

"I don't see why," interrupted Teddy.

"Of course there was a big kick about it," said Slim smoothly, "but the decision went, just the same. The umpire said the rabbit paced the runner and made him run faster than he otherwise would, and so he got to the plate before the ball."

There was a dead silence, while the boys watched Slim, as though they expected the fate of Ananias to overtake him.

Fred coughed significantly.

"You see," said Slim mournfully, to Granger, "he doesn't believe it either. You've poisoned his mind against me. You've taken away my reputation. Why, if you don't believe it," he went on, in pretended indignation, "I can take you out there and show you the very grounds where the thing happened! I can show you the very base that the rabbit touched! I can show you the bleachers where the crowd sat that frightened the rabbit! If the rabbit's alive still, perhaps I can show you the rabbit! If—"

"That'll do," said Melvin solemnly. "The court finds you guilty, and condemns you to twenty years of truth-telling."

"That's a cruel and unusual punishment," put in Billy Burton, "and the Constitution forbids that kind."

"I'm only making the punishment fit the crime," answered Melvin. "I'm ashamed of you, Slim. Now you go way back and sit down, while I introduce the rest of these infants."

The remaining "infants," so disrespectfully alluded to, were duly made known to the boys in a similar jovial way. There was Ned Wayland, who was introduced as the heaviest batter on the baseball team, and Tom Eldridge, who had kicked the deciding goal in their last game of football with a rival school.

Finally, there were Lester Lee and Bill Garwood, of whom Melvin had less to say, because they had just come, and he knew them hardly better than he did the Rushton boys themselves.

But Fred and Teddy felt from the start that there was something in these newcomers that attracted them strongly.

Bill Garwood, they found, was a quiet, reserved youth, who gave one the impression of latent force. His eyes that looked straight into theirs were clear and frank, and there were the tiny wrinkles beneath them that come from looking off into far spaces. On the ranch at Snake River from which he came, he had lived far from neighbors, and he seemed a little shy and awkward amid the abounding life at the Hall. But, underneath his quiet exterior, one felt that he had sterling qualities and in case of trouble would be a good friend to have at one's back.

Lester Lee impressed them with equal favor. He was tall and lean, and his face was as bronzed as a sailor's. This did not surprise the boys when they learned that he had lived in the lighthouse at Bartanet Shoals on the coast of Maine. He was jolly and full of fun, and had a magnetic way with him that put him on cordial terms with the boys at once.

When at last they were undressing, seated on their adjoining beds, Fred turned to Teddy, who had just given a low chuckle.

"What's the joke?" he asked.

"I was thinking that the joke was on Uncle Aaron," replied Teddy.

"How's that?"

"Why, he thought he was punishing us by having us sent here," answered Teddy, "and I'll just bet that we're going to have the best time of our lives."

"Provided we don't have a run in with Andy Shanks," suggested Fred, yawning.

"Yes," said Teddy thoughtfully, "we've got to look out for that fellow."

"I don't think he knows we're here yet," continued Fred. "He didn't seem to see us when he spoke to Granger this afternoon."

"He'll find it out soon enough," remarked Teddy, "and when he does, look out for squalls."

And the squalls were not long in coming.

CHAPTER XVII

TEDDY'S JOKE

Two weeks went by with amazing swiftness, and it looked as though Teddy's prediction was going to be realized. Certainly, so far, they were having, in Fred's words, "a whale of a time."

All the newness and rawness had worn off, and they felt as fully at home at Rally Hall, as they might have felt in months, if they had started under less favorable conditions.

All the boys in their own dormitory had learned to like them thoroughly, and among the rest of the boys outside they were general favorites.

There were, to be sure, a few exceptions. And chief among these were the bully, Andy Shanks, and his toady, Sid Wilton, together with two or three others who hung about Shanks, because of his money and the "good times" he could give those who sought his favor.

Andy, in the crowd at the station, had not seen the boys get off the train and enter the bus. So that he was entirely taken aback, when, on the following day, he had come face to face with them on the campus.

He stepped back with an ugly sneer.

"So you're here, are you?" he whipped out.

"No," said Fred coolly, "I'm somewhere else."

"None of your lip now!" snarled Shanks, thrusting out his jaw and putting his pasty face close to Fred's. "I'm not used to taking back talk from any fellow in this school."

"You'd better get used to it then right away," was the retort, "because I give it to you straight that you're going to get plenty of it, if you come fooling around me. And I give you the tip to steer clear of me, if you don't want to get something besides talk."

The bully was clearly at a loss to know what to do, when he found his bluff called in such a determined manner. He had been used to having things largely his own way. His money was accountable for this, in part, and then, too, he was much larger and stronger than most of the boys in the school.

He measured Fred with his eye from head to foot, and what he saw did not serve to increase his confidence. Fred was tall and muscular, and Andy saw again in his eyes the fighting look that had cowed him in the train.

Still it was hard for him to believe that, when the test came, this newcomer would not back down as most of the other boys had done. Besides, quite a crowd of the fellows had come up now, scenting a fight in prospect, and it would ruin his reputation among them if he retreated now before them all.

"I've a good mind to give you a thump in the jaw," he growled.

"Don't hesitate on my account," said Fred politely.

The snicker that came from the crowd at this remark maddened Andy.

"I won't," he shouted, and made a move to strike.

Like a flash, Fred shed his coat.

"Come on then," he cried, "and I'll give you the licking that you're aching for."

There was a delighted stir among the other fellows, as they formed a ring around the two. Their sympathies were all with Fred, although few expected him to win against the bully of the school.

Only one voice was lifted for Shanks.

"Soak him, Andy," piped up the shrill voice of Sid Wilton, his toady, whom most of the boys disliked even more than they did Andy, if that were possible.

But Andy, at that moment, was not showing any great eagerness to "soak" his antagonist. If Fred had flinched in the slightest degree, he would have been upon him. But as he looked into the flashing eyes that met his defiantly, the "yellow streak" that is in most bullies began to show in Andy. His pallid face grew whiter and a blue tinge showed about his lips.

With the eyes of all upon him, however, he saw no way of retreat, and began to take off his coat.

It was noticeable, though, that he did this with great deliberation.

Suddenly a look of relief came into his eyes as he saw an approaching figure.

"Here comes Professor Raymond," he said, trying to put into his words a tone of disappointment. "We'll have to put this off till some other time. Mighty lucky for you, too, or I'd have done you up good and proper," he flung at Fred, all his courage returning when there was no longer any demand for it.

"Let's go down to the gymnasium and have it out there," suggested Fred. But Andy pretended not to hear. He slipped on his coat hurriedly, and, in company with Sid Wilton, strolled off in one direction, while most of the boys scattered in the other.

Professor Raymond sauntered up to a little group, composed of Fred, Teddy, Billy Burton and "Slim" Haley.

His keen eye took in the flushed face of Fred and the air of suppressed excitement among the others. He guessed pretty well what had been about to happen, and, knowing Andy for what he was, he had little doubt as to who had provoked the row. In his secret heart he would not have been at all sorry to have that young cub get the whipping he richly deserved.

Still, of course, he could not tolerate any breach of the rules of the school, which strictly forbade fighting.

He paused and looked keenly from one to the other.

"Any trouble, boys?" he asked.

"No, sir," answered Fred respectfully, "that is, not yet."

"Nor at any other time, I hope," said his teacher. "Remember, boys, no fighting."

But he did not pursue the matter further, and, after chatting a moment, went on, with a little smile upon his lips. In his own college days he had been the lightweight champion of his class. There was good red blood in Professor Raymond.

"That 'not yet' was a good one," grinned Billy Burton. "I see a whole lot of trouble coming in the near future."

"I shouldn't wonder," answered Fred, who was firmly convinced in his own mind that Andy would still force him to give him the thrashing that he needed.

"And I guess that most of the trouble will be for Andy," said Slim. "Did you notice how he tried to crawfish just now? And how glad he was to see the prof coming? It was a life-saver for Andy."

"Yes," laughed Billy, "he reminded me of two fellows that got into a fight. Half a dozen men rushed in, crying, 'hold them, stop them.' The fellow who had been getting the worst of it hollered out: 'That's right, boys, five of you hold him. One'll be enough to hold me.'"

"It sure wouldn't have needed many to hold Andy back," chuckled Slim.

As the days passed on, however, the affair simmered down and perhaps would have died a natural death, if a bit of mischief on Teddy's part had not revived it.

Andy, one day, brought out on the campus a placard, on which was written "Kick me." A bent pin at the top enabled him to fasten it to the coat of some unsuspecting boy. Then Andy would give him a vigorous kick, and when the victim protested, would show him the invitation.

Under ordinary conditions it would only have been a harmless joke, and would have been taken in good part. But Andy's vicious nature and love for causing pain made him kick so hard and

cruelly that his victims felt rage and resentment. But as he carefully chose only the smaller boys, they did not dare to retaliate.

But after a while they were all on their guard, and the brave Andy, seeing no more worlds to conquer, laid the placard on a bench and forgot it.

Teddy caught sight of it, and the impulse seized him to give the bully a taste of his own medicine. He slipped up behind him and fastened the card to his coat amid the awestruck silence of those who saw him.

Bill Garwood, who had seen with indignation what Andy had been doing, promptly accepted the invitation. He swung his foot and it landed fair on Shanks, who turned with a roar of rage.

"What did you do that for?" he howled.

"Because you asked me to," said Bill, deftly unhooking the placard and showing it to him.

"Ted Rushton put that on you," shrilled Sid Wilton, who came hurrying up. "I saw him do it."

Bill was husky, while Teddy was smaller, and Shanks, true to his nature, reached for what seemed to him the easier game. Teddy stoutly stood his ground, but before the bully could reach him, Bill Garwood's hand was on his collar, his knuckles boring deep into his neck.

"No, you don't," he said, as he yanked him back. "What kind of a sport are you, anyway? You've been kicking these fellows twice as hard as I kicked you, but the minute you get a taste of it, you go off the handle. And anyway, if you want to do any fighting why don't you pick out a fellow of your size? I'm about your size. Do you get me?"

There was no doubt of his meaning, and his perfect readiness to stand by his meaning was so evident, that Andy concluded discretion to be the better part of valor. He turned away sourly, shooting a look at Teddy, which, if looks could kill, would have left him dead upon the spot.

For both Fred and Teddy a storm was brewing.

CHAPTER XVIII

KICKING THE PIGSKIN

Letters kept coming every week to the Rushton boys from the family at home. Mr. Rushton's, although less frequent than his wife's, were always bright and jolly, and seldom came without enclosing a check, which helped to cover the cost of many a midnight spread in the dormitory, when the boys were supposed to be in bed. Their friends were a unit in declaring that Mr. Rushton was a "real sport."

Those of Mrs. Rushton came oftener, and were full of loving expressions and anxious advice to wear proper clothing and avoid rough sports and be careful about getting their feet wet. Although her chicks were no longer under her maternal wings, she brooded over them every moment, and was counting the days till they returned to her.

She often referred to Uncle Aaron, and the boys were sorry to learn that there was still no trace of the missing watch and papers. He had offered a reward and advertised widely, but had never received even a hint of their whereabouts.

"Old Hi Vickers is a swell detective—I don't think," sighed Teddy, after reading the latest letter.

"I blame myself, partly, for the loss of the watch," remarked Fred regretfully. "I ought to have told somebody right away about those tramps hanging around. Then they might have been rounded up and chased out of town before they had a chance to break into the store."

"You're not to blame for anything," said Teddy bitterly. "I'm the person that caused all the trouble. If I'd only had sense enough not to plug Jed's horse that day, this whole thing wouldn't have happened. If a prize were offered for ivory domes, I'd win it, sure."

"Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these—it might have been,"

quoted Tom Eldridge, who usually had something pat in the poetical line for all occasions.

"Lay off on the spouting stuff, Tom," said Ned Wayland, "and you fellows stop your grizzling and come down to the football field. It's a dandy afternoon for practice."

It was a wonderful October day, with a crisp breeze coming from the lake that moderated the warmth of the sun, and the boys were stirred by the thrill of youth and life that ran through every vein.

It was too much for Tom, despite the sarcasm with which his previous effort had been greeted, and he burst out:

"There is that nameless splendor everywhere,
That wild exhilaration in the air—"

He dodged a pass that Ned made at him.

"Let me alone," he chortled. "Don't you see that I can't help it?"

"The lyric joys that in me throng,
Seek to express themselves in song."

The other lads gave it up.

"A hopeless case," murmured Ned, shaking his head sadly.

"Yes," mourned Fred. "And he used to be such a nice fellow, too, before he went bughouse."

"You rough necks are jealous," grinned Tom. "You'd have tried to discourage Shakespeare, if you'd been living then."

"Lucky for the world, you weren't living then," he went on. "For that matter you're not living now. You're dead ones, but you don't know it."

They were still trying to think up a sufficiently cutting response when they came in sight of the football field.

It was an animated scene. A dozen or more boys in their football togs were running over the field, while many more crowded round the side lines as spectators. There was a dummy, at which some of the players were throwing themselves in turn to get tackling practice. Others were running down under punts, and still others were getting instructions in the forward pass.

The game with the Lake Forest School, one of their principal rivals, was now only two weeks off, and the boys were working for dear life to get into form. They had a good team, although three of their best players of the year before had not returned to school this fall.

Teddy was a little too light for the heavy work required in football, although he would have made a good quarter-back, where quickness is more necessary than weight. But that position was already filled by Billy Burton, who was doing capital work, so that there seemed no opening for Teddy. He consoled himself by the determination to make the shortstop position on the baseball team the following spring.

But Fred was husky enough to fill any position, either in the line or the back field, and he had been picked out by Melvin Granger as a "comer."

Melvin was the captain of the team and played centre. He was always on the lookout for any one who could strengthen the team, and had promptly spotted Fred as first-class material.

"Ever play football?" he had asked him, the day after his arrival at Rally Hall.

"A little," answered Fred modestly. He was averse to boasting and did not add, as he might have done truthfully, that he had been, far and away, the best player in his school league.

"What position have you played?" asked Melvin, interested at once.

"Oh, I've played left end and right tackle at different times, but I've had more experience at fullback than anywhere else."

"Great!" exclaimed Melvin. "Welcome to our fair city. We've got a lot of good players for almost every other position on the team, and, if one gets hurt, we don't have much trouble in finding a substitute from the scrubs, which is almost as good as the regular. But in the fullback job there's only one first-class fellow, and that's Tom Eldridge, who's playing it now. Tom's a dandy, but he might get hurt at any time, and we'd have hard work to find any one who could fill his shoes.

"Of course," he went on, "there isn't any vacancy now, and the boys who have been here longest will be given first chance. But, to hold his position, he'll have to prove that no one of the new fellows is better than he is. You won't mind playing on the scrubs at the start, will you?"

"Not a bit," answered Fred stoutly. "I'll go in there and work my head off just the same as if I were on the regular team."

"That's the talk," cried Melvin. "That's the spirit I like to see. And I can see right now that Tom will have all he wants to do to hold his job."

So Fred had gone in on the scrub. There had not been as much chance for practice as usual, as there had been an unusually large number of rainy days that fall, but already he had loomed up as by far the best player among the substitutes. He was right in line for promotion.

And this afternoon his chance came, sooner than he had expected.

The playing had been unusually spirited, and the scrubs had been giving the regulars all they could do to hold their own. At last, however, the first team had got the ball down within ten feet of their opponents' line, and the ball had been passed to Tom Eldridge for one determined attempt to "get it over."

The scrubs braced savagely, but Tom came plunging in like a locomotive. There was a wild mix-up as his adversaries piled up on him, and when the mass was untangled, Tom lay on the ground with a badly sprained ankle. He tried to rise, but sank back with a groan.

They lifted him up, and he stood on one foot, with his arms on their shoulders. Professor Raymond, who had the oversight of athletic sports, came hurrying up and examined the injury. All were immensely relieved when they learned that there were no bones broken, but became grave again when the professor said that the sprain was a bad one and would probably lay Tom up for a couple of weeks.

"Just before the Lake Forest game, too!" exclaimed Ned Wayland. "I tell you, it's tough."

"We're goners now!" moaned Slim Haley.

"Not by a jugful," put in Tom, between whom and Fred the rivalry had been of the most generous kind. "I never saw the day when I could play better football than Fred Rushton. He'll play the position to the queen's taste."

"Nonsense," said Fred. "You can put it all over me, Tom. I'm awfully sorry you got hurt."

Professor Raymond insisted that Tom should be carried at once to the school, where he could have his injured ankle attended to properly. The boys cheered the lad as he was taken away, and then Granger turned to Fred.

"You take his place, Fred," he said, "and show these fellows from Missouri what you can do."

And Fred showed them. He was a little nervous at first as he felt all eyes following him, but, in the excitement of the game, this wore off, and he played like a fiend. He was here, there and everywhere, dodging, twisting, running like a deer, bucking the line with a force that would not be denied. Twice he carried the ball over the line for a touchdown, and before his onslaughts the scrubs crumpled up like paper. It was some of the finest playing that Rally Hall had ever seen, and when the game was ended, he was greeted with a tempest of cheers. He had "made good" beyond a doubt.

"Fred, you played like a wild man!" said Melvin, as they were walking back to the Hall after the game. "You're all to the mustard. Keep it up and we'll lick Lake Forest out of their boots!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

A few days later Teddy came rushing up to Fred on the campus, his face aglow with excitement.

"Say, Fred," he gasped, "I saw one of them to-day!"

"One of whom?" asked Fred.

"The tramps that looted Cy Brigg's store," responded Teddy.

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Fred, catching his brother's excitement. "Are you sure? Where did you see him? How do you know he was one of them?"

"By the scar on his face," answered Teddy. "You remember the tall one who looked as if some one had stabbed him up near the temple? I'm sure he's the same one we saw in Sam Perkins' barn."

"Wasn't the other fellow with him?" asked Fred.

"No, he was all alone this time. I was coming up from the post office with Lester Lee when I caught sight of him near the railroad track. He looked tough and slouchy, but not as ragged as when we first saw him."

"Yes," interrupted Fred, "he's had money since then."

"I thought there was something about him that reminded me of some one," went on Teddy, "but it wasn't till after I'd passed him that it came over me who he was. Then I turned around to go after him, with the idea of having him arrested. But he had just gone over the tracks in front of a freight train. The train was a long one and we had to wait several minutes on this side before it got by. Then it was too late. We hunted all over, but couldn't see anything of him."

"That was hard luck," said Fred regretfully.

"Of course," resumed Teddy, "he wasn't trying to get away, because he'd never seen me before, and didn't know that I'd ever seen him. He must have turned a corner somewhere and then melted out of sight. Maybe I wasn't sore! Think what a satisfaction it would be to telegraph to Uncle Aaron that we'd got the fellow who stole his watch."

"It's certainly tough," assented Fred, "to come so close to him and just miss getting him. I'll 'phone down right away to the constable at Green Haven, and tell him to be on the lookout for the fellow."

"Tell him there's a reward out for him," suggested Teddy. "That'll make him keep his eye peeled."

Fred telephoned at once, and received the assurance that the fellow would be arrested if found, and held as a suspicious character until the Oldtown authorities could send for him.

And the next day, the boys themselves, together with a number of their friends, spent all their spare time searching in that part of the town where the tramp had disappeared.

"It's no use, I guess," remarked Fred at last, as they turned back from the outskirts of the town. "He may be miles away by this time."

"Getting ready to break into some other store, perhaps," suggested Teddy. "The loot he got in Oldtown won't last him forever."

"There's a pretty tough looking customer going down that lane," exclaimed Bill Garwood, as they came to a corner in a poor part of the town.

The boys followed his glance and saw a tall, roughly dressed man slouching along a hundred yards away and making toward the open country. He was alone and seemed to be in no hurry.

"It's the same fellow we saw yesterday," said Teddy excitedly. "I'm sure of it. How about it, Lester?"

"It surely looks like him," replied Lester Lee. "The same walk and the same clothes and-yes, the same face," as the man gave a careless look behind him.

"You get down to the constable's office, quick, Teddy," directed Fred. "Run every step of the way. Tell him we've got this fellow located. We'll try to keep him in sight until you get back. Hustle."

Teddy was off like a shot.

But the tramp seemed to know that something was in the air. He looked around again and then quickened his pace. The boys, too, walked faster, and, noting this with another backward glance, the man in front made certain that they were following him with a purpose. What that purpose was he did not know, but his guilty conscience told him that it might be for any one of half a dozen offences.

At the first corner he turned sharply, and when the boys reached it, they saw him loping along at a pace that carried him rapidly over the ground. The houses had thinned out, and there was no one to intercept him as he made for the woods that lay a little way ahead.

"Oh, if Teddy were here with the constable," exclaimed Fred, in an agony of apprehension, as he saw the prey escaping.

They all broke into a run, and, as they were younger and fleeter, they were soon at the fellow's heels. His whiskey sodden body could not keep up the pace, and as they neared him, he stopped running and turned about savagely.

"What are you fellows chasing me for?" he snarled, a dangerous light in his eyes.

"What are you running away for?" countered Fred.

"None of yer business," the fellow growled. "Now you git, or I'll split yer heads," he snapped as he drew an ugly looking blackjack from his pocket.

For an instant the boys hesitated. Then Fred had an inspiration.

"That's the man, Constable," he cried, looking over the fellow's shoulder. "Nab him."

The man turned in alarm to see who was behind him, and at the same instant Fred dived for his legs in a flying tackle that brought him to the ground. It was a splendid tackle, but the man was

big and heavy, and, as they struck the ground, his knee drove into Fred's chest and knocked the breath out of him.

In another second, the other boys could have launched themselves upon the tramp, and their united strength would have been able to hold him down until the arrival of the officer. This had been Fred's idea when he had made the tackle. But his mind worked so much more quickly and his action had been so swift, that they did not at once grasp the situation. And when they did, it was too late.

The tramp, desperate now, got on his feet and rushed at them with his blackjack. Before that deadly weapon they scattered. The next instant, he was running toward the shelter of the woods. Fred still lay gasping for breath, and, not knowing how badly he might have been hurt, his chums rushed to help him to his feet.

He was white and shaken, but had sustained no injury beside the temporary loss of breath. In a few minutes he was as good as ever. But by this time the tramp had made good his escape.

Presently Teddy came up with the constable and a careful search of the woods was made. But it was all to no purpose.

"Hard luck, old scout," consoled Lester, "but that flying tackle of yours was a dandy."

"That knee of his was better," mourned Fred. "It knocked me out good and proper."

"You threw an awful scare into him, anyway," laughed Bill. "I'll bet he's running yet."

"He can't always get away with it," prophesied Teddy. "That's twice. The next time will be the third time and out."

They got back to the school tired and vexed. But their thoughts were turned in another and a welcome direction by a tip given them by Slim Haley on their return.

"Big feed on," he whispered. "Ned Wayland's uncle sent him a ten-dollar gold piece for his birthday, and Ned has blown nearly all of it for a spread in the dormitory to-night."

"Best news I've heard since Hector was a pup," exulted Teddy.

"Ned's the real goods," said Fred. "I wish he had a birthday every month."

It was hard for the occupants of Dormitory Number Three to keep their minds on their lessons during the study period that followed supper, and it was with a whoop and a bang that they rushed into their quarters, when the gong released them from further work that night.

"On with the dance, let joy be unrefined," sang out Teddy, as he flung a pillow at Billy Burton.

"You mean unconfined," corrected Billy.

"I mean just what I said," replied Teddy. "I know the bunch of lowbrows I'm talking to."

"Where have you stacked the eats, Ned?" asked Tom Eldridge, who, though his ankle was still weak, found his appetite as good as ever.

"In here," replied Ned, throwing open his wardrobe door and displaying a host of things that made their mouths water.

"Wow, what a pile!" exclaimed Lester Lee.

"It won't be a pile long, when you cormorants get at it," said Tom.

"He counted them at break of day,
And when the sun set, where were they?"

he quoted.

"Officer, he's in again," said Melvin.

"It takes more than a sprained ankle to keep Tom off the poetry stuff," laughed Fred. "Nothing less than an axe will do the business."

"How did you get all this fodder up here?" asked Slim.

"I gave Jimmy, the laundryman, half a dollar for the use of his hand cart," explained Ned, "and he sent his boy up with it, with directions to wait down on the other side of the gymnasium. Then I slipped out between supper time and study period, and smuggled them in without any one's seeing me. The janitor nearly caught me, though. Big Sluper was just turning into the corridor as I got the last thing in and shut the wardrobe door."

"We want to look out for Beansey, though," he warned them. "He's monitor this week, and you know how strict he is."

"Beansey," as the boys called him, because he came from Boston, was a monitor and assistant instructor. He was very lank and solemn, and extremely precise in his manner of speech. In the matter of discipline, he was almost as severe as Dr. Rally himself, and the boys sometimes referred to him as "Hardtack's understudy."

"Who cares for Beansey?" said the irrepressible Teddy. "If he comes, we'll sic the cheese on him. It smells strong enough to down him. What kind is it, Ned? Brie, Roquefort, Limburger?"

"It is pretty strong," admitted Ned. "When I ordered it from the grocer, he turned to one of his clerks and said: 'Unchain Number Eight.'"

The laugh that followed was interrupted by a warning:

"Lay low. Here he comes now."

"Beansey" came in with measured step and walked slowly through the dormitory. His sharp eyes took in everything, but there was nothing to awaken distrust, even in his suspicious soul. All the boys were busily engaged in getting ready for bed, and frequent yawns seemed to indicate that they would be only too glad to get there.

As the door closed behind him, there was a smothered chuckle of exultation.

"He won't be round now for another hour," said Tom, "and what we can do in an hour will be plenty."

"You bet!" said Bill Garwood. "Just watch our smoke."

They slipped the bolt on the door to avoid a sudden surprise. Then they dragged the clothing and mattress off one of the beds, and made a table of the springs. On this they piled, indiscriminately, the things brought from the wardrobe, gloating over the evidence of Ned's generous provision for the "inner man."

"Say!" exclaimed Fred, "why didn't you clean out the whole store while you were about it?"

"Some feast," commented Melvin. "Cheese and pickles and sardines, and pies and chocolates, and ginger ale and soda water, and cake and jelly, and grapes and—"

"Shut up, Mel, and get busy, or you'll get left," said Slim, as he speared a bunch of sardines, an example which the rest needed no urging to follow.

The various good things disappeared like magic before the onslaught of ten hungry boys, and one would have thought, to see them eat, that they had just been rescued after days in an open boat without food or water. And not till the last crumb had disappeared did they lie back in all sorts of lazy attitudes, like so many young anacondas gorged to the limit.

"That old Roman, Lucullus, or whatever his name was, who used to give those feasts, didn't have anything on you, Ned," said Tom. "You've got him skinned to death."

"Who's all right, fellows?" asked Fred.

"Ned Wayland!" came the unanimous shout.

"And now," said Melvin, "it's up to Billy Burton to give us a song. Tune up, Billy."

"Great Scott!" protested Billy, "haven't you fellows any feelings at all? It's cruelty to animals to ask me to sing after such a feed as that."

But they persisted and Billy finally obliged with what the boys called a pathetic little ballad, entitled: "I Didn't Raise My Dog to be a Sausage."

It met with such approval that he gave as an encore: "Mother, Bring the Hammer, There's a Fly on Baby's Head." This "went great," as they say in vaudeville, but despite uproarious applause, the "Sweet Singer of the Wabash" declared that that was his limit for the night.

"A story from Slim!" cried Teddy, and, "A story! A story!" clamored the other boys.

"Ah, what's the use," said Slim, with a gloom that the twinkle in his eyes belied. "You wouldn't believe it, anyway."

"I would," said Melvin solemnly. "Cross my heart and hope to die if I wouldn't."

"Well," began Slim cautiously, "there was a fellow up in Maine once that was spending the winter with a pal of his, trapping in the woods. They were about twenty miles off from the nearest town, and every month or so one of them would have to go to town to lay in a stock of provisions.

"This was a good many years ago, and the wolves were very thick in this part of Maine up near the Canadian border. That winter had been colder than usual, and, as the ground was covered with snow, the wolves were unusually fierce and hungry.

"One day, this fellow I'm telling you about, hitched up his team to the sleigh and drove to town, as their stock was running pretty low. He was kept in town longer than he had expected, and it was late in the afternoon when he started back for his cabin in the woods.

"He had gone about half way, when he heard behind him the howl of a wolf. Then other wolves took it up, and, looking back, he saw some black specks that kept getting bigger and bigger. He whipped up his horses, and they did the best they could, because the wolves frightened them just as much as they did the driver. But they had traveled a good many miles that day, and the wolves kept getting nearer.

"The man had some flour and bacon and other things in the sleigh, and he kept throwing these out as he went along, hoping it would stop the wolves until he could reach his cabin. But he soon found that this was no go, and they'd surely get him, unless he tried something else.

"The only things left in the sleigh now were an empty hogshead, a cask of nails and a hatchet.

"By this time, he had reached a small lake that he had to cross. It was frozen solid, with ice several feet thick.

"By the time he had driven into the middle of this, the wolves were close behind and coming fast. He jumped out of the sleigh and cut the traces, so that the horses might have a chance to get away. Then he threw the nails and hatchet and empty hogshead out on the ice. He turned the hogshead upside down, crept in under and let it down over him. He hadn't any more than done this, before the wolves were all around him.

"But he was safe enough for the time. He had the little cask of nails to sit on, and he was sure that he could hold the hogshead down so that they couldn't overturn it.

"They came sniffing around and trying to stick their paws under, and suddenly that gave him an idea."

Here Slim looked slyly out of the corner of his eye at his companions. They were listening breathlessly, hanging on every word.

"He took the hatchet," Slim resumed, "and broke open the cask of nails. The next time a paw came under he drove a nail through it, fastening it to the ice. He did this to the next and the next, until there was a circle of paws under the hogshead. Then he chopped off the paws and the wolves limped away howling.

"Then he slid the hogshead along to a smooth place in the ice, and did the same thing all over again. There seemed to be no end of wolves, and he kept moving on from place to place till all his nails were used up.

"At last, he didn't hear any more noise, and, lifting up the edge of the hogshead, he saw that it was morning, and all the wolves were gone. He got out, and made his way on foot to the cabin, where he found that the horses had got home safe, and his friend was just setting out to look for him. They went back together and counted the paws, and there were just—"

He paused a moment.

"How many?" asked Billy Burton.

"Seven thousand nine hundred and ninety-six," said Slim impressively. Then, as the boys gasped, "seven thousand nine hundred and ninety-six," he repeated firmly.

They rose to smite him.

"Of all the yarn spinners this side of kingdom come!" burst out Ned Wayland.

"There you go," protested Slim plaintively, "you're always pickin' on me.

"It does seem quite a lot," he admitted judicially, "but if it wasn't true, why should they give

those exact figures, seven thousand nine hundred and ninety-six? It shows they were conscientious and careful. Now, a liar might have said eight thousand and let it go at that. He might have—”

Just then there came a knock at the door.

CHAPTER XX

A RATTLING GAME

The lights went out in a second.

“Great Scott!” whispered Melvin. “It’s Beansey. I didn’t think it was anywhere near time for him to be around again.”

Again came the knock, a little more impatient and imperative this time.

“Open the door,” came a voice that they had no difficulty in recognizing as that of “Beansey” Walton.

The boys huddled together, scarcely venturing to breathe.

“Who is there?” drawled out Melvin, in a voice that he tried to make as sleepy as possible.

“It’s me, Mr. Walton,” was the response.

Melvin had an inspiration.

“Not on your life!” he shouted. “You’re one of those lowbrows from Number Two trying to play a trick on us. Mr. Walton wouldn’t say: ‘It’s me.’ He’d have said, ‘It is I.’ Now, go ’way and let us sleep. We’re on to you, all right.”

There was a moment of awful silence and then they heard the steps of their visitor going softly and swiftly down the hall.

The boys were nearly bursting with laughter at Melvin’s audacity, and when they felt sure that it had really succeeded, they broke out in a roar.

“And it worked!” shrieked Slim, rolling over and over. “By jiminy, it really worked! Mel, you’re a genius. I take off my hat to you.”

“You covered yourself with glory that time, old man,” said Fred, as soon as he could speak for laughter. “Beansey will never get over it. Can’t you see his face, as he faded away down the hall? The fellows in the other dormitories will be green with envy when they hear about it.”

“It was nip and tuck,” grinned Melvin. “I just took a chance that Beansey would rather let us go than to own up that he’d made a slip in grammar. But even now, we’re not safe. He might think it over and come back. Let’s get a hustle on and remove these evidences of crime.”

In three minutes more, everything was set to rights, and the boys slipped in between their covers, theoretically to sleep, but actually to lie awake and chuckle for a long time, at the way they had “put one over” on the monitor.

The day for the football game with Lake Forest was rapidly drawing nearer. Under the steady practice and hard work through which Granger put his team, it was swiftly rounding into shape.

Although at first the other boys had the advantage over Fred of having played a long time together, and of knowing just what to expect from one another in any crisis of the game, his quick mind and keen ambition soon put him on a level with them in that respect, and he had developed into one of the mainstays of the team.

None had appreciated this more than Tom Eldridge, whose place Fred had taken at fullback, but there was not a trace of envy in the way he stood around the side lines, leaning on a stick, and applauding every brilliant play of his successor.

“You’re a star, Fred,” he said to him one day after an especially sparkling bit of strategy. “You can play rings around the Lake Forest fullback. And he’s no slouch, either.”

“You must put me on to his style,” said Fred; and together they worked out a scheme of offence and defence that they hoped would bring victory to Rally Hall.

There was a good deal of anxiety as the day of the game drew near. The last time the elevens had met, Lake Forest had won by two touchdowns, and it was reported that they were fully as fast this year.

“They’ve got a cracking good team and no mistake,” admitted Melvin. “They’re a bit heavier than we are in the line, but I think we have it on them in the back field. But it’ll be a fight for blood from the first kickoff, and I don’t look for a big score, whichever side wins.”

Professor Raymond, who himself had been a crack player on his own college eleven, worked hard to get the team into first-class shape. He had been much worried by the accident to Tom, but, as he watched the work of Fred, he soon reached the conclusion that the team had been strengthened rather than weakened.

So that it was with strong hopes of a successful outcome that Rally Hall went into the fight on the day of the great game.

It was a beautiful day, with just enough snap and coolness in the air to make it perfect for football. The game was to take place on the Rally Hall grounds, and Big Sluper, the janitor, with his assistants, had outdone themselves in getting the gridiron into fine condition.

Long before the time set for the game, a great crowd had gathered. Of course, every member of the school was there, ready to yell for his favorites, and, in addition, everybody in Green Haven who had a drop of sporting blood in his veins had journeyed out to see the gridiron battle.

Lake Forest had sent down a large crowd of rooters with the team, and while, of course, they were in the minority, they were chock full of enthusiasm, and prepared to make up in noise what they lacked in numbers.

"How do you feel, Fred?" asked Melvin, as they were getting into their togs.

"Like a fighting cock," replied Fred, doing an impromptu jig. "If I felt any better, I'd be afraid of myself."

"Great!" said Melvin. "I feel the same way myself. We'll sure bring home the bacon."

"Here they come!"

There was a roar of greeting, when the Lake Forest team trotted out and began passing and falling on the ball. But the roar became thunderous when the Rally Hall boys came into view.

"They're sure giving us a royal send off," commented Billy Burton, "and it won't do to disappoint them. We've simply *got* to win."

The Lake Forest captain won the choice of goals, and Rally Hall therefore had the kickoff. Amid a breathless silence, Fred measured the distance, gave a mighty swing and sent the ball sailing down toward the enemy's goal. Adams, their left end, made a good catch, but before he could run back with it, Billy Burton downed him in his tracks. The team lined up for the scrimmage on Lake Forest's forty-yard line, and the game was fairly on.

It soon became apparent that the teams were very evenly matched, and that neither would have a walkover. Back and forth they surged, neither able to make a definite gain, though most of the time it was in Lake Forest's territory. Each of the teams had the ball in turn, only to lose it before the fourth down could be made, so stubborn was the resistance.

Melvin, at centre, stood like a rock against the enemy's charges, while Billy, at quarter, reeled off the signals as steadily as a clock. Slim Haley, with his great bulk, was a tower of strength at right guard, and Madison and Ames did some savage tackling. Fred, at full, did the work of two ordinary players, and was ably helped by Thompson and Wayland, the two halfbacks. But neither side scored, and it began to look like a goose egg for each, for the first quarter.

It was two minutes from the end of the quarter, and the ball was within thirty yards of the Lake Forest goal. Ensley, the enemy's left halfback, had the ball, but in his eagerness to advance it, he fumbled it, and Billy Burton pounced upon it like a hawk. Like lightning, he passed it to Fred, who dropped back for a kick. The enemy's line bore down upon him, but too late. He lifted the ball into the air, and it soared like a bird above the bar between the posts. The Lake Forest rooters looked glum, and the home team's supporters went wild with joy.

Just then, the whistle blew, and the quarter ended, with the score three to none, in favor of Rally Hall.

"Some class to that kick, Fred!" cried Melvin, while the rest of the team gathered around and patted him on the shoulders. "I never saw a cleaner goal from field."

"All we've got to do now is to hold them down, and the game is ours," exulted Ned Wayland.

But "holding them down" was no easy task. The lead they had gained put their opponents on their mettle, and they fairly ran amuck in the second quarter. By successive rushes, they worked the ball down the field. At the ten-yard line, the Rally Hall boys braced, and the enemy lost the ball on downs. A fake forward pass, splendidly engineered by Billy and Fred, would have saved the day, but Ned, who received it, slipped, just as he turned to run. The ball dropped from his hands, and Burns, of the Lake Forests, grabbed it on the bound and went over the line for a touchdown.

"Five points for Lake Forest!" yelled one of their rooters.

"Six points, you mean," shouted his neighbor. "Wake up."

"Why, I thought a touchdown counted five," was the answer.

"It used to, but under the new rules it counts for six."

"So much the better! We need every point we can get," the other chuckled. "See, there's another one to the good," as Burns kicked the goal.

"Hurrah! That's the way to do it!"

"Now keep it up, Lake Forest!"

"Hurrah! hurrah!"

It was now the visitors' turn to cheer. They shook their rattles, blew their horns, danced up and down and yelled like madmen.

CHAPTER XXI

A DESPERATE STRUGGLE

"We've got our work cut out for us," said Melvin grimly, as, after their brief rest, the teams lined up for the third quarter.

"Don't worry, Mel, we've just begun to fight," was Fred's reassuring answer.

The fighting blood of both teams was up now, and they scrapped like wildcats for the slightest advantage. Twice during the period, Fortune seemed about to smile on the home team, but each time the smile faded into a frown, and the hearts of their supporters went down into their boots.

Once, on the Lake Forest thirty-yard line, the home boys tried out a trick play that Professor Raymond had taught them. The ball was passed to Fred, apparently for him to make a drop kick. But instead of doing this, he started to skirt the end. The opposing halfback thought that this was a fake to draw in the end. He hesitated to come in, therefore, and in the meantime Fred kept on running behind the scrimmage line, until the halfback did not dare to wait any longer, as it seemed to be a dead sure thing that Fred was going to circle the end. In the meantime, Melvin had had time to get down the field, and Fred turned about swiftly, just as the halfback reached out for him, and sent the ball like a shot to Melvin. It was a pretty play, and nine times out of ten

would have got by, but just as it had almost reached Melvin's outstretched hands, Barton, the opposing left tackle, touched it with the tips of his fingers, just enough to deflect it from its course. Ensley grabbed it, and it was Lake Forest's ball.

"What do you think of that for luck?" growled Slim disgustedly.

"They're sure getting all the breaks," agreed Billy.

"Never mind, fellows!" sang out Melvin. "Buck up. We'll beat them yet."

But the gloom of the Rally Hall rooters became still deeper a few minutes later, when a beautiful drop kick of Fred's that was going straight for the goal was blown by a puff of wind just enough to graze the post on the wrong side.

There was no more scoring in that period, and the quarter ended with Lake Forest still in the lead.

"Now, fellows," said Melvin, as they came out to do or die in the last quarter, "it's our last chance. Go at them and rip up their line. Go through them like a prairie fire. We won't try drop kicking. Even if we got a goal from the field, they'd still be ahead, and the time's too short to make two of them. The only thing that'll do us any good is a touchdown. We *must* win! Hammer the heart out of them! Tear them to pieces!"

And the boys responded nobly. They charged hard and played fast. They plunged into the lines of their opponents like so many wild men. Every member of the team played as though the victory depended on him alone. Down the field they went, in one desperate raging charge that carried all before it. Only once did they fail to make their distance, and even then they got the ball back promptly.

But time was on the enemy's side. They fought back savagely and contested every inch. Six, eight, ten minutes went by, while the ball was traveling down the field, and when the teams faced each other, pale, panting, covered with dust and sweat, on Lake Forest's ten-yard line, only three minutes of playing time remained.

All the spectators now were on their feet, yelling wildly, and the tumult was fearful.

"Brace, fellows, brace!" screamed Eggleston, the Lake Forest captain. "Throw 'em back! Don't give an inch!"

Melvin selected Fred for the final plunge.

"Go to it, old scout," he said. "This is the third down. For heaven's sake, make it."

Fred's eyes were blazing.

"Watch me," he said.

Billy made a perfect snap to Melvin, who passed the ball to Fred like a flash. Haley and Ames made a hole between left guard and tackle, and Fred, with lowered head, plunged in like a battering ram. The whole team piled in after him, and when at last he was downed, he had gained six yards of the coveted space.

Dizzy and bruised, he rose to his feet.

"We've got 'em going!" yelled Melvin. "One more does it!"

"Hold 'em, boys, hold 'em!" shouted Eggleston. "This is their last down."

"Rushton! Rushton! Rushton!" the stands were shouting.

"They're counting on you, you see," said Melvin.

Fred's muscles grew taut, and he braced for one final effort.

Once more the ball was passed, and, like a thunderbolt, he went into the line between centre and guard.

The whole Lake Forest team threw themselves upon him, but there was no stopping him. Ploughing, raging, tearing, he went through them and over the line for a touchdown!

"Look at that!"

"Great work! Hurrah!"

Rally Hall had won the game in the last minute of play!

The stands went crazy, and after the goal had been kicked, making the final score ten to seven, the crowd swept down over the field, hoisted Fred upon their shoulders and marched up and down yelling like Indians. It was all he could do to get away from them and to the shower baths and dressing rooms of the gymnasium.

Here he met with another ovation from the team itself. They were all in a state of the highest delight and excitement at winning the game that had seemed so surely lost, and they insisted on giving him the chief credit for the victory.

"Nonsense," he protested, "I didn't do a thing more than any one else. It takes eleven men to win a football game."

Professor Raymond was warm in his congratulations, and even Dr. Rally, who had seen the game from a portion of the stand reserved for the teaching staff, so far unbent as to stop for a moment and tell him that he had done "very well, very well indeed."

"Say," murmured Slim, after the doctor had passed on, "even Hardtack is human. He's got something beside ice water in his veins."

"Sure!" assented Billy, "I'll bet the old chap's tickled to death to see Rally Hall put one over on Lake Forest."

Eggleston, the captain of the Lake Forest team, who had a few minutes before train time, also was generous enough to come in and shake hands with his conquerors. He was a fine, manly fellow, and took his beating like a gentleman.

"You sure have a dandy fullback," he said to Melvin. "You've been pretty foxy in keeping him under cover. We hadn't any idea what we were going up against."

"Isn't he a pippin?" said Melvin enthusiastically. "You'd have copped the game all right, if it hadn't been for him."

"He's some line buckler," assented Eggleston. "I got in his way once, and he stood me on my head. You might as well try to stop an express train."

"It's hard to flag that kind of a train," laughed Melvin.

"Sure thing," grinned Eggleston. "Well, so long. I'll just have time to get to the station. We'll try to even things up next year."

As the boys were strolling back to the Hall, they passed Andy Shanks and Sid Wilton talking earnestly together. They were so absorbed that they did not see Fred and his companion.

"Wonder what they're hatching up now?" laughed Fred.

"Some mischief, I'll be bound," answered Granger. "It isn't the first time I've seen them putting their heads together lately, and somehow or other, I rather think it has to do with you."

"Nonsense!" said Fred lightly.

"Maybe it's nonsense and maybe it's not," replied Melvin soberly. "I know Andy pretty well, and I'm dead sure he'll never forget the show you made of him before the other fellows. At any rate keep your eyes wide open and look out for squalls."

"I'll take a chance," laughed Fred.

"Don't take too many," Melvin warned him. "Of course, I may be wrong, but I have a feeling that he's out to do you."

Melvin was a better prophet than he knew.

CHAPTER XXII

ANDY SHANKS GETS BUSY

There were great times on the campus that night. By a special decree of Dr. Rally, the regular study period was omitted, and after supper the boys had full liberty to do as they pleased until bedtime, provided they did not stray beyond the limits of the grounds.

They built a bonfire and paraded about it, carrying brooms to indicate the clean sweep they had made of the game. They cheered the team in general, and then cheered each separate member in particular. They cheered the final touchdown and the boy who had made it. They cheered Professor Raymond, and even raised a doubtful cheer for Dr. Rally. They were ready to cheer for anything or anybody that offered them the slightest excuse. They yelled for speeches from Granger, the captain, and from Fred, the hero of the day.

Tony Dirocco brought out his violin and played a series of rollicking tunes that set their feet to jigging and their hands to clapping. Billy was made to sing his choicest songs until he was hoarse. Then they all gathered on the broad steps, and lifted up their young voices in the old school songs that swelled out into the night. And it was a tired, but thoroughly happy crowd that scattered at last and went reluctantly to their rooms.

Altogether, it had been one of the greatest days and nights that Rally Hall had ever known. Fred had won his spurs and established his footing firmly in the school. He had been popular from the first in his own dormitory, but now he was known and liked by all the boys at the Hall.

Except, of course, by Andy Shanks, Sid Wilton, and a few of their stripe. Andy, if possible, hated him now worse than ever. It had been gall and wormwood for him when Fred had made the touchdown.

He, himself, had had an ambition to play on the team. He was big and heavy enough for a place in the line. But he was stupid in getting the signals and slow in running down under kicks. Besides, he was a trouble maker on the team, disobeying the captain and quarreling with the other members. They had tried him for a while, but he was of no use, and both Granger and Professor Raymond had ruled him out.

So that he was doubly angered at Fred for having made a brilliant success where he had scored a dismal failure. He had hoped to put Fred in bad repute with the boys by giving him a beating. But since that day on the campus when Fred had defied him and dared him to come on, he had lost all ambition in that direction.

But he was more determined than ever to crush him by hook or by crook, and he cudgeled his slow brain to find a way that would be safe for himself and disastrous to Fred.

As the weeks went by, however, and nothing occurred to him, he began almost to despair.

But the Evil One is said to "look after his own," and as the Christmas holidays drew nearer, Andy had an inspiration.

The winter weather set in unusually early, and the air was sharp and stinging. A score or more of the boys were down in the gymnasium, chinning the bar and swinging in the rings.

"If this kind of weather keeps up," said Melvin, "it won't be long before we have skating. There's ice forming on the lake now, down near the edges."

"Over the ice-bound lake we fly,
Swift as the wind and free,"

chanted Tom Eldridge, as he made a flying leap from one horizontal bar to the next.

"Swift' all right, but it won't be 'free,'" grumbled Billy Burton. "I won't feel 'free,' till I get those awful examinations off my mind. They'll be here now in less than a week, and I can't think of anything else."

"They'll be pretty tough, do you think?" asked Fred.

"Tough!" broke in Slim, "they'll be as tough as a pine knot. Professor Raymond is a shark on algebra. He'd rather solve a problem than eat. And because it's so easy for him, he thinks it ought to be easy for us, too. He puts down corks for us to do, and then looks at us in pained surprise if we think they're hard. If I get through this time, it'll be due to a special providence."

"I wish we knew what he was going to ask, beforehand," sighed Billy. "Couldn't we bone up on

them then? I'd get a hundred per cent. sure."

"Wouldn't it be bully, if we were mind readers, and knew just what questions he was going to put on that printed list?" laughed Fred.

"The first glimpse we'll get of that printed list will be when they're plumped down on the desk in front of us the day of the examination," said Ned Wayland. "They'll be kept snug under lock and key until then."

"Yes," chimed in Tom, "and the prof's so foxy that he doesn't even have them printed in town, for fear that some copy might get into some of the fellows' hands. He sends them away to some city to be printed, and they're sent back to him by registered mail."

"I'll bet that was the package I saw him putting away in his desk yesterday!" exclaimed Fred. "It was a long manila envelope, stuffed with something that crackled, and it had a lot of sealing wax on it. I noticed that he seemed to be very careful of it, and put it away under a lot of other papers before he locked his desk."

"Likely enough, those were the examination slips," said Billy.

"We'll see them soon enough, but then it'll be too late to do any good," remarked Melvin.

The conversation took another turn and the subject was forgotten for the time.

Andy, busy at one of the rings, had overheard the talk, although he had not joined in it because of the terms on which he was with Fred and his friends. He had pricked up his ears at Fred's laughing remark about mind reading, and from then on he had followed closely all that had been said about the papers. An idea had suddenly come into his mind, and a slow, evil smile spread over his face as he turned it over and over.

Two nights later, Fred woke from his sleep about midnight, conscious that something was bothering him. He found that it was the moon, which was just then at the full, and was shining in his face. He rose, and went to the window to draw down the shade.

The campus was flooded with light and Fred stood for a moment, enjoying the beauty of the scene.

Suddenly, something moving beneath him attracted his attention.

The buildings threw a heavy shadow, made all the deeper by contrast with the moonlight beyond. But Fred could just make out a moving figure coming down the steps swiftly, and crouching as though to avoid detection.

At first he thought it was the dog belonging to Big Sluper, the janitor. But as the figure turned around the corner of the building, he saw that it was a boy, rather slight in figure. His hat was drawn over his eyes and his coat over the lower part of his face, so that it was impossible to recognize him.

"That's queer," mused Fred. "I wonder who he was and what he was doing at this time of night."

But the floor was cold and his eyes were heavy with sleep, and he did not debate the problem long. He crept back into the warm bed, drew the covers over him, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BLOW FALLS

The next day, after school hours, Professor Raymond opened his desk to get a paper that he wanted. He was about to close it again, when something in the tumbled condition of its contents, attracted his attention. He reached sharply over to the lower right-hand corner, and felt for a package that he knew had been there the day before.

A startled look came into his face, and he felt again more carefully. Then he hastily took out everything that the desk contained.

He sat down in his chair with a jolt, and a grim expression came into his eyes. Then he made a painstaking examination of the lock.

It had not been broken, nor was there any other evidence that violence had been used.

He took out his penknife and scraped the lock. A tiny shaving of something soft was brought out by the blade, and close examination showed that it was wax.

He rang the bell for the janitor, and when Big Sluper came in, he motioned him to a chair.

"Sluper," he said abruptly, "my desk was robbed last night."

"What!" cried Sluper, starting up. "How could that be? Are you sure, sir?"

"Perfectly sure," replied the professor. "I only wish I were not. But I had a valuable package in here yesterday, and now it's gone."

"Why, nothing of that kind has ever happened before," said Sluper, much agitated. "Did the thief take anything else?"

"No," replied Professor Raymond. "And it was no outsider that took the package. There was a little money in the desk, and any ordinary thief would have taken that. Besides, the papers that were taken would have been of no value to any one outside the school. They were the examination slips for the next algebra test. Sluper, we've a thief right here in Rally Hall."

"I'd be sorry to think that, sir," said the dismayed janitor. "I can't think of any of the boys who might do such a thing."

"But some one of them did, just the same," replied the professor. "See here," and he showed the janitor the shaving of wax.

"That proves that it was all planned beforehand," he said. "An outside thief would have had a

skeleton key, or simply pried it open with a jimmy. But somebody has taken a wax impression of the lock and had a key made to fit.

"Keep this thing perfectly quiet for a time," the teacher cautioned. "Be on the watch for anything suspicious you may see or hear among the boys. And I want you to go down town to Kelly's, the locksmith. Get into a talk with him, and bring the conversation round to the subject of duplicate keys, and how they're made. If he's done anything of that kind lately, he may drop a hint of it. He'd have no reason to keep quiet, for he's an honest man and wouldn't do a crooked thing. If he's made such a key, the thief has given him some plausible reason for getting it made. Find out anything you can, and let me know at once. But, above all things, don't let the matter get out."

The janitor, badly confused, went away on his mission, while Professor Raymond sought out Dr. Rally to lay the matter before him. If it had been an ordinary case, he would have acted on his own discretion. But this was altogether too serious, involving as it did the good name of one of the scholars, and, to a certain extent, the reputation of the school itself.

He found the doctor in his office, and laid the matter before him, giving him all the details that he knew himself and telling of his instructions to the janitor.

Dr. Rally was white hot with amazement and indignation.

"The rascal shall suffer for it if we catch him!" he announced, with a grimness that would have delighted Aaron Rushton and confirmed him in his admiration for the doctor's sternness. "I'll dismiss him. I'll disgrace him. I'll make such an example of him that nothing of the kind will ever happen in this school again."

His eyes flashed under his shaggy brows, and the fist he brought down on the desk clenched till the knuckles showed white.

"But what could have been the motive?" he asked, as he grew more composed. "Of course, we can understand why some one might want to know the questions that were going to be asked. But why did they take the whole package? One slip would have done as well as fifty. Then, too, they might know that if the whole package were taken, you would simply call the examination off, as soon as you had missed them, and make out a new set of questions. Then they'd have had all their trouble and risk for nothing."

"It is curious," answered Raymond. "If the idea was simply to get advance information to help some boy through with the test, the only way to do it was to take one copy and leave the rest of the slips there, trusting me not to notice that the package had been tampered with.

"My theory is that he meant to do this, but perhaps was frightened away by some sound, and didn't have time to do it. In that case, he may take out one of the slips and try to put the package back to-night. The examination doesn't take place till day after to-morrow, and he may figure that I haven't missed them. As a matter of fact, it was only by the merest chance that I did miss them to-day."

"Well, let us hope that he will try it," said Doctor Rally. "We'll have Sluper stay in your office all night and nab him if he comes."

Sluper came back from his trip to town and reported that Kelly knew nothing of the matter. Nor had he heard of anything among the boys that might throw light on the mystery.

He kept a careful watch that night in Professor Raymond's office, but without result.

The next day there was something in the atmosphere of Rally Hall that made every one feel that a storm was brewing. The air was electric with signs of trouble. Nothing had been allowed to leak out, but any one could see that something was the matter, though without the slightest idea of what it was.

Doctor Rally was more snappy and gruff than they had ever seen him, and Professor Raymond went about his work in a brooding and absent-minded way, that, with him, was most unusual.

"What's come over Raymond to-day?" asked Fred. "He looks as though he were going to the electric chair."

"He certainly does have plenty of the gloom stuff," agreed Billy.

"Off his feed, perhaps," suggested Slim, to whom nothing seemed more tragic than a loss of appetite.

"Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days be dark and dreary,"

quoted Tom.

Fred laughed and made a pass at him, little thinking how soon the lines would apply to himself.

In his mail that afternoon, the professor received a letter. There was nothing about it to identify the writer. In fact, there was no writing, as both the address and the letter itself were printed in rough, sprawling letters. It read this way:

"Look in Fred Rushton's locker."

The professor was thunderstruck. For several minutes, he sat staring at the printed words without moving a muscle.

The first shock of amazement gave place to a sharp, gripping pain.

It could not be a coincidence. In the present condition of affairs, this mysterious note could refer only to one thing—the missing slips of the algebra test.

Fred Rushton! He, of all boys! Why, he would almost have been ready to stake his life on the lad's honesty. He was so frank, so square, so "white." The professor had grown to have the warmest kind of a liking for him. In study and in sport, he had stood in the first rank, and so far there had not been the slightest stain on his record.

No, it could not be possible that he had done this dastardly thing. He was almost tempted to tear the letter up.

And yet—and yet—

He *must* make sure.

He went to the office of Doctor Rally. From there, after a short conference, he went in search of Fred.

"Would you mind letting me take a look at your locker, Rushton?" he asked carelessly.

"Why, certainly not," answered Fred promptly, but wonderingly.

They went to the dormitory which at that hour was deserted.

"Here you are, Professor," he said, opening the locker.

There were some clothes lying there, neatly folded. The professor picked them up.

There, with the seals still unbroken, lay the missing package!

CHAPTER XXIV A PUZZLING CASE

Professor Raymond picked the package up and examined it carefully. There was no sign of tampering with the seals. It was in precisely the same condition as when he had received it.

"Well," he said, as he looked coldly and accusingly at Fred, "what have you got to say?"

Fred was looking at the package with wide open and horrified eyes. He groped for words in his bewilderment, but his tongue seemed unable to utter them. The silence grew painful.

"Why," he managed to stammer, at last, "I don't know what to say. I hadn't any idea that there was anything in the locker, except my clothes."

"How could it have got there unless you put it there?" pursued the professor.

"I don't know," replied Fred, his head still whirling, "unless some one else put it there by mistake, thinking it was his own locker. I certainly never saw the package before. That is," as he looked at it more closely, "I think I did see it once."

"Oh, you did, eh?" said Professor Raymond quickly. "And when was that?"

"Two or three days ago," answered Fred. "I was gathering up my books in your office, and I saw you put in your desk a package that looked just like this one."

The professor's heart grew sick within him, as every new item seemed to connect Fred more closely with the theft.

"You knew then that it was in my desk?" he went on. "Did you have any idea of what the package contained?"

"Not then," answered Fred. "But, a little while afterward I was talking with some of the fellows in the gymnasium, and they said it probably held the examination slips for the algebra test."

"Do you remember anything else you said at that time?" asked the cross-examiner.

"No-o," began Fred slowly. "Oh, yes, I remember saying what fun it would be if one were a mind reader and could know just what you were going to ask."

"But, Professor," he broke out, as the significance of all these questions dawned upon him, "you don't think for the minute, do you, that I stole this package from your desk?"

"I hardly know what to think," replied the professor sadly, "but I want you to come right over with me to Doctor Rally's office."

Utterly stunned and overwhelmed by the blow that had fallen upon him, Fred followed the professor. His limbs dragged, as though he were walking in a nightmare. They crossed the campus, and went straight to the room where Doctor Rally awaited them.

He motioned them to chairs, and sat there, stern and implacable as Fate, his eyes seeming to bore Fred through and through, while the professor told of the finding of the papers in Fred's locker, and the explanation, or rather the lack of explanation, that Fred had offered.

"Well, young man," the doctor said, and, although his eyes were flaming, his words were as cold as ice, "you seem to have put the rope around your own neck by your admissions. Have you anything else to say?"

"What can I say?" burst out Fred desperately. "If telling the truth has put the rope around my neck, I can't help it. I didn't take the papers, and don't know a single thing about them. Every single word I've said is true."

"But the papers were found in your locker," returned the inquisitor coldly, "and they couldn't have got there of their own accord. Some one put them there. If you didn't, who did?"

"I don't know," said Fred miserably.

"Have you any enemy in the school, who might have done it?" asked Professor Raymond.

"Not that I know of," answered Fred. "That is—" the thought of Andy flashed across his mind, but he was too generous to give it utterance. "No," he went on, "I don't think of anybody who could be mean enough to put the thing off on me."

"Is there anything that might have any connection with this matter that you haven't yet told us?" continued his questioner.

"Only one thing," replied Fred, to whom at that moment came the recollection of what he had seen in the moonlight. "I did see a fellow going away from the Hall the other night after twelve o'clock."

"Ah," came from both men, bending forward, and then they questioned him carefully about the size and general appearance of the midnight skulker.

"Why didn't you tell some of us about that at the time?" asked Doctor Rally severely.

"I suppose I ought to have done so," was the answer, "but I was cold and sleepy, and the next day I forgot all about it."

There was a long silence, while Doctor Rally pondered. He broke it at last by saying:

"I want to be entirely just to you, Rushton. I am not ready to condemn you on this evidence, though I will not deny that things look dark for you. I shall look into the matter further, and when I have reached a decision I will let you know. That is all for the present."

He nodded a dismissal, and Fred, picking up his hat, stumbled blindly from the room.

The two men who held his fate in their hands, stared at each other for a long minute without speaking.

"It looks bad," said Doctor Rally, at last, "and I am more sorry than I can tell, that he should be mixed up in such a wretched mess. His parents are the finest kind of people, and his uncle is a particular friend of mine."

"Do you think that he is guilty, then?" asked the professor.

"What else can I think?" said the doctor gloomily. "Everything seems to indicate it. The facts are like so many spokes of a wheel, all leading to the hub, and that hub is Rushton."

"Who knew that the examination papers were in your desk? Rushton. Who had been wishing he were a mind reader, so that he might know what questions you were going to ask? Rushton. Who saw, or says he saw a mysterious marauder coming from the building at midnight, and yet said nothing to any one about it? Rushton. And, above all, who actually had the missing package in his locker? Rushton."

"Of course, all this is circumstantial evidence. But sometimes that is the strongest kind. Naturally, he would take the greatest care not to have any witnesses to the theft. The proof seems strong and many a man has been hung on less."

"That is true," admitted the other thoughtfully, "but there are many things, too, to be said on the other side."

"In the first place, there is the boy's character up to this time. He ought to have the full advantage of that, and certainly he has seemed to be one of the most upright and straightforward boys in the entire school. I haven't had a black mark against him, and neither has any of the other teachers."

"Then, too, what motive did he have for taking them? He's very bright, especially in mathematics, for which he has a natural gift. He's always up in the nineties somewhere in his marks. He hadn't the slightest reason to fear the examinations."

"And I can't understand his manner, if he is guilty. When I first spoke to him, instead of being the least bit flustered, he wasn't at all slow in taking me straight to the locker. And when we caught sight of the papers, he was just as much dumfounded as I was myself, more so if anything, because I had had a hint that they were there."

"Why did he tell us about the talk in the gymnasium? He didn't need to say a word about it. Yet he blurted it out without any hesitation. Either the boy is innocent, or he's one of the finest actors I ever saw."

"What is your theory, then?" asked the doctor. "Do you think that somebody, in his haste to conceal the papers, mistook Rushton's locker for his own?"

"Hardly that," replied Professor Raymond. "The matter was too important for such carelessness. The papers were put there deliberately."

"By whom?"

"By the person who wrote this letter," and the professor took from his pocket the scrap of paper he had received that afternoon.

CHAPTER XXV TO THE RESCUE

The master of Rally Hall and Professor Raymond knitted their brows as they studied the scrawl. There was absolutely no clue, except that it bore the Green Haven postmark on the envelope, and had been mailed that morning.

"One of the boys sent it, without a doubt," went on the professor. "He knew we were familiar with his handwriting and so printed the letter."

"Might not the writer, whoever he is, have seen Rushton hide the package, and chosen this method to tell on him?" queried the doctor.

"I would go further than that," said the other slowly. "I believe that the writer of this note deliberately stole the package and put it in Rushton's locker, in order to bring disgrace on him."

"It's hard to think that there is such a despicable wretch as that in Rally Hall," said Doctor Rally, bringing his clenched fist down on his desk.

"So it is," replied the other, "but to believe that Fred Rushton stole them is harder yet."

"Who, in the whole body of students, do you believe is capable of such a thing?" asked the doctor.

"Only one," was the cautious answer, "but, in the total absence of proof, it wouldn't perhaps be fair to name him."

"I think I know whom you have in mind," rejoined the master. "Here," tearing two bits of paper from a sheet on his desk, "in order that our guess be independent, you write a name on this piece of paper and I will write on this. Then we will compare."

The professor did so. Then they laid the papers side by side.

Each bore the same name, "Shanks."

"He's a poor stick," mused the doctor, "but I'd hate to think that he'd sink as low as this. And, of course, so far, it is purely guess work. He may be as innocent as the driven snow. Has he ever

had any trouble with Rushton?"

"Not that I know of," was the answer, "although at one time I came upon them when they seemed to have been having words," and Professor Raymond narrated the affair on the campus.

"Well," Doctor Rally wound up the discussion by saying, "for the present, we suspend judgment. Keep a sharp eye on both Rushton and Shanks. I'll not rest until I have probed this thing to the bottom."

In the meantime Fred had gone to his room utterly crushed and despondent. The whole thing had come on him like a thunderbolt. In half an hour, from being one of the happiest boys in the school he had become the most miserable.

It seemed to him as though all his world had fallen into ruins. To be accused of theft, to be, perhaps, driven in disgrace from Rally Hall, to have all his relatives and friends know of the awful charge against him! For a time, he felt that he would go crazy.

Teddy, who was the only one in whom he could confide, was studying when Fred dragged himself in.

"Oh, Ted," he groaned, as he threw himself down on his bed.

"What's the matter, Fred?" exclaimed Teddy, leaping to his feet in alarm, as he saw the blank misery in his brother's eyes.

"They think I'm a thief," moaned Fred.

"Who thinks so? What do you mean?" and Teddy fairly shouted.

"Doctor Rally and Professor Raymond," was the answer. "They think I stole the examination papers."

"Stole! *Stole!*" roared Teddy. "Why, they're crazy! What makes them think anything like that?"

"They'd been taken from Professor Raymond's desk, and they found them in my locker."

He blurted out the whole story and Teddy was wild with grief and rage. But in the absence of the slightest clue, they were unable to do anything but await events while they ate their hearts out in silence.

A week went by without results. The winter had set in in earnest, and the lake was coated with ice, thick enough for skating.

Fred had been looking forward to hockey and skating, in both of which he took great delight. But now, he had little interest in them, and kept as much as possible to himself.

The boys, of course, saw that something had happened, and did all they could to cheer him up.

"You've simply got to come to-day, Fred," said Melvin, one bright December day, bursting into the room, his eyes dancing and his cheeks glowing with the frost. "It's just one peach of a day, and the ice is as smooth as glass."

"Nothing doing," he went on, as Fred started to protest. "Come along, fellows, and we'll rush him down to the lake. A bird that can skate and won't skate must be made to skate."

"I never heard of a bird skating," objected Fred, but yielded, as the whole laughing throng closed around him and hurried him out of doors.

Once on the ice, with the inspiring feeling of the skates beneath him, with the tingling air bringing the blood to his cheeks, and the glorious expanse of the frozen lake beckoning to him, the "blues" left him for a time, and he was his natural self again, all aglow with the mere delight of living.

He had gone around the lower end of the lake, and was making a wide sweep to return when he passed Andy Shanks and Sid Wilton. They shot a malicious look at him as they passed, and he saw them whisper to each other.

Once more he made the circuit of the lake, with long swinging strokes, his spirits steadily rising as the keen air nipped his face and put him in a glow from head to foot.

At the northern end of the lake was a bluff about twenty feet high. As there had been two or three heavy snowfalls already that winter, the top of the bluff held a mass of snow and ice that was many feet deep. The wind had hollowed out the lower part of the drifts so that the upper part overhung the lake for some distance from the shore.

A group of boys, including Andy Shanks and his toady, Sid Wilton, were playing "snap-the-whip." Shanks had put his "valet," as the boys called him, at the extreme end, and, although this was the most dangerous point and Wilton had little relish for it, he had not dared to object to anything that Andy wanted.

As Fred approached, the "whip" was "snapped"

Skating at full speed, the long line straightened out and Wilton was let go. He shot away from the others, trying to skirt the edge of the ice so as to avoid the shore and sweep out into the open. But the space was too narrow and he went into the bluff with a crash.

He scrambled up, jarred and bruised, and just as he did so, Fred saw the great overhanging mass of snow on the top of the bluff sway forward.

"Jump!" he yelled. "The snow! Quick! For your lives!"

The other boys looked up and skated from under. Sid made a desperate lunge forward, but too late. With a sullen roar the snow came down and buried him from sight.

There were exclamations of fright and horror. Andy skated away, panic-stricken. Most of the boys lost their heads. Two or three shouted for help.

Fred alone remained cool. With one motion, he unclamped his skates and threw them from him. The next instant he had plunged into the tons of snow and his arms were working like flails as he threw the masses aside.

"Quick, fellows!" he shouted. "Go at it, all of you! He'll smother if we don't get him out right away!"

Inspired by his example, the others pitched in, working like beavers. Other boys coming up aided in the work of cleaving a way to their imprisoned schoolmate.

Their frantic energy soon brought results.

"I touched him then, fellows!" cried Fred. "Hurry, hurry," he added, as he himself put forth

redoubled efforts.

A few minutes more and they had uncovered Sid's head and shoulders. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be unconscious.

"We're getting him," exulted Fred, forgetful of his hands that were torn and bleeding from tearing at the ice mixed with the snow.

He grabbed Sid under the arms.

"Now, fellows," he cried, "get hold of me and when I say pull—"

But just then there was a startled cry:

"Look out! There's more coming!"

Fred looked up and saw that another enormous mass was slipping slowly over the edge.

The other boys jumped back, but Fred remained. He tugged frantically, putting forth all his strength. One more desperate pull and he fell back on the ice, dragging Sid with him. At the same instant a tremendous mass of snow came down, one heavy block of ice just grazing him where he lay, panting and breathless.

"Fred, old boy, that was a grand thing for you to do!" cried Melvin, who with Teddy had just come up; and the sentiment was echoed by all the others who clustered admiringly around him.

"Oh, that was nothing," disclaimed Fred. "We've got to get a hustle on now and take him to the Hall."

They carried the unconscious Sid to his dormitory, and medical aid was called at once. The doctor worked over him vigorously, and was soon able to predict that in a day or two he would be all right again.

Fred took a hot bath and changed into other clothes, and had soon shaken off all the shock of the accident.

He had barely finished supper when a message was brought to him that Sid wanted to see him.

He went at once, without any thought of what awaited him.

CHAPTER XXVI

SID WILTON TELLS

Fred found Wilton propped up in bed, in a room off the main dormitory that was used in cases of sickness or accident. He looked very white and weak, and, although Fred had never liked the boy, he felt sincerely sorry that he had had such a shock.

He reached out his hand with a friendly smile, and Wilton grasped it eagerly.

"I can't thank you enough for pulling me out of the snowfall, Rushton," he said. "I don't remember much about it after it once buried me, but they tell me that I was all in when you got me. It was an awfully plucky thing for you to do, to hang on when that second mass was coming down, and I don't believe there's another fellow in school that would have taken the chance."

"Oh, yes there are, plenty of them," said Fred heartily. "I just happened to be the nearest one to you. I'm glad to hear that you will be all right again in a little while."

"All right in body, perhaps," said Sid with a faint smile, "but I won't be all right in mind till I tell you something you ought to know."

"What do you mean?" said Fred wonderingly.

Sid turned to the boy who was sitting in the room to wait upon him.

"Would you mind leaving me alone with Rushton for a few minutes, Henley?" he asked.

"Sure thing!" answered Henley, rising. "I'll come in again later on."

He left the room; and Sid turned to Fred.

"It's about the examination papers," he said, shamefacedly.

Fred's heart gave a leap as though it would jump out of his body.

"What do you mean?" he cried excitedly.

"I mean," and Sid's face went red with the shame of the confession, "that Andy Shanks and I put up a job on you. We took the papers and put them in your locker, so that Professor Raymond would think you stole them. There, it's out now."

The room seemed to be whirling about Fred. The blood pounded madly through his veins. With an effort he steadied himself.

"What?" he shouted. "You did *that*?"

"It was a dirty trick, I know," went on the younger boy, not venturing to meet the eyes of the youth he had wronged, "and I'd give anything I've got in the world if I hadn't done it. But Andy—"

"Wait," cried Fred, jumping up, "wait till I can get Professor Raymond over here, so that he can hear what you've got to say."

"No need of that," said a deep voice, and Professor Raymond advanced from the door towards the bed. "I was coming in to see how Wilton was getting along, and, as the door was ajar, I heard what he was saying."

He looked sadly and sternly at Sid, who cowered down on his pillow.

"You have done a terrible thing, Wilton," he said; "but you're weak and sick now, and what I have to say and do will be postponed to a later time. Now, go ahead and tell us all about it from beginning to end."

With trembling voice Sid went on:

"Andy was down in the gymnasium one day, and he heard Rushton say that he had seen you put a package in your desk, and one of the other fellows said that they were probably the examination slips. He was sore at Rushton because of something that had happened on the train

coming here, and because, later on, Rushton had faced him down on the campus. So he went off to another town, after I had got a wax impression from the lock of your desk, and had a key made to fit. Then I opened your desk one night and got the package. I watched my chance till there was no one in Number Three Dormitory, and hid the papers in Rushton's locker. Then Andy printed a letter to you, telling you where to look."

"We didn't know for sure what happened after that, but Rushton has been so down in the mouth, that we felt sure the plan worked. Andy expected him every day to be sent away from the school, and he didn't know why he was allowed to hang on. I felt awfully mean about it, because Rushton had never done anything to me. But Andy was my friend and it seemed that I had to do anything he asked me, no matter what."

"But after what Rushton did for me to-day, I simply had to tell him about it. He saved my life—" Here his voice faltered, and Sid hid his face in his hands.

A few more questions and they left him, shamed to the marrow by what he had done, but relieved at getting the thing off his conscience.

Outside the room, Professor Raymond turned to Fred.

"Rushton," he said, "this confession will be laid before Doctor Rally at once, and you can trust us to deal with Shanks. In the meantime, I want to shake hands with you, and tell you how delighted I am to have this thing cleared up. It must have been a fearful strain on you, but you have borne yourself nobly. And your brave act of to-day only confirms me in what I have felt all along, that you were a credit to Rally Hall."

Fred stammered some words of thanks and was off to break the glorious news to his brother.

Teddy went wild with delight.

"Glory, hallelujah!" he shouted, catching Fred in his arms and dancing around the room.

"Hey, what's the matter with you fellows?" called out Lester Lee, as they gyrated about. "You act as though you'd just got money from home."

"Better than that, eh, Ted?" beamed Fred, his face radiant with happiness.

"You bet it is," chuckled Teddy.

"Better than money, eh?" grunted Lester. "It must be pretty good then. But bear in mind that this is a respectable joint, and if you don't stop acting rough house, I'll call a cop and have you pinched."

But it was a long time before they could sober down. The reaction was so great that they laughed and chattered and whooped like a pair of lunatics.

Fred felt as though he were walking on air. The black cloud was lifted. His good name was given back to him. He stood untarnished before the world.

"What are you going to do to Andy?" asked Teddy.

"Do?" replied Fred. "I'm going to lick him to a frazzle."

But Doctor Rally got at Andy first.

That very night, he sent for him and confronted him with the confession. Andy, true to his nature, tried to lie out of it, but, under the searching questions of the head of the school, he broke down and confessed. Then Doctor Rally, in words that stung and blistered even Andy's thick hide, told him that he was a disgrace to the school, and commanded him to leave Rally Hall, bag and baggage, within twenty-four hours.

Andy begged and blubbered, but to no purpose. His offence was too dastardly and contemptible. The doctor, doubly enraged because he had so nearly condemned an innocent lad, justified the reputation for sternness that Uncle Aaron had given him.

Andy slunk away white and shaken, and the next morning the whole school was surprised to learn that he had gone for good.

"Humph!" exclaimed Fred, when he heard the news, "I wish he'd waited just one day more. Now, I suppose we've seen the last of him."

But Fred was mistaken. He had not yet seen the last of Andy Shanks.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BASEBALL TEAM

The rest of the winter passed rapidly, and Fred, with the load off his mind, pitched into all the winter sports, making up royally for all he had missed in the dark days when he was under suspicion.

He and Teddy had gone home for the Christmas holidays, taking with them Bill Garwood and Lester Lee, to whom they had become warmly attached. Mr. and Mrs. Rushton had outdone themselves to give them a good time, and Martha, her black face shining, had made the table fairly groan with the good things she heaped upon it for her "lamb" and their friends.

The days had slipped away like magic. The visitors had had the time of their lives, and both Bill and Lester had insisted that the boys should come to see them in the summer vacation. They had a partial promise to this effect, but the matter was left for final decision later on.

Uncle Aaron had not been in Oldtown at the time, for which the boys were profoundly thankful. They could easily do without him any time, but now, with the watch and papers still missing, they cared less than ever to see him.

Nothing had been heard of the stolen watch, nor had the papers turned up, and every day that passed made it less likely that they ever would.

"Those papers!" sighed Teddy. "And that watch! Oh, if I'd only nabbed that tramp when I saw

him!"

"Cheer up, old scout," said Bill. "While there's life, there's hope."

"Yes," agreed Fred, "but there isn't much nourishment in hope."

The Rushton boys returned to Rally Hall, refreshed and rested, ready for hard work as well as for fun and frolic. The going of Andy Shanks had removed a disturbing element from the school, and the second term was much more pleasant than the first had been.

And now, they were right on the verge of spring. The ice had disappeared, the athletic field was drying out and getting into shape, and the thoughts of all were turning toward baseball practice.

Slim Haley was in the midst of one of his stories, when Fred, with a bat in his hand, burst into the dormitory one Saturday morning.

"Come along, fellows," he called out. "Come out and get some practice. What do you mean by staying indoors a morning like this?"

"Just a minute, Fred," answered Bill Garwood, for the rest. "Slim has got to get this story out of his system."

"As I was saying when this low-brow came in to interrupt me," said Slim, looking severely at Fred, "this cat was a very smart cat. And a plucky one too, by ginger. There was no rat so big that he was afraid to tackle it. And the way he went for snakes was a caution."

"Snakes!" exclaimed Lester Lee incredulously.

"That's what I said, 'snakes,'" said Slim firmly. "There used to be a lot of rattlesnakes in that neighborhood, and the cat would go out hunting for one every morning.

"When he found a rattler, he would creep up to him, and the snake, seeing him, would throw itself into a coil to strike. The cat would hold up a paw and the snake would strike at it. But the cat was too quick and would dodge the stroke. Then, before the snake could coil up again, the cat would have it by the neck. He used to drag them home and stretch them out in the dooryard, so as to show his folks how smart he was."

"Some cat!" murmured Melvin.

"Yes," assented Slim, "and he was a good-hearted cat too. Some folks say that a cat thinks only of himself, but do you know what that cat did?"

"One day, the baby of the house had lost his rattle and was crying. The cat sat looking at him for a minute. Then he went out in the yard, bit the rattles off a dead snake and brought it in and laid it down near the baby. You see—"

But what Slim saw just at that moment was a pillow coming toward his head. He dodged with an agility born of long practice; and the laughing crowd went out with Fred into the bright April morning.

They scattered out on the diamond, on which Big Sluper and his assistants had been busy for some days past, and which was already in condition for a game. The turf was smooth and springy, the base paths had been rolled until they were perfectly level, and the foul lines stretched away toward left and right field.

"Won't we have some bully times here this spring?" exulted Fred.

"Bet your life we will!" assented Teddy, turning a handspring. "And I'm going to play shortstop and don't you forget it!"

"Don't be too sure of that," Fred cautioned him. "It'll be nip and tuck between you and Shorty Ward for the position. And Shorty's a pretty nifty player."

"I know he is," admitted Teddy. "But I'm going to make a fight for it."

"There's Ned Wayland and Professor Raymond over there now, sizing the fellows up," said Fred. "They're from Missouri and will have to be shown. Get out there and I'll knock you some hot grounders."

Ned Wayland was the captain of the team. He played pitcher and had made a splendid record in the box the year before. He had a good fast ball and a puzzling assortment of curves. Contrary to the usual run of pitchers, he was also a heavy batter, and could usually be relied on to "come across" when a hit was needed.

Most of last year's team had returned to the school, so that a fairly good nine was assured from the start. But there were also a lot of promising youngsters among the newcomers, who, in Professor Raymond's judgment, would "bear close watching."

He and Ned were standing a little to one side of the diamond, looking over the old material and the "new blood," as they cavorted like so many colts about the base lines. The boys knew that they were under inspection, and they played with snap and vim, each hoping that he would be chosen for some coveted position on the team.

"Pretty good stuff to choose from, don't you think, Professor?" remarked Ned.

"Unusually so, it seems to me," replied the other, as his keen eye followed a great pick-up and swift throw to first by Teddy. "Unless all signs fail, we ought to have a cracking good team this year."

"We need to have if we're going to beat out Mount Vernon," said Wayland. "I hear that they're going great guns in practice."

"We're all right in the outfield," mused the professor. "Duncan at right, Hawley in centre and Melton at left are all good fielders, and they're heavy hitters, too."

"We could make our infield stronger than it is, though. I don't think that—"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Wayland. "Look at that!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN EXCITING BATTLE

The "that" was a brilliant bit of fielding "pulled off" by Teddy.

Fred had varied the grounders by sending up a high fly into short centre field. It was away over Teddy's head, and it seemed impossible for him to reach it. But he had started for it at the crack of the bat, and, running like a deer, he just managed to get under it with his ungloved hand. He clung to it desperately, however, and, although he rolled over and over, he rose with the ball in his hand. It was a neat bit of fielding and Teddy got a round of hand clapping from those who had seen it.

"Wasn't that a peach?" asked Wayland enthusiastically.

"It certainly was!" agreed the professor warmly. "I didn't think he had a chance to reach it."

"Of course, one swallow doesn't make a summer," conceded Wayland, "and perhaps he couldn't do it often."

"I don't think it was a fluke," said the professor. "I saw him make a swift pick-up a few minutes ago that nine out of ten would have missed. And he threw down to first almost on a line. The ball didn't rise more than three inches on the way down."

"If he can keep up that kind of work, he'll give Ward all he can do to hold his job," declared Ned.

"Baseball ability seems to run in the family," said the professor. "Fred is a first-rate pitcher, and, with him in the box besides yourself, I think we'll be well fortified in that position. Besides, he's a good hitter, and on days when he isn't pitching, you can put him in to bat at times when a hit is needed."

"Yes," agreed Ned, "he'll be a great big element in our success this season. That outcurve of his is awfully hard to hit, and his drop ball is a pippin."

"As for the backstop," went on the professor, "Tom Eldridge hasn't any rival. Granger, at first base, is a star both in fielding and hitting. But we're not any too strong at second. Hendricks doesn't seem to take so much interest in his work as he did last season."

"How would it do to put Morley there, on trial?" suggested Ned. "Then we could shift Ward to third and try out Teddy Rushton at short."

For several days the sifting process went on, but when the line up was finally settled upon, Teddy held down short, while Fred was to alternate with Ned as pitcher.

The nine practiced faithfully, playing with neighboring village teams and making a good record. They had won three games and lost only one, and that by a close score, when the day came for the Mount Vernon game.

This was to be held on the enemy's grounds, and the boys had a train ride of twenty miles before they reached the station. A crowd of the Rally Hall boys went with them, to root and cheer for a victory over their most important baseball rivals.

The Green Haven station was crowded that morning with hilarious youths, and there was a buzzing as of a swarm of bees, while they waited for their train to come.

The only fly in the ointment was the cloudy condition of the sky. No rain had fallen, but it looked as though it might come down at any moment.

"It's up to us to get a good start early in the game," remarked Fred, "so that if the rain does come down after the fifth inning and we're in the lead, we'll win anyway."

"Right you are," replied Ned. "Last year we lost a game that way just as we thought we had it tucked away in our bat bag. The other fellows were one run ahead, and when we came to bat in our half of the sixth we got three men on bases in less than no time. Our heaviest batters were just coming up, and one of them knocked a homer, clearing the bases and putting us three runs in the lead. The fellows were dancing round and hugging each other, when just then the rain came down like fury and the game had to be called. Of course, our runs didn't count and the score stood as it was at the end of the fifth, with the other fellows ahead. I tell you it was a tough game to lose."

"Well, I swan,
It looks like ra-in,
Gidde-ap, Napoleon,
We'll get the hay in,"

drawled Tom, who had not only a store of good poetry always on tap but was also well provided with plenty that was not so good.

"Your poetry is rank, Tom," laughed Teddy, as he made a pass at him, "but the sentiment is all to the good. We'll get the hay in in the early part of the game."

Just then there was a whistle in the distance.

"Here she comes!" went up the cry and there was a general scurry toward the front of the platform. The train was a local, with only three cars, and it was a certainty that with the unusual crush that morning a lot of the passengers would have to stand.

The train drew up with a clang and a rattle, and there was a regular football rush the moment it came to a stop.

"Get aboard!" shouted one.

"If you can't get a board, get a plank," yelled another.

"Easy there," shouted the conductor, as the swirling mob almost swept him off his feet.

But he might as well have tried to check a cyclone. They swarmed around him, and in less than a minute the train was packed. There was a lot of jolly, good-natured scuffling to get the vacant seats.

"Wow! get off my toes!" yelled one of the unlucky ones.

"How can I help it?" laughed the one addressed. "I've got to stand somewhere, haven't I?"

The conductor wiped his perspiring brow.

"Well, of all the young limbs!" he ejaculated. But his frown quickly melted into a grin. He had boys of his own.

"They can only be kids once," he muttered, as he gave the engineer the signal to go ahead.

Inside the cars, all was cheerful hubbub and confusion.

"Give us a song, Billy!" shouted one.

The request was greeted by a roar of unanimous approval.

"What shall it be?" grinned Billy Burton, who seldom had to be coaxed.

There was a chorus of suggestions, for Billy's repertoire was very extensive. The majority seemed to favor: "We All Sit Round and Listen, When Hiram Drinks His Soup," although there was a strong minority for "When Father Carves the Duck." In order to satisfy them all, Billy sang both ditties to a thunder of applause.

He had to respond to numerous encores, and when at last he was too hoarse to sing any longer, the crowd fell back on "Ten Little Injuns" and "Forty-nine Bluebottles, a-Hanging on the Wall," together with other school favorites. There were any number of discords and any amount of flatting, but little things like that did not bother the young minstrels. They wanted noise and plenty of it. And no one in that train could deny that they got what they wanted.

"Now, Slim, it's up to you," said Ned Wayland. "It's a long time since we've had one of your truthful stories."

"A story from Slim," went up the chorus, as all that could crowded around.

But Slim assumed an air of profoundest gloom.

"Nothing doing," he said, shaking his head with a decision that the twinkle in his eyes belied.

"You fellows wouldn't believe me anyway.

"Look at the last one I told you," he went on, with an aggrieved air, "about the fellows that used to catch crabs with their toes as they sat on the end of the dock. Didn't you fellows as much as call me a-er-fabricator? Even when I explained that they had hardened their toes by soaking them in alum, so that they wouldn't feel the bites? Even when I offered to show you one of the crabs that they caught?"

He wagged his head sadly, as one who was deeply pained by the appalling amount of unbelief to be met with in the world.

"Perhaps we did you a great injustice, Slim," said Fred with a mock air of penitence.

"I'm willing to apologize and never do it again," chimed in Melvin.

"And I'll go still further and agree to believe your next story before you tell it," promised Tom.

"Now that sounds more like it," said Slim, throwing off his gloom. "I'm always ready to add to the slight store of knowledge that you lowbrows have in stock, but you must admit that it's rather discouraging to see that cold, hard look in your eyes when I'm doing my best to give you the exact facts."

"We'll admit anything, Ananias," chirped up Billy; "only go ahead with the story."

Slim shot a scathing glance at Billy, but seeing that all were waiting breathlessly, he gave an impressive cough and started in.

"There was a farmer down our way," he began, "who was strictly up to date. He wasn't satisfied to go along like the majority of old mossbacks, year in and year out, doing the same old thing in the same old way as it had been done for a hundred years. He tried all the new wrinkles, subscribed to the leading farm papers, and studied the market reports.

"He was looking over these one night when he saw that there was an unusual demand for beef tongues and that they were bringing the biggest price in the market that they had brought for a good many years past. This set him thinking.

"You know how fond cattle are of salt. Well, this farmer set aside about a dozen of his cows, to try an experiment with them. He kept them without salt during the day so that they got crazy for it. Then at night he tied them up in stalls, and hung a lump of rock salt by a string just a little out of their reach. They'd stick out their tongues to get at it but couldn't quite make it. At last, by straining hard they'd maybe touch it. Of course, as they stretched, the effort gradually made their tongues grow bigger, and--"

Here, Slim looked around rather dubiously to see if his hearers were preparing to spring upon him, but they seemed as if held in the spell of an awful fascination. So he took courage and went on:

"You know how it is with a blacksmith. The more he exercises his arm the bigger the muscles get. You know that our dear Dr. Rally has often impressed on our youthful minds that the more we use our brains the more brains we'll have to use. Well, that's just the way it was with these cows. Each day the farmer would put the salt a little further ahead of them, and they'd keep stretching more and more, until finally their tongues were three times the ordinary size. I tell you that farmer cleared up a pile of money when he sent his cattle to market that fall, and--"

"I should think," interrupted Fred, in a voice that he tried to keep steady, "that their tongues would get in the way and choke them."

"You would think so," admitted Slim, easily, "but as I said, this farmer was up to date and he had figured that out. He got a lot of rubber tubes and taught the cows to curl their tongues around in those and keep them out of the way. He--"

But just then, the overtaxed patience of his auditors gave way and they rushed in a body on Slim.

"I told you it would be that way," he complained, as he extricated himself from the laughing mob. "It's casting pearls before swine to try to tell you fellows the truth. You wouldn't want the truth, if I handed it to you on a gold platter."

The rest of the passengers in the train, other than the Rally Hall boys, looked on and listened with varied emotions. One or two had a sour expression and muttered more or less about "those pesky boys," but by far the greater number were smiling and showed a frank pleasure in the picture of bubbling, joyous youth that they presented. It came as a welcome interlude in the cares of life.

Fred had found a seat alongside a rather elderly man whose face radiated good nature. When

the train had gone ten miles or so, the stranger entered into conversation.

"A jolly crowd you have here," he said, beaming. "I take it you're going somewhere special. What's on for to-day?"

"We're going to play a game of ball with the Mount Vernon team, a little way up the line," Fred smiled in return.

"Baseball, eh?" said the other with an evident quickening of interest. "That's the king of sports with me. I used to play a lot in my time and I've never got over my liking for it. I'd rather see a game than eat."

"It's a dandy sport, all right," assented Fred, with enthusiasm. "There isn't anything in the world to equal it in my opinion, except perhaps football."

"I don't know much about football," admitted the other. "I see a game once in a while, but it always seems to me rather confusing. That's because I don't know the rules, I guess. But I know baseball from start to finish and from the time the umpire says 'Play ball!' until the last man's out in the ninth inning, I don't take my eyes off the diamond."

"I suppose you have some great memories of the old days," remarked Fred.

"You're just right," said the stranger with emphasis. "I guess I've seen almost all the great players who made the game at one time or another. There were the old Red Stockings of Cincinnati, the Mutuals of New York, the Haymakers of Troy, the Forest Cities of Rockford, that we boys used to read and talk about all the time. We had our special heroes, too, just as you have to-day."

"Of course," he went on, "the game has improved a great deal, like everything else. The pitching is better now. My, how those old timers used to bat the pitchers all over the lot! You don't see any scores of two hundred runs in a game these days."

"Two hundred runs!" exclaimed Fred. "You don't mean to say that any team ever made as many as that?"

"Not often, I'll admit," smiled the other. "Still, the Niagaras of Buffalo won a game once by 201 to 11."

"Whew!" ejaculated Tom, who had been sitting on the arm of the seat, listening to the talk. "There must have been some tired outfielders when that game was over."

"I'd have hated to be the scorer," laughed Fred.

"Of course that was unusual," said the other, "but big scores were a common thing. The first game between college teams was won by 66 to 32."

"There was a time," he continued, "when a man could make two or three home runs on a single hit. The diamonds were only vacant lots as a rule and the ball would get lost in the high grass. Then the runner, after reaching the plate, could start round the bases again and keep on running until the ball was found or until he was too tired out to run any longer. Of course that was in the very early days of the game. We used to put a man out then by throwing the ball at him and hitting him with it."

"I'd hate to have one of them catch me between the shoulders nowadays!" exclaimed Tom.

"The ball was soft then and didn't hurt much," explained the other. "Oh, the game is better now in every way. We didn't know anything about 'inside stuff' as you call it, 'the squeeze play,' 'the delayed steal' and all that."

"I'll bet you got just as much fun out of it though as we do now," said Fred.

"I suppose we did," assented the other. "You can trust boys to get fun out of anything. But in those days it was mainly sport. Now it's sport and skill combined."

The lads were to get off at the next station, and there was a general stir as they got their things together.

"I'm very glad I met you," said Fred, as he shook hands with his chance acquaintance. "I've learned a lot about the game that I didn't know before."

"It does me good to brush up against you young fellows," the man replied warmly, returning the handshake. "I hope you wax the other team this afternoon. I'll be rooting for you to win."

"We'll do our best," promised Fred. "Thanks for the good wishes. It would be jolly if you could stop off and see the game."

"I'd like nothing better, but business won't let me. Good-bye and good luck."

"Who's your friend that you were talking to so long?" asked Ned, as the crowd got off the train.

"I never saw him before," answered Fred. "But he's a good old scout, whoever he is. He sure is fond of baseball and he knows the game. I'd like to have him in the stands this afternoon. I'll bet he'd be a mascot for us."

The nine was in fine fettle, and felt that they would have no excuses to offer if they failed to win.

"But we're not going to lose!" exclaimed Granger. "I feel it in my bones!"

"It'll be the score and not your bones that'll tell the story," jibed Slim.

"Scots wha' hae with Wallace bled,
Scots wha' Bruce has often led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victory,"

chanted Tom Eldridge.

"And it's going to be victory," affirmed Teddy, "The other fellows will be the dead ones."

But the "other fellows" had views of their own on that subject, and from the time the first ball was pitched the Rally Hall boys knew that they had their work cut out for them.

Ned was in the box at the start, and Fred, who was ready to take his place if needed, played right field.

The pitchers on both sides were in good form, and for the first three innings neither side scored a run, although a two-base hit by Melvin and a daring steal had gotten him as far as third. Two

were out at the time, however, and Ward made the third out on a high fly to left.

The pitcher on the Mount Vernon team was a big, sandy-haired, freckle-faced youth who did not look at all like a student, and the boys noticed that when his nine was at the bat, he sat apart from the others, almost as though he were a stranger. Slim Haley had a suspicion, and strolled over to have a chat with him, while he was resting.

"Mount Vernon is a pretty good school," said Slim, trying to start a conversation.

"Yep," said the other shortly.

"Nice bunch of fellows," continued Slim affably.

"Good enough, I s'pose," said the other.

"What studies are you taking?" asked Slim, his suspicions deepening.

The other hesitated a moment.

"Voconometry and trigoculture," he got out, with an effort.

"What?" asked the puzzled Slim.

But just then the inning ended, and the sandy-haired pitcher had to go to the box.

Slim made his way back to his own crowd.

"Did you fellows ever hear of voconometry and trigoculture?" he asked.

"What are you giving us?" jeered Tom, with a grin.

"Stop stringing us, Slim," added Ned.

"Honest, I'm not fooling," protested Slim, "I asked that pitcher what studies he was taking, and he said 'voconometry and trigoculture.'"

The boys pondered a moment.

"I've got it!" shouted Fred, a light breaking in on him. "That fellow's a 'ringer.' He isn't a Mount Vernon student at all. There's something the matter with their regular pitcher, and they've picked up this fellow somewhere and rung him in on us as a regular school player. They've been afraid we might tumble to it and ask him questions, and so they told him what to say."

"But why did they tell him to say any nonsense like that?" asked Slim, perplexed.

"They didn't," explained Fred. "He's got mixed up. What they told him to say if any one asked him was that he was studying trigonometry and vocal culture.' He got stuck and called it 'voconometry and trigoculture.'"

There was a roar of laughter, but this was quickly followed by indignation.

"It's a dirty trick to play on us," growled Billy Burton.

"Sure it is," agreed Tom. "But it's too late to protest now. Let's go in and lick them anyway."

In the fifth inning, a scorching liner struck Ned on his pitching arm. He picked it up and got his man at first. But the blow had bruised his muscles badly, and he became wild. He could not control the sphere, and gave two bases on balls. These, with an error and a hit sandwiched in, yielded two runs before the side was out.

"You'll have to take my place, Fred," he said as they came in for their turn at bat. "My arm is numb and I can't get them over."

So Fred took up the pitching burden with a handicap of two runs against him to start with.

"All over but the shouting," yelled the Mount Vernon rooters.

But they changed their tune as Fred shot his curves and benders over the plate. He pitched his prettiest, and only once was in danger. Then, with a man on first and one out, a rattling double play started by Teddy pulled him out of the hole.

But the other fellow, too, was pitching magnificently.

CHAPTER XXIX

ANDY SHANKS "GETS HIS"

The Mount Vernon partisans were in an ecstasy of delight at the lead their favorites were holding and from present indications seemed likely to hold to the end. They yelled their loudest at every good play made by the home team, and did all they could to keep them up to fighting pitch.

The Rally Hall followers, although of course outnumbered, kept up their end and shouted until they were hoarse. Among these none were more vociferous than Lester Lee and Bill Garwood. They had not "made" the team, although they liked and understood the game. But they were "dyed-in-the-wool" rooters for their team, and especially for the Rushton boys upon whose shoulders rested so much of responsibility for the fate of the game.

As luck would have it, they were surrounded on every side by the Mount Vernon boys, many of whom were accompanied by pretty girls who had come to see the downfall of the invaders. Some of them knew very little of the game, but that did not dampen their enthusiasm, and they clapped their hands and waved their flags whenever that seemed the right thing to do.

One of them was seated right alongside of Lester, and he and Bill could not help hearing her conversation.

Her escort, in an interval between innings, was trying to tell her of a game he had recently seen.

"This fellow was a fast runner," he remarked, "and he stole second base while the pitcher wasn't looking."

"Stole it!" she exclaimed. "Why, I thought the bases were fastened down."

"They are," the young man laughed, "but he stole it just the same."

"I think that's just disgraceful," she said indignantly. "Did they arrest him?"

Her escort explained what he meant, and she looked relieved.

"A minute later, he tried it again," he went on, "but this time the ball was too quick for him, and the runner died at third."

"Oh, how dreadful! I suppose he had been running so hard that his heart gave out."

Bill nudged Lester, whose face was purple with his efforts to restrain himself.

Again her escort patiently explained that the incident at third had been in no sense a tragedy.

"That made two out," he went on, "but the next man at the bat lammed the horsehide-No," he interrupted himself hurriedly, as he saw another question trembling on her lips, "the horse wasn't in the hide. I mean, he hit the ball and made a home run. That rattled the pitcher and he went up in the air."

"Let's get out," whispered Bill to Lester. "I can see that she'll ask him whether it was a baseball game or an aviation meet."

"It's his own fault," replied Lester, as he followed his companion to another part of the stand where they could give free vent to their mirth. "You can't blame her for not understanding baseball slang. I'll bet after this that he'll stick to plain English."

"Look at those clouds coming up!" exclaimed Bill suddenly. "I'm afraid rain's coming before the game is over."

"And our fellows behind," groaned Lester.

"We ought to have 'got the hay in' before this," said Bill, as Tom's doggerel of the morning came back to him.

The Mount Vernon team was quick to see its advantage and began to play for time.

They were ahead, and as more than five innings had been played, it would be called a complete game and credited to them, if they could keep their opponents from scoring before the rain came down.

With this end in view, they began a series of movements designed to delay the game. The Rally Hall boys were at the bat and it was the beginning of the seventh inning. They were desperate in their desire to tie or go ahead of the enemy. Those two runs loomed bigger and bigger, as the game drew near its end.

"We've got to get a move on, fellows," admonished Fred, as his side came to bat.

"And in an awful hurry, too," agreed Melvin.

"The time's short even if the rain doesn't come," declared Ned. "But from the look of those clouds, we won't play a full game. Make this the 'lucky seventh' and crack out a couple of runs."

"How are we going to get anything, if that pitcher doesn't put it over?" asked Tom, as he stood at the plate, bat in hand. "Hi, there," he called to the boxman. "Put the ball over the plate and I'll kill it."

"Take your time," drawled the pitcher, as he bent over, pretending to tie his shoe lace. "I'll strike you out soon enough."

That shoe lace seemed very hard to tie, judging from the time he spent in doing it. At last, when he could not keep up the pretence any longer, he straightened up and took his position in the box. Then, something about the ball seemed to attract his attention. He looked at it earnestly and signaled to the captain who walked in slowly from centre field. He in turn beckoned to the first baseman, and the three joined in conversation at the pitcher's box.

By this time, the crowd had caught the idea, and a storm of protest broke out from the stands.

"Play ball!"

"Cut out the baby act!"

"Can't you win without the rain?"

"What a crowd of quitters!"

"Be sports and play the game!"

"They're showing a yellow streak!"

"The white feather, you mean!"

Most of the protests came from the Rally Hall followers, but a good many also of the home team's supporters were disgusted at these unsportsmanlike tactics.

Teddy rushed up to the umpire, his eyes blazing.

"Are you going to stand for this?" he asked. "What kind of a deal are we getting in this town, anyway?"

The umpire, who had tried to be strictly impartial, raised his hand soothingly.

"Go easy, son," he replied. "I was only waiting to make sure. I'll see that you get fair play."

"Cut out that waiting stuff," he called to the pitcher, "and play ball."

The pitcher took his position in the box, but the captain strolled toward centre field at a snail's pace.

"Hurry up there now," ordered the umpire. "I'll give you till I count ten to get out in the field. If you're not there by that time, I'll put you out of the game."

"I'm going, am I not?" retorted the captain, still creeping along.

"One," said the umpire. "Two. Three."

The captain's pace quickened.

"Four. Five. Six."

The captain broke into a trot.

"Seven. Eight. Nine."

But by this time the captain had reached his position. It was evident that the umpire meant what he said.

"Now, put them over," he ordered the pitcher, "and I'll send you to the bench, if I see any signs of holding back. Play ball."

There was no further delay, and the pitcher shot the ball over the plate. Tom, true to his promise, "killed" the ball, sending a scorching liner between second and third that netted him two bases. Fred sacrificed him to third by laying a beautiful bunt down on the first base line.

Morley hit the ball a resounding crack, but it went straight to the second baseman, who made a great stop and nipped Tom as he came rushing in to the plate. A long fly to centre field ended the inning, and gloom settled down on the boys from Rally Hall.

"Seven goose eggs in a row," groaned Billy Burton.

"Never mind," said Fred cheerily, as he picked up his glove. "We're getting on to his curves now. Did you see how we belted him in that inning? No pop-up flies, but good solid welts. The breaks in the luck were against us but they won't be always."

As though to back up his words of cheer, the sun at that instant broke through the clouds and the field was flooded with light.

"Hurrah!" yelled Teddy, throwing up his hat. "It isn't going to rain after all."

"Those were only wind clouds," exulted Melvin.

"It is the sun of Austerlitz," quoted Tom.

"It's a good omen anyway," declared Ned. "Buckle down to your work now, boys, and play like tigers."

And they did. Fred promptly struck the first man out on three pitched balls. The second popped up a high foul, which Tom gathered in after a long run. The third man up dribbled a slow one to the box and Fred quickly snapped the ball over to first for an out.

"Short and sweet, that inning," commented Slim Haley.

"Now it's our turn again," said Teddy. "Here's where we win."

"Up guards and at them," encouraged Tom.

But, try as they would, their bad luck persisted. Their slugging was hard and fierce, but the ball went straight into a fielder's hands, and again they went out on the diamond without a score to their credit.

In the enemy's eighth turn at bat, it looked as if they might get one or more runs over the plate. A lucky bound allowed one man to get to first, and he went to second when Morley dropped a high fly after a long run. There were men on first and second with none out, and their chance for a score was bright.

The next man up sent a whistling liner right over second. Teddy, who was playing close to the bag, jumped in the air and pulled down the ball. That, of course, put out the batter. As Teddy came down with the ball in his hand, he stepped on the base, thus putting out the man who had made a bee line for third, thinking the ball would go safe, and was now trying desperately to get back. That made two out. The fellow who had been on first had almost reached second, but turned and sprinted back with Teddy in hot pursuit. He clapped the ball on him just in time, and the side was out. Teddy had made a triple play unassisted.

It was a sparkling and most unusual feat, and the whole stand rose to Teddy as he came in, and cheered and cheered until he was forced to pull off his cap. The Mount Vernon rooters forgot their partisanship and shouted as loudly as the rest. As for his schoolmates, they mauled and hugged him until he fled for refuge to the bench.

"Some fireworks!" yelled one.

"I can die happy, now!" exclaimed another. "I've seen a triple play pulled off."

"You'll never see another," prophesied his neighbor.

The Rally Hall boys were yelling their loudest to encourage their favorites when they came to bat for the last time.

A groan went up when Duncan lifted a high fly to centre field, which was caught easily. But Melvin sent a sizzling liner to left, just inside third, and made two bases on it. And the yells were deafening, when Ward advanced him to third, by a fierce grounder to short, that was too hot to hold.

"Rushton! Rushton!" they shouted, as Fred came to bat after Tom had gone out on a foul. "Hit it on the trademark!" "Give it a ride!" "Win your own game!"

The first ball was a deceptive drop, but Fred did not "bite." The second was a low fast one, about knee high, just the kind he was accustomed to "kill."

With a mighty swing he caught it fair "on the seam." It rose like a shot and soared into centre field, far over the fielder's head.

Melvin and Ward came in, tying the score, and Fred, who had gone around the bases like a deer, made it a home run by just beating the ball on a headlong slide to the plate.

Rally Hall promptly went raving mad.

There was still one more chance for the Mount Vernon lads, and their best hitters were coming on. But Fred was on his mettle now, and put every ounce of his strength and cunning into his pitching. They simply could not hit his slants. The first went out on strikes, Ward made a dazzling catch of a hot liner, and, when Melvin, after a long run, caught a high foul close to the left field bleachers, the game was over, with the score three to two in favor of Rally Hall.

It was a hilarious crowd that met the team at Green Haven when the train pulled in. The whole nine had played well, and all came in for their share of the ovation, though the Rushton brothers were regarded as having carried off the honors of the game.

"Do you know what pleased me most of all?" asked Fred of Melvin.

"That home run you made, I suppose," answered the other.

"No," was the answer. "It was that we downed the 'ringer.' They couldn't get away with their low-down trick. We put one over on 'voconometry and trigoculture.'"

But Fred had a chance to "put one over" a few days later that pleased him still more.

A group of the boys had been down to the post office and were walking slowly on the road back to Rally Hall. It was a beautiful afternoon, and they took their time, in no hurry to get home.

Suddenly there was a loud "honk," "honk" behind them, and, looking back, they saw an automobile coming swiftly toward them.

They scattered to let it pass, but, as it came up it slackened speed and began zigzagging from one side of the road to the other, making the boys jump to keep out of the way.

"Can't you look out where you're going?" asked Slim angrily. "What kind of a driver are you, anyway?"

"By Jove, fellows!" exclaimed Bill Garwood, as he looked more closely at the face behind the goggles, "it's Andy Shanks!"

It was indeed that disgraced youth, who was making a trip through that part of the state, and whom some impulse had prompted to go by way of Green Haven.

"Sure it is," he answered sourly. "Get out of the way, you boobs. Jump, you skate," he said to Fred, as he darted the machine at him.

Fred leaped nimbly out of the way, and Andy, with a derisive jeer, sped on, looking behind him and laughing insolently.

Fred was white with indignation.

"The coward!" he exclaimed. "If I could get on that running board, I'd drag him from his seat!"

"He sure ought to have a licking," agreed Bill. "But we'd have to be some good little sprinters to catch him now."

"Look, fellows!" cried Billy Burton excitedly, "he's stopped. There must be something the matter with his engine."

They all started to run.

Andy had dismounted quickly and was working desperately to get his stalled engine going.

He got it sparking at last, but before he could jump into the seat the boys were on him.

"No, you don't!" cried Fred, getting between him and the machine. "I've got an account to settle with you."

"Get out of my way," snarled Andy, trying to push past.

Fred's answer was a blow that caught the bully under the chin and sent his teeth together with a snap.

"I'll fix you for that," Andy roared.

"Come along," was Fred's challenge, slipping off his coat, "but first take off your goggles. I'm going to lick you good and plenty, but I don't want to blind you."

Then followed a fight that Slim afterward described to a delighted group at the dormitory as a "peach of a scrap."

Even a rat will fight if it is cornered, and Andy, having no way out, did his best. All the hate and venom he felt for Fred came to the surface, and he fought ferociously.

But he was no match, despite his size and strength, for the boy he had wronged. Fred was in splendid shape, thanks to his athletic training, and, besides, he was as quick as a cat. He easily evaded the bull-like rushes of Andy, and got in one clean-cut blow after another that shook the bully from head to foot. The thought of all he had suffered through Shank's trickery gave an additional sting to the blows he showered on him, and it was not long before Andy lay on the ground, sullen and vanquished.

"Have you had enough?" asked Fred.

"Enough," mumbled Andy, through his bruised lips.

They left him there, humbled but furious, and went on their way to the Hall.

"Fred, you went round him like a cooper round a barrel!" said Bill Garwood admiringly.

"He had it coming to him," answered Fred. "If ever a fellow needed it, he did."

He stepped aside to avoid a car coming toward him in which two rough-looking men were seated.

"Look, Fred!" cried Teddy, clutching his brother's arm as the car went by.

"What? Where?" asked Fred wonderingly.

"The auto!" gasped Teddy. "The man with a scar! The fellows that stole Uncle Aaron's watch!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE CAPTURE-CONCLUSION

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Fred, as excited as Teddy.

"I'm sure of it! And now we're going to miss them again," groaned his brother.

At that moment a boy on a motorcycle came round a curve in the road.

"It's Lester Lee on his motorbike!" cried Fred, as an idea came to him. "Quick!" he yelled, waving his hand to Lester.

The latter put on speed and was soon beside them.

"What's the matter?" he asked, as he jumped from the saddle.

"Lend us your machine, Lester, like a good fellow," cried Fred. "I'll tell you all about it later. Quick, Teddy, jump on with me!"

In a second the Rushton boys were off, while the boys without the slightest idea of what was happening, looked after them with wonder in their eyes.

Fred had often ridden on Lester's motorcycle and knew how to handle it as well as the owner himself. He let out all speed and soon was traveling like the wind, with Teddy hanging on for dear life.

The automobile had a good start, and it was several minutes before they came in sight of it. Then they slackened their pace, keeping a couple of hundred yards in the rear.

"How on earth did those fellows ever get an auto?" asked Teddy wonderingly.

"Stole it, probably," answered Fred. "But that isn't what is bothering me. What I want to know is, how we're going to get them nabbed. We don't know where they're going to stop, and when

they do land somewhere they'll probably have others of their gang around."

It was a perplexing problem, and they taxed their brains to think of an answer. But at present, the chief thing was to keep them in sight, and, as the men had no idea that they were being followed, this was easy enough.

Everything went well until, just after they turned a bend in the road, they ran into a bed of sand. Up to now the road had been hard and smooth, and they had been going at top speed. Fred saw the sandy stretch and tried to put on the brakes, but the distance was too short.

The sudden check in speed as the motorcycle ploughed into the sand sent both boys flying over the handle bars, while the machine staggered and at last fell down beside the trunk of a tree.

For a moment they lay still, the breath fairly knocked out of them by the shock. Then they slowly scrambled to their feet, a little shakily, and looked at each other in disgust.

"Did you ever see such luck as that?" asked Teddy. "Now our goose is cooked. We'll lose sight of them and that will be the end of it."

"Not by a jugful, it won't," declared Fred, stoutly. "Jump up, and we'll catch up to them in a jiffy."

He righted the machine, and after leading it through the streak of sandy road, they mounted and started off. But they had not gone twenty rods before they began to slow up, and Fred discovered to his dismay that they were riding on a flat tire.

"We must have had a puncture when the machine fell down," he said as they jumped off. "It bumped up against the tree, and some projection jammed into the tire. Here it is now," as he disclosed a tiny opening.

They opened Lester's tool box and set themselves vigorously to work to repair the puncture. They worked feverishly, and in a minute or two got out the inner tube and prepared to patch the damaged spot.

"I can do this just as well alone," said Fred. "You take a squint at the tank and see if we have enough gas to take us on. Lester may have been nearly out when we grabbed the machine from him."

A groan from Teddy, a moment later, told him that he had hit on an unpleasant truth.

"Almost empty!" exclaimed Teddy. "There isn't enough to take us another mile. There's a hoodoo in it. We no sooner see those fellows than we lose them again."

There was consternation in the boys' eyes as they gazed blankly at each other.

Fred rose to his feet and looked about him. Half a mile ahead, he saw a church spire rising above the trees.

"There must be a town over there," he said. "I'll tell you what we'll do. You skip ahead and find some place where they sell gasoline. Get a couple of quarts and hustle back. This job will take me ten or fifteen minutes more, and as soon as I get it done, I'll come on to meet you. If the gas gives out before I get there, I'll trundle the machine along until we meet. Get a move on now, for every minute counts."

Teddy started off on a dog trot, and Fred once more bent over his work. Despite his air of confidence, he had very little hope of picking up the trail, once the vagrants had gotten out of sight. Still, they could make inquiries and might have luck. At the very worst they could do no more than fail, and they would have the consolation of knowing that they had not quit.

He worked desperately, and soon the inner tube was as good as ever. He tumbled the tools back into the box, mounted the machine, and as the road was good, once past the sandy stretch, he let it out, fearing, however, that at any moment it might go dry.

He had reached the outskirts of the village, when he saw Teddy hurrying toward him with a can in his hand. He greeted his brother with a shout. And it seemed to the boys that they had never heard sweeter music than the splashing of the gasoline as it went down into the tank.

"I've had one bit of luck, anyway!" exclaimed Teddy, once more in his normal high spirits. "I asked if they had seen the auto go through, and they showed me where it had turned off to the right. We'll get them yet."

"That's the way to talk!" responded his brother. "We'll follow the old advice and be like the postage stamp. We'll stick until we get there."

They took the road to the right that had been pointed out, and let the motorcycle out at full speed. They soon made up for lost time, and their hearts exulted when at last they saw before them the automobile they were looking for. They slowed down at once, keeping an easy distance in the rear.

On they went through several villages, until at last the automobile stopped at a low roadhouse on the outskirts of the town of Saxby. The men got out and went into the house.

Still without any definite plan, the boys brought the motorcycle to a stop at the same place.

There was a barroom in front, and a sign announced that soda and soft drinks were for sale.

They pulled their caps down over their faces, went in and ordered sarsaparilla. They took their seats at a small table in the rear and sipped it slowly, glancing carelessly from time to time at the two men who were sitting nearby with a whisky bottle between them.

And as they looked, the suspicion that these were the tramps they had seen in Sam Perkins' barn became a certainty. There was the tall man with the scar on his temple showing clearly; and the short, stout man with him was without doubt his former companion. They were dressed more decently than before, evidently as the result of their stealings, but there had been no improvement in their coarse and evil faces.

They seemed in no hurry, and it was a pretty safe guess that they would tarry where they were until they had emptied the bottle.

"You stay here," whispered Fred to Teddy, "and keep your eye on them. I'll take the bike and skip down to the main part of the town and get a constable."

"I'll be back in a minute, Ted," he said aloud, as he sauntered from the room.

He climbed into the saddle and in three minutes was in the heart of the town. A hurried inquiry

led him to the office of the constable. He found him at his ease, swapping stories with three or four of his cronies.

But the indifference with which he greeted Fred's entrance gave place to eager interest as Fred told him of the theft at Oldtown and of the reward that had been offered.

"Sure, I'll go with you, Son," he said, rising to his feet. "And two or three of you fellows had better come along," he added to his friends. "Those fellows may put up a fight when they're tackled."

A moment more and an automobile carrying four men was speeding to the roadhouse, while Fred rode alongside.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that the other automobile was still standing in front. The birds had not yet flown.

Two of the constable's party stayed outside to intercept the men if they should attempt to escape, while he himself, with another, entered the room. He went straight up to the pair, who looked at him angrily.

"I want you," he said, at the same time exhibiting his badge.

As though moved by the same spring, the men jumped to their feet and rushed for the door. The constable collared the short one, but the tall man had nearly reached the door when Fred tripped him, and he went down with a crash. Before he could rise the rest were on him and in a moment both men were handcuffed.

They bundled them into the automobile and took them to the constable's office. Fred and Teddy accompanied them on the motorcycle, their hearts beating high with exultation.

A careful search of their pockets brought to light several pawntickets. The boys scanned them eagerly.

"Here it is!" cried Fred, as he noted the date on one of them. "It's for a watch, and it's dated three days after the robbery at Oldtown. And here's the number of the watch on it."

He drew from his vest pocket a slip of paper and compared the number.

"Sure as guns!" he exclaimed delightedly. "Here's the number, 61,284. The same one that's on the pawn ticket."

"Won't Uncle Aaron be tickled to death?" chortled Teddy. "Glory, hallelujah!"

"What are these, I wonder," asked the constable as he looked over a package of papers.

"Why don't you say we stole those, too?" snarled the tall prisoner.

"Well, didn't you?" asked the constable sarcastically.

"No, we didn't," was the sullen reply. "We found them in an open road near a bridge—"

"A bridge!" interrupted Teddy, pricking up his ears. "Let's see them."

They spread out the papers. They were greasy and dirty from long carrying, but the boys' hearts leaped as they saw on them the name of Aaron Rushton.

They looked at each other. Then they shouted.

"Hang out the flags!" cried Teddy. "Fire the cannon! Ring the bells! Say, Fred, is this our lucky day, or isn't it?"

"You bet your life!" gloated Fred. "What is the nearest way to the telegraph station?" he asked, turning to the constable.

The officer told him.

"Can't get the news home quick enough, eh?" he laughed good-naturedly. "Well, I don't wonder. And when you see your folks, tell 'em I said they're lucky to have such a pair of kids."

It was rather an excited, jumbled message that reached the Rushton home that night, but it made Mr. Rushton's eyes kindle with pride, while his wife's were wet with happy tears. Old Martha strutted about, glorying in the vindication of her "lambs," and Uncle Aaron so far forgot himself as to clap his brother on the shoulder and say:

"Fine boys, Mansfield, fine boys!"

Then, as though he had said too much, he added:

"I knew that Rally Hall would be the making of them."

After the telegram had been sent, the Rushton boys started back for Rally Hall. They had had the most strenuous kind of a day, but all their weariness was forgotten in the glorious ending that had been brought about.

"It's a long lane that has no turning," remarked Fred, as they rode along through the darkness. "Those fellows got away from us twice, but they couldn't do it again."

"It was the third time and out for them, all right," jubilated Teddy. "Say, Fred, can't you see the folks at home when they get that telegram? Perhaps they're reading it this blessed minute."

"I guess we've squared ourselves with Uncle Aaron," chuckled his brother.

"You mean I've squared myself," corrected Teddy. "He never had very much against you, except that you always stood up for me when I got into scrapes."

"He'll put it all up to Dr. Rally and the splendid discipline of the school," said Fred.

"I suppose so," assented Teddy. "But we don't care where the credit goes, as long as he gets back his watch and papers."

"By the way, Fred," he continued, as he became conscious of a feeling of emptiness. "Do you realize that we haven't had any supper?"

"Haven't thought a thing about it," laughed Fred. "The fact is; I've been too excited to think of eating. I'll bet that's the first time I ever forgot anything like that. But now that you speak of it, I certainly could punish a good supper."

"It'll be way past supper time when we get to the Hall," mused Teddy.

"Right you are," was the answer. "But we won't be long in getting to sleep, after a day like this, and when we wake up it will be time for breakfast."

But fate had willed that they should not go to bed hungry, for when at last they reached their dormitory, they found their mates indulging in a spread that Slim had furnished to celebrate the downing of Andy Shanks.

They greeted Fred and Teddy with a frenzy of enthusiasm and pushed them down in seats before the eatables. A volley of questions was hurled at them, but Mel assumed command.

"Not a word," he said, "until we've filled these pilgrims up to the brim."

"But think how long that'll take," joked Billy. "I've seen these fellows eat before."

"Mel," said Fred, as he pitched in like a hungry wolf, ably seconded by Teddy, "I always thought you were a good friend of mine, but now I know it. You've saved my life."

They ate till they could eat no more. Then, to the eager crowd around them, the Rushton boys went over all the events of that memorable day. Their chums listened breathlessly as they told of the exciting pursuit of the tramps and their rounding up in the road house. And when they had finished, there was a tumult of applause and congratulation.

"Great stuff, old scouts!" was the way Melvin summed up the general feeling. "You've both done yourselves proud this day."

"Of course I'm glad you got back those things for your uncle," said Slim, "but the thing that tickles me to death is the way you polished off Andy Shanks. I haven't enjoyed anything so much since I've been at Rally Hall. Whatever happens now, I feel that I haven't lived in vain."

"I guess we all feel the same way," acquiesced Billy. "Andy has had that coming to him for a long time. Mel trimmed him once, but that was a year ago, and he's been aching for another licking ever since."

"Well, he got it all right," declared Lester, "and it was a most artistic job."

"What gets me is how he ever had the nerve to come back here, after he'd been bundled out in disgrace," wondered Tom.

"Oh, I don't know," grinned Slim. "You know they say every criminal is drawn back to the scene of his crimes."

"If he has that feeling again, I don't think he will yield to it," laughed Lester. "I guess we've seen the last of Andy Shanks."

It was late when at last they got to bed and the Rushton boys had never slept more soundly than they did that night.

And when the boys went home a little later they had the warmest kind of greeting. Nothing was too good for them. Teddy saw his advantage, and the youth struck while the iron was hot.

"You *are* going to let us go with Bill Garwood to his ranch, aren't you, Mother?" he asked coaxingly.

"I guess I'll have to," smiled his mother, while Mr. Rushton nodded assent.

"Sure!" broke in Uncle Aaron, "and what's more I'll buy the railroad tickets."

And at this the boys almost fainted.

"Say," asked Teddy, when they were alone, "won't we have a bully time with Bill on the ranch?"

"We most certainly will," agreed Fred with emphasis.

And what glorious times they had in that wild western country, with its wide sweep of plain and forest, its danger and its mystery, its bucking bronchos and reckless cowboys will be told in our next volume, to be entitled: "The Rushton Boys in the Saddle; or, The Ghost of the Plains."

"And the cowboys," exulted Teddy. "Whoopie!"

"Riding the mustangs and watching the round-ups," added Fred.

"And greasers and rustlers and Indians and maybe some shooting," said Teddy, hopefully.

"S-sh," warned his brother, "if mother hears any talk of shooting, it's all off."

"I don't mean men," explained Teddy, "but bears or panthers or buffaloes—"

"Nothing doing with buffaloes," laughed Fred. "They've all been wiped out long ago."

"Well, anyway," Teddy wound up, his eyes shining, "we're going to have the most exciting time of our lives."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RUSHTON BOYS AT RALLY HALL; OR,
GREAT DAYS IN SCHOOL AND OUT ***

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