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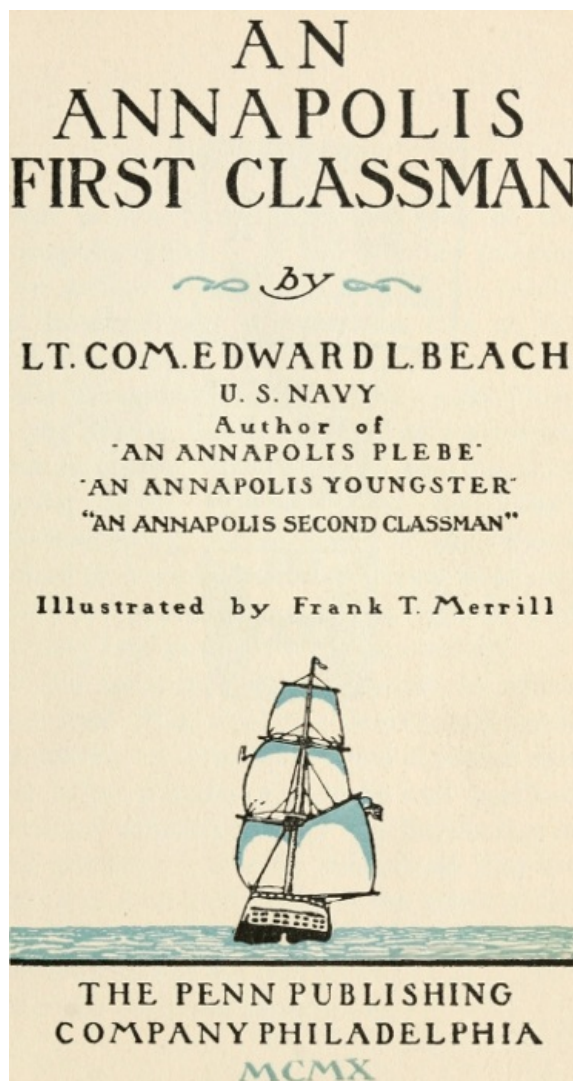
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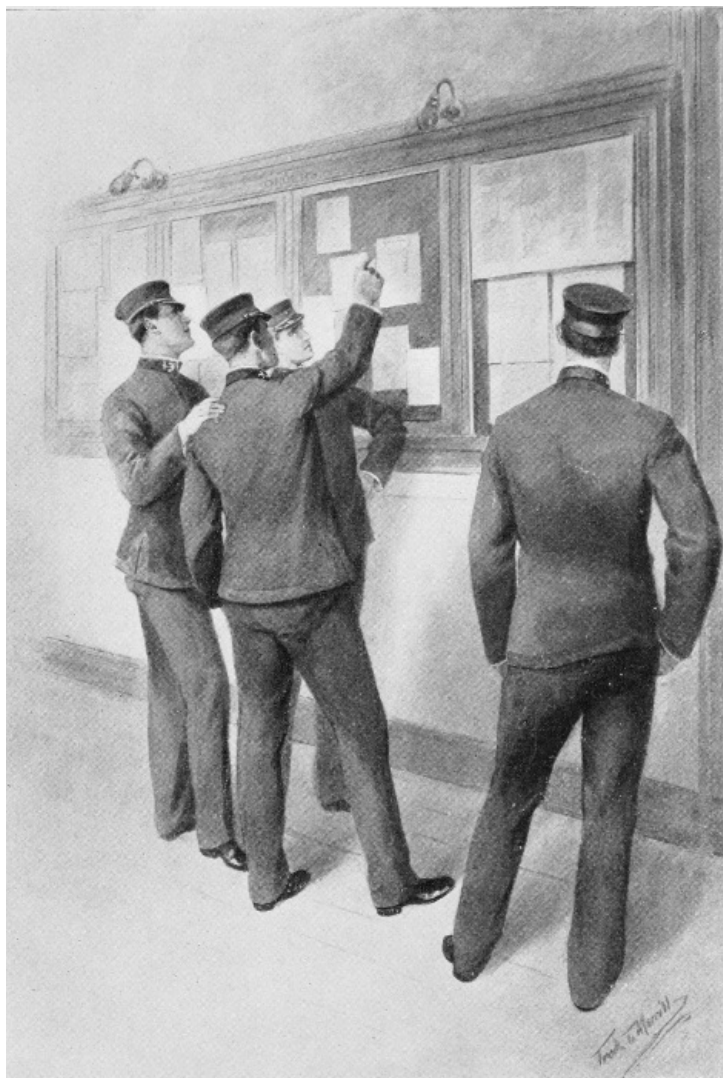
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AN ANNAPOLIS FIRST CLASSMAN ***



cover



HE GLANCED AT THE WRITTEN ORDER

**AN
ANNAPOLIS
FIRST CLASSMAN**

by

LT. COM. EDWARD L. BEACH

U.S. NAVY

Author of

**"AN ANNAPOLIS PLEBE"
"AN ANNAPOLIS YOUNGSTER"
"AN ANNAPOLIS SECOND CLASSMAN"**

Illustrated by Frank T. Merrill

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Introduction

This is the fourth and last book of the "Annapolis Series." It has been the purpose of the author faithfully to portray the conditions in which our midshipmen live at the Naval Academy. The training given at Annapolis is regulated by the needs of the Fleet, and the Naval Academy in all of its departments is entirely directed and controlled by seagoing naval officers. After the Fleet's world-encircling cruise, many of the officers attached to it were sent to the Naval Academy to instruct midshipmen in navigation and electricity and gunnery and seamanship.

In the navy it is believed that the officer who is fresh from drilling a twelve-inch turret or a battery of broadside guns at record and battle target practice, should be well qualified to initiate midshipmen in the beginnings of naval gunnery. It is for this reason that the training at Annapolis reflects the needs of the Fleet, and every officer on duty there has either seen recent sea service or is looking forward to an early sea assignment.

Stonewell and Robert Drake by name never existed, but the same thoughts and ambitions that animate them have animated many hundreds of midshipmen; and incidents similar to those described have happened countless times. From this point of view these stories are true stories. The names of their chief characters may be found in no navy list, but the truth of the Annapolis books does not depend upon that. Stonewell and Robert Drake have actually lived many times, and to-day are living at Annapolis. [4]

The author hopes he has presented in this book and its three predecessors, "An Annapolis Plebe," "An Annapolis Youngster," and "An Annapolis Second Classman," a fair picture of the life of American midshipmen; and not only of the naval atmosphere which surrounds them, but of that inner life which for the time dominates their relations to each other and to the institution made famous as the alma mater of many names illustrious in naval history.

EDWARD L. BEACH,
Lieutenant-Commander, U.S. Navy.

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An Annapolis First Classman

CHAPTER I

GLASSFELL, DRAKE AND STONEWELL

"Hello, Stone! Hello, Bob! By George, but I'm glad to see you!"

"Hello, Glass, you old sinner, I can just imagine you've led those dear old aunts of yours a lively life the last two weeks."

"You'll win, Stone, but you ought to get them to tell you about it; ha, ha, ha! the dear old ladies never dropped once."

Explosively enthusiastic greetings were exchanged between three stalwart young men in the Union Station, Chicago, on the twentieth of September, of the year nineteen hundred and something. Passers-by noticed them and smiled, and in approving accents said, "College boys!" All three were tall, broad-shouldered, bronzed in face, and possessed a litheness of movement that betokened health and strength.

Glassfell, Drake and Stonewell were midshipmen on leave from the United States Naval Academy. It was evident that they had met in the Union Station by appointment. Glassfell had just arrived from Wisconsin, and Drake and Stonewell were to leave in two hours for Annapolis. [10]

"You two chaps are martyrs!" exclaimed Glassfell; "here you are giving up ten days of glorious leave just to go and train for the football team. Now here I am, cheer leader, head yeller, or whatever you call me, far more important than either of you, you'll admit, and I'm not due at Annapolis until October first."

"'Daily News,' last edition," droned a newsboy near by.

"Don't bother me, boy; Chicago news doesn't interest me. Some new sandbagging on Wabash Avenue, I suppose, and nothing else. Get out."

"A fine cruise, wasn't it, Glass?" remarked Robert Drake. "By George! I'd had some troubles on my previous cruises, but this went like clockwork; not a single thing happened to worry me, and I certainly had troubles enough on my plebe and youngster cruises."

"You did indeed, Bob," remarked Stonewell, "but you'll have to admit you were fortunate in the wind up. Now Glass, here——" [11]

"'Daily News,' last edition," was shouted close to their ears.

"Stuff that boy. Put a corn-cob down his throat," said Glassfell with an amused glance at the persistent newsboy. "Say, fellows, wasn't that a good one I worked on old 'I mean to say'? Ha, ha, ha!"

"Which one, Glass?" asked Robert Drake.

"Oh, the best one, the time I hoisted up two red balls to the masthead when he was on watch in charge of the deck, during drill period. And didn't the captain give him the mischief?"

An outburst of wild hilarious laughter greeted this reminiscence, as evidently a very humorous

episode was recalled. In seagoing language two red balls means that the ship carrying them is not under control; and at the time referred to by Glassfell the red balls had no business to be hoisted, and their presence brought down upon Lieutenant-Commander Gettem, nicknamed "I mean to say" by the midshipmen, a wrathful reprimand from his captain.

"That was pretty good, Glass," laughed Stonewell, "but you had to own up, and got sanded well for it." [12]

"Daily News,' last edition!" screamed a voice interrupting the midshipmen.

"Look here, boy, how many papers have you to sell?" inquired Glassfell.

"Twenty-five, boss; here's yours, and only one cent."

"All right. I'll buy your twenty-five papers and give you twenty-five cents besides if you'll make a hundred yard dash for the outside. Give me your papers; here's fifty cents."

"I'm your man, boss," cried the newsboy, handing over his papers, grabbing the fifty-cent piece and making a tremendous bolt toward the exit.

"He's afraid of a recall," laughed Robert. "Say, Glass, are you going to start a wholesale newspaper business?"

"Let's see what the news of the day is," replied Glassfell, unfolding one of the papers and laying the others down on a seat.

"Here's an alderman up for graft; a bank cashier has gone wrong; hello! My heavens, here's a naval war-ship goes to the bottom with all on board." [13]

"What ship? what ship?" simultaneously cried out Stonewell and Robert, in affrighted tones.

"The submarine boat 'Holland'! Ha, ha, ha, I got you both that time, didn't I? You chaps will nab any bait that comes along."

All three laughed heartily. "You're an incorrigible wretch," smiled Robert; "I shudder at the idea of spending another year with you at the Academy." But the friendly hug that accompanied these words left no doubt of the affection Robert bore to the jovial Glassfell.

"By George, fellows, here is an interesting item, 'New cadet officers at the Naval——'"

"You don't sell me again to-day, Glass," grinned Robert. "You'll be giving yourself five stripes and Stone a second class buzzard."

"Pick up a paper and read for yourself," cried out Glassfell excitedly. "Farnum gets five stripes!" Glassfell read no further, but with an expression of intense disgust threw the paper down and stamped on it.

Stonewell and Robert were now eagerly reading the paper. "Cadet Commander, commanding the Brigade of Midshipmen, Farnum," read Robert. "Cadet Lieutenant-Commanders, commanding first and second battalions, respectively, Stonewell and Sewall; Cadet Lieutenant and Brigade Adjutant, Ryerson. Cadet Lieutenant, commanding first company, Blair——" [14]

A look of blank astonishment mingled with disdain was to be seen on Robert's face. "Well, Stone," he said, "the officers have done it again, and I guess they can be relied upon to make chumps of themselves as regularly as they assign the brigade officers. You should be our cadet commander, Stone, our five striper; you know it, every midshipman in the brigade knows it, the officers ought to know it! You are number one man in the class, the leader in Academy athletics, head and shoulders above us all. And here they've picked out a regular 'snide,' a sneak, and have given him the place that belongs to you." Robert spoke passionately; he was intensely disappointed.

"You are entirely wrong about Farnum, Bob," remarked Stonewell quietly; "he's a far better man than you give him credit for. You don't understand Farnum; he'll do credit to his five stripes. I'm entirely satisfied with my four stripes; to be cadet lieutenant-commander is as much as I have any right to expect." [15]

"You know why you don't get five stripes, don't you?" asked Robert vehemently; "it's because you took French leave a year ago, and reported yourself for it! And didn't Farnum jump ship at the same time? Only he didn't get spotted for it. You reported yourself for the purpose of explaining my deliberate neglect of duty last year. You were reduced to ranks as a result and Farnum was then given your position as acting senior cadet officer of the summer detail. If he'd had any sense of fitness he would have reported himself rather than have accepted it; that was only a temporary affair, however, and didn't amount to much; but because of that same report it's outrageous that you should be shoved out of the five stripes you've earned by a man who was equally guilty, but didn't have the manhood to report himself when you did."

"It's rotten," remarked Glassfell. "Well, Stone, old chap," he continued, "I'm sorry; everybody will be; we all thought you had a cinch on five stripes. But I wouldn't be in Farnum's shoes; everybody will know he is a fake. But as long as they didn't make Stonewell cadet commander I'm rather surprised they didn't give the job to me." [16]

"Look here, Bob," said Stonewell, "I have been hoping you would get three stripes—but I'm sorry not to see you down for anything."

"That's too bad; isn't Bob down for anything?" inquired Glassfell.

"Not even for a second class buzzard, the lowest thing in cadet rank at the Naval Academy," replied Stonewell.

"I'm sorry to hear that," remarked Glassfell, much concerned. "Bob ought to have three stripes, anyway."

"Don't you worry, fellows," said Robert, cheerily, "I haven't expected a thing and am not a bit disappointed. A midshipman cannot live down a 'deliberate neglect of duty' report in one year."

"Yes, Bob, I know, but I had hoped that your conduct at the fire a year ago and that remarkable trip of yours last June would——" [17]

"Now, Stone, please don't; you know that is not to be talked about."

"Of course, but at the same time in spite of that report you ought to get three stripes."

"That's right," commented Glassfell. "The officers only see one side of a midshipman's character; here I am, another martyr to their ignorance; I'm one of the best men in the class, the band master thinks so, and he's the grandest thing I've ever seen at Annapolis; and I'm a private in ranks for another year. But perhaps this report isn't authentic; let's see, the paper says that it is likely that these recommendations will be made to the superintendent by the commandant; the former is away, will not arrive at Annapolis for two days yet—hurrah, I may still get five stripes."

"Stone, I still hope you may command the brigade of midshipmen our last year," said Robert thoughtfully. "This newspaper account does not pretend to be official; it says 'it has leaked out' that the commandant of midshipmen's recommendation of the assignment of cadet officers of the brigade will be so and so. Now the superintendent evidently has not seen these recommendations, so they are not as yet finally decided upon. Probably this newspaper list is correct in the main, but it is not final; the superintendent is away on leave and has not yet acted; he has not even seen the commandant's recommendations. If either the superintendent or the commandant were to know that Farnum had been guilty of the same offense which is now to deprive you of the five stripes you otherwise, by every count, had earned, you would never be set aside in favor of a man equally guilty but not so square. It's shameful, that's what it is." [18]

Robert boiled over with angry thoughts. Strong feelings dominated his expressive features, and it was with difficulty that he controlled himself. His classmate Stonewell was at once his joy and pride, and he loved him with brotherly affection. Stonewell in his studies towered above all of his classmates; he was the leader in athletics, captain of the football team, and captain of the Academy crew. He was class president and his own class and all midshipmen confidently expected he would be cadet commander in his last year at the Naval Academy. [19]

But Robert Drake more than wished for it. Until this moment he had not realized how he longed for it. In the preceding three years at Annapolis Robert had had perhaps more than his own share of troubles, and in them all Stonewell had been to him a mountain of strength and a deep well of affectionate wisdom.

"Farnum for our five striper! Faugh! The thought of it makes me sick! I'll not stand for it," cried Robert.

"How can you help it, Bob?" queried Glassfell, himself much disappointed, though not nearly so vehement as Robert.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," almost shouted the latter; "Stone and I will be in Annapolis the day after to-morrow, and I'm going straight to the commandant and convince him that he's made a big bust. That's what I'm going to do!"

"No, you're not, Bob," said Stonewell, quietly, yet determinedly; "you'll do nothing of the kind. The commandant isn't going to give me five stripes just because you want me to have them. You've had some troubles at the Academy, partly due perhaps to a sort of unrestrained impetuosity. Sometimes you are apt to mix up in matters that other people don't admit concern you. You'll do me more harm than good if you're not careful; and as a friend of mine I demand you do nothing whatever about this matter." [20]

Robert knew that Stonewell meant exactly what he said, yet he could not give in at once. "Look here, Stone," he doggedly maintained, "some one ought to do this, and I'm the man. Why don't you wish me to?"

"I've given you one good reason, Bob, and I'll give you another. It wouldn't be fair to Farnum."

"It wouldn't be fair to Farnum!" ejaculated Robert. "It wouldn't be fair to Farnum," he again repeated, in astonished accents. "Will you please tell me why it would be unfair to that sneak? How could it be unfair to him for me to make a plain statement of facts to the commandant, a statement that would prevent Farnum from being put into a high position which is utterly undeserved?"

"I'll tell you, Bob; to begin with you've made a mistake about Farnum; he's not at all the poor character, the sneak, you think him to be. You don't know him. You've good reason to know how unfair it is to be misunderstood. Your action would be particularly unfair to Farnum because the first thing he will do when he gets to Annapolis will be to go to the commandant and tell him just what you have said you intended doing." [21]

"You've a better opinion of Farnum than I have, Stone," rejoined Robert, shortly. "If he does that I'll apologize to him. But if he doesn't—well, he'll have a mighty uncomfortable year, in spite of his five stripes, that's all I've got to say."

THE COMMANDANT OF MIDSHIPMEN

Drake and Stonewell reached Washington the next morning, and the following morning took a train bound for Annapolis. They were ahead of the yearly rush of midshipmen returning from September leave; members of the Naval Academy football team are expected to sacrifice part of their precious vacation in order to commence football practice early. Hardly were they aboard their train when a tall, fine-looking young man, of perhaps twenty-one or twenty-two years, approached them. In his hurried glance at Robert and Stonewell one might have seen an expression of pleasure combined with uncertainty, the pleasure when looking at Stonewell, the uncertainty when his gaze rested momentarily upon Robert.

"How do you do, Stonewell?" he said, in a rather precise way, extending his hand to him. "I'm glad to see you and Drake; have you seen any others of the football squad?"

"Hello, Farnum, how are you, old chap? I'm real glad to see you," said Stonewell, heartily. "No, I haven't seen any midshipmen but you yet." [23]

"How are you, Drake?" continued Farnum, rather pointedly, and stood with hand outstretched toward Drake. Apparently the latter did not see Farnum's hand; he made no effort to take it, but with his own right hand he touched his hat and said: "Hello, Farnum." Farnum's hand dropped to his side, and he said impulsively, "Why won't you shake hands with me, Drake? I would like to be friendly with you, and I don't know why we shouldn't be friends. Perhaps you are thinking of the time when most of us misjudged you, a matter that no one has more regretted than I have."

"Farnum," said Robert, "you remember our second class summer, don't you, when I was reported for deliberate neglect of duty?"

"Surely," answered Farnum.

"And you remember why I neglected my duty? I was on as 'midshipman in charge of floor' when you and Stone and Pete and some others were Frenching, and I left my post so as not to have to report you all." [24]

"I remember that very well indeed," rejoined Farnum; "what of it?"

"Stone and the rest of them, except you, reported themselves for the purpose of helping me out, as much as they could, of the trouble I was in. Stone was broken as acting senior cadet officer, and you, guilty of the same offense, were given his place. I hope you enjoyed it." Robert spoke warmly.

"Look here, Drake, suppose you let me ask you a few questions. When you left your post that night was it to avoid reporting me? Would you have deliberately neglected your duty for me, or was it to benefit your own particular chums, Stone, Pete and Glass?"

"I'd do more for them than for anybody else at the Academy."

"Of course you would; I'd blame you if you wouldn't. But you wouldn't have done it for me alone, would you?"

"I don't know—I'd got sick of reporting classmates. I hope I won't have to face that question again."

"Drake, I wouldn't either have asked or expected you to do that for me. I didn't report myself because you didn't do it for me; I took my chance and was not reported. It was all right for Stone to report himself if he wanted to. As for being shoved into his position as acting senior cadet officer, that didn't amount to a hill of beans, and you know it. It was a very temporary matter, and it didn't make any difference to Stone or me or you or anybody else. At the same time I don't mind saying that I was sorry at the time I supplanted Stone. I'm also sorry you have seen fit to brood over this matter. I suppose I can get along without your friendship, though I was perfectly sincere in offering you mine." [25]

"Do you know who's going to have five stripes?" asked Robert sharply.

"Why Stone, of course—I haven't seen the stripe list yet, but I don't imagine anybody else will be considered for that job."

Without saying anything more, Robert took a newspaper clipping from his pocket and handed it to Farnum. Stonewell, who had been silent during the talk between his two classmates, now said, offering his hand to the latter, "I congratulate you, Farnum; I'm sure you'll have a good brigade; you may depend on my helping you to the best of my ability." [26]

Though Farnum was ordinarily a very self-contained young man, his eyes bulged when he saw himself gazetted as cadet commander. He hesitated for a moment, seemingly lost in perturbed thought; then turning to Stonewell, he took his hand and said, "Stone, this is very kind of you," and without another word passed out of the car.

"Bob," said Stonewell rather sharply, "I have a request to make of you, and if you are the friend I take you to be you'll heed it. I want you to drop this matter of five stripes. You'll make a nuisance of yourself and will make me ridiculous. I want you to promise me you will not go around and tell people Farnum shouldn't have five stripes and that I should."

"Stone, I boil over every time I think about it; I can't help it. It just makes me mad to see Farnum smirking and grinning, and usurping the place that belongs to you. But I don't think he'll enjoy

his job, feeling in his heart that everybody knows he's an impostor. The idea of his saying to you 'this is very kind of you.' I'm disgusted!" [27]

"Well, Bob, don't think about him, and as you feel so strongly try to avoid talking about the matter. Let's talk of something else. The entire squad should arrive by to-morrow, and we ought to get in some good practice——"

Here Stonewell received a violent interruption. A sudden lurch of the train threw a passing youth right on top of the two midshipmen. The young man immediately recovered himself and then broke out into a hearty peal of laughter. "I beg your pardon, I'd no idea I was so clumsy. You chaps are going to Annapolis, aren't you? So am I. I'm a midshipman." The speaker seemed to take it for granted that he was both important and interesting. He was full of apparent good nature and friendliness and wanted to talk; he was about nineteen years old, and was tall and strongly built. A great shock of tawny yellow hair surmounted a rather handsome, freckled, healthy face. He had a thick neck and his shoulders were heavy. His appearance betokened great good nature, and there were health, strength and quickness in every movement. [28]

"You don't look like a midshipman," said Robert shortly.

"Oh," said the young man with a laugh, "I've only been one for twenty days; I was sworn in September first, and then got leave, a grandmother died and the estate had to be settled—ha, ha, ha,—any excuse would have done—but I'm going to go back to-day for football. I know something about the game, and expect to make the team from the start. My name is Henry Bligh. What are yours?"

"Young man," said Stonewell, in forbidding tones, "after you've been a midshipman for a while you will notice that other midshipmen are a bit slow in proclaiming who they are to strangers in public places. You are excused."

A blank expression spread itself over Mr. Bligh's face. He looked from Stonewell to Robert. Neither took any further notice of him, and in a hesitating way he walked to the rear of the car.

"A bit fresh, isn't he, Stone?" smiled Robert.

"Yes, Bob; like you and I were when we first came here, and like most midshipmen are at first. He's a well-built plebe, and looks like good football material. Well, here's old Annapolis once more—what a pleasure it is to get back to the old town." [29]

The train slowed down and stopped and the passengers impatiently crowded to the door, anxious to be off.

"Hello," exclaimed Robert, "Farnum must be in a hurry; he's taken a carriage; I'm glad I'm not in a hurry, for I'm busted, as usual."

Farnum had jumped into a carriage and gave directions to be driven to Bancroft Hall; on his arrival there he went immediately to the commandant.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Farnum," said the commandant, greeting him warmly. "I suppose you've come back early for football practice?"

"Yes, sir." Farnum paused for a moment and then began abruptly, "Captain, I have here a list of midshipmen which it is said you are to recommend as cadet officers. I am slated, according to this list, to be cadet commander. I wish permission to speak to you frankly about this." [30]

"Go ahead, Mr. Farnum. Those are the recommendations I shall submit to the superintendent within an hour. The list was not made public by me; it leaked out somehow; but I guess no harm has been done. But it will not be final until the superintendent approves it. He has just returned from leave, and so has not acted upon it."

"Will you please tell me frankly why I am recommended to be cadet commander, and Mr. Stonewell is not?"

"This is unusual, Mr. Farnum, but as you are recommended for the highest cadet rank I don't mind being perfectly frank. Mr. Stonewell is number one in your class, and in pretty nearly everything at the Academy. The summer cruise officers and the ordnance and seamanship and discipline officers have recommended that he be made cadet commander; and you were recommended pretty nearly unanimously to be the senior cadet lieutenant-commander. But last summer Mr. Stonewell committed a most serious breach of Academy regulations. He took French leave one night."

"Is that the only reason he doesn't get five stripes, sir?" [31]

"Frankly, yes."

"Then, sir, I must report I was also guilty, at the same time, of the same offense. Mr. Stonewell and all the others of the party, except myself, reported themselves for being absent, for the purpose of helping Mr. Drake. I didn't at the time feel called upon to do so, though I have since keenly wished I had. You can see, sir, it will be impossible for me to hold five stripes with any degree of self-respect. My classmates know all the circumstances. I would feel that I was an impostor and my classmates would have contempt for me. I could never have the respect nor exert the moral authority that should go with five stripes."

"Mr. Farnum, I'm entirely surprised. You should have reported yourself last summer."

"Yes, sir, but as I didn't do so then I must now."

"Of course; however questionable your notions of last summer were your present action is

commendable. Well, Mr. Farnum, you will hardly get five stripes, but, I assure you, you have my entire respect. Good-morning, sir," and Farnum was bowed out. [32]

"By George," reflected the commandant, "that young man has a sense of duty; he's pointed right. I shouldn't wonder but what it would be a good thing to call in the leading midshipmen of a class before cadet officers are assigned and talk it over with them. Well, I think the best thing I can do about this list is to recommend Stonewell for the brigade commander and Farnum for command of the first battalion. They will simply shift places and the other recommendations will not be disturbed."

After making this change in the list the commandant left his office and was soon with the superintendent, Rear-Admiral Wentworth. After a cordial greeting and some preliminary talk the commandant, Commander Dalton, said: "Admiral, the most pressing thing I have is to get your approval for the assignment of the cadet officers. I have the recommendations here; I am entirely satisfied we'll have the brigade of midshipmen well officered this year."

"Let me have your list," said the superintendent, reaching out for it. "I see you have recommended Mr. Stonewell for cadet commander. Hum. I had almost decided to put another young man in that position, but I think I'll let that stand. Farnum and Sewall are to be the cadet lieutenant-commanders. Well, let that go. Ryerson, senior cadet lieutenant; he'll make an ideal brigade adjutant. Pass him; but where does my young friend come in?" [33]

"Who is he, admiral? What's his name?" queried Commander Dalton.

The superintendent did not reply, but read the list over hurriedly, and then said, impatiently, "Why, Dalton, his name doesn't figure here at all, but I can fix that easily; he goes in right after Ryerson, and will be cadet lieutenant, commanding the first company of midshipmen."

The admiral seized a pen, interpolated a name between Ryerson and Blair, and then signed the roster of cadet officers. He handed this to the commandant, saying, "Dalton, Mr. Drake will command the first company; shove everybody after him on your list down a peg."

"Why, admiral," remonstrated the commandant, "Mr. Drake isn't entitled to this; it is true he was unanimously recommended by all but the discipline officers to be cadet lieutenant, but he most deliberately neglected his duty when he was a second classman when on a special detail. He is a very attractive young man, but we cannot forget such a serious blot as that." [34]

The superintendent smiled. "Dalton," he said, "I was here on duty twenty-five years ago, when I was a lieutenant, in the department of seamanship."

"Yes, sir, I well remember your being here, for I was at that time here also, as a midshipman."

"Well, one year I was among those detailed to make the recommendation for new cadet officers. There was one midshipman, high in his class, a splendid fellow, that would have had high cadet office except he was constantly kicking over the regulations. He was the leader of every mad excursion that occurred within these walls; his exuberance of spirits brought him continual trouble. So when we came to make our recommendations we pursed our lips and passed over the midshipman I'm speaking of. We made a mistake I've regretted ever since. Well, that midshipman became an officer that the whole navy ever since has been proud of, and when I was ordered here as superintendent I asked the Navy Department to send him here as commandant. By the way, his name is Dalton." [35]

Commander Dalton became very red in the face, and then in a husky voice much affected said, "Admiral, I'd no idea you had this opinion of me—I can't express my feelings; you have touched them deeply. I am glad Mr. Drake is to be cadet lieutenant. I'll have the list copied and published this afternoon."

CHAPTER III

 [36]

A HAPPY SURPRISE

Robert and Stonewell spent the first day of their return in getting settled and in seeing the football coaches and talking about the football material of the new fourth class. A number of the regular players had already returned, and the afternoon train brought in about twenty midshipmen who had been in the squad the previous year, all of whom were now eager to commence practice.

"We'll start in to-morrow, fellows, good and hard," said Stonewell; "be on the field at eight in the morning; we'll get the whole fourth class out later, after they've finished their morning drill, and we'll size up and pick out the likely ones and give them a tryout. Come on, Bob, let's go to quarters. Come along with us, Farnum, if you're walking that way."

The three walked toward Bancroft Hall together. "What do you think of the fourth class, Stone?" asked Farnum. "Are there any good men in it?" [37]

"There are indeed, I should say, from just looking at them, but we will know better to-morrow, after we've given them a try on the field. There's a plebe named Bligh who has told me he expects to make the team."

Farnum laughed. "He told me the same thing. I hope he'll make good; if he does we'll pardon his freshness. What do you hear of West Point? No midshipman now at Annapolis has ever seen the

Academy beat West Point at football. George! I do hope we'll win; we ought to, we have twice as many men here as there are at West Point."

"It would seem so. And yet when we had many less midshipmen than there were cadets at West Point we used to beat them right along, and since we have had more West Point has beaten us. You can depend on one thing, both academies will have strong teams this year and both will make strenuous efforts in the great battle to be fought in Philadelphia next fall. I hope you'll make the team this year, Farnum; you tried hard enough last year," added Stonewell kindly.

"I'll get it if desperate work on my part will bring it to me."

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Neither Farnum nor Robert addressed remarks directly to one another, and after a while the three midshipmen had reached the steps leading to Bancroft Hall.

"Let's see if there are any new orders posted," suggested Robert, and the three young men directed their steps toward the bulletin-board. In an instant Robert set up a great shout. "Hooray," he cried, "Stonewell has five stripes." Robert had looked no further than the head of the list and was wild with unexpected happiness. Then he suddenly grabbed Farnum by the arm and said: "Stone told me that I wasn't fair to you; that you were a better man than I took you to be; that the first thing you would do when you got to Annapolis would be to go to the commandant and report yourself for that affair of last summer. Did you do that?"

Farnum looked pleased. "Yes, Drake, I did, but it makes me feel mighty good that Stone thought well enough of me to predict that I would. I'd rather have that confidence on his part than five stripes, any day of the week."

"Farnum, I'm not as wise as old Stone; I apologize to you for my unkind judgment and for not taking your hand in the train. I hope you will forgive me and accept my friendship," and a warm handclasp and a happy reconciliation followed.

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"Why don't you chaps read the rest of this list, and see who the remaining cadet officers are?" asked Stonewell.

"They're just the same as in the list we saw published, aren't they?" queried Robert.

"Well, Farnum gets the first battalion——"

"Good, I'm delighted," burst out Robert.

"They've a good man commanding the first company, haven't they?" continued Stonewell.

"Yes, Blair is one of the best men in the class; he'll make a splendid three striper; he——"

"Oh, it isn't Blair; take a look for yourself, Bob."

Robert glanced at the written order assigning the brigade officers.

"Drake, cadet lieutenant, commanding first company."

Robert's heart commenced to thump, the blood rushed to his head and he felt a surging of happiness within that seemed almost overwhelming. He was like a thirsty man in a desert unexpectedly finding water. Until this moment he had never known how much cadet rank meant to him.

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"Oh, Stonewell," he cried, "I can't believe it; isn't it likely to be a mistake?"

"Not a bit of it. The superintendent's name is signed to it. This is better news to me than the five stripes, even," rejoined Stonewell. "Bob, I'm pleased beyond expression."

"I'm delighted, Bob," cried Farnum.

It was indeed a happy trio that congratulated each other and tried to realize their good fortune.

"Come on, Bob," said the practical Stonewell at last, "let's go to our room and straighten it up a bit. Will you come along, Farnum?"

"No, I've my own room to fix up. Bob, old chap, you're my senior three striper, and I'm ever so glad of it," and Farnum's expressive eyes confirmed this feeling.

Once in their room Robert was in no hurry to do anything but talk. Boisterous jubilation exuded from his every movement and every expression. "Stone, the first company is going to win the flag this year," he suddenly exclaimed. "We're going to have the best drilled, the best all around company of the brigade. Just keep your eye on the first company this year, old fellow."

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"Bully for you, Bob, I believe you'll win it," replied Stonewell. "Now I wonder," he continued with a laugh, "if you have already decided which pretty girl you will ask to present the flag to your company after you have won it."

Robert's face reddened, and then he said, smiling happily, "We'll talk about that later."

The young men now busied themselves in unpacking their trunks and stowing their clothes in their wardrobes, placing aside their civilian clothing to be sent to the basement. After this was finished they commenced to talk. "This is a fine room, Stone," commented Robert. "Here, out of this window, is Chesapeake Bay, and from the other we can look over at the Armory across the lawns, and into the city of Annapolis. I tell you, it's worth while to room with the five striper. And it's worth while to be a five striper, too. You can visit during study hours, you can come and go as you please; no officer would ever think of questioning the cadet commander. You'll have a good brigade, Stone; discipline here depends pretty much on the cadet officers, and every one of us will do his level best that your brigade shall be the best of our time."

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"That's right, Bob, we'll all do our best. We'll try to make every man feel that what he does is important. If all the units are earnest the grand result is bound to be satisfactory."

"Stone, you and I are the best of friends, aren't we?"

"That's been my idea, Bob, for several years."

"Well, I've been thinking it's surprising that in spite of our intimate friendship I should know so little of your family; you know all about mine."

"Why, Bob, what's put that into your head. You've been to my home in Chicago and have met my people—and they think everything of you." [43]

"Well, it just came over me that you never speak of them. Do you remember three years ago, at about this time, how you Frenched from the 'Santee' and how I followed you out into Annapolis, and how Captain Blunt caught us and reported us?"

"I do indeed; pretty hard luck, wasn't it? Say, Captain Blunt is a fine fellow, isn't he? I've just read that his ship, the 'New Orleans,' now on the Asiatic station, is to come home in a few months. I trust his hopeful son will not be bilged by that time; that young man is in constant danger of getting into trouble." Stonewell picked up his cap and continued, "I'm going down the corridor; I'll be back in a little while."

"Hold on, Stone, I want to talk about that time we Frenched. Now I've never asked you any particulars; you told me you had to go out to see a brother who was in some terrible trouble, and you've never said a word about him since—and I've never asked you. Now can't you tell me something about him, Stone? It isn't mere idle curiosity, but you are so much in my thoughts that I can't help but be interested in your brother. Is he like you?" [44]

Stonewell sat down, saying: "Bob, you were very good to me at that time and were most considerate then and have been ever since in not asking questions. I went out that night to see my brother Frank. Frank is entirely unlike me in character, though people say we resemble one another very much in appearance; from his earliest boyhood he has constantly been getting into scrapes, and some of these have been serious. He is wild and impulsive. Frank wouldn't intentionally do a low or a wrong thing, but has done some crazy acts which have resulted badly."

"Now, the day I Frenched, when you followed me, I had received word that Frank had passed a forged check, and the same day I learned he was hiding in Annapolis; I was beside myself. You see I didn't know but what if it was true. Well, it came out all right. Frank hadn't passed a bad check, but an older man with whom he spent much time had, and Frank's name was brought in. He was badly scared; he was only sixteen at the time, and he came here to me. You see there was no real occasion for his being scared and coming here or for my being so upset. But I didn't know how bad it was and I was nearly crazy until the next morning, when I received word that everything was all right. Still, it isn't a very pleasant recollection, and I have never felt inclined to talk about it. Now, Bob, I think I've answered your question. Do you want to know anything more about Frank?" [45]

"Yes, where is he now?"

"He's a sophomore at Princeton," returned Stonewell.

"Well, you are the greatest fellow, Stone; if I had a brother at Princeton I couldn't help but talk about it; all my friends here would know it."

Stonewell smiled. "Come on, Bob," he said, picking up his cap again. "Let's go out and see what fellows have come back. The entire squad should be here by this time."

CHAPTER IV

[46]

ACADEMY LIFE BEGINS

The next morning the returned football squad were all out on the athletic field, and everybody was busy with preliminary practice in passing, kicking, tackling the dummy and running with the ball. At eleven o'clock the entire fourth class were assembled on the field. Each one of these three hundred young men was looked at and questioned as to previous football experience, and about forty of them were advised to come out for practice. Of these forty, ten appeared to be likely candidates and were told to find football uniforms, and to practice for the time being with the squad. The most promising of these ten was Bligh, and this promise did not suffer from excessive modesty on the part of Mr. Bligh.

"Oh, yes, I can play football—a little," he said, with a smile that intended to convey the idea that "the little" was in reality a great deal.

"Where have you played?" asked Stonewell.

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"Oh, two years on the University of Minnesota's team, and before that at St. Paul High School," drawled Mr. Bligh.

"What have you played?"

"Quarter, half and end. Look up the 'St. Paul Pioneer Press's' All Northwestern team for last year; I guess you'll find they know who I am out there, mister."

"We'll give you a chance to show what you can do, Mr. Henry Bligh. Now take a ball and punt for a while."

It wasn't long before Stonewell said: "That fellow knows football; he's a find. We need a good quarter and will try him for it. You can see by the way he handles the ball that he's an old hand at it. But I don't like his manners, though we'll forget that if he plays good football. He's a good deal of a brag."

"Good-morning, Mr. Drake," said a pleasant voice behind Robert. The latter turned around and then enthusiastically cried:

"Hello, Sexton, I'm glad to see you back. I hope you'll make it a go this time. Why have you those togs on?"

"I'm going to try for the squad," replied Sexton.

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"Look here, Sexton, take my advice and don't go into football; math comes hard to you, and football takes up a lot of time on one hand and tires you out; makes it hard to study, on the other. Now you don't want to bilge again, and you don't want to take up anything that will interfere with your studies." Sexton had failed in his studies and had been dropped from the Academy in consequence the previous year.

"I want to play," replied Sexton, "and if I get low in my studies and it is known I play football the instructors will help me out; will give me easy subjects and high marks."

"Not unless you're a star player. You'd better give it up, Sexton. Hello, Blunt," Robert continued to another young man who just came up, "so you're out for football, too, are you?"

"You bet, and I'm going to make quarter on the first team, too. Last year's quarter graduated in June, and I'm the boy to take his place."

"Do you see that plebe over there, kicking the ball?" interrupted Stonewell, who, while watching different players, had half listened to the talk going on about him.

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"That fellow with a thick bunch of hair, that one who has just kicked?"

"Yes, watch him a bit. He knows the game; he has played quarter on Minnesota's team. You'll have to get up and dust to beat that fellow out of quarter-back."

"Do you think I'm going to let a plebe beat me?" cried out Third Classman Blunt, indignantly. "I'll stand him on his head. I'll——"

"Blunt, leave the football field immediately and turn in your clothes," interposed Stonewell, sharply. "I'll be in my room at half-past seven to-night if you care to discuss with me your future conduct on the football field."

"Mr. Stonewell, I'm not going off the field. I didn't mean anything—I—I——" stammered the dismayed Blunt.

"Is your delay in obeying my order due to ignorance or insubordination?" demanded Stonewell severely. Blunt had been somewhat insolent in his manner to Stonewell, and was being disciplined on the spot.

Without another word Harry Blunt turned and slowly left the field.

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"Stone, aren't you a little hard on him?" asked Robert.

"Purposely so, Bob; it's the only kind of treatment he understands. He's an irrepressible youngster, well meaning, but it's best in dealing with him to temper justice with cruelty. He'll be around to-night in a contrite spirit with sincere promises to be good, and to-morrow he'll be on the field again and he'll play for all that's in him. He'll be wild to beat that plebe, and this lesson will be good for him."

Blunt did as Stonewell predicted he would, and was out on the field next day. Two teams were formed and at the end of each day's practice these were lined up against each other and a fierce scrimmage occurred. Robert Drake was put at right end of the first team; opposing him was Farnum. Stonewell played left tackle; Bligh was quarter-back of the first team, Blunt quarter of the second. These positions were subject to constant change, and many midshipmen were tried in different positions. A common spirit animated them. First a winning team must be developed, and a winning team meant but one thing; it meant West Point's defeat. After that each player was anxious either to hold his own place on the first team or by superior playing on the second team to earn a place on the first. Bligh sprang into immediate popularity because he played well from the start. Harry Blunt did not have Bligh's previous experience, but gave promise of developing into a good quarter-back.

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Robert Drake found Farnum a formidable opponent. The latter played with an impetuosity and spirit that took no heed of possible injury, and before October first he was regularly playing on the first team, much to his satisfaction. The midshipmen of the football squad by October first had had much exercise and were pretty well hardened; most of them were old players, and in the first real game, against Lehigh, the Naval Academy team played with a dash and spirit that delighted the hearts of hundreds of midshipmen on the bleachers as well as scores of officers.

By this time everybody, midshipmen and officers, had returned from leave, and in a day Academy life had settled down to its regular routine. One day was allowed the midshipmen to get ready for the year's work, and the next day midshipmen were marching to recitations and drills with monotonous regularity.

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The first formation of the brigade was a thrilling moment to Robert Drake. The warning bugle blew and eight hundred midshipmen scampered to their places in ranks, laughing and talking, some in desperate efforts to "beat the bugle." With the last blast of that unmusical instrument came complete quiet; then in front of each of the twelve companies into which the midshipmen were divided was to be seen a young man rapidly calling his company roll; and as names were called vociferous "heres" were to be heard coming from all parts of the long line of midshipmen; when the midshipman in front of the first company on the extreme right had finished calling his roll, he came to an about face, and saluted an impassive midshipman, his company commander, Cadet Lieutenant Drake.

"First company, three absent, sir," reported First Petty Officer Peters.

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"Take your post, sir," ordered his captain, Cadet Lieutenant Drake. First Petty Officer Peters smartly stepped off to the right of the company, Cadet Lieutenant Drake at the same time going to the company's left. Down the line could be heard shouts of different company officers, aligning their companies. And then the midshipmen of the first company heard a ringing order, not too loud, but in a tone that before the end of the year became entirely familiar to them and in which each man learned to have entire trust.

"First company, left step, march. Company halt. Left dress. Back in the centre, up on the right, carry it along, back extreme right. Steady. Front." Each of the twelve companies had been similarly aligned by its cadet lieutenant, and the brigade, stretching along the terrace for over five hundred feet, was now as straight as a taut string.

In front of the brigade, facing it, all alone, stood a tall, erect, manly-looking midshipman, entirely self-possessed, apparently not carried away by the distinguished position he occupied. Triumphant feeling must have had a place in his heart, but of this there was no external evidence.

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Such formations as these occur innumerable times in the midshipmen's career; they are held before every meal, before every drill, and on many other occasions; and each time every midshipman at the Academy is accounted for.

Six hundred and sixty-five permanent regulations, besides special orders, control the lives and actions of each of the eight hundred midshipmen at our national Naval School. There are many officers on duty there for instruction purposes, and a few have special disciplinary duties concerned with the inspection and regulation of the conduct of the midshipmen. But it is only by the effective coöperation of the cadet officers that discipline is maintained. The commandant inspects the midshipmen and their quarters Sunday morning; the lieutenant-commander on duty for the day as "officer-in-charge" makes several inspections during his twenty-four hours' time; but the cadet officers have multifarious disciplinary duties over midshipmen in their control, and as stated, it is the efficient execution of these duties by the cadet officers and the carrying out by them of the commandant's and officer-in-charge's orders, that largely controls the actions and conduct of individual midshipmen.

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Robert Drake realized all this; what midshipman does not who has been at the Naval Academy for three years? And now came to him, as comes to all cadet officers, a determination to do his part with all the ability he possessed. He was indeed happy to be cadet lieutenant, and was proud of the three stripes on each sleeve that indicated that rank. As cadet lieutenant he had many daily routine inspections and reports to make and was assisted in these by two cadet officers, a cadet junior lieutenant and a cadet ensign, and by eight petty officers, a number of the latter being second classmen.

"Well, Stone," Robert remarked as they commenced their studies, "I certainly have a busy eight months cut out for me. Just look at these formidable lessons assigned us for to-morrow. Here are twenty pages in seamanship, and about the same amount in gunnery and in electricity. We've got an awful lot to do this year in steam engineering, and look at those five hundred pages in navigation. Whew! I don't see how we're going to do it well. Then I'm sure to be constantly busy with my company duties; this ought to be enough, but on top of this is an hour and a half's drill each day, and after that, football till it is too dark to see. Jimmini! If we get more than a smattering out of those books I'll be surprised. And you'll be busy too; you're editor of the 'Lucky Bag'^[1] and chairman of the hop committee!"

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[1] Each year the senior class publishes a book called "The Lucky Bag," which is illustrative of midshipman life.

"Yes, we'll have no spare minutes," replied Stonewell. "Let's get to work."

The next morning, as the gunnery recitation commenced, the instructor, Lieutenant Clement, said: "Gentlemen, your theoretical book work has been all planned, and by looking through your ordnance and gunnery books you can see just what it will be. For practical work during winter drill periods we will take torpedo mechanisms apart and put them together, and we'll go aboard the monitor 'Nevada' and study her turret and her guns. In the last of May a crew of first classmen from each company will go out into the bay and will fire at a regulation target with the 'Nevada's' six-pounder guns under the regular target practice conditions. Each company six-pounder crew may practice as much as it can find time to with the six-pounder gun in the armory gun shed. The head of the department instructs me to tell you that you are encouraged to make any devices or innovations so long as the gun is in no way disabled, though any suggested change must be submitted to him before firing the gun. The record made in gun-firing is entirely competitive. The crew making the best record will do a good deal toward winning the flag for the company it belongs to; a poor record will certainly defeat any such chance. Now we will proceed to our day's lesson in ballistics. Mr. Drake, take the first problem."

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The drill assigned to the first company that afternoon was infantry. The drill call sounded after the last study period was over, and by four o'clock Robert was marching his company across lawns to the drill grounds. He marched them in columns of squads, changing to company front, and felt very important indeed in his position as company commander. Upon arrival at the drill grounds he ordered:

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"Company—halt! Unfix bayonets. Stand at ease." Then, sheathing his sword he said: "Fellows, since I've been at the Academy the first company has always been among the best companies of the brigade. I want it to keep its reputation as such this year, and I'm sure you'll all have the same desire. The company had the honor of carrying the brigade colors a year ago, but it lost it last June by a narrow margin. You all know the company that has the best record for the year wins the flag, and carries it for the next year. The record is made up of many things, excellence in the various drills, excellence in the different forms of athletics, target practice, boat sailing, sharp-shooting, etc. Any man that does well individually in anything adds to his company's multiple and helps just that much. I'm going to do the very best I can to help win the flag for the first company. I take it for granted every one of you is with me and each will do his best for the same purpose. And we may be certain that each of the other eleven companies will do its utmost to win the colors." Bob paused.

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"Company attention! Shoulder arms! Rear rank, fourth file, last squad, step to the front."

A diminutive midshipman, seemingly hardly five feet tall, but fat, happy and careless looking, assisted by some vehement whispered advice of the left guide, shambled awkwardly to the front of the company, with his rifle on his right shoulder.

"That chap over there said you meant me, mister," said the small midshipman, in an engaging manner.

"Salute," ordered Cadet Lieutenant Drake, severely.

"Certainly, mister," replied the young man, eagerly taking off his cap and bowing.

"Put on that cap. Don't you know the rifle salute? Have you had any drill? What's your name?"

"Reginald Mumma. These chaps call me Mama's Darling, mister; I wish you'd have it stopped."

"When did you enter the Academy?"

"A month ago, but I've been sick in the hospital; just got out yesterday."

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"Third petty officer, fall out of line of file closers. Drill Mr. Mumma as a recruit every day this week, and whenever the company has infantry, till he can take his place in ranks. Squads right, full step, march."

CHAPTER V

[61]

A MYSTERIOUS CRY

The football season opened auspiciously for Annapolis. About fifty midshipmen were members of the football squad; these were excused from drills except on two afternoons of the week. Of those selected to play in regular games all were seasoned players, and except Bligh, all had played on the Naval Academy team the previous year. And so Stonewell and Robert and others were quite hopeful.

The head coach was Professor Danton, the field coach Gates, a famous old Yale player.

After several hard games on successive Wednesdays and Saturdays Stonewell was called into special consultation by Danton and Gates.

"Stonewell," began Gates, "I've been watching our team, and I'm convinced we have a fine lot of men here; not only good football players but real trustworthy chaps, men who will keep their promise, whose word can be depended upon."

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"We don't want any other kind," replied Stonewell, thinking by Gates' manner that there was something in the wind.

"I've been trying to size up each man's character," continued Gates, "and I've decided to put personal trust in every one of them. But I will exact an individual promise of secrecy from every member of the squad for something I'm going to give them. The matter is this: I have devised a forward pass which if it isn't expected and is properly executed is practically certain to bring a touch-down to the team that works it. I've sent it to Yale, where it has been tried out in secret practice, and the people there are wild over it. I've told them I wanted to give it to the midshipmen. They don't like that idea, but it's my own play, and I can do so if I wish to. They've asked me, if I give it to the midshipmen, to take every precaution for secrecy and not to use it until after Yale plays Harvard. Annapolis plays West Point the same day that Yale meets Harvard, and you could work the trick against the soldiers. It's a beauty. Now what do you say, Stonewell?"

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"We will most certainly agree to secrecy," replied Stonewell, much impressed. "I will get the individual promise you require from every member of the squad to observe entire secrecy about this play, and we'll never practice it except in secret practice and will never play it in a game until we meet West Point. Is that what you require?"

"Yes; I'll give it to you. We'll suppose our men have come down the field and are within an easy place-kick of the goal; we'll then make all preparations apparently for a goal from the field, and turn the play into a forward pass. We'll station our men as follows—" and a lot of technical football talk followed.

Stonewell was delighted. "By George," he said, "that's great! We'll work that on Franklin Field, and we'll certainly make the 'Army blue.' We'll try it to-morrow afternoon. I'll let only the first team know of it and get your required promise from them, and we'll work it on the unsuspecting second team; we'll have everybody, officers and all, kept away." [64]

"Secret practice" for the football squad was ordered for the next day; at the beginning of the practice the first and second teams were ordered at first to keep in different parts of the field.

"What's up?" queried Harry Blunt, the ambitious quarter-back of the second team, to a group of players about him. "One would think the Only Stonewell had something up his sleeve. Come along, fellows; if we keep up our work of yesterday this team will be the first team before long."

After half an hour's practice the two teams were called together for a scrimmage. Bucking the line, running around the ends and punting were employed until the ball was fifteen yards from the second team's goal and in the possession of the first team. Then quarter-back Bligh gave the regular signal for a goal from the field. The second team knew, of course, the first team's signals, but it did not know that an apparent stumbling in the numbers he called out was a signal that the Gates forward pass was now to be played.

The first team players took their places for a goal from the field, Stonewell, as usual, dropping back, and before the second team players knew what had happened Robert Drake was sitting on the ball between the goal posts. [65]

Everybody was crazy with delight. One would have imagined West Point had been scored upon. The play had worked perfectly. The squad was now all gathered together and was talked to by Gates and Stonewell; it was evident that Gates was well satisfied that his confidence in the midshipmen was not misplaced.

In the next few weeks this play was repeatedly practiced, and Gates was satisfied that if the midshipmen had the opportunity they would play it successfully on the day of the great West Point game.

It was Stonewell's purpose to develop the team as a whole, not individual star players. As right end Robert became famous among midshipmen for getting down the field promptly under kicks, and for tackling and downing in his tracks the opposing player who caught the ball. The two finds of the season were Bligh and Farnum. The former knew the game and played with intelligent skill. As quarter-back his position was most important and at different critical moments he ran the team with unerring judgment. [66]

Farnum played with desperate valor. His tackling was fierce, and in running with the ball and interfering when one of his own side had it he took every chance. His impetuosity brought him into prominence as a sure ground gainer. In close places the ball was generally given to Stonewell. There was something peculiarly invigorating in Stonewell's personality. When his signal was made there was a penetrating intensity that affected every Annapolis player. The danger was in working him too much.

One Saturday early in November, Annapolis was matched against Bucknell. Bucknell had always been a formidable antagonist of the midshipmen; the year previous it had defeated them. Up to now Annapolis had not lost a game, and the midshipmen were particularly anxious to defeat Bucknell, which on this occasion had brought a stalwart lot of players. They were strong, heavy, and confident. Before the game Stonewell called Farnum aside and said: "Now, old chap, be a little careful of yourself. You are bound to get badly hurt at the rate you are going, and we want you to save yourself for the West Point game. You're going to be given the ball a good deal to-day; Bob Drake is a bit stale, and my knee is bothering me. Now look out for yourself." [67]

"I'll try to remember, Stone," was the reply; "but when I get started I'm not apt to think of anything but the game. But I'll try to be careful."

Bucknell kicked off and Drake caught the ball. He was down the field with a tremendous start, dodging one player, smashing by another, making twenty-five yards before he was downed.

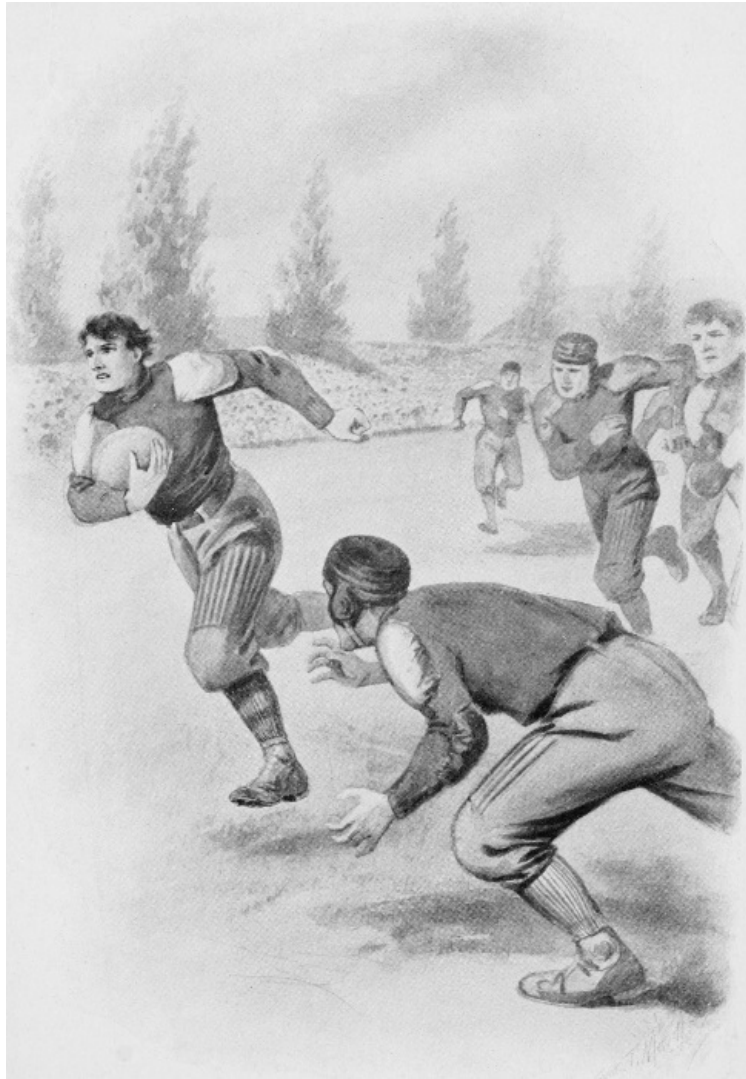
Bligh believed in quick action. The Annapolis team was lined up immediately and in a second the ball was in play. Farnum banged through the line between guard and tackle, making over fifteen yards for Annapolis.

"Take it easy, Farnum," cautioned Stonewell. In an instant Farnum had the ball again and was around the end and speeding for Bucknell's goal. Ten yards before he got there he was brought to earth with terrific violence, and he lay there still and limp. [68]

On the side lines, leading the cheering, Glassfell was executing all kinds of crazy antics; the midshipmen on the bleachers, full of joy, shouted themselves hoarse. But poor Farnum lay there unheeded, entirely unconscious. And in vain did the appreciative midshipmen shout: "Farnum! Farnum! Farnum!" for that young man was carried off the field on a stretcher without regaining consciousness.

Two more plays, Stonewell carrying the ball, brought a touch-down to Annapolis and Stonewell kicked a goal. This was the only scoring done during the game. In vain did each team hurl itself against the other; all for nothing did prodigies of violence occur. When time was finally called the score stood Annapolis 6, Bucknell 0.

And then thoughts turned to Farnum, now in the Academy sick quarters. When questioned Surgeon Pickron looked grave and said, "Mr. Farnum has had a terrible blow on the head—he has had many recurring spasms ever since—I regard his condition as very serious."



AROUND THE END

Such news travels fast, and on Saturday night the whole Academy, officers and midshipmen, were much perturbed. Sunday brought no change for the better and Surgeon Pickron advised an operation. Farnum had not regained consciousness. Surgeon Welton, who was in command of the hospital, insisted on delaying, against Dr. Pickron's advice, and on Monday morning everybody was much cheered up by hearing that Farnum's spasms had ceased and that he had come to himself. It was decided not to perform the operation, though Dr. Pickron believed that a clot of blood had formed and that Farnum's skull should be trephined.

From now on Farnum continued to improve and in two weeks he was discharged from sick quarters and sent back to Bancroft Hall, though it was ordered that he was to play no more football. But it was not the same Farnum. In place of the cheery, wideawake youth who had battled so valiantly against Bucknell, was a slow-moving, hesitating young man. He seemed afraid. The slightest unexpected noise or untoward incident seemed to startle him, sometimes to frighten him badly. "I can't help it, Bob," he said one time, with half a laugh and half a sob; "it's my nerves, I suppose; I'm sure there's something wrong with me; I know I'm acting like a baby, and I guess it will pass after a while; but I can't help it, I can't help it," and then Farnum broke down.

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Stonewell, Robert and some of the others had long talks with him. They were all drawn to him and were much concerned. One of Farnum's peculiarities was that he didn't dare to go out at night. The entire first class were now devoted to him. His popularity had come late in his midshipman career, but it was now strong and abiding. And his sufferings were so acute and so constant that he had the warm sympathy of all.

And Academy life went on apace, and Academy life at this period of the year is mostly concerned with football. True, there are study hours and recitations; long hard lessons must be read over and officers must hear recitations; formations must be attended, drills undergone, and examinations prepared for. This football spirit infected the officers as it did midshipmen. Football was the one topic of conversation, the one purpose in life during this epoch, and those that didn't play shouted vociferous advice, admonition and encouragement from the bleachers.

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One Friday night in the middle of November, at five minutes before ten, the bugles in Bancroft Hall rang out their customary discordant warnings that all midshipmen were to repair to their rooms immediately. In five minutes the midshipmen were to be in bed and all lights out. And instantly hundreds of midshipmen rushed through the corridors to get to their own rooms; for

they are given the time from nine-thirty, the end of their study period, to ten for visiting.

On this Friday night the midshipmen ran to their rooms as usual at the warning signal. Until the last minute of the allowed time there was to be heard the scurrying of hurried feet resounding through the corridors and a babble of shouting and laughter. Eight hundred midshipmen seemed to have something to say that couldn't keep till the morrow.

Ten o'clock came, and with it complete silence save for the measured tread of cadet officers going from room to room to see the occupants thereof were all in bed. And now sounded forth the clock, with its ominous tick-tock, as though it had been silent all day, and there came the oppressive silence which reigns each night after ten o'clock. So it was this Friday night. Four bells, indicating ten o'clock, were struck, the lights were put out and a solemn hush was upon the eight hundred occupants of Bancroft Hall. [72]

And then, in the stillness of the night, there arose an awful heart-terrifying shriek. It was plainly in the armory wing and evidently from one of the upper floors. Startled, affrighted midshipmen jumped from their beds and stood in listening attitudes. Again came a cry that permeated every nook and corner of the armory wing, and hundreds of midshipmen listening with painful intensity plainly heard the words:

"Help, help, Stonewell, help; I'm going down, going down, down." The tones were those of one in fearful agony. The midshipmen jumped to the doors of their rooms and into the corridors, all with unspeakable dread in their hearts, waiting for a leader to direct their actions. [73]

Stonewell, rooming on the first floor, dashed into the corridor, followed by Drake.

"Where's that cry?" he demanded in strident tones.

"The top floor, sir," cried little Mr. Mumma, with trembling voice. Up the stairway bounded Stonewell and Robert.

Hardly had this occurred when the cry was again heard. It seemed now to be in the corridor of the third floor, which by this time Stonewell had reached. Stonewell stood perplexed and worried; in a second the fearful scream was again heard, but now evidently from the floor below, the second floor. Stonewell ran to the stairway at one end of the corridor, followed by the other midshipman. "Where is that cry?" he again demanded of the startled midshipmen standing about, much bewildered.

"It was here a minute ago, right here, right here," replied Harry Blunt. "But what's the matter? what's happened?" he asked. Again they were silenced by the awful cry: "Help, help, Stonewell, save me!" which arose from the floor below. It was twice repeated, each time seeming farther away, and then it ceased entirely. By this time Stonewell and Robert had run down two flights to the ground floor. Midshipmen here had heard the frightful shrieks and many scared faces were to be seen. [74]

"Turn out, everybody; get into ranks. Company officers, muster your companies," shouted Stonewell. "Pass the word to the upper floors, Bob," he called out. "Muster on the first and ground floors," and Robert was off in a flash.

"You have anticipated my orders, Mr. Stonewell," remarked the officer-in-charge. "Make a careful muster; we'll investigate; what do you think it was?"

"I can't imagine, sir; I'm entirely bewildered; the cry was undoubtedly heard at the top of the building, and it was heard later on each floor. I followed it down from the third floor. But nobody came down on the stairways, I'm certain of that, and the cry seemed near the centre of each floor, where no stairway leads down. If it wasn't that I believe everything on earth is explainable I would say it is uncanny." [75]

While Stonewell and the officer-in-charge were talking Bancroft Hall had burst into life. The cries had ceased.

In going along the ground floor Stonewell came across Bligh, half supporting Farnum. The latter was shivering with unconcealed fright.

"What is it, Stonewell?" he half whispered. "Oh, what has happened? Hasn't something dreadful occurred?"

Farnum had the appearance of a sick man. He was agitated in manner, and seemed weak and trembled; without Bligh's assistance he would have fallen.

"Just a joke, old chap," replied Stonewell kindly; "nothing to worry about; but you're sick, I can see that. Man, you have a raging fever!"

"Get to your company, Bligh; I'll take care of Farnum."

Stonewell reported Farnum as being sick, and received permission to take him to sick quarters, at some distance from Bancroft Hall.

The result of the muster was that Bligh and Farnum were reported as not being present but the absence of both was explained, Farnum being sick and Bligh being with him when the latter's company was mustered. [76]

The midshipmen, tremendously interested and impressed, were now waiting to be dismissed. All sorts of conjectures were ventured to explain the mystery, and some had superstitious fears in their hearts. Mr. Henry Bligh listened with a queer expression to a great many theories of this remarkable episode, but offered none himself. But after he was dismissed he chuckled and laughed, being apparently much pleased with something.

CHAPTER VI

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THE GATES FORWARD PASS

The commandant was inclined to make little of the incident of that Friday night. "Just a midshipman's joke," he said next morning to the officer-in-charge.

"I don't feel that way at all," replied that officer. "I don't believe anybody could have simulated the horror of those tones. I confess I have no theory about the matter and I'm at an utter loss in attempting to account for the way the cry descended from the upper to the lower floor, for it certainly did do that. It couldn't have been anybody running downstairs, for the midshipmen in charge of floors were at their desks at the foot of the stairways, and they say that nobody except Mr. Stonewell and Mr. Drake came down, and it wasn't either of them."

"Oh, I'll tell you how it was done," said Commander Dalton. "Some jokers got some rubber hose in some way and fixed up a plant to bewilder the officer-in-charge. I can imagine sections of hose were led to the different floors and were triced up overhead and acted as speaking tubes. You didn't think to look overhead, did you?"

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"No, I didn't, but I don't think that could be the explanation."

"Perhaps not, but some joking midshipman was at the bottom of it. If it happens again just look overhead."

For several days following Stonewell appeared much preoccupied and was to be seen wandering about the corridors in the central part of the armory wing. Facing the corridors were long lines of midshipmen's rooms; the only communication between the floors were the stairways, two to each floor. Finally Stonewell went to the top floor and after looking about, disappeared into a small doorway leading to the tower, where the ventilating blower was in operation. This was on Wednesday afternoon just after study hours were over. At this time Robert Drake was standing by the stairway of the ground floor, leading to the basement. Harry Blunt came by and said: "Hello, Drake, come along, if you're going to football practice to-day; Stonewell said he wanted us on the field as early as we could get there."

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"I'm just waiting for Stone; he's gone up to the fourth floor, and said he would be down directly."

Then to Robert's great surprise, Stonewell came up the stairway from the basement.

"How in the world did you get into the basement?" he exclaimed. "I saw you start for the top of the building and you came out of the bottom. How did you do it?"

"I'll let you know later, Bob," Stonewell said quietly, and Robert knew he didn't care to talk before Blunt. "Come along, fellows."

They started off at a brisk pace; near sick quarters, Stonewell said: "I'm going to drop in to see Farnum; an operation was performed on him Saturday afternoon, and Dr. Pickron said I might see him to-day. He is getting along finely."

"That's splendid news," exclaimed Robert; "just tell him how sorry we all are that he has been sick."

"May I see Mr. Farnum for a few minutes?" asked Stonewell of Dr. Pickron, in sick quarters.

"Yes, top floor back on the right. Don't stay too long with him."

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"Thank you, doctor, I'll only be with him a moment."

Stonewell found Farnum lying in bed with his head bandaged. "Hello, Stone," cried the latter happily, as Stonewell came in, in a different tone of voice than Farnum had had for some weeks. "By George, Stone, I'm feeling a lot better; I've got rid of that miserable feeling I had for such a long time. Dr. Pickron is all right; he cut my head open and I'm going to be well and out in ten days or two weeks. I knew there was something wrong with me, but Dr. Pickron has fixed it all right. I'd been in bad shape ever since that Bucknell game."

"I'm delighted, old fellow," replied Stonewell enthusiastically; "that was a hard bump you got that day, but you're looking ever so much better. Everybody will be awfully glad to hear you are getting along so nicely; the squad, particularly."

"I'm afraid I'll play no more football this year."

"Don't worry about that, Farnum. You played a slashing game, and had much to do in getting that six against Bucknell; but you played too hard, as I was afraid you would. Say, old chap, you were pretty sick the night I brought you over here, weren't you? Do you remember much about it?"

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"I've been worrying about that, Stone; I remember coming over with you, but I'm a good deal bewildered as to what happened before I saw you. I'd been feeling sick all day and turned in early. I went to sleep and had a horrible nightmare; I hate to think about it."

"Where were you when you woke up?"

"That's what has been bothering me. Stone, I found myself in the basement. How in the world I got there, what I was doing, I have no idea. I woke up with the most awful feeling of terror a man ever had, and I didn't know where I was. If it hadn't been that young Bligh was down there I'd have lost my grip; I didn't have much of one as it was. Bligh saw I was in bad shape, and grabbed me and half carried me to the floor above."

"What was Bligh doing there at that time?"

"I don't like to say, Stone; you must remember he did me a good turn."

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"Well, I know what he was doing, he was breaking training; I suspected that; I detected the odor of tobacco on him that night, and I've had this same notion before. If I learn that he's breaking training I'll fire him off the team. Do you know, Farnum, I've heard you were seen going up on the fourth floor a little before ten that night. Have you any recollection at all of that, any dream even?"

"None except a most horrible dream; I shudder to think about it. Say, Stone, I hope you won't talk about this; I'd hate to have the notion get among the fellows that I had been crazy."

"I won't speak of it, old chap, to anybody; but I can tell by your very appearance you're going to have no more trouble. Say, our next game is with the University of Virginia, and after that we play Harvard; by George, I hope we make a good showing. Good-bye, old chap; I'll drop in to see you every day or so until you're back with us."

On his way out Stonewell stopped in to see Dr. Pickron. "Doctor," he said, "Farnum is doing well. What was the operation you performed?"

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"We trephined his skull. He received a hard blow on the right side of his head in the Bucknell game; this caused a rupture and resulted in a hemorrhage or blood clot, which was formed between the membranes of the brain and the skull; and there was a slight depression of the skull over this area. I wanted to operate at the time he was first hurt, but the blood clot was mostly absorbed, and apparently Mr. Farnum regained his normal condition. But actually there remained a thickening of the membrane over this area, and this, with the slight depression of the skull, caused a constant pressure. This resulted in a certain form of epilepsy, which was his condition when you brought him over last Friday night."

"Doctor, while in this condition could Mr. Farnum have walked about, unaware of what he was doing, as if he were asleep, and later know nothing about what had happened?"

"Yes, indeed; it's quite likely that very thing happened to Mr. Farnum."

"Thank you very much, doctor," and Stonewell left and went to the athletic field, where football practice had already commenced.

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"Bligh," called out Stonewell sharply, "I believe you've been breaking training. I give you fair warning that if you are caught at it you'll be kicked off the team without ceremony."

Bligh looked uncomfortable and commenced to bluster. "Who says I've broken training; just let me know who it is! Don't I play quarter well enough for you, Mister Stonewell?" he continued sneeringly.

"Blunt can take your place any time," replied Stonewell shortly. "He's playing better every day, and your playing is at a standstill. Now get busy."

"Oh, you're one of the mighty Stonewell's pets," muttered Bligh to Harry Blunt. "Your bootlicking begins to draw interest."

This uncalled for and unexpected insult was too much for Harry Blunt's uncertain temper; full of rage he jumped at Bligh and struck him heavily in the face. The two lads clinched, but were immediately separated, Harry's face aflame with angry indignation, and Bligh furious with mortification. Stonewell called them sternly to time, threatening summarily to dismiss both from the team if they didn't bury their personal differences: nor would he listen to any explanation from either.

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"Shut up, both of you, and get to work," he ordered peremptorily.

After this the rivalry between Bligh and Blunt became bitter. Blunt secretly was tremendously encouraged by Stonewell's remark that he could take Bligh's place any time. In the next game, against the University of Virginia, Blunt was put in at quarter, and won golden opinions. Virginia was beaten 10 to 0, and there were many that now openly said: "Blunt is every bit as good as Bligh, and with another season's experience he will be better."

Bligh was aware of this sentiment, and it exasperated his already bitter feeling against his rival; he had much enjoyed the reputation of being the Naval Academy's best quarter-back. He showed this bitterness by a sullen behavior that was evident to everybody and which brought down upon him severe criticism and reprimand. But he did not change.

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On the next Wednesday, Annapolis was matched against Harvard. The wearers of the crimson came to the field smiling and confident, but it wasn't long before they commenced to look worried. Annapolis immediately commenced to tear great holes for steady gains through the Harvard line. To the enthusiastic midshipmen on the bleachers it seemed like a regular walk down the field. When ten yards from Harvard's goal, Lumsden, a second classman, took the ball. No one knew just how it happened, but the ball slipped from Lumsden's grasp, and quick as a flash the Harvard captain emerged from the scuffle with the ball under his arm and an apparently clear field before him. Robert Drake downed him on the Annapolis fifteen yard line.

Harvard now tried rushing tactics, but to her dismay could make no headway, and on the third down kicked a goal from the field. From now on Annapolis played with wild desperation. Chances looked bright for them, but without realizing it the team was exhausting itself. Toward the close of the second half Annapolis had the ball seventeen yards from the Harvard goal line, and now Stonewell realized, too late, that his men were exhausted, that Harvard had better staying

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powers. Twice Stonewell threw the entire strength of his team against Harvard, but the latter stood the shock easily. The midshipmen were worn out. And then on the third down, Stonewell whispered to Bligh, the quarter-back, to try a goal from the field. "Our best and only hope is to tie the score," he said.

Once more the two teams were lined up, Annapolis bracing itself for a final effort, Harvard doggedly determined. And then Bligh gave the signal.

"Thirteen, twenty-one, ninety-seven, forty-six."

"Time, time," called Stonewell, suddenly, running out and holding up his hand. "Blunt, oh, Blunt!" he shouted to the side lines.

"Get off the field, you hound," Stonewell said in tones of contempt to Bligh.

The latter had given the signal for the Gates forward pass.

CHAPTER VII

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THE WEST POINT GAME

In another moment, but for Stonewell's quick action, the ball might have been put in play.

All the Naval Academy players instantly realized what Bligh had intended, and every one was intensely angry.

Gates, who had heard the signal, came running out on the field from the side lines; the Harvard players were tremendously surprised and did not know what to make of the commotion among the midshipmen, and the umpire was angrily ordering the midshipmen to play and Gates to get off the field. Short shrift was given to Bligh; the latter's attempted expostulation was cut short, and Stonewell passionately ordered him away. Blunt took his place as quarter. A place-kick was attempted, but was blocked, and time was soon called. The game ended with the score Harvard 3, Annapolis 0.

The midshipmen players ran to their dressing rooms, and much hot and angry talk followed. Some were for reporting Bligh and having him dismissed. Others were for giving him a physical beating; others proposed that he be put into complete "coventry."

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"None of this will do, fellows," said Stonewell, after listening to a lot of angry proposals for Mr. Bligh's discomfiture. "Not one of us here will ever speak to the man; that goes as a matter of course; but we must be very careful to avoid doing anything that will tend to create discussion. Bligh's leaving the field was not understood by anybody but our own players. If he be put in 'coventry' or thrashed or reported or disciplined for what he did to-day the matter might leak out. West Point scouts were present watching our play, and Harvard plays Yale soon. The only thing to do is to keep absolutely mum; in this case the ends of justice and of discipline must give way to football necessities. We must keep faith with our friends of Yale."

"But is such a hound to be permitted to remain a midshipman?" burst out Harry Blunt. "I've been brought up to believe a midshipman could not do a dishonorable thing and remain a midshipman; is Bligh to do a scoundrelly act and not only go unpunished but also to have the secret of it kept by us who would have been disgraced if he had succeeded in his purpose?"

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"Just so, Blunt," replied Stonewell. "There's nothing else to do. Should we report Bligh it is quite possible the whole thing would come out, and Gates' forward pass from a fake kick formation would become a matter of common knowledge. We may win the West Point game through it. Yale plays Harvard the same day we play West Point. Each of us must avoid doing a thing in regard to Bligh that will cause comment or discussion. His leaving the field at that time and his being put off the squad is bound to cause talk in the brigade. If anybody asks why, just say he didn't suit, and change the subject."

"That's right," broke in Professor Danton, who had been an interested listener, "but I just want to add one thing; in the many years I've been here, there have been at different times bad characters entered as midshipmen; but they're invariably found out and dismissed. Mark my words, Mr. Bligh will be no exception—he's undoubtedly a dishonorable character—don't worry about him; he'll not last a year here."

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Much discontented grumbling followed, but all realized there was nothing to do except follow Stonewell's directions. As a natural result impotent rage was felt by the midshipmen players against Bligh. In spite of Bligh's dastardly act they were to be powerless to show their contempt for him or their resentment of his conduct, nor could the midshipmen of the brigade be told until after the football season had ended.

"And just think of the brigade giving Bligh the 'four N yell,' fellows, as he left the field," grumbled Harry Blunt.

The members of the team talked of Bligh's conduct rather than of the game in which they had just been defeated. Before the game they had hardly dared to hope for victory against Harvard, and all had now a satisfactory feeling that a good battle had been fought, and that no apology was necessary.

Amongst the midshipmen of Bancroft Hall much enthusiasm was felt for their team, but great

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surprise was exhibited when at supper Bligh was seen to go to his regular seat in the mess hall instead of going to the training table. It became instantly known that Bligh was off the football squad, and "Why?" was the question asked everywhere.

Bligh was very quiet, and in reply to numerous questions said he could not talk about the matter. Then all knew that he had been dismissed from the squad.

"Pass the word, Pete," said Glassfell to Peters, "that Stone says that no questions are to be asked, and Bligh's leaving the football squad is not to be talked about." It was wonderful how loyally this mandate was observed. It soon got to every midshipman of the brigade and in spite of the intense curiosity that existed every midshipman felt it a duty to the team to carry out Stonewell's wishes.

That same Wednesday night, shortly before half-past nine, Bligh appeared in the room occupied by Stonewell and Robert Drake.

"By what authority are you visiting my room in study hours?" demanded Stonewell in coldly official tones.

"From the officer-in-charge, sir; I told him it was most important."

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"What is it?"

Bligh's reply came in halting, jerky sentences.

"I wish to explain that signal to-day, sir. I was wild for our team to win; we could have won by the play; I gave the signal without thought, sir. It just sprang from my lips—I never once thought about the promise—and besides, it would be a greater honor to win from Harvard than from West Point—and probably we would have won by it from West Point, too—we have never yet won from Harvard. Don't you see, sir, I was working for the Academy? I was carried away at the time; it was a tremendous minute and the desire to use a play that would win crowded all other thoughts out of my mind; it's well enough to think of promises when you have time to do so; it's easy when you're sitting in a chair doing nothing, but too much outside matter should not be expected of the quarter-back in the middle of a fierce game. I want to go back on the squad."

"Mr. Bligh, from the very best possible construction of your act, even if it were agreed that your character is high, that with you a promise intentionally broken is impossible, your conduct has shown you to be irresponsible, a person in whom trust cannot be reposed. But from your words I judge you regard a promise lightly—to be broken easily. Your action was particularly bad because it might have caused other men, who have higher regard for their word than you have, to be faithless to a promise. But I'm going to make you one promise, and that is as long as you are at the Naval Academy you will never play football here again. You may leave my room, sir."

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"Do you think I'm going to stand this?" cried Bligh, in passionate tones. "Do you expect me to sit idle while you are ruining my reputation? I'm not powerless, perhaps I know of some way I may injure you—and some others," and Bligh's eyes glared with savage intelligence.

"I know what you're thinking of, you miserable plebe. You're thinking you will write to both West Point and Harvard about the fake kick."

Bligh gave a violent start.

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"But let me tell you," continued Stonewell, "those people would spurn a correspondence with you. If you attempt such a thing as that I will learn of it, and then I'll make you another promise; if you should do it you'll be drummed out of this place to the tune of the Rogue's March. Return to the officer-in-charge, sir, and report you have concluded your important matter."

Bligh turned and left the room. Angry feelings dominated him. In his statements to Stonewell he had unconsciously expressed his sentiments; honor and truth were in fact not salient characteristics of this young man, and when giving the signal for the Gates forward pass he had not given much thought to the promise he and all of the team were bound by. So he left Stonewell with a sense of injury and resentment, not of remorse.

Stonewell and Robert lived in the corner room of the ground floor, armory wing. Bligh roomed with Sexton in the main corridor, next door to the room used as an office by the lieutenant-commander in charge of the first division of midshipmen, that officer occupying the room only during the day.

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When Bligh returned he found his roommate, who had been off on some unauthorized visiting since supper time, leaving the room again with his arms full of clothes.

"What's up? Where are you taking those things, Sexton?" inquired Bligh.

"I have permission to change my room; I'm not going to room with you any more."

Sexton was on the football squad, and so knew of what Bligh had done. "So you're against me too, are you?" shouted Bligh, now beside himself with anger; he then left the room and started down the corridor, and in a moment saw Harry Blunt coming toward him. He did not notice that Blunt, on seeing him, suddenly clenched his hands and seemed to breathe hard. In fact Harry's anger was yet intensely alive, and the sight of Bligh set his nerves on edge.

Bligh's overwrought feelings now left his control; he wanted somebody to hate, and because of his previous troubles with Blunt it was very easy for him to vent his passion on that young man. So as he passed Harry he suddenly stopped and said:

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"So the Great Stonewell's pet chicken has bootlicked himself into quarter, has he?"

And then an avalanche struck Mr. Henry Bligh. Before he thought of defending himself a steam

hammer blow slammed him against the corridor wall and in the space of three or four seconds blow after blow was rained upon him; blows sent by Harry Blunt, animated by intense personal animosity and utter detestation. And then Bligh dropped to the floor, covered his face with his hands, acknowledging defeat, and groaning in utter despair. To that overwrought fourth classman it seemed as if the entire world had combined against him.

Stonewell came running down the corridor. "What does this mean?" he demanded savagely of Blunt.

"He said I was your pet chicken, and had bootlicked myself into quarter. I hit him; I had to, I couldn't help it. I hadn't said a word to him when he insulted me."

"Go to your room and keep away from him. Get up, Bligh, and go to your room."

After this episode Bligh was very quiet, and kept much to himself. But whenever he passed Harry Blunt or Stonewell a peculiar expression crossed his face. One would have said that though he never spoke of them yet he thought much about them, and these thoughts evidently were not pleasant ones. [98]

The football season now drew to a close, and finally those ancient friends but football rivals, Annapolis and West Point, once more faced each other on Franklin Field, in Philadelphia. It is not the purpose here to depict that glorious struggle; that is a matter of too recent history and has been told many times.

The teams seemed about equally matched. In the mighty rushing of one team against the other neither side could make much, and but few first downs were recorded; end runs were nipped in the bud. All in vain would one team hurl itself upon the other, and many tremendous efforts accomplished nothing. And so before the end of the first half kicking tactics were adopted by both sides. Twice when Annapolis had recovered the ball from a punt down the field a place-kick was tried, but each time it was blocked by West Point.

Once more, while there was yet ten minutes to play, the midshipmen were within striking distance of West Point's goal, and once more Blunt gave the same signal for an attempt for a goal from the field; a signal the West Pointers now knew perfectly well. But they did not appreciate a difference in Blunt's manner of giving the signal, something well understood by every midshipman player. Stonewell fell back in his place, the midshipmen braced themselves as usual, and the West Pointers prepared to block the kick. [99]

On the bleachers the mighty host who had been yelling themselves hoarse were momentarily silent. Harry Blunt now grabbed the snapped ball and then, with terrific force, West Point plunged into the Annapolis line. The shock was backed by all the strength and pluck and spirit that the West Pointers possessed. But bewilderment overtook them, for something out of the usual had happened, and in awful dismay they were like men groping in the dark.

Blunt grabbed the ball when it was snapped back and ran seven or eight yards to the right; and at the same instant, with the speed of a deer Robert Drake sped far over to the right. He then turned and caught the ball which with unerring skill Blunt had thrown to the point where Robert was to catch it. [100]

In but a few seconds Robert was lying flat on the ground between the goal posts. Annapolis had made a touch-down. And now from the Navy side there broke out prolonged roars and shouts from fifteen thousand enthusiastic Navy friends, while over on the West Point side there was nothing but silent dismay.

There was no more scoring, but all Annapolis was wild with delight; for the first time in four years she had defeated West Point.

But on the midshipman stand, surrounded by excited midshipmen in blue, there was one young man who did not participate in the general delight; for with brooding face and troubled eyes Midshipman Henry Bligh sat silent.

CHAPTER VIII

[101]

"THE MAN WORE A SLOUCH HAT"

"Bang," went the reveille gun at six in the morning, rattling every window in Bancroft Hall; and out of bed jumped Robert Drake in a hurry. He first took his customary cold shower-bath, and then quickly threw on his clothes. "Turn out, Stone," he called to his roommate, who was in his own sleeping room across the study. A suite for two midshipmen consists of two sleeping rooms separated by a longer room used in common by both, a large clothes closet, and a shower-bath.

Hardly had the reverberating roar of the morning gun died away than Bancroft Hall was filled with the harsh, sleep-blasting notes of discordant bugles.

"Turn out on this floor, turn out, turn out," called out Robert in the corridor just outside of his own room.

Then he entered the room next to his own, in which Peters and Glassfell roomed.

"All right, Bob," came from each sleeping room which opened into the study room where Robert had entered, and Robert left and rushed into the next room. It must be confessed that Robert was [102]

hardly out of the room when Glassfell was once more sound asleep. And further it is admitted that Robert did not give the same stern inspection to first classmen's rooms that he gave to those of the lower classes. He was satisfied with the report from his own classmates of "all right," but saw with his own eyes that all others were actually turned out. On this particular morning Mr. Harry Blunt, midshipman third class, was strangely very tired after what should have been eight hours of sleep, so tired, in fact, that neither gun-firing nor bugle detonation awakened him.

"Turn out, Blunt, turn out," called out Robert, standing over him. "Get up; you're on the report for not being turned out at reveille inspection."

Harry slowly turned out, and Robert rushed away to continue his inspection.

Breakfast formation came half an hour later. Most midshipmen were in ranks before roll call, but at the last note of the bugle swarms of midshipmen rushed madly from Bancroft Hall; midshipmen who had taken a few winks after reveille inspection, hoping to get to the formation without being marked late. This was Glassfell's habit, and he had developed remarkable skill in dressing himself while running at full speed. He would leave his room half dressed and at the end of a dead run he would appear in ranks ready for inspection. [103]

"By George, Stone," said Robert later, "can you imagine there is anybody in the world who does more mad rushing than midshipmen do? We are jumped out of our sleep by a cannon going off right under us, and we run about in a feverish hurry all day long, always having to be present at some formation or other, always fearful of punishment if we are late at anything. And one day is just like another; we were jumped about all day long when we were plebes, and we are still at it."

Every minute of Robert's life was interesting and never had it been so full of zest as in this, his last year at Annapolis. He enjoyed his rank with its duties and authority as cadet lieutenant, also his studies and drills were engrossing. These days, though so crowded with detail, were much the same; several hours daily were spent in preparing lessons; recitations followed, and then at four o'clock came the afternoon drills. The practical drills supplemented the theoretical work in class rooms, and all was based upon what was to be required of the midshipmen after graduation. And as an important duty of graduated midshipmen is to teach and train enlisted men, Robert, in common with the rest of his classmates, was drilled at many different things. He commanded his own company at infantry and artillery manoeuvres and felt proud and important in this position, but at other times he was to be found at a forge, dirty with grime and sweat, or taking the place of a fireman at a boiler. He could now turn out a fair piece of work at the lathe, shaper, or drill-press; and he was quite at home in sailing a boat, running an engine or manipulating a twelve-inch gun turret. For at Annapolis drills are many and varied, and the mind, eye and hand are all trained together. [104]

December passed and with it football was forgotten. In the last of January came the semi-annual examinations; of the first class there now remained but one-half of those who had originally entered. [105]

In February occurred an incident of much interest to Robert. At a Saturday night dance he saw his first commander, Captain Blunt, and with the latter was Miss Helen, his daughter, and Harry Blunt's sister. It would be hard to decide who was most pleased at this meeting. Captain Blunt evinced real pleasure in meeting Robert again, and Helen's welcome was a genuinely glad one.

"Come and see us, Mr. Drake," said Captain Blunt to Robert; "I've given up my command and am on leave; I've brought Mrs. Blunt and Helen to Annapolis. We've opened our house here, as I'm going to be here for several months and then go to the Light House Board. Come and see us, and bring Mr. Stonewell with you."

Meanwhile Midshipman Henry Bligh lived a very quiet life. After the football game the reason for his dismissal from the squad became noised about, and Bligh felt he was ignored by upper classmen and shunned by his own class. He probably thought more of this than did anybody else and his thoughts were not happy. Besides, he was low in his studies and in danger of "bilging." He was barely satisfactory at the semi-annual examinations. [106]

One night early in February, after taps inspection, and after the midshipmen in charge of floors had been sent to their rooms, the door of Bligh's room opened and that young man's head cautiously appeared. Looking up and down the corridor, and seeing the midshipmen in charge were not at their desks, Bligh left his room and walked to the end of the corridor for a glass of water. This act was inoffensive in itself, except that midshipmen are required to attend to such matters before ten o'clock or wait until after eleven; it was not yet eleven and naturally Bligh did not wish to be seen.

While drinking the water Bligh heard some steps on the stairway leading to the next upper floor, and fearing it might be the officer-in-charge he quickly slipped into a dark corner at the side of the stairway, hoping he would not be noticed; in a moment a figure passed a few feet from him, and to his surprise he saw it was Third Classman Blunt.

"Now, what's that fellow up to?" reflected Bligh, his mind full of the injuries he imagined he had received from Harry Blunt. Bligh peered around the corner and in the dim light he saw Harry quickly and quietly walk down the corridor and then stop for a moment in front of the door of the room that Bligh knew was the office of Lieutenant-Commander Brooks, one of the discipline officers. The next instant Harry had opened the door of this room and entered it. Bligh was astounded. He walked softly to the room, paused an instant, and then gently, without making any noise, turned the knob of the door. [107]

The door was locked. Bligh was filled with wonder. It was evident that Blunt had a key to the

door, had entered the room, and was now inside.

Bligh could not imagine why any midshipman should want to enter a discipline officer's room; it was certain no midshipman had a right to be in that office except to see Lieutenant-Commander Brooks on duty. Blunt was committing a serious offense in being in the room. This did not worry Bligh at all, but he was completely puzzled.

"What can Blunt be doing in there?" he asked himself again and again. He listened intently and heard Blunt moving about; and then he heard a noise as if a chair were being moved and had knocked against something. Looking up through the transom he saw it was all dark within; Blunt had not turned on any light. [108]

Bligh now entered his own room, which was next to the one that Blunt had entered, and where Bligh now lived alone without a roommate. With a puzzled mind he drew a chair to his window, and thought and wondered. His imagination could not help him. He had been in the office next door and knew it contained nothing but a desk, a table, two chairs and a midshipman wardrobe where Lieutenant-Commander Brooks could hang a coat if he were so disposed.

Bligh sat by his window, his mind full of Harry Blunt. The soft moonlight streamed into his room. And then Bligh was startled by hearing a noise in the room next door, as if a window were being raised. Straining his eyes he looked out from his window, and in the next instant he saw the dark figure of a man creep out on the passageway leading from the window of the office to the terrace. [109]

The man turned to his left, and with the bright moonlight full on his face Bligh got a good look at him, but did not recognize him. The man wore a slouch hat, sack coat, and had a moustache and full beard.

The dark figure stole over to the terrace and soon disappeared.

"Now I understand," cried Bligh to himself. "Blunt had an appointment with some 'cit' and they met in the room next door. He's up to something, and I'll see that he gets reported for this, and I hope it will bilge him."

Bligh now opened the door of his room and looked out, expecting every moment to see Harry Blunt emerge from the office. Bligh was thoughtful for a while, then he took a spool of black linen thread from a drawer in his wardrobe. He tied one end of the thread to the door-knob of the office and carried the thread overhead through the open transom of his room. He then sat in the chair by the window holding the thread hauled taut; and Bligh sat there for the next two hours, thread in hand.

At one o'clock his watchfulness was rewarded. He saw the figure of a man steal up over the terrace and across the passageway. And in the moonlight he recognized the same hat, moustache, beard and sack coat. [110]

Bligh sat perfectly still, and it was not long before the thread in his hand suddenly pulled and snapped. Bligh quickly stepped to the doorway of his room and looked out, and there going down the corridor was Harry Blunt in his service uniform.

Then Mr. Henry Bligh, midshipman, fourth class, gave a pleased laugh and went to bed.

CHAPTER IX

[111]

ROBERT GETS BAD NEWS

"Stone," said Robert Drake one Saturday in March, "let's call on the Blunts this afternoon. Captain Blunt is home on leave; his ship, the 'New Orleans,' arrived in New York last month. He's a splendid man."

Stonewell laughed. "Come along," he replied, "and perhaps I'll have a chance to see Mrs. Blunt; she's such a pleasant woman; and then there's that scamp of a son of hers; perhaps he may be at home. I haven't seen much of him since the football season ended. I never see him nowadays if he sees me first. Mark my words, Bob, Harry Blunt is up to some mischief, and he'll be getting into a lot of trouble before long. Every time I pass him he looks conscious. By the way, Bob, whom have you asked to present the flag to your company? You expect to win it, of course."

"Come along, Stone, and quit your fooling. You know I'll be glad to see Captain Blunt, and nowadays I don't need an excuse to call on Helen. She is always pleasant and cordial. I hope her brother won't get into any trouble, but I've an idea he's taking lots of liberties with the regulations. I imagine there are not many of the six hundred and sixty-five that he's not broken. I hope it won't come my way to have to report him for anything; I wish he were in some other company than the first." [112]

Half an hour later they were admitted into the Blunt home, and were received as old friends.

"How are you, Mr. Drake?" exclaimed Captain Blunt, shaking Robert's hand heartily. "And here is Mr. Stonewell, glad to see you; I can't believe it's nearly four years ago since I took you out on the 'Constellation.' Then you were subdued plebes, and now what a transformation! Here Mr. Stonewell is cadet commander, and I'm not surprised. And, Drake, here you are a cadet lieutenant, and I'm told my son Harry is in your company. How is he doing?"

"Very well, captain. He stands fairly well in his class and is very well liked. He did wonders in [113]

football."

"So I've heard, but I want to know whether he runs against the regulations or not, that is, if he has been reported for any serious offenses; for instance, to-day is Saturday and he can't come out to Annapolis on liberty, which means he is not on the first conduct grade. Now what's he been doing? That's what I want to know, and you can tell me because you're his company commander."

"Nothing at all that I can recollect now, sir, or for you to be concerned about. He has probably been reported for not being turned out at reveille inspection, or late at formation. A few such reports would deprive him of Saturday liberty in Annapolis. I'm sure no serious reports have been made against Harry. Had there been I should have remembered them."

"And then of course you would speak of them to his family."

"No, sir, I should not wish to."

"Come, Robert," interposed Helen Blunt, "let father talk with Mr. Stonewell. Mr. Stonewell is so solemn and he knows so much that he will just suit father. Come into the dining-room." [114]

As they walked away Helen said: "Robert, I'm bothered to death about Harry and I want you to help me. That brother of mine is going to get into trouble, trouble bad enough to get him dismissed, and that would be a terrible misfortune for us."

"I don't think there's any danger of that, Helen. Harry is all right; he's just a little careless, that's all."

"Well, Mr. Robert," retorted Helen scornfully, "would you think Harry was only a little careless if you knew he was up-stairs this instant? He comes out in town regularly when he has no right to, and some time he will be caught. And he will be reported for something much worse than taking French leave—he will be reported for something that will dismiss him." And pretty Helen was indignant and much concerned over her brother's recklessness.

"Now, Robert Drake," she continued, "you've just got to help me."

"I wish I could, Helen; I might intimidate Harry, that's about all I could do. I couldn't appeal to him with any success, I've tried that; he would tell me to mind my own business. Harry doesn't take preaching patiently. Now another thing, Helen; he is in my company. If you hear I ever report him for anything I want you to believe I had to do it and that I hated to." [115]

"I'll know that beforehand, Robert," replied Helen gently. "But Harry is very good about such things; he never talks at home about troubles with other midshipmen. But now he is up-stairs, and he dare not come down, for father would surely see him. Now can't you and Mr. Stonewell start to go soon and ask father to walk to the Academy grounds with you? If Harry doesn't leave the house soon he will be absent from supper formation, and then he'll have to tell why, and his being out in town would be found out."

"I can't treat your father that way, Helen; it wouldn't be right at all; but I must go myself now."

As Robert went into the next room to take his leave, he was in a state of great discomfort. Helen Blunt had thoughtlessly put him into a very uncomfortable position. From her point of view she felt justified in using any means to get her father from the house. But Robert felt he could not be a party to a deception practised upon Captain Blunt, and he was particularly uneasy as to how Helen would take his refusal. He feared that to her his attitude would appear priggish. But his mind was soon eased in that respect, for Helen said in a low voice: "I shouldn't have asked you to do that, Robert; that wasn't nice of me. I didn't think, but I'm so worried about Harry." [116]

"I'm going to walk to the yard with you," suddenly said Captain Blunt. "I'm going to see the commandant for a few minutes, and if you don't mind walking with an old fellow like me we'll go together."

Robert was much relieved, and all three soon left the house.

Half an hour later supper formation occurred, and Robert was relieved to see Third Classman Blunt in his customary place in ranks. Toward that young man he now experienced a sentiment of irritation, even of indignation. He knew that Harry had been taking unauthorized leave, or "Frenching," as it is called, one of the most serious offenses a midshipman can commit, and evidently had been jeopardizing his place as a midshipman. To do this regularly in the face of his family's protestations seemed to Robert to be utterly callous. [117]

After supper he accosted Harry and said: "Blunt, you've been Frenching, and you've got to stop it. If you keep it up you will surely be caught and will stand a good chance of being dismissed. You ought to have some regard for your family, and personally I don't mind saying I'd hate to be placed in a position where I'd have to report you."

"Drake," replied Harry, "are you advising me as a friend or speaking to me officially as my company commander?"

"As a friend, I hope."

"Well, then," rejoined Harry in a short, snappy way, "as a friend will you kindly mind your own business?" and the young man started away, whistling as he went, but was instantly stopped by a sharp military order of "Halt." Robert stood before him with flashing eyes, and in menacing tones said: "I'll not address you again as a friend, Mr. Blunt; you will please to realize that when I speak to you hereafter it will be your company commander who is talking. And you'll do no more whistling in my face. That will do, sir. About face, march off." [118]

Harry Blunt had a new sensation; he was actually intimidated. He really liked Robert as much as

a third classman ever likes a cadet officer, and in his heart was sorry he had provoked Robert's displeasure. "But Drake is a good chap," he later said to himself; "he'll come around all right."

From here Robert went to his room. "Hello, Bob," greeted Stonewell; "there's a letter for you." Stonewell was busy writing and after a few moments he looked up, and suddenly cried out: "Why, Bob, what's the matter; no bad news from home, I hope?"

Robert, with the letter clutched in his hand, and with a quivering chin, looked the picture of woe. He had evidently received some news that made him very unhappy.

"What's the matter, old chap?" inquired Stonewell anxiously; "something has happened; what is it?" and the comforting kindness of his tone went straight to Robert's heart. [119]

"Stone," he said, "this is a letter from father; a month ago the railway company that employed him was reorganized and he lost his position. He has been half sick ever since, and it's impossible for him to get employment. He hadn't intended to tell me, but he felt he ought to. You know mother has been an invalid for years. Stone, I've got to resign, there's no other way out of it. Mother and father are sick, and no money is coming in. I've got to go home to take care of them."

Stonewell regarded him with his eyes full of sympathy. "I'm dreadfully sorry, Bob," he said; "I'm sure your father will get employment. But don't talk of resigning; you might find it very difficult to secure employment for yourself; you're too near graduation to resign, and after you graduate you will be in a position to help your father financially, if he needs it. It would distress him terribly if he thought for a moment you contemplated leaving the naval service. I'm going out for a while, Bob; now don't you feel so badly; I'm sure matters will right themselves." [120]

Stonewell left and Robert paced up and down the room with blurred eyes and a sad heart. The condition of his father and mother, ill and without resources, filled him with agony. He longed to relieve them from their troubles and anxieties; he dreaded the unfriendliness and coldness dealt to people without means, and thinking of the mental torture his father was in overwhelmed him with grief.

Stonewell went out into the city of Annapolis, direct to where the Blunts lived. Here he asked to see Captain Blunt and was soon closeted with that gentleman.

"Captain," he commenced, "you knew my roommate's father, didn't you, Mr. Drake? I believe he was graduated from Annapolis shortly after you were."

"Yes, indeed, he was a fine fellow, too; he had a splendid record in the navy, and it was a great pity he resigned. What about him, Mr. Stonewell?"

"Well, sir, Bob, my roommate, is in great trouble about his father and mother, and as you and Mrs. Blunt are real friends of his I thought I'd talk to you about it. Of course Bob doesn't know I'm with you. His father has lost his position and has no income, and Bob thinks he ought to resign to go to Chicago. He feels his duty is to be with his father and mother. It would be such a pity for him to resign so near his graduation. I thought perhaps you might send for him and influence him more than I could. I'm sure he'll listen to you." [121]

"By jingo, Stonewell," exploded Captain Blunt, "I'm detached from my ship and ordered to duty as secretary of the Light House Board, and only to-day received a letter asking me to recommend somebody, preferably one familiar with marine matters, to be chief clerk to the board. Drake's father would be just the man. He will get living pay and it's a life position. Let me have Mr. Drake's address; I'll write to him to-night."

Upon his return to Bancroft Hall Stonewell found Robert quiet and composed, but determined. "I've got to do it, Stone," said Robert handing his roommate an ominously official-looking paper. In it he had formally tendered his resignation as a midshipman. "It's a lifetime disappointment," he continued, "but I've got to go home to my people. They need me. Now I feel you're going to argue with me and I beg you not to attempt to dissuade me; nothing you or anybody could say would change my determination. I feel terribly about it and you would only make me feel the worse. Please don't, Stone. I must do my duty to my father and mother." [122]

"I shall not attempt to dissuade you, Bob; I know exactly how you feel. But I'm going to ask you to do something for me. I feel as if it would break my heart if you were to resign. Now I'm going to ask you to let me lend you fifty dollars. You can send this to your father, and if he is in immediate need of money this will help out for a few days. And I want you to promise me you will delay your resignation for one week. Surely you can do this for me, and I have strong hopes that in a week's time you will feel there is no need in Chicago that would compel your resignation."

"That's awfully good of you, Stone, but can you spare the fifty dollars? I feel I ought to leave immediately, but if I could send father some money I might wait a week. The idea of resigning is like death to my hopes." [123]

"Of course I can; you know I've plenty of money," replied Stonewell, jumping up enthusiastically. "I know something good is going to happen, Bob, and don't you worry; you're not going to resign."

Stonewell's happiness was infectious and Robert's heart seemed lightened from a heavy load. Stonewell had gained his point and he did not choose that Robert should learn from him what Captain Blunt had in his mind for Robert's father.

ROBERT GETS GOOD NEWS

The days following dragged slowly by for the apprehensive Robert. His mind was full of the needs of his father and mother and it took real effort on his part to attend to his duties and prepare his studies. He anxiously awaited each mail delivery, but not until Saturday morning after drill did any letters come from him. He and Stonewell entered their rooms together and Robert fairly pounced on the two letters that were awaiting him. Eagerly he tore open the letter in his father's well-known handwriting, and rapidly read it. Then he gave a shout of joy.

"What do you think, Stone?" he cried. "Here's the happiest news in the world. Father writes me that Captain Blunt has secured a splendid position for him, chief clerk of the Light House Board. Isn't that just splendid? All of my worries are over; and father returns the fifty dollars I sent him. I'm so happy, it seems as if a ton had been lifted from me. I do hope I'll be able to convince Captain Blunt of my gratitude to him. What a wonderful thing to have such a friend, Stone. But how did he come to do it?" Robert paused a moment and then added: "Stone, did you tell him of the trouble I was in?" [125]

"Bob, I told him you felt it was your duty to resign, and I told him why. I wanted an older friend than myself to advise you. It was a liberty; but, by George, I can't feel it's a case for an apology. I am just as happy as you are, Bob. Jingo! but Captain Blunt is a fine man."

"I do wish I could do something to show him how much I appreciate what he has done for me!" exclaimed Robert.

"You can," rejoined Stonewell. "There's his son Harry. You can try to help him out of trouble; he's pointed for a lot of it. There are rocks and shoals ahead of him, and he's pretty certain to get bumped hard."

"I can't do anything for that youngster, Stone," replied Robert. "Positively he never loses an opportunity of cheeking me."

"You may have the chance, Bob; but why don't you read your other letter?" [126]

"I forgot I had another letter. Hello, this is from Stanton; let's see what he says."

"What! Stanton!" queried Stonewell. "Do you mean last year's five striper?"

"Yes; what a splendid fellow he is. He says he is having a fine time aboard the 'Paul Jones,' a torpedo boat destroyer, and he's learning a lot. He says his ship made a good record at the last target practice but it will do much better next time. His captain is devising a new sight for the six-pounder gun; the one now attached to that style of gun is very poor. Stanton says that anybody can get up a better sight, and now the Navy Department is allowing officers to make improvements on the guns they are going to fire at target practice. That's what our instructor in gunnery said last October, don't you remember?"

"Yes, and by the way, Bob, now that your mind is easy about everything you had better get busy if you expect your company to win the flag this year. You've got a good company, but so has Blair, and he's red hot after the flag. He'll wipe your eye, Bob, if you don't hustle. And it's getting late in the year." [127]

"That's right. I'll get busy next week. Let's see, now my company does well in infantry and artillery; I ought to beat Blair in those subjects."

"Yes, but Blair's company is pretty sure to get first place in seamanship, and on the whole his company is better, more numerously represented in the different forms of athletics than yours is. As an offhand guess I would say the second company has a better show for the flag than yours has. You see the total possible multiple for the entire brigade is 3,000. Blair will probably get fifty points in fencing, and he has a lot of fellows on the track and field teams; he'll probably get 100 points there; and the best gymnasts of the Academy belong to his company; besides, the second company is certainly as well represented as the first company in the football and baseball squads and in the crew. You may make it, Bob, but you won't if you don't get your company stirred up."

"By George, Stone," cried Robert, "I'd rather win that flag than have five stripes. My company is all right; we will average just as well in drills and in athletics as the second company. We haven't done much talking of what we're going to do, but don't imagine we've forgotten about the flag. We are after it, hard and strong." [128]

"If you do win it, I'll wager a hundred dollars to an onion that you'll deserve to win. Blair is not to be easily beaten," replied Stonewell.

"Let's go out and call on the Blunts," suddenly proposed Robert. "I want to thank the captain."

"Don't say another word, Mr. Drake," Captain Blunt was saying to Robert later the same day; "your feeling for your father is natural and does you credit. I was really glad to be of service to him and to you; but aside from all that, the Light House Board is glad to get your father for its chief clerk; he is just the man we need. So we are all pleased. How is my boy Harry coming along? By George! I could have sworn I saw him ahead of me on Maryland Avenue to-day; you don't think Harry is Frenching, do you?"

"I hope he isn't, captain. I should be inexpressibly sorry if he were and I had to report him for it. You know he is in my company." [129]

"If you find him Frenching I want you to report him," savagely rejoined Captain Blunt. "Don't

have any false notions on that subject, Mr. Drake."

"That is a matter of great concern to me, captain," replied Robert in tones of anxiety. "I'd almost prefer to bilge than to report your son for a serious matter. He is a splendid fellow; everybody likes him and admires him. But he is undoubtedly reckless and careless. The great trouble to me is that he won't let me speak to him except officially. He is impatient of advice and won't listen to any from me."

"Mr. Drake, I desire and expect you to report him when you ought to do so. Don't worry about that."

Helen, growing impatient at this long conversation, said suddenly, "Robert, I made some fudge this morning; won't you come back in the pantry with me and help me bring it out?"

As soon as they were out of hearing, she said in a low voice: "Harry is up-stairs again, and he can't come down to get away without father seeing him. What shall I do? Harry is terribly afraid of his father." [130]

"The only advice I can give you, Helen, is to tell your father he is there. You can't cover up his tracks, and I don't know anybody except his father who can influence him."

This advice to Helen seemed too explosive, and she felt she could devise some way herself to protect Harry, and she must make him feel that he must never, never do it again. So she remained silent.

When they returned to the drawing-room Robert felt ill at ease. Mrs. Blunt, always sympathetically friendly to him, engaged him in talk; but after a few minutes Robert got up to take his leave, accompanied by Stonewell.

"Weren't you in a bit of a rush, Bob?" inquired Stonewell, glancing keenly at his roommate.

"Perhaps," replied Robert uncomfortably.

"Perhaps you found young Blunt eating pie in the pantry," remarked Stonewell.

"Not that close, Stone, but I guess he was in the house. Now what am I to do? I can just see that before long I'll be in a fix where I'll have to report young Blunt for a bilging offense, the son of the man that has every claim to my gratitude—or else I'll have to go back on the strongest principles I possess. What am I to do, Stone?" [131]

"That's a hard problem; we'll think about it, and perhaps we may be able to intimidate Blunt. Perhaps I may find a means to influence him. By the way, did you know that the first class has late liberty to-night? Penfield is going to play Richard the Third at the Colonial Theatre. It's a great opportunity. I went to the commandant, and our class is going to have eleven-thirty liberty. It's Penfield's best play; and I already have our tickets. Aren't you pleased, Bob?"

Robert looked at his roommate in sheer astonishment. "Well, of all things!" he said. "To think of your knowing that for hours and never mentioning it. Why, I was talking with Mrs. Blunt and Helen about the play and wishing I could go. I'm immensely pleased. But why didn't you speak of it before, Stone?"

"Oh, I just didn't. In fact I haven't told anybody. The news will be announced at supper formation, so you know it sooner than anybody else does. And we'll have a glorious time." [132]

"I'm delighted," cried Robert. "Stone, this is just fine. Bully for old Dalton. He's a daisy commandant."

CHAPTER XI

"THREE GROANS FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT"

Great was the delight of first classmen at the privilege of theatre liberty, a rare privilege for midshipmen; and loud and deep were the indignant murmurs of midshipmen other than first classmen to whom this privilege was not accorded.

"There's no reason, no reasonable reason why the second and third classmen should not go," protested Third Classman Blunt at supper. "I'm in favor of the whole third class going in a body; we'll show the authorities what we think of the commandant's ridiculous treatment—"

"Mr. Blunt, you are called to order," rang out the sharp, dictatorial voice of Cadet Lieutenant Drake, sitting at the head of the table. "You are inciting mutiny and speaking disrespectfully of your superior officers."

Harry Blunt was plainly cowed and subsided for a time; but later said in a low tone to a classmate sitting on his right: "I'm going out anyway; it won't be the first time I have gone over the wall." [134]

"You'd be recognized at the theatre and spotted, and you'd be missed at taps inspection; you had better not try it," was the reply.

"I guess you're right," grumbled Harry, "but I've a pretty good trick up my sleeve, and I may work it."

Later, when the first classmen were all gone and the corridors were deserted, Third Classman Blunt might have been seen to slip into room number 23, the divisional officers' room. And in a

few minutes he came out looking perplexed and worried.

The Colonial Theatre was a gay sight that Saturday night. All of society Annapolis was present, the ladies beautifully gowned, and the men in correct evening dress. Annapolis prides itself on being as strict in such matters as Newport. Interspersed throughout the audience were to be seen many navy uniforms; and well toward the front and centre, in seats reserved for them, were seated as fine a body of young men as had ever been brought together, the senior class of midshipmen.

It seemed more like a friendly party than an ordinary audience, for everybody knew everybody else, and before the curtain rose there were innumerable greetings and much pleasant talk. [135]

But to the "costume de rigueur" so faithfully observed by the Annapolitans, there was one exception. In a back seat of a box, on the right of the stage (a public box where seats were sold separately) sat a man dressed in defiance of social custom. He was simply clothed in a sack coat, and trousers of dark material. He wore a heavy moustache and full pointed beard. However, he didn't seem to know anybody and none appeared to notice him or worry over his unconventional attire.

Penfield had an appreciative audience that night. Never had anything so fine been given at Annapolis, and enthusiastic delight was repeatedly expressed.

At twenty minutes before ten the bearded man in the box suddenly left and once outside of the theatre he started at a dead run toward the Academy grounds. A convenient negro made twenty-five cents by boosting him over the wall. The bearded man rushed on the Chesapeake Bay side of the Armory and Bancroft Hall, ran over the terrace, and bolted into the open window of room 23. The five minutes' warning bugle was soon heard, to be followed by the call for taps. And in Bancroft Hall was to be heard the measured tread of the midshipmen on duty making the ten o'clock inspection of rooms. [136]

Hardly had this ceased when the bearded man emerged from Bancroft Hall by the same way he had entered it. He was off on a bound and ran through the grounds unobserved. The wall presented no difficulty to him, and he was soon back in his seat in the theatre box.

"What luck," he said to himself, with great satisfaction. "I got out in the first place, got back again, was in my bed at taps inspection, and now I'm back here and have missed only a little of the play. And nobody saw me or knows anything about it."

The play proceeded. At a little before eleven, near the end, while some scenery was being changed, the manager of the theatre stepped out on the stage and called:

"Is Midshipman Stonewell present?" [137]

"I am he," replied Stonewell, rising in his seat.

"I'm sorry, but the superintendent of the Naval Academy has just telephoned me to have Midshipman Stonewell send in all midshipmen on the run." Before Stonewell had a chance to reply or give an order, and before the look of dismay and disappointment had disappeared from his classmates' faces, everybody in the theatre was startled by a loud cry in harsh, strident tones of:

"Midshipmen and everybody else, attention!"

An intense breathless stillness followed. Everybody looked to the direction from where the cry had come. There, in the front of the right hand box, stood a tall athletic looking man. Now a brown slouch hat was pulled down on his forehead; his face was covered with a dark beard. He wore a sack coat buttoned tightly over his chest.

By this penetrating voice everybody's attention was attracted. An expectant hush fell upon the audience. Every eye was upon the bearded stranger.

From the lips of the interrupter came a defiant call of: [138]

"Three groans for the superintendent of the Naval Academy and the commandant. Oh—oh—oh."

Without a moment's hesitation came ringing orders from Stonewell:

"First classmen, rise! March out on the double. Form in two ranks outside."

There was no hesitation or delay in obeying Stonewell's order. Swiftly they ran out of the theatre and halted on the walk outside. And almost immediately they were put in motion by Stonewell's order of "First classmen, forward, double time-march," and away they sped. Soon fire-bells were heard ringing and the siren in the Academy grounds was emitting long, terrifying blasts.

"Something's afire in the Naval Academy, Bob," cried Stonewell; "hurry." The first classmen dashed to the Maryland Avenue gate and here were met by streams of lower class midshipmen, starting to drag out the different hose reels. The first classmen immediately assumed charge of their various commands. The fire proved to be in the carpen-ter's shop, and in a very few minutes it was put out. [139]

After the midshipmen were back in their quarters the one topic of conversation was the startling event in the theatre.

The next morning was Sunday. Shortly after ten o'clock, when the commandant had finished his inspection of rooms, Cadet Lieutenant Drake appeared at the door of Midshipman Blunt's room and said: "Blunt, report to the commandant's office immediately."

Harry Blunt clutched the table as if for support, and with pallid face and in trembling tones he

asked: "What does he want me for?"

"You'll know when he tells you," and Robert walked out. It was not with his usual debonair manner that Harry Blunt entered the commandant's presence. In fact it was a very scared youth who confronted Commander Dalton. Fear and apprehension were plainly depicted in his face.

"Mr. Blunt," commenced the commandant, "your father, mother and sister are to dine at my house to-day, and I want you to come too. Your father tells me he hasn't seen much of you of late; you are not on the first conduct grade, are you? If you are not I'll dispense with the regulation and grant you special permission to dine with an officer to-day." [140]

Harry Blunt suddenly sat down on a chair behind him. He was momentarily speechless.

"Sit down, Mr. Blunt," smiled the commandant. Then Harry stood up.

"Wa-wa-was that all you wanted to see me for?" he stammered.

"Yes; we dine at half-past one."

"Thank you, captain; I'll be delighted to dine with you and be with my father. This is awfully kind of you, captain. Oh, thank you; yes, indeed, I'll be there—I don't believe I've ever called on you, captain, but—"

"Well, well, Mr. Blunt," interrupted the commandant, "what is the matter with you? At first when you came into my office you seemed to be bereft of speech, and all of a sudden you talk with such a rush that you can't stop yourself. Perhaps you thought I was going to talk about something else," and Commander Dalton glanced keenly at Harry.

"Be at my house by half-past one," repeated the commandant, dismissing Harry, and the latter left. He took several deep breaths when out of the commandant's office. [141]

"By George," he said, almost aloud, in tones of great relief, "I feared I was up against it. I was never so scared in all my life."

CHAPTER XII

[142]

ROBERT MAKES A DISCOVERY

"Pete," said Robert a few days later, "let's go to the gun shed."

"All right," replied the amiable Peters, "come along; but what are we to do there? I don't know of any more uninteresting place in the whole Academy."

"You know that our company is going to try hard to win the flag, don't you?"

"Of course we are. And so is every other company. Don't think for a minute, Bob, that you're the only cadet lieutenant who has picked out the girl who's going to present it. But what has the gun shed to do with our company winning the flag?"

"It all counts, Pete; you know part of the grand multiple each company makes is made up of its record at target practice with six-pounder guns, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Well, I received a letter from Stanton last week; he says the sights of this gun are very poor. Now in our gunnery sections we were all encouraged to make improvements. You see gunnery in the navy is now a matter of terrific competition; it is ship against ship and gun against gun. At each target practice the ship that does the best carries the gunnery trophy for a year, and big money prizes are won by the best gun crews. And officers in command of different guns are encouraged to make improvements. Why, just before the Spanish war the twelve-inch guns of the 'Texas' could only shoot once in five minutes, and then the shots didn't hit often. On her last target practice those same guns fired once a minute and hit the target almost every time. And the improvements were all made by officers aboard the ship." [143]

"Well, Bob, here is your six-pounder gun; just take a look at it. I don't imagine you will be allowed to do much tinkering with it. You don't know a great deal about the gun—not nearly so much as the men who designed and built it—and here you are talking about improving it. You would probably injure rather than improve it."

"I know how to work it, anyway, and I have fired a six-pounder a number of times," replied Robert, rapidly throwing down a couple of clamps, and turning the gun on its pivot. [144]

"I have no notion of touching the mechanism of the gun; but Stanton says the gun sights are poor; that anybody could put better sights on the gun."

Robert now put himself at the rear of the gun, assuming the prescribed position of the man who fired it, holding it securely by the shoulder and hand of his right arm, his left hand being at the trigger. He ran his eye over the gun sights, and moved the gun up and down, and from side to side.

"Pete," he remarked, "look at this rear sight; it's an open sight—just a mere notch, a groove. And the forward sight is just a sharp point. If I screw my eye up or down, or from side to side, I might think there were many different places the gun would shoot to. When the gun is fired in this exact position the shot is going in only one direction, but I bet you if ten different fellows should

aim along these sights as the gun is now and say where the shot was going to hit you would find there were ten different opinions." [145]

"Of course there would be," replied Peters in a superior tone; "there always are with open sights; professional marksmen always use peep-sights."

"Pete, you're a treasure," cried Robert in enthusiastic approval; "we'll fit peep-sights to this gun, but we'll keep it a dead secret, and when we come to fire our string of shots we'll use our own peep-sights."

"How are you going to fit peep-sights to this gun and not have everybody else know about it?" asked Peters dubiously. "And we only practice with this gun; we will actually fire one of the 'Nevada's' six-pounders,—and probably the sight you fitted to this gun wouldn't fit the 'Nevada's.'"

"Let's go aboard the 'Nevada'; she's alongside the 'Santee' wharf, and we'll talk to the captain. I know him, and we'll ask him to let us fit up the six-pounder we're going to use. There's a gunner's mate named Lenn aboard that ship who is a great friend of mine; he's awfully handy with tools, and he'll help me."

"But, Bob, a captain isn't going to let a midshipman monkey with the guns of his ship." [146]

"The 'Nevada' is in reserve with a crew of only thirty-five men on board; she's here for the instruction of midshipmen, and besides, we're not going to make any permanent change; we're going to invent a new six-pounder gun sight; we'll just take off the old sights and put in our own peep-sights; the captain can put the other ones back if he wants to."

"You talk as if you had already invented your peep-sights and all you had to do was to put them on. Now let me tell you, Bob, it isn't so all-fired easy. This gun isn't fitted for peep-sights. Another thing, the rear sight is attached here to a graduated bar; it moves up and down according to the distance of the target you are firing at, and it also moves from side to side, to allow for the speed of the ship. Now you're going to have a good deal of trouble to arrange an entire new kind of sights for this gun."

"Pete, those are problems that I'm sure can be solved. I don't pretend to say I know just how we can make the change, but I'm going to study the question, and I'm going to get expert help. Now let's go over to the 'Nevada' and talk with Captain Brice; we've got to get his consent first; and then I'll get that smart gunner's mate, Lenn, to help me; he's a very inventive chap. Come along." [147]

Before long the two midshipmen were aboard the monitor "Nevada" and were talking with Captain Brice. At first the latter was utterly opposed to any "monkeying," as he expressed it, with one of his guns. Finally he became interested in Robert's earnestness, and relented to the extent of the following ultimatum:

"Now, Mr. Drake, I'll allow you to remove the present sights of one of my six-pounders; the sights are kept out of the gun, anyway, for that matter; and in their places you may put in new sights. But you are not to alter the gun in any way; you must fix it so that any sights you put in can be immediately replaced by the regular sights. I'll send for the man you want, Lenn, and tell him to give you a hand."

Chief Gunner's Mate Lenn soon appeared, and he and the two midshipmen repaired to the forward starboard six-pounder on the superstructure deck, where Robert explained what he wanted. Lenn grasped the idea with avidity. [148]

"Why, Mr. Drake," he said, "we can fix up what you want with no trouble at all. A sight is a simple thing—the principle is that the centre line of the gun's bore must be exactly parallel to the line of sight at point-blank range with no speed allowance. Now you want a peep-sight. We'll get a hollow cylinder, say an inch in diameter, and an inch or two long; we'll plug the end and drill a fine hole in the end of your plug. There's the peep. And the forward sight will be a ring with cross wires in it. Now your line from the peep-hole to the cross wires must be parallel to the axis of the gun. And while I think of it the rear and front sights should be as far apart as possible; I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll carry the sight at the end of a long piece of brass pipe; I've just the stuff in my storeroom. I'll fit a Y piece to where the present front sight is, pivot it there and hang the forward part of the pipe in its gimbals. I'll just run a quarter-inch pin through the pipe; and I'll drop the rear end of the brass pipe on this rear sight—I'll have to make a slight alteration in this rear sight—"

"You can't change a thing, Lenn, you mustn't," interrupted Robert. "Captain Brice will not allow any changes of the gun—"

"Oh, I've an old condemned rear sight below; I'll use that," smiled Lenn. "Now we'll fasten our new front cross wire and rear peep-sights to the ends of our brass pipe—why, anybody can see at a glance it will be a far better arrangement than the present poor system."

When Robert and Peters left Lenn said: "Come aboard the 'Nevada' in two days from now and you'll find your new sights on this gun ready for business."

On the following Saturday, after supper, Robert and Stonewell were enjoying a pleasant call at the Blunt household. Captain Blunt was telling Stonewell of the last target practice his ship had gone through. "Why, sir," he said, "if my six-pounders had not done so poorly I would surely have won the trophy; my six-inch guns averaged seven hits a minute, each of the best guns making ten hits. If we had had decent sights for our six-pounders the 'New Orleans' would have made the best record of any ship of her class in the navy." [150]

Robert was eagerly listening, and was much interested, but Helen Blunt wasn't.

"Father," she interrupted, "you talk of nothing but guns, guns, guns and hits per minute. Now that isn't nearly so interesting to midshipmen as ice-cream and cake. Robert, come along to the pantry with me and help me get some."

That young man was on the point of asking Captain Blunt a question about six-pounder gun sights, but Helen was already on her way toward the hall; so he thought his question could wait, and he started to join Helen. She had gone to the rear of the house, to the pantry next the kitchen. The passageway was dark, but Robert knew the way, and he hurried after Helen, and soon ran right into her.

"You are a regular blunderer, aren't you, Robert?" she laughed. "I am trying to turn on the light but can't find the key. What a bother it is that in Annapolis all the servants go home at night—and there goes the doorbell. I'll have to go see who it is. Now try to find the switch; it's somewhere near on this wall. Just feel about and you'll find it. I hope you're not afraid to be left in the dark," was her parting shot, "but the kitchen door is locked, so that no burglars can get in." And Helen ran away. [151]

Robert groped about, but could not find the switch to the electric light, and while he was fumbling his ear caught the noise of a click in the kitchen, as if a door had been unlocked. A moment later he heard a door opened, and with it he felt the draft blow on him.

"Some one has let himself into the kitchen," thought Robert. He kept quite still, wondering who it might be. Then he heard footsteps on the kitchen floor; they seemed quite close to him and he felt confident there was an intruder there. He peered through the open door of the pantry into the kitchen, but in the dark could see nothing; suddenly an electric light in the kitchen was turned on, and Robert, himself unseen, looked with fascination on the person he saw.

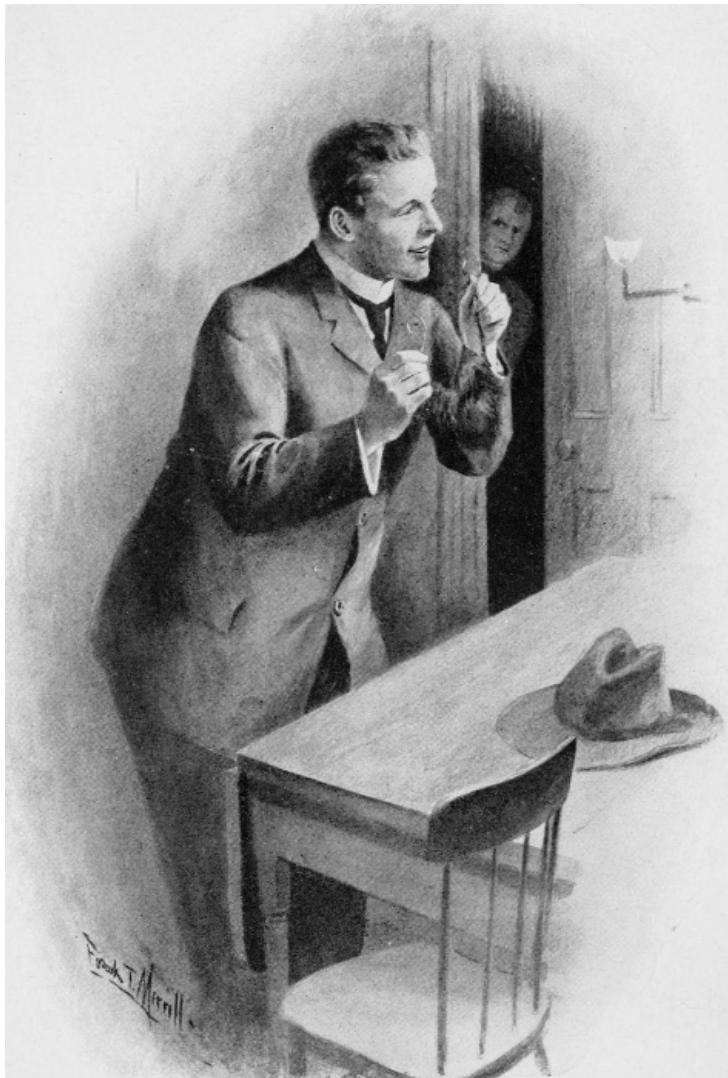
There standing by a table was a man with a brown slouch hat drawn down over his eyes, a man with a heavy moustache and dark pointed beard; he was dressed in a dark sack coat, buttoned closely across his chest and wore trousers of a dark material. [152]

Robert felt his breath come quickly.

"What can this man be doing here?" he wondered. "I know him; he's the scoundrel who called for three groans for the superintendent and commandant."

Robert had a confused idea that the stranger might be a thief and he was wondering what he had best do, when suddenly a feeling of dismay and horror swept over him. The stranger threw off his hat, and with a quick movement of each hand unhooked from around his ears the support of what was evidently a false beard. And the merry face of Harry Blunt was revealed.

It is difficult to analyze Robert's feelings, but chief among them was an utter detestation for Harry. That a midshipman, himself the son of a splendid officer, should be the miscreant who had so wantonly, so publicly, insulted the highest officers at the Naval Academy, filled Robert with disgust.



THE STRANGER THREW OFF HIS HAT

For a midshipman to take unauthorized leave was a common offense, so also was it for a midshipman to have civilian clothing in his possession. Such offenses were committed at great personal risk and when detected brought down upon the offender's head severe punishment, and if repeated it meant dismissal. But reprehensible from a military view-point as it was, such an offense was not dishonorable.

Since the event at the Colonial Theatre none at Annapolis had ever had the slightest notion that the perpetrator of the insult of that night could be a midshipman; such an idea never was suggested, never even entered any person's mind. And so to Robert, his recognition of Harry Blunt as the culprit was as astounding as it was painful. He loathed Harry as an utterly unfit, dishonorable person, who had done shameful wrong to the Naval Academy. And immediately there arose in Robert's mind the knowledge that it was his duty to report Harry to the commandant, to report the son of his benefactor.

In agonized perplexity Robert turned and quietly walked through the dining-room to the hall.

"Did you find the cakes and things in the pantry, Robert?" cried Helen seeing him, "or did you get tired waiting for me? Mr. Farnum called, and he comes so seldom I felt I couldn't run away from him. Why, Robert, what's the matter? You have such a strange look on your face. What is it?" [153] [154]

"I—I couldn't find the light, Helen, I——"

"Oh, come back and try it again. But what is the matter, Robert? I'm sure something's the matter."

"I'm not feeling well, Helen. I—I—have to go—I can't stay,—please say good-night to your father and mother—I really must go," and with utter misery showing in every feature, Robert grabbed his hat and bolted out of the house.

CHAPTER XIII

HARRY BLUNT IS REBUFFED

Helen Blunt was grieved and hurt at Robert's strange action. It was incomprehensible to her. The others expressed much surprise at his sudden leaving. After a few minutes Helen got the refreshments, but she was much subdued for the rest of the evening, and it was only too evident that the pleasure of the day had gone for her.

Robert hurried back to the Academy and was soon in his room.

"I can't report him," he reflected. "I know I'm going back on my rank, on my duty, on my principles, on what I've preached ever since I've been at the Academy. The contemptible hound! He ought to be kicked out! It's a shame that such a despicable person should have such a fine father and mother—and—and sister. It's outrageous that he should remain here. But his father saved my father—I can't report him; it would utterly disgrace Captain Blunt—I'm full of gratitude to him—I suppose I have no right to let that gratitude interfere with my duty; but I can't help myself." [156]

For the next hour Robert indulged himself in many bitter reflections, but his conclusions were unchanged, and he deliberately determined to keep to himself what he had learned, neither to report Harry Blunt nor to tell even Stonewell what he had seen.

Stonewell came in a little before ten o'clock. "What's the matter with you, Bob?" he asked almost roughly. "Do you think you treated the Blunts very politely? You spoiled Helen's evening, and I could see Captain and Mrs. Blunt were concerned; they must have thought you acted very queerly, to say the least."

"I'm sorry, Stone—I couldn't help it. Please don't talk about it to me."

Stonewell glanced keenly at his roommate's worried face. "Look here, Bob, when you went out to the pantry did you see young Blunt? Has that scamp been Frenching again?"

"Stone, except once, you have practically never discussed your personal matters with me; I never insist on it, intimate as we are. Now this is a personal matter of a kind that I just can't talk about; please don't expect me to." [157]

"All right, Bob; but it's my opinion you feel you ought to report Blunt for Frenching and you feel you can't because you're under obligation of lasting gratitude to his father; and so you feel you're going back on your principles, and so forth. Now you were not on duty; no reasonable man would expect you to violate your own feelings to that extent. So cheer up, Bob; I'll tell you right now that if when I'm not on duty I find young Blunt Frenching in his father's house, I most certainly shall not report him."

To this Robert made no comment, but in his heart thought that if his roommate knew what a scoundrel Blunt was, that Stonewell would be the very first to report him.

Taps soon sounded, and before long Robert was in bed; but long hours passed before sleep came to him. "What a lot of terrible rogues I've been mixed up with," was one of the thoughts that came to his mind; "there was Hillman, Ramsay, Williams, and now this detestable Blunt. And of them all I fear Blunt is the worst." [158]

The next afternoon Stonewell went to Blunt's room and found that young man there alone. "Hello, Stone," greeted Blunt; "but now that football is over perhaps I should say Mister Stonewell to the five striper."

"Never mind the 'Mister,' Blunt. I thought I'd drop around to tell you that I think you are an unintentional cad."

"Your words are offensive, sir," cried Harry, getting angry immediately; "I'm not aware of any Naval Academy regulation that permits the cadet commander to insult a third classman."

"I don't wish to insult you, Blunt, and I admit my words require explanation. The point is just this: Bob Drake, your company commander, is entirely upset about something. He will not talk about it to me, and has no idea of my seeing you about the matter. He was out at your father's house last night, and I've a notion you were Frenching out there and he saw you. You probably know he has very strict notions of duty. My idea is that he feels he should report you or else go back on every principle he ever had. And for a particular reason he cannot report you." [159]

"Oh," replied Harry disdainfully, "if the reason is that he is currying favor with Helen most people would say Drake is the cad."

"It isn't your sister, Blunt. It's your father, whom he owes a debt of gratitude to."

"Why should Drake be grateful to my father?" exclaimed Harry in evident surprise.

"For personal reasons. I don't feel at liberty to talk about them, except to say that a couple of weeks ago a kind action on your father's part saved Drake from resigning. You see Drake cannot report your father's son; and come now, wouldn't a man be a cad to force a man like Drake to go back on his principles?"

"Good old dad," cried Harry impulsively; "I was a cad, but I'm glad you said unintentionally so. I'd have had no use for Drake if it had been on Helen's account. But really I didn't know Drake saw me last night. Are you sure he did?"

"I have just imagined so; you ought to know whether he did or not. He was at your house last night; at half-past eight he went out in the pantry to get something and all of a sudden bolted out of the house. He won't speak of the matter even to me, but he has been miserable ever since." [160]

"By Jove!" ejaculated Harry. "Perhaps he saw me in the cit's clothes; that would be a bilging spot, [2] wouldn't it?"

[2] A report involving dismissal.

"I shouldn't wonder," remarked Stonewell, drily.

"Stonewell, I'm obliged to you, and I'll tell you right now I won't give Drake another chance to

report me for Frenching; I'm awfully sorry the thing happened. I'll tell him I'll do the square thing hereafter."

In the meantime Robert and Peters had gone aboard the "Nevada"; Lenn saw them coming. "Come up above," he said to them; "I've something to show you." When Robert saw what this something was he was delighted. Lenn had fitted up the forward starboard six-pounder gun with the gun sights they had talked about.

"I've bore sighted the gun, Mr. Drake. Just train the gun on that white stone on the shore over there; look through your peep-sight and get the gun exactly on it. All right. Now shift your eye to the bore; the bore sights are in the gun. Now what do you say?" [161]

"It's wonderful," cried Robert; "are these bore sights in the exact centre of the gun?"

"Within a hair's breadth."

"Both the new gun sights and the bore sights are pointing at the white stone. The stone is over half a mile away. That means the line of the gun sights is parallel to the axis of the gun, doesn't it?"

"It does, indeed," replied Lenn, much pleased with Robert's enthusiastic approval.

"Let me see," insisted Peters, pushing Robert away from the breech of the gun. "Gee, but this is splendid," he called out a moment later. "Say, Bob, if you keep this quiet you'll make the gunnery record next June."

"Lenn, can we prevent people from seeing these sights?"

"Surely. I'll take them down when you leave; it only takes a minute to take them off the gun. I'll keep them in my storeroom when you're not using them; but, Mr. Drake, if you expect to make a good target record you'll have lots of work to do. You'll have to get your crew here day after day, for at least half an hour's drill. I'll be here to help you." [162]

"Good. And thank you, Lenn; I'll start to-morrow." And the two midshipmen left the ship.

"Now, Pete," said Robert, "we must organize to win the flag. Our company is well represented in all forms of athletics; we have football and baseball stars in it; now you and I and Glassfell and a couple of others will quietly drill with this gun. And at target practice we'll spring a great surprise on everybody. Whom had we better put in the gun's crew with us?"

"Well, let's see. There's young Blunt, he's a——"

"Don't speak of that fellow to me," interrupted Robert savagely.

"Why, Bob, what has he done; why are you so down on him?" inquired Peters, utterly surprised at Robert's vehemence.

"I want nothing to do with him. I don't wish to talk about him." [163]

"All right, old man, I'll think of some one else. Will see you later."

As soon as Robert saw his roommate later in the day, he began eagerly to tell him of his plans. "I'm going out to win the flag, Stone. My company stands as good a chance, better, I believe, than any other company to win it. But I'm going to make sure of it. Now you drill with my company, and what you individually do will count."

"Of course. And I'll do all I can. I want you to come out for the crew, Bob; you've pulled in two winning races——"

"I can't, Stone; now just listen to what I've done," and Robert told Stonewell of the new six-pounder gun sights and of what he expected to accomplish. "You see I'll not be able to come out for racing shell practice, and besides, you don't need me—my company is well represented in all athletics and if we win at target practice we'll get the flag."

Here the door was thrown open and Harry Blunt entered. Robert jumped to his feet, and with flashing eyes and in angry tones asked: "What do you want, sir?" [164]

"Why, Drake," replied Harry, completely taken back by this hostile reception, "I just thought I would tell you that if any act of mine has disturbed you, if I have forced you in a false position, I extremely regret it; I hope you will have no further concern because of me."

"Mr. Blunt, will you please leave my room? I despise you and I want nothing whatever to do with you."

"This is decent of you, Blunt, and I thank you for coming in," suddenly interposed Stonewell. "I know your motive, and it's all right!"

Harry Blunt stood in the doorway utterly chagrined. Tears came into his eyes and his chin quivered. Then without comment he left the room. Stonewell was extremely provoked. "He came in at my suggestion," he angrily said.

"I believe you," replied Robert calmly.

"I don't like the way you have acted. I don't understand you."

"Stone, I despise Blunt. There is a reason. You think you know it, but you are mistaken. Now, old friend, I cannot talk this matter over with you; I can but ask you to trust me, also to avoid discussing that young man when I am around." [165]

Stonewell was not inclined at first to be satisfied with this, but he soon decided to drop the matter; and several months passed before Midshipman Harry Blunt was discussed between them.

A MYSTERY SOLVED

The end of March brought with it to Annapolis a veritable blizzard; the ground everywhere was covered with snow. The soft snow, clinging to the tree branches, had commenced to melt, when promise of good weather suddenly changed to sharp cold, followed by another snow-storm. The intense cold had turned the trees into glistening skeletons, and the powdered white falling upon them made a beautiful picture, but the weight caused many branches to break, and Annapolis presented a most wintry spectacle. And then of a sudden out burst the sun, sending down hot rays that in a few days turned winter into spring. In but a short time all the trees were budding and spring, turning rapidly into summer, came with leaps and bounds and the bleak desolate days were soon forgotten.

There remained to Robert Drake but two months more of Academy life—two months of deep contentment. He surveyed his previous four years and drew much satisfaction in contemplating them. He was sure to graduate high in his class, with probably only Stonewell, Farnum, Sewall and Ryerson ahead of him. He had had troubles, but everything now seemed clear sailing before him. [167]

Midshipmen enjoy these last months of the school year. Out of town friends by the hundreds come to Annapolis, and after drills and on Saturdays and Sundays, the Naval Academy grounds are thronged with pretty girls, each flanked by at least one midshipman, and some by ten.

Every afternoon saw the midshipmen at their infantry or artillery drills, marching and executing military movements with precision that betokened much practice; or if not on the parade grounds the young men were to be seen in the steam launches, or else in the shops. After drill hours till seven o'clock four racing shells were out on the Severn River. The athletic field was sure to be crowded by baseball players; the tennis-courts always had a waiting list. And far off on the superstructure deck of the "Nevada," unknown and unseen by other midshipmen, were Robert Drake and four classmates, practicing loading and aiming with a six-pounder gun. Day after day this drill went on, always in recreation times. [168]

Robert took the shoulder-piece, finger on trigger, keeping his gun aimed at some boat moving in the Severn River. He was, according to the prescribed gun drill, "First Pointer."

Peters was the "sight setter." He ran up the rear sight according to the distance away of the object aimed at, and also he would move the rear sight to the right or left, according to the speed the boat was moving.

Glassfell was loader, and as such acting gun captain. Robert picked out two other classmates, Taylor and Warren, to act as shell-men.

"All ready now, fellows," cried Glassfell, late one beautiful April day; "let's have one more drill to-night and then we'll knock off. We'll start with the gun empty and breech closed. Lenn, you throw down the breech as usual after each make-believe shot—you won't have to when we really fire the gun because the gun is semi-automatic and the discharge of one shot opens the breech, ready to load the next one." [169]

"I learned that years ago, Mr. Glassfell. But I'll open the breech for you. We're all ready, sir."

"Load," rang out Glassfell's voice. Down went the breech, and instantly Glassfell threw in a dummy cartridge, and up slammed the breech, closing the gun with a click.

Robert snapped the trigger, and instantly Lenn threw down the breech; the dummy was ejected and Glassfell threw in another cartridge. This was repeated again and again, until Lenn called out "time."

"That was well done, sir; you loaded and fired twenty-nine times in a minute; I kept time; there wasn't a hitch. You have a well-trained crew, Mr. Drake."

On the way back, Robert met Helen Blunt walking with her brother. There was no question but that Helen expected Robert to stop and speak with her. She slackened her pace a bit, bowing to Robert with a sort of mute reproach in her manner; Robert hesitated a moment, then turned and joined her, while Harry Blunt walked on ahead, neither he nor Robert giving any greeting. [170]

"What's the matter? Don't you and Harry speak?" asked Helen, in a surprised, hurt way.

"Midshipmen never seem to have time for that sort of thing," said Robert, trying to speak lightly. "Men of different classes seldom speak unless they are particular friends. Let's go down to the sea-wall, Helen, and watch the shells; I do hope we'll win this year; we ought to, we've splendid men on the crew. What have you been doing lately? I haven't seen you for an age, and there's ___"

"Well, whose fault is that?" interrupted Helen with some spirit; "you bolted out of the house the other night as though you feared contagion, and I haven't seen you or heard from you since. I should think you would have something to tell me or explain."

"Yes, yes, Helen, I have ever so many things I want to speak to you about," and then Robert dropped into silence as they walked along.

"We've been such friends," said Helen quietly, "and had so many unforeseen things happen, that [171]

it seems as though we ought to get along without any more misunderstandings in the future; and yet we seem to be having one now. You have suddenly stopped coming to see me; surely there was a reason, Robert; what was it?"

Robert felt supremely miserable and uncomfortable; he did not know what to say. There was a reason, and yet he could not tell it to this sympathetic and congenial girl whose friendship he was so anxious to keep; he could not tell this reason, nor could he pretend there was none. It would be no act of kindness to Captain Blunt to inform him of the unworthiness of his son. And so Robert did not wish Helen to know that Harry was in any way concerned with the matter Helen wished to talk about.

"What's the reason, Robert?" repeated Helen with her eyes full of interest and concern.

Just then, the far-away bell of the "Santee" was struck four times. "Six o'clock," exclaimed Robert; "we've a whole hour before supper; let's walk along the sea-wall to College Creek and back; we'll just have time to do it." Poor Robert then relapsed into silence; he was happy to be with his friend again and eager to tell her that he could not explain his peculiar conduct; but he could not talk.

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His mind was in confusion, yet seemed a blank; and the trivial things about him took a prominence that in milder moods would have remained unnoticed. He noted with the eye of a naturalist a squirrel that scampered across their path, and ran along the fence, disappearing up a maple tree; two robins were scolding and fussing in the tree top near their nest. And from the coxswain of the racing shell, out in the Severn River, came regularly, like the tick-tock of a clock, the monotonous words—"Stroke—Stroke—Stroke." Thump, thump, thump went his heart. "Stroke—Stroke—Stroke," called out the ruthless coxswain to his tired crew on the river a quarter of a mile away.

Robert did not know what to say. His heart was so full he could not speak lightly. Helen looked straight ahead and said nothing, waiting no doubt for Robert to begin his explanation. Each was intensely uncomfortable. After Maryland Avenue was crossed, Helen turned to her companion and wistfully said: "I thought you had so much to talk with me about, Robert; but you haven't said a word. What is the matter; are we not good friends? Or is there some misunderstanding which prevents our talking to each other?"

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"Oh, Helen," cried he, "I'm awfully disturbed about something. It is of such a peculiar nature that I can't talk about it to any one. Can't you trust me and not ask me to explain myself? You see sometimes things occur that a midshipman can't talk about—it has nothing to do with any action of yours or mine,—I think so much of your friendship that it distresses me to appear as if I had any other feeling—"

"Robert, if you really are so anxious for my friendship, what Naval Academy affair could happen that would send you running out of my house and that would prevent you coming to see me?"

Then a great light broke upon her, and stopping suddenly, she confronted Robert and said excitedly:

"Robert Drake, I understand at last. You saw Harry that night, after I left you in the pantry. It was your duty, I suppose, to report him and you didn't do so because of—of the rest of us. And you haven't called since because you are afraid you will see him again. I'm right, I know I'm right!"

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Robert looked helplessly at her, and then said: "Helen, you and I have been good friends, haven't we? And can't good friends expect favors of one another? Now I've a real favor to ask of you, and it's this. Don't think of this matter, and please, oh, please, don't talk about it. Don't talk about it to your father and mother; I beg of you don't refer to the matter in any way."

"Robert, I really will do as you want me to, though I don't see why you have been so much upset. Harry isn't Frenching any more; he has promised me not to do that again. And even if he should you will not know of it or see him at my home; but I'm confident he won't, now that he has given me his word. Won't you come next Saturday and have supper with us? And bring Mr. Stonewell and Mr. Farnum with you."

Robert returned to his room in a happy mood. He had worried much at how the Blunts would look upon his abrupt action, and of his sudden avoidance of their home. He had decided not to call so as to take no chance of seeing Harry Blunt there, and he knew he could never explain the reason of his action to any of the Blunts. But now he felt that Helen, in a way at least, understood; she would require no further explanation and would not gossip about his reasons. And also he believed that Helen would so arrange it that he would run no chance of seeing Harry Blunt at her home when that young man had no right to be outside of the Academy grounds.

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And so Robert felt more light-hearted than for many days, so much so that after supper, while preparing for the next day's recitation, Stonewell, who knew his roommate's every mood, looked up smiling and said:

"Well, Bob, what is it; have you won the flag ahead of time, or have you made up with Helen Blunt? I've noticed you haven't been going to her house much of late; and for some time past you've been as glum as a Russian bear."

"Never you mind, Stone, I'm just feeling pretty fit, that's all."

Ten o'clock soon came, and with it out went the lights in Bancroft Hall and a perfect stillness broken only by the tread of midshipmen making taps inspection. Soon this measured tread ceased and complete silence reigned.

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And then out of this profound stillness came again that terrible cry, shrieked out in affright, startling every midshipman in the armory wing of Bancroft Hall. "Help! Help!" Far away it first seemed, and yet it was plainly heard.

With lightning speed Stonewell leaped from his bed and jumped into his clothes.

"Turn out, Bob," he cried. "I've a job to do, and won't be with you; turn out everybody in armory wing; tell Farnum to have everybody fall in by companies on the ground and first floors," and Stonewell dashed from the room.

Again the weird shriek sounded, now heard much plainer. Robert had followed Stonewell out of the room, and ran down the corridor shouting: "Turn out, everybody! Company officers, get your companies together!"

Midshipmen from all the rooms poured into the corridors.

"Help, help, save me, save me!" in agonized fearful tones were resounding throughout the building. And these cries became clearer on the lower floors. They seemed to have started from above and to have come down gradually. [177]

"Help, help," rang out the cry, now apparently on the first floor; it seemed to come right from the midst of a throng of midshipmen falling into their places in company formation; these were entirely mystified. And then the cry descended and was heard on the floor below, the ground floor.

"Where is Stone?" asked Robert of Farnum; "do you know where he went? He said he had a job to do."

"I turned out when I heard that awful yell," replied Farnum, "and I saw Stone run down these stairs into the basement. I wonder why he went down there."

Robert and Farnum were standing before the first division of midshipmen in the middle of the corridor, just in front of the stairway that led to the basement. "Where is Mr. Stonewell?" called the officer-in-charge, Lieutenant-Commander Brooks; "look overhead in each corridor—what's that going on on the stairway?" he suddenly exclaimed, interrupting himself. [178]

A midshipman was seen fairly running up the dark stairway, dragging by the collar of his coat another midshipman, who was vainly endeavoring to regain his balance and foothold.

The first midshipman was Stonewell. In a moment he had reached the head of the stairway, and then, with a mighty effort, he hurled his heavy burden from him.

"It's Bligh," cried out Robert.

"What does this mean, Mr. Stonewell?" demanded Lieutenant-Commander Brooks, in wondering accents. Fourth Classman Bligh presented a rueful, crestfallen figure. Stonewell had handled him with no gentle force, and at the head of the stairway had thrown Bligh violently from him; and he now lay in a heap on the floor. But evidently he was not seriously injured, for he commenced to sob convulsively.

Stonewell came up to Lieutenant-Commander Brooks and quietly said: "Sir, some time ago I thought I learned the source of the mysterious cries we heard then and which were repeated a few minutes ago. I went up into the tower and saw a boatswain's chair in the ventilating shaft which leads from the top of the building to the basement. This boatswain's chair was on a long rope which led through a pulley block overhead, and by it a man can lower himself from the top of the building to the basement in the ventilating shaft—I suppose it's there so that a person can lower himself to make any repairs that are needed in the shaft. When I heard the cry to-night I ran to the basement—to the opening of the ventilating shaft—and before long I could see somebody coming down. I didn't know who it was, but suspected it was Bligh, and it was. He gave his last yell when he was even with this floor. Then he lowered himself to the bottom and I collared him just as he got down." [179]

Mr. Bligh was a pitiable spectacle. "It was only a joke, sir," he gasped incoherently. "I meant to do no harm, sir; it was just a little fun. Mr. Stonewell had no occasion to use me so roughly—he hurt me, sir."

"Go to my office immediately, sir," ordered Lieutenant-Commander Brooks. "I will attend to your case later. Mr. Stonewell, you have done well, as usual. Dismiss the battalion, turn everybody in, and have the usual inspection made," and the officer-in-charge left and returned to his office. [180]

Fourth Classman Henry Bligh got up slowly. He looked from face to face; not one friendly expression did he find.

Full of pent-up feelings which he dared not express Bligh turned and left.

"Dismiss the battalion, sir," ordered Cadet Commander Stonewell to Cadet Lieutenant-Commander Farnum.

"Companies are dismissed," rang out through the corridor. "Go to your rooms immediately and turn in. Company officers make the usual taps inspection."

When Henry Bligh became a midshipman he was not at all a vicious young man. But he arrived at Annapolis with an unformed character. His predominating trait was a desire for applause, and early in his fourth class year his football ability had many times earned for him vociferous applause. It was his predominating desire, a passion to become personally famous, that had urged him to give the signal for the Gates forward pass when playing against Harvard—the dishonor attached to the act had not been clearly fixed in his mind. The immediate result, his dismissal from the football squad in disgrace, his execration by the entire brigade of midshipmen—the change of his position from one of bright fame to contemptuous disesteem, had immediate effect upon the unformed character of Mr. Henry Bligh. He was plunged in the blackest of gloom and he brooded day and night over his troubles. [182]

It was a pity he had no close friend to talk with, no older midshipman to be advised by. Amongst the midshipmen there had been a burst of anger against him and then he had been left entirely alone.

No organized "coventry" was declared against him, but a most effective, far-reaching one existed. Its direct result was to make Bligh continually unhappy, and this engendered in him passionate anger. Anger must find an object, and Bligh's directed its full force upon Stonewell and Blunt. The former, so he believed, had been the cause of all of his troubles; the latter had supplanted him at football, had defeated him in a personal fight.

On that first night when the midshipmen of Bancroft Hall had been so startled by the awful cry of "Save me," Bligh had been in the basement; he heard the cries and found Farnum, out of his head, seated in the boatswain's chair at the bottom of the ventilating shaft. Bligh of course immediately knew what had happened, but he kept this knowledge to himself.

On the night spoken of in the last chapter, Bligh had been on the sick list, and therefore was excused from company muster. It occurred to him that he could perpetrate this act and scare the hundreds of midshipmen who had showered such contumelious treatment upon him. [183]

It really would have been a good joke had it succeeded, but unfortunately for Bligh his detection rendered his position almost unbearable. He had been roughly treated by Stonewell; and now whenever he passed a cadet officer he was halted and given directions.

"Brace up, Mr. Bligh, put your heels together, little fingers on the seams of your trousers, chest out, belly in, head up, chin in."

Had the joke been done by Glassfell or perhaps any upper classman it would have been laughed at. But to have been perpetrated by a plebe was an indignity to time-honored midshipman custom. And that the plebe should have been Mr. Bligh made the act worse than an indignity; it was an unbearable thought. And so for a while Plebe Bligh figured on every delinquency conduct report. Cadet officers suddenly discovered that Fourth Classman Bligh's hair was too long, his clothes not brushed, his shoes not shined. Bligh grew nearly frantic, morning after morning, at hearing such a report read out as: [184]

"Bligh, Wearing torn trousers at morning inspection.

"Same, Soiled collar at same.

"Same, Not properly shaved at same."

Bligh, much as he was to be blamed, really was to be pitied. No midshipman was ever more friendless, ever more in need of kindly direction. Under some circumstances he might have developed a useful character, a high standard of thought and action. But in his lonely life there was nothing but black, bitter hopelessness. Bligh was in a state of mind to yield to dark temptation if it presented itself. Had his mental state been known some one might have taken him in hand and befriended him and directed his thoughts to more wholesome subjects. But Bligh made no advances to any one and in sad silence unknown and unthought of, brooded tempestuously. [185]

Beautiful May once more held dominion over man and nature at Annapolis. For the midshipmen there were studies, to be sure, but the studies were all reviews of previous lessons and therefore were easy. And then there were drills, but these, this last month, were always in the presence of hundreds of visitors and therefore of particular interest to the midshipmen drilling. Cadet Lieutenant Drake, marching his company across the parade ground, and giving in stentorian tones such orders as:

"Squads right, full step, march," "Company shoulder arms, double time march!" felt particularly important in so doing, and thought all eyes were on him; and little Fourth Classman Mumma, handling a rifle instead of a sword, and obeying instead of giving orders, knew in his own mind that the people were really looking at him, so he was filled with pride and martial ardor; and so with all of the rest of them.

And after drills were over the Academy grounds were thronged with midshipmen and their friends, and the happiness ushered in at Annapolis by every May seemed to enter all hearts. [186]

Robert Drake now frequently called at the Blunt household and always found a warm greeting there. Harry Blunt gladdened his mother's heart by getting on the first conduct grade, and so at times was to be seen in his father's house on authorized liberty. Robert never spoke to him, and though Helen wondered why he should so cling to animosity against her brother, and thought him unreasonable, yet she contrived it that Robert and Harry were never at the same time

together in the house.

"Bob," remarked Stonewell the next Sunday morning, just after the commandant had finished room inspection, "this is a glorious day; what do you say to a ramble? Let's go across the river and strike into the woods; I know a trail through there, where the woods are wonderfully thick; it will be beautiful to-day."

"Do you mean the path that leads by two old chestnut trees, trees of enormous size and now almost dead?" inquired Robert. [187]

"Yes, that's the place; those trees must be hundreds of years old. Then wild flowers and ferns will be out, all so fresh and lovely this time of year. Don't you just long for the woods when the spring-time comes?"

"Indeed I do, Stone," cried Robert, "and this will be a fine day for a stroll."

Soon the bugles rang out their call for brigade formation and hundreds of midshipmen rushed out on the terrace. Here the companies were rapidly formed and then Cadet Commander Stonewell came to an about face, saluted and reported:

"Sir, the brigade is formed."

Upon this the commandant, accompanied by a staff of officers and cadet officers, passed in front of the long line, scanning each midshipman closely, and corrected those who were careless in dress. The ranks were then closed and the brigade was marched to the chapel.

After service was concluded the midshipmen were dismissed and Robert and Stonewell went back to their rooms together.

In their absence mail had been distributed, and on the table in their room lay two letters, one for Robert, the other for his roommate. [188]

Robert's letter was from his father, and was full of cheering home news, and it was eagerly read by the young man.

"By George, Stone, father enjoys his work with the Light House Board ever so much. He says—Why, Stone, old chap, what is the matter?"

Stonewell was standing at the open window, looking blankly across the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. In his left hand, crushed, was the letter he had just received. His face was drawn, and in it Robert recognized an expression he had seen but once before. Intense apprehension and worry, perhaps fear, shone from Stonewell's eyes. Apparently he was oblivious to his roommate's question, for he took no notice of it.

"What's the matter, Stone?" again cried Robert, rising from his chair, and going to his roommate.

"Oh, Bob, excuse me for not answering your question—I was—I was thinking of something else."

"But have you had bad news? You surely have, Stone. Can't you talk it over with me? Just think how much good you did me when I had bad news." [189]

Stonewell gave Robert a look of great affection and said: "Thank you, old friend, there is no one on earth I would talk with so quickly as I would with you. And it may be that I will want to talk something over with you later, but just at present, Bob, there is nothing I could say—you must excuse me." And with that Stonewell picked up his hat and strode from the room.

Robert was full of surprise and worry. It was plainly evident that Stonewell was under deep emotion, and just like him, he could not or would not speak of the matter that so affected him.

"I wish he would talk it over with me," thought Robert; "it always makes a fellow feel better if he tells his worries to a true friend. What a lot of times old Stone has helped me in my troubles—and some of them were big ones, too! When we take our walk this afternoon I'll try to get him to tell me."

Robert now went out in the grounds, thinking he might meet his roommate, but he did not, and as they sat at different mess tables he had no chance to talk with Stonewell until after dinner. [190]

As soon as they were dismissed after dinner Robert found his roommate, and said:

"Come along, Stone, let's start out right away; it's a beautiful day and we'll have a glorious ramble."

"Bob, I can't go; I find I have some letters I must write; get somebody else to go with you, old fellow—I wish I could go, but I really can't."

Robert looked blankly at Stonewell. His anticipations of a pleasant walk suddenly vanished and the day seemed dreary. He knew his roommate too well to try to expostulate or argue with him.

"I'm awfully sorry, Bob," continued Stonewell, laying an affectionate arm on Robert's shoulder, and with real concern noticing Robert's evident disappointment. "I do wish I could go with you, but I really can't."

"I think I'll write some letters too," remarked Robert in a dull, forlorn sort of way.

"Oh, don't waste this beautiful afternoon that way!" said Stonewell; "why don't you get Helen to take a walk with you; she's probably thinking you may call to-day." [191]

"I'm going to write some letters," reiterated Robert stolidly.

"Why, Bob, that's ridiculous; go out and enjoy the day," urged Stonewell; "it will be awfully tiresome remaining indoors all afternoon."

But Robert was as immovable as he knew Stonewell to be; the latter seemed more anxious for Robert to go out than the circumstances called for.

In a few minutes both were in their room, writing, and both ill at ease. As a matter of fact neither wanted to write letters.

"Stone, I want you to tell me what has been bothering you," Robert finally blurted out. "You have helped me any number of times and I have never done a thing for you."

"You are constantly helping me, every day," replied Stonewell; "you can have no idea of how your opinion and regard for me have kept me braced up. I know that my course here at Annapolis is considered a successful one; I know, Bob, you think I am superior to you. Now I know I'm not; you have qualities of steadfastness, of decision of character that I can never hope for. I have a certain faculty of quickly solving problems that has given me my class rank, but, Bob, I know you have qualities that will outlast mine; and it is your attitude of mind toward me that has kept me striving, and to you is largely due the success I have won here. So never again say you have not helped me. You have been my constant inspiration. Now, Bob, you think there is something on my mind. If there is, it does not concern myself, and I assure you I want to forget it; and I cannot talk about it even with you. But I promise you I will come immediately to you if the slightest thing should arise in which you could help me. So oblige me, Bob, by dismissing this matter from your mind." [192]

Robert listened like one astonished. That he could have been of such help to his roommate he had never imagined and the thought of it made him very happy.

"Bob," continued Stonewell with his rare smile, "I'm sure Helen Blunt will be surprised if you don't drop around to see her this fine afternoon, and as that scamp of a brother of hers is on the first conduct grade it won't hurt if you see him at her home." [193]

"All right, Stone," rejoined Robert, cheerily. "I see you want to be alone and I won't bother you any more; but I'm sorry you're going to miss that stroll across the river. I'm much obliged, old chap, if you think I ever helped you; I never knew I had, and I'm very happy at the thought. I think I'll see if I can find Helen and persuade her to take a walk."

CHAPTER XVI

 [194]

BLIGH MAKES A FRIEND

"Well, Robert Drake, I'm glad to see you; I was hoping you might come over this afternoon," exclaimed Helen Blunt as Robert appeared on the porch of her home; "suppose we go out for a walk. I want to do an errand for mother in Conduit Street; and then suppose we walk over the bridge and go through Eastport; there are some gorgeous woods beyond there. Come along."

"That's just what I wanted to do," replied Robert as they started off. "But did you really expect me to-day? To tell you the truth, Stonewell and I first intended to spend the afternoon in the woods across the river, but he found he had to write some letters, so he decided not to go out to-day."

"So I come next after Stonewell, do I, Robert?" queried Helen.

"I'll tell you where you stand—as one of the best friends a fellow ever had," replied Robert earnestly. "It is not a question of standing next to Stonewell; he's just like a big brother to me; do you know, Helen, he is one of the most remarkable characters alive; why, if he had studied law I believe he would some day be President of the United States. He excels in everything, and besides all that he is just the best fellow imaginable." [195]

"He is indeed a splendid, a most superior man, Robert, but I believe Mr. Stonewell isn't really as ambitious as you are, that he is more influenced by your extravagant opinion of him than he is by the abstract desire to excel as a naval officer. You see it is so easy for him to excel if he only half tries. But, Robert, as much as I admire him, I do not feel that I really know him. And come now, after rooming with him for four years, do you feel you know his intimate thoughts? Are you really certain that you know Mr. Stonewell just as he knows you?"

"Indeed I do," Robert stoutly maintained. "I know all about him. I know he's one of the finest fellows that ever lived."

"And you know all about him, do you?"

"Of course I do."

"And he couldn't go walking with you to-day because he had some letters to write?" [196]

"That was the reason; but, Helen, it seems to me you are asking some very odd questions."

"I know I am, but while we've been walking down here, you have been looking this way. Suppose you look around in the other direction and tell me who you see walking at such a rapid rate—I don't mean on Main Street, but down Conduit Street, where we will turn in a minute."

Robert did so, and to his intense surprise saw Stonewell. The latter evidently had not seen Helen or her companion. He was swinging down Conduit Street with rapid strides, perhaps a hundred yards ahead of them. Robert was so amazed that he could say nothing. It was now evident to him that Stonewell had received news of some nature that caused him to break his engagement to go walking, news that brought him in this great hurry on Conduit Street, a part of Annapolis not

much frequented by midshipmen; and news that he certainly did not care to discuss with his most intimate friend.

"Now what do you think of that, Mr. Robert?" cried Helen triumphantly. "He broke his engagement to write some letters, and as soon as you leave he rushes out to Conduit Street. There, he's gone into that big yellow house. Now, do you think you know as much about Mr. Stonewell as he does about you?" [197]

Robert was silent. He too thought it was queer. He was too loyal in his friendship to Stonewell to tell Helen of the misgivings he had felt since he had seen his roommate so affected by that morning letter. And Stonewell's action now was decidedly mystifying. Robert instinctively knew his roommate was in deep trouble and he longed to know of the burden upon him and to share it with him.

"Do forgive me, Robert," said Helen a little later, noticing how sober he had become. "I'm awfully sorry I called your attention to Mr. Stonewell; I know how devoted you are to your friends. Let's try and forget about it and be happy. We'll go into the woods and gather some violets and dogwood—the woods are so pretty now—full of moss and ferns—let's walk fast."

Robert was cheered up a bit, and when they had finished their errand on Conduit Street they hastened to the woods. Leaving their troubles behind them, these young people were soon in a happy, merry mood. The woods were soon deep about them, and they drank deep breaths from the forest-perfumed air. Robert told Helen the great secret of his gun drill and the means he had taken to win the flag. [198]

"And, Helen, if my company wins it I am going to ask you to present it; if we win it that will be my privilege."

Helen was enthusiastic, of course, for the greatest glory a girl ever wins at Annapolis is to be chosen to present the colors to the winning company.

"You'll win it, I'm sure you will," she cried; and then, woman-like, she immediately became deeply pensive.

"Why so quiet?" queried Robert.

"Oh, I was thinking about what kind of a dress I shall wear, and I must have a new hat too,—I'm sure you'll win, Robert, just as sure as though it had really happened."

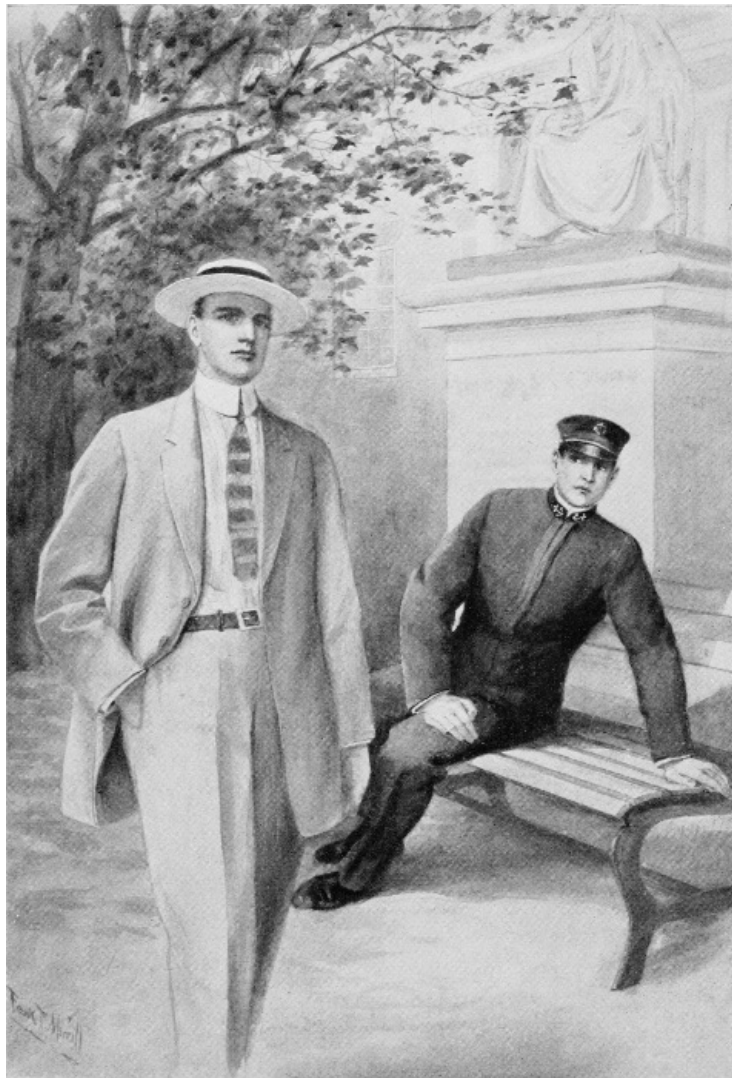
Mr. Henry Bligh continued to lead, in a crowded community of light-hearted young men, a solitary life. He commenced to experience a certain kind of cruel pleasure in being the martyr he considered himself to be. Calm though he outwardly was his mind was in a continual ferment, with a direct result that he was never in a humor to study; naturally he did poorly in his daily recitations and worse in examinations. The time for the annual examinations was now near and Bligh knew he had but little hope of passing. Only by heroic effort could he hope to make a satisfactory mark for his final average and thus become a third classman. Bligh was in no mental state to make this required heroic effort. In fact it was practically certain that he would fail and be required to resign. [199]

One Saturday in the middle of May, Bligh went out in the city of Annapolis and walked around in an aimless way. He wandered in the State House grounds and finally sat down on an iron bench near the statue of Chief Justice Taney.

After a few minutes he observed a young man approach on the walk that led by his bench. Bligh gave him a careless glance, and as the young man passed he happened to look at him again. And then a startling change came over Mr. Henry Bligh. His eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets; involuntarily he half arose from his seat; his breath came in quick gasps; he gave every evidence of complete amazement. Then he suddenly sank back, relaxed and gave himself over to uncontrolled merriment. [200]

"Oh, what a joke," he cried; "oh, my, oh, my!—who would believe it?"

It had been long since Bligh had laughed so heartily. And it was strange indeed, because there was nothing particularly remarkable in the appearance of the young man who had so affected Bligh. He was dressed in a well made gray suit and wore a straw hat. His features were undeniably handsome. He had a broad forehead, and under heavy eyebrows there gleamed a pair of thoughtful gray eyes; he was tall and powerfully built, and walked with a swinging gait. Before the civilian had gone far, Bligh arose, in a hesitating way, and half-heartedly followed him. The stranger walked around State House Circle into Main Street, and turned down that street; Bligh followed. Soon he apparently gathered courage and drew nearer to the man ahead. The latter went into a drug store, stopped at the fountain and seemingly ordered a summer drink. Bligh had a good look at him through the open door, pausing there for a moment; then he went inside and stood by the counter and ordered an orange phosphate.



HE HALF AROSE FROM HIS SEAT

"It's a good cooling drink for warm weather," he observed to the young man on his right, looking squarely at him.

"Indeed it is," replied that person, looking at Bligh with friendly interest; "but try a lime phosphate some time; the West Indian lime is very cooling."

"I will," replied Bligh heartily. "You're a stranger here, aren't you?"

"Yes, and I see you are a midshipman. I've heard lots about the Naval Academy; it's a fine place, isn't it? I imagine midshipmen live a most interesting life."

"Some do, I suppose; I know others who don't. Some fellows here make a false start, slip up on something, you know, and get in a bad light, and after that they have no chance; everybody gets down on them." Bligh spoke bitterly. [201]

"That's pretty hard luck," observed the stranger; "my sympathy always goes to a fellow in that fix. Even if he does slip up once there may be lots of good left in him, and a man should not be utterly condemned for one mistake. That isn't fair at all. If I had to choose a friend between two men, one of whom had been careless in some act and acknowledged it, and the other was of the I-am-better-than-thou-class, I'd take the first fellow for a friend every time. But my thoughts can hardly interest you,—I don't suppose they apply to you at all," and the speaker turned a thoughtful, penetrating glance upon Bligh. [202]

Tears suddenly gushed from Bligh's eyes, and in a broken voice he said: "See here, you are the first man that has spoken to me in a friendly way for months."

Bligh showed genuine emotion and feeling when he spoke. He was totally friendless, and he suddenly felt great pity for himself.

"Why, my dear fellow," exclaimed his newly-made acquaintance, "you will pardon me for my inadvertent remarks—but suppose we take a walk; come over to my rooms, and if you feel like it talk things over with me—I don't know you, but I want to know you. I don't believe I see anything bad in your face, though I imagine there is sadness there." [203]

These kind words were to Bligh like heaven-sent manna. Until this moment he had no conception of how he yearned for just one single friend, one person who believed there was good in him, one to whom he could open his heart and pour out its griefs. Instantly this newly-made friendship became precious, and he felt brighter and happier than he had for months. Sincerity and kindness were written in the features of this new friend.

Bligh spent several hours with him in his rooms, and acquainted him with the troubles, mistakes and heartburnings that were his daily portion in his now unfortunate condition; in doing this he

saw himself in a new light; and now when his new friend pointed out where he was blameworthy, where he had been wrong, he eagerly assented. For this grave friend, sympathetic though he was to the sad story that rushed from Bligh's lips, in a kindly spirit severely criticized Bligh for his wrong actions. He laughed heartily at Bligh's woeful story of how he had lowered himself in the ventilating shaft. "That was good, Mr. Bligh," he said; "but it's a great pity that you were caught." [204]

When Bligh returned to his quarters he was like a different man; more happiness to his wounded spirit had come to him this day than he had had for months.

"If I had only had a friend like this when the year commenced," he reflected, "my life here would have been different. But now I'm afraid it's too late; I'm pretty sure to bilge."

CHAPTER XVII [205]

AN ILL-FAVORED, RED-BEARDED ROGUE

"Bob, I think I've got the flag this year," remarked Cadet Lieutenant Blair, to his fellow three striper, Robert Drake; "everybody says my company is better than yours in artillery; I've an even chance with you at infantry—members of my company have had part in baseball and football games, fencing, rowing, tennis, gymnasium and all other contests. The second company, I think, will get the most points in seamanship, and I have more trained marksmen than you have. I've got you beaten, Bob, old boy."

"Don't you be too sure of that, Sam; the first company has a notion it wants to carry the colors next year; and look here, Sam, I'll put you on to something if you'll agree to keep quiet about it."

"What is it, Bob? I'll keep mum," replied Blair expectantly, impressed by Robert's earnest manner.

"The first company is going to try to win the flag, and I'm going to spring a big surprise on you." [206]

"Pshaw! Is that your news? Perhaps I'll spring a surprise on you."

"Go ahead if you can, Sam, but I warn you now that I have done something toward winning the flag that you don't know anything about. It's in line with advice that was given to all of us months ago, and what I've done is perfectly proper and legitimate. I'll tell you frankly that because of special preparation I have made, I expect the first company will have a higher final multiple than your company will have."

"What was the advice you refer to, Bob? I don't recall any."

"By the way, haven't you been doing some special stunts in seamanship? Haven't some old boatswain's mates been giving your men some extra drill in handling sail?"

"Never mind about that, Bob; if I have done special work in seamanship I'm not bound to tell you what it is. But what was the advice you spoke of?"

"Sam, we'll be on the square with each other. I learned accidentally that you were getting specially coached in seamanship; well, I'm doing special work in gunnery. It's a fair field and no favor, and may the best company win." [207]

"Good. Some of the fellows have been figuring up the points already known to be credited to the different companies; more than half of the points are already made, you know, and as it happens both the first and second companies are so far pretty close together; we're within ten points of each other to-day and no other company is within twenty points of either of us. Either you or I will win the flag, that is certain. And, Bob, if you win it I'm going to lead the cheering for the winning company."

"I appreciate that sentiment, Sam, and if you win the flag I will lead the cheering."

"Say, Bob, have you read about that kidnapping case in Baltimore? Some rascals have stolen a little boy named Georgie Thompson."

"No, I hadn't. Jingo! I hope they catch the scoundrels and get the boy back."

The two young men shook hands in the heartiest fashion and separated. There was intense personal rivalry between them, far more than their words expressed; it was a commendable rivalry; each was determined to make every effort to win the great prize, but each had a high personal regard for the other. [208]

This meeting was on one of the Saturdays in May. Robert was now highly elated with the efficiency of his six-pounder crew. It drilled every day. Dummy six-pounder shells were thrown into the gun with tremendous speed and remarkable precision. There were now no slips, no jams. While this was proceeding Robert would be at the shoulder-piece, his eye at the peep-sight, aiming at some boat in the river. This was the nearest approach possible to actually firing the gun. And every man of the gun's crew was enthusiastically confident.

"Stone," said Robert, after dinner this Saturday, "I've permission to use a steamer this afternoon and I've got up a party to go up the Severn River."

"I'll bet Helen is in the party," replied Stonewell, smiling at his roommate.

"Of course she is; Mrs. Blunt is coming, and Glassfell and Farnum. Now we want you too." [209]

"I wish I could go, but I can't," replied Stonewell, decidedly. "I've an engagement I can't break."

"Oh, rats, chuck your tailor for once—your measure will keep. But now I'll give you some information that will bring you along with us—Nellie Strong is with the Blunts; she arrived this morning and is going to stay over for graduation. Now will you come?"

"I can't, Bob, but I'll be out to the Blunts' house to-night."

"Pshaw, I counted on your going—what is your engagement; can't you put it off?"

"I really wish I could, but it's imperative; there's nothing pleasant about it—I may tell you about it later—I can't now."

"It seems to me you've been getting an extra lot of letters lately, Stone."

"Yes, more than I wish for," rejoined Stone rather bitterly.

"Helen and I went walking that Sunday afternoon, the Sunday you and I had intended going across the river. First Helen had an errand to do on Conduit Street and right ahead of us you were walking along. You went into a big yellow house." [210]

Stonewell gave a start. "Well," he said, "what of it?"

"Look here, Stone, old chap, you have something on your mind that's bothering you terribly. Is there no way I can help you; will it do you no good to talk things over with me?"

"Bob, I can't talk; I don't pretend I'm not worried, but I just can't unburden my mind, not even to the best friend a man ever had," replied Stonewell huskily, with almost a break in his voice. He walked away from his roommate with agitated face, and gloomily looked out upon the waters of Chesapeake Bay.

Loud were the expressions of disappointment from Robert's friends when he told them Stonewell could not join them on their trip. They all got aboard the steam launch, which immediately started up the Severn River; the day was pleasant and all were in high spirits. The Severn River is most picturesque in its scenery. High, densely-wooded banks, irregular in outline, line its shores, and there are many indentations of little bays that lead into the river. Three miles above its mouth the Severn widens into Round Bay, a sheet of water several miles in diameter. And above this and emptying into it is a narrow stream, which is still called Severn River. [211]

The launch steamed through Round Bay, and then entered this narrow stream. "Isn't this beautiful?" cried Robert. "Just look at this winding little river; I wonder how far up we can go. Say, coxswain, how far up this river can we steam?"

"If I knew the channel I could take you up to Indian Landing, sir," answered the coxswain; "some of our steamers have been up that far; but I don't know the channel, sir; I'm afraid we'll go aground at any minute."

"Well, can't you follow that gasoline launch ahead of us? The fellow in it probably knows the channel."

"Yes, sir, I can do that."

A covered gasoline launch was a quarter of a mile ahead. "Give me all the speed you can," called out the coxswain to the engineer; "I want to catch that boat ahead; this river has so many little turns that I'll have to keep close to that chap ahead." The engineer of the launch turned on a steam jet in the smokestack to force the draft and the little boat instantly responded and made a great fuss in increasing the speed of the engine. [212]

"Why don't we catch up?" asked Robert, in a few minutes; "we are surely going much faster than we were."

"Because he has nearly doubled his speed, Mr. Drake," replied the coxswain.

"Hurrah, it's a race!" shouted the midshipman; "now let's see who will win."

The steam launch commenced to gain on the gasoline boat. The coxswain had been looking at the latter through a pair of binoculars; after a time he quietly remarked to Robert, "This isn't a race, sir; those men in the boat ahead of us think we are chasing them, and if I ever saw a pair of precious rogues in my life I'm looking at them now. Take a look at them, Mr. Drake."

"Well, no one would ever say they were pretty," remarked Robert after a good look at them through the glasses. "We are catching up with them now. Hello, they've stopped." [213]

In a short time the steam launch was abreast of the gasoline boat. In the latter but one man was to be seen, and an ill-favored man he was.

"My! What a brutal-looking fellow," remarked Nellie Strong with a shudder.

"What do you want?" demanded the man, in a surly, sullen way.

"We were stealing pilotage from you, that's all," replied Robert. "We're going up this river and don't know the channel and are afraid of going ashore. Is there danger of that if we keep in the middle of the stream?"

"I hope you'll strike a shoal and stay there till the crack of doom. You've no business to go running after another boat that way."

"What's the matter with you?" called out Robert; "and why don't your two friends show themselves? It looks to me as if you're afraid of the police."

The man made an angry exclamation and the steamer passed ahead. "What an ill-tempered man,"

said Helen Blunt to Robert; "I wish he'd cut off that red beard of his; he wouldn't look so much like a pirate then." [214]

"We won't worry about that fellow. Now I'm going up in the bow with a boat-hook to take soundings; we'll run slow and keep right in the middle of the river. But isn't it beautiful around here. Just look how the little river twists and winds about and how irregular the shore is; and there are lots of little creeks running into the river and little bays stretching out from it."

"And isn't it lonely?" rejoined Helen. "There is hardly a house or a clearing to be seen; it's a regular wilderness."

Robert went to the bow of the steamer, and taking a boat-hook thrust it in the water; it was quite deep enough, so he felt reassured about the boat's not going ashore.

"There's Indian Landing ahead of us," called out the coxswain. "I don't think we had better go much further; we've got eleven miles to run before we get back, and I'm afraid of getting low in coal."

"All right, put aback and return." And soon the steamer was headed down the river.

"Where's that gasoline boat; can you see her anywhere?" asked Robert, a few moments later. [215]

"No, sir, we would have met her by this time if she had followed straight up the river. And that's odd, too. Indian Landing is the only place boats ever come to up here—she must be hidden in one of those lonely creeks."

"That's it, I imagine. There's something queer about that boat; it certainly had three ugly-looking men in it, and two of them didn't want to be seen. That bearded chap was a fierce-looking specimen."

"Say, Bob," called out Glassfell from aft, "mess gear is spread and we're waiting for you to pipe us to dinner, but we won't wait long—you'd better get here in a hurry."

Robert lost no time and immediately joined the others. An attractive lunch had been spread and was now attacked with energy; in the launch was a party of good friends, all in gay spirits. The day was delightful and when they finally reached the "Santee" wharf and left the launch it was unanimously agreed that a most enjoyable afternoon had been spent.

Early this afternoon Stonewell left his room, and unaccompanied went out in the city of Annapolis. He walked rapidly and before long was in Conduit Street, and without stopping to wait for admittance, entered a large yellow house. Two hours later he left and hastened to a telegraph office. [216]

But Stonewell was not the only visitor that day who entered this large yellow house on Conduit Street. For at about eight o'clock that evening a man in civilian garb, wearing a moustache and heavy pointed beard, with a brown slouch hat drawn low over his forehead, and in closely buttoned sack coat, went to the same house, and without hesitation, opened the door by a pass key and passed inside.

CHAPTER XVIII

[217]

AN OLD COLORED MAN IS IN TROUBLE

A hop was given that Saturday night at the Armory. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about this hop; it was just like hundreds of its predecessors. As usual, near graduation time, there were many out of town visitors, and it is likely that brass buttons proved attractive to them. Many glad faces were to be seen whirling around, and judging by the happy laughs that were heard everyone was having a jolly time.

Robert Drake had escorted an old friend that night, Miss Nellie Strong. He had seen her card filled up, had presented her partners, and had taken three numbers himself.

"Something is always happening to you, Robert," remarked Nellie as they walked around the room after the second dance. "Now tell me what misadventure you have had this year."

"Not one, Nellie; my bad luck is all over; not one single unpleasant thing has happened to me since I became a first classman." [218]

"What was the occasion of that remarkable disappearance of yours a year ago? Surely you can tell me now; I've never been so curious over anything in my life."

"I've never told anybody about that, neither my father nor Stonewell nor Helen nor anybody else."

"Well, I declare! I don't suppose it amounted to much, anyway. And perhaps you think you're more interesting if you're mysterious. Now, Mr. Robert, tell me something else; why wasn't Harry Blunt with us this afternoon? I asked him and he said you hadn't invited him. Don't you like him, Robert? I think Harry is a nice boy."

"Don't talk to me about Harry Blunt. Let's talk about his sister. Helen is a very good friend of mine, and her father is one of the finest——"

"Robert," suddenly interrupted Nellie, "something is going to happen to you again—that colored

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man in the doorway motioned to you; just look at him, he's motioning to you now; he wants to speak to you,—oh, I just knew something would happen to you."

"Nonsense. That's old Grice. He's a great old chap. He just wants to see me about something—I'll take you to where Mrs. Blunt is and then go see what he wants."

"What is it, Grice?" asked Robert to the old man at the door, a moment later.

"Sompin' powerful bad, Mistah Drake; I'se feared to talk heah. Can yo' come outside, suh? I'se somef'n mighty bad to tell yo', suh!"

The old darkey shook his head and rolled his eyes, making a grotesque effort to express the worried feelings evidently in his mind.

"Come outside, but hurry. I'm here with some young ladies, and I haven't much time to talk with you."

"No, suh, co'se not. And dem young ladies am pow'ful nice, suh."

"Well, Grice, what is it that you want with me?"

"Well, suh, I doan' know how to tell it. Yo' knows I'se messenger for department of mathmax, doan' yo', Mistah Drake?"

"Of course; what of it?"

"Mistah Drake, suh, will yo' gibe me yor promise as a naval officer an' gemman that yo' won' tell anybody what I'se gwine to say?" [220]

"No, of course I won't."

"Well, suh, a big crime is goin' to be cormitted. An' a pore ole niggah man knows about it an' goes to a young gemman friend of hizn and asks fo' help and can't get none. And the pore ole niggah will be accused an' go to jail. Won' yo' help me, Mistah Drake? Won' yo' help a pore ole niggah what's in trouble?"

"Of course I will, Grice, but I'm not going to promise you to keep secret what you tell me."

"Ef yo' goes roun' talking 'bout what I tells yo' no one will believe me. I'll be bounced, suh, after thirty years heah, an' ef yo' doan' help me a crime will be cormitted and folks will say ole Grice done it. Ain't yo' gwine to help me, Mistah Drake?"

Robert thought for a moment, looking intently at the old negro. The latter talked with great effort. Beads of perspiration burst out on his face. It was evident that Grice was in terror of losing his all and knew not what to do. "Grice, I'll help you if I can," said Robert. "If what you tell me is important I will talk about it to the commandant and to no one else. Now what is it? Be quick." [221]

"Thank yo', suh. Two midshipmen is a-gwine to steal the mathmax zamnation. I wuz sleepin' in the mathmax room last night. My ole woman an' I done hav' a disregard 'bout religion yesterday; she's Zion Baptis' an' I'se Asbury Methodis'. We disregarded so hard that I didn't go home las' night,—co'se 'tain't allowed to sleep in mathmax room, but I done it las' night; well, suh, Mistah Drake, suh, suah as yo' is bawn, suh, it woke me up. Two men came in the mathmax room. The doors wuz all locked; I done that myself; they mus' have had a key made. They come to the desk were the zamnation questions is kep'. They had a light—turned it on, and put somfin' in the key bob of the desk, I seen 'em do it, suh. This morning I fin' wax in keyhole. Zamnations ain't made out yet, but these gemmen will come back with the keys and steal the zamnation—den ole Grice will be 'cused and dismissed—zamnations have been stolen befoah, Mistah Drake, yo' knows it, suh, an' money stolen, an' gen'ally some pore niggah gets dismissed an' half de time it's some pore white trash in midshipman close what does it. Yes, suh, an' —" [222]

"Did you see the faces of these midshipmen, Grice?" interrupted Robert.

"Yes, suh. I done had a good luk at 'em."

"Who were they?"

"Foah de Lawd sake, Mistah Drake, doan' yo' ask me no such questionings," cried out Grice in affrighted tones.

"Do you know the names of those two midshipmen?"

"Yes, suh, Mistah Drake, suh, but I ain't a-gwine to say who they is; ef I tole yo' who they is they would tole yo' Grice prevaricated and Grice would be dismissed. No, suh, I ain't a-gwine to tole yo' who they is, Mistah Drake, suh; yo' done got to catch 'em, suh."

"Grice, I shall tell the commandant what you have told me and he will make you tell him who they are."

"I disremember their names, suh," suddenly replied Grice. "I forgets their names, but I knows 'em; they is midshipmen. Now, Mistah Drake, suh, they will come back, suah they will, suh, an' yo' an' me will be in the mathmax room and catch 'em." [223]

"All right, Grice, I'll help you; but I've got to go now. Call on me if anything new turns up," and Robert returned to the ballroom and soon was with Helen Blunt.

"Robert," she said after a few minutes, "we're awfully worried about Harry; he's been dropping in mathematics and is officially warned that he is in danger of failing at the annual examination. Do you think he will fail?"

"There's but little danger of that, Helen; don't worry; lots of his classmates have been warned

and your brother is really bright. He would have high class rank if he studied, and he always does fairly well in examinations. I saw his name posted at the beginning of this month, but you needn't worry; he probably has been boning and no doubt will pass."

"Won't you help him, Robert?" asked Helen in wistful tones; "you know what a terribly sad thing it is to a naval family to have a son fail at Annapolis."

"Wherever and whenever I can. Just bet on that; but your brother and I are not friendly and I'm quite sure he would disdain any help from me." [224]

"Oh, Robert, what did that old colored man want?" cried Nellie Strong, running up.

"Oh," laughed Robert, "he wanted to know who that powerfully pretty girl was that I was with. He said she was the nicest girl on the floor. And then he wanted to know who made that crepe de chine gown you are wearing and——"

"Robert Drake, stop your nonsense, and tell me what that old man wanted," cried Nellie, consumed with curiosity; "are you in some more trouble; are you going to disappear again?"

"What is it, Robert; has anything happened?" inquired Helen, much concerned.

"Nothing much; an old colored man, Grice, who is the sweeper and cleaner of the mathematical department, is in trouble and wanted my advice and help. You see his wife is a Zion Baptist and he's an Asbury Methodist, something like that, and they have 'disregards,' so Grice tells me——"

"Oh, I know old Harriet Grice," interrupted Helen. "She used to cook for us when father was commandant, and every night when she went home she carried with her everything left in the pantry and ice-box. Once when I caught her in the act she said she was taking the stuff to the Zion Church; that it wasn't stealing because she was giving it to the Lord. She and old Grice have terrible rows, in spite of their both being so religious." [225]

Everybody laughed and Nellie Strong was satisfied. Then the music started. "This is ours, Nellie," remarked Robert, and in a moment the two were lost in the crowd.

The next morning after chapel service, Robert spent half an hour with the commandant and related what Grice had told him.

"I'll send for Grice to-morrow," said that officer, "but I doubt if he will disclose the names of the midshipmen, even if he really does know them. These darkeys are remarkably stubborn when they once get a notion in their woolly heads. If Grice is telling a true story we must certainly catch the offenders in the act." The commandant thought for a moment and then continued: "I could post some watchmen about the place, but then the guilty persons might take alarm. If Grice's story is true there is surely a bad pair of midshipmen here, and we must get them and dismiss them." [226]

CHAPTER XIX

[227]

THE KIDNAPPERS

Annapolis was full of excitement. It always is at this time of year, and though the town is old, and though graduation scenes have been rehearsed for more than sixty years, still the play is always fresh; young lives are about to go out and do their battle in the world, and friends come to applaud them and to spend a few days with them, and to wish them Godspeed. And so visitors by thousands poured into the ancient city; and the young men of Robert Drake's class had a sense of great importance because it was all to do honor to their graduation, now but a few weeks off.

But it wasn't only at the Naval Academy that important matters were happening at this time; for near Annapolis, events were occurring of tremendous import to a few people, and particularly so to a small, white-faced whimpering boy, seven years old.

Up the Severn River, some little distance before it reaches Round Bay, was an offshoot from the river. This offshoot, a small creek, by devious windings led through a desolate, untenanted, uncultivated, roadless region. Once, in the heyday of slavery, prosperous tobacco fields existed where now there was a dense second growth of trees crowded by a tangled underbrush impenetrable to man unless armed with a hatchet. Here, through an absolute wilderness, inhabited only by coons, squirrels and hares, the little offshoot to the Severn took its unmolested way. No Man's Creek it was called, and well named it was. Not even isolated negroes' cabins were to be seen on its banks, and wild duck in their season, unmolested by the gun, here found a secure place. [228]

But, completely hidden in this creek, disturbing visitors had recently appeared. In one of the sharp turns of No Man's Creek, and completely hidden from view, was a covered gasoline launch. In it were three men and a small, weeping boy.

"We'll start to-night at eleven; it will be dark then, the moon sets at nine; and I'll be glad to have the thing over with. Jingo! I wish we had never done this thing," said one of them, a red-bearded man of uncertain age. "I'm sure no one followed us to Indian Landing; we landed there at a time when nobody was awake. But it was a hard trip from there across lots to this place. I never would have found this spot if I weren't so well acquainted about here. But I wish we could have got out last night—confound that leaky gasoline tank—it dished us at the last moment. But we'll be out to-night sure—it will take us an hour to run by the Naval Academy, and two hours later we'll be [229]

across the bay and in Kent Island—once there I'll be easy in my mind; we'll be absolutely safe. And then we'll get ten thousand for our trouble. Stop your crying, Georgie, we're taking you to your father. Hello, Jim, what's that noise? I hear a man shouting!"

The red-bearded man jumped up and out of the boat; he ran up a bank and returned in a moment. "We're caught," he cried hoarsely; "somebody has seen us and has given us away. We'll have to leave instantly—cut the painter! Hurry, start the engine—shove off the boat; we haven't a moment to lose!" [230]

With zeal born of fear and desperation, the three men worked frantically, and very soon the gasoline boat was chugging down the stream. And none too soon, for two men now standing near where the gasoline boat had been secured were shouting for them to return. With pallid faces the three men confronted one another.

"What is to be done?" asked one.

"Let's land somewhere on Round Bay shore, turn the kid adrift and run," ventured a second one. "We'll be caught in this boat; our only hope is to separate and each of us try to get away by himself."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," retorted the red-bearded man; "we will stick to this boat; we'll follow the original programme. What chance would I have? That chap saw me plainly and everybody in six counties would look for a man with red whiskers. No, sir! Those two men are left on the shore; they are miles from a telephone; we'll be halfway across Chesapeake Bay before they can communicate with anybody, and there are so many launches in the Severn River that we won't be noticed. That's the only thing to do, fellows." [231]

"It's twenty years in prison if we're caught," remarked one with a gasp.

"Stop your sniveling! Cheer up! We'll be on the Eastern Shore to-night, and once there I defy anybody to find us."

These three men were the kidnapers of little Georgie Thompson. Seemingly their plans had been perfectly laid. Two of them had driven from Baltimore in a roundabout way to a place near Indian Landing, arriving there at night. One of these, with Georgie, had stolen that same night to where the gasoline launch had been brought by the third man. The other had gone further on and turned adrift the horse and buggy they had driven from Baltimore and joined the launch later. Had it not been for the loss of the gasoline the boat would already have been on the other side of Chesapeake Bay. More gasoline had been secured, and this cowardly trio had determined to wait until dark before leaving their hiding-place.

The gasoline launch shot out of No Man's Creek and swung into the Severn River. Soon Round Bay was reached and the launch struck across the centre of it and, keeping at equal distance from either shore, ran down the river at full speed. They attracted no notice on their way and soon the railroad bridge was passed, then the county bridge and they were abreast of the Naval Academy grounds. No passing boats seemed at all interested in their movements, and the men felt easier. In but a short time they would be out of the river and on their way across Chesapeake Bay. Hardly a word had been spoken on this fast trip down the river, but desperate fear gripped each man's heart. Little Georgie was now crying softly; he did not realize what was happening, did not comprehend what these strange men were doing beyond their statement that they were taking him to his father, but they were a long time about it and he was hungry and uncomfortable. There was something terrifying in it all to the little boy and now and again he would sob bitterly. [232]

When opposite the lower part of the Naval Academy grounds the gasoline engine suddenly stopped. With a fierce exclamation of fear and rage the red-bearded man jumped to the engine and tried to start it again, but with no success. [233]

"Everything seems to be all right here," he said in a low, intense way; "the spark is all right,"—then in a voice of fright he said, "This cock doesn't show there is any gasoline in the feed pipe; see if there is any in the tank."

"Not a drop," exclaimed the other in a terrified voice; "this rotten tank has sprung another leak."

"Get out an oar and make for that sloop," cried the red-bearded man.

Fifty feet away was a sloop yacht anchored; her sail was all spread, though the sheets were not belayed. A fresh breeze was blowing down the Severn; this helped the gasoline boat, and with the aid of the oars it was soon alongside the sloop. "Jump aboard, quick with you," cried the leader; "come along, Georgie; run forward, Jim, and heave up the anchor; never mind our boat—we've no time to lose—I'll look out for the sheets and helm."

With a practiced hand the man with the red beard grabbed the tiller. They found nobody aboard—but the sails being loosed and no small boat being alongside it was likely that a party to go sailing would soon be pulled off from the shore to the yacht. [234]

The anchor was hove up to the bows in a moment, the head of the yacht swung round, the sails filled, and she was off with a bound.

With a critical eye the man at the helm trimmed the different sails, set the trysail and then heaved a sigh of profound relief.

"I think we're safe," he said; "hello, there's a navy ship on the port bow, and another one several miles away on the starboard bow. I'll steer between—they don't know anything about us—they won't bother us."

While the superintendent of the Naval Academy was sitting at his desk this same afternoon, his telephone bell rang.

"Hello, what is it?" he asked.

"Is this the superintendent?"

"Yes."

"This is Halstead, aboard the 'Santee.'"

"What is it, Halstead?"

"Sir, the quartermaster has reported that a gasoline launch went alongside the 'Robert Centre' a few minutes ago and several people got out of the launch and went aboard the yacht; the gasoline launch is now drifting down the river and the 'Robert Centre' is tearing out into the bay." [235]

"Who were the people that got out of the launch?"

"The quartermaster says they were strangers. One was a man with a red beard, and a little boy was along."

"Had anybody intended to take the 'Robert Centre' out to-day?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Brooks and some friends of his. They are now being pulled out in the river in the 'Centre's' boat. What shall I do, sir?"

"Hoist the 'Robert Centre's' recall. Secure the gasoline launch and keep it awaiting my orders. Have the quartermaster keep a good lookout on the 'Robert Centre' to see where she goes. Have you any steamer you could send for her?"

"No, sir, the 'Standish' is out with the 'Nevada.'"

"I think you'll find that the matter will be explained; it was probably a party of young officers out for a lark and a sail. Or it may have been some friends of officers; it will no doubt come out all right." [236]

Half an hour later the superintendent was again called up by the telephone.

"This is the superintendent. What is it?" he asked.

"I am Detective Cross, a Pinkerton detective. I traced the kidnapers of the Thompson boy to No Man's Creek, near the Severn, below Indian Landing. They saw me and shoved their boat off in a hurry, and went down river. The boy is with them. I've had a time finding a telephone in this forsaken country; keep a lookout for a green gasoline launch; it has a cabin in it—three kidnapers and Georgie Thompson were in the——" But the superintendent had heard enough and, ringing off the speaker, he commenced to do some rapid telephoning on his own account.

CHAPTER XX

[237]

SIX-POUNDER TARGET PRACTICE

Graduation day drew near, bringing exultant happiness to Robert Drake. Not many more things could occur to him—the annual examinations were soon to be held, but these brought no terrors to Robert's mind. Most of the drills had been finished, and the first and second companies were now neck and neck in competition for the first place, with Blair's company slightly in the lead. The final standing now depended upon the records these respective companies made at target practice.

Annapolis was now in ribboned and brass-buttoned glory. Proudly the brigade of midshipmen marched each afternoon for dress parade, and on the walks viewing them was much fluttering loveliness. Then, after dismissal, came pleasant, even if short, strolls through the grounds, in and about the shady walks.

Robert was happy because of four years of hard work well done and well appreciated. He loved the place. Every tree on the grounds was an old friend, and every spot near and about old Annapolis called up pleasant memories. [238]

The important things yet to occur were target practice, the first class german, graduation, and the great June ball.

Among the midshipmen there were a few, however, who were not happy at this time. Among them was Harry Blunt; in danger of failing in mathematics, disturbed by reproachful looks from his mother and sister and worried by severe letters from his father, he commenced to have an anxious appearance, and actually abandoned the gaieties that were now thrust into midshipman life in favor of much neglected books; the dreaded annual examinations were almost upon him.

Midshipman Bligh, though also in the same precarious position, seemed to lose some of the gloom he had been carrying about him and become more normal. He went into the city of Annapolis at every opportunity and always came back with a grateful heart; for Bligh had found a friend who believed in him, and this friend had rescued Bligh from the pit of despondency and terrible sadness into which he had descended. [239]

"Say, Bob," remarked Stonewell one day, "have you noticed that fellow Bligh of late?"

"I never happen to think of him. What about him?"

"Nothing much, except that I am constantly meeting him. He never seems to look at me, but whenever I go out in town nowadays he's pretty sure to be standing at the Maryland Avenue gate; and then later, half the time I go out I meet him somewhere. This has happened so often of late that I can't help but feel he's interested in where I go."

"Lots of people are interested in where you go, Stone; every day somebody asks me why you go out so much alone. For years we have gone out together, but now you never want me."

"It's not that," replied Stonewell hurriedly,—"I've had some personal matters come up that require my attention. Look here, that Bligh is going to bilge, isn't he?"

"He is practically certain to. He is low in every study—he'll have to make bigger marks in each of them than he ever yet has made to get satisfactory in the final average. But he may do it; people have pulled out of worse holes than he is in." [240]

"What are you reading, Bob? You seem to be giving that newspaper a good deal of your attention to-day."

"I'm reading about the boy who was kidnapped in Baltimore several days ago. First it was thought the boy was lost, but now the police believe he was kidnapped; it says here that Mr. Thompson has received word his boy will be restored to him on payment of ten thousand dollars. By George! I hope they catch the kidnappers and send them to prison for life. That's an awful crime!"

"It is indeed; and just think, Baltimore is only thirty miles away. I've been reading about that Thompson boy and I do hope he will be sent back home. Well, Bob, are you all ready for your target practice? Do you really put faith in this new sight you have invented?"

"More so every day, Stone, particularly since I've learned that practically the same sight as I have aboard the 'Nevada' has been put on many different guns throughout the navy. Anybody who sees it and works with it a little is bound to believe it is far better than the old sights. Those were simply miserable. I'm now fifteen or twenty points behind Blair, with only target practice yet to be heard from, and I'm sure to beat him. I'd beat him even if we should use the old sights. You see I have a really very well-drilled crew; they load rapidly. I'm wild to get into the practice; I've a flag at stake, you know. It will be settled before night. Hello, the bugle has busted. Let's get to formation." [241]

On board the monitor "Nevada" they joined the other midshipmen, and soon she was under way and steaming through the buoyed channel to the free waters of Chesapeake Bay. The "Nevada" had on board the officers belonging to the Department of Ordnance and Gunnery and a number of midshipmen; there were also on board a six-pounder crew of five men from each of the twelve companies of midshipmen. In addition many midshipmen who had no duties but who were interested in seeing the target practice were allowed to be present. Soon a cry from aloft was heard. [242]

"Sail ho!" cried the midshipman lookout on the "Nevada's" mast.

"Where away, can you make her out?" returned the midshipman officer-of-the-deck, hailing the lookout.

"Right ahead, sir, but I don't know what it is. It looks like a funny kind of a ship with six sails on it."

"Who made that ridiculous report?" inquired Commander Brice in great disgust. "If it were an ordinary seaman I'd disrate him to an afterguard sweeper. But I imagine it's a future admiral. The sail he's reported are the targets—there are six of them. Anybody but a midshipman would know it. They've been in sight ever since we left the Severn River."

The target was now seen by everybody and the "Nevada" steered for it. It was at the apex of an equilateral triangle each side of which was one thousand yards long. The word targets, rather than target, should have been used, because in this apex, for the purpose of expediting this practice, of finishing it in one afternoon, six targets on rafts had been placed. The tug "Standish" was anchored near by. She had brought a party of enlisted men, who had been working all morning, and had erected the marks. [243]

Commander Shaw, the head of the Department of Ordnance and Gunnery, remained on the bridge with Commander Brice until the "Nevada" had cleared the channel. Then, as he descended the ladder leading from the bridge to the superstructure deck, he was met by an eager-faced midshipman, who cried to him:

"Captain Shaw, do you remember we were all encouraged by your instructors to make any improvements we could in the guns we were to drill with?"

"I do indeed, Mr. Drake," replied Commander Shaw, smiling with interest at Robert's eagerness. "What have you been doing?"

"I will show you, sir. Will you please come over to the starboard six-pounder gun?"

Robert stepped quickly to the starboard side, followed by the commander. He then quickly unscrewed the regular gun sights, drew them out of the sockets, and threw them over to Chief Gunner's Mate Lenn. The latter handed Robert a long parcel wrapped in paper. [244]

"Hello, Bob, what have you there, a new gun?" laughed Blair. "Say, fellows, let's see what Bob is up to." Everybody became interested and crowded about, and many were the laughing remarks

made to Robert. But the latter, paying no attention to these, quickly stripped the paper from the parcel, and a long brass pipe was exposed to the curious eyes about him. On one end of the pipe was clamped a piece of metal which carried a circular ring, across which were attached, at right angles, thin silvery-white wires. At the other end of the pipe was attached a small brass cylinder, closed except for a minute hole through its centre. Near the cross wire end, hanging from the pipe, was a solid plug, cylindrical in section.

Robert worked rapidly. He slipped this plug into the recess left by the front sight, putting in several thin washers; at the rear end of the brass pipe was attached a condemned rear sight, one furnished by Lenn, and this naturally slipped into its place. [245]

"By George, Mr. Drake," cried out Commander Shaw, "this is splendid. It's the Paul Jones' bar sight! She won this year's six-pounder record by that sight—I only yesterday received a drawing of it—how in the world did you get this up?"

"Several helped, sir, and Chief Gunner's Mate Lenn did all the work about it. May I use these sights, sir, on my target practice to-day?"

"Indeed you may, and all of the rest of the gun crews will. We've known for some time the old sights were very poor. I'm delighted, Mr. Drake."

Robert's face was radiant with happiness. His classmates crowded about him; everybody saw at a glance that Robert's sight was a decided improvement.

"I congratulate you, Bob," said Blair to him. "I guess you've got the flag and you deserve to have it; this is just fine. Captain Shaw," continued Blair, "I request permission to fire my shots with the old sights."

"Not granted, sir."

"But, captain, there is a special reason why I should, a big reason. You see, sir, Drake and I are fighting for the flag; this target practice will decide things; one of us is bound to win it; now he has got up this sight and it would certainly be unfair to him if I were to get the benefit of his good ideas and——" [246]

"Captain Shaw," cried Robert, interrupting Blair, "if you think it's a good sight let's all fire with it, and give the Naval Academy a better record in target practice than last year; and if Blair can beat me out—then all the more credit to him, for I've had a lot of practice in aiming and loading. And, captain, I'd like to have each crew practice as much as they can find time for; I've had hours of it. It's very easy to go from the old sights to this; you just keep the gun pointed with your shoulder and arm so that the line through the peep-hole and intersection of cross wires prolonged will meet the object you want to hit. Here, Sam, you take the gun and get used to it."

"Bob, this is awfully white of you, and it's not fair to you."

"Gentlemen, you'll all fire with this new sight of Mr. Drake's," announced Commander Shaw, decisively. [247]

"Bob, I'm going to do my best, of course, but you ought to win; if I should happen to get credited for the most hits I couldn't feel I deserved to beat you."

"Don't you worry, Sam," chuckled Robert; "I've been practicing with that sight for some months. If you can win you've a right to."

Robert was radiantly happy; this public recognition of his having done something worth while filled him with joy. And at the same time he was completely confident that he would make the best record during the day. He was really desirous of having everybody who fired use the sight he had installed, because he expected to win anyway. He knew in his heart that with all the special drill he had had he was practically certain to make the highest score in target practice, no matter which sight was used, and he felt he would really have more credit if all who fired used the same sights.

"Now, gentlemen, each pointer will have a chance to practice with Mr. Drake's bar sight before he fires," announced Commander Shaw. "Mr. Drake, you will fire first. Are you bore sighted?" [248]

"Yes, sir, everything is ready, but I'd like to fire a trial shot."

"Very well. We'll steam to the range and give you a trial shot, and then Mr. Blair may practice aiming. Then we'll go on the range and you will commence, and when you finish the second company's gun crew will commence; as soon as they finish, and while turning the ship around for the return run, the pointers of the third and fourth crews will practice with the sight. We'll fire two pointers on a run and practice two on the return, so after six double runs we will have fired at the six targets; then a boat from the 'Standish' will patch up the targets, and after that we'll fire the other six gun crews; we ought to finish before five o'clock. Have you your range cards ready, and a stop-watch?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right." Then to Commander Brice on the bridge: "Are you making ten knots, captain?"

"Yes, sir, just exactly ten knots."

"Take your trial shot just after we pass the first buoy, Mr Drake." [249]

"Yes, sir; I'm ready, sir."

The "Nevada" was now rapidly approaching the range, which was marked by three buoys in line, this line forming the base of the triangle, of which the targets were in the apex. The "Nevada"

was to travel just outside of the line while the six-pounder was being fired.

"What yacht is that?" asked Commander Shaw of Commander Brice, indicating a yacht that had evidently just come from Annapolis.

"That's the 'Robert Centre,'"replied Commander Brice, after looking at her through his glasses.

"I think she has come out to see the target practice, and I'll wager a ship's biscuit that a party of midshipmen with some girl friends are on board," he continued, with a laugh.

"Just look at the way sail is crowded on her. Jerusalem! the fellow who is running that yacht has a lot of nerve; he's got every rag stretched that's aboard."

The "Robert Centre" was a yacht that some years previous had been presented to the Naval Academy, and in leisure hours midshipmen were allowed to sail her in Chesapeake Bay. She was coming out under a great press of canvas with a fresh, spanking breeze on her port quarter. [250]

"I'll blow the ship's steam whistle when the first buoy is abeam of the mast," called out Commander Shaw. "Mr. Drake, take your trial shot as soon after as you please."

"Aye, aye, sir."

In a moment there was a strident blast from the steam whistle and immediately after: "Bang!" went the six-pounder.

Many midshipmen, not prepared for the deafening report, jumped violently.

"A bull's-eye," cried out Commander Shaw in delight. "Mr. Drake, your sight is all right, and the powder is all right. Captain Brice, I'd like to go back and commence over again. Mr. Drake, let Mr. Blair practice sighting the gun. You'll find, Mr. Blair, that the new sights are easier to shoot with. Mr. Drake, I'm delighted; that was a bully good shot."

Again the "Nevada" steamed toward the range.

"Now, fellows," said Robert, "put cotton in your ears and don't mind about the noise; get the gun loaded as soon as I fire; and, Glass, be sure you throw the shell in home; the only chance of a poor score is a jammed cartridge." [251]

The "Nevada" rapidly approached the first buoy. An intense, breathless silence, an air of solemnity, pervaded the ship. Standing like statues grouped about the six-pounder gun that was about to fire, were Robert and his crew, with grim determination written on every face.

"After the whistle blows commence firing immediately," ordered Commander Shaw. "I'll time you with a stop-watch; you will fire for just a minute; jump back the instant I tap you on the arm like this. Mr. Blair, have your crew ready to jump to the gun just when I signal to Mr. Drake to cease."

"Aye, aye, sir," came the replies in unison from both Robert and Blair.

When the whistle blew, there came a novel sensation to those on board who had never before seen a navy target practice.

A sheet of white flame burst from the muzzle of the six-pounder, a thunderous, reverberating report assaulted the ears of everybody, and hardly had this been experienced when the same thing was repeated, over and over again. The grim statues at the gun had burst into reckless life. At the first shot, the recoil of the gun had thrown down the breech-block and so had opened the gun, ejecting the used cartridge case. The gun was ready for loading, and Glassfell lost no time. Hardly had the empty cartridge case been ejected than into the chamber he threw a fresh shell. A spring was automatically released, throwing the breech-block into place, and the gun was ready for firing. Almost instantly it was discharged, for Robert never allowed the sights to leave the target. [252]

And so a thunderous bang! bang! bang! was kept up from the gun.

Commander Brice, on top of the pilot house, with his glasses leveled on the target, was in an ecstasy of delight.

"A bull's-eye," he cried, "another bull's-eye, a beautiful shot, wonderful shooting."

While this was going on, a wild-eyed enlisted man, scantily clad in working trousers and undershirt, and evidently under intense excitement, came tumbling up on the superstructure deck, screaming, "Captain, captain." [253]

He ran into half a dozen midshipmen, fell down twice, reached the ladder leading to the pilot house top, still continuing his wild cry of "Captain." He bumped into Captain Brice, and when the latter turned angrily around to him, he thrust a paper into the captain's hands.

Commander Brice read the paper, and then in a stentorian voice cried out: "Cease firing."

At the same instant Commander Shaw touched Robert on the shoulder and called "time."

"Cease firing," repeated Commander Brice. "Keep Mr. Drake and his crew at the gun! Hard a starboard the helm! Call away the life-boat. Gunner's mate, get up twelve rifles and rifle ammunition, double time! Captain Shaw, detail Lieutenant Joynes to take charge of the life-boat; have two midshipmen crews, armed with rifles, prepared to go in the life-boat when it is lowered. Ease the helm, amidships with it—steady so."

Many pairs of surprised eyes were upon Commander Brice. With glasses up to his eyes, he was now looking at a yacht on the starboard bow, recognized by everybody to be the "Robert Centre" which, some distance away, was careening far to one side and was bowling along at a furious [254]

speed.

"Mr. Drake!" called out Commander Brice.

"Sir?"

"Do you see the 'Robert Centre'?"

"Yes, sir."

"Drop a shell under her bows. Don't hit her. The range is about fifteen hundred yards."

CHAPTER XXI

[255]

A GOOD SHOT WITH THE SIX-POUNDER

"Bang," went the six-pounder, and four seconds later a heavy column of water rose up under the bow of the "Robert Centre," three quarters of a mile away.

"Well placed," called out Commander Brice, as he saw the shot fall. "What," he exclaimed a moment later, "the rascal won't heave to! Split the mast, Mr. Drake, six feet above the deck."

Hardly had he given the order when Robert again fired.

"Five feet to the right; aim a little to the left of the mast."

Again a sheet of flame leaped from the six-pounder's mouth, again the thunderous reverberating report, dying out in far-away echoes, rolled from the gun.

Except for Commander Brice's orders, the noise of the gun, and the now painfully loud throbbing of the engines, an intense stillness prevailed on the "Nevada's" deck. Thoroughly accustomed to navy ways, not a soul on board thought of questioning the captain's reason for injuring the graceful yacht, which had seen many pleasant sailing parties of midshipmen and their friends. All eyes were on the yacht; a few seconds after Robert's last shot the tall raking mast was seen suddenly to snap off close to the deck. Down went the mast over the side into the water, carrying with it every sail; and the yacht a minute before so full of life and spirit, so swiftly plunging through the water, now rolled helplessly, inert and lifeless.

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"A beautiful shot, Mr. Drake," cried Commander Brice, delightedly. "Mr. Joynes, as soon as we are near that yacht I'll slow down and stop and you lower the life-boat; get your armed crew aboard, and row over to the 'Robert Centre'! Take three men and a small boy from her—and let go the yacht's anchor; we'll let the 'Standish' tow her in after target practice."

"What is it, Brice?" asked Commander Shaw, who had gone up on top of the pilot house.

"Read this wireless message from the superintendent. It's evident that the kidnappers of Georgie Thompson stole the 'Robert Centre' and now are on board with the boy. By Jingo! Mr. Drake did some fine shooting. Between wireless telegraphy and good shooting villainy isn't profitable these days."

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Before long three silent, gloomy men and a small boy were brought on board. Two of the men were on the verge of collapse; new life had come to little Georgie, who wondered what it was all about.

"Master-at-arms, put these men in a cell and place a guard over them. Where is the wireless operator? Oh—send this message immediately. Look here, my little man, is your name Georgie Thompson?"

"Yes, sir. Where is my papa? Is he here? What were those awful noises, Mister? May I have a piece of bread and butter? I'm awfully hungry. Where is my papa?"

"Steward, take Georgie to my cabin and keep him there, and get him something to eat, right away. Full speed, both engines, hard aport the helm. Now we'll run back by the buoys again. Take charge, Shaw, and fire as you will."

[258]

Before long Blair's crew fired at its target, and in quick succession the remaining four targets were fired at, and then the "Nevada" ran up to the targets to count the shot holes in them and the "Standish" went up to repair them.

Never did Robert Drake have a more exultant feeling than when he saw the holes his shots had torn through the canvas. He had fired twenty-two times in his minute, and there were nineteen gaping holes in his target. Blair had fired sixteen times and had made thirteen hits. Robert now knew the flag was his and he was glad indeed. Six more crews were to fire, but he knew in his heart that none could hope to equal his record, because none had had the practice his crew had had.

Nothing could have exceeded the cordial congratulations of his closest rival, Blair.

"You've beaten me out, Bob, but, by George, you deserve to. I'm not ashamed of my score; thirteen hits is not a bad record—but what luck you have had—what a wonderful bull's-eye you made when you knocked down the 'Robert Centre's' mast; you deserve the flag, Bob! There's no doubt of that fact; you've won it, and by no fluke."

[259]

The targets were soon patched up, and the remaining six gun crews fired their shots. On the whole the target practice was very good and the midshipmen and the ordnance officers present

were jubilant.

The "Nevada" returned to her wharf at six o'clock, and found a great crowd waiting for her. Present was a middle-aged gentleman, Mr. Thompson, who had come down from Baltimore on a special train; he was full of emotion and feeling, and wild with eagerness to see once more the dear little boy who had been so rudely torn from him.

Among the crowd were police officers, sailormen, and a company of marines. The transfer of the three miscreants to the police did not take long. Outside of the Naval Academy gate a howling, derisive mob of whites and blacks had gathered and they jeered the miserable criminals as they were taken through the streets to the railroad station.

Language was not powerful enough for Mr. Thompson to express his gratitude. "What can I do for you, sir?" he asked of Commander Brice. "I had determined to give the kidnappers the ten thousand dollars they demanded; could I—may I—"

"Your train doesn't leave for a couple of hours, Mr. Thompson; suppose you take dinner with me—and of course you know how glad we all are your boy is restored to you. But I'm going to introduce to you the midshipman who knocked the mast out of the yacht, the bulliest shot I've ever seen. Come here, Mr. Drake; this is Georgie's father."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Drake?" eagerly asked the happy man. "Please say something—do let me do something for you."

Robert thought a moment, and then said: "Why, sir, I'm going to graduate in less than three weeks; won't you come to my graduation, sir? I'd be so glad if you would."

Mr. Thompson looked reproachfully at them both. "Well, all I can say is, you are all gentlemen, every one of you!" Tears stood in his eyes as he said this, and he couldn't have said anything that would have touched and pleased officers and midshipmen more deeply.

This affair redounded to the credit of the Naval Academy. The superintendent had acted quickly, Captain Brice had acted with judgment, and midshipmen could hit when they shot. This was the boiled-down newspaper comment.

"How did you feel, Bob, when you shot at the 'Robert Centre's' mast?" asked Stonewell later.

"Feel? Why, I didn't feel at all, beyond an intention to hit the mast."

"But wasn't there an idea in your mind that you might hurt somebody?"

"You see, Stone," said Robert, "at that moment Captain Brice's will dominated my action; I was a machine, an automaton. I was completely controlled by him. Now when we talk this over in cold blood it seems terrible, but I suppose that in a case like that a man loses all personal feeling—he is under a peculiar power. I imagine this is human nature and accounts for a lot of things. In our case it results no doubt from the military training we have received here these last four years. Now when we get an order from the commandant or officer-in-charge we just naturally obey it."

"I think you're right, Bob. Well, old chap, you are graduating with flying colors. I'd rather have aimed the shot that took down the 'Robert Centre's' mast than have done any other thing that has happened since I became a midshipman. You've won the flag, that was your great ambition; and you are graduating number five or six. But everybody here isn't as happy as you and I are, Bob. I'm quite concerned over Harry Blunt; he stands in some danger of bilging; not a great deal, but it is possible."

Robert stiffened immediately. "Since when have you taken up with that rascal, Stone?"

"Look here, you've no right to call him a rascal. You've Frenched yourself; so have I, so have Blair and Farnum."

"Since when have you taken up with him, Stone?" persisted Robert.

"I haven't taken up with him; I hardly ever have occasion to speak with him. But I think a lot of Helen and his father and mother. You do too; you don't want to see him bilge, do you?"

"For the sake of his father and mother and sister, no. Let's talk of something else. This is Friday; the annual examinations commence on Monday. They will soon be over and we graduate in two weeks. I'll hate to leave this place, Stone; I've had such a happy year."

"It has been fine, indeed. Well, Bob, we'll be back here as instructors some day. Perhaps one of us may be officer-in-charge. By the way, I'm going to say good-bye to you for a couple of days. I've leave to go to Washington. I'm going to take the five o'clock train to-night and I'll be back Sunday morning at about ten o'clock."

Robert looked at his roommate with unconcealed amazement.

"Well, Stone, you'll excuse my being astonished. But for an intimate chum you are the most remarkably secretive, non-communicative, open-hearted fellow that ever lived. Why, to go to Washington is an event for a midshipman. Were I going to Washington, everybody in my class would know of it. But it's just in line with your lonely trips out to Conduit Street. Now, Stone, I'm intensely interested, you know that; and I'm not going to ask any questions; but if you can tell me why you are going, what you are going to do, I do wish you would."

"Bob, I've had a family matter on my mind for some time and I just cannot talk about it. But I think everything is coming out all right. I expect to be back here with a free mind Sunday morning and I hope to talk openly with you then. Good-bye; I'm going to start now."

"I'll go to the train with you; there's plenty of time."

"Bob," said Stonewell, awkwardly, "I've got an errand to do before I go, and—and—"

"All right, Stone, I understand. Good-bye, old chap, and good luck. Conduit Street again," muttered Robert to himself, after Stonewell had left.

CHAPTER XXII

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GRICE APPEARS AGAIN

Robert Drake's character was singularly generous and ingenuous. He had taken the greatest of interest in his various studies and drills. At no time did he ever have desire or ambition of standing first in his class. Without being brilliant he had a good, clear mind with excellent reasoning ability, and by hard work and diligent application he had finally taken high class rank, and now he was certain to be graduated. So much had come to him this last year in the way of friendship and honors that it had proved one of heartfelt satisfaction to him, and Robert realized that he would always look back upon this year as probably the happiest period of his life.

Stonewell had left on Friday, and the next night Robert went to a hop given at the Armory. These occur many times during the year, and serve to bring desired relaxation and pleasure into the crowded, hard-working life of the midshipman.

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"Helen, is your gown all ready?" asked Robert with glad triumph in his face.

"Oh, Robert," exclaimed Helen with enthusiasm, "I knew you would win the flag. I'm so happy about it, and so is father and mother. You see we are really proud of our friend who has done so well. Really, Robert, I am truly glad to be distinguished among your friends by your asking me to present the flag. I wanted you to win it for yourself, not for the brief distinction that comes to me; and actually I don't present it to you; it's already yours. I've had these thoughts all day, Robert; I can only say I'm proud to be the one to present the flag to you, just because I'm proud of my friend."

"Don't analyze too much, Helen; take the day as it comes and enjoy the honey of the hour. You see, the friendship of you and your father and mother is something I will always remember, and little as the flag presentation may be, neither you nor yours will forget it."

"Little!" exclaimed Helen, the real girl coming out, her philosophizing over; "well! I guess it won't be little. I'm to be out in front of seven hundred midshipmen, all by myself, and there will be ten thousand other people looking at me. I will have on a new gown made at the Convent at Baltimore and a new hat and a gorgeous bouquet of American beauties. I imagine you won't think it's little when it happens, Robert Drake."

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Robert laughed. "That's right, Helen; that's the way to feel. By the way, do you remember that Sunday long ago, when we took our first walk? It was soon after I first met you."

"Oh, yes. And you helped me jump over a mud-puddle."

"Do you remember the invitation I gave you then to our class graduation german and ball?"

"Yes, Robert, I remember all that and you have spoken of it since. Indeed I shall be glad to go with you."

"I was just thinking how pleasant our friendship has been, Helen, and how all of these things have come to pass. I was so blue and unhappy the day I first went to your father's house—you see there weren't many people who had a friendly word for me then. Your father has always been a true friend of mine."

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"Indeed he is. He is here to-night; hunt him up later; he always speaks of you when he comes to Annapolis; he will talk to you of your father; he sees him every day now. But, Robert, I can't help but be surprised that though you are so friendly to father and mother and me, you are always so hostile to Harry. Harry wants to be friendly; he said only yesterday that he liked you, but that you cut him every time you met him."

"I wish your brother every good luck, Helen, and I hope he'll be worthy of his father. Some time ___"

"Robert, there's that old colored man in the doorway again, old Grice—he is surely beckoning to you—I wonder if he has 'disregarded' with his wife again about religion. Go and see what he wants and come back and tell me about it."

It was now nearing eleven o'clock. In their talk Robert and Helen had walked several times around the room, so engrossed with each other that they paid but little attention to the beautiful music and none to the happy throng of young people gliding over the floor. Robert looked with annoyance at Grice. The latter was now gesticulating frantically at him through the open doorway.

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"What do you want, Grice?" he asked almost roughly.

"Come 'long, Mistah Drake," the old colored man cried; "come 'long or yo'll be too late."

"Come along where?"

"To the department of mathmax. The two midshipmen gwine ter steal the zamnation at 'leven 'clock ter-night."

"How do you know?"

"They come las' night. I was there. I heared dem talk; they had keys an' opened the doors and desk where the zamnations are kept. I heared one say the zamnations were not there; he says, 'We'll come back 'leven Saturday night; the zamnations are sure to be here Saturday night.' And they wuz right. I knowed the zamnation wusn't there den, but dey is there now. So, come 'long, hurry up."

"Have you told anybody?"

"No, suh," and a look of cunning came over the face of the old darkey. "'Deed I haven't, Mistah Drake. Ef I tole anybody he would say ole Grice lied and I would be dismissed. No, suh, I haven't tole no one. Come 'long, Mistah Drake, or the zamnation will be stole." [270]

"You idiot," exclaimed Robert, intensely angry. He looked about hoping to see some officer he could consult, but none were near him; he had a notion of getting some midshipman to go with him, but at this instant "Home Sweet Home" was started by the band, indicating the close of the dance, and now it would be impossible to get any advice or anybody to come with him. "Fletcher," he said to the midshipmen's head waiter, who was at the lemonade stand, "find Captain Blunt; tell him I'm unexpectedly called away; ask him to tell his daughter."

"Come 'long, Mistah Drake, or the zamnation will be stole, an' ef it is I'll tell the commandant ter-morrer that I tole yo' an' yo' wouldn't come. Come 'long, suh," urged the old man, his face glowing with an eager, frightened look.

Robert groaned in extreme disgust. The matter was unutterably distasteful to him, but he felt helpless. He wished that the examination had been stolen and he had known nothing about it. But there was no help for him; he knew he had to go, so with an impatient angry exclamation he quickly went to the hat room on his right, and a moment later joined Grice. Without further talk the two then ran across the grounds and soon were in the Academic building. Here all was dark, but Grice had keys with him and led the way. [271]

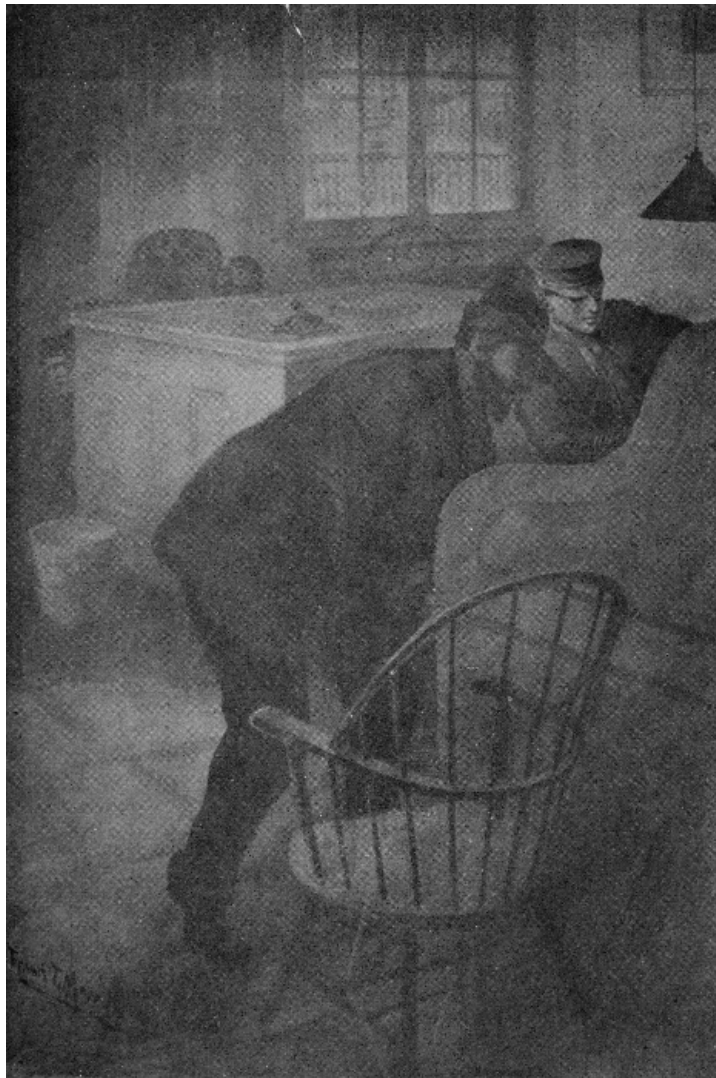
"They'll be heah soon, suh," whispered Grice; "now ef you go behind that table, an' kneel down, you'll be near the zamnation papers; I'll go over heah, an' after they get to the desk I'll turn on the 'lectric light."

Robert took the old man's suggestion and crouched down by a long table. The moonlight streaming through the window threw weird, ghostlike shadows over the floor and gave Robert a creepy sensation. He felt intensely annoyed and irritated to be there, but realized it was a duty he could not avoid. At the other end of the room was old Grice; outside was heard the rumble of [272] carriages coming from the Armory; the bell in the yard struck six, and was followed like an echo by the bells from the ships and tugs at anchor in the harbor. A marine sentinel not far away called out in tones long drawn out the words, "Post number three—and all's well."

And then came a slight noise. Some one was surely fumbling at the door. In the stillness Robert could hear his heart beat. It seemed as though seconds were prolonged into hours. Soon Robert was conscious that the door leading out into the hall was being slowly opened and softly closed. And then in the dim moonlight, he saw two dark figures like phantoms, making no sound, approach the desk where he knew the examination questions of the coming week were kept. With painful intensity of mind, and with a suffocating feeling, he saw them pause before the desk and heard a faint jingle, as of keys on a ring.

Then the room was suddenly flooded with light.

Robert never afterward liked to think, far less to speak, of the feelings he experienced in the next few seconds. They brought him more agony, more desolate grief, than he had ever felt before, or, [273] it is hoped, will ever come again to him.



HE SAW TWO DARK FIGURES

With startled, frightened glances the two jumped up. One was in civilian garb, a brown slouch hat was down over his forehead, a heavy dark moustache and beard covered his face; he wore a tightly buttoned up coat. The other was in midshipman uniform, and five golden stripes adorned each sleeve.

"Oh!" gasped Robert, in anguish; "oh, Stonewell." Robert himself, unseen under the table, was almost overcome with grief and dismay. The bearded man jumped as if he had been shot, and then his companion exclaimed in a low voice: "Run, Harry, we're caught."

As he said this both bolted from the room, and the last Robert saw of them was the electric light flashing on the golden stripes, which for a year had been Robert's joy, and the pride of every midshipman, but were now so dishonored and disgraced.

The shock was too unexpected, too sudden for Robert. So his beloved friend, his idol of manhood and honor, the ideal all-around midshipman of his time, had proved to be but a low, contemptible dastard—

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Robert's head sank on his knees and unrestrained convulsive sobs burst from his lips. He was suddenly robbed of that which was dearest to him; and blank hopeless desolation took possession of him.

CHAPTER XXIII

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ROBERT RESIGNS

"Didn't I tole yo' so, suh? That other man was Mistah Harry Blunt, suh; didn't yo' hear Mistah Stonewell call him Harry, suh? An' suppose dis ole niggah had done tole the commandan' that Mistah Stonewell, the fines' gemman in the 'Cademy, and Mistah Harry Blunt, the son of Capt'in Blunt, were stealin' zamnations, what would have happened ter ole Grice? He'd been 'cused of lyin', yo' knows dat, Mistah Drake. I known fer seberal months dat Mistah Harry Blunt been goin' about town in cibilians' close, but I ben feared to tole any one. Ain't I right, Mistah Drake? We done caught 'em, suh, an' yo' is evidence that ole Grice done tole de truf."

With horror in his heart, and almost unmanned by the situation which had so suddenly burst upon him, Robert was speechless. He was confused, entirely confounded. That one of these unprincipled midshipmen was Harry Blunt did not surprise Robert; he was quite ready to believe

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anything of that young man. But it brought him into an intensely disagreeable position. He knew he would be called upon for evidence, and to give testimony that would cover all of the Blunt family with ignominious disgrace—that family who had rescued his own father and mother from absolute want, which had put his father in a self-respecting, self-supporting position. "I had rather bilge than do it," thought our cadet lieutenant. Wild bitterness toward Harry Blunt filled his mind. And yet these feelings sank to small dimensions compared to those concerning Stonewell. Faith in everything seemed to be lost with faith and trust lost in this old friend. And combined with this was a feeling of inexpressible amazement, amazement made up of many different things.

Robert was astonished that any reason could have existed which would have induced Stonewell to join Harry Blunt in such an enterprise. In a helpless, uncertain way, Robert imagined that Blunt had some hold over Stonewell, and even this was hard to believe. "But how else can I account for it?" he asked himself. "I never would have believed anybody, or any number of people had they told me they had seen Stone do this—but it was Stone—in his uniform with his five stripes on his sleeve." [277]

Had Robert known of a conversation between the two intruders after they had dashed out of the building, he would have been still more amazed. "It's too bad, Stonewell," said the one; "you did it all for me—no man ever did so much for me as you have. But I'm afraid you were recognized; I wish you hadn't had on that uniform and had some disguise. I'm awfully sorry I got you into this."

"Don't feel that way, Harry; I suggested it," replied the other. "I hope I was not recognized. But if I were, I will have to stand for it. Did you see anybody in the room?"

"No," answered Harry; "my one hope is that whoever it was didn't see you; nobody would have known me. Good-night; I'll be around to Conduit Street to-morrow afternoon and will tell you of any talk I may hear."

Now that old Grice's mind was easy in regard to himself he was much concerned about Robert. [278]

"Doan yo' feel bad, Mistah Drake. The commerdan' will think yo' is a smart young gemman when yo' report this; he won' think yo' had nuffin' to do with it yo'self. I'ze gwine ter tell him I couldn't hev detected the gemmen ef it hadn't been fer yo', an' he'll give yo' Mistah Stonewell's five stripes, suah as yo' is bawn, he will, suh."

Grice rolled his eyes in ecstasy. He imagined he too would receive praise and reward for what he had done, and now he was quite happy.

"Shut up," cried Robert, annoyed beyond endurance at his rambling. And without another word, or so much as a glance at Grice, he slowly walked away and returned to his room. He feared yet hoped he might find Stonewell there. "If I could only see Stone," he thought, "I'd surely learn some excuse for him. But why did he do this? Why did he pretend to go to Washington? Why should he engage in such an affair with Harry Blunt?" Countless other questions crowded themselves into Robert's mind, but to not one could he find a suitable answer. [279]

He found his room empty, nor was there any evidence that Stonewell had been there. Robert paced restlessly up and down the room in troubled thought, and as the minutes dragged on he grew more and more hopeless.

"Well, I'm done for, as well as Stone and Harry Blunt. I suppose Grice will report this matter, and I'll be called up; I'll have to give my evidence against Stone and Blunt or else be bilged myself. Well, I'll bilge. I can't help what Stone has done; I could never be happy if my evidence were to dismiss him. As for that Blunt, who got him into this—well, he's the son of Captain Blunt, and Helen's brother. I never could convince them I was not an ungrateful cur. No, Stone and I will both bilge together; but I wonder if Stone isn't now in Blunt's room—" and Robert stopped short.

It was now after midnight, and all the midshipmen were back from having escorted their partners to their homes. Robert looked out in the corridor and saw that the midshipman in charge of the floor had left his desk.

"The men on duty are turned in; I'll go to Blunt's room and see if Stone is there." [280]

Robert darted through the corridor. Turning a corner near where Harry Blunt's room was he saw that young man just entering it. Robert jumped in after him.

"Where is Stonewell?" he savagely demanded.

When Blunt saw who his midnight visitor was he was visibly startled.

"Why—why—how should I know?" he stammered.

"You hound, you—" cried Robert. "Tell me where Stonewell is! Do you hear me? Tell me where Stonewell is!" And Robert seized him by both arms.

"I—I don't know—I haven't seen him for some time," faltered Harry Blunt, with a white face, in which fear was but too plainly depicted.

From the overhead transom light from a corridor lamp streamed in, and on the table in the room were three burning candles.

Robert looked suspiciously at Harry. In the latter's arms was a bundle of clothing. Robert suddenly grabbed this and opened it up. It was composed of a dark sack coat, out of which two articles fell to the floor. Robert picked them up and instantly recognized them. One was a brown slouch hat and the other a false beard. In an agony of bitterness and hate Robert completely lost [281]

control of himself. He grabbed Harry and shook him violently and then dashed him against the wall.

"You contemptible cur," he cried. "For the last time, will you tell me where Stonewell is?"

"I don't know," sullenly replied Harry.

"Do you expect to see him again to-night?"

"I do not."

Robert looked at him utterly without belief.

"Drake," implored Harry, "if you report me for this you will bilge me; you know how that will affect my people; I suppose it is your duty to report me, but if you do only one thing can happen to me. I will be dismissed; you know that as well as I do."

Robert looked at him with contempt, and left the room.

The long night passed slowly, but it brought no sleep or rest to the overwrought nerves of Robert. He went to bed and tossed about in an agony. [282]

"Oh, that Stonewell would only come," was Robert's thought, repeated countless times. But Stonewell did not come. The moonlight faded away; the silence was broken only by the striking of bells and the monotonous call of sentries. The first gleam of dawn found Robert still wide awake, hopeless and dejected. Mechanically he prepared his room and himself for Sunday inspection. Finally reveille was sounded, the gun thundered and Bancroft Hall burst into life. Later came breakfast formation and Robert, against his inclination, had to mix with the other midshipmen.

"What's the matter, Bob?" inquired Peters, with friendly concern; "you're not looking well."

"Oh, I'm all right," impatiently answered Robert. Then came breakfast, which seemed interminable. Robert sat at his table's head longing for the order "rise." Food would have choked him; he gulped down a cup of coffee, and sat idly drumming the table.

After breakfast Glassfell came up to him. "Look here, Bob, what's bothering you?" he asked with real solicitude. "You're not yourself this morning, old chap. What's the trouble?" [283]

"Have you seen Stonewell?" abruptly asked Robert.

"By jingo!" exclaimed Glassfell. "Last night I could have sworn I saw Stonewell pass me. I was on Main Street, and a midshipman with some stripes, and I thought a good many, passed me in a great hurry and turned into Conduit Street. It was dark and yet at the time I had no thought but that it was Stonewell. 'Hello, Stone!' I called out; 'I thought you were in Washington;' but the fellow paid no attention to me. He seemed to be in a hurry, almost running. Then I concluded I must have been mistaken, because I knew Stone was in Washington, and it was pretty dark. The thing bothered me a bit for the time, but I must have been mistaken. I had taken my partner home from the Armory and was on my way back. It was about half-past eleven, I think. But why do you ask me about Stone? He won't be back from Washington until ten this morning." [284]

"If you see him tell him I'm looking for him," and Robert turned away. He now wanted to be by himself. He went in one of the wing corridors and looked out of the window, hardly replying to different salutations of midshipmen who passed him. Outside it was raining, one of those tenacious rains that seem determined to last throughout the day. Overhead were spread heavy dark forbidding clouds; the day was gloomy and hopeless, but not nearly so much so as felt this midshipman.

After a while one stroke of the bell told Robert it was half-past eight, and soon he saw the commandant's tall form, wrapped up in a great rubber coat, come down the walk. Some time later he saw two figures emerge from the trees that line the main walk; one he recognized as that of Commander Beckwith, the head of the Department of Mathematics, the other, of low figure and shambling walk, he instantly recognized as that of old Grice. With throbbing heart, Robert watched them until they disappeared into the commandant's office; then the cadet lieutenant went to his room. [285]

It was evident to him that Grice had told his story to Commander Beckwith and the latter was now talking with the commandant about it. Robert waited for the summons he knew was coming, to appear before the commandant. Thoughts came surging through his brain. Sooner than testify against Stonewell he would accept dismissal. And likewise, in spite of his bitter dislike toward Harry Blunt, before he would bring disgrace upon the dear friends who had done so much for him, he would accept dismissal. Robert, with a steady mind, without hesitation, determined on this stand. He now knew his last moment of inaction had arrived. Not that he had any hope or expectation of saving either Stonewell or Blunt, but that he should be the means of their disgrace and dismissal was an unbearable thought. It were far better to bilge.

Steps were heard in the corridor and Farnum appeared at his door.

"Hello, Bob," he said, "the commandant wants to see you right away. He's in his office."

"All right, Farnum, I'll start in a moment." And then taking a sheet of official paper, and hurriedly heading it, he wrote: [286]

"I hereby tender my resignation as a midshipman in the naval service."

This he signed, and with it in his hand he walked down the corridor, and was soon standing before the commandant.

IT WAS STONEWELL

"Good-morning, Mr. Drake," said the commandant, pleasantly enough. "I'm surprised that you haven't been to me with a report before now—that is, unless Grice has made some great mistake. He has told me that you and he caught two midshipmen last night attempting to steal an examination—he says he knows who they are, but seems afraid to give their names. Who are they, Mr. Drake?"

Commander Dalton was grave and impassive. He spoke to Robert as one officer might to another on an official matter; his manner betokened an expectation on his part of receiving an absolutely frank report from the cadet lieutenant.

Instead of making any reply Robert approached the desk at which the commandant was sitting and handed him a folded sheet of paper.

"Who were the midshipmen, Mr. Drake? Or did you fail to recognize them?" And then after a pause, with a trace of annoyance in his voice due to Robert's backwardness in answering his questions, "Or is Grice's report incorrect?" [288]

He looked at Robert with surprise as the latter made no effort whatever to reply. He then opened the paper and cried out in amazement: "You tender your resignation as a midshipman? What does this mean, sir? I have asked you certain questions which you do not answer, and then you resign. Come, Mr. Drake, explain yourself, sir! First tell me if Grice's statement is correct. Do you refuse to answer, sir?"

Still Robert was silent; he looked at the commandant with gloomy, troubled eyes.

"Mr. Drake, are you aware of what you are doing? Don't you know that persistence in this course will cause your summary dismissal?"

"Don't dismiss him, captin'," cried out old Grice, now in great trouble about Robert. "He's a fine young gemman, 'deed he is, suh. I'll tell yo' who dese young gemmen wuz; he doan' want to tell yo', but I'll tell yo', captin', suh; dey wuz Mistah Stonewell and Mistah Harry Blunt, suh. I seed 'em, suh, and Mistah Drake seed 'em, and Mistah Drake doan' want ter tole yo', suh, because——" [289]

The commandant jumped from his chair as if he had been shot. "What are you talking about? You're demented!" he roughly cried. "Do you know who you are talking about? Do you know that Mr. Stonewell is cadet commander? Grice, you must be crazy!"

"Yes, suh, captin', suh; beggin' yo' pardin, suh, dat's why I didn't tole yo' befoah, suh. I knowed you'd say ole Grice wuz surely crazy; but de fax am, captin', that Mistah Stonewell, in his unerform—I counted de five gold stripes on his sleeve, suh, at de time—and Mistah Harry Blunt, the son of de ole commerdan', at 'bout 'leven 'clock las' night tried to steal a zamnation. I seed dem try, and Mistah Drake, he seen 'em try ter steal it. An' ef yo' doan' believe me, captin', yo' ask Mistah Drake; he knows Mistah Stonewell tried to steal the zamnation 'kase he seen him. Yo' ask Mistah Drake, captin'."

"Mr. Drake," cried Commander Dalton, "you have heard this monstrous charge; I'm waiting for your indignant denial! Why are you silent? Are you mute, when you hear the character of the first midshipman of his time so shamefully assailed? You shall answer me! Do you understand that this negro says that you and he together saw Mr. Stonewell and Mr. Blunt attempt to steal an examination last night? Do you hear that, and are you silent, sir?" [290]

Commander Dalton's manner was vehement and intimidating. "What have you to say, sir?" he thundered, slamming a clinched fist with a bang on his desk.

With parched lips and in trembling accents Robert commenced to speak. Four years of the strictest training urged him to yield to the commandant's order; but Robert had expected this and had tried to prepare himself for it.

"As I have handed in my resignation, sir," he faltered, "I respectfully request that I be not asked any questions. This is all I can say, sir." The commandant dropped into his chair; he looked sorrowfully at Robert, and then in an altered tone said:

"Mr. Drake, you and Mr. Stonewell are close friends, are you not?"

"He has been more to me than a brother could have been, sir," replied Robert, in a broken voice. And then in an effort to control his feelings he turned his back on the commandant and with blinding tears in his eyes looked through the window in front of him at the mournful, steady rain without. [291]

Captain Dalton picked up a telephone and said, "Central, give me number twenty-seven. Hello, is this Captain Blunt?"

"Yes, the commandant of midshipmen."

"Blunt, can you come to my office immediately? A most serious charge has been made against your son."

Then he rang for his orderly and said: "Tell the officer-in-charge I won't inspect this morning, and tell him to send Midshipman Blunt to my office immediately."

When Harry Blunt walked in the office, instead of his usual debonair manner, there was a look of worry and anxiety on his face.

"Wait a few minutes, Mr. Blunt. Beckwith, excuse me while I write something."

Harry Blunt glanced at Robert and at the others; several times he looked as if he were about to say something, but he did not.

It was not long before Captain Blunt appeared; he jumped out of an automobile that had stopped before the Academy steps, and fairly ran up them and into the commandant's office. Commander Dalton rose to greet him with a worried expression. [292]

"Captain Blunt," he began, "a week ago Mr. Drake reported to me that Grice informed him two midshipmen were planning to steal an examination in mathematics; I told Mr. Drake to ascertain who these midshipmen were if he could. This morning Grice reported to his department head, Beckwith, that he and Mr. Drake had caught two midshipmen in the act of stealing this examination. Grice was afraid to tell who they were; he said Mr. Drake could. I sent for Mr. Drake and asked him who they were, and if Grice's statement was true. Instead of replying Mr. Drake hands me this paper. Read it. Then Grice made the most astounding statement I have ever heard. He says the midshipmen were Mr. Stonewell and Mr. Harry Blunt."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Captain Blunt.

"And when Grice made this statement Mr. Drake remained silent, and he still remains so."

"Impossible!" again exclaimed Captain Blunt, in an agony of spirit. "Harry, my boy, say it is false." [293]

"He cain't, Capting Blunt, he cain't, becace I seed him; an' Mistah Drake, he seed him too, suh," broke in old Grice, feeling that he had to substantiate his charge. "Mr. Stonewell was in unerform, suh. Mr. Harry Blunt wuz in citerzens' close; he had on an ole brown hat and he wore whiskers, but I knowed him; I done seen Mr. Harry afore in dem same close."

"When and where?" demanded Commander Dalton.

"In Capting Blunt's kitchen, suh; I wuz er passin' by the house at night when all midshipmen is supposed to be studyin', and I seed a man in the kitchen. I seed him take off dem whiskers and de hat an' I seed it wuz Mr. Harry Blunt. Yo' ask him, suh. An' I seed him 'nother time, suh. Capting, yo' 'member that time at de theatre, heah, when a man stood up in a box an' says, 'Three groans for de superintendent an' commandan'?' Dat wuz Mistah Harry Blunt too, suh; I wuz dar. I didn't know it at de time, but when I seen Mistah Harry in Capting Blunt's kitchen I knowed it then, 'cose he had on de same hat an' coat an' whiskers. Ef yo' doan' believe me yo' ask him, suh; an' las' night Mistah Stonewell calls him Harry. I heard him an' Mistah Drake heard him. An' ef yo' looks in Mistah Harry Blunt's room I spect yo'll find them whiskers an' coat." [294]

Beads of perspiration burst out on Captain Blunt's forehead. He tried to speak, but his voice choked in his throat. That this disgrace was to come upon him after a lifetime of honorable service in the navy was hard, but that the pride and hope of his life, his son Harry, could be guilty of so vile an act, was an unbearable thought; he looked at Harry. Frightened and appealing, the latter cried: "Father, I deny that—"

"Keep still; don't say a word," called out Captain Blunt; then turning to the commandant he said: "My son is in a terrible position, Dalton; he might be tempted to falsehood. I want to save him from that, at least. Before we go any further I want to ask you to have his room searched—I would like to be present when it is."

The commandant sent for the officer-in-charge, and directed him to take a cadet officer and search Harry Blunt's room. Captain Blunt left with the officer-in-charge. It was not long before they returned, and the cadet officer carried with him a bundle composed of a citizen's coat, hat and trousers, and a false beard. [295]

"Put them on," ordered Captain Blunt, harshly, to his son. The latter did so mechanically.

"Will you please send for some midshipman who was at the theatre that night?"

"All of the first class were there, and most of the officers. I'll send for Mr. Farnum and Mr. Blair."

When these two midshipmen came in, Captain Blunt said: "Take a look at this man; have you ever seen him before?"

Blair and Farnum recognized him immediately. The heavy dark pointed beard and moustache once seen were not likely to be forgotten, particularly when seen under such startling circumstances as they first had been at the theatre on the night Penfield played Richard the Third.

"He's the man who gave three groans for the superintendent and commandant," cried Farnum, excitedly. [296]

"He's the man, sir; there is no doubt of it," said Blair.

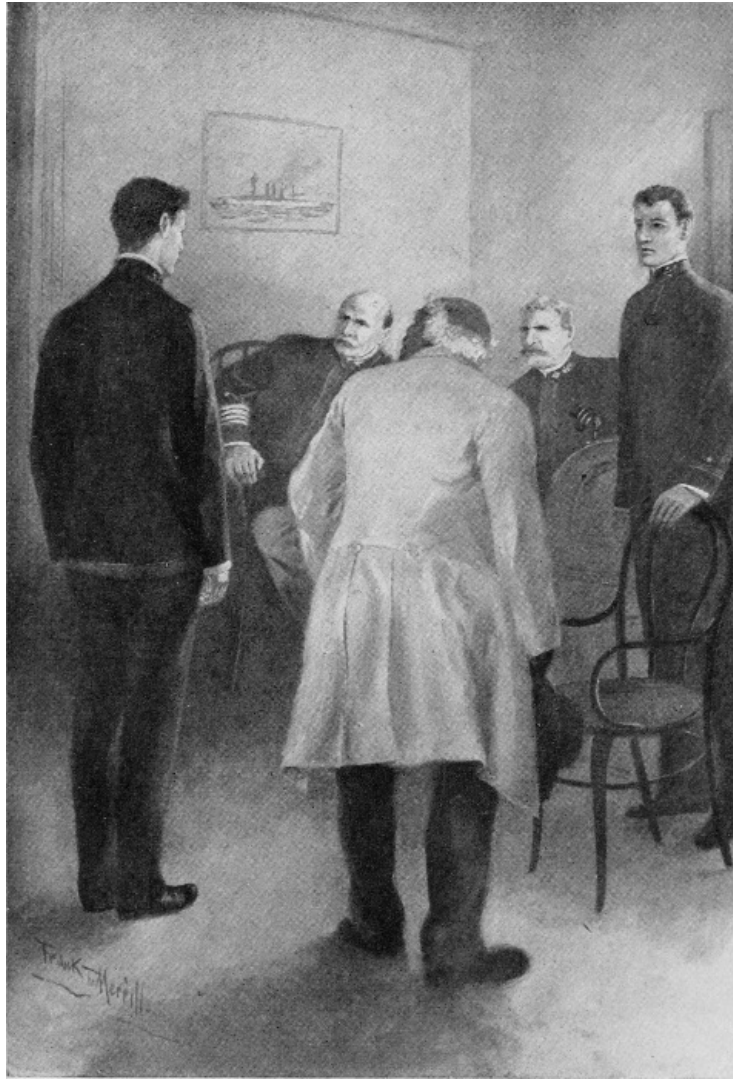
"That will do, gentlemen," returned the commandant; "you will not speak of this to any one."

Captain Blunt sat up straight and rigid in his chair; his face had turned an ashen gray. The greatest sorrow of his life was upon him. "Mr. Drake," he said after a moment, "have you ever seen my son in this disguise? Did you detect him trying to steal an examination? I wish a direct answer." His voice sounded strange and harsh.

"I have resigned, sir; I request to be excused from answering any questions," was Robert's reply.

Commander Dalton looked sorrowfully at his brother officer, but made no comment, while Harry Blunt regarded Robert with intense surprise, stupefaction, fear and amazement.

Robert, inert and dull, gazing idly out of the window, suddenly gave a start and looked up with interest and expectancy as the office door was opened, and a midshipman entered. [297]



"THAT WILL DO, GENTLEMEN"

"Good-morning, sir," said the newcomer; "I have to report my return from two days' leave."
The midshipman was Stonewell.

CHAPTER XXV

[298]

JOHN 15:13

With Stonewell's entrance came a silence that was positively painful. The commandant looked at him with undisguised loathing. In Captain Blunt's face woe unutterable was clearly depicted. Harry Blunt, pale and uneasy, regarded him with frightened glance. Robert Drake looked at Stonewell with fascinated gaze; he felt that now the end of all things at the Naval Academy was to happen.

Stonewell, clear-eyed and calm as usual, looked at Robert, and then slowly his eyes traveled and rested upon each person in the room. Never had Stonewell appeared better. In his dignified bearing there was not a single trace of fear or worry. No response was made to his salutation or report. Again he glanced about the room, and getting no response inquired, "What is the matter? Am I intruding?"

"What's the matter?" cried the commandant. "Have you the effrontery to ask what the matter is?" [299]

"I beg to be so informed," replied Stonewell coolly, after a moment's hesitation.

"Read this paper, sir. Do you not know why Mr. Drake has offered his resignation?"

Stonewell read the paper; then looked keenly at Robert, then at Captain Blunt and Harry; things seemed to explain themselves and he merely said, "Ah," as if it were in response to some unspoken thought of his own.

"Where were you last night at eleven o'clock, Mr. Stonewell?"

"In Washington, sir; I spent the day in Princeton, New Jersey, and returned to Washington at

seven o'clock."

An angry exclamation left the commandant's lips. Again his closed fist banged the desk.

"Mr. Stonewell!"

"Sir?"

"Last night, shortly after eleven o'clock, Mr. Drake and this man Grice caught two midshipmen in the act of stealing an examination. Mr. Drake knows who these midshipmen are, but resigns rather than give their names. But we know them. One of these midshipmen was disguised. Mr. Blunt, put on your false beard and your hat." [300]

Harry Blunt did so, shamefacedly enough.

"Look at this man; have you ever seen him before?" thundered the commandant, in scornful tones, leaning over his desk.

Stonewell looked at Harry, then at Robert, and then at Captain Blunt. Again Stonewell said "Ah," and further remarked, "Now I understand."

"Answer my question, sir," fairly shouted Commander Dalton. "Did you ever before see a person who looked as Mr. Blunt does now?"

"Yes, sir. The man who gave three groans for the superintendent and commandant that night in the Colonial Theatre was evidently Mr. Blunt in disguise. I didn't know it at the time, but evidently my roommate did. This accounts for his past inveterate hostility to Mr. Blunt. He never told me about it, and I have been puzzled at his strong dislike for Mr. Blunt. From what you have said I imagine that Mr. Blunt was one of the two midshipmen caught by Mr. Drake. I now see what the trouble is. Mr. Drake will not tell because of his gratitude to Captain Blunt." [301]

"Mr. Stonewell," burst out the commandant, "have you descended to the bottom of the pit of hypocrisy and infamy? Do you add lying to your other crimes, sir?"

"Do I add lying to my other crimes?" repeated Stonewell. "These are strange questions, Captain Dalton; will you please tell me in what way I have been infamous and a hypocrite? What are those other crimes, and in what respect have I lied?" Indignation with ringing force was in Stonewell's voice as he looked steadily and unflinchingly at the commandant.

"Grice," said Captain Dalton, turning to the negro, "did you and Mr. Drake see Mr. Blunt trying to steal an examination last night?"

"Yes, sir," eagerly replied Grice; "we done catched him, suh, an' Mistah Stonewell was with him, suh; Mistah Drake wasn't six feet from Mistah Stonewell when I turned on de 'lectric light, suh; dere ain't no mistake, captin. Mistah Harry Blunt was dere disguised, but I knowed 'im. An' Mistah Stonewell was dere; he wuz in his unerform, gold stripes an' all." [302]

"Mr. Drake," said the commandant turning to Robert, "I will once more order you either to deny that Mr. Stonewell was there last night or to admit it."

Robert looked at his beloved friend. Never had Stonewell appeared more manly, more forceful. Character and greatness of soul seemed to radiate from him, and it almost seemed that midshipman though he was, the others present were dwarfed into insignificance.

With unmoved expression and with a clear, straightforward gaze Stonewell returned Robert's look, and smiled; smiled as though to assure him that all was well; Robert felt pity mingle with his deep affection for his erring friend, and confused as he was and knowing that Stonewell was guilty, there was yet something so noble, so fearless in Stonewell's bearing that a hope leaped up in him that his friend was not without some justification for his act, impossible as it was to imagine what it could be.

"Do you deny that you detected Mr. Stonewell last night trying to steal an examination?"

"As I have resigned I respectfully request to be excused from answering questions," replied Robert in a breaking voice. [303]

"Mr. Stonewell, I shall recommend your immediate dismissal for scandalous conduct, and you too, Mr. Blunt. Mr. Drake will be dismissed for disobedience of orders. Mr. Stonewell, your crimes have found you out. You, the most esteemed midshipman of your time, have turned out to be but a sorry hypocrite, an impostor. You, a shameful, dishonorable man to wear a naval uniform, to represent your country? Never! Oh, that I had never come to this place! What is to be hoped for our navy when the midshipman we are most proud of turns out to be a hypocrite and a cheat?"

The commandant spoke with, warm, intense feeling. He paused for a moment, and then contemptuously said: "You are as brazen as you are false. Your position was so high that I cannot imagine what could have induced you, even though you are devoid of honor, to have so acted. And now that you are found out I cannot help but wonder—I would like to know what excuse, what explanation you can offer, and what your thoughts are at this moment." [304]

While the commandant spoke, Stonewell stood proudly erect before him. He neither cringed nor for a moment took his eyes from the commandant's face. Over at one side stood Robert, now utterly collapsed.

Stonewell fearlessly looked the commandant through and through, and then he looked at Robert. There was almost a break in his voice when in tones showing not a trace of resentment for the commandant's scathing, contemptuous words, but instead full of unutterable affection, he said

softly to the commandant, but looking at Robert: "I cannot tell you what my thoughts at this moment are, sir, but I will tell Drake later."

CHAPTER XXVI

[305]

COMMANDER DALTON BECOMES ANGRY

"This matter isn't settled yet, sir," continued Stonewell. "A man accused has a right to offer a defense: I insist on that right. First, I am not guilty. I shall have no trouble in proving my innocence. I shall leave your office for a few minutes and will return with the proof of that innocence. And as I have been charged with scandalous acts in the presence of everybody here in your office, I have to request that they all remain until I return and that no further action be taken until I am back."

"Just a moment, Mr. Stonewell," called out the commandant, but the former, paying no attention to this order, hurriedly left the office.

Commander Dalton looked undecided. "I don't understand this at all. Mr. Stonewell should not have left at this time."

"I think you had better let him go, Dalton; he is entitled to present a defense if he has one," observed Captain Blunt. [306]

"Of course, but he had the opportunity right here; Blunt, do you wish to question your son?"

"After Mr. Stonewell returns I would like a chance to talk privately with Harry and with Mr. Drake."

"Father," started Harry Blunt, appealingly, "I will admit that——"

"Keep quiet, will you?" interrupted his father fiercely. "Dalton, I don't want my boy to say a word. Look at him; he is entirely unstrung, and in his condition I fear he may be tempted to untruth. Bad as things are, I must save him from that if I can."

"Father," pleaded Harry, imploringly, "let me speak—I deny that——"

"Harry, don't say a word. There is no hurry about this; Dalton, have you any objection to my having a private talk now with my son?"

"None at all, Captain Blunt. Take him into this rear office."

When the captain passed Robert on his way to the rear office, he said to him sadly: "Mr. Drake, don't hesitate to tell the facts; you have proved you will not tell an untruth, that you will resign sooner than do so. But don't spoil your whole career by trying to defend one so unworthy as my son has proved to be. And if you have any notion, as implied by Mr. Stonewell's words, that you are under obligations to me, I assure you there is no such debt; and even if you feel that there is one, I freely absolve you from it. Come, Mr. Drake, have you seen Harry in that disguise? Was he the one guilty of that shameful insult to the superintendent and commandant? Did you detect a person in that disguise in the act of stealing an examination last night? These are now my questions, Mr. Drake, not the commandant's; I beg of you to answer them frankly." [307]

"Thank you, Captain Blunt," replied Robert, huskily; "but I have resigned, and I request to be excused from answering questions." Captain Blunt passed out of the room with his son. Commander Beckwith now excused himself for a few minutes, and there remained in the room only Robert, Grice and the commandant. The latter busied himself writing, with never a glance at Robert. Old Grice rolled his eyes, fearfully apprehending some disaster to himself. [308]

All the midshipmen were out of the building, and absolute stillness, save for the mournful tick-tock of the clock, reigned in Bancroft Hall. Outside the rain came down steadily, and Robert Drake felt burdened with a hopeless sadness. He now fully realized that his silence would in no way help or save Stonewell or Harry Blunt; that its only result would be his own dismissal; and yet there was not in his mind any tinge of regret that he had refused to disclose what he knew. Better to go out and commence over again than to stay in by taking part in the disgrace of Stonewell and Captain Blunt's son. In regard to Stonewell, Robert's mind was in a state of disordered confusion. Stonewell's manner and bearing were at utter variance with the idea of guilt; as much so as had been his previous character. And it was inconceivable that anything imaginable could have induced him to steal an examination. And so the long minutes passed with Robert's mind going through a bewildered maze.

Commander Beckwith was the first to return, saying as he came in the door: "I have been with the officer-in-charge; but I see Mr. Stonewell is returning; he'll be here in a moment." [309]

"Come in the office, please," called out the commandant, to Captain Blunt, and when the latter returned accompanied by Harry, he looked about as bewildered and perplexed as he did before he left.

When Stonewell left the commandant's office it was at a dead run. Outside of Bancroft Hall he gave no heed to the "Keep-off-the-grass" signs; he plunged over the lawn toward Maryland Avenue gate at more than football speed. Just outside the gate was a public automobile. He jumped into it crying: "Conduit Street. Rush for your life; I'll double your fare."

When Stonewell returned to the commandant's office, he was followed by another young man in

midshipman's uniform. And strange to say the young man's coat had five golden stripes on his sleeve—strange because there is but one cadet commander at a time at the Naval Academy.

"Captain, this is my brother, Frank Stonewell," said Stonewell simply.

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"Your brother, Frank Stonewell!" ejaculated Commander Dalton, in tones of stupefied amazement, "Your brother, Frank Stonewell!" he repeated in the same manner. He looked at Stonewell and then at his brother Frank and was speechless.

"Oh, Stone!" cried Robert Drake, with joy radiating his face. "Oh, Stone, how could I have doubted you?"

"Mr. Drake, I don't blame you for mistaking Mr. Frank Stonewell for his brother; if that is what you did," finally said the commandant; for the likeness of the two brothers was marvelous, and the resemblance even extended to the tones of their voices. They were of the same height and build. Frank Stonewell had the same expression, the same features as had his brother. Seeing them together one could detect a difference, but apart one would certainly be taken for the other.

"I was in Washington last night, sir. I spent the night at the house of my congressman, Mr. Blake. We were talking together between ten and eleven o'clock. You will have no trouble in ascertaining whether or not this statement is correct. My brother was in Annapolis at that time. He has been here for some weeks, living in Conduit Street. I have not told him why he was wanted here nor have we talked about what may have happened last night. Perhaps he may imagine. Whatever he may have done, I believe you may accept his statement as truthful."

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"Will you please tell me, sir, what you are doing in that uniform?" demanded the commandant in a stern tone.

"I was sitting in my room when my brother John bolted in and pulled me out in a rush. He gave me no time to change."

"Where did you get that uniform?"

"Oh, it's John's. He has come out frequently to see me and brought it over one day. It's much more comfortable to sit about in than that bobtailed stiff jacket midshipmen wear."

"Humph! Two midshipmen were seen stealing an examination last night. One was recognized to be your brother. What have you to say to that, sir?"

"Do you believe that, sir?"

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"I believe it to such an extent that I told him he would be dismissed from the Naval Academy for scandalous crimes. I accused him also of lying and of being a shameless hypocrite."

"I think you have an apology to make, captain, if that is your title," remarked Frank Stonewell, in great good nature. "John was in Washington last night. And John isn't that kind of a fellow; evidently you don't know him."

"Well, if your brother didn't do it, then you did."

"You may find some trouble in proving that."

"Mr. Drake, was this the man you saw last night?" shouted the commandant angrily to Robert.

Before he had finished his question, Stonewell said quickly to his brother, in a low imperative tone: "Acknowledge it, Frank. Don't force Drake either to refuse to answer or to tell on you."

"I was the man, I acknowledge it," quickly interposed Frank Stonewell.

"You are a brother to be proud of, aren't you?" announced the commandant scornfully. "In your brother's absence, donning his uniform, you committed a despicable act, trusting if caught that his uniform and the marked resemblance you bear to him would throw the blame and shame on him."

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"Not at all, captain," replied Frank Stonewell, in an easy manner as one talking socially with a friend; and it was a sharp contrast to the deference and crisp military replies of the others. "Not at all; you mistake the purpose of my wearing his uniform. It was to permit me to be about the grounds and buildings at night; as a civilian the watchmen would have fired me out; but rigged up in this way I would never be questioned. And as for throwing blame or shame on him; before he came for me this morning I knew I might have been seen and mistaken for him. No blame could come to him because I have been ready to acknowledge the facts."

"You are brazen, sir; you have done a shameful deed, you have disgraced your brother. But I am glad to know that the shame I thought was his belongs to you. I am indeed relieved to know he is guiltless. I pity him for the burden of disgrace in having such a brother."

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"Pardon me, captain. This is something of an academic question. What may be shameful for John or any other midshipman is not necessarily so to a civilian owing no allegiance to your Naval Academy. I have never lied or cheated, I have never broken a promise—I have never done a dishonorable act. I admit having engaged in some quiet larks at college, and other places—this is one of them, that's all."

"You are a burglar; you could be sent to prison."

"Oh, I think not, captain; I think you'd have hard work to convince any jury of that."

The commandant was furious; Frank Stonewell was cool and entirely self-possessed and not at all intimidated. None of the others present attempted to say a word. Robert Drake listened with absorbing interest. A great load had been lifted from him, and in spite of his own unfortunate

position great happiness had suddenly come to him in the knowledge that John Stonewell's character was as clean and true as he had always believed it to be. [315]

"If you have cleared your brother, Mr. Frank Stonewell, there is one person you cannot clear, and that is the contemptible midshipman who was with you," vehemently exclaimed the commandant.

Frank Stonewell was silent.

"Do you deny, sir, that a midshipman accompanied you last night?"

"I will answer only such questions as concern myself," replied Frank decidedly.

"I know your companion, sir, and I'll show him to you." And turning abruptly toward Harry Blunt he exclaimed, "Come over here, and let Mr. Frank Stonewell look at you."

As Frank looked up into Harry Blunt's face, he said coolly enough, "Who are you?"

"Who is he?" almost shouted Commander Dalton. "Do you mean to say you don't know who he is?"

"I never saw him before in my life. What has he to do with this matter?"

"He's Harry, the Harry you spoke to last night."

"Harry? Harry who? I never spoke to him in my life." [316]

"He's the Harry of the false beard, the Harry who proposed three groans for the superintendent and commandant, the Harry who accompanied you last night, for whom you tried to steal an examination."

"Oh, I think not. I don't know who this chap is; he was not with me last night; I never saw him before. Look here, captain, I hope you navigate better than you investigate," rejoined Frank Stonewell, in a disgusted tone; "if you don't I fear you will bump into every rock that is hanging about loose."

"Mr. Stonewell," said Commander Dalton to the cadet commander, "you told me your brother would speak the truth. Now, Mr. Frank Stonewell," he continued, "your companion was a midshipman disguised in this beard and with this coat and hat on. He was recognized by this colored man who had seen Mr. Harry Blunt at one time remove this disguise. There is every reason to believe that Mr. Drake had previously seen Mr. Blunt in this disguise. Mr. Drake evidently believed he saw your brother last night, and also Mr. Blunt, but he has refused to answer about either, for which he will be dismissed. I will add that this disguise was found in Mr. Blunt's room. Now, what have you to say about this matter?" [317]

Frank, with all the appearance of keen interest, listened to the commandant. "I would say that Drake is a bully good chap," he burst out enthusiastically, "a fellow to tie to; this must be a queer place if you fire such a fellow for standing by a chum. John has told me that Drake was the very best fellow who ever lived," he ran on. "I guess he's all right," and Frank looked over at Robert and gave him a friendly nod.

The commandant looked the rage he felt and no doubt would have liked to inflict the punishment of double irons upon this insolent, effervescent trifler. He darted an extinguishing glance upon him and turned toward Captain Blunt and said:

"Captain Blunt, I can get nothing from this man. Do you wish to ask him any questions?"

"I do indeed, Dalton. Mr. Stonewell, Mr. Blunt is my son. He stands accused of having attempted, while in your company, and while in this disguise, to steal an examination. My son admits that the disguise is his property, and has been for months; but he most solemnly assures me he was not with you last night, that he was not out of this building after seven o'clock. For this offense, of which you say he is guiltless, he stands recommended to be dismissed. Now I call upon you to state who was the man that was with you." [318]

"Your son was not with me; I shall make no further statement than that."

"Do you mean that you would allow an innocent person to be punished?"

"I mean I will tell the truth. I never saw your son to my knowledge till I entered this office. If after my statement the authorities dismiss him the fault is theirs, not mine. I should regret to see this done, but I shall not try to find somebody to take his place."

"But how do you account for my son being recognized as the person with you?"

Frank Stonewell seized the hat and beard and quickly hooked the latter over his ears. He then suddenly assumed a bent-over position and leaning over toward Grice said: "Did you ever see me before?"

"Fer goodness' sake, suh, I does berlieve yo' wuz de young gemman in dose whiskers." [319]

Tossing the hat and beard to one side Frank Stonewell laughed and said: "It was the beard and hat that were recognized, not your son, sir." Hardly had he spoken when the door of the commandant's office opened, and a midshipman entered unannounced.

"What is it, sir? Why do you enter my office without permission?" inquired the commandant.

"I think I'm needed in this investigation, sir," replied the midshipman, a tall, broad-shouldered young man, athletic of build, of rather pleasant features, and with stern resolution written in his face.

"I am Midshipman Bligh of the fourth class."

CHAPTER XXVII

[320]

ROBERT FINALLY ANSWERS

"What is it, sir?" demanded the commandant, sternly, of Midshipman Bligh.

The latter hesitated for a moment, as if uncertain how best to express himself.

"I—I—have heard that some—that some civilian clothing and a false beard were found in Mr. Blunt's room this morning—I learned Mr. Blunt was in your office—and a little while ago I saw Mr. Frank Stonewell come into the building with his brother. I have thought that perhaps Mr. Blunt is charged with having used that disguise last night; is that so, sir?"

"It is; what do you know about the affair, sir?" returned the commandant, looking fixedly at Bligh, while Frank Stonewell regarded him with friendly approval in his expressive face.

"Mr. Blunt is not guilty, sir. I was in possession last night of the things found this morning in his room."

"And did you accompany Mr. Frank Stonewell in an attempt to steal the examination last night, sir?" [321]

"I am guilty of having made that attempt, sir."

"Mr. Blunt is also charged with being the person who proposed the three groans for the superintendent and commandant. Were you guilty of that, too, sir?"

"I was, sir."

When Bligh said this Captain Blunt was undoubtedly the happiest person in the room; he seemed to relax from the strain and tension he had been on for the past hour; and it is likely that a more crestfallen young man than Robert Drake would have been hard to find. Relieved as the latter was, he felt abjectly foolish. He had made a most needless sacrifice; he had jumped to conclusions and had been entirely wrong.

The commandant was silent for a few moments, apparently lost in thought. He finally remarked: "Mr. Bligh, do you know that this confession of yours will cause your dismissal from the Naval Academy?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bligh, simply.

"I suppose that you do this to save Mr. Blunt; was this your reason?" [322]

"That was only an incidental cause, sir; the real reason was I wanted to do one decent thing at the Naval Academy. I have done so many things that I am not proud of; and I want to justify Frank Stonewell's belief that there is some good in me. I have had a hard time here, sir. I commenced wrong, and I have been punished severely—for months not one single midshipman at the Academy has spoken a friendly word to me. Then some weeks ago I met Frank Stonewell, and somehow I opened up my heart to him—I was in a bad way at that time; but he made me feel I was not hopelessly bad; it is hard lines, sir, to be made an outcast, a pariah, by one's classmates."

"I see," remarked the commandant, a bit unbelieving and skeptical; "apparently Mr. Frank Stonewell stirred up the good that was in you and the direct stirring up resulted in your shameful act of last night. I sincerely hope Mr. Frank Stonewell will not try to stir up any more good at the Naval Academy. But, Mr. Bligh, you at least seem disposed to tell the truth. I wish to get to the bottom of this whole affair. Tell me how you got hold of Mr. Blunt's disguise. Did he know of it?" [323]

"No, sir. My room is next to the divisional officer's office, on the ground floor. Late one night, months ago, while I was getting a glass of water, I observed Mr. Blunt enter that office. Two hours later I saw Mr. Blunt, in disguise, come over the terrace and soon I saw him leave the office. I didn't understand it at first, but suddenly it flashed over me that Mr. Blunt kept civilian clothes somewhere in his divisional officer's office. Then I knew it was Mr. Blunt in disguise, and not a civilian, who had left and entered that office by the window. So later I took a wax impression and had a key made for the door of that office; I went in one night and found on top of the wardrobe (it is a regular midshipman's wardrobe) the coat, hat and false beard,—well, that's about all, sir. I used them several times besides the twice you know of."

"That's enough, quite enough to dismiss you from the Naval Academy. I am glad indeed finally to have arrived at the facts. The one thing I cannot understand is that after these shameful acts you should talk such twaddle about wanting to prove there is some good in you. Faugh! There's no good in a cheat, and your attempt to steal that examination was caused by a desire to cheat. You can't convince me there's anything particularly good in you by what you have done in the last twenty-four hours." [324]

"I have no hope of convincing you of anything, sir, except that I and not Midshipman Blunt am guilty of the offenses charged to him. If I have done that, sir, I am entirely satisfied. I admit that my intention was to cheat, but the purpose was to pass the examination, not to pass higher than some rival. It was pretty bad, but not so bad as for a midshipman who is satisfactory to cheat for the purpose of getting higher rank. Now as for my purpose in coming before you—I don't know of any way you could have proved, without my own voluntary confession, that I and not Mr. Blunt was guilty. Cadet Commander Stonewell has spurned me. Mr. Blunt has repeatedly treated me with contempt. This resulted from my own unfortunate start here; I don't say it wasn't my fault,

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but I do say that I have been given no chance to retrieve myself. Every one here seemed to be against me—this was a new experience to me, sir. Every day was full of bitterness and unhappiness. I could not feel I was so entirely worthless! The groans I proposed were a bubbling over of this bitterness; it was not personal to either the superintendent or yourself. At a time when I was ready to do anything vile Mr. Frank Stonewell got hold of me and he has made a different man of me, at least in my own feelings. I have a self-respect now that I had been without for months. In spite of last night's act, I submit, sir, that this voluntary statement should show you I am not entirely bad; and what is more important to me, I believe it will prove to Mr. Frank Stonewell that I am on the square."

"What is your purpose in telling me all of this stuff, Mr. Bligh?"

"Sir, I want to get a fresh grip on myself; I hope to live a self-respecting life, to make an honorable place for myself in civil life. Can't you see, sir, that I don't want the stigma, the disgrace of dishonorable expulsion from here just as I commence civil life? Sir, I request to be allowed to resign instead of being dismissed. I want a chance, sir; I've done mean things here, but even if it is the last moment, I've repented; I've done what I could to clear Mr. Blunt."

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"There's something in what you say, Mr. Bligh. I deprecate your wrong actions, but I acknowledge you have shown the proper spirit this morning. Now write out a statement of just what your actions have been, and append to it your resignation. I will endorse this, giving you credit for your proper act of this morning. Whether you will be allowed to resign or be dismissed will be decided by the superintendent. I regret you have had such a hard time here; I should be pleased to learn that from now on you will live a good life. That will do, sir."

Bligh left the room.

"Not altogether bad, is he, captain?" remarked Frank Stonewell, nodding approvingly at the captain. "I knew he would come up like a man when the time came."

"I'll have nothing to say to you, sir; I consider your ideas of right and wrong have but a shadowy boundary between them. I'll not detain you in my office any longer," snapped Commander Dalton.

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"Good-day, sir," and with an easy, friendly smile for all Frank Stonewell left.

The commandant drew a long breath. "Now, Mr. Blunt," he said, "you are cleared of the worst charges that have been made against you; I desire you to make a frank statement of your connection with that disguise."

"Captain, I owned it; the disguise is mine. You know, sir, that midshipmen do lots of things that are not discovered; if a fellow would cheat or do anything dishonorable, none of his classmates would speak to him; but if he were to 'French' as I have done, he would not lose caste. There are many offenses here of a military nature that a midshipman might commit which would be severely punished by the authorities if he were detected, and yet at which most midshipmen would smile. Well, sir, I have never cheated nor done anything dishonorable; but I did have this disguise and 'Frenched' out in Annapolis several times with it on. I did not propose the three groans that night at the theatre and I was not out of this building last night after seven o'clock."

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"Captain Blunt," resumed the commandant, "I don't mind saying that I am more relieved than it is possible to express. Now, Mr. Blunt, did you never fear detection? I am rather interested in this matter."

"Yes, sir. Captain, do you remember the Sunday morning you invited me to dine with you?"

"I do, indeed. I recall that at first you were tongue-tied and acted queerly; then you gushed out words that didn't have much sense. That was the next day after the three groans were proposed at the theatre. I remember it well."

"The night before, sir, Saturday night, I went after my disguise intending to use it, and it was missing. When you called me up I was scared; I thought I was found out. Evidently Mr. Bligh had taken it, but I didn't know or imagine he had."

"Who did you imagine had taken the things?"

"I just couldn't imagine, except that some servant might have stolen the disguise, and then thought better of it and put it back. But no trouble came to me about it, so I didn't worry."

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"When you heard about the man in the theatre proposing the three groans, didn't you recognize from his description that it was somebody with your disguise on?"

"Why, no, sir. People said it was some cit. I never gave particular thought to that affair."

"Mr. Blunt, you as a third classman have already received one hundred and forty-seven demerits—I have looked up your record. As a third classman you may receive in the year two hundred and fifty demerits without being unsatisfactory in conduct. For having civilian clothes in possession you will receive fifty demerits, and for having been absent from academic limits, fifty more. That leaves you only three to run on, but the end of the year is at hand and you should be able to do it. Further, I shall recommend that you be deprived of your September leave. I am sorry, Captain Blunt," he continued, "to punish your son so severely, but if this had occurred while you were commandant I don't believe you would have been more lenient."

"His actions merit dismissal, Dalton; you have been more than merciful," replied Captain Blunt grimly. "But at the same time I am glad that my son is not guilty of dishonorable acts, and also that he is not to be dismissed. But, Harry, clear up one more thing. How did those things happen to be found in your room?"

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"Last night, father, I got to worrying about that disguise and at about midnight I went to the office and got them. I intended to take them out in town to-day. Just as I got into my room Mr. Drake came in and asked where Mr. Stonewell was, and saw the coat, hat and beard. Drake looked wild; I guess he didn't have much sleep last——"

"That's enough, Harry; you're getting a bit too loquacious," interrupted the young man's father.

During all of this talk Stonewell and Robert were both silent and yet rapt listeners. Not one word had they exchanged, but at times Stonewell regarded Robert with an expression of deep affection, full of concern. And Robert was so full of self-disgust and shame that he dared not look either his roommate or Captain Blunt in the face. He felt that his own action had been simply ridiculous; that instead of heroism he had been guilty of foolishness. [331]

"Now, Dalton," remarked Captain Blunt, and his face assumed a look of intense earnestness and feeling, "everything has come out well for Mr. Stonewell and for my son. I hope you will pardon me for speaking for Mr. Drake. I realize, of course, his offense; and I know that for this offense you will be justified in inflicting any punishment up to dismissal. I am of course aware of your duties as commandant, of the imperative necessity that discipline must be maintained. And I agree that he has committed a most serious offense. But, Dalton," and here Captain Blunt's voice, rugged veteran though he was, broke with emotion, and in husky tones he continued, "Dalton, Mr. Drake's offense arose from sentiments that do credit to his heart—his idea was to spare me from sorrow—and he could not force himself to testify against his roommate. Dalton, is this not a case for mercy? He not only tried to save my boy for my sake, but three years ago he saved my own life. Dalton—I make a personal plea for mercy." [332]

Commander Dalton's eyes were shining very bright. He looked at Robert with an expression that caused him to feel that at least his judge was sympathetic.

"Mr. Drake," he began, "if a midshipman persists in disobedience to the commandant's orders, if he persists in refusing to answer the commandant's questions, he must be dismissed; no other action is possible. You have been asked certain questions which you have not yet answered; and by now you have had plenty of time to decide your answers. I will repeat my questions. Did you last night detect Cadet Commander Stonewell in an attempt to steal an examination?"

"Sir?" gasped Robert, a flood of joy surging through him.

"Did you, Mr. Drake?"

"I thought I did, sir, but I was mistaken; I know now it was his brother, Frank Stonewell," stammered Robert, realizing the purport of the commandant's question, yet hardly able to answer through sheer happiness.

"Did you, Mr. Drake, detect Mr. Harry Blunt in an attempt to steal an examination last night?" [333]

"I thought I did, sir, but I was mistaken. I know now it was Midshipman Bligh whom I saw."

Commander Dalton smiled happily. "I think this disposes of Mr. Drake's case," he remarked. "Now, Mr. Blunt, my advice to you is to walk a chalk mark the rest of your time here. Mr. Stonewell, I am sure you will forgive my words. I was mistaken, of course, and was under great feeling. You can hardly be happier over the final outcome than I am. I will turn your brother's case over to you to handle; he is beyond me. I can but say I envy you the friend you possess. Evidently Mr. Drake would sacrifice his career rather than contribute to his friend's disgrace. And yet he could not lie, even to save that friend. Gentlemen, we've had a hard morning, and deep feelings have been stirred. I think this is all. Captain Blunt, are you ready to leave?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

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"BLIGH, BLIGH, BLIGH!"

That Sunday afternoon the Naval Academy was in an uproar, for the complete history of Harry Blunt's disguise had become known to all midshipmen, and every one of them was fascinated and intensely amused at his daring.

It was not the commandant's intention that the facts should become generally known. But Harry Blunt never yet had been very amenable to orders. First he told two or three intimates under strict injunctions of secrecy, and each of these told three or four of their close friends in confidence; and in this strictly confidential way the history of Harry Blunt's disguise became known before dinner was over to every midshipman of the brigade.

Now the stern officers who inculcate discipline and a few other things on the minds and character of midshipmen know that these young gentlemen should have been pained and grieved to learn that one of their number had left a disguise in the office of the dreaded officer-in-charge of the first division of midshipmen; in that office where demerits were assigned and daily preachments were solemnly made to erring midshipmen. And we know they should have been dismayed that yet another one had proposed three groans for the highest authorities at the Naval Academy. But to be candid one is compelled to admit that the midshipmen's sentiments on these matters were far otherwise. [335]

Indeed, the fact is Bligh's audacity thrilled and fascinated every midshipman of the brigade. It came as a violent shock; and after the thrill came amazement, and then uproarious laughter.

That a midshipman should have kept civilian clothes for months right under the nose of an austere lieutenant-commander touched the brigade's "funny bone."

It was felt that Harry Blunt had a good joke on that lieutenant-commander. Toward Bligh there suddenly developed great admiration. His proposing groans for the superintendent and the commandant was the most audacious thing that had happened in the memory of any midshipman then at Annapolis. And his frank assumption of the guilt of the acts charged against Third Classman Blunt, a man with whom he had been on the worst of terms, suddenly awoke all midshipmen to a belief that the despised Bligh had not merited the obloquy so universally cast upon him. [336]

"Poor beggar," remarked Glassfell to Farnum, "he was only a plebe, and hadn't yet been educated up to the niceties of honor. He was only trying to save himself from bilging; and he hasn't been treated decently here, that's a fact. But what unparalleled nerve! Goodness! The idea of his standing up and shouting out those groans! Well, I think a good many of us have groaned more than once at the superintendent and commandant!" and Glassfell chuckled.

When Harry Blunt left the commandant's office that Sunday morning he went straight to Bligh's room.

"Bligh," he cried, "you are white, and by jingo! everybody in this Academy is going to know it before night. I've treated you badly, Bligh, right from the start; and when I think of what you did this morning—well, I'm ashamed of myself, that's how I feel. Look here, Bligh, would you shake hands?" [337]

"Do you mean that, Blunt?" exclaimed Bligh, joyfully, his face aglow with happiness.

"Mean it? I'm proud to be your friend if you will only let me!" and these two young men who had so long cherished bitter feelings against each other jumped into a warm, generous friendship.

With the tale of Bligh's audacity went everywhere the story of how he had saved Blunt. And midshipmen were touched deeply in suddenly realizing the sad, lonely, ostracized life Bligh had led; of the generosity of conduct by one so universally despised. And thus there was a reaction by leaps and bounds of generous feeling toward that once unhappiest of young men.

Bligh's character was hardly changed in these few days; the strongest thing in it was still a desire for applause, and he fairly drank in the kindly words that were now profusely showered upon him. The direct effect was to make him tremendously happy; Bligh really had never been hopelessly vicious, unwarrantable as had been some of his acts. And no midshipman had ever lived a sadder life at the Naval Academy. And the sudden change from ostracism to popularity overwhelmed him with happiness and filled him with ambition to merit the kindly feelings that went with him in his final days at Annapolis. [338]

On the following Wednesday Bligh received an official letter from the Secretary of the Navy with the curt information that his resignation as midshipman had been accepted, and so the fear of disgraceful dismissal vanished. He was to reënter civil life without the stigma of expulsion from the naval service. He was all packed up and left on the afternoon train.

Beside him in the car sat Frank Stonewell.

"Stonewell," remarked Bligh, "you will never know the good you've done me; you came to me with your friendship when I had no friend and when I needed one badly. I was going to the dogs and hated everybody; you helped to restore my self-respect and gave me a hope I might be of some account after all. I'm going to try to live right from now on, to make a point of deserving friends." [339]

"You're all right, Harry," replied Frank Stonewell; "you just needed to get a good grip on yourself; you had the academic regulations and standards on the brain when I first met you; you were actually morbid about them. Perhaps I pushed my defiance of them a little too far when I played the last trick, but I love to dare. However, it's all a phase of life. But, I say, Bligh, look out there! What are all those midshipmen running into the station for?"

"Oh, that's Blunt and a lot of third and fourth classmen. I guess they had a late dress parade and are trying to get to this train to bid somebody good-bye. Probably some girl is aboard whom they all like."

"All aboard!" shouted the conductor.

Then came a sharp cry in staccato words, from the well-known voice of Harry Blunt. "Four N yell, fellows," he cried, just before the train started.

And then from over a hundred throats came a well-known Naval Academy shout, as follows: [340]

"N N N N
A A A A
V V V V
Y Y Y Y
Navy—
Bligh, Bligh, Bligh."

It was in this way, and with this shout tingling in his ears, that Bligh left Annapolis. His eyes glistened. A mist swam before them. A moment later he turned to his companion and said: "Frank, I've heard that same call before—but I'd given up all hope of ever hearing it again—I can't tell you what it means to me—but it seems as if those good chaps have forgotten scores of mean things and have remembered the one decent thing I did at Annapolis."

Three years later a recent Princeton graduate was speaking at Annapolis with Cadet Lieutenant Sexton.

"Tell me about Bligh," inquired Sexton. "I've heard you chaps at Princeton liked him there. He was here for a while, in fact was my roommate—he had a hard time at first, but everybody here liked him when he left." [341]

"Liked him!" exclaimed the Princeton man. "I guess we did; we more than liked him. Harry Bligh was one of the squarest fellows that ever lived, and one of the kindest and best besides. We were proud of his football record, of course—he was probably the best half-back in the country last season. But he was lots more than that. He was a helpful friend to all of us. I remember he once pulled me out of a deep hole; and I wasn't the only one. Just let a fellow get into trouble and before long you'd find Bligh helping him out. Bligh could never be turned against any one. I remember one of our fellows did something off color; he offended our class feeling; well, we were going to do something—I don't know what—but Bligh sort of took charge of affairs and said: 'Let's not condemn that fellow; we may only succeed in shoving him deeper into the pit he is in; let's see if we can't find some good in him, or point him right, anyway.' Well, we did, and we were mighty glad of it afterward. He was always helping a fellow that needed a friend. I once said to him, 'Harry, what is your ambition?' He seemed to think quite a while and then said: 'I want to be square, and I want people to believe I am square.' And you just bet, Sexton, that a bullier, squarer chap than Harry Bligh never lived." [342]

CHAPTER XXIX

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THE END OF A LONG DAY

"Stone, will you ever forgive me?" asked Robert shamefacedly, as soon as they had left the commandant's office.

"Forgive you, Bob? Never speak of such a thing! Forgive you for sacrificing yourself for me? Bob, I can hardly talk about it," and Stonewell felt such a rush of feeling come over him at the memory of what Robert was willing to do for him, and of his own affection for his friend, that it was necessary for him to control himself before he could continue. "Bob," he finally said, "the whole thing was my fault. I should have told you about Frank. You are not a bit to blame for thinking you saw me last night. Well, Bob, there's no use in my thanking you for your attitude toward me—such actions are away beyond thanks. It's hard to talk these things over, but I want you to believe one thing. I'll never forget what you've done for me—never. Bob, I don't suppose the time will ever come when I will have occasion to show my appreciation—I don't want it to come, for that would mean misfortune—and I don't imagine I could possibly show the greatness of soul you have. But don't you ever look up to me again. I may work out probs a bit faster than you do, but for greatness of character, for everything that goes to make up leadership, you are the man of the class, not I. Why, when I think of you I positively feel small." [344]

Robert laughed happily. "Oh, Stone," he said, "don't talk foolishness. The whole thing seems like a dream to me now. I was in the most mixed up state imaginable. I just saw you do it; that's the way I felt. I knew it was you, and yet I could not realize how it could be you. I thought that for some unexplainable reason you had determined to help Blunt. But why should you help Blunt? The whole thing was wholly beyond my comprehension; and yet I thought I saw you do it. Well, it's all right now, thank goodness. But what a remarkable resemblance your brother has to you; not only in features but also in voice."

"Yes, I suppose so; still, such resemblances frequently exist. There is a rear admiral in our navy that had a son here and another at West Point at the same time. On one occasion when these two chaps were at home together, they exchanged uniforms and even the old gentleman himself was completely fooled. But I'm going to tell you about Frank. He has been at several schools and colleges and has repeatedly been dismissed. Some time ago he was expelled from Princeton and came down here. You see he's afraid of my father and leans somewhat on me. I was intensely disgusted. He was mixed up in a scrape in which some unpopular professor was left over night tied up in a room. Now as a matter of fact Frank for once had no part in this outrage. But he was suspected and accused—it's a long story; I won't go into that, Bob. He denied it, but was not believed, and was dismissed; if he were not guilty it was evident he knew who the guilty parties were, and he refused to divulge their names. So he came to Annapolis, and for this thing to occur just before our graduation was extremely unpleasant to me. I just couldn't talk about him, but I used to go out to see him. A short time ago the whole truth came out, and Frank was exonerated, and then to my surprise he refused to return to Princeton. He had no good reason, but now I can see that he had become interested in Bligh. He was stubborn about not going back, and this surprised me. He never spoke of Bligh; probably the latter had asked him not to. Finally he demanded an apology from somebody in Princeton who had accused him of falsehood, and I went up to see what could be done. But the whole thing, including Frank's stubbornness, was so distasteful to me that I never spoke of it even to you." [345]

"Gracious, if you'd only told me, Stone;—I hope he'll have no more trouble. But did you fix matters at Princeton for him?" [346]

"Yes, but his skirts were not entirely clean and he'll have to repeat his year. I imagine he'll take Bligh back with him—those two have struck up a great friendship."

"Stone, I'm going to see young Blunt, and apologize to him."

"What for? You've never said a word about him to anybody."

"No, but I've thought a lot. Come along."

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"Blunt," said Robert later in the latter's room, "I apologize to you for imagining you did things which you didn't do."

"Oh, bother your apology, Drake. But, by George, I want to tell you you are a regular brick. You've a pile of nerve and are all sorts of a good fellow. And isn't that chap Bligh a trump? Just to think of his using my cit suit, and his groaning for the supe. Say, that's the best thing that has ever happened at the Naval Academy," and Blunt burst into a peal of infectious laughter.

After they left Harry, Stonewell said: "Now, Bob, we are going to call on Captain Blunt."

"I can't, Stone—you have no notion how awkward I feel."

"Of course you do, but you've got to get over that feeling, and it will only last a moment."

But Robert didn't feel awkward at all; he had no chance to. He was received by Mrs. Blunt with a loving cordiality that put him entirely at his ease. And Helen's manner was as bright and natural as usual. Captain Blunt said but little, but that little seemed to say, in addition to the words he spoke: "I approve of this young man; he will be an honor to the cloth." The fact that Robert had acted under a misapprehension was not considered. The intent that animated him was what influenced their feelings.

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Nellie Strong, who was visiting with the Blunts, as usual was tremendously interested in all that happened. "I just knew something was to occur to you, Robert Drake," she exclaimed. "I never feel safe when you are around. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if a terrible Turk were to burst in upon us this minute and carry you off. You're positively dangerous to have around."

"Nellie, I hear you are to lead our class german with Stonewell," was Robert's smiling reply.

"Yes, and I'm just delighted over it. Helen Blunt thinks she's the most important girl in town because she's going to present the flag to your company; and I'm awfully glad she is, Robert; it's just fine. But I'd much rather lead the german with Mr. Stonewell. Helen's glory will last only five minutes—and mine will last for hours. What in the world are you yawning for, Robert Drake? Don't you find my conversation interesting enough to keep you awake? One would imagine you hadn't had many winks of sleep last night."

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"I beg your pardon, Nellie," he said. "To tell you the truth now that I come to think of it, I don't think I had even one wink last night."

CHAPTER XXX

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GRADUATION

The annual examinations commenced the next morning and lasted throughout the week. It was a time of apprehension to some, of exultation to others, and of tremendous interest to all; for these examinations, averaged in with the previous records made in daily recitations and monthly examinations, were to determine the class rank of each midshipman. The examinations were written; they began at eight o'clock each morning and lasted till one. In the afternoons hundreds of midshipmen were to be seen streaming through the pleasant grounds of the Naval Academy, many of them accompanied by pretty girls who seemed to think that the institution's chief purpose was to provide them with pleasant times. For though the examinations took all of the mornings, in the afternoons were teas, launch parties and impromptu dances. And happy were the midshipmen who were without fear of failure, and so could afford these social pleasures. There were other midshipmen who, not so fortunate, with puckered brows and worried faces, feverishly worked at their books, and among these was Harry Blunt.

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The week passed quickly, and at its close Robert Drake knew he would graduate fifth in his class. That Stonewell would graduate first had long been a foregone conclusion. The Blunt family were now out of suspense and knew that Harry had passed, his application to his studies in these last days being well rewarded.

Graduation week came, and with it the Annual Board of Visitors, who are supposed to make a serious investigation of the Naval Academy in all of its parts. And for one week the midshipmen are required to show off their various accomplishments.

On Monday morning, the midshipmen as a brigade of infantry passed in review before the Board of Visitors, and Robert Drake, commanding the first company, felt proud indeed as he snapped out the order, just before he reached the reviewing stand, of:

"First company—eyes right!"

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After dismissal the midshipmen rushed into their working clothes and dispersed into different shops, and great was the hammering in the blacksmith and boiler shops as the Board marched through. In this week of each year the Naval Academy is on official exhibition for this wise Board. And for its benefit sham battles are fought, young men scramble aloft on antiquated sailing ships and feverishly loose and make sail, haul on buntlines, clewlines, sheets and braces. They are mustered in the different class rooms and the Board sees them at the blackboard, pointer in

hand, in the act of explaining an intricate valve motion to an earnest lieutenant. What the Board does not see is the alacrity with which pointer, blackboard and room are abandoned as soon as the Board has passed on.

So this week there were, as there always is at graduation time, sample machine shop drills, gunnery drills, electrical drills, steam engine drills—and many others. And the tired, earnest, hard-working Board was marched through it all at a lively pace. This Board was composed of statesmen, professional men, and business men of established reputation; but it is not certain that any of them knew the difference between a Stephenson link of an engine and the club link of an anchor chain. However, they worked hard and wrote a voluminous report of fifty printed pages, which, covered with dust, is lying with fifty other similar reports in a pigeonhole at the Navy Department. [353]

On Wednesday occurred the great day for Helen Blunt. At ten in the morning she was in the receiving stand gowned beautifully in simple white, and carrying a huge bunch of American Beauty roses.

Soon martial music was heard, and then the brigade of midshipmen was to be seen across the parade ground, marching with its precise military stride. Then loud vibrating orders were carried to the ears of ten thousand spectators and bugles rang out their harsh notes. In exact unison the seven hundred midshipmen, who had been in column of squads, wheeled into line, and marched steadily to the front until they were within a hundred paces of the reviewing stand, where they halted. In the centre of the long line were the colors, unfolded and waving to the breeze. [354]

"Color guard to the front," was the vibrant order from Cadet Commander Stonewell.

"First company to the front and centre," followed immediately.

The old color guard with the colors marched slowly to the front, and on the right of the line some quick, jerky orders were heard, and the first company broke from the line and came marching toward the centre of the brigade.

Thousands of spectators now saw a pretty ceremony. A young girl stepped from the receiving stand and advanced toward the waiting color guard; the Academy colors were handed to her, and the ex-color guard was then marched off.

Helen did not remain alone for many moments, but for an instant a pretty picture was presented on the drill grounds. A beautiful girl, carrying in one arm a huge bunch of red roses, and in the other steadying the glorious colors of the Naval Academy, standing alone, facing seven hundred blue-coated statues. But in a moment another color guard approached, the color guard of the company judged to have won the flag. And with it marched the captain of the company, Cadet Lieutenant Drake.



The new color guard halted a few feet in front of Helen, and then Robert stepped forward.

The air was very still save for the robins chirping to their young. An absolute hush fell over the many thousand spectators. It was evident that the young lady was presenting the flag, and was making a speech to the captain of the winning company. But so far away she was, and so softly she spoke, that none heard her words; that is, none save Robert Drake and the new color guard. But people said it must have been a very pretty speech. After apparently saying a few words, Helen seemed suddenly to pick up the colors and fairly throw them into the hands of Cadet Lieutenant Drake.

"Wasn't that pretty?" was an exclamation made by many of the onlookers.

"You have done very well, Mr. Drake," faltered Helen; "your company has done splendidly. Oh—I had a good speech made up, but I've forgotten all about it! Father wants you to come to dinner to-night—he has a surprise for you—oh, dear, what am I talking about? Won't this do? Haven't I said enough?—Oh, take the flag!" and Helen threw it at Robert.

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The next day the papers said that Miss Helen Blunt had made an eloquent little speech of well chosen words when presenting the colors to Cadet Lieutenant Drake, but of that one may judge for himself.

"Thank you," said Robert, simply and gravely, taking the colors and handing them to his color sergeant; "the first company is honored."

And then Stonewell, in clear ringing tones shouted:

"Three cheers for the girl who has presented the colors."

"Hurrah—hurrah—hurrah!" rang out in perfect unison from over seven hundred young throats.

Then Cadet Lieutenant Sam Blair stepped to the front and proposed, "Three cheers for the winning company, and its cadet lieutenant," which were heartily given.

"What's the surprise, Helen?" asked Robert that evening at seven o'clock as he entered the Blunt house.

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"I won't tell you; you must find out for yourself," replied Helen happily; "come into the drawing-room."

"Mother—father—oh, what a happy surprise," cried Robert a moment later. "Captain Blunt, you have had my mother and father come to my graduation!" Indeed Robert could hardly speak for sheer joy.

"Yes, Robert," said Mr. Drake, "Captain Blunt has asked us to visit him for your last days, and here we are; we thought to give you a happy surprise."

It had been many years since Mr. Drake had visited Annapolis. He vividly recalled his own midshipman days, the joyful strife and the friendly rivalry. These had long passed, but he found classmates and many old navy friends with whom to renew old scenes and almost forgotten times.

The first class german took place that night in the Armory, and only first classmen and their chosen partners went on the floor. These midshipmen had donned for the occasion their new white officer uniforms, and the young ladies all wore pure white dresses with ribbons of old gold. Stonewell led, and with him, radiant with happiness, was Nellie Strong. The first classmen, seventy in number, were all present.

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On the balcony overhead were thousands of visitors enjoying the pretty, novel figures made by the handsome couples on the floor below.

The next night the evening promenade concert occurred. The grounds were made bright with numbers of lighted Japanese lanterns hung among the trees. The Naval Academy band played beautifully, and Robert, walking between his father and mother, followed the crowd of happy promenaders, talking of his four years within the Academy walls, of the difficulties he had had, and of the friends and good fortune that had come to him.

And the following day was Robert's graduation.

The brigade was formed with the band on the right; next came the first classmen about to be graduated, without arms. Then came the brigade, with rifles, the temporarily appointed cadet officers of the second class wearing swords. Soon the brigade marched off with slow measured tread to the chapel, the band playing all the way that tune, full of joy to midshipmen's ears, of: "Ain't I glad to get out of the wilderness?" It finally had a special meaning to the young men about to receive their diplomas. In the chapel the chaplain, dear to generations of midshipmen, made an eloquent, heartfelt prayer, and then the superintendent delivered a short address.

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"Young gentlemen," he began, "your lives in the navy are now to begin in earnest. You have been here for four years, surrounded by a naval atmosphere, and drilled in those things required of our naval officers. From now on your work will be on familiar lines, but yet there will be a great difference. Here, at the Naval Academy, if you make a mistake in your navigation work, you will receive a low mark. Aboard ship you will do the same exact kind of navigation, but if you make a mistake you may cause a ship and hundreds of lives to be lost. The great difference is that in the outside naval service you are at all times under great responsibilities; here your responsibilities have been but slight. Here, if you drill well, your company may win the Academy colors, and that is what many of you have worked for. Aboard ship, if the enlisted men under you do not drill well,

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it will be your fault, and it will mean your men do not shoot accurately, that your engines are inefficient, that your ship is neither an honor to the flag, nor could an admiral depend upon it in battle when the interests of your country were at stake.

"Here you have been under instruction. You have for long years been drilled in the duties of the private in the ranks, of the fireman at the furnace, of the machinist at the lathe, of the electrician at the switchboard, of the gun pointer in the turret, of the helmsman at the wheel—there is no duty that an enlisted man can be called upon to do aboard ship that you have not been drilled in at this institution. But, besides this, you have designed steam and electric engines, and built them with your own hands in the shops; you have gone deeply into the mathematics of natural law and can not only operate a machine, but you can design it and build it.

"Gentlemen, you have been under a most expensive instruction here, for which, as yet, you have rendered no return. [361]

"You are now splendidly equipped for your life-work in the navy. You will find that aboard ship your principal duties will be the instruction of enlisted men. You were gathered here, not only that you personally might become accomplished officers, but that you might receive instruction for the purpose of imparting it to others. You must prove that the earnest efforts spent upon you have not been wasted. You must apply full benefit of the training you have here received to the enlisted men who will soon be in your charge, or else the purpose of this institution has failed.

"We expect to hear good reports of you; we are proud of you, but we will know our confidence in you is not misplaced when we hear that your guns shoot straight, your engines steam well, and that the enlisted men under you are contented and believe in you. When we hear that we will be content, for we will know our work here has produced results.

"For a last word, never forget the glorious record made by our navy in every war; and may it enter your hearts that you all have a special duty to do your utmost to keep bright our naval history." [362]

As the superintendent sat down the choir sang:

"God be with you till we meet again."

The midshipmen were now marched out and formed a line near the band stand, the graduating class in front of the brigade, who stood at "Order arms." The superintendent and other officials proceeded to the band stand; the superintendent studied his watch anxiously. "He should be here now," he remarked. "Ah, there is the carriage." The carriage he looked for stopped on the walk in front of the band stand, and Robert Drake's heart thumped when he saw who got out of it.

A rather thick-set, not overtall, fair complexioned gentleman jumped out of the carriage. Everybody about glanced with much interest at him, and all hats came off.

"I couldn't help being late; I had much to do this morning," remarked the gentleman; "did you receive my telegram, admiral?"

"Yes, Mr. President, and we went right ahead," replied the superintendent; "but you are in time to give out the diplomas." [363]

"Good."

Stonewell's name was the first called out to come up for his diploma. A storm of applause broke forth from his classmates and friends as this erect, manly young officer approached the President. Cheer after cheer greeted him, for by this time Stonewell was appreciated outside as well as inside of the Academy.

The President shook Stonewell's hand warmly and handed him his diploma with a smile, saying, "We all know you, Mr. Stonewell; I feel like joining in that cheer myself."

Farnum came up next, then Sewall, then Ryerson, and all received generous cheers. Then the name Drake was called. Tumultuous shouts and applause now broke loose. Robert was liked and respected by the entire brigade, but as the captain of the winning company in the flag competition he had sixty devoted champions in ranks who were not willing that any graduating midshipman should receive more applause than their own popular cadet lieutenant. [364]

Robert's father and mother in front seats were filled with happy pride that their son should graduate so high in his class, and with such vociferous evidence of warm regard. And then a strange thing happened, a little incident that overwhelmed not only Mr. and Mrs. Drake with amazement, but also thousands of spectators.

When the name Drake was called, the most famous man in the world of his day left the platform where he had been standing, and rapidly approached Robert, meeting him half way. He greeted him warmly, and said: "Mr. Drake, one of the reasons that induced me to come to Annapolis today was to have the pleasure of personally handing you your diploma. The superintendent has told me your father and mother are present. Are they close at hand?"

"Just in front, sir."

"Present me, please."

The President said to them, "Mr. and Mrs. Drake, I am delighted to meet you. I congratulate you on your son. I am proud of him. A year ago at this time he rendered signal service to his country." [365]

In this way the President of the United States showed that his formerly expressed appreciation had not been lightly forgotten, and thus he publicly performed an act of kindly recognition.

That their son should be so wonderfully honored filled Robert's father and mother with a deep happiness that outweighed all other thoughts, and they were much affected by the President's attention.

One by one the remaining members of the graduating class received their diplomas and a hearty handshake from the President; and soon the graduation was over.

But one more scene occurred in Robert's life as a midshipman at Annapolis. That night the much talked of graduating ball, given to his class, was held. The great Armory was beautifully decorated with flowers and plants, and in between and overhead were flags and bunting tastefully arranged. And on the floor were beautiful girls and manly young men.

"It has been a wonderful life to me, Helen," said Robert to his partner; "as I look back it seems that I never lived until I entered Annapolis. I've had glorious times; my life has been full of hard work, but the results give me intense satisfaction. And besides the work, there has been almost complete contentment; it is so satisfactory to work hard and work successfully. And in addition to all this are the friendships that have come to me, that of you, and your family, Stonewell and others." [366]

"Yes, Robert," replied Helen wistfully, with half a sigh; "all this is so, but to-morrow you are to leave us for those dreadful Philippine Islands, and how we shall all miss you! That is the sad thing about naval friendships; we enjoy them daily and deeply for a short time and then suddenly our dear friends are torn from us and we do not see them for years. And then—oh, then things are changed and nothing ever seems so happy and bright as it once was," and Helen's voice trembled and her eyes filled as she thought these happy days could not continue.

"Helen, you will let me write to you, won't you? And you will answer my letters?" [367]

"Oh, yes," replied Helen sadly.

"And, Helen, I am coming back to you, just as I am now; nothing can change the thoughts that are part of me."

Helen suddenly looked at Robert and a glorified beauty shone from her eyes. They walked slowly around the Armory satisfied just to be with each other. And a beautiful content rested upon them.

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