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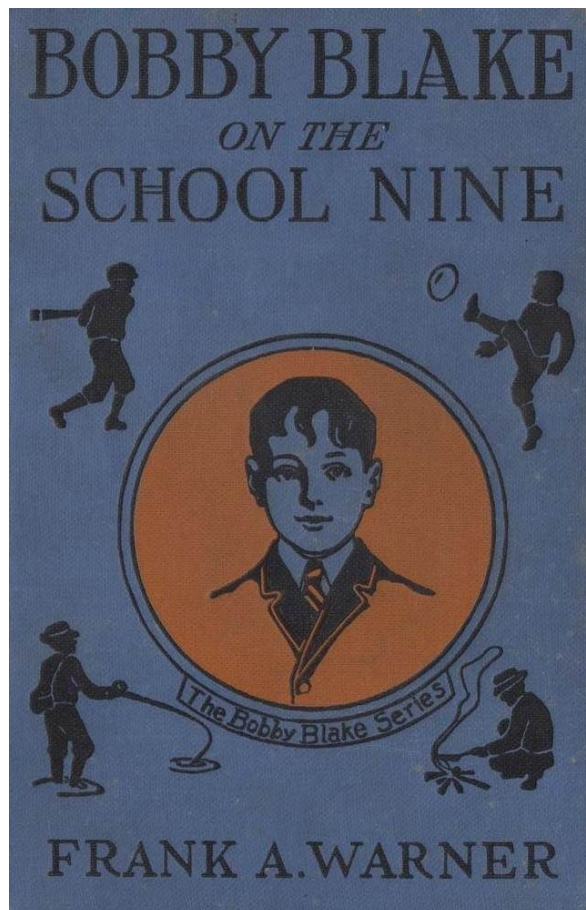
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BOBBY BLAKE ON THE SCHOOL NINE; OR, THE CHAMPIONS OF THE MONATOOK LAKE LEAGUE ***





They slowly and sullenly handed over the contents of their pockets.

BOBBY BLAKE ON
THE SCHOOL NINE

OR

THE CHAMPIONS OF THE MONATOOK
LAKE LEAGUE

BY

FRANK A. WARNER

AUTHOR OF "BOBBY BLAKE AT ROCKLEDGE SCHOOL,"
"BOBBY BLAKE ON A CRUISE," "BOBBY
BLAKE AND HIS SCHOOL CHUMS," ETC.

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R. EMMETT OWEN

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Bobby Blake on the School Nine

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CONTENTS

- I [FLYING SNOWBALLS](#)
- II [A FRIEND INTERFERES](#)
- III [THE COMING STORM](#)
- IV [HELD UP](#)
- V [THE TRAMPS' RETREAT](#)
- VI [HEAVY ODDS](#)
- VII [PAYING AN OLD DEBT](#)
- VIII [THE CLOUD BREAKS AWAY](#)
- IX [A COWARDLY TRICK](#)
- X [ROCKLEDGE SCHOOL](#)
- XI [TOM HICKSLEY REAPPEARS](#)
- XII [A NEW ENEMY](#)
- XIII [THE MONATOOK LAKE LEAGUE](#)
- XIV [GLOWING HOPES](#)
- XV [SPOILING THE FUN](#)
- XVI [WHO WAS GUILTY?](#)
- XVII [ON THE TRAIL](#)
- XVIII [A HARD HIT](#)
- XIX [SPRING PRACTICE](#)
- XX [THE SUGAR CAMP](#)
- XXI [THE FIRST GAME](#)
- XXII [TO THE RESCUE](#)
- XXIII [THE EGG AND THE FAN](#)
- XXIV [AN UNDESERVED PUNISHMENT](#)
- XXV [OFF FOR A SWIM](#)
- XXVI [THE SCAR AND THE LIMP](#)
- XXVII [A GLEAM OF LIGHT](#)
- XXVIII [TOM HICKSLEY GETS A THRASHING](#)
- XXIX [A WILD CHASE](#)
- XXX [WINNING THE PENNANT—CONCLUSION](#)

BOBBY BLAKE ON THE SCHOOL NINE

CHAPTER I

FLYING SNOWBALLS

"Ouch!"

"That was a dandy!"

"How's that for a straight shot?"

"Thought you could dodge it, did you?"

"Have a heart, fellows! I've got a ton of snow down my back already."

A tumult of shouts and laughter rose into the frosty air from a group of boys, ranging in age from ten to twelve years, who were throwing and dodging snowballs near the railroad station in the little town of Clinton.

Even the fact that four of the group were on their way back to school after the Christmas holidays was not sufficient to dampen their youthful spirits, and the piles of snow heaped up back of the platform had been too tempting to resist.

As though moved by a single spring they had dropped the bags they were carrying, and the next instant the air was full of flying snowballs. Most of them found their mark, though a few in the excitement of the fray passed dangerously near the station windows.

Flushed and eager, the panting warriors advanced or retreated, until a stray missile just grazed the ear of the baggage man, who was wheeling a load of trunks along the platform. He gave a roar of protest, and the boys thought it was time to stop. But they did it reluctantly.

"Too bad to stop right in the middle of the fun," said Bobby Blake, a bright wholesome boy of about eleven years, with a frank face and merry brown eyes.

"Bailey's got a grouch on this morning," remarked Fred Martin, better known among the boys as "Ginger," because of his red hair and equally fiery temper.

"I never saw him any other way," put in "Scat" Monroe, one of the village boys, who had come down to the station to bid his friends good-bye. "I don't believe Bailey ever was a boy."

"Oh, I guess he was—once," said Bobby, with the air of one making a generous concession, "but it was so long ago that he's forgotten all about it."

"Perhaps you'd be grouchy too if you came near being hit," ventured Betty Martin, Fred's sister, "especially if you weren't getting any fun out of it."

Betty formed one of a party of girls who had accompanied the boys to the station to see them off. With flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, these girls had stood huddled together like a flock of snowbirds, watching the friendly scuffle and giving a little squeal occasionally when a snowball came too close to them.

Fred looked at his sister coldly. He was very fond of Betty, but as the only boy in a large family of girls, he felt it was incumbent on him to maintain the dignity of the male sex. He had pronounced ideas on the necessity of keeping girls in their place, and Betty was something of a trial to him because she refused to be squelched.

"Of course, girls feel that way," he said loftily. "They're afraid of the least little thing. But men aren't such scare-cats."

"Men!" sniffed Betty scornfully. "You don't call yourself a man, do you?"

"Well, I'm going to be some day," her brother retorted, "and that's more than you can say."

This was undeniable, and Fred felt that he had scored a point.

Betty was reduced to the defensive.

"I wouldn't want to be," she rejoined rather feebly.

Fred cast a proud look around.

"Sour grapes!" he ejaculated.

Then, elated by his success, he sought rather imprudently to follow it up.

"As for me," he declared, "I wouldn't care how hard I was hit. I'd only laugh."

Betty saw an opening.

"You wouldn't dare let me throw one at you," she challenged, her eyes dancing.

Fred went into pretended convulsions.

"You throw!" he jeered. "A girl throw! Why! you couldn't hit the—the side of a house," he ended lamely, his invention failing.

"I couldn't, eh?" cried Betty, a little nettled. "Well, you just stand up against that post and see if I can't."

Fred was somewhat startled by her prompt answer to his taunt, but it would never do to show the white feather.

"All right," he responded, and took up his position, while Betty stood some twenty feet away.

The laughing group of boys and girls gathered around her, and Bobby and Scat began to make snowballs for Betty.

"No, you don't!" cried Fred. "I know you fellows. You'll make soakers. Let Betty make her own snowballs."

"What do you care, if you're so sure she can't hit you?" said Bobby slyly.

"Never you mind," replied Fred, ignoring the thrust. "You leave all that to Betty."

The boys desisted and Betty made her own missiles.

"How many chances do I have?" she asked. "Will you give me three shots?"

"Three hundred if you like," replied her brother grandly. "It's all the same to me."

He stiffened up sternly against the post. Somewhere he had seen a picture of Ajax defying the lightning, and he hoped that he looked like that.

Betty poised herself to throw, but at the last moment her tender heart misgave her.

"I—I'm afraid I'll hurt you," she faltered.

"Aw, go ahead," urged "Mouser" Pryde, one of the four lads who were leaving for school.

"Aim right at his head," added "Pee Wee" Wise, another schoolmate who was to accompany Bobby and Fred to Rockledge.

"You can't miss that red mop of his," put in Scat heartlessly.

"N-no," said Betty, dropping her hand to her side. "I guess I don't want to."

Fred scented an easy victory, but made a mistake by not being satisfied to let well enough alone.

"She knows she can't hit me and she's afraid to try," he gibed.

The light of battle began to glow in Betty's eyes, but still she stood irresolute.

"I'll give you a cent if you hit me," pursued Fred.

"My! isn't he reckless with his money?" mocked Pee Wee.

"He talks like a millionaire," added Mouser.

"A whole cent," mused Bobby.

Fred flushed.

"Make it a nickel, then," he said. "And if that isn't enough, I'll give you a dime," he added, in a final burst of generosity.

"Have you got it?" Betty asked suspiciously. She knew that Fred was usually in a state of bankruptcy.

"I've got it all right," retorted her brother, "and what's more I'm going to keep it, because you couldn't hit anything in a thousand years."

Whether it was the taunt or the dime or both, Betty was spurred to action. She hesitated no longer, but picked up a snowball and threw it at the fair mark that Fred presented.

It went wide and Fred laughed gleefully.

"Guess that dime stays right in my pocket," he chuckled.

"Never mind, Betty," encouraged Bobby. "You were just getting the range then. Better luck next time."

But the next shot also failed, and Fred's mirth became uproarious.

"I might just as well have made it a dollar," he mocked.

But his smile suddenly faded when Betty's third throw caught him right on the point of the nose.

Fortunately the ball was not very hard. It spread all over his face, getting into his eyes and filling his mouth, and leaving him for the moment blinded and sputtering.

The girls gave little shrieks and the boys doubled up with laughter, which increased as the victim brushed away the snow and they caught sight of his startled and sheepish face. Betty, in swift penitence, flew to his side.

"Oh, Fred!" she wailed, "I hope I didn't hurt you!"

To do Fred justice, he was game, and after the first moment of discomfiture he tried to smile, though the attempt was not much of a success.

"That's all right, Betty," he said. "You're a better shot than I thought you were. Here's your dime," he added, taking the coin from his pocket.

"I don't want it," replied Betty. "I'm sorry I won it."

But Fred insisted and she took it, although reluctantly.

"Too bad you didn't make it a dollar, Fred," joked Pee Wee.

"Couldn't hit you in a thousand years, eh?" chuckled Scat.

"Oh, cut it out, you fellows," protested Fred. "I didn't dodge anyway, did I? You've got to give me credit for that."

"That was pretty good work for short distance shooting," remarked Bobby Blake, molding a snowball. "But now watch me hit that rock on the other side of the road."

"Look out that you don't hit that horse," cautioned Betty.

But the snowball had already left Bobby's hand. He had thought that it would easily clear the scraggy old horse that was jogging along drawing a sleigh. But the aim was too low, and the snowball hit the horse plump in the neck.

The startled brute reared and plunged, and the driver, a big hulky boy with pale eyes and a pasty complexion, had all he could do to quiet him.

He succeeded at last, and then, grasping his whip, jumped over the side of the sleigh and came running up to the boys, his face convulsed with rage.

A FRIEND INTERFERES

"Oh," gasped Betty, "it's Ap Plunkit!"

"Yes," added Fred, "and he's as mad as a hornet."

Applethwaite Plunkit was the son of a farmer who lived a short distance out of town. He was older and larger than the rest of the boys gathered on the station platform, and they all disliked him thoroughly because of his mean and ugly disposition.

Bobby and Fred had had several squabbles with him when he had attempted to bully them, but their quarrels had never yet got to the point of an actual fight. But just now, as he strode up to them, it looked as though a fight were coming.

Bobby was a plucky boy, and though he never went around looking for trouble, he was always willing and able to take his own part when it became necessary. But Ap was a great deal bigger and heavier than he, and just now had the advantage of the whip. So that Bobby's breath came a little faster as Ap came nearer. But he never thought of retreating, and faced the bully with an outward calm that he was very far from feeling.

"Which one of you fellows hit my horse?" demanded Ap, in a voice that trembled with rage.

"I did," replied Bobby, stepping forward a little in advance of the group.

"What did you do it for?" cried Ap, at the same time raising his whip.

"I didn't aim at the horse," replied Bobby. "I was trying to hit a rock on the other side of the road."

"I don't believe it," snarled the bully.

"I can't help whether you believe it or not," answered Bobby. "It's the truth."

"You needn't think you're going to crawl out of it that way," Ap snapped back. "You hit my horse on purpose and now I'm going to hit you."

He lifted his whip higher to make good his threat. Bobby's fists clenched and his eyes glowed.

"Don't you touch me with that whip, Ap Plunkit," he warned, "or it will be the worse for you."

"You bet it will!" cried Fred, rushing forward. "You touch Bobby and we'll all pitch into you."

"That's what!" ejaculated Mouser.

"Sure thing," added Pee Wee, who, though lazy and hard to rouse, was always loyal to his friends.

For a moment it seemed as though a general scrimmage could not be avoided, and the girls gave little frightened shrieks.

Ap hesitated.

"Four against one," he muttered sarcastically. "You're a plucky lot, you are."

"Throw down that whip and any one of us will tackle you," cried Fred hotly, his fiery temper getting the better of him.

But just then a diversion came from a new quarter.

A boy who was just about equal to Ap in age and weight, who had a lot of freckles, a snub nose, a jolly Irish face and a crop of red hair that rivaled Fred's own, pushed his way through the crowd that had gathered.

"It's Pat Moriarty," cried Betty in relief.

"Hello, Bobby! Hello, Fred!" called out the newcomer cheerily. "What's the rumpus here?"

"It's this Ap Plunkit," explained Bobby. "I hit his horse with a snowball by accident."

"And the big coward's brought his whip over to get even," volunteered Fred.

"To git even is it," said Pat, as his eyes fell on the bully, who was beginning to move backward.

"Well, I'll give him the chanst."

He went over rapidly to Ap.

"Why don't you tackle a feller of your size?" he asked scornfully. "Like me, fur instance?"

"You keep out of this," muttered Ap uneasily.

"Keep out of it!" jeered Pat pugnaciously. "A Moriarty never keeps out of a scrap when he sees a big feller pickin' on a little one."

With a sudden movement he snatched Ap's whip and threw it on the ground.

Resentment flared up in Ap's eyes.

While the two antagonists stand glaring at each other, it may be well, for the benefit of those who have not followed the fortunes and adventures of Bobby Blake from the beginning, to give a brief outline of the preceding volumes in this series.

Bobby was the only child of his parents, who resided in the little inland town of Clinton. Although their hearts were bound up in their son, they had been sensible enough not to spoil him, and he had grown into a bright, manly boy, full of fun and frolic, and a general favorite among the boys of the town.

Fred Martin, whose family lived only a few doors away from the Blakes, was Bobby's closest friend and companion. The boys were very different in temperament, and it was this very unlikeness, perhaps, which had made them chums. Fred had a hot temper which was constantly getting him into scrapes, and Bobby, who was much cooler and more self-controlled, was kept busy a good deal of the time in getting his friend out of trouble. They seldom had any differences between themselves and were almost constantly together.

Mr. Blake was once suddenly called to South America on business, and it was arranged that Mrs. Blake should go with him. What to do with Bobby during their absence gave them a good many anxious moments. They finally decided to send him to Rockledge School, of which they had heard excellent reports, and to Bobby's great delight, Mr. Martin consented to let Fred go with him.

The school opened a new world for the boys. They had to study hard, but a lot of fun was mixed in with the work and they had many exciting adventures. They formed warm friendships, but there were two or three bullies in the school who tried to make their lives burdensome. How they finally defeated

these petty tyrants and came out on top is told in the first volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake at Rockledge School; or, Winning the Medal of Honor."

The steamer on which Mr. Blake and his wife had sailed was lost at sea, and for a time it was feared that all on board had gone down with her. Bobby was heart-broken; so when news came later that his parents had been rescued his joy can be imagined. The end of the spring term was near, and Bobby and Fred accepted the invitation of one of their schoolmates, Perry (nicknamed "Pee Wee") Wise, to spend part of the summer vacation on the coast, where Perry's father had a summer home. There they had a splendid time. Their most stirring adventure involved the search for a missing boat. This is described in the second volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake at Bass Cove; or, The Hunt for the Motor Boat *Gem*."

They would have stayed longer at this delightful place, had it not been for a message brought to Bobby by an old sea captain who was a friend of Mr. Blake. He told Bobby that his parents were on their way home but would stop for a while at Porto Rico, where they wanted Bobby to join them. Bobby was wild to see his parents again, and his joy was increased when Mr. Martin said that he would go too and take Fred along. They expected adventure, but got more than they bargained for, and the story of how they were cast away and finally picked up by the very ship on which Bobby's father and mother were sailing is told in the third volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake on a Cruise; or, The Castaways of Volcano Island."

Once more at home, the two boys were preparing to go back to Rockledge for the fall term, when they suddenly came into possession of a pocketbook containing a large sum of money. A strange series of happenings led them at last to the owner. In the meantime, their school life was full of action, culminating in a lively football game where Bobby and Fred helped to defeat Belden School, their chief rival. How well they played their part is shown in the fourth volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake and His School Chums; or, The Rivals of Rockledge."

The uncle of "Mouser" Pryde, one of Bobby's particular friends at school, owned a shooting lodge up in the Big Woods, and he invited Mouser to ask some of his friends up there to spend part of the Christmas holidays. Bobby and Fred were members of the party, and they had a glorious time, skating, snowshoeing, fishing through the ice and hunting. In turn, they were themselves hunted by a big bear and had a narrow escape. Incidentally they were fortunate enough to rescue and bring back to his right mind a demented hunter who proved to be Pat Moriarty's father. How they did this and won the everlasting gratitude of the red-headed Irish boy is described in the fifth volume of the series, entitled: "Bobby Blake at Snowtop Camp; or, Winter Holidays in the Big Woods."

Pat and Ap seemed to be trying to outstare each other, and the rest waited in breathless silence during this silent duel of eyes.

But Ap's eyes were the first to fall before the blaze in Pat's.

"I'll get even with that Bobby Blake yet," he mumbled, stooping to pick up his whip.

"Well, the next time don't bring along your whip to help you out," replied Bobby.

"An' when you feel like lookin' for trouble, I can find it for you," added Pat. "You'll be rememberin', Ap Plunkit, that I licked you once when you gave a hot penny to a monkey, an' I can do it again."

It was evident that Ap did remember perfectly well the fact which Pat referred to, for he did not seem to want to stay any longer in the Irish lad's vicinity. He picked up his whip, went over to the wagon and climbed in. Then he took out his spite by giving his nag a vicious slash and drove away. But first he doubled up his fist and shook it at the boys, a gesture which they answered with a derisive shout of laughter.

"I think that Ap Plunkit is just horrid," declared Betty, with a stamp of her little foot.

"I don't blame him for feeling a little sore," said Bobby, "especially before he knew I didn't do it on purpose. But I guess he has a grudge against me anyway."

"He was just looking for an excuse to make trouble," put in Fred, "and it was just like him to bring his whip along. He never has played fair yet."

"He's got a yaller streak in him, I'm thinkin'," chuckled Pat, a broad smile covering his jolly face. "I just couldn't help buttin' in when I seen him a swingin' of that whip."

"You always stand up for your friends, don't you, Pat?" said Mouser admiringly.

"Sure thing," grinned Pat. "Especially when they're the best friends a feller ever had. I'll never forget what Bobby and Fred have done for me an' my folks."

"Oh, that was nothing," put in Bobby hastily.

"Nothin'!" exclaimed Pat. "It was just everything, an' there isn't a day goes by in our house but what we're talkin' about it."

"How did you happen to be Johnny-on-the-spot this morning?" asked Bobby, anxious to change the conversation.

"I just was doin' an errand at the grocery store when I heard some one say that you boys were goin' off to school this mornin'," answered Pat, "an' I dropped everything an' came down here on a dead run to say good-bye and wish you slathers of luck. I guess me mother will be after wonderin' what's keepin' me, an' she a waitin' fur the butter an' sugar," he added, with a grin, "but she won't care when I tell her what the reason was."

"I wish you were going along with us, Pat," said Bobby, who was genuinely fond of the good-hearted Irish boy.

"Yes," drawled Pee Wee. "We've got a couple of fellows up at Rockledge that I'd like to see you handle just as you faced down Ap this morning."

"If there's any kind of a shindig, I'd sure like to be in the thick of it," laughed Pat. "But I'll trust you boys not to let them fellers do any crowin' over you."

"Right you are," put in Mouser. "There aren't any of 'em that can make Bobby and Fred lie down when they get their dander up."

"Oh, dear," sighed Betty, as the toot of the train's whistle was heard up the track. "Here it comes. I just hate to have to say good-bye to you boys."

"Never mind, Betty," cried Bobby cheerily. "It won't be so very long and you'll hear from us every

once in a while. And maybe we'll be able to come home for a few days at Easter."

There was a scurrying about as the boys got their hand-baggage together and brushed the snow from their clothes. The train had now come in sight, and a minute later with a great rattle and clamor and hissing of steam it drew up to the platform.

"All aboard!" shouted Mouser, and the four boys scrambled up the steps, Pee Wee as usual bringing up the rear.

They rushed up the aisle and were lucky enough to find two vacant seats next to each other. They turned over the back of one of them, so that two of them could sit facing the others, and tucked away their belongings in the racks and under the seats. Then they threw up the windows so as to have a last word with those they were leaving behind.

The girls had their handkerchiefs out ready to wave a good-bye, and Betty was applying hers furtively to one of her eyes.

"I hope your nose isn't hurting you, Fred," she questioned, the mischief glinting out in spite of the tears.

"Not a bit of it," answered Fred hastily, as though the subject was not to his liking.

"And you're sure you don't need the ten cents?"

"Need nothing," declared Fred, with the magnificent gesture of one to whom money was a trifle. "I've got plenty with me."

Betty drew back a little, and Scat and Pat came along and grasped the four hands that were thrust out to meet theirs.

"Good luck, fellows," said Scat. "I hope you'll get on the baseball nine this spring and lay it all over the teams you play against."

"We're going to do our best," Bobby replied.

"Good-bye, boys!" called out Pat. "I sure am sorry to have you goin'. It won't seem like the same old place when you ain't here no more."

"Good-bye, Pat!" the four shouted in chorus.

"If you have any mix-up with Ap while we're gone, be sure to let us know," laughed Bobby.

"There won't be any mix-up," put in Fred. "Not if Ap sees Pat first, there won't."

"Ap will crawfish all right," confirmed Mouser.

"He's a wonder at backing out," added Pee Wee.

The bell of the engine began to clang and the train started slowly out of the station. The little party left behind ran alongside until they reached the end of the platform, shouting and waving.

The travelers, with their heads far out of the windows, waved and called in return until they were out of sight and hearing.

"Betty's a bully girl, isn't she, Fred?" remarked Bobby, as they settled back in their seats. "You're a lucky fellow. I wish I had a sister like her."

"Ye-e-s," assented Fred, rather hesitatingly. "Betty's a brick. That is," he added hastily, "as far as any girl can be. But don't be wishing too hard for sisters, Bobby," he went on darkly. "Girls aren't all they're cracked up to be."

"Especially when they know how to throw," put in Bobby, with a roguish glint in his eyes.

Fred pretended to think this remark unworthy of an answer, but he rubbed his nose reflectively.

CHAPTER III

THE COMING STORM

For several minutes the boys were the least bit quiet and subdued. There is always something sobering in going away from home and leaving relatives and friends behind, especially when the parting is going to last for many months, and the warm-hearted farewells of the group at the station were still ringing in the boy's ears.

But it is not in boy nature to remain quiet long, and their irrepressible spirits soon asserted themselves and caused the young travelers to bubble over with fun and merriment.

Besides, Pee Wee and Mouser had said good-bye to their parents the day before in their own homes, and had been stopping over night with their school chums in Clinton. Their depression was but for the moment and was over the thought of leaving behind so much fun and good will as they had found at their chums' home town, and they helped Bobby and Fred to forget their feeling of homesickness.

There were not many other passengers on the train that morning, so that the boys had plenty of room and could give vent to their feelings without causing annoyance to others. They snatched each other's caps and threw them in the aisles or under the seats, indulged in good-natured scuffling, sang bits of the Rockledge songs and cut up "high jinks" generally.

Fred and Mouser were seized by a longing for a drink of water at the same moment, and they had a race to see who would get to the cooler first. Fred won and got first drink while Mouser waited for his turn. But Mouser got even by knocking Fred's elbow so that half the water was spilled over the front of his coat.

"Quit, I tell you, Mouser," remonstrated Fred, half choking from the effort to drink and talk at the same time.

But Mouser kept on, until suddenly Fred saw a chance to get back at him.

"What does it say there?" he asked, pointing to some words engraved on the lower part of the cooler. "I can't quite make the letters out from here."

Mouser innocently bent over, and Fred, taking advantage of his stooping position, tipped his glass and sent a stream of water down his victim's neck.

There was a startled howl from Mouser as the cold water trickled down his spine. He straightened up with a jerk and chased Fred down the aisle, while Bobby and Pee Wee went into whoops of laughter at his discomfiture.

"That's no way to drink water, Mouser," chaffed Bobby as soon as he could speak. "You want to use your mouth instead of taking in through the pores."

"Oh, dry up," ejaculated Mouser, making frantic efforts to stuff his handkerchief down his back.

"We're dry enough already," chuckled Pee Wee. "Seems to me it's you that needs drying up."

"You will jog my elbow, eh?" jeered Fred, who was delighted at the success of his stratagem.

"My turn will come," grunted Mouser. "It's a long worm that has no turning," he added, getting mixed up in his proverbs.

Again the boys shouted and Mouser himself, although he tried to keep up his dignity, ended by joining in the merriment.

In the scramble for seats when they had first boarded the train, Bobby and Fred had had the luck to get the seat that faced forward. Mouser and Pee Wee had to ride backward and naturally after a while they objected.

"You fellows have all the best of it," grumbled Pee Wee.

"That's all right," retorted Fred. "That's as it should be. Nothing's too good for Bobby and me. The best people ought to have the best of everything."

"Sure thing," Bobby backed him up. "The common people ought to be satisfied with what they can get. You fellows ought to be glad that we let you travel with us at all."

"Those fellows just hate themselves, don't they?" Mouser appealed to his seat mate.

"Aren't they the modest little flowers?" agreed Pee Wee.

"What do you say to rushing them and firing them out?" suggested Mouser.

"Oh, don't do that," cried Fred in mock alarm. "Pee Wee might fall on one of us, and then there'd be nothing left but a grease spot."

"Might as well have a ton of brick on top of you," confirmed Bobby.

"I'll tell you what," grinned Pee Wee. "We'll draw straws for it and the fellows that get the two longest straws get the best seats."

"That would be all right and I'd be glad to do it," said Fred with an air of candor. "Only there aren't any straws handy. So we'll have to let things stay as they are."

"You don't get out of it that way, you old fox," cried Mouser. "Here's an old letter and we'll make strips of paper take the place of the straws."

"All right," agreed Fred, driven into the open. "Give me the letter and I'll make the strips and you fellows can draw."

"Will you play fair?" asked Mouser suspiciously.

Fred put on an air of offended virtue.

"Do you think I'm a crook?" he asked.

"I don't know," retorted Mouser in a most unflattering way. "A fellow that will pour water down my back when I'm trying to do him a favor will do anything."

Fred looked at him sadly as though lamenting his lack of faith, but proceeded briskly to tear the strips. The boys drew and Bobby had the luck to retain his seat, but Fred had to exchange with Mouser.

"It's a shame to have to sit with Pee Wee," said Fred as he squeezed in beside the fat boy. "He takes up two-thirds of the seat."

"The conductor ought to charge him double fare," grinned Mouser.

Pee Wee only smiled lazily.

"Look at him," jeered Bobby. "He looks just like the cat that's swallowed the canary."

"It would take more than that to make Pee Wee happy," put in Fred. "A canary would be a mighty slim meal for him."

"You'd think so if you'd seen how he piled into the buckwheat cakes this morning," chuckled Bobby. "Honestly, fellows, I thought that Meena would have heart failure trying to cook them fast enough."

"I noticed that you did your part all right," laughed Pee Wee. "I had all I could do to get my share of the maple syrup."

"Buckwheats and maple syrup!" groaned Mouser. "Say, fellows! stop talking about them or you'll make me so hungry I'll have to bite the woodwork."

"We can do better than that," said Fred. "Here comes the train boy. Let's get some candy and peanuts."

The boys bought lavishly and munched away contentedly.

"Look at the way the snow's coming down!" exclaimed Fred, gazing out of the window.

"It is for a fact," agreed Bobby.

"Looks as though it had settled in for a regular storm," commented Mouser.

"Maybe it will be a blizzard," suggested Pee Wee.

As a matter of fact, it appeared to be that already. The snow was falling heavily and shutting out the view so that the boys could scarcely see the telegraph poles at the side of the track. A fierce wind was blowing, and in many places the fence rails were almost covered where the snow had drifted.

"Hope we won't have any trouble in getting to Rockledge," remarked Fred rather apprehensively.

"Not so bad as that I guess," said Bobby. "There's one place though, a little further on, where the track runs through a gulch and that may be pretty well filled up if the storm keeps on."

"I wonder if there's anything to eat on the train if we should get snowbound," ventured Pee Wee.

"Trust Pee Wee to think of his stomach the first thing," giped Fred.

"There isn't any dining car on the train," said Mouser. "And we're still a good way from the station where it usually stops for lunch."

"We're all right anyway as long as the candy and peanuts hold out," laughed Bobby.

"Yes," mourned Pee Wee, "but there isn't much nourishment in them when a fellow's really hungry."

The storm continued without abatement, and the few passengers that got on at the way stations looked like so many polar bears as they shook the clinging flakes from their clothes and shoes.

"Oh well, what do we care," concluded Pee Wee, settling back in his seat. "There's no use borrowing trouble. It always comes soon enough if it comes at all."

"We ought to be used to snow by this time," remarked Mouser. "After what we went through up in the Big Woods this doesn't seem anything at all."

"Listen to the north pole explorer," mocked Fred. "You'd think, to hear him talk, that he'd been up with Cook or Peary."

"Well, I've got it all over those fellows in one way," maintained Mouser. "I'll bet they never had a snowslide come down and cover the shack they were living in."

"That was a close shave all right," said Bobby a little soberly, as he thought of what had been almost a tragedy during their recent holiday at Snowtop Camp. "I thought once we were never going to get out of that scrape alive."

"It was almost as bad when we were chased by the bear," put in Fred. "We did some good little running that day all right. I thought my breath would never come back."

"And the running wouldn't have done us any good if it hadn't been for good old Don," added Mouser. "How that old dog did stand up to the bear."

"He got some fierce old digs from the bear's claws while he was doing it," said Bobby.

"He got over them all right," affirmed Mouser. "I got a letter from my uncle a couple of days ago, and he says that Don is as good as he ever was."

The train for some time past had been going more and more slowly. Suddenly it came to a halt, although there was no station in sight. It backed up for perhaps three hundred feet, put on all steam and again rushed forward only to come to an abrupt stop with a jerk that almost threw the boys out of their seats.

They looked at each other in consternation.

CHAPTER IV

HELD UP

Once more, as though unwilling to admit that it was conquered, the train backed up and then made a forward dash. But the result was the same. The snorting monster seemed to give up the struggle, and stood puffing and wheezing, with the steam hissing and great volumes of smoke rising from the stack.

"We're blocked," cried Bobby.

"It must be that we've got to the gulch," observed Fred.

"A pretty kettle of fish," grumbled Pee Wee.

"We're up against it for fair, I guess," admitted Mouser. "But let's get out and see how bad the trouble is."

The boys joined the procession of passengers going down the aisle and jumped off the steps of the car into a pile of snow beside the track that came up to their knees. Pee Wee, who as usual was last, lost his balance as he sprang, and went head over heels into a drift. His laughing comrades helped him to his feet.

"Wallowing like a porpoise," grinned Fred.

"You went into that snow as if you liked it," chuckled Bobby.

"Lots of sympathy from you boobs," grumbled Pee Wee, as he brushed the snow from his face and hair.

"Lots of that in the dictionary," sang out Mouser. "But come ahead, fellows, and see what's doing."

The others waded after Mouser until they stood abreast of the locomotive.

It was a scene of wintry desolation that lay stretched before their eyes. As far as they could see, they could make out little but the white blanket of snow, above which the trees tossed their black and leafless branches. Paths and fences were blotted out, and except for the thin column of smoke that rose from a farmhouse half a mile away, they might have been in an uninhabited world of white.

"Looks like Snowtop, sure enough," muttered Mouser, as he looked around.

The conductor and the engineer, together with the trainmen, had gathered in a little group near the engine, and the boys edged closer in order to hear what they were saying.

"It's no use," the grizzled old engineer was remarking. "The jig's up as far as Seventy-three is concerned. I tried to get the old girl to buck the drifts, but she couldn't do it."

The boys thought it was no wonder that Seventy-three had gone on strike, as they noted that her cowcatcher was buried while the drift rose higher than her stack.

"It's too bad," rejoined the conductor, shaking his head in a perplexed fashion. "I've been worrying about the gulch ever since it came on to snow so hard. It wouldn't have mattered so much if it hadn't been for the wind. That's slacked up some now, but the damage is done already."

"What are you going to do, boss?" asked one of the trainmen.

"You'll have to go back to the last station and wire up to the Junction for them to send the snow-plough down and clear the track," responded the conductor. "Get a hustle on now and ask them to send it along in a hurry."

The trainman started back at as fast a pace as the snow permitted, and the engineer climbed back into his cab to get out of the wind while waiting for help. The conductor started back for the smoking car, and as he went past, Bobby ventured to speak to him.

"How long do you think we'll have to wait here?" he inquired.

"No telling, sonny," the conductor answered. "Perhaps a couple of hours, maybe longer. It all depends on how soon they can get that snow-plough down to us."

He passed on and Mouser gave a low whistle.

"Scubbity-yow!" cried Fred, giving vent to his favorite exclamation. "Two long hours in this neck of the woods!"

"And nothing to eat in sight," groaned Pee Wee.

"I wish I'd let Meena put up that lunch for us this morning," said Bobby regretfully. "My mother wanted me to bring one along, but I was in a hurry and counted on getting something to eat at the railroad lunch station."

"What are we going to do?" moaned Pee Wee.

"Fill up on snowballs," suggested Mouser heartlessly.

Pee Wee glared at him.

"I'm almost as bad as Pee Wee," said Fred. "I feel as empty as though I hadn't had anything to eat for a week. I could eat the bark off a tree."

"I tell you what, fellows," suggested Bobby, who was usually the leader when it came to action; "what do you say to going over to that farmhouse and trying to buy something to eat? I don't think they'd let us go away hungry."

They followed the direction of his pointing finger, and new hope sprang up in them.

"But it's an awful long way off," objected Pee Wee, whose fear of exertion was only second to his love of eating.

"Have you got another stone bruise on your foot?" asked Mouser sarcastically.

This was a standing joke among the boys. Whenever Pee Wee hung back from a walk or a run, he usually put forth the excuse of a stone bruise that made him lame for the time.

"No, I haven't any stone bruise," Pee Wee rapped back at him, "but how do you know I didn't bark my shins when I had that tumble a few minutes ago?"

He put on a pained look which might have deceived those who did not know him so well. But the steady stare of his comrades was too much for him to stand without wilting, and he had to join rather sheepishly in the laugh that followed.

"You stay here then, Pee Wee, while we go over and get something to eat," suggested Fred. "We'll ask the farmer to bring you over something on a gold tray. He'll be glad to do it."

"Oh, cut it out," grinned Pee Wee. "Go ahead and I'll follow."

"Foxy boy, isn't he?" chuckled Fred. "He wants us to break out the path so that it will be easier for him."

"I'd rather have Pee Wee go ahead," remarked Mouser. "He'd be better than any snow plough."

With chaff and laughter they started out, Bobby leading the way and the rest following in single file. They had pulled their caps down over their ears and buttoned their coats tightly about their necks. Luckily for them the wind had moderated, although the snow still kept falling, but more lightly than before.

They did not do much talking, for they needed all their breath to make their way through the drifts. As they had no path to guide them, they made straight across the fields, bumping every now and then into a fence that they had to climb. They were pretty well winded and panting hard when at last they reached the fence that bounded the spacious dooryard in front of the farmhouse.

A big black dog came bounding down to the gate barking ferociously. The boys took comfort from the fact that the fence was high and that the dog was too big and heavy to leap over it.

"He's glad to see us—I don't think," said Fred.

"Seems to have a sweet disposition," muttered Pee Wee.

"Let Mouser get to talking to him," suggested Bobby. "He'll tame him down in no time."

Mouser, somewhat flattered, stepped forward. He had gained his nickname because he had a number of mice which he had taught to do all sorts of clever tricks. His fondness extended to all animals, and he had the remarkable power over them with which some people are gifted. No matter how savage or frightened they might be, they seemed to yield to his charm.

It did not fail him now. He muttered some words soothingly to the dog, whose barking grew feebler. Soon it stopped altogether, and in another minute or two the brute was wagging his tail and poking his muzzle through the rails of the fence for Mouser to pat him.

It was almost uncanny, and the boys held their breath as they watched the transformation.

"It's all right now," said Mouser, lifting the latch of the gate. "Come along, fellows."

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Bobby. "How do you do it?"

"You ought to be with a circus," said Fred in undisguised admiration. "You'd make a dandy lion tamer."

Mouser was elated at the tribute, but accepted it modestly enough, and led the way up to the house, the dog prancing along with them in the most friendly manner.

As they reached the door and were about to knock, it was opened, and a motherly looking woman appeared on the threshold. There was an expression of anxiety on her face.

"Down, Tiger, down," she cried. Then as she saw the evident pleasure of the brute in the boys' company, her worried expression changed to one of surprise.

"Mercy on us!" she exclaimed. "I was afraid the dog would eat you up. He's awfully savage, but we keep him on account of there being so many tramps around. I was upstairs when I heard him barking, and I hurried down as fast as I could, for I was sure he'd bite you if you came inside the gate."

"Oh, Tiger's a good friend of mine, aren't you, Tiger?" laughed Mouser, as he stooped to caress the dog.

Tiger licked his hand.

"Well, I never saw anything like it," said their hostess. "I just can't understand it. But here I am keeping you standing outside when you must be half perished with the cold," she went on with quick sympathy. "Come right inside and get warm before you say another word."

She led the way into a bright, cheerful sitting room, where there was a big wood fire blazing on the hearth. She bustled around and saw that they were comfortably seated before the fire. Then Bobby explained their errand.

"I suppose we're sort of tramps ourselves," he said with the winning smile that always gained for him instant liking. "But we were on the train and it got stalled over there in the gulch on account of the snow. We hadn't brought any lunch with us and we thought we'd come over here and see if we could buy something to eat."

"You poor starved boys!" she exclaimed with as ready a sympathy as though she had been the mother of them all. "Of course you can have all you want to eat. It's too early for dinner yet, as Mr. Wilson—that's my husband—went to town this morning and will be a little late in getting back. But I'll get up something for you right away. You just sit here and get warmed through and I'll have it on the table in a jiffy."

"Don't go to too much trouble," put in Bobby. "Anything will do."

She was off at once, and they heard the cheerful clatter of pans and dishes in the adjoining kitchen.

The boys stretched out luxuriously before the fire and looked at each other in silent ecstasy.

"Talk about luck," murmured Mouser.

"All we want to eat," repeated Pee Wee.

"She didn't know you when she said that," chaffed Fred. "I don't believe there's enough in the house to fill that contract."

"Pee Wee will have to go some to get ahead of me," chimed in Bobby.

A savory odor was soon wafted in from the kitchen. Pee Wee sat bolt upright and sniffed.

"Say, fellows! do you smell that?" he asked. "If I'm dreaming, don't wake me up."

"It's no dream," Mouser assured him. "It's something a good sight more real than that."

Before long the door opened to reveal the smiling face of Mrs. Wilson.

"All ready, boys," she announced cheerily. "Come right along."

CHAPTER V

THE TRAMPS' RETREAT

The boys needed no second invitation. Even Pee Wee shook off his usual laziness. With a single impulse they sprang from their chairs and trooped out into the dining room.

It seemed to the hungry boys as though nothing had ever looked so good as the meal that their hostess had provided for them. There was a huge dish of bacon and eggs, plates piled high with snowy, puffy biscuit, which, as Mrs. Wilson told them, she had "knocked together" in a hurry, smoking hot from the oven, a great platter of fried potatoes, and, to crown the feast, mince and apple and pumpkin pies whose flaky crusts seemed to fairly beg to be eaten.

A simultaneous "ah-h" came from the boys, as they looked at the store of good things set before them, and the way they plunged into the meal was the sincerest tribute that could be paid to the cookery of their hostess. It brought a glow of pleasure into her kindly eyes and a happy flush to her cheeks. She fluttered about them like a hen over her chicks, renewing the dishes, pressing them to take more—a thing which was wholly unnecessary—and joining in their jokes and laughter. It is safe to say that a merrier meal had not been enjoyed in that old farmhouse for many a day.

But even a meal like that had to come to an end at last, and it was with a sigh of perfect satisfaction that the boys finally sat back in their chairs and looked about at the complete wreck they had made of the viands.

"Looks as if a whirlwind had passed this way," remarked Mouser.

"I never enjoyed a meal so much," said Pee Wee.

"Well, you're certainly a judge," laughed Fred. "When you say a meal's the limit you know what you're talking about. And this time I agree with you."

"I'm glad you liked things," put in Mrs. Wilson. "It does me good to see the way you boys eat."

"I'm afraid you wouldn't make much money if you had us as steady boarders," smiled Bobby.

"Come right back to the living room and get yourselves warm as toast before you start out again in this wind," urged their hostess.

"We'd like to ever so much," replied Bobby. "But I guess we'd better be getting along. Perhaps that snow plough will get down sooner than we thought, and everything's been so good here that I'm afraid perhaps we've stayed too long already."

They wrapped themselves up warmly, and then Bobby as spokesman turned to their hostess.

"How much do we owe you?" he asked, taking out his pocketbook, while the others prepared to do the same.

"You don't owe me a cent!" declared Mrs. Wilson with emphasis.

"Oh, but yes," rejoined Bobby, somewhat startled. "We couldn't think of letting you go to all that trouble and expense without paying for it."

"I won't take a penny, bless your hearts," Mrs. Wilson repeated. "It's been a real joy to have you here. I haven't any children of my own, and the old place gets a bit lonesome at times. I haven't had such a good time for years as I've had this morning, seeing you eat so hearty and listening to your fun. I feel that I owe you a good deal more than you do me."

She was firm in her determination, although the boys pressed the matter as far as they could without offending her. So they were forced at last to yield to her wishes and return the money to their pockets.

It was with the warmest thanks that they left their kind-hearted hostess and went down the steps, Tiger accompanying them to the gate. He seemed to want to go further and whined softly when Mouser patted him good-bye.

"Isn't she a prince?" said Pee Wee admiringly, as they waved their hands in farewell.

"A princess you mean," corrected Mouser.

"Have it your own way," retorted Pee Wee. "Whichever name's the best, she's that."

They were in a high state of elation as they ploughed their way across the snowy fields. They were blissfully conscious of being, as Mouser put it, "full to the chin," and little else was needed at their age to make their happiness complete.

But they were sharply awakened by the sound of a whistle.

"That must be our train," cried Fred in alarm.

"That's what it is," assented Bobby, quickening his pace. "We stayed a long time at the table, and the snow-plough must have come along sooner than they thought it would. Hurry, fellows, hurry!" and he tried to break into a run.

The others followed his example, but the snow was too deep for that. It clung about their feet and legs until they felt that they were moving in a nightmare.

"She's going, fellows!" shouted Mouser in despair, as a stream of smoke began to stretch out behind the moving train.

"And all our bags and things are on board!" wailed Fred.

"Now we're in a pretty mess," gasped Pee Wee, slumping down in the snow.

There was no use in hurrying now, and they looked blankly at each other as they came to a full stop.

"Scubbity-yow!" howled Fred as the only way to relieve his feelings.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed Mouser.

Pee Wee was too tired out from his exertion to say anything, and Bobby, too, kept silent, though for a different reason. He was busy thinking of the best way to get out of the tangle.

"There's no use in worrying about our baggage, fellows," he said at last. "Probably the conductor will take good care of that. And we may be able to send a telegram from some place telling the conductor to put our things off at Rockledge and leave them in care of the station agent there. What we've got to worry about is ourselves. We can't stay here, and we've got to find some way to get

another train as soon as we can. Have any of you fellows got a time table?"

"I had one," replied Mouser, "but it's in my bag on the train."

None of the others had one and Bobby came to a quick decision.

"There's no other way," he announced. "We'll have to go back and ask Mrs. Wilson. She'll know all about the trains and what's the best station for us to go to."

They trudged back rather forlornly and explained their plight to Mrs. Wilson, who was full of sympathy.

"I'd like to have you stay here all night," she volunteered, "and Mr. Wilson will take you over to the station in a rig to-morrow morning."

They thanked her heartily, but explained that this was out of the question. They would be missed from the train, telegrams would be flying back and forth and their parents would be anxious and excited. They must get to some place where they could either telegraph or, better yet, get a train that would land them in Rockledge that afternoon or evening.

"I'll tell you what to do," she suggested, as a thought struck her. "You can't get a train on this line you've been traveling on until very late to-night. But there's another road that crosses this at a junction about two miles from here and connects with the main line that goes on to Rockledge. There's an afternoon train on that line that you'll have plenty of time to make, and it will land you in Rockledge before night. There's a telegraph office there too, and you can send any messages you like before you board the train."

"That's just the very thing," cried Bobby with enthusiasm.

"Just what the doctor ordered," chuckled Mouser.

She gave them very careful directions for finding the station, and as there was none too much time and the walking was bound to be slow they set out at once, after thanking their friend for having come a second time to their relief.

Their path led for the most part through a wood and they passed no other houses on their way. Even in summer it was evident that the locality was wild and deserted. Now with the snow over everything it was especially desolate.

"You might almost think you were up in the Big Woods," commented Mouser.

"That's what," agreed Fred. "It would be a dandy place for train robbers and that kind of fellows."

"I'd hate to be wandering around here at night," remarked Pee Wee, who was panting with the exertion of keeping up with the others.

"It would give one a sort of creepy feeling, like being in a cemetery," assented Bobby.

Suddenly Fred uttered an exclamation.

"There's a little house right over in that hollow," he cried, pointing to the right.

"More like a hut or a shack than a regular house, seems to me," grunted Mouser.

"I don't believe there's any one living there," commented Pee Wee.

"Yes, there must be," declared Bobby. "I can see the light of a fire shining through the window."

The hut in question was a dilapidated structure of only one story that stood in a little hollow just off the road. It was in the last stages of decay and looked as though a strong wind would blow it to pieces. There were no fences nor barn nor any wagon or farm implement in sight.

Yet that some one lived in the crazy shack was evident, as Bobby had said, by the red light that came flickeringly through the only window that the cabin possessed.

"Let's stop there for a minute and get warm," suggested Fred. "Then, too, we can make sure that we're still on the right road to the station."

"What's the use?" cautioned Bobby. "We got left once to-day by stopping too long."

"It will only take a minute," urged Fred.

As the others also wanted to stop, and Bobby did not wish to insist too much, they all went down into the hollow together.

The snow of course deadened their footsteps, so that whoever was in the cabin had no notice of their approach.

Fred, who was in advance, rapped on the door.

There was silence for a moment and then the door swung open and a rough looking man appeared on the sill.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

"We wanted to ask directions about the road," said Fred, a little dismayed by the fellow's surly manner.

The man looked them over for a moment, noticed that they were well dressed and hesitated no longer.

"Come in," he said briefly, and stood aside for them to pass.

CHAPTER VI

HEAVY ODDS

Although feeling rather uneasy because of the man's rough manner, the boys hardly saw what they could do but accept the invitation, and they went inside. The next moment they wished they had not.

There were two other men within the hut besides the one who had opened the door. They were seated at a bare pine table, and on the table there was a bottle of liquor. There seemed to be no other furniture in the miserable room, except a rusty wood stove, which was at white heat, two or three stools and a pile of hay in the corner, which evidently served as a bed.

The heat inside was stifling, and the room was rank with the fumes of liquor. The unshaven faces of the men were flushed, their eyes red and bleared, and a greasy pack of cards told of their occupation when they had been interrupted.

"Tramps," whispered Bobby to Fred, who was nearest. "Let's get out of this."

"You bet," returned Fred, as he made a motion toward the door.

But the man who had let them in now stood with his back against the closed door, looking at them with an ugly grin on his face, a face which was made still more repellant by a livid scar up near the temple.

"What do these young buckos want here?" asked one of the men at the table, rising and coming toward them. As he did so, Bobby noticed that he limped a trifle.

"We stopped in for a minute to ask if we were on the right road to the station," said Bobby in a tone which he tried to render as careless as possible.

"You did, eh?" said the man. "Well, just wait a minute and I'll tell you."

He and his companion approached their comrade at the door, and for a few moments there was a whispered conversation. Then the man with the scar, who seemed to be the leader of the gang, turned to Bobby.

"You're on the right road all right," he said.

"Thank you," returned Bobby. "Then I guess we'll be getting on."

The man laughed at this.

"Guess again, young feller," said one of them.

"What's your hurry?" asked the lame man.

"We don't often have such nice young kids drop in to keep us company," sneered the man with the scar. "Take off your hats and stay awhile."

The boys' hearts sank. They no longer had any doubts of the evil intentions of the men who held them virtually prisoners. They had fallen into a den of thieves.

"We're going now," declared Bobby, in a last desperate attempt to bluff the matter through, "and if you try to stop us it will be the worse for you."

The men laughed uproariously.

"A fine young turkey cock he is!" croaked one of them. "We'll have to cut his comb for him."

"You'll get your own cut first," shouted Fred, who was blazing with anger. "Don't forget that there are policemen and jails for just such fellows as you are."

"Shut up, Redhead," commanded the scar-faced man, adding insult to injury.

Then his jocular manner passed and was replaced by a wicked snarl.

"Hand over what money you've got in your pockets," he commanded, "and turn your pockets inside out. Do it quick too, or we'll skin you alive."

There was no mistaking the menace in his tone. He was in deadly earnest and his eyes shone like those of a beast of prey.

There was nothing to do but to obey. His victims were trapped and helpless. They were only eleven year old boys, and were no match physically even for one such burly ruffian. Against three, resistance would have been ridiculous.

Boiling with inward rage, they slowly and sullenly handed over the contents of their pockets. None of them had any great amount of money—only a few dollars for spending allowance. But taken altogether it made quite a respectable sum, over which the robbers gloated with evident satisfaction. Probably their chief calculation was the amount of liquor it would buy for their spree.

But even with this the thieves were not content. Bobby's silver watch, a scarf pin of Mouser's, Fred's seal ring and Pee Wee's gold sleeve buttons went to swell the pile. They even carried their meanness so far as to rob the lads of their railroad tickets. Then when they found that there was nothing else worth the plucking, the leader opened the door.

"Now beat it," he growled, "and thank your lucky stars that we didn't swipe your clothes."

Half blinded with wrath, the crestfallen boys climbed out of the hollow and into the road which they had left in such high spirits a few minutes before. They had been stripped clean. If their outer clothing had fitted any of the rascals they would have probably lost that too. They were utterly forlorn and downhearted.

If they had lost their possessions after a hot resistance against those who were anyway near their age and size, there would at least have been the exhilaration of the fight. But even that poor compensation was denied them. The odds had been too overwhelming even to think of a struggle.

At first they could not even speak to each other. When they attempted to find words they were so mad that they could only splutter.

"The skunks!" Fred managed to get out at last.

"The low down brutes," growled Mouser.

"Every cent gone," groaned Pee Wee. "And those sleeve buttons were a Christmas gift from my mother."

"And that silver watch was one my father gave me on my last birthday," muttered Bobby thickly.

"If they'd only left us our railroad tickets!" mourned Fred.

"That was the dirtiest trick of all," put in Mouser. "You can understand why they took the money and jewelry. But they probably don't have any idea in the world of using the tickets."

"Likely enough by this time they've torn them up and thrown them into the fire," Pee Wee conjectured.

"Don't speak the word, 'fire,'" said Bobby. "If we hadn't seen the light of it through the window, we wouldn't have gone in there at all."

"It was all my fault," moaned Fred. "What a fool stunt it was of me to want to stop there anyway."

Bobby could easily have said, "I told you so," but that was not Bobby's way.

"It wasn't anybody's fault," he said. "It was just our hard luck. We might have done it a thousand times and found only decent people there each time."

"Lucky I gave that dime to Betty this morning anyway," grunted Fred. "That's one thing the thieves didn't get."

The remark struck the boys as so comical that they broke into laughter. It was the one thing needed to relieve the tension. It cleared the air and all felt better.

"Talk about looking on the bright side of things," chuckled Pee Wee.

"You're a wonder as a little cheerer-up," commented Mouser.

"That's looking at the doughnut instead of seeing only the hole in the doughnut," laughed Bobby.

After all they were alive and unharmed. The thieves might have beaten them up or tied them in the cabin while they made their escape.

"Things might have been a great deal worse," said Bobby cheerfully, putting their thoughts into words. "The money didn't amount to so much after all, and our folks will send us more. And we may be able to have the tramps arrested and get back our other things. We'll telegraph just as soon as we get to—"

But here he stopped short in dismay.

"We haven't even money enough to pay for the message!" he exclaimed.

"Perhaps the station man will trust us," suggested Fred.

"I think there's a way of sending messages so that the folks who get them pay on the other end," said Pee Wee hopefully.

None of the boys were very clear on this point, but it offered a ray of cheer.

"We won't need to send more than one message anyway," said practical Bobby as they trudged along. "Some of our folks might be away and there might be some delay in getting to them. But I know that my father is at home and I'll just ask him to send on enough money for the bunch of us. Then you fellows can square it up with me afterwards."

They had reached the outskirts of a village now and the walking had become easier. They quickened their pace and soon came in sight of the station.

"There it is!" cried Fred, and the boys broke into a run.

CHAPTER VII

PAYING AN OLD DEBT

As Bobby's watch had been the only one in the party, the boys had not been able to keep track of the time during the latter part of their journey, and they were a little fearful that they might be late for their train.

They were relieved therefore to learn they were in plenty of time. The train was not regularly due for half an hour, and owing to the snowstorm it would probably be an hour or more behind time.

The station agent at Roseville, as the town was named, had charge of the telegraph office as well. He was a kindly man and listened with the greatest sympathy to the boys' story. His indignation at the robbers was hot, and he promised to put the constable on their trail at once.

"It's a beastly outrage," he stormed. "That old deserted shack has been too handy for fellows of that kind. They make it a regular hang-out. We'll clean out the gang and burn the place to the ground. I've got to stay here now until after the train leaves, but as soon as it's gone, I'll get busy."

He assured them that he would send on the telegram to be paid for at the other end, and the boys, possessing themselves of some blanks, withdrew to a quiet corner to prepare the message.

It proved to be a matter requiring some thought, and several blanks were cast aside before it suited them.

"You see," said Bobby, as he sat frowning over his stub of a pencil, "I don't want to scare the folks to death by telling them we've been robbed. They'd think that perhaps we'd been hurt besides and were keeping it quiet so as not to worry 'em. We can write 'em a letter afterward and tell 'em all about it."

The final outcome of their combined efforts stated the matter with sufficient clearness:

Lost money and tickets. All safe and sound. Please telegraph twenty dollars to me, care station agent, Roseville. Will explain in letter.

Bobby.

This suited them all, though Fred suggested that they might save by cutting out the "please." He was voted down however, and the telegram was handed through the office window and put on the wire at once.

This being attended to, there was nothing to do but to wait. Then a new worry assailed them.

"How long do you think it will be before we can get an answer?" asked Mouser.

"Not very long," replied Bobby confidently.

"The message must be in Clinton this very minute," chimed in Pee Wee.

"Yes, but that's the least part of it," remarked Fred. "It will have to be carried up to your house from the station and I've heard my father say that Claxton isn't as quick about those things as he ought to be. Sometimes he gets Bailey to deliver for him, and you know what an old slow-poke he is."

"And even when it gets to the house your father may be downtown and your mother may be out sleigh riding or visiting or something," observed Mouser gloomily.

"And then too, it will take some time for your father to get down to the telegraph office and send the money," was Pee Wee's contribution.

"Oh, stop your croaking, you fellows," cried Bobby. "I'm sure everything will be all right." But, just the same, their doleful suggestions made him a little uneasy, and he fidgeted about as he watched the hands of the station clock.

"There's another thing," observed Mouser, returning to the charge. "Suppose now—just suppose—that the money doesn't get to us before the train starts, what are we going to do?"

"Then we'll be stuck," admitted Bobby. "And we'll have to do a whole lot more telegraphing to Rockledge telling them that we can't get there till to-morrow. But even if the money is late, it's sure to come. We can pay for our meals and lodging over night and won't have to go to the poorhouse."

"Lucky we got such a dandy feed at Mrs. Wilson's anyway," remarked Pee Wee. "That will keep us going until the money comes."

"It was mighty good of her to give us such a meal and not charge a cent for it," said Mouser.

"Free meals for five hungry boys," murmured Fred.

"Five!" exclaimed Pee Wee in surprise. "Why, there were only four of us."

"Yes," replied Fred, "but you counted for two."

Pee Wee made a rush toward him, but Fred dodged adroitly.

Just then, Mouser, who was looking out of the station window, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Look here, fellows," he cried. "See who's coming!"

They crowded together, looking over his shoulder.

"Why, it's Tommy Stone!" ejaculated Bobby.

"He must be going back to Belden School," added Fred.

"And that's his father with him, I guess," put in Pee Wee.

Tommy Stone was a boy who had played quite a part in the lives of Bobby and Fred a few months before. He had run away from home to go out West to "fight Indians." He had taken his father's pocketbook with him, intending to use only enough to pay his fare and send the rest back.

Unluckily for the young Indian fighter—or rather luckily, as it turned out—he lost the pocketbook out of the car window. Bobby and Fred were standing by the side of the track as the train went thundering past, and the wallet fell almost at their feet. They picked it up and were wildly excited when they found that it contained no less than four hundred dollars.

The boys had dreams of unlimited ice-cream and soda water as the result of their find. Still they and their parents made earnest effort to find the owner, but as the days passed by and no claimant appeared it looked as though the money would become the boys' property.

Late in the fall, Bobby and Fred rescued a small boy from the clutches of some larger boys who were

amusing themselves by tormenting him. The boy turned out to be Tommy Stone. He had been brought back after his runaway and sent to Belden School, which was not far from Rockledge. Tommy had heard that the boys had found a pocketbook and suspected that it was the one that he had lost. He made a clean breast of it, and the money was restored to its rightful owner. Mr. Stone wanted to reward the boys handsomely, but their parents would not permit them to accept a money reward, and Mr. Stone compromised by sending them the material for a royal feast at Rockledge.

As for Tommy, he had an interview with his father, the nature of which can be guessed at by Tommy's statement afterward that he could not sit down for a week unless he had pillows under him.

"He doesn't look like an Indian killer," laughed Mouser.

"Not so that you could notice it," chuckled Pee Wee.

"I don't see any scalps at his belt," grinned Fred.

Tommy caught sight of the boys as he entered the station, and ran forward to meet them with exclamations of pleasure and surprise. Mr. Stone looked curiously at the group but said nothing, and went over to the agent's window to buy his son's ticket.

"What in the world are you fellows doing here?" cried Tommy.

"We're just as much surprised to see you as you are to see us," replied Bobby, with a smile.

"On your way to Belden?" inquired Fred.

"Yep," answered Tommy, making a wry face, "and I'm not any too glad, either. I've never liked that school. The big fellows are all the time taking it out on the little ones."

"You ought to get your father to let you come to Rockledge," suggested Bobby.

"Then you'd be going to a real school," remarked Fred, who felt to the full the traditional rivalry between Rockledge and its chief rival.

"Not but what we've got some bullies of our own," put in Pee Wee.

"Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks, for instance," observed Mouser.

"I'd like first rate to change," admitted Tommy, "and perhaps next year I can. But my father has all his arrangements made now, and I'll have to stick it out at Belden for the rest of this term."

"Is that your father over there?" asked Bobby.

"Yes."

"Looks as though he had a good right arm," said Fred slyly.

"I'll bet he's practiced with it out in the woodshed," put in Pee Wee.

"What's the price of strap oil, Tommy?" inquired Mouser.

Tommy winced a little at the chaffing. It was evidently a painful subject.

Bobby came to his rescue.

"Oh, cut it out, fellows," he remonstrated. "We all make mistakes sometimes."

Tommy flashed him a grateful look.

"Yes," he agreed. "But you can bet that I'm not going to make the same mistake twice."

"That's the way to talk," rejoined Bobby heartily.

Mr. Stone had completed his purchase and now strolled over to the group. He had never seen the boys before, as the return of the pocketbook had been made by Mr. Blake.

"Some young friends of yours, Tommy?" he asked, with a genial smile.

"Yes, sir," Tommy answered. "They go to Rockledge School, right on the other side of the lake from Belden."

He introduced the boys by name, and Mr. Stone pricked up his ears as he heard the names, "Blake" and "Martin."

"What!" he exclaimed. "Can this be the Bobby Blake and Fred Martin who found my pocketbook and sent it back to me?"

"That's who they are," replied Tommy, flushing.

Mr. Stone took the boys' hands in both of his and wrung them warmly.

"Well this is a bit of luck," he said heartily. "I can't tell you boys how glad I am to see you. I've often wanted to lay eyes on the boys who could find four hundred dollars and never rest till they got the money back to the owner."

"Oh, that was nothing," answered Bobby, who always felt embarrassed when any one praised him.

"It was the only thing to do," added Fred, his face getting almost as red as his hair.

"All the same, there are lots of boys who would never have said a word about it," persisted Mr. Stone. "I've always felt sorry that your folks wouldn't let me show my gratitude by making you boys a present of something that would have been worth while."

"You did give us the stuff for a dandy spread."

"Some spread that was too, fellows," put in Pee Wee. "I was in on that and it was just scrumptious."

"Trust Pee Wee to remember spreads if he never remembers anything else," laughed Mouser.

Mr. Stone's eyes twinkled as he took in Pee Wee's generous proportions.

"Well, I'm glad if you enjoyed it," he smiled. "But tell me now how you boys find yourselves here. I thought you traveled by the road that runs through Clinton."

"So we do," replied Bobby, and started to relate the occurrences of the morning.

"I see," said Mr. Stone, interrupting before Bobby had got very far into his story. "And then you found out you could get a train on this road and tramped over here. Well, you won't have long to wait now, for the train will be along in a few minutes."

"But that isn't all," put in Fred.

"No?" queried Mr. Stone. "What else is there?"

"We were robbed on the way," answered Fred.

Mr. Stone gasped and Tommy showed symptoms of great excitement. Robbed! It was almost as good as Indians.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CLOUD BREAKS AWAY

Mr. Stone sank down into a seat.

"Robbed!" he repeated. "Now tell me just what you mean."

In simple words the boys told how they had been held up and despoiled by the tramps.

Mr. Stone could hardly restrain his rage.

"It's the most atrocious and cowardly thing I've heard of for a long time," he ejaculated. "To think of those scoundrels robbing you of everything you had, even your railroad tickets! They ought to be drawn and quartered."

The boys were rather hazy as to what drawing and quartering involved, but they heartily agreed with him.

"I'll have to get busy at once!" Mr. Stone exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "There isn't a minute to lose. Those rascals will know that the officers will be after them as soon as you tell your story and they'll be planning to clear out. They may have started already, for all we know. I'll get the constable and some other men after them and I'll go along to do all I can to put the thieves in jail."

"But first," he went on, "I'll have to fix up you boys. The train will be along in a few minutes. I'll get your tickets for you and give you plenty of money besides to get on with."

"I've already telegraphed for money and I'm expecting it every minute," put in Bobby.

"That's all right, but we can't take chances on that. It may not come in time for you to catch the train. I'll look after the telegram if it comes after you leave, and see that it's sent on to you."

"Of course our folks will make this all right with you," said Fred who, like Bobby himself, hated to be under any money obligation.

"That's understood," assented Mr. Stone. "I'll send them a bill."

But from the whimsical droop at the corner of his mouth it was evident that if the boys' fathers waited for a bill from Mr. Stone they would wait a long time.

He hurried over to the window of the agent's office and bought four additional tickets for Rockledge.

"Take these and distribute them among the other boys," he said, as he handed them to Bobby. "And here's some money to get on with until you hear from your folks," he added, thrusting a number of bills in his hand.

"It's awfully good of you, Mr. Stone," replied Bobby, as he put them in his pocket. "I don't know how to thank you enough. I'll keep careful account and see that you get it back to the last cent."

"Don't worry about that," rejoined Mr. Stone. "I'm only paying back an old debt, and even at that I still owe you a lot. Now you boys go right ahead and forget all your troubles. I'll take full charge of the answer to your telegram and see that it gets to you all right."

"I'd like to stay with you until the train leaves," he went on, "but as I said before, every minute is precious now if we want to have any chance to nab those villains who robbed you. I'll hustle up the constable and I'll let you know later how we come out."

He gave Tommy a kiss and a hug, waved good-bye to the others in a gesture that included them all, and went out of the door. Through the window they could see him going briskly up the village street in a walk that was almost a run.

The boys, left alone, looked gleefully at each other.

"Scubbity-*yow!*" shouted Fred, as he threw his cap to the ceiling.

"All our troubles are over now," exulted Pee Wee.

"Isn't he a brick?" demanded Bobby gratefully.

"Reminds me of the bread cast upon the waters that our minister was talking about last Sunday," remarked Mouser. "He said it would come back to you after many days, and by ginger I believe it now."

"It's more than bread," gloated Pee Wee. "It's cake."

"If Pee Wee says it's cake, it *is* cake," mocked Fred. "There's nobody knows more than he does about things to eat."

They were now all as full of good spirits as they had formerly been full of misery. They had found that their cloud had a silver lining. In fact there was not a cloud any longer. It had broken away entirely.

Their satisfaction was still greater when, a few minutes later, they saw two sleighs sweep past the station and take the direction that led toward the cabin in the woods. There were three determined-looking men in each sleigh, and among them they recognized the stalwart figure of Mr. Stone.

"They're after them already," cried Fred joyfully. "Gee whiz, Tommy! your father is some hustler."

"He sure is," assented Tommy proudly.

"Here's hoping that they catch the thieves!" exclaimed Mouser.

"Wouldn't it be bully!" cried Bobby. "I sure am crazy to get back my watch."

"And my scarf pin."

"And my sleeve buttons."

"And my seal ring."

The boys watched the sleighs intently until they were drawn out of sight.

"What do you suppose they'll do to the thieves if they catch them?" wondered Bobby.

"I don't know," said Mouser, whose notions of legal procedure were woefully indistinct. "Hang them, maybe."

"Not so bad as that," objected Pee Wee. "But I'll bet they get a good long term in jail."

"Perhaps they'll be drawn and quartered, as Mr. Stone said they ought to be," said Fred hopefully. "What do you suppose that means anyway, fellows?"

"I'm not sure," answered Bobby, "but I guess it means to be cut up into quarters."

"They can cut them up into eighths for all I care," rejoined Fred vindictively. "Especially that fellow who called me red-head."

"Well, what if he did?" said Pee Wee mischievously. "He only told the truth, didn't he?"

"What difference does that make?" flared up Fred, who was rather sensitive on the subject. "You wouldn't like to be called a pig because you're as fat as one, would you?"

"Here, fellows, cut out your scrapping," soothed Bobby.

"Let's agree that Pee Wee's as thin as a rail and Fred's hair is as black as ink," suggested Mouser. "Then we'll all be happy."

In the general laugh that followed, the rumpled feathers were smoothed and all differences forgotten.

A moment later the whistle of the train was heard in the distance.

"Here she comes!" cried Mouser.

"I'm sorry that telegram hasn't come yet," murmured Bobby regretfully.

"Guess old Bailey's rheumatism made him slow in getting up to the house," suggested Fred.

"Well, don't let's worry," observed Pee Wee, who was always ready to shunt his responsibilities to the shoulders of somebody else. "Mr. Stone will look after that."

The boys boarded the train and sank back into their seats with a sigh of relief. Their troubles were over. They had been under a strain that would have been trying even to those much older than these eleven-year-old boys.

"I never thought I'd be cheering for going back to school," remarked Fred. "But I'm ready to do it now. All together, fellows:

"Hurrah for Rockledge!"

They shouted it with a will.

CHAPTER IX

A COWARDLY TRICK

"We seem to have this car almost all to ourselves," remarked Mouser, looking around.

"We ought to call it the Rockledge Special," laughed Pee Wee.

"Perhaps Tommy might object to that," said Bobby.

"Go as far as you like," grinned Tommy.

The travel was indeed very light on that particular day. There were only six or eight people scattered through the car. This was due in part to the snowstorm. Nobody would do much traveling on such a day unless it was absolutely necessary.

Half-way down the car, and on the other side of the aisle, a very old man was seated. He was evidently traveling alone. His hair was gray and scanty and his face was seamed with wrinkles. It was clear that he was very tired, and every once in a while his head would drop on his breast in a doze from which he would awake with a start at any sudden jar of the train.

"It's too bad that such an old man should have to be going on a journey all alone," remarked Bobby with quick sympathy.

"Yes," agreed Fred. "He must be awful old. He looks as if he was as much as eighty."

"He's a Grand Army man too," observed Mouser. "You can see that from the hat he has there up in the rack."

"He may be going to visit some of his children," suggested Pee Wee.

"More likely he's going to the Old Soldiers' Home," conjectured Bobby. "You know there is one a little way the other side of Rockledge."

"I'll bet he could tell some mighty good stories about the war," said Fred.

"I'd like to see all that he has seen," mused Bobby.

"Or do all that he has done," added Mouser. "It must be great to have been in a big war like that."

"Maybe he was at Gettysburg," guessed Pee Wee.

"Or marched with Grant or Sherman," chimed in Fred.

Their youthful imaginations quickened as they recalled the exciting scenes in which the veteran might have played a part, and they had a deep respect for him now as he sat there in his old age and weakness.

"I'd almost like to go up and get him to talking," ventured Fred. "We might get him started on the war. It's all very well to read about it, but there's nothing like hearing from one who has been through it."

"I don't think I would if I were you," objected Bobby. "He's probably too tired to do much talking and would rather be left alone."

"There's another fellow going up to him now," replied Fred, "and I'll bet he'll get some good stories out of him."

He indicated a large overgrown boy who seemed to be about fourteen years old. Up to now, he had been seated on the other side of the aisle from the veteran. But now he had risen and gone over in his direction. But instead of slipping into the seat beside him, as the boys had expected, he sat down in the seat directly behind him.

"Guess again, Fred," laughed Pee Wee good-naturedly.

"Everybody's hunches go wrong sometimes," answered Fred defensively.

"What's the fellow up to anyway?" asked Mouser, with a sudden stirring of curiosity.

The newcomer seemed to have a long feather in his hand such as is commonly used in feather dusters. While the old man's head drooped in a doze, the boy reached over and tickled the back of the old man's neck with the tip of the feather.

The veteran reached up his hand fretfully as though to brush away a fly that was annoying him. The boy drew back and snickered audibly.

The boys looked at each other indignantly.

"What do you think of that?" demanded Mouser.

"Queer sense of fun some people have," snorted Pee Wee.

"He's a cheap skate," declared Fred angrily.

"He ought to have a thrashing," exclaimed Bobby.

Several times the scene was repeated, and the would-be joker was in high glee at the success of his trick.

At last the old man gave up the attempt to sleep, and straightened up wearily in his seat.

The joker looked around the car as though seeking for applause, but the silly grin on his face stiffened into a scowl as he met only contemptuous glances.

But his delicate sense of humor was not yet exhausted. The old man rose from his seat to go to the back of the car to get a drink of water. As he passed the fellow's seat, the latter reached out the tip of his foot. The veteran tripped against it, stumbled and had all he could do to keep from falling by clutching the back of a seat.

This was the last straw and the boys were furious. By a common impulse they sprang out of their seats and went quickly down the aisle to where the fellow was sitting.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" snapped Bobby.

"You're too mean to live!" blazed out Fred.

"A fellow that'll torment an old man like that ought to be tarred and feathered," blurted Mouser.

"And ridden on a rail," finished Pee Wee.

The fellow looked at them with surprise that was mingled with alarm as he noted their wrathful faces. He jumped up and stood with his back toward the window.

Now that they saw him at closer range, their first impression of him was confirmed. He was strong

and muscular, but the strength of his body was belied by the weakness of his face. It was a thoroughly mean face, pallid and unhealthy looking, with a loose mouth and shifty eyes that dropped when you looked straight into them.

"What's the matter with you boobs?" he demanded, in a voice that he tried to make threatening. "You'd better mind your own business. Who asked you to butt in?"

"We didn't need any asking," replied Bobby. "We saw what you did to that old man. You seemed to think it was funny, but we think it's mean and sneaking."

"And you've got to stop it," put in Fred.

"It will be the worse for you if you don't," added Mouser.

"I'll do just exactly what I want to do," was the ugly reply, "and I'd like to see you Buttinskis stop me."

"We'll stop you quick enough," said Bobby, "and the first thing we're going to do is to make you change your seat."

"Oh, you own the car, do you? I've paid my fare on this train and I'll sit anywhere I want to. Any one would think you were president of the road to hear you talk."

"We'll do something besides talk in a minute," Mouser came back at him.

"What'll you do?" jeered the bully, though his voice now was getting unsteady as he saw that the boys were in earnest.

Fred leaned forward, snatched the fellow's cap from his head and threw it in a seat some distance away.

"Follow your hat and you'll find your seat," he cried.

The fellow started forward in a rage, but just then the conductor came into the car. He came forward briskly.

"Here, none of this!" he exclaimed. "You boys mustn't do any scrapping on this train. Get back in your seats now, all of you, and behave yourselves."

The boys slowly obeyed, although Fred, whose fighting blood was up, had to be urged along a little by the others.

"No sense in not minding the conductor," counseled Bobby. "We've carried our point and that's enough."

They had indeed carried their point, for the fellow, having regained his cap, slumped down in the seat where Fred had thrown it, and for the rest of the trip the old man was left in peace.

Nor did the bully try to get even for his discomfiture. But if looks could kill, the boys would surely have been withered up by the angry glances he shot at them from time to time.

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

"A nice thing to have around the house," commented Pee Wee.

"He'd brighten it up on rainy days," laughed Bobby.

"A cute little cut-up, all right," affirmed Fred.

"I'd hate to have him at Rockledge," said Mouser.

"Perhaps he's going there, for all we know," Pee Wee suggested.

"I hope not!" exclaimed Fred. "Bronson and Jinks are about all we can stand as it is."

"Wouldn't Bronson and Jinks be glad to have him there?" said Bobby. "They'd be as thick as peas in a pod in less than no time."

But further comment was cut short by the brake man throwing open the door and shouting:

"All out for Rockledge!"

CHAPTER X

ROCKLEDGE SCHOOL

The boys reached instinctively for their bags. Then they remembered that they had none, and looked at each other with a sheepish grin on their faces.

"Nothing doing in that line," mourned Fred. "I wonder if we'll find them in the station."

They stepped off the platform into a crowd of their schoolmates, who had come down to welcome them. There they were, shouting and laughing and all talking at once—Billy Bassett, Jimmy Ailshine, "Sparrow" Bangs, Howell Purdy and a host of others. They fairly mobbed the newcomers and were for dragging them off at once to the trolley car that ran to the school. But the boys explained that they first had to look after their missing baggage and they all trooped into the station.

"Haven't we got a lot to tell you fellows!" exclaimed Mouser. "You just wait till you hear it all!"

"Caught in a snowslide," volunteered Pee Wee.

"Held up by tramps," declared Fred.

"Robbed of all we had," added Bobby.

These tantalizing bits of information only served to whet the appetite for more. Their friends crowded around them open-eyed, and questions shot out at them like bullets from guns. The boys suddenly found themselves exalted to the rank of heroes. But they bore their honors meekly enough, although they were almost bursting with the feeling of their importance.

They were delighted to find their missing bags and suit-cases waiting for them. The conductor had known the station their tickets called for, and had left the articles in the care of the Rockledge station agent.

There was a telegram too from Mr. Blake to Bobby. He had wired the money to Roseville and Mr. Stone had seen to it that it was sent on to Bobby at Rockledge. Mr. Blake's telegram was a lengthy one and full of anxiety. In it he told Bobby to wire at once on his arrival at Rockledge, which Bobby promptly did.

Mr. Stone had sent a separate telegram also on his own account. He stated briefly that the robbers had not yet been caught, but that the police were busily hunting for them and hoped to get them soon.

"Well," sighed Bobby, as he folded up the telegram, "I suppose all we can do is to watch and wait."

"Wait for the watch you mean," laughed Mouser.

"Now don't start anything like that," grinned Fred. "You'll start Billy Bassett going if you do, and I can see that he's got a lot of conundrums all ready to fire off at us."

"Who's that talking about me?" laughed Billy, coming forward. "Let him say it to my face."

"Ginger thought you'd be springing something on us," replied Pee Wee, "and we were getting ready to duck."

Billy looked aggrieved.

"You fellows don't know a good riddle when you hear one," he remarked scornfully.

"How do you know?" countered Mouser. "You never give us a chance to try. Spring a real good one and see how quick we'll tumble."

Billy looked dubious but took a chance.

"Well, take this one, then," he said. "What is it that happens twice in a moment, once in a minute, and not once in a thousand years."

The boys put on their thinking caps, but the problem was beyond them, and Billy strutted around with a triumphant look upon his face.

"Don't seem to be any too much brains in this crowd," he said, in a superior way.

"Give us time," pleaded Mouser.

"Maybe it's because it's so bad and not because it's so good that we can't guess it," conjectured Fred.

"Take all the time you want," said Billy patronizingly, "but I guessed it as soon as I heard it."

As they had no evidence to the contrary, they had to take Billy's word for this.

They pondered it for several minutes, but no answer was forthcoming.

"Nobody home," taunted Billy. "You're a bunch of dead ones for fair."

"I'll give it up," said Mouser.

"Let's have it, Billy," surrendered Fred.

"I'll be the goat," said Bobby. "What's the answer?"

"The letter M," crowed Billy.

Disgust and discomfiture sat on the boys' faces.

"Rotten," groaned Pee Wee.

"The worst I ever heard," grunted Fred.

"Wish I had a gun," remarked Mouser.

"It's a mighty good one," defended Billy. "But what's the use in giving you fellows something to chew over. It's like casting diamonds before swine."

"You mean pearls," corrected Mouser.

"Well, I may be mistaken about the diamonds," Billy came back at them, "but I'm dead sure about the swine."

The laugh that followed told Billy that he had made a hit, and he swelled up like a pouter pigeon.

"I've got another good one," he volunteered, "a regular peach. Why is—"

But here the boys fell on Billy in a body and he was forced to hold his "peach" in reserve for another time.

Bobby by this time had finished all he had to do in the station, and the boys gathered up their recovered suit-cases and made a bee line for the trolley. A car was coming, not a block away, and they piled aboard almost before it had come to a stop with wild clatter and hubbub. But the motorman and

conductor were used to the uproar and the pranks of the Rockledge boys, and what few other passengers there were smiled indulgently.

Rockledge was a lively little town with good stores and pleasant residence streets shaded by handsome oak trees. There were gas and electric lights, a number of churches and all the usual appurtenances of a bustling village that hoped some day to become a city. And not the least of the things in which the townspeople took pride was Rockledge School.

Dr. Raymond, the head of the school, had been fortunate in choosing its location. He had been able to secure, at a remarkably low price, a beautiful private estate, whose owner had died and whose family had moved away. There were several buildings on the grounds and these he had remodeled and adapted to the purposes of a school, and he had built up an institution that was well and favorably known in all that section of the State.

The school was select. By this is not meant that it was in the least degree snobbish. Dr. Raymond hated anything of that kind, and the school was run on a purely democratic basis, with every pupil on exactly the same level, whether his parents happened to be rich or poor. But the doctor was a great believer in the personal influence of teacher over pupil, and this could not be exerted so well if the classes were large. So the school was limited to fifty pupils, and this limit was never exceeded. At this figure the school was always full, and there was usually a waiting list from which any vacancy that might occur could be quickly filled.

The doctor himself was a scholar of high standing, and he had surrounded himself with an efficient staff of teachers. Discipline was firm without being severe, and the boys were put largely on their honor to do the right thing. There was a society called the "Sword and Star" to which admission could be gained only on the ground of scholarship and good behavior.

Bobby had won membership in this the year before and had also gained the Medal of Honor which was allotted each year to that pupil who, in the judgment both of his teachers and school-fellows, had stood out above all others. Fred, who was more flighty and less inclined to study, and whose "red-headed" disposition was always getting him into trouble, was not yet a member of the society, but had faithfully promised himself that he would win membership in the term just beginning.

A ride of only a few minutes brought them close to the school grounds and the boys prepared to get off. Tommy Stone was to stay on the trolley car, which ran as far as Belden School.

Tommy had kept himself rather in the background during the trip. He happened to be the only Belden boy on the car, and, owing to the intense rivalry between the two schools, a Belden boy was usually as popular with the Rockledge boys as poison ivy at a picnic party. But just now Tommy was traveling under the protection of Bobby and his party, and this saved him from the horse play he would otherwise have had to undergo.

"Good-bye, Tommy!" said Bobby, as he got ready to leave the car. "Tell your father when you write to him how much obliged we are to him for all he has done for us. I'm going to write him a letter myself about it to-morrow."

"Oh, that's all right," said Tommy. "Your father would have done the same for me if I'd been in the same fix as you fellows were."

"And tell the Belden boys that we're going to trim 'em good and plenty when the baseball season begins," laughed Mouser.

"Don't be too sure of that," grinned Tommy in return. "But I'll tell them and they'll be all ready for you."

The boys dropped off the car, and in a few minutes saw the school buildings looming up before them.

"Scubbity-yow!" cried Fred, dropping his suitcase and executing a jig. "The old place certainly looks good to me."

"Seemed a long way off a few hours ago when we didn't have a cent to our names," remarked Mouser.

"Looked as if we'd have to walk the ties to get here," laughed Pee Wee.

"And think how many stone bruises you'd have got," suggested Bobby.

"'Barked shins,' you mean," corrected Mouser. "They're the latest thing in Pee Wee's collection."

The fat boy grinned. He was too happy or perhaps too lazy to enter any protest just then.

The school was beautifully located on a high bluff overlooking Monatook Lake, a sheet of water, nearly oval in shape. It was about ten miles long and five miles wide at its broadest part. There were several small islands scattered over the lake, and, as may be imagined, these were favorite resorts of the boys when they were permitted to visit them.

A strong fence guarded the edge of the bluff for the entire length of the school grounds. A winding staircase led from the top of the bluff to the boathouse and the lake level.

Just now Monatook was clothed in an icy mantle that shone like silver under the light of the moon which had just risen. It was a scene of wintry splendor that gladdened the heart to look upon.

There were four buildings on the grounds. In the main building, which was made of brick and sandstone, the classrooms and dining-room were located. The basement had two sections, one for the kitchen and the other for the indoor gymnasium.

On the upper floor were ranged the dormitories. These were two in number. There were beds for twenty boys in each one. Then there were five separate sleeping rooms, each one designed for the use of two boys.

A little off from the main building, but connected with it by a portico, was a roomy house in which the doctor and his family lived, together with the members of the teaching staff.

Besides these there were a gate-keeper's cottage, where the servants slept, and a minor building used for storage purposes.

The grounds were skillfully laid out, and with their well kept lawns and shaded paths formed a very attractive campus. To supply the athletic needs of the boys there was a football field, a baseball diamond, and tennis and basketball courts.

So that the boys who had the luck to be sent by their parents to Rockledge School were usually

convinced before they had been there long that their lines had fallen in pleasant places.

"Well, I suppose the first thing we'll have to do is to report to Dr. Raymond," said Bobby.

"He'll know that the school can go on all right now that we're here," grinned Mouser.

"I suppose we'll have to let him know that we're on deck," admitted Fred, "but let's get it over in a hurry and get some grub. I'm hungry enough to eat nails."

"Couldn't we get something to eat first?" asked Pee Wee wistfully.

"You ate enough at Mrs. Wilson's to last for a week, I should think," said Bobby.

"I notice that you weren't very far behind," retorted Pee Wee.

They trooped into the doctor's office and found him busy with some papers, which he laid aside at once, however, as he stood up to greet them.

He was a tall, spare man, with a clean-cut face and kindly eyes that usually had a humorous twinkle in them, although they could flash fire if he caught any of the boys doing a mean or tricky thing. He smiled cordially and shook hands with them all.

"You're a little later than you expected to be, aren't you?" he asked. "I was looking for you on an earlier train."

"We've had a hard time getting here," smiled Bobby, and in a few words he told of the stirring adventures through which the little party had gone that day. The doctor listened intently, surprise, indignation and sympathy in his eyes.

"It was an outrage!" he exclaimed, when Bobby had finished, "and I will get in touch with Mr. Stone at once and lend him any aid I can in catching the thieves. But I am very glad and thankful that it was only a loss of money and property. Those rascals might have used personal violence. I'll telephone tomorrow to a number of different towns, giving a description of the tramps and urging the authorities to be on the look-out for them. The sooner such fellows are put in jail the better."

He made notes of as many points about the robbers as the boys could remember, especially of the scar of one man and the limp of the other. As to the third man, the boys were somewhat hazy. He was just "plain tramp."

"And now," said the doctor, his eyes twinkling, "I suppose there's no need of asking you boys whether you are hungry."

There was an eager assent on the part of the other boys and a heart-felt groan from Pee Wee.

"Of course it is long after the usual supper hour," smiled the doctor, "but go over to the dining-room, find the housekeeper and tell her I want her to give you the very best meal she knows how to get up."

There was no need of a second injunction, and the boys wished the head of the school good-night and were off to hunt up the housekeeper.

"Isn't the doctor a brick?" ejaculated Mouser. "I thought he'd keep us there half an hour or more talking about the work for the coming term and what he would expect of us."

"That'll come later," said Fred. "Just now he knew that we were hungry."

"That's what makes him such a bully sort," said Bobby. "He hasn't forgotten that he was once a boy himself," he added, with a happy sigh.

And this, perhaps, was as high tribute as could be paid by one of his pupils to the master of Rockledge School.

TOM HICKSLEY REAPPEARS

The housekeeper carried out the principal's order to the letter. And she did it with the better grace because she herself was fond of the boys. She bustled about and in a very short time, which seemed long enough, however, to the hungry boys, had a smoking hot meal on the table. The boys gathered around and pitched into the good things like so many hungry wolves, while the housekeeper watched them with a genial smile on her good-natured face.

"Some feed," pronounced Fred, with a sigh of satisfaction, when at last they were through.

"We've had a tough day in some ways," declared Pee Wee, "but a mighty lucky one in another. Just think of the three cooks we've come up against. Meena for breakfast, Mrs. Wilson for dinner, and Mary here for supper. Yum-yum!"

"Sounds as if you were a cannibal," commented Mouser, with a grin.

"Oh, Pee Wee hasn't got to that yet," mocked Fred, "but there's no telling when he will if that appetite of his holds out."

"I'd hate to be out on a raft with Pee Wee in the middle of the ocean, if we were short of grub," chuckled Mouser. "Just think of the hungry looks he'd be throwing at me."

"I'd like nothing better than to have Pee Wee along," put in Bobby. "We could live off him for a month."

The chaff flew back and forth for a while, and then the call of sleep began to make itself felt.

Bobby yawned and reached for his watch.

"I wonder what time—" he began, and then stopped short in chagrin.

"No use, Bobby," said Mouser. "The chances are that you'll never see that watch again."

"Maybe it's in some pawnshop by this time," was the cold comfort that Fred had to offer.

"No loss without some gain," chimed in Pee Wee. "I won't have the trouble of unfastening my sleeve buttons anyway."

"That's looking on the bright side of things all right," laughed Bobby. "Come along, fellows, and let's get to bed."

There was no dissenting voice, and they made their way upstairs to the old familiar dormitory.

This was one of the brightest and most cheerful rooms in the school and not the least of its charm was that it commanded a splendid view of the lake. There was ample space for the twenty beds that the room contained. A locker stood beside each bed for the exclusive use of the occupant, and there was a chair at the head of each bed on which the regulations of the school demanded that clothing should be carefully folded and arranged each night upon retiring.

Most of the boys had already arrived for the beginning of the term, and the room was full of noise and the clatter of tongues. Later on, a little more quiet would be insisted upon, but the regular school course was not in full swing yet and the boys were allowed a little more latitude than usual.

The other occupants of the room clustered instantly about Bobby and his party, who were general favorites. They had already learned almost all there was to be told about the adventures of the day, but they were keenly interested in the exploits of the party during their winter holiday in the Big Woods.

"Shiner"—the nickname that had been bestowed on Jimmy Ailshine—Howell Purdy and "Sparrow" Bangs, had also been on that memorable trip, but as they too had reached school but a little earlier in the day, they had been able to tell only enough of their adventures to whet the appetite for more. The newcomers were pleased at this, as they had feared that all the wind would be taken out of their sails and that the trip would be an old story when they arrived upon the scene.

"Sparrow says that you killed a big bear up in the woods," said Sam Thompson, one of the younger boys.

"And to hear Sparrow tell it, it must have been a twenty-foot bear at least," laughed Frank Durrock.

"No," grinned Fred. "It had only four feet, just like any other bear."

"Smarty!" Frank shot back at him.

"But it seemed like twenty feet when he reared up at us," explained Bobby.

"He was an old sockdolager, all right," added Mouser.

"I don't want to see any bear so close again," remarked Pee Wee.

"I've seen him in my sleep once or twice since," said Fred, "and I've waked up all in a sweat."

"Just which one of you was it that killed it?" asked Sam, his eyes as big as saucers.

"That's something we can't tell," answered Bobby. "We all fired at it, but I guess it was Gid Harple, the guide, who did the trick. He was a dandy shot, all right."

"Gid's going to fix up the claws and teeth and send 'em down to us," said Mouser. "Then you can see for yourself just what a big fellow that bear was."

"I heard that you had a shot at a wildcat too," put in "Skeets" Brody.

"Yes," said Fred, "and that was a fool stunt too. We didn't have much chance of getting him, and that left our guns empty when we saw the bear the first time. My! but we had a run for it that day. Talk about a Marathon!"

"How did Pee Wee manage to make it?" asked Frank skeptically. "I can't imagine him putting on speed."

"Pee Wee wasn't with us that time," explained Bobby. "The rest of the fellows walked down to the station, but Pee Wee came behind in the sleigh with Gid."

"I had more sense than the rest of the gang," put in Pee Wee, with a superior air.

"I hear you got a lot of muskrats by stunning them through the ice," said Skeets. "How did you make out with training them, Mouser?"

"Not very well," confessed Mouser. "They're too wild. Gid said I couldn't train 'em, and I guess he

knew what he was talking about.”

The finding of Pat’s father in the little shack, and the story of the hunting lodge, completely buried in the big snowslide, and the great fight they had to get out alive were also subjects of which their audience could not have enough. The listeners kept clamoring for more details and still more, until in sheer self-defense the boys had to call a halt.

“Have a heart, fellows,” said Bobby. “I’m so dead tired that I can hardly keep my eyes open.”

“Yes,” added Fred, “we’ll have all the term to tell you about the rest of it.”

Their hearers had to be content with this, and in a few moments more the boys had undressed and were in bed. But it is safe to say that in their dreams that night enough bears and wildcats were seen to stock a menagerie.

“Say, Fred,” was Bobby’s last remark that night, as he slipped between the sheets, “isn’t it bully to be back in the old dormitory again? Just suppose the tramps had tied us up in that old shack while they slipped out and left us there.”

“Ugh!” shuddered Fred, as he snuggled still deeper in his bed. “It gives me the cold shivers just to think of it.”

It was a hard thing for the boys to get out of their warm beds when the rising bell sounded the next morning. But there was no help for it, and they washed and dressed in a hurry, cheered by the thought of breakfast waiting for them.

Several tables were spread in the large bright dining-room. One of them was reserved for Dr. Raymond and his family, together with the head teachers. The boys were ranged about the others, with a junior instructor sitting at the head of each to keep order. But his duties were light, for the boys were so intent upon dispatching their food that they had little time left for mischief. Each kept a wary eye on his plate, however, for special dainties had a way sometimes of vanishing mysteriously, and “eternal vigilance” was the price of pie.

The morning was frosty but sunny, and after they had finished their meal, the boys lost no time in getting outdoors. There was little to be done on the first day except to gather in the classrooms for a few minutes and have their lessons assigned for the following day.

“Any new fellows here this term, Skeets?” Bobby asked, as the latter strolled with him and Fred on the hard snowy path in front of the main building.

“Two or three came in yesterday, I heard,” answered Skeets, “but I’ve only met one of them so far. His name’s Tom Hicksley.”

“What kind of fellow does he seem to be?” asked Fred.

“I don’t care for him very much,” replied Skeets. “That is, judging by his looks. But you can’t always tell by that. There he is now,” he added, as a boy approached them.

Fred and Bobby looked first at the newcomer and then at each other.

“My! it’s the fellow we squelched for teasing the old soldier on the train!” gasped Bobby.

CHAPTER XII

A NEW ENEMY

Tom Hicksley had caught sight of the three boys at the same moment, and from the spiteful look that came into his small eyes it was clear that he recognized Bobby and Fred.

The boys looked at him coldly but did not speak, and Hicksley, on his part, seemed at first as though he were going to pass them without saying anything. But the events of the evening before still rankled in him, and he suddenly stopped.

"So you're the butt-ins that mixed up in my affairs last night, are you?" he asked, in a tone that he tried to make sarcastic.

Fred flared up at once.

"Yes, we did," he shot out; "and we'd do it again if we saw you up to your mean tricks. You can't do anything of that kind while we're around and expect to get away with it."

"Hello! what's the fuss about?" asked Skeets, with sudden interest.

"You shut up!" commanded Hicksley. "This isn't any of your funeral. I'm talking to these two boobs here."

"Don't tell me to shut up!" cried Skeets, who had a hair trigger temper very much like Fred's own.

"I'll tell you anything I like," retorted Hicksley, who seemed to be a master in the "gentle art of making enemies."

"I'll tell you what it was, Skeets," said Bobby. "I don't wonder that he's so ashamed of it that he doesn't want it talked about. We saw him teasing an old soldier—a real old man, mind you—who was trying to get a little sleep. Then when the old man went up the aisle to get some water, this fellow stuck out his foot and tried to trip him up. The man had all he could do to keep from falling. That was too much for us fellows and we made him stop."

"He ought to have had his head knocked off," growled Skeets.

"It would take more than you fellows to knock my head off," returned Hicksley belligerently.

"You'd probably get along as well without it as with it," retorted Fred. "We knocked your cap off anyway, and I notice that you changed your seat just as we told you to."

"That was because the conductor came along," replied Hicksley. "And it's a mighty good thing for you that he did. If he hadn't I'd have knocked you into the middle of next week."

"You couldn't knock me into to-morrow, let alone the middle of next week," returned Fred, who was now thoroughly aroused.

"Come, come, Fred," said Bobby soothingly. "There's no use in getting into a temper about this fellow. He isn't worth it."

"I'll show you whether I'm worth it or not," cried Hicksley, in a rage. "Don't you think for a minute that you've heard the last of this. There were four of you fellows last night, and there are three of you now. But I'll catch each one of you alone some time, and I'll tan each one of you within an inch of your life."

"You'd better try it," answered Fred. "You'd be afraid to tackle a live one. All you're good for is to torment a helpless old man. You're a nice fellow, you are."

The quarrel, although it was none of the boys' seeking, was growing so hot that it was perhaps just as well that Mr. Carrier, one of the teachers, should come walking briskly along just at that moment. He saw from their flushed faces that something unpleasant was in the wind, but thought it just as well to ignore it rather than give it importance by taking notice of it.

"Good morning, boys," he called cordially. "It's just about time for meeting in the main hall. I'm going over there now, and you'd better come along with me."

This put an end to the threatening trouble for the time, and the boys followed along in his wake, Hicksley some distance behind the other three and muttering threats under his breath.

"Isn't he a pippin?" said Bobby, in a low voice, so that Mr. Carrier could not hear.

"Looks to me like something that the cat brought in," grumbled Fred, whose ruffled feathers took some time for smoothing.

"He's going around looking for trouble," observed Skeets; "and that kind is sure to find it before very long."

"No decent fellow will want to have anything to do with him," remarked Fred.

"Except perhaps Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks," amended Bobby. "He'll be just nuts for them."

"I said *decent* fellow," repeated Fred.

They soon reached the main assembly room into which the boys were streaming from all directions.

Dr. Raymond and the rest of the teaching staff were seated on a platform in the front of the room. When the gathering had subsided into silence, the principal rose and gave the boys a little informal talk about the duties of the coming term and the spirit in which he hoped they would go about their work. He dwelt especially on the incentives offered them to become members of the "Sword and Star," the main society of the school, and as he mentioned the name of the society, the boys who were members jumped to their feet and gave the society yell:

"One, two, three—*boom!*
Boom Z-z-z-ah!
Rockledge! Rockledge!
Sword and Star!
Who's on top?
We sure are—
Rock-ledge!"

The hearty shout brought a flush of pleasure into the doctor's cheeks and he looked around upon his

charges with a face beaming with pride. He concluded his talk with an urgent invitation to each of the boys to strive for the Medal of Honor, the highest prize within the gift of the school, and then dismissed them to their respective classes.

Here the proceedings were brief. The tasks for the following day were assigned and then the boys were left to their own devices until the hours set aside that afternoon and evening for preparing their lessons.

"Our soft snap is nearly over," mourned Fred. "From now on it will be steady work until the end of the term."

"But think how much fun we'll have in between," comforted Bobby. "I've got a hunch that we're going to have the bulliest time at Rockledge that we've ever had yet."

"What makes you think that?" asked Fred pessimistically.

"I said it was a hunch, didn't I?" demanded Bobby. "You don't have to explain a hunch. You just have it and that's all there is to it."

"I hate to think of buckling down to work again," said Fred. "We had such a bully free time up in the woods that I wish it would last forever."

"That's all the more reason you ought to be willing to work when the time comes," remonstrated Bobby. "Think of the poor fellows that never have any outings and have to work hard all the time."

"I suppose you're right," conceded Fred. "I don't know just what it is that makes me feel that way. It wasn't so when I got up this morning. I'll tell you just what I think it is," he said, as a sudden explanation of his mood suggested itself to him. "I'll bet it's that Tom Hicksley. I wanted to get a crack at him this morning when Mr. Carrier came along and stopped us. I'd have felt better if I'd lit out at him."

"Now, Fred, cut out that fighting talk," said Bobby impatiently. "There's nothing in it. What's the use of getting into a row that will make your folks feel bad when they hear of it and perhaps bring you up before the doctor?"

"I notice that you're ready enough to fight sometimes," grumbled Fred in self-defense. "You'd have pitched into Ap Plunkit if he'd hit you with that whip yesterday morning, and you were all worked up on the train at Hicksley."

"That's a very different thing from looking for trouble," said Bobby stoutly. "It's all right to take your own part when people try to bully or strike you. But it's always best to keep out of a fight unless you're forced into it. There wasn't really any reason to fight Tom Hicksley this morning, and you know it."

"Perhaps if you had hair as red as mine you wouldn't find it so easy to keep your temper," said Fred, falling back on an excuse he was fond of using.

"Maybe not," laughed Bobby, "but you can make a try at it anyhow."

"What's this I hear about fighting?" said Frank Durrock, as he came up behind them.

Frank was larger and older than the two boys, and a prime favorite with them. He held the post of captain of the school. This carried with it no official power, as that rested wholly with the teachers. But Frank was supposed to have a general oversight, stop any disorder that went too far and in general to act as a sort of big brother to the younger boys.

He was a fine athlete also, and had been captain of the football team on which Bobby and Fred had played the preceding fall and which had won the Thanksgiving game from Belden. His skill in baseball was also marked, and he was expected to play first base on the nine in the spring.

"Oh, Fred was feeling a little sore over a row he had with Hicksley this morning," explained Bobby.

"That new fellow?" asked Durrock. "I passed him a little while ago and he was talking with Bronson and Jinks. They seemed to be quite chummy together."

"What did I tell you?" cried Fred to Bobby. "I knew those fellows would get together as sure as shooting."

"They're three of a kind," assented Bobby.

"I don't know anything about what kind of fellow he is," remarked Frank, "but somebody was telling me that he was a good baseball player."

The boys did not think it was worth while to tell what they knew of Hicksley and so kept quiet.

"He's big and husky and ought to make a good slugger," continued Frank, "and we can't have too much batting strength on our nine. So if he can field as well as bat, he may be able to get a place on the team."

The prospect was not at all pleasing to Bobby and Fred, but above everything else they were loyal to the school, and if the newcomer would be a help to the Rockledge nine they were perfectly willing to forget their own feeling.

"So you see, Fred," continued Frank, "you don't want to hold any grudge you may have against Hicksley. I don't know what your scrap was about and I don't want to know, but whatever it is, forget it."

"Sure I will," said Fred heartily.

"You know how it was on the football team," went on Frank. "There were fellows on that team that you didn't like—Jinks, for instance—but you overlooked that feeling and played good football just the same. And we want to do the same thing on the nine."

"I'm especially anxious to get up a strong nine this year," he continued, "because we're going to have some pretty nifty teams against us. Belden has got two or three new fellows that they say are crackerjacks and they'll give us all we want to do to beat 'em."

"Then, too, we're going to have a little different scheme this season than we ever had before. While you hunters have been up in the woods shooting bears"—here he grinned—"I've been hustling around with a few others and organized a new league."

"A new league!" exclaimed Bobby and Fred in the same breath.

"A new league!" repeated Skeets Brody and Sparrow Bangs, who had come up just in time to hear the last words. "What do you mean, Frank? Tell us all about it."

They gathered about him, their eyes glistening.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MONATOOK LAKE LEAGUE

"Now, now, don't all get excited," admonished Frank, who, all the same, was immensely delighted with the sensation he had stirred up by his announcement.

"Don't keep us waiting, Frank," pleaded Fred, who would rather play baseball at any time than eat.

"Out with it, like a good fellow," chimed in Bobby, whose pitching had won a game from Belden the previous term.

Frank, with the instinct of the true story teller, waited until he had got his audience worked up to the proper pitch. Then when they were on edge, he proceeded:

"It's this way," he explained. "Up to now we've been going on in a kind of rut. Belden is about the only team we've ever played any real games with, and that hasn't given us enough practice. We've had our own scrub nine to practice with, but as a rule they've been so easy that we haven't had to work hard enough to win. The only way we can learn to hit different kinds of pitching is to come up against nines that give us a stiff fight to win."

"But we have played with village nines sometimes," interrupted Fred.

"We played the Benton team last year and beat them six to five," reminded Bobby.

"Yes, I know," admitted Frank; "but those were only single games, and there wasn't enough at stake. It didn't make much difference whether we won from them or not as long as we put it all over Belden."

"Now, don't you see how much more exciting it would be to have several different teams, all members of one league, each one playing the other a certain number of games, each one fighting hard for every game and each team working its head off to get the pennant, which would be given to the nine that had won the most games at the end of the season?"

The boys broke into a chorus of delighted exclamations.

"That would be bully!" cried Bobby.

"It would be a regular see-saw!" exclaimed Fred. "First one team would be in the lead and then the other. It would be a rattling hard fight all the way from the start of the season to the finish."

"It's a corker," agreed Skeets.

"A pippin of a scheme," declared Sparrow with emphasis.

"I thought you fellows would like it," said Frank, much pleased at the enthusiastic reception of his plan. "I talked it over with Dr. Raymond, and he said that he saw no objection to it."

"The doc's a good old sport," commented Fred.

"And Dr. Raymond saw the head of the Belden school and he agreed to it too," continued Frank, "while the captain of the Belden nine is fairly daffy over it."

"How many clubs are there to be in the league?" asked Bobby.

"We decided that four would be enough," answered Frank. "You see, we have only Saturdays to play, and if we had too many clubs in the league we couldn't play enough games to really make the thing go. But with four teams, each can play three games with every other team and that would give us a pretty good line on the strength of each nine."

"Every team would play nine games altogether, then," figured Fred.

"Yes, and that would take nine Saturdays. Allowing for some days when it might be too rainy to play that will just about cover the playing season before school closes for the summer."

"Who are to be the other two nines besides Belden and ourselves?" asked Sparrow.

"We've been scouting around and have found two town nines that will be glad to go in with us," answered Frank. "One is at Somerset and the other at Ridgefield. They're all within a few miles so that we wouldn't have to travel far to play them. The fellows are about the same age as we are, from eleven to fourteen."

"What will be the name of the league?" asked Skeets.

"How does Monatook Lake League strike you?" asked Frank. "Both towns are right on the lake, just as Rockledge and Belden are."

"Just the thing," was the verdict of all.

"Some of those town boys are dandy players," said Skeets. "I saw the Somerset team play once and they certainly put up a fine game."

"And the Ridgefield boys have a pitcher who is a peach, all right," said Frank. "But that's just what we're looking for. It wouldn't be any fun defeating a lot of dubs."

"We'll have to look out that they don't ring in some good players from other towns to fill up weak places on their team," said Fred.

"Of course we'll have to take a chance on that," admitted Frank. "But I don't think we'll have to worry much. I know some of the boys on both teams and they seem to be pretty square fellows."

"You'll have to limber up that pitching arm of yours and get it in good shape, Bobby," cried Fred jubilantly, clapping his friend on the shoulder.

"How do you know I'll get a chance to pitch?" asked Bobby modestly. "The nine isn't made up yet and won't be till we've had a chance to practice. Some of the new fellows may be a good deal better than I am at pitching."

"I don't believe they will be," returned Skeets. "Do you remember, Fred, that last game when Bobby pitched and we beat Belden by three to two?"

"You bet I do," replied Fred. "And I remember that catch that Bobby made in the ninth inning when he rolled over and over and yet held on to the ball. If he had let it get away from him, Belden would have won sure."

"I wish we could go right out on the field tomorrow!" exclaimed impatient Fred, who was very much worked up over the prospect of sport that the new league opened up.

"That would be rushing things for fair," laughed Frank.

"It would hardly do to be playing ball in overcoats and mittens," grinned Skeets.

"Let's see," said Sparrow. "This is the twenty-fifth of January. To the twenty-fifth of February is one month and to the twenty-fifth of March is another. The field ought to be in shape for playing by that time. Don't you think so, Frank?"

"If we have a fairly early spring it ought to," said Frank. "Still in this climate I've seen snow on the ground sometimes in April."

"February is a short month," said Fred hopefully. "That will cut the time down some."

"Anyway we can do a whole lot of practicing indoors," said Bobby. "The gymnasium is good and warm and we can rig up some kind of a cage for pitching and catching."

"Just as they do in colleges," said Sparrow proudly. "I tell you, fellows, we're some class!"

"I'll bet the town papers'll put in reports of the games," said Fred, who already in imagination saw his name in print.

"Sure they will," agreed Skeets. "They'll be glad of a chance to fill up space."

This was not very flattering, and Fred, who saw fame coming his way with giant strides, rather resented it.

"They won't do it only for that reason," he said indignantly. "I bet there'll be some dandy games played and lots of people in the towns will come out to see them."

"Maybe, especially as they won't have to pay to get in," retorted Skeets, who was not averse at times to stirring Fred up just for the fun of seeing him roiled.

"Well, we can always count on big crowds when Rockledge and Belden play anyway," put in Bobby, before Fred had a chance to throw back at Skeets.

"We ought to get some kind of monogram sewed on our uniforms or caps to show the name of the league," said Sparrow, who was quite as alive as Fred was to the new dignity that was coming to them.

"The letters M. L. L. would look nifty, sure enough," agreed Bobby.

"Well there's plenty of time to think of those things before the season opens," remarked Frank. "The main thing now is to get up a team that will put it all over the other fellows."

"Just think how it would feel to be the champions of the league," said Sparrow.

"And to pull up the pennant on the flagpole just back of center field," gloated Fred.

"Rockledge wouldn't be big enough to hold us," said Bobby.

"That's all right, fellows," cautioned Frank. "But remember all the other fellows are feeling the same way. It's easy enough to win games in our dreams, but the only ones that count are those that are won on the diamond."

"We'll win them all right there too," replied Fred, who already saw himself cracking out a home run with the bases full. "We'll be there with bells on from the time the season opens."

"I bet we'll go all through the season without losing a game," declared Sparrow, in a wild flight of fancy.

"Come off the perch," warned Bobby.

"Turn over, turn over, you're on your back," said the irreverent Skeets.

"You'll bring bad luck on us if you talk like that," cautioned Frank. "It stands to reason that we'll have to lose some games. The other fellows are no slouches, don't you forget that, and they'll be out to win just as we are."

"The best teams in the big leagues lose lots of games, even to the poorest ones," said Bobby. "You'll notice that the nines that win the championships don't often come through the season with much more than six hundred per cent."

"Just what does that mean?" asked Skeets, who had never been especially strong in mathematics.

Bobby did a swift sum in mental arithmetic.

"That means they won three games out of five," he announced. "So you see they had lots of losses before they won the pennant. We've got a swell chance of winning every game—I don't think. If we win six out of the nine, I shall be perfectly satisfied. That will give us a percentage of six hundred and sixty-seven."

"Bobby's right," confirmed Frank. "That would be two out of every three, and the team that wins isn't likely to do any better than that. The best team in the world will sometimes be whipped by a poor one. That's what makes baseball such a bully game. Lots of good luck and hard luck come into a game, and it's never settled until the last man is out in the ninth inning."

"But in the long run it's the best team that wins," protested Fred, still undaunted. "And the best team in the Monatook Lake League this year will be the team of Rockledge School."

CHAPTER XIV

GLOWING HOPES

The boys all laughed at Fred's declaration, though they hoped ardently that it would turn out to be true.

"Well," conceded Frank, "confidence is a good thing, especially if there is good hard work back of it. One thing is certain, and that is if any team beats Rockledge it will know it's been in a fight."

"I suppose Larry Cronk will be pitching for Belden," mused Fred.

"I suppose so, and he's a corking good pitcher too. But Bobby beat him the last time he faced him and I guess he can do it again."

"Trust Bobby," replied Fred loyally.

"Well, I'll have to go now," concluded Frank. "I'm glad you boys think the league is going to be a good thing."

"The best thing that ever happened," declared Sparrow.

"I'm tickled to death with it," agreed Fred.

"Hits me awful hard," said Bobby.

"Monatook Lake League sounds mighty good to me," added Skeets.

"There's a lot of work to be done yet in getting it fairly started," observed Frank. "We'll have to work out a schedule of dates and decide on the kind of pennant we're going to have and a bunch of things like that. But we'll have plenty of time for that, and everything will be running slick as grease by the time the season begins. And remember what I said, Fred, about cutting out all hard feelings," he concluded.

"I'll do it all right," answered Fred. "I don't like the fellow and I never will, but I'll forget all about that when it comes to working for the good of the team."

"That's the way I like to hear you talk," returned Frank with a smile, as he went away.

"What did Frank mean by that?" asked Skeets curiously.

"Oh, it's about that Tom Hicksley," Fred replied. "Frank has heard that he's a good ball player, and if he is, he wants him on the nine. He heard Bobby and me talking of the scrap we had with him this morning, and he doesn't want trouble in the team."

"Maybe Frank's right, at that," conceded Skeets. "But I don't know that it's good dope to have a fellow like that on the nine, no matter how good a player he is. He'll be wanting to run things and perhaps break up the whole team."

"We'll hope not," said Bobby. "At any rate, there's no use worrying about it yet. He may not be so good a player as Frank has heard he is, and may not play on the team at all."

"We'll have to look over our baseball togs and see if they're in good shape," said Fred. "I know the spikes on my shoes need sharpening."

"And I'll have to pound that new baseball glove of mine until it's good and soft and has a big hollow in the middle," added Bobby. "We mustn't overlook the least thing that's going to help us to win."

"Won't the Clinton boys open their eyes if we can tell them when we go home for the summer vacation that we're the champions of the Monatook Lake League?" gloated Fred.

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched," laughed Sparrow. "It's a long time yet before the end of the season."

"It's all over but the shouting, the way I look at it," persisted Fred defiantly.

"Don't wake him up, he is dreaming," mocked Skeets.

"The pennant bee is buzzing in his bonnet," laughed Sparrow.

For that matter, they all heard the buzzing of the same bee, and it was a very pleasant sound to them. To these four eleven-year-old boys the words "league" and "pennant" conveyed a sense of dignity and importance that they had never felt before.

From that time on, baseball took up a large part of their thoughts, even though the ground was covered with snow and the lake held fast in icy fetters.

The gymnasium was warm and comfortable, and though they had no regular cage and the limited space did not give much chance for batting practice the boys got in quite a lot of pitching and catching. And this was quickened by the news that came to them that Belden had taken up the idea of the league with as much enthusiasm as they had, and were already predicting that they would be the victors in the coming struggle. It was said that two of the new Belden boys were hard hitters and could "send the ball a mile."

"But we heard something like that before the last game, and we licked them just the same," remarked Fred, who expected to play short stop, the same position he had held the previous season.

"Belden's bark is worse than its bite," confirmed Bobby. "But because they didn't come through the last time doesn't say they won't now. We'll have to be right up on our toes all the time. It isn't going to be a walkover for anybody."

The study hours at Rockledge were not excessive, and had been arranged with a view of giving the growing boys all the time they needed for wholesome exercise and recreation. Dr. Raymond knew that a well trained mind and strong body must go together in order to get the best results. And on the occasions of the big baseball and football games he was always sure to be present as a keenly interested spectator.

Mr. Carrier, too, the second assistant on the teaching staff, had himself been an athlete in his college days, and his advice and coaching on the diamond and the gridiron were very valuable to the Rockledge boys.

With the lake so near at hand, there were plenty of winter sports. The smooth level of the ice, stretching away for miles in every direction, made skating a delight and offered a splendid field for hockey games. On all fine afternoons and every Saturday from morning till night, the ice was alive

with darting figures, and rang with the music of steel against the frozen surface and the merry laughter of the skaters as they cracked the whip or flew by in impromptu races.

There was plenty of snow on the ground this year and this gave a chance for some good coasting. Most of the boys had sleds, and Bobby had brought along the splendid one that he had received as a Christmas present.

He had had considerable trouble in settling on a name. Billy Barry's suggestion that it be called "Lightning" and Betty Martin's laughing idea that it ought to be called "Oyster," because it "slipped down so easily," had received due consideration, but Bobby had finally settled on "Red Arrow." This seemed to him to cover both its color and its speed. And that speed could not be questioned. It certainly shot down hill like an arrow from a how. None of the other sleds at the school could do such fetching.

Naturally Bobby took great pride in his sled, and the runners were rubbed with emery and oil until they were as smooth as silk and shone like silver.

There were several good hills in the vicinity of the school, but most of them were dangerous; one because it crossed the railroad at its base and others because cross streets, along which there was much travel, offered chances for collisions. These were therefore forbidden to the boys.

On one hill, however, they were permitted to coast whenever they wanted to do so. This stretched away from the town, and there were no cross streets throughout its entire length. It was absolutely safe, and as it was very long and reasonably steep, the boys felt no special regret at not being allowed to use the other hills.

For several days before Lincoln's Birthday the weather had been mild and there was a considerable thaw. The snow on the hill had become soft and mushy and coasting had been impossible.

This interfered with the plans of the boys in Bobby's dormitory, who had expected to have a big coasting carnival on the night of the holiday, when there would be a full moon. Now it looked as if the ground might be bare.

But on the eleventh of February there came a sudden change in the weather that gladdened the hearts of the would-be coasters. The thermometer fell rapidly until it was ten degrees below zero. The hill froze solid and was even better than it had been before, because the water from the melting snow now formed a glare of ice over the whole surface.

Bobby and his chums were jubilant over the change as they got together in the gymnasium after breakfast on the morning of the holiday.

"Isn't it just bully?" cried Fred, doing a handspring.

"The hill will be like glass," gloated Mouser.

"I'll bet we fetch further than we ever did before," exulted Bobby, who could see himself scudding like the wind on his trusty Red Arrow.

"But, gee! won't it be tough climbing up to the top again," put in Pee Wee, who liked well enough to ride down but hated the task of walking back.

"Don't worry, Pee Wee," chaffed Fred. "We wouldn't let a hard-working fellow like you walk back. We'll take turns drawing you up on our sleds."

"Sure we will," added Sparrow. "We'll just fight for the privilege."

"I'd hate to have Pee Wee bark his shins again," laughed Bobby.

The boys were so engrossed in the lively give and take that none of them noticed that Tom Hicksley, who had been practicing on the rings and had been near enough to hear their conversation, had quietly slipped out of the gymnasium.

There had been no open trouble between him and Bobby and his friends since that morning when the coming of Mr. Carrier had stopped the quarrel. None of the boys took any special pains to avoid him but had simply left him alone. Hicksley had cast sullen and angry glances at them as they passed him on the campus or in the halls, but they cared nothing for that. They did not doubt that he was nursing his grudge and would lose no chance to get back at them if he could, but they felt able to take care of themselves.

As a matter of fact, Hicksley had only two friends in the school. These were Bill Bronson and Jack Jinks, the two most detested boys at Rockledge. They were of the same type as Hicksley, mean and tyrannical. They were two of the largest pupils and took advantage of their size to make themselves thoroughly disliked by the other boys.

They had "cottoned" to Hicksley at once, recognizing him as a kindred spirit, and the three were almost constantly together.

Bronson and Jinks belonged to neither of the dormitories, but occupied one of the smaller rooms together.

To this room Hicksley went straight from the gymnasium and rapped on the door.

CHAPTER XV

SPOILING THE FUN

There was a scurrying within the room and Hicksley heard the sound of a window being hastily thrown up. Then after a long pause the door was slowly opened.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Bronson in a tone of relief.

"Sure it is," replied Hicksley tersely. "Who did you think it was? What's the matter with you fellows anyway. Any one might think I was a cop, from the time you took to open the door."

"Worse than that," grinned Bronson. "I thought you might be Dr. Raymond or one of the teachers. We were smoking. Now you've made us throw away two perfectly good cigarettes and freeze ourselves by opening the window to get the smoke out of the room. Shut the window again, Jack. It's only Tom."

"Well, I'm not going to tell on you," replied Hicksley. "That is," he added with a grin, "if you've got another cigarette left for me."

It was strictly against the rules to smoke, but in the opinion of these worthless fellows rules were made only to be broken, and all three were soon puffing away, after making sure that the door was securely locked.

Bronson was a tall, thin boy, with straw-colored hair. Jinks was shorter, but very stocky. A squint that made his small eyes look smaller still gave him a most unprepossessing appearance.

"Well, what's up?" asked Bronson, seeing from Hicksley's manner that he had something to propose.

"I've just heard something that gave me an idea of how to get even with that Bobby Blake and the bunch of boobs he goes with," replied Hicksley.

"Hope it's a good idea," said Bronson. "Anything that will down those fellows you can count me in on."

"Same here!" ejaculated Jinks. "I never had any use for any of that crowd."

"Let's have it, Tom," broke in Bronson impatiently. "Don't keep us waiting."

"They're planning to have a big coasting time to-night," explained Hicksley. "I heard them talking about it when I was down in the gymnasium just now. And while I was listening I thought of a way to queer the whole thing."

This sounded promising, and the interest on the faces of the others grew intense.

"What is it?" they asked in the same breath, leaning forward eagerly.

Hicksley lowered his voice a trifle and rapidly outlined the plan that had come to him.

He was fully satisfied with its reception, for both of his hearers roared with delight.

"It's just bully!" cried Bronson.

"Best thing I've heard since Hector was a pup!" ejaculated Jinks.

"That'll put a spoke in their wheel all right," gloated Hicksley.

"Won't they feel sore?"

"They'll be frothing at the mouth."

"We'll have to be hiding somewhere near by where we can see the whole thing," said Bronson.

"I wouldn't miss it for a hundred dollars," chuckled Jinks.

"They'll sing small for a long time after that," grinned Hicksley. "But now if you think the plan is all right, we'll have to figure out just how to go about it. It'll be a lot of hard work, and I don't want to do it myself. I don't suppose you fellows want to muss yourselves up either."

"I'll tell you what!" exclaimed Bronson. "Do you know who Dago Joe is?"

"He's that Italian fellow down town who goes about doing odd jobs, isn't he?" queried Hicksley.

"That's the one," Bronson assented.

"Well, what about him?" asked Hicksley.

"Just this," Bronson answered. "He's just the fellow for this job. He's got a hand cart, and that will make it easy for him. Then, too, a dollar will look as big to him as a meeting house. But even if he charges more than that we can all chip in and it won't make very much for any of us."

"I wouldn't care if it cost us a dollar apiece," said Jinks. "It would be worth it."

They talked for a few minutes longer, and then decided that rather than let Hicksley do it alone they would all go down together to see Dago Joe.

But to their surprise, Joe was at first inclined to balk at the proposition. He was poor and had a large family to support and he needed every dollar he could get, but he seemed to fear that the plan that the bullies suggested might get him into trouble.

"I donta know," he said, shrugging his shoulders and extending the palms of his hands. "Perhaps people nota like it. Maybe I be arrest."

"Nonsense, Joe," said Bronson. "There isn't a chance in the world that anybody will get on to who did it. It will be after dark anyway. Be a sport and take a chance."

"We'll make it two dollars," said Jinks. "It's easy money and you'd be a fool not to take it."

Joe still had some qualms, but when the boys raised the price to three dollars his scruples vanished.

"You can get the stuff down near the roundhouse," suggested Jinks. "There's always plenty of it there."

Joe wanted his three dollars at once, but they compromised by paying him half down with a promise of the other half when the work was done.

"Now for the big blowout," chuckled Jinks, as they wended their way back to the school.

"It'll be a scream," gloated Bronson.

"A perfect riot," added Hicksley, who was in high feather, now that his scheme seemed in a fair way of going through.

As for Dago Joe, he was a busy man for the rest of the day and for some time after darkness fell.

There was an unusually good supper that night in honor of the holiday, and the boys did it full

justice. But they would have lingered still longer at the table, if they had not been impatient to get out on the hill for their carnival of coasting.

The wind had died down, but the air was keen and brought a frosty glow to their eyes and cheeks as they made their way to the hill, drawing their sleds behind them by ropes that hung over their shoulders.

"We'll make a new record to-night," said Bobby jubilantly. "I shouldn't wonder if we fetched as far as the bridge; and we've never done that yet."

"If we don't do it to-night we never shall," replied Fred, as they came to the hill.

"It doesn't seem as if the sleds could ever stop when they get started on ice like this," exulted Mouser.

"I'll tell you what let's do," suggested Sparrow. "The hill's wide enough to hold six sleds going down at the same time. There's just about seventeen or eighteen of us here. Let's start out in a bunch of six at a time and go the whole length. Then, after that, we can have the separate races."

"That's all right," agreed Fred. "The trouble is that each fellow will want to go off in the first six."

"We'll soon settle that," replied Sparrow. "We'll draw lots and then nobody will have any kick coming."

This proposal was greeted with acclamation, and amid a great deal of chaff and laughter the lots were drawn.

The lucky ones happened to be Fred, Bobby, Mouser, Sparrow, Skeets and Pee Wee.

"We'll let Pee Wee go in the middle," laughed Fred, "and we'd better take care to keep close to the side of the road. He'll need more room than any of the rest of us."

"I'd hate to have him plunk into me," grinned Bobby. "It would be a case for the doctor, for sure."

"For the undertaker, more likely," chuckled Mouser.

"You fellows think you're smart, don't you?" grunted Pee Wee. "All the same I bet I'll fetch farther than any of you."

"Hear who's talking," jibed Sparrow. "We'll leave you so far behind you won't be able to see us with a telescope."

They ranged their sleds side by side and lay upon them flat on their stomachs, holding firmly on the sides in front in order to steer correctly.

"Are you all ready?" asked Howell Purdy, who had been chosen to give the word.

"Ready," they answered.

"Then go!" shouted Howell.

The six sleds shot forward with a rush.

CHAPTER XVI

WHO WAS GUILTY?

For the first third of the distance, the ice was as smooth as quicksilver, with never a lump or hummock to mar the surface. The sleds flew down the frozen surface, gaining a velocity that took the boys' breath away and almost frightened them.

Then suddenly there was a jar, a chorus of shouts, and they were thrown headlong over the fronts of their sleds, landing in a confused heap of limbs and bodies, while the sleds relieved of their burdens swirled around aimlessly for a time and finally came to a stop.

A yell of consternation and alarm came from the mass, as the boys tried to struggle to their feet.

Those who had been left at the top of the hill, hearing the yells and knowing that some accident had happened, came slipping and scrambling down to the scene of the disaster.

They helped the half stunned victims to their feet, and for a time there was a wild hullabaloo of questions and answers as they tried to solve the mystery.

Fortunately none of them was badly hurt, though at the rate they were going it might very easily have turned out to be a tragedy.

Most of the boys had rubbed pieces of skin off their arms and legs, and Fred had a cut in his scalp from which the blood was flowing.

"What did it?" shouted Howell.

"I don't know," replied Bobby hesitatingly. His head was going round like a top.

"M-must have hit a tree trunk or something like that," stammered Sparrow.

"That isn't it," replied Howell, looking around him. "There isn't anything of that kind in sight as far as I can see. Just wait a minute till I get Sam Thompson's flashlight."

Luckily Sam had it with him and promptly handed it over.

Howell flashed it about him and gave a shout.

"It's ashes!" he cried. "The whole hill's littered with 'em."

"Ashes?" came a chorus of surprised questions.

"That's what it is," declared Howell emphatically. "There are heaps and heaps of 'em. I'll bet they reach clear down to the bottom of the hill."

He went down further and confirmed what he had said. He had no trouble in walking, for he could not have slipped if he had wanted to. The whole lower surface of the hill was strewn with ashes that spoiled the coasting for that night utterly, and promised to ruin it for many days to come.

A wave of wrath and fierce indignation swept over the boys as they heard Howell's report.

"Who could have done it?" was the question that came to the lips of all.

"Could it have been the town council?" suggested Skeets. "They might have done it to keep the horses from slipping."

"They never did anything like that before," objected Sparrow.

"And if they were the ones, they would have made a clean job of it and gone right up to the top of the hill," said Mouser. "But you fellows will notice that it was perfectly clear for a long part of the way down."

"Mouser is right," declared Bobby. "Somebody did this just to spoil our fun."

"And they wanted us to be fooled and get started down so that we'd get a tumble when we came to the ashes," added Fred. "That's why they left it smooth at the top."

"Some of us might have been killed," groaned Skeets, gingerly soothing an injured knee.

"And it's only a bit of luck that we weren't," growled Fred.

"My shins are barked for fair," moaned Pee Wee, "and that's no joke this time either."

"Whoever did it was a low-down skunk," burst out Howell angrily.

"He might have been a murderer," added Skeets.

"I'd like to have my hands on him for a minute," declared Fred.

"Well, our fun is over for this night anyway," said Bobby sadly.

"And for a whole lot of other nights," put in Pee Wee. "Those ashes will get ground in and there's no sweeping 'em off."

"We'll have to wait for another snow storm before we can do any more coasting," wailed Sparrow.

It was a sorely disgruntled band of boys who gathered up their sleds and limped slowly to the top of the hill. One of the sleds was smashed and all had been more or less scratched and bruised.

Once at the top, they squatted down on their sleds and held a council of war.

"Now, fellows," said Bobby, "we've got to get to the bottom of this thing somehow. The ashes didn't come there of themselves. Somebody put them there, and whoever it was knew that we were out for a grand coasting bee to-night. So it must have been some fellow in the school."

"I hate to think that there's any fellow at Rockledge who could do such a dirty trick," remarked Howell. "If we can find out who it was we ought to tell Doctor Raymond about it and have the fellow sent away from school."

"No," objected Bobby. "This is our affair and we oughtn't to bring the teachers into it at all."

"The question is who could have done it," put in Skeets.

"Whoever did it is mean enough to steal sheep," growled Fred.

"Or take the pennies from a dead man's eyes," added Mouser.

"I can figure out just three fellows in the school who could do a thing like that," said Howell.

"Bill Bronson."

"Jack Jinks."

"Tom Hicksley."

The answers came from as many different lips, and the readiness with which they were accepted was not at all flattering to the boys who bore the names.

"It may have been one of those three or all three together," said Bobby, coming nearer to the mark than he knew.

"That reminds me," cried Fred suddenly. "Tom Hicksley was practicing on the flying rings when we were talking this thing over in the gymnasium this morning."

"That's so," chimed in Mouser. "And I remember now that he seemed to stop all of a sudden and slip away. I didn't think anything about it then, but I remember it plainly now."

"He owes some of us a grudge for what happened on the train," remarked Pee Wee.

"And he said then he'd get even with us," observed Fred.

"There's one thing we fellows have forgotten," said Skeets. "Whoever did this would want to be hiding around and see what happened. We ought to hunt them out and pay them up."

This seemed likely enough and the boys looked eagerly about them.

"Doesn't seem to be any place up here where they could hide without our seeing them," remarked Mouser.

"No, but there's a lot of bushes at the side of the road half way down the hill," put in Sparrow. "Let's go down there."

They went down in a body. There was no one there, but as they got to the other side of the bushes they could faintly make out three figures retreating in the distance.

They were too far away to be recognized and they had too long a start to make it worth while pursuing them, but from their general size and build the boys had little doubt as to who they were.

"What did I tell you?" cried Fred. "I knew that they were the only ones who could do a thing like that."

"It seems that the whole bunch of them are in it," remarked Mouser.

"I'll bet that Hicksley went straight to them and cooked this up when he left the gym this morning," conjectured Sparrow.

"That makes something else we owe those fellows," growled Skeets.

"We owed them enough without that," said Howell. "The big bullies have tried to pester the life out of us ever since we've been at Rockledge."

"Our turn will come," replied Bobby with conviction. "But now, fellows, we might as well hustle back to the dormitory. There's no use of staying here any longer."

They made their way back to the school with very different feelings from those they had when they left it.

"A holiday spoiled," grumbled Mouser.

"And there's only two more holidays this month," observed Sparrow.

"Two!" exclaimed Bobby. "There's only one more and that's Washington's Birthday."

"How about St. Valentine's Day?" objected Sparrow. "That's only two days from now."

"Oh, that's only a fake holiday," replied Fred. "Lessons will go on just the same."

"I don't care whether it's a fake holiday or a real one," answered Sparrow. "I'm going to get a lot of fun out of it just the same."

CHAPTER XVII

ON THE TRAIL

The school chums sat up late in the dormitory that night, nursing their bruises, and by the time they had got through applying arnica and other lotions, the place smelled like a hospital.

How they could bring the trick home to those who had played it was a problem that was too much for them at the present. They felt sure that the bullies would deny it if taxed with it, and there was no way of actually proving it, no matter how sure they might feel in their own minds.

The matter could of course have been carried to the authorities of the school, and there is no doubt that they would have looked upon it very gravely because of the serious accident that might have resulted from it. But their code of schoolboy ethics was to keep the teachers out of such things and fight it out among themselves. They felt reasonably sure that sometime or other they would get even, and they bided their time.

It was a very lame and sore lot of boys who dragged themselves out of bed when the rising hell rang on the following morning.

"Scubbity-yow!" exclaimed Fred. "I feel as though I'd been in a railroad smash-up."

"I'm one big ache all over," groaned Pee Wee.

"One *big* ache is right," grinned Mouser. "You couldn't be a little one if you tried."

"My joints creak like a wooden doll's, every time I go to move," complained Sparrow.

"I bet I'll go to pieces on the stairs and have to be shoveled up in bits," prophesied Skeets.

"We'll each keep a part to remember you by," laughed Bobby. "Quit your groaning, you fellows, and let's go down to the table. You'll feel better when you get filled up."

The filling up process was carried out with neatness and despatch, and when it was over the boys were inclined to look on life in a more cheerful way.

"We can't do anything this morning on account of lessons," remarked Bobby. "But as soon as they're over this afternoon, let's make a break for that hill and see what we can find out."

"And see how Hicksley and his pals act in the classrooms," suggested Skeets. "That may give us a tip to go by."

"I don't count much on that," said Mouser. "They'll be on their guard and won't want to give themselves away."

To a certain extent this proved true. There was no attempt on the part of the bullies to gloat over the victims of their trick. But the boys surprised furtive grins and winks that passed between the three when they thought no one was looking, and this confirmed their suspicions that now were almost certainties.

"They did it all right," pronounced Fred. "I'm sure of it from the way I saw them grinning at each other. But they'll laugh on the other side of their mouths before long."

As soon as the boys were free from their duties, they went with all speed to the scene of their misadventure. And again they lamented, when they saw by daylight how thoroughly the hill was spoiled for coasting.

"There must be bushels and bushels of ashes!" exclaimed Mouser, as his eyes roamed over the lower half of the hill.

"It beats me how they managed to get it all here," observed Skeets.

"It must have been brought a long way," commented Sparrow. "There's no place round here they could have got them from."

"They couldn't have carried all that stuff themselves," said Bobby thoughtfully.

"It would have been an awful job," added Howell, "and those fellows don't like work well enough for that."

"They might have hired a man with a horse and wagon," suggested Skeets.

"If that's so, there must be some tracks in the snow," returned Bobby. "Scatter out, fellows, and see if you can find any marks of hoofs or wheels."

They followed his directions, and in a moment there was a cry from Sparrow.

"Here're the marks of wheels," he called. "But I don't see any horse tracks."

There, indeed, were the clearly defined print of wheels leading in a roundabout way toward the town. As they looked a little more closely they could see too where a man's feet had broken at places through the crust of snow.

"It must have been a hand cart," said Bobby, "and you can see that it held ashes from the bits that lie along its tracks. That's what they brought it in and you can bet on it."

"There aren't many hand carts in town," observed Fred reflectively. "How many do you fellows remember seeing?"

"The laundryman has one," replied Howell, "and the paper man has another. Those are the only ones I know of, except that shaky thing of Dago Joe's."

"He's the fellow!" cried Fred excitedly. "None of the others would lend their carts for anything like that."

"Let's follow up the tracks and see where they lead to," suggested Sparrow.

This was detective work to their liking and even Pee Wee made no objections to the tramp over the snow.

Their satisfaction was increased when they found that the tracks led straight to the roundhouse. Here there were great piles of ashes that had been dropped from the fire boxes of the locomotives when they were being shifted or put up for the night. It was quite clear that here was the place where the hand cart had been filled.

But their elation received a sudden check when they prepared to trace the wheel prints to the shabby shack in town where Joe lived with his numerous brood. For now they were in the outskirts of

the town, where wagons were coming and going all the time, and the tracks they had been following were lost in a multitude of others.

They looked at each other a little sheepishly.

"Stung!" muttered Fred.

"Bum detectives we are," grinned Sparrow.

"We're up a tree now for sure," declared Sparrow.

"All this walk for nothing," growled Pee Wee.

"We do seem to be stumped," admitted Bobby. "What do you say to going to Joe and asking him right up and down whether he did it or not?"

"Swell chance we'd have of getting anything out of him," commented Mouser.

"He'd lie about it sure," declared Sparrow.

"I suppose likely he would," agreed Bobby. "But we might be able to tell something by the way he acts. It won't do any harm to try anyhow."

They found Dago Joe pottering about some work in the small yard in front of his shack. But Joe had seen them coming and his uneasy conscience had taken alarm. If he had had time, he would have slipped inside the house and had his wife or one of the children deny that he was at home. But it was too late for that, and he took refuge in the assumed ignorance that had served him many times before.

He greeted them with a genial smile that showed his mouthful of white teeth which was the only personal attraction he possessed.

"Goota day," he said blandly.

"How are you, Joe?" said Bobby, as spokesman for the party. "Been pretty busy?"

Joe's mouth drooped.

"Not do nothin' much," he answered. "Beesness bad, ver' bad."

"Carry any loads of ashes lately?" Bobby went on.

Joe looked puzzled. Then a light came into his face.

"Hash?" he said delightedly. "Me likea hash. Tasta good. Bambino like it too."

"Not hash, but ashes," returned Bobby, joining in the laugh of the rest of the boys. "You know, ashes—what falls out of the stove, wood ashes, coal ashes."

Joe's face resembled that of a graven image.

"No unnerstan," he said, shrugging his shoulders with an air of perplexity.

In the face of his determination, the boys saw that it was of no use to prolong the conversation.

"You're a good actor, Joe," said Bobby, half vexed, half amused, as the boys turned to go.

Joe showed his teeth again in an engaging smile that embraced all the party and waved them a cordial good-bye.

"How sweetly the old rascal smiles at us!" grinned Mouser.

"Laughs at us, you mean," snorted Fred. "He's tickled to death inside to think of the way he's got the best of us."

"I bet if we asked him if he'd like to have us give him five dollars, he'd understand, all right," laughed Sparrow.

"He couldn't grab the money too quick," agreed Skeets.

"Well, we haven't wasted our afternoon anyway," Bobby summed up. "We've found out how the ashes were taken there, and we feel dead certain in our own minds that Joe did it. We know, of course, that he didn't do it of his own accord. Somebody hired him to do it. Now if we could only find some one who saw Hicksley and Joe talking together, it would help some."

"But that wouldn't prove anything," objected Sparrow. "They might be talking about the weather."

"Or about hash," interjected Pee Wee.

"Hash seems to stick in your crop," grinned Skeets.

"I wish some of it were sticking there right now," answered Pee Wee, "especially if it were like the hash that Meena makes."

"By the way, fellows," chimed in Fred, "it must be close to supper time this very minute. Let's beat it."

They started off on a run.

"The one that gets there last is a Chinaman," Skeets flung back over his shoulder.

Pee Wee was the Chinaman.

CHAPTER XVIII

A HARD HIT

The next morning the boys woke to the realization that it was St. Valentine's Day. There were valentines in their mail, valentines that had been slipped slyly into their pockets, valentines that had found their way under their pillows.

Some of them were the grotesque "comics" that were on sale in the village stationery store, while others were mere scrawls adorned with so-called pictures, and had been made by the boys themselves with pen and pencil.

There was not much art about them, but there was a good deal of fun, and that was all the boys were looking for. Most of them were based on nicknames that the boys carried or on some event in their lives that was known to the rest.

Mouser, for instance, was pictured with his own face on the body of a mouse who was creeping toward a cage in which a big piece of cheese was temptingly displayed.

Skeets was buzzing about as a big mosquito, over the bald head of a fat man, who was getting ready to crash him as soon as he should settle down.

Fred's red head had been drawn in red ink, and above his flaming mop one boy was holding a frying pan and another was breaking eggs to cook an omelet.

The boys had learned from Fred of the time when Bobby had coasted down the Trent Street hill and gone head over heels into the drift. Bobby's head could not be seen but his two heels were waving wildly in the air and on one of them was the word "Bobby" and on the other "Blake."

Of course Pee Wee had not been overlooked. He was shown as a big fat boy, and each of his knees had a dog's head on it. The dogs were barking furiously. This was supposed to indicate his "barked" shins.

Because Billy Bassett was always asking questions with his conundrums, he was shown as a great big question mark with the word "guess" underneath.

Sparrow Bangs sat on a branch with a flock of birds, singing with all his might, while in the bushes a hunter was taking careful aim and getting ready to fire.

Under most of the pictures there were verses that brought forth shrieks of laughter—usually from all, but sometimes from all but the recipient.

As a rule, it was pure fun without any sting in it, though Fred pointed out that the hair in the picture was a good deal redder than that which really waved over his freckled forehead. Pee Wee too was sure that he was not anyway near so big as the human mountain that his picture showed him to be.

There was plenty of chaff and laughter as the boys pored over the valentines, and they would have gladly spent more time discussing them. But as Fred had said, Valentine's Day was only a "fake" holiday, and the hard-hearted teachers insisted on lessons and recitations. So the pictures were hastily thrust into pockets until they had more time to look at them and the boys trooped over to the classrooms.

Several times through the morning's work, they noticed that Tom Hicksley shot furious glances at them and this aroused their curiosity.

"His royal highness seems mighty sore about something this morning," Fred whispered to Bobby.

"Got out of bed the wrong foot first maybe," replied Bobby.

"I hope he's got something to feel sore about," snapped Fred.

What that something was they learned after the lessons were over, and they stood chattering with their friends, a little way off from the main building.

Hicksley came up to them, accompanied by Bronson and Jinks. There was an ugly look in the bully's eyes and he held a folded sheet of paper in his hand.

"Which one of you boobs sent me this valentine?" he asked threateningly.

"How do you know that any of us did?" replied Bobby in Yankee fashion, answering a question by asking one.

"I know that some of you did, because you butted in on me before," replied Hicksley.

"When was that?" asked Fred aggravatingly.

"You know well enough," growled Hicksley, who was not any too anxious to recall his bully-ragging of the old soldier.

"Oh, yes, I remember," put in Mouser, as though he had just thought of it. "You remember, fellows, how Hicksley reached out his foot and tried to trip the old man up."

"I didn't," cried Hicksley untruthfully. "He fell over it by accident."

"And I suppose it was an accident that you kept at him with the feather so that he couldn't get any sleep?" retorted Fred.

"That's neither here nor there," snarled Hicksley, dodging the matter. "What I want to know is which one of you sent this valentine?"

"What are you going to do if you find out?" asked Bobby innocently.

"I'm going to give him a trimming that he'll remember," growled Hicksley.

Bronson and Jinks ranged up alongside of him as though to assure him of their support, and it looked as if trouble were coming.

"Give it to him good and plenty, Tom," said Bronson.

"The whole bunch of them need a licking," added Jinks.

"It will take more than you to give it to us," blazed out Fred defiantly.

The bullies were much larger and stronger than any of the boys opposed to them. On the other hand, the smaller boys had a larger number, so that if a tussle did come, the forces would be about equal.

"What is this valentine you're making all this fuss about?" demanded Bobby.

"Here it is," cried Hicksley furiously, thrusting it forward. "And I'm going to make the fellow that sent it pay for it."

The boys crowded round and looked at it curiously, at the same time keeping wary eyes on the bullies.

The picture was fairly well done, and had evidently taken a great deal of work and time on the part of the one who had made it. It represented a boy taking a dead mouse from a blind kitten. The boy was grinning, and the kitten was pawing wildly about, trying to get back its mouse.

To make sure there could be no mistake, the kitten had a card around its neck bearing the words, "I am blind," and under the figure of the boy was scrawled the name, "Tom Hicksley."

The boys roared with laughter, and Hicksley's temper rose to the boiling point.

"Own up now, which one of you did it," he demanded fiercely.

"Whoever did it knew you pretty well, Tom Hicksley," said Fred.

"What do you suppose the picture means?" inquired Mouser, as though he could not quite make it out.

"I think it means that the fellow who would take a dead mouse from a blind kitten is about as mean as they make them," put in Sparrow.

"Mean enough to torment a poor old soldier, I shouldn't wonder," added Shiner, pouring oil on the flames.

"Are you going to tell me who did it?" snarled Hicksley once more, snatching back the valentine, which he now regretted having shown, and doubling up his fist.

"I would have done it if I'd thought of it," Fred came back at him.

Hicksley sprang forward, followed by Bronson and Jinks.

The boys stood their ground and there was a wild mix-up. In a moment they were all down in the snow in a flying tangle of arms and legs.

There was no telling how the tussle would have terminated, though Hicksley was getting his face well washed with snow that the boys were cramming into his mouth and eyes, when a shout arose:

"Cheese it, fellows, there's a teacher coming!"

The combatants scrambled to their feet and scurried in all directions, and when Mr. Leith, the head teacher, arrived on the spot, there was no one to be seen.

Bobby and his friends found themselves, red, panting and uproariously happy, in their dormitory, where they flung their books upon their beds and fairly danced about with glee.

"I jammed so much snow in Tom Hicksley's mouth that I bet he'll taste it for a month," chortled Fred.

"They tackled the wrong bunch that time," gurgled Mouser.

"They thought we'd run," chuckled Bobby.

"Wasn't that a dandy valentine?" demanded Skeets.

"What a fool he was to show it," grinned Pee Wee. "Now it'll go all over the school."

"Who do you suppose sent it?" wondered Shiner.

"I'd give a dollar to know," declared Fred.

"All right," grinned Sparrow, holding out his hand. "Pass over the dollar."

"You?" cried the other boys in chorus.

CHAPTER XIX

SPRING PRACTICE

"I'm the fellow who did it," admitted Sparrow modestly.

"Sparrow, old scout, you're a wonder!" cried Mouser, clapping him on the back.

"It hit him right where he lived," chuckled Skeets.

"That pays him up for scattering ashes on the hill," grinned Fred.

"He'll never hear the last of it as long as he stays in school," said Shiner. "Every once in a while a dead mouse will turn up on his desk and make him hopping mad."

"He'll never be much madder than he was this morning," put in Skeets. "His eyes were fairly snapping."

"Bronson and Jinks got theirs, too," said Pee Wee. "I guess they'll think twice before they pick on the other fellows again."

"They've been rather quiet since the goat tumbled them over at our last initiation," laughed Bobby, referring to an incident of the previous term, "but since Hicksley came they've been getting ugly again. I guess what they got this morning will hold them for a while."

As a matter of fact, the bullies did seem to be somewhat dashed by the stout resistance that the smaller boys had put up and they did not refer to the valentine again. They were only too willing to have it forgotten, and Tom Hicksley ground his teeth more than once at not having kept it to himself.

Spring was now at hand, coming this year a little earlier than usual. The snow disappeared from the ground, the ice vanished from the lake, and the soft winds that blew up from the south turned the thoughts of the boys to track games and baseball.

Fred and Bobby had done a good deal of practicing in the gymnasium and were in prime condition. But actual practice on the diamond was the real thing they wanted, and they were delighted when the ground had dried out enough to play in the open air.

Frank Durrock had been busy for a month past, getting all the details perfected for the entrance of Rockledge into the Monatook Lake League. But now everything was ready and he could devote himself to picking the members of the team.

This proved to be no easy matter. An unusually large number of good players were at Rockledge, and the struggle for places on the nine was interesting and exciting.

It seemed that Bobby should play in the pitcher's box and Fred at short stop. They had both done exceedingly well at those positions the previous spring and fall. But there was a new boy, Willis by name, who had been a good short stop on his home nine before he had come to the school, and it seemed to be a toss up between him and Fred as to who could do better in the position.

Bobby, too, had rivalry to face in the person of Tom Hicksley.

On the first day that they actually had field practice, Hicksley came out on the ball ground in an old uniform that proclaimed that he had once been a member of the "Eagles" of Cresskill, his native town.

Frank knew that he had been a pitcher, and so he put him in the box and had him toss up some balls for the rest of the team in batting practice.

And Hicksley did exceedingly well. Whatever his defects in character, he certainly knew how to pitch. He had a good outcurve, a fair incurve and a high fast ball that Bobby himself generously declared to be a "peach."

Hicksley's height and strength, too, were greater than Bobby's, which was not to be wondered at when it was considered that he was three years older. But he was inclined to be a little wild, and his control was not as good as Bobby's.

But what made his work of special interest to Frank was that he pitched with his left hand. Most of the pitchers in the new league were right-handed, and the boys were used to hitting that kind of pitching.

Frank felt that with a left-handed pitcher he would have the other fellows all at sea when it came to "lining them out," and for that reason he watched Hicksley with the closest attention.

"He puts them over all right," conceded Bobby, as he watched Hicksley winging them over the plate.

"Yes," said Fred, "when he gets them over at all. But lots of them don't even cut the corners. He'll give too many bases on balls."

"And a base on balls is as good for the fellow that gets it as a base hit," commented Mouser.

"His arm seems to be all right, but we don't know how he'll act when he gets in a pinch," said Skeets dubiously.

"That's what makes Bobby so strong as a pitcher," said Shiner. "No matter how tight a hole he finds himself in, he's cool as an iceberg."

"That's so," remarked Pee Wee, who was too fat and too slow to play himself, but was an ardent rooter for the home team. "I've never seen Bobby get rattled yet."

"That's because there isn't a bit of yellow in him," said Fred, throwing his arm affectionately about his chum's shoulder.

"And I'll bet that Hicksley has a yellow streak in him a yard wide," snapped Sparrow.

"Oh he may not be that way when it comes to baseball," remonstrated Bobby who always tried to be fair. "At any rate he ought to have a chance to show what he can do before we make up our minds about him. You fellows know that I don't like him a bit more than you do, but that doesn't say he may not be a good baseball player."

Jinks was not on the nine, but Bronson, who was a good batter and a fair fielder, was expected to play center field. They were both delighted at the showing that their crony was making and were loud in their applause. Their praise was so extravagant in fact that it was clear that they did it to depreciate Bobby.

"You're the best pitcher we ever had at Rockledge, Tom," cried Bronson, casting a side glance at

Bobby to make sure that he heard.

"You lay over them all," crowed Jinks. "There's no one else can hold a candle to you."

"Here, cut that out, you fellows," called Frank Durrock sharply. "Blake has proved what he can do and I don't want any talk like that. He won both of the last games he pitched against Belden, and any one who can do better than he did will have to be going some."

"You bet they will," cried Fred loyally, and there was a round of hand clapping from the other boys, with most of whom Bobby was a prime favorite.

Frank's hearty defense put Bobby on his mettle, and when his turn came to put the balls over, he did so with a snap and skill that delighted his friends.

The practice all around was sharp and spirited, and Frank was greatly encouraged as he saw how well the team took hold. But it would not do to play too long on the first day, and after an hour or so, he called a halt.

"We want to keep an eye on those fellows, Bobby," remarked Fred a little uneasily as they were going toward the school. "They're going to crowd you out if they can."

"Let them try," replied Bobby. "I'm going to try my best to hold up my end with Hicksley and beat him if I can. But if he can prove that he's a better pitcher than I am, I won't kick if I have to play second fiddle. I'd be willing to do anything to help Rockledge win."

THE SUGAR CAMP

An untimely snow storm that was wholly unlooked for by the boys dismayed them by putting a stop to their practice for the time being. But the snow, though heavy, did not last long, and began to melt rapidly under the rays of the sun.

"See how the water is running down those trees," remarked Shiner, looking out of the window one Friday morning.

"That isn't water, boy," said Sparrow. "That's sap. The trees are bursting with it just now."

"By the way, fellows," put in Skeets, "have you ever been to a maple sugar camp when the sap was running?"

Most of them had not and Skeets went on to explain.

"It's the best fun ever," he said; "and now's just the time to see it running full blast when the snow is melting and the air is warm. On a day like this the sap comes down in bucketfuls. And you can see just how they collect it, and how they boil it down until it's a thick syrup, and the way that hot maple sugar does taste—yum yum!" and here he closed his eyes in blissful recollection.

"Sounds mighty good to me," said Pee Wee, with whom the memory of Meena and her breakfast of buckwheat cakes and maple syrup still lingered.

"You can take out the hot sugar in big spoons and let it cool on a pan of snow," continued Skeets, drawing out the details as he saw that his friends' mouths were watering in anticipation, "and when you get the first taste of it you never want to stop eating."

"I wonder if there's a sugar camp anywhere around here," said Pee Wee with great animation.

"I know of one that's about three miles away," said Sparrow. "What do you say to our making up a party and going out there to-morrow if Doc Raymond will let us go out of bounds?"

There was a general chorus of gleeful assent.

"What we ought to do," said Skeets, "is to have a couple of fellows go out there to-day and make arrangements. We want to take up a collection and fix it up with the farmer's wife to have hot biscuits and other things ready for us. I tell you what, fellows, hot biscuits and fresh butter and hot thick maple sugar just out of the boiler—"

"Don't say another word," cried Pee Wee frantically, "or I'll never, never be able to wait till to-morrow."

They took stock of their resources and collected several dollars between them, enough they thought to cover the expense. Bobby and Fred were appointed as a committee of two to go out to the camp that afternoon so that everything would be in readiness on the morrow.

Dr. Raymond's permission was readily obtained, and the chums set out on their three mile walk. They had no trouble in finding the camp and the farmer's wife, a bright, cheery person, was very ready to entertain the party and promised to have an abundant lunch provided for them.

The boys would have dearly liked to inspect the camp, but they had promised their chums that they would not do so until all could see it together, and they kept loyally to their word.

No finer day could have been selected for that particular outing than the one that dawned the next morning. The air was mild and the sun shining brightly. The only drawback was the walking, as the roads were full of mud in some places and melting slush in others, but as they were all warmly shod that made little difference.

Pee Wee groaned occasionally as he lagged along in the rear, but they had no fear of his dropping out. It would have taken a good deal more than a three-mile walk to keep Pee Wee away from that sugar camp after Skeets's description.

"There it is," cried Fred at last, pointing to a big grove of trees in the rear of a farmhouse.

Pee Wee sniffed the air.

"Seems to me I can smell the sugar cooking from here," he said joyously.

They left the road now, took a short cut across the fields and soon entered the grove of maples.

It was an extensive grove, containing several hundred of the stately trees. Into each one of these that had reached their full growth a hole had been made, a spigot driven in, and a bright tin pail suspended from each spigot. Into these pails the sap was falling with a musical drip so that a tinkling murmur ran through the grove as though some one were gently touching the strings of a zither.

An old horse attached to a low sled was shambling slowly along through the woodland paths, stopping at each tree. The driver would empty the pail into one of several large cans that the sled contained, replace the pail and go on to the next.

"Seems almost a shame to tap those splendid trees," murmured Mouser. "It's almost like bleeding them to death."

"Doesn't do them a bit of harm," explained Skeets cheerfully. "The farmers take good care not to drain out more sap than the tree can spare."

When the sled had made its round, the boys followed it to the shed where the sap was boiled down into sugar. Here they saw an enormous caldron with a roaring fire underneath. Into this caldron the sap was poured, and here its transformation began. A delicious odor arose that made the nostrils of the boys dilate hungrily.

Every little while, the man who was supervising the boiling drew out a huge ladleful to see how thick it was getting. At a certain stage he turned to the boys with a grin.

"Each one of you take one of those pans," he directed, pointing to a bright row of dairy tins which the housewife had made ready. "Fill them up with snow and pack the snow down hard."

In a twinkling the boys were ready. Then, as each held up his pan, the man poured a big ladle of the hot syrup on the snow. The rich golden brown against the whiteness of the snow would have delighted the soul of an artist. But these lads were not artists, only hungry boys, and their only concern was to

get the sugar cool enough to eat.

Pee Wee in fact burned his lips and tongue by starting too soon, but he soon forgot a trifle like that, and in a moment more he and the others were eating as if they had never tasted anything so good in all their lives.

"Hot biscuits coming, boys," smiled the farmer. "Better leave some room."

"Let them come," mumbled Mouser with his mouth full of sugar. "None of them will go away again."

And they made good this prophecy when a little later they were called into the farmhouse, where a table was spread, heaped high with fluffy biscuits just from the oven. On these the boys spread butter and then piled them up with the delicious syrup. There were other things on the table too, pickles and pies and cakes, but to these the boys paid slight attention. They could have those any day, but to-day maple sugar was king.

When at length they were through, they all acknowledged to having eaten more than was good for them.

"We'll have to use a derrick to get Pee Wee on his feet," laughed Bobby.

"And borrow the horse and sled to take him back to school," said Sparrow.

But it was not quite so bad as that, though after they started back the other boys had to moderate their gait in order not to leave Pee Wee too far behind.

"Hurry up, Pee Wee," admonished Skeets. "You're slow as molasses."

"Slow as maple syrup when it's cooling," amended Sparrow.

"Well, fellows, this has sure been a bully trip," remarked Shiner, summing up the sentiments of all.

"This is the end of a perfect day," Fred chanted gayly, lifting up his voice in song.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIRST GAME

Notwithstanding Fred's jubilant song, the day was not yet ended.

As the boys approached the school, they saw a figure in the road a little way ahead that seemed familiar to them. They quickened their pace, quickly overtaking Dago Joe.

"Hello, Joe," came from many voices at once.

Joe flashed them a smile, showing his fine, white teeth.

"Hello," he answered genially.

"Wonder if he's as fond of hash as ever," Fred remarked in a low voice to Mouser.

"What are you doing up this way, Joe?" asked Bobby.

"Looking for any one?" inquired Sparrow.

But Joe was wary and refused to be drawn out.

"Can't get that old fox to give himself away," muttered Skeets.

Just then Tom Hicksley approached, accompanied by Bronson and Jinks. They caught sight of Joe at the same time that he saw them, and tried to retreat. Bronson and Jinks succeeded, but Joe was too quick for Hicksley, and hurrying forward laid his hand on his arm, while he jabbered away excitedly.

"Ha ha!" exclaimed Fred in a tragic way. "I see it all now."

"He's boning Hicksley for something," guessed Sparrow.

"Money, I'll bet," ventured Shiner.

"I shouldn't wonder if it's on account of that job he did for those fellows, hauling those ashes," said Bobby.

"Wasn't it luck that we happened along just at this minute?" chuckled Mouser delightedly.

As Joe and Hicksley were right in the path that led up to the school, the boys sauntered along carelessly until they were nearly abreast of them.

For a man who understood so little English, Joe was talking at a great rate.

"I wanta ze mon," the boys heard him say.

"I tell you I haven't got it with me just now," Hicksley responded in an undertone, trying to quiet the man and keep the boys from hearing.

"I wanta ze mon now," repeated Joe doggedly.

"Oh, give the man his money, Hicksley," broke in Sparrow suddenly.

"He needs it to buy hash with," said the irrepressible Fred.

"Let's take up a collection to help out," suggested Skeets sarcastically.

"You fellows shut up," cried Hicksley, turning on them fiercely.

"We know how he earned it," returned Bobby undauntedly.

"You don't know anything of the kind," snarled the bully, but his eyes wavered as they met Bobby's fixed upon them.

"It was pretty hard work carting ashes all that way to spoil our coast," went on Bobby. "You'd better pony up, Hicksley."

"I don't know what you're talking about," growled Hicksley.

But as he did not like the way the boys were gathering around him, he put his hand in his pocket, drew out the dollar and a half that he had promised to pay when the work should be finished and which he had ever since been trying to cheat Joe out of, and slunk away, glad to escape the contempt that he felt in the eyes and manner of the boys.

"Caught with the goods!" cried Fred jubilantly, throwing his cap into the air.

"Couldn't have been nicer if we'd planned it ourselves," exulted Sparrow.

"Well, now that we're sure that he did it, what are we going to do about it?" asked Skeets.

"Oh, I guess there's nothing to be done," said Bobby slowly. "If it wasn't that he's likely to be on the baseball team we might make it hot for him. Not with the teachers of course, but among ourselves. But we want Rockledge to win the championship, and it won't help any to have trouble with any boy on the nine. Besides, he's had a good deal of punishment just in the last few minutes. I never saw a fellow look as cheap as he did when he faded away just now."

"I guess you're right, Bobby," assented Sparrow. "But all the same he wouldn't let up on you if he had you in a fix."

The next day they all felt rather logy after their feast of the day before, and Pee Wee, who had a severe stomach ache, did not get up at all. Fortunately it was Sunday, and the day of rest helped to get them in shape again before their school duties began on Monday morning.

From that time on the weather was all that the boys could ask, and every hour the ball players could spare was spent in practice on the diamond.

Gradually, under the coaching of Mr. Carrier, their athletic instructor, ably assisted by Frank Durrock, the nine was getting into good form.

Fred, at short stop, was thought to be a shade better than Willis, and he was slated to play in the first game.

As to the pitchers, while there was no doubt that they would be Bobby and Hicksley, it was by no means certain which of them would twirl in the opening game, which was to be with the Somerset nine on the Rockledge grounds.

Each was doing well, and each had some points that the other did not possess. Hicksley, the older of the two, had more muscular strength, and could whip the ball over with more speed than Bobby. But Bobby was a better general, a quicker thinker, and he had a control of his curves that was far better than his rival's.

"One thing is certain," said Mr. Carrier, in one of his conferences with Frank. "We're better fixed in the box than we ever were before. It's hard to choose between them, though, take all things together,

I think Blake is the better pitcher of the two."

"Yes," agreed Frank. "I feel a little safer myself with Bobby in there than I do with Hicksley. Hicksley has lots of speed but he's liable to go up with a bang. But I've never yet seen Bobby get rattled."

The long expected day arrived at last, and all Rockledge turned out to see the game. The stand was full, and Dr. Raymond himself, with most of the teachers, sat in a little space that had been railed off and decorated with the Rockledge colors.

The Somerset nine, made up of strong, sturdy looking boys, had come over with a large number of rooters from their town. They were full of confidence, and they went through their preliminary practice with a snap and a vim that showed they were good players.

Frank had watched them as they batted out flies, and noted that several of them were left-handed batters. He held an anxious conference with Mr. Carrier, and then came over to Bobby who was warming up.

"I had expected to have you pitch to-day, Bobby," he said; "but I've just been noticing that those fellows have two or three left-handed batters. Now you know as well as I do that for that kind it's best to have left-handed pitching. They can't hit it so easily."

"Sure," replied Bobby.

"And so I think I'll have to put in Hicksley," continued Frank.

"That's all right," said Bobby heartily, "and I'll be rooting my head off for him to win."

"You're a brick, Bobby!" exclaimed Frank. "I was sure you'd understand."

When the umpire cried: "Play ball!" there was a buzz of surprise among the spectators, when, instead of Bobby, it was Tom Hicksley who picked up the ball and faced the batter.

CHAPTER XXII

TO THE RESCUE

Hicksley started off in good shape. The first man up went out on a foul that Sparrow caught after a long run. The second batter, who was left-handed, could do nothing with the ball at all and went out on strikes. The third man connected and shot a sharp grounder which Fred picked up neatly and threw in plenty of time to Durrock at first.

The side was out, and hearty applause greeted Hicksley as he came in to the bench, Bobby joining in as heartily as any of the others.

"That was a dandy start!" cried Bronson.

"Keep it up, Tom!" exclaimed Jinks, encouragingly. "They can't touch you."

Rockledge was more fortunate in its half of the inning. Frank, who led off in the batting order, had two halls and one strike called on him, but on his second attempt he sent the ball on a line between center and right for three bases. He was tempted to try to stretch it to a home run, but Bobby, who was coaching, saw that the ball would get there before him and held him at third.

The next batter fouled out, but Mouser, who followed him, sent a neat single to left on which Frank scored easily. Barry went out on strikes, and Mouser was left on the bag when Spentz died on a weak dribbler to the box.

But Rockledge was one run to the good and had shown that they were in a batting humor, so that their rooters in the stand were jubilant at the promising beginning.

The next two innings went by without a score for either side. Hicksley was still pitching well, and the opposing pitcher had tightened up considerably.

In the fourth, Somerset broke the ice. The first man up laid down a bunt that Hicksley picked up, but threw wild to Durrock, and the batter reached second before the ball was recovered. A neat sacrifice put him on third, from which he scored on a long fly to right, which Spentz gobbled after a long run, but could not return to the plate in time to catch the man running in from third after the out. No further damage was done as Fred and Durrock disposed of the batter, but the score was tied, and it was Somerset's turn to cheer.

But Rockledge got the run right back again in the fifth, and added one for good measure. Fred smashing out a rattling two-bagger to left. He stole third on the first ball pitched. Two infield flies followed, and it began to look as though Fred's hit had gone for nothing. Then Mouser brought the stand yelling to its feet by a clean home run, following Fred over the plate and making the score three to one.

His comrades gathered around him, pawing and mauling him exultantly.

"That's what you call hitting it a mile!" cried Bobby.

"A lallapaloozer!" shouted Fred, doing a war dance.

"A peach!"

"A pippin!"

"You're all there, Mouser!" yelled Pee Wee.

Mouser grinned appreciatively at the medley of shouts that greeted him, and then retired to the bench, where he sat panting and happy.

Radford, the Somerset pitcher, pulled himself together and retired the next man on strikes, and Somerset came in for its turn at the bat.

"Go for 'em now, fellows!" shouted their supporters.

"Eat 'em up!"

"Get right after 'em!"

"The game's young yet."

But Hicksley, encouraged by the two-run lead his team had handed him, was still more than they could solve, and again they went out into the field runless.

The Rockledge boys also had a goose egg for their portion in their half, but this did not worry them much. The game was two thirds over, and at that stage a lead of two runs looked mighty good to them.

But in the seventh inning their confidence began to give way to anxiety. Hicksley began well by retiring the first man on strikes. But then he began to lose control. Two batters in succession were given their bases on balls. A fine pickup of Fred's disposed of the next batter at first, each of the others advancing a base on the play. There was only one other to be put out and end the inning without a run being recorded.

But the next batter landed square on the ball, which whizzed like a bullet between first and second, and in a jiffy two runs came over the plate, tying the score. The batter reached second on the play and then imprudently tried to make third. A quick throw to Sparrow caught him ten feet from the bag and the side was out.

Hicksley came in shaking and with a strained look in his face. The Rockledge rooters yelled encouragement to him, but he paid no attention to them and sat moping sullenly on the bench.

Frank and Mr. Carrier had a hurried consultation, and then the former came over to Bobby.

"You'd better get out there at one side and warm up," he directed him.

Bobby did as ordered.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Hicksley in a surly tone. "Take me out and put that fellow in?"

"Not yet," answered Frank soothingly. "You've had a bad inning, but that can happen to any one. Perhaps you'll be all right after a rest. We'll see how you start out the next inning."

The Somerset boys, with their chances brightened, had taken a mighty brace, and Rockledge went out in one, two, three order.

Hicksley took up his position in the box with an air of confidence that Frank felt was assumed.

Still, the first ball he pitched cut the plate for a strike. The next two were balls. Then followed another strike and a third ball, making the count three and two.

With both batter and pitcher "in the hole," the next was a ball and the batter capered happily down to first.

Durrock walked over to Hicksley.

"How about it, Hicksley?" he asked.

"Let me alone," growled Hicksley.

The next batter connected for a clean single, advancing his mate to second.

Hicksley now was plainly cracking, and when he issued another "pass," filling the bases, Frank motioned him to retire and beckoned Bobby to the box.

Hicksley glared at Bobby as the latter came forward.

"Sorry, Hicksley," said Bobby regretfully, as he reached out for the ball. "You pitched a dandy game for the first six innings."

"Yes, you're sorry a lot," snarled Hicksley. "You're tickled to death at the chance to show me up."

Instead of handing the ball to Bobby, he threw it angrily on the ground and slouched away to the bench.

Bobby's eyes flashed, but he controlled himself, quietly picked up the ball and took his position in the box. It was no time now to get angry when he needed above all things to keep cool.

It was a trying position for so young a player. The bases were full with no one out, and the Somerset rooters were yelling at the top of their lungs, trying to rattle him.

A clean hit would bring in at least one run, probably two. Even a long fly to the outfield would probably enable the man on third to score.

"Go to it, Bobby, old boy!" called Fred from short.

"You can hold them!" encouraged Mouser.

"We're all behind you, Bobby!" sang out Sparrow.

Bobby sized up the batter and wound up for the first pitch.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE EGG AND THE FAN

The ball whizzed over the plate, cutting an outside corner for a strike.

The Rockledge rooters regarded this as a good omen and greeted it with wild shouts. They all had a warm spot in their hearts for Bobby, and they had been disgusted at the unsportsmanlike way in which Hicksley had left the box.

The next ball was a high fast one, at which the batter refused to bite.

Bobby had seen out of the corner of his eye that the occupant of the third bag was taking too big a lead. As the ball came back to him from the catcher, he suddenly turned and shot it to third.

The runner tried frantically to get back, but Sparrow had the ball on him like a flash.

"You're out!" shouted the umpire.

"Scubbity-yow!" yelled Fred. "That was nice work, Bobby."

This relieved the pressure somewhat, and the crowd breathed more freely.

But the danger was still threatening, and the batter was the captain of the Somerset team and one of its best hitters. He fouled off the next two. On his third attempt, he chopped a boulder to Mouser at second, who made a clever stop and threw him out at first, while the runners each advanced a base.

"Two down," cried Sparrow from third. "You're getting them, Bobby. Keep it up."

Bobby now put on all steam. There was only one more inning after this one, and he did not need to save his arm. He sent two outcurves in succession. Each went for a strike. Then when the batter was set for another of the same kind, Bobby outguessed him with a straight fast one, and the ball plunked into the catcher's mitt for an out.

There was a chorus of cheers from the Rockledge rooters as Bobby drew off his glove and came in to the bench.

"That's what you call getting out of a hole," cried one.

"The bases full and nobody out and yet they couldn't score," shouted another.

"We'll give you a run this time, Bobby, and all you'll need to do then will be to hold them down in the ninth," prophesied Frank, as he selected his bat.

He started in to make his words good by cracking out a single on the second ball pitched. A sacrifice bunt to the right of the pitcher's box advanced him to second. The next batter went out on an infield fly that held Frank anchored to the bag. Barry was given his base on balls. Then Spentz walloped a corker to left, on which Frank scored and Barry reached third. A moment later a quick throw caught him napping and the side was out.

"We're in the lead now, Bobby," exulted Fred, as Rockledge took the field. "Put the kibosh on them just once more and we're all right."

"Make this inning short and sweet, old scout!" sang out Mouser.

And short and sweet was what Bobby made it. He was on his mettle, and put every bit of control he had upon the ball. Despite the frantic efforts of the Somerset coaches to rattle him, he kept perfectly cool. Victory was too close now for him to let it go.

The first batter up knocked a high foul to Sparrow, who held it tight. The next sent a weak boulder to Frank, which he tossed to Bobby, who had run over to cover the bag. Then Bobby shattered the last hope of Somerset by striking out the last man on three pitched balls.

The Rockledge rooters, wild with delight, rushed down from the stands and gathered about their favorites, who were grinning happily. They had played a good game and deserved to win, but Bobby, because of his gallant stand when the team had its back against the wall, came in naturally for the lion's share of the applause.

"That was some sweet pitching all right."

"You had them standing on their heads."

"Your nerve was right with you."

"Wait till he tackles Belden. He'll show them a thing or two."

"I'm glad we pulled through all right," said Bobby modestly. "All the boys put up a dandy game. And don't forget that Hicksley held them down splendidly in the first part of the game."

"That's so," conceded Mouser. "But when it came to the pinch he cracked."

"He couldn't stand the gaff," put in Sparrow.

"Any pitcher will get knocked out of the box sometimes," argued Bobby. "Then, too, he had been pitching six hard innings and was tired. I was fresh when I went in and only had two innings to pitch."

Hicksley had left the bench as soon as the last man was out. He could not bear to wait to see the praise that he knew would be showered on his rival. He had been joined by Jinks and Bronson, and the three were now slouching grumpily toward the school buildings.

"Doesn't seem as if they were tickled to death because Rockledge won," commented Fred, as he looked at the group.

"Well, the rest of us are, anyway," cried Sparrow. "We've made a mighty good start, taking the first game."

"I can see the pennant flying from that pole already," jubilated Skeets, pointing to the flagstaff back of center field.

"You've got dandy eyesight, Skeets," laughed Bobby. "We've got a long way to go yet."

"One swallow doesn't make a summer," cautioned Frank, who, while he was as pleased as the rest, did not want his team to be too confident.

"And if the Ridgefield nine is as good as the Somersets, we'll have our work cut out for us," remarked Mouser. "Those fellows gave us all we wanted to do to win."

"They put up a bully fight," agreed Shiner.

Doctor Raymond came down among the boys to congratulate them on the victory they had won for

the school, and Mr. Carrier was even more enthusiastic over the success of his charges.

"You've made a fine start, boys, and I'm proud of you," he told them. "Now, don't let down a bit, but keep it right up to the finish of the season."

"We will."

"Trust us."

"We've only begun to fight."

"That's the right spirit," said Mr. Carrier, smiling. "And now to make you feel better, I'm going to tell you that I've just received a telegram that Ridgefield whipped Belden this afternoon by seven to three."

A tremendous shout arose at this. They had counted on Belden as the rival from whom they had the most to fear, and they were immensely pleased to learn that it had begun the season with a defeat.

It was a jubilant throng of boys that made their way toward the school buildings that afternoon. They knew that a rocky road lay ahead of them, but a good deal depended upon the start, and it was a great thing to know that they had the lead on the other fellows.

"Hicksley acted like a game sport this afternoon when he threw the ball down in the box instead of handing it to you," remarked Fred, with whom the incident rankled.

"Oh, well," said Bobby, "you must make some allowance for him. It was natural that he should feel sore."

"That isn't the point," persisted Fred. "A thoroughbred might have felt sore, but he wouldn't have shown it. I tell you, Bobby, you want to look out for that fellow. If you could have seen the way he looked at you while you were pitching."

"Looks don't hurt," Bobby flung back carelessly.

But a few days later an incident occurred which showed that Hicksley was willing to go much further than looks in his hatred of his rival.

It was one of those unseasonably warm days that sometimes come in the spring. Recitations were being held in the classroom of Mr. Leith, the head teacher, and in order to make the air cooler the electric fan had been set going.

The seats of Hicksley, Bronson and Jinks were just behind those of Bobby and Fred, and were in the rear of the room.

The lessons were proceeding as usual, when suddenly there was a crash, and something wet and sticky and evil smelling was scattered over the room. Almost all the boys got some of it, and a large yellow splash showed against the immaculate white shirt of Mr. Leith himself.

Somebody had thrown an egg into the electric fan! And it was a very old egg, as was proved by the vile odor which spread through the classroom.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN UNDESERVED PUNISHMENT

The whirling fan, going at tremendous speed, had scattered the contents of the egg far and wide, and hardly any one had escaped.

For a moment there was a stunned silence. Then a roar of laughter broke from the boys. To them it seemed a capital joke.

But Mr. Leith did not laugh. His black eyes snapped and his face was pale with anger.

"Who did that?" he asked, as he took out his handkerchief and wiped the smear from the bosom of his shirt.

Naturally there was no answer. The laughter died out, and everything became as silent as the grave.

"Such conduct is subversive of all discipline," went on Mr. Leith in his stilted way and trying to get control of his voice. "If the boy who did that will confess, I will take that into account in the punishment I shall lay upon him. But no matter how long it takes, I am determined to find the culprit."

Still no answer.

"Well," said Mr. Leith after waiting a moment, "I see that I shall have to question each one of you separately."

He called them up one by one, beginning at the front of the room, and each one denied knowing anything about it, Bobby among the rest. Then he came last to Hicksley.

"I didn't do it," said Hicksley; "but—"

Then he stopped, as though he had gone further than he intended.

"But what?" queried the teacher sharply.

"Nothing," mumbled Hicksley, in apparent confusion.

"You were going to say something else," said Mr. Leith, "and I insist on knowing what it was."

Hicksley kept silent. He wanted to give the impression that if he told anything it would have to be dragged out of him against his will.

"You had better tell me what you were going to say," snapped the teacher severely, "or it will be the worse for you."

"I don't want to tell on anybody," said Hicksley.

"Oh, then you know who threw it," said Mr. Leith, brisking up like a hound on the trail.

"Yes," replied Hicksley.

"Who was it?"

"I don't want to tell."

"Who was it, I say?" thundered Mr. Leith in exasperation.

"Blake," blurted out Hicksley, as though he did not want to say it but had to yield to force.

Bobby was thunderstruck, and for a minute the room seemed to be whirling around him.

"It isn't true," he cried, recovering himself.

"It's a—a whopper!" shouted Fred fiercely. "I was sitting right beside Bobby, and he didn't throw it."

"Keep quiet, Martin," commanded Mr. Leith. "Blake, come here."

Bobby went forward and stood in front of the desk.

"Why did you do a thing like that?" asked Mr. Leith.

"I didn't do it," replied Bobby stoutly. "I was as surprised as any one else when it happened."

Mr. Leith beckoned to Fred.

"You say that Blake didn't throw it," he said. "Were you looking at him at the time?"

"N-no, sir," Fred had to confess, "I was looking at the blackboard. But I know I'd have noticed it if he had made any motion. Besides," he added in his attempt to help his friend, "if Bobby had been going to do anything of that kind he'd have told me beforehand."

"That isn't proof," remarked the teacher; "especially when Hicksley says that he actually saw him do it. Do you still stick to that, Hicksley?"

"Yes sir," answered Hicksley, who was scared now at the tempest he had raised but had gone too far to back out.

But he carefully avoided meeting the blazing eyes of Bobby.

"Go to your seats," Mr. Leith ordered.

They obeyed, and as Hicksley sank down between Bronson and Jinks, he whispered in a panic:

"Don't forget that you fellows have got to stand by me."

Mr. Leith reflected for a moment.

"Did any one else see Blake throw the egg?" he asked at length.

Hicksley nudged his cronies and both raised their hands.

"I did," came from both at once.

Bobby half rose from his seat and Fred clenched his fists.

"It's not so!" exclaimed Bobby.

"The low-down skunks!" ejaculated Fred.

Mr. Leith quieted them with a gesture.

He was a good man, and he tried to be just. But he had been sorely tried by this breach of discipline, and his dignity had received a severe shock. He could not forget the glaring yellow smear on his shirt front, and he felt that he had been made a laughing stock before his class.

He had always liked Bobby, who had stood high in his lessons and whose behavior in class had always been good. Yet it was possible that an impish spirit of mischief had suddenly taken possession of him, and that on the impulse of the moment he might have taken refuge in denial.

And there was the positive testimony of three witnesses that they had actually seen Bobby throw the egg. To be sure, he knew something of the character of those witnesses, and against any one of them he would have been inclined to take Bobby's word in preference. But he knew nothing of the grudge

the bullies held against Bobby, and to a man of his upright character it was inconceivable that three of them should make such a charge if it were not true.

He pondered the matter for several minutes, while the class waited breathlessly.

"I shall look into this matter further," he finally announced; "but for the present, Blake, and until the affair is cleared up, you are not to take part in track sports or play on the baseball team."

OFF FOR A SWIM

Bobby sat as if stunned. There was bitter revolt in his heart against the injustice of it all. And, in addition, he felt as though he would like to get at Hicksley and thrash him well.

But for the moment he was helpless. The evidence was against him, and he was too proud to make any further protest or appeal to Mr. Leith.

To the rest of the boys, the sentence came like a clap of thunder. They were fond of Bobby and believed he was telling the truth. They would have been sorry to see him punished for any reason. But it was not only the fact of the punishment, but the nature of it, that filled them with consternation. Bobby Blake off the ball team! Where would Rockledge be now in the race for the pennant of the Monatook Lake League?

The lessons proceeded, but the class might as well have been dismissed at once, for only one thought filled the minds of all. And when at last the gong rang, there was a rush for Bobby on the campus, and a buzzing arose that resembled a hive of angry bees.

It was well for the bullies that, sitting on the rear seats, they had slipped out of the door quickly and disappeared. They would surely have come to grief in the present excited condition of the boys.

Fred slammed his books so violently on the ground that he broke the strap that held them.

"Just wait!" he stormed, "just wait! I'll pitch into that Tom Hicksley the minute I see him, big as he is."

"It would have been bad enough of him to tell, even if Bobby had done it," growled Mouser.

"He ought to have his head knocked off," raged Skeets.

"Swell chance now we'll have of winning the pennant," groaned Shiner.

"Not a Chinaman's chance," mourned Pee Wee.

"I can see us coming in as tail-enders," prophesied Sparrow.

"Was such a dirty trick ever heard of?" wailed Billy Bassett, appealing to high heaven, as though even in his grief he was asking the answer to a riddle.

Bobby had had time now to get a grip on himself, and although his heart was hot within him, he was outwardly the coolest of them all.

"Tom Hicksley will pay for this all right," he declared. "Some time the truth will come out and I hope it will be soon. I haven't any doubt of course that he did it himself. Then he got cold feet when he saw how angry Mr. Leith was and fibbed out of it."

"Of course, he'd fib out of it!" exclaimed Fred. "Nobody who knows Tom Hicksley would expect him to do anything else. But why did he put it on you?"

"Because he's sore at me, I suppose," Bobby answered. "He's always hated me since that afternoon on the train."

"Yes, but he's just as sore at the rest of us who butted in, as he calls it," persisted Fred. "It's something more than that, Bobby. It's because you saved the game when he had almost lost it."

"He's never forgiven you for that," agreed Mouser.

"Well, whatever his reason was, I'm the goat all right," said Bobby, in a feeble attempt to put the best face on the matter.

"It isn't only you, but it's Rockledge that's the goat," amended Sparrow. "We'll be licked out of our boots."

"You fellows will have to play all the harder," said Bobby. "Mr. Leith may change his mind when he comes to think it over. I have a hunch that Hicksley isn't going to get away with such a whopper as that."

"I'd like to have him by the throat and choke the truth out of him," snapped Fred wrathfully.

"It would be a pretty big job to get any truth out of that fellow," grunted Mouser.

"What did the old weather want to go and get so hot for all of a sudden?" burst out Pee Wee. "If it hadn't been for that, the fan wouldn't have been going and the whole thing wouldn't have happened."

This kick against nature struck the boys as comical, and the laugh that followed cleared the air somewhat and relieved their excited feelings. But for the rest of the day and evening, there was but one topic that held the attention of any of them.

Bobby felt blue and depressed. He would rather have had any other penalty put on him than to be ordered not to play on the team. The very sight of his glove and uniform made him miserable.

It would have been bad enough, even if he had been guilty of that special bit of mischief. But then he would have "taken his medicine" with as good grace as possible. But it made him raging angry to feel that he had been made the victim of a contemptible plot by such a fellow as Tom Hicksley.

What made it still more exasperating was the fact that he did not see any way to get at the real truth. Hicksley had been on the rear row of seats, and his only companions were Bronson and Jinks, who were just as bad as himself. No one but they had seen the egg thrown, if, as Bobby felt sure, Hicksley had thrown it. And now that they had put it on Bobby, they had to stand by the falsehood. One was as deep in the mud as the others were in the mire, and there was not a chance in the world of their confessing.

It hurt Bobby, too, to know that he rested under a cloud in the eyes of Mr. Leith, who had practically told him that afternoon that he did not believe him. He was a truthful boy and it came hard to have his word questioned.

All the next morning he was gloomy and downhearted. In the afternoon, Fred, like the loyal friend he was, tried to get his mind off his troubles by suggesting that they go swimming.

"Don't let's go to the lake this time," said Fred. "Let's go to Beekman's Pond up in the woods. There's a dandy place there for diving."

It was a little early in the season yet for a swim, but the warm weather, which still continued, made

the prospect an agreeable one. So, shortly after dinner, having received permission to go out of bounds, Bobby and Fred with half a dozen of the other boys started out for the pond.

"Say, fellows," asked Billy as they trudged along, "what's the dif—"

"There goes the human question mark again," interrupted Mouser.

"He's not to blame, he was born that way," said Skeets with large toleration.

"Honestly, Billy," chaffed Fred, "I don't believe you can say a single sentence that isn't a question."

"Can't I?" said Billy, a little nettled.

"There! what did I tell you?" said Fred, trapping him neatly.

The boys roared, and even Billy grinned.

"Well," he said, "I might as well have the game as the name. What's the difference—"

"Stop him, somebody," cried Sparrow, wringing his hands in pretended agony.

Billy looked at him scornfully.

"Oh, let him get it out," said Bobby resignedly. "Go ahead, Billy."

"Shoot," said Fred.

"What's the difference," asked Billy, "between a fisherman and a lazy scholar?"

"Ask Pee Wee," replied Skeets. "He ought to know."

"Pee Wee isn't a fisherman," objected Mouser.

"Who said he was?" retorted Skeets.

"If you're hinting that I'm a lazy scholar," remarked Pee Wee, "all I've got to say is that I'll never be lonesome among you boobs."

"Stop your chinning," said Billy, "and answer my question."

"One catches fish and the other catches a licking," ventured Fred.

"Each one sometimes finds himself in deep water," guessed Skeets.

"No," said Billy. "They're not so bad, but neither one's the real answer."

Finally the boys gave it up.

"One baits his hooks and the other hates his books," chirped Billy.

A groan went up from the sufferers.

"I think that's a pippin," remarked Billy proudly; "but I've got another one that's better still. Why is a—"

"Sic the dog on him!" ejaculated Mouser.

"What's the use of letting him live?" asked Fred.

"He seems to be human, but is he?" queried Sparrow.

As Beekman's Pond came in sight just then, they broke into a run, and Billy had to save his masterpiece for another time.

They found a secluded spot, and with a whoop and a shout were out of their clothes in a hurry. Then with a shiver each took the plunge into the clear waters of the pond.

THE SCAR AND THE LIMP

The chums came up shuddering, with hair plastered over their faces and the water streaming from their shoulders.

"Ugh," sputtered Fred, "the water's as cold as ice!"

"A polar bear would like it," chattered Skeets.

"Turn on the hot water faucet, Jeems," laughed Bobby.

"We'll be all right in a minute or two," remarked Sparrow.

They swam around, racing and diving like so many young porpoises, and in a little while the blood returned to their chilled surfaces, making them perfectly comfortable again.

"Reminds you something of Plunkit's Creek, doesn't it, Fred?" said Bobby.

"Yes," agreed Fred, "only this is a good deal longer and wider than that."

"Then, too, we haven't got Ap here, watching us from the bank and getting ready to set his dog on us," grinned Mouser.

"We don't owe Ap anything," laughed Bobby. "We paid him all up that day we made him walk the plank."

"Do you remember how he looked when he struck the water?" chuckled Pee Wee.

"I wonder if he and Pat have met each other since we came away," said Bobby, as he recalled the scene at the railway station on the morning they left Clinton.

"Ap had better keep his whip handy," observed Fred.

"That wouldn't help him much," returned Bobby. "Pat would take it away from him and wade into him."

They had been in and out of the water for perhaps an hour, when Bobby, who had swum down to where the shore curved a little, suddenly turned and swam back again as fast as he could.

"Come along with me, fellows," he cried, "and don't make any more noise than you can help."

The others followed him wonderingly until they reached the bend. Then, while they hid behind some grasses, Bobby pointed to two men who were lounging under a tree a short distance away.

They were smoking stubby pipes as they lay at their ease. Their faces were rough and unshaven and their clothing dirty and ragged.

"Don't see much to get excited about," remarked Shiner disappointedly. "Just a couple of tramps."

"They're more than that to us," replied Bobby. "They're the very tramps who robbed us in that old hut."

The boys were on edge in an instant. Just then one of the men rose, stretched himself lazily and took a few steps toward the tree. As he did so, the boys saw that he had a perceptible limp.

"And the other one has a scar on his face," whispered Bobby excitedly. "You can see it if you look close."

They looked more closely, and Fred in his eagerness rose a little too high. His red head caught the eye of the man with the scar, and he uttered a startled exclamation.

"Now you've, done it," whispered Mouser disgustedly. "Why didn't you keep that red mop of yours out of sight?"

"Hurry, fellows," urged Bobby. "We've got to catch those fellows before they can get away. Whip on your clothes and let's get back after them."

The boys swam back as fast as possible and rushed up on the bank.

"Who put a knot in the leg of my pants?" came in a howl from Fred as he struggled desperately to unfasten the knot.

"I'd like to catch the fellow who tied my socks together," growled Mouser.

"And here's one of my shoes floating in the water," wailed Skeets.

They had to pay the penalty now of the tricks they had played on one another, and they felt as though they were in a nightmare as they tried frantically to get into their clothes.

"They'll get away sure," groaned Bobby. "Hustle, fellows, hustle! Come along just as you are if you can't do any better."

He led the way, and the rest came stumbling after him in all conditions of dress and undress. Mouser had stuffed his stockings in his pocket, Skeets carried his wet shoes in his hands, while Fred, with one leg in his trousers, held up the rest of the garment in his hand and made what speed he could.

But when they reached the tree under which the tramps had been sitting, they found no one. The birds had flown. They may possibly have recognized Fred's red head as that of one of their victims, or they may have thought that he was one of a company, including men, who might ask them curious and troublesome questions. At any rate they had quickly gotten out of sight.

The boys searched about everywhere in that part of the woods, but fruitlessly. Pee Wee fell into a small excavation, this time barking his shins in reality. But he had no other injury except to his feelings, and his comrades hauled him out without much trouble.

"Well," said Fred at last, "there doesn't seem any more reason for hurry, and I guess I'll get my pants on."

"And I'll put on my shoes," said Skeets, suiting the action to the word. "This stubble has hurt my feet something fierce."

Mouser's socks also took their rightful place, and the boys began to feel more like human beings.

"What would you have done anyway, Bobby, if you'd found them under the tree?" asked Mouser.

"I don't know exactly," answered Bobby frankly. "Of course, we couldn't tackle grown men. But we could have kept them in sight until we met some farmers and had them nabbed. Or one of us could have gone back to Rockledge and got the constable. But we know that they're hanging round in this

neighborhood now, and we'll tell the constable about it and he'll telephone to all the towns near by to be on the lookout for them."

"I sure would like to get back my ring," said Fred longingly.

"Those sleeve buttons would look mighty good to me," chimed in Pee Wee.

"I could use my scarf pin too," added Mouser.

"I don't *much* expect to see my watch again," said Bobby, "but there's a *chance* of finding where they pawned 'em if we can get those fellows arrested."

"There were only two of 'em," mused Fred. "I wonder where the other one was."

"Round at some farmhouse begging for grub maybe," suggested Skeets.

"Or in jail perhaps," guessed Sparrow. "If he isn't, he ought to be."

"He'll get there sooner or later," said Fred, "and so will the rest of the bunch."

The boys hurried back to town and put the matter in the hands of the constable, who promised that he would do all in his power to catch the thieves. But the days passed into weeks with the tramps still at liberty, and the chances of the boys ever getting back the stolen articles became more and more unlikely.

But this did not hold such a place in their thoughts as the race for the championship of the Monatook Lake League, which kept getting hotter and hotter as the various teams tried their strength against each other.

It was a case of nip and tuck. First one team and then the other would forge to the front. By the time the first five games had been played not a single team could be said to be out of it.

But what grieved the Rockledge boys was that their bitter rival, Belden, although it started the season with a defeat at the hands of Ridgefield, had made a strong rally and was now in front with a total of four victories and one lost game. Somerset and Ridgefield were tied for second place, while Rockledge—Rockledge, which had so proudly counted on the pennant—was *last!*

CHAPTER XXVII

A GLEAM OF LIGHT

There was no trouble at all in finding out the reason why Rockledge was the tail-ender. The batting and fielding of the team was all that could be asked for. Both in offense and defense they had the edge on their rivals. The weakness lay in the pitcher's box.

It was not that Hicksley did not work hard. He had a double reason now for pitching at the top of his speed, for he not only wanted to win the glory to himself, but he wanted to show that the absence of Bobby did not weaken the team.

But the trouble with him was that, as a rule, he could not last for the full nine innings. He would go along like a house afire for the first half of the game. Then about the fifth or sixth inning, he would begin to falter, and in some one of the remaining innings would "go up with a bang."

At such times there was no one to come to the rescue, as in the first game that Bobby had pulled out of the fire. Spentz, the right fielder, who knew a little about twirling, had replaced him once but had not been able to undo the damage. In the game with Ridgefield, Hicksley had managed to last long enough to win by one run, and in the second game with Somerset had pitched fairly well, though he lost. But Ridgefield had come back with an easy victory, and Belden had fairly smothered him under a shower of hits to every part of the field. So that the outlook was very blue for Rockledge, and the boys fairly squirmed under the crowing of the Belden fellows whenever they met them on the trolley or in the town.

"If we only had Bobby in the box, we'd be going along at the head of the procession," groaned Fred.

"That yellow streak of Hicksley's comes out in almost every game," growled Sparrow.

"He can't stand the gaff when it comes to a pinch," assented Skeets gloomily.

"A fellow who would lie as he did about Bobby doesn't deserve to have any luck," grunted Pee Wee.

"He's a hoodoo," agreed Shiner. "But what are we going to do?" he asked despairingly. "We haven't anybody else to take his place, now that Bobby is out of it."

Things were at this stage, when Bobby and Fred, who had been on a trip to town, were caught on their return in a terrific thunder storm. They were lucky enough to find refuge in a culvert under the railroad, and there they waited till the storm had spent its fury.

It was one of the worst storms they ever remembered, and peal after peal of thunder shook the earth, while streaks of jagged lightning shot across the sky.

"Scubbity-yow!" exclaimed Fred, after one particularly violent clap of thunder, followed by a blinding flash. "I'll bet that hit around here somewhere."

"I wouldn't like to be near anything it hit," replied Bobby.

The rain came down in torrents for some time longer, but at last the storm abated, rifts of blue sky appeared in the clouds, and the boys started off toward the school.

They were taking a short cut through the woods, when they were startled at seeing a great tree, that had been split from top to base, lying across the path.

"Jiminy Christmas!" exclaimed Bobby. "This is what the lightning hit that time."

"It made a clean job of it," cried Fred. "But listen," he added, as muffled sounds came from the great tangle of branches. "What's making that noise?"

"It's somebody in there!" ejaculated Bobby, as he peered through the green welter of boughs and branches. "Quick, Fred, let's get in there."

With much difficulty, they forced their way through the tangle of foliage, until they were able to see two dim figures crouching in the center of the mass. Their surprise was great and became still greater, when they recognized them as two of the smaller of the Rockledge boys, Charlie White and Jimmy Thacker.

They were confused by their fright, and were whimpering. They gave only broken and stammering replies to the questions of their rescuers, who had a good deal of work in getting them out from the boughs that held them down.

They were finally pulled out to the open air. They were more frightened than hurt, although they had a number of scratches and bruises where the branches had swept against them in their fall.

"How did you boys manage to be caught in there?" queried Bobby and Fred in one breath.

"We were standing under a tree while it was raining," answered Charlie, who was not quite as upset as his companion, "when this other tree was hit and fell over. We tried to run, but the branches caught us before we could get away."

"I thought sure we were going to get killed!" whimpered Jimmy.

"Don't you fellows know that you ought never to stand under a tree in a thunderstorm?" demanded Fred.

"We know it now," returned Charlie; "and you can be sure we'll never do it again."

"Are you much hurt?" asked Bobby anxiously.

"I guess not," answered Charlie, "but we've got lots of scratches."

"Let's see if you can walk all right," ordered Bobby.

They made the attempt, and although they were wobbly and uncertain on their legs, all were relieved to find that no bones had been broken.

"You'll be all right as soon as you get over your scare," pronounced Fred.

"It was mighty lucky for us that you two boys came along," said Jimmy gratefully.

"Yes," added Charlie. "We were held down by those heavy branches, and I don't see how we would have got out by ourselves."

"After this, Charlie," said Jimmy, looking at his companion, "we ought to tell Bobby all we know about the fellow who threw that egg into the electric fan."

Their hearers started as though they had been shot.

"Who was it?" cried Fred excitedly.
"Out with it!" commanded Bobby.

TOM HICKSLEY GETS A THRASHING

The boys looked for a moment as though they almost regretted having let the cat out of the bag.

"Come along, now," urged Bobby eagerly.

"Let's have the whole story," cried Fred.

"It—it was Tom Hicksley," Jimmy stammered.

"I knew it," cried Fred jubilantly.

"Do you know that, or are you only guessing?" asked Bobby, wild with anxiety.

"We *saw* him do it," returned Charlie, who saw now that the only thing left was to tell the whole story.

"We were going along the hall to Mr. Carrier's classroom that afternoon," put in Jimmy, "and the door into your room was open because the day was so warm. We peeped in as we went by, and we saw Hicksley take the egg out of his pocket and throw it into the electric fan."

"And why didn't you tell about it before?" asked Fred.

"'Cause we were afraid that Hicksley would lick us if we did," confessed Jimmy.

"He's so much bigger than we are, and he jumped on us once for nothing at all," added Charlie in self-defense.

"That's all right," said Bobby, who was perfectly willing to excuse them, now that he saw he was going to be cleared. "We all know that he's a big bully and always picking on the little fellows."

"You come right along with me," said Fred, in a masterful way. "You keep out of this, Bobby. I'll have this thing fixed up in a jiffy."

Bobby was perfectly satisfied to leave the settlement of the matter in the hands of his loyal friend, and he went on to the dormitory, while Fred headed the little procession that a few minutes after marched into the office of Mr. Leith.

What went on there was shown the following morning after Mr. Leith had called his class to order.

"Blake," he said, clearing his throat, "come up here."

Bobby went up and stood in front of the desk.

"Blake," went on Mr. Leith, "I did a great injustice to you a few weeks ago, and I want to apologize to you before the whole class. I have found out the real culprit. I know the name of the boy who threw the egg into the electric fan."

There was a buzz of wild excitement in the class, and Hicksley, together with his two cronies, flushed red and grew pale in turn.

"That will do, Blake," Mr. Leith went on. "You may go to your seat."

Bobby retired, murmuring something, he did not know what.

"Hicksley, come here," commanded the teacher. "And you, Bronson, and Jinks, come along."

The three of them, with shuffling steps and hang-dog looks, walked slowly up the aisle.

"Hicksley," said Mr. Leith severely, "you said at the time this thing happened that you actually saw Blake throw the egg. I do not want to condemn you without your being heard, and I am going to give you this chance to tell the truth. Are you willing to stand by your statement, or do you wish to take it back?"

Hicksley hesitated for a moment and then decided to bluff it out.

"I did see him," he muttered doggedly.

"Martin," directed Mr. Leith. "Step to the door and tell White and Thacker to come in."

Fred did as ordered and returned, bringing the two small boys with him.

"Tell me now, boys, what you told me yesterday," the teacher commanded.

They looked fearfully at Hicksley and his companions, who shot threatening glances at them. But they went ahead and related what they had seen on the afternoon in question. The simple story bore the mark of truth on its face and carried conviction.

Mr. Leith dismissed them and turned to the three in front of him.

"What have you to say to this?" he demanded.

They kept silent, with their heads lowered, and after a moment the teacher continued:

"I am not going to say anything more just now to add to the shame you must be feeling. You are all to report to Doctor Raymond in his study at three o'clock this afternoon. That is all for the present."

They stumbled back to their seats, avoiding the contemptuous looks of their schoolmates. And that afternoon at the hour named they had the interview they dreaded with the head of the school.

That interview was short, but quite long enough to make their faces blanch and their hearts quake. If Hicksley had been guilty simply of denying the act as having been done by him, that would have been bad enough, but the punishment would have been lighter. But to try deliberately to put it on another was unforgivable. Hicksley was dismissed from the school and Bronson and Jinks were suspended for the remainder of the term.

Hicksley, boiling with rage, went to his room to pack. On his way down to summon the expressman, he met Bobby coming alone up the stairs.

Hicksley saw his opportunity and plunged heavily into Bobby, sending him stumbling backwards down the stairs almost to the lower landing. Had it not been for a wild clutch at the banister, Bobby would have fallen flat on his back.

All his fighting blood awoke at this unprovoked assault. It was the last straw. He had been under great restraint for the past few weeks while the injustice done him had rankled sorely. He clenched his fists, and as the bully reached the landing he received a blow that drove his head back and chased the malicious grin from his face.

In a moment the two boys were fighting, hammer and tongs. Hicksley was the larger but Bobby was strong and as quick as a young wildcat. Besides, he had no "yellow streak" in him.

CHAPTER XXIX

A WILD CHASE

Not five minutes had elapsed before Hicksley was lying on the floor of the hall, holding his hand to his eyes and nose.

"Get up!" Bobby commanded.

Hicksley did nothing but grunt.

"Have you had enough?" asked Bobby.

"Enough," mumbled the bully, all the fight taken out of him.

He slunk away, while the boys, who had crowded out into the hall at the sound of combat and had viewed with rapture the defeat of the bully, gathered about Bobby, who, except for a bruise on his forehead, showed no sign of the battle.

"Bully for you, Bobby!" crowed Mouser.

"Scubbity-yow!" howled Fred in delight. "That was a peach of a scrap."

"He got all that was coming to him," exulted Sparrow.

"Hicksley couldn't lick a postage stamp!" exclaimed Skeets gleefully.

"He must have learned to fight by mail," grinned Shiner.

"A mighty good job you made of it, Bobby," commended Billy Bassett.

"I wasn't looking for trouble," explained Bobby, "but when he butted into me and knocked me down the stairs, I couldn't help pitching into him."

For the rest of that day and evening little else was thought of or spoken of but the "trimming" that Bobby had given to the bully. But apart from the satisfaction of having Hicksley get what he so richly deserved, a still greater joy was in the hearts of all.

Bobby Blake was back again on the team!

"Now," cried Fred, expressing the hope and belief of all, "you'll see Rockledge begin to climb."

And Rockledge did climb with a vengeance.

The very next Saturday with Bobby in the box and pitching gilt-edged ball they walked all over Belden, not only beating their chief rival but doing it to the score of seven to nothing. The whole team played behind their pitcher as though they were inspired with new life. And from that time on, the Beldenites drew into their shell and did not do so much crowing when they met the Rockledge boys in the town.

But Bobby and his comrades knew that they still had a heavy task before them, if they were to win the pennant of the Monatook Lake League.

Belden had now won four games and lost two. Rockledge was even in gains and losses, having won three and lost three. If there had been many more games to play, Rockledge would have felt much more confident, for she was now traveling faster than her rival. But the end of the season was coming fearfully close, and there were only three more games to play.

"Belden is the one we've got to beat," declared Frank. "We've got the Indian sign, I think, on Somerset and Ridgefield."

As far as Ridgefield was concerned, this seemed true, for Rockledge won the game by four to two, his mates handing Bobby a lead in the first inning that he was able to keep throughout the game. But as Belden also won on the same day from Somerset, though after a harder battle, the Rockledge boys were still "trailing" the school across the lake.

The excitement now was reaching fever pitch, and it broke all bounds the following Saturday, when Belden came a cropper with Ridgefield, being "nosed out" in the ninth by a sudden rally on the part of their opponents, while Rockledge won handily from Somerset in a free batting game by ten runs to six.

"Hurrah!" yelled Mouser, "we're tied with Belden now."

"Bobby has pulled us up in dandy shape," declared Frank. "You're a wonder, Bobby, old scout."

"Just keep it up for one more game, Bobby," pleaded Sparrow.

"Scubbity-yow!" shouted Fred. "I'll bet old Belden is shaking in its boots."

Somerset and Ridgefield had played good ball in spots, but now they were out of the race. Belden and Rockledge had each won five and lost three, and the game that was to be played between them on the following Saturday would wind up the season and decide which of the teams was to win the pennant of the Monatook Lake League.

It was almost impossible for the boys to keep their minds on their lessons, but as there were only ten days remaining in the school term this did not matter to the same degree as it would have done earlier in the year.

But an incident occurred on the Monday following the game with Somerset that gave a new slant to their thoughts, and for a few hours drove even thoughts of the pennant from the minds of Bobby and his friends.

Shiner had been invited to go for an automobile ride by a friend of his family, who was staying for a few days at Rockledge. He came rushing into the dormitory with his eyes bulging.

"Say, fellows!" he gasped, "if you want to catch those tramps of yours, come along with me."

"What do you mean?" his chums asked in chorus, as they made a wild grab for their hats.

"I've seen them," panted Shiner. "But come along and I'll tell you. Hustle!"

The boys rushed downstairs to find an automobile waiting. Beside Mr. Wharton, the owner, they recognized the constable.

"Tumble in," said Mr. Wharton, smiling, and a half dozen boys swarmed into the automobile.

"You see," explained Shiner, "we passed three tramps about two miles from here, and I saw that two of them were the ones we saw the day we were swimming. I told Mr. Wharton and we put on speed, picked up the constable and hurried up for you, so that you could go along and identify them."

Mr. Wharton had started the car the moment the boys were inside, and it was skimming along like a

bird. It went so fast that the boys had to hold on to their caps, and although they were all chattering with might and main, the wind made it almost impossible for one to hear what the others were saying.

In a very few minutes they saw three figures on the lonely country road ahead. The one in the center had a limp that was familiar.

The tramps heard the coming car, and at first stood aside to let it pass. But as it slowed up on approaching them, they took alarm, climbed over a fence and started across the fields toward a piece of woodland a little way off.

Their pursuers leaped from the car and gave chase. The lithe limbs of the boys gave them an advantage over their heavier companions, and they were soon on the heels of the tramps, who turned snarling and faced them.

"Keep off or I'll club the life out of you," shouted one, whom they recognized as the man with the scar.

"No you won't," cried Bobby, defiantly.

"We want the things you stole from us," sang out Fred.

"Jail for yours!" Mouser shouted.

They circled round the men, thus holding them in check, and in another moment Mr. Wharton and the constable had come up and each grabbed one of the men by the collar. At the sight of the constable's star, the other quickly wilted.

The officer slipped handcuffs on them all and pushed them into the car, while the boys crowded in as best they could, two of them standing on the running-board. In triumph, they went back to town and the men were placed in jail.

First they were searched, and, greatly to the boys' delight, pawn tickets were found that accounted for all the articles that had been stolen from them. The money of course was gone, but the boys cared little for that, as long as they were sure that they could get back their cherished personal possessions.

"We're some demon thief catchers, all right," chuckled Mouser.

"He would call me red-head, would he?" grinned Fred, referring to the scar-faced tramp.

"It means good luck for us, fellows," declared Bobby. "Now, I'm *sure* we're going to down Belden."

WINNING THE PENNANT—CONCLUSION

Belden had its own idea as to who was to be "downed," and almost the whole school went to Rockledge with colors flying on the great day that was to decide who should carry off the flag of the Monatook Lake League.

As the teams had each played a game on the other's grounds, it had been left to the toss of a coin as to where the deciding game should take place, and Rockledge had won.

This was a good omen in itself, and the Rockledge boys were chock-full of confidence, as they slipped into their baseball suits in the gymnasium before going on the field.

"We've just *got* to win to-day, Fred," remarked Bobby. "It would never do to lose with all our folks in the stand looking on."

"You bet we'll win," replied Fred emphatically. "If we don't, I'll hunt up some hole, slip in and pull the hole in after me."

Mr. and Mrs. Blake had come down on this last day. Fred's father and mother were also present, accompanied by Betty. And to give the boys a pleasant surprise they had brought Scat Monroe and Pat Moriarty along with them.

The weather had been a little threatening in the morning, but about noon it cleared beautifully. A great crowd was present, for all the towns near Monatook Lake had become interested in the pennant fight, and people came in droves to see the deciding game.

Bobby and Fred went up in the stand for a little chat with their friends and families before the game began.

"Oh, I'm so glad it's such a beautiful day!" exclaimed Betty gleefully. "I was so afraid the rain would come down this morning."

"You wouldn't expect the rain to go up, would you?" asked her brother airily.

"Smarty!" said Betty, and she made a little face at him.

"Fred had better behave himself or we'll say 'snowball' to him, won't we, Betty?" laughed Bobby.

"I'm rooting for you boys to win to-day," remarked Pat, his freckled face wreathed with smiles.

"We're going to fight like the mischief to do it," returned Bobby.

"Put the whitewash brush on them," said Scat.

"Perhaps that's asking a little too much," grinned Fred. "We'll be satisfied with the big end of the score."

Their parents smiled on them fondly and urged them to do their best to win for Rockledge, and the boys went down on the field with their hearts full of determination.

But it was evident from the moment the first ball went over the plate that it would be no easy task for either side to win. Each team was screwed to the highest pitch and full of determination and enthusiasm.

Bobby started out like a winner. His arm had never felt better, and he whipped the ball over the plate at a speed that delighted the spectators—always excepting the Belden rooters—but that made Frank Durrock a little anxious.

"Easy there, Bobby," he counseled from first base, when the first batter had gone out on strikes. "The game's young yet, and you've a long way to go."

Bobby realized the wisdom of this, and made the next batter pop up an infield fly to Mouser at second. Then he mixed in a slow one that seemed easy enough to hit as it came floating up to the plate, but which resulted in an easy roller to the box which Bobby had plenty of time to throw to first.

"That's what you call a change of pace, old scout," congratulated Sparrow, as the nine came in from the field amid a general clapping of hands at the promising beginning.

But Bobby was not to carry off the pitching honors of the game without a struggle. Larry Cronk, the Belden pitcher, was in splendid form, and he had had the benefit of being coached by his brother, who was a student at Yale and a member of the Varsity team. The result of this training was shown in a new "hop" ball that Larry sprung on them for the first time. It came singing over the plate with a jump on it just before it reached the batter that at first puzzled the Rockledge boys completely. Two of them struck out and the third was an easy victim on a foul.

Now it was Belden's turn to howl. And howl they did.

"Bobby's got his work cut out for him to-day," remarked Sparrow to Skeets, as they went out into the field.

"That's just the time Bobby's at his best," returned Skeets confidently.

"Bobby's got that fadeaway of his when it comes to the pinch," added Mouser, "and I'll back that against Larry's hop any time."

Bobby was not daunted by this showing on the part of his opponent. But he knew that he must not slow down for a second. He must put brains in his work as well as muscle, must study and outguess the batters and give them just what they did not want.

So he worked with exceeding care, mixing up his curves and his fast and slow balls so skillfully that in the first four innings only two hits were made off him, and one of them a scratch, and no one got as far as second base. And in doing this he nursed his strength, so that he felt almost as strong and fresh as at the beginning.

"Talk about a fox," chuckled Fred, "he isn't in it with Bobby."

Larry, too, had kept any one from denting the home plate, but he was so exultant over the success of his new delivery that he relied upon it almost entirely. And by and by the Rockledge boys began to find him more easily than they did at first. They had not yet made more than one clean hit, but the bat was beginning to meet the ball more solidly and it was only a matter of a little time before they would be lining out base hits, unless Larry changed his style and mixed in his other curves.

"We'll straighten them out in the next inning, see if we don't," remarked Spentz confidently.

And so they did. Spentz himself led off with a crashing three-bagger to right. Fred brought him home with a sizzling single and stole second on the next ball pitched. Larry tightened up then, and although a clever sacrifice bunt put Fred on third, he was left there, as the next two batters went out on strikes.

Belden's half had been scoreless, so that the end of the fifth inning found Rockledge in the lead by one to none. And in such a close game as this promised to be, that one run looked as big as a mountain.

But by the time Belden's sixth inning was over, the Rockledge rooters were in a panic.

The trouble began when Frank Durrock, old reliable Frank, muffed an easy fly that ordinarily he would have "eaten up." Not only did he drop the ball, but he let it get so far away from him that the batter took a chance of making second. Frank, in his haste to catch him, threw the ball over Mouser's head into left field, and before it could be recovered, the runner had made the circuit of the bases.

The error seemed to demoralize the whole team. Sparrow booted a grounder, and by the time he had got through fumbling, it was too late to throw to first. Spentz, in right, dropped a high fly and then threw wildly to head off the runner, who was legging it for third. The ball went ten feet over Sparrow's head and both boys scored, making the count three to one in favor of the visitors. Rockledge had a bad case of "rattles."

Bobby walked down to first as though he wanted to talk to Frank, but really to give his mates time to recover.

"Play ball!" shouted the Belden rooters.

Bobby took his time in returning, and even when he was back in the box found a shoe lace that needed tying. Not until he was fully ready did he straighten up.

He put on all speed now and disposed of the next batters in order, two on high fouls and one on strikes. He did not want to let any balls go far out, in the present nervous conditions of his mates.

As for them, they were full of rage and self-reproach.

"Three runs without a single hit!" groaned Frank.

"Never mind, fellows!" cried Bobby cheerily. "Go right in now and get them back again. Knock the cover off the ball."

But this was more easily said than done. Once in that inning and again in the seventh and eighth, they got men on the bases, but they could not bring them in. In the eighth inning a rattling double play brought groans from the Rockledge rooters, as they saw a promising rally nipped in the bud.

Bobby had been mowing the Belden boys down almost as fast as they came to the plate. He had brought out his fadeaway now and mixed it in so well with the others that the batters never had a chance. His mates had recovered their nerve and were backing him up splendidly. Nevertheless the fact still faced them that their rivals were two runs ahead.

In the ninth inning, after disposing of Belden, Rockledge went in to do or die. Yells of encouragement came from their partisans as they made their last stand.

"Go to it, boys!"

"You can beat them yet!"

"Never say die!"

"Rockledge! Rockledge! Rockledge!"

But the shouts turned to groans, when Willis, who was playing center field in place of Bronson, put up a skyscraper which Cronk gobbled up without moving in his tracks. Barry sent a hot grounder to short which was fielded cleverly and sent to first ahead of the batter. There was a movement in the stand, as the spectators got ready to leave.

But they stopped short when Spentz sent a screaming hit to center for a clean single. Frank followed with a grasser between short and second that gave him first and sent Spentz to third. Larry faltered and gave Fred his base on balls. The bases were full when Bobby came to the bat.

Larry eyed him narrowly and wound a fast one about his neck, at which Bobby refused to bite. The next was right in the groove, and Bobby caught it square on the end of his bat and sent it whistling over the head of the first baseman. It rolled clear to the right field fence, and before it could be recovered, the Rockledge runners had gone round the bases like so many jack rabbits, and had jumped on the home plate, while Bobby pulled up at second.

The game was over, the game was won and the Rockledge boys were the champions of the Monatook Lake League!

Bobby's comrades rushed upon him, mauling and pounding him; the shouting crowd swooped out from the stand and surrounded him.

"Champions!" "Champions!" "Champions!" they yelled, until their throats were husky and their lungs were sore.

It was a long time before Bobby could get through the crowd to where his visitors awaited him. There Betty cried one minute and laughed the next, in her happy excitement. Mrs. Blake's eyes, too, were moist as she hugged her boy, and Mr. Blake cleared his throat as he put his hand on Bobby and told him he was proud of him.

Fred, too, came in for his share of well-earned praise and the boys were happy beyond words. And Scat and Pat were almost as delighted as though they had won the game themselves.

Finally, when matters were somewhat quieted down, some one asked the boys about their plans for the summer vacation. How full that summer proved to be of stirring and exciting adventure will be told in the next volume of this series.

But just now all their thoughts were of the present. Their school term was over. There had been some unpleasant features, but in the main their experiences had been happy ones.

"We did it, Bobby!" exclaimed Fred joyfully, for perhaps the twentieth time.

"We got there," agreed Bobby; "but it was a mighty hard fight."

"That's what makes it all the more worth winning," Fred declared.

"Yes," said Bobby, "I guess the things that come easy aren't worth much. That's what makes us feel

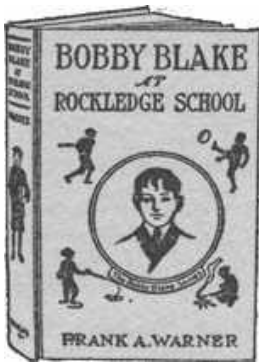
so good about being champions. For there wasn't anything easy about winning the pennant of the Monatook Lake League."

THE END

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