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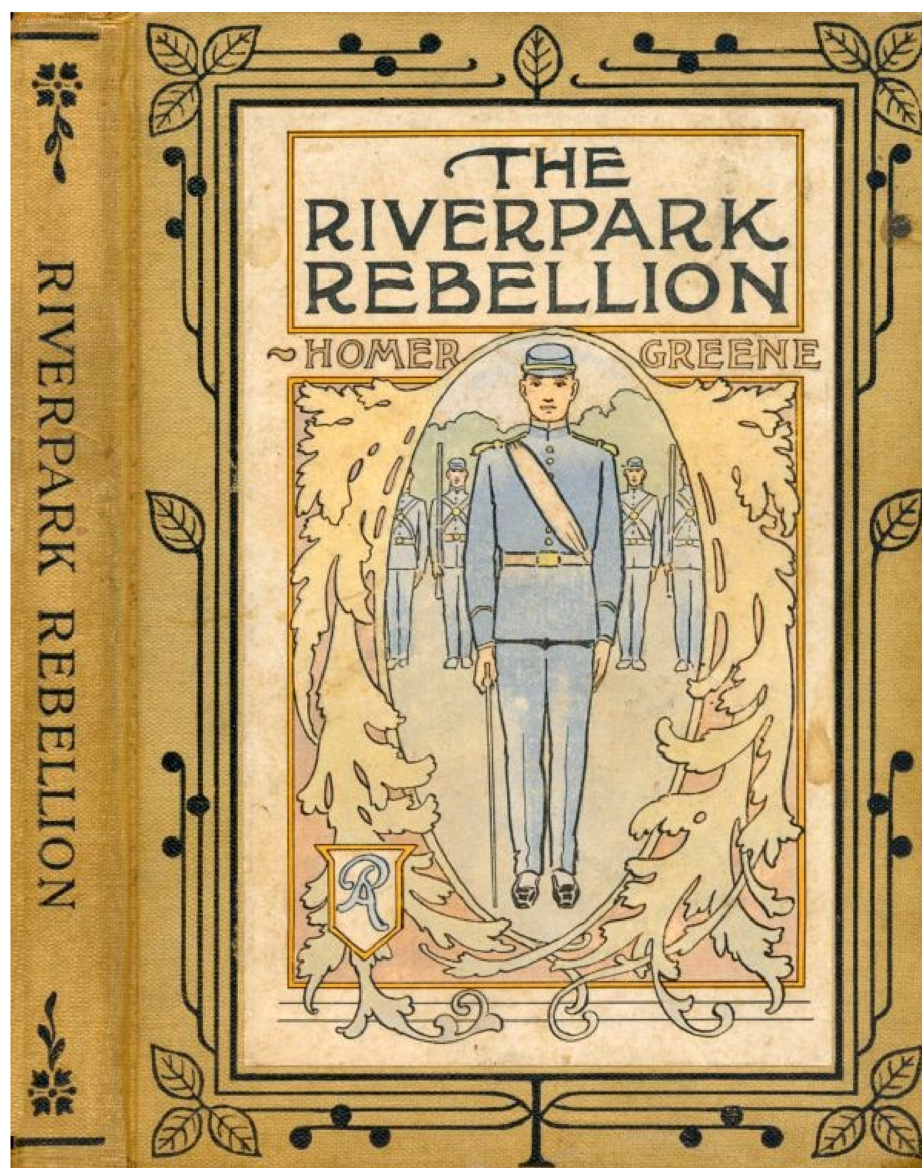

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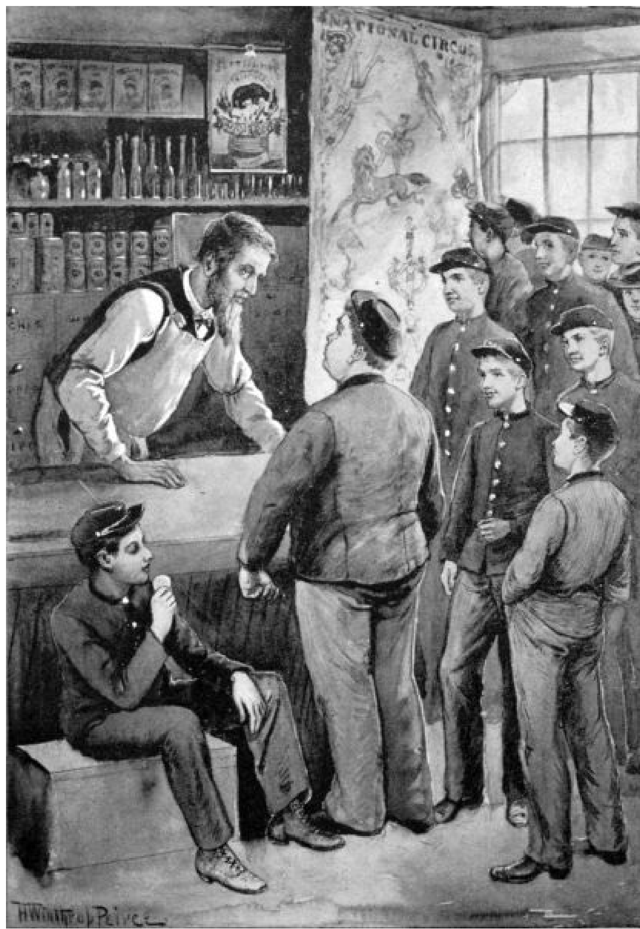

"Anything else I can git for ye, young gentlemen?"

The Riverpark Rebellion

BY

HOMER GREENE

AUTHOR OF "THE BLIND BROTHER," "BURNHAM BREAKER," ETC.

NEW YORK
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This Volume is Reverently Inscribed to the Memory

OF

COLONEL OTIS BISBEE,

Who, in his lifetime, was Principal of the Riverview Military Academy at Poughkeepsie, N. Y., and under whose guidance and instruction, long ago, two happy years were spent

BY THE AUTHOR.

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“Anything else I can git for ye, young gentlemen?”

“These figures are correct. That is my true standing.”

He lay staring into the deep shadows, until it became impossible for him longer to remain quiet.

THE RIVERPARK REBELLION.

CHAPTER I.

A LOSS OF TEMPER.

“Battalion, right forward, fours right, march! Guide left!”

The command was sharp, distinct, soldierly. The first set of fours moved straight to the front with unhesitating firmness and uniformity of step; the orderly sergeant took his place to the left of the set with ease and rapidity. The remainder of the battalion broke into fours, wheeling to the right with promptness and precision, and in the next moment the entire column was on the march.

The Riverpark Academy corps of cadets were the best-drilled troops outside of West Point. The uniform was dark blue; the belts, gloves, and shoulder-belts were white, and the breastplates were of polished brass. The barrels of the cadets’ muskets glittered in the April sunlight, as they marched and counter-marched, wheeled to the right and left, marked time, and halted.

There was a short interval of rest. The boys in the ranks talked freely, laughed, shouted at one another, leaning out from the line to do so, making strenuous efforts, nevertheless, to keep one foot in place, according to the rule.

Major Drumlist, the drill-master, wiped the perspiration from his face, exchanged a few words with the members of his staff, and then called the troops to attention.

He divided the battalion into four platoons, and placed each platoon in charge of an officer, with directions to instruct the men more thoroughly in the art of wheeling. Upton’s infantry tactics, which had recently been adopted in the United States Army, had but lately come into use at Riverpark; and as the excellence of the new system depended largely on the perfection attained in the wheelings, it seemed necessary to give much time and attention to that particular branch.

The third platoon, in the absence of Lieutenant Smeath, of Company B, was placed in charge of Adjutant Brightly, who marched his men to the southerly part of the parade-ground, and began a systematic drill, as directed. The adjutant was a lad of sixteen years. He was well-proportioned, stood erect, and looked the typical soldier throughout. He was well versed in the tactics and an

excellent drill-master, but it was apparent that to-day he had little heart in his task. The men in the ranks noticed his indifference, and took advantage of it. The major came down to them in his round of inspection.

“Lieutenant Brightly,” he said, “you are too easy with your men to-day. Give your commands as though you meant they should be obeyed, and see that strict discipline is maintained in the ranks.”

This admonition roused the lad’s spirit,—not so much a spirit of emulation as of impatience at reproof. As the major passed on to the next platoon, Brightly became more strict; but his severity [10] was now apparently without effect. The loose discipline of the first ten minutes had so demoralized the men that they were awkward and slow, and it seemed impossible to keep them in good alignment while they were in motion. Now the centre would bow out and then in; now the pivot would turn too rapidly, or the flank break away and come crowding up with broken step. Nothing went well. The adjutant became heated, annoyed, impatient, and finally quite lost his temper.

There was one man near the centre of the line who particularly vexed him. He was constantly either too far to the front or to the rear, or breaking touch toward the guiding flank. Brightly had spoken severely to him several times. At last he said,—

“Belcher, if you don’t do better, I shall send you to the awkward squad. You are a disgrace to your company.”

The boy looked out angrily from the ranks, and made as if to reply.

[11] “Stop!” exclaimed the officer. “Not a word! There’s no possible excuse for you. You have eyes; you can see. You have arms; you can keep touch. Now pay attention to your duties.”

Again the platoon was wheeled, and again Belcher pushed out ahead of the line, and broke it hopelessly in the centre. Brightly, who was at the pivot, watching the alignment, was exasperated beyond endurance. He passed swiftly down the front, and struck the flat of his sword against Belcher’s breastplate with force enough to make it clatter.

“Keep back!” he shouted; “keep back! An idiot would know enough to keep the line!”

The platoon was no sooner halted than Belcher stepped one pace to the front, and brought his hand up against his musket at the shoulder with a force that made it rattle, thus signifying his desire to speak.

“Step back into the ranks, sir!” ordered Brightly. “Take your place, I say!” as the lad hesitated. “I’ll do what talking’s to be done, and you’ll obey orders!”

[12] Belcher stepped back, muttering angrily, his face pale with passion and his eyes flashing fiercely.

Up by the color-staff the bugle sounded the recall. The officers marched their platoons to common ground, wheeled them into line, and reported to the major. The battalion was then broken into companies, and these were marched to company grounds and dismissed by the first sergeants.

Lieutenant Brightly crossed the parade-ground leisurely, entered the academy building, mounted three flights of stairs, and passed to his room in the southwest angle. He threw his cap, gloves, and sword on the bed, drew a chair to the window, seated himself, and looked listlessly out.

The beautiful landscape, with the Hudson River in the distance, had little attraction for him. Indeed, nothing interested him that he could see either on land or water. It was evident that his mind was preoccupied, and the look of discontent and discouragement on his face showed that his thoughts were not pleasant ones.

[13] There was a quick step in the hall, and presently Harple came into the room. Harple was Brightly’s room-mate. He and Brightly had roomed together for nearly two years, and aside from little wordy encounters carried on in jest rather than in earnest, they had never had a quarrel. Harple was captain of Company B. He was a good soldier, a good student, a good fellow, and as fond of Brightly as if they had been brothers.

“Come on, Bright!” he exclaimed, as he entered. “Roberts and I are going to get a permit for a walk, and we’re going down to the pine grove. Come along with us; it’s a charming day, and we’ll have a good time.”

“Oh, I don’t care about going out this afternoon, Charley; I’m too indolent. Besides, I have some letters to write;” and Brightly threw his arms up and locked his fingers behind his head with a yawn.

“I’ll tell you what it is,” responded Harple, earnestly, “you’ll get indolent and careless and everything else if you keep on in this way. You haven’t been out of the grounds for a week; you [14] haven’t studied a lesson with vim for a fortnight; you haven’t cared for three months whether school kept or not. I tell you, Bright, you’ve got to brace up. If you keep this thing going much longer, you’ll wake up some day and find yourself—”

The speaker paused for an appropriate word; then snapping his thumb and forefinger high in the air in such a way as to indicate something being sent whirling into space, he continued, “eliminated. Now you know what that means.”

Brightly looked up, evidently annoyed.

"I haven't asked you for any advice, have I, Charley?" he said.

"No, but I propose to give you some, all the same," responded Harple, throwing his red-silk officer's sash across the foot of his bed, and seating himself astride the only other chair in the room. "I've had this thing on my mind for some time," he continued; "and to-day, when I saw you make such a fool of yourself with Belcher—pardon the expression—I concluded to let out on you.

"I can't conceive what you're thinking of, Bright! For a year and a half you were *the* A No. 1 fellow in this school; but for four months, without any reasonable cause, you've stood still in your tracks. You've kept up with your classes because you couldn't help it; but you've sat and moped and growled till you're fossilized and moulded, and the moss is growing on you. To-day you woke up long enough to get into an undignified squabble with a private in the ranks, and now you're going to drop off to sleep again. Brace up, Bright! For goodness' sake, brace up, and don't let yourself go to the dogs this way!" [15]

Brightly looked a little surprised at first, then slightly indignant, and then, with a forced air of weariness, he replied,—

"Don't worry about me, Charley. I feel fully competent to take care of myself." After a moment's pause, he continued with more vigor: "But I will be obeyed in the ranks. Belcher was obstinate and ugly. I lost all patience with him, and I went further than I ought; I admit that, but the circumstances were a sufficient excuse." [16]

"No, they were not. They were aggravating; so much the more reason why you should hold your temper. You remember Colonel Silsbee warned us, when we were commissioned, to exercise patience as well as firmness, and to—"

"Oh, don't quote Colonel Silsbee to me! If he doesn't want me to reprove his blockheads he's not obliged to keep me in commission. He might as well have left me in the ranks in the first place, so far as that is concerned."

Harple drew his chair a trifle nearer.

"Bright, look here! I know what the trouble is; it's all about that matter of the appointments. You ought to have been captain of Company A,—I admit that freely; you deserved it on every account; but what's the use in giving up to disappointment? You have a good thing as it is. There isn't a more showy, responsible, soldierly position in the battalion than that of adjutant. And then there are only two of us who out-rank you, Brede and I; and as for me, you know I'd lay down my sword and shoulder-straps and go back into the ranks to-morrow if it could help you, or bring you to yourself again." [17]

"Oh, yes, I know that. I don't care so much about your ranking me, Charley; that's all right. You're fitted to fill any position you get, and you deserve the best. It simply occurs to me that after a fellow has been here two years, and has stood at the head of the school in study-marks, and has behaved himself reasonably well, he shouldn't be insulted by having such an egotistical fool as Brede is placed over him in rank."

"Well, Brede can't really help being stuck up and silly; it's in him. But he makes a good officer in many respects; he doesn't get easily embarrassed, has plenty of self-esteem—"

"Oh, yes, lots of it; struts around in his shoulder-straps as though he owned the school; is constantly showing his infinite superiority over everybody in general and me in particular. It's a good thing I'm on the staff and not under his immediate command. I wouldn't stand his insolence for an hour. I detest the fellow,—absolutely detest him!" [18]

"Well, I'll admit that he's not a lovable character; but Colonel Silsbee had some good reason for making him the ranking cadet-officer, you may be sure, and it's our duty as soldiers to accept the situation and make the best of it."

"Good reason, did you say? Good reason! Harple, I'll tell you why Brede is captain and I'm only lieutenant; it's because his father is a general in the army and worth a hundred thousand dollars, and my mother has to stint herself in order to pay for my schooling. Now, that's what hurts me; it's the rank injustice of it!"

Brightly had risen to his feet, and was pacing the floor savagely. "Bright," exclaimed his friend, "Bright, don't say that! You do wrong to believe it; you can't believe it. I tell you if it isn't all a mistake there's some good reason for it, and one that does no discredit to you, or to Colonel Silsbee either. Why can't you let it rest at that, Bright, and brace up. Get back to where you were three months ago, and stay there, and don't give Brede and his set the chance to see you go to pieces. [19]

"And there's another thing, too," continued Harple, as Brightly seated himself again in the chair by the window. "I'm afraid there's going to be trouble here before the term is over. There's a kind of uneasiness among the boys; they've been up to a good deal of mischief lately, and the colonel's drawing the lines pretty tight, and they're chafing under 'em. It gets that way every year,—it seems to come in with the spring air; but I've never seen it so bad before as it is now. It wouldn't take much to start a first-class insurrection. If such a storm comes, Bright, I don't want you to get swept away in it. I'd be awfully sorry to see you lose your head entirely."

Brightly appreciated his friend's unselfish anxiety and earnestness on his account, but he was not deeply impressed with Harple's argument. There was a tender pitch to his voice though, as he laughed a little, said he guessed there was no danger, and continued, more earnestly: "But I'm much obliged to you, Charley; you mean well by me, and you're a good fellow. I'll try not to disgrace you anyway." [20]

"All right! I must go now; Roberts'll wonder what's become of me. Say, Bright," turning back into the room, "look out for Belcher! He's breathing out threatenings and slaughter against you. Keep your temper; don't let him draw you into a quarrel,—he's a bad lot. That's all to-day. No charge. Good-by."

"Good-by."

At six o'clock, when the signal for retreat was sounded, a steady storm had set in, and the line was formed in the drill-hall. Brightly came down while the roll was being called, and, in the absence of the major, received the salutes and reports of the inferior staff-officers. It grew to be so dark in the hall that the wall lamps were lighted.

[21] After retreat the boys usually remained downstairs until the supper-bell was rung; and to-night, on account of the storm, nearly every one was in the drill-hall. Some were gathered in groups, some promenaded up and down the hall, some ran about playing jokes on their companions.

Among these last was a boy of twelve or fourteen, whom capricious nature had rendered so extravagantly obese that he resembled a great, overgrown baby. He had a round, good-natured face, a complexion as fair and rosy as a girl's, and a voice that would have done credit to a miss of fifteen. When he walked or ran, the flesh on his body shook and tumbled about like jelly.

Those upon whom his pranks were being played turned on him at last, a dozen of them, and backing him up against the wall, amused themselves by running full tilt against him and rebounding from his elastic body.

Finally they dragged him to a corner of the drill-hall, where a large box stood on end, and hoisting him to the top of it with much roughness, they bent before him in mock reverence, hailing him as "His Fatness the King of Hogland." [22] He beamed down upon them good-naturedly for a moment, and then replied, in his peculiar, falsetto voice,—

"I thank you kindly, my dear little pigs. You shall have an extra allowance of pig-feed to-night to pay you for these marks of high esteem."

The next moment his round face took on a look of feigned horror; he rolled awkwardly down from his perch, and fled with ludicrous haste across the hall, followed by an increased crowd of tormentors.

Brightly stood in a corner watching the rude play, and laughing listlessly. Captain Brede and Cadet Belcher were walking up and down the south side of the drill-hall, conversing together in low tones.

"I wouldn't stand it," said Brede, looking furtively at Brightly as they passed. "I'd let him know he couldn't insult me if I was in the ranks. And he struck you with his sword; why, I heard the blow myself. It's an outrage,—it's a brutal outrage. He wouldn't use a man that way the second time that belongs to my company, I can tell you; [23] but Harple, your captain, why Harple'd lie down and roll over to let Brightly stamp on him. No, sir! You'll never get any satisfaction unless you take it yourself."

Belcher looked across to where Brightly was still standing, as if measuring with his eye the muscular strength of the young adjutant.

"I've a mind to tackle him now," he said. "I can tell him what I think of him, anyway."

"I would; I'd do it. And if he gives you any of his impudence, slap his face for him. You've got a right to; he's no better than you are, out of ranks. He deserves a good thrashing, anyway, and I'd like to see him get it."

They were crossing the hall now, toward Brightly. Belcher was working himself into an appropriate frame of mind for the attack on his intended victim.

"Give it to him, Belch!" urged Brede again, in a whisper; "give it to him! I'll stand by you. I'll see you through it."

[24] Thus encouraged, Belcher loosed his hold on the captain's arm and walked directly up to Brightly, while Brede, standing at a little distance from them, looked on with a cruel light in his gray eyes and a cruel smile on his thin lips.

He did not care so much that Belcher should be protected as he did that Brightly should be punished. He was shrewd and unscrupulous; he was proud and boastful. By his craft he had gained standing in his studies; by his self-laudation he had gained a following in the school.

But Brightly had seen through him, had measured him, had disliked him from the start. Brede knew it, and it angered him. He employed every means in his power to hurt Brightly without incurring the risk of a personal encounter. His triumph when he obtained the ranking cadet-office was great but short-lived. Brightly ignored him and snubbed him more after that than he ever had before, and this engendered hate in his heart.

He longed to see this fellow humbled, subdued, punished, degraded. This was why he was urging Belcher on. [25] He knew that Belcher would probably get worsted in an encounter; he did not care for that if only Brightly were disgraced.

Belcher stepped before the adjutant in a threatening attitude, with his hands clinched at his side.

"I want to know," he said, "what right you had to insult me in the ranks to-day, and to strike me with your sword?"

Brightly folded his arms, and looked coolly at his antagonist.

“I do not,” he replied, “explain my conduct as an officer to a private in the ranks.”

“Your conduct as a bully!” exclaimed Belcher. “An officer who is a gentleman wouldn’t be guilty of doing what you did to-day. You were given the office of adjutant because it was a place where you could do the least mischief, and you wouldn’t have got that if your mother hadn’t come here and begged it for you. You got it out of pity.”

Brightly’s eyes began to flash, but his arms still remained folded.

“That’s a lie,” he said deliberately.

[26] Already a crowd had gathered around the two boys. Some had heard Belcher’s loud words, others had scented the trouble from afar. They swarmed to the scene of conflict, as boys always do, like honey-bees to a field of clover.

They were pressing in wildly toward the two disputants. They had expected a quarrel between them, and now it was on. They were bound to see and hear the whole of it.

Belcher had worked himself into a white heat.

“Officer!” he exclaimed sarcastically; “officer! You’re nothing but a cowardly bully!”

Brightly’s arms were loosed and dropped to his side. His face grew pale. His fingers twitched convulsively, the veins on his forehead stood out dark and prominent. “One more word,” he said slowly, “and I’ll strike you.”

“A hundred words if you like,” replied Belcher, passionately, “and strike if you dare! I repeat it that you’re a cowardly bully and a disgrace to—”

[27] He had not time to finish the sentence. Brightly’s hand came up like a flash; but his stroke was parried and returned. Blows fell from each in quick succession; then the combatants clinched, and the next moment they were struggling in each other’s arms with the fury of wild beasts.

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[28]

CHAPTER II.

CHANGING THE RECORD.

The fight was fierce but short.

Harple entered the drill-hall from the stairway, stood for a moment in terrified astonishment, and then pushed his way violently through the crowd to the enraged combatants.

“Stop this!” he cried, laying a firm hand on each wrestler; but in an instant they had broken from his grasp, and fell, struggling, panting, and still fighting, to the floor.

“Bright!” he called, kneeling above them, and trying to gain a new hold, “Bright, for goodness’ sake!”

The door from the dining-room was opened, and in the doorway was framed the stalwart figure [29] of Colonel Silsbee. He took in the situation at a glance, and strode hastily toward the combatants. The crowd separated as if by magic to let him pass; but before he reached the struggling figures on the floor, they, too, had become aware of his presence, had loosed their hold of each other, and had risen to their feet.

They were a sorry sight. Their clothing was torn, their hair dishevelled, their faces bruised and bloody. For a moment there was no sound in the room; the silence was appalling. Then Colonel Silsbee spoke,—

“Boys, this is disgraceful! I hope never to witness a scene like this in my school again. Lieutenant Brightly and Cadet Belcher, you will both report at my office at half-past seven o’clock. Drummer, beat the mess-call!”

Belcher was led back to the faucet by his friends, and Brightly was hurried up to his room by Harple, while the battalion fell in for supper.

“Charley, I’ve made a fool of myself, haven’t I?” asked Brightly, when the door of their room was closed on them.

[30] “I’m afraid you have, Bright,” was the reply. “I guess you’ve spoiled everything now. You’ve lost your shoulder-straps without doubt.”

Harple took the pitcher and hurried down the hall for some warm water with which to bathe his friend’s wounds. “I haven’t much hope for you after this,” he said, returning. “You simply won’t listen to advice.”

“Well, how could I help it, Charley?” Brightly stood in his shirt-sleeves, waiting for the water. His wrath was rising again at the remembrance of Belcher’s taunting words.

“How could I help it?” he repeated. “A fellow would have to be more than human to stand such abuse. It was simply impossible not to strike him.”

“Well, there’s no use talking about it; that part of it’s over. The next chapter is what you’ve got to look out for now,—the one that opens up at half-past seven. If I thought you’d take any advice

at all, I’d counsel you, when you get in before Colonel Silsbee, to own up, say you are sorry, agree to abide squarely by your sentence, [31] and then go to work and get back to your old place again.”

Harple bathed his chum’s face and neck carefully, and dressed a slight wound on the cheek. Clean linen and a fresh coat restored Brightly to an appearance of respectability, and then the two hurried down to the supper-room.

At half-past seven o’clock the principal of Riverpark Academy sat in his office, awaiting the appearance of the offenders. He was troubled and anxious,—not so much because two of his pupils had engaged in a rough-and-tumble fight, as because the entire school seemed trembling on the verge of disorder, of which he feared that this encounter was the first serious manifestation.

For some weeks he had noticed this tendency toward mischief and toward rebellion against rules of the school, and it worried him. He had had the same experience in former years; but the warmth of the advancing season and the excitement of out-door sports had heretofore served to dissipate disorderly tendencies, and he could only hope that such might now be the case. [32]

Promptly at the hour named Belcher came into the office. A moment later Brightly entered also. They stood respectfully, undergoing with apparent composure the sharp scrutiny of the principal.

“Boys,” said Colonel Silsbee at last, “I did not summon you here to hear excuses for your conduct. There can be no possible excuse for it. It is intended that this school shall be composed of soldiers and gentlemen, and they never descend to such encounters as yours has been. The instinct that impels one man in the heat of passion to strike another is a brutal instinct, and in my school it must be kept down. I intend to subject each of you to severe punishment; but lest I should do either of you an injustice, I desire to hear from you an account of the trouble, and of the causes which led to it. Belcher, you may give me your statement.”

The lad addressed advanced a step and laid his hand on the table.

[33] “It began,” he said, “this afternoon at drill. Lieutenant Brightly was in command of our platoon. I wasn’t able to do the wheelings properly; it wasn’t my fault, either. But Brightly insulted me, and called me an idiot; and he wasn’t satisfied with that, but he rushed at me and struck me a blow with his sword. To-night, in the drill-hall, I asked him why he did it. He answered me impertinently, and I called him a bully. Then he struck me, and the fight began. You came in in time to see the end of it.”

“If you had a grievance against Lieutenant Brightly, why did you not report it at headquarters, that an examination might have been made and justice done? Why did you take the matter into your own hands?”

“Well, I—I thought I had a right to. Brede told me I had a right to, Captain Brede. He said an officer was no better than a private out of ranks. He said I ought to thrash Brightly for what he had done.”

[34] A look of surprise and pain came upon Colonel Silsbee’s face,—of surprise, that Belcher should thus try to lay the blame of his conduct on another; of pain, that the ranking cadet-officer in his school should have given such advice.

“Captain Brede was greatly mistaken,” he said quietly. “Lieutenant Brightly, let us hear your account of this affair.”

“Belcher has given a pretty correct version of it,” responded Brightly, “except that of course he has colored the facts to make in his favor. I have nothing further to say.”

“Very well,” said Colonel Silsbee. “I still see no excuse for either of you. Belcher, you may go. Brightly, you will remain for a moment.”

When the door had closed behind Belcher, the principal motioned the other lad to a chair.

“Brightly,” he said, and there was kindness in his face and voice, “I have had it in mind for some time to have a little talk with you, and the occurrence of to-night seems now to have made it a necessity. [35] You have not, of late, been keeping up to your usual standard in any department; your manner also has been indicative of dissatisfaction and carelessness. I am sorry for this, because I had grown accustomed to thinking of you as one of my first boys. Where does the fault lie, Brightly? Is it with us, or is it with you?”

The lad hesitated a moment before replying. Finally he said, “I didn’t think my standing and conduct here were appreciated. I tried to do very well, but it seemed to me that my efforts met with punishment rather than with reward. Of course that discouraged me, and lately I haven’t tried very hard to keep up.”

“Do you wish me to understand that you were disappointed in the rank assigned to you in the battalion?”

“Well, I thought I deserved to rank higher than first lieutenant.”

“I see. I can understand your feeling. But if a mistake was made, the mistake and the fault were ours, not yours. Moreover, there was no slight put upon you. You were given a very honorable position; it was your duty as a soldier to acquiesce in our judgment, [36] and to accept the situation without question. To give you my reasons for making the appointments that I did, while you are in your present state of mind, would be subversive of discipline.

“I regret this affair of to-night more than you do,—very much more. I should be glad to relieve

you of its consequences if it were possible, not only for your own sake, but for your mother's as well; but it is not possible; my duty to you and to the school forbids it.

"I shall be obliged to suspend you from your office for a time; not long, I hope. It is my wish, also, that your mother may not learn of your disgrace until she can be informed also of your reformation and restoration."

"I should prefer that myself. I think her feelings have been already sufficiently hurt in learning that I was not considered worthy of the promotion to which she believed, with me, that I was entitled."

There was no repentance manifest in Brightly's voice; the spirit indicated by it was still unyielding.

Colonel Silsbee looked up sharply at the boy. "Has your mother made a complaint to you on account of the appointment?" he asked. [37]

"N—no, I can't say that she has. I don't think *she* would do me an injustice like that."

The emphasis was too plain to be misunderstood. The stern look came back into the principal's face.

"You may go now," he said. "And you may consider yourself suspended from office until such time as an order to that effect shall be published."

Brightly bowed, and left the room somewhat haughtily. His punishment was to be greater than he had anticipated. He had expected to receive discredit marks enough to cut deeply into his standing in deportment; but he had not thought that he should be reduced to the ranks, even for a short time. He felt that his sentence was unnecessarily severe; that it was unjust and uncalled for. It bruised his pride, it awakened animosity in his mind, and roused rebellion in his heart.

It was not long after Brightly had taken leave of the principal that Brede was also summoned to the office. He arose, walked across the schoolroom with his accustomed swagger, and passed in through the office-door with the usual supercilious smile upon his lips. The entire school wondered what he had been summoned for, but only Belcher and Brightly guessed aright. They knew instinctively that his visit had to do with Belcher's awkward excuse for his own fault. [38]

When Brede returned to the schoolroom some fifteen minutes later, he had lost something of his swagger; the curl on his lips was less pronounced, and his face was more than usually pale. Every one who saw him knew that his interview with Colonel Silsbee had not been a pleasant one.

Moreover, from that night on he ignored both Brightly and Belcher; the men in the ranks noticed that he grew more quick-tempered and morose; the principal and teachers in the school found that he became less careful of his standing.

On the evening following the fight between Brightly and Belcher the following order was published at retreat:— [39]

HEADQUARTERS, RIVERPARK ACADEMY.
April 30, 186-.

SPECIAL ORDER, NO. 15.

Paragraph I.—Cadet Lieutenant Horace E. Brightly, for conduct unbecoming an officer, is hereby suspended from the office of first lieutenant and adjutant of the battalion, for a period of two weeks, the suspension to date from the 29th inst.

Paragraph II.—Sergeant Major J. R. Finkelton will act as adjutant of the battalion during the period of Lieutenant Brightly's suspension, and all papers pertaining to said office of adjutant will be turned over to him at once.

By order of the Principal,

Col. JONAS SILSBEE.

Brightly promptly gave to the acting adjutant all papers pertaining to the office, which were principally tables showing the merits and demerits credited to each student in the line of conduct.

The system of marking deportment at Riverpark was, in many respects, an excellent one. Every evening, at retreat, one of the older cadets was appointed to act as officer of the day for the following twenty-four hours. [40] It was his duty to make entry in the "officer of the day's book" of such offences as were reported to him by the principal, the teachers, or the cadet-officers, and of such also as came under his own notice in the schoolroom, where he occupied a position at the desk throughout the day.

On Friday evenings it was the duty of the adjutant to go, attended by a clerk, to the office of the principal, and while the clerk read from the book the reports of offences, the principal would assign the number of demerit marks to each, and the adjutant would record them on his list opposite the name of each offender.

He also kept a list of merit marks, a certain number of which cancelled a certain greater number of demerit marks. If the excess of demerit marks reached a certain amount, it made the offender a delinquent for a day; a certain greater amount extended the term of his delinquency to two days, three days, a week, and so on.

The balance against some of the more careless and mischievous boys was always so large as to put them on what was known as perpetual delinquency. Of this last class "Plumpy," as the fat boy was affectionately called by his companions, was a conspicuous and shining example. [41]

A delinquent was not allowed to leave the grounds under any pretext. Besides that, he was confined to the schoolroom during the hour or two of every afternoon when the other boys were at leisure, at play, walking in the country, boating on the river, or visiting the town. This confinement came especially hard on Saturday afternoons, when the hours of permitted absence extended from two to six o'clock, and there was a general exodus from the school of all but the unhappy delinquents.

It was the duty of the adjutant to keep these deportment lists and records in his possession, and to make up from them the tables of conduct that entered into the term reports and determined each student's standing.

The three students who, at the close of each year, bore the highest rank in studies and deportment formed the honor grade, and each of them was entitled to wear the honor-grade chevron. [42]

It was not easy at first for Finkelton to comprehend this somewhat complicated method of keeping the records, and he asked Brightly one day to come up and explain it to him. Brightly replied, somewhat abruptly, that he believed he had fulfilled his entire duty when he turned the papers over, and that he knew of no reason why he should spend his time in the labors of an office from which he derived neither profit nor honor.

But the next day his better nature came to the rescue, and he went up to Finkelton's room to acknowledge his fault, and to offer assistance.

"I was too bearish yesterday," he explained. "I didn't think what a mean way it was to speak till afterward. I'll show you anything you want to know about the records, and be glad to."

Finkelton received him rather coldly.

"I haven't the lists here now," he said. "Captain Brede came and got them this morning to figure out his company's standing as against Harple's. Besides, I won't need your assistance; I got all the information I wanted from another source." [43]

Brightly was surprised and chilled by Finkelton's manner toward him. They had been very good friends. But after a moment's thought, he knew that he merited the implied reproach; and without another word he turned and went away. Ten minutes later Brede came into Finkelton's room, bringing the adjutant's papers with him.

"I've brought back the lists, Fink," he said, "and here's a curious thing in this one that I want to show you."

He spread out on the table the general record and pointed to Brightly's name on it.

"Do you see," he continued, "that some one has scratched out a 25 in the balance opposite that name and left it a 5?"

"That's so," replied Finkelton, scrutinizing the paper closely. "That certainly has been a 25. I didn't notice it before. Do you suppose Brightly has done a thing like this?" [44]

"Well, a man'll do a good deal to save an honor-grade chevron. Twenty-five would have lost it for him, five will let him make it yet. See?"

"Yes, but I can't quite believe that of Bright. Maybe five is correct after all."

"If it is, what was the use of mutilating the weekly lists? You look at them and you'll see that they're changed too. I tell you I believe he's altered them himself. The colonel didn't cut him in standing when he suspended him, and the fellow wants to take home a big report to show to his mother, and make her think he's been at the head of the heap all the time."

Finkelton was rummaging among the weekly lists.

"Don't you think," continued Brede, "that you'd better call Colonel Silsbee's attention to the matter, anyway?"

"Well, I might," responded Finkelton, slowly; "but I don't know that it's my duty to, and maybe —" [45] He paused for a moment, recalling the somewhat strained relations existing at present between him and Brightly; then he added: "I've no objection to doing it, though. I believe I owe him no favors."

"Just so," assented Brede. "I think such a rascally and clumsy trick ought to be exposed. You might do it to-night when you go in to the office to make up the reports. I'll go in with you as clerk if you want me to, and then I can explain how I came to detect the fraud. See?"

Finkelton nodded. He had entered unsuspectingly into a cruel plot laid by an unscrupulous schemer.

Ten minutes later, when Brede left the room, his eyes had a wicked gleam in them, and his thin lips were curled in pleasant contemplation of satisfying revenge. He himself had erased the figures. He had been guilty not only of a mean and cowardly act, but of a criminal one as well. Yet conscience did not smite him, nor fear of discovery cause him to hesitate.

Finkelton carried out to the letter the programme laid down for him by Brede. He took the captain into the office with him that evening to assist in making up the weekly report. At an opportune moment Colonel Silsbee's attention was called to the erased and substituted figures [46]

opposite Brightly’s name and Brede very glibly related the story of his discovery.

Colonel Silsbee was much surprised and perplexed. He could not believe that Brightly had deliberately falsified the record. The lad had always been scrupulously honest. He questioned Brede and Finkelton closely, but they gave him no further information. Finally he said,—

“Brightly shall not be condemned without a hearing. Whatever his faults may have been of late, I cannot credit the fact that he has been guilty of so gross a misdemeanor as these papers would seem to indicate. We will call him in and hear what he has to say.”

The school was gathered in evening session, and unusual quiet rested on the assembly, when Colonel Silsbee appeared at the door of his office and summoned Brightly. The suspended officer laid aside his book, and walked up the aisle and across the open space by the desk with a smile on his face. [47]

He had quite expected to be called. He had felt sure that Finkelton would not be capable of making up the reports. Now it had proved so. They were in a snarl, and needed him to assist them in the unravelling.

The idea seemed to please him greatly. He closed the office-door behind him and advanced to the table at which the principal and the two cadets were sitting. His first glance revealed to him that something more important and more serious than the disentangling of reports had occasioned his presence.

Colonel Silsbee was the first to speak.

“Brightly,” he said, “my attention has been called to the fact that erasures have been made opposite to your name in the reports which have, until recently, been in your possession. It is apparent that large balances on the demerit side have been changed to small ones in your favor. I do not ask for an explanation from you, as that would seem to prejudge you. I only ask whether the balance as it now stands on the general roll is the true one. Your simple assertion as a gentleman and a soldier will decide the matter to my satisfaction. You may examine the papers.” [48]

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[49]

CHAPTER III.

AN IMPERTINENT PETITION.

Brightly was speechless.

He looked from one to the other of the persons present in unfeigned astonishment. Beginning to recover his presence of mind, he took up the papers and examined them. Surely enough, there was the erasure, and there the substitution. The work had not been neatly done, either. The original figures were still discernible.

He laid down the lists, more perplexed than ever. He was sure he had not made the alterations himself, and he could not understand why any one else should have made them,—especially why they should have been made in his favor. Glancing around again on the occupants of the room, he noticed that Colonel Silsbee and Finkelton were looking steadfastly at him, but that Brede sat with his eyes turned away.

In the next moment the explanation was suggested to Brightly’s mind. He knew that Brede had handled the reports that day; he knew that Brede would go any length to injure him. The plot, its conception, its object, its fulfilment, were as plain to him now as sunlight. [50]

A sudden hatred flared up in his heart against the author of so cowardly a scheme,—such a hatred as impels the hand of the assassin. Hot words came to his lips; an indignant denial was on his tongue, a passionate charging of malice and crime against his implacable enemy.

But in the midst of his wrath he took counsel of his judgment, and checked the utterance. What would Brede care for his anger or his arraignment? He would have anticipated that. He would only curl his lips more scornfully than usual, and invite proof of the accusation. That would not do.

Suddenly a new thought flashed into Brightly’s mind. It was the conception of a scheme completely to checkmate his enemy,—a scheme so bold and novel and unprincipled that it swept conscience like a feather before it, and impetuously floated its lie to the lad’s lips. [51]

For one moment he hesitated; then he placed his finger on the altered list, and said: “These figures are correct. That is my true standing.”

“These figures are correct. That is my true standing.”

Brede turned in his chair and started to his feet, gazing upon the speaker incredulously. The lie was so unexpected, so deliberate, so audacious, that it staggered him.

“Why!” he exclaimed impulsively, “I—” Another word would have betrayed him hopelessly. He saw his mistake in time, checked himself, and dropped into his chair in red-faced confusion.

Colonel Silsbee waved his hand toward the door.

“That is all, Brightly,” he said. “The figures will stand as they are. You are excused.”

Brightly bowed, left the office, and returned to his place in the schoolroom. A few minutes later Brede came out also. His countenance had greatly changed. Instead of the scornful smile of self-satisfaction, his face bore marks of humiliation and of bitter disappointment. He shot one angry glance at the enemy who had outwitted him, and passed to his seat. But his books were nothing to him; he had been baffled, crushed, out-Heroded. He smarted and writhed with a sense of ignominious defeat. [52]

The night passed and the morning came, and the days went by; but this feeling remained with him,—he could not shake it off.

To know that his intended victim had been guilty of an offence so enormous that its mere disclosure would bring down upon the offender punishment and permanent disgrace, and yet to be powerless, to see this unblushing liar go scot-free from the penalty of a crime which he did not dare to bring to light, hurt him, galled him, exasperated him almost beyond endurance.

It made him careless at drill, neglectful of his studies, violent in temper. He spoke lightly of rules; he sought the society of boisterous fellows; he fraternized with the ruder and disorderly element. His demoralization was so marked and rapid that it became the talk of the school. [53]

He never spoke to Brightly; he tried to ignore him; but whenever these two met in those days, whether in the drill-hall, the classroom, or the corridor, each felt that the other knew to a certainty the guilt of both.

And Brede, measuring his enemy’s feeling by his own, had no conception of the true state of Brightly’s mind.

Had he known what this young fellow suffered, he might have asked no greater revenge. The lie was scarcely cold on the lad’s lips before he regretted having spoken it. Within ten minutes from the time he uttered it he would have given much to be able to recall it; but that was clearly impossible. He felt that it would only make the matter so much the worse.

His exultation at Brede’s discomfiture was short-lived. After that night it never gave him a moment’s pleasure. He sought to drown the memory of it in idle thought, in boisterous fun, in hot discussion with his fellows; but all expedients were vain. It was a veritable Banquo’s ghost. He lost strength, hope, courage, ambition. Before the utterance of that fatal falsehood he had not thought but that he should soon regain his office, his honor, and his old position in the school. Now he did not even wish to do so. [54]

But of Brede he had scarcely a thought now, except the occasional flashing up of that old hatred and disgust in his heart. They were little more to each other than strangers.

Once they met and exchanged words. It was in the drill-hall, while they were waiting for supper. There was a small boy at the school who was called by his companions “Apache,” or, more briefly, “Patchy.” He had come there from an army post in the far West, where his father, a government officer, was stationed; and it had pleased his fellows to pretend that they supposed him to belong to the Apache tribe of Indians.

[55] Brede was annoying this boy, who liked play well enough so long as it was not too boisterous, but who felt that he was being handled a little too roughly now, and who called, still half in fun, to Brightly, who was passing at the time, to come to his aid.

Brede had not intended to hurt the lad, and would not have done so; but this appeal to his enemy angered him, and he gave the child’s arm a twist that caused the little fellow to cry out with a pain not now assumed.

Brightly had stopped for a moment, uncertain whether to respond; but when the cry came, he advanced a step toward the two, and said to Brede, “Let the boy alone.”

The captain loosed his hold of Patchy, who immediately made his escape, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, stared for a moment in feigned contempt at his adversary.

“I don’t take orders from disgraced officers!” he said.

[56] Brightly answered, trying to be calm, “A person who has been guilty of forging records shouldn’t talk to others about disgrace.”

Brede’s face grew white with passion. “Nor do I take advice from common and contemptible liars,” he responded scornfully.

It is uncertain what would have been said or done next, had not Harple seized Brightly’s arm and hurried him away. He had chanced to notice the two boys in conversation, had hurried across the hall in time to hear the last words, and, acting on the urgent necessity of the moment, now rescued his friend from further trouble by removing him from the scene.

Harple had made it his business during these days to be with or near his chum as much as possible. He felt somehow that Brightly was no longer responsible for his own conduct, and that some one should be on hand to keep him from bringing further disgrace upon himself. In this case, at least, his vigilance had been amply rewarded. He shuddered to think what the result would have been if the quarrel with Brede had gone on.

[57] But Harple suffered much by reason of his anxiety for his friend. It pained him deeply to see Brightly sinking into such a deplorable state; he was beginning to feel that he was powerless to save him. He had exhausted his powers of logic, of entreaty, even of abuse. He could do nothing now except to stand by and extend such aid and comfort as he might. Brightly was still as friendly with him and apparently as fond of him as of old; but he would not listen to reproof or advice.

Harple watched with alarm the demoralization also of Brede. He felt and knew that there were strong and co-operating influences at work on these two long-time rivals and enemies that were dragging them both, surely and rapidly, to degradation; but what these influences were he could not even guess.

Almost every movement made by either was an act of retrogression. Perhaps the change was more marked in respect to the society they chose than in any other way. Boys with whom Brightly had had nothing in common in the better days, and whom Brede had utterly disdained, appeared [58] now to be the friends of both.

Colonel Silsbee’s hope that the deepening spring-time would put to rest the spirit of unquietness and discontent among his boys was not realized. There was neglect of lessons; there were breaches of military discipline, infractions of academy rules, private quarrels, boisterous conduct.

A half-dozen of the older boys had been discovered one day in a secluded nook smoking cigars and pipes, and had been promptly disciplined. There had been an incipient riot in the upper dormitory at night after taps, the participants in which had been severely punished. Half the school was on delinquency, and of half that number the delinquency was perpetual.

The principal and teachers were quite at a loss what course to pursue. One thing only seemed feasible, and that was to draw the lines with still greater strictness, and to compel the utmost obedience by the severest discipline.

[59] Thus matters stood at the close of a beautiful May day. It was one of those languid, luxuriant days on which every lover of Nature longs to be in the woods and fields, breathing without stint air sweetened by the touch of bursting buds and growing leaves and springing grass.

It was after supper and before the time for the evening session. The boys were strolling about the grounds, playing quiet games, or lounging on the lawn. A group of them, however, had gathered near the eastern porch of the building, and were shouting and singing boisterously. Some one had composed a few doggerel verses containing little of either rhyme or metre, and had entitled them “The Noble Army of Delinquents.” It was the chorus of this song that the members of the little group were shouting out with rude vigor. They tired of this finally, and then one, Fryant, spoke up.

“What we want and need, fellows,” he said, “is a holiday. It’s a shame for Old Sil to put us on

delinquency and keep us shut up here such a day as this."

"True enough!" responded Belcher. "Last year we had a holiday long before this time. The old man's trying to spite us because we happen to belong to the noble army of delinquents. That's what's the matter now, and I, for one, don't propose—" [60]

"Let's petition him to go to-morrow," broke in a third speaker. "The woods are splendid now; Beach and Valentine were over the river yesterday, and they said so."

"Yes, let's petition him!" exclaimed two or three at once.

Some one threw up his cap and cried out, "A holiday! holiday!"

In a moment others took up the cry, and sent it out through the twilight. Boys, separately and in groups, came hurrying toward the little party, attracted by the unusual sound. When they heard what the proposition was, they were mostly in favor of it.

It had been the custom of Colonel Silsbee to give his boys a holiday every spring. They usually went in a body to the groves across the river, taking luncheon with them, and spending the day in rowing, in athletic games, or in roaming about the woods. [61]

Such a day could not fail to have charms for any boy; but for these delinquent lads, who were not allowed to leave the grounds, save as they were marched discreetly to church on Sunday mornings and evenings, the very thought of pleasure like this was intoxicating.

The holiday idea was infectious; it spread like a swift contagion. Everybody was shouting for it now.

Some one turned to Brightly, saying, "Here, Bright, you draw the petition; you can do it."

"Yes," cried some one else, "let Bright draw it; he's literary; he can put it in better shape than any other fellow in school."

Now Brightly was not averse to compliments; and in no way was his vanity more easily flattered than by favorable comment on his literary ability, which, indeed, was not slight.

Moreover, he felt a certain grim pleasure in the fact that although he had been suspended and disgraced by the authorities, yet when anything was to be done requiring peculiar mental skill and art, he was unanimously selected by the boys of the school to do it. So, followed by a score or more of them, he led the way to the vacant schoolroom, intent on the accomplishment of their desires, thoughtless and careless of what the result might be to himself. [62]

Hastily scribbling what he considered a good form for a petition, he read it to the boys.

"'Taint strong enough," said one.

"We don't want so much beggarly humility in it," said another. "We've got a right to a holiday, and we'd best let him know't we know it."

"Put it to him fair and square, Bright," said Fryant. "There's no use mincing matters; he's bearing down heavy on us, and we've got to meet him on his own ground."

Thus conjured, Brightly made another effort, this time apparently with better success; for when he read what he had written, they all cried, "Good! that's good! now copy it!" [63]

Six months before he would never have thought of writing such a paper at the dictation of this lawless crowd; but now, with jealousy stinging him, with conscience torturing him, with disgrace hanging over him, he had only his self-respect to fall back upon,—and that, alas! was already following in the wake of hope and ambition, both of which had left him weeks ago.

When the petition was copied, it read as follows:—

> TO COL. JONAS SILSBEE,
> *Principal of Riverpark Academy*.
>
> The petition of the undersigned cadets and students of Riverpark respectfully represents:
>
> That, whereas it has been the custom yearly to devote one day of the spring season to a whole holiday for the entire school, with games, lunches, etc., in the groves across the river, and whereas the time has fully come when such holiday should be enjoyed;
>
> Now, therefore, we, the undersigned, designate to-morrow, the tenth day of May, as the day of our choice for said holiday; and we herewith make known our proposition for celebrating the same, to the end that the proper arrangements may be duly made and the programme carried out according to the usual custom. [64]
>
> (Signed) ______

At the moment when the paper was ready for signature, Brede entered the room.

"Here!" cried a dozen boys at once. "Brede, captain! sign the petition!"

"What for?" asked Brede, surlily.

"A holiday! We're going to have a holiday; sign the petish!"

The captain took the paper and read it.

"Haven't you put it pretty strong?" he asked.

“It’s got to be strong,” was the reply, “or we won’t get the holiday.”

Plumpy, the fat boy, waddled hastily toward the group, crying out in his falsetto voice: “A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a mule!”

“Plumpy wants a mule!” shouted Patchy, hilariously. “What you want a mule for, Plumpy?”

“To cross the raging Helles-py-ont and picnic in the groves of doodle dell,” responded Plumpy, in mock heroics.

[65] “Oh, shut up!” cried some one, but Plumpy continued: “Why, then, without a mule, I’ll swim the raging flood me selluf to bask—”

“Oh, shut up! shut up!” sounded a chorus of voices. “Put him out! Sit on him!”

This last suggestion was promptly acted on; a half-dozen lads pounced on the unfortunate fat boy, dragged him to the floor, rolled him over and over like a bulging barrel, and smothered his squeals by placing their combined weight on his elastic body. But they did not hurt him. Indeed, it seemed almost impossible by any course of treatment to give Plumpy more than the suggestion of physical pain.

Brede was still scanning the petition.

“Oh, come, captain!” said some one at his elbow, “sign the petition. If you don’t sign it we won’t stand a ghost of a show.”

“And if you do,” continued another, “we’ll have a dead sure thing.”

Brede’s vanity was flattered.

[66] “Well, I don’t care,” he said sharply. “What’s the use? If a fellow gets into trouble, all he’s got to do is to lie out of it, and Silsbee’ll coddle him back to virtue. There’s no use trying to be decent here any more. Where’s your pen?”

The pen was given to him, and he signed his name. His was the first signature to the petition. Then Harple was sought; but he could not be found, and there was no time to be lost, so others affixed their signatures without regard to the order in which they came.

Brightly signed the paper, of course. He could do no less after having drawn it. Not that he cared about the holiday; but he had become too weak and indifferent to resist any pressure, or to count the cost of any action.

The evening session interfered with a further circulation of the petition; but before tattoo was sounded there was another opportunity to sign it, and at reveille on the following morning it was again on its rounds.

[67] At inspection a committee of two was appointed to present it to the principal. These two, Robinson and Miller, had been selected on account of their popularity and their high standing; one of them, indeed, was an honor-grade man.

They selected the time immediately after breakfast to approach Colonel Silsbee with the petition. He was in his office, and they went there. They were gone but a few moments. When they came out, they were surrounded by a group of eager questioners.

“What did he say?” “Are we going?” “Did he read it?” They were all asking at once.

“Keep still a minute,” said Robinson, “and I’ll tell you. He took the paper and just glanced at it, and then he folded it up again. He said he’d take the matter into consideration, and whatever he conceived to be for the best interests of the school, that he’d do. He said he’d let us know at the opening of the session. Now that’s as near as I can remember it. Isn’t that about what he said, Miller?”

“Just about. It’s as close as you can get to it, anyway. I tell you what, boys, he looked mighty favorable.”

[68] “Do you think we’ll get it, honest?” asked an eager bystander.

“Yes,” replied Miller, “I do.”

“Hurrah for the holiday!” shouted an enthusiastic delinquent. “We’re going to get the holiday! hurrah!”

The good news spread, and as it passed from lip to lip, the holiday was spoken of as an assured fact. Indeed, many of the boys hastened to their rooms to make preparations for going.

As the long file wound up into the schoolroom at the usual hour for the morning session, the flow of good feeling was manifested by so much good-natured mischief that the officers found it difficult to keep order in the ranks.

The morning was beautiful. Nature was propitious; there was not a cloud to be discovered either in the blue sky or on the bright hopes of the students. Everybody was jubilant. Even Brightly had awakened to an unusual degree of enthusiasm, and Brede was smiling and swaggering with much of the old-time manner.

[69] Colonel Silsbee entered the room, read the Scripture lesson as usual, and offered the morning prayer. Then, seating himself again in his chair, he looked down for a moment on the bright and expectant faces before him. In that look, kindly but stern, his pupils discovered the first cloud upon the horizon of their hopes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ORDER OF THE BLACK STAR.

[70]

Colonel Silsbee’s manner was deliberate, and his voice was very firm as he began to speak.

“I promised your committee,” he said, “to give you my decision at this time in the matter of your proposed holiday. I will say at the outset, that your request, if it may be considered a request, cannot be granted. Perhaps I should leave the matter there, and refrain from giving you the reasons for my decision; but this is an unusual case, and I will take the unusual course of explaining my action.

“There are several good reasons for my decision to deny what you ask. In the first place, it would have been impossible to make the proper arrangements between the time your petition was handed to me and the time at which it would have been necessary to start. Moreover, I am informed that the woods are still too damp to make it quite safe for you to spend a whole day there. Some of you are quite delicate in health, and I should not be willing to allow you thus to expose yourselves.

[71]

“These reasons would be sufficient on which to base a refusal of your demand if there were no others; but there are others, and they are such as to make a refusal necessary simply as a matter of school discipline.

“I cannot—no teacher could—receive with favor a paper couched in such language as is the one which you have presented to me this morning. A holiday in this school is not a matter of right, but of grace. That must be plainly understood. Petitions must be so worded as to imply authority in the principal; if they are not, they certainly will not be granted; they will not even be considered. More than that, the presentation hereafter of such a petition as the one of this morning will be regarded not only as a breach of courtesy, but of discipline, and will be acted upon accordingly.

[72]

“I will take this opportunity to add something more. There has been for some weeks a spirit of disorder prevalent among you, which must be effectually quelled before any favors can be shown to the school as a whole. We have been very patient with you, and have tried to temper justice with mercy. Now I desire to give you fair notice that I propose to be master here, and that the rules of this school, and the orders of my teachers and officers, must be obeyed to the letter. If any boy chooses to dispute this point practically, we shall make it convenient to do without him at Riverpark.

“But while desiring and intending to maintain strict discipline in the school, I desire to be not only fair and just, but magnanimous; and when I discover a better feeling on your part, and an honest effort to live up to your duties as gentlemen and soldiers, I shall most assuredly meet you more than half way.

[73]

“Let this be made manifest by your conduct, and it will not be necessary for you to present petitions; it will be my pleasure to anticipate your reasonable desires for enjoyment, and to indulge them without the asking.

“Now you understand me. I regret that in thus speaking to you it is necessary for me to address the school as a whole. There are manly boys here who deserve only words of commendation. They are the more deserving, because they have maintained a high standing in the midst of adverse influences. I take this opportunity to thank them publicly.

“Officer of the day, you may call the classes.”

The last words were addressed to the cadet-official who sat at the desk. Then Colonel Silsbee descended from the platform, crossed the room, and entered his office.

[74]

There was no opportunity for the petitioners to take counsel together concerning the refusal of their petition until the recess for luncheon at twelve o’clock. The sandwiches were brought up, as usual, in a huge tray, and placed on the desk, and each boy took one as he passed by in the march from the schoolroom. A minute later, in the drill-hall, the petitioners gathered in excited groups, and discussed the situation loudly.

There was general disappointment, and not a little ill-feeling; there were even some expressions of downright anger.

A few of the boys boldly declared their determination to take a holiday at the first opportunity, with or without leave; but for the greater number, the determined words and earnest manner of Colonel Silsbee had acted as a temporary check to the formation of projects involving any breach of the rules.

The recess was only fifteen minutes in length, and the students were soon all back in the schoolroom, where the usual order of exercises was carried out; but nobody remembered a day on which all the recitations had been so poor, and everybody was glad when the afternoon session was at an end.

[75]

At two o’clock came dinner. Drill was from three to four; after that the session for delinquents, and then an hour’s respite before retreat.

During this interval, a half-dozen of the leading spirits of disorder locked themselves in Fryant’s room to discuss plans for “getting even with the old man.” It seemed to be “the sense of the meeting” that a holiday should be had, regardless of the morning’s refusal.

The only questions at issue were, how, when, and where the project could be carried out. No one was quite bold enough, as yet, to propose that the school as a body, or any material part of it, should set out for a holiday, purposely and deliberately, against the will of the principal. That would be open rebellion. But as the discussion and feeling both waxed warmer, the approach to such an end became more apparent.

"He's tyrannized over us long enough!" exclaimed Drake. "If we don't show him what our rights are, an' take 'em, we'll get to be nigger slaves before the term's done!"

[76] "Talk about our being gentlemen and soldiers!" protested another, pompously. "We are, and more. But when oppression grows too severe, even soldiers rebel against it, and the civilized world upholds them in rebellion. I say go! I say run up the black flag! I say fight, if need be, for liberty! I say—"

There came a knock at the door, and the impassioned orator lapsed into sudden and trembling silence; but it was only one of the delinquents, who had heard of the meeting, and desired to participate in it. He was allowed to enter.

Not long afterward another one came, and still others, until finally the room was full of excited and rebellious boys. The latest comer was Plumpy.

"Plumpy," said Fryant, authoritatively, "this is a secret brotherhood, with a well-defined object. Do you desire to join the mystic fraternity?"

"If the court knows herself," answered the fat boy, "she do."

"Very well. Let's initiate him into the—the—"

[77] "Order of the Black Star," suggested some one.

"Yes, Order of the Black Star. Now, John Porcupine Fatness de Montmorency Jones, remove all unnecessary clothing from above your waist."

"Will you allow me first to make my will, gentlemen? 'Let but the commons hear this testament, which, pardon me, I do not mean to—'"

"No! no!" shouted a half-dozen boys, pouncing on him, pulling off his coat and vest, and opening wide the bosom of his shirt.

"Bring forth the ink indelible, and set the seal of our most noble order on his brawny front."

A mucilage-brush was dipped into an ink-bottle by some one, and a great rude star was hastily daubed on the fat boy's bared and ample breast, in spite of his struggles and his squeals.

The operation served to put new ideas into the fertile mind of Drake.

[78] "Let's have a genuine society," he said, "and have a black star for a badge, and every one that belongs to it wear it under the lapel of his coat, or inside his jacket."

The idea was caught up enthusiastically, and in a few moments a dozen hands were busy cutting rude stars out of paper, daubing them with black ink, and pinning them to coats and vests. In the midst of this occupation the signal for retreat was heard; and with an understanding that they should hold all matters secret, and meet again in the same room immediately after supper, the members of the new Order hurried away.

On no one in the school had Colonel Silsbee's address of the morning fallen with greater severity than on Brightly. The strong denunciation of the language of the petition had cut deeply into his sensibilities. Every boy in the school knew that he had drawn the paper; he believed that Colonel Silsbee himself knew it.

He had of late grown partially indifferent to his suspension and disgrace; even the stings of [79] conscience were becoming somewhat dulled; but now came a thrust at his pride and vanity that not only made new, deep wounds, but set the old ones bleeding afresh. It roused within him a spirit of resentment that he had not felt before; it changed his moodiness into reckless obstinacy; it gave him an excuse to take another long leap downward.

He had descended, by degrees, from his lofty height of six months before, one step after another, three steps at a time, until, with this latest plunge, he found himself down among the common elements, among ignoble spirits, mixing with the lawless crowd.

He felt, indeed, the shame, the disgrace, the humiliation of it all; he suffered far more than he himself knew. But he had allowed this insidious disease so to sap his moral strength and weaken his force of character, that he had now neither the courage nor the will to make the attempt to climb back to manhood and self-respect.

The situation had become so manifestly serious that Harple again made the attempt, that [80] afternoon, to reason his misguided chum into a different state of mind. The good fellow was patient, persevering, tearfully earnest; but, alas! he was wholly unsuccessful. The demoralized student was in no mood even to listen with respect. He repelled every kind advance with sharp impatience. He was excited and feverish; he paced the floor nervously; he was fast losing control of his own will.

Harple's alarm increased rapidly and materially. He put on his cap, went downstairs, and walked out alone across the fields, trying to devise some plan of rescue for his friend. He felt that the danger was great and immediate.

Brede was no less annoyed and excited about the result of the petition than was Brightly himself. His name had been the first one signed to it. He felt that Colonel Silsbee's denunciation

had been aimed directly at him, and it roused anger and resentment in his breast also.

Since the night of his visit to Colonel Silsbee's office, after the fight between Brightly and Belcher, his lower nature had come to the front, and had manifested itself in a hundred ugly ways; and since the hour when Brightly's bold lie blocked his path to sweet revenge, he had made no effort to hold his evil disposition in check. Stings of jealousy, hurts of reproof, pangs of disappointment, had so clouded and embittered for him the passing days, that not even his fondness for flattery or pride of position could keep him longer above the level toward which his natural inclinations were constantly drawing him. [81]

And now, this morning, the last straw had fallen; he could bear the burden of respectability no longer. He threw discretion and even self-respect to the winds, and declared his readiness to take part in any rebellious plan for pleasure, no matter how desperate or how disorderly.

So a strange thing happened. When the conspirators met in Fryant's room that evening, according to agreement, both Brightly and Brede were present with them.

Every boy wondered at that; every one knew that they were rivals and enemies, and had been since the first week they were at the school together; every one knew that the exalted positions to which both had attained were the result, in great part, of the ungenerous rivalry between them, of the strong determination on the part of each to outdo the other for the mere sake of outdoing; every one knew moreover, that during the last few weeks the feeling between them had degenerated into downright bitterness and hate. [82]

Yet here they were, ready to join hands with each other and their companions in any wild scheme for the upheaval of discipline and the inauguration of rebellion.

The door was locked, and the meeting began its secret session. The most important thing that suggested itself was a grip, the fashion of which, after much discussion, was decided on. Then a password was adopted. Finally, it occurred to some one to suggest that the society should have officers.

Plumpy spoke up. "I move," he said, "that Captain Brede be the Chief High Muck-a-Muck of this Benighted Band of Brothers." [83]

For once, his words were taken seriously, and by whispered votes Brede was elected chief.

"Now," continued Plumpy, "I nominate Temporary Ex-Lieutenant Brightly for Grand Scribbler of the Lone Goose Quill, Great Splasher of the Blood-red Seal, Most Gorgeous Manipulator of the Golden Purse, and—"

Brightly stepped out from the crowd. "I don't want your offices," he said impatiently. "I'm ready to go with you any time, anywhere, and do my part; but I don't want your offices."

The zeal for electing officers suddenly died out, and excited discussion ensued as to how and when the object of the organization could be best accomplished.

It was finally agreed that the chairman should appoint a committee of five to decide upon that matter. The rest were to hold themselves in readiness to go, at a moment's notice, whenever the committee should give the word, and to follow without question the lead of the chief. Among his five advisers Brede did not appoint Brightly. [84]

The drum, sounding the call for the evening session, interrupted the deliberations of the conspirators; and, one by one, they passed quietly into the hall and down the stairs. The short recess preceding tattoo was devoted to proselyting, and before taps sounded that night, many an ink-splashed paper star was pinned in a hidden place on coat or vest.

In the school at large there was feverish excitement. Those who were not in the secret were puzzled by the general air of mystery which prevailed. Those who were in the conspiracy gathered in whispering groups, and discussed the situation.

Morning came, but the excitement had not abated,—indeed, it had grown in intensity. At the breakfast-table the teachers noted the spirit of suppressed turbulence which seemed to be in the air, and feared trouble. Two of them went to Colonel Silsbee as soon as the dining-room was clear, and gave expression to their fear. They related various matters which had attracted their attention during the previous day and evening, and which seemed to indicate that serious mischief was brewing. [85]

In the mean time, in the drill-hall, down in a corner by the armory, Brede was holding a consultation with his committee. The discussion was an animated one.

"I say to-day!" exclaimed Fryant,—"now! There's no time like the present; we'll never have a better chance."

"But we're not ready," protested another; "we've got no plan; we don't know where we're going!"

"It don't matter where we go," insisted Drake,—"anywhere to get out of this place; an' we don't want a plan,—that 'ud be too much like a regular holiday. It's a hundred times jollier to let things turn up as they will, an' take 'em as they come. I say go!"

"The only way to decide it," said Brede, "is to vote on it. Whatever a majority of us vote to do we'll do, and we can't afford to lose any time about it either. All you who want to take a holiday to-day say 'Ay'!" [86]

There was a chorus of ays. There was but one dissenting voice in the committee, and the owner of that was soon won over.

“Now, let’s have it unanimous,” said Fryant; “put the motion again, Brede.”

The motion was put again, and was carried with a yell.

The other students, many of whom were gathered in whispering groups, or were passing rapidly from one group to another, startled by this unusual sound, turned toward Brede and his companions to learn the cause of it. Fryant broke away from the group and started toward the middle of the floor, gesticulating wildly.

“The time has come!” he cried. “Order of the Black Star, we go to-day!—now—ready—get your caps—follow us—come on!”

[87] For a moment there was dead silence. Every one was too astonished to speak or to move; the order to go had come with such startling suddenness. Then Brede made a dash for his cap. Others ran for theirs. There was a general movement toward the drill-hall door. Talking and shouting began again. Some one cried, “Show your stars!” and in a moment the ink-splashed paper stars were displayed outside of coats and jackets. Plumpy produced one on which he had labored zealously the night before, and which covered his entire breast.

Outside there was a moment’s halt. Brede had turned toward his rash followers, many of whom were pale and trembling with excitement, and cried tragically:

“All cowards turn back! All men and soldiers follow me!”

Then, closely surrounded by the leading spirits of rebellion, he moved rapidly across the drill-ground toward the high board fence that enclosed Riverpark on the south. The rest followed them like frightened sheep.

[88] Some went, realizing fully the enormity of their offence. Others were carried away in the whirl of passion and excitement; and still others, reckless of results, caring nothing for either past or future, went without a thought beyond the desire to go.

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[89]

CHAPTER V.

A HAPLESS HOLIDAY.

Brede, Brightly, and the larger boys leaped up, caught the top of the fence, and swung themselves over lightly, while others unable to do this ran along the base of it wildly, like frightened animals seeking a passage through.

There was a board broken off at one place, and, one at a time, the smaller boys began to squeeze through this narrow aperture. Plumpy tried to get through here, but succeeded only in getting himself wedged tightly in the opening. After vigorous efforts his comrades released him, making a way again for themselves.

When they had all passed through, the fat boy, fearful of being left behind, found a foothold on the broken board, and managed to climb by it to the top of the fence. Here he hung for a moment in ludicrous suspense, sawing the air with his hands, kicking lustily with both feet, and shouting [90] at the top of his voice; then, losing his imperfect balance, he went toppling to the ground on the outside of the enclosure.

The earth was soft, his body was elastic, and he was not even bruised; but his great paper star was ruined beyond hope of repair. He scrambled hastily to his feet, and ran clumsily after his comrades, who were gathered again into a single body, and were making a devious path across the hilly fields. Finally they struck into a country cross-road, and turned their faces toward the river.

They hurried along, as if, by their own resolution, they had not the whole day before them for pleasure. They talked and laughed loudly as they went, but the ring of sincere enjoyment was not in their voices.

Once they were suddenly alarmed by one of their number, who shouted that Colonel Silsbee was coming after them with a horse and buggy. On looking around, they did see a horse and [91] buggy approaching them, but the man in the vehicle was not Colonel Silsbee. He looked wonderingly at them as he passed, and drove rapidly on.

After a little time they crossed the tracks of the Hudson River Railroad, and kept on down to the river. A sloop was lying at the dock, taking on a load of sawed lumber, and the boys amused themselves for a short time running over the little vessel, and watching the dock-hands at their work. Some one proposed a boat-ride on the river; but this was clearly out of the question, as there were but two row-boats to be had there, and these would not contain half of the party.

It was finally decided to go up to the railroad track and follow it down the river, keeping a sharp lookout for anything that might turn up in the way of diversion.

Patchy had lost his cap somewhere, and Brightly tied his handkerchief over the child’s head to protect him from the hot rays of the sun. It gave him a comical appearance, and some of the [92] larger boys began to make fun of him. The little fellow wanted to take it off; but Brightly turned savagely on the tormentors and shut them up, and ordered Patchy sternly to keep it on.

The utter foolishness of the expedition was already beginning to impress itself on Brightly’s

mind. Now that the step had been taken, the breach made, now that it was too late to turn back, he was just coming to a realization of the position in which he had placed himself.

Moreover, the thought that this little boy, the youngest in the school, had been led into evil by the example and persuasion of such fellows as he,—fellows old enough to be responsible,—preyed upon his mind, as he walked silently along over the ties.

He kept Patchy in sight, helping him across the short bridges, and holding him up against the bank while the trains flashed by. Brede went on ahead, talking loudly, coarsely at times, telling what he should do in case "Old Sil" attempted to punish him, or any of his fellows.

By and by they came to a tunnel in the face of an abrupt hill. The mouth of it was very dark, and the small, rectangular spot of light which marked the farther opening indicated that it was also very long. Some of the more foolhardy were for pushing on through it; but the timid ones stoutly demurred, and one frightened small boy began to cry. Then Brightly declared that he should not enter it, nor allow any one else to do so, if he could prevent him.

So wiser counsels prevailed, and the company retraced their steps till they came to a narrow lane at the edge of a piece of woods, and they turned up it toward the highway; but the unfenced woods along this route were so cool and attractive, and the forest air was so sweet, that they all lay down under the shade of the trees to rest.

Many of the lads were still laboring under deep excitement; but the tendency to loud talking and boisterous laughter had lessened, and the country stillness was scarcely broken by their noise. For most of them, indeed, this quiet hour among the shadows of the forest was the only bit of genuine enjoyment that they had during their entire outing. Even Brightly felt the calming influence of Nature on his perturbed spirit.

Brede had stretched himself lazily on the ground, and he and two or three others were smoking cigars, which one of their number had thought to bring. There was no sign of serious thought in his face, nor of genuine enjoyment. He felt that he had crossed the Rubicon of disobedience; he proposed now to indulge his vicious taste for rebellious freedom to the full.

It was Plumpy who called the company to attention by the remark, "I'm hungry. Isn't it about lunch-time?"

The few watches in the crowd were consulted, and it was discovered to be nearly noon. Every one was hungry, and every one said so. Then the question arose as to how, when, and where food was to be obtained.

Some one bethought him of a country store that he had once seen at a cross-road corner a little way down the main road, and it was resolved to go there. But who would buy the things to eat? This question led to the evident necessity of further plans, and Drake's fertile mind quickly conceived a way out of the difficulty.

"Now, boys," he said, "I'll tell you what we've got to do. Everybody's got to turn his pockets inside out, an' give all the money he's got to one fellow. I should say give it to Captain Brede,—he's the head man here,—an' let him be the treasurer, an' make the bargains an' buy the things for us all."

"But," suggested one, whose pockets were evidently not empty, "some'll be givin' twice as much as others, an' that won't be fair."

Drake was ready with an answer to the objection.

"Well," he said, "everybody gives all he's got, an' if he aint got anything, he don't give anything,—not now. An' when we get back, we'll figure up what it all cost, an' then every fellow's got to pay his share, an' you that pay more now'll get that much more back."

This plan met the approval of the company, and all hands were immediately plunged into their owners' pockets.

It was not a wealthy assemblage. There were forty-one boys in the company, and the sum of their riches, which consisted largely of pennies and fractional currency, was six dollars and fifty-four cents. Brede took the money, and the boys resumed their march. They went up to the highway, and turned toward the south. It was a good mile to the country store, and it was long past noon when they reached it. They were all tired, too, and very hungry.

Brede acted as spokesman for the party.

"We're out on a picnic to-day," he explained, "and we want a little something to eat; a kind of lunch, you know."

The storekeeper took a sugar-scoop out of a barrel and leaned on it for a minute, looking at the crowd that filled the space between his counters as if uncertain whether they were friends or foes.

"Well," he said finally, "wha' do ye want? We've got crackers an' cheese, an' that's about all we hev got that'll go around among ye."

"Well, boys," inquired Brede, "what do you say? Shall we have crackers and cheese?"

Every one assented, and the captain turned again to the storekeeper.

"How do you sell your crackers and cheese?" he asked.

"Crackers is wuth a shillin' a pound, an' cheese is wuth two shillin'."

"Well, how many pounds do you think it'd take for us?"

"Oh, I don' know. S'pose you try ten pounds o' crackers an' a couple or three pounds o' cheese; an' if that aint enough, why, they's more here."

"All right, weigh it out."

The crackers were weighed out and distributed, the cheese cut into small pieces and laid on the counters; and the hungry lads helped themselves so liberally that it was not a great while before a fresh supply was called for. Brede paid for the lunch with an important air, and the storekeeper, who had hitherto appeared as if fearful that he was contracting a bad debt, suddenly relaxed into good humor, and put on a more hospitable manner. [98]

"Anything else I can git for ye, young gentlemen?" he asked.

Plumpy responded. "We'd like a little after-dinner coffee," he said soberly, "and some nuts and fruit; and I desire to remind you, as delicately as possible, that you have forgotten to furnish us with napkins and finger-bowls."

For a moment the storekeeper looked puzzled, but the shouts and laughter of the other boys soon convinced him that nothing more was really required.

A straw hat was voted to Patchy, and purchased with money from the common fund; then the question arose again: What should be done next? Some of the boys, Brightly among the number, were in favor of turning back up the road toward Riverpark. They calculated that it would be almost time for retreat before they could reach there, if they should start immediately. This plan might have prevailed had not the storekeeper, anxious to find favor in the eyes of his customers, made a suggestion which met with their immediate and hearty approval. [99]

"Mebbe," he said reflectively, "mebbe you young gentlemen'd like to go on down to New Hornbury an' see the circus. 'Taint but a few mile below here. Them's the advertisements up there," pointing to the highly-colored show-bills hanging from the beams at the back of the store.

The thought of a circus is always a pleasant one to boys, but to these boys on this day it presented a suggestive attractiveness that was wholly irresistible. They shouted as with one voice: "The circus! the circus! hurrah for the circus!"

In two minutes the store at the country cross-roads was empty of human beings, and the storekeeper was standing on his porch watching the shouting and hurrying crowd of boys as they moved along the highway, their faces still turned toward the south. The road was broad and smooth, and the anticipation of unusual pleasure so nerved their limbs and refreshed their spirits that they made very good time toward their new destination for the first few miles of the way. [100]

But weariness overtook them, and their steps lagged before they were able to discern the flags floating from the tent-tops, before even the outskirts of the town came upon their view. Finally Brede, who was in the lead, threw himself at full length on a shady bank, exclaiming, "I'm going to take a rest!"

The other boys were not long in following his example. They were all tired, dusty, and perspiring, and glad enough to get a minute's respite from their toilsome march, even at the risk of being late at the circus.

An embarrassing thought came to Fryant.

"Have we got money enough to take us all in?" he asked. "How much is there left, Cap?"

Brede made a hasty calculation on the sleeve of his white cuff. "Four dollars and thirty-three cents," he replied.

"How much does it cost to get in?" some one asked.

Fryant answered promptly. "Fifty cents apiece." [101]

"Let me see," said the questioner, "that'd be— Brede, you figure it."

"That would be," responded Brede, slowly, marking again on his cuff, "twenty dollars and fifty cents for the crowd."

A look of consternation came upon all faces.

"That settles it!" exclaimed Brightly; "we can't go in." Indeed, he was rather glad of it. There would be some excuse now for turning back toward home. He feared lest the company, by inconsiderate action, should make it impossible to reach Riverpark before night.

"But," said Fryant, after a moment of comparative silence, "there are half of us who are young enough to go in at half-price."

"And they always give schools a reduction," added another.

"And their old show must be half-out by this time, anyway," said a third, consulting his watch.

[102] "But there's Plumpy," said Drake, in whom not even the seriousness of the emergency could wholly quench the spirit of fun. "Plumpy's as big as any five of us, an' it'd cost two dollars an' a half to get him in, anyway, and they'd have to cut the canvas to do it, at that."

Patchy had lately been reading the story of Joseph and his brethren.

"Le's sell Plumpy to the Lishmalites for a freak!" he exclaimed, "an' go into the show on the money."

There was a general shout at this, in which Plumpy joined, and after that the fat boy bore the

added title, “The Freak.”

“Well,” cried Brede, petulantly, “there’s no time for fooling. Shall we go on? What do you say?”

“Yes,” came the answer from nearly every one. “Go on.”

“Come along, then!”

Brede led the way, and the tired stragglers started out once more in his wake. At the very next turn in the road they discovered the town of New Hornbury, and to their ears came faintly the inspiring strains of music from the band. [103] They hurried on, to find that the circus-tents were set up in the southerly suburbs of the town. It was nearly four o’clock when they reached the ground, and some one told them that the show had been in progress for more than an hour.

Brede and Fryant held a hasty conference with one of the managers, who chanced to be in the ticket-seller’s wagon, and explained the situation to him in a few words.

“How much money has your crowd got?” he asked. Brede told him. “Well, give us three dollars,” he said.

Then, as the money was paid to him, stepping down from the wagon, he continued: “Never mind the tickets; come along with me.”

He led the party through the entrance of the main tent, and piloted them to seats in the high back-rows on the farther side of the arena.

There was still a good hour left of the performance, and those of the boys who were not too tired to enjoy anything seemed to derive some pleasure from the exhibition. [104] But poor little Patchy, overcome by heat and fatigue, fell asleep in Brightly’s arms long before the last gorgeous procession had made its final exit.

When the party came out of the menagerie tent, some time after the close of the performance, it was nearly six o’clock. Struggling away from the outpouring mass of people, they gathered at one side of the circus ground for consultation.

What was to be done now? They were all very tired and very hungry. In an hour darkness would set in, and they were ten miles from home. They had left of their common fund only a dollar and thirty-three cents,—not enough to hire conveyances to take them to Riverpark; not enough to pay their passage by either boat or cars; not enough to pay for beds to sleep on here; not even enough to buy for their supper so poor a meal as they had eaten at mid-day. The situation was a serious one. There was no jesting now. Every tired face was sober and anxious in its aspect.

[105] Brede was sullen, and answered questions in petulant monosyllables, or refused to answer at all. Brightly saw the impossibility of getting these foot-sore lads back to Riverpark through the darkness of night, and could suggest nothing better than that they should remain where they were until morning. The prospect was indeed disheartening.

Then one of the boys spoke up who had, hitherto, said very little. His name was Glück, and he was of German descent. His home was in the city of Newburg, about six miles farther down, on the other side of the Hudson.

“I have an uncle,” he said, “a farmer, who lives across the river about a mile below here. If you boys have a mind to go over there with me, we can get a roof to sleep under, and something for supper and breakfast, and he’ll trust me for the bill.”

The suggestion was adopted at once. It seemed to be a sure way out of the present difficulty. Brede alone remained sullen and silent. The party moved up the street and then down to the dock. [106] There was a row-boat ferry there, and, after much dickering, the proprietor of it agreed to take them across the river for six shillings.

Brede inquired privately of a man standing by when the next train would go north, and, learning that it was due at New Hornbury in about ten minutes, he became animated with a sudden desire to get the boats loaded and started as quickly as possible. He took charge of the proceeding, and hurried it along vigorously.

The first boat, in which Brightly had embarked, with the smaller boys, had already been pushed off, and the strong young man who managed it was heading it down the river against the tide. In the second boat the proprietor of the ferry seated himself at the oars.

“All ready!” cried Brede, still standing on the dock; “push off!”

“Aint you goin’ yourself?” inquired the man.

“No; push off, I say!”

[107] The ferryman, with a sweep of his oars, placed a broad band of foaming water between the boat and the landing. Then some one, recovering from sudden amazement, pointed at Brede and shouted,—

“He’s got the money!”

The shout aroused Brightly in the forward boat. He took in the situation at a glance.

“Stop!” he cried to the rowers; “stop! turn back—back—quick—to the landing!”

Brede had already turned, and was hastening up the dock toward the railroad station. The whole party understood the meaning of his conduct now, and every breast was filled with sudden indignation. He was playing the part of traitor and coward at a most critical moment.

The water curled and foamed under the oars of the rowers in the foremost boat as it was backed speedily to the landing. Brightly leaped lightly to the dock, and, followed by a half-dozen others, gave chase to the retreating captain. Brede saw them coming, and broke into a run.

Already the whistle of the approaching train was in his ears, and the next minute it rumbled by him and pulled up at the station. He knew that if he could reach it and get on board, he could protect himself from his pursuers during the minute that might elapse before it should be again under way. He redoubled his efforts. [108]

The bell rang for the train to move. The rear car was not fifty feet ahead of him; but behind him he heard fleet steps and quick breathing, and he knew that Brightly was at his heels.

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[109]

CHAPTER VI.

QUARTERED ON A HAYMOW.

The race was an exciting one. The people who crowded the platform of the station looked on with interest, supposing that both boys were running to catch the train.

At the edge of the platform Brede tripped and fell, with Brightly so close behind that he stumbled involuntarily over the captain’s prostrate body. In an instant both boys were up and facing each other, Brightly’s face pale with excitement and determination, and Brede’s distorted with fear and anger.

“You coward!” exclaimed Brightly, his breast heaving with exhaustion and indignation. “You coward, give back that money!”

For an instant Brede glared defiantly at his captor; then, as the conductor shouted “All aboard!” and the engine gave its first long puff at starting, he plunged his hand into his pocket, held out a handful of small coin and paper currency, and turned again toward the cars. [110]

“Stop!” said Brightly, looking the money over rapidly. “Wait! This isn’t all of it; I want the rest.”

“I’ll keep my part,” replied Brede, darting suddenly in among the people. Before he could escape, Brightly’s hand was on his shoulder, and the demand was repeated. The fugitive turned, almost crying in his rage, and flung a few pieces of paper money into his captor’s face. Then, grasping the rail of the last car as it passed rapidly by him, he swung himself to the step. Some one helped him up to the platform, and he looked back with a curse on his white lips as the train bore him swiftly out of sight. By this time the entire party had disembarked, and were hurrying toward the station. Brightly, after a few words of explanation to the men who gathered about him on the platform, turned back to meet his companions. They had all witnessed Brede’s treachery, and were all excited and indignant to the last degree. They crowded around Brightly, asking all sorts of questions: “Why didn’t you knock ’im down, Bright?” “Why didn’t you kick ’im?” “Why didn’t you hold ’im so’t he couldn’t go?” [111]

Brightly turned on the last questioner.

“We’re lucky to get rid of him,” he replied. “We don’t want him with us.”

“That’s so!” came the response from a dozen voices at once, and the party went down again to the dock.

“Did you ketch ’im?” asked the ferryman.

“We did,” was the reply.

“Git the money?”

“Yes; you shall have your pay as soon as you land us on the other side.”

Once more the company embarked. The sky was heavily overcast, and the south wind that had sprung up during the afternoon had increased almost to a gale. The tide was setting strongly northward; the white caps were riding the crests of the waves; and when they were fairly out into the stream, the boats rocked and plunged violently. The timid ones clung to the sides and the benches in fear, and the rowers labored strenuously to push the heavily laden vessels through the beating waves. Once the rear boat, by some mischance, shipped a heavy sea, and the drenched lads cried out in terror. [112]

The river is narrow at this point, and the time occupied in crossing would not have been very great if the water had been smooth. As it was, darkness was settling down when both boats reached the western shore; and besides being hungry and excessively fatigued, many of the lads were weak from fright after the terrors of the rough passage.

Brightly paid the boatman the fee agreed upon, and, with Glück leading, the party turned again to the south, and soon began to wind up the hill to the tableland back from the river.

It was nearly two miles to Glück’s uncle’s farm, and long before they reached the place thick darkness had fallen on them from a starless sky. They said little as they toiled up the long stretches of hilly road; the time for song and jest and play was long past; the only words that escaped their lips now were words of suffering. [113]

To all of them the physical discomforts resulting from hunger and fatigue were extreme; and

for many of them, especially the smaller boys, the strangeness of the situation and the darkness of the night added a touch of terror. Patchy was crying softly as he stumbled on, holding fast to Brightly’s hand, and it would have taken but slight provocation to bring tears to the eyes of many others.

Finally lights were seen gleaming through the trees a little distance away, and Glück declared that they were approaching the house. He had spent a month there during the preceding summer vacation, and knew the place well. The party waited outside by the gate while Glück went in to acquaint his uncle with the situation, and to bespeak his kind offices. It seemed to the weary lads, who had only to stand in the darkness and listen to the barking and the growling of the dogs, that [114] their spokesman was a long time gone.

Glück told them afterward that he had great difficulty in making the honest German farmer believe that his tale was true. But the door was opened at last, the light shone out cheerily from it, and Glück’s voice was heard saying, “It’s all right boys! You’re to come in.”

They entered the house, and were greeted good-naturedly by the astonished farmer and his still more astonished wife. Places to sit were found for the exhausted lads in the sitting-room and kitchen, and the German host moved around among them smoking a drooping pipe, and exclaiming,—

“Vell! vell! Uf I don’t see it myself, I don’t haf pelieved it! Heinrich,” turning to his nephew, “was ist los’ mit der schule, ha? Vell! vell!”

In the mean time the good wife, with the help of a rosy-cheeked girl, was stirring up flour and grinding coffee in the pantry; and almost before they could realize it, the boys in the kitchen saw [115] the biscuits browning in the sloping pan of the Dutch oven, and caught the fragrant fumes of the boiling beverage.

As soon as each boy had finished washing his face and hands in the basin at the sink, a thick slice of bread and a piece of cold sausage were given to him, and later on, when appetites were well sharpened, hot biscuits and coffee were added to the repast. Every one was satisfied at last; every one declared it the best meal he had ever eaten, and every one blessed Glück and praised Glück’s uncle and aunt without stint.

But no sooner had the food been disposed of and the plates and crumbs cleared away, than many of the boys, especially the younger ones, began to grow sleepy, and wide yawns were visible in almost every direction.

The good farmer and his wife had been consulting together on the practical question of what was to be done with the party for the night. There were but five beds in the house. Quarters on the floor were proposed, but young Glück interposed with another suggestion. [116]

“There’s the barn, Uncle Carl. We could all sleep there on the haymow.”

“Yes,” replied Brightly, “that would do very nicely. We should be glad to sleep there, shouldn’t we, boys?”

“Yes! yes!” was the hearty response. “Indeed we should!” added Drake.

In spite of their weariness, there was something in the thought of sleeping on a haymow in a country barn that appealed to the love of the romantic in these boys, and they caught at the suggestion with great eagerness. Glück’s uncle left the room with a puzzled expression on his face; but returning in a few moments with a lighted lantern, he beckoned to the boys to follow him out into the yard.

Glück arose to go with the rest; but his aunt went up to him, put her hand on his arm, and asked him if he would not sleep in the house.

“No, auntie,” he replied, “I will go with the boys. We must all fare alike to-night.”

“So?”

“Yes. Good-night, auntie.” [117]

“*Gute nacht!*”

The other boys said good-night to their hostess as they passed out of the door, and then, in single file, they followed the farmer across the wide barn-yard. They entered the building by a low door at one corner, went along a narrow aisle between two high board partitions, and came in finally on the wide threshing-floor between the bays. This floor extended the entire length of the barn, and on each side of it, about midway, a narrow vertical ladder ran up between fixed posts, by which one could reach the top of the mow at whatever height it might be.

At this season of the year the hay was greatly reduced in quantity. The bay on one side of the threshing-floor, was quite empty; on the other side the mow reached to a height of only eight or ten feet from the floor. The farmer pointed to the ladder on this side, and said smiling, “You must dees latter goen oop, und you vill de bett finden.”

Drake was the first to mount.

“It’s splendid up here!” he cried. “Oceans an’ oceans o’ room!” [118]

So, one by one, the boys climbed to their strange quarters on the haymow. The last one to go up was Plumpy the Freak. Glück’s uncle looked in amused astonishment at the ponderous, awkward figure, with its masses of moving flesh, as the fat boy slowly worked his way upward.

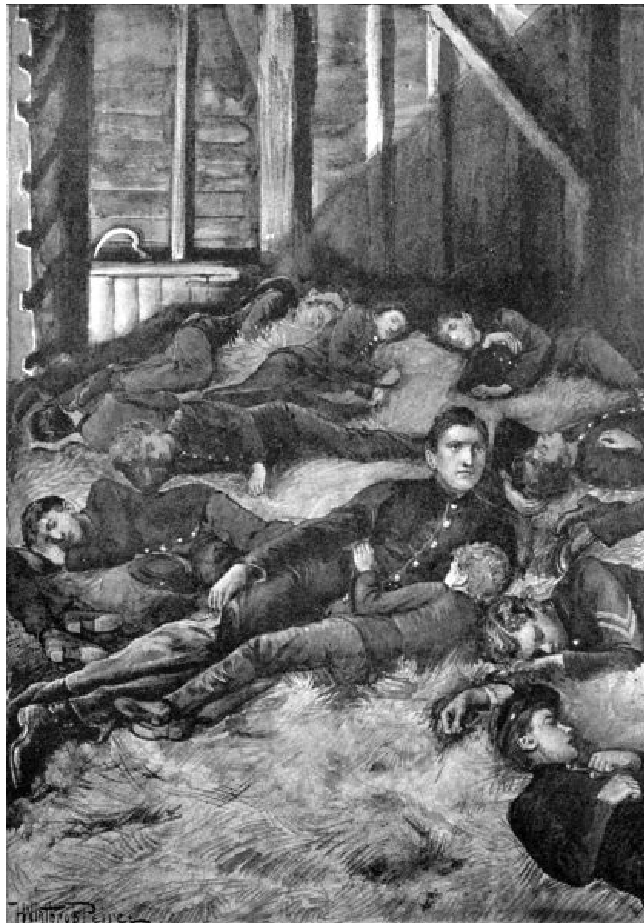
“Vell! vell!” he exclaimed, holding his lantern high, in order to see the more clearly, “uf I don’t

see it myself, I don’t haf pelieved it.”

Hanging the lantern on a wooden pin in the framework, and cautioning the boys not to disturb it, and not to strike a match nor make a fire of any kind in the barn, the farmer responded to the chorus of good-nights from the mow, and made his way through the darkness, back across the barnyard to his house. On almost any other occasion there would have been an unlimited amount of horse-play, before these boys could have settled themselves for the night and gone to sleep. But now all the boys were too weary to be gay, and in less than twenty minutes from the time of the mounting of the ladder the whole company was asleep. [119]

Yet not the whole company. Brightly closed his eyes, but sleep would not come to him. In this strange place, in this hour of quiet, with only the heavy breathing around him to break the stillness; with only the dim light of the lantern to make partly visible and wholly weird the huge timbers and vast spaces of the great barn’s interior,—thought took possession of his mind and drove slumber from his eyelids. Regret assailed him; conscience awakened, and began again her vigorous reproach.

He lay staring into the deep shadows among the tie-beams and rafters until it became impossible for him longer to remain quiet. Gently disengaging himself from Patchy’s arm, which the child had thrown across his protector’s breast at the very moment when sleep conquered him, Brightly arose from his bed of hay, slid softly to the ladder, and crept down it to the floor of the barn.



He lay staring into the deep shadows, until it became impossible for him longer to remain quiet.

[120] The carpet of straw that covered the floor-planks deadened the sound of his footsteps, and he was able to walk up and down the entire length of the building without in any way disturbing the sleepers on the mow. Thus walking, he gave himself up to thought,—bitter, laborious, regretful thought.

He went back over the entire history of his troubles at Riverpark, beginning with the appointments six months before, and culminating in this night of adventure and suffering.

With that brief review he recognized his error,—an error founded on jealousy, nurtured in selfish pride, and fed and fostered with a lie. Colonel Silsbee had sought to make it plain to him, but without success; Harple, with all the earnestness of friendship, had brought it up in vain before his mind and conscience.

But now, this night, in this strange place, his eyes were opened, and he saw. One sweep of his own hand at last had brushed away the clinging cobwebs, and the full extent of his folly and guilt lay bare before him.

[121] But it was of no use now to think of what might have been. The past was beyond recall. It would lie forever behind him, a great shadow of disgrace and humiliation, which only the long years could lessen.

It was the future of which he must now think. What should that be? What should he do to-morrow, next day, next week? Could he ever retrieve the disasters he had brought upon himself?

Was it possible for him to begin again at the lowest round of the ladder and toil back up into manhood?

Back and forth the young penitent walked, up and down, dashing a tear from his face now and then, never halting in his march. The minutes grew into hours; but the sleepers on the mow slept on, unconscious of the agony below them, knowing nothing of the storm that raged in their companion’s heart. But when the storm passed, the atmosphere it left was clean and pure; and when, in the small hours of the morning, the lad climbed up again to his bed of hay, his mind was fixed, and his heart was set. After that, no power could be strong enough to move him from the path that he had marked out for his feet to follow. [122]

It was late on the following morning before the guests at the farmer’s barn descended the vertical ladder to the floor. They brushed the hay-seed from their clothing and the hay-dust from their eyes, and went over, in little groups, to the farm-house. Glück’s aunt had prepared for them a breakfast similar to the supper of the night before, only a little better and in greater variety, and they partook of it heartily and thankfully.

The strong south wind had brought up, during the night, a storm of rain, and as soon as the lads had done eating, they retired again to the shelter of the barn.

Brightly was the last to return from breakfast, and when he entered the barn he found that the boys were all waiting for him.

“We’ve agreed to leave it to you, Bright,” said one, “what we shall do. We’ve got to do something, that’s certain. To my mind we’re in a pretty bad fix.” [123]

Brightly stood with his back to the doorpost, facing the assembly.

“I’ve been thinking the matter over a little, boys,” he replied, “and talking with Glück’s uncle about it. We’ve got to get back to Riverpark to-day some way; that’s plain, isn’t it?”

They all assented.

“Well, we couldn’t find wagons enough here to carry us back if we had the money to hire them; we couldn’t pay our way on the cars if we were to cross the river; so I don’t know of any better plan than to go as we came,—on foot. We have enough money to pay our passage across the river, and once on the other side we can get up to Riverpark easily enough. It will be a long march and a tiresome one, and will take the better part of the day; but it’s the best plan I can think of. If anybody has a better one, let’s have it.”

No one could suggest anything better; and, after a minute’s awkward pause, Brightly continued, somewhat hesitatingly at first, but with increasing firmness and earnestness,— [124]

“Now that I’m talking, I may as well tell you what I think of this whole business. I think not only that we’ve made fools of ourselves, but that it’s a good deal worse than that; and I believe we’ve got some pretty serious matters to face when we get back. I don’t know what the colonel will do. I shouldn’t be surprised at anything in the way of punishment; I’m sure we deserve all that we shall get. But if he lets us stay at Riverpark, I think we ought to be very thankful, and very humble, too, and take whatever comes to us, and bear it like men. We’ve treated the colonel very shabbily; now let’s try and make it up to him as fast and as far as we can.”

Everybody looked a little ashamed when the speaker stopped, but no one said a word.

“And before we go,” continued Brightly, “I think it’s due to these kind people who have fed and sheltered us, that we should express our thanks to them in some formal way. They’ve certainly treated us very kindly indeed.” [125]

“That’s so,” said Drake, earnestly; “and I move that Bright and Glück go over to the house an’ tell ’em so, as the opinion of the crowd.”

The motion was unanimously carried.

“You can’t make it any too strong, fellows,” said one of the party; “tell ’em we’ll never forget it of ’em, never.”

When the two boys came back there were traces of tears in their eyes. Something that the good people had said or done had made them cry.

After a little Glück’s uncle came out with the basket of sandwiches that they were to carry with them for their lunch. The rain had ceased falling for a time, and they thought it best to start.

Brightly formed them in ranks, assigning to places of command such officers as were in the party.

“We can do better in marching order, boys,” he said; “we can make better time, and keep together better. Now, then, are you all ready? Forward, march!”

They moved out into the road in good form and with soldierly precision; but when they came in front of the large white farm-house, the command was given to them to halt. [126]

“Right face!”

They turned as one man.

“Three cheers for Glück’s uncle and aunt!”

“*Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!*”

They were given with a will, and a rousing tiger added.

“Left face! Forward, march!”

The farmer gazed after the retreating column in open-mouthed wonder and admiration.

“Vell! vell!” he exclaimed to his wife, as the company vanished from his sight around a curve in the road, “ven somepody told me dees I don’t haf pelieved it.”

But it was a sorry band of soldiers. The first mile of muddy road wearied them, the second was discouraging, the third brought suffering. They stopped by the roadside many times to rest. Once they took refuge in an open barn from the pelting rain. They were drenched, ragged, splashed with mud, footsore, weak from hunger and fatigue. It took all of Brightly’s powers of command, of logic, of entreaty, of encouragement, to hold them to their places and keep them moving. [127]

But he did it. The hours passed, the wind grew chill, the weariness increased; but every step brought them nearer and yet nearer to the longed for destination,—the home they had so lightly and recklessly left in the sunshine of the day before.

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CHAPTER VII.

THE RETURN OF THE FUGITIVES.

On the morning of the departure of the rebels from Riverpark, Mr. Graydon, one of the teachers, happening to stand at the window of his recitation-room, saw the boys as they ran to the fence, leaped over, and passed into the fields beyond. He was too greatly astonished by the act to realize at once what it meant. Then it occurred to him that these lads had broken into open rebellion, and were about to take the holiday that had been denied them by the principal. He hurried across the schoolroom to Colonel Silsbee’s office, and entered it in a state of great excitement.

“They have gone!” he exclaimed. “The boys—forty or fifty of them—have leaped the south fence, and are hurrying across the fields into the country!”

Colonel Silsbee started from his chair, and the blood rushed violently to his face. [129]

“Is it possible!” he exclaimed.

“Yes; I just saw them from my window. If you’ll step this way, you can see them. They’re not yet out of sight.”

“I prefer not to see them,” said the principal, sinking back into his chair. The blood had already receded, and left an unusual pallor on his face.

“I didn’t know but you might want some of us to hurry out and intercept their flight,” continued Mr. Graydon, earnestly.

“No, I don’t think that would be wise. Let them go; they’ll repent of it sooner if allowed to take their own course. I’m sorry, very sorry. It’s an almost unpardonable offence.”

Other teachers now came in from the hall, and Colonel Silsbee continued: “Our policy, gentlemen, will be to conduct the school as usual, and to take no notice of the affair until the boys return. They will doubtless be with us again before night, and then we will consult as to what shall be done. Mr. Graydon, will you learn if the drummer has gone, and if so, will you find some one to beat the school-call?” [130]

Mr. Graydon hurried away, and, after a few more words, the other teachers passed to their respective rooms.

In the mean time there was the most intense excitement among the boys who had remained. Some of them had gone to the highest windows of the building to watch the fleeing rebels; others were examining the fence where the runaways had leaped over or crawled through; and still others were gathered in the hall and about the grounds, discussing the marvellous event with bated breath.

At the usual hour the school-call was beaten on the drum; the remnant of the battalion formed and passed into the schoolroom, and Colonel Silsbee came in, book in hand, as was his custom, to conduct the morning service. He took his seat at the desk, laid his book down in front of him, and looked around over the half-empty benches. He was taking note of the absentees, trying to learn who of his soldiers had so betrayed his trust in them as to rise in open revolt against his rule. [131]

He cast his eyes toward Brede’s chair; it was empty. Those who were watching him saw a deeper compression of his lips. Harple was in his accustomed place; he was glad of that,—he had placed much confidence in Harple. And Brightly—Brightly was missing. This seemed to give him much pain; his pale face grew perceptibly paler.

So his gaze went from one seat to another. The boys thought he would never have done looking them over. They saw that he was suffering; they feared that he was trying to suppress intense anger; and they scarcely breathed until his eyes fell back upon his book, and he took it up and opened it as usual.

He looked up again before he began to read, and his lips parted as if he was about to speak; but apparently he thought better of it, and, after a moment’s silence, went on with the morning

[132]

Scripture lesson and prayer. After this he went back to his office, and the classes were called. None of the teachers made reference to the revolt, and the morning dragged by with exasperating slowness.

At lunch-time the boys almost darted from the ranks to form into excited and whispering groups. Where had the fugitives gone, and what punishment would they suffer on their return? These were the topics of discussion.

At dinner-time the excitement was intense, but not boisterous. The rebellion and flight were spoken of in hushed tones. The whole thing was so desperate and revolutionary.

There were many who looked out occasionally across the fields by which the runaways went, half-expecting to see them come straying back in time for dinner; but the dinner-hour passed, and they did not come. The afternoon drill went on awkwardly. It was difficult to arrange the squads in the absence of so many men and officers.

[133] At retreat thirty-seven answered the roll-call. Supper was eaten in haste, and then every one went out to the best points on the grounds, or gathered in the south windows, to watch for the return of the holiday-seekers. No one dreamed that they would not come back before nightfall. There were several false alarms, especially as twilight came on, and objects at a distance grew indistinct; but the fugitives were watched for in vain.

Colonel Silsbee began to be anxious. He had thought it best not to follow the erring lads, but to let them return at will. Consequently he had sent no messengers for them, and no messages to them. He preferred to deal with them after they had voluntarily returned to his authority.

But now night was coming on, and they were still absent, and there were small boys among them who might be harmed by the unusual exposure. He had heard of them in the afternoon,—that they were on the high-road going toward New Hornbury. He thought they would probably return in the same way, and he sent a team with a double wagon down to meet them, with [134] instructions that certain of the smaller boys should be brought back in it.

Night came; the call for the evening session was sounded, and again only the boys who had remained at home filed into their places in the schoolroom.

Colonel Silsbee came in and took his place at the desk as usual. The look of anger which the boys thought they had seen on his face in the morning had now given way to one of anxiety and sadness. He looked down again on the empty chairs with perceptible emotion.

“To you who have remained faithful,” he said, addressing the boys, “it is perhaps right that I should say something of what has occurred. You doubtless agree with me that your companions who are absent from us to-night have made a grievous mistake. For those younger boys who have been led away thoughtlessly into this folly I have much anxiety and pity; but for those who are older, and who ought to be wiser, I know of no excuse. There must come a day of retribution for them, and their punishment will be severe. Some of these young men have received honors at our [135] hands; many of them have received favors; all of them have enjoyed the best we had to give: and my indignation at their unexampled conduct is lost in the deep pain which their ingratitude has given me.”

He paused a moment; then, greatly moved, he continued: “I have had schoolboys under my care for nearly thirty years, but I have never experienced anything like this before. It is not I alone who suffer; there are fathers and mothers who will be grieved beyond measure at this reckless conduct of their sons, for it is my plain duty to make that conduct known to them.

“To-night I can only hope that no harm will befall these rash adventurers; to-morrow they will doubtless be with us again, and in the hard, unhappy days that must come for them, we shall look to you, you who are wise, to lead them into right paths. From this time on, the honor of the school will rest on you.”

[136] He opened the book, and read a favorite selection from the Psalms; but in the prayer his voice broke, and his “Amen” was scarcely audible.

He went back across the room to his office; and the boys, some of them furtively wiping tears from their eyes, took up their evening tasks.

The next day passed in much the same way as the preceding one had done. Some one brought a morning paper down from the city, and an eager group read the reporter’s vivid and somewhat amusing account of the rebellion and flight. A special telegram to the paper from New Hornbury, dated the previous night, was to the effect that the rebels had attended the circus at that town in a body, and from there had crossed the river by the rowboat ferry. The supposition was that they were on their way to New Bury.

About noon a rumor came floating down to the school that one of the row-boats containing the runaways had been swamped, and several of the boys drowned; but telegraphic inquiry resulted in a contradiction of this report later in the day.

[137] No one was on the lookout for the home-coming now. The boys might return, or they might not. To imaginations which had for two days endured such a prodigious strain, nothing could seem any longer improbable. But how desolate it seemed at the school! How funereal everything was, how quiet! There were no games going on; there was no sound of merry voices, no boisterous laughter, no fun of any kind; but there were the empty benches, the eager faces, the thin ranks, the whispered conversations, the unusual monotony of the usual tasks. It was a dreary time.

When the daily drill was over, at four o’clock, Harple went up to his room and threw himself

into a chair by the window in gloomy despair. His surprise at the sudden departure of the rebellious company had given way to pain and consternation when he learned that Brightly was a member of it; and these feelings were in turn replaced by anxiety, alarm, deep grief, as the hours went by, and his friend and companion did not return.

There was no hope now in any direction. Brightly, whom he had loved; of whom he had been proud; for whom he had suffered; for whom, indeed, he would have laid down his sword and shoulder-straps any day, if that would have saved him,—Brightly was lost beyond hope of recovery, disgraced and ruined beyond possibility of reform. It was sad, it was very sad,—it was dreadful! [138]

The lad started nervously to his feet, and began walking hastily up and down the narrow floor of his room. At last he dashed from his eyes the tears that had started there, and went about some tasks that he had set down for quiet accomplishment.

It was a dark, dull day, wet and cold and cheerless. The rain, which had fallen irregularly during the morning hours, had now set in again more steadily, and was driving against the windows of Harple’s room in rattling sheets.

About five o’clock Harple became aware that something unusual was going on in the hall below him. There were quick steps and excited voices. Outside some one was shouting and calling. He hurried to the window and looked out. [139]

The fugitives were returning. They were coming up from the street leading to the river, and climbing the terrace, one by one, to the drill-ground.

They bore scarcely a resemblance to those boys of Riverpark who had started away in the morning of the day before, with shout and song, abounding in rebellious glee. Their torn clothes were drenched with the rain and splashed with red mud. Their soiled faces were haggard and weatherbeaten, and bore marks of great weariness and pain. Their movements were slow and halting; and some, unable to climb the bank alone, were being helped along by others.

As they crossed the drill-ground there were no demonstrations, either of delight or disapproval. Those who saw them come and were waiting to welcome them, were too greatly shocked at their wretched appearance to do more than look upon them with surprise and pity.

Harple did not go down. He sat in his chair by the window, with his face in his hands, and waited for his friend. Brightly came down the hall at last, with hesitating steps. [140]

“Don’t look at me, Charley,” he said, as he entered the room; “don’t look at me!”

His voice was weak and broken. The very sound of it roused all the pity in Harple’s compassionate nature. He rose from his chair, took one of Brightly’s hands in his, put his arm around Brightly’s neck, and laid his face against Brightly’s wet, cold cheek. That was the welcome. It was a long time before Brightly found his voice again. When he did, it was only long enough to say,—

“O Charley, it’s been terrible! terrible!”

They did not talk much after that. Harple knew, from the first word that his chum had spoken, that no admonition was needed from him. He helped Brightly to remove his wet garments and clothe himself in dry ones, and then he considerately left the room.

It was after supper that Brightly took down his military coat, and severed the shoulder-straps from it, and the honor-grade chevrons from the sleeves. Then he took these, and his sword and sash, and went downstairs. He crossed through the private hall to Colonel Silsbee’s office door, knocked, and was bidden to enter. The principal was there alone. Brightly laid the insignia of his rank on the table before Colonel Silsbee. [141]

“I have brought these things to you,” he said. “I have no right to them any more. I have worn them unworthily. There was no excuse for my going away. I have been very foolish and wicked and ungrateful.”

He hesitated a moment, then went on: “I would like to speak about that night that you called me in before Brede and Finkelton to explain my marks. That was a lie that I told then. The figures were correct before. I did not change them; I don’t know, certainly, who did. I would like to have them put back as they were. I hope it won’t be necessary to send me away. I look at things very differently from what I did yesterday. I am ready to stand any punishment. I don’t want to be released from any,—I didn’t come to you for that; I only wanted you to know that I’m not rebellious any longer—nor careless—nor—” [142]

But here the lad broke down. He had spoken with painful hesitancy for a whole minute.

He had feared that his coming might be misinterpreted. But there was no danger of that. When he looked at Colonel Silsbee again he knew there was no danger of it. The man, with his sympathetic nature, had divined the boy’s feelings to their greatest depth. He rose from his chair and laid his hand on Brightly’s shoulder.

“I am glad you came,” he said. “You must suffer with the rest, but—I am glad you came. I shall remember it of you,—I shall never forget it.”

It was strange, but Colonel Silsbee’s voice had broken, too. He turned his face away and resumed his seat, and, in the silence that ensued, Brightly went quietly out.

The next morning at the opening of the morning session, Colonel Silsbee came in, and conducted the Scripture reading and prayer as usual, but made no remarks. He merely gave to [143]

the officer of the day, for record, a slip of paper which contained the order placing on perpetual delinquency all members of the school who had participated in the rebellion.

That night, at retreat, another order was read by the acting adjutant, reducing permanently to the ranks all officers, both commissioned and non-commissioned, who had taken part in the revolt.

But what had become of Brede? This was the question which now agitated the school. He had not as yet returned to Riverpark. He had not been seen by any one connected with the academy since his departure northward on the train from New Hornbury. Every one now knew of his treacherous and cowardly conduct, and the general opinion was that he was afraid to return.

[144] But the doubt as to his whereabouts was soon to be dispelled. It was not long after taps that night, that those of the boys who were not yet asleep heard an unusual commotion downstairs. There were hurrying footsteps, loud voices, once a noise as of a slight scuffle; then all was quiet again.

On the following morning, at the reveille roll-call, a whisper ran rapidly around the school to the effect that Brede was in the guard-house. This was a cell-like room, on the second floor, in a remote corner of the building, with one narrow window near the ceiling, and a heavy door studded with round-headed spikes, and locked with a great brass key.

Only once before, in the memory of the oldest student, had that door been opened to admit a refractory pupil. Indeed, few of those in the school had even so much as seen it. The guard-house was always spoken of with an indefinable shiver, and an unpleasant thought of bread and water and ghostly solitude. The fact that Brede was confined there brought to a climax the excitement under which the school had been laboring for a week.

[145] Later in the morning the nature of Brede's offence became known. He had been found, the night before, at a disreputable resort in the lower part of the city, in a state of gross intoxication. He had quarrelled with the keeper of the place, had been taken in charge by the police and marched to the station-house, where the police captain had recognized him; and on account of his youth and the disgrace which would attend the publicity of his offence, had directed the officers to take him to Riverpark and turn him over to Colonel Silsbee for punishment. So now he was in the guard-house, living on bread and water.

It was a terrible thing. Boys who were not accustomed to hearing stories of vice and crime, spoke of it in whispers. Indeed, there were some who hardly dared speak of it at all, it was so utterly and shamelessly disgraceful.

That evening Brightly was sick. The fatigue and exposure, especially the nervous strain of the last few days, had so worn upon him that he was obliged to ask for an excuse before the evening [146] session was half through, that he might go to his room and to bed. The favor was readily granted, and he passed slowly up the two flights of stairs to the upper dormitory.

As he went down the hall toward his room, he saw, through the transom over the door, a flickering light. He thought it strange, as he knew that Harple was still in the schoolroom.

It suddenly occurred to him that it was the light of fire. He darted to the door, pushed it open, and started back in horrified amazement.

Brede was kneeling by the bed, holding a lighted candle in his hand, and the mattress in front of him was rapidly bursting into flame.

He had partly risen at Brightly's approach, and was facing the door when it was opened. Seeing who confronted him, he dropped the candle and made a savage spring toward his old antagonist. In a moment they were both on the floor, fighting desperately.

[147] Over and over they rolled, down the entire length of the hall. In their struggles they reached the landing at the head of the stairs, and the next violent turn sent them pitching down into the darkness.

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[148]

CHAPTER VIII.

A GENERAL AMNESTY.

The two combatants, clasped tightly in each other's arms, plunged into a party of teachers and cadets who were hastening upward in response to Brightly's cry of "Fire!" In another moment Brede was secured; and when the fire, which had been confined to Brightly's room, was extinguished, he was taken back to the guard-house, from which he had escaped by reason of a defective lock.

When they came to assist Brightly to his feet they found that he had fainted. They carried him to Mrs. Silsbee's rooms, and after a little time he returned to consciousness. He was badly bruised, and his wrist and shoulder were sprained. Beyond that, he had sustained no bodily injury; but the shock to his nerves, already weak and disordered, had completely prostrated him. [149]

That night a fever came on, and the next day he was delirious.

When the boys marched into the schoolroom on the following evening, they all wore very sober faces. The events of the past twenty-four hours had been so dramatic, so tragic, that the impressions left by them on these young minds were little less than terrible. The lads were frightened, humbled, submissive; the rebellious spirit was utterly broken.

Colonel Silsbee saw this in their faces that night as he looked down on them from the desk; his sympathy grew strong for them, and he laid down his book and spoke to them.

“I had not thought,” he said, “to speak to you of the occurrences of the past few days until some later period, when the excitement attending them should have died out, and we could talk of them calmly and without prejudice; but the developments of the last twenty-four hours seem to make it fitting that something should be said to you to-night. I trust that the climax of the evil has been reached and passed. Indeed, I know on looking into your faces, that this is so. I cannot [150] doubt that you realize that the painful events of the past three days have been the result of the folly of your own conduct. I speak to those of you who have been engaged in rebellion.”

He paused a moment and then proceeded:

“You thought you knew better than we did what was best for you. In carrying out that idea you took a fatiguing journey down the river; you narrowly escaped drowning in crossing the Hudson; and had it not been for the kindness of a stranger to all of you save one, you would have been shelterless and hungry in the storm and night. Your return home was a journey, of the sufferings of which I need not speak to you. Its accomplishment was made possible only by the energetic effort and forceful conduct of one of your own number.

“That was your holiday. Now what are the results? Broken studies, physical ailments, nervous exhaustion, ruined clothing, officers reduced to ranks, half of the school on perpetual [151] delinquency. These are some of them, but not the most serious.

“In a family-room, in another part of this building, one of your comrades is raving in delirium.

“In the guard-house, in still another part of the building, your former ranking cadet-commander is confined on prison-fare, having disgraced himself and having brought reproach on you and us. To the same building, which represents my earthly possessions and answers for your home, the torch has been applied, and only a timely discovery has saved us all from homelessness and ruin.”

His voice was trembling, but not with anger, and his face was very pale. After a moment’s pause, he continued,—

“You do not need reproof nor admonition now; I can see that very plainly. I recall these results only because I want you never to forget that the causes which have led to them were produced by you. Such things will not occur in this school again in my lifetime. This lesson will pass down through many generations of students here, and help them to firmer loyalty and higher manhood. [152] But from to-night we shall fear no ill. From to-night we shall have the old fair feeling between us, and the old confidence and sympathy.”

At the last his voice had broken, and it was some minutes before he felt that he could control it sufficiently to go on with the evening lesson and prayer; but when the short service was concluded, there was not a boy in the room whose better nature had not been deeply touched and strengthened, and whose heart was not fixed steadfastly for the right.

The next night, when the ranks were formed at tattoo, the cadets were told that taps would not sound as usual; that they were to go to their rooms, and might lie down if they chose, but that they were to hold themselves in readiness to “fall in” at any moment.

At first no one knew what the order meant; but it was soon whispered around that Brede’s father was coming that night to take his son away, and that the battalion was to be formed at his [153] departure. Of course, under these circumstances, sleep was out of the question, and Brede’s fate was the topic of conversation in every room.

It was not until eleven o’clock that those on the east side of the building heard a carriage drive up to the front entrance. Then it was known that General Brede had come, and was alone with Colonel Silsbee in the office. A half-hour later orders were communicated to the cadets to form in the drill-hall.

The formation of ranks was accomplished almost noiselessly. The orderly sergeants called their rolls in tones scarcely above a whisper; all commands were given with hushed voices. It was as if they were fearful of rousing some one from sleep, or as if death was present in the house.

The command to “Rest!” was given. This left the boys free to move in their places and to talk; but there were few who moved and there were none who talked. The stillness was impressive. Only two lamps were burning in the drill-hall, and the corners of the room were in deep shadow. [154]

Outside, by the door, a carriage waited, and there was heard at times the impatient pawing of horses.

After a few minutes Colonel Silsbee and General Brede entered from the dining-room. The battalion was called to attention, and a squad of four was detailed, in charge of a sergeant, to proceed to the guard-house, relieve the sentinels on duty there, and escort Cadet Brede to the drill-hall.

They passed out and up the stairs, and all was again quiet.

Colonel Silsbee stood near the stairway entrance. General Brede had taken up a position at the

farther end of the hall by the outside door. Dressed in military hat and cloak, magnificent in figure, stern of countenance, he stood with folded arms, like the immovable statue of a soldier.

Once the horses moved outside; once a sudden shifting of the wind caused the rain to dash noisily against the windows. Save for these sounds the stillness was unbroken. [155]

After a little the regular tramp of feet was heard descending the staircase, and out from the darkness the squad marched, with Brede in the midst, straight to Colonel Silsbee. The salute was given and returned, and the soldiers retired to their places in the ranks. With a slight motion of his hand, the colonel directed Brede to go with him. Then they went together down the length of the hall, down the front of the battalion.

The disgraced cadet started on the trying journey with all of his old-time swagger. He looked boldly into the faces of his companions, and forced the hard smile again into his face, and the old cruel curl into his lips.

But there was no answering smile from the motionless ranks. Every lip was like marble; every face was like adamant. It was a terrible farewell. The light went out from Brede’s countenance as he walked; the curl left his lips; his face grew pale as death, and took on an expression of agony [156] and fear. Step by step his swagger left him; step by step his head fell, his shoulders bowed, his body shrank into itself. It was as if he were passing to his execution.

At three paces from the general they halted, and Colonel Silsbee gave the military salute. General Brede answered it, and motioned to the boy to pass out with him at the opened door. No word was spoken.

On the threshold Brede turned, and looked back for an instant into the room on the rigid ranks, the stony faces of his old companions. Then his pride, his bravado, his whole heart, gave way; he put his hands to his face, and cried out in agony.

The father and son passed out into the darkness; the carriage-door was closed, and the sound of receding wheels was drowned in the roaring of the storm.

No one who saw that white and frightened face against the background of the night or heard that cry has ever forgotten it. It was sad, it was just, it was terrible! It was a lesson that burned [157] itself indelibly on the heart of every boy who witnessed it.

They sent for Brightly’s mother, and she came; but the prompt medical attention and the unremitting care of good Mrs. Silsbee had brought on a favorable change, and on her arrival she found her boy already on the road to recovery.

She stayed with him for a time. One day during his early convalescence, Brightly had been talking to his mother of the troubles at the school, and of his own faults and mistakes and recent resolutions.

It was then that she told him the secret of the appointments. Colonel Silsbee had intimated to her at the beginning of the year that he intended to make her son his ranking cadet-commander; but after she had thought upon the matter, she requested him not to do so. She wanted Brightly to have still another year at Riverpark, and had made the request in the belief that the hope of future honors and the opportunity to win higher rank would be an incentive to his ambition, and that their attainment would add zest and variety to his last year at school. [158]

Colonel Silsbee, in compliance with her request, had appointed to the two ranking offices cadets who would certainly leave at the end of the year, and had given to Brightly the third position. When the lad heard this he turned his face away and was silent; but the expression of his countenance told the story of regret and humility better than words could have told it.

Time passed at Riverpark. May melted softly into June, and June’s days, too, were now almost at an end. One by one she had counted them out, tinted with emerald, glowing with sunshine, jewelled with raindrops. Indeed, there were scarcely ten more of them left in her rose-clasped girdle.

But to forty soldiers of the Riverpark battalion the solaces of summer fell exclusively within the grounds of the academy. For them there were no long walks in the country, no boating on the river, no pilgrimages to the city. Yet they acknowledged the justness of their punishment, and [159] bore it bravely.

Brightly was with them again, quite recovered from his illness. He studied hard; his deportment was beyond question; he was a model soldier. He went about among the delinquents with cheerful face and hearty manner, and inaugurated for them such mild pleasures as could be enjoyed in delinquency. By counsel and example he reconciled the unfortunates to their fate, and by the very strength of his presence diffused among them a feeling of hope, of confidence, of good-will, which inspired them to higher effort, to better work, to nobler manhood.

The last week of the school-year came. It was to be, according to custom, a week of camp-life. Already the white tents were dotting the eastern slope of the lawn; already the schoolroom was deserted and the recitation-rooms were empty; the sentinels were pacing their beats through shade and sunshine, and the grounds of Riverpark were alive with bodies of moving troops. [160]

It was the afternoon of the first day in camp, and the hour for dress-parade. Many people had come up from the city to witness the evolutions of the troops, and the east porch was bright with

the summer costumes of the ladies who had gathered there.

Brightly, marching in the ranks, felt a sudden, sharp pang of regret. If he were only adjutant to-day! if he could only feel the weight of his plume, see his sword flashing in the sunshine, hear his voice in words of command! It was such a splendid place,—that post of adjutant; the ceremonial set down for him was so knightly, so dignified, so grand! The folly of disobedience and revolt impressed itself upon him even more at that moment than it had done during the hard weeks of his punishment.

Another thing worried and perplexed him. Something was going on among the boys that they were keeping hid from him. There were secret conferences that he had unwittingly disturbed, [161] whispered words that were not meant for his ears; once a paper was whisked suddenly out of his sight to which some one had been just in the act of affixing his signature.

He hoped that there was no new mischief brewing; he could not quite bring himself to believe that, under the calmness and good discipline of the time, rebellion was again struggling for an outbreak.

But the dress-parade was on. The boys had never drilled better. Their white-gloved hands moved in perfect unison, and the points of their bayonets flashed into line through the sunlight as quickly and sharply as a lightning-stroke. Every one admired and praised the movements.

At that point in the military ceremonial where the adjutant faces to the commanding officer and gives him the result of the orderly sergeant's reports, something unusual occurred.

[162] Finkelton was acting as adjutant. The point of his sword was still all but touching the ground, and the words of the report were scarcely out of his mouth, when Major Drumlist, who was in command, said,—

"Publish your Orders, sir."

Finkelton faced to the battalion again, sheathed his sword, drew a paper from his belt, unfolded it, gave the command: "Attention to orders!" and began to read.

Headquarters, Riverpark Academy.
June 20, 186-.

SPECIAL ORDER, NO. 21.

In consideration of the excellent order and high standing which have recently been maintained by the cadets of Riverpark, a general amnesty is hereby proclaimed in favor of all offenders. All delinquencies are cancelled to this date, and all delinquents are hereby absolved from further punishment or restriction on account of past offences.

By order of the Principal,

Col. Jonas Silsbee.

J. R. Finkelton,
Acting First Lieut. and Adjt.

It was a full half-minute before the boys in the ranks realized the great good fortune that had fallen on them. Then they all seemed to discover it at once. A shout went up as from a single [163] throat. Caps were tossed wildly into the air. There was cheering, hand-shaking, excited laughter, enthusiasm beyond control. To those forty delinquents it was the same as giving sudden freedom to a caged wild bird.

Plumpy, whose irrepressible spirits had made it necessary, since the very beginning of the year, that he should dwell in seclusion at Riverpark, was almost convulsed with delight. He leaped and waved his cap and shouted, until the boys nearest to him in the ranks felt obliged to resort to their customary method of laying him down on his back and sitting on him to repress his wild enthusiasm.

When order had been partially restored in the ranks, the major turned and saluted Colonel Silsbee, who had been standing near him, with folded arms, enjoying the scene quietly, but intensely. The colonel returned the salute, and advanced to address the troops.

[164] "Soldiers of the Riverpark battalion," he said, "I have to-day received a petition signed by every cadet in the school save one. I have read it with great pleasure; for it shows me that you appreciate soldierly efforts to regain the standing lost through an unhappy error. So do I appreciate them; and it will not detract one whit from the strength and virtue of your petition to tell you that I had already decided, before receiving it, to do that which you request. I do it very cheerfully; I am glad to confer honor upon one whom you yourselves have designated as the first soldier and gentleman among you."

Colonel Silsbee saluted the major, and the major saluted the acting adjutant, and said,—

"Publish your Order, sir."

Clear and resonant came Finkelton's voice:

Headquarters, Riverpark Academy.
June 20, 186-.

SPECIAL ORDER, NO. 22.

Cadet Horace E. Brightly is hereby restored to the rank of First Lieutenant

[165]

and Adjutant of the Riverpark Battalion, his commission to date from to-day. He will proceed immediately to the exercise of the duties of said office, and will be respected and obeyed accordingly.

By order of the Principal,

Col. Jonas Silsbee.

J. R. Finkelton,
Acting First Lieut. and Adjt.

What a shout went up then! No one ever heard anything like it before. They cheered till they were hoarse. Those who were near enough to Brightly hugged him frantically, and those who were not near enough reached out their muskets to touch bayonets with him. They laughed—why, some of them laughed till they cried.

Brightly himself was completely overcome by joy at his restoration, and pride in the applause of his comrades. Colonel Silsbee's face was so radiant with pleasure that no one noticed the big teardrops that glistened on his cheeks.

How they ever got the battalion to attention again no one knew. But they did get the boys to observe order at last, and the dress parade closed with all its military pomp and display. The jubilant ranks were broken, the bright-faced ladies walked slowly away, and the sweet sunshine of June rested upon the earth in radiant splendor. But oh the sweeter sunshine of happiness in fourscore boyish hearts! [166]

Transcriber's Notes:

A List of Illustrations has been provided for the convenience of the reader.

Punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved, except as noted below.

The author's em-dash style has been retained.

The Chapter VI title in the Contents was adjusted to match the title in the text (Hay-mow -> Haymow).

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIVERPARK REBELLION ***

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