

The High School Pitcher eBook

The High School Pitcher by H. Irving Hancock

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CHAPTER I

The principal hears something about "Pennies"

Clang!

"Attention, please."

The barely audible droning of study ceased promptly in the big assembly room of the Gridley High School.

The new principal, who had just stepped into the room, and who now stood waiting behind his flat-top desk on the platform, was a tall, thin, severe-looking man of thirty-two or three.

For this year Dr. Carl Thornton, beloved principal for a half-score of years, was not in command at the school. Ill health had forced the good old doctor to take at least a year's rest, and this stranger now sat in the Thornton chair.

"Mr. Harper," almost rasped out Mr. Cantwell's voice, "stop rustling that paper."

Harper, a little freshmen, who had merely meant to slip the paper inside his desk, and who was not making a disturbing noise thereby, flushed pink and sat immobile, the paper swinging from one hand.

From the principal's attitude and his look of seriousness, something unusual was pending. Some of the girls permitted their apprehension to be seen. On the faces of several of the boys rested a look of half defiance, for this principal was unpopular, and, by the students, was considered unjust.

"It being now in the early part of December," went on Mr. Cantwell, "we shall, on Monday, begin rehearsing the music for the special exercises to be held in this school on the day before Christmas. To that end, each of you found, on returning from recess, the new Christmas music on your desk."

Mr. Cantwell paused an instant for this important information to sink in. Several slight, little sighs of relief escaped the students, especially from the girls' side of the great room. This speech did not presage anything very dreadful to come.

"This sheet music," continued Mr. Cantwell, "is to be sold to the pupils at cost to the Board of Education. This cost price is fifteen cents."

Again Mr. Cantwell paused. It was a trick of his, a personal peculiarity. Then he permitted himself a slight smile as he added:

“This being Friday, I will ask you all to be sure to bring, on Monday morning, the money, which you will pay to me. Don’t forget, please; each of you bring me his little fifteen pennies. Now, return to your studies until the beginning of the fourth period is announced.”

As he bent his head low behind a bulky textbook, Dan Dalzell, of the sophomore class, glanced over at Dick Prescott with sparkling mischief gleaming in his eyes.

Dick, who was now a sophomore, and one of the assured leaders in sports and fun, guessed that Dan Dalzell was hatching another of the wild schemes for which Dalzell was somewhat famous. Dick even guessed that he knew about what was passing in Dan’s mind.

Though moderate whispering was permitted, at need, in the assembly room, there was no chance for Dick and Dan to pass even a word at this time, for almost immediately the bell for the fourth period of the morning’s work sounded, and the sections rose and filed out to the various recitation rooms.

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To readers of the preceding volume in this series, Dick & Co. will need no introduction. All six of the youngsters were very well introduced in “The High School Freshmen.”

Such readers will remember their first view of Dick & Co. With brown-haired Dick Prescott as leader, the other members of this unique firm of High School youngsters, were Tom Reade, Dan Dalzell, Harry Hazelton, Gregory Holmes and Dave Darrin.

The six had been chums at the Central Grammar School, and had stuck together like burrs through the freshman year at the Gridley High School. In fact, even in their freshmen period, when new students are not expected to have much to say, and are given no chance at the school athletics, Dick & Co. had made themselves abundantly felt.

Our readers will recall how the Board of Education had some notion of prohibiting High School football, despite the fact that the Gridley H.S. eleven was one of the best in the United States. Readers will also recall the prank hatched by Dick & Co., by means of which the Board was quickly shown how unpopular such a move would be in the city.

Our readers will also recollect that, though freshmen were barred from active part in sports, yet Dick & Co. found the effective way of raising plentiful funds for the Athletics Committee. In the annual paper chase the freshmen hounds, under Dick Prescott’s captaincy, beat the sophomore hares—for the first time in many years. In the skating events, later on, Dick and his chums captured, for the freshman class, three of the eight events. From the start, Dick & Co. had shown great ingenuity in “boosting” football, in return for which, many of the usual restrictions on freshmen were waived where Dick & Co. were concerned.

In the nearly three months, now, that the new school year had gone along, Dick & Co. had proved that, as sophs, they were youngsters of great importance in the student body. They were highly popular with most of their fellow-students; but of course that very popularity made them some enemies among those who envied or disliked them.

For one thing, neither Dick nor any of his partners came of families of any wealth. Yet it was inevitable that some of the boys and girls of Gridley H.S. should come from families of more or less wealth.

It is but fair to say that most of these scions of the wealthier families were agreeable, affable and democratic—in a word, Americans without any regard to the size of the family purse.

A few of the wealthier young people, however, made no secret of their dislike for smiling, happy, capable Dick & Co. One of the leaders in this feeling was Fred Ripley, son of a wealthy, retired lawyer.

During the skating events of the preceding winter, Dick Prescott, aided by his chums, had saved the life of Ripley, who had gone through thin ice. However, so haughty a young man as Fred Ripley, though he had been slightly affected by the brave generosity, could not quite bring himself to regard Dick as other than an interloper in High School life.

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Ripley had even gone so far as to bribe Tip Scammon, worthless, profligate son of the honest old janitor of the High School, to commit a series of robberies from the locker rooms in the school basement while Dick carried the key as monitor there. The “plunder” had been found in Dick’s own room at home, and the young man had been suspended from the High School for a while. Thanks, however, to Laura Bentley and Belle Meade, two girls then freshmen and now sophs, Tip had been run down. Then the police made Tip confess, and he was sent away to the penitentiary for a short term. Tip, however, refused to the last to name his accomplice. Dick knew that Ripley was the accomplice, but kept his silence, preferring to fight all his own battles by himself.

So Fred Ripley was now a junior, in good standing as far as scholarship and school record went.

So far, during this new year, Ripley had managed to smother his hatred for Dick & Co., especially for Dick himself.

Lessons and recitations on this early December morning went off as usual. In time the hands of the clock moved around to one o’clock in the afternoon, at which time the High School closed for the day.

The partners of Dick & Co. went down the steps of the building and all soon found their way through the surging crowds of escaped students. This sextette turned down one of the streets and trudged along together. At first several of the other High School boys walked along near them. Finally, however, the crowd thinned away until only Dick & Co. were together.

“Dan,” said Dick, smilingly, “something struck you hard this morning, when Mr. Cantwell asked us all to bring the music-money on Monday.”

“He didn’t say exactly ‘money,’” retorted Dan Dalzell, quickly. “What Prin. did say was that each one of us was to bring fifteen *pennies*.”

“Yes, I remember,” laughed Dick.

“Now, we couldn’t have held that mob when school let out,” pursued Dan. “And now it’s too late. But say, if the Prin. had only sprung that on us *before* recess-----”

“Well, suppose he had?” interrupted Greg Holmes, a trifle impatiently.

“Why, then,” retorted Dan, mournfully, “we could have passed word around, at recess, to have everybody bring just what the Prin. called for—*pennies*!”

“Hm!” grinned Dave Darrin, who was never slow to see the point of anything. “Then you had a vision of the unpopular Prin. being swamped under a deluge of pennies—plain, individual little copper cents?”

“That’s it!” agreed Dan. “But now, we won’t see more than a few before we go to school again Monday. Oh—wow! What a chance that takes away from us. Just imagine the Prin. industriously counting away at thousands of pennies, and a long line of boy and girl students in line, each one waiting to pass him another handful of *pennies*! Say, can you see the Prin.—just turning white and muttering to himself? But there’s no chance to get the word around, now!”

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"We don't need to get the word around," smiled Dick. "If we passed the word around, it might get to the Prin.'s ears before Monday, and he'd hatch up some way to head us off."

"If you can see how to work the trick at this late hour, you can see further than I can," muttered Dan, rather enviously.

"Oh, Dick has the scheme hatching, or he wouldn't talk about it," declared Dave Darrin, confidently.

"Why, if all you want is to send the whole student body on Monday morning, each with fifteen copper cents to hand the Prin., that can be fixed up easily enough," Dick pronounced, judicially.

"How are we going to do it?" asked Dalzell, dubiously.

"Well, let us see how many pennies would be needed? There are close to two hundred and fifty students, but a few might refuse to go into the trick. Let us say two hundred and forty *times* fifteen. That's thirty-six hundred, isn't it? That means we want to get thirty-six dollars' worth of pennies. Well, we'll get them!"

"We will?" demanded Dan, with a snort. "Dick, unless you've got more cash on hand than the rest of us then I don't believe a dragnet search of this crowd would turn up two dollars. Thirty-six? That's going some and halfway back!"

"There are three principal ways of buying goods of any kind," Dick continued. "One way is with cash-----"

"That's the street we live on!" broke in Harry Hazelton, with a laugh.

"The second way," Dick went on, "is to pay with a check. But you must have cash at the bank behind the check, or you get into trouble. Now the third way is to buy goods on credit."

"That's just as bad," protested Dan. "Where, in the whole town, could a bunch of youngsters like us, get thirty-six dollars' worth of real credit?"

"I can," declared Dick, coolly.

"You? Where? With your father?"

"No; Dad rarely takes in much in the way of pennies. I don't suppose he has two dollars' worth of pennies on hand at any time. But, fellows, you know that 'The Morning

Blade' is a one cent paper. Now, the publisher of 'The Blade' must bank a keg of pennies every day in the week. I can see Mr. Pollock, the editor, this afternoon, right after luncheon. He has probably sent most of the pennies to bank today, but I'll ask him if he'll have to-morrow's pennies saved for us."

"Say, if he'll only do that!" glowed Dan, his eyes flashing.

"He will," declared Dave Darrin. "Mr. Pollock will do anything, within reason, that Dick asks."

"Now, fellows, if I can put this thing through, we can meet in my room to-morrow afternoon at one o'clock. Pennies come in rolls of fifty each, you know. We'll have to break up the rolls, and make new ones, each containing fifteen pennies."

Dave Darrin stopped where he was, and began to laugh. Tom Reade quickly joined in. The others were grinning.

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"Oh, say, just for one look at Prin.'s face, if we can spring that job on him!" chuckled Harry Hazelton.

"We can," announced Dick, gravely. "So go home and enjoy your dinners, fellows. If you want to meet on the same old corner on Main Street, at half-past two to-day, we'll go in a body to 'The Blade' office and learn what Mr. Pollock has to say about our credit."

"*Your* credit, you mean," corrected Dave.

After dinner Dick & Co. met as agreed. Arrived at "The Blade" office it was decided that Dick Prescott should go in alone to carry on the negotiation. He soon came out again, wearing a satisfied smile and carrying a package under one arm.

"If I'm any good at guessing," suggested Dave, "you put the deal over."

"Mr. Pollock agreed, all right," nodded Dick. "I have fourteen dollars here. He'll let us have the rest to-morrow."

They hurried back to Dick's room, over the bookstore that was run by Mr. and Mrs. Prescott.

"Whew, but this stuff is heavy," muttered Dick, dumping the package on the table. "Mr. Pollock sent out to the pressroom and had some paper cut of just the size that we shall need for wrappers."

"Did you tell Pollock what we are going to do?" asked Greg Holmes.

"Not exactly, but he guessed that some mischief was on. He wanted to know if it was anything that would make good local reading in 'The Blade,' so I told him I thought it would be worth a paragraph or two, and that I'd drop around Monday afternoon and give him the particulars. That was all I said."

Inside the package were three "sticks" of the kind that are used for laying the little coins in a row before wrapping.

"Now, one thing we must be dead careful about, fellows," urged Dick, as he undid the package, "is to be sure that we get an exact fifteen coins in each wrapper. If we got in more, we'd be the losers. If we put less than fifteen cents in any wrapper, then we're likely to be accused of running a swindling game."

So every one of the plotters was most careful to count the coins. It was not rapid work, and only half the partners could work at any one time. They soon caught the trick of wrapping, however, and then the little rolls began to pile up.

Saturday afternoon Dick & Co. were similarly engaged. Nor did they find the work too hard. Americans will endure a good deal for the sake of a joke.

Monday morning, shortly after half-past seven, Dick and his chums had stationed themselves along six different approaches to the High School. Each young prankster had his pockets weighted down with small packages, each containing fifteen pennies.

Purcell, of the junior class, was the first to pass Dick Prescott.

"Hullo, Purcell," Dick greeted the other, with a grin. "Want to see some fun?"

"Of course," nodded the junior. "What's going?"

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"You remember that Prin. asked us, last Friday, to bring in our fifteen pennies for the Christmas music?"

"Of course. Well, I have my money in my pocket."

"*In pennies?*" insisted Dick.

"Well, no; of course not. But I have a quarter, and I guess Prin. can change that."

Dick quickly explained the scheme. Purcell, with a guffaw, purchased one of the rolls.

"Now, see here," hinted Dick, "there'll be such a rush, soon, that we six can't attend to all the business. Won't you take a dozen rolls and peddle them? I'll charge 'em to you, until you can make an accounting."

Purcell caught at the bait with another laugh. Dick noted Purcell's name on a piece of paper, with a dollar and eighty cents charged against it.

All the other partners did the same with other students. With such a series of pickets out around the school none of the student body got through without buying pennies, except Fred Ripley and Clara Deane. They were not asked to buy.

Meanwhile, up in the great assembly room a scene was going on that was worth looking at.

Abner Cantwell had seated himself at his desk. Before him lay a printed copy of the roll of the student body. It was the new principal's intention to check off each name as a boy or girl paid for the music. Knowing that he would have a good deal of currency to handle, the principal had brought along a satchel for this morning.

First of all, Harper came tripping into the room. He went to his desk with his books, then turned and marched to the principal's desk.

"I've brought the money for the music, Mr. Cantwell."

"That's right, Mr. Harper," nodded the principal.

The little freshman carefully deposited his fifteen pennies on the desk. They were out of the roll. Dick & Co. had cautioned each investor to break the wrapper, and count the pennies before moving on.

Two of the seniors presently came in. They settled with pennies. Then came Laura Bentley and Belle Meade. Their pennies were laid on the principal's desk.

"Why, all pennies, so far!" exclaimed Mr. Cantwell. "I trust not many will bring coins of such low denomination."

A look of bland innocence rested on Laura's face.

"Why, sir," she remarked, "you asked us, Friday, to bring pennies.

"Did I?" demanded the principal, a look of astonishment on his face.

"Why, yes, sir," Belle Meade rattled on. "Don't you remember? You laughed, Mr. Cantwell, and asked each one of us to bring fifteen pennies to-day."

"I had forgotten that, Miss Meade," returned the principal. Then, as the sophomore young ladies turned away, a look of suspicion began to settle on the principal's face. Nor did that look lessen any when the next six students to come in each carried pennies to the desk.

Twenty more brought pennies. By this time there was a stern look on the principal's white face.

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During the next few minutes after that only two or three came in, for Dick had thought of a new aspect to the joke. He had sent messengers scurrying out through the street approaches with this message:

"We're not required to be in the assembly room until eight o'clock. Let's all wait until two minutes of eight—then go in a throng."

So the principal had a chance to catch up with his counting as the minutes passed. So busy was he, however, that it didn't quite occur to him to wonder why so few of the student body had as yet come in.

Then, at 7.58, a resounding tread was heard on the stairs leading up from the basement locker rooms. Some two hundred boys and girls were coming up in two separate throngs. They were still coming when the assembly bell rang. As fast as any entered they made their way, with solemn faces, to the desk on the platform.

As Mr. Cantwell had feared, the pennies still continued to pour in upon him. Suddenly the principal struck his desk sharply with a ruler, then leaped to his feet. His face was whiter than ever. It was plain that the man was struggling to control himself against an outburst of wrath. He even forced a smile to his face a sort of smile that had no mirth in it.

"Young ladies and young gentlemen," Mr. Cantwell rasped out, sharply, "some of you have seen fit to plan a joke against me, and to carry it out most audaciously. It's a good joke, and I admit that it's on me. But it has been carried far enough. If you please—*no more pennies!*"

"But pennies are all I happen to have, sir," protested Dave Darrin, stepping forward. "Don't you want me to pay you for the music, sir?"

"Oh, well," replied the principal, with a sigh, "I'll take 'em, then."

As Dick & Co. had disposed of every one of their little rolls of fifteen, few of the students were unprovided with pennies. So the copper stream continued to pour in. Mr. Cantwell could have called any or all of his submasters and teachers to his aid. He thought of it presently, as his fingers ached from handling all the pennies.

"Mr. Drake, will you come to the desk?" he called.

So Submaster Drake came to the platform, drawing a chair up beside the principal's. But Mr. Cantwell still felt obliged to do the counting, as he was responsible for the correctness of the sums. So all Mr. Drake could do was check off the names as the principal called them.

Faster and faster poured the copper stream now. Mr. Cantwell, the cords sticking out on his forehead, and a clammy dew bespangling his white face, counted on in consuming anger. Every now and then he turned to dump two or three handfuls of counted pennies into his open satchel.

Gathered all around the desk was a throng of students, waiting to pay. Beyond this throng, safely out of range of vision, other students gathered in groups and chuckled almost silently.

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Clatter! By an unintentional move of one arm Mr. Cantwell swept fully a hundred pennies off on to the floor. He leaped up, flushed and angry.

"Will the young—gentlemen—aid me in recovering the coins that went on the floor?" he asked.

There was promptly a great scurrying and searching. The principal surely felt harassed that morning. It was ten minutes of nine when the last student had paid and had had his name checked off. Mr. Cantwell was at the boiling point of wrath.

Just as the principal was putting the last of the coins into his satchel Mr. Drake leaned over to whisper:

"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

"Certainly," replied the principal coldly. "Yet I trust, Mr. Drake, that it won't be a suggestion for an easy way of accumulating more pennies than I already have."

"I think, if I were you, sir, I should pay no heed to this joke-----"

"Joke?" hissed the principal under his breath. "It's an outrage!"

"But intended only as a piece of pleasantry, sir. So I think it will pass off much better if you don't allow the students to see that they have annoyed you."

"Why? Do the students *want* to annoy me?" demanded Mr. Cantwell, in another angry undertone.

"I wouldn't say that," replied Mr. Drake. "But, if the young men discover that you are easily teased, they are sufficiently mischief-loving to try other jokes on you."

"Then a good friend of theirs would advise them not to do so," replied Mr. Cantwell, with a snap of his jaws.

That closed the matter for the time being. The first recitation period of the morning had been lost, but now the students, most of them finding difficulty in suppressing their chuckles, were sent to the various class rooms.

Before recess came, the principal having a period free from class work, silently escaped from the building, carrying the thirty-six hundred pennies to the bank. As that number of pennies weighs something more than twenty-three pounds, the load was not a light one.

"I have a big lot of pennies here that I want to deposit," he explained to the receiving teller.

"How many?" asked the teller.

"Thirty-six hundred," replied Mr. Cantwell.

"Are they counted and done up into rolls of fifty, with your name on each roll?" asked the teller.

"Why—er—no," stammered the principal. "They're just loose—in bulk, I mean."

"Then I'm very sorry, Mr. Cantwell, but we can't receive them in that shape, sir. They will have to be counted and wrapped, and your name written on each roll."

"Do you mean to say that I must take these pennies home, count them all—again!—and then wrap them and sign the wrappers."

"I'm sorry, but you, or some one will have to do it, Mr. Cantwell."

Then and there the principal exploded. One man there was in the bank at that moment who was obliged to turn his head away and stifle back the laughter. That man was Mr. Pollock, of "The Blade." Pollock knew now what Dick & Co. had wanted of such a cargo of pennies.

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"I can't carry this infernal satchel back to school," groaned the principal, disgustedly. "Some of the boys, when they see me, will realize that the satchel is still loaded, and they'll know what has happened to me at the bank. It will make me look fearfully ridiculous to be caught in that fashion, with the joke against me a second time! And yet I have a class immediately after recess. What can I do?"

A moment later, however, he had solved the problem. There was a livery stable not far away, and he knew the proprietor. So to that stable Mr. Cantwell hurried, changing the satchel from one hand to the other whenever an arm ached too much.

"This satchel contains a lot of currency, Mr. Getchel," explained the poor principal. "I wish you could do me the favor of having a horse hitched up and take this to my wife. Will you do it?"

"Certainly," nodded the liveryman. "Just lock the satchel; that is all. I'll have the bag at your home within fifteen minutes."

So during the first period after recess Mrs. Cantwell was visited by Getchel, who handed her the satchel, merely remarking:

"Mr. Cantwell left this at my office, ma'am, and asked me to bring it down to you. It contains some money that your husband sent you."

Money? The good woman, who "loved" money too well to spend much of it, hefted the satchel. Gracious! There must be a big lot of the valuable stuff. But the satchel was locked. Mrs. Cantwell promptly hunted until she found another satchel key that fitted. Then she opened the bag, staring at the contents with big eyes.

"What on earth can my husband have been doing?" she wondered. "Surely he hasn't been robbing the Salvation Army Christmas boxes! And the idea of sending me money all in pennies!"

The more she thought about it the more indignant did Mrs. Cantwell become. Finally, a little after noon, Mrs. Cantwell decided to take the stuff to the bank, have it counted and turned over into greenbacks. So she trudged up to the bank with it. The journey was something more than a mile in length. Mrs. Cantwell arrived at the bank, only to make the same discovery that her husband had made about the need of counting and wrapping the money before it could be deposited or exchanged. It was close to one o'clock, and the High School not far away. So, full of ire, Mrs. Cantwell started down to her husband's place of employment.

Once school let out for the day, a quarter of a thousand members of the student body went off, full of glee, to spread the news of the joke. As they hurried along many of the students noticed that Mrs. Cantwell was standing not far from the gate and that, at her

feet, lay her husband's black satchel. Several of the students were quick to wonder what this new phase of the matter meant.

After school was dismissed Fred Ripley remained behind, strapping several books together. Then, as he passed the principal's desk, he remarked:

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"I suppose, Mr. Cantwell, that some of the students thought that a very funny trick that was played on you this morning. While I am speaking of it, I wish to assure you, sir, that I had no hand in the outrage."

"I am very glad to hear you say that, Mr. Ripley. Some day I hope I shall have a notion who *did* originate the practical joke."

"I don't believe you would have to guess very long, sir," Ripley hinted.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, sir, whenever anything of that sort is hatched up in this school, it's generally a pretty safe guess that Dick & Co. are at the bottom of it all."

"Dick & Co.?" repeated Mr. Cantwell.

"Dick Prescott and his chums, sir," replied Ripley, rapidly naming the five partners. Then, having accomplished what he wanted, Fred sauntered out.

"I'll look into this further," thought Mr. Cantwell, angrily. "If I can satisfy myself that Prescott was at the bottom of this wicked hoax then I—I may find it possible to make him want to cut his High School course short!"

Mrs. Cantwell was waiting at the gate.

"What on earth, Abner, did you mean by sending me this great cartload of pennies?" demanded the principal's spouse. "Here I've taken it up to the bank, and find they won't accept it—not in this form, anyway. Now, I've carried it this far, Abner, and you may carry it the rest of the way home."

"Why—er—er—" stammered the principal.

"Mr. Getchel brought the satchel to me, and told me it was money you had sent me. But I want to say, Abner, that of all the-----"

At this moment the principal picked up the hateful satchel and the pair passed out of hearing of four young freshmen who had hidden near to learn what the mystery of the satchel meant. It was not long, either, before the further joke had become known to a great many of the students.

CHAPTER II

DICK TAKES UP HIS PEN

Dick had no sooner ventured out on the street after dinner than he encountered the news of Mrs. Cantwell's meeting with her husband.

But Dick did not linger long to discuss the matter. His pockets now contained, in place of pennies, a few banknotes and many dimes, pennies and nickels, amounting in all to thirty-six dollars. He was headed for "The Blade" office to settle with Mr. Pollock.

"I think I can tell you a little story now, that may be worth a paragraph or two," Dick announced after he had counted out the money and had turned it over to the editor.

"You played a little joke on your new and not wholly popular principal, didn't you?" Mr. Pollock asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes; has the thing reached you already?"

"I don't know the whole story of the joke," Mr. Pollock replied, "but perhaps I can tell you one side of it that you don't know."

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Thereupon the editor described Mr. Cantwell's visit to the bank. "Now, I've got a still further side to the story," Dick continued, and repeated the story told by the freshmen of how Mrs. Cantwell also had carried the money to the bank, and then, still carrying it, had waited for her husband at the school gateway.

Editor Pollock leaned back, laughing until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I'm sorry for the good lady's discomfiture," explained the editor, presently. "But the whole story is very, very funny."

"Now, I guess you know all the facts," finished Dick Prescott, rising.

"Yes, but I haven't a single reporter about." Then, after a pause, "See here, Prescott, why couldn't you write this up for me?"

"I?" repeated Dick, astonished. "I never wrote a line for publication in my life."

"Everyone who does, has to make a start some time," replied Mr. Pollock. "And I believe you could write it up all right, too. See here, Prescott, just go over to that desk. There's a stack of copy paper there. Write it briefly and crisply, and, for delicacy's sake, leave out all that relates to Mrs. Cantwell. No use in dragging a woman into a hazing scrape."

Dick went over to the desk, picking up a pen. For the first three or four minutes he sat staring at the paper, the desk, the floor, the wall and the street door. But Mr. Pollock paid no heed to him. Then, finally, Dick began to write. As he wrote a grin came to his face. That grin broadened as he wrote on. At last he took the pages over to Mr. Pollock.

"I don't suppose that's what you want," he said, his face very red, "but the main facts are all there."

Laying down his own pen Mr. Pollock read rapidly but thoughtfully. The editor began to laugh again. Then he laid down the last sheet.

"Prescott, that's well done. There's a good reporter lurking somewhere inside of you."

Thrusting one hand down into a pocket Mr. Pollock brought out a half-dollar, which he tendered to Dick.

"What am I to do with this?" asked the young sophomore.

"Anything you please," replied the editor. "The money's for you."

"For me?" gasped Dick.

“Yes, of course. Didn’t you write this yarn for me? Of course ‘The Blade’ is only a country daily, and our space rates are not high. But see here, Prescott, I’ll pay you a dollar a column for anything you write for us that possesses local interest enough to warrant our printing it. Now, while going to the High School, why can’t you turn reporter in your spare time, and earn a little pocket money?”

Again Dick gasped. He had never thought of himself as a budding young journalist. Yet, as Mr. Pollock inquired, “Why not?” Why not, indeed!

“Well, how do you think you’d like to work for us?” asked Mr. Pollock, after a pause. “Of course you would not leave the High School. You would not even neglect your studies in the least. But a young man who knows almost everybody in Gridley, and who goes about town as much as you do, ought to be able to pick up quite a lot of newsy stuff.”

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"I wonder if I could make a reporter out of myself," Dick pondered.

"The way to answer that question is to try," replied Mr. Pollock. "For myself, I think that, with some training, you'd make a good reporter. By the way, Prescott, have you planned on what you mean to be when you're through school?"

"Why, it isn't settled yet," Dick replied slowly. "Father and mother hope to be able to send me further than the High School, and so they've suggested that I wait until I'm fairly well through before I decide on what I want to be. Then, if it's anything that a college course would help me to, they'll try to provide it."

"What would you like most of all in the world to be?" inquired the editor of "The Blade."

"A soldier!" replied young Prescott, with great promptness and emphasis.

"Hm! The soldier's trade is rather dull these days," replied the editor. "We're becoming a peaceful people, and the arbitrator's word does the work that the sword used to do."

"This country has been in several wars," argued Dick, "and will be in others yet to come. In times of peace a soldier's duty is to fit himself for the war time that is to come. Oh, I believe there's plenty, always, that an American soldier ought to be doing."

"Perhaps. But newspaper work is the next best thing to soldiering, anyway. Prescott, my boy, the reporter of to-day is the descendant of the old free-lance soldier of fortune. It takes a lot of nerve to be a reporter, sometimes, and to do one's work just as it should be done. The reporter's life is almost as full of adventure as the soldier's. And there are no 'peace times' for the reporter. He never knows when his style of 'war' will break out. But I must get back to my work. Are you going to try to bring us in good matter at a dollar a column?"

"Yes, I am, thank you," Dick replied, unhesitatingly, now.

"Good," nodded Mr. Pollock, opening one of the smaller drawers over his desk. "Here's something you can put on and wear."

He held out to the boy an oblong little piece of metal, gold plated.

"It's a badge such as 'The Blade' reporters wear, and has the paper's name on it," continued the editor. "You can pin it on your vest."

"I guess I'd better leave that part out for a while," laughed Dick, drawing back. "The fellows at school wouldn't do a thing to me if they caught me wearing a reporter's badge."

“Oh, just as you please about that,” nodded Mr. Pollock, tossing the badge back into the drawer. “But don’t forget to bring us in something good, Prescott.”

“I won’t forget, Mr. Pollock.”

As Dick went down the street, whistling blithely, he kept his hand in his pocket on the half-dollar. He had had much more money with him a little while before, but that was to pay to some one else. This half-dollar was wholly his own money, and, with the prospect it carried of earning more, the High School boy was delighted. Pocket money had never been plentiful with young Prescott. The new opportunity filled him with jubilation.

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It was not long, however, before a new thought struck him. He went straight to his parents' bookstore, where he found his mother alone, Mr. Prescott being out on business.

To his mother Dick quickly related his new good fortune. Mrs. Prescott's face and words both expressed her pleasure.

"At first, mother, I didn't think of anything but pocket money," Dick admitted. "Then my head got to work a bit. It has struck me that if I can make a little money each week by writing for 'The Blade,' I can pay you at least a bit of the money that you and Dad have to spend to keep me going."

"I am glad you thought of that," replied Mrs. Prescott, patting her boy's hand. "But we shan't look to you to do anything of the sort. Your father and I are not rich, but we have managed all along to keep you going, and I think we can do it for a while longer. Whatever money you can earn, Richard, must be your own. We shall take none of it. But I trust you will learn how to handle your own money wisely. *That* is one of the most valuable lessons to be learned in life."

To his chums, when he saw them later in the afternoon, Dick said nothing of Mr. Pollock's request. The young soph thought it better to wait a while, and see how he got along at amateur reporting before he let anyone else into the secret.

But late that afternoon Dick ran into a matter of interest and took it to "The Blade" office.

"That's all right," nodded Mr. Pollock, after looking over Dick's "copy." "Glad to see you have started in, my boy. Now, I won't pay you for this on the nail. Wait until Saturday morning, cutting all that you have printed out of the 'The Blade.' Paste all the items together, end on end, and bring them to me. That is what reporters call a 'space string.' Bring your 'string' to me every Saturday afternoon. We'll measure it up with you and settle."

Dick hurried away, content. He even found that evening that he could study with more interest, now that he found he had a financial place in life.

In the morning Gridley read and laughed over Dick's item about the High School hoax. But there was one man who saw it at his breakfast table, and who went into a white heat of rage at once. That man was Abner Cantwell, the principal.

He was still at white heat when he started for the High School; though, warned by prudence, he tried to keep his temper down. Nevertheless, there was fire in Mr. Cantwell's eyes when he rang the bell to bring the student body to attention to begin the morning's work.

CHAPTER III

MR. CANTWELL THINKS TWICE—OR OFTENER

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"Young ladies and young gentlemen," began the principal, "a very silly hoax was perpetrated on me yesterday. I do not believe you will have any difficulty in understanding what I mean. But the matter went beyond this school room. An account of the hoax was published in the morning paper, and that holds me up to severe ridicule. I trust that we shall not have any repetition of such childish, so-called jokes. I do not know yet what action I may or may not take in this matter, and can promise nothing. I can and do promise, however, that if any more such hoaxes are attempted I shall do all in my power to ferret out and summarily punish the offenders!-----"

Here the principal's own sense of prudence warned him that he had gone quite as far as was necessary or prudent. So he choked down his rising words and called for the morning singing. Yet, as Mr. Cantwell uttered his last words his glance fell very sternly on one particular young member of the sophomore class. Dick Prescott.

"Prin. has it in for you, old fellow!" whispered Dave Darrin, as he and Dick jostled on the way to a recitation. "But if he has—humph—it won't be long before he finds out that you had some help. You shan't be the scapegoat for all of Dick & Co."

"Don't say anything," Dick whispered back. "I'll find a way to take care of myself. If any trouble is to come, I think I can take care of it. Anyway, I won't have anyone else dragged into it."

But the principal said nothing more during that school session. In the afternoon, however, when Mr. Cantwell took his accustomed walk after dinner, he met several acquaintances who made laughing or casual references to the yarn in the morning's "Blade."

"I've got to stamp this spirit out in the school," decided the principal, again at a white heat. "If I don't I'll soon have some real trouble on hand with these young jackanapes! The idea of their making me—the principal—ridiculous in the town! No school principal can submit to hoaxes like that one without suffering in public esteem. I'll sift this matter down and nip the whole spirit in the bud."

In this Mr. Cantwell was quite possibly at error in judgment. Probably the High School boys wouldn't have played such a prank on good old Dr. Thornton, had he still been their school chief. But, if they had, Dr. Thornton would have admitted the joke good-humoredly and would have taken outside chaffing with a good nature that would have disarmed all wit aimed at him. Mr. Cantwell, as will be seen, lacked the saving grace of a sense of humor. He also lacked ability in handling full-blooded, fun-loving boys.

Wednesday, just before one o'clock, the principal electrified the assembled students by saying, in a voice that was ominously quiet and cool:

“When school is dismissed I shall be glad to have Mr. Prescott remain for a few words with me.”

“Now it’s coming,” thought Dick, though without any particular thrill of dismay.

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He waited while the others filed out. Somehow the big building didn't empty as fast as usual. Had Mr. Cantwell known more about boy nature he would have suspected that several of Dick's friends had remained behind in hiding places of their own choosing.

Dick remained in his seat, coolly turning the pages of his text-book on ancient history.

"Mr. Prescott," called the principal sharply.

"Yes, sir," responded Dick, closing the book, slipping it into his desk, and rising as though to go forward.

"No, no; keep your seat until I am ready to speak with you, Mr. Prescott. But it isn't necessary to read, is it?"

"I was looking through to-morrow's history lesson, sir," Dick replied, looking extremely innocent. "But, of course, I won't if you disapprove."

"Wait until I come back," rapped out the principal, leaving the room. He went out to see that the building was being emptied of students, but of course he failed to discover that a few were hiding as nearly within earshot as they could get.

Two or three of the teachers who had remained behind now left the room. The last to go was Mr. Drake, the submaster. As he went he cast a look at Dick that was full of sympathy, though the submaster, who was a very decent man and teacher, did not by any means intend to foster mutiny in the heart of a High School boy. But Mr. Drake knew that Mr. Cantwell was not fitted either to command respect or to enforce discipline in the High School.

When Mr. Cantwell came back he and the young soph had the great room to themselves.

"Now you may come forward, Mr. Prescott," announced the principal, "and stand in front of the platform."

As Dick went forward there was nothing of undue confidence or any notion of bravado in his bearing. He was not one of those schoolboys who, when brought to task by authority, try to put on a don't-care look. Dick's glance, as he halted before the platform and turned to look at Mr. Cantwell, was one of simple inquiry.

"Mr. Prescott, you are fully informed as to the hoax that was perpetrated on me yesterday morning?"

"You mean the incident of the pennies, I think, sir?" returned the boy, inquiringly.

“You know very well that I do, young man,” retorted Mr. Cantwell, rapping his desk with one hand.

“Yes, sir; I am fully informed about it.”

“And you know who was at the bottom of it, too, Mr. Prescott?”

The principal bent upon the boy a look that was meant to make him quail, but Dick didn't quail.

“Yes, sir,” he admitted, promptly. “I know at least several that had a hand in the affair.”

“And you were one of them?”

“Yes, sir,” admitted the young soph, frankly. “I think I had as much to do with what you term the hoax, sir, as anyone else had.”

“Who were the others?” fired the principal, quickly and sharply.

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"I—I beg your pardon, sir. I cannot answer that."

"You can't? Why not, Mr. Prescott?" demanded the principal.

Again the principal launched his most compelling look.

"Because, sir," answered Dick, quietly, and in a tone in which no sign of disrespect could be detected, "it would strike me as being dishonorable to drag others into this affair."

"You would consider it dishonorable?" cried Mr. Cantwell, his face again turning deathly white with inward rage. "*You*, who admit having had a big hand in what was really an outrage?"

But Dick met and returned the other's gaze composedly.

"The Board of Education, Mr. Cantwell, has several times decided that one pupil in the public schools cannot be compelled by a teacher to bear tales that implicate another student. I have admitted my own share in the joke that has so much displeased you, but I cannot name any others."

"You *must!*" insisted the principal, rising swiftly from his chair.

"I regret to have to say, sir," responded Prescott, quietly, "that I shall not do it. If you make it necessary, I shall have to take refuge behind the rulings of the Board of Education on that point."

Mr. Cantwell glared at Dick, but the latter still met the gaze unflinchingly.

Then the principal began to feel his wrath rising to such a point that he found himself threatened with an angry outburst. As his temper had often betrayed him before in life, Mr. Cantwell, pointing angrily to Dick's place, said:

"Back to your seat, Mr. Prescott, until I have given this matter a little more thought!"

Immediately afterward the principal quitted the room. Dick, after sitting in silence for a few moments, drew his history again from his desk, turned over the pages, found the place he wanted and began to read.

It was ten minutes later when the principal returned to the room. He had been to one of the class rooms, where he had paced up and down until he felt that he could control himself enough to utter a few words. Now, he came back.

"Prescott, I shall have to think over your admission before I come to any decision in the matter. I may not be able to announce my decision for a while. I shall give it most careful thought. In the meantime, I trust, very sincerely, that you will not be caught in

any more mischief—least of all, anything as serious, as revolutionary, as yesterday's outrageous impudence. You may go, now—for to-day!"

"Very good, sir," replied Dick Prescott, who had risen at his desk as soon as Mr. Cantwell began to talk to him. As young Prescott passed from the room he favored the principal with a decorous little bow.

Dave Darrin, Tom Reade, Greg Holmes, Harper and another member of the freshman class, came out of various places of hiding. As he went down the stairs Dick was obliged to tread heavily enough to drown out their more stealthy footfalls.

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Once in the open, Harper and the other freshman scurried away, their curiosity satisfied. But, a moment later, when Mr. Cantwell looked out of the window, he was much surprised to see four members of Dick & Co. walking together, and almost out through the gate.

“Have they been within earshot—listening?” wondered the principal to himself, and jotted down the names of Darrin, Reade and Holmes. The two freshmen, by their prompt departure had saved themselves from suspicion.

On Thursday nothing was said or done about Dick’s case. When Friday’s session drew toward its close young Prescott fully expected to have sentence pronounced, or at least to be directed to remain after school. But nothing of the sort happened. Dick filed out at the week’s end with the rest.

“What do you imagine Prin. can be up to?” Dave Darrin asked, as Dick & Co. marched homeward that early Friday afternoon.

“I don’t know,” Dick confessed. “It may be that Mr. Cantwell is just trying to keep me guessing.”

“If that’s his plan,” inquired Reade, “what are you going to do, old fellow?”

“Perhaps—just possibly—I shall fight back with the same weapon,” smiled Dick.

Mr. Cantwell had, in truth, formed his plan, or as much of it as he could form until he had found just how the land lay, and what would be safe. His present berth, as principal of Gridley H.S., was a much better one than he had ever occupied before. Mr. Cantwell cherished a hope of being able to keep the position for a good many years to come. Yet this would depend on the attitude of the Board of Education. In order not to take any step that would bring censure from the Board, Mr. Cantwell had decided to attend the Board’s next meeting on the following Monday evening, and lay the matter before the members confidentially. If the Board so advised, Mr. Cantwell was personally quite satisfied with the idea of disciplining Dick by dropping him from the High School rolls.

“I’ll protect my dignity, at any cost,” Mr. Cantwell, murmured, eagerly to himself. “After all, what is a High School principal, without dignity?”

Monday afternoon Dick Prescott stepped in at “The Blade” office.

“Got something for us again?” asked Mr. Pollock, looking around.

“Not quite yet,” Dick replied. “I’ve come to make a suggestion.”

“Prescott, suggestions are the food of a newspaper editor. Go ahead.”

“You don’t send a reporter to report the Board of Education meetings, do you?”

“No; those meetings are rarely newsy enough to be worth while. I can’t afford to take up the evening of a salaried reporter in that way. But Spencer generally drops around, at the time the Board is expected to adjourn, or else he telephones the clerk, from this office, and learns what has been done. It’s mostly nothing, you know.”

“Spencer wouldn’t care if he didn’t have to report the Board meetings at all?”

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"Of course not. Len would be delighted at not having anything more to do."

"Then let me go and report the meetings for you, on space."

"My boy, a reporter would starve on that kind of space work. Why, after you put in the whole evening there, you might come to the office only to learn that we didn't consider any of the Board's doings worth space to tell about them."

"Will you let me attend a few of the meetings, and take my chances on the amount of space I can get out of it?"

"Go ahead, Prescott, if you can afford to waste your time in that fashion," replied Mr. Pollock, almost pityingly.

"Thank you. That's what I wanted," acknowledged Dick, and went out very well contented.

When it lacked a few minutes of eight, that evening, all the members of the Board of Education had arrived. It was the same Board as in the year before. All the members had been re-elected at the last city election, though some of them by small majorities. Mr. Gadsby, one of the members who had won by only a slight margin over his opponent, stood with his back to a radiator, warming himself, when he saw the door open.

Mr. Gadsby nodded most genially to Mr. Cantwell, who entered. The principal came straight over to this member, and they shook hands cordially. Mr. Gadsby had been one of the members of the Board who had been most anxious about having Cantwell appointed principal; Cantwell was, in fact, a family connection of Mrs. Gadsby's.

"Coming to make some report, or some suggestion, I take it, eh, Cantwell?" murmured Mr. Gadsby in a low voice. "Most excellent idea, my dear fellow. Keeps you in notice and shows that your heart is in the work. Most excellent idea, really."

"I have a report to make," admitted Mr. Cantwell, in an equally low voice. "I—I find it necessary to make a statement about the doings of a rather troublesome element in the school. Suspension or expulsion may be necessary in order to give the best ideas of good discipline to many of the other students. But I shall state the facts, and ask the Board to advise me as to just what I ought to do in the premises."

"Ask the Board's advice? Most excellent idea, really," murmured Mr. Gadsby. "You can't go wrong then. But—er—what's the nature of the trouble? Who is the offen-----"

Mr. Gadsby was rubbing his hands, under his coat tails, as he felt the warmth from the steam radiator reach them.

“Why, the principal offender is named-----”

Here Mr. Cantwell paused, and looked rather astonished.

“Tell me, Mr. Gadsby, what is Prescott, of the sophomore class, doing here?”

The principal’s glance had just rested on Dick, who sat at a small side table, a little pile of copy paper on the table, a pencil in his hand.

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"Oh—ah—Prescott, Richard Prescott?" inquired Mr. Gadsby. "Some of us were a bit surprised this evening to learn that Prescott, though he will continue to attend High School, has also taken a position with 'The Morning Blade.' Among other things to which he will attend, after this, Cantwell, is the matter of school doings in this city. He is to be the regular reporter of School Board meetings. Rather a young man to wield the power of the press isn't he?" Mr. Gadsby chuckled at his own joke.

"Power of the press?" murmured Mr. Cantwell, uncomfortably. "Surely you don't mean, Gadsby, that this mere boy, this High School student, is going to be taken here seriously as representing the undoubtedly great power of the press?"

"To some extent, yes," admitted Mr. Gadsby. "'The Blade,' as you may know, is a good deal of a power in local politics. Now, some of us—er—did not win our re-elections by any too large margins. A little dangerous opposition to—er—some of us—would mean a few new faces around the table at Board meetings. Mr. Pollock is—er—a most estimable citizen, and a useful man in the community. Yet Mr. Pollock is—er—Cantwell—er—that is, a bit 'touchy.' No matter if Pollock's reporter is a schoolboy, if we treated the boy with any lack of consideration, then Pollock would most certainly take umbrage at what he would choose to consider a slight upon himself, received through his representative. So at these Board meetings, young Prescott will have to be treated with as much courtesy as though he were really a man, for Pollock's hostility would be most disastrous to us—er—to some of us, possibly, I mean. But, really, young Prescott is a most bright and enterprising young fellow, anyway—a very likable boy. *You* like him, don't you, Cantwell?"

"Ye-e-es," admitted the principal, though he added grimly under his breath:

"I like him so well that I could eat him, right now, if I had a little Worcestershire sauce to make him more palatable."

"The Board will please come to order," summoned Chairman Stone, rapping the table with his gavel. "Mr. Reporter, have you good light over at your table."

"Excellent, thank you, Mr. Chairman," Dick replied.

"Er—aren't you going to stay, Cantwell?" demanded Gadsby, as the principal turned to leave the room.

"No; the fact is—I—well, I want to consider my statement a little more before I offer it to the Board. Good evening!"

Mr. Cantwell got out of the room while some of the members were still scraping their chairs into place.

Dick Prescott had not openly looked in the principal's direction. Yet the amateur reporter had taken it all in. He was grinning inside now. He had taken upon himself the work of reporting these meetings that he might be in a position to block any unfair move on the part of the principal.

"I wonder what Mr. Cantwell is thinking about, *now*?" Dick asked himself, with an inward grin as he picked up his pencil.

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That Board meeting was about as dull and uneventful as the average. Yet Dick managed to make a few live paragraphs out of it that Guilford, "The Blade's" news editor, accepted.

It still lacked some minutes of ten o'clock when young Prescott left the morning newspaper office and started briskly homeward.

"I didn't catch that Board-reporting idea a day too soon," the boy told himself, laughing. "Mr. Cantwell was certainly on hand for mischief to-night. But how quickly he made his get-away when he discovered that his culprit was present as a member of the press! I guess Mr. Gadsby must have passed him a strong hint. But I must be careful not to have any malice in the matter. Some evening when Mr. Cantwell does come before the Board with some report I must take pains to give him and his report a nice little notice and ask 'The Blade' folks to be sure to print it. Then—gracious!"

Utterly startled, Dick heard and saw an ugly brickbat whizz by his head. It came out of the dark alley that the sophomore was passing at that moment. And now came another, aimed straight for his head!

CHAPTER IV

DAVE WARNS TIP SCAMMON

There wasn't time to jump out of the way of that second flying missile.

By an instinct of self-preservation young Prescott, instead of trying to leap out of the way, just collapsed, going down to his knees.

As he sank the missile struck the top of his cap, carrying it from his head.

"Hi! Stop that, you blamed rascal!"

It was Dave Darrin's voice that rang out, as that young man came rushing down the street behind Prescott.

Dick in another second was on his feet, crouching low, and running full tilt into the alleyway.

It was Dick's way—to run at danger, instead of away from it.

At his first bound into the alley, Prescott dimly made out some fellow running at the further end.



There was an outlet of escape down there—two of them, in fact, as the indignant pursuer knew. So he put on speed, but soon was obliged to halt, finding that his unknown enemy had gotten away. Here Dick was joined by breathless Dave Darrin, who had followed swiftly.

“You go through there, Dave; I’ll take the other way,” urged Dick, again starting in pursuit.

The unknown one, however, had taken advantage of those few seconds of delay to get safely beyond chase. So the chums met, soon, in a side street.

“His line of retreat was good,” muttered Dick, rather disgustedly.

“Who was it, anyway?” Dave indignantly inquired.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see.”

“Do you suppose it could have been Tip Scammon?” asked Dave, shrewdly.

“Is Tip Scammon back from the penitentiary?”

“Got back this afternoon, and has been showing himself around town this evening,” nodded Dave. “Say, I wonder if he could have been the one who ambushed you?”

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"I don't like to throw suspicion on anyone," Dick replied. "Still, I can't imagine anyone else who would have as much temptation to try to lay me up. Tip Scammon acted as Fred Ripley's tool, last year, in trying to make me out a High School thief. Tip was sent away, and Fred didn't have to suffer at all, because Tip wouldn't betray his employer. But Tip must have felt sore at me many a time when he was breaking rock at the penitentiary."

The two chums walked slowly back to Main Street, still talking.

"I saw you ahead of me, on the street," Dave rattled on. "I was trying to overtake you, without calling, when that thing came whizzing by your head. Say, Dick, I wonder——"

"What?" demanded Prescott.

"Oh, of course, it's a crazy notion. But I was wondering if Mr. Cantwell could have it in for you so hard that he'd put anyone up to lying in ambush for you."

Dick started, then thought a few moments. "No," he decided. "Cantwell may be erratic, and he certainly has a treacherous temper, and some mean ways. But this was hardly the sort of trick he'd go in for."

"Then it was Tip Scammon, all by himself," declared Darrin, with great conviction.

"But to go back to Mr. Cantwell," Dick resumed, with a grin, "I must tell you something really funny. Prin. went to School Board tonight with a long, bright knife sharpened for me. But he didn't do a thing."

Then Prescott confessed to being a "Blade" representative, and told of the principal's visit to the Board, and of his hurried departure.

Dave laughed heartily, though what seemed to amaze him most of all was that Dick had found a chance to write for pay.

"Of course you can do it, Dick," continued his loyal friend, "but I never thought that anyone as young as you ever got the chance."

"It came my way," Dick went on, "and I'm mighty glad it did.
So-----"

"Wow!" muttered Dave, suddenly, then started off at a sprint, as he muttered:

"Here's Tip Scammon now!"

Both boys moved along on a hot run. Tip was walking slowly along Main Street, giving a very good imitation of one unconcerned.

He turned when he heard the running feet behind him, however. His first impulse seemed to be to take to his heels. But the young jailbird quickly changed his mind, and turned to face them, an inquisitive look on his hard cunning face.

"Good evenin', fellers. Where's the fire?" he hailed.

"In my eyes! See it?" demanded Dave Darrin. His dark eyes certainly were flashing as he reached out and seized Tip by one shoulder.

"Now don't ye git festive with *me*!" warned Tip.

"Oh, we don't feel ready for anything more festive than a lynching party," muttered Dave, hotly. "See here, you-----"

"I s'pose ye think ye can do all ye want to me, jest because I've been doin' my stretch?" demanded Tip, aggressively. "But don't be too sure. Take yer hand offen my shoulder!"

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Dave didn't show any sign of immediate intention of complying.

"Take it off!" insisted Tip.

But Dave met the fellow's baleful gaze with a cool, steady look. Tip, muttering something, edged away from under Dave's extended hand.

"Now, ye want'er understand," continued young Scammon, "that I can't be played with, jest because some folks think I'm down. If you come fooling around me you'll have to explain or apologize."

"Tip," questioned Dave Darrin, sharply, "why did you just throw two brickbats at Dick Prescott's head?"

"I didn't," retorted Tip, stolidly.

"You *did*."

"I didn't."

"Tip," declared Dave, solemnly, "I won't call you a liar. I'll just remark that you and truth are strangers."

"I ain't interested in what you fellers got to say," flared Tip, sullenly. "And I don't like your company, neither. So jest skate along."

"We're not going to linger with you, Tip, any longer than seems absolutely necessary," promised Dave, coolly. "But what I want to say is this: If you make any more attempts to do Dick Prescott any harm our crowd will get you, no matter how far we have to go to find you. Is that clear?"

"I s'pose it is, if you say so," sneered young Scammon.

"We'll get you," pursued Dave, "and we'll turn you over to the authorities. One citizen like Dick Prescott is worth more than a million of your stamp. If we find you up to any more tricks against Dick Prescott, or against any of us, for that matter, we'll soon have you doing your second 'stretch,' as you have learned to call a term at the penitentiary. Tip, your best card will be to turn over a very new leaf, and find an honest job. Just because you've been in jail once don't go along with the notion that it's the only place where you can find your kind of company. But whatever you do, steer clear of Dick Prescott and his chums. I think you understand that. Now, go!"

Tip tried to brazen it out, but there was a compelling quality in the clear, steady gaze of Dave Darrin's dark eyes. After a moment Tip Scammon let his own gaze drop. He turned and shuffled away.

“Poor fellow!” muttered Dick.

“Yes, with all my heart,” agreed Dave. “But the fellow doesn’t want to get any notion that he can go about terrorizing folks in Gridley!”

CHAPTER V

RIPLEY LEARNS THAT THE PIPER MUST BE PAID

Scammon, however, knew one person in Gridley whom he thought he could terrorize. He started in promptly to do it.

At three the next afternoon young Scammon loitered under a big, bare oak on one of the winding, little-traveled streets that led from Gridley out into the open country beyond.

In summer it was a favorite thoroughfare, especially for young engaged couples who wanted to loiter along the road, chatting and picking wild flowers.

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In winter, however, the place was usually deserted, being more than a mile out of the city.

As Tip lingered he caught sight of haughty Fred Ripley coming down the road at a fast walk. Fred looked both angry and worried. Tip, as soon as he caught sight of the young fellow who imagined himself an “aristocrat,” began to grin in his evil way.

A dull, sullen, red fired Fred’s cheeks when he caught sight of the one who was waiting for him.

“Ye’re most nearly on time,” Tip informed the other.

“See here, Scammon, what in blazes did you mean by sending me a note like the one I got from you” demanded Fred?

Tip only grinned.

“What did you mean, fellow?” Ripley insisted angrily.

“I meant to get ye here, to let ye know what I had to say to ye,” Scammon retorted.

“Why, confound you, fellow——” Fred began, stuttering a bit, but the other cut in on him in short fashion.

“None o’ that to me, now, Fred Ripley. D’ye hear? Me an’ you used to be pretty good pals, once on a time.”

At this charge, Fred winced very plainly.

“And maybe we’ll be pals, now, too,” Tip pursued, with the air of one who believed himself to be able to dictate terms. “That is, for your sake, I hope we are, Ripley.”

“What are you talking about? What do you want to see me about? Come to the point in mighty few words,” Ripley commanded, impatiently.

“Well, now, first-off, last year, before I went away for my health——” Tip grinned in ghastly fashion ‘ye hired me to do a certain job for ye. Right, so far, ain’t I?”

“Possibly,” assented Fred, coldly.

“Ye hired me to get hold of keys that could be used on one o’ the High School locker rooms,” Tip went on, cunningly. “Ye hired me to steal some stuff from the coats o’ the young gents that study there. Then ye hired me to break inter Dick Prescott’s room and get the loot inter his trunk. Right, ain’t I?”

Tip spoke assertively, making no effort to keep his voice low.

“For goodness’ sake don’t shout it all over four counties,” protested Fred Ripley, glancing apprehensively about him. His face was paler, now, from uneasiness.

“Oh, I ain’t afraid about anyone hearing me,” Tip went on, unconcernedly. “D’ye know why, Fred, my boy? Because I done my stretch for the trick, and there ain’t nuthin’ more comin’ to me on that score. If *you’re* ‘fraid, jest go an’ do yer stretch, like I did, an’ then ye won’t care who hears or knows!”

Tip laughed cunningly. Fred’s face darkened. He squirmed, yet found himself afraid to show anger.

“So I dropped ye that note, tellin’ ye to come here at three this aft’noon,” Scammon continued. “I told ye I hoped ye’d find it convenient to come, an’ hinted that if ye didn’t, ye might wish later, that ye had.”

“I’m here,” retorted the Ripley heir. “Now, what do you want to say to me?”

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"I'm broke," Tip informed Ripley, plaintively. "Stony! Understand? I hain't got no money."

"You don't expect me to furnish you with any?" demanded Fred, his eyes opening wide in astonishment. "I paid you, in full, last year."

"Ye didn't pay me fer the stretch I done, did ye?" demanded Tip, insolently. "How much did ye pay me for keeping my mouth closed, so you wouldn't have to do your stretch?"

Fred winced painfully under that steady, half-ugly glance of the other.

"And now," continued Scammon, in a half-hurt way, "ye think it's hard if I tell ye that I want a few dollars to keep food in my insides."

"You've got your father," hinted Fred.

"Sure, I have," Tip assented.

"But it's mighty little he'll do for me until I get a job and settle down to it."

"Well, why don't you?" asked Fred Ripley. "That's the surest way to get straight with the world."

"When I want advice," sneered Scammon, "I won't tramp all the way out here, an' ask *you* for it. Nope. I don't want advice. What I want is money."

"Oh, well, Tip, I'm sorry for you and your troubles. Here's a dollar for you. I wish I could make it more."

Fred Ripley drew out the greenback, passing it over. Tip took the money, studying it curiously.

"Ye're sorry just a dollar's worth—is that it? Well, old pal, ye'll have to be more sorry'n that. I'll let ye off fer ten dollars, but hand it over quick!"

Fred's first impulse was to get angry, but it didn't take him more than an instant to realize that it would be better to keep this fellow quiet.

"I haven't ten dollars, Tip—on my honor," he protested, hesitatingly.

"On yer—what?" questioned Scammon, with utter scorn.

"I haven't ten dollars."

"How much have ye?"

There was something in Tip's ugly eyes that scared the boy. Fred went quickly through his pockets, producing, finally, six dollars and a half.

"I'll give you six of this, Tip," proposed Fred, rather miserably.

"Ye'll give me *all* of it, ye mean," responded Scammon. "And ye'll meet me to-morrow aft'noon with five more—something for interest, ye know."

"But I won't have five dollars again, as soon as that," argued Fred, weakly.

"Yes, you will," leered Tip. "You'll have to!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Fred, trying to bluster, but making a failure of the attempt.

"It'll take five more to give me lock-jaw," declared Scammon. "I'm jest out of prison, and I mean to enjoy myself restin' a few days before I settle down to a job again. So, to-morrow, turn up with the five!"

"I don't know where to get the money."

"Find out, then," sneered the other. "I don't care where you get it, but you've got to get it and hand it over to me to-morrow, or it'll be too late, an' Gridley'll be too hot a place for 'ye!"

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"I'll try," agreed Ripley, weakly.

"Ye'll do more'n try, 'cause if ye fail me ye'll have no further show," declared Tip, with emphasis.

"See, here, Scammon, if I can find another five—somehow—that'll be the last of this business? You won't expect to get any more money out of me?"

"The five that you're goin' to bring me tomorrow will be in full payment."

"Of all possible claims to date?" Fred insisted.

"Yes, in full—to date," agreed Scammon, grinning as though he were enjoying himself.

"And there'll never be any further demands?" questioned Fred.

"Never again!" Scammon asserted, with emphasis.

"You promise that, solemnly?"

"On my honor," promised the jailbird, sardonically.

"I'll try to get you the money, Tip. But see here, I'll be in front of the drug store next to the post office, at just three o'clock to-morrow afternoon. You stop and look in the same window, but don't speak to me. If I can get the five I'll slip it into your hand. Then I'll move away. You stand looking in the window a minute or so after I leave you, will you?"

"Sure," agreed Scammon, cheerfully.

"And don't do anything so plainly that any passerby can detect the fact that you and I are meeting there. Don't let anyone see what I slip into your hand."

"That'll be all right," declared Tip Scammon, readily enough.

"And mind you, that's the last money you're ever to ask me for."

"That'll be all right, too," came readily enough from the jailbird.

"Then good-bye until to-morrow. Don't follow me too closely."

"Sure not," promised Tip. "Ye don't want anyone to know that I'm your friend, and I'm good at keepin' secrets."

For two or three minutes young Scammon remained standing under the bare tree. But his gaze followed the vanishing figure of Fred Ripley, and a cunning look gleamed in Tip's eyes.

Fred Ripley, when he had heard of Tip going to prison without saying a word, had been foolish enough to suppose that that incident in his own life was closed. Fred had yet to learn that evil remains a long time alive, and that its consequences hit the evil doer harder than the victim.

CHAPTER VI

THE CALL TO THE DIAMOND—FRED SCHEMES

Recess! As the long lines filed rhythmically down from the second floor, thence to the basement, the leaders of the files quickly discovered something new posted on the bulletin board near the boys' locker rooms.

As quickly as the files broke, there was such a rush to see the new bulletin that those who got the best places had to read aloud to others. This was what the bulletin proclaimed:

Notice.

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The gymnasium will be open at 2.30 this afternoon for the gathering of all male students, except freshmen, who may be interested in trying to make either the school or second baseball teams for the coming season. Gridley will have some notable rivals in the field this next year. Information comes that several of school baseball teams will have better material and longer training for next season. It is earnestly desired that all members of the three upper classes who consider themselves capable of making either of the Gridley High School baseball teams be on hand this afternoon, when as full plans as possible will be made.

By order of the Athletics Committee of the Alumni Association.

(signed) Edward Luce, B.B. Coach._

A shout of approval went up from half of those present as Purcell, of the junior class, finished reading.

Many of those who had no thought of making the school or second teams were filled with delight at thought of the training season being so soon to open.

One of the boys who was pleased was Fred Ripley. He had handed that five-dollar bill to Tip Scammon the afternoon before, and now felt rather certain that he had closed the door on the whole Scammon episode.

Like many another haughty, disagreeable person, Ripley had, in spite of his treatment of others, a keen desire to be well thought of. The year before, in the sophomore class, Fred had played as one of the pitchers in the second team, and had done fairly well on the few occasions when he had been given a chance.

"There's no good reason why I can't make the post of pitcher on the school team this year," thought young Ripley, with a thrill of hope and expectant delight.

"Going to show up this afternoon?" asked Dave of Prescott.

"Of course I am, Darrin," answered Prescott, as Dick & Co. met out on the sidewalk.

"Going to try to make the regular team?"

"Of course I am," declared Dick, smiling. "And so, I hope, are every one of you fellows."

"I'd like to," agreed Tom Reade.

"Then don't say you'd *like* to; say you're *going* to," admonished Dick. "The fellow who doesn't quite know never gets much of any place. Just say to yourself that you're going to be one of the stars on the school team. If you have to fall into the second team——"

don't be cast down over it—but make every possible effort toward getting on the top team. That's the spirit that wins in athletics," finished Dick, sagely.

"I'm going to make the school team," announced Dave Darrin. "Not only that, but I'll proclaim it to anyone who'll be kind enough to listen. The school nine, or 'bust,' for me."

"Good enough!" cheered Dick. "Now, then, fellows, we'll all be on hand this afternoon, won't we, and on every other afternoon that we're needed?"

Dick & Co. carried that proposition by a unanimous vote.

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"But see here, fellows," urged Dick Prescott, "just try to keep one idea in mind, please. There's a good deal of objection, every year, that athletics are allowed to interfere with studies. Now, as soon as the end of recess is called to-day, let's every one of us go back with our minds closed to baseball. Let us all keep our minds right on our studies. Why can't we six help to prove that interest in athletics puts the scholarship mark up, not down?"

"We can," nodded Dave Darrin. "Good! I like that idea. We'll simply go ahead and put our scholarship away up over where it is at present."

To this the other chums agreed heartily.

Luce, the coach for baseball, was one of the under submasters. He had made a record at college, for both baseball and scholarship. He was a complete enthusiast on the game of the diamond. The year before he had trained the school nine to a record that beat anything in the High School line in the whole state. His bulletin announced that he intended to try to make the coming nine the best yet. It didn't say that, in so many words, but the bulletin implied it.

Fred Ripley did not hit upon the idea of improved scholarship. Instead, that young man went into two classes, after recess, and reported "not prepared." Then he settled back into a brown study of his chances in baseball.

"I don't suppose Dick & Co. will have the nerve to try for anything better than the second nine," muttered Fred to himself. "Still, one can never tell what that crowd will have the nerve to do!"

School out, Fred hurried home faster than was his wont. He caught his father just as the latter was leaving the lunch table.

"Dad, can I have a few minutes' talk with you about one of my ambitions?" pleaded Fred.

"Certainly, my boy," replied the wealthy, retired lawyer. "I'm glad, indeed, to hear that you have any ambitions. Come into the library, if you can let your luncheon go that long."

"If you don't mind, Dad, I'd rather eat while I talk," urged Fred. "I have to be back at school before three."

"What—under discipline?" inquired the lawyer.

"No, sir; it's baseball that I wish to talk about."

"Well, then, Fred, what is it?" asked his father.

“Why, sir, we’re going to get together on baseball, this afternoon. The start for the season is to be made early this year. Gridley expects to put forth the finest High School nine ever.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” nodded the lawyer. “School and college athletics, rightly indulged in, give the budding man health, strength, courage and discipline to take with him out into the battle of life. We didn’t have much in the way of athletics when I was at college, but I appreciate the modern tendency more than do some men of my age.”

Fred, though not interested in his father’s praise of athletics waited patiently until his parent had finished.

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"I'm pretty sure, Dad, I can make the chance of being the star pitcher on the school team for this coming season, if only you'll back me up in it."

"Why, as far as that goes," replied Lawyer Ripley, "I believe that about all the benefits of school athletics can be gained by one who isn't necessarily right at the top of the crowd."

"But not to go to the top of the crowd, and not to try too, Dad, is contrary to the spirit of athletics," argued Fred, rather cleverly. "Besides, one of the best things about athletics, I think, is the spirit to fight for leadership. That's a useful lesson—leadership—to carry out into life, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes, it is; you're right about that, son," nodded the lawyer.

"Well, sir, Everett, one of the crack pitchers of national fame, is over in Duxbridge for the winter. He doesn't go south with his team for practice until the middle or latter part of February. Duxbridge is only twelve miles from here. He could come over here, or you could let your man take me over to Duxbridge in your auto. Dad, I want to be the pitcher of the crack battery in the school nine. Will you engage Everett, or let me hire him, to train me right from the start in all the best styles of pitching?"

"How much would it cost?" asked the lawyer, cautiously.

"I don't know exactly, sir. A few hundred dollars, probably."

Fred's face was glowing with eagerness. His mother, who was standing just behind him, nodded encouragingly at her husband.

"Well, yes, Fred, if you're sure you can make yourself the star pitcher of the school nine, I will."

"When may I go to see Everett, sir?" asked Fred, making no effort to conceal the great joy this promise had given him.

"Since you're to be engaged for this afternoon, Fred, we'll make it to-morrow. I'll order out the car and go over to Duxbridge with you."

It was in the happiest possible frame of mind, for him, that Fred Ripley went back to the High School that afternoon. He didn't arrive until five minutes before the hour for calling the meeting; he didn't care to be of the common crowd that would be on hand at or soon after two-thirty.

When he entered, he found a goodly and noisy crowd of some eighty High School boys of the three upper classes present. Ripley nodded to a few with whom he was on the best terms.

Settees had been placed at one end of the gym. There was an aisle between two groups of these seats.

"Gentlemen, you'll please come to order, now," called out Coach Luce, mounting to a small platform before the seats.

It took a couple of minutes to get the eager, half-turbulent throng seated in order. Then the coach rapped sharply, and instantly all was silence, save for the voice of the speaker.

"Gentlemen," announced Mr. Luce, "it is the plan to make the next season the banner one in baseball in all our school's history. This will call for some real work, for constantly sustained effort. Every man who goes into the baseball training squad will be expected to do his full share of general gymnastic work here, and to improve every favorable chance for such cross-country running and other outdoor sports as may be ordered.

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"To-day, as we are so close to Christmas, we will arrange only the general details——have a sort of mapping-out, as it were. But immediately after the holidays the entire baseball squad that enrolls will be required to start at once to get in general athletic condition. There will be hard——what some may call grilling——gym. work at the outset, and much of the gym. work will be kept up even after the actual ball practice begins.

"Early in February work in the baseball cage must begin, and it will be made rather severe this year. In fact, I can assure you that the whole training, this coming year, will be something that none but those who mean to train in earnest can get through with successfully.

"Any man who is detected smoking cigarettes or using tobacco in any form, will be dropped from the squad instantly. Every man who enrolls will be required to make a promise to abstain, until the end of the ball season, from tobacco in any form.

"In past years we have often been urged to adopt the training table, in order that no greedy man may eat himself out of physical condition. It is not, of course, feasible to provide such a table here at the gym. I wish it were. But we will have training table to just this extent: Every member of the squad will be handed a list of the things he may eat or drink, and another list of those things that are barred. The only exception, in the way of departure, from the training list, will be the Christmas dinner. Every man who enrolls is in honor bound to stick closely to his list of permissible foods until the end of the training season.

"Remember, this year's work is to be one of the hardest work and all the necessary self-denial. It must be a disciplined and sustained effort for excellence and victory. Those who cannot accept these principles in full are urged not to enroll in the squad at all.

"Now, I will wait five minutes, during which conversation will be in order. When I call the meeting to order again I will ask all who have decided to enter the squad to occupy the seats here at my right hand, the others to take the seats at my left hand."

Immediately a buzz of talk ran around that end of the gym. The High School boys left their seats and moved about, talking over the coach's few but pointed remarks.

"How do you like Mr. Luce's idea, Dick?" asked Tom Reade.

"It's good down to the ground, and all the way up again," Dick retorted, enthusiastically. "His ideas are just the ideas I'm glad to hear put forward. No shirking; every effort bent on excelling, and every man to keep his own body as strong, clean and wholesome as a body can be kept. Why, that alone is worth more than victory. It means a fellow's victory over all sloth and bad habits!"

“Luce meant all he said, too, and the fellows know he did,” declared Dave Darrin. “I wonder what effect it will have on the size of the squad?”

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There was a good deal of curiosity on that score. The five minutes passed quickly. Then Coach Luce called for the division. As the new baseball squad gathered at the right-hand seats there was an eager counting.

"Forty-nine," announced Greg Holmes, as soon as he had finished counting. "Five whole nines and a few extras left over."

"I'm glad to see that Gridley High School grit is up to the old standard," declared Coach Luce, cheerily, after he had brought them to order. "Our squad, this year, contains three more men than appeared last year. It is plain that my threats haven't scared anyone off the Gridley diamond. Now, I am going to write down the names of the squad. Then I will ask each member, as his name is called, to indicate the position for which he wishes to qualify."

There was a buzz of conversation again, until the names had all been written down. Then, after Coach Luce had called for silence, he began to read off the names in alphabetical order.

"Dalzell?" asked the coach, when he had gone that far down on the list.

"First base," answered Dan, loudly and promptly.

"Darrin?"

"Pitcher," responded Dave.

There was a little ripple of surprise. When a sophomore goes in for work in the box it is notice that he has a good opinion of his abilities.

A few more names were called off. Then:

"Hazelton?"

"Short stop," replied Harry, coolly.

"Whew!" An audible gasp of surprise went up and traveled around.

After the battery, the post of short stop is the swiftest thing for which to reach out.

"Holmes?"

"Left field."

"It's plain enough," sneered Fred Ripley to the fellow beside him, "that Dick & Co., reporters and raga-muffins, expect to be two thirds of the nine. I wonder whom they'll allow to hold the other three positions?"

Several more names were called off. Then came:

"Prescott?"

"Pitcher," Dick answered, quietly.

A thrill of delight went through Fred. This was more luck than he had hoped for. What great delight there was going to be in beating out Dick Prescott!

"Reade?"

"Second base."

"Ripley?"

"P-p-pitcher!" Fred fairly stuttered in his eagerness to get the word out emphatically. In fact, the word left him so explosively that several of the fellows caught themselves laughing.

"Oh, laugh, then, hang you all!" muttered Fred, in a low voice, glaring all around him. "But you don't know what you're laughing at. Maybe I won't show you something in the way of real pitching!"

"The first Tuesday after the holidays' vacation the squad will report here for gymnastic work from three-thirty to five," called the coach. "Now, I'll talk informally with any who wish to ask questions."

Fred Ripley's face was aglow with satisfaction. His eyes fairly glistened with his secret, inward triumph.

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“So you think you can pitch, Prescott?” he muttered to himself. “Humph! With the great Everett training me for weeks, I’ll make you look like a pewter monkey, Dick Prescott.”

CHAPTER VII

DAVE TALKS WITH ONE HAND

The next afternoon Fred and his father went over to Duxbridge.

They found the great Everett at home, and not only at home, but willing to take up with their proposal.

The celebrated professional pitcher named a price that caused Lawyer Ripley to hesitate for a few moments. Then catching the appealing look in his son’s face, the elder Ripley agreed to the terms. The training was to be given at Duxbridge, in Everett’s big and almost empty barn.

That night Lawyer Ripley, a man of prompt habit in business, mailed his check for the entire amount.

Fred, in the privacy of his own room, danced several brief but exuberant jigs.

“Now, I’ve got you, Dick Prescott! And I’ve not only got you, but if you come in second to me, I’ll try to keep in such condition that I pitch every important game of the whole season!”

But the next morning the Ripley heir received a sad jolt. In one of his text-books he ran across a piece of cardboard on which was printed, in coarse characters:

“Tuday, same plas, same time. Bring ten. Or don’t, if you dare!”

“That infernal blackmailer, Tip Scammon!” flared Fred indignantly.

In the courage of desperation Fred promptly decided that he would ignore the Scammon rascal. Nor did Fred change his mind. Besides, this afternoon he was due at Duxbridge for his first lesson under the mighty Everett.

So Tip was on hand at the drug store beside the post office, but no Fred came. Tip scowled and hung about in the neighborhood until after four o’clock. Then he went away, a black look indeed on his not handsome face.

Meanwhile, most of the people of Gridley, as elsewhere in the Christian world, were thinking of “Peace on Earth” and all that goes with it. The stores were radiant with

decorations and the display of gifts. The candy stores and hot soda places were doing a rushing business.

Dick, who had been scurrying about in search of a few news paragraphs, and had found them, encountered Dave Darrin. Being something of a capitalist in these days, when "The Blade" was paying him two and a half to three dollars a week, Prescott invited his chum in to have a hot soda. While they were still in the place Laura Bentley and Belle Meade entered. The High School boys lifted their hats courteously to the girls and Dick invited them to have their soda with Dave and himself.

"We hear that baseball is going to be a matter of great enthusiasm during the next few months," said Laura, as they sipped their soda.

"Yes; and the cause of no end of heartburnings and envies," laughed Prescott. "From just after the holidays to some time in April every fellow will be busy trying to make the school team, and will feel aggrieved if he hits only the second team."

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"Who's going to pitch for the school nine?" asked Belle.

"Dick Prescott," declared Dave instantly.

"I'd like to," nodded Dick, "but I've several good men against me. Darrin may take it all away from me. There are eight men down for pitching, altogether, so it isn't going to be an easy cinch for anyone."

"The nine always has more than one pitcher. Why can't *you* make the position of pitcher, too?" asked Belle, looking at Dave.

"Oh, I may make the job of brevet-pitcher on the second nine," Dave laughed goodhumoredly. "The only reason I put my name down for pitcher was so as to make the fight look bigger."

"Who are the other candidates for pitcher?" asked Laura.

"Well, Ripley's one," replied Dave.

"Ripley? Oh, *he*!" uttered Miss Bentley, in a tone of scorn.

"I understand he's no fool of a pitcher," Dick remarked.

"I congratulate him, then," smiled Laura.

"On what?"

"Not being a fool in everything," returned Laura. Then she added, quickly:

"I'm afraid that expresses my real opinion, but I've no right to say it."

"There are two reasons why you shouldn't say it," added Dave, gravely.

"What are they?" Laura wanted to know.

"First of all—well, pardon me, but it sounds like talking about another behind his back. The other reason is that Ripley isn't worth talking about, anyway."

"Now, what are you doing?" demanded Belle.

"Oh, well," Dave replied, "Ripley knows my opinion of him pretty well. But what are you doing this afternoon?"

"We're going shopping," Laura informed the boys as the quartette left the soda fountain. "Do you care to go around with us and look at the displays in the stores?"

"That's about all shopping means, isn't it?" smiled Dick. "Just going around and looking at things?"

"Then if you don't care to come with us-----" pouted Miss Bentley.

"Stop—please do, I beg of you," Dick hastily added. "Of course we want to go."

The two chums put in a very pleasant hour wandering about through the stores with the High School girls. Laura and Belle *did* make some small purchases of materials out of which they intended to make gifts for the approaching holiday.

As they came out of the last store they moved toward the corner, the girls intending to take a car to pay a little visit to an aunt of Laura's before the afternoon was over.

Dick saw something in one of the windows at the corner and signed to Dave to come over. The two girls were left, momentarily, standing on the corner.

While they stood thus Fred Ripley came along. His first lesson in pitching had been brief, the great Everett declining to tire the boy's arm too much at the first drill. So young Ripley, after a twelve-mile trip in the auto through the crisp December air, came swinging down the street at a brisk walk.

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Just as this moment he espied the two girls, though he did not see Dick or Dave. Belle happened to turn as Ripley came near her.

"Hullo, Meade!" he called, patronizingly.

It is a trick with some High School boys thus to address a girl student by her last name only, but it is not the act of a gentleman. Belle resented it by stiffening at once, and glancing coldly at Ripley without greeting him.

In another instant Dave Darrin, at a bound, stood before the astonished Fred. Dave's eyes were flashing in a way they were wont to do when he was thoroughly angry.

"Ripley—you cur! To address a young woman in that familiar fashion!" glared Dave.

"What have you to say about it?" demanded Fred, insolently.

"This!" was Dave Darrin's only answer in words.

Smack! His fist landed on one side of Fred's face. The latter staggered, then slipped to the ground.

"There's the car, Dick," uttered Dave, in a low tone. "Put the girls aboard."

Half a dozen passers-by had already turned and were coming back to learn the meaning of this encounter. Dick understood how awkward the situation would be for the girls, so he glided forward, hailed the car, and led Laura and Belle out to it.

"But I'd rather stay," whispered Belle, in protest. "I want to make sure that Dave doesn't get into any trouble."

"He won't," Dick promised. "It'll save him annoyance if he knows you girls are not being stared at by curious rowdies."

Dick quickly helped the girls aboard the car, then nodded to the conductor to ring the bell. A second later Dick was bounding back to his chum's side.

Fred Ripley was on his feet, scowling at Dave Darrin. The latter, though his fists were not up, was plainly in an attitude where he could quickly defend himself.

"That was an unprovoked assault, you rowdy!" Fred exclaimed wrathfully.

"I'd trust to any committee of *gentlemen* to exonerate me," Dave answered coolly. "You acted the rowdy, Ripley, and you'd show more sense if you admitted it and reformed."

"What did he do?" demanded one of the curious ones in the crowd.



"He addressed a young lady with offensive familiarity," Dave replied hotly.

"What did *you* do?" demanded another in the crowd.

"I knocked him down," Dave admitted coolly.

"Well, that's about the proper thing to do," declared another bystander. "The Ripley kid has no kick coming to him. Move on, young feller!"

Fred started, glaring angrily at the speaker. But half a dozen pressed forward about him. Ripley's face went white with rage when he found himself being edged off the sidewalk into the gutter.

"Get back, there, you, and leave me alone!" he ordered, hoarsely.

A laugh from the crowd was the first answer. Then some one gave the junior a shove that sent him spinning out into the street.

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Ripley darted by the crowd now, his caution and his dread of too much of a scene coming to his aid. Besides, some one had just called out, banteringly:

“Why not take him to the horse trough?”

That decided Fred on quick retreat. Ducked, deservedly, by a crowd on Main Street, Ripley could never regain real standing in the High School, and he knew that.

As soon as they could Dick and Dave walked on to “The Blade” office. Here Darrin took a chair in the corner, occasionally glancing almost enviously at Prescott, as the latter, seated at a reporter’s table, slowly wrote the few little local items that he had picked up during the afternoon. When Dick had finished he handed his “copy” to Mr. Pollock, and the chums left the office.

“Dick, old fellow,” hinted Dave, confidentially, “I’m afraid I ought to give you a tip, even though it does make me feel something like a spy.”

“Under such circumstances,” smiled Prescott, “it might be well to think twice before giving the tip.”

“I’ve thought about it *seventeen* times already,” Dave asserted, gravely, “and you’re my chum, anyway. So here goes. When we were in the department store, do you remember that the girls were looking over some worsteds, or yarns, or whatever you call the stuff?”

“Yes,” Prescott nodded.

“Well, I couldn’t quite help hearing Laura Bentley say to Belle that the yarn she picked up was just what she wanted for you.”

“What on earth did that mean?” queried Dick, looking almost startled.

“It means that you’re going to get a Christmas present from Laura,” Dave answered.

“But I never had a present from a girl before!”

“Most anything is likely to happen,” laughed Dave, “now that you’re a sophomore—and a reporter, too.”

“Thank goodness I’m earning a little money now,” murmured Dick, breathing a bit rapidly. “But, say, Dave!”

“Well?”

“What on earth does one give a girl at Christmas?”



“Tooth-powder, scented soap, ribbons—oh, hang it! I don’t know,” floundered Dave hopelessly. “Anyway, I don’t have to know. It’s your scrape, Dick Prescott!”

“Yours, too, Dave Darrin!”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, I saw Belle buying some of that yarny stuff, too.”

“Great Scott!” groaned Dave. “Say, what do you suppose they’re planning to put up on us for a Christmas job? Some of those big-as-all-outdoors, wobbly, crocheted slippers?”

CHAPTER VIII

HUH? WOOLLY CROCHETED SLIPPERS

The night before Christmas Dick Prescott attended a ball, in his new capacity of reporter.

Being young, also “green” in the ways of newspaper work, he imagined it his duty to remain rather late in order to be sure that he had all the needed data for the brief description that he was to write for “The Blade.”

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Christmas morning the boy slept late, for his parents did not call him. When, at last, Dick did appear in the dining room he found some pleasing gifts from his father and mother. When he had sufficiently examined them, Mrs. Prescott smiled as she said:

“Now, step into the parlor, Richard, and you’ll find something that came for you this morning.”

“But, first of all, mother, I’ve something for you and Dad.”

Dick went back into his room, bringing out, with some pride, a silver-plated teapot on a tray of the same material. It wasn’t much, but it was the finest gift he had ever been able to make his parents. He came in for a good deal of thanks and other words of appreciation.

“But you’re forgetting the package in the parlor,” persisted Mrs. Prescott presently.

Dick nodded, and hurried in, thinking to himself:

“The worsted slippers from the girls, I suppose.”

To his surprise the boy found Dave Darrin sitting in the room, while, on a chair near by rested a rather bulky package.

After exchanging “Merry Christmas” greetings with Darrin, Dick turned to look at the package. To it was tied a card, which read:

“From Laura Bentley and Isabelle Meade, with kindest Christmas greetings.”

“That doesn’t look like slippers, Dave,” murmured Dick, as he pulled away the cord that bound the package.

“I’ll bet you’re getting a duplicate of what came to me,” Darrin answered.

“What was that?”

“I’m not going to tell you until I see yours.”

Dick quickly had the wrapper off, unfolding something woolleny.

“That’s it!” cried Dave, jubilantly. “I thought so. Mine was the same, except that Belle’s name was ahead of Laura’s on the card.”

Dick felt almost dazed for an instant. Then a quick rush of color came to his face.

The object that he held was a bulky, substantial, woven “sweater.” Across the front of it had been worked, in cross-stitch, the initials, “G.H.S.”

“Gridley High School! Did you get one just like this, Dave?”

“Yes.”

“But we can’t wear ’em,” muttered Dick. “The initials are allowed only to the students who have made some school team, or who have captured some major athletic event. We’ve never done either.”

“That’s just the point of the gift, I reckon,” beamed Darrin.

“Oh, I see,” cried Dick. “These sweaters are our orders to go ahead and make the baseball nine.”

“That’s just it,” declared Dave.

“Well, it’s mighty fine of the girls,” murmured Dick, gratefully. “Are you—going to accept yours, Dave?”

“Accept?” retorted Dave. “Why, it would be rank not to.”

“Of course,” Prescott agreed.. “But you know what acceptance carries with it? Now, we’ve got to make the nine, whether or not. We pledge ourselves to that in accepting these fine gifts.”

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"Oh, that's all right," nodded Dave, cheerily. "You're going to make the team."

"If there's any power in me to do it," declared Dick.

"And you're going to drag me in after you. Dick, old fellow, we've absolutely as good as promised that we will make the nine."

Dick Prescott was now engaged in pulling the sweater over his head. This accomplished, he stood surveying himself in the glass.

"Gracious! But this is fine," gasped young Prescott. "And now, oh, Dave, but we've got to hustle! Think how disgusted the girls will be if we fail."

"We can't fail, now," declared Dave earnestly. "The girls, and the sweaters themselves, are our mascots against failure."

"Good! That's the right talk!" cheered Prescott, seizing his chum's hand. "Yes, sir! We'll make the nine or bury ourselves under a shipload of self-disgust!"

"Both of the girls must have a hand in each sweater," Dave went on, examining Dick's closely. "I can't see a shade of difference between yours and mine. But I'm afraid the other fellows in Dick & Co. will feel just a bit green with envy over our good luck."

"It's a mighty fine gift," Dick went on, "yet I'm almost inclined to wish the girls hadn't done it. It must have made a big inroad in their Christmas money."

"That's so," nodded Darrin, thoughtfully. "But say, Dick! I'm thundering glad I got wind of this before it happened. Thank goodness we didn't have to leave the girls out. Though we would have missed if it hadn't been for you."

"I wonder how the girls like their gifts?" mused Dick.

It was sheer good luck that had enabled these youngsters to make a good showing. A new-style device for women, consisting of heater and tongs for curling the hair, was on the market this year. Electric current was required for the heater, but both Laura and Belle had electric light service in their homes. This new-style device was one of the fads of this Christmas season. The retail price was eight dollars per outfit, and a good many had been sold before the holidays. The advertising agent for the manufacturing concern had been in town, and had presented "The Blade" with two of these devices. Despite the eight-dollar price, the devices cost only a small fraction of that amount to manufacture, so the advertising agent had not been extremely generous in leaving the pair.

"What on earth shall we do with them?" grunted Pollock, in Dick's hearing. "We're all bachelors here."

“Sell ’em to me, if you don’t want ’em,” spoke up Dick, quickly. “What’ll you take for ’em? Make it low, to fit a schoolboy’s shallow purse.”

“Hm! I’ll speak to the proprietor about it,” replied Pollock, who presently brought back the word:

“As they’re for you, Dick, the proprietor says you can take the pair for two-fifty. And if you’re short of cash, I’ll take fifty cents a week out of your space bill until the amount is paid.”

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"Fine and dandy!" uttered Dick, his eyes glowing.

"One's for your mother," hinted Mr. Pollock teasingly. "*But who's the girl?*"

"Two girls," Dick corrected him, unabashed. "My mother never uses hair-curlers."

"*Two girls?*" cried Mr. Pollock, looking aghast. "Dick! Dick! You study history at the High School, don't you?"

"Yes, sir; of course."

"Then don't you know, my boy, how often *two girls* have altered the fates of whole nations? Tremble and be wise!"

"I haven't any girl," Dick retorted, sensibly, "and I think a fellow is weak-minded to talk about having a girl until he can also talk authoritatively on the ability to support a wife. But there's a good deal of social life going on at the High School, Mr. Pollock, and I'm very, very glad of this chance to cancel my obligations so cheaply and at the same time rather handsomely."

So Laura and Belle had each received, that Christmas morning, a present that proved a source of delight.

"Yet I didn't expect the foolish boys to send me anything like this," Laura told herself, rather regretfully. "I'm sure they've pledged their pocket money for weeks on this."

When Belle called, it developed that she had received an identical gift.

"It's lovely of the boys," Belle admitted. "But it's foolish, too, for they've had to use their pocket money away ahead, I'm certain."

Dick and Dave had sent their gifts, as had the girls, in both names.

Christmas was a day of rejoicing among all of the High School students except the least-favored ones.

Fred Ripley, however, spent his Christmas day in a way differing from the enjoyments of any of the others. A new fever of energy had seized the young man. In his fierce determination to carry away the star pitchership, especially from Dick Prescott, Ripley employed even Christmas afternoon by going over to Duxbridge and taking another lesson in pitching from the great Everett.

CHAPTER IX

FRED PITCHES A BOMBSHELL INTO TRAINING CAMP

“One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four!”

“Halt! Rest!”

“Attention! Overhead to front and back. Commence! One, two, three, four!”

Coach Luce’s voice rang out in a solid, carrying tone of military command.

The baseball squad was hard at work in the gymnasium, perspiring even though the gym. was not heated above fifty degrees.

Dumb-bell drill was going off with great snap. It was followed by work with the Indian clubs. Then, after a brief rest, the entire squad took to the track in the gallery. For ten minutes the High School young men jogged around the track. Any fellow in the lot would have been ashamed to drop out, short of breath.

As a matter of fact, no one was out of breath. Mr. Luce was what the boys called a “griller,” and he certainly knew all about whipping a lot of youngsters into fine physical shape.

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This training work was now along in the third week of the new winter term.

Three times weekly the squad had been assembled. On other days of the week, the young men were pledged to outside running, when the roads permitted, and to certain indoor work at other times.

Every member of the big squad now began to feel “hard as nails.” Slight defects in breathing had been corrected; lung-power had been developed, and backs that ached at first, from the work, had now grown too well seasoned to ache. Every member of the squad was conscious of a new, growing muscular power. Hard, bumpy muscles were not being cultivated. The long, smooth, lithe and active “Indian” muscle, built more for endurance than for great strength, was the ideal of Coach Luce.

After the jogging came a halt for rest. Luce now addressed them.

“Young gentlemen, I know, well enough, that, while all this work is good for you, you’re all of you anxious to see the production of the regular League ball on this floor. Now, the baseball cage will not be put up for a few days yet. However, this afternoon, for the rest of our tour, I’m going to produce the ball!”

A joyous “hurrah!” went up from the squad. The ball was the real thing in their eyes.

Coach Luce turned away to one of the spacious cupboard lockers, returning with a ball, still in the sealed package, and a bat with well wrapped handle.

“I’ll handle the bat,” announced Mr. Luce, smiling. “It’s just barely possible that I, can drive a good liner straighter than some of you, and put it nearer where I want it. Until the cage is in place, I don’t like to risk smashing any of the gymnasium windows. Now, which one of you pitchers is ambitious to do something?”

Naturally, all of them were. Yet none liked to appear too forward or greedy, so silence followed.

“I’ll try you modest young men out on my own lines, then,” laughed the coach. Calling to one of the juniors to stand behind him as catcher, Luce continued:

“Darrin, as you’re a candidate for pitcher, show us some of the things you can do to fool a batsman.”

Dave took his post, his face a bit red. He handled the ball for a few moments, rather nervously.

“Don’t get rattled, lad,” counseled the coach. “Remember, this is just fun. Bear in mind that you’re aiming to send the ball in to the catcher. Don’t let the ball drive through a window by mistake.”

A laugh went up at this. Dave, instead of losing his nerve, flashed back at the squad, then steadied himself.

“Now, then, let her drive—not too hard,” ordered Mr. Luce.

Dave let go with what he thought was an outcurve. It didn’t fool the coach. He deliberately struck the ball, sending it rolling along the floor as a grounder.

“A little more twist to the wrist, Darrin,” counseled the coach, after a scout from the squad had picked up the ball and sent it to this budding pitcher.

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Dave's next delivery was struck down as easily. Then Darrin began to grow a bit angry and much more determined.

"Don't feel put out, Darrin," counseled the coach. "I had the batting record of my college when I was there, and I'm in better trim and nerve than you are yet. Don't be discouraged."

Soon Dave was making a rather decent showing.

"I'll show you later, Darrin, a little more about the way to turn the hand in the wrist twist," remarked the coach, as he let Dave go. "You'll soon have the hang of the thing. Now, Prescott, you step into the imaginary box, if you please."

Dick took to an inshoot. His first serve was as easily clouted as Dave's had been. After that, by putting on a little more steam, and throwing in a good deal more calculation, Dick got three successive balls by Mr. Luce. At two of these, coach had struck.

"You're going to do first-rate, Prescott, by the time we get outdoors, I think;" Mr. Luce announced. "I shall pay particular attention to your wrist work."

"I'm afraid I showed up like a lout," whispered Dave, as Dick rejoined his chums.

"No, you didn't," Dick retorted. "You showed what all of us show—that you need training to get into good shape. That's what the coach is working with us for."

"I'm betting on you and Dick for the team," put in Tom Reade, quickly.

"Dick will make it, and I think you will, too, Dave," added Harry Hazelton.

"I wish I were as sure for myself," muttered Greg Holmes, plaintively.

"Oh, well, if I can't make the team," grinned Dan Dalzell, "I'm going to stop this work and go in training as a mascot."

"Look at the fellow who always carries Luck in his pocket!" giped Hazelton, good-humoredly.

Coach Luce was now calling off several names rapidly. These young men were directed to scatter on the gym. floor. To one of them Mr. Luce tossed the ball.

"Now, then," shot out Luce's voice, "this is for quick understanding and judgment. Whoever receives the ball will throw it without delay to anyone I name. So post yourselves on where each other man stands. I want fast work, and I want straight, accurate work. But no amount of speed will avail, unless the accuracy is there. *And vice versa!*"

For five minutes this was kept up, with a steam engine idea of rapidity of motion. Many were the fumbles. A good deal of laughter came from the sides of the gym.

“Myself!” shouted Luce, just as one of the players received the ball. The young man with the ball looked puzzled for an instant. Then, when too late to count, the young man understood and drove the ball for the coach.

“Not quick enough on judgment,” admonished Mr. Luce. “Now, we’ll take another look at the style of an ambitious pitcher or two. Ripley, suppose you try?”

Fred started and colored. Next, he looked pleased with himself as he strode jauntily forward.

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"May I ask for my own catcher, sir?" Fred asked.

"Yes; certainly," nodded the coach.

"Rip must have something big up his sleeve, if any old dub of a catcher won't do," jeered some one at the back of the crowd.

"Attention! Rip, the ladylike twirler!" sang out another teasing student.

"Let her rip, Rip!"

A good many were laughing. Fred was not popular. Many tolerated him, and some of the boys treated him with a fair amount of comradeship. Yet the lawyer's son was no prime favorite.

"Order!" rapped out the coach, sharply. "This is training work. You'll find the minstrel show, if that's what you want, at the opera house next Thursday night."

"How well the coach keeps track of minstrel shows!" called another gibing voice.

"That was you, Parkinson!" called Mr. Luce, with mock severity. "Run over and harden your funny-bone on the punching bag. Run along with you, now!"

Everybody laughed, except Parkinson, who grinned sheepishly.

"Training orders, Parkinson!" insisted the coach. "Trot right over and let the funny-bone of each arm drive at the bag for twenty-five times. Hurry up. We'll watch you."

So Mr. Parkinson, of the junior class, seeing that the order was a positive one, had the good sense to obey. He "hardened" the funny-bone of either arm against the punching bag to the tune of jeering laughter from the rest of the squad. That was Coach Luce's way of dealing with the too-funny amateur humorist.

Fred, meantime, had selected his own catcher, and had whispered some words of instruction to him.

"Now, come on, Ripley," ordered Mr. Luce, swinging his bat over an imaginary plate. "Let her come in about as you want to."

"He's going to try a spit ball," muttered several, as they saw Fred moisten his fingers.

"That's a hard one for a greenhorn to put over," added another.

Fred took his place with a rather confident air; he had been drilling at Duxbridge for some weeks now.

Then, with a turn of his body, Ripley let the ball go off of his finger tips. Straight and rather slowly it went toward the plate. It looked like the easiest ball that had been sent in so far. Coach Luce, with a calculating eye, watched it come, moving his bat ever so little. Then he struck. But the spit ball, having traveled to the hitting point, dropped nearly twenty inches. The bat fanned air, and the catcher, crouching just behind the coach, gathered in the ball.

Luce was anything but mortified. A gleam of exultation lit up his eyes as he swung the bat exultantly over his head. In a swift outburst of old college enthusiasm he forgot most of his dignity as a submaster.

“Wow!” yelled the coach. “That was a *bird*! A lulu-cooler and a scalp-taker! Ripley, I reckon you’re the new cop that runs the beat!”

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It took the High School onlookers a few seconds to gather the full importance of what they had seen. Then a wild cheer broke loose:

“Ripley? Oh, Ripley’ll pitch for the nine!” surged up on all sides.

CHAPTER X

DICK & CO. TAKE A TURN AT FEELING GLUM

“What’s the matter with Ripley?” yelled one senior.

And another answered, hoarsely:

“Nothing! He’s a wonder!”

Fred Ripley was unpopular. He was regarded as a cad and a sneak. But he could pitch ball! He could give great aid in bringing an unbroken line of victories to Gridley. That was enough.

By now Coach Luce was a bit red in the face. He realized that his momentary relapse into the old college enthusiasm had made him look ridiculous, in his other guise of High School submaster.

But when the submaster coach turned and saw Parkinson butting his head against the punching bag he called out:

“What’s the matter, Parkinson?”

“Subbing for you, sir!”

That turned the good-natured laugh of a few on Mr. Luce. Most of those present, however, had not been struck by the unusualness of his speech.

Dick and Dave looked hard at each other. Both boys wanted to make the team as pitchers. Yet now it seemed most certain that Fred Ripley must stand out head and shoulders over any other candidates for the Gridley box.

Dick’s face shone with enthusiasm, none the less. If he couldn’t make the nine this year, he could at least feel that Gridley High School was already well on toward the lead over all competing school nines.

“I wish it were somebody else,” muttered Dave, huskily, in his chum’s ear.

“Gridley is fixed for lead, anyway,” replied Dick, “if Ripley can always keep in such form as that.”

“Can Ripley do it again?” shouted one Gridley senior.

“Try it, and see, Ripley,” urged Mr. Luce, again swinging his bat.

Fred had been holding the returned ball for a minute or two. His face was flushed, his eyes glowing. Never before had he made such a hit among his schoolmates. It was sweet, at last, to taste the pleasures of local fame.

He stood gazing about him, drinking in the evident delight of the High School boys. In fact he did not hear the coach’s order until it came again.

“Try another one, Ripley!”

The young man moistened his fingers, placing the ball carefully. Of a sudden his arm shot out. Again the coach struck for what looked a fair ball, yet once more Mr. Luce fanned air and the catcher straightened up, ball in hand.

Pumph! The lazily thrown ball landed in Ripley’s outstretched left. He moistened his fingers, wet the ball, and let drive almost instantly. For the third time Mr. Luce fanned out.

Then Fred spoke, in a tone of satisfied self-importance:

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“Coach, that’s all I’ll do this afternoon, if you don’t mind.”

“Right,” nodded Mr. Luce. “You don’t want to strain your work before you’ve really begun it any other candidates for pitching want to have a try now?”

As the boys of the squad waited for an answer, a low laugh began to ripple around the gym. The very idea of any fellow trying after Ripley had made his wonderful showing was wholly funny!

Coach Luce called out the names of another small squad to scatter over the gym. and to throw the ball to anyone he named. Except for the few who were in this forced work, no attention was paid to the players.

Fred Ripley had walked complacently to one side of the gym. A noisy, gleeful group formed around him.

“Rip, where did you ever learn that great work?”

“Who taught you?”

“Say, how long have you been hiding that thousand-candle-power light under a bushel?”

“Rip, it was the greatest work I ever saw a boy do.”

“Will you show me—after the nine has been made up, of course?”

“How did you ever get it down so slick?”

This was all meat to the boy who had long been unpopular.

“I always was a pretty fair pitcher, wasn’t I?” asked Fred.

“Yes; but never anything like the pitcher you showed us to-day,” glowed eager Parkinson.

“I’ve been doing a good deal of practicing and study since the close of last season,” Fred replied importantly. “I’ve studied out a lot of new things. I shan’t show them all, either, until the real season begins.”

Fred’s glance, in roaming around, took in Dick & Co. For once, these six very popular sophomores had no one else around them.

“Whew! I think I’ve taken some wind out of the sails of Mr. Self-satisfied Prescott,” Fred told himself jubilantly. “We shan’t hear so much about Dick & Co. for a few months!”



“Well, anyway, Dick,” said Tom Reade, “you and Dave needn’t feel too badly. If Ripley turns out to be the nine’s crack pitcher, the nine also carries two relief pitchers. You and Dave have a chance to be the relief pitchers. *That* will make the nine for you both, anyway. But, then, that spitball may be the only thing Ripley knows.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” returned Prescott, shaking his head. “If Ripley can do that one so much like a veteran, then he knows other styles of tossing, too. I’m glad for Gridley High School—mighty glad. I wouldn’t mind on personal grounds, either, if only---if-----”

“If Fred Ripley were only a half decent fellow,” Harry Hazelton finished for him.

Coach Luce soon dismissed the squad for the day. A few minutes later the boys left the gym. in groups. Of course the pitching they had seen was the sole theme. Ripley didn’t have to walk away alone to-day. Coach Luce and a dozen of the boys stepped along with him in great glee.

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"It's Rip! Old Rip will be the most talked about fellow in any High School league this year," Parkinson declared, enthusiastically.

Even the fellows who actually despised Fred couldn't help their jubilation. Gridley was strong in athletics just because of the real old Gridley High School spirit. Gridley's boys always played to win. They made heroes of the fellows who could lead them to victory after victory.

Fred was far on his way home ere the last boy had left him.

"I'll get everything in sight now," Ripley told himself, in ecstasy, as he turned in at the gateway to his home. "Why, even if Prescott does get into the relief box, I can decide when he shall or shall not pitch. I'll never see him get a *big* game to pitch in. Oh, but this blow to-day has hurt Dick Prescott worse than a blow over the head with an iron stake could. I've wiped him up and put him down again. I've made him feel sick and ashamed of his puny little inshoot! Prescott, you're mine to do as I please with on this year's nine—if you can make it at all!"

In truth, though young Prescott kept a smiling face, and talked cheerily, he could hardly have been more cast down than he was. Dick always went into any sport to win and lead, and he had set his heart on being Gridley's best man in the box. But now-----

Dick & Co. all felt that they needed the open air after the grilling and the surprise at the gym. So they strolled, together, on Main Street, for nearly an hour ere they parted and went home to supper.

The next day the talk at school was mostly about Ripley, or "Rip," as he was now more intimately called.

Even the girls took more notice of him. Formerly Fred hadn't been widely popular among them. But now, as the coming star of the High School nine, and a new wonder in the school firmament, he had a new interest for them.

Half the girls, or more, were "sincere fans" at the ball games. Baseball was so much of a craze among them that these girls didn't have to ask about the points of the game. They knew the diamond and most of its rules.

Incense was sweet to the boy to whom it had so long been denied, but of course it turned "Rip's" head.

CHAPTER XI

THE THIRD PARTY'S AMAZEMENT

Eleven o'clock pealed out from the steeple of the nearest church.

The night was dark. Rain or snow was in the air.

In a shadow across the street hung Tip Scammon. His shabby cap was pulled down over his eyes, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his ragged reefer. Tip's eyes were turned toward the Ripley home opposite.

"To think o' that feller in a fine, warm, soft bed nights, an' all the swell stuff to eat at table!" muttered Tip, enviously. "And then me, out in the cold, wearing a tramp's clothes! Never sure whether to-morrer has a meal comin' with it! But, anyway, I can make that Ripley kid dance when I pull the string! He dances pretty tolerable frequent, too! He's got to do it to-night, an' he'd better hurry up some!"

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Soon after the sound of the striking clock had died away, Tip's keen eyes saw a figure steal around one side of the house from the rear.

"Here comes Rip, now. He's on time," thought Tip. "Huh! It's a pity—fer—him that he wouldn't take a new think an' chase me. But he's like most pups that hire other folks to do their tough work—they hain't 't got no nerve o' their own."

Fred came stealthily out of the yard, after looking back at the house. He went straight up to young Scammon.

"So here ye are, pal," laughed Tip. "Glad ye didn't keep me waitin'. Ye brought the wherewithal?"

"See here, Tip, you scoundrel," muttered Fred, hoarsely, a worried look showing in his eyes, "I'm getting plumb down to the bottom of anything I can get for you."

"I told ye to bring twenty," retorted young Scammon, abruptly. "That will be enough."

"I couldn't get it," muttered Fred.

"Now, see here, pal," warned Tip, threateningly, "don't try to pull no roots on me. Ye can get all the money ye want."

"I couldn't this time," Fred contended, stubbornly. "I've got eleven dollars, and that's every bit I could get my hands on."

"But I've *got* to have twenty," muttered Tip, fiercely. "Now, ye trot back and look through yer Sunday-best suit. You have money enough; yer father's rich, an' he gives ye a lot. Now, ye've no business spendin' any o' that money until ye've paid me what's proper comin' to me. So back to the house with ye, and get the rest o' yer money!"

"It's no use, Tip. I simply can't get another dollar. Here's the eleven, and you'd better be off with it. I can't get any more, either, inside of a fortnight."

"See here," raged young Scammon, "if ye think ye can play-----"

"Take this money and get off," demanded Fred, impatiently. "I'm going back home and to bed."

"I guess, boy, it's about time fer me to see your old man," blustered Tip. "If I hold off until to-morrer afternoon, will ye have the other nine, an' an extry dollar fer me trouble?"

"No," rasped Fred. "It's no use at all—not for another fortnight, anyway. Good night!"



Turning, Fred sped across the street and back under the shadows at the rear of the lawyer's great house.

"I wonder if the youngker's gettin' wise?" murmured Tip. "He ain't smart enough to know that fer him to go to his old man an' tell the whole yarn 'ud be cheapest in the run. The old man 'ud be mad at Rip, but the old man's a lawyer, an' 'ud know how to lay down the blackmail law to me!"

Feeling certain that he was wholly alone by this time, Tip had spoken the words aloud or sufficiently so for him to be heard a few feet away by any lurker.

Shivering a bit, for he was none too warmly clad, young Scammon turned, making his way up the street.

Fully two minutes after Tip had gone his way Dick Prescott stepped out from behind the place where Tip had been standing.

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There was a queer and rather puzzled look on Dick's face.

"So Fred's paying Tip money, and Tip knows it's blackmail?" muttered the sophomore. "That can mean just one thing then. When Tip held his tongue before and at his trial, last year, he was looking ahead to the time when he could extort money by threatening Fred. And now Tip's doing it. That must be the way he gets his living. Whew, but Ripley must be allowed a heap of spending money if he can stand that sort of drain!"

How Dick came to be on hand at the time can be easily explained. Earlier in the evening he had been at "The Blade" office. Mr. Pollock had asked him to go out on a news story that could be obtained by calling upon a citizen at his home. The story would be longer than Dick usually succeeded in turning in. It looked attractive to a boy who wanted to earn money, so the sophomore eagerly accepted the assignment.

As it happened, Dick had had to wait a long time at the house at which he called before the man he wanted to see returned home. Dick was on his way to "The Blade" office when he caught sight of Tip Scammon. The latter did not see or hear the sophomore approaching.

So Dick halted, darting behind a tree.

"Now, what's Tip doing down here, near the Ripley place?" wondered Prescott. "He must be waiting to see Fred. Then they must have an appointment. Dave always thought that Tip ambushed me with those brickbats at Fred Ripley's order. There may be something of that sort in the wind again. I guess I've got a right to listen."

Looking about him, Prescott saw a chance to slip into a yard, get over a fence, and creep up rather close to Scammon, though still being hidden from that scoundrel. At last Prescott found himself well hidden in the yard behind Tip.

So Dick heard the talk. Now, as he hurried back to "The Blade" office the young sophomore guessed shrewdly at the meaning of what he had heard.

"Now, what had I better do about it?" Dick Prescott asked himself. "What's the fair and honorable thing to do—keep quiet? It would seem a bit sneaky to go and tell Lawyer Ripley. Shall I tell Fred? I wonder if I could make him understand how foolish and cowardly it is to go on paying for a blackmailer's silence? Yet it's ten to one that Fred wouldn't thank me. Oh, bother it, what had a fellow better do in a case like this?"

A moment later, Dick laughed dryly.

"I know one thing I could do. I could go to Fred, tell him what I know, and scare him so he'd fall down in his effort to become the crack pitcher of the nine! My, but he'd go all to pieces if he thought I knew and could tell on him!"

Dick chuckled, then his face sobered, as he added:

“Fred’s safe from that *trick*, though. I couldn’t stand a glimpse of my own face in the mirror, afterward, if I did such a low piece of business.”

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Prescott was still revolving the whole thing in his mind when he reached “The Blade” office. He turned in the news story he had been sent for. As he did so the news editor looked up to remark:

“We have plenty of room to spare in the paper to-night, Prescott.”

“Yes? Well?”

“Can’t you give us a few paragraphs of real High School news? Something about the state of athletics there?”

“Why, yes, of course,” the young sophomore nodded.

Returning to the desk where he had been sitting, Dick ran off a few paragraphs on the outlook of the coming High School baseball season.

“Did you write that High School baseball stuff in this morning’s paper, Dick?” asked Tom Reade, the next day.

“Yes.”

“You said that the indications are that Ripley will be the crack pitcher this season, and that he is plainly going to be far ahead of all the other box candidates.”

“That’s correct, isn’t it?” challenged Dick.

“It looks so, of course,” Tom admitted. “But why did you give Ripley such a boost? He’s no friend of yours, or ours.”

“Newspapers are published for the purpose of giving information,” Dick explained. “If a newspaper’s writers all wrote just to please themselves and their friends, how many people do you suppose would buy the daily papers? Fred Ripley is the most prominent box candidate we have. He towers away over the rest of us. That was why I so stated it in ‘The Blade.’”

“And I guess that’s the only right way to do things when you’re writing for the papers,” agreed Darrin.

“It’s a pity you can’t print some other things about Ripley that you know to be true,” grumbled Hazelton.

“True,” agreed Dick, thoughtfully. “I’m only a green, amateur reporter, but I’ve already learned that a reporter soon knows more than he can print.”

Prescott was thinking of the meeting he had witnessed, the night before, between Fred and Tip.

After sleeping on the question for the night, Dick had decided that he would say nothing of the matter, for the present, either to the elder or the younger Ripley.

"If Fred found out that I knew all about it, he'd be sure that I was biding my time," was what Dick had concluded. "He'd be sure that I was only waiting for the best chance to expose him. On the other hand, if I cautioned his father, there'd be an awful row at the Ripley home. Either way, Fred Ripley would go to pieces. He'd lose what little nerve he ever had. After that he'd be no good at pitching. He'd go plumb to pieces. That might leave me the chance to be Gridley's crack pitcher this year. Oh, I'd like to be the leading pitcher of the High School nine! But I don't want to win the honor in any way that I'm not positive is wholly square and honorable."

Then, after a few moments more of thought:

"Besides, I'm loyal to good old Gridley High School. I want to see our nine have the best pitcher it can get—no matter who he is!"

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By some it might be argued that Dick Prescott was under a moral obligation to go and caution Lawyer Ripley. But Dick hated talebearers. He acted up to the best promptings of his own best conscience, which is all any honorable man can do.

CHAPTER XII

TRYING OUT THE PITCHERS

"Oh, you Rip!"

"Good boy, Rip!"

"You're the winning piece of leather, Rip!"

"Get after him, Dick!"

"Wait till you see Prescott!"

"And don't you forget Dave Darrin, either!" Late in March, it was the biggest day of Spring out at the High School Athletic Field.

This field, the fruit of the labors of the Alumni Association for many years, was a model one even in the best of High School towns.

The field, some six acres in extent, lay well outside the city proper. It was a walled field, laid out for football, baseball, cricket and field and track sports. In order that even the High School girls might have a strong sense of ownership in it, the field also contained two croquet grounds, well laid out.

Just now, the whole crowd was gathered at the sides of the diamond. Hundreds were perched up on one of the stands for spectators.

Down on the diamond stood the members of the baseball squad. As far as the onlookers could see, every one of the forty-odd young men was in the pink of physical condition. The indoor training had been hard from the outset. Weeks of cage work had been gone through with in the gym. But from this day on, whenever it didn't rain too hard, the baseball training work was to take place on the field.

Coach Luce now stepped out of the little building in which were the team dressing rooms. As he went across the diamond he was followed by lusty cheers from High School boys up on the spectators' seats. The girls clapped their hands, or waved handkerchiefs. A few already carried the gold and crimson banners of Gridley. Besides the High School young people, there were a few hundred older people, who had come out to see what the youngsters were doing.

For this was the day on which the pitchers were to be tried out. Ripley was known to be the favorite in all the guessing. In fact, there wasn't any guessing. Some, however, believed that Dick, and possibly Dave, might be chosen as the relief pitchers.

Dick himself looked mighty solemn, as he stood by, apparently seeing but little of what was going on. Beside him stood Dave. The other four chums were not far off.

Another wild howl went up from the High School contingent when two more men were seen to leave the dressing room building and walk out toward Coach Luce. These were two members of the Athletic Committee, former students at Gridley High School. These two were to aid the coach in choosing the men for the school team. They would also name the members of the school's second team.

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"Now, we'll try you out on pitching, if you're ready," announced Mr. Luce, turning to a member of the junior class. The young fellow grinned half-sheepishly, but was game. He ran over to the box, after nodding to the catcher he had chosen. Luce took the bat and stood by the home plate. To-day the coach did not intend to strike at any of the balls, but he and the two members of the Athletic Committee would judge, and award marks to the candidates.

"Oh, we don't want the dub! Trot out Rip!" came a roaring chorus.

Coach Luce, however, from this time on, paid no heed to the shouts or demands of spectators.

The candidate for box honors now displayed all he knew about pitching, though some nervousness doubtless marred his performance.

"Now, run out Rip!" came the insistent chorus again, after this candidate had shown his curves and had gone back.

But it was another member of the junior class who came to the box for the next trial.

"Dead ball! Throw wild and cut it short!" came the advice from the seats.

Then a sophomore was tried out. But the crowd was becoming highly impatient.

"We want Rip! We demand Rip. Give us Rip or give us chloroform!" came the insistent clamor. "We'll come another day to see the dead ones, if you insist."

Coach Luce looked over at Fred, and nodded. The tumultuous cheering lasted two full minutes, for Gridley was always as strong on fans as it wanted to be on players.

Fred Ripley was flushed but proud. He tried to hold himself jauntily, with an air of indifference, as he stood with the ball clasped in both hands, awaiting the signal.

Ripley felt that he could afford to be satisfied with himself. The advance consciousness of victory thrilled him. He had worked rather hard with Everett; and, though the great pitcher had not succeeded in bringing out all that he had hoped to do with the boy, yet Everett had praised him only yesterday. One reason why Fred had not absolutely suited his trainer was that the boy had broken his training pledge by taking up with coffee. For that reason his nerves were not in the best possible shape. Yet they didn't need to be in order to beat such awkward, rural pitchers as Prescott or Darrin.

For a while Coach Luce waited for the cheering for Ripley to die down. Then he raised his bat as a signal. Fred sent in his favorite spit-ball. To all who understood the game, it was clear that the ball had not been well delivered. The crowd on the seats stopped cheering to look on in some concern.

“Brace, Ripley! You can beat that,” warned the coach, in a low tone.

Fred did better the second time. The third ball was nearly up to his form; the fourth, wholly so. Now, Fred sent in two more spitballs, then changed to other styles. He was pitching famously, now.

“That’s all, unless you wish more, sir,” announced Fred, finally, when the ball came back to him.

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"It's enough. Magnificently done," called Coach Luce, after a glance at the two members of the Athletic Committee.

"Oh, you Rip!"

"Good old Rip!"

The cheering commenced again, swelling in volume.

Coach Luce signaled to Dick Prescott, who, coolly, yet with a somewhat pallid face, came forward to the box. He removed the wrapping from a new ball and took his post.

The cheering stopped now. Dick was extremely well liked in Gridley. Most of the spectators felt sorry for this poor young soph, who must make a showing after that phenomenon, Ripley.

"The first two or three don't need to count, Prescott," called Luce. "Get yourself warmed up."

Fred stood at the side, looking on with a sense of amusement which, for policy's sake, he strove to conceal.

"Great Scott! The nerve of the fellow!" gasped Ripley, inwardly, as he saw Prescott moisten his fingers. "He's going to try the spit-ball after what I've shown!"

The silence grew deeper, for most of the onlookers understood the significance of Dick's moistened fingers.

Dick drove in, Tom Reade catching. That first spit-ball was not quite as good as some that Ripley had shown. But Fred's face went white.

"Where did Prescott get that thing? He's been *stealing* from the little he has seen me do."

A shout of jubilation went up from a hundred throats now, for Dick had just spun his second spit-ball across the plate. It was equal to any that Ripley had shown.

"Confound the upstart! He's getting close to me on that style!" gasped the astonished Ripley.

Now, Dick held the ball for a few moments, rolling it over in his hands. An instant later, he unbent. Then he let drive. The ball went slowly toward the plate, with flat trajectory.

"Wow!" came the sudden explosion. It was a *jump-ball*, going almost to the plate, then rising instead of falling.

Three more of these Dick served, and now the cheering was the biggest of the afternoon. Fred Ripley's mouth was wide open, his breath coming jerkily.

Three fine inshoots followed. The hundreds on the seats were standing up now. Then, to rest his arm, Dick, who was wholly collected, and as cool as a veteran under fire, served the spectators with a glimpse of an out-curve that was not quite like any that they had ever seen before. This out-curve had a suspicion of the jump-ball about it.

Dick was pitching easily, now. He had gotten his warming and his nerve, and appeared to work without conscious strain.

"Do you want more, sir?" called Dick, at last.

"No," decided Coach Luce. "You've done enough, Prescott. Mr. Darrin!"

Dave ran briskly to the box, opening the wrappings on a new ball as he stepped into the box. After the first two balls Dave's exhibition was swift, certain, fine. He had almost reached Dick with his performance.

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Ripley's bewildered astonishment was apparent in his face.

"Thunder, I'd no idea they could do anything like that!" gasped Fred to himself. "They're very nearly as good as I am. How in blazes did they ever get hold of the wrinkles? They can't afford a man like Everett."

"Any more candidates?" called Coach Luce. There weren't. No other fellow was going forward to show himself after the last three who had worked from the box.

There was almost a dead silence, then, while Coach Luce and the two members of the Athletics Committee conferred in whispers. At last the coach stepped forward.

"We have chosen the pitchers!" he shouted. Then, after a pause, Mr. Luce went on:

"The pitchers for the regular school nine will be Prescott, Darrin, Ripley, in the order named."

"Oh, you Dick!"

"Bang-up Prescott!"

"Reliable old Darrin!"

"Ripley—ugh!"

And now the fierce cheering drowned out all other cries. But Fred Ripley, his face purple with rage, darted forward before the judges.

"I protest!" he cried.

"Protests are useless," replied Mr. Luce. "The judges give you four points less than Darrin, and seven less than Prescott. You've had a fair show, Mr. Ripley."

"I haven't. I'm better than either of them!" bawled Fred, hoarsely, for the cheering was still on and he had to make himself heard.

"No use, Ripley," spoke up a member of the Athletics Committee. "You're third, and that's good enough, for we never before had such a pitching triumvirate."

"Where did these fellows ever learn to pitch to beat me?" jeered Fred, angrily. "They had no such trainer. Until he went south with his own team, I was trained by-----"

Fred paused suddenly. Perhaps he had better not tell too much, after all.

The din from the seats had now died down.

“Well, Ripley, who trained you?” asked a member of the Athletics Committee.

Fred bit his lip, but Dick broke in quietly:

“I can tell. Perhaps a little confession will be good for us all around. Ripley was trained by Everett over at Duxbridge. I found out that much, weeks ago.”

“You spy!” hissed Fred angrily, but Dick, not heeding his enemy, continued:

“The way Ripley started out, the first showing he made, Darrin and I saw that we were left in the stable. Candidly, we were in despair of doing anything real in the box, after Ripley got through. But I suppose all you gentlemen have heard of Pop Gint?”

“Gint! Old Pop?” demanded Coach Luce, a light glowing in his eyes. “Well, I should say so. Why, Pop Gint was the famous old trainer who taught Everett and a half dozen other of our best national pitchers all they first learned about style. Pop Gint is the best trainer of pitchers that ever was.”

“Pop Gint is an uncle of Mr. Pollock, editor of ‘The Blade,’” Dick went on, smilingly. “Pop Gint has retired, and won’t teach for money, any more. But Mr. Pollock coaxed his uncle to train Darrin and myself. Right faithfully the old gentleman did it, too. Why, Pop Gint, today, is as much of a boy-----”

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"Oh, shut up!" grated Fred, harshly, turning upon his rival. "Mr. Luce, I throw down the team as far as I'm concerned. I won't pitch as an inferior to these two boobies. Scratch my name off."

"I'll give you a day or two, Mr. Ripley, to think that over," replied Mr. Luce, quietly. "Remember, Ripley, you must be a good sportsman, and you should also be loyal to your High School. In matters of loyalty one can't always act on spite or impulse."

"Humph!" muttered Fred, stalking away.

His keen disappointment was welling up inside. With the vent of speech the suffering of the arrogant boy had become greater. Now, Fred's whole desire was to get away by himself, where he could nurse his rage in secret. There were no more yells of "Oh, you Rip!" He had done some splendid pitching, and had made the team, for that matter, but he was not to be one of the season's stars. This latter fact, added to his deserved unpopularity, filled his spirit with gall as he hastened toward the dressing rooms. There he quickly got into his street clothes and as hastily quitted the athletic field.

Therein Fred Ripley made a mistake, as he generally did in other things. In sport all can't win. It is more of an art to be a cheerful, game loser than to bow to the plaudits of the throng.

"Mr. Prescott," demanded Coach Luce, "how long have you been working under Pop Gint's training?"

"Between four and five weeks, sir."

"And Darrin the same length of time?"

"Yes, sir," nodded Dave.

"Then, unless you two find something a whole lot better to do in life, you could do worse than to keep in mind the idea of trying for positions on the national teams when you're older."

"I think we have something better in view, Mr. Luce," Dick answered smilingly. "Eh, Dave?"

"Yes," nodded Darrin and speaking emphatically. "Athletics and sports are good for what they bring to a fellow in the way of health and training. But a fellow ought to use the benefits as a physical foundation in some other kind of life where he can be more useful."

"I suppose you two, then, have it all mapped out as to what you're going to do in life?"

“Not quite,” Dick replied. “But I think I know what we’d like to do when we’re through with our studies.”

There were other try-outs that afternoon, but the great interest was over. Gridley fans were satisfied that the High School had a pitching trio that it would be difficult to beat anywhere except on the professional diamond.

“If anything *should* happen to Prescott and Darrin just before any of *the big games*,” muttered Ripley, darkly, to himself, “then I’d have my chance, after all! Can’t I get my head to working and find a way to *make* something happen?”

CHAPTER XIII

THE RIOT CALL AND OTHER LITTLE THINGS

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"To your seat, Mr. Bristow! You're acting like a rowdy!"

Principal Cantwell uttered the order sharply.

Fully half the student body had gathered in the big assembly room at the High School. It was still five minutes before the opening hour, and there had been a buzz of conversation through the room.

The principal's voice was so loud that it carried through the room. Almost at once the buzz ceased as the students turned to see what was happening. Bristow had been skylarking a bit. Undoubtedly he had been more boisterous with one of the other fellows in the assembly room than good taste sanctioned.

Just as naturally, however, Bristow resented the style of rebuke from authority. The boy wheeled about, glaring at the principal.

"Go to your seat, sir!" thundered the principal, his face turning ghastly white from his suppressed rage.

Bristow wheeled once more, in sullen silence, to go to his seat. Certainly he did not move fast, but he was obeying.

"You mutinous young rascal, that won't do!" shot out from the principal's lips. In another instant Mr. Cantwell was crossing the floor rapidly toward the slow-moving offender.

"Get to your seat quickly, or go in pieces!" rasped out the angry principal.

Seizing the boy from behind by both shoulders, Mr. Cantwell gave him a violent push. Bristow tripped, falling across a desk and cutting a gash in his forehead.

In an instant the boy was up and wheeled about, blood dripping from the cut, but something worse flashing in his eyes.

The principal was at once terrified. He was not naturally courageous, but he had a dangerous temper, and he now realized to what it had brought him. Mr. Cantwell was trying to frame a lame apology when an indignant voice cried out:

"*Coward!*"

His face livid, the principal turned.

"Who said that?" he demanded, at white heat.

"*I did!*" admitted Purcell, promptly. Abner Cantwell sprang at this second "offender." But Purcell threw himself quickly into an attitude of defence.

“Keep your hands off of me, Mr. Cantwell, or I’ll knock you down!”

“Good!”

“That’s the talk!”

The excited High School boys came crowding about the principal and Purcell. Bristow was swept back by the surging throng. He had his handkerchief out, now, at his forehead.

“Some of you young men seize Purcell and march him to my private office,” commanded the principal, who had lacked the courage to strike at the young fellow who stood waiting for him.

“Will you fight Purcell like a man, if we do?” asked another voice.

“Run Cantwell out! He isn’t fit to be here!” yelled another voice.

Mr. Drake, the only submaster in the room at the time, was pushing his way forward.

“Calmly, boys, calmly,” called Drake. “Don’t do anything you’ll be sorry for afterwards.”

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But those who were more hot headed were still pressing forward. It looked as though they were trying to get close enough to lay hands on the now trembling principal.

Under the circumstances, Mr. Cantwell did the very worst thing he could have done. He pushed three or four boys aside and made a break across the assembly room. Once out in the corridor, the principal dove into his private office, turning the key after him. Secure, now, and his anger once more boiling up, Mr. Cantwell rang his telephone bell. Calling for the police station, he called for Chief Coy and reported that mutiny and violence had broken loose in the High School.

"That seems almost incredible," replied Chief Coy. "But I'll come on the run with some of my men."

Several of the fellows made a move to follow the principal out into the corridor. Dick Prescott swung the door shut and threw himself against it. Dave Darrin and Tom Reade rushed to his support. The other chums got to him as quickly as they could.

"Nothing rash, fellows!" urged Dick. "Remember, we don't make the laws, or execute them. This business will be settled more to our satisfaction if we don't put ourselves in the wrong."

"Pull that fellow Prescott away from the door!" called Fred Ripley, anxious to start any kind of trouble against Dick & Co. Submaster Drake, forcing his way through the throng, calming the hottest-headed ones, turned an accusing look on Fred. The latter saw it and slunk back into the crowd.

Bristow, still holding his handkerchief to his head, darted out of the building.

Submaster Morton and Luce, bearing the excitement, came up from class rooms on the ground floor. They entered by the same door through which Bristow had left.

Over on the other side of the room, fearing that a violent riot was about to start, some of the girls began to scream. The women teachers present hurried among the girls, quieting them by reassuring words.

"Now, young gentlemen," called Mr. Drake, "we'll consider all this rumpus done with. Discipline reigns and Gridley's good name must be preserved!"

This brought a cheer from many, for Mr. Drake was genuinely respected by the boys as a good and fair-minded man. Such men as Drake, Morton or Luce could lead these warm-hearted boys anywhere.

Stepping quickly back to the platform, Drake sounded the bell. In an instant there was an orderly movement toward the desks. At the second bell all were seated.

“In the absence of the principal,” began Mr. Drake, “I-----”

A low-voiced laugh started in some quarters of the room.

“Silence!” insisted Mr. Drake, with dignity. “School has opened.
I-----”

He was interrupted by a new note. Out in the yard sounded the clanging of a bell, the quick trot of horses’ feet and the roll of wheels. The boys looked at one another in unbelieving astonishment.

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Then heavy steps sounded on the stairway. Outside Mr. Cantwell's voice could be heard:

"I'll take you inside, chief!"

In came the principal, his face now white from dread of what he had done, instead of showing the white-heat of passion. After him came Chief Coy and three policemen in uniform.

For at least a full half minute Chief Coy stood glancing around the room, where every student was in his seat and all was orderly. The boys returned the chief's look with wondering eyes. Then Mr. Coy spoke:

"Where's your riot, principal? Is this what you termed a mutiny?"

Mr. Cantwell, who had gone to his post behind the desk, appeared to find difficulty in answering.

"Humph!" muttered the chief, and, turning, strode from the room. His three policemen followed.

Then there came indeed an awkward silence.

Submaster Drake had abandoned the center of the stage to the principal. Mr. Cantwell found himself at some loss for words. But at last he began:

"Young ladies and young gentlemen, I cannot begin to tell you how much I regret the occurrences of this morning. Discipline is one of my greatest ideals, and this morning's mutiny-----"

He felt obliged to pause there, for an angry murmur started on the boys' side, and traveled over to where the girls were seated:

"This morning's mutiny-----" began the principal again.

The murmur grew louder. Mr. Cantwell looked up, more of fear than of anger in his eyes. Mr. Drake, who stood behind the principal, held up one hand appealingly. It was that gesture which saved the situation at that critical moment. The boys thought that if silence would please Mr. Drake, then he might have it.

"Pardon me, sir," whispered Drake in Cantwell's ear. "I wouldn't harp on the word mutiny, sir. Express your regret for the injury unintentionally done Bristow."

Mr. Cantwell wheeled abruptly.

"Who is principal here, Mr. Drake?"

"You are, sir."

"Then be good enough to let me finish my remarks."

This dialogue was spoken in an undertone, but the students guessed some inkling of its substance.

The submaster subsided, but Mr. Cantwell couldn't seem to remember, just then, what he wanted to say. So he stood gazing about the room. In doing this he caught sight of the face of Purcell.

"Mr. Purcell!" called the principal.

That young man rose, standing by his seat. "Mr. Purcell, you made some threat to me a few minutes ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was that threat?"

"I told you that, if you laid hands on me, I'd floor you."

"Would you have done it?"

"At the time, yes, sir. Or I'd have tried to do so."

"That is all. The locker room monitor will go with you to the basement. You may go for the day. When you come to-morrow morning, I will let you know what I have decided in your case."

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Submaster Drake bit his lips. This was not the way to deal with a situation in which the principal had started the trouble. Mr. Drake wouldn't have handled the situation in this way, nor would Dr. Thornton, the former principal.

But Purcell, with cheerfulness murmured, "Very good, sir," and left the room, while many approving glances followed him.

Messrs. Morton and Luce shuffled rather uneasily in their seats. Mr. Cantwell began to gather an idea that he was making his own bad matter worse, so he changed, making an address in which he touched but lightly upon the incidents of the morning. He made an urgent plea for discipline at all times, and tried to impress upon the student body the need for absolute self-control.

In view of his own hasty temper that last part of the speech nearly provoked an uproar of laughter. Only respect for Mr. Drake and the other submasters prevented that. The women teachers, or most of them, too, the boys were sure, sided with them secretly.

The first recitation period of the morning was going by rapidly, but Mr. Cantwell didn't allow that to interfere with his remarks. At last, however, he called for the belated singing. This was in progress when the door opened. Mr. Eldridge, superintendent of schools, entered, followed by Bristow's father. That latter gentleman looked angry.

"Mr. Cantwell, can you spare us a few moments in your office?" inquired Mr. Eldridge.

There was no way out of it. The principal left with them. In a few minutes there was a call for Mr. Drake. Then two of the women teachers were sent for. Finally, Dick Prescott and three or four of the other boys were summoned. On the complaint of a very angry parent Superintendent Eldridge was holding a very thorough investigation. Many statements were asked for and listened to.

"I think we have heard enough, haven't we, Mr. Eldridge?" asked the elder Bristow, at last. "Shall I state my view of the affair now?"

"You may," nodded the superintendent.

"It is plain enough to me," snorted Mr. Bristow, "that this principal hasn't self-control enough to be charged with teaching discipline to a lot of spirited boys. His example is bad for them—continually bad. However, that is for the Board of Education to determine. My son will not come to school to-day, but he will attend to-morrow. As the first step toward righting to-day's affair I shall expect Mr. Cantwell to address, before the whole student body, an ample and satisfactory apology to my son. I shall be present to hear that apology myself."

"If it is offered," broke in Principal Cantwell, sardonically, but Superintendent Eldridge held up a hand to check him.

“If you don’t offer the apology, to-morrow morning, and do it properly,” retorted Mr. Bristow, “I shall go to my lawyer and instruct him to get out a warrant charging you with felonious assault. That is all I have to say, sir. Mr. Eldridge, I thank you, sir, for your very prompt and kind help. Good morning, all!”

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"At the close of the session the principal wishes to see Mr. Prescott," read Mr. Cantwell from the platform just before school was dismissed that afternoon.

Dick waited in some curiosity.

"Mr. Prescott, you write for 'The Blade,' don't you?" asked Mr. Cantwell.

"Sometimes, sir."

"Then, Mr. Prescott, please understand that I forbid you to write anything for publication concerning this morning's happenings."

Dick remained silent.

"You will not, will you?"

"That, Mr. Cantwell, is a matter that seems to rest between the editor and myself."

"But I have forbidden it," insisted the principal, in surprise.

"That is a matter, sir, about which you will have to see the editor. Here at school, Mr. Cantwell, I am under your orders. At 'The Blade' office I work under Mr. Pollock's instructions."

The principal looked as though he were going to grow angry. On the whole, though, he felt that he had had enough of the consequences of his own wrath for one day. So he swallowed hard and replied:

"Very good, then, Mr. Prescott. I shall hold you responsible for anything you publish that I may consider harmful to me."

Dick did print an account of the trouble at school. He confined himself to a statement of the facts that he had observed with his own eyes. Editorially "The Blade" printed a comment to the effect that such scenes would have been impossible under the much-missed Dr. Thornton.

Mr. Cantwell didn't have anything disagreeable to say to Dick Prescott the next morning. Purcell took up the burden of his studies again without comment. The principal did apologize effectively to young Bristow before the student body, while the elder Bristow stood grimly by.

CHAPTER XIV

THE STEAM OF THE BATSMAN

All of Dick & Co. had made the High School nine, though not all as star players in their positions.

Holmes had won out for left field, and Hazelton for shortstop. As far as the early outdoor practice showed, the latter was going to be the strongest man of the school in that important position.

Dalzell and Reade became first and second basemen.

During the rest of March practice proceeded briskly. Six days in every week the youngsters worked hard at the field in the afternoons. When it rained they put in their time at the gym.

On the second of April Coach Luce called a meeting of the baseball squad at the gym.

"We're a week, now, from our first game, gentlemen," announced the coach. "I want you all to be in flawless condition from now on. I will put a question to you, now, on your honor. Has any man broken training table?"

No one spoke or stirred. Ripley, who had gotten over the worst of his sulks, was present, but he did not admit any of his many breaches of the training table diet that he was pledged to follow at home.

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"Has any man used tobacco since training began?" continued the coach.

Again there was silence.

"I am gratified to note that I can't get a response to either question," smiled Mr. Luce.

"This assures me that every one of you has kept in the strictest training. It will show as soon as you begin to meet Gridley's opponents in the field.

"Faithful observance of all training rules bespeaks a good state of discipline. In all sports, and in team sports especially, discipline is our very foundation stone. Every man must sacrifice himself and his feelings for the good of the team. Each one of you must forget, in all baseball matters, that he is an individual. He must think of himself only as a spoke in the wheel.

"During the baseball season I want every man of you in bed by nine-thirty. On the night before a game turn in at eight-thirty. Make up your minds that there shall be no variation from this. In the mornings I want every man, when it isn't raining, to go out and jog along the road, in running shoes and sweaters, for twenty minutes without a break; for thirty minutes, instead, on any morning when you can spare the time.

"Whenever you can do so, practice swift, short sprints. Many a nine, full of otherwise good men, loses a game or a season's record just because this important matter of speedy base running has been neglected.

"Not only this, but I want every one of you to be careful about the method of sprinting. The man who runs flat-footedly is using up steam and endurance. Run balanced well forward on the balls of your feet. Throw your heels up; travel as though you were trying to kick the backs of your thighs. Breathe through the nose, always, in running, and master to the highest degree the trick of making a great air reservoir of your lungs. We have had considerable practice, both in jogging and in sprinting, but this afternoon I am going to sprint each man in turn, and I'm going to pick all his flaws of style or speed to small pieces. We will now adjourn to the field for that purpose. Remember, that a batsman has two very valuable assets—his hitting judgment and his running steam. Wagons are waiting outside, and we'll now make quick time to the field."

Arriving there, Coach Luce led them at once to the dressing rooms.

"Now, then, we want quick work!" he called after the sweaters and ball shoes had been hurriedly donned.

"Now let us go over to the diamond; go to the home plate as I call the names. Darrin Ripley-Prescott-Reade-Purcell-----"

And so on. The young men named made quick time to the plate.

“You’re up, Darrin. Run! Two bases only. Halt at second! Ripley, run! Reade, run! Not on your flat feet, Ripley. Up on your toes, man! Reade, more steam!”

Then others were given the starting word. Coach did not run more men at a time than he could readily watch.

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"Prescott, throw your feet up behind better. You've been jogging, but that isn't the gait. Holmes, straighten back more—don't cramp your chest!"

So the criticisms rang out. Luce was an authority on short sprinting. He had made good in that line in his own college days.

"Jennison, you're not running with your arms! Forget 'em!"

Jennison promptly let his arms hang motionless at his sides.

"Come in, Jennison!" called coach.

Jennison came in.

"You mustn't work your arms like fly-wheels, nor like piston rods, either," explained Mr. Luce. "Keep your elbows in fairly close to your sides; fists loosely closed and forward, a little higher than your elbows. Now, all runners come in."

Gathering the squad about him, and demanding close attention, Mr. Luce showed the pose of the body at the instant of starting.

"Now, I'm going to run to first and second," continued the coach. "I want every man of you to watch closely and catch the idea. You note how I hold my body—sloping slightly forward, yet with every effort to avoid cramping the chest. Observe how I run on the forward part of the ball of the foot—not exactly on the toes, but close to it. See just how it is that I throw my feet up behind me. And be very particular to note that I keep my hands and arms in just this position all the way. Now, then, when you strike at a ball, and expect to hit it, have your lungs inflated ready for the first bound of the spurt. Now—watching, all of you?"

After an instant Mr. Luce shouted, "Strike!" and was off like a flash. Many of the boys present had never seen coach really sprint before. As they watched during the amazingly few seconds a yell of delight went up from them. This was sprinting!

"Did you all find time to observe?" smiled coach, as he came loping in from second base.

"We all watched you," laughed Dick. "But the time was short."

"You see the true principle of the sprint?"

"Yes; but it would take any of us years to get the sprint down that fine," protested Darrin.

"Don't be too sure of that," retorted coach. "Some of you will have doubled the style and steam of your sprint by the time you're running in the first game. Now, don't forget a



word of what I've said about the importance of true sprinting. I've seen many a nine whose members had a fine battery, and all the fielders good men; yet, when they went to the bat and hit the leather, their sprinting was so poor that they lost game after game. From now on, the sprint's the thing! Yet don't overdo it by doing it all the time. Take plenty of rest and deep breathing between sprints. Usually, a two-bag sprint is all you need. Now, some more of you get out and try it."

Rapidly coach called off the names of those he wanted to try out. Some of these young men did better than the starters, for they had learned from the criticisms, and from the showing of Luce's standard form.

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Presently the young men were standing about in various parts of the field, for none came in until called.

"Ripley," said Mr. Luce, turning to that young man, "you have the build and the lines of a good sprinter."

"Thank you, sir," nodded Fred.

"And yet your performance falls off. Your lung capacity ought to be all right from your appearance. What is the trouble? Honestly, have you been smoking any cigarettes?"

"Not one," Fred declared promptly.

Mr. Luce lifted the boy's right hand, scanning it.

"If I were going to make such a denial," remarked coach coolly, "I'd be sure to have a piece of pumice stone, and I'd use it often to take away those yellowish stains."

The light-brownish stains were faint on Fred's first and second fingers. Yet, under careful scrutiny, they could be made out.

Ripley colored uncomfortably, jerking his hand away.

"Better cut out the paper pests," advised coach quietly.

"Only one, once in a while," murmured the boy. "I won't have even that many after this."

"I should hope not," replied Mr. Luce. "You're under training pledge, you know."

All Fred meant by his promise was that he would use pumice stone painstakingly on his finger tips hereafter.

Within the next few days, Dick and Darrin made about the best showing as to sprinting form, though many of the others did remarkably well.

"Ripley isn't cutting out the cigarettes," decided Mr. Luce, watching the running of the lawyer's son. "He proves it by his lack of improvement. His respiration is all to the bad."

Mr. Luce was shrewd enough to know that, in Fred Ripley, he had a liar to deal with, and that neither repeated warnings nor renewed promises were worth much. So he held his peace.

In a few days more, all the members of the Athletics Committee who could attend went to the field. A practice match between the first and second teams had been ordered. Ripley consented to pitch for second, while Dick pitched for the school nine. The latter

nine won by a score of eleven to two, but that had been expected. It was for another purpose that the members of the Athletics Committee were present.

After the game, there was a brief conference between coach and the committee members.

"It is time, now, to announce the appointment of captain," called coach, when he had again gathered the squad. "Purcell, of the junior class, will be captain of the nine. Prescott, of the sophomore class, will be second, or relief captain."

Then the announcements were made for the second nine.

And now the first game was close at hand. The opponent was to be Gardiner City High School. Gardiner possessed one of the strongest school nines in the state. Coach Luce would have preferred an easier opponent for the first regular game, but had to take the only match that he could get.

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"However, young gentlemen," he announced to the squad on the field, "the Gridley idea is that all opponents look alike to us. Your city and your school will demand that you win—not merely that you try to win!"

"We'll win—no other way to do!" came the hearty promise.

CHAPTER XV

A DASTARD'S WORK IN THE DARK

Thanks to the methods Dick & Co. had started the year before of raising funds for High School athletics through stirring appeal to the local pride of the wealthy residents of the city, the school nine had an abundant supply of money for all needs.

Through the columns of "The Blade" Prescott warmed up local interest effectively. Tickets sold well ahead of the time for the meeting with Gardiner City High School.

"Prescott, you've been picked to pitch for the Gardiner game," Coach Luce informed the sophomore. "We're going to have almost the hardest rub of the season with this nine, on account of its being our first game. Gardiner City has played two games already, and her men have their diamond nerve with them. Keep yourself in shape, Mr. Prescott. Don't take any even slight chance of getting out of condition."

"You may be sure I won't," Dick replied, his eyes glowing. "You know, Mr. Luce, that, though I played some on second football team last fall, this is the first chance I've had to play on the regular team."

"As the game is close at hand," continued the coach, "I'd even be careful not to train too much. You're in as fine condition, now, as you can be this season. Sometimes, just in keeping up training, a fellow has something happen to him that lays him up for a few days."

"It won't happen to me, sir," Dick asserted. "I'm going to take care of myself as if I were glass, until the Gardiner game is over."

"You won't get too nervous, will you?"

"I may be a bit, before the game," Dick confessed, candidly.

"But after the game starts?"

"Once the game opens, I shall forget that there's any such fellow as Prescott, sir. I shall be just a part of Gridley, with nothing individual about me."

“Good! I like to hear you talk that way,” laughed Mr. Luce. “I hope you’ll be able to keep up to it when you go to the diamond. Once the game opens, don’t let yourself have a single careless moment. Any single point we can get away from Gardiner will have to be done by just watching for it. You saw them play last year?”

“I did,” Prescott nodded. “Gridley won, four to three, and until the last half of the last inning we had only one run. I thought nothing could save us that day.”

“Nothing did,” replied the coach, “except the hard and fast can’t-lose tradition of Gridley.”

“We’re not going to lose this time, either,” Dick declared. “I know that I’m going to strike out a string in every inning. If I go stale, you have Darrin to fall back on, and he’s as baffling a pitcher as I can hope to be. And Ripley is a wonder.”

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"He would be," nodded Mr. Luce, sadly, "if he were a better base runner at the same time."

It seemed as though nothing else could be talked of in Gridley but the opening game. Just because it was the starter of the season the local military band, reinforced to thirty-five pieces, was to be on hand to give swing and life to the affair.

"Are you going, Laura?" Dick asked, when he met Miss Bentley.

"Am I going?" replied Laura, opening her eyes in amazement. "Why, Dick, do you think anything but pestilence or death could keep me away? Father is going to take Belle and myself. The seats are already bought."

Prescott's own parents were to attend. Out of his newspaper money he had bought them grand stand seats, and some one else had been engaged to attend in the store while the game was on.

"You'll have a great chance, Dick, old fellow, against a nine like Gardiner," said Dave Darrin. "And, do you know, I'm glad it's up to you to pitch? I'm afraid I'd be too rattled to pitch against a nine like Gardiner in the very first game of the season. All I have to do is to keep at the side and watch you."

"See here, Dave Darrin," expostulated his chum, "you keep yourself in the best trim, and make up your mind that you may *have* to be called before the game is over. What if my wrist goes lame during the game?"

"Pooh! I don't believe it will, or *can*," Dave retorted. "You're in much too fine shape for that, Dick."

"Other pitchers have often had to be retired before a game ended," Prescott rejoined, gravely. "And I don't believe that I am the greatest or the most enduring ever. Keep yourself up, Dave! Be ready for the call at any second."

"Oh, I will, but it will be needless," Dave answered.

Dalzell and Holmes were other members of the school nine squad who had been picked for this first game. Purcell was to catch, making perhaps, the strongest battery pair that Gridley High School had ever put in the field. Half of Dick & Co. were to make up a third of the nine in its first battle.

"I'm getting a bit scared," muttered Dan, the Friday afternoon before the Saturday game.

"Now, cut all that out," Dick advised. "If you don't I'll report you to the coach and captain."

This was said with a grin, and Dick went on earnestly:

“Dan, the scared soldier is always a mighty big drag in any battle. It takes two or three other good soldiers to look after him and hold him to duty.”

“I’ll admit, for myself, that I wish the druggist knew of some sort of pill that would give me more confidence for this confounded old first game,” muttered Greg Holmes.

“I can tell you how to get the pill put up,” Prescott hinted.

“I wish you would, then.” But Greg spoke dubiously.

“Tell the druggist to use tragacanth paste to hold the pill together.”

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“Yes?-----” followed Greg.

“And tell the druggist to mix into each pill a pound of good old Yankee ginger,” wound up Prescott. “Take four, an hour apart before the game to-morrow.”

“Then I’d never play left field,” grinned Greg.

“Yes, you would. You’d forget your nervousness. Try it, Greg.”

The three were walking up Main Street, when they encountered Laura Bentley and Belle Meade.

“What are you going to do to-morrow?” asked Laura, looking at the trio, keenly. “Are you going to win for the glory and honor of good old Gridley?”

“Dick is,” smiled Greg. “Dan and I are going to sit at the side and use foot-warmers.”

“You two aren’t losing heart, are you?” asked Belle, looking at Dick Prescott’s companions with some scorn.

“N-n-not if you girls are all going to take things as seriously as that,” protested Greg.

“Every Gridley High School girl expects the nine to win to-morrow,” spoke Laura almost sternly.

“Then we’re going to win,” affirmed Dan Dalzell. “On second thought, I’ll sell my footwarmers at half the cost price.”

“That’s the way to talk,” laughed Belle. “Now, remember, boys—though Dick doesn’t need to have his backbone stiffened—if you boys haven’t pride enough in Gridley to carry you through anything, the Gridley High School girls are heart and soul in the game. If you lose the game to-morrow don’t any of you ever show up again at a class dance!”

The girls went away laughing, yet they meant what they said. Gridley girls were baseball fans and football rooters of the most intense sort.

Dave wanted to be abed by half past eight that evening, as Coach Luce had requested; but about a quarter past eight, just as he was about to retire, his mother discovered that she needed coffee for the next morning’s breakfast, so she sent him to the grocer’s on the errand. Dick, while eating supper, thought of an item that he wanted to print in the next day’s “Blade.” Accordingly, he hurried to the newspaper office as soon as the meal

was over. It was ten minutes past eight when Dick handed in his copy to the night editor.

“Time enough,” muttered the boy, as he reached the street. “A brisk jog homeward is just the thing before pulling off clothes and dropping in between the sheets.”

As Dick jogged along he remembered having noticed, on the way to the office, Tip Scammon in a new suit of clothes.

“Tip’s stock is coming up in the world,” thought young Prescott. “But I wonder whether Tip earned that suit or stole it, or whether he has just succeeded in threatening more money out of Ripley. How foolish Fred is to stand for blackmail! I wonder if I ought to speak to him about it, or give his father a hint. I hate to be meddlesome. And, by ginger! Now I think of it, Tip looked rather curiously at me. He—oh!—*murder!*”

The last exclamation was wrung from Dick Prescott by a most amazing happening.

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He was passing a building in the course of erection. It stood flush with the sidewalk, and the contractor had laid down a board walk over the sidewalk, and had covered it with a roofed staging.

Just as Dick passed under this, still on a lope, a long pole was thrust quickly out from the blackness inside the building. Between Dick's moving legs went the pole.

Bump! Down came Dick, on both hands and one knee. Then he rolled over sideways.

Away back in the building the young pitcher heard fast-moving feet.

In a flash Dick tried to get up. It took him more time than he had expected. He clutched at one of the upright beams for support.

Half a dozen people had seen the fall. Stopping curiously, they soon turned, hurrying toward Prescott.

Forgotten, in an instant, was the youngster's pain. His face went white with another throbbing realization.

"The game to-morrow! This knee puts me out!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE HOUR OF TORMENTING DOUBT

"Oh, no! That mustn't be. I've got to pitch in to-morrow's game!"

Prescott ground out the words between his clenched teeth. The consciousness of pain was again asserting itself.

"What's the matter, Prescott?" called the first passer-by to reach him.

"Matter enough," grumbled Dick, pointing to the pole that lay near him. "See that thing?"

"Yes. Trip over it?"

"I did. But some one thrust it between my legs as I was running past here."

"Sho!" exclaimed another, curiously. "Now, who would want to do that?"

"Anyone who didn't want me to pitch to-morrow's game, perhaps," flashed Dick, with sudden divination.

"What's this?" demanded a boy, breaking in through the small crowd that was collecting. "Dick—you hurt?"

It didn't take Dave many seconds to understand the situation.

"I'll bet I know who did it!" he muttered, vengefully.

"Who?" spoke up one of the men.

But Dick gave a warning nudge. "Oh, well!" muttered Dave Darrin. "We'll settle this thing all in our own good time."

"Let me have your arm, Dave," begged young Prescott. "I want to see how well I can walk."

The young pitcher had already been experimenting, cautiously, to see how much weight he could bear on his injured left leg.

"Take my arm on the other side," volunteered a sympathetic man in the crowd.

Dick was about to do so, when the lights of an auto showed as the machine came close to the curb.

"Here's a doctor," called some one.

"Which one?" asked Dick.

"Bentley."

"Good!" muttered Dave. "Dr. Bentley is medical examiner to the High School athletic teams. Ask Dr. Bentley if he won't come in here. Stand still, Dick, and put all the weight you can on your sound leg."

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Prescott was already doing this.

Dr. Bentley, a strong looking man of about fifty, rather short though broad-shouldered, took a quick survey of the situation.

"One of you men help me put Prescott in the tonneau of my car," he directed, "and come along with me to Prescott's home. The lad must not step on that leg until it has been looked at."

Dick found himself being lifted and placed in a comfortable seat in the after part of the auto. Dave and the man who had helped the physician got in with him.

Barely a minute later Dr. Bentley stopped his car before the Prescott book store.

"You stay in the car a minute," directed the physician. "I want to speak to your mother, so she won't be scared to death."

Mrs. Prescott, from whom Dick had inherited much of his own pluck, was not the kind of woman to faint. She quickly followed Dr. Bentley from the store.

"I'm hurt only in my feelings, mother," said Dick cheerfully. "I'm afraid I have a little wrench that will keep me out of the game tomorrow."

"That's almost a tragedy, I know," replied Mrs. Prescott bravely.

The physician directing, the boy was lifted from the car, while Mrs. Prescott went ahead to open the door.

Dave Darrin followed, his eyes flashing. Dave had his own theory to account for this state of affairs.

Into his own room Dick was carried, and laid on the bed. Mrs. Prescott remained outside while Dave helped undress his chum.

"Now, let us see just how bad this is," mused the physician aloud.

"It isn't so very bad," smiled Dick. "I wouldn't mind at all, if it weren't for the game tomorrow. I'll play, anyway."

"Huh!" muttered Dave, incredulously.

Dr. Bentley was running his fingers over the left knee, which looked rather red.

"Does this hurt? Does this? Or this" inquired the medical man, pressing on different parts of the knee.

"No," Dick answered, in each case.

"We don't want grit, my boy. We want the truth."

"Why, no; it doesn't hurt," Dick insisted. "I believe I could rub that knee a little, and then walk on it."

"I hope that's right," Dave muttered, half incredulously.

Dr. Bentley made some further examination before he stated:

"I knew there was nothing broken there, but I feared that the ligaments of the knee had been strained. That might have put you out of the game for the season, Prescott."

"I'll be able to sprint in the morning," declared the young pitcher, with spirit.

"You fell on your hands, as well, didn't you?" asked the physician.

"Yes, sir."

"That saved you from worse trouble, then. The ligaments are not torn at all. The worst you've met with, Prescott, is a wrench of the knee, and there's a little swelling. It hurt to stand on your foot when you first tried to do so, didn't it?"

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"Yes, sir."

"It would probably hurt a little less, now. No—don't try it," as Dick started to bolster himself up. "You want that knee in shape at the earliest moment, don't you?"

"Of course I do, doctor."

"Then lie very quiet, and do, in everything, just what you are told."

"I've got to pitch to-morrow afternoon, you know, doctor. And I've got to run bases."

Dr. Bentley pursed his lips.

"There's a chance in a thousand that you'll be able, Prescott. The slight swelling is the worst thing we have to deal with, I'm glad to say. We'll have to keep the leg pretty quiet, and put cold compresses on frequently."

"I'll stay here and do it," volunteered Dave, promptly.

"You have to pitch to-morrow, Dave, if anything *should* make the coach order me off the field," interposed Dick, anxiously. "And you ought to be home and in bed now."

"If Mrs. Prescott will put on the bandages up to one o'clock to-night that will be doing well enough," suggested Dr. Bentley. "I shall be in to look at the young man quite early in the morning. But don't attempt to get up for anything, do you understand, Prescott? You know—" here Dr. Bentley assumed an air of authority—"I'm more than the mere physician. I'm medical director to your nine. So you're in duty bound to follow my orders to the letter."

"I will—if you'll promise me that I can pitch," promised the boy fervently.

"I can't promise, but I'll do my best."

"And, Dave," pressed Dick, "you'll skip home, now, and get a big night's rest, won't you? There's a bare chance that you *might* have to throw the ball to-morrow. But I won't let you, if I can stop it," Prescott added wistfully.

So Dave departed, for he was accustomed to following the wishes of the head of Dick & Co. in such matters.

Mrs. Prescott had come in as soon as the lad had been placed between the sheets. Dr. Bentley gave some further directions, then left something that would quiet the pain without having the effect of an opiate.

"It all depends on keeping the leg quiet and keeping the cold compresses renewed," were the medical man's parting words.

Twenty minutes later Dave telephoned the store below. Darrin was in a state of great excitement.

"Tell Dick, when he's awake in the morning," begged Dave of Mr. Prescott, who answered the call, "that Gridley pitchers seem to be in danger to-night. At least, *two* of 'em are. I was right near home, and running a bit, when I passed the head of the alley near our house. A bag of sand was thrown out right in front of my feet. How I did it I don't quite know yet, but I jumped over that bag, and came down on my feet beyond it. It was a fearfully close call, though. No; I guess you hadn't better tell Dick to-night. But you can tell him in the morning."

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Though “The Blade” somehow missed the matter, there were a good many in Gridley who had heard the news by Saturday morning. It traveled especially among the High School boys. More than a dozen of them were at the book store as soon as that place was opened.

“How’s Dick?” asked all the callers.

“Doing finely,” replied the elder Prescott, cheerily.

“Great! Is he going to pitch this afternoon?”

“Um—I can’t say about that.”

“If he can’t, Mr. Prescott, that’ll be one of Gridley’s chances gone over the fence.”

Dave was on hand as early as he could be. Dick had already been told of the attempt on his chum the night before.

“You didn’t see the fellow well enough to make out who he was?” Prescott pressed eagerly.

“No,” admitted Dave, sadly. “After a few seconds I got over my bewilderment enough to try to give chase. But the dastard had sneaked away, cat-foot. I know who it was, though, even if I didn’t see him.”

“Tip Scammon?”

“Surely,” nodded Darrin. “He’s Ripley’s right hand at nasty work, isn’t he?”

“I’d hate to think that Fred had a hand in such mean business,” muttered Dick, flushing.

“Don’t be simple,” muttered Dave. “Who wanted to be crack pitcher for the nine? Who pitches to-day, if neither of us can? That would be a mean hint to throw out, if Ripley’s past conduct didn’t warrant the suspicion.”

Later in the morning there was another phase of the sensation, and Dave came back with it. He was just in time to find Dick walking out into the little parlor of the flat, Dr. Bentley watching.

“Fine!” cheered Dave. “How is he, doctor?”

“Doing nicely,” nodded Dr. Bentley.

“But how about the big problem—can he pitch to-day?”

"That's what we're trying to guess," replied the physician. "Now, see here, Prescott, you're to sit over there by the window, in the sunlight. During the first hour you will get up once in every five minutes and walk around the room once, then seating yourself again. In the second hour, you'll walk around twice, every five minutes. After that you may move about as much as you like, but don't go out of the room. I think you can, by this gentle exercise, work out all the little stiffness that's left there."

"And now for my news," cried Dave, as soon as the medical man had gone. "Fred Ripley ran into trouble, too."

"Got hurt, you mean?" asked Dick quickly.

"Not quite," went on Darrin, making a face. "When Fred was going into the house last night he tripped slightly—against a rope that had been stretched across the garden path between two stakes."

"But Fred wasn't hurt?"

"No; he says he tripped, but he recovered himself."

"I'm afraid you don't believe that, Dave?"

"I ought to, anyway," retorted Darrin dryly. "Fred is showing the rope."

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"A piece of rope is easy enough to get," mused Dick.

"Yep; and a lie is easy enough for some fellows to tell. But some of the fellows are inclined to believe Rip, so they've started a yarn that Gardiner High School is up to tricks, and that some fellows have been sent over in advance to cripple our box men for to-day."

"That's vile!" flushed Prescott indignantly, as he got up to make the circuit of the room. "The Gardiner fellows have always been good, fair sportsmen. They wouldn't be back of any tricks of that sort."

"Well, Fred has managed to cover himself, anyway," returned Dave rather disgustedly. "He called his father and mother out to see the rope before he cut it away from the stakes. Oh, I guess a good many fellows will believe Ripley's yarn!"

"I'm afraid you don't, Dave;"

"Oh, yes; I'm easy," grinned Darrin.

"Can you see two young ladies, Richard?" asked Mrs. Prescott, looking into the room.

"Certainly, mother, if I get a chance. My vision is not impaired in the least," laughed Dick.

Mrs. Prescott stood aside to admit Laura and Belle, then followed them into the room.

"We came to make sure that Gridley is not to lose its great pitcher to-day," announced Laura.

"Then your father must have told you that I'd do," cried Dick, eagerly.

"Father?" pouted Miss Bentley. "You don't know him then. One can never get a word out of father about any of his patients. But he said we might call."

The visit of the girls brightened up twenty minutes of the morning.

"Of course," said Laura, as they rose to go, "you mustn't attempt to pitch if you really can't do it, or if it would hurt you for future games."

"I'm afraid the coach won't let me pitch, unless your father says I can," murmured Dick, with a wry face.

Few in Gridley who knew the state of affairs had any idea that Dick Prescott would be able to stand in the box against Gardiner. But the young pitcher boarded a trolley car, accompanied by Dave Darrin, and both reached the Athletic Field before two o'clock.



Dr. Bentley was there soon after. In the Gridley dressing room, Dick's left leg was bared, while Coach Luce drew off his coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves. Under the physician's direction the coach administered a very thorough massage, following this with an alcohol rubbing.

When it was all over Dick rose to exhibit the motions of that leg before the eyes of the doubtful physician.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN THE HOME FANS QUIVERED

"Is Prescott going to toss!"

"They say not."

"It's a shame."

"And there's a suspicion," whispered one of the High School speakers, "that the other name of the shame is Fred Ripley."

"He ought to be lynched!"

"But he claims that an attempt was made against him, also."

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"Ripley never was strong on the truth."

Though the gossip about Fred Ripley was not general, the anxiety over Pitcher Prescott was heard on all sides.

"It'll be a sure hoodoo if Prescott can't pitch the season's first game," declared a man who seldom missed a High School game on the home diamond.

Before three o'clock the grand stand was comfortably filled. The cheaper seats beyond held about as many spectators as they were built to hold.

The attendance, that day, was nearly three thousand. Gardiner had sent a delegation of nearly one-tenth of this number.

Before three o'clock the band began to play. Whenever the musicians launched into a popular baseball ditty the crowd joined with the words.

"Prescott is going to pitch!"

"No, he isn't."

"The word has just been passed around. Besides, his name's down on the score card."

"The score cards were printed yesterday."

Finally, curiosity could stand it no longer. A committee left the grand stand to go toward the dressing rooms building. But a policeman waved them back.

"None but players and officials allowed in there," declared the officer.

"We want to find out whether Prescott is going to pitch," urged the spokesman.

"I heard something about that," admitted the policeman.

"What was it? Quick!"

"Let me see. Oh! Prescott wants to pitch; the coach is half willing, but the doctor ain't certain."

This was the best they could do, so the committee returned to their seats. But nothing was settled.

At three-twenty, just as the band ceased playing, the compact bunch of Gardiner fans sent up the yell:

"Here they come! Our fellows! The only ones!"

Using their privilege as visiting team, the Gardiner players were now filing on to the field for a little warming-up practice.

“Throw him down, McCluskey!” tooted the band, derisively. But the cheers from the wild Gardiner fans nearly drowned out the instrumental racket. Quickly the visitors had a practice ball in motion. Now the home fans waited breathlessly.

At last the band played again. “See the Conquering Hero Comes!”

Gridley High School, natty and clean looking in their gray and black uniforms, with black stockings, caps and belts, came out on the field. Instantly there was craning of necks to see if Prescott were among the players.

“There he is!” yelled one of the High School fans. “There’s our Dick! Wow!”

Cheering went up from every Gridley seat. The bleachers contributed a bedlam of noise. “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow!” blared forth the band. Girls and women stood up, waving fans, handkerchiefs, banners. Another round of cheering started. Dick walked quietly, looking neither to right nor left. Yet the boy was wondering, in astonishment, if kings usually got such a welcome.

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By the time the cheering had ceased, Fred Ripley, also in uniform, strolled out and walked toward the sub bench.

A hiss greeted Ripley. It was not loud, nor insistent, and presently died out. But Fred went as white as a sheet, then, with eyes cast downward, he dropped to his seat at the end of the sub bench. His chest heaved, for the greeting had unnerved him.

"I wonder why I usually get that sort of thing, while that fellow Prescott has a band to play him in," muttered Fred.

The bulk of the audience was now quiet, while the three hundred visiting fans roared out one of their school yells.

Then followed a noisy whooping of the Gridley High School yell.

Coach Luce had walked over to a post behind the sub bench.

Umpire Foley, his mask dangling from his left hand, now summoned Purcell and the Gardiner captain. A coin spun up in the air. Gardiner's diamond chieftain won the toss, and chose first chance at the bat. Purcell's men scattered to their fielding posts, while the young captain of the home team fastened on his catcher's mask.

The umpire took a ball from its package, inspected it, then tossed it to Dick Prescott, who stood in the box awaiting it. There was a moment's tense expectation, followed by the command that set all the real fans wild:

"Play ball!"

Gardiner High School had put up a husky young giant who stood beside the plate, a confident grin on his face as he swung the bat.

Dick moistened his fingers. The batsman saw that, and guessed what was coming. He didn't guess quite low enough, however, for, though he stooped and swung the stick lower, the ball went under it by three inches.

"Strike one!" called Mr. Foley, judicially.

An imperceptible signal told Purcell what was coming next. Then it came—a jump ball. This time Gardiner's batsman aimed low enough but it proved to be a jump ball.

"Strike two!"

A howl of glee went up from all quarters, save from the Gardiner visitors.

Again Dick signaled. His third was altogether different—a bewildering out-curve. Gardiner's batsman didn't offer, but Purcell caught the leather neatly.

"Strike three, and out! One out!" announced the umpire.

"Whoop!" The joy from the home fans was let loose. With a disgusted look, Gardiner's man slouched back to the players' bench.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GRIT OF THE GRAND OLD GAME

In that half of the inning it was one, two, three—down and out!

Even Fred Ripley found himself gasping with admiration of Prescott's wonderfully true pitching.

Yet the joy of the home fans was somewhat curbed when Gridley went to bat and her third man struck out after two of the nine had reached bases.

So the first inning closed without score. Gardiner had found that Gridley was "good," and the latter realized that even young Prescott's pitching could not do it all.

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The first five innings went off quickly, neither side scoring.

"It'll be a tie at dark," sighed some of the fans.

"Oh, well, a tie doesn't score against Gridley," others added, consolingly.

In the five innings Dick Prescott had to run twice. The first time he was left at first base. The second time he had reached second, and was cautiously stealing third, when Gridley's batsman, Captain Purcell, struck his side out on a foul hit.

"How's your wrist holding up?" asked Purcell, in a low tone, as Dick came in.

"It feels strong.

"Do you think Darrin had better have the rest of the game?"

"Not on account of my wrist."

"But can you run the bases to the end?"

"If it doesn't call for any more running than we've had," smiled Dick.

Then he caught the ball, held it an instant, signaled, and let drive. It was the same Gardiner batsman whom Prescott had struck out at the opening of the game. This time the young giant got the range of the ball by sheer good guessing.

Crack! It soared. Right field ran backward after the ball. Now the Gardiner fans were up and yelling like Comanches.

"Leg it, Prendergast!"

The runner touched first bag, then darted on for second. Right field was still after the ball.

"Whoop! He's pulverized the second bag!"

"Just look at third, old man, and come steaming home over the plate!"

That runner had been well trained. He was close upon third base and going with unabated speed.

He kicked the bag—then a warning cry told him that right field had the ball.

A swift look over his shoulder, and Prendergast fell back upon third just before the ball dropped into the third baseman's hands.

“Safe on third!” came the umpire’s announcement. The ball arched over to Dick Prescott. Purcell signaled him to let the ball come in over the plate.

Now the air was all a-tingle. The visitors had a run in sight. Dick felt the thrill, but steeled himself against any impulsiveness or loss of nerve. He signaled the drive, then let go. Three strikes and out, the ball all the while so closely under control that Prendergast fidgeted but did not dare steal far from third.

Then came Dowdy to the bat. He was far and away the best batsman from Gardiner. Prendergast began to edge in.

“Strike one!” from the umpire.

Crack! The leather hung low, a little to the left of shortstop, who raced after it. Prendergast was going in at a tremendous clip. As shortstop reached the ball, he swooped down on it, stopped its rolling, and rising quickly, hurled it in across the plate.

Purcell was waiting, and made a good catch. It looked close. Everyone eyed Umpire Foley.

“Runner safe home,” he decided.

There was a gasp of disappointment, but the decision was fair. Prendergast had made good by a fraction of a second—and there was a man on first.

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"Oh, Dick! Oh, Prescott!" wailed the home fans. "We look to you."

Dick's answer was to strike the next man out, with never a chance for the man on first to steal away from Dalzell and make second. Then a short fly filled first and second. Dick struck out a second man—then a third.

But this was getting on Gridley's nerves. Despite Prescott's fine pitching, it began to look as though Gardiner High School was fitted for getting the only one or two runs that the game would witness.

In the eighth, Gardiner got a second run, but that inning closed with Gridley as much "stumped" as ever.

"Why play the ninth?" yelled one of the visitor fans. "Let's go and drink tea. Gridley boys are nice little fellows, but----"

"How's that wrist?" asked Captain Purcell, anxiously, as the players changed places to begin the ninth. Coach Luce had stepped close, too, and looked anxious.

"Just a bit lame, of course," Dick admitted. "But I'm going to pull through."

"You're sure about it?" Purcell asked.

"Sure enough!"

The first Gardiner man to bat went out on the third ball sent past him. Then a second. Now came Prendergast to the bat, blood in his eye. He glared grimly at young Prescott, as though to say:

"Now, I'll take it out of you for making a comedian of me the first time I held the stick!"

Dick felt, somehow, that Prendergast would make good.

The first ball that Prescott put over the plate was a called strike.
At the second serve—

Crack! and Prendergast was running.

Dan Dalzell gauged the flight of that ball better than anyone else on the diamond. He side-stepped like a flash, falling back a couple of paces. Then pulling the leather down out of the air, he leaped back to first. He was holding the ball in his left hand when Prendergast, breathing fast, hopped at the bag.

“Runner out!” called Umpire Foley. Prendergast stamped back, with a look of huge disgust. And now Gridley came in at the bat.

“It’s no use! We’re whipped!” That was the comment everywhere as Gridley came in from the field prepared for a last effort.

Gridley’s first and second men went bad—the first struck out, and the second knocked a foul bit that was caught.

“Greg, you’ve got to go to bat next,” whispered Dick to Holmes, just a moment before. “Oh, *don’t* you strike out. Hit something drive it somewhere. Remember Gridley can’t and won’t lose! Get the Gridley spirit soaked into you instanter. Chase that leather *somewhere!*”

Gardiner’s pitcher, his face beaming, faced Holmes, whom he did not regard as one of the team’s heavyweights in batting skill. Visiting fans were rising, preparing to leave the stand.

“Strike one!”

“There he goes!”

“Strike two!”

“It’s all over.”

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Crack! Greg was off like a colt. Running was in his line. He had swatted the ball somewhere over into left field, and he didn't care where it landed. Gardiner's left field was forced to pick up the leather.

Greg didn't know that anyone had the ball. He didn't care; he had to make first, anyway.

He kicked the bag, turning for the second lap. Then he saw the sphere coming through the air, and slid back.

"Runner safe on first!"

Gridley, with its nerve always on hand, felt that there was a ray of hope. The good, old, strong and fierce school yell went up. The soprano voices of the girls sounded high on the air.

Now Dan Dalzell came up to the plate, bat in hand. Dan hadn't hit a thing during the afternoon, but he meant to do so, now. It was either that or the swan-song!

"Strike one!—" a groan came from Gridley, a cheer from Gardiner.

But Dan was not in the least confused. He was ready for the next ball.

Biff! It was the pistol shot for Greg, who was off like a two-legged streak, with Dan, ninety feet behind but striving to catch up. The ball came to first only a quarter-second behind Dan's arrival.

"Both runners safe!"

"Oh, now, *Purcell!*"

The man now hovering over the plate knew he simply *had* to do something. He was captain of the nine. He had caught like a Pinkerton detective all afternoon, but now something was demanded of his brain and brawn.

"Strike one!" called the umpire, with voice that grated.

"Good-bye!"

"Strike two!" came again the umpire's rasping tones.

Even now Gridley fans wouldn't admit cold feet, but the chills were starting that way.

Crack!

"Whoop!" Then the battle-cry of Gridley rose frantically from all the seats—Purcell had made first base.

“Prescott!”

“It’s yours!”

“*Don’t* fall down!”

Schimmelpodt, a wealthy old German contractor, rose from his seat, shouting hoarsely:

“Bresgott I gif fifyd tollars by dot Athletic Committee bis you win der game vor Gridley!”

The offer brought a laugh and a cheer. Schimmelpodt rarely threw away money.

Dick, smiling confidently, stood bat in hand.

Most other boys might have felt nervous with so much depending on them. But Dick was one of the kind who would put off growing nervous until the need of steady nerves was past.

It was always impossible for him to admit defeat.

The game stood two to nothing in favor of the Gardiner nine, but Gridley had bases full.

Dick’s help might not have been needed for all the uneasiness that he displayed.

There was no pallor about his face, nor any flush. His hands grasped the willow easily, confidently.

“Strike one!”

Prescott had missed the ball, but it failed to rattle him.

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“Strike two!”

The boy was still undaunted, though he had lost two chances out of the three.

Again he tried for the ball.

Swish! It was a foul hit, out sideways. Gardiner’s catcher darted nimbly in under the ball.

Home fans groaned.

As for Dick, he didn’t turn his head to look. Catcher had the ball in his fingers, but fumbled it. It slipped.

“Hard luck,” muttered the standing Gardiner fans, waiting to give their final cheer of victory.

Dick’s next sight of the ball was when it sailed lazily over his head, into the hands of the man in the box.

“I hope Dick is bracing,” groaned one of Gridley’s subs.

“He isn’t,” retorted Dave Darrin. “He’s just on the job, steady as iron, cool as a cucumber and confident as an American.”

Gardiner’s pitcher measured his man critically, then signaled the next ball.

It came, just as Dick, closely watching the pitcher, expected it to come, a swift, graceful out-curve.

Bang!

At least it sounded like a gunshot. Dick Prescott struck the ball with all his might. He struck with greatest force just barely below the center of the sphere.

It was a fearful crack, aimed right and full of steam and speed.

“Wow!”

Three base-runners, at the first sound had started running for all they were worth. Dick’s bat flew like a projectile itself, fortunately hitting no one, and Prescott was running like Greek of old on the Olympic field.

One man in!

The ball had gone past the furthest limits of outfield. Before it had touched the ground Dick Prescott touched first and started for second.

Gardiner right and left fields were running a race with center field.

The latter was the one to get it, but his two supporters simply couldn't stand still.

Prescott kicked the second bag. Almost at the same instant the second man was in.

Score tied!

What about that ball?

It was rolling on the ground, now, many yards ahead of the flying center-field.

Dick was nearing third, the man ahead of him fast nearing the home plate.

Centerfield had the ball in his hands, whirling as if on springs.

Third man safe home—Dick Prescott turning the third bag and into the last leg of the diamond.

Center-field threw with all his might, but the distance was long.

Second base had to stoop for the ball. Even at that, it got past his hands. He wheeled, bolted after the ball, got it and made a throw to the catcher.

Out of the corner of his eyes, young Prescott saw the arching ball descend, a good throw and a true one.

Yet, ere it landed in the catcher's hand, Dick, by the fraction of a second, had sprinted desperately across the home plate.

"Runner safe home!"

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"Whoo-oopee! Wow! wow! wow!" rang the chorus of thousands.

"Four to two!"

"What about Gridley, *now*?"

"What about Dick Prescott?"

Then words were lost in volleys of cheers. The Gardiner fans who had risen to cheer slipped dejectedly down from the stand.

And Dick Prescott?

While running he had given no thought to his knee.

Now, as he dashed across the plate, and heard the umpire's decision, he tried to stop, but slipped and went down. He tried to rise, but found it would be better to sit where he was.

The game was over. Gridley, having made the winning runs in the last half of the ninth, the rules of the game forbade any further attempts to pile up score.

One of the first of the great crowd to leap over into the field and cross the diamond was Coach Luce. He ran straight to the young pitcher's side, kneeling close by him.

"You've given your knee a fearful twist, Prescott. I could see it," said Luce sympathetically.

"What do I care?" Dick called back, his face beaming. "The score's safe, isn't it?"

Had it not been for the state of his knee Prescott would have been snatched up by a dozen hands and rushed across the field in triumph. But Mr. Luce waved them all back. Dick's father and mother came hurrying across the field to see what was wrong with their boy.

"Let me lean on you as I get up, Mr. Luce," begged Dick, and the coach was only too quick to help the boy to his feet. Then, with the aid of Luce's arm, Dick was able to show his parents that he could walk without too much of a limp.

"You did it for us, Dick, old boy!" greeted Captain Purcell, as soon as he could get close.

"Did I?" snorted the young pitcher. "I thought there were four of us in it, with five others helping a bit."

"It was the crack you gave that ball that brought us in," glowed Purcell. "Gracious, I don't believe that Gardiner pitcher was ever stung as badly as that before!"

The band was playing, now. As the strain stopped, and the young pitcher came across the field, leaning now on Dave Darrin's arm, the music crashed out again into "Hail to the Chief!"

"You see, Purcell. You're getting your share of the credit now," laughed Dick. "The band is playing something about a captain, isn't it?"

In the dressing room Dick had abundant offers of help. Fred Ripley was the only silent one in the group. He changed his togs for street clothes as quickly as he could and disappeared. Later, Dave Darrin and Greg Holmes helped Dick on to a street car, and saw him safely home. That knee required further treatment by Dr. Bentley, but there was time, now, and no game depending on the result.

"Fred, I can't say much for your appetite tonight," remarked his father at the evening meal.

"Neither can I, sir," Fred answered.

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"Are you out of sorts?"

"Never felt any better, sir."

"Being out in the open air all this April afternoon should have given you an appetite."

"I didn't do anything this afternoon, except sit around in my ball togs," Fred grumbled.

"I hope you'll have a few good games to pitch this season," his father went on. "You worked hard enough, and I spent money enough on the effort to prepare you."

"You can't beat some people's luck—unless you do it with a club," grumbled Fred, absently.

"Eh?" asked his father, looking up sharply from his plate. But the boy did not explain.

Late that night, however, breaking training rules for the tenth time, Fred was out on the sly to meet Tip Scammon. The pair of them laid plans that aimed to stop Dick Prescott's career as High School pitcher.

CHAPTER XIX

SOME MEAN TRICKS LEFT OVER

Mr. Schimmelpodt had offered that fifty dollars in a moment of undue excitement.

For two or three days afterward he wondered if he couldn't find some way out of "spending" the money that would yet let him keep his self-respect.

Finding, at last, that he could not, he wrote out the check and mailed it. He pinned the check to a half-sheet of paper on which he wrote, "Rah mit Prescott!"

A few days later Mr. Schimmelpodt turned from Main Street into the side street on which Dick's parents kept their store and their home.

"Ach! Und dere is de door vot that boy lives by," thought Mr. Schimmelpodt, just before he passed Dick's door. "Yen der game over was, und I saw dot boy go down—ach!"

For Mr. Schimmelpodt had suited the action to the word. Out from under him his feet shot. But Mr. Schimmelpodt, being short and flabby of leg, with a bulky body above, came down as slowly as big bodies are supposed to move. It was rather a gradual tumble. Having so much fat on all portions of his body Mr. Schimmelpodt came down with more astonishment than jar.

“Ach! Such a slipperyishness!” he grunted. “Hey, Bresgott—! look out!”

The door had opened suddenly at this early hour in the morning. Dick, charged with doing a breakfast errand for his mother at the last moment, sprang down the steps and started to sprint away.

At the first step on the sidewalk, however, Dick’s landing foot shot out from under him.

He tried to bring the other down in time to save himself. That, too, slipped. Dick waved his arms, wind-mill fashion in the quick effort to save himself.

“Bresgott,” observed the seated contractor, solemnly, “I bet you five tollars to den cents dot you-----”

Here Schimmelpodt waited until Dick settled the question of the center of gravity by sprawling on the sidewalk.

“—Dot you fall,” finished the German, gravely. “I—Und I yin!”

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"Why, good morning, Mr. Schimmelpodt," Dick responded, as he started to get up. "What are you doing here."

"Oh, choost vaiting to see bis you do the same thing," grunted the contractor. "It was great sport—not?"

"Decidedly 'not,'" laughed Dick, stepping gingerly over a sidewalk that had been spread thinly with some sticky substance. "Can I help you up, Mr. Schimmelpodt?"

The German, who knew his own weight, glanced at the boy's slight figure rather doubtfully.

"Bresgott, how many horsepower are you alretty?"

But Dick, standing carefully so that he would not slip again, displayed more strength than the contractor had expected. In another moment the German was on his feet, moving cautiously away, his eyes on the sidewalk. Yet he did not forget to mutter his thanks to the boy.

As Dick now went on his way again, slipping around the corner and into a bakeshop, he noticed that his right wrist felt a bit queer.

"Well, I haven't broken anything," he murmured, feeling of the wrist with his left hand. "But what on earth happened to the sidewalk."

As he paused before his door on the way back, he looked carefully down at the sidewalk. Right before the door several flags in the walk appeared to be thinly coated with some colorless specimen of slime.

"It looks as though it might be soft soap," pondered Prescott, examining the stuff more closely. "It'll be dry in a half an hour more, but I think I had better fix it."

In the basement was a barrel of sand that was used for sanding the icy sidewalk in winter. As soon as Dick had run upstairs with the bread he went below, got a few handfuls of sand and fixed the sidewalk.

At recess Dick noticed just enough about his wrist to make him speak about it to Submaster Luce.

"Let me see it," demanded coach. "Hm!" he muttered. "Another peculiar accident, and only two days before our game with Chichester! See Dr. Bentley about your wrist at his office this afternoon. I'm beginning to think, Prescott, that it's a fortunate thing for you that the medical director is paid out of the fund. You'd bankrupt an ordinary citizen if you're going to keep on having these tumbles."

Dr. Bentley's verdict was that, while the wrist was not in a condition that need bother men much in ordinary callings, yet, as a pitcher's wrist, it would need rest and care.

"I've just got the tip that I'm to pitch in the Chichester game," said Dave, coming to his chum that afternoon.

"Yes; Doe thinks I ought to look after this wrist—that it wouldn't stand extraordinary strain during the next few days. But, Dave, old fellow, watch out! Keep your eye on the sidewalks near your home. Don't prowl in lonely places after dark. Act as if you were made of glass until you get on the field at the Chichester game."

Darrin glanced shrewdly at his friend, then nodded.

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"I'm on, Dick! Confound that fellow, Ripley. And he's as slick and slippery as an eel. I don't suppose there is any way that we can catch him?"

"If I knew a way I'd use it," growled Prescott. "I'm sick of having this thing so onesided all the time. Ripley plans, and we pay the piper. The blackguard!"

"Then you're sure Ripley is at the bottom of these accidents?"

"The accidents are planned," retorted Dick. "Who else would care to plan them, except that disagreeable fellow?"

"I'd like to get just proof enough to justify me in demanding that he stand up before me for twenty rounds," gritted Dave Darrin.

Dave did take extraordinary care of himself, and was on hand to pitch at the game with Chichester. This game, like the first, was on the home grounds.

It was a close game, won by Gridley, two to one. In some respects Chichester's fielding work was better than the home team's. It was undying grit that won the battle—that and Dave Darrin's pitching.

As the jubilant home fans left the ball grounds it was the general opinion that Dave Darrin was only the merest shade behind Dick Prescott as a pitcher.

"Either one of them in the box," said Coach Luce to a friend, "and the game is half won."

"But how about Ripley?"

"Ripley?" replied the coach. "He made a good showing in the tryouts, but we haven't had in the field yet. He will be, though, the next game. We play Brayton High School over at Brayton. It's one of the smaller games, and we're going to try Ripley there."

Then the coach added, to himself:

"Ripley is presentable enough, but I believe there's a big yellow streak in him somewhere. I wouldn't dare to put Fred into one of the big games requiring all the grit that Prescott or Darrin can show!"

CHAPTER XX

A TIN CAN FOR THE YELLOW DOG

With Ripley in the box Gridley won its third game of the season, beating Brayton High School by a score of five to two.

"It ought to have been a whitewash against a small-fry crowd like Brayton," Coach Luce confided to Captain Purcell.

"What was our weak spot, Coach?"

"Have you an opinion, Captain?" asked the coach.

"Yes, but I'm afraid I'm wrong."

"What is your idea?"

"Why, it seemed to me, Mr. Luce, that Ripley went stiff at just the wrong times. Yet I hate to say that, and I am afraid I'm unfair, for Rip surely does throw in some wonderful balls."

"You've struck my idea, anyway," responded Mr. Luce. "Please don't say anything about it to the other men. But, between ourselves, Captain, I think we'll do well to give Ripley few and unimportant chances this season. Most people can't see where real grit comes in, in baseball"

"Yet you think the lack of grit, or stamina, is just what ails Rip?" asked Captain Purcell keenly.

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"You can judge, from what I've said," replied Coach Luce.

"I'm glad then, Coach, for it shows I wasn't so far off the track in my own private judgment."

Yet, to hear Fred Ripley tell about the game, it wasn't such a small affair. He judged his foemen by the fact that they had to contend with *him*.

"Five to two is the safest margin we've had yet," he confided to those who listened to him at the High School. "More than that, we had Brayton tied down so that, at no time in the game, did they have any show to break the score against us. Now, if Luce and Purcell fix it up for me to pitch the real games of the season"

"Oh, cut it out, Rip," advised one listener, good-naturedly. "Brayton is only a fishball team, anyway. Not a real, sturdy beef-eater in the lot."

The season moved on briskly now. Dick pitched two games, and Darrin one in between Prescott's pair. Dick's first game was won by a score of one to nothing; his second game, the return date against Gardiner, was a tie. The game in which Darrin pitched was won by a score of three to two.

Then came a game with a team not much above Brayton's standing.

"Prescott and Darrin must be saved for some of the bigger games," decided Coach Luce. "Purcell, don't you think it will be safe to trust Ripley to pitch against Cedarville High School?"

"Yes," nodded the captain of the nine. "I don't believe Cedarville could harm us, anyway, if we put left field or shortstop in the box."

Fred Ripley was notified. At once Cedarville became, in his talk, one of the most formidable nines on the state's High School circuit.

"But we'll skin 'em, you'll see," promised Fred, through the week. "Be at the game, and see what I can do when I'm feeling well. Cedarville has no chance."

Ripley was in high spirits all through the week. All through that Saturday forenoon he moved about in a trance of exultation. Yet, underneath it all, he was somewhat seedy in a physical sense, for he had been out late the night before to meet Tip and hand over some money.

Late that Saturday forenoon, Lawyer Ripley returned from a business trip. Soon after he returned home, and had seen a man in his library, he went in search of his wife.

"Where's Fred?" demanded the lawyer.

“He went out up the street, to get a good walk,” replied Mrs. Ripley. “You know, my dear, he is to pitch for Gridley in one of the biggest games of the season this afternoon.”

“Hm!” said the lawyer. “Well, see here. Let Fred have his luncheon. Don’t say a word until then. As soon as he is over with the meal, send him to me in the library. Don’t give him any hint until he has finished eating.”

“Is—is anything wrong?” asked Mrs. Ripley, turning around quickly.

“Just a few little questions I want to talk over with the boy,” replied Mr. Ripley.

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It was shortly after one o'clock when Fred stepped into the library. This apartment was really in two rooms, separated by folding doors. In the front room Mr. Ripley had his desk, and did his writing. Most of his books were in the rear room. At the time when Fred entered the folding doors were closed.

"You wished to see me, sir?" Fred asked, as he entered.

"Yes," said his father, pointing to a chair; "take a seat."

"I hope it isn't anything that will take much time," hinted Fred. "you know, sir, I've got to be at the field early this afternoon. I am to pitch in one of the biggest-----"

"I'll try to be very brief," replied the lawyer, quietly. "Fred, as you know, whenever I find I have more money about me than I care to carry, I put it in the private safe upstairs. Your mother and I have a place where we hide the key to that old-fashioned safe. But, do you know, I have been missing some money from that safe of late? Of course, it would be sheer impudence in me to suspect your mother."

"Of course it would," agreed Fred, with feigned heartiness. He was fighting inwardly to banish the pallor that he knew was creeping into his cheeks.

"Have you any theory, Fred, that would help to account for the missing of these sums of money?" pursued the lawyer, one hand toying with a pencil.

"Do you suspect any of the servants?" asked the boy, quickly.

"We have had all our servants in the family for years," replied the lawyer, "and it would seem hard to suspect any of them."

"Then whom can you suspect, sir?"

"Fred, do you know, I have had a quiet little idea. I am well acquainted with the scrapes that young fellows sometimes get into. My experience as a lawyer has brought me much in contact with such cases. Now, it is a peculiar thing that young fellows often get into very bad scrapes indeed in pursuing their peculiar ideals of manliness. Fred, have you been getting into any scrapes? Have you found out where your mother and I hide the key to the safe? Have you been helping yourself to the money on the sly?"

These last three questions Lawyer Ripley shot out with great suddenness, though without raising his voice.

The effect upon young Ripley was electrical. He sprang to his feet, his face dramatically expressive of a mingling of intense astonishment and hurt pride.

"Dad," he gasped, "how can you ask me such questions?"

“Because I want the answer, and a truthful one,” replied the lawyer, coolly. “Will you oblige me with the answer? Take your time, and think deliberately. If you have made any mistakes I want you to be fair and honorable with me. Now, what do you say, sir?”

Fred’s mind had been working like lightning. He had come to the conclusion that it would be safe to bluff his denial through to the end.

“Father,” he uttered, earnestly, in a voice into which he tried to throw intense earnestness and sincerity, “I give you my word of honor, as a Ripley, that I know nothing more about the missing money than you have just told me.”

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"You are sure of that, Fred?"

"Sure of it, sir? Why, I will take any oath that will satisfy-----"

"We don't want any perjury here," cut in the lawyer, crisply, and touched a bell.

The folding doors behind them flew open with a bang. As Fred started and whirled about he beheld a stranger advancing toward them, and that stranger was escorting——Tip Scammon.

The stranger halted with his jailbird companion some five or six feet away. The stranger did not appear greatly concerned. Tip, however, looked utterly abashed, and unable to raise his gaze from the floor.

"With this exhibit, young man," went on the lawyer, in a sorrowful tone, "I don't suppose it is necessary to go much further with the story. When I first began to miss small sums from the safe I thought I might merely have made a mistake about the sums that I had put away. Finally, I took to counting the money more carefully. Then I puzzled for a while. At last, I sent for this man, who is a detective. He has come and gone so quietly that probably you have not noticed him. This man has had a hiding place from which he could watch the safe. Early last evening you took the key and opened the safe——robbed it! You took four five-dollar bills, but they were marked. This man saw you meet Tip Scammon, saw you pass the money over, and heard a conversation that has filled me with amazement. So my son has been paying blackmail money for months!"

Fred stood staggered, for a few moments. Then he wheeled fiercely on Scammon.

"You scoundrel, you've been talking about me——telling lies about me," young Ripley uttered hoarsely.

"I hain't told nothing about ye," retorted Tip stolidly. "But this rich man's cop (detective) nabbed me the first thing this morning. He took me up inter yer father's office, an' asked me whether I'd let *him* explore my clothes, or whether I'd rather have a policeman called in. He 'splained that, if he had to call the poor man's cop, I'd have to be arrested for fair. So I let him go through my clothes. He found four five-spots on me, and told me I'd better wait an' see yer father. So I'm here, an' not particular a bit about having to go up to the penitentiary for another stretch."

"It hasn't been necessary, Fred, to question Scammon very far," broke in the elder Ripley. "That'll do, now, Haight. Since Scammon volunteered to give the money back, and said he didn't know it had been stolen, you can turn him loose."

The detective and Tip had no more than gone when Lawyer Ripley, his face flushed with shame, wheeled about on his son.

“So you see, Fred, what your word of honor the word of a Ripley—is sometimes worth. You have been robbing me steadily. How much you have taken I do not know as I have not always counted or recorded money that I put in the safe.”

Fred’s face had now taken on a defiant look. He saw that his father did not intend to be harsh, so the boy determined to brave it out.

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"Haven't you anything to say?" asked the lawyer, after a brief silence.

"No," retorted Fred, sulkily. "Not after you've disgraced me by putting a private detective on my track. It was shameful."

That brought the hot blood rushing to his father's face.

"Shameful, was it, you young reprobate? Shameful to you, when you have been stealing for weeks, if not for months? It is you who are dead to the sense of shame. Your life, I fear, young man, cannot go on as it has been going. You are not fitted for a home of wealth and refinement. You have had too much money, too easy a time. I see that, now. Well, it shall all change! You shall have a different kind of home."

Fred began to quake. He knew that his father, when in a mood like this, was not to be trifled with.

"You—you don't mean jail?" gasped the boy with a yellow streak in him.

"No; I don't; at least, not this time," retorted his father. "But, let me see. You spoke of an engagement to do something this afternoon. What was it?"

"I was to have pitched in the game against Cedarville High School."

"Go on, then, and do it," replied his father.

"I---I can't pitch, now. My nerves are too-----"

"Go on and do what you're pledged to do!" thundered Lawyer Ripley, in a tone which Fred knew was not to be disregarded. So the boy started for the door.

"And while you are gone," his father shot after him, "I will think out my plan for changing your life in such a way as to save whatever good may be in you, and to knock a lot of foolish, idle ideas out of your head!"

Fred's cheeks were ashen, his legs shaking under him as he left the house.

"I've never seen the guv'nor so worked up before—at least, not about me," thought the boy wretchedly. "Now, what does he mean to do? I can't turn him a hair's breadth, now, from whatever plan he may make. Why didn't I have more sense? Why didn't I own up, and 'throw myself on the mercy of the court'?"



In his present mood the frightened boy knew he couldn't sit still in a street car. So he walked all the way to the Athletic Field. He was still shaking, still worried and pale when at length he arrived there.

He walked into the dressing room. The rest of the nine and the subs were already on hand, many of them dressed.

"You're late, Mr. Ripley," said Coach Luce, a look of annoyance on his face.

Outside, the first of the fans on the seats were starting the rumpus that goes under the name of enthusiasm.

"I—I know it. But—but—I—I'm sorry, Mr. Luce. I—I believe I'm going to be ill. I—I know I can't pitch to-day."

So Coach Luce and Captain Purcell conferred briefly, and decided that Dave Darrin should pitch to-day.

Darrin did pitch. He handled his tricky curves so well that puny Cedarville was beaten by the contemptuous score of seventeen to nothing.

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Meanwhile, Fred Ripley was wandering about Gridley, in a state of abject, hopeless cowardice.

CHAPTER XXI

DICK IS GENEROUS BECAUSE IT'S NATURAL

"Say, will you look at Rip?"

No wonder Harry Hazelton exploded with wonder as he turned to Dan Dalzell and Greg Holmes.

In this warmer weather, the young men loitered in the school yard until the first bell.

These three members of Dick & Co. were standing near the gateway when Fred Ripley turned the nearest corner and came on nervously, hurriedly, a hang-dog look in his face.

What had caught Harry Hazelton's eye, and now made his comrades stare, was the new suit that Fred wore. Gone was all that young man's former elegance of attire. His stern father had just left the boy, after having taken him to a clothing store where Fred was tricked out in a coarse, ready-made suit that had cost just seven dollars and a half. A more manly boy would have made a better appearance in such clothes, but it was past Fred Ripley. And he was miserably conscious of the cheap-looking derby that rested on his head. Even his shoes were new and coarse.

Ripley hurried by the chums, and across the yard, to be met at the door by Purcell, who stared at him in candid astonishment.

"Oh, say, Rip!" demanded Purcell. "What's the bet?"

"Shut up!" retorted Ripley, passing quickly inside.

"Fine manners," grinned Purcell to a girl who had also paused, impelled by excusable curiosity.

Dick, when he came along, heard the news from Hazelton and the others.

"What can be the cause of it all?" asked Tom Reade, wonderingly.

"Oh, some row with his father," decided Dick slowly. "When I was up on Main Street I saw them both going into Marsh's clothing store."

"I asked poor old Rip what the bet was," chuckled Purcell as he joined the group.

“Say, if you want to have fun at recess,” proposed Dan Dalzell, “let’s about twenty of us, one after the other, go up and ask Rip what the bet is, and how long it’s for?”

“Say,” retorted Dick sternly, eyeing hapless Dan, “I believe, if you got into a fight and knocked a fellow down, you’d jump on him and keep hammering him.”

“Not much I wouldn’t, old safety-valve,” retorted Dan, reddening. “But I see that you’re right, Dick. Rip has never been any friend of ours, and to jump him now, when he’s evidently down at home, would be too mean for the principles of Dick & Co.”

“I’d rather give the poor fellow a helping hand up, if we could,” pursued young Prescott musingly, “Purcell, do you think there’d be any use in trying that sort of thing?”

“Why, I don’t know,” replied Captain Purcell, easy going and good hearted. “Barring a few snobbish airs, I always used to like Rip well enough. He was always pretty proud, but pride, in itself, is no bar to being a decent fellow. The only fellow who comes to harm with pride is the fellow who gets proud before he has done anything to be proud of. At least, that’s the way it always hit me.”

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"Ripley certainly looked hang-dog," commented Hazelton.

"And he must feel mightily ashamed over something," continued Dick. "I wonder if his father has found out anything about Tip Scammon and certain happenings of last year. That might account for a lot. But what do you say, fellows? If Ripley has been a bit disagreeable and ugly, shall we try to make him feel that there's always a chance to turn around and be decent?"

"Why, I'd believe in trying to point out the better road to Old Nick himself," replied Dave Darrin warmly. "Only, I don't believe in doing it in the preachy way—like some people do."

"That's right," nodded Dick. "See here, Purcell, if Ripley is looking down in the mouth at recess, why don't you go up to him and talk baseball? Then call us over, after you've raised some point for discussion. And we'll tip two or three other fellows to join in, without, of course, getting a crowd."

"I'll try it," nodded Purcell. "Though I can't guess how it will turn out. Of course, if Rip gives us the black scowl we'll have to conclude that no help is wanted."

It was tried, however, at recess. Purcell went about it with the tact that often comes to the easy going and big hearted. Soon Purcell had Dick and Dave with Fred and himself. Then the other chums drifted up. Two or three other fellows came along. After some sulkiness at first Fred talked eagerly, if nervously. On the whole, he seemed grateful.

When Dick reached home that day he felt staggered with astonishment. Waiting for him was a note from Lawyer Ripley, asking the boy to be at the latter's office at half-past two.

"I shall take it as a very great favor," the note ran on, "and, from what I know of you, I feel certain that you will be glad to aid me in a matter that is of vast importance to me."

"What on earth is coming?" wondered Dick. But he made up his mind to comply with the request.

Promptly to the minute Dick reached the street door of the office building. Here he encountered Dave Darrin and Dalzell.

"You, too?" asked Dick.

"It looks as though all of Dick & Co. had been summoned," replied Dave Darrin.

On entering the lawyer's office they found their other three chums there ahead of them. Tip Scammon was there, also, looking far from downcast.

Lawyer Ripley looked very grave. He looked, too, like a man who had a serious task to perform, and who meant to go about it courageously.

“Young gentlemen, I thank you all,” said the lawyer slowly. “I am pursuing a matter in which I feel certain that I need your help. There has been some evil connection between Scammon and my son. What it is Scammon has refused to tell me. I will first of all tell you what I *do* know. I am telling you, of course, on the assumption that you are all young men of honor, and that you will treat a father’s confidence as men of honor should do.”

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The boys bowed, wondering what was coming. Lawyer Ripley thereupon plunged into a narration of the happenings of the day before, telling it all with a lawyer's exactness of statement.

"And now I will ask you," wound up Mr. Ripley, "whether you can tell me anything about the hold that Scammon seems to have exercised over my son?"

"That's an embarrassing question, sir," Dick replied, after there had been a long pause.

"Do you know the nature of that hold?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask how you know?"

"I overheard a conversation, one night, between your son and Tip Scammon."

"What was the substance of that conversation?" pressed the lawyer.

"I don't quite see how I can tell you, sir," Dick responded slowly and painfully. "I'm not a tale bearer. I don't want to come here and play the tittle-tattle on your son."

"I respect your reluctance," nodded Lawyer Ripley. "But let me put it to you another way. I am the boy's father. I am responsible for his career in this world, as far as anyone but himself can be responsible. I am also seeking what is for the boy's best good. I cannot act intelligently unless I have exact facts. Both my son and Scammon are too stubborn to tell me anything. In the cause of justice, Prescott, will you answer me frankly?"

"That word, 'justice,' has an ominous sound, sir," Prescott answered. "It is generally connected with the word punishment, instead of with the word mercy."

"I suspect that my son has been your very bitter enemy, Prescott," said the lawyer keenly. "I suspect that he has plotted against you and all your chums. Would you now try to shield him from the consequences of such acts?"

"Why, sir, I think any boy of seventeen is young enough to have another chance."

"And I agree with you," cried the lawyer, a sudden new light shining in his eyes. "Now, will you be wholly frank with me if I promise you that my course toward my son will be one that will give him every chance to do better if he wants to?"

"That's an odd bargain to have to make with a father," smiled Dick.

"It *is*," admitted Lawyer Ripley, struck by the force of the remark. "You've scored a point there, Prescott. Well, then, since I *am* the boy's father, and since I want to do him full justice on the side of mercy, if he'll have it—will you tell all of the truth that you know to that boy's father?"

Dick glanced around at his chums. One after another they nodded. Then the High School pitcher unburdened himself. Tip Scammon sat up and took keen notice. When Dick had finished with all he knew, including the tripping with the pole, and the soft-soaping of the sidewalk before his home door, Tip was ready to talk.

"I done 'em all," he admitted, "includin' the throwin' of the brickbats. The brickbats was on my own hook, but the pole and the soft soap was parts of the jobs me and Fred put up between us."

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"Why did you throw the brickbats on your own hook?" asked Lawyer Ripley sharply.

"Why, you see, 'squire, 'twas just like this," returned Tip. "After I'd done it, if I had hurt Prescott, then I was goin' to go to your son an' scare 'im good an' proper by threatenin' to blab that he had hired me to use them brickbats. That'd been good fer all his spendin' money, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, and for all he could steal, too," replied Lawyer Ripley.

"I didn't know nothing about his stealin' money," retorted Tip, half virtuously. "I jest thought he had too much pocket money fer his own good, an' so I'd help him spend some of it. But, see here, lawyer, ye promised me that, if I did talk, nothin' I told yer should be used against myself."

"I am prepared to keep that promise," replied Mr. Ripley coldly.

The sound of a slight stir came from the doorway between the outer and inner office. There in the doorway, his face ghastly white, his whole body seeming devoid of strength, leaned Fred Ripley.

"I had almost forgotten that I asked you to come here," said Mr. Ripley, as he looked up. "How long have you been here?"

"Not very long, perhaps, but long enough to know that Dick Prescott and the rest have been doing all they can to make matters harder for me," Fred answered in a dispirited voice.

"As it happens, they have been doing nothing of the sort," replied the lawyer crisply. "Come in here, Fred. I have had the whole story of your doings, but it was on a pledge that I would give you another chance to show whether there's any good in you. Fred, I can understand, now that you've always thought yourself better than most boys——above them. The truth is that you've a long way to go to get up to the level of ordinary, decent, good American boyhood. You may get there yet; I hope so. But come, sir, are you going to make a decent apology to Prescott and his friends for the contemptible things you've tried to do to them?"

Somehow, Fred Ripley managed to mumble his way through an apology, though he kept his eyes on the floor all the while. Full of sympathy for the father who, if proud, was at least upright, Dick and his chums accepted that apology, offered their hands, then tip-toed out, leaving father and son together.

CHAPTER XXII

ALL ROADS LEAD TO THE SWIMMING POOL

In the next few weeks, if Fred Ripley didn't improve greatly in popularity, he was at all events vastly quieter and more reserved in his manner.

Tip Scammon had vanished, so far as common knowledge went. Mr. Ripley, feeling somewhat responsible for that scamp's wrong doing, in that Fred had put him up to his first serious wrong doing, had given Scammon some money and a start in another part of the country. That disappearance saved Scammon from a stern reckoning with Prescott's partners, who had not forgotten him.

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Fred was again a well-dressed boy, also a well-mannered one. He had very little to say, and he kept his snobbishness, if any remained, well concealed.

Dick & Co., after the scene in the lawyer's office, if not exactly cordial with the unhappy junior, at all events remembered that they had agreed to "forget." Nor were Prescott and his chums priggish enough to take great credit to themselves for their behavior. They merely admitted among themselves that any fellow ought to have the show that was now accorded to the younger Ripley.

Baseball had gone off with an hurrah this season, though there had been an enormous amount of hard work behind all the successes.

Now, but one game remained. Out of fourteen played, so far, only one had resulted in a tie; the others had all been victories for Gridley.

With the warm June weather commencement was looming near. One Wednesday morning there was a long and tedious amount of practice over the singing that was to be offered at the close of the school year.

"Huh! I thought we'd never get through," snorted Prescott, as he raced out into the school yard. "And we were kept ten minutes over the usual time for recess."

"Gee, but it's hot to-day," muttered Tom Reade, fanning himself with his straw hat.

"Oh, what wouldn't I give, right now, for a good swim down at Foster's Pond!" muttered Purcell moodily.

"Well, why can't we have it?" suggested Gint.

"We couldn't get back by the time recess is over," replied Purcell.

"The end of recess would be when we *did* get back, wouldn't it!" asked a senior.

"Let's go, anyway!" urged another boy, restlessly.

As students were allowed to spend their recess quietly on the near-by streets, if they preferred, the girls generally deserted the yard.

The spirit of mischievous mutiny was getting loose among the young men. Nor will anyone who remembers his own school days wonder much at that. In June, when the end of the school year is all but at hand, restraints become trebly irksome.

Dick's own face was glowing. As much as any boy there he wanted a swim, just now, down in Foster's Pond. Oh, how he wanted it!

“See here, fellows,” Prescott called to some of the nearest ones. “And you especially, Charley Grady, for you’re studying to be a lawyer.”

“What has a lawyer to do with the aching desire for a swim?” inquired Grady.

“Well, post us a bit,” begged Dick. “What was it the great Burke had to say about punishing a community?”

“Why,” responded Grady thoughtfully, “Burke laid down a theory that has since become a principle in law. It was to the effect that a community cannot be indicted.”

“All of us fellows—*all* of us might be called a community, don’t you think?” queried Dick.

“Why—er—aha—hem!” responded Grady.

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"Oh, come, now, drop the extras," ordered Dick. "Time is short. Are we a community, in a sort of legal sense? Just plain yes or no."

"Well, then, yes!" decided Grady.

"Whoop!" ejaculated Dick, placing his straw hat back on his head and starting on a sprint out of the yard. His chums followed. Some of the fellows who were nearer the gate tried to reach it first. In an instant, the flight was general.

"Come on, Rip! You're not going to hang back on the crowd, are you?" uttered one boy, reproachfully. "Don't spoil the community idea."

So Fred Ripely tagged on at the rear of the flight.

"What is it, boys—a fire?" called Laura Bentley. A dozen girls had drawn in, pressing against the wall, to let this whirlwind of boys go by.

"Tell you when we get back," Purcell called. "Time presses now."

It took the leaders only about four minutes to reach Foster's Pond. Even Ripley and the other tail-enders were on hand about a minute later. There was a fine grove here, fringed by thick bushes, and no houses near. In a jiffy the High School boys were disrobing.

"And the fellow who 'chaws' anyone else's clothes, to-day," proposed Dick, "is to be thrown in and kept in, when he's dressed!"

"Hear! hear!"

Dick was one of the first to get stripped. He started on a run, glided out over a log that lay from the bank, and plunged headlong into one of the deepest pools. Then up he came, spouting water.

"Come on, in, fellows! The water's *grand*!" he yelled.

Splash! splash! The surface of the pond at that point was churned white. The bobbing heads made one think of huckleberries bobbing on a bowl of milk.

Splash! splash! More were diving in. And now the fun and the frolic went swiftly to their height.

"This is the real thing!" vented one ecstatic swimmer. "Down with 'do-re—mi-fa-sol!"

"As long as we're all to be hanged together, what say if we don't go back at all to-day?" questioned Purcell.

There were some affirmative shouts, but Dick, who had just stepped back on the bank for a moment shook his head.

“Don’t be hogs, fellows!” he urged. “Don’t run a good thing into the ground. We’ll have our swim, get well cooled off—and then we’d better go back looking as penitent as the circumstances seem to call for.”

“I guess it’s the wise one talking,” nodded Purcell, as he climbed to the bank preparatory to another dive.

For at least twenty minutes the High School boys remained at their delightful sport. Then cries started here and there:

“All out! All out!”

Reluctantly the youngsters began to leave the water.

“Now, don’t let anyone lag,” begged Purcell. “As we ran away together, we ought all to go back together.”

So dressing went on apace. Then the fellows began to look at each other, wonderingly. To be sure, they didn’t stand so much in personal awe of the principal. But then Mr. Cantwell had the Board of Education behind him. There was Superintendent Eldridge, also, and back of it all, what parents might—oh, hang it, it began to look just a bit serious now.

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"Who are the heroes here?" called out one fellow.

"Why?" demanded another.

"Well, we need our assured brave ones to lead going back."

"That's where the baseball squad comes in, then," nodded Purcell. "School nine and subs first, second team following. Then let the chilly-footed ones bring up the rear."

"We can go back in column of fours," proposed Dick, as he fastened on his collar, "with no leaders or file-closers. Then it will be hard to guess at any ring-leaders."

"That's the best idea yet," agreed Purcell. "Then, fellows, a block from the school, let the baseball squad form first, and then all of the rest of you fall in behind in column of fours, just as you happen along."

"And keep good ranks, and march the best you know how," urged Dick. "Unyielding ranks may suggest the community idea to Prin."

"Then we won't have to explain it," laughed Grady.

"Oh, come, now," shouted another, "don't flatter yourselves that we're going to get out of some tall explaining."

A block from the school the order was given to form fours. This was quickly done. Purcell, Dick, Darrin and Dan Dalzell composed the first four as the line turned into the yard.

There at the main doorway the culprits beheld the principal. And that gentlemen certainly looked almost angry about something. The weather indications were for squalls in the High School.

"Go to your seats in the assembly room," said the principal, coldly, as the head of the line neared him. As the boys wore no overcoats it was not necessary to file down to the locker rooms first. They marched into the hat room just off of the assembly room. And here they found Mr. Drake on duty.

"No conversation here. Go directly to your seats," ordered Mr. Drake.

The few girls who were not at classes looked up with eyes full of mischievous inquiry when the boys entered the big room. The principal and Mr. Drake took their seats on the platform. The late swimmers reached for their books, though most of them made but a pretense of study. Almost at once there was another diversion made by the girls who were returning from recitations.



Then the bell was struck for the beginning of the next period. Out filed the sections. The boys began to feel that this ominous quiet boded them no good. Not until closing time did the principal make any reference to the affair.

"The young ladies are dismissed for the day," he remarked. "The young gentlemen will remain." Clang!

Then a dead silence fell over the room. It was broken, after a minute, by the principal, who asked:

"Where were you, young gentlemen, when the end of recess bell rang this morning!"

No one being addressed, no one answered.

"Where were you, Mr. Purcell?"

"Swimming at Foster's Pond, sir."

"All of you?"

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"All of us, sir, I think."

"Whose idea was it?"

"As I remember, sir, the idea belonged to us all."

"Who made the first proposal?"

"That would be impossible to say, now, sir."

"Do you remember anything about it?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was it?"

"I believe the fellows voted that Mr. Grady, who is studying to be a lawyer, should represent us as counsel."

"Ah! I shall be very glad, then, to hear from Judge Grady," the principal dryly remarked.

"Judge" Grady bobbed up, smiling and confident—or he seemed so. As for the rest of the fellows, the principal's frigid coolness was beginning to get on their nerves.

"Mr. Principal," began Grady, thrusting his right hand in between his vest buttons, "the illustrious, perhaps immortal Burke, once elucidated a principle that has since become historic, authoritative and illuminating. Among American and English jurists alike, Burke's principle has been accepted as akin to the organic law and the idea is that a community cannot be indicted."

It was a fine speech, for Grady had real genius in him, and this was the first chance he had ever had. The principal waited until the budding legal light had finished. Then Mr. Cantwell cleared his throat, to reply crisply:

"While I will not venture to gainsay Burke, and he is not here to be cross-examined, I will say that the indictment of the community, in this instance, would mean the expulsion of all the young men in the High School. To that form of sentence I do not lean. A light form of punishment would be to prohibit absolutely the final baseball game of the school season. A sever form would be to withhold the diplomas of the young men of the graduating senior class. I think it likely that both forms of punishment will be administered, but I shall not announce my decision to-day. It will come later. The young men are dismissed." Clang!

Dismay would have been a mild name for what the fellows felt when they found themselves outside the building. Of the principal, in a rage they were little afraid. But

when the principal controlled his temper he was a man in authority and of dangerous power.

After his own meal, and some scowling reflection, Mr. Cantwell set out to find his friend and backer in the Board of Education, Mr. Gadsby. That custodian of local education heard Mr. Cantwell through, after which he replied:

“Er—um—ah—my dear Cantwell, you can’t very well prohibit the game, or talk of withholding diplomas from the young men of the graduating class. Either course would make you tremendously unpopular. The people of Gridley would say that you were lacking in—era sense of humor.”

“Sense of humor?” raged the principal, getting up and pacing the floor. “Is it humorous to have a lot of young rascals running all over one’s authority?”

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"Certainly not," responded Mr. Gadsby. "You should—er—preserve discipline."

"How am I to preserve discipline, if I can't inflict punishments?" insisted Mr. Cantwell.

"But you should—er—that is—my dear Cantwell, you should make the punishments merely fit the crimes."

"In such an outrageous case as to-day's," fumed the principal, "what course would have been taken by the Dr. Thornton whom you are so fond of holding up to me as a man who knew how to handle boys?"

"Dr. Thornton," responded Mr. Gadsby, "would have been ingenious in his punishment. How long were the boys out, over recess time?"

"Twenty-five minutes."

"Then," returned Mr. Gadsby, "I can quite see Dr. Thornton informing the young men that they would be expected to remain at least five times as long after school as they had been improperly away from it. That is—er—ah—he would have sent for his own dinner, and would have eaten it at his desk, with scores of hungry young men looking on while their own dinners went cold. At three o'clock—perhaps—Dr. Thornton would have dismissed the offenders. It would be many a day before the boys would try anything of that sort again on good old Thornton. But you, my dear Cantwell, I am afraid you have failed to make the boys respect you at all times. The power of enforcing respect is the basis of all discipline."

"Then what shall I do with the young men this time?"

"Since you have—er—missed your opportunity, you—er—can do nothing, now, but let it pass. Let them imagine, from day to day, that sentence is still suspended and hovering over them."

Wily Dick Prescott had been to see Mr. Gadsby, just before the arrival of the principal. In his other capacity of reporter for "The Blade" the High School pitcher had said a few earnest words to his host. Mr. Gadsby, with his eye turned ever toward election day and the press, had been wholly willing to listen.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE AGONY OF THE LAST BIG GAME

"Ya, ya, ya! Ye gotter do somethings!"

This from Mr. Schimmelpodt. That gentleman was waving one of his short, fat arms wildly. It may as well be stated that from the smaller extremity of that arm, namely, his hand—a small crimson and gold banner attached to a stick cut circles in the air.

“Go to it, Gridley!”

“Get busy! You can’t take a black eye at this end of the season.”

Gridley High School with a season’s record of one tied game and a long tally of victories, seemed now in dire straits.

Sides were changing for the last half of the ninth inning.

Gridley had taken seven runs. Wayland High School, with six runs already to their credit, was now going to bat for the last inning unless the score should be tied.

The perfect June day, just before commencement, had brought out a host. Wayland had sent nearly four hundred people. The total attendance was past four thousand paid admissions.

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Herr Schimmelpodt, who, since his first enthusiasm, had not missed a game, was now among the most concerned.

The band was there, but silent. The leader knew that, in this state of affairs the spectators wanted to make the noise themselves.

“Oh, you Dick!”

“Strike ’em out as fast as they come up.”

“Save Gridley!”

“Aw, let somebody have a game,” roared a voice from the Wayland seats, “and we need this one!”

“Prescott, remember the record!”

“No defeats this year!”

“Don’t give us one, now!”

Dick & Co. were in full force on the nine today. True, Dave Darrin sat only on the sub bench to-day, but he was ready to give relief at any moment if Gridley’s beloved pitcher, Prescott, went under.

Holmes was out in left field; Hazelton was the nimble shortstop; Dalzell pranced at the first bag on the diamond; Tom Reade was eternally vigilant on second base.

Gridley’s High School girls, devoted feminine fans as any in the world, were breathing soft and fast now. If only Dick, backed at need by the outfield, could keep Wayland from scoring further, then all was well. If Wayland should score even once in this inning, it would make a tie and call for a tenth inning. If Wayland scored twice—but that was too nerve-racking to contemplate.

Then a hush fell. The umpire had called for play.

Dick let drive with his most tantalizing spitball. The leather fell down gracefully under the Wayland’s batsman’s guess, and Purcell mitted the ball.

“Strike one!”

A hopeful cheer went up from Gridley seats, to be met with one word from Wayland fans:

“Wait!”



Dick served the second ball. Swat! There it went, arching up in the air, a fair hit. As fast as he could leg it went Holmes after it, and with good judgment. But the ball got there before Greg did. In a twinkling, the young left fielder had the ball up and in motion. Tom Reade caught it deftly at second, and wheeled toward first. But the runner saw his error in leaving first, and slid back in season.

Turning back, with his lips close together, Dick tried a new batsman. Two strikes, and then the visitor sent out a little pop-over that touched ground and rolled ere Harry Hazelton could race in and get it, driving it on to first base.

“Safe at first,” called the umpire, and the other Waylander had reached second.

“O-o-o-h!”

“Don’t let ’em have it, Dick—*don’t!*”

The wail that reached his ears was pathetic, but Prescott paid no heed. He was always all but deaf to remarks from the spectators. He knew what he was trying to do, and he was coming as close as a hard-worked pitcher could get to that idea at the fag-end of the game.

The fatigue germ was hard at work in the young pitcher’s wrist, but Dick nerved himself for better efforts. Despite him, however, a third batsman got away from him, and from Greg, and now the bases were full.

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"O-o-oh, Dick!"

It was a wail, full of despair. Though he paid no direct heed to it the sorely pressed young pitcher put up his left hand to wipe the old sweat out of his eyes. His heart was pounding with the strain of it. Dick Prescott, born soldier, would have died for victory, *just* then. At least, that was what he felt.

The Wayland man who now stood over the plate looked like a grinning monkey as he took the pitcher's measure.

"Go to it, Dickson—kill the ball!" roared the visiting fans. "Just a little two-bagger—that's all!"

Dick felt something fluttering inside. In himself he felt the whole Gridley honor and fame revolving during that moment. Then he resolutely choked down the feeling. The umpire was signaling impatiently for him to deliver.

Dick essayed a jump ball. With a broadening grin Dickson of Wayland reached for it vigorously. He struck it, but feebly. Another of those short-winded, high-arched pops went up in air.

There was no hope or chance for Hazelton to get to the spot in time—and Wayland's man away from third was steaming in while Purcell made the home plate at a bound.

Dick raced—raced for all he was worth, though his heart felt as if steam had shut down.

Across the grass raced Prescott, as though he believed he could make history in fifths of seconds.

In his speed he went too far. The ball was due to come down behind him.

There was no time to think. Running at full speed as he was, Pitcher Dick rose in the air. It looked like an incredible leap—but he made it. His hands pulled the slow-moving popball down out of the air.

Barely did Dick's feet touch the ground when he simply reached over and dropped the ball at Purcell.

The captain of the Gridley nine dropped to one knee, hands low, but he took the leather in—took it just the bare part of a second before the Waylander from third got there.

For an instant the dazed crowd held its breath just long enough to hear the umpire announce.

“Striker out! Out at home plate. Two out!”

Then the tumult broke loose.

For an instant or two Dick stood dizzy just where he had landed on his feet.

Umpire Davidson came bounding over.

“Do you want to call for a relief pitcher, Prescott?”

“No—Wayland pitched all through with one man!”

Back to the box marched Dick Prescott, but he took his time about it. He had need of a clear head and steadier nerves and muscles, for Wayland had a man again at third, and another dancing away from second. There was plenty of chance yet to lose.

“Prescott ought to call you out,” whispered Fred Ripley to Dave.

“And I’d get out there on the dead run, just as you would, Rip. But you know how Dick feels. Wayland went through on one man, and Dick’s going to do it if he lives through the next few minutes!”

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While that momentary dizziness lasted, something happened that caused the young pitcher to flush with humiliation. Sandwiched in between two strikes were called balls enough to send the new batsman to first, and again the bases were full. One more “bad break” of this kind and Wayland would receive the tie run as a present. And then one more—it would be the High School pitcher handing the only lost game of the season as a gift to the visitors!

Dick braced himself supremely for the next man at bat.

“Strike one!”

It wasn’t the batter’s fault. A very imp had sat on the spitball that Prescott bowled in.

“Strike two!”

The batsman was sweating nervously, but he couldn’t help it. Dick Prescott had fairly forced himself into the form of the first inning. But it couldn’t last.

Gink! It was only a little crack at the ball, struck rather downward. A grounding ball struck the grit and rolled out toward right infield. There was no shortstop here. The instant that Prescott took in the direction he was on the run. There was no time to get there ahead of the rolling leather. It was Dick’s left foot that stopped it, but in the same fraction of a second he bent and swooped it up—wheeled.

Wayland’s man from third base looked three fourths of the way in. Captain Purcell, half frantic, was doubled up at the home plate.

Into that throw Dick put all the steam he had left in. The leather gone from his hand, he waited. His heart seemed to stop.

To half the eyes that looked on, ball and runner seemed to reach the home plate at the same instant. The umpire, crouching, squinting, had the best view of all.

It was an age before Dick, with the mists before his eyes, heard the faraway words for which thousands waited breathlessly:

“Out at home—three out!”

Three disheartened base runners turned and slouched dispiritedly toward the dressing rooms.

“You could have hit that ball a better swipe,” growled Wayland’s captain to the last man at bat. The victim of the rebuke didn’t answer. He knew that he had faced a pitcher wholly rejuvenated by sheer grit and nerve force.

At its loudest the band was blaring forth “At the Old Ball Game,” and thousands were following with the words. Wayland fans were strolling away in dejection, but Gridley folks stood up to watch and cheer.

The whole nine had done its duty in fine shape, but Dick Prescott had made himself the idol of the Gridley diamond.

When the band stopped, the cheers welled forth. The lion’s share was for Prescott, but Darrin was not forgotten. Even Ripley, who had pitched three of the minor games, came in for some notice.

Dick?

With the strain and suspense gone he felt limp and weak for a few minutes. Under the cold shower he revived somewhat. Yet, when he started homeward, he found that he ached all over. With the last game of the season gone by, Dick half imagined that his right wrist was a huge boil.

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At the gateway Schimmelpodt, that true devotee of sport, waited. As the young High School pitcher came forth Herr Schimmelpodt rested a fat hand on the boy's shoulder, whispering in his ear:

"Ach! But I know vere is dere a *real* jointed fishpole. It was two dollar, but now it stands itself by, marked to one-nineteen. In der morning, Bresgott, it shall be yours. Und listen!"

Dick looked up into the blinking eyes.

"Dot fishpole for der summer use is goot fine! Und venever you see me going by bis my wagon, don't you be slow to holler und ask me for a ride!"

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

Commencement Day!

For a large percentage of High School boys and girls, the end of the sophomore year marks the end of their schooling.

This was true at Gridley as elsewhere. When the crowd came forth from commencement exercises at the Opera House on this bright, warm June afternoon, there were not a few of the sophomores who were saying good-bye to the classic halls of instruction.

Not so, however, with Dick & Co. They were bound all the way through the course, and hoped to take up with college or other academic training when once good old Gridley High School must be left behind.

"What are you going to do this summer, Prescott?" asked Dr. Bentley, gripping the lad's arm, as Dick stood on the sidewalk chatting with Dave Darrin.

"Work, mostly, doctor. I'm getting near the age when fellow should try to bear some of the expense of keeping himself."

"What will you work at?"

"Why, reporting for 'The Blade.' I believe I can capture a good many stray dollars this summer."

“Good enough,” murmured Dr. Bentley, approvingly. “But are you going to have any spare time?”

“A little, I hope—just about enough for some rest.”

“Then I’ll tell you where you can take that rest,” went on the medical man. “My family are going into camp for the summer, in three days. They’ll be over at the lake range, on a piece of ground that I’ve bought there. You can get over once in a while, and spend a night or two, can’t you? Mrs. Bentley charged me to ask you and Darrin,” added the physician. “Belle Meade is going to spend the summer in camp with Laura.”

Both boys were prompt with their thanks.

“Confound it,” muttered Dr. Bentley, “I’m forgetting two thirds of my message at that. The invitation includes all of Dick & Co. Now remember you’ll all be looked for from time to time, and most heartily welcome.”

Both boys were most hearty in their thanks. This took care of whatever spare time they might have, for Dave, too, was to be busy a good deal of the time. He had work as an extra clerk at the express office.

Then the two girl chums came along. Dick and Dave strolled along with Laura and Belle. The other partners of Dick & Co. were soon to be seen, their narrow-brimmed straw hats close to bobbing picture hats.

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"Your father gave us a message, Laura," Dick murmured to the girl beside him.

"And you're going to accept it?" asked the girl quickly.

"At any chance to be honestly away from work," Dick promised fervently. "Yet at my age a fellow must keep something of an eye toward business, too, Laura."

"Yes," she answered slowly, glancing covertly at the bronzed young face and the strong, lithe body. "You're nearing manhood, Dick."

"Just about as rapidly as you're growing into womanhood, Laura," answered the boy.

Dave and Belle were chatting, too, but what they said wouldn't interest very staid old people.

Gridley was prouder than ever of its athletic teams. The great record in baseball, with Dick & Co. in the team, was something worth talking about.

Lest there be some who may think that a season of baseball with no defeats is an all but impossible record, the chronicler hastens to add that there are, through the length and breadth of these United States, several High School teams every year that make such a showing.

Yet, in baseball, as in everything else, the record is reached only by nines like the Gridley crowd, where the stiffest training, the best coaches and the best individual nerve and grit among the players are to be found.

Did Fred Ripley truly make good?

What else happened?

These and various other burning questions must now be answered in the chronicle of the time to which they belonged. So the reader is referred to the next volume in this series, which is to be published at once under the caption: "*The High School Left End; Or, Dick & Co. Grilling on the Football Gridiron.*"

At the same time, no interested reader will allow himself to overlook the second volume in the "*High School Boys' Vacation Series*," which runs parallel with this present series. All the wonderful summer vacation adventures that followed the sophomore year of Prescott and his chums will be found in the volume published under the title, "*The High School Boys' In Summer Camp; Or, The Dick Prescott Six Training for the Gridley Eleven.*" It is a thrilling story that no follower of the fortunes of these lads can afford to overlook.

THE END