

The High School Captain of the Team eBook

The High School Captain of the Team by H. Irving Hancock

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CHAPTER I

"Kicker" Drayne Revolts

"I'm going to play quarter-back," declared Drayne stolidly.

"You?" demanded Captain Dick Prescott, looking at the aspirant in stolid wonder.

"Of course," retorted Drayne. "It's the one position I'm best fitted for of all on the team."

"Do you mean that you're better fitted for that post than anyone else on the team?" inquired Prescott. "Or that it's the position that best fits your talents?"

"Both," replied Drayne.

Dick Prescott glanced out over Gridley High School's broad athletic field.

A group of the middle men of the line, and their substitutes, had gathered around Coach Morton.

On another part of the field Dave Darrin was handling a squad of new football men, teaching how to rush in and tackle the swinging lay figure.

Still others, under Greg Holmes, were practicing punt kicks.

Drayne's face was flushed, and, though he strove to hide the fact, there was an anxious look there.

"I didn't quite understand, Drayne," continued the young captain of the team, "that you were to take a very important part this year."

"Pshaw! I'd like to know why I'm not," returned the other boy hotly.

"I think that is regarded as being the general understanding," continued Dick. He didn't like this classmate, yet he hated to give offense or to hurt the other's feelings in any way.

"The general understanding?" repeated Drayne hotly. "Then I can tell the man who started that understanding."

"I think I can, too," Prescott answered, smiling patiently.

"It was you, Dick Prescott! You, the leader of Dick & Co., a gang that tries to boss everything in the High School!



“Cool down a bit,” advised young Prescott coolly. “You know well enough that the little band of chums who have been nicknamed Dick & Co. don’t try to run things in the High School. You know, too, Drayne, if you’ll be honest about it, that my chums and I have sometimes sacrificed our own wishes to what seemed to be the greatest good of the school.”

“Then who is the man who has worked to put me on the shelf in football?” insisted the other boy, eyeing Dick menacingly.

“Yourself, Drayne!”

“What are you talking about?” cried Drayne, more angry than before.

“Don’t be blind, Drayne,” continued the young captain. “And don’t be silly enough to pretend that you don’t know just what I mean. You remember last Thanksgiving Day?”

“Oh, that?” said Drayne, contemptuously. “Just because I wouldn’t do just what you fellows wished me to do?”

“I was there,” pursued Captain Prescott, “and I heard all that was said, saw all that was done. There was nothing unreasonable asked of you. Some of the fellows were a good bit worried as to whether you were really in shape for the game, and they talked about it among themselves. They didn’t intend you to over hear, but you did, and you took offense. The next thing we knew, you were hauling off your togs in hot temper, and telling us that you wouldn’t play. You did this in spite of the fact that we were about to play the last and biggest game of the season.”



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"I should say I wouldn't play, under such circumstances! Nor would you, Prescott, had the same thing happened to you."

"I have had worse things happen to me," replied Dick coolly. "I have been hectoring to pieces, at times, both on the baseball and football teams. The hectoring has even gone so far that I have had to fight, more than once. But never sulked in dressing quarters and refused to go on the field."

"No!" taunted Drayne. "And a good reason why. You craved to get out, always, and make grand stand plays!"

"I suppose I'm as fond of applause from the grand stand as any other natural fellow," laughed Dick good-humoredly. "But I'll tell you one thing, Drayne: I never hear a murmur of what comes from the grand stand until the game is over. I play for the success of the team to which I belong, and listening to applause would take my mind off the plays. But, candidly, what the fellows have against you, is that you're a quitter. You throw down your togs at a critical moment, and tell us you won't play, just because your fearfully sensitive feelings have been hurt. Now, a sportsman doesn't do that."

"Oh, it's all right for you to take on that mighty superior air, and try to lecture me," retorted Drayne gruffly.

"I'm not lecturing you. But the fellows chose me to lead the team this year, and the captain is the spokesman of the team. He also has to attend to its disagreeable business. Don't blame me, Drayne, and don't blame anyone else-----"

"Captain Prescott!" sounded the low, but clean-cut, penetrating voice of Mr. Morton, submaster and football coach of the Gridley High School.

"Coming, sir!" answered Dick promptly.

Then he added, to Drayne:

"Just blame your own conduct for the decision that was reached by coach and myself after listening to the instructions of the alumni Athletics Committee."

Dick moved away at a loping run, for football practice was limited to an hour and a half in an afternoon, and he knew there was no time to be frittered.

"Oh, you sneak!" quivered Drayne, clenching his hands as he scowled at the back of the captain. "It was you who brought up the old dispute. It is you who are keeping me from any decent chance this last year of mine in the High School. I won't stand it! I'll shake the dust from my feet on this crowd. I won't remain in the squad, just for a possible chance to sub in some small game!"

His face still hot with what he considered righteous indignation, Drayne felt better as soon as he had decided to shake the crowd.

In an instant, however, he changed his mind. A sly, exultant look came into his eyes.

“On second thought I believe I won’t quit,” he grinned to himself. “I’ll stay—I’ll drill—and I’ll get good and square with this cheap crowd, captained by a cheap man! Gridley hasn’t lost a game in years. Well, you chaps shall lose more than one game this year! I’ll teach you! I’ll make this a year that shall never be forgotten by humbled Gridley pride!”

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Just what Phin Drayne was planning will doubtless be made plain ere long.

Readers of the preceding volumes in this series are already familiar with nearly all the people, young and old, of both sexes, whom they are now to meet again. In the first volume, "*The High School Freshmen*," our readers became acquainted with Dick Prescott, Dave Darrin, Greg Holmes, Dan Dalzell, Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton, six young chums who, back in their days in the Central Grammar School Gridley, had become fast friends, and had become known as Dick & Co.

These chums played together, planned together, entered all sports together. They were inseparable. All were manly young fellows. When they entered Gridley High School, and caught the fine High School spirit prevailing there, they made the honor of the school even more important than their own companionship.

In the first year at High School the boys, being mere freshmen, could not expect to enter any of the school's athletic teams. Yet, as our readers know, Dick and his friends found many a quiet way to boost local interest and pride in High School athletics. Dick & Co. also indulged in many merry and startlingly novel pranks. Dick secured an amateur position as space reporter on "The Blade," the morning newspaper of the little city, and was assigned, among other things, to look after the news end of the transactions of the Board of Education. The "influence" that young Prescott secured in that way doubtless saved him from having grave trouble, or being expelled when, owing to Dr. Thornton's ill-health, Abner Cantwell, a man with an uncontrollable temper, came temporarily to the principal's chair. To everybody's great delight, at the beginning of this their senior year, Dr. Thornton had returned to his position fully restored to his former vigor and health.

In "*The High School Pitcher*" Dick & Co., then sophomores, were shown in some fine work with the Gridley High School nine, and Dick had serious, even dangerous, Trouble, with mean, treacherous enemies that he made.

In "*The High School Left End*," Dick & Co., juniors, made their real entrance into High School athletics by securing places in the school football eleven. It was in this year that there occurred the famous strife between the "soreheads" and their enemies, whom the former termed the "muckers." The "soreheads" were the sons of certain aristocratic families who resolved to secede from football in case any of the members of Dick & Co. or of other poor Gridley families, were allowed to make places on the team. As the group of "soreheads" contained a few young men who were really absolutely necessary to the success of the Gridley High School football eleven, the strife threatened to put Gridley in the back row as far as football went.

But Dick, with his characteristic vigor, went after the "soreheads" in the columns of "The Blade." He covered them with ridicule and scorn so that the citizens of the town began to take a hand in the matter as soon as their public pride was aroused.

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The “soreheads” were driven, then, to apply for places in the football squad. Only those most needed, however, had been admitted, and the rest had retired in sullen admission of defeat.

Two of the latter, Bayliss and Bert Dodge, carried matters so far, however, that they were actually forced out of the High School and left Gridley to go to a preparatory school elsewhere.

The hostile attempts of young Ripley, of Dodge, Drayne and others to injure Dick & Co. have been fully related in the four volumes of the “*High School Boys’ Vacation Series*.” This series deals with the good times enjoyed by Dick & Co. during their first three summers as high school boys. These stories are replete with summer athletics, and a host of exciting adventures. The four volumes of this Vacation Series are published under the titles: “*The High School Boys’ Canoe Club*,” “*The High School Boys in Summer Camp*,” “*The High School Boys Fishing Trip*” and “*The High School Boys’ Training Hike*.”

This present year no “sorehead” movement had been attempted. Every student who honestly wanted to play football presented himself at the school gymnasium, on the afternoon named by Coach Morton for the call, including Drayne, who had been one of the original “soreheads.” Drayne afterwards returned to the football fold, behaving with absurd childishness at the big Thanksgiving game, as our readers will recall.

Leaving Coach Morton, Captain Prescott hurried away to take charge of the practice.

“Come, Mr. Drayne!” called Coach Morton “Get into the tackling work, and be sure to mix it up lively.”

“Just a moment, coach, if you please,” begged Drayne.

“Well, Drayne?” asked Mr. Morton

“Captain Prescott has just been telling me that I’m to be only a sort of sub this year.”

“Well, he’s captain,” replied the submaster.

“Huh! I thought it was all Prescott’s fine work!” sneered Phin.

“You’re wrong there, Mr. Drayne,” rejoined the coach frankly. “As a matter of fact, it was I who suggested that you be cast for light work this year.”

“Oh!” muttered Drayne

“Yes; if you feel like blaming anyone, blame me, not Prescott. You know, Drayne, you didn’t behave very well last Thanksgiving Day.”



“I admit that my behavior was unreasonable, sir. But you know, Mr. Morton, that I’m one of the valuable men.”

“There’s a crowd of valuable men this year, Drayne,” smiled the submaster.

“On the strongest pledge that I can give you, Mr. Morton, will you allow me to play regular quarter-back this season?” begged the quitter of the year before.

“I would give the idea more thought if Prescott recommended it; but I doubt if he would,” answered Mr. Morton slowly. “Personally, Drayne, I don’t approve of putting you on strong this year. The quitter’s reputation Drayne, is one that can’t ever be really lived down, you know.”

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Though coach's manner was mild enough, there was look of the resolute eyes of this famous college athlete that made Phin Drayne realized how hopeless it was to expect any consideration from him.

"All right then Mr. Morton," he replied huskily. "I'll do my best on a small showing, and take what comes to me."

Yet, as he walked slowly over to join the tacklers around the swinging figure, the hot blood came again to young Drayne's face.

"I'll make this year a year of sorrow Gridley!" he quivered indignantly. "I'll hang on, and make believe I'm meek as a lamb, but I'll spoil Gridley's record for this year! There was in olden times a chap who had a famous knack for getting square with people who used him the wrong way. I wish I could remember his name at this moment."

Drayne couldn't recall the name at the time, but another name that might have served Drayne to remember at this instant was—

Benedict Arnold.

CHAPTER II

A Hint from the Girls

There had been nothing rapid in Dick Prescott's elevation to the captaincy of the eleven.

Back in the grammar school he had started his apprenticeship in athletics. During his freshman year in High School he had kept up his training. In his sophomore year he had trained hard for and had won honors in the baseball nine. In his junior year, after harder training than ever, he had performed a season's brilliant work, playing left end in all the biggest games of the season.

So now, in his senior and last year at Gridley High School he had come by degrees to the most envied of all possible positions in school athletics.

The election to the football captaincy had not been sought by Dick. In his junior year it had been offered to him, but he had declined it, feeling that Wadleigh, both by training and judgement, was better fitted to lead the eleven on the gridiron. But now, having reached his senior year, Dick was by far the best leader possible. Coach and football squad alike conceded it, and the Alumni Association's Athletics Committee had approved.

Dick Prescott had grown in years since first we saw him, but not in conceit. Like all who succeed in this world, he had a good degree of positiveness in his make-up; but from



this he left out strong self-conceit. In all things, as in his school life, he was prepared to sacrifice himself along whatever lines pointed to the best good.

Dave Darrin, of all the chums, was nearly as well fitted as was Prescott to lead, though not quite. So Dave, with Dick's own kind of spirit, fell back willingly into second place. This year Dave was second captain of the eleven, ready to lead to victory if Dick should become incapacitated.

Beyond these, any of the four other chums were almost as well qualified for leadership. Ability to lead was strong in all the "partners" of Dick & Co.

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While they were on the field that afternoon all of the six worked as though football were the sole subject on earth that interested them. That was the Gridley High School way, and it was the spirit that Coach Morton always succeeded in putting into worthy young men. Once back in dressing quarters, however, and under the shower baths, the talk turned but little on football.

As soon as they had rubbed down and dressed Dick & Co. went outside and started back to town—on foot. Time could be saved by taking the street car, but Dick and his friends believed that a brief walk, after the practice served to keep the kinks out of their joints and muscles.

“What ailed old Drayne this afternoon, Dick?” asked Tom Reade.

“Why, he told me that he had hoped to play quarter this season.”

“Regular quarter?” demanded Dan Dalzell, opening his eyes very wide.

“That was what I gathered, from what he said,” nodded Dick.

“Well, of all the nerve!” muttered Hazelton.

“The star position—for a fellow with a quitter’s record!”

“I was obliged to say something of the sort” smiled Dick, “though I tried to say it in a way that wouldn’t hurt his feelings.”

“You didn’t succeed very well in salving his feelings, if his looks gave any indication.” laughed Greg Holmes quietly.

“Drayne went over to coach afterwards,” added Dave Darrin. “Mr. Morton didn’t seem to give the fellow any more satisfaction than you did, Dick.”

“Who is to be quarter, anyway?” asked Harry Hazelton.

“Why, Dave is my first and last choice,” Prescott answered frankly. “But, personally, I’m not going to press him any too hard for the post.”

“Why not?” challenged Greg.

“Because everyone will say that I’m playing everything in the interest of Dick & Co.”

“Dave Darrin is head and shoulders above any other possibility for quarter-back,” insisted Greg, with so much conviction that Darrin, with mock politeness, turned and lifted his cap in acknowledgment of the compliment.



“Then coach and the Athletics Committee are intelligent enough to find it out,” answered the young football captain.

“That suits me,” nodded Dave. “I want to play at quarter; yet, if I can’t make everyone concerned feel that I am the man for the job, then I haven’t made good to a sufficient extent to be allowed to carry off the honors in a satchel.”

“That’s my idea, Darrin,” answered Dick. “I believe you have made good, and so good at that, that I’m going to dodge any charge of favoritism, and leave it to others to see that you’re forced to take what you deserve.”

“Of course I want to play this season, and I’m training hard to be at my best,” said Reade. “Yet when it’s all over, and we’ve won every game, good old Gridley style, I shall feel mighty happy.”

“Yes,” nodded Harry Hazelton, “and the same thing here.”



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“That’s because you two are not only attending High School, but also trying to blaze out your future path in life,” laughed Dave.

“Well, the rest of you fellows had better be serious about your careers in life,” urged Tom. “It isn’t every pair of fellows, of course, who’ve been as fortunate as Harry and I.”

“No; and all fellows can’t be suited by the same chances, which is a good thing,” replied Prescott. “For my part, I wouldn’t find much of any cheer in the thought that I was going to be allowed to carry a transit, a chain or a leveler’s rod through life.”

“Well, we don’t expect to be working in the baggage department of our profession forever,” protested Harry Hazelton, with so much warmth that Dave Darrin chuckled.

Tom and Harry had decided that civil or railroad engineering, or both, perhaps, combined with some bridge building, offered them their best chances of pleasant employment in life.

Mr. Appleton, a local civil engineer with whom the pair had talked had offered to take them into his office for preliminary training. because at the High School, Tom and Harry had already qualified in the mathematical work necessary for a start.

No practicing civil engineer in these days feels that he has the time or the inclination to take a beginner into his office and teach him all of the work from the ground up. On the other hand, a boy who has been grounded well in algebra, geometry and trigonometry may then easily enter the office of a practicing civil engineer and begin with the tools of the profession. Transit manipulation and readings, the use of the plummet line, the level, compass, rod, chain and staking work may all be learned thus and a knowledge of map drawing imparted to a boy who has a natural talent for the work.

It undoubtedly is better for the High School boy to go to a technical school for his course in civil engineering; yet with a foundation of mathematics and a sufficient amount of determination, the High School boy may go direct to the engineer’s office and pick up his profession. Boys have done this, and have afterwards reached honors in their profession.

So Tom and Harry had their future picked out, as they saw it. As soon as they had learned enough of the rudiments, both were resolved to go out to the far West, and there to pick up more, much more, right in the camps of engineers engaged in surveying and laying railroads.

“You fellows can talk about us going to work in the baggage department of our profession,” pursued Tom Meade, a slight flush on his manly face. “But, Dick, you and Dave are in the dream department, for you fellows have only a hazy notion that—perhaps—you may be able to work your way into the government academies at West



Point and Annapolis. As for Greg and Dan, they don't appear to have even a dream of what they hope to do in future."

"You fellows haven't been spreading the news that Dave and I want to go to Annapolis and West Point, have you!" asked Dick seriously.



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“Now, what do you take us for?” protested Tom indignantly “Don’t we understand well enough that you’re both trying to keep it close secret?”

As the young men turned into Main Street the merry laughter of a group of girls came to their ears.

Four of the High School girls of the senior class had stopped to chat for a moment.

Laura Bentley and Belle Meade were there, and both turned quickly to note Dick and Dave. The other girls in the group were Faith Kendall and Jessie Vance.

“Here comes the captain who is going to spoil all of Gridley a chances this year,” laughed Miss Vance.

“Hush, Jess,” reproved Belle, while Laura looked much annoyed.

I see you have a wholly just appreciation of my merits, Miss Jessie,” smiled Dick, as the boys raised their hats.

“Oh, what I said is nothing but the silly talk of him Dra-----” began Jessie lightly, but stopped when she again found herself under the reproving glances of Laura and Belle.

Dick glanced at one of the girls in turn, his glance beginning to show curiosity.

Laura bit her lip; Belle looked highly indignant.

Prescott opened his month as though to ask a question, then closed his lips.

“I guess you might as well tell them, Laura,” hinted Faith Kendall.

“Oh, nonsense.” retorted Miss Bentley, flushing. “It’s nothing at all, especially coming from such a source.”

“Then some one has been giving me the roasting that I plainly deserve?” laughed Captain Prescott.

“It’s all foolish talk, and I’m sorry the girls couldn’t hold their tongues,” cried Laura impatiently.

“Then I won’t ask you what it was,” suggested Dick, “since you don’t like to tell me voluntarily.”



“You might as well, Laura,” urged Faith.

“It’s that Phin-----” began Jessie.

“Do be quiet, Jess,” urged Belle.

“Why,” explained Laura Bentley, “Phin Drayne just passed us, and stopped to chat when Jessie spoke to him-----”

“I didn’t,” objected Miss Vance indignantly. “I only said good afternoon, and——”

“I asked Drayne if he had been out to the field for practice,” continued Laura. “He grunted, and said he’d been out to see how badly things were going.”

“Then, of course, Laura flared up and asked what he meant by such talk,” broke in the irrepressible Jessie. “Then——ouch!”

For Belle had slyly pinched the talkative one’s arm.

“Mr. Drayne had a great string to offer us,” resumed Laura. “He said football affairs had never been in as bad shape before, and he predicted that the team would go to pieces in all the strong games this year.”

“We have a rule of unswerving loyalty in the history of our eleven,” said Prescott, smiling, though a grim light lurked in his eyes. “I guess Phin was merely practicing some of that loyalty.”

“None of us care what Drayne thinks, anyway,” broke in Dave Darrin contemptuously. “He wants to play as a regular, and he’s slated only as a possible sub. So I suppose he simply can’t see how the eleven is to win without him. But, making allowances for human nature, I don’t believe we need to roast him for his grouch.”



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"I didn't think his talk was worth paying any attention to," added Laura. "I wouldn't have said anything about it, if it hadn't leaked out."

Jessie took this rebuke to herself, and flushed, as she rattled on:

"I guess it was no more than mere 'sorehead' talk on Phin Drayne's part, anyway. Mr. Drayne said he had saved a good deal of his pocket money, lately, and that he was going to win more money by betting on Gridley's more classy opponents this season."

"There's a fine and loyal High School fellow for you!" muttered Greg.

"Suppose we all change the subject," proposed Dick good-humoredly.

Two or three minutes later Dick & Co. again lifted their caps, then continued on their way.

"Dick," whispered Dave, "on the whole, I'm glad that was repeated to us."

"Why?"

"It ought to put us on our guard?"

"Guard? Against whom?"

"I should say against Phin Drayne."

"But he's merely offering to bet that we can't win our biggest games this year," smiled Prescott. "That doesn't prove that we can't win, does it?"

"Oh, of course not."

"Any fellow that will lower himself enough to make wagers on sporting events shows too little judgment to be entitled to have any spending money," pursued Prescott. "But, if Drayne has money, and is going to bet, he won't be entitled to any sympathy when he loses, will he?"

"Humph!" grunted Dave. "I'd like to have this matter followed up. Any fellow who is betting against us ought not to be allowed to play at all."

"Oh, it was just the talk of a silly, disappointed fellow," argued Dick. "I suppose a boy is a good deal like a man, always. There are some men who imagine that it lends importance to themselves when they talk loudly and offer to wager money. I'm not going to offer any bets, Dave, but I feel pretty certain that Drayne is just talking for effect."



“His offering to bet against his own crowd would be enough to justify you in dropping Drayne from the squad altogether,” hinted Greg Holmes.

“Yes, of course,” admitted Dick. “But we had enough of football soreheads last year. Now, wouldn’t it make us look like soreheads if we took any malicious delight in dropping Drayne from the squad just because he has been blowing off some steam?”

“But I wouldn’t trust him on the job,” snapped Dan Dalzell. “I believe Phin Drayne would sell out any crowd for sheer spite.”

“Even his country?” asked Dick quietly.

And there the matter dropped, for the time. Had Dick & Co. and some other High School fellows but known it, however, Drayne would have borne close watching.

CHAPTER III

Putting the Tag on the Sneak

Anything that Dick Prescott had charge of went along at leaps and bounds. Hence the football eleven was in good shape ten days earlier than Coach Morton could remember to have happened before.



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"Your eleven is all ready to line up in the field, now, Captain," announced coach, one afternoon not long after, as the squad came out from dressing quarters for practice.

"I'm glad you think so, sir," replied Dick, a flush of pleasure mantling his cheeks.

"You have every man in fine condition. Condition couldn't be better, in fact, for those of the men who are likely to get on the actual battle line. And all the work is well understood, too. In fact, Captain, you can all but rest on your oars during the next fortnight, up to your first game."

"Hadn't we better go on training hard every day, sir?" inquired the young captain.

"Not hard," replied coach, shaking his head. "If you do, you'll get your men down too fine. Now, there's almost more danger in having your men overtrained than in having them undertrained. Your men can be trained too hard and go stale."

"I've heard of that," Dick nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes," continued coach, "and I've seen school teams that suffered from training down too fine. Boys can't stand it. They haven't as much flesh in training down hard, and they haven't as much endurance as college men, who are older. Captain, you will train your men lightly, three afternoons a week. For the rest, see to it that they stick to all training orders, including diet and hygiene and no tobacco. But don't work any of the men hard, with an idea of getting them in still better shape. You can't do it."

"Then I'd like to make a suggestion, Coach."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"You never saw a school team, did you, sir, that understood its signal work any too well?"

"Never," laughed Mr. Morton.

"Then I would suggest, sir, that most of our training time, from now until the season opens, be spent on drilling in the signals. We ought to keep at practicing the signals. We ought to get the signals down better than ever a Gridley team had them before, sir."

"You've just the right idea, Captain!" cried Mr. Morton heartily, resting one hand around Dick's shoulders. "I was going to order that, but I'm glad you anticipated me."

"Hudson," called out Prescott, "you head a scrub team. Take the men you want after I've chosen for the school team."



Dick rapidly made his choice for the school team. He played center himself, putting Dave Darrin at quarter, Greg Holmes as left tackle and Tom Reade as right end. Dalzell and Hazelton were left out, but they understood, quite well, that this was to avoid showing favoritism by taking all of Dick & Co. on the star team for practice.

“Let me play quarter, Hudson,” whispered Drayne, going over to the acting captain of the “scrub.”

“Not this afternoon, anyway,” smiled Hudson. “I want Dalzell.”

Drayne fell back. He was not chosen at all for the scrub team. Yet, as he had nearly a score of companions, out of the large football squad, he had no special reason to feel hurt. Those who had not been picked for either team lined up at the sides. There was a chance that some of them might be called out as subs, though practice in signal work was hardly likely to result in any of the players being injured.



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Drayne did not appear to take his mild snub very seriously.

In fact, after his one outbreak before the team captain, and his subsequent remarks to the girls, Drayne had appeared to fall in line, satisfied even to be a member of the school's big squad.

The ball was placed for a snap-back, and Coach Morton sounded the whistle.

"Twelve-nine-seventeen—twenty-eight—four!" called Dave Darrin.

Then the scrimmage was on in earnest. As soon as the play had properly developed Mr. Morton blew his whistle, for this was practice only in the signal part.

Then Hudson took the ball and Dalzell called off:

"Nine—eight—thirteen—two!"

Again the ball was put in play, to be stopped after ten seconds.

So it went on through the afternoon's work. The substitutes on the side lines watched with deep interest, for they, too, had to learn all the signal work.

Within three afternoons of practice Dick had nearly all of his players so that they knew every signal, and were instantly ready to execute their parts in whatever was called for.

But there was no danger of knowing the signals too well. Captain Prescott still called out the squad and gave signal work unceasingly.

"The Gridley boys never jumped so swiftly to carry out their signals before, Captain," spoke Mr. Morton commendingly.

"I want to have this line of work ahead of anything that Tottenville can show next Saturday," Dick replied.

"I guess you have the Tottenville boys beaten all right," nodded Mr. Morton.

Tottenville High School always gave one of the stiffest games that Gridley had to meet. This season Tottenville was first on the list. Prescott's young men knew that they had a stiff fight. It was to take place on the Gridley grounds—that was comfort to the home eleven.

The entire student body was now feeling the enthusiasm of the opening of the season on Saturday.



The townsmen of Gridley had subscribed as liberally as ever to the athletics fund. There had also been a fine advance sale of seats, and the Gridley band had been engaged to make the occasion a lively one.

"You'll win, if ever the signs were worth anything, Captain," remarked Mr. Morton to Prescott, at recess Thursday forenoon.

"Of course we'll win, sir," laughed Dick. "That's the Gridley way—that's all. We don't know how to be whipped. I've been taught that ever since I first entered the High School."

"Pshaw!" muttered Drayne, who was passing.

"Don't you believe our chances are good, Mr. Drayne?" asked Mr. Morton, smiling.

"I look upon the Gridley chances as being so good, sir," replied Phin, "that, if I weren't a member of the squad, and a student of the High School, I think I'd be tempted to bet all I could raise on Tottenville."

"Betting is too strong a vice for boys, Mr. Drayne," replied the submaster, rather stiffly. "And doubt of your own comrades isn't very good school spirit."



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"I was talking, for the moment, as an outsider," replied Phin Drayne, flushing.

"Change around then, Mr. Drayne, and consider yourself, like every other student of this school, as an insider wherever the Gridley interests are involved."

Drayne moved away, a half-sneer on his face.

"I don't like that young man," muttered Mr. Morton confidentially to the young captain of the team.

"I have no violent personal admiration for him," Prescott answered.

Then the bell sounded, calling all the boys and girls back to their studies.

At just about the hour of noon, a young caller strode into the yard, paused an instant, studying the different entrances of the High School building, then kept straight on and entered.

"A visitor for Mr. Prescott, in the reception, room," announced the teacher in charge of the assembly room.

Bowing his thanks, Dick passed out of the room, crossed the hall, entered a small room, and turned to greet his caller.

A fine-looking, broad-shouldered, bronzed young man of nineteen rose and came forward, holding out his hand.

"Do you remember me, Mr. Prescott?" asked the caller heartily.

"I've played football against you, somewhere," replied Dick, studying the other's face closely.

"Yes, I guess you have," laughed the other. "I played with Tottenville last year. I'm captain this season. Jarvis is my name."

"Oh, I'm downright glad to see you, Mr. Jarvis," Dick went on. "Be seated, won't you?"

"Yes; if you wish. Though I've half a notion that what I have to say may bring you jumping out of your seat in a moment."

"Anything happened that you want to postpone the game?" inquired Prescott, taking a chair opposite his caller.

"No; we're ready for Saturday, and will give you the stiffest fight that is in us," returned Jarvis. "But see here, Mr. Prescott, I'll come direct to the point. Is 'thirty-eight, nine,



eleven, four' your team's signal for a play around the left end, after quarter has passed the ball to tackle and he to the end?"

Dick started, despite himself, for that was truly the signal for that play.

"Really Mr. Jarvis, you don't expect me to tell you our signals!" laughed Dick, pretending to be unconcerned.

But Jarvis called off another signal and interpreted it.

"From your face I begin to feel sure that I'm reeling off the right signals," pursued the Tottenville youth. "Now, I'll get still closer to the point, Mr. Prescott."

From an inside pocket Jarvis drew forth four typewritten pages, clamped together and neatly folded.

"Run your eye over these pages, Mr. Prescott, or as far as you want to go."

As Dick read down the pages every vestige of color faded from his face.

Here was Gridley's whole elaborate signal code, laid down in black and white to the last detail. It was all flawlessly correct, too.



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“Mr. Jarvis,” said Dick, looking up, “you’ve been a gentleman in this matter. This is our signal code, signal for signal. It’s the code on which we relied for our chance to give your team a thrashing on Saturday. I thank you for your honesty, sir.”

“Why, I always have rather prided myself on a desire to do the manly thing,” smiled Captain Jarvis.

“May I ask how this came into your possession?” demanded Dick.

“It was in our family mail box, this morning, and I took it out on my way to school,” replied Jarvis. “You see, the heading on the first sheet shows that the document purports to give the Gridley signals.”

“And it does give them, to a dot,” groaned Prescott, paling again.

“So I showed it to our coach, Mr. Matthews, and to some of the members of the team,” continued Mr. Jarvis. “I would have brought this to you, in any case, and I’m heartily glad to say that every one of our fellows agreed that it was the only manly thing to do.”

“You have won the Gridley gratitude,” protested Dick. “This code couldn’t have been tabulated by anyone but a member of our own squad. No one else had access to this list. There’s a Benedict Arnold somewhere in our crowd,” continued Dick, with a sudden rush of righteous passion. “Oh, I wish we could find him. But this typewriting, I fear, will give us no conclusive evidence. Was the address on the envelope in which this came also typewritten?”

“No,” replied Mr. Jarvis. “I opened this communication on the street, while on my way to school. I tossed the envelope away. Then I fell to studying this document.”

“You must have thought it a hoax,” smiled Dick wearily.

“I did, at first, yes,” continued the Tottenville football captain. “In fact, I was half of that mind when I left Tottenville to come here. But I was determined to find out the truth of the matter. Mr. Prescott, I’m very nearly as sorry as you can be, to have to bring you this evidence that you have a sneak in Gridley High School.”

“I’d far rather have lost Saturday’s game,” choked Prescott, “than to discover that we’ve such a sneak in Gridley High School. I’m fearfully upset. I wish I had any kind of evidence on which to find this sneak.”

“Have you any suspicions?”

“That would be too much to say yet.”



“Of course, Mr. Prescott,” continued the Tottenville youth, “you’ll now have to revise all your signals. It will be a huge undertaking between now and Saturday. If you wish to postpone the game, I’ll consent. Our coach has authorized me to say this.”

“I think not,” replied Dick, “though on behalf of the team I thank you. I’ll have to speak to our coach, and Mr. Morton is in his classroom, occupied until the close of the school session.”

“I’ll meet you anywhere, Mr. Prescott, after school is over.”



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"You're mighty good, Mr. Jarvis," murmured Dick gratefully. "Now, by the way, if we're to catch the sneak who has done this dastardly thing, we've got to work fast. We ought not to let the traitor suspect anything until we're ready to act. Mr. Jarvis, do you mind leaving here promptly, and going to 'The Morning Blade' office? If you tell Mr. Pollock that you're waiting for me, he'll give you a chair and plenty to read."

"I'm off, then," smiled Jarvis, rising and reaching for his hat.

"I want to shake hands with you, Jarvis, and to thank you again for your manly conduct in bringing this thing straight to me."

"Why, that's almost insulting," retorted Jarvis quizzically. "Why shouldn't an American High School student be a gentleman? Wouldn't you have done the same for me, if the thing had been turned around?"

"Of course," Dick declared hastily. "But I'm glad that this fell into your hands. If we had gone into the game, relying on this signal code-----"

"We'd have burned you to a crisp on the gridiron," laughed Jarvis. "But what earthly good would it do our school to win a game that we got by clasping hands with a sneak and a traitor? Can any school care to win games in that fashion? But now, I'm off for 'The Blade's office—if your Mr. Pollock doesn't throw me out."

"He won't," Dick replied, "I'm a member of 'The Blade' staff."

"Don't go back into assembly room with a face betraying as much as yours does," whispered Captain Jarvis, over his shoulder.

"Thank you for the tip," Dick responded.

When young Prescott stepped back into the general assembly room his face, though not all the color had returned to it, wore a smiling expression. He stepped jauntily, with his head well up, as he moved to his seat.

For fifteen minutes or more Dick made a pretense of studying his trigonometry hard. Then, picking up a pen with a careless gesture, he wrote slowly, with an appearance of indifference, this note:

"Dear Mr. Morton: Something of the utmost importance has come up in connection with the football work. Will you, without mentioning this note, and without doing anything that can sound the warning to any other student, meet me at 'The Blade' office as soon as possible after school is dismissed? I shall go to 'The Blade' office just as soon as I get away from here, and I shall await you in the greatest anxiety.

"Prescott." _



This note Dick carried forward and left on the general desk. It was addressed to Mr. Morton, and marked "immediate."

When the reciting classes returned, and the teachers followed, Mr. Morton read his note without change of expression.

A moment later school was dismissed.

"In a hurry, Dick?" called Dave, racing after his leader as the young men made a joyous break away from the school building.

"Yes," breathed Prescott. "Come along, Dave. But I don't want the others, for I don't want a crowd."



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“Why, what-----”

“Quiet, now, old fellow,” murmured Dick. “You’ll have a big enough surprise in a few moments.”

They got away together before their other chums had a chance to catch up.

“From the look in your face, I’d say that there was something queer in the air,” guessed Dave.

“There is, Darrin. But wait until the moment comes to talk about it.”

Walking rapidly, the two chums came to “The Blade” office. Jarvis, who had been sitting at the back of the office, rose as the two Gridley boys entered. Dick quietly introduced Dave to the young man from Tottenville who greeted him cordially.

“Now, we’re waiting for one more before we talk,” smiled Dick anxiously.

At that moment the door opened again, and Mr. Morton entered briskly.

“Now, Captain, what is your news?” called coach, as he came forward.

“Why, this is one of the Tottenville team, isn’t it?”

“Mr. Morton, Captain Jarvis, of the Tottenville High School team,” replied Dick, and the two shook hands.

Then Dick drew the typewritten document from his pocket. They could talk here, for Mr. Pollock had been the only other occupant of the room, and that editor has just stepped out to the composing room.

“Captain Jarvis received this in the mail this morning, sir,” announced Prescott, in a voice that quivered with emotion.

Coach glanced through the paper, his face showing plainly what he felt. Then Dick took the paper and passed it to Dave Darrin, who sat consumed by curiosity.

“The abominable traitor—whoever he is!” cried Dave, rising as though he found his chair red hot. “And I think I can come pretty near putting the tag on the sneak!”

CHAPTER IV

The Traitor Gets His Deserts



Mr. Morton hesitated a moment, ere he trusted himself to speak.

“Yes,” he murmured. “I fear we all suspect the same young man.”

“Phin Drayne!” cried Dave, in a voice quivering with anger.

“I didn’t intend to name him,” resumed the coach. “It’s a serious thing to do.”

“To sell out one’s school—I should say ‘yes!’” choked Darrin.

“No; I meant that it is a fearful thing to accuse anyone until we have proof that can’t be disputed,” added Mr. Morton gravely, though his muscles were twitching as though he had been stricken by palsy.

“Listen,” begged Dick, “while Mr. Jarvis tells you all he knows of this dastardly business.”

The Tottenville captain repeated his short tale. Then Coach Morton asked several rapid questions. But there was no more to be told than Dick Prescott already knew.

“I’m tremendously sorry about that envelope,” protested Jarvis. “I’d give anything to be able to hand that envelope over to you, but I’m afraid I’ll never see it again.”

“We appreciate your anxiety to help, Mr. Jarvis, as deeply as we appreciate your manliness in coming to us without an instant’s delay,” replied Mr. Morton, earnestly.



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At this moment the office boy entered with the mail sack.

“Mr. Pollock!” he bellowed, tossing the sack down on the editor’s desk. Then the office boy hurried to the rear of the building, intent on other duties.

Mr. Pollock returned to his desk, opening the mail. The football folks in the further corner lowered their voices almost to whispers.

“Letter for you, Dick,” called Mr. Pollock, tossing aside an envelope.

Excusing himself, Dick darted over to get his mail. In an instant he came back, with a flushed face.

“Here’s something that may interest you all,” whispered Dick, shaking as though fever had seized him.

Mr. Morton took the sheet of paper, from which he read:

“Dear Old Gridleyites: If the enclosed is a fake, it won’t work. If there’s really a traitor in your camp you ought to know it. Milton High School doesn’t take any games except by the use of its own fair fighting devices. Decker, Captain, Milton High School Football Team.”

“And here’s a duplicate set of our signals, returned by our Milton friends,” went on Dick, with almost a sob in his voice. “Fortunately, Mr. Decker thought to preserve the envelope that contained our signal code. Here is the envelope, addressed in some person’s handwriting.”

Coach Morton seized the envelope, staring at it hard. He studied it with the practiced eye of a school teacher accustomed to overlooking examination papers in all styles of handwriting.

“The writer has tried to conceal his handwriting,” murmured the coach, rather brokenly. “Yet I think we may succeed in tracing it back and fixing it on the sender.”

“Oh!” growled Dave Darrin savagely. “I believe I know on whom to fasten this handwriting right now.”

“I have a possible offender in mind,” replied Mr. Morton more evenly. “In a case of this kind we must proceed with such absolute caution and reserve that we will not be obliged to retract afterwards in deep shame and humiliation.”

“I think I’ve done all that I can, gentlemen,” broke in Mr. Jarvis. “I think it is my place, now, to draw out of this painful business, and leave it to you whom it most concerns. But I am happy in the thought that I have been able to be of some service to you. I will



now state that I am authorized to offer to postpone Saturday's game, if you wish, so that you may have time in, which to train up under changed signals."

"If you consent, sir," proposed Dick, turning to the coach, "we'll go on with Saturday's game just the same. There has been a big sale of tickets, the band has been engaged, and a good many arrangements made that will be expensive to cancel."

"Can you do it?" asked Mr. Morton, looking doubtfully at the young captain of the team. "It's Thursday afternoon, now."

"I feel that we've got to do it, sir," Dick replied doggedly. "Yes, sir; we'll make it, somehow."



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So the matter was arranged. The Gridleyites followed Jarvis out to the sidewalk, where they renewed their assurances of regard for the attitude taken by Tottenville High School. Then Jarvis hurried away to catch a train home.

“Now, young gentlemen,” proposed Mr. Morton, “we’ll go home and see whether we can engender the idea of eating any lunch, after this unmasking of villainy in our own crowd. But at half past two promptly to the minute, meet me at the High School. Remember, we’ve practice on for half past three.”

“Of all the mean, contemptible-----” began Darrin, after the submaster had left them.

“Stop right there, Dave!” begged his chum. “This is the most fearful thing we’ve ever met, and we both want to think carefully before we trust ourselves to say another word on the shameful subject.”

So the two chums walked along in silence, soon parting to take their different ways home.

At half-past two both chums met Mr. Morton at the High School. The submaster led the way to the office, producing his keys and unlocking the door. They had moved in silence so far.

“Take seats, please,” requested Mr. Morton, in a low voice. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

The submaster then stepped over to a huge filing cabinet. Unlocking one of the sections, he looked busily through, then came back with a paper in his hand.

“I think I know whom you both suspect,” began coach.

“Phin Drayne,” spoke Dick, without hesitation.

“Yes. Well here is Drayne’s recent examination paper in modern literature. It is, of course, in his own handwriting.”

Eagerly the two football men and their coach bent over to compare Drayne’s handwriting with that on the envelope that had come back from Milton.

“There has been an attempt at disguise,” announced Mr. Morton, using a magnifying glass over the two specimens of writing. “Yet I am rather sure, in my own mind, that a handwriting expert would pronounce both specimens to have been written by the same hand.”



“We’ve nailed Drayne, then,” muttered Darrin vengefully.

“It looks like it,” assented Mr. Morton. “However, we’ll go slowly. For the present I’ll put this examination paper with our other ‘exhibits’ and secure them all carefully in my inside pocket. Now, then, let us make our pencils fly for a while in getting up a revised code of signals.”

It was not a long task after all. From the two typewritten copies Dick copied the first half of the plays, Dave the latter. Then Coach Morton went over the new sheets, rapidly jotting down new figures that should make all plain.

“Ten minutes past three,” muttered coach, thrusting all the papers in his inside pocket and buttoning his coat. “Now, we’ll have to take a car and get up to the field on the jump.”

“But, oh, the task of drilling all the new calls into the fellows between now and Saturday afternoon!” groaned Dave Darrin, in a tone that suggested real misery.



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“We’ll do it,” retorted Captain Dick. “We’ve got to!”

“And to make the boys forget all the old calls, so that they won’t mix the signals!” muttered Dave disconsolately.

“We’ll do it!”

It was Coach Morton who took up the refrain this time. And it was Prescott who added:

“We’ve got to do it. Nothing is impossible, when one must!”

It was just twenty-five minutes past three when the coach and his two younger companions turned around the corner of the athletic grounds and slipped in through the gate.

Most of the fellows were in the dressing quarters.

Phin Drayne sat on the edge of a locker chest. One of his feet lay across the knee of the other leg. He was in the act of unlacing one of his street shoes when Coach Morton called to him.

“Me?” asked Phin, looking up quickly.

“Yes,” said Mr. Morton quietly. “I want to post you about something.”

“Oh, all right; right with you, sir,” returned Phin, leaping up and following the coach outside.

“What is it?” asked Phin, beginning to feel uneasy.

“Come along where the others can’t hear,” replied Mr. Morton, taking hold of Drayne’s nearer elbow.

Phin turned white now. He went along, saying nothing, until Mr. Morton halted by the outer gate.

“Pass through, Drayne—and never let us see your face inside this gate again.”

“But why? What——”

“Ask your conscience!” snapped back the coach. “You’d better travel fast! I’m going back to talk to the other fellows!”

Mr. Morton was gone. For an instant Phin Drayne stood there as though he would brave out this assertion of authority. Then, seized by another impulse, he turned and made rapidly for a town-bound street car that was heading his way.



“What’s up?” asked two or three of the fellows of Dick Prescott. Perceiving something out of the usual, they spoke in the same breath.

“Oh, if there’s anything to tell you,” spoke Prescott, suppressing a pretended yawn, “Mr. Morton may tell you——some time.”

But Mr. Morton was soon back. Knocking on the wall for attention, he told, in as few and as crisp sentences as he could command, the whole story, as far as known.

“Now, young gentlemen,” wound up the coach, “we must practice the new signals like wild fire. There’s mustn’t be a single slip not a solitary break in our game with Tottenville. And that game will begin at three-thirty on Saturday!

“In reverting to Drayne, I wish to impress upon you all, with the greatest emphasis, that this must be treated by you all with the utmost secrecy until we are prepared, with proofs, to go further! If it should turn out that we’re wrong in our suspicions, we’ll turn and give Phineas Drayne the biggest and most complete public apology that a wronged man ever received.”

“All out to practice the new signals!” shouted Prescott, the young captain of the team.



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CHAPTER V

“Brass” for an Armor Plate

Thursday night and Friday morning more copies of the betrayed signals poured in upon Captain Dick.

Wherever these signals had been received by captains of other school teams, it soon appeared, these captains of rival elevens had punctually mailed them back. It spoke volumes for the honor of the American schoolboy, for Gridley High School was feared far and wide on the gridiron, and there was not an eleven in the state but would have welcomed an honorable way of beating Prescott's men.

Moreover, working on Dick's suggestion, Mr. Morton busied himself with securing several letters that had been received from Drayne's father.

These letters were compared, Friday evening, with the copies of the signals that had been sent to other elevens. Under a magnifying glass these collected papers all exhibited one fact that the letters and the copies of the signal code had been struck off on a machine having the same peculiarities as to worn faces of certain types. It was thus rather clearly established that Phin Drayne must have used the typewriting machine that stood in his father's office.

Drayne was not at school on Friday. Instead, an excuse of illness was received from him.

Nor did Mr. Morton say anything to Dr. Thornton, the principal, until the end of the school week.

Just after school had been dismissed, at one o'clock Friday afternoon, Mr. Morton called Dr. Thornton to the private office, and there laid before him the charges and the proofs.

That fine old gentleman was overwhelmed with grief that “one of his boys” should have done such an utterly mean, wanton and dishonorable thing.

“This can't be passed by, Mr. Morton,” exclaimed Dr. Thornton brokenly. “If you will kindly leave the proofs in my hands, I will see that the whole matter is taken up officially.”

Friday afternoon the football squad met for more practice with the new signals. Friday evening each young man who was scheduled as being even likely to play the next day studied over the signals at home, then, under orders, burned his copy of the code. Saturday morning the squad met for some more practice, though not much.



“I believe all of us are in trim now, sir,” Captain Prescott reported to the coach. “I am rather sure all of our men know the new signals by heart, and there’ll be no confusion. But, of course, for the first game, the old snap of our recent practice will be missing. It has been a hard blow to us.”

“If we have to lose to-day’s game,” muttered Mr. Morton, “I’ll be almost satisfied to lose it to Tottenville, after the manly and straightout conduct of Mr. Jarvis!”

“That same line of thought would make us content to go through a losing season, for all the fellows in other towns who received that betrayed code sent the information right back to us,” smiled Prescott. “But we’re not going to lose to-day’s game, Mr. Morton, nor any other day’s. Drayne’s treachery has just about crazed the other fellows with anger. They’ll win everything ahead of ’em, now, just for spite and disgust, if for no better reason.”



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"Sometimes anger serves a good purpose," laughed Mr. Morton. "But it was pitiful to look at poor old Dr. Thornton yesterday afternoon. At first I thought he was going to faint. He seemed suddenly to grow ten years older. It cut him to the quick. He loves every one of his boys, and to have one of them go bad is just as painful to him as to see his own son sent to the penitentiary."

"Is Dr. Thornton coming to the game this afternoon, sir?"

"Yes; he has never missed one yet, in any year that he has been principal of Gridley High School."

"Then we'll make that fine old American gentleman feel all right again by the grand game that we'll put up," promised Dick vehemently. "I'll pass the word, and the fellows will strain themselves to the last drop."

Orders were issued to the gate tenders to throw Drayne out if he presented himself at the gate.

Drayne did put in an appearance, and he got through the gate to a seat on the grand stand, but it was no fault of the gate tenders.

Drayne had spent some of his spare money at the costumer's. With his trim, rather slim figure Phin Drayne made up rather well as a girl. He wore black—mourning throughout, perhaps in memory of his departed honor—and a heavy veil covered his face. In this disguise Drayne sat where he could see what would happen.

At the outset it was Gridley's kick off, and for the next ten minutes Tottenville had the ball, fighting stubbornly with it. But at last, when forced half way down the field between center and its own goal line, Gridley blocked so well in the three following plays that the pigskin came to the home eleven.

Dick bent over, holding the ball for the snapback, while his battle front formed on each side of him.

Dave Darrin, quarter-back, raced back a few steps, then halted, looking keenly, swiftly over the field.

Phin Drayne drew his breath sharply. Then his heart almost stopped beating as he listened.

"Thirty-eight—nine—eleven—four!" sounded Darrin's voice, sharp and clear.

"That's the run around the left end!" throbbed Phin Drayne.

But it wasn't. A fake kick, followed by a cyclonic impact at the right followed.



“They’ve changed the signals!” gulped the guilty masquerader behind the black veil.
“Then they’ve found out.”

With this came the next disheartening thought:

“That’s the reason, then, why the coach ordered me out of the field Thursday afternoon. Morton is wise. I wonder if he has told it all around?”

Gridley High School was doing some of its brilliant, old-style play now. Prescott was proving himself an ideal captain, quick-witted, full of strategy, force, push and dash, yet all the while displaying the best of cool judgment in sizing up the chances of the hard battle.

But that which Phin Drayne noted most of all was that every signal used had a different meaning from that employed in the code he had mailed to the captains of the other school teams.



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“It was all found out, and Gridley wasn’t hurt,” thought Phin, gnashing his teeth. “Good luck always seems to follow that fellow Prescott! Can’t he be beaten? We shall see! Prescott, my fine bully, I’m not through with you yet.”

The first half ended without either side scoring. Impartial onlookers thought that perhaps formidable Tottenville had had rather the better of it, but no one could tell with certainty which was the better team.

When neither side scores in the first half that which remains to be determined is, which side will show the bigger reserve of vitality in the second half.

And now the ball was off again, with twenty-two men pursuing and fighting for it as though the fate of the nation hung on the result. Dick, too, soon had things moving at a gait that had all Gridley standing up and boosting with all the powers of lungs, hands and feet.

All that remained to interest Phin Drayne was to discover whether his late comrades had sufficiently mastered their new signals not to fail in their team work.

Once in the second half there was a brief fluster. Two Gridley men went “woozy” over the same signal. But alert Dave Darrin rushed in and snatched a clever advantage out of momentary confusion.

After that there was no more confusion. Gridley took the game by a single touchdown, failing in the subsequent kick for goal. Five minutes later time expired.

Feeling doubly contemptible now, and sick at heart, Phin Drayne crawled weakly down from the grand stand. He made his way out in the throng, undetected. He returned to the costumer’s, got off his sneaking garb and donned his own clothing, then slipped away out through a back door that opened on an alleyway.

Not until Sunday afternoon did Drayne yield to the desire to get out of doors. His training life had made outer air a necessity to him, so he yielded to the desire. But he kept to back streets.

Just as luck would have it, Drayne came suddenly face to face with Dr. Thornton.

The good old principal had a fixed belief which followed the practice of American law, to the effect that every accused man is innocent until he has been proved guilty.

In addition, the doctor had recovered a good deal from his first depression. Therefore he was able to meet this offending pupil as he would want to under the circumstances.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Drayne,” was Dr. Thornton’s courteous greeting. “It is beautiful; weather to be out, isn’t it?”



“It is a perfect day, sir,” Drayne replied.

Once he had gotten past the principal the young wretch gave way to his exultation.

“No charge has been made, then,” he told himself gloatingly. “If I had been denounced, the Prin. could hardly have been as gracious. Well, hang it all, what are charges going to amount to, anyway?”

At the High School Monday morning, both before school and at recess, the members of the football squad cut Drayne dead.



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"They suspect me, but they can't prove anything, anyway," chuckled the traitor to himself. "Brass, Phin, my boy! Brass! That is bound to win out when the clodhoppers can't prove a blessed thing."

As none of the students outside of the squad showed any especial inclination to cut him, Phin felt almost wholly reassured.

"It would be libelous, anyway, if the gang passed around a word that they couldn't prove," chuckled Drayne. "So I guess those that may be doing a heap of thinking will have caution enough to keep their mouths shut, anyway,"

That afternoon, after luncheon, Phin Drayne took a long tramp over country roads at the back of the big town. It was five o'clock when he returned.

"Here's a note for you, on High School stationery," said Mrs. Drayne, putting an envelope in her son's hand. "It came some time ago."

Something warned the fellow not to open the envelope there. He took it to his room, where he read the letter. It was from Dr. Thornton, and said only:

"You are directed to appear before the Board of Education at its stated weekly meeting to-night. This is urgent, and you are warned not to fail in giving this summons due heed."

In an instant Phin was white with fear. His legs trembled under him, and cold sweat stood out on his neck, face and forehead.

For some moments the young man acted as though in danger of collapse. Then he staggered over to the tap at his washbowl, and gulped down a glass of water. He paced the room restlessly for a long time, and finally went over and stood looking out of the window.

"Young man," he said to himself severely, "you've got to brace, and brace hard. If you haven't any nerve, then getting square is too strenuous a game for you? Now, what can that gang prove? They can suspect, and they can charge, but my denial is fully as good as any other man's affirmation. Go before the Board of Education? Of course I will. And I'll make any accuser of mine look mighty small before that august board of local duffers!"

Brave words! They cheered the young miscreant, anyway. Phin ate his supper with something like relish. Afterwards he set out for the High School building, in which the Board had its offices. Nor did his courage fail him until he had turned in through the gate.



A young man, whistling blithely, came in behind him. It was Dick Prescott, erect of carriage, and brisk and strong of stride, as becomes a young athlete whose conscience is clear and wholesome.

“Hullo, Prescott, what are you doing around here to-night?” hailed Drayne.

But Dick seemed not to have heard. Not a note did he drop in the tune that he was whistling. Springing up the steps ahead, Dick vanished behind the big door.

“Oh, of course he goes here to-night,” thought Phin, with sudden disgust. “Prescott scribbles for ‘The Blade’ and the Board of Education is one of his stunts each week.”



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CHAPTER VI

One of the Fallen

For a few moments Drayne hung about outside, irresolute. Then his native shrewdness asserted itself.

“Not to go in, after having been seen here in the yard would be to confess whatever anyone wants to charge,” muttered Phin. “Of course I’ll go in. And I’ll just stand there and look more and more astounded every time that anyone says anything. Brass, Phin—brass! Oh, I’d like to see anyone down me!”

So, with all the swagger he could put on, this young Benedict Arnold of the school stepped into the Board room. As he entered, the clerk of the Board hastened toward him.

“Step into this anteroom at the side, Mr. Drayne, until you’re called,” the clerk directed. “There will be some routine business to be transacted first. Then, I believe, the Board has a few questions it desires to ask you.”

Left by himself, the young man began to be a good bit frightened. He was brave enough in matters requiring only physical courage. But in this instance the culprit knew that he had been guilty of a contemptibly mean act, and the knowledge of it made a moral coward of him.

“What are they doing? Trying to sentence, me to solitary confinement?” wondered the young man, when minute after minute went by without any call for him. In the Board room he could hear the droning of voices.

“And that Dick Prescott is out there, sitting at a reporter’s table, ready to take in all that happens,” muttered Phin savagely. “Won’t he enjoy himself, though?”

At last it seemed to Phin as though a hush fell over those in the next room. But it was only that voices had been much lowered.

Then a door opened, the clerk looking in and calling:

“Mr. Drayne, will you come before the Board now?”

Phin passed into the larger apartment. Seated in one chair was Dr. Thornton; in another chair Mr. Morton. And Dick Prescott was there, but gathering up his writing materials as though about to go.

The chairman waited in silence until Prescott had passed out of the Board room. After the clerk had closed the door the chairman announced:

“The Board is now in executive session. Dr. Thornton, we will listen to the matter which we understand you wish to bring before us for consideration.”

Composedly Dr. Thornton stepped to the edge of the table, standing there, resting his left hand on the table as he began to speak.

In simple words, without any visible emotion, the High School principal stated what he understood of the receipt of copies of the football signal code by the captains of rival football elevens.

Next Mr. Morton took the stand, so to speak, and went much more into detail. He told what the reader already knows, producing several of the copies returned by the honorable captains of other school teams.

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Then Mr. Morton put in evidence, with these copies of the code, copies of business letters received from Drayne's father, and presumably written on the Drayne office machine.

"If you examine these exhibits, gentlemen, I think you will agree that the betrayed code and the business letters were written on one and the same machine. The use of the magnifying glass makes it even more plain."

Then Mr. Morton sat down.

"Now, young Mr. Drayne, what have you to say?" demanded the presiding officer.

"Why should I say anything, sir?" demand Drayne, with an impudent assumption of swaggering ease.

"Then you admit the truth of the charges, Mr. Drayne?"

"I do not."

"Then you must really have something to say."

"I have heard a charge made against me. I am waiting to have it proved."

"Do you admit," asked the presiding officer, "that these copies of the code were written on your father's office machine?"

"I do not, sir. But, if it be true, is that any proof that I made those copies of the signal code? Is it argued that I alone have access to the typewriter in my father's office. For that matter, if I have an enemy in the High School and I must have several—wouldn't it be possible for that enemy, or several of them, to slyly break into my father's office and use that particular typewriting machine?"

This was confidently delivered, and it made an undoubted impression on at least two or three members of the Board. But now Mr. Morton broke in, quietly:

"I thought some such attempt as this might be made. So I waited until I saw what the young man's line of defense might be. Here is an envelope in which one of the copies was received by the captain of a rival football team. You will note that the sender, while understanding something about the use of a type machine, was plainly a novice in directing an envelope on the typewriter. So he addressed this envelope in handwriting. Here is the envelope in question, and here is one of Mr. Drayne's school examination papers, also in his own handwriting. I will ask the members of the Board to examine both."



There was silence, while the copies passed from hand to hand, Drayne losing color at this point.

“Be brassy!” he whispered to himself. “You’ll pull through, Phin, old boy.”

“I am sorry to say, Mr. Drayne, that the evidence appears to be against you,” declared the chairman slowly.

“It may, sir,” returned the boy, “but it isn’t conclusive evidence.”

“Have you anything more to say, Mr. Morton?” asked the chairman, looking at the submaster.

“Plenty, Mr. Chairman, if the Board will listen to me.”

“Proceed, Mr. Morton.”

The football coach thereupon launched into a swiftly spoken tirade against the “brand of coward and sneak” who would betray his school in such a fashion. Without naming Phin, Mr. Morton analyzed the motives and the character of such a sneak, and he did it mercilessly, although in the most parliamentary language. Nor did he look toward the boy, but Phin was squirming under the lash, his face alternately red or ghastly.



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“For such a scoundrel,” continued Mr. Morton, “there is no hope greater than the penitentiary! He is fit for nothing else. Such a traitor would betray his best friend, or his country. Such a sneak would be dead to all feelings of generosity. The smallest meannesses must envelop his soul. Why, sir, the sender of these copies of the signal code was so mean, so small minded, so sneaking and so utterly selfish”—how Phin squirmed in his seat!—“that, in sending the envelopes through the mail he was not even man enough to pay full postage. Four cents was the postage required for each envelope, but this small-souled sneak, this ungenerous leech actually made the receivers pay half of the postage on ‘due-postage’ stamps.”

“I didn’t!” fairly screamed red-faced Phin, leaping up out of his chair. “I stuck a four-cent stamp on each envelope myself! I remem-----”

Of a sudden he stopped in his impetuous burst of language. A great hush fell in the room. Phin felt himself reeling with a new fright.

“Then,” demanded Mr. Morton, in a very low voice, his face white, “why did you deny having sent out these envelopes containing the copies of the code?”

There was a shuffling of feet. Two or three of the Board laughed harshly.

“Oh, well!” burst almost incoherently from the trapped boy. “When you employ such methods as these you make a fellow tell on himself!”

All his ‘brass’ was gone now. He looked, indeed, a most pitiable object as he stood there, his lower jaw drooped and his cheeks twitching.

“I think you have said about all, Mr. Drayne, that it is necessary for you to say,” interposed the chairman. “Still, in the interest of fair play we will allow you to make any further statements that you may wish to make. Have you anything to offer?”

“No!” he uttered, at last, gruffly.

At a sign from the chairman the clerk stepped silently over, took Phin by one elbow, and led him to the door. Phin passed on out of the building, stumbling blindly. He got home, somehow, and into bed.

In the morning, however, even a sneak is braver.

“What can they do to me, anyway?” muttered Phin, as he dressed. “I didn’t break any of the laws of the state! All anyone can do is to cut me. I’ll show ’em all how little I care for their contempt.”

So it was not wholly in awe that Phin Drayne entered the general assembly room the next morning, a few minutes before opening time. Several of the students greeted him

pleasantly enough. Phin was quick to conclude that the news had not leaked anyway, beyond the members of the football squad.

Then came the opening of the session. The singing books lay on the desks before the students. Instead, however, of calling out the page on which the morning's music would be found, Dr. Thornton held his little gavel in his hand, after giving a preliminary rap or two on his desk.

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"I have something to say to the students of the school this morning," began Dr. Thornton, in a low but steady voice. "It is something which, I am happy to state, I have never before been called upon to say.

"One of the most valuable qualities in any man or woman is loyalty. All of us know, from our studies in history and literature, many conspicuous and noble examples of loyalty. We have also, in our mind's eye, some examples of the opposite qualities, disloyalty and treachery. Outside of sacred history one of the most conspicuous examples of betrayal was that of Benedict Arnold."

Every boy and girl now had his eyes turned fixedly on the old principal. Outside of the football squad no student had any idea what was coming. Phin tried to look wholly unconscious.

Dr. Thornton spoke a little more on the meanness of treachery and betrayal. Then, looking straight over at the middle of the third aisle on the boys' side of the room, the principal commanded:

"Mr. Drayne, stand by your desk!"

Phin was up, hardly knowing how he accomplished the move. Every pair of eyes in the room was focused on him.

"Mr. Drayne," continued the principal, and now there was a steely glitter of contempt in the old man's eyes, "you were displeased because you did not attain to as high honors on the football eleven as you had hoped. In revenge you made copies of the code signals of the team, and mailed a copy to the captain of nearly every team against which Gridley High School is to play this year."

There came, from all parts of the room, a gasp of incredulous amazement.

"Your infamy, your treachery and betrayal, Mr. Drayne, were traced back to you," continued the principal. "You were forced to admit it, last night, before the Board of Education. That Board has passed sentence in your case. Mr. Drayne, you are found utterly unfit to associate with the decent manhood and womanhood to be found in the student body of this High School. By the decision of the Board you are now expelled from this school. You will take your books and belongings and leave instantly. You will never presume to enter through the doors of this school again. Go, sir!"

From Phin came an angry snarl of defiance. He tried to shout out, to tell the principal and his late fellow students how little, or less than little, he cared about their opinions.

But the words stuck in his throat. Ere he could try again, a hiss arose from one quarter of the room. The hiss grew and swelled. Phin realized, though he dared not look about him any longer, that the hissing came as much from the girls as from the boys.



Drayne did not attempt to bend over his desk. Instead, he marched swiftly down the half of the aisle, then past the platform toward the door.

“Mr. Drayne,” called Dr. Thornton, “you have not taken your books, or paper or other desk materials.”



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“I leave them, sir,” shouted Phin, above the tumult of hissing, “for the use of some of your many pauper students.”

Then he went out, slamming the door after him. He darted down to the basement, then waited before the locker door until one of the monitors came down, unlocked the door, and allowed Phin to get his hat. But the monitor never looked at him, or spoke.

Once out of the building, Phin could keep back the choking sob and tears no longer. Stealing down a side street, where he would have to pass few people, Phin gave way to his pent-up shame. Yet in it all there was nothing of repentance. He was angry with himself—in a fiendish rage toward others.

Afterwards, he learned that the books and other contents of his desk were burned in the school yard at recess, to the singing of a dirge. But, even for the purpose of making a bonfire of his books the students would not touch the articles with their hands. They coaxed the janitor to find a pair of tongs, and with this implement Phin’s books and papers were conveyed to the purifying blaze.

Behind the door in the privacy of his own room Phin Drayne shook his fist at the surrounding air.

“I have one mission in life, now, anyway!” raged the boy. “I’ve got some cruel scores to pay. You, Dick Prescott, shall come in for a large share of the payment! No matter how long I have to wait and plan, or what I have to risk, you shan’t get away from me!”

CHAPTER VII

Dick Meets the Boy-with-a-Kick

Evil thoughts can never be cherished, day after day, without leading the more daring or brutal into some form of crime.

Phin, the first three or four times he tried to appear on Main Street, was “spotted” and hissed by High School boys.

Even the boys of the lower schools heard the news, and took up the hissing with great zest.

So Phin was forced to remain indoors during the day, which drove him out by night, instead.

Had he been older, and known more of human nature, he would have known that the hissing would soon die out, and thereafter he would meet only cold looks.



At home, be sure Phin was not happy. His mother, a good woman, suffered in silence, saying little to her son.

Phin's father, a hard-headed and not over scrupulous man of business, looked upon the incident of expulsion as a mere phase in life. He thought it "would do the boy good, and teach him to be more clever."

Gridley met Milton High School and scored another victory, Milton taking only two points on a safety that Gridley was forced to make.

And now the game with Chester was looming up ahead. It was due for the coming Saturday.

Three times a week, Dick Prescott had his squad out for drill and practice, though he was careful to follow Mr. Morton's suggestion not to get the young men trained down "too fine."

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Early one evening in mid-week, Dick sat at his desk in “The Blade” office, “grinding out” some local copy. He was in a hurry to finish, for he was due to be in bed soon. Every member of team and squad was pledged to keep early hours of retiring on every night but Saturday.

In another chair, near by, sat Dave Darrin, who dropped in to speak with his chum, and was now waiting until they could stroll down Main Street together.

“I’ve just thought of something I want to do, Dick,” muttered Dave suddenly. “I’ll jump out and attend to it, now. Walk down Main Street, when you’re through, and you’ll run into me.”

Prescott, nodding, went on with his writing, turning out page after page. Then he rose, placing the sheets on News Editor Bradley’s desk.

“I’m pretty sure you’ll find it all right, Mr. Bradley,” declared Dick. “Now, I must get home, for I’m due in bed in half an hour.”

“Training and newspaper work don’t go well together,” laughed the news editor. “However, your football season will soon be over. This time next year you’ll be through with High School, and I hope you’ll be with us then altogether.”

“I don’t know about that, Mr. Bradley,” smiled Dick, picking up his hat and starting for the door. “But I do know that I like newspaper work mighty well. When a fellow is writing for a paper he seems to be alive all the time, and right up to the minute.”

“That youngster may come to us for a while, after he gets out of High School,” called Mr. Pollock, across the room, after Prescott had, gone out. “But he won’t stay long on a small daily. A youngster with all his hustle is sure to pull out, soon, for one of the big city dailies. The country towns can’t hold ’em.”

Dick went briskly down the street, whistling blithely, as a boy will do when he’s healthy and his conscience is clear.

A block below another boy, betraying the hang-dog spirit only too plainly, turned the corner into Main Street.

It was Phin Drayne, out for one of his night walks. Fearing that he might be insulted, and get into a fight with some one, Drayne had armed himself with one of his father’s canes. The stick had a crook for a handle.

Prescott caught a glimpse of the other boy’s face; then he turned away, hastening on.

“I’m not even worth looking at,” muttered Phin to himself.



Just as Dick went past, Phin seized the cane by the ferule end, and lunged out quickly.

The crook caught neatly around one of Dick's ankles just as the foot was lifted.

Like a flash Prescott went down. One less nimble, and having had less training, might have been in for a split kneecap. But Dick was too much master of his body and its movements. He went down to his hands, then touched lightly on his knees.

Phin laughed sneeringly as Dick sprang up, unhurt.

"Keep out of my way, after this—you less-than-nothing!" muttered Dick between his teeth. "I don't want to have to even hit a thing like you!"



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“You’ll show good judgment, Mr. Big-head, if you don’t try it,” jeered Drayne, menacing Dick with the cane.

The color came into Dick’s face. Leaping forward, with all the adroitness of the born tackler, he caught that cane, just as it descended, and wrenched it out of Phin Drayne’s cowardly, hand.

Crack! Dick broke it in two across his knee, then tossed the pieces into the street.

“You’ll never be able to do anything better than a sneaky act,” muttered Dick contemptuously, turning to walk on.

With a smothered cry Phin Drayne leaped forward to strike Prescott down from behind.

Dick was around again like a flash, one fist striking up the arm with which the sneak had aimed his blow.

“Stand off, and keep away,” advised Prescott coldly.

“I won’t; I’ll thrash you!” hissed Phin.

There was nothing for Dick to do but put up his guard, which he did with great promptness. Drayne danced around him, seeking a good point at which to close in.

Prescott had no notion of fighting; neither did he propose to take an assault meekly.

“Look out!” yelled Drayne, suddenly rushing in.

“Certainly,” mocked Prescott coolly.

He shot up Phin’s arm as easily as could have been desired. With his right he parried another blow.

“Get out of this, and go about your business,” advised Dick sternly.

“Think I’ll take any orders from you?” snarled Phin. “I’ll-----”

He continued to crowd in, hammering blows. Dick parried, but did not attempt to retaliate. The truth was, he felt secretly sorry for the fellow who had fallen as low as Phin.

But Drayne was no coward physically, when his blood was up. It drove him to fever heat, now, to see how easily the captain of the football team repulsed him.



“I’ll get your wind going, and then I’ll hammer you for fair!” snarled Drayne.

“Mistake there, somewhere,” retorted Dick coolly.

But Drayne was coming in, harder and harder. Dick simply had to do something. So, after he had parried more than a score of blows the young football captain suddenly took a springy step forward, shot up Phin’s guard, and landed a staggering blow on the nose. Phin began to reel. Dick hit him more lightly on the chest, yet with force enough to “follow up” and send to his knees.

“Here, what’s this?” called a voice, and a heavy hand seized Dick by the collar behind, pulling him back.

It was Heathcote Drayne, Phin’s father, a powerful man, who now held Prescott.

Phin was quickly upon his feet and start forward.

From across the street sounded a warning cry, followed by footsteps.

“Now, I’ve got you!” cried Phin exultantly. He struck, and landed, on Dick’s cheek.

“Stop that, Phin!” shouted his father, without letting go of Dick’s collar, however. Phin, however, instead of obeying, aimed another blow, and would have landed, had not another figure bounded in and taken the blow, next hurling Phin back against a brick wall.



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It was Len Spencer, “star” reporter of “The Blade,” who had thus interfered. And now Dave Darrin was dancing in front of Heathcote Drayne, ordering:

“Let go of Prescott! What sort of fair play is this?”

“Mind your own business!” ordered Mr. Drayne. “I’m stopping a fight.”

Not an instant did impulsive Darrin waste in arguing the matter. He landed his fist just under Heathcote Drayne’s left eye, causing that Heathcote to let go of Dick in a hurry.

“You young scoundrel!” glared Mr. Drayne, glaring at Dave.

“Opinions may differ as to who the scoundrel is,” retorted Dave unconcernedly. “My own notions of fair play are against holding one of the parties in a fight so that the other may hammer him.”

“I’ll have you arrested for this assault,” stormed Mr. Drayne, applying a handkerchief to the bruised spot under his eye. “Both you and Prescott—your ruffian friend for assaulting my son.

“Go ahead and do it,” retorted Dave. “As it happens, your son did all the assaulting, and Prescott, who didn’t care about fighting with such a thing, only defended himself. We saw it all from across the street, but we didn’t come across to interfere until we had to.”

“I’ll take some of your impudence out of you in the police court,” insisted Mr. Drayne.

“Yes, I would, if I were you,” broke in Len Spencer coolly. “I saw this whole business, too, and I’ll take pleasure in testifying against you both. Mr. Drayne, you didn’t see the start of this thing, and I did. But you, at least, know that your son is a moral leper kicked out of the High School because he was not decent enough to associate with the other students. I wouldn’t be surprised if he gets some of his bad qualities from you, sir”

“You’ll sing a different tune in court,” asserted Heathcote Drayne heatedly.

“So will you,” laughed Len Spencer. “By the way, I see a policeman down the street. If you want to prefer a charge, Mr. Drayne, I’ll blow my police whistle and bring the officer here.”

Spencer took a whistle from his pocket, moving it toward his lips.

“Do you want the officer!” challenged the reporter.

But Mr. Drayne began to see the matter in a somewhat different light. He knew much about the nature of his son, and here were two witnesses against him. Besides, one



was a trusted staff writer for the local paper, and the whole affair was likely to result in a disagreeable publicity.

"I'll think this all over before I act," returned Mr. Drayne stiffly, as he took his son by one arm. "Come along, Phin."

As the Draynes moved away each held a handkerchief to his face.

"I don't think much of fighting, and I don't like to do it," muttered Darrin, who was beginning to cool down. "But if Heathcote Drayne had had to do more fighting when he was younger he might have known how to train that cub of his to be more of a man."



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CHAPTER VIII

Dick Puts "A Better Man" in His Place

Of course Dick heard no more from the Draynes. He didn't expect that he would.

Phin, however, was noticed no more on the streets of the little city. Then, in some way, it leaked out that his father had sent him to a military boarding school where the discipline was credited with being very rigid.

"I guess papa has found that his little boy was none too much of an angel," laughed Dave Darrin when discussing the news with his chums.

The first four games of the season went off successfully for Gridley, though all were hard battles in which only fine leadership and splendid team work by all saved the day.

Two of these games had been played on the home grounds, two away from home. The fifth game of the season was scheduled to be played on the home grounds. The opponent for this game was to be Hallam Heights High School. The Hallam boys were a somewhat aristocratic lot, but not snobbish, and the Gridley young men looked forward to an exciting and pleasant game. It was the first game ever played between Gridley and Hallam Heights. Coach Morton talked about the strangers one rainy afternoon in the gymnasium.

"I believe you're going to find yourselves up against a hard proposition," declared coach slowly "These young men attend a High School where no expense is spared. Some of the wealthy men of the town engage the physical director, who is one of the best men in his class. Speight, who was at college with me, is engaged in addition as the football coach. I remember Speight as one of the cleverest and most dangerous men we had at college. He could think up a whole lot of new field tricks overnight. Then again, most of the Hallam Heights boys are young fellows who go away for athletic summers. That is, they are young fellows who do a lot of boating, yachting, riding, tennis, track work, and all the rest of it. They are young fellows who glory in being in training all the year around. Speight writes me that he thinks he has the finest, strongest and most alert boys in the United States."

"We'll whip them, just the same," announced Dick coolly.

"Gridley will, if anyone can—I know that," agreed Mr. Morton. "You've won all four games that you've played this season. Hallam Heights has played five games and won them all. The Hallam youngsters are out to capture the record that Gridley has held for some time that of capturing all the games of the season."



“Bring ‘em on!” begged Darrin. “I wish we had ‘em here to play just as soon as the rain lets up.”

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking that, because the Hallam boys have rich fathers, they’re dudes, who can’t play on wet ground,” laughed Mr. Morton.

“If Hallam sends forth such terrors,” grinned Dick, rising from the bench on which he had been sitting, “then we must get in trim for ‘em. Come on, fellows; some of the light speedy exercises. I’ll work you up to all the speed you can take care of, this afternoon.”



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For the next ten minutes Dick was as good as his word. Then, after a brief breathing spell, Prescott ordered his men to the running track in the gallery.

“Three laps at full speed, with a two-minute jog between each speed burst, and a minute of breathing between each kind of running,” called out Dick.

Then, after he had seen the fellows started, he turned to the coach.

“If I never learned anything else from you, Mr. Morton, I think I’ve wholly absorbed the idea that no man is in condition unless he can run well; and that nothing will make for condition like judicious running.”

“As to what you’ve learned from me, Captain Prescott,” replied the coach, “I fully believe that you’ve learned all that I have to teach. I wouldn’t be afraid to go away on a vacation and leave the team in your hands.”

“Him!” smiled Dick. “Without you to back me up, Mr. Morton, I’m afraid some of the fellows might kick over the traces.”

“They wouldn’t kick over but once,” laughed the coach. “The first time any fellow did that you’d drop him from the team. And the fellows know it. I haven’t noticed the young men attempting to frisk you any.”

“One did.”

“I know whom you mean,” replied the submaster, his brow clouding. “But he got out of the team, didn’t he?”

“Yes; but I didn’t put him out.”

“You would have put him off the team if it had been left for you to do it.”

As soon as he thought the squad had had enough exercise to keep them in tone, Dick dismissed them.

“But every one of you do his level best to keep in condition all the time until we get through with Hallam Heights,” urged the young captain. “That applies, too, not only to team members, but to every man in the squad. If the Hallam fellows are swift and terrific, we can’t tell on whom we may have to pounce for substitutes.”

This was to be a mid-week game, taking place Wednesday afternoon. Wednesday morning word reached school that Hudson, who was down to play right guard, and Dan Dalzell, right end, were both at home in bed, threatened with pneumonia. In each case the doctor was hopeful that the attack would be averted, but that didn’t help out the afternoon’s game any.



“Two of our prize men out,” muttered Dick anxiously to Dave at recess.

“And it’s claimed that misfortunes always travel by threes,” returned Darrin, half mournfully.

“Don’t!” shivered Prescott. “Let us off with two misfortunes.”

Afternoon came along, somewhat raw and lowering. Rain might prevent the game. Less than three quarters of the people who bought seats in advance appeared at the grounds. The sale of spot seats was not as brisk by half as it would have been on a pleasanter day.

But the Hallam Heights boys came along early, bounding and full of fun and dash.

They were a fine-looking lot of boys. The Gridley youngsters took to their opponents instantly.



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"I wonder what's keeping Dick?" muttered Dave Darrin, half anxiously, in dressing quarters.

"Anyway, we won't worry about him until we have to," nodded Mr. Morton. "Our young captain is about the promptest man, as a rule, in the whole squad."

"That's just why I am uneasy," grunted Dave.

Hardly had he spoken when Dick Prescott came in—but limping slightly!

And what a rueful countenance the young captain of the team displayed!

"Suffering Ebenezer, man, but what has happened?" gasped Dave.

All the other Gridley youngsters stopped half way in their togging to listen for the reply.

"Nothing much," grunted Dick. "Yet it came near to being too much. A man bumped me, as I was getting on the car, and drove me against the iron dasher. It was all an accident, due to the man's clumsiness. But it barked my knee a good bit."

"Let me see you walk about the room," ordered Coach Morton. He watched closely, as Dick obeyed.

"Sit down, Prescott, and draw the trousers leg off on that side. I want to examine the knee."

While Mr. Morton went to work the other members of the team crowded about, anxiety written on all their faces.

"Does it hurt more when I press?" asked the submaster keenly. "Ah, I thought so! Prescott, you're not badly hurt for anything else; but your knee is in no shape to play this afternoon!"

A wail of dismay went up from the team members. The rueful look in Dick's face deepened.

"I was afraid you'd bar me out," he confessed. "I never felt so ashamed in my life."

"It wouldn't be of any use for you to play, for that knee wouldn't stand it in any rough smash," declared the coach, shaking his head solemnly.

"It's all off with us, then," groaned one of the fellows. "We may as well ask Hallam if they'll allow us to hand 'em a score of six to nothing on a platter, and then stay off the field."



“Hush your croaking, will you?” demanded Dave Darrin angrily, glaring about him. “Is that the Gridley way? Do we ever admit defeat? Whoever croaks had better quit the team altogether.”

Under that rebuke the boy who had ventured the opinion shrank back abashed.

“You’re sure I’ll be in no shape to go on, Coach?” asked Dick anxiously.

“Why, of course you could go on,” replied Mr. Morton. “And you could run about some, too, unless your knee got a good deal stiffer. But you wouldn’t be up to Gridley form.”

“Have I any right to go on, with a knee in this shape?” queried Dick.

“You certainly haven’t,” replied Mr. Morton, with great emphasis.

“Dave,” called the young football chief, “you’re second captain of the team. Get in and get busy. Put up the best fight you can for old Gridley!”

“Aye, that I will,” retorted Dave Darrin, his eyes sparkling, cheeks glowing. “I’ll go in like a pirate chief, and I’ll break the neck of any Gridley man who doesn’t do all there is in him this afternoon.”



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“Listen to the fire eater,” laughed Fenton. Dave grinned good-humoredly, but went insistently:

“All right. If any of you fellows think I take less than the best you can possibly do, try it out with me.”

Then Darrin came over to rest a hand on Prescott’s shoulder.

“Dick, you’ll give me any orders you have before we go on, and between the halves, won’t you?”

“Not a word,” replied Dick promptly. “Dave, you can lead as well as ever I have done. If you’re going to be captain to-day you’ll be captain in earnest. I’ll hamper you neither with advice nor orders.”

With so important a player as Dick Prescott out of the team Dave had a hard task in rearranging the eleven. In this he sought direction from Mr. Morton. Rapidly they sketched the new line-up.

Darrin himself would have to drop quarterback and go to center. For this latter post Dave was rather light, but he carried the knack of sturdy assault better than any other man in the team after Prescott.

Tom Reade was called to quarter. Shortly afterwards all the details had been completed.

“As to style, you’ll gather that from the signals,” muttered Darrin. “The only rule is the one we always have—that we can’t be beat and we know we can’t.”

There came a rap at the door. Then a bushy mop of football hair was thrust into the doorway.

“Talking strategy, signals or anything we shouldn’t hear?” asked the pleasant voice of Forsythe, captain of the Hallam Heights boys.

“Not a blessed thing,” returned Dave. “Come in, gentlemen.”

Captain Forsythe, in full field toggery, came in, followed by the members of the visiting team, all as completely attired for work.

“We’re really not intruding?” asked Forsythe, after he had stepped into the room.

“Not the least in the world,” responded Dave heartily. “Mr. Forsythe. let me introduce you to Mr. Morton, our coach, and to Mr. Prescott, the real captain of this tin-pan crowd of pigskin chasers.”



“Oh, I mistook you for Prescott,” replied Forsythe, as he acknowledged the introductions.

“No; I’m Darrin, the pewter-plate second captain—the worst you’ve got to fear to-day,” laughed Dave, as he held out his hand.

“Why—what—anything happened?” asked Captain Forsythe, looking truly concerned.

“Captain Prescott has had his knee injured, and two of our other crack men are in bed, sick,” replied Mr. Morton cheerfully. “Otherwise we’re all quite well.”

“Your captain and two other good men out?” asked Forsythe in real sympathy. “That doesn’t sound fair, for we came over here prepared to put up the very best we had against you old invincibles. I’m awfully sorry.”

“Captain Forsythe, we all thank you for your sympathy,” Dick answered, “but Captain Darrin can lead at least as well as I can. I believe he can do it better. As for the team that we’re putting in the field to-day, if you can beat it, you could as easily beat anything we could offer at any other time. So, as far as one may, with such courteous opponents as you are, Gridley hurls back its defiance and throws down the battle gage! But play your very best team, Captain Forsythe, and we’ll do our best in return.”



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CHAPTER IX

Could Dave Make Good?

Dave Darrin, a good deal disheveled and covered with soil and perspiration on his face and neck, came striding in after time had been called on the first half.

Dave's generalship had kept Hallam Heights from scoring, but Gridley hadn't put away any points, either.

"You saw it all from the side lines, Dick?" Dave asked, as the chums, arm in arm, strolled into dressing quarters.

"Yes."

"What are your instructions for the second half?"

"I haven't any."

"Your advice, then?"

"I haven't any of that, either. Dave, any fellow who can hold those young human cyclones back as you've done doesn't need any pointers in the game."

"But we simply couldn't score against them," muttered Darrin. "So I know there's something wrong with my leadership. What is it?"

"Nothing whatever, Darrin. It simply means that you're up against the hardest line to get through that I've ever seen Gridley tackle. Why, yesterday I was looking over the record of these Hallam boys, and I find that they've already whipped two college second teams. But you'll get through them in the next Dave, if there's any human way of doing it. So that's all I've got to say, for I'm not out there on the gridiron, and I can't see things from the side line the same as you can on the ten-yard line. Perhaps Mr. Morton may have something to offer."

But the coach hadn't.

"You're doing as well as any man of Gridley could do, Darrin," the submaster assured the young second captain. "Of course, with Prescott at center, and yourself jumping around as quarter-back the team would be stronger. But in Prescott's enforced absence, I don't see how you can play any point of the line more forcefully than you've been doing."

But Dave, instead of looking puffed up, replied half dejectedly:



“I was in hopes you could both show me where I’m weak.”

“You’re not weak,” insisted Coach Morton.

“That throws me back on thinking hard for myself,” muttered Darrin.

Where a weaker man would have been pleased with such direct praise Dave felt that he was not doing his duty because he had not been able to lead as brilliantly as Dick had done in earlier games.

“Brute strength isn’t any good against these Hallam fellows,” Darrin told himself, as he returned to the field. “They’re all A-1 athletes. Even if Gridley played a slugging game, it wouldn’t bear these Hallam boys down. As to speed and scientific points, they seem to be our masters. Whatever we do against them, it must be something seldom heard of on the gridiron something that will be so brand new that they can’t get by it.”

Yet twice in the half that followed Gridley barely escaped having to make a safety to save their goal line. Each time, however, Dave wriggled out of it.



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When there were but seven minutes left neither team had scored.

Gridley now had the ball for snap-back at its own twenty-five-yard line.

The most that home boosters were hoping for now was that Gridley would be able to hold down the game to no score.

Dave had been thinking deeply. He had just found a chance to mutter orders swiftly.

Fenton, little, wiry and swift, was to-day playing at left end, the position that Dick himself had made famous in the year before.

“Eighteen—three—eleven—seven—nine!” called Tom Reade, crisply.

The first four figures called off the play that Gridley was to make, or to pretend to make. But that nine, capping all at the end, caused a swift flutter in Gridley hearts. For that nine, at the end of the signal, called for a fake play.

Yet the instant that the whistle trilled out its command every Gridley player unlimbered and dashed to the position ordered.

Only three men on the team understood what was contemplated. Coach Morton, from the side lines, had looked puzzled from the moment that he heard the signal.

Dick Prescott, eager for his chum's success, as well as the team's, stood as erect as he could beside Mr. Morton, trying to take in the whole field with one wide, sweeping glance.

As Tom Reade caught the ball on its backward snap, he straightened up, tucking the ball under his left arm and making a dash for Gridley's right end.

Immediately, of course, Hallam rushed its men toward that point.

Yet the movements of Gridley's right wing puzzled the visitors. For all of Dave's right flankers dashed forward, making an effective interference.

Surely, reasoned Captain Forsythe, Tom Reade didn't mean to try to break through by himself with the pigskin.

That much was a correct guess. Tom didn't intend anything of the sort.

All in a flash Reade, as prearranged, dropped the ball, punting it vigorously.

Up it went, soaring obliquely over Gridley's left flank and far beyond.



Just a second before the ball itself started, little Fenton had put himself in motion. By the time that the ball was in the air Fenton was past Hallam's line and scorching down the field.

Now Forsythe and every Hallam man comprehended all in a flash.

Fenton had caught the ball with a nicety that brought wild whoops from the Gridley boosters, now standing on their seats and waving the Gridley colors.

"That little fellow looks like a streak of light," yelled one Gridley booster.

The description wasn't a bad one. Fenton was doing some of the finest sprinting conceivable. Before him nothing menaced but big Harlowe, Hallam's fullback. Harlowe, however, was hurling himself straight in the impetuous way of little Fenton.

It looked like a bump. There could be but one result. Fenton would have to go down to save the ball.



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Harlowe reached out to tackle.

Fenton came to a quivering stop, just out of reach. Then, almost instantly, the little left end dashed straight forward again.

But the move had been enough to fool Harlowe. Of course, he assumed that Fenton would spring to one side. Harlowe imagined that it would be a dodge to the left, and Harlowe leaped there to tackle his man.

But Fenton, actually going straight ahead, fooled the calculation of his powerful adversary and got past on the clever trick.

Harlowe dashed after his sly opponent. But Fenton, still almost with his first big breath in his lungs, was running as fast as ever. A man of Harlowe's size was no one to send after a greased mosquito like Fenton.

So nothing hindered. Amid the wildest, noisiest rooting, Fenton stepped it over Hallam's now undefended goal line, reached down and pressed the pigskin against the earth for a touchdown.

On the grand stand the noise was deafening. The whistle sounded and the flushed players of both teams came back to range up for the kick from field. Dave, his cheeks glowing, took the kick. He sent a clean one that scored one more point for Gridley.

The cheering and the playing of the band still continued when the two elevens again lined up for play during the last five minutes of the game. The referee was obliged to signal to the leader to stop his musicians.

Forsythe looked hot and weary. His expectation of an easy victory had come to naught. Unless he and ten other Hallam boys could work wonders in five minutes.

But they couldn't and didn't. The time keeper brought the game to a close.

"Gridley has handed us six to nothing," muttered Forsythe, as he led his disheartened fellows from the field. "That puts us with the other second-rate teams in the state."

"A great lot of orders you needed, didn't you?" was Captain Dick Prescott's happy greeting as Dave met him beyond the side lines.

"You won that game for us, just the same," retorted Dave.

"I?" demanded Dick, in genuine amazement.

"Yes; you, and no one else."



“How?”

“You refused to give me a hint. You threw me down hard, on my own resources. I saw all those hundreds of people demanding that Gridley win,” retorted Dave. “What could I do? I had to make the fellows do something like what they’ve been doing under Dick Prescott, or confess myself a dub. I couldn’t lean on a word from you, Dick. So you fairly drove me into planning something that would either carry off the game or make us look like chromos of football players. You wouldn’t say a word, Prescott, that would take any of the blame on yourself! So didn’t you force me to win!”

“That’s ingenious, but not convincing,” retorted Dick, as the two chums stepped into dressing quarters. “To tell you the truth, Dave, I think a good many people now believe that you ought to be the regular captain.”



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But Darrin only grinned. He knew better.

Some of the fellows tried to praise Fenton to his face.

“Quit! You can’t get away with that,” chuckled the fast little left end. “Some one had to take that ball and drop it behind Hallam’s goal line. I was the one who was ordered to do it. If I hadn’t, what would you fellows have said about me?”

By the time that the Hallam Heights young men were dressed several of them came to the Gridley quarters, Forsythe at their head.

“We want to shake hands,” laughed Forsythe, “and to make sure that you have no hard feelings for what we tried to do to you.”

Dick and Darrin took this in laughing goodfellowship.

“If you call this your dub team to-day,” continued Forsythe, a bit more gloomily, “we shudder to think what would have happened to us had you put in your regular line-up.”

“There isn’t any dub team in Gridley,” spoke Dick quickly. “All of our fellows are trained in the same way, by the same coach, and we stake all our chances on any line-up that’s picked for the day. It was hard on you, gentlemen, that my knee put me out for the day. Darrin is twice as crafty as I am.”

“Oh, Darrin is crafty, all right,” agreed Forsythe cheerfully. “But, somehow, I like him for it.”

On some of the side streets Gridley boys were allowed to light bonfires that evening, and there was general rejoicing of a lively nature. From the news that had come over concerning the Hallam Heights team there had been a good deal of fear that Gridley would, on this day, receive a set-back to its rule of always winning.

CHAPTER X

Leading the Town to Athletics

“Mr. Morton, we want a little word with you.”

“All right—anything to please you,” laughed the submaster, looking at Dick and Dave as they came up to him in the yard at recess.

“We’ve been thinking over a plan,” Dick continued.

“It has something to do with athletics, then!” guessed the submaster.



“Yes, sir,” nodded Dave.

“High School athletics, at that,” continued Mr. Morton.

“There you’re wrong, sir, for once,” smiled Prescott. “Mr. Morton, we’ve been thinking of the High School gym. It’s a big place. Pretty nearly three hundred gymnasts could be drilled there at once.”

“Yes; I know.”

“There’s a fine lot of apparatus there,” went on Dick. “It cost thousands and thousands of dollars to put that gym. in shape.”

“And it’s worth every dollar of the cost,” contended Mr. Morton firmly.

“Mr. Morton,” challenged Dick, “who paid for it?”

“The city government,” replied the submaster.

“Where did the city government get the money?”

“From the citizens, of course.”

“Now, Mr. Morton,” went on Prescott, “how many of the citizens get any direct benefit out of that gym.? Only about a quarter of a thousand of High School students! Couldn’t the city’s money be spent so that a far greater number would have the use of and benefit from the city’s big investment!”



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“Why,” replied the submaster, looking puzzled, “the youngsters in the lower schools have their needs provided for, in some way, in their own school buildings.”

“True,” agreed Dick. “But what of the small army of clerks and factory employees of Gridley? Aren’t they citizens, even if they haven’t the time to attend High School? Haven’t our smaller business fry a right to the health and good spirits that come out of gymnastic and athletic work? Haven’t our typewriters, our salesgirls and factory girls a right to some of the good things from the gym.? Aren’t they all citizens, and isn’t the gym. their property as much as it’s anyone else’s!”

“Excellent,” nodded Mr. Morton. “But how do you propose to get them interested in the use of their property, even if the Board of Education will permit it?”

“The willingness of the Board of Education can be dropped out of sight,” argued Dick. “The Board is the servant of the people, and must do what the people want. What Dave and I want to see is to have the High School gym. turned over to the young working people of the city in the evening time. Say, two evenings a week for young men and two evenings for the young women. We believe it will result in big gains for Gridley. When you put new life and brighter blood into the toilers, it increases the wealth of the whole city, doesn’t it?”

“I declare, I think it ought to,” replied Mr. Morton. “But see here, how are two boys—or, let us say, two boys and a submaster—going to bring about any such result as this?”

“By presenting it properly through the leading daily of Gridley,” replied Prescott, with great promptness.

“Have you received any assurance that Mr. Pollock, of ‘The Blade,’ will be for this big scheme of yours?” asked Mr. Morton.

“When we’ve explained it all, I don’t see how he can help being for it,” rejoined Prescott. “If ‘The Blade’ takes hold and booms this idea, day in and day out, it won’t be very long before evening gym. classes will be filled to overflowing. And the Board of Education would have to give way before the pressure.”

Then Dave took hold of the subject for a while, talking with great earnestness. Mr. Morton listened with increasing interest.

“I think, boys, that you’ve hit upon an idea that will be of great service to our city,” remarked the submaster. “Yet what put all this into your heads!”

“Why, sir, it’s our last year at the High School,” replied Dick, smiling though speaking with great earnestness. “After four years of the fine training we’ve had here, Dave and I feel that it’s our place to do something to leave our mark behind. We’ve been talking it all over, and we’ve hit upon this idea. Will you stand by us in it?”



“Why, yes; all that I can, you may be sure. But just what do you boys expect me to be able to do!”



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“Why, help us form the plans and back us up in them. You are really the leader in school athletics in this town, Mr. Morton,” explained Prescott. “I can quote you in ‘The Blade’ as to the benefits that would result in giving gym. training to workers who can’t attend High School. And, in the spring, after a winter in the gym., young men and women could form outdoor squads for running and other outside training. Altogether, sir, we think we might make Gridley famous as a place where all who possess any real energy go in to keep it up through public athletics. And such classes of young men and women could have the use of our athletics field.”

By the time that recess was over the submaster certainly had enough thoughts to keep him busy.

That afternoon Dick and Dave took Mr. Morton around to “The Blade” office. Right at the outset Mr. Pollock jumped at the idea.

“Prescott,” he cried, “you’ve sprung a big idea. ‘The Blade’ will feature this idea for days to come. You may have a column, or a column and a half every day, and ‘The Blade’ will also back it up on the editorial page. Now, go ahead and get your stuff in shape. Above all, have interviews with prominent men, especially employers, setting forth the benefit that ought to come to the young people and to the city at large. Take as your keynote the idea that the city’s duty is just as great to provide physical education as it is to supply learning out of textbooks. You’ll know how to go ahead on that line, Prescott.”

By the next day Gridley had something new to talk about. By the time three days had passed the matter was being discussed with great seriousness.

Employers saw, and said that the time young men spent in a gym. would not be spent in billiard rooms or other resorts of a harmful or useless character. Young women who went to the gym. would be home and in bed early, instead of staying up most of the night at a dance. All who entered the gym. classes would begin to think about their bodily condition and plan to improve it. Improved bodies meant a better grade of work and increased pay.

Dick wrote splendidly on the subject. “The Blade,” editorially, gave Dick & Co. full credit for springing the idea. The Board of Education, at its next meeting, authorized the superintendent of schools to throw the High School gym., open evenings for the purpose indicated. It also voted Mr. Morton an increase of pay on condition that he take charge of the evening gym. classes for young men. One of the women teachers was granted a like increase for assuming charge of the evening gym. classes for young women.

Dick Prescott, on behalf of the High School boys, guaranteed that the most skilled in athletics among the High School boys would be on hand to aid in training the young



men, and in getting up sports and games for the gym. in winter, and for the athletic field in the spring.

As soon as the classes were opened they were crowded to their utmost capacity. All of the younger portion of Gridley seemed suddenly anxious to go in for athletics.



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“Prescott and his well-known comrades of the High School appear to be leading in the very vanguard of athletics this year,” stated “The Blade” editorially.

Dick and his friends could not, however, give as much aid to the new scheme now as they intended to do later. They were in the middle of the football season, and that had to be carried through first of all.

Yet it was a big evening for Dick, Dave and their chums when the High School gym. was thrown open for the forming of the gymnastic class for young men.

Almost three hundred presented themselves for enrollment. Scores of the leading citizens were also on hand to see how the new plan would take. Among these latter was Herr Schimmelpodt, the retired contractor, who was always such an enthusiastic booster for High School athletics.

“I tell you, Breggott, it vos a fine idea of yours,” cried the big German, as he stood in a corner, looking on, while Dick talked with him. “This vill keep young folks out of drouble, and put dem in health. It vill put Gridley to being twice as good a town, alretty.”

“Hullo, Mr. Schimmelpodt,” called a young clerk, passing in trunks and gym. shoes. “Don’t you get into a squad to-night? This would do you a lot of good.”

“Maype, if I go in for dis sort of thing, I crowd out some young mans who needs it as much as you do,” retorted the German, blinking.

“But don’t you think you need it, also” laughed the clerk?

“Now, led me see,” pondered the German. “Young man, you think you gan run?”

“I know I can,” laughed the clerk, leaping lightly up and down on his soft gym. shoes.

“I yonder if you could reach dot door ofer dere so soon alretty as I gan?” queried Herr Schimmelpodt.

“Will you run me a race?” grinned the clerk.

“Vell, you start, und ve see apout it.”

Tantalizingly, the clerk started. Then he glanced back over his shoulder. There was a great noise on the floor of the gym. Herr Schimmelpodt had started. He was so big that he made a good deal of noise when he traveled. But he was going like a streak, and the clerk began to sprint in earnest.



It was all in vain, however. With a few great bounds Herr Schimmelpodt was close enough to reach out one of his big arms and lay hold of the fleeing clerk. That clerk stopped suddenly, with a jolt.

“Vy don’t you go on running, ain’t it?” demanded Herr Schimmelpodt.

A crowd formed about them.

The reason why the clerk didn’t continue his running was a very good one. One of the German’s big hands encircled the clerk’s thin arm like a bracelet of steel. The clerk struggled, but he might as well have tried to break out of irons.

“You vant me to bractise running, so dot I gan catch you, eh?” grunted the German.

“You vant me to eat breakfast sawdust for a dyspepsia vot I ain’t got, huh? You vant me to dake breathing eggsercises ven I can dake more air into my lungs, alretty, dan your whole body gan disblace? You vant me to do monkey-tricks mit a dumb-pell, yen I gan do things like dis?”



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Suiting the action to the word, Herr Schimmelpodt grasped the clerk by one shoulder and one thigh. Up over his head the German raised the unhappy young man. Herr Schimmelpodt's arms fell and rose as he "exercised" with the young man for a wand.

Everything in the gym. had stopped. All eyes were on this novel performance. Roars of laughter greeted some new stunts that Herr Schimmelpodt performed with his human wand. The great German was the only one who seemed unconscious of the hurricane of laughter that he was causing.

At last the German put his victim back on the floor.

"Yah, young mans, I am much oblige dot you show me how I need eggsercise. I feel much better alretty."

Red-faced, the clerk fled to the other side of the room, followed by the laughter of the other gymnasts.

Yet Herr Schimmelpodt's good-natured performance had great value. It taught many of the young men present how far this generation has fallen behind in matters of personal strength. Mr. Morton had easier sailing after that.

CHAPTER XI

The "King Deed" of Daring

"Yes; that performance helped a lot."

Herr Schimmelpodt was prevailed upon, by Mr. Morton, to come around on another evening to show some further feats with his great strength.

Around the waist-line the German was flabby; the fat rolled in heavy ridges. Feeling aware of this defect in personal appearance Herr Schimmelpodt determined to devote some of his abundant leisure to getting his belt line into smaller compass. But the German would not do this before all eyes in the public, gym. So he and some other well-to-do business men who were conscious that the years had dealt too generously by them in the matter of flesh, hired a small hall and converted it into a private gym.

It was all the doings of Dick & Co., just the same.

The town was ripe, now, for performances in extraordinary athletics. Fate willed it that there should be a chance.

Once a year an opera company of considerable prominence appeared at Gridley for one evening.



Whenever this evening came around, it was made the occasion for a big time in local society. The women of the well-to-do families turned out in their most dazzling finery.

This year "Lohengrin" was to be sung at the local opera house. Dick could have obtained, at "The Blade" office, free seats for Dave and himself for this Friday night. But they were still in close training, and there was a game on for the afternoon of the day following. For that reason nine o'clock found both of the young men in bed and asleep.

Near the opera house the street was thronged with carriages. Carriage after carriage drove up and discharged its load of handsomely dressed women and their more severely attired escorts. All of Gridley that could attend the opera were in evening dress.



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During the evening a half gale of wind sprang up. While all was light and warmth inside, outside the wind howled harder and harder. By the time that the music lovers began to pour out, the blast was furious.

Leaning on the arm of her escort, as her carriage drove up to the door, one beautifully gowned woman stepped out. Over her hair was thrown a black, filmy scarf in which nestled a number of handsome diamonds.

Just as she reached the curb, but before she could step into the waiting carriage, this woman gave a shriek of dismay.

The gale had caught at her diamond-strewn head-covering. Like a flash that costly creation was caught up from her hair and borne on the wind.

Others standing by saw the costly thing whisked obliquely up into the air. It was still ascending on the blast when it passed out of the range of vision.

“O-o-o-oh! My beautiful jeweled scarf!” sobbed the woman hysterically. The crowd quickly formed about her. She was recognized as Mrs. Macey, the wife of a wealthy real estate operator.

“It was careless not to have it fastened more securely, but it’s no use to cry over what can’t be helped now, my dear,” replied her husband. “Get into the carriage and I’ll see if any trace can be found of the scarf.”

Still sobbing, Mrs. Macey was helped into the carriage. Then Mr. Macey enlisted the help of the bystanders.

In every direction the street was searched. The fronts of the buildings opposite were examined; the gratings in the sidewalk were peered through. But there was no trace, anywhere, of the jeweled scarf.

“It will be worth two hundred and fifty dollars for anyone to find it and return it to me,” shouted Mr. Macey. That scattered the searchers more widely still. Presently a woman friend drove home with Mrs. Macey, while her husband remained to push the search. He kept at it until two o’clock in the morning, half a hundred men and boys remaining in the search.

Then Mr. Macey gave it up. The gaudy, foolish trifle was worth about five thousand dollars. As the night wore on Mr. Macey began to have a pessimistic notion that perhaps some one had found the scarf but had been too “thrifty” to turn in such a precious article for so small a reward.

“I guess it may as well be given up,” sighed Mr. Macey, after two in the morning. “I’m going home, anyway.”



The readers of "The Blade" that crisp October morning knew of Mrs. Macey's loss.

There was much talk about the matter around the town. People who walked downtown early that morning peered into gutters and down through sidewalk gratings. Then, at about seven o'clock a sensation started, and swiftly grew.

One man, glancing skyward, had his attention attracted to something fluttering at the top of the spire of the Methodist church, more than half a block away from the opera house. It was fabric of some sort, and one end fluttered in the breeze, though most of the black material appeared to be wrapped around the tip of the weather vane in which the spire staff terminated.



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“That’s the jeweled scarf, I’ll bet a month’s pay!” gasped the discoverer. Then, mindful of the reward, he dashed to the nearest telephone office, asking “central” to ring insistently until an answer came over the Macey wire.

“Hullo, is that you, Mr. Macey?” called the discoverer, a teamster. “Then come straight up to the Methodist church. I’ll be there. I’ve discovered the jeweled scarf.”

“How—how many jewels are left on it?” demanded Mr. Macey.

“Come right up! I’ll tell you all about it when you get here.”

Then the teamster rang off, after giving his name. The real estate man came in a hurry, in a runabout. His wife, pallid and hollow-cheeked, rode in the car with him. To Mr. Macey the teamster pointed out the barely visible bit of black fluttering a hundred and sixty feet above the pavement.

“Now how about the reward, Mr. Macey?” demanded the teamster.

“That will be paid you, if you return the scarf to Mrs. Macey,” replied the real estate man dryly.

The teamster’s jaw dropped. For the uppermost eighteen feet of the spire consisted of a stout flagpole. Below this was the sloping slate roof of the top of the steeple proper. Only a monkey or a “steeplejack” could get up there, and on a day like this, with a half gale still blowing, a steeplejack might be pardoned for declining the task.

Swiftly the news spread, and a great crowd collected. Dave Darrin heard of it right after breakfast, and hurried to get Dick Prescott. Together the chums joined the crowd.

“You’ll have to get a steeplejack for the job, Mr. Macey,” the chums heard one man advise the real estate operator.

Only one was known. His home was some forty miles away. Mr. Macey tried patiently to get the man over the long distance telephone. Some member of the man’s family answered for him. The expert was away, and would not be home, or available, for three days to come at least.

“Never mind, Macey,” laughed the friend, consolingly. “It’ll wait. No one in Gridley will take the scarf. It’s safe up there.”

“Huh! Is it, though?” snorted the real estate man. “At any minute the strong wind may unwind it and send it whirling off over the town. Or the gale may tear it to pieces, scattering the diamonds over a whole block, and not one in ten of the stones would ever be found.”



Mrs. Macey sat in the runabout, a picture of mute misery.

Herr Schimmelpodt elbowed his way through the outskirts of the crowd and stood absorbing his share in the local excitement.

“Ach! I am afraid dere is von thing dot you gan’t do, Bresgott,” smiled the German.
“Ach! By chimminy, though, I don’t know yet.”

“I was wondering myself whether I could make a good try at steeple climbing,” laughed Dick eagerly. “The money sounds good to me anyway.”

“No; I don’t know. I think it would be foolish,” replied Herr Schimmelpodt.



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"I believe you could get up there, Dick," muttered Darrin, in a low voice.

"Then you could, Dave."

"I think I could," nodded Darrin. "And, by crickets, if you were here, Dick, I'd certainly try it."

"Try it anyway, then," urged Prescott.

"Not unless you balk at it," returned Darrin.

"I'm not going to balk at it," retorted Dick, flushing just a bit. "But you spoke of it first, Dave, and I think you ought to have first chance at the reward."

"Tell you what I'll do," proposed Darrin, seriously. "We'll toss for it, and the winner has the try."

"I'll go you," nodded Prescott.

Herr Schimmelpodt, regarding them both seriously, saw that they meant it.

"Boys, boys!" he remonstrated. "Don't think of it yet!"

"Why not?" asked Dick.

"You would be killed," remonstrated the big German.

"Is that the best opinion you have of us, after the way you've been praising us athletes for two years?" laughed Prescott.

"I'll toss you for it, Dick," nudged Dave.

"What's this?" demanded Mr. Macey.

"Prescott and I are going to toss for it, to see who shall have the first chance to climb the spire and flagstaff," replied Dave.

"Nonsense! Out of the question," almost exploded Mr. Macey. "It would be like murder to allow either of you to try. That's work for a regular steeplejack."

"Well, what is a steeplejack?" demanded Dick. "He's a fellow of good muscle and nerve, who can stand being in high places. Either of us could climb a flagpole from down here in the street. Why can't either of us go up there, just as well, and climb from the steeple roof?"



“Prescott, have you any idea of the strength of the wind up there?” demanded the real estate man. “It’s blowing great guns up there!”

“Get some one to toss the coin, and either you or I call,” insisted Darrin.

Some one told Mrs. Macey what was being proposed.

“Oh, stop them!” she cried, leaning forward from the runabout. “Boys, boys! Don’t do anything wildly rash like that! I’d sooner lose the scarf than have lives risked.”

“She needn’t worry,” sneered some one in the crowd. “The High School dudes are only bluffing. They haven’t either o’ them the sand to do a thing like that.”

Both Prescott and Darrin heard. Both flushed, though that was all the sign they gave.

“Herr Schimmelpodt, you must have a cent,” suggested Dick. “Toss it, will you, and let Darrin call the turn.”

Grumbling a good deal the German produced the required coin. He fingered it nervously, for a moment, then flipped it high in the air.

“Tails!” called Dave.

It came down heads.

“Oh, well, the best two out of three,” insisted Dick.

“That fellow’s nerve is going already,” laughed some one. “He’s anxious for the other fellow to get the honor.”



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There was a grim twitching at the corners of prescott's mouth, but he said nothing.

Again the coin was tossed. This time Dick called:

"Heads!"

He won.

"I'm ready," announced Dick quietly.

"I congratulate you, old fellow," murmured Dave eagerly. "And I'm going with you to the base of the flagpole! The last climb is yours you've won it!"

CHAPTER XII

The Nerve of the Soldier

Again Mrs. Macey sought to interpose. Her husband, too, was at first against it.

But, now that the die was fairly cast, Herr Schimmelpodt firmly championed the boys.

"Eider von of dem gan do it—easy!" declared the big German. "You don't know dem boys—vot? Ach, I do. Dey got der brain, der nerves und der muscle."

"It's a crime to let such youths attempt the thing," shivered an anaemic-looking man in the crowd. "Whichever one goes up that flagstaff will come down again faster. He'll be killed!"

"Cheer up some more," advised Herr Schimmelpodt stolidly. "It don't gost you nottings, anyway. If Dick Bresgott preak his neck soon, I gif him der bulliest funeral dot any boy in Gridley efer hat."

"But what good-----" began the nervous man tremulously.

"Talk ist cheap," retorted Herr Schimmelpodt, with a wink, "mid dot's all I haf to bay for dot funeral. Dick Bresgott ain't fool enough yet to preak der only neck he has."

At this a jolly laugh went around, relieving the tension a bit, for there were many in the crowd who had begun to feel mighty serious as soon as they realized that Dick was in earnest.

Some one brought the janitor of the church. A hardware dealer near by came along with two coils of rope, which he thought might be handy.



Mr. Macey went inside with the janitor and the two chums. A score or two more would have followed, but the janitor called to Herr Schimmelpodt to bar the way, which the big German readily did.

Then the four inside began to climb the winding staircase to the bell loft.

“Go slowly, Dick; loaf,” counseled Dave. “Don’t waste a bit of your wind foolishly.”

At the bell loft all four paused to look down at the crowd.

Now up a series of ladders the four were obliged to climb, inside the spire top. This spire top was thirty-six feet above the floor of the bell loft; but eight feet from the top of the spire a window let out upon a narrow iron gallery that ran around the spire.

“I—I don’t believe I’ll step out there,” faltered Mr. Macey, who was stout and apoplectic-looking.

“I don’t blame ye any,” agreed the janitor. “It ain’t just the place, out there, for a man o’ your weight and years.”

“Don’t look down at the street, Dick,” begged Dave.

“Why not?” asked Prescott, deliberately disobeying. “If I couldn’t do that without getting dizzy, it would be foolish to climb the pole.”



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“Prescott, you’d better not try it,” protested Mr. Macey. “Just listen to how strong the wind is at this height. I’m afraid you’ll be dashed down to the ground. Gracious! Hear the flagstaff rattle.”

“I expected it,” replied Dick, sitting down, inside the spire top.

“What are you doing?” demanded the real estate man.

“Taking off my shoes,” Dick replied coolly.

“Do you really mean to make the attempt?”

“You don’t think a Gridley boy would back out at this late moment?” queried Dick, in surprise.

“Ye couldn’t stop these youngers, now, by force,” chuckled the janitor.

“I certainly wouldn’t care to try force,” remarked Mr. Macey dryly. “These young men are too well developed.”

Dave was now on the floor, getting off his shoes.

“What are you going to do, old fellow?” asked Prescott.

“Going to follow you as far as the top of the spire,” replied Darrin quietly. “Who knows but I may be able to be of some use?”

Dave stepped out first on the little iron balcony. The crowd below saw him, but at the distance could not make out clearly which boy it was. Then Prescott followed.

“Give me one foot,” called Dave, kneeling and making a cup of his hands.

Dick placed his foot, then started to climb the sloping surface of slate, Darrin aiding.

As Dave straightened to a standing position Dick reached up, getting hold of the base of the flagstaff.

“Hold on there, a minute,” advised Dave, as his chum stood on the little ledge at the top of the spire. “And don’t be foolish enough to look down into the street.”

Dave darted inside, picking up the lighter of the ropes. Going out on the balcony again Darrin tossed one end of the rope to Dick, who made it fast around the flagpole.

Using the rope, Dave went easily up and stood beside Prescott.



“There is a fearful wind here,” muttered Dick, as both swayed while holding to the stout, vibrating mast. “But you can make it, old fellow.”

It had been the original intention in building the church to use this mast as a flag pole. Then some doubt had arisen among the members of the parish. A weather vane had been put at the top of the pole, and the question of connecting flag tackle had been left to be decided at a later date.

Had the flag tackle been there now Dick could have made an easier problem of the ascent; yet, even with the rope, it would have been an undertaking from which most men would have shrunk.

“I’m going to start now,” said Dick very quietly.

“Good luck, Dick, old fellow!” called Dave cheerily. “You’ll get through.”

Darrin still remained standing on top of the spire after Dick had started to climb.

The only way that Prescott could move upward was to wrap arms and legs around the pole.

How the wind swayed, jarred and vibrated it! Once, when ten feet of the ascent had been accomplished, Dick felt his heart fail him.



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A momentary impulse, almost of cowardice, swept over him.

Then he steeled himself, and went on and up.

That staff must be more than a mile high, it now seemed to the boy, hanging there in momentary danger of his life.

Dave, standing below, looking up, knew far more torment.

Watching Dick, Darrin began to feel wholly responsible for the whole awful predicament of his chum.

"I urged him on to it," thought Dave, with a rush of horror that his own peril could not have brought to him. "Oh, I hope the splendid old fellow does make this stunt safely!"

It seemed as though thousands were packed in the street below, every face upturned. The breath of the multitude came short and sharp. Two women and a girl fainted from the strain.

In a window in the building across the street a photographer poised his camera. Behind the shutter was a long-angled lens, fitted for taking pictures at a distance.

Just as Dick Prescott's arms were within two feet of the weather vane the photographer exposed his plate.

Dick, in the meantime, was moving in a sort of dumb way now. The keenness of his senses had left him. He moved mechanically; he knew what he was after, and he kept on. Yet he seemed largely to have lost the power to realize the danger of his position.

A-a-ah! He was up there now, holding to the weathervane! His legs curled doggedly around the flagstaff. He had need now to use all the strength in his legs, for he must use one hand to disentangle the black scarf, which lay twisted about the vane just over his head. But it was the right scarf. The glint and dazzle of the diamonds was in his eyes.

How the extreme end of that flag pole quivered. It seemed to the boy as though the pole must bend and snap, what with the pressure of the heavy wind and the weight of his body!

Slowly, laboriously, mechanically, like one in a trance, Dick employed his left hand in patiently disentangling the black web from the trap in which it had been caught.

At last the scarf was free. Most cautiously Dick lowered his left hand, tucking the jeweled fabric carefully into the inner pocket of his coat.



“I—I—guess—it safe—in there,” he muttered, hardly realizing that he was saying any thing.

Dave, from below, had looked on, fascinated. Now that he saw the major part of the daring feat accomplished, Darrin did not make the mistake of shouting any advice to his comrade. He knew that any sudden shout might attract Prescott’s attention in a way to cause him to lose his head.

Slowly—oh, so slowly! Dick came down. It seemed as though, at last, he understood his danger to the full and was afraid. The truth was, Prescott realized that, with all the vibrating of the staff in the wind, his muscular power was being sapped out of him.

Dave Darrin was down again, crouching on top of the spire, when Dick reached him.



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“Just touch your feet, Dick!” Darrin called coolly. “Then stand holding to the pole until I get down into the balcony.”

Dick obeyed as one who could no longer think for himself.

This done, Dave slipped down the spire’s slope, by the aid of the rope, until his feet touched the balcony’s floor. Now he stood with upturned face and arms uplifted.

“Use the rope and come down, Dick,” hailed. Darrin softly. “I’m here to catch you, if you need it.”

Down came Prescott, holding to the rope, but helped more by Dave’s loyal arms.

“Help Prescott inside, you two,” Dave ordered sharply. Then, after the men inside the spire top had obeyed, Dave swung himself in. He left the rope fastened above, for whoever cared to go and get it.

Mr. Macey, ashen faced and shaking, stared at Dick in a sort of fascination.

“I—I got it,” said Dick, when he could control his voice. “Here it is, safe in my pocket.”

“I forgot to ask,” rejoined Mr. Macey tremulously. “I’m sick of that bauble. Ever since you started aloft, Prescott, I’ve been calling myself all sorts of names for being a party to this thing.”

“Why, it’s all right,” laughed Dick, only a bit brokenly. “It was easy enough—with a fellow like Dave to help.”

“Did he go up the flagstaff, too?” demanded Mr. Macey, opening his eyes wider.

“No,” declared Darrin promptly. “Prescott did it.”

“But good old Dave was right at hand to help,” Dick contended staunchly.

“Get yourselves together, boys. Then we’ll get down out of here,” urged Mr. Macey. “I haven’t done anything, but I feel as though I’d be the one to reel and faint.”

“Take this scarf, now, please,” begged Dick, holding open his coat.

The real estate man looked over the bauble that had placed two manly lives in such desperate jeopardy. The fabric was much torn, but all the precious stones still appeared to be there.

Mr. Macey folded the scarf and placed it in one of his own inner pockets.



“Now, let us get down out of here,” begged the real estate man. “This place is giving me the horrors.”

“You can start ahead, sir,” laughed Dave. “But we want time to put our shoes on.”

Two or three minutes later the four started below, going slowly over the ladder part of the route. When they struck the winding staircase they went a bit more rapidly.

Down in the street it seemed to the watchers as though ages had passed since the two boys had been seen going inside from the iron balcony.

But now, at last, Herr Schimmelpodt heard steps inside, so he threw open the heavy door at once.

As Dick and Dave came out again into the sunlight what a mighty roar of applause and cheering went up.

Then Herr Schimmelpodt, advancing to the edge of the steps, and laying one hand over his heart, bowed profoundly and repeatedly.

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That turned the cheering to laughter. The big German held up his right hand for silence.

“Ladies und chentlemen,” shouted Herr Schimmelpodt, as soon as he could make himself heard, “I don’t vant to bose as a hero!”

“That’s all right,” came with a burst of goodhumored laughter. “You’re not!”

“It vos really nottings vot I did,” continued the German, with another bow.

“True for you.”

“Maybe,” continued Herr Schimmelpodt, “you think I vos afraid when I climb dot pole. But I wos not—I pledch you mein vord. It is nottings for me to climb flagpoles. Ven I vos ein poy in Germany I did it efery day. But I will not dake up your time mit idle remarks. I repeat dot I am not ein hero.”

The wily old German had played out his purpose. He had turned the wild cheering, which he knew would have embarrassed Prescott, into a good-natured laugh. He had diverted the first big burst of attention away from the boys, much to the relief of the latter.

But now the crowd bethought itself of the heroes that a crowd always loves. Hundreds pressed about to shake the bands of Prescott and Darrin.

“Get into my car! Stand up in front of Mrs. Macey and myself until we can get out of this crowd,” urged Mr. Macey, bustling the boys toward the runabout.

Mrs. Macey, whitefaced, was crying softly and could not speak. But her husband, with the two boys standing up before him, honked his horn and turned on the power, starting the car slowly. A path was thus made for their escape through the crowd, though the cheering began again.

“Now, you can put us down, if you will, sir,” suggested Dick, when they had reached the outer edge of the crowd.

“Not yet,” retorted Mr. Macey.

“Why not, sir?”

“You’ve a little trip to make with me yet.”

“Trip?”

“Wait a moment, and you’ll see.”



Less than two minutes later Mr. Macey drove his car up in front of one of the banks and jumped out.

“Come on, boys,” he cried. “I want to get that reward off my mind.”

“You run in, Dick,” proposed Dave, on the sidewalk. “I’ll wait for you.”

“You’ll go with me,” Prescott retorted, “or I won’t stir inside.”

So Darrin followed them into the bank.

“I’m so thankful to see you boys safely out of the scrape,” declared Mr. Macey, inside, “that I’m going to pay the full reward to each of you.”

“No you won’t,” retorted Dick very promptly. “You’ll pay no more than you offered. Dave and I’ll divide that between us.”

“Not a cent for me!” propounded Darrin, with emphasis.

“If you don’t share the reward evenly, I won’t touch a cent of it either, Dave Darrin,” rejoined Dick heatedly.

Dave tried to have his way, but his chum won. Mr. Macey made another effort to double the reward, but was overruled.



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So young Prescott received the two hundred and fifty dollars in crisp, new bills, and as promptly turned half of the sum over to his chum.

Now that it was safely over with, it had not been a bad morning's work!

CHAPTER XIII

Dick Begins To Feel Old

Despite the strain of what they had gone through Dick and Dave led the Gridley boys through a fierce gridiron battle that same afternoon, and won again by a score of 13 to 5.

But the people of Gridley paid little heed to the score that day, or the next. The sensation that Dick and Dave had supplied was the talk of the town, to the exclusion of other topics relating to high School boys.

Mr. Pollock bought a copy of the photograph showing Dick close to the weather vane on his climb. A half-tone cut made from this photograph was printed in "The Blade."

"This young man is now a member of 'The Blade' staff, reporting school and other matters," ran the comment under the spirited picture. "We believe that Mr. Prescott will continue to be a member of the staff, and to grow with 'The Blade.'"

"What about that, Dick?" laughed Darrin.

"I've told Mr. Pollock and Mr. Bradley that I believe my plans will carry me a good distance away from 'The Blade' office after this year," replied Dick, with a meaning smile. "If they won't believe me now, perhaps they'll wake up later."

The town had not been wanting in croakers at the outset of the football season, who had predicted that Dick Prescott and his chums would "drag down" the football team and its fine traditions from past years.

But the eleven, mainly under Dick and under Dave's captaincy in two fierce gridiron battles, had gone right along winning games.

The last three battles had been fought out to a successful finish in November. There now remained only the Thanksgiving Day game to complete the season.

By all traditions each football team in the country strives to have its biggest fight take place on Thanksgiving Day. By another tradition, every team seeks to have this game take place on the home grounds.



In the latter respect Gridley lost this year. The game, which was against Fordham High School, was scheduled to take place at Fordham.

Enthusiasm, however, was at top notch. Citizens hired the Gridley Band to go along with the young men and help out on noise. A special train in two sections was chartered, for some seven hundred Gridleyites had voted in favor of an evening dinner on Thanksgiving Day; they were going along to see the game.

Fordham had lost two games, against exceptionally strong teams, earlier in the season, but had of late a fine record. Fordham had dropped several of its original players, putting in heavier or better men, and a new coach had been employed. The Fordham boys were now believed to be able to put up a strenuous game.



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“I hope you’re going to win, Prescott,” said Mr. Macey, meeting Dick on the street one afternoon not long before Thanksgiving.

“Have you any doubts, sir?” smiled the captain of the Gridley team.

“Well, you see, Fordham was my native town. I run down there often, and I know a good deal of what’s going on there. Fordham’s second coach has attended the last two games you played, and he has been stealing all your points that he could get.”

“He has, eh?” muttered Prescott. “That’s news to me. Oh, well, it’s legitimate to learn all you can about another team’s play.”

“From the reports Fordham has of your play the young men over in that town are certain that they’re enough better to be able to bring your scalps into camp.”

“Perhaps they’ll do it,” laughed Dick pleasantly. “We’ll admit that we’re about due for a walloping whenever the crowd comes along that can do it.”

“I am only telling you what I hear from Fordham,” continued Mr. Macey.

“And I’m glad you did, sir. We’ll try to turn the laugh on Fordham.”

“Then you think you can beat ’em?”

“No, sir. We never think we can. We always know that we can! That’s the Gridley way—the Gridley spirit. We always win our battles before we go into them, Mr. Macey. We make up our minds that we can’t and won’t be beaten. It isn’t just brag, though. We base all our positiveness on the way that we stick to our training and coaching, and on our discipline. Mr. Macey, this is the third year that I’ve been playing on different Gridley High School teams. I remember a tie game, but no defeats.”

“I guess Fordham will find it a hard enough proposition to down you young men,” remarked Mr. Macey.

“They’re going to discover, sir, that they simply can’t do it. Gridley never goes onto any field to get beaten.”

“Und dot isn’t brag, neider,” broke in a man who had halted to listen. “Ven dese young men pack deir togs to go away, dey pack der winning score in der bag, too. Ach! Don’t I know dot? Don’t I make mineself young vonce more by following dese young athletes about?”

Herr Schimmelpodt looked utterly shocked that anyone should think it possible for another High School eleven to take a game from Gridley.



Dick soon encountered Dave and told him the news he had gleaned from Mr. Macey.

“Been sending their second coach over to watch our play, have they?” laughed Darrin softly. “That seems to show how much they fear us in Fordham.”

“I believe we are going to have a stiff game,” muttered Prescott. “Hallam Heights and Fordham are the only two teams that think enough of the game to hire two coaches.”

“Well, we have Hallam’s scalp dangling down at the gym.,” laughed Dave Darrin.

“And we’ll have Fordham’s in the same way,” predicted Dick confidently.

It barely occurred to the young captain of the team to wonder what it would mean for him if the game to Fordham should be lost. Dick would be the first captain in years who had lost a football game for Gridley. It would be a mean record to take out of High School life. But Dick gave no thought to such a possibility.



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"Of course we're going to wallop Fordham," he thought. "I wish only one thing. I'd like to see the Fordhams play through a stiff game just once."

It was too late, however, to give any real thought to this, for Fordham's next and last game of the season was to be the one with Gridley.

"Are you girls going to the game?" asked Dick, when he and his chum met Laura Bentley and Belle Meade before the post office.

"Haven't you heard what the girls are doing, Dick?" questioned Laura, looking at him in some surprise.

"I have heard that a lot of the girls are going to the game."

"Just forty-two of us, to be exact," Laura continued. "We girls and our chaperons are to have one car in the first section. You see, we've arranged to go right along with the team. We have our seats all together at Fordham, too."

"My, what a lot of noise forty-two girls can make in a moment of enthusiasm!" murmured Dave.

"We can, if you give us any excuse," advanced Belle.

"Oh, we'll give you excuse enough. See to it that you keep the noise up to the grade of our playing."

"Mr. Confident!" teased Belle.

"Why, you know, as well as we do, that we'll come home with Fordham's scalp!" retorted, Darrin.

"You've heard some of the talk about Fordham's confidence in winning, haven't you?" asked Laura, a bit anxiously.

"Yes," nodded Dick. "But that doesn't mean anything. You know the Gridley record, the Gridley spirit and confidence."

"Still," objected Belle, "one side has to lose, and the Fordham boys have all the stuff ready to light bonfires on Thanksgiving night."

"Have you any particular friends over in Fordham?" asked Dave Darrin, with a sudden swift, significant look.



“No, I haven’t,” retorted Belle hastily. “And I hope, with all my heart, that Gridley gains the only points that are allowed. Yet, sometimes, so much confidence all the while seems just a bit alarming.”

“I won’t say another word, then, until after the game,” promised Darrin meekly.

“And then-----?”

“Oh, I’ll turn half girl, and say ‘I told you so,’” mimicked Dave good-humoredly.

It would have been hard to find anyone in Gridley who would have said openly that he expected the home boys to be beaten; but there were many who knew that they were more than a bit anxious. Before the game, anyway, Fordham’s brag was just as good as Gridley brag.

“Won’t you be glad, anyway, when the Thanksgiving game is over?” asked Laura.

“Yes, and no,” smiled Prescott seriously. “When I come back from Fordham I shall know that I have captained my last game on a High School team. That tells me that I am getting along in life—that I am growing old, and shall soon have to think of much more serious things. But, honestly, I hate awfully to think of all these grand old High School days coming to an end. I mustn’t think too much about it until after the game. It makes me just a bit blue.”



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“Won’t you be captain of the basket ball team this winter?” asked Laura quickly.

“No; I can’t take everything. Hudson will probably head the basket ball team.”

“Why, I heard that you were going in hard for basket ball.”

“So I am. Mr. Morton is so busy, with the new evening training classes, that he has asked me to be second coach to the basket ball crowd. I’ll undoubtedly do that.”

“Oh, then you’ll still be leading the athletic vanguard at the High School,” murmured Laura, and, somehow, there was a note of contentment in her voice.

“I shall be, until I’m through with the High School,” Prescott answered. “But think—just think—how soon that will come around for all of us!”

CHAPTER XIV

Fordham Plays a Slugging Game

For half an hour before the first section of the special pulled out, the Gridley Band played its liveliest tunes. A part of the time the band played accompaniment to the school airs, which the crowd took up with lively spirit.

There is a peculiar enthusiasm which attaches to the Thanksgiving Day game. This is due partly to the extra holiday spirit of the affair. Then, too, there is the high tension that precedes the last game of the season.

With a team that has won every game to that point, yet often with great difficulty, the tension of spirits is even higher.

As the first section of the special rolled in at the railway station the part of the crowd that was “going” began to break up into groups headed for the different parts of the train.

Herr Schimmelpodt went, of course, to the car that carried the team. The boys wouldn’t have been satisfied to start or to travel without him. The big German had come to be the mascot of Gridley High School.

Just before the train started Herr Schimmelpodt waddled out to the rear platform of the car.

In his right hand he brandished a massive cane to which the Gridley High School colors were secured.



“Now, listen,” he bellowed out. “Ve come back our scalps not wigs! You hear dot, alretty?”

While the cheering was still going on, and while the band was crashing out music, the first section pulled out, making room for the second section.

A run of a little more than an hour at good speed, and with no way stops, brought the Gridley invading forces to Fordham.

At the depot, the local team’s second coach awaited the players. He had two stages at hand, into which the team and subs piled. A wagon followed, carrying the kits of the Gridley boys. There were two more stages for the band. All the other travelers had to depend on the street-car service.

Finding the stages rather crowded, Dick nudged Darrin, then made for the kit wagon.

“I really believe we’ll have more comfort, Dave,” proposed Prescott, “if we get aboard, this rig and ride on top of the tog bags.”

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The suggestion was carried out at once.

"I'll drive along fast, if you want," proposed the driver, "and get the togs down to the grounds ahead of your team."

"If you please," nodded Dick. "Our boys will want everything ready when they reach the grounds."

So the two chums were quickly carried beyond the noise and confusion. A few minutes later the wagon turned in at the Fordham Athletic grounds.

The Fordham High School boys were out in the field, practicing. As seen in their padded togs they were an extra-bulky looking lot.

"Great Scott!" grunted Darrin, half disgustedly. "Each one of those Fordham fellows must weigh close to a ton."

"The more weight the less speed, anyway," laughed Dick good-humoredly.

"And, look! I wonder how old some of those fellows are," continued Darrin. "I wonder if, in this town, men wait until they've made their fortunes and retired, before they enter High School. Why, some of these Fordham fellows must have voted for president the last two times."

"Hardly as bad as that, I guess," smiled Prescott. "Still, these Fordham boys do look more like a college eleven than a High School crowd."

Dave continued to gaze over at the home team, and to scowl, until the wagon was halted before dressing quarters. Here the teamster and another man made short work of carrying in all the tog-bags.

A few minutes later the other fellows arrived.

"Say, which team is it we're fighting to-day?" demanded Hudson. "Harvard, or Yale?"

There was general grumbling comment.

"I think," insisted Tom Reade, "that the Fordham team wouldn't like to stand a searching hunt into the eligibility of some of their players."

"They've surely brought in some who are not regular, fair-and-square High School students," contended Dan Dalzell.



There was much more talk of this sort, some of the Gridley boys insisting that Fordham ought to be compelled to account for the size and seeming age of some of the home players.

"We're up against a crooked line-up, or I'll give up," muttered Greg Holmes.

"Now, see here, fellows," laughed Captain Dick. "I don't believe in making any fuss beforehand. We'll just go ahead and take what comes to us."

"It would be too late to make a kick after we've played," cried some one.

"You fellows," continued Dick, "make me think of what I heard Mr. Pollock say to Wilcox, chairman of the campaign committee back home."

"What was that?" demanded half a dozen.

"Why," chuckled Prescott, "Mr. Pollock said to Wilcox: 'Now, see here, there's always a chance that the election will go our way. So never yell fraud until after the election is over.'"

"I guess that's the wisest philosophy," laughed Coach Morton, who had taken no part in the previous conversation.

"If that's the Fordham team," continued Dick, "it's one of pretty sizable fellows. But we'll do our plain duty, which is to pile out on to the field and proceed to stroll through any line that is posted in our way."

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Just before the Gridley youngsters were ready to go out for preliminary practice the big Fordham fellows came off the field.

“Hullo!” piped Dave, as the Gridley boys strolled out to the gridiron. “You ought to feel happy, Dick. There’s a big section of West Point over on the grand stand.”

Nearly two hundred young men in black and gray cadet uniforms of the United States Military Academy pattern sat in a solid block at one point on the grand stand.

“No, they’re not West Pointers,” sighed Dick. “See here, those fellows, of course, are students at the Fordham Military institute. They wear the West Point uniform. And that’s the military school that Phin Drayne went to.”

“The sneak!” grunted Dave. “I wonder if he’s over in that bunch, now.”

“I’m not even enough interested to wonder,” returned Prescott. “He’s where he can’t do us any harm, anyway.”

“But, if the Fordham boys put anything over us, I’ll bet Drayne has things timed so that the military boys will do a big and noisy lot of boasting.”

“They will, anyway, if we allow them a chance,” answered Dick. “Now, spread out, fellows,” he called, raising his voice.

In the next moment the ball was in lively play.

The first time that a fumble was made a jeering chorus sounded among the military school boys.

“I expected it,” growled Darrin.

“We don’t care, anyway,” smiled Dick. “Let ’em hoot! I don’t draw the line until they throw things.”

“If they knew Phin Drayne as we do, they’d throw him first,” grimaced Darrin.

A minute later another hoot went up. It was plain that the military school boys had been primed for this.

But the gray-clad youths, it was very soon evident, were not the only ones who had come out to make a noise. Half of the Fordham crowd present joined in the volleys of derision that were showered down on the practicing boys from Gridley.

“It’s nothing but a mob!” declared Darrin, his eyes flashing.



“Careful, old fellow,” counseled Prescott coolly. “They’re trying to get our nerve before the game begins. Don’t let ’em do it.”

This excellent instruction Dick contrived to pass throughout his team. Thereafter the Gridley boys seemed not to hear the harsh witticisms that were hurled at them from all sides of the field.

Just in the nick of time the Gridley Band began playing. That stopped the annoyance for a while, for Fordham had neglected to provide a band.

Yet when the Gridley High School song was started by the band, and the Gridley boosters joined in the words, the answer from Fordham came in the form of a “laughing-song,” let loose with such volume that the Gridley offering to the merriment was drowned out.

“I hope we can give this rough town a horrible thumping—that’s all,” muttered Dave, his eyes flashing.

“Don’t let them capture your ‘goat,’ and we will,” Dick promised, as quietly as ever.

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The plain hostility of the home crowd was wearing in on more than one of the Gridley boys. Dick felt obliged to call his eleven together, and to give them some quiet, homely but forcible advice. Coach Morton followed, with more in the same line.

Yet it came as a welcome relief to the Gridley youngsters when the referee and the other officials came to the field and game was called.

Dick Prescott won the toss, and took the kickoff.

That, of course, sent the ball into Fordham ranks. In an instant the solid Fordham line emitted a murmur that sounded like a bear's growl, then came thundering down upon the smaller Gridley youngsters.

There was a fierce collision, but Gridley held on like a herd of bulls. The ball was soon down.

For five minutes or so there was savage playing. Fordham played a "slugging" game of the worst kind. Several foul tackles were quickly made by home players, yet so quickly released that the referee could not be sure and could not inflict a penalty. Sly blows were struck when the lines came together.

The average football captain would have claimed penalties, and fought the matter out.

But Dick Prescott let matters run by. He was waiting his opportunity.

So hard was the "slugging," so overbearing and ruthlessly unfair was the Fordham charge that, at the end of five minutes, Gridley was forced to make a safety, losing two points at the outset.

"Yah!" sneered an exultant voice from the ranks of the military school. "That's the fine Captain Prescott we've heard about!"

Tom Reade, in togs, was standing among the Gridley subs at the side line.

Tom recognized, as did all the Gridley boys, the voice of Phin Drayne.

"Yes!" bellowed Tom, facing the gray-clad group. "And that last speaker was a fellow who was expelled from Gridley High School for selling out his team!"

It was a swift shot and a bull's-eye. The Fordham Institute boys had no answer ready for that. Half of them turned to stare at Phin Drayne, whose guilty face, with color coming and going in flashes seemed to admit the truth of Reade's taunt.



“Dick,” growled Darrin, as they moved forward, after the safety, to Gridley’s twenty-five yard line, “these Fordham fellows are simply ruffians. They’re fouling us every second, and they’ll smash half our fellows into the hospital.”

“We’ll see about that!”

Dick Prescott’s voice was as quiet and cool as ever, but there was an ominous flash in his eyes.

CHAPTER XV

“We’ll Play the Gentleman’s Game.”

At the next down Dan Dalzell held up his hand, making a dash for the referee.

“I claim a foul!” he called.

“Captain, this is for you,” announced the referee, turning to Dick. “Be quick, if you’ve any complaint to make.”



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“Come here, Dalzell,” called Prescott. “What was the foul?”

The Fordham players crowded about, muttering in an ugly way—all except one man, who skulked at the rear.

“There’s the hoodlum,” continued Dan excitedly, one hand over his left breast. He pointed to the Fordham player skulking at the rear. “That fellow deliberately gave me the elbow over the heart when we came together.”

“What have you to say, Captain Barnes?” demanded the referee, turning to the Fordham leader.

“It’s not true,” retorted Barnes hotly. “Daniels, come here.”

The matter was argued quickly and hotly, Gridley accusing, Fordham hotly denying.

“Can’t you Gridley fellows play with anything but your mouths?” snarled Captain Barnes.

“We play a straight game,” retorted Dick coldly. “We play like gentlemen.”

“Do you mean that we’re not?” demanded Barnes swaggeringly.

“So far you’ve played like a lot of sluggers.”

“See here! I’ve a good mind to thrash you, Prescott!” quivered Barnes.

“It’s always the truth that stings,” retorted Dick, with a cool smile.

“My fist would hurt, too.”

“That’s what we’re asking you to do—to save all your slugging and bruising tactics until after a straight and gentlemanly game has been played,” retorted Dick, with spirit.

Barnes clenched his fists, but the referee stepped squarely in between the rival captains.

“Cut it!” directed that official tersely. “I’ll do all the talking myself. Captain Barnes, return to your men and tell them that slugging and tricky work will be watched for more carefully, and penalized as heavily as the rules allow. If it goes too far I’ll declare the game forfeited to the visiting team.”

“This is a shame!” fumed Barnes. “And the whole charge is a mass of lies.”

“I’ll watch out and see,” promised—or threatened—the referee. “Back to your positions. Captain Barnes, I’ll give you thirty seconds to pass the word around among your men.”



“That black-haired prize-fighter with the mole on his chin tries to give me his knee every time we meet in a scrimmage,” growled Hudson to Dick. “If he carries it any further, I think I know a kick that will put his ankle out of business!”

“Then don’t you dare use it,” warned Dick sternly. “No matter what the other fellows do, our team is playing a square, honest game every minute of both halves!”

The referee had signaled them to positions. The Gridley boys leaped into place.

Play was resumed. In the next three plays Fordham, under the now more keenly watchful eyes of the officials, failed to make the required distance, and lost the ball.

Gridley took the ball, now. In the next two plays, the smaller fellows advanced the ball some twelve yards. But in the next three plays following, they lost on downs, and Fordham again carried the pigskin.



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“The Fordham fellows are passing a lot of whispers every chance they get,” reported alert Dave.

“I don’t care how much they whisper,” was Dick’s rejoinder. “But watch out for crooked tricks.”

Minute after minute went by. Gridley got the ball down to the enemy’s fifteen-yard line, then saw it slowly forced back into their own territory.

Now Fordham began to “slug” again; yet so cleverly was it done that the officials could not put their fingers on a definite instance that could be penalized.

Bravely fighting, Gridley was none the less driven back. From the ten-yard line Fordham suddenly made a right end play on which the whole weight and force of the team was concentrated. In the mad crush, three or four Gridley boys were “slugged” in the slyest manner conceivable. Fordham broke through the line, carrying the pigskin over the goal line with a rush.

Fordham boosters set up a roar that seemed to make the ground shake, but the two hundred boys from the military school took little or no part in the demonstration. Tom Reade’s reply to Phin Drayne had silenced them.

Swaggering like swashbucklers Fordham followed the ball back for the kick for goal. It was made, securing six points, which were added to the two received from Gridley being forced to make that safety earlier in the game.

“Of all the miserable gangs of rowdies!” uttered Dave Darrin, as the teams rested in quarters between the halves.

“I have two black-and-blue spots to show, I know I have,” muttered Hudson.

“We’ll have some of our men on stretchers, if this thing keeps up,” growled Greg Holmes.

“What are you going to do about this business, Captain?” demanded two or three of the fellows, in one breath.

“As long as we play,” replied Dick Prescott, “we’ll play the same gentleman’s game, no matter what the other fellows do. We may quit, but we won’t slug. We won’t sully Gridley’s good name for honest play. And we won’t quit, either, until Mr. Morton orders us from the field.”

“You have it right, Prescott,” nodded the coach. “And I shan’t interfere, either, unless things get a good deal worse than they have been. But the Fordham work has been



shameful, and I don't blame any of you for feeling that you'd rather forfeit the game and walk off the field."

Besides being coach, Mr. Morton was also manager. At his call the team would have left the field instantly, despite any other orders from the referee. It always makes a bad showing, however, for a team to leave the field on a claim of foul playing.

"All out for the second half!" sounded a voice in the doorway.

The Gridley boys went, fire in their hearts, flame in their eyes.

CHAPTER XVI

Gridley's Last Charge

"Remember, Captain Barnes!" called the referee significantly.



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“Why don’t you talk to Prescott, too?” demanded the Fordham captain sulkily.

“I don’t need to.”

“You——don’t——need to?” demanded Barnes, opening his eyes in pretended wonder.

“No; Prescott and his fellows have a magnificent reputation for fair play, and they’ve won it on merit.”

“You’re down on us,” growled Captain Barnes.

“I’m only waiting till I can put my finger on some slugging to stop the game and hand it to Gridley,” retorted the referee, with a snap.

“Be mighty careful, fellows; be clever,” whispered the Fordham captain to his most “dependable” men.

“Are we going to throw the game?” demanded the slugger who had so angered Hudson.

“No; but don’t get caught at anything. Better not do anything. We’ve got those milk-diet infants eight to nothing now. Play their own kind of kindergarten game as long as we can hold the score without rough work.”

Barnes’s own instructions would have sufficiently stamped his team, had these orders been heard by anyone else.

At the beginning of the second half Fordham played a much more honest game, and Gridley began to pick up hope that fairness might prevail hereafter.

Gridley’s own game, in the second half, was as swift and scientific as it had ever been. By sheer good playing and brilliant dashes Dick and his men carried the ball down the field, losing it once on downs; but after the first ten minutes of the half they kept the pigskin wholly in Fordham territory.

Back and forth surged the battle. Fordham, despite its greatly superior weight and bulk, was not by any means superior when under the utmost watchfulness of a referee avowedly anxious to penalize.

Yet, until the game was nearly over, Fordham managed to keep the ball away from its own goal line.

Then, while the lines reformed and Dick bent over to snap back, Dave Darrin called out a signal that electrified the whole Gridley line. It called for one of their most daring plays, that Prescott himself made famous the year before.



While the start, after the ball was in play, seemed directed toward the right wing of Gridley, the ball was actually jumped to little Fenton, at the left end, and Fenton, backed solidly by a superb interference, got off and away with the ball. In a twinkling he had it down behind Fordham's goal line.

Then the ball went back for the kick. The band played a few spirited measures while the wearied Gridley boosters suddenly rose and whooped themselves black in the face.

The kick, too, was won.

"Oh, well." growled Barnes, "we have two points to the good yet, and only four minutes and a half left for the game. Don't get rough, fellows, unless you have to."

As the Gridley boys sprang to a fresh line-up their eyes were glowing.

"Remember, fellows, the time is short, but battles have been won in two minutes!"



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This was the inspiring message flashed out by Captain Dick Prescott.

With all the zeal of race horses the Gridley High School boys flung themselves into their work.

After a minute and a half of play, Gridley had done so much that, just before the next snapback Barnes let his sulky eyes flash about him in a way that was understood.

Fordham must rush in, now, and hold the enemy back, no matter at what cost of roughness—if the roughness could be done slyly enough.

Then it came, a fierce, frenzied charge. The ball was down again in an instant, and Hazelton, a Gridley man, lay on the field, unable to rise.

Physicians hurried out from the side lines.

“Broken leg,” said one of them, and a stretcher was brought.

“Have we got to stand this sort of thing?” demanded Hudson, in a hoarse whisper. “Say the word, and I’ll send two of their men after Hazelton.”

“Don’t you do it!” snapped Dick sharply. “It would disgrace our school colors and our school honor. Don’t let knaves make a knave of you.”

Tom Reade came out on a swift run from the side lines to take Hazelton’s place.

“We ought to be allowed to carry guns, when we play a team like this one,” blurted Tom indignantly.

“We’ll pay them back in the score,” retorted Dick soberly, though his eyes were flashing.

Dave, in the meantime, was swiftly passing some orders Dick had whispered to him. These orders, however, related to plays to come, and did not call for retaliation on Hazelton’s account.

Play was called sharply. “Pay in the score,” became the battle cry raging in every Gridley boy’s heart.

Four successive plays carried the ball so close to the Fordham goal line that Barnes and his followers were in despair.

They still used whatever rough tricks they thought they could sneak in under the eyes of the game’s officials, and some of these made the Gridley boys ache.



Then came a signal beginning with “three” which stood for reverse signal. The numerals that came after the three called for the same trick that Fenton had put through so splendidly.

Again the ball started toward the right wing. This time the Fordham players were sure they understood—and like a flash massed their defense against Gridley’s left.

But on that reverse signal the ball continued to move at the right. Before Barnes and his followers could comprehend, another touchdown had been scored by the visitors.

And then came the kick for goal, and it was a splendid success. The kick came just at the end of the second half. That kick won the game for Dick’s sorely pressed team.

Gridley’s score, won by a cleanly played game against bruisers, stood at twelve to eight!

Now, indeed, did the Gridley boosters turn themselves loose, the band leading.

Barnes and his ruffians skulked back to dressing quarters, there to abuse the referee, the “Gridley kickers” and everyone and everything else but themselves.



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It wasn't long before some of the Fordham subs slipped out to find their cronies and sympathizers in the crowd that was slowly dissolving.

Then the word was passed around:

"Wait and be with us. Barnes is going to stop the Gridleys on the way to the station. Barnes is going to make Prescott fight for some things he said on the field! Of course, if you fellows get generally peevish, and the whole Gridley team gets cleaned out, there won't be many tears shed."

So scores of the sort of rabble in whom such an appeal finds ready response hung about, eager to see what would turn up.

CHAPTER XVII

The Long Gray Column

One small urchin there was, so small that he escaped notice as he hung about hearing the word passed.

But that urchin was a Gridley boy who had raised the money to come and see this game. The boy possessed the Gridley spirit. As fast as his legs would carry him he raced to dressing quarters, and there told what he had heard.

"Thank you, kid!" said Dick. "You're a good Gridley boy," and then he continued:

"So that's the game, is it They're going to mob us, are they I guess they can do it—but, fellows, keep in mind to pass some of the blows back! When we go down in the dirt be sure that some of the Fordham fellows have something to remember us by for many a day! I'm glad Hazelton has already been sent forward in an ambulance."

As Dick finished dressing and waited for the others, he saw one of the subs dropping a spiked shoe into an outer jacket pocket.

"What's that for?" Dick demanded sternly. "A weapon?"

"Yes," sheepishly admitted the other.

"Put it in your bag, then, and let it go on the baggage wagon. Fellows, we'll fight with nothing but fists, and only then if we're attacked."

"But those scoundrels will probably use brickbats," argued the fellow who had tried to drop the spiked shoe into his overcoat pocket.



“No matter,” rang Dick’s voice, low but commanding. “If we have to, we’ll fight for our lives as we fought for the game—on the square! Good citizens don’t carry concealed weapons until called upon by the authorities to do it.”

“Bully for you, Prescott!” rang the voice of the coach.

“You here, Mr. Morton?” cried Dick, wheeling and seeking the submaster. “Mr. Morton, you’re not a boy, and you don’t want to be mixed up in such affairs. Why don’t you start-----”

“My place, Captain Prescott, is with the team I’m coaching,” replied the submaster. “And I think the signs are that we’re going to need all the pairs of fists that we have, and, more, too.”

The baggage wagon came to the door. Dick, Dave and Tom coolly loaded the baggage on. The wagon started off at good speed.

Then the two stages drove up to the door.



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“Pile in, boys!” called one of the drivers.

Neither of the stage drivers was in the secret of what was likely to happen down the road.

The start was made, the horses moving barely faster than a walk.

By this time the athletic field was practically deserted. There was no sign of the presence of the Fordham High School team, nor of the bad element that Barnes had enlisted.

It was not until the stages had proceeded nearly four blocks that Dave, sitting beside Dick on the driver’s seat of the first stage, caught sight of some bobbing heads further up the road.

“There they are,” whispered Dave. “Lying in wait at the next corner. They’ll jump out when we get there.”

“Let them!” muttered Dick. “They’ll have to start it—but after they do-----!”

The stages had almost reached the next corner. Grinning, or scowling, according to individual moods, the roughs streamed out into the street.

Gridley boys steeled themselves for a conflict, hopeless in odds of five to one!

At this point a clear voice sounded in the distance.

“A Company, left wheel, march!”

Around another corner near by came a company of boys from the Fordham Military Institute. It was followed by a second company, a third and a fourth.

Then, by a further series of commands, one company was sent, on the double quick, to march ahead of the first stage, while another company fell in behind the second stage, while the other companies formed and marched on either side of the stages.

While these hasty maneuvers were being carried out the fine-looking young cadet major of the battalion lifted his fatigue cap to Dick Prescott.

“Captain,” called the boyish major, “you gave us such a fine exhibition of gentlemanly football that we beg leave to show our appreciation by marching as your escort of honor to the station.”



The rough crowd in the street had fallen back to the sidewalks, a savage mutter going up at the same time.

The Military School boys were without arms, save those Nature had given them, but they, marched in solid ranks and stood for two hundred pairs of fists!

So Barnes's last hope of vengeance vanished. Even his own rough followers turned to eye him in disgust.

Before they left the grounds some of the Military School boys had heard a whisper or two of what Barnes planned.

The soldier is drilled to fair play, and to detestation of cowardice. These young military students passed the word quickly. They left the grounds at once, but formed near by, on a side street near where they learned that Barnes and his rough mob lay in ambush.

"I declare, that's the neatest, most military thing I ever saw done!" laughed Dave Darrin.

"And done by the boys you made fun of as sham West Pointers!" laughed Dick quizzically.

"But I didn't mean it," protested Dave, growing very red. "These are splendid fellows. Evidently they think that they, too, are entitled to say a word or two about the good name of Fordham."



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“You didn’t like the first look of these fellows, Dave, because they had started to cheer for Fordham High School. But did you notice that they cheered no more for Fordham after Reade answered Phin Drayne so forcibly.”

“It’s a fact that these men didn’t boost any more for Fordham,” assented Dave. “By the way, I have one clear notion in my head!”

“What is it?”

“That Phin Drayne isn’t marching in these close gray ranks about us.”

Phin Drayne wasn’t. At this moment Phin was back at the military institute, his face twitching horribly as he packed his clothing in the trunk in which it had come.

For, almost instantly after Reade had called out, some of the military students around Drayne had demanded of him whether there was a shadow of truth in what Reade had said.

Phin Drayne’s “brass” had deserted him. He knew, anyway, that these comrades could dig up his past record at Gridley very quickly.

Drayne knew that his days at Fordham were over.

“It was all my confounded tongue, too,” muttered Phin dejectedly. “If I had kept my tongue behind my teeth I don’t believe any of the Gridley fellows would have noticed me, or said anything. Oh, dear! I wonder where I can go next!”

In the meantime the Gridley High School team and substitutes, escorted with so much pomp, attracted a great deal of notice in the streets of Fordham.

People turned out to cheer them, and to wave handkerchiefs and ribbons. For Fordham wasn’t all bad or rough; not even the High School. The roughest element in the school had captured football—that was all. Some of these boys belonged to the wealthier families, and had been brought up to believe they could do as they pleased. This was the High School in which Phin Drayne naturally belonged.

Down at the railway station the Gridley crowd and the Gridley Band awaited the coming of the team. The fine sight made by the gray military escort brought a hurricane of cheers from the Gridleyites.

Just at the nick of time the leader of the band bethought himself, and signaled his musicians. As the stages drew up the band played, and the Fordham Military Institute’s battalion moved into line of battalion front.

Dick feelingly thanked young Major Ransom.



“Oh, that’s all right, Prescott,” laughed young Ransom. “If we hadn’t shown up at all you fellows would have given a good account of yourselves. But we had to do it. Fordham is our headquarters, too, and the honor of the town, while we live and study here, means something to all of us. Don’t gauge even the Fordham High School by what happened to-day—or came near happening. There are some mighty fine fellows and a lot of noble girls who attend Fordham High School. But Barnes—he’s the curse of the school population of the town.”

Three or four days later Dick asked Darrin:

“Did you hear the outcome of the Fordham affair?”



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"No," Dave admitted.

"I just heard it all up at 'The Blade' office. The fact that the Military School cadets escorted us in such formal manner to the railway station attracted a lot of attention in Fordham. The principal of the High School there started a quiet investigation of his own. Barnes and two other fellows on the Fordham eleven have been suspended from school until the School Board can take up their cases and decide whether they ought to be expelled. The Fordham principal has also made it plain that next year's team will have to be scanned by him, and that he'll keep out of the eleven any fellows who don't come up to the tests. There's a jolly big row on in Fordham, and Barnes isn't having any sympathy wasted on him you can just bet."

"It serves him and that whole football crew just right," blazed Darrin.

Hazelton's injury kept him out of school only a fortnight. The supposed break in his leg turned out to be only a sprain.

While school teams like that commanded by Barnes are rare, they are found, now and then. Yet the fate of rowdy athletes in the school world is usually swift and satisfying. Other schools refuse to compete with schools that are known to put out "rough-house men."

Dick & Co. had laid by their togs. They had said farewell to school athletics.

In the winter's basket ball they did not intend to take part. For the baseball nine, that would begin practice soon after the new year, there was plenty of fine material in the lower classes.

"I feel almost as if I had been to a funeral," snorted Darrin, when he came away from the gym. after having turned in all his togs and paraphernalia.

"It's time to give the younger fellows a show," sighed Dick.

"You talk as though we were old men," gibed Dave.

"In the High School we are," laughed Dick. "We're seniors. In a few short months more we shall be graduates, unless-----"

There he stopped, but Darrin didn't need to look at his chum. Both knew what that pause meant.



CHAPTER XVIII

The Would-Be Candidates

The big stir came earlier than it had been expected.

Every boy who has followed such matters in his own interest will appreciate what the "big stir" means.

Congressman Spokes, representing the district in which Gridley lay, had a vacant cadetship at West Point within his gift, and also a cadetship at Annapolis.

"On December 17, at nine A.M., at the town hall in Wilburville, I will meet all young men who believe themselves to possess the other proper qualifications for a cadetship at either West Point or Annapolis."

So ran the Congressman's announcement in the daily press of the district.

Every young man had to be of proper age, height, weight and general good bodily condition. He must, of course, be a citizen of the United States.



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Every young man was advised to save himself some possible trouble and disappointment by going, first of all, to his family physician for a thorough examination. If serious bodily defects were found, that would save the young man from the trouble of going further in the matter.

But at the Wilburville town hall there was to be another physical examination, which every young man must pass before he would be admitted to the mental examinations, which were to last into the evening.

Dick Prescott read this announcement and thrilled over it.

For two years or more he had been awaiting this very opportunity.

Every Congressman once in four years has one of these cadetships to give to some young man.

Sometimes the Congressman would give the chance to a boy of high social connections, or else to the son of an influential politician. A cadetship was a prize with which the Congress man too often paid his debts.

Good old General Daniel E. Sickles was the first Congressman to formulate the plan of giving the cadetship to the brightest boy in district, the young man proving his fitness by defeating all other aspirants in a competitive examination.

Since that time the custom had grown up of doing this regularly. It is true, at any rate of most of the states of the Union. In some western and some southern states the cadetship is still given as a matter of favor.

The young man who receives the appointment goes to the United States Military Academy at West Point. He is now a "candidate" only. At West Point he is subjected to another searching series of physical and mental examinations. If he comes out of them successfully he is admitted to the cadet corps, and becomes a full-fledged cadet.

The candidate must report at West Point on the first of March. If he succeeds in entering the corps, and keeps in it, four years and three months later the young man is graduated from the Military Academy. The President now commissions him as a second lieutenant in the Regular Army. Thus started on his career, the young man may, in later days, become a general.

While the cadet is at West Point he is paid a salary that is just about sufficient for his needs and leaves enough over to enable him to buy his first set of uniforms and other equipment as an army officer.

West Point is no place for idlers, nor for boys who dislike discipline. It is a severe training that the cadet receives, and the education furnished him by the United States is

a magnificent and costly one. It costs Uncle Sam more than twenty thousand dollars for each cadet he educates and graduates from the United States Military Academy.

The same general statement is true regarding the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland. In the latter institution, however, the cadet learns how to become an officer in the United States Navy.

Now, here were both grand opportunities, offered together.



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While Dick Prescott had been waiting, hoping and praying for the cadetship at West Point; Dave Darrin had been equally wistful for the chance to go to Annapolis.

“Our chances have come, old chum!” cried Dick, looking into the glowing face of Darrin.

“Yes; and of course an Army or Navy officer should be a brave man. But now the chance has come, I find myself an utter coward,” confessed Dave.

“How so?”

“I’m in a blue funk for fear some other fellow will get it away from me,” confessed Darrin honestly. “And if I fail in this great ambition of my life, I’m wondering if I’ll have the nerve to go on living afterwards.”

“Brace up!” laughed Dick protestingly.

“Now, honestly, old fellow, aren’t you just badly scared!” Dave demanded.

“Whisper, Dave! I am,” Dick admitted.

“Well, there is nothing like having some one that you can confess everything to, is there?” muttered Darrin.

“I guess it has done us both good to own up,” laughed Dick. “But see here!”

“Well?”

“I simply won’t allow myself to be scared.”

“Then you’re as keen for West Point as I am for Annapolis,” retorted Darrin suspiciously.

“Dave, old fellow, you know what the Gridley spirit demands? You know how we and the rest of the fellows managed to win eternally in athletics? Just because we made up our minds that defeat was impossible.”

“That’s fine,” laughed Dave. “But we’ll probably have to buck up against more fellows than we do on an athletic field. And probably dozens of them go in with the same determination.”

“I don’t care,” declared Prescott. “I want that West Point cadetship. I’ve wanted it for years, and now the chance has come. I’m going to have it!”

Dave Darrin gradually succeeded in working himself into the same frame of mind. Yet there were many moments when he was tortured by doubts as to whether the “Gridley



spirit” would serve in bucking a long line of young fellows all equally anxious to get to Annapolis.

The first step taken by Dick and Dave was to get excused from the High School for the time.

Both boys had lists of the studies and standards required for entrance to the Military Academy or the Naval Academy. Dick and Dave, each in his own room at home, spent the next few days in “boning” as neither had ever “boned” before.

“But we must get three hours in the open air each day, Dave,” Dick insisted. “We mustn’t go up for the trial with our nerves shattered by moping all the time indoors.”

Only Dick & Co., and a very few friends, knew what Dick and Dave were planning. It was kept a secret.

The date of the High School senior ball was set for December 17.

“Can you be back in time to go to the ball?” Laura Bentley asked Prescott.

“I’m afraid not, Laura. Besides, when I get back from Wilburville, I’m afraid I’ll feel pretty well tired out.”



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"You're not afraid of failing?" asked Laura anxiously.

"I'm not going to allow myself to fail. Yet, even if I win, I shall be tired out after the ordeal. Wish the ball could come a couple of days after the ordeal. I wanted to go to it and to dance with you, Laura."

"I'm sorry you can't go," sighed the girl.

Darrin, too, had given up all thoughts of attending the senior ball, and this was the first time that either lad had "skipped" the class ball.

"It seems too bad to be away," grumbled Dave. "But I know how I'll feel on that night. If I carry off the honors for Annapolis, no mere ball could hold me! I'll need air and space. I'll be lucky if I don't get arrested on that night for building bonfires in the streets."

Dave next sighed dismally and continued:

"If I don't carry off the Annapolis prize, I'll feel so disappointed that I won't look anybody in the face! Dick, Dick! It's fearful, this waiting—and wanting!"

"It won't seem like the class ball a bit without you two boys," declared Belle Meade, pouting, the next afternoon.

"But if we get through," muttered Dave, "think of the gay, splendid times to which we can invite you at Annapolis and West Point."

"Indianapolis and Blue Point are far away," murmured Belle, purposely misnaming both famous places.

"*Ann*-apolis!" flared Dave

"*West* Point!" protested Dick hotly.

"Don't mind Belle," begged Laura quietly. "She's the worst tease I know."

"If I get the appointment to Annapolis," continued Darrin, "you'll be asking me, next, if I expect to be promoted, after a while, to be helmsman, or fireman, on some cruiser."

"Well, would you expect to be!" asked Belle, with an appearance of great innocence.

"Don't, Belle," pleaded Laura. "The boys are too much in earnest. It isn't fair to tease them, now. Wait until they've been at West Point and Annapolis a couple of years. Then ask them."



“What would be the use then?” asked Belle dryly. “By that time our young cadets will have met so many girls that they would have to think back quite a while before they could remember our names.”

Laura’s pretty color lessened for an instant.

“Don’t you believe it,” broke in Dick promptly. “Just as soon as I have a right ask for cards for a West Point hop I’m going to ask for cards for Miss Bentley and Miss Deane, and their chaperon.”

“The same here, for Annapolis,” promised Dave solemnly. “So you see, girls, you’ll have to be prepared to do some traveling in the near future.

“But you won’t get to Annapolis, anyway, until June,” replied Belle, a bit more gently. “So you won’t have any Annapolis hops until next fall, will you?”

“Probably not,” Dave admitted.

“But you won’t go to Annapolis, anyway,” suggested Laura, turning to Prescott. “There may be some West Point hops between then and June.”



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"I feel pretty sure there will be," nodded Dick cheerily. "And you girls may be sure of my keeping my promise."

"And I'll keep mine for the very first hop that comes off at Annapolis after I get there," Darrin assured them.

The laugh was on both young men, though neither they nor their fair young companions knew it.

The poor "plebe," as the first year's man at either West Point or Annapolis is known, would be in for a terrible experience at the hands of his comrades if, during his "plebe" year, he had the "cheek" to seek to attend a cadet hop. He must wait until he has entered his second year before he has that privilege.

This is a wise regulation. In his first year the poor "plebe" has so bewilderingly much to learn that he simply couldn't spare any time for the cultivation of the graces of the ballroom. In his first year, he has dancing lessons, but that is all that comes his way.

Greg Holmes came to Prescott with a wistful, rather sad face.

"How are you coming on, Dick?" Greg asked.

"Meaning what?"

"Are you going to be well prepared for the examinations?"

"As far as being able to pass with a decent percentage," Dick answered, "I am not all uneasy. All that worries me is the fear that some other fellow may have a slightly better percentage. That would ditch me, you know."

"Oh, you'll win out," predicted Greg loyally. "And I just wish I had a chance like yours!"

"Why don't you go in and try for it, then?" urged Dick generously.

"No use," uttered Greg, shaking his head. "You can beat me on the scholastic examination, and I know it, Dick. The best I could hope for would be an appointment as your alternate. And your alternate to West Point isn't going to stand any show for a cadetship, Dick Prescott!"

Besides the candidate each Congressman may appoint one or more "alternates." These alternates also report at West Point. If the "principal" fails there, the alternate is given a chance to make good for the cadetship.

But Greg Holmes, though he was wildly anxious to go to West Point, felt certain that it would be useless to go there as Dick Prescott's alternate.



"I hate to see you not try at all, Greg," declared Dick. "Why don't you try? If you beat me out there won't be any hard feelings."

"I couldn't beat you out, and I don't want to, either," responded Greg. "But wait! I may have something to tell you later on."

Dan Dalzell had much the same kind of a talk with Dave Darrin. Dan felt the call to the sailor's life, but hadn't any notion that he could slip in ahead of Darrin.

"Even if I could, Dave, I wouldn't try it," declared Dan earnestly. "I want badly enough to go to Annapolis, and I admit it. But I believe you're just about crazy to get there."

"I am," Dave admitted honestly. "But the prize goes to the best fellow, Dan. Jump in, old fellow, and have your try at it."



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Dalzell, however, shook his head and remained silent on the subject after that.

To both Dick and Dave it seemed as though the next few days simply refused to budge along on the calendar. Certainly neither of them had ever known time to pass so slowly before.

"I hope I'll be able to keep my nerve up until the seventeenth," groaned Darrin.

"Surely, you will," grinned Dick. "You've got to!"

"I've been studying until all the words on a page seem to run together, and I don't know one word from another," complained Dave.

"Then drop study—if you dare to!"

"I'm thinking of it," proposed Darrin seriously. "Actually, I've been boning so that the whole thing gets on my nerves, and stays there like a cargo of lead."

"Let's pledge ourselves, then, not to study on the fifteenth or the sixteenth," urged Dick.

"I'll go you, right off, on that," cried Darrin eagerly.

"And we'll spend those two days in the open air, roaming around, and trying to enjoy ourselves," added Prescott.

"Enjoy ourselves—with all the load of suspense hanging over our heads?" gasped Darrin.

"Well, we'll try it anyway."

To most people in and around Gridley the world, in these few days, seemed to bob along very much as usual. Dick and Dave, however, knew better.

At last came the evening of the sixteenth! Both anxious boys turned in early, though neither expected to sleep much. Both, however, were soon in the land of Nod.

But Dick awoke at half-past four on the morning of the fateful seventeenth. By five o'clock he knew that he wasn't going to sleep any more. So he got up and dressed.

Dave Darrin was in his bath, that same morning, before four o'clock. Then he, too, dressed, and wondered whether every other fellow who was going into the contest today felt as restless.

The mothers of both boys were astir almost as early. Mothers can't take these examinations, but mothers know what a son's suspense means.



Dick and Dave met at the station a full twenty minutes before train time.

CHAPTER XIX

Tom Reade Bosses the Job

“Ugh!” shivered Dave, as the chums met on the platform. “It’s cold out here!”

“Come inside, then, and get warm. But you’re a great athlete, to mind an ordinary December morning,” laughed Dick Prescott.

Together they stepped into the waiting room.

“What time does our train go?” asked Dave, though he had known the time of this train for the last week.

“Seven-forty,” replied Dick.

“And it’s seven-twenty, now. Whew, what a await!”

“I could have stayed home a little longer,” nodded Dick. “Only I told father and mother that I’d feel more like being started if I got down here this far on the way.”



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“Sure thing,” nodded Dave sympathetically. “My Dad had to hold on to me to stop my leaving the house an hour earlier than I did.”

Both boys laughed, though not very heartily. Each was under a terrific strain—just from wondering!

“If I get through, and win out to-day,” muttered Dick, “I know I shan’t feel half as anxious when it comes time to take the graduating exams.”

“No,” agreed Dave. “Then you’ll know you have a chance; but to-day you can’t be sure of that much.”

Five minutes before train time the chums were astonished at seeing another of the chums walk into the station. It was Tom Reade, looking as jovial and contented as a youngster could possibly look.

“Hullo, Tom!” came from Dick.

“Howdy, Tom, old man!” was Dave’s greeting.

“Hullo, fellows!” from Reade.

“Where are you bound?” inquired Dick.

“Wilburville?”

“*What?*”

“Fact!” Reade assured them.

“Going to the exams.?” Dave demanded quickly.

“Yep.”

“Why, you never said a word about thinking of West Point,” exploded Prescott.

“You were making fun of Annapolis only the other day!” asserted Dave, just as though making fun of Annapolis were one of the capital crimes.

“Hang West Point!” exploded Tom Reade.

“Oh! Then it’s Annapolis you’re after,” grunted Darrin.

“Sink Annapolis!” exclaimed Reade.

“Then what on earth are you after?” demanded Dick.



“Have you any fool idea in your head, Tom, that you can take an exam and stand a chance of getting Congressman Spokes’s job away from him?” Dave asked.

Tom threw himself into one of the seats, crossed his feet, thrust his hands down in his ulster pockets, and surveyed the pair before he answered:

“I’ll tell you what ails you two. You have a notion that the sun rises at West Point and sets at Annapolis. Now, I know a heap better, and I haven’t an eye on either place. Can you fellows guess why I’ve taken the day off from school and why I’m going to Wilburville?”

“We surely can’t,” declared Dave.

“Well, then, I’ll tell you,” promised Tom amiably. “I knew you two good old chaps would be going to pieces with blue funk to-day. I knew you’d be chattering inside, and turning all sorts of colors outside. You’d try to cheer each other, but each of you is too badly scared to be of any use to the other. So I’ve come along to take up your minds, jolly you and stiffen your backbones alternately. That’s my whole job for to-day.”

Looking in some amazement at Reade, the other two chums realized that good old Tom was telling the truth.

“Of course, I’ll admit,” continued Reade, “that, if I were going on the grill to-day, I’d be worse than either of you. But I’m not. I wouldn’t live in West Point, and I wouldn’t be caught dead at Annapolis, so I shan’t have any scares or any nervous streak to-day. I’ll look after you both, the best I can, and do what little lies in my power to keep your minds off your troubles.”



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"Well, who'd ever have thought of a thing like that but Tom Reade?" gasped Dick gratefully.

"It's mighty good of you, old chum," declared Darrin fervently.

"Now, then," resumed Reade, uncrossing his legs, "as I'm on the job to look after you, allow me to remind you that that is your train whistling at this moment."

Three very jolly boys, therefore, piled out of the station building and boarded the train.

Tom spoke to the conductor a moment before following the others to seats.

"You see," spoke Reade, "I'm even going to the trouble to make sure that this is the right train, and not a belated express."

"I never thought of that," muttered Darrin, turning a bit pale.

"Great Scott!" gasped Dick. "I can feel the cold sweat oozing out at the bare thought. Suppose we had been harebrained enough to get on the wrong train, and be carried so far past that we couldn't get back to Wilburville by nine o'clock!"

"Drop all worry. Don't think of anything alarming, or even disconcerting," chuckled Tom. "I've taken charge of the whole job, and I guarantee everything. One of the little things I guarantee is that you'll both win out to-day."

"In algebra," muttered Darrin, "I hope they won't go too deeply into quadratic equations-----"

"Cut it!" ordered Reade severely. "Likewise forget it! Say, I heard a rattling good story last night. It carries a Dutchman, a poodle, a dude and an old maid. Let me see if I can remember just how it runs."

With that Reade got started. He soon had his two friends started as well. They laughed until the brakeman at last thrust his head in and called:

"Next station, Wilburville!"

"Stop and get out, young man!" called Tom. "Do you think we don't know our way?"

Then into another story plunged Tom Reade. He spun it out, purposely, until the train slowed up at Wilburville.

"Bus right up to the town hall!" cried a driver, sizing the trio up shrewdly.



“Thank you; that’s our auto over there,” nodded Tom, pointing to a lunch wagon. Reade started the chums at a brisk walk. Of the first native they met they inquired the way.

Tom was still talking at forty horse-power when they came to the town hall.

“That building holds our fate!” muttered Dave, as they drew near.

“Stop that!” ordered Tom. “Anyone would think that Annapolis was all the candy in the land. What are you worrying about, anyway? Haven’t I taken all the responsibility for this thing upon myself? Haven’t I promised you both that you shall find your little toy appointments in your Christmas stockings? Do you think I’m lying?”

“But the exams!” groaned Dave.

“Well, they’re competitive,” quoted Tom cheerily.

“That’s just what ails ’em!” argued Dave.



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“You make me think of my cousin, Jack Reade, of the militia,” taunted Tom. “He’s a captain. Now, Jack wanted to be appointed assistant inspector general of rifle practice. He was ordered up for his exam. Poor fellow spent three weeks, days and nights, boning for that exam. The family had the doctor in twice, for they were afraid Jack was studying himself crazy. Then the day came for the exam. Jack went into the ordeal shivering. The examiner asked Jack to write down his full name, the date of his birth, and the date of his entry into the militia. Jack answered all three questions straight, and got a hundred per cent. for his marking. Yet you fellows talk about exams as though they were really hard!”

Still laughing the three passed inside.

Dick Prescott had firmly resolved to do no more talking about the ordeal. But Darrin hadn’t. So, after the boys had entered the building, and had climbed to the next floor, where the hall was, and had taken a look inside, Dave drew back into the corridor.

“Great guns, did you look inside?” he demanded. “There are a million boys in there already.”

“Cheer up,” soothed Tom. “Most of ’em want to go to West Point.”

Tom fairly forced his chums inside. The boys already there, some three-score, at least, turned to regard the newcomers curiously.

“The rest of you may as well go home,” announced Tom laughingly. “My friends have a first mortgage on the jobs you’re after.”

Presently, more fellows came in. Then some more, and still more.

“Let’s go down and stand by the door, where we can get more air,” urged Darrin.

“Yes,” agreed Tom. “And we’ll throw out any of the rest that may have a nerve to try to step in here.”

Hardly had they taken their stand by the door when the three chums received a shock.

For the next arrivals were Phin Drayne, and his father, Heathcote Drayne.

Phin was now in attendance at the Wilburville Academy, and his father had come down, the evening before, to urge his son to try for West Point.

Tom looked the newcomer over with especial disfavor. Young Drayne, like many another “peculiar” fellow, was an unusually good student. At any time Drayne would have a very good chance of coming out even with, or just ahead of, either Dick or Dave.



The Draynes did not favor our three chums with any greeting, but walked on down into the hall.

“Excuse me a minute,” murmured Tom. “I want to find out how the land lies.”

Tom thereupon walked boldly over to the Draynes.

“May I speak with you just a moment, Mr. Drayne?” asked Tom.

“Go ahead,” replied Mr. Heathcote Drayne, not over-graciously.

“It is important, sir, that I speak with you aside,” Tom went on.

Heathcote Drayne scowled, then stepped to one side, turning and glancing down at Reade.



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“Well, young man, what is it?”

“I thought it barely possible,” continued Tom coolly, “that I might be able to offer you a hint or two worth while.”

“Worth whose while?” demanded Heathcote Drayne, suspiciously.

“Yours. Has your son come here to compete for either the West Point or Annapolis cadetship?”

“What if he has?”

“Then has Phin his certificates of good character with him?” demanded Tom, his blue eyes steely and cold as he looked straight and significantly at the elder Drayne.

“Confound your impudence, Reade! What do you mean?”

“Just this,” continued Tom readily. “Only boys of good character are eligible for West Point or Annapolis. Now, the fact is, your son was expelled from Gridley High School for a dishonorable action. Are you content to have your son try for a cadetship, with that record hanging over his head and enveloping his chances?”

“Who’ll know anything about that record if you don’t blab?” demanded Mr. Drayne.

“Why, your son would have to state where he had attended school, and furnish certificates of good character from his teachers,” ran on Reade. “Now, honestly, do you think that Dr. Thornton, of Gridley High School, would furnish a certificate on which Congressman Spokes could appoint your boy to West Point or Annapolis? Because, if you think so,” wound up Reade, “go ahead and put Phin in the running, to be sure.”

With that Tom marched off back to his chums.

“What have you been up to?” asked Dick curiously.

“I’m manager for you two half-witted fellows, ain’t I?” queried Reade.

“What have you been saying to Mr. Drayne?” asked Dave.

“Just watch father and son, and see how they seem to be enjoying their talk,” chuckled Tom. “There, what do you see now? I thought it would end like that.”

This was the first time it had occurred to the elder Drayne that his son’s character would be inquired into. In fact, Mr. Drayne had had half an idea that the United States Military Academy was a place that made a specialty of reforming wild boys and making useful citizens of them.



CHAPTER XX

When the Great News Was Given Out

At just nine o'clock Congressman Spokes came on to the platform followed by two other men.

One of these latter was a town official, who, in a very few words, introduced the Member of Congress.

Congressman Spokes now addressed the young men upon the vocations they were seeking to enter. He explained that neither the Military nor the Naval Academy offered an inducement to boys fond only of their ease and good times.

"At either school," warned the Congressman "you will find ahead of you years of the hardest work and the strictest discipline. No boy whose character is not good can hope to enter these schools of the nation. It is not worth any boy's while to enter unless he stands ready to sacrifice everything, his own ideas and prejudices included, to the service of his country and his flag."

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Congressman Spokes continued in this line for some time. Then he called for the boys who wished to try for West Point to gather at the right side of the hall; those for Annapolis at the left side.

“This is the first time you and I haven’t been on the same side in everything, old fellow,” Dick whispered smilingly, as he and Dave Darrin parted.

What a hurried count the interested youngsters made! But Tom Reade, who didn’t belong to either crowd, probably made the most accurate count. He discovered that sixty-two of the boys had voted for West Point. Forty-one favored Annapolis. A few young men present, like Tom, didn’t care to go to either government school.

“When I am ready to give the word,” continued Congressman Spokes, “the young men who want to go to West Point will file out of the door at this end of the hall. In the rooms across the corridor they will find the physicians who are making the physical examinations for West Point.

“The Annapolis aspirants will file downstairs and enter through the first door at the left, where other physicians will make the physical examinations for Annapolis.

“The examinations by the physicians here will not be conclusive for the successful candidates. The final physical examinations, like the final scholastic examinations, will be made at West Point and Annapolis.

“Now, each young gentleman who passes the physical examination will receive a signed card with his name on it. Such successful young men are then excused until one o’clock. At one o’clock sharp the young men who have certificates from the medical examiners may report for their scholastic examinations. Do not come here, however, for the scholastic examinations. West Point aspirants will report at the High School, and those for Annapolis at the Central Grammar School.

“Now, at eight o’clock this evening you return here. At that hour, or as soon there after as possible, announcement will be made, from this platform, of the names of the successful young men and their alternates. Now the young men for West Point forward, the Annapolis hopefuls downstairs!”

Inside of two minutes the town hall was bare, save for the presence of Tom Reade, who, with his hands in his pockets, walked about, whistling.

In forty-five minutes Dick, flushed and breathless, broke in upon Tom, as the latter sat waiting patiently for his friends.

“I’ve passed the doctors all right,” announced Dick, producing his card.

“That’s all right, then,” nodded Tom. “And the rest will be easier.”



Twenty minutes later Dave Darrin join them.

“I’ve passed—that part of the trial,” he proclaimed.

“Then, until twelve o’clock, there’s nothing to do but go out and kill time,” declared Reade.

“Twelve o’clock” repeated Dick. “You mean one o’clock.”

“I mean twelve,” retorted Tom, with emphasis. “At twelve you eat; you don’t gorge, but you chew and swallow something nourishing. Then you’ll be in fit shape for the little game of the afternoon.”



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Both of the chums had reason to realize the weight of their debt to jovial, helpful Reade; who was banishing care and keeping their minds off their suspense. In fact time passed quickly until it was time for Dick and Dave once more to part, to seek their separate examinations.

Just forty of the boys who wanted to go to West Point had passed the doctors as being presumably fit in body and general health. Twenty-seven of the Annapolis aspirants had passed the doctors. Already three dozen disappointed young Americans were on their way home, their dream over.

Tom Reade chose to walk over to the local High School with Dick. Dave found his way alone to his place of examination.

Dick Prescott and the thirty-nine other aspirants were assembled in one of the class rooms at the High School. On each desk was a supply of stationery. After the young men had been seated the examination papers in English were passed around. This examination Dick thought absurdly easy. He finished his paper early, and read it through three times while waiting for the papers to be collected.

History was a bit harder, but Dick was not especially disturbed by it. Not quite so with geography. Dick had had no instruction in this branch since his grammar school days, and, though he had brushed up much of late on this subject, he found himself compelled to go slowly and thoughtfully. Arithmetic was not so hard; algebra a bit more puzzling.

It was after six o'clock when the examinations were finished, and all papers in. As fast as each examination was finished, however, the papers had been hurried off to the examiners and marked.

Faithful Tom was waiting as Dick came out in the throng.

"Congratulations, old fellow!" cried Reade, holding out his hand.

"You've passed," announced Tom gravely.

"Why, the examiners haven't fin-----"

"They don't have to," snorted Tom. "I don't have to wait for the opinions of mere examiners. You've passed, and won out, I tell you. Now let's go look for Dave."

It had been agreed that the three should meet, for supper, at the same restaurant where they had lunched. Darrin was not there yet. It was nearly seven o'clock when Dave came in, looking fagged and worried.



But Tom was up on his feet in an instant, darting toward Darrin.

“Didn’t I tell you, old fellow?” demanded. Reade. “And my congratulations!”

“If you hadn’t been such a good fellow all day I might be cross,” sighed Dave. “Whee! But those examiners certainly did turn my head inside out. Don’t you see a few corners of the brain still sloping over outside?”

“Cheer up,” quoth Tom grimly. “Nothing doing. You haven’t brains enough to overflow. In fact, you’ve so few brains that I’m going to do the ordering for your supper.”

“Everything I can do, now, is over with, anyway,” muttered Prescott. “So I’m going to forget my troubles and enjoy this meal.”

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Dave tried to, also, but he was more worried, and could not wholly banish his gloom.

Tom succeeded in making the meal drag along until about ten minutes of eight. Then he led his friends from the restaurant and down the street to the town hall.

Here, though most of the young men were already on hand, there was nothing of boisterousness. Some were quiet; others were glum. All showed how much the result of the examinations meant to them.

But the time dragged fearfully. It was twenty minutes of nine when Congressman Spokes appeared on the platform and rapped for order. He did not have to rap twice. In the stillness that followed the Congressman's voice sounded thunderous.

"Young gentlemen, I now have the results from all the examiners, and the averages have been made up. I am now able to announce my appointments to West Point and Annapolis."

Mr. Spokes paused an instant.

"For West Point," he announced, "My candidate will be----Richard Prescott, of Gridley. The alternate will be----"

But Dick Prescott didn't catch a syllable of the alternate's name, for his ears were buzzing. But now, for the first time, Tom Reade was most unsympathetically silent.

"For Annapolis, my candidate will be----David Darrin, of Gridley. The alternate----"

Neither did Darrin hear the name of his alternate. Dave's head was reeling. He was sure it was a dream.

"Pinch me, Tom," he begged, in a hoarse whisper, and Reade complied—heartily.

"The young men who have won the appointments as candidates and alternates will please come to see me at once, in the anteroom," continued Congressman Spokes, who, however, lingered to address a few words of tactful sympathy to the eager young Americans who had tried and lost.

"Come along, now, and let's get this over with as quickly as possible," grumbled Tom Reade. "This Congressman bores me."



“Bores you?” repeated Prescott, in a shocked voice. “What on earth do you mean?”

“I don’t like his nerve,” asserted Reade. “Here he is, giving out as if it were fresh, news that I announced two hours ago.”

Congressman Spokes was waiting in the anteroom to shake hands with the winners. He congratulated the candidates most heartily, and cautioned the alternates that they also must be alert, as one or both of them might yet have a chance to pass on over the heads of the principal candidates.

Mr. Spokes then asked from each of the young men the name of his school principal, the address of his clergyman and of one business man. These were references to whom Mr. Spokes would write at once in order to inform himself that the lucky ones were young men of excellent character.

Then the Congressman wished the young men all the luck in the world, and bade them good evening, after informing them that they would hear, presently, from the Secretary of War with full instructions for West Point, and from the Secretary of the Navy for Annapolis.



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“Fancy Phin Drayne passing in his references for the character ordeal!” chuckled Tom Reade, as the three chums walked down the street.

“What time does the next train leave for Gridley?” suddenly demanded Dave.

“In twelve minutes,” answered Tom, after looking at his watch.

“Let’s run, then!” proposed Dave.

“We can mope, and have five minutes to spare,” objected Reade.

“Let’s run, just the same!” urged Dick Prescott.

The three chums broke into a run that brought them swiftly to the station, red faced, laughing and happy.

“Oh, what a difference since the morning!” sang Dick blithely. “Say, just think! West Point really for mine!”

“Bosh!” grunted Darrin happily. “I’m going to Annapolis!”

Then, as by a common impulse Dick and Dave seized Tom Reade by either hand.

“Tom,” uttered Dick huskily, “we owe you for a lot of the nerve and confidence that carried us through to-day!”

“Tom Reade,” declared Darrin, tremulously, “you’re the best and most dependable fellow on earth!”

“Shut up, both of you,” growled Reade, in a tone of disgust. “You’re getting as prosy as that Congressman—and that’s the most insulting thing I can think of to say to either of you.”

The train seemed fairly to fly home. It was keeping pace with the happy spirits of the young men, who, at last, came to realize that the great good news was actually true.

Neither Dick nor Dave could think of walking home from the station. They broke into a run. By and by they discovered that Tom Reade was, no longer with them.

“Now isn’t that just like old Tom?” laughed Darrin, when he discovered that their friend was missing. “Well, anyway, I can’t wait. Here’s where our roads branch, Dick, old fellow. And say! Aren’t we the lucky simpletons? Good night, old chum!”

Dick fairly raced into the bookstore conducted by his parents. He almost upset a customer who was leaving with a package under his arm.



“Dad!” whispered Dick, leaning briefly over the counter and laying a hand on Mr. Prescott’s shoulder. “I passed and won! I’m going to West Point!”

A look of intense happiness wreathed his father’s face and tears glistened in his eyes. But Dick raced on into the back room, where he found his mother.

“All the luck in the land is mine, mother!” he whispered, bending over and kissing her. “I won out! I go to West Point when the month of March comes!”

Mrs. Prescott was upon her feet, her arms around her boy. She didn’t say much, but she didn’t need to. After a moment Dick disengaged himself.

“Mother, Laura Bentley will be glad to know this news. She’s at the ball of the senior class to-night, but I’ll see if I can get her father on the ’phone, and tell him the news for her.”

But presently it was Laura’s own sweet voice that answered over the wire.



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"You?" demanded Dick. "Why, I thought you'd be at the ball!"

"Did you think I could be happy all the evening, wondering how you were coming on with your great wish?" asked Laura quietly. "Say, oh, Dick! How did you come out?"

CHAPTER XXI

Gridley Seniors Whoop It Up

"Oh, so many, so many congratulations, Dick!" came the response to Prescott's eagerly imparted information.

"And so you missed the dance just because you could sympathize with some one else's worry?" demanded Dick. "But say! The evening is still young, as dances go. Couldn't you get dressed in a little while? Then we could both go and celebrate my good luck."

"I'm dressed," came the demure answer.

"What? Oh---well, now, that's nice of you-----"

"I have been expecting this good news," laughed Laura. "And so I've been dressed all evening, on the chance."

"And you'll go to the class ball if I come around quickly?"

"It would be mean of you not to come and take me, Dick!"

"I'll have to change," declared Dick. "But that never takes a boy long. Won't I be around to your house in short order, though!"

Dick rang off and started to bound upstairs, but a new ting-ling sounded on the 'phone bell.

"Here's another party been trying to get you," announced central. "Go ahead."

"Hullo, Dick," sounded a low, pleased voice. "I hope you've called up Laura."

"Just rang off, Dave."

"Then you know that the girls didn't go to the class ball to-night, but just dressed and waited on the chance of hearing from us. I'm on the jump to dress, but I'll meet you there, Dick."



Dick took only time to explain the change in his night's plans to his parents. Then he bounded off upstairs, but soon came down again, looking a bit dandyish in his best, and very happy into the bargain.

When Dick arrived at Dr. Bentley's home an automobile stood in front of the house. Dick recognized it, however, as the doctor's machine with the doctor's man at the lever.

The instant that Prescott put his finger on the bell button Laura herself opened the door. She was radiant of face and exquisite in ball costume as she threw open the door and stood framed there, the light behind her.

"Oh, I'm so glad, Dick, so glad!" came her ready greeting. "Come in. I'm all ready but the wrap, but father and mother wish to be among the first to congratulate you."

In the doctor's office stood Dr. and Mrs. Bentley. They greeted Dick cordially and expressed delight over his success.

"But this is only the first ditch taken, you know," spoke Prescott soberly, though in military phrase. "I have my chance now; that is all. I have more than four years of hard fight facing me before I am sure that the Army can be my career."



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"You'll make it, Prescott, just as you've made everything you've gone after at High School," replied Dr. Bentley heartily. "But, now that we've congratulated you, we mustn't keep you an instant longer from your classmates. I had just come in with my car, and Laura told me, so I directed my man to wait. He'll take you both along the road in short order. Good night, my boy!"

Laura brought her wrap, holding it out to Dick.

"If you're to be a gallant Army officer," she teased, "you must learn to do this sort of thing gracefully."

Blushing, Dick did his best. Then the young people went out. Dick helped his companion into the car, then seated himself beside her.

"We're going to pick up Dave and Belle," Laura explained, as the car moved swiftly away. "Then we'll all go in together."

One fellow had beaten them to the class ball, and that fellow was Tom Reade. How he ever did it no one will be able to guess, but Tom flew home, got into his best, and had reached the ball before these young people appeared on the scene.

The happy young candidates-elect went with their companions to the cloak room. Then, Laura on Dick's arm, and Belle clinging to Dave, the two couples entered the ballroom. The strains of a waltz were floating out. Abruptly the music ceased in the middle of the air, for Reade, standing beside the director, had motioned him to cease playing.

"Classmates and friends!" bellowed Reade, "it is my proud opportunity to-night to be able to be the first to announce to you some wonderful good news. To-day Dick Prescott, of ours, defeated all other competitors, and has secured the appointment from this district to the United States Military Academy!"

"Wow! Whoop!" That announcement had them all going. There was one tremendous, increasing din of noise. But Tom, jumping up and down, waving both arms and scowling fiercely, finally secured silence.

"Who's doing this announcing?" he demanded. "Who's master of ceremonies, if I am not. You just wait—all of you! I'll give you the cue when to turn the noise-works loose. As I just stated, it's Dick for West Point, but or, and—it's Dave Darrin for Annapolis at the same time. Yes, Dave is going to represent this district at Annapolis!"

The musicians were on their feet by this time. All with a rush the sweet, proud strains rang out:

"My country, 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty, Of thee I sing!"



Instantly all stood at attention, the young men all over the hail holding themselves with especial erectness. Not a voice was heard until the good old refrain was through. To the two happy chums "America" had a newer, stronger meaning. The spirited air came to them with a new meaning that had never been plain before.

Dick felt the tears in his eyes. Foolish, o course, but he couldn't help it! And choky Dave furtively wished that he dared reach for his handkerchief with all those hundreds of eyes turned on him.



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As the music came to an end the High School boys filled their lungs for a mighty cheer. Quick as a flash, however, the leader of the orchestra tapped his baton, then swung it once more, and the instruments leaped on into:

“Columbia, the gem of the ocean!”

That was for the Navy, of course, and one didn't have to keep quiet, either. Words of the song, and cheers, mingled with the musicians' strains.

And then it wound up in a cheer and a mad rush of yelling that must have been heard for a mile.

An impromptu reception and hand shaking followed, but to Dick and Dave, and their partners, it had more the look of a mob.

It was a joyous and big-hearted mob, though, and in time it quieted down. After a very long interruption the dancing started again, and Dick and Dave were able to whirl away with their partners.

As the next dance after that, started there was a sudden halt by many of the couples, and soon a roar of laughter ascended. For the orchestra had chosen, as the air, “The Girl I Left Behind Me.”

This air will always be associated with the United Service—the Army and Navy. It is a rollicking, jolly, spirited old tune, as it needs must be for “The Girl I Left Behind Me” is the tune that is played when the country's defenders, in war time, are marching away for the front, after just having said the last goodbye to mother, sister and sweetheart.

Just now, however, the old air had none of the tragic connected with it. It was all in the spirit of fun. Laura, blushing furiously, and Belle striving to appear wholly unconscious, but striving too hard, lent all the more merriment to the moment.

“It's that confounded old idiot, Tom Reade,” muttered Dave to his partner. “I wonder how many more such tricks he knows!”

Presently came “The Army Lancers,” and that brought out a right royal good cheer. Two numbers after that, came “A Life on the Ocean Wave,” and more cheers.

It was after three in the morning when the gay affair broke up. But who cared for that? Class balls come but once a year.

Right after “Home, Sweet Home,” which wound up the ball, the orchestra added a number, “The Star Spangled Banner.”



Both Dick and Dave reached home pretty thoroughly tired out, after having seen their girl friends home. Neither boy rose much before noon the day following.

Dick and Dave remained enrolled at High School until the Christmas Holidays, then dropped out, having ended the term.

Each boy had other studies with which he wished to busy himself—studies that would have a direct bearing on the stiff entrance examinations at West Point and Annapolis. The rest of their time, until they reported at their respective National Academies, they intended to devote to these other studies to make doubly sure of their success.

Dick's notification from the Secretary of War arrived on Christmas morning.



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“The grandest Christmas present. I ever had!” muttered Dick, gazing at the single sheet, the words on which were couched in stiff official language.

Dave Darrin fumed a good deal, for it was nearly a month later before he received his notification from the Secretary of the Navy. It came at last, however, and Darrin knew what postponed happiness means.

CHAPTER XXII

The Message from the Unknown

With the Christmas holidays Phin Drayne came home, to stay so far as school was concerned.

After his unhappy experience at the Fordham Military Institute, Phin had found things almost as unpleasant at Wilburville Academy.

For some reason the boys at Wilburville hadn't taken to him. Phin had come to the conclusion that he wasn't appreciated anywhere save at home, so back he came, disgusted with the idea of carrying his education any further.

As a natural sequence, Drayne took to lounging about the streets. High School boys and girls no longer paid any heed to him, so he did not fear slight or insult.

Two nights in every week Dick and Dave went faithfully to the High School gym. to help Mr. Morton with the new evening classes in training.

One afternoon Prescott and Darrin encountered good old Dr. Thornton, the principal, who asked them how they were coming along.

“We're pretty busy,” Dick admitted. “Still, it does seem rather hard to us not to be connected with the High School any more.”

“Why, you are with us yet, and of us!” cried the principal. “I carry your names on the rolls, with ‘excused’ written against your names. If you don't believe that you're still of my High School boys, then drop in any day and take your places, for an hour, or as long as you please, at your old desks. You will find them still reserved for you.”

“Now, isn't that mighty decent of old Prin.!” demanded Dave, after the two chums had thanked Dr. Thornton, and had gone on their way. “So we still belong to old Gridley High School?”

“We always shall, I reckon,” declared Dick. “Gridley High School has done everything for us, and has given us our start and most of our pleasures in life.”

“I’m going to drop in, one of these January days,” murmured Dave.

“And so am I. But,” added Dick, with a smile, “don’t let us be indiscreet and be roped into going into a recitation. We’ll find the class has been moving ahead while we’ve been boning over West Point and Annapolis requirements.”

“At all events, none of them ought to be ahead of us when we’ve gone four years further,” contended Dave. “At West Point or Annapolis we have to grind in a way that is never required of mere college men. We ought to be miles ahead of any fellow who has just finished at High School and then has put in four years only at college.”

Thus the happy young egotists always talked, nowadays. To them there was really little in life that did not come through the government military academies.



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Phin Drayne, lounging about purposely, with the shambling gait, often saw these happy chums, and scowled after them.

“Everything seems to come to them!” growled Phin. “What rot it is to say that this is a square world, and that everyone has the same chance! Why doesn’t something good come my way?”

The oftener Phin looked in the direction of the chums, and more particularly of Dick, the blacker did Drayne’s thoughts become.

“Prescott has had everything come his way ever since he entered High School,” growled Phin. “And now the mucker is going off to West Point, and the government is going to stamp him ‘gentleman.’ A gentleman? Pooh! I’d like to show him up, as a bumptious upstart. Phin scowled fiercely for a moment, before he added:

“And, by glory, I will do something to him! I’ll take the conceit out of Dick Prescott!”

At first it was only the purpose that formed in Drayne’s dark mind. But, by dint of much thinking, he began to feel that he saw the way of working to Prescott’s complete disgrace.

Dick, in the meantime, was still writing occasionally for “The Blade.”

“I’m afraid you’ve slipped away from us, Dick,” declared Mr. Pollock, with a wry smile. “If you go to West Point and pass the exams. there, then newspaper work is going to lose one of its bright, promising young men.”

“But I always told you that my plans would undoubtedly take me away from ‘The Blade’ when my High School life was done with,” Prescott answered.

“Yes; but why do you want the life of the uniform? That’s what I fail to understand? Why don’t you go into something connected with the pulsing everyday life of the country? Here you are, going away to bury yourself in a uniform. You’ll work, of course; the Army is no place for loafers. But after all, you’re only preparing for war, and you may be an old, white-haired officer before we have another war.”

“If that war does come in your life time,” returned Dick, “you’ll know what we of the uniforms have been working for all along. You’ll realize, then, that an Army’s biggest work isn’t fighting, in time of war, but preparing in time of peace. And you’ll thank every one of us when the time comes.”

“Oh, yes, I suppose so,” smiled the editor. “But it all seems so far away. Now, here is something much more practical right at hand. Take these burglaries that have been annoying the small merchants lately. The police don’t seem to be able to catch the fellow. For the last three days I’ve taken Len Spencer off of all other work and set him



to trying to run down the burglar. Now, Len isn't afraid of much, and he's one of the brightest young reporters going. Yet Len admits he's stumped. All the while the merchants are fearing that the burglar will bring about bigger losses. Dick Prescott, if you could catch that burglar, and see him sent off where he belongs, you'd be doing a vastly greater service to the community than you possibly could by helping the country prepare for a war that is thirty or forty years away."



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"I wouldn't mind having a crack at the burglar scare, either," laughed Dick. "But the question is, how am I going to go about it to catch the fellow? He has baffled all the police, and even Len Spencer. What show have I for finding the rascal?"

"Just the same, Dick, I believe you would catch him, if you'd set your mind and your energies to it. Will you do it? Will you put in a week trying to run down this burglar and give 'The Blade' the first chance at the story? I'll agree, in advance, to pay you for whatever time you'll put in on it for a week, if even you are not successful in running him down."

"I'll think it over," Dick replied, with a quiet smile. "I'll talk it over with Dave."

"There's another mighty bright young fellow!" cried the editor. "Now, why can't you get Darrin to go into it with you? I'll pay Darrin for his time, too."

Dave, when the project was sprung on him, gave his hearty assent.

"It won't do any harm to have a try at it, anyway, Dick," urged Darrin. "It'll wake us up a bit, too. Not that I've any real and abiding idea that we're going to catch Mr. Burglar."

"If we're in earnest we're going to catch him," declared Prescott. "That's the old Gridley High School way, you know. What well start on we've got to put through."

Night after night, in that cold January week, Dick and Dave slipped out late at night, and prowled about through the business district of Gridley. Very often the chums ran across the police, but both were known well to the police, and were not challenged. Indeed, the police soon learned that Dick and Dave were employed by "The Blade" for the purpose of assisting in the efforts to capture the mysterious burglar or burglars.

In that week two more "breaks" happened, and each time the thief or thieves got away with valuable booty.

"You youngsters don't seem to be having any luck," remarked Editor Pollock. "But keep on the case a little longer. I know you'll land something sooner or later. Keep ahead, just as if you had to score a touchdown before the half was over."

So for two nights Dick and Dave kept out, with equally bad luck.

One night at eleven o'clock Dick answered the home telephone. He listened in amazement, then tried to find out who his informant was, but the latter rang off promptly.

"I believe that is straight," muttered Dick. "At all events, I'll look into this game for all it's worth. What if we are about to catch the thief red-handed?"

Snatching up a heavy walking stick, Dick Prescott hurriedly quitted the house.



CHAPTER XXIII

The Plight of the Innocent

If the information that had come over the wire from an unknown was correct there was not a moment to be lost in telephoning.

It was a masculine voice that had sounded in the 'phone and the message was to the effect that the sender of the message had just observed two men forcing the rear entrance of Kahn's drygoods store.



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“And hearing that ‘The Blade’ is trying to catch the burglars I thought I’d just let you know,” the voice had continued. “But I guess you’ll have to be quick if you want a sight of the burglars. They’ll probably get away in quick order.”

Then had come the ring-off, just as Dick had tried to get the name of his informant.

Now Dick was sprinting toward the scene by the shortest route that he could think of.

Kahn’s store was on Main Street, but the rear entrance, used for the receipt of goods opened in off an alleyway that ran parallel with Main Street.

“There can’t be much time to spare,” muttered Dick, looking hard for a policeman.

At this late hour of the night the streets that Dick traveled in his haste were bare of pedestrians.

“I wish I had had time to get Dave,” thought Prescott. “But that would have lost at least five minutes more. And Dave wasn’t going to be ready to go out until he came around for me nearer midnight.”

Dick was at the head of the alley, now, moving cautiously, eyes wide open and ears on the alert.

How dark it was down in here! Dick wondered, a moment, at the keenness of vision that had enabled some neighbor to see what was going on over in this dark place.

In his pocket, at the time of receiving the message, Prescott had placed a pocket electric “search-light.”

This he thought of, now, but he did not deem it wise to go flashing the light about unless he had to.

“The first point in my information is right, anyway,” muttered Dick. “The rear door of Kahn’s is open.”

Moving in the shadow of the building, he had paused not far away from the door in question.

“There were two of the fellows, the message said,” muttered Dick. “In that case, I should think one would have been left outside as a lookout. However, the lookout may be just a little way inside of the door. It won’t do to use my light now. I’ll see if I can slip in and get close to the lookout before the thieves know there’s anyone around.”

A step at a time Prescott softly reached the open door. He paused, listening intently.



“I don’t hear a sound in there. I guess I’d better take a few very soft steps inside, and see if I can discover where the rogues are. That is, unless they have already bagged their booty, and have gotten away again.”

Just inside of the open door, Dick halted again. He listened, but there was no sound.

“These scoundrels are surely the original mice for soft moving,” muttered the boy grimly. “What part of the establishment can they be in? Hadn’t I better slip out and get the police? I can’t learn anything in here unless I use my light.”

Yet Prescott didn’t want to turn on that flare. The light was much more likely to show him up to the burglars than to enable him to find men who were not making a sound.



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So Dick penetrated a little further, and a little further, listening. As he moved he was obliged to grope his way.

At last, however, he found himself confused as to the points of the compass. In this darkness, he was not even sure which was the way out.

"I'll have to use the flash now," concluded Dick.

Taking the long tube from one of his pockets, he pressed the button briefly, giving a flash that lasted barely a second.

"What was that?" muttered the boy, with a start, as the light went out.

Clearly enough, now, he heard stealthy steps. He was almost certain, too, that he distinguished the sound of low whispers.

"That flash has scared the rascals," throbbed Dick Prescott. "Now, if I can only locate 'em, and get out first! I may succeed in getting the police to the scene before both get away. One of 'em, anyway, I ought to be able to floor with this heavy cane!"

Transferring the light to his left hand, Dick took a strong grip of the cane. It did not occur to him to be afraid in here. He was trying to trap the burglars as a piece of enterprise for "The Blade," and that was all he thought about.

Suddenly there was a more decided step in the darkness. It sounded, too, right in advance of the boy who stood there guessing in the dark.

"Halt, where you are!" shouted Dick. "And throw up your hands as high as you can, if you don't want to get drilled! Don't try to use your weapons, for I have the drop!"

It was sheer bluff, for the only thing with which Prescott could claim the drop was his cane.

Yet, in such circumstances, a bold front is half the battle.

Prescott bounded forward, boldly, at the same moment turning on his light.

The next moment, though he held the light, the cane dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"We've got you, Prescott!" roared a voice. "And you? Of all the thundering big surprises. But we've got you! Stop all nonsense and get in line to come along with us."

It was the chief of police, backed by three of his men, whom Dick now faced. They had thrown their lights on, too, so that there was now plenty of illumination.



Nor was this Chief Coy, one of Dick's old time friends, but Chief Simmons, a new man appointed only a few months before.

Chief Simmons was almost frantically anxious to catch the burglar or burglars, for their continued operations reflected upon his abilities as the new police chief.

All in a flash young Prescott took in the horrifying idea that Chief Simmons believed him to be the real burglar.

"But I-----" began Dick chokingly.

"Yes, you will!" retorted Chief Simmons. "You can't put up any fight, and you can't make any denial."

"I-----"

"Take him, you men, and handcuff him." roared the chief. "Then we'll go through the rest of the store, and see what we can learn."



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Dick drew back, with a shudder, as two of the officers came toward him, intent on carrying out their chief's order.

"You'd better submit, Prescott," warned the chief sternly. "We're not in a mood to stand any fooling."

"But won't you listen-----" began Dick, gasping.

"I'm not the trial judge," jeered Simmons. "Still, I'll listen to you all you want, later in the night. Now, stand forward!"

Dick realized the folly and the uselessness of defying the police. He moved nearer to the chief, as ordered. And Prescott began to understand how black the whole affair looked for him.

But how had it happened?

He would have given worlds to know.

"Hold your hands forward, and together," commanded Chief Simmons.

Quivering, flushing with the shame of the thing, young Prescott obeyed. The officer who fitted the handcuffs to the boy's wrists felt ashamed of his work, for he had always been one of Dick's friends.

The click of the steel ratchets brought Prescott back to a realization of things.

"I'm not much of a catch, chief," muttered the boy. "You'd better not be content with me alone. Leave me under watch and then the rest of you had better spread through this place. I think there are others here—the men you seek."

"You've confederates here, have you?" demanded Simmons, fixing his suspicious gaze on the boy. "Judkins, you watch Prescott—and mind you don't let him give you the slip. The rest of us will keep on going through this store. You say you think there are others here, Prescott?"

"I think so," replied the boy.

Chief Simmons raised his voice.

"If there's anyone here-----" he called.



“There is!” came back in a tone that made Dick Prescott start and throb with alarm.

“Who—where—” asked Chief Simmons, excitedly.

“Right here!” came the voice. “Hold your lights on me!”

Two flash-lights at once centered their rays on the speaker, and Dave Darrin bounded forward into the light.

“So you two have been working this thing as side partners, have you?” asked Chief Simmons harshly. “Great Scott, how you’ve fooled us, then! Like everyone else, we believed you two boys to be straight. Tell me,” commanded Simmons dryly, “is Editor Pollock in this store-robbing gang, too?”

“Ask Mr. Pollock yourself,” Dave flung back.

“I will, when I get time,” retorted Simmons. “Grab Darrin and put the irons on his wrists, too!”

CHAPTER XXIV

Dave Gives Points to the Chief of Police

“You clumsy bungler!” spoke Dave Darrin hotly. “Chief, I demand the right to speak to you for a moment.”

“After you’re ironed and taken to the station house,” snapped Mr. Simmons.

“Chief, you’re not afraid to step aside with me and listen to about ten words?” demanded Darrin scornfully. “And if you don’t—if you go on in your bull-headed way—you’ll be the scorn of the town by morning. Why don’t you hear what I’ve got to say, instead of letting precious seconds slip by. Come! Over this way!”



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There was something so commanding in Darrin's voice and manner that Simmons concluded to listen for a moment.

Keeping his flash-light turned on Darrin, the chief of police followed Dave. Darrin whispered something in the big man's ear. In another moment the two were whispering together animatedly.

"Why didn't you come to the point before, Darrin?" demanded the chief gruffly.

"Great Scott, didn't I, as soon as I could postpone your mania for having me loaded down with police chains?"

"Yet how do I know you're telling me anything like the truth?"

"If I'm lying, you can find it out very quickly, can't you?" demanded Darrin. "But come along, or you'll be too late. Oh, why do all the biggest slow pokes in creation get appointed to the police force?"

"Come along with me, Delmar," ordered Chief Simmons, turning to one of his policemen. "The rest of you stay here—though you can pass on into the open air. Then wait there for us."

"Don't you waste any time on worry, Dick," Dave called back.

Prescott laughed easily. Whatever Dave had discovered, or thought he had, Darrin's chum was quite content now to await the result of all that enthusiasm.

"We must not make much noise," cautioned Darrin, as he led the way swiftly, though on tiptoe. "We don't want to scare the other people cold until we have them cooped so that they can't get away. But you'd better be ready, in case they're desperate enough to try shooting!"

Up the street, to the head of another alley way, Darrin led the swift chase.

"Now, softer than ever," he whispered, over his shoulder, without halting.

A moment later Dave halted before two stone steps that led down to a basement junk shop.

Just as he did so a low voice inside could be heard, saying in barely audible tones:

"I'm so anxious to know whether Prescott fell into the trap that I can hardly wait another minute."



“You’d better wait until morning, or you’ll tumble into something with your eyes shut, and that will mean both of us nabbed,” growled another voice.

“Do you think they found Prescott—that they believed in the appearances against him?”

“I can’t say,” came the other low voice. “And I can wait. I’m not crazy on the subject, as you seem to be.”

“Explain this all over again, to us, won’t you?” shouted the chief, pushing open the door of the junk shop and striding in, backed by the light and the revolver of Officer Delmar.

“What?” screamed Phin Drayne, then sank to his knees in the extremity of his terror.

“Don’t either of you try to put up any fight,” warned the chief. “Delmar, here are my handcuffs to put with your own. Hand me your light, and then iron both of these fellows securely.”

The owner of the junk shop, a man under thirty, dirty and low browed, stood cowering back against a bench. The fellow looked as though he would have fought had there been any chance to draw a weapon. But he was gazing straight into the muzzle of the police chief’s weapon.



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An instant later both prisoners had been handcuffed, and a pistol had been taken from the clothing of each. From the junkman, too, had been taken a ring of keys.

“One of these fit your door?” demanded Simmons.

“Yes,” growled the scowling one. “The long key.”

“Bring the prisoners along, Delmar,” ordered the chief. “I’ll lock up here. We’ll come back later for a search.”

Out on the sidewalk Phin Drayne plucked up courage enough to find his voice.

“For goodness’ sake, let me go, Chief,” he begged, falteringly. “I haven’t done anything, although things look against me.”

“I guess we’ll be able to put things enough against you,” retorted the police official mockingly.

“Think of my mother!” pleaded the wild boy. “Think of our family—one of the most respectable in town. Think of-----”

“Oh, you’re enough to make one tired,” broke in Dave Darrin, in deep disgust. “You thought of Dick Prescott when you put up the job to have him arrested as a burglar, didn’t you?”

“Why, what do you mean? I didn’t do anything to Dick Prescott,” shouted Drayne angrily, or affecting to be angry.

“Tell that to the marines,” quoth Darrin contemptuously. “It was through following on your trail, Drayne, that I discovered the whole trick, and also knew just where to take the police to find you.”

An hour later Chief Simmons was well satisfied that he had laid the burglar scare in Gridley.

Not that the new chief had had so very much to do with the result, either.

The first move had been to get back to the Kahn store, where Dick Prescott was promptly freed, with the chief’s hearty apologies.

Over at the police station, by separating Drayne from his accomplice, Bill Stevens, the junkman, and questioning each separately, the whole story had come out, chiefly through frenzied confessions.



Phin Drayne, loafing about town, and with his pocket money nearly cut off by his father, had formed the acquaintance of Stevens, who, besides being a junkman, was a very fair locksmith, though about the latter trade he had never bragged publicly.

Drayne had been ripe for any move that would place him in more funds. So, first of all, he and Stevens had entered the commercial establishment of Drayne, senior. There, thanks to Phin's knowledge of the premises, they had made a very good-sized "haul."

After that the pair had operated together frequently. Stevens' junk shop had offered a handy place in which to hide the plunder.

Then, as time went on, and Phin heard, by chance, that Dick and Dave were trying to catch the burglars in behalf of "The Blade," a plan had occurred to Phin by which he might ruin Dick utterly in the eyes of the community.

The whole plan had been carefully laid by Stevens and young Drayne.

On this night, just after Conklin's drug store had been closed for the night, Stevens had slipped in a key that had opened a side door for him. Then the door was left closed but unlocked. At that hour of the night no one was likely to notice anyone who went in or out at the side door. And Conklin's was equipped with a public telephone.



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Then down to the alleyway had stolen the evil pair. Kahn's rear door had been opened with false keys and left ajar. Then Phin Drayne stole back to the junk shop, while Stevens, whose voice could not be recognized over the wire by Dick, sent the message.

Next, back to where he could watch the alleyway, hurried Stevens, and hid. Stevens saw Dick Prescott slip into the alleyway, then go inside the store. That was enough for Stevens, who had slipped back and into the drug store once more, getting the police station on the wire and 'phoning to the chief that Gridley's burglars had just entered Kahn's through the rear door.

Only a block and a half from Kahn's was the police station. Almost immediately the officers were on the spot, stalking—Dick Prescott.

But, at the time when Dick left his own home and went down the street so hurriedly Dave Darrin had been sauntering along, to call his chum out on their nightly quest for "The Blade." Seeing Dick move so swiftly, Darrin concluded that something most unusual was about to happen. So Dave trailed swiftly in the rear.

Thus it was that Darrin drew back just in time to see Bill Stevens slipping away from a hiding place at the head of that alleyway.

"That does for Prescott," chuckled Stevens, half aloud.

"Oh, it does, does it?" silently murmured alert Dave, and now he intently followed Stevens to the drug store, and thence back to the junk shop. Dave's next swift move was to rush back to Kahn's with the result already known.

"Well, did you think the folks of Gridley would continue to believe such a charge against young Prescott?" demanded Chief Simmons of the sneak.

"I knew some wouldn't, but I thought the whole affair would make such a row that Prescott would never be quite able to hold up his head in Gridley again," declared Drayne huskily. "But I thought that it would stop his thinking of going to West Point, anyway."

"Instead of which," muttered Simmons dryly, "you'll get four years—or more, Drayne at some place that won't be West Point."

"Oh, my father won't quite stand for that," returned Phin, a bit more loftily. "He has money and some family pride."

"Money doesn't help much for confessed burglars," rejoined Chief Simmons.

At that moment Heathcote Drayne, who had been roused out of bed by a policeman, came in, so white faced that Dick and Dave felt sorry indeed for the unhappy parent.



But Dick didn't remain to see the meeting between father and son. Prescott and his chum hastened around to "The Blade" office. Gladly enough would both boys have kept Phin's disgrace from going before the public, but it was too big a story, locally, and was bound to come out. So Dick wrote a straight account, after which he and Dave hurried home to get the fag end of a night's rest.

Gridley merchants lost but little, in the end, through the series of burglaries. Most of the plunder was recovered at the junk shop.



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Bill Stevens was sent to prison for a term of eight years. Phin, being only seventeen, was allowed to plead his youth. In his case justice was satisfied with his commitment to a reform school until he should be twenty-one years of age.

And so ended the story of the mysterious burglaries.

CHAPTER XXV

Conclusion

One evening about a week after these events Dick and Dave were sitting in the former's room chatting, when Greg Holmes and Dan Dalzell, apparently in great good humor, broke in upon them.

"When do you go to West Point, Dick?" queried Greg.

"I'm ordered to report to the adjutant there on the first of March," Prescott replied.

"Mind my running up there with you?" demanded Greg.

"Why, I'd be tickled to pieces, if you can afford the trip, Greg."

"Oh, I guess I can," laughed the other boy. "Dad is going to pay my freight bill."

"See here, you fellows, you can't have been reading the newspapers much, since you two were appointed," broke in Dan Dalzell.

"What have we missed?" challenged Dave.

"Why, didn't you know a thing about Senator Frayne and his appointments?" went on Dan Dalzell. "The Senator doesn't appoint from a single district. He appoints at large from the whole state. Senator Frayne announced, a while ago, two appointments-at-large, one for West Point, the other for Annapolis."

"And we went up to the state capital yesterday," rattled on Greg. "We went through the examinations. The winners weren't named until this morning. You'll find it in the evening papers, later to-day. I go to West Point, and Dan goes to Annapolis."

"What?" yelled Dick, leaping as high as he could jump.

"Tell it to us again!" begged Darrin huskily.

"Oh, it's all a fact, straight and right enough," Greg assured them happily.

Then and there the four chums executed a war dance. It seemed too wonderful to believe.

“But isn’t Gridley the whole show?” demanded Dave presently. “Four cadetships in the same year to one little city!”

“Well, we had to win ’em from other comers,” retorted Greg. “And none of us are out of the woods yet. We’ve got to pass at West Point and at Annapolis.

“This is great!” quivered young Prescott. “But wouldn’t it be grand if only Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton had gotten in line, too, and gone along into the service with us? Then all of the old Dick & Co. would have been enrolled under the battle flag.”

“But you know what Tom told us,” put in Darrin. “He said he wouldn’t live at West Point, and he wouldn’t be caught dead at Annapolis. Tom is all for becoming a great civil engineer—a builder of railroads and all that sort of thing.”

“Well, Harry Hazelton is just as bad,” said Greg. “He’s all for doing engineer stunts in the wilderness, too.”



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"Here they come now," announced Dan Dalzell.

Tom and Harry were heartily glad, of course, to hear of the luck that had befallen Greg and Dan.

"We were just wishing that you two had fallen into the same kind of luck, and that you were going into uniform with us," declared Dick.

Reade glared at Prescott.

"Humph!" muttered Tom. "I thought you were a friend of mine!"

"I judge it's a mighty good thing we don't all hunger for the same careers," laughed Harry. "For instance, all young fellows can't go into the United Service. There aren't jobs enough to go around. The United States Army is just about big enough to find with a good magnifying glass. As for the Navy-----"

"Be careful," warned Darrin touchily.

"As for the Navy," continued Hazelton, "Congress has a lot of officers trained and then seems to think that one new battleship every other year or so ought to keep the country patient."

"You fellows are going to be downright happy, I know," resumed Tom. "But so are Harry and I. We finish out our High School work, and then our chance is ahead of us."

"To *find*?" queried Dave.

"No, sir! We've *got* it," retorted Tom. "It came to us only recently, and Harry and I have been keeping a bit quiet, but now it is time to tell the news—just in the circle of Dick & Co."

By dint of great hustling, and backed by recommendations from the local civil engineer, Reade and Hazelton had secured a chance, beginning in the coming July, to join as rodmen the engineering party that was laying a new railroad over the Rockies, in Colorado.

Just before the first of March, Dick Prescott and Greg Holmes slipped quietly away, and reported at West Point.

But what further happened to Dick and Greg—and there was a lot of it—must be reserved for the volumes of the new West Point series.

The first volume will appear under the title, "*Dick Prescott's First Year at West Point; Or, Two Chums in the Cadet Gray.*"

Later on Dave Darrin and Dan Dalzell left Gridley and home for Annapolis. Their adventures will be followed up in the new Annapolis series.

The first volume in this series will be entitled: "*Dave Darrin's First Year at Annapolis; Or, Two Plebes at the Naval Academy.*"

Nor did Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton fail of some very extraordinary adventures in their chosen career of engineering. Their career led them into some of the wild spots of the earth. It will all be told in the Young Engineer series.

The first volume in this series will appear shortly under the caption: "*The Young Engineers in Colorado; Or, at Railroad Building in Earnest.*"

How about the other Gridley folks whose acquaintance has been so enjoyable? Fred Ripley? Well, as to Fred—when we first made his acquaintance, he was anything but an agreeable fellow, but he learned his lesson in time, and, under the wholesome influence of Dick & Co., but especially of Dick Prescott himself, Fred had become a different boy. Such is the effect of good example.

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As to the rest, many of them are bound to appear again, as we follow the fortunes of our Gridley boys through the tales of West Point, the annals of Annapolis and the doings of the Young Engineer Boys.

So here we will leave them all for the moment, soon to renew the acquaintance of all who had any future share in the lives or thoughts of the six splendid young Americans who were once known to their classmates as Dick & Co.

THE END